

***The Luck Shop***

***Evelyn Winch***

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## ROMANCE

The “Luck Shop,” that little shop of magic, had become the vogue for the moment, the rendezvous for smart Mayfair and a home from home for superstitious Belgravia. In the narrow room behind the shop, Madame Fiona, formerly a dancer of international fame, told fortunes, and Pennie (short for Pennsylvania) Cummin secured a post as her assistant. Pennie finds herself the unwilling participant in strange rites, but Michael Kerr comes to rescue her from her unfortunate plight. Miss Evelyn Winch has written a gripping romance which will enthrall her readers.

*By the Same Author*

AT SECOND SIGHT  
THE GIRL IN THE FLAT  
ENEMY’S KISS

EVELYN WINCH

*The Luck Shop*

A ROMANTIC  
NOVEL

COLLINS  
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# The Luck Shop

## CHAPTER ONE

### LUCK FOR SALE

Pennie Cummin held her paper up high to avoid the fixed stare of the young man opposite.

She glanced sideways at her watch: another hour yet getting into London! If only she'd waited—if only she'd not been in such a desperate hurry to leave home—if only there had been a corridor, so that she could get help! But this was an extra train, put hurriedly together to relieve the strain of snowbound traffic up from Folkestone, and the carriages were old. Non-stop to Victoria. Another *hour*. . . .

Outside, the night was black and cold and windy, making the soot-scented warmth of a third-class compartment seem almost comfortable by comparison: the silence was only intensified by the crisp rustle of her newspaper and the regular clack-clackety-clack of the train passing over points. Under the edge of the paper she could see his knees in green plus-fours, his legs in woollen stockings, his hands, very red and locked together hard, so that the knotted knuckles stood out white. She tried to look away from them and kept looking back.

Had he moved?

A haggard young man, hardly more than a boy, surely under twenty, he had thick bright gold hair, bloodshot blue eyes and an unshaven chin; his face was chalky white, there were blue hollows under his eyes, and a purple bruise ran diagonally across his big uneven nose. His expensive green plus-fours were sodden, and gave out the peaty odour of wet tweed. He had no hat, and his only luggage seemed to be that wicked little flat revolver. . . .

He'd tried to hide it hurriedly when Pennie got into the carriage, but she had seen it all the same; it was in his pocket now. Taken with his hunted look, his jerky, nervous movements and those brooding bloodshot eyes he had made her think at first of Dillinger, another youthful harmless-looking man. But now, after an hour and a half, she guessed the truth.

Her round, serious mouth was puckered, her grey eyes thoughtful. A quiet, shy girl, slight and long-limbed, Pennie (whose full name was Pennsylvania) inherited her soft brown hair, little bird-like nose and clear, pale face from Quaker ancestors—a face not beautiful but sharply sweet, refreshing as an English apple. And now some remnant of a Quaker conscience was urging her to do her duty.

The boy's hands parted, one was going to his coat pocket. . . .

The paper crumpled suddenly. Pennie stood up. He had his hand half-out, but thrust it back hard. He looked up at her sullenly, then turned away. Shy with strangers, rarely impulsive, Pennie hesitated, gathering her courage. At the same instant he spoke in a hoarse, deep croak.

“I say, I hope you don't mind my asking, but—are you going up to London?”

“Yes, of course.” She stared at him.

“Would it be a frightful bother if I asked you to post a letter?”

His eyes were imploring now, as piteous as a stray dog's—it was impossible to refuse.

“No. Of course not. But—this is non-stop to Victoria, you know.”

“I know. But it—it's frightfully urgent. It must catch the post to-night and—I shan't have time.” He mumbled the words in a tremendous hurry, feeling about in his pockets as he spoke.

Pennie watched him wonderingly. Had she been mistaken? His hands were shaking, there were feverish spots of pink on his thin cheeks, he was certainly wet through. With a year's hospital training behind her, Pennie felt sure that the hoarse croaking voice and heavy breathing meant congestion of the lungs. If his clothes had been less expensive, she might have guessed that he had been sleeping out; his cuffs were dirty, his collar and silk tie one stringy ruin. She watched him anxiously while he produced the dog's-eared mass of papers which every man seems to conceal about him; he was trembling so much that, sorting them, he scattered them on the floor.

“Let me——” She slid to her knees, careless of her best blue coat. All her fear was gone; she only felt sorry for him as he stooped, grabbing wildly for his papers. She gathered them up with long, cool fingers.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, thanks.” He found the letter, a bulky one, stamped and addressed. She put it in her bag. “You—you won’t forget it?”

“No, of course I won’t.” She promised soothingly. Bold now, added, “You know, I’m a hospital nurse——” Her strict conscience dictated, “At least, I’ve been a probationer—and I hope you won’t think I’m rude if I say that you ought to see a doctor? You’ve a bad cold and in those clothes——”

He laughed harshly.

“I’m all right.”

“You’re *not!*” Pennie was roused now. “You look very feverish.”

“It’s nothing . . . a cold . . .”

“It’s not.” Her chin went up in the air; they had been a stiff-necked crew, those Quaker ancestors. She said decisively, “You’re going to let me take your temperature.”

There was a thermometer inside her cheap suitcase up on the rack; she got it out, shook it, and held it out. He yielded with a little rueful smile which made him look about fifteen. She put one hand on his wrist, looked at her watch and counted. Thirty seconds.

“It’s awfully good of you to worry, but—honestly, I’m all right.”

One hundred and three point seven. Pennie slid the thermometer into its case.

“You’re ill and you ought to be in hospital. I’m going to stop the train.”

“Good Lord, no!” He jumped for her outstretched arm fiercely, dragging it down. “Really—I—I couldn’t. I’ve important business—in—I’ve got to catch a train to Scotland to-night.”

“You’re not fit to travel.”

“I can’t help that. I’ve got to.”

Forced to it, she told him bluntly, “You’re risking your life, sitting about in those wet clothes.”

He smiled weakly.

“I can’t very well change, can I? Honestly, don’t worry. I’ll be all right.”

She bit her lip; said with the motherly wisdom of nineteen and a half, “Even if your business is important, it won’t do you much good to die of pneumonia, will it?”

He burst into a hoot of hoarse laughter, so loud and hysterical that Pennie thought for a moment that he was in delirium.

“Do stop! Listen,” she begged. “I’ve some aspirin here. If I give you two, will you take them?”

He stopped laughing as suddenly as he had begun.

“Thanks. That’s awfully good of you.”

She said, as she might have done to a young brother, “I wish you’d let me pull that cord!”

“No . . .”

Pennie, rummaging in her case, found the bottle and her thick dressing-gown, cut, man’s-shape, out of fluffy blue wool.

“Take your coat off, then, and put this on.”

He shook his head, choking down the dry aspirin.

“Why not?” she urged. “I tell you, this is non-stop. There’s no one here to mind. You must get warm.”

“Honestly, I don’t need it.”

Pennie sighed; his teeth were chattering, his lips looked blue. She put the dressing-gown about his shoulders.

“If I pull the shade down, can you sleep?” She was no longer in the least shy; felt as if she were back in hospital, with Sister’s gimlet-sharp eyes on her, and a helpless patient to be settled in. She had a feeling that she should be entering up his chart! But the patient showed no signs of settling.

“I don’t want to sleep.” He moved restlessly, drawing her skimpy blue gown round his rather burly young form.

“All right,” agreed Pennie cheerfully. “Would you rather not talk?”

He looked at her suddenly with such a charming, boyish smile that her heart melted.

“If you don’t mind, I’d love to!”

“It’d do him good,” she decided; he was not only feverish, but in a state of nerves. In a minute or two the aspirin would make him feel sleepy.

“How did you get so wet?”

He looked grimly at his soaked sleeve.

“I was out all night.”

“To-night?” It was only nine-fifteen.

“No. Last night. I was walking. Up on the Leas.” He said it as casually as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Hiking in this weather?” No wonder he had congestion of the lungs! No wonder his face looked that leaden colour!

A fresh light broke on Pennie.

“Have you had anything to eat?”

He shook his head.

“*Nothing?*”

“Oh, I didn’t want anything. . . .”

Broke. So broke that he hadn’t money to eat; travelling without a ticket, playing with that revolver! She jumped from one conclusion to the next, feeling faintly shocked. Not that she herself had any money except what she earned, but there had always been home to fall back on if it came to *that*. Her pity showed in her widened, candid eyes. He read it there.

“Good Lord, no! I’m not broke—not like that. I mean, not in that way. I could have bought something to eat if I’d wanted it—only——” He broke off sharply. He looked extremely young, wrapped in her dressing-gown, his drying golden hair all fluffy—like a chicken out of the egg. Pennie had an uncomfortable certainty that he was on the verge of breaking down. She looked away tactfully; she herself had been in such desperate trouble to-day that she could sympathise with him, knew the awful feeling when one’s throat got tied into a ball and wouldn’t behave.

He said with the sort of stiff cheerfulness which she recognised, “No. I’m all right for money. It’s just—well——” He stopped.

Pennie waited. It was one of her gifts, a sympathetic silence; like her precise, neat ways, her almost noiseless movements, one of the things which had made Sister grieve that she was not strong enough to finish training as a nurse.

It was a very long silence, the minutes ticked away, and Pennie waited.

He said at last, his eyes on the black, cold night outside, “Have you ever been in a jam?”

“H’m. I’m in one now.” She confessed it cheerfully. Was it a jam, she wondered, to run away from home?

“Then you’ll understand.” The words came dropping out slowly. “Things get so sticky sometimes—one doesn’t much care.”

And Pennie was silent. What could she say? What words of comfort existed that wouldn’t sound priggish? In spite of those ancient Quakers, Pennie herself belonged to 1935; she had no very fixed religious views, a strict code of duty took its place, with a vague desire to help in a world which seemed pretty down and out. She sat there now, almost envying the solid faith of her forefathers. At least they would have known what to say!

His unhappy eyes were on her face, a wordless S.O.S. She got out rather forlornly, “I know. There isn’t much to do when things go like that, except set one’s teeth and stick it out.”

He did not even answer, turned to stare out into the night.

She ventured timidly, “If I knew what the jam was——” And he shook his head, unable to speak. Pennie’s eyes, avoiding him, drifted to the floor.

“Oh!” She dived forward suddenly, glad of the chance to tide over that awkward moment. “Look! Is this yours?”

She held it out to him on her palm; a thin, round piece of oakwood, black with age and intricately carved into the shape of a ring enclosing a tree. A mascot of some kind, it was beautifully made, being not more than two inches long yet fine as lace. Oddly, the little gold ring threaded with thin red silk cord was at the wrong end, the root end, of the tree.

He almost snatched it from her hand. Deliberately broke it in two, dropping it on the floor.

“Oh, what a shame!” It was out before she could stop it.

“Think so?” He was standing now, had set his heel on the two fragments, grinding them to bits. He said shakily, “I—I’m quite warm now.” And tugged off her dressing-gown roughly.

“Please keep it on,” Pennie begged. “We’ve another forty minutes to London.”

But he was obstinate as only a feverish man can be.

“No, I’m too warm.” He was shivering. She eyed him anxiously.

“You ought to keep still after aspirin,” she scolded, turning to the rack to put back her dressing-gown. “You oughtn’t to eat with that fever, but I’ve some chocolate; perhaps that’d warm you——”

A cold draught struck her cheek and ankle; she swung with trained instinct, grabbed at his coat and the strap beside her window in the same movement. His weight, flung out, wrenched the coat out of her clutch and only a violent lurch back saved her as he fell. As she sunk, sick and dizzy, on the seat the door banged to; the train, travelling at forty miles an hour, gave a shrill whistle as it dived into a tunnel. Pennie, limp and faint, sat staring at the seat opposite.

The empty seat. . . .

2

It was, perhaps, twenty seconds before she stood up with trembling knees and tugged at the communication cord. Twenty seconds of sheer blank horror in which she was conscious only of the empty carriage and her own escape from death. She was still holding the cord when, with shrill shrieking of brakes, the train slid to a stop. In the silence of the tunnel she could hear excited voices and footsteps far down the line. The guard thrust his head and shoulders in at the door.

“You rang the communication bell?” He looked round the empty carriage. “What’s wrong?”

“A man—in here—threw himself out—back there——” Pennie was shivering violently; her own voice sounded harsh and strange. “I tried to stop him——”

“All right. We’ll look——” The guard went hurrying away, swinging his lantern, followed by an excited group of passengers. Pennie stood still, steadying trembling knees to walk. The guard had left the door open and the retreating footsteps, the distant hoot of a car above the tunnel and a faint dripping sound of water down a wall all sounded loud, distinct and menacing. She climbed down and started up the line as quickly as she dared. Trained in first aid, she might be of use. . . .

But she knew, as she reached the little group gathered by a siding, that she could be of none.

With eyes averted, shivering, she told her story in a very clear, unmoved voice; gave her name and the address of the one hotel she could remember off-hand. She had not meant to stay even one night at anything half so

luxurious, but that could not be helped. Anything was better than to stand there explaining that she had no address, no idea of what she meant to do next.

She walked stiffly back towards the train, had almost reached it when an onlooker, a stout red-cheeked countrywoman, guessed the truth and put an arm round her just in time.

“There, miss, you’ll be all right! Just lean against me. Come, dearie! Shock, that’s what it is. Here, John, give me a hand, can’t you?” Between them, the fat old body and her gaunt, henpecked husband lifted Pennie inside their own carriage, the motherly arm supporting while its owner scolded. “John, don’t stand *gaping* there! Open my case and get the Thermos. Down the *left* side. Unfasten it, silly! Think I can unscrew it with one hand? Now you’re spilling it! Isn’t that a man all over? There! A nice drop of hot tea, dearie—it’ll do you good. . . .”

Pennie felt limp as a doll, helpless as a baby when the tin lid of the Thermos was put to her mouth. But it was very comforting, that stout arm encased in bright-green cloth. The rough hands all puffy from the wash-tub were wonderfully gentle.

“Now! We’ll roll my coat up and tuck it in behind your back. Is that better? A little more tea? No? Well, then, just try and rest against my arm. There, we’re off again. . . . *John!* Put that out at once! Lighting a *pipe!* You don’t mind, dear? Oh, well then! Go along, John, smoke! A man wanting his pipe’s like a baby wanting its bottle, I always say!” A fat chuckle stirred the well-upholstered chest on which Pennie’s cheek rested. “Big babies, that’s all they are. Where’d they be without us?”

“Use your *head*, girl, not your tongue!” the grim-faced sister in Ward Seven used to snap at her probationers. “You can’t *talk* a patient well!” But to Pennie, shaken by the memory of that dreadful moment on the line, the brisk, cheery voice with its ceaseless flow of words helped to ease the self-torture of the question which would echo through her brain: “Could I have saved him? Could I have stopped him? Gussed—done *anything?*”

There was fresh torment, unavoidable, waiting at Victoria. An official person in gold lace, another in plain clothes, and a policeman clustering round her with questions, but somehow she managed to answer them all and even sign a statement without breaking down.

Her fat friend hovered on the outskirts of the group, sizzling with indignation.

“Worrying her like that—can’t they see the pore thing’s beat? If I’d my way——” Disregarding all her John’s reminders that time was getting on. Emily’d be wondering where they were. Emily could wait! Not until Pennie sat inside a taxi did the good Samaritan give up her charge.

Pennie flung her soft young arms round the old woman’s neck.

“You’ve been a darling. I don’t know what I’d have done without you \_\_\_\_\_”

The taxi started with a jerk, flinging her back midway through the sentence; she was half-way across St. James’s Park before she realised she had not got the woman’s name.

She had kissed a complete stranger, had cried over the death of a boy whose name she didn’t know! What a strange night—what a strange and grim beginning to a new life! From first to last it had been one of those days when Fate seems to take one by the neck and hustle one across her fences!

Just fourteen hours, thought Pennie, since she had wakened in her attic bedroom in Folkestone, with no expectation of anything except the usual day of tiring household duties, bells to answer, trays to carry up, the monotony of her aunt’s scoldings, her uncle’s querulous complaints.

In the continual rows between her aunt and uncle, Pennie offered a convenient target for the wrath of both; had she not thoughtlessly broken down in health without finishing her hospital training? Had she ever been anything but a drag, a burden, and an expense, since coming to live with them at the age of ten?

A slow temper, and a deep natural loyalty, inherited from her Quaker father’s side, had always kept her silent during those outbursts; they had given her a home when her parents died and, if they exacted in return a full-time maid’s work, Pennie did not grudge it. She had hoped to be a nurse, the hurt of failure was her own business, she confided it to no one. She had tried to find another job, at a time when every one was cutting down their staff, a time when even her aunt was forced to take in boarders.

“Stick it out”—that, with a smiling eye and a cheerful answer handy, was the whole of Pennie’s young philosophy. But that quiet Quaker father had had pride too; enough to make him break with all his people, marry an actress, and fight in the war.

A flat-iron had done Pennie’s business; a hot flat-iron which, insecurely propped, had burned a hole in her aunt’s new petticoat while Pennie was upstairs answering a bell. Words, however many of them screeched at her,

would never have done it; she was used to them. It was the iron flying through the air, missing her face by a bare inch, which had sent Pennie walking upstairs to her room. Twenty minutes later, the bare minimum of clothing in her case, her small savings in her bag, she had climbed into the train at Folkestone station; the relief train to the seven forty-five fast up. Never guessing what a strange, grim, romantic sequence of events she would set in motion by that one act. Pennie, going up in the chromium-plated lift of the Grand Palace Hotel in the Strand, was too tired to think. She undressed quickly in a room more luxurious than any she had occupied in her life, climbed into bed and drew a thick blue silk eiderdown up round her chin. She could not sleep, of course. She would leave the light burning, for in the dark she might see again the swinging door, the dark hedgerows, the shape of a boy who fell with arms thrown out; to-morrow she must find an agency, try to get a job. To-night she would lie still and try to calm herself with a book.

The lamp was still burning when she opened her eyes again in broad daylight.

She was actually dressed to go downstairs when, opening her bag for the maid's tip, she saw the letter. . . .

### 3

It lay there in her bag, stamped, ready, but unposted! As she looked down at it she remembered with a qualm of conscience the boy's hoarse voice saying, "It's frightfully urgent—it *must* catch the post to-night——"

No wonder he had been so anxious she should post it, knowing that otherwise it would reach the coroner!

She looked at it in dismay.

In the horror and distress of last night, she never once remembered its existence. Ought she to post it now or hand it over to the police?

If she put it in the post she might, unwittingly, be breaking the law. Yet could she utterly disregard the memory of the boy's fear-filled eyes, his sudden, desperate trust in a stranger?

Remembering the revolver, she thought, "He might have been a murderer," but he had not looked bad. Only young and unhappy and overdriven, nothing worse. . . .

She took up the letter, reading the address, trying to make up her mind. She recollected, rather incongruously, that people read character by

handwriting; this was round, boyish writing, rather weak, the words running into each other as though the writer had been in a great hurry: Michael Kerr, Esq., and 10 Chilham Court, St. James's, S.W. The boy's imploring eyes seemed to look up at her from the envelope.

With a sudden gesture, Pennie tucked it in her bag. It should go! Right or wrong, he was dead, and it was the last thing he had asked in life. She had a sense of almost personal relief as she made up her mind, as though she had settled her own fate. It should go; the question was, would it be too late?

Half-past eight; even if she posted it at once, it would not be delivered for some hours. If she delivered it herself would it be in time? St. James's. She did not mean in any case to breakfast in the hotel, it would be too expensive; if she took a bus, she could be there in ten minutes.

Pennie shut her suitcase, tipped the maid, and hurried downstairs; a supremely gorgeous young man who, even at this hour, had an orchid in his button-hole, receipted her bill, agreed to hold her letters and her bag until she called. A man in Admiral's uniform, or something like it, offered to find a taxi. Pennie, refusing, took a humble bus to Pall Mall.

Chilham Court proved to be mansion flats in a quiet cul-de-sac; a hall porter with a bright row of medals on his blue coat took her up to the top floor. Number 10 had a polished door with a vast brass knob to it, which shone like the sun at noonday. Pennie, who knew exactly how long it took to get that superfine polish on metal, could appreciate that. The door was opened by a very short negro with a coal-black, cheerful, wrinkled face.

"Ya-as, miss?"

"Does Mr. Kerr live here?"

"Ya-as, miss!"

"Will you give him this, please, and tell him that I'm very sorry indeed that I forgot to post it last night?"

"Ya-as, miss." He produced a silver salver from behind his back, breathed on it, rubbed it with his black sleeve and laid the letter on it, with all the air of a person who carries out a solemn ritual.

"There's no answer," said Pennie.

She turned away and heard the door close; the lift had gone down and she rang the bell. It gave her a pleasant sense of luxury, ringing for the lift, after those seven steep flights of stairs in the tall house at Folkestone. The

lift came up, the iron gate clattered, Pennie was in the act of stepping in when a hand clutched at her sleeve. She turned to find the negro.

“You come talk Missuh Kerr!”

Pennie hesitated. The lift was waiting. She shook her head, but the negro held her sleeve. He jerked it as one would a dog’s lead.

“Ya-as, miss! You come talk Missuh Kerr!” he was imperative.

The lift bell was ringing; that decided her.

“Very well.”

She followed the little black man back into the flat, through a hall that was a mere passage lined with books and decorated with strange African trophies, to an open door upon the left.

“She come, sah.” The man held open the door. Pennie, entering, stood stock still in surprise. She was back in hospital!

The door closed behind her and she corrected her mistake. There were enamel tables, porcelain sink, the glass shelves with wide-mouthed bottles and sterilising oven, but there was no sheeted patient waiting for the chloroform. The young man behind the table wore a surgeon’s overall, but the odd structure of metal before him was X-ray apparatus of some kind.

He came directly to the point.

“You brought me this?”

“Yes. I was in the train with him last night. He gave it me to post and I forgot.” Under a pair of blue eyes that were penetrating in their honesty, it was unnecessary, Pennie felt, to mince matters; Michael Kerr did not look as though he would mind facing facts.

“Before he—jumped out?” His manner was extremely grave but very friendly.

“Yes.”

“Were you alone with him, then?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid you must have had a bad shock.”

He said that gently, sat silent for a moment, his face shaded from her by his hand, before he asked:

“Do you feel able to tell me what happened? You see, I only heard this—a few minutes ago. He was my brother.” She would have guessed this without being told; his craggy nose, square chin that had a dimple in the centre and golden hair were unmistakably alike; only in this brother there was a forceful strength which the boy had lacked, and there was a firm line in the pleasant mouth and clean-shaved jaw. Older than his brother, about twenty-four or five, Michael Kerr was very powerfully built, broad-shouldered and deep-chested.

“I’ll tell you all I know.”

“Won’t you sit down?” he asked rather absently, turning to drag forward a plain wooden chair, its seat all stained with acid, and Pennie noticed for the first time that he used his left hand. His right was swathed in bandages.

He made it easy, listening quietly while she gave him a brief account of what had happened in the train—the hidden revolver, her impression that the boy meant to shoot himself, her attempt to get him into hospital; only at the end her voice faltered.

“I suppose I ought to have guessed he might do that,” she stammered.

“You couldn’t have known,” declared Kerr.

“All the same, it *was* my fault.” She confessed it in a low, unhappy voice.

“Your *fault*?” That came out so sharply that she looked up quickly.

“Y-yes. I—felt him pulling at my arm and I thought I’d fall too, and—let go. . . .” She ended with a gulp; not even to the Samaritan last night had she confessed that.

“Don’t!” He leaned forward suddenly, laid his hand on hers, covering them both. “Don’t think that. You did everything you could.” He was so gentle now in contrast to that sudden sharp note, that Pennie had to bite her lip. Considerately, he gave her a moment to recover; Pennie’s heart was beating rather hard, she felt glad that she had come.

When she turned at last, trying to smile, he said quietly, “Bobby—my brother—he didn’t tell you what was the matter?”

“No. Only that he was in a jam.”

“I see. Nothing more? No details?” He was watching her closely now.

“No.”

“He didn’t give you any inkling of what was in this letter?” Kerr insisted.

“No. He only said that it was urgent.”

“Nor mention any names?”

“No?” It was a question, that last wondering “no.” Kerr answered it.

“You see, it’s not like him, not like Bobby, to do what he did.”

“He doesn’t explain it in the letter?” Pennie guessed.

“No. It’s all—very mysterious.” He drummed softly on the table, looking straight ahead of him, and deep in thought, added almost to himself, “I wish I knew!”

Pennie sat quietly waiting; now that she had told her story, she had an odd sense of relief, even contentment, sitting there on the hard wooden chair in this big bare laboratory. She stole another glance at Michael Kerr, longing to comfort him, for it was evident that the boy’s death had hit him hard. She felt desperately sorry for him, yet unable to help. As he turned back, their eyes met.

In time, that glance lasted no more than a few seconds; yet to Pennie it was as if a whole age had ticked away before he spoke, an age in which something strange and tumultuous happened, making her both happy and afraid. It was as if, in those few seconds of silence, he had asked her something tremendously important, receiving her assent.

The words, when they came, seemed not to matter.

“I’m awfully grateful to you for bringing me this. It might’ve gone to the coroner; that would’ve done no one any good. I’m afraid you may have to attend the inquest, but I’d be awfully obliged if you’d say nothing about this.”

“Of course I won’t!”

There was a small note-pad and a pencil on the table beside the test tubes in the rack. He stretched back for it, asking, “Might I have your name? His—fiancée may want to write to you.”

“Pennsylvania Cummin.”

He repeated it in a surprised, delighted tone.

“Pennsylvania! How pretty! It sounds like a Quaker name from the United States!”

“Only from Norwich.” She tried to speak lightly to hide the sense of heady, tremulous pleasure she felt in hearing him praise it.

“What’s the address?” His pencil was poised; she gave the name of the hotel.

At the door, holding it open for her, he took her hand and held it, smiling at her with a friendly warmth.

“If you have to go down to the inquest, may I look out for you on the train?”

“Of course.” She tried to make that casual and failed.

“Good-bye and—thanks again. . . .” His grip was hard.

Pennie, all the way down in the lift, nursed her right hand as though it hurt.

4

A telephone booth in Jermyn Street gave her the name of three agencies, including one in that street. It was six months since, fresh from the doctor’s hands, Pennie had failed to find work, but now, climbing a double flight of narrow, carpetless stairs, she tried to feel hopeful. The woman who occupied the inner office was not encouraging.

Short, brisk and florid, efficient from her cropped grey hair to her number six brogues, she flipped over the pages of a book with the air of a person who has no time to waste.

“Typing? Shorthand? No? Only a year’s hospital training? Health—I *see*. . . . Any experience with children? None? You’re going to find it difficult. Shop assistant? Apply direct. Not worth our while, nowadays! They want experience too. I could put you *down*, of course, as nurse-companion, but I’ve nothing at present. What about lady-help—no children, a boarding-house, salary fifty? It’s seaside—Folkestone.”

Pennie’s meek “I’d rather not take domestic work” was crushed at once.

A dry “You’ll find it difficult, then, without training. I’ve five names here”—a little rap—“for every vacancy!” Which settled *that*.

Pennie put down her name as lady-help, town only, and went down the narrow stairs. She had taken five addresses from the telephone directory and the next was in Sloane Street. It looked as if even a bus might be a luxury. The day was fine, the shop windows gay with Christmas goods, and she

decided to walk. She was just beyond Fortnum's when she stopped, her eyes caught by a swinging sign.

The Luck Shop.

What an odd name! Well, if any one needed to buy luck, it was herself!

Pennie glanced, half-amused and half-intrigued, at the high, narrow bow window.

A curtain of grey velvet hid the shop and the show shelf was lined to match; on it lay a single unset stone, a sapphire that gleamed deeply blue. A clever hand had draped behind it a scarf of misty silk of green as changeable as a September sea. Below them, a small oblong card demanded boldly, "Is this *your* luck-bringer?"

It was sheer nonsense, of course, Pennie's sturdy sense declared, but still—how could one tell? Did they give the answer? Apparently not. Did people really buy a jewel and a strip of silk to bring them luck?

Certainly the little shop looked bright and prosperous; the door was set sideways, at right angles to the window, for a maisonette door faced the street, but there was grey net across the glass which revealed nothing. Pennie was turning away when another card stuck there caught her eye. A common visiting card this time, with the name "Madame Fiona," and five words scribbled below: "Wanted, temporary help. Apply within."

"Apply direct," the woman at the agency had said. Pennie, breathless with sudden hope, tugged at the door handle.

The shop inside was very dim and quiet; hung, too, with grey and filled with colourful, rich things, bright silks, and gilded images, an opal chain, a fortune-teller's crystal on a stand.

A woman came from behind a tall teak screen. The proprietor—no one else would dare to dress like that!

For she was staggering. There was no other word. Only good manners and an effort prevented Pennie from staring, open-mouthed.

The dress she wore, an evening dress of dull black crêpe, might have touched the floor if it had not been held up by a girdle at the hips of common white tape. As it was, it hung above a pair of slender calves and very lovely ankles which were shrouded in long lamb's-wool combinations; a pair of high-heeled scarlet satin sandals merely emphasised the naked feet. A thick beige knitted cardigan, unbuttoned, and a pair of fur mittens made an odd contrast with two waist-long strings of pearls. The owner of this

curious costume had brittle blue-black hair and a thick mask of paint which did not hide the fact that she was nearing sixty, but neither her dress, her eyes, black as boot-buttons, or a bony, arched nose could prevent her looking distinguished.

As Pennie came forward she threw out both hands and cried in a high, sweet, un-English voice, "Ah, you have come! I was expecting you! Have you brought your luggage?"

Stammering, taken aback, Pennie managed to get out, "I—I'm sorry. You're making a mistake. I saw that card in the window and came in to apply as temporary help."

The lady of the Luck Shop nodded tranquilly.

"I know. You saw the card and walked in. Well, you are engaged."

With that, she crossed to the door, took out the card, and tore it up.

5

The proprietress of the Luck Shop gave her no time to think.

"You are come to help me, *hein?* That is good. It is not difficult." She moved gracefully back to the counter, picked a cigarette from an open shagreen box and lit it at a tiny jet of gas set in the counter. She blew out a puff of smoke, and added: "There is not much to do; I want some one to live with me, to keep me company, and help here in the shop. You will not find it hard. I have an apartment upstairs, a maid comes each day to cook, do everything, and I have prepared a ver' nice room for you."

Human nature is a perverse thing. Pennie had come in bursting with hope that she might find a job; this calm assumption that she would take one without discussion or references filled her with prickly distrust.

She said distantly: "I'm not sure this is the kind of work I'm looking for," as if all the jobs in London were hers to choose from. "How much salary are you offering?"

"One—two pounds——" Madame Fiona snapped her fingers. "What do you ask?"

"I might take two pounds," said Pennie, as though the sum was not higher than her wildest hopes. "How long's it for?"

"How can *I* tell?" Her hands, wrinkled and sparkling with many rings, flew out like bright-winged butterflies; she shrugged expressive shoulders.

“A long time, perhaps, I hope—shall we go and see, yes?”

She turned and led the way down the shop past the high teak screen; mystified, Pennie followed. Opening an inner door, she took Pennie down two steps into a back room.

Like the shop outside, it was hung with grey velvet, and it had a second entrance facing an alley but there was no furniture here except a tall lamp, a small electric fire, a golden bowl of yellow roses and two low chairs with, set between them, a sort of stand draped with a black velvet cloth.

Waving Pennie to a chair, Madame drew this off and the girl saw that underneath was a great round crystal ball sunk in the table.

In the most matter-of-fact and quite unmystic manner, Fiona dropped into the opposite chair, blew a spiral of smoke towards the ceiling, and laid her cigarette down on top of the unlit electric fire. Then, leaning forward with one elbow on each side of the crystal, she stared down intently.

To Pennie, accustomed all her life to walk under ladders, travel on a Friday, spill salt without a thought and treat a broken mirror as so much common glass, the whole thing seemed mad. She had no belief at all in crystal-gazing and felt slightly amused at this elderly lady's obvious faith. But the quiet room, the well-sprung comfort of her chair, and the silence had another effect.

Sitting patiently, with folded hands, while Madame stared into the crystal, Pennie found herself remembering her struggle to find work in Folkestone, the brisk dismissal of her hopes that morning. Domestic work, five names to every vacancy! Her own common sense urged her not to throw away this excellent chance. Two pounds a week—and she had gathered from Madame's voluble opening that she would have to live in; two pounds a week with bed and board would mean that she could save, and it would give her somewhere to live while looking for a proper job. . . .

Suddenly, in an ordinary, conversational tone, Madame began to speak.

“I can see you here in the crystal as I have seen you every day since the new moon, working here in my shop; oh, yes, certainly you are meant to come here to me!”

In spite of herself, Pennie bent over to stare into the crystal ball, but she could see nothing but a gleaming surface which reflected the room. But Madame Fiona could, apparently, see something else, for she went on in the same confident, almost careless tone.

“There is a very dark mist here behind you, it is some dreadful thing, that, a death perhaps, a great trouble; you have, I think, lost some one that you love by a quick dreadful death—is that it?” Her dark eyes came up, searching the girl’s face and Pennie managed to shake her head. A blind shot, of course, but too near the truth, that guess!

Madame Fiona merely said, “No? Not yet? Ah, then I am afraid it is to come. For this mist is close to you, it comes round you.”

It would have been less impressive, thought Pennie, if she had been more mysterious; there was something in that quiet, almost casual tone which was definitely disturbing. It was as if she was looking out of a window and describing some real happening in the street.

“Now I can see a man, near you! He takes your hand——”

“What is he like?” Involuntarily, that came slipping out. “Very big and broad? With blue eyes?”

The seer shook her head.

“No. Not this man. He has his back to me. I cannot see his face. But he is slim, this one, very dark, and the mist is coming with him.” Her voice sank, growing troubled. “It means danger, that mist; death and danger, for you are getting terribly afraid! But it is strange! You are afraid and yet—that man, a dark man, is there, in your fate, to bring you money and marriage—yes, and *love!*” Suddenly her arms dropped. She repeated in a shrill, awed voice, “But it is strange! You are gone! There is nothing more left, only that dark mist!”

She sat upright, gazing at the girl, frowning, but Pennie only laughed.

“Oh? What does that mean?”

“I cannot tell.” Abruptly, Madame Fiona stooped, drew up the black cloth. Then, with a deep sigh, she picked up her cigarette and asked quite calmly, “Can you come to me to-day?”

“If you want me to.” Pennie said it with great reluctance. She wished that she could afford to refuse. Impressed against her own judgment, she did not relish the idea of living with this rather eerie woman. But Madame Fiona seemed quite satisfied.

“Good.” She got up and led the way back into the shop, confiding, “My son is still away in Amsterdam, and with the shop, alone, I cannot sell and do the fortunes too, so I lose money.”

She stopped behind the counter and Pennie, watching, noticed for the first time that there was a desk there, built into the wall. Madame Fiona opened a small drawer and took out a handful of loose silver. She poured it, uncounted, into Pennie's hand.

Saying in a matter-of-fact tone: "You will fetch your clothes now—yes? Take a taxi and hurry!"

Outside the shop, looking back as she climbed into the taxi, Pennie read again the small sign which had first captured her attention.

The Luck Shop. Well, it had certainly brought luck to her!

Or had it?

On second thoughts she was not quite so sure. . . .

## 6

Three days later Pennie was certain. She looked back on those first hesitations only wondering how she could ever have doubted her own luck. The strangest job in the world, perhaps, but certainly the best.

For Madame Fiona, once a famous dancer and now the owner of the Luck Shop, had won Pennie's heart completely.

Spanish by birth and artist to her finger-tips, the little maisonette above the shop which she shared with Pennie was crammed like a museum with the souvenirs of Fiona's triumphal past. Her sitting-room and bedroom next it, the bath-dressing-room opposite, Pennie's own small back room were all on the first floor, and were papered with unframed photographs; even the cramped cupboard of a kitchen and the long straight stair down to the front door had their share; and Fiona's kind heart would not part with one.

"Who knows?" she told Pennie. "Perhaps one day those people might come to see me and find their picture gone. It is not nice to be forgotten."

So her friends were cherished without any distinction, whether circus clowns or kings. Large-hearted, careless, generous to a fault, Fiona's stories of them, grim or gay or scandalous, kept Pennie continually amused; she spoke of her triumphs and her lovers with a child-like candour embarrassing to Pennie; she never stopped talking. If she was superstitious, spreading the cards each morning, casting her horoscope and gazing in the crystal, at least she believed in her own queer trade with a devout faith.

A queer trade it certainly seemed to Pennie Cummin. All day long, from nine till six, she could see, outside the narrow high bow window, the sleek

stream-line cars go gliding up Jermyn Street, carrying rich people with that hard, modern, cellulose finish which looks back contemptuously on the past. Yet all day long the little bell over the shop door kept tinkling and those same people drifted in to buy charms and mascots, or to vanish behind the tall teak screen which hid Madame Fiona's door!

Pennie herself, behind the long grey counter, sold the queerest goods—bees drowned in amber that would bring good luck to men in business, bangles of jade that, given by a man, ensnare a girl's heart, spells as old as Egypt that would keep away the evil eye, magic squares of metal that would write the answer to any question and little bottles with a love-philtre inside their cloudy glass.

She felt positively dishonest when she watched some pretty girl choose, asking, "What's this? A love charm?" and had to answer, "To win love, madam, or to hold it?"

"To win love. . . ." Nine times out of ten, that was the answer, given with a laugh.

Pennie had to judge then, sum up her customer; would she buy a ring, or only something cheap—one of those little magic squares that answered questions, perhaps?

"Look at their furs, child," Madame Fiona had commanded. "Shoes and furs. A girl can make herself a nice dress, but for those things—good shoes and furs, some one must pay!"

Madame had learned shrewd wisdom during her years in the limelight, for Pennie found that a good rule. Mink and silver fox always seemed ready to buy jewels for luck; it was the dainty girls with inexpensive shoes who bought the swastika or the faded, four-leaved clover which brings health, wealth, fame and a happy marriage.

She hated it when they said, "Thanks ever so much! I just know this'll bring me luck!" It made her feel mean.

But for the most part Pennie enjoyed handling these pretty things. Sheer nonsense, of course! She told herself that many times a day. As if peridots could renew youth, or a ball of polished rock crystal know whether one must marry a slim, dark man!

Absurd; and if, polishing the big crystal every morning, Pennie *did* peep into it, she felt quite certain that it was mere curiosity which made her look and no thought of Michael Kerr.

If she smiled sometimes at Fiona's superstitions, she would not hurt the kind, impulsive old dancer by laughing openly.

Though sometimes it was very hard not to laugh—for instance:

She had been in her new job just a week that day. She had carried Madame's chocolate up to her room at eight, making it herself since she had discovered by then that the old dancer loved it made Vienna fashion, in a tall glass with whipped cream on top. Mrs. Ransom, the gaunt, silent Scottish daily maid could not rise to such heights, but Sister in hospital had taught Pennie.

Madame, as usual, was sitting in her huge bed with the whole worn pack of cards spread across the orange quilt; she greeted Pennie with a wail.

“Oh, Pen-nie, look!” (She always made two equal syllables of Pennie's name.) “I shall be ill! the eight of spades and now the king! You see? He is a devil, that king. He brings bad luck!”

Pennie laughed. Trim and neat in a new grey woollen dress which Fiona had given her the day before, she pushed the little bedside table nearer and set the chocolate down. No good arguing! She had discovered that already. No words, however eloquent, would convince Fiona that the king of Spades could not make her ill. Instead she leaned over and put a red shawl round the dancer's shoulders.

This morning, Fiona had all her famous jewellery on in bed. Rings on her hands and bracelets winking all the way up her arms, rubies like drops of blood hung in her ears, and festoons of milky pearls wound round and round her throat, fantastic, barbarous and splendid. Jewels were her passion; spendthrift and generous, her final exit from the stage had left her penniless—except for these jewels. Yet she refused to sell them, preferred to keep the Luck Shop, live in a shabby maisonette and own no car, rather than part with one of her valuable stones. She even confessed to Pennie once, downstairs, that she hated selling jewels that were in stock.

“They don't love them, those women who buy!” she had declared. “Jewels, they are like people. They want love. They give their best to those that love them. Look how my rings glow! They are happy. They are glad to be out of their dark box. Stones, they are cold and lonely like a dancer behind the footlights—they want love!”

So to-day Pennie said nothing, merely covering the cascades of pearls with the red shawl.

“Drink up your chocolate, Madame,” she advised, “or it will get cold.”

Fiona put up her withered ivory cheek to be kissed, murmuring, "You are good to me. You are a sweet child." Then, with an eerie squeal, "Ah! See! The nine of clubs too—but it is bad. With all those little clubs here to spoil business!"

She was almost triumphant when, at five o'clock that evening, she went down with 'flu.

"What did I tell you? That eight of clubs! You laugh, but it is true!"

The doctor came next morning and was quite firm; Madame dissolved in tears when he refused to allow her to get up.

"But I tell you, I have appointments, a client to-night, another to-morrow! How can I tell fortunes up here in bed?"

"You can't go downstairs with that chill." Doctor West was used to her, treated her as a child. "You don't want your clients to see you with a red nose, do you?"

Fiona was not to be comforted.

"But I cannot let them down. I have never, never let my public down! Besides, like this I lose much money." Utterly careless with what money she had, she earned it greedily, spent it like water. "How shall I pay you without money? To-night, I must be down."

"Impossible!" He dried his hands. Madame's shrill wail followed him to the door.

"I will go down! I will! I will!"

Outside the door, the doctor was more urgent.

"She mustn't get up," he told Pennie. "Get her quiet. She ought to sleep after that injection. Don't let her get up. A chill like that at her age——"

Easy to say.

"All right!" announced Fiona, when Pennie implored her to stay in bed. "All right! Very well! You shall be Fiona. You shall tell fortunes!" Her eyes bright with fever and elfin spite, enjoying Pennie's dismay.

"You know I can't." Madame in this mood was as naughty as a spoiled child. "Oh, do be reasonable!"

"No. I get up or you take my place." She made a movement as if to climb out of bed and Pennie quickly tucked her in.

“But I don’t know how to tell fortunes!”

“It is easy. It is nothing. You sit down, pretend to look in the crystal, watch the client’s face, and say, ‘Wait! I see a fair woman . . .’ or, ‘There is a man in your life . . .’ And then you see by the face if you are right. Sometimes, when my power goes for a day, I do that.”

“Honestly, I couldn’t!”

“Then honestly, I will get up now!”

It was past nine already; the shop should be open, and Pennie looked desperately from the clock to the obstinate flushed face among the pillows. Madame caught that look.

“If I die,” she announced dramatically, “it will be your fault!”

“Oh, all *right!*” Pennie yielded. “Only you must lie down and try to sleep.”

Fiona cooed like a child.

“I will be good, quiet as a little rat! Only, you must not tell them I am ill. Or they will say, ‘We paid to see Fiona, but she was not there!’ ”

“Very well.” Pennie was ready to promise anything if it would keep the old dancer in bed. “They won’t believe me!”

“These, they are new clients. They have not seen me,” said Fiona, complacently patting the girl’s cheek. “There! Do not worry. You will tell them good fortunes.”

Easy to promise, not so easy to fulfil!

All day long Pennie watched the shop door anxiously, sighing with relief when the customers went out without asking for Fiona. At seven in the evening, the shop closed and Madame safe asleep, she prepared for the one client who was booked.

To have to sit down and tell a lot of lies to a total stranger!

“It’s not as if I had imagination,” she thought miserably. “I’m not even a *good* liar.”

Clients who came after the shop shut came directly into the back room by the small side door in the alley. It seemed strange to take Madame’s big chair and sit there waiting behind the crystal. The grey walls and carpet, the shaded lamp and the soft glow of the fire gave the room a muted peace, a paralysing peace it seemed to Pennie.

“I hope the woman forgets to come,” she wished fervently. “If only she’d get the date wrong or something. . . .”

She wished that she had asked Madame about the client, but she had forgotten when she was upstairs and now it was too late. All very well for Fiona at sixty, with her amazing clothes, her mind well stocked with mystic words, her shrewd, imperious air to talk about seeing the future; very different to sit there at twenty and a half with no better support than a new woollen dress and a rebellious conscience. Pennie felt horribly young and totally inadequate as she drew off the velvet that covered the crystal. If only she had not given her word!

“I wish to *heaven*——”

The wish was never finished, for the bell above the side door pinged. Pennie shut her eyes, braced her feet against the floor and drew a deep breath.

Now!

“Madame Fiona?”

She tried to say “yes” and failed; could only nod. Her throat felt choked, her hands like lumps of ice. For the client in the door was not a woman. It was Michael Kerr.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LITTLE BLACK TREE

He came forward glancing round him critically; he looked larger than ever as he sat down in Fiona's low arm-chair opposite and laid his hat beside him on the ground. Pennie, her pale cheeks flushed for once, did not dare to meet his eyes.

"I suppose you call yourself Madame Fiona as a business name, then?" he said rather slowly. "I thought at first—there was a famous dancer of that name, you know." And, after a tiny pause, dryly: "I prefer Pennsylvania Cummin."

And still Pennie could not speak. She tried to choke back the big lump in her throat, but it kept rising again. Looking up guiltily, she found his eyes on her no longer at all friendly, but hard and full of doubt. If only she had not promised, could explain without letting down Fiona!

"Well, you're going to tell my fortune." He held out his hand, palm up.

"I—I don't do it by palmistry." She got the words out somehow.

"No? Do you use this thing?" His tone was utterly sceptical; he flicked the big crystal contemptuously.

"Yes. . . ."

"Go ahead, then."

Pennie bent over the crystal. Hard enough to make up lies to tell to some superstitious woman, but to sit down in cold blood under that quizzical gaze and talk about luck and dark men——

To give herself time to think, she bent over the crystal, trying hard to remember any of the phrases she had heard Madame Fiona use.

"Watch their faces," Fiona had said, but he was leaning right back, his face in shadow. The clear surface of the polished stone showed her nothing but a pale expanse of ceiling, and angle of the grey wall, with a little red glint in one corner where it caught the firelight. Not at all inspiring! In the short silence she could feel him looking at her with cold amusement, summing her up as a fraud.

What could she say? She knew nothing of him except that he worked in a laboratory, had hurt his hand and had a brother who was dead! What could she do except confess? Desperately, Pennie strove to recollect any fragment of the patter usual to fortune-tellers—good news, a letter, a dark man who would be a mischief maker, a fair widow; she tried to frame the sentences and could not. She stared hard at the tiny red speck in the crystal, afraid to raise her eyes. Her mind was like a blank white bit of paper, the silence in the room had grown thick and heavy. She heard him make a slight, restless, impatient movement.

And then suddenly a thin, low, very clear voice began to speak. A voice that was confident, and said amazing things. It took Pennie an instant to realise that the voice was her own.

“You are luckier than you think! The thing that you wanted most would have brought you more harm still. If you had won the race or if the car had not skidded you would have taken the appointment offered to you out in Africa. And you would be dead now.”

*“What exactly are you talking about?”*

Involuntarily, Pennie had looked up; she saw his hands gripping the chair arm violently, a knotted vein that stood out down the centre of his forehead, met his amazed, incredulous eyes.

She herself could not have told him where the knowledge came from, but she answered with the most firm conviction that she was speaking the truth.

“I’m talking about your past. A year ago, a year and three weeks to be exact, you were going back to Africa to a government appointment. You meant to accept. But the same day, a friend who was to drive in a motor race got ill, and you offered to take his place. There was a bad corner on a steep hill and your car skidded. You went to hospital and while you were there the appointment went to another man. You were very badly injured and had to change your whole plans in life. But I tell you, that if you had taken that appointment you would now be dead. Am I right?”

“Go on.” He said it in a puzzled, almost repulsed tone, but she *knew* that she was right. Knew it as simply, and as clearly, as she knew that she had got up that morning. It was just something that had happened.

But if it was clear to Pennie, it was not clear to Kerr. He said suddenly, “I don’t know how the devil you know, but you’re right even to the date.

The man who took the job caught sleeping sickness only a few weeks after he got out and died.”

Pennie nodded; she was not surprised.

“The work you do now is more useful.” She asserted it calmly. “You don’t care about the money at all. You’ve enough and the work you’re on, research work, interests you more too.”

He was leaning forward, his knees apart, his hands clasped together, frowning at her. He said again, “Go on. This is interesting.”

Pennie did not stop to think; she had no notion what her mouth would say next; she had only an odd, exultant feeling that she could not be mistaken.

“You are working on an X-ray experiment to do with cholera. It used to be your hobby and it’s now your job.”

“You *couldn’t* know that!”

“It’s true, though, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes, it’s true.” He admitted it grudgingly. “Do you know any more about my—past?”

“Yes. Before your accident, you hoped to get married, but the girl turned you down.” She wished, as she said it, that her tongue had not run so fast, so independently of her mind. She saw a dark-red flush spread right over his face from forehead to chin and down his neck below the collar. He was looking at her now with distaste, although he did not speak. She tried to put it right, clumsily. “You will get married, I think, but not to that girl.”

“Oh?” That was a sneer. Dry and harsh. “Perhaps you can describe *her!*”

“Not very well. I don’t see her clearly.” Pennie hesitated now, flushing herself, conscious of that blundering reference to things that hurt. “I’m sure she will be nice and she will make you happy, because——” She cut that off abruptly, with an effort.

“Because what?” in a voice like cold steel.

“Nothing,” ended Pennie lamely.

There was silence between them; he sat with his face bent, looking at her under knitted brows, his mouth hidden by one hand which tugged at his lip. The room seemed terribly quiet. Pennie’s courage failed her, the elated sense of knowledge had begun to ebb.

“Very curious.” He said that slowly, as if to himself. Then, with definite hostility, “I’m still a little vague about my future and the lovely lady I’m going to marry. Is she blonde or dark?”

Pennie shook her head. She felt like a balloon being deflated.

“You don’t know?” He said that unkindly. “Too bad! Can you tell me anything else about her?”

“Only—only that you mayn’t find her.” Pennie brought that out with a gasp, her mind clutching at that receding, ebbing sense of power.

“Oh!” His eyebrows went up. “I see! I mayn’t marry her after all? That’s certainly a pity! Am I—engaged to her now?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see. You don’t know everything. Can you tell me anything else about my private affairs? Anything I particularly want to know?”

“I don’t think so,” she confessed humbly.

He hesitated, eyeing her with that deep distrust that he had shown from the moment that he had come into the room. When he did speak it was as though he chose each separate word carefully.

“I came to see you to-day because I hoped you might be able to help me. I’m in a very great difficulty. A certain girl—I won’t tell you her name—with your remarkable powers you ought to be able to tell me! But—well, she is mixed up with my brother’s death. I’m going to see her this evening when I leave you. Can you tell me if I ought to prosecute her?”

“No. . . .” She admitted it blankly. There was no sense of power and knowledge left, only a firm conviction that she had been a fool. A week ago, in his flat, his glance had been kind; now he was looking at her with dislike. If only she had told him from the first instead of letting her imagination bring out all that stuff!

“You can’t tell me *anything* about her? Help me in any way?” he insisted.

“I’m afraid I can’t.”

“You can’t even tell me”—he was looking at her now with extraordinary intensity—“what will happen if I prosecute her?”

Pennie shook her head; she could not speak.

“Well, that seems to be that, then!” He got up, towering over her. “How much do I owe you?”

“Two guineas.” It seemed wrong to take all that for nothing, but it was Madame’s regular charge. He produced two pound notes and a florin without a murmur, and picked up his hat. She stood up, one hand resting on the crystal, the money in the other.

“Well, it’s been very interesting. I can’t say that I believe in clairvoyance, but you certainly get surprising results.” He was smiling now, but Pennie missed something, the friendly warmth that had been there before. “Good-night.”

“Good-night.” She held out her free hand; his left one barely closed on it, but for the mere fraction of a second, they touched. And Pennie spoke again without thinking.

“I can tell you one thing.” It came breathlessly. “Now, when you leave here, you’re going to lose your hat!”

It was idiotic, utterly silly. As she said it the colour flamed into her face. She felt more foolish than she had ever felt in all her life. He looked at her curiously, more kindly.

“Well, that’s a prophecy that won’t take long to prove!” was all he said.

He went to the door. Pennie, the crackling notes growing warm inside her hand, stood watching him as he unlatched the door and went out. A little rush of wind edged with December frost seemed to dispel the last of that queer sense of power. She stared blankly at the shut door.

He was gone. Gone, thinking her, no doubt, the biggest fraud he’d ever met!

He would go home, with his hat perfectly intact, and laugh at her; tell the story as a joke to all his friends! The fortune-teller in the Luck Shop, a cheap little liar who made up a whole pack of nonsense! And yet, she *hadn’t* made it up!

Pennie gazed miserably at the big crystal. What on earth had made her do it? She had not meant it for one moment; every word had come by itself, had seemed *true*, when she spoke. She just couldn’t help saying it. Was it something in the crystal? Did the big, shining ball hypnotise one into talking rubbish?

She gripped the rounded ebony edge of the table and peered down, trying to make out the reason. But she could see nothing but the reflection of

her own face looking rather moist about the eyes. She drew up the velvet and shut the two sides of the table which enclosed the ball with a sharp, vicious snap.

“Well, anyway, nothing—nothing on *earth* will ever make me do it again!”

With that firm resolution, she shut up the shop and went round to the maisonette door, up to dinner.

2

She needed all her firmness that night.

When she went in at ten o'clock, to tuck Fiona up, fill her hot-water bottle and set the glass of herb tea which she always took beside her bed, the old dancer was agog to know how she had got on.

“A man? Did he think *you* were Fiona? What did you tell him? Was he small, dark? Did you fall in love?”

It was to turn aside the embarrassing flow of questions that Pennie said, “I told him all sorts of stuff. I didn't know what I was saying. It just came out.”

“You mean, without making it up?” Madame caught at her hand, pulled her round imperiously. “Let me look at you! How did it come?”

“I—don't know. I was sitting trying to think of something to say—and—it just came.”

Fiona nodded.

“That is it! Didn't I say so? You have second sight!”

“Then I don't want it!” Pennie started from the puffy red silk eiderdown, spoke fiercely. “It's horrible! Even for you, I wouldn't go through that again.”

Fiona smiled, pityingly.

“My dear, you will go through it again, you can't help it. When one has that gift strongly, it just comes—how can one tell?”

“It isn't coming to me!” Old Norwich couldn't have produced anything firmer than that. “It's made me feel all creepy.” Then with an effort to recover herself, “I'm sorry, Madame, but honestly, I can't do it to-morrow. You'll have to put off your appointments.”

The dancer was lying back between the pillows, looking at the girl's flushed face between narrowed eyelids. Her reply seemed quite beside the mark.

"Did he—your client—seem pleased?"

"I'm sure he hated it!" said Pennie hotly. "As much as I did. It was—uncanny."

Fiona's hand closed on her arm and forced her down on to the bed.

"No! You're not going yet. I don't want to go to sleep! Listen. You say 'uncanny.' You are wrong. You think I—I—tell my clients a lot of lies? No! I tell them the truth—sometimes. When the power to see is there. When it does not come"—the thin shoulders under the shawl and miming hands expressed resigned despair—"I must tell them something! That power to see, it is not like the wireless you turn on with a switch. No. It is like one of those old crystal sets we had once, with a little stone in them. You took the needle in your hand and set it and perhaps, if you are lucky, you got Paris, London, Rome—or perhaps only a little bit of music that died away—or nothing." The flexible hands ended that with a snap like castanets. "Well, we, you and I, we are like that little stone. Not always, not just when we want to, but *sometimes* we can see what is to come! I tell you, it is natural! not more uncanny than the radio over there!"

"I don't see how it's possible." Impressed more than she showed, Pennie was obstinate. "How can any one see things that haven't happened?"

Madame laughed, a laugh that rang out sharp-toned as a silver bell.

"You think you know everything, *hein?* You stand on the earth and cannot see over the horizon. Do you, for that, say, 'There is nothing more! That is the edge of the world?' No. You know, if you go up a little, up a hill—in an aeroplane, perhaps—you will see more, things that cannot be seen by people who stand on the earth because the earth is rounded, a ball. Isn't it so? Well, then, time too, is like that. Time and space, they are in one and they curve so!" The white arm swam out, graceful as a swan's neck. "Don't you see that?"

"No," said Pennie flatly. "I don't."

"Oh, but you are *bête*, dumb, *stupid!*" Fiona beat on the bed with clenched fists. "It is as clear as day! We are not speaking of mysteries, I tell you the truth. We all have the power to see over the curve of time, you, I, Mrs. Ransom, every one! It is as natural as those two little ears of yours. But, just as some of us have *better* ears than others, so you and I can see

around time a leetle better than the rest! Think! You will see it is true. How many people have you heard, who said, 'I had a feeling it would happen—I thought she'd write to me to-day——' *Every* one does. They see a leetle, not clearly. You and I—sometimes—can see well. That is all."

She was so sincere, believed in what she said so devoutly, that Pennie was half-convinced. It did sound plausible. And certainly something had happened to her during those moments downstairs when she talked to Michael Kerr. Yet her sound sense hesitated.

"I don't know," she admitted dubiously.

"I tell you, it is simple, natural as the radio," insisted Fiona. "One day, when we understand this, we will use it as we do radio or a cinema!"

Pennie smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll believe you when I meet my slim dark young man!" she retorted. "But whatever you say, I won't risk telling fortunes any more!"

And she adhered to that, in spite of Madame's tears.

### 3

The little blue paper which summoned her to attend the inquest arrived just nine days after she had started work at the Luck Shop. Madame was sweet about it and gave her leave to go without a murmur, but she felt very apprehensive when, at half-past ten, she took her seat in the train. She chose an empty carriage—not again would she travel alone with one other passenger!—and she noted with relief that this train had a corridor. The day outside was bright with a clear silver frost and sunshine, as different as possible from the black night a week ago, but Pennie's eyes were glued to the door. Ten—twenty—twenty-five minutes. Still he did not come.

Had that dreadful business of the fortune-telling finished the chance of friendship? Would he stay away? There was some one walking down the corridor and she turned her head away afraid to look.

"I thought you'd be on this train."

She started so violently that she dropped her paper. He stooped to pick it up. She noticed that he was wearing a black band round his hat, a dark suit, and black tie.

"I wanted to see you again," he told her. "You see, I've been thinking about you a lot."

“Yes?” defensively. Was he laughing at her? Pennie wondered. He looked very boyish and disarming when he smiled like that.

“Yes. D’you mind if I smoke?” He offered her a long silver case, but she shook her head; having lighted his own cigarette, he deliberately crossed his feet. “I feel safer like this.”

He was laughing openly now! Pennie felt the blood stealing up into her face, she kept her lips pressed tight together. “I’ve never met a live witch before. You see, I did lose my hat.”

“You—*did*—lose it?” Pennie’s eyes grew round and wide. “You mean, that night?”

“Yes. You seem surprised?” His eyes quizzed her. “I shouldn’t have thought your familiar spirit would have told you, or do you talk to a black cat?”

“Do stop joking!” Pennie begged. “What really happened?”

“I’m not joking. I’m in deadly earnest—and scared too!” He looked it, sitting there laughing! “I tell you, I left your shop quite determined that whatever else happened I’d hold my hat on like grim death. I did too. I simply clung to it. I’d got as far as the corner of the road when an old woman with a big umbrella came barging round the corner and stabbed her umbrella right into my chest! That was *your* doing, I suppose! Anyway, my hand went out to steady her and my hat rolled into the street, where a passing car ruined it for any one except George Robey!”

“Are you pulling my leg?” demanded Pennie incredulously.

“Of course I’m not! For a witch, you don’t show much respect for your own powers, do you? I’m telling you the truth—cross my heart. It was a new hat too, a dashed good hat. I’m not sure I oughtn’t to ask you for my two guineas back!”

Pennie sat silent, astounded. It was sheer coincidence, of course, but what a fluke! That he should lose his hat that night, and almost immediately. Coincidences do happen in life, but this one seemed quite extraordinary. Her astonishment showed plainly in her face.

“I suppose I mustn’t ask you how you do it?” He was still smiling, and it seemed to Pennie that he was looking at her with the kindness which had been missing in the shop. “Did you turn yourself into the old woman, or was she your black cat? I feel rather brave trusting myself near you. You might turn me into a kitten!”

Pennie burst out laughing. There was so much of him, he looked so masculine, unfeline and solidly real, that the idea of changing him into a kitten was deliciously absurd.

“Don’t worry, I won’t do that!” she promised.

He uncrossed his feet ostentatiously.

“Good. I feel safer. All the same, as a reasonable being with no faith at all in magic, I *would* like to know how you could tell that I was going to lose my hat.”

“I couldn’t. It was just coincidence. At least——” Would it be betraying Fiona, she wondered, if she told him the truth? Doubtful, she temporised, “I only know things sometimes.”

“I suppose you couldn’t make that a little more clear, could you?” he asked plaintively.

Hesitatingly, as well as she could, Pennie repeated as much as she remembered of Madame’s explanations.

“I see! A curve in space-time? That’s the idea.” She could not be sure whether he was impressed or not, whether under a grave manner he was still laughing. “Well, it’s certainly queer!” He looked across at her as if considering, before he added, “You know, you’re a most intriguing person.”

“I am?” She was genuinely surprised. “I should’ve said I was very ordinary.”

“Whatever else you are, you’re not that!” He said it with so much conviction that she flushed pink again.

“In what way? I mean, intriguing?” She could not help asking.

“In every way.” He was grave enough now. “That letter, for instance. Was that just—fate, or did you know beforehand what was going to happen?”

“In the train?” There was sheer horror in her voice. “Of course not! Oh, please, don’t joke about that!”

“I’m not joking at all. I’m terribly serious. You see, I’m not at all satisfied.”

“Satisfied about what?” She was completely puzzled.

“About the whole thing. It seems to me there must be something more behind it all. Bobby—my brother—was driven to do what he did, of course,

but—you say he told you nothing about that?”

“Only what I repeated to you.”

“I see. Nothing more.”

“No.”

He was silent a minute, thinking deeply, his eyes puzzled. Then, “You have no idea what his trouble was, whether it was money, or a love affair or—a criminal matter?”

“Not the faintest idea.” Pennie was emphatic.

“I see. Well, it’s all very mysterious!” He stood up. Steadying himself by the luggage rack, looking down at her very steadily, as though he could pierce her mind and read what was in it. His left hand went, with a gesture that she remembered, to his mouth, the forefinger stroking his upper lip. “H’m. I wonder!”

“About what?” There was some resentment in the challenge. His look and manner, it seemed to Pennie, were like an accusation. In spite of that incident of the hat, in spite of his jokes, he *did* think she was a fraud, lying.

He did not answer the question; instead, his hand went down to his waistcoat pocket and he held something out towards her in the palm of his hand. It was a tiny blackened piece of oak carved in the shape of a circle enclosing a tree.

“Ever seen one of those before?” he asked it casually.

Pennie cried breathlessly, “Yes! But—but—how did you get it? I mean—it was broken——”

“Oh? How?” His tone was sharp now, incisive.

“Your brother had it in the train!” She took it from his hand, staring at it. Surely it was the same? Yes, even to the little gold ring at the wrong end. . . .

“Oh? It wasn’t among the things they found, the things on him.”

“No.” Pennie hesitated, concentrating hard, conjuring up the scene. “He broke it in two and trod on it on purpose. I don’t know why.”

“*You* don’t know why.” In some way she could not define that sounded rude. The hard look had returned to his eyes, the distrust, almost dislike which he had shown when he came to have his fortune told. He took back the charm and slipped it into his pocket. Said, “You know, the odd thing is, I feel that we’ve met somewhere, though I can’t place it.”

Pennie shook her head.

“No, I don’t think so. I’d have remembered you.” Who could forget him, she thought. “I’ve a good memory for faces.”

“I suppose so. You must need it in your business.”

That was a dig; this time she was sure of it. She thrust her chin up, and said defiantly, “Of course! We don’t forget our clients.”

“I don’t suppose you do.” He said that in such a grim, hard voice that she was startled, looked up indignantly, but he had already turned away. “Well, we must be getting in. . . .”

He stood for a second in the corridor, flattening himself to let another passenger pass, and then was gone. Pennie sat still, puzzled and hurt, pondering that curious conversation. He had been so friendly at first, so comfortingly friendly! And then, all of a sudden, he had changed. His last words had been definitely hostile.

The train was slowing down; Pennie stared out of the window at the fields, under plough and blue with frost, a pale metallic blue against the rusty earth, the iron-cold colour of the leafless hedges and the naked trees. Somewhere between that chaffing opening and that rather bitter close she must have said something that offended him. But what? She could remember nothing. But what had she said—or done—to make him change like that?

She looked out with unhappy, troubled eyes at the station, as the train slid to a stop. Watching, she picked out the bulk of Kerr from the small group of passengers who were climbing out; he did not wait or look back.

Pennie gave a sigh and got up. She must collect her thoughts, get ready to face a fresh inquisition. She had never been to an inquest, but had an idea that coroners asked personal, irrelevant questions. She wished that Michael Kerr was not going to be there, listening to everything she said, watching her with that hostile look. Somehow, it hurt. She gave a sigh as she went up the platform.

She need not have worried. The inquest on Bobby Kerr, held in a rather stuffy school-house, was simple enough, short, almost indecently brief. The coroner, a local doctor, satisfied that, as a nurse, her evidence as to the boy’s state must be trustworthy, hurried through the formal questions which he put to her and let her go. Michael Kerr stated that his brother had had financial

worries. The jury gave their verdict without moving. Suicide while temporarily of unsound mind. In less than half an hour, Pennie found herself back in the station with forty minutes to wait for the next train up.

When it came, it was a cheap day train to London, packed with people coming up to do their Christmas shopping. Pennie who should have felt pleased at occupying a carriage with a very cheerful family of seven, found herself wondering whether she would see Kerr again at Victoria.

He was there, she caught sight of him ahead of her passing through the barrier, but he did not turn and she did not like to speak to him, since he might be upset. Waiting for a bus in Grosvenor Place, she saw him pass in a big car, driven by his black servant.

By ten past one she was back before the Luck Shop.

She lingered a moment, looking at the window, thinking of the events which had led her there. Luck—chance? But for the fact that she had taken that letter to Michael Kerr's flat, she would not have looked up the telephone book to find an agency in Jermyn Street; she would never have walked down that street that day past that window—or would she? Was it fate or luck?

She glanced up beyond the roofs where a faint, white impression of the moon, pallid by daylight, floated in the sky. Did everything depend on one's star? Was Madame Fiona right when she said that Venus, hidden by the pale glow of a winter sun, had sent her to the Luck Shop, to fulfil a destiny that makes the lucky planet's children deal in beauty, ornaments, jewellery and the fine arts? Had Madame *willed* her to come? Or was the whole thing the purest fluke, like that umbrella which had knocked off Kerr's hat?

She looked at the window, familiar now with its grey setting, its little grey card which she herself had set out that morning under an amethyst for February, a scarf that blended violet, blue and mauve. Pisces, the fishes, clasped the bag to match that scarf and they belonged to people born between February 20th and the same date in March. She was beginning to know the whole rigmarole now by heart! Her own birth sign was Gemini, the Twins, her stone the emerald that brings a happy marriage—far too expensive a mascot to buy on two pounds a week! But unaccountably depressed, she found herself wondering for the first time whether one of those scarves, the one with the fine stripes of yellow, green and orange, would really bring her happiness.

Absurd! How could a little bit of striped silk tied round one's neck act like a magnet, drawing one to the man one loved? It was rubbish, of course, like Madame's prophecies and her terror that morning at turning up an ace of spades with its sharp end pointing downwards. A pack of silly superstitions!

Pennie pushed the shop door open firmly, determined to keep the twenty-five and sixpence for a scarf inside her sensible dark-blue bag. Pushed it open and stood still.

There was a customer inside the shop, but behind the counter, in her own place, there stood a man.

A very slim, dark man. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### A BOX FOR TWO

#### 1

He turned, as Pennie came up to the counter, with a suave “Yes, madam?” And instantly the intense dislike which she had been nursing for the nebulous dark man of her future found a focus.

How dared he look at her like that?

His eyes swept over her slowly, lingering on her mouth. It was impertinent.

Her icy “I’m not a customer” merely made it worse.

He dropped his voice to a confidential, intimate whisper to say, “I ought to have known it was Pennie Cummin.” And made way for her to pass with a delighted smile.

Pennie turned her back on him and went up the shop to hang her coat and hat in their place, on the hook behind the teak screen.

Madame’s nephew, of course. He must be that, for he was selling the mascots and knew the necessary patter about them all. Madame’s nephew, Spanish, perhaps, but not a scrap like Fiona. Slim enough, well built (Pennie admitted it grudgingly), he was fairly tall, looked taller because he was so thin. Slim and dark, unusually dark, not only in the smooth, oily blackness of his hair, but in his skin, that had a sallow, dusky tint. The round shape of his head, his small, straight nose and the feminine slenderness of his ankles and wrists, taken with his quick movements, might have been those of a Hindu but for his eyes. They were light, in contrast to his dark skin startling; a bright and very luminous yellow like a topaz. But there was plenty of strength in the thin, brown, pointed hands which were stained gamboge with nicotine; they handled the heavy trays as though they were made of paper. And he knew his business.

Pennie, waiting idly behind the counter, had to admire the way he wooed his customer.

“No. I couldn’t wear it. I never wear green.” She had a high, peevish voice, bored and discourteous; a woman of fifty, just a shade too fat and thoroughly spoiled. Pennie knew the type; many of her customers during the

past week had been like that. Curling her lower lip down, stretching her plump neck round inside a three-skin sable tie, to ask, “How much is that?” without the least intention in the world of buying. Just a woman with time to waste, showing off before people she thought of as inferiors. Her puffy hand pushed away the peridot ring and Pennie suppressed a smile. Hardly that—a peridot to renew youth and protect women’s beauty!

“You feel green brings you ill-luck?” His voice was soothing, almost affectionate. “Then you have never worn it? Well, you don’t need it yet. Some day, perhaps, when you are older, you will change your mind, when you are thirty-six, forty, perhaps, you’ll come back to me and say, show me something, please, that will keep time away, that will wipe out wrinkles and bring back the brightness to tired eyes and keep muscles strong and firm, and you will buy a peridot or some charm stronger still. But to-day there is no need to buy that; green, brown, blue, they are all equally lucky for you, all your birth colours. This turquoise brooch, for instance, it will bring you luck at cards.”

Already the woman’s hand had stolen out again to touch the peridot, but he pretended not to notice. “No? You don’t like blue? Brown stones are dull, your hand is too white for those and in a ring they look cheap. But I have here a bag——” He broke off, for his customer was trying to put on the ring which was too small for her thick finger. “Let me do that for you.”

There was flattery even in the way he drew the ring on, coaxing it on to her hand as gently as a lover giving an engagement ring. He dared to let his fingers hold hers for an instant while he admired. “Ah! Now that does look lovely. It’s not many hands could wear that ring, madame. I’m only a tradesman and my business is to sell things but I’m an artist too, I love jewels, and I assure you it hurts me when I see a fine stone on a pair of bony, coarse hands. Fingers like yours—we call them Gainsbrough hands in the trade—set off a good stone. It’s a pleasure to see an oval ring like that on you.”

She almost purred; went out at last promising to return, the ring still on her finger, the brown bag under her arm, the turquoise brooch wrapped up inside the bag. It was not honest, but as sheer salesmanship it was superb. Locking up the cheque, he caught Pennie’s eye and laughed.

“Old trout!”

Pennie’s chin went up into the air.

“That ring looked awful on her finger. You were simply telling her lies!”

“Well, suppose I did?” There was nothing foreign about his accent, it was English enough. “That kind of old fool doesn’t want the truth! If I’d told her her hand was too shrivelled for jewellery she’d have gone out in a huff!”

It was quite true.

“All the same,” temporised Pennie, “I do try to persuade them to buy something that looks nice. I *try* not to tell them lies.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“She likes flattery. She *buys* it. I’ll bet you anything you like that all her servants cheat her and she has a doctor’s bill a yard long for visits she doesn’t need.”

“Even then—I don’t see——”

“Don’t you?” He had come quite close, was looking down at her with impudent yellow eyes which seemed so odd under tar-black hair. “Don’t tell me you’re a prude!”

“I don’t think so. It isn’t prudish to tell the truth.”

“Truth’s like petrol.” He smiled, showing perfect teeth. “All right to run on as long as you don’t leave out the oil—a little flattery.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Pennie stoutly.

He leaned back against the counter, looking at her lazily from between his thick black lashes, longer than her own. “You only tell the truth?”

“I try to.” Pennie was brisk.

“But you sell mascots. D’you believe, then, that a peridot can give that old trout back her good looks? Take off about ten years and two stone overweight?”

“N-no. Neither do you!”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I do!”

“How can it?” she demanded scornfully. “I mean, she eats too much and doesn’t take enough exercise. Wearing a ring can’t alter that!”

“Are you sure?” He shook his head from side to side slowly two or three times. “She’ll *think* it will. And there’s a lot, you know, in what people *think*. I’ve seen a woman older than that, as ugly, change in a single night until you might have thought she was a girl!”

“How could she?”

He laughed again, a tantalising laugh.

“Ah! Perhaps one day, when you grow old, I’ll tell you. . . .”

Before Pennie could reply, the door behind the screen opened and a girl came hurrying out of Fiona’s room; well dressed but very plain, with red hair, the sandy red that goes with a sallow skin; she looked troubled. She hurried through the shop as though there was no one in it, staring straight before her, and her eyelids were swollen as though she had been crying. His eyes followed her lingeringly until she vanished through the door.

Pennie was glad of the interruption, which gave her a chance to change the subject.

“I’ve had lunch on the train; I can take the shop now if you want to go out.” She used her most matter-of-fact tone.

“Oh, yes. . . .” He was still looking at the door.

“Does Madame know you are here?”

He did not answer that, and Pennie repeated it a tone louder.

“What? Oh, yes.” Even then he did not turn his head. Pennie looked round, wondering what made him stare. There was nothing in the door.

She felt a strong, quite unaccountable revulsion to him when he stared like that and asked impatiently, “Would you prefer me to take over?”

He nodded, got his hat and, on his way out, stopped by the counter, where she was tidying away the brooches and bags.

“Lock up and come out and have lunch with me.”

“I’ve had lunch. Anyway, I couldn’t do that,” said Pennie. “We often get customers now. Madame wouldn’t like it.”

“Shall I ask her?”

“No, thanks, really.”

He gave a soft laugh and went out. Pennie, left alone, looked down at the scarf she was folding—a silk one with fine yellow, green and orange stripes; she gave it a little vicious shake.

Fiona’s nephew! Well, she didn’t like him. If *that* was the slim, dark man

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“I don’t know about danger and money, and so on,” thought Pennie. “But if there’s going to be any marriage about it—well, it won’t be him!”

A hand touched her arm, she looked round and found Fiona close beside her. The old dancer was smiling.

“So you’re back safely! My dear, what did I tell you this morning? The knave and king of clubs falling together, and a diamond ace? Didn’t I say a reunion? And my nephew came back by air to-day! He is here again. You see, the fortunes *I* tell, they are always true!”

2

It was evident to Pennie that Fiona was devoted to her nephew; she seemed particularly cheerful, and stayed in the shop just so she might talk about him—his cleverness, his love of jewels and his salesmanship.

“This place was his idea,” she told Pennie. “Of course I own it, but all this”—her hands swept round to include the mascots, the grey walls and the window—“is Lal’s idea. Even the name, the Luck Shop, is his! It pleases me most because he thought of it for me. He said that I should tell fortunes, but that I must have my setting, my decor. I tell you, he has a sensitive heart, that boy!” There were tears in her bright, beady eyes, a new note in her voice, and Pennie felt sorry that she could not like Lal more for his aunt’s sake.

Even when he got back, the old dancer lingered, talking so openly that Pennie wondered how Lal could stand there complacently listening to praises of himself.

“The best nephew in the world!” Fiona declared emotionally, patting his hand while he stooped, gracefully enough, to kiss hers. “Like a son to me!” And then, with one of her kind, impulsive gestures, she included Pennie, sliding an arm round her waist and one round Lal as she said, “But now I have two children, yes! For I think of you as a daughter.”

“I’m not sure I want her as a sister!” declared Lal, and his eyes went to Pennie’s face charged with meaning.

Fiona only chuckled delightedly.

“I tell you, you must be careful of him!” she warned Pennie. “He is a good boy, but with women—oh!” She flung up her hands. “I tell you, I never have any money. Lal’s bills——”

All that day, watching him, Pennie could not help noticing how well he understood women, playing on their vanity. “You take the pretty girls, leave the others to me,” he commanded. Women who would never have let Pennie sell them jewellery, meekly allowed Lal to persuade them into wild

extravagances. They adored him and let him see it, and it was his obvious assumption that Pennie would adore him too that irritated her almost beyond endurance.

It was much to her relief that Pennie learnt that Lal did not sleep in the maisonette. He had a flat of his own, farther west, in Pont Street, and though he dined with Fiona that night at ten-thirty he rose to go.

“Go down with him, Pennie, and lock up,” Fiona commanded.

The stairs, straight and narrow, ran direct to the front door; Pennie waited on the last step but one while he struggled into his coat.

“Well, good-night—Pennie!”

“Good-night.” She made that brisk and businesslike; she was standing full under the lamp and he took her hand, looking up into her eyes.

“You won’t say ‘Good-night, Lal?’ ”

Pennie shrugged her shoulders.

“If you’d rather.” After all, surnames were stupid. She tried to withdraw her hand but his, slightly cold and dry like leather, held it fast.

“Say it, then!”

“What? Oh, good-night, Lal.” She gave her head an impatient little shake, trying to get free.

He said nothing, but for quite a minute stood there looking at her and smiling. She gave her hand a violent tug. He dropped it and turned away.

Pennie snapped the door shut quickly; it had a Yale lock and, uncertain as to whether he possessed a key, an impulse made her put up the chain. Going upstairs to bed, she felt particularly glad he was not going to sleep in the bath-dressing-room. She thought him over with distaste for quite five minutes while she undressed—and forgot him altogether, wondering whether she would ever have the chance to see Michael Kerr again.

If only Lal had stayed away! That was Pennie’s wish at the end of twenty-four more hours. In those first days, when she and Fiona had been quite alone, she had liked her job, enjoying the dim quiet of the shop, the lovely things she handled, and the old dancer’s kindness. Fiona had made things so easy; never scolding, always ready to explain what a particular

mascot meant or what to say to customers, and content to let Pennie arrange the show-cases as she liked best.

Now all that was changed. Fiona sat in her inner room while Lal took charge of the shop, criticising Pennie's work ruthlessly; making her feel clumsy, slow and rather stupid when he took the scarf which she had been painstakingly spreading and, with a flick of his brown wrist, dropped it on the stand in just the right way.

"There! Silly little thing, aren't you?" She could have borne a downright scolding better than his impertinent familiar smile, his way of taking little liberties she could not openly resent.

"You should use red nail polish." Lifting her hand and holding it. "The colour shows off silk better." Or "Wear your scarf this way—look." Deliberately letting his fingers touch her neck. "Now, that's better. Appearance matters in a shop."

Just within his rights yet leaving Pennie longing to revolt. The shop and even the maisonette above, which had been such a peaceful haven after work, now seemed more like a prison with Lal pervading both and no chance of escape.

She was almost glad when at last he gave her a chance to let fly.

It had been a busy day with people in the fever of their final shopping before Christmas. There was no time after midday for more than a few stray words of conversation, for the customers who came in were not buying for themselves, but selecting a long list of gifts which took some time to choose.

It was Pennie's own suggestion, that; and the idea had caught on. The little card in the window had been changed—there were two now, Lal wrote them out—which read, "Will this bring luck to her?" and "Will this bring luck to him?" The notion of a Christmas present in birthday colours, or a mascot to bring luck, seemed to please people, and one woman spent thirty-two pounds on bags, charms and trinkets for her friends. It was that "something different" which appeals at once to the jaded shopper.

Fiona, too, was entertaining friends that night, and Pennie, tired, slipped away early from the music and chatter to prepare Madame's herb tea; an intricate affair for it involved getting the kettle to boil, infusing three separate doses of the dried leaves which were sent direct from Spain, and mixing them when all three were cool. She was in the bathroom, getting out the herbs from the little white cupboard where Madame kept her drugs when she heard the door click shut and turned to find Lal there.

“What do you want?” Sister herself might have envied the cool brusqueness of that.

He leant against the door with that faint smile which annoyed her so much. A trifle patronising and more than a trifle impudent.

“You haven’t talked to me all day. Aren’t you going to give me a minute?”

“I’m busy.” She turned her back abruptly and began measuring out the herbs into the three glasses; a tablespoonful into each. Two hands closed on her arms, pinioning them against her sides. The spoon clattered on to the floor.

She stood quite still, rigidly, feeling his breath warm on the nape of her neck and expecting every minute he would kiss her there.

“Just—exactly—*what*—do you imagine you’re doing?” In the looking-glass over the table she could see his face over her shoulder. His eyes laughed at her.

“Look at me!”

“Sorry. I’m not playing. Would you mind letting go?”

“I’d mind horribly.” He changed his hands over so swiftly that it did not give her time to move, spun her round to face him. “Why be so unfriendly?”

Pennie put both hands flat on his waist and gave a violent shove that sent him reeling back against the door. Her eyes were blazing now.

“I don’t know where you learned your manners but I don’t like them. You seem to have some idea you’re attractive. You may be, but not to me.” She did not raise her voice at all, but kept it at a steely level. “I’m afraid I like my friends to have at least the rudiments of common decency.” That last phrase had been culled direct from Sister, only the word had been probationers in that case, and the unfortunate victim a flirtatious little thing from Hove.

“I didn’t mean to annoy you.” He was almost meek.

“You haven’t,” said Pennie sweetly. “It takes a full-sized person to do that.”

She turned and put the stoppers back in the three bottles, set them on the shelf between the milk of magnesia and the silver cyanide for cleaning Madame’s slippers. The door closed with a snap and, looking up at the glass, she saw that she was alone.

Uncomfortable but very necessary and effective. She had no more trouble of that sort with Lal; he became exaggeratedly polite down in the shop.

It was over Madame that the real row occurred.

It began on the 19th of December, a Tuesday. Pennie had felt worried all that day; something was wrong. Fiona and Lal had an air of mystery, they kept whispering together in low tones and breaking off when she came near and Fiona was unusually silent. Generally, when anything excited her, she talked without stopping, confiding in Pennie, the daily maid, her doctor, all her friends, even her hairdresser. But all that day she went about hinting, checking herself suddenly as if there were things she must not say.

“To-morrow I cannot see clients. Make no appointments. I shall be—away. For the evening, I mean—it is important.”

Fiona, restless, flitted from room to room, settling in her chair only to get up again at once, smoking incessantly in open defiance of her doctor.

Lal, too, went about with a shy smile, a cat-like glint in his queer yellow eyes. What was he planning? Nothing that would do Fiona any good, Pennie felt sure. He might kiss his aunt’s fingers gracefully and call her pet-names, but he was too vain, too shallow and too selfish to give any one real love. His behaviour over the big book of cuttings showed that.

Each morning he would go up to the maisonette while Pennie was getting out the stock, and having said good-morning to Fiona, would come down with his arms full of the picture papers the dancer loved. In any free minute during the day, he would look through these and take cuttings, which he pasted into a fat scrap book, kept in the desk. The pictures that he chose were always the same kind—they seemed to have a fascination for him, plain or elderly women. A touch of curiosity made Pennie ask, “Why do you keep those?”

His answer shocked her horribly.

“I’m looking ahead! One day, you know, when the old lady dies, this shop will be mine. I’ll have to tell fortunes then, and these will be useful!”

It seemed to Pennie utterly cold-blooded to calculate upon a person’s death like that; it confirmed her deep distrust of Lal. He took money, too, as if it were his own—helping himself out of the till. When Pennie protested, he only laughed.

“Oh, that’s all right. She knows. Anyway, I’m her heir, it’ll be mine one day, so what’s it matter? Aunt Fiona doesn’t mind.”

It made Pennie angry, knowing how casual Fiona was about money, how generous and careless of her own comfort. Was Lal now planning some fresh way to drain the dancer’s purse? Pennie’s grey eyes followed him all day suspiciously, wondering.

But it was on the morning of the 20th, Wednesday, that she really got an inkling of what was going on.

She had brought in the chocolate as usual, and was clearing Madame’s bed of a litter of cards, picture papers, cigarette stubs, letters and jewellery.

“Which of these shall I leave out?” She held up a handful of brooches. “This?”

It was a favourite with Madame, a little platinum set with square diamonds which she wore pinned on above her heart declaring that it was especially powerful to ward off all kinds of evil. But to-day she almost screamed.

“Not that! Not that, anyway! It would be—fatal!”

“Fatal to what?” Pennie asked, amused.

“To—what I have to do.” She clutched suddenly at Pennie’s hand, a childish gesture she always made when excited. “Child, I wish you’d come with me! That would be wonderful! I’ll ask Lal, I’m sure it wouldn’t matter! I was telling him only yesterday of *your* experience, I mean with the crystal, and he agreed you were—the type.”

“The type for what?” Pennie was suspicious now.

“Experiments. I can’t tell you. I’ll ask Lal. . . .”

She wouldn’t say anything more; went off to her bath all pent up with mysteries. But at seven that night, when Pennie was going through the show-cases, alone in the shop, checking and shutting them before locking up, she came with her eyes shining and her cheeks pink.

“There! It’s all settled. I asked Lal just now and he’ll fix it. Hurry and get that done. Child, you’re slow! Don’t fiddle! I’ll do that, you run and get your hat on; we’ll be off in half an hour.”

“This—it is old, old knowledge—wisdom that was old when people lived in Ur of the Chaldees.” Fiona’s eyes were glowing, her voice was muted, all the magnetism which had charmed the world when she had

danced was in her hushed gesture. It was as if the one tiny movement of her hand evoked these old, old things and made them live.

“Do you mean—devil worship?” Pennie was frankly horrified.

“*No!*” There was a world of scorn in that one syllable. “That—it is nothing, abracadabra, the sacrifice of a black cock, a white hen, a goat—that is for stu-pid peasants! No. This is a thing strange, old, powerful—we do not know how powerful!” She turned her gleaming eyes to Pennie. “The secret which men have tried to find through all the ages since first they hid in caves and hunted in forests—the secret which was known to old, wise ones once, long ago!” The slow voice, solemn, awed, impressed Pennie against her will. “The secret, perhaps, of life itself!”

Suddenly Fiona’s arm went round her.

“Come! Get your hat on! We will go!”

“No!” With a gasp, Pennie broke from that arm. “No. I’d rather not. Honestly, I—I don’t like those things. I don’t understand them.”

Fiona shrugged her shoulders.

“As you like.” She gave a deep sigh. Then she kissed the girl warmly, said very tenderly, “I’ve grown so fond of you, child. You’re so different, you think so little of yourself. I would like to share with you what I have learnt—but—well, perhaps that will come later.”

It was genuine, utterly sincere; Pennie did not doubt that. Madame believed with all her mind and soul in the strange medley of magic which she practised. Actress and charlatan, artist to her finger-tips, conscious at all times of the dramatic value of each word and gesture, at the core lay something fine, simple, generous and warm in the old dancer which had won Pennie’s heart.

“I’m sorry. I am really.” That was true. “I hate disappointing you.”

“You’re not.” She kissed Pennie again, cheerfully. “Amuse yourself well.”

But when Fiona had gone, driving off with Lal, Pennie, alone by the fire in the sitting-room upstairs, felt utterly ashamed.

She had been thoughtless, selfish; it would have cost her very little to go with Madame. She did not believe in the occult and it would not have troubled her, while Fiona might feel hurt. Pennie’s undisciplined conscience, thoroughly aroused, did its worst; instead of enjoying a quiet evening by the

fire she got out her workbox and, by way of penance, mended and then ironed some of Madame's clothes.

It was past one in the morning when, at last, she heard the car stop outside, the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut. She slid out of bed, into her dressing-gown, and ran into the sitting-room where she had a kettle on the boil, ready to make the herb tea. The glasses were ready, Pennie filled them all, let them infuse, then strained the mixture off. Fiona would be cold, if she would get straight into bed, drink the stuff up——

A sudden chill struck at Pennie's heart. What was she doing? She was taking a long time in coming upstairs. Pennie hurried out of the sitting-room towards the stairs.

A glance was enough.

The door was shut, but against the bottom step Fiona lay face downwards in a crumpled heap.

Hurling herself down three steps at a time, Pennie bent over the old dancer. She moved feebly at the girl's touch.

"Madame? What's happened?" Pennie was terrified. "Did you fall?"

Fiona shook her head, gasped between blue lips, "No. . . ." And fainted.

It was five minutes before she came to and could stand.

Little by little, coaxing, pleading, at times taking her whole weight on an aching left arm, Pennie drew the old woman upstairs, got her flat at last upon her bed. Under the light of the lamp, the paint on the dancer's face stood out in vivid splashes, the skin beneath looked grey; her lips were the colour of a stormy sky, her eyes were lustreless and her pulse was so feeble that for a moment Pennie's heart stood still. There was a heart tonic in the medicine cupboard, she fetched it and gave Fiona a dose, feeding it into her blue lips; when some of her colour had come back, she covered her and fled to the telephone.

The doctor, summoned, was angry.

"You shouldn't let her do things like this! She's been dancing about or something, her heart's not strong enough. You must keep her *quiet*! She'll be all right now, but one day this sort of thing will be the end of her!"

Pennie was so relieved to hear his verdict that she did not even attempt to defend herself.

Her wrath broke on Lal.

She was waiting for him ten minutes before the shop opened, didn't give him time to speak.

“What possessed you to keep her out like that last night? Didn't you see she was tired? Do you *want* her to die? Hadn't you even enough sense to bring her up the stairs? If I hadn't happened to be awake——” It took her ten minutes to work her wrath off to the lees.

He listened to it all without moving a muscle, with that superior, irritating little smile. When she had quite finished he said coolly, “If you think it's so dangerous, why didn't you come with her to protect her?”

Pennie turned her back on him abruptly and began to open up the shop.

But there was an elasticity about the old dancer's constitution, a wiriness bred of years of hard, muscular exercise, which defied even a weakened heart. By the next morning she was awake, alert and cheerful, spreading the cards as usual, chatting as though nothing had happened. She did not mention anything about her experiment to Pennie but insisted on getting up at midday and keeping an appointment to dine with friends. Perhaps she had noticed her tidy cupboards, perhaps she merely remembered that long, painful climb up the stairs, but she had an envelope in her hand when she came in from her small room at lunch-time.

“I'm dining out to-night and I want you to enjoy yourself. I want you to see a play.” She thrust the envelope into the girl's hands.

It contained a ticket for a box at Drury Lane.

“But, Madame, you shouldn't! I don't know any one in London who'd come with me. It's a box for two!” Pennie protested. “All my friends are nurses and they're only free on their day off.”

“Then sit in the box alone,” said Fiona. “It will be more dull, that is all. I'd send Lal with you, but he is dining, too.”

Pennie went alone, but not to a box. She arrived half an hour before the performance and returned the ticket, begging the box-office man to try to sell it again. Fortunately, being Christmas and a popular new musical show, he succeeded. Pennie, in the front row of the circle, thoroughly enjoyed the play, all the more because she had a matter of two pounds seventeen in her bag that would go back to Fiona.

She was on her way out, wedged in between two fat old sisters who, to judge from their conversation, went to plays as a penance, when far ahead of

her, among the crowd who came surging out of the stalls, she saw one special profile.

The two fat sisters found themselves suddenly jammed together; a heavy man tried to compress himself against the wall as Pennie shot through the crowd like an eel, writhing her slender body in and out in breathless haste.

“Mr. Kerr!” She touched his arm, trying to summon up a proper casual smile although her blood was tingling, her heart pounding madly.

Michael Kerr looked round. He looked full at her, turned away deliberately and, walking down the steps, went out of sight.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ROOM WITH BLACK PILLARS

#### 1

He had cut her dead!

Pennie stood on the pavement staring after him; unconscious of the crowd which jostled past her and the thin drizzle which was ruining her one good coat. She felt stunned.

“Taxi, miss?”

“What? No.” She turned and hurried away towards the bus stop, her head bent, her mind revolving in hurt, miserable bewilderment that one question—why? What had she done?

But although long after she was back home, tucked under the warmth of her eiderdown, the light out, she lay thinking, trying not to cry, she could find no answer. At their first meeting he had been so friendly, she remembered the moment when he laid his hand on hers; even in the train he had joked about his future—and now, this!

What had she *done*?

#### 2

It seemed to Pennie that no day passed so slowly as the twenty-third of December. True, the shop was unusually crowded; she and Lal were kept busy all day, so busy that she cut lunch, and drank a glass of milk brought down to her by Mrs. Ransom to save time. Trade was good, people who had been economical for a whole year were in the mood to have an extra good time at Christmas, rich customers who had left their shopping late came ready to buy anything at any price. But though she had barely a moment to herself, the day seemed endless. By half-past three her head was aching hideously and she felt sick; her back seemed to be made of wet putty with an ache in it and the stock phrases—“If you could tell me your birth date, madam?” and “A mascot to bring money, luck, or love?” stuck in her throat. She felt almost tired enough to cry.

To-morrow night the shop would shut at six, the shutters would go up for three whole days, but to-morrow seemed a year away. Her fingers fumbled,

fitting back the rings into their velvet slots and her eyes kept smarting with the pain in her head. To put the coping stone on everything, Lal was in high spirits. Choosing the plainest and most elderly of the customers, playing on their vanity like a violinist, drawing exactly what response he wanted and making Pennie feel stupid by comparison. Between customers he joked.

“A mascot, madam? Let me show you a leap-year penny, they should be particularly fortunate for you! Or a ring? I have one here, set with Newfoundland stone, grey and green, the colour of your eyes. We recommend it as a love charm to melt hearts of stone!”

“Oh, stop it!” Pennie stamped, nearly upsetting the tray of rings. “Don’t I get enough of that all day without *you*?”

“I’ve made you angry.” He was triumphant and malicious. “I must be growing up!”

“Do leave me alone!” She bent down angrily over the tray, thrusting the slippery rings in; her shoulders were shaking. Furious with herself and him, she struggled to control herself. He put a hand out, capturing one of hers, and she jerked it violently away. The tray toppled, scattering its contents to the floor. “There! Look what you’ve made me do!” She broke fairly into tears, dropping on her knees to gather up the rings. Lal knelt beside her, sweeping them into a heap.

“Pennie! Don’t! Don’t cry! I didn’t mean to make you cross.” He had his arm round her, was crushing her against him as he stroked her forehead. “Pennie, please——”

Her control had gone completely. Half-stupefied with pain, she did not even try to free herself, lay there limply in his arms, crying. His thin brown hand moved soothingly, moved up and out, down and up again with finger tips no more than touching her brow. Slowly her sobs subsided. She slipped from his arms and sat up, dabbing at her face.

“I—I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be a fool—I’ve got a filthy headache, that’s all. Oh, look, what a mess! Suppose a customer came in!” Trying to laugh, she shovelled up the rings, while he grovelled to collect one that had rolled under the counter.

“A headache? It’s your eyes, working all day by artificial light,” Lal declared. “It does affect them.”

He was very sober now, much nicer than usual, Pennie thought; it was as though her outburst had cleared the air. “You ought to have them looked at.”

“Heavens, no; my eyes never give me any trouble.” She stood up, reached for her bag and patted some powder in to her face, then stooped for the tray of rings.

“Let me do that.” He lifted it up and put it on the counter, asked anxiously, “Is the headache very bad?”

“M’m,” admitted Pennie. “My head feels as if it’d split.”

“Where’s the pain exactly?”

“Here”—she put her hands to her temples—“and right over the back to the nape of my neck.”

“Is that better?”

“Y-yes.”

The firm pressure of his fingers right at the back of her neck did seem to ease the headache, but she moved quickly from under his hand.

“Eyes,” he stated positively. “As a nurse you ought to know that! You should see an oculist when you have time, but I’ll cure your headache if you like.”

“How?” Pennie asked suspiciously.

“Just by touching you.”

She laughed and shook her head—another excuse, she guessed, to take one of those little liberties which she so much resented. But Lal was serious. A bunch of customers coming in interrupted them then, but when the shop was clear again, he returned to the subject.

“Some people *can* heal by touch. Oh, I know you laugh at those things, but it’s true. I could cure your head in a second. Let me try!”

“No, thanks.”

He smiled.

“Are you so much afraid of me?”

“Of course I’m not. Don’t be silly!” Pennie put up one hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the lamp above the window as she turned it on.

“You are, or you *would* let me try!” There was a mocking gleam in his yellow eyes. “You’re frightened of me because you *do* believe me, though you say you don’t.”

Pennie whisked round irritably.

“I *don't*. No one can cure a sick headache by touch!” she declared. “There’s nothing in all that stuff! You’d better keep it for your customers!”

“If there’s nothing in it, why won’t you let me try?”

It was logical and maddening; Pennie fell back on feminine unreason.

“Honestly, I’m all right now. Forget about it.” She tugged hard at a drawer, and it came out with a jerk that sent a lightning streak of agony all down her neck.

Lal, watching, saw her wince and said quietly, “Isn’t it rather silly to go through hours of pain when you can stop it? I’m not as dangerous as all that, you know!”

The throbbing ache was sickening; at that moment Pennie would almost have been willing to cut off her head to make it stop, but it was Lal’s little sneering smile that made her say brusquely, “Oh, all right, touch it away, if you’re so clever!”

“Come here!” He was standing under the bright lamp now. Pennie, already angry, obeyed warily. She half-expected him to attempt some impertinence, a kiss perhaps. But Lal’s hands were delicately gentle and impersonal as he laid them one on each side of her head, bending it slightly backwards so that she stared up towards the light.

“No, don’t shut your eyes! Now, do exactly as I say.” A surgeon might have issued those level, quiet commands. “Look straight at the light—now, towards my hand. Relax a little. That’s better. Now look straight at me. . . .”

His face was only a few inches away; for a long minute Pennie stared up into his eyes, seeing the tiny pin points of his pupils wax large, immense and black.

“There. You’ll be all right now.” His hands dropped suddenly and he turned away at once, as though he had lost interest, but Pennie stood still, marvelling.

“You know, it’s most amazing, my headache *is* gone!”

“It’s nothing. It’s simply a gift, like water-divining.” He was matter of fact. “I’m glad you’re better.”

“It’s wonderful,” said Pennie. The splitting pain had gone, even the heavy sense of depression had lifted; she felt fit, cheerful, ready for anything, as though refreshed by a long sleep. She added, rather humbly, “I’m sorry I was rude. . . .”

“That’s all right.”

He did not refer to it again. But though it was past seven-thirty before they got the last of the stray customers out by the little side door, and even then there were sales to be entered and cash to check, Pennie had no more trouble with her headache.

3

It was with an odd, flat feeling that she locked the Luck Shop at six o’clock on Christmas Eve; she had been too busy to make plans or consider her own holiday. Fiona had said nothing about off time, although she was going out herself that evening. It seemed very odd to realise that to-morrow, for three whole days, there would be no shutters to take down at nine, no window to dress or customers to serve. Pennie, fastening the long iron bar which clamped the shutters, felt flat and a little lonely as she looked forward to an empty evening. She did not want to think.

She went out by the side door and locked it, through the narrow passage into Jermyn Street where the cars were still streaming past the brightly lighted shops, the crowds hurrying home laden with parcels. Watching them with a touch of envy, Pennie wished that she had thought of asking Matron at the hospital whether she might join the Christmas Eve dance, and help unofficially to decorate the wards. It would have been pleasant to meet old friends and feel useful. But it was rather late now.

She shivered a little as she slid her key into the maisonette door. The passage lamp had not been turned on, the stairs looked long and dark; she groped her way up and, switching it up, found the sitting-room empty. The fire was very low; Mrs. Ransom, off early, had not cleared away lunch.

At least there was something to do!

Pennie was almost glad to get a tray, pack the dirty dishes on it, carry them off to the tiny cupboard of a kitchen and wash them clean. She was coaxing the fire up with a bit of newspaper when Fiona came in. The dancer had her hat and rather worn fur coat on over a high, black dress.

“I am just going off now. You will be all right here all alone?”

“Quite all right.” She managed to make that cheery, but Madame’s eyes were quick.

“I hate leaving you. You’re sure you won’t come with us?”

Pennie looked up with swift suspicion; Madame was drawing on her gloves, her coat hung open, and there was no little diamond cross on her black dress.

“Madame! You’re not going to—to go *there* again?” The girl was aghast.

“Oh, yes, of course!” Fiona spoke airily, but she looked as guilty as a child caught with forbidden sweets.

“Madame, *please!* You know how it upset you last time! Why, the doctor said it might kill you!” Pennie noticed the obstinate set of Fiona’s lips and her heart sank; the door had opened and Lal was there waiting. She whisked on him furiously. “You’ve no right to take her! You know the doctor said it was *terribly* bad for her!”

“That doctor, he is a fool,” said Fiona impatiently. “It is all no, no, no, with him! He tells me I mustn’t smoke, I mustn’t drink, take exercise even!” Then suddenly, wheedling, “Come with us, Pennie! You shall see for yourself. And with you there, why, if I am tired you can take me home!”

Pennie opened her mouth fully intending to refuse, but in the second her lips framed the word “No” she caught sight of Lal looking full at Fiona; an odd little thrill of fear ran down her back. Her momentary friendliness towards him evaporated in a rush of dread. There was a wary, calculating coldness in his eyes. What was he planning? What new way of getting the money he spent so lightly on those expensive suits, cigars, and his huge stream-line car? All her instinctive distrust of the man awoke—in spite of his hand-kissing and his tenderness towards his aunt he had not shown the least concern for her the other night!

“All right, I will come!” She said it defiantly, watching the effect on Lal. But he only smiled.

Fiona was delighted. “Splendid! Run and dress quickly—quickly, child!” And before Pennie was half-way to the door, “Put on your black gorgette!”

“But it’s an evening dress,” protested Pennie, looking at Fiona’s high one.

“That doesn’t matter. *Hurry!*”

Her window was open, it was a sleety, bitter night, and Pennie, shutting it, felt chilled through before she took off her clothes. Her hands were trembling as she got into her black evening dress and added a short, black velvet cape, both made by herself; on a sudden impulse, she rummaged in her painted box of treasures and got out a little silver cross she had once

worn at her confirmation. It was on a silver chain and she fastened this to her shoulder-strap inside her dress, letting it hang hidden. She was half-ashamed of the impulse yet it gave her some sense of security as she ran out in answer to Madame's shrill, "Pennie! Are you ready? Hurry, child!"

Lal's big cream-coloured car was outside the door; they got into it and drove down Jermyn Street into Piccadilly, turning south over Lambeth Bridge. Pennie was soon confused and bewildered among the many brightly-lit streets and had no notion which way they were going. Madame for once was silent, lying back with her eyes closed.

They were at last on a wide arterial road when Fiona said contentedly, "We shall soon be there."

There were houses, bungalows, tea-shops, all along the road; Pennie found them rather comforting. They had a solid suburban quality that made it hard to believe that they were going into anything particularly menacing. But presently the suburbs gave way to open country and when they stopped at last it was on a bare and lovely stretch of moor, before a low, white building with a modern outline, a flat roof, a semicircular entrance supported on about a dozen short pillars, the whole thing floodlit and looking rather gay.

The doors were shut, but the place looked no more alarming than any of the road-houses they had passed, rather better kept than most with its scarlet urns filled with black, artificial shrubs. There were three other cars ahead of them, and Pennie, waiting, saw the people getting out.

They too, did not look alarming, for they were all women. A party of three extraordinarily ugly girls who were evidently sisters and well-off, to judge by their car and the sophisticated smartness of their dress. Pennie was glad to see that they wore evening dresses, black like her own; it was only a second glance that she noticed all three were albinos. A dark, sad-looking young woman with a hooked nose and a noticeable black moustache, two older, jaded creatures, rather crudely dressed and painted to the eyelids, and a very fat one in a flowing black cloak, swart and vaguely like a toad, looked less promising. Their own party made up ten, and while Pennie got out another car drove up, disgorging a tall, fair, haggard woman with intense eyes and a girl who looked half an idiot. They all passed in one by one, each showing something to the keeper of the door, a man all in black robes like a monk, mysterious with his grey face and pale, abstracted eyes.

Pennie, following Fiona, felt the dancer catch her hand and thrust something into it; she whispered "Show it!" and Pennie obeyed, holding her

open hand up to the doorkeeper. It was dim in the hall and she could not see the pass she held as the door shut behind them, but she slipped it into her bag. They followed the man in black down a passage that was very badly lighted and through a low, curtained door. Pennie, open-eyed, looked round her.

The room seemed small, although it was difficult to be sure about that, for the walls were black, everything, even the smooth stone floor under her feet, even the shade over the very bright light which hung at one side above a row of chairs that were black too. Walls made of shiny black glass, with dull flooring like black cement, a dull black lampshade lined with silver and six tub chairs painted black on each side of a high one like a throne made the place odd enough, but the other people were evidently accustomed to it all, for they moved without speaking as if they knew precisely what to do. Pennie, watching, copied them.

They moved in the same order as they had come in, each standing in front of a chair and Pennie found herself by the innermost one, next to the high throne. The brilliant light poured down on them with a hot, blinding radiance and the room was very warm.

As they stood there, stiffly upright, Pennie could just make out the shape of two squat pillars in the two corners, but the bell-like shade over the lamp concentrated all the light into a circle, leaving the darkness beyond dense and thick. Fiona turned her head, Pennie, doing the same, saw that all the other people were looking at the high centre chair eagerly. Then, as if obeying an order, they all sat down. The centre chair was still empty.

After the cold night outside, the heat of the room sent a lazy warmth through Pennie as she waited. The light went out suddenly, leaving them in pitch darkness. All sounds, even the sound of breathing, died away.

There was complete silence, a taut silence, broken by Pennie as she gave a gasp.

For there was light now, a very faint blue light between the pillars and in this patch of light something was floating, a cloudy something which took shape there, under their eyes. A girl.

Very lovely she was, with vivid red hair, skin as clear as milk, a thick, wide, scarlet mouth and eyes that, long and narrow, glinted green. Barefoot, she wore some kind of filmy stuff which floated out; and she was dancing. Not with any violent movement but swaying, slow and rhythmically, as though each step came rippling from her outstretched arms towards her

naked feet. Dancing quite noiselessly and with an amazing, an *inhuman* grace inside that faint blue patch of light; dancing with head flung back, lips parted, rapt, unseeing eyes.

*Empty eyes.*

A cold shiver trickled down Pennie's spine, her hands tightened on the arm of her chair. For the girl's eyes were not those of a living person, they had no thoughts behind them, no consciousness. And as Pennie watched it seemed as though the narrow green eyes vanished altogether, leaving only dark hollows.

It wasn't possible, of course, could only be an optical illusion, but it seemed as though, dancing faster, even the girl's white skin was growing transparent until one could trace the bones of her feet and those wide-flung arms. She was moving faster now, whirling round, spinning, while her arms were not white and rounded any longer, they were bony, shrivelled. The dance slowed and her face was changing—turning old and——

*“Oh!”*

Pennie ducked her head, trying to blot out that horror, and looking up again found that the figure had vanished. The blue light was still there, but it was spreading now, evenly, getting stronger—a hard, blue-white glare as vivid as sheet lightning which seemed to pour from some concealed source high up in the walls.

And, as the light grew, the room seemed to grow with it, the black walls stretched out farther, two more pillars sprang out of the darkness, then another two—two long rows of pillars each with a huge black urn filled with flame-coloured flowers at its base until, by that harsh uncanny light, Pennie could see she was not in a room at all. The place was a swimming-bath!

Black walls and black stone flooring, black pillars and black roof had rendered the unlit space invisible; the bath itself was black so that the bath itself lay like a huge sheet of black glass. A long bath with, at the far end, the white statue of a satyr.

He had a laughing face and both his hands, flung wide, formed a fountain; for as Pennie watched ten little jets of water shot into the air and fell with a tinkle into the bath, sending long ripples down the water, breaking the reflection of the blue light and scarlet flowers; the effect was bizarre but rather beautiful.

Glancing sideways, Pennie could see Fiona sitting in an uneasy pose, with strained eyes and haggard face; beyond her the other faces had the

same tense look. An odd tightness seemed to fasten round Pennie's throat—they were waiting for something, but what? She looked out beyond the satyr at the far wall, but could see nothing.

Suddenly without sound or warning the fat woman at the other side lurched to her feet. She went, reeling grotesquely like a clown, catching at the air, stumbling, her cloak flying out and her grey, short hair on end; but Pennie could not laugh. It was horrible, like the antics of an idiot. The three albinos followed, then the two older women with the paint on their faces showing in blobs under the hard blue light. And they were dancing, clumsily, in and out among the black pillars and the red flowers, five of them, six, seven——

“Madame!” Pennie clutched at Fiona's arm. The old dancer shook off her fingers as though they were made of paper. She stood up, flung back her head, tossed both arms in the air and rose on the points of her toes.

“Madame, *please!* You know you mustn't dance.” In her anxiety, Pennie cried out loud; her voice went echoing among the pillars with a weird effect as though a hobgoblin were laughing, but no one of the long chain of dancers looked back. It was as though they had not heard. “Oh, please, let's get out of this!”

Pennie tried to rise and fell back as Fiona thrust her down impatiently. Watching, with a sort of sick horror, she saw the old woman go tripping stiffly, with practised steps made jerky by muscles that were no longer young. The chairs were empty now, but for the hooded figure of the doorkeeper who sat bent and still at the far end, and Pennie, gripping her chair, found herself watching with an odd, uncomfortable fascination as the queer dance went on.

There was no music but the soft tinkle of falling water, no sound but the echoing feet of the women—ten women who now danced faster, more wildly, as they threaded their way in and out the pillars, stooping towards the water to catch it up in handfuls, flinging their arms out frenziedly. The hard blue light beat down upon their ugliness and age and Pennie, watching, shivered, for it seemed to her as though Fiona's face, too, had changed; as though whirling past the beady eyes had lost their brightness, vanishing in their dark sockets; as though the eyes of all the ten dancers were empty, lifeless, without soul.

“It's morbid—filthy! I must get her away!” thought Pennie desperately; but when she tried to move it was if a gigantic arm held her fast in her chair, as if her eyes were glued to the dancers against her will.

And now the water was stirring, the rippling surface of the bath was broken in the centre; something was coming up, something rounded, rough, dark—that glistened wetly, while the crazy circle of dancers drew in towards it, whirling, stamping, holding out their arms, crying now in gasps of, “Aaah! Aa-aa!”

Pennie, fighting the invisible force which seemed to hold her in her chair, caught sight of Fiona’s face, clay-white and ghastly. With a tremendous effort she dragged her eyes away, forced herself to look at the opposite wall, concentrating with all her will-power.

“I *must* get up, *must* get her away——” Staring at the black wall beyond the satyr, it seemed to vanish, leave only a dark, cavernous depth in which twinkled two bright sparks of yellow light.

Windows or lamps? She wasn’t sure; as she stared she saw them grow bigger, huge, two discs of yellow flame that rotated one against the other. They dazzled her, but she could not shut her eyes; in a sudden rush of fear, she put her hand to her shoulder to find the thin chain. It was gone. Her scalp was tingling, a trickle of cold running down her spine, her ears seemed to fill with the insistent clatter of stamping feet; the flames were bigger, bigger—they had swallowed up the movement in the water, the long vista of the bath, the frenzied dancers, the white satyr, even the cavern wall. There was nothing left but a whirlpool of yellow flame—and she was falling headlong——

With a violent effort of will Pennie shut her eyes. Spent and trembling, she realised that she was upright, standing on her feet. She dragged her eyes open and saw she was not looking down the pillared room any more—it lay behind her; she was right inside the dark cavern beyond.

And the two lights had gone.

From somewhere in the darkness beyond her, she could hear some one sobbing very softly, hopelessly.

With an effort, groping, Pennie moved towards that human sound.

Her hand touched the wall; it gave under her fingers and a rush of cold clean air blew in her face. A door! She pushed it open and found herself outside, upon the terrace facing the road.

Sick and dizzy, she leaned against the wall; the cold air was like a tonic, bracing up her shaken nerves. Out here, facing the steel-grey ribbon of the

road, the little tubs, the parked row of cars, she felt sane again, normal. There was devilry going on in that room behind her, but she knew now it was human devilry. She felt less afraid than angry. Furious with herself for letting her nerves get the better of her, more furious with Lal for bringing them there. What part he had played in that scene inside she did not know, but of one thing she was certain—she must get Fiona out. Drawing a deep breath, she turned back to the door, pushed—and found it locked.

Well, there was another way in! Pennie’s teeth clicked shut firmly. She ran round the pillared porch and found the front entry—a sliding door this, like that of a garage, and shut too. There was no bell and though she pushed at it with all her might she could not make it move. She jumped off the end of the porch, ran round the end of the house, but could see no other door, reaching the small one by which she had come out, beating upon it with her fists.

“Hallo! What’s up?”

She turned quickly and saw Lal. He was leaning out of the parked car and watching her; there was a cigarette in his mouth. He looked at her with a faint smile.

“Tired of it already?”

“How long’ve you been here?” Pennie demanded.

“Me? All the time. Why?”

“But you came in with us!” she insisted, frowning.

“No, I didn’t. I saw you in.”

“But—you were in the passage!”

He shook his head, laughing. Said practically, “Look here, it’s no good banging on that door, they never answer once the show begins. Where’s Aunt Fiona?”

He was so natural, so innocent about it that it was hard to doubt him, yet Pennie felt convinced that he had been behind her when she went up that dark passage. She said, “I must get in. She’s in there still——”

“She’ll come when she’s had enough,” he said coolly. “You’ll catch cold. Do get into the car and get warm.”

“No, I’m going to find her,” said Pennie.

“Want me to come with you?”

“No!” She did not know why she answered that so rudely; perhaps the caressing tone of his voice. But though she walked right round the house again she could not get in. Lal had left the car; he watched her efforts to get in with an amused twinkle.

“You’d much better come back to the car.”

There was nothing else for it. She was cold and standing in the porch did no one any good; anxious now about Fiona and cross, she followed him back to the car. He tucked her up tenderly in the rug.

“That’s better. Have a cigarette?”

“No, thanks.” Pennie was brusque. She was sure he must know how to get in. She felt that she had been out-generalled, and chafed against having to sit there helpless while, inside, Fiona might be going through some such devilment as that which had overtaken her! No wonder the dancer came back tired! Pennie herself felt spent, now that the excitement had worn off. All her latent Puritan blood was up in arms at the sensuous trickery she had witnessed. That red-haired girl—an hallucination, of course, but ugly, morbid, rotten! She said with prickly chillness to Lal, “You ought to know better than to bring her here!”

“Here? Bad, is it?”

“You know it is.”

He laughed softly. “*You* went in, I didn’t!”

“You know perfectly well what’s going on!”

He said—it sounded genuine: “I give you my word, I haven’t a notion what you saw!”

Pennie only snorted; there is no other word for that crisp sniff of disbelief.

Then, with a little cry, “Oh!”

“What is it?” He looked down curiously as she swooped towards the floor.

“Nothing.” But there was relief in Pennie’s voice as she hid away the little silver cross on its silver chain. It explained at least one of these mysteries. The chain must have snapped, have slipped down under her dress when she got out of the car. Well, it was there again and safe. It gave her a quite unaccountable comfort. She wondered if Lal had seen it, but he was looking now towards the house.

“They’re coming out.”

She switched up the blind to peer; the big door was open, she could see them in the hall, a whole group of them, including Fiona. Standing there talking and sipping drinks in the most natural way, like a party of friends at a convivial evening. Pennie, scanning them as they finished their drinks and came on to the porch—they were all there—the fat woman in her black cloak, the three albinos, even the doorkeeper. All, except the girl with red hair.

Fiona came out and got into the car.

“Ah, Pennie, there you are! I wondered what had happened to you. You got tired?” She waved in the most ordinary manner to the group still drinking in the entrance and, as the car slid off, added, “A bad evening, Lal. We had the dance of Death and got the water maker started and then the whole thing broke.”

“Get any help?” There was a sub-note of acid mockery in his voice. He was driving in the front seat and did not turn his head.

“A little only.” Fiona sighed deeply. “The road is long. At least I am not quite so tired. . . .”

But tired enough, thought Pennie; her fingers, stroking Fiona’s wrist, had found the pulse, beating very faintly. She said fiercely, “I wish you wouldn’t go there! It’s very bad for you and—beastly. You’re worn out.”

“It shocked you, yes?” Fiona laughed softly, rather tenderly. “You don’t understand, child. You are still young. If one would learn to use a power, a great power, one must work. It is like dancing, an art to be learned—first the exercises, hurting the muscles, the long, long hours of practice when one could cry with one’s aches, the same thing to do time after time till it is perfect—and then, at last the première—success—the whole world at one’s feet!” Her hand closed on Pennie’s, convulsively, as she repeated, “Success! You don’t know what that means—to hold a great, packed house so that the people there don’t breathe! To hold them and hear that first long sigh as you sink into the curtsey—a deep breath like this—and then—Encore! Brava! The flowers, the triumph! Ah!” Her voice sank to a whisper. “To be young, beautiful, to have the whole world at your feet—to be young *again!*”

To Pennie it was like a thin ray of light, that one word.

Again! So that was it! The dark room, the queer, ugly, ageing women, the red-haired girl’s dance—it all took on meaning suddenly. To be young again, beautiful! Somehow Lal had persuaded his aunt that by this folly she

could get back her youth! Or did Lal believe it too? Was that why he seemed so indifferent to the effect of all this overstrain on Fiona? Did *he* believe, too, that in that darkness and the dancing there was some magic that could wheedle ugliness and age away? Did he really believe that he could give the old dancer her heart's desire, win back her youth, her triumphs over again? What had Fiona meant when she said that the whole thing broke—had she expected then and there to grow young? Or was there something more, something that hadn't happened, something—rather horrible?

Pennie, remembering the thing which had stirred in the water, remembering the sound of sobbing in the blind dark, let her hand tighten protectively upon Fiona's cold one; she was glad now that she had gone. At least she knew what they were doing, might persuade Lal, if not Fiona, of the risk the old dancer ran when she got worked up to this pitch of excitement. If she herself was dead tired, what must it do to a woman whose heart was already weak?

"I won't say anything to-night," decided Pennie wisely. "We're both tired. It's silly and morbid, of course, but I suppose there's no real harm in it, except that it tires her out."

She was glad when the car stopped and she could help Fiona into bed. More than glad to shut her own door at last and be alone. She had opened her bag to empty it when something rattled on the glass top of her table. Pennie stared, the colour ebbing from her face.

The thing which lay there was a mascot, a little round piece of dark wood carved into a ring that enclosed a spreading black tree. . . .

5

At nine o'clock on Christmas morning Pennie let herself out into Jermyn Street. Madame was still sleeping. Mrs. Ransom, come for half a day only, was busy tidying the flat. Pennie shut the door a trifle breathlessly and turned to walk briskly towards St. James's Street.

Her mouth was pursed firmly, her chin up; there was an unusual glint in her quiet grey eyes. A hint of happy triumph. The little black tree lay inside her bag.

Worth it—and worth it twice over! She would have paid more than that one evening's discomfort to have that tiny piece of wood that gave her the right to walk to Michael Kerr's flat. Remembering the mascot which had been broken, the second one which he had shown her on the train, she did not doubt that she had here the key he wanted, the key to Bobby's death.

What link there was between that mascot, the black room with the pillars and the boy's death she could not guess, but with that, she had a right to go to Michael, a chance to ask why he had changed. . . .

But would he be there? Would he be away for Christmas?

She hurried, flushed with excitement and the chill air, down St. James's Street into St. James's Square and to the left; the cul-de-sac was very quiet on this quiet morning. The be-medalled porter, in shirt sleeves, was busy with a broom, and apologised for both.

"I didn't expect visitors so early, miss, not to-day. A merry Christmas to you. Mr. Kerr? No, miss, he's not away. . . ."

The negro servant came to the door in khaki shorts and a white apron.

"Misseh Kerr? Ya-as, miss. He have 'em breakfuss. I go see. . . ."

Pennie, standing in the hall with its high shelves of books, could hear Michael Kerr's voice: "Who? *Who?*" Then a rush of words in an unknown tongue.

"Come!" The servant beckoned. Pennie found herself trembling.

A dining-room, this, festive with a bright fire, table set with silver and holly set up above the pictures. Michael Kerr was standing by the table.

"You wished to see me?" It came bleak as a north-east wind.

"Yes!" Pennie's eyes were shining as she took the little black tree from her bag, laid it on the table. "I came to bring you this."

He picked it up.

"I see." The tone was low, cold and incisive. "But I think not—this time! Abdul! Geeb' askari! Go and fetch the police!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### BIG MAGIC

1

Police?

The door shut on the negro; involuntarily, Pennie started towards it, but Kerr was quick, surprisingly quick.

“Oh, no!” His back was to the door. “You’ll stay here now until the police come. You won’t get away with it this time!”

“Are you quite mad?” Pennie stared at him blankly, pale and trembling. “First you cut me and now you behave like this! I don’t understand!”

He said contemptuously, “You do it very well, but I’m afraid it won’t wash. I’ll admit you took me in properly with all that stuff about my past, only I happen to know how you got hold of it!”

“You mean—you’re trying to prosecute me—for telling fortunes?” gasped Pennie. Until that minute she had forgotten that there was a law forbidding such things.

“I’m giving you in charge”—he was looking at her grimly as a judge—“for blackmail.”

Pennie went whiter than the tablecloth behind her.

“You’re mad!”

“Am I? I suppose you’ve never seen this before?” Negligently he pulled an envelope from the pocket of his old tweed coat, held it out towards her; a commonplace manilla envelope addressed to Robert Kerr, Esq. Pennie stared at it.

“No.”

“I see.” He was dangerously polite. “And I suppose you didn’t drive my brother to suicide, either?”

“Oh!” Her hand flew up as though to ward off a blow. “How *can* you \_\_\_\_\_”

“You travelled up on that train to blackmail him!” Michael was leaning against the door, looking at her with cold, bitter contempt; he spoke with an absolute conviction.

“It’s not *true!*” Pennie broke loose now, her eyes blazing. “I *didn’t!* I’d never seen him in my life before! I didn’t even know his name!”

“No? That’s funny. He knew you!” Then with a sudden icy gust of fury, “Nothing’s going to give me greater pleasure than to put you in jail!”

Pennie could not speak. She snatched the envelope out of his hand, tugged out a sheet of paper. An ordinary flimsy sheet of typewriting paper with two lines scribbled in a faint, spidery hand: “I think, if you don’t care to pay up, your fiancée may. Think it over.” There was no signature.

“I didn’t write this!” Pennie looked up in utter bewilderment.

He left the door and came close to her, menacingly close.

“No? Look inside the envelope!”

She shook it and something fell into her hand—a little black tree. Very slowly, Pennie raised her head and met his angry and accusing eyes.

“*No!*”

He only said grimly, “We’ll see whether the police agree with you.”

He was moving back to the door when Pennie stopped him with an imperious gesture.

“Don’t worry! You needn’t stand there! I’m not going to run away!” She faced him defiantly. “I’ve told you the truth. I’d never seen your brother before, I didn’t know anything about these mascot things till last night. Won’t you believe me?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. You see, I happen to know you’re lying.” He was almost as white as Pennie herself. “I happen to have found out that the whole business started when *you* told Bobby’s fortune!”

“Oh!” The relief was almost too great; the blood surged into her face. “Oh! But I’ve only *been* there a fortnight! It was coming *here*, with that letter, which took me to the Luck Shop! I’d never heard of it till that day!”

He stared at her, completely disconcerted.

“I—don’t understand——?”

“I can prove it! I’d been in Folkestone for eight months, living with my uncle, until the day I came up with him in the train.”

He repeated, “I don’t understand. The shop *belongs* to you. Do you mean you’ve just bought it?”

“No. *I’m* not Madame Fiona.”

“But you said——”

“I know. I had to. Fiona was ill. Quick, give me a pencil!”

He obeyed unwillingly, puzzled. She took it and wrote across the envelope—copying the address. “There!”

He looked down doubtfully at her wide, rounded handwriting, comparing it with the spidery script above.

“Oh, please, *please*—don’t you see I’m speaking the truth? Won’t you believe me?” Pennie was fighting not only for her safety but for his trust. She was no longer angry, only desperate. “I came here to-day to help you! *Can’t* you believe that?”

He said slowly, “Yes. I don’t understand it, but—I do believe you.”

“Saat-el-bey, askari hena.” The door had opened; the negro stood there panting. Behind him was a tall policeman.

“Just a moment.” Michael Kerr stepped out and shut the door.

## 2

Pennie looked again at the blackmailing letter. A common sheet of paper, the sloping writing in a very dark velvet ink, the two little trees were exactly alike in every detail. She could only tell them apart by the fact that hers lay nearer Michael’s chair.

Hers, she knew now, was a pass of admittance to that show last night—but macabre and unwholesome as the séance had been, there was nothing in it which could lead to blackmail! Yet Bobby had died, his death doubly linked to the little black tree, the blackmailing letter—and the Luck Shop!

Outside the door she could hear Michael talking to the policeman. Suppose he had not believed her! As it was, would he be only half-convinced, unfriendly always?

The door shut with a click. Kerr came forward slowly.

“I’ve sent the police away.” He looked at Pennie gravely and very sternly. “Suppose you sit down now and tell me exactly how you got this thing”—he touched the second little black tree—“and why you came here?”

“All right.”

Kerr sank into a chair beside the fire, while Pennie chose one opposite. There was a sort of armed neutrality in his manner as he asked, “You say you’ve only been at the Luck Shop a fortnight?”

“Yes.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Easily. I can give you my aunt’s address. There are at least four other people in the house who can prove I’ve been there for over eight months.”

He accepted that with a nod, asked, “Then why did you say to me that you were Madame Fiona?”

Simply, truthfully, Pennie told her story; she could not worry about Fiona’s feelings now, to be suspected of blackmail was too serious. Michael Kerr listened intently until he came to her moment at the crystal.

“I know that bit.” He was smiling. “You remembered all about me, didn’t you? I knew I’d seen you somewhere, but I didn’t guess until that day at the inquest when you said that you were a nurse. I remembered then. You were a probationer in the next ward, weren’t you, when I was there? You used to bring round soup when we were all on the balcony.”

“Did I? I don’t remember you.” Pennie netted her brows together.

“I wasn’t one of your patients. I’d a private room, but I’ve often seen you. I suppose you heard about my leg and so on from Nurse Eva?”

“Perhaps I did—I don’t remember it.” Pennie shook her head. “Oh, I believe—yes! I do remember her telling me about a patient who’d smashed motor racing——”

“You see! Subconscious memory!”

“I suppose so.” She felt too puzzled to be shy with him, although he was looking at her now in quite a different way, no longer doubtful, very friendly. “Honestly, I didn’t remember it at the time—or connect her with you——”

He smiled. “Your subconscious mind did. Perhaps I was thinking of *you* a lot too—thought transference!”

Pennie grew pink.

“Why? Were you?”

“I was. Y’know, you puzzled me all along. You didn’t fit in with that crystal business or—those.” He jerked his head towards the table and the mascots. “There’s too much that’s”—he hesitated, chose a word—“Pennsylvania about you for that! Do you know what I mean?”

She laughed.

“I think so. You mean—I look a bit too honest?”

“More than that. Too—clean. I don’t know about fortune-telling, there may be something in clairvoyance, we may be able to see thoughts, or have some power we don’t understand,” he admitted it reluctantly; “but that shop—the Luck Shop, all those mascots and so on—the occult—it’s ugly, unhealthy. Don’t you think so yourself?”

“Perhaps it is. . . .” Pennie was not so certain. Added in defence, “I just couldn’t *help* telling your fortune! Besides, how could I know about your hat?”

He laughed. “Pure fluke, that! Hats do blow off on windy nights, you know. Never mind! You got the rest right, anyway, all except the lady. She doesn’t exist. What did you do after that?”

But when she got to her experience in the pillared room, his face grew dark, his fingers tapped out a tattoo upon the arm of his big chair.

“That’s bad!”

“Why?” asked Pennie. “I mean, it was rather nasty, but——”

He said, as if to himself, “It explains a lot.” Then suddenly, “You’ll want to know my end—about Bobby.”

“If you can tell me,” she admitted.

“It’s not a pretty story.” Michael Kerr’s rather angular face looked suddenly stern and set. “But what you’ve told me puts it in a new light. Lord knows what the boy was up against! Anyway, it began last July. He’d just got engaged to a girl, a really nice girl, but her parents objected and as a matter of fact, I did too. They were both awfully young; she’d some money of her own, but Bobby wouldn’t have any until he was twenty-one—he hadn’t even got a job. He wanted me to increase his allowance—I wish to heaven I had! I wouldn’t. You see, it seemed to me a bit—rough on the girl.”

He was looking so sad and troubled now that Pennie felt again that longing to offer him comfort, but no words were adequate. She sat very still, her hands folded in her lap. After a moment, Michael went on, "Well, her father wouldn't hear of an engagement, and lately they just couldn't stand it. They made up their minds to run away and get married in spite of every one—mind you, I knew nothing of all this. I only learned it from the letter you brought me. They agreed that the girl would come up to London, to her sister's house, and Bobby would be waiting with a special licence. She had come up to meet him that night, the night Bobby threw himself out of the train."

"You don't know why he did it?" Pennie was seeing again the boy's unhappy face, the little black revolver.

"No. In the letter he just said that he was in a hopeless mess, that he'd never straighten things out, and that it was the only thing to do—the only fair thing to her." Michael was looking into the red heart of the fire, as though he might read there the answer to the puzzle. "That's all I know—from him."

"But, if she loved him, and they were going to get married——"

"I know. Doesn't make sense, does it? The day you came here I went and saw the girl. She couldn't tell me much, poor thing, she was all to bits. But I gleaned this much—and this is where you come in. Bobby had been seeing her secretly—her father had forbidden them to meet—and at their last meeting he was in rather a queer state, all worked up and excited. He told her that he had been to a Madame Fiona, who had told his fortune and told him that he was going to have a chance to make money in a strange way and immediately. A lot of money, but he must be prepared to risk capital. Well, she had been right; the chance had come. Bobby refused to tell the girl just what it was, as he had promised to keep it absolutely to himself—so he *said*. But he was very worried because he could not get hold of the capital. If the chance came off it would make it easy for them to get married. To cut a long story short, he took her capital—about two thousand pounds, fixed up to elope—and she never set eyes on him again. You see, it's not a pretty story. . . ."

"No," admitted Pennie. "But I don't believe it!"

He looked up suddenly.

"Why do you say that?"

“Well, I saw him that night, and—well, that’s why I didn’t give the letter to the police. He didn’t look—the kind of person to do anything *really* wrong. . . .”

Michael nodded. “He wasn’t. He was white all through. That’s why—I don’t understand it. He wouldn’t have taken her money unless he thought he was on to a sure thing, but—well, I’ve been through his papers. The money was drawn in a lump sum two days after she gave it to him. And that letter was among the papers in his pocket.”

“You mean, you think he paid it out in blackmail?”

“I don’t know what else to think,” said Michael Kerr frankly. “I hate to think it—you see, I knew my young brother pretty well, but—well, there were no stocks, shares, *nothing*, not even a receipt for that money!” He added slowly, “No clue at all, except that one mention of a fortune told by Madame Fiona.”

“Oh! That’s why you came? You didn’t really want your fortune told?” That cleared up a lot; she had wondered what had brought him, he didn’t seem to be the type of person to be attracted by that swinging sign.

“No. I wanted to have a look at the shop, see if I could find out anything. I wanted to see this Madame Fiona——”

“You thought *Fiona* was blackmailing him?” Pennie shook her head. “Honestly, you’re wrong there! I know her really well now, and whatever else she is, she’s not like that. She’s much too tender-hearted!”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Whoever was harrying Bobby, they weren’t tender-hearted about it. That letter on the table is sheer blackmail—and now you bring me another mascot of the same kind.”

“That’s why you asked me in the train?” guessed Pennie. “And then in the theatre——”

“I know. I want to apologise—I ought to have known——” He broke off awkwardly, ended with a “First impressions are generally right.”

“And your first impression was I was a fraud?”

“No. The other way. My first impression was—well, Pennsylvania!” He smiled ruefully. “You know, that name does suit you. But afterwards you called yourself Fiona, and when I remembered about your being in hospital, and your bringing the letter—well, it seemed more than a coincidence, that you should be on that particular train at that moment.”

Pennie nodded; it was understandable enough. Only——

“It *was* coincidence,” she admitted; “but it was the other way round. A coincidence that, going back from this house, I should happen to see the notice in the Luck Shop. Or was it? I mean, do you think that was a sort of hypnotism too? Madame seeing me in the crystal and—expecting me?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It might be. Hypnotism’s a queer thing. I’ve been out in Africa long enough to know that. Queer—and dangerous, the basis of all sorts of filthy witchcraft. You know, when you turned up again this morning with that thing over there I thought——” He broke off suddenly, ended, “I suppose you can’t forgive me?”

“It was my fault,” confessed Pennie, “for saying I was Fiona.”

He had got up, was standing with his back to the fire now, looking at her.

“You’re very angry with me?”

“No!”

“Then—are we friends?”

She took the hand he held out with a smile.

“Good!” He squeezed it hard.

Pennie said contritely, “I’ve kept you from your breakfast and now it’s all got cold!” It was twenty-five to ten; Mrs. Ransom would be wondering what had become of her. She added, “I must get back to mine.”

“You haven’t had breakfast!” He seemed horrified. “Look here; stay and have some with me.”

“I oughtn’t to——” began Pennie, but he did not let her finish.

“I must talk to you, and we can eat while we talk. Abdul!”

He clapped his hands.

“You’re sure it won’t give your servant a lot of trouble?” Pennie knew all about people who wanted breakfast late, when the kitchen fire was low.

“Not Abdul. He’s a funny little fellow, isn’t he? I’ve had him five years—got him out in Abyssinia. He started life as a cannibal among other things!”

The black servant had arrived in the doorway in time to catch the last few words, and he nodded, grinning, as though rather proud of such a record.

“Clear those away and fetch breakfast for two, Abdul,” commanded Michael Kerr.

The wizened little negro came forward cheerfully, was reaching out for the dish of cold congealed bacon, when he leaped back suddenly as if he had been stung.

“W’allah!” He was shaking as he stared from the table to Michael. Then he burst into a flood of his own language, while his dark eyes rolled round his head.

“What’s the matter with him?” asked Pennie.

“Those. Wait a minute.” Michael asked him something and the black replied. Then, picking up the two mascots and the envelope, even the mat that they had lain upon, he came back to the fire. He said in a low voice, “Wait till he’s gone, I’ll tell you. . . .”

The negro was still nervous, but now he cleared the table hurriedly and disappeared with the things. Michael smiled.

“D’you know what he asked me?”

“No.”

“He asked if you brought the mascots. I wanted to know why he asked, and he told me that if you had you were a witch of the most dangerous kind!”

Pennie laughed.

“Why? What does he know about them?”

“We’ll ask him, when he comes back. Why not take off your coat and hat? Look here, will you pour out coffee?”

When Abdul came back, bringing with him a tray so loaded up with coffee, freshly cooked bacon, eggs and kidneys, hot toast and hot milk that only his wide grin showed above the load, Michael Kerr began to question him, translating to Pennie.

“He says that, in his own country, before the Abyssinians caught him and made him a slave, he was the eldest son of a witch doctor. He has seen mascots like those. They were made, he says, of very sacred wood at a time when all men lived in the forest like gorillas and hunted for their food, when there were no white people like me. He also explained that I was a better witch doctor than his father, because I cured an ulcer on his leg!”

“Does he know what they were used for?” asked Pennie. The negro was listening hard, with an intelligent gleam in his eyes and his unfailing grin; he nodded vigorously.

“Ya-as, miss; ya-as, miss! I know!” he asserted.

“What were they used for?”

But Abdul had to put it in his native tongue; his English did not run to discussions on magic, black or white. Pennie, watching Michael’s face, saw that beneath his gravity he was trying not to smile.

“Abdul says that they are the oldest, strongest magic in the world, that if you leave those with gold in the ground it will grow into more gold, if you know how to use them you can keep young and strong for ever, and if you take one into battle no one can kill you; in fact, they’re useful little gadgets and ought to be patented!”

“That agrees with what happened last night!” Pennie was excited now. “Does he know *how* they are used?”

Again the negro nodded, jabbering in his own tongue. Michael translated: “He says that only witches know exactly, but that it is a long business, that it may take years, like learning to be white man’s servant! With those, you and I can bring to us the soul of the great tree which is the whole world, and rob it of its name and power. But to do that one must first make big magic.”

“What is big magic? Does he know? It might help if we knew what they were doing,” said Pennie. “Ask him!”

But Michael shook his head.

“No. I know the answer. All right, Abdul.” When the servant was gone, he added very gravely, “You see, I’ve studied African witchcraft, it was part of my job. Half the trouble in my bit of district was mixed up with it. Big magic always means the same thing to a native.”

“What?” Pennie was turning the little black carving over; it looked innocent enough, really rather pretty. Michael leaned over the table and took it gently from her hand.

“I don’t even like to see you touching it—if Abdul’s right. You see,” he said, “big magic is another name for human sacrifice.” And quickly, “Look here, suppose we talk of something else? This is spoiling my breakfast!”

Breakfast is a very domestic meal; it seemed strange to be sitting there, with her hat off, pouring out Michael Kerr's coffee. It seemed to amuse him, too, for he kept smiling at her. But he only said, "You look more like your name than ever with your hat off!"

"Sugar? What do you mean?" she asked.

"I can see you sitting in a meeting house in old Norwich! A Puritan in porcelain!"

"I don't know that I like that!"

"Don't you?" He said that in a queer tone.

"It sounds too prim," declared Pennie.

"It isn't. It's just—rare." He added rather quickly, "That's why I hated seeing you the other night beside that crystal. It was like coming into church and finding people dancing jazz!"

Pennie laughed.

"You're not very complimentary! First I'm prim and now I'm like a church! It sounds gloomy to me!"

"It's not," he asserted, laughing too. "Y'know, some of us, quiet fellows like me, get rather fed up with all this film stuff, lipstick and tinsel hair, and all the rest of it. It's—well, refreshing to find some one who isn't like that."

"I'm afraid I don't paint only because if I do I come out in big pink spots!" declared Pennie lightly. She was bubbling with an effervescent happiness; life seemed almost too good to be true.

"You don't need it, anyway," he stated. Then, with a swift change of tone, "I hate the idea of your going back there."

"Where? To the Luck Shop?"

He nodded.

"Oh, but I must."

"Why? Chuck it up!"

Pennie said earnestly, "I know what you think, but honestly, Fiona's not in it. She's a darling, I'm awfully fond of her. She's been utterly sweet to me—and she's not even being dishonest over the shop. You see, she really *does* believe in mascots and things. If you'd met her, you'd understand."

“I don’t like it.” He was obstinate. “I look at the place whenever I go by, and there’s something morbid about it.”

“I expect it’s only that you’re like me,” Pennie guessed. “You’re not superstitious.”

He shook his head firmly.

“It’s not that. I distrust that fellow—the nephew. From what you’ve told me, he’s a nasty bit of work. Just the sort who’d dabble in the occult, hypnotism and all that stuff.”

“You don’t believe in it, do you?” Pennie asked incredulously.

“I don’t believe in magic,” he corrected. “No one pretends there isn’t such a thing as hypnotism, though. It’s trickery, but the most dangerous trickery in the whole world—playing with the human brain and nerves!”

He was so much in earnest, so anxious, that Pennie could not smile now.

“But if he did hypnotise me, what could he do?”

“He could put you into a hypnotic sleep without touching you, even from a distance, and order you to do anything he pleased.”

“And you think I’d do it? I see myself taking orders from Lal!”

“You couldn’t help obeying, unless you had your thoughts absolutely fixed on something else—something that mattered more to you. I tell you, I’m worried!”

“You wouldn’t be, if you worked there and knew Lal,” said Pennie. “He’s nasty, but—well, not impressive.”

“I’d be much happier if you were out of it,” stated Michael so simply that it startled her. She looked up at him quickly, but he did not seem to realise how much his words might mean.

She managed with an effort to speak evenly.

“I can’t very well give up my job, they’re not easy to get.”

He seemed to consider that, in silence.

“You’ve never hunted big game, of course, or you’d know what I mean.” His face was troubled. “There are times—when you’re out after a lion, for instance—when all the spoor and so on, say that the lion’s right on ahead. And yet, all the while you’re following, you feel in your bones that he’s not

—that he’s behind you, stalking *you*! Well, that’s the feeling I’ve had, ever since I went into that shop. Only it’s you I’m frightened about.”

“You mustn’t worry about me.” Her voice sounded strange and small.

“Promise me one thing.”

“What?” She would have promised anything.

“That you won’t go with them to that other place again!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t. You couldn’t drag me there.” Though Pennie laughed, she was not amused. The memory of a girl sobbing in the dark still haunted her thoughts.

Perhaps the thought showed on her face, for Michael Kerr said with sudden energy, “I’m going to get at the bottom of this business!”

“What’re you going to do?” A pang of fear shot through Pennie. When he looked like that, when that reckless light came into his eyes, he might do anything.

“I’m going to have a look at the place first, and then——” He stopped. Glanced up at the clock.

“Are you doing anything this afternoon?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Would you drive down with me, show me where it is?”

“I’m not sure I could find it,” Pennie confessed. “You see, it was after dark and some way out of London. I only noticed two things—we turned to the right by a very brightly-lit corner—a public house called the Marquess of Granby, the name struck me because it’s out of Dickens.”

Michael nodded.

“Well, and we went past bungalows down a wide arterial road.”

“The Folkestone Road.”

“Was it? I’ve only come up by train.”

“Would you know the place again if you saw it?”

“Oh, yes!” Would she ever forget it, Pennie wondered.

“When’ll you know if you can come?”

“I could ask Fiona at once.”

“That’s fixed, then. Ring me up.” He went to a writing-table, fetched a sheet of notepaper. “That’s my number.”

“All right,” agreed Pennie. “But I must go now. Madame’ll be awake and wondering where I am. What time do you want to start?”

“Twelve—half-past—or one? We could lunch *en route*.”

Pennie nodded.

“D’you mind if I keep this?” he held up the little black tree.

“Not a bit. *I* don’t want it!”

At the lift, holding her hand, he said, “*Au revoir*. Try and come, won’t you?”

“Of course I will!”

Walking back to Jermyn Street, Pennie discovered that London was paved with rubber and endowed with air as fizzy as champagne.

It struck ten as she inserted her latchkey into the door. Just an hour since she had come out. What a lot had happened in that hour! The thought of the afternoon ahead was utterly exciting; with Michael Kerr she did not feel afraid. Pennie’s spirits were soaring as she pushed open the door—to find herself confronting Lal.

## CHAPTER SIX

### HORROR BY DAYLIGHT

#### 1

His first words made her step back.

“Where the hell have you been?”

It was not so much the words, though they were rude enough; it was his eyes which made Pennie step back as if he had hit her. They glared at her with an almost insane fury.

It took her less than a second to recover.

“What business is that of yours?”

“You’re Fiona’s companion. You’re not supposed to go out without leave.”

“Has she said so?” Pennie knew she was in the wrong there, but at least it was none of Lal’s business.

“She’s awake. She’s been asking for you,” he evaded. “Where’ve you *been?*”

“I still don’t see what it’s got to do with you!” Pennie pushed lightly past him and ran up the stairs. At the top, she turned to the right and knocked at Fiona’s door.

“Come in! Ah! Pennie, there you are!” Fiona held out one arm, drew the girl down on to the bed. “I’m glad you have come. I’m unhappy! Lal has been here making—oh, such a fuss!”

There were tears in the dancer’s eyes; Pennie, already ruffled with Lal, said fiercely, “What’s he been doing?” And half-rose as though she would go down again.

“About money! It is always money with Lal! He takes all that is in the shop and then he comes and says, ‘Give me money!’ ” wailed Fiona.

“Then why do you give it to him?” asked the practical Pennie.

Fiona’s hands waved in wild, tragic gestures of despair.

“How can I help it? I love him so, he is like my son to me. He is all I have in the world to love—except you. If I say no, he will be angry with me for days. He will not come and see me. I will get frightened and think he is ill, dead!”

“You can’t give him money if you haven’t got it,” pointed out Pennie.

“I know. But I have these.” The dancer touched her bracelets. “He says, ‘Sell your jewels. You love those stones more than you love me. They make me jealous.’ He is a very jealous boy,” added Fiona, almost complacently.

“Why *should* you sell your jewels? He’s had masses of money this week, anyway. He’s cleared the till practically every night!” Pennie was thoroughly indignant.

“That’s different. That is not for himself.” Fiona’s voice sank. “He paid that for me—for—you know what!”

“You mean—last night?”

The dancer nodded half a dozen times, her lips pressed tight.

“Madame!” Pennie’s little hand shot out, caught at Fiona’s. “I wish you wouldn’t go there. It’s not—wholesome. It’s not safe!”

“You don’t understand.” Fiona was obstinate now. “I must. It is my only chance.”

“I know. You want to be young again. But it’s not helping you. Honestly, I don’t know why Lal takes you!”

And now Fiona truly did surprise her, for she said with great simplicity, “Lal? He hates my going.”

*Lal* does? Pennie had felt so certain in her own mind that Lal was at the bottom of the whole business that she was astounded.

“No. He says, too, that it is dangerous. He says he likes me as I am, he does not want me to be—great again.” Fiona turned suddenly and earnestly towards the girl. “Pennie, you have never known what it means, or you would understand. The limelight, the encores, the feeling inside oneself that one can stir all those people. Flowers, jewels, love—*youth!*” She flung back her head, her eyes shut, as though picturing that past. Ended sadly and slowly, “Age—it is so lonely. . . .”

“You’re still loved.” Pennie squeezed her hand.

“I know.” Fiona smiled. “You do love me, don’t you? And Lal. He is a good boy, really, only he is like all young men, he must have cars, clothes, money to spend. . . .”

“Then he doesn’t—run that show?” Pennie asked the question quickly.

“Lal?” Fiona broke out laughing. “Oh, but that is funny! *Lal!* No! In that galère? He will not even come inside! He’s so frightened. He says, too, that it is not safe. The man who owns it all, the Master, he is there, but we never *see* him. You saw that yourself! He comes, but he can come without the clumsy body—if he pleases. You see the body—that wears out—but the mind, the spirit, that is eternal!”

“Then Lal wasn’t there last night?”

“No. He went away with the car, came back for us. He hates all this. He tells me that I am a fool to go. That power to dance again—that may be very beautiful, but it is not worth the price.”

“It’s horribly expensive?” Pennie was reckoning that last week’s sales, the emptied till. If Fiona had paid all that for one evening’s séance——

“No.” Fiona’s voice sank. “The price. You see, one day—it is not like last night—one day we succeed, and then—there is a price to pay.” Her eyes looked very bright and strange as she whispered the words. “A price which *one* of us must pay—but which one?”

Ten minutes later Pennie rang up Michael Kerr to say that she would be with him by one o’clock.

## 2

He was waiting for her in the car when she arrived—a grey twelve two-seater Chrysler, stubby and comfortable, and while they ran out over Lambeth Bridge, Pennie told him of her conversation with Fiona.

“I’m sure of one thing, whatever else there is, she isn’t in it. She’s quite honest. Do you think Lal can be like your brother? Caught in it? His taking so much money and always asking for more rather looks like it,” she suggested.

“It does,” Michael agreed; “it’s difficult to tell. Since you left me, I’ve been thinking out ways. It would be easy to prove whether Madame Fiona had anything to do with the other.”

“How?”

“Like this. She hasn’t seen me. Well, if I make an appointment and go there, do what I did with you—get her to tell my future and make some admission that sounds damaging—pretend I’ve escaped from prison or something. You’d be in the shop, wouldn’t you? Well, you could watch. *Then*, if I get a blackmailing letter afterwards we shall know it must be one of them. You could get a specimen of her handwriting for me, and see if there’s any trace of these particular mascots on the books.”

“I don’t like it!” declared Pennie.

“Why not?” he asked curiously.

“I—I’m working there for her. I can’t set a trap—against her——” Pennie found it hard to explain, though she knew clearly in her own mind what she meant.

He nodded at once.

“I see. You’re right. You mustn’t have any part in it. Still, if my story is told only in the Luck Shop, and I get one of those mascot things or a blackmailing letter, it’d link up, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” Pennie admitted. “Yes, I suppose it would.”

“Then, you see, we’d know that one of those two must be in it. It’d whittle things down. You don’t mind my doing that?”

“No.”

“Then I want you to do one other thing for me.”

“What?”

“Let me know when Madame Fiona is going to another of those séance shows. Will you?”

Pennie hesitated.

He said urgently, “You know, you yourself want to stop it, don’t you? If your friend at the Luck Shop’s not in it, finding out won’t hurt her, will it?”

“N-no.” Pennie looked at him suddenly. “You think she runs it, don’t you, that she *is* in it?”

“Yes, I do.” He admitted it bluntly.

“Why? You haven’t met her, I have. And, I don’t think so. Why should you?”

“Only because from what you tell me, it would be so easy”—he was quite frank—“so terribly easy, to use a shop like that as a sort of a sieve. Don’t you see the idea? People who came into the shop to spend money on charms or to have their fortunes told—must be a bit superstitious. It would be easy for a person selling things to pick out the ones who were most credulous, and to give the signal to the fortune-teller inside, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m the person who sells!”

“You know I don’t mean that,” he said quickly. “But, think—it *would* be easy! And then the fortune-teller could say that a visit from a dark man would bring one money or marriage or luck, or something of that sort. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“Well, the other partner would turn up as the dark man and bring the victim along to the séances, where they’d be hypnotised into stealing money or something. Then they could start blackmailing and plucking the poor wretch till he or she couldn’t stand any more. Don’t you see that?”

Pennie nodded.

“Yes. I do see. Only, I *know* Fiona. And I don’t believe she’s a crook. Lal might be, not Fiona.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Michael good-humouredly. “Look, there’s the Marquess of Granby.”

He swung the car right-handed and they ran down through Lewisham out to Cory’s corner, swinging right again and holding to the big arterial road, past shops and bungalows, out into open country.

“See it?”

“No.” Pennie admitted. “But we were going much faster the other night, touching sixty, I should think. It must be quite twenty miles out of London.”

When Michael spoke again it was not about Fiona.

“It doesn’t make you nervous, does it, my driving with one hand?”

“No. Not a bit. Have you sprained your wrist or something?”

He said casually, “This arm’s the last trace of my accident. I’ve had to have it broken and re-set twice since you saw me in hospital.”

“Bad luck. Is it all right now?”

“I hope so. I can use it, though it’s not strong yet, and I hope to get the last of the strappings off before I sail.”

Pennie’s heart missed three beats.

“You—you’re going abroad?”

“Yes. Off to China, sailing almost at once.”

“For fun?” How long did ‘at once’ mean, Pennie wondered anxiously.

“No. Job of work. It’ll take about six months,” he explained.

Even six months can be a long time.

“What is it, research work?” she asked.

“In a way, yes. I’m going out to chase cholera germs about the country, trying out my new cure.”

“*Cholera?* You mean you’ll be with cholera cases? But—but that’s *dangerous!*” It was out before she could stop it.

He said lightly, “If I catch it, I shall have to try my own medicine! Let’s hope it works!”

“You think there’s a chance you may catch it? You mean, you’ll be right in among it?” She tried to keep her voice steady, was glad that Michael was not looking at her.

“That’s the rough idea.”

“Couldn’t you try your stuff at home?” She hoped that sounded like mere curiosity.

“No. One can’t get really insanitary conditions with cholera in this country. It works all right in hospital, here, but will it work all right in a country like that, without experts to handle it, that’s the question.”

Pennie bit her lip. Six months—six months of bad conditions, constant risk of infection—the chance of death was enormous! It was as great as if he was going out to war. The cold fear hurt. At best he would be gone six months, at worst might never come back; and he was leaving soon, almost at once!

He said thoughtfully, “It’s going to be interesting, there’s that about it. By the way, how did you know that I liked my present job better than the one I’d missed?”

“I don’t know.” At that moment she knew nothing but the bare fact that Michael Kerr was going to risk his life.

He said laughingly, “I’m not sure yet that you’re not a witch!”

“You called me a church this morning!” Pennie reminded him.

“I know.” He was smiling, yet there was a deeper note in his low voice. “That’s what makes you so dangerous. A witch in Quaker grey!”

“You’re not observant! Considering I put on my best new blue coat to come out with you——”

“You can’t take off your Quaker grey eyes! Do your spells work overseas, or should I be safe in China?”

She said almost tartly, “I think you’d be very safe anywhere!”

“I wonder. . . .” And then, rather quickly, “I say, what about some lunch?”

“It’s getting late,” Pennie admitted. The clock on the dashboard showed a quarter to two.

“That looks all right.” He pointed to a hotel, built in what had once been a big house. A wide pull-in beckoned them, and he drew up by the door.

After the cold drive, it was warm inside. There were only three people inside, a pair of lovers absorbed in themselves and a commercial traveller, eating while he read his paper. Pennie and Michael took a table which looked out on to the yard.

It was a good lunch, and Michael Kerr had the rare and delightful gift of making people talk. Without seeming to leave the conversation to Pennie, he drew her out, learned a little about the life she had left, though she did not explain that sudden decision to escape from home, except by a vague, “Things got on my nerves a bit, so I thought I’d come up to London and look for a job. . . .” He was very understanding. She had told him of her hopes of being a nurse, their crashing, when he said:

“That hit you hard, I’m afraid?”

“Yes. How do you know?”

“By your face. When you were talking about the hospital just now, you looked happier than I’ve ever seen you look.”

“I hated giving it up,” she admitted that in a low voice.

“I’m sure you did. I can sympathise a bit; I hated giving up my show in Africa at the time, though I’m glad now.” He added, “You did stagger me when you brought out that bit about my crash!”

“I’m sorry. I hated saying it and couldn’t stop myself.” He knew, and she knew that he knew, that she was apologising, not for that, but for another thing she had said; that blunder about a girl. He knew, and saw that she knew, for he said quietly, “You were right about that too, though I didn’t know that I’d given it away in hospital. She did chuck me.”

“Don’t!” began Pennie.

“I don’t mind talking about it now,” he said. “It’s all over long ago. I admit it was a shock at the time. You see, we were getting married. I’d come home to get married. The racing car was her brother’s.”

Pennie said nothing; what she thought was written on her face for him to read.

He said quickly, “I don’t blame her; she was right. If she hadn’t had the courage to chuck me, I’d have had to chuck her. You know, that’s the worst of things like that. There’s a sort of code that says one ought to stick it out, marry the other person; it seems to me stupid. It takes more courage to be honest, and saves two people being miserable.”

“But if she cared for you—she wouldn’t have been miserable.”

“She didn’t. And she found that out when it looked as if I might be an invalid for life. Heroic gestures are all right, it’s rather easy really to make them, at the time; it’s living up to them afterwards that counts. By the way, speaking of hospitals, did you ever come across a friend of mine when you were in hospital—he was a doctor there, named Fegg?”

Pennie had worked under Mr. Fegg and the talk glided away, imperceptibly, from personal things. It was a quarter to three when he looked at the clock and started up.

“I say, we ought to be getting on. We want time to take a look round before it gets too dark.”

He wrapped her up well, insisted on her having the rug round her knees; though Pennie protested she was warm enough, it was rather nice to be fussed over; she could never remember being fussed over by any one, since she was ten.

They had been running in silence for about fifteen minutes when Michael pointed.

“What about that?”

Ahead of them, on the left side of the road, was a long, low, white building with a curved shallow porch that formed a semicircle out towards the road and upheld by a row of squat white pillars.

“That’s it!” cried Pennie.

The car swerved and they ran in by the short, rounded drive marked off from the road by concrete posts and double loops of chain, and drew up beside the steps.

Pennie got out, looking about her curiously. Yes, this was the place; the tubs with their black shrubs had been removed, but here was the same square sliding door by which they had come in, there was the car park where she had found Lal. Michael, climbing out beside her, banged on the door. The sound went echoing hollowly. A second louder bang produced no result.

“Shut up now, anyway,” he said. “Come on, we’ll explore.”

He turned to the right and led the way round the curved porch; it ended abruptly by the tiny door out of which Pennie had run last night. They tried that, but it was locked. The back of the place was one long, blind wall, with a scrubby garden where half-grown shrubs, looking desolate by daylight, ran down to a high, dilapidated fence which seemed to guard a rubbish dump. There were green streaks of damp down the white walls, and the whole place looked now, in daylight, no more than a swimming-bath shut up for the winter and badly in need of repair.

“I’m afraid it’s a dud,” he said ruefully. “We can’t break in and the whole place is shut up.”

“What’s that?” Pennie held her breath; the sound had been very faint, but it had come from inside.

“I can’t hear anything.”

“Can’t you? I can.” Pennie bent, laying her ear to the keyhole. “There—*oh!*” She swung round violently, her face flushed and angry. “Oh, Michael, can’t we get in? Please! There must be some way! It’s a *dog!* Howling in pain!”

He bent now, too, to listen. Straightened suddenly.

“Poor brute.”

“They’ve locked it up and left the place.”

Pennie's mouth worked tremulously; of all things in the world she could least bear to think of a dog suffering. "We must get in somehow!"

"Stand back a minute." Michael drew back and ran with all his force at the door. It did not yield at all. "Pretty stout. One'd need a battering ram for that. . . ."

"Try the little one," she suggested.

But the smaller door was as obdurate.

"Shall we get the police?"

"We will, if we can't get in." Michael was looking now at the bare white wall. "There must be a window somewhere, some ventilation. They can't air the whole place through those two doors. Wait a minute!"

"What are you going to do?" Pennie felt terribly nervous.

"Climb up and see." He had stripped off his heavy lamb's-wool coat. He threw his arms round one of the squat pillars, tried to hoist himself up as a sailor goes up a mast, hand over hand.

"Damn! Sorry. . . ." His weaker arm slipped, he came down heavily on the steps, said ruefully, "That's the worst of being a crock! I wonder if I ran the car up close——?"

"The top wouldn't take your weight." There was no superfluous fat on him, but he must have weighed thirteen stone. "Look here, let me get up!"

"No, it's not safe."

"It's much safer for me than for you," Pennie pointed out. "I'm lighter. Besides, if you let me get on your back I could do it easily."

"If I put you up there you'll be careful?" he urged.

"'Course!"

He stooped and, bracing himself firmly, let her climb up on his shoulders, straightened, steadying her ankles with both hands. "How's that?"

"Gracious, you are strong!"

She gripped the coping of the roof with both hands and hoisted herself up.

"All right?"

"Quite! The roof's flat." Pennie peered over at him. "There are two big skylights, but they are both covered up now."

“For Heaven’s sake be careful, don’t go through.”

“No. It’s quite firm.” She was exploring, walking round the coping which stood about twelve inches above the flat roof. She could see him looking up anxiously, and laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m only looking to see if they’ll open.”

The two skylights were at one end, both together were perhaps nine feet square. They were fastened on the inside, and did not yield at all to her tugs and striving. Covered by black blinds which fitted close, they gave away nothing.

“I can’t even break the glass,” she reported. “It’s wired.”

But now something else caught her eye. A crack perhaps an inch wide ran round the three-quarters of the roof, beyond the two skylights, and about four feet from the edge.

“I say, have you got a knife?” She peered over at him.

“What are you going to do?” He sounded apprehensive.

“I think I’ve found an opening!”

“Dash my wretched arm! You’re having all the fun.”

“I’m sorry. Have you got a knife?”

It came hurtling up to her, thrown with neat precision, a horn clasp knife of the type small boys love, well worn.

“Don’t let any one see you; it’s house-breaking,” he warned from below, but Pennie was not listening. She had got the pen-knife open and sitting in the centre of the roof was fitting it into a sort of iron catch.

“Oh, Lord, I’ve broken your knife!” She looked ruefully at the two halves of the blade.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Got it open?”

“No, sorry.” She stooped and fitted the broken blade into the catch, gave a great wrench on its lever.

“God! Be careful!” He barely breathed it as she staggered back. His arms went out and up, but Pennie, intent, did not see. A crack had opened across the whole width of the roof. She dropped the knife, slid her heels into the crack, braced her body against the frame of the skylight, throwing her whole weight against her feet. Slowly, laboriously, the crack grew.

“There!” She looked down at him, laughing. “It’s a sun-roof. It rolls right back.”

“Look here, don’t do anything more. Just wait up there,” he begged. “I’m going to find a ladder or something and come up.”

He went round the end of the house, appeared again down the garden and vanished through a gap in the board fence. Pennie, left alone, peered down into the dark slit at her feet. She could not see a thing; it was like looking down into a well.

“I believe I could wriggle through, though,” she thought. The opening was perhaps eighteen inches wide. If Michael sat on the coping, he could hold her hands, balance her slight weight, while she went through and felt about for a foothold. He was a long time in coming. She looked back at the drive where the car stood. Pity they had not thought of bringing rope; perhaps he’d got a car strap? With that he could lower her inside. A sound made her turn her head. There was a ’bus coming up the road.

Impossible, from where she sat, to retreat. The coping was not high enough to hide her; the drop to the steps measured at least twelve feet, with the chance of a twisted ankle on landing. The thoughts flew through Pennie’s brain. At the same second her hands acted. She caught the coping firmly, lowered herself, with a little wriggle, into the gap until, swinging free, her head came below the level of the roof.

“Michael’ll be scared,” she thought, “if he gets back now!”

The ’bus was passing; she could hear it as it came rumbling by and, her arms tiring, it seemed an age until it was gone and she was free to pull herself up. There! Unlikely any one would look back——

With an effort she hauled on the coping, and felt it give. Instinctively, to save herself, she let go, grabbed at the sliding roof and missed, felt herself falling, falling into the darkness, and hit water with a terrific splash. At the same instant she heard the roof slide to with a clang.

“Michael!” Struggling in the water in the black darkness she screamed it aloud. The sound came echoing back to her, multiplied a score of times, with horrible effect. Gasping, hampered by her thick blue coat and heavy shoes, Pennie struck out, not knowing whether she was swimming towards the edge or the centre of the bath. Then her face went under; choking, she clutched wildly, felt something under her hand that moved, and remembered that dark lump she had seen in the water. Was it——?

As she came up, a spray of water played on to her face.

The satyr! She remembered the white figure with the ten jets as she retched out the water, and went down again. It was on the far edge of the bath; if she could grip that——

Fighting, struggling for her life against the coat which seemed to wind itself round her legs like strips of lead, she came up again and flung herself with a terrific effort forwards.

Her clutching touched stone; she held it fast, reached out the other and felt the knotted arm of the laughing satyr. It was wet and slippery, and her feet, kicking wildly for a foothold, found none. The black darkness pressed upon her eyeballs, she got her knees up and slipped on slimy stone.

“Michael!”

The echoes seemed to laugh diabolically. Pennie, her fingers strained almost to the limit of endurance as she held the wet stone, made a last despairing effort, and felt the ledge of the satyr’s basin underneath her knee. A second later, clinging to the stone figure, she had hauled herself out and rolled over, spent, on to the flagged floor.

Her breath was gone; her eyes and nose smarted with water; her clothes made a thick, dripping mass round her limbs as she tried weakly to sit up. She tried to squeeze the water from her hair, brush it out of her eyes.

“Michael!” Could he hear, she wondered? Were the walls thick? The howling of the dog had been barely audible. Was he on the roof, trying to push it back? Rolling slowly to her knees, standing up with fresh cascades of water running down her in every direction, Pennie cupped her mouth in both hands and screamed:

“Michael, I’m in here! Mich-ael!”

The echoes seemed to roll back, laughing, “Ael—ael—ae—ae—ae—l!” before they died away into that tinkling splash of little waters falling. Then suddenly, quite clearly, Pennie heard a faint sound.

He must be trying to get at her through the door!

Over there! She turned and ran that way; although the echoes played confusingly with her footsteps, disguising the noise outside, she was certain that the door was over there. Her hands out before her to ward off the pillars, her wet coat clinging, she ran a dozen steps—and flat into a wall. Standing stock still to get her breath back, she made out the tinkle of water on her right. The satyr lay over there, then! Mentally, she recalled the chairs, the long twin rows of pillars, the satyr gleaming white at the far end. If it was on

her right now, she must be facing a side wall, the left side wall; and if she turned, found the pillars, she could guide herself by those towards the row of chairs, the passage and the door. Leaning against the wall, another faint sound made her start.

“Careful. I mustn’t lose my head,” thought Pennie, although her heart was beating like a triphammer. “It was nothing—it was——”

She heard it again; surely a car starting up; two hoots, a horn, very thin and distant, followed. For a second it reassured her, making the thick darkness less menacing with its message of the road, the daylight outside. The next, it struck a chill; she had heard no other car—and yet this was an arterial road and she had been there, groping for some minutes! The second hoot had been the fainter. There was no sound at all now. . . .

The truth struck her like a blow.

*The car had been outside—right outside this wall, and it had started up, had gone—away.*

Pennie shouted and ran. She ran blindly, bumped into a pillar, missed the bath by the width of her instep and, slipping, lurching, bumped another pillar with the whole of her weight. The shock brought her to her senses. Panic-stricken, hearing her own footsteps repeated as if scores of feet chased her, she stood clinging to the bare edge of her control.

Michael had gone. She was alone! Her one chance lay in keeping cool—*sane!*

She tried to shut her ears against those echoes, *think*.

The bath was there—her foot, stretched out exploring, found the round edge of the stones. The falling water seemed loudest behind her, therefore the fountain lay that way; she must be facing the chairs now, the passageway by which she had come last night.

“If I keep my head, walk slowly, straight,” Pennie told herself, shivering, “I can feel the next pillar.”

Groping, with outstretched arms, she found it.

“Four steps between,” she counted them under her breath. Four more and she ran her toe against one of the stone jars, felt a second pillar, counted another four steps, touched a third. Four, five, six pillars—four more steps to each, her hand feeling for the seventh, found that it was not there. For an instant her breath caught. Then she remembered. She must be under the

alcove where they had sat looking out on to the bath. If she could find the chairs——

She moved, chilled through and with a sick faintness near her waist, with both palms together, turning them and bringing them wide like a swimmer, taking the full reach of her arms at each sweep. The third brought her to something which moved; her hand, coming down, grasped a chair back; there was another to the left, none to the right.

“I’m at the far end of the line, where the two girls sat,” she thought. “There were six little ones each side.” And counting the chair backs as she passed slowly—one, two, three, four, five, six—and the tall chair——

Her right hand closed on the outside knob of the high carved back, her left went out——

Pennie shrieked. *There was some one sitting in the chair!* Four ice-cold fingers and a thumb were closing round her wrist.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A TRAP IS LAID

As she shrieked, Pennie jumped back so violently that she wrenched her hand free and went lurching back. In utter terror, conscious only of that terror behind, she turned and ran. Her own footsteps made an outrageous clamour as she went blindly, reeling from one pillar to the next, hardly knowing what she did, fetching up with a terrific bump against the wall. The shock was stunning; her shaking knees gave, she sank, half crouching, sick and faint, while the echoes of her own running feet grew fainter and died out.

Numbed with fear, she could not move. She could hardly breathe. There was something—*some one*—there in the darkness; there was no imagination about it, she could still feel the pressure of those cold and bony fingers on her aching wrist. She strained her eyes and could see nothing, the darkness shut her in like a black curtain that seemed to hang stiflingly close. She could not even make out the faint glimmer of the satyr now, or hear any sound of a dog howling. It had stopped. There was no sound at all except the pounding of her own heart, her own gasps, a drip, drip, at intervals that seemed endless as single drops of water fell into the pool. She lay there, very still, holding her breath until the blood, pounding in her ears and eyes, made her gasp, listening, striving to see through the blind dark, expecting every second to feel that cold hand fall on her again.

Pad, slip-pad. . . .

It was very soft, far off, she thought; a sound like a beastly footfall, muffled. A faint, slipping scuffle, as something moved. Was it nearer?

Pad, slip-pad. . . .

Under her wet clothes, all her ice-cold flesh began to rise, her scalp to prickle.

Pad, slip-pad—close at hand now; surely very close!

The blood sang in her ears, choking her, as she held her breath. That dry, rustling sound—was it a hand touching the walls, feeling? Pennie shrank back. It was *nearer*! She could hear breathing now. It was listening—

She clamped her teeth together, trying to hold back her breath, and in the silence heard a hand slide out over the smooth wall, close by her ear. A few steps more——

Pad, slip-pad. . . .

It was going! Her pent breath, released with infinite care, made a very small sigh. Instantly she heard the thing turn, heard the sweeping hand slide low, lower a foot above her head, lower——

Pennie's nerve broke. She screamed and leaped at the same second, heedless of direction, conscious only of a blind need to escape.

*Crash! Clang! Bang!*

A bright beam of light struck through the darkness, and she ran into it, dazzled as a hunted deer, felt two arms close on her and fought wildly, tearing, kicking, shrieking as, borne back by sheer weight, she crumpled, half-fainting, on the floor.

2

“Pennie! Pennie—don't! Pennie darling, *please!*”

Very slowly it filtered into her numbed brain—the sound of her own name, repeated in that desperate, urgent voice.

“You're all right now. You're *safe*. Pennie, please, darling, look at me ——”

There was an oblong of daylight; she kept staring at that as though unable to turn her head and felt a man's cheek brush her face, smooth-shaven and soft. The arms that held her so tightly were gentle. They raised her as if she was a child. Suddenly, clutching at him, clinging, she began to cry. Tears beyond any sort of control that poured in a stream down her cold, wet face.

Her head was bent. Michael had his lips against her hair, soothing, explaining, cursing himself and comforting her, but Pennie could hardly make out the words.

“Never guessed you were in there—looking for you—the man said you'd gone—oh, my darling, are you all right?”

Presently, recovering a little control, Pennie slid from his arms and sat up.

“Has—it gone?”

“It? What? The dog?”

“No—back—there——” She hardly liked to look over her shoulder.

“What is it?” He wasn’t holding her now, was chafing her cold hands.

“There was something in there—chasing me——”

He shook his head, but she insisted.

“There’s nothing there.”

“There was! I felt it—groping for me—running after me.”

“I saw nothing. I’ll go and look.” He was half up when, clutching at him, she dragged him back.

“No! No, please! I—I—don’t leave me!”

He pulled her up to her feet, said coaxingly, “Come—we’ll look together. . . .”

Pennie yielded, shivering, as he slid his thick greatcoat off, wrapped it round her and put an arm round her to hold it close. He had a torch, a large searchlight one of the type used by gamekeepers, and as he drew her with him round the swimming bath, flashed it here and there among the pillars, sending weird shadows dancing on the water. But the long room was quite empty. The thirteen chairs all empty. There was the door, beyond the narrow passage by which she had first come in last night. It looked dingy under the bright beam of the torch, its black paint chipped and its carpet rather worn. The hall, lit by the half-open front door and some chinks of light which filtered past the shuttered skylight, was simply a bare room with black walls and carpet.

Pennie noticed that the lock of the door had been splintered and hung by one screw.

“There’s nothing here,” said Michael, but Pennie was looking up now.

“One skylight. Where’s the other? It was right alongside.”

“Which side—there?” Michael tapped the wall. “This is solid all right. Wait a minute!” He darted across to the other side, pushed at one of the six-foot wide panels which, with mouldings round them, formed the only decoration. It gave, sliding back to show a little shallow cocktail bar with rows of scarlet shelves well stocked with bottles, and the second skylight above.

There was nothing else; they retraced their way back to the bath, walked right round it. At the far end, behind the satyr, there was a deep recess with the small door which they had seen from the outside and rough black walls, but it, too, was empty. The water lay like black glass now, still and smooth, reflecting the red flowers, the satyr's leering grin, as the lamp flashed on it. The round black pillars which held up the roof hid nothing, the smooth black-glazed walls showed them their own faces, peering anxiously above the torch.

"No dog; no nothing!" Michael tried to speak lightly, but failed. He looked down at the girl. "Let's get out of this. You're dripping wet."

They shut the door as best they could, jamming it to, and climbed into the car. Two women, passing in a big saloon car, looked at them curiously and Pennie, putting up her hand, felt her wet hair. Inside Michael's coat her limbs were growing warm again.

He turned out on to the arterial road and, looking round, asked, "What did you *think* you saw?"

"I tell you, it was there. I *felt* it!"

Pennie, unwrapping her chilled wrist, held it out. The marks were there—four bluish bruises on one side, another larger one on the wrist below the palm. He looked down at them in silence, with a queer expression on his face. For a moment she thought he would stop the car and turn back. She plunged into her story, and he listened with only a soft, "Oh, my God!" once, when she described that circling hand which swept the wall. At the end he shook his head.

"I don't pretend to understand it. Listen! When I left you, up there on the roof, I walked straight to the end of the garden at the back. I'd noticed a heap of scrap iron beyond the fence, so I got through and found the thing I thought I'd seen—a length of iron railing. I thought, you see, I could up-end it and use it as a ladder. It was pretty clumsy and I suppose I took a few minutes getting it clear. Anyway, I got it through the fence at last, and up the path. I'd put it down, and gone to look for you, when a man said, 'Are you looking for the young lady, sir?'"

"I said I was. And he said, 'She told me to tell you that she'd gone up that way, sir, to telephone the police.' I asked how long you'd been gone, and he said about five minutes."

"What was he like?" asked Pennie breathlessly.

“Quite a decent-looking man, rather quiet, ordinary workman’s clothes, and he had a bicycle. It never struck me he might be lying. I tried to give him a tip, and he said you’d given him sixpence already. Then he got on his bicycle and rode off. Anyway, I got into the car and drove down the turning he’d pointed out; rather a winding lane, and I must’ve been going down it about five minutes altogether before I saw that you weren’t ahead, and knew the man had been lying.”

“I couldn’t think why you’d gone,” said Pennie, smiling rather wanly. “I thought I heard the car go.”

He opened his lips as though to speak, shut them again rather tightly, got out, after a tiny pause: “I was a dam’ fool! I oughtn’t to have believed him. But he seemed perfectly normal. Anyway, then of course I dashed back as fast as I could and saw you weren’t here and heard a very faint noise inside and used the railing as a battering ram to bash that door in.”

“And you didn’t see *anything*?” She asked it wonderingly.

“Honestly, not a thing. You don’t think the thing you felt was the statue? If you’d bruised yourself on that—I mean in the dark—it’d be cold all right \_\_\_\_\_”

“No!” Pennie was obdurate. “I was at the other end. I felt the chairs. He must have heard you coming, run out——”

“He’d ’ve had to run the whole length of the bath to get to that back door; I couldn’t have missed him. I don’t understand it!”

Pennie shuddered.

“Let’s forget it!” She snuggled down inside the coat which wrapped her round; it had a faint scent of good pipe tobacco. Now that the first numbed shock was over, she had a warm glow inside, an odd feeling of lightness which made her want to laugh and never stop. In the first moments of relief, broken, she had hardly realised the significance of Michael’s words when he held her in that black room. Her whole being had been concentrated on the one bare fact, that she was safe. Now, remembering, she felt content to lie still; she could almost wish the journey back to London would never end. She wanted to lie back, remembering that tone in his voice: “Pennie—Pennie, darling—please——” He *did* love her, then—cared as she cared for him——

Her hand stole out towards him; his injured right found it, pressed it to his knee. She let it stay there and lay back content. Her eyes closed. A little

while ago, at lunch, she had been afraid, thinking that he would go away to China, that she would never see him any more. Now——

Pennie smiled a little, thinking of Fiona's prophecy: a *slight, dark man!* Well, no one could call Michael slight or dark! It only showed how silly it was to believe in such things. Presently he would tell her again. Now she was happy just to lie still, feel him there beside her, close, remember the touch of his lips on her hair.

He said roughly, almost harshly, "Are you warm enough?"

"Quite warm now." It was true, too, in a way; there are more kinds of warmth than one.

"We'll get you out of those wet clothes in a minute," he promised. "Oh, Lord, I could kick myself!"

"It wasn't your fault!"

"It was."

"Of course it wasn't," defended Pennie stoutly. He said nothing, but, glancing at him, she saw that he was very white, his jaw set, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Don't say it, please," she pleaded. "You couldn't have guessed!"

"No. I wasn't thinking of that." He was relapsing sombrely into silence. The car swung sharply to the right, crunched over a short gravel drive and came to a stop. Pennie sat up.

Lying back, she had not even noticed that they had left the arterial road; now they were in front of a large, white house. An hotel? But it did not look like an hotel. Michael climbed out. He opened the door, helped, almost lifted her out.

"What's this?" She asked it with curiosity.

"You're going to change those wet clothes. Just a moment." He vanished, leaving Pennie in the porch. There was music inside, lights in the tall windows, a sound of voices and laughter. The door opened, and Michael drew her in.

Inside the door was a wide hall, panelled in white, with a gallery running round it; and Pennie's first impression after the cold dusk of a December day was a kaleidoscope of colour. Perhaps fifteen people, mostly children, were

dancing with paper caps on their heads, to the music of a piano; beyond an open door, Pennie could see a Christmas tree. Many eyes and heads turned towards them as they came in. A big, well-built woman, about forty, with a handsome face and kindly eyes, came forward to Pennie.

“Michael tells me you’ve had an accident on the ice.” She glanced at the girl’s dress as he helped her off with the thick coat. “Oh, you poor thing! You are wet. Sybil!”

A girl who was dancing left her sixteen-year-old partner and joined Pennie.

A fair-haired girl, in brown velvet, fragile-looking, with a pair of wistful, big brown eyes that seemed to fill her face and hectic spots of colour on her thin cheeks. She, too, looked at Pennie’s sodden dress, which sent little pools of water on to the polished floor.

“Good Heavens, Michael, what’s happened?”

“We’ve had an accident, trying out the ice,” he explained. “I wonder if you’d lend Miss Cummin something dry to get home in?”

“Of course! Come with me.” The girl turned at once and led the way up a stairway carpeted in red into the gallery. Pennie, following, found herself in a wide passage with many doors. The girl opened one and took her into a warm, pretty bedroom, decorated in buff and green chintz. She flung open a cupboard, took a thick-quilted silk dressing-gown from its hanger and gave it to Pennie.

“Get into that first. You must be absolutely chilled through. Look here, would you like a hot bath?”

“I’d love one. It’s awfully kind of you.”

Pennie looked down ruefully at her new blue coat, a sodden ruin with all the fur in rats-tails. Her face was dirty, her dress was not only wet but split up one seam. Her little cap was gone and her hair lay in limp streaks. Outside, she had hardly given a thought to her appearance; here, in this warm, bright room, with its kidney-shaped table frilled with chintz, its gilt mirror upheld by flying cupids, she felt the wreck she looked.

“Not a bit. I wonder if my things’ll fit you?” The girl in velvet looked at her measuring. “You’re not quite so tall as I am. What about this?”

She took out a grey taffeta dress with a wide white lace collar and balloon sleeves, which hung with a grey coat to match.

“I believe this’d fit you——”

“Are you sure I won’t spoil it?” Pennie said doubtfully. “A coat and skirt’s all I need——”

“Nonsense!” The girl gave a high, nervous laugh. “You’ll have to stay to tea now.”

“But really——”

“Of course you are! Wimple——” Pennie, looking round, saw a grey-haired, plump maid behind her. “Wimple, Miss—Cummin, isn’t it?—has had an accident on the ice. She wants to bath and change. Just see she has everything she needs.” And to Pennie, “I must fly down and dance. Wimple’ll see you’re all right.”

She nodded and ran out quickly. Pennie, left alone with the maid, was thankful to get into the big hot bath scented with bath mustard. It was lovely to relax her stiff cold limbs in the hot water, dry on a huge bathsheet, and put on the brief, soft silk underclothes that Wimple had ready.

“You’re sure you’ll be warm enough in those, Miss? I can get you woollies if you’d rather.”

The maid treated her like a child, putting on the garments for her, kneeling to draw fine grey silk stockings on to her legs.

“No, I’m beautifully warm now.” Pennie stood up and let the woman drop the grey taffeta over her head. It fitted amazingly well when the wide sash was tied.

“How pretty!” Pennie turned before the glass, smiling. In all her life, she had never possessed a dress so perfect; the thick silk fell in stiff folds to her feet, the wide white collar framed her lovely shoulders and long, graceful neck perfectly. Grey shoes with buckles glistened under the long skirt. The maid threw a silk dressing-jacket round her shoulders and made her sit before the glass.

“How do you like your hair, Miss? Parted?”

“Oh, rolled up.” Pennie watched the woman’s swift, practised hands, as they pinched her still damp hair into waves, setting it in bands that looped in front, rose into tiny rolls above the curve of her small head. A little mist of softened curls lay on her forehead.

“Thanks. You’ve done it wonderfully.” Pennie took a final glance at the girl in the glass. A Puritan in porcelain! She remembered Michael’s phrase

again. Well, she did look that now; demure and Quaker, very faintly flushed with pleasure, her wide-set grey eyes flecked with green light in contrast to the dove-grey silk. Never in her life had she looked half so pretty! She felt suddenly glad she had come, that she was to stay for tea and that Michael would see her like this. The maid was gathering up the sodden garments. Pennie found her bag, took out half a crown.

“Thank you ever so much.”

The woman demurred, but she took the money and went off with the wet clothes. Pennie, going out into the gallery, looked down on the dancers. She could not see Michael or Sybil at first; then, she picked them out together at the far end of the room.

They were sitting in the window-seat, half hidden by the curtains, talking very earnestly—too earnestly. His hand held the girl’s, and he was bent towards her, looking at her. Sybil’s head was turned towards the room, with the strangest fixed expression in her huge brown eyes. Pennie, looking at them, was swept by a sudden, cold wave of doubt.

Had she been mistaken? They were sitting there like lovers. Could that moment by the swimming pool have been just—nothing? She remembered with a cold stab of fear that Michael had said nothing in the car. . . . Had she assumed too much?

Suddenly Pennie caught up the long dress and went down the stairs. He saw her coming and jumped up, but she did not look at him. Spoke gaily to Sybil.

“You can’t think how good it feels to feel dry! I was like a drowned rabbit! You’re perfectly sure you don’t mind my wearing this dress?”

“Not a bit. You look lovely in it. Doesn’t she, Michael?”

“Lovely.” He did not sound as if he meant it. Pennie, looking at him, saw that his face was flushed darkly, that he was looking at her with an odd, intent expression. And again she had that awful stab of doubt. He said rather quickly, “I think we’d better tell Miss Cummin, Sybil, what we’ve fixed.”

Miss Cummin! It sounded cold and formal. Pennie’s heart sank. Sybil said quickly, “Not now! Wait till the children finish their tea. There’s Mummy signalling to me. I ought to help. Michael, could you help to get the tree going?” And to Pennie, “Come on. I’ll find you some tea.”

There was nothing for it. Pennie followed, and in a few minutes found herself sitting by a small boy in a clown’s cap, who painstakingly ate

everything within reach. Her sole attempt to make him talk, a mild, "I suppose you're at school?" was met by a cold, crushing, "I'm at Eton." Snubbed, Pennie relapsed into silence. Michael had disappeared; she could see Sybil feeding a very little girl. Her own partner began in a grownup manner to ask her about her accident, and Pennie found herself forced to make up details. He did not seem interested. Once the woman who had welcomed her, Sybil's mother, waved in a friendly way as she went past. A little boy of two on her other side let Pennie cut up everything for him, and when she had time to look she noticed that Sybil, too, had gone. It seemed a long time before tea was finished and the children began to troop out of the door, comparing cracker toys. Pennie, following, felt a hand touch her arm.

It was Sybil.

"Come in here. . . ."

They went down a passage together, into a small room with bookshelves, shabby chairs and red curtains; an old schoolroom. Michael was already there, and as the two girls came in he shut the door. Sybil gave a deep sigh of relief and caught at his arm.

"Oh, darling, I thought tea'd never end!" she said. "Now—let's get down to it. Tell me again—what is it you want me to do?"

She sank as if tired into a deep chair, Michael perched on the arm of it, while Pennie, opposite, felt that cold doubt grow. Their pose was too intimate, her "darling" had slid out so naturally; they were friends—and more than friends.

And Michael's opening sounded even less promising.

"I've been telling Sybil all about your adventure; I think she can help. You see, we must have some one whom they won't know by sight. I'm no use; that man saw me. My idea is, that Sybil should come to the Luck Shop and ask to have her fortune told. Then at the first opportunity begin to ask questions as if she was anxious. Tell some sort of story, about being in trouble, as I told you. Then, leaving the shop, she'll come straight back to my flat, as if it was her home. If she gets a blackmailing letter addressed there, we shall know it can only have come via the Luck Shop. What do you think?"

"It seems to work all right." Pennie could not keep the faint chill she felt out of her voice. Sybil was smiling up at him with that queer, rather wistful look.

“Well, then, the only other thing I want you to do,” he was brisk and businesslike, “is to let us know when the next séance is to take place. *Whatever you do*, don’t go to it; just leave the rest to us. Isn’t that it?” He looked down at Sybil. She nodded.

“That’s it. There’s just one thing. What about the pass?”

Michael drew out the envelope which Pennie had seen that morning. He took out the little flat, wooden charm and gave it to Sybil. “If there’s anything else, I shall be seeing you to-morrow, shan’t I?”

“Four o’clock,” she agreed. “I’ll run and get Miss Cummin a coat. You can slip out now without mother seeing. I’ll make your excuses.”

She vanished. Michael got up and went towards the window. Pennie sat rather still. Somehow, all the elation she had felt was gone. The adventure was no longer an adventure, no longer a link between them. It was between Michael and Sybil now.

He said suddenly, very earnestly, “I want you to promise me that, *whatever you do*, you won’t go to the séance with them again.”

“Why not?” Pennie was mutinous. This had been her show. To be cut out of it like this, to let Sybil go with Michael, hurt.

He hesitated, then answered frankly, “Because you have been hypnotised. Don’t you see that? The things you saw, that girl dancing, for instance, and to-day—you wouldn’t have seen them unless you’d been hypnotised a bit; not a lot, perhaps, but a bit. They *made* you see things. Those bruises on your arm——”

“I tell you there was some one—some thing—there!”

“It’s not possible. We were by the door. We must have seen anything.” He was firm. “Anyway, if you’ve once been hypnotised, anything may happen. If you went there, they might—harm you—or force you to harm yourself. You remember what Fiona said? One must pay. But which one? Sybil is warned, she won’t let herself get hypnotised; she’s waiting for it. She’ll be safe.”

Nerves—he had simply put the whole thing down to scare! Pennie froze. No wonder he preferred to let his friend Sybil come in. He thought that she, Pennie, had funkcd—and now he was politely making up an explanation to get her out of the way. He couldn’t really believe one could be forced by hypnotism into killing oneself!

“Just as you like. . . .” Pennie tried to make that careless.

There was a short silence. He was standing by the window, a French one, looking out into the garden, in the dusk. He said doggedly, "I owe you an apology—a whole sheaf of them—for this afternoon."

"Why, what do you mean?" She asked it in a small, cold voice.

"For everything. I don't know how to put it—my behaviour——"

"You got me out of that beastly place. I don't know what else there was." Not for worlds would she let him see quite how much he hurt.

He looked round quickly; but she was sitting there very upright, almost as still as if she had been a piece of porcelain.

"After getting you into it?" Was there relief in his voice?

"Nonsense. You couldn't help that. It was my own fault. Any one would have believed the man outside."

"No. I couldn't help that." He said it bitterly.

The door burst open. Sybil came flying in with a squirrel coat across her arm.

"Sorry! Mother caught me. Here you are." She held out the coat to Pennie. "It'll keep you warm."

"Thanks!" Pennie slid into it, fastening the high collar round her chin.

"What about my own clothes?" she asked. "Hadn't I better change?"

"They're not dry. I'll leave them at Michael's, then you can pick them up there and leave mine. You'd better go out this way——" She held the French door open.

Pennie hurried out. She wanted nothing in the world so much at that moment as to get back to the Luck Shop, back to her own small bedroom. Glancing back, she saw the two of them in silhouette against the light. Michael's arm was round Sybil's shoulders, she was close against him. Pennie turned and ran round the house, scrambling into the car.

Well, that was that. . . .

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE TRAP CLOSSES

They drove back into London in complete silence. Were crossing Lambeth Bridge before Pennie spoke.

“I think, if you don’t mind, I’ll get you to drop me this side of Jermyn Street. I’ll have to make sure I can slip in quietly. Madame’ll ask questions if she sees me come in in these clothes.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he agreed. “It might be safer.”

“I’ll pack them up and leave them with the porter at your flat,” she said. An hour and a half ago the grey dress had given her pleasure; now she only longed to get it off, packed out of sight. She added, “Perhaps you’d thank your fiancée for me.”

“My——? Sybil?” He broke out laughing.

“Isn’t she?” Pennie wished her heart would not give such a sickening bump.

“Sybil? Of course not. I’ve known her since she was a child. No——” He was grave again now. “No, poor child! She’s the girl who was engaged to Bobby. This last business has almost finished her. That’s why I’m glad she can help. It may—take her out of her troubles.” Then he looked down at Pennie curiously. “What on earth made you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. . . .” Pennie’s heart was bumping up against her ribs in an alarming fashion.

“I’m very fond of her, but she’s the last person in the world I’d care for like that.” He was decisive. “A mass of nerves, poor little thing; and the worst of it is I’m partly to blame. If I’d helped them to marry—it didn’t seem right or fair to her at the time, but——” He ended with a deep sigh. After a little pause added, “No. Whatever else I do, I’m not getting engaged.” And before Pennie could recover, “By the way, the fellow who fixed that job for me in China was there this afternoon. I saw him while you were having tea, and I’m off on Thursday.”

The car drew up by the pavement at the bottom of St. James’s Street, and Pennie got out.

Thursday! And this was Sunday. Four more days. . . .

Pennie let herself in to the maisonette and turned the light on, climbed the long steps.

In four days he would go off to China, and she would never see him again. Standing in her own small bedroom, the folds of the grey taffeta rustling softly as she moved, she did not undress. Her hands were clenched tightly as she went to and fro.

Surely, if it meant anything, those moments when he had held her in his arms and whispered meant that he was in love? And yet if he wanted her, what could hold him back?

He had money enough to marry; his flat and his car were not those of a very poor man; it couldn't be that. She had told him plainly enough when she felt for his hand in the car—too plainly, Pennie feared, flushing as she remembered. What had she done or said that could make him think that he had no chance?

Or was it that——?

Pennie stopped before the long glass. She had not taken off Sybil's squirrel coat; her reflection showed her another being, a girl who had that finished daintiness, that luxurious look of wealth which is the result of well-cut clothes, expensive furs, shoes which match exactly and which need not face two winters' wear. The wide lace collar was of real Mechlin, the stiff silk that taffeta-faille which can cost two pounds a yard; the grey suede shoes had rhinestone buckles and were of a pale dove-grey that would show every spot. The maid had fixed her hair as if it had been done at a hairdressers, and the make-up she had put on Pennie's eyes was done so finely, it looked completely natural. Very slowly, with fingers that shook, Pennie took off her coat, undid the sash and slid out of the taffeta; she took out an old dress, one of navy blue she had made herself out of a remnant bought cheap; a dress she loved well and yet now——

Was *that* it?

She remembered the room in which she had changed, with its soft lighting and fresh, bright chintzes; the children dancing in their expensive dresses, the soft-footed, well-trained servants who had waited at table and Sybil's casual acceptance of all these things; his friends and his world. Had he taken her there this afternoon to see how she would fit into his own environment—and had she somehow, somewhere, failed?

“He’s not like that!” she told herself fiercely, and catching up the taffeta dress began to fold it up in sheets of tissue paper, putting it with the fur coat into her small case. To-morrow she would slip out early and leave them at his flat with the porter. To-morrow was Monday, Boxing Day. On Tuesday the Luck Shop would open again; she would be tied behind the counter. Sybil, all his friends——

Suddenly Pennie flung herself on her bed and lay there dry-eyed, her face pressed hard into the pillows.

Thursday. Four days. . . . Presently she got up slowly to get ready for dinner with Fiona and Lal.

That night she had an odd dream.

It seemed as if she was running down an immense dark passage lined with black pillars, her feet weighted with lead. Try as she would, she could not make them hasten; each step only took her a yard or two. Ahead there lay twin yellow lights which gleamed like topaz, and somewhere within that light, but hidden by it, she knew that Michael was going into danger. If she could reach him, warn him, stop him, all would be well; but he was moving now; in a minute——

She tugged at her heavy feet, which seemed to be fastened down to the floor—and woke, shivering, to find herself outside her bedroom, in the passage, looking at Fiona’s door.

### 3

On Tuesday afternoon at half-past four the door of the Luck Shop opened to admit a customer. It had been a dull day; not a single person had come in since early morning, and then only a foreigner inquiring the way to Baker Street. Pennie had spent most of the day checking up the Christmas accounts and post-orders, but at that particular moment she was taking stock. She glanced up from a tray of little gilt swastikas and looked quickly down again.

Sybil—Sybil in a little dress of red crêpe mirande and the very same squirrel coat which she herself had worn. She dared not look again in case her face betrayed her excitement.

“Can I have my fortune told?”

“I’ll go and see, Madame.” Lal’s swift glance and Sybil’s shoes and fur coat did not escape Pennie. He went up towards the teak screen and Pennie, her eyes still on the tray in front of her, heard a soft whisper.

“Don’t look up. . . .” Sybil was turning over the handbags. “Michael wants you to come round at seven to-night. Can you?”

Pennie nodded. She had been afraid that they might carry out their scheme without warning; that Michael might leave England without seeing her again. But there was no time to answer now. Lal was coming back.

“If you’ll step this way——”

When Lal had shown Sybil into the inner room, he found Pennie sitting at the built-in desk, very busy with the stock-book.

“D’you mind if I come there?” He seemed a trifle impatient. “I must finish my accounts.”

As Pennie gave way to him he added, “Why not go and have some tea? It’s half-past four.”

“I don’t really want any——” was on the tip of Pennie’s tongue. She choked it back. Better go. If Lal was at the back of it all, and she did not feel sure he was, still, he would be more likely to give himself away if she was not there. She substituted quickly, “Thanks, I’d like to, if you’re not in a hurry.”

“It’ll take me twenty minutes to finish this.” He glanced at the pages he was checking for audit.

“Oh, I won’t be longer than that,” Pennie promised. “I only want a cup of tea.”

She went down to the hook behind the teak screen to fetch her coat and hat. On a sudden thought, she stopped there to put them on, and stooped towards the door. It was supposed to be soundproof. Could it be that Lal listened here, hidden from the shop? Though her ears were acute, she could hear nothing, yet Pennie did not feel satisfied.

She did not want tea, was too excited to go and have it. On an impulse, once outside the shop, she turned left and went up the alley which faced the side door. No more than a passage, the door and window opened on it. Pennie hesitated. It was spying, of course, yet if by spying she could prove that Fiona had nothing to do with all this business? She stopped quietly, trying to hear. By listening hard she could just catch the low murmur of voices, but not a single clear word. Even by the window, which was shut, she could hear nothing, and she went on through the alley into Piccadilly wondering whether after all their plans would flop.

Strolling casually like a passer-by, she lingered for a minute by the shop window, glanced through the curtained door. With the lights full on, one could see through the net curtain, and from where she stood she could see Lal's back. He had not moved, was still at the desk, his pen poised as though busy with his books. From where he sat, half-way down the shop and well away from the back room, it was totally impossible that he could hear the voices of the two inside. And though Pennie strolled up and down outside the shop a dozen times, pretending to be waiting, he did not move. He was still at his place when she pushed open the door at last and went back.

“Had tea? You've been quick.” He was very genial. His eyes looked unnaturally bright.

“I only wanted one cup.” Pennie tried to sound casual, but her eyes roamed round the shop, seeking anything which might be out of place, any clue at all. There was nothing. “Will you go now?”

“In a minute. I must finish this. You might tie up this mystic square—it's to go to that old hag who came in yesterday—Mrs. Williams.” He bent back over his books, and the only sound was the shrill squeaking of his feather pen.

Pennie took her stock-book and pretended to check through the three trays under the counter, but she could not concentrate. Could she be mistaken? Had she misjudged Lal? Was the whole business mere coincidence and Bobby's death nothing to do with Fiona? Or could it be that the old dancer's charm was just a blind? It was thirty minutes since Sybil had gone through the door behind the teak screen. Would she never come?

But it was fully ten more minutes before she did come out.

Her thin face was flushed, her big brown eyes sparkling, and she came through the shop quickly, but not too quickly for Lal. He was at her side before she could reach the door.

“You will buy a mascot, Madame? We have mascots to bring all kinds of luck, spells, charms, and love-philtres.”

Pennie, behind the counter, her hands busy tying up the tiny parcel, listened hard, but she could not detect any difference in the patter Lal always used.

“Your birthday, Madame? 12th August? Then you were born under the sign of Leo. Yellow is your colour and gold brings you luck. A gold bracelet if you would hold a heart safe, a golden bell to guard against trouble, one of these mystic squares in thin gold if you want to gain your wish, or learn an

answer to a question. Gold is your metal; it not only brings you luck, but it will obey you, if you know how to use it.”

Pennie had heard it all before, hundreds of times, in those days at the Luck Shop, the very same words that varied only in the stone or metal which agreed with the birth sign; and if Lal’s fingers lingered a little as they touched Sybil’s, showing her how to use the magic square, they always did linger on a woman’s hand.

Sybil acted her part well, flitting from one thing to another, the very image of a feather-brained customer. She bought a bracelet, a ring set with sardonyx and a mystic square, paying for them. And Lal let Pennie pack them up; did not even ask Sybil’s name or offer to send the goods. He watched her leave as he watched every customer with that faint sly twinkle at Pennie, which said, “Aren’t they just fools?”

Fiona might believe in fortunes and mascots. Lal certainly did not, in spite of his words to Pennie when he first came.

“Well, I’ll get tea.” He caught up his hat, and a new notion shot through Pennie’s brain as she dropped the country parcel into the post basket. She waited until the door had shut behind him before she moved; then, screened by the velvet curtain, she peeped out. Was he really off to tea? The shop they always used for tea lay to the left. Sybil had turned right. Which way would Lal go? Left.

Pennie dropped the curtain and turned back, puzzled. The trap had been set. Had it missed? Had Lal guessed or was it true that he had no share in Bobby’s death, or all that business in the swimming-bath?

On a sudden thought, she sat down at the desk, in Lal’s place. A modern one, it was built into the wall on three sides, and contained a deep shelf filled with reference books, a row of pigeonholes and a drop front, with three long drawers below. A telephone and some bills, books stuffed with invoices, the cash till and a litter of bill-heads and business letters occupied one side; on the other stood Lal’s typewriter. There was nothing else.

She was not quite certain herself what she expected—a concealed dictaphone, perhaps, like one sees a spy use on the movies; but the telephone was innocent enough—she used that herself—and the drawers and pigeonholes hid no mystery, holding nothing worse than Lal’s cuttings and some boxes of samples which she herself had put there. When she rose at last she felt one thing was proved: If Sybil was blackmailed, Lal could have no share in it.

Sybil was of the same opinion. She greeted Pennie when she reached Michael's flat, sitting on one of the two enamel tables and waving a half-filled sherry glass, with a view halloo and a shrill, "Here she is herself! I'll say you were marvellous! Michael, she cut me dead. No one on earth could have imagined she'd ever seen me in her life before. You're some little actress, aren't you?"

Michael, still in his white working overall, filled a sherry glass for Pennie.

"I hear the whole thing flopped," he said, smiling down at her, "and that your performance was the one bright spot."

"Nothing happened?" Pennie refused the sherry.

"Not a thing," declared Sybil. "I did my bit; and I will say your Madame Fiona's impressive. She told me things about my life she couldn't possibly guess——"

"Such as?" asked Michael seriously; but Sybil quelled him with a quick, "I'm not giving myself away to *you*! Anyway, she did. And when I got off my story about being worried about a stumer cheque and so on, as we'd agreed, she took hardly any notice. I'm not sure that she even heard me. She didn't want my address. If you ask me, she's straight; or if she's crooked she's clever—too clever for me." Then to Pennie, "What about Lal?"

"I didn't see anything." Pennie recounted her experience inside and outside the shop.

"I must say, I don't see then how it's done," Sybil conceded. "He can't have listened from that desk place. It's half-way down the shop."

"Did Fiona say anything to the point?" asked Michael, frowning.

"Not a thing." Sybil was emphatic. "Nothing about a strange man meeting me, or séances, or danger, or luck waiting for me in a swimming-bath, or anything. I was waiting for it, listening to every word, trying to find something in it that'd fit, but she simply told my fortune, gave me a pretty clear account of what I'd done and—what's happened to me." Just for a moment Sybil's light voice faltered, recovered with a jerk, as she added extra casually, "She even told me about Bobby."

"What d'you mean?" They got it out together.

“Only that there was some one I—I’d cared for—who’d died lately—violently. Nothing more. Honestly, Michael, she was good, and there was nothing in it that fitted at all with what we think. I didn’t even see a mascot in the shop like the other ones. What do you think?”

“It beats me,” he admitted. “Yet we can’t be wrong. . . . Bobby went to Fiona, that’s certain, and to that damned bath; and the blackmailing letter enclosed the same kind of mascot, and the one he had in the train shows that, taken with Pennie’s pass one into the baths, the three things go together some way. You see, it all links up.”

“It all links up,” Pennie agreed, “but how? That’s what I can’t see. If Lal’s in it, how’s it done? He’d never seen Sybil before, and he certainly didn’t try to blackmail her.”

“Michael, you know I went there thinking it was Fiona?” Sybil was in earnest now, grave. “You know I *wanted* to think she did it. Well, I don’t now. Or if she’s in it, she knew all about me before I got there. And how could she unless——” She broke off suddenly. It was Pennie who finished the sentence bravely.

“You mean there’s just one link that links them all—and that’s me.”

“Rot!” Michael spoke angrily. “*You* don’t. The whole thing happened while you were still at Folkestone. No . . . you couldn’t know. Sybil, it’s no good looking at me like that!”

“No. She’s right!” Pennie spoke energetically. “You ought to make sure, prove my story. After all, you’d never seen me till I came here with that letter. I do work there, at the Luck Shop. I did tell you about the baths.”

“And you dashed nearly died of fright in them!” ended Michael grimly.

“I might’ve been shamming!”

“My dear girl.” Michael was impatient. “I know enough about medicine for that! You couldn’t fake the state you were in. Don’t be silly! As for the rest, as it happens, I do know your story’s true.”

“How?” It was Sybil who challenged.

He answered her rather coldly. “To begin with, I’ve never doubted it since I heard Pennie was just up from Folkestone. But as a matter of fact the police took it up without my knowledge. I saw an inspector yesterday, trying to trace the mascots, and he told me. They’d found out all about Pennie before she gave evidence at the inquest.”

“That’s that,” agreed Sybil. And to Pennie, “Sorry! I’m in a state when I’d believe anything of any one.”

“Of course. There’s no reason you should believe me. But I give my word I never said a word either to Fiona or Lal. They couldn’t have been warned about you!”

“Then I’m done. More sherry.” Sybil held out her glass. She gulped it in two mouthfuls, then asked, “What’re we to do now? I can’t gatecrash into the séance, can I, without invitation?”

Michael shook his head.

“It wouldn’t do much good. They probably have a definite number for each séance, almost certainly thirteen. You’d be stopped at the door. No, we’ve got to find some way to get you in.”

“What about me?” Pennie spoke eagerly. “I’ll go again.”

“You *won’t!*” Michael said it so fiercely, looked for a moment so possessive, that Pennie felt her heart begin to thud. “You’re not going near that dam’ place, whatever happens. You’ve promised me that. No. What we want is fresh, independent evidence for the police of what goes on inside. No, Sybil’s the right person, and we’ve got to get her in. . . .”

“You don’t think there can be any clue in the parcel?” Sybil caught up the little packet she had taken from the Luck Shop, pulled the string off with quick, jerky movements which betrayed her state of nerves. Pennie shook her head.

“They can’t use the mascots. Why, we sell them to any one who comes into the shop.”

“Hallo? Where’s the bracelet and the ring?” Sybil shook the paper. “He hasn’t put them in.”

“I packed your parcel,” Pennie reminded her. “Oh, you’ve got the wrong one! This was for the post. I must have addressed yours to Mrs. Williams. But it can’t be that. We buy most of them wholesale from Java merchants in Amsterdam.”

“Is this from Java?” Michael picked up the square, a piece of very thinly-beaten gold all engraved with ancient luck symbols. He looked at it curiously.

“No, China. It’s only a sort of oracle thing,” Pennie explained. “You put the pad of paper under it and lay your hand on it and it writes the answer to

your question. We sell dozens of them.”

“How does it work?”

“I don’t quite know. I’ve never tried one. It’s supposed to be by the power that Leo children have over the metal gold. When they touch it, it works. No, it couldn’t be anything to do with that show in the baths, or I’d have been told not to sell them. They gave me my little tree at the door—at least Fiona did.”

“Fiona?” Sybil looked up, startled.

“Yes. But she talked as if she had to ask some one else, through Lal, to get it for me.”

“We’re on the wrong track somewhere.” Sybil took back the mystic square, laid it on its little note-pad. “We’ll have to start again, that’s all. If the Luck Shop’s in it at all they must get at people to blackmail them some other way. Look here, what about this?” She leaned forward suddenly, eagerly, on one hand. “Suppose it’s not run by Fiona *or* through the Luck Shop. Suppose they’ve just got hold of Fiona and are blackmailing *her* to send them names of superstitious people; people with money; of the sort who’d go all haywire under hypnotism? Would that work?”

Michael shook his head.

“You acted as if you believed in mascots and the whole show, didn’t you? If it was that she’d have taken your name or made another appointment with you.”

“She never takes names for appointments,” Pennie put in. “She doesn’t even keep a book of them. She doesn’t like knowing who’s coming; she says it puts her off seeing.”

“That sounds genuine enough.” Sybil sat back. “Well, I’m beat. Give me some more sherry. Look out!”

Michael, reaching for her glass, had swept the brown paper off the table, sending the mystic square and its little block of clean white paper to the floor. He stooped to pick them up.

“What’s the matter?” Pennie stared at him. He had gone white, was gazing down at the floor.

Instead of answering, he picked up the small white pad and laid it on the table. The two girls, leaning forward till their heads touched, stared at it; for

across the square white page, very faintly written in pale blue, ran six lines in a thin, sloping spidery hand:

“The road lies East across the Pilgrim’s Way,  
From spire of Canterbury still afar;  
The gate of Youth is hidden by the bay,  
Thirteen black trees; the pillars stand ajar  
Ere, old Year dying, Saturn owns the day.  
When dark brings eight, seek thou the Queen, Ishtar.”

Very faintly blue—and fainter yet—and fading. As they stared, the words vanished and the white page lay bare.

## CHAPTER NINE

### BY INVITATION ONLY

“Michael!” In her utter surprise Pennie forgot that she had never used his name. “Michael, did you see?”

Sybil was pale as a windflower; she picked up the pad, turned it over, flipping through the pages.

“There’s absolutely nothing on it! *Nothing!*”

“It’s gone. But it was *there*.” Pennie insisted.

“Oh, it was there.” Michael’s tone was grim and yet admiring, as he repeated, “It was *there* all right! By Gad, but that’s neat!”

He took up the pad, still staring at the blank white topmost page, said, “They’re clever devils, Pennie. We’re up against more than I thought.”

“How’s it done, then?” Pennie asked, frowning. By way of answer, he set the pad down on the table, put the little gold square on top.

“It was there, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she admitted. She still felt a bewildered sense that magic had been done.

“Do exactly what you did just now,” Michael commanded Sybil.

“What did I do? You mean when you upset it?”

“No. Before that. You leaned forward. Was your hand on it?”

“Yes.” She recollected with an effort. “Yes, I suppose it was.”

“You just leaned forward without thinking with your palm flat on the gold square?”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s what the man in the shop told you to do—put your hand on it?”

“Yes . . .?”

“Then do it again. No! Don’t! You do it this time.” Michael’s eyes twinkled at Pennie. “You’re not born under Leo or anything, are you? You

haven't any special witch-powers over gold?"

"No. I think I'm under Gemini." She laughed, too. "Why?"

"Oh, only to prove it. Put your hand flat on the square."

Pennie obeyed, resting her weight on the palm of her hand as Sybil had done a few minutes earlier.

"Keep it there a minute," Michael ordered. "Just like that. Now!"

Pennie lifted her hand, Sybil drew off the little gold square. The pad underneath was no longer white, the faint blue words lay visible, unchanged. Slowly, beneath their eyes the words faded.

"East, across the Pilgrims' Way—and towards Canterbury—that's the Folkestone road. Pillars, black bays—— We've got 'em!" Michael was triumphant.

"I don't see." Pennie was frowning. "How do they pick and choose, then? I mean, we sell those to any one."

"Of course!" Michael was triumphant now, content. "That's what makes it so dam' clever. You, any one, can sell one of these things and aren't any the wiser. How could you connect them with that bath-place, or blackmail? Don't you see?"

"No, I don't. Not yet."

"Personally, I think it's black magic," declared Sybil firmly. Michael laughed.

"Well, then, it's the kind of magic I work all day long! Those words are written in some chemical, probably chloride of cobalt. Warmth, the right warmth, brings out the letters; at any normal room temperature, they'd fade. That's all. They're written on the pad before you buy it; you see a clear blank sheet; you put the square on and get the message. Imagine the effect on any one who was worried and unhappy, a bit worked up and rather superstitious—it'd seem like a direct answer! They'd go. All those crooks have to do is to choose out the person they want, sell 'em one of these—a special one prepared beforehand, of course!—and get them to that place. The rest's hypnotism—and blackmail. I tell you, this is the link we want—the link we're looking for!"

"You think we've really got them?" Sybil was almost choking with excitement. "Oh, Michael, if we have! When I think of Bobby——!"

“We’ve got them all right!” He squeezed her hand sympathetically. “Don’t worry.”

Only Pennie still looked troubled.

“I don’t see how,” she insisted, “they *can* choose. Lal told me to pack that mystic square as he gave it to me. But he never moved from that desk; he couldn’t hear a word Fiona said from there or anything said to her. How could he know what was said inside the inner room—pick the right person?”

“There’s no reason he should, with this,” said Michael.

“You mean—he just picks out people in the shop?”

“That’s it. You’re glad?” For Pennie looked intensely relieved. “You’re fond of Fiona, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I couldn’t believe she was in it!”

“I know what you mean. I felt that way,” Sybil put in quickly.

“Of course she may be still,” Michael pointed out. “We can’t be sure. But this stunt could be worked by one person.”

“I’m sure she’s not.” Pennie’s faith was firm.

“Well, we shall know for certain now.” Sybil pressed her hand on to the square, reviving the verse. “Ere, old Year dying, Saturn owns the day.” “What’s that mean? Friday the 20th?”

“That’s about it,” agreed Michael; “and eight o’clock.”

Sybil rose and collected her bag, gloves and fur. “Well, I’m for the thirteen bay trees on Friday at eight,” she announced. “The lady who got my parcel can keep it—and Heaven help your dusky friend who fixed up this!”

“Friday,” Michael was considering. “I’m supposed to catch the boat from Dover for Marseilles on Thursday morning at eleven. But I’m not going to miss this. The boat doesn’t leave Marseilles till Sunday night. If I caught the air-mail to Paris at five on Sunday morning——”

“Saturday,” corrected Sybil.

“Sunday.” He was looking now at Pennie. “I could still be in Marseilles by Sunday night. Look here, if we pull this off, will you have dinner with me on Saturday night to celebrate?”

“I’d love to.” Pennie marvelled at the controlled calmness of her voice.

“Good! Then that’s settled. Going, Sybil?”

“Must. I’m dining out. Don’t worry—I can find the door. Well, I expect I’ll see you after Friday, if I’m still sane!” She waved to Pennie and ran out. As the door shut Michael said softly, “Poor child!”

“You think she’ll be all right?” Remembering with a shudder that black room, Pennie felt anxious.

“I know she will. Don’t go yet!”

“I must. It’s getting late.” Pennie, too, had gathered up her bag and gloves.

“Stay a few minutes longer,” Michael begged. “I—I want to talk to you.”

Pennie yielded. She sat down again on the enamel table, with its litter of pipkins, tubes and Bunsen burners. He stood looking at her rather fixedly.

“Pennsylvania——”

“No one ever calls me that!”

“I like it. Mayn’t I call you that?”

“If you like! It sounds very solemn, though!”

“I’m being solemn. I want to ask you something——”

“What?”

“I want to ask you to do something for me. . . .”

It would be difficult, Pennie thought, to refuse him anything when he looked down at her like that.

“What is it?”

The reply was the last thing she expected.

“I want you not to go back to the Luck Shop.”

“Oh, but I can’t!” It broke out in dismay. “I—I can’t afford to.”

“You can’t afford to stop there.” He was urgent. “It’s not safe!”

“It’ll be all right. I mean, if I don’t go near that beastly place again, what can they do?”

“Anything,” he declared soberly. “I know what I’m talking about. Hypnotism is a thing we treat rather lightly as a joke here in England. It isn’t. It’s dangerous. It’s abject slavery, and slavery without hope of escape. A person under hypnotism is not his own master. At first his own will may fight the other, asleep he may still do what’s in his own mind, but after the

power is exercised a few times it grows stronger, until at last the person who holds power can force the victim to do anything—anything—without even knowing that he has done it! Out in the East they know that. They understand it; we don't. The use—no, that's not the right word!—the criminal *misuse* of the power of one mind over another's something we've yet got to learn. It's a very old, old magic which the West has forgotten, if it ever knew about it."

Funny that he should use those words, thought Pennie, almost Fiona's own words!

He was emphatic as he went on, "You don't know the danger you're running into. I tell you, I do. I've *seen* it. Out in Africa, the land's bedevilled with witchcraft. At the bottom it's simply fear, of course—old primitive fear that dates back to the Stone Age, playing on the mind until it's half insane—and mesmerism—mesmerism's at the basis of all witchcraft."

"You called *me* a witch once," she reminded him.

"Not that kind of witch." There was a sudden, deep inflection in his voice which he checked quickly. "Hypnotism is an ugly thing—dangerous, *horrible*——"

"You mean even Fiona's second sight?"

"No, not necessarily. I'm not saying that clairvoyance is wrong. But we don't know enough at present to separate the natural powers we call clairvoyance from hypnotism and all sorts of devilry. Until we do, they're all better left alone——"

"Even if you're right," Pennie insisted, "I don't see why any one should worry about me. I'm not worth it. I haven't any money."

"You've something else."

"What?"

"You're rather an attractive person." He said that dryly. "And, apart from that, you know too much. Don't forget, at least *one* man knew you were in that bath-place the other day! They saw me, and they must know that you told me; that I broke in there, through you. They know that I'm connected with Bobby, for they wouldn't miss that inquest. I tell you, we're not dealing with fools. No fool invented that sympathetic ink business or that bestial bath. It's clever, calculated beastliness; and it's run from the Luck Shop. I want to see you safely out of there—*now*—to-night. Anyway—before I go."

Only three words, but they seemed to Pennie like a fierce wind tearing through her hopes. She had not realised how high that cloud castle had grown since she had come into this room. For half an hour past it had seemed to her that by every word and gesture and look he had been saying, “I love you!” And now, with three words, he had destroyed it all. “See you safely out of there—*before I go*——” Surely, surely if he cared he would not say that? The words of a person who feels, not love, but some responsibility and wishes to get clear of it with a clean conscience! To him, then, she was no more than a girl who had got mixed up in his affairs, whom he must see safely out of any scrape for which he felt responsible before he went abroad!

“What do you want me to do, then?” Somehow she forced that out between her pale lips, terrified for fear he might guess what had been in her mind.

He answered readily, “I’m going to find you another job. I want you to take it.”

“I’m all right where I am.” In her hurt, she spoke harshly.

“I don’t think so.”

“I think I’m the judge of that.”

“I can’t force you to leave,” he admitted, “but I wish you would.”

And Pennie, her pride in arms, answered, “If you feel it’s through you or your brother I went there, you needn’t. You’re not responsible in any way. If I choose to stay there, that’s my look out.”

He said quietly, “I’m asking it as a favour.”

“Why should you worry about me?” she challenged, bold in her despair.

“Because——” He stopped, gave a little gesture of resignation.

“You do feel responsible?”

“You can put it that way.”

Pennie stood up.

“You still really think that Fiona’s in it, don’t you? Well, I’ll leave the Luck Shop when you prove to me that Fiona is mixed up in it!”

He gave way with a sigh.

“Is that a bargain?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of a job would you like?” He said it with such calm assurance that Pennie’s pride revolted.

“You seem pretty sure!”

“I am as sure that she is in it,” he spoke in a level tone, “as I am that you are in appalling danger. So sure, that I don’t intend to leave England until I see you safe.”

She was utterly shaken, stood looking at him, disarmed.

“You’d put off your journey for me?”

“Of course!” He made that matter of fact.

“I don’t understand!”

It was true; she said it without thinking.

“Don’t you?” He had come close to her. Just for a moment she thought he meant to kiss her, drew in her breath. Then he turned away abruptly with, “Don’t try. It isn’t necessary.” He added, “I shall hold you to your bargain.”

Pennie put on her gloves.

“All right.”

He smiled suddenly.

“Then you have made me two promises. You won’t go near that bath again, and when I prove to you that Fiona runs it, you’ll take another job. Good!”

She was in the lift before he added to that: “Don’t forget you’ve made a third promise! You’re going to dine with me on Saturday!”

All the way home to the Luck Shop Pennie’s thoughts could have been put into two words—just “I wonder. . . .”

But she had no mystic square to give an answer.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—throughout those three days Pennie found herself watching. She could not help it. All day long, from the moment she carried in the tall glass with its pile of frothy whipped cream balanced on the chocolate to the moment that she kissed Fiona good-night and set the glass of herb tea by her bedside, she kept wondering and watching; wondering what Michael meant by his cryptic, “Don’t you?” to

her question, and whether the old dancer had any part in that faint rhymed message which had developed under Sybil's hand.

For Fiona seemed just herself, no different than she had been from the first moment she had greeted Pennie in the Luck Shop. Impulsive, generous, utterly kind and filled with more affection than Pennie had ever received from any one else in her whole life.

From her morning "Ah, child! Come and look——" with the cards spread out across her bed, to her final kiss, when Pennie came to say good-night, she treated the girl less as a companion than a daughter. She even insisted on re-trimming one of Pennie's hats, a little blue felt which she wore now in place of the one she had lost.

"It is passé," she had declared, the first time that Pennie put it on to go out to lunch with her, that Tuesday. "Wait till we get in to-night!"

And, once the shop was shut and they were safely in the upper room, with Lal playing the piano, she brought out an inlaid workbox and, with clever fingers snipped and pinned the felt on Pennie's head until, from a last year's shape, emerged a new and fascinating tilted deerstalker with two absurd felt feathers which stood up at a provocative, alluring angle.

"You ought to run a hat shop, Madame," Pennie declared, adoring it in the glass.

"Hats? No! For those I love I do it," Fiona replied. "But to sit all day making hats for fat, so *ugly* women—never!"

Pennie, watching the ring-laden fingers stitching the felt neatly, found it harder than ever to believe that Madame Fiona had any part in blackmail.

Lal was another matter. Even at the piano, there was always a hint of something hidden about Lal; even when he played some favourite ballet for his aunt or stooped to kiss her hand affectionately Pennie had a feeling that the graceful gestures only masked impatience with the old woman.

And Lal had enough motive. It was early on Thursday before he reached the shop that the large man in the grey bowler hat appeared.

"Mr. Lallard Hatton?"

Pennie had never heard Lal's full name, and she said, "No," believing that she spoke the truth.

"He works here, doesn't he?" The man had a pair of small, shrewd, unpleasant eyes which gave her the lie.

“Hatton? There’s no one of that name—oh! Just a minute! I’ll ask.”

She used the telephone to Fiona’s sitting-room upstairs, unable to leave the shop.

“Hatton? Yes—Lal. What does he want?” Fiona’s voice came thickly and Pennie guessed that she was eating nougat; she had a passion for nougat of the stickiest raspberry kind, and bought it in big slabs.

“I don’t know. I’ll ask.” Pennie relayed the question to the man. He gave a scornful smile.

“Up there, is he?” jerking a finger at the ceiling. “I’ll go up.”

“He’s not in,” said Pennie firmly, just a little frightened. “What did you want him for?”

The man smiled again; he had a most unpleasant smile.

“Don’t know when he’ll *be* in, I s’pose?” As Pennie shook her head, “I thought not!”

“I can give him a message,” she pointed out.

“Not this message, you can’t,” he added a broad grin to that. “I’ll wait.”

“You can’t stay in here. This is not Mr. Hatton’s shop,” said Pennie, more anxious than ever to see him go.

“No? Belongs to his aunt, don’t it?” Again the man’s manner was offensive. “Well, then, perhaps she’d like to settle a little matter of twenty-four pounds, seventeen and ten?”

He completed the request by laying a buff slip on the counter and giving Pennie one final and triumphant smile, as if it was the ace of trumps.

Bailiffs!

Pennie, uncertain what to do, hesitated. Ought she to tell Fiona? It was Lal himself who settled the question. He entered jauntily.

“What’s this?” At a glance he frowned. “I told you to come to my house! What the Hell do you mean by coming here—you——” He used such appalling language that Pennie longed to turn and leave the shop. The man, however, seemed quite unperturbed.

“Got the money, sir?” was his only comment.

“Wait a minute——” Lal left the shop and dived into the little back room. He reappeared and went out with the man. It was nearly twelve

o'clock before he came back, and he said nothing more to Pennie about the whole matter.

Of Lal she would believe anything. But, if it was Lal, how had he got outside, into the car, that night?

Friday came at last. Even without foreknowledge, Pennie would have guessed what was to happen. Fiona's excitement was almost painful.

"It's fixed for to-night!" Her eyes alight with hope. "But wait, child! This time you will see. . . ."

She seemed to assume that Pennie would come with them, and it was hard to know which was the right moment to refuse without rousing suspicion. Twice Pennie tried to take her courage in both hands and tell her, but each time before she had a chance to get the words out she found Lal watching. He had kept close to Fiona all Friday, taking her out to lunch, having tea with her in the inner room, even coming upstairs at seven to wait while she changed.

Pennie, by the fire in the sitting-room, saw him standing in the passage, and wished he would go; she did not want him there when she explained.

"Pennie, child, aren't you ready?" There was consternation in Fiona's voice, and Lal had followed her into the room.

"I'm not coming, Madame. I don't think I want to go again. . . ." She'd been rehearsing the one sentence for three whole long days. She opened her mouth to speak them now, and no sound came.

"You've got a black dress on. Come as you are." Fiona seemed more impatient than ever. "We shall be late."

Again Pennie opened her lips to speak. Lal was looking at her, and she felt a sudden, shivering fear that he could read the thought inside her mind.

"I'm not——"

Something was wrong; the words had stuck, would not form. She struggled with them physically, trying to shape her mouth into "not coming. . . ."

The effort made her dizzy, but Pennie knew she must get them out. She had promised Michael. . . .

What? When they both stared at her like that it made her feel confused, dizzy.

She found it difficult to think. She had promised Michael—Michael Kerr—three promises—to—to——

Suddenly, with an amazing startling clarity, she knew—remembered.

Of course! She had promised Michael to go to a séance! He had written the instructions on paper, in silly rhymes. She could almost read again the sloping, faint words——

She heard her own voice say quite loudly and clearly, “I’ve got my hat out here——”

As they went downstairs, arm in arm, Lal following, Pennie could hear the noise of the car engine running outside the house. It gave her a vague sense of disquiet; she could not quite think why. . . .

### 3

A white porch with pillars, floodlit, with thirteen low black bay trees planted in scarlet tubs. Pennie had a feeling that she had seen them somewhere before. She did not like the effect; it was too glaring—or maybe too dark. . . .

A man with a grey-sallow face in a monkish black robe stood inside the door. Pennie, feeling something put into her hand, held it out to him. The man went down a passage. There were other people following them and Pennie’s eyes rested for a moment on a girl with clouds of frizzy fair hair and enormous brown eyes—a pretty girl all dressed in black. The passage beyond the hall was dark and ended in black darkness. The sound of a door closing made her jump.

There were thirteen chairs under a light, empty—or was the centre chair empty? To Pennie, looking at it, it seemed as though there was a mist over the middle chair, a mist which took shape——

Now there was no light. And then a faint blue light in which figures danced, dazzling her eyes; a blue light which grew out of the darkness where the water played, darkness which seemed to end beyond the world—illimitable night unlit by any star.

Shapes were floating in a blue haze, leaping and crying round a sheet of water where something dark and dreadful moved—a great round black thing which rose from the water like a monstrous mushroom. She watched it rising with a dreamy, rapt attention. A huge black tree which pushed up and up towards the sky, with huge branches which reached out, menacing—— A

little cold wind blew off the water, and Pennie knew the wind for what it was—fear.

She was afraid, alone now and afraid, out in that darkness watching two yellow specks that shone behind the tree, waxing and dwindling. If she could reach the lights she would be safe.

She would be safe; but the tree lay in between—and some one whom she loved—was in danger—going into danger—now—unless she could stop him——

Pennie began to struggle. Her legs and arms were heavy as iron and they moved in little jerks, impelled against her will. There was some one she must reach—and something she must do, and something else she did not want to do. Unless she did *that*——

The yellow specks were larger, had become one, were whirling round, a dizzy wheel of fire that circled round a dark tree——

A tree. She must reach it quickly, yet her body fought, contesting each step, numbed by the cold wind—fear. She must reach the tree, be safe, and her feet would not move. Chilled to the bone, she knew that she must yield up her own will, drift on the wind, to be safe—silently she fought the desire to yield, felt herself growing weaker, moving—her fingers touched something ice-cold—a black branch—which closed——

“A-aa-ah!”

An awful scream, shrill, high and terrible. At that sound it seemed to Pennie that the whole world fell apart, dissolving into a white, blinding glare of light.

## CHAPTER TEN

### GOOD LUCK AND GOOD-BYE

“She’s coming to. . . .”

Pennie opened her eyes and looked up into Michael Kerr’s face. Her head was resting on his arm. Sybil, a glass of water in her hand, was just behind him; beyond her hovered Fiona, dishevelled, her face raddled with tears and looking horribly ill. Pennie sat up.

“Madame? *Oh!*”

She was in the black-pillared room, but now it was a strange sight. The roof was half open, and from it poured the blinding beam of a searchlight; two more at the far end of the bath made the place light as day, and it was humming like an overturned hive.

Near the satyr fountain surged a group of women, one overwrought and sobbing, the rest in various stages of hysteria, arguing shrilly with a policeman; beyond them, guarded by two more, stood the doorkeeper, no longer at all mysterious, but with his black hooded robe thrown back, revealing an ordinary pepper-and-salt suit, a collar which had come undone and an exceedingly bald head. He was smoking a cigarette and watching the police with an expression of philosophic resignation. Half-way up, between two black pillars, a girl in white was struggling with a policeman who held both her wrists, and Pennie gave a gasp, for this creature who swore and tried to bite the policeman’s hand was the girl with red hair whom she had seen dancing in the circle of blue light. But now she looked less ethereal than devilish as she writhed and shouted, cursing and kicking out with her bare feet. But strangest of all was the thing which towered up out of the long bath, an enormous tree like an oak with spreading, leafless branches, artificial, black and wet!

Fiona put her arm round the girl, but did not speak, stood watching with a strained, white face. After a minute a policeman came up and drew her away.

“You’d better sit down.” Michael had fetched a chair, and Pennie sank into it, glad to be off her feet. Her knees were trembling and she felt dazed. Vague, dreamlike recollections floated through her brain, but she had no clear memory of anything since the minute in which she had tried to tell

Fiona that she would not come. Now she was here, with a police raid in full progress and Michael standing rather stiffly by her side, frowning.

An inspector, a stolid young man with a toothbrush moustache, strolled up, carrying in one arm a small white terrier with a black patch over one eye. He looked at Pennie kindly.

“Feeling better? That’s right. You’d a close shave!” And to Michael, “Look what I’ve found! Poor brute, they had him shut up there in the dark with a tight muzzle on!”

“Where did you find him?” Pennie asked timidly. “I—we—looked for him the other day——”

“I forgot. You haven’t seen, have you?” He walked a few steps back to the wall, touched a glass panel and it swung round, leaving a narrow space on each side. He touched the next and it, too, opened. There was no light behind the glass, but the beams from outside showed up an iron bedstead, some clothes hanging on a peg, and a shelf with a cheap looking-glass. “There’s a whole suite of rooms behind there, living-room, garage for a bicycle, everything! A complete modern flat! You see, this place was a swimming-bath before, and they’ve simply taken the doors off the cubicles and fitted this up. The whole lot lock with one bar worked from that end, fitted like a file cabinet. Neat, isn’t it?”

“You mean, the man who scared me so——”

Pennie looked up at Michael.

He said rather gruffly, “Must have come out in the dark and popped in again when I broke in. We could have searched all day.”

“Oh, they could do some very pretty effects in here.” The police inspector laughed. “That chair”—he pointed to the high, squared centre throne—“is just a box with a toy cine-camera inside; it was worked by a black wire and a switch. When we broke in they’d got it turned on that girl over there; and I can tell you it gave *me* a shock! With her white dress on she looked like a moving skeleton! And that tree—rubber! It inflates itself mechanically as the water runs out. When it’s not in use, it’s hidden by a box that matches the bath. The Houdini principle—black doesn’t show on black. This place has always had a bad reputation. We had to shut it when it was a roadhouse, and that’s how they got it cheap. But they meant to make money at this game; they spent a couple of thousand pounds on fitting it up.”

“A couple of thousand——” Michael turned his head suddenly, met Pennie’s eyes. She heard him catch his breath before he asked, “As much as

that?”

“According to that fellow over there.” The young inspector nodded casually at the doorkeeper. “He’s in it, of course. That red-haired vixen’s his wife. We know all about them; they’ve both done time. When he saw the game was up, he talked. It seems they got hold of some young mug to put up the money.”

“Was—the mug—in it?” There was a hard line now round Michael’s mouth, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“Lord, no. They spun him some yarn about running a beauty parlour on new lines with an X-ray invention. When he found out the whole thing was a rank fraud, apparently he quit—or they blackmailed him out. Those two were in before for blackmail.”

“I—see.” For a fraction of an instant Michael’s eyes met Pennie’s as he added quietly, “Poor devil! Well, I suppose you’ve got them now? I take it you can nail them on this?”

“Ah! That’s another story.” The inspector watched his men as they climbed up out of the bath. The huge rubber tree began to sink and crumple as the water came in, flooding the bottom of the bath. “It’s fraud, of course—a dirty fraud, getting money out of all those women by false pretences——” His glance twinkled down at Pennie. “What won’t your sex do to keep young? But getting evidence is another matter. I haven’t found one of these ladies who’d be willing to make a charge. They’re too frightened of it getting into the papers and making them look silly.”

“What about me?” It was Sybil who spoke. She had come back so quietly that Pennie did not know that she was standing right behind her chair. As she turned her head she was shocked at Sybil’s face, pale and dragged with big eyes glittering fiercely.

“Sorry, I wish you could.” There was a note of real regret in the inspector’s tone. “I’d like to get ’em under lock and key, but unfortunately you weren’t invited, were you? I mean, you didn’t pay to get in and they didn’t promise anything. As evidence, you’re no good.”

“Then I’m not either?” said Pennie. She was looking round for Fiona.

“No. We’ll charge them, of course, with selling drink without a licence; but they won’t go to jail for that. Anyway, the place’ll be shut up.”

“What about—blackmail?” Michael spoke through clenched teeth.

“If we’d any evidence——”

“Would evidence of blackmail against some one who’s—dead, do?” asked Michael.

“I’m afraid not.”

“You mean they’ll get of scot-free?” That burst from Sybil.

“I’m afraid so—this time.” The inspector added soothingly, “We’ll get them in the end; we always do. Look, they’re finished now. You can go if you want to.”

“Where’s Fiona?” Pennie had been anxiously scanning the space below the pillars; some one had turned up the shaded light there, and the blue lamps above the pillars. But among the people who crowded towards the door there was no sign of Fiona. She stood up. “I must find her!”

“She’s gone. I told her I would take you back to London.” Michael said that rather grimly. Added to Sybil, “Are you coming with us?”

“No, I’ll get straight home. Good-night!”

There was a catch in Sybil’s voice as she squeezed Pennie’s hand. She turned and hurried away.

Michael led the way towards the smaller doors as Pennie, still anxious, demanded, “Where’s Fiona gone? Are you sure she’s all right?” Her own brain was clearing, though she still felt faint and sick, and she had a vision of Fiona alone, perhaps ill with shock.

“She’s all right. She’s gone home. You were right about her; she wasn’t in it. That’s why your friend Fiona was so upset. It seems the whole show belongs to the nephew Lal.”

They went past the strangest thing yet—two small, ordinary oil lamps with a tin reflector behind each which were set on the floor of the recess. The door was guarded by a burly policeman, who nodded and let them through. Outside, there was a police car with two uniformed policemen in the back, and, sitting between them, Lal.

Michael’s car was with a dozen others in the park as he helped Pennie in.

He had been driving for about ten minutes when Pennie said timidly, “I broke my promise.”

“So I noticed.” He did not look round.

“I didn’t mean to. I couldn’t help it.”

“I suppose Fiona asked you to come?” His tone, dry and sarcastic, turned suddenly savage. “Do you know what I’d like to do? I’d like to stop the car now and slap you! It’s what you thoroughly deserve!”

“But——”

He did not let her finish.

“You were hypnotised? Of course! Well, I warned you, didn’t I? I told you it’d happen if you went there again——”

“I know you did; but——”

“But you went all the same! Exactly! Well, perhaps it might amuse you to know that if we’d broken in a few seconds later you’d have been dead.”

“*Dead?*” Pennie stared at him with distended eyes.

“Yes, dead. Do you know what you were doing when we got in?”

“No. I’d a sort of misty idea of escaping, I think.”

Michael laughed. It was a short, angry laugh.

“You were walking straight towards that bath—a twelve-foot drop!”

“But——”

“Water? Quite! But there wasn’t any. They’d run it off. In a couple of steps more you’d have been over and have broken your neck.” He was angry, furiously angry, hitting out to hurt. “You gave me your solemn promise you wouldn’t go near the place, and you went. But for sheer luck, the fact we broke in at that particular moment, you’d be dead. If you hadn’t enough sense to listen when I told you it was dangerous, couldn’t you at least have kept your word?”

Pennie did not answer.

“*Why* did you go? Didn’t you care a bit that you’d promised me?”

“I did. I tried to say I wouldn’t—I *meant* to——” Pennie was struggling hard now not to cry. “I couldn’t *help* it!”

The car drew in to the pavement with a jerk.

“Don’t! Don’t! I’ve been a brute. Please!” His hands captured hers. “I didn’t mean to say that either; only you gave me such a fright. You see, I thought we were too late when that light went on! I only just grabbed you back in time! Oh, Pennie, please——”

“I’m all right now.” She brought her head up with a little jerk. “It’s only—I’m feeling rather queer still.”

“Would you like to find an hotel—lie down a bit?” He was very gentle now and sounded anxious.

“No, I’d rather get back.”

“Lie still, then, and keep quiet.” He tucked the rug round her, started up again and drove towards London. Advised, “Try to sleep.”

“Where are you taking me?” Pennie sat up. They were right up St. James’s Street.

“Sybil’s mother has a flat in Half Moon Street. You can stay there to-night.”

“Michael, I must go back!”

“Not to the Luck Shop?” There was consternation in his voice.

“Yes! Oh, don’t you see? *She* wasn’t in it. You said so yourself! She didn’t know, and she’ll have had a frightful shock. I can’t leave her there alone!”

“It’s not safe——” he began; but Pennie cut him short.

“It is. Lal won’t come there to-night, will he? He’ll have to go to the police station, won’t he, first, get bail or something, if he’s going to be charged with selling liquor?”

“I suppose so,” Michael admitted reluctantly. “Can’t you just go round and see her and then come to the flat in Half Moon Street? I don’t like your sleeping in that shop.”

“I wouldn’t feel happy, honestly,” Pennie insisted. “Fiona’s been sweet to me, and she’ll need me.”

He gave way.

“All right. I’ll drive you round.”

“No, it’s only down Jermyn Street. I’ll walk.”

“I’m going to drive you.”

“You’re a very obstinate man!”

“You need some one to look after you!” Michael retorted.

“Do I?” They were drawing up before the Luck Shop.

“You do—badly.” He was looking at her now, and Pennie flushed under that scrutiny. Then he said abruptly, “You’re dining with me to-morrow, don’t forget. How about eight at the Savoy?”

“I’ll be there.”

He stood waiting while she fitted her latchkey.

“Well, good-night!”

“I’m not going yet. Which is your window?”

“The little one up there.”

“When you’ve seen Madame Fiona, and if Lal’s not there and everything’s all right, turn your light on and look out and wave, will you? I’ll give you ten minutes. If you don’t wave I shall come in!”

“You’re being very careful!”

“I am.” He added nothing to that.

“I won’t wave. I’ll come down again.”

“All right.”

Two minutes later she reappeared, breathless.

“It’s all right. Good-night!”

“Good-night.”

But even after the door had closed, when he had heard her put up the chain and the light on the stairs that showed through the fanlight had gone out, Michael Kerr sat in the car, smoking and watching one upper window. It was late, past midnight, when a light flashed on behind the chintz curtains. Once or twice a girl’s shadow showed for an instant. The light went off again and the curtains were drawn, the window went up. Pennie, leaning out, did not notice the big car below; she was looking across the roofs towards St. James’s Square. Michael waited till her head vanished again; then, with a sigh, he switched on his engine and went off towards St. James’s Square.

## 2

Pennie had found Fiona in her room, but not, as she had feared, in a state of collapse. Fiona was up, dressed, and she flew at Pennie, catching her in both arms.

“Pennie! You’re all right again! Oh, but my dear, what I have suffered for you! Come——”

“Just one moment, Madame, I must bolt the front door.” Pennie slipped out to Michael, came hurrying back. “Lie down,” she begged. “Let me fetch your herb tea.”

“No! I tell you, I can’t rest. You were there. You saw!”

“I know what happened.”

Fiona turned a tear-stained, raddled face up to her, the black eyes snapping.

“Then you know that Lal—*Lal!*—cheated me! Every week—every week for a year—he has said, ‘It is a pity you should pay so much money to that place just to be young! They will make you young, yes, but they will make you poor, too!’ And all the time”—the old dancer’s voice rose to a shrill cry—“all the time he was taking that money for himself! He was using *my* money, my own money, that he took out of *my* till, to run that place to cheat me! Oh!”

“Madame, don’t. Madame, forget about him. Come to bed and get some sleep.” Pennie was frightened. Fiona’s eyes looked so wild, so crazy with anger, that she must break in a minute.

“I don’t *want* to sleep!” Fiona shook herself free. “He is there in prison, and—he asked me to go bail—me—*me!* I wish I had! I’d like to have him here and—I would *beat* him! Oh, when I think of him!”

She flung herself on her bed, her black hair sticking out in a great tousled mass, both clenched hands thumping on the quilt.

“When I think of him!” Then, with a rush of tears, “Pennie, you know I loved him! From the time he was a little, little boy I loved him, gave him everything! He was like a son. I took nothing for myself. When I had *no* money, after I stopped dancing, I sold my dresses to keep Lal. Everything! My furs, everything, only my jewels! If he had needed it, I would have sold those! And now——”

Pennie had been hurriedly preparing a little medicine glass of heart tonic, but Fiona waved it aside. She sat bolt upright, her tear-wet face working.

“I took him from the workhouse,” she declaimed. “He would have been brought up there but for me. And now he does this—my own sister’s son! The gate of youth! The Tree of Life! One must dance, wait, do incantations, magic, till it grows, and then pluck a leaf, dive in the water, grow young for ever—and it is a rubber toy he makes to laugh at me! That girl there beside

me to-night—he had told her she would be beautiful, he had had her crying after each séance because she had failed—and it is a trick! A cheat—aah!” She jumped up and went striding about the room.

“Madame, *please*.” Pennie had her arm round the old woman. “Don’t. You know it’s bad for you. You must rest!”

But Fiona would not listen.

“*Lal* would not come in! *He* was afraid! He must stay outside in the car! Do you know where they found him? Hiding there in that caretaker’s room drinking whisky and soda while he worked the switches! Oh, he is clever enough to cheat an old woman, but not the police!” She flung up both her hands, brought them crashing on to her table, sending the little pots topped with tortoiseshell dancing across the glass. “I shall never speak to him again!”

“You won’t let him come back to the shop? Pennie could not keep a note of hope out of that.”

“The shop? No! There is no shop. How can I open it again?” Fiona’s distraught face looked round at her, twisted with pain. “He made that shop for me, my setting, because he loved me—*Lal*!” She laughed discordantly. “Do you know *why*? So that I, Fiona, may bring silly women to him who can be cheated! I draw my friends—my clientele—people who come to see me, and I pay everything—and he waits there to rob—cheat—*steal*——”

Suddenly, without warning, Fiona’s head dropped forward on to Pennie’s shoulder as she broke into a storm of tears.

It was nearly an hour before Pennie got her quiet, into bed, with her hot herb tea and an aspirin, had kissed her and turned out the light. After she had undressed and looked across the roofs of Jermyn Street, she took an eiderdown and a pillow and stole back into Fiona’s bedroom where, in an arm-chair, she sat up all night.

### 3

Emotion, which left Pennie washed out, had no after effects on the old dancer. By eleven o’clock on Saturday morning she was alert, fresh, almost cheerful, adamant only on one point—*Lal*.

Pennie tried to persuade her to stay safely in bed, but Fiona would not hear of that. By eleven she was up and busy turning the whole flat over to find and pack up things which belonged to *Lal*.

“Nothing of his shall stay here!” she declared. “I will not have him here for these. I will see him in the shop.” And she insisted on packing them up herself—books of photographs, his sheet music, a Spanish guitar, even photographs and souvenirs of him as a small boy which she had treasured. She would not let either Pennie or Mrs. Ransom help. The bony Scots daily maid went about with her lips compressed, saying nothing, but well aware of all that had happened. There were news items in the papers which read: “Raid on Night Road House: Black Swimming-bath,” which she had seen. Sour and silent, Mrs. Ransom said nothing, but she was almost rude when Pennie asked her whether, since she was going off for her half day, being a Saturday, she would leave a meal that could be got hot.

“Me? Go off and leave her to-day? What’d I do with a half holiday to-day?” She flounced off in a huff, leaving Pennie to gather she was offended by the mere suggestion she could be so heartless as to leave Fiona.

In one way, Pennie was glad. She had decided last night to telephone to Michael and tell him that dinner was off; she could not let Fiona dine alone. But Mrs. Ransom’s announcement was at once followed by Fiona’s own suggestion that she should have some friends in that night.

The shop was closed. Madame was firm in her decision not to open it again. “I will sell it all,” she declared. “You and I, Pennie, we will travel. Yes? You’ve never been abroad? Then you shall come with me! We will sell the shop and take the money and go to France, Italy, Spain——!”

By twelve o’clock Pennie felt free to go out and do a little shopping for herself.

It seemed strange to have the time, not to be tied during the hours on which shops are open. Most of the dressmakers were still shut, but one of the bigger stores yielded an evening dress. Not black! Never again, thought Pennie with a shudder, would she buy a black dress—nor yet grey; that reminded her too vividly of that unhappy afternoon when she had worn Sybil’s grey taffeta. She chose a soft blue-green which brought out the green flecks in her dark grey eyes.

A new dress, new shoes, the hairdresser. It was past one before she finished and went hurrying back to Jermyn Street with her parcels hanging from her fingers. All her savings from her work at the Luck Shop had gone—yet she did not grudge them a bit. To-night, dining with Michael, she would feel fresh, new, that exhilarated feeling which only a new dress can give.

It took her, even then, three-quarters of an hour to dress. Fiona, already busy with her friends, gave her a kiss.

“You’re looking sweet! Your eyes look very bright, you are dining with a friend? I wonder——!” A little burst of laughter followed her as Pennie went out.

The Savoy. She had never been inside it, and felt rather shy as she went across the big hall, looking this way and that to find Michael. He was near the steps.

“That’s a pretty dress!” He still held her hand. “I’ve taken tickets for a musical show. I hope that’s what you like?”

“I’d love it.” Pennie was ready to go in, but he stopped her.

“Not yet. I want to tell you about that business first, and then forget it for the evening. Have a cocktail?”

“Only tomato juice, then,” stipulated Pennie.

They sat on a big sofa where they could watch the crowds come in, and Michael told her, “Lal and his friends were brought up before the magistrate to-day. Unfortunately they couldn’t prove anything against him as far as fraud went. The women were all too much afraid that they’d be laughed at. Lal got off with a fine for running a drinking bar without a licence, and his red-haired friend paid up. Anyway, he’s at liberty again, though I don’t think he’ll be reopening his roadhouse! Now, I want you to listen to me——”

“I’m listening very hard!” Pennie, bubbling with happiness, laughed at him above the glassful of tomato juice.

“Good! You remember Sybil’s mother? You saw her at tea on Christmas Day? Well, she wants some one to be secretary, and I want you to leave the Luck Shop to-morrow morning and take on the job. She’ll pay you whatever you’re getting now. Will you do it?”

The glass with the tomato juice shook, clattering against Pennie’s teeth, but her voice was quite level.

“It’s sweet of you, but I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Michael leaned forward. “Listen, Pennie! I’ve got to fly to Paris at five o’clock to-morrow morning. How can I go off and leave you knowing that you’re there in that cursed shop? I *can’t* do it!”

“You needn’t worry.” Pennie’s voice was very low as she set down the glass, wiped a spot of scarlet juice from the lap of her brand-new dress. “I

haven't told you my news. The shop's shut."

Quickly she summarised her conversation with Fiona. Michael seemed delighted.

"That's wonderful!" He jumped up. "Come on! We'll have some dinner and forget it all!"

They had a table by an unshaded window which looked out over the river lights. Michael had ordered dinner beforehand, and there was a Victorian posy of flowers in the centre of the table.

"To match Pennsylvania!" he told her.

"I'm not feeling a bit Pennsylvania to-night!"

"You'll always be like that to me. When I'm out in China I shall think of you like you are now, with your hair all smooth and that little mist of it over your forehead and your hands folded. You know——"—the tone changed quickly—"I can hardly believe it'll be months before I see all this again!"

Months! To Pennie the words sounded like "eternity." Suppose he caught cholera out there—died——? Suppose—— She tried to smile.

"Perhaps you'll meet the lady of my fortune out there!"

"No. That's the only thing I'm sure of. I might die, but I shan't get engaged out there." He bent across the table to fill up her glass.

"Why are you so certain?" It was easy to ask it here where the little pool of red-shaded light seemed to cut them off from all the other diners, all the world outside.

He hesitated a moment before answering.

"It's going to be a whole-time job. Time enough for other things when it's done." He turned away to tell the waiter to bring more ice. Pennie sat very still.

When he turned back she was smiling, and began to ask him in a gay, light voice about his work, and sat appalled. He talked casually enough, but to Pennie the careless sentences meant cholera camps, journeys alone in the unsettled land, the risk of typhoid, malaria, a stray bullet, and one would never know or hear perhaps for months—eternity! It was only when they were driving back together, the evening over, that she made one request: "May I have your address—some address——? I'd like to let you know if anything more happens."

“I’d love it if you’d write. . . .”

They were in Duke Street. He stopped the car, felt and took out an envelope, gave it to her. “That’s the address. I shan’t get there, of course, for about three weeks, but it’ll always find me.”

Pennie folded the envelope and slipped it in her bag.

“Thanks. I’ve had a wonderful evening. Don’t go on; it’s only a few yards from here.” She slid out. “Well, good luck—and good-bye——”

He took her hand.

His eyes met hers and held them, saying something which was not written in the book of words.

“Good-bye—Pennsylvania.”

The lamps of Duke Street blurred suddenly as Pennie slid her hand free and turned away.

4

“What’re you doing here!”

He stepped out from the dark shadow of the archway as she came in—  
Lal.

“I’ve got to talk to you!” He did not move, was blocking her way to the door.

“I’ve nothing to say to you. Let me pass, please!” Pennie stamped her foot.

He said sullenly, “I must see Fiona!”

“She doesn’t want to see you.” It was brutal, but he deserved it.

“She is angry?”

“Yes! Will you let me pass, please?”

He said suddenly, with a burst of rabid fury, “It was all *your* fault! *You* took that fellow there! My God, I could——”

“If you don’t get out of the way I’ll call that policeman.” It was no idle threat; she meant it; and the policeman was close by, already looking towards them. He moved at once, stood aside and let her by. Pennie pushed the key in quickly, opened the door just wide enough to slip through, shut it with a bang and, fastening the snib, put up the chain. The chain had been up

every night since Lal first entered the Luck Shop; but to-night she pushed in both bolts as well.

Fiona's door was half open.

"Pennie?"

For a second Pennie stood bracing herself, blinking rather fast.

"Madame?"

Fiona was in bed, a book, as usual, open before her, the little shaded lamp beside her turned on. She would lie like that for perhaps an hour, reading and sipping at her herb tea, slowly dropping off at last to sleep.

"You have your tea? Oh, did I tell Mrs. Ransom——? Wait just a minute!" Glad to escape, Pennie hurried to the kitchen. The electric kettle there was quick to boil, but to-night it seemed to take ages, although the clock only marked five minutes. The herbs, too, seemed slow to infuse.

"There!" She set down the hot glass in its little silver holder by the dancer's bed. "You're all right?"

"I'm all right." Fiona's double bracelet clinked as she caught at Pennie's hand. "And you? No! Let me look at you!"

They stayed like that, Pennie on her knees beside the bed, for perhaps a minute; then Fiona raised the girl's hand, pressed it to her cheek.

They did not speak. But Fiona drew Pennie's face down till it touched the tired old face upon the pillow.

## 5

Michael was gone.

It was her first thought when she opened her eyes. The little clock beside her showed the time—seven-thirty.

Gone. He would be in Paris by now. By to-night would be in Marseilles, boarding his ship. Three weeks before a letter could reach him—six at least before she could get any answer, even if she wrote to-day. . . .

Pennie sat up, slid a foot out of the bedclothes and felt for her bath slippers, found one and groped about to find the other. It was early yet; she would have a bath and go out, take a long walk through the quiet morning streets when even London seems to be different. Fresh air might clear away the heavy weariness out of her brain.

Where was the other slipper? She looked under the bed and could not see it. Frowning, put on her dressing-gown and went out, down the passage. Right in the middle of it lay a scarlet slipper.

Pennie picked it up. How had it got out here? She went back to her room and got the other, still frowning. With both on, went towards the bathroom, past Fiona's room.

The door was half open. Pennie peeped inside. The bedside lamp was still on, the old dancer had fallen asleep without remembering to turn it off. Pennie crossed the room and clicked off the switch. Looking down, caught her breath.

Madame Fiona was dead!

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### PAYMENT DEMANDED

There was no need to touch the cold, stiff hand which lay outstretched towards her, no need to raise the fallen pillow; Pennie knew, and with a gasp shut her eyes. Turning, fled along the passage to the sitting-room. The telephone stood on the table. She caught it up, dialled with fingers that would scarcely find the slots.

Fiona dead—Fiona whose warm cheek had lain against her hand last night, whose wordless sympathy and understanding was still warm inside her heart. Fiona—dead.

Pennie could not cry; her dry eyes stared blankly at the photographs pinned on the walls. This grief was different from her tears for Michael; it was grief like a cold hand that closed, holding one fast, not to be shaken off. The doctor seemed to be a long time in coming to the telephone.

“I’ll be round at once. Don’t move her.” His brisk human voice was vaguely comforting. Pennie dropped the receiver back and ran to her room. She waited for no bath, splashed some cold water on her face and arms, cleaned her teeth and hurried into her clothes. Even so, the doctor was already ringing at the door as she ran down. The little wire basket was full of letters, but she did not stop to clear it, took him straight upstairs.

“H’m. Dead.” He said it as he crossed the end of the bed and saw that outstretched hand that was half up as though Fiona had tried to turn off the light. Her face was hidden by the fallen pillow, but his fingers touched the wrist feeling for the pulse, which had stopped. He nodded.

“Heart, of course! What’s she been doing?”

“She was in that raid—the Black Bay Roadhouse——” Pennie heard herself speaking quite clearly, but a long way off.

“Good Heavens! *That* show? But—good Heavens!” The doctor stopped, his rounded russet face all wrinkled up in disgust. “What was she doing there?”

“Her nephew—ran it. She didn’t know—she was furious.” Pennie’s words came out jerkily. “It gave her an awful shock when it came out——”

“That’d be enough to kill her. Why didn’t you send for me?” The little doctor was angry now.

“I wanted to. But she wouldn’t let me. She was all right yesterday—I thought——” Suddenly Pennie cried out, “Oh! It’s my fault! I ought to have slept here last night! I did on Saturday; only last night—oh! It’s my fault!”

“There, there! Nonsense. You couldn’t have done anything. She’d angina pectoris. It was bound to come like this some time——” He looked again swiftly at the girl’s face. “You run outside. I’ll make my examination and come out and fix things.”

He half pushed her through the door. Outside, in the passage, Pennie leaned against the wall. Her fault. If, last night, she had not been selfishly thinking of herself alone, she would have shared Fiona’s room, have sat up again. Tired and unhappy, she had gone to bed and slept. Perhaps Fiona had cried out, she had not heard——

Pennie’s conscience, merciless, roused, gave her no peace; the stone-hard sense of grief was reinforced by her remorse.

The door clicked sharply, the doctor stood outside.

“Where’s the telephone?”

“In here.” Pennie led him to the sitting-room.

“Police? Doctor West speaking from 1189 Jermyn Street. There’s been a death here that I think you should investigate. . . . I’ll wait till you come.”

“Doctor? What’s wrong?” Pennie caught at his arm. “What’s *wrong*?”

He did not answer the question, asked another.

“What did she take last night, last thing?”

“Only the herb tea, the stuff she always took last thing, when she was in bed——” Pennie’s eyes were round and startled. “Why?”

Again he did not answer.

“Were you the last person who saw her last night?”

“Y-yes.”

“What sort of state was she in?”

It was hard to answer. Fiona had not been herself, was subdued and tired. But it was difficult to put in words.

“She was still—rather upset, I think.”

His next question was more startling.

“What drugs do you keep here in the house?”

“Here? Oh, not many——” Pennie had to think. “Aspirin, of course, and the heart tonic you gave her, and amyl of mitryl pearls, ammonia, iodine, salts and liver pills, an oil and so on—nothing dangerous.” She added wonderingly, “They’re all up in the bathroom cupboard.”

“No cyanide?”

“*Cyanide?*” Pennie gasped. “Doctor, you don’t think. . .” He shrugged his shoulders.

“She was an hysterical, emotional woman. You say she’d had a shock over her nephew——”

“She wouldn’t do that!”

“Is there any cyanide in the house?”

“No! Oh——! Yes. There is. Silver cyanide. She used it to clean evening shoes.”

“In the bathroom? Where she could get it?”

Pennie nodded, looking at him with horrified eyes.

“Did she make her own herb tea last night?”

“No, I did.”

“When?”

“The very last thing, late, before I went to bed.” As she spoke, she conjured up that picture. “She was in bed when I got in. I came into her room and saw she hadn’t got her tea, and went and made it. I brought it in myself.”

“And she seemed quite normal then?”

“Yes.”

“What time was that?”

“I suppose about eleven—no more. I remember it struck eleven as I left the theatre.”

“Then you left her and went to bed—when? About a quarter-past eleven?”

“Rather later.” Pennie, with a frozen feeling of misery, concentrated hard, trying to remember. “It was eleven when I started back—I must’ve been five minutes making the tea—I should think twenty past eleven.”

He nodded.

“You left her going to sleep?”

“She was reading. She always read and drank some of her tea and dozed a bit and then woke up and drank the rest slowly before going to sleep.”

“She didn’t say anything to you that sounded—that might suggest that—she was thinking——?”

“No!”

He nodded again, sighed. “Well, that sounds like the police downstairs. I’ll go and let them in.”

Pennie said nothing. She went out and turned towards Fiona’s room. The door was not quite shut, but still she hesitated. Downstairs she could hear Doctor West speaking to the police. Suddenly, impulsively, Pennie pushed the door open. The quilt was drawn up, but she did not look at it, kept her face averted as she hurried across the room to the small bedside table. The empty glass which had held Fiona’s tea still stood there. A single sniff was enough. Almonds. . . .

Pennie went slowly out into the passage with misery in her eyes. Suicide. Fiona’s last kiss, that warm, long kiss had been good-bye. . . .

Pennie’s teeth caught on her lip, biting it fiercely till a little drop of blood oozed up. If only she had stayed, had been in the room, awake!

“I ought to have guessed.” She took herself to task miserably. “I ought to have known! She was just breaking her heart over Lal. If I’d only thought she might do that!”

There were footsteps coming up the stairs. She moved rather quickly into the sitting-room. The sight of Fiona’s open workbox hurt. She shut it and slid it into the corner, turned, bracing herself to meet the policeman, a tired-looking grey-haired man in a blue overcoat, who followed the doctor. At the tail-end of the procession was Lal.

Involuntarily Pennie started forward as though to drive him out, and drew back again. It was his house now, he had a right to come in! Yet it

seemed wrong that Lal, the very cause of Fiona's death, should stand there, alive and sound, talking to the doctor.

"I rang up and Mrs. Ransom told me that my aunt—had died. I came as quick as I could." He was not properly dressed, had a coat buttoned high up to his neck, his chin unshaved. "When did it happen? Why did no one let me know she was ill?"

"She was dead when Miss Cummin went into her bedroom this morning." The little doctor disliked Lal, and there was no tenderness in his manner.

Lal swung angrily on Pennie.

"Why didn't you ring me? You should have rung me first. You'd no right to do anything without me——"

"She rang me." It was Doctor West's tone, rather than the words. "Quite properly. *I* rang the police."

"I suppose she preferred to have a quarter of an hour alone in the house!" Lal's eyes were blazing.

The doctor's angry, "That's quite uncalled for!" was followed by the inspector's quiet, "I don't think I should make that sort of insinuation, sir. It's libellous."

Lal said roughly, "I'm sorry. But—well, she's made enough mischief already!"

The inspector's eyebrows rose, but he said nothing. Pennie, pale and quiet, waited by the door in silence. The inspector's tone was gentle as he asked, "If you could tell me what happened?"

Pennie repeated her story quickly and briefly. The doctor confirmed the facts, adding, "I'm afraid it looks like a case of suicide."

"I don't believe it!" It was Lal who cut in violently. Both men turned towards him.

"Why not, sir?" The inspector had a notebook out.

"My aunt wouldn't have done that—she'd never do it," Lal declared emphatically.

"I disagree with you." Doctor West was firm. "As her doctor, I should say she was an emotional woman, capable of killing herself if she was under any great strain."

“You may be her doctor. I was her nephew!” Lal flung back hotly. “She’d never have done it! Apart from anything else, she rang up my rooms and left a message for me, telling me to come round this morning and see her.”

“When was that, sir?” The inspector had his pencil ready.

“Must have been pretty late, after midnight,” said Lal. “Only a few minutes before I got in. She wouldn’t have done that if she meant to commit suicide! I tell you, her heart was wrong——”

“She died of cyanide poisoning.” Doctor West put that in quietly.

Lal seemed taken aback. Then he said insultingly, “I’d like another opinion on that!”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. The inspector mentioned, “There’ll be a post-mortem, of course.”

But Lal seemed unconvinced.

“She’d never have asked me to come round this morning,” he insisted, “if she meant to kill herself. She made a great point of my being here, downstairs in the shop, by nine.”

“I don’t believe it!”

They all turned to look at Pennie. She had kept so quiet during the interchange between Lal and the doctor that they had almost forgotten her; but now she spoke emphatically. “I don’t believe she did!”

“Oh?” Lal was staring at her hard. “Why do you say that?”

“Because——” She found it hard to bring the words out. Lal’s yellow eyes were glaring at her and she knew he was *willing* her not to speak. She forced her eyes away with a tremendous effort as she ended in a low tone, “Because she told me she never wanted to see you again—told me before I went to bed last night!”

“Oh? That’s your story, is it?” Lal was openly hostile. She could feel him trying to draw her eyes towards his, and she kept them glued firmly on the top button of the inspector’s dark-blue overcoat. “Well, it may interest you to know that my landlady took the message!”

The inspector shrugged his shoulders, said politely, “If you don’t mind, sir, I should like to see the body now.”

Lal made no move. It was the doctor who led him out in to Fiona's bedroom. Pennie, standing by the doorway, stood as still, with eyes rigidly downcast, as if she were waiting by a hospital bed for the house-surgeon to come his rounds. They were already in Fiona's room when Lal came forwards, stepping lightly, and shut the sitting-room door.

"Pennie, you're being a fool!" He was standing close to her now, almost touching her, but she did not raise her eyes. "Listen! It doesn't do *you* any good to fight me over this. Look at me!"

She neither spoke nor raised her eyes. Lal gave a little laugh as though that gratified his vanity. He kept his voice very low and went on quickly, "It'd pay you better to help me. Fiona's life was insured. If they call it suicide the insurance people won't pay up. You're out of a job and you won't find another quickly without a reference from me. You better say what I tell you. I'll see you don't lose by it." He had put a hand on her shoulder. Pennie broke from under it in panic; even through her dress she could feel the magnetism of that touch like little waves that ran through her. She kept her eyes on the carpet, kept repeating to herself the one thing that came into her mind, "Michael will be in Paris now—in Paris——" conjuring up his face, his hand as it had lain in her own. . . .

"Are you listening to what I'm saying?" Lal's voice was threatening now. "You're being a fool, Pennie!"

He was between her and the door. To move would mean his touching her again. The pattern on the carpet was a lattice, bright green on darker green; it ran together when one stared at it hard. She fastened her thoughts desperately upon Michael.

"A letter for you, Miss."

The door was open, Mrs. Ransom's eyes were red and she was sniffing, but her gaunt face seemed more than wonderful to Pennie. She caught the letter with a gasped, "Thank you!" and fairly ran past the startled maid out into the passage, ran like a deer into her room and, slamming the door, locked it. Leaning against the door-panels, exhausted, she glanced dully at the letter in her hand—an unknown writing and the postmark Croydon——

*Croydon!*

Her head came up with a jerk. With shaking hands she tore the envelope open, got the letter unfolded. The letter crumpled suddenly in her hand. The white wall opposite seemed to be starred with letters of fire.

“I’m writing this to ask you something. Pennsylvania, will you marry me? When we said good-bye——”

Pennie crossed the room and sank down on her bed. Her face was colourless, her eyes like two stars. Very slowly she smoothed out the crumpled letter and began to read.

3

A very long letter, eight solid pages of it written in an angular, firm hand. There were sounds outside her room, but Pennie did not hear them. A clock struck, but she did not look up. She seemed to see Michael himself speaking, leaning towards her, saying all the things he had written, the things she had been hoping so desperately to hear.

“When we said good-bye last night it was all I could do not to take you in my arms and kiss you. I was afraid I’d let you see that. You can’t guess how difficult it’s been all this time, for I’ve loved you ever since you first came through my door, looking like a little pale Madonna. I knew then that you were everything, all the things that I’d always looked for all my life—and that’s why it hit me so hard when I thought I’d been mistaken about you. I can’t understand now how I could have been such a fool!

“When I saw you standing on the edge of that bath, with your dear eyes all wide and staring, my heart simply stopped, for I love you as I thought I could never love any one. And I didn’t mean to let you know it yet.

“Well, fate’s been too strong for me, that’s all. I must tell you. Leave you to decide. I don’t know whether I’ve the slimmest hope, really. There’s no reason why you should care for me at all, but I want you as I’ve never wanted anything in my whole life—and I’m rather good at wanting, Pennsylvania. You see, the wretched part of it is that, placed as I am, I’ve no right at all to ask you to marry me.

“That’s the truth. Last night at dinner I had to hold myself in tight or the words would simply have come out. The thought of not seeing you again for months was simply driving me crazy. If this job had been anything but what it is I’d have chucked it up.

“But I can’t do that; I’m the only person at present who knows how to work my rays—and if I’m right they’ll save at least fifty per cent. of cholera cases. I’m a selfish sort of cuss, I’m afraid, for I’ve literally had to fight myself not to send in my resignation. You see from my—perhaps stupid—point of view I don’t feel it’s fair to ask a girl to marry me when I’m going to barge off at once into a job like this. It’s simply asking her to wait. And I

know you pretty well—time doesn't count when one feels like this—I know you're just the sort of person who'd torture yourself if anything happened to me out there and you'd said 'No'—or who'd say 'Yes' out of sheer pity for me. I didn't want you to do that; and if, by any miracle, if you do care even a little bit for me, I didn't want you to feel tied to a man who might come back knocked out with some rotten fever or other, a crock for life. I've seen that happen, and I didn't want it to happen to you. Now do you understand, Pennsylvania, why I fought myself to a standstill last night?"

“Well, I've broken down, that's all. I've no excuse to offer you. I meant to wait, to risk your getting engaged before I got back, to make sure that if and when I did ask you I could at least offer you a healthy body, even though a pretty rotten sort of fellow, I'm afraid in many ways, not good enough really to touch one of your soft little hands. I meant to and I can't do it. I can't face the next six months without knowing whether I have an earthly of making you care for me. If I have any, even the smallest chance in the world, will you wire to my ship—S.S. *Mootania*—at Marseilles? If I don't get any wire, I shall know what to think. The boat goes late to-morrow night. Oh, darling, if you knew how much I wanted to kiss the dimple by your mouth.—MICHAEL.”

When she had read through the whole eight pages, Pennie turned back to the beginning again.

Michael loved her and she had a right to tell him at last that she loved him!

The cold grief of Fiona's death was still there unchanged, but beyond it, like spring seen from behind bars, life had suddenly become golden and glorious. Pennie felt almost guilty as she folded the letter up and put on her hat.

There was a little writing-case on her table. She took it up and found a piece of paper. How should she word the wire? Should she tell him of Fiona's death? Better, perhaps, to leave that for a letter——

In the end she wrote, “Your letter makes me unutterably happy. Yes.” and signed it for the first time in her life with her full name—Pennsylvania.

She put on her hat. No one else could be trusted to send that telegram! Later she would write, make plans. Already a vague idea of applying for work out in China was floating through her mind, but she dismissed it. She must not think of that yet. On her way back from sending off the telegram

she would get some flowers—not white—Fiona hated white—these should be yellow, and roses, the flowers of Fiona’s birth sign, Venus, the flowers she herself loved best.

“I’ll get that big yellow vase out of the back shop,” thought Pennie. “They’d look nice in that; and candles, the tall kind.”

She opened her door. There was a policeman in the passage by Fiona’s room. Pennie hurried past him. The sitting-room was open but empty. Running down the stairs, she felt in her bag for the key of the shop.

The shop was still locked up as they had locked it last on Christmas Eve. Pennie went round to the side and opened it, fetched the big gold glass vase which stood on a low stand by Fiona’s chair. She glanced at the covered crystal with a sad heart. Only a few weeks since she had sat there opposite Fiona smiling at her prophecies—yet now her fears had come true. The black ace which had upset her so much that other morning *had* meant death. Perhaps Michael was right, it was all nonsense, and dangerous nonsense, but still—Fiona had believed in it, and Pennie, with the memory of the old dancer’s kiss in her mind, would have given anything to hear the shrill voice declaim again, “There! I tell you, Pen-nie, that ace of diamonds means a letter, and that way up, good news——”

Pennie, the big vase clasped in her arms, stood suddenly rigid.

Prophecy. Surely Lal was right? Surely Fiona, of all people, would never have compassed her own death? She who believed in fate so blindly and obeyed it—would she have defied fate?

She remembered the dancer’s face on the pillow, that evening after the scene at the baths; her furious, “Rob—cheat—steal!” Looking back, Pennie realised for the first time that on Saturday morning she had not seen the cards spread out upon the dancer’s bed. For once she had omitted her ritual. The Luck Shop was shut. Had Fiona, deprived of the comfort she found in foretelling the future, found life not worth living? Was Lal just lying about that telephone call?

Pennie shut the door and went round to the maisonnette. She carried the vase upstairs and set it in the bathroom. When she had bought her flowers she would wash and polish it, fill it with water to take Fiona’s last yellow roses. She shut the bathroom with a sigh and turning, nearly ran into a man.

He was standing right outside the door—a tall man with grey hair, eye-glasses and a lean, hatchet face. Pennie had not seen him before, and in the

second in which she drew back with, "I'm sorry!" she took him for another policeman.

Then she caught what he was saying, "I have the keys of her safe here."

"Then I'll take them now." Lal had come out of the sitting-room, was standing beyond him, and he barely glanced at Pennie as she tried to squeeze past.

The man did not answer Lal. He said, "Miss Cummin?"

"Yes?" Pennie turned, surprised.

The tall man held out his hand.

"You don't know me. My name is Baird. I acted for Madame Fiona as her solicitor. This is a dreadful business!"

"It's awful!"

"I hear you found her?"

Pennie nodded. "Yes."

"You're going out?" His manner was kind, subdued.

"Only for a little while. I want to—to get some flowers."

"Of course. Could you spare me a minute first?"

"Yes?" Pennie looked at him wonderingly. Did he want to question her, too?

"Perhaps you'd give me the keys." Lal was impatient. "Are her policies in the safe?"

"Madame Fiona's will and her policies are at my office." There was a note of disapproval in Mr. Baird's answer.

"Then please send them round here to me by hand this morning." Lal was brisk and not too pleasant. "I'll check through her jewels now and make sure they've not been tampered with." His glance at Pennie added rude point to the words. "And then I'll put them in the bank." He held out his hand. "The keys?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you them," said Mr. Baird quietly. "It's a matter for Miss Cummin."

"*What do you mean?*" Lal's face went putty-coloured.

“Under Madame Fiona’s will, Miss Cummin is sole legatee,” said Mr. Baird, as if the matter were of no account.

4

“I don’t believe it!” Lal’s voice rose almost to a shriek.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to,” said the solicitor. “I can show you the will.” He looked towards Pennie, who was staring at him with amazed eyes. “It is duly witnessed and attested.”

“She—left everything—to *me*?” Pennie whispered it, almost shocked. Her hand clenched suddenly on the small bag which held Michael’s letter.

“Yes. Her jewellery, except one or two legacies to friends, this house and shop and her life policies—there was no other substantial property.” Mr. Baird spoke pleasantly.

“*When* did she do this?” came hoarsely from Lal.

“Yesterday.”

“She *couldn’t* do it! I’m her next of kin—her only relative! The shop’s half mine! She’d no right——”

“I think you’re mistaken. The shop and this house were in her name,” corrected the solicitor.

“But she told me herself often that she’d left everything to me—the jewels, a policy for ten thousand and—she *couldn’t* do that!”

“She explained her reasons to me fully, and they seemed adequate.” The lawyer’s dry face twitched. Pennie thought that he took a pleasure in what he was saying. “Her own words are embodied in the will. You can read them. She stated that you had cheated her of sums of money, had been ungrateful, wicked, deceitful and extravagant——”

“*You* knew this!” Lal swung on Pennie, his eyes filled with gleaming fury. “*You* persuaded her to do it!”

“I never thought of such a thing!”

But Lal paid no attention.

“*You* did it, but you won’t get away with it! You thought you’d get it all by this, but you won’t! A murderer can’t benefit by his crime——”

“*What are you talking about?*” demanded the lawyer.

Lal pointed a shaking finger at Pennie.

“She murdered my aunt! That’s the truth!”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### BLACK MAGIC, WHITE MAGIC

“Be careful what you’re saying,” Mr. Baird threatened. “That’s a very serious charge to make.”

“It’s the truth!” Lal was calm suddenly, almost triumphant.

“It’s a *wicked* thing to say!” Pennie got out the words in a gasp. “You know it isn’t true.”

Lal disregarded her, he spoke to Mr. Baird.

“Take the facts! You say this will was signed yesterday. Well! Fiona was alive and well enough to have friends in last night. The servant can prove that. This woman”—he pointed dramatically at Pennie—“out with her lover \_\_\_\_\_”

“Oh! How dare you——”

Lal laughed.

“It’s no good denying it! I’ve seen you go to his flat. I warned Fiona about you!” Then to the solicitor, “She parted with her lover and came back here about eleven. Fiona was alive then, for she telephoned to me at twelve-fifteen. I’ve verified the call. I can prove that. This morning she’s found dead. Poisoned. The poison is in a glass of medicine which *she* prepared.” His accusing finger struck at Pennie. “Between eleven last night and early this morning there was no one else here at all. No one! *She’s* trying to make out that Fiona committed suicide. My aunt never took poison of her own free will. You knew her! Was she the woman who’d do that? Was she thinking of it when she saw you yesterday?”

Mr. Baird tugged at his chin.

“She certainly didn’t talk as if she was—er—contemplating anything rash,” he admitted. “In fact, we discussed selling the shop, buying an annuity——”

“Exactly! An annuity! A person who means to commit suicide! It’s likely, isn’t it?” He grinned savagely at Pennie. “And now she’s poisoned. There’s only one person in the world who could have put that poison in her glass—*you!*”

“I never touched it! You know I didn’t! Oh, you’re wicked! You’re simply lying!” Her hands twisted the little bag round, tearing at it. “You know I loved her.”

“Yes?” Lal’s face was flushed dark red now, his eyes gleamed like cats’ eyes. “You loved her so much you made mischief between us, nearly broke her heart with all your lies! You played on her superstitions, got her half mesmerised. I ask you”—he swung to Baird—“is it natural that Fiona should leave everything—everything in the world—to a girl she’d barely known a month? It’s crazy lunacy!”

“It is not natural,” Mr. Baird was judicial, “but Madame Fiona was a very impulsive woman. She took strong likes and dislikes on sight. As a matter of fact,” he confessed, “I did try to dissuade her from making her new will yesterday. I—er—pointed out that she hadn’t known Miss Cummin long——” His smile was half apologetic as he faced Pennie. “I said it was rash; that a legacy, perhaps—but you know what she was like! When she’d got an idea into her head she wouldn’t be moved.”

“I’ve no idea, honestly, that she’d even thought of such a thing, or I’d have tried to stop her myself,” cried Pennie.

“She was like that,” said Baird. “Amazingly generous and—er—too impulsive, *always*.” He stressed the last word with a look of distaste at Lal. “But—well, I don’t think you have any basis, really, for the sort of charge you are making against Miss Cummin.”

“Haven’t I?” There was harsh malice in that. “I can prove that she came in here last night at eleven. I was there, outside the door. I spoke to her, told her that I’d expose her to Fiona——”

“That’s a lie!” Pennie was fighting now.

“There was a policeman outside. He can prove she went in. He must have heard her bolt the door. There was no one else sleeping in the house. She admits she got that glass ready, and the cyanide was in the bathroom, the police have got the bottle, looking for fingerprints. Fiona was alive at twelve-fifteen and she was dead by eight. She must have been dead six to eight hours, the doctor said, when she was found. Who else *could* have got into this house and killed her?”

And now even Baird was silent, frowning uneasily at Pennie.

“I never touched the cyanide. You know it’s not true!” she wailed. But Lal went on remorselessly.

“What in the world would be easier? She engineered the quarrel between my aunt and myself, she knows that Fiona’s made a new will in her favour, she overhears Fiona ring up my rooms, make an appointment with me——”

“I *didn’t*! Oh, how can you? It’s simply that you hate me!”

“Overheard and *knew*,” Lal stressed the word, “that I could expose her and her lover——”

“*Oh!*”

“All she had to do was slip back, while Fiona was speaking on the telephone, run into the bathroom, get the stuff and slip it into a half-empty glass!” He was looking with gleaming eyes at Pennie. “Wasn’t that it? Wasn’t that what you did? Hid and waited, perhaps, watched until you’d seen her drink it? And then ran back to bed?”

Baird was looking at Pennie. Lal was looking at her, waiting.

He repeated, “Wasn’t that how you did it?”

But Pennie did not even hear him. She stared with wide, distended eyes at the passage floor, seeing there a single, scarlet bath slipper.

## 2

It was as if some vast dark hole opened suddenly in solid earth, looking down into a chasm without end.

The slipper had been *there*, a foot or so beyond Fiona’s door. She had worn both slippers when she went to the bathroom to wash, had kicked them both off underneath the bed when she got in. They had been lying there, the two red heels showing, when she had leaned out to turn off the light. And one—*one*—slipper had been lying near Fiona’s door this morning. . . .

How had it moved?

Pennie, standing white-lipped under those two pairs of sharp, accusing eyes, remembered a night when she had wakened to find herself half-way along that passage, outside Fiona’s door. She had been dreaming that night, had wakened. But——?

*Supposing she had not wakened?*

Would she have gone on into the bathroom, have opened that little cupboard high on the wall, taken out the cyanide? Would she have gone into Fiona’s room, with feet drawn there unwillingly, in leaden jerks, *as she had been drawn towards those whirling yellow lights in the black dark?*

“Look at her face!” cried Lal.

And Pennie did not hear him.

“Oh!” Her head went down, buried in her hands. “*Oh!*” And she raised it again, staring at him. “You hypnotised me on purpose; you were trying all the time to make me do—*that*. . . .”

Suddenly, blindly, she whirled round and rushed back into the bathroom, slammed and locked the door. Crouching, shivering on the edge of the bath, she rocked to and fro, her face in her hands.

Presently there were noises outside, heavy feet tramping, men’s voices, the sound of something long and unwieldy being carried down the narrow stairway, but Pennie did not raise her head.

She rocked to and fro, her fingers pressed against her eyes, trying to shut out the picture of an old and trusting woman sitting at the telephone, while behind her a girl in white, with wide, unseeing eyes and little scarlet slippers, stole noiselessly, blindly, past, carrying a bottle in her hand. . . .

3

“Miss Cummin?”

He was still there, waiting in the passage, as she came back. Looking graver, his manner rather stiff.

“Is Lal there?” Pennie’s face was pale as milk but dry-eyed. The storm had worn itself out.

“No. I’m afraid he’s—er—gone to tell his story to the police.” Mr. Baird was singularly gentle. “Don’t you think perhaps you could come in here for a minute and talk this over calmly?”

He held open the door of the sitting-room, adding, “For the moment, you know, I am acting for you, and anything you say won’t go any further *under any circumstances*.” He stressed the last three words hard.

Fiona’s door was open, the room empty. Pennie went into the sitting-room with her head held rather high.

“Just tell me your side of it,” Mr. Baird urged, pushing up a chair for her beside the fire, which had burned low. He stirred it into a blaze, offered her a cigarette, which she refused. “Take your time, don’t hurry,” he advised. “Let’s get all this clear.”

Then, since Pennie did not speak, he said a trifle coldly, "I think it only right to warn you that your own position does look rather serious—as it's been stated, I mean. You see, one can't get past the fact that you were in the house alone, and that you—stand to benefit."

"I see that." Pennie's voice was perfectly controlled now.

"The door was locked?"

"Yes. I locked it and snibbed it and put up the chain and shot both bolts," she told him truthfully. "I remember doing it perfectly."

"And they were shut, untouched, when you let in the doctor?"

"Yes. It took an awful time to get the door open for the doctor." She smiled faintly at the recollection. "I remember thinking that."

"There was nothing—nothing at all—to show that any one else had been in the house?"

"No. They *couldn't* have got in. There's no other door."

"They couldn't get it open by the fanlight?"

"Not possibly. No. No one could have come in."

"Then there was no one else here all night?"

"No. Only Madame Fiona and myself."

"She didn't say *anything* which might suggest——"

"Nothing. She was a little upset, that's all, but not—like that. She said good-night to me and kissed me, and I went to bed and went to sleep."

"What time was this?"

"I must have been asleep before a quarter to twelve, or I should have heard it strike."

He made no comment on that, merely said, "Then you can only suggest that Madame Fiona got out of bed, telephoned, made an appointment to meet her nephew and then fetched the cyanide and took it?" He added quickly, "I think you ought to remember there seems no doubt at all she died within a few minutes of making that telephone call. The condition of the body——" He broke off, for Pennie had shuddered. Substituted, "You can't make any suggestion?"

"Yes. I know what happened now." She stated it tonelessly. He glanced curiously at the slight figure which sat so upright, so rigidly controlled as

she went on, "I know now that I did just what he—Lal—said. I must have left my slipper in the passage. I found it this morning."

He was gazing at her in horror, but she went on evenly.

"I did kill her."

"You mean—you're guilty?" It seemed impossible that he should change so suddenly, become so stern.

"No! I was hypnotised—by Lal."

She told him the whole story, leaving out only her own feelings towards Michael. Mr. Baird listened patiently. Pennie did not look at him; only at the very last moment she raised her eyes in an agony of fear.

"You do believe me?"

He did not answer. Her control broke.

"It's *true!*" That was a wild cry.

He got up, looking down at her, said, "Miss Cummin, it's not my business to judge your story. More competent—people—will do that. My firm will act for you until you care to make other arrangements. My advice to you now is, to put the matter in the hands of counsel at once—*at once*. And I do beg you not to offer the"—he searched for a word—"the *wild* theory that you've given me to the police! In your own interests, refuse to answer *any* questions whatever and say *nothing* of all this!"

"You don't believe me?" She spoke hopelessly.

He repeated, "That's my advice. Shall I take counsel's opinion?"

"Please do anything you think best," she said dully.

"Very well. I'll let you know later. Ring me up if anything happens. H. Baird. I'm in the telephone book."

He did not seem to see the hand which Pennie held out as he turned to go.

4

She stood there where he had left her, her hand still thrust out, her mind gripped with an awful icy fear.

She had told the truth and he had not believed it. He thought she was a murderess!

The house seemed horribly still, empty. A motor horn hooting made Pennie start. She wandered out of the sitting-room into the passage.

Fiona's bed, with the clothes dragging to the floor, the curtains still drawn, lay empty. Mrs. Ransom had gone out, no doubt, to talk with the charwoman next door. The sound of the clock beside Fiona's bed ticking seemed unnaturally loud. Through the open bathroom door Pennie could see the drug cupboard hanging open, the great gold vase still standing on the floor.

The fear which had held her still, staring, broke suddenly into a wave of ghastly panic. She acted without quite knowing what she was doing, blindly.

Her bedroom door was open, she rushed through it, caught up her bag and gloves, dragged out her trinket case and emptied all the money that was in it into her purse, thrust the latchkey on top and fled down the stairs.

Out in the street, she hailed a taxi, tumbled in and told it to drive to Victoria.

There would be a train—the time was ten-seven—there would be a train at ten-forty. She sat forward on the edge of the seat, watching the traffic with trembling impatience, watching the minutes tick by on her watch. If she should miss it——

She had the change ready, thrust it at the man and bolted into the station.

Platform Six.

“Is it gone?” she asked breathlessly.

“Which train, miss?” the man smiled.

“Ten-forty Folkestone!”

He pointed at the clock—ten-twenty—held his hand out for her ticket, and Pennie remembered that she had bought none. By ten twenty-five she was in her place, waiting with a beating heart, looking out at the platform. The sight of a policeman near the cab rank made her shrink back. The train starting made her gasp in her relief.

Just past Ashford she opened her bag and took out Michael's letter, read it through in dull despair. The telegram that she had written was folded with it. She tore that into little fragments, let them float out of the window. Whatever happened, she could not send off that telegram now.

At Folkestone station she took a cab into the town.

Not to her aunt's house; least of all there. Wherever else she went, it would not be to those two. She looked out at the familiar streets, the shops that sloped away down the hill, with a desolate sense of being isolated from the crowd who went light-heartedly to do their shopping. They were ordinary people living safe and happy lives; they could drive past a policeman without drawing back and pressing into a corner to escape his eye. The cab stopped and she told it to wait.

The house was an old-fashioned one, with a little flagged path that ran up from an iron gate. She had not been down it since the day, two years ago, when she was eighteen and old Mr. Findlater, who had looked after her father's little legacy, had sent for her in state to inform her that, by his will, she could now draw an allowance of twenty pounds a year. When she married the whole capital sum would be hers to use as she pleased. *When . . .* The memory stung a little now.

The clerk, an old man with grey whiskers that were very neatly combed and spectacles with gold rims, informed her that Mr. Findlater was not in but was expected back. Pennie was given a chair in a room six feet by four, that contained that and a shelf of books. The minutes seemed to go like so many hours and, feeling faint, she remembered that she had not eaten anything that day.

"Ah! Miss Cummin? I thought you'd left Folkestone?" Was there a shade of disapproval on Mr. Findlater's round, red face which shone as if he had polished it daily with soap. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long, but I had an important client in the country." He was not very genial. "Another time it would be better if you made an appointment."

"I couldn't to-day." Pennie sat down in the rubbed red leatherette arm-chair. "You see, I've been accused of murder."

Mr. Findlater's mouth opened, his rimless eye-glass dropped off his nose and hung swinging.

"My—my *dear* child!" he said.

It heartened Pennie to begin. Here at last was a man who had known her all her life, who had known her father well. He, if any one, would listen to her and believe her. But she watched anxiously as she told him her tale. His hands were fumbling at the eye-glasses now, fitting them on; he was rubbing his chin thoughtfully, once he leaned forwards and asked, "You're not feeling at all faint, feverish?"

“I’m not ill and I’m quite sane.” Pennie laughed dismally. “I’m just telling the truth.”

He let her finish, let her reach, “So I came down here.”

Then he leaned forward, resting his weight on his folded arms, looked at her shrewdly through his glasses and said, “Now, remember, I’ve known you since you were a very little girl. Be sensible! Tell me the truth!”

5

“You tell me you’ve got a solicitor acting for you? If you are innocent, the best thing you can do is to go straight back to London, give yourself up to the police and leave the rest to him.”

That was the gist of Mr. Findlater’s advice. Pennie followed the first part of it.

The station restaurant supplied her with a meal. There were two women at the next table, and one of them kept peering at her furtively. It got on her nerves. Of a sudden she stared back ferociously and the woman retreated hurriedly behind a newspaper, leaving Pennie to find out as she passed a looking-glass that there was a black smudge right across her cheek.

In the train she found an empty compartment and sat staring out the window, seeing nothing.

Mr. Findlater had been kind, too kind; but he had shown himself shaken. Not for one minute had he believed her story of Lal, the Black Bay Roadhouse or the slipper in the passage. In fact the mere mention of a roadhouse seemed to shock him profoundly. He gave Pennie a feeling that he regarded her as a lost soul from the mere fact that she had been there; was hardly surprised that she should afterwards be charged with murder. His advice agreed with Mr. Baird’s to the letter, and with the additional remark that she had done the worst thing possible in leaving London.

“If you are innocent”—the “if” seemed to stand out in capitals—“it makes you look guilty. If the police take out a warrant for your arrest and find you gone it’ll tell against you. You should go back to London at once!”

Yet if Mr. Findlater, who knew her and had acted for her since she was ten, could believe her guilty of the cold-blooded murder of an old woman, how could she expect, thought Pennie, to convince a jury of twelve perfect strangers?

What hope had she of proving the truth?

“I could simply tell lies,” thought Pennie wretchedly, “say that Fiona did talk about suicide or something—make up a story——” But her whole soul revolted against that expedient. She was *innocent!*

“I won’t lie! They must believe me!” she told herself fiercely. “They can’t hang me for something I never meant to do! I’m not *guilty.*”

Or was one guilty of a crime committed by one’s hands without consent of one’s mind? Was Fiona’s blood on her hands now?

Pennie looked down at them; long, soft, white hands shaped delicately. She had always been proud of them, had taken care to keep them covered when at work, the nails well manicured. It had been her chief extravagance, nail polish and emery boards and cream. Even in hospital she had managed somehow to guard them, in spite of constant immersion in strong disinfectants. Now she looked down at them in horror, seeing between the soft palms that octagonal bottle with its blue label—“Poison.” Seeing another hand, Fiona’s arm stretched stiffly up towards the lamp; Fiona, coming back from the telephone, climbing into bed, reaching out to take up the glass which, still half full, she had laid down only a few minutes before. How could she guess that in those few minutes poison had been added to the herbs? She must have gulped one mouthful—would have swallowed it before she guessed or knew. Cyanide was instantaneous. Almost before she realised the truth she would be dead. Had she, in those few pain-strangled seconds, realised that there was only *one* person in the flat? Pennie shrank against the seat, cringing back from that thought.

Her mind flew back to the old dancer sitting before the crystal, as she had sat that first day, her elbows resting on the table frame, her cigarette sending a long banneret of smoke towards the ceiling. “A slim dark man who comes bringing you money, marriage—yes, and love,” the dancer had said.

With a shudder Pennie thought, “Why, it’s all true!” True, but in a sense so different from any they had conceived that morning sitting by the crystal. True as the things of that half-world in which Fiona lived among her dream shadows are apt to be—a grim, misleading sort of half-truth. If she was right, if every one in the world had at times the power to peer over that curve of the horizon which we call the future, then those swift broken glimpses brought neither comfort nor safety, thought Pennie, staring at the hedges slipping past. Blurred signposts, leading one astray.

A slim, dark man—Lal. Well, he had come and through him she had money, which she might never use, an offer of marriage which she could not

accept, love which could only add the weight of longing to her fear—and danger enough! Pennie remembered with a fresh, cold chill, Fiona's face as she looked up, her eyes as she said, "The mist closed round you!" She had laughed then. She had no wish to laugh now.

She looked out at the telegraph posts as they flew past, at the thin silver threads of rail which ran beside the train. Dusk was drawing in; the shadows gathered like a dark mist hiding in the hedges. In a little while now it would be night. For an instant Pennie had a vision of a lighted carriage, the door swinging open, a figure with arms flung out which fell; only now the falling figure was her own.

So easy, so quick! All over in a few minutes, with forgetfulness at the end. . . .

There was a cold dew of sweat on her forehead. Suddenly, with a violent effort, she wrenched her eyes away, sank crouching in a heap on the floor.

## 6

"Go straight to the police," Mr. Findlater had said. But Pennie, walking from the platform to the pavement, brushed against a running newsboy with a placard in the station yard.

She found a coin and grabbed at the paper, read the news in the half columns on the front page. The light of a fog-dimmed lamp fell on the print. In life, they had forgotten Fiona; now that she lay dead she was front-page news. All her former triumphs on the stage recalled and printed to support the story of her death.

Pennie read it through, read Lal's name—and her own. Merely a statement that she was nurse-companion and alone in the house, and that she had rung up the doctor, who found the dancer poisoned; but she found herself reading an accusation into the words and went hurrying, crimson-faced, along the street. She dared not get on a crowded 'bus.

Even the taxi-driver looked at her oddly when he stopped before the Luck Shop; he had read the news. Pennie stuck her key into the door and hurried inside, putting up the chain. She remembered with a pang that this was her own house. It seemed untrue.

Mrs. Ransom had gone. A little note upon the kitchen table informed Pennie that she was not coming to-morrow. Pennie read it twice—a verdict passed on her without trial.

The house seemed cold and empty, the fire unlit. She had no heart to get herself tea. She hurried to her room, turning all the lights up everywhere as she went, dragged her suitcase out and began to put her things in any how, all jumbled. For a moment, with the grey woollen dress in her hand which Fiona had given her, she wanted to cry, but found she had no tears left. A dreadful notion made her flying hands hasten. It was said that the victim of a murder haunted the murderer!

Would Fiona know the *truth* now?

A loud peal on the bell made Pennie jump. She went downstairs, opened the front door wide.

There was a man outside. “Miss Pennsylvania Cummin?”

“Yes, that’s my name.”

“Pennsylvania Cummin——” That was what Michael called her—Pennsylvania; but this man was gabbling off a formula so fast that she could hardly follow. “I hold here a warrant for your arrest. It is my duty to warn you that anything you now say may later be—used in evidence against you \_\_\_\_”

It was the detective who said, after a long silence, “Better get some clothes, hadn’t you? You’ll need them for the night.”

7

She finished packing with the detective, large and watchful, standing in the doorway of her room. He helped her to carry her bag downstairs to the waiting taxi. She asked him no question, after that first moment did not speak again.

The police station looked warm, lighted, almost cheerful by comparison with the house she had left; a sergeant of police read out the charge, asking, “Have you anything to say?”

And Pennie knew with final certainty that she could do nothing else but speak the truth.

She heard her own voice say clearly, “Yes. I wish to make a statement,” as though that were natural, an everyday routine. But the police-sergeant was not listening; he was looking at the door. Pennie looked round, too.

It was a moment before her weary mind could realise who stood there.

It was Michael Kerr.

With a little cry Pennie ran into his arms.

Pennie had been so docile that the police-sergeant was not ready for that sudden rush. She was in Michael's arms before any one could stop her.

"I saw the news this afternoon in Paris." His arms were still round her. "I'd have been here before, only I got held up, flying in this fog. When I found the house empty I was scared!"

"How did you know I was here?" Pennie whispered, clinging to him, hardly daring to take her eyes off his face in case she should be dreaming.

"The woman next door told me I'd just missed you. She'd seen you go, and heard the detective give the address."

"Excuse me, sir, I'm afraid I must trouble you to move. The lady's under arrest." The policeman was kind, almost fatherly. Michael's arm tightened as he felt Pennie shiver.

"I know!" He snapped that at the policeman. "I've come to get her out."

"The charge is murder. There's no bail." The sergeant stated that without heat.

"I didn't say bail." Pennie noticed for the first time that he was wearing a leather coat and air-helmet, that his face looked grey with fatigue. "Do I understand that she is charged with the murder of Madame Fiona, the dancer?"

"That's right, sir."

The second policeman jugged Pennie's elbow gently, trying to dislodge her; but she had both her hands wound tightly round Michael's arm. He pressed her hands against his side, gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"At what time was she killed?" he demanded.

"Between twelve-fifteen and two-thirty a.m.," returned the sergeant, "last night."

"Then take this down." Michael spoke as though the man were under his orders, rapping the words out sharply. "Miss Cummin was in my flat from four minutes to twelve last night until ten past four this morning."

"Michael! It's not true!" Pennie had let go, had sprung from him.

The sergeant said impassively, "Are you trying to establish an alibi, sir?" There were three other policemen and a wardress in the room. They were all listening hard.

“I can *prove* an alibi,” Michael corrected. “I’ve two independent witnesses outside in my taxi.” His hand went out and clutched Pennie’s, drawing her close. He smiled at her wondering face. “Shall I bring them in?”

“If you’d tell me your story first, sir?” The sergeant dipped his pen in the ink, shook it and pulled up a sheet of paper, but he looked dubious.

“Miss Cummin arrived at my house at four minutes to twelve. The hall porter can prove that.” Michael spoke with crisp assurance. “He was locking up the building and he recognised her as she came up, noticed her particularly because she was wearing a mackintosh over her nightdress, and slippers.”

“Can he swear to the time, sir?” The sergeant was unmoved.

“Yes. Absolutely. He always locks up at midnight, and he was waiting for Big Ben to strike. He spoke to Miss Cummin, and she did not answer. He realised then she was unconscious of what she was doing.” Pennie gave a little gasp and Michael’s hand squeezed hers. “She walked straight to the lift and got in, and he thought it better not to try to waken her, so he brought her up to my flat.” The policemen were exchanging glances, but Pennie did not see them; she was watching Michael with wide, startled eyes.

He went on coolly, “My black servant opened the door and ran to fetch me. I found Miss Cummin standing in the hall, completely unconscious and evidently either hypnotised or walking in her sleep. I took her into my sitting-room and led her to the sofa, where she sat down. I did not try to waken her in case the shock should be dangerous. I was packing, as I had to leave for Paris by the first ’plane from Croydon; but either myself or my servant was with her the whole time. She never left the sofa. She stayed there until I was ready to leave. I couldn’t miss my air-liner, and I couldn’t leave her there. I and my servant got her downstairs, and with the porter’s help, into a taxi. The porter waited up to lock up when I left, because I asked him to do so in case we needed any help in the lift. He saw us leave at ten past four.”

“He’s willing to swear to this, sir?” The sergeant was frowning.

“He’s outside. I’ll get him in now.”

“Finish your story first,” said the sergeant.

“There’s not much more. We drove her back to Jermyn Street, Madame Fiona’s house.”

“Yes, sir?”

“The door was closed but unlocked. I led her inside and told her two or three times to go upstairs. She didn’t appear to understand me, and I did not dare to go up in case Madame Fiona woke. So I shut the door and waited to see whether she would come out. I heard her put up the chain of the door and shoot the bolts before I went away. The taxi-driver and my servant were there and can swear to that.”

“What time was this, sir?”

“A quarter-past four.”

For a moment there was no sound but the squeaking of the sergeant’s pen. Then Michael asked one question in a low, strained voice.

“There is no doubt at all that Madame Fiona was killed between twelve-fifteen and two-thirty?”

“None at all, sir.” The sergeant did not look up from his writing. “She had a telephone call at twelve-fifteen and rigor mortis set in by seven-thirty.”

“Thank you,” said Michael, with profound relief. “I’ll go and get my servant and the porter.”

Pennie stood quite still, looking at the floor.

8

It is easier to take out a warrant than to cancel it, and a police cell is not the place for confidences. The sergeant, more fatherly than ever, permitted Michael a few minutes in the cell, but not alone. Chaperoned by a wardress, a pillar of discretion who sat knitting, they were given four minutes together.

If the wardress was looking at that first, long kiss it was through her eyelids. Pennie lay rather limply in Michael’s arms. She only asked one question.

“You’ve missed your boat?”

“Yes,” said Michael. “I tell you, when I saw the news in that French newspaper—I was actually in the Gare du Lyons—I’d only just time to catch Abdul and get my baggage off the train before it left. The fool at Le Bourget said he wouldn’t take a ’plane up in the fog. If I hadn’t had the luck to find a man I knew who owned a private ’plane I wouldn’t be here now. Even then I had to pilot her myself!”

“I didn’t know you were a pilot!”

“You’ve a lot to find out about me.” He could not stop smiling, held on to her as though she might slip through his hands. “I thought I’d never get here. We couldn’t find Croydon and had to chance a dive. The petrol was getting low. I was terrified I’d find myself at Havre or Lympne instead of Croydon. You can’t think what I felt when I saw where we were—plumb in the middle of the aerodrome—not bad guessing! You see, directly I read that Fiona had been poisoned in the middle of the night I knew you weren’t just sleep-walking, that Lal had a hand in it somewhere.”

The wardress folded up her knitting.

“I’m afraid you must go now, sir,” she said composedly, and immediately became immensely interested in the door.

It was hours later, free of the police station and in the car, that Pennie asked another question.

“When did you write to me?”

Michael hesitated before he answered.

“While you were in my flat.”

Pennie said nothing.

He added tenderly, “I never got your wire, you see, as I didn’t reach Marseilles.”

She looked round and faced him then, said levelly, “There wasn’t any wire. I didn’t send one.”

“*You don’t mean—*” He looked at her set face, then turned his head suddenly, staring out at the foggy street.

“Yes!” She got it out with a gasp. “The answer’s—no.”

The taxi drew up before a house in Half Moon Street.

9

“Where’s this?”

“Sybil’s mother’s flat. She’ll put you up for the night.” Michael helped her out and rang the bell.

“I’d rather go to an hotel.”

“You’re going to stay here. It’s safer. You’re not really safe till they’ve got Lal locked up,” he returned and, speaking to the butler who opened the door, led Pennie through a big hall into a library. It was empty.

“They’re away, but I’ve spoken to Sybil. She’s coming straight up,” Michael said. The door closed on the butler.

Pennie drew a deep breath.

“I want to thank you for—*everything*.” Her grey eyes met his steadily as she repeated, “Everything. I’m—sorry, Michael.”

“Listen!” He caught her hands. “No! You *must* listen! You think that I wrote—what I said in that letter because your coming to my flat might be—misunderstood, don’t you?”

“You wouldn’t have written if I hadn’t come.”

“What makes you think that?”

Pennie’s reply was another question.

“What did I say to you when I was—asleep? Did I really not speak?”

There was a silence while a person might count five before Michael answered.

“You told me the one thing in the whole world that I wanted to hear.”

“I told you that I loved you?”

“You asked me not to go away.” He was watching her face, cried out, “Oh, my dear, don’t make us both unhappy!”

But Pennie whispered brokenly, “Then what you—wrote—was not true. . . .”

His arms went round her, pinning her close. Her head was back, looking up at him. He told her, “Every single word I wrote was true! I loved you the first time I saw you, I love you now. Don’t you *know* that’s true? Only I had no right to tell you, and I’d have waited till I got back—if you hadn’t come last night. My dear, I owe Lal an enormous debt! He hypnotised you with the idea that you’d go to Fiona’s room and kill her; but though he could put you to sleep, he hadn’t got you right under his will. You didn’t obey him. You did the thing which was uppermost in your own mind—you came to me! When I realised that, when you asked me not to go—oh, my dear, you can’t think how happy I was! You see, it gave me the right to tell you what was true—that I love you, love you, *love* you!” And, as he read her eyes, “Pennsylvania?”

Pennie gave a little sob and yielded to his arms.

Once the police knew that the door of the maisonette in Jermyn Street had been open from twelve to four in the morning, they had the thread they needed. It took less than twelve hours to complete their case.

The maidservant of the house next door, coming home late with her young man, had noticed Lal in the alley at twelve o'clock. The young man, on his way home after twenty minutes spent, so he swears, in saying the one word "Good-night," remarked the same man coming out of the maisonette. It had struck him as queer that the gentleman had not shut his front door, and he guessed he must be going to post a letter. Lal's landlady was ready to swear that she had taken Fiona's telephone call in her dressing-gown and with some annoyance at being called out of bed at just twelve-fifteen; and she had heard Lal himself come in at twelve twenty-five. His own story of Fiona sitting at the telephone, the empty bedroom, a figure which stole in and dropped poison into the herb tea, watching, unsuspected, until Fiona returned to bed would have completed the story without the diamond bracelet which, missing from Fiona's arm, was found hidden in his rooms—stolen from the dead woman because Lal, not knowing of the will, wished to manufacture a motive against Pennie. But though the case was clear, Lal himself never came to trial; the police who came to fetch him were not quick enough in getting into his bathroom—he had time to shoot himself while they were breaking down the door.

Because there was no time for any preparations, Pennie was married in a grey taffeta dress and squirrel coat given to her by Sybil, the only bridesmaid. In any case, she could not take a trousseau on that strange honeymoon, that started with an air trip into China and lasted through six months of strenuous nursing, in constant danger, travelling with Michael into parts where no white woman had ever been before. As Pennie herself said, it was worth it, since it meant a new cure established, but she was glad when she had him safe on board the ship, the China coast behind them, heading West, for home.

The Luck Shop is sold to make way for a new restaurant; the jewels which Fiona loved are in the collection of a famous connoisseur who worships gleaming stones; the mascots and talismans, the love-potions and the big crystal were destroyed, by Pennie's order, the money from these things going to help the new ward of a children's hospital. Only one memento went with Pennie Kerr to China and back, and that will never leave her—an old worn pack of cards. But if you ask if she tells fortunes she

will flare up as she says, “I hate magic and all that sort of thing; it’s dangerous!”

Which, as Michael points out, is ungrateful in a girl who has got at least one man bewitched for good.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *The Luck Shop* by Evelyn Winch]