



Mr. Campion
AND OTHERS

MARGERY ALLINGHAM



*"For the Connoisseur
of Detective Fiction"*

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MARGERY ALLINGHAM

Mr. Campion and Others



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M.A.

PART ONE

Mr. Champion's Case Book

THE CASE OF THE WIDOW

The second prettiest girl in Mayfair was thanking Superintendent Stanislaus Oates for the recovery of her diamond bracelet and the ring with the square-cut emerald in it, and Mr Campion, who had accompanied her to the ceremony, was admiring her technique.

She was doing it very charmingly; so charmingly, in fact, that the Superintendent's depressing little office had taken on an air of garden-party gaiety which it certainly did not possess in the ordinary way, while the Superintendent himself had undergone an even more sensational change.

His long dyspeptic face was transformed by a blush of smug satisfaction and he quite forgot the short lecture he had prepared for his visitor on *The Carelessness Which Tempts the Criminal*, or its blunter version, *Stupidity Which Earns Its Own Reward*.

It was altogether a most gratifying scene, and Mr Campion, seated in the visitor's chair, his long thin legs crossed and his pale eyes amused behind his horn-rimmed spectacles, enjoyed it to the full.

Miss Leonie Peterhouse-Vaughn raised her remarkable eyes to the Superintendent's slightly sheepish face and spoke with deep earnestness.

'I honestly think you're wonderful,' she said.

Realizing that too much butter can have a disastrous effect on any dish, and not being at all certain of his old friend's digestive capabilities, Mr Campion coughed.

'He has his failures too,' he ventured. 'He's not omnipotent, you know. Just an ordinary man.'

'Really?' said Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn with gratifying surprise.

'Oh yes; well, we're only human, miss.' The Superintendent granted Mr Campion a reproachful look. 'Sometimes we have our little disappointments. Of course on those occasions we call in Mr Campion here,' he added with a flash of malice.

Leonie laughed prettily and Mr Oates's ruffled fur subsided like a wave.

'Sometimes even he can't help us,' he went on, encouraged, and, inspired no doubt by the theory that the greater the enemy the greater the

honour, launched into an explanation perhaps not altogether discreet. 'Sometimes we come up against a man who slips through our fingers every time. There's a man in London today who's been responsible for more trouble than I can mention. We know him, we know where he lives, we could put our hands on him any moment of the day or night, but have we any proof against him? Could we hold him for ten minutes without getting into serious trouble for molesting a respectable citizen? Could we? Well, we couldn't.'

Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn's expression of mystified interest was very flattering.

'This is incredibly exciting,' she said. 'Who is he?—or mustn't you tell?'

The Superintendent shook his head.

'Entirely against the regulations,' he said regretfully, and then, on seeing her disappointment and feeling, no doubt, that his portentous declaration had fallen a little flat, he relented and made a compromise between his conscience and a latent vanity which Mr Campion had never before suspected. 'Well, I'll show you this,' he conceded. 'It's a very curious thing.'

With Leonie's fascinated eyes upon him, he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a single sheet torn from a week-old London evening paper. A small advertisement in the Situations Vacant column was ringed with blue pencil. Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn took it eagerly and Mr Campion got up lazily to read it over her shoulder.

*WANTED: Entertainer suitable for children's party.
Good money offered to right man. Apply in person any
evening. Widow, 13 Blakenham Gardens, W.1.*

Leonie read the lines three times and looked up.

'But it seems quite ordinary,' she said.

The Superintendent nodded. 'That's what any member of the public would think,' he agreed, gracefully keeping all hint of condescension out of his tone. 'And it would have escaped our notice too except for one thing, and that's the name and address. You see, the man I was telling you about happens to live at 13 Blakenham Gardens.'

'Is his name Widow? How queer!'

‘No, miss, it’s not.’ Oates looked uncomfortable, seeing the pitfall too late. ‘I ought not to be telling you this,’ he went on severely. ‘This gentleman—and we’ve got nothing we can pin on him, remember—is known as “The Widow” to the criminal classes. That’s why this paragraph interested us. As it stands it’s an ad. for a crook, and the fellow has the impudence to use his own address! Doesn’t even hide it under a box number.’

Mr Campion eyed his old friend. He seemed mildly interested.

‘Did you send someone along to answer it?’ he inquired.

‘We did.’ The Superintendent spoke heavily. ‘Poor young Billings was kept there singing comic songs for three-quarters of an hour while W—I mean this fellow—watched him without a smile. Then he told him he’d go down better at a police concert.’

Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn looked sympathetic.

‘What a shame!’ she said gravely, and Mr Campion never admired her more.

‘We sent another man,’ continued the Superintendent, ‘but when he got there the servant told him the vacancy had been filled. We kept an eye on the place, too, but it wasn’t easy. The whole crescent was a seething mass of would-be child entertainers.’

‘So you haven’t an idea what he’s up to?’ Mr Campion seemed amused.

‘Not the faintest,’ Oates admitted. ‘We shall in the end, though; I’ll lay my bottom dollar. He was the moving spirit in that cussed Featherstone case, you know, and we’re pretty certain it was he who slipped through the police net in the Barking business.’

Mr Campion raised his eyebrows. ‘Blackmail and smuggling?’ he said. ‘He seems to be a versatile soul, doesn’t he?’

‘He’s up to anything,’ Oates declared. ‘Absolutely anything. I’d give a packet to get my hands on him. But what he wants with a kids’ entertainer—if it is an entertainer he’s after—I do not know.’

‘Perhaps he just wants to give a children’s party?’ suggested Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn and while the policeman was considering this possibility, evidently the one explanation which had not crossed his mind, she took her leave.

‘I must thank you once again, Mr Oates,’ she said. ‘I can’t tell you how terribly, terribly clever I think you are, and how awfully grateful I am, and how frightfully careful I’ll be in future not to give you any more dreadful trouble.’

It was a charming little speech in spite of her catastrophic adjectives and the Superintendent beamed.

‘It’s been a pleasure, miss,’ he said.

As Mr Campion handed her into her mother’s Daimler he regarded her coldly.

‘A pretty performance,’ he remarked. ‘Tell me, what do you say when a spark of genuine gratitude warms your nasty little heart? My poor Oates!’

Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn grinned.

‘I did do it well, didn’t I?’ she said complacently. ‘He’s rather a dear old goat.’

Mr Campion was shocked and said so.

‘The Superintendent is a distinguished officer. I always knew that, of course, but this afternoon I discovered a broad streak of chivalry in him. In his place I think I might have permitted myself a few comments on the type of young woman who leaves a diamond bracelet and an emerald ring in the soap-dish at a public restaurant and then goes smiling to Scotland Yard to ask for it back. The wretched man had performed a miracle for you and you call him a dear old goat.’

Leonie was young enough to look abashed without losing her charm.

‘Oh, but I am grateful,’ she said. ‘I think he’s wonderful. But not so absolutely brilliant as somebody else.’

‘That’s very nice of you, my child.’ Mr Campion prepared to unbend.

‘Oh, not you, darling.’ Leonie squeezed his arm. ‘I was talking about the other man—The Widow. He’s got real nerve, don’t you think?—using his own address and making the detective sing and all that. . . . So amusing!’

Her companion looked down at her severely.

‘Don’t make a hero out of *him*,’ he said.

‘Why not?’

‘Because, my dear little hideous, he’s a crook. It’s only while he remains uncaught that he’s faintly interesting. Sooner or later your elderly admirer, the Superintendent, is going to clap him under lock and key and then he’ll just be an ordinary convict, who is anything but romantic, believe me.’

Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn shook her head.

‘He won’t get caught,’ she said. ‘Or if he does—forgive me, darling—it’ll be by someone much cleverer than you or Mr Oates.’

Mr Campion’s professional pride rebelled.

‘What’ll you bet?’

‘Anything you like,’ said Leonie. ‘Up to two pounds,’ she added prudently.

Campion laughed. ‘The girl’s learning caution at last!’ he said. ‘I may hold you to that.’

The conversation changed to the charity matinée of the day before, wherein Miss Peterhouse-Vaughn had appeared as Wisdom, and continued its easy course, gravitating naturally to the most important pending event in the Peterhouse-Vaughn family, the christening of Master Brian Desmond Peterhouse-Vaughn, nephew to Leonie, son to her elder brother, Desmond Brian, and godson to Mr Albert Campion.

It was his new responsibility as a godfather which led Mr Campion to take part in yet another elegant little ceremony some few days after the christening and nearly three weeks after Leonie’s sensational conquest of Superintendent Oates’s susceptible heart.

Mr Campion called to see Mr Thistledown in Cheese Street, E.C., and they went reverently to the cellars together.

Mr Thistledown was a small man, elderly and dignified. His white hair was inclined to flow a little and his figure was more suited, perhaps, to his vocation than to his name. As head of the small but distinguished firm of Thistledown, Friend and Son, Wine Importers since 1798, he very seldom permitted himself a personal interview with any client under the age of sixty-five, for at that year he openly believed the genus *homo sapiens*, considered solely as a connoisseur of vintage wine, alone attained full maturity.

Mr Campion, however, was an exception. Mr Thistledown thought of him as a lad still, but a promising one. He took his client’s errand with all the gravity he felt it to deserve.

‘Twelve dozen of port to be laid down for Master Brian Desmond Peterhouse-Vaughn,’ he said, rolling the words round his tongue as though they, too, had their flavour. ‘Let me see, it is now the end of ’36. It will have to be a ’27 wine. Then by the time your godson is forty—he won’t want to drink it before that age, surely?—there should be a very fine fifty-year-old vintage awaiting him.’

A long and somewhat heated discussion, or, rather, monologue, for Mr Campion was sufficiently experienced to offer no opinion, followed. The relative merits of Croft, Taylor, Da Silva, Noval and Fonseca were considered at length, and in the end Mr Campion followed his mentor through the sacred tunnels and personally affixed his seal upon a bin of Taylor, 1927.

Mr Thistledown was in favour of a stipulation to provide that Master Peterhouse-Vaughn should not attain full control over his vinous inheritance until he attained the age of thirty, whereas Mr Campion preferred the more conventional twenty-one. Finally a compromise of twenty-five was agreed upon and the two gentlemen retired to Mr Thistledown’s consulting-room glowing with the conscious virtue of men who had conferred a benefit upon posterity.

The consulting-room was comfortable. It was really no more than an arbour of bottles constructed in the vault of the largest cellar and was furnished with a table and chairs of solid ship’s timber. Mr Thistledown paused by the table and hesitated before speaking. There was clearly something on his mind and Campion, who had always considered him slightly inhuman, a sort of living port crust, was interested.

When at last the old gentleman unburdened himself it was to make a short speech.

‘It takes an elderly man to judge a port or a claret,’ he said, ‘but spirits are definitely in another category. Some men may live to be a hundred without ever realizing the subtle differences of the finest rums. To judge a spirit one must be born with a certain kind of palate. Mr Campion, would you taste a brandy for me?’

His visitor was startled. Always a modest soul, he made no pretensions to connoisseurship and now he said so firmly.

‘I don’t know.’ Mr Thistledown regarded him seriously. ‘I have watched your taste for some years now and I am inclined to put you down as one of the few really knowledgeable younger men. Wait for me a moment.’

He went out, and through the arbour's doorway Campion saw him conferring with the oldest and most cobwebby of the troglodyte persons who lurked about the vaults.

Considerably flattered in spite of himself, he sat back and awaited developments. Presently one of the younger myrmidons, a mere youth of fifty or so, appeared with a tray and a small selection of balloon glasses. He was followed by an elder with two bottles, and at the rear of the procession came Mr Thistledown himself with something covered by a large silk handkerchief. Not until they were alone did he remove the veil. Then, whipping the handkerchief aside, he produced a partly full half-bottle with a new cork and no label. He held it up to the light and Mr Campion saw that the liquid within was of the true dark amber.

Still with the ritualistic air, Mr Thistledown polished a glass and poured a tablespoonful of the spirit, afterwards handing it to his client.

Feeling like a man with his honour at stake, Campion warmed the glass in his hand, sniffed at it intelligently, and finally allowed a little of the stuff to touch his tongue.

Mr Thistledown watched him earnestly. Campion tasted again and inhaled once more. Finally he set down his glass and grinned.

'I may be wrong,' he said, 'but it tastes like the real McKay.'

Mr Thistledown frowned at the vulgarism. He seemed satisfied, however, and there was a curious mixture of pleasure and discomfort on his face.

'I put it down as a Champagne Fine, 1835,' he said. 'It has not, perhaps, quite the superb caress of the true Napoleon—but a brave, yes, a brave brandy! The third best I have ever tasted in my life. And that, let me tell you, Mr Campion, is a very extraordinary thing.'

He paused, looking like some old white cockatoo standing at the end of the table.

'I wonder if I might take you into my confidence?' he ventured at last. 'Ah—a great many people do take you into their confidence, I believe? Forgive me for putting it that way.'

Campion smiled. 'I'm as secret as the grave,' he said, 'and if there's anything I can do I shall be delighted.'

Mr Thistledown sighed with relief and became almost human.

‘This confounded bottle was sent to me some little time ago,’ he said. ‘With it was a letter from a man called Gervaise Papulous; I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of him, but he wrote a very fine monograph on brandies some years ago which was greatly appreciated by connoisseurs. I had an idea he lived a hermit’s life somewhere in Scotland, but that’s neither here nor there. The fact remains that when I had this note from an address in Half Moon Street I recognized the name immediately. It was a very civil letter, asking me if I’d mind, as an expert, giving my opinion of the age and quality of the sample.’

He paused and smiled faintly.

‘I was a little flattered, perhaps,’ he said. ‘After all, the man is a well-known authority himself. Anyway, I made the usual tests, tasted it and compared it with the oldest and finest stuff we have in stock. We have a few bottles of 1848 and one or two of the 1835. I made the most careful comparisons and at last I decided that the sample was a ’35 brandy, but not the same blend as our own. I wrote him; I said I did not care to commit myself, but I gave him my opinion for what it was worth and I appended my reasons for forming it.’

Mr Thistledown’s precise voice ceased and his colour heightened.

‘By return I received a letter thanking me for mine and asking me whether I would care to consider an arrangement whereby I could buy the identical spirit in any quantity I cared to name at a hundred and twenty shillings a dozen, excluding duty—or, in other words, ten shillings per bottle.’

Mr Campion sat up. ‘Ten shillings?’ he said.

‘Ten shillings,’ repeated Mr Thistledown. ‘The price of a wireless licence,’ he added with contempt. ‘Well, as you can imagine, Mr Campion, I thought there must be some mistake. Our own ’35 is listed at sixty shillings a bottle and you cannot get finer value anywhere in London. The stuff is rare. In a year or two it will be priceless. I considered this sample again and reaffirmed my own first opinion. Then I re-read the letter and noticed the peculiar phrase—“an arrangement whereby you will be able to purchase”. I thought about it all day and finally I put on my hat and went down to see the man.’

He glanced at his visitor almost timidly. Campion was reassuring.

‘If it was genuine it was not a chance to be missed,’ he murmured.

‘Exactly.’ Mr Thistledown smiled. ‘Well, I saw him, a younger man than I had imagined but well informed, and I received quite a pleasant impression. I asked him frankly where he got the brandy and he came out with an extraordinary suggestion. He asked me first if I was satisfied with the sample, and I said I was or I should hardly have come to see him. Then he said the whole matter was a secret at the moment, but that he was asking certain well-informed persons to a private conference and something he called a scientific experiment. Finally he offered me an invitation. It is to take place next Monday evening in a little hotel on the Norfolk coast where Mr Papulous says the ideal conditions for his experiment exist.’

Mr Campion’s interest was thoroughly aroused.

‘I should go,’ he said.

Mr Thistledown spread out his hands.

‘I had thought of it,’ he admitted. ‘As I came out of the flat at Half Moon Street I passed a man I knew on the stairs. I won’t mention his name and I won’t say his firm is exactly a rival of ours, but—well, you know how it is. Two or three old firms get the reputation for supplying certain rare vintages. Their names are equally good and naturally there is a certain competition between them. If this fellow has happened on a whole cellar full of this brandy I should like to have as good a chance of buying it as the next man, especially at the price. But in my opinion and in my experience that is too much to hope for, and that is why I have ventured to mention the matter to you.’

A light dawned upon his client.

‘You want me to attend the conference and make certain everything’s above-board?’

‘I hardly dared to suggest it,’ he said, ‘but since you are such an excellent judge, and since your reputation as an investigator—if I may be forgiven the term—is so great, I admit the thought did go through my mind.’

Campion picked up his glass and sniffed its fragrance.

‘My dear man, I’d jump at it,’ he said. ‘Do I pass myself off as a member of the firm?’

Mr Thistledown looked owlsh.

‘In the circumstances I think we might connive at that little inexactitude,’ he murmured. ‘Don’t you?’

‘I think we’ll have to,’ said Mr Campion.

When he saw the ‘little hotel on the Norfolk coast’ at half-past six on the following Monday afternoon the thought came to him that it was extremely fortunate for the proprietor that it should be so suitable for Mr Papulous’s experiment, for it was certainly not designed to be of much interest to any ordinary winter visitor. It was a large country public-house, not old enough to be picturesque, standing by itself at the end of a lane some little distance from a cold and sleepy village. In the summer, no doubt, it provided a headquarters for a great many picnic parties, but in winter it was deserted.

Inside it was warm and comfortable enough, however, and Campion found a curious little company seated round the fire in the lounge. His host rose to greet him and he was aware at once of a considerable personality.

He saw a tall man with a shy ingratiating manner, whose clothes were elegant and whose face was remarkable. His deep-set eyes were dark and intelligent and his wide mouth could smile disarmingly, but the feature which was most distinctive was the way in which his iron-grey hair drew into a clean-cut peak in the centre of his high forehead, giving him an odd, Mephistophelean appearance.

‘Mr Fellowes?’ he said, using the alias Campion and Mr Thistledown had agreed upon. ‘I heard from your firm this morning. Of course I’m very sorry not to have Mr Thistledown here. He says in his note that I am to regard you as his second self. You handle the French side, I understand?’

‘Yes. It was only by chance that I was in England yesterday when Mr Thistledown asked me to come.’

‘I see.’ Mr Papulous seemed contented with the explanation. Campion looked a mild, inoffensive young man, even a little foolish.

He was introduced to the rest of the company round the fire and was interested to see that Mr Thistledown had been right in his guess. Half a dozen of the best-known smaller and older wine firms were represented, in most cases by their senior partners.

Conversation, however, was not as general as might have been expected among men of such similar interests. On the contrary, there was a distinct atmosphere of restraint, and it occurred to Mr Campion that they were all close rivals and each man had not expected to see the others.

Mr Papulous alone seemed happily unconscious of any discomfort. He stood behind his chair at the head of the group and glanced round him with satisfaction.

‘It’s really very kind of you all to have come,’ he said in his deep musical voice. ‘Very kind indeed. I felt we must have experts, the finest experts in the world, to test this thing, because it’s revolutionary—absolutely revolutionary.’

A large old gentleman with a hint of superciliousness in his manner glanced up.

‘When are we going to come to the horses, Mr Papulous?’

His host turned to him with a depreciatory smile.

‘Not until after dinner, I’m afraid, Mr Jerome. I’m sorry to seem so secretive, but the whole nature of the discovery is so extraordinary that I want you to see the demonstration with your own eyes.’

Mr Jerome, whose name Campion recognized as belonging to the moving spirit of Bolitho Brothers, of St Mary Axe, seemed only partly mollified. He laughed.

‘Is it the salubrious air of this particular hotel that you need for your experiment, may I ask?’ he inquired.

‘Oh no, my dear sir. It’s the stillness.’ Mr Papulous appeared to be completely oblivious of any suggestion of a sneer. ‘It’s the utter quiet. At night, round about ten o’clock, there is a lack of vibration here, so complete that you can almost feel it, if I may use such a contradiction in terms. Now, Mr Fellowes, dinner’s at seven-thirty. Perhaps you’d care to see your room?’

Campion was puzzled. As he changed for the meal—a gesture which seemed to be expected of him—he surveyed the situation with growing curiosity. Papulous was no ordinary customer. He managed to convey an air of conspiracy and mystery while appearing himself as open and simple as the day. Whatever he was up to, he was certainly a good salesman.

The dinner was simple and well cooked and was served by Papulous’s own man. There was no alcohol and the dishes were not highly seasoned, out of deference, their host explained, to the test that was to be put to their palates later on.

When it was over and the mahogany had been cleared of dessert, a glass of water was set before each guest and from the head of the table Mr Papulous addressed his guests. He made a very distinguished figure, leaning forward across the polished wood, the candle-light flickering on his deeply lined face and high heart-shaped forehead.

‘First of all let me recapitulate,’ he said. ‘You all know my name and you have all been kind enough to say that you have read my little book. I mention this because I want you to realize that by asking you down here to witness a most extraordinary demonstration I am taking my reputation in my hands. Having made that point, let me remind you that you have, each of you, with the single exception of Mr Fellowes, been kind enough to give me your considered views on a sample of brandy which I sent you. In every case, I need hardly mention, opinion was the same—a Champagne Fine of 1835.’

A murmur of satisfaction not untinged with relief ran round the table and Mr Papulous smiled.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘frankly that would have been my own opinion had I not known—mark you, I say “known”—that the brandy I sent you was a raw cognac of nearly a hundred years later—to be exact, of 1932.’

There was a moment of bewilderment, followed by an explosion from Mr Jerome.

‘I hope you’re not trying to make fools of us, sir,’ he said severely. ‘I’m not going to sit here, and—’

‘One moment, one moment.’ Papulous spoke soothingly. ‘You really must forgive me. I know you all too well by repute to dare to make such a statement without following it immediately by the explanation to which you are entitled. As you’re all aware, the doctoring of brandy is an old game. Such dreadful additions as vanilla and burnt sugar have all been used in their time and will, no doubt, be used again, but such crude deceptions are instantly detected by the cultured palate. This is something different.’

Mr Jerome began to seethe.

‘Are you trying to interest us in a fake, sir?’ he demanded. ‘Because, if so, let me tell you I, for one, am not interested.’

There was a chorus of hasty assent in which Mr Campion virtuously joined.

Gervaise Papulous smiled faintly.

‘But of course not,’ he said. ‘We are all experts. The true expert knows that no fake can be successful, even should we so far forget ourselves as to countenance its existence. I am bringing you a discovery—not a trick, not a clever fraud, but a genuine discovery which may revolutionize the whole market. As you know, time is the principal factor in the maturing of spirits.’

Until now time has been the one factor which could not be artificially replaced. An old brandy, therefore, is quite a different thing from a new one.'

Mr Campion blinked. A light was beginning to dawn upon him.

Mr Papulous continued. There seemed to be no stopping him. At the risk of boring his audience he displayed a great knowledge of technical detail and went through the life history of an old liqueur brandy from the time it was an unripe grapeskin on a vine outside Cognac.

When he had finished he paused dramatically, adding softly:

'What I hope to introduce to you tonight, gentlemen, is the latest discovery of science, a method of speeding up this long and wearisome process so that the whole business of maturing the spirit takes place in a few minutes instead of a hundred years. You have all examined the first-fruits of this method already and have been interested enough to come down here. Shall we go on?'

The effect of his announcement was naturally considerable. Everybody began to talk at once save Mr Campion, who sat silent and thoughtful. It occurred to him that his temporary colleagues were not only interested in making a great deal of money but very much alarmed at the prospect of losing a considerable quantity also.

'If it's true it'll upset the whole damned trade,' murmured his next-door neighbour, a little thin man with wispy straw-coloured hair.

Papulous rose. 'In the next room the inventor, M. Philippe Jessant, is waiting to demonstrate,' he said. 'He began work on the idea during the period of prohibition in America and his researches were assisted there by one of the richest men in the world, but when the country was restored to sanity his patron lost interest in the work and he was left to perfect it unassisted. You will find him a simple, uneducated, unbusiness-like man, like many inventors. He came to me for help because he had read my little book and I am doing what I can for him by introducing him to you. Conditions are now ideal. The house is perfectly still. Will you come with me?'

The sceptical but excited little company filed into the large 'commercial' room on the other side of the passage. The place had been stripped of furniture save for a half-circle of chairs and a large deal table. On the table was a curious contraption, vaguely resembling two or three of those

complicated coffee percolators which seemed to be designed solely for the wedding-present trade.

An excitable little man in a long brown overall was standing behind the table. If not an impressive figure, he was certainly an odd one, with his longish hair and gold-rimmed pince-nez.

‘Quiet, please. I must beg of you quiet,’ he commanded, holding up his hand as they appeared. ‘We must have no vibration, no vibration at all, if I am to succeed.’

He had a harsh voice and a curious foreign accent, which Campion could not instantly trace, but his manner was authoritative and the experts tiptoed gently to their seats.

‘Now,’ said Mr Jessant, his small eyes flashing, ‘I leave all explanations to my friend here. For me, I am only interested in the demonstration. You understand?’

He glared at them and Papulous hastened to explain.

‘Mr Jessant does not mean the human voice, of course,’ he murmured. ‘It is vibration, sudden movement, of which he is afraid.’

‘Quiet,’ cut in the inventor impatiently. ‘When a spirit matures in the ordinary way what does it have?—quiet, darkness, peace. These conditions are essential. Now we will begin, if you please.’

It was a simple business. A clear-glass decanter of brandy was produced and duly smelt and sampled by each guest. Papulous himself handed round the glasses and poured the liquid. By unanimous consent it was voted a raw spirit. The years 1932 and 1934 were both mentioned.

Then the same decanter was emptied into the contraption on the table and its progress watched through a system of glass tubes and a filter into a large retort-shaped vessel at the foot of the apparatus.

M. Jessant looked up.

‘Now,’ he said softly. ‘You will come, one at a time, please, and examine my invention. Walk softly.’

The inspection was made and the man in the brown overall covered the retort with a hood composed of something that looked like black rubber. For a while he busied himself with thermometers and a little electric battery.

‘It is going on now,’ he explained, suppressed excitement in his voice. ‘Every second roughly corresponds to a year—a long, dark, dismal year.’

Now—we shall see.’

The hood was removed, fresh glasses brought, and the retort itself carefully detached from the rest of the apparatus.

Mr Jerome was the first to examine the liquid it contained and his expression was ludicrous in its astonishment.

‘It’s incredible!’ he said at last. ‘Incredible! I can’t believe it. . . . There are certain tests I should like to make, of course, but I could swear this is an 1835 brandy.’

The others were of the same opinion and even Mr Campion was impressed. The inventor was persuaded to do his experiment again. To do him justice he complied willingly.

‘It is the only disadvantage,’ he said. ‘So little can be treated at the one time. I tell my friend I should like to make my invention foolproof and sell the machines and the instructions to the public, but he tells me no.’

‘No indeed!’ ejaculated Mr Campion’s neighbour. ‘Good heavens! it would knock the bottom out of half my trade. . . .’

When at last the gathering broke up in excitement it was after midnight. Mr Papulous addressed his guests.

‘It is late,’ he said. ‘Let us go to bed now and consider the whole matter in the morning when M. Jessant can explain the theory of his process. Meanwhile, I am sure you will agree with me that we all have something to think about.’

A somewhat subdued company trooped off upstairs. There was little conversation. A man does not discuss a revolutionary discovery with his nearest rival.

Campion came down in the morning to find Mr Jerome already up. He was pacing the lounge and turned on the young man almost angrily.

‘I like to get up at six,’ he said without preamble, ‘but there were no servants in the place. A woman, her husband and a maid came along at seven. It seems Papulous made them sleep out. Afraid of vibration, I suppose. Well, it’s an extraordinary discovery, isn’t it? If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes I should never have believed it. I suppose one’s got to be prepared for progress, but I can’t say I like it. Never did.’

He lowered his voice and came closer.

‘We shall have to get together and suppress it, you know,’ he said. ‘Only thing to do. We can’t have a thing like this blurted out to the public and we can’t have any single firm owning the secret. Anyway, that’s my opinion.’

Campion murmured that he did not care to express his own without first consulting Mr Thistledown.

‘Quite, quite. There’ll be a good many conferences in the City this afternoon,’ said Mr Jerome gloomily. ‘And that’s another thing. D’you know there isn’t a telephone in this confounded pub?’

Campion’s eyes narrowed.

‘Is that so?’ he said softly. ‘That’s very interesting.’

Mr Jerome shot him a suspicious glance.

‘In my opinion. . .’ he began heavily, but got no further. The door was thrust open and the small wispy-haired man, who had been Campion’s neighbour at dinner, came bursting into the room.

‘I say,’ he said, ‘a frightful thing! The little inventor chap has been attacked in the night. His machine is smashed and the plans and formula are stolen. Poor old Papulous is nearly off his head.’

Both Campion and Jerome started for the doorway and a moment later joined the startled group on the landing. Gervaise Papulous, an impressive figure in a long black dressing-gown, was standing with his back to the inventor’s door.

‘This is terrible, terrible!’ he was saying. ‘I beseech you all, go downstairs and wait until I see what is best to be done. My poor friend has only just regained consciousness.’

Jerome pushed his way through the group.

‘But this is outrageous,’ he began.

Papulous towered over him, his eyes dark and angry.

‘It is just as you say, outrageous,’ he said, and Mr Jerome quailed before the suppressed fury in his voice.

‘Look here,’ he began, ‘you surely don’t think . . . you’re not insinuating. . .’

‘I am only thinking of my poor friend,’ said Mr Papulous.

Campion went quietly downstairs.

‘What on earth does this mean?’ demanded the small wispy-haired gentleman, who had remained in the lounge.

Campion grinned. ‘I rather fancy we shall all find that out pretty clearly in about an hour,’ he said.

He was right. Mr Gervaise Papulous put the whole matter to them in the bluntest possible way as they sat dejectedly looking at the remains of what had proved a very unsatisfactory breakfast.

M. Jessant, his head in bandages and his face pale with exhaustion, had told a heart-breaking story. He had awakened to find a pad of chloroform across his mouth and nose. It was dark and he could not see his assailant, who also struck him repeatedly. His efforts to give the alarm were futile and in the end the anaesthetic had overpowered him.

When at last he had come to himself his apparatus had been smashed and his precious black pocket-book, which held his calculations and which he always kept under his pillow, had gone.

At this point he had broken down completely and had been led away by Papulous’s man. Mr Gervaise Papulous then took the floor. He looked pale and nervous and there was an underlying suggestion of righteous anger and indignation in his manner which was very impressive.

‘I won’t waste time by telling you how appalled I am by this monstrous attack,’ he began, his fine voice trembling. ‘I can only tell you the facts. We were alone in this house last night. Even my own man slept out in the village. I arranged this to ensure ideal conditions for the experiment. The landlady reports that the doors were locked this morning and the house had not been entered from the outside. Now you see what this means? Until last night only the inventor and I knew of the existence of a secret which is of such great importance to all of you here. Last night we told you, we took you into our confidence, and now. . . .’ he shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well, we have been robbed and my friend assaulted. Need I say more?’

An excited babble of protest arose and Mr Jerome seemed in danger of apoplexy. Papulous remained calm and a little contemptuous.

‘There is only one thing to do,’ he said, ‘but I hesitated before calling in the police, because, of course, only one of you can be guilty and the secret must still be in the house, whereas I know the publicity which cannot be avoided will be detrimental to you all. And not only to yourselves personally, but to the firms you represent.’

He paused and frowned.

‘The Press is so ignorant,’ he said. ‘I am so afraid you may all be represented as having come here to see some sort of faking process—new brandy into old. It doesn’t sound convincing, does it?’

His announcement burst like a bomb in the quiet room. Mr Jerome sat very still, his mouth partly open. Somebody began to speak, but thought better of it. A long unhappy silence supervened.

Gervaise Papulous cleared his throat.

‘I am sorry,’ he said. ‘I must either have my friend’s note-book back and full compensation, or I must send for the police. What else can I do?’

Mr Jerome pulled himself together.

‘Wait,’ he said in a smothered voice. ‘Before you do anything rash we must have a conference. I’ve been thinking over this discovery of yours, Mr Papulous, and in my opinion it raises very serious considerations for the whole trade.’

There was a murmur of agreement in the room and he went on.

‘The one thing none of us can afford is publicity. In the first place, even if the thing becomes generally known it certainly won’t become generally believed. The public doesn’t rely on its palate; it relies on our labels, and that puts us in a very awkward position. This final development precipitates everything. We must clear up this mystery in private and then decide what is best to be done.’

There was a vigorous chorus of assent, but Mr Papulous shook his head.

‘I’m afraid I can’t agree,’ he said coldly. ‘In the ordinary way M. Jessant and I would have been glad to meet you in any way, but this outrage alters everything. I insist on a public examination unless, of course,’ he added deliberately, ‘unless you care to take the whole matter out of our hands.’

‘What do you mean?’ Mr Jerome’s voice was faint.

The tall man with the deeply lined face regarded him steadily.

‘Unless you care to club together and buy us out,’ said Mr Papulous. ‘Then you can settle the matter as you like. The sum M. Jessant had in mind was fifteen thousand pounds, a very reasonable price for such a secret.’

There was silence after he had spoken.

‘Blackmail,’ said Mr Campion under his breath and at the same moment his glance lighted on Mr Papulous’s most outstanding feature. His eyebrows

rose and an expression of incredulity, followed by amazement, passed over his face. Then he kicked himself gently under the breakfast table. He rose.

‘I must send a wire to my principal,’ he said. ‘You’ll understand I’m in an impossible position and must get in touch with Mr Thistledown at once.’

Papulous regarded him.

‘If you will write your message my man will despatch it from the village,’ he said politely and there was no mistaking the implied threat.

Campion understood he was not to be allowed to make any private communication with the outside world. He looked blank.

‘Thank you,’ he said and took out a pencil and a loose-leaf note-book.

‘Unexpected development,’ he wrote. ‘Come down immediately. Inform Charlie and George cannot lunch Tuesday. A. C. Fellowes.’

Papulous took the message, read it and went out with it, leaving a horrified group behind him.

Mr Thistledown received Mr Campion’s wire at eleven o’clock and read it carefully. The signature particularly interested him. Shutting himself in his private room, he rang up Scotland Yard and was fortunate in discovering Superintendent Oates at his desk. He dictated the wire carefully and added with a depreciatory cough:

‘Mr Campion told me to send on to you any message from him signed with his own initials. I don’t know if you can make much of this. It seems very ordinary to me.’

‘Leave all that to us, sir.’ Oates sounded cheerful. ‘Where is he, by the way?’

Mr Thistledown gave the address and hung up the receiver. At the other end of the wire the Superintendent unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a small red manuscript book. Each page was ruled with double columns and filled with Mr Campion’s own elegant handwriting. Oates ran a forefinger down the left-hand column on the third page.

‘Carrie . . . Catherine . . . Charles. . . .’

His eye ran across the page.

‘Someone you want,’ he read and looked on down the list.

The legend against the word ‘George’ was brief. ‘Two’, it said simply.

Oates turned to the back of the book. There were several messages under the useful word 'lunch'. 'Come to lunch' meant 'Send two men'. 'Lunch with me' was translated 'Send men armed', and 'Cannot lunch' was 'Come yourself'.

'Tuesday' was on another page. The Superintendent did not trouble to look it up. He knew its meaning. It was 'hurry'.

He wrote the whole message out on a pad.

'Unexpected developments. Come down immediately. Someone you want (two). Come yourself. Hurry. Campion.'

He sighed. 'Energetic chap,' he commented and pressed a bell for Sergeant Bloom.

As it happened, it was Mr Gervaise Papulous himself who caught the first glimpse of the police car which pulled up outside the lonely little hotel. He was standing by the window in an upper room whose floor was so flimsily constructed that he could listen with ease to the discussion taking place in the lounge below. There the unfortunate experts were still arguing. The only point on which they all agreed was the absolute necessity of avoiding a scandal.

As the car stopped and the Superintendent sprang out and made for the door, Papulous caught a glimpse of his official-looking figure. He swung round savagely to the forlorn little figure who sat hunched up on the bed.

'You peached, damn you!' he whispered.

'Me?' The man who had been calling himself 'Jessant' sat up in indignation. 'Me peach?' he repeated, his foreign accent fading into honest South London. 'Don't be silly. And you pay up, my lad. I'm fed up with this. First I do me stuff, then you chloroform me, then you bandage me, then you keep me shut up 'ere, and now you accuse me of splitting. What you playing at?'

'You're lying, you little rat.' Papulous's voice was dangerously soft and he strode swiftly across the room towards the man on the bed, who shrank back in sudden alarm.

'Here—that'll do, that'll do. What's going on here?'

It was Oates who spoke. Followed by Campion and the sergeant he strode across the room.

‘Let the fellow go,’ he commanded. ‘Good heavens, man, you’re choking him.’

Doubling his fist, he brought it up under the other man’s wrists with a blow which not only loosed their hold but sent their owner staggering back across the room.

The man on the bed let out a howl and stumbled towards the door into the waiting arms of Sergeant Bloom, but Oates did not notice him. His eyes were fixed upon the face of the tall man on the other side of the room.

‘The Widow!’ he ejaculated. ‘Well I’ll be damned!’

The other smiled.

‘More than probably, my dear Inspector. Or have they promoted you?’ he said. ‘But at the moment I’m afraid you’re trespassing.’

The Superintendent glanced inquiringly at the mild and elegant figure at his side.

‘False pretences is the charge,’ murmured Mr Campion affably. ‘There are certain rather unpleasant traces of blackmail in the matter, but false pretences will do. There are six witnesses and myself.’

The man whose alias was The Widow stared at his accuser.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded, and then, as the answer dawned upon him, he swore softly. ‘Campion,’ he said. ‘Albert Campion . . . I ought to have recognized you from your description.’

Campion grinned. ‘That’s where I had the advantage of you,’ he said.

Mr Campion and the Superintendent drove back to London together, leaving a very relieved company of experts to travel home in their own ways. Oates was jubilant.

‘Got him,’ he said. ‘Got him at last. And a clear case. A pretty little swindle, too. Just like him. If you hadn’t been there all those poor devils would have paid up something. They’re the kind of people he goes for, folk whose business depends on their absolute integrity. They all represent small firms, you see, with old, conservative clients. When did you realize that he wasn’t the real Gervaise Papulous?’

‘As soon as I saw him I thought it unlikely.’ Campion grinned as he spoke. ‘Before I left town I rang up the publishers of the Papulous monograph. They had lost sight of him, they said, but from their publicity department I learned that Papulous was born in ’72. So as soon as I saw our

friend The Widow I realized that he was a good deal younger than the real man. However, like a fool I didn't get on to the swindle until this morning. It was when he was putting on that brilliant final act of his. I suddenly recognized him and, of course, the whole thing came to me in a flash.'

'Recognized him?' Oates looked blank. 'I never described him to you.'

Mr Champion looked modest. 'D'you remember showing off to a very pretty girl I brought up to your office, and so far forgetting yourself as to produce an advertisement from an evening paper?' he inquired.

'I remember the ad,' Oates said doggedly. 'The fellow advertised for a kids' entertainer. But I don't remember him including a photograph of himself.'

'He printed his name,' Champion persisted. 'It's a funny nickname. The significance didn't occur to me until I looked at him this morning, knowing that he was a crook. I realized that he was tricking us, but I couldn't see how. Then his face gave him away.'

'His face?'

'My dear fellow, you haven't spotted it yet. I'm glad of that. It didn't come to me for a bit. Consider that face. How do crooks get their names? How did Beaky Doyle get his name? Why was Cauliflower Edwards so called? Think of his forehead, man. Think of his hair.'

'Peak,' said the Superintendent suddenly. 'Of course, a widow's peak! Funny I didn't think of that before. It's obvious when it comes to you. But even so,' he added more seriously, 'I wonder you cared to risk sending for me on that alone. Plenty of people have a widow's peak. You'd have looked silly if he'd been on the level.'

'Oh, but I had the advertisement as well,' Champion objected. 'Taken in conjunction, the two things are obvious. That demonstration last night was masterly. Young brandy went in at one end of the apparatus and old brandy came out at the other, and we saw, or thought we saw, the spirit the whole time. There was only one type of man who could have done it—a children's party entertainer.'

Oates shook his head.

'I'm only a poor demented policeman,' he said derisively. 'My mind doesn't work. I'll buy it.'

Champion turned to him. 'My good Oates, have you ever been to a children's party?'

‘No.’

‘Well, you’ve been a child, I suppose?’

‘I seem to remember something like it.’

‘Well, when you were a child what entertained you? Singing? Dancing? *The Wreck of the Hesperus*? No, my dear friend, there’s only one kind of performer who goes down well with children and that is a member of the brotherhood of which Jessant is hardly an ornament. A magician, Oates. In other words, a conjurer. And a damned good trick he showed us all last night!’

He trod on the accelerator and the car rushed on again.

The Superintendent sat silent for a long time. Then he glanced up.

‘That *was* a pretty girl,’ he said. ‘Nice manners, too.’

‘Leonie?’ Champion nodded. ‘That reminds me, I must phone her when we get back to town.’

‘Oh?’ The Superintendent was interested. ‘Nothing I can do for you, I suppose?’ he inquired archly.

Campion smiled. ‘Hardly,’ he said. ‘I want to tell her she owes me two pounds.’

THE CASE OF THE NAME ON THE WRAPPER

Mr Albert Campion was one of those useful if at times exasperating people who remain interested in the world in general at three o'clock on a chilly winter's morning. When he saw the overturned car, dark and unattended by the grass verge, therefore, he pulled up his own saloon and climbed out on to the road, whose frosty surface was glistening like a thousand diamonds.

His lean figure wrapped in a dark overcoat was rendered slightly top-heavy by the fact that he wore over it a small travelling-rug arranged as a cape. This sartorial anachronism was not of his own devising. His dinner hostess, old Mrs Laverock, was notorious both for her strong will and her fear of throat infections, and when Mr Campion had at last detached himself from her husband's brandy and reminiscences she had appeared at the top of the Jacobean staircase, swaddled in pink velvet, with the rug in her arms.

'Either that young man wears this round his throat or he does not leave this house.'

The edict went forth with more authority than ever her husband had been able to dispense from the bench, and Mr Campion had gone out into the night for a fifty-mile run back to Piccadilly wearing the rug, with his silk hat perched precariously above it.

Now, its folds, which reached his nose, prevented him from seeing that part of the ground which lay directly at his feet, so that he kicked the ring and sent it wheeling down the moonlit road before he saw it. The coloured flash in the pale light caught his attention and he went after it. It lay in his hand a few minutes later, as unattractive a piece of jewellery as ever he had been called upon to consider. It was a circle of different-coloured stones mounted on heavy gold, and was certainly unusual, if not particularly beautiful or valuable. He thrust it absently into his coat pocket before he resumed his investigation of the abandoned car.

He had just decided that the departed driver had been either drunk or certifiably insane in the moment of disaster when the swift crackle of bicycle wheels on the frost behind him made him swing round, and he found himself confronted by another caped figure who came to a wobbling and suspicious halt at his elbow.

‘Now, now, there’s no use you putting up a fight. I ain’t alone, and if I were I’m more’n a match for you.’

The effect of these two thundering lies uttered in a pleasant country voice rendered unnaturally high by what was, no doubt, excusable nervousness, delighted Mr Champion, but unfortunately the folds of his hostess’s rug hid his disarming smile and the country policeman stood gripping his bicycle as if it were a weapon.

‘You’re caught!’ he said, his East Anglian accent bringing the final word out in a roar of triumph not altogether justified. ‘Take off your mask.’

‘My what?’ Mr Champion’s startled question was muffled by his drapery, and he pulled it down to let his chin out.

‘That’s right,’ said the constable with a return of confidence, as his prisoner appeared so tractable. ‘Now, what have you been a-doing of? Answer up. It’ll be best for you.’

‘My good oaf’—Mr Champion’s tone was forgiving—‘you’re making an ass of yourself, and I should hold that bicycle still if I were you or you’ll get the back wheel between your legs and fall over it.’

‘Now then, no names, no names, if you please, sir.’ The Law was showing signs of disquiet again, but the bicycle was straightened hastily. ‘You’ll have to come down to see the Inspector.’

Mr Champion’s astonishment began to grow visible and convincing, for, after all, the country bobby is not as a rule a night bird of prey.

‘Look here,’ he said patiently, ‘this pathetic-looking mess here isn’t *my* car.’

‘No, I know that’s not.’ The triumphant note crept into the constable’s voice again. ‘I seen the number as soon as I come up.’

‘Since you’ve observed so much,’ continued Mr Champion politely, ‘would it be tasteless to inquire if you’ve noticed that?’

He swung round as he spoke and pointed to his own car, standing like a silver ghost a few yards down the road.

‘Eh?’ The Law was evidently taken by surprise. ‘Oh, you ran into him, did you? Where is he?’

Champion sighed and embarked on the slow process of convincing his captor that the car ahead belonged to him, his licences were in order, and that he was properly and expensively insured. He also gave his own name

and address, Colonel Laverock's name and address, and the time at which he had left the house. By way of full measure he also delivered a short lecture on 'Cars and How to Overturn Them', with special reference to the one on the verge, and was finally conducted to his own vehicle and grudgingly permitted to depart.

'I don't really know as how you oughtn't to have come along to find the Inspector,' said the constable finally as he leaned on the low near-side door. 'You didn't ought to have been masked. I'll have to report it. That rug might have been to protect your throat, but then that might not.'

'That cape of yours may be buttoned up against the cold or it may be worn simply to disguise the fact that your tunic is loosened at the throat,' retorted Mr Campion, and, letting in the clutch, he drove away, leaving a startled countryman with the conviction that he had actually encountered a man with X-ray eyes at last.

On the by-pass Mr Campion ran into a police cordon, and once again was subjected to a searching inquiry concerning his licences. Having been, in his opinion, held up quite long enough while the police fooled about looking for stolen cars, he said nothing about the overturned one, but drove peacefully home to his flat in Bottle Street and went to bed. His ridiculous encounter with the excitable constable had driven all recollection of the ring from his head and he thought no more about it until it appeared on his breakfast table the following morning.

His man had discovered it in the coat pocket, and, deducing the conventional worst, had set it out with an air of commiseration not altogether tactful; anxious, no doubt, that his employer should remember first thing in the morning any lady who might have refused him on the night before.

Campion put aside *The Times* with regret and took up the ring. By morning light it was even less beautiful than it had appeared under the moon. It was a woman's size and was heavy in the baroque fashion that has returned after fifty or sixty years. Some of the stones, which ran all the way round the hoop, were very good and some were not; and as he sat looking at it his eyebrows rose. He was still admiring it as a curio rather than a work of art when his old friend Superintendent Stanislaus Oates rang up from Scotland Yard. He sounded heavily amused.

‘So you’ve been running round the country in disguise, have you?’ he said cheerfully. ‘Like to come in for a chat this morning?’

‘Not particularly. What for?’

‘I want an explanation for a telephoned report which has come in this morning. We’ve been called in by the Colnewych police on a very interesting little case. I’m going over the stuff now. I’ll expect you in half an hour.’

‘All right.’ Mr Campion did not sound enthusiastic. ‘Shall I wear my mask?’

‘Come with your head in a bag, if you like,’ invited the Superintendent vulgarly. ‘Keep your throat wrapped up. There’s nothing like an old sock, they say. Place the toe upon the windpipe and . . .’

Mr Campion rang off.

Half an hour later, however, he presented himself at the Superintendent’s office and sat, affable and exquisite, in the visitor’s chair. Oates dismissed his secretary and leaned over the desk. His grey face, which was usually so lugubrious, had brightened considerably as Campion appeared and now he had some difficulty in hiding a grin of satisfaction.

‘Driving round the country with a topper over your eyes and a blanket round your neck at three o’clock in the morning,’ he said. ‘You *must* have been lit. Still, I won’t go into that. I’ll be magnanimous. What do you know about this business?’

‘I’m innocent,’ announced his visitor flatly. ‘Whatever it is, I haven’t done it. I went out to dinner with a wealthy and childless godparent. I mention this in case your mercenary soul may not be able to believe that any sober man will motor fifty miles into the wilds of East Anglia for a meal. When I left, my godparent’s wife, who once had tonsillitis as a child and has never forgotten it, lent me a small rug. (It is sixty inches by sixty inches and is of a rather lurid tartan which I am not entitled to wear.) As she will tell you, if you ask her, she safety-pinned this firmly to the back of my neck. On my way home I passed a very interestingly overturned car, and while I was looking at it a large red-faced ape dressed up as a policeman attempted to arrest me. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.’

‘Then you don’t know anything about the crime?’ The Superintendent was disappointed but unabashed. ‘I’ll tell you. You never know, you might

be useful.’

‘It has happened,’ murmured Mr Campion.

‘It’s a case of robbery,’ went on Oates, ignoring the interruption. ‘A real big haul. The assessors are on to it now, but, roughly speaking, it’s in the neighbourhood of twenty thousand pounds’ worth of jewellery and little boxes.’

‘Little boxes?’

‘Snuff-boxes and patch-boxes, enamel things covered with diamonds and what-not.’ Oates sounded contemptuous and Campion laughed.

‘People of ostentatious tastes?’ he ventured.

‘No, it’s a collection of antiques,’ said Oates seriously, and looked up to find Campion grinning. ‘You’re a bit lah-di-blinking-dah today, aren’t you?’ he protested. ‘What is it? The effects of your night on the tiles? Look here, you pay attention, my lad. You were found nosing round the wreckage of a car thought to have been driven by the thief or thieves, and the very least you can do is to try and make yourself useful. Last night there was a bit of a do at St Brede’s Priory, about five miles away from your godpapa’s place. It was a largish show, and the place, which seems to be about as big as the British Museum and rather like it, was full to bursting.’

Campion stared at him.

‘You’re talking about the Hunt Ball at old Allenbrough’s private house, I take it?’ he put in mildly.

‘Then you do know about it?’

‘I don’t know about the robbery. I know about the Ball. It’s an annual affair. Old Porky Allenbrough’s ball is almost an institution, like the Lord Mayor’s Show—it’s very like that in general effect, too, now I come to think of it. I used to attend regularly when I was young.’

Oates sniffed.

‘Well, anyway, there seem to have been close on five hundred people gathered together there,’ he said. ‘They were all over the house and grounds, cars going and coming all the time. A real party, the local Super says it was. All we know is that about two o’clock, just when the crowd was thinning a bit, her ladyship goes up to her room and finds her jewellery gone and her famous collection of antiques pinched out of the glass-fronted cupboard in the boudoir next door to her bedroom.’

‘All the servants were downstairs watching the fun, of course, and hadn’t seen a thing. The local police decided it must have been a professional job and they flung a cordon round the whole district. They figured that a crook had taken advantage of the general excitement to burgle the place in the ordinary way. They were very smart on the job, but they didn’t lay hands on a single “pro”. In fact, the only suspicious character who showed up during the whole of the evening was a lad in a top hat with a plaid blanket—’

‘What about that overturned car?’ interrupted his visitor.

‘I’m coming to that,’ said Oates severely. ‘Wait a minute. That car belonged to a very respectable couple who went to the dance and stayed at it. They were just going to leave when the alarm was given and it was then they discovered the car had been stolen. The gardeners who were acting as car-park attendants didn’t remember it going, but then, as they said, cars were moving in and out all the evening. People would drive ’em off a little way to sit out in. It was a real old muddle by the sound of it. The Super told me on the ’phone that in his opinion every manservant on the place was as tight as a lord the whole evening.’

‘And every lord as tight as a drum, no doubt,’ added Mr Campion cheerfully. ‘Very likely. It sounds like the good old days before the Conferences. I see. Well, the suggestion is that the car was pinched by the burglar, who used it to escape in. What did he arrive in? A howdah?’

Oates sat back and scratched his chin.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That’s the trouble. The police are in a bit of a difficulty. You see, her ladyship is howling for the return of her valuables, but neither she nor her husband will admit for an instant that one of their guests might be the culprit. That was the awkward thing at the time. A watch was kept on those guests who left after the discovery of the theft, but no one was searched, of course.’

Mr Campion was silent for a moment.

‘These shows are done in parties,’ he remarked at last. ‘People take a party to a ball like that. Porky and his missis would invite a hundred friends or so and ask them each to bring a party. It’s a private affair, you see, not an ordinary Hunt Ball. Allenbrough calls it the Whippersfield Hunt Ball because he likes to see a pink coat or two about. He’s M.F.H. and can do what he likes, and it’s a wealthy hunt, anyway. Yes, I see the trouble. I don’t envy the local Super if he has to go round to all old Allenbrough’s pals and

say: "Excuse me, but did you include a professional jewel-thief in the party you took to the ball at St Brede's on the twenty-third last?"

'I know. That's what it amounts to.' Oates was gloomy. 'Got any ideas? You're our Society expert.'

'Am I? Well, in that capacity let me advise you that such a course would provoke endless correspondence both to the Chief Constable and the heavier daily Press. You're sure this was a professional job?'

'Yes. The jewellery was in a wall-safe which had been very neatly cracked and the show cupboard had been opened by an expert. Also there were no finger-prints.'

'No trade-marks, either, I expect?'

'No, it was a simple job for a "pro". It didn't call for anything sensational. It was simply far too neat for an amateur, that's all. We're rounding up all the likelies, of course, but with such a field to choose from the right man may easily slip the stuff before we can get round to him.'

Mr Champion rose.

'You have all my sympathy. It's not what you yourself would call a picnic, is it? Still, I'll ferret round a bit and let you have any great thoughts that may come to me. By the way, what do you think of that?'

He crossed the room and he spoke and laid the many-stoned ring on the desk.

'Not very much,' said Oates, turning it over with a dubious forefinger. 'Where did you get it?'

'I picked it up in the street,' said Mr Champion truthfully. 'I ought to take it to a police station, but I don't think I will. I'd rather like to give it back to the owner myself.'

'Do what you like with it, my lad.' Oates was mildly exasperated. 'Keep your mind on the important jewellery, because now Scotland Yard has taken over the case it means the Metropolitan area pays for the inquiry; don't forget that.'

Champion was still looking at the ring.

'Anyway, I showed it to you,' he said, and wandered towards the door.

'Don't waste your time over trifles,' Oates called after him. 'You can have that ring. If anybody asks you, say I said you could.'

It would have appeared that Mr Campion took the Superintendent's final offer seriously, for he replaced the trinket carefully in his waistcoat pocket before turning into the nearest telephone booth, where he rang up that unfailing source of Society gossip, old Lady Laradine. After listening to her for a full two minutes, while she asked after every relative he had in the world, he put the question he had in mind.

'Who is Gina Gray? I've heard the name, but I can't place her. Gray. Gray with an A.'

'My dear boy! So pretty! Just the girl for you. Oh no, perhaps not. I've just remembered she's engaged. Announced last month. Still, she's very charming.' The old voice, which was strong enough to penetrate any first-night babel in London, rattled on, and Campion felt for another twopence.

'I know,' he shouted. 'I know she's lovely, or at least I guessed she was. But who, *who* is she? Also, of course, where?'

'What? Oh, *where* is she? With her aunt, of course. She's spending the winter there. She's so young, Albert. Straight down from the shires. The father owns a row of Welsh mountains or something equally romantic.'

'Who?' bellowed Mr Campion through the din. 'Who, my good gramophone, is the aunt?'

'What did you call me, Albert?' The famous voice was dangerously soft.

'Gramophone,' said Mr Campion, who was a great believer in the truth when the worst had come to the worst.

'Oh, I thought you said . . . never mind.' Lady Laradine, who had several grandchildren and regarded each new arrival as a personal insult, was mollified. 'I do talk very fast, I know, especially on the 'phone. It's my exuberant spirit. You want to know who the aunt is. Why, Dora Carrington. You know her.'

'I do,' said Campion with relief. 'I didn't realize she had a niece.'

'Oh, but she has; just out of the nest. Presented last year. A sweetly pretty child. Such a pity she's engaged. Tell me, have you any information about Wivenhoe's son? No? Then what about the Pritchards?'

She went on and on with the relentless energy of the very bored, and it was not until Mr Campion ran out of coppers that the monologue came to an end.

It was late in the morning, therefore, when Mr Campion presented himself at the charming Lowndes Square house which Dora Carrington had made her London home.

Miss Gina Gray only decided to see him after a considerable pause, during which, he felt, old Pollard, the butler, must have worked hard vouching for his desirability.

She came into the lounge at last, looking much as he had thought she might, very young and startled, with frank, miserable eyes, but dark, curling hair instead of the sleek blonde he had somehow expected.

He introduced himself apologetically.

‘It’s rather odd turning up like this out of the blue,’ he said, ‘but you’ll have to forgive me. Perhaps you could think of me as a sort of long-lost elderly relative. I might have been your uncle, of course, if Dora had taken it into her head to marry me instead of Tubby, not that the idea ever occurred to either of us at the time, of course. Don’t get that into your head. I only say it might have happened so that you’ll see the sort of reliable bird I am.’

He paused. The alarm had died out of her eyes and she even looked wanly amused. He was relieved. Idiotic conversation, although invaluable, was not a luxury which he often permitted himself now that the thirty-five-year-old landmark was passed.

‘It’s very nice of you to come,’ she said in a polite, small voice. ‘What can I do?’

‘Nothing. I came to return something I think you’ve lost, that’s all.’ He fished in his pocket and drew out the ring. ‘That’s yours, isn’t it?’ he said gently.

He had expected some reaction, but not that it would be so violent. She stood trembling before him, every tinge of colour draining out of her face.

‘Where did you get it?’ she whispered, and then, pulling herself together with a desperate courage which he rather admired, she shook her head. ‘It’s not mine. I’ve never seen it before. I don’t know who you are either, and I—I don’t want to. Please go away.’

‘Oh, Gina Gray!’ said Mr Campion. ‘Gina Gray, don’t be silly. I’m the original old gentleman with the kind heart. Don’t deny the irrefutable.’

‘It’s not mine.’ To his horror he saw tears in her eyes. ‘It’s not mine. It’s not. It’s not. Go away.’

She turned and made for the door, her slender, brown-suited figure looking very small and fugitive as she ran.

Mr Campion was still debating his next move when Dora came in, a vision of fox-furs and smiles.

‘My dear!’ she said. ‘You haven’t been to see us for years and years and now you turn up when I’m due out to lunch in fifteen minutes. Where have you been?’

‘About,’ said Mr Campion truthfully, reflecting that it was all wrong that the people one never had time to visit were always one’s oldest and closest friends.

They drank a cocktail together and were still reminiscing happily when Dora’s luncheon escort arrived. In the end Mr Campion showed his hostess out of her own house and was standing rather forlornly on the pavement, waving after her departing car, when he observed a familiar figure stumping dejectedly down the steps which he had so recently descended himself.

‘Jonathan!’ he said. ‘What are you doing here?’

Mr Jonathan Peters started violently, as if he had been caught sleep-walking, and looked up with only a faint smile on his gloomy young face.

‘Hallo, Campion,’ he said. ‘I didn’t see you. I’ve been kicking my heels in the breakfast-room. Hell! let’s go and have a drink.’

In the end, after some half-hearted bickering, they went along to that home from home, the Junior Greys, and Mr Campion, who, in company with the rest of the world, considered himself to be the best listener on earth, persuaded his young acquaintance to unburden himself.

Jonathan was a younger brother of the two Peters who had been Campion’s Cambridge companions, and in the ordinary way the ten years’ difference in their ages would have raised an insurmountable barrier between them; but at the moment Jonathan was a man with a sorrow.

‘It’s Gina,’ he said ‘We’re engaged, you know.’

‘Really?’ Mr Campion was interested. ‘What’s the row?’

‘Oh, I suppose it’ll be all right in the end.’ The young man sounded wistful and only partially convinced. ‘I mean, I think she’ll come round. Anyway, I hope so. What annoys me is that I’m the one with the grievance,

and yet here I am dithering around as though it were all my fault.' He frowned and shook his head over the unreasonableness of life in general and love in particular.

'You were at Porky Allenbrough's show last night, I suppose?' Mr Campion put the question innocently and was rewarded.

'Yes, we both were. I didn't see you there. There was a tremendous crush and it might have been a really good bust if it hadn't been for one thing and another. I've got a genuine grouch, you know.' Mr Peters' young face was very earnest, and under the influence of half a pint of excellent Chablis he came out with the full story.

As far as Mr Campion could make out from his somewhat disjointed account the history was a simple one. Miss Gina Gray, while enjoying the London season, had yet not wished to give up all strenuous physical exercise and so had formed the habit of hunting with the Whippersfield five or six times a month. On these occasions she had been entertained by a relation of Dora Carrington's husband who lived in the district and had very kindly stabled her horses for her. Her custom had been to run down by car early in the morning, returning to London either at night or on the following day.

In view of all this hospitality, it had been arranged that she should go to the Priors Ball with her host and his party, while Jonathan should attend with another group of people from a different house. The arrangement between the couple had been, therefore, that, while Gina should arrive at the ball with her own crowd, Jonathan should have the privilege of driving her back before rejoining his own host and hostess.

'It was a bit thick,' he concluded resentfully. 'Gina turned up with a crowd of people I didn't know, including a lad whom nobody seemed to have seen before. She danced with him most of the evening and finally he drove her home himself. He left me a message to say so, the little toot. I felt fed up and I imagine I may have got pretty tight, but anyway, when I arrived at the town house this morning ready to forgive and forget like a hero, she wouldn't even see me.'

'Infuriating,' agreed Mr Campion, his eyes thoughtful. 'Did you find out who this interloping tick happened to be?'

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders.

'I did hear his name . . . Robertson, or something. Apparently he's been hunting fairly regularly this season and he came along with Gina's lot.'

That's all I know.'

'What did he look like?'

Jonathan screwed up his eyes in an effort of recollection.

'An ugly blighter,' he said at last. 'Ordinary height, I think. I don't remember much about him except that I disliked his face.'

It was not a very helpful description, but Mr Champion sat pondering over it for some time after the despondent Jonathan had wandered off to keep an afternoon appointment.

Suddenly he sat up, a new expression on his lean, good-humoured face.

'Rocks,' he said under his breath. 'Rocks Denver . . .' and he made for the nearest telephone.

It was nine o'clock that evening when Superintendent Oates came striding into his office and, flinging his hat upon the desk, turned to survey the elegant, dinner-jacketed visitor who had been patiently awaiting his arrival for the best part of half an hour.

'Got him,' he said briefly. 'The lads shadowed him to Peachy Dale's club in Rosebery Avenue, and then, of course, we knew we were safe. Peachy may be a rotten fence, but he's the only man in London who would have handled those snuff-boxes, now I come to think of it. It was a lovely little cop. We gave him time to get settled and then closed in on all five entrances. There he was with the stuff in a satchel. It was beautiful. I've never seen a man so astounded in my life.'

He paused and a reminiscent smile floated over his sad face.

'A little work of art, that's what that arrest was, a little work of art.'

'That's fine, then,' said his visitor, rising. 'I think I'll drift.'

'No you don't, my lad.' The Superintendent was firm. 'You don't do conjuring tricks under my nose without an explanation. You come across.'

Mr Champion sighed.

'My dear good Enthusiast, what more can you possibly want?' he protested. 'You've got the man and you've got the swag. That's enough for a conviction—and Porky's blessing.'

‘Very likely, but what about my dignity?’ Oates was severe. ‘It may be enough for the Bench, but it’s not enough for me. Who do you think you are, the Home Office?’

‘Heaven forbid,’ said Mr Campion piously. ‘I thought you might express your ingratitude in this revolting way. Look here, if I explain, my witness doesn’t go into Court. Is that a bet?’

The Superintendent held out his hand.

‘May I be struck pink,’ he said sincerely. ‘I mean it.’

Since he knew from experience that this was an oath that Oates held peculiarly sacred, Mr Campion relented.

‘Give me twenty minutes,’ he said. ‘I’ll go and fetch her.’

Oates groaned. ‘Another woman!’ he exploded. ‘You find ’em, don’t you? All right, I’ll wait.’

Miss Gina Gray looked so genuinely pathetic as she came into the office clinging to Mr Campion’s arm a little over half an hour later that Oates, who had an unexpected weakness for youth and beauty, was inclined to be mollified. Campion observed the first signs of his heavily avuncular mood with relief.

‘It’s perfectly all right,’ he said to the girl at his side. ‘I’ve given you my word you’ll be kept clean out of it. This solemn-looking person will be struck a fine hunting pink if he attempts to make me break it. That’s written in the unchanging stars. Isn’t that so, Superintendent?’

Oates regarded him with fishy eyes.

‘You go and put on your mask,’ he said. ‘Now, what is all this? What’s been going on?’

Gina Gray required a little gentle pumping, but beneath Campion’s expert treatment she began to relax, and within ten minutes she was pouring out her story with all the energy of injured innocence behind it.

‘I met the man I knew as Tony Roberts—you say his real name is Rocks Denver—in the hunting-field,’ she said. ‘He always seemed to be out when I was, and he talked to me as people do out hunting. I didn’t know him, he wasn’t a friend, but I got used to him being about. He rode very well and he helped me out of a mess once or twice. You know that sort of acquaintance, don’t you?’

Oates nodded and shook his head. He was smiling.

‘We do,’ he said. ‘And then what?’

‘Then nothing,’ declared Miss Gray innocently. ‘Nothing at all until last night. We were all getting ready to go to the Priory in three or four cars when he ’phoned me at Major Carrington’s, where I was staying, and said his car had broken down in the village and he’d got to leave it and would it be awful cheek of him to ask if one of us would give him a lift to the hall. I said of course, naturally, and when we met him trudging along, rather disconsolate in full kit, we stopped and picked him up.’

Oates glanced at Campion triumphantly.

‘So that’s how he got in?’ he said. ‘Neat, eh? I see, Miss Gray. And then when you got your acquaintance to the party you didn’t like to leave him cold. Is that how it was?’

The girl blushed and her dark eyes were very frank.

‘Well, he *was* rather out of everything and he *did* dance very well,’ she admitted apologetically. ‘He hadn’t talked much about himself, and it was only then I realized he didn’t live near and didn’t know everybody else. His—his manners were all right.’

Oates laughed. ‘Oh yes, Rocky’s very presentable,’ he agreed. ‘He’s one of the lads who let his old school down, I’m afraid. Well, and then what?’

She hesitated and turned to Campion.

‘I’ve been so incredibly silly,’ she murmured. It was a direct appeal, and the Superintendent was not unchivalrous.

‘There’s nothing new in that, Miss,’ he observed kindly. ‘We all make errors of judgment at times. You missed him for a bit, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I danced with several people and I’d half forgotten him when he turned up at my elbow with a raincoat over his arm. He took me out on the terrace and put it over my shoulders and said—oh, a lot of silly things about being there alone without a soul to speak to. He said he’d found one man he knew, but that he was wrapped up with some woman or other, and suggested that we borrowed this friend’s car and went for a run round. It was getting rather late and I was livid with Jonathan anyway, so I said all right.’

‘Why were you livid with Jonathan?’ Campion put the question curiously and Miss Gray met his eyes.

‘He got jealous as soon as we arrived and drowned his sorrows rather too soon.’

‘I see.’ Champion smiled as he began to understand Mr Peters’ astonishing magnanimity, which had hitherto seemed somewhat too saintly to be strictly in character.

‘Well then . . .’ Oates went back to the main story, ‘. . . off you went in the car. You drove around for quite a while.’

Gina took a deep breath.

‘Yes,’ she said steadily. ‘We drove around for a bit, but not very far. The car wasn’t his, you see, and he had trouble with it. It started all right, but it conked out down the lane and he was fooling about with it for a long time. He got so frightfully angry that I began to feel—well, rather uncomfortable. Also I was cold. He had taken the raincoat off my shoulders and flung it in the back seat, and I remembered that it was heavy and warm, so I turned to get it. Just then he closed the bonnet and came back. He snatched the coat and swore at me, and I began to get thoroughly frightened. I tried to persuade him to take me back, but he just drove on down the lane towards the main road. It was then that we passed the three policemen on motor-cycles racing towards the Priory. That seemed to unnerve him completely and he turned off towards Major Carrington’s house, with the car limping and misfiring all the time. I didn’t know what to do. I was far too frightened to make a row, you see, because I was a guest at the Major’s, and—well, there was Jonathan and Aunt Dora to consider and—oh, you do understand, don’t you?’

‘I think so,’ said Champion gravely. ‘When did you take off your ring?’

She gaped at him.

‘Why, at that moment,’ she said. ‘How did you know? It’s a stupid trick I have when I’m nervous. It was rather loose, and I pulled it off and started to play with it. He looked down and saw me with it and seemed to lose his head. He snatched it out of my hand and demanded to know where I’d got it, and then, when he saw it clearly by the dashboard light, he suddenly pitched it out of the window in disgust. It was so utterly unexpected that I forgot where I was and made a leap for it across him. Then—then I’m afraid the car turned over.’

‘Well, well,’ said Oates inadequately. ‘And so there you were, so to speak.’

She nodded gravely. 'I was so frightened,' she said. 'Fortunately we were quite near the house, but my dress was spoilt and I was shaken and bruised, and I just set off across the fields and let myself in by the stable gate. He came after me, and we had a dreadful sort of row in whispers, out in the drive. He wanted me to put him up for the night, and didn't seem to realize that I was a visitor and couldn't dream of doing such a thing. In the end I showed him where the saddle-room was, off the stable yard. There was a stove there and some rugs and things. Then I sneaked up to my own room and went to bed. This morning I pretended that I'd had a headache and got somebody to give me a lift home. He'd gone by then, of course.'

'Of course he had. Hopped on one of those country 'buses before the servants stirred,' Oates put in with satisfaction. 'He relied on you to hold your tongue for your own sake.'

'There wasn't much else he could do in the circumstances,' observed Champion mildly. 'Once he had the howling misfortune to pick a sick car all his original plans went to pieces. He used Miss Gray to get the stuff safely out of the house in the usual false pocket of the raincoat. Then his idea must have been to drive her a mile or two down the road and strand her, while he toddled off to Town alone. The breakdown delayed him and, once he saw the police were about, he knew the cordon would go round and that he was trapped, so he had to think out other tactics. That exercise seems to have unnerved him entirely. I can understand him wanting to get into the house. After all, it'd be a first-class hiding-place in the circumstances. Yes, well, that's fairly clear now, I hope, Superintendent. Here's your ring, Miss Gray.'

As Gina put out her hand for the trinket her eyes grew puzzled.

'You're a very frightening person,' she said. 'How on earth did you know it was mine?'

'Quite.' Oates was frankly suspicious. 'If you've never met this young lady before, I don't see how you guessed it belonged to her.'

Champion stood regarding the girl with genuine surprise.

'My dear child,' he said, 'surely you know yourself? Who had this ring made for you?'

'No one. It was left to me. My father's sister died about six months ago and told me in a letter always to wear it for luck. It doesn't seem to have brought me much.'

For a moment Champion seemed completely bewildered. After a while, however, he laughed.

‘Your father’s sister? Were you named after her?’

‘Yes, I was.’ Miss Gray’s dark eyes were widening visibly. ‘How do you know all this? You’re frightening.’

Campion took the ring between his thumb and forefinger and turned it slowly round, while the stones winked and glittered in the hard electric light.

‘It’s such a simple trick I hardly like to explain and spoil the effect,’ he said. ‘About fifty years ago it was a fairly common conceit to give young ladies rings like this. You see, I knew this was Gina Gray’s ring because it had her name on the wrapper, as it were. Look, start at the little gold star and what have you? Garnet, Indicolite—that’s an indigo variety of tourmaline, Superintendent—Nephrite, Amethyst, then another smaller gold star and Garnet again, Rose Quartz, Agate and finally Yellow Sapphire. There you are. I thought you must know. G.I.N.A. G.R.A.Y., all done according to the best sentimental jewellery tradition. As soon as I came to consider the ring in cold blood it was obvious. Look at it, Oates. What man in his senses would put that collection of stones together if he didn’t mean something by them?’

The Superintendent did not answer immediately. He sat turning the ring round and round with an expression of grudging astonishment on his grey face. When at last he did look up he expressed himself unexpectedly.

‘Fancy that,’ he said. ‘Dear me.’

When Miss Gray had departed in a taxicab, which, on Mr Campion’s suggestion, a patient and sober Jonathan had kept ticking up outside on the Embankment during the whole of the short interview, he was more explicit.

‘She had her name on it,’ he said after a moment or two of purely decorative imagery. ‘She had her dear little name on it! Very smart of you, Mr Campion. Don’t let it go to your head. I don’t know if I’m quite satisfied yet. Who put you on to Rocky? Why Rocky? Why not any other of the fifty first-class jewel thieves in London?’

Campion grinned. It was not often that the Superintendent condescended to ask straight questions and he felt justifiably gratified by the phenomenon.

‘You said he was a “pro”,’ he explained. ‘That was the first step. Then young Jonathan Peters told me Gina had met the fellow hunting regularly, and so, putting two and two together, I arrived at Rocky. Rocky is an anachronism in the underworld; he can ride. How many jewel thieves do

you know who can ride well enough to turn up at a hunt, pay their caps, and not make an exhibition of themselves? Hunting over strange country isn't trotting round the Row, you know.'

Oates shook his head sadly.

'You depress me,' he said. 'First you think of the obvious and then you go and say it, and then you're proved right. It's very irritating. The ring was a new one on me, though. D'you know, I wouldn't mind giving my wife one of those. It's a pretty idea. She'd like it. Besides,' he added seriously, 'it might come in useful some time. You never know.'

In the end Champion sat down and worked it out for him.

THE CASE OF THE HAT TRICK

Mr Champion received the hat as a sentimental tribute. Mrs Wynyard pressed it into his hand at her farewell party at the Braganza on the night before she sailed home to New York.

‘I want you to have it,’ she said, her curly white head held on one side and her plump hand resting lightly on the sleeve of his tail coat. ‘It’s exclusive. I got it from old Wolfgarten in one of those cute little streets off Bond Street, and he gave me his solemn word by everything he feels to be holy that it’s quite u-nique. There’s not another one in the world, and I want you to keep it to remind you of me and Mr Honeyball and the grand times we’ve had this trip.’

Hubert Wynyard, who was so good-humoured that he let his wife call him anything, even ‘Mr Honeyball’, winked at Champion across his glass.

‘So now you know,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about a speech of thanks. Time’s short. Where’s that confounded wine waiter?’

So Champion pocketed the hat, which was less than half an inch high and made of onyx, with a cunningly carved agate where the opening for the head should have been, and thought no more about it.

He found it again next time he put on full war paint, which was for the first night of Lorimer’s *Carry Over* at the Sovereign Theatre. The occasion was so smart that he was beginning to feel that ‘sticky’ might be the term for it when the curtain descended on the second act and someone touched him on the shoulder. It turned out to be Peter Herrick, looking a trifle pink and disconcerted, which was unusual in one normally so very elegantly at ease.

‘I say, old man, I need a spot of support,’ he muttered. ‘Can you come?’

There was a note of genuine supplication in the plea, and Champion excused himself from his party and joined him.

‘What’s up? Going to start a fight?’

His whisper was respectfully amused as they pressed their way through the noisy, perfumed crowd in the corridor.

‘I hope not. As a matter of fact that’s what I’m trying to avoid. It’s social support I need.’

Peter had edged into a convenient corner between a gilt settee and an enormous basket of hydrangeas. He was a trifle red about the ears and his vivid blue eyes, which lent his young face most of its charm, were laughing but embarrassed.

‘I suddenly caught sight of you,’ he said, ‘and I realized you were probably the one man in the world of whom one could ask such a damn silly thing and not get cut for the rest of one’s life. Come and back me up like a good bloke. You couldn’t look like a duke or something, could you?’

‘I don’t see why not.’ Mr Champion’s lean face took on an even more vacant expression. ‘What’s the idea? Whom do I impress?’

‘You’ll see.’ Peter was grim. ‘I’m suspect, old boy. I’m not the thing. Not—er—quite *it*, don’t you know. I think someone’s spread it around that my old man’s a bobby.’

Campion’s eyebrows appeared above his horn-rimmed spectacles and he began to laugh. Major Herrick was well known to him as one of the Assistant Commissioners and one of the more poker-backed of his acquaintances, while Peter’s worst enemy, if he had one, which seemed unlikely, could scarcely accuse him of being unpresentable. The whole situation seemed to Champion to have the elements of humour and he said so, delicately.

‘But also very charming,’ he added cheerfully. ‘All olde worlde and young-man-what-are-your-intentions. Must you bother about the woman? There is a woman, I take it?’

Peter shot a revealing glance at him.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘but you wait until you see her. I met her on a boat and then I lost her. Now I’ve found her again at last, and there’s this insane old father and the incredible tick of a fellow they’re touting around with them. Come on, old boy, do your stuff. I’m out of my depth altogether. Prudence is embarrassed, and the other two have to be seen to be believed.’

A trifle under two minutes later Champion was inclined to agree with half the final statement. Old Mr Thomas K. Burns was not unbelievable, Norman Whitman was. As for Prudence Burns, he took one look at her slender red-headed loveliness and was prepared to sympathize with any enthusiasm which Peter might evince. The girl was a raving beauty of the modern type. She sat on her gold chair in Box B and smiled up at him with humour and intelligence as well as embarrassment in her brown eyes.

Her escorts were far less pleasant to meet. Old Mr Burns was a plain man in every sense of the word who had made an enormous amount of money in South Africa. He was in the midst of recounting these two obvious facts to Campion immediately after their introduction when a warning frown from the third member of his party silenced him as though a hand had been placed over his mouth, leaving him deflated and at sea. He turned helplessly, with an appealing flicker in his small grey eyes.

‘This ’ere—I should say, this gentleman is Mr Norman Whitman,’ he said, and paused for the name to take effect.

Entirely because he felt it was expected of him, Campion looked interested, while Norman Whitman favoured him with a supercilious stare. Campion was puzzled. He saw a plumpish, consequential little person with sleek hair and a pale face in which the eyeglass was a definite mistake. He was well dressed, not to say natty, and from the toes of his shoes to the highlight on his prominent white forehead he was polished until he shone. His voice, which was high, was so carefully modulated as to sound affected, and altogether he exuded an atmosphere of conceit and self-importance which was quite insufferable.

‘I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before,’ he said, making the announcement sound like an accusation. ‘Not very good acting, is it? I’m afraid poor Emily is a sad disappointment.’

Campion had thought that Dame Emily Storm’s performance was well up to its usual standard of polished perfection, and said so.

‘She always says she’s very nervous on first nights,’ he added.

‘Oh, do you know her?’ There was real excitement and hero-worship in Prudence Burns’s inquiry, and a quality of youthful *naïveté* in her eagerness which made Campion like her.

‘My dear child, not the *stage!*’ Norman Whitman shook an admonishing finger at the girl and she stared at him blankly, as did they all save old Mr Burns, who said somewhat hurriedly, ‘I should think not. Not likely,’ and assumed a virtuous expression which was patently false and ill suited to his round, red face.

The incredible Norman leant over the side of the box.

‘Isn’t that the Countess?’ he exclaimed suddenly. ‘Is it? Why, of course. Yes, it is. You must all excuse me a moment. I really must go and say

“Hello”.’

He bustled off and Mr Burns moved into his place and looked down at the frothing pool of clothes and their owners in the stalls below. There was something almost pathetic in his interest, a quality of small-boyishness which Campion found disarming. Peter was less sympathetic. He looked scandalized and crossed over to the girl at once. It seemed only charitable to give him a moment or so, and Campion gallantly concentrated on the father.

Mr Burns glanced up at him and looked away again.

‘He’s not there yet,’ he said and hesitated, adding abruptly because of his embarrassment, ‘do you see her?’

‘Who?’

‘The Countess,’ said Mr Burns, lowering his voice to a respectful whisper.

Campion became a little embarrassed also. His fingers deep in his pockets found the onyx hat, and he began to play with it, taking it out and letting it roll idly in his hand. He was standing up in the box, a little behind the old man, who seemed in danger of falling out altogether in his eagerness.

‘There he is.’ Mr Burns’s voice rose in his excitement. ‘That’s her, is it? You don’t recognize her, do you?’

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t,’ said Campion helplessly as he glanced at the large lady in the crimson cloak who had paused to speak to Norman Whitman in the crowd below. Mr Burns nodded gloomily as though he had feared as much, and Campion was aware that both he and Peter had lost caste. Having stared his fill, the old man straightened himself and stepped back.

‘Better not let him catch us,’ he remarked, and coughed explosively but a trifle too late to cover the ill-advised statement. For the first time he was able to give Campion his attention.

‘You’re in business, I suppose?’ he inquired, regarding him morosely.

The tall thin man in the horn-rimmed spectacles grinned unhappily. The *bourgeois gentilhomme* is an age-old character who moves some people to laughter, but others are apt to find his wistful gaucherie a little dispiriting, and Campion was of the latter category. He was so anxious not to hurt in any way that he hesitated over his answer.

‘Not exactly,’ he said, casually, and flicked the little hat into the air, catching it again and rolling it over between his fingers. The gesture was so idle that he was scarcely aware that he had made it, so that Mr Burns’s reaction came as a complete surprise to him.

All he saw at first was that the old man’s eyes were positively bulging and that there were pale patches in the mottled crimson of his cheeks. The next moment Prudence’s father’s entire attitude towards his new acquaintance underwent a complete change. His depression vanished and he became more than merely friendly. Within two minutes he had offered Campion a cigar, told him his hotel, begged him to visit him, and imparted a tip for the Stock Exchange which his somewhat startled visitor happened to know was a good one. Even the young people, who were engrossed in themselves, were aware of the change of front. Indeed, Campion felt that the entire theatre must notice it. Old Mr Burns was not subtle.

In the midst of his expansiveness he glanced at Peter and, returning to Campion, jerked his head at the young man.

‘Known him long?’ he inquired with husky confiding.

‘A great many years,’ Campion assured him.

‘Oh, he’s all right then, is he?’ The red face was very serious.

‘He’s one of my best friends.’ Campion had no intention of sounding severe, but the question was bewildering and in spite of himself the words came coldly.

Mr Burns took a rebuke. ‘That’s all right then,’ he said, sighing. ‘To tell you the honest truth, I’m not exactly in my place yet. A bit out of touch.’

He glanced up shyly to see how this confidence had been received and, noting that Campion remained affable if blank, added in a conspiratorial whisper: ‘You’ve no idea what a weight off my mind that is.’

Campion began to feel that the weight on his own mind was considerable, and he was on the point of launching out into a minor campaign of discreet inquiry when the curtain bell rang and he was forced to rejoin his own party. Mr Burns let him go with great reluctance but consoled himself a little when Peter accepted his invitation to remain.

Campion hurried down the corridor in a state of complete mystification. He was used to being a success but not a riot, and the single startled glance which Peter had turned upon him at parting made him laugh whenever he

thought of it, but he was thankful he had not been pressed for an explanation.

On the stairs he passed Norman Whitman. The little man was bustling back to his seat and puffing consequentially as he hurried. He glanced at Campion and nodded to him.

‘She spared me a word, the dear thing,’ he said, as if the intelligence was good news of the highest importance, and trotted on out of sight. Campion glanced after him and somewhere in the far depths of his memory something stirred only to be lost again immediately.

There are few things more irritating than an elusive impression that one has seen someone or something before, and as he went on down the staircase and re-entered the now darkened auditorium Campion walked slowly, his forehead wrinkled. Somewhere, some time had he seen that plump little figure waddling along; but where and when escaped him utterly. It was most tantalizing.

He did not see Peter again that evening, but the following morning the boy telephoned while Campion was still in bed.

‘I say,’ the young voice sounded enthusiastic over the wire, ‘that was pretty sensational, wasn’t it? How did you do it?’

‘Did it last?’ Campion inquired cautiously.

‘Rather! We’re all going off to the races this morning. I’m more than grateful to you. I knew you were remarkable in many ways but I wasn’t prepared for a miracle. I’m still bewildered. Do you realize that I’d had the cold shoulder with icicles on it until you arrived? But now I’m the old man’s white-headed boy. What did you say?’

With pardonable weakness, Campion was loth to cast down his laurels.

‘Nothing much,’ he said truthfully. ‘I talked through my hat a bit, you know.’

‘I have no doubt you did, old boy,’ Peter agreed laughing, ‘but what did you actually say? Hang it all, you’ve altered the man’s entire attitude.’

‘I scarcely spoke,’ said Campion, regretting that this exactitude was hardly convincing. ‘How about the “gentleman friend”? Did you cut much ice with him?’

‘No.’ Peter’s tone carried unutterable contempt. ‘I’m afraid I scarcely noticed the little twirp. I say, you might let me know how to work the

oracle.’

Since he had no idea at all and could therefore hardly be helpful, Campion thought it best to change the subject.

‘A very pretty girl,’ he ventured.

Peter rose to the bait like a salmon to a fly.

‘Amazing,’ he said warmly. ‘I don’t mind telling you I’m not coherent on the subject.’

It was nearly ten minutes later when Campion was at last allowed to hang up the receiver and he re-settled himself, grinning. Peter had underestimated himself.

Thinking over the entire incident, Campion was inclined to wash his hands of the whole affair, putting it down as one of those odd things that do sometimes occur. There are degrees of oddness, however, and the next time the onyx hat came under his serious consideration it was in circumstances which could hardly be disregarded.

The following Wednesday was the seventeenth and on the seventeenth of September, whenever he was in London, Campion took his Aunt Eva to dinner after the Dahlia Show. This was one of those family fixtures which begin as a graceful gesture in commemoration of past favours in the way of timely financial assistance in mid-term, and may very well end as awful responsibilities; but Aunt Eva might easily have been worse. She was a spry little old lady in brown velvet and bangles, and her mind was almost entirely devoted to horticulture, whereas, of course, it might easily have been Pekinese or other people’s love affairs.

It was a time-honoured arrangement between them that she should choose the restaurant and, because of her preference for flower names, they sometimes dined well and sometimes appallingly, which was why Campion was not particularly astonished when he arrived at her hotel to find her all set, in garnets and gold galloon, to visit the Gillyflower.

‘I warn you it may be expensive,’ she said, settling herself in the taxi, ‘but I remembered poor Marchant left you all that money in the spring, so I dare say you can afford it. Don’t hesitate to mention it, my dear boy, if you’d rather not.’

‘Darling, I can’t think of a place in which I should enjoy seeing you more,’ he assured her, and spoke with a certain amount of truth, for the

Gillyflower was an exotic bloom and he was interested to see what she would make of it.

He had visited the place once himself about three months before, just after it opened, and had found it flashy, exorbitant and badly staffed, but there had been an air of ultra-smart sophistication about it which he thought might possibly strike a new note after the homely sobriety of the Manor House dining-room.

They found the place noisy but not crowded. It did not yet exude the cold depression of failure, but neither was there the cheerful blare of assured success. Aunt Eva was able to choose a table with an excellent view of the floral display round the band platform, although it only gave her an oblique angle on the cabaret. All the same the meal was not one of their triumphs. The staff still left much to be desired and the food, although quite extraordinarily pretentious, was certainly not cooked by a master.

The quality of the service began to irritate Campion about half-way through the meal. A dirty plate, a forgotten order, a leaking ice-pail, two delays, and impossibly cold coffee reduced him by slow stages to a state of politely repressed irritation, and he was relieved that Aunt Eva was too happily engrossed in her subject for the evening, which appeared to be the merits of ground bones as a fertilizer, to notice the many defects in the meal.

However, what with one thing and another it was a trying experience for Campion, and while he was waiting patiently for the second brew of coffee and the wine waiter his fingers encountered the onyx hat and he took it out and began to play with it, rolling it over and over upon the table-cloth.

The first thing that happened was that the waiter spilt the coffee. Campion drew back wearily and looked up to receive his second surprise. He was prepared for some sort of apology but not for abnegation. The unfortunate man was green. He grovelled. He all but wept, and from that moment the Gillyflower appeared to belong to Mr Campion.

The change was astounding. The head waiter appeared at his elbow in solicitous friendliness, myrmidons arrived on all sides showering little attentions like so many fallow amorelli, Aunt Eva received a bouquet of Lady Forteviot roses, and Campion was tempted with a Napoleon *fine* from a bottle which certainly looked as though it had seen Paris, if not the siege. There was no doubt at all about their sudden rise to importance as guests of the Gillyflower and Campion's eyes grew thoughtful behind his spectacles as he turned the charm over and over.

‘That’s a nice little hat,’ remarked Aunt Eva, smiling over her roses.

‘Isn’t it?’ said Campion. ‘A smart little hat, not to say clever.’

Just how clever it was, however, lay as yet unrevealed. That surprise came later when the lady went off to collect her old-fashioned sables and Campion glanced down at a bill for three pounds, seventeen shillings and one penny. On his nod of acceptance the waiter took the bill away. There was no charge, of course, he said, and seemed hurt that the guest should suggest it. ‘But naturally,’ no charge at all.

Campion gaped at the man, who smiled at him with bland satisfaction and expressed the pious hope that he had enjoyed the meal. Campion was taking out his note-case in stolid defiance when the *maître d’hôtel*, round as a football and sleek as a seal, appeared to corroborate the first man’s story.

‘No charge, sir,’ he said. ‘No, no, no charge. If only you had telephoned we should have been so happy to reserve you a better table.’

Campion looked down at the onyx hat which sat, prim and shining, on the edge of an ashtray. The man followed his glance and beamed.

‘You are satisfied?’ he inquired.

Campion flicked the trinket with his forefinger and a memory bringing enlightenment in its train blazed up suddenly in his mind.

‘That pays the waiter, does it?’ he said.

And then they both laughed; but Campion laughed all the way home.

It was over a fortnight later when he received a visit from Peter Herrick. That young man was in an indignant mood.

‘I say, I was glad you ’phoned,’ he said, coming into the study in the Piccadilly flat like a small electric storm. ‘I was just making up my mind to come down on you for another spot of help when you rang. Your success with old man Burns was so sensational that I was going to risk a second appeal. You wouldn’t care to be the complete hero and have another go, would you?’

His host, who was mixing the drinks, looked round from the cocktail cabinet and grinned.

‘My influence wore off, did it?’ he said. ‘I wondered if it might.’

Peter sat down. ‘It weakened,’ he admitted. ‘It’s that unspeakable little toot Whitman, you know. He’s got an idiotic line in pseudo smart-set talk that gets the old boy all of a flutter. When we’re alone he’s perfectly happy, apart from the fact that he wants to talk about you still, which is curious—forgive me, but you know what I mean.’

He broke off to laugh at himself.

‘I’m an ass,’ he said. ‘The whole truth of the matter—and you may be astounded to hear it, for I’m completely bewildered by it myself—the truth is that I’m nuts about Prudence, Campion, absolutely nuts. I want her to marry me, and she’s dead keen on the idea, which is another staggering piece of luck, and, logically speaking, everything ought to be pretty good. However, the old boy is completely taken in by Whitman. Whitman sells him the most fantastic hints on etiquette and he falls for it every time.’

Campion looked sympathetic.

‘Old Burns has an idea that Whitman is some sort of social capture, I take it?’ he ventured.

‘That’s it, I’m afraid.’ Peter was embarrassed. ‘It’s ludicrous, of course, and very uncomfortable, especially as the old lad himself is quite all right, really. Apart from this fantastic snob complex he’s a darned interesting, shrewd old chap. Whitman is simply taking advantage of his pet weakness. Prudence says her old man has always had a touch of it, but it’s got worse since he retired and settled down to enjoy his cash. Still, for Prudence’s sake I’d put up with Whitman if it wasn’t for this last piece of cheek. He’s had the impudence to suggest that he might marry her himself.’

‘Has he, by George?’ said Campion. ‘That’s sailing near the wind, isn’t it?’

‘I thought so.’ Peter spoke with feeling. ‘Unfortunately the old man is half sold in the idea. He’s anxious for Prudence to be happy, of course, for he’s dead set on doing his duty and that sort of thing, but you can see that the idea of the socialite son-in-law is going over big. What is so infuriating is that he’s being taken in. Whitman is about as bogus as they go. He’s quite sincere, I expect, but look at him! What is he? A wretched little tuft-hunter with no more brains than that soda-water syphon. Wasn’t that your impression?’

‘Since you press me, no,’ said Mr Campion judicially. ‘No, old boy, I’m sorry, but it wasn’t. I think you underestimate him. However, that’s beside the point. What does A do now? Have you anything in mind?’

‘Well—’ Peter was evidently leading up to a delicate subject with some trepidation. ‘I may as well make a clean breast of it. Old Burns wants to take Prudence, Whitman and myself out to a meal tonight to “talk things over”. It went through my mind that if I had the infernal cheek to ask you to join the party you might be able to do your celebrated heart-softening act once again. The old boy will be tickled to death, of course. He’s worried my life out to get hold of you again. But I do see that it’s a ghastly imposition from your point of view.’ He paused unhappily. ‘It’s the limit,’ he said. ‘The ultimate outside edge. But she’s grown so darned important to me that I’m forgetting the ordinary decencies.’

‘My dear chap, not at all. I think it might be an extremely jolly gathering.’ Champion sounded positively enthusiastic. ‘There’s only one thing, though,’ he hurried on, while his visitor eyed him in astonishment, ‘you don’t think you could fix it so that we went either to the Gillyflower or the Maison Grecque?’

The other man sat up, his eyes wide with suspicion. ‘Why on earth do you suggest that?’

Campion avoided his glance.

‘They’re the only two places in London at which one can eat, aren’t they?’ he murmured idiotically.

‘Look here, Champion, what do you know about all this business?’ Peter was scrambling out of his chair. ‘You might have been imitating Whitman, except that he’s got an extra half-dozen perfectly appalling places of the same type on his list.’

‘Half a dozen others, has he?’ Champion seemed impressed. ‘What a thorough bird he is.’

‘Thorough?’ said Peter. ‘I thought he was off his head.’

‘Oh, dear me, no. He’s an intelligent chap. I thought that the first time I saw him. You’ll fix it then, will you? Either the Gillyflower or the Maison Grecque.’

The younger man stretched out his hand for the telephone.

‘I’ll get on to the old man this minute before you can change your mind,’ he announced. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you it might be a trying party. You’re an astonishing chap, aren’t you? I didn’t know you’d ever seen Whitman before I introduced him. Where do you keep all this information?’

‘Under my little hat,’ said Champion innocently. ‘All under my remarkable little hat.’

The first thirty-five minutes of Mr Thomas Burns’s little dinner-party at the Maison Grecque amply justified Peter Herrick’s worst fears. The restaurant itself was a trifle more pretentious than the Gillyflower, and on this occasion the service was even more ostentatiously attentive than that which had distinguished the latter half of Aunt Eva’s night out. Mr Burns himself was considerably subdued by the fuss accorded him and frequently fingered his tight evening collar in a wistful fashion which made his desire to take it off as clear as if he had announced it in so many words.

Champion, glancing round the table, decided that Prudence was embarrassed by the avowed object of the gathering, but there was a line of determination in her firm mouth and an expression in her eyes when she glanced at Peter which made him like her.

Mr Herrick was frankly distraught and unhelpful, while Champion did his gallant best with the conversation.

The only person in the party who seemed both to experience no discomfort himself and to be capable of ignoring it in his fellows was Mr Norman Whitman. All through the over-elaborate meal he sat bored and superior, smiling superciliously at Champion’s conversational efforts and only opening his own mouth to murmur an occasional comment on some celebrity whom he saw, or thought he saw, among the neighbouring diners.

Champion, who made a hobby of what he was pleased to call ‘tick-fancying’, could hardly refrain from the open gloat. The man was a collector’s piece. His pallid shining forehead could express ‘refined distaste’ with more downright vulgarity than seemed possible on a single surface and he revealed a line in ‘host deflation’ which had to be heard and seen to be believed.

It soon became clear to everybody that Mr Burns’s hope of a ‘little friendly chat about love and courtship’ was doomed, and the young people were openly relieved. Mr Burns himself was depressed and Norman remained aloof but condescending.

Towards the end of the meal, however, the host brightened. A childlike gleam of anticipation came into his eyes, and Champion caught him glancing towards him once or twice with disarming eagerness. Moreover, every now and again he felt in his waistcoat pocket and at last, when coffee was served

and Peter had carried Prudence off on to the dance floor, he could deny himself no longer but took a small onyx hat out of its hiding-place and let it roll over and over in his plump palm.

Norman Whitman frowned at him warningly, but the Burns blood was up and the old man ignored his mentor. He was watching Campion with the same shy delight and triumph which is displayed by the child who suddenly produces a new toy as good as the other boy's.

Campion did not look at Norman Whitman. He stretched out his hand.

'That's very attractive, isn't it?' he said, and, taking up the charm, he turned it over.

The old man laughed. 'It's quite genuine,' he said. 'It's the real McCoy, isn't it?'

Still Campion did not glance at the third man, who was watching the incident with a face as innocent of expression as a ball of wool.

'I think so.' Campion spoke softly and frowned. It seemed such a shame.

'I think so, too.' The old man chuckled over the words. 'Waiter, bring my bill!'

It did not work.

After five minutes of such unbearable embarrassment and chagrin that Campion could have wept for him, Mr Burns had to face that indubitable fact.

He rolled the hat, he placed it black and shining in the midst of the white table-cloth, he waved it frantically beneath the waiter's nose, but the wooden face did not change and the man remained polite but immovable as a rock while the bill stayed folded on the table.

There came a moment—it was nicely timed—when both Mr Burns and Mr Campion looked at Norman Whitman. It was a steady inspection which lasted for some little time. The fat man did not change colour. His boiled eyes remained blank and his expression reserved. After a while, however, the silence became unendurable and he rose with a conciliatory laugh.

'I'll see the manager for you, Burns,' he murmured. 'You must forgive these fellows. They have to be very careful.'

If the implied insult was unmistakable it was also a master-stroke, and the old man, whose eyes had been slowly narrowing, permitted himself a gleam of hope.

All the same he did not speak. He and Campion sat in silence watching the consequential figure bustling across the room, to disappear finally behind the bank of flowers which masked the exit.

After allowing his host due time for meditation, Campion leaned back in his chair and took out his own onyx hat, which he placed on the table beside the other. They were identical; two little toppers exact in every detail.

‘I had mine given me,’ Campion observed.

Burns raised his eyes from the two trinkets and stared.

‘Given you?’ he said. ‘Some gift. I thought I had a fair enough bank-roll, but I couldn’t afford to give presents like that.’

The lean man in the horn-rimmed spectacles looked apologetic.

‘A very charming American and her husband wanted to give me a little keepsake to remind me of their visit here,’ he said. ‘They bought this at Wolfgarten’s in Cellini Street. He told them it was exclusive and unique, but then he has his own definition of the term. “Unique” to Wolfgarten means one for London and one for New York. He may have charged them about a fiver. I—er—I thought I’d better tell you.’

Mr Burns was sitting up stiffly, his face blank and his small eyes grown hard. Suddenly he swung round in his chair and gazed at the bank of flowers. Campion put out a gently restraining hand.

‘Hold on,’ he said. ‘It’s entirely up to you. I’ve taken the liberty of arranging it so that you can have him if you want him. At this moment, I imagine, our Norman is in the manager’s office asking why the devil the arrangement which he made here has been ignored. You see, three weeks ago he opened an account of twenty pounds each at quite a number of restaurants on the understanding that anyone who displayed a small onyx top hat, which he showed them, should be taken without question to be his personal representative. It was a curious request, but after all the personal token, the signet ring and so on, has served this sort of purpose from time immemorial, and the restaurants didn’t stand to lose anything while they held his twenty pounds.’

Mr Burns swallowed. ‘Go on,’ he said.

‘Well,’ Campion was even more diffident, ‘just now I’m afraid the manager may be explaining to Whitman that the particular twenty pounds which he invested here has been used up. Doubtless he is bringing bills to

prove it. I've been eating here and at the Gillyflower until my little hat wouldn't do its trick any more, and I fear I must owe our Norman quite a considerable sum. However, that's beside the point. What is important is that the house detective is sitting in the manager's office. Now the story which he will hear from Mr Whitman is a perfectly innocent if eccentric one. But should he subsequently get a rather different tale from you—as he certainly has from me—well, it won't be toppers and tails and bogus countesses for our Norman for some time, will it? I'm so sorry to bring it out like this, but it seemed the only satisfactory and safe way if you should decide to prosecute.'

The old man sat perfectly still for some moments. He made a stolid, powerful figure, his shoulders bowed and his head, with its thatch of thick grey hair, thrust forward as his eyes dwelt upon the two hats. After a while he glanced up and caught Champion's eye. There was a moment of mutual understanding and then, to the young man's intense relief, they both laughed.

Mr Burns laughed for rather a long time for one who has been suddenly confronted with unpleasant news, and Champion was growing a trifle apprehensive when the older man pulled himself together and picked up his own hat.

'Five thousand pounds,' he said, looking at it. 'I thought it was a darned sight too cheap to be sound.'

'Too cheap for what?'

'Free food for life at all the best restaurants in London for as many guests up to six as I cared to bring,' said the old man calmly. 'Wait a minute. I'm not so daft as I look. It was a good story. Norman's a smart-fellow. He went to work very carefully. I'd known him about six weeks before he brought me in here one night, and I don't mind admitting that he impressed me with his way of doing things.'

He paused and looked at Champion shyly. 'I'm not what you might call a social swell,' he said. 'No, no, don't be nice about it; I'm a fool but not a damned fool. I came over here with plenty of money and plenty of time. I meant to get in with the right lot and learn all the tricks and the refinements that I'd read about, and I got just about what I was asking for. Norman looked all right to me. Obviously I was wrong. Anyway, he taught me one or two useful things about the clothes to wear and so on, and then we came in here and he did his act with his damn-fool hat.'

‘I was impressed. These stiff of waiters always get me flustered, and when I saw it all go off so smoothly I was attracted. It seemed to be so easy, so dignified and gentlemanly. No money passing and so on. Well, I asked him about it, and he pretended he didn’t want to tell me. But I’m a tenacious sort of chap, and presently out it came. It was a most ingenious spiel. This hat represented the Top Hat Club, he said, a club so exclusive that only the very best people in the land belonged to it . . . royalty and so on. He also explained that, like all these very superior affairs, it was practically secret because the restaurant only entered into the arrangement if they were certain they were getting only the very best people.’

He broke off and grinned sheepishly.

‘Well, you can guess the rest,’ he said. ‘It seemed quite reasonable the way he told it, and the business side of it was sound. If you can buy an annuity for life why shouldn’t you buy a meal ticket, providing your honesty is guaranteed and they know you’re not the sort of chap to make money on it by hiring it out? Oh, I’m the mug all right, but he had luck. I happened to see your hat, you see. I didn’t mention it to him, of course, because he didn’t seem to like you and I didn’t want him getting jealous.’

‘He was going to get you elected to this club, I take it?’

‘That’s about it, son. Five thousand quid entrance fee. It seemed cheap. I’m fifty-six and I may go eating in restaurants for another twenty years. But what about you? When did you come into this?’

Campion told his story frankly. He felt it was the very least he could do with those bright eyes watching him suspiciously.

‘I remember Norman,’ he said. ‘He came back to me. It took me a tremendous time, but after my first free meal at the Gillyflower the whole thing suddenly became as clear as mud. I don’t want to depress you, but I’m afraid we’ve stumbled on the great forefather of all confidence tricks. Years and years ago, just after I came down from Cambridge, I went to Canada, and right out in the wilds I came upon a fit-up company in an awful little one-eyed town. They were real old barnstormers, the last in the world I should think, and they gave a four-hour programme, comprising a melodrama, a farce and a variety show all at one sitting. The farce was one of those traditional country tales which are handed down for generations and have no set form. The actors invent the dialogue as they go along. Well, the standard was frightful, of course, but there was one fat young man who

played villains who was at least funny. He had a ridiculous walk, for one thing, and when I saw Whitman bolting down the corridor to your box he reminded me of something. Then of course when I saw the top hat at the dinner table it all came roaring back to me. . . . What's the matter?"

Mr Burns was gazing at him, an incredulous expression growing in his eyes as recollection struggled to life.

'Touch 'At Pays Waiter!' he ejaculated, thumping the table with an enormous fist. 'Good Lord! My old grandfather told me that story out in South Africa before I was breeched. I remember it! "Touch 'At Pays Waiter", the story of the poor silly bumpkin who was persuaded to exchange his cow for a magic hat. Good lord! Before I was breeched!'

Campion hesitated. 'What about Norman?' he suggested. 'What do you want to do? There may be a certain amount of publicity, you see, and—'

He broke off. The old man was not listening. He sat slumped in his chair, his eyes fixed on the far distance. Presently he began to laugh. He laughed so much that the tears ran down his face and he grew purple and breathless.

'Campion,' he began weakly, when he had regained comparative coherence, 'Campion, do you recall the end of that story?'

His guest frowned. 'No,' he said at last. 'No, I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't. It's gone completely. What was it?'

Mr Burns struggled for air.

'The bumpkin didn't pay,' he gasped. 'The bumpkin ate the meal and didn't part with the cow. That is what I've done! This was the final try-out. I was parting with the cash tonight. I've got the cheque all ready made out here in my wallet. I haven't parted and you've eaten his forty quid.'

They were still looking at each other when the young people returned. Prudence regarded them with mild astonishment.

'You two seem to be making a lot of noise,' she remarked. 'What are you talking about?'

Mr Burns winked at his companion.

'What would you call it? The Hat Trick?' he suggested.

Campion hesitated. 'Hardly cricket,' he said.

THE CASE OF THE QUESTION MARK

When Miss Chloe Pleyell became engaged to Sir Matthew Pearing, K.C., Mr Albert Champion crossed her name off his private list entitled 'Elegant Young Persons Whom I Ought to Take to Lunch' and wrote it in neatly at the foot of his 'People I Must Send Christmas Cards to' folder.

He made the exchange with a smile that was only partially regretful. There had been a time when Miss Pleyell had seemed to him to have a light-heartedness all her own, but once or twice lately it had occurred to him somewhat forcefully that light-headedness might be a more accurate description. Without the slightest trace of malice, therefore, he wished Sir Matthew, who was a monument of humourless pomposity, joy of his choice.

He was still wishing him every happiness, albeit a trifle dubiously, as he stood in the big old-fashioned office at the back of Julius Florian's Bond Street shop and watched the astute old silversmith persuading Chloe to decide whether Mr Champion should signify his goodwill on her marriage with the Adam candlesticks or the baroque epergne.

Chloe was in form. She sat on the edge of the walnut desk, her cocoa ermine coat slipping off her shoulders and her small yellow head on one side. Her eyes were narrowed, their vivid blue intensified by the tremendous mental effort involved in the choice.

Mr Florian appeared to find her wholly charming. He stood before her, his round dark face alight with an interest all the more remarkable since she had been in the shop for the best part of three-quarters of an hour already.

'The epergne is exquisitely fashionable now,' murmured Chloe, 'and I adore it. It's so magnificently *silly*. But the Adam things will be there always, won't they, like a family butler or something.'

Old Florian laughed.

'So truly put,' he observed, with a little nod to Mr Champion. 'Which shall it be, then? The fashion of the day or the pride of a lifetime?'

'I'll have the epergne, Mr Florian. And you're an angel to give it me, Albert. Every time I look across it at poor Matthew sitting at the other end of the table I shall think of you.'

'That'll be nice for both of us,' said Mr Champion cheerfully.

Chloe slid off the desk and drifted to the side-table where the epergne stood holding out its little silver baskets on slender curling arms. The silversmith trotted after her.

‘A lovely thing,’ he said. ‘Fine early George the Third, eight sweetmeat baskets hand-pierced and chased, gadroon edges, ball feet. I can tell you its entire history. It was made for Lord Perowne and remained in that family for seventy-two years, when it was purchased by a Mr Andrew Chappell, who left it to his daughter who lived at Brighton and—’

Chloe’s laugh interrupted him.

‘How sweet!’ she said. ‘Like a dog. Having a pedigree, I mean. I shall call it Rover. All my furniture’s going to have names, Albert.’

‘When one buys a fine piece of silver one usually likes to know something of its history,’ said Mr Florian stiffly.

Miss Pleyell’s brain struggled with the information and came out on top.

‘Oh, of course, in case it’s stolen,’ she said brightly. ‘I never thought of that. How fascinating! Tell me, do you deal much in stolen stuff, Mr Florian? By accident, I mean,’ she added belatedly, as the small man’s face grew slowly red and then more slowly purple.

Campion hurried to the rescue.

‘The police lists protect you from all disasters of that sort, don’t they, Mr Florian?’

The silversmith regained his poise and even his smile.

‘Ah yes,’ he said graciously. ‘The police lists are very interesting. I’ll show you one.’

He touched a bell on his desk and went on talking in his slow, slightly affected voice.

‘Whenever there has been a robbery the police circularize the trade with a list of the missing valuables. Then, if the thief or his agents are foolish enough to attempt to dispose of the haul to any reputable firm, they can be—ah—instantly apprehended.’

‘How lovely!’ said Chloe, with such emphasis that Campion glanced at her sharply, only to find her gazing at Mr Florian with an eager interest in her china-blue eyes which was utterly disarming.

The silversmith thawed visibly, and by the time his clerk reappeared with the folder he was beaming.

‘I don’t show these to everybody,’ he said archly, his black eyes twinkling at Chloe. ‘Here’s a list of things taken from a mansion in Surrey. And here’s another very curious thing. These are the valuables taken from the Hewes-Bellewe house in Manchester Square. No doubt you read of the burglary? I found it particularly interesting because I’m familiar with Lady Hewes-Bellewe’s collection of silver. Most of these pieces have been through my hands from time to time for special cleaning and minor repairs.’

‘Fascinating,’ murmured Chloe, glancing down a column of technicalities with what was only too obviously an uncomprehending eye. ‘What’s an early silver muffineer with BG, LG?’

‘A sugar sifter with a blue glass lining,’ Mr Florian seemed delighted to explain, and it occurred to Mr Campion that a lot of beauty went a remarkably long way. ‘That’s a very interesting piece,’ the silversmith went on. ‘I had it here once when we gave a little loan exhibition of rare silver. It has a charming design of ivy leaves, hand-pierced, and on one of the leaves a little putto in a boat has been engraved. Engraving with hand-piercing is comparatively rare, and I told Lady Hewes-Bellewe that in my opinion the putto must have been the brilliant work of some eighteenth-century amateur. What a tragedy to think it’s gone!’

‘Frightful,’ agreed Chloe, blank but game. ‘But it all depends on how you look at it, doesn’t it?’

Campion felt it time to be helpful.

‘I remember that burglary,’ he remarked. ‘That was the Question Mark’s last escapade, wasn’t it? The fellow the newspapers call the “Crooked Crook”.’

‘That’s the man.’ The suave Mr Florian was almost excited. ‘The police can’t put their hands on him, and I understand they think he’s responsible for at least half a dozen London burglaries. I’m particularly interested in him because he has a mania for fine silver. He must be quite a connoisseur in his way. I can’t bring myself to believe he has that beautiful stuff melted down. It must go abroad.’

Chloe smiled at the old man with ingratiating earnestness.

‘This is wonderful,’ she smiled. ‘I feel I’m learning trade secrets. Why is he called the Question Mark and the Crooked Crook?’

‘Because he walks with a stoop, my child,’ explained Mr Campion. ‘He’s been seen once or twice, a thin bent figure lurking in dark passageways and on unlighted staircases. Frighten yourself to death with that vision, my poppet, and come along.’

‘He’s a cripple? How devastating!’ Miss Pleyell was thinking rapidly, and the unaccustomed exercise brought most becoming spots of colour to her cheek-bones. ‘Tell me, how does he get up drainpipes and do all the energetic things burglars do?’

Florian smiled, and Campion saw with relief that he had evidently decided to get into line with the rest of Chloe’s acquaintances and consider her an adorable halfwit.

‘Ah, but he’s not a real crookback,’ he said, lowering his voice as though he were speaking to a child. ‘He was nearly captured on one occasion. A servant girl caught sight of him from an upper window and gave the alarm. He took to his heels and the woman told the police that he straightened up as he ran.’

‘How very peculiar,’ commented Chloe unexpectedly.

‘Not really.’ Florian’s tone was still gently humorous. ‘Most crooks have their little foibles, their little trade marks. It’s a tradition. There’s one man who always cuts a heart-shaped hole in the pane of a downstairs window and lifts the piece out carefully with a small rubber sucker so that he can get at the latch. There’s another who disguises himself as a milkman before he cracks a crib. This fellow the Question Mark probably looks quite normal in private life, but the police hunted for a long time for someone with a pronounced stoop.’

‘Really?’ said Chloe, her breathlessness a little overdone.

‘Oh yes. Dear me, yes. Crooks are extraordinary people. Ask Mr Campion. He’s the expert. Why, I remember when I was a young man first in business there was a thief who had our whole trade by the ears. We dreaded him. And he used to do his work in a guardsman’s uniform, red tunic, moustachios, a swagger-cane, and all.’

Campion looked up with interest.

‘That’s a prize effort,’ he said, laughing. ‘I’ve never heard of him.’

Florian shook his head.

‘Ah well, it’s thirty-five years ago at least. But he existed, believe me. We were all very much relieved when he was caught and gaoled. I don’t

know what happened to him when he was released. Some of your older friends at Scotland Yard might remember him. They called him the Shiner. Well, Miss Pleyell, you don't want to hear any more of my reminiscences, I'm sure. I'll have the epergne dispatched to you immediately.'

Mr Campion carried Miss Pleyell away.

'It's sweet of you,' she said, thoughtfully eyeing him across the little table in the crowded but fashionable lounge where she had elected to take tea. 'I shall treasure Rover always.'

'But not next to your heart,' murmured her host absently. His thoughts had wandered to a curious little notion which had come to him during the silversmith's lecture on the crooks of the past. It was an odd little idea, and presently he put it out of his mind as ridiculous.

He grinned at Chloe.

'I hope you didn't let old Florian bore you?' he said.

'Bore me? My dear, you know I'm never bored.' Chloe's eyes were gently reproachful. 'Besides, the funny little creature was quite amusing. As it happens, I'm frightfully interested in crime just now.'

'Oh?' Mr Campion's eyebrows rose apprehensively.

Chloe's smile was candid and confiding.

'Albert, my pet,' she said, 'I want your advice. I don't know if I've been frightfully clever or terribly childish.'

Her host resisted the impulse to cover his eyes with his hand.

'Criminal?' he inquired casually.

'Oh no!' Chloe was amused. 'Quite the reverse. I'm just employing a detective, that's all. It's really to oblige Gracie. Have you seen Gracie, my maid? She's the girl with little black eyes. She has Bulgarian blood, or something. She sews exquisitely. I couldn't lose her. She's invaluable.'

Her escort blinked.

'Perhaps I'm not quite right in the head,' he remarked affably. 'I don't get the hang of this at all. Is the detective keeping an eye on Gracie to see she doesn't wander off into the blue?'

‘No, my dear.’ Chloe was patient. ‘The detective is engaged to Gracie—for the time being. It won’t last. It never does. She’s so temperamental. It’s her Bulgarian blood. I’m simply giving him a job so she won’t marry him and start a shop or something frightful. You don’t follow me, do you? I’ll explain it all most carefully because I’d like your advice. I think I’ve been rather bright.’

The tall young man in the horn-rimmed spectacles sighed. ‘Put the worst in words of one syllable,’ he invited.

Chloe leant forward, her expression childlike and serious.

‘First of all you must realize about Gracie,’ she said earnestly. ‘If I were cynical I should say that Gracie was the most important person in my life. Without Gracie my hair, my style, my clothes, my *entire personality* would simply go to pieces. Do you understand now?’

Mr Campion thought she looked very charming and he said so. Chloe looked almost worried.

‘Yes, well, there you are,’ she said. ‘I’m not a fool. I give Gracie full credit for everything. I’m simply hopeless alone and I know it. I simply can’t afford to lose her. Unfortunately she’s frightfully susceptible. It’s her Middle-European blood. It’s always coming out. She’s had nine serious love affairs in the past two years.’

‘Dear me!’ said Mr Campion. ‘And now she’s in love with a detective?’

‘Ah yes. But he wasn’t a detective to begin with,’ explained Miss Pleyell, and went on airily: ‘He was out of work, you see, and Gracie was passionately sorry for him. She gets all worked up on these occasions, urgently maternal and all that.’

‘Her Bulgarian blood, no doubt,’ put in Mr Campion soberly.

‘Yes. She can’t help it. She wanted to marry Herbert immediately and invest her savings in a shop so that she could settle down and make something of him. What are you thinking, Albert?’

‘Thank heaven she can sew,’ murmured her escort piously. ‘When did you turn Herbert into a detective?’

‘Oh, I didn’t do it. It was entirely his idea. You see, when Gracie first told me about him I begged her to wait. A man must have the kind of work he really loves, mustn’t he? Even I know that. I told her that she simply must make Herbert find out what his vocation was and then I’d see he got into it. Then we could both wait and see how it worked.’

She smiled brightly across the table.

‘And Herbert thought he felt the call to become a “tec”?’ Mr Campion’s lean face split into a smile of pure amusement. ‘How charming! What did you do? Bribe a private agency to take him on?’

‘No, I didn’t. I never thought of that. No, I simply employed him myself at two pounds a week. Gracie usually takes about six weeks to get over a passion, and I thought it would be the most inexpensive way of doing it.’

Her companion looked at her almost affectionately.

‘You have a sort of flair, my child, haven’t you?’ he said. ‘He just loafes around until Gracie’s Bulgarian eye lights on another victim, I suppose?’

Chloe hesitated and evidently decided to make a clean breast.

‘Well, no,’ she said at last. ‘Unfortunately he doesn’t. In a way it’s rather awkward. Herbert’s devastatingly conscientious. He *will* work. He just insists on detecting all over the place. I put him on to Mother for the first week, but he found out that her cook was taking bribes from the tradesmen and had the idiocy to want the woman dismissed. Mother was furious, of course, as cooks are so scarce. I had a frightful time with the three of them. Now I’ve been rather clever, I think. I’ve told Herbert to keep an eye on Matthew. Matthew is the complete model of rectitude. He never forgets his dignity for an instant. I think Matthew will exhaust Herbert, don’t you?’

Mr Campion took off his spectacles, a sign with him of deep emotion. In his mind’s eye he saw again the pompous young K.C., so correct and conventional that even his mother did not dare to use any diminutive of his Christian name.

‘You astound me,’ he said simply. ‘You have my undying respect. How did you get Sir Matthew to stand for it?’

‘I didn’t,’ she said at last. ‘Herbert is very discreet, so I didn’t think it necessary to mention it to Matthew at all. Do you think that was unwise?’

Mr Campion’s face grew blank. ‘My good girl,’ he said flatly. ‘My good insane girl.’

Miss Pleyell coloured and glanced down at her plate.

‘It did just occur to me once or twice that it might not be such a good idea as it looked. That’s why I mentioned it to you,’ she murmured defensively. ‘Matthew’s ridiculously stiff in some ways, isn’t he?’

Since he did not trust himself to speak, her host made no comment. She forced a smile.

‘Still, he’ll never notice Herbert,’ she said. ‘Herbert’s such an ordinary, nondescript little man. Matthew never notices unimportant people.’

Mr Champion took himself in hand, and when he spoke his voice was almost gentle. He had a gift for lucidity when he chose to employ it, and his short lecture on the gentle art of blackmail and its perpetrators was clear and to the point. He also touched upon the more ethical side of the arrangement, with a direct reference to the dictates of good taste. His feelings carried him away, and he only came to an abrupt pause when Miss Pleyell’s small face began to pucker dangerously.

‘Oh, how awful!’ she said, waving away his belated apology. ‘I never looked at it like that. It never entered my head that Herbert might be dishonest. I do see it’s dangerous and rather beastly; I do now. But before, it never occurred to me. I was simply thinking of not losing Gracie. What shall I do? Anything except tell Matthew. I daren’t do that. I just daren’t. He wouldn’t see it in my way at all and I am terribly fond of him. What shall I do?’

She looked so small and pretty and woebegone that Mr Champion felt a brute.

‘Call the watch-dog off,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Go round to Paul Fenner of the Efficiency Detective Bureau and tell him from me to give Herbert a temporary job at your expense. Then keep quiet. Don’t tell the story to anybody.’

‘No, of course I won’t.’ Miss Pleyell’s relief was charming. ‘You’re a darling,’ she said. ‘A perfect dear. I’m terribly grateful to you, Albert. You’re so frightfully clever. I’ll do exactly what you say, and then everything will be all right, won’t it? You don’t think I’m a fool, though, do you? I couldn’t bear that.’

Mr Champion surveyed her with great tolerance.

‘I think you’re fantastic, my child,’ he said gravely.

He made a different and more forceful remark about her the following morning when her telephone call coincided with his early tea. She was tearfully incoherent at the other end of the wire.

‘It’s happened.’ Her whisper reached him, shaken with tragic intensity. ‘It’s Herbert. What shall I do?’

‘Herbert?’ Mr Champion shook the sleep out of his head and strove to collect his thoughts. ‘Oh yes, Herbert the amateur detective. What’s he done?’

‘Can I tell you on the ’phone?’

‘Well, I hope so.’ Mr Champion raised his eyebrows at the instrument. ‘What’s he doing? Demanding money?’

‘Oh no . . . no . . . worse than that. Albert, he’s found out something about Matthew and he wants to go to the police. Herbert says he’s got proof that Matthew’s a crook.’

There was a long silence from Mr Champion’s end of the wire.

‘Can you hear me? What shall I do?’

Champion held the receiver an inch or so from his ear.

‘Yes, I can hear,’ he said dryly. ‘My voice had left me, that was all. Well, my dear young friend, your course is clear. Tell Master Herbert to go to the police and make his accusation by all means. When he changes his tone and you get down to the vital question of the fiver he has in mind, threaten to *send* for the police.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Chloe sounded partially convinced. ‘Then you think Herbert’s simply lying about Matthew being a mysterious thief and all that? He’s very convincing. Are you there, Albert? Listen, you don’t think it’s *true*? What’s the matter with your voice? Why does it keep going like this?’

‘It’s a form of nervous paralysis,’ explained Mr Champion gently, and rang off.

While he was dressing he thought of Chloe and shook his head over her. She was beautiful and she was charming and at heart a dear, he reflected, but unfortunately hardly safe out. He hoped most devoutly for her sake that the dignified Sir Matthew would never hear of Gracie’s Herbert.

A morning at the Leicester Galleries and a protracted luncheon kept him away from the Piccadilly flat until half-way through the afternoon. He let himself in with his key and was walking down the corridor to his study when an unexpected vision on the floor of his sitting-room caught his eye through the half-open doorway. He paused and stared at it.

Lying on the carpet was a battered portmanteau, while round it, spread out in dazzling array, was as choice a collection of unfamiliar silver as ever he had seen. Blinking a little, he pushed open the door and glanced round. A sturdy, respectable figure with a round face and a permanently injured expression rose stiffly from an upright chair.

Campion surveyed the man in astonishment. He was a perfect stranger and was neatly dressed in nondescript tweeds.

‘Mr Campion?’ he demanded in a brisk, high-pitched voice. ‘Your man said I could wait ’ere for you.’

‘Oh yes, quite.’ Campion’s gaze wandered back to the array upon the floor. ‘You’ve brought your—luggage, I see.’

‘My name’s Boot,’ said the visitor, ignoring the remark. ‘Miss Pleyell said I was to see you before I went to the police. Come what might I was to see you first. That’s what she said.’

A great light dawned slowly upon Mr Campion.

‘You’re not Herbert, by any chance?’ he inquired.

Mr Boot blushed.

‘My young lady calls me Herbert,’ he admitted grudgingly. ‘I’m a private inquiry agent in the employ of Miss Chloe Pleyell. She said she’d mentioned me to you. Is that right?’

‘Oh, yes. Yes, she did. She did indeed. Won’t you sit down?’

Mr Campion’s pale eyes were narrowed behind his spectacles. Gracie’s young man was not at all the type he had expected.

‘I’d rather stand, if you don’t mind,’ said Herbert without impoliteness. ‘Time’s short. I’ve been here since noon. Notice anything about this lot?’

Mr Campion ran a thoughtful eye over the glistening treasure trove at his feet. One item in particular caught his special attention. It was a large Georgian sugar sifter lined with blue glass and decorated with a design of hand-pierced ivy leaves. The centre of one leaf was exquisitely engraved with the tiny likeness of a cupid in a boat.

‘Dear me!’ said Mr Campion.

‘Seen the police lists lately, sir?’ Herbert inquired, his aggrieved expression deepening. ‘I have. Do you know what this collection represents? It’s the proceeds of a robbery committed on the night of the fifteenth at a

house in Manchester Square. Hewes-Bellewe was the family's name. In the papers the police were said to be looking for a person they're pleased to call the Question Mark. Now you see, sir, whatever you or Miss Pleyell may say, I *must* go to the police with this stuff. I *must*. It's my duty and, in a way, my privilege. I owe it to myself. I've found it. I've got to report it. I know there's a dangerous criminal masquerading as a gentleman of title, and although I'm very sorry for Miss Pleyell, I'm in a cleft stick. I've got to do my duty.'

Mr Campion felt a little giddy.

'Look here, Herbert,' he said at last, 'let me get this clear. You're not thinking of accusing Sir Matthew Pearing of being the Question Mark, are you?'

Herbert's bright brown eyes became belligerent.

'I'm telling the police all I know,' he said. 'Since he done it he ought to be made to pay for it.'

Mr Campion's mind grappled with the absurdities of the situation. 'Before we go along to the Yard I think you'd better tell me the full story.'

'Would that be *Scotland* Yard, sir?' Mr Boot's tone was suddenly respectful. 'I've always wanted to go there and see the big shots,' he added naïvely. 'I was afraid I'd have to take these along to a common police station and let some jack-in-office of a local Inspector take most of the credit.'

'Oh, I'll take you to Scotland Yard all right,' said Mr Campion, feeling a little foolish. 'We'll go and have tea with the Superintendent, if you like. Where did you get all this incriminating property?'

Mr Boot smiled. The mention of the name 'Scotland Yard' seemed to have thawed him into childlike affability. He sat down.

'I'll tell you,' he said. 'Out of the cloakroom at Charing Cross. Fancy that.'

'Fancy indeed,' echoed Campion. 'Where did you get the ticket?'

'Ah. . . .' Herbert raised his head. 'Where do you think? Out of one of his lordship's own blessed suits, and that's a fact. I've got witnesses.'

It seemed to Mr Campion that ever since he had met Chloe on the previous afternoon the very flavour of life had been touched with the fantastic, a circumstance he had attributed entirely to the influence of her personality, but this was a frank absurdity, and he began to doubt his ears.

Herbert beamed at his perplexity.

‘I’ll tell you the story,’ he said. ‘I can see you’re a bit took back and I don’t blame you. I was myself when I first opened this suitcase. I was put on to Sir Matthew Pearing by Miss Pleyell, who got to know of me through my young lady. “Just keep an eye on Sir Matthew,” she said. Naturally I asked her in what way and she said she didn’t know, but she thought there was something definitely mysterious about him. Those were her very words, sir; “definitely mysterious”.’

Campion groaned silently and Herbert continued.

‘Well, I kept an eye on the gentleman,’ he said, folding his hands on his waistcoat. ‘And what did I find? Nothing at all for a long time. That Sir Matthew’s a sly bird. For weeks he went on living a most regular life with his servants as solemn as he was. And then—chance took a ’and.’

He nodded complacently.

‘Then I got a bit o’ luck. There’s a Mr Tuke who is Sir Matthew’s valet. I ingratiated myself with ’im. He’s one of these lazy, overpaid gent’s gents, and I found out he ’ad the sauce to send ’is master’s suits down to the quick cleaners to save ’isself the trouble of doing the pressing. ’E paid for them out of ’is own money, I dare say, but it wasn’t right. I said nothing, of course, and as it happened that little trick of Master Tuke’s was lucky for me. This morning I was in the kitchen—I often go round there early—and Mr Tuke asked me if I’d do him a favour by slipping down to the cleaners and collecting a dinner-jacket outfit he’d left there last night. I went, and when the girl gave me the parcel she handed over a little black wallet that had been left in the pocket. I examined it in accordance with my duties and inside I found two penny stamps and a cloakroom ticket.’

‘You hung on to the wallet?’

‘I did.’ Herbert spoke firmly. ‘I examined it in front of the girl. I’m very careful. You have to be in this business. I made her make a note of the case, the stamps, and the number of the ticket. Then I came away. I gave the suit to Mr Tuke, who identified it, mind you, but I kept the wallet and I went down to Charing Cross. I gave up the ticket at the cloakroom. I got this suitcase in return *and I opened it before the attendant*. “Now, my lad,” I said to him when I see what was inside, “I’m a detective. Take a good look at me. Here’s my card,” I said. “Take a look at this stuff,” I said. “I’ll need you as a witness.” After that I gave ’im a signed receipt for the case and kept the

cloakroom ticket. I took a copy of the receipt and I mentioned the number of the cloakroom ticket on each slip of paper.’

‘Did you, though?’ said Mr Champion, whose respect for Herbert was slowly mounting. ‘Then you went to Miss Pleyell and she sent you on to me, I suppose?’

‘Exactly,’ his visitor agreed. ‘And now, if you please, sir, I’d like to go to Scotland Yard.’

Mr Champion glanced at the silver at his feet.

‘Yes,’ he said slowly. ‘Yes. Quite. I think you’d better. I’ll come with you.’

A little over an hour later Superintendent Stanislaus Oates sat behind his desk in his private office at the headquarters of the Central Branch and stared at his friend Mr Albert Champion, a slightly bewildered expression in his bright blue eyes.

Herbert had retold his story once and was now obligingly doing so again to a sergeant in another room, while a constable wrote it all down. The two friends were alone.

‘It’s idiotic,’ said Oates suddenly. ‘We’ll check up on Boot’s story, of course, and it *may* be false, yet I’m open to bet it’s the truth. I know his type—we’ve got plenty of ’em in the Force. What an extraordinary thing!’

Champion lit a cigarette and his eyes were thoughtful.

‘Oh, our Herbert is honest,’ he said. ‘Herbert’s as honest as the day. You’re sure you can identify the stuff?’

‘Certain.’ Oates glanced towards the battered suitcase on the table in the corner. ‘There’s no doubt of that. You heard what Inspector Baker said. He’s working on the case. He’s seen photographs and studied descriptions. Besides, my dear chap, it’s all there. That’s the proceeds of the Question Mark’s Manchester Square haul all right; no doubt about it. We’ll check up on the cloakroom attendant and the girl at the cleaners’, and if these are okay we’ll have to interview Sir Matthew. There’s no other way. We must find out where the ticket came from. He’ll be able to give us an explanation all right, but we must have it.’

Campion thrust his hands into his pockets and his lean face was troubled.

‘That’s going to be infernally awkward, isn’t it?’ he ventured. ‘You’ll have to drag in Herbert to protect yourselves, and *he’ll* have to mention Miss Pleyell to protect himself.’

Oates, one of the kindest and most sympathetic of men, spread out his stubby fingers in a gesture of regret.

‘He’s a lawyer,’ he said. ‘Her name will come out in the end. You can’t suppress it. She’s asked for it, you know.’

Campion nodded. ‘Still, it seems a pity she should get it,’ he said, and grimaced. ‘Sir Matthew’s obviously not the Question Mark himself, and it’s a pity to drag him into it. He’ll never forgive her. He’s not that type.’

The Superintendent did not smile. ‘I know, I know, my lad,’ he said. ‘You needn’t tell me. I’d like to do all I could for the girl. Indirectly she’s put us on to a very important thing. But what other course is open to me? I ask you.’

The tall young man in the horn-rimmed spectacles was silent for some moments. The vague idea which had come to him on the previous afternoon when Mr Florian had been talking to Chloe, and which had been knocking at intervals on the door of his mind ever since, suddenly presented itself as a concrete thing. He looked up.

‘What was the number of the ticket for the suit?’ he demanded.

‘The cloakroom ticket?’

‘No, that was for the suitcase. What was the number of the cleaners’ ticket that Tuke gave Herbert when he sent him down to claim Sir Matthew’s dinner jacket?’

Oates regarded him silently.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said at last. ‘I’ve got it here. Boot got it from the girl and gave her a receipt instead. He’s a cautious lad, is Herbert. Here you are—*one hundred and sixty-one.*’

He pushed over a small square of magenta paper on which the figures were roughly printed beneath a single line of very small type announcing ‘The Birch Road Quick-Cleaning Coy.’ Campion folded the heading over carefully and turned the slip round before he gave it back.

‘How about that if a girl was in a hurry?’ he inquired.

The Superintendent’s heavy eyebrows rose as he stared at it.

‘That’s an idea,’ he said cautiously. ‘A genuine idea.’

Campion leaned over the desk.

‘Come down yourself to the cleaners’ with me now and bring the wallet,’ he said. ‘I’ve got an idea.’

‘Another?’

‘I think so. It’s a notion which has been fidgeting me all day. There’s just a chance I may be on to the man you want. Those two descriptions of the Question Mark which you had—one from a postman in the Clarges Street show and one from the nurse in the earlier business—both agreed that he was a stooping, sinister figure, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, but the other woman who saw him running said he straightened up when he was on the move,’ Oates objected.

‘Ah, but she saw him from above,’ said Mr Campion. ‘Will you come down to the cleaners’ with me?’

The Superintendent rose, grumbling.

‘I don’t mind you working yourself to death for your friends,’ he said, ‘but I resent it when I’m expected to do the same. All right, we’ll take Herbert and a sergeant. I hope you have got something up your sleeve.’

‘So do I,’ murmured Mr Campion fervently. ‘I should hate to have to take back that epergne.’

The Birch Road Quick-Cleaning Company’s establishment was not a large affair. It was situated in a back street some way behind the magnificent block in which Sir Matthew Pearing had his super-flat. Herbert and the sergeant remained in the taxicab some little distance down the road, while Campion and the Superintendent interviewed the harassed but by no means unintelligent young woman in charge.

She left the steaming press in the window and listened carefully to their questions.

She remembered Herbert’s visit perfectly, and readily produced his receipt for the suit and the wallet. Moreover, she remembered Mr Tuke, who was a regular customer, bringing in the dinner-jacket on the previous evening. She also identified her own official ticket.

‘One hundred and sixty-one,’ she said. ‘I remember it.’

Campion turned the magenta slip round.

‘How about one hundred and ninety-one? It’s an easy slip if you look at it quickly,’ he suggested.

She glanced up at him with shrewd Cockney eyes.

‘It could ’ave ’appened,’ she admitted. ‘But it didn’t. I remember the suit.’

‘Very likely, Miss.’ Oates beamed upon her in his most avuncular fashion. ‘But that’s not the point. It’s the wallet we’re interested in. What happens when something is left in the pocket of a coat which comes in to be cleaned?’

The girl’s face cleared.

‘That’s about it,’ she said suddenly. ‘Just a minute.’

As she crossed the shop to the inner room Oates glanced at Campion.

‘She’s sharp,’ he said. ‘We’re lucky.’

‘George,’ shouted the girl, ‘come here, will you?’

A tall thin man, clad in bedraggled trousers and a singlet, came out of the steam chamber, wiping his face and arms with a towel.

‘This is my brother George,’ the girl explained. ‘He does the suits. He’d know what you want.’

George stared at the black wallet which the Superintendent showed him for some little time before he committed himself.

‘That’s right,’ he said at last. ‘I found it in an inside pocket of a waistcoat. It was very nearly empty when I saw it—a couple of stamps and a ticket.’

‘That’s right. It’s of no value. But what did you do with it?’

‘Put it in here, like I always do when I come across things.’

George pulled open a drawer in the cash desk, where several odds and ends were stacked neatly, each with a slip of paper attached.

‘See?’ he said. ‘I lay the article in here and I write the number of the suit I took it from on a bit of paper and lay it on top of the thing. When Sis gives the clothes back she just matches the numbers and returns the property.’

Campion sighed with relief.

‘Then it would have been possible to mistake the number one-six-one for one-nine-one, for instance?’

George hesitated. ‘It might,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you one thing, if it’s any help to you. I took that wallet from the inside waistcoat pocket of a brown tweed suit. I remember it distinctly—a brown tweed suit. What the number was I can’t say.’

The girl pounced on the ledger and ran her finger down a column of hieroglyphics.

‘You’re right,’ she said, grinning at Campion. ‘That’s how it happened. I took George’s writing the wrong way up. One-nine-one was a brown tweed suit. The fellow came in for it half an hour ago.’

A muffled exclamation escaped the Superintendent, but Campion interrupted him.

‘Just a minute,’ he said. ‘Was he by any chance a very tall, well-set-up man, about fifty-five to sixty? Grey hair, perhaps.’

‘Yes, he was.’ The girl seemed surprised. ‘I didn’t see his hair because he had a hat on, but he wasn’t young. I noticed him particularly, being so tall. He was a bit hasty too. He said his landlady had taken the suit to be cleaned without his knowing—seemed quite shirty about it. He didn’t ask about the wallet.’

‘No, he wouldn’t,’ said Campion. ‘He wouldn’t want to call your attention to it.’

‘He’ll come back,’ put in Oates suddenly. ‘When he gets that parcel undone and finds he’s lost the wallet he’ll come back, if he doesn’t see us first. We must clear out. Now look here, my dear, here’s the wallet. It’s got two stamps and a ticket in it. When he comes, give it to him, and whatever you do don’t act in any way that may make him suspicious. Can I rely on you?’

She nodded and stretched out a firm, capable hand for the black folder.

The Superintendent hurried his friend from the shop, and the waiting sergeant in the taxi received his instructions.

‘Right you are, sir,’ he said, touching his felt hat. ‘I’ll lay for him and I’ll tail him. He won’t get away from me.’

Oates nodded and thrust Campion into the cab.

‘The Yard first to get the stuff, and then Charing Cross,’ he said briefly. ‘Is that how you were figuring it out, Campion?’

The younger man leaned back in the cab.

‘Perfect,’ he said contentedly. ‘There’s nothing like a fair cop.’

Herbert, who had watched the proceedings with his little ferret’s eyes glistening with excitement, ventured a question.

‘Are we going to see Sir Matthew now, sir?’

Campion glanced at Oates.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, Herbert, but no. For the time being the aristocracy is out of it. But we’re going to meet a celebrity, I fancy, and when we see him we’re going to take his fingerprints.’

The Superintendent regarded his friend with eyes that were bright and suspicious.

‘I want a word or two with you, my lad,’ he said. ‘What do you know about this chap we’re after? When did you see him?’

‘I haven’t,’ said Mr Campion.

‘What about that description you gave the girl?’

‘That was rather good, wasn’t it?’ Campion agreed, grinning. ‘I made that up.’

Oates opened his mouth to speak but caught sight of Herbert’s fascinated gaze and thought better of it.

‘Wait till I get you on your own,’ he murmured, and rapped on the window to urge the driver to hurry.

The next fifteen minutes did not give anybody much opportunity for conversation. The cab paused for a moment at the Yard to take on board two plain-clothes men and the bag of silver, and afterwards swung round to speed back to Charing Cross Station.

‘If I know the type we shan’t have long to wait,’ said Oates as he and Campion took up their positions in a convenient doorway, which afforded them a good view of the cloakroom window. ‘As soon as he gets his hands on that ticket he’ll beetle down here and make sure that the stuff is safe. I’m trusting that girl.’

Campion glanced casually across the station to where two inconspicuous plain-clothes figures were lounging by the bookstall.

‘The clerk’s giving them the sign, is he?’

Oates nodded. ‘Yes, they understand one another. He’s a good man, that clerk. The way he corroborated Herbert Boot’s story was intelligent and convincing. My fellows have got to rely on him. They haven’t the least idea who they’re waiting for, see?’

Campion coughed.

‘I don’t think they’ll miss him,’ he murmured. ‘He’s a distinctive sort of chap, you know.’

Oates swung round on him. ‘Damn it, Campion, what do you know about this business?’ he demanded. ‘This tale about the tall elderly man: where did you get it from?’

‘Wait.’ Campion laid a restraining hand on his friend’s arm and nodded towards a figure which had come striding in through the crowd. The man was striking and even distinguished. Well over six feet four, he was very erect, with a clean-shaven, sharp-featured face which must, in youth, have been remarkably handsome.

Oates stiffened, a startled expression creeping into his eyes.

‘Recognize him?’ murmured Campion.

‘Yes, I think so.’ The Superintendent’s voice was wondering, and he stepped forward at the same moment as the two Yard men darted out into the open and closed in on either side of the stranger as he took the heavy, battered suitcase from the cloakroom counter. There was only a very brief struggle.

The tall man glanced shrewdly at his adversaries.

‘I guess I’m too old for a scrap, boys,’ he said. ‘I’ll come quietly. It’s all there in the bag—oh, you know that, do you?’

As Mr Campion and the Superintendent drove quietly back to the Yard together Oates was still thoughtful.

‘It must be nearly thirty years ago,’ he said at last. ‘I was a sergeant at the Thames Court Police Station, I remember, and we had that fellow in the cells there for a couple of days. I can’t think of his name, but as soon as I set

eyes on him this afternoon I recognized him. He looks much older, of course, but you can't mistake that height or that face. What was his name, now?'

Mr Campion hesitated. 'Does "The Shiner" convey anything to you?' he said diffidently.

'The Shiner! That's it, The Shiner!' The Superintendent's voice rose with excitement. 'By George, it's the same lark, too—old silver shipped to a fence in Amsterdam. That's him. Good heavens, Campion, how did you know?'

The younger man looked pleased.

'Oh, it occurred to me, you know,' he said modestly. 'I was in old Florian's shop yesterday, talking about these burglaries, and he got reminiscing about crooks who had specialized in old silver in the past. He mentioned this chap, The Shiner, and said he hadn't been heard of since he came out of jail. Florian also said that The Shiner used to do his early burglaries in full guardsman's uniform.'

'That's right,' said Oates. 'So he did. Amazing vanity these fellows have. A guardsman before the war was a picturesque figure, and there were a lot of them about in London.'

Campion ignored the interruption.

'The fancy dress appealed to me,' he said, 'and I was thinking about it, and also about your mysterious Question Mark, when the astonishing points of similarity between the two occurred to me. I didn't see how it worked out, of course, until I'd heard Herbert's contribution and put things together a bit.'

Oates shook his head.

'I'll buy it,' he said. 'I don't see any similarity between the Question Mark and The Shiner. One was a bent, sinister figure straightening up to run, and the other made himself conspicuous in a red tunic. They both pinched silver, I know, but if you can see any other likeness between the two you're a cleverer man than I am, or off your head.'

'It's imagination you lack, gov'nor.' Mr Campion regarded his friend regretfully. 'Think of the fellow. See him in your mind's eye. What is his one inescapable and most damning characteristic? His height. Think of it! What was he to do?'

'Good Lord!' The Superintendent sat up.

‘You’re right,’ he said slowly. ‘Of course. It didn’t occur to me at once. The uniform disguised him when he was young, it didn’t make him conspicuous. Everyone expected to see a tall soldier in a scarlet tunic. A shorter man would have looked peculiar. When he came back and started up again he had to think of something else, I suppose, so he counterfeited a stoop for the actual job, only straightening up when he made a dash for it. Wait a minute, though; he was seen running. The witness didn’t mention his height.’

‘Because she didn’t see it,’ Campion protested. ‘She only saw him from above. It was that that strengthened my first suspicion. By the way, there’ll be no need to interview Sir Matthew now, I take it?’

‘No, it’s a fair cop.’ Oates spoke with satisfaction. ‘We caught him with the stuff. That’s good enough. You’re saved again, Campion, or your girl friend is. Give her my regards and tell her she doesn’t know how lucky she is to have a lucky pal.’

Mr Campion opened his mouth to protest but thought better of it. In his experience it was far more comfortable to be considered lucky than clever by any policeman. He was silent for some time and sat looking out of the window, a faint smile playing round his lips.

The Superintendent glanced at him.

‘What are you thinking of now?’ he inquired suspiciously.

‘I was wondering,’ said Mr Campion truthfully, ‘I was just wondering who young Gracie was going to get engaged to next.’

THE CASE OF THE OLD MAN IN THE WINDOW

Newly appointed Superintendent Stanislaus Oates was by no means intoxicated, but he was cheerful, as became a man celebrating an important advance in a distinguished career, and Mr Campion, who sat opposite him at the small table in the corner of the chop-house, surveyed the change in his usually taciturn friend with interest.

‘This promotion puts me into the memoir class when I retire, you know,’ observed the ex-Inspector suddenly with uncharacteristic ingenuousness. ‘I could write a first-rate book if someone put it down for me. We professionals get to know all kinds of things, interesting stuff a lot of it, that you amateurs never come across; things you’d never consider worth noticing. I struck something very curious today. Big business is extraordinary, Campion. Amazing inducements to crime in it. Let me tell you something about company law.’

Mr Campion grinned. ‘Tell the world as well,’ he suggested affably, for the Superintendent’s voice had risen. ‘I thought you said this place was deserted in the evening,’ he went on, stretching his long thin legs under the table and adjusting his horn-rimmed spectacles. ‘It seems to me to be pretty well crowded with youth and—er—passion.’

The ex-Inspector’s innate caution reasserted itself and as he glanced about him his long face took on its natural melancholy expression.

‘Must have suddenly become fashionable,’ he said gloomily. ‘That’s the trouble with these places. The word goes round that So-and-so’s is good, quiet and cheap, and what happens? Before you know where you are a great bunch of goggle-eyed sweethearts swoop down on it and up go the prices while the food goes to pieces. There’s a lad over there out with someone he doesn’t intend to take home to meet the family.’

Mr Campion, glancing casually over his thin shoulder, caught a glimpse of a heavily jowled face beneath a domed head prematurely bald, and beyond it the dark curls and crimson lips of a girl in a grey hat. He looked away again hastily.

‘The name is March,’ said Oates, whose spirits were reviving. ‘Member of the big theatrical machinery firm. Funny we should see him. It reminds me of what I was going to tell you. They’re in low water again, you know.’

His voice promised to carry across the small print-hung room and Mr Campion protested.

‘Does alcohol always make you shout?’ he inquired gently. ‘Don’t bellow. I know the fellow quite well by sight. We’re members of the same club.’

‘Really? I heard the clubs were having a thin time,’ said Oates more quietly but unabashed. ‘Still, I didn’t know they had to let anyone in.’

Mr Campion looked hurt. ‘He’s a valued and respected member as far as I know,’ he said, ‘and may very well be out with his wife.’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ said Oates cheerfully. ‘That little kid is on at the Frivolity, or was until the show closed last week. And what’s more, my lad, Mr Arthur March is due to marry someone else in less than a month. A good policeman studies everything, even the gossip columns, and that bears out what I told you about you amateurs not being thorough. You don’t collect sufficient out-of-the-way information. Take this company law, for instance ...’

He broke off, a light of interest in his mournful grey eyes. From where they sat the view of the entrance was unobstructed and Campion, following his glance, saw two young people come in. Superintendent Stanislaus Oates grinned broadly.

‘This is good,’ he said. ‘That’s the girl March is engaged to—Denise Warren. She’s out on the spree with a boy friend too. They’ve come here because they’ve heard it’s quiet, I bet you. They haven’t seen March yet.’

Mr Campion did not speak. He was looking at the girl. She was an unusual type, taller than the average and very fair, with wide-apart blue-grey eyes and a magnificent carriage.

Her companion was a square, solid young man only a few years her senior. He was not unhandsome and had an air of authority about him unusual in one of his age. They found a table and settled down in full view of Campion and his guest. Oates was frankly delighted.

‘They’ll see each other in a moment,’ he said with schoolboy mischievousness. ‘Who’s the fellow with her? Do you know?’

Mr Campion was frowning. 'Yes, I do,' he said. 'That's Rupert Fielding, a surgeon. He's young but an absolute prodigy, they say. I hope he's not playing the fool. His is the one profession that still demands absolute conventionality.'

Oates grinned: 'Another member of the club?'

Campion echoed his smile. 'Yes, as it happens. Spends all his spare time there. Gives the older members a sense of security, I think.'

Oates glanced at the girl again. 'Oh well, she's keeping it in the family, isn't she? What is this famous club? Not Puffin's?'

'No. Quite as respectable if not so eminent. The Junior Greys, Pall Mall.'

Oates sat up with interest. 'Curiouser and curiouser,' he said. 'Isn't that the place where the old boy sits in the window all day?'

'Old Rosemary?'

'That's the man. One of the landmarks of London. Hasn't changed in fifty years. It's a funny thing, I was hearing of him today, as I was going to tell you. Is he as old as they say?'

'He's ninety some time this year.'

'Really?' The Superintendent was interested. 'I've seen him, of course, dozens of times. You can't very well miss him sitting there in that great window. He looks young enough from the street. Scraggy men like yourself wear well. What's he like close to?'

Mr Campion considered. He was eager to give serious attention to any subject which would divert his guest's embarrassing attention from his two fellow-members and their more intimate affairs.

'One doesn't get very close to him in the ordinary way,' he said at last. 'That bay window is his holy of holies. There's a draught screen round the back of his chair and a table between him and the rest of the room. I'm seldom there early enough to see him come in in the morning but I meet him tottering out at half-past six now and again.'

'He's frail then?' the Superintendent persisted. 'Frail but young-looking? I'm sorry to be so inquisitive,' he added, 'but I don't like freaks. How young does he actually look close to in a good light?'

Mr Campion hesitated. 'He's very well preserved,' he began at last. 'Had all kinds of things done to him.'

‘Oh, facial stuff, rejuvenation, toupees, special teeth to take out the hollows—I know.’ The Superintendent spoke with contempt. ‘That accounts for it. I hate that sort of thing. It’s bad enough in old women but in old men it’s revolting.’

He paused and, evidently thinking that he might have expressed himself ungraciously, added handsomely: ‘Of course, when you remember he was a famous actor it doesn’t seem so bad. He was one of the first of the stage knights, wasn’t he?’

‘I believe so. Sir Charles Rosemary, one of the great figures of the ‘eighties. I believe he was magnificent.’

‘And now he spends his days sitting in a window trying to look sixty,’ the Superintendent murmured. ‘Is it true he does it all day and every day?’

‘An unbroken record of twenty years, I believe,’ said Mr Campion, who was growing weary of the catechism. ‘It’s quite a legend. He comes up to the club at eleven o’clock and sits there until six-thirty.’

‘My God!’ said Oates expressively and added abruptly:

‘Hullo, he’s seen her!’

Mr Campion gave up the hope of diverting him. The Superintendent’s round dull eyes were alight with amusement.

‘Look at March,’ he said. ‘He’s wild. Isn’t that typical of that sort of chap? Doesn’t seem to realize he’s in the same boat. Can you see him?’

‘Yes, in the mirror behind you,’ Campion admitted grudgingly. ‘Rather awkward for his guest, isn’t it?’

‘She’s used to it, I’d say,’ said the ex-Inspector cheerfully. ‘Look at him.’

Arthur March was angry and appeared to be indifferent about showing it. He sat upright in his chair, staring at his fiancée and her companion with white-faced indignation. The girl opposite in the grey hat did her best to look faintly amused, but her eyes were angry.

Campion looked at Miss Warren and caught her at the moment when curious glances from other tables directed her attention to the furious man on the other side of the room. She met his eyes for a moment and grew slowly crimson. Then she murmured something to the stolid young man at her side.

Oates was very interested.

‘March is going over,’ he said suddenly. ‘No, he’s changed his mind. He’s sending a note.’

The waiter who bore the hastily scribbled message on the half-sheet torn from a memorandum book looked considerably embarrassed and he handed it to Miss Warren with a word of apology. She glanced at it, blushed even more deeply than before, and passed it on to Fielding.

The young surgeon’s square, immobile face became a shade darker and, leaning towards the girl, he said something abruptly. She hesitated, looked up at him and nodded.

A moment later the waiter was off across the room again, a faint smile on his face. The Superintendent frowned.

‘What happened?’ he demanded. ‘I didn’t see, did you? Wait a minute.’

Before Campion could stop him he had risen from his seat and sauntered off across the room, ostensibly to get a pipe out of the pocket of his overcoat which hung on a stand near the doorway. The somewhat circuitous route he chose led him directly behind March’s chair at the moment when he received the return note from the waiter.

Oates came back smiling.

‘I thought so,’ he said triumphantly as he sat down. ‘She wrapped her engagement ring in his own note and sent it back to him. Oh, very dignified and crushing, whatever he wrote! Look at him now . . . is he going to make a row?’

‘I hope not,’ said Mr Campion fervently.

‘No, he’s thought better of it. He’s going.’ The Superintendent seemed a little disappointed. ‘He’s livid, though. Look at his hands. He’s shaking with fury. I say, Campion, I don’t like the look of him; he’s demented with rage.’

‘Don’t gawp at him then, poor chap,’ his host protested. ‘You were going to tell me something of unparalleled interest about company law.’

The Superintendent frowned, his eyes still on the retreating figures at the other side of the room.

‘Was I? This little show has put it out of my head,’ he said. ‘Ah, they’ve gone and the other two are settling down again. Well, that’s the end of that little romance. I enjoyed it.’

‘Obviously,’ said Mr Campion bitterly. ‘It’s probably cost me two perfectly good acquaintances, but what of that if you’re happy? The whole

incident would have been washed away with a few pretty tears in a day or so and might have been decently forgotten. Still, if you enjoyed it. . . .’

The ex-Inspector regarded him owlshly.

‘You’re wrong,’ he said. ‘I’m not a man given to—er—soothsaying . . . what’s the word?’

‘Prophecy?’ suggested Campion, laughing.

‘Prophecy,’ echoed Oates with success. ‘But I tell you, Campion, that the incident we have just witnessed is going to have far-reaching consequences.’

‘You’re tight,’ said his companion.

He was, of course, but it was a remarkable thing, as he himself pointed out afterwards, that he was unequivocally right at the same time.

The engagement between Miss Denise Warren and Mr Rupert Fielding, F.R.C.S., was announced at the end of August, a decent six weeks after the intimation that her marriage to Mr Arthur March, son of the late Sir Joshua March, would not take place, and when Mr Campion walked down Pall Mall to the Junior Greys one morning in October the whole affair was ancient history.

It was a little before twelve and the sun was shining in at the great bay windows of the club, windows so large and frank that the decorous gentlemen within looked almost more like exhibits under glass than spectators of the procession of traffic in the street below.

As he approached the building Mr Campion was aware of a subtle sense of loss. It was not until he had stood for some seconds on the pavement surveying the broad façade of the left wing of the building that he realized where the difference lay. When he saw it he was shocked. The great chair in the centre window of the lounge was occupied not by the familiar aquiline figure of old Rosemary but by a short fattish old gentleman by the name of Briggs, a member of but ten or fifteen years’ standing, a truculent, tasteless person of little popularity.

Mr Campion entered beneath the Adam porch with a premonition of disaster and was confirmed in his suspicions a few moments later when he discovered Walters, the head steward, in tears. Since Walters was a portly sixty-five and possessed a dignity which was proverbial, the spectacle was both shocking and embarrassing. He blew his nose hastily when Mr Campion appeared and murmured a word of apology, after which he added baldly: ‘He’s gone, sir.’

‘Not old—I mean Sir Charles Rosemary?’ Mr Campion was shocked.

‘Yes, sir.’ Walters permitted himself a ghostly sniff. ‘It happened this morning, sir. In his chair where he always sat, just as he would have liked. Mr March and one or two other gentlemen had a word with him when he first came in and then he dozed off. I saw him sleeping heavily but didn’t think anything of it, him being so old, but when Mr Fielding came in about an hour ago he noticed at once that something was wrong and called me. We got the old gentleman into a taxi between us and Mr Fielding took him home. He died in the taxi. Mr Fielding has just come in and told us. He’d have been ninety in two days’ time. It’s been a great shock. Like the end of an era, sir. I remember the old Queen going but it didn’t seem like this. I remember him when I came here forty years ago, you see.’

Mr Campion was surprised to find that he was a trifle shaken himself. There was a great deal in what Walters said. Old Rosemary had been an institution.

As he came into the lounge he caught sight of Fielding standing by the eastern fireplace with a small crowd round him. Mr Campion joined it.

Fielding’s professional calm was standing him in good stead. He was giving information quietly and seriously, without capitalizing or even seeming conscious of the undue prominence into which chance had forced him. He nodded to Campion and went on with his story.

‘He was breathing so stertorously that I went and had a look at him,’ he was saying. ‘He wasn’t conscious then and didn’t recover before the end, which came in the taxi, as you know.’

‘He had a flat in Dover Street, hadn’t he?’ said someone.

Fielding nodded. ‘Yes. Walters got me the address. He’d gone before we arrived and I knew I couldn’t do anything, so I got hold of his man, who seems a very capable chap. We put him on to his bed and the servant told me that his regular doctor was Philipson, so I rang Harley Street and came away.’

‘Sir Edgar was upset, I bet,’ said a man Campion did not know. ‘They knew each other well. Still, he was very old. I don’t suppose he was surprised. The very old often die suddenly and peacefully like that.’

The crowd split up into smaller groups, which grew again as other members came in to lunch. Mr Briggs’s behaviour in commandeering the favourite seat came in for a good deal of comment and the secretary received several complaints. A half-excited gloom, as at a major disaster, settled over

the smoking-room, and the newspapers, who had already been notified by one of Walters's underlings, received quite a number of calls.

The awkward incident occurred just before lunch, however. Mr Campion witnessed it and was shocked by it, in company with nine-tenths of his fellow-members present. Arthur March came in and made a scene.

It began in the hall when he heard the news from Scroop, the porter. His high thin tones protesting disbelief reached the lounge before he appeared himself, pale and excitable, in the doorway. He sank into a chair, snapped at the wine steward, and, after mopping his brow a trifle ostentatiously, rose to his feet again and came across the room to where Fielding stood with Campion.

'This is ghastly,' he said without preamble. 'I was with the old man only this morning, you know. He was in one of his black moods but otherwise he seemed perfectly all right. You found him, didn't you? Was—was it peaceful?'

'Perfectly,' said Fielding shortly. He was obviously embarrassed and Campion found himself wondering if the two men had ever spoken since the little scene in the City chop-house earlier in the year.

'Thank God!' said March with nauseating fervour. 'Oh, thank God!'

He did not move away and the surgeon hesitated.

'Relation of yours?' he inquired abruptly.

March coloured. 'Practically,' he said. 'My grandfather and he were like brothers.'

The explanation evidently sounded a little lame, even to himself, for he took refuge in wholly unwarrantable abuse.

'You wouldn't understand that sort of loyalty,' he muttered and turned on his heel.

Fielding stood looking after him, his eyebrows raised.

'That chap's in a funny mental state . . . ' he was beginning when Mr Campion touched his sleeve.

'Lunch,' said Mr Campion.

It was after the meal, nearing the end of the hour of pleasant somnolence sacred to the gods of digestion, when the Junior Greys experienced its first real sensation since the suffragette outrage, of which no one ever speaks.

Campion had been watching with lazy eyes the efforts of the bishop in the chair next his own to keep his attention on the pamphlet on his knee when he saw that divine sit upright in his chair, the healthy colour draining rapidly from his plump cheeks.

At the same moment, on the other side of the room, Major-General Stukely Wivenhoe's cigar dropped from his mouth and rolled on the carpet.

A communal intake of breath, like the sigh of a great animal, sounded all over the room and in a far corner somebody knocked over a coffee-cup.

Mr Campion hoisted himself on one elbow and looked round. He remained arrested in that uncomfortable position for some seconds.

Old Rosemary, immaculate and jaunty as ever, was coming slowly across the room. There was a red carnation in his buttonhole, his flowing white hair glistened, and his curiously unwrinkled face wore its customary faint smile.

Behind him, portly and efficient, strode Sir Edgar Philipson, the Harley Street man.

It was a petrifying moment and one which demanded every ounce of the Junior Greys' celebrated aplomb.

Half-way across the room the newcomers were met by a page hurrying in with the early editions. Confronted by the spectacle of old Rosemary himself the boy lost his head completely. He thrust an *Evening Wire* at the old man.

'They—they say you're dead, sir,' he blurted out idiotically.

Rosemary took the paper and peered at it while the stupefied room waited in silence.

'Greatly exaggerated,' he said in the unmistakable clipped tone they all knew so well. 'Take it away.'

He moved on to his chair. No one saw Briggs leave it. Some insist that he crawled out behind the screen on all fours; and others, more imaginative, that he dived out of the window and was afterwards found gibbering in the basement. But at all events, his departure was silent and immediate.

Old Rosemary sat down, and beckoning to a paralysed servant, ordered a whisky and soda.

Meanwhile, Sir Edgar Philipson stood looking round the room, and Fielding, pale and incredulous, rose to meet him. The elder man was not

kind.

‘That’s the trouble with you younger men, Fielding,’ he said in a rumbling undertone that was yet loud enough to be heard. ‘Overhasty in your diagnosis. Make sure before you act, my boy. Make sure.’

He walked away, a handsome old man very pleased with himself.

Fielding glanced helplessly round the room, but no one met his eyes. Mr Campion, who alone was sympathetic, was looking at old Rosemary, noting the healthy brilliance of his eyes and the colour in his cheeks.

Fielding walked out of the room in silence.

Mr Campion dined alone that evening and was writing a brief report on his own share in the Case of the Yellow Shoes, which had just come to a satisfactory conclusion, when the young surgeon called. Fielding was embarrassed and said so. He stood awkwardly in the middle of the study in the flat in Bottle Street and made a hesitating apology.

‘I’m terribly sorry to presume on an acquaintance like this, Campion,’ he said, ‘but I’m in such a devil of a mess. That chap Rosemary, you know, he was dead as mutton this morning.’

Mr Campion produced a decanter.

‘I should sit down,’ he said. ‘It soothes the nerves and rests the feet. I suppose this affair is going to be—er—bad for business?’

Fielding looked relieved and a faint smile appeared for an instant on his square, solemn face.

‘Frightfully,’ he said, accepting the glass Campion handed him. ‘It makes such a darned good story, you see. Rupert Fielding is such a brilliant surgeon that he doesn’t know when he’s beaten and the patient is dead—it’s all over the place already. I shall be ruined. Incompetence is bad enough in any profession, but in mine it’s unforgivable. And,’ he added helplessly, ‘he was dead, or at least I thought so. His heart had stopped and when I got him home I tried the mirror test. Of course, miracles do happen nowadays, but not under old Philipson. At least, I wouldn’t have said so yesterday. It’s funny, isn’t it?’

‘Odd, certainly,’ Mr Campion agreed slowly. ‘When you talk of these modern miracles, what are they exactly?’

‘Oh, electrical treatment and that sort of thing.’ Fielding spoke vaguely. ‘You see,’ he added frankly, ‘I’m not a physician; I’m a surgeon. I’ve done a

certain amount of medicine, of course, but I don't set up to be a G.P. Drugs are not in my line.'

Mr Campion glanced up and his pale eyes behind his spectacles were inquisitive.

'You're wondering if the old boy couldn't have taken something that produced a pretty good simulation of death?' he suggested.

The younger man regarded him steadily. 'It sounds far-fetched, I know,' he said, 'but it's the only explanation I can think of, although what on earth the stuff can have been I can't imagine. You see, the dreadful thing is that I didn't do anything. I just made up my mind he was dead and, realizing the whole thing was hopeless, I simply rang up Philipson in accordance with medical etiquette.'

'I see.' Mr Campion spoke gravely. 'What do you want me to do?'

Fielding hesitated. 'If you could find out what actually happened you'd save my reason, anyway,' he said so simply that the words were robbed of any hint of melodrama. 'Nothing can save my career—at least for a few years, I'm afraid. But I tell you, Campion, I must know if I'm losing my grip or if my mind's going. I must know how I came to make such an incredible mistake.'

Mr Campion glanced at the dignified youngster and noted that he betrayed no hint of the nervous strain he was undergoing. He felt his sympathy aroused and, at the same time, his curiosity. Before he could speak, however, Fielding went on.

'There are other complications too,' he said awkwardly. 'I'm engaged to old Rosemary's grandchild, you know, and when I tell you she's his principal heir you'll see how infernally awkward it all is.'

Mr Campion whistled. 'I say, that's very unfortunate.'

'It is,' said Fielding grimly. 'And it's not all. I'm afraid she broke off her engagement with Arthur March on my account and he had the impudence to 'phone her about this business almost as soon as it happened. I saw him this evening and frankly I don't understand the fellow. My mistake is an appalling one, I know. Old Rosemary's perfectly entitled to sue me. But March has taken the business as a personal insult. He blew me up as if I was a schoolboy, and, after all, he's only the grandson of a friend of the family. There's no blood tie at all. I couldn't say much to him; I'm so hopelessly in the wrong.'

Mr Campion considered. 'I noticed the old man when he came in this afternoon,' he said. 'He was looking remarkably well.'

Fielding smiled wryly. 'If you'd gone close to him you'd have been amazed,' he said. 'I was when I got him into the cab. It's vanity, I suppose, but the amount of time he must spend while his man gets him ready for the day must be considerable. It's gone on for so many years, I suppose, that the little additions and adjustments have mounted up, but what began presumably as a toupee is now damned nearly a wig, I can tell you. I don't think you'd have seen any ill effects of a drug, even if there were any. Still, I've talked too much. Will you have a shot at it?'

Mr Campion would not commit himself. 'I'll have a look round,' he said. 'I can't promise anything. It sounds like conjury to me.'

All the same, the following morning found him at the Junior Greys much earlier than usual. He sought out Walters and cornered him in the deserted smoking-room. The steward was in expansive mood.

'A dreadful thing, sir,' he agreed. 'Quite a scandal in its way. One gets to trust doctors, if I may say so. Still, I'd rather a dozen scandals than lose Sir Charles. Yes, he's here already, right on his usual time and in one of his good moods.'

Mr Campion smiled. 'His bad moods were pretty sensational, weren't they?'

'Well, he's old, sir.' Walters spoke indulgently. 'There are days when he snaps everybody's head off and sits sulking over his paper without speaking to a soul, but I don't take any notice because I know that tomorrow he'll be quite different, quite his old charming self with a nod and a smile to everyone. I always know which mood it's to be. As soon as he comes in he calls for a whisky. If it's a good day it's whisky and water and if he's upset it's whisky and soda, so I have plenty of warning, you see.'

Mr Campion thanked him and wandered away. He had suddenly become very grave and the expression in his eyes behind his horn-rimmed spectacles was one of alarm.

He went down to the telephone and called Oates. Less than twenty minutes later he and the Superintendent were in a taxi speeding towards Fleet Street. Stanislaus Oates was his customary sombre self. The somewhat elephantine gaiety which he had displayed at the chop-house was gone as if it had never been. This morning he was a trifle irritable.

‘I hope this isn’t a wild-goose chase, Champion,’ he protested as the cab lurched down the Embankment. ‘I’m not an idle man, you know, and I’ve got no business careering off on a purely private jaunt like this.’

Campion turned to him and the elder man was surprised by the gravity of his expression.

‘Somehow, I don’t think even you could keep this business private if you wanted to,’ said Mr Champion. ‘Here we are. Wait for me.’

The cab had pulled up outside a dingy building in a narrow court and the Superintendent, peering out after his departing guide, saw him disappear into the offices of the *Curtain*, a well-known stage weekly famous for its theatrical cards and intimate gossip.

He was gone for some little time, but seemed pleased with himself when he reappeared. He gave an address in Streatham to the man and clambered back beside his friend.

‘I’ve got it,’ he said briefly. ‘We shan’t be too late to interfere, although of course the main mischief is done. Why? That’s what I don’t understand. It couldn’t have been merely to discredit Fielding; that was taking far too long a chance.’

‘I wish you’d explain and not talk like the wrong end of a telephone,’ said Oates testily. ‘What have you got from the benighted hole we’ve just left?’

Campion looked at him as though he had only just remembered his existence.

‘The address, of course,’ he said briefly.

The cab drew up at last in a wide suburban street where each pair of houses was exactly like the next—red brick, white stucco and solid chocolate paint.

Mr Champion led the way up a short tiled path to a neat front door and Oates, who had taken one look at the windows with their drawn blinds, followed him hastily, his irritation vanishing.

A little woman in a dark overall, her grey hair scraped into a tight knot at the back of her head, opened the door to them. Her face was mottled and her eyes red.

‘Mr Nowell?’ she echoed in response to Champion’s question, and then, fishing hastily for her handkerchief, she began to cry.

Mr Campion was very gentle with her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t have asked for him like that. He’s dead isn’t he?’

She looked up at him sharply. ‘Oh, you’re from the police, are you?’ she said unexpectedly. ‘The doctor told me there’d have to be an inquest, as the death was so sudden. It’s been such a shock. He lodged here so long.’

She made way for them and they crowded into the little hall. The Superintendent realized they were entering by false pretences, but there seemed to be no point in going into explanations just then.

‘When did you find him?’ Campion inquired cautiously.

‘Not till this morning when I took up his tea.’ The old woman was anxious to talk. ‘He must have died last night, so the doctor says. He put me through it very carefully. “Well, he was alive at ten o’clock,” I said, “because I spoke to him.” I always go to bed at a quarter to ten and if Mr Nowell was later he didn’t like me to sit up for him. He had his own key and there was always someone to help him up.’

She paused for breath and Campion nodded encouragingly.

‘Well,’ she went on, ‘last night I had just turned out my bedroom light when I heard a motor stop and then the door went. “Is that you, Mr Nowell?” I called. “Yes, Mrs Bell,” he said. “Good night.” A little while afterwards I heard the car drive away.’

Oates interrupted her. ‘Did the chauffeur come in with him?’

Mrs Bell turned to him. ‘I don’t know if it was the chauffeur, sir, but somebody did. He was nearly eighty, you know, and it was nothing for the gentleman who brought him home to help him up to his room.’

‘Can we see him, please?’ said Mr Campion softly.

Mrs Bell began to weep again, but afterwards, when they stood bareheaded in the big front bedroom and looked down at the gaunt still figure on the bed, she began to speak quietly and with pride.

‘You’re not seeing him as he was at all,’ she said. ‘He was wonderfully handsome with his white hair, his cane and his buttonhole. He used to take a great pride in his appearance. Spend hours and hours and pounds and pounds over it, he would. There was something he used to do with his cheeks to make them stand out more; I don’t know what it was.’

Campion bent towards her and murmured something. She shook her head dubiously.

‘A photograph, sir?’ she repeated. ‘No, that’s a thing I don’t think I ’ave got. He was extraordinarily touchy about having his photograph took, which was funny when he thought so much of himself, if I can say such a thing without meaning to be unkind. Wait a minute, though. I do believe I’ve got a little snapshot I took of him in the garden one day when he didn’t know. I’ll go and get it.’

As soon as they were alone Campion bent over the man on the bed and raised an eyelid very gently.

‘Yes, I think so,’ he said softly. ‘Fielding couldn’t be blamed for not noticing that. It would look like a perfectly normal death to him, thinking he knew the fellow’s age. If we can get your people on to this at once and get ’em to test for morphia sulphate I fancy they’ll get results if they hurry.’

The Superintendent’s question was cut short by the return of Mrs Bell with a faded snapshot and they adjourned to a little light room at the back of the house.

‘There he is,’ she said proudly. ‘I was lucky to find him. That was taken last summer. He wasn’t going up to Town so often then.’

‘What did he do in London?’ inquired Mr Campion, holding the photograph down, to the annoyance of the Superintendent.

Mrs Bell looked uncomfortable. ‘I hardly know,’ she said. ‘He used to tell me he spent his time in his nephew’s office keeping an eye on things, but I think myself he was in a sort of high-class library and was one of those people who sit about making the place look respectable. “Dressing the house”, we used to call it in my stage days.’

Oates smiled. ‘That’s a funny idea,’ he said. ‘I’ve never heard of it being done in a library.’

‘Well, a very expensive tailor’s, then,’ she persisted. ‘I know I thought I saw him sitting in a window in a West End street once. He wasn’t doing anything; only sitting there and looking very nice. I asked him about it, of course, but he got very angry and made me promise never to speak of it again.’

The front-door bell interrupted her and she hurried out with a word of excuse.

Oates turned to Campion. 'I'm in a fog,' he said. 'You'll have to explain.'

The younger man gave him the snapshot and he stared at the little photograph of a tall, thin, distinguished figure walking down the gravelled path of the tiny garden.

'Old Rosemary!' ejaculated the Superintendent and raised a bewildered face to his friend's. 'Good Lord, Campion, who was that chap in the next room?'

'John Nowell, Sir Charles Rosemary's understudy at the Thespian Theatre thirty years ago—and ever since, apparently.'

Mr Campion spoke calmly.

'I admit the idea didn't seem credible when I first thought of it,' he went on, 'but afterwards, when I looked into it, it became obvious. Nowell got his job nearly sixty years ago because he resembled Rosemary; that was when he was twenty. Rosemary was nearly ten years older, but they were the same type and very much alike in feature. Since then Nowell has spent his life in imitating the greater actor. He copied his walk and his mannerisms, and as the two men grew older the simulation became easier. Rosemary resorted to artificial aids to keep young-looking, and Nowell, to the same aids to look like Rosemary.'

'Yes, yes, I get that,' said the Superintendent testily. 'But in the name of heaven, why?'

Mr Campion shrugged his shoulders.

'Vanity takes a lot of explaining,' he said. 'But Rosemary was a rich man and I think it was worth his while to employ a fellow, already a pensioner of his perhaps, to sit in the Greys and keep the legend of his perennial health alive. If ever Rosemary was prevented from going to the club Nowell took his place. When you think of it, Rosemary's record at the Greys, all day and every day for twenty years, is much more hard to swallow than this explanation of it.'

Oates continued to stare at the photograph.

'I grant the looks,' he said suddenly, 'now that I've seen the chap in the next room, but what happened if he had to talk?'

'He didn't,' said Campion. 'At least, hardly at all. For the last few years Rosemary's been having moods. On his good days he was his old self. On his bad days he was very nearly speechless with sulkiness. It was these

moods that put me on to Nowell, as a matter of fact. Walters told me this morning that on his good days Rosemary drank whisky and water and on his bad ones whisky and soda. I have met men who'd drink whisky and soup at a pinch, but never one who hadn't a definite preference in the water or soda controversy when he was in a position to choose. It occurred to me, therefore, that there must be two men, and an understudy naturally came into my mind because the imitation had to be so perfect. So I called at the *Curtain* offices and was lucky to catch Bellew, who does the old-timers' gossip. I asked him if Rosemary ever had a regular understudy and he coughed up the name and address immediately.'

'Neat,' admitted the Superintendent slowly. 'Very neat. But what are we doing here and where's the crime?'

'Well, it's murder, you know,' said Mr Campion diffidently. 'Yesterday morning someone gave that poor chap in there a shot of something in his whisky and soda under the impression that he was giving it to Rosemary. Nowell dropped into a coma at the club and young Fielding the surgeon, seeing that he was pretty far gone, took him home. In the cab he died. Morphia sulphate produces very much the same symptoms as the sudden cardiac collapse of the aged, and Fielding, thinking it was a clear case, left the body with Rosemary's man at the Dover Street flat, 'phoned Sir Edgar Philipson and went away like a polite little medico. When Philipson got there, of course, he saw Rosemary himself, who was perfectly fit. I imagine Nowell's body remained at Dover Street all day and in the evening, when Mrs Bell was thought likely to be in bed, the valet, probably aided by Rosemary's chauffeur, brought it down here. They took it up to his room, as they'd often done before, and went away.'

'But the voice?' protested the Superintendent. 'He spoke to the landlady; she said so.'

Campion glanced at him. 'I think,' he said slowly, 'old Rosemary must have come down here, too, just in case. After copying him so long, Nowell's voice was a replica of Rosemary's, you see.'

'At ninety?' exclaimed the Superintendent. 'A nerve like that at ninety?'

'I don't know,' said Mr Campion. 'It takes a bit of nerve to get to ninety, I should say.'

Oates glanced towards the door. 'She's a long time,' he said. 'I wonder if that was the coroner's officer. . . .'

He went out on to the narrow landing with Campion behind him and appeared just as Mrs Bell opened the door of the front bedroom and showed a white-faced man out.

‘I can’t tell you any more, sir,’ she was saying stiffly. ‘Perhaps you’ll ask the police gentlemen here?’

She got no further. With an inarticulate cry the stranger swung round and the light from the landing window fell upon his face. It was Arthur March. He stood staring at Campion, his eyes narrowed and the knotted veins standing out on his temples.

‘You—you interfering swine!’ he said suddenly and sprang.

Campion only just met the attack in time. As the man’s fingers closed round his throat he jerked his knee upward and caught his opponent in the wind. March collapsed against the flimsy balustrade, which gave beneath the sudden weight and sent him sprawling on to the stairs below, Campion after him.

A vigorous pounding on the hall door announcing the arrival of the coroner’s officer added to the general confusion, and the Superintendent, with an energy surprising in one of his somewhat dyspeptic appearance, pounced down upon the two scuffling on the stairs.

It was nearly three hours later when Mr Campion sat in the Superintendent’s office at Scotland Yard and expostulated mildly.

‘It’s all very well to arrest him on the assault charge,’ he was saying, ‘but you can’t hold him. You cannot prove the attempted murder of Rosemary or the actual murder of Nowell.’

Stanislaus Oates sat at his desk, his hands crossed on his waistcoat. He was very pleased.

‘Think not?’ he inquired.

‘Well,’ said Mr Campion judicially, ‘I hate to dampen your enthusiasm, but what have you got? Walters can swear that March met him in the lounge yesterday morning and persuaded him to let him take the old man’s refresher over to him, as he wanted an excuse to have a word with the old boy, who was in a bad humour. There’s opportunity there, I know, but that’s not much in court. Then you can show that March spotted his error and, by much the same process of reasoning as mine, arrived at Nowell’s. And you can prove that he attacked me. But that’s your whole case. He’ll go scot-free. After all,

why should March want to kill Rosemary? Because the old boy's granddaughter wouldn't marry him?"

'That's not so absurd as you think, my boy.' Oates was avuncular. 'As a matter of fact, if Denise Warren had married Arthur March, Rosemary would never have been attacked.'

Mr Campion stared at him and the Superintendent continued contentedly:

'Do you remember a meal we had together at Benjamin's chop-house to celebrate my promotion?'

'Perfectly. You were very tight and made an exhibition of us.'

'Not at all.' Oates was scandalized. 'I was observant and informative. I observed Miss Warren break off her engagement with the grandson of Rosemary's old friend, Sir Joshua March, and I tried to inform you of certain facts and you wouldn't listen to me. Do you remember me telling you that you amateurs don't collect enough data? Do you remember me telling you about company law?'

'It comes back to me,' admitted Mr Campion.

The Superintendent was mollified.

'Did you know it's a common practice among small companies to raise money on large life insurances taken out on behalf of a member of the firm for the express purpose of such money-raising?'

'Yes, I had heard of it. But it's usually a partner who insures his life, isn't it?'

'Not always. That's the point.' Oates was beaming. 'If the partners are none of them particularly good risks they often insure a junior member of the firm, or sometimes an outside person altogether who happens to be "a good risk", as they call it. Now look here, Campion. . . .' Oates leant across the desk. 'When Allan March and Son—the first Sir Joshua was the son in those days—were in low water sixty-odd years ago they wanted to take out a sixty-thousand-pound policy in order to borrow upon it. Allan March was an old man and Joshua was a heart subject. They needed someone who was a good risk, you see, because the sum was so large that it was necessary to get the premium as low as possible. Rosemary and Joshua were friends and in those days Rosemary was something of a marvel. His constitution was wonderful, his habits were temperate, and also he had a strong publicity value.'

He paused and Campion nodded.

‘Go on. I’m following.’

‘Well, March and Son approached the Mutual Ordered Life Endowment, which was a young firm then, one of the first of the flashy, advertising insurance companies, and they agreed to take the risk at an extremely low premium because of the publicity and because, of course, the fellow was a pretty good life. Rosemary agreed to stand for his part in the business; that is, he agreed to have himself insured for friendship’s sake and because the Marches were in a bad way. But as a sort of gesture he made a stipulation. “If I live to ninety,” he said, “the policy reverts to me.” It was a joke at the time, because the heavier Victorians didn’t usually reach anywhere near that age, and, anyway, it was the immediate loan which interested everyone. However, they agreed to it and it was all duly signed and sealed.’

‘Had March and Son kept up the insurance?’

‘Oh yes.’ The Superintendent was watching Campion’s face as he spoke. ‘I don’t suppose it’s been convenient for them to repay the sum they’d borrowed on that policy, or that, since the premium was so low, they could have bought a loan more cheaply. But you see the situation now. I’d have told you all this back in the summer if you’d listened. It’s a clear case, isn’t it?’

Mr Campion blinked. ‘If old Rosemary died before his ninetieth birthday, then,’ he said at last, ‘the residue of the sixty thousand went to March and Son; but if he lives until after tomorrow it will pass into his own estate and go to Denise Warren.’

‘Tomorrow’s the ninetieth birthday, is it?’ said Oates. ‘March was cutting it pretty fine. I suppose he hoped the girl would come back to him and he’d get the cash through her. Well, my lad, what have you got to say now?’

‘Nothing,’ said Mr Campion affably. ‘Nothing, except that it wasn’t company law, was it? It sounds more like insurance to me.’

Oates shrugged his shoulders. ‘You may be right,’ he said airily. ‘I’m not a dictionary and I didn’t go to a night school. Still,’ he added with a chuckle, ‘we like to feel we do a little, you know, we professionals. You amateurs have your uses now and again, but when it comes to the groundwork we’ve got you licked every time.’

Mr Campion grinned at him.

‘I really think you believe that, you old sinner,’ he said.

THE CASE OF THE WHITE ELEPHANT

Mr. Campion, piloting his companion through the crowded courtyard at Burlington House, became aware of the old lady in the Daimler, partly because her chauffeur almost ran over him and partly because she gave him a stare of such vigorous and personal disapproval that he felt she must either know him very well indeed or have mistaken him for someone else entirely.

Juliet Fysher-Sprigge, who was leaning on his arm with all the weariness of a two-hour trek round the Academy's Summer Exhibition, enlightened him.

'We were *not* amused, were we?' she said. 'Old-fashioned people have minds that are just too prurient, my dear. After all, I have known you for years, haven't I, and I'm not even married to Philip. Besides, the Academy is so respectable. It isn't as though she'd seen me sneaking out of the National Gallery.'

Mr. Campion handed her into a taxicab.

'Who was she?' he inquired, hoisting his lank form in after her.

Juliet laughed. Her laughter was one of her most charming attributes, for it wiped the sophistication from her debutante's face and left her the schoolgirl he had known three years before.

'My dear, didn't you recognize her? That would have been the last straw for the poor darling! That's Florence, Dowager Countess of Marle. Philip's Auntie Flo.'

Mr. Campion's pale blue eyes grew momentarily more intelligent behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

'Ah, hence the disgust,' he said. 'You'll have to explain me away. The police are always doing it.'

Juliet turned to him with the wide-eyed ingenuousness of one who perceives a long-awaited opening.

'You still dabble in police and detection and things, then?' she said breathlessly and not very tactfully, since his reputation as a criminologist was considerable. 'Do tell me, what is the low-down on these terribly

exciting burglaries? Are the police really beaten or are they being bribed? No one talks of anything else these days. I just had to see you and find out.'

Her companion leant back in the leathery depths of the cab and sighed regretfully.

'When you 'phoned me and demanded to be taken to this execrable exhibition I was vain enough to think it was my companionship you were after,' he said. 'Now it turns out to be merely a vulgar pursuit of the material for gossip. Well, my girl, you're going to be disappointed. The clever gentleman doesn't know a thing and, what's more, he doesn't care. Have you lost anything yourself?'

'Me?' Juliet's gratification at the implied compliment all but outweighed her disappointment. 'Of course I haven't. It's only the really worth-while collections that have gone. That's why it's so interesting. The De Breuil diamonds went first. Then the Denver woman lost her emeralds and the glorious Napoleon necklace. Josephine Pharaoh had her house burgled and just lost her tiara, which was the one really good thing she had, and now poor old Mrs Dacre has had her diamonds and rubies pinched, including the famous dog collar. Forty-two diamonds, my dear!—each one quite as big as a pea. They say it's a cat burglar and the police know him quite well, but they can't find him—at least, that's one story. The other one is that it's all being done for the insurance and the police are in it. What do you think?'

Mr Campion glanced at her affectionately and noted that the gold hair under her small black hat curled as naturally as ever.

'Both stories are equally good,' he announced placidly. 'Come and have some tea, or has Philip's Auntie Flo got spies everywhere?'

Miss Fysher-Sprigge blushed. 'I don't care if she has,' she said. 'I've quarrelled with Philip, anyway.'

It took Mr Campion several minutes—until they were seated at a table on the edge of the Hôtel Monde's smaller dance-floor, in fact—before he fully digested this piece of information. Juliet was leaning back in her chair, her eyes roving over the gathering in a frank search for old acquaintances, when he spoke again.

'Seriously?' he inquired.

Juliet met his eyes and again he saw her sophistication vanish.

'I hope not,' she said soberly. 'I've been rather an ass. Can I tell you about it?'

Mr Champion smiled ruefully. It was a sign of the end of the thirties, he supposed, when one submitted cheerfully to the indignity of taking a young woman out only to hear about her hopes and fears concerning a younger man. Juliet went on blissfully, lowering her voice so that the heart-searchings of the balalaika orchestra across the floor concealed it from adjoining tables.

‘Philip is a dear, but he has to be so filthily careful about the stupidest things,’ she said, accepting a rhum-baba. ‘The F.O. casts a sort of white light over people, have you noticed? His relations are like it, too, only worse. You can’t talk of anything without getting warned off. The aunt we saw today bit my head off the other evening for merely mentioning these cat burglaries, which, after all, are terribly exciting. “My child,” she said, “we can’t afford to know about such things,” and went on talking about her old White Elephant until I nearly wept.’

‘White Elephant?’ Mr Champion looked blank. ‘The charity?’

Juliet nodded. ‘“Send your white elephant to Florence, Countess of Marle, and she will find it a home where it will be the pet of the family,”’ she quoted. ‘It’s quite an important affair, patronized by royalty and blessed by every archbishop in the world. I pointed out it was only a glorified jumble sale and she nearly had a fit. She works herself to death for it. I go and help pack up parcels sometimes—or I did before this row with Philip. I’ve been rather silly. I’ve done something infuriating. Philip’s livid with me now and I don’t know what’s going to happen when he finds out everything. I must tell somebody. Can I tell you?’

A faint smile passed over Mr Champion’s thin face.

‘You’re quite a nice girl,’ he said, ‘but you won’t stay twenty-one for ever. Stop treating me as though I was a maiden uncle.’

‘You must be thirty-six at least,’ said Miss Fysher-Sprigge brutally, ‘and I’m rather glad, because presumably you’re sensible. Look here, if a man has a criminal record it doesn’t mean he’s always going to be stealing things, does it? Not if he promises to go straight?’

Her companion frowned. ‘I don’t quite follow,’ he said. ‘Age is stopping the brain from functioning. I thought we were talking about Philip Graysby, Auntie Flo’s nephew?’

‘So we are,’ said Juliet. ‘He hasn’t got the record, of course, but Henry Swan has. Henry Swan is—or, rather, was—Philip’s man. He’d been with Philip for eighteen months and been perfectly good, and then this came out

about him. Philip said he was awfully sorry, but he'd have to go. Philip couldn't help it, I suppose—I do see that now—but at the time I was furious. It seemed so unfair, and we had a quarrel. I said some beastly things and so did he, but he wouldn't give in and Swan went.'

She paused and eyed her companion dubiously. Mr Campion shrugged his shoulders.

'It doesn't seem very serious,' he said.

Juliet accepted the cigarette he offered her and seemed engrossed in the tip of it.

'No,' she agreed. 'That part isn't. But you see, I'm a very impulsive person and I was stupidly cross at the time and so when I had a wonderful idea for getting my own back I acted on it. I got Swan a job with the most respectable person I knew and, in order to do it, I gave him a reference. To make it a good reference I didn't say anything about the record. How's that?'

'Not so good,' he admitted. 'Who's the most respectable person harbouring this human bomb?'

Juliet avoided his eyes. 'Philip's Auntie Flo,' she said. 'She's the stiffest, thorniest, most conventional of them all. Philip doesn't go there often, so he hasn't seen Swan yet, but when he does and makes inquiries and hears about me—well, it's going to be awkward. D'you think he'll ever forgive me? He stands to get a fortune from Auntie Flo if he doesn't annoy her. It was a silly thing of me to do, wasn't it?'

'Not bright,' agreed Mr Campion. 'Are you in love with Philip?'

'Horribly,' said Juliet Fysher-Sprigge and looked away across the dance-floor.

Mr Campion had spent some time expounding a wise course of action, in which a clean breast to all concerned figured largely, when he became aware that he was not being heard. Juliet was still staring across the room, her eyes puzzled.

'I say,' she said unexpectedly, 'this place is wildly expensive, isn't it?'

'I hope not,' said Mr Campion mildly.

Juliet did not smile. Her cheeks were faintly flushed and her eyes questioning.

‘Don’t be a fool. You know what I mean. This is probably the most expensive place in London, isn’t it? How queer! It looks as though Auntie Flo really has got her spies everywhere. That’s her manicurist over there, having tea alone.’

He glanced casually across the room.

‘The woman sitting directly under the orchestra?’ he inquired. ‘The one who looks like a little bull in a navy hat? She’s an interesting type, isn’t she? Not very nice.’

Juliet’s eyes were still thoughtful.

‘That’s her. Miss Matisse. A visiting manicurist,’ she said. ‘She goes to dozens of people I know. I believe she’s very good. How funny for her to come to tea alone, here of all places. . . .’

Mr Campion’s casual interest in the small square figure who managed somehow to look flamboyant in spite of her sober clothes showed signs of waning.

‘She may be waiting for someone,’ he suggested.

‘But she’s ordered her tea and started it.’

‘Oh well, perhaps she just felt like eating.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Juliet. ‘You pay ten and sixpence just to sit in this room because you can dance if you want to.’

Her host laughed. ‘Auntie Flo has a pretty turn of speed if she tracked us down here and then whipped round and set her manicuring bloodhound on us, all in half an hour,’ he said.

Juliet ignored him. Her attention had wandered once again.

‘I say,’ she murmured, ‘can you see through that mirror over there? See that man eating alone? I thought at first he was watching Miss Matisse, but I believe it’s you he’s most interested in.’

Her companion turned his head and his eyes widened.

‘Apologies,’ he said. ‘I under-estimated you. That’s Detective-Sergeant Blower, one of the best men in the public-school and night-club tradition. I wonder whom he’s tailing. Don’t watch him—it’s unkind.’

Juliet laughed. ‘You’re a most exciting person to have tea with,’ she said. ‘I do believe. . . .’

The remainder of her remark was lost as, in common with all but one visitor in the room, she was silenced by what was, for the Hôtel Monde, a rather extraordinary incident.

The balalaika orchestra had ceased to play for a moment or so and the dance floor was practically deserted when, as though taking advantage of the lull, the woman in the navy hat rose from her chair and shouted down the whole length of the long room, in an effort, apparently, to attract the attention of a second woman who had just entered.

‘Mrs Gregory!’ Her voice was powerful and well articulated. ‘Mrs Gregory! Mrs Gregory!’

The newcomer halted as all eyes were turned upon her, and her escort expostulated angrily to the excited *maitre d’hôtel* who hurried forward.

Miss Matisse sat down, and in the silence Mr Campion heard her explaining in a curiously flat voice to the waiter who came up to her:

‘I am sorry. I thought I recognized a friend. I was mistaken. Bring me my bill, please.’

Juliet stared across the table, her young face shocked.

‘What a very extraordinary thing to do,’ she said.

Mr Campion did not reply. From this place of vantage he could see in the mirror that Detective-Sergeant Blower had also called for his bill and was preparing to leave.

Some little time later, when Mr Campion deposited Juliet on her Mount Street doorstep, she was in a more cheerful mood.

‘Then you think if I go to Philip and tell him the worst and say that I’m sorry he’ll forgive me?’ she said as they parted.

‘If he’s human he’ll forgive you anything,’ Mr Campion assured her gallantly.

Juliet sighed. ‘Age does improve the manners,’ she said unnecessarily. ‘I’ll forgive you for disappointing me about the burglaries. I really had hoped to get all the dirt. Good-bye.’

‘Damn the burglaries!’ said Mr Campion and took a taxi home.

Three days later he said the same thing again, but for a different reason. This reason arrived by post. It came in a fragrant green box designed to contain a large flask of familiar perfume and it lay upon his breakfast table

winking at him with evil amusement. It was Mrs Dacre's ruby-and-diamond dog collar and it was not alone. In a nest of cotton wool beneath it were five diamond rings of considerable value, a pair of exquisite ruby ear-clips, and a small hooped bracelet set with large alternate stones.

Mr Campion, who was familiar with the 'stolen' list which the police send round to their local stations and circularize to the jewellers and pawnbrokers of the kingdom, had no difficulty in recognizing the collection as the haul of the last cat burglary.

The sender of so dubious a gift might have been harder to identify had it not been for the familiarity of the perfume and the presence of a small card on which was printed, in shaky, ill-disguised characters, a simple request and a specious promise:

*Get these back where they belong and I'll love you for ever,
darling.*

Mr Campion had a considerable respect for the Law, but he spent some time that morning in acquiring a box of similar design but different and more powerful perfume, and it was not until the jewellery was freshly housed and the card burned that he carried his responsibility to Scotland Yard and laid it with a sigh of relief on the desk of Chief Detective-Inspector Stanislaus Oates, his friend and partner in many adventures.

The original wrapping he decided to retain. Its ill-written address might have been scrawled by anyone, and the fact that it was grossly overfranked showed that it had been dropped into a public box and not passed over a post-office counter.

He let the chief, who was a tall, disconsolate personage with a grey face and dyspepsia, recover from his first transports of mingled relief and suspicion before regretting his inability to help him further. Oates regarded him.

'It's my duty to warn you that you're under suspicion,' he said with the portentous solemnity which passed with him for wit.

Campion laughed. 'My cat-burglary days are over,' he said. 'Or am I the fence?'

'That's more like it.' The chief passed his cigarette case. 'I can't tell you how glad I am to see this lot. But it doesn't help us very much unless we know where it came from. These "cat" jobs are done by The Sparrow. We knew that as soon as we saw the first one. You remember him, Campion?—a

sleek, handsome chap with an insufferable manner. These jobs have his trade-marks all over them. Pane cut out with a diamond and the glass removed with a sucker—no finger-prints, no noise, no mistakes.’ He paused and caressed his ear sadly. ‘It’s getting on my nerves,’ he said. ‘The Commissioner is sarcastic and the papers are just libellous. It’s hard on us. We know who and where the fellow is, but we can’t get him. We’ve held him as long as we dared, three separate times this summer, but we haven’t got a thing we can fix on him. I’ve been trusting the stuff would turn up somewhere so that we could work back on him from that angle, but, frankly, this is the first scrap of it I’ve seen. Where’s all the early swag? This was only pinched five days ago.’

Mr Campion remained unhelpful. ‘I got it this morning,’ he said. ‘It just came out of the air. Ask the postman.’

‘Oh, I know. . . .’ The chief waved the suggestion aside. ‘You’ll help us just as much as you can, which means as much as you care to. Some society bit is mixed up in this somewhere, I’m sure of it. Look here, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll put my cards on the table. This isn’t official; this is the truth. Edward Borringer, alias The Sparrow, is living with his wife in digs in Kilburn. They’re very respectable at the moment, just a quiet hard-working couple. He takes classes in the local gym and she does visiting manicure work.’

‘Under the name of Matisse?’

‘Exactly!’ The Inspector was jubilant. ‘Now you’ve given yourself away, my lad. What do you know about Margot Matisse?’

‘Not much,’ his visitor confessed affably. ‘She was pointed out to me as a manicurist at a *thé dansant* at the Hôtel Monde on Tuesday. Looking round, I saw Blower on her trail, so naturally when you mentioned manicurists I put two and two together.’

‘Who pointed her out to you?’

‘A lady who had seen her at work in a relation’s house.’

‘All right.’ The policeman became depressed again. ‘Well, there you are. It’s quite obvious how they’re working it. She goes round to the big houses and spots the stuff and the lie of the land, and then he calls one night and does the job. It’s the old game worked very neatly. Too neatly, if you ask me. What we can’t fathom is how they’re disposing of the stuff. They certainly haven’t got it about them, and their acquaintance just now is so respectable, not to say aristocratic, that we can barely approach it. Besides, to make this

big stuff worth the risk they must be using an expert. Most of these stones are so well known that they must go to a first-class fellow to be recut.'

Mr Campion hesitated. 'I seem to remember that Edward Borringer was once associated with our old friend Bertrand Meyer and his *ménage*,' he ventured. 'Are they still functioning?'

'Not in England.' The chief was emphatic. 'And if these two are getting their stuff out of the country I'll eat my hat. The customs are co-operating with us. We thought a maid in one of the houses which the Matisse woman visits might be in it and so, if you've heard a squawk from your society pals about severity at the ports, that's our work. I don't mind telling you it's all very difficult. You can see for yourself. These are the Matisse clients.'

Mr Campion scanned the typewritten page and his sympathy for his friend deepened.

'Oh yes, Caesar's wives,' he agreed. 'Every one of 'em. Servants been in the families for years, I suppose?'

'Unto the third and fourth generations,' said the chief bitterly.

His visitor considered the situation.

'I suppose they've got alibis fixed up for the nights of the crimes?' he inquired.

'Fixed up?' The chief's tone was eloquent. 'The alibis are so good that we ought to be able to arrest 'em on suspicion alone. An alibi these days doesn't mean anything except that the fellow knows his job. Borringer does, too, and so does his wife. We've had them both on the carpet for hours without getting a glimmer from them. No, it's no use, Campion; we've got to spot the middleman and then the fence, and pin it on to them that way. Personally, I think the woman actually passes the stuff, but we've had Blower on her for weeks and he swears she doesn't speak to a soul except these superior clients of hers. Also, of course, neither of them post anything. We thought we'd get something once and got the Postal authorities to help us, but all we got for our trouble was a p.c. to a viscountess about an appointment for chiropody.'

Mr Campion was silent for some time.

'It was funny, her shouting out like that in the Hôtel Monde,' he said at last.

The chief grunted. 'Mrs Gregory,' he said. 'Yes, I heard about that. A little show for Blower's benefit, if you ask me. Thought she'd give him

something to think about. The Borringers are like that, cocky as hell.'

Once again there was a thoughtful silence in the light airy office and this time it was Stanislaus Oates who spoke first.

'Look here, Champion,' he said, 'you and I know one another. Let this be a word of friendly warning. If you suspect anyone you know of getting mixed up in this—for a bit of fun, perhaps—see that she's careful. If The Sparrow and his wife are still tied up with the Meyer lot—and they very well may be—the Meyer crowd aren't a pretty bunch. In fact, you know as well as I do, they're dirty and they're dangerous.'

His visitor picked up the list again. Philip Graysby's aunt's name headed the second column. He made up his mind.

'I don't know anything,' he said. 'I'm speaking entirely from guesswork and I rely on you to go into this in stockings with your discretion wrapping you like a blanket. But if I were you I should have a little chat with one Henry Swan, employed by Florence, Dowager Countess of Marle.'

'Ah,' said the chief with relief, 'that's where the wind blows, does it? I thought you'd come across.'

'I don't promise anything,' Champion protested.

'Who does?' said Stanislaus Oates and pulled a pad towards him. . . .

Mr Champion kept late hours. He was sitting up by the open window of his flat in Bottle Street, the cul-de-sac off Piccadilly, when the Chief Detective-Inspector called upon him just after midnight on the evening of his visit to Scotland Yard. The policeman was unusually fidgety. He accepted a drink and sat down before mentioning the purpose of his visit, which was, in fact, to gossip.

Campion, who knew him, let him take his time.

'We pulled that chap Swan in this afternoon,' he volunteered at last. 'He's a poor weedy little beggar who did a stretch for larceny in twenty-three and seems to have gone straight since. We had quite a time with him. He wouldn't open his mouth at first. Fainted when he thought we were going to jug him. Finally, of course, out it came, and a very funny story it was. Know anything about the White Elephant Society, Champion?'

His host blinked. 'Nothing against it,' he admitted. 'Ordinary charity stunt. Very decently run, I believe. The dowager does it herself.'

‘I know.’ There was a note of mystification in the chief’s voice. ‘See this?’

From his wallet he took a small green stick-on label. It was an ornate product embellished with a design of angels in the worst artistic taste. Across the top was a printed heading:

This is a gift from the White Elephant Society (Secy, Florence, Countess of Marle) and contains— A blank space had been filled up with the legend: *Two Pairs of Fancy Woollen Gloves* in ink. The address, which was also in ink, was that a well-known orphanage and the addressee was the matron.

‘That’s how they send the white elephants out,’ Oates explained. ‘There’s a word or two inside in the countess’s own handwriting. This is a specimen label. See what it means? It’s as good as a diplomatic pass with that old woman’s name on it.’

‘Whom to?’ demanded Mr Campion dubiously.

‘Anyone,’ declared the chief triumphantly. ‘Especially the poor chap in the customs office who’s tired of opening parcels. Even if he does open ’em he’s not going to examine ’em. Now here’s Swan’s story. He admits he found the jewellery, which he passed on to a friend whose name he will not divulge. That friend must have sent it to you. It sounds like a woman to me, but I’m not interested in her at the moment.’

‘Thank God for that,’ murmured his host devoutly. ‘Go on. Where did he find the stuff?’

‘In a woollen duck inside one of these White Elephant parcels,’ said the chief unexpectedly. ‘We’ve got the duck; home-made toy with little chamois pockets under its wings. The odd thing is that Swan swears the old lady gave the parcel to him herself, told him to post it, and made such a fuss about it that he became suspicious and opened it up.’

‘Do you believe that?’ Mr Campion was grinning and Oates frowned.

‘I do,’ he said slowly. ‘Curiously enough I do, in the main. In the first place, this chap honestly wants to go straight. One dose of clink has put him in terror of it for life. Secondly, if he was in on the theft why give the whole game away? Why produce the duck? What I do think is that he recognized the address. He says he can’t remember anything about it except that it was somewhere abroad, but that’s just what he would say if he recognized it and thought it was dangerous and was keeping quiet for fear of reprisals. Anyway, I believed him sufficiently to go down and interview the old lady.’

‘Did you, By Jove!’ murmured Mr Champion with respect.

Stanislaus Oates smiled wryly and ran his finger round the inside of his collar.

‘Not a homely woman,’ he observed. ‘Ever met someone who made you feel you wanted a haircut, Champion? I was very careful, of course. Kid gloves all the way. Had to. I tell you one funny thing, though: she was rattled.’

Mr Champion sat up. He knew his friend to be one of the soberest judges of humanity in the police force, where humanity is deeply studied.

‘Sure?’ he demanded incredulously.

‘Take my dying oath on it,’ said the chief. ‘Scared blue, if you ask me.’

The young man in the horn-rimmed spectacles made polite but depreciating noises. The chief shook his head.

‘It’s the truth. I gave her the facts—well, most of them. I didn’t explain how we came to open the parcel, since that part of the business wasn’t strictly orthodox. But I gave her the rest of the story just as I’ve given it to you, and instead of being helpful she tried to send me about my business with a flea in my ear. She insisted that she had directed each outgoing parcel during the last four weeks herself and swore that the Matisse woman could never have had access to any of them. Also, which is significant, she would not give me a definite reply about the duck. She was not sure if she’d ever seen it before. I ask you—a badly made yellow duck in a blue pullover. Anyone ’d know it again.’

Mr Champion grinned. ‘What was the upshot of this embarrassing interview?’ he inquired.

The chief laughed. ‘When she started talking about her son in the Upper House I came away,’ he said briefly. ‘I thought I’d let it rest for a day or two. Meanwhile, we shall keep a wary eye on Swan and the Borringers, although if those three are working together I’ll resign.’

He was silent for a moment.

‘She certainly was rattled,’ he repeated at last. ‘I’d swear it. Under the magnificent manner of hers she was scared. She had that set look about the eyes. You can’t mistake it. What d’you make of that, my lad?’

‘I don’t,’ said Champion discreetly. ‘It’s absurd.’

Oates sighed. ‘Of course it is,’ he agreed. ‘And so what?’

‘Sleep on it,’ his host suggested and the chief took the hint. . . .

It was unfortunate for everyone concerned that Mr Campion should have gone into the country early the following morning on a purely personal matter concerning a horse which he was thinking of buying and should not have returned to his flat until the evening. When he did get back he found Juliet and the dark, good-looking Philip Graysby, with whom she had presumably made up her differences, waiting for him. To Mr Campion they both seemed very young and very distressed. Juliet appeared to have been crying and it was she who broke the news.

‘It’s Auntie Flo,’ she said in a small tragic voice. ‘She’s bunked, Albert.’

It took Mr Campion some seconds to assimilate this interesting development, and by that time young Graysby had launched into hurried explanations.

‘That’s putting it very crudely,’ he said. ‘My aunt caught the Paris ’plane this morning. Certainly she travelled alone, which was unusual, but that may not mean anything. Unfortunately, she did not leave an address, and although we’ve got into touch with the Crillon she doesn’t seem to have arrived there.’

He hesitated and his dark face became suddenly ingenuous.

‘It’s so ridiculously awkward, her going off like this without telling anyone just after Detective-Inspector Oates called on her last night. I don’t know what the interview was about, of course—nobody does—but there’s an absurd feeling in the household that it wasn’t very pleasant. Anyway, the Inspector was very interested to hear that she had gone away when he called round this afternoon. It was embarrassing not being able to give him any real information about her return, and precious little about her departure. You see, we shouldn’t have known she’d taken the ’plane if the chauffeur hadn’t driven her to Croydon. She simply walked out of the house this morning and ordered the car. She didn’t even take a suitcase, which looks as though she meant to come back tonight, and, of course, there’s every possibility that she will.’

Mr Campion perched himself on the table and his eyes were grave.

‘Tell me,’ he said quietly, ‘had Lady Florence an appointment with her manicurist today?’

‘Miss Matisse?’ Juliet looked up. ‘Why, yes, she had, as a matter of fact. I went round there quite early this morning. Swan ’phoned me and told me Aunt had left rather hurriedly, so I—er—I went to see him.’

She shot an appealing glance at Philip, who grimaced at her, and she hurried on.

‘While I was there Miss Matisse arrived and Bennett—Aunt’s maid—told her all the gossip before I could stop her. Oh my dear, you don’t think . . . ?’

Instead of replying Mr Campion reached for the telephone and dialled a famous Whitehall number. Chief Detective-Inspector Oates was glad to hear his voice. He said so. He was also interested to know if Mr Campion had heard of the recent developments in The Sparrow case.

‘No,’ he said in reply to Mr Campion’s sharp question. ‘The two Borringers are behaving just as usual. Blower’s had the girl under his eye all day. . . . No, she hasn’t communicated with anyone. . . . What? . . . Wait a minute. I’ve got notes on Blower’s telephoned report here. Here we are. “On leaving the Dowager Countess of Marle’s house Miss Matisse went to the Venetian Cinema in Regent Street for the luncheon programme.” Nothing happened there except that she pulled Blower’s leg again.’

‘Did she shout to someone?’ Mr Campion’s tone was urgent.

‘Yes. Called to a woman named Mattie, who she said she thought was in the circle. Same silly stunt as last time. What’s the matter?’

Campion checked his exasperation. He was desperately in earnest and his face as he bent over the instrument was frighteningly grave.

‘Oates,’ he said quietly, ‘I’m going to ring you again in ten minutes and then you’ve got to get busy. Remember our little talk about the Meyers? This may be life or death.’

‘Good. . .’ began the chief and was cut off.

Mr Campion hustled his visitors out of the flat.

‘We’re going down to see Swan,’ he said, ‘and the quicker we get there the better.’

Henry Swan proved to be a small frightened man who was inclined to be more than diffident until he had had matters explained to him very thoroughly. Then he was almost pathetically anxious to help.

‘The address on the duck parcel, sir?’ he said, echoing Mr Campion’s question nervously. ‘I daren’t tell the police that. It might have been more than my life was worth. But if you think her ladyship—’

‘Let’s have it,’ cut in Graysby irritably.

‘Please,’ murmured Juliet.

Mr Swan came across. ‘Nineteen A, Rue Robespierre, Lyons, France,’ he blurted out. ‘I’ve burned the label, but I remember the address. In fact, to tell you the truth, it was because of the address I opened the box in the first place. I never had such a fright in all me life, sir, really.’

‘I see. Whom was the parcel sent to?’ Mr Champion’s manner was comfortingly reassuring.

Henry Swan hesitated. ‘Maurice Bonnet,’ he said at last, ‘and I once met a man who called himself that.’

Mr Champion’s eyes flickered. ‘On those occasions when he wasn’t calling himself Meyer, I suppose?’ he remarked.

The small man turned a shade or so paler and dropped his eyes.

‘I shouldn’t like to say, sir,’ he murmured.

‘Very wise,’ Champion agreed. ‘But you’ve got nothing to worry about now. We’ve got the address and that’s all that matters. You run along. Graysby, you and I have got to hurry. I’ll just have a word with Oates on the ’phone and then we’ll nip down to Croydon and charter a ’plane.’

Juliet caught his arm. ‘You don’t mean Philip’s aunt might be in *danger*?’ she said.

Mr Champion smiled down at her. ‘Some people do resent interference so, my dear,’ he said, ‘especially when they have quite a considerable amount to lose. . . .’

The Rue Robespierre is not in the most affluent quarter of Lyons and just before midnight on a warm spring evening it is not seen at its best. There silent figures loll in the dark doorways of houses which have come down in the world, and the night life has nothing to do with gaiety.

From Scotland Yard the wires had been busy and Champion and Graysby were not alone as they hurried down the centre of the wide street. A military little capitaine and four gendarmes accompanied them, but even so they were not overstaffed.

As their small company came to a stop before the crumbling façade of number nineteen A an upper window was thrown open and a shot spat down upon them. The capitaine drew his own gun and fired back, while the others put their shoulders to the door.

As they pitched into the dark musty hall a rain of fire met them from the staircase. A bullet took Mr Champion's hat from his head, and one of the gendarmes stepped back swearing, his left hand clasping a shattered right elbow.

The raiding party defended itself. For three minutes the darkness was streaked with fire, while the air became heavy with the smell of cordite.

The end came suddenly. There was a scream from the landing and a figure pitched over the balustrade on to the flags below, dragging another with it in its flight, while pattering footsteps flying up to the top storey testified to the presence of a fugitive.

Mr Champion plunged forward, the others at his heels. They found Florence, Dowager Countess of Marle, at last in a locked bedroom on the third floor. She had defended herself and had suffered for it. Her black silk was torn and dusty and her coiffure dishevelled. But her spirit was unbroken and the French police listened to her tirade with a respect all the more remarkable since they could not understand one word of it.

Graysby took his aunt back to her hotel in a police car and Mr Champion remained to assist in the cleaning up.

Bertrand Meyer himself actually succeeded in getting out on to the roof, but he was brought back finally and the little capitaine had the satisfaction of putting the handcuffs on him.

One of the gang had been killed outright when his head had met the flagstones of the hall, and the remaining member was hurried off to a prison hospital with a broken thigh.

Mr Champion looked at Meyer with interest. He was an oldish man, square and powerful, with strong sensitive hands and the hot angry eyes of a fanatic. His workroom revealed many treasures. A jeweller's bench, exquisitely fitted with all the latest appliances, contained also a drawer which revealed the dismembered fragments of the proceeds of the first three London burglaries, together with some French stones in particular request by the *Sûreté*.

Champion looked round him. 'Ah,' he said with satisfaction, 'and there's the wireless set. I wondered when some of you fellows were going to make use of the outside broadcasting programmes. How did you work it? Had someone listening to the first part of the first programme to be broadcast from a London public place each day, I suppose? It really is amazing how clearly those asides come, her voice quite fearless and yet so natural that it

wasn't until some time afterwards that I realized she had been standing just below the orchestra's live microphone.'

Meyer did not answer. His face was sullen and his eyes were fixed on the stones which the Frenchmen were turning out of little chamois leather bags on to the baize surface of the bench. . . .

It was some days later, back in the flat in Bottle Street, when Chief Detective-Inspector Oates sipped a whisky and soda and beamed upon his friend.

'I take off my hat to the old girl,' he said disrespectfully. 'She's got courage and a great sense of justice. She says she'll go into the witness-box if we need her and she apologized handsomely to me for taking the law into her own hands.'

'Good,' said Mr Campion. 'You've got the Borringers, of course?'

The chief grinned. 'We've got 'em safe as a couple of ferrets in a box,' he declared. 'The man's an expert, but the woman's a genius. The story she told the old lady, for instance. That was more than brains. After she'd got her ladyship interested in her she broke down one day and told a pretty little yarn about her cruel husband in France who had framed a divorce and got the custody of the kid. She told a harrowing story about the little presents she had made for it herself and had had sent back to her *pronto*. It didn't take her long to get the old woman to offer to send them as though they'd come from the White Elephant Society. Every woman has a streak of sentimentality in her somewhere. So all the Borringer—alias Matisse—girl had to do was to bring along the toys in her manicure case from time to time and have 'em despatched free, gratis, with a label which almost guaranteed 'em a free pass. Very nice, eh?'

'Very,' Campion agreed. 'Almost simple.'

The chief nodded. 'She did it well,' he said; 'so well that even after I'd given the old lady the facts she didn't trust me. She believed so strongly in this fictitious kid that she went roaring over to Lyons to find out the truth for herself before she gave the girl away. Unfortunately, the Borringers had that means of wireless communication with Meyer and so when she arrived the gang was ready for her. It's a good thing you got there, Campion. They're a hot lot. I wonder what they'd have done with her.'

'Neat,' muttered Mr Campion. 'That wireless stunt, I mean.'

'It was.' Oates was still impressed. 'The use of the names made it sound so natural. What was the code exactly? Do you know?'

His host pulled a dictionary from a shelf at his side and turned over the leaves until he came to a small section at the end.

‘It’s childish,’ he said. ‘Funny how these people never do any inventing if they can help it. Look it all up.’

The chief took the book and read the heading aloud.

‘The More Common British Christian Names and Their Meanings.’

He ran his eyes down the columns.

‘*Gregory*,’ he read. ‘*A watcher*. Good Lord, that was to tell ’em Blower was on their track, I suppose. And Mattie . . . what’s Mattie?’

He paused. ‘“*Diminutive of Matilda*,”’ he said at last. ‘“*Mighty Battle Maid*.” I don’t get that.’

‘Dangerous, indignant and female,’ translated Mr Campion. ‘It rather sums up Philip Graysby’s Auntie Flo, don’t you think?’

It was after the chief had gone and he was alone that Juliet ’phoned. She was jubilant and her clear voice bubbled over the wire.

‘I can’t thank you,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what to say. Aunt Florence is perfectly marvellous about everything. And I say, Albert. . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Philip says we can keep Swan if we have him at the country house. We’re going to be married quite soon, you know. Our reconciliation rather hurried things along. . . . Oh, what did you say?’

Mr Campion smiled. ‘I said I’ll have to send you a wedding present, then,’ he lied.

There was a fraction of silence at the other end of the wire.

‘Well, darling . . . it would be just too terribly sweet if you really *wanted* to,’ said Miss Fysher-Sprigge.

THE BORDER-LINE CASE

It was so hot in London that night that we slept with the wide skylight in our City studio open and let the soot-blacks fall in on us willingly, so long as they brought with them a single stirring breath to move the stifling air. Heat hung on the dark horizons and beneath our particular bowl of sky the City fidgeted, breathless and uncomfortable.

The early editions of the evening papers carried the story of the murder. I read it when they came along about three o'clock on the following afternoon. My mind took in the details lazily, for my eyelids were sticky and the printed words seemed remote and unrelated to reality.

It was a straightforward little incident, or so I thought it, and when I had read the guarded half-column I threw the paper over to Albert Campion, who had drifted in to lunch and stayed to sit quietly in a corner, blinking behind his spectacles, existing merely, in the sweltering day.

The newspapers called the murder the 'Coal Court Shooting Case', and the facts were simple.

At one o'clock in the morning, when Vacation Street, NE, had been a deserted lane of odoriferous heat, a policeman on the beat had seen a man stumble and fall to the pavement. The intense discomfort of the night being uppermost in his mind, he had not unnaturally diagnosed a case of ordinary collapse and, after loosening the stranger's collar, had summoned the ambulance.

When the authorities arrived, however, the man was pronounced to be dead and the body was taken to the mortuary, where it was discovered that death had been due to a bullet wound neatly placed between the shoulder-blades. The bullet had made a small blue hole and, after perforating the left lung, had furrowed the heart itself, finally coming to rest in the bony structure of the chest.

Since this was so, and the fact that the police constable had heard no untoward sound, it had been reasonable to believe that the shot had been fired at some little distance from a gun with a silencer.

Mr Campion was only politely interested. The afternoon certainly was hot and the story, as it then appeared, was hardly original or exciting. He sat

on the floor reading it patiently, his long thin legs stretched out in front of him.

‘Someone died at any rate,’ he remarked at last and added after a pause: ‘Poor chap! Out of the frying-pan. . . . Dear me, I suppose it’s the locality which predisposes one to think of that. Ever seen Vacation Street, Margery?’

I did not answer him. I was thinking how odd it was that a general irritant like the heat should make the dozens of situations arising all round one in the great City seem suddenly almost personal. I found I was desperately sorry for the man who had been shot, whoever he was.

It was Stanislaus Oates who told us the real story behind the half-column in the evening paper. He came in just after four looking for Campion. He was a Detective-Inspector in those days and had just begun to develop the habit of chatting over his problems with the pale young man in the horn-rimmed spectacles. Theirs was an odd relationship. It was certainly not a case of the clever amateur and the humble policeman: rather the irritable and pugnacious policeman taking it out of the inoffensive, friendly representative of the general public.

On this occasion Oates was rattled.

‘It’s a case right down your street,’ he said briefly to Campion as he sat down. ‘Seems to be a miracle, for one thing.’

He explained after a while, having salved his conscience by pointing out that he had no business to discuss the case and excusing himself most illogically on grounds of the heat.

‘It’s “low-class” crime,’ he went on briskly. ‘Practically gang-shooting. And probably quite uninteresting to all of you, who like romance in your crimes. However, it’s got me right down on two counts: the first because the man who shot the fellow who died couldn’t possibly have done so, and second because I was wrong about the girl. They’re so true to type, these girls, that you can’t even rely on the proverbial exception.’

He sighed as if the discovery had really grieved him.

We heard the story of Josephine as we sat round in the paralytically hot studio and, although I never saw the girl then or afterwards, I shall not forget the scene; the three of us listening, breathing rather heavily, while the Inspector talked.

She had been Donovan’s girl, so Oates said, and he painted a picture for us: slender and flat-chested, with black hair and eyes like a Russian

madonna's in a transparent face. She wore blouses, he said, with lace on them and gold ornaments, little chains and crosses and frail brooches whose security was reinforced by gilt safety pins. She was only twenty, Oates said, and added enigmatically that he would have betted on her, but that it served him right and showed him there was no fool like an old one.

He went on to talk about Donovan, who, it seemed, was thirty-five and had spent ten years of his life in gaol. The Inspector did not seem to think any the less of him for that. The fact seemed to put the man in a definite category in his mind and that was all.

'Robbery with violence and the R.O. boys,' he said with a wave of his hand and smiled contentedly as though he had made everything clear. 'She was sixteen when he found her and he's given her hell ever since.'

While he still held our interest he mentioned Johnny Gilchick. Johnny Gilchick was the man who was dead.

Oates, who was never more sentimental than was strictly reasonable in the circumstances, let himself go about Josephine and Johnny Gilchick. It was love, he said—love, sudden, painful and ludicrous; and he admitted that he liked to see it.

'I had an aunt once who used to talk about the Real Thing,' he explained, 'and embarrassingly silly the old lady sounded, but after seeing those two youngsters meet and flame and go on until they were a single fiery entity—youngsters who were pretty ordinary tawdry material without it—I find myself sympathizing with her if not condoning the phrase.'

He hesitated and his smooth grey face cracked into a depreciating smile.

'Well, we were both wrong, anyway,' he murmured, 'my aunt and I. Josephine let her Johnny down just as you'd expect her to and after he got what was coming to him and was lying in the mortuary he was born to lie in, she upped and perjured her immortal soul to swear his murderer an alibi. Not that her testimony is of much value as evidence. That's beside the point. The fact remains that she's certainly done her best. You may think me sentimental, but it depresses me. I thought that girl was genuine and my judgment was out.'

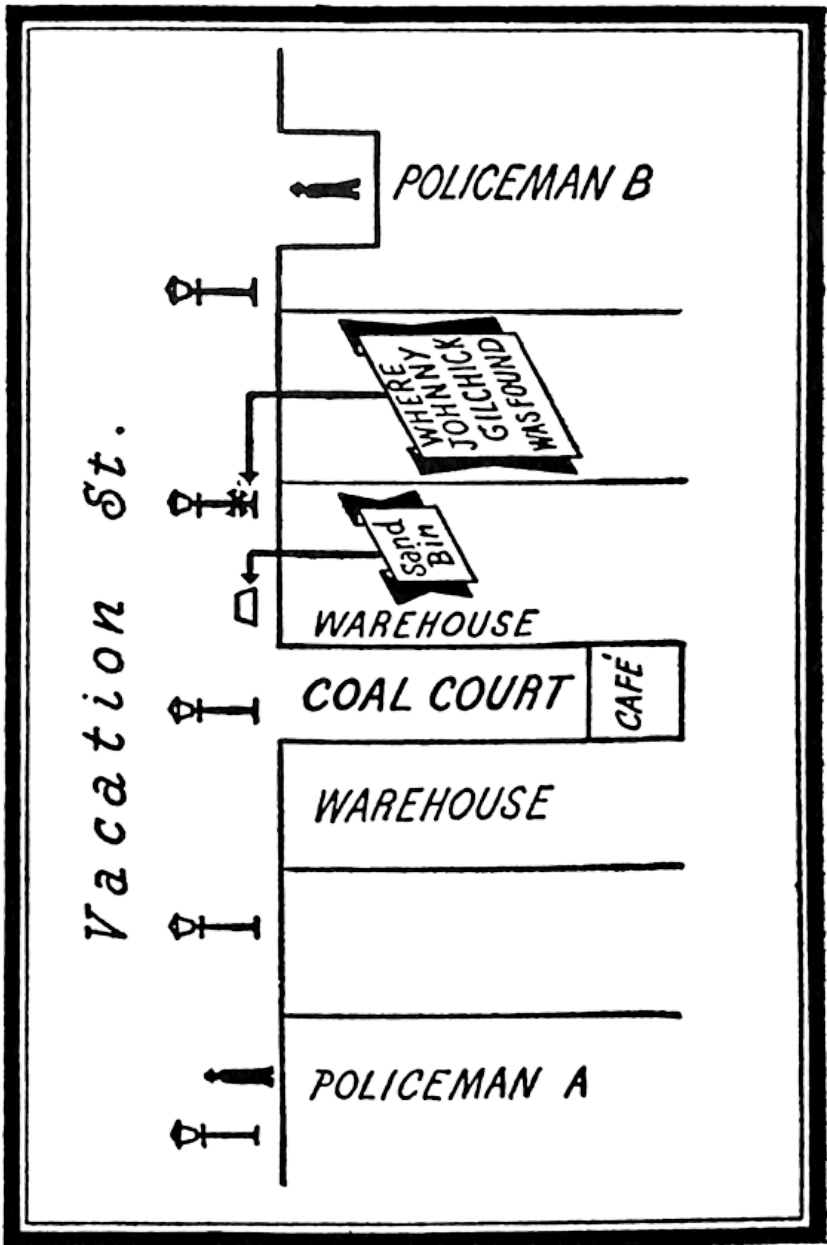
Mr Campion stirred.

'Could we have the details?' he asked politely. 'We've only seen the evening paper. It wasn't very helpful.'

Oates glared at him balefully.

‘Frankly, the facts are exasperating,’ he said. ‘There’s a little catch in them somewhere. It must be something so simple that I missed it altogether. That’s really why I’ve come to look for you. I thought you might care to come along and take a glance at the place. What about it?’

There was no general movement. It was too hot to stir. Finally the Inspector took up a piece of chalk and sketched a rough diagram on the bare boards of the model’s throne.



Map of Vacation Street

‘This is Vacation Street,’ he said, edging the chalk along a crack. ‘It’s the best part of a mile long. Up this end, here by the chair, it’s nearly all wholesale houses. This sand-bin I’m sketching in now marks the boundary

of two police divisions. We'll take that as the starting point. Well, here, ten yards to the left, is the entrance to Coal Court, which is a cul-de-sac composed of two blank backs of warehouse buildings and a café at the far end. The café is open all night. It serves the printers from the two big presses further down the road. That's its legitimate trade. But it is also a sort of unofficial headquarters for Donovan's mob. Josephine sits at the desk downstairs and keeps an eye on the door. God knows what hours she keeps. She always seems to be there.'

He paused and there came into my mind a recollection of the breathless night through which we had all passed, and I could imagine the girl sitting there in the stuffy shop with her thin chest and her great black eyes.

The Inspector was still speaking.

'Now,' he said, 'there's an upstairs room in the café. It's on the second floor. That's where our friend Donovan spent most of his evening. I expect he had a good few friends with him and we shall locate them all in time.'

He bent over the diagram.

'Johnny Gilchick died here,' he said, drawing a circle about a foot beyond the square which indicated the sand-bin. 'Although the bobby was right down the road, he saw him pause under the lamp-post, stagger and fall. He called the constable from the other division and they got the ambulance. All that is plain sailing. There's just one difficulty. Where was Donovan when he fired the shot? There were two policemen in the street at the time, remember. At the moment of the actual shooting one of them, the Never Street man, was making a round of a warehouse yard, but the other, the Phyllis Court chap, was there on the spot, not forty yards away, and it was he who actually saw Johnny Gilchick fall, although he heard no shot. Now I tell you, Champion, there's not an ounce of cover in the whole of that street. How did Donovan get out of the café, where did he stand to shoot Johnny neatly through the back, and how did he get back again without being seen? The side walls of the cul-de-sac are solid concrete backs of warehouses, there is no way round from the back of the café, nor could he possibly have gone over the roofs. The warehouses tower over the café like liners over a tug. Had he come out down the road one or other of the bobbies must have been certain to have seen him. How did he do it?'

'Perhaps Donovan didn't do it,' I ventured and received a pitying glance for my temerity.

‘That’s the one fact,’ said the Inspector heavily. ‘That’s the only thing I do know. I know Donovan. He’s one of the few English mob boys who carry guns. He served five years with the gangs in New York before Repeal and he has the misfortune to take his liquor in bouts. After each bout he has a period of black depression, during which he may do anything. Johnny Gilchick used to be one of Donovan’s mob and when Johnny fell for the girl he turned in the gang, which was adding insult to injury where Donovan was concerned.’

He paused and smiled.

‘Donovan was bound to get Johnny in the end,’ he said. ‘It was never anything but a question of time. The whole mob expected it. The neighbourhood was waiting for it. Donovan had said openly that the next time Johnny dropped into the café would be his final appearance there. Johnny called last night, was ordered out of the place by the terrified girl, and finally walked out of the cul-de-sac. He turned the corner and strolled down the road. Then he was shot by Donovan. There’s no way round it, Campion. The doctors say that death was as near instantaneous as may be. Johnny Gilchick could not have walked three paces with that bullet in his back. As for the gun, that was pretty obviously Donovan’s too. We haven’t actually picked it up yet, but we know he had one of the type we are after. It’s a clear case, a straightforward case, if only we knew where Donovan stood when he fired the shot.’

Mr Campion looked up. His eyes were thoughtful behind his spectacles.

‘The girl gave Donovan an alibi?’ he inquired.

Oates shrugged his shoulders. ‘Rather,’ he said. ‘She was passionate about it. He was there the whole time, every minute of the time, never left the upper room once in the whole evening. I could kill her and she would not alter her story; she’d take her dying oath on it and so on and so on. It didn’t mean anything either way. Still, I was sorry to see her doing it, with her boy friend barely cold. She was sucking up to the mob, of course; probably had excellent reasons for doing so. Yet, as I say, I was sorry to hear her volunteering the alibi before she was asked.’

‘Ah! She volunteered it, did she?’ Campion was interested.

Oates nodded and his small grey eyes widened expressively.

‘Forced it on us. Came roaring round to the police station with it. Threw it off her chest as if she were doing something fine. I’m not usually squeamish about that sort of thing, but it gave me a distinct sense of distaste,

I don't mind telling you. Frankly, I gave her a piece of my mind. Told her to go and look at the body, for one thing.'

'Not kind of you,' observed Mr Campion mildly. 'And what did she do?'

'Oh, blubbered herself sick, like the rest of 'em.' Oates was still disgruntled. 'Still, that's not of interest. What girls like Josephine do or don't do doesn't really matter. She was saving her own skin. If she hadn't been so enthusiastic about it I'd have forgiven her. It's Donovan who is important. Where was Donovan when he fired?'

The shrill chatter of the telephone answered him and he glanced at me apologetically.

'I'm afraid that's mine,' he said. 'You don't mind, do you? I left the number with the sergeant.'

He took off the receiver and as he bent his head to listen his face changed. We watched him with an interest it was far too hot to dissemble.

'Oh,' he said flatly after a long pause. 'Really? Well, it doesn't matter either way, does it? . . . Still, what did she do it for? . . . What? . . . I suppose so . . . Yes? . . . Really?'

He seemed suddenly astounded as his informant at the other end of the wire evidently came out with a second piece of information more important than the first.

'You can't be certain . . . you are? . . . What?'

The far-away voice explained busily. We could hear its steady drone. Inspector Oates's exasperation grew.

'Oh, all right, all right,' he said at last. 'I'm crackers . . . we're all crackers . . . have it your own damned way.'

With which vulgar outburst he rang off.

'Alibi sustained?' inquired Mr Campion.

'Yes.' The Inspector grunted out the word. 'A couple of printers who were in the downstairs room swear he did not go through the shop all the evening. They're sound fellows. Make good witnesses. Yet Donovan shot Johnny. I'm certain of it. He shot him clean through the concrete angle of a piano warehouse as far as I can see.' He turned to Campion almost angrily. 'Explain that, can you?'

Mr Campion coughed. He seemed a little embarrassed.

‘I say, you know,’ he ventured, ‘there are just two things that occur to me.’

‘Then out with them, son.’ The Inspector lit a cigarette and wiped his face. ‘Out with them. I’m not proud.’

Mr Campion coughed. ‘Well, the—er—heat, for one thing, don’t you know,’ he said with profound uneasiness. ‘The heat, and one of your concrete walls.’

The Inspector swore a little and apologized.

‘If anyone could forget this heat he’s welcome,’ he said. ‘What’s the matter with the wall, too?’

Mr Campion bent over the diagram on the boards of the throne. He was very apologetic.

‘Here is the angle of the warehouse,’ he said, ‘and here is the sand-bin. Here to the left is the lamp-post where Johnny Gilchick was found. Further on to the left is the P.C. from Never Street examining a courtyard and temporarily off the scene, while to the right, on the other side of the entrance to Coal Court, is another constable, P.C. someone-or-other, of Phyllis Court. One is apt to—er—think of the problem as though it were contained in four solid walls, two concrete walls, two policemen.’

He hesitated and glanced timidly at the Inspector.

‘When is a policeman not a concrete wall, Oates? In—er—well, in just such heat . . . do you think, or don’t you?’

Oates was staring at him, his eyes narrowed.

‘Damn it!’ he said explosively. ‘Damn it, Campion, I believe you’re right. I knew it was something so simple that it was staring me in the face.’

They stood together looking down at the diagram. Oates stooped to put a chalk cross at the entrance to the cul-de-sac.

‘It was *that* lamp-post,’ he said. ‘Give me that telephone. Wait till I get hold of that fellow.’

While he was carrying on an excited conversation we demanded an explanation from Mr Campion and he gave it to us at last, mild and apologetic as usual.

‘Well, you see,’ he said, ‘there’s the sand-bin. The sand-bin marks the boundary of two police divisions. Policeman A, very hot and tired, sees a

man collapse from the heat under a lamp-post on his own territory. The man is a little fellow and it occurs to Policeman A that it would be a simple matter to move him to the next lamp-post on the other side of the sand-bin, where he would automatically become the responsibility of Policeman B, who is even now approaching. Policeman A achieves the change and is bending over the prostrate figure when his colleague comes up. Since he knows nothing of the bullet wound, the entrance to the cul-de-sac, with its clear view to the café second-floor room, has no significance in his mind. Today, when its full importance must have dawned upon him, he evidently thinks it best to hold his tongue.'

Oates came back from the 'phone triumphant.

'The first bobby went on leave this morning,' he said. 'He was an old hand. He must have spotted the chap was dead, took it for granted it was the heat, and didn't want to be held up here by the inquest. Funny I didn't see that in the beginning.'

We were all silent for some moments.

'Then—the girl?' I began at last.

The Inspector frowned and made a little grimace of regret.

'A pity about the girl,' he said. 'Of course it was probably an accident. Our man who saw it happen said he couldn't be sure.'

I stared at him and he explained, albeit a little hurriedly.

'Didn't I tell you? When my sergeant 'phoned about the alibi he told me. As Josephine crossed the road after visiting the mortuary this morning she stepped under a bus. . . . Oh yes, instantly.'

He shook his head. He seemed uncomfortable.

'She thought she was making a gesture when she came down to the station, don't you see? The mob must have told her to swear that no one had been in the upstairs room; that must have been their first story until they saw how the luck lay. So when she came beetling down to us she must have thought she was risking her life to give her Johnny's murderer away, while instead of that she was simply giving the fellow an alibi. . . . Funny the way things happen, isn't it?'

He glanced at Campion affectionately.

'It's because you don't get your mind cluttered up with the human element that you see these things so quickly,' he said. 'You see everything in

terms of A and B. It makes all the difference.’

Mr Campion, the most gentle of men, made no comment at all.

THE CASE OF THE FRENCHMAN'S GLOVES

Mr Albert Campion was considering the hundred and fifteenth unintelligible oil painting under the muslin-shaded lights of the Excelsior Gallery's stuffiest room, and wondered if it was honest reaction or merely age which made him yearn for an occasional pair of gluey-eyed, human-faced dogs by old Mr Landseer. A pathetic sigh at his shoulder recalled him to his duty as a nursemaid. He glanced at Felicity apologetically.

'Do you like this?'

'Tremendously,' said Miss Felicity Carrington stoutly, adding, with a touch of candour induced by sheer physical exhaustion, 'if you do.'

A memory of his own youth returned to Mr Campion enlighteningly.

'My dear child,' he said, 'my *dear* child, you're not enduring this for my sake, are you?'

Felicity blushed, bringing it home to her escort that the fashion in nineteen-year-olds had changed. He felt kindly disposed towards 'Alice's girl', who had been handed over to him to amuse for the afternoon. She was certainly extraordinarily pretty. The first time he had seen her, he remembered, she had been bald, toothless and crimson in the face at a christening party, and he was gratified to see what Time could do.

'Let's get this straight,' he suggested. 'I thought you told me you wanted to go to a picture gallery to see something modern? I trust you didn't do that to put me at my ease?'

'Well,' Felicity's large grey eyes were honest, 'Mother did hint that you were frightfully clever, and it occurred to me that you might take a bit of living up to. A picture gallery seemed the only safe bet. Don't be annoyed. I only wanted to put you into a good mood.'

Mr Campion's lean face split into a smile.

'That's a mistake,' he said, piloting her towards the door. 'That's mistake number one in the art of being taken out. Never try to please the man beside you. It gives him a sense of superiority, and superiority breeds discontent. What would you really like to do? Eat ice-cream?'

The girl regarded him seriously. It appeared she was giving the question earnest thought, so that he found her final pronouncement surprising.

‘What I’d like most, more than anything else in the world,’ she said at last, ‘is to go to the Hotel Balsamic and have some tea.’

‘The Balsamic?’ he echoed blankly. ‘You’ve got the names muddled. You mean the Berkeley.’

‘No, I haven’t. I mean the Balsamic. I’d rather go there to tea than anywhere else on earth.’

‘You’re not only original, my girl; you’re unique, I should think,’ said her escort, obediently handing her into a cab. ‘Ever been there before?’

‘No, I’m afraid I haven’t. I know it’s not very gay.’

‘Gay?’ Mr Campion considered. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘The Balsamic is respectable, comfortable, worthy, florid, English, unutterably decent, but gay—no. I hear they’ve met the changing mode with a small unsprung dance-floor and a string band, but if it’s food you’re after, the French pastries should be excellent. Do you still want to go there?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Felicity, adding abruptly: ‘Tell me about your mysteries. You’re terribly clever at clearing them up, aren’t you?’

Mr Campion leant back in a corner of the taxi and stretched his long legs.

‘I’m brilliant,’ he said, regarding her soberly from behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. ‘Positively uncanny. I can’t hide it. My best friends are always telling me. Don’t run away with the suspicion that I’m vain, either. I simply happen to have X-ray eyes and all sorts of staggering personal gadgets of that sort. Nor am I proud. I’ll show you my methods. For instance, I deduce from certain phenomena, obviously invisible to you but stunningly clear to me, that you, young woman, have been buttering me up all the afternoon with intent to convert my power to possible use in the near future. I deduce, further, that you have a small private mystery that you’d like cleared up, and that that mystery is connected with the venerable old Balsamic. Am I right?’

Felicity sat in her corner, silent and reproachful. She was at the small-cat stage, with enormous eyes, a pointed chin, and a little delicate neck rising up out of a scarlet choker.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Mr Campion was contrite. ‘When I get a chance to do my trick I can’t resist it. Any opening goes to my head like wine. What’s up? Lost something?’

Felicity’s triangular mouth opened hesitantly.

‘I haven’t,’ she began. ‘But. . .’

‘Not A Friend?’ said Mr Campion firmly. ‘I’m sorry, but as part of your educational system I cannot pass that. This is Rule Two. Avoid A Friend. He or she is a Mrs Harris whom no one likes. A Friend is dead. A Friend is a myth who never ought to have existed. As an alibi he’s worse than being caught with the silver in a sack.’

The girl sat up.

‘You think you’re clever, don’t you?’ she said with sudden spirit. ‘Do you know what I think of you? I think you’re bogus. A silly, oldish fraud.’

Her companion sighed and settled down.

‘That’s fine,’ he said. ‘I knew the ice must break if only the pressure was great enough. Now that we understand one another, what’s the trouble? Who has lost what?’

Felicity was mollified.

‘I’m not taking anything back yet,’ she said warningly, ‘but I admit I did have a purpose in trying to put you in a useful frame of mind. It’s Madeleine. Madeleine was at school with me, at Paddledean, and we’re still great friends. She’s living over here with some English godparents down in Cornwall, but of course they haven’t any authority at all. I mean, her father is the real court of appeal. So when she got engaged and the wretched Roundels became so difficult she had to write to him and. . .’

‘Wait,’ said Mr Campion hastily. ‘Wait. My trick doesn’t seem to be working. Let’s do it again. Begin with Madeleine. Madeleine who?’

‘Madeleine Gerard.’

‘I see. She’s living in Cornwall with some English godparents. She’s a Frenchwoman?’

‘Well, of course!’

Mr Campion looked hurt.

‘There’s no “of course” about it,’ he said firmly. ‘That’s the worst of you amateurs. You take my astounding gifts for granted after the first

performance. Well now, Madeleine Gerard, French, young, educated at Paddledean, and living with English people in Cornwall, has got herself engaged. So far, that's all right. Then we come to someone called Roundel. There can hardly be two families in Cornwall with that all-embracing name, so I take it you mean Sir Nigel Roundel and his good lady? They have, I seem to remember, about seventeen daughters and one small male lamb and heir called Henry, who must be about twenty. Madeleine, I take it, has got engaged to Henry? Unofficially, no doubt.'

Felicity laughed.

'I do take it back. You're not bad,' she said. 'You're right, even down to the part about it being unofficial. The Roundels are hopelessly old-fashioned and County in the worst sense of the word. Also they've got it in their heads that Henry is the most important thing on earth. The trouble is that both Henry and Madeleine are under age, and whereas the Roundels don't exactly say, or even think, that Madeleine isn't perfectly suitable, they want to make sure. You do see, don't you?'

'I do indeed.' Champion, who had met Sir Nigel and had a vivid memory of that sturdy old gentleman, spoke with understanding. 'So Madeleine wrote to her papa. Where does he live, by the way?'

'In Vaux.' Felicity was warming up to her subject and he was glad to note that all trace of restraining respect had vanished from her manner. 'That was a blow. You see, he's old-fashioned, too, and apparently he had some other idea for Madeleine's future. He's pretty rich, I think. Anyway, he wrote back a very stiff letter to Madeleine and everything was rather awkward. Madeleine and Henry stuck to their guns, however, and finally, after a lot of excitement and polite letters in bad English to Sir Nigel, followed by rather rude ones in worse French to Monsieur Gerard, it's been arranged that there shall be a luncheon party at Claridge's tomorrow for the parents to meet and discuss things. M. Gerard is in London now, and the Roundels are coming up from Cornwall tonight.

'Madeleine,' she continued, 'has been staying with us since the beginning of the week and the tension is pretty high. It's a dreadful set-out. Apparently Madeleine's father hadn't been to England for fifteen years and feels he's making an enormous concession in coming as far as London to see the Roundels, and the Roundels feel it's monstrous that they should have to come to London to see M. Gerard, whom they insist on regarding as illiterate and "in trade". The whole affair has been nearly shipwrecked half a dozen times, but Madeleine and Henry are convinced that if only the

meeting comes off it'll be perfectly all right. Everything hinges on the lunch, doesn't it?'

'Food sounds to me to be the only hope,' said Mr Campion dryly. 'Let us trust not a forlorn one. What has Madeleine lost? The meal ticket?'

Felicity did not reply immediately. The taxi had pulled up at the discreet entrance of the Balsamic Hotel, and not until that vast foyer had swallowed them up did she return to the subject.

As they settled themselves at one of the tea-tables in the gloomy Palm Garden and glanced round at the three other adventurous couples who had braved that dignified wilderness of napery, she spoke again.

'It doesn't look a—a fishy place, does it?' she said candidly.

'Fishy?' Mr Campion was startled. 'My dear child, nothing more questionable than a sly Episcopal pun in Greek can ever have enlivened these revolting tomato-and-ormulu walls. Look here, let's get back to Madeleine. She's beginning to worry me. What can the poor girl have lost here, of all unlikely places?'

Felicity raised her large eyes to his. 'Her father, of course, silly,' she said.

Campion blinked.

'Dear me, that's almost vital, isn't it? His patience with Sir Nigel as a correspondent gave out, I suppose. How very unfortunate for young love, though. Hasn't there been any word of explanation? Has Papa simply not turned up here?'

'Oh no, it's nothing ordinary like that.' There was an engaging directness in the young eyes. 'You see, he's lost *in* the hotel. He's staying here—at least, that's what the management says. But he didn't come to call for Madeleine as he promised on Tuesday night. She waited for him, feeling rather scared because she knew he was angry with her, and on Wednesday she called up this hotel, where he had booked rooms. They admitted he was staying here, but they said he'd gone out. She left a message, but he didn't answer it, and since then she hasn't heard a word. This morning she was so nervy that she called here. The people at the office were awfully polite but not very helpful. They simply repeated what they'd said before.'

Felicity hesitated and added with sudden *naïveté*, 'Madeleine's very young and rather shy, so I don't suppose they thought she was very

important. She asked Mother's advice, and Mother, she said, thought it was safest to leave him alone and just trust that he'll turn up at Claridge's. It's terribly unkind of him, though, isn't it? I mean, he must realize what the suspense is like for Madeleine.'

Her companion considered the case of the harsh French parent.

'Gerard,' he said at last. 'What sort of business had Père Gerard over here?'

'I don't know. He's very rich in that quiet French way and has something to do with precious stones, I think.'

Mr Campion bolted a small portion of buttered teacake and swallowed hard.

'We're not discussing Edmond Gerard by any chance, are we?' he said. '*The Edmond Gerard?*'

'Yes, that's the man. Do you know him?'

'I know of him.' Mr Campion was thoughtful. 'He's a very famous and distinguished person in an exclusive sort of way. I heard his name the other day. Oh yes, he's rumoured to have the governing interest in Bergère Frères, who are an enormous jewel firm with houses in London, Paris and Amsterdam, but he's far too magnificent to worry his head about business. Dear me, the bluff Sir Nigel must have put a large riding-boot right into it. "In trade" indeed! My hat, that's going to be a sensational luncheon!'

'If it comes off,' said Felicity gloomily. 'I don't care how important he is, he's been a pig to Madeleine. It's so odd, because he's very fond of her, although he's so strict, and she adores him. Her mother died when she was a child. That's why his behaviour is so unreasonable. What are you thinking?'

Mr Campion was frowning.

'It is unreasonable,' he said. 'Thunderingly unreasonable. Almost unlikely. The hotel people said quite definitely that he was staying here, you say?'

'Yes, they told Madeleine so this morning. He's been here since Tuesday. Can't you find out where he is and if he's going to turn up at Claridge's tomorrow?'

She looked very young and hopeful seated before him, natural colour in her cheeks, and in her eyes an engaging faith in his power to work small

miracles. Champion was touched and, what was more, his curiosity was aroused.

‘There is one way of finding out a little,’ he said at last. ‘I don’t altogether approve of this as a method, but if one suspects the front door may be closed in one’s face the intelligent caller slopes quietly round to the back.’

He took a card from his case as he spoke and, scribbling a few lines upon it, beckoned to a waiter.

‘Is Ex-Inspector Bloomer still here?’

‘Yes, sir. No trouble, I hope, sir?’

‘I hope not too,’ agreed Mr Champion affably. ‘If it’s convenient I’ll meet him in the foyer in five minutes. Rule Number three,’ he continued, turning to his pupil as the man went off. ‘Never forget an Old Face, especially if it’s in the Force. Bloomer—don’t be misled by his name—was quite an ornament in the City police some years ago. I don’t mean anything flashy, mind you. Bloomer was always something solid and good. When he retired he received the job of house detective here as a man in a different profession might receive a quiet country rectorship. He’s the man for our money. I’ll be back in ten minutes. You needn’t save me an éclair.’

His time estimate proved entirely wrong, as it happened. To his surprise he found the ex-Inspector not only ready but eager to discuss Mr Edmond Gerard. Bloomer had aged and widened in his three years at the Balsamic, and his close-cropped hair was white, but he still possessed that blue-eyed innocence of expression which his visitor remembered so well.

‘Come into me office,’ he invited, as soon as Gerard’s name was mentioned. ‘It’s a cosy little place; sound-proof door, too. You can’t be too discreet in this house. To tell you the truth I’m glad someone’s going to bring the subject up. Three days is a long time for an elderly bloke to wander about London, without his luggage, say what you like.’

Champion controlled his question until the sound-proof door closed behind them, but once there he put it with some force. ‘Do you mean to say Edmond Gerard hasn’t slept here since Tuesday?’

‘He hasn’t slept here at all,’ said Bloomer cheerfully. ‘The management tells me not to be fussy, but he was a respectable, oldish cove, you know; not at all the type to go off gallivanting. He came in early on Tuesday, took up his reservations, and went out without leaving a message. That’s all we’ve seen of him. At five-fifteen a Hatton Garden firm called Bergère Brothers

rang through and asked if he'd come in. The clerk told them no, but promised to 'phone when he did arrive. He didn't show up all night. In the morning, just when we were going to ring them, Bergère's 'phoned again. We said we were alarmed and they shut us up at once. They said he was a director of their firm and that they would take full responsibility for making inquiries at the hospitals and so on. They were very insistent that it wasn't necessary to call the police, and, between you and me, we weren't keen on that idea ourselves.'

He grinned. 'We're slightly la-di-dah here, you know. In our opinion the police are a very common lot.'

Campion sat on the edge of the table and digested this alarming information.

'Did M. Gerard get any other calls?'

'Oh yes, I was forgetting. A little girl 'phoned every two or three hours yesterday and today she came round. They put her off. She was very young, the clerk said, and she said that she was Gerard's daughter, but he was a Frenchman, you see, and she was so obviously English—not a trace of accent. Somehow we didn't altogether believe her.'

Campion laughed abruptly.

'Poor child!' he said. 'That's one of the disadvantages of a really good education, Bloomer: no one allows for it. I say, this is very odd.'

'I don't like it.' The old man shook his head. 'But what can you do? If a guest books a suite in advance and leaves his luggage in it there's nothing to stop him. His firm hasn't found him yet because they keep 'phoning, but they still say it's okay for us to wait. We don't want a fuss. He may have three or four unofficial families to see over here, for all we know.'

'That's unlikely,' murmured Campion. 'I'd like to see those rooms of his. What about it?'

'Oh, I couldn't do that, sir! You didn't ought to ask me.' The old man was honestly scandalized, so that it was a tribute to his visitor's powers of persuasion that ten minutes later they entered the deserted suite together.

The two rooms with the adjoining bathroom showed no signs of occupation whatever, apart from the two neat hide cases standing on the luggage bench. Nothing was unpacked. The soap in the bathroom was still a fresh cake. Clearly the visitor had merely seen his baggage safely deposited before walking out again. Mr Campion regarded the suitcases wistfully.

‘No, sir, we couldn’t. It’s more than my job and my pension are worth.’ Bloomer sounded adamant this time, and his visitor sighed.

‘You hold things up so,’ he said. ‘Think of that poor child waiting downstairs.’

It took him another five minutes’ hard persuasion, and when he finally discovered that the cases were unlocked Bloomer was standing with his back against the door, listening for footsteps, with the sweat standing out on his forehead.

‘Hurry, for Pete’s sake,’ he whispered huskily. ‘You frighten me, you do. Found anything yet?’

‘Cut-up corpse,’ said his colleague, sepulchrally.

‘No!’ ejaculated Bloomer, deserting his post.

‘No,’ agreed Campion, turning over a pile of white shirts with deft fingers. ‘No, not even a bundle of Government plans. Not even a dirty collar.’

He closed the second case and went over to the soiled-linen basket. It’s yield seemed to interest him. It contained one pair of crumpled grey cotton gloves and no more.

He stood looking at the gloves, which he spread out side by side on the bed.

‘That’s very curious,’ he said at last. ‘Don’t you think so?’

‘Well, no, Mr Campion, I can’t say I do, since you ask me.’

‘This basket would have been cleared before M. Gerard took possession of the room?’

‘I should hope so.’

‘Well then, since this suite hasn’t been occupied by anyone else, presumably he left these.’

‘Very likely. Why not?’

‘Nothing. Except that it’s very odd that these should be *all* he left. Don’t you see, Bloomer, the old boy didn’t even change his shirt. Think of it: he’s come from Paris, travelled all night, come up from Southampton on the early train, and yet he doesn’t bath, doesn’t shave, doesn’t even change his

collar. I admit there are men who are above such trifles as soot round the cuff-band, but this lad wasn't one of these. He's only over here for four days and yet he's brought three suits, eight shirts, and a neat little soiled-linen bag embroidered with his monogram, to say nothing of a nest of collars. Why didn't he change? And what, in the name of goodness, does he look like by this time?

Bloomer frowned.

'Does seem funny when you put it like that,' he said. 'What about the gloves? They don't look like part of a smart gentleman's outfit to me. Grey cotton . . . that's not very natty.'

'Not so much natty as necessary,' said Campion. 'On the Continent, that home of iniquity, my good Bloomer, the trains are so inclement that the intelligent native traveller always provides himself with a pair of these to keep his hands clean. That's what makes it all so infernally fishy. Apparently the eminent M. Gerard rushed up here, tore off his gloves and rushed down again. Besides, there's something curious about the gloves, don't you think?'

Bloomer looked at them steadily for a long time.

'They're dirty,' he said at last.

'So they are, indeed,' agreed Campion, and put them in his pocket. 'Don't worry about trifles,' he insisted, brushing aside the detective's protest. 'We've got to get a move on. I want a cab and my poor patient Felicity.'

Bloomer gaped at him.

'Here,' he said, 'you don't think there's something criminally serious up, do you?'

'I hope not,' said Campion.

He repeated the same sentiment five minutes later to Felicity as he helped her into a taxi. 'Now you know what you have to do?' he said, leaning in at the door. 'Mr Bloomer will be waiting here for you both. After that, go straight on to Scotland Yard and ask for Superintendent Stanislaus Oates.'

'All right.' Felicity was scared but game, and her round eyes were anxious. 'Madeleine's going to be frightfully nervous; I suppose you realize that? It's not only about the luncheons. She's terribly fond of her father. I haven't made that clear, I'm afraid.'

‘I detected that,’ said Campion, grinning at her cheerfully. ‘Don’t worry. Stick to the instructions on the bottle and we’ll all go to the party. You take the high road and I’ll take the low and I’ll be on the Embankment before you. That’s a bet.’

As he stepped back and nodded to the driver his smile faded, and by the time he had captured another taxi and was on his way to Hatton Garden he was frowning, yet he was as good as his word. When Miss Felicity Carrington and Mlle Madeleine Gerard were conducted up to Superintendent Stanislaus Oates’s office a little over half an hour later he was there to introduce them.

The Superintendent rose as they appeared. His grey face was even more lugubrious than usual, but he brightened up a little at the sight of Felicity. Oates had an avuncular spot in his heart for what he privately described as ‘a County blonde’.

Madeleine was a surprise to Mr Campion. He had imagined, for some reason or other, a little dark seventeen-year-old, so that the tall, willowy young woman with the sleek ash-blonde hair and the indescribable air of chic about her was unexpected. She was trembling with nervousness and her first remark explained much that had puzzled Campion.

‘I ought not to come to the police. My father will be so angry. He hates any sort of interference. Yet nothing could have happened to him, could it?’

The Superintendent smiled disarmingly.

‘Suppose we sit down,’ he said. ‘I think we can consider this an unofficial talk for the time being. We can get a bit forrader with Mr Gerard ever knowing anything about it, if it all turns out to be normal.’

‘The signature wasn’t normal,’ cut in Felicity. ‘We did what you said, Albert. We went to the hotel and Mr Bloomer showed us the register. Madeleine was startled by the signature; it was so shaky.’

‘It’s my father’s writing, but it’s so unsteady,’ murmured Madeleine. ‘I’m so afraid he’s been taken ill. What can we do?’

Oates glanced at Campion.

‘According to Bloomer, Bergère Frères are taking care of that end,’ he said. ‘I think, somehow, we ought to have them represented at this little conference. You got nothing out of them, you say?’

Campion shrugged his shoulders.

‘I was not exactly pitched out,’ he admitted. ‘But the visit was not productive. I never met people who were so anxious not to talk to me.’

‘That was a change for you, wasn’t it?’ said Oates with relish. ‘If I may say so, it’s authority you lack, my lad.’

‘Which is why I’m here, of course,’ agreed Mr Champion cheerfully. ‘With my brains and your authority what could we two not accomplish? I don’t want to hurry you, Superintendent, but these offices in Hatton Garden sometimes shut. As it is, I very much doubt if you’ll get anyone to come down here.’

Oates took the hint.

‘I’ll ’phone them from the other room,’ he said, rising. ‘We’ll see what my not-so-celebrated charm will do.’

He returned in five minutes, grave but secretly pleased with himself.

‘Mr Kenway will be with us,’ he announced, eyeing Champion with a faint gleam in his eyes. ‘He said you’d called. It seems he couldn’t see you. He’s the manager. Do you know him, Miss Gerard?’

‘I? Oh no. I’m afraid I don’t know anything about my father’s affairs. I wish I did. Has this man seen Daddy?’

‘Yes. Apparently he called on Tuesday afternoon. Since then they haven’t heard from him.’

‘But where is he? This is terrifying.’ The girl was obviously frightened and the Superintendent’s manner became heavily kind.

‘Don’t worry too much, young lady,’ he said. ‘He’s not in hospital. Mr Kenway seems to have made certain of that. As a matter of fact, I thought Bergère’s were relieved to hear from me. I couldn’t understand why they hadn’t been here themselves, but apparently they have the same ideas about your father that you have yourself. He’s a little autocratic, is he? Likes to go his own way?’

‘He doesn’t like interference at all,’ murmured Madeleine Gerard, and sounded as though she knew what she was talking about.

Oates pulled a pad towards him.

‘Could you give me a description of your father?’ he inquired. ‘Don’t be alarmed. This is only routine. Now, what age would he be, please?’

Mr Champion read the pencilled note over the Superintendent's grey-tweed shoulder.

Age: 61. Height: 5 ft. 7 in. approx. Hair: Greyish white. Weight: She doesn't know at all. Fattish. Complexion, pale. Eyes: Grey-blue. Clean-shaven. Wears no rings. No distinguishing marks she can think of. Probably smartly dressed.

As the policeman finished writing he glanced up at Champion.

'Any comments?'

'I was wondering. . . .' The younger man's tone was diffident. 'Mademoiselle Gerard, what are your father's recreations? Is he keen on any sports?'

'No.' Madeleine looked puzzled and so, to do her justice, did the Superintendent. 'He spends all his time in his study and in the strong-room in the little château at Vaux. I don't think he has any recreation at all, unless you count his violin.'

'His violin?' There was an inflection in Champion's voice which made Oates stare at him. 'He still plays, you say?'

'Yes. Only to amuse himself, of course. He's a recluse, Mr Champion. He likes to be alone. He lives alone. He travels alone. He hates to give any account of himself and loathes any intrusion on his privacy. That's why I'm so afraid I ought not to be here. And yet I'm so frightened he may have been taken ill.'

There was a charming honesty in her manner which made Champion like her, and he made a mental note of the fact that young Henry Roundel was a lucky youngster.

'Don't get alarmed, Miss Gerard. There's no need for that.' Oates turned away from Champion, whom he had been watching with terrier-like curiosity, to make the reassurance. 'That's very interesting, but I'm afraid it's not going to help us much. Ah, here's the man we want.'

Richard Kenway came hurrying into the room, past the helmetless constable who had announced him, like a very small train shunting into a station. He was a short, plump person, dark in the hair and pale in the face and at the moment he was breathless and startled out of his wits. He shook

hands with Oates, nodded coldly to Campion, and pounced on Madeleine with relief.

‘I had no idea that M. Gerard had a daughter over here or I’d have got in touch with you at once,’ he said earnestly. ‘This is terrible. Haven’t you seen your father at all? Didn’t you meet him at the station?’

‘Oh no, he’d never have forgiven me.’ Madeleine spoke with deep conviction. ‘He doesn’t like what he calls being fussed. Don’t you find that?’

Mr Kenway passed a plump white hand over his hair. He coughed.

‘As a matter of fact,’ he said, ‘that was the private information which we received from our Paris house. That was how it all happened. Dear me, this is terrible! Our hands have been tied, and we’ve been sitting about doing nothing, while anything may have happened to him, anything!’

‘Oh, I hope not, sir, I hope not.’ Oates spoke firmly and raised his eyebrows at the visitor. ‘Suppose you tell us about M. Gerard’s visit to you? He called about half-past four in the afternoon, I understand?’

‘Yes, he did.’ Mr Kenway hesitated. ‘I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing. This is an impossible situation. I really think I’d better tell you the whole story. If it proves to be indiscreet I must take the consequences. First of all I must disclose a trade secret. Although the firm of Bergère Brothers is now virtually owned by M. Gerard, he doesn’t bother himself with business; in fact, he affects to know little, or nothing about it and is even celebrated for his casualness and unconventionality in these affairs. May I say that, mademoiselle?’

Madeleine nodded. ‘I believe that is his reputation,’ she said. ‘I’ve heard he’s rather terrifying. He wanders about with stones loose in his waistcoat pocket. That’s the kind of thing you mean, isn’t it, Mr Kenway?’

The jewel-broker wiped his forehead.

‘That is the kind of thing,’ he agreed dryly. ‘Added to that there is this dislike of ceremony, any sort of interference, or—er—any friendliness; I had almost said any ordinary business civility. Our Paris manager warned me, in so many words, not to ask him to lunch, or even to make any effort at conversation. Well, there we were on Tuesday morning, all very much aware that our principal was due at any moment. We had a very fine collection of unset rubies which we knew he was interested to see, and the whole staff was hanging about on tenterhooks, myself included, until four-thirty in the afternoon. We had almost given him up when he walked in, produced his

credentials, and asked to see the rubies. It was just like that; as formal and peremptory as if he had nothing to do with the firm at all.'

He paused and shook his head over the experience.

'Frankly, I saw at a glance that he was not faintly interested in me, even as another human being, so I imitated his own manner. I studied his credentials, handed them back to him and opened the safe. He sat down at the table and began to examine the tray of stones which I set before him. After a while he glanced up and said in French: "Don't disturb me for half an hour." Naturally I left him. I waited in the outer office for nearly an hour. When at last I did go back the door from my room to the corridor was open and he had gone. I haven't seen him since. He had evidently finished his examination and not bothered to summon me. The lift-boy who had brought him up naturally took him down again and he walked out of the building.'

'I see. Not an easy gentleman to entertain,' said Oates in a valiant attempt at tact. 'Then you rang up the hotel?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.' Mr Kenway seemed to be struggling with himself. Finally his anxiety prevailed. 'There is one thing I haven't made clear,' he said huskily. 'When M. Gerard went out he took the rubies with him.'

Oates smothered an exclamation. 'And yet you didn't report the matter?' he demanded.

'My dear sir, how dared I?' Mr Kenway was almost weeping. 'They were his own stones. The whole firm belongs to him. I had express instructions from Paris, from M. Bergère himself, that M. Gerard was to be treated with the utmost care. He was to have anything he wanted. I was to do anything, absolutely anything he told me. M. Bergère himself is something of an autocrat. He does not tolerate failure in a subordinate. I have not dared to report the affair to him yet. I gave myself until tonight, hoping against hope that M. Gerard would return. Now I must 'phone Paris and, frankly, I might as well hand in my own resignation at the same time.'

'Don't be too hasty, sir.' The Superintendent sounded genuinely sorry for the little man. 'Give us a chance to do what we can. This was the first time you'd met Mr Gerard, was it?'

'Yes. No one on this side knows him. He hasn't been in England for a great many years. He hardly ever leaves his home. The news of his visit was a great surprise to us.'

‘I see. Here’s Miss Gerard’s description of her father. Can you add anything to it?’

Mr Kenway took the slip of paper and read it carefully.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘No, that’s accurate as far as it goes. He wore a grey suit and a soft hat, ordinary but very good. He spoke French all the time. No, I don’t think I noticed anything else.’

‘Did he gesticulate when he talked?’

Mr Campion’s mild question sounded a trifle silly and even Oates stared at him, while Mr Kenway chose to be irritated.

‘He did not, sir,’ he said. ‘As far as I remember he was very quiet. He stood with his left hand in his pocket, and his glove and stick in the other most of the time I was with him.’

‘Really?’ Mr Campion’s vacant expression had misled many a shrewder man than Mr Kenway; and when the angry little broker had turned away in disgust Campion wandered towards the door. ‘I think I’ll go down and see Pleyel, if you don’t mind, Superintendent,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ll call you on the house ’phone. I fancy we might have to hurry, don’t you?’

Oates stood looking at the door for a moment, an expression of incredulity growing in his eyes. The mention of the name had started a train of thought in his mind which was enlightening.

Inspector Pleyel spent most of his days looking over the Rogues’ Gallery, now that his more active career was past, and in that department he was known disrespectfully as The Elephant. Since he was a slender, somewhat shrivelled man the name seemed pointless until one had once seen him at work. After that, however, its appositeness was obvious. Inspector Pleyel and the great beasts had one important attribute in common: like them, he never forgot.

Oates was watching his secretary attending to the formalities of certain official statements when the buzzer on his desk vibrated and Campion’s voice came up to him.

‘The address is 39 Welkin Street, Soho,’ it said, sounding thin and far-away as the instrument distorted it. ‘Pleyel recognizes my description. The name is Marcel Lautrec. Do you know him? He’s been out of jail for about three months and was last seen with Lefty Rowe and a fellow called Patsy Carver.’

‘I know Rowe and Carver.’ The Superintendent’s tone was grim. ‘What’s this 39 Welkin Street?’

‘Pleyel says it’s a cheap eating-house with lodgings above. Carver’s wife runs it and Rowe has been staying there. I think we ought to hurry.’

The policeman’s grey face grew hard and his eyes were no longer kindly.

‘You’re right,’ he said, and added with a sudden burst of exasperation, ‘what a nerve, Campion! What a thundering nerve!’

The raid on 39 Welkin Street made Soho history, and that is no easy thing to do. The dark, shabby thoroughfare with its rows of dingy shops and sooty upstairs windows is not a favourite place for the patrolling policeman at any time, but in the evening, when the street lamps are yellow in the blue twilight, it is sometimes avoided by him altogether, and the inhabitants have come to regard it as a stronghold where any inquisitiveness is met with swift discouragement.

Two police cars swept down the narrow road and stopped with beautiful precision directly outside the entrance to the café with the steamy windows and the cracked glass door.

At the same moment a third car halted in Fern Mews, that unattractive little cul-de-sac which runs along behind the houses in Welkin Street, and from all three vehicles there stepped a number of heavily-built men, all distinguished by the same peculiarly purposeful manner.

Oates took the lead, with Campion close behind him, and it was he who first strode down the narrow aisle between the tables to the curtained doorway behind the counter where the coffee urn boiled.

The rustle which heralded their appearance turned into complete silence as their escort tramped in behind them, and the company in the little dining alcoves studied their plates or their papers with the complete absorption of those who have decided to withdraw in the spirit if not in the flesh.

It was the woman who gave the alarm. She confronted them in the narrow staircase, her untidy black-gowned body completely blocking the way.

‘Now then, Missus—’ Oates got no further. She screamed and screamed, standing there with her head thrown back and her eyes closed. The noise was deafening. But behind it there were other sounds, swift, furtive movements on the floor above.

Campion bent his head and ducked under her arm. She hit out at him, but the blow was trifling, and her screams redoubled as a vast plain-clothes man gathered her up and carried her, kicking, into the kitchen.

Meanwhile Oates and Campion had reached the landing, which was in darkness. There they were met by an odour strange in that house. It swept down upon them from the floor above, the clean, and in the circumstances highly suspicious, odour of fresh air.

‘The roof!’ shouted Campion and sped on.

They caught Lefty Rowe half in and half out of the skylight. Carver was brought in much later after a wearisome chase round the chimney-pots. But it was not in these old acquaintances that Oates and his companion were most interested. There were two locked rooms on the top floor of that ill-ventilated house, each of which contained a bed, and on each bed lay a man who was approximately five feet seven inches in height, fattish, grey-haired, and French.

There the likeness ended abruptly, for doubles are not easy to find, and although Messrs. Rowe and Carver had been clever they had not been very lucky.

Marcel Lautrec gave himself up with the resignation of a man who has already spent the best part of his life in jail and sees no other prospect for the future. Nothing, however, prevented him from grumbling.

‘It’s my arm,’ he said bitterly, regarding his stiff sleeve. ‘I haven’t got a chance. That’s what happens to a man who loses his arm defending his fatherland.’

‘In a street fight in Amiens in 1926,’ interrupted a stolid plain-clothes man, who made no other observation throughout the entire proceedings.

Lautrec shrugged his shoulders.

‘What does it matter?’ he said. ‘It’s my arm that betrays me every time. If I had both my arms should I have been locked up here?’

Oates’s grin was sardonic.

‘Since you’ve raised the subject,’ he said, ‘let me tell you something. You were locked up by your pals because you double-crossed them. They trusted you to do a job and you let them down. Once you’d got your hands on those rubies you weren’t sharing them, were you?’

Lautrec's small eyes widened in sudden terror and he began to swear violently in a mixture of Gallic and honest Anglo-Saxon, giving as varied a performance as anyone present had ever heard, which was no mean feat.

Oates let him run on for a while.

'That'll do,' he said at last. 'Don't exhaust yourself. You've convinced me. Where are the stones? Tucked away in a railway cloakroom? Give the ticket to the boys. Take him along,' he added over his shoulder, and went into the other room where Champion was bending over the second plump Frenchman, who lay so silent upon the bed.

Champion straightened himself as Oates appeared.

'He'll do, I think,' he said. 'He's pretty tough, thank God. His pulse is fairly normal. I think they've kept him under with one of the barbituric group. When the doctor comes we'll get him back to the hotel.'

The Superintendent stood looking down at the elderly man who was only so very superficially like Marcel Lautrec. His expression was faintly bewildered.

'It's the infernal *impudence*,' he said. 'That's what startles me every time, old as I am. Who do these darned crooks think they are? They might have got away with it, you know; that's the exasperating thing.'

'That's the terrifying thing, old boy,' observed Champion soberly, and for once Oates did not correct him.

It was after midnight when the two of them finally left the Hôtel Balsamic. The Superintendent was in cheerful mood. He was so clearly determined to talk that Champion did not attempt to dissuade him and suggested that they should go back to his own Piccadilly flat for a drink. Oates agreed with alacrity, and a few minutes later settled himself by the open window looking down on the traffic and raised his glass to his host.

'We deserve it,' he said magnificently. 'I don't want to take all the credit. You were very useful. That was quite a touching little scene between father and daughter at the hotel tonight, wasn't it? The old man's delighted with her, and well he might be. If it hadn't been for her he'd have stayed in that Welkin Street hovel until Rowe and Carver had bullied Lautrec into a sense of the realities of life.'

'He did double-cross them, did he?'

‘He tried to.’ Oates laughed. ‘They were far too experienced to fall for that sort of game. Lautrec’s a mug. Still, he did us a good turn. He held ’em up by playing the fool. Otherwise the stones would be out of the country by this time. As it is, we’ll get ’em.’

Campion lay back in his chair.

‘It was an ingenious swindle,’ he remarked. ‘Who is the brain there?’

‘Rowe. He’s an old con. man and he always fails by falling back on force when cornered. He’s behind the whole thing. He found out that Gerard was coming to London and that no one at Bergère’s knew him personally. There’s a leakage in Gerard’s secretarial staff somewhere, if you ask me. Anyway, Rowe bought that information from someone. He picked up the Frenchman on the train from Paris, boarded the boat with him, and located his cabin. The rest was elementary. Gerard is notoriously a bad sailor, it appears. Rowe went in to help the old man, who was seasick, and mixed him up a dose which made him dopy.

‘When they arrived at Southampton the kindly Mr Rowe helped his new friend through the Customs, and, since he was so ill, gallantly offered to drive him to an hotel. Gerard was taken off his guard and accepted the offer. Meanwhile, Carver was waiting with the car, by arrangement. They put Gerard in the back, where he collapsed, and Rowe got in beside him, ready to give him another shot if he recovered too soon.

‘All this was at six o’clock in the morning, mind you, so there was no one much about to get inquisitive. Instead of going to a Southampton hotel Carver drove to London, and when Gerard recovered consciousness he was where we found him.’

He drew a deep breath and raised his glass again.

‘There you are,’ he said; ‘it was impudence, sheer impudence. Gerard’s reputation and temperament made the whole thing possible. He travelled alone, he wasn’t known, he was doing the unusual thing.’

Campion nodded. ‘It was neat,’ he admitted. ‘Lautrec was waiting for them in London, I suppose?’

‘Oh yes. Rowe got hold of him some weeks ago. He had to use a Frenchman, you see, and someone who would conform at least to a verbal description of Gerard. Lautrec was ideal, save for his arm. His artificial arm is dangerous, but he’s used to concealing it, so they took the risk. Having deposited Rowe and Gerard at Welkin Street, Carver drove to Victoria and carried Gerard’s two suitcases and all his papers on to the station, where

Lautrec was waiting for them. Once Lautrec had all the necessary information, hotel reservations and everything, he took a cab to the Balsamic. He had to do that, you see, in case Bergère's 'phoned through and found Gerard had not arrived. He signed the register, making such a clumsy attempt at Gerard's signature that the innocent Mademoiselle thought her father might have been ill when he wrote it. After that he went upstairs, where he left his cases and his travelling gloves, which he had worn for the benefit of the hotel folk. Then he walked out of the building, to hang about until he thought Bergère's were ready to receive him.'

'Neat,' said Champion again. 'It's a serious thought, Oates, but it ought to have come off. Lautrec's arm let them down.'

'Ye-es,' agreed the Superintendent dubiously and then, since his host was uncommunicative, added with sudden bluntness, 'how do you make that out?'

Champion thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a pair of crumpled grey cotton gloves. Oates waved them aside.

'You showed me those before,' he said. 'I don't want a lecture. I want to know how you got on to Lautrec. And, what's more,' he added complacently, 'I'm sitting here in this chair drinking your whisky until I do know.'

Champion took off his spectacles.

'It seemed so obvious to me,' he said apologetically. 'The kidnapping and impersonation notion flickered into my head as soon as I found that Gerard had neither bathed nor changed his linen after his journey. With that in mind I looked at the gloves and saw that while the right-hand one was fairly dirty, the left, although it was crumpled and had been worn, was perfectly clean. No ordinary man travels from Paris to London and arrives with one dirty hand and one clean one. There had to be a special reason for it. The obvious explanation was that the man, whoever he was, didn't use his left hand, presumably because it wasn't usable. In your office Madeleine Gerard told me that her father was a violinist. That settled it that the gloves were not his. You can do a lot of things with one hand, my good Oates, but playing the violin isn't one of them. Therefore I took it that the gloves belonged to the impersonator. It was blindingly clear, I thought.'

'Yes,' said Oates again. 'But even old Pleyel couldn't pick out the right man when all he had to go upon was an artificial arm.'

Campion sighed. ‘That wasn’t all,’ he protested mildly. ‘Madeleine had described the real M. Gerard, superficially I admit, but at least she gave us the general impression of the man. Richard Kenway read her description and found that it tallied with his impression of his visitor, yet he, mark you, had only seen the impersonator. I went to Pleyel and asked him if he knew of any confidence man who was (a) French, (b) fifty to sixty years old; (c) plumpish and (d) one-armed. He supplied Lautrec’s name at once and the current intelligence files gave us the rest.’

Oates laughed. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Funny how I missed that. Well, I think that we can congratulate ourselves, don’t you?’

Campion did not answer. He did not seem to have heard. There was a scandalized expression in his eyes.

‘I say,’ he said, ‘this is frightful! Oates, I’ve forgotten Felicity. I left her in your office.’

‘The little blonde?’ Oates was mildly interested. ‘She’s all right. I sent her home with a sergeant from the College. Ring her up in the morning.’

Campion took his advice, but Felicity was out. His afternoon call was more successful.

‘My dear, don’t be silly,’ she sounded jubilant as she waved aside his apologies. ‘It was thrilling. I loved it, every minute of it. You’re going to get deluged with praise and bouquets from the Gerards. I’m going to be a bridesmaid.’

‘Are you, indeed? The lunch was not so horrific after all, was it?’

‘The lunch was a success,’ said Felicity. ‘Got any more rules for me?’

Campion grinned. ‘Only one,’ he said, ‘and I’m afraid it’s one for me. When you invite a young woman to spend the afternoon inspecting a gallery of modern art with you, don’t get her taken home by a policeman.’

‘Rubbish,’ protested Felicity. ‘She *liked* it.’

‘That’s the catch,’ said Mr Campion.

THE CASE OF THE LONGER VIEW

On the day that the entrancing Beatrix Lea married her famous leading man, Mr Albert Champion took Mr Lance Feering to re-visit the happy scenes of Mr Feering's youth.

The expedition was purely remedial. Throughout their long luncheon Lance had remained mildly depressed. After all, as he said, a broken heart takes at least twenty-four hours in which to mend without a seam and, while he was perfectly prepared to believe that life with a young woman of Miss Lea's uncontrolled and vituperant tongue might drive a man to suicide, he yet needed a day or two to get used to his merciful deliverance.

Champion, who had known Lance long before he had become one of the leading designers of stage *décor* in Europe, was ready to agree, but it occurred to him that a little gentle exercise, judiciously coupled with a rival sentimental regret, might possibly speed up the recovery.

He was rewarded. As they turned into the web of little streets which floats out like a dusty cap round the neck of the Museum, Lance began to brighten visibly.

'I used to live round here once,' he remarked casually. 'Four of us existed in a hovel on the top floor of a house in Duke's Row. We were all under twenty. Berry was there, and Jorkins, and old Salmon, the poster chap. We were all broke and completely happy. We used to slave away like lunatics, all striving and dreaming of the glorious future when our respective geniuses would be recognized and we should be rich and eat three times a day. It's tragic, you know, Champion. Look at us now. All recognized, all successful, and all damned miserable. We've got the apple off the top of the tree and the cursed thing's sour.'

Champion experienced a sensation of relief. The man was becoming recognizable. Once Lance got going on his time-honoured 'futility of endeavour' the next stage, 'self-expression, the comforter,' was close at hand, and after that it was but a step to that mood of light-hearted good temper laced with high excitement which was his normal state.

'What we all miss now is adventure,' Lance continued, absent-mindedly crossing the road to reach a familiar turning. 'When we lived down here it

was an adventure to be alive at all. Here we are. That's the place. Wonderful architecture. Look at that porch and those windows. Look at them!

Campion surveyed the row of dusty houses, but even the rose-coloured spectacles of Lance Feering's reawakening enthusiasm could not restore Duke's Row to any sort of splendour. The backwater was forlorn and shabby. Fine doors hung open under the ragged elegance of graceful porches, betraying glimpses of bare and dirty communal hallways within. It was a sad street of decayed mansions, whose rooms were now let out unfurnished at a few shillings a week. Lance strolled down the road.

'I haven't been here for ten years,' he said regretfully. 'All the old crowd must have gone, of course. No one stayed here long. It was a sort of half-way house. If you lived here you were either going up or coming down. I wonder who's got our old hovel now?'

He had paused before an open doorway as he spoke and, after a moment's contemplation, suddenly dived through it and hurried up the fine but unsteady flight of wooden stairs inside. Campion followed dubiously, catching up with him just as he was shamelessly engaged in trying the handle of the door on the top landing.

'I say, is this wise?' Campion put out a restraining hand, but the door swung open and Feering grinned.

'Empty, by George!' he said delightedly. 'This is an omen, Campion. Who knows, it may be the will of Providence that we take this place, and, turning our backs resolutely on the fleshpots, settle down to adventure and art for art's sake.'

Campion remained polite but unimpressed. The crumbling attic with the discoloured walls, the wobbling floorboards, and the one dusty window did not attract him. But Feering was his old volatile self again.

'It's a hole, Campion, I admit,' he said. 'It's a dirty little hole, twice as dark and half the size I thought it was. Yet we all worked in here and slept in this bedroom. Lord, look at it! It's a cupboard. Salmon, Berry, and I shared this.'

He had thrown open an inner door and they stepped gingerly into a tiny room in which there was nothing but a broken chair, a cup without a handle, and a portrait of a film star torn from one of the weekly magazines. Feering's enthusiasm sagged before this scene of desolation.

'I wouldn't like to see us trying it now,' he remarked. 'You haven't met old Salmon lately, have you? He's grown very pompous since his success,

poor chap. We used to make Jorkins sleep in this cupboard over here. He was short enough to lie down in it.'

He was still laughing as he opened the small door in the wall. Campion did not follow him immediately. An empty cigarette carton on the window sill had caught his attention and he had gone across to look at it. He still had it in his hand when Feering's voice came sharply from the cupboard.

'I say, Campion, come here. Look at this.'

Campion put his head into the little cell and glanced round its dingy walls through his horn-rimmed spectacles. The place was less than six feet square and was lit by a small window in the roof. It was quite devoid of furnishing, but possessed one startling feature. All round the rough plaster walls, about a foot above the wainscot, ran a string of six-inch crimson letters. They made out the words with difficulty.

'Let me out,' they read. *'O let me out let me out let me out let me out let me out.'*

The writing was shaky and irregular, but there was no mistaking the message. It sprang out at them from the little den like a cry and sent an unaccustomed thrill down Campion's spine. On and on the message went, all round the tiny room. Sometimes it was in a double row. Sometimes it staggered up the wall.

'Let me out o let me out let me out let me out.'

Very low down on the back of the door was the single word *'Janey'* repeated half a dozen times.

The two men stared at each other for an instant and finally Feering laughed.

'It's mad, of course,' he said. 'Some sort of joke. It gave me a shock, though, almost a superstitious thrill. "Let me out" written in blood on the walls of a prison. As soon as one's mind works one realizes it's a false effect. If anyone had been imprisoned here he would have shouted the words, not scribbled them. How attractively absurd!'

Campion was silent. He was kneeling down on the floor, peering at the inscription. Presently he rubbed one of the letters with an inquisitive forefinger and the colour came off on his hand. He moved under the skylight to examine it.

'It's recent work, anyway,' he observed at last. 'Wait a minute. Get out of the light, can you, old boy? Stand in the doorway while I have a look

round.’

Feering moved obligingly and stood watching.

‘I like to see the veteran sleuth sleuthing,’ he remarked cheerfully. ‘It’s very instructive. Look out for the trouser knees. Hullo, have you got something? What is it? The clue the great man knew was there?’

‘The clue the great man hoped was there,’ corrected Campion modestly. He prised something small and bright from beneath the wainscot board, and rose, holding the treasure in the palm of his hand. ‘There you are,’ he said. ‘There’s half the explanation of the blood-stained handwriting. All done while you wait.’

‘Lipstick!’ Lance took the small gilt holder from which practically all the cosmetic had been worn away, and turned it over curiously. ‘Sample size,’ he commented. ‘What’s the little bit of green thread for? That’s amateur work.’

‘I shouldn’t pull it off.’ Campion spoke hastily, an urgency in his tone which made the other man glance at him inquiringly.

‘Taking it seriously?’ he asked. ‘It is a joke of some sort, isn’t it? Have we stumbled on a crime?’ He almost sounded hopeful, and Campion shrugged his shoulders. He was laughing.

‘My dear chap, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I admit it doesn’t seem likely, and even if we have it’s hardly anything to do with us. Yet it’s odd that any woman should waste a whole lipstick writing “*let me out*” all round the wainscot of an empty room.’

‘Perhaps it wasn’t empty then?’

‘In that case it’s curiouser and curiouser. Why should she move the furniture away from the walls in order to write behind it?’

‘I say, there is that.’ Lance Feering’s black eyes were growing sharper. ‘Still, why write it? Why not shout it?’ he insisted. ‘And anyway, why so low down?’

Campion hesitated. ‘I don’t want to be melodramatic,’ he said, ‘but if she were lying on the floor she could just reach as high as that, and I can imagine a frightened woman writing like that if she was prevented from shouting.’

‘Good Lord!’ Feering was staring at the little cell in blank astonishment. ‘Gagged!’ he ejaculated. ‘Bound and gagged.’

‘Hardly. If she was bound she couldn’t write, and if she wasn’t bound she’d hardly remain gagged. But she might have been frightened. It’s very curious.’

‘It’s incredible.’ Lance was frankly excited. ‘What shall we do? Call a bobby?’

‘Oh no, I shouldn’t do that.’ Campion was firm. ‘He might not be amused. We’ve got to account for ourselves being here at all, you see. We walked in off the street without being asked. There isn’t even a “To Let” sign anywhere. We’re on enclosed premises. If you call the police we shall spend the rest of the day making statements. It’s interesting, though. I should say it had been written within the last forty-eight hours. The stuff isn’t dry, you see.’

Lance grimaced. ‘I came up here on a silly sentimental impulse, hoping to recapture some of the old spirit of adventure,’ he remarked. ‘Now I seem to have found it, and hang it, Campion, it’s a responsibility. Look at it. “*Let me out o let me out.*” It’s pathetic, poignant. It must be answered. I don’t see what we’re going to do, though, apart from making discreet inquiries from the people downstairs.’

‘Wait a moment.’ Campion was examining the lipstick holder. ‘All in good time. Let’s do the thing in proper academic style. First we learn all we can from the scene. Then we take the statements. I’ll tell you something, young sir. This is no ordinary lipstick. Not only is it a sample but it has an inscription. Look. “*Prince Pierrot, Inc. ‘Maiden Voyage.’*” What does that tell you? Nothing, I suppose. However, the experienced sleuth deduces instantly that Prince Pierrot is an American firm of high-class cosmetic manufacturers; American because he’s “Inc.” and not “and Co.” and high-class because the smell of the stuff is not offensive but rather pleasing. Moreover, it’s a nice expensive-looking colour. The “Maiden Voyage” provokes a longer shot, I admit, but there has been a pretty important maiden voyage from the U.S. just lately.’

‘The *Eire!*’ Lance swung round. ‘I say, that’s about it. That boat is the last word in floating hotels and I believe the advertising tie-ups were incredible. Probably these Pierrot people control the beauty parlours on board and ran off a few special samples with the complimentary name. There you are. This poor girl Janey—her name must be Janey—came over on the *Eire*. We’re on to something highly peculiar. They were all first-class passengers on that trip. What’s an American socialite doing in a dive like

this less than a week after she lands in England? We must find her. Hang it, it's up to us!

Campion smiled, but his eyes were still serious.

'Don't be disappointed,' he said warningly.

'Disappointed?' Lance was hurt. 'My dear chap, I'm not a ghoul. I only hope it is a joke. I don't want any beautiful young woman to have had a beastly time. What are you laughing at?'

'I was wondering if she was beautiful and if she was young,' murmured Campion. 'There's absolutely no guarantee of that.'

Lance grinned. 'Poor, ugly little beast, then,' he said. 'I don't care. I've got my adventure. Her name is Janey and I am her knight-errant. We've got all eternity before us. Where do we go from here?'

Their preliminary investigations were unexpectedly profitable. To Feering's delight he discovered that the old charwoman who had lived in the basement in the days of his youth was still in occupation. After a glorious reunion, which could not have been more hearty had he been her long-lost son, she told them all she knew of the ex-tenants of the top floor. This was not a great deal, but the story had points of interest.

There had been two of them, she said, 'flash boys, a little too smart to be trusted.' They had been living there for the best part of a month, and had seemed to her experienced eyes to be none too flush with money, even according to the standards of the neighbourhood. However, two days before there had come a change. The tenants of the attic had received visitors of an unusual kind. The strangers had arrived late one night. Out of her basement window she had caught a glimpse of their limousine, and afterwards had heard the sound of trampling feet on the uncarpeted stairs. The following evening the car had called again, and this time every one had gone off in it, carrying bundles and packages.

The old lady suspected a moonlight flit but had been surprised in the morning to discover one of the tenants still in possession. Even more to her astonishment, he had fetched in a junk dealer and disposed of the entire furnishings for a few shillings. Then, after leaving a week's rent for the landlord, he had walked out quietly into the blue.

That was all Mrs Sadd had to report, and she hardly liked to take the treasury note which Feering pressed upon her, but she came running after

them to tell them that one of the ‘flash boys’ had spoken with an American accent.

‘No girl,’ Lance remarked dubiously, as he followed Campion into a cab. ‘No mention of a girl at all. No screams. Nothing. The only corroboration we have is that one of the tenants had an American accent.’

‘He liked American cigarettes too,’ Campion observed. ‘There was an empty “Camel” carton on the mantelshef. They’re expensive over here. Perhaps the visitors brought him a packet. It may be a wild-goose chase, but I think we’ll try the shipping office.’

‘Janey,’ said Feering, leaning back in the cab. ‘I see her as a dazzling blonde with dark eyes.’

Since Beatrix was a brunette with blue eyes, Campion took the observation to be a favourable sign.

Lance waited in the cab while Campion negotiated the somewhat delicate line of inquiry in the shipping office. It was a long vigil, but he was rewarded. The tall man in the horn-rimmed spectacles came striding out of the impressive doorway wearing that vacant expression which indicated that he was on the track of something interesting. He directed the taxi-man to the offices of one of the newspapers and climbed in beside his friend.

‘Miss Janey Lobbet, travelling with her mother, Mrs Fran Lobbet, of Boston, Mass.,’ he said briefly. ‘That’s all I can find out about her. Passenger lists aren’t very communicative. But she was the only Janey on the boat, so far as I can find out. There’s one other point. You were perfectly right. Messrs. Prince Pierrot Inc. had the monopoly of the beauty trade on the ship and they did run a special line in “Maiden Voyage” samples, exclusive to the trip. How’s that?’

Lance whistled. ‘What an extraordinary thing!’ he said at last. ‘*“Let me out o let me out”* . . . what on earth does it mean? There’s been nothing in the papers. What’s happened, Campion?’

‘I don’t know.’ The other man spoke with a seriousness unusual in him. ‘I don’t know at all, but I don’t like the feel of it and I rather think it’s something I ought to find out.’

At the newspaper office Campion’s call was on Miss Dorothea Azores, well known as the most industrious gossip-writer of the day. The lady herself was out, unfortunately, but her secretary was able to give them at least the bare bones of the information they sought. Mrs Fran Lobbet was the widow of Carl Lobbet, the paper magnate, and she and her only

daughter, Janey, were staying at the Aragon Hotel, overlooking the Park. The secretary apologized that she had no photographs and so little information about the pair, but explained gently that there were a great many Americans in London.

‘Well, what do we do?’ inquired Lance as they came out through the bronze-and-glass doors into Fleet Street again. ‘Do we barge in on these good ladies and ask if either of them has spent a bad half-hour in Duke’s Row?’

Campion hesitated. ‘No,’ he said, the anxious expression still lingering behind his spectacles. ‘No, hardly that. But we might dine at the Aragon tonight if you’re not doing anything. I think I shall go myself, in any case.’

‘No, you don’t,’ said Lance firmly. ‘No poaching. This is my adventure. I found it and I’m sticking to it. The dinner’s mine. I’ll meet you in the restaurant at a quarter to eight. Don’t look so dubious. This is going to be good.’

‘I hope so.’ But Campion did not sound sanguine.

The Aragon was fashionable that year, and the big dining-room with the fine windows opening on to the Park was crowded with the usual noisy, well-dressed crowd when Lance arrived. He found Campion already installed at a table at the far end of the room, on the edge of the little dais which was part of the orchestra platform. It was a most advantageous position, giving him a clear view of the entire gathering.

‘Any luck?’

‘It all depends.’ Campion was cautious. ‘I’m not sure. I’ve been talking to Baptiste. He’s the *maitre d’hôtel* here. I cultivate a line in *maitres d’hôtel*. He’s an old friend. The Lobbets are here all right, or rather Madame is. Mademoiselle is away for a few days, staying with friends. That’s the table, the little one down there by the window. She’s expected any moment now.’

‘Staying with friends?’ Lance repeated, his eyebrows rising. ‘That’s suggestive, isn’t it? This is damned silly and exciting. Don’t be so blasé—or is this an everyday affair for you?’

‘I’m not blasé.’ Campion resented the accusation. ‘I don’t like the look of the thing. If I’m on the right track, and I’m afraid I may be, I’m appalled by it. Hello, here she is.’

Feering followed his glance across the room to where the portly Baptiste was settling a newcomer at the little table by the window.

‘It’s Janey.’ Lance turned to Champion. ‘What did I tell you? A dazzling blonde with dark eyes. I’m the seventh child of a seventh child: I’ve got prophetic vision. She looks a little pale, a little sad, doesn’t she? Momma has been very trying and she doesn’t know anybody in London. By George, she’s lovely! Look at her.’

Champion was looking at her. He saw a pale slender girl of twenty-eight or so, with ash-blonde hair and enormous dark eyes, the shadows beneath them enhancing their sombre loveliness. She was delightfully dressed, and from the clasp on her shoulder came the unmistakable watery gleam of real diamonds, yet he thought he had never seen anyone who looked so forlorn and miserably unhappy in his life. Lance drew a card from his wallet and began to scribble on it.

‘One can only be snubbed,’ he observed philosophically. ‘“Faint heart”, “nothing venture”, likewise “fain would I climb”. Give me that lipstick-holder. The green thread may touch a chord.’

He pushed the card across the table so that Champion could read the message.

‘I think this is yours. May I tell you where I found it and how I know? It’s a good story.’

‘Yes, that’ll do, I think.’ Champion produced the lipstick-holder as he spoke. ‘I wonder though,’ he went on. ‘It’s not fair to spring it on her like this unless—’

His voice trailed away. Lance was no longer listening to him. He had signalled a waiter and was dispatching his message.

Together the two friends watched the man cross the room. He paused before the table in the window, and said something to the girl. She looked surprised and almost, it seemed to Lance, a little frightened, but she glanced across at him and took the card as the waiter placed the holder on the white table-cloth beside her plate. The card fluttered from her hand as she caught sight of it and even from that distance they saw all trace of colour creep slowly from her face. She grew paler and paler and her eyelids drooped. Champion rose.

‘Look out, she’s going to faint,’ he said.

He was too late. The girl swayed sideways and crumpled to the ground.

Instantly there was commotion all round her, and the two men on the other side of the room had the uncomfortable experience of seeing her assisted to the door. Baptiste fluttering behind the procession like a scandalized duenna.

Lance turned to Campion. In any other circumstances the bewildered regret upon his face would have been comic.

‘Ghastly,’ he said. ‘How did that happen? Was it coincidence or the sight of that confounded thing?’

Campion put his napkin on the table. ‘We’re going to find out,’ he said briefly.

Baptiste, solemn and reproachful, was bearing down upon them. He paused before the table and gave the message in a tone in which respectful deference was subtly mingled with deep disapproval.

‘Mrs Lobbet will be glad to see the two gentlemen who sent her the card in her private sitting-room.’

It was not so much an invitation as a royal command, and Lance said afterwards that he followed Campion to the suite on the first floor feeling as if he were bound for the headmaster’s study. At any rate, five minutes later they stood side by side, looking helplessly at the pale, unsmiling woman who waited to receive them with courage and dignity as well as terror in her dark eyes.

As the door closed behind the servant who had conducted them she spoke. Her voice was unexpectedly deep, and its trace of New England accent made it very attractive.

‘Well?’ she said. ‘Has the price gone up again? Or couldn’t you wait until tomorrow?’

They gaped at her and Lance tugged at his collar uncomfortably.

‘I’m afraid there’s some mistake,’ he began awkwardly. ‘You see, we had no idea that you were Mrs Lobbet. We—that is, I—was looking for Janey.’

The name was too much for the woman. She remained for a moment struggling to master herself and then, with a gesture of complete helplessness, collapsed into a chair and hid her face.

‘Don’t,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, please don’t. I’ve told you I’ll meet any demands you like to make, but don’t torture us like this. Is she all right? Please, please tell me. Don’t you understand, she’s my baby? Is she all right?’

Lance glanced sharply at Champion and met the other man’s eyes.

‘A child!’ he said huskily. ‘Good Lord, I never guessed.’

Champion did not reply to him. His mouth was grim as he went across the room and looked down at the woman.

‘Mrs Lobbet, you should have gone to the police,’ he said quietly. ‘When did you miss your daughter?’

The young widow sprang up. Before she had been broken-hearted; now she was terrified.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded. ‘I tell you I don’t know anything. I—I don’t want to discuss anything with you. Please go away.’

He shook his head.

‘You’re making a great mistake,’ he said gently. ‘This is England, you know. Conditions are rather different over here. I know when someone dear is kidnapped in America it is often safest not to go to the authorities for fear of reprisals, but over here, believe me, it’s not the same.’

The girl did not speak. There was a light of pure desperation in her eyes and her lips remained obstinately closed. He stood watching her for a little while and finally shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘You could have trusted us.’

He had reached the door before she called him back.

‘If only I knew what to do,’ she said brokenly. ‘If only I knew what to do.’

Lance went suddenly across the room and took her hand. He looked young for his years and very handsome as he peered down into her face.

‘We are both reputable people, my dear girl,’ he said. ‘We’ll give you our credentials if you’ll let us. We found that holder in such very odd circumstances that it made us curious, and quite by chance we were able to trace it to you. Won’t you tell us all about it? We’ll help you if we can.’

It was a sincere little speech and gradually the tenseness round her mouth slackened, although her eyes were still afraid.

‘Where did you get it?’ she whispered. ‘Did you see her? Do you know where she is?’

It took them the best part of an hour to convince her that they were genuinely disinterested in the affair. Lance left the description of the scribbled message, which had now taken on such a new and pathetic significance, to Campion, who managed it very tactfully, without frightening the young mother unduly.

‘So you see,’ he finished at last, ‘we were curious and just a little apprehensive. How old is Janey?’

‘Only six.’ Fran Lobbet’s voice quivered. ‘She’s just a baby. I’ve never let her out of my sight before, but this new nurse seemed so sensible and trustworthy that I let them both go out into the Park. When they didn’t return I was paralysed with fear. Then the telephone message from these—these people came.’

‘Oh, they ’phoned you, did they? What did they say?’

‘The usual thing. I nearly fainted when I heard the warning. I’ve read about the same sort of thing in our newspapers. I wasn’t to tell anyone or— or I’d never see her again. I was to go to Oxborough Racecourse and put ten thousand dollars to win on a certain horse with a certain bookmaker. Then they promised she’d be returned to me.’

‘Did you do it?’

‘Oh yes, of course. That was the day before yesterday. I did everything they told me, but there was no sign of her when I got back here. I waited by the telephone all day and this morning, when I was half out of my mind, they rang again. They swore that she was safe but they made another demand. They may be playing with me. She may be dead. But what can I do? What *can* I do?’

The appeal was too much for Lance.

‘My poor, dear, good girl,’ he said, forgetting himself completely, ‘ring up the police instantly. This is frightful. You poor child, you must be in agony. See to it, Campion. Get on the telephone.’

‘No, no, please don’t! Please. They’ll kill her if I do that. I know they will. They so often do. There are hundreds of cases of it back home.’ She was clutching his coat imploringly, and Campion intervened.

‘You’re not back home now,’ he said. ‘Look here, it’s not as bad as you think, or at least I think not, thank God. This is a smaller country and the law

is tighter, but I think you may be right about not calling in the police at this juncture. Tell me, did the man you spoke to on the 'phone have an American accent?'

'Yes, a slight one.'

'I see. Then that's what's happened. Probably the whole thing's engineered from the other side, with confederates in this country. The nurse is in it, of course. When did you engage her?'

'Just before we sailed. She came to me with wonderful references and she seemed so placid and sensible that I never dreamed—'

Mrs Lobbet's voice trembled and she broke off, fighting with her tears.

'I'm alone,' she said. 'I daren't trust anyone. Even now I don't know about you. Forgive me, but you come to me out of the air with something that Janey had with her. How can I trust you? I oughtn't to talk. Oh, my God, I oughtn't to talk!'

'Wait a minute,' said Lance, who was still puzzled. 'What was a child of six doing with a lipstick?'

In spite of her anxiety a faint smile passed over Fran Lobbet's beautiful face.

'It belonged to her doll,' she said. 'Janey has a very grand French doll with a green belt, and on the boat, when they were giving away those little samples, she got hold of one because it was a doll's size. I tied it on to the belt for her with a piece of green thread. That's how I recognized it. Look, the thread's still there.'

'I see. And when she was too scared to shout she used it to write her name on the door. She's a clever kid for six.' Lance's black eyes had grown bleak. 'They're swine,' he said softly. 'They deserve what's coming to them. Now look here, Mrs Lobbet, you've got to allow us to manage this. We'll get her back, I promise you. We'll get her back safely if it's the last thing we do. You can rely on us.'

Campion did not echo the impulsive promise. Long experience of criminals had made him cautious. But there was a rare spark of anger in the shadows behind his eyes.

'Suppose you tell us about this latest demand,' he said quietly.

Mrs Lobbet glanced from one to the other of the two men. She seemed pathetically young and tragic and, to Lance at any rate, one of the loveliest

women he had ever seen.

‘It’s so impressed on us back home that complete silence is the only hope,’ she said, ‘but I can’t help it. They’ve lied to me once and they may go on doing it. I feel I’m taking her life in my hands, but I’ll tell you, and please God I’m doing the right thing. This is what they’ve told me to do.’

As Campion listened to the instructions his opinion of the organising powers of the gang increased. It was a pretty little plan, evidently devised by someone with a proper appreciation of English laws and police procedure. Janey’s captors required her mother to attend Thursday’s Oxborough meeting alone. She was to seek out a bookie called Fred Fitz, whose stand would be among the others, but she was not to speak to him until the second race was actually being run. Then she was to walk over and place two thousand pounds in one-pound notes on *Flyaway* to win the two-thirty.

The simplicity of the scheme was exquisite. Here was no clumsy passing of notes in narrow lanes, no leaving of mysterious boxes on churchyard walls. A bookmaker is the only man on earth who can receive large sums of money for nothing from perfect strangers in the open light of day without occasioning suspicion or even interest. Moreover, in the event of a police trap what man could have a better story? Any tale which she might tell about mysterious telephone messages could always come as a complete surprise to him, and who could argue? No charge could be preferred against him, for he had done nothing to offend.

‘I’ve got the money ready and I shall do exactly what they say.’ The girl spoke stiffly, as if her lips were set. ‘You mustn’t come with me. I mustn’t jeopardize her chances in any way. I daren’t. I just daren’t.’

‘Mrs Lobbet is right,’ said Campion hastily before Lance could interrupt. ‘For her own peace of mind she must keep her bargain with the crooks. She must go to the meeting and pay the ransom money alone.’

‘But we shall be there,’ Lance insisted.

Campion cocked an eye at him. ‘Oh, dear me, yes,’ he said and his precise voice was almost caressing. ‘We shall be there.’

They *were* there. Lance Feering, in chauffeur’s uniform, drove Fran Lobbet to the meeting in his own car.

Campion went racing alone. Apart from an hour’s intensive telephoning in the morning, his day might have borne the scrutiny of the most suspicious

of shadowing crooks. He had an early lunch at the celebrated White Hart Hotel in Oxborough Wool Market and drove gently down to the car park as though he had no care in the world. He watched the first race from the stand, won a little money, and afterwards wandered down to the bookies' ring to collect it and place another trifling stake.

He did not bet with Fred Fitz. Indeed, he scarcely looked at the wizened little man who was shouting so lustily. He did not recognize his face and did not expect to. The morning's careful inquiries had identified him as a small man of no reputation, nor of sufficient importance to be of any great interest to the police. After discussing him on the telephone with Superintendent Stanislaus Oates of Scotland Yard, Campion had been moved once more to admire the organizing abilities of the men who had engineered the kidnapping of the little American girl. Fitz was one of those men who float round the edge of the underworld, doing odd jobs for larger and more wholehearted crooks. Since nothing definite was known against him the police were bound to treat him as an honest man, whatever their private opinions might be.

The man who was acting as his clerk, however, was a different person altogether. As soon as Campion set eyes upon that sharp white face his own expression became an amiable blank and he never glanced again in his direction. There was no mistaking Fingers Hawkins. Once seen never forgotten, and Campion had not only seen but had dealt before with that little crook, whose reputation was not admired even by his own kind.

He returned to the stand in thoughtful mood. If Fingers was a typical member of the gang with whom he had to deal, things could hardly be more unpromising.

He took up his position and reviewed the scene through his glasses. The meeting was not a very popular one and the crowds were not enormous, although there were enough people to make the gathering interesting. The racecourse is just outside the town, which lies in a hollow, and beyond the red rooftops the rolling green hills, dotted with country houses, rise up to the skyline. It was a sunny day, and as Campion's powerful glasses swept the country they brought him little intimate glimpses of manors and farms and villas nestling in their surrounding greenery. He spent some time apparently lost in the beauties of the scene, and dragged his attention back to the course almost with reluctance.

Just before the second race started, when the stand was full and the crowd was moving steadily towards the rails, he caught sight of Fran

Lobbet. She was wearing the red hat on which they had agreed, and was quite alone, he was relieved to notice. Through his glasses he watched her edging her way towards the ring, clutching an enormous white handbag with both hands. She made a very small and pathetic figure in her loneliness, and his indignation rose to boiling-point. He did not notice the horses coming up to the start, and it was not until the roar from the crowd told him that they were off that he was ever aware of their existence.

As the crowd swept past Fran in a last-minute rush, the bookies and their stands were temporarily deserted, and Champion saw her walk resolutely forward. His glasses left the girl and focused upon the ignoble features of Fingers Hawkins. The little crook appeared to be employed in something which looked at first like amateur tic-tac work. His arms rose above his head and dropped again. Then Fran came into the circle. A package passed and she received her slip. Still Champion did not follow her. Fingers made his entry and then, stepping up on the box, raised his arms once again. Afterwards he too raised glasses and looked steadfastly out across the course.

Champion remained where he was for a few seconds and for a while appeared to watch the race, but he did not stay to see the finish. At the very moment when the horses passed the post he was forcing his way out through the excited throng, and two minutes later climbed into a solid-looking black car containing five expressionless men, all of whom appeared to favour the same particular type of nondescript raincoat.

‘Over there, on the brown hill,’ he said briefly to the man at the wheel. ‘A modern white villa with a flat roof. Take the London road and branch off by a church with a spire.’

The short fat man with the American accent, who was known to the Federal Police as Louis Greener, was still standing on the flat roof of the white villa, his glasses trained on the racecourse which lay, a patterned ribbon of colour, in the valley below him, when one police car, followed by another, swung quietly up the steep drive and debouched its swarming cargo before it reached a standstill.

Mr Greener was engrossed in his vigil and was not disturbed from it until a shout from the room below him, followed by a volley of revolver shots, brought him back to present emergencies with a rush. He dropped his glasses and fled to the stairhead just as a lean figure appeared through the hatchway, an automatic in its hand.

‘I should come very quietly if I were you,’ said Campion.

Twenty minutes later the villa was calm and peaceful again, and the drive was empty. Fingers Hawkins drove up in a small car, a tremendous smile on his unbeautiful face, and a suspicious bulkiness about his coat pockets. He was not alone. Two men accompanied him, each betraying a certain careful solicitude for his safety which could hardly be accounted for by mere affection. Fingers was jaunty. He sounded the horn two or three times.

‘You come be’ind me,’ he said to his bodyguard. ‘I deserve a committee of welcome for this lot. Now let’s see how his American Nibs treats a bloke who’s done ’alf his work for him.’

He strolled up to the front door and kicked it open.

‘Anyone at ’ome?’ he shouted as he passed into the hall. ‘No ’anging about, if you please. Oi! Shop!’

His companions followed him, and as soon as they came into the hall the door closed quietly behind them. The little click which the latch made as it shot home brought them all round, the hair bristling on their necks. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence and the police closed in on them.

Meanwhile, in a private sitting-room at the White Hart, Fran Lobbet sat in an arm-chair clasping a grubby little bundle, while tears of pure relief streamed down her face. From the other side of the room Lance Feering beamed at her.

‘She’s all right,’ he said. ‘I believe she enjoyed it.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ Janey Lobbet’s bright eyes peered at him from a tangle of hair. ‘Sometimes I was frightened. After Nurse left me I was frightened.’

‘But you’re not frightened now, are you, darling?’ Fran put the question anxiously and the child chuckled.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not now. I’m *tough*.’

They laughed and Fran smiled at the man.

‘I’ll never be able to thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me. Campion worked the oracle.’ Feering nodded towards the fourth occupant of the room, who sat on the edge of a table, an expression of mild satisfaction on his thin face. ‘I don’t see now how you spotted the house. What was it? Second sight?’

‘In a way, yes. I did it with my binoculars,’ said Campion modestly. ‘Fingers takes full credit for the rest. As soon as I saw his little weasel snout quivering pinkly through the undergrowth I thought, “Hullo, my lad, you’re not handling two thousand pounds of anybody’s money without a pretty close watch being kept on you, I’ll bet.” I saw he had two attendants in the background, but neither of them looked exactly like the foreman of the sort of outfit we had been led to expect. I was completely in the dark until I noticed Fingers signal to someone apparently in the middle of the course. Then he put his glasses up and I saw he wasn’t watching the race. Since he was taking a longer view, naturally I did the same myself and caught sight of a person, whom I now know to be a most unpleasant bird called Louis Greener, standing on a flat roof and waving his arms about in reply.

‘That was really quite enough in the circumstances. The police were waiting, as they had promised, so off we went and there was the gang and there was Janey. She and I came away and we left the boys waiting for Fingers and the loot. There should be a happy family party down at the police station by this time.’

His voice died away. Neither Fran nor Lance was listening to him. He watched them for some seconds, but they appeared to be having a satisfactory, if wordless, conversation of their own, so presently he wandered off to find the Inspector in charge of the raid. That good-tempered man was comforting.

‘Fingers has been talking about you, sir,’ he said cheerfully as Campion appeared. ‘I’ve had it all took down. I’m thinking you might like a copy. Coming from him it’s a regular testimonial. If it wasn’t so highly coloured that some might think it vulgar, you could almost have it framed.’

PART TWO

Some Other Mysteries

IT DIDN'T WORK OUT

This is a confession. I want to tell the whole truth and to explain how it happened.

In the first place my name is Margaret Hawkins, and later on, when I went on the stage, I changed it to Polly Oliver. I don't suppose you remember the name now, but your fathers might, although I don't know . . . it's no good me pretending.

I was clever and I had looks when I was younger, but I was never what you might call a top-liner, not like Louie. It's really because of her that I'm confessing at all. The fair boy, who looked too young to be a policeman when he took his hat off, didn't suspect me. I don't think anybody did, not even the coroner, and there was a shrewd old man if ever I saw one.

I suppose you would say that I've got clean away with it, but I want to tell about it because of Louie. After all, she was the main cause of it. If it hadn't been for her, poor old girl, I certainly shouldn't have ever brought myself to stretch out my hand and—

But I'm coming to that.

Louie and I were pals, not like girls on the stage are nowadays. I'm not saying anything against them, but they're not the women we used to be. Little bits of rubbish they look to me, as they come in and out of my house. They don't look like actresses. That was one thing about me and Louie. In the old days—I'm talking about thirty or forty years ago—if you saw us a mile off you'd know we were in the profession, with our white boots and our bits of fluff, and the boys running along behind.

We met in burlesque. I was in the chorus, and she had a little part: nothing much, you know, but she used to come on in front of us girls and say: 'Here we are, boys!' I can see her now, her figure pinched in and her tights glistening, and her bright yellow curls, which were always real—more than mine were, I don't mind telling you—bobbing up and down as she moved.

Even then she had that spirit—'verve' we called it then, and 'pep' they call it now—which made her name for her afterwards. Louie Lester: you've all known it since your cradles, you've all heard your fathers talk about her

and most of you have seen her. She went on the halls in nineteen hundred, and she still headed the bill in nineteen-eighteen—at least, up north.

I remember her best in the early days when she was making her name. ‘Grandpapa Has Done It Again’, ‘Jonah Likes a Little Bit of Pink’, ‘Forget It and Kiss Me Again’—Lorn wrote all those songs for her and she ought to have married him. You must remember the act? First there’d be the little twiddly bit from the orchestra, then the red curtains’d go up, and there’d be the ‘Town Hall’ set with the piano and the potted palms, and Lorn himself in the early days sitting there playing. The house’d be clapping by this time, and then the silver curtains that she travelled with her would part over the archway centre-back and out she’d come, all twelve stone of her, silk stockings, petticoats, white skin, and eyes so blue they made the sapphires Jorkins gave her look like bits of glass, all twinkling and shaking, and giving off great waves of life like a dynamo going all out.

They used to say she never had a voice, but she had. It was tuneful, and it filled the hall. She hadn’t any fancy notes, but she put the stuff over. And she never tired. They could shout for her again and again and she’d still give them a chorus and lead ’em over the difficult bits like kids at a singing class.

They loved her and she loved them. Her turn was like a reunion.

I haven’t described her now—I don’t suppose there’s any need to—but since you probably remember her when she was stouter and noisier, although she never lost her spirit, I may as well tell you how I saw her, and how I always think of her.

She was tall and fair, with blue eyes and a wide mouth, and a figure that was fine and strong and very human, and she radiated affection. I think myself that was her great gift. You felt she loved you, everybody did; taxi-drivers, people in shops, the orchestra, the house itself, they all sat up and preened themselves when she smiled because it was a personal smile, if you understand me, meant for you and genuine because she liked you. It made her what she was and it kept her there for a long time.

I’m telling you all this because I want you to understand why I did what I did do and where I made my mistake, my terrible mistake.

She met him when she was at the top of her career. There were thousands of men she could have married, men with money, men who could have given her something. Or there was Lorn, if she wanted somebody to take care of. Lorn would have died for her—did die for her, when you come to think of it. She didn’t know he had consumption and that theatre up at

— but it was pulled down a long time ago and there's no need to rub it in —was a deathtrap, notoriously.

Still, that's not the point. As I say, she might have married anybody and she chose Frank. I don't know what he was. Something in the orchestra, in a little one-eyed town whose very name I've forgotten. I remember when she brought him round to my dressing-room—I was still in burlesque and only just out of the chorus. I looked at him and she said: 'This is Frank Springer. We're going to be married,' and I waited for her to wink at me, but she didn't.

I didn't like him even then and her money hadn't gone to his head at that time. He was an undersized, flashy little object, with so much side you wondered he didn't fall over. He could talk: I gave him that. There was nobody who could talk so well to people they didn't know. The first half-hour you were with him made you think you'd discovered something, but all the other half-hours were a disillusionment.

And she never saw through him. At least I don't suppose that's quite true. But she never saw right through him. It made me wild then, and it still makes me wild when I think of it. To everybody else in this blessed world that man was a four-flushing gasbag, a fellow with such an inferiority complex, as they say now, that his whole life was spent trying to boost himself up to himself, and the more weak and hopeless and inefficient he saw himself the wilder and more irritating his lies became.

I had enough of him on the first evening, and when I got her alone I began to laugh at him, and that was the first time I ever saw her 'funny'.

She wasn't angry, but a sort of obstinate look came into her face. I can't describe it and I won't try, but it was the one thing I never understood about her. He was the one subject on which we never were frank, and one is frank with pals one's known and worked with.

'You're not really going to marry him, duck?' I said at last. I was quite startled by this time.

'Oh, don't you like him?'

It was all she said, but there was an appeal in it. She had a way of doing that, of saying ordinary things and making you feel they were important.

'Yes, I do in a way,' I said cautiously, because I didn't want to hurt her. 'But you're not really going to marry him? Is he rich?'

‘He hasn’t got a brown,’ she said, and she sounded pleased and somehow complacent.

I was younger then and I hadn’t learnt what I have now, so I’m afraid I said what I thought.

She walked out on me and in the morning when I tried to get hold of her she told the old girl to say she was out. That was the first row we ever had, and when I met her again it was after her big hit at the Oxford with ‘When Father Brings the Flowers Home With the Milk’. We had a drink together and she said she was married.

I said I was sorry for what I’d said about her husband—after all, when a man’s a girl’s husband it makes him somebody—and she warmed up to me again and I felt things weren’t really so bad. I was out of a shop at the time and I saw her at the second house, and afterwards I met him again in the dressing-room.

He was horrible. Even afterwards, when he was old and I knew him for what he was, I never really loathed him as much as I did at that first meeting after they were married. He took all the credit for her success, talked about her as though he’d made her, and he wore a diamond and chucked his weight about until it made everybody sick. There were a whole crowd of us there, her old friends and several new ones and a lot of smart people. They were nice to him because of her. But he took it all to himself and, although it was a jolly enough gathering, for the first time I saw her in that atmosphere which never deserted her all her life.

It’s hard to describe it, but it was a sort of pitying-polite atmosphere, almost as though she’d got a hump or a wooden leg, and everyone was too fond of her to let her know that they’d noticed it.

Lorn was sitting in a corner. His illness had got hold of him by then, but we didn’t know it. Frank was rude to him and had the impudence to criticize the way he played one of his own songs, but he didn’t say anything. He just sat there shivering and sipping his glass of the champagne somebody’d brought in.

He looked so miserable that I went over and joined him, and afterwards, when Louie had fixed up to go out to supper at some titled chap’s house and Frank had invited himself and promised that she’d give a show there, announcing he’d accompany her himself, Lorn and I went off and had a meal together.

We went to a Sam Isaacs'—I don't know if it's still there—and had some fish and stout. I had a job to make Lorn eat; he just sat shivering. Neither of us mentioned Louie at first. I knew he was supposed to be in love with her, but then most people were. It became half habit, half affectation with every man who knew her, and I suppose Lorn knew her as well as anybody in the world.

He sat playing with his food, turning it over and over on his plate and looking at it as though he were not at all sure what it was.

'How d'you like him?' I said at last when every other topic had failed.

He put down his knife and fork and looked at me across the little table. Now that I've seen death in a man's eyes I know what it was that shocked me so in his expression.

'Oh, God, Polly!' he said. 'Oh, God!'

'You eat your grub,' I said, because I was flustered and embarrassed by him. 'You mark my words, my lad, the time's coming when it's going to be easy for a respectable woman to get in and out of marriage. She'll get tired of him and pack up.'

He looked at me earnestly. 'Do you really believe that? Because if you do you're more of a perishing little fool than I thought you were.'

'Isn't that what you think?' I said.

Neither of us was in the mood to get touchy with what the other said.

'No,' he said, so quietly that I stared at him. I can see that pale face of his with the great high-bridged mournful nose and the wildish light eyes to this day. 'No,' he repeated. 'She loves him, Polly. She loves that little squirt and she'll go on loving him until she breaks her heart or someone takes him by the back of his scrawny little neck and twists it round and round until his head falls off.'

His voice had risen on the words and one or two of the other people in the room—it was a quiet little place—looked round at us. I felt uncomfortable.

'You be quiet,' I said. 'Don't say such dreadful things. Frank's not the type to get done in and if he is it's not going to be by you or me.'

I remember I choked over the last word, and he laughed and gave me a bit of bread and we cheered up after that. But I think of it now sometimes.

It's twenty-five years ago. I didn't believe in the Subconscious or Fate then, and I don't now, really, but I did choke and I did kill him.

Lorn took me home that night. I was digging at old Ma Villiers' just off the Streatham High. You certainly wouldn't remember her, but she was a fine old trouper and had been quite a queen of melodrama in her day. We sat round the fire in her kitchen and I can see her now standing on a swaying chair, ferreting about in the cupboard for some cinnamon for Lorn's cold.

After he had gone—and he went slowly, I remember, with heavy steps like an old man—she stood talking to me while I filled my hot-water bottle from the kettle on the stove. She was a great gaunt old woman—they don't all run to fat—with a shock of grey hair and a Shakespearean manner.

'There's death there,' she said. 'You won't see him again.'

I was sharp with her.

'He's all right. He's only got a cold and he's fed up because his girl's married somebody else.'

She looked at me sharply with her little black eyes.

'"*A scratch, a scratch, but marry 'tis enough,*"' she said. 'You won't see him again.'

She was right. I didn't. I never saw Lorn again. I heard about his death long afterwards from some people who were in the same bill as Louie up north when Lorn collapsed. They were nice people, a dancing act, who came into a burlesque show in which I was playing. We were calling them 'revues' by that time. I remember the woman, a pretty little dark-haired thing—she was called Lola Darling—telling me with tears in her eyes of the awful row there had been back stage, Louie insisting that Lorn was not fit to go on and Frank bullying her and swearing first at her and then at Lorn, and finally Lorn staggering out to the piano and doing his little bit in the icy draught that would have killed an elephant, let alone a man half dead already. And then Lorn collapsing—dreadfully vivid she was, I dreamt of Lorn in pools of blood for nights afterwards—and being rushed off to hospital and dying there.

'Who's accompanying her now?' I said, and when she told me Frank was doing it himself I felt anxious.

He didn't smash her career at once. Nobody could have done that except Louie herself. But he chipped away at the foundations of it, if you

understand what I mean. The rumour went round that the act was temperamental, but that didn't matter while she drew the houses.

I didn't see much of her then. She used to write to me sometimes, but her letters grew guarded. At first they were all about Frank. Frank did this, Frank did that, Frank was so clever, Frank won three thousand pounds at Doncaster on one race. But afterwards I didn't hear so much about Frank. She wrote generalities.

All the time, though, she was at the top of the bill, and when she did come to London her old songs went down just like they used to do, even if some of the new ones weren't so successful.

The rumour went around that Frank was jealous of Lorn's memory, and threw a tantrum every time she revived one of his songs.

He wrote one or two for her himself, but they were terrible, and even her personality couldn't put them over. I believe he gave her hell when that happened, but, of course, nobody knew about it then.

That was the beginning of the secret life she led, the life that turned her into two different people.

Meanwhile I was having my own adventures. My husband—did I say I had a husband?—died and left me the little bit of money he had, bless him! We never got on together but we never worried each other. I banked my money and went on working.

It was war-time now and there was a lot of stuff going. I was so hurried I didn't have time to think. We were all so busy making merry in case we died tomorrow that I didn't realize I was getting older, but I was always a sound worker, reliable and steady, and the managers found me little bits so that I could live and save my spot of money.

It was nearing the end of the war that I first saw the new Louie. We hadn't set eyes upon one another for two years, and although there had been rumours about her, her extravagance, her wildness and the sort of crowd she was mixed up with, I was not prepared for the atmosphere I found when I went round to her dressing-room at the Palladium after my own little show at the Winter Garden was done.

I tapped on the door and the dresser opened it half an inch. It was a new woman. Old Gertie had got the sack, I heard afterwards. This new one was a beery old party with a face like a frightened hare. When she saw I wasn't going to hit her she opened the door a fraction or so wider.

‘You can’t come in,’ she said. ‘Miss Lester’s resting.’

‘Resting?’ I said. ‘What’s she been doing? Swimming the Channel?’

‘Polly!’ I heard Louie’s voice from inside and I pushed the woman aside and went in.

She was lying on a couch, her make-up still on but standing out from her face as though the skin beneath it had shrunk. I hardly recognized her. She was heavier, older, and although still lovely there was an exhaustion, a weakness which was incredible when associated with Louie.

‘Oh, Polly,’ she said, ‘oh, Polly . . .’ and burst into tears.

This was so unlike her that I forgot myself entirely.

‘Why, Duck,’ I said, ‘why, Duck, what’s the matter?’

She wiped her tears away and looked nervously at the woman.

‘You clear out, Auntie,’ I said. ‘Go and have a drink. I’ll look after Miss Lester.’

The old rabbit stood her ground.

‘Mr Springer said she wasn’t to be left,’ she said.

‘Mr Springer said . . .!’ I gaped at her. ‘You get out!’ I said. ‘Gawd luv a policeman, what d’you think Miss Lester’s going to do? Blow up? You get out. And if you meet Mr Springer, you tell him I told you to.’

‘Oh no, Polly, no.’ Louie put her hand to me and clutched my arm and I looked down at her hand and saw that her rings were paste. I can’t tell you why, but that shocked me more than anything I’ve ever seen in all my life . . . yes, more than his face when—

But I’m coming to that later.

Finally the old woman went. I’m not so big, and the last part I ever played was a burlesque charwoman, but I usually get what I want when I set my mind to it.

When the door closed behind her I locked it and turned to Louie.

‘Are you ill?’ I said.

‘No. Only tired.’

‘How many shows have you done today?’

‘One.’

‘Strewth!’ I said. ‘What’s the matter?’

She began to cry again.

‘I don’t know, Polly, I don’t know. I’m all right when I’m on the stage, but afterwards I’m laid out. I used not to be like this always, did I, Polly? Did I?’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ I said. ‘You ought to go along to see a doctor.’

‘A doctor?’ She laughed. ‘Frank wouldn’t like me to do that.’

I tried to point out to her that it wasn’t much to do with Frank, but that made her laugh. She wasn’t bitter about him. She was very nice.

I was really frightened for her by this time and I remember sitting down at the foot of the couch and trying to get the trouble out of her.

But you’re helpless, you know, you’re so helpless when you’re only fond of people and haven’t any authority.

‘How are things going?’ I asked her.

She shot me a little sidelong frightened glance.

‘All right,’ she said dully.

‘What do you mean—“all right”? How are bookings?’

‘Oh, good. Good. Frank says they’ve never been so good. He’s my manager now, you know.’

‘What! Old Tuppy gone?’ I was shocked. Tuppy had put Louie on the map years before.

Her mouth twisted. ‘Tuppy was killed. He would join up—over age, you know. Killed the first day he landed. He’s gone. Everybody’s gone.’

‘Except Frank,’ I said rather pointedly.

She was up in arms at once.

‘Frank’s over age and his chest’s weak. There isn’t a doctor on earth who’d pass him.’

I tried to be more cheerful.

‘Well, if money’s all right what are you worrying about? You’re not losing your popularity.’

She hesitated. ‘Money isn’t too good. We—we have to live extravagantly, you know.’

I looked down at her hands and she hid them behind her like a child.

‘What do you mean, “have to live extravagantly”?’

‘Oh, publicity,’ she said vaguely. ‘Frank—I—I mean, we’ve had a lot of betting losses too. I’ve never been in debt before, Polly, and now I’m getting tired. I get too tired to rehearse, and I’ve got to go on or I don’t know where we’ll be.’

‘D’you mean to say you haven’t saved anything?’ I said.

She shook her head. ‘Nothing. And now we’re getting old. I can feel it coming on. I’m still successful, but it’s not going to last. I don’t get the big hits I used to. The songs aren’t so good and one can’t go on for ever.’

‘Look here,’ I said, ‘you’ve worked all your life and your husband’s gone through your money and you’re tired, my girl. You want a holiday. Give it up for a couple of months. Go down to the country.’

She closed her eyes. ‘I can’t. I can’t afford it. I haven’t got anything I could sell, even. Besides, Frank wouldn’t let me.’

I told her what I thought of Frank. It took me a long time and when I’d done she smiled at me.

‘You’re wrong,’ she said. ‘You’ve never understood Frank, Polly, and you never will. He just doesn’t realize, that’s all. He so strong, so full of life himself.’

I remember putting my hands on her shoulders and looking down into her face.

‘Louie,’ I said, ‘you’re sacrificing yourself for that man and he’s not worth it. Now I’m going to say something that’s going to hurt you, but I’m an old friend and you’ve got to take it. I’ve heard all sorts of tales about Frank. What about this little “bit” on at the Empire?’

I could see the colour fade out of her face under the make-up.

‘Oh, they’re talking about it, are they?’ she said. ‘Haven’t you heard about the others too? You’re a bit behindhand, you know, Polly.’

‘Gawd!’ I said, and I didn’t get any further because there was an almighty row outside the door and Louie was on her feet immediately.

‘Quick, let him in,’ she said. ‘We’ve had two barnies with the management already.’

He came in and I shall never forget him. You'd think that a mint of money spent on a man would at least make him fatter if it made him nothing else. A wizened little brick-red manikin he looked, not even too clean.

He glanced round the room, ignoring me.

'Where's Eva? I told her not to leave you.'

'I sent her out,' I said. 'I wanted to talk to Louie.'

He swung round and peered at me and she tugged my sleeve warningly.

'Miss Oliver, I did not want my wife disturbed.'

Even his accent was wearing thin and, having decided that he had finished with me, I suppose, he returned to her.

'We're going on to a night-club,' he said, 'and if you're asked to sing, damn well sing, because it'll probably be your last chance with the shows you're putting up here.'

'My God!' I said, and I began to tell him exactly where he got off.

He stopped me.

I've been on the stage all my life and I've never heard language like it. I could hear footsteps in the corridor outside and I can see Louie's face as she turned to him imploringly to this day.

'You're drunk,' I said at last when I could get a word in.

But he wasn't. If he had been I could have forgiven him. He wasn't drunk. He didn't need drink. He was like it naturally.

'Louie, for God's sake leave him,' I said.

That did it. The balloon went up. I've never had a row like it and I've been in a few. I remember turning to Louie in the middle of it.

'He's ruining you, old girl. And you've ruined him. He ought never to have had more than three pounds a week in his life. You've given him so much corn he's blown his head off.'

Of course it didn't do any good. I might have known. She stuck to him and stood by him even then while a crowd of his little girl friends were waiting for him at the stage door in his own car, anxious to get every little bit they could out of him. Even then she stood for him, poor old girl.

He threw me out—physically. Took me out by the shoulders and pitched me into the corridor. I was wild. I was beside myself.

‘I’ll kill you for this,’ I said.

But when it came to it and I did kill him I wasn’t in that mood at all.

They came to live in my house at the end of the ’twenties. We all get old and I admit that the discovery came to me as a bit of a shock, but it didn’t throw me off my balance. It was the same sort of feeling I had when I realized that I couldn’t wear a ballet skirt any longer. Something had to be done about it. It was a pity, but it couldn’t be helped.

I left the stage and bought my house with most of my little bit of money. It’s not a grand house, but it’s just the place for me and a couple of little girls to run when the boarders do most of their own work.

I won’t tell you the exact address, but it’s up Maida Vale way, nearly to Kilburn, and it stands in a row with a lot of other houses which used to be very fashionable and are still respectable, in spite of the efforts of some people whom I have to call neighbours.

There are three floors, a basement and an attic. I live in the basement. There’s a little room for me and a kitchen and a tiny spare room that used to be a pantry where I can put up an old pal who can’t afford to pay me what they’d like to.

Louie and Frank started on the first floor. That was at the beginning of the time. Then they moved upstairs, but at the time I’m talking of they were in the attic. There were two rooms, with a little gas-stove in one of them and a sink out in the passage. The windows of the rooms looked out over the parapet, which is one of the features of all the houses in our street. It’s a big yellow stucco parapet that finishes the roof off and makes the houses look like great slabs of margarine on a Sainsbury counter.

I don’t think I ever really got to know Frank until I had him in the house. Louie I seemed to know less. Every now and again I’d recognize the dear old girl she really was and I’d see a spark of the old spirit, the old friendliness that had made me love her all my life. But for the most part she was on guard against me. She wouldn’t let me get near her. She was always defensive, always frightened.

Frank was mad. I came to that conclusion when he gave the Peeler Ventriloquist Act’s parrot a great lump of bacon and killed it, and Louie and I were at our wits’ end covering the business up.

It’s difficult to explain why I should have found that so enlightening, but it wasn’t done through ignorance and it wasn’t done as a joke, and it wasn’t even done out of maliciousness, because he had nothing against the Peeler

pair except that they were living in the rooms he used to have. But it was done out of a desire to be powerful, if you see what I mean, and after that I knew he was dangerous.

I find myself skipping the story of Louie and Frank in between that time we had a row at the Palladium and the time they finally gravitated to my attic. It's because it's an old story and a tragic story, the same old miserable story that any one-time star who hasn't saved can tell you.

There were more rows, less good performances, changes in the public taste, hard times and, worst of all, a dreadful moment when her old spirit came back and she gave 'em the affection that she used to give 'em, gasping and exhausted and fighting as she was, and they didn't want it any more. And there were empty seats and perhaps even a catcall or so from the 'gods'.

There were other things too: unpleasant interviews with managers who didn't even know the names of predecessors who'd been more than half in love with her.

And all the time there was Frank, making it worse. He'd always done silly things, but being wild with a lot of money is funny and being wild with no money is criminal.

He was never in gaol. She kept him out of that somehow. Now and again she got a little engagement. At those times I had my hands full with him. If he could get down to the theatre he'd make a scene. He couldn't help it; he just wanted to be in the picture, like a silly hysterical woman.

He was never drunk, or at least only very rarely and then only when it suited his purpose and he fancied himself doing the Garrick act. Then he'd knock her about. It looks incredible now I've written it down. You remember Louie Lester: can you see any man knocking her about? But he did. I've had the doctor in to clean up a black eye before now.

As the years went on it got worse—worse for me, I mean. She'd always had hell's delight with him, I imagine. But he became an old man of the sea. They couldn't pay me very much at first and they paid me less and less until they paid me nothing at all. Time and again I'd lose my temper and threaten to throw him out, and then he'd laugh at me.

'If I go Louie goes,' he'd say. 'Can you see her, Polly, sitting under the Adelphi Arches?'

I couldn't, but I could see *him* sitting there and her singing in the street until she could bring him something, like a poor old mother wagtail with an obscene, bald red cuckoo tucked up in her nest.

So they stayed. Times had been difficult in the theatrical profession. They still are. People have still got to live but they don't live so well, and there are too many real business people in the boarding-house line to make it all jam for old women like me, who don't know how to count every halfpenny and haven't learnt how to be mean.

He began to affect my business. I haven't brought myself to tell you his worse fault; I don't know how to describe it without making him sound a lunatic, which he wasn't. If he'd been certifiable I'd have had him done long ago, whatever Louie said.

He used to swank. But it wasn't only that; lots of people swank, especially old pros. But he did it with a sort of frenzy. A man couldn't open his mouth and mention anything clever or remarkable that he or anyone else had done without my lord piping up with a tale of how he'd done the same thing much better.

There wasn't an actress you could mention he hadn't either slept with or taught her her job. There wasn't a manager who hadn't borrowed money from him. All of it lies, silly lies, lies everybody saw through. He used to get on people's nerves and I found I was getting my house full of foreigners who couldn't understand him.

When he couldn't get satisfaction that way he'd do tricks, make out he could walk tight ropes and jump on to the ledges of tables. I used to think he'd kill himself and hoped he would.

Louie never deserted him. She used to get cross and I'd hear her pleading with him and sometimes snapping at him. But she'd never do anything definite. She'd never frighten him. She'd never turn him out of the house, even for half an hour.

He lost her all her old pals, some of them useful. There were folks who'd retired and gone down to live in the country who'd have been glad to put her up for a week or so, but they couldn't stomach Frank and you couldn't blame them.

She kept her health wonderfully. You only get a vital personality like that when there's an iron constitution behind it, and it's a miracle to me what a real constitution will stand. He'd exhaust her, beat her, jag her nerves to ribbons, and she'd come up again, a ghost of herself but still ready for punishment.

I gave up trying to plead with her after the first year. She was never angry, only obstinate. She'd never leave him.

They'd been in the attic over a year and things were terrible. It was two years since Louie had had a shop and then it was in some dirty little unheard-of hall on the south coast. Frank had gone down there and after the management had had a dose of him, if she'd filled every seat in the house it wouldn't have got her a return booking. And she hadn't filled every seat by a long chalk.

Things were bad with me too. I'd mortgaged the place for more than it was worth and got rid of one of my little girls. Money wasn't coming in. I didn't see what I was going to do.

Then one day, just when it looked as though we'd all be in the street, young Harry Ferris came round to see me. Just walked into the kitchen without ringing the bell, and although I hadn't seen him since he was at school I recognized him; he was so like his dad. It was all I could do to prevent myself from crying all over him, and that's not the way to treat any manager even if you're sixteen, much less sixty.

He was a nice boy, much quieter and more the gentleman than his father, and he called me Miss Oliver. But he was none the worse for that and he sat down at the kitchen table and talked to me. I soon saw what he was after.

They were trying to revive the old music-hall at the New Imperial and he wanted Louie.

'There's a chance for her, Miss Oliver,' he said. 'A real chance. She could sing all those old songs of—Lord's, was it?'

'Lorn,' I said, and I thought of him, the first time he'd come into my mind for years. Poor Lorn! He was just one of the good things Louie threw away.

'Lorn, was it?' said my visitor. 'Oh well . . . anyway you know the songs. I'm not promising anything, but if she did go over big—and she might; there's a great revival in this old hearty stuff just now—well, there'd be a good long run. There's only one thing I'm afraid of, though.'

He hesitated and I knew why he'd come to me and not gone straight to Louie, and I saw Frank for what he was for the first time in my life. He wasn't a man at all: he was a vice, a vice of Louie's.

'It's her husband,' the boy said, and if he'd said 'it's her drinking', he couldn't have said it in any other way.

'Now look here,' he hurried on, 'we're going to start in Manchester, and I want her up in Manchester for a trial fortnight, and I want her there *alone*.

Can you manage it?’

‘I’ll try,’ I said.

‘And when she comes to London I want that man kept away,’ he continued. ‘It’s a great chance, Miss Oliver. Do what you can, won’t you?’

‘Of course I will,’ I said, and because I was so happy and because he looked like a rescuing angel I forgot he wasn’t his father and I kissed him.

He looked very uncomfortable and went off upstairs.

Louie came down to me about an hour later. She was bubbling with excitement as she told me the whole story all over again.

‘I can do it, you know, Polly,’ she said. ‘I can do it! I know I can. These new kids today aren’t the war-tired lot who wanted to be sung to sleep. They can stand a bit of noise, a bit of the old stuff. I’m going to do it. Oh, Duck!’ she said, and threw her arms round me. ‘Oh, Duck, it’s going to be all right!’

We both had a bit of a cry, I remember.

We started talking about the arrangements, how to raise her fare and what to do about her clothes and so on, and then I said:

‘I’ll look after Frank.’

She looked at me and I saw her openness disappear. It was as though a shutter had been drawn down inside her eyes. She looked at me wearily.

‘Frank’ll come with me,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t want to be left at home. You can understand it. I shan’t mention it to Mr Ferris—you know how difficult these new managers are—but Frank can come up and stay at different digs. He’ll keep quiet, Polly, he’ll keep quiet.’

‘Now look here, my girl,’ I said. . . .

I talked to her for two hours by the clock and had lunch late for everybody and in the end she agreed with me. She *had* to see it.

‘He’ll be difficult,’ she said. ‘You know what he is, Polly.’

‘Yes, I do,’ I said, ‘and that’s why it’s suicide to take him. If I had my way I’d keep him under lock and key the whole engagement.’

She nodded gravely. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But we couldn’t do that. He’d get out. You don’t understand him.’

‘You put your foot down,’ I said.

There were tears on her cheeks when she gave me her promise.

Half an hour later he'd got round her again.

There were fourteen days before she had to go to Manchester and we had time to get busy. She had to rehearse and we had to get her clothes. I think we both realized how much depended on it. It was the last chance, you see; the last life-line.

I made up my mind I'd see to Frank. I tried arguing with him. I tried pleading. In the end I tried to bribe him. It wasn't until I thought of frightening him that I got him to listen to me at all, and then I saw how it was going to be. He'd agree with me, they'd both agree with me, they'd both promise, and then I'd find him brushing up his best suit and taking some of the money we'd scraped together for her stage clothes to buy himself a couple of fancy shirts, old and horrible though he was.

I saw him beating me and I got the idea of him as a vice more clearly in my head. I had a father once who used to drink, and all that business came back to me as I struggled with him and I struggled with Louie. There was the same cunning, the same promising and going behind your back, and the same utter hopelessness of it all.

Once when she was out he came down and sat on my kitchen table and laughed at me.

'You've tried to separate us all your life, haven't you, Polly? You're not going to do it, d'you hear? I made her. I put her where she was and she'll never do anything without me. We shall be together at the end. She's been a bitch to me, Polly, but I've stuck her . . . and I'm going to stick to her. And if we go down together, well—' he nodded his little round head, '—well, we go down together, see?'

'Yes, you're a millstone all right,' I said.

He looked surprised.

'A millstone? I'm her lifebelt.'

And I could see by the way he said it that he'd deceived himself and he believed it.

It was then, as I lifted the saucepan off the fire and put it on to the draining-board, that I began to make up my mind how I was going to kill him. It was a question of who was going under, you see; him, or all of us together.

It's not easy to kill someone in your own house if you don't want anybody to know. I didn't see how I was going to do it and the need was so

great it became a nightmare to me, growing more and more desperate as the days approached and I saw him and her, too, making little sly preparations to get him to Manchester.

If he'd only let her have her chance without him! Just a start. But he wouldn't, and I had to hurry.

I'd let my second floor, which is very nearly self-contained, as all my places are, to Ma Pollini and her family, who had booked up a seven-week engagement on the Stuart Circuit. She was a monstrous old girl who looked like a bull. She used to be in the act herself and still kept them all together, Pa and the three boys and their wives and the two kids. I never knew a woman who was so clean. I wonder she didn't have the paper off the wall. She spoke English all right but not too well, and you had to explain to her things very carefully, but there wasn't much her little black eyes missed and I knew I'd got to be careful with her.

Young Ferris used to let Louie go and rehearse up at some practice rooms he had over the theatre. There were pianos there and a clever accompanist, so she was out a great deal and it was good to see her coming back bright and hopeful and to feel her pat my shoulder and say: 'It's going to be all right, Duck. Oh, it's going to be all right.'

I thought: 'Yes, by God it is! If I can rid of this horror for you.'

I'd begun to see him like that, like a cancer or a monstrous deformity that was dragging her to death before my eyes and taking me with her—because I knew I'd never let her down, however much I argued with myself.

While she was out I used to go up and clean her rooms in the attic, and although I got used to him talking I did wonder why she hadn't gone out of her mind. Idiomatic lies—dozens of them! Continuous tales of his importance and his cleverness which didn't even sound true. Nothing was too big for him to have done, nothing too small. I happened to mention an act I'd seen that was new to London, a fellow flinging himself down from the flies without a wire or a net or anything, and immediately he caught me up.

'That . . . !' he said. 'God! That was an old trick when I was a boy. I could do it . . . have done it a hundred times. Though I'm an old man I could do it now.'

I didn't say anything at the time, but it gave me the first real helpful idea I'd had.

I went about it very slowly. It began when I started shaking the tablecloth out of the front attic window, that is to say out of their living-

room window. I had to fling it wide because it had to miss the parapet, and the crumbs—I saw there were plenty of them—used to float down on to the little balcony outside Ma Pollini's sitting-room. I knew it would annoy her and it did. We had quite a set-to about it on the stairs and the whole house knew about it. I was apologetic because I didn't want to lose her just then, but the next morning I did it again. There was another row and the third morning I shook the crumbs into a dust-pan as any sensible woman would.

But the fourth morning—however, I'm coming to that.

I am not usually a chatty woman. In my experience the less you say the less people can repeat. And if I'd been the most talkative person in the world I wouldn't have talked to him. But I spent a lot of time with him during those four days and I did my share of talking. I talked about the Pollinis.

'He's a clever man,' I said. 'That act's come on.'

Frank rose to it as I thought he would. I knew he wasn't too fond of Pollini. He'd tried to tap him without much success. No one, not even Frank, could tap a man who looked at you like a surprised bison and shambled off muttering: 'Don' understand. Git th'hell outa here.'

'Pollini?' said Frank. He was sitting in his shirt-sleeves, without a collar, on the back of the dilapidated old chesterfield that Louie slept on when they had a row. 'I taught Pollini all he knows and he's too much of a stiff to say "How d'you do?" to me these days.'

That was the sort of statement he used to make. It had no relation to the truth at all and no purpose as far as I could see, because not even Frank could expect *me* to believe it.

I rambled on. I told him I'd seen young Latte Pollini teaching the kids.

'Hand-springs!' I said. 'You've never seen such neat ones.'

I won't tell you what he called me. There's no point in writing things like that down.

'Look at this,' he said, and he stood there poised at the top of the sofa looking like an organ-grinder's monkey, the white stubble sticking out on his red face.

'You be careful. You'll hurt yourself,' I said over my shoulder.

'Look!' he commanded. 'Look!'

I straightened my back and stood there, the dust-pan in my hand.

‘I’m looking,’ I said.

Well, he didn’t do it. I didn’t think he would. That’s what I was afraid of. He always took wonderful care of himself. But I went on.

Louie came in when he was telling me how he once walked a tight rope and threatening to show me if I’d get him one. I had to leave it for that day.

The next day I started again, still on the Pollinis. At first I thought I’d frightened him. He sat there, morose and angry, while I did the room.

It was then I found out about the shirts. I told him what I thought of him and I realized more and more how necessary it was for me to hurry if she was going to have her chance at all.

He began boasting to me. ‘This time next week we shall be at Manchester. I shall tell them what she used to be like. She’s not much to look at now, but I’ll put her over.’

My heart was in my mouth and I very nearly picked up the poker and did him in there and then, and it might have been just as well in a way.

However, I didn’t. I went on about the Pollinis and I got him interested. He even did a simple somersault for me and when he pretended that he’d hurt himself I got him a drink, and another.

It was an extraordinary thing, but I only discovered then, after all these years, that he couldn’t drink. A couple made him silly. I left him sleeping.

That was the day I had my second row with Ma Pollini about the crumbs.

The next day I only gave him one drink and I brought it up with me. I’d told my little girl that I was doing it for his health and she didn’t think anything of it. People were always having little drops for their health in my house.

Everything played into my hands. He’d had words with Latte on the staircase the evening before and didn’t want to hear about the Pollinis’ prowess. But I kept on. I let him have it.

‘Do a hand-spring if you’re so clever,’ I said. ‘A simple hand-spring.’

He saw I was laughing at him and came and thrust his face into mine.

‘I can’t do it here,’ he said. ‘There’s not room.’

‘There’s no room big enough for you in the whole world, you old liar,’ I said.

That rattled him. He opened the door so that he could get on to the passage and took a run, stumbled, actually succeeded in turning some sort of cartwheel, and pitched downstairs, finishing up on the half-landing between me and Ma Pollini.

She came out and I explained to her what had happened. And she laughed. You should have seen her laugh! She'd have made a fortune on the halls just doing it. Tears poured out of her eyes and ran down the sides of her great coarse nose and she shook all over. What with the noise she made and the sound of him swearing the whole house was roused and everybody knew that old Springer had been swanking again and had nearly broken his neck doing it.

Louie heard about it when she came in, and it made her cry.

The fourth morning I watched Louie out of the house. I've never felt like it before or since. Everything seemed to be in bright colours and Louie's old black satin coat shone like a black-beetle as she went out under the porch and down the little stone yard that we call a garden and out into the road.

I was trembling and I don't know if I looked funny, but anyway there was no one to see me except my little girl, and she's so busy, poor kid, she doesn't have time to keep her mind on two things together, even if it were capable of it.

I went slowly up the stairs and started making the bed. There was Louie's suitcase half packed, and in a cupboard, where they thought I wouldn't see it, there was his. It's still there, for all I know. All packed up neatly, labelled and ready.

He came out when I was in the bathroom and I knew by the way he fidgeted and talked about his health that he was wondering if I'd brought him up his drink. I sent him down for it.

I'd forgotten it; that's what frightened me. I had meant to bring it and it had gone clean out of my mind. I wondered what else I'd forgotten.

He went off, padding down the stairs in his stockinged feet, and came back very pleased with himself. I wondered if he hadn't taken an extra dram. He said something uncomplimentary about my little girl and I guessed she'd given him something to go on with.

I started talking about the Pollinis and, as I hoped, the memory of old Ma Pollini laughing at him made him furious. He told me the Pollinis were a lot of stiffs. Wops and stiffs, he called them. He said they hadn't got a trick

between them that any man couldn't do if he had his wits about him, and told me what he could do as a child.

I was getting him where I wanted him. I went into the other room where the gas stove was and opened the window, when I'd taken the cloth off the table. Then I went back to the bedroom and shook it out of there, so that the crumbs would miss Ma Pollini's balcony.

My heart was beating noisily and I was so long about it that I thought he'd notice something. Finally I did what I meant to do and the cloth slipped out of my hand and landed on the edge of the parapet.

It was very neatly thought out, because, as I forgot to tell you, the window in the bedroom was stuck. It wouldn't open more than six inches at the top. I had to stand up on the sill, push the cloth through and shake it with one hand.

I went back to the other room, where he was sitting up on the end of the sofa again.

'What are you looking at me like that for, Polly?' he said.

I pulled myself together. I couldn't tell him that I saw him in bright colours, just like I'd seen Louie go out of the gate. I saw him in crude colours, like the printing in a twopenny comic. His shirt was bright blue and his head was smudged red.

'I want a broom,' I said. 'I've dropped the tablecloth out of the window and it's stuck on the parapet. Now if you were a Pollini. . . .'

He didn't hear me, or didn't seem to, and I was afraid I'd been too quick. But he was interested, as he always was in silly little incidental things that happened. He went to the other window and looked out. He could see the cloth about fifteen feet along.

'How are you going to get it?' he said.

'I'm going to get a broom and fish it up through the window in the other room,' I said. 'Or get a Pollini kid to come and walk along the parapet and bring it in for me.'

'Let me try with a broom,' he said.

I looked about for a broom, though it was the last thing I wanted.

'You'll break my window,' I said.

He grinned at me. 'I'll buy you fifty windows when I come back from Manchester.'

I leant out of the window. The parapet sticks up about a foot over the glass and the windows are built out of the roof, dormer fashion.

'I'll get a broom,' I said. My courage was going. I thought I'd have to try some other way. It wasn't working out as I thought it was going to.

I suppose I must have been silent for nearly three minutes, for then he said quite suddenly:

'I suppose one of your Pollini pals would just trot along there and pick it up?'

'I believe even old Ma Pollini could,' I said.

That did it. He swept me out of the way.

'I'll do it,' he said. 'I'll get your damned tablecloth. I can do anything a Pollini can.'

He scrambled up on the sill and I saw that he was waiting for me to pull him back. I did. That was the extraordinary thing: I did.

'Don't you dare,' I said. 'You'll break your neck. You haven't got the courage.'

He thrust his little red face into mine. 'I'll show you,' he said.

I watched him out upon the sill and saw him climb shakily on to the parapet, which was nearly a foot wide, holding his arms out like a tight-rope walker.

'Don't you dare,' I said. 'Don't you dare.'

Now I'd got him there I panicked. I lost my head. I screamed. I ran to the top of the stairs.

'Bring a broom!' I shouted to nobody in particular and rushed back again.

There was no sign of him, only the big bare room with the stove and the window open at the bottom, and far away the tops of the trees.

I ran over to the window and looked out. He was coming towards me, holding the cloth in his arms. I screamed. I screamed and screamed.

'Be careful!' I said. 'Be careful!'

He came to the window and stood there swaying, holding the cloth, his little bulk blotting out most of the light. I saw his short trousers and his shoeless feet in their grey army socks standing on the slippery stucco. He put down his hand to catch the top of the window and at that moment I leant out and caught him round the ankles.

I can hear my own voice now shouting hoarsely:

‘Be careful! Be careful!’

I heard him shout and I realized that I could make up my mind there and then.

I pushed.

He threw his weight against the top of the window and a shower of glass fell in over me. I was still pushing, pushing with my head, my arms round his ankles.

I felt him go. I heard his scream. Just for a moment I saw his body swing past me and then there was silence until far below in the little stone yard that we call a garden there was another sound, a sound I can’t get out of my mind.

I stepped back from the window and from that moment my mind was clear. There was a noise on the stairs and I ran towards it, screaming, but intentionally this time, knowing what I was doing.

It was Ma Pollini. I tried to tell her, but she’d only talk in Italian and finally I pushed her out of the way and hurried on down the stairs.

Everybody in the house was running out into the street and I remember coming out under the porch and standing there in the bright sunlight.

I didn’t see him. There was a crowd round him and one of the Denver boys, who had the ground-floor rooms, came and put his arms round me.

‘Don’t look, Ma,’ he said, ‘don’t look.’

I told the young policeman exactly what happened right up to the moment when I caught Frank by the feet. Then I said I was so frightened that I just hung there until he overbalanced and went out, jerking his ankles out of my arms.

He was very kind to me, I remember.

Then the other men came and I told them the same thing and they said there’d have to be an inquest. And all the time he was lying out there in the

yard, with a sheet off the Denver boys' bed over him.

They'd just finished with me when Louie came back. The other Denver boy had told her over the 'phone what had happened.

I shall never forget her as she sat in my kitchen with the police there and listened while I told my story yet another time. She didn't break down and when I saw the calm in her face, the extraordinary repose and dignity, I felt it was worth it.

She never reproached me. Instead she came over and kissed me and said: 'Don't worry, Polly. I know you did what you could.'

Then the first-floor people took her in and wouldn't let her go upstairs.

The police were very careful, but they were never unkind, they never bullied. I thought how young they were, even the oldest of them. I remember the Inspector particularly. Such a boy he looked when he took his cap off.

They couldn't understand how he got out on the parapet, but when I told my story there were lots of people to back me up: Ma Pollini and the Denver boys who had been in bed when he fell downstairs the day before. They all knew him for what he was, and told stories about how he'd show off and how he'd lie and the idiotic things he'd do, and gradually the police got him straight in their minds.

They chose two or three of the boarders for witnesses at the inquest and I had to go too. There was only one awkward moment and that came from the Inspector.

'You know, you killed him, Ma,' he said just as he was going.

I suppose I gaped at him, because he dropped a hand on my shoulder.

'Let that be a warning to you not to try to drag a man in through a top-floor window by his feet,' he said.

I expect you read a report of the inquest. It took up quite a bit in the paper. The Coroner put me through it, but I stuck to my story: I was frightened and I held him round the feet. It was a silly thing to do, but they were all I could get hold of.

Finally they were satisfied. The jury brought in Death by Misadventure and I went home.

A lot of my boarders had come to the inquest with me. Louie was there too, of course, and she gave her evidence very quietly and calmly and I

thought she looked years younger, poor girl.

She went to bed early that night. She didn't want to talk to me and I didn't want to talk to her. I knew it had been a shock and I wanted her to get over it and wake up and find out what it was like to be cured, what it was like to have her chance all over again without the dead weight that had been dragging her down half her life.

I got so used to telling my story that I believed it. It was such a simple story, so easy to remember, so like what really happened.

It became so real to me in the next two or three days that now I have to strain my memory, as it were, to get at the truth.

People were very kind. We had to borrow for the funeral, but it was worth it and as I stood beside his grave I hoped he'd lie quiet and have more rest himself than ever he gave Louie or me.

That would have been the end of the story. I should never have tried to remember the truth and I should never have set it down if it had not been for the one thing that beat me, the one thing that had always beaten me, the one vital fact that I never recognized until now.

This is the day that Louie ought to have gone to Manchester. There are a lot of bills up there now advertising her triumphant return. But she'll never come through the silver curtains and blow a kiss to the orchestra and sing 'Jonah Likes a Little Bit of Pink' in Manchester or anywhere else.

This morning my little girl tapped on my door when she came at six o'clock to tell me there was a smell of gas in the house. I didn't go up. Somehow I knew what had happened.

Latte Pollini found Louie lying with her head in the gas oven, for all the world as if she'd gone to sleep.

She loved him, you see. I never knew that, or perhaps I never knew what it meant. Poor, dear, loving old girl.

THEY NEVER GET CAUGHT

‘Millie dear, this does explain itself, doesn’t it, Henry?’ Mr Henry Brownrigg signed his name on the back of the little blue bill with a flourish. Then he set the scrap of paper carefully in the exact centre of the imperfectly scoured developing bath, and, leaving the offending utensil on the kitchen table for his wife to find when she came in, he stalked back to the shop, feeling that he had administered the rebuke surely and at the same time gracefully.

In fifteen years Mr Brownrigg felt that he had mastered the art of teaching his wife her job. Not that he had taught her. That, Mr Brownrigg felt, with a woman of Millie’s staggering obtuseness was past praying for. But now, after long practice, he could deliver the snub or administer the punishing word in a way which would penetrate her placid dullness.

Within half an hour after she had returned from shopping and before lunch was set upon the table, he knew the bath would be back in the dark-room, bright and pristine as when it was new, and nothing more would be said about it. Millie would be a little more ineffectually anxious to please at lunch, perhaps, but that was all.

Mr Brownrigg passed behind the counter and flicked a speck of dust off the dummy cartons of face-cream. It was twelve twenty-five and a half. In four and a half minutes Phyllis Bell would leave her office further down the High Street, and in seven and a half minutes she would come in through that narrow, sunlit doorway to the cool, drug-scented shop.

On that patch of floor where the sunlight lay blue and yellow, since it had found its way in through the enormous glass vases in the window which were the emblem of his trade, she would stand and look at him, her blue eyes limpid and her small mouth pursed and adorable.

The chemist took up one of the ebony-backed hand mirrors exposed on the counter for sale and glanced at himself in it. He was not altogether a prepossessing person. Never a tall man, at forty-two his wide, stocky figure showed a definite tendency to become fleshy, but there was strength and virility in his thick shoulders, while his clean-shaven face and broad neck were short and bull-like and his lips were full.

Phyllis liked his eyes. They held her, she said, and most of the other young women who bought their cosmetics at the corner shop and chatted with Mr Brownrigg across the counter might have been inclined to agree with her.

Over-dark, round, hot eyes had Mr Brownrigg; not at all the sort of eyes for a little, plump, middle-aged chemist with a placid wife like Millie.

But Mr Brownrigg did not contemplate his own eyes. He smothered his hair, wiped his lips, and then, realizing that Phyllis was almost due, he disappeared behind the dispensing desk. It was as well, he always thought, not to appear too eager.

He was watching the door, though, when she came in. He saw the flicker of her green skirt as she hesitated on the step and saw her half-eager, half-apprehensive expression as she glanced towards the counter.

He was glad she had not come in when a customer was there. Phyllis was different from any of the others whose little histories stretched back through the past fourteen years. When Phyllis was in the shop Mr Brownrigg found he was liable to make mistakes, liable to drop things and fluff the change.

He came out from his obscurity eager in spite of himself, and drew the little golden-haired girl sharply towards him over that part of the counter which was lowest and which he purposely kept uncluttered.

He kissed her and the sudden hungry force of the movement betrayed him utterly. He heard her quick intake of breath before she released herself and stepped back.

‘You—you shouldn’t,’ she said, nervously tugging her hat back into position.

She was barely twenty, small and young-looking for her years, with yellow hair and a pleasant, quiet style. Her blue eyes were frightened and a little disgusted now, as though she found herself caught up in an emotion which her instincts considered not quite nice.

Henry Brownrigg recognized the expression. He had seen it before in other eyes, but whereas on past occasions he had been able to be tolerantly amused and therefore comforting and glibly reassuring, in Phyllis it irritated and almost frightened him.

‘Why not?’ he demanded sharply, too sharply he knew immediately, and the blood rushed into his face.

Phyllis took a deep breath.

‘I came to tell you,’ she said jerkily, like a child saying its piece, ‘I’ve been thinking things over. I can’t go on with all this. You’re married. I want to be married some day. I—I shan’t come in again.’

‘You haven’t been talking to someone?’ he demanded, suddenly cold.

‘About you? Good heavens, no!’

Her vehemence was convincing, and because of that he shut his mind to its uncomplimentary inference and experienced only relief.

‘You love me,’ said Henry Brownrigg. ‘I love you and you love me. You know that.’

He spoke without intentional histrionics, but adopted a curious monotone which, some actors have discovered, is one of the most convincing methods of conveying deep sincerity.

Phyllis nodded miserably and then seemed oddly embarrassed. Wistfully her eyes wandered to the sunlit street and back again.

‘Good-bye,’ she said huskily and fled.

He saw her speeding past the window, almost running.

For some time Henry Brownrigg remained looking down at the patch of blue sunlight where she had stood. Finally he raised his eyes and smiled with conscious wryness. She would come back. Tomorrow, or in a week, or in ten days perhaps, she would come back. But the obstacle, the insurmountable obstacle would arise again, in time it would defeat him and he would lose her.

Phyllis was different from the others. He would lose her. Unless that obstacle were removed.

Henry Brownrigg frowned.

There were other considerations too. The old, mottled ledger told those only too clearly.

If the obstacle were removed it would automatically wipe away those difficulties also, for was there not the insurance and that small income Millie’s father had left so securely tied, as though the old man had divined his daughter would grow up a fool?

Mr Brownrigg’s eyes rested upon the little drawer under the counter marked: ‘Prescriptions: private.’ It was locked and not even young Perry, his

errand boy and general assistant, who poked his nose into most things, guessed that under the pile of slips within was a packet of letters scrawled in Phyllis's childish hand.

He turned away abruptly. His breath was hard to draw and he was trembling. The time had come.

Some months previously Henry Brownrigg had decided that he must become a widower before the end of the year, but the interview of the morning had convinced him that he must hurry.

At this moment Millie, her face still pink with shame at the recollection of the affair of the ill-washed bath, put her head round the inner door.

'Lunch is on the table, Henry,' she said, and added with that stupidity which had annoyed him ever since it had ceased to please him by making him feel superior: 'Well, you do look serious. Oh, Henry, you haven't made a mistake and given somebody a wrong bottle?'

'No, my dear Millie,' said her husband, surveying her coldly and speaking with heavy sarcasm. 'That is the peculiar sort of idiot mistake I have yet to make. I haven't reached my wife's level yet.'

And as he followed her uncomplaining figure to the little room behind the shop a word echoed rhythmically in the back of his mind and kept time with the beating of his heart. 'Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!'

'Henry dear,' said Millie Brownrigg, turning a troubled face towards her husband, 'why Doctor Crupiner? He's so expensive and so old.'

She was standing in front of the dressing-table in the big front bedroom above the shop, brushing her brown, grey-streaked hair before she plaited it and coiled it round her head.

Henry Brownrigg, lying awake in his bed on the far side of the room, did not answer her.

Millie went on talking. She was used to Henry's silence. Henry was so clever. Most of his time was spent in thought.

'I've heard all sorts of odd things about Doctor Crupiner,' she remarked. 'They say he's so old he forgets. Why shouldn't we go to Mother's man? She swears by him.'

'Unfortunately for your mother she has your intelligence, without a man to look after her, poor woman,' said Henry Brownrigg.

Millie made no comment.

‘Crupiner,’ continued Henry Brownrigg, ‘may not be much good as a general practitioner, but there is one subject on which he is a master. I want him to see you. I want to get you well, old dear.’

Millie’s gentle, expressionless face flushed and her blue eyes looked moist and foolish in the mirror. Henry could see her reflection in the glass and he turned away. There were moments when, by her obvious gratitude for a kind word from him, Millie made him feel a certain distaste for his project. He wished to God she would go away and leave him his last few moments in bed to think of Phyllis in peace.

‘You know, Henry,’ said Mrs Brownrigg suddenly, ‘I don’t feel ill. Those things you’re giving me are doing me good, I’m sure. I don’t feel nearly so tired at the end of the day now. Can’t you treat me yourself?’

The man in the bed stiffened. Any compunction he may have felt vanished and he became wary.

‘Of course they’re doing you good,’ he said with the satisfaction of knowing that he was telling the truth up to a point, or at least of knowing that he was doing nothing reprehensible—yet.

‘I don’t believe in patent medicines as a rule, but Fender’s pills are good. They’re a well-known formula, and they certainly do pick one up. But I just want to make sure that you’re organically sound. I don’t like you getting breathless when you hurry, and the colour of your lips isn’t good, you know.’

Plump, foolish Millie looked in the mirror and nervously ran her forefinger over her mouth.

Like many women of her age she had lost much of her colour, and there certainly was a faint, very faint, blue streak round the edge of her lips.

The chemist was heavily reassuring.

‘Nothing to worry about, I’m sure, but I think we’ll go down and see Crupiner this evening,’ he said, and added adroitly: ‘We want to be on the safe side, don’t we?’

Millie nodded, her mouth trembling.

‘Yes, dear,’ she said, and paused, adding afterwards in that insufferable way of hers: ‘I suppose so.’

When she had gone downstairs to attend to breakfast Henry Brownrigg rose with his own last phrase still on his lips. He repeated it thoughtfully.

‘The safe side.’ That was right. The safe side. No ghastly hash of it for Henry Brownrigg.

Only fools made a hash of things. Only fools got caught. This was almost too easy. Millie was so simple-minded, so utterly unsuspecting.

By the end of the day Mr Brownrigg was nervy. The boy Perry had reported, innocently enough, that he had seen young Hill in his new car going down Acacia Road at something over sixty, and had added casually that he had had the Bell girl with him. The youngest one. Phyllis. Did Mr Brownrigg remember her? She was rather pretty.

For a moment Henry Brownrigg was in terror lest the boy had discovered his secret and was wounding him maliciously. But having convinced himself that this was not so, the fact and the sting remained.

Young Hill was handsome and a bachelor. Phyllis was young and impressionable. The chemist imagined them pulling up in some shady copse outside the town, holding hands, perhaps even kissing, and the heart which could remain steady while Millie’s stupid eyes met his anxiously as she spoke of her illness turned over painfully in Henry Brownrigg’s side at the thought of that embrace.

‘Hurry.’ The word formed itself again in the back of his mind. Hurry . . . hurry.

Millie was breathless when they arrived at Doctor Crupiner’s old-fashioned house. Henry had been self-absorbed and had walked very fast.

Doctor Crupiner saw them immediately. He was a vast, dusty old man. Privately Millie thought she would like to take a good stiff broom to him, and the picture the idea conjured in her mind was so ridiculous that she giggled nervously and Henry had to shake his head at her warningly.

She flushed painfully, and the old, stupid expression settled down over her face again.

Henry explained her symptoms to the doctor and Millie looked surprised and gratified at the anxiety he betrayed. Henry had evidently noticed her little wearinesses much more often than she had supposed.

When he had finished his recital of her small ills, none of them alarming in themselves but piling up in total to a rather terrifying sum of evidence, Doctor Crupiner turned his eyes, which were small and greasy, with red

veins in their whites, on to Millie, and his old lips, which were mottled like Henry's ledger, moved for a fraction of a second before his voice came, wheezy and sepulchral.

'Well, madam,' he said, 'your husband here seems worried about you. Let's have a look at you.'

Millie trembled. She was getting breathless again from sheer apprehension. Once or twice lately it had occurred to her that the Fender's pills made her feel breathless, even while they bucked her up in other ways, but she had not liked to mention this to Henry.

Doctor Crupiner came close to her, breathing heavily through his nose in an effort of concentration. He thrust a stubby, unsteady finger into her eye-socket, dragging down the skin so that he could peer short-sightedly at her eyeball. He thumped her half-heartedly on the back and felt the palms of her hands.

Mr Brownrigg, who watched all this somewhat meaningless ritual, his round eyes thoughtful and uneasy, suddenly took the doctor on one side, and the two men had a muttered conversation at the far end of the long room.

Millie could not help overhearing some of it, because Doctor Crupiner was deaf these days and Henry was anxious to make himself understood.

'Twenty years ago,' she heard. 'Very sudden.' And then, after a pause, the awful word 'hereditary'.

Millie's trembling fit increased in intensity and her broad, stupid face looked frightened. They were talking about her poor papa. He had died very suddenly of heart disease.

Her own heart jumped painfully. So that was why Henry seemed so anxious.

Doctor Crupiner came back to her. She had to undo her dress and Doctor Crupiner listened to her heart with an ancient stethoscope. Millie, already trembling, began to breathe with difficulty as her alarm became unbearable.

At last the old man finished with her. He stared at her unwinkingly for some seconds and finally turned to Henry, and together they went back to the far end of the room.

Millie strained her ears and heard the old man's rumbling voice.

'A certain irregularity. Nothing very alarming. Bring her to see me again.'

Then there was a question from Henry which she could not catch, but afterwards, as the doctor seemed to be fumbling in his mind for a reply, the chemist remarked in an ordinary tone: 'I've been giving her Fender's pills.'

'Fender's pills?' Doctor Crupiner echoed the words with relief. 'Excellent. Excellent. You chemists like patent medicines, I know, and I don't want to encourage you, but that's a well-known formula and will save you mixing up my prescription. Carry on with those for a while. Very good things; I often recommend them. Take them in moderation, of course.'

'Oh, of course,' said Henry. 'But do you think I'm doing right, Doctor?'

Millie looked pleased and startled at the earnestness of Henry's tone.

'Oh, without doubt, Mr Brownrigg, without doubt.' Doctor Crupiner repeated the words again as he came back to Millie. 'There, Mrs Brownrigg,' he said with spurious jollity, 'you take care of yourself and do what your husband says. Come to see me again in a week or so and you'll be as right as ninepence. Off you go. Oh, but Mrs Brownrigg, no shocks, mind. No excitements. No little upsets. And don't over-tire yourself.'

He shook hands perfunctorily, and while Henry was helping Millie to collect her things with a solicitude quite unusual in him, the old man took down a large, dusty book from the shelves.

Just before they left he peered at Henry over his spectacles.

'Those Fender's pills are quite a good idea,' he remarked in a tone quite different from his professional rumble. 'Just the things. They contain a small percentage of digitalin.'

One of Mr Brownrigg's least attractive habits was his method of spending Saturday nights.

At half-past seven the patient but silently disapproving Millie would clear away the remains of the final meal of the day and place one glass and an unopened bottle of whisky and a siphon of soda on the green serge tablecloth.

This done, she would retire to the kitchen, wash up, and complete the week's ironing. She usually left this job until then, because it was a longish business, with frequent pauses for minor repairs to Henry's shirts and her own underclothing, and she knew she had plenty of undisturbed time on her hands.

She had, in fact, until midnight. When the kitchen clock wheezed twelve Millie folded her ironing board and turned up the irons on the stove to cool.

Then she went into the living-room and took away the glass and the empty bottle, so that the daily help should not see them in the morning. She also picked up the papers and straightened the room.

Finally, when the gas fire had been extinguished, she attended to Henry.

A fortnight and three days after her first visit to Doctor Crupiner—the doctor, at Henry's suggestion, had increased her dose of Fender's pills from three to five a day—she went through her Saturday ritual as usual.

For a man engaged in Mr Brownrigg's particular programme to get hopelessly and incapably drunk once, much less once a week, might well have been suicidal lunacy.

One small glass of whisky reduced him to taciturnity. Twelve large glasses of whisky, or one bottle, made of him a limp, silent sack of humanity, incapable of movement or speech, but, quite remarkably, not a senseless creature.

It might well have occurred to Millie to wonder why her husband should choose to transform himself into a Thérèse Raquin paralytic once every week in his life, but in spite of her awful stupidity she was a tolerant woman and honestly believed that men were odd, privileged creatures who took delight in strange perversions. So she humoured him and kept his weakness secret even from her mother.

Oddly enough, Henry Brownrigg enjoyed his periodical orgy. He did not drink during the week, and his Saturday experience was at once an adventure and a habit. At the outset of his present project he had thought of forgoing it until his plan was completed, but he realized the absolute necessity of adhering rigidly to his normal course of life, so that there could be no hook, however small, on which the garment of suspicion could catch and take hold.

On this particular evening Millie quite exhausted herself getting him upstairs and into bed. She was so tired when it was all over that she sat on the edge of her couch and breathed hard, quite unable to pull herself together sufficiently to undress.

So exhausted was she that she forgot to take the two Fender's pills that Henry had left on the dressing-table for her, and once in bed she could not persuade herself to get out again for them.

In the morning Henry found them still in the little box. He listened to her startled explanations in silence and then, as she added apology to apology, suddenly became himself again.

‘Dear Millie,’ he said in the old exasperated tone she knew so well, ‘isn’t it enough for me to do all I can to get you well without you hampering me at every turn?’

Millie bent low over the stove and, as if he felt she might be hiding sudden tears, his manner became more conciliatory.

‘Don’t you like them?’ he inquired softly. ‘Don’t you like the taste of them? Perhaps they’re too big? Look here, old dear, I’ll put them up in an easier form. You shall have them in jelly cases. Leave it to me. There, there, don’t worry. But you must take your medicine, you know.’

He patted her plump shoulder awkwardly and hurried upstairs to dress.

Millie became thoughtful. Henry was clearly very worried about her indeed, or he would never be so nice about her silly mistake.

Young Bill Perry, Brownrigg’s errand-boy assistant, was at the awkward stage, if indeed he would ever grow out of it.

He was scrawny, red-headed, with a tendency to acne, and great raw, scarlet wrists. Mr Brownrigg he loathed as only the young can loathe the possessor of a sarcastic tongue, but Millie he liked, and his pale, sandy-fringed eyes twinkled kindly when she spoke to him.

Young Perry did not think Millie was half so daft as the Old Man made out.

If only because she was kind to him, young Perry was interested in the state of Millie’s health.

On the Monday night young Perry saw Mr Brownrigg putting up the contents of the Fender’s pills in jelly cases and he inquired about them.

Mr Brownrigg was unusually communicative. He told young Perry in strict confidence that Mrs Brownrigg was far from well and that Doctor Crupiner was worried about her.

Mr Brownrigg also intimated that he and Doctor Crupiner were, as professional men, agreed that if complete freedom from care and Fender’s pills could not save Mrs Brownrigg, nothing could.

‘Do you mean she might die?’ said young Perry, aghast. ‘Suddenly, I mean, sir?’

He was sorry as soon as he had spoken, because Mr Brownrigg’s hand trembled so much that he dropped one of the jelly cases and young Perry realized that the Old Man was really wild about the Old Girl after all, and that his bullyragging her was all a sham to hide his feelings.

At that moment young Perry’s sentimental, impressionable heart went out to Mr Brownrigg, and he generously forgave him for his observation that young Perry was patently cut out for the diplomatic service, since his tact and delicacy were so great.

The stores arrived. Bill Perry unpacked the two big cases; the smaller case he opened, but left the unpacking to his employer.

Mr Brownrigg finished his pill-making, although he was keeping the boy waiting, rinsed his hands and got down to work with his usual deliberation.

There were not a great many packages in the case and young Perry, who had taken a peep at the mottled ledger some time before, thought he knew why. The Old Man was riding close to the edge. Bills and receipts had to be juggled very carefully these days.

The boy read the invoice from the wholesalers’, and Mr Brownrigg put the drugs away.

‘Sodii Bicarbonas, Magnesia Levis,’ he read, stumbling over the difficult words. ‘Iodine, Quininae Hydrochloridum, Tincture Digitalin . . . that must be it, Mr Brownrigg. There, in the biggish packet.’

Bill Perry knew he read badly and was only trying to be helpful when he indicated the parcel, but Mr Brownrigg shot a truly terrifying glance in his direction as he literally snatched up the package and carried it off to the drug cabinet.

Young Perry was dismayed. He was late and he wanted to go. In his panic he floundered on, making matters worse.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ he said. ‘I was only trying to help. I thought you might be—er—thinking of something else and got a bit muddled.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Brownrigg slowly, fixing him with those hot, round eyes in a way which was oddly disturbing. ‘And of what should I be thinking when I am doing my work, boy?’

‘Of—of Mrs Brownrigg, sir,’ stammered the wretched Perry helplessly.

Henry Brownrigg froze. The blood congealed in his face and his eyes seemed to sink into his head.

Young Perry, who realized he had said the wrong thing, and who had a natural delicacy which revolted at prying into another's sorrow, mistook his employer's symptoms for acute embarrassment.

'I'm sorry,' he said again. 'I was really trying to help. I'm a bit—er—windy myself, sir. Mrs Brownrigg's been very kind to me. I'm sorry she's so ill.'

A great sigh escaped Henry Brownrigg.

'That's all right, my boy,' he said, with a gentleness his assistant had never before heard in his tone. 'I'm a bit rattled myself, too. You can go now. I'll see to these few things.'

Young Perry sped off, happy to be free on such a sunny evening, but also a little awe-stricken by the revelation of this tragedy of married love.

Phyllis hurried down Coe's Lane, which was a short cut between her own road and Priory Avenue. It was a narrow, paper-baggy little thoroughfare, with a dusty hedge on one side and high tarred fence on the other.

On this occasion Coe's Lane appeared to be deserted, but when Phyllis reached the stunted may-tree half-way down the hedge a figure stepped out and came to meet her.

The girl stopped abruptly in the middle of the path. Her cheeks were patched with pink and white and she caught her breath sharply as though afraid of herself.

Henry Brownrigg himself was unprepared for the savagery of the sudden pain in his breast when he saw her, and the writhing, vicious, mindless passion which checked his breathing and made his eyelids feel sticky and his mouth dry, frightened him a little also.

They were alone in the lane and he kissed her, putting into his hunched shoulders and greedy lips all the insufferable, senseless longing of the past eighteen days.

When he released her she was crying. The big, bright tears which filled her eyes brimmed over on to her cheeks and made her mouth look hot and wet and feverish.

‘Go away,’ she said and her tone was husky and imploring. ‘Oh, go away—please, please!’

After the kiss Henry Brownrigg was human again and no longer the fiend-possessed soul in torment he had been while waiting in the lane. Now he could behave normally, for a time at least.

‘All right,’ he said, and added so lightly that she was deceived, ‘Going out with Peter Hill again this afternoon?’

The girl’s lips trembled and her eyes were pleading.

‘I’m trying to get free,’ she said. ‘Don’t you see I’m trying to get free from you? It’s not easy.’

Henry Brownrigg stared at her inquisitively for a full minute. Then he laughed shortly and explosively and strode away back down the lane at a great pace.

Henry Brownrigg went home. He walked very fast, his round eyes introspective but his step light and purposeful. His thoughts were pleasant. So Phyllis was there when he wanted her, there for the taking when the obstacle was once removed. That had been his only doubt. Now he was certain of it. The practical part of his project alone remained.

Small, relatively unimportant things like the new story the mottled ledger would have to tell when the insurance money was in the bank and Millie’s small income was realized and reinvested crowded into his mind, but he brushed them aside impatiently. This afternoon he must be grimly practical. There was delicate work to do.

When he reached home Millie had gone over to her mother’s.

It was also early-closing day and young Perry was far away, bowling wides for the St Anne’s parish cricket club.

Mr Brownrigg went round the house carefully and made sure that all the doors were locked. The shop shutters were up too, and he knew from careful observation that they permitted no light from within to escape.

He removed his jacket and donned his working overall, switched on the lights, locked the door between the shop and the living-room, and set to work.

He knew exactly what he had to do. Millie had been taking five Fender’s pills regularly now for eight days. Each pill contained 1/16 gr. Nativelle’s

Digitalin, and the stuff was cumulative. No wonder she had been complaining of biliousness and headaches lately! Millie was a hopeless fool.

He took out the bottle of Tincturae Digitalin, which had come when young Perry had given him such a scare, and looked at it. He wished he had risked it and bought the Quevenne's, or the freshly powdered leaves. He wouldn't have had all this trouble now.

Still, he hadn't taken the chance, and on second thoughts he was glad. As it was, the wholesalers couldn't possibly notice anything unusual in his order. There could be no inquiry: it meant he need never worry—afterwards.

He worked feverishly as his thoughts raced on. He knew the dose. All that had been worked out months before when the idea had first occurred to him, and he had gone over this part of the proceedings again and again in his mind so that there could be no mistake, no slip.

Nine drachms of the tincture had killed a patient with no digitalin already in the system. But then the tincture was notoriously liable to deteriorate. Still, this stuff was fresh; barely six days old, if the wholesalers could be trusted. He had thought of that.

He prepared his burner and the evaporator. It took a long time. Although he was so practised, his hands were unsteady and clumsy, and the irritant fumes got into his eyes.

Suddenly he discovered that it was nearly four o'clock. He was panic-stricken. Only two hours and Millie would come back, and there was a lot to be done.

As the burner did its work his mind moved rapidly. Digitalin was so difficult to trace afterwards; that was the beauty of it. Even the great Tardieu had been unable to state positively if it was digitalin that had been used in the Pommeraise case, and that after the most exhaustive P.M. and tests on frogs and all that sort of thing.

Henry Brownrigg's face split into the semblance of a smile. Old Crupiner was no Tardieu. Crupiner would not advise a P.M. if he could possibly avoid it. He'd give the certificate all right; his mind was prepared for it. Probably he wouldn't even come and look at the body.

Millie's stupid, placid body. Henry Brownrigg put the thought from him. No use getting nervy now.

A shattering peal on the back door startled him so much that he nearly upset his paraphernalia. For a moment he stood breathing wildly, like a

trapped animal, but he pulled himself together in the end, and, changing into his coat, went down to answer the summons.

He locked the shop door behind him, smoothed his hair, and opened the back door, confident that he looked normal, even ordinary.

But the small boy with the evening paper did not wait for his Saturday's sixpence but rushed away after a single glance at Mr Brownrigg's face. He was a timid twelve-year-old, however, who often imagined things, and his employer, an older boy, cuffed him for the story and made a mental note to call for the money himself on the Monday night.

The effect of the incident on Henry Brownrigg was considerable. He went back to his work like a man in a nightmare, and for the rest of the proceedings he kept his mind resolutely on the physical task.

At last it was done.

He turned out the burner, scoured the evaporator, measured the toxic dose carefully, adding to it considerably to be on the safe side. After all, one could hardly overdo it; that was the charm of this stuff.

Then he effectively disposed of the residue and felt much better.

He had locked the door and changed his coat again before he noticed the awful thing. A layer of fine dust on the top of one of the bottles first attracted his attention. He removed it with fastidious care. He hated a frowzy shop.

He had replaced his handkerchief before he saw the show-case ledge and the first glimmering of the dreadful truth percolated his startled mind.

From the ledge his eyes travelled to the counter-top, to the dummy cartons, to the bottles and jars, to the window shutters, to the very floor.

Great drops appeared on Henry Brownrigg's forehead. There was not an inch of surface in the whole shop that was innocent of the thinnest, faintest coat of yellowish dust.

Digitalin! Digitalin over the whole shop. Digitalin over the whole world! The evidence of his guilt everywhere, damning, inescapable, clear to the first intelligent observer.

Henry Brownrigg stood very still.

Gradually his brain, cool at the bidding of the instinct of self-preservation, began to work again. Delay. That was the all-important note. Millie must not take the capsule tonight as he had planned. Not tonight, nor

tomorrow. Millie must not die until every trace of that yellow dust had been driven from the shop.

Swiftly he rearranged his plan. Tonight he must behave as usual and tomorrow, when Millie went to church, he must clear off the worst of the stuff before young Perry noticed anything.

Then on Monday he would make an excuse and have the vacuum-cleaning people in. They came with a great machine and put pipes in through the window. He had often said he would have it done.

They worked quickly; so on Tuesday. . . .

Meanwhile, normality. That was the main thing. He must do nothing to alarm Millie or excite her curiosity.

It did not occur to him that there would be a grim irony in getting Millie to help him dust the shop that evening. But he dismissed the idea. They'd never do it thoroughly in the time.

He washed in the kitchen and went back into the hall. A step on the stairs above him brought a scream to his throat which he only just succeeded in stifling.

It was Millie. She had come in the back way without him hearing her, heaven knew how long before.

'I've borrowed a portière curtain from Mother for your bedroom door, Henry,' she said mildly. 'You won't be troubled by the draught up there any more. It's such a good thick one. I've just been fixing it up. It looks very nice.'

Henry Brownrigg made a noise which might have meant anything. His nerves had gone to pieces.

Her next remark was reassuring, however; so reassuring that he almost laughed aloud.

'Oh, Henry,' she said, 'you only gave me four of those pills today, dear. You won't forget the other one, will you?'

'Cold ham from the cooked meat shop, cold tinned peas, potato salad and Worcester sauce. What a cook! What a cook I've married, my dear Millie.'

Henry Brownrigg derived a vicious pleasure from the clumsy sarcasm, and when Millie's pale face became wooden he was gratified.

As he sat at the small table and looked at her he was aware of a curious phenomenon. The woman stood out from the rest of the room's contents as though she alone was in relief. He saw every line of her features, every fold of her dark cotton foulard dress, as though they were drawn with a thick black pencil.

Millie was silent. Even her usual flow of banality had dried up, and he was glad of it.

He found himself regarding her dispassionately, as though she had been a stranger. He did not hate her, he decided. On the contrary, he was prepared to believe that she was quite an estimable, practicable person in her own limited fashion. But she was in the way.

This plump, fatuous creature, not even different in her very obtuseness from many of the other matrons in the town, had committed the crowning impudence of getting in the way of Henry Brownrigg. She, this ridiculous, lowly woman, actually stood between Henry Brownrigg and the inmost desires of his heart.

It was an insight into the state of the chemist's mind that at that moment nothing impressed him so forcibly as her remarkable audacity.

Monday, he thought. Monday, and possibly Tuesday, and then. . . .

Millie cleared away.

Mr Brownrigg drank his first glass of whisky and soda with a relish he did not often experience. For him the pleasure of his Saturday night libations lay in the odd sensation he experienced when really drunk.

When Henry Brownrigg was a sack of limp, uninviting humanity to his wife and the rest of the world, to himself he was a quiet, all-powerful ghost, seated, comfortable and protected, in the shell of his body, able to see and comprehend everything, but too mighty and too important to direct any of the drivelling little matters which made up his immediate world.

On these occasions Henry Brownrigg tasted godhead.

The evening began like all the others, and by the time there was but an inch of amber elixir in the square bottle, Millie and the dust in the shop and Doctor Crupiner had become in his mind as ants and ant burdens, while he towered above them, a colossus in mind and power.

When the final inch had dwindled to a yellow stain in the bottom of the white glass bottle Mr Brownrigg sat very still. In a few minutes now he would attain the peak of that ascendancy over his fellow-mortals when the body, so important to them, was for him literally nothing; not even a dull encumbrance, not even a nerveless covering but a nothingless, an unimportant, unnoticed element.

When Millie came in at last a pin could have been thrust deep into Mr Brownrigg's flesh and he would not have noticed it.

It was when he was in bed, his useless body clad in clean pyjamas, that he noticed that Millie was not behaving quite as usual. She had folded his clothes neatly on the chair at the end of the bed when he saw her peering at something intently.

He followed her eyes and saw for the first time the new portière curtain. It certainly was a fine affair, a great, thick, heavy plush thing that looked as though it would stop any draught there ever had been.

He remembered clearly losing his temper with Millie in front of young Perry one day, and, searching in his mind for a suitable excuse, had invented this draught beneath his bedroom door. And there wasn't one, his ghost remembered; that was the beauty of it. The door fitted tightly in the jamb. But it gave Millie something to worry about.

Millie went out of the room without extinguishing the lights. He tried to call out to her and only then realized the disadvantages of being a disembodied spirit. He could not speak, of course.

He was lying puzzled at this obvious flaw in his omnipotence when he heard her go downstairs instead of crossing into her room. He was suddenly furious and would have risen, had it been possible. But in the midst of his anger he remembered something amusing and lay still, inwardly convulsed with secret laughter.

Soon Millie would be dead. Dead—dead—dead!

Millie would be stupid no longer. Millie would appal him by her awful mindlessness no more. Millie would be dead.

She came up again and stepped softly into the room.

The alcohol was beginning to take its full effect now and he could not move his head. Soon oblivion would come and he would leave his body and rush off into the exciting darkness, not to return until the dawn.

He saw only Millie's head and shoulders when she came into his line of vision. He was annoyed. She still had those thick black lines round her, and there was an absorbed expression upon her face which he remembered seeing before when she was engrossed in some particularly difficult household task.

She switched out the light and then went over to the far window. He was interested now, and saw her pull up the blinds.

Then to his astonishment he heard the crackle of paper; not an ordinary crackle, but something familiar, something he had heard hundreds of times before.

He placed it suddenly. Sticky paper. His own reel of sticky paper from the shop.

He was so cross with her for touching it that for some moments he did not wonder what she was doing with it, and it was not until he saw her silhouetted against the second row of panes that he guessed. She was sticking up the window cracks.

His ghost laughed again. The draught! Silly, stupid Millie trying to stop the draught.

She pulled down the blinds and turned on the light again. Her face was mild and expressionless as ever, her blue eyes vacant and foolish.

He saw her go to the dressing-table, still moving briskly, as she always did when working about the house.

Once again the phenomenon he had noticed at the evening meal became startlingly apparent. He saw her hand and its contents, positively glowing because of its black outline, thrown up in high relief against the white table-cover.

Millie was putting two pieces of paper there: one white with a deckle edge, one blue and familiar.

Henry Brownrigg's ghost yammered in its prison. His body ceased to be negligible: it became a coffin, a sealed, leaden coffin suffocating him in its senseless shell. He fought to free himself, to stir that mighty weight, to move.

Millie knew.

The white paper with the deckle edge was a letter from Phyllis out of the drawer in the shop, and the blue paper—he remembered it now—the blue

paper he had left in the dirty developing bath.

He re-read his own pencilled words as clearly as if his eye had become possessed of telescopic sight:

'Millie dear, this does explain itself, doesn't it?'

And then his name, signed with a flourish. He had been so pleased with himself when he had written it.

He fought wildly. The coffin was made of glass now, thick, heavy glass which would not respond to his greatest effort.

Millie was hesitating. She had picked up Phyllis's letter. Now she was reading it again.

He saw her frown and tear the paper into shreds, thrusting the pieces into the pocket of her cardigan.

Henry Brownrigg, understood. Millie was sorry for Phyllis. For all her obtuseness she had guessed at some of the girl's piteous infatuation and had decided to keep her out of it.

What then? Henry Brownrigg writhed inside his inanimate body.

Millie was back at the table now. She was putting something else there. What was it? Oh, what was it?

The ledger! He saw it plainly, the old mottled ledger, whose story was plain for any fool coroner to read and misunderstand.

Millie had turned away now. He hardly noticed her pause before the fireplace. She did not stoop. Her felt-shod slipper flipped the gas-tap over.

Then she passed out of the door, extinguishing the light as she went. He heard the rustle of the thick curtain as she drew the wood close. There was an infinitesimal pause and then the key turned in the lock.

She had behaved throughout the whole proceeding as though she had been getting dinner or tidying the spare room.

In his prison Henry Brownrigg's impotent ghost listened. There was a hissing from the far end of the room.

In the attic, although he could not possibly hear it, he knew the meter ticked every two or three seconds.

Henry Brownrigg saw in a vision the scene in the morning. Every room in the house had the same key, so Millie would have no difficulty in

explaining that on awakening she had noticed the smell of gas and, on finding her husband's door locked, had opened it with her own key.

The ghost stirred in its shell. Once again the earth and earthly incidents looked small and negligible. The oblivion was coming, the darkness was waiting; only now it was no longer exciting darkness.

The shell moved. He felt it writhe and choke. It was fighting—fighting—fighting.

The darkness drew him. He was no longer conscious of the shell now. It had been beaten. It had given up the fight.

The streak of light beneath the blind where the street lamp shone was fading. Fading. Now it was gone.

As Henry Brownrigg's ghost crept out into the cold a whisper came to it, ghastly in its conviction:

‘They never get caught, that kind. They're too dull, too practical, too unimaginative. They never get caught.’

PUBLICITY

‘Benedick,’ murmured Tadema, just loudly enough for the cadence of his fine voice to be audible all round the dressing-room.

The intonation did not quite satisfy his fastidious ear.

‘Benedick,’ he repeated, giving the word this time a sadness and a certain pride.

Then, with an assumption of carelessness which could have been only for his personal benefit, since he was entirely without other audience, he took up the copy of the illustrated weekly once more and studied afresh the full-page snapshots of himself and Chloe standing on the steps of her mother’s house in Brook Street.

Her new oiled make-up looked very well, he thought. She was youthful, yet sophisticated and arresting without being actually vulgar. A dear girl.

Of himself he was not so sure. Snapshots were notoriously unkind. Yet the photograph was certainly like him, and he peered affectionately at the gallant and romantic figure which the London public knew so well. He re-read the caption slowly.

BENEDICK AND THE DEB

‘The surprise of the little season has been the engagement of Lady Chloe Staratt, beautiful daughter of the Earl of Scaresfield, to Sir Geoffrey Tadema, the bachelor actor knight. Lady Chloe, besides being the acknowledged leader of the younger set, is thought by many people to be the smartest woman in London. Sir Geoffrey is the great lover of the stage, but until now has proved himself impervious to Cupid’s darts. Their many friends have been surprised and delighted by this romantic love match.’

Tadema threw down the paper and smiled. The Press had been magnificent. The dailies had been generous with space and there had been several long interviews in the cheaper Sundays. But the old *Tell-Tale* had come up to scratch. They had done the thing with the right delicacy. Some of the dailies had mentioned the discrepancy in age, he had been sorry to see.

At fifty-one, Tadema looked, on the stage at least, sixteen or seventeen years younger. His figure was as good, or nearly as good, as ever it had been, and he had changed hardly at all in the past ten years.

His astonishing success was all the more extraordinary in view of his limitations, histrionically speaking. In addition to his face, which had a propensity for expressing passionate emotion decently repressed, he had a natural charm of manner, a little more theatrical off the stage than it was on, and two endearing mannerisms: his nervous shake of the head when addressing the beloved kept his feminine gallery in ecstasy, and his sudden smile, so disarming in its warmth, moved the same body to audible quivers of delight.

Obviously it was not these alone which had kept the name of Tadema in foot-high letters on the board outside the Gresham for nearly fourteen years. He had other assets.

An excellent business man, he had a gift for finding the right sort of play, and, of course, he had his instinct.

In what circumstances an instinct becomes genius, and when genius is transmuted into Art it is difficult to say, but with Tadema publicity was all these three, with the result that the public, who very properly believes what it has inferred, read, or seen with its own eyes, knew that Sir Geoffrey Tadema was romance made carnate. It also knew that his conquests were myriad and that his life was the constant pursuit of the One Woman of the Perfect Heart, a vaguely defined lady but easily identifiable by every woman in his audience.

Since in private life Sir Geoffrey was a normal bachelor of somewhat fixed habits, this public façade of his was no mean achievement. Publicity was his hobby, and he worked at it with diligence and delicacy.

Jealous colleagues spoke bitterly of vast sums spent in bribes, betraying that they knew nothing of the Art and of newspapers less.

Sir Geoffrey himself honestly believed that he represented the secret soul-mate of all unloved women in London, but he over-estimated himself, as he began to find out about two years after the talkies first became a real substitute for the theatre.

It was this discovery which was ultimately responsible for Chloe. On the screen Tadema's years were irritatingly apparent, and his famous personality curiously artificial. He had made one movie at his own expense and had regretted it ever since. He accepted two secondary parts in other films, but in

the studio he was clumsy and a nobody, and neither he nor his admirers liked to see him playing second fiddle.

On the stage he was still a force, but his last play had run only nine months instead of the customary twelve, and he felt himself slipping.

He had been considering a happy and romantic marriage for some time as a new medium for the Personality when he first met Chloe, then on the crest of her first wave of public interest. She was the most photographed, most paragraphed deb of the season, and he admired the way she worked at it.

The thought of marrying her did not then occur to him, but now, in her second season, when he realized that she was not out for money and titled obscurity but was preparing for a career as a public person, the beautiful idea had come to him.

The hour was propitious. The recent royal engagement had put marriage at a premium, and Chloe's adventure with the masked motor bandits, who had chivalrously restored her possessions because of her sweet face and endearing manner alone, had just come out.

Chloe had been 'too much of a sport' to prefer a charge against the criminals, and had only 'confessed' the story to a newspaper-man after pressure. This risky business had come off very well, considering, although Tadema had felt it dangerously crude at the time. He felt instinctly that an engagement would be a sound move for both of them.

Chloe saw it, of course. Tadema warmed to her with real affection when he saw her grave eyes when he proposed. He was a little in love, even. It was typical of him that he should have done the thing so thoroughly, once the ulterior motive had been faced and shelved in the back of his mind.

He was hurt when she used the twenty-four hours which she demanded before giving him an answer to allow a pet paragraphist to get into print with the 'rumour', but he was mollified by the Press reception.

'Our great lover.' 'The man who understands women.' 'Real romance at last.'

At the moment Tadema was very pleased.

He was so happy, even, that when a total stranger walked in upon him—an unheard-of thing at any time and almost sacrilegious before a matinée—his smile did not fade.

The newcomer paused in the doorway and stared at him disconcertingly.

After a moment or two of this stern scrutiny Tadema's good humour wavered. He rose to his feet and was about to make the obvious inquiry when he suddenly recollected where he had seen this tall, thick-featured boy before. The newsreels of the week had been largely concerned with the latest air hero, and although Mr Gyp Rains, the twenty-year-old boy flier, looked even younger and more raw when in colour and the usual three dimensions than he had appeared on the screen, he was nevertheless perfectly recognizable.

Quite apart from any little professional feeling which an old public favourite may experience when faced with a new, Tadema conceived an instant dislike for this solemn youngster with the cold blue eyes who stood in his dressing-room doorway and regarded him so uncompromisingly.

The aviator's first remark did not help to dispel his animosity.

'I've come to see you, sir, because I felt it was my duty and the only decent thing to do,' he said.

Tadema fell back upon the particular brand of sarcasm of which he was a master. 'How very nice of you,' he said. 'Perhaps you would sit down and be as decent and as dutiful as you can in the few moments which I have at my disposal.'

Had he said nothing at all he could hardly have made less impression upon Mr Rains' stolid and bony countenance. The boy advanced into the room, placed himself within a foot of its owner, and recited, still in the same monotone:

'Chloe did not want me to tell you, sir, but I realized that even a man of your age has his feelings and I thought it was the only right thing to do, and so I've come to warn you. I always do what I think is right,' he added with unexpected *naïveté*, and Tadema, who had the uncomfortable impression that he was back on the stage with the stock company of his early youth, caught a glimpse of something glazed and terrified in the intense blue eyes and realized that he was dealing with a young man labouring under intense excitement.

But he had no time for any feelings Mr Gyp Rains might have been imperfectly concealing. He had heard the name 'Chloe', and a great fear had descended upon him.

'Perhaps you'd better explain a little more fully,' he said. 'What's all this about?'

Beads of sweat appeared upon the younger man's forehead and his naturally vivid colour had heightened.

'It's a secret,' he said. 'Chloe and I are to be married. We've fallen in love and we're going to elope. I start on my big flight tomorrow night and she's coming with me. They'll find her at the first stop in Athens, of course, and I don't suppose they'll let her go, but we're getting married late tomorrow; so you see it'll be all above-board.'

Had his revelations been less sensational Tadema might have been alarmed for his visitor's immediate health. The youngster was breathing stertorously, and this, combined with his sweating forehead, unwavering blue eyes, and complete lack of expression, made a somewhat alarming spectacle.

But the actor had other more personal matters to consider. He sank into his chair, ignoring this time the subconscious warning.

'Are you talking about Chloe Staratt?'

'Of course.' Mr Gyp Rains seemed to regard the question as surprisingly unnecessary.

'I see,' said Tadema with awful solemnity. 'I see. And what do you intend me to do about it?'

For the first time during the interview Gyp Rains' face changed. His eyebrows rose. His eyes became round and foolish.

'What *can* you do?' he said. 'I only came to tell you.'

Tadema's mouth opened but no sound came.

Mr Rains continued. 'I've only told you,' he said gently, 'because I did not think it was the decent thing not to. You can't do anything because we're in love. You see that, don't you?'

The final question was put gently. There was no threat in it, and as such it was completely unanswerable.

'Look here, my boy—' Tadema was clutching wildly at straws, 'I don't want to appear offensive, but you don't think that something Lady Chloe may have said may have given you a wrong impression? I mean—'

'Oh no.' The shining countenance was blank as ever. 'I brought this along. She couldn't keep it very well, could she? She saw that as soon as I

put it to her.’

And, advancing towards the dressing-table, he set down amongst the grease-paint the very large and expensive diamond-and-platinum ring which Sir Geoffrey had chosen only a few weeks before and had paid for but a few days previously.

There was a long and difficult pause. Mr Gyp Rains braced himself for the final efforts. ‘Both Chloe and I rely upon your decency, sir. We know you won’t give us away. Chloe’s afraid of trouble with her father, you see, and so far, you are the only person in the know. You won’t let us down, will you? I know that.’

And, having dropped his bombshell, Mr Gyp Rains, lone boy flier and latest darling of the air-minded British public, smiled kindly at Sir Geoffrey Tadema and walked stolidly out of the dressing-room, a ridiculous, humourless, and unconquerable figure.

Tadema acted the big scene silently by himself for perhaps two minutes. He paced the floor, he looked at the ring, he peered at himself in the mirror, he threw the ring away, picked it up again, put it in his pocket, shrugged his shoulders, wiped his eyes, and went through every pantomime which the most exacting producer could have desired.

And then, having reacted in this perfectly normal way, he pulled himself up abruptly and began to think. There were many words which fitly describe Chloe, but he was not the man to fall to cursing. Behind his fury there was a quiet part of his mind which could almost admire her. As a piece of publicity it was superb—the discovery in Athens, the secret marriage, and that stolid, love-besotted boy to back her up. There was a story to delight the most blasé of journalists.

It was while he was visualizing this flux of newsprint that he suddenly saw his own name. A wave of hot blood rose up in his throat and passed over his head, so that his hairs tingled. He saw himself deflated, saw his carefully built-up personality blown away in idle sheets down a dusty road. This would be the end of him. This would be disaster—the beautiful, romantic figure drowned in tears of pity if not derision.

He bounded to his feet again. Something had got to be done. Yes, by God! something had got to be done, and how much time had he?

The call-boy knocked timidly at his door.

‘Five minutes, Sir Geoffrey. Curtain’s up.’

There are times when the mind panics, moments when the imagination takes the bit between its teeth and carries a man headlong through vasty avenues of nightmare much more vivid than actual experience, hampered by time and the hour, can ever hope to be.

In the intervals of the worst performance of his life Tadema lived through the whole gamut of human humiliation. He heard himself pitied and derided, heard his age discussed and fixed at an erroneous sixty-five, saw his perennial youth withered and his beautiful façade torn down to reveal a travesty of himself, ten times more false than any illusion of the past.

Even in his saner moments, when he regarded the situation coldly, the prospect of being publicly jilted by Chloe for a younger, wider-known man was not inviting, to say the least of it.

To do him justice, he had very little thought of retaliation as such. His mind was completely taken up with self-protective projects.

Even so, his immediate plan of campaign was most difficult to decide, and there was the vital question of time. When had the insufferable young lout said they intended to elope? Tomorrow night? Tadema paused in the middle of the repudiation scene in the second act and stared glassily at Miss Miller, who played the girl.

She gave him his cue and an apprehensive glance under her lashes. It was not like the old man to lurch unwisely. She hoped devoutly that he was not going to have a stroke.

By the middle of the third act Tadema had it all worked out. If Chloe was going to elope the following day she would be discovered in Athens the next morning and would make the evening papers of the same day. That gave him only until tomorrow to set up a counterblast, only until tomorrow to get into print himself with a sensation which would make her effort an anti-climax.

His mind revolved feverishly. Today was Tuesday. Therefore Chloe would strike the headlines on Thursday evening. That gave him Wednesday night’s press and the Thursday’s morning papers to get his blow in first. It could be done. It was just possible if one acted promptly.

There was only one vital question to be settled. What on earth could he do? Tadema was desperate.

He dismissed his dresser and stood staring through the minute window of his dressing-room at the roofs and spires of London, deep blue in the evening light.

At length he turned slowly away and switched on the lights. He had decided on the first step. Where it was going to lead him he had no idea, but like all true artists he trusted to his instinct and prepared for action.

The inspiration for the second move would come, he did not doubt. Necessity, the proverbial mother, should provide.

Having committed himself to the undertaking, he went about his preparations with artistry and dispatch. The nondescript grey suit taken down from the peg in the big store where no one recognized him, since no one expected him, fitted well enough to look comfortable. The soft shirt with two collars was equally unarresting, as were the brown shoes, socks, tie, and even underwear—Tadema was justly famous in theatrical circles for his passion for detail—which he collected on his journey throughout the shop.

At a minute before six o'clock he walked out of the store, a half-dozen or so blue packages stowed away in a neat brown suitcase.

Fifteen minutes later the cloakroom of Tottenham Court Road Tube Station received the case and Tadema taxied home to his Mayfair flat to bathe and dine before returning to the theatre for the evening performance. He was not exactly happy, but he experienced that curious sense of elation which comes to those about to take a desperate plunge.

The discovery that Sharper, his old-maidish and inappropriately-named man, had let Lessington into the study to wait for him was an unexpected blow. Lessington was a plump, bald, fortyish person whose early effeminacy had grown into effeteness. If his plays had not been so competent Tadema could not have tolerated him. As it was he fraternized with him but grudgingly.

Lessington was in form. Apéritif in hand, he posed before the fire and just had to tell old Taddy the perfectly marvellous notion he had just had for the new show.

‘Of course I shall put it over,’ said Lessington. He spoke with assurance, and Tadema reflected bitterly that he would.

‘Splendid, my dear fellow, splendid!’ said Tadema with great heartiness, since a warning voice in the back of his mind bade him behave normally. If anyone should guess there was anything unusual afoot the whole strength of his project would be ruined.

He got rid of Lessington only when dinner was over and he was departing for the theatre. Conversation had been a great strain, but he had weathered it. Lessington, he knew, would now be prepared to swear that dear old Taddy had been completely himself and to report that they had spent a very happy hour discussing a new play.

Back at the theatre Tadema put on a very careful performance. The relieved Miss Miller found the Old Man in the best of humours. He accepted a supper invitation for midnight and agreed to give a magazine correspondent an interview after the show.

As the time wore on he was conscious of a growing nervousness, but he had made up his mind and in the interval before the third act he wandered into De Lara’s room and stood chatting with the ‘heavy’ for a minute or so.

Paul Ritchie, his own understudy, who shared the dressing-room, was lounging disconsolately in his corner, he saw, but the young actor said afterward that the Old Man never once looked in his direction after the first affable nod.

After leaving De Lara, Tadema, who was wearing the striking pin-stripe suit in which he appeared in the third act, was seen by Lottie Queen, the ‘heavy’ woman, on the staircase leading up to the roof. He smiled at her, graciously congratulating her on her performance, and passed on. It went through the old lady’s mind that it was odd that he should be wandering about the theatre when time was getting on, but it was a habit of the company to wander up to the flat roof when the weather was close and she thought no more of the incident just then.

An electrician observed him higher up on the staircase immediately below the roof, but the man said no word passed, and that was all the evidence the united company could supply when the inquiry was instituted.

At the moment when Tadema stepped out upon the dark roof, the dizzy lights of the City below him, he was trembling with excitement, but he realized that he had very little time and moved swiftly, stepping daintily across the leads to the desolate collection of builders’ débris which he had observed there earlier in the week and the recollection of which had given him his idea.

The Gresham Theatre was an old-fashioned building whose rococo parapet was barely four feet away from its nearest neighbour, the Ever-Safe Insurance Company's premises. At one particular point a younger man might have sprung from one roof to the other, but Tadema preferred the plank. Pulling it out from beneath the laths and folded sacks he pushed it into position and prepared to climb across.

It was a risky proceeding for a man of his years and unathletic habits, and it is possible that had he seriously considered the physical side of the venture his nerve might have failed him.

As it was, however, his thoughts were occupied only by the other aspect of the plan, the enormity of it, the courage, the complete ruthlessness. It took his breath away. To walk out of the theatre in costume in the midst of the play! To go on to the roof and thence to—disappear! Told of any man it would be a piquant story, like the beginning of a mystery yarn, but when the man was Tadema—oh, the headlines would be large and the wind would seep out of Chloe's sails! Would she start, even? Sir Geoffrey doubted it.

He stepped on to the insurance company's leads and thrust the plank back sharply. It clattered on to the theatre roof so noisily that for a moment he was afraid. Discovery at this juncture would be disastrous. But there was no untoward sound from below, and he went on.

The fire escape descended into a narrow alley behind the building. As Tadema went down the spidery stair a new cause for alarm confronted him. London is a crowded city, and the ever-watchful police are suspicious of shadowy figures on the fire escapes of dark buildings. An arrest, or even an inquiry, would be too embarrassing even to contemplate.

Sir Geoffrey reached the pavement white with apprehension. He went unchallenged, however, and sped through the darker streets towards Tottenham Court Road.

For the next half-hour his mind was taken up completely with technical details. It is a simple thing to plan to change one's clothes, and with them one's personality, in the toilet room of a large and crowded station, but it is a surprisingly complicated project to carry through. Sir Geoffrey had completely overlooked the hampering qualities of a sense of guilt.

In spite of these unexpected difficulties, however, his metamorphosis was remarkably successful. One does not dress up and pretend to be somebody else practically every night of one's professional life without

becoming an adept at the art, and at twenty minutes to eleven, when Paul Ritchie was ploughing through the last act at the Gresham, a mild-looking provincial gentleman walked on to Liverpool Street Station, a newish portmanteau in his hand.

This stranger bore a superficial resemblance to the debonair Sir Geoffrey, it is true, but none of the weary passengers on the great dirty station glanced at the neat grey-suited figure with any sort of recognition.

Tadema himself was gradually getting the feel of his part. As he became increasingly aware of his safety he experienced a new sensation. He felt free. He had fifty pounds in cash on him in an envelope—all he had dared to collect without leaving traces of flight. His watch, studs, wallet, and a letter or two were still in the clothes he had worn on leaving the theatre which were now stowed away in the case in hand. He felt light and irresponsible, almost as though he had really walked out of life as cleanly and as mysteriously as the world must soon believe.

He glanced at the station clock. His train, the Yarmouth Mail, left in thirty-five minutes. Why he had chosen Yarmouth he did not know, save that it was at a fair distance from London and was on the coast. He had no definite plan in his head as yet, but he relied upon the long slow journey to bring counsel. The first and most important step had been taken and Chloe had been passed at the post. That was the main thing, and the rest, he thought superbly, would come.

The suitcase, and its contents, must be disposed of to the best possible advantage. Obviousness dictated the coast. Hence Yarmouth, since Brighton would have been ridiculous. But all that was yet to be arranged. Inspiration would arrive.

Tadema smiled, and the man who had been watching him so intently for the past ten minutes from the other side of the platform moved a little nearer.

Duds Wallace walked round Tadema, eyeing him covertly. The height was okay, he decided. So were the shoulders. And there was about the same room round the waist. But above all the style was right, and, in Duds' opinion, style was the ticket.

With a certain department in Scotland Yard where minor criminals are regarded with complete understanding, Duds Wallace was something of a pet and a curiosity. He was unique. His long criminal record, which comprised some sixteen convictions, related an odd history of

misdeemeanour and proved conclusively that whatever other qualities Mr Wallace might have possessed the gods had not made him versatile. His programme was always the same. Whenever his somewhat finicky taste dictated that he required a new outfit, he stole a suitcase.

This in itself was sufficiently unenterprising, but he carried his orthodoxy a step further. Invariably he stole a suitcase from a railway station, and—invariably this was the hallmark of a Wallace activity—his victim was a man who closely resembled himself in build, colouring, and a quiet, inexpensive taste.

At the moment, Mr Wallace, whose sartorial ambitions alone seemed to lead him into wrongdoing, was downright ashamed of his appearance. His sharp brown eyes rested wistfully on Tadema's substantial portmanteau. There was a suit in that: he would bet on it; a suit, shirts, pyjamas, and, with luck, a pair of shoes.

He glanced at the actor-manager's feet and those decent brown shoes with the round toes swept away his last remnants of doubt.

Having made up his mind, Duds followed his routine closely. When the train came into the main platform Tadema selected an empty third-class compartment, placed his bag on the corner seat to reserve it, and, as his watcher confidently expected, stepped out on to the platform again and wandered off to look for a paper.

As soon as he was lost to sight, Duds entered a second empty third, a little lower down the train. Instead of sitting down he passed on into the corridor and wandered up to Tadema's compartment. His casual manner was excellent. He gripped the suitcase with just the right familiarity and carried it out into the corridor.

As he passed on down the train he glanced into each carriage inquiringly as he went by. Tadema was nowhere to be seen. It was really very simple.

When Mr Wallace reached the end of the train, which had pulled into the shadow of the passenger bridge, he walked out of the last compartment, passed through the main booking hall and, turning up the dark hill, melted quietly into the street.

Tadema discovered his loss when it was too late to do anything about it. Irritated and disconsolate, he threw himself down in a corner seat and glowered. Apart from the normal sense of insult which invariably comes to one on discovering that the misfortunes which seem so natural in others

should have at last overtaken oneself, Tadema felt he had a special grievance. Without his clothes there was really no point in his going to the coast at all, yet here he was entrained for Yarmouth, of all places. The very foundation of the plan he had intended to evolve upon this journey was removed. Moreover, he could have no redress for the loss of his property. In the circumstances he could hardly go to the police. It was all very exasperating, and augured, he could not help feeling, bad luck to the venture.

He reviewed his position gloomily. If things were not going to go right they were going to go very badly indeed. However, he comforted himself with the thought of the sensation in the morrow's papers and, after some moments of happy contemplation, some of his old confidence returned and he leant back, content to wait for inspiration to arrive. Something, no doubt, would turn up. He slept.

He awoke with a start at one minute to four in the morning to find himself bundled out on to a dark and clammy cold railway station, without overcoat or luggage. He looked about him. No provincial town is at its best at four o'clock on an autumn morning. Tadema did not know the place and did not particularly want to. His best plan, he decided, was to leave Yarmouth. He consulted a weary porter.

'First train, sir? Where for, sir?'

'Anywhere,' said Tadema recklessly. 'The first train to leave this station.'

The man looked at him curiously and replied that there was a slow branch-line train leaving in an hour.

'Take you to Esbury, Lessing, and Saffronden,' he concluded.

Saffronden. The name struck a familiar note in Tadema's memory. There was a theatre in Saffronden, or rather, there had been once a theatre there: the Theatre Royal, a little dark house with a smell. The old 'Hearts Afire' company under Benny Fancy had played there for a week way back in 190—. Tadema forgot the year.

Another memory returned to him. It was very vague, but it conjured up a sensation of warmth and stuffiness and amusement. It was a joke, he fancied, and something to do with cocoa, of all things; something excruciatingly funny to do with cocoa. He brightened up.

‘I’ll go to Saffronden,’ he said, adding abruptly as he returned to the temporarily forgotten porter: ‘There’s a bookstall there, isn’t there? What time do the morning papers arrive?’

Both bewildered replies having proved satisfactory, Tadema the fugitive entered the Saffronden train.

He was waiting on Saffronden station when the papers arrived, and he pounced upon a copy of the *Sun* and turned the pages over feverishly.

At first he thought he was not mentioned at all and a feeling of bewilderment passed over him. It was not until the third time that he searched the paper that he found the small paragraph tucked away at the bottom of the page.

‘Famous Actor’s Indisposition. Sir Geoffrey Tadema, the well-known actor-manager, was forced by indisposition to retire from the cast of *Lovers’ Meeting*, now enjoying a successful run at the Gresham. Sir Geoffrey’s part in the third act was played by his understudy, Paul Ritchie. Sir Geoffrey is confidently expected to return to his role at this evening’s performance.’

Tadema swore softly under his breath. What an idiot Wentworth was! As a business manager he was intelligent and economical, but in an emergency he always did the wrong thing. If only the fool knew it, he was wasting precious time. He’d have to rely on the evening papers. The lunatic would be sure to do something by that time.

Tadema could not repress a schoolboyish chuckle at the spectacle. ‘Dashing about like a demented hen,’ he said to himself as he walked down the winding hill from the station into the main road of the town, which had miraculously become much smaller and sleepier than he remembered it.

But by the time he was breakfasting in the seedy commercial room of the ‘Red Lion’ his trepidation had returned. Time was so very short. By this time tomorrow Chloe would be well on her way to Athens and a few hours later the wires would be buzzing.

He was beside himself with impatience and a growing sense of impotence in the matter. There was nothing he could possibly do to speed things up. He had relied upon the morning newspapers to give him a lead. Whatever he did, it had to be good.

By the end of breakfast he had decided to wait. Nothing could be done at the moment; so much was painfully obvious.

By paying in advance and sending out for a suit of pyjamas, Tadema dispelled any doubts which the clerk at the 'Red Lion' might have entertained concerning him, and, having bathed and shaved, he retired to bed, leaving instructions that he was to be called with tea and an evening paper so soon as that sheet should have arrived.

He lay awake for some time, fuming at Wentworth and worrying over his predicament, but his night's journey had been long and uncomfortable in spite of his doze in the train, and he dropped off into a fitful sleep.

However, he was awake and pacing up and down the room in pyjamas and a bed quilt when the chambermaid arrived. The girl set down the tray and would have spoken, but Tadema had pounced upon the folded paper and she went out again huffily.

Right across the front page and surmounting a large photograph of himself were the words:

TRAGIC DEATH OF FAMOUS ACTOR

The double-column headlines told more.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE FROM ROOF IN MIDST OF PLAY

DEATH THIS MORNING IN TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES

DIES IN STAGE CLOTHES

'Early this morning a man was knocked down and terribly mutilated by an L.C.C. tram in the Gray's Inn Road. From papers in his pocket the police discovered him to be the famous stage actor, Sir Geoffrey Tadema. Subsequent inquiries at Sir Geoffrey's flat proved that the actor-manager had not been seen by any of his associates since the interval after the second act of *Lovers' Meeting* at the Gresham Theatre last night, when he was seen by Miss Lottie Queen going up on the roof of the theatre.

'When Sir Geoffrey's body was found it was clad in the clothes which he wore in the third act of the piece. His friends can give no explanation for the

tragedy. "He was in the best of humours when I saw him last night," said Mr Lessington, the playwright, on the 'phone this morning. "I cannot understand it."

'Mr Henry Sharper, Sir Geoffrey's valet, broke down at the mortuary where he was taken to identify the body. He fainted when he saw his master's corpse, and has been taken home to relatives suffering from shock.

'A summary of Sir Geoffrey's career is given on page 5.'

Tadema let the paper drop from his hand. His eyes were glazed, and the expression upon his face was mainly pathetic.

'Well, I—I'm damned,' he said aloud, and added as a gleam of intelligence returned to his blue eyes: 'I am, too.'

Tragic death. Tadema sat on the edge of his bed in his new pyjamas and re-read the words until they became meaningless and afterward horribly clear again. He was, of course, completely unaware of the existence, or rather pre-existence, of Duds Wallace, that luckless seeker after sartorial correctness who, clad in all the glory of the pin-stripe suit, had blundered blindly into a tram on the way to air his plumage.

But it was obvious that some disaster must have occurred. Tadema read every word the paper had printed about himself, and there were a great many, and then, with disaster weighing numbingly upon him, he dressed carefully and went downstairs.

He collected the other papers and carried them off to his room. They had the same story, of course, but with a few added details.

There was only one mention of Chloe. The *Trumpeter* observed that Sir Geoffrey's fiancée, Lady Chloe Staratt, was out of London.

'Thinking out some way of cashing in on the story,' thought Tadema grimly. 'Or, more likely, trying to prevent the young flying lout from blethering his side of the affair.'

For the first time a faint smile passed over the actor's lips. Chloe was frustrated all right; temporarily rendered speechless, it seemed.

His enjoyment in this aspect of the affair was shortlived as his own position became painfully apparent. As far as publicity was concerned he had certainly scored heavily. His name and prowess filled all three papers,

but what of the future? What could he do? What on earth could he do? How could he return without providing the greatest anti-climax of all time?

He toyed with the idea of simply walking back into his part and meeting the subsequent inquiry with a more or less plausible story. That would be a sensational course, in all conscience, and would serve his purpose very well unless Chloe eloped. And she would: he knew it instinctively. Chloe would elope and people would draw the inevitable and, unfortunately, true conclusions.

The only way to prevent her going off and marrying someone else immediately was for him to remain dead. If he remained dead, how could he ever resurrect himself? How could he ever explain why he had allowed some unknown man to be buried in his stead?

He wandered out into the town. Some of the passers-by glanced at the stranger in their midst with the mild interest of country folk, and Tadema might have been alarmed for the safety of his incognito had he cared about it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he was perfectly safe. The carefully taken studio portraits reproduced in the newspapers showed a man twenty years younger, with darker eyes and deeper and more interesting shadows than this pale, worried-looking middle-aged gentleman who hurried along so fast and yet, had they only known it, so aimlessly.

As far as the man in the street was concerned, Sir Geoffrey Tadema was dead.

The queue outside the pit impeded his progress, and finally pulled him up. He stood staring at the shabby old theatre for a moment with the first interest he had shown in externals since the advent of the evening papers. The Theatre Royal was on its last legs, or at least its plaster pillars were crumbling. Tadema was shocked. A genteel shabbiness it had always possessed, besides its characteristic smell, but in the old days it had never looked like this. To Tadema the Theatre Royal, Saffronden, looked like some depraved and leering old harridan clad in filthy finery, all the more depressing because he had known her in her better days.

The Chasberg Stock Company was playing there, he gathered from the bills. The piece that week was *Beggar's Choice*, and the highest price of admission five-and-nine.

Tadema took a box.

He remembered the play as soon as the curtain rose. It was an ancient melodrama about a race-horse, an impoverished lord, and the inevitable Lady Mary. He had played in it himself many times in the old days.

He almost enjoyed it. The contemplation of the past at least took his mind off the horror of the present.

Seated well back among the dusty crimson curtains, the pungent camphory smell tingling in his nostrils, he looked down at the shabby old stage and remembered with a hint of sadness something he had long forgotten, the excitement of these early days. Tadema, already extremely sorry for himself, nearly wept when he remembered how long ago it all was.

He had been watching the Lady Mary for some minutes before he recognized her. It was a trick of her voice which finally caught his attention and made him lean forward in the box and peer more closely at her face. She was older, of course—far too old for the part. Tadema could not remember her name, but her voice was familiar, and she had a way of turning her head and smiling that came back to him.

He could not see his programme, and relied upon his memory. What *was* the woman's name? Chrissie something, he was inclined to think, and they had travelled together. It must have been in the old repertoire days.

She had improved, he thought suddenly. That was it; in the old days she had been appalling. Appalling and rather sweet. She was still pretty enough, if it came to that, in spite of her figure settling and her hair looking a bit old-fashioned and not so bright.

Tadema closed his eyes and delved back into the past. The voices on the stage helped him considerably. He remembered whole sequences, and there was one scene on the steps of a hotel just off the racecourse which returned so vividly to his mind that he sat up abruptly. That was it! Her name was Chrissie, and they must have played this part together.

It wasn't such a coincidence, if one thought of it. He had played in the provinces for fifteen years, and there must have been a great many actresses who claimed to have played with Tadema. Some of them Sir Geoffrey could remember much more clearly. This woman was only a vague memory. But he knew her. Her name was Chrissie something, and she had been rather sweet. It had been very long ago, he decided; in his early years. He didn't think there had been the ghost of an affair. If there had he would have remembered.

He turned his attention to the stage. Whole scenes, he realized, were modern interpolations. Much of the bravura had been dropped. It was all very interesting.

When the lights of the first interval went up he looked at his programme. 'Lady Mary . . . Miss Chrissie Dilling.' Chrissie Dilling; that was the name. How could a woman have gone through a lifetime of leading ladyship with a name like that?

He was debating whether to send his card round, and had indeed half decided to when he remembered his predicament with a start and the whole dreadful business poured back into his mind. He did not go out of the theatre, however, but sat there till the curtain rose again. At least he was hidden, and inspiration must surely come in time.

Fortunately for him, the second act opened with a scene in an attic room which he remembered. The words came back to him so clearly that he was irritated by the rather hopeless boy playing the part when his inflections and interpretations were unfamiliar.

Chrissie *had* improved! She was almost good, in an old-fashioned way. Not West-End standard, of course, but first-class for the provinces. She held the audience, too. They loved her.

Something else returned to Tadema's memory. He heard Chrissie complaining that someone always struck a match in her big scenes and it put her off. Always at the most dramatic part that little pin-point of light out in the dark audience would catch her eye, telling her that there was someone whose attention she was not holding.

Softly, and feeling indescribably guilty, Tadema drew a box from his pocket. He waited for the right moment and struck the match. He was leaning forward, and the flickering light caught his face, accentuating the hollows and darkening the eyes.

Miss Dilling wavered, her glance rested on the box, and then, with a little shrill cry, she clasped her hand over her heart.

Tadema started back in his box. He did not see her gallant recovery, did not see her struggling on with the scene. The only thought in his mind was one of intense excitement, and, curiously enough, of relief. He was alive. The secret was out: whatever disaster might accompany the revelation, he was alive again. Somebody knew it. He slipped out of the box and hurried round to the stage door.

He was sitting in the dressing-room when she came in from the stage, still a little pale under her make-up. Tadema rose and gallantly held out his hands.

‘Why, Chrissie!’ he said.

The woman stared at him, and for an uncomfortable moment he thought that she was going to faint. Stock Company actresses are more or less inured to shock, however, and Miss Dilling revived.

‘Well, Geoff,’ she said, and added awkwardly after a pause, ‘I was only thinking of you this evening.’

As soon as the words left her mouth she bit her lower lip sharply and regarded him apologetically with round eyes.

Tadema remembered the trick. He remembered the eyes, too, and it occurred to him again that there must have been some sort of little romance here; nothing serious; just a boy-and-girl flirtation perhaps. She was several years younger than himself; ten perhaps—he was not sure.

Miss Dilling continued to stare. ‘Well, I don’t know what to say, I’m sure,’ she said at last. ‘The papers are wrong, of course.’

Sir Geoffrey felt suddenly at ease. His brief experience as an unimportant, not to say practically non-existent, person had told him subconsciously, and the relief at finding himself once more a personage was tremendous.

‘Well, naturally,’ he murmured, smiling at her and sinking down once again into the uncomfortable basket chair. ‘There’s been some silly mistake. I must put things right in a day or so. Meanwhile, this is very pleasant, Chrissie.’

Miss Billing blinked, and Tadema remembered that she had never been very clever.

‘But what happened?’ she ventured timidly. ‘How did you get here?’

Tadema leaned forward. ‘As a matter of fact, old girl,’ he said, unconsciously slipping back a decade or even two in his phrase: ‘I disappeared. Someone pinched my clothes and got himself smashed up unrecognizably; the idiots think it’s me.’

‘Disappeared?’ echoed Miss Dilling. ‘Why, Geoffrey, whatever for?’

‘Strain,’ said Tadema, who was always more inventive before an audience. ‘My dear girl, the strain and the worry of that West-End work—

show after show, expenses running on and people badgering one for jobs! I couldn't stand it. I felt I must get away or go mad. So I walked out.'

Miss Dilling raised her head and met his eyes. So easily she could have said: 'From the roof of the house in the middle of the show?' or even: That's a nice yarn to tell anybody.' Either remark would have been disastrous. But Miss Dilling was a rare person.

'You poor boy,' said Miss Dilling.

Presently, when a girl arrived with the modest glass of stout which she always took after the second act for her health's sake, she insisted that Tadema swallow it.

Since he had eaten no food all day he was very grateful.

'Look here, Chrissie,' he said when her call came, 'I'll go in front again but I'll look round after the show. We might have a little supper together at the "Red Lion". I'm staying there. What do you say?'

Miss Dilling flushed. 'That would be very nice,' she said.

'You'll keep my secret, won't you?' Either the stout or the unusualness of the whole adventure was stimulating Sir Geoffrey's mercurial temperament.

'Of course I will!' She was laughing. She really was extraordinarily well preserved. 'Oh, I must fly. After the show, then.'

Miss Dilling was gone. Tadema went back to the box.

Chrissie's performance was not quite so good in the third act. She was excited and her mannerisms were accentuated. She reminded Tadema strongly of herself in the old days. Chrissie Dilling was still, in spite of years of the most disappointing, soul-wearying work in the world, rather sweet and nice.

She was also very human, so that if she confided her thrilling secret to Mr Katz, the stage manager, she was not altogether to blame.

Mr Katz did not believe her, but he was loth to let any opportunity of pleasing Mr Lewis, the manager, go by, for Mr Lewis had the ear of Mr Chasberg himself.

Tadema was actually waiting just inside the stage door when Miss Dilling came out. As he helped her into one of the few cabs which

Saffronden possessed he was so engrossed that he did not see Mr Lewis, who was so smart that his friends thought him wasted in the provinces, watching him from the stage-doorkeeper's window with a thoughtful and introspective eye.

The morning papers published a fresh Tadema sensation. Lady Chloe Staratt had been led by an apparently friendly *Sun* reporter into an admission that her engagement to Sir Geoffrey had been broken off on the morning of his disappearance, but whereas the weeping, broken-hearted Chloe might have made a pretty enough picture to grace any suburban breakfast table, it was considerably marred by an independent statement by Mr Gyp Rains in the same paper to the effect that his own marriage to Lady Chloe had been fixed for the morrow, this announcement being backed up by the evidence of a special licence.

The *Sun*, never famed for its delicacy, published the two stories one after the other and the report of the inquest in the next column.

Since the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of 'Death by misadventure' and vetoed absolutely any question of deliberation, the combined effect of the three stories was unfortunate as far as Chloe was concerned.

Tadema, reading the paper over his breakfast in the hotel lounge, was almost sorry for her.

Most of his sympathy, however, he reserved for himself. The morning's news had brought him no respite. He was still a dead man, and to revive with honour looked like proving an impossibility.

He had just decided to lie low for another forty-eight hours at least, until opportunity if not sheer necessity drove him to action, when Miss Dilling arrived. Tadema was pleased to see her, but only mildly so. By morning light she looked most of her age and her clothes were painfully provincial. However, her smile was friendly and admiring.

She came out with her request immediately, her eyes meeting his anxiously. She hardly dared to suggest it, but Derek Fayre, her leading man, was really too ill to play and Mr Lewis was so worried. The incognito would be preserved, of course. No one knew. She had simply spoken of him as an actor friend, and that had given Mr Lewis the idea. After all, they had done the show so many times in the past. It would be like old times. Would he? Would he? Dare she ask?

The idea appealed to Tadema from the moment it was presented to him. It is possible, of course, that he might have smelt a rat if anyone but Chrissie Dilling had put the thing up to him. But she was so patently without second motive, so obviously anxious only to play at old times again. All women were sentimental, Tadema thought privately; all except that hussy Chloe.

Over supper the previous evening he had asked Chrissie why she had never married. Her reply had been heart-breaking.

‘Oh, you know how it is,’ she had said, wrinkling her nose at him. ‘First, it’s a career. Afterward, there’s no one round the theatre quite good enough. And then—you just don’t.’

Poor old Chrissie, with her ladylikeness, her stout for her strength’s sake, her old-fashioned sophistication that was sophistication no more. She just hadn’t.

He went to rehearsal with her like a lamb. He had a glorious time. Every nervous criticism put in by the breathless Mr Katz for verisimilitude’s sweet sake amused and delighted him. Things which would have rendered him speechless in his own theatre here struck him as being funny, and the old play came back easily. Right words, wrong words, delicious gags, they slipped to his tongue and he let himself go.

The irony of the situation as he knew it he found exquisite, and all the more so since he had an appreciative audience in Miss Dilling. Neither of them so much as thought of Mr Lewis, which was perhaps fortunate.

Breathless, laughing, and twenty years younger, Sir Geoffrey knocked off for lunch. He and Miss Dilling ate sausage and drank beer at the ‘Red Lion’ and reminisced.

Tadema put the world of reality into the back of his mind. He felt reckless and somehow slightly truculent. If the world combined to mock and frustrate him, at least he was a fine old trouper still. Yes, by God he was! And secretly he longed for the show.

There was an electric atmosphere in the Theatre Royal that night. The whole company was in a state of whispering hysteria. Even the seedy orchestra tuned up its ancient instruments with a spirited quaver or two and the audience had got wind of something in the magical way that audiences have.

The only two innocent participants in the comedy were frankly and engagingly happy. The first act went with a bang. Tadema was aware of a

large and appreciative audience, and gave his best. The Personality revived in all its early splendour. Miss Dilling was quite carried away.

No curtain calls till the end of the show: that was the rule of the house and it was observed.

Tadema climbed happily out of mess jacket into hunting pink and from hunting pink to naval uniform without a dresser or a qualm. He romped and gagged and threw his weight about atrociously, while the provincial audience, which only asks a little spirit, rejoiced with him. It was a glorious night.

When the final moment came on the steps of the castle (how fond we were of steps!), and the lovers were reunited with the immortal line, 'Marry me, Mary. I'm a man again,' Sir Geoffrey swung Miss Dilling into his arms and kissed her in the style of his predecessors with a sound that was heard at the back of the gallery.

That gallery rose, and the grand, glorious sound of applause poured sweetly on his head. Tadema, gallantly leading Miss Dilling, took the curtain. Not once or twice, but again and again they came forward. At last Miss Dilling fled and Tadema took the final call alone.

As he stood before the curtain, the lights shot up in the theatre and he looked around its dustiness. The crowd was still applauding and Tadema bowed. He was superbly happy.

As he raised his head again, however, he stiffened. Directly in front of him, in the middle of the first row, was a boiled shirt, and above that shirt sat the smug face of Evans of the *Trumpeter*.

Tadema, grown old again, glanced sharply down the line, his blood chilled. There they were, all of them: Richardson, Playfair, Jones—the whole gang.

He walked back through the curtains, his head held stiffly but his eyes unfocused, strode through the sniggering throng behind the scenes and entered the little dressing-room at the end of the corridor.

Miss Dilling, a faded blue robe over her slip, turned from her dressing-table and paled before his expression. He told her what he thought coldly and all the more bitterly because of his great humiliation. Miss Dilling wept.

'I didn't—oh, Geoff, I didn't.'

‘Nobody else knew,’ said Tadema. ‘Do you realize,’ he went on with sudden heat, ‘that to get a little publicity for your paltry little company you’ve sacrificed and made a fool of *me*? Publicity!’

He laughed rather theatrically, and would have made his exit on that word, but they were upon him like a pack of dogs. They all swarmed in through the door, jostling, laughing, eager and content that the chase was yielding a kill. They were all there, the half-dozen that he had seen in the stalls and more that he had missed.

Tadema, obscuring the tragic Miss Dilling, faced them.

‘Let’s have the story, Sir Geoffrey—the whole story. It’ll take a bit of explaining, you know.’

That was Richardson, grinning away like a Barbary ape.

‘A remarkable performance, Tadema. I didn’t think you had it in you.’

Sir Geoffrey had often wanted to kick Evans, but never more than now.

‘Come, Tadema, was it because of Lady Chloe? You’ve seen the papers, of course. What poor devil did you lend your clothes to?’

They were jostling him, hectoring him. His mind shuttered.

‘We’ll let you down lightly. It was the engagement, of course?’

‘Gentlemen—’ Tadema raised a protesting hand, ‘—just a moment. Just a moment, please.’

The sound of his own voice gave him confidence. It always did; it was so absolutely right.

‘Since you’ve hunted me out—I almost said hounded me down—’ the easy, rounded phrases slipped out softly, ‘I suppose I must tell you the truth.’

‘I should say so. I’m holding a wire,’ muttered a youngster, and was instantly suppressed.

Tadema went smoothly on. ‘Lady Chloe Staratt has said that our engagement was broken off the day before yesterday. Lady Chloe is a very sweet and charming girl, but she is not quite accurate. Our engagement was broken off last Sunday—’

‘Why? The whole story. We must have the whole story.’

Tadema shrugged his shoulders and threw out his hands. A faint smile which was not wholly assumed played round his lips.

‘Even an actor has private affairs, gentlemen,’ he murmured. ‘And yet—well—since you’ve come for the truth—’

Turning swiftly like a conjuror, he took Miss Dilling’s quivering hand.

‘This is Miss Chrissie Dilling,’ he said simply. ‘My first love and my last. This evening she has honoured me by accepting the proposal I made her when I first arrived in this town yesterday morning.’

He paused for the announcement to sink in, and then, when he was sure he had all their attention, added superbly and with great dignity: ‘Even at my age, gentlemen, romance is not wholly dead. There is always one woman—somewhere.’

He watched them scribbling and his smile widened. Inspiration had arrived.

Chrissie Dilling, that rare woman, did not speak.

Some days later Sir Geoffrey Tadema turned away from the contemplation of his wedding presents to glance at the proofs of an interview which his fiancée had granted to a woman’s magazine. Chrissie had brought it to him and now stood at his side while he ran a pencil along the lines.

‘Christiana Dilling glanced at me
and I thought I saw something very
charming in her wistful blue eyes.
“Of course, I always hoped he’d
come back,” she confessed.’

Tadema lifted the pencil.

‘We’ll take out that “hoped”, my dear,’ he said, ‘and put “knew”. It’s better publicity.’

THE PERFECT BUTLER

Knowles was the perfect butler, and, since the word knows no qualification, he was only that; yet there were some who would have stretched the point and claimed that he was more than perfect, inasmuch as the very art of buttlng achieved under his hand a flowering, a golden renaissance it never before had known.

At the moment he was in his pantry at the back of a great Georgian house in Berkeley Square, considering the polish on the Georgian spoons. His son, young Harold, attended to the spoons, his round face pink and absorbed as he rubbed away with the leather.

Young Harold was his father's only anxiety. The boy came from an unbroken line of butlers as ancient as the family which they served.

When the present Knowles looked at young Harold and realized everything the lad had to live up to he trembled. The past can be a cruel master, especially when legend has strengthened its hand, and Knowles feared for Harold. Could Harold make the grade? There were times when his father lay awake wondering.

When they were alone, as now, in that blessed interval when tea is a thing of the past and dinner only a partly realized dream in the chef's mind, Knowles would talk to young Harold and impart the deeper secrets of his calling.

Since young Harold was only fifteen and still human, and Knowles was fifty-five and superhuman, the conversation was liable to have a one-sided quality, but there were rare occasions when the imperfectly subdued nature of the boy got out of hand. This was one of them.

'I saw Lady Susan this afternoon. She had been crying,' he observed, rashly.

Knowles set down a mellow spoon with great deliberation and, taking a pair of small pince-nez from his waistcoat pocket, placed them carefully on the bridge of his nose.

'You *saw* Lady Susan?' he said. 'Where was she?'

‘In the hall,’ faltered the helpless Harold, observing only too late the abyss widening beneath his feet.

‘And where were you?’

‘At the top of the service stairs,’ stuttered the boy.

‘Where you had no right to be.’

There was a long and awful pause. Young Harold had been well grounded in the first rules of service, and ‘Thou shalt not give back answers’ was graven on his soul.

‘The young servant,’ said Knowles, giving the word its true dignity, ‘has to learn to serve the family with his mind, his body, and his affection, but without his human nature, Harold.

‘You must notice things and not notice them, if you take my meaning. That is to say, you must see everything, but only retain in your head those matters which may possibly concern you.

‘I remember the case of the gentleman with kleptomania who dined with his late lordship,’ he observed unexpectedly. ‘Now it was my duty to notice that he had a pair of very fine salt-cellars in his hip pocket when he left the table, but it was not my duty to mention the fact to him or to any one else. I made a point of helping him on with his overcoat as he left, and then I ventured to suggest that the awkward bulge spoiled the set of his coat. I begged him to allow me to send a messenger round with the contents of his pocket the following morning. I was not rude, you understand, Harold; just respectfully solicitous and, of course, firm. He gave up the salt-cellars rather grudgingly, I remember, and, of course, his lordship never knew.’

The deep voice ceased and Knowles eyed his son.

‘Quiet, impersonal, and firm; that’s the line, my boy. It takes time to learn it, but it’s worth it in the end. When you’re a good butler you know that you’re more than a man. In your sphere you are infallible. Crises may arise, difficult situations may start up and face you, but with training you can look them in the eye and not see them, if you take me.

‘Besides,’ he went on with apparent irrelevance, ‘there’s nothing so vulgar as vulgar curiosity.’

Harold followed his father’s train of thought perfectly and was silent, his mind busy fitting together the odd words he had gleaned among the

whispers which had been agitating the servants' hall all day.

Knowles, too, pondered on the unfortunate situation which had arisen above-stairs and on the disastrous paragraph in the morning's papers. However, decency and respect and even simulated ignorance he could and would enforce in his own domain below-stairs, and in Knowles' opinion it would be as well if there were another equally competent person in charge of the world outside.

He was disturbed in his thoughts by the muffled buzzing of the front-door bell. What instinct persuaded the old man to answer it himself he never rightly knew, but he strode out into the passage, swept Edward, the footman, out of the way, and mounted the service stairs with a brisk purposefulness quite unlike his usual pontifical stride.

As he entered the main hall, which in deference to her ladyship's wishes was kept but softly lit, he was aware of a minor crisis. The front door was swinging wide and through it rushed the warm, rain-laden air of the city's evening.

Knowles had just mastered his first sense of outrage at this unheard-of indignity when he saw the visitor. Without his pince-nez Knowles was very near-sighted, and the man was standing in the darker part of the hall by the Doric columns. The old man had to go up to him before his features were clearly visible, yet Knowles had recognized him the moment the man had entered his blurred vision, and now, as the butler peered into those striking features, small beads of perspiration appeared upon the high forehead above the perfect face, and Knowles' plump hands were damp and clammy as the night wind from the square.

However, the quality of perfection is not lightly cast down. Knowles stood his ground and looked the newcomer glassily in the eye.

Before that stare, as unnatural as his own, the visitor wavered and turned slightly, so that the old man saw his absence of collar and another very unpleasant thing about his chest and the shoulder of his coat.

Still Knowles stood his ground and waited, as was his custom, for the visitor to speak first.

'Take me up to Lady Susan, Knowles, please.'

The butler stood perfectly still, his eyes, accustomed by long practice, focused upon those other eyes. The absence of collar and the other things

Knowles no longer saw.

‘Lady Susan, sir?’ he said, with just the right intonation of surprise. ‘Ah—surely you’re under some misapprehension, sir, if I may venture to say so?’

‘Don’t be a fool, Knowles.’ The newcomer was angry. ‘You know perfectly well who I am—Captain Lester Phillips. You’ve admitted me a dozen times. Take me up to Lady Susan immediately, or must I go without you?’

He made a movement, but in spite of an icy chill of apprehension Knowles stood firm. He gave his celebrated little cough.

‘I—ah—still think you’ve made a mistake, sir,’ he said, gently. ‘Lady Susan no longer lives here.’

‘No longer lives here?’ The newcomer’s eyes wavered for a moment. ‘But I saw her here only two nights ago—only last Wednesday. You showed me up yourself.’

He paused, and Knowles, seizing the advantage, spoke again:

‘Not last Wednesday, sir,’ he said, calmly. ‘That was—ah—if you’ll forgive me saying so, some years ago. Back in nineteen thirty-five, sir, long before the family moved. I stayed with the house, sir. You’ll hardly come up and see Mr Goldberger, sir?’

‘Mr Goldberger?’

‘My new employer, sir.’

‘I see.’

A bewildered expression had crept over the visitor’s pallid features. He looked lost, frightened. If it had not been for the absence of collar and those other things, Knowles could have found it in his heart to sympathize with him. As it was, he ushered him gently towards the open door.

On the threshold the stranger paused.

‘You don’t know where she’s living now?’

‘No, sir. I couldn’t say.’ Knowles swallowed. ‘After the family migrated to Australia I lost touch with them, sir.’

‘Australia? Are you sure, Knowles?’

Knowles’ eyes did not falter. ‘Australia, sir.’

‘How long have they been there?’

‘It must be nearly ten years, sir.’

Just for a moment the visitor’s wild eyes rested upon the perfect face.

‘You don’t look changed, Knowles.’

It was then, perhaps, that, in the face of the greatest danger, Knowles reached the highest peak of his perfection.

‘I never change, sir,’ he said magnificently.

‘I see.’

Without further adieux the tall figure flung himself down the stone steps and strode out into the square, where the blue London night swallowed it.

Knowles so far forgot himself as to watch until it disappeared. Then he closed the door and went slowly down to his pantry. Ignoring Harold’s inquiring glance, he passed on down the narrow room to his private cupboard, which he unlocked.

The bottle of Napoleon brandy left to him by name in the will of his late lordship was brought forth. Knowles poured himself out a generous tot and swallowed most of it. Then he replaced the bottle, locked the cupboard, and, assuming his pince-nez, drew his own copy of the *Daily Trumpet* from its place among the silver-towels. The late news paragraph slipped in on the front page was not hard to find. Nearly every servant in the house had stolen a surreptitious glance at it at least once that day. Old Knowles read it through once more.

‘Young Guardsman’s Tragic Death.’

‘Early this morning the valet of Captain Geoffrey Lester Phillips, son of Major-General and Mrs Lester Phillips, of Horton, in Norfolk, found his employer sitting before his dressing-table, dead. His throat had been cut and a non-safety razor lay by his side.

‘It was announced in these columns only the day before yesterday that the marriage which had been arranged between Captain Lester Phillips and Lady Susan, younger daughter of Lord Tollesbury, would not take place.’

Knowles folded the paper and returned it to the drawer. For a while he sipped the remainder of his Napoleon with a connoisseur's relish. Then he glanced at Harold.

‘And that’s another thing, my lad,’ he said. ‘The perfect butler should be able to turn away anybody without giving offence—anybody or *anything*.’

THE MISTRESS IN THE HOUSE

Mrs Finbridge was the woman behind her husband.

She stood behind him like the white paper behind a silhouette. When he sat as chairman on the Bench of Magistrates or made the main speech of the evening at the Minstree Conservative meeting, or whipped up his hounds as they gathered beneath the fine stone façade of his mansion, his handsome angular figure was strengthened, made solid as it were, by the knowledge, shared by all beholders, that somewhere near at hand was that round, untidy, boundlessly energetic little woman.

The establishment, with its staff of fourteen, emancipated, half-educated men and women—butler, cook, two gardeners, two grooms, six maids, knife-boy and laundry-woman—ran with that smooth precision which was an ideal only in the days when domestic situations were scarce and is little short of miraculous in a modern regime when personal jealousies and idiosyncrasies are cultivated as earnestly and openly below-stairs as above.

The village, too, was cozened, bribed and tended as befitted the kernel of Major Finbridge's constituency.

The local gentry were dined, the aged poor remembered, the newly-born sponsored at the font, the Women's Institute assisted, the Girl Guides inspected, the Flower Show patronized, the Vicar backed, the Nursing Fund augmented, and every local tradesman rigorously apportioned his fair share of the great house's trade.

When Major Finbridge rode down the winding hill on his roan gelding with the white eye, people looked after him and said: 'There goes a nice gentleman,' or: 'One decent Englishman left, thank God,' according to their station. Yet in the back of each speaker's mind was the image of Mrs Finbridge when he said these things. He was not actively aware of her, but he knew she was there, just as on seeing a statue one is conscious of the plinth on which it stands.

To the stream of visitors who passed through the house Mrs Finbridge was a hostess rather than a person. Pretty women were apt to patronize her at first for her lack of physical charm, her 'sat-in' brown tweed skirts and her wispy hair that was neither brown nor black, and then to discover that they had told her the more intimate details of their private lives. She never

repeated their confidences or even offered advice, but sat placid and friendly, looking, for all her lack of beauty a little younger than her age, which was, as everybody knew who chose to work it out, somewhere between thirty-eight and forty-two.

The country ladies, those little tigresses who, by reason of the very paucity of game, will amuse themselves by tearing the veriest sheep to ribbons in the pretence it is a dangerous enemy, gave her up in despair. They returned from a planned sortie to find they had agreed to play Queen Guinevere in the July pageant, or undertaken to give a lecture on *petit-point* at the spring meeting of the 'Mothers' Own'. Mrs Finbridge, as a woman, had escaped them.

With celebrities she was equally successful.

When the Prime Minister and his wife came down to Minstree for the week-end and the Major took his leader to inspect the hounds and discuss the country, his lady found herself sitting with her feet up on the couch in the south drawing-room, her proudly waved white head resting on a cushion and her faded eyes moist as she talked, of all things, about a half-forgotten little boy who had died in the War.

Yet the two women were not friends. When the Prime Minister's wife went back to Downing Street she had forgotten Mrs Finbridge, save as a little brown mouse, and her conversation with her that afternoon was as vague and unimportant as a dream. Yet she remembered the Major as a 'very fine type of the man we want' and told her husband so.

Of all the people who visited Minstree Margaret Telkamp Smith, the novelist, came as near as anyone to discovering Mrs Finbridge, and that was not because she made friends with her—Mrs Finbridge had no friends—but because she was a highly trained sleuth who tracked the inner emotions of her fellow-beings with the ruthless, passionate curiosity of a pointer on a trail. Like a pointer, when she had uncovered her quarry she would stand square and indicate its hiding-place to all beholders with pride and conscious virtue in every beautiful line.

The Major she recognized instantly, a perfect specimen of a type aimed at perfection. He was fifteen years older than his wife, cold with the chilliness of empty space, a little selfish, a little small, but just with the justice which has grown out of trial and error and become a concrete, complicated thing too difficult to be digested, and so incorporated into the very being of its administrators and existing there an instinct.

To tell him that he took his wife for granted would have been to tell him that he breathed air or drank hock. He knew he did and saw no reason why he should not. He belonged to the school and generation who thought that if a gentleman could not take his wife for granted what, in God's name, could he take?

He was never rude to her, never unkind, never even considerate. Certain courtesies were her right and he gave her those as befitted her position and his own dignity.

He was not a lovable man but an admirable one. He liked his house, he liked and admired his wife, and he loved his villagers and his hounds.

To say Mrs Finbridge understood him would have been to suggest that there was something to forgive. In Miss Telkamp Smith's opinion Mrs Finbridge was denied even that crumb of masochistic comfort. They got on together in the way that acrobats get on together on the trapeze. Their association was a miracle of co-ordination, as cold as machinery, as smooth and easy as flight.

Yet out of this Mrs Finbridge arose a vital, human force, a woman exquisitely fulfilled. She tantalized Miss Smith.

Having suffered badly at an early age the pains and degradations of an unhappy marriage, contented wives had become Miss Smith's speciality. They fascinated her. Knowing herself to be a normal woman, she saw in these placid creatures something monstrous to be dissected, and, once their essential difference was discovered, dismissed safely into each her own category.

She set to work on Mrs Finbridge with all the excitement of an etymologist sighting a new species.

It was she who discovered that the Finbridges occupied separate bedrooms with a connecting bathroom, and that Mrs Finbridge arose half an hour before her husband and did her hair in his bedroom while they discussed those morning letters which concerned them both.

It was she who found out that Mrs Finbridge's private allowance was ridiculously small, but that the Major brought his tailor's bills to his wife to audit, and it was Mrs Finbridge who compiled the list of guns for the October shoot.

With her nose on the trail Margaret Telkamp Smith tracked down the address of Mrs Finbridge's costumier and was shocked to find that a local tailor cut her tweeds. She also discovered, quite by accident, that the busy

little woman possessed a magnificent set of emeralds and that when she accompanied her husband to the Dover House Ball she wore them with a gown made for her by the actual woman who dressed the Queen.

Mrs Finbridge herself still escaped her. She did not even know her Christian name. Her husband called her 'my dear', 'the missus' or 'my wife', according to the person he addressed, and she signed her letters 'E. J. Finbridge'.

Margaret Telkamp Smith was not easily defeated. She followed her hostess everywhere, recklessly sacrificing any pretence of good manners to the cause of art. She found Mrs Finbridge had a private room of her own on the third floor and forced her way into it, only to find that it was the housekeeper's sanctum, unchanged since the Major's father's day, and that when Mrs Finbridge sat at the battered desk therein, she studied bills for horse-feed, wrote out dinner-party menus, and despatched suitable replies to charitable appeals.

Margaret seated herself in the basket chair before the small coal fire and begged her hostess to continue her work.

To create an atmosphere of confidence she threw her own more private affairs on to the altar of sacrifice, tore her ex-husband's rather pathetic veils of self-concealment aside, and presented him in all his piteous nakedness. Nor did she spare herself, but drew her own forceful character with only a few shreds of extenuating circumstance to cover its indecency. She had an incorrigibly dramatic mind and her performance was not uninteresting.

Mrs Finbridge gave up the half-yearly farrier's bill and sat watching her. Her round face, with the light brown intelligent eyes, was innocent of anything but the merest trace of powder and her small, unexpectedly fine hands were unadorned save for her big loose wedding ring. When she spoke it was only of Miss Smith's own problems and she did not seem to have a trace of the familiar strip-mania which Margaret had come to believe was part of the normal make-up of every female thing.

Temporarily defeated, Miss Telkamp Smith resorted to crude questioning and risked the snub direct.

'You seem so happy—no, perhaps that's not the word—content,' she ventured, trusting that the insult would succeed where soft invitation failed.

'Yes,' said Mrs Finbridge and smiled.

'But, forgive me, my dear, is that enough?' Miss Telkamp Smith turned her grey eyes earnestly on her hostess. She was a big, beautiful woman,

rather like Britannia to look at or the photographs of Mary Anderson as a girl.

‘Quite enough,’ said Mrs Finbridge, and she seemed amused.

‘County,’ reflected Margaret. ‘County, cold and probably over-bred.’

Aloud she continued, feeling for words and giving her voice an attractive hesitancy:

‘Oh, I know you’re wonderful. This house is incredible. It moves like a machine. Don’t think I don’t realize the genius it takes to do a thing like that. You’re an amazing wife. You *enjoy* it all so. Your husband is made by you, my dear. You give him poise, dignity, security, but—but, I do hope you won’t think I’m horribly rude, is it enough for *you*? Do *you* get enough out of it all?’

Mrs Finbridge considered gravely.

‘I think I do,’ she said at last. ‘What else is there?’

Miss Smith tried another tack.

‘You’re young,’ she said, ‘and frightfully attractive—in a way. If you weren’t—forgive me—I could understand. But you’ve got energy, life, enthusiasm. Oh dear, I’m saying this so badly! But you do puzzle me. To put it crudely, don’t you think the people you meet, the people who come here, think of you as a hostess, the mistress of the house, rather than—er—a living person? Do please forgive me.’

Mrs Finbridge closed a little drawer in the desk and locked it mechanically. She had a naturally tidy mind, Miss Smith noted.

‘I take it all very seriously,’ said Mrs Finbridge. ‘I work hard. I give my husband exactly what he wants.’

‘Yes, but where do you get the energy? The mental and emotional stimulus? You work like a slave. What for? What makes you do it?’

Now that she had put the whole crux of her inquiry into simple words Miss Smith felt a little exhausted.

Mrs Finbridge seemed to unbend.

‘The driving force?’ she said thoughtfully. ‘I never looked at it like that.’

Margaret lost all sense of decency.

‘If you had children I could understand it,’ she declared almost petulantly. ‘Then you’d have the mother urge. If you were afraid you were losing your husband, if you were trying to make every man you met fall in love with you, then all this force would be natural. But you don’t get any personal reward for your energy, if I may say so. Don’t you have any break?’

Mrs Finbridge laughed. She did not seem in the least offended.

‘I understand you now,’ she said. ‘I have a beauty treatment once a month, you know.’

‘A beauty treatment?’ Miss Smith looked at her face, her hair, and her round comfortable figure with frank disbelief.

If the other woman noticed her reactions she did not show it.

‘It’s a wonderful change,’ she said calmly. ‘I just give myself over to it once a month. I don’t worry all the rest of the time, as you can see.’

‘Nerve treatment, Turkish bath, relaxation, that sort of thing?’ murmured Miss Smith blankly.

Mrs Finbridge laughed like a girl.

‘I don’t call it anything so grand as nerve treatment,’ she said. ‘Let’s go down, shall we? My husband will be looking for us.’

When Miss Smith went back to Hampstead she had Mrs Finbridge safely pigeon-holed.

On the morning in February on which Mrs Finbridge set out for London, she gave the butler instructions which he knew by heart.

The Major would not be home until the morrow. He would stay with Sir Charles after doing his duty on the Bench. Any message of importance would reach him there. She herself was not to be disturbed on any pretext whatever. She would ’phone the time of her return train in the morning.

The same arrangements had been made so often before that the butler could recite the words.

The Major came hurrying down and was helped into his top-coat. His suitcase was carried out to the waiting car, his stick and spectacles were found. Just before he left he went over to his wife and took her hand.

‘Back in the morning,’ he said.

She looked up at him and smiled. ‘Back in the morning,’ she repeated.

He paused a moment, nodded, smiled and hurried out. On the step he hesitated for the little speech which was part of the ritual.

‘I’ll remember you to Charles and his missus, shall I?’

‘Please.’

‘Right. Good-bye, my dear. Mustn’t be late.’

The butler glanced at the hall clock. The other car would be round in three minutes. But before that Mrs Finbridge had to go up to her little housekeeper’s room. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her already mounting the stairs. It was part of her invariable routine and it never occurred to him to wonder at the habit. He was a creature of custom himself.

Mrs Finbridge walked placidly into her sanctum and closed the door. From her handbag she took a key and unlocked a small drawer in her desk. It contained a little red-leather case and nothing else. She took the case and for the first time a touch of colour came into her face and her light brown eyes grew a shade darker. She looked very brisk and happy as she ran down the stairs.

When she walked into the chastely decorated hall of the Ladies’ Constitutional Club in Manchester Square the woman in the desk smiled at her shyly and handed her her door-keys.

‘Your room is waiting,’ she said. ‘I’ll send your suitcase up. And the other one too, shall I?’

‘If you would,’ said Mrs Finbridge graciously and went over to the lift.

A page came up with the two cases, identical rawhide bags. One had travelled up from Minstree with her that morning; the other had lain in the club cloakroom since the month before.

Mrs Finbridge locked her door. She opened the second case with the key from the red-leather folder which she had taken from the desk in the housekeeper’s room. It contained a complete change of clothes and a black handbag.

Mrs Finbridge hurried. When she was dressed she cast a single appraising glance at herself in the long mirror. She looked younger in the black suit and wide collarless cloth coat which tied at her throat with a bow of the material. The small black hat with the veil completed the transformation. Her clothes were not expensive but were well chosen. She looked more feminine but less correct, less wealthy, and the obstinately

‘good’ effect of the British country gentlewoman had vanished from her as though it had never been.

She had touched her face up carefully. There was no hint of heavy make-up, but her lips were bright and a trace of artificial colour heightened her cheek-bones.

She betrayed no outward excitement. All her movements were deliberate and performed with quiet purposeful haste. But her step was lighter and the unusual excitement had not vanished from her eyes.

She packed her Minstree clothes carefully, including the solid crocodile handbag with its contents. Having relocked the case she sat down on the bed and opened the black pochette. It contained a handkerchief, a compactum, a dry-cleaner’s bill and two pounds, fifteen shillings and seven-pence. She counted the money carefully, glanced at the cleaner’s account and seemed pleased.

The woman in the desk saw her hurrying down the hall and beckoned to the page.

‘Get Mrs Finbridge’s cab.’

The boy hurried out and was waiting with the taxi door open when she came down the steps. He had already given the address.

‘Arthur’s, Bond Street, isn’t it, madam?’ he murmured and touched his forehead when she smiled and thanked him. As he went back into the club he hoped she enjoyed her bath and massage and wondered how much these old girls actually spent on their faces. He did not begrudge Mrs Finbridge her luxuries; she was a nice woman, and if the results of her expenditure were not startling, at least they kept her younger than some of them.

Mrs Finbridge waited until the cab had turned into Oxford Street before she leant forward and pushed the window back. This, too, was part of the routine and her next words were familiar from long use.

‘I think I’ll change my mind. Will you take me to Marble Arch Tube Station?’

‘Marble Arch, M’m?’

‘Yes, please.’

As she stepped into the draughty booking hall, the warm stale air billowing about her like the breath of London itself, Mrs Finbridge became another person. She glanced at the clock and frowned to see that it was

almost three already. She bought her twopenny ticket and hurried into the train.

The street into which she emerged ten minutes later was shabby and busy. Hundreds of women jostled her on the wide pavement and from the gutter yellow-faced Cockney hawkers offered her oranges and plump, anaemic pears.

Mrs Finbridge hurried with the rest. She called at a grocer's and bought some coffee and sugar, begging a brown-paper carrier to put them in. A jar of stuffed olives caught her eye and she hesitated, performing some complicated mental arithmetic. She was half out of the shop before she changed her mind and went back for it.

At the butcher's there was considerable delay. The cutlets were not attractive and she took the fillet of veal after some badinage with the large-stomached person with the blue apron buttoned to his waistcoat. As he packed the meat he glanced at her with the fatherly interest which his profession keeps for the intelligent housewife.

'The weather doesn't worry you, M'm,' he said.

'The weather?'

'Well, it's raining, ain't it, my dear?'

Mrs Finbridge glanced through the festoons of sausages at the blue murk without, where already the yellow lights were blurred stars.

'I didn't notice,' she said, and laughed so happily that he joined her.

She was laden when she reached the cleaner's and the pallid girl behind the counter demurred at handing her such a large parcel.

'We'll send it if you like, Madam.'

'No, thank you. I'm in a hurry. It's not far.'

She paid six shillings and sixpence and the girl tucked the parcel under her arm, so that she staggered out like a laden argosy, a carrier in either hand.

The garden door banged behind her and the door of the second of the two studios which that dry quarter-acre contained opened to admit a thin inquisitive face. The woman stared at Mrs Finbridge and her burdens with the open disapproval and secret excitement which is an ageless reaction.

Mrs Finbridge ignored her. She had expected her and her heart had leapt as she appeared. No other women ever looked at Mrs Finbridge like that. To Mrs Finbridge that woman and her malice were a trophy.

She ploughed down the ragged path and set her burdens on the little step. A second key from the red case rattled in the lock and she entered her house.

It was very small—two rooms and a bath kitchenette. The air within was stale. She put her parcels in the kitchen, opened the windows and drew the curtains. She lit the gas fires in each room and coaxed the small coal fire in the main room before she took off her coat or turned on the lights.

It was eerie groping about in the dark, but she knew every foot of the small space so well. The home welcomed her with the tenderness of an old and favourite garment.

She knelt for a moment and looked down into the fire. Her heart was beating noisily and she was breathless. She pulled off her hat and shook the rain from it.

Suddenly she remembered the time and sprang to her feet. It was so short, so terribly, terribly short.

The lights revealed an odd, comfortable room, shabby but not without character. She hurried through the inner door and came out again in an overall and comfortable shoes. For an hour she worked swiftly and methodically, cleaning and dusting. The room waked to life as the fire-light flickered on the shabby brocade of the couch and the one deep arm-chair.

It was five o'clock when she began to cook.

At seven she was waiting, the dinner set and the kitchenette a cabinet of savoury smells. The portière curtain between the rooms had come out of the cleaner's parcel and now hung, a wall of crumpled flame velvet, warming the corner beyond the fireplace. Mrs Finbridge glanced at it and its colour quickened the darkness in her eyes. She laughed and her small even white teeth glistened.

When she heard the garden gate close she slipped into the bedroom in momentary panic, looked at herself in the mirror, and received a blurred impression of pink cheeks above the brown satin folds of her tea-gown. There was a Chinese ivory brooch on her shoulder and the twisted bodies of the dragons which composed it writhed afresh in the ecstasy of their battle.

The draught as the hall door opened swayed the curtain behind her and she turned to meet it. The last twenty years of her life were swept aside as

such years may sometimes be scattered for an instant before they marshal their forces and return to their unconquerable advance.

The man in the heavy overcoat met her midway across the living-room hearth. There was rain on his face and his cheek was cold and a little rough as his arms closed round her and his mouth found her neck and lips.

He pushed her away from him immediately and held her at arms' length, looking at her with that mixture of excitement, astonishment and irrepressible, overpacked satisfaction which is so inadequately called 'delight'.

'Betty,' he said, and, raising a great hand, rubbed the back of her head until her carefully brushed hair stood out like a fishwife's mop.

'Cad,' said Elizabeth Finbridge and, smoothing her tousled coiffure as best she could, helped him off with his coat.

He took it from her and they went out into the hall together. She slipped into the kitchen as he hung up his coat and he followed her, clumsy and excited as a boy.

'Anything I like?' he inquired, regarding the small nickelled gas-stove as if it were a conjuror's cabinet.

The woman turned her head. It was a little arrested, birdlike movement that brought her face within a foot of his own.

'What do you think?'

He sat on the edge of the bath, looking like a very young man disguised as his own father. His grave suit, very white linen, and the white hair at the sides of his head seemed palpable falsities. When she tied a little apron over her gown he pulled the strings undone and jerked her on to his knee.

'There's a bottle outside,' he said. 'Can I open it yet?'

They achieved the meal together with the inspired success of well-practised amateurs and ate it seated at the little lace-hung table in candle and firelight.

Their conversation was of the immediate present only.

'Betty, when you go to Heaven they'll make you cook the whole blessed time. Send the old man a scrap or two when the lift goes down.'

'Darling, did you learn about champagne or is it an instinct?'

Mrs Finbridge made the coffee in a glass percolator and, armed with a stop-watch, they made small bets on the exact moment when the aromatic bubbles should rise into the upper crystal bowl.

She cupped the watch in her small ringless hands and he held her wrist in a solid brown paw that enclosed it completely.

When the meal was over she swept the remains into the kitchenette, obstinately refusing all assistance, and came back to find him seated in the chair, his eyes bent on the dancing fire.

He looked up as she stood by the mantelpiece and their eyes met. There was a moment of complete understanding before they both laughed in precisely the same way and at the same thing.

‘Come,’ he said.

She sat on his knees, slipping her hand behind him so that her shoulder was under his arm and her head on his coat. They remained for a long time looking into the fire and listening to the rain on the roof.

‘The elder boy got through,’ he said suddenly. ‘He goes to Sandhurst.’

‘Oh my dear, that’s good,’ she said and meant it. ‘And the baby?’

‘Baby?’ He laughed. ‘He wouldn’t thank you for that! The little pup—he’s fourteen. Looks like any of his mother’s family. I see him sometimes staring at me with those light eyes, and I’m damned if I know what he’s thinking. You’re spared that, Betty. There comes a time when you look at ’em and realize they’re not kids, but people, people you don’t know and probably never will. Yet you’ve had to plan your life to suit ’em.’

‘And Dorothy?’ Her tone was casual.

‘Clever as usual,’ he said with amusement. ‘Clever as a cartload of monkeys. A boy of twenty fell in love with her the other day—pleased her like anything. She seems to be telling somebody about it every time I see her.’

His arm tightened about the woman on his knee and he kissed her lips.

‘I saw a photograph of you in *The Tatler* last week,’ he remarked. ‘Looking half-witted. You were at a hunter trial or something. I tore it out and stuck it up over my bed. I only got it down just before Cooper brought my coffee in in the morning. He found the hole in the panelling where the thumb-tack had been, though, and the next night there was a little dab of fresh paint over it. He gave me a dirty look, I noticed—silly ass.’

She laughed and he banged her gently.

‘Don’t giggle. You’re shaking my dinner.’

She lay still obediently and he turned in his chair so that he could look into her face. She was a little higher than he now and his face turned up to her was strained against the skin, so that its maturity disappeared and his eyes were revealing.

‘So obstinately young,’ she said without thinking.

‘Who?’

‘Love is.’

A shadow passed over his face and he nodded.

‘Betty,’ he began, ‘why don’t we—?’

He was silent.

She laughed and presently he joined her.

‘I made twenty thousand last week,’ he said unexpectedly.

‘And did the seventeenth in one.’

‘How did you know?’

‘I read it somewhere.’

‘Clever of me?’

‘Wonderful, really wonderful. You’re disgustingly accomplished.’

‘Huh. You have any adventures?’

‘Nothing of interest. Someone wrote an anonymous letter to the Vicar on my notepaper—I think the parlourmaid.’

‘Sack her,’ he said at once and with conviction. ‘Don’t have a row, don’t ask any questions. Just sack her. It’s the only way.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Certain, my dear girl. Even if you’re wrong it’s worth it. Just get rid of her quietly.’

‘All right.’

‘You’ve got pretty arms, Betty.’

‘So you always tell me, my sweet.’

He rubbed his head against her and held her close to him.

‘You’re a pretty woman altogether,’ he said. ‘I love you. I love you like hell.’

He carried her into the bedroom and came back from the bathroom in a vituperant dressing-gown.

‘Like it?’ he inquired and pirouetted in front of her, holding out the outrageous skirts. ‘I saw it in a shop window and went right in and bought it. What are you laughing at?’

Betty Finbridge sat up in bed, her eyes brimming and her lips parted.

‘Brush your hair up at the back a bit more.’ He did so obediently and stood looking at her, his eyes dancing and his short coarse hair standing up in a black and white halo.

‘Superb!’ gasped Mrs Finbridge. ‘Oh, superb!’

He went over to her, still laughing, and she lay looking up at him, tears of amusement on her cheeks.

Suddenly they were both very still and after a pause he stretched out his hand and flicked off the light.

‘Still think I’m funny?’ he demanded.

Mrs Finbridge stirred in the darkness and drew him down, hot and trembling, into the coolness of her arms.

At eleven o’clock, with a watery sun peering through the tall windows, Elizabeth Finbridge took her bath, put on her overall and tidied her house. She cleared the grate, re-set the fire, washed the dishes and put a shilling in the gas-meter. The breakfast tray she re-laid and packed in its accustomed cupboard.

The spare butter, an egg and the remainder of the perishable food she packed in a little parcel and left it with a note and five shillings for the charwoman, who would come in later in the week to polish the floors, clean the windows and take the laundry.

At twelve-thirty she walked down the garden path, the skirts of her black coat swinging jauntily, her pochette in her hand. The curtains of the other studio closed with a petulant swoop as she approached. Mrs Finbridge smiled at them and walked to the tube station.

At the club she nodded brightly to the woman at the desk and hurried upstairs. She lunched in the dining-room in her familiar ladylike tweeds. One case stood waiting for her in the cubbyhole behind the desk; the other was back in the cloakroom.

While she ate she consulted a notebook from the capacious crocodile bag. It contained memoranda of several little errands; badges for the Vicar's Child Attendance Scheme, a jar of veterinary ointment unobtainable in their country town, a trifle for a servant's birthday.

On the other side of the room an elderly lady lunching with her paid companion strove to catch her attention. Mrs Finbridge avoided her skilfully. She had no time to sit on any more committees.

When she telephoned Minstree a few minutes later the butler answered her.

'Yes, Madam, all well here. The four-thirty train? Very good, Madam, I'll tell the chauffeur. The Master said if you 'phoned I was to remind you about the ointment . . . beg pardon, Madam, that *is* the Mistress speaking?'

Mrs Finbridge hesitated and for an instant her light brown eyes were wistful.

'Yes, Peterson, it is,' she said. 'I won't forget. The four-thirty train.'

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Mr. Campion and Others* by Margery Allingham]