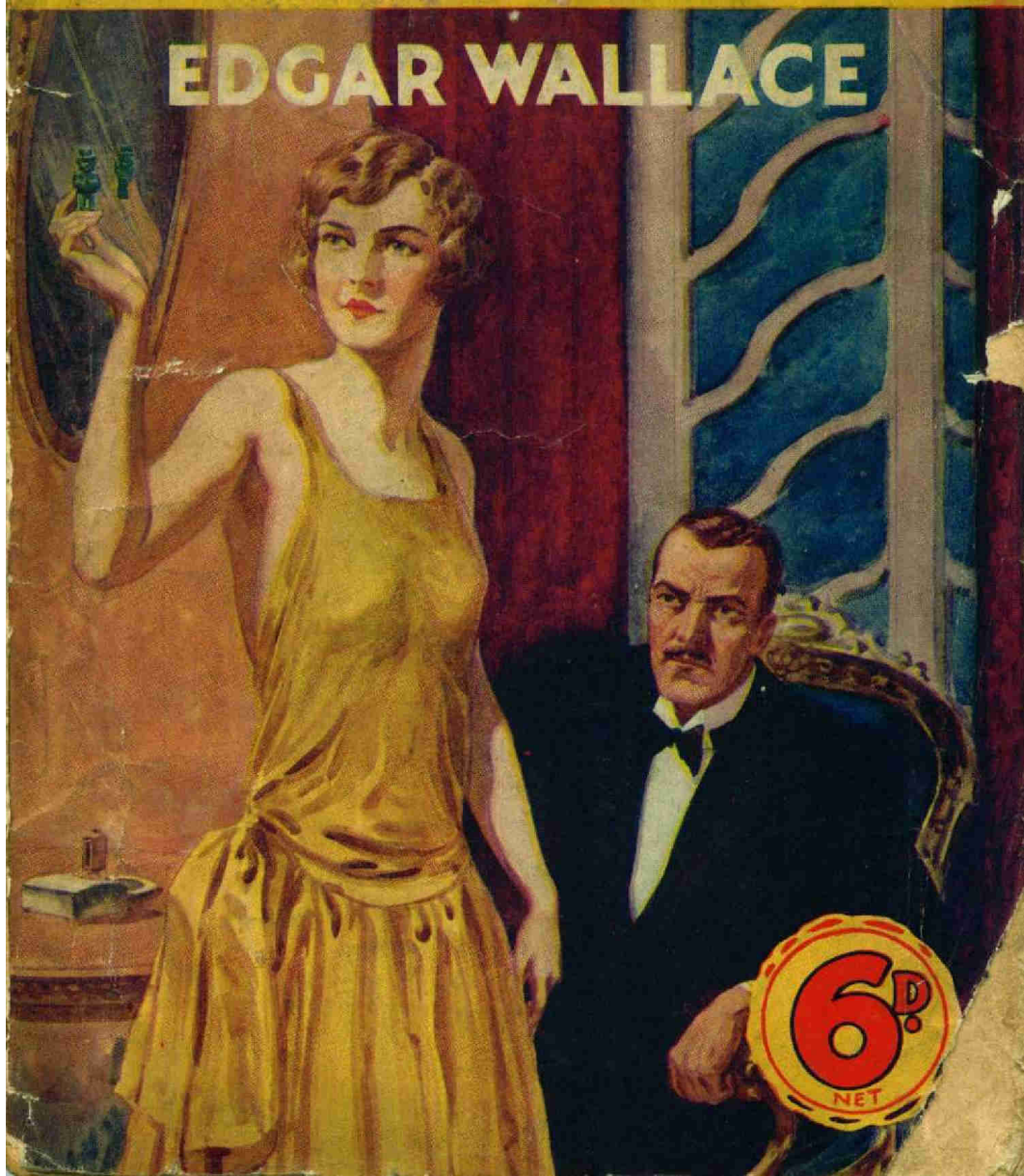


THE LITTLE GREEN MAN

EDGAR WALLACE



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THE LITTLE GREEN MAN

By EDGAR WALLACE



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THE LITTLE GREEN MAN

I

An understanding, disturbed or terminated, has a more tragic aspect than a broken contract. For understandings are without the foundations of pledge and promise written or spoken.

There was an understanding between Molly Linden and Thursby Grant. Neither was important, because they were young; they were as yet nebulae, hoping to be worlds. He was poor in the sense that he could afford no more than a Kensington flat and the lightest of light cars; he was (Molly thought) very handsome and very, very nice.

Mr. Fathergill amused her—fascinated her by reason of his great age and romantic past. He was forty, and his immense riches were common knowledge. But that did not count with Molly. She much preferred riding in his smooth-running limousine to being buffeted and rattled in Thursby's two-seater. Mr. Fathergill's little dinners at the Ritz had a comfort which was not offered by the solid restaurant where tablecloths were only changed when absolutely necessary.

Still, there was a sort of understanding. If the matter had been allowed to remain where Charles Fathergill left it, that warm night in June when they paced the scented dusky garden, Thursby Grant might have become a tender memory or a bitter disappointment, according to the way he accepted his *congé*. Unhappily, Molly's father had been a little tactless.

She carried the news to him in his study; she was fluttered, a little tearful. One nice word about Thursby would have swung her definitely to the side of Charles Fathergill.

Instead, Mr. Linden said:

“Thank God for that, Molly! You had better write to young Grant and tell him he need not call again.”

There was no reason in the world why he should not have called again; why he should not have appeared with a sad, brave smile and a hearty, “Good luck, old girl!”

But Mr. Linden had been brought up in the Victorian tradition. Then and there Thursby Grant was martyred for love; became a radiant figure of

persecution. Worse, he himself accepted the martyr's rôle, and indited severe and haughty letters to Molly's father, to Molly's fiancé.

One evening he walked fiercely down Pall Mall, entered the sublime portals of the Disraeli Club and, thrusting his hat at an inoffensive page-boy, was ushered into the smoke-room. For the greater part of an hour he sat in a sort of trance, listening to Mr. Charles Fathergill, who was never averse from talking . . .

Just beyond Fathergill's chair was a high marble pillar of a rich red, broken by white spots and minute serpentines. Thursby Grant had been staring at that pillar for twenty minutes with a painful intensity, some place in his brain busy with the baffling quest for the exact part of the world where such marble may be quarried. *Rosso antico*—that was its technical description. He remembered a big house in Marlborough with a fireplace. *Rosso antico*. That was it.

Behind the pillar, half concealed, was a hatchet-faced little waiter, whose livery hung upon him in folds. He was staring out of the window at the white façade of the Auto Club.

A big room, rather over decorated, with red paper and dingy gildings. Scores of well-used, cosy chairs about round tables, where middle-aged men sat smoking over their coffee and told one another of the queer thing that happened to them, twenty?—no, it must be twenty-five—years ago.

Rosso antico . . .

A buzz of talk as even as an asphalt pavement lay on the club smoking-room. Fathergill's voice, pitched on an infinitesimally higher plane, rippled along its surface.

All Thursby's brain which was not occupied by *rosso antico* was at Fathergill's disposition.

“. . . hundred, two hundred years ago, quite a lot of people would have hired a bravo to cut me up. Possibly you would not have descended to hiring an assassin. A quarrel in a coffee-house, chairs to Leicester Gardens, and a few passes with our swords would have settled the matter. Satisfactory—in a way. It would depend entirely upon who was pinked. Now we take no risks, carry no swords, do nothing stupid, and only a few things that are vulgar. Slay and heal with currency; the age of reason.”

Fathergill's head was long and narrow. He had a dark face and black, abundant hair brushed back from his forehead. He affected a tiny black moustache, an adequate occupation for his long fingers in moments of

abstraction. His lank body was doubled up in a low chair, and he lay back so that his knees were level with his chin. When he spoke he waved one hand or the other to emphasise a point.

With the free part of his mind Thursby found himself wishing that the man did not wear diamond studs in his dress shirt.

“I asked you to dinner to-night—you preferred to come in for coffee. I appreciate your feelings. You are hurt. You are saying to yourself: ‘Here am I, a struggling engineer, who has found a nice girl who likes me’—I grant that—’ and here is a fellow worth millions who comes along and cuts me out, not because he’s more attractive, but because he has enough money to order life as he wishes it.’ ”

“It isn’t much to boast about, is it?” asked Thursby, his voice husky from a long, dry-mouthed silence.

Charles FATHERGILL shook his head.

“I am not boasting. You have suddenly found the door of a nice house on Wimbledon Common closed to you—or only opened as far as is necessary to tell you that Miss Molly Linden is not at home. All this is unexpected—rather staggering. Your letters are returned, your telephone messages not delivered. You know I am a friend of the family, and you ask me if I can explain. I bring you to my club, and I tell you plainly and honestly that I intend within the next twelve months marrying Molly Linden, that her father has agreed, and that she—seems reconciled. Could I be fairer?”

Thursby drew a long breath. It almost seemed that he had suddenly awakened from a heavy, ugly sleep.

“Money could not have been the only inducement,” he said.

FATHERGILL shrugged one shoulder, silently inserted a cigarette in the end of a long holder, and lit it with deliberate puffs.

“The key to all power is knowledge,” he said—“and ruthlessness.”

Throughout the interview his tone, his manner, had been most friendly. The wrath of this good-looking young guest, who had come with murder in his heart, had been blanketed under the unconscious friendliness of one whom Thursby Grant so little regarded as a host that he had not sipped the coffee that had filmed itself cold under his eyes.

“I started life as a bricklayer’s assistant”—FATHERGILL watched the ragged wisps of smoke dissipating with an air of enjoyment—“and at an early stage of my career I began to *know*. I knew that we were cheating the Borough

Surveyor. The Borough Surveyor gave me ten shillings for my information. He took me into his office. He had a love affair with his typist. I knew—I was assistant store-keeper at eighteen.”

“That sounds almost like blackmail to me,” frowned Thursby.

Mr. Fathergill smiled slowly.

“Never label things,” he warned. “Know them, but never commit yourself to labels.”

“You mean you have some hold over Linden?”

“Melodrama,” murmured the other, closing his eyes wearily. “How terribly young you are. No. I know that John Linden wants to marry again. He is fifty, and young for fifty. A good-looking man, with an ineradicable sense of adventure. You would not be able to marry Molly for three years—at least I would marry at once; she asks for a year. Molly must have an establishment of her own before John Linden makes his inevitable blunder and brings his inevitably youthful bride to Wimbledon.”

Again Thursby discovered that he was breathing heavily through his nose, and checked his rising anger.

“I think that is about all I wanted to know,” he said, and rose awkwardly.

“You *know*: that is important,” said Fathergill, and offered a lifeless hand.

As much of this interview as he deemed necessary went forward to Wimbledon.

John Linden, grey and red-faced, read scraps of the letter written on club notepaper to his daughter. Over his glasses he looked to see how she took the news. Her face was expressionless.

“I really think that a year will make all the difference,” he told her—and himself. “I like Thursby, but, my dear, I have to consider you.”

She raised her eyes from the plate. She was not especially beautiful: she was distinctly pretty—the kind of cultivated-garden prettiness which youth brings, and good, simply cut clothes adorn.

“Are you very rich, father?”

She had never asked him such a question before.

“Why, my dear? I’m not rich in money and not particularly rich in property. Why?”

She looked past him through the leaded casement window.

“Only . . . Charles never made the least suggestion that he wanted to marry me until he came back from Roumania.”

He laughed loudly at this.

“What a romantic little devil you are!” he said good-humouredly. “I see how your queer little mind is working. Fathergill went to Roumania and discovered my oil property is worth a fortune; he kept the knowledge to himself and came back to propose to my daughter.”

If she had not thought this, she should not have gone scarlet. He did not add to her embarrassment.

“I should be glad to get back the money I have sunk in Roumanian oil,” he said. “You seem to forget that I have an agent in Bukharest who keeps me *au fait* with all that is happening.”

“Thursby says you can buy any Roumanian agent for a thousand *lei*,” she protested, and he shook his head.

“You seem to forget that Charles Fathergill is a millionaire——”

“He says so. Thursby says——”

Mr. Linden consigned Thursby to the devil.

“I really am in love with Thursby,” she said haltingly.

Mr. Linden said nothing. Soon after she got up from the table hurriedly. She was rather young.

It could not be said that Charles Fathergill was well known in the City. The obvious is accepted without analysis: that is the deadly danger of the obvious. One knows that Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square is built of stone. Nobody knows or cares who built it or what stone was employed. Everybody knew that Mr. Charles Fathergill was immensely rich. He had a flat in Carlton House Gardens, and paid a twenty-thousand-pounds premium to secure it. The cabmen he tipped, the club servants, the policeman on the beat—who else matters?—could all testify to his wealth and generosity. He grew richer by being rich. When interested people inquired as to his stability, Stubbs pointed out the fact that he had never had a judgment recorded against him; his lawyers certified him as a desirable client or customer to any person who wished him as a client or customer; one of his bank managers—he employed several bankers—seconded the reference. There is only one peculiarity which need be mentioned—each of his bankers

was under the impression that they were carrying his smallest account, and often hinted to him that they would like to carry one of his heavier balances.

As has been remarked before, he was not known in the City, for he did not speculate or engage in commerce. And not being known in the City has this advantage, that nothing is known to your disadvantage.

Mr. Linden met his prospective son-in-law at the club a few days later.

“Going to Roumania?” Mr. Fathergill’s eyes opened. “Good heavens!—why? I haven’t been back four months.”

Mr. Linden tossed down a cocktail and wiped his mouth busily.

“I thought I’d go . . . may meet the girl of my dreams, eh?” A long chuckle: John Linden was old enough not to be ashamed of dreams.

“When do you think of leaving? I am going as far as Budapest. I have some big interests there.”

A rapid calculation produced the assurance that Mr. John Linden’s many directorships and annual general meetings would make it impossible to leave before another month. Charles pursed his lips thoughtfully. He must go before then, he said.

He left London within a week.

Thursby Grant was at Victoria Station saying good-bye to a friend who was travelling to the Near East. He acknowledged Fathergill’s smiling nod without effort, being helped to toleration by a letter which crashed all solemn promises made by the writer.

“Good Lord!” said Thursby’s friend. “Do you know Charles Fathergill? They say he is a millionaire five times over.”

“Six times,” said Thursby, suddenly sour. “Why damn his reputation for a million?”

II

Mr. Linden’s agent in Bukharest was a lawyer, one Bolescue. He was a stout man, with a large, damp face, who loved food and music and baccarat. Otherwise he and discretion and probity might have walked hand in hand. As it was, he vociferated refusals, his countenance growing moister, talked wildly of “committees,” fearfully of engineers, but never once of the majestic law, soon to be flaunted.

Charles Fathergill had a letter of credit for many thousands of pounds. His French was not too good; the money spoke with the purest accent. M. Bolescue, with his light heart fixed upon the gambling tables at Cinta, agreed that certain reports might be postponed, an engineer's emphatic opinion suppressed, borings now in progress slowed till the coming of Mr. John Linden, and then suspended.

"After six months' more time all subterfuges is impossibility," said M. Bolescue, who occasionally tried to speak good English.

"After six months nothing matters," replied the lank man.

His plan was to stay a fortnight in Bukharest, leaving for Constantinople to avoid John Linden. But a fortnight is a long time, and the joys of motoring in hired machines are too easily exhausted. Nor had beautiful Cinta in the hills, with its glorious surroundings of mountain and forest, any attraction for him.

On the eighth night he sent for the hall porter of the *Petite Splendide*, and the official came quickly, Mr. Fathergill being a lordly dispenser of tips. A short man, square-shouldered, bow-legged, resplendent in gold lace, he came, hat in hand—would have crawled.

"I'm bored, Peter," said Mr. Fathergill.

His half-eaten dinner was on the table. He had scarcely touched his wine.

"Ah!" said Peter, and beamed.

"I want amusing: somebody who can talk or sing. God! I'm sick of Bukharest."

He was justified, for into Bukharest seem to have seeped the dregs of ancient Rome—dregs that have gained a little foulness from Turk and Slav. A rococo Rome.

"Talk . . . seeng . . . hum!"

Peter's stumpy hand caressed two of his blue-black chins.

"The book I can bring . . . some beautiful ones—no? Talk and seeng—ah! Gott of Gotts!"

He resolved into a windmill of waving palms; noises of pride and exultation came from him.

“One who never came to the books! New—a princess, Mr. Fat’ergill! No! I swear by Gott”—he put his hand on his heart and raised his eyes piously to the ceiling—“I would not lie. You will say, Peter says this of all. But a veritable princess. Russian . . . from—I don’t know—the Black Sea somewhere. You say yes?” He nodded in anticipation, and then his face fell. “You must be rich for this princess . . . wait!”

He rummaged in the tail pocket of his frock coat and found a packet of letters, fixed steel-rimmed pince-nez, and sought for something, his lips moving in silent speech—a comical, cherubic bawd of a man.

“Here—it is in French . . . I read. From she—to me!” He struck an attitude. “Irene . . . listen . . .”

He read rapidly. Charles could not understand half the letter: the important half was intelligible.

“All right; tell her to come up and have a glass of wine with me.”

“I shall telephone,” said Peter . . .

Ten struck when Irene came. Charles, reading a week-old *Times*, looked up over the newspaper at the click of the lock and saw the door opening slowly. She stood in the doorway, looking at him. Very slim and lithe and white. Her black hair dressed severely, parted in the centre and framing her face. Clear-skinned, no art gave her aid there. The exquisite loveliness of her caught him by the throat. He rose instinctively, and then the faintest smile twitched the corner of her blood-red mouth.

Regal . . . and Russian. Russia was in her dark eyes—the inscrutable mystery of the Slav . . . a million æons removed from Western understanding.

“May I come in?”

Her voice was as he had expected—rather low and rich. There was a sort of husky sweetness in it that made his slow pulses beat the faster. Her English was faultless.

“May I have a cigarette?”

She was at the table, looking down at him, one hand already in the silver box.

“Sit down, won’t you?” He found his voice.

He drew up a chair so that he faced her.

“Do you want me to sing—really? I’m afraid my voice isn’t awfully good. Or don’t you?”

He shook his head.

“What are you doing . . . here?” His gesture embraced not only the material part of Bukharest, but the place she occupied in its social life.

Again that faint smile.

“One must live . . . singing and . . . and talking to people. I have not really begun my career as . . . an entertainer. You are my first audience. It may prove to be very amusing after all.”

“Very amusing,” he repeated mechanically.

“So many things have seemed—impossible.” She blew ring after ring of smoke between her words. “So many nights I have sat on my bed and looked at The Little Green Man and wondered . . . and wondered. Then I have put The Little Green Man under my pillow and said: Let me see tomorrow—it may be fun.’ ”

She was smiling at his perplexity, reached for the black velvet handbag that she had laid on the table, and, opening it, took out a small green bottle. It was fashioned like a squat Russian moujik, wearing a heavy overcoat belted at the waist. The hat was the stopper. As she held it up to the light, Fathergill saw that it was three parts filled with a fluid.

“In other words, poison. That’s rather theatrical, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” She was interested. “I don’t know. Professor Bekinsky gave it to me the week before he was arrested. He was a Jew and a good man. They blew his brains out in front of the house where I was staying in Kieff.”

Charles Fathergill was chilled: this was not amusing.

“Has it any special properties—arsenic . . . aconite . . .?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know. He called it ‘knowledge’—he had a sense of humour.” She made a wry little face at him, then laughed softly. It was one of those delicious chuckling laughs that are so beautiful when heard from a woman. “You would rather I sang?”

“No . . . only it is rather depressing, isn’t it?”

She asked him who he was. On the subject of Mr. Fathergill he could be eloquent. To talk of himself without exposing his theory of life was difficult.

She listened gravely. He felt that it was impossible that she could be startled.

Lovely, he thought as he talked—amazingly lovely. The contours of her face had some indefinable value that he had not found in any other. In a pause she asked:

“But you are ruthless!” (He rather liked that.) “You would stop at nothing to reach your end?”

“Nothing. Knowledge is power only when it can be utilised for the benefit of its holder.”

She shook her head.

“That is strange—because it seems you have no objective. You wish to get nowhere, only somewhere better at all costs. I could understand if it was for a definite place.”

He was flattered by her disapproval.

“Have you any objective?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Happiness . . . security. The security that a peasant workman could give his wife.”

“In fact, marriage?” he smiled.

She nodded slowly and mushroomed the red end of her cigarette in the silver ash-tray.

“Yes . . . I would fight like a devil to retain that. It is my idea of heaven. I have a little sister—here in Bukharest.”

She looked up at him slowly.

“A sister is like a baby: one does things and puts The Little Green Man under the pillow for her sake.”

She seemed to shake herself as though she were throwing off an unpleasant garment. When she spoke her voice was almost gay.

“We are getting tedious. Shall I sing, or shall we talk?”

“We have talked too much,” said Fathergill.

He walked to the window and pulled the curtains together.

A few months later an eminent firm of lawyers wrote to Mr. Linden to the effect that they had a client who wished to acquire oil land. They understood he had a property, etc.

Mr. Linden, a very happy and cheerful man, wrote asking that the offer should be reduced to sterling.

There were many reasons why adventures in Roumanian oil should have no further appeal, and why he wished to convert a property of dubious value into something which paid six per cent, with monotonous regularity.

Mr. Fathergill, who had reached Paris, received the lawyers' intimation with mild interest. It was curious, he mused, how much labour, how many hours of anxiety are involved needlessly and uselessly because one cannot foresee the end. In the months that had elapsed between his going to Roumania and his return to Paris he had become a millionaire, and every one of his banks believed that they carried his heaviest account.

He had met a man in Constantinople, an international financier, who bought properties for a song and talked them into cantatas. Dog does not eat dog except in Constantinople. Mr. Fathergill was unaware of this exception. He acquired a tract of wild mountain-land, and a concession sealed and signed by the Turkish Government. And on the day his cheque was honoured and the vendor was on his way, per Orient Express, to acquire a timber concession in Sofia, a miracle happened. A forgotten and unpaid prospector made a discovery. Mr. Fathergill believed in quick profits, particularly if they were big profits. The syndicate which took over his holding and his concession offered him a head-reeling sum.

The oil proposition was now an amusing side-line . . . but there was Molly.

"That may be awkward," said Charles, and pulled at his nose thoughtfully.

For Mr. Linden was married again. Molly had mentioned the fact in one of her cold, proper letters. She did not tell him that John Linden had become de-Victorianised and that Thursby Grant was a frequent visitor at Wimbledon Common.

John Linden wrote. The letter was awaiting the wanderer on his arrival at the Meurice. Would he come over and spend Christmas with the family?

"I am getting rid of my oil lands—some foolish man wishes to buy and has offered me a good price."

Charles left for London on the next day: he would have preferred to have spent Christmas in Paris. The boat-train was crowded, the sea choppy. Mr. Fothergill arrived in London a very ruffled man. Paris would have been ideal at Christmas—or Bukharest. Irene! A most unsubstantial dream. The fragrant memory of her caught at his heart. A week after he had left Bukharest he had gone back to find her. Peter contorted himself apologetically. The lady had left Bukharest: he had inquired for her; some other guest had desired speech and song. It was a thousand pities. She was a veritable princess. But (here he brightened) there was a beautiful little girl, a veritable lady . . .

Charles Fothergill had shaken his head. He looked for her in Budapest; caused inquiries to be made in Vienna . . . no.

He stalked up and down his beautiful drawing-room, his hands in his pockets. Wimbledon . . . roast turkey . . . plum pudding . . . Molly Linden . . . he shuddered.

Snow was falling heavily when his car pulled up under the portico, and there was John Linden, rubicund and white, and there were holly wreaths hanging on the panelled walls of the hall, and Molly, gauche and awkward, and an uncomfortable Thursday Grant—Charles could have fallen on his neck. And there too was a stranger—a pretty, slim child in white, with a clear skin and dark hair and eyes, and . . .

“You haven’t met Mrs. Linden, old boy.” John was very jovial, very excited. “I told you I would get my romance. We met on the train just outside of Trieste. . . . Irene, darling!”

Irene, darling!

There she was, her calm, glorious self, framed in a doorway, as he had seen her before. Only now she wore purple . . . it suited her better than black, completed her regality.

Her eyes met his. Only the faintest hint of recognition lit and died within their unfathomable deeps. Had she been prepared, he would not have seen even that.

“Glad to meet you . . . Mrs. Linden.”

He took her hand in his; the pressure was just as firm as, and no firmer than, one would expect in a hostess.

“Come along to my study—the man will take the suitcase to your room.”

In the study Charles drank a little port and listened.

“Um . . . about Molly. I’ve been thinking—you don’t mind if we have this out right away?”

Fathergill shook his head. He preferred that the matter of Molly should be disposed of.

“My wife—by the way, she was the Princess Irene Dalruski—had a terrible time in the revolution; I will tell you all about it one of these days—my wife thinks it would be a mistake for Molly to marry except where her heart is. Old-fashioned, eh?—By the way, did you see Vera—my wife’s sister, a dear kid . . .”

How curiously futile everything was, Charles Fathergill thought. All his scheming—the Roumanian lawyer with a moist face. Suppose now he had put no spoke in the wheel, had let the reports go forward, and John Linden had entered into his minor riches, and instead had fastened to himself with hooks of iron this find of Peter’s . . .

He was very silent at dinner; scarcely looked at the glorious being at the head of this suburban table; permitted himself the fatuity of wearing a paper cap. Molly thought he was sorrowing over a lost bride and cried herself to sleep that night.

“Have a talk with Irene. I’d like you to know her,” said John Linden.

There was a little drawing-room that was half conservatory, and was in consequence a place that smelt faintly of the earth. Hostess and guest detached themselves from the noisy group about a Christmas tree.

“Well, my dear?” Charles Fathergill closed the door. His heart was beating a shade faster than usual, a sense of exhilaration made him feel a little drunk.

“Well?”

She did not sit down. Curiously was the scene reminiscent of another meeting—eighteen hundred miles away.

“You have reached your objective?” he said, and, when she slowly nodded: “I have searched Europe for you.”

She looked at him steadily.

“Why?”

He was nonplussed for a moment.

“Why do you think?” he asked, and went on quickly: “We’re going to be very good friends, aren’t we?”

“I hope so. You won’t come here again, of course?”

“Why not? Linden’s a great friend of mine.”

She nodded.

“That is the reason. I have heard a great deal about you, without realising who you were.”

He smiled at this; the hinted disparagement pleased him. She had aroused that kind of emotion once before.

“You still believe that knowledge is power?”

He still believed that. This was the moment he would have chosen to hammer home the guiding principle of his life.

“And The Little Green Man?” he bantered. “Has he been smashed?”

She shook her head.

“No. Once or twice I thought I would bury him, with all that belongs to his day. Something prevented me.”

A very long, uncomfortable silence followed. The sound of laughter came faintly from the larger drawing-room.

“I have rather a nice apartment in Carlton House Gardens. I hope you will come along and see me. Often.”

She made no reply. He repeated the invitation.

“You mean that I should enter a new bondage for an indefinite period?”

She looked round.

“It needs Peter to smooth over the crudities.”

He thought she was being very sensible and was relieved.

“And if I cannot find time to see your beautiful flat? Will you grow reminiscent some day when you meet John Linden?”

He did not hesitate.

“Yes. You may say: ‘What purpose will that serve?’ You asked me that before. I reply now, as I replied then: ‘Knowledge is of value so long as it is used. A threat of its use, unless it is backed by the will to use it, is so much

foolish talk.' It is because you believe, rightly, that not in a spirit of revenge, but as a logical consequence . . ."

"I see."

She half turned towards the door.

"I wanted to be sure. Come and be festive . . . have you seen my little sister?"

"A lovely child," he said conventionally.

That was all that passed between them: they did not speak again. He asked for a glass of milk to be sent to his room, and this was done.

When he went upstairs to bed he looked for her, but she had already retired. The servant who knocked at his door the next morning could not make him hear. She went in and drew up the blinds, put down the tray, and did not notice that the glass she had taken up the previous night was gone.

"Your tea, sir," she said.

Even John Linden did not believe that FATHERGILL was dead until the doctor came.

"I am sorry your Christmas has been spoilt," said Irene gravely, and looked from him to the big fire which burnt in her bedroom. The Little Green Man had already melted out of sight.

CODE NO. 2

The Secret Service never call themselves anything so melodramatic. If they speak at all, it is vaguely of “The Department”—not even “The Intelligence Department,” you will note. It is a remarkable department, however, and not the least of the remarkable men who served—in a minor capacity, it is true—was Schiller.

He was an inventive young Swiss with a passion for foreign languages. He knew all the bad men in London—bad from the violently political standpoint—and was useful to the Chief Secretary (Intelligence), though Bland and the big men . . . well, they didn’t dislike him, but they sort of . . . I don’t know how to put it.

Watch a high-spirited horse pass a scrap of white paper on the road. He doesn’t exactly shy, but he looks at the flapping thing very expectantly.

He was never in the Big Game, though he tried his best to get there. But the Big Game was played by men who “chew ciphers in the cradle,” as Bland put it.

In some mysterious way Schiller got to know that Reggie Batten had been shot dead whilst extracting the mobilisation orders of the 14th Bavarian Corps from a safe in Munich—this was in ’11, and the sad occurrence was described as an “aviation accident.”

The Munich military authorities took Reggie’s body up in an aeroplane and dropped it . . . and the Munich newspapers gave poor Reggie some beautiful notices, and said that the funeral would be at two o’clock, and they hoped that all his loving friends would gather round. Such of his unsuspecting acquaintances as did gather were arrested and searched, their lodgings and baggage ransacked, and were in due course most incontinently sent across the frontier.

Bland, who was in Munich, did not attend the funeral; in fact, he left the beer city without lingering unnecessarily.

He was back in town only a day when Schiller asked for an interview.

Bland, square-chinned, clean-shaven, and wholly impassive, heard particulars of Schiller’s application and laughed.

“You are altogether wrong in your view of Mr. Batten,” he said. “He was unconnected with this department, and his death was due to a very deplorable accident. Therefore I cannot give you his job.”

Schiller heard and bowed.

“I have been misinformed, sir,” he said politely.

He went to work in another way and made a carefully planned attack upon the Chief Secretary, who had reached that delicate stage of a man’s career which is represented by the interregnum between the end of a period of usefulness and the consciousness of the fact.

Sir John Grander had been in his time the greatest Intelligence man in Europe, but now—he still talked of wireless telegraphy as “a wonderful invention.”

Yet Sir John was chief, and a fairly shrewd chief. His seal of office was Code No. 2, which no mortal eye had seen save his. It lay on the bottom shelf of the safe between steel-bound covers, sheet after sheet of close writing in his own neat hand.

No. 2 Code is a very secret one. It is the code which the big agents employ. It is not printed, nor are written copies circulated, but is learnt under the tuition of the Chief himself. The men who know Code No. 2 do not boast of their knowledge, because their lives hang upon a thread—even in peace time.

Schiller could never be a big agent. For one thing, he was a naturalised foreign subject and the big men are nationals, trained to the Game from the day they enter the Office. They are educated men, condemned for life to dissociate themselves from the land of their birth, and who they are, or where they live, is known to three men, two of whom have no official existence.

Sir John liked Schiller and did many things for him. He told him stories of his past adventures and Schiller listened attentively. In the course of one of these post-prandial discussions (he was a most presentable young man, and Sir John frequently took him home to dinner), Schiller casually mentioned Code No. 2. He spoke of it with easy familiarity, and Sir John discussed the Code in general terms. He told his guest how it was kept in the special safe, how it was made up on the loose-leaf system, and how it was a nuisance because it was always in disorder because he had to consult it every day, and invariably replaced the sheets he had been using on the top, irrespective of their alphabetical right to that position.

The young man had innocently suggested that he should come to Sir John's office every night and sort them out, but the old man smiled benevolently and had said he thought not.

Bland summoned Grigsby to his office one day, and that florid young man came to the tick of the clock.

"This fellow Schiller is bothering me," said Bland in the low tones which are almost second nature in the Service. "He is a smart fellow and very useful, but I mistrust him."

"He has a blameless record," said the other, staring out of the window, "and he knows little of the bigger things—Sir John is a ditherer, but he's close enough. What is worrying you now?"

Bland strode up and down the room.

"He is inventing a new wireless receiver," he said, "and he has got the old man interested. He works all day at it in his room, and at night he carries it down to Sir John's office, where it is most religiously locked in the safe.

"Of course, it is absurd to imagine that the box—it is about the size of a biscuit-tin—can contain anything with human intelligence and get out in an airtight safe and walk around, or go squinting at the code; but, somehow, I don't like it."

Grigsby chuckled.

"It's a new one on me," he confessed. "I'm not denying that Schiller isn't clever; he invented a draught excluder for my room which is a model of ingenuity, but I can hardly imagine a wireless receiver which reads and transmits a code from the interior of a steel safe."

But Bland was not convinced.

He sent for May Prince. She was holiday-making in Devonshire, but came at once to town: a straight slip of a girl—she looked eighteen, though in truth she was ten years older—with the loveliest smile in the world, a pair of appraising grey eyes, and a mouth which, in repose, was a little inclined to droop.

"Sorry to disturb you on your holiday," said Bland, "but I want Schiller kept under observation. Next week you will be discharged from the Department for neglect of duty. You will retire with a grievance, and you will tell Schiller, whom you will continue to meet, that I am a beast and that I lose a great deal of money backing racehorses. I will have a few bookmakers' accounts prepared for you, which you will show discreetly."

“Is he to blackmail you?” she asked.

Bland shook his head.

“If he is all I think he is, he will not. No, he might give you confidence for confidence—so long.”

And May, with a nod, went out.

Schiller’s invention took an unconscionable time to develop. Yet he was enthusiastic over its possibilities and inspired the Chief with some of his enthusiasm. He worked in his spare time at the machine, and regularly every evening at five minutes to six he would carry his heavy box to the Chief’s office, solemnly deposit his burden on the iron grill which formed the one shelf of the safe, and watch the locking up with a jealous eye.

And May Prince had nothing to report. Three days before that fatal 1st of August which brought so much destruction and misery to Europe, Bland, who had been working day and night in the interest of his department, went up to Schiller’s room to question him regarding the *bona fides* of a certain Antonio Malatesta, suspected of being an agent of the Central Powers. Bland very seldom visited the offices of his subordinates, but on this occasion his ’phone was out of order.

He found the door locked and knocked impatiently. Presently it was opened by the smiling Schiller. The table was covered with a litter of wire, electric batteries, tools, and screws, but of the great wireless receiver there was no sign.

“You are looking for my wonder-box, sir?” said Schiller. “She is in my safe—soon I will give you the most remarkable demonstration! Even to-day I caught a signal from the Admiralty—through a closed window.”

But Bland was not listening.

He stood erect, his nose in the air, sniffing.

There was a faint, sweetish smell—a scent of camphor and something else. Schiller watched him through narrowed eyes.

“H’m,” said Bland, and, turning on his heel, left the room.

A telegram lay on the table. It had been delivered in his brief absence:

“Schiller is agent in Central European pay. He is head of cryptogram department. Have proof.—MAY.”

Bland pulled open the drawer of his desk, took out an automatic pistol, and raced through the door, and took the stairs two at a time.

Schiller's door was open, but he had gone.

He had not passed out through the lobby or the front entrance of the building, but a commissionaire on duty at the side door had seen him pass and had heard him hail a cab.

Bland went back to his office and put through a 'phone call to the police:

"Watch all railway stations and docks. Arrest and detain Augustus Schiller."

He described him briefly, but with a sure touch.

"It is very lamentable," said Sir John, really troubled, "but I can't think he has taken away anything of importance. Has he removed his invention?"

"I have that all right, Sir John," said Bland grimly, "and to-night with your permission I am going to see what happens."

"But surely you don't think——?"

Bland nodded.

"I haven't monkeyed with it at all, but I've listened very carefully through a microphone and there is no doubt that it contains a clockwork mechanism. It is almost silent, but I have detected the sound. I suggest that we place the box where it is usually put, leave the safe door open, and watch."

Sir John frowned. All this seemed a reflection on his judgment and, as such, was to be resented, but he was too loyal a man in the Service to which he had given forty-five years of his life to allow his injured vanity to come before his public duty.

At six o'clock the box was placed in the safe.

"Is that where it was always put?" asked Bland.

"I generally—in fact invariably—put it on the iron grid."

"Just above Code 2, I see, sir."

The Chief Secretary frowned again, but this time in an effort of thought.

"That is true," he said slowly; "once, I remember, when the box was placed a little to one side Schiller pushed it to the centre, which I thought was a little impertinent of him."

The two men drew up a couple of arm-chairs and seated themselves before the safe.

Their vigil promised to be a long one.

Eight, nine, ten o'clock passed, and nothing happened.

"I think it is rather ridiculous, don't you?" asked Sir John testily, as the quarter to eleven chimed.

"It seems so," said Bland doggedly, "but I want to see—good God—look!"

Sir John gasped.

Immediately beneath the box was Code 2, enclosed in a leather binder, the edges of which were bound, for durability sake, with a thin-ribbon of steel.

Now, slowly the cover of the book was rising. It jerked up a little then fell, leapt again and fell back, as though there were something inside which was struggling to get free. Then of a sudden the cover opened and remained stiffly erect, forming, with the contents, the letter L, the upright of which was the cover.

There was a "click," and the interior of the safe was illuminated with a soft greenish radiance. It threw a glow upon the top page of the code which lasted for nearly a minute. Then it died away and the cover of the book fell.

"Phew!" whistled Bland.

He lifted the black box carefully from the safe and carried it to Sir John's desk, examined the bottom of the box with a long and patient scrutiny, then set it down.

"Code No. 2 is in the hands of the enemy, sir," he said.

It was daylight when he finished his investigations. Half the box was taken up by accumulators. They supplied the current which, operating through a powerful magnet, lifted the cover of the Code-book. They gave the light to the wonderful little mercurial-vapour lamps, which afforded the concealed camera just enough light to make an effective exposure.

"The little clockwork arrangement is, of course, simple," said Bland, "that sets the time for the machine to work and switches the current on and off. It probably opens and closes the shutters which hide the lens and the lamp and the magnet. I suspected the camera when I smelt the film in his room."

Sir John, white and haggard, nodded.

“Get me out of this as well as you can, Bland,” he said gruffly. “I’ll retire at the end of the year. I’m a damned old man.”

He walked to the door and paused with his fingers on the handle.

“There are thirty men’s lives in Schiller’s keeping,” he said; “their names and addresses are in that book. I suppose he got through the book. I am so careless that I changed the order of the pages almost every day, and the devil has been at work for nine months. He ought to have worked through the book by now, for there was a different sheet on top every time.”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” said Bland.

Schiller was away—and safely away—before war was declared. He was seen in Holland and was traced to Cologne. There was no possibility of changing the code, and messages were already coming through from agents.

Bland took a bold step. Through a man in Denmark he got into communication with Schiller and offered to make a deal. But Schiller was not selling. In the telegraphed words of the emissary whom Bland had sent:

“Schiller is receiving an enormous fee from enemy government for decoding wireless messages that your agents are sending. He alone knows the code.”

Nothing daunted, Bland again got into communication with the traitor, offering him an enormous sum if he would consent to return to a neutral country and retain his secret.

“Meet me in Holland, and I will fix everything,” his message ended. It elicited a reply which was characteristic of the ingenious master-spy:

“Come into Belgium and I will arrange.”

A mad suggestion, for Belgium was now enemy ground, but Bland took his life in his hands, and a long glass dagger in his handbag, and left the same night for the Continent.

Bland went into Belgium by the back door and made a laborious way to Brussels. It would not be in the national interest to explain the means and methods he employed to make his entry into that carefully guarded land, but it is sufficient to say that he met Schiller, looking very prosperous, in the *estaminet* of the Gold Lion at Hazbrulle, a small village on the Ghent-Lille Road.

“You are a very brave man, Mr. Bland,” complimented Schiller, “and I wish I could oblige you in what you wish. Unfortunately, I cannot.”

“Then why did you bring me here?” asked Bland.

The other looked at him curiously.

“I have a certain code,” he said quietly. “I have it complete with certain exceptions: there are three pages missing. What do you want for them?”

Here was a stagerer for a smaller man than Bland.

“That is a fair offer,” he said, calmness itself, “but what is the particular code you are buying?”

“No. 2,” said the other, “I thought——”

Bland interrupted him.

“No. 2 Code?” he said, sipping his bock (he was for the time being a Belgian peasant). “Of course, that’s rubbish. Neither you nor I know No. 2 Code; the code you stole was No. 3.”

Schiller smiled superiorly.

“When you get back to London,” he said, “ask your Chief whether ‘Agate’ does not mean ‘Transports loading at Borkum.’ ”

“You might have got hold of that particular word by accident,” said Bland grudgingly.

“Ask him if ‘Optique’ does not mean ‘Emperor has gone to Dresden,’ ” persisted the calm Schiller.

Bland looked round the room thoughtfully.

“You know a great deal, my friend,” he said.

The woman who managed the *estaminet* came in a little later and found Bland pulling slowly at a rank cigar, his elbows on the table, a half-emptied bock before him.

The woman glanced with a little smile at Schiller.

“He’s tired,” said Bland, emptying the bock. “Let him sleep on. And don’t let the flies disturb him,” he added humorously.

Schiller lay sideways on the bench at which Bland was sitting, his face to the wall, and over his head was a coarse blue handkerchief.

“He will not be disturbed,” said Madame, and pocketed the five-sou tip that Bland gave her with a grateful smirk.

“When he wakes,” said Bland at the door, “tell him I have gone on to Ghent.”

Three hours later a German landsturm soldier, who had come for his evening coffee, whisked away the handkerchief which covered the sleeper’s face, and stammered:

“Gott!”

For Schiller was dead, and had been dead for three hours. It took even the doctor quite a long time to discover the blade of the glass dagger in his heart.

A week after this Bland was dressing for dinner in his West End flat, and had reached the patience stage of bow-tying, when his valet informed him that Grigsby had called.

“I told him you were dressing, sir,” said Taylor, “but Mr. Grigsby is that full of his horse winning the Gatwick steeplechase that he won’t take ‘No’ for an answer.”

Taylor was a privileged person, and was permitted to be critical even of Bland’s friends. Taylor was an ideal servant from his master’s point of view, being simple and garrulous. To a man in Bland’s profession garrulity in a servant was a virtue because it kept the employer always on his guard, never allowed him the delusion of safety or the luxury of indiscretion. Moreover, one knew what a garrulous servant was thinking and, through the medium of secret agents, what he was saying.

“Show him up here,” said Bland after a while.

Mr. Grigsby came noisily into the dressing-room, though his greeting of Bland was a little cold.

“I’ve a bone to pick with you,” he said. “What the devil have you been saying to Lady Greenholm about me? You know my feelings about Alice _____”

“Wait a moment, please,” said Bland sharply, and turned to his servant. “Taylor, you can go to the General Post Office with the letter you will find on the hall-stand.”

Mr. Grigsby waited until he heard the door of the flat close, then walked into the passage and shot the bolt of the front door.

He came back to where Bland was standing with his back to the fire, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets.

“You’re sure he had No. 2?” he asked.

Bland nodded.

Grigsby bit his lip thoughtfully.

“It isn’t worth while worrying about how he got it—now,” he said. “The question is, who will get it next?”

Bland opened a cigar case, bit off the end of a cigar, and lit up before he replied.

“What news have you at this end?” he asked. “I was across the border before, they discovered his death; naturally, I have heard nothing save what our Amsterdam man told me.”

“The code is in London,” said Grigsby briefly. “As soon as he was dead a cablegram was sent to Valparaiso by the authorities in Brussels. It was addressed to a man named Von Hooch—probably a third party. Here it is _____”

He took out a pocket-book and laid a slip of paper on the table. The message was short and was in Spanish:

“Schiller’s London lodging.”

“It’s rather puzzling,” said Bland. “Schiller wouldn’t have written the code out—he was too clever for that. And yet he must have given the authorities a guarantee that the secret should not be lost with his death. It has probably been arranged that he should tell some person agreed upon—in this case a man in South America—in what manner the code was hidden. The exact *locale* he left until his death, probably sealed up amongst his private papers.”

“That is a sound theory,” said Grigsby. “He told you nothing more _____?”

Bland shook his head.

“I had to kill him, of course,” he said with a note of regret. “It was pretty beastly, but the lives of thirty good men were in his holding. He probably knew where they were stationed.”

“And the man that comes after will also know,” said the other grimly. “We start to-night to make a very scientific search of his lodgings.”

But the flat in Soho Square yielded no profit.

For the greater part of a fortnight three of the smartest Intelligence men (including Lecomte from the French department) probed and searched, slitting furniture, pulling up floors, and dismantling cupboards.

And the result was a negative one.

"I'll swear it is there," said Bland dejectedly. "We've overlooked something. Where is May Prince?"

"She's at the Chief Censor's. She has an office there," explained Grigsby.

"Ask her to come over."

May came in some triumph.

"I thought you'd send for me," she said. "I could have saved you such a lot of trouble!"

Bland was all apologies.

"I've neglected you terribly, May," he said. "Do you know, I have never seen you since you sent me the wire about Schiller?"

She nodded.

"I know that—Schiller is dead, isn't he?"

"How did you know?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"One reads things in the Censor's office—innocent letters from Holland, with messages written between the lines in formic acid and milk which becomes quite visible if you use the correct formulae. Mr. Schiller was a remarkable man; and his father was one of the greatest scholars Switzerland has produced, though he was blind. What do you want of me now?"

Bland explained briefly. The girl knew of Code No. 2 and the secrecy which surrounded it, and realised the urgency of the situation.

"By the way, how did you know that he was an enemy agent?" he asked.

"I discovered *his* code," she replied cryptically.

Accompanied by the two men she went to the flat in Soho Square. The flooring had been replaced and the rooms were habitable again. She made a tour through the flat, then she returned to the big dining-room.

“This is the room where the code is,” she said decisively.

It was a cheerful apartment, papered in a rich brown. A broad dado of a simple design belted the walls, and the wainscoting had been painted a chocolate colour to harmonise with the paper. From the ceiling hung an electric fitting, and at this May glanced.

“We’ve had that down,” said Bland, “and the wainscot has been taken out, but we’ve found nothing.”

“Will you leave me alone here for a few minutes?” asked the girl.

The two men withdrew, but they were hardly out of the room before she followed, her eyes blazing with the joy of discovery.

“Got it!” she laughed. “Oh, I knew—I knew!”

“Where is it?” demanded the astonished Bland.

“Wait,” she said eagerly. “When do you expect your South American visitor?”

“To-morrow—of course, the room will be guarded and he will have no chance of searching.”

Her eyes were still dancing when she nodded.

“We shall see—to-morrow. I fancy you will have a very frank visitor from Valparaiso, and when he comes I want you to send for me.”

“What on earth——”

“Wait, wait, please! What will he say?” She closed her eyes and frowned. “I can tell you his name; it is Raymond Viztelli——”

“You knew this all along?” asked the astonished Grigsby, but she shook her head.

“I knew it when I went into the room,” she said, “but now I am guessing. I think he will offer to help you discover the code, and he will tell you there is a secret panel in the wall, and that it will take days and days to make the discovery. And I think he will ask you to be present when he makes his search.”

“He needn’t ask that,” said Bland unpleasantly. “I think you’re very mysterious, May, but I’ve a kind of feeling that you’re right.”

She had a few questions to ask the janitor of the building before she left.

“Mr. Schiller did all his own decorations—in the dining-room, didn’t he?”

“Yes, miss,” said the man. “A regular feller he was for potterin’ about with a paste-pot or a paint-brush.”

“And he has paid his rent in advance?”

“That’s right, miss.”

“And said that nothing was to be done to the flat till he came back?”

“His very words!” said the caretaker.

“I thought so,” said May.

At ten o’clock next morning a card was brought to Bland. It was inscribed:

“SEÑOR X. BERTRAMO SILVA,”

and written in a corner, “of Valparaiso.”

Bland pressed a bell, and in a little time Grigsby and the girl came in.

“He’s come,” said Bland shortly, and handed her the card.

The visitor was shown in. He was a dapper little man with a pointed beard, and spoke excellent English. Moreover, after the preliminaries he plunged straight into the heart of his subject.

“I am going to be very frank with you, Mr. Bland,” he began; and Bland, shooting a swift glance at the girl, saw the laughter in her eyes.

“I was for some time an agent of the Central Powers—I tell you this because I wish you to clearly understand my position,” he went on. “Safe in South America, I thought no call would be made upon my services. A few weeks ago, however, I received a cablegram which was intercepted by the British authorities.”

“I had known, of course, that in certain eventualities I might be obliged to come to England to make a search for certain documents, and that I should learn the place where they were hidden by telegram. That telegram came—I am here!”

He flung his arms dramatically.

“I came straight to you on my arrival. I tell you frankly why I came, because I decided, the night before I reached Plymouth, that the game was

not worth the candle. I will assist you as far as possible to discover the documents, and then I will, if you will allow me, return to South America.”

It was all very amazing to Bland. The man had said almost all that May had predicted he would say. He looked at the girl again, and she nodded.

“You understand that your search——” began Bland.

“Will be under the eyes of the police?” interrupted the man from Valparaiso. “I would prefer it.”

“You would like to start your search at once, I suppose?” asked Bland.

“The sooner the better,” said the other heartily.

“One moment.”

It was the girl who spoke.

“You have a very good memory, señor?” she asked.

For just a fraction of a second the smile died from the man’s eyes.

“I have an excellent memory, madame,” he said curtly.

They went together in a cab and were admitted to Schiller’s flat by the police officer on guard.

“Have you any theory?” asked Bland as they stood in the hall.

“Yes,” replied the other quickly. “I think the documents are hidden in a recess in the wall behind a secret panel. It may take a week to find the panel. This is a very old house, and it is possible Mr. Schiller chose it for some structural advantage it may have had.”

Again Bland thought rapidly—the frankness of the man, his willingness to help—the talk of secret panels was all in accordance with the girl’s amazing prophecy.

He saw the glee in her eyes—glee at the mystification of her Chief.

Then he turned to the little man.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Señor Silva bowed.

“I will take this wall first,” he said, “and I will search for the evidence of a panel. My fingers are perhaps more sensitive than yours——”

His hand was outstretched toward the dado, when—

“Stop!”

At the sound of the girl’s sharp warning Señor Silva turned.

“Before you go any farther,” she said, “let me ask you if you value your life?”

The Chilian shrugged and spread his hands.

“Naturally, madame.”

The girl turned to Bland.

“If this man learns Code 2, what will happen to him?”

Bland looked from May to the face of the stranger.

“He will certainly die,” he said simply.

She nodded.

“You may go on if you wish, but you are starting a little too far to the right.”

His face went a ghastly grey.

“To the right——!” he stammered.

“The message to you begins at the door, Señor Viztelli,” she said calmly. “The code does not begin until you reach the window. Will you continue?”

He shook his head, having no words.

Bland called in his men, and they hustled the little South American into a cab.

“And now explain,” said Bland.

The girl walked to the wall near the door and touched the dado.

“Feel,” she said.

Eland’s fingers touched the wall-paper gingerly. He felt a few pin-point eruptions, passed his hand to the right, and felt more. Then the truth dawned on him.

“Braille!” he whispered. The girl nodded.

“Schiller’s father was a blind man,” she said, “and Schiller evidently took up the study of the alphabet by which blind men read. Silva was informed how the code had been written and learnt it against the time when it would be necessary to take over Schiller’s work.”

She ran her fingers along the dado.

“There are seven lines of writing, and they run round the room,” she said. “Schiller pasted this dado on himself—a bit at a time—as fast as he was able to photograph Code 2. This is how the top line begins:

“To Raymond Viztelli,” she read. “Keep up pretence helping police; be frank, as I have told you. Tell them there is a secret panel, and you will be able to come often. Code begins: ‘Abraham’ means ‘New guns have been fitted——’”

Bland caught her hand and gently drew it away.

“If you want to be a nice live girl and dine with me to-night,” he said half humorously, “do not pursue your investigations any further.”

That afternoon Bland did a little amateur paper-stripping and made a good job of it.

THE STRETELLI CASE

Detective-Inspector John Mackenzie has retired—the newspapers are filled with stories of his exploits. His immediate chiefs are equally filled with wonder, suspecting many reasons for his premature withdrawal from the services of his country, but never by any chance hitting upon the real cause, which was the unquenchable antagonism between his sense of duty, his sense of justice, and his grim sense of humour.

And this conflict of emotions arose over the Stretelli case, which most crime experts and the majority of people consider as having been rounded off on a certain cold December morning in Nottingham Prison.

In a sense this was true; yet, with the compliments of his Chief in his ears and with the knowledge that there was a vacant post for a new superintendent to be filled, duty, justice, and humour battled it out so briskly in his mind that he sat down in his office and wrote his resignation.

In one sense Mackenzie was old-fashioned, and when a card was brought into his office inscribed “Dr. Mona Stretelli, Madrid,” he sniffed.

He was prejudiced against women doctors, though this was the first lady who had ever called upon him professionally.

“Show her in,” he said, and wondered exactly what had brought a Spanish lady doctor to Scotland Yard.

She was in the room before his speculations were carried far—a girl of middle height, dark, capable, and even pretty.

“I am very honoured to meet you, doctor,” he said conventionally, speaking in French. “What can I do for you?”

She smiled faintly at the brusque greeting.

“You can give me ten minutes of your valuable time, Mr. Mackenzie,” she said in perfect English. “I have rather an important statement to make.”

She handed him a letter bearing the Home Office stamp. It was an introduction from a high official, and Inspector Mackenzie ceased to wonder.

“Do you know Mr. Peter Morstels?” she asked, and he shook his head.

She hesitated.

“In London you must hear . . . rumours about people—in the West End, I mean. Have you ever heard of Margaret Stretelli?”

Mackenzie frowned.

“Of course! I thought the name was familiar. Stretelli! You are related?”

She nodded.

“She was my sister,” she said quietly.

“Was—she’s not dead?”

The girl nodded again, and he saw that her eyes were wet.

When Margaret Stretelli disappeared from London, nobody at police headquarters was either relieved or sorry, but the event did not pass unnoticed. Margaret belonged to the bobbed-hair set that had its meeting-place in a Soho restaurant. She was known to be an associate of questionable people; there was talk of cocaine traffic in which she played an exciting but unprofitable part; there was one wild party into which the police had intruded, and a minor court case where she had figured, a little vulgarly, as the driver of a car which had charged a lamp-post.

Police headquarters was mildly interested in her vagaries, knew her to be well off in the matter of money, and when she was no longer seen at her haunts they made discreet inquiries, to discover that she had married a gentleman farmer in the Midlands, and had run away from him a very few weeks after the marriage, and had gone to New York.

A very uninteresting and commonplace story, hardly worthy the attention of Scotland Yard’s recording angel, yet, since all crime has its basis in the commonplace, the circumstances were duly noted and filed.

“Perhaps I had better tell you our story,” she began. “My father was a doctor of Madrid, and on his death he left five million pesetas between his two daughters, myself and Margaret. I had taken up my father’s profession, the profession of medicine, and was in my third year when he died.

“Poor Margaret loved life—as she understood it. Three months after father’s death, she left Madrid for Paris, ostensibly to study music. From Paris she went to London, and, so far as I can learn, she got into a very undesirable set. How she came to meet Mr. Morstels, I have never been able to discover. It is certain that she had wasted a great deal of money when she came under his influence. He proposed to her and they were married at Marylebone Registry Office, and she left with him for his home at Little Saffron.

“She was seen there by some of the villagers, and, so far as can be ascertained, lived with him for three weeks. How much longer she was a resident is not known. It may have been three months, it may have been no longer than a month. But, when she disappeared, the story that she had run away from her husband was accepted as true by the villagers of Avignon, who had got quite used to the unfortunate character of Mr. Morstels’ marriages.”

“He had been married before?” asked Mackenzie.

“Twice,” said the girl; “and each time his wife ran away and was divorced by him. Mr. Mackenzie, I am satisfied that my sister has been murdered!”

Mackenzie sat up in his chair.

“Murdered? My dear young lady, that sort of thing does not happen _____”

He stopped suddenly, realising that this was the type of crime that did happen.

“Possibly his story is true, and your sister ran away,” he suggested.

She shook her head.

“That is impossible. Had she run away she would have come to me. We were always the best of friends, and though she was wilful and headstrong, she never got into a strait when she did not ask me to get her out of it.”

“Have you seen Mr. Morstels?” asked Mackenzie.

“I have seen him: I saw him yesterday for the first time,” she said, “and the sight of him convinces me that my sister has been murdered.”

“That’s rather a serious statement to make, but I realise that you would not advance such a theory unless you had good grounds,” said Mackenzie, with a smile. “After all, doctors as a profession are not easily influenced or given to making rash statements, are they?”

She shook her head.

“I am not, certainly,” she said, rising and walking up and down the room, her voice rising agitatedly. “Forgive me, Mr. Mackenzie, but I am so convinced that poor Margaret is dead that, if she walked into the room at this moment, I know that I should be suffering from an illusion.”

“But why do you feel this?” Mackenzie persisted. “Beyond the fact that Mr. Morstels seems to be, by your account, a much married man, nothing is known against him.”

“I have been making inquiries,” she said. “The local police speak well of him, but I think that I can furnish you with some details which may be of interest. Before Margaret left London, she drew from the bank the sum of six thousand five hundred pounds. Where is that money?”

“Did you ask him?”

“I asked him, and he said that one of his greatest misfortunes was that the lady, when she left him, had taken with her not only her own money but some of his. He had the audacity to ask me if I was prepared to refund it.”

Mackenzie sat hunched up at his desk, his chin in his hand, a heavy frown on his face.

“It grows more and more like a conventional murder story,” he said. “I hope for your sake, Miss Stretelli, that you are mistaken. I will see Mr. Morstels.”

On a wintry morning, when the frost showed whitely on the bare branches in Mr. Peter Morstels’ orchard, Detective-Inspector Mackenzie made his leisurely way from the little railway station, a pipe between the teeth, the furred umbrella, without which he never moved, under his arm.

In sight of Hill Cottage he stopped and carefully inspected the rambling house with the ugly concrete extension that had recently been completed. It stood on the slope of a hill, a picturesque dwelling, owing something of its charm to distance.

Five minutes later he was inspecting the building nearer at hand, and he was not impressed. The man who answered his knock was unusually tall and broad, a veritable giant of a man. His thin hair was flaxen, his big face ruddy with the glow of health. Standing square in the doorway, he looked down upon the detective with a scowl of suspicion.

“Good morning, Mr. Morstels. I am Inspector Mackenzie from Scotland Yard.”

Not a muscle of the big man’s face moved. No flicker of lid hid for a second the pale blue of the saucer eyes.

“Glad to see you, officer. Come in.”

He led the way to a stone-floored kitchen, low-ceilinged and clean.

“I’m wondering if Miss Stretelli sent you? She did, eh? I thought it was likely. If I haven’t had enough trouble with her sister without her coming to me with fantastic stories about my wife!”

“Where is your wife?” asked Mackenzie bluntly.

“In America somewhere—she never told me the town she was going to, naturally. I’ve got her letter upstairs.”

He was gone a few minutes, returning with a sheet of grey paper. It bore no address.

“I am leaving you because I cannot endure the quietness of the country. I am writing this on board the *Teuronic*. Please divorce me. I am not travelling in my own name.”

Mackenzie turned the letter over in his hand.

“Why didn’t she use ship’s stationery?” he asked pleasantly. “A woman in a hurry to get away does not usually unpack her trunks in order to get stationery that is available in the saloon. I suppose you traced her through the passenger list—oh, of course, you couldn’t! She was travelling in another name. I wonder how she got over the passport difficulty?”

He said all this musingly, watching the man before him, but if he expected to irritate Peter Morstels into an indiscreet statement, he was to be disappointed.

“That was her business,” said the other calmly. “She did not take me into her confidence. Her sister thinks I have killed her!” He laughed quietly. “Fortunately, I was alone when she called the other day. A nice story would have gone through the village if my servant had heard her!”

His eyes never left the detective’s face as he spoke.

“I suppose she told you something of the sort?” he queried. “If she did, you’re at liberty to search the house, dig up the ground, and pull the place to pieces. I can say no fairer than that. The only things I have of hers are some clothing she did not take away. Would you care to see it?”

Mackenzie followed him up the stairs to the big bedroom at the front of the house. In a wardrobe closet, he found a fur coat, two or three dresses, and half a dozen pairs of shoes. These latter he examined carefully, one by one, and found a pair that had not been worn. Mackenzie, who knew something of women, drew his own conclusions.

An examination of the garden and the grounds brought him no nearer to a solution of the girl's disappearance.

"What are you building there?" he asked, pointing to the half-finished concrete annexe.

The man smiled slowly.

"That was to have been a new bathroom for my lady! Hill Cottage wasn't good enough for her. I was building this place as a sitting-room for myself, but she made me remodel it for her use. I'm a poor man, Mr. Mackenzie, but I would have spent my last sou for that woman! She had plenty of money—thousands—but not a penny did she give me. Not that I wanted it."

Mackenzie drew a long breath.

"You've been rather unfortunate in your matrimonial affairs," he said, and had nothing but a grunted agreement.

The detective went back to town that morning in a thoughtful mood. He found Mona Stretelli waiting for him in his office.

"I see by your face that you have learned nothing," she said.

"You must be a thought reader," he smiled. "The only thing I am satisfied about, and this is unofficial, is that Morstels is a liar. He may be a murderer, too, but—there is a 'but'!"

"Do you think that, if you had authority to search, you should find anything?"

Mackenzie shook his head.

"I don't think so," he replied regretfully. "This man is more than an ordinary criminal. If he has killed these unfortunate women——"

He saw her turn white and stagger, and ran to her assistance.

"It is nothing," she said, and suddenly her black brows met, and there came a fire in her eyes that startled him. "I swear to you," she said, in a low, vehement tone, "that this man shall not escape! He shall suffer for his crimes——"

Suddenly she stopped, and her compressed lips gave some indication of the self-restraint she was exercising. She held out her hand.

"I shall not see you again," she said.

That afternoon, Mackenzie reported to his Chief, and put the matter plainly to him. The Commissioner was not hopeful.

“I am afraid we can do nothing. Naturally, this unfortunate Spanish girl is excited by the loss of her sister, but these disappearances are very common, particularly when the person who disappears is—let us say Bohemian. She will very likely turn up at Monte Carlo next season.”

Mackenzie disagreed.

He did not see Mona Stretelli for a fortnight, though, to his surprise, he read about her. There had been a sale of some old jewellery, the property of a deceased Marquis, and she had purchased a famous paste ring, which had been the property of Marie Antoinette, for £200. A picture of the ring appeared in some of the London newspapers, the editors being possibly attracted by the quaint and even bizarre setting. It was such a ring as no woman could wear—it was enormously large—and he was puzzled that she had overcome her distress so that she could indulge in a frivolity of this kind. Then, about a week later, a most amazing thing happened. She went to Scotland Yard unannounced one evening, and he expected some news, but certainly not the news she gave him.

“Mr. Mackenzie,” she said, “I have been very ungenerous in reference to Mr. Morstels, and I am perfectly satisfied that my suspicions were ill-founded.”

He looked at her in amazement.

“Have you seen him?” he asked.

She nodded; there was a flush in her cheek and her voice was unsteady as she answered him.

“I am going to be married to Mr. Morstels this week.”

He looked at her, speechless with astonishment.

“Married?” he gasped. “But, knowing what you do——”

“I am afraid we were both very prejudiced against Peter,” she said calmly. “I have found him a most charming and fascinating man.”

“I should imagine you have,” said Mackenzie grimly. “But do you realise what you are doing?”

She nodded.

“And you’re really going to marry him?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I am marrying him when—when his divorce proceedings are through. I am staying with him for a week. His aunt is coming to chaperon me. I told you I would not see you again,” she said, with a half-smile, “but this time I mean it!”

With a curt farewell she was gone. As she was leaving the room, the bag she was carrying under her arm slipped and fell. She picked it up hurriedly and passed out of the room, but in falling the bag had opened and a long moire silk purse had fallen out. He did not notice it until she had gone. Picking it up, he opened the purse, thinking to find a card bearing her Paris address. All there was in the purse was an oblong receipt form which interested him considerably.

A few seconds later she was announced again. Evidently the girl had discovered her loss.

“I know what you have come for,” said Mackenzie, looking at her flushed face. “I found it on the floor a few seconds ago.”

“Thank you,” she said, a little breathlessly, and without another word she turned and went away.

The next morning he received a wire telling him she was leaving for the country. Mackenzie thought many things—but mostly his mind was occupied by one problem: what value would the homicidal Peter Morstels place upon the eccentric ring of Marie Antoinette? The reason for the purchase of the ring was now clear.

On the second morning after the departure of the girl, he strolled down to Waterloo Station to see the passengers off and to watch the departure of the boat-train for Southampton. There was a very big trans-Atlantic passenger list, and so many people were crossing to America that the train was run in two sections.

“Queer how these Americans travel,” said the station inspector, recognising him. “Look at that old lady.” He pointed to a bent figure in deep mourning, walking painfully along the platform with the aid of two sticks. “At her time of life to be risking a sea voyage!”

“Extraordinary,” agreed Mackenzie.

When he returned to the house that afternoon he found a letter waiting for him. The envelope was soiled and muddy, the address was in pencil. Inside was a visiting-card—Mona Stretelli’s—and scrawled on its face were the words: “For God’s sake come to me!”

Mackenzie carried the news to his Chief, and from that moment he was out of the case, though he had credit for all that followed.

“But, my dear fellow, you must take the case!” insisted his Chief, but Mac was adamant, and to Inspector Jordan belongs all the immediate credit for the discoveries.

It was near midnight when Jordan arrived at the farm, and this time he went armed with authority, for he had seen his Chief and had impressed him with the seriousness of the possibilities.

Peter Morstels, half dressed, opened the door himself, and turned a little pale when he saw his visitor.

“Where is Mona Stretelli?” asked Jordan curtly.

“She has left,” said Peter. “She left me the night she arrived here. My aunt could not come, and she would not stay without a chaperon.”

“You’re lying,” said the detective shortly, “and I am going to place you under arrest while I make a search of the house.”

The search of the house revealed nothing, but in the morning Jordan questioned the villagers, and produced evidence which made the case against Morstels look black. Two men who, returning from a neighbouring village, had passed by a short cut within a quarter of a mile of the house, had heard a woman’s sharp scream at nine o’clock that night. It came from the direction of Hill Cottage. No further sound was heard, and apparently the villagers took little notice of the occurrence. When questioned by the detective, Morstels admitted that, for some unaccountable reason, which he had put down to hysteria, Mona Stretelli had started screaming.

“She was like a lunatic,” he protested. “Must I be arrested because a woman screams? I gave her an hour to calm down, then I went to her room and knocked at her door, but there was no answer. I opened it, and she was gone—possibly through a window, for it is a window from which she could drop easily to the ground.”

“That story isn’t quite good enough,” said Jordan. “I am going to remove you to the police station, pending an examination of the ground.”

The whole of the estate, such as was not covered by trees, was very carefully probed and dug, and on the third day of the investigation the big discovery was made. Under about four feet of earth was found a heap of charred bones; but, most damning of all, the ring of Marie Antoinette!

Jordan came back to London and woke Mackenzie with the news.

“He evidently disposed of the bodies by burning,” he said exultantly. “There is a huge fireplace in the kitchen, and the bodies could be burnt without detection. We have our pathologist, who swears that the bones are human.”

“They are not necessarily the bones of Mona Stretelli,” said Mackenzie warningly.

“But there is the ring!” he said in triumph. “That is sufficient!”

Throughout the trial that followed, Morstels preserved a sangfroid which was remarkable. The only time he broke down was when the death sentence was pronounced, and then it was only for a few moments.

On the morning before his execution, Mackenzie went to Nottingham Prison to see him, at the condemned man’s request. He was smoking a cigarette and chatting with one of the warders, and he greeted the detective with a little nod.

“You brought me bad luck, Mackenzie, but I’m going to tell you something. I did kill several women—three or four, I forget,” he said, with a shrug of indifference. “They are all in concrete, the foundations of my new house,” he chuckled. “But Mona Stretelli I did not kill—that I swear. It is a bit tough on me, Mac, that I’m to swing for a murder which I did not commit!”

He brooded for a minute, then:

“I should like to see this girl Stretelli and congratulate her.”

Mackenzie did not reply until he wrote his resignation. He had seen in Mona Stretelli’s purse a receipt from a Steamship Company for her passage. To make doubly sure, he had gone to Waterloo and recognised her, though she was well disguised, as she boarded the train.

The night after she was supposed to have been murdered, she was on the broad Atlantic, bound for a new home, a new land, and a new life, leaving behind her, in a hole which she herself had dug, the calcined bones which she had purchased from an anatomical establishment, and the ring which was to bring Morstels to the scaffold.

And Mackenzie knew it, and let a man hang for a crime he had not committed. His conscience and his sense of justice were appeased. His sense of humour was entirely satisfied.

THE MAN WHO NEVER LOST

The man in the grey cashmere suit who lolled with his face to the Hotel de Paris was dimly conscious that from one of the balconies he was being particularised. He guessed also that he was in process of being described, but he was hardened to notoriety. He could almost hear the man tell the girl, "That is the celebrated Twyford—the fellow with the system who breaks the bank regularly every week."

Too lazy and somnolent to raise his head even to identify the newcomers to Monte Carlo (as he guessed they were), he stretched his long legs to the sun and settled sideways for greater comfort.

He was forty and greyish. A lean, clean-shaven face; large, regular white teeth that showed readily, for he was easily amused; eyes of steady, unwinking blue, and a gun-metal nerve: these were some of the features and qualities of Aubrey Twyford, the Man Who Never Lost.

"That's Aubrey Twyford," said the envious young man on the balcony. "I wish to Heaven I had half his luck or a tenth."

"Poor Bobby!" said the girl.

Her eyes were sympathetic and kindly, and at the pressure of her hand on his arm he turned.

"Whose luck?"

The middle-aged lady who came through the French windows and joined them on the balcony had no sympathetic quality in her tone, nor was there kindness in her nod.

"Hello, Bobby," she said, and gave him her cheek; "I heard you had arrived. Who were you talking about?"

He nodded to the square and, shading her eyes, Mrs. Brane took in the lounging figure, from the tips of his white shoes to the crown of his grey hat.

"That's Aubrey Twyford—they call him The Man Who Can't Lose. He comes to Monte Carlo every season from February to May and never leaves the table except as a winner."

"Wonderful man!" said Mrs. Brane dryly. "Are you thinking of emulating his example, Bobby?"

“Well, to tell you the truth, aunt,” said Bobby Gardner with a laugh, “I had hopes.”

She sniffed.

“I hate gamblers,” she said shortly. “He must be a very horrid person.” She looked again at the object of their conversation.

Twyford had risen and was walking slowly to meet a short, stout man who had come down the steps of the Hotel de Paris.

“That’s Souchet, the big Paris banker. He is a millionaire, and I wouldn’t change places with him for all his money. His daughter ran away with the chauffeur this week, and the poor old gentleman is quite knocked out. He is losing money at the tables, but the beggar can well afford it,” said Bobby gloomily.

The girl had gone into the room, and his aunt walked closer to him.

“Why did you come to Monte Carlo, Bobby?”

“Why?” His pretence of surprise was very transparent. “Why, I come here every year.”

“But why have you come now?” she asked.

He did not immediately reply nor meet her eye.

“I am getting very tired of this business, Bobby,” she said quietly. “You are making a fool of Madge. The girl is simply worried to death. Why don’t you propose to her if you are going to?”

He laughed a little bitterly, for Bobby had occasional moments when he was sorry for himself.

“With £400 a year?”

“Bah,” she said contemptuously, “as if money made any difference!”

He swung round.

“It makes a lot of difference. Madge is a very rich girl and I am a very poor man. When I can meet her on something like equal terms, I will ask her.”

“That is just your vanity,” said the elder woman; “man’s vanity! It would not worry you if she were poor and you were rich. You would not regard it as being an undignified thing for her to accept your wealth.”

“That is different,” he said.

“Only from a man’s point of view,” said she, and walked back into the sitting-room.

A quarter of an hour later all three passed into the rooms, through the big and terribly serious public room into the ornate *Cercle Privée*. They passed along the roulette tables and came to the crowd about the *trente-et-quarante* players.

“That is the only game he ever plays,” said Bobby in an undertone. “Look at him packing it up!”

Before this man in grey, with his expressionless face and his lean, white hands, was a thick pile of thousand-franc notes, and whilst they looked he had added 24,000 to his stock. On the opposite side of the table Bobby saw the dour, bearded face of Souchet the banker. He was not gambling, unless betting in louis can be so described, but five out of every six stakes he played were raked to the croupier.

“Who is Aubrey Twyford?”

“It is a rum story,” said Bobby, leading the girl to one of the seats by the wall. “He used to be a professor of psychology, a man who never gambled, and took his modest holiday every year in Monte Carlo. People who knew him here twenty years ago say that he never risked as much as a five-franc piece on the table until he discovered his system.”

“Has he a system?” she asked.

Bobby nodded.

“The Casino authorities have tried to find what it is. They have had detectives and officials watching him for years. All his coups have been recorded and examined by the best system experts in Europe, but apparently there is no system at all. I have reason to believe they have searched his baggage time and time again to discover some clue which will put them on to his scheme of play, but they found nothing.”

“That is very strange, Bobby,” she said.

“This is his last season, by the way. He told me yesterday he was chucking it up.”

At that moment there was a stir at the table. Souchet and Twyford rose together and walked away, Souchet explaining something with a little smile and The Man Who Never Lost nodding his reply as he pocketed his winnings.

Bobby noticed that he needed two pockets.

“Go on about him,” said the girl. “I am fearfully interested.”

“About twelve years ago he started playing, and since then he has never looked back. The Casino officials say that he has taken nearly £700,000 from the tables in the past ten years.”

She frowned.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked quickly.

“I had an idea,” she said. “That is all.”

He did not press her. Mr. Aubrey Twyford entertained on a lavish scale. His table, in a corner of the Café de Paris, was always crowded for dinner, and when Bobby and the girl came in that night they found the usual throng about him.

“I forgot something about Twyford, and I ought to tell you this in justice to him,” he said. “He is most awfully good to people who have bad luck. I have known him to go down to see off a man who has gone broke, and to hand him an envelope containing every penny he had lost. You see,” said Bobby, with a smile, “one is frightfully communicative at Monte Carlo, and one knows just how the other fellows are doing at the tables. Last season a widow came down with £3000 and lost it in four days. She had come down because she wanted to raise enough money to buy her son a business. It was a mad sort of idea, and Twyford told her so when he got into conversation with her the first day she played, and do you know what he did? He gave her £6000 on the day she left Monte Carlo on the promise she would not gamble again.”

“It is incredible,” said the girl. “Who is that man next to him?”

“That is young Stanton. His father is a very rich Manchester merchant. He won 200,000 francs this afternoon.”

She laughed.

“Is the financial position of anybody in Monte Carlo secret?” she asked.

“Not a bit,” laughed Bobby. “I bet you the croupiers could tell you your income to within a pound!”

Mr. Stanton had taken a little too much wine. He was loud and talkative.

“I’m going to set ’em alight to-night,” he said, with a laugh. “Stand by, everybody, and see me break the bank.”

Twyford raised his glass of Vichy water and sipped.

“It is very unlucky, to talk about breaking the bank,” he said.

“Luck?” said the other. “My dear chap, there isn’t any luck in it! One has only to keep one’s head——”

“Don’t despise luck,” said Aubrey. He had a rich mellow voice and spoke slowly and deliberately. “There are three lucky moments in every twenty-four hours, no more. I have studied the subject very carefully. If you get in on the flood-tide of your luck, you can’t lose. If you strike any of the other minutes, you cannot win.”

“Do you suggest that you only win for three minutes in every twenty-four hours?” scoffed Stanton.

“I am not talking about myself,” said the other quietly. “I work on a system, and by my system I cannot lose.”

“But if you’ve got a system,” persisted Stanton, gulping down a glass of champagne, “why is it you are not playing all the time? Why, you go for days without making a bet!”

“I shall bet to-night,” said Twyford quietly, “and I shall win and win heavily. I am going to play maximums of twelve thousand francs.”

“What we ought to do”—it was Souchet the banker who spoke—“is to follow our friend, but how? He does not play his stake until they start dealing the cards, and then it is too late to follow him.”

Twyford smiled.

“That is also part of my system,” he said dryly.

The girl leant across the table to Bobby.

“Bobby,” she said, “take me back to the Casino when Mr. Twyford goes. I am most anxious to watch his play.”

“I’ll get you a seat near him,” said Bobby. “There are generally one or two sleepers who will give up their seats for a louis.”

“Sleepers?” she said, puzzled.

“That isn’t the name, I don’t think,” he said, and explained that there was a class of habitués at the rooms who did nothing but sit on the offchance that somebody would put down a stake and either walk away or forget to take his winnings. In this case the wily watcher reaches out his hand and rakes in the

“sleeper” unless the croupier is extra vigilant and has noticed who staked the money.

Presently the big party broke up, and they strolled through the café across the deserted square. With very little difficulty Bobby secured a seat, two removed from Twyford, for the girl. Immediately opposite her sat the optimistic Stanton, flushed and voluble.

True to his word, Twyford produced a bigger pad of notes than he had taken away in the afternoon. His first stake was for twelve thousand francs, and this he lost. He lost his second stake on black. He staked again on black and won. The girl watched him, fascinated. He dodged from black to red, from red to *couleur*, from *couleur* to *invers*, and five out of every six coups he won. It was enthralling to the girl, possibly because the scene and the setting were so novel and bizarre. She watched the dealer as with amazing dexterity he led out the two lines of cards. . . .

“Rouge perd et couleur.”

A clicking of counters against rakes, a flutter of mille notes, and invariably it seemed it was toward Aubrey Twyford that the notes fluttered. She kept note of the colours in a little book which Bobby had provided. There was no method in the run of the cards; they dodged from black to red and from red to black. They ran three times on black before they started zig-zagging from black to red again, and it seemed that everybody at the table was losing—except The Man Who Could Not Lose.

Mr. Stanton was no longer voluble. His big pile had steadily decreased until it was the merest slice. He was losing his nerve. He would put a big stake upon a colour, then change his mind and withdraw the greater part of it before the cards were dealt. Once he put down a maximum, hesitated, and took it off, substituting 500 francs on the red. The red won, and he cursed audibly. Aubrey Twyford, who had had his maximum on the red, smiled.

At eleven o'clock Stanton pushed back his chair and walked round to Twyford.

“They’ve cleaned me out,” he said. “I’ve lost 300,000 francs. You don’t seem to have done so badly.”

Twyford smiled.

“Do you want any money?” he asked.

“No, I’ve finished for the night,” said Stanton. “I’ll try again in the morning,” and walked past him to the bar.

Twyford caught Bobby's eye and nodded.

"Come and drink orangeade," he said. "I am bloated with wealth."

"May I introduce Mr. Twyford?"

The girl looked into the half-smiling eyes of The Man Who Could Not Lose, and saw a whole wealth of humanity and humour in their depths.

"You must drink orangeade, Miss Radley," he said; "everybody does it."

"It sounds very innocuous," she laughed.

"That is just what we want," said he.

"I have been watching your wonderful system, Mr. Twyford," she said.

He chuckled.

"I hope you are not going to tell people how I do it," he said dryly. "Everybody watches my wonderful system and I fear they are as wise as ever, though why they should not understand it from the first, Heaven only knows!"

They sat down in the big, comfortable arm-chairs with which the buffet was well furnished, and the waiter brought them great tumblers of fragrant orange-juice packed to the brim with cracked ice.

"When I have finished at Monte Carlo, I must write a book about my system," said Twyford.

"And I will be one of your first readers," said the girl. "I am sure I shall come straight to Monte Carlo and win a fortune."

He shook his head, and the smile vanished from his face.

"It requires a heart of iron to work my system," he said. "It is just because I am getting human that I am giving it up."

Bobby went to the bar to get some sandwiches, and the girl turned to the man.

"Mr. Twyford," she said, speaking rapidly in a low voice, "there is something I want to say to you. You are really leaving Monte Carlo for good?"

He nodded.

"And you are not going to work your system again?"

"I am not," he said; "that you may be sure."

“Suppose, Mr. Twyford,” she dropped her eyes and fingered the arm of the chair nervously, “suppose somebody offered you a big sum for your system, would you sell it?”

She looked up sharply and saw he was smiling.

“Not for myself,” she said, going red, “but there is somebody—somebody I want to see well off.”

“I could not sell it,” he said shortly. “I am very, very sorry, and I am really acting in the best interests of the—er—somebody you want to help, but it is impossible.”

She bit her lip.

“May I ask you not to tell——?”

He raised his hand to stop her and regarded the returning Bobby with more interest.

Her aunt came into the buffet at that moment and claimed her.

“You ought to be in bed, Madge,” she said. “Bobby, why do you keep Madge up so late?”

Then she saw Twyford, and the girl introduced them.

“Have you been teaching them your system, Mr. Twyford?” she asked, with a little smile.

“I teach all Monte Carlo my system,” he laughed, “and really the Casino should charge a fee to see me play.”

When the women had gone, Twyford turned to Bobby and favoured him with a long scrutiny.

“Mr. Gardner,” said the elder man, “you aren’t playing to-day.”

Bobby shrugged as he sank back in his seat.

“What’s the use?” he said. “I fool about with louis, and I neither make money nor lose money. I haven’t the nerve to be a gambler, and yet I never have been so tempted to risk every cent I have as I am to-day.”

Twyford sucked at his straw.

“Bad news?” he asked.

“No,” said Bobby, “just a realisation of what a perfectly useless ass I am!”

“That sort of thing does upset you,” said Twyford.

“Do you know what I am going to do?” asked Bobby suddenly, and his fresh young face fired at the thought. “I’m going to have a real old gamble to-morrow. I’ve got a couple of thousand pounds which I’ve been putting aside for—for—well, for something, and I’m going to play thousand-franc stakes!”

“You will lose,” said Twyford, without hesitation. “Every man who goes out to win big money because he must win big money loses.”

“How do you know I must?” said the other sharply.

“I gather from your tone that it is necessary for you to have a lot of money,” said Twyford, “and when a man goes out to win that money he loses.”

“Always?”

“In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred,” said Twyford; “I think the percentage is a little higher. I kept very complete psychological data during the first few years I was at Monte Carlo, and I think it works out at ninety-nine point four per cent.”

Bobby stared at him.

“Then I am going to be the point six per cent, that wins!” he said, and rushed off to see the girl before she retired for the night.

Twyford looked after him with a little smile, then with a shrug of his shoulders he beckoned the waiter.

Bobby Gardner came down to the vestibule of the hotel the next morning and found Twyford reading a newspaper.

“I was waiting for you,” he said. “Do you think you could persuade your ladies to take an auto ride to Grasse?”

“It is awfully kind of you,” said Bobby gratefully.

The girl was at first reluctant. She had felt the last night’s refusal as a rebuff, but Mrs. Brane wanted to go to Grasse to buy some perfumes, and Madge consented.

It was a much more pleasant ride than she had anticipated. The beauties of the Grand Cornich had been so often described to her that she was prepared to be bored, but the wonder of hill and valley, of narrow mountain roads and dizzy precipices, filled her with amazement and delight.

It was on the journey back, when they had stopped at the Gorge du Loup for afternoon tea, that Aubrey Twyford beckoned her more with a look than a gesture, and she detached herself from Bobby and went to him.

“I have been thinking of what you said last night,” he said. “Will you walk a little way up the Gorge with me?”

“About the system?” she said quickly.

He nodded.

“You will sell it?”

“No, I will not sell it,” he said, “but I will give it to you. I have decided to leave Monte Carlo to-morrow. All the stories they tell about me are perfectly true. I am a very rich man, and there is no further need for me to gamble. First,” he said, turning and facing her, “you must promise me that you will not reveal my secret until after I have left Monte Carlo.”

“I promise,” she said, “but——”

“There must be no ‘buts,’ ” he said, “not even to Mr. Gardner!”

He saw the colour mount to her cheek, and smiled inwardly, then, taking her arm, he slowly paced the road, and the system of the Man Who Could Not Lose was revealed.

At first she was incredulous. Then she felt a sense of revulsion. Then, as his calm, even tones related the story of his years at Monte Carlo, she recognised that he was speaking as a doctor might speak about his cases, cold-bloodedly and scientifically. At the end of the revelation she held out her hand.

“I am awfully obliged and grateful to you, Mr. Twyford. No, I shan’t tell Bobby, and I don’t think I shall tell anybody else.”

“You will see to-night,” he repeated for the second time.

She inclined her head gravely.

They were nearing the party again when he said suddenly:

“Miss Radley, Bobby Gardner is a real good fellow, as clean a specimen of a boy as I have ever met. I have seen him here year after year, and I have particularly studied him.”

She had gone very red, but it was with a smile that she asked:

“Why do you tell me this, Mr. Twyford?”

“It was quite unnecessary,” he agreed. “I am sure you have noticed those qualities yourself.”

The *trente-et-quarante* table was crowded when Twyford took his seat. Bobby, bright of eye and inordinately cheerful, laid his modest fortune before him, and nodded brightly to Twyford. Then the gambling began. Bobby started with a stake of a thousand francs and won. He increased his stake and won again.

With the exception of three he won twelve successive coups, and suddenly Twyford rose from the table with a little laugh, picked up the remainder of his money, and left the *trente-et-quarante* table for good. He stood watching Bobby, and Bobby was winning heavily until the girl whispered something in his ear when he, too, rose, both hands filled with notes and counters.

Twyford was sitting on a bench smiling, and he jerked his head inviting them, but he was only looking at the girl.

“Come and sit down,” he said. “I want to ask you a question.” He shook an admonitory forefinger at her, and she laughed. “I am not going to ask you whether you told Bobby Gardner my precious secret,” he said.

“I thought you were,” she replied in surprise.

“I am merely going to ask you this. Have you become engaged to Bobby since I saw you last?”

She nodded.

“That explains it,” said the other.

He rose and shook hands with both of them, and the Man Who Could Not Lose left the gaming rooms, never to reappear.

“You see,” began the girl, “Mr. Twyford was a great psychologist.”

“But do you mean to say,” said the incredulous Bobby, “that he told you his system before he left?”

She nodded.

“By the way,” he added, “do you know he lost nearly 200,000 francs last night?”

She nodded again.

“I guessed that,” she said, “but I don’t think that will worry him very much.”

“What was the system?” said Bobby.

“I was telling you,” said the girl severely, “when you interrupted. He studied the people of Monte Carlo, especially the gambling people, for eight years, and the thing he discovered was that there are conditions under which a gambler cannot win. If a man is worried about some outside matter, if he is losing steadily and cannot afford to lose, or if he comes to the tables and simply must win money, Mr. Twyford knew that whatever else happened, his money would go, and the majority of his stakes would vanish. And when he found this out he took the trouble to discover who at Monte Carlo was in trouble, who wanted money very badly, who was playing with their last stakes—and he played against them. If they backed red he backed black, if they backed *couleur* he backed *invers*.”

“Good lord!” gasped Bobby; “was that playing the game?”

“That’s what I asked him,” said the girl, “and he had no difficulty in convincing me that it was. It was not he who was influencing the bad luck of the others, their bad luck was simply influencing him to fortune. Sometimes the man with the bad luck would only lose a few thousand francs, and Mr. Twyford would win hundreds of thousands by betting against him. If he knew a man or woman whom he had played against was ruined, he always made good their losses before they left—he said he could afford to, because he was very often playing twelve thousand francs against their forty. He said it is the only system in the world, and I believe it is.”

“But why did he lose last night?” asked Bobby, and the girl smiled.

“I suppose it was because he was playing against somebody who ought to have been radiantly happy,” she said. “Didn’t you hear him ask me if I had accepted you?”

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE CHINA DOG

Inventors are proverbially consecrated amongst the gods. Tam M'Tavish recalled the proverb and grinned at the reeking pot which bubbled and frothed above a gas burner.

It was a large iron pot, and he had first qualified for his consecration by extemporising from the tubes of an ancient bicycle a tripod from which his boiler was suspended.

The draughty little barn which housed the home-scientist was a discarded army hut of iron, and its few contents were of a character which would not burn. Moreover the boiling mess, which from time to time he stirred with an iron rod, was itself non-inflammable. The smell of it poisoned the adjoining fields and penetrated to the village a mile away, but Tam, in the ecstasy of invention, sniffed nothing amiss.

The tap of a stick's iron ferrule against the door roused him from his rapt contemplation of the cauldron. The little man rose reluctantly, stooping to turn down the flame of the burner, opened the door and stepped out into the light.

At first he thought the caller was a complete stranger. A glimpse of the car's bonnet on the road at the end of the garden explained how the visitor had come.

"Why, Tam," said the stranger, "you're just as skinny and ugly as you always were!"

Tam's eyes narrowed.

"It's not Mr. Merrick?" he said in genuine astonishment. "Why, Mr. Merrick, sir, you have changed."

In the days of the war, Merrick had been one of the brightest and most resourceful of the fighting airmen, and Tam spoke no more than the truth when he said that his erstwhile comrade had changed. It was not a change for the better. Sudden prosperity had not agreed with Walter Merrick: it had made him unhealthily plump, and had brought tiny sacks under his eyes, and an unwholesome colour to the skin which Tam remembered used to be like the skin of a girl.

“Changed, have I?” said the other carelessly. “Well, you haven’t. What are you doing in there, Tam?”

“It’s a wee invention of mine,” said Tam solemnly. “A new dope, Mr. Merrick. ’Tis fireproof and waterproof, and I ha’ me doots that I’ll be making me fortune one of these days.”

“You’re married, aren’t you?” said Merrick, as he walked towards the house, with the shirt-sleeved Tam at his elbow.

“Aye,” said Tam, with that habitual caution which made him admit even such important facts as his marriage with an air of reservation, “but ma lady is awa’—in America. She’s American,” explained Tam, “and her folks wanted to see the wee bairn.”

“So you’re a grass widower—h’m, that’s awkward.”

Mr. Merrick looked round the cosy sitting-room into which Tam had ushered him without any evidence of approval.

“Why do you live out in this God-forsaken part of the world? I suppose it is handy for your air-taxi—I saw your advertisement in *The Times* the other day. What is the bus like?”

“She’s like all the buses you ever knew, Mr. Merrick, sir,” said Tam. He was wondering why the absence of his wife should be described as “awkward.” “She has the engine of a bomber and the wings of a scout. I bought bits of her from the Disposal Board, and I assembled them mysel’. You’re not wanting a ride, Mr. Merrick?”

His eyes twinkled mischievously.

“A ride? Good lord, no!” said Mr. Merrick. “I haven’t the nerve for it now, Tam; I think I must be getting old.”

“Maybe your nerves are losing their confidence in ye,” said Tam quietly.

Merrick had seated himself in a chair by the window and was looking around restlessly.

“My nerves are gone, that’s a fact,” he admitted. “I wouldn’t dare trust myself with a joy-stick now, though I don’t suppose I’d be afraid to go as a passenger, especially if you were the pilot, Tam.”

“Any testimonial you’d like to give to me would you kindly put into writing, Mr. Merrick? I’m making a collection of them.”

There was an awkward pause. The visitor had certainly not yet revealed his business, and Tam was curious to hear.

Presently the object of his visit was exposed.

“Tam,” he said suddenly, “I’m wondering how you’re fixed for money. Would you like a five hundred pound job?”

“Five hundred a year or five hundred a week?” asked Tam.

“Five hundred pounds for a few days’ work,” said Mr. Merrick impressively.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the room.

“I’ll tell you what it is all about, Tam,” he said, “and you’ll understand that I am putting myself rather in your power. It’s about a girl.”

“Aye,” said Tam quietly, “I was thinking it was, Mr. Merrick, sir.”

“She’s very unhappy,” said Mr. Merrick, who was no story-teller, and left many gaps to be filled in by his hearer. “The fact is, Tam, she’s married to a fellow who doesn’t appreciate her.”

“I’ve read of such cases,” said Tam. “Ye have to get married before ye get thoroughly unappreciated.”

“But I’m fond of her,” said Mr. Merrick doggedly, “and she’s fond of me. I’m a pretty rich man, Tam. I came into all my uncle’s money after the war, and I can give her the time she wants, but I don’t want to get mixed up in this business, you see.”

“Do ye want her to get mixed up in it?” asked Tam dryly.

“That’s different,” said Mr. Merrick, with a wave of his hand. “She’s going to run away from him anyway. He’s as poor as a church mouse, and naturally a girl who likes life and pleasure, theatre parties, Tam, and all that sort of thing . . . she’s just fretting her heart out.”

“Puir lassie,” said Tam, without any great display of sympathy. “Maybe she’s never tried the ceenema pictures? They’re verra interesting, Mr. Merrick.”

“Don’t be a fool,” said the other rudely. “Pictures! What the devil does she want to go to pictures for, when she can have the time of her life? However, I don’t want to discuss that matter. Would you take her over to Paris and bring her back again at the end of a week and”—he hesitated—“well,” he blurted out at last, “you’re married and nobody knows your

wife isn't here. Suppose any inquiries were made, would you say that she'd been staying . . ." he ended a little breathlessly, for he had seen the queer, hard look in Tam's eyes. "It is all square and above board," he added hastily. "Platonic friendship, you know, Tam. She will come with a chaperone, and all that sort of thing, and it's worth five hundred."

"Maybe it is worth five thousand," said Tam quietly, "but not to me, Mr. Merrick. I believe in making the coorse of love run smooth, but I've no experience with platonic friendship. And noo, Mr. Merrick, we'll talk about other things. Why, I haven't seen you since Mr. Selby's wedding. He's a graund young fellow, that friend of yours, Mr. Merrick. I mind the day he brought doon six of our late enemy."

Merrick, who had resumed his chair, shifted round uncomfortably and swallowed something.

"A gey fine man," said Tam emphatically, "and a verra fine lady he married, Mr. Merrick. Wi' all that graund golden hair and eyes like blue saucers. Have ye seen him lately?"

"Oh yes," said Merrick indifferently, "I see them occasionally. She often speaks about you," he said, and Tam thought he spoke meaningly.

"Aboot me," he said in surprise. "And I did na' think she ever saw me; I was eating all the time I was there."

"She likes you, Tam," said Merrick, "and she trusts you. She only said the other day, 'I'm sure Tam would do anything for me.'"

Tam M'Tavish stepped back, his head perched on one side like an inquisitive hen, his hands thrust deeply into his breeches pocket.

"Oh aye," he said softly, "but you're not telling me, Mr. Merrick, that Mrs. Selby is the lady who is starving for the grand boulevards de Paris?"

"Yes, she is," said the other doggedly. "Now are you going to help?"

Tam looked at the floor for a long time. Then he walked slowly to the door and opened it.

"Ye'll be getting along now, Mr. Merrick," he said. "There'll be rain coming, or my corn is committing pairjury."

"All right," said the other, his face red with anger, "if you're going to play the sneak on an old comrade, Tam, of course I'm in your power."

"I wouldna outrage yair sense of decency by so low doon an action," said Tam with cold sarcasm. "There's na reason to sneak against ye, Mr.

Merrick; ye're no married, and if ye were I shouldna want your wife, or the chaperone within yair gates, to go zooming off to Paris wi' me. Noo, will ye get oot?" His voice trembled with suppressed fury, and Mr. Merrick did not look back as he strode down the flagged path of the garden to his waiting car.

Tam went back to his room not a little perturbed. Such problems as these came very seldom into his experience, and when, as he did at times, he caught glimpses of an ugly side of life, more ugly than the battlefields of France and Flanders had shown him, he was nauseated.

Before he had joined the Flying Corps he had been a mechanic in a Glasgow factory, and his life had been one of singular austerity. He had hated war: his chief offence against society had been his hatred of war, and his steadfast refusal to join the army until the sheer mechanics of flying had lured him into uniform. But there were things he hated worse than war.

He had heard, and perforce been a spectator, of uncleanly things, but to him they were part of the phenomena of the circumstances in which he found himself. He was a spectator without ever having the faintest idea that he could be a participator in irregularities which neither offended nor interested him.

He was not readily shocked, but now, as he sat down and thought out the situation which had been presented to him that afternoon, he was first bewildered, then horrified. Little Selby had been a favourite of his: Tam had liked him because of his sheer incompetence. He was the worst pilot in the flight, crashed more machines on landing than any other man in the squadron, and had escaped the consequence of his blundering so often that he had earned the nickname of "the immortal Selby." He was a straight little man, with a heart as big as his head, a man without fear or malice. He had eventually been transferred to the tactical bureau of the corps, where he had made a big name for himself. Tam went to his wedding, and had admired, in his critical way, his fluffy little bride. Tam was not a fair judge of women. Whatever might be their qualities, they were foredoomed to fall short of the standard represented by the girl who bore his name, and who, at that moment, with the chubby son of his house, was visiting her relations on the other side. It didn't seem possible that a girl like Mrs. Selby . . . and yet Tam knew in his heart of hearts that Merrick had spoken the truth. To go to the injured husband was impossible. To warn the girl herself was beyond Tam's courage.

He went back to his little barn to find half his precious dope had boiled over on the floor, extinguishing the fire and adding to the general confusion of smells the additional pungency of escaping gas.

It was a week later before Tam found time to go to London. His experiment, and a hiring which took him into Cornwall, intervened.

Selby, he discovered, was employed by a firm of city architects, but he was not in his office. He had not been there for three days. Tam inquired for his private address, and took a bus to Hampstead to call at the house, without having any definite idea in his mind as to what he would say, or what excuse he would make for his visit when he got there.

He had, too, an uncomfortable feeling that Mrs. Selby knew of his refusal to aid Merrick, and the knowledge that he was privy to her secret could not fail to be embarrassing to both.

The house, a little villa, was locked up. No answer came to his knock; the blinds were drawn; and he inquired of a neighbour. The neighbour was so woodenly discreet that Tam felt his heart sink. Then by a piece of good luck he came upon a gossiping milkman who supplied disquieting information.

Mrs. Selby had gone away; whither, nobody knew. She had left a note, because the housemaid had seen Selby read it on his return in the evening. The next morning he closed up the house, and himself disappeared.

The milkman was satisfied that the lady had run away, and that her husband had started off in pursuit of her, and that was the view that Tam took until he read the next week in the newspaper a paragraph saying that John Selby, an ex-officer of the Royal Air Force, had been charged with being drunk and disorderly in the west end of London, and had been discharged with a caution.

Tam came to London again and tried to find his old comrade. At the police court they furnished him with the address that the prisoner had given. This proved to be a furnished room in Bloomsbury, which Selby had quitted the day after his appearance at the police court.

Tam went back to his experiments with a sad heart.

It was four days before Christmas that he received a letter, and the handwriting on the envelope seemed familiar. He opened it. It was from Selby, and it was dated from Tunbridge Wells.

“DEAR TAM (it ran), I hear you have been making inquiries about me and I am sorry I missed you. At present I am in a nursing home, rather run down, but I hope you will come and call upon us when I get out, which will be some time in the new year. My wife will be very glad to see you. She has been abroad for a little while, but she is now back in town.”

Tam read the letter again. “She is now back in town.” He frowned, and then a smile slowly dawned on his face, and he went back to the work of painting his machine, for he had discovered that non-inflammable dope for which inventors had sought, a dope that rendered even a soft wood fireproof, so that he could thrust a stick painted with the wonder into the heart of a coal fire and withdraw it hot but flameless. The sturdy little air-taxi grew green under his persevering brush, and his diminutive assistant and he worked while daylight lasted, covering fusilage and wings, rudder post, and elevators with the fire-resisting concoction.

On the Christmas Eve Tam had finished his work. It had been a raw, grey day, a south-westerly gale had blown itself out, and had been succeeded by a drizzling rain, and Tam, who, like most Scotsmen, had less of a sentimental interest in Christmas than in the New Year, retired to his snugger to read.

Two long shelves carried his reading matter, and the literature was of a type which is very seldom found in the libraries of ordinary students. For they were those stories of daring and adventure which delight the heart of youth. Stories of superhuman cowboys, of unnaturally villainous desperadoes, and amazingly brilliant detectives, who discovered on the last page the solution which the reader had found for himself on the second. Stories of heroic young sailors, who, although of a tender age, had ordered captains from the bridge in moments of peril, and had piloted gallant barques to safe harbourage amidst the applause of beautiful passengers. They were all very precious to Tam, and more convincing, more human than the tales of Phryxus or Ulysses, or the Pythian Apollo.

He filled his pipe and settled back comfortably into his chair, and only the sound of rain-water dripping from the runnels and the occasional flap-flap where the wind caught a loose board of his hangar broke the stillness. Presently the sound of the tapping board got on Tam’s nerves, and he rose, slipped on his boots, and went out into the night with a hammer and a nail. He nailed down the board, opened the door of the hangar, and took a look at the machine. He touched the glittering paint with his finger, and wiped his

finger on his overall before he withdrew, locking the door behind him. As he drew nearer the house he was conscious of a shrill sound. It was the telephone ringing, and he hurried indoors.

“Is that Mr. M’Tavish?” said a voice.

“That’s me,” said Tam.

“We’ve a job for you to-night.”

“Who is it talking?” asked Tam.

The speaker gave the name of a firm that Tam did not remember having heard before.

“It’s no’ a night for flyin’,” said Tam discouragingly, for the cheerful fire and the open book on the table had a powerful appeal. “There’s no moon and——”

“The fee is a hundred guineas each way,” was the reply. “The glass has gone up and the wind is veering to the west. It is a case of life or death, Mr. M’Tavish.”

Tam scratched his chin.

“Will it no’ do in the morning?” he asked.

“No,” was the emphatic reply. “A gentleman has been bitten by a mad dog. He must get over to Paris to-night to the Pasteur institute for an injection. You can bring him back before the early morning.”

“Is there no Pasteur institute in this country?” asked Tam in surprise.

“This is a special case,” said the man impatiently. “Will you take it?”

“How long will he be?” asked Tam.

“He’ll be with you in an hour,” was the answer.

Tam looked at his watch. It was eight o’clock.

“All right,” he said. “Does he know where I live? I’ll be waiting in the field.”

“Flash a lamp,” said the speaker. “He will come over on his motor-bicycle.”

“Where are you speaking from?” asked Tam.

“From London,” and then they were cut off.

Tam hung up the telephone receiver, put a fire-guard before the fire, and then went up to change. A quarter of an hour later with some difficulty he wheeled the aeroplane from its hangar and filled up his tanks. Then he dragged the machine to the end of the field he leased. A night ascent had no terrors for Tam, particularly now that the wind had fallen and the stars showed through the breaking clouds.

He had been waiting half an hour when he heard the “ticka-tick” of a motor-cycle coming along the road. Presently it stopped and he flashed his hand-lamp. A few minutes later a man came walking towards him out of the darkness. He saved Tam from committing the impertinence of flashing his lamp upon him by stopping to light a cigarette. Tam had a glimpse of a man with a close-cropped iron beard and heavy black eyebrows.

“You’ll no’ be able to smoke, sir,” said Tam.

“Oh, shan’t I?” said the other gruffly as he threw his cigarette away. “Are you ready?”

“Ah’ve just to swing the prop,” said Tam, and was moving off.

“You’d better take this money,” said the passenger, and thrust a roll of notes into Tam’s hand.

“It would have done any time,” said Tam politely. Nevertheless, he buttoned it away into his pocket. The stranger, he noticed, was dressed in a leather coat perfectly equipped for the journey.

“Where would you like to be landing?” said Tam. “There are two aerodromes.”

“There’s one to the east of the city—the old army aerodrome.”

“It’s no’ used now,” said Tam.

“It will do,” said the man. “It is nearest to—to the institute.”

Tam looked at him suspiciously. He was not the type of man who would be engaged in smuggling, beside which he carried no baggage whatever, and the things in which smugglers find profit have bulk. Tam knew that it was an irregularity to land passengers at any other than the official aerodromes, but he was not a stickler for the law. Tam, at heart, was a revolutionary. Regulations filled him with an insane sense of resentment, and his first temptation on being acquainted with a new rule was to break it.

“Will you be able to land here on the return journey?” asked the passenger.

“I’ll land or fa’,” said Tam laconically.

Ten minutes later the machine was racing through a mist of cloud, and they glimpsed the world below at intervals. Tiny spangles of light at wide intervals and parallelograms of lighted pin-points distinguished country from town.

Now they were over the sea, rolling and pitching in the uneven air which the storm had left in its trail.

Calais light stabbed up at them in vivid, narrow beams, and an air-way lighthouse sent a steady pillar of light to the sky to direct them. Soon Paris was ahead on the horizon, a blur of white and yellow lights, and Tam banked to the left and peered downward for the landing ground he had known so well during the war. It lay in the centre of a triangle, the base of which was the white arcs of a railway siding, the apex a blast furnace, the blue light of which was visible.

Tam had not landed here for eighteen months. It might have been built on for all he knew, or worse still, it might be littered with war stores, the fate of so many aerodromes.

He could see nothing in the black void to which the nose of his machine was pointing. Down, down he swept, and then peering through two eyes which were veritable slits he dropped the nose a fraction more, flattened out and landed without mishap.

“Here ye are, sir,” he said. “What time will ye be thinking of returning?”

The man leapt lightly to the ground.

“If I’m not back by three o’clock I shall not be coming at all,” he said, and added, “I shall have been detained in the institute for further treatment.”

“Very good, sir,” said Tam gravely. “The best way into the town is along by the railway. You strike the road about five hundred yards away.”

The stranger did not trouble to reply. He disappeared into the darkness, and Tam remembered that he had not asked him his name. He lit his pipe and was walking round the machine when he felt something soft at his feet, and turned the flashlight on it. It was the stranger’s leather coat, his gloves, and the helmet he had been wearing. Apparently he had carried some sort of cloth cap in his pocket. Tam looked at the coat and smiled ruefully, for it was daubed and streaked with the fire-resisting dope which was perfect in all respects save that it refused to dry.

It happened that that night Mr. Merrick entertained a party at the “Chien de Chine,” which at the moment was the rendezvous of all that was smart and fashionable in Paris. At eleven o’clock in the evening his dinner-party might be said to have only just begun for most of the guests. For Mr. Merrick it had begun in the afternoon at the American bar at Pangianas, and eleven o’clock found him tearfully voluble on women and their fickleness. He had an interested audience. For Walter Merrick was an extraordinarily wealthy young man, and those kind of orators command a respectful hearing. “*Donna e mobile*” from the orchestra furnished at once the text and the excuse for the lecture, which began with a toast which he insisted upon all his guests drinking. The toast was “Absent fairies,” and most of the company knew who his fairy was and the circumstances in which she had flown away.

“. . . mind you, I admit I was disagreeable,” said Mr. Merrick a little thickly. “But when a woman whines all the time about another fellow, what is a fellow to do? I sent her packing! She bored me, she wearied me, but, girls, I adore her!”

He blinked back two drunken tears.

“She’s got ’n impossible husband, the awful fool——”

He went on to talk frankly and, to the ears of any decent man or woman, unpleasantly. They would have got up and left the gilded-mirrored room, and would have drunk in God’s fresh air with gratitude and relief. But the acquaintances Walter Merrick had accumulated—and he had had the pick of every revue house in Paris—only imperfectly understood him when he spoke in English, and would not have been greatly offended if they had understood all.

“What I think about women . . .” resumed Merrick after a pause.

He got so far when the door opened slowly. A man with an iron-grey beard stood in the doorway. The bemused host did not see him for a moment, and when he did a frown gathered on his plump face.

“Hello, who the devil are you?” he asked.

The stranger did not reply. He raised an automatic which was in his hand and fired twice, and Walter Merrick fell across the table stone dead. Before the most excitable could scream, the door closed with a crash and a key was turned.

It was half-past one when Tam thought he heard somebody moving toward him, and pressed the key of his electric lamp.

“There you are!” said a voice. “Put out your lamp. Are you ready?”

“Aye,” said Tam. “Did ye get what ye wanted?”

“Yes,” said the man shortly.

They made a good get-away, but it was not till they were over Abbeville that Tam remembered that he had not mentioned the leather coat which he had stowed in the fusilage. He leant forward and tapped the man on the shoulder.

“Your coat’s under your seat,” he yelled, and saw the passenger nod, but he made no attempt to shelter himself from the keen south-westerly wind.

Tam reached Horsham, flying unerringly by certain land-lights which were familiar to him, and he made his landing in the dark without troubling to fire the magnesium flares under his wing tips. It was four o’clock when he said good-bye to the stranger, and heard the “ticka-tick” of his cycle growing fainter and fainter in the direction of Horsham town. Then he turned to the task of housing his machine.

“A happy Christmas to ye, son,” he said grimly as he stood surveying himself in the bedroom mirror. “Ye’re a grand pilot but, man, ye’re a puir, mean kind of inventor,” and he spent another hour ridding himself of the dope that would not dry on anything except his clothing.

It was later in the morning over a frugal breakfast that he read of the murder of Walter Merrick. The reporters had given a very graphic description of the orgy which had preceded the murder, and one had secured an almost verbatim report of Merrick’s drunken homily. Tam read the account through several times. Then he folded the paper and went on eating his breakfast with great calmness. Now the story of May Selby’s folly was revealed in all its ugliness, for although no names were given, Tam guessed who the woman was—the woman who had “bored” the exigent Mr. Merrick and whom he had sent “packing.”

In the afternoon he got out his little two-seater and drove to Tunbridge Wells, a journey of twenty miles.

He had no difficulty in finding the nursing-home where Selby was confined, and almost immediately he was taken by the matron to the big room which the sick man occupied.

“No,” said that lady in reply to his question. “Mr. Selby isn’t very ill. He requires rest and quiet. He has been suffering a little from overstrain.”

“Has he been here long?”

“For nearly a week,” said the matron. “He has a room on the ground floor in one of the wings. He is such a light sleeper that the slightest noise awakens him. Mrs. Selby is with him now.”

Tam stopped dead.

“Mrs. Selby?” he said in a panic, and then, drawing a long breath, “Verra good, ma’am, if ye’ll be kind enough to show me the way.”

Selby was in bed, a fair-haired young man, his face was drawn and a little wasted by care, but he greeted Tam with a smile and a nod.

“I’m glad to see you, Tam,” he said. “You got my letter.”

“Aye, I got your letter. Good afternoon, Mistress Selby.”

The girl who was sitting by the side of her husband’s bed rose and held out her hand. Something had matured what had been mere prettiness into an almost ethereal beauty, thought Tam. There was no challenge in her eyes as he had expected. She met him with the assurance which wisdom gives to saint and sinner alike, and which comes from a knowledge of the worst. Her eyes were red, Tam noticed, and Selby with his quick intuition must have realised that Tam had noted this.

“My wife is rather upset by the death of an old friend of ours,” he said. “You remember Merrick, Tam?”

The coolness of the question took Tam’s breath away.

“Aye, I remember him,” he said, after a pause.

“He was the man who was shot in Paris last night,” said Selby gently, and Tam looked at him fascinated.

“You don’t say,” he said; then:

“Have you been to Paris lately?” asked Selby unexpectedly.

Tam was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

“No, I’ve no’ been to Paris for months,” he replied, and his voice was as steady as Selby’s.

Mrs. Selby went soon after, and Tam was left alone with the sick man.

“It’s a grand room you’ve got, Mr. Selby, sir,” he said. “A beautiful large window, and you could drop into the garden as easy as saying knife. And I don’t doot that ye could keep a nice little motor-cycle in yon garage.”

He nodded his head toward the open window.

“I dare say I could, Tam,” said Selby quietly.

Tam rubbed his chin with an irritable gesture.

“Mr. Selby, sir,” he said, “do ye remember the theatrical entertainments we used to have in France? They were fine and gay. And do ye remember how ye used to make up like an auld gentleman, so that your best friends wouldn’t know ye?”

Selby did not reply.

“I’ll be awa’ the noo,” said Tam, and held out his hand.

The other hesitated, and then with a quick movement clasped the outstretched palm.

Tam held the hand for a moment, then turned its palm upwards. There was a faint green stain across the fingers.

“Ye’ll find pumice-stone the only thing that’ll take it off,” said Tam, and walked slowly to the door.

With the edge of the door in his hand he turned.

“Did ye not know, Mr. Selby, sir,” he said reproachfully, “that ye could no’ smoke a cigarette in a bus? It was verra unprofessional, Mr. Selby, sir, verra unprofessional.”

CHUBB OF THE *SLIPPER*

I

No doubt about Chubb's gift of oratory. When he was a sprat of twelve, a chubby midget filling his neat cadet uniform, he had orated to the Commander of H.M.S. *Britannia* to such purpose (it was on the subject of messing) that, recovering from his trance, the outraged officer had stopped his shore leave and threatened him with expulsion.

People thought it was cheek, but really it was a natural gift for oratory. The *Britannia* boys called him Demosthenes Junior, but that was too long and it was "Chubb" that stuck, and rightly so, for "Chubb" fitted him as well as he fitted his clothes.

He orated his way from Hong-Kong to Chatham, from Benin to Sydney. He addressed Admirals, Captains, Commanders, Navigators, and—at rare intervals—the Lords of the Admiralty themselves.

He talked of himself soberly and gravely, as though he held the wheel of Destiny, and those who met him for the first time began by sniggering openly or secretly (according to their rank), and ended in a condition of awe-stricken reverence.

If Chubb hadn't been a good fellow, a splendid seaman, one of the best torpedo officers of his day, he would have been a bore. As it was, men sought him out to learn of his wisdom, and even Admirals, called up to respond at local functions for the Navy, came to Chubb to pick up the wrinkles of rhetoric.

On a day in July, Chubb Church came down to the quay, driving his little yellow two-seater. His suit was aggressively brown, and perched above his round, red, cherubic face was a grey top hat. He had a long cigar between his teeth and a look of settled melancholy in his eyes.

He drew the car up with a jerk by the edge of the landing-stage and slowly descended.

A waiting petty officer touched his cap.

"Flagship's made a signal, Get up steam sir," he said.

"The Flagship's made a signal, Get up steam," repeated Chubb absently. "Oh, it has, has it?"

He inspected his small car with a bleak stare and shook his head.

“Never again, O car of fate,” he said.

The chief petty officer twiddled his bare toes in embarrassment.

“Beg pardon, sir?” he said.

Chubb brought his eyes to his subordinate.

“Is your name Carr, my lad?” he asked.

“No, sir—Samson, sir.”

“Then you are not the car I was addressing, Samson.”

He returned to his contemplation of the machine.

His chauffeur had climbed out of the little well at the back of the car, and was regarding its mechanism anxiously and not a little resentfully.

Chubb twirled his cane, and pushed his grey hat further on the back of his head and sighed.

“Son,” he said, “take the car to Plymouth—I may be there; who knows the strange and beneficent workings of Providence? If I do not come, you will call every morning at Drake’s Lodge and tell Miss Gillander that the car is entirely at her disposal mornin’, afternoon, and evenin’—at any hour of the day or night. Tell her——”

Here he stopped. Even Chubb felt the delicacy of delivering tragic messages by a chauffeur, and moreover in the presence of a hard-footed and eager-eared sailor who would repeat the conversation for the benefit of his favoured members of the Petty Officers’ Mess.

Also there was a chance of the battleship going into Devonport, where he might deliver the message himself.

“Recall signal flying, sir,” said the petty officer.

“Blow the recall signal!” replied Chubb mutinously.

He turned and walked slowly down the steps and stepped nimbly into the bobbing pinnace.

“Cast off,” he said and settled himself in the tiny cabin as the pinnace danced over the sunlit waters of Falmouth to the *Ironside*.

“What the devil were you waiting for, Chubb?” asked a justly annoyed Captain, who had been watching the scene ashore with his telescope; “I jolly nearly recalled the pinnace without you.”

Chubb took off his hat.

“Sir,” he said, “there are moments in life when the premonition trembles upon one edge of sordid actuality.”

“Hurry up and get out of that kit,” interrupted the skipper briefly. “Come on to the bridge, I want to speak to you.”

“We are going into Devonport,” said Captain Benson ten minutes later, when they stood side by side on the bridge of the battleship; “I suppose you’ve heard the news?”

Chubb bowed his head.

“She sails on Wednesday next,” he said, with splendid resignation. “You may think, sir, that I’m a sentimental ass—well, sir, as dear old Socrates or Plato or one of those officers said——”

“Who sails?” asked his astounded superior. “I’m not talking about anybody sailing.”

“I thought you referred to Miss Gillander, sir,” replied Chubb, redder than ever.

The Captain’s lips twitched.

“Nothing so important,” he said gravely, “merely a question of European complications, and you’re gazetted to the *Slipper* for special service.”

And so it came about that Chubb saw Jo Gillander again.

He saw her in the big and fragrant drawing-room that overlooks the Hard, and there was pleasure unmistakable in her eyes.

She was the tiniest of girls, so perfectly and beautifully proportioned that you forgot she was under the height of the average woman. Her face was delicately modelled and delicately coloured. There was a dancing imp of laughter in her eyes, yet so tender a laughter that tears seemed near at hand.

“I saw your big fat ship come in,” she said, and patted the settee by her side most invitingly.

No doubt but that Chubb prepared a rapid survey in language of overpowering vividness. From the world to this little lady was a natural transposition.

“It is not for me,” he finished gravely, “to forecast the enormous and cataclysmic consequence to a situation already workin’ to its ordained and fearful end. What spark of rhetoric, what brand of eloquence will eventually

fire the magazine, changin' the destinies of men, and casting into the melting-pot the fortunes of nations—but, Miss Gillander, I can say with great earnestness and sincerity that I love you.”

She raised her hand gently to stop him, but there was kindness in her eyes and the laughter had gone.

“For you,” he went on, “I am prepared at any given moment—so far as the exigencies of the Service admit—to throw down the gage of war to all the world; refuse me, as you have done not once, but many times, and let the world grow apprehensive in the face of a heart-broken and reckless man.”

Of course it was absurd. She explained the absurdity in a very few words. It wasn't the disparity in their fortunes, because, although the American heiress was credited with millions, yet Chubb was very well off indeed. It wasn't that her parents objected, because she had no parents. It wasn't even that she disliked Chubb—but (here was the truth, and she could not tell it) Chubb was without the heroic qualities. He was less like the hero of tradition than anybody she had met. He was fat—there was no getting away from his girth; he was plump, he was babylike.

She was a worshipper of tall men, with sad, clean-cut features, powdered grey at the temples. Chubb threatened to go bald on the slightest provocation.

She explained, getting round the subject as best she could, why it was impossible for her to marry him.

Chubb went back to the dockyard to superintend the revictualling of H.M.S. *Slipper* with a heavy heart.

It was his first important command, but it gave him no pleasure. It was a dream of a ship, could pull out twenty-eight knots; a lightly armed, unprotected cruiser designed for the protection of shipping—a sleek, swift, deadly little ship, such as Chubb could handle better than any man in the Service.

But his heart was at Drake's Lodge, with a girl whose packing he interrupted from day to day.

She was very definite at last, being humanly annoyed, not so much at his persistence as from his having called at 11 a.m. and caught her immersed in the prosaic task of making a cubic yard of wearing apparel fit half a cubic yard of box.

The Steamship Company had sent her a frantic warning that she must reduce her baggage to its smallest limit, for war was in the air, and the holds of S.S. *Germanie* were needed for passenger accommodation.

“Understand finally, Captain Church,” said she, still kind, but this time unpleasantly so, “I cannot marry; you are not the kind of man I want——”

There—she had said it!

Chubb stood comically, tragically bewildered.

What kind of man could she want?

“The hot weather has perhaps affected you, Miss Gillander,” he said gently; “the psychology of weather in its relation to human affairs has often—in short, what’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t want you,” she said, biting her lips.

There was a long and painful silence.

“Oh,” said Chubb, and groped for his cap; “all right.” He walked to the door and turned upon her a face charged with portent. “For all that happens hereafter,” said he, “you are responsible.”

She ignored the unfairness of the threat.

“You are not going to——” she began in agitation.

“You will see the map of Europe changed,” said Chubb and walked out.

From that moment, in Chubb’s mind, war was inevitable.

II

The *Slipper* came slowly through the darkening seas, all her lights out, a blur of grey on a grey ocean. Behind her, scarcely visible, was the coast of Ireland.

Chubb stood on the bridge, and by his side was his First Lieutenant. The telegraph marked “Slow ahead.” Chubb looked at his watch, snapped the case cover, and took from his pocket an envelope heavily sealed. He handed it without a word to his Number One, who examined the seal and passed it back to his superior.

Chubb tore the envelope of his sealed orders and read the contents.

“Convey the *Germanie* to latitude . . .” he read aloud; . . .
“wireless me when you have opened this . . . keep an eye open for

the enemy's torpedo boats; there are four in your area. . . .”

There were other instructions concerning a certain collier which would be found waiting at a rendezvous—of other ships suspected of acting as colliers to the enemy. Chubb knew all about the *Germanie*. Its immense speed, its crowded accommodation, and, most important item of all, the fact that it carried two million pounds of gold had been set forth in the columns of the Press.

“What the deuce are they sending gold to America for?” he asked fretfully. “It seems to me that this is the time of all times when the auriferous metal is most needed at the seat of war.”

“Shipment purchased months ago by the U.S. Treasury, sir,” said his Number One. “Dash it all—we can't pinch the gold of neutrals!”

“But why not send this damned stuff on an American ship?” protested Chubb. “Are you aware that the *Studgardt* and the *Altona* are in these waters—two of the fastest cruisers the Dutchmen have? Are you aware that on the *Germanie* are delicately nurtured ladies to whom the very thought of war is abhorrent? By Heavens!”—he raised a dramatic fist to the sky—“rather would I see the vexed boundaries of Europe twist in serpentine convulsions than that one spasm of fear——”

“Wireless from the Flagship, sir.”

The operator came on board with a bit of paper.

Chubb looked at the paper.

“Candour, devoted, Portsmouth, tempted,” it ran.

“Decode that,” he said, and in three minutes the message was in his hands.

“Destroyers covering *Studgardt* are crossing you.”

Chubb nodded.

He was dressed in grey flannel trousers and grey sweater, a grim, workmanlike suit for the task in hand.

He was the seaman now, cautious, alert, and tense.

The engine telegraph went over to “Full ahead,” and the swift *Slipper* gathering speed tore through the water, cutting the heavy seas with her knife-like bows. The day was failing but there was no mist. Officers searched the seas ahead through their binoculars, but there was no sign of

craft. Darkness fell, and then far away on the starboard bow Chubb saw something.

It was no more than a patch of foam on the water, but it was moving.

It was for all the world as though a big white feather was being trailed on the sea at the end of an invisible swing.

“Submarine on the starboard bow,” he shouted, and the *Slipper* heeled over as though she was turning turtle as she came bow on to the danger.

“Bang!”

From the starboard gun of the forward battery flicked a straight rod of flame. Instantly the white beams of two searchlights played upon the feather.

Chubb’s finger touched a button and two seconds later a long fish-like shape leapt from the bow to the water—a shape that seemed alive as it swam straight and swift to its prey.

“Bang!”

The shell from the second gun threw up a column of water to the rear of the feather, now moving in a circle preparatory to launching her death-dealing messenger.

She was half turned when the British torpedo struck her. Up into the air jumped a great column of water sprinkled with black wreckage. A deafening explosion and then silence.

“A—way cutter!” roared Chubb, and the boat went over the side to pick up what was left of the luckless crew.

“Phew!” said Chubb and wiped his forehead as the boat came back from its fruitless search.

The boat was hardly inboard when the second attack came. The two destroyers came into the white beams of the searchlights as the *Slipper* was gathering way. The four starboard guns of the *Slipper* spoke together, and there came across the waters a sound like the emptying of a sack of old iron.

“That’s got her,” began Chubb, when the bridge on which he stood was raked by a mad twirling shell, which carried away rail and port telegraph, and almost carried Chubb with it. It was the last shot the destroyer fired. Again the fish-like shape leapt joyfully to its work from the torpedo tube in the bow.

It met and passed another, which just missed the swinging stern of the *Slipper* . . . the torpedo boat went down by the head in a swirl of water.

But the second was intact though lamed.

The aft guns of the *Slipper* pumped shell into her, but at an ever-increasing distance.

“Wireless the Flagship,” said Chubb; “they can send a couple of T.B.D.’s to pick her up.”

He was bothered. He was working blindly. Somewhere beyond the rim of the sea men were playing a game with the *Slipper* as a pawn. Somewhere in a big building in the very heart of London the players watched him dispassionately—condemning him, perhaps, that from his sacrifice they might gain some advantage of which he knew nothing.

He searched the seas again through his night-glasses. It was not a hostile cruiser he sought; the *Stuttgart* was a thousand miles away. It was *Germanie* he was looking for. The fact was the panic-stricken *Germanie* was running at top speed to the New England coast with her precious cargo.

He parted from the cruiser fleet at Brow Head and had taken his instructions from the grey-haired young Admiral.

“Here are your orders,” he said, handing the sealed package; “you won’t have much trouble, I fancy—keep to the south of the *Germanie*’s course. Coal at Halifax, and report to the C.I.C., North Atlantic.”

“Far be it from me, sir,” said Chubb, “to discuss or question the high strategists of war, but a great passenger steamer carrying huge quantities of gold demands much greater protection than I can give her.”

“Don’t make speeches at me, you insubordinate devil,” said the Admiral. “You’re not likely to be bothered, and if you are you can run up to the *Germanie*, take off Miss Gillander, and set a course for a desert island.”

Chubb blushed and went down the ladder, cursing all high officers who gossiped about his private affairs.

So the fleet sailed eastward, and a man who had been lying out of sight of the coastguards on the Irish coast carefully noted the direction it took, and making his way to the nearest post office telegraphed to London a tender inquiry after his mother’s health.

An hour later the German North Atlantic Squadron received news *via* Togoland that the rich prize *Germanie* was on her way to America escorted

by one insignificant, unprotected cruiser.

Wireless messages went left and right, and while two destroyers and a submarine moved from their secret base to cut off the *Slipper*, the cruiser squadron made its preparations for the rapid transference of gold.

III

There was on board the *Germanie* a certain air of tension which communicated itself by some remarkable method from the ships' officers, who knew the peril, to the passengers, who knew nothing.

Jo Gillander, stretched in a big deck chair, her grave eyes on the horizon, found a certain melancholy pleasure in the nervousness of her fellow-passengers. For she needed diversion. There lingered in her mind the unheroic figure of a stout young naval officer and in her ears his sombre eloquence. She smiled faintly, but the smile soon passed.

She had not realised how big a place he held in her heart and in her thoughts. She looked up with half a frown as the dapper figure of the middle-aged von Sedlitz dropped into the chair by her side. She had known him for some years. He was attached to the Embassy at Washington, an automatically smiling man, with a clean skin and a carefully brushed moustache.

"Now you shall soon be back in your free land," he smiled, "away from horrid war, hein? Soon we shall make wars impossible and police all Europe—Europe in peace under our High Kaiser!"

"Do you think you will win?" She looked at him curiously, and he laughed.

"Cer-tain-ly—why not? First to crush France, then to crush Russia, and all the time we weary the English fleet—picking off one ship here and one ship there."

He stopped and hesitated.

"Already," he said impressively, and his hand swept to the sea, "in this circle of water there has been one such ship—*pouf!*—gone! I know."

He nodded wisely.

She looked at him with resentment in her eyes. That he could smile amidst such horrors! That he could be so complacent in the face of tragedy! And she remembered that stout man of hers—yes, *of hers*, she told herself defiantly, and enveloped him in that second of time in the heroic qualities

which had never been his. At this moment the Captain of the *Slipper* was very precious to this dainty little lady.

“Yes, it went out,” von Sedlitz went on, unconscious of the storm that was gathering; “one moment a proud ship—the next moment our friend the *Slipper*——”.

“The *Slipper*!”

She was on her feet, white and shaking.

“Ja wohl!” he said jocularly—he was a dense man and saw only the sensation he had made. “Such is my knowledge. You saw a fishing-boat pass yesterday—you saw a man waving little flags—he told me everything.”

She confronted him, pale as death, that rosebud mouth set in a straight line.

“If the *Slipper* is sunk,” she said in a low voice, “I hope this ship sinks, and you and I with it.”

He stared at her, but he was never destined to utter what was in his mind . . . they felt the ship slow down, without realising what was happening, then

“Gott!” cried the exultant von Sedlitz; “look!”

Right ahead, barring the way, were four great ships painted grey, and from their main fluttered the white-and-black flag.

“For the gold, you understand,” he cried, beside himself with joy—“for twenty million marks on this ship. Hoch!”

Nearer and nearer they came, then the *Germanie*'s engines reversed and stopped, and a little steamboat came rocking from the Flagship of the squadron. It got half-way when under its bows came a fountain of water, and dully across the sea came the shock of the explosion.

Jo Gillander turned her head and gasped. Coming at full speed, the water, creamy white at her sharp nose, raced the *Slipper*.

It was madness—she realised that. She saw the German picket-boat turn, then of a sudden it flew to splinters before her eyes.

Simultaneously the squadron ahead moved left and right and came into action.

“Crash! Crash! Crash!”

The guns were thunder; the whizzing, shrieking shells indescribably terrifying.

With clasped hands and grey face she saw the *Slipper* turn almost on her side as she changed her course, saw a black cavity yawn in her upper works.

The *Slipper* was showing her teeth now. Her four-point-two guns were not to be despised, and she hit back, spitting fire, fore, aft, and mid ships.

Worse than this, the lean grey devils were being loosened from their forward tubes.

The *Studgardt* was suddenly enveloped in flame and smoke and listed heavily to port.

Then a shell carried away mast and fore-funnel of the *Slipper*, and she went over again, to recover almost immediately.

But the cruiser squadron was showing unusual activity. Smoke belched from their stacks and there was a flurry of water astern. . . .

They saw the British fleet long before the hysterical folk on the *Germanie* had seen her.

They came up in two divisions, marvellously appearing over the rim of the sea—eighty mighty vessels of war, throwing steel farther and heavier than any cruiser that was ever built.

The end came in a horrible whirlpool of water that marked a vanished cruiser.

“It was a ruse, of course,” said von Sedlitz, his mouth working pathetically; “they sent the *Slipper*, and followed her up.”

She said nothing, waiting at the end of the gangway, up which there ran a beautiful man in a grey sweater, his red face grimy with powder, a most unlovely cut across his cheek—he got that from a splinter of shell which all but missed him.

“The Admiral’s compliments to you, and can you go ahead, sir?” said Chubb. “I——”

Then he saw the girl.

“I told you what would happen,” he said reproachfully, and indicated a battered cruiser; “all this might have been avoided.”

And as he saddled her with the full responsibility for a European war, she came laughing and crying to his arms.

THE KING'S BRAHM

There is a certain type of man, common to both hemispheres, and possibly to all races, though he is more sharply outlined when he is English or American, who thrives on disaster.

You meet him to-day seedy and unshaven, and slip him the trifling loan he asks; you turn aside to-morrow to avoid him, but beware how you cross the street the next day lest his lacquered limousine strike you into an unconsciousness whence even the fragrance of his considerable cigar shall not recall you.

For weeks, months even, such men occupy suites furnished like the model offices that look so well in catalogues. They have clerks and managers, and their names are painted on glass doors. Elevator boys respect them, and even policemen smile at them as they pass.

Then of a sudden they vanish. New names appear on the office indicator, new staffs occupy their suites; and inquiry as to their whereabouts elicits brusque and negative replies. Months afterwards you meet them unexpectedly in country towns, a little shabby, a little furtive, but immensely enthusiastic about the new patent cinder-sifter that they are selling on commission. Then they seem to vanish out of life, and their acquaintances, when they think of them at all, wonder whether they are in the poorhouse or only in gaol . . . and we continue in our speculation until one night the flash of a diamond shirt-stud in a box at the Opera betrays their presence in the rôle of the newest millionaire.

They live in a world of their own; in some mysterious way they carry their own population. Neither the men they meet nor the businesses they operate touch, even remotely, the everyday life of ordinary people.

As a rule they are wistful, relentless men, with a gift for telling circumstantial lies in an easy absent-minded way, which is the only way lies can be told convincingly.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett was such a phenomenon. He was a commercial magician at the wave of whose slim hands mining corporations grew in a night, and substantial boards of directors were created in the wink of an eye. He himself never accepted a directorship. His name was absent from the innumerable prospectuses he had composed, nor did it appear as the holder of any important blocks of shares.

In such companies as he promoted there were only two classes, and only one that mattered. These were the shareholders and the moneyholders. He seldom held shares. He appeared usually as the “vendor” of the property to be incorporated. He invariably had a property to sell—even in his day of dire necessity he could produce an oil field from his pocket-book with the surprising celerity of the conjurer who extracts a rabbit from a top hat.

Sometimes, so alluring were these properties that the mere announcement of their possession filled the letter-box of his office with the appeals of would-be sharers of fortune. Thereafter came a period of prosperity which invited the envy of the honest poor. A period of luncheon parties, at which the principal stockholders of the new company received their first and only dividend in the shape of a full meal and faultless cigars.

Mr. Thannett’s path through life was littered with the crippled remains of little optimists who had reached greedily towards him for easy wealth and had been shrivelled at a touch.

There were probably widows amongst the debris; very likely there were orphans too, though this is doubtful, for the widow and the orphan with money have trustees and guardians to protect them. More pathetic were the fat and comfortable little men of business whose accumulations had vanished into the magician’s pocket. There was a suicide or two, but such things are inevitable.

Mr. Thannett grew prosperous after many vicissitudes which involved occasional disappearance from the haunts of men, and he might have reached the summit of his ambition (there was an unreachable woman upon it) but for the fact that in the course of a certain operation he came into conflict with the imponderable factor of tradition.

In the year 1920 Mr. Thannett, returning from a tour of Europe, the possessor of five square miles of forest land whereon was sited an oil well of dubious value, was seized of a brilliant idea. From this, and the five square miles of Bulgarian territory, purchased from a drunken farmer for a song, grew “The Balkan Oil and Timber Corporation.” The originator of this great idea had a confederate whom he described variously as “my partner” and “our General Manager,” one Steelson, a man as stout in build as himself but less presentable—for Thannett prided himself upon his gentlemanly appearance.

On the day after his return to Paris, which for the time being was his headquarters, he sat with Mr. Steelson in his room at the Grand Hotel, a

large scale map of Northern Bulgaria spread on the bed, and outlined the possibilities of the new venture.

Steelton's puckered face creased discouragingly.

"You can't do much with eight square kilometres, Ben," he said, shaking his head, "not in Europe anyway. Why not go to New York? It'll look bigger from there."

Ben Thannett pulled at his cigar thoughtfully. He was a tall, full-blooded man with faded eyes and a moustache of startling blackness.

"I think not," he said carefully. "There are a whole lot of reasons why I don't want to go to America just now."

Mr. Steelton wrinkled his nose.

"They've forgot that Cobalt Silver proposition of yours by now," he said contemptuously. "A sucker is born every minute, but one dies every thirty seconds."

"Maybe they do, but there are enough left alive to tell the tale," said the other decisively. "No, it's London or nothing. They don't feel very bad about Bulgaria in England, and besides, nobody knows anything about the country. I met a man on the Orient Express—he was English—who raved about Bulgaria; said it was the finest country in Europe, full of minerals and timber and oil. That got me thinking. At Milan I got into conversation with two or three other men who were coming through and passed on all this oil and mineral talk. They lapped it up, Steel—like puppies round a dripper of cream. It appears that Bulgaria is one of the nine promised lands—like Mesopotamia used to be and Central Africa, until they found 'em out."

"Five square miles," murmured Steelton, shaking his head. "Now if it was five hundred . . .!"

Benjamin had taken off his coat for greater comfort and was pacing the floor, stopping now and again to survey the roofs and chimneys of Paris. He stopped and started to smile.

"There's a million hectares of land to be got," he said deliberately; "a million good hectares, worth twenty *leva* a hectare before the war——"

"What's a *leva*?" asked the other. "I don't know these Balkan monies."

"A lev is a franc, roughly," explained Benjamin patiently.

"Twenty million francs! Where are we going to get twenty million francs?" demanded Mr. Steelton disgustedly.

“There may be oil on it: a lot of people think there is,” Benjamin went on, sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands, in his trousers pockets. “You can’t buy land in that part of the country just now under two pounds sterling a hectare.”

“Then what in hell are you talking about?” asked the exasperated Steelson. “We’ve got under eighty thousand francs at the Foncier.”

Mr. Benjamin Thannett resumed his pacing.

“I have no sympathy with Germans,” he said, with seeming inconsequence; “it will be one regret of my life, Steelson, that I was detained in the Argentine by that Cattle Syndicate of mine during the war. I’d have given anything to have been in the Hindenburg line, or in the Argonne, Steelson——”

“Oh, shut up,” snarled his partner. “What’s Germany got to do with it?”

“And I’m a democrat at heart, Steelson—you know that? I hate these hereditary institutions. They’re tyrannies, Steel. They crush the masses into—into pulp, and batten—that’s the word—batten on the likes of me and you. Do you agree?”

But Mr. Steelson was speechless. He could only stare, and Benjamin, who had drama in his system, beamed delightedly at the sensation he had created. Now he produced his climax.

Unlocking the bag that had accompanied him on his travels, he opened it, and after a search, brought out a small red box, not unlike a jewel-case. Inside, reposing on a plush bed, was a big irregular chunk of amber.

The fascinated Mr. Steelson rose and examined the trophy.

“Amber,” he said wonderingly. “What is that inside?”

“That,” replied Benjamin, in his most impressive tone, “is a small butterfly. It’s rare. There are only about ten pieces of amber in the world that contain a butterfly; it cost me five thousand francs, Steel.”

And then Steelson exploded, speaking, it would seem, in his capacity as partner rather than General Manager.

“. . . we’ll be down to our last cent at the end of this week,” he said violently, “and you fool away money . . .”

Benjamin allowed his friend to exhaust himself before he explained.

“You’re a fool, and you always have been a fool,” he said calmly. “Finding that was the biggest luck I have had in years. I saw it by accident in Milan as I was strolling through the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. It came from heaven, that bit of amber, when I was puzzling my brains sick as to how I could get an introduction to King Gustavus . . .”

“All right,” said Steelson helplessly, “let’s all go mad together.”

The light faded in the sky, and the streets of Paris were aglitter with light before Mr. Benjamin Thannett had concluded the narrative of his scheme. When they went down to dinner together, The Balkan Oil & Timber Corporation was born.

The chief asset of the Company, in happy ignorance of the part for which he had been cast, was at that moment listening to an excellent municipal orchestra some seven hundred miles from Paris.

The good people of Interlaken, who gathered on warm evenings to drink beer or sip at sugary ices in the big open Kursaal, knew the grey man very well, for, unlike his fellows in misfortune, he was a permanent resident. Guides, escorting gaping tourists, lowered their voices and with a sidelong jerk of their head indicated the thin figure which sat near the orchestra and eked out one china mug of beer so that it lasted the whole evening. He was always shabbily dressed, generally in a faded grey suit that was worn at the elbows. His wristbands were frayed, his collar was usually in the same condition. Generally he came alone, but occasionally a pretty girl came with him, a delightful lady who upset all local traditions by the invariable luxury of her dress. For her very expensiveness confounded that section of public opinion which would have it that King Gustavus XXV. of Hardenberg was reduced to starvation, that he slept miserably in the cheapest room at the Victoria, and that only by the charity of the proprietor.

The other section having taken the trouble to make inquiries, refuted this statement.

His Majesty had a suite of ten rooms: his bill was paid with punctilious regularity, and there was no need to explain away either the extensive wardrobe of the Princess Stephanie, his daughter, or the poverty of his own attire.

It was notorious that in the palmiest days of his prosperity the king had, amongst others, a weakness for old clothing, nor was his air of abstraction and melancholy peculiar to his present situation.

“No doubt the poor man is thinking of his magnificent castles and palaces,” said the burgess of Interlaken pityingly. “Such is the penalty of defeat and revolution.”

But Gustavus, sitting with his chin in the palm of his thin hand, his gloomy eyes staring into vacancy, regretted nothing except the loss of his wonderful collection of butterflies.

The king’s passion for collecting was commonly paraphrased through the press of Europe; the folks of Interlaken should at heart have known as much as Mr. Benjamin Thannett discovered when he began to read up the character and history of the owner of the Hardenberg Concession.

Kingship of a small German state had meant little to Gustavus. It had been something of an embarrassment. Chief of the advantages was that, as the head of the state, he was not amenable to certain rigid conventions, and might dispense with the interminable business of wearing stiff uniforms. Only on state occasions, at great Potsdam reviews, or council meetings, did he groaningly dress himself in the skin-tight uniform of the Hardenberg Fusiliers of the Guard (of which he was Colonel), and for the rest of the time, wearing an old knickerbocker suit, with a butterfly net in his hand and a specimen-box slung at his side, he prowled the Steinhart Forest in search of notable additions to his museum.

More kingly in the power he wielded was the tall, stout man who sat, a month or so after the Paris meeting, at the king’s little table, smoking a cigar of great size and quality. The habitués of the Kursaal, who were growing accustomed to the stranger, decided that he must be an ex-minister of the deposed monarch, and probably one of the highest birth, for his manner was free and his laughter at times loud and unrestrained. And every time he laughed, the king winced a little, and his hand went nervously to his white moustache with an embarrassed gesture.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett was neither well born nor well mannered. He was very sensitive to his own conceptions of humour, and his laughter meant no more than that he said something or thought something which was amusing to himself.

“I don’t know why I take so much trouble,” he said, with a gesture of indifference; “your forest land is not really worth a great deal to me; none of these Bulgarian concessions can be worked for years. Why, there isn’t a railway for two hundred kilometres, and you can buy land at a *lev* a hectare, and *leva* work out at two hundred to a dollar!”

The king shifted uncomfortably.

“Yes, yes,” he said nervously. “I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Thannett, for taking so much trouble.”

“It is a pleasure,” said Benjamin, with truth. He had ceased saying “your Majesty” three weeks before, and had now dispensed with the “sir.”

The measure of this gentle exile had been taken. Mr. Thannett’s personality was dominant, and instinct told him that he was near to an achievement.

“I’ve bought a lot of land lately,” he went on, flicking the ash of his cigar upon the polished floor. “I acquired a tract in the Ukraine the other day for a million. I don’t suppose I shall ever see the money again,” he added carelessly. “At the same time I don’t want you to be a loser. Given the time, I can get big money for your land. That is why it interests me. Money to people like me means nothing. It is the thrill of the battle: pitting my genius against my business rivals—that is the thing that keeps me going.”

“Naturally, naturally,” said the king hastily, in terror of hurting the feelings of his guest. “I appreciate all you have done, Mr. Thannett. In fact, I am delighted that I have had the opportunity of meeting you—I am rather conscience-stricken about having taken your beautiful gift. By the way, I have verified the genus of that insect—it is the *Lycæna Icirus*.”

“That was nothing,” said Mr. Benjamin Thannett airily. “Absolutely nothing. I heard of your interest in *Lepidoptera*, and as I happened to have an amber in my collection, I thought, as a fellow-collector, it would be an act of courtesy to pass it on to you.”

The king murmured his thanks.

“Now what I should suggest,” said Mr. Benjamin Thannett, suddenly the practical business man, “is for you to sell your land at a nominal figure to the company I have formed for the purpose. We would market that property in England, and I feel that we should get a better price if your name was not associated with the sale. You quite understand there is still a great deal of prejudice in Europe against Germany.”

The old man nodded.

“That is quite understandable,” he said, and then with a note of anxiety, “Would not your method mean a protracted negotiation? Of course, there is no need to hurry, but—I have been considering the sale of this land for some time. It was given to my grandfather by his cousin, the Emperor of Austria,

and although it has not been a profitable possession, the land has always been highly spoken of. I'm sure you realise, Mr. Thannett," he went on, with some evidence of reluctance, "that my position here in Switzerland is a very anxious one. I left my country at short notice, and my funds are not inexhaustible."

Benjamin nodded slowly.

"I can promise you," he said impressively, "that the sale will be completed within a few weeks. I will credit your estate with half a million sterling, and that amount, less a trifling fee for conveyance, will be in your hands within a month."

The king studied the interior of his beer mug, as though it contained a solution to all his problems.

"Very good, Mr. Thannett," he said; "I will arrange the transfer to your company to-morrow. May I ask you," he said, as they descended the broad stairs leading into the garden, "not to mention this to Her Serene Highness? She has"—he hesitated—"other views."

He was too polite to tell Mr. Benjamin Thannett that Her Serene Highness disliked the company promoter instinctively; indeed, it was unnecessary, for Benjamin was sensitive to atmosphere.

As they walked along the dark avenue, a man came from the shadows of the trees and fell in behind them. Thannett looked round quickly.

"It is my Stirrup Man," said the king. "He always accompanies me; you must have noticed him before, Mr. Thannett."

Thannett breathed a sigh of relief.

"No, I haven't noticed him before," he said, more respectfully. "Why do you call him a stirrup man, sir?"

The king laughed softly.

"In Hardenberg they call him the King's Brahm. The Brahms have been in the service of our family, as personal attendants, for eight hundred years, Mr. Thannett, and one of the family has always stood at the king's stirrup for all those years. They have followed them into exile, for I am not the first of my race to be driven from Hardenberg, and they have stood with them in their prosperity. This is John Brahm, the eldest of six brothers, and he has a son who will serve my daughter and my daughter's son when I am gone. They are the common people in Hardenberg who have a coat-of-arms and a

motto—‘To do all things, to risk all things, and suffer all things for the King’s Comfort.’ ”

“Very interesting,” said Mr. Thannett.

He accompanied the king to the hotel and took his leave in the lobby.

A girl who was sitting curled up in a chair reading a French magazine rose as the king entered, and dropped a little curtsey.

“Your millionaire kept you late to-night, father,” she said, with a smile.

“You don’t like my millionaire,” said the king grimly. “My dear, we cannot afford to have likes or dislikes. He is an extremely useful man.”

She came and put her arm round his shoulder and gently shook him.

“He gave you a beautiful butterfly in a beautiful piece of amber,” she said, with gentle mockery, “and he probably bought it out of a curiosity shop in order to get an introduction to you.”

“My dear, it came from his private collection,” he said, a little testily. “Why are you so prejudiced, Stephanie? I suppose because he is an Englishman?”

“Is he?” she asked carelessly. “No, it would make no difference to me if he were a Turk, and Heaven knows I dislike the Turks intensely. But I feel that he is an adventurer.”

“You mustn’t say these things,” said her father seriously. “I tell you he is a very useful man. We need money very badly, dear; besides——”

“Does John Brahm like him?” asked the girl quietly.

The king looked at the stolid figure standing stiffly in the doorway.

John Brahm was a tall man of tawny complexion and dull yellow hair. He wore the gaily embroidered waistcoat, the spotless linen shirt open at the neck, and the knee-breeches and heavy shoes which formed the peasant garb of Hardenberg.

“Well, John Brahm,” asked the king, a little impatiently, “you saw the excellency who was with me to-night. Is he a good man or a bad man?”

“Majesty, he is a bad man,” said John Brahm.

“You’re a fool, John Brahm,” said the old man, but the girl’s eyes were dancing with laughter.

“Listen to the words of the king’s Brahm,” she said. “Really, father, aren’t you just a little too trusting?”

King Gustavus frowned, and then a twinkle came into his eyes also.

“In a month you will be very sorry that you have maligned my poor friend,” he said, and the girl suddenly became serious.

“In a month?” she repeated. “Why, what is going to happen, father?”

But he would not satisfy her curiosity, and went off to his room with his stolid retainer walking in his rear.

The Princess Stephanie stayed up very late that night. She was uneasy to a point of panic. Her father had never discussed business affairs with her, but she had some idea of the state of his finances.

Her dislike of Benjamin Thannett was instinctive. It was not his vulgarity, his blatant assertiveness, or the apparent meanness of his birth which made her curl up in his presence—it was not that queer sixth sense which warns women of personal peril; his presence brought a vague unease and feeling of resentment which she could not analyse. He had come to dinner soon after his presentation of the introductory butterfly, and she had felt repelled, sickened, almost frightened by him. He seemed to embody a terror to her future and the future of her house.

She rose early in the morning after a restless night, and, going to the telegraph office, dispatched a wire to a lawyer in Geneva who had acted for her father. He arrived at Interlaken in time for dinner, a meal which King Gustavus did not grace by his presence.

“I am sorry my father is out,” said the troubled girl. “He went to the Kursaal soon after five and told me not to wait dinner for him.”

The old lawyer laughed.

“You’re not worried about His Majesty,” he said. “I presume he is accompanied by that gigantic guard of his.”

“John Brahm,” she smiled. “Oh yes, John will be with him. No, I’m not worried about father’s bodily comfort,” and she proceeded to relate something of her fears.

“Thannett,” repeated the lawyer thoughtfully. “I seem to know that name; yes, of course; he is the company promoter. We had some trouble with him in Geneva three years ago. He bought a clock factory for promotion purposes. I don’t think the factory proprietors ever received their

money. We had several inquiries about him. Yes, yes, I remember now very well indeed. The man is a swindler, but one of those swindlers who keep on the right side of the law. I had no idea he was in Switzerland. But His Majesty has nothing to sell?"

The girl had gone suddenly white.

"We have land in Bulgaria," she said slowly. "I never thought of that! It is the only property we have. We left Hardenberg with a few thousand marks, and His Majesty had some property in Switzerland which he sold after we arrived. Oh, Doctor Vallois, if we have lost the Hardenberg Concession, we are ruined!"

And then King Gustavus arrived, unusually cheerful, a smile on his grey face, and a certain jauntiness in his air, which made the girl's heart sink still further. Without any preliminary she demanded:

"Have you sold the Hardenberg land, father?"

He looked astonished.

"Yes, my dear," he said, with a little chuckle. "I have been worrying about the value, and I am happy to tell you that I have received a magnificent price. Hello, Doctor!"

He greeted the lawyer almost jovially.

"What brings you to Interlaken?"

"I sent for the doctor," said the girl quietly. "I had a feeling that something like this would happen. Father, did Mr. Thannett pay you much money?"

"To be exact, he paid me a thousand francs," said the king humorously.

"A thousand francs!" she said, horrified. "Surely you are joking?"

"No, I'm teasing you," said the king. "I certainly received only a thousand francs, but that was the nominal sum we agreed upon."

He explained the situation more fully, and the lawyer listened open-mouthed.

"But surely your Majesty has not sold this property? You retain some lien on it?"

"I have shares in the company," said the king impatiently, "shares which I think will most probably produce more than I anticipate."

There was a dead silence.

“Have you a copy of your agreement or contract?” asked the lawyer.

The king passed the paper across the table, and watched the lawyer a little uneasily as he read line by line and clause by clause. Presently he finished.

“You have no claim whatever upon Mr. Thannett nor upon his company,” he said. “He has the power without consultation of so increasing the capital that your shares will be valueless. It is an old trick of his.”

“Do you mean——” cried the old man, half starting up.

“I mean that your Majesty has been swindled,” said the lawyer, “and this paper is not worth the stamps that are on it. Thannett undertakes to do nothing except to sell the property to the best advantage. To whose advantage it will be I can guess.”

“I will notify the police,” gasped the king.

The lawyer shook his head.

“This document is legal. The man has acted legally. He is within the law, and your Majesty cannot touch him,” he said. “The agreement has been drawn up by one who is skilful in such matters, as I can testify.”

“You mean I shall get nothing more than the thousand francs I have received?” asked the old man huskily.

“I mean,” said the lawyer, “that the document to which you have signed your name, and which is in Mr. Thannett’s possession, deprives you of every right you have to your Bulgarian property, without conferring any advantage or rights whatever upon yourself.”

The girl looked from her father to the lawyer, and then her eyes strayed to the tall, broad figure of the king’s Brahm standing stiffly behind his master’s chair. She rose.

“John Brahm,” she commanded, “you will attend me.”

She turned and walked from the dining-room, and John Brahm followed heavily.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett had left Interlaken by the evening train. He stopped at Spiez to snatch a hasty meal, then boarded the electric train that connects with the Oberland railway. He came to Montreux at eleven o’clock that night, and Mr. Steelson greeted him on the platform.

“You’re late,” said Mr. Steelson fretfully. “Did you get it?”

“Did I get it?” repeated the other scornfully. “Of course I got it. These damn’ Swiss railway officials kept the train back an hour at Zweisimmen to pick up an aeroplane passenger who had lost the train at Spiez. I’d like to have the reorganisation of these railways, Steel.”

“I dare say you would,” said the unimpressed Steelson. “Come over and have a bite; there’s time before the Simplon comes in. She’s late too.”

They went down the stairs to the Suisse Hotel, and over their coffee Mr. Thannett told his story.

“There ought to be a society for the protection of kings,” he said humorously. “It was the easiest thing. Do you think he’ll kick? That daughter of his won’t take it without a fight.”

“What can she do?” asked the other, examining the contract with an expert’s eye. “We can sell in Paris on this. There are three men on the Bourse who’ll take this contract, and make as much out of it as we shall. Bulgarian land is booming just now.”

“It makes you think, Steel,” ruminated Mr. Thannett. “Here’s a fellow who was a king, had all the power that a man could have. A real king, Steel! And here am I—a nothing, so to speak, and I bested him—it was like taking money away from a child. And I’ve got the law behind me.” He laughed till he shook at the thought. “It’s a wonderful thing, the law,” he added piously.

“Give you three brandies, and you’ll preach a sermon,” said the practical Mr. Steelson.

“No, you needn’t worry about this contract; it meets ninety-nine contingencies out of a hundred, and I can’t think what the hundredth could be. Come along if you want to catch that train.”

They boarded the northern express, and took their places in the two sleeping compartments which Steelson had reserved.

“It’s brains that win,” was Benjamin’s last remark as he turned into his cabin.

“I dare say,” said the other. “Good-night.”

Mr. Benjamin Thannett stretched himself luxuriously upon the bed. He did not want to undress until the frontier station had passed, and the Custom House officials had made their inspection; but the gentle jogging of the train made him doze. He woke suddenly; a man was in his compartment; he must

have come in and closed the door behind him. Benjamin had a momentary glimpse of a tall, uncouth figure in ready-made clothes which did not quite fit, and then the lamp was switched out.

“What are you——” he began, but a hand, large and heavy, closed on his throat.

When the Custom House officials came to search the carriage, they found it in darkness. Switching on a light, they saw a man lying on his side. Mr. Benjamin Thannett was quite dead when they found him, for his neck had been broken, and Steelson, searching the clothes in frantic haste, failed to discover the contract over which they had gloated an hour before. That was in the pocket of John Brahm’s coat. John Brahm at that moment was tramping back to the Swiss frontier station.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett had provided for all contingencies except the tradition of the House of Brahm, which was to do all things, and risk all things, and suffer all things for the king’s comfort.

THE MAN WHO KILLED HIMSELF

Preston Somerville was standing on his balcony as the train wheezed and snorted up the last stiff slope to Caux. So that he saw the man and the woman arrive. There were a pair of prismatic field-glasses on the little, round, iron table which, with a basket-chair, constituted the furniture of the balcony, and he focused them upon the station.

Yes, he was right, and, curiously enough, he had expected them that very day by that very train. They would not see him, the gaudy sun-blind above him was cover; besides, he was too far away. He watched them walking up the path, a porter carrying their two valises. Behind, walking at his leisure, was George Dixon; him he had recognised almost before he had stepped on to the platform.

Marie and the man were coming to the hotel of the Stars! They might, in decency, have gone to the Palace or the Grand, or to one of the big pensions. But Templar! He smiled. Templar had no finesse.

He looked again through the glasses.

Marie had grown stouter. He could not see the colour of her hair, but doubted whether it was still the same fluff of gold that he had known seventeen years before.

As to Templar, he had put on flesh considerably. It was over a year since he had seen him!

Somerville shrugged his shoulders and turned to survey the glory of Lac Leman, blue, purple, and eau de nil. There was snow on Grammont that had come in the night. The Dent du Midi was white down to the tree line. Two thousand feet below him was Territet, a toy-town set in a garden. A beautiful country and a wonderful world, and for him prospects of the brightest, except . . .

He walked back into his room, unlocked a bureau, and took out a weather-stained grip. It was fastened with two locks, and these, he opened at leisure. He put in his hand and pulled forth a leather case which also needed unlocking. There were two packages of letters, a few photographs, and something in a blue envelope. He had carried this around for years. There was absolutely no necessity for his doing so. Indeed, it amounted to a folly. It was a certificate of marriage, and recorded the fact that Preston George

Somerville had married Marie Clara Legrande, and the date was seventeen years before. Why a man should carry about the evidence of his own bigamy, that criminal folly of his which, for seventeen years, had been an unceasing nightmare, he could not explain. He had married when he was eighteen, and his married life had been short but violent. His wife had left him, and then Marie Templar had come along. He might have told her the truth, and was on the point of doing so—he put away the certificate and locked it up. He had spent the greater part of seventeen years wondering as much over the things he did not do as those he had done.

There was a tap at the door.

“Come in,” he said, looked up, and crossed the room with outstretched hands to welcome George Dixon.

“Why, you’re looking fine, Preston,” said that man of law, returning the grip. “How on earth did you know I was in Switzerland? It knocked me over to get your wire.”

“I read the newspapers,” said Somerville, “especially the Visitors’ List, and I spotted you at Interlaken.”

“One item of news I’ve to break to you, old man,” said Dixon, “and it is that I must be back in London in three days’ time. That means that I must leave this paradise to-night or to-morrow.”

Somerville nodded slowly.

“It couldn’t be better,” he said. “Sounds uncomplimentary, doesn’t it? Well, it isn’t really.”

“And now what is the trouble?” began the lawyer. “And before you tell me anything, I suppose you know who is here?”

Somerville nodded again.

“I came up in the train with him,” Dixon went on. “Is there going to be—a settlement?”

“Yes, there is going to be a settlement.”

Somerville’s voice was soft, and he seemed to be speaking half to himself.

“Well, if I can do anything to bring that about, Preston, I’ll wait a week,” said the other heartily. “Man, you’ve been ten times a fool to have let this thing go on. I could have stopped it for you ten years ago when you first told me, if you’d only given me the word.”

“I’ll stop it—myself,” said Somerville, and Mr. Dixon looked at him curiously.

“How did this man Templar come into the case? You never explained it to me.”

Somerville was filling his pipe, his eyes fixed upon the bluey-white mountains, and he did not reply immediately.

“There is much that I haven’t told you,” he said, “but Templar is the easiest thing to explain. Marie, that is my second wife, was a member of a third-class musical company which came to the wilderness where I was nursing my private grief—I think that is the expression. Templar was her manager in more senses than one. I think I was a little mad. In fact, I think I was very mad. I was keen on Marie, and that in itself was a form of lunacy. I am not going to make excuses, George, and really the excuse I offer reveals my greatest offence; but I was not sober for fourteen days when I took Marie Legrande—God knows what her real name was—to the nearest joy town, perjured myself before the necessary official, and took her for better or for worse. She discovered the truth three months afterwards, through Templar. Personally, I think she would have let the thing go without bothering, only, unfortunately”—he pronounced all five syllables of the word—“Templar wasn’t of the letting-go sort. It was my misfortune that I had money. That’s the story: Templar and she have been running together ever since. I tell you, I don’t think Marie is a bad lot. She is one of the weak, fluffy type, who loves the good things of life, and I have kept her and Templar on Easy Street ever since. I have lived through”—he shrugged his shoulders—“I am going to be melodramatic, if I am not careful,” he said, with a faint smile. “I was content to pay and go on paying, only——”

“Only what?” asked George.

The other got up and strolled out on to the balcony, looked around and came back before he answered.

“When my first wife ran away from me, I had been married about six months,” he resumed in that slow, matter-of-fact tone of his. “Seven or eight months later—in fact, a few weeks after I had married Marie—I received a note from my first wife, asking me if I could meet her. It was that note which fell into the hands of Templar, and left him in no doubt whatever as to my offence. That, however, is by the way. I met the first Mrs. Somerville, and she made me a present—the most wonderful present that any man has ever received at the hands of a woman.” His voice shook momentarily.

From his inside pocket he took a flat leather case, opened and handed it to the lawyer. George Dixon saw the smiling face of a girl, radiant and beautiful, looking out at him from the leather frame.

“Who is this?” he asked in surprise.

“My daughter.”

“Your daughter?” gasped George. “But I never knew——”

“That was one of the secrets I kept,” said Somerville, and took the case back.

He looked at the face for a moment, closed the cover, and replaced it in his pocket.

“That was one of the secrets I kept,” he repeated, “and will explain, if nothing else does, just why I have been so complacent. I know as well as you that, if I went into court, my punishment would be purely nominal. I might even gain the respectful sympathies of a court crowded with stout ladies from Bayswater. But this”—he tapped his pocket—“how would it affect this? No, no, George, that wasn’t the solution.”

“But does Templar know?”

Somerville nodded.

“That is why he’s coming three months before his time,” he said. “He only discovered the fact a month or so ago. My little girl is at Cheltenham, and apparently she took part in some school theatricals, and earned an honourable mention in the local newspaper. The honourable mentioner, unhappily, added the name of Preston Somerville as the father of this delightful debutante. They had a pull before they knew about Maisie. What sort of a pull have they now?”

“But there must be a solution, there must, Preston,” said George. “Couldn’t you send the girl to America——”

Somerville stopped him with a gesture.

“Solutions and solutions,” he said; “and because I have hit upon one I telegraphed to you, providentially discovering you at Interlaken, to come along and see me. My affairs at home are in pretty straight order, but I wanted you to know about the girl, because you may have to administer my estate.”

“Good God!” cried George Dixon. “You’re not going to find *that* way out! Think, think, Preston! You used to be so clever at this sort of thing

when we were at Oxford. Don't you remember our crime club discussion, how you used to work out the solution of all the story mysteries, and plan to the minutest detail mysteries even more mysterious than appeared in newspapers? Surely some of that old ingenuity remains?"

Somerville stopped in his restless stride and looked down at the other.

"It's curious you recall that," he said, "extremely curious. Because, as I say, I think I have found the solution to all my problems."

George sprang up, his eyes blazing.

"I knew you would, old fellow. By Gad, I'm glad!"

"Yes, I've found a solution," said the other slowly. "I've had a detective watching these two people. It was he who wired me that I might expect them here. My sleuth discovered many interesting facts, but none quite so vitally important as——" he paused.

"As?" said George Dixon impatiently.

"As the thing he carries in his right-hand waistcoat pocket," said Somerville, speaking with quiet emphasis.

"What is it?" asked the other curiously.

"That you will discover. We must leave the revelation to the very last chapter," smiled Preston Somerville. "But there it is, snug in his right-hand waistcoat pocket." He laughed softly. "I've lived through hell because of that man," he said, without raising his voice. "The woman is different. I'm certain of that. She alone would never trouble me."

He heaved a long sigh, then turned abruptly to his friend, and his tone was brisk and business-like.

"Now, George, I'll tell you just what I want you to do, in case my scheme goes wrong. . . ."

In a large double bedroom of the Hotel of the Stars, the stout and florid Mr. Templar sat on the edge of his bed, looking at the lady who was registered in his name. She was on her knees before her open valise, unpacking with some show of reluctance.

"You told me that we'd only be here a day," she said discontentedly.

"It all depends, Marie," said the other, speaking through his cigar. "We may have to wire home for money."

Her next words confirmed Mr. Somerville's judgment.

“Why don’t you leave him alone?” she asked, twisting round and sitting on her heels. She was still a passably pretty woman, though the gold of her hair did not carry conviction to the sophisticated. “Poor devil! We’ve bled him enough, and we’ve got enough too, Joe; why not let’s go back home and see that farm you’re always talking about?”

Mr. Templar chuckled. There was little of the desperado in his appearance, for he was mild, thin-haired, and readily amused. His face was pink, his bulging eyes unlined. He took life very easily.

“If I had listened to you,” he said good-humouredly, “you’d have had twenty weeks’ engagements a year at about four pounds per. I should have been managing dirty little third-rate companies in dirty little fourth-rate towns. Here you are in a beautiful country, living on the fat of the land at the best hotels, and you’re grouching. You haven’t had a bad time for years; not a real bad time.”

She had resumed her unpacking.

“It depends on what you call a bad time,” she said. “I’ve had my bad times, don’t you worry! And you’ve had yours too, Joe.” She swung round. “There’s been times when you’ve thought that Preston was going for you. Do you remember that night in Paris when you saw him with the fellow from Scotland Yard, walking through the café?”

He blinked and swallowed.

“Shut up,” he said uneasily. “Prison—phew! I’ll never do that! I have lived like a gentleman, and I think I can die like a gentleman,” and his hand strayed to his right-hand waistcoat pocket. “There’s something in that farm idea, dear,” he said after a while. “I’ve always said so too. Let’s try him this once, and then we’ll chuck it.”

She, on her knees, laughed bitterly.

“If you’ve said that once, you’ve said it forty times; anyway, I’m not going to see him.”

“Did I ask you to?” demanded Mr. Templar in an aggrieved tone.

It was not till the next morning that he met his victim. They were alone on the broad stoep of the hotel, looking down over Territet. Templar made his usual gambit.

“Well, Mr. Somerville, I am sorry to trouble you again, but things have been going pretty badly.”

“They’ll go worse for you,” interrupted Somerville, with unexpected malignity. “I shall live to see you some cold, misty morning hauling stones from the Dartmoor quarries. I’ve promised myself the pleasure of a trip to Princetown with this object.”

Templar was speechless. This was not the man he had known, the cynical, quiet gentleman with the hard smile, who had paid without question, and had offered him no other offence than his contempt.

“I—I——” he spluttered. “What do you mean? Suppose it is you who go there?” He raised his voice. “Suppose I send you there and bring . . . your daughter to see you! That makes you sit up, old man? Suppose I bring her down . . . to see you? That’s a different tale, isn’t it?”

A faint flush had come to Somerville’s lean cheeks, but his provocation had served its purpose. Templar’s loud voice had brought an inquisitive waiter to the verandah, who lingered a moment, eyeing them interestedly, until the fact that his presence was not required was made obvious, and he retired.

“How much do you want this time?” asked Somerville in a quieter voice.

“Three thousand,” said Templar, made bold by anger. “That is, seventy-five thousand francs Swiss.”

Somerville walked to the balustrade of the stoep, and leant on his folded arms, looking down to the lake. In Templar’s eyes he was a crushed and beaten man. That final argument about the daughter had been sufficient, said Templar to Templar, and exulting in the new weapon he planned other raids, conveniently forgetting the attractions of farm life which panic had conjured.

Presently the other man looked round.

“Meet me to-morrow afternoon at three o’clock, in the Gorge du Chauderon.”

“Gorge du Chauderon?” said Templar, puzzled. “Where’s that?”

“You walk down the hill to Glion, turn to your right through the town, and you’ll strike a road which leads eventually to Les Avants. Near the bridge which crosses the gorge, you will find a path which runs down to the river-bed. It’s a nice, quiet place, where we are not likely to be interrupted.”

“Why not here?” asked the stout man. “I can come to your room to-night
_____”

“You’ll get your blood-money in the Gorge or nowhere,” said the other decisively. “What’s the matter with you, Templar? As a rule, you don’t care for your ‘allowance’ to be transferred in a room, where the transaction might be witnessed by a hidden detective; that was the excuse you made in London for taking me out in the middle of the night to the Embankment.”

“There are plenty of places we can meet,” growled Templar, “besides _____”

“That’s the place I have decided upon,” said Somerville.

Templar was eyeing him suspiciously.

“There’s going to be no monkey tricks, you know, Preston Somerville!” he blustered. “If you try . . . I’ll have no mercy on you!”

Somerville snapped his fingers contemptuously, and turned away.

“At three o’clock,” he said.

“I’ll be there,” between his teeth; “and if you attempt any——”

Somerville did not wait. He walked leisurely along the stoep, turned in through the lounge, and made his way to the manager’s office. Templar followed. He had his doubts and his own fears. He took a chair where he could watch the entrance to the bureau, and as the time passed and Somerville did not make a reappearance, he began to fidget. Twenty minutes had gone when his prey came out, talking in low tones to the manager, and Templar thought that the manager looked across at him with a certain significance. He felt hot, wiped his neck with his handkerchief, and rose to his feet with a self-conscious cough, and stalked back to his room with the self-conscious carriage of one wholly disinterested in Somerville’s existence.

Disjointedly and with unusual heat he retailed the particulars of his meeting to the silent woman. He was badly rattled; was impelled three times to the bottle of whisky he kept in his trunk, and rendered all the more irritable by her unresponsive attitude.

“Well, say something,” he snapped at last. “What’s he after? What’s his game? He never treated me like that before. Is he short of money?”

She looked him straight in the face.

“Joe,” she said, “do you want my advice?”

“If it’s the kind of advice I want,” he said, biting savagely at the end of his cigar.

“Well, you’ll leave Caux at once,” she said. “I don’t know much about Preston—I didn’t live long enough with him to discover all his little ways. But he’s cleverer than ten devils if he’s put to it. And it’s not like him to lose his temper.”

She sat a moment with pursed lips, then rose jerkily.

“I’m going,” she said.

“You’re going! Where are you going? You’re not going anywhere,” he said sharply, and she swung round on him.

“Don’t try any of that rough stuff with me, Joe,” she said. “I’m going back to Paris by the night train. You can stay and get what you like, but I’m through with this. The Lord didn’t give me the equipment of a blackmailer, and I don’t think He gave it to you either,” she said. “I know what has put you up in the air; his talk about Dartmoor.”

Mr. Templar testified to the shrewdness of her guess with that nervous little blink of his.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea if you went,” he said, after a while. “Anyway, there’s no need for you to stay. But, by thunder, if he tries any of his funny business with me . . .!” He drew a deep breath.

He saw her off that night by the last train down the mountain, a greatly relieved woman; their farewells were unemotional. Then he went back to his room and slept, and his sleep was interrupted by bad dreams.

In the morning a further happening disturbed him not a little. He had taken his breakfast in his room, and had spent an hour reading the newspapers on the stoep. On his return to his room he found that the valet had unpacked and had brushed and hung his clothes; but, what was more disturbing, had taken from the bottom of his valise the somewhat theatrical revolver which Templar carried with him, and had laid it on the dressing-table. It was an excellent weapon, despite its silver plating and mother-of-pearl butt.

“Who told you to unpack my grip?” demanded Templar angrily.

The astonished valet raised his shoulders to the level of his ears and smiled.

“I thought monsieur desired. It is usual,” he said.

“I gave strict orders that my bag was not to be touched! I told you myself!” roared Templar. “I’ll complain to the manager and have you fired,

damn you!”

What could a well-meaning valet do but raise his shoulders again to the level of his ears and smile even more despairingly before he melted from the aggrieved presence.

Templar took up the revolver and examined it. He would want that, at any rate. If this fellow tried any monkey tricks (Templar’s vocabulary was a limited one), he would show him! He searched in his bag, took out a little packet of cartridges, loaded the weapon, and slipped it in his hip pocket. The weight of it gave him no little comfort. The sense of its possession added to the sum of his confidence, and he needed all the confidence he could muster. There was something sinister and menacing in the name of that place, Gorge du Chauderon, which made him shiver, though he was to find the journey thereto prosaic enough. He went down to the Glion by train, and walked along the hill road cut in the steep slope of the gorge. He found the little path without difficulty, and slid and slipped down through a wilderness of larch and pine to the rocky valley bottom. He stopped to rest now and again, for he had plenty of time. There was no sign of Somerville. He half expected to find him a fellow-traveller along this tortuous descent. But Somerville had gone ahead, and was sitting on a rock in a small clearing, in sight of the furious stream which leapt and dashed on its impetuous journey to the lake.

Somerville sat waiting in this drowsy spot, where the ceaseless “shish-shish” of the mountain river drowned the ceaseless shrill of crickets. From where he sat he could see the naked peak of Jarman and the scarred shoulder of Rocher de Naye. He heard the hesitating footsteps of his enemy and rose to his feet.

Templar stopped dead on seeing him, all his suspicions and fears revived.

“Come along, man, what are you afraid of?” called Somerville, and the man advanced with hesitant footsteps. He peered from left to right, seeking the witness he always suspected was lurking somewhere within hearing; but the thin vegetation hereabouts offered no cover, and he came closer.

“Sit down on that rock, Templar,” said Somerville. “Let’s talk.”

“I don’t want any talking,” bullied the man. “I haven’t come here for conversation—I’ve come——”

“But I have,” said Somerville. “I’m going to tell you something.”

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m going to tell you this,” resumed Somerville. “You’re at the end of your tether, my friend.”

“Oh, so that’s it?” Again he looked round. “You think you’ve caught me, do you?”

“I have not only caught you,” said Somerville evenly, “but I am going to kill you.”

Templar leapt up, and in his hand glittered and flashed the weapon he had jerked from his pocket.

“Oh, you are, are you?” he breathed. “Well, if it comes to killing, Somerville—I guess two can play at that game. You try any of your monkey tricks . . .” He paused, at a loss for breath, and Somerville laughed quietly.

“Keep your gun,” he mocked. “I hoped you would bring it. I repeat I am going to kill you,” he went on. “For a very long time, nearly seventeen years, you have lain on my life like a horrible dream. You thought it was because I feared for myself that I shrank from the disgrace which would attach to my name. You now know, having made the discovery recently, that I was afraid for—some one else.”

“Your daughter. I know all about that,” interrupted Templar, who had regained something of his nerve.

“I only want you to realise just how I have suffered,” said Somerville, “so that, if a tardy sense of justice is awakened in you before you die, you may have the comforting reflection that you deserved all that came to you.”

He walked slowly towards the other, and Templar levelled his pistol.

“Don’t come any nearer,” he said hoarsely. “I’ll shoot you like a dog—by God I will!”

“Shoot!”

The contempt in the tone might have stung another man to desperate action, but Templar cowered.

“Shoot! You fool, whatever you do, you’re doomed! Shoot! You haven’t the guts . . . your hand is shaking . . . ah!”

Somerville, drawing nearer and nearer to the wobbling barrel, suddenly launched himself at the man. One hand gripped the revolver and wrenched it from Templar’s grip, dropping it on the grass at his feet. The struggle which followed was short. Preston Somerville, lean and lithe, was all muscle and

nerve—his opponent started the fight at this unfair advantage, that he was wholly demoralised.

For a second or two they swayed, Templar squirming and clawing, and then he fell, grazing his cheek against the rough face of a boulder.

Somerville stooped, turning him over, and noted the lacerated cheek with a lift of eyebrows.

“Excellent,” he said steadily. “Most excellent! If I had designed that scratched face of yours, Templar, I could not have executed the deed more neatly—get up!”

He had picked up the revolver and slipped it into his pocket.

Templar rose shakily.

“You’ll suffer for this,” he said in jerks.

“On the contrary, you will suffer—that is why you are here.”

A look of fear, blind, hysterical fear showed in the prominent eyes, and Somerville smiled.

“I’m not going to kill you—here,” he said. “As a matter of fact, in a few minutes you will be climbing that path again. I intend that you shall spend the rest of your years in a Swiss prison, Templar—one of those mountain prisons where men go through life seeing nothing but grey peaks and white peaks until they die. Doing nothing but digging and quarrying until somebody digs——”

“Shut up!”

Templar’s voice was a squeak.

“You can’t do it! See! You try . . . you try!”

Somerville nodded.

“I am going to do it.”

He took the man’s revolver from his pocket and laid it on the rock beside him. Then he produced a thick pad of banknotes. Templar saw they were each for a thousand francs. His next proceeding was more difficult to understand. With a small pen-knife he made a little incision in his wrist. It was no more than a scratch, and the blood bubbled slowly to view. He waited a second, then lifted his revolver.

“Come here!” he said sharply.

Slowly the man obeyed.

“Lay your finger-tip on that cut,” he commanded.

“What’s the game?”

“Do as I tell you.”

The reluctant Templar obeyed.

“Now take that note—the top one.”

“Look here——!” But the revolver barrel drove forward into the pit of his stomach, and Templar clutched the note with his bloody fingers.

“Give it to me,” said Somerville, taking the money and examining it. “An excellent impression. The chain is complete.”

Templar was breaking quickly.

“What’s the game, hey?” he fretted. “What’s the idea of all this fooling? You’re not going to scare me, Somerville, take it from me! I’ve seen too much of play-acting——”

“The chain is complete!” Somerville’s voice was harsh and joyous. “Listen! Here are the links. First you quarrel with me this morning in the presence of a waiter—that it happened to be I that started the quarrel is immaterial. Next I inform the hotel manager that you are a bad character who has demanded money from me.”

Templar’s face was purple.

“Next,” said Somerville, “I instruct the valet—he attends me also—to open your bag in order that he may identify your revolver. He could never forget having seen the elegant weapon. Next I meet you alone here in the Gorge du Chauderon—and next?”

The truth was dawning on Templar—the hideous trap into which he had fallen. He could only blink and swallow and swallow and blink.

“Next,” said Somerville slowly, “I am found dead here—your revolver near by; your blood-stained fingerprint on a banknote . . . the marks of a struggle on your face——”

“No, no!” Templar screamed the words. “You’d never do it, Mr. Somerville! For God’s sake—you’d never do it . . . suicide . . .!”

The torrent of his speech ran into a delta of sheer incoherence.

“Suicide,” said Somerville. “I’ve planned it all—step by step. You’ve given me seventeen years to plan it, you dog . . . and you’re going down with me. They’ll find my body here—I wrote to the police at Les Planches to tell them I was meeting you and asking for protection. The letter will be delivered this afternoon—I even worked out the time.”

He lifted the wad of banknotes and held them out.

“Take these,” he said. “Take them all save the one which must be found by my side——”

With a howl Templar struck at the extended hand, and the grass was strewn with the scattered notes.

Then he turned and fled up the path, sobbing like a frightened child. He must reach the road—find a man—a witness, and return to the place before . . . before . . . He must have a witness—somebody who had seen Somerville alive. . . .

Half-way up the path he was stricken motionless.

“Crack!”

The hills echoed and re-echoed at the pistol shot. He turned open-mouthed, ashen, toward the sound. He was paralysed, could only mouth incomprehensible noises of woe. He could descend and recover the note. Face that? With a wail he turned and fled up the side of the hill, stumbling out into the roadway almost under the wheels of an empty fiacre.

The driver looked at the dishevelled figure wonderingly. As for Templar, he could only outstare the coachman, who had pulled his horse to a halt.

What suspicion was in this peasant’s mind? Templar pulled himself together with a superhuman effort, and pushed back the hair from his streaming forehead.

“Glion—Gare!” he muttered, and stumbled into the victoria.

He would get down to Territet, he thought. The funicular left every ten minutes. After Territet? There was the lake or the rail. He could get to Italy—seven hours’ run, but he’d have to wait until the morning for a train. Or to Lausanne, or—— That was the scheme! By boat to Evian! Evian was in France, and an hour’s journey across the lake.

He took courage at the thought.

He paid the cocher, and the man looked at him curiously.

“M’sieu has injured himself? See, there is blood on M’sieu’s fingers.”

Templar remembered and cursed. He offered no explanation, walked straight to the ticket office, and secured his billet. The car waited, and he fumed. Why were they waiting? The answer came when the sky-blue train from Montreux clanked into the station. Two men got out, and Templar bit his lip to stop the cry which he could arrest in no other way. They were Swiss gendarmes. Of course! The police office was at Les Planches, half-way between Montreux and Glion. He would like to have crouched down in the high pew-like compartment out of sight, but he braced himself to sit stock still.

The policeman spoke to the *chef de gare*, then walked briskly from the station and turned on to the road. A bell tinkled, and Templar could have wept his relief as his car dropped slowly on its steep run to Territet.

He had a quarter of an hour to wait for a boat to Lausanne. No steamer ran direct to the French ports from this end of the lake, and at Ouchy he discovered that the last boat for Evian had already gone.

It was getting late now, so he went up to Lausanne and snatched a hasty meal. The way out was by rail. Valorbe was only a few miles, and he discovered that a mixed train ran to Pontarlier at eleven o’clock—and Pontarlier was France. He took his ticket and went into a gloomy waiting-room, and, choosing the gloomiest corner, sat down to wait.

He spoke and understood French, and all that evening in the café and in the crowds which flocked the *quais* of Lausanne Station he had listened intently for some word of the crime—his crime! The one crime of all crimes which he had not committed and was incapable of committing.

But he had heard no word. . . . The Swiss police kept these things quiet.

Prison . . . years and years . . . all his life . . . they did not execute for murder in Switzerland.

He shook his head violently.

“No . . . no prison for me.”

From outside the waiting-room a man watched him through the window. It was rather difficult to see Templar, because he had chosen his corner well, but the watcher identified him and walked back along the platform to the entrance, where two policemen were standing.

“The man is in the waiting-room,” he said in French, “in the corner nearest the clock. Do not forget his name is Templar.”

“You accuse him of having stolen your bag?” said one of the policemen.

The man nodded, and the policeman moved off. Templar heard the door open, and sat bolt upright at the sight of the uniforms.

“M’sieu Templar?” said one of the policemen.

Templar nodded.

“I arrest you——”

Templar had taken the little phial from his right-hand waistcoat pocket, and had swallowed its contents at a gulp.

“Prison . . .? No prison for me . . .” he said thickly. “Blackmail, yes . . . but not murder . . . not——”

They caught him as he fell, and one went to look for the man who had charged him.

But Somerville had disappeared from the tragedy he had staged.

An hour later he was speeding back to Montreux in a fast motor-launch. On the way he dropped overboard the silver-plated revolver which he had fired into the air that afternoon.

It was a bad day for the man Templar when an inquisitive detective had discovered that he was in the habit of carrying cyanide in his right-hand waistcoat pocket.

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.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the eBook edition.

[The end of *The Little Green Man* by Edgar Wallace]