

DILEMMAS
A. E. W. MASON

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Dilemmas

Date of first publication: 1935

Author: A. E. W. (Alfred Edward Woodley) Mason (1865-1948)

Date first posted: Dec. 16, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 16, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211232

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

*A Master Story-Teller
Sets His Plots in
Cosmopolitan Atmosphere*

France, England, South America, the Mediterranean, are the background for A. E. W. Mason's magical tales of drama and horror. From the story of what lovely Joan Winterbourne saw from the window of the old house near Caen on the night of the Studio Ball to the story of "The Wounded God" ending in that strange, loud splash in the darkness by the little French stream and the young, clear, vibrating voice calling "*Run! Run!*"—they are impregnated with color and atmosphere and tense drama. The book closes with two thrilling incidents from the World War. What really happened that pale morning when Mata Hari was led to the post to face a firing squad, is a revelation of femininity both haunting and appalling. The other story concerns the cruise of the *Virgen del Socorro*, an incident of humor and pathos fought out on the choppy waters of the Channel.

Dilemmas

Books By
A. E. W. MASON

Dilemmas
The Sapphire
The Three Gentlemen
The Dean's Elbow
The Prisoner in the Opal
No Other Tiger
The House of the Arrow
The Winding Stair
The Four Feathers
The Summons
The Broken Road
Miranda of the Balcony
Clementina
The Turnstile
The Truants
At the Villa Rose
Running Water
The Courtship of Morrice Buckler
The Philanderers
Lawrence Clavering
The Watchers
A Romance of Wastdale
Ensign Knightley and Other Tales
From the Four Corners of the World

Dilemmas

A. E. W. MASON



DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

Garden City, New York

MCMXXXV

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT, 1926, 1927, 1930, 1933, 1934, 1935
BY ALFRED EDWARD WOODLEY MASON
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

FIRST EDITION

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
CHRISTABEL ABERCONWAY

THE CHARACTERS in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person.

CONTENTS

THE STRANGE CASE OF JOAN WINTERBOURNE

P. 1

THE WOUNDED GOD

P. 29

THE CHRONOMETER

P. 56

SIXTEEN BELLS

P. 74

THE REVEREND BERNARD SIMMONS, B.D.

P. 94

A FLAW IN THE ORGANIZATION

P. 118

THE LAW OF FLIGHT

P. 136

THE KEY

P. 160

TASMANIAN JIM'S SPECIALITIES

P. 182

THE ITALIAN

P. 204

MAGIC

P. 228

THE DUCHESS AND LADY TORRENT

P. 248

WAR NOTES

[Mata Hari](#)

P. 275

[The Cruise of the *Virgen del Socorro*](#)

P. 280

THE STRANGE CASE OF JOAN WINTERBOURNE

CLOSE to the foot of the staircase, the manager of the hotel was giving instructions to a liveried attendant. A little way off five young people, three men and two women, were standing together in an impatient group. It was the height of the holiday season at this watering-place, and the roar of voices from the dining-room behind the glass doors drowned altogether the thunder of the surf upon the beach.

“Joan was certain to be late,” said the hostess of the party as she looked with vexation about the lounge, now alcove after alcove, a wilderness of plush upholstery and oriental tables. “It’s part of her present make-up.”

At that moment the girl herself came running down the wide staircase, a gleaming slender creature of twenty-two years, with large brown eyes and a fresh face which she had carefully painted a shade of orange. Her lips showed the bright scarlet which women’s lips share with the tunics of the Guards. She carried, of course, neither fan nor gloves, but about her slim white throat she wore a string of iridescent beads which might have been pearls had not their enormous size boasted their artificiality. She gave to Bramley, the young surgeon who formed one of the group of five, the amusing impression that she was playing very hard at being the young lady of the dance clubs. She was certainly abrim with eagerness to make a quite complete affair of this evening’s enjoyment.

“I am so sorry, Marjorie, that I am late,” she cried to her hostess, and so stopped suddenly upon the last shallow tread of the stairs. All her joy was extinguished in an instant. Her hands clenched and then flew upwards to cover her face. But in the moment which intervened Bramley read so stark a terror in the gleam of her eyes and the quiver of her lips that it shocked him. A fluttering wail broke from her lips, and she crumpled as if her bones were suddenly turned to water. She slid down in a heap against the balustrade. Before Bramley could reach her she had fainted.

“What is the number of her room?” he asked.

“Twenty-three, on the first floor,” said Marjorie Hastings. “Oh, I hope it’s not serious.”

“I don’t think there’s any reason for alarm,” the surgeon reassured her. He turned to the manager of the hotel. “You might send a maid”; and lifting the girl up in his arms with an ease which surprised everyone, he carried her up the stairs.

At the landing he called down:

“You’d better all go in to dinner. We’ll follow.”

But the greater part of an hour had passed before Bramley joined the party at the table; and then he returned alone.

“Joan wants nothing,” he explained. “She is asleep now.”

“What was the matter?” asked Marjorie Hastings.

“I haven’t one idea,” replied Bramley. “There’s nothing wrong with her really.”

“I can explain,” said a stout hearty young man who sat on the other side of Marjorie Hastings. “You met Joan for the first time yesterday. But I can tell you she has been overdoin’ it for a good few years now. First she was going to be an artist and she slashed on paint all day for months. When that fell down, she splashed ink on paper all night for another set of months. When that fell down, she plumped for the open air and set out to show Miss Leitch how to play golf. When that fell down, she hit the cabarets. Now she has fallen down herself. Joan is a perfect darling, but she wants someone to smack her from time to time.”

He sketched her history. No father and no mother, an aunt somewhere—utterly useless—a bachelor flat in Pall Mall, and a sufficient income. “And a little nervous always,” he concluded. “She’s not a case for you, Bramley, at all. She’s meant for the psycho-wanglers.”

Bramley shook his head vigorously. To him, already eminent as an operator and a firm believer that man’s best friend was the knife, psycho-analysis was the heresy of heresies.

“Just jargon. Quacks doctoring the half-baked,” he declared confidently. For like many brilliant men he was a little arrogant in his attitude towards the things which he did not know. He was none the less troubled by Joan Winterbourne’s collapse, and the next morning when the rest of the party went off to the golf-course, he stayed behind.

Joan came down at eleven. Her step was firm. There was not even a shadow under her eyes. Her swoon had left no other trace than this: she was

dressed for a journey.

“You are going away?” Bramley asked. He saw the door of the luggage lift open and trunks painted with her initials.

“Yes. I have left a note for Marjorie. I am very sorry. I was enjoying myself here very much. But I have got to go.”

“It’s a pity,” Bramley said regretfully. “For I should have liked to have looked after you for a little.”

Joan smiled gratefully.

“That’s very kind,” she answered warmly. “But what happened to me last night has happened three times before; and I never can bear the place where it happened, or anything associated with it afterwards. I couldn’t stay here another day. I can’t give you any reason, but I couldn’t.”

Joan was quite without affectation now. She was not playing at being anything but herself—a girl driven hard by an unaccountable experience and seeking the one only way of relief which her instincts had taught to her. Bramley made no attempt to dissuade her.

“If you’ll send your maid with your luggage on to the station by the omnibus, I’ll walk along with you,” he said.

They went out on to the sea-front together, and in the course of that walk, Joan was persuaded by his mere reticence to reveal more of herself than she ever had done before.

“The first time I behaved in that silly fashion,” she said, “was on the sailing-yacht of Monsieur de Ferraud off Bordeaux two summers ago. In May of the next year came the second time. I was on a motor-trip to the South of France by the Route des Alpes and the car broke down in the Dauphiné between La Grave and the Col de Lauteret. I was standing at the side of the road, and crumpled up as I did last night. The third time I was fortunately sitting down. It was in a circus at St. Etienne. I haven’t one idea why it happens. So you see that since I can’t endure a yacht, or a motor-car, or a circus, and now shall shrink from any seaside hotel, my life is becoming a little circumscribed.”

She ended with a smile of humour which did not hide from him that her distress was very real. Bramley put her into a carriage.

“Will you give me a chance?” he asked, as he shook her hand. “It’s all wrong that any girl as young and healthy as you are should go on being attacked in this way. There must be an explanation, and therefore there must be a cure.”

The blood mounted into Joan's cheeks. Gratitude shone in her eyes. It did Bramley besides no harm in her thoughts that he was a good-looking young man of a tall and sinewy build.

"Of course I shall be ever so thankful if you'll look after me," she said; and the train moved out of the station.

Bramley walked back to the hotel and made some inquiries that evening of the ruddy-faced optimist who gave the Winterbourne family a clean bill of health.

"Never heard of any epilepsy. A nervous, kind of artistic lot—that, yes. The father, for instance, would always rather paint a bird than shoot one. Queer taste, isn't it? But all of them clean-blooded and clear-eyed just like Joan herself. No, no, it's not your affair, Bramley, so you can keep your penknife in your pocket. Joan ought to go to the psycho-boys."

This time Bramley did not shake his head in contempt. Certainly if there was anything in the theories of the "psycho-boys," here was the very patient for them. It was all heresy, to be sure, but none the less he found himself in his perplexity formulating the case from their angle. Thus:

"A girl, by heredity and of her own disposition nervous, passes through an experience which Nature, in its determination to survive, proceeds to bury deep down in the girl's subconsciousness below the levels of memory. The experience therefore was one terrible enough to shake her reason; and from time to time something, a word perhaps, or an article, associated with that experience reproduces suddenly in a milder form the original terror and shock. The only cure is to be found in restoring this experience to the patient's memory. For she will then understand; and the trouble will be at an end."

Thus he reflected, whilst he paid an indifferent attention to the conversation at the dinner-table; so indifferent indeed that he actually began to carry on his formulation aloud:

"It is quite clear, therefore, or would be quite clear, if I accepted these fantastic theories, which I don't——"

At this point Marjorie Hastings interrupted him.

"My dear man, what are you talking about?"

"Nothing, Marjorie. The idiocy with which I have long been threatened has at last declared itself."

What was, or would have been quite clear to him, if he had accepted the heresy, amounted simply to this. There was one circumstance, one factor common to all the four occasions upon which Joan had felt the inrush of

terror and had swooned away. At first nothing seemed more hopeless to Bramley than to find a link between the lounge of a hotel upon the south coast of England, and a circus at St. Etienne in France, or between a yacht in the Bay of Biscay and a motor-car breakdown in the Dauphiné Alps. Yet undoubtedly such a link there must be.

He turned to Marjorie Hastings.

“Do you know St. Etienne?”

“No. Where is it?”

Bramley had drawn a blank there and tried again.

“Monsieur de Ferraud’s yacht, I believe, is little short of a palace.”

Marjorie Hastings looked at him with sympathy.

“You poor thing!” she cried. “You must hold some ice to your forehead. Try some sarsaparilla! It may be just what you want.”

“Silence, woman!” returned Bramley. He had drawn another blank, but he tried again. “Did you ever travel by the Route des Alpes?”

“Don’t be silly! Of course I did. I motored to Florence one spring with Joan and——” Marjorie Hastings came to an abrupt stop. “That’s curious,” she resumed slowly. “I hadn’t thought of it until now. Joan had just the same sort of attack and behaved just in the same strange way afterwards. She wouldn’t go on with us. She went back in the Diligence to Grenoble and joined us in Nice by train.”

This time Bramley had drawn a horse at all events. He turned to Marjorie eagerly.

“Tell me all about it, please.”

The car had broken down just beyond a tunnel half an hour or so after passing La Grave. They had sent back to the village for a cart; they turned the car round by hand to have it ready; and after that they had all strolled idly about, admiring the great bastion of the Meije across the valley and the white velvet of its enormous glacier. The cart had emerged from the tunnel. The driver had got down to fix his tow-rope to the axle of the car and without a word Joan dropped in the middle of the road as if she had been shot. “She might have broken her nose or got concussion. I tell you, it was alarming.”

“Thank you,” said Bramley. The yacht of Monsieur de Ferraud off Bordeaux, the breakdown of the motor-car in the Dauphiné, the circus of St. Etienne. It had flashed upon him that these three circumstances had after all

a common factor. Did the empty lounge of the hotel last night contain it also? Bramley sought out the manager immediately after dinner.

“You were close to the foot of the stairs when Miss Winterbourne fainted,” he said.

“Yes. I was arranging with Alphonse the space we should reserve for dancing.”

“Alphonse!” cried Bramley. “The lounge-attendant. Yes, of course. He is French?”

“But of course, as I am.”

“And you were speaking in French?”

“No doubt!” The manager shrugged his shoulders. “I do not remember. But no doubt! We always do. Would you like to see Alphonse, Mr. Bramley?”

“Of all things,” Bramley replied; and after a quarter of an hour, and some goings and comings of the lounge-attendant, Bramley left the office with a smile upon his face and a package under his arm. He felt the excitement of an adventurer upon a treasure-hunt who has discovered the first important clue.

Upon his return to London, he wrote to Joan Winterbourne, asking her to play golf with him on the first Saturday at Beaconsfield. She telephoned in reply: “Delighted, if we go down by train,” and though she laughed as she spoke, it was clear that she meant what she said. Bramley had planned to put no questions to her at all, but to lure her on to talk about herself in any rambling way she chose. They were much more likely to approach the truth that way. But the pair had not been playing for more than five minutes before he had forgotten all about his plans and was concerned solely with approaches of quite a different kind. For he found to his surprise and a little to his discomfort that Joan could give him half a stroke a hole.

At the ninth hole, however, when she was six up, she missed the easiest of putts and sat down on a bank with her face between her hands and despair in her brown eyes.

“Look at that!” she cried, and she swore loudly and lustily so that an elderly lady close by left out the next two holes and removed herself to a less vicious part of the course.

“I shall never be any good at anything. It was just the same when I painted. Year after year I used to go in the summer to Normandy with a class and I never got anywhere.”

Bramley became aware once more of his attractive patient and forgot the catastrophe of his golf.

“Oho! So you used to go to Normandy?” he repeated with the utmost carelessness.

“Yes. To St.-Vire-en-Pré, a tiny village a mile from the sea. You’ll never have heard of it. I went there for three summers, until I was eighteen. Then I hated it. Shall we go on?”

“Yes. You are only five up now. So you hated it? An ugly little village, eh?”

“On the contrary, lovely. I lodged in an old farm with another girl, Mary Cole. I think she’s married now.”

Joan drove off from the tenth tee with her whole attention concentrated on the stroke. The memory of the summers at St.-Vire-en-Pré meant nothing to her, quite obviously. Bramley’s thoughts, however, ran as follows:

“I must find Mary Cole. Marjorie Hastings must help me. I want to know if Joan was on Monsieur de Ferraud’s yacht after the last summer at St.-Vire-en-Pré. If after, then we may be very near to the solution of our riddle.” With the result that his ball escaped into a patch of rough grass and dug itself in.

Bramley, however, no longer minded. He was indeed rather elated, chiefly on Joan’s account, but a little too because he was now minded to demonstrate to the “psycho-boys” that any old surgeon could play their game just as well as they did, if he only took the trouble.

Marjorie Hastings produced Mary Cole in due course. She was a brisk young woman, now married, with a couple of children, who had slipped quite out of the little set in which Joan played so conspicuous a part. Even the summers on the coast of Normandy had become unsubstantial as dreams to her. But she remembered how those visits ceased.

“We were a large party that year. So Joan and I had to find a lodging in a house which was strange to us. We found it at a farm a hundred yards or so beyond the end of the village, the farm of Narcisse Perdoux. The work of the farm was all done by the family and we were charged an extortionate price for our two rooms. We had made up our minds never to go back there in any case. Then came the last night before the party broke up. We had a dance in the studio. Joan and I went back to the farm at about one o’clock in the morning. The door was on the latch—a relief to us, for old Narcisse Perdoux, even with his Sunday manners on, was a grudging inappeasable person. What he would have been if we had waked him out of his bed to let

us in we were afraid to think. We crept upstairs to our rooms, which stood end to end on the first floor, my window looking out towards the sea, Joan's at the back looking out past the barn to the open country. We both went at once to our separate rooms, for we had our packing to do in the morning, and I at all events was more than half-asleep already. I don't suppose that ten minutes had passed before I was in bed. I am certain that fifteen hadn't before I was asleep. I was awakened by someone falling into my room and collapsing with a thud on the floor. I lit my candle. It was Joan. For a moment I thought that she was dead. But her heart was beating and she was breathing. I got her into my bed, chafed her feet, put my salts to her nostrils, did in a word what I could and after a little while she came to. She was sick—terribly sick for a long while. The farm was stirring before she dropped off to sleep, but then she slept heavily for a long time.”

“She had no injury?” Bramley asked.

“None at all.”

“And how did she explain her rush into your bedroom at two o'clock in the morning,” interrupted Marjorie Hastings; “and her swoon?”

“Of course she didn't explain that at all,” Bramley replied, and Mary Cole stared at him in surprise.

“How could you know that?” she asked. “But it's true. Nothing might have happened to her at all, beyond that she had slept in my bed instead of her own. She never alluded to it. She went about her packing. The only unusual sign she made was a desperate hurry to get away from the house.”

“But why she was in a hurry she didn't know,” said Bramley, and again Mary Cole turned to him in surprise.

“That's just it. Joan suddenly hated the place. It made her ill.”

“But surely you questioned her?” Marjorie Hastings urged. “I should have been frightened out of my life if anyone had come tumbling about my bedroom in a lonely farmhouse in the middle of the night. My word, I should have asked a question or two and seen that I got the answers.”

Marjorie's pretty face was truculent. Bramley was smiling at her truculence when Mary Cole explained:

“I was anxious to get away too, without wasting a moment. For the farm was all upset, and we weren't wanted. You see Charles, Narcisse Perdoux's oldest son, had died during the night.—What in the world's the matter?”

This question was thrown in a startled voice at Bramley, from whose face the smile had suddenly vanished.

“Nothing,” he answered gravely and hesitatingly, “except—that we are in deeper waters than ever I imagined us to be.”

All Bramley’s stipulations were working out in the most dreadful fashion. The first experience of Joan’s, terrible enough to shake the reason; Nature’s determination to thrust it beyond the reach of memory; the factor common to the original seizure and to each recurrence; and now this revelation by Mary Cole all pointed to some grim and sinister story of the darkness—an outrage upon nature, a horror upon horrors. Bramley remembered the stark look of terror which had shone in Joan’s eyes during the moment when she had clung to the balustrade in the hotel lounge and before she had clapped her hands to her face to shut the vision out. He felt a chill as though ice had slipped down his spine. And this story had to be dragged up in all its dimly seen ugliness into the full light! There was no hope for Joan in any other way. She must be made to remember. After all, he realized with a sudden humility, the “psycho-boys” had their penknives too, though they were different from his.

II

He sent for Joan Winterbourne the next day and she came to him in Harley Street. From her close-fitting hat to her beige stockings and her shiny shoes, she was just one of the pretty young women in the uniform of the day. But there was a tension, a vague anxiety in her face which had already begun to set her a little apart. It would overcloud her altogether unless it was explained to her and thereby dissolved.

“You have been all right since you beat me so disgracefully at Beaconsfield?” he asked.

“Quite. But one never knows. . . .”

“I believe we are going to know this morning,” he reassured her; and a sudden wave of confidence and hope brought the colour into her cheeks. He put her into a chair by the side of his table.

“I want you to tell me one or two things.”

“Ask away?” said Joan.

“When did you have this attack on Monsieur de Ferraud’s yacht?”

“Three years ago.”

“I see. After your last visit to St.-Vire-en-Pré?”

“Yes, a year after.”

“And in the same month of the year?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the same day of the month?”

“That I can’t remember.”

“Sure? Let’s see! You left St.-Vire-en-Pré”—and here Bramley was careful to speak without a hint of emphasis or significance—“the day after Charles Perdoux died at the farm. You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter.”

And it didn’t. The day of the week was of no importance. What did matter was the swift sidelong stare of Joan’s eyes when he mentioned Charles Perdoux’s name, and the curious foxiness which sharpened her face. She was suddenly disfigured. In another age he would have said that she was possessed by the devil. For the change was horrible. All her grace and youth in a second were gone. Her gaze was perfectly steady, but it was cunning. Yet cunning was too respectable a word. It was leery—as was the smile which distorted her mouth. Bramley had an inspiration that he was wrestling with some obscene spirit ages old for the possession of this girl. The spirit seemed to dare him to make her remember if he could. If he had ever doubted that he was on the right lines, he threw his doubts overboard now. Heresy or no heresy, he knew. The “psycho-boys” were one up.

“Joan,” he said gently. He bent forward and took her hand in his. “Let us get back to the yacht.”

“Yes,” she answered, her features relaxed; she flashed back to her normal self, attentive to his questions, certain of his goodwill, dispossessed of the devil.

She marshalled her memories.

“It was in the morning. I was on deck. The yacht was a schooner. We were going to race that day. The crew were busy with their preparations. Almost over my head a sailor seated on the yard was fitting a new rope through a block. I remember the end of the rope slipping down the side of the mast like a snake. I was for no reason shocked out of my wits and I fainted.”

“Thank you,” Bramley interrupted. “I needn’t bother you any more about the yacht. You saw a rope shaking down the side of the mast, and you passed out. Right! Let’s come now to the breakdown of the motor on the Route des Alpes.”

Joan leaned forward.

“Yes?”

“You were all out of the car on the road.”

“Yes.”

“Across the valley the Meije rose.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a huge mass of a mountain with pinnacles and glaciers flowing down its flank.”

“Yes.”

“But at that moment you weren’t admiring it. You weren’t looking at it at all. Just visualize that exact spot if you can!”

Joan leaned back in her chair and concentrated her thoughts, a little timidly at first lest her experience on the road should be repeated here in Bramley’s consulting-room; and afterwards, since nothing happened, with a greater freedom.

“I had the Meije upon my left,” she resumed slowly. “It’s true. I was not looking at the mountain. I was facing the tunnel through which we had come. The brokendown car was in front of me. A cart had come through the tunnel from La Grave to tow us back. The driver of the car was fixing a rope to the front axle of the car, I remember the same horrible sense of sickness and terror overwhelming me.”

“Exactly,” said Bramley. She was rather white now, but he was smiling at her cheerfully. “It’s all working out. Don’t worry!”

Joan did not answer in words, but the deep breath she drew was sign enough of her desperate need to free herself from the ghastly obsession which was darkening all her life.

“Every time I cross a road,” she said, “I ask myself, ‘Shall I go down here under the wheels?’ ”

“We shall answer that, Joan, before we have finished,” Bramley replied, with every sign of confidence. “Now let’s see what was happening in the circus at St. Etienne.”

“That wasn’t so inexcusable,” Joan answered. “An acrobat was performing on a trapeze and one of its ropes broke. Luckily he was sitting on the trapeze at rest. He was able to save himself, for the second rope held. But for the moment it gave everyone a jar.”

“So all those three occurrences had one thing in common.”

Joan looked puzzled.

“I don’t see. . . . A rope, of course, but——”

“Exactly, a rope,” Bramley returned.

“But when I was running down the stairs in the hotel,” Joan argued quickly. “I didn’t——” and she came to a stop and resumed again in a voice of surprise. “Oh, yes! There was a man in a livery holding a rope.”

“Yes. And that rope is the most important of all the ropes. The rope covered with red baize which was usually stretched out to mark off the arena reserved for dancing had been lost.”

“But I have seen heaps of ropes,” Joan protested. “They have never affected me at all.”

“Wait a bit,” Bramley returned. “The attendant in the livery was a Frenchman. He produced a rope of his own, a French rope.”

“Why should that French rope be the most important?” Joan asked.

“Because I bought it,” answered Bramley. “I have got it here.”

“Yes?” For more than a second or two Joan hesitated. She shrank back. Bramley used no persuasions. There was something he wanted her to say without any promptings from him. Joan gathered her courage; she shrugged her shoulders.

“I had better see it, hadn’t I?”

Bramley said:

“Yes, if you’d like to.”

“I should like to,” answered Joan.

“Good!”

Bramley sprang up and went to his cupboard.

“It’s just a rope woven in the French way. It won’t affect you at all now. It can’t do anything. And you are prepared for it.” Whilst he spoke he brought the brown-paper parcel from the cupboard and carried it to his table and untied the string in front of Joan. The movements of his fingers had a surgeon’s neatness and precision. Every element of drama was carefully eliminated. He never even looked at Joan, although he was aware of her every gesture. He unwrapped the parcel with no more care than if it had been a box of sweets. But his heart was beating fast enough; and if he did not look at his patient it was lest his face should betray his fear. The fear, however, was now all upon his side.

“A rope?” said Joan. She was merely curious now and wondering.

Bramley opened his parcel. “There it is.”

Joan stretched out her hand and drew it back again and then took the rope between her fingers, felt it and looked at it, all with a frowning forehead and perplexed eyes.

“Not very alarming, is it?” said Bramley. “But notice the make of it. English ropes are wound in spirals. In this one the strands cross and recross one another in little diamond patterns. That’s the French way. That’s why it looked like a snake sliding down the mast.”

“Yes, I see.”

Joan examined the rope, bending her head over it.

“But why in the world should I or any girl drop down at the sight of a rope even with this pattern? It makes me out a complete fool!”

“Yes, why? That’s just what I want you to tell me,” replied Bramley. He took both her hands in his and held her eyes with an unwavering glance. “What happened at the farm of Narcisse Perdoux at St.-Vire-en-Pré the night before you went away?”

Her hands tightened within his grasp. She flinched away a little. She shook her head.

“What did you see after you and Mary Cole separated for the night?”

The darkness within her was troubled. The tension of her fingers was relaxed. A glimmer of light shone in her eyes and was extinguished. She drew her hands away from Bramley’s, took up the rope again, and played with it. Bramley’s eyes never left hers for the fraction of a second.

“Baril——” she began, and stopped and tried again. “Barillier. Yes——” She patted the rope. “Barillier’s rope. They borrowed it.”

“From Barillier, the butcher?”

“Yes.”

“They sent for it, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“There was a barn?”

“Oh!”

Joan gasped. She looked up instantly to Bramley’s face, her eyes bright, the blood coming and going in her cheeks. A door was opening and shutting and opening again.

“A barn?” she repeated. “Yes, there was a barn.”

“Where was the barn?”

“Behind the farmhouse.”

“Then your bedroom windows looked on to it?”

“Yes.”

Joan was on the edge of a dreaded revelation. She looked at the rope, twisted and pulled at it, and smoothed it. Bramley dared not move. He spoke in a low, even, monotonous voice, but all his will was behind the words.

“How did Charles Perdoux die on that night, Joan?”

Nature had come to Joan’s rescue on that night; had buried deep beyond the reach of her conscious memory an unsettling experience, but had left this one chink. For her reason’s sake she must dig now until that experience was recovered. Nothing was heard in the room for a long time but the swift ticking of a clock upon the mantelpiece. Then she looked up and answered:

“A great crime was committed on that night.”

And at last the story was told.

III

Narcisse Perdoux was thought throughout that district of Normandy to be a warm man, though none except his creditors ever saw the colour of his money. They, however, were scrupulously paid to the last mite on the day when their bills fell due, the old man fetching the exact sum in discoloured notes and coppers from his room upstairs. There were five in the household, Narcisse himself, a gnarled giant, strong as an ox, with wrinkles on his copper-brown neck like gashes, his wife Angèle, a crone before her time, his daughter Clothilde, a plain, hard-featured young woman with a shrill quarrelsome voice, and two sons Charles and Desiré. They lived meagrely in the vast smoke-grimed kitchen, like the poorest of peasants, and slaved upon the farm from the dark of the morning to long after nightfall, tasting neither amusement, nor books, nor any grace of life. For they were greedy, with a sort of passion of ill will towards every one of their neighbours. They could never get it out of their heads that they were being robbed. Someone more cunning was always getting the better of them.

But even within the household there was ill will and rancour too. Charles by some freak of nature was a slender good-looking lad, eager for such poor pleasures as came his way. Occasionally he would run up a bill in Caen for a fine suit of clothes and another for a dinner and a bottle of wine enjoyed in company with a girl. On such occasions you would have thought that the whole family was ruined, such shrill lamentations broke from the women, such tirades of abuse from Narcisse and Desiré. Charles was the simpleton, the spendthrift; gaol would be the end of him and bankruptcy the lot of the

family. Nevertheless, in that primitive society he retained the rights of the first-born, though Desiré, a brutish counterpart of his father, watched him with a sullen jealousy and rancour.

Thus it was Charles's privilege to drive in the high gig to Caen with thirty-two pounds in his pocket for the payment of some bills on the afternoon of the Studio Ball. Joan saw him drive off, looking as smart as could be in his best clothes, with his hat cocked on the side of his head and a rapturous smile upon his face, like a schoolboy going home.

"Mind you walk the horse up the hills!" said Narcisse, and "Take care you are back before nine!" screamed Clothilde; and with a flourish of his whip, Charles Perdoux drove off. That was at three o'clock in the afternoon. At one o'clock in the morning, on their return from the studio, Joan said good night to Mary Cole in a whisper, for the house was all quiet and dark, and went into her room. But once in her room, being hot and dusty from the dance, she suddenly felt that she must have some hot water to wash in before she went to bed. There was always a great kettle simmering on the kitchen fire; and what with the early risings and the late retirings of that laborious household, the fire was seldom out.

Joan accordingly crept down the stairs with her can in one hand and her lighted candle in the other. She put the can silently down and gently unlatched the kitchen door. To her amazement the lamp was still burning and about the fire Narcisse, Angèle, Clothilde and Desiré were grouped. They were sitting bolt upright, quite silent and quite motionless. Joan closed the door again with an unaccountable chill of fear at her heart. There was something dreadfully sinister in the aspect of that silent group. They had the look of a pitiless tribunal.

Not one of them had seen her. She went upstairs to her room, and had hardly closed the door before she heard a horse's hoofs and the creak of wheels. The sounds stopped at the gate of the yard which her window overlooked. She extinguished her candle, and looked out of her window which was open and the blind not lowered. The night was clear and lit by stars. She could see Charles Perdoux lead in the horse, unharness and stable it, and wheel the gig into its shed. He did everything very quietly so that the household might not be aroused. Then he stood in front of the door for a few moments, as if he was afraid, before he raised the latch and went in. Almost at once Joan heard the voice of Narcisse. That too, for a wonder, was very quiet, and it daunted Joan as the loud tones which he used when in a passion could not have done. She pictured to herself the luckless youth creeping towards the stairs and the old man confronting him in the doorway of the

kitchen and asking for the reason of his tardiness. The voice died away as the door of the kitchen was closed. There was not after all to be a quarrel then, and Joan, greatly relieved, went to bed and fell asleep.

But very soon afterwards she was awakened by the slamming of a gate. She got out of bed and looked again from her window; she was astonished to see by certain chinks in the wall, that the great barn opposite was lit up. Someone crossed the yard from the gate to the barn door. As he opened it and the light fell upon his face, she saw that it was Desiré and that he carried a coil of rope in his hand. She might have thought that the household was just beginning its day's work, but there was a clumsy stealthiness in Desiré's movements which alarmed her. He opened one of the great doors only just enough to enable him to slip through and he closed it carefully and noiselessly behind him. As he closed it, terror seized upon Joan and held her a prisoner by the window. Desiré came out again into the courtyard and disappeared amongst the shadows. But the light still burned within the barn, and Joan still clung to the window-sill.

But she was not the only one to be uneasy that night in St.-Vire-en-Pré. For she heard the sound of a man running in heavy shoes which rang upon the road. He at all events was making no effort to be secret. The sound of his running grew louder and louder. He stopped at the gate and even then Joan could hear the noise of his breathing. He was panting as though his heart would burst. He pushed open the gate and entered the courtyard. He looked first up at the darkened windows of the house, and only afterwards caught sight of the rays of light streaming out from the barn. Then in his turn he crept across the yard towards it and, as one shaft touched his face, Joan recognized him for Barillier, the village butcher, who lived at the nearest house down the road to the sea.

He peered between the great leaves of the door and with a loud cry dragged them open. They were wide, high doors reaching upwards to the edge of the roof-tiles. They clattered back against the walls, and the interior of the barn was exposed to Joan's eyes, brightly lit by a hissing petrol lamp, like a scene of a theatre. Joan was paralysed by horror. For Charles Perdoux was jerking and dangling from a rope thrown over a crossbeam, whilst the family stood below and watched him. Their shadows were thrown upon the walls in monstrous and misshapen exaggerations; whilst by some freak of the lamp's position, the shadow of the dangling figure showed like that of a little doll. At the clatter of the doors, Narcisse turned and with a bellow of rage ran at Barillier.

“What are you doing here, in my barn?” he cried roughly.

Barillier cowered back against the wall.

“I was afraid,” he stammered. “I was afraid.”

The tremendous fact stood out that Barillier was a coward. Narcisse with his primitive cunning took his immediate profit of it. His voice lost all its truculence, and dropped to a whine: “So are we all afraid. Poor people, what will become of us? Here is my unfortunate boy Charles! He gambles away thirty-two pounds”—and even at that moment he could hardly mention the sum without a snarl of rage—“in Caen and then in despair hangs himself! What disgrace! What misery!”

“Hangs himself?” repeated Barillier, startled even out of his cowardice. “But it’s my rope! Desiré woke me up to borrow it . . . in the middle of the night! That’s what frightened me——” and he broke off with a great cry which rang out into the night and trembled away over the empty country. “He is alive! I saw his lips move!”

Joan from her window had seen that too, and the loud cry of Barillier drowned a moan from her. Barillier snatched a great clasp-knife from his pocket and ran, as he opened it, towards the boy dangling in the noose. Narcisse seized his arm and stopped him.

“What are you doing?” he exclaimed with amazement in his voice. “You can’t cut a good rope like that! It’s quite new. You are mad.”

Narcisse stared from under his great eyebrows at the butcher, as though he gazed upon a lunatic; and in a hurry to spare his eyes such an outrage, began himself to untie the end of the rope from the foot of one of the roof pillars. “Such a rope!” he said. “It will be of use on the farm. It is clear, my friend Barillier, that you are a rich man.”

And then Clothilde spoke. She and her mother had drawn apart and had been sitting side by side upon an old packing-case with no more emotion than a couple of wax figures might have shown. Her voice rose hard and rancorous, whilst Barillier held up in his arms the inert figure of Charles Perdoux.

“Yes, no doubt Barillier can afford to lose thirty-two pounds in an afternoon, just like that,” and she snapped her fingers. “But we poor people, when that happens, we have to do something.”

“Hold your tongue, Clothilde,” Narcisse growled with an angry glance of warning, as he let the rope go. He went to Barillier’s side and, loosening the noose, slipped it off the lad’s head.

“Now give him to me,” he said, and he took Charles Perdoux into his strong arms as if he weighed no more than the shadow of the doll upon the

wall.

“He wants air,” said Narcisse, and turning his back upon Barillier he carried the boy towards the open doors, but he almost knocked against Desiré who, alarmed by the noise, had run back to the barn to see how things were getting on. Desiré recoiled with a look of stupefaction from his father. He looked round the barn, at Barillier, at his mother, at Clothilde; and in a grating voice which seemed to hold all the venom in the world, he cried:

“You have taken him down—you cowards!”

But Narcisse spoke to him in an undertone and he drew aside. Narcisse sat down upon a truss of hay in the wide doorway with his face to the courtyard and his back to the petrol lamp, and laid Charles across his knees.

“It is of no use,” he said. “Go home, Barillier! It is of no use. The boy’s dead. Go home and hold your tongue.”

Barillier, now that his one audacity had been accomplished, was shaking with fear like a man in a fever.

“Yes, yes! But what will you say, Perdoux, to-day? Where will they find Charles?”

“They will find him hanging in the barn,” Narcisse interrupted. “*We* shall find him. He is dead, Barillier. Go home!” And he repeated with a harsh menace in his voice: “And hold your tongue!”

Barillier, the coward, went, without another word.

Desiré escorted him to the gate and this time he locked it when Barillier had passed out. He stood listening whilst the heavy shoes which had rung so loudly and quickly on the road a few minutes ago, now dragged away, the footsteps of a man without heart or decision. Desiré came back to the barn.

“He has gone, the fool. But we must be quick. We shall have the morning on us before we know it.”

And then Narcisse leaned forward. The lad struggled ever so slightly on his knees.

“Good God!” cried Narcisse. “The dirty pig wants to come to life again.”

Clothilde at the back added with a savage laugh:

“He would! After robbing us!” And Joan saw the immense corded hands of Narcisse move and move horribly.

His back was towards the barn and the lamp was behind him. Joan could only see that his arms were moving, but she had not a doubt what his fingers were doing. They were upon the lad’s throat. And his struggles ceased.

The old woman, Angèle, from beginning to end, had not said one word.

IV

It was at this moment that Joan had torn herself from the window and rushed into Mary Cole's room and dropped upon the floor in a swoon which had drowned all memory of the affair, until now when she sat in Bramley's room.

"I am ashamed of myself," she said, springing up from her chair. "For four years those murderers have walked about their farm, and I have done nothing."

Bramley held up his hand.

"There is no need to do anything. When Mary Cole told me what she knew, the name of Perdoux sounded familiar to me. And that night I remembered a curious story which I had read carelessly in a newspaper. I found the paper." He took a cutting from a drawer in his table.

"The sequel is as astounding as anything you have told me. Listen! Last year Barillier, under the pressure of a growing remorse for his cowardice, began to drop dark hints. Finally he whispered that young Charles Perdoux had not committed suicide at all, but had been murdered by his father. The Perdoux family began to be looked at askance and the old man, Narcisse, who clung to his respectability as closely as he did to his money, actually brought an action for slander against Barillier, thinking no doubt that a coward once would be a coward a second time. But Barillier told his story, glad to rid his conscience of the burden, and told it with so much circumstance that no one in court doubted its truth. Narcisse Perdoux was arrested and the night before he was to be brought into the presence of the examining magistrate, he in fact did hang himself with his braces from the window-bars of his cell."

Bramley handed to Joan the cutting which came from a newspaper six weeks old.

"We can leave it there," he said.

Joan nodded her head. She took up the rope, and looked at it curiously. Then she turned and held out both her hands.

"I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me," she said. "I am free."

THE WOUNDED GOD

THERE were only two really young people in Mrs. Maine's drawing-room that evening and naturally enough they sat apart talking to each other. At least that is how Cynthia Maine would have put it. The young man in fact was dutifully listening and Cynthia was in full flight. The eager thrill of her voice, her face a-quiver, the sparkling intensity of her charming and charmingly dressed person, all suggested that she was satisfactorily solving one of the world's great problems. But she was not. She was debating with her beau—as Cynthia understood debate—where they should go and dance the night away as soon as these tiresome elders had trailed off to their beds. Should it be the Fifty-Fifty, or the Embassy, or the Café de Paris? But before the momentous decision was reached, Cynthia suddenly gave up. She leaned back in her chair and her hands dropped over the arms.

“I have been fighting against it all the evening, but I'm beaten,” she said moodily. Then she rose abruptly and slipped out between the curtains on to the balcony.

Her bewildered companion found her there. She was leaning, her elbows propped upon the red cushion which stretched along the top of the balcony's parapet, and her hands pressed tightly over her eyes in a vain endeavour to shut out some vision which obsessed her.

“Cynthia, what in the world have I done to hurt you?” the youth asked remorsefully.

Cynthia lifted her face up and stared at him. She found his quite natural question utterly inexplicable.

“You, Jim? Why, nothing of course.”

She looked out over the Green Park, and threw up her head as though she was bathing her forehead and her throat in its cool fresh darkness; and drew from it some balm for her agitation.

“This is one of Mummy's parties,” she said. “There are people here whom I don't know. People she met this spring when I wasn't with her, at

Cairo, or Tunis, or Algiers, or somewhere. So I can't tell which of them is doing it. Can I?"

"No, you certainly can't," Jim asserted stoutly.

Cynthia swerved like a filly when a sheet of paper blows across the road in front of her, and with a frown wrinkling her pretty forehead, surveyed through the gaps between the curtains her mother's guests. Jim looked over her shoulder, frowning still more portentously, and forgot his manners.

"They look as commonplace a crowd as I ever saw gathered together in my life. Not one of them has got anything on you," he said.

"Yes, but there is one of them who isn't commonplace at all," returned Cynthia with conviction. "One of them is doing it."

Jim was half inclined to jest and sing, "Everybody's doing it." But tact was his strong suit on this summer night.

"Doing what, Cynthia?" he asked gently.

"Hush!"

An appealing hand was thrust under his arm and pressed into his coat-sleeve. Cynthia wanted companionship, not conversation.

"I shall have an awful night, Jim, unless we put up a barrage."

Cynthia was very miserable. Jim turned back his hand and got hold of Cynthia's.

"I know. We'll slip out now and get away. I have got my little car at the door."

Cynthia, however, shook her head.

"It wouldn't be fair on Mummy. We must wait. They'll all go very soon. Besides, it is important to me to find out which of them it is who's doing it. Then I can make sure that whoever it is never comes to this house again."

It was an appalling threat, but Jim recognized that it was just. People had no right to do things to Cynthia which would give her an awful night, even across a drawing-room. They must be black-balled thoroughly. Then a dreadful explanation of Cynthia's misery smote him.

"My dear, you are not a natural medium, are you?" he asked in a voice of awe. He turned her towards him and contemplated her with pleasure. He looked her up and down from her neatly shingled fair brown hair to her shining feet. She was a slim, long-legged, slinky creature. All that he had ever heard about mediums led him to believe that as a rule they ran to breadth and flesh. He drew a breath of relief, but Cynthia looked at him very curiously.

“No,” she answered after a moment’s reflection. “It’s just this one thing. I am not odd in any other way. And this one thing isn’t my fault either. And there’s a very good real reason for it too.” She broke off to ask anxiously, “I don’t seem to you to be incoherent at all, do I, Jim?”

Jim firmly reassured her.

“No one could be more lucid.”

Cynthia breathed her relief.

“Thank you. You are a comfort, Jim. I’ll tell you something more now. This thing—somebody in that drawing-room knows about it—has been thinking about it all the evening—has been making me think about it—has come here to-night to make me think about it. And it’s a horror!”

And she suddenly swept her arm out across the expanse of the Green Park, from Piccadilly on the north to Buckingham Palace on the south.

“Yes, it’s a horror,” she repeated in a low voice.

She was watching a dreadful procession go by, endlessly and always from north to south. It moved not in the darkness, but along a straight white riband of road under a hot sun, between pleasant and sunny fields, but in a choking mist of yellow dust. There was a herd of white oxen at one point of the procession, and here a troop of goats and there a flock of bleating sheep. But the bulk of it was made up of old clumsy heavy carts, drawn by old, old horses, and accompanied by old, old men, and piled up with mattresses and stores and utensils, on the top of which lurched and clung old, old women and very young children. It was the age of all, men and beasts, who were taking part in this stupendous migration which gave to it its horror. These were no pioneers. It was a flight. There was one particularly dreadful spectacle, an old man without cart or horse who carried upon his bent back like a sack a still older woman. All through the day, dipping down from the northern horizon and rising to the edge of the southern, the procession streamed slowly by. At nightfall it just stopped; at daybreak it resumed. There would come a moment, Cynthia knew well—it always did come—but after she was asleep—when the procession would begin to race, when the old men and the old horses would begin to leap and jump, grotesquely with stiff limbs, like marionettes—and that was much more horrible. For some of them would fall and be trampled under foot, and no one would mind. But that moment was not yet.

There was a stir in the drawing-room behind her.

“They are going,” she said.

Both of these young people turned to the window, and Cynthia laid her hand again on Jim's arm and detained him.

"Wait! Wait!" she whispered eagerly. "I believe we shall find out which of them it is."

They watched through the gap between the curtains all the preliminary movements of a general and on the whole eagerly welcomed retreat, the guests rising as one person, the hostess with just a little less but not much less alacrity and murmurs about a delightful evening coming as if from the mouths of a succession of polite automata. They saw Mrs. Maine turn her head towards a picture on the wall. They heard her say:

"That? Yes, it is quite lovely, isn't it? Let us look at it."

Both Cynthia and Jim fixed their eyes upon the particular guest who had called Mrs. Maine's attention to the picture and now crossed the room with her. A woman, if anything a little below the average height, of an indeterminate age somewhere between thirty-six and fifty, she had no distinctive personality. She was dark, neither ugly nor beautiful. There was even something ungraceful in her walk.

"She is as commonplace as a sheep," said Jim, meaning that it could not possibly be she who had so disturbed and controlled the shining young creature just in front of him.

"Wait!" Cynthia advised. "Were you introduced to her, Jim?"

"No."

"I suppose that Mummy introduced me to her. But I don't remember anything about her. She was at the other end of the dinner-table too."

"It can't be her," said Jim.

Mrs. Maine led her visitor to the picture, a sketch of an old French château glowing in a blaze of sunlight. A great lawn, smooth and green as an emerald and set in a wide border of flowers, spread in front of a building at once elegant and solid; and a wide stream with a glint of silver, bathed the edge of the lawn in front. At the sides of the château, tall chestnut trees made an avenue and behind the château rose a high bare hill.

"Many years ago, my husband and I saw that house when we were touring in France," Mrs. Maine explained. "I fell in love with it and he bought it for me. We spent four months a year there. After my husband died, I still went back to it, but five years ago Cynthia——"

"Your daughter?" interrupted the stranger.

“Yes, my daughter took a distaste for it. So I sold it to a Monsieur Franchard. He made a great fortune out of the War and is very fond of it, I am told.”

“That’s the woman, Jim,” said Cynthia with a little shake in her voice.

But the woman in question showed no further interest in the picture. Jim had a fear lest the very intensity of Cynthia’s regard, the concentration of all her senses, should draw that strange woman’s eyes to the curtain behind which the pair of them stood concealed. But not a bit of it! The strange woman smiled, thanked her hostess for her evening, shook her hand and waddled—the word was in Jim’s thoughts—waddled out of the room. Nothing could have been more banal than her exit.

As soon as she had gone Cynthia slipped back between the curtains and took her place by her mother’s side.

“Who was it who was talking to you about the Château Doré, Mummy?” she asked in an interval between shaking hands with departing guests.

“A Madame D’Estourie,” replied her mother. “She was kind to me in Algiers. She came to London a week ago and called upon me. So I asked her to dinner.”

“Algiers!” Cynthia repeated with a start, and to herself she said: “I was right. She must never come to the house any more. I’ll speak to Mummy tomorrow.”

The room was now empty except for her mother, herself and Jim.

“We are going off now to dance,” she said.

Cynthia’s mother smiled.

“You have got your latchkey?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Maine turned to the young man.

“And, Jim, don’t let her stay up too late. She’s going to dance again tomorrow. Good night, my dear.”

At the door of the drawing-room Cynthia said:

“Jim, I am going to run up for a cloak and you can start your old car and wait for me in the hall.”

She ran upstairs, through her little sitting-room and into her bedroom beyond it. Whilst she was getting her cloak out of the cupboard, it seemed to her that she heard a slight movement in her sitting-room. When she

reëntered that room she saw that the door on to the staircase was closed; and that Madame D'Estourie was sitting in a chair, waiting for her.

But Madame D'Estourie was no longer insignificant.

II

"I thought that you had gone," Cynthia stammered.

Madame D'Estourie smiled at so childish a notion and by her smile made Cynthia feel a child and rather a helpless child—a sensation which she very much disliked.

"I knew of course that you were behind the curtains on the balcony," Madame D'Estourie explained quite calmly. "I slipped into the dark room at the side of the drawing-room and watched for you. I saw you run upstairs. I followed you."

Cynthia was troubled and exasperated. She did something she hated herself for even whilst she was doing it. She became impudent.

"Do you think it's decent manners to come to Mummy's dinner-party in order to spy and intrude on me?" she asked, haughtily lifting her pretty face above the ermine collar of her coat and stamping her foot.

"I didn't give my manners a thought," Madame D'Estourie replied calmly. "I have been searching for you for years. I got this spring the first hint that it was you I was searching for. I became certain to-night. I couldn't let you go for the sake of my good manners."

Cynthia did not pretend any bewilderment as to the object of Madame D'Estourie's persistence.

"I have never spoken about it to anyone, not even to Mummy," she said, yielding a little in spite of herself.

"In that you are to blame," Madame D'Estourie returned relentlessly.

Cynthia's face had lost its resentment. She was on weak ground here. She had no sharp words of rejoinder.

"I hate thinking about it at all," she said in excuse.

"Yet you do think about it."

"At times. I can't help it"; and Cynthia shivered and clasped her cloak about her.

"When you have talked about it, you won't have to think about it. You will be freed from the tyranny of your memories."

Cynthia looked curiously, almost hopefully, at Madame D'Estourie.

“I wonder,” she said.

It might be possible that all these recurring nightmares, these obsessions by day were warnings that she should speak, and punishments because she did not. She tried one final evasion.

“I’ll come and talk to you one day, Madame D’Estourie, and quite, quite soon. I have to go out to-night.”

Madame D’Estourie shook her head, and for the first time in that interview a smile of humour softened the set of her lips.

“It will take you five minutes to tell your story, and the young gentleman in the hall has before now no doubt waited for ten.”

Cynthia was no match for her unwelcome visitor. Madame D’Estourie was as undistinguished as Jim had declared. But she had the tremendous power conferred by a single purpose never forgotten for an hour during ten long years. The young girl, gracious, independent, exquisite and finished from the points of her toes to the top of her head, in spite of her belief that the world belonged exclusively to the young, sat obediently down in face of her commonplace and rather dowdy companion and recited her story. Recited is the only suitable word: her recollections were so continuous and so clear.

III

“I was nine years old that July. On the fifteenth of the month I crossed from England with my governess, passed through Paris and out by the Eastern Railway to Neuilly-sur-Morin, which was the station for the Château Doré. Mummy was in London and meant to join me in August. So, you see, my governess and I were caught at the Château Doré. Even in Paris, on the Friday nothing definite was known and then at midday on Saturday the Eastern Railway was taken over by the Army. There we were, fifty miles from Paris. Our two motors, every horse under twenty years old, and the farm carts were commandeered the next day. No one could get to us, we could not get away and no letters or telegrams arrived—not even a newspaper. You can understand that a little girl of nine thoroughly enjoyed it. I was reading with my governess Jules Verne’s *Career of a Comet*, and I used to play at imagining that we had been carried away into space like the soldiers in the garrison. We were indeed just as isolated—except for the noise of the great trains which thundered by to the East at the back of the hill all day and all night.

“Thrilling things too happened in our little village. One morning I found the old schoolmaster and Polydore Cromecq, the Mayor who kept the little

estaminet, driving two great posts into the road and closing it with a heavy chain.

“‘Now let the spies come!’ cried Polydore Cromecq. ‘Ah, les salauds! We shall be ready for them.’”

“He took a great pull at a bock of beer and explained to the little Miss as he called me that night and day there was to be a guard upon the chain and no one was to pass without papers.

“Polydore fascinated me at that time tremendously. He was short and squat and swarthy; he had a great rumbling laugh and great hands and feet to match the laugh; and he had an enormous walrusy black moustache, which I adored. For it used to get all covered with the froth of the beer and then there would be little bubbles winking and breaking all over it, until after a time he would put a huge tongue out and lick it all off. He knew how I adored this and used to make quite a performance of it. I watched him now and clapped my hands when he had finished. Polydore burst out laughing.

“‘Good little Miss! Sleep in your bed without fear! No one shall pass. Courage! Courage!’”

“Polydore in those days was always shouting ‘Courage!’ though why I could not imagine. We knew of course that leagues and leagues away soldiers were fighting, but it wasn’t real to any of us—yet. Our village was not even on the main road which ran east and west at the back of the hill close to the railway. It was tucked into its own little corner at a bend of the Morin and the by-road which led to it led to nowhere else.

“For three weeks then our village slept in the sunlight, and Polydore shouted, ‘Courage! Courage! We shall get them.’ Then Polydore shouted no more, and he went about heavy and sour and if he saw me he shrugged his shoulders and said bitterly, ‘Of course, it’s only France’; as if, because I wasn’t French, I had scored some mean advantage over France. For the carts of the refugees began to rumble all day on the road on the other side of the hill, and we heard each day a little nearer the boom and reverberation of the heavy guns, and my governess set to work to install the château as a hospital. Then one night, the last night I slept in the Château Doré, I heard suddenly in the middle of a deadly stillness a quite new strange sound. It was as though a boy was running along a path and drawing, as he ran, a stick across a paling of iron rails. It was the first time I had ever heard a machine-gun.

“The next morning, immediately after breakfast, I ran down to the village. The whole of the village council was assembled in the Mayor’s office, and the remaining inhabitants were standing silent and crowded

together outside watching through the windows the progress of the debate. A rumour had spread that we were surrounded by Uhlans. Everybody believed it. Uhlans! There were peasants who remembered 1870. The mere name carried with it panic and despair. So overwhelming was the dread that when a party of four men in uniform came out from a little wood, at the end of the village, the women and even some of the men began to scream, 'The Uhlans! The Uhlans!'

"The village council broke up in a hurry and rushed into the street, Polydore wiping his forehead with a great coloured handkerchief, and cursing under his breath. The old schoolmaster was the first to recall everybody to reason.

"'These are French uniforms,' he cried. 'They are Zouaves'; and everybody began to pelt along the streets towards them, cheering at the tops of their voices in their relief. But the cheers dropped as we got nearer. For we saw that three of the Zouaves were supporting and almost carrying the fourth. He was a young lieutenant, almost a boy, and very handsome. He was as white as a sheet of paper, and there was a dreadful look of pain in his eyes, though his lips smiled at us. The blood was bubbling out of his coat at the breast. He seemed to me a young wounded god.

"I forced my way through the crowd and said:

"'He must be taken to the château. There we will look after him.'

"But one of the soldiers shook his head and smiled gratefully.

"'No, Miss. We must leave him here at the first house. If the bleeding is stopped and he can lie quiet, he may recover. Many do. Besides, we have to find our own company.'

"The first house in the village was a small general store and sweet-shop kept by a Mademoiselle Cromecq, a withered old spinster and a sister of the Mayor.

"'But he will spoil my furniture,' she cried, standing in her shop door and barring the way.

"A storm of protests rose from the throats of all the other villagers who didn't have to have their furniture spoiled. On all sides I heard:

"'Did you ever hear anything like it?'

"'There's a Frenchwoman for you!'

"'A dirty vixen!'

"Fists were shaken, mouths spat. The only good-humoured people were the soldiers.

“‘Come, Mother,’ said the one who had smiled at me. ‘Imagine for a moment that this fine lad’s your son.’

“They pushed her good-humouredly out of the way and carried the boy into a room at the side of the shop and laid him very gently on a couch. Then the leader of them—he wore a sergeant’s stripes—came out again and, walking straight up to me, saluted.

“‘Mademoiselle,’ he said, ‘at your château you have bandages and someone who can nurse. He is a good boy, our young officer. I leave him to you. For us, we have been separated from our battalion—a glass of wine in a hurry—what?—and we go back.’

“Somehow, in the presence of this cheerful—what shall I say?—adequate soldier who knew exactly what he wanted, we all felt emboldened. Polydore ran to his estaminet half-way down the small village street for a jug of wine and some glasses. Meanwhile I—you must remember that I was a child of nine—I ran home as fast as my legs would carry me, my heart swelling with pride. The smiling soldier had singled me out, had confided the young wounded god to my care. Fast as I ran, however, I had not reached the house before I heard a great sound of cheering and looking down from the slope leading up to the château, I saw the three remaining soldiers waving their kepis as they hurried back into the wood. I burst into the house with my story and in a minute, my governess with Honorine, one of the servants, and myself at her heels, all of us laden with lint and cotton-wool and bottles of disinfectant, and a suit of pyjamas, were racing back to the little general store.

“The village was still massed outside the shop, still on fire with loyalty. We were welcomed with a torrent of cheers.

“‘Ah, the English women! The English women!’ some of them cried—we were popular in France in those days except with Polydore. And an old man of eighty looked at me with a chuckle.

“‘The little one! I wish I had her legs—that’s all!’

“‘Yes, she has the legs, the little foreigner,’ Polydore added sourly. ‘She will be able to run.’

“My governess would not allow me to follow them into the house. So I remained outside, hopping from one foot on to the other in my anxiety, wondering what they were doing to my young wounded god, and praying with all my heart that they would not hurt him. Meanwhile the villagers drifted away. It was summer. The crops had to be got in, the vines to be tended, and there were no young men to help. I was glad when they went. I

didn't want them to hear a groan or even a sign of pain from my young god, lest they should remember it and thereafter think the less of him. But not a sound came through the open window. And all my pride in him was changed into a dreadful fear lest he should have died.

"I remember shutting my eyes and clenching my fists in a refusal to believe it, when I heard Polydore Cromecq grumbling behind me.

"'It is true, you know. The old one will have her furniture spoilt. All that blood! And who will pay for it? The Government? I don't think!'

"It was the grocer who replied, a little ferrety man:

"'Yes, they should have taken him to the château. What does it matter to the rich ones at the château if some of their fine sheets are ruined? They can afford it. He will die? But this is war and he is a soldier.'

"'It is worse than war,' cried Polydore Cromecq with an oath. 'This is 1870 over again.'

"Suddenly they became silent and I had a conviction that one of them was nudging the other in the ribs and pointing towards me.

"The silence was broken by a new-comer to that group—my old friend, the schoolmaster.

"'Monsieur le Maire,' he said, addressing Polydore Cromecq in the formal tones which he kept for authority, 'I think that if a wounded officer is brought into this village the enemy must be very near. We hear no good accounts of them from the refugees. I put it to you, Monsieur le Maire, that the women should be ordered to leave.'

"The old schoolmaster was the only man in the village with a cool head upon his shoulders. Polydore Cromecq and the little grocer Gavroche had been occupied by their own little grievances and meannesses. We had lost our hearts and our senses in our enthusiasm over our wounded hero. The proximity of the enemy had been overlooked. Even the Uhlans had been forgotten during the last hour.

"Polydore ran off to make out an order for the evacuation of the village and at the same time my governess called to me from the window of the cottage.

"'He wants to thank you.'

"I went into the room on tiptoe. The young Zouave was lying in a bed made up on a great couch. His wound had been staunched, he had been washed and dressed in the pyjamas we had brought from the château.

“‘You need not speak, Monsieur Henri,’ said my governess. He was already ‘Monsieur Henri’ to them—in his full title the Lieutenant Henri Flavelle of the 6th Regiment of Zouaves.

“‘He has been shot through the lung, but the wound is clean and, if he is sensible, he will get well.’

“The Zouave smiled at me. He was easier now. The look of pain had gone from his eyes. He beckoned me with a little movement of his fingers and I sat down—oh, so gently!—on the side of his bed so as not to shake him.

“‘You wanted to take me into your château,’ he whispered. ‘I thank you, little friend. No, you mustn’t cry. You heard what Mademoiselle said. I am going to get well.’ Then he laughed a little, in spite of a warning shake of the fingers from my governess. ‘When I am well and you are grown up, will you marry me, little friend?’

“I clasped my hands together with a gasp. Oh, wouldn’t I just!

“‘Good! Then that’s settled,’ he said, his eyes twinkling with fun, and then he became serious. ‘Now listen, all of you! You must leave this village to-night. You have bicycles? Good! Take what money you have and leave secretly after dark. Countries at war are not very safe for young women with no men to protect them. Travel by the by-roads as fast as you can, and not towards Paris. Go south.’

“‘But we can’t leave you here like this,’ I cried, and he shook his head reproachfully.

“‘What sort of dog’s life shall we lead when we are married, if you refuse my first prayer. Promise!’

“Before I could promise, a boy covered with dust and panting for breath burst into the room.

“‘I was sent here from the château. It is Mees Lovetear.’

“We were all accustomed to hearing Miss Lowther addressed in that way. My governess held out her hand, and the boy put his hand into his blouse and drew forth a letter. It was from Mummy.

“‘I have got to Barbizon, but cannot get nearer. Come at once on your bicycles. The boy will show you the way.’

“‘You see,’ said the Zouave. ‘To-night you will go?’

“We promised. The boy had come on a bicycle from Barbizon, and had been two days upon the journey. We sent him off to the château to get some food. My governess put a jug of water by the Zouave’s bed, gave him some

opium tablets, and paid some money to Mademoiselle Cromecq for his nourishment. Then we left him.

“It was a day of events. Opposite the little ‘Mairie’ I saw our old bearded forest-guardian, Papa François, talking to Polydore Cromecq and Gavroche, and the tears were rolling down his face. He was blubbering like a child as he talked. . . . It was horrible to see. . . . And it frightened me. But the moment we got near, Polydore cried ‘Chut! Chut!’ in a savage undertone and the old forester stopped at once. That frightened me still more. I had a feeling that something horrible was growing and growing in the village, some idea which was monstrous. I returned to the château and whilst we ate a meal and waited for darkness my uneasiness grew until I burst out sobbing as if my heart would break. My governess put my outburst down to terror at our position, to fear for myself. But I wasn’t afraid for myself. I hadn’t realized that we were in any danger.

“‘It’s getting dark already, Cynthia,’ she said to comfort me. ‘We’ll be off in a few minutes’; and she went upstairs to put a few things together.

“I was left alone in the great dining-room. The shadows were deepening in every corner every second. I ran into the kitchen. All the servants had gone already. Only the boy who was to guide us was there finishing his meal.

“‘Gilbert,’ I asked, ‘which way do we go?’

“‘Over the little bridge at the back of the village, across the Morin, then by the cart-track through Jouy-le-Chatel, Mademoiselle.’

“‘Good! You must take my bicycle with you, Gilbert. I will meet you and Mademoiselle at the gate where the cart-track begins. Tell Mademoiselle and wait for me there.’

“I gave him no time to answer me. I left him gaping at me with his mouth open. I was terrified lest my governess should come down whilst I was still in the house. I ran out by the kitchen and down the avenue of trees. In the village there was only one light burning and that came through the open door of Cromecq’s estaminet and lay like a broad yellow blade across the street. I crept to the edge of it and then raced across. But no one had seen me. No one called. I ran on to the cottage at the end of the village. That was in darkness too. I stopped under the window where the Zouave lay and listened. I couldn’t even hear him breathing. I raised my hand to tap upon the window-pane. But the window was open. I stood upon tiptoe with my fingers on the sill and could just look in. It was all black—yes, even where the white sheets of his bed should have glimmered.

“‘Henri,’ I whispered. ‘Monsieur Henri!’ But not even a sigh answered me.

“I felt sure that he was dead. I heard myself sobbing. But I had got to make sure. I tried the door. It was locked. I knocked upon it gently at first, then in a fury. There wasn’t a sound. The house was empty—empty of all perhaps but the young Zouave. I found a pail, by chance. I turned it upside down and standing on it climbed into the room through the open window.

“‘Monsieur Henri,’ I whispered. I was terribly afraid, but I had got to make sure. There was no one on the couch at all. The very sheets had been taken away. I crept over to the corner where I had seen his uniform folded. That too had disappeared. So had his sword which had been leaning against the corner of the wall. There was no longer a trace of him at all. I was seized with a panic as I stood in that dark empty room. I ran to the window and tumbled out of it—somehow. As I reached the ground I upset the pail. The clattering of it sounded to me like a peal of thunder. I turned to run and someone grasped and held my arm. I gave a gasp and should have fainted, but a rough friendly voice spoke to me.

“‘You, Mademoiselle! What are you doing here? You should have gone with the rest. All the women have gone. There is an order. Don’t you know that?’ and he shook my arm chidingly. ‘My word, how you frightened me! It is not right to frighten an old man like that!’

“‘We are going to-night, Papa François,’ I answered. ‘We are going to Barbizon. But I wanted to say good-bye to the Zouave and make sure that he was comfortable. And he has gone, Papa François.’

“‘But of course he has gone. Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard? They will occupy the village to-morrow morning.’ I did not have to ask whom he meant by ‘they.’ ‘They caught me in the forest and sent me back with a message for the Mayor. If a French soldier, a French weapon, even a French uniform is found in Neuilly-sur-Morin, they will burn every house to the ground. We could not leave an officer at the very first house they will come to—the house of Mademoiselle Cromecq too. You see that, little Miss?’ Poor Papa François was torn between terror for his village and pity for the young officer. Remorsefully he pleaded his necessity. ‘The house of the sister of the Mayor. No, then, for sure, everything would be destroyed. So we moved him—but very tenderly. There is a stretcher, you know. We did not hurt him—oh, no.’

“‘And where is he now, Papa François?’ I broke in.

“The old man hesitated and blundered. Oh, it took ages to get the truth out of him, as he grumbled and quavered and whispered in that dark street.

“‘It is the only place. . . . He is safe there. . . . The village too. And after all it is not so bad. Bah! He is a soldier. He has slept in many worse places this last month. . . .’

“‘Where? Where?’ I insisted.

“‘It is in the Fire-shed. But it is only for an hour or two. To-night Monsieur le Maire and Gavroche will carry him across the Morin and hide him safely in a farm——’

“But I did not wait to hear more excuses. I tore my arm free from Papa François and darted across the street. Yes, we had a Fire-shed at the back of the estaminet, on the river bank—a miserable little hut filled up with our little hand-drawn fire-engine, and with a mud floor. Oh, I was not afraid any longer. I was mad with passion, the passion of a little girl nine years old for a young god, in a uniform too, dropped out of the clouds, wounded—a young god who had asked her to marry him. And they treated him like that! Once more I hadn’t a doubt who ‘they’ were—Polydore Cromeq, and his sister whose furniture would be spoilt by a bleeding man, and little Gavroche, the grocer!

“Skimming along in the darkness, with my heart all upside down, I nearly ran headlong into the vine-covered trellis work which stretched out into the road on each side of the estaminet and made a shelter for the little tables. I pulled up in time, however, and the next moment I was crouching against the vine-leaves, holding my breath, listening—that is, listening as well as the beating of my heart would allow me.

“For just on the other side of the trellis, seated at a little table in the corner where the light from the open door could not reach, there were Polydore and Gavroche, drinking. They must have heard me, I was convinced, but they had not, and immediately I learnt why.

“The neck of a bottle rattled on the rim of a glass and Polydore in a thick wheedling voice said:

“‘Another glass, old comrade! I do not bring out such brandy as this for every client. No!’

“‘It is good,’ answered Gavroche. ‘We need such drink for our work. To save this little corner of France, eh, my friend.’

“They were both of them half drunk. I did not trouble my head about what they were saying. They talked of France, they thought of themselves. But they had not yet carried my wounded god across the river. I slipped by the side of the house through the grass to the little Fire-shed. It was very

dark that night, but I had the eyes of a cat and I could see the triangle of the roof against the sky. The door was unlocked. I pulled it open.

“‘Monsieur Henri,’ I said in a low voice, and he answered from my feet. There was just room for him to lie across the shed between the engine and the door, and they had laid his stretcher there on the mud floor.

“‘You little angel!’ he whispered in a startled tone. ‘What are you doing here? You should have gone hours ago.’

“I dropped down on my knees beside him. He was shivering with cold.

“‘The brutes! The brutes!’

“He lifted a hand and laid it over my lips.

“‘Listen, little one! Before you go. You must never mention to anyone, not even to your mother, one word about what has happened to-night. Promise me? For the honour of France!’

“‘I don’t understand,’ I sobbed.

“‘But you will, dear. Kiss me once! Thank you! Remember! For the honour of France! Now go!’ and since I did not move, his voice strengthened suddenly. ‘Then I shall sit up and that will kill me.’

“‘No, no!’ I prayed, and I sprang to my feet—and through the open door we both heard the Mayor and Gavroche encouraging one another drunkenly as they stumbled through the grass.

“‘Look quickly! Do they carry a lantern?’ Henri asked. He was frightened now—since the morning of that day I have never been able to mistake the sound of fear in a man’s voice—but frightened for me.

“‘No, they have no lantern.’

“The Zouave drew a breath of relief.

“‘Then run! Run, little betrothed one, as fast as you can, as silently as you can. Oh, whilst there’s time, my dear.’ His head fell back upon the pillow. ‘You see I can do nothing!’

“There was such an agony of appeal in his voice that I slipped round the side of the shed at once. I hid behind a bush on the river bank and I heard Polydore utter a startled oath as his hand knocked against the open door of the shed.

“‘So you have had a visitor, my Lieutenant,’ he said, and I never heard geniality ring with so false a note.

“‘I?’ replied Henri, and he spoke as loudly, as warningly as he could. ‘I was stifled in here. I pushed the door open with the one hand I could use.’

“‘Yes, it is bad,’ Gavroche agreed. ‘But all that are left in the village are asleep now. We can carry you, my Lieutenant, to a place where no one can betray you. Gently! Gently! So!’

“The two men moved away from the shed with the stretcher between them. Yes, but they didn’t carry it eastwards towards the bridge but westwards where there was no bridge at all. They were drunk—that was what I thought—they had mistaken their way. I ran out from the hedge—I was on the point of calling to them—when I heard an oath and one of them stumbled—or seemed to stumble. I heard a loud splash, I saw in the darkness a sudden swirl of white as the river broke into foam, and above the sound of the splash a cry rose in a clear young vibrating voice:

“‘Run! Run!’

“A cry to me! But I was paralysed by the horror of the accident. For a moment I couldn’t run. Then I did—towards the spot where the accident had happened. I was close to them when a dreadful thing happened. The wounded Zouave’s head rose above the water, his hands clutched at the bank, and I saw Polydore Cromecq raise a great stick and beat with all his strength upon the knuckles. A groan answered the blows, and the Zouave with a groan sank again beneath the water.

“The two men remained kneeling upon the bank, peering into the darkness, listening. Polydore said:

“‘It is over now.’

“And Gavroche replied:

“‘Yes, it is over. We had to think of our village, hadn’t we? Yes, yes, we had to think of France.’

“Then they stood up and saw me just behind them. Now, indeed, I ran, with both of them at my heels, in and out amongst the bushes along the river bank, towards the bridge. Polydore Cromecq had grudged me my young legs that afternoon. He grudged me them still more during these minutes. I heard the two men crashing through the grass after me, panting, swaying, but I gained on them. Then Polydore raised his voice:

“‘Little Miss, wait for me! Come back to the estaminet and wish us good-bye! You shall see me drink a bock and the little bubbles wink on my big moustache. That will be amusing—what? For the last time, eh? It is good to part with a laugh.’

“But I ran the faster. I crossed the bridge. My governess and the boy were waiting with the bicycles at the gate.

“‘Quick, please, quick,’ I cried. ‘I will tell you afterwards.’

“My governess was the woman for an emergency. We were off down the cart-track on our bicycles when Polydore and Gavroche crossed the bridge.

“ ‘Little Miss! Little Miss!’

“The cry rang out, once, twice, and each time fainter. Then we heard it no more. I never did tell my governess afterwards of the crime which was committed that night—no, nor anyone, since my Zouave had forbidden me. But I have broken my promise to him to-night. The cruel thing is that ‘they’ never did enter the village. For they began their retreat the next morning.”

IV

Cynthia ended her story. For a minute the middle-aged woman and the girl stared into the unlit grate. Then Madame D’Estourie said slowly:

“For the honour of France, he said.”

“Yes. I didn’t understand what he meant. I do now, of course. It’s better that nothing should be said. War makes some men monsters.”

Madame D’Estourie stood up.

“And many women, childless,” she added.

Cynthia looked quickly at her.

“But Madame D’Estourie,” she began, and her visitor interrupted her.

“I was Madame Flavelle, before I was Madame D’Estourie. Your wounded Zouave was my boy. For six years I have been searching why he died and meaning to exact justice to the uttermost farthing. But—for the honour of France—he said”; and she let her arms drop against her sides in resignation. She turned her eyes to Cynthia. They were wells of pain. “I may kiss you?” she asked. She held the girl tight to her breast. “Thank you! Thank you!” she whispered in a breaking voice. She let her go and wrapped her cloak about her throat.

“Now,” she said in a cheerful voice. “We shall go downstairs together.”

But Cynthia drew back. Madame D’Estourie, however, would have none of it.

“No, no, that won’t do,” she cried. “That poor young man has been waiting in the hall more than his ten minutes. Let us go to him. And I think that old misery, now that you have told it to me, will not haunt you any more.”

She put her arm tenderly about Cynthia’s waist and they went down the stairs. But half-way down Madame D’Estourie ran forward with a little sob, as though her self-restraint at last was failing her. When Cynthia reached the

floor, she found Jim seated patiently on a hall-chair, exchanging consolatory phrases with a no less patient butler.

It did not occur to Jim to complain, nor on the other hand did it occur to Cynthia to apologize. She said:

“Oh, Jim, I don’t want to dance to-night. Be an angel, will you? Drive me down the Portsmouth road as far as Ripley and back, will you?”

Jim’s face lit up with a smile.

“Cynthia,” he said, “there are bright moments in your young life which give me hopes for your future”; and he went outside and cranked up his car.

THE CHRONOMETER

AGES and ages ago one of our crack steamers of the Dagger Line piled herself up at night on the rocks of Sokotra in the first violence of the South-west Monsoon. I was then a youngster in the Agent's office at Port Said learning the work, and during the next few weeks my education was rapid and intensive. The ship was the *Calobar* of eleven thousand tons, the Flagship of the Line and a favourite with passengers. But fortunately the homeward rush from the East was over and there were no more than seventy souls on board apart from the officers and the crew. The *Calobar* struck heavily and heeled over at a dangerous cant, with a furious sea thrashing her hull and boiling across her deck. There was some trouble, too, with the native portion of her crew. But in the early morning one life-boat was got away. It carried the women and children, twenty-five of them, and it was manned by the best of the English sailors under the command of the third officer, a forlorn hope, no doubt, but to all appearances the only one. But by one of the sea's favourite ironies, those who remained on board the *Calobar* to die were rescued and the life-boat was never heard of again.

A big tramp steamer bound from Karachi to Liverpool picked the battered survivors off the wreck, and with her natural speed of ten knots an hour checked down to seven by the monsoon, carried them into Aden. There they waited for a mail-boat and arrived at Suez in the second week of June upon a steamer of the Khedivial Line. From Suez they travelled by train to Port Said; and thus it was that I came across them. And what with securing rooms for them, buying them clothes, sending cables home and arranging their bank-drafts and their passages to England, I had enough to do. So completely enough that of all those distressed and haggard travellers, only one remained clearly individualized in my memories as a passenger by s.s. *Calobar*.

My chief brought him into the little room I occupied on the water-front. It was on the second floor and if I craned my body out of the window, I could see the great breakwater with the Lesseps statue reaching out into the

sea; and below me was all the traffic of the harbour from the little feluccas of the Mediterranean to the funnelled giants of the outer seas.

“Will you hear what Mr. Trinic has to say,” said my chief, “and draft out a petition to the Board of Trade which he will sign and I will support?”

As a matter of fact the request had already gone forward on the Company’s own initiative, and the Shipping Agent’s proposal was merely a kindly attempt to find something for Mr. Trinic to do whilst he had to wait at Port Said.

“I can hand you over with every confidence to my assistant,” said the Agent to Mr. Trinic; and he left him with me.

Mr. Trinic was as commonplace in appearance as his name was odd. His face was a whitish grey, his age a year or two over fifty—he had big ears and a little button of a nose, but such an aura of grief enveloped him and set him apart that I saw in him a person of high dignity. I could imagine him, just whilst his distress lasted, a leader amongst men.

“I want to know that she’s dead,” he said as soon as we were alone, speaking with some sort of provincial accent which I could not identify. “I had done my work, you see—planting tobacco in Java. I had made enough. I was going back home to Liverpool with my girl to set up house. She was twenty-four, you see. She had been seven years out with me—ever since my wife died. It was time I took her home and gave her her chance, you see, amongst her own people.”

He was carrying a chart and a very thin book under his arm. He laid these down on the table and took from his pocket a leather case.

“There she is. Have a look!”

He handed me the case and turning his back walked to the window whilst I opened it. There were two photographs, face to face, of a girl, one in profile, one full, and they took my breath away. I couldn’t reconcile her with the man staring out of the window. It was not a mere matter of looks, though hers were rare enough. She was haunting. There was humour in the shape and set of her mouth, and in her big eyes enormous wisdom. In the full face, she looked out at you, knowing you—excusing you—accepting you marvellously into her company. In the photograph of the side face, she was just looking forward beyond the world, waiting quietly for something far off which she saw approaching.

“Yes,” I said, and I closed the case. There was nothing, indeed, for me to say.

“So you see.” He turned back from the window and tucked the case away in his pocket as he talked; and he talked quite quietly and sensibly. “The Liverpool plan’s over and done with——” I had an odd feeling that Liverpool did not quite agree with those two photographs. I saw in imagination a street of little villas with backyards and front gardens. “But I want to know that my girl’s dead. How can I go back to Liverpool and live there—alone—for how many years!—unless I know that? You must see. I’ve got to know that Mona’s dead, haven’t I?”

He was appealing to me as a reasonable man in a voice which he might have used to explain some detail in his accounts. It was as dry and tearless as his eyes. But I was conscious of a measureless unhappiness in the man which made any word of sympathy the most futile of banalities.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Trinic?” I asked.

He spread out his chart upon my table and pinned down the four corners.

“That life-boat was well-found in every way,” he argued. “It had good English sailors, water, food, an officer who understood navigation, sails—and it wasn’t overcrowded.”

“But you don’t imagine that in that storm——” I cried, and he did not let me finish the sentence.

“Why did the Captain send it off, then?” he asked.

“Well . . . yes,” I had to admit. “I suppose he thought it had a chance.”

“Exactly. I have been studying this book,” and he showed me the title-page. It was *The Gulf of Aden Pilot*. “I bought it off an officer of the tramp steamer which took us into Aden. After the first violent blow, the wind often drops at the beginning of June. There it is, written in the book. And I’ll tell you another thing. On the north of Sokotra the current runs eastward forty miles to the day. I’ll tell you a third thing too. During the South-west Monsoon the nearer you get to the Arabian coast, except just within one area, the lighter you get the wind and the smoother the sea.”

“The Arabian coast!” I exclaimed. “But, Mr. Trinic, the distance——”

“Three hundred miles, and the wind aft all the while,” he replied promptly. “Measure it for yourself on the chart. Here!” He took calipers out of his pocket and handed the instrument to me. He had everything ready which could help his argument. I took it reluctantly and measured off the distance.

“Yes, three hundred miles—just about,” said I.

There was after all this horrid possibility which was torturing my visitor.

“Some ship going East may have picked up the life-boat,” I argued.

“It’s a fortnight since the life-boat left the wreck. We should have heard.”

Wireless was still at that time a marvel to come. But the Gulf of Aden was the world’s greatest trade-route; and though you may cross the Atlantic and never see a ship till you sight the Bishop or Sandy Hook, you steam in company through the narrow seas beyond Perim. Signals would have been exchanged. From half a dozen ports the news would have been flashed a week ago that the *Calobar*’s life-boat with its castaways had been saved.

“Yes, we should have heard,” I conceded. I looked at the chart again.

“If they reached Arabia it would have been here, wouldn’t it? At Dhofar,” I said.

“And then?” Trinic asked. “Where’s my girl? In the harem of some wretched little black Sultan ruling over a cabbage patch and living in a block house. Listen to this”—he turned over the pages of the *Pilot*—“‘The Beni Gharrah bedouins have a great hatred towards Europeans.’ The Beni Gharrah bedouins are the people who live at Dhofar. Or suppose the boat landed a little nearer—here—in the Bay of Kamar——” and again he turned the pages of his book and read: “‘The Mahrah tribe is very numerous and powerful . . . their enmity towards the English is very great. . . .’ I want to be sure that my girl’s dead.”

“You want us to send a ship along that coast and look for the wreckage of the life-boat,” I suggested.

“That’s not enough,” said Trinic. He referred yet again to the *Pilot*. “Boats of thirty and forty tons are hauled up on shore during the South-west Monsoon. It wouldn’t be difficult to haul up a ship’s life-boat and hide it. No, I want the Government to search that strip of coast from end to end with a man-of-war. I want every little tinpot king to turn his household out for inspection. I want to know that my girl’s dead.”

I drew a sheet of foolscap towards me and began to draft out his petition to the Board of Trade. All that day we worked at it together, and when it was finished and signed it was sent home, whilst Trinic carried a copy of it to the Consul-General at Cairo. As the world knows, the search was made immediately by the Board of Trade and a little while afterwards a second survey was taken by a steamer of the Company’s Line. But between Kamar Bay and the Kuria Muria islands, the limits east and west within which a search was of use, not a plank of wreckage was discovered, and not a fisherman had any story to tell of the landing of the castaways. The

Calobar's life-boat had disappeared with all its cargo of passengers. Mr. Trinic carried his misery home with him to Liverpool and disappeared too. Gradually under the stress of business and immediate things to be done the memory of the catastrophe faded. Moreover, I was moved about the world's big chess-board. I was transferred the next year to Colombo and thence to Hong Kong and thence to London, and in due course after fifteen years I returned to Port Said as Head Agent there of the Dagger Line.

II

The events which I am going to relate happened in my sixth year as Head Agent. Yes, I had been five years in Port Said and I enjoyed every minute of it. I had the pleasantest kind of work for anyone who likes ships, and after all, the town itself is a Grand Hotel with the world passing in at one door and out by the other. One morning I found that my watch had stopped and I took it that afternoon to little Papyanni, the jeweller in the Rue de la Poste. He opened the back and screwed his magnifying-glass into his eye.

"The mainspring's broken, Mr. Woodyer," he said. "I'll want three days."

Then he put the watch away in a drawer. He was a brisk little man in the ordinary way, but this afternoon either he was thinking of something else or he had a touch of the gout in his foot. For he moved like a snail. But he was thinking of something else and of something which concerned me. For when he returned to his counter he leaned across it confidentially and actually opened his mouth to speak. But a woman from an All-Round-the-World Luxury Steamer interrupted at that moment with a demand for a silver spoon enamelled with the flag of Egypt, and the opportunity was lost. For little Papyanni had a second thought. He stood up again straight.

"In three days, Mr. Woodyer," he said shortly, and he turned to his lady customer. "Just about this time."

So just about that time in three days I turned up at Papyanni's and asked for my watch. The All-Round-the-World Luxury Steamer had carried off its passengers to Colombo and the shop was empty. Little Papyanni had my watch ready and he set it to the hour by means of a large chronometer which was ticking away in a battered but handsome mahogany box lined with faded old green cloth.

"Is that right?" I asked, with a nod towards the chronometer.

As a rule, Papyanni set a watch that he had mended by the clock hanging up against the wall opposite to the door. But he never looked at it to-day. He

rapped on the side of the mahogany case with his knuckles and answered:

“Oh, yes, this keeps very good time.”

Then he shot a little inquisitive darting look at me to notice how I took the answer. But I took it too simply for him. I said:

“Well, if you’re satisfied, I’ve no doubt it’s all right”; and I clipped the watch on to my watch-chain, dropped it into my waistcoat pocket and went away. I left a very disappointed watchmaker behind.

He was, indeed, so disappointed that he wrote me a letter that evening asking me, if I could make the visit convenient, to call round at his shop. I was intrigued by his insistence. Papyanni was not at all the kind of man who must make a drama out of every trifle which happens to him. He was an unimaginative little corpulent Levantine. He obviously had something to tell me. Accordingly I went round to the Rue de la Poste just as he was shutting up his shop for the luncheon hour. He opened the glass door again at once and locked it when I had entered.

“I have something to show you, Mr. Woodyer,” he said. He slipped behind his counter and lifted down from a shelf behind him the big chronometer in the mahogany case by which he had set my watch yesterday.

“But you showed me that yesterday,” I answered.

“Do you know what it is, Mr. Woodyer?” he asked.

“Of course I do. That’s a ship’s chronometer.”

“What ship’s?”

I turned the deep square case towards me and opened the lid. There was no label on the green lining and only the name of the Glasgow manufacturer on the dial of the clock.

“I haven’t an idea.”

And suddenly he shot his shoulders and chest across the counter.

“The *Calobar’s*,” said he.

Once more I disappointed him.

“The *Calobar*. . . . The *Calobar*!”

I had served the Dagger Line in a great many ports and in different countries. For twenty years I had watched the procession of ships, each like its fellow and each with a name of its own. I worked back to the *Calobar*, however, in a minute or so.

“She was wrecked on Sokotra,” I said, and Papyanni nodded.

“A tramp brought up the survivors to Aden. And a mailship picked them up there. But how do you know this chronometer comes from that ship? Did somebody pinch it and sell it to you?”

Papyanni shook his head.

“It’s not mine. It was left with me to clean and repair a couple of months ago.”

“How do you know it’s the *Calobar*’s, then?” I repeated.

Papyanni became mysterious.

“I was curious. There’s a number, see!” He lifted the chronometer off the gimbals on which it was slung in the mahogany case and showed the number engraved upon the bottom. “I wrote to the makers in Glasgow. It was made for the *Calobar* twenty-four years ago.”

I began to remember now—and more than I wanted to remember. I stepped back from the counter, sharply, as though that chronometer in its battered case were alive and dangerous. I did not want to hear one other word about it. Yet in spite of myself I heard myself asking:

“It was brought to you, you say?”

“A couple of months ago.”

“Who brought it?”

“I’ve got the name somewhere,” Papyanni answered. He dived into a drawer and fetched out a long order-book, looked back over two months of orders and commissions and ran his finger down a page. “I don’t remember names very easily.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear that one, after all,” said I, turning away. But Papyanni had found it.

“Hassan Bu Ali, ’Imam of Merbat,” he read out; so I stayed exactly where I was.

Merbat was on the Arabian coast in the district of Dhofar. So much I knew. It was also just within the area at some point of which, according to Trinic, the *Calobar*’s life-boat running before the South-west Monsoon might have been expected to make the land. There was a phrase Trinic had used. The life-boat was well-found. It might very well have one of the ship’s chronometers on board. There was another phrase he had used and repeated. Standing in Papyanni’s shop, I wished that he hadn’t. I didn’t want to listen to that phrase again whether a living voice cried it out in an agony of grief or my own memory whispered it. Whispered it? Across the road outside a café there was one of the galla-galla conjurers producing tiny chickens out of a

tourist's pocket. He had been exhibiting that trick for twenty years. But he was no more visible to me at this moment than Trinic. His voice was thundering in my hearing across those twenty years: "I want to know that my girl's dead."

I turned to Papyanni.

"What was this 'Imam like?"

Papyanni described him. He was tall, stout, prosperous, clean, middle-aged, and black as ebony.

"Of course I saw him at his best," said Papyanni.

"How was that?"

"He was on his way to Mecca. He was waiting at Suez for a steamer to Jeddah and meanwhile he had come up by the train to Port Said."

"I see."

I was in doubt what I should do. I wanted to do the cowardly thing. I was tempted to walk out of Papyanni's shop without another word in the hope that this troublesome story of the *Calobar's* shipwreck would drift back again into the fog of oblivion. And if I had seriously believed that possible, I should have so acted. But I had a conviction that it was not possible. The story had been trying for twenty years to force itself up through the crust of events and occurrences into the memory of men; and now it ensured for itself perpetuity by propounding a riddle. For an unanswered riddle outlives the world.

"Hassan Bu Ali is to call for the chronometer when he returns, I suppose," I said.

"Yes."

I played with the latch of his glass door. I unlocked and pulled the door open. I was out on the pavement. The galla-galla man was moving away. The iniquity of oblivion would have scattered her poppy over him the moment he had turned the corner, but over the riddle of the chronometer—no! I went back into the shop.

"I must see this monarch when he comes back in his green turban," I said, with a laugh which could not have sounded natural.

Papyanni nodded his head.

"I'll call you up, Mr. Woodyer, on the telephone. I can pretend that I have put the clock aside. I can keep him whilst I have it found."

"Good."

When I got back home, I looked up Merbat in *The Gulf of Aden Pilot*. Trinic had left it with me and between its leaves I found the tragic sheet of notepaper on which he had jotted down in pencil his references and notes.

Bad people, p. 115.

Anchorage safe from S.W., pp. 136-7-8.

Merbat. People civil, p. 122.

I turned to page 122 eagerly. Merbat was the principal trading town of Dhofar. It exported frankincense and gum-arabic in its own baghalahs. The 'Imam levied a ten per cent. duty on the exports and five per cent. on the imports; and—yes, here it was!—the population was friendly.

That was all very well. But a good many questions arose. If the population were friendly and the life-boat had reached Merbat, how was it that one of the bigger baghalahs wasn't sent along the coast with the survivors to Aden, as soon as the monsoon stopped at the end of September? How was it, if the life-boat reached Merbat and the people were friendly, that no trace of the life-boat was found when the Board of Trade and the Dagger Line sent their search-ships? And if the life-boat did not reach the coast, how came the chronometer to? What I wasn't sure of was the accuracy of the *Pilot*. It was dated 1882 and so far as I knew there had been no survey since; nor was there any reason for one. For ships whether bound east or west give that long stormy strip of coast between Ras-el-Hadd and Aden as wide a berth as they can.

I put the riddle aside and as far out of my thoughts as I could. And months passed. And my telephone-bell rang. The town exchange. Mr. Papyanni wanted me. I took the receiver off its hook. A man—not Hassan Bu Ali—but one wearing the green turban of the pilgrim returning from Mecca, had called for the chronometer. Would I please to come quickly? I went as quickly as my legs, hampered by the dignity of the Head Agent of the Dagger Line, would carry me. When I reached Papyanni's shop it was empty and the *Calobar's* chronometer in its mahogany case waited upon the counter.

Papyanni cringed and apologized. I never saw any sense in apologies. When I am raised to the Peerage my motto will be "Never apologize," and my crest a hand holding a hammer, rampant. However, that's to come. I cut the little man's apologies short.

"An Arab—not Hassan Bu Ali but one wearing the green turban—came looking furtively to the right and left like a countryman on his first visit to a town. He asked for the clock, giving me a chit and producing the money. I

went to the telephone—it is here, you see, in a corner—and called up your office. I said, ‘Let Mr. Woodyer come at once,’ and over my shoulder I see a flicker and when I turn my Arab is gone.”

“You frightened him,” said I.

“Everything frightened him,” said Papyanni with a shrug of the shoulders; and I could only hope that the ’Imam would come now in person for his chronometer instead of sending his servant.

It was not he, however, who solved my riddle. Two days later a hired victoria with a running *sais* stopped at the door. The clerk ran upstairs to my room with a request from the *sais*. Would I be pleased to receive a visit from a lady?

“Certainly,” I said, and honestly I do not know what impulse made me ask: “Does the *sais* wear a green turban?”

“Yes,” said my clerk; and the next moment I was at the window. Below me was the victoria and in it was seated an Egyptian lady so veiled and bundled and swathed in such a superfluity of clothes that whether she was angular or round, fat or thin, young or old, not the keenest connoisseur could have discovered.

“She had better come up,” I said.

As soon as she entered the room she said in Arabic, of course, and in a very low voice, that she wished to speak to me alone. I bowed to her and spoke in English to my clerk.

“Put a chair for the lady and then clear out!” and a little gasp, a little sharp movement from the shrouded woman gave me my opening. As soon as we were alone I said in English:

“So you were in the *Calobar’s* life-boat.”

She sat quite still. I had been guided by that swift small agitation. I reckoned that she had not heard her own language spoken for twenty years and that however carefully she had prepared herself against the shock of actually hearing it, it had none the less startled her.

“Yes,” she answered at length, and she too spoke in English. “I think that I was the only one who was saved. I wish that I had not been.”

“Tell me!” I said; and she told.

“We had a terrible passage. Three days and three nights. Some were washed out of the boat, some died from exhaustion. We were driven upon a rock in the bay of Merbat. I was the only one who was saved. I was flung up on the beach half-drowned, with the wreck of the boat.”

The 'Imam had claimed her. He had a stone-house with a garden and a pavilion in the garden for his women.

“He made me his wife. . . . I should have killed myself if I could. . . . I had not the means. . . . One gets used to everything. . . . He was not unkind.”

Thus and thus only she epitomized the history of twenty appalling years. The 'Imam had traded with his baghalahs as far south as Zanzibar, as far west as Aden. He had put money at Aden and this spring, taking his wife with him and a small train of servants, he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. At Jeddah on his way home he had died. She was left well off.

“You are free then!” I cried like a fool.

She sat like an image. Her very silence rebuked me. How could she be free with those twenty terrible years like a chain dragging behind her? She said:

“I have heard that all those who remained on the wreck at Sokotra were saved. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Was there a planter from Java?”

“Mr. Trinic. Yes.”

Upon my word Trinic might have been standing before me. I saw him so clearly—his insignificant features, the leather case with the two portraits of his daughter in his hands and the immense desolation wrapping him about in dignity. And now here in the same room twenty years afterwards was the daughter herself. I could not doubt it. The girl with the wise quiet eyes and the curiously spiritual look—what in those days had she been so surely expecting?—and this bundle of clothes were one and the same but for twenty intervening years of horror.

“What did he say?” she asked.

I was not going to tell her.

“He was distracted. He wanted the coast searched for the wreckage of the life-boat. We did search, the Board of Trade and the Dagger Line.”

“Yes?”

It was a question. I was telling her of things dead and done with. She held me to her question.

“He had planned to make a home in Liverpool. He was dreading going into it alone. He stayed here until he was sure that he would have to go alone. Then he sailed for England.”

She sat quietly and in silence for a little while longer. Then her restraint suddenly gave way.

“What shall I do?” she wailed, and the cry cut the air like a knife. “I thought that he would have spoken a word.”

She wanted a sign. I had been wondering why she had come to me. For it was certainly not to discuss the ownership of the clock. But the reason was out now. In the choice which she must make, she wanted to open the book of years and put her finger on a sentence which would point her the way she was to take. I sat and looked at her. After her one cry she had recovered her calm. She had withdrawn within the cocoon of her wrappings. She was shapeless, faceless. There was only the memory of her cry to warn me to tread very delicately. For, you see, I had the word she asked for.

It all seems easy enough now, but in truth I was in a dilemma at the time. I remembered the two photographs. I wanted her to recover what she could of the life which the photographs had promised her—odds and ends of it at the best. On the other hand, could any of it be recovered? Suppose that she went to Liverpool—suppose that she found her father alive—what sort of life could there be for both of them? The world has moved a bit no doubt in these last twenty or thirty years; but enough? Weren't there prejudices rooted in the blood which no veneer of broad-mindedness could hide? However, it was for her to make her choice. I said, after a struggle with myself:

“Your father did say more than I have told you. He said, ‘I want to know that my daughter’s dead.’ ”

She moved or rather she bent forward in her chair. I thought that she was going to faint and pitch forward on the floor; and I started up. But from somewhere in the folds of her clothes she produced a hand and checked me. She was really bowing her head to the message.

“Twenty years!” she said. “Sorrows destroy themselves in time. What should I bring but confusion?” Her voice sank as she added: “And I too have at all events now found peace.”

She rose from her chair.

“You will tell no one of my visit.”

She did not wait for an answer. She was gone before I could move to the door. I heard the carriage drive away. A little time afterwards I remembered the chronometer and I telephoned to Papyanni to hand it over if it was called for. But no one called for it.

SIXTEEN BELLS

SYLVIA STRODE threw a party on New Year's Eve at the Semiramis Hotel. She summoned to it the young and lovely as the groundwork, then the lame ducks, the old friends who were getting a little sere at the edges, and the new ones with the fresh glister of their youth—the medley, in fact, in which her wise warm heart delighted. One of the lame ducks had refused her invitation, and as she looked about the big long table, his absence threatened to spoil the perfection of her pleasure. But after all he came, and the odd circumstances of his coming made that evening specially memorable to her. Some amongst her guests afterwards, when the facts were known, pretended some uneasiness, and shivered. But Sylvia Strode knew better, and she marked the night in the Roman style, with a white stone.

There were still a few minutes to run before midnight; the lights throughout the restaurant were already being dimmed; on ships at sea quartermasters were getting ready to strike on this one occasion in the twelvemonth sixteen bells; and Michael Croyle made his way between the tables as quickly as the crowded room allowed. Sylvia caught sight of him, stood up, and called him to her side.

“Michael! You wrote to me that you couldn't come!”

“I found to my surprise that I could,” he answered, laughing. “So I ran. I am nearly out of breath.”

Sylvia made room for him at her side and ordered a waiter to bring up a chair. “You complete my party,” she said.

“You make mine perfect,” he said, as he sat down.

Michael Croyle was a man of middle age, thin, grey, and worn, with, as a rule, the haggard look of a man waiting for something to happen which wouldn't and didn't happen. But to-night the haggard look had gone. Michael's eyes were bright and untired; his manner was at last at ease; he was secure; and a smile promising good news teased Sylvia.

“Tell me,” she said; and as she bent her head towards him, she noticed in the dim light that with the contentment and the ease, a new spirituality like a quality of someone borne on wings was luminous behind the mask of his face. She looked round upon her guests. They were talking and laughing at the tops of their voices with ridiculous caps of tinsel and tissue-paper perched above their gay, flushed faces. Some were exploding crackers with their eyes closed and their foreheads knit, and their heads averted, as though they expected to be blown to the skies. Others were making noises with little mouth-organs and, marvellous to relate, no one was laying down any law upon any subject. Sylvia turned comfortably to the middle-aged man at her side.

“Tell me! You have till midnight.”

“Have I?” he asked, and he looked behind him to the white face of the clock glimmering upon the wall. “I want no more time, but I do want that much. I want you to know. For you were very good to me a year or so ago.”

Sylvia shrugged her young shoulders.

“I did nothing——”

“Except make me perpetually aware that in the midst of your own happiness you had thought and time to spare for the distress I was—what shall I say?—wilting—yes, wilting under.” He spoke with a smile upon his lips, as though he was contemplating with a trifle of pity and a good deal more of amusement, some foolish child who had mistaken a slight wound for a mortal hurt. Michael Croyle had no need to be precise about his dates nor to re-tell his story to Sylvia.

“That wasn’t very much for me to do,” she put in, “since it was at my house that you first met Joan Ferrers and came in for all this trouble.”

“My dear,” Croyle answered, “you gave me five years of wonder. Joan, twenty-three, lovely with her brown-black hair with the glinting lights in it, her enormous dark eyes, and the throb of colour in her cheeks, and I, a battered thirty-five with a wife who didn’t want me and wouldn’t divorce me. Had I been able to marry Joan—there would have been Heaven already. But we had five years—such fun, too,” and he nodded his head with a wistful laugh at his recollections. “Fun—the little silly jokes in common—Lord! don’t they make the passionate side twice as glorious? You laugh, and you slip an arm under hers, and you feel it answer to yours, and you don’t laugh any more, but you pity the world, and everyone who passes you. What a shame that they too can’t feel just a little of your thrill and delight! But there it is, poor dears, they can’t.”

Sylvia looked at the clock, and significantly. Here were the minutes running on to midnight when the lights would go out and up again and there would be Auld Lang Synes and seasonable greetings and all the rest of the paraphernalia of the New Year, and what had happened to Michael Croyle on this wonderful evening would be hidden for ever from her knowledge. For he would never tell her unless he told her to-night—of that she felt sure—he was really in a hurry to tell it—in his own phrase, almost out of breath to tell it.

“You must get along, Michael,” she warned him.

All that he had said so far, Sylvia knew already. She knew, too, of the toss which Joan Ferrers had taken when she was hunting in the New Forest; of her removal to a nursing-home pitched on a high stretch of moor above that sea of trees; and of her long waiting with a broken spine.

“Joan put up a great fight, didn’t she, Sylvia? She wouldn’t give in, would she? Only every now and then a little word when she wasn’t watching slipped past her tongue. Once, on an evening when her fever abated, she said with a laugh of delight, ‘I’m cool. Think of it!’ and she drew a breath—enough to shiver your heart, eh? But she was going to mend—surely she would—and then everything came with a rush. The Powers which fix the dates—Joan was weakened down to her date. A fortnight and she drifted out in her sleep.”

Thus Michael Croyle, and Sylvia answered, “Yes?” in a question which she made as patient as she could. For this too she knew. But there were certainly strange things which she did not know and must know—before the clock struck—things which had metamorphosed Croyle from a solitary and guarded man, standing sentinel over himself, into this rather commonplace new Ovid platitudinizing upon the delights of Love. Sylvia urged him on with an excitement which, even so, was a little unaccountable to herself.

“He has some odd secret to share with me,” Sylvia reflected. “My reward for a little sympathy and good fellowship.”

And since in her curiosity for the experiences outside the normal horizon she went far beyond her fellows, she was to hold herself on this night richly rewarded.

“The afternoon when I was told that a fortnight would end everything, I came up from Hampshire by train,” Croyle continued. “I did not pay much attention to the places we passed. I had the carriage to myself. But just at one place by chance I looked out of the window. I saw a stretch of heath, a white tavern at a corner and a broad strip of road—just a few yards of it—and for the first time I realized the dreadful thing which was going to

happen. Joan used to drive down that road in my great car to join me when I had a house by the sea. She was like a child with a magnificent new toy, except that besides enjoying the toy she saw the fun of herself enjoying her toy. She used to sit forward and take the salutes of the A.A. and R.A.C. men stationed at the cross-ways. She loved and laughed at any sort of magnificence. And as I looked suddenly out of the window of the railway carriage at a point in the road where—always on race days and often on others a man would be standing with his hand to the peak of his cap as she passed—I knew—oh, not in words, but in terms of months and years—that she would never drive down that road again until the end of time, and chuckle at herself acting the great lady in her fine big car.” He stopped and smiled as his memories painted the lively picture on the air in front of him.

“So I have never driven down that road again,” he added simply, “and when I have had to pass in the train that corner with the white public-house—the Duke of Cornwall I think it’s called—I’ve sat at the window on the other side of the carriage. See?”

“Yes. I can follow that,” said Sylvia.

“Until this week,” he continued; and Sylvia looked at him sharply. “When for no reason whatever my whole point of view changed.”

Sylvia was startled. Had he gone the way of all men? Mended a despair with the splints of a new passion? Repaired his wound with the poultice of a few years? Well, it was usual enough, but she had not expected it. Also, she was a trifle hurt.

“So you went on a visit, and you refused to come to my party, Michael,” she said. A man might go setting up new gods and even new goddesses, but need he throw down old friends? She didn’t.

Michael Croyle laid his hand on her arm and gave it a little shake.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Sylvia,” he said, with a quiet laugh of enjoyment. “I didn’t go on any visit. But I did make a visit with the strangest and most glorious experience.”

“How?” asked Sylvia, not yet reassured. “In London?”

“No! Just listen! You know, or rather you don’t know, that I have kept up writing letters.”

“To Joan?”

“Yes.”

Sylvia stared at him.

“Just the same sort of letters which I used to write when she was lying in her nursing-home—telling her everything, what I was doing and thinking, and discussing things we were both interested in, and asking what she thought about this and that. The sort of long letters lovers can write—putting down anything which might amuse the other.”

“But what in the world,” Sylvia exclaimed, “did you do with the letters when you had written them?”

Michael Croyle laughed.

“I didn’t post them, you may be sure. But I didn’t have to. I had an idea—no, a conviction, that Joan read them over my shoulder as I wrote them. Sylvia, I have felt the touch of her hand upon my shoulder as she leaned forward to read the word I had not yet finished writing. I have heard a faint gurgle of laughter at something which I knew would amuse her. I never dared turn round—that way Eurydice was lost. I just went on. Well, I was writing to her on the day before your invitation came, and right in the middle of the letter I understood that I needn’t write any more—that letter-writing was at an end.”

Sylvia, though fantasy and imagination played their parts, and great parts too, in her life, had a sound practical foundation on which she stood firm. She could vibrate like a well-built lighthouse, but she remained on her rock. She asked now:

“But something must have happened? Something which you have forgotten?”

Croyle shook his head.

“No, my dear. Letter-writing had come definitely to an end. That was all.”

“Something took its place?”

And Croyle laughed and agreed.

“But not immediately. I am bound to say that I did expect something.”

“A message?” Sylvia asked, and she, following unconsciously in his humour, spoke as if Joan was living next door in a London street and might be expected to send round a note at any moment.

“But it didn’t come,” Croyle answered. “You are right, however. I expected it enough to feel that I must say no to your invitation, Sylvia; I had to hold myself ready.”

“For what?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. For everything—for nothing. It was nothing, you see, and since it was nothing, I thought that I had better write to you and ask whether it was too late for me to come to your party after all.”

“Why didn’t you?” Sylvia asked.

“I began to,” said Croyle, “in fact, I was actually writing when it occurred to me that the time had come for me to revisit all the places which were associated with Joan in my mind. I had fought shy of them. But I’ve never believed in making a luxury of one’s troubles—that was never my line nor Joan’s—and I had always known that sooner or later I should see them again—and indeed be pleased to see them. Well, here was the opportunity quite naturally presented to me! I had said that I couldn’t come to you. Nothing that I had expected had materialized. I was free. So I telegraphed to an hotel in the New Forest, to which I used to go from Friday to Monday whilst Joan was lying ill. You remember the nursing-home? It was a big square house built, I think, upon the highest point of the Forest. The main road to Southampton passed it and was joined below the house by the side road from Brockenhurst. You dipped down from this fortress of a house through Burling and came to my hotel—a long red house on the road with a big garden and orchard behind it. I telegraphed for the suite of rooms I used to have, looking out on to the garden, and when I had secured them I went down by train on the last day of the year!”

“To-day!” Sylvia cried.

“Yes, to-day,” answered Michael.

Then how was it that he was back again and so soon? Sylvia was puzzled, but she kept her perplexities to herself. The moving fingers of the clock were writing off the minutes and would not wait for questions.

“Do you know,” Michael continued, “that I sat close by the window I used to avoid, and that I waited impatiently for the glimpse of the dark road by the Duke of Cornwall public-house at the corner? There’s a miserable little triangle of bare grass and sand between the railway and the road which is a golf-course—and I should think the only golf-course where the members still go proudly out in red jackets. I looked out for the flashes of red, oddly excited. I laughed when I saw two of them between the sparse bushes, and then the Duke’s white inn flew by and vanished—but not before I had seen a Rolls Royce skimming along the tarmac and an A.A. man with his hand to the peak of his cap in a military salute.”

Sylvia leaned forward. Her imagination was provoked by the picture of the man in the train and the great car upon the road—and perhaps—perhaps

—a girl sitting a little forward in the car, alight from her dark starry eyes to her red lips with amusement and delight.

“A tryst, then!” she whispered; and Michael Croyle sat back, he in his turn surprised.

“That never occurred to me,” he cried. “I never dreamed of it.”

He sat in silence for a little while and then, with a shake of the head:

“No, my dear. It would have been amusing.”

“Amusing?”

Could there be, Sylvia thought, a word more odd to use in such a connexion? But Michael *was* amused.

“Yes. But if it had been Joan in that car, I should have known, shouldn’t I? Oh, yes, I must have known. It was the merest coincidence,” and he shook his head. “I reached the Forest Hotel,” he continued, “late in the afternoon. A good many people had come there, either for a change or more probably to escape the festivities of the season. For they were most of them rather old, solitary people, a retired General from the Punjab, a couple of those elderly spinsters who tramp the world with Baedekers under their arms, a pensioned governess, a man who had given his life to watching birds, a middle-aged couple without children—that sort of visitor. All of them friendly, making the best of things, achieving a kind of gaiety—but on the whole a rather pathetic gathering. There was, however, one young couple, recently married, which gave us a real lustre. They were both young, he a Civil Servant of the Straits Settlements on leave, she a girl from the hill country of Dorsetshire, both good-looking and both tremendously in love, but decently in love. There was a touch of Millamant in their behaviour. They were reserved and very private with each other, though every now and then they broke down over some little joke of their own and gave themselves away.”

Sylvia laughed. Michael might have been describing Joan and himself in the days when she had lived.

“They were charming to us,” Michael continued. “If they thought us the waifs and strays of the world, they gave not a sign of it, unless their consideration was a sign. We met in the lounge for a cocktail before dinner; we dined at small tables in the dining-room looking on the garden, talking to each other across the room, and after dinner we played a game.”

He dwelled for a moment upon the phrase. “Yes, we played a game, the sort of simple round game, suitable to the gathering and the occasion. Someone had to go out of the room. The rest of us had to agree upon some object in the room upon which we were to concentrate our thoughts. Then

the person outside the room was to be called back into it and find out by asking questions, or watching the direction of our eyes, what it was we were thinking about.”

“Wasn’t that all rather commonplace?” Sylvia asked. She had been expecting something more timely and dramatic than this very conventional and tedious evening.

“It was very commonplace,” Croyle agreed. “That’s what makes the whole affair to me so true and natural. There was nothing odd or significant in any of the preliminaries. Everything, even to the last lovely incident, came in a simple sequence of everyday things. There was, therefore, no doubting it. There was no drama. The evening flowed, just flowed, to its end, like a quiet river to the sea.”

“The evening?” Sylvia stammered. “*This* evening? To-night?”

“Yes, to-night,” Michael answered, wondering apparently what puzzled her.

But how in the world, since he was here in London and the time still short of twelve, could he have spent that evening a hundred miles away in Hampshire? Sylvia drew away from him as if she was afraid that his mind had gone, but she saw that he noticed her movement, and that a shadow darkened his face. She leaned forward at once.

“To-night, yes. I see, my dear. You poor derelicts were playing animal, vegetable, mineral in the drawing-room of your hotel.”

“Yes. The drawing-room was a little-used room in the front of the house overlooking the road. My sitting-room was behind it and opened on to the garden and had a door into the drawing-room. It was, therefore, the natural room to be used as the waiting-room whilst the thing to be guessed was decided upon. Of course, the young wife, Cynthia Stile, was chosen to go out of the room. She was a tallish slim girl with hair the colour of corn and grey eyes, and she was dressed in a blue frock which set off her white throat and shoulders perfectly. I remember that one of the travelling spinsters cried out in a burst of enthusiasm as soon as the door of my sitting-room was closed upon Cynthia, ‘Oh, I do hope she guesses it quickly.’

“We all laughed, but I think that at the back of our minds we all had the same wish. We wanted no crumpled rose-leaves to ruffle the contentment of our lovers—we had almost a proprietary interest in their happiness during this New Year season. Mark Stile, the husband, laughed confidently. ‘I don’t think Cynthia will be long,’ he said, and we set ourselves to agreeing upon some object in the room. We chose in the end a rose in a bunch of flowers

which stood in a glass vase upon a mat on the grand piano; and we made up our minds not to look at it definitely, not to look away from it definitely, but just to keep it in mind. Then the General, who was appointed master of ceremonies, rose and went to the door of my sitting-room. He opened it.

“‘Mrs. Stile. We are ready.’

“Then he closed the door again and resumed his seat and, stroking his grey moustache, put on as vacant and indifferent an air as he could. So we all sat posed rather like figures in Madame Tussaud’s, and waiting for Cynthia Stile to appear and question us.

“But she didn’t appear. We waited, thinking that she had snatched the occasion to run off to her room, repair the vermilion of her lips and powder her nose. We weren’t impatient. No; we rather liked her for it. We thought these pretty attentions to her looks were a pretty compliment to us, the derelicts. But still she didn’t appear. Someone shifted his feet and composed them again quickly. Someone coughed. The General from the Punjab went HRRHM-HaHa, like an elephant and relapsed into a sense of guilt—and still Cynthia didn’t appear. I don’t pretend to be more sensitive than another to the vibrations and reactions of the people about me, but I became conscious of a gradual and extraordinary change in the mood of all of us. Perhaps the silence we kept uneasily had as much to do with it as any other reason, and the carefully careless poses we were at pains to assume and retain. But—something was growing in the room. That’s the truth. Something strange and new was growing in the room. A few minutes ago we were playing with the semi-serious attention of grown-ups in such circumstances, an after-dinner game which should carry us comfortably on to the moment when we would turn out the lights, fling open the windows and hear the church bells pealing across the glades of the New Forest messages and messages and messages!

“But now the idea of the New Year imminent was being wiped out of our minds. Something was going to happen—here and now. Something was happening—here and now. That’s how I read the new conviction which was creeping from guest to guest in the silent room of the Forest Hotel, dominating us, binding us in the very spells of expectation.

“It needed one of the travelling ladies to break a silence which was intolerable and seemed unbreakable. I suppose she was of a firmer mould than the rest of us.

“‘I wish Cynthia would come,’ she said fretfully. Yes, we already, even on so slight an acquaintance, thought of her as Cynthia. But her voice was not quite under control. It rose and quavered, almost with a hint of hysteria

—certainly with a note of fear. It was the note of fear, calling to the same unacknowledged feeling in all of us which brought Mark Stile to his feet.

“ ‘I’ll fetch her,’ he said, and he hurried to the door. Just for the fraction of a second he hesitated and the handle of the door rattled in his grasp. Then he turned it. As the door opened, we saw through the opening that the room was in darkness. Mark Stile slipped in.

“ ‘Cynthia!’ he called in a panic. Then the alarm was drowned in laughter. ‘Oh!’ he added, and he shut the door behind him.

“His burst of laughter set us all at ease. The old General growled and twisted his moustache, and said good-humouredly: ‘The young monkey. She’s up to some mischief.’

“We were delighted that she was. Cynthia Stile was going to play some pleasant and unexpected trick upon us. We waited for it patiently. Yes, we could wait at our ease now. She had enlisted her husband. Very well! Then it needed a little preparation. We must give them time and, meanwhile, we might guess as cleverly as our brains could manage it what entertainment the lovers were plotting for us. From a charade to a séance, from a duologue to a dance, we ranged through the possibilities, and then the man whose life was given to watching birds said suddenly:

“ ‘They are a long time, aren’t they?’ They *had* been a long time. And all our unstable fears began to crowd and gibber at us again. But we wouldn’t have their company. We shouted down that watcher of birds. How dare he, who should have been the most patient of us all, show such perturbation? The retired governess hurried to the rescue, as she must often have done to appease a panic in the school-room.

“ ‘Oh, I expect they are really going to astonish us. Dressing up takes a lot of time. Ask the General.’

“A little joke can go a long way, and the General took it with an excellent spirit.

“ ‘But, my dear lady, you don’t know me,’ he replied fiercely, twirling his moustache. ‘Within ten minutes of stepping out of my bath you couldn’t have found a button of my tunic out of place.’

“But the little chorus of laughter which sprang up died away quickly. There had come a fresh development in our suspense. We began to watch the door now, dreading lest it should open rather than wishing that it would. I should have said, Sylvia, ‘*They* began to watch the door. *They* were afraid.’ I could feel their fear, throbbing about me, attacking me.”

“But you weren’t afraid,” said Sylvia.

“I hadn’t room for fear,” Michael Croyle answered. “I was simply conscious that it was my turn now to go into that room. This certainty filled me and I got up from the chair.

“‘Oh, you’re not going to follow them?’ cried one of the ladies in a voice of agitation—I think that it was the middle-aged, stoutish wife.

“‘It’s time that I did,’ I answered, and the husband grumbled a protest against my folly.

“‘Not a bit of it, Mr. Croyle,’ he said. ‘There’s heaps of time. You’ll probably just spoil their game when they’ve just got it ready for us. Have a heart and give them a chance! There’s still an hour to go before midnight.’

“He was right, for I looked at my watch. The hands pointed exactly to eleven o’clock. But the time mentioned was merely an excuse to stop me from doing the thing which it was ordained that I should do. An earthquake would not have stopped me at that moment.

“‘It’s my turn,’ I said. ‘I am called,’ and I walked to the door rather stiffly, like a man walking along a narrow board.

“‘You’re coming back, of course?’ the General said gruffly.

“‘Of course,’ I answered. I turned the handle and went into the room. I heard the governess say, as the door was closing softly behind me, ‘I heard nobody call him. He’s as white as a ghost.’

“That, of course, was the merest piece of imagination. They were all, I think, worked up to expect that some startling and dreadful catastrophe was hidden in my sitting-room. What I was expecting, frankly, I cannot tell you. During the last few minutes I had been moving without volition like an automaton on a string, but an automaton with his senses alert. The room in which I stood was dark, but outside the moon was riding high behind a fleece of white cloud and all the garden was bathed in a wan and vaporous light. The long windows stood open, and the freshness of the dew filled the air. It was very still. Occasionally a bird rustled on a branch and far away an owl hooted softly; and on the lawn in front of me Mark Stile was walking with his wife, his arm about her shoulders. That was what the catastrophe amounted to, Sylvia. Cynthia Stile, by the simple device of not answering the summons to the drawing-room, had lured her husband to join her in the glamour of that forest garden. Once he had joined her the magic of the night, something mystical in the pale radiance which lit it up, and the amazing riddle to them of their love, obliterated from their minds the drawing-room and our commonplace little company. They were deep in talk and we had ceased to be. Yes, but it couldn’t go on. They weren’t playing fair. We were

a little community gathered up by chance into this space amongst the trees and united by certain needs most acutely felt at this one season of the year—children, relations, love, all of which we were without. And the two lovers, because they had everything they wanted, were a real solace to each one of us. They couldn't be allowed to get away by themselves on this night of all nights. They were a ministration to us, the derelicts. So they must minister. I had to see to it that these lucky people did their duty by the waifs and strays.

"I moved towards the window, but before I could open my mouth, I heard a whisper behind me:

"'Don't call, my dear!'

"The whisper was low and clear and—you won't think me a fool, Sylvia?—in a moment the tears were running down my cheeks. You know how impossible it is to hear again by memory, however much you ply your imagination, a voice which once played upon your heart the loveliest music in the world. How often I had tried to recapture it! But it is just as impossible to mistake it when it falls actually upon your ears. Joan! Of course it was Joan who was speaking, and at once everything was explained to me. Why my letter-writing had come to an end, why I could watch the stretch of road with the white tavern at the corner without distress, why I had come back to the hotel in the forest which I had looked upon as forbidden land for me. I cried without shame, and I felt Joan's hand upon my shoulder.

"I turned round—or rather she turned me round. There was nothing strange or new in her. She was wearing a white velvet dress which she had bought in London just before her accident and had, I remembered, once worn. She glimmered white against the black of the room, her eyes darkly shining, her lips lovely with a smile. I think I babbled some excuse for my tears. I know that she was in my arms. The last time I had seen her, I had stooped and kissed her forehead—and it had been cold as marble. I remembered at this moment that I had not been sorry, for the coldness was a sign that the long days and nights of pain were over. I could afford to remember it, for now her lips were warm and tender and she lay in my arms pulsing with blood and life.

"'Dearest and dearest, I have wanted you,' I said.

"Joan stroked her hand down my cheek.

"'I know, darling. I read your letters.'

"'You did?'

"'Yes. Over your shoulder as you wrote them.'

“‘I thought you did.’

“‘Had you once faltered in your need of me,’ she said with loving pride, ‘I could not have come to you to-night,’ and her arms clung to me. ‘As it is ——’ and such a sigh of happiness broke from her lips as made all my sorrows of no account.

“‘You are here,’ I said, and I laughed.

“Joan laid a finger on my lips.

“‘Hush!’ and she pointed to the lovers deep in talk upon the lawn. I had forgotten them as completely as they had forgotten us. ‘We owe them a great deal,’ said Joan, with a laugh in her eyes. ‘Don’t let us bring them to earth before we need.’

“‘What do we owe them?’ I asked in a low voice.

“‘But for them I couldn’t have come to you, my dear. To come to you there was a bridge needed for me to cross—and the only one bridge by which I could cross was the bridge of a perfect love. That is the law.’

“I looked out through the windows to where the two lovers waited in the silver grey and misty light for the chimes to break upon the stillness of the night. They seemed to me further away than they had been, ever so much further. The air about them was more vaporous, but it made a sort of archway in which they stood quite clearly, bathed in a lovely silver radiance. And all the time Joan was at my side, her hand clasping mine, her breath upon my cheek. . . . I wanted you to know, Sylvia, for I am going to skip out when the lights go down.”

Michael had hardly finished speaking when the lights went out in the great restaurant and every ship flying the Red Ensign between Pole and Pole struck sixteen bells. When the lights went up again, and the band broke into Auld Lang Syne, and Sylvia reached out a crossed hand to Michael Croyle, he had gone.

“You saw him go?” she asked quietly to her neighbour as she closed up the gap.

“Yes. He whispered good night and went away.”

And with that answer Sylvia was contented, but only for a little while. Michael Croyle had spoken of New Year’s Eve as of a time long since past. But it was this New Year’s Eve, nevertheless, the New Year’s Eve which only five minutes ago was still to-night. He had told her a story of events not an hour old—events which had happened to him a hundred miles away in the depths of the New Forest. But he had not finished his story. Sylvia sat back in her chair startled and for a moment dismayed. It was she who had to

finish it. She was sure of that just as Michael had been sure that it was his turn to go into the room which opened on to the garden.

“I shan’t be a moment,” she said to the man who sat next to her. “Will you come with me to the telephone?”

She tried to call up Croyle’s house in Deanery Street, but she could not get on. She rang up the supervisor and was told that the line was occupied by a trunk call from the New Forest, where Michael Croyle had just died in a room opening upon the garden.

THE REVEREND
BERNARD SIMMONS, B.D.

DAVID SWAINE worked for more than eight hours a day and from a man became a master. He had his offices in Gracechurch Street and in this, his thirty-eighth year, a seat in the House of Commons; and up till now he had enjoyed a reasonable contentment. But for no particular reason, the monotonous industry of his life began to be disturbed. Pictures of strange rivers and exotic cities drifted across the pages of his ledgers on dusty and sunlit afternoons. The air of the House of Commons, filtered up through fold upon fold of cotton-wool, became to his senses or imagination faded and sickly. He wanted a holiday. He wanted fresh air. He wanted colour.

He proposed to himself a rush round the world, and he certainly did get as far as Ceylon. He landed at Colombo and did all the right things. He bought tortoise-shell at Galle and saw the Great Tooth in the Temple at Kandy. He climbed Adam's Peak and watched the sun rise and the huge Shadow launch itself across the mists. He played a round of golf in the English climate of Nuwara Eliya, and visited the Rock Temple at Dhamballa. And finally, still revelling in the green and glistening radiance of the island, he came by some stroke of Fate to Anuradhapura, the old dead city, dug after so many centuries out of its overgrowth of jungle.

Swaine wrote his name in the hotel book, left a letter of introduction at the house of the Commissioner of the District, and set enthusiastically out in search of tank and moonstone, temple and sacred tree. He was walking back in the late afternoon from those serried lines of low square stone pillars which pass by the name of the Brazen Palace, lost in an effort to shoot himself back into the age when High Priests and monks and a comparatively unimportant King actually lived in the Palace above the stones, when the most ancient and modern thing in the world happened. A woman called to him.

He had been vaguely aware that someone had passed him. He had been vaguely conscious too that this someone had stopped and turned. But the

call swung him round; for it was his Christian name which was used. He saw a middle-aged woman of a stout coarse build with a round red face which seemed to him swollen. Little red veins disfigured the whites of her eyes.

“She drinks,” he said to himself, “but how the dickens does she know my name?”

And the call came again, “David,” but this time upon a note of reproach. David walked slowly towards her, frowning in his perplexity. He saw a look of fear leap into her eyes.

“You surely know me again, don’t you, David?” and ever so little her voice shook.

So she had not always looked the round barrel of a woman she looked now, and in her heart she knew it, but dreaded to have to recognize it.

“Of course I know you again,” he said quickly, and was rewarded by a smile of relief.

“Then tell me my name,” she continued, with a dreadful archness which sat upon her monstrously.

Now that was not fair. She should have given him a lead. She was asking for the very answer she dreaded; and but for the flash of fear which had shone so distinctly in her eyes she would have got it. It gave him no pleasure, however, to wound for the sake of wounding. Obviously he had once known this woman. He reflected and by some subconscious message of his memory, her name suddenly stood out. There was certainly nothing in her appearance, no accent in her husky voice to remind him of the pretty slender girl to whom years ago he had once made love in the country lanes between Dulwich and Forest Hill.

“You are Dulcie Elverton,” he said with a smile, and he held out his hand.

“Yes, that’s it,” she exclaimed with relief. “’Ow, you gave me quite a turn when I thought you didn’t remember me—such sweethearts as we were too.”

She slipped her hand inside his arm and walked on beside him.

“Fancy meetin’ you in Ceylon, David! Well, you’ve got on in the world, haven’t you? I see your name in the papers regular. That wouldn’t have happened if we’d run away and got married at nineteen, as we talked of,” she added shrewdly, and was silent for a moment. Then the archness returned to her and she nudged him in the ribs.

“D’you remember the laburnum tree, David?”

“Could I forget it?” he asked uncomfortably.

“Well, I don’t know. Men are that queer. You never do know.”

The laburnum tree had overhung the high garden wall of the Elverton’s house and a couple kissing underneath it were hidden even from the topmost windows. The picture flashed back now into Swaine’s memory—of himself waiting under the cover of the wall, of Dulcie stealing out to him, of the stolen passionate kisses, nineteen years crying hungrily to eighteen years, of the hurried partings a little way from the house—for the Elvertons were wholesale people in the leather trade and David Swaine was merely a clerk on an office stool without any prospects whatever. David Swaine remembered now, remembered even the tragic emotions with which they parted, he to his advancement in Liverpool.

“You never once wrote to me, David. No doubt you were right,” she said. “It all seemed pretty hopeless. But I was fairly heartbroken.”

One thing Swaine couldn’t remember—the Cockney accent which she used now, which gave to her sentimental recollections a quite pathetic vulgarity. But she herself unconsciously supplied the explanation.

“I knew you were going up and up,” she said in a voice of pride: and he remembered that he had been put to the greatest pains to get rid of a Cockney accent himself. He had taken lessons in elocution; he had watched himself and the faces of the people to whom he talked to make sure of his lapses, and correct them. He had gone up. Dulcie Elverton had stood still—there was the explanation.

“Yes, it’s always been a pride to me that I was right about you,” she resumed. “I was modern, wasn’t I?”

David Swaine laughed. He had not recollected that quality of hers until she mentioned the familiar word.

“Of course you were,” he said.

Dulcie Elverton had been all for the latest movements. Her last word of contempt had been “Mid-Victorian.” She had dared to smoke a cigarette, she had even dared to mention Oscar Wilde, she had been the very impersonation of the Forward Movement in her little suburban circle.

“Yes, I always had courage, hadn’t I?”—and suddenly her voice rang with a sudden note of despair, which made the embarrassed David look sharply into her face.

“Have things gone wrong with you, Dulcie?” he asked lamely—foolishly. For looking at her now and comparing her with the dainty slip of a girl she had been, he knew there was no need to ask that question.

“No, no, not a bit,” she replied bravely. But she sent a quick glance of fear to this side and that like a criminal with the police on his track, and she added in a low hurried voice: “I must go. I must go.”

She drew her hand away from Swaine’s arm, and then seized it again and clung to it.

“I’d have bolted with you, David, in a sec. if you’d asked me. Oh, why didn’t you?”

Swaine had never in his life heard a regret so pitiful. He began confusedly to stammer a few incoherencies. It wouldn’t have been fair to her. . . . He had no position, no security to offer to her. . . . It would have meant poverty made poorer perhaps by children. . . . Dulcie cut quickly into his explanations.

“It doesn’t matter now,” she said. “But I’m awfully proud of you, David. Do you remember what I used to call you? You’ve forgotten. You were my beau ideal”; and with that piece of banality she turned away. They were standing in a broad road in the native city and he saw her disappear into the darkness between two shops gaudily lit by petrol lamps.

It is uncomfortable to meet unexpectedly your first love and to find that she has swollen into a mountainous ruin. You begin to speculate whether you, though you cannot see it, are something of a ruin yourself. It becomes still more uncomfortable if you are made to realize that you are in some way responsible for the ruin. This was David Swaine’s position as he walked back to his hotel with all his eager enjoyment quenched.

A hundred torturing questions, which he had never asked, which Dulcie Elverton had determined that he should not ask, presented themselves to him now, demanding answers. Why was Dulcie in Ceylon at all? Was she living there, or a tourist like himself? Why had she suddenly turned away from him and disappeared—as if—yes, as if she feared to be seen with him even in the native bazaar? What had happened to bring her down from her status as a suburban heiress to that of a lone disfigured creature driven to try to warm her hands at the cold ashes of a boy and girl romance?

David Swaine walked back to the hotel set in a sort of park of turf and red-flowered rain trees and was very uncomfortable indeed. Therefore he was grateful for a curious little incident which distracted his thoughts.

In the lobby of the hotel, a man in a suit of khaki drill was examining the visitors' book; his back was turned towards Swaine, and all that Swaine noticed at first was that he wore a soft flat clerical hat. But he noticed something else immediately afterwards. The native clerk behind the desk touched the man in the clerical hat quickly with the butt of his pen; and the man sprang up and turned round. He was undoubtedly a Cingalese too, but he wore the stiff white stock and black silk breastplate which are the trademarks of the English clergyman.

"A missionary," said Swaine to himself, and he politely raised his hat.

The missionary, if such he was, returned the bow with a singular obsequiousness, so marked indeed that it had all the appearance of a sneer. Swaine passed on and upstairs and along the corridor to his room, which had a balcony overlooking the park and just to the right of the porch. On the table was a polite letter from the Commissioner bidding him to dinner that evening at eight. Swaine scribbled an acceptance—he might find an answer to some at all events of his hundred questions at the Commissioner's dinner-table—and, after ringing the bell, sent his letter off by a messenger. Then he lit a cigarette and stepped out upon his balcony, and he saw on the sandy drive beneath him the missionary. The missionary was looking up with a frown at the façade of the hotel, and made a little movement as Swaine appeared. Swaine had an impression that the man had been waiting for his appearance, and that, now that he had appeared, he was fixing in his mind the exact location of his room. Of course it was fancy, he argued; but none the less the missionary walked off now along the drive to the white entrance gates with the air of a man who had found out just what he wanted to find out and had nothing more to do there.

Now Swaine was of the type which objects to moving amongst mysteries. He liked people in a category and things which could be exactly defined, so that he could choose his ground and deal with them. Therefore this curious little encounter remained in his mind, remained indeed uppermost in his mind throughout dinner and as soon as the Commissioner's wife and his daughter had left the table, he returned to it.

"Do you know a native clergyman or missionary here?" he asked.

"Do I not," replied Mr. Septimus Gordon, the Commissioner. He was a tall, thin, grey, tired man grown cynical with his years of service. "The Reverend Bernard Simmons, M.A., of Balliol College, Oxford, B.D. He is going to give me more trouble than all the rest of the district put together."

"Why?" asked Swaine.

“First, he married a white woman and brought her out here. And that always means trouble.”

Swaine jumped in his chair. Dulcie Elverton had prided herself on her modernity, her freedom from prejudice and convention. Was it to this that her modernity had brought her?

“Secondly, he drinks,” continued Mr. Gordon in a drawl, “and he has taught his wife to drink too. Poor creature, I am not surprised. What else could she do?”

So Dulcie was the wife. No wonder she had cried out against Swaine for not taking his courage in his hands and running away with her. Swaine twiddled the stem of his liqueur glass between his fingers and his thumb and wished to goodness that he had never come to Ceylon. The room with the faded air was better than this. For the first lesson to be learnt in that room was to cease to reproach yourself for any breaches of faith. He shifted his legs uncomfortably and looked up to find Mr. Gordon watching him with a hint of amusement in his eyes. However, he merely continued his catalogue.

“Thirdly, the Reverend Bernard Simmons, M.A., B.D., is backsliding. Yes, that’s quite the natural thing to happen.”

“Backsliding?” inquired Swaine.

“Well, it depends upon your point of view,” answered Gordon. “Most people would call it backsliding, though for my part between Buddhism and Christianity there isn’t the thickness of a six-penny bit.”

In that statement Mr. Septimus Gordon was wrong. There is one point of difference, a point which was to prove of enormous importance to David Swaine. Gordon was generalizing hastily with his thoughts rather upon the Reverend Bernard Simmons, B.D., and the trouble that man was going to give him. He gave Swaine a sketch of his history as far as he knew it.

“He was a scholar with a sort of facile cleverness common enough amongst his type. He seems to have been swept rather off his feet by some Revivalist Meetings in the East End of London. He even changed his name, which is really Mahinda Bahu, to mark his complete severance from his old creed and its associations, and finally he took orders. Somehow he managed to marry some girl bored to death with her suburban surroundings and with her head full of ignorance and dreams. There’s some obscure sex-instinct too at the bottom of these marriages, no doubt.” Mr. Gordon shrugged his shoulders. “Some expectation of more than sane and normal . . .”—he hesitated upon the word pleasure, and chose the more decent and comprehensive—“happiness. Anyway he married her and the good people at

home put the lid on the whole unfortunate business. They sent him back here as a missionary.”

“It has been a failure?” Swaine asked miserably. He was disturbed by the uneasy suspicion which comes to all men, however successful they may be, at some time or another, that there is something wickedly, irretrievably wrong in the very make-up of the world. Here were two well-meaning young people, himself and Dulcie Elverton, and between them they had made the most dreadful hash of the girl’s life. Here were two very good qualities, ambition on his side, and a freedom from prejudice on hers, and together they had produced wreckage.

“A complete failure,” replied Mr. Gordon. “How in the world could you with a house, and a servant, and an English wife, and a frock-coat and a clerical choker, expect to convert people whose priests go about in a fold of saffron cloth with a beggar bowl? It isn’t reasonable. And why should you try?”

Once more Mr. Septimus Gordon overlooked the point of enormous difference with which David Swaine was to become acquainted.

“Anyway, the Reverend Bernard Simmons, M.A., Oxford, B.D., alias Mahinda Bahu, isn’t trying any more,” he resumed. “He’s amongst his own people. Disappointment, drink, quarrels with his wife, who is of course bitterly handicapped by her marriage, are driving him back to the old beliefs and—worse—to the old superstitions. Yes, that’s the really bad thing. But it was bound to be, wasn’t it? Extreme left goes extreme right, and doesn’t oscillate gently in the middle.”

Mr. Septimus Gordon suddenly broke off and switched his chair round to face Swaine.

“I have told you all this for a reason. You can do a good thing. You can persuade Dulcie Simmons to get out of this place and go back to her own people.”

“She has probably quarrelled with them,” said Swaine slowly, “if they are still alive. I never knew the parents, but I should think that they had wiped her off the family.”

He was the more sure of it the more clearly he recollected them, a stiff-necked couple who uttered the responses in church louder than anyone else, looked upon “business” as something peculiarly righteous, and the wealthiest families in their residential suburb as the greatest leaders of Society. Then he looked at Mr. Septimus Gordon in surprise.

“How do you know that Mrs. Simmons is a friend of mine?”

Mr. Gordon laughed outright.

“Everybody within miles knows that you are a friend of hers. Everybody within miles knows that you are here staying at this hotel. I don’t wonder that the Reverend Simmons was hanging about to have a look at you. She talks about you

‘From morn to afternoon—
From afternoon to night——’ ”

he quoted, from “The Yeomen of the Guard.” “Do you know what you are to Dulcie Simmons? You are her beau ideal.”

Words could not describe the languid mockery with which Mr. Gordon pronounced that dreadful phrase. David Swaine flushed to the roots of his hair.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he answered uncomfortably. “I’ll call on her tomorrow if you will give me her address.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Gordon. “They live in the native quarter, of course”; and he wrote the address down, whilst more and more David Swaine wished that he had booked a passage straight on to Australia, Burma, Penang, Singapore—to anywhere in the world which avoided a prolonged stoppage at Ceylon.

“You can do us all a good service, I am sure,” said Mr. Septimus Gordon.

II

David Swaine, however, did not after all call upon Mrs. Simmons. He started out with that object certainly in the afternoon of the next day, but as he closed the white gate of the drive behind him, she called to him again from a clump of trees at the side of the road; and she called in a low and agitated voice.

“David!”

He turned on to the turf and found her holding her hand against her heart and her lips trembling.

“Oh, I thought you were never goin’ to come out of the hotel,” she said. “I’ve been waitin’ for you the whole afternoon. I’ve got to talk to you.”

She turned and hurried by a path through the trees until she came to an open space where a temple on a raised platform above a terrace and a neatly kept garden of flowers was built against a tall rock. In front of it slept a tank overshadowed on one side by high trees, and over its smooth water kingfishers flitted with a glint of gold and vivid blue. Dulcie Elverton sank down upon a garden seat on the edge of the tank and quite in the open.

“We shall be safe here,” she said. “Tourists are always coming to this temple. So he wouldn’t come near it.”

There was no doubt in Swaine’s mind who “he” must be.

“But I should have thought,” he rejoined, “that with his Oxford training he would have welcomed——”

“White people,” interrupted Dulcie. “Not he! All that was veneer. He has gone back to his own people—angrily.”

“Then you ought to leave him,” said Swaine, obeying Mr. Septimus Gordon’s instructions.

Dulcie shook her head decidedly.

“I? Where should I go to?”

“Home.”

“There’s no such place for me, my dear,” she returned, with half an attempt at a smile which ended in a complete sob. “I quarrelled once and for all with my people over—over—Bernard. They’d never have me back again, and if they would, I wouldn’t go. What would I look like, creeping back—looking,” and her voice sank to a whisper, “looking as I do look. I who am remembered at all events as a pretty girl. You were very kind to me yesterday, David, pretending to remember me. But you didn’t really. No, I couldn’t go back”; and then seizing fast hold of a purpose which she had clean forgotten, she exclaimed: “But you! You *must*. That’s what I waited by the gate to tell you! You must go, David! You must pack your bag and hire a car and get away. I am afraid whilst you’re here. You can reach Colombo to-night in a car if you start off at once. As long as you’re here I’m frightened, desperately frightened.”

Her large red face had a mottled look, the hands she held out to him beseechingly shook and in her eyes there was so urgent a prayer that Swaine was shocked by it.

“But, Dulcie,” he exclaimed. “He daren’t hurt you! He’s here, in the open——” and suddenly he stopped. For all the fear in her face had turned to perplexity.

“Me?” she cried. “I’m not in danger. It’s you—don’t you understand that? Of course it’s you! You see, I have talked of you—yes, more than I ought to have done—when we quarrelled at night. I’ve held you up against him. I’ve said that I could have married you and had a fine home in England, if I had chosen. Yes, I’ve said that over and over. He hates you, and he’s gone back to Buddhism—yes,” and she nodded her head at him. “Don’t you see what a difference that makes?”

“No, I don’t,” replied Swaine stoutly, although a troublesome recollection of the Reverend Bernard Simmons, B.D., standing in the drive and locating the exact position of his bedroom window did recur to him. He recollected the man, however, too, a little square creature, sturdy enough no doubt, but not one to inspire terror.

“I don’t understand what difference his going back to Buddhism can make to me. Why, only last night the Commissioner told me there wasn’t the breadth of a sixpence between Buddhism and Christianity.”

Dulcie Simmons could hardly let him finish, so immense was her contempt.

“He told you that!” she cried scathingly, and in one dreadful sentence she put the difference clear and stark before her companion. “If you hate enough, Buddhism makes murder worth while.”

“Murder!”

Swaine had come up from Colombo, a mere law-abiding globe-trotting tourist to see a buried city of olden times, and he was confronted suddenly with a threat of violent death. He was not going to believe it—no!—there was a police force in Ceylon—yet a chill even in that bright sunlight crept into his flesh and his bones and set him shivering.

“Yes, murder,” she went on eagerly. “Don’t you see, David?” and she beat her fist upon her knee in her anger at the obtuseness of men.

“If he’s tried, if he’s hanged, what does it matter? You think he’s dead. He knows better. He’s going to live again, perhaps as an animal, yes, perhaps as the lowest sort of animal, since he has a crime to expiate; but he’s going to work up again. In a few generations—and what are a few generations?—he’ll be not the Reverend Bernard Simmons again, no, he won’t make that mistake, but Mahinda Bahu getting nearer and nearer to the final blissful extinction.”

She looked around suddenly and though no one was within earshot and only a few tourists were on the terrace of the great Dagoba, she lowered her voice.

“I know he’s planning mischief. For he made a wax image last night and stabbed it through the heart.”

Swaine’s common sense revolted.

“My dear Dulcie, sorcerers did that sort of thing in the Middle Ages.”

“And natives of Ceylon who hate enough, do that sort of thing still,” she rejoined stubbornly.

The sun was going down fast behind the trees. Dulcie Simmons sprang to her feet.

“I must go,” she exclaimed. “He’s certain to imagine that I am with you, if I don’t get back. No, don’t come with me, please! Only go, David! Promise me!”

He took her trembling hand in his.

“I was going to-morrow morning anyway, Dulcie. I’ll keep to my arrangement. I can’t run away, you know. But I’ll go early.”

He made that concession. It was the most his pride would let him do. After all, he, David Swaine, M.P., was not going to turn tail before a missionary, whatever murderous designs that missionary might be nursing in his heart. Dulcie shrugged her shoulders. She knew the uselessness of arguing in favour of the things that aren’t done.

“Very well. Only to-night, David, take care! Oh, take good care! Good-bye!” and she wrung his hand and hurried off in a stumbling run as if she could hardly see whether she kept the path or no. But she disappeared amongst the rain trees at last, a grotesque ambling ruin of a woman blinded with tears.

Swaine walked back towards his hotel courageously enough to begin with. For he could not associate the appearance of Dulcie Simmons with violent events. She was so utterly in keeping with the ordinary humdrum world where nothing happens to-day which did not happen yesterday. But as he walked, the sun dropped behind the trees suddenly, and the gold was off the world. It sank like a ship, a burning ship, into a cold sea, and a chill breath of wind made gooseflesh of his back. “Somebody’s walking over my grave,” he said to himself inadvertently, and was troubled by the inadvertence. “Nonsense,” he said, now correcting himself, and he quickened his pace. But Dulcie Simmons’ appearance was fading from his memories, as quickly as the light was disappearing out of the sky. On the other hand, something frantic in her gestures, the terror which winged her words, the contempt with which she had torn through and through the Commissioner’s tolerant philosophy, asserted themselves and re-asserted themselves. “Yes, men labour over books and theories and experiments and observations,” he argued, “and women pluck the truth out of things by a sure instinct.”

He was passing through the trees now, and he began to run a little until his pride came to his help, and forced him to dawdle. But he dawdled in a rising fear. “It is ridiculous that—anything of the kind”—even in his thoughts he could not bring himself to be more precise than that—“should

happen to *me*," he exclaimed, with at the same time an amazed helpless consciousness that after all just that thing might happen to him. He came to the white gate with a gasp of relief. He flung it open and passed through, and the clink of the latch, repeated and repeated as it swung backwards and forwards behind him, comforted him with a sound which was homely and familiar.

But a little way ahead of him the façade and the porch of the hotel rose, the lower windows ablaze with light, the upper ones shuttered and dark; and as he stood watching it, his momentary sense of comfort oozed out of him.

"Take care to-night! Take care!"

The trees about him began to whisper the warning and he realized with an exaggerated sense of desolation that he was in a strange land amongst a strange people. How could he take care when he didn't know what to take care against? The squat sturdy figure of the missionary under his clerical hat became ominous and sinister. Swaine stepped off the hard surface of the drive on to the turf, so that his footsteps might not be heard. Standing in the darkness outside he peered into the lighted lounge. It was empty. He walked in. Beyond the lounge on the right side facing the staircase was an office-desk at which sat a Cingalese clerk. Swaine stepped up to the desk and ordered a motor-car for the next morning to take him into Colombo.

"You are leaving us so soon, Mister Swaine M.P.!" said the clerk with a polite smile.

"I must be on board before four o'clock," said Swaine. Already he felt the breeze as his steamer put out between the enormous breakwaters to the open sea. "So I should like to start at eight in the morning. Can you arrange for that?"

"Of course, Mister Swaine," said the clerk, and—was it the dim light of the electric lamp in the office, or some passing shadow—his smile all at once seemed secret. Swaine began to interpret it. "You won't leave here to-morrow morning at all, Mister Swaine M.P. The motor-car will be on the bill, but you won't be in the motor-car—no, no, Mister Swaine M.P."

He turned away abruptly and went upstairs. Outside his door, his bearer was waiting, the door was open, the light burning within, and his change of clothes laid out for him.

"You will have to pack this evening," said Swaine.

"Everything packed already, sir," said the bearer, lifting the lid of the suit-case. "Just night things and clothes for the morning left out."

Swaine experienced another of his alternations, this time from doubt to confidence. The company of others in the dining-room, like himself seeing the world, confirmed his courage. He drank half a bottle of champagne and felt himself again. A missionary from Balliol and a Bachelor of Divinity must be a civilized person. Swaine scoffed at his folly in allowing himself to be frightened. Yes, he admitted it now—now that it was all over. He had actually been frightened—actually he—and in the midst of a conversation on the history of moonstones, which he was having with an erudite American, he sprang up from his chair, his face white, his eyes staring.

“What has happened?” asked his companion.

“I thought that I saw someone flit by the open door.”

“I saw no one,” the American assured him.

“A shadow, no doubt,” said Swaine. But he remained on his feet staring out through the open door of the dining-room, through the lounge beyond and into the darkness of the park. For the momentary chill of sunset had been followed by a stifling heat and every door stood open.

Swaine turned back towards the American, who was regarding him with the oddest look.

“The fact is,” Swaine explained, “I expected someone to-night, a missionary, and if he doesn’t come I shall miss him altogether. For I am leaving early to-morrow.”

Even whilst he made the explanation, he had a feeling that he was tempting God to send the missionary to him, as an answer and retort to the regret he had tried to force into his voice. But though his eyes searched the darkness, there was not a movement, not a flicker.

“It was my fancy,” he said, sinking down again into his chair.

“A touch of liver, I should think,” returned the American, and he resumed his discourse.

But Swaine was no longer in the mood to listen. His confidence had gone for good with the flitting of that shadow across the open doorway. Apparently he listened, but—in his mind he saw as on a board written up in fiery letters——

“It makes murder worth while. To-night take care!”

After all, he had got the best part of his life in front of him. He was only thirty-seven and he had progressed so far already that all the rewards were in his reach. It wouldn’t do for him to die in Anuradhapura to satisfy the insane jealousy of a Cingalee. He relit his cigar and stood up.

“It’s hot in here. Shall we go outside?”

“That’s a fine idea,” said his companion sympathetically. “I am from the Santa Fé valley and I expect I feel the heat less than you do.”

Swaine was very glad to have a companion with him and the two men paced the drive together for an hour. No one passed them. On the top of the porch which made a big common balcony for the guests of the hotel, some of the visitors were sitting. Swaine’s room was next to the porch, and as he looked up to its shuttered window, he drew some relief from the contiguity of those visitors.

“Well, I shall go to bed. Good night, sir,” said the American.

“I am coming too,” replied Swaine quickly, and he threw the butt of his cigar away. He would have someone with him as he went up the stairs, and there would still be his door and—made sure that it was a shadow which had flitted across his vision—a shadow of his own disordered thoughts. None the less he flung his door open violently and held it pressed back with all the force of his right arm whilst he groped for the switch of the electric light with his left hand. It seemed ages before he found it.

He left the door open after he had entered. The room was bare and clean as befitted the climate. A strip of carpet on the boards beside the bed, a chest of drawers, a chair and an arm-chair, a washing stand, a dressing-table, and a wardrobe with a glass door, a high bed without valance or flounce, shrouded in its mosquito curtain—that was all the furniture which the room contained. Swaine crossed the room and jerked open the door of the wardrobe—it was empty and it was the only place in the room where a man could hide. The windows stood open, their white flimsy curtains were drawn apart, the shutters were barred. There was no cupboard in the walls. The space beneath the bed was bare. Satisfied that his room harboured no assailant, Swaine at last closed the door. There was a key in the lock, and below the lock a strong bolt. He turned the key and shot the bolt. He was safe till daylight came, as safe as in a fortress.

But he made up his mind to leave the light burning. If anyone thought of getting in, in spite of the lock and the bolt and the shutter-bars, he would see under the sill of the door or through the slats of the shutters that the light was on, that Swaine was still awake. He undressed, slipped under his mosquito curtain and nestled down in his bed. But at once he became uneasy. The light was outside the mosquito curtain. He could not see the room any longer as clearly as he wanted to see, as clearly as he ought to see. The white veil of the curtain hindered his vision. On the other hand, he lying inside the net was visible. That would not do. That would not do at all. He

raised the mosquito curtain on both sides and flung it up to lie in a bundle on the top of the high bed frame. That was very much better. He leaned up on his elbow. He could see the whole room now—every inch and corner of it, and above all the door of that wardrobe, empty though it was—empty though it undoubtedly was.

The tiny “ping” of a mosquito close to his face determined him to smoke a pipe of tobacco. He had a copy of *Great Expectations* on the table by his bed. Swaine had always cherished a fondness for that book because of its title. When in due course he had a title, *Great Expectations* was to be his motto. He filled his pipe, once more swinging back to a mood of ease. In the company of Pip and Joe Gargery and Miss Haversham, he could pass the hours very pleasantly till morning came.

He struck a match and as the flame spurted, the electric light went out. The management of the hotel had principles of economy which were not shared by David Swaine. It was time for all good people to be asleep. Swaine held the lighted match until the flame burnt his fingers—his mouth open, his eyes set and staring like a man who has had a stroke. There was no candle in the room, and only some half a dozen matches left in the box. Those he must nurse; but so many voices whispered in his ear “Take care tonight,” so many stealthy footsteps approached his bed, that every one of them had been used before half the night was over. Then after all, the door of the wardrobe creaked, and he heard the hinges whine as it swung slowly open. He lay now in a stark panic, a bead of sweat trickled suddenly down his cheek, he could hear nothing for the throbbing of his heart, loud as a drum to which soldiers march.

And some time or another, from sheer exhaustion he fell asleep. For he heard a loud knocking upon his door and, starting up, saw the daylight filtering through the lattices of the shutters. He had actually been asleep, he realized with amazement.

“Who’s there?” he cried, and the voice of his bearer replied to him:

“Time, sir. Motor-car coming soon.”

Swaine sprang out of bed and flung back the shutters. The little park was spread out before him, the coolness of the morning bathed and refreshed him. He unlocked the door and drew the bolt back.

“Get me my bath,” he said; and looking at his servant with his long hair fixed with a great tortoise-shell comb on the top of his head and the curious femininity of his bust which he had remarked in so many of the Cingalese, he was astounded that he should ever have been afraid.

“Bath all ready, eh? And water very hot?” he asked jovially.

“Water very hot, sir,” said the bearer, as he put the bath slippers by the bed and arranged the dressing-gown over the foot. Swaine slipped on the dressing-gown and thrust his feet into the slippers.

“Get the chota-hazri, John, and then finish packing,” said Swaine. “We’ll get off as soon as we can.”

He took up his big sponge on the palm of one hand and his cake of soap in the other, and went down the passage to the bathroom, where a great tub full of steaming water awaited him. He set the sponge and the soap down by the side of the bath, and stripped. A great earthenware ewer filled with cold water stood by the side of the bath. Swaine, with a sense of luxury dipped his sponge into it, raised the sponge high above his head and with an “Ah!” of anticipation squeezed and squeezed hard. Then he screamed and flung the sponge from him.

It fell into the steaming bath and suddenly came to life. It bubbled and sank and rose again. It spun and twisted in frantic convulsions, and rocked on the water like a boat in a storm. Swaine watched it stupidly, with a face the colour of putty, whilst his left hand gripped his right forearm like a vice. Then out of the sponge a little snake of greenish-yellow colour, with a startling black band across its back, darted like a bullet and lashed the water in its agony like a whipcord. Once more Swaine screamed and then tumbled with a crash on to the floor of the bathroom.

“A curious thing,” said the doctor afterwards to Mr. Septimus Gordon—the Commissioner. “It was a snake from the Gulf of Manar. Deadly enough of course. No doubt the bite would have killed him. But it didn’t. I saw his face. He died of fear.”

The Commissioner nodded.

“He didn’t know the rule of the East—to throw your sponge into the bath before you use it. A snake from the Gulf of Manar. There’s a snake-charmer giving performances at that hotel. I’ll round him up.”

He sat for a little time in thought, and his thoughts went straight to the Reverend Bernard Simmons, M.A., Oxon., B.D.

“I wonder,” he said, less to the doctor than to himself.

A FLAW IN THE ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION was the long suit of Julian Clere, the eminent solicitor. Not probity, nor affection, but organization. Years and years ago when he had been defending in the Police Courts, prisoners little poorer than himself, one of his failures, not so indignant at the severity of his sentence as bewildered that he should have been sentenced at all, said:

“I saw a pigeon and I plucked ’im. Ain’t that right, Mister?”

To Julian Clere that was very, very right. What was wrong was that the prisoner had not organized what he would doubtless have called his get-away. Mr. Clere meant to make no such mistake himself and through the years, as he rose, one might say, from pigeon to pigeon, he tucked a comfortable little fortune away in a bank at Stockholm, under the name of Hiram T. Clegg, of Cleveland, Ohio. He had made the acquaintance of the Bank Manager in Stockholm and through him had bought a small island with a comfortable house upon it on the lovely stretch of river between the city and the sea. All the links in the long and devious chain which stretched from his office in Waterloo Place, S.W.1, to his island had been regularly tested and he felt pleasantly safe.

He had need of that feeling now. Up till this year, by paying incomes out of capital, and some fortunate speculations made at critical moments, he had been able to meet all the clients whose affairs he had mis-managed, with an unclouded brow. But the American slump had caught him in the fall of last year and the recovery was too slow. It was now the month of May, he was fifty-one years old, a widower with a daughter of nineteen, and his time had come. Young Charlie Heseltine would come of age on Friday morning and to-day was Monday. Mr. Julian Clere had the sensation of pride a great general might feel who launches a campaign of which every detail has been planned and tested through a long succession of years.

Yet suddenly there appeared a crack in the organization. A clerk knocked upon and opened the door of his private office and before he could announce

Mr. Heseltine, Mr. Heseltine with his boyish faith that everyone was his friend and delighted to see him, pushed by into the room.

“How do you do, Mr. Clere?” he cried. “I was passing. I thought that I’d run in”; and he shook his trustee and solicitor warmly by the hand.

Julian Clere rose hastily. He was aware of an odd sinking in the pit of his stomach. “Panicky! That won’t do,” he said to himself. But none of the panic showed in his face.

“Of course, of course,” he replied heartily, and turning to his clerk, “Put a chair for Mr. Heseltine, Willis.”

Whilst Willis placed the chair in position by the table Mr. Clere opened a drawer and slipped into it the little map on which he had been marking a neat little star in red ink. It was a map of the Cruising Club, giving the contours and the depths of some lonely inlets in the south-western corner of Ireland. “Did Heseltine notice it?” he asked himself.

But Charlie Heseltine gave no sign that he had noticed anything at all.

“I am really not going to take up your time, Mr. Clere,” he said. “What I ran in to say was that I am crossing to Ireland to-night for three days of fishing.”

“Where?” Julian Clere asked.

“The Shannon. But I shall be back on Friday for the meeting. It’s fixed for ten in the morning, isn’t it? Well, I might be a little late. Does that matter?”

“Not a bit,” said Mr. Clere, speaking the truth. “I shall have all the securities and papers ready for you,” he added, telling a lie. “Any time on Friday morning will do.”

Obviously Charlie Heseltine had never noticed the map. Even if he had, what could he have made of it, except that a hard-worked solicitor was planning out his summer holiday? Mr. Clere breathed more easily. But he realized with a little shock of astonishment that he had been afraid. For fear had not entered at all into any of his possibilities. His organization was a thing of cast-iron solidity. There could not be the shadow of a reason for fear. Yet . . . yet . . . absurdly he had been in a veritable panic. Another shock awaited him. For as Charlie Heseltine edged towards the door, he said with some embarrassment:

“You know, perhaps, Mr. Clere, that I have been meeting your daughter a good deal lately, at luncheons, and dances, and that sort of thing.”

Mr. Clere sat very still, but with his usual cordial smile upon his face.

“No, Marjorie hasn’t mentioned it. But nowadays young people manage their own affairs, don’t they? We’re lucky if we’re consulted at all.”

“Well, I’m consulting you now, sir,” said Heseltine, gathering his courage. He returned into the room and sat down again in the chair. “I know that I only come of age on Friday, but I can tell you,” and with his face reddening he blurted out, “Marjorie means all the world to me.”

Julian Clere nodded his head, once or twice. Then he asked:

“Have you said anything of this to Marjorie?”

“Not a word.”

Once more fear had gripped Mr. Clere and once more it relaxed its hold. He hardly listened to Heseltine’s explanation.

“I thought you ought to know. I mean to ask Marjorie to marry me in any case. I want to be frank about that. But I hope you won’t see any objection.”

Mr. Clere raised his eyebrows and laughed genially.

“You are both of you rather young for matrimony, aren’t you?” he said.

“I don’t think so,” Heseltine urged. “After all, I’ve taken my degree. I’m down from Oxford. And I shall be very well off, shan’t I?”

The solicitor looked sharply at the young man.

“Very well off of course,” he said.

“And I don’t intend to waste my life doing nothing,” Heseltine continued. “I’m going to work. I took a First, you know, in History.”

Julian Clere patted the young man’s arm.

“I know your record, my dear boy. It’s clean and good, as good as any father could wish for his daughter. But you see, Marjorie is my daughter and—I’ve no one else.” Nothing could have been better than his simple unaffected statement. He was the man of affairs quizzing himself because across his busy life a great love shone. “I would hate Marjorie to run into unhappiness because she had mistaken the depth of her feelings. Or because you had mistaken the depth of yours.”

“I haven’t,” Heseltine insisted.

“I wonder how many young men have said that and learnt within the year that they were wrong,” Mr. Clere rejoined. “You must remember,” he added whimsically, “that I am a solicitor and come across a good many unhappy marriages. It’s natural that I should be cautious. However, that’s all that I am—cautious. I want you to think over the thing very carefully, whilst you are away.”

He saw Charlie Heseltine's face brighten.

"I want you really to examine yourself whilst you are in Ireland. I am not a fisherman myself, but I understand that even with the best of you there are opportunities for a good deal of reflection." He laughed and Heseltine joined in his laughter. "Well, then, if when you come back you are still certain that you have made your choice for good and all, you shall have my blessing."

Young Heseltine wrung the solicitor's hand until he winced.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said.

Mr. Clere accompanied him to the door.

"But meanwhile," he said, "you have promised me, haven't you, not to hold any communication with Marjorie."

Heseltine had made no such promise, but he was not for the moment aware of it. The kindness of his father-in-law to be filled him with enthusiasm. He was ready to make him any reasonable promise, so long as it brought him nearer to Marjorie.

"I agree to that," he said.

"You are leaving for Ireland to-night," Mr. Clere insisted. "Mind, not even a telephone message before you go."

"I agree," Heseltine repeated. "But on Friday, after I'm definitely my own master, I'm going to try to get Marjorie to lunch with me."

"And in my turn I agree," said Julian Clere, with all the goodwill in the world. "You shall telephone to her through this instrument," and he touched the telephone upon his table.

But as soon as he was once more alone in his office his uneasiness returned. Heseltine's proposal, however, had no share in it at all. Marry Marjorie, would he! The idea was grotesque. Marjorie was a link in the organization though she was as yet unaware of it. She had her work to do. Besides, when he reached his island in the Baltic, Hiram T. Clegg would need a companion. Marjorie's marriage did not produce a single wrinkle in his forehead.

But—for a moment he had been afraid; and the sensation left an unpleasant savour in his mouth. Fear had not occurred to him as a possibility when he was creating his organization. Therefore he had not organized against it—as no doubt he might have done. He had a shadowy vision of himself living upon his lovely island in an unending palpitation of terror; starting to run if a launch swept up to his landing-stage; shivering at a knock

upon the door. Mr. Clere looked about his office, frowning. He hated the room in which fear had first come to him.

It was six o'clock. He rang for his clerk and ran over the list of his appointments for the morning. He wrapped his map round a little wooden roller and sealed it and placed it in his pocket. Then putting on his hat and taking his stick he sauntered a hundred yards or so to his Club in Pall Mall and played a couple of rubbers of Bridge, just as he had done on most days of his working months during the last fifteen years. The rubbers reassured him. His judgment was as cool, his calls as acute as they always had been. When bathed, and comfortable in his dinner-jacket he sat down at his table in his house in Charles Street, Mayfair, to dine with his daughter, he felt ready to press the button and set the organization in action.

"My dear," he said. "I want you to do something for me if you will."

Marjorie, his very pretty daughter, turned towards him a pair of big grey eager eyes.

She didn't ask "What?" she just said "Yes."

How well I have trained her, reflected Julian Clere. And indeed he had. He had sent her all by herself to Madrid to identify a man who had once dined at his house, and he had sent her with a false passport so that her relationship to him might not be suspected. Again, he had telegraphed to Marjorie in London to pick up a letter at an office in Berlin and join him secretly in Buda-Pesth. And he had found her waiting for him in the sitting-room of his hotel a day before he had expected her. Both these odd missions were nothing but a training and a preparation for the real work long-foreseen which she was now to do.

"I want you to take the train to Southampton to-morrow night," he explained. "You'll cross by the night boat to Havre. In Havre harbour I have a motor-yacht of two hundred tons. It's a French yacht, manned by a French crew, and it's called, like a hundred other yachts, *Bagatelle*. I want you to go on board of it as soon as you arrive on Wednesday morning. You will hand a letter to the Captain—Captain Morbaix—and a chart. You will sail that evening." He nodded carelessly. "You might travel as Miss Sadie Clegg, of Cleveland, Ohio."

For a second or two the quiet grey eyes rested upon Mr. Julian Clere with a look of doubt in them; and again fear caught him. Could Marjorie suspect? Could Marjorie know? He felt that he was standing on the edge of a precipice and growing dizzy. But Marjorie put her doubt into words—and Julian Clere stepped back from his precipice.

“Isn’t Sadie short for another name?”

“You were christened Sadie at Cleveland, Ohio,” Julian returned, and the girl clapped her hands and bubbled over with laughter.

“What fun!” she cried.

Here was another of the odd exciting missions in which from time to time she helped her father. That he never explained them enhanced their importance. She made of them deep mysterious affairs in which her father took a silent and dangerous part. They were not to be talked about, even when he and she sat alone at their dinner-table. For if he never took her into his confidence, she had the completest confidence in him.

“And after we have sailed?” she asked. She wanted her orders—that was all. Julian Clere, for his part, reflected. “The idea of a girl like that marrying Charlie Heseltine! Ridiculous!”

Aloud he said:

“We’ll go into the library and I’ll tell you.”

He took her by the arm affectionately and sat her down in an arm-chair at the side of his writing-table.

“This is more important than anything else we have done together, Marjorie,” he began, and her eyes shone and her body thrilled as he spoke. He certainly knew the right words to use. “I hate the phrase Secret Service. It has become rather silly, since the war. It has come to mean little conjuring tricks with chemicals, hasn’t it? And yet I don’t know a better one. I should take a good many clothes. Sadie Clegg of Cleveland wouldn’t travel with a suit-case. Here’s your passport. I’ve had it put through by Cook’s.”

He unlocked a drawer and took it out and opened it.

“Sadie’s travelled a good deal,” he said, with a smile. He made sure that the last visa was stamped correctly for Sweden and then he handed it to her. She shut up the little book and put it away at once in her hand-bag and leaned forward towards him.

“You had better get me your own passport,” he continued, “before we forget it, and I’ll lock it away.”

Marjorie went off to her room whilst Julian Clere wrote his letter of instructions to Captain Morbaix. It was short and he had finished it by the time when Marjorie returned. He took her passport from her and laid it on his table.

“The other one—the one you used for Madrid and Buda-Pesth—we destroyed that, didn’t we?” he asked.

“In the fire here,” Marjorie replied.

“Good!”

Mr. Clere brought into view now the two little Cruising Club charts wrapped about the roller.

“Captain Morbaix will make for the inlet on the Irish Coast marked on these maps with a star. It’s important that he should not arrive there before nightfall on Thursday and I don’t want him hanging about in the neighbourhood during daylight either. He must slow down a good way out and then make a rush for it. You understand, Marjorie?”

“Yes, Father.”

“It’s quite easy. The entrance is broad, there’s no bar, and there’s a depth of forty feet. Show as few lights as possible when you are entering and douse them all once you are in—until midnight. From midnight onwards show one strong light towards the sky.”

“I give one chart to the Captain?” said Marjorie.

“Yes.”

“And I keep the other?”

“No,” said Julian Clere. He had come to a moment of peril. He had known that he must come to it ever since Charlie Heseltine had left his office that afternoon. Did Marjorie know that Friday was the day when he must render an account of his stewardship to Heseltine? Even if Heseltine had kept his promise to send no message of any kind to Marjorie, he might easily have told her that much before he gave the promise. But not a trace of his anxiety showed in his manner.

“No, I keep the other,” he said gaily.

“You, Father! Oh, then—yes—you are joining us.”

There was a hint of—something—in her voice. Disappointment? Perplexity? She knew! She knew! He must find a reason, and quickly, to explain why on Friday morning he must be in a creek of Ireland rather than in his office, handing over his inheritance to young Heseltine.

“Oh, of course, I am glad really,” cried Marjorie, noticing the disorder of his face. “Just for a second I wanted to be doing something for you by myself.”

Julian Clere took his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “It wouldn’t do,” he was saying to himself. For the third time already, since the late afternoon, he had been in a panic—he who had made the perfect unassailable organization. There wasn’t a flaw in it really—no. But the one

thing he hadn't organized against was fear. Fear baseless and unreasonable, but still fear—fear that shook one to the centre and made one ill.

“Yes, I shall join you, or rather Hiram T. Clegg will join you,” he said gaily. “And now, my dear, you had better get on with your packing.”

After she had gone to her room he burnt carefully her genuine passport and his own in the fire.

“That's the end of the Clere family,” he said. “Charlie Heseltine indeed. Marry my girl, would he! Charlie Heseltine must think again. Why, the fellow's a pauper. Damned impudence, I call it!”

Mr. Clere indignantly stamped the remnants of the passports into the burning coals and betook himself to bed.

On Thursday afternoon he returned to his office after luncheon at half-past two. He signed some letters, remarked that he would probably not be back again that day, put on his hat and went out. He walked up Lower Regent Street to the Circus, took a taxi which had just put down a passenger at Swan and Edgar's, and rode to Paddington. There he entered a first-class carriage in the three-thirty to Weston-super-Mare. He did not tip the guard to secure the compartment to himself, because he had no wish to call attention to himself in any way. He was not likely to meet any of his acquaintances on that train, and he did not. He arrived at Weston-super-Mare at seven-thirty-five. As he walked along the Parade a French seaplane roared over the hills and dropped through the mists of that evening of early summer on to the smooth water of the Bristol Channel. It taxied towards the land beyond the town and came to rest. Mr. Julian Clere ate in a shelter of the Parade some sandwiches which he had brought from town. Then he strolled out beyond the town and, coming to a small beach in a tiny bay after it was dark, he flashed an electric torch three times and waited. In a very little while he heard a splash of oars. He turned on his torch again and, laying it down with the light directed seawards, he took off his shoes and his socks and rolled up his trousers as high up his thighs as he could. By the time he had knotted his shoes together and hung them round his neck, a collapsible Berthon boat sculled by one man quietly approached the beach. Mr. Clere switched off his torch and walked into the water. He climbed carefully into the boat, and the sculler bent again to his sculls. A quarter of an hour later a flurry of broken water patched the darkness with white and the roar of the seaplane rose and diminished above the Channel. In the early hours of the morning the Irish hills heard it, but only the stars saw it swoop to an inlet of the sea where a small ship showed a great light. By daylight the seaplane was on its way

back to France and the small ship under the full power of her Diesel engines was driving due West into the heart of the Atlantic.

For four days *Bagatelle* held her course, a little to the North of the curved trade-route to New York. Throughout the first day Mr. Clere was in fantastically high spirits. A schoolboy on a winter holiday at St. Moritz would have seemed sullen by the side of him.

“We are flying the French flag,” said Marjorie, as they sat at their luncheon in the charmingly decorated saloon.

“Well, it’s a French yacht,” Julian Clere replied, with a chuckle.

“We ought to have a wireless on board,” said Marjorie.

“So we ought, my dear. I must have forgotten about it.” He laughed immoderately, as if aware that he had been very, very witty.

On the second day, however, hours of apprehension alternated with the hours of gaiety. He spent his time chiefly on the bridge with a telescope as often as not to his eye. In the late afternoon, against a clear red sunset, far to the South a great ship was sighted.

“A cruiser,” cried Julian, in a panic.

“No, sir, a liner,” the officer of the watch replied.

At dinner that night when they sat with the side ports secured and a covering over the skylight, he exclaimed after a long silence:

“They always go South. Spain or the Argentine. Sunny climes and the rest of it. Stupid! We go North.”

He proposed to make a wide sweep round the Shetlands, creep down the coast of Norway, and run the Cattegat at night.

“Who always go South?” Marjorie asked.

“The explorers,” Mr. Clere returned quickly, upbraiding himself for his imprudence. “I mustn’t make mistakes like that again,” he argued. “Some time, of course, I’ll have to have a show-down with Marjorie. But not yet. Not till we reach my island.”

He glanced apprehensively at Marjorie. He had not hitherto given much thought to what her reactions to his crime might be when she came to learn of it. He tried to push all such speculations out of his mind now. “Every little thing alarms me,” he said to himself. “Absurd!”

Nevertheless he was up on the bridge with his telescope by daylight of the third day. They were North of the trade-route now, yet Mr. Clere managed to detect a good many destroyers and cruisers pursuing him, and gaining on him during the course of the day.

“This won’t do,” he said, taking himself to task. “I’m afraid when there’s nothing to be afraid of. Of course it’ll be different when we get home to the island.”

But he no longer felt so sure upon that point. The vision of a life spent in terror which he had dimly seen in his office in Waterloo Place was getting clearer and clearer and more and more real. The hideous sinking in the pit of his stomach which had so surprised him, took him unawares now for such slight causes as an abrupt movement at his elbow or the dropping of a teacup on the deck.

On the fourth day after Captain Morbaix and his chief officer had worked out the position of the yacht and marked it on the chart, Julian Clere gave an order. Captain Morbaix ported his helm and steered due North; and with the change of direction Clere recovered some of his spirits. There was a small deck-house aft and he took his tea there with his daughter at five o’clock. The sea was like a shining mirror continually splintered by the swift and steady thrust of the yacht, the sun warm, the air balmy and mild. Mr. Clere was inclined to seize the moment and take his daughter a little deeper into his confidence.

“My dear girl,” he had actually begun, when there was a sudden flurry on the deck. A whistle sounded, sailors were running, the First Officer who had been standing by the clock of the log hurried forward to the bridge—and Mr. Clere turned grey and sprang to his feet. He stood for a moment staring at his daughter as if she were a stranger; and for a moment, too, she did not know him. It was as if some chemical change had taken place in his blood, making him a creature different from man. She had never seen terror so dreadful.

Clere ran out of the deck-house. All about the yacht the sea was empty; ahead hung a curious fog. An expression of despair crept into Clere’s face. The least little thing—the blast of a whistle, for instance—and he was overthrown. How long could one live if that was to be normal? Julian climbed to the bridge, with Marjorie upon his heels. The Captain and the First Officer stood together, perplexed, alarmed, looking ahead and every now and then exchanging a word. Certainly the spectacle at which they stared was disturbing and no one was surprised when Captain Morbaix laid his hand on the engine-room telegraph and signalled for half-speed. The yacht was moving over a smooth sunlit sea in the stillest and clearest air. But ahead a curtain of mist thick as wool and dark as night stretched across the world from rim to rim. It had indeed the look of a wall rather than of a curtain, it was so solid, so abrupt. Towards this wall *Bagatelle* was moving

and not one of those upon her bridge could resist the fancy that there must be a collision and a shipwreck when mist and yacht met. They held their breath in suspense as the space between lessened and lessened.

“Two minutes . . . one minute . . . thirty seconds,” said Captain Morbaix, and he began to count, “one, two, three” and so on like a man holding a watch at the start of a race. Another second and the bowsprit touched and pierced the mist and disappeared entirely from before their eyes. The bows of the little ship followed—vanished. It was as though some unknown elemental force destroyed the yacht section by section noiselessly and dispersed it into atoms so fine as to be invisible. Then the bridge was swallowed up; and at once it was night and very cold. The beat of the propellers in the water astern alone seemed to belong to this world. Captain Morbaix pressed a button and his siren screamed harshly twice. To the consternation of passengers and crew it was answered loudly from a spot on the port side very near at hand. Captain Morbaix with a cry once more seized the handle of the telegraph and jammed it down to stop.

“No, no,” Julian Clere shouted—it was less a shout than a panic-stricken scream. “Carry on, Captain. Starboard her and carry on! At full speed!”

He moved towards the telegraph to wrest it out of the Captain’s hand, and suddenly there was no motion in the ship. Mr. Clere turned and hurried down the ladder from the bridge. On the bridge they heard him stumbling along the deck to the companion.

Marjorie was troubled. She had never known her father to be nervous. And nervousness had been growing upon him these last days. No doubt this odd change from sunlight to darkness and winter-cold was enough to make anyone nervous. The Captain and the First Mate were talking together in hushed tones. They, sailors, more accustomed to the violent transformations of the sea, were at a loss. She listened for the siren again to sound across the water, and suddenly realized that she was chilled to the bone.

She descended to her cabin, feeling her way down the companion ladder, for the cabin lights had not yet been switched on from the engine-room. She came to her father’s door and knocked upon the panel.

“Father, are you all right?” she asked, and she got no answer. She turned the handle and opened the door. It was quite dark in the cabin.

“Father,” she cried, and hearing nothing but her own voice she went in. Something touched her and yielded to her, something soft and fluttering. She thought that she caught a whisper very close to her. Then the something swung against her or she pushed it—she never knew which. But she knew what the something was. She called aloud for help and until the help came

she supported her father in her arms. But when the rope was untied and her father laid upon his bed it was too late. His heart had ceased to beat.

“Will you leave us together now,” she asked in a quiet voice. “For the moment what is to be done, I can do.”

They left her alone in the dark cabin with the dead body of her father. In half an hour the propellers began once more to beat the water and the ship to vibrate. But Marjorie was not aware that the yacht was moving until many minutes had passed. Then she went up again on to the bridge. The mist was thinning. Between wreaths of it overhead could be seen patches of blue and suddenly the yacht burst out of it into the sunlight.

Captain Morbaix was free to offer his sympathies to Sadie Clegg, alias Marjorie Clere. She listened and thanked him and asked:

“What ship was that in the fog which signalled you to stop? A cruiser? A destroyer?”

Captain Morbaix looked at the girl in bewilderment.

“But, Miss Sadie, there was no ship. What you heard was the echo of our siren flung back at us from an iceberg.”

There was, you see, after all a flaw in Julian Clere’s organization. He had not organized against fear.

THE LAW OF FLIGHT

I WAS IN COLOMBIA during a recent year. I travelled for a night up the Magdalena River to Calamar whence I was to take the train to Cartagena. On the big stern-wheel steamer I dined with my friend George Peacham, the Consul for the United States at Barranquilla; and, our conversation running upon the Central American Republics in several of which he had served, he told me the following story. I relate it to the best of my recollection in the words which he used.

II

The country of Ensenada has all the useful climates, tropical, sub-tropical and temperate. It is therefore a pasturage, a cornfield, an orchard and a plantation. It has more than its share of the world's liquid minerals and quite its share of the world's hard metals. It is therefore also an oilfield and a mine. It has the most accommodating rainfall that ever was known; a string of large cities; and a constitution and a code which, for moral uplift, leave all other written documents at the post. It has an Air Force with Aces, which is remarkable, since its Air Force has never yet been engaged in war. And it has Boy Scouts trained in the very spirit of the country, as may be judged from their parade-drill which, admirably performed, represents the execution of a comrade for treachery. And yet it breeds now and then a discontented intellectual. Against the names of such people there are naturally black marks.

My friend Anton de Hoyos, owner and editor of the daily newspaper *La Libertad*—ill-omened name!—was one of them. I was, therefore, not surprised to receive from him one evening a very urgent summons, written in a very shaky hand. I found his house in the wide Paseo, shuttered from the basement to the attic, so anxious were its inhabitants to escape attention. I rang the bell and the door swung open on the instant. Someone had been waiting for me behind the panels. The hall was as black as a cavern. But for the whine of the hinges I should not have noticed that the door had been opened.

“Will you come in, please, Señor Peacham?”

The voice came out of the darkness low and steady but desolate. I recognized it, of course. Otherwise I should not have stepped in so trustfully. It was the voice of old Concepcion Pardo who had been Anton’s nurse and now ruled his widower’s household with a flail. I heard her lock, bolt and chain the door behind me. Then she shuffled along the passage past me and at the end, beyond the stairs, she turned on one small light.

“Something grave has happened?” I asked foolishly.

Concepcion was a woman of vociferous outcries and the vocabulary of a Chautauqua lecturer, and it all meant nothing at all. Now she was dumb and her silence was tremendous. She raised both her hands above her head and shook them, and I could see by the feeble light that the tears were running down her wrinkled face. She climbed heavily up the stairs with me at her heels. I don’t think that I have ever had so utter a sense of catastrophe. I had a ridiculous feeling that the big dark house was aching like a person in pain. I am sure that, except for Anton, old Concepcion and myself, it was empty.

Concepcion showed me into a fine painted room on the first floor and closed the door softly. The room was in the front of the house looking over the Paseo, and though only a single light burned by the bedside, the windows were shuttered and curtained so that not a gleam should escape. The heat of the room was stifling. Anton de Hoyos lay in a great satin-wood bed, his face flushed, the sweat in beads upon his forehead and his eyes glassy with fever—or fear.

“You are ill, Anton,” I said, as I walked round the great bed to his side, and once more I despised myself for my banality. Everything I said was so far below the occasion.

“That is nothing,” he said eagerly. “A chill and a touch of fever. I can travel safely enough.”

It was a curious phrase for a sick man in bed to use. Why should he be in such haste to travel? And why should he be so anxious to convince me that he could travel?

I took his hand and sat down in the chair placed ready for me by the bed. I felt perfectly certain that I should only say something dreadfully silly and commonplace if I opened my mouth again. So I kept silent. Anton de Hoyos needed no button pushed to set him going.

“The Government has suppressed *La Libertad* to-day.” Certainly *La Libertad* had not of late been admiring either the efficiency or the incorruptibility of the Government.

“Just for a day or two, no doubt, to teach you a lesson,” I said, speaking lightly.

“No, for good,” he answered; and I could no longer pretend to make little of his misfortune. For he revelled in the conduct of his newspaper, magnifying its influence, flaunting its independence, strutting upon an imaginary stage in dazzling armour whilst his wicked enemies quailed before him.

“Oh, come!” I protested. “That’s too strong a measure even for those gentlemen.”

Anton de Hoyos shook his head.

“I have been expecting it for a long while,” he said with a quiet indifference which amazed me at first and then distressed me tremendously. For some shocking danger must needs be threatening him before he could count the loss of that daily battle of such small account.

“If it was only the paper that was to be suppressed——” he began, and suddenly he shivered to the soles of his feet and broke against his will into little whimperings. I was never so startled nor so distressed in my life. I had never seen fear so stark, so—so abject. “I have one friend amongst them who comes to me secretly,” he continued, rubbing the back of his hand to and fro across his forehead with a curious restless gesture. “He tells me that to-morrow the President will contradict what I say about the corruption at the silver mines and will announce that he is sending me to them with an escort to protect me, so that I may discover the truth for myself.”

In spite of myself I started back in my chair.

“Yes, you understand what the escort to protect me means,” said Anton, and he turned his head away upon the pillow so that I should not see the quivering of his lips.

“The Ley Fuga,” I said in a low voice.

That convenient simple law which gave any escort the right to shoot any prisoner on the pretence that he was trying to escape. Suppose that a public trial was coming on, which would provoke some awkward talk! You transfer the prisoner to a second prison, and on the way the law of flight takes its course. All the troublesome little revelations are avoided and the prisoner demonstrably guilty—otherwise he wouldn’t have tried to run away. So with Anton de Hoyos shivering here in his bed. Despatched—and despatched is certainly the word—across the mountains to verify his statements, he proves by running away that he daren’t face the facts, and he is protected from

causing us any anxiety in the future by the Law of Flight. I could not find a hope in all this for Anton de Hoyos.

“There is one,” he cried, breaking in upon my thoughts and startling me by his ability to read them. “Just one.” He was leaning up on one elbow, his eyes fixed anxiously upon mine. “They don’t know that I’ve been informed of their intentions. They won’t move until after the President has made his pronouncement. And the Express for the frontier leaves at five o’clock in the morning.”

“Yes,” said I. “To-morrow’s Sunday, certainly.”

There was one through train a week which made the two-days’ journey without a change or any halt for longer than half an hour.

“But I have no visa for your country on my passport,” he went on timidly like someone asking an immense favour.

“That?” I exclaimed. “I can take your passport down to the office, visa it and bring it back to you now. But——” and I stopped, for he had fallen back upon his pillows, as though every trouble he had in the world was at an end.

For my part, I couldn’t really see that he was much better off than before and no doubt my face once more showed my hopelessness.

“You are thinking of money,” he said. “But I am in no anxiety about money. I have been sending money for some years into the United States. I have enough there to start a little printing business at Los Angeles. I shall give lessons in Spanish too. In time I hope to print a small newspaper”—and he ran off cheerfully into this and that speculation and project, making mention of his age, which was forty-three years, and painting all his future in the rosiest tints. Unfortunately, as events proved, I did not listen to these rather hysterical anticipations. I wasn’t thinking about money at all, as he imagined. I was saying to myself:

“He will have two days in the train before he reaches the border. To-morrow during the morning it will be discovered that he has bolted. Either to-morrow night or the next day he will be picked off the train and for once the Law of Flight will be carried out upon a real fugitive.”

I could hardly put the point so crudely to Anton de Hoyos, but I managed to convey it discreetly wrapped up. Anton, however, was not troubled at all by any anxiety upon those grounds.

“So long as I can reach the station, board the train and leave Ensenada City a mile or two behind me, with your visa upon my passport, I have no fear,” he said. He tapped me upon the arm. “Paul Taylor guarantees me.”

“Guarantee!” I growled, a little too roughly, no doubt. “There’s a word for you! What does it mean? How can Paul Taylor guarantee anything?”

Anton just smiled indulgently. You and I working along recognized lines are bound to go wrong in forecasting what is likely to happen in those topsy-turvy countries. Anton de Hoyos knew exactly what he was talking about. The one person in Ensenada City who could get for you the solitary drawing-room on the solitary Pullman Car on the weekly Express, who could ensure that you would be treated throughout your journey like a Prince of the Blood Royal, was not the station-master nor the chief of the Booking Office in the town, nor even the Minister of the Railways, but just Paul Taylor, the negro porter of the American Club. He had been Pullman Car conductor on the Santa Fé Railway, thence he had moved south to the Ensenada State Railway; now if he came out of his porter’s hutch at the Club and said, “Yes, sir, that goes,”—why, it went and it didn’t cost you so very much either. It was always worth the price. So much I knew. But to guarantee the flight of a man whom the Administration proposed to kill—that was a strong order. However, Anton de Hoyos was satisfied. So I took his passport over to my office, stamped it and signed it and, making sure that I was not followed, I carried it back to the house in the Paseo. Anton clasped it to his breast with a look of exultation in his eyes, just like a hero on the stage, clasping a reprieve in the shadow of the gallows.

But if Anton was satisfied, I wasn’t. That word “guarantee” stuck in my throat. It’s a ridiculous word, anyway. It’s thrown about right and left, and people eat it, don’t they? “Is this good whisky?” you ask, and the salesman stares at you as if you were an idiot. “Why, of course it is, it’s guaranteed.” “Will this watch go?” you inquire, having experience of watches which didn’t. “Go?” says the shopman haughtily. “So-and-so’s watches are guaranteed.” And then your whisky lays you out and your watch stops for good on the second day.

I left the house in the Paseo as discontented as any intellectual. I walked down into the town and dropped into the American Club. Paul Taylor, six feet of broad-shouldered negro, stood in the doorway.

“Paul,” said I in a low voice. “What of Señor Anton de Hoyos? He’s a friend of mine.”

Paul’s face became one broad grin and two sets of white flashing teeth.

“That is all organized from the top to the bottom, yes, sir,” said he.

And somehow I felt reassured. At all events he used a better phrase than guarantee. And also he was right. The train was searched twice on its way to the frontier, but the assistant in the kitchen, who was Anton de Hoyos,

escaped a close inspection on both occasions. No doubt a reasonable sum of money had been paid. Anton settled down at Los Angeles and wrote me a letter full of gratitude. All the fine ideas of which he had told me and to which unfortunately I hadn't listened, were working out finely. He was full of confidence and, I thought, a trifle arrogant too. I couldn't help remembering the sick man shivering with terror under his bedclothes. For me, later in the year I was promoted from Vice-Consul to Consul and transferred to Marazan, the big town upon the border.

III

Anyone who knows Marazan will realize that a Consul's position there means time and overtime. The frontier neatly divides the long main street, the Calle Ensenada, into two halves, the southern side being the territory of Ensenada State; and a town which enables you to pass from one country into another by merely stepping across a tramline offers remarkable allurements to a certain type of people. The rabble of a continent washes to and fro in Marazan and I was kept busy. So busy that the Charles Landau Grand Opera Company had completed three weeks of its month's season before I even thought of taking a seat, passionately fond of music though I am. Others no less fond had been less remiss, so that when I did go to the box-office, the only stall which I could obtain was for the very last night—a gala performance at increased prices, the programme to consist of selections from the various operas of the Repertoire so that the chief singers might say farewell in their favourite characters.

The Square in front of the Opera House was on that last night as bright as day under the blaze of the great arc-lights and so crowded with onlookers running and pressing to stare into the windows of the motor-cars and the old-fashioned country carriages that every minute I expected some dreadful accident. Inside the auditorium there was a clack-clack of stalls being unfolded like continuous musketry, the women in their shimmering frocks were jewelled from their toes to their hair, and the young bloods had made the rare concession of white ties and swallow-tail coats. There was that atmosphere of suspense and excitement which makes a crowd neighbourly. Everybody was chattering and I soon learned that the great success of the season had been achieved by a young diva, Margarita Sabani, who had made her *début* the year before in a minor part at the New York Metropolitan Opera House and was now trying her wings on tour in the great rôles.

Then for a moment there was a sudden hush as a tall, good-looking, fair-haired young man appeared all alone in the big box on the first tier next to the stage. He flung his overcoat into one chair, his hat on to a second, stood

for a few seconds surveying the crowded house like a lord and then seated himself with complete unconcern in the middle chair of the row. He was my ideal of an Englishman.

But he wasn't an Englishman at all. For the chatter burst out all around me, all the more voluble for that moment of restraint, and very quickly put me wise.

"That's Ignacio."

"Well, he was certain to be here."

A shriller voice rose high above the others.

"Of course. Ignacio has occupied that box alone every night that the Sabani has sung. My dear, they're outrageously in love."

"It's whispered that he's going to marry her."

"It's true. They tell me that his old father roars about the house like a bull all day, and declares that he'd rather see his son lying dead at his feet."

The shrill voice died away as the conductor took his place and under the magic of his wand, from the peons in the gallery to the notables in the stalls, the whole house was hushed. But I had my information up to date. Ignacio was the son of Heriberto Reyes, the millionaire landowner, who could boast an unbroken pedigree from a Spanish adventurer of the sixteenth century. Heriberto was seventy-five years of age now, vain of his wealth and proud of his blood, and I could quite imagine him bellowing about his *finca* over the contumacy of his son.

Very natural, no doubt, but I was heart and soul for Ignacio as soon as Margarita Sabani stepped out upon the stage. "Madame" of course she called herself, but she was little more than a girl, tall and slim with a face rather classic in its outlines, but redeemed from coldness by a smile which set the dimples playing in her cheeks and by an aura of happiness which enveloped her. The part which she had chosen was that of Cherubino in "The Marriage of Figaro." And when she took the stage, spruce and trim in her white satin coat and breeches and her scarlet-heeled shoes, she set the house on fire. All through the evening the audience had been waiting just for her and it rose at her with a roar like a great wave breaking upon a beach. She was obviously nervous, and as the applause continued, all of us at all events who were near to the orchestra read an appeal in her big dark eyes to let her get on with her scene before she broke down.

With her first note, however, her embarrassment vanished. She was in her part and her voice poured from her throat, clear and effortless and liquid like the song of a blackbird on your lawn on a summer's morning. She was

entrancing, and I wasn't surprised to see Ignacio Reyes strain forward over the ledge as though his soul were on the stage with her and only the shell of him in the box.

And that was the last time in her life that Margarita Sabani sang. Yes! Though she spoke, to be sure. Yes, she spoke two words. For after the curtain had been raised twenty times, after Ignacio, even, had left his box, she was called back once more. She stretched out her hands towards her friends, she cried on a note which soared like a flute above the uproar, "Arrivederci!"—and then clasping her hands over her face she ran headlong from the stage. As I mounted the winding staircase from the stalls, I saw Ignacio waiting half-way up at the little iron door which led on to the stage.

IV

The rare enjoyment of an evening like that was not to be frittered away by gossip in a café! I took it all home with me to bed. But at three o'clock in the morning I was waked up by a continuous ringing of my door-bell. I looked out of my window and saw the top of a man's hat and an arm stretched out to the button of the bell.

"What do you want?" I asked.

The man looked up. He was quite a stranger to me, but I could see by the light of a standard that under his open overcoat he was wearing evening dress.

"I am Charles Landau," he said.

"Of the Opera Company?" I inquired with that sort of foolish redundancy of which one never seems to rid oneself.

"Yes."

"I'll be down in a minute," said I.

Something dejected in the man's appearance and speech disturbed me. I slipped some clothes on over my pyjamas, let him in, took him into my little library and turned on the light. He was a small round Jewish man who somehow reminded me of an idol. But he was, on the other hand, intensely agitated which, after all, an idol cannot be.

"Margarita Sabani has disappeared," he said, standing in front of me, his short arms spread out, his brown gentle eyes actually abrim with tears.

I couldn't help smiling. The Opera tour was finished that night. I recollected now that some weeks ago I had stamped my visa on Ignacio Reyes' passport. This little man must look out for a new prima donna—that was all.

“It was to be expected,” I returned. “But such things have happened no doubt before in your experience. They might, however, have left a word for you. That certainly was not polite.”

“They!” he cried. “They!” and with a quite unintelligible relief. “Then, Mr. Peacham, you are in the secret. You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

He sat down and clasped his little hands upon his little paunch, the image of a man who has just had a troublesome big back tooth drawn.

“My dear Mr. Landau,” said I, “I think you must be the only person in Marazan who is out of the secret. Why, Margarita Sabani and Ignacio Reyes—they are the great romance of the town. They have gone. Well, let us remember we were once young too, and not look for them.”

Charles Landau did not move. But all the colour ebbed out of his face. It became a grey mask with a pair of eyes—in which horror glistened.

“Ignacio Reyes is now scouring Marazan for her. He has not spoken to her to-night. He has not seen her except upon the stage.”

“But I saw him! He was standing at the iron door which leads on to the stage.”

“Margarita had disappeared then.”

“Disappeared? There wasn’t time for her to disappear.”

“Yes.”

But it was impossible! A minute before she had been upon the stage decked out in the Court dress of a youth of the eighteenth century, buckles and ruffles and gold-embroidered coat, and she had vanished.

“No,” said I violently. “I was born in Missouri. You must show me.”

And Charles Landau showed me.

Margarita Sabani, in running off the stage, had found her dresser waiting in the wings with a light wrap of silver tissue. She had flung this over her shoulders and walked quickly to the opening at the back of the stage. In front of her was a short passage leading to a couple of swing doors beyond which were a tiny vestibule, the stage-door-keeper’s hutch and the stage-door itself which gave on to a narrow street. On her right was the corridor leading to her dressing-room. At the angle of these passages and just as she was turning into the corridor she was stopped by the stage-door-keeper. He told her that Ignacio was at the stage-door and urgently wanted a word with her. She had seen Ignacio leave his box a moment or two before. She was certainly excited and indeed overcome by the enthusiasm of the audience.

She could have expected no harm. So instead of going to her dressing-room she ran down the passage and between the swing doors.

The stage-door-keeper, a man named Garcia Pardo, crossed the stage to deliver a note to one of the company whose dressing-room was upon that side. When the door-keeper returned to his own place he found Margarita's dresser at the angle of the passages. She asked him where Madame Sabani was, since she had certainly not come to her dressing-room. Garcia Pardo replied:

“She went down through the swing doors. I'll find her.”

He pushed open the swing doors and went through. The small vestibule was empty. He looked out of the stage-door. The street was empty, too, except for a sergeant of police. In a few minutes it would no doubt be occupied by autograph-hunters and such people as find a diversion in seeing their stage-favourites at close quarters. But they were still struggling out from the exits of the auditorium. Garcia Pardo crossed to the sergeant of police, described Margarita and asked whether he had seen her.

“I have seen nobody,” the sergeant replied.

Garcia Pardo returned to the theatre and, according to his statement, was surprised to find Ignacio Reyes standing with Margarita's dresser at the angle of the passages. He had only a moment ago been admitted past the iron door in the proscenium wall.

“I never went round to the stage-door at all. You can't have seen me there,” he cried to the door-keeper.

Pardo admitted that he had not seen Ignacio himself.

“A man whom I took to be a messenger of yours, Señor, came to me with word that you wished to see the señora at the stage-door the moment she left the stage.”

During the last few moments alarm had been growing. It was now intense. The stage-manager and Charles Landau were sent for, the dressing-rooms were visited, the theatre searched. There was nowhere a sign of the girl, not even a shred from the silver tissue of her cloak.

“Margarita,” Charles Landau concluded in a despairing voice, “ran off the stage and out of the world.”

Frankly I was appalled. I didn't believe one word of Garcia Pardo's story and I knew this town of Marazan and its froth of bad people, thieves, gamblers, white-slavers and murderers.

“Ignacio Reyes says that his father has done it.”

“Exactly,” I answered.

That was my thought all along. The old man bellowing in his *finca* that he would see his son dead first, wouldn’t stop at bellowing—not he. Heriberto Reyes was rich, he was powerful, and he wouldn’t find the authorities squeamish if he wanted their help. He *had* had their help. Else how was it that the police sergeant had seen nobody? And what was he doing keeping watch in a little empty street, anyway?

I rose to my feet.

“Just wait here, Mr. Landau, until I have dressed myself decently. Then we’ll go and wake up the Comandante. We may still be in time.”

But the little man stopped me.

“You can’t appear in this case officially, Consul. To attempt it would only mean trouble for you and very probably much humiliation. Margarita Sabani is not a citizen of the United States. She has nothing to do with the United States. She belongs to this country we are in—Ensenada. Her real name is Pilar de Hoyos.”

I stood stupidly in front of Charles Landau, swaying, I think, a little on my feet, like a boxer in a ring who has received a blow which has jarred his wits out of him.

“Daughter of Anton de Hoyos?” I asked.

“Of Los Angeles,” he returned.

“And Ignacio knew it?”

“No doubt!”

“And no doubt told his father.”

Landau didn’t answer, but it was certain. The De Hoyos blood was good Spanish blood like the Reyes. Ignacio was certain to have made the most of it to his father. And there, you see, was the dreadful business at last made clear. The rich Heriberto Reyes accommodated and the refugee Anton de Hoyos, the man with the black blot against his name, punished as no man was ever punished in this world. For the girl, young, lovely, adorably happy, snatched away at the moment of triumph into unspeakable horrors—not a thought! She was a pawn upon the chess-board. She didn’t count.

The same shocking conviction had taken possession of the little Jewish impresario, too shocking for either of us to put into words. He sat and cried without shame, reproaching himself bitterly for crossing the border into Ensenada.

“Perhaps Ignacio has found her,” I said, but I didn’t believe it. Neither did Charles Landau.

“He promised to bring her here if he found her. He thought that you would somehow manage to shelter her,” he said miserably.

He looked up at the clock upon the mantelshelf. “It is after four o’clock now. There is nothing to be done.”

He got up on to his feet with a lamentable little gesture of submission. But I wasn’t prepared to submit. A girl kidnapped in the middle of a town to satisfy an old man’s pride of race and a Government’s thirst for revenge—no! Such things mustn’t be, couldn’t be, shouldn’t be.

“Wait a moment,” I said.

I walked up and down the room and at last I got some glimpses of an expedient.

“I can interfere,” I said. “The Cherubino dress belongs to you, doesn’t it? It’s your property. I can raise the whole question of Pilar de Hoyos’ disappearance by means of that dress. Yes, I can.”

“But not to-night,” said Charles Landau; and that was true.

But I couldn’t even raise it the next morning. For before ten o’clock the complete costume, neatly folded and packed, was delivered at the stage-door of the Opera House. Can you imagine anything more damnably, cruelly subtle than that? Anton de Hoyos was to know exactly what had happened. Pilar had now no clothes at all and there is only one sort of house where women don’t need clothes.

Meanwhile Ignacio Reyes also had disappeared.

But four nights afterwards, at nine o’clock, I heard a cautious knocking upon the window of my library. I went at once to the door. Ignacio Reyes was on the step and another, a shorter and older man, stood behind him.

“Good God!” I exclaimed in a whisper. “Come in quickly.”

The smaller man was Anton de Hoyos. I locked the door and took them into the library. Both men were haggard and unshaved, their clothes dishevelled and white with dust, their eyes red for want of sleep.

“You here!” I said to Anton, in consternation. “You are mad.”

Anton waved my reproach aside. It wasn’t worth an answer. And the last time I had seen this man he was shivering in terror under his bedclothes! Ignacio began to speak at once. I had only once seen him before and never had had a word with him. But he spoke as if we had parted company half an hour ago.

“We know where Margarita is now,” he said. His voice was hoarse, his throat dry with the dust of his journey. I mixed him a highball and he threw back his head and took it down at a draught. Then he resumed in quick staccato sentences.

“I had no money, you see. I tried to borrow it that night. But everybody was afraid of my father. Our only chance was money. So I crossed the border before morning. Before I could be stopped. I had just enough money to carry me to Los Angeles.”

“I collected six thousand dollars the evening he arrived,” Anton interrupted. “I have five thousand still.”

“Five thousand American dollars,” Ignacio insisted. “They should be enough. For we have all the facts now. I left some friends behind to make inquiries. One man saw all that happened from a dark window opposite the stage-door but was afraid to open his mouth until to-night.”

“But your dollars persuaded him,” I said to Anton.

“Five hundred of them,” he explained.

“This man,” Ignacio resumed, “saw a closed motor-car without any lights turn into the street and stop just beyond the stage-door. The sergeant of police was standing on the opposite side of the road and took no notice. The stage-door-keeper was in the doorway and seemed to be on the lookout. Two men, neither of them in a uniform, got out of the car and one spoke to the door-keeper, who at once went back into the theatre. The two men left the door of the car open and planted themselves erect against the wall one on each side of the door, making themselves small. In a few minutes, a boy with a glittering cloak loose upon his shoulders ran out eagerly and looked disappointedly up the street. The two men sprang upon him from behind and the boy screamed like a woman—screamed once. For one of the men gagged him and bound his arms to his side, whilst the other stooped and tied his feet. The boy was flung into the car, the two men jumped in afterwards, and the car whipped out of the street in a flash. The police sergeant all this while had never moved. He was there, of course, to see fair play,” said Ignacio, with the most mirthless smile that ever distorted a face. “The boy was Margarita.”

“But the man who saw the attack couldn’t have followed the car,” I objected.

“No. Someone else saw the car stop, saw someone or something carried quickly into a house.”

Ignacio named the street, a sordid little alley in the worst quarter of the town, and gave the number of the house, the notorious number which all over the world explains the business carried on behind the door. Then he sprang up.

“We are going now with our money to the Comandante.”

Anton de Hoyos got up at the same time and reached for his hat.

“You too!” I exclaimed.

“Yes.”

One look at his face showed the futility of any argument.

“Very well, then. I too,” said I. “I can at all events ensure that you will see the Comandante.”

The Comandante, however, showed not the slightest reluctance to receive us. We were taken into his office and within a few minutes he joined us, a big dark man with a heavy black moustache and quite charming manners.

“Señor Consul,” he said, shaking me by the hand; “and Señor Ignacio, and—you have, I see, a friend with you,”

“Anton de Hoyos,” Anton himself said quietly.

The Comandante blinked. But in a moment he had recovered all his ease.

“There was a time, Señor, when you did not altogether approve of us. But that was all long ago,” he said with a friendly wave of the hand. He bade us be seated and asked how he could serve us. I admired Ignacio immensely that night. He neither mentioned himself, nor his father, nor the witness at the dark window, nor the sergeant of police. He stated the fact of Pilar de Hoyos’ disappearance and the address at which she was detained, and blamed no one but the rabble which a town like Marazan invites.

The Comandante listened with a grave and troubled face. At the end he said, “I will give an order,” and he left the room abruptly. When he returned he said:

“This is a very abominable affair and it will be best for all of us, except Señor Peacham, who is in no way concerned, and for the young lady, that as little scandal as possible should be provoked. The order I gave was that the house should be quietly surrounded and no one allowed to leave or enter it. I shall see to that myself, and as soon as I am sure that every outlet is guarded, I will call for you two gentlemen at your hotel”—this, of course, to Ignacio and Anton—“and we will search the place together.”

Ignacio leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed, and all the fatigue of the last four days took him into its possession. He who had told his dreadful story with the dispassion of a lawyer could now only falter out a few poorest words of thanks. Anton de Hoyos drew out his money-case. The big sheaf of yellow-back notes bulged from it.

“There will be expenses, Señor Coronel,” he began, and the Comandante stopped him there.

“No, no, my friend, there will be no expenses. Put up that roll, and in half an hour at your hotel.”

He conducted the two men to the door and as they went off turned anxiously to me.

“Señor Consul, such an affair could only happen, as Ignacio says, in a town like this where the rogues of all nations run for cover. I beg you not to blame us all.”

I protested that I blamed no one. The Comandante shook me by the hand with an air of great relief and I left him to his preparations. I could do nothing more. I went back to my house—but I was a trifle uneasy. I didn’t understand the Comandante refusing all that money. It didn’t seem natural to me. . . .

Ignacio and Anton never reached their hotel. They were intercepted by a Captain and a guard of soldiers, conducted to the barracks, stripped of everything but their clothes and hustled into a cell. At half-past twelve the Captain fetched them out. He had an order, he said, to transfer them to the little town of Cristobal forty miles away over the mountains. They were to start at once, without food and without blankets. There would be no need for either, you see. For this time the Law of Flight would function. They were taken in a carriage to the outskirts of the town and thence made to march. It was bitterly cold and as soon as morning broke the Captain halted them in the midst of a desolate country. It was the very spot to justify the Ley Fuga, for parallel with the road on which they were and only three hundred yards away ran the road on the other side of the frontier. Who wouldn’t take a chance?

Ignacio did the moment the escort stopped, and was shot dead through the back before he had run twenty yards. Anton for his part did not move. He had no wish to live, but as the Captain’s pistol swung round on him he turned sideways to the shot instinctively. The bullet tore through his clothes and ploughed the surface of his chest, stunning rather than wounding him. He fell to the ground and the Captain, stepping up to his feet fired again, this time at his head. But Anton’s head was tilted back and again the bullet

glanced, covering his face with a mask of blood but doing him no mortal hurt. When he came again to his senses the sun was up. He crawled painfully and slowly to the other road. He was just in time. For as he collapsed at the side of it he saw a fatigue party with spades approaching along the lower road from Marazan.

v

This is the story which George Peacham told me on the Magdalena River. I disembarked at Calamar and going by train to Cartagena, took a passage on one of the Fruit Steamers to New York. A year later business took me to Los Angeles and I met Anton de Hoyos. A deep scar ran straight up his forehead from just above the eyebrow and made a furrow in his thick white upstanding hair. He was still conducting his printing business and making quite a success of it. But he was a secret, broken man, very difficult to talk to, and his eyes seemed to brood always upon an irreparable horror.

THE KEY

MATTIE DRIVER sat on a bench under the palmetto trees of Alicante fingering a solitary peseta in one of his pockets. It is a common saying that no one can really starve in Spain, but Mattie had an uncomfortable suspicion that unless he could rub his one peseta into two and then those two into four, he was shortly going to disprove that saying. It was such a wonderful morning too. It was an affront to the simple sybaritism of Mattie Driver that he should be uncomfortable on such a morning. The month was June. The sunlight sparkled on the sapphire of the Mediterranean and made the stone pavements a blaze of gold; under the palmetto trees it was cool and pleasant; and on the landward side of this avenue, that very good Club and those very good restaurants deployed their invitations. It would have been so pleasant to have eaten his breakfast in one of them, and thereafter to have helped the sun down the sky with discourse to each new-comer of the stirring and calamitous events which had hurled him out of Morocco and flung him up like a string of seaweed on the beach at Alicante. But Mattie Driver had just one peseta in his pocket, and no amount of turning and returning would make it into two. Another miracle, however, happened.

A voice spoke behind his back.

“Hombre!”

Mattie recognized the voice and his heart jumped. It might be that someone wanted him after all. Mattie was twenty-three years old and hungry with all the health of those twenty-three years. But he was prudent and he dared not break into his solitary peseta. He turned, however, without haste.

“Señor Fontana,” he said easily. “Your duties are over?”

Fontana, a semi-youthful, clean-shaven man in dingy striped flannel trousers and more or less white canvas shoes with patent leather tips, flourished a straw hat and sat down by Mattie’s side.

“For the moment—yes. It is the hour of luncheon.”

Fontana was one of those curious nondescripts to be found at Spanish ports, half of him a Marine and an Official, the other half ship's agent, trader, speculator, a kind of waterside odd-job man. Mattie when he had landed at Alicante from the little Almeria steamer at seven o'clock that morning had remarked him at once; and his knowledge of the world, helped by a facility quite Spanish to engage the most complete of strangers at once in intimate conversation, had led him to expose his distressful case and ask for any job of work which might offer. Here already was the reply.

"Señor Driver, I have a friend who would esteem your help," said Fontana. "He invites you to lunch with him so that you may talk over this little affair quietly."

Mattie Driver looked at the Club-house.

"No, not there," said Fontana, "nor at the Reina Christina Hotel. You would not be quiet there. The little affair is not, it is true, of great importance, but it is—curious."

Fontana dwelt a little on that adjective and, as it were, underlined it by his smile. It was an intriguing word and Fontana's smile was a promising smile. Mattie rose to it eagerly.

"Shall I lead the way?" Fontana asked.

"I shall be obliged," said Mattie.

The two men walked beneath the palmettos past the Yacht Club and reached a corner where a road joined the esplanade. At this corner a small restaurant stood in a garden.

"The food here is excellent," said Fontana, and at this moment Mattie received his first impression that his little affair was certainly curious and might not be so unimportant as his genial friend was pretending. Fontana's friendliness did not surprise him in that friendly country. Any Spaniard will go out of his way to do a stranger a good turn, so long as it actually does not cost him money. But just as they stepped out from the avenue to cross the garden restaurant Fontana laid a hand upon Mattie's arm and glanced swiftly up and down the road.

"He has no doubt already arrived," said Fontana, but Mattie was not at all deceived by that explanation. The glance of apprehension, the swift grip of his arm, now as swiftly relaxed, meant a fear lest they were being watched. Mattie was a man of an adventurous spirit and had he needed any other persuasion than his poverty, he would have found it in Fontana's fear. He was still more thrilled when in a corner of the empty garden he was set face to face with a small, slender, elderly gentleman, scrupulously dressed,

who wore a little white pointed beard and a white moustache, and appraised him with eyes of steel.

“Let me present you to each other,” said Fontana, all pleasure and smiles. “This is my friend Señor Juan Gomez, a merchant of Cordoba.”

“Retired,” Gomez added.

“It must be pleasant to be able to retire,” said Mattie Driver, without a hint of disbelief in the truth of Fontana’s description.

“On the other hand, it must be still more pleasant to have your youth,” replied Señor Gomez, and upon this small change of compliments, Fontana took his leave.

“You will do me the honour to lunch with me, I hope,” said the older man; and though the *hors-d’œuvres* of black olives, and sardines, and radishes in thin little white dishes arranged on a tablecloth scrupulously clean, invited him overwhelmingly, Mattie sat down to the meal in extreme discomfort. His clothes were not to blame. It was a rule of Mattie Driver’s simple philosophy that once your clothes were disreputable the game was up, but that until then hope lurks round every corner. He had been careful to snatch the best of his wardrobe from the holocaust of his fortunes, and he sat here in a blue suit as neat as Don Juan’s. No, it was the actual personality of his host which sent little thrills of warning tinkling along all his nerves.

Juan Gomez, however, did not approach his business until the luncheon was finished. Up till then, he was the cultured host talking easily of the great cities to which his business had carried him.

“Cordoba, of course, you know like the palm of your hand,” said Mattie Driver.

“Since I lived there for so many years,” answered the merchant with a shrug of the shoulders. “It is for that reason, no doubt, that I have not talked of its wonders. You know Cordoba?”

“No”; and Señor Gomez began to discourse upon Cordoba until the coffee was on the table and Mattie sat with a big Gener cigar between his lips and a glass of Fundador at his elbow. Then Gomez changed his note. They had the garden to themselves. Gomez did not lower his voice, but he spoke abruptly and with an air of relief that all the preliminary banalities were at last at an end.

“Fontana tells me, Señor Driver, that some reverse of fortune, such as may happen to any of us, has for the moment embarrassed you.”

“Yes. Raisuli was my friend. With his surrender I lost everything.”

Mattie had been born at Larache on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, of English parents long established there. He had never once been in England, though he had crossed many times to Spain. He was in many respects more like a Moor than an Englishman; he had a Moor's cunning, a Moor's good humour, and at the age of twenty, when he found himself with a little money and no parents, he knew his world and its opportunities. He knew it from the Atlas Mountains to the Straits of Gibraltar. He established himself at Alkasar, became Raisuli's agent, acquired flocks which were tended for him by Raisuli's chiefs, and was well on the way to a fortune when Abd-el-Krim from the Riff country upset Raisuli altogether and captured with him all his treasure and belongings. Mattie found himself in a day reduced to penury. A few weeks of vain effort to re-establish himself under the new rigid arrangements of the Spanish consumed the little store of actual money which he possessed. He had fled across the water to Spain, had travelled from Algeciras to Malaga, from Malaga to Almeria, from Almeria to Alicante in search of a fresh opportunity and had come now to his last peseta.

The merchant from Cordoba listened to the story in silence. Then leaning forward a little he said with a smile:

"Romance still lives then, though we poor drab stay-at-homes see little of its colour. So swift a rise to fortune!"

"So still more swift a decline," added Mattie ruefully.

"What you have once done you can do again. Let us think of the swift rise, my friend," and Gomez's voice became silky. "To achieve that your methods must have been a little—shall we say?—informal."

"I had only one method," answered Mattie, "—to keep my given word to the minute and in its uttermost detail."

"Claro," Juan Gomez agreed. "That is what I mean. For to keep your word thus with Señor B. the landed Sheikh, Señor X. the Jew trader might perhaps suffer?"

Mattie thought over the problem.

"Yes," he confessed, "I suppose I was never much troubled by the woes of the X's."

Gomez smiled and showed the strong white teeth of a young man.

"We cannot afford to be. I asked you that question, because in this little affair which I shall put before you, I propose to be Señor B. and not Señor X."

Mattie nodded his head.

“That is understood, of course.”

“Good!” Gomez knocked the ash from the end of his cigar. “I shall ask you to return to Morocco but to a safer district. You know, perhaps, the Kasbah of Taugirt?”

Mattie was a little startled.

“In the Atlas Mountains?”

“Yes,” said Gomez.

“I know it.”

“Perhaps then you know the Kaid of Taugirt himself?”

“I do.”

Juan Gomez laughed cheerfully, a curious little tittering laugh.

“I am lucky, my young friend. I had not hoped for such good fortune.”

Mattie, on the other hand, frowned dismally.

“Wait a moment, Señor Gomez!” he said abruptly. “I am not so sure of your good fortune. For I gather that the Kaid of Taugirt is to be our Señor X.”

“That may be,” said Gomez simply.

Mattie was torn in two. It was true that in the ordinary way of business he was not greatly troubled by minute scruples. But he liked Moors better than Spaniards, anyway, and the Kaid of Taugirt infinitely more than this wicked old scoundrel from Cordoba. He had a picture of the kindly old gentleman keeping guard in his great Kasbah with its turrets and its crenellated walls over one of the high passes of the Atlas like some great Baron of old days on the Marches. On the other hand, he had one peseta in his pocket only and it would not turn into two.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked sullenly.

Gomez leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

“It is not so serious, my young friend! No harm will be done to anyone—not even to Señor X. Listen! There is a great key in the Kasbah of Taugirt, a great key with many complicated wards. It hangs on a nail, I think, in the big patio.”

Mattie looked swiftly up.

“It is treasured?”

“It certainly will not be given to you.”

“Therefore I must steal it?”

“Let us say that you must not ask for it. Yet I want that key.”

“Why?”

Juan Gomez raised his hands in amusement.

“My young friend, consider! If I were prepared to give explanations, I should not have sought for a complete stranger down to his last peseta to help me. Nor should I offer for this little service the high reward which I am willing to pay.”

“Yes?” said Mattie, looking quickly up. “How much is that?”

“Twenty thousand pesetas. Five thousand now for your expenses, fifteen thousand when you hand me the key.”

It was certainly a handsome sum for a little villainy. But Mattie had a very strong conviction that the villainy was really colossal. And not only colossal, but very devious and subtle. He was much better informed than the merchant from Cordoba imagined; yet he was as a child in the dark. He contemplated Señor Juan Gomez with respect—and with an inward reservation that he might have to tread a measure with him requiring considerable dexterity.

Gomez took a note-case from his pocket and counted out on the table four notes of a thousand pesetas each and ten notes of one hundred.

“Señor B. keeps his word,” he said with a laugh, as he pushed the notes across the table. Mattie could not resist them.

“I have to go from here to Casablanca, from Casablanca to Marrakesh, from Marrakesh up into the Atlas. It will be four weeks before I bring back the—tribute from Señor X. How shall I find you again?”

“You will announce your arrival to Fontana,” said Gomez. He paid the bill, ordered another Fundador for Mattie Driver, and rose from his chair.

“You will give me ten minutes, if you please,” and there was a note of authority in his voice now as though he spoke to a servant. Mattie was not offended. He was suddenly afraid. It seemed to him that his whole body was just a house ringing with alarm-bells. More than the ten minutes had elapsed before he realized that he was smoking a very good cigar in a very pleasant garden and that June in Alicante was the nearest thing to the Heavenly Choirs which earth could provide.

Mattie, however, had eaten of the Cordoba merchant’s salt and had taken the Cordoba merchant’s money. He travelled by the air-service the next morning from Alicante to Casablanca and a week later climbed one morning with his little mule train up to the great Kasbah of the Kaid of Taugirt. The

Kaid rode forward to meet him seated on a high red saddle on a white mule. From afar he cried out in a voice of welcome:

“Mattee!” and he led Mattie Driver through his great courtyard into the hall. It was a place of tiles, and pillars painted and decorated, and a fountain playing in a marble basin.

“I saw you from afar with the glasses you gave to me,” said the old gentleman, to whom in more prosperous days Mattie had presented a Ross binocular. “Now how can I serve you?”

“I was in Marrakesh,” replied Mattie, “and I had a wish to see you again, and I had some days to spare from my affairs.”

The Kaid’s eyes narrowed a little and his face became a mask. But he asked no further questions and busied himself with brews of tea. Four years had passed since Mattie had come to these lonely regions and the Kaid discoursed warmly of the French and their friendship. Meanwhile Mattie’s eyes wandered around the court and in a little while he saw it, a great shining key like silver, hanging from a nail against a pillar where all eyes might see it.

“You will stay with me for a week? I will have a hunt for the third day. It may be that we shall find a moufflon.”

But Mattie shook his head.

“Sid Mohammed-el-Hati, on the morning of the third day I must be on my way back to Marrakesh.”

“It shall be as you wish,” said the Kaid. “Meanwhile my house is yours, Mattee—and all that it holds.”

Mattie slept in a room of honour with a window opening upon the south and a door leading on to the balcony above the patio. And at one o’clock in the morning on the second night of his visit, when the whole Kasbah slept, he crept down into the patio. Through the open roof the moonlight poured down upon the tiles. Even in the darkness under the balcony the great key gleamed upon the pillar like a jewel. Mattie lifted his hand to it, and a light suddenly shone behind him. Mattie turned silently and swiftly. An electric torch exposed him from head to foot, and concealed the man who held the torch. Then the light went out and from the mouth of an alcove the old Kaid spoke very gently.

“You too, Mattee? I told you that my house was yours and all it holds. Why creep down the stairs, then, like a thief in the middle of the night?”

Mattie stood rooted to the ground in shame, whilst the Kaid lit the candles in a branched silver candelabrum which stood upon the floor of the

alcove.

“I wouldn’t have had this happen for worlds,” said Mattie slowly.

“Yet it has happened,” answered Sid Mahommed-el-Hati. “Let us talk.”

He sat down crosslegged upon a long cushion and beckoned to Mattie to sit beside him. Mattie, however, stood in front of his host.

“‘You too,’ ” he quoted. “Then others have preceded me?”

“One,” replied the Kaid. “He came last year, and at this time. He was a stranger. He had a story that he was travelling to Tafilet. He stayed one night. In the morning my key was gone. I sent after him, not on the road forward to Tafilet but on the road backward to Marrakesh. In his luggage my key was found. He was brought back to me. He was very poor, it seemed. He had been offered much money for my key. I let him go.”

The old Kaid stopped and once more beckoned to Mattie Driver to sit down at his side; and this time Mattie obeyed.

“So you too, Mattee, are now very poor,” continued the old man.

Mattie nodded his head, and in a voice full of shame he explained the pass to which he had come. The extremes of fortune bring no surprises to a Moor who may be a Prime Minister one day and a beggar without his eyes the next.

“And you want my key, Mattee?”

The Kaid did not wait for an answer. He crossed the moonlit patio and lifted the key from its nail. He brought it back into the alcove and he balanced it between his fingers, the light from the candles rippling along its stem and its wards, until it seemed a thing alive which moved.

“Not a speck of rust. Not a flaw in its metal,” the old man continued. “Yet it has hung upon that pillar for three hundred and fifty years. We call it the Key of Paradise. For it opens the door of my house in Spain.”

Mattie Driver had expected just this statement. Here and there about Morocco, in Rabat as in the Atlas, in Fez as in Marrakesh, in the great houses of the Nobles hung similar keys. Their ancestors, driven out by Ferdinand and Isabella, had carried their house keys away with them against the time when they would return to Spain and fit them into the locks again. Even now their descendants keep alive that faith.

“Perhaps even I——” said the old Kaid, and he broke off with a laugh. “But if so, the time must come soon, Mattee, very soon,” and he sat absorbed like a man gazing upon a treasure.

“And where is this house of yours, Sid Mohammed-el-Hati?”

“At Elche.”

Mattie drew a deep breath. He was thinking.

“Yes, this is a bigger piece of villainy than I dreamed of. But I don’t understand it. I think I am afraid.”

Aloud he said:

“Elche is that old Moorish town with its famous date palms thirty kilometres or so from Alicante.”

“Yes,” said the Kaid. “My house stands on the river bank in a great garden. I have never seen it.”

“And who occupies it now?” Mattie asked.

“The Conde de Torrevieja”; and with a cry Mattie sprang to his feet.

“I was sure of it. Listen, Sid Mohammed! A man calling himself Juan Gomez, a merchant of Cordoba, hired me to steal your key. But I had seen his picture in the newspaper *El Liberal*—an evil little white-bearded rogue, as supple as steel, and not over that name. But over what name I could not remember until now. He is the Conde de Torrevieja.”

He stared down at the lighted candles in perplexity.

“He wants the key which opens the house in which during the summer he lives—a second key—safe in a castle of the Atlas Mountains. Why? He wants it secretly too—so secretly that he sends two men to steal it. Why?”

“That, Mattee, you shall find out,” said the old Kaid slowly. “For I shall lend you my key. I ask you to bring it back to me as clean and bright as it is now.”

He was speaking a parable, as Mattie Driver very well understood, and he held up the key between his two hands for Mattie to take it.

But Mattie’s alarm-bells were all ringing more noisily than ever. He saw the old Kaid sitting in his white robes, as motionless as an image. He saw the shining key, the candles burning steadily in the silver candelabrum at his feet; he was aware of this lonely castle in the hills, and of the shadowy pillared hall. But all these things were as unsubstantial as the visions of a dream through which he saw looming up terrifically a veiled and monstrous enigma.

In the end, however, Mattie took the key and returned to Alicante, but in a less noticeable way by boat and rail. He slipped quietly into the town one evening, with a week in hand, and betook himself to an hotel. He had still fifteen hundred pesetas left and he was in no hurry to connect up with Fontana.

“It strikes me,” he said to himself, “that Señor B. is giving me the baby to hold, and I should like to see what make of baby it is.”

But Mattie had no luck. As he strolled under the palmettos in front of the Club and listened to the band on that very night, Fontana brushed past him and said in a low voice without turning his eyes in his direction:

“Follow!”

Reluctantly Mattie followed in his steps. On the dark side of a Square at the back of the esplanade away from the lights and the music, Fontana stopped and waited.

“You have been quick, my friend, and I hope successful,” he said, as Mattie joined him.

“Yes.”

Fontana patted him on the back.

“I knew, of course, that you had returned this evening, but I was afraid, since you were here a week before your time. It is encouraging to offer a little help and find oneself so justified. You will be glad to have finished with our small affair and to receive your reward. You shall receive it to-night.”

Fontana was all joviality and goodwill, but he allowed Mattie no time for deliberation. He hurried on with his instructions. It was something which Mattie was to fetch, he understood. He did not want to know what it was. Heaven be thanked, he was not curious. All that he wanted was now and then to do a good turn for someone on the rocks. The point was, Mattie had fetched it and the good Juan Gomez was anxious to have it—was, indeed, at this moment waiting for it at his house in Elche—oh, a mere hop, skip and jump of thirty kilometres—an hour in a motor-car—and it was not yet eleven.

“But I must go back to my hotel first to fetch——” Mattie began and was at once interrupted.

“Yes, yes, no doubt. To fetch what you have to fetch! See how wonderfully everything agrees. Whilst you fetch what you have to fetch, I will get a car and send it here to this quiet Square. At one o’clock you will be back in your hotel, your little mission accomplished, and to-morrow you start life again a capitalist. Bravo!”

Fontana shook Mattie warmly by the hand, gazed at him in delighted admiration, and added:

“It will be best that the car should not go to the house. You have understood, of course, that Juan Gomez does not wish for the limelight, the old fox,” and with a chuckle he poked Mattie in the ribs. “You cannot mistake the house,” and he proceeded to give the same description of the house at Elche which Mattie had already heard at the Castle in the Atlas Mountains. Though in the one case the details had been given from a traditional knowledge with a real passion of desire; in the other merely as a means of leading a stranger straight to his goal.

“But by the time I arrive there, Gomez will be in bed,” Mattie expostulated.

Fontana laid his forefinger cunningly along the side of his nose.

“He will be expecting you. I telephoned to him, as soon as I knew of your return”; and without waiting for any further objections, Fontana stepped out across the Square and disappeared into the mouth of a narrow street.

Mattie was all for running home to his hotel and putting his head under the bedclothes. But fifteen thousand pesetas were fifteen thousand pesetas. Moreover, his elementary ideas of Law and Justice were based upon the Moorish system as he knew it. He saw no reason why, if he failed Gomez, Gomez should not pay the Governor something, get him clapped into prison and kept there. He went to his hotel and fetched the key. He was going to keep his word with Señor B. But he meant also to keep it with Señor X. That key must be returned bright and clean to the Kaid of Taugirt. It must be the instrument of no crime; it must help no dishonourable scheme.

It was eleven o'clock when Mattie returned to the Square. Every house was dark, the roadway quite deserted. But the side-lamps of a motor-car were burning on the spot where he and Fontana had stood.

“You are waiting for me? You know where to go?”

“Elche,” said the driver.

Mattie got in. The car ran parallel with the coast until the salt-pans were reached, and at that point, just after it had turned inland, the engine stopped. Mattie sat on a pile of stones at the roadside, watching the pyramids of salt glimmering in the summer night and hoping that the damage was too important for the chauffeur to repair. But in twenty minutes the car was ready again, and it ran so smoothly over the last part of the journey, that Mattie suspected there never had been any damage at all. What if the accident were just a trick to delay him, so that he might reach the house on the river bank at a moment exactly prearranged? Mattie was in the mood to

turn back at all costs when the car reached the outskirts of the village, swung to the left, and stopped before the mouth of a lane between hedges which ran downhill to the river bank.

“It is here, man,” said the chauffeur.

“You will wait for me,” said Mattie Driver.

“Perfectly,” replied the chauffeur. He extinguished his lamps as Mattie entered the lane. A hundred yards on Mattie came upon the house, a solid block of a house flush with the lane and at the side towards the river massive old date palms standing up behind high garden walls.

There was not a light in any of the windows upon the lane, not a sound from any room. Mattie’s feet sank without noise into a carpet of deep sand. He seemed to have come to some derelict, forgotten mansion in a wilderness. Yet somewhere in the depths of it, the disturbing little Count of Torrevieja was waiting for him, a pile of notes under one hand, the other stretched out for the key.

“Well, the sooner I get it all over the better,” said Mattie, and taking the key from his pocket in his right hand he slid his left over the surface of the door in search of the keyhole. The door was a massive barrier of walnut wood and bolts and bars and hung upon hinges which would stop a battering-ram. Yet, as Mattie touched it, it swung open smoothly and noiselessly. A child could have opened it; and it opened upon a cavern of blackness.

Mattie drew back with a little gasp. He was now thoroughly frightened. Why was the house in darkness when he was expected? What trick was being played on him by that old spider of a Torrevieja? Why should he carry on in an affair so suspicious? Ah, there was an answer to that question—fifteen thousand pesetas.

Mattie stepped cautiously across the threshold and, realizing that he might be visible against the glimmer of the open night to anyone watching within the hall, he drew the door close to behind him. Then he waited and he listened. The house was as still as a tomb.

But at last far away he saw a single perpendicular thread of faint light, as though across a vast hall a door stood just ajar. But whether his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and the door had always stood ajar, or whether it had only just been silently opened, he could not tell. He moved very cautiously across the floor. He imagined himself to be in some old patio which had been roofed in during a later century and he held out his hands in front of him, lest he should clatter against a pillar. He touched one and then

another and so came to the angle in which the door was placed. It opened inwards and at the corner of a room. The chink was so narrow that Mattie could see nothing through it but a strip of wall-panelling. He bent his head forward and listened. He heard nothing—not even a sound of breathing. The lighted room seemed as empty as this black cavern of a hall.

Very carefully Mattie pushed the door. It yielded but with a tiny whine of the hinges which sent his heart fluttering into his mouth. But even then, no cry, no question was uttered, and there was no sound of any movement of alarm. The room then was empty. Mattie opened the door wide, with an eye upon the crack at the hinges, lest anyone should be concealed behind the panels. But that space was empty; so was the room itself—so far as he could see. But it was a bedroom with a great four-poster bed, round which the curtains were drawn as though someone slept there—or as though someone watched there, holding his breath. Mattie's eyes wandered to a long cheval-glass which stood opposite to him in a recess by the bed and became fixed in a stare. He shivered as he looked. It seemed to him that all the ice in the world was trickling down his spine and he felt his hair lift upon his head. He saw himself and behind him, to the left of the door, the dressing-table and upon the dressing-table the solitary candle which lit the room. It gleamed like a star in the depths of the mirror and threw its pale radiance down upon a litter of broken jewel-cases and fragments of jewels: here a chain from which a pendant had been wrenched, there a gold setting from which the stones had been roughly forced. There had been a robbery in the house that night. That was why he had found the door open. The thief had noiselessly escaped that way. Then—then—what lay hidden behind the curtains of the bed?

Mattie was drawn across the room as a needle is drawn by a magnet. He pulled one of the curtains aside and dropped it again, and stood holding his breath. There was someone there—in the bed—asleep. Yes—no doubt asleep. Yet Mattie looked again towards the dressing-table. All that violence, that destruction, must have been accompanied by noise. Mattie pushed the curtain aside again. The bedclothes were drawn over the sleeper's head and there was no stir, no rise and fall, as there must be, however slight, if the sleeper breathed at all. Whoever lay in that bed was dead. Mattie approached the head of the bed and his eyes once more encountered the mirror. They met in the mirror another pair of eyes. The Count of Torre vieja, late Juan Gomez, merchant of Cordoba, was standing in the doorway, his eyes bright and sharp as a bird's, a smile of satisfaction upon his lips, a glittering sword in his hand. As Mattie turned, the Count raised his voice in a scream.

“Murder! Help! Romero, Felipe, hurry!” and as he screamed he sprang towards Mattie.

Mattie had no weapon, but as the point of that glittering sword darted towards his breast, he swung the curtain of the bed and caught it in the folds. Already in the room above a clamour arose, there was a rushing of feet. Before Torrevieja could disengage his sword, Mattie’s hand was in and out of his pocket. It held now the heavy key and with it he struck twice at Torrevieja’s head; at the second blow the Spaniard fell.

Mattie leaped across him as he lay. Candles gleamed upon the stairway as he raced across the hall. He had no thought of the pillars now. He reached the door. Once more it swung inwards without noise. In a second he was outside. He drew the door to as the shouts and the stamping of feet resounded through the hall. He had a moment whilst the servants rushed into the bedroom—more than a moment perhaps—yes, more than a moment. For they would wait until the old man recovered his senses and could give his orders. Mattie fitted the key into the lock and locked the door. Then he took the key out again and ran. For a while the house was still. Then the cries, the shouts, broke out again, and lights leaped from window to window as though the whole great building was in flames. Mattie reached the mouth of the lane. His motor-car had gone.

In a few minutes that door would be opened; Torrevieja’s men would spread over the country; the whole district would be raised in pursuit of him, the ruined adventurer from Morocco, who had stolen from his friend the Kaid of Taugirt the key of Torrevieja’s palace at Elche and had crossed into Spain to rob and murder!

Mattie ran and ran.

Months afterwards a haggard bearded man dragged himself up to the Kasbah of Taugirt and was admitted to the presence of the Kaid. From his ragged clothing he drew a bright and shining key.

“There is, however, some rust upon it,” said Mattie. “It is the blood of the worst scoundrel I ever met. I would that I had hit harder and killed!”

“Mattee, explain this to me,” said the Kaid, as he hung once more the key upon its nail in the patio. Mattie Driver told his story and at the end he produced a cutting from a Spanish newspaper.

“It is now certain that the murder and attempted robbery of the Condesa de Torrevieja must be classed amongst the unsolved mysteries of crime. It is thought that the murderer must have hidden himself in the house during the day; but the police have no clue to his identity and the fact that he had not the time to take any of the Condesa’s jewellery with him makes his discovery now almost impossible. The Count of

Torre vieja, who was prostrated by grief, intends to travel for a year. He, of course, inherited all the great wealth of his Argentine wife.”

Mattie read the extract to Sid Mohammed-el-Hati and resumed:

“Torre vieja meant, of course, to kill me there and then with his sword. If his men had taken me prisoner, I should not have been in any better case. For who would have believed my story? Fontana would have denied it, you may be sure, the driver of the car too, if he had been found. I was caught in the room with the key of the house in my pocket, and the Countess’s jewels in a bag and the Countess murdered in her bed. But since I got away, the Count will not speak of that key. He has all he wants, you see. If I were sought out and brought to trial, and told my story, it would not save me, no, but here and there his enemies might begin to talk, there would come a shadow over his name. So he leaves me alone. But I wish that I had struck harder with your key.”

The Kaid looked up at his key.

“Mattee, we are in God’s hands,” said he.

TASMANIAN JIM'S SPECIALITIES

AUDREY LANE decided to become a vamp at half-past ten on the night of the first Sunday in August. The decision, surprising in an efficient secretary of an earnest Member of Parliament, can be traced back to an unwise prayer uttered a fortnight before.

Roddy Garrow had said, "God bless you, Miss," as he tripped down the staircase. That was all. But the perfunctory and professional tone of Roddy's voice, as much as the cant phrase itself, betrayed him. For half an hour Roddy had been draping himself in the murky dignity of a great criminal. A moment's relaxation when the costume was complete had stripped him bare. He was shown to be just a cadger.

"God bless you, Miss," said Roddy, and the girl wearing the eyeshade and the heavily rimmed spectacles and the holland sleeves upon her arms slammed the door of the flat with a quite startling violence. Roddy stopped and looked upwards uneasily, and with the hand which did not hold the parcel, he tilted his hat on one side and scratched his head. His story and the honest manliness with which he told it were his stock-in-trade, his special contribution to a very simple piece of roguery which in spite of its simplicity seldom failed.

"It's my business to get the necessary money," Roddy reflected, "and if there's anything wrong with the way I get it I've got to know about it."

But the story held together. It was big. It was moving. A boy in a circus; manager of the western circuit at the age of twenty-four; a bet on a horse-race and a win; other bets and losses; the profits of a season used in a desperate plunge; a bit of forgery—the big crime. The big punishment followed. None of your trumpety little sentences in the squalid court of a magistrate, but the Assizes; trumpeters, sheriffs, and a red Judge. Five years' penal servitude; freedom at the age of twenty-nine, but freedom destitute. A relapse into peddling trickeries, and at last the chance to stand upright. His little wife—had he said "little"?—he hoped not—no!—his wife had stood by him all through. She was a waitress at Dreamland, a kind of permanent

fair in Margate, and if he could only meet some generous person who would give him an old dress-suit and lend him his railway money to Margate and a pound or two to pay off his lodging, she could find a place for him too. He would be free of Tasmanian Jim and his little squad of sneak-thieves. He would be able to run straight.

It was a good story Roddy assured himself. He had told it well too, without a whine or a break of the voice over the fidelity of his wife. He had three pounds of the girl's salary in his pocket, and wrapped in a brown-paper parcel an old dress-suit which she had commandeered from her employer's wardrobe. Yet at the end she had slammed the door on him. His uneasiness remained with him. He pawned the dress-suit in the Marylebone Lane for eight shillings, he extracted twenty-five pounds from a soft-hearted lady and smaller sums from others. He had a quite successful day. Yet he was troubled.

"I don't get it," he said to himself.

But he was to get it later on and in the neck. For he left behind the slammed door a highly resourceful young woman in a state of extreme exasperation. Audrey Lane never suffered fools gladly and when she had behaved like one herself, her indignation was unbounded. She flew out into the hall the moment she heard her employer's latchkey in the lock.

"Mr. Giscombe," she cried breathlessly, "I have given an old dress-suit of yours to a thief and you must stop it out of my salary."

"I can do better than that," Mr. Giscombe returned. "I'll take it out in overtime for the Brighton Conference. I have been chosen to propose a motion for the reform of our penal system."

"I can certainly help you there," said Miss Lane viciously. "We'll stiffen it up a bit."

The Annual Conference of Political Associations was going to be an affair of crowded hours. Mr. Giscombe was booked for meetings, speeches, receptions, and dinners. Thus the fortnight of preparation was heavy and Miss Lane worked overtime. But at Brighton she had her reward. Mr. Giscombe lunched with her on the Sunday in the big hotel on the sea-front.

"There will be nothing for you to look after but the routine letters," he said. "So you must take a holiday which you thoroughly deserve. You will probably find a girl friend amongst the other secretaries. So——"

He handed her a couple of envelopes with a smile.

Audrey opened the envelopes and found in them vouchers for the Grand Stand.

“You’re a dear,” she said vaguely, her thoughts rather aloof.

“The first three days Brighton, the second three Lewes,” he explained. “The Brighton week, you know.”

“Races?” cried Audrey Lane suddenly.

“Yes.”

“That’s it! Of course that’s it,” she exclaimed. “And that’s Tasmanian Jim.”

Mr. Giscombe was puzzled for a moment. But he prided himself on being a man of the world.

“Tasmanian Jim!” he replied. “Oh, I see. A horse.”

“A pig of a horse,” said Miss Lane with violence.

“You have lost money on him, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Giscombe.

“No, but I have on Roddy,” said Miss Lane.

“I see,” Mr. Giscombe remarked. “They’re both from the same stable, I suppose.”

Now, no man objects to be thought a wit even if he only achieves his witticism by accident. Mr. Giscombe had not the remotest idea why Miss Lane’s eyes danced and why her laugh was so hearty. But it was his doing and he rewarded her for her appreciation.

“Brighton races are not Ascot,” he remarked. “There will probably be undesirable people present.”

“Tough babies,” said Miss Lane sedately.

“Tough, certainly, but babies only in the matter of bottles,” Mr. Giscombe returned. “So I think that if during this week you take a car from the hotel and keep it to bring you back, we should reckon it under legitimate expenses.”

“I said you were a darling,” Miss Lane observed. She had not, but Mr. Giscombe did not correct her. It was the more attractive word of the two. He looked at his watch. In twenty minutes the Chief Organizer of his Party would arrive at the Railway Station.

“I must be off,” he said, “and please, Miss Lane”—he smiled. Oh, he could talk the vernacular as naturally as anyone—“Don’t put your shirt on Tasmanian Jim. He might be scratched.”

“I’d willingly go without my shirt if I could do the scratching,” said Miss Lane, and her fingers curved suddenly in the most illustrative fashion.

To Mr. Giscombe that morning his secretary was rather cryptic, but in fact she had never been more natural. For on the opposite side of the most expensive restaurant in Brighton sat the man who should have been waiting on trippers at Dreamland in Mr. Giscombe's old dress-suit. Roddy was elegantly clothed in pale grey, he was eating sumptuous food and between courses was consulting privately with a small, elderly, sharp man.

"Wait till Roddy catches sight of me," said Miss Lane to herself. "I shan't see him for dust."

She walked out of the restaurant and straight to the office counter in the hall. On the counter stood the Visitors' Book. Miss Lane looked down the list of arrivals—and there the names were written not as lasting but certainly as bold as brass.

Mr. James Kershaw.

Hobart, Tasmania.

Mr. Roderick Garrow.

London.

As she turned away she saw Roddy. He too was on his way to the Visitors' Book. Audrey Lane was in his path and she remained in his path, savouring delightedly the moment of triumph which must be hers when Roddy recognized her. But the moment never came. Audrey with her fair hair prettily waved, her shining brown eyes, her lips properly varnished, Audrey wearing a modish blue hat, a white frock and smart shoes, was not to be identified with the little pale grub of a secretary who wore an eyeshade and horn spectacles. All the return she got for standing in Roddy's way was a glad eye—or rather half a glad eye, for Roddy was bent upon serious business and not even a prepossessing young woman must interfere with that.

Audrey plumped herself down in a chair and quivered with rage. She had an impulse to seek the hotel manager and tell him about Roddy in revenge. But she would probably not be believed.

"Oh, if I could only show him,"—it was curious how exactly the American idioms expressed her moods, "—if I could only show him where he gets off!"

And her chance came that evening. She was sitting in the lounge, a novel upon her lap, a cigarette between her lips. She had chosen that particular seat because Roddy and Mr. Kershaw occupied a settee close by. Suddenly Mr. Kershaw sat up straight and touched his companion on the sleeve.

"By Jingo, if that isn't Carstairs!" he cried in a voice unnecessarily loud. "Over there! Just coming out of the dining-room."

Audrey looked as well as Roddy and her heart exulted within her. A tiny man with a wide mouth, a short chin and an air indefinably horsey was standing by the dining-room door. Now, Carstairs was the name of the leading jockey of the day, but it was more than that to Audrey. It was a keyword, a revelation. Roddy the good story-teller had ingeniously woven fact with fiction when he had melted the clasp of Audrey's purse. The big crime and the red Judge were fiction, but the squalid little swindles were taken from life—Roddy's life. If Miss Lane did not yet know where Roddy got off, she at all events knew where she was; and she settled herself in her chair like a visitor at the play.

Mr. James Kershaw's voice rose again.

"Why not ask him to play you a hundred up, my boy?" and Roddy moved obediently off.

Miss Lane asked herself for whom the little scene was staged. The young couple obviously on their honeymoon? No! The stout Hebrew on his holiday? It might be. He looked wealthy—and then she saw the intended victim, to make sure of whose arrival Roddy had been hurrying to the Visitors' Book that afternoon. An ingenuous and lonely young man was sitting within earshot, a newspaper folded at the sporting page upon his knees, a little book with a brown-paper cover on the floor beside his chair. From the cut of his clothes, the packet of Camel cigarettes which he held in his hand and his eager, puzzled air, she classified him as one of the minor plutocrats from one of the smaller towns of America curious to learn something of the cultures and pleasures of Europe. The name of Carstairs had set him on fire. He watched Roddy pilot the little horsey man to the settee. He heard Mr. Kershaw boom:

"Yes, you two run along! I'll join you in a minute."

He saw the two wander off, and he began to shift in his seat. The American desire to make friends was fighting the tradition of the Englishman's inaccessibility. But just when he was resigning himself to his paper and his brown book, Mr. Kershaw's eyes swept round the hall, embracing the whole company with a smiling benevolence. The young man plunged, or as Audrey put it, was hooked. In a second he was at the settee.

"May I speak to you, sir?"

"Of course, my boy." Mr. Kershaw could have sat for a statue of geniality. "Sit down!" and he patted the settee at his side.

The young man sat down.

“My name’s Conroy,” he said. “Henry Conroy. I am from Dallas in the United States.”

“Ah! Your first visit to us?”

“Yes. I know no one here at all.”

“You’ll make friends when you wish for them, Mr. Conroy.”

“I was wondering—was that Mr. Carstairs, the famous jockey?” he asked.

Kershaw shook his head and laughed indulgently.

“Oh, no, no! Carstairs the jockey is probably sitting in the hot room of a Turkish Bath. He rides to-morrow, you know. Still, you weren’t so far wrong,” and Mr. Kershaw had a look of admiration in his eyes and a note of admiration in his voice. “You were very near to it, in fact. He’s the jockey’s brother. We’ll join him if you like.”

The two men got up and followed Roddy and Carstairs to the billiard-room. But before they were out of sight Mr. Kershaw stopped his new young friend and said something to him in a whisper, something serious like a warning.

A little while after they had gone, Audrey noticed that the little brown book with the paper cover was still lying upon the carpet by the side of Conroy’s chair. She moved unobtrusively and picked it up. It was entitled *Form at a Glance*. Holding it in her hand she looked at the clock. It was half-past ten and it was precisely at half-past ten that she decided to become a vamp.

II

The next morning after the routine letters had been written and Mr. Giscombe packed off to his meeting, Miss Lane descended to the hall with *Form at a Glance* in her hand. She was fortunate enough to find Mr. Conroy busy with the morning papers. She went straight up to him. She was wearing a dress of pale yellow with a big white straw hat and she looked like a summer morning. Mr. Conroy could not believe that it was breaking upon him.

“This is yours, I think,” she said, with a smile. “I thought that if I didn’t retrieve it for you, you’d never see it again.”

“Oh, say!” Conroy exclaimed. How kind people were! “I’m ashamed to have caused you the trouble.”

Audrey laughed away his apologies.

“As a matter of fact, I rather jumped at the opportunity of looking up some of those horses’ records myself.”

“Then you’re going to the races?”

“I am.”

At this point Audrey should have turned away, but she did not.

“Of course, you’re with a party,” said Mr. Conroy.

“I’m alone,” Miss Lane replied. She told him who she was and why she would be alone.

“Look at here!” exclaimed Mr. Conroy. “Do you think—I mean—would you mind if I came up and spoke to you?”

“I shan’t call for the police if you do,” Audrey returned.

Heaven, it seemed, was opening for this young man.

“We might have some tea together,” he said.

“If you’re allowed,” said Audrey coldly.

Heaven seemed to be closing. Nevertheless, at half-past four that afternoon—just after a horse at three to one on had won a race, Henry found the lonely Miss Lane in the Paddock.

“May I offer you some tea?” he asked, and Miss Lane, who was hot and bored stiff into the bargain, responded with alacrity.

Across the tea-table Mr. Conroy burst into enthusiasm.

“It’s wonderful, Miss Lane. Yesterday I could have cut my throat. I landed in England three weeks ago and I’ve done nothing ever since but play solitaire. Now I’ve had the honour of meeting you—that’s first, of course—and three quite charming gentlemen.”

Miss Lane’s lips twitched and a dimple showed in each cheek.

“By the way,” she said. “I take it that you backed that horse at three to one on.”

Mr. Conroy’s eyes grew round with amazement at her sagacity.

“How in the wide world did you know, Miss Lane? I did. I won thirty-three shillings in your coinage. But,” and after a look this way and that, he continued in a whisper, “I’m promised a big tip for to-morrow.”

“I am sure you are,” said Miss Lane.

“I’ll tell you about it as soon as I know,” he went on.

“I think I’ll tell you about it first,” Miss Lane said dryly.

Henry Conroy became subtle and wily, but there was never anything so obvious as his subtlety and wiliness.

“You couldn’t tell me about it this evening, could you? If perhaps—you won’t think it impertinent, will you—if perhaps you would dine with me —?”

Miss Lane shook her head.

“I won’t dine with you, Mr. Conroy, but you might dine at my table,” she said. “And now I’m going back to the hotel.”

Conroy found her car for her and she drove away.

Miss Lane had a cunning little black velvet frock which she reserved for what her circle called soirées. She put it on that evening and she allowed Mr. Conroy to order champagne, chiefly because Mr. Kershaw and his companions across the room were watching them with goggle-eyed dismay.

“And how do you like Tasmanian Jim?” she asked, towards the end of dinner.

Conroy stared.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Mr. Kershaw I mean, of course,” she explained carelessly.

“Tasmanian Jim!” young Conroy repeated. “Do you know, Miss Lane, that sounds as if he wasn’t straight.”

“It does and he isn’t,” said Miss Lane.

“But how can you know?”

“I’ve had some,” said Miss Lane.

Conroy leaned back in his chair.

“But really——”

“Please don’t look round, they are watching us.”

“I won’t,” and young Conroy gladly leaned forward over the table, for Audrey’s eyes were getting to work at the vamp business. “But I’m sure you must be mistaken.”

“You’re not from Dallas,” Miss Lane remarked. “You’re from Missouri and I’m showing you—that is, if I’m allowed,” she added hastily. For she detected signs of haste across the room.

Mr. Kershaw’s little wee lamb was being stolen from him, was being vamped by a yellow-haired siren. Tasmanian Jim wouldn’t stand for it. He had made his plans and they mustn’t be interfered with. Miss Goldilocks

must pick up somebody else. Kershaw demanded his bill so that he might initial it and demanded it urgently. Miss Lane decided that that formality should be postponed at her table.

“Let’s slip out on to the Parade quickly. You don’t want a hat with all that hair”—Conroy had just the ordinary amount of hair, but he smoothed it with a smile—“and my wrap’s on the back of my chair.”

They were only just in time, but they were in time. They found a dark shelter where only the whiteness of their faces was visible. The sea was spread in front of them, placid as a lagoon; overhead the stars moved in their slow procession across a clear sky; Audrey sighed with contentment.

“That was a pleasant sound,” said the young man; and Audrey was a little disturbed. She had a strong suspicion that her sigh was no part of her vamping but an honest-to-goodness sigh.

“Give me a Camel,” she said, and as he held the lighted match to it, her eyes looked at him over the flame and danced.

“Let us be serious!” she said. “Here is a true account of your acquaintance with Tasmanian Jim. When he stopped you last night on the way to the billiard-room it was to warn you not to refer to the jockey at all. Carstairs was very sensitive about it, for the moment it got known he was the jockey’s brother, he was surrounded by undesirable people clamouring for information.”

“That’s just what Kershaw did say,” cried young Conroy, round-eyed with amazement.

“Of course Carstairs’ real name isn’t Carstairs at all,” she continued. “Tasmanian Jim probably told you also that Roddy’s business was to buy blood stock for Lord Derby in the Argentine, but that mustn’t be mentioned either.”

“That’s all true,” said Mr. Conroy. “But you don’t know——”

“But I do know,” Audrey Lane insisted. “You were warned off betting. You were told it’s a mug’s game. You were very reluctantly allowed to give Carstairs a five-pound note to put on a horse if he could find his brother to tip him a winner. Carstairs stayed away until a horse was three to one on. Then he returned and gave you back your fiver and one pound thirteen shillings and told you you had won it. Ground bait, Mr. Conroy.”

Mr. Conroy sat without speaking. He was shaken and hurt. But he had a young man’s stubborn faith in his knowledge of the world. Audrey had, however, a master stroke of an argument.

“Did you, by any chance, go into Mr. Kershaw’s bedroom?” she asked.

“Yes, we all went up with him and had a final drink.”

“Did you notice that he had a set of silver-backed toilet things spread out rather elaborately on his dressing-table?”

“I did,” cried Conroy.

“Now listen!” She explained to him how Roddy Garrow had come to tell her some of the tricks of his gang. He had to collect some money—not so very much—but enough to pay their single railway fares, their entrances into Tattersall’s Ring and a good second-hand dressing-case with solid silver fittings to inspire confidence in the hotel staff. The silver fittings were essential. They made it sure that the bill would not be presented until the end of the week.

“But at the end of the week it would still be presented,” Conroy argued.

“And they would have your money to pay it with,” said Audrey. She turned quickly towards him. “I take it that you have a certain amount of money which you can afford to lose.”

“I have.”

Audrey nodded.

“Tasmanian Jim has two specialities. One is to know what a given victim can afford to lose without squealing and to be content with just that. So he seldom gets into trouble.”

Young Conroy was convinced. But he was very downcast.

“No one took me for a sucker in Dallas,” he said, and he stared gloomily out over the black sea. “I suppose I go back to solitaire unless you’d let me go to the races with you to-morrow.”

“But I’m not going to the races to-morrow,” she returned. “I’m going to take the loveliest drive in the world. Through Arundel and across the Downs to a little old sleepy town called Midhurst, and back again in the cool of the evening.”

There was quite a pause when she had ended. Audrey was conscious of disappointment. It began to look as if there was a flaw in her vamping. But at last he spoke.

“I’ve heard of your Arundel Castle.”

He called it Arundel Castle with the accent on the run, but the accent was not more noticeable than the wistfulness in his voice. Audrey cheered up.

“Would you care to come with me?” she asked.

“Oh!” said Mr. Conroy, clasping his hands together. So he went.

III

The car was descending Bury Hill on the following afternoon when Miss Lane said accusingly:

“You have something on your mind, Mr. Conroy.”

Mr. Conroy grew red.

“I ought to have knocked him down,” said he.

“Which one?” Miss Lane asked.

“Roddy Garrow.”

Miss Lane set her lips together.

“What did he say about me?” she asked, and Conroy jumped in his seat.

“You *are* quick!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t do a thing because I didn’t want a scandal and——”

“What did he say?” Miss Lane interrupted.

“I could never tell you.”

And then he told her.

“When I said to him in the lounge that I wasn’t going to the races, he answered nastily. I really ought to have hit him. He said—oh, I can’t repeat it—he said, ‘You’ve fallen for the bird who tried to pick me up in the hall on Sunday.’ ”

Miss Lane flushed scarlet, but she only said meekly and quietly:

“Yes, I’ve quite a lot to thank Roddy for.”

There was, besides, a question at the back of Conroy’s mind, but subdued by the magic of that summer day and the wealth of gold and green through which they passed, he forgot it until they were once more in the hall of the hotel. Then he said:

“Oh, yes. I wanted to ask you. What is Tasmanian Jim’s second speciality?”

Audrey Lane was startled.

“Yes. . . . Yes. . . .” she said. “That reminds me,” and she walked straight to the Visitors’ Book on the counter. She examined it and nodded her head in relief.

“It’s all right so far, as the man who fell off the roof was heard to say at the sixth storey,” she said, but from that moment in the intervals of revealing

to the young American at Mr. Giscombe's expense the beauties of West Sussex, she kept an eye on the Visitors' Book.

"You are expecting someone," said Mr. Conroy, accusing her.

"No, something," Audrey answered; and on the afternoon of Thursday it had happened. Tasmanian Jim had changed his room. He had moved down, but not to the third floor where Conroy was lodged as she had expected, but to the fourth on which she slept herself.

For a foolish second Audrey went cold.

"You're shivering," said Harry Conroy, who stood close to her. He was Harry now and usually close to her.

Audrey lifted her head and laughed. The big motives, revenge for instance, and the big crimes, for instance murder, were not for Tasmanian Jim and his crew of sneak-thieves. They were after the money for the Saturday bill. Harry Conroy had failed them. Well, then, Tasmanian Jim's second gift must be called upon. Audrey looked carefully for the names of the visitors upon the fourth floor and an obvious name flashed out at her.

"Mr. Joseph Amersheim."

Yes, that was the stout and prosperous man whom she had noticed in the lounge on her first night in the hotel. She had met him once or twice in the corridor. His room was near to hers, but on the opposite and more expensive side.

"I suppose Mr. Amersheim is a regular visitor?" she said to the clerk.

The clerk smiled. He was for the moment free.

"Every summer, Miss, and every Christmas. He calls the hotel his little grey home in the west. Witty, I call it, though it isn't really in the west, if you understand me."

"Nor is it grey," said Audrey, thinking of the red bricks.

"Nor is it little," added the clerk. "But it's witty, isn't it?"

"It's rich," said Audrey, "like Mr. Amersheim."

The clerk spread out his hands to indicate Mr. Amersheim's wealth. Then he added: "It's funny you should ask about him. Someone else was doing the same yesterday."

"Ah?" said Audrey, quite carelessly.

"A gentleman who has left, I think."

"Mr. Carstairs," Audrey suggested. Mr. Carstairs had left on the day before.

“I believe it was, Miss. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Funny but not witty,” said Audrey as she turned away.

So Mr. Amersheim was to be the victim of Tasmanian Jim’s second gift, and either to-night or to-morrow night. For the Saturday bill was imminent.

At this point Miss Lane undoubtedly misbehaved. She should have warned the manager of the hotel and there is not very much to be said for her. This, perhaps. Tasmanian Jim never carried firearms and never fought. If they were caught they submitted and took their little sentences as the order of the day. The worst that could happen in Miss Lane’s opinion was that Mr. Amersheim should have a fright. Against that she set the overwhelming pleasure which she herself would enjoy. There were three lovely Latin words which were so much in her mind that evening that she was afraid that unconsciously she would speak them aloud. *In flagrante delicto*.

To-night or to-morrow night! Think of it! Miss Lane could think of nothing else, not even of Harry Conroy. At some time after eleven Tasmanian Jim, followed by Roddy, walked towards the lift. As the door was thrown open, he said to Roddy:

“You might have a drink in my room and we’ll discuss that plan for next week.”

He spoke loudly enough for the lift man and anyone near to hear him. Audrey heard him and Audrey was thrilled. Here was the prepared excuse if the pair were found late at night in the corridor. Mr. Kershaw, the conversation finished, was conducting his friend to the lift. It was to be for to-night, then. Audrey rubbed her hands together. She looked about the lounge. Mr. Amersheim was early to bed and late to rise. He had gone up to his room an hour ago. Audrey waited for another ten minutes. Then she ascended to her floor. She did not undress. She placed a chair in position, set her door slightly ajar, arranged the telephone instrument so that it would be by her hand, switched off her light and sat down in the darkness to wait. Through the chink she looked obliquely across the passage to the door of Amersheim’s room. There was only one light left burning and that at a distance. Here all was silence and shadows.

It was in the natural contrariety of things that after an hour’s vigil during which nothing had happened an intense desire to sleep should steal over Audrey. Her head would fall forward, her eyelids would close and her bed called to her like a church bell. Certainly she dozed in her chair—and then was suddenly awake, wide awake. Someone was moving very quietly in the corridor. Two people. She saw their shadows on the wall and with a heart

beating so noisily that she feared it would warn them, she recognized them. She heard a whisper.

“Watch!”

Then in a second Tasmanian Jim, in a dressing-gown over his pyjamas, was exercising his second gift. He was stooping at the door of Amersheim’s room with his ear against the panel, holding his breath. The gift by which he had profited a score of times was that of knowing from the sound of the breathing whether the sleeper slept heavily or slept light. Snoring, according to the experience of Tasmanian Jim, meant nothing at all. Some of the noisiest snorers awoke at the creak of a wardrobe or the flutter of a blind against the frame of an open window. It was obvious in a moment or two that Tasmanian Jim was not satisfied to-night. He stood up, straightening his shoulders to relieve his back, and stooped again. He was puzzled rather than disappointed. It looked to Audrey as if he had come across some kind of respiration which he could not understand or classify. Roddy crept to his side and his movement decided Tasmanian Jim.

“We’ve got to,” Roddy whispered.

Kershaw nodded. He took a little shining forceps of steel from the pocket of his dressing-gown and inserted it into the lock of the door. The key turned, the door swung slowly inwards. A dim light was burning within the room and shone on the side wall. For a couple of tense seconds the two men stood one behind the other ready for flight. But no sound reached Audrey at all and none reached the watchers beyond the breathing of their quarry. They slipped like shadows into the room and noiselessly closed the door behind them.

Audrey closed her door too and got busy. She telephoned to the night porter. Two men had managed to unlock Mr. Amersheim’s door. She knew them as thieves. Would the porter get the manager and the police and be very quick and very silent? Audrey slipped out of her room and past Mr. Amersheim’s door. A few paces beyond it a broad hall branched off and from the hall the staircase and the lift descended. Audrey planted herself at the junction of corridor and hall. “Only over my dead body,” she said to herself with a little giggle of excitement. It seemed to her that hours passed before the lift door opened, but when it did there emerged the night porter, a half-dressed manager, and a calm and hefty policeman. Audrey vamped him with a smile, laid her forefinger on her lips and led the little party on tiptoe to Mr. Amersheim’s door. As they reached it, it opened. Tasmanian Jim peeped out. Audrey had a glimpse of a face convulsed with terror. For a moment, though his eyes wandered from the manager’s face to the

policeman and from the policeman to Audrey, he was not aware of them. Then with a little squeal he tried to close the door again. But he did not succeed.

“Now then! Now then! What’s up here?” said the policeman, and suddenly they were all in the room and all silent. Most silent of all was Mr. Amersheim. For he lay in his bed with his eyes staring at the ceiling and his chin dropped.

“We never touched him, I swear,” Kershaw stammered. “I knew there was something wrong when I listened outside. You can’t fix it on us.”

“He didn’t wake up,” Roddy explained in a shaking voice. Audrey had never seen terror in the raw before, and she did not like it. “I was watching him. We didn’t frighten him. He never knew we were in the room. He stopped breathing and his eyes opened—oh,” and his face was contorted and a spasm of sickness shook his body. “He never woke up.”

That was the question. Mr. Amersheim’s doctor refused to commit himself. Mr. Amersheim’s heart? Yes, he might have died naturally and peacefully in his sleep. On the other hand, the shock of finding thieves in his room might very well have killed him. And in that case Roddy and Tasmanian Jim would have been guilty of manslaughter certainly and murder perhaps. The magistrates sent the prisoners to the Assizes and so Roddy and his friend came before a red Judge at last. They were acquitted on the graver charge. Audrey, who was in Court, saw the colour return to their faces as the verdict was given. They had pleaded guilty to burglary, however, and the tale of their squalid little villainies, recited by an officer of the C.I.D., bleached them again.

“Ten years’ penal servitude,” said the red Judge, and Roddy clutched at the rail of the dock. If he had not committed the big crime, he had got the big punishment.

“Ten years!” he repeated with a slobbering mouth. “Ten years!” Suddenly he stopped and the slobbering mouth hung open. For looking straight at him from the seat occupied a second ago by the bird who had tried to pick him up in the lounge of the hotel, was the little grub of a secretary with the eyeshade and the horn-rimmed spectacles.

“Well, I’m jiggered!” said Roddy as the warder tapped him on the shoulder. Even in the minor matters of expressing himself Roddy was a poor creature.

THE ITALIAN

“I AM SORRY, MRS. QUINTASH,” said Police-Inspector Grant. “Our presence is, of course, very distressing, but your parlourmaid, Martha, acted very sensibly when she called us in. You will be free of us all the sooner.”

“I don’t blame her at all,” answered Doria Quintash.

Grant was a large, kindly, middle-aged man, with a dread of emotional scenes which not even his long experience had been able to remove. He was very grateful to Mrs. Quintash for the steadiness of her voice and the quietude of her manner. She was a young woman, trim and complete even at this moment. She might be beautiful, the inspector conjectured, to those who liked something a bit foreign. For himself he preferred the English type, fair, and a trifle buxom perhaps. Doria Quintash had a clear pale face, which at this hour seemed to be owned and occupied by a big, clear pair of eyes black as night, rather full, red lips, and black, shining hair most neatly parted in the middle and sweeping down in great curves to hide all but the lobes of the ears. She was seated at a gilt table covered with a red silk cloth fringed with little red balls; and in front of her was a cup of tea and a plate of buttered toast.

“Whilst you go on with your breakfast, Mrs. Quintash,” said the inspector, “I’ll read out to you the report I’m making, and by the time I’ve finished I expect our surgeon will have done.”

“Certainly—whatever is usual,” Doria Quintash answered. It was quite a surprise to the inspector that there was no trace of a strange accent in her voice. Foreign she looked but English she spoke. “Won’t you sit down, Inspector, before you begin?”

“Oh, thank you.”

The inspector looked uneasily about the room for a piece of furniture which would bear his weight. It was a drawing-room as he thought a drawing-room ought to be—at once florid and musty, a place with a suite of

ebony and gold furniture upholstered in blue satin, a cabinet of ebony and gold painted with staring posies of flowers, little gimcracky tables, a thick Axminster carpet, and a big marble vase in one of the front windows. It was to the inspector a nice room, which a self-respecting person had but didn't use. Only there was not much for a self-respecting person of sixteen stone to sit upon. However, the inspector drew forward a spindle-legged cane chair and lowered himself gingerly on to the edge of it.

“At five minutes past eight a.m.,” he read from his notebook, “Martha Green, house-parlourmaid to Mr. Anthony Quintash, the famous explorer, rang up the police-station and said that on taking, as per usual, a cup of tea into her employer's bedroom, at eight o'clock, she found him dead, and a book which he had been reading and the bedclothes spattered with blood. The bedside lamp was still burning. Martha Green at once proceeded to the hall where a fixed telephone is installed, and called up the district police-station. I had just come on duty, and instructing Martha Green to see that the room was not entered or touched, I warned the police surgeon, Mr. Graham Buckland, and in company with him repaired to 15A, Ryde Street, Queen's Gate, where the tragedy had occurred. On arriving I found that Martha Green had waked up Mrs. Quintash, who had been sleeping in a room divided from her husband's by a bathroom, and up to that moment was unaware of the catastrophe.

“Anthony Quintash's room was in the front of the house upon the third floor, and his bed stood with its head against the outer wall in the angle of the room. Quintash was lying upon his left side with his face to the wall. A thin, sharp stiletto was driven into his heart, and a book was lying tumbled upon the bedclothes. There was very little blood, and that already dry, both upon the sheets and the page of the book. Upon examination some writing in pencil was found upon the border of the last page of the book, which had been cut. The writing was without doubt in Quintash's hand, although it was weak and faltering and a trifle blurred. But it was easily decipherable. It ran:

“‘No one is to blame. I fell asleep and tossed over on to my side. My fault.—Tony.’”

At this point Inspector Grant interrupted his report to ask:

“You heard no cry, Mrs. Quintash?”

“None,” Doria answered. “I don't think I could have heard if Tony had cried out. There's always a certain amount of noise from cars and lorries on the Knightsbridge road at night.”

Grant nodded.

“This street runs up to Knightsbridge, doesn’t it? Yes. And there’s all the Covent Garden traffic. Besides, I expect Mr. Quintash realized that his injury was fatal and preserved his strength to write those sentences.”

He looked again at his report.

“Mr. Quintash, I understand, used that stiletto as a paper-knife regularly, in spite of remonstrances from both you and Martha,” he continued.

“Yes, we both thought it dangerous,” replied Doria. “I used to put it away the moment Tony went off upon his travels, but it was always lying upon his writing-table the day after he had returned. He had a reason, of course.”

Grant looked up.

“Oh! Might I hear it?”

“He read a good many foreign scientific books. I don’t know whether you’re familiar with the look of them, Mr. Grant. They are heavy books with paper covers and thick uncut pages which do want a lot of cutting.”

“Yes, I see. I was puzzled about that paper-knife, Mrs. Quintash, and I was afraid that the coroner might be so too——”

“The coroner?”

Doria Quintash was the puzzled one of the two now. Her forehead set in a frown.

“Do you mean to say that I must have all the publicity of an inquest?” she asked, and there was just a shade of resentment in her voice.

“I don’t say that,” the inspector hurried to say. “The coroner may issue a certificate right away, as soon as he gets our surgeon’s report. I don’t see why he shouldn’t. But he has to be informed.”

“It depends on the surgeon?”

“A good deal. But I hear him coming, Mrs. Quintash.”

The police surgeon was a long, thin, shambling man with a grizzled moustache and an aquiline face. He stared for a few moments at Doria Quintash, at a loss to reconcile this young widow who seemed to have stepped straight out from the canvas of an old Italian master with the characterless jumble of tawdry, expensive furniture which cluttered up her drawing-room. If the room had a distinctive feature at all, it was a complete absence of taste, and here she sat at her ease in it.

“Mr. Graham Buckland,” said the inspector, introducing him. The surgeon bowed. He carried a parcel under his arm. He spoke with sympathy.

“I think if we could get hold of your doctor now, Mrs. Quintash, we could between us simplify matters for you.”

Doria Quintash shook her head, she glanced at him aslant and a little wistful smile glimmered for a second at the corners of her lips.

“We haven’t got a doctor,” she answered. She was still saying “We” as if her husband was alive. “I moved into this house whilst Tony was away in Brazil, not a year ago, and we were both of us never ill.”

The answer disturbed Graham Buckland. He edged away on his long, loose legs to the window which was not covered by the marble vase, and stood with his back to the room. It was somehow outrageous and futile that the man who had burst out of the jungle into Bahia with the remnants of his expedition after a two years’ successful search for a lost city of the fourteenth century should come so soon to so unnecessary an end in a dull, flat row of houses, with great porticoes much too big for them, in a side-street of Queen’s Gate.

“Then I must put my one question directly to you, Mrs. Quintash.”

“Yes?”

“Quintash’s death is perfectly explained by the words he wrote in the book,” Graham Buckland said bluntly. He had got to get his point clear, and though bluntness sounded cruel, it was, like the surgeon’s knife, the kinder on that account. “That stiletto might certainly have caused his death just in that way, and probably did. The smallness of the wound, and the slight loss of blood, would have given him the time to scrawl his message, and probably did. But I was at the great reception last night.”

Behind him a chair was suddenly pushed back and knocked against a table.

“Oh, not so much of a coincidence, Mrs. Quintash. When I was a younger man I did a good deal of mountain climbing in odd corners of the world, and I’ve always taken a great interest in the proceedings of the great Society. Last night was not one to be missed. You were there, weren’t you? At the end of the third row.”

For a quarter of a minute he waited, and then the answer came, quiet and even and controlled.

“Yes. I was there, of course. And I was at the end of the third row.”

“Then perhaps you may have noticed what I noticed.”

It had been the night of the season. The big lecture theatre had been crowded. Anthony Quintash had broken silence for the first time since his

return and had told a moving story of his long search; the hopes and fears, the elations and disheartenments which had attended it; the discovery of the earthquake-riven, empty city hidden in the foothills of the Andes; the gradual diminution by fever and snake-bite and attack of his company; the death of his young partner and friend, Julian Devenish, by the upsetting of a canoe in a rapid. The photography had been marvellous; the diction of the lecture enthralling; the subsequent presentation of the Society's gold medal had been the opportunity for a demonstration of quite unusual enthusiasm.

"But through it all I seemed to hear," Graham Buckland continued, "a quite tragic note of disillusionment. Do you remember when he threw the portrait of Julian Devenish on the screen, that young, eager friend with the fine face marred by the deep scar from the corner of the eye to the jaw—do you remember his words? 'Was it worth while? What have we done? Added a footnote to "The Golden Bough," perhaps. Was that worth the loss of so loyal and ardent a spirit as Julian Devenish? I wonder.' On that note of depression he ended, Mrs. Quintash, and my one little doubt is whether Quintash's iron nerve had not at last given way. He was forty-two—young as the world goes now—yes. But he had lived a dozen lives; he carried, as I know now, the scars of a dozen hairbreadth escapes. And I just wonder—you, of course, will know, where I only wonder—whether something had cracked within him, whether"—and here the surgeon's voice hesitated—"whether in a moment of revulsion after his great triumph, he suddenly took his own life last night."

He heard a gasp and turned round. Mrs. Quintash was gazing at him with parted lips and a flush of colour in her face. Her great eyes were wide open and curiously bright.

"I never thought of that," she cried, and she added: "I am sure that Tony never did."

The surgeon inclined his head.

"It is for you to say."

"I say 'No.'"

Inspector Grant had been turning over the pages of his report a trifle impatiently. He was against speculations in the air. He liked facts on the ground.

"There's one final point, Mrs. Quintash," he said. "You and your husband had supper here when you returned."

"Yes. We dined early before the lecture and I gave orders that something cold should be left for us."

“Martha didn’t stay up for you?”

“Oh, no. We didn’t get back until after eleven. Martha had gone to bed.”

“Quite, quite,” said Inspector Grant. “But the dining-room is still as you left it; and though there are two plates used, there are three glasses used.”

Mrs. Quintash turned her face to the inspector, and the enigmatic trifle of a smile shone for the fraction of a second in the sideways glance of her eyes and the curl at the corners of her lips.

“A friend of ours took me to the lecture and drove us both back home after it. He came in. He wouldn’t stay for supper, but he had a glass of champagne”—the surgeon felt that that was all wrong; it should have been a glass of Chianti—“before he went away.”

“And the name of this friend?” continued Inspector Grant, moistening the tip of his pencil with his tongue.

Doria Quintash moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Mr. Cleveland Hill,” she answered. “But he is just a friend of ours. He can tell you nothing more.”

“I am sure,” replied the inspector. “But I’ve got to make a report. If I could see him for a moment, and write down that I’ve seen him, you get rid of us then altogether, Mrs. Quintash.”

The inspector smiled invitingly and waited.

“He lives in Mount Street,” Doria Quintash answered. “I have his telephone number somewhere,” and she half-rose from her chair.

But Grant was already on his feet.

“He will be in the book, no doubt. You haven’t an extension here? No. We’ll go down and get on to him from the hall. This is a distressing business for you, Mrs. Quintash.”

“But we’ll spare you all we can,” the surgeon added, tucking the parcel under his arm.

The two men went downstairs. The telephone was fixed on the wall of the passage to the front door, with the directory on a sloping shelf beneath it. The inspector went straight to it. Graham Buckland opened a door upon the right hand. It led into a dining-room at the front of the house. On the threshold he stopped, looking about the room. On the white tablecloth stood the two plates with the remnants of the cold supper upon them. Quintash had sat at the end of the table and carved the ham. There was the gold medal open in its case beside his plate. At the side here Mrs. Quintash had sat—there was the fragment of lace from her gown caught in the joint of her chair

—as if, perhaps, she had risen in a hurry. Her plate was pushed forward and the salt-cellar was upset. Graham Buckland drew the plate back to its natural position and suddenly stooped over the tablecloth. He remained in that position and then suddenly stood erect and with his face upturned towards the ceiling. At once he moved back into the passage. He heard the inspector speaking into the mouthpiece.

“It will be better if you heard it all here, sir. Yes, sir, it’s serious. . . . No, Mrs. Quintash is quite well. . . . No, she can’t come for the moment to the telephone . . .” and Graham Buckland tapped him on the shoulder. “Just a moment, sir.”

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand, and Buckland asked in a low voice:

“You left all the doors of the bedroom locked?”

“Yes. I’ve got the keys.”

Grant pulled them out of his pocket and the surgeon glanced at them disparagingly.

“Any sort of door key I should think would open those locks,” he said. “However——”

He shrugged his shoulders, and whilst Inspector Grant continued to assure Mr. Cleveland Hill that there was nothing the matter with Mrs. Quintash and that the sooner he threw on his clothes and came to Queen’s Gate the quicker he would know what was up, he returned into the dining-room and carefully replaced the plate which he had touched on the spot where he had found it. There was the empty champagne bottle—yes—a glass at the side of each chair—yes, and the third glass at the end of the table where Mr. Cleveland Hill had stood. The surgeon drifted out of the room.

The inspector was hanging up the receiver at last.

“Fairly frantic, that young man, Mr. Buckland. There’s one, I reckon, who won’t grieve very deeply over the loss to science of Mr. Anthony Quintash.”

“That room behind the dining-room is Quintash’s study, I suppose——” said Buckland.

“Yes, but there’s nothing there, Mr. Buckland. I had a look round when you were making your examination upstairs.” Nevertheless, Buckland drifted along the passage and went into the study. Very methodically he looked round the room, taking it by portions. Grant followed him.

“Nothing to see here, Mr. Buckland. This is where that stiletto lay, as a rule, according to Martha. On this big table under the window, on the right of the blotting-pad . . .” and suddenly the telephone-bell rang. Grant ran out of the room, crying aloud so that he could be heard at once in the kitchen below and in the drawing-room upstairs. “All right, all right. I’ll answer it.” And the moment he had gone Graham Buckland very quickly and very silently closed the study door, shutting himself in alone.

Outside in the hall, William Grant listened and replied:

“No, sir, this isn’t Mrs. Quintash. . . . No, sir, I can’t disturb her now. No, no, no, she’s really quite well. But it would be very much better if you came here at the quickest. . . . It’s impossible to explain over the telephone. . . . Oh, you’re dressing. Then we’ll expect you in a few minutes. . . . Good! . . . Oh, very well, sir, if you insist . . . yes, we are the police.”

Inspector Grant was a little exasperated. “That lad doesn’t sound too bright to me,” he grumbled. “You only hurt yourself if you go off the deep end over the telephone. The telephone’s no spring-board.”

He turned round to share his dissatisfaction with the surgeon and saw him coming out of the study, dusting his fingers.

“Mr. Buckland, you’ve left that parcel behind in the study.”

“No, I put it on the sideboard in the dining-room. I want to have a look at it now.”

But he seemed in no hurry, once he was back in the dining-room. He stood with his nose up in the air as if he could smell some secret.

“I wonder what happened in this room last night,” he said, slowly and seriously; and Inspector Grant was startled.

But he knew the surgeon for an astute and reasonable man. Graham Buckland did not go off the deep end, either at a telephone or away from it.

“This young man can tell us if anything happened here,” said Grant.

“Can he? I wonder,” Buckland answered.

He took his parcel then and opened it.

“Here’s the stiletto.” It was wrapped in a piece of medical gauze, and he handed it to Grant. “You had better take charge of it—but carefully, for it’s as sharp as a razor. It’ll have to go to the laboratory, of course, but it’s the book which interests me. Have a look at it, Grant.”

He had the book wrapped up too, but he sat himself down in a chair by the window, and turned back the gauze. It was a biggish book of quarto size

with a paper cover and thick leaves, and it was written in French. Whilst Grant stooped down, Buckland set the book on his knees.

“*Travels in the Sus Country*—that’s the title, and—look at the date at the bottom of the title-page—it was published seven years ago.”

He turned the title-page and came to the fly-leaf.

“And Anthony Quintash bought it seven years ago. There’s his name and the date written, and, as you see, half of the pages uncut. Doesn’t it seem a little odd to you that he didn’t read it when he bought it?”

Inspector Grant pushed out a lower lip and thought the question over.

“No,” he said at length. “I think a lot of people buy books which they think they’ll read one day and set ’em up on their shelves and never look at ’em again.”

Buckland caught him up at once.

“But Quintash did look at this book again, and last night. I’m not sure that that isn’t more curious still. You see, when this book was written very little was known about the Sus Country. Long after Lyautey had Morocco well in hand, this strip in the South beyond the Atlas was dangerous and unexplored. But it’s better known now. There are more recent, more knowledgeable books about the Sus Country than this. Isn’t it odd that Quintash should have taken up to bed to read for the first time a book already quite out of date?”

But William Grant dug his toes in. He distrusted finely drawn speculations in police work. They led you astray for one thing. Juries made short work of them for another.

“No,” he said stubbornly. “Perhaps that book’s literature.”

The surgeon laughed.

“You’ve got an answer for everything, Grant,” he said.

“But you’ve got a hunch, Mr. Buckland,” Grant returned uncomfortably. “And I don’t like it. For I’ve known your hunches to be better than my answers.”

“Let’s hope it isn’t so in this case!” said the surgeon. “But here’s Mr. Cleveland Hill, I take it, and he may have something to tell us.”

A powerful two-seater sports car swung round the corner from Knightsbridge and stopped with a smooth precipitation in front of the door. A young man, tanned on the golf-links and trained to the prize-fighter’s ounce, burst from it like a bullet and hammered with the knocker until the

house shook. Inspector Grant opened the door, and at the sight of his uniform the young man staggered back against the rail.

“Good God, what has happened?” he cried.

“If you want the street to hear, I can tell you now, Mr. Cleveland Hill,” said the inspector. “But I should prefer you to come in.”

Mr. Hill pushed into the hall with an apology:

“I beg your pardon. I’m a fool.”

The inspector shut the door and ushered the young man into the dining-room.

“Our surgeon, Mr. Graham Buckland.”

“Surgeon?”

“Yes, Mr. Hill. Will you sit down, please!” The inspector turned to his notebook. “At eight o’clock this morning, as per usual, Martha Green, house-parlourmaid, took a cup of tea into Mr. Quintash’s bedroom,” and he continued to read until the simple facts of the explorer’s death were complete. At the end of the story Cleveland Hill sprang to his feet.

“Where’s Doria?” he cried. “I mean, Mrs. Quintash.”

“She is upstairs, sir.”

“Alone?”

“For the moment.”

“I’ll go up to her,” and he turned towards the door, but Inspector Grant was in the way.

“One moment, sir.”

Mr. Cleveland Hill stared at the big officer as if he were the obtusest thing in the world.

“But you can’t let her stay up there alone. It’s inhuman.” He turned to the surgeon. “You’ve seen Mrs. Quintash? I had a picture upon the wall of my nursery with just her sensitive face and just her hint of a smile.”

“An oleograph of the Mona Lisa, I expect,” said Mr. Buckland with a nod.

“That’s it. Well, you can see. I’ve known her all my life. She’s got to have sympathy. . . .”

“We only want to ask you a question or two,” the surgeon interrupted. “For instance, you drank out of that glass last night?”

The young man controlled himself with an effort.

“Yes, I did. I drove Quintash and Doria home here and came in with them, and I had a glass of champagne.”

“But you didn’t stay for supper.”

“No.” Mr. Cleveland Hill’s face fell. He was a very open young man. “They didn’t ask me,” he explained, and then corrected himself. “At least, Doria did, but Quintash was against it. You know Quintash was a very queer fellow. Running away to Brazil and places like that when you have a wife like Mrs. Quintash, eh? But last night he made quite a little speech, kind, you know, and warm-hearted. It was to be the greatest night of his life—that sort of thing. He had been presented with his Society’s gold medal and he wanted to complete the evening with a private little presentation to his wife.”

“What!”

And suddenly the surgeon was on his feet with the strangest expression upon his face.

“Yes. Queer, wasn’t it? Doria couldn’t make head or tail of it. I don’t think she half liked it, you know. It wasn’t after all very civil to me, was it? He had only got to say good evening and I should have gone away without any of that play-acting.”

“I see. You think he was just staging an excuse to get rid of you.”

“Well, it looked a bit like it, didn’t it?” said Mr. Cleveland Hill. “Is that all?”

“As far as I am concerned,” said Buckland.

“The same here,” the inspector added pleasantly. “We had to make sure with an accident of this kind that everything was normal, of course.”

He held open the door and Mr. Cleveland Hill was half-way up the stairs in a flash. The police surgeon shot a queer glance at the inspector. “So you think that everything’s quite normal. We’ll just wait a second until the gentleman upstairs is deep in his oleographic Italy—floating between high black houses on a canal of Venice, or gazing at the moon in a dark garden of Florence. Mona Lisa! She *is* uncommon like the Gioconda, but I don’t think the Gioconda could have put up with the drawing-room furniture.”

All the while he was talking, Graham Buckland was wrapping up the travel book in its gauze.

“I am going to borrow this from you for a day. You can trust it to me.”

He went to the door and listened. “It’s all right, I think. Let me have the key of the bedroom door again. Right! Swiss guides used to have an idea

that if you made a noise on a dangerous snow slope, you might bring an avalanche down. Just see what a good climber I was.”

The surgeon slipped up the stairs like a shadow. He heard a murmur of voices in the drawing-room and went up to the next floor. He was more careful than ever, and the voices were still murmuring in the drawing-room when he got down again to the ground floor.

“All right,” he said, and he handed the key of Anthony Quintash’s bedroom back to Inspector Grant. “You can leave all the doors open now, for all that I have to say. Quintash, of course—the usual proper dignities. He needn’t be moved from his room. I shall see the coroner this morning, but I’ll tell you something.” He drew the inspector into the dining-room and closed the door.

“The coroner will not give a certificate. You can take that from me.”

The inspector was disappointed.

“There will have to be a public inquest?” he asked.

“There will, and it won’t end with the inquest,” Buckland said grimly. He picked up the book which Anthony Quintash had been reading and tucked it under his arm. “Can I find you late to-night if I want you? At your house, eh? I’ve got the address. You’re unhappy? Yes. You hoped it was just an accident? Normal was your word. Well, you may be right. But I think we are up against as grim and strange a crime as you and I have ever known”; and with that the surgeon let himself out into the respectable area of Queen’s Gate.

At half-past eleven that night Inspector Grant was smoking a final pipe in the parlour of his little house in the Brixton Road. He was uneasy, for he had never seen Graham Buckland, in all the years of their common experience, thrown so markedly out of his stride. The inspector looked at the clock upon his mantelshelf. “He won’t come now,” he said at one moment. “He’d have sent me a message if he wasn’t coming,” at the next, and as the hands pointed to a quarter to twelve, a stick was stretched out from the steps at the front door and tapped upon the bow-window. Grant opened the door to a very tired and exhausted surgeon of police.

“Give me a drink first,” said Graham Buckland, and he toppled into an arm-chair. “It’s a case for a warrant on a charge of murder.”

Grant mixed a stiff whisky-and-soda for his guest and watched him drink it. Then he sat down opposite him and said quietly:

“Let me hear!”

“I was puzzled over that book from the beginning,” Buckland explained. “Partly for the reasons I gave you, partly too because that bloodstained page looked to me a little used. I put that together with the disheartened tone Quintash had employed last night in his lecture, and I was honestly inclined to suspect that he had deliberately committed suicide and had written that message to deceive everybody into the belief that he had died by accident. Personally, I should have been prepared to help him out, but I had got to be sure about it. A small bunch of keys was lying with his watch on the table by his bed, and I took that bunch away with me, thinking that some paper or another in a locked drawer might put me wise. There was one rather elaborate small key of Italian workmanship which particularly caught my eye. With that bunch in my pocket I came down to the drawing-room, and I had no sooner put my suspicion of suicide into words, than it was badly shaken. Do you remember what Mrs. Quintash did? She gave a gasp and said: ‘Oh, I never thought of that.’ Well, that might just mean, ‘I never dreamed he would do a thing like that.’ But it might also mean, and I had an unpleasant hunch that it did mean, ‘That would have been a better explanation, if I had thought of it.’

“Mere guess-work? Yes, but wait. We went downstairs and whilst you were telephoning to young Cleveland Hill, I went into the dining-room. Did you notice that the plate in front of Mrs. Quintash’s chair had been pushed forward and the salt-cellar upset? You did, and thought no more about it than I did. But I moved the plate back to its original place, and I saw that it covered four little sets of marks in the tablecloth—not exactly rents, but threads in the linen had been torn, the nap fluffed up a little, and the cloth pricked. And these four sets were the corners of a small square and they were quite fresh. It seemed to me that at some time during supper a small square box mounted on metal claws had been placed on the table in front of Mrs. Quintash and that she had sprung up and pushed her plate violently away from her, upsetting the salt-cellar and whatever it was which had been placed in front of her.

“I looked round the room and could see nothing which offered any explanation. So I went along the passage to the study.”

“And I followed you,” said Inspector Grant.

“But you were called to the telephone by that ebullient young gentleman, Mr. Cleveland Hill,” Graham Buckland continued. “By that time I had spotted something which might account for the marks, a square steel box of old make mounted on claw feet, standing on the top of a high bookshelf. I jumped on to a chair and took it down. The small Italian key upon

Quintash's bunch slipped exactly into the lock. I opened the box. It was about the height of a spirit case and, like a spirit case, the front fell down with the raising of the lid. I was looking at a human face about the size of a small melon, a face with every feature intact and there was hair upon the scalp. The only real disfigurement was that the lips were bloated and there were holes in them as though they had been skewered together. After the first jar, I remembered Quintash had been in Brazil. To reduce the head of the enemy you have killed to the size of an orange without spoiling the features is a secret of the Indians on the Amazon. You put it up on the mantelpiece, as it were, as a memento, and if you feel down and out, why, you have something to cheer you up again. A good many people have brought one of these heads home as a curiosity. But something puzzled me about this one. It didn't look native," and Inspector Grant sat back in his chair with a gasp. He looked round his sitting-room, comforting himself with the knowledge that he was in the Brixton Road with taxis and late omnibuses roaring past his door.

"The face was dark, of course, dark as an Indian's, but then it had been kippered. It had been hung up by the lips and smoked, but it didn't look native. No! I took it up in my hands and I got the shock of my life. Upon my soul, I almost dropped it. I feel myself tingling now. For a great scar ran down from the corner of the eye to the jaw. I was looking at the head of Quintash's young friend, Julian Devenish. The loyal and devoted partner to whom Quintash had paid so pathetic a tribute in his lecture. You see, I had to revise my opinion of Quintash. What was he? A hypocrite? A man who hated Devenish and when he was dead treated him with the same horrible indignity which an Indian would use towards his enemy? I replaced the head in the box and the box again on the bookshelf. I went back to the dining-room with my brain in a whirl, and five minutes afterwards young Cleveland Hill gave the whole show away. Quintash wouldn't let him stay for supper—not he. He meant to complete his day. He had been presented with a gold medal and he meant to make a presentation to his wife. What he presented her with was Julian Devenish's head, exact in every feature but the lips—eyes, skull, nose, scar, everything, but reduced to the size of a small melon which you could hold in your hand. The end of a perfect day, what?"

"But that's devilish," Grant exclaimed, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. "Even if there were provocation."

"Was there provocation?" Buckland resumed. "Was Julian Devenish Doria Quintash's lover? Was this Quintash's revenge? And if so—that was the question I was stubbing my toes against—what was Doria Quintash's

reaction last night? Do you see, Grant? I fell back upon my first idea—modified. The book held the secret and I had got to tear it out of it.”

“What did you do?” Grant asked, leaning forward eagerly in his chair, and Graham Buckland resumed his narrative.

“I looked up an old copy of *Who’s Who* and I found that at the time this French book was published, Quintash was living near to Farnham. I drove down to Farnham and found the house, smothered in roses and surrounded by a garden—a haunt of peace on a country road. Then after a few inquiries I found the doctor who had attended them. He was a tall, lean man, who seemed to think that the world was a ridiculous joke and went off into great fits of laughter over catastrophes and disasters, a Dr. Sturgis.

“‘And what do you want to see me about, Mr. Buckland?’ he asked.

“‘About this,’ I answered, and I held the book out to him.

“‘Where in the world did you get that?’ he continued, in surprise. ‘I saw in the evening paper that Quintash had died.’

“‘So you know the book?’ said I.

“‘Know it? I should think I do. I attended Quintash after his accident.’

“‘Accident?’ I cried.

“‘Yes. He took that book to bed with him and a sharp knife to cut the leaves, and he fell asleep and rolled over on his side and wounded himself.’

“‘And when was that?’

“‘Dr. Sturgis searched in a little safe and fetched out a case-book.

“‘That’s the time. Seven years ago.’ To Dr. Sturgis it was the funniest episode. ‘He thought he was going to die—he wasn’t near dying really—and he wrote that message on the margin. “It’s all my fault, etc.”’

“‘To save his wife any difficulties if he did die, I suppose,’ I said, and Sturgis roared with amusement.

“‘I’m sorry, but you’ll have to do that bit over again, Mr. Buckland. It won’t do,’ said Sturgis. And then out the truth came. Quintash and his wife hated one another like cat and dog. There was a young fellow, called Julian Devenish, who had just made a little name for himself by a journey in Arabia. He was always about the place, adored her. I made a remark about her striking appearance and I was afraid Dr. Sturgis was going to roll out of his chair on to the floor, so diverting he found it.

“‘Oh, yes, the Mona Lisa stunt. She had the sideways glance all right—if a young man was around—but that’s all. She was a common little trollop.’ And Sturgis added, and, my dear Grant, I beg you to notice the addition,

‘The only Italian in that *ménage* was Anthony Quintash. He was small, supple, vindictive, patient and proud. Remember him! Dress him up in a doublet and hose. He came straight out of the Cinquecento, didn’t he? He wrote those lines on the margin of his book, because if he died he wasn’t going to have his neighbours think that he’d killed himself out of jealousy or unhappiness. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about. Anthony Quintash was waiting his turn. He could even find enjoyment in waiting. Sooner or later, in his own good time, at the artistically perfect moment, he meant to tread a measure with his Mona Lisa.’

“Thus spoke Dr. Sturgis, and last night Quintash trod his measure with his Mona Lisa. He had been received with acclamation, he had been presented with his gold medal. She, indifferent to him and confident in her own attractions, was stringing along a new lover. Imagine the moment if you can when Anthony Quintash placed in front of her, no doubt with a thousand ceremonious and courtly words, the head of her old lover, reduced to the compass of an eight-day clock. No wonder she pushed her plate away and upset the salt. How shall we explain her? Panic? Horror? Fear? Hatred? Wouldn’t that be the order? But she remembers that accident seven years ago, and when Quintash is asleep, she stages it more effectively in the dead of the night.”

Graham Buckland rose to his feet.

“I am going home. The rest is for you.”

Inspector Grant knocked his pipe out against the fire-bars.

“Yes,” he said heavily. “The steel box is on the top of the bookshelf in the library? And I have the book of travels? And the name of the doctor at Farnham is Sturgis? Yes, I’ll take action. You’ll want a taxi?”

“Please!”

Inspector Grant came out on to the steps of his house with the surgeon, and hailed a passing taxi.

“Good night, Mr. Buckland.” He looked up and down the street with its vista of little villas lit and ensured by the rows of street-lamps linked as far as the eye could see.

“I’ve at times, Mr. Buckland,” he said, “felt an urge to see the world, but upon my word, there’s something to be said for the Brixton Road.”

MAGIC

MR. COLIN SAUNDRY, C.M.G., started out as usual upon his circuit through the Barotse country at the end of the rainy season. He went with his usual pleasure in a few months' freedom from routine. But his pleasure was not shared by everyone in that forest-covered province. There were others besides malefactors who sighed with regret when they saw the first of his caravan and relief when they saw the last of it. Tall, lean, loose-limbed, with an odd, ugly monkey face and a voice which creaked like a rusty machine, he had a way of setting a lonely settlement rocketing with excitement. He was Commemoration Week, Eton and Harrow, Ascot, and a Court Ball all in one. To the wives he was romance and adventure and a whisper from old days. To the men he was an interference and a blatancy. He was too obviously The Great Big Noise, and too arrogantly explicit that nothing but his career must stand in the way of his pleasures.

On this occasion, however, he brought two guests along with him, a Major George Hardacre and Hardacre's wife, Carmel. He had found them two days out from his Headquarters sitting disconsolately at a fruit farm which had never begun to be anything but a failure.

"We hadn't enough capital or enough knowledge," Hardacre had said, pulling moodily at his moustache. He was a retired cavalry officer of thirty-six years, heavy, vacuous, and just as unfitted for the work of a pioneer as a man could well be.

"And we hadn't the resources in ourselves which might perhaps have made up for the want of other things," Carmel added, gently enough; but there was a gleam in her eyes which Colin Saundry was quick to notice. Also, she was tall and slim and no more than twenty-eight years old, dark of hair and eyes, full-lipped and rather beautiful. To Colin Saundry a challenge. So he made his suggestion.

"You both ought to get away from here at once. You can't see things in their proper proportion with the litter of a failure about you. If you come

along with me, you'll have the leisure to make your plans, and I shall be very glad of your company."

They locked their door and came along. Colin Saundry was in no hurry. He was quite content to let the contrast between his easy efficiency and Hardacre's moody helplessness loom up into something very large and important. He went about the work of administering his district, and for a week saw little of his companions until the day was done. In the end a night came when Hardacre maundered with more than his usual monotony.

"I can't really forgive myself, you know. I didn't play fair with Carmel. You can see that for yourself, Saundry. I got her to put her little bit of money into that farm with mine. It seemed the right sort of thing to do after the War. Try the new lands, eh? But I wasn't the man for it."

And suddenly Carmel rose up with a look of exasperation upon her face.

"Oh, what's the use?" she cried.

They had been sitting in their camp-chairs about a big log-fire built in the open. Behind them were their sleeping-huts. A little way off, Saundry's police and his servants were chattering about a fire of their own. Carmel took a few steps away from the fire and spoke again with her back towards them.

"Don't let's talk of it! We'll only spoil this lovely night."

Saundry got up quickly and joined her.

"I'll show you something," he said; and he led her across the grass and between the bushes to the foot of a little hill. As they climbed it a thunderous, muffled noise as of enormous engines revolving beneath the earth reached their ears and grew louder. On the top they halted, and Carmel drew in a deep breath, throwing her head back. Forest and open glade and scattered bush were spread out before them under a silver moon.

"It's magical," she said. "Listen!"

Far away in a stretch of forest a baboon mumbled and barked.

"It's the country of magic," Saundry returned. "Look!"

A long way off in the south-east above a hollow a white mist hung and swirled and changed its shape like a great canopy in a wind; and every now and then some corner of it flashed brightly as though the canopy disclosed an edge of glistening embroidery.

"The spray of the Victoria Falls," he said.

For a little while they watched, held by the enchantment of the scene. Then suddenly Carmel cried:

“If he’d only turn on me once and tell me I was no more use to him than a wet rag, I’d love it. I don’t believe I’d mind if he smacked my face. But he’s on his knees—always. Oh!”

And he was on her nerves, Colin Saundry could have added. The devout, remorseful lover! Could there be in the world a person more exasperating to a young and beautiful woman in the ruin of her fortunes? What she wanted was courage, resolution, a definite plan to set things right. Instead she got a whine.

“How did it happen?” Colin Saundry asked.

“Our marriage?” said Carmel. She looked at her companion thoughtfully. She had no wish to belittle herself in his eyes by imitating her husband’s whine. On the other hand, she did not want him to think her an empty-headed fool who had been caught by the ancient glamour of a uniform. As they turned and walked back towards the camp she replied, choosing her words and watching her companion’s face.

“You must go back to the War, no doubt, to understand it,” she said. “I was eighteen. We were all easily carried away. The same sort of spirit brought us out here to Africa. A new Britain! A new world!”

She laughed half in scorn, half in regret, remembering those vanished enthusiasms, and then suddenly caught Saundry by the arm. They were half-way down the hill.

“Look!”

“I have been looking for some while,” Saundry answered in an odd voice.

“At George there by the fire?”

“At George before he went to the fire?”

Hardacre, his pipe in his mouth, was leaning forward in his camp-chair fiddling with the lighted boughs of the camp-fire, pushing one into the heart of the blaze, shifting another to one side, and all with such method that the little pyramid of flame and smoke might have been to him the most important thing in existence.

“Oh, can’t you do something, Colin?” she cried passionately, and looked at him. Saundry was standing very still at her side with his eyes upon her; and she was suddenly alarmed. She drew back, conscious of a shock. She repeated, rather to break the silence than to compel an answer:

“Can’t you do something?”—and this time she omitted the Colin.

“Yes,” he replied. “I can. This, as I told you, is the country of magic.”

And now she was almost sorry that she had put the question. As they returned to the fire, Hardacre took his pipe from his mouth.

“I say—you two! I’ve been thinking.”

“You have? Yes?”

There was a lively eagerness in Carmel’s voice. After all, then, he had been working out some plan whilst fiddling with the branches of the fire.

“I’ve been thinkin’ that since we’ve got to get a move on pretty early in the mornin’, it’s about time we did a little shut-eye, what?”

Carmel turned abruptly away, so that the look upon her face was hidden. Colin Saundry answered:

“There’s no hurry. We shan’t, after all, be starting until the afternoon. A little thing has happened to-day. I meant to have told you about it at dinner. But I forgot.”

He went at once across the clearing, and spoke to the head man of his police. It seemed that he too had not been warned of this change of plan. Carmel wondered, with a small stab of fear, whether Colin Saundry could have told them at dinner of the little thing which had happened; and whether it hadn’t happened within the last hour. She watched Saundry anxiously as he returned to the camp-fire.

“To-morrow,” he said to her, “I’ll present to you the most remarkable woman, except yourself, north of the Zambesi River.”

II

The three of them rode half a mile the next morning, and dismounted at the gate of a palisade which surrounded a native village of some thirty huts. In front of the most important of these huts, a plump young woman, black and sleek as a new silk hat, sat on a mat in her best beads and awaited her visitors with dignity.

Colin Saundry strode up to her and bowed twice.

“N’Gamba, great chief,” he said in the only sort of English she could understand. “Dis judge,” and he tapped himself upon the breast, “he catch complaint.”

Away went N’Gamba’s dignity. She clapped her hands delightedly, her round face creasing and crumpling like a baby’s. She was N’Gamba, of course. She ruled thirty poverty-stricken Barotse families by the mere lift of her eyebrows. But here was the great magistrate, with the voice like a rusty chain, pretending to appeal for her protection. Could anything be more entrancing? She took him up in his own style. She shot one wicked little

glance at the tall, slim white woman with the wedding-ring and replied sedately.

“N’Gamba make mammy palaver one time.”

Before she could utter another word, Colin Saundry interrupted sharply.

“Hold your tongue, N’Gamba.”

N’Gamba giggled, whilst Saundry mopped his face with his handkerchief.

“The little devil!” he said. “She’s too quick by a lot.”

Mammy palavers dealt with divorce and compensation, and the questions asked of the parties were as a rule primitive and impolite.

“Mammy palaver finish,” he said sharply, and now some of the fun died out of her face. “Money palaver begin,” he continued slowly, and now all the fun had gone. N’Gamba sat very still, her face wiped clean of expression, her eyes lowered, waiting.

Carmel Hardacre waited too, oddly disturbed, so swift and complete a change had clouded that interview. There was something serious to be proposed, and perhaps to be refused—something unknown but alarming.

“For three days, N’Gamba, I camp by your village, and go about my business.”

“One, two, t’ree days,” said N’Gamba, with a nod.

“During those days eighty-five pounds of my Government’s money are stolen. I want that money back.”

Again N’Gamba did not reply. But she raised her eyes and kept them fixed and unwavering upon Colin Saundry’s face. There was neither appeal in them nor fear. She watched him—sounded him, seeking—or was it not rather already knowing?—the depths and the shallows of his nature. At the first, Carmel was conscious of a sense of outrage. The little naked black girl, mistress of thirty miserable Barotse families lost in a forest, was actually sitting in judgment over the white magistrate who had the high justice and the law in all these parts! By some strange mutation the proper authority of the one had passed into the possession of the other. Or so it seemed to Carmel—until she looked at Colin Saundry, and was reassured.

He stood at his ease, now slightly contemptuous, his left hand in his riding-breeches pocket, his right hand holding his switch hanging motionless at his side. If those two wills were fighting it was the man’s which won. For it was N’Gamba who spoke now, not he.

“My people tief half a bit, yes, but big t’ings, no,” and now her face was all appeal that he should be content and let his accusation fall.

But Saundry shook his head.

“It won’t do, N’Gamba. I can’t lose eighty-five sovereigns of my Government’s money. For if I lose, I must pay.”

In the quiet which followed, Carmel suffered a new discomfort. She became aware that though N’Gamba’s eyes never wavered from Colin Saundry’s, and her face with all its prayer and appeal was turned to him, the prayer and appeal were now being diverted to her and with an overmastering force. It was no affair of hers, she tried to argue, but with a sting of indignation she felt that she was being drawn into it—enlisted to plead by the side of N’Gamba that the inquiry should cease here and now. Against her will, indeed, she took a little step towards Colin, but before she could speak he turned to her, and the mere arrogant look of him broke the spell which had been laid upon her. He turned back to N’Gamba.

“Listen to me! I go from here to-morrow upon my work. In seven days I return. When I return you find for me the money and the thief. It is an order.”

It seemed that as he had released Carmel Hardacre from the compulsion put upon her, so he had broken down N’Gamba’s opposition. As the fun had once died out of her face, so now did the appeal and the prayer. But it was not submission which took their place. On the contrary, Carmel had the illusion that though no physical change took place, the little black plump girl grew into a creature formidable, potent. Carmel said to herself, wonderingly: “I thought her a little figure of fun.” She saw her now as the immemorial wise woman of all the ages and all the races—the woman with all the secrets of the future locked away behind her eyes. It was no longer the theft of eighty-five sovereigns which was in question, but something of vast moment at which she could not guess.

N’Gamba stretched out her hand, and said in a curiously toneless and gentle voice:

“Baas, I do what you say. But I catch some prayer.”

“That I leave it all alone?” Saundry asked.

N’Gamba nodded her head.

“Baas—some t’ings—you meet ’um so. I t’ink Goddy go do ’um.”

Colin Saundry received the message with a harsh burst of laughter.

“Isn’t that just what a child cries,” he exclaimed, “who’s asked to explain how the apples have vanished?”

“But it wasn’t a child who cried it,” Carmel objected.

“It’s a child, at any rate, now,” George Hardacre added, with a grin. It was his only contribution to the dispute, and certainly he seemed to be right. For as they turned away to the gate in the palisade, scream upon scream followed them; and there was N’Gamba rocking her body from side to side upon her mat, beating the ground with the palms of her hands and sobbing like an infant in a paroxysm of passion. Colin Saundry smiled as he looked back.

“But she’ll find the thief and the money,” he said, with the completest confidence; “they’re all frightened to death of her.”

“Why?” Carmel asked.

“She’s the greatest Rainmaker in these parts, and for people who live on mealies, rain at the right time in the proper moderation is a very important thing. The natives travel miles to give her presents and ensure her goodwill. As you saw, she’s getting a little too fat and prosperous.”

“How in the world can she make rain?” said Carmel, and Colin Saundry shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s her secret and her father’s before her. I can’t tell you how it’s done or whether it’s done. All I know is that she flew into a rage once and told her Barotses that they shouldn’t have any rain. And they didn’t. Then when they argued with her that they were starving, she flew into a greater rage still and told them she’d bring down so much rain upon them that she’d wash their mealies out of the ground for them. And she did.”

Hardacre laughed loudly.

“Oh, I say, I say, old fellow. A bit of a fairy story, what?”

“South Kensington would call it a fairy story, no doubt,” Saundry replied dryly. “But these things happened here in Africa.”

Carmel felt again the little stab of fear. She, at all events, had not lived north of the Zambesi without knowing of mysteries not to be solved by the rules of logic.

“This is the country of magic,” he had said, and she looked at him, the magistrate, and wondered whether it had not taken him to itself and taught him some of its dark secrets.

They were to break camp after an early luncheon. Carmel finished her packing quickly and crossed to the hut which they used as a mess-room.

There she found Saundry alone, and put a question to him at once.

“What did that girl mean when she spoke of a mammy palaver?”

Colin Saundry chuckled.

“She was a bit too quick, wasn’t she?”

“Why? What did she mean?”

“She meant—how many oxen I ought to pay your husband.”

“I see.” She lowered her eyes from Saundry’s face, and added, “None, of course.”

Colin nodded his head ruefully.

“No, none.”

It seemed that he had upon the tip of his tongue the word “yet” to add to his “none”; and Carmel drew back a step as though he had uttered it. She had not yielded to him—yet, but she was not sure that she wasn’t going to. The vividness of the man almost swept her off her feet, lifted her on to her toes, at all events. There were comparisons forced upon her each hour of the day. Even now she must glance back through the doorway to the hut in which her husband was packing. It wanted just some small extra thing to push her one way or the other. But she was conscious of a queer enmity towards Colin Saundry. She disliked where she almost loved.

It was her enmity which spoke now.

“That money. You are quite sure you’ve been robbed of it?”

Colin Saundry’s face flamed.

“Of course,” he said, and there was certainly nothing but indignation in his voice. “I’m not likely to make a mistake in a matter like that. There were hundreds of opportunities. You and Hardacre were out shooting. I was on my circuit with my police. The camp has been practically deserted all day whilst we’ve been here.”

Carmel agreed.

“That’s true,” she said. “Here’s George.”

“And here’s luncheon,” added Colin Saundry.

III

On the evening of the seventh day the party returned to the same camp. The theft had been avoided as a topic during the week by some sort of tacit agreement between Carmel and Colin Saundry, whilst Hardacre had become more and more silent and morose. But Carmel had not forgotten it, and now

that they were back in the camp again the odd conviction seized upon her that they were all concerned in some alarming way with a matter of much deeper importance than the recovery of the money. An uneasy excitement made her restless, and touched Colin Saundry too. He sent a messenger into the village to announce his arrival to N’Gamba, and a little time afterwards lifted his head for silence.

“Listen!”

From a distance came the tapping of a solitary drum.

“Well, we’ve heard that a good many times and in a good many places during the last weeks,” said Hardacre, with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I know,” answered Colin Saundry.

But he still listened anxiously. They went out into the open after dinner. Above the trees half a mile away the loom of the village fires reddened the sky. From that quarter came the beating of the drum. It was louder now and they could all distinguish changes in its rhythm as though it sent a message in a code. For now it was spaced and monotonous, now it hurried, the taps following one upon another like sparks from an anvil; now the taps merged in one prolonged roll like a summons or an alarm. Colin Saundry listened with his head on one side and a frown upon his face.

“How far would the sound reach?” Carmel asked in a low voice.

“For miles. It fills the night.” Then he tried to laugh. “I was wondering for a moment whether N’Gamba had taken it into her head to make some trouble for me to-morrow. But she wouldn’t dare. No, I am sure. She wouldn’t dare.”

Trouble of the kind which Colin Saundry feared, N’Gamba certainly did not make. For no more quiet and orderly assemblage could be imagined than that which the village presented to the magistrate and his friends the next morning. It was, in fact, too quiet and orderly. For it was panic-stricken.

Carmel could not make head or tail of the spectacle. It seemed to her that a sort of performance was being given which held the tribe spellbound, and she was sure that it was entirely displeasing to Colin Saundry. For she heard him curse N’Gamba under his breath, and add: “Well, it’s got to go on now.”

The tribe was seated on the ground in a semicircle, with N’Gamba at the central point of the arc; and it watched a hideous old man who was mumming in the open space—watched him as though death waited at every turn of his feet. He was clothed in a leopard skin; dirty rags decorated his arms and ankles, and a string of shark’s teeth hung about his neck. His hair was twisted up on the top of his head and bunched there with ivory skewers,

and he held a calabash in his hands half-filled with old screws and bits of broken iron, and rattled it as he slowly twisted and stamped.

“Who’s that comedian?” Hardacre asked, and suddenly Carmel knew. The three of them were standing at one end of the semicircle and she had a clear view. The terror stamped upon the faces of all those savages squatting upon the ground told her, and explained too the anger of the official at her side. N’Gamba had called in a witch-doctor to find his money for him.

The old man, bent and decrepit and thin as a baboon, ceased his dance and sat crosslegged on the ground. From his calabash he fetched out four bones, tossed them in the air, caught them like a juggler, and then set them in the shape of a diamond in front of him, altering them from time to time so that now the point of the diamond was directed to one man, now to another. And whilst he juggled with his bones, he whined rather than crooned some monotonous old chant which held in it the melancholy and the despair of all the ages.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Hardacre quoted.

From Colin Saundry there came a sharp hiss.

“Keep still!”

He knew his people and Hardacre did not. These Barotses, to a man, were bound in a spell by stark fright. What if the spell broke? And a little thing might break it. What if frenzy followed upon fright? A massacre might come of it. Even now a man half-rose to his feet with a whimpering cry and squatted down again, as though he dared neither flee nor stay.

The witch-doctor unslung from his shoulders a buffalo-horn. He took from his basket a rusty spoon, and—of all incongruous paraphernalia for a magician—a dirty old jar which had once held Keiller’s marmalade. Comic enough, no doubt, elsewhere than in a forest of Africa amongst a tribe of panic-tortured savages. Here every commonplace, familiar little implement gave an added touch of the macabre to the whole ghoulish exhibition. Carmel knew from a sharp movement at her side that the climax of the grotesque rite was at hand. As terror chained that black sweeping curve of men, so suspense held her—or all of her but her throbbing heart.

The old pantaloons scooped from the jar a pitch-like grease, so rank that the evil smell of it tainted the air even where Carmel stood. He filled each end of the buffalo-horn with it.

“That’s his magic,” said Saundry in a low voice, and the witch-doctor rose to his feet. Balancing the horn in his hands he scuttled suddenly with a quite horrible quick run to the point of the semicircle opposite to Carmel.

Before the first man he halted, and she witnessed a ritual which shocked her as an unexpected blow might do and drained her cheeks of all their colour. The old man extended the horn, and the other, his teeth chattering, his body trembling, took it with a humble reverence like one upon his knees. For a little while he held it upon the palms of his upturned hands, whilst standing over him the wizard muttered and whined. Carmel had, for a moment or two, a horrible illusion that she was present at, and condoning by her presence, a filthy parody of the sublime mystery of her faith. But the ceremony was too real to all these participants for such an error to persist. Because it was terrifying and real to them, it became real to her, real and compelling. The centuries fell away behind her. She was assisting at some ordeal which had been repeated and repeated in this still, sunlit glade in the forest long before even the men from Babylon passed southwards to quarry their diamonds and their gold. And it could not fail! She was sure of it. She watched the old and hideous magician pass his buffalo-horn from man to man, stooping, muttering. At some moment a man would rise, unable to endure his torment for one more second, and flinging up his arms avow his guilt. She was sure of it. She waited for it with clenched hands and parted lips.

If only that had happened!

Right round the semicircle the witch-doctor practised his sorcery in vain. He came to the last of the tribe and failed with him. He stood, a noisome creature to be imagined in a nightmare, his small eyes glinting, his wizened body an offence.

“Let me look at that horn,” cried a voice by Carmel’s side—and a strange voice it seemed—a voice which spoke under compulsion. Carmel turned towards her husband. It was he who had spoken, and he had the appearance of a man in a trance. Carmel looked suddenly at N’Gamba. N’Gamba was squatting on the ground, her head lowered upon her bosom, her eyes veiled. She was motionless as a statue. The recollection of the power which that little black girl had exercised over Carmel on this very spot flashed back into Carmel’s mind. She would have yielded to it but for Saundry’s interruption. He would interrupt again—yes—yes! Carmel looked at Saundry hopefully, but the man was rattled; he was angry; he was alarmed. For one fatal hour his easy assurance failed him. In the contest between these two, the wise woman with the lore of Africa and the white man from the West, the white man lost. Carmel saw her husband reach out his hands. She tried to cry out; her dry throat refused a sound. And the odious horrible catastrophe happened in a second. As Hardacre grasped the horn, it leapt and twisted in his hands. Before even Colin Saundry could

have seized and held him, he was out there in the open space, wrestling like a madman with a buffalo-horn which no one held. There could never have been such ignominy. He was dragged about like a doll. Carmel was hardly aware that all the black men were on their feet, leaping, screaming, laughing in their reprieve from fear, or that N’Gamba sat like an idol of stone, her head lowered, her arms crossed upon her breast. But she heard Colin Saundry’s voice raised in a loud anger, she saw him cross to N’Gamba and fling at her some passionate words; and when she came to herself she was outside the palisade and one of Saundry’s police was holding the stirrup of her horse.

They rode back to the camp without a word. But when they reached it, Hardacre said:

“My hut must be searched.”

Colin Saundry waved the suggestion aside.

“It was a trick. . . . No doubt they have some queer powers, these witch-men. Powers we don’t understand. N’Gamba set him to it. By God, she shall pay.” He slipped his arm through Hardacre’s. “You mustn’t mind, Hardacre. We shall be away from here to-morrow.”

Hardacre drew his arm away.

“I insist.”

His pallor under the sunburn gave him the look of a man sick to death. Colin Saundry dropped his arms to his side.

“I wouldn’t have had a ridiculous thing like this happen for ten times eighty-five pounds. You shall have your way, of course.”

And that night as they sat silently smoking about the camp-fire, Saundry’s head man came forward to them carrying a bag of sovereigns which he had just dug out of Hardacre’s hut.

For a while no one uttered a word. A silence weighed about that fire such as might follow a dread verdict in a court of justice. A turtle-dove, startlingly near, called suddenly from a bough of a tree and far away a baboon mumbled, and then by the fire Saundry shook the bag so that the sovereigns in it rattled. If he had been seeking for the one extra jolt which should thrust Carmel into a more definite position between the two men, he could have found nothing more decisive. He had got his money back, yes, but Carmel hated him.

“Of course, it was a plant,” he said. “N’Gamba must have found the thief, and then buried the money, knowing that we should return. I’ll get it

cleared up on my next circuit. Meanwhile here's the money and no harm done. There's absolutely no motive, of course. . . ."

He spoke with generosity knowing—it must have been so—that there was all the motive in the world. But he was not allowed to expand his argument. Hardacre stood up and pulled at his moustache. Even at that moment he could not be impressive. He alarmed neither of his companions. He did not even look at them. He just said in a dull voice:

"I've had about enough of this."

Then he pulled a pistol out of his pocket, blew out his brains and pitched forward into the fire. Fortunately Carmel Hardacre fainted.

The affair, of course, could not end there. Slowly the facts were put together. Finally N'Gamba spoke. Saundry had sent her a message summoning her to meet him in the forest two days before he returned to his camp by her village. He came to the appointed place riding in great haste and alone. He bade her accuse Hardacre of the theft. No blame should fall on her, for the money would certainly be found in Hardacre's hut. N'Gamba wept, pleaded, yielded. But she chose her own way. She called in her witch-doctor. She used her own dark gifts. You may give them what name you will, magic, witchcraft, mass hypnotism. It is wiser perhaps to accept the experience of Colin Saundry and say that the fairy story in Kensington happens in Africa. But from first to last N'Gamba never wavered from this assertion. She could have done nothing whatever had Hardacre been innocent.

Colin Saundry, however, got no profit from his scheme. He lost Carmel at the moment when he chinked the bag. He lost his position when N'Gamba told of their meeting in the forest, and thereafter he fell upon difficult days.

Some years afterwards, when rather drunk at a shabby party in his lodgings behind the Bayswater Road, he was asked for his explanation of the story. He said, "Hardacre, of course, stole the money all right. I saw him going from my hut to his when I came down a hill towards the camp-fire one night. The next morning I missed the money. Oh, yes, Hardacre stole the money all right." Then he laughed foolishly and bibulously, and added:

"Some t'ings—you meet 'um so. I t'ink Goddy go do 'um."

THE DUCHESS AND LADY TORRENT

A SOUNDING phrase which merely states a case will often be accepted as an explanation in other fields besides politics. Thus, if one person said, "Extraordinary affair, that of Lady Torrent: it's just a case of social suicide," the reply was certain to be, "Yes, my dear, that's just what it was."

Social suicide indeed! Toby Manister, whenever he heard the words—and he heard them pretty often during one season—shrugged his shoulders and smiled contemptuously. They were the mere husk and shell of the affair, and he wanted the kernel.

But he said nothing. For he was a dangerous little busybody with a sharp edge of malice to his mind as well as to his words; and here was, he felt sure, the very puzzle to amuse him, so long as he moved with sufficient discretion. Discretion was necessary, for he had a glimpse of big names, and he at all events had no intention to commit social suicide.

In the end, by putting this and that fragment of conversation together, by analysing little incidents, which he had witnessed without realizing their significance—he was present, for instance, at Lady Torrent's party—by a deft question here and there, and finally, when he was fairly sure of his facts, by a bold visit to Lady Torrent herself in her retreat near Dieppe, he got the story complete.

And years afterwards, when the principal actors had safely disappeared from the scene, he told it.

It was at a dinner-party where topic chased topic across the table and out of sight like so many feathers of cloud across a sky; a party of young people for the most part, amongst whom Toby Manister was beginning to feel uncomfortably out of date. Then someone dropped a reminiscence of Lady Torrent, and Toby Manister sat up in his chair.

The old phrase leapt out, reminded:

"The most inexplicable affair! After twenty solid years of untiring effort to achieve social success, twenty seasons when the gilt rout-chairs went out

of the house every morning to return to the house every evening, when every new reputation was chased and caught and sooner or later exhibited in the drawing-room at Emperor's Gate, and was there thenceforward to be known as Eddie or Archie or Mona or Dollie, as the case might be—after all the boredom, and patience, and humiliation which such a life must mean, suddenly Lady Torrent goes off at the deep end and commits social suicide. Why?"

Toby Manister replied:

"She saw red suddenly and nothing else mattered. She became a woman instead of a machine like a hostess. She acquired a violent life of her own, or she had always possessed it and now let it rip. She was out for blood, and prudence, ambitions, Society could go to blazes. Poor dear, it was she who went to blazes."

Toby was so pathetically eager to re-establish himself, that no one of the kind, gay party could gainsay him. They were rewarded with a curiously sinister little story of a duel to the death between a great lady and a little lady in which the little lady very nearly won.

"I sat through the trial, of course," said Toby Manister, "and I noticed, as all the newspapers noticed, Lady Torrent's quick, bird-like glances towards the doors at the back of the court whenever they swung open, as they so continually did, to admit one more spectator to the already congested benches. The newspapers put those glances down to fear—fear of what in the end did happen. But I felt certain that not for the first time the papers had observed and misread.

"Fear, after all, is unmistakable; and I couldn't discover any sign of fear in Lady Torrent; not even, indeed, any anxiety. What I saw was a sly, confident expectation of triumph. The appearance of the little jeweller from Brighton with the necklace in his hand was, I believe, the greatest shock she had ever received in her life. She thought herself safe; she was already gloating, when in an instant——"

Toby Manister lifted his hand and brought the palm of it flat upon the table with a bang as though he crushed an insect.

"We may look forward, it appears, to a charming story," said the hostess with a note of mockery.

Toby Manister needed no further encouragement.

"The Duchess of Saxemundham was sitting with her secretary," and he smiled complacently at the little start of astonishment which was universal

in his audience. “Yes, the Duchess of Saxemundham was the great lady in the case.”

II

The Duchess of Saxemundham was of an unsullied reputation. She possessed enormous wealth, a great political influence, and a reprobate husband who in Paris, and Monte Carlo, and Venice, and Aix, in fact anywhere except in London, might be seen to shake his head muzzily and say, “Cynthia’s miles too good for the likes of me. She’s a classic filly, I am the most contemptible of the Platets.”

Of all these advantages the Duchess was well aware. She carried her charmingly tip-tilted nose high in the air, narrowed her intimate friends into a very small circle, and stood graciously aloof—a figure to which State and Church both clung as a proof that, after all, the world was not wholly lost.

In this particular June when she sat with her secretary in her study overlooking the Green Park, she had reached the age of thirty-one and the very perfection of her delicate, rosebud, rather appealing and pathetic beauty. The Duchess was greatly helped to keep her balance upon her pedestal by a natural look of spirituality which hung like an aura about her small head with its heavy coils of dark hair. This look and her little wistful smile were indeed among her most important assets; for apart from their effect upon the people who didn’t know her, they made her very human and racy comments upon people and things seem attractively bizarre to those who did.

“There’s another letter from Lady Torrent,” said Muriel Chalmers, the secretary, as she tore open the envelope with the laugh which in so many houses greeted Lady Torrent’s invitations. “She expects you to dine with her on Thursday week.”

“Expects me?” exclaimed the Duchess—she was altogether Duchess at that moment. “Why, I have refused to go.”

“I know. I wrote the letter,” said Muriel.

She spoke slowly with a note of perplexity in her voice as she read this second invitation from Lady Torrent.

“I asked you to mention that I hadn’t so far the honour of her acquaintance.”

“And I did mention it. But—it’s quite impossible, of course—but this letter reads to me like a threat.”

She turned to Cynthia Saxemundham with the letter in her hand.

Cynthia took it with a trill of amusement. Yes, there it was, a threatening letter—oh, very cleverly worded, not a phrase but could be made to look innocence itself—yet, taken altogether, a pistol held quite definitely to the Duchess of Saxemundham's head.

Muriel Chalmers awaited another delicate outburst of amusement, but it never came. She turned about again with a gleam of anxiety in her eyes. But it was nothing to the anxiety which was now visible in every feature of Cynthia Saxemundham's face. She sat very still and spoke rather to herself than to her young secretary.

"She would never have dared to write like this unless——" The Duchess did not finish the sentence but rose abruptly and ran out of the room. The windows were all open and Muriel heard her humming a gay little tune as she moved about her bedroom just above. Muriel drew a breath of relief.

But though the Duchess returned to the study still humming, she was doing it absently and her face had quite lost its colour.

"Muriel," she said abruptly, "you remember that maid of mine, Nellie Webster, whom I dismissed for drinking?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what became of her?"

Muriel Chalmers shook her head.

"No. She never wrote for a character."

"She didn't need one," the Duchess returned dryly. "She went straight off to Lady Torrent. I have asked my housekeeper. She took with her something much more valuable than a character."

She sat down and smoked a cigarette and faced the position of affairs.

"Lady Torrent wishes to push that very ponderous husband of hers into the Cabinet, of which she hasn't a chance. Partly for that reason, partly because I have always refused to know the woman, she wishes to exhibit me in her house."

A sudden vision of Lady Torrent's good-looking little face, hard as iron under its pretence of *bonhomie* and vivacity, made the Duchess shiver. "She's a poisonous little devil too," she concluded lamely.

Muriel Chalmers, no less her friend than her secretary, turned to her aghast.

"Oh, Duchess, you are not going to go!" she exclaimed.

Cynthia Saxemundham smiled.

“No, my dear, I won’t. I can see the butler announcing me, the guests smirking, Lady Torrent hurrying forward, her smile of welcome struggling with a little snarl of triumph, and the captive Duchess trying to conceal her handcuffs and to be spoken of from that evening on as ‘Cynthia Saxemundham.’ No! No!—whatever happens!”

“But must anything happen?” Muriel Chalmers asked timidly. “Can’t I do something?”

Cynthia Saxemundham’s face lost its look of defiance, and softened.

“Yes, my dear, you can ring up the Guards’ Club and ask if Colonel Marchmont is there. If so, I should like to speak to him.”

In a few moments Muriel handed the instrument to the Duchess.

“He is on the line.”

The Duchess spoke three sentences:

“Henry, will you please come to luncheon with me to-day at half-past one? I shall be alone. I want your help.”

It was like her to hang up the receiver without waiting for an answer.

“He will help me out of my scrape,” she said, and she added, with a grimace which altogether failed to hide a very genuine regret, “but at the same time I shall lose for good something which I have treasured for a long while. On the whole—yes—damn Lady Torrent!”

III

Lieut.-Col. Henry Marchmont, with a long tail of decorations to his name, had just returned from an expedition in the deserts of Asia, and should consequently have furnished the Duchess with an hour’s amusement and interest. But nothing in the world at the moment could have done that. Cynthia Saxemundham ate a deplorable luncheon.

For she had to confess that she, the one woman on a pedestal, had once taken a lover. And she had to make the confession to a man whom she had very nearly married, who on her account had remained a bachelor and become a wanderer over the face of the earth, and who, besides, worshipped her as a snow-white martyr bearing up courageously in a very speckled world.

The task was not very pleasant for the Duchess of Saxemundham, but she managed to stumble through it over the coffee. She saw her friend’s face harden and a flush of anger deepen the tan of his cheeks.

“Who’s the man?” he asked bluntly as soon as she had finished.

“Yes, of course, he would ask that,” thought the Duchess, wringing her hands beneath the table. There was no escape for her, however. She mentioned a name beneath her breath. The Colonel grew redder than ever.

“That fellow!” he exploded. “Ronald Chepstowe! Cynthia! He’s hairy-heeled.”

“Oh, Henry, I never looked at his heels,” cried Cynthia in despair. “He was artistic, and sympathetic—and he played polo divinely—and it only lasted the tiniest bit of time—and I was most unhappy—it was just a year after I was married and things were most hateful—and”—she stole a glance at Henry Marchmont—“and you were miles away on the other side of the world—and, anyway, you put me up on a pedestal and wouldn’t have—and so it didn’t seem to matter whom so long as——”

“So long as it was someone,” interrupted Marchmont.

“Henry, you are hating me,” she cried.

“I am disappointed,” replied the Colonel gruffly, and he rose and looked for a long time out of the window.

The Duchess looked pathetically at his broad shoulders; they were rather attractive, without an ounce of spare flesh, she was suddenly diverted to recognize, but her own woes seized upon her again the next moment. She saw herself a white alabaster statue lying on the grass beside a pedestal, all in pieces. Would he put the pieces together again, or would he look out of the window for ever and ever?

He turned back at last.

“You wanted some help, Cynthia,” he said in a gentler voice.

“Yes. Your return to London was announced in *The Times* yesterday. So you are certain to be asked to a party by Lady Torrent.”

“That has already happened,” said Marchmont.

“Oh, you haven’t refused?” cried Cynthia, a new anxiety seizing her.

“Of course not,” said Marchmont. “I have accepted. I am dining with her to-morrow.”

Cynthia Saxemundham was relieved, of course; yes, undoubtedly she was relieved. But the answer caused her a little shock, nevertheless. It had almost the air of a desertion.

“Why?” she asked, in a rather chilly voice.

“Because I amuse myself there,” he answered. “People do. It’s an amusing house. I never could understand why you must go shouting all over London that you wouldn’t go inside her door.”

“She calls people whom she doesn’t know by their Christian names,” said the Duchess stubbornly.

“Well, you needn’t keep slapping her face all the time just for that.”

“Oh, Henry, I don’t slap her face,” cried Cynthia, and suddenly her fingers tingled. “But I should like to,” she added with a heartfelt fervour.

Colonel Marchmont looked at her curiously.

“What in the world has Lady Torrent done to you?” he asked.

Cynthia Saxemundham told him of the invitation which was a threat.

“She has got a hold over you, then?”

“Yes, Henry.”

“What sort of a hold?”

Cynthia Saxemundham trod very delicately, like a person on the edge of a quicksand.

“Do you remember that old lawyer, Sir Hugo Cope, who was such a good friend of mine when I was a child?”

Marchmont nodded.

“A wicked old devil,” said he.

“But such a darling,” replied Cynthia. “The day I was married, at the reception after the ceremony, he said to me, ‘My dear, I have given you a handsome present, but I am now going to give you three pieces of advice which are much more valuable. First, if you have to go and stay at an hotel, take care you always stay under your own name. Second, never keep any letters. Third, if in spite of one and two you still get into trouble, come and see me at once!’ ”

For the first time since the confession had begun Henry Marchmont laughed.

“Well?”

“The third piece of advice, of course, I can’t follow, because Sir Hugo’s dead—and also,” she added quickly, “because you are here. The first I certainly did—I mean I should have if—well, once I did—that time—in the Isle of Wight.”

The statement, confusing though it sounds, was clear as crystal to the Colonel. He nodded grimly.

“The second piece of advice is where I went wrong,” the Duchess resumed.

“You didn’t follow it?”

“No,” said the Duchess.

“You wrote some letters?”

“I kept some letters,” the Duchess corrected.

“From Hairy-heels?”

Cynthia Saxemundham in her predicament did not think it worth while to challenge the name. She passed on.

“And a maid whom I dismissed took them. The maid’s now in Lady Torrent’s service.”

Colonel Marchmont whistled.

“I see. Awkward, eh? Lady Torrent’s going to turn the screw a bit, eh? It’s not to be expected that she would do anything else. But what can I do about it, Cynthia?”

Cynthia Saxemundham looked at him with displeasure. She remembered that he never would wrap things up decently, and just do what he was wanted to do without asking what it was.

“You are going to amuse yourself at Emperor’s Gate to-morrow, aren’t you? . . . Well, then!”

Marchmont whistled again. Then he grinned with a cynical enjoyment, as he contemplated the wistful, slender angel in front of him.

“You want me to steal ’em, eh?”

Cynthia looked hurt.

“‘Steal’ isn’t the right word to use. Lady Torrent stole them. I want you to recover them.”

Colonel Marchmont’s grin broadened. He was, after all, being offered a form of sport which would certainly have its difficulties and might have some thrills.

“I’ll try. How many days have we got?”

“I am expected to dinner on Thursday week. Lady Torrent won’t move before then.”

“We have ten days, then. I’ll examine the ground to-morrow night,” said Colonel Marchmont. He shook hands with his hostess and amusement suddenly twinkled in his eyes. “Cynthia, what a fool you have made of me!” he cried.

He went out of the house, and Cynthia Saxemundham heard him laughing aloud to himself as he went down the steps. She in her turn began to giggle. After all, she was not so sure that she had lost so much by her confession as she had predicted to her secretary. On the whole she was inclined to like him better as her cynical partner in the chase after her vanishing reputation than as the blindfold adorer in front of the snow-white statue.

She found her secretary in the study.

“I think he’ll do it, Muriel,” she said gaily.

Muriel clasped her hands together in relief.

“What a thing it is to have a man like that on his knees to you,” she exclaimed.

“He has got up off his knees,” said the Duchess dryly.

IV

Colonel Marchmont found his quest so easy of accomplishment that he could not suppress an uneasy feeling that somewhere there must be a catch in it. He went to the big house in Emperor’s Gate early, and excusing himself to the butler on the ground that he had misread the time on his card of invitation, was shown into a quite empty drawing-room. His hostess had not yet come down from her dressing. On the other hand, she had left some evidence of how she had been engaged before she had gone up.

For lying open upon a couch was a large and luxurious illustrated volume bound in vellum and gold.

Marchmont glanced at the open page and laughed. Lady Torrent was altogether too easy an antagonist. For the book was *The Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, and the particular tale which lay open was that famous story of diplomacy and the police, “The Purloined Letter.” Colonel Marchmont knew it almost by heart: how the Minister D—— got the whip hand of a Royal Personage by stealing a letter, and how he concealed it successfully against the minutest investigations of the police by placing it in an obvious position under their very noses. These details flashed at once into his mind. The conclusion from these premises was as obvious to Marchmont as the hiding-place of the Purloined Letter had been to Poe’s analytical investigator, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin.

“Lady Torrent has taken a leaf out of this book,” he said to himself, “and the love-letters of Hairy-heels are not hidden in some locked cabinet or secret drawer where a clever burglar might find them, but in some

commonplace receptacle in a public place where no one would for an instant think of looking for them—the dining-room, for instance, or here.”

He began to move about the room, not touching anything, but taking note of everything. Hunting expeditions in thick jungles had not merely sharpened his vision, but given to it accuracy. His survey, therefore, was as complete as it was rapid.

There were between twenty and thirty of the incriminating letters. Clearly the ordinary little toys and porcelain boxes of a drawing-room would not contain them. There remained two other objects—a handsome onyx cigarette-box on a side-table by the fireplace, and another, a cheap affair of painted wood, fashioned in the shape of a tiny travelling-trunk and fastened with a trumpery lock. It needed just the inscription “A Present from Switzerland” to complete it.

“Now, what in the world is a thing like that doing here?” he asked.

It stood in the centre of a round rosewood table which was pushed into a corner of the room, and about it were arranged a miniature, a tortoise-shell paper-knife set in gold, some silver ashtrays, a second cigarette-box, this time of silver, and one or two small pieces of Battersea enamel. Marchmont took a seat on the opposite side of the room.

“She has followed the example of Monsieur D—— too faithfully,” he reasoned. “That wooden box is too commonplace, too inconsiderable. She has given herself away by it. If the letters are in this room at all, they are there.”

He was confirmed in his belief a moment afterwards when Lady Torrent on entering the room saw the book, and made a perceptible movement of annoyance. She closed it and put it away whilst Marchmont once more made his excuses, and her eyes glanced guiltily towards the Swiss wooden box and back again to his face.

“The great thing is that you are here,” she said, “and I hope that you are not going to run away after dinner; for a good many amusing people are coming in, and the garden will be lit up.”

Marchmont once more felt that the gods were smiling upon his adventure; for this room at odd moments in the evening would certainly be empty, and a throng of guests would make it difficult for his hostess afterwards to select the criminal.

He had no further conversation with her until after dinner, when she sat down beside him and, with the dreadful habit which ruled her out of the

company of great ladies, asked him eagerly what he had been doing, and, whilst he answered, gave her attention to the movements of her other guests.

“It must have been charming,” she said as he told of an encounter with a crocodile.

“It was indeed,” said he, and she rose abruptly and crossed the room; for two young people were standing by the rosewood table and bending over the miniature by the side of the Swiss box.

In a few minutes the lanterns began to glow in the garden, and the increasing throng began to seek the coolness of the summer night.

It was just a London garden—a square of lawn, a stone-paved path, a few lilac bushes and shrubs, and a border of flowers; but the lanterns were so arranged that a pleasant sense of great space was given, and the dingy walls which surrounded it were lost in shadows. Marchmont followed with the rest of the company, and noticed with satisfaction that from the house-door to the stone pavement four steps led down. The windows of the drawing-room were then well above the level of the garden, and Marchmont made sure that only from the far side of the lawn could the interior of the room be seen. He was safe, then, for Lady Torrent was busily engaged at the very bottom of the steps in receiving the fresh groups of people who had come on from theatres and dinners.

Marchmont slipped back into the house at a moment when Lady Torrent was surrounded.

The drawing-room was empty. In a second the wooden box was under his coat and he in the passage. His heart was beating now quickly enough to satisfy his thirst for adventure. He felt a mad desire to thrust his way out of the house just as he stood. But he must control himself to nonchalance; he must fetch his overcoat and his hat without haste. He must stand in front of the little counter, hiding the box beneath his arm, and wait his turn whilst other guests who were coming had their coats folded and packed away. It seemed a century before his were found and handed to him.

He sauntered upstairs again with his coat over his arm and was approached by the butler. But the butler only said:

“Shall I get you a taxi, sir?”

“I’ll pick one up,” Marchmont replied, and hoped that the man had not noticed his gasp of relief.

Twenty yards from the front door, he stopped a passing cab and gave the Duchess’s address.

“That’s that,” said he as he tucked the box away in the folds of his topcoat; and ten minutes later he produced it in the Duchess’s study.

“I think they’re in that box,” he said.

Cynthia Saxemundham seized upon it.

“It’s locked,” she said, and she shook the box. “There’s something inside. We must break it open.”

“No,” said Marchmont. “Any little key will open it; and if it’s not broken, we can return it through the post.”

A bunch of little keys was found in a drawer of the bureau. With eager fingers Cynthia Saxemundham tried them.

“Oh, I’ll never be such a fool again,” she said, and as she tried the third key the lock yielded, the lid flew open.

Cynthia uttered a little cry of delight. A sheaf of letters tied up in a carefully sealed ribbon met her gaze.

“Yes, they are here, untampered with,” she cried, and she turned the box upside down and shook them out on to the table.

But she shook something else out too, something which rattled, and both of them stared at it, shocked out of all their glee. Under the letters at the bottom of the box had lain a string of pearls. It was now on the top of them on the table, milkily gleaming—dangerous to both of them as some white adder.

Cynthia for the moment understood only the embarrassment of finding the pearls there.

“They are valuable—they must be returned, of course,” she said; but she looked up and saw Marchmont staring at her with a look of consternation in his eyes.

“It’s a trap, you see, Cynthia,” he said, “and I have walked straight into it.”

“A trap?”

“Yes. I found it so ridiculously easy to locate your letters. I was meant to find it easy. Lady Torrent knows I am your friend. She expected me to come early. The open volume of Poe, her annoyance when she found it open, her quick glances towards the box, her anxiety lest anyone should touch it—they were all meant for me, all meant to persuade me to do just what I did, slip the box under my coat and bolt with it. I am a real thief now, you see. I have stolen her necklace. I can be arrested, tried, imprisoned.”

“No!” cried Cynthia, “I have only to come forward and explain——”

“Exactly—that’s what she’s after; that you should explain in the witness-box before a crowded court that you had sent me to recover the letters which had passed between you and your lover. She’s out for blood, Cynthia. She doesn’t want you in her house on Thursday week. She wants you smashed for good and all.”

Cynthia Saxemundham threw up her hands in the air.

“The impudence of the woman!” she cried scornfully.

“Yes, that won’t help us,” returned Marchmont.

Cynthia’s thoughts took another direction.

“She daren’t risk it! She would have to admit that she was blackmailing me to come and dine with her.”

Colonel Marchmont shook his head gloomily.

“Would that stop her?” he asked. “There are lots of women who, once they see red, wouldn’t mind coming an almighty crash if they could bring their enemy down with them.”

“Enemy!” Cynthia exclaimed. It was doing altogether too much honour to Lady Torrent to allow that she could consider the Duchess of Saxemundham as her enemy. She fingered the gleaming necklace. “Couldn’t you go back now and quietly return it?”

“She has laid her plans so thoroughly, that she must have foreseen that I might try to do that,” Marchmont answered. “I am willing to bet that there’s a policeman already waiting outside the house. I should never be allowed to enter the house. I should be arrested in the street with the damned thing in my pocket.”

“Anyway, Henry,” said the Duchess stubbornly, “I am not going to let you go to prison on my account.”

“And I’m not going to let you go into the witness-box,” he returned. “So there we are!”

There they were indeed. They sat in a miserable silence, each one casting about vainly for an escape from their predicament, when they heard a car stop at the door, and a latchkey turn in the lock.

“Muriel!” said Cynthia Saxemundham. “There’s no reason why she should see these things.”

She threw the letters into the grate and set fire to them.

“Muriel,” said Marchmont in quite a different note. He went to the door of the room and opened it.

Muriel Chalmers, in an evening gown, was already half-way up the stairs. She turned and asked:

“Do you want me?”

“Badly,” said the Colonel.

Muriel Chalmers ran down again eagerly. She was to be allowed to help after all.

“What can I do?” she asked.

The letters were blazing and curling up and turning black, while the Duchess on her knees beat them into tattered fragments with the poker. The necklace and the wooden box still stood upon the table.

“Let’s consider,” said Marchmont.

The three of them sat about the table.

“Do you know Lady Torrent?” he asked of Muriel.

“No.”

“But you have written to her?”

“I have answered invitations.”

“In your own name?”

“No.”

Here the Duchess interrupted. She saw the way out too, and her face was alight.

“Muriel can take a false name.”

“No,” Marchmont expostulated. “This time we’ll remember Sir Hugo’s advice. Let her go in her own!” He turned again to Muriel Chalmers. “Do you know really well any of these people?” and he recited the names of the guests at Lady Torrent’s party.

In a moment or two Muriel stopped him.

“Yes, Mrs. Daventry. She’s a friend of mine.”

“Good!”

Marchmont looked at the clock. The hands pointed to midnight. The party at Emperor’s Gate would be in full swing. Muriel was to take the box and the necklace and drive to the house. She would be shown upstairs to leave her cloak. She was to tuck the box and the necklace away somewhere—anywhere—in the room into which she was shown. She was to come down again. She was to give her real name to the butler, who would lead her into the garden. If Lady Torrent was still at her post she was to say boldly

that Mrs. Daventry had asked her to join her there. If Lady Torrent wasn't still on duty, then Muriel must find Mrs. Daventry for herself, and persuade her to say that she had asked Muriel to join her.

"Will she do that, without asking you questions?" Marchmont asked.

"Certainly."

"Otherwise I'll give you a note to her. For I know her very well myself," said the Duchess, beginning to rise from her chair.

But once more Henry Marchmont interposed.

"No, for heaven's sake! No letters! Let's stick to Sir Hugo. The only real danger is that Muriel may be presented to Lady Torrent when she is actually talking to Mrs. Daventry. But we must leave it to her to make the best of it."

That catastrophe, however, did not occur. Muriel drove off to Emperor's Gate in a taxi. She was shown upstairs to an empty room heaped with cloaks. She found a knee-hole writing-table in a bay-window, and into the bottom drawer on the left-hand side she thrust the box with the necklace. Coming downstairs, she gave her name to the butler and followed him into the garden. The butler looked round the dim garden, with its groups of people mingling and changing like a kaleidoscope.

"Her ladyship is, I think, in the supper-room," he said.

"I'll find her, then, sooner or later," said Muriel lightly, and she sped across the lawn. For she had seen Mrs. Daventry shaking hands with a man as though she was bidding him farewell.

"You asked me to join you here," said Muriel, with determination.

"I did, no doubt," answered Mrs. Daventry, who was not easily surprised; "but I am going away now."

"That is all to the good," said Muriel; and five minutes later she had left the house in Mrs. Daventry's motor-car.

Thus the restitution was made, and not a soul in Lady Torrent's establishment was ever aware that the Duchess of Saxemundham's secretary had been present that night as an uninvited guest.

But Lieut.-Colonel Henry Marchmont, with a tail of decorations at the end of his name, was arrested the next morning for the theft of a valuable pearl necklace.

He was brought before the Chief Magistrate at Bow Street. Lady Torrent had the most convincing story to tell.

“I wore my pearls in the afternoon,” she said, “and whilst I was having tea the clasp got loose and the pearls dropped from my neck on to the floor. I picked them up and placed them in a little wooden box on the table, which I locked. I meant to take the box upstairs when I went up to dress, but some friends came in and made me late. I ran upstairs in a hurry, forgetting about the box. When I descended, Colonel Marchmont was in the room. I told him of my misadventure whilst we were waiting for the other guests. Later on, when we were all in the garden, he was seen by two of my servants to enter the drawing-room. One of them watched him through the crack of the door and saw him with the box under his coat. He left the house immediately afterwards.”

Lady Torrent had her witnesses at hand, the friends who had kept her late in the afternoon and the two servants. Colonel Marchmont, on the other hand, disappointed his friends. He contented himself with reserving his defence. He was accordingly committed for trial at the next Old Bailey Sessions, which were to take place in a week, and admitted to bail.

During that week, of course, the scandal was immense and pleasurable. A season otherwise unremarkable received a tremendous fillip. The applications for seats at the trial made to Judges, High Sheriffs, Under-Sheriffs, Barristers and Cabinet Ministers, exceeded the applications made to the management at Covent Garden when Madame Jeritza was to sing.

Meanwhile Lady Torrent sat in her house in Emperor’s Gate, dramatising the wonderful moments when the Duchess of Saxemundham would take her stand in the witness-box and admit in low and broken tones that she had sent Colonel Marchmont to recover the compromising letters of her lover. For the hundredth time she reviewed her own position. She would be recalled to the witness-box.

“Letters? Certainly the Duchess’s love-letters were in the box too. I didn’t mention them, for the Duchess’s sake. How did I come to have them? I took them from a maid who had left the Duchess’s service and clearly meant to use them for blackmail. I expected the Duchess to dine with me on Thursday week, and I kept them locked in the box in order to return them to her with my own hand. Of course, if the love-letters were what Colonel Marchmont was after, let him return my necklace and I shall be happy to withdraw the charge against him.”

Her attitude would be incontestably magnanimous; and she would be repaid—how she would be repaid!—for twenty years of trying to become the real thing and not quite becoming it, for all her rebuffs, those witticisms at her expense, the little slaps in the face which she was going to return with

one resounding smack which would bowl the beautiful idol of the day altogether off her pedestal and dismiss her to the obscurity of her island in the Hebrides.

Thus rejoicing, on the third day before the trial, Lady Torrent opened by chance the lowest drawer in the left-hand side of her knee-hole writing-table; and sat like one turned into stone, and felt as cold as stone.

“Of course, I have been thinking of it too much,” she whispered to herself. “I see that box everywhere.”

But she could not convince herself by that argument. She dived for the box. It was real. It was locked. She shook it. Something rattled inside of it. She fetched the key and unlocked it. Her pearl necklace gleamed at her, but the letters were gone. She had been outwitted after all.

There was really only one course for Lady Torrent to take, to call for her motor-car, drive to her solicitor, and withdraw the charge of theft in terms as little humiliating as possible. But she could not do it. The triumph so earnestly prayed for—yes, she had dared to pray for it on her knees—must not be lost.

She consulted no one. She looked at her clock. It was three o’clock. She burnt the box, wrapped up the necklace, slipped on a cloche hat which came well down over her eyes, flung some furs about her shoulders, took a cab from the corner of the street to Victoria Station, travelled by the first available train to Brighton, pawned the necklace at a small jeweller’s in the King’s Road, and was back again at Emperor’s Gate in time to sit down to dinner with her husband.

“Three more days, my dear,” he said, looking at her tired face, “and this trial will be over, and we can get away to Switzerland for a holiday and a rest!”

“Yes, that will be pleasant,” she said. She added, with a timid glance: “Do you know, I think I can guess what Colonel Marchmont’s defence will be. He will say that the necklace is mislaid somewhere in the house.”

Sir William Torrent leaned back in his chair and blew out his lips, a sign with him of serious reflection.

“I hadn’t thought of that. We ought to have the house searched in the presence of witnesses; for that would be a suggestion, of course, that you had stolen it yourself to pay some secret debt,” he said, and he saw her face turn as white as the tablecloth.

A gasp of relief broke from her. She was thinking, “What a stroke of luck that I found the necklace to-day.”

While the knowledge of the shipwreck she had escaped was still overwhelmingly new to her, there came a knocking upon the door. A most polite inspector of police had come to make sure that the necklace had been nowhere mislaid.

“The positions in the world of yourself and Colonel Marchmont make this, of course, a most serious case, my lady,” he explained. “It is the intention of the Crown to take over the prosecution.”

The inspector’s statement troubled and even frightened Lady Torrent. This was a private feud between herself and the Duchess of Saxemundham. She had not calculated that since she had chosen to fight it out in the public courts, with a charge of theft against a third person as her weapon, the Crown would inevitably interfere.

Even when the inspector had departed satisfied that the necklace was not in the house, she was not altogether at her ease. She almost confided the truth to her husband. She began, and hesitated, and refrained; and this probably was the most fatal of all her mistakes in the affair.

For he was proud of the necklace. He had bought the pearls one by one, he had selected the design of the clasp, and when he went into the witness-box he was able to give so complete a description of it that any attempt to dispose of it undetected was quite out of possibility.

The little jeweller in the King’s Road read the description in his evening paper at Brighton. Now, he amongst jewellers was as Lady Torrent among Duchesses of Saxemundham. He too wanted prestige and recognition and the very best customers at his establishment; and here was his opportunity.

The next morning he tucked the necklace into his pocket, travelled up to London, and sent his name and the nature of his evidence in to the counsel for the defence.

VI

Toby Manister gave a glowing account of the sensation in court when, standing in the witness-box, he identified Lady Torrent as the woman who had pawned the necklace; of the modest demeanour of Colonel Marchmont; and of the collapse of Lady Torrent.

“But from what I could gather,” he added, “the Torrents are really much happier in their villa near Dieppe than they ever were while they were climbing. And as for the Duchess of Saxemundham, though she had lost the adoration of her Colonel, she received her compensations too; for the pair of them remained on the most affectionate terms for many years, and were

often to be seen dining together at Claridge's. Thus, as you will see, everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

WAR NOTES

THE two following sketches were written very shortly after the war ended. Of one I knew; of the other I was informed; and it seemed to me that both occurrences were sufficiently striking to be worth preserving.

Mata Hari

The Great War dispelled many illusions; amongst them that of the beautiful spy. It is the brutal truth that most of the regular women agents were of no use at all. There were upon our side, and no doubt upon the German side too, devoted women in a position to give real help, who did give it at great risk, and the names of only a few of these will ever be known. But the women of the restaurants and the continental resorts, the last word in clothes and sinuous grace, few though they were, did not really pay for their keep. The most notorious of them was no doubt the half-breed Javanese dancer Mata Hari. Yet the one startling feature of her career, and her only notable achievement, was the manner of her death.

Her real name was Margaret Gertrude Zeller. Born of a Dutch father and a Javanese mother, she had no doubt in her youth a kind of exotic beauty which appeals more to the Latin races than to the Anglo-Saxon. Certainly, though she danced in London, she made no success of it. Her triumphs, both on the stage and in her multitudinous affairs of the heart, were won upon the more favourable battle-ground of Paris. There the skin which we call yellow, would be more charmingly described as amber. There too, when youth has passed, valuable jewellery, beautiful dresses, and chic, plus a reputation for high affairs of love, will keep a star bright with its original lustre. Post-war French novelists have got to work upon her, idealizing both her beauty and her character and building up by their prose a sentimental monument to her memory. *La Chèvre aux Pieds d'Or* makes her out a pretty child with an overwhelming terror of death and poverty. *Les Défaitistes* puts her on the level of the great Hetairæ of Greece. But the sentimentalism of the French is

a mere veneer upon the surface of the natures. When it comes to serious affairs no race is more practical, no race can be harder, and Mata Hari was treated in the end with the practical justice which she deserved. France gave to her her prestige, both as a dancer and as a harlot, covered her with jewels, and set her up in a little clandestine house in Passy; and in return for these favours she used her best efforts to ruin France for cash and did actually ruin one high official of that country, from whom in vain she endeavoured to extract information.

Mata Hari had one particular qualification for the work of a secret agent of Germany. Her profession, and the *réclame* she had acquired in it, made journeys to the neutral capitals of Europe natural, ordinary events. She was thus in a position, if she obtained information or documents of real value in Paris, to pass them on at first hand to Chiefs of German Espionage abroad. But as a matter of fact her information was futile; and her indiscretions glaring. It was, indeed, to her indiscretions that she owed her trial and execution.

Thus, in the summer of 1915, she was dancing in Madrid and at the same time associating far too openly with members of the very important branch of the German Secret Service established there under the German Naval, and the German Military, attaché. The war had been in progress a year and there is little doubt that at this time the German Service had a fairly direct channel of communication with Berlin, across a strip of French railway from Port-Bou and through Switzerland. At the close of her engagement at Madrid, Mata Hari took ship for Holland on her way to Germany. By this time suspicions, entertained for some months, had gathered strength. Her ship was brought into Falmouth, and she herself escorted to London; where she had the amazing assurance to declare to Sir Basil Thomson, then Chief of the C.I.D., that she was indeed a spy, but a spy of France. She carried, however, nothing incriminating; she had not intended to land in England; and there was no definite evidence. It was not reasonable, therefore, to detain her. On the other hand, it would have been foolish to have helped to forward her on to Berlin; though the probability is that she was aware of the suspicions she had provoked, was thoroughly shaken, and was running to Germany for a refuge as well as for her reward. A compromise accordingly was reached. She was warned, with the utmost kindness, that her activities were known and she was sent back to Spain.

Upon her return to Madrid her position became tragic. She was frightened and she had no money. Like so many of her class, especially those who in their youth were poor, she had lived in a whirlpool of extravagance. Nothing was put by for the inevitable rainy day. At Madrid

she applied for sufficient money to enable her to live out of France until the end of the war. But the Germans had no money for her either—or at all events yet. There was one last service to be fulfilled—one last journey to be made, and of all places, to Paris. Pressed for money, harried by fear, with the warning of Scotland Yard still in her ears, this unhappy creature set off by the train for France. She was searched, of course, at the French frontier town of Hendaye and some papers were found upon her. It is significant that the papers incriminated her fatally—and yet were of no real importance. The German Secret Service had little use for agents who had failed them and it is incredible that they should have imagined for an instant that Mata Hari carrying treasonable documents into France could have escaped detection. She was brought to Paris, condemned on July 25th, 1916, and executed on October 15th.

She is not a case for pity or sympathy. I can perfectly understand admiration and sympathy for a woman running grave risks for the sake of her own country, but when a great war is on foot, involving the fortunes of big nations and the lives and welfare of millions of individual people, the neutrals should keep quiet. It is not their affair, and if for the sake of cash they choose to meddle, they deserve the fate which the laws of nations assign for such crimes. The career of Mata Hari would be nothing but a sordid and commonplace incident but for her one bizarre and magnificent moment in the actual hour of her death.

She was driven out to Vincennes in the grey of an October morning. She had dressed herself with great care—a long chinchilla coat, a large hat, long gloves and her best suède shoes and stockings. Upon the journey she betrayed to the officer who was in the carriage with her no sign of fear. From the spot where the motor-car stopped to the centre of the parade ground where the execution post was fixed was some little distance. The file of soldiers with loaded rifles was already drawn up. The ground was wet and muddy. Mata Hari picked her way carefully and daintily over the ground, avoiding the pools as if she was afraid of soiling her shoes. When she got to the post the officer in charge of the file proposed to tie her up to it, but she refused. The officer, who was impressed by her courage, pleaded with her that it was the wisest thing to do. Tied up to the post it was certain that she would not be hurt, while if she remained quite free she might flinch or fall at the last moment, and her death not be as immediate as it ought to be. She was insistent, however, that she would not move. The officer then produced a folded handkerchief and proposed to blindfold her eyes, but Mata Hari again refused. The officer once more argued with her: she would know nothing about the execution if he bound her eyes. But she still refused, and

since she made a point of the indignity of these precautions the officer in view of her bravery did not insist. She stood erect and quiet against the post whilst the officer gave his orders, and as the rifles of the firing-party were presented she suddenly flung back her chinchilla coat, showed her slender figure stark naked to the tops of her stockings, raised her fingers to her lips and blew a kiss at the soldiers. She fell dead the next instant. It was the death of a poor spy but a great cocotte.

The Cruise of the "Virgen del Socorro"

Amongst the minor adventures of the war, none was more gallant than the cruise of the *Virgen del Socorro*. To find its equal in audacity, one must go back to the clippers which in the North and South War of America ran—or tried to run—the blockade into Charleston. The facts are as follows:

During the round-up of the German troops in the Cameroons, certain bodies of them slipped across the border into Spanish Guinea and there laid down their arms. These men with the consent of the Allies were transported to Spain and interned in two camps, one at Pampluna and the other at the Northern Alcala. The officers were put upon parole and the private soldiers remained under the discipline of their officers. Lord Tennyson's epigram, however, is as applicable to the German soldier as it was to Lancelot.

"His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true."

It was the German's honour all through the war to break his word of honour if by so doing he could serve his country. It was not long, therefore, before plans of escape began to be concerted.

So far as the mere getting away from the camps was concerned very little difficulty was anticipated. Spanish sympathies were curiously divided during the first years of the war. What happened afterwards I do not know. I was transferred from the region of the Western Mediterranean in the spring of 1917 to a quite other part of the world. But in the first year this division existed. The captains of the ports and the navy on the one hand were notoriously pro-German. The chiefs of police on the other hand were for the most part in favour of the Allies. The army itself was rent by its internal dissensions. Its organization was inefficient, promotion was slow and went more by political favour than by military capacity; an appalling corruption had played havoc with its stores and ammunition; from General to private soldier, it knew as one man that it could take no distinguished part on either side of a European war; and its high national pride forbade it to take any

other. Its contending sections were looking for support for their different policies now to the Allies, now to Germany, both of which sides were for the moment sufficiently occupied. The Roman Catholic Church in Spain, with the exception of one or two outstanding figures like the Archbishop of Tarragona, was violent in its hope that the German cause, with all that it meant in the Rule of Authority and the relegation, perhaps for centuries, of popular control, would quickly prevail.

This division of opinion inevitably reacted upon the vigilance of the supervision supposed to be maintained by the Spanish authorities at the two camps of Pampluna and Alcala. The officers, for instance, got leave of absence without the slightest difficulty, and I saw parties of them from Pampluna in the restaurants of Barcelona and at the sea-coast resorts during the summer months, such as Arenys del Mar. Their difficulties, therefore, lay not in their disappearance from their camps, but in their subsequent escape from the coast of Spain and the ubiquity of the British patrols upon the high seas. A few secured false passports, and embarking on Spanish liners to South America, got quite as far as Gibraltar—which, according to the classic phrase, is another story. Captain Carl Koch, however, a reservist of the German Colonial Army at Pampluna, and Sergeant-major Gratschus at Alcala, worked out a likelier and bolder scheme. There were lying at that time in the harbour at Vigo two large German liners which had run into that neutral port for refuge upon the outbreak of war. These ships had their full crews and captains aboard. In fact, in every big or little port in Spain you would come across perhaps a small German sailing-ship, perhaps a cargo boat of 9,000 tons, perhaps a tramp steamer, and here and there a liner tied up against the quay, their fires out, waiting for the war to end. Nothing could have been more galling to these crews than to see English and French ships run in and out of the harbours on the ordinary business of commerce, and no stories of the damage done by the submarines, however startling, could have compensated them for their inactivity. Red-letter days no doubt they had. I remember myself putting into the harbour of Valencia the day after Warsaw fell and seeing two big German ships dressed in flags as if for a review. And another red-letter day was now to come for the liners at Vigo.

Through the agency of a young Spaniard a small felucca named *La Virgen del Socorro* was bought at Corunna and sailed round to Vigo Harbour, where it was tied up alongside between the German ships, and secretly provisioned from their stores. Its presence there did not escape the notice of Allied observers, but they had no official position which would entitle them to interfere; and the little ship was so small, so apparently useless for any purpose of war, that protest against its position alongside the

liners would have only raised difficulties for the Allied services. Its cost was only £400, even in those days when anything which could masquerade as a sea-going ship commanded a fabulous price. No doubt too, the Port Authorities gave to the *Virgen del Socorro* their kindest inattention. Meanwhile, by car and by train, non-commissioned officers from Pampluna and Alcala began to slip into Vigo and hide themselves on the German liners; and in the dusk of the afternoon of October 7th this little felucca, crowded up with the best part of twenty soldiers, tacked out between the headlands of the harbour and plunged gallantly out into the storms of the Bay of Biscay.

The *Virgen del Socorro* had not even a motor. She was a tiny, decked sailing-boat, low in the water, and rigged with a great lateen sail, such as is used about the coast of Spain for fishing. She ran into bad weather immediately, and the life of these soldiers crowded together on board this nutshell and tossed from billow to billow in the welter of the Bay of Biscay during the equinoctial storms must have been hideous in its discomfort. Meanwhile the news of this ship's departure had been spread abroad, and cost us in the Western Mediterranean a great deal of anxiety.

The reason for our anxiety was this. The French were at that time holding their huge zone of Morocco—its prosperity still only in the bud—with a good deal less than the minimum of troops required. They were holding it by the prestige of their arms and the wisdom of their great Governor-General, le Maréchal Lyautey. They held it by continuing their great harbour works at Casablanca, and the extension of their high roads through Mequinez and Fez across the breadth of the country to the frontier of Algiers, as though no ruinous and devastating war were in progress at all. They held it too by their policy and their administration. Step by step they had brought peace and security into Morocco. The process was, first the sharp lesson, then the utmost goodwill, then the handing over of local and municipal administration to the tribesmen and sheiks under the advice of French administrators. Left to herself France would have felt herself established securely in Morocco: but of course she was not left to herself. For just to the north of her ran the Spanish Zone with its great tracts unoccupied and ungoverned. These tracts were in the hands of wild and bellicose tribesmen, in whom Germany found an easy weapon. A German named Bartels, who was in the Consular Service in Morocco at the outbreak of war, managed to escape into this Spanish Zone, and received every month some twelve or thirteen thousand pounds through Tetuan and Melilla from German sources at Seville, without any real hindrance from the Spanish authorities. With this large sum of money Bartels collected and armed two

thousand men from the surrounding tribes. He built himself a fortified camp close upon the borders of French Morocco, and whenever Monsieur le Maréchal Lyautey was in a position by training Moorish troops to send reinforcements into France for the Western front, Bartels and his tribesmen would boil over the frontier line, burn, destroy, levy war and compel the retention in Morocco of the troops which should have been fighting in France. These troops would then be run up country to deal with Bartels, but long before they could reach him he and his men had hopped back over the border into the Spanish Zone, and the French were powerless to punish them or put an end to this astute form of warfare. At a later date Bartels' camp was destroyed, his men scattered, and his command extinguished by the use of aeroplanes, which, bombing him and the crops which surrounded his camp, drove him from refuge to refuge, until the tribesmen themselves found him too dangerous and embarrassing a neighbour. But at the time when the *Virgen del Socorro* put out to sea, Bartels was at the height of his strength.

On the south of the French Zone too, trouble of another kind was brewing. The Sus country beyond the Atlas range of mountains had never acknowledged the suzerainty of the Sultan any more than had the Riffs; and a powerful chieftain of the Sus country, El Hiba, had been bribed with promises to raise a flag of revolt against the Sultan on behalf of Germany. The Sultan, it must be remembered, had declared war himself on the side of the Allies and was at this time nominally a belligerent.

Messages from El Hiba for Germany had been intercepted praying above all for two particular things, arms and ammunition for one, and German non-commissioned officers for the other. That arms and ammunition had been already landed we had some sort of evidence. That an attempt was being made to land more we knew, for a French patrolship had picked up in the Atlantic close to the Sus coast a raft, stacked with German rifles and cartridges, which had been clearly dropped according to plan by a passing ship.

It will be seen, therefore, that our anxiety as to the destination of the *Virgen del Socorro* was justified. For there were on board of her a sufficient number of non-commissioned officers with a record of war-service to be of the utmost value to El Hiba and of the utmost annoyance to France. The Sus country also was much the most likely spot for this felucca with its overload of men and its low freeboard to make for. She would be running fairly close to land the whole time, and the farther south she went the better weather she would get. The most careful patrol therefore was established on the waters along the Atlantic coast of North Africa; but day after day passed and no big

lateen sail was seen swinging down to the south, and no capture was reported. After some weeks we came to the conclusion that the *Virgen del Socorro* had either sunk in a gale or had somehow managed to slip through our patrol and reach her destination. Then suddenly seven weeks later, towards the end of December, a message came over the wires that a Spanish felucca called the *Virgen del Socorro* had been captured off Deal in the Downs at 3.30 on a foggy December afternoon when night had already begun to fall. She had managed somehow to survive the storms in the Bay of Biscay. On coming out of the Bay she had set her course for the west of Ireland, meaning to round the north of Scotland and make for the coast of Norway. But whilst she was still hundreds of miles to the south of Ireland, she ran into the worst gale she had encountered; and buffeted by those mountainous seas she lost her rudder. Captain Koch and his gallant little company somehow managed to rig up a jury rudder, but it was no longer possible for them to hope to round Cape Wrath. Also their provisions were running short, and they could, of course, put in nowhere to get a fresh supply. They turned and drove eastwards before the gale. They were almost wrecked upon the Scilly Isles, but the weather taking up, and the wind abating, they slipped by the Longships Lighthouse and boldly entered the English Channel, jury rudder, lateen sail, and all. The felucca ran past Falmouth, past Bolt Head, across the West Bay to Portland Bill, through St. Albans Race and round the Isle of Wight; past Dover; and she was never stopped.

It would seem incredible that a ship with so foreign a rig could possibly pass through narrow seas guarded as were the seas of the English Channel in those days, without being held up and inspected. But she kept to the traffic-route and moved on normally with the rest of the ships to the Downs, where all were rounded up and examined.

But even then the *Virgen del Socorro* might have slipped through the net. It was growing dark, the weather was foggy, the month was December. Had Captain Koch so timed his sailing upon that last day as to arrive at the South Foreland Lighthouse an hour and a half later than he did, there was a chance for him. Twelve hours later he would have been lost from view in the North Sea. In eighteen hours he might actually have landed his men on a friendly, if not his native, shore. He made a second mistake which was fatal to his chance. Either to escape examination, or in ignorance of the regulations, he ran out of the traffic-route and steered eastward of the Goodwin Sands. He was pounced upon at once by the drifters *Paramount* and *Present Help*.

Thus the adventurous voyage ended. With soldiers where there should have been sailors, with amateur navigators on a little ship which nearly

foundered a hundred times, short of food, drenched to the skin, day and night, the men from Pampluna and Alcala were within an inch of success. And there was, I think, even at that bitter moment of war, a sort of regret amongst English sailors that so gallant an exploit had miscarried.

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.

[The end of *Dilemmas* by A. E. W. (Alfred Edward Woodley) Mason]