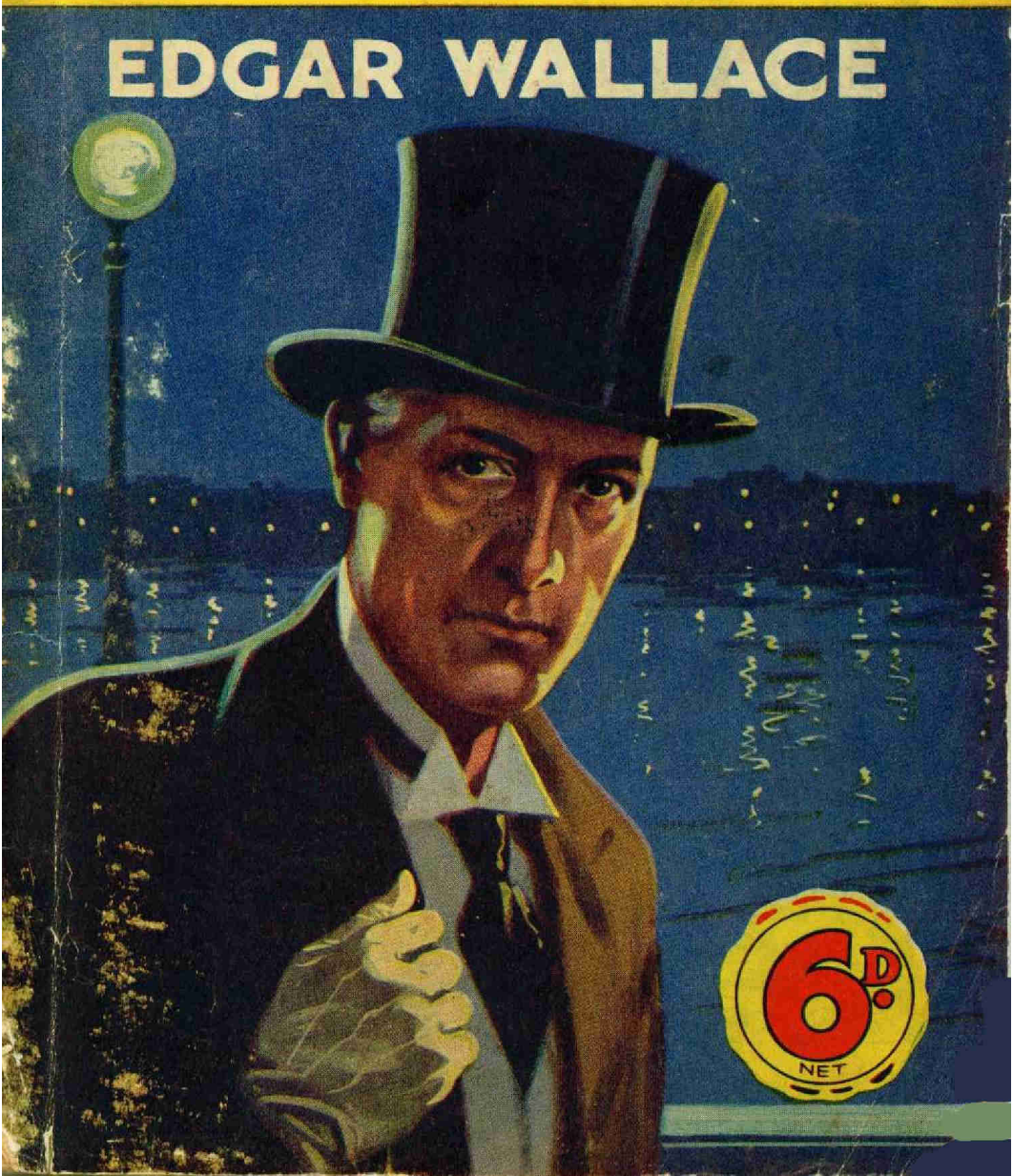
KILLER KAY

EDGAR WALLACE



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Title: Killer Kay
Date of first publication: 1930
Author: Edgar Wallace (1875-1932)
Date first posted: January 31, 2024
Date last updated: January 31, 2024
Faded Page eBook #20240149

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, akaitharam, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

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By EDGAR WALLACE

LONDON
GEORGE NEWNES, LIMITED
SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C. 2

CONTENTS

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When the Eastbourne Express pulled out of Victoria Station on a bright afternoon in June, Mary Boyd had neither eyes for the glories of the Sussex scenery through which the train was presently flying, nor for the heartening sunshine, nor yet for the other occupant of the carriage in which she sat. For the greater part of an hour he was so immersed in the study of newspapers, that he also seemed oblivious to her presence.

The express was shrieking through Three Bridges when, looking up, she caught his eyes fixed on her. A lanky, lean-faced man of forty, his hair grey at the temples, but for the rest a deep brown, brushed back from his forehead, he had the appearance of a successful professional man. He was dressed with finicking care; his morning coat fitted perfectly, his dark trousers were carefully creased, and the silk hat on the seat by his side polished so that it shone. In that one glance she took him in, from the pearl pin in his cravat to the shiny point of his enamelled shoes. And there her interest might have ended if those deep-set eyes of his had not held hers in fascinated bondage.

Only for a second and then, flushing, she turned her gaze to the countryside which was running swiftly past.

"Aren't you Miss Boyd?"

His voice was remarkably deep and rich, and in it was an indefinable quality of sympathy.

She turned her eyes again in his direction, surprise, suspicion, resentment at this intrusion into her sorrow, manifested in that one glance.

"Yes, I am Miss Boyd," she said quietly, and wondered if she had ever met him. It was hardly likely, for his was a face which she would not have forgotten.

"I am Dr. Kay of the Home Office," he introduced himself, and she was puzzled. Dr. Kay? She remembered something about him. Frank must have spoken of him.

"I did not wait for the end of the inquest," he went on. "I was trying to find the verdict in the last editions. I suppose it was . . .?"

She nodded, her lips compressed, her eyes filled with unshed tears. Bertram Boyd had not been an ideal father. His pitiful weakness had estranged him from his family, and had brought his wife to a premature end. Yet there were memories of him that Mary treasured. She remembered him before his love of the bottle had mastered him—a jolly, good-natured man, who had carried her on his shoulder through the garden of Ashcome House. So that was how this stranger had seen her; in that dismal court where twelve bored tradesmen had adjudicated upon the method by which Colonel Bertram Boyd had ended his life. They might well regard it as a waste of time; since Boyd had been found one morning by a horrified kitchenmaid, with his head in a gas oven and all the taps turned on. And this in the town house of Sir John Thorley, his brother-in-law.

"I was in court," said the lean-faced man. "I wonder . . . I realise it must pain you to speak of these things even to a doctor—but I wonder if you can tell me whether your father had shown any suicidal tendencies before?"

She hesitated, loath, as he knew, to talk about the hideous tragedy which clouded her life. And yet those eyes of his were very compelling, as they were kind. He looked like a man who felt intensely, though it was hardly likely, she told herself, that a doctor of experience should feel things very deeply.

"Yes, sometimes . . . he used to drink a great deal, and lately, since my aunt's death—Lady Thorley, you know—he had been very depressed. Uncle John took him to town, thinking that a change of scene and new interests might brighten him, but I don't think that his new life had any effect. I had a letter from Sir John only a day before—before this dreadful thing happened, saying that poor father had been strange in his manner."

"But," persisted the other, "did your father ever say to you, 'I am tired of life,' or anything of that kind?"

She shook her head.

"No. But he has said it to Uncle John . . . it came out in the evidence."

Dr. Kay was silent. He sat hunched up in a corner of the compartment, a heavy frown on his face, his lips pursed, his eyes fixed on the carpeted floor.

"I wish I had stayed, but unfortunately I had an appointment. Was anything found in your father's room?"

Again she seemed disinclined to answer.

"Two whisky bottles—one empty, the other nearly empty," she said.

"Was he dressed when he was found?"

She nodded.

"Fully dressed, except he was in his stockinged feet. He had put on his slippers earlier in the evening. Sir John's valet, in his evidence, said that when he went into the room the last thing that night he was sitting in his slippers."

"Can you tell me what kind of slippers he wore?"

Her gesture of distaste was not lost on the questioner.

"They were bathroom slippers—the kind without backs that you slip your feet into. I am awfully sorry if I seem rude, Dr. Kay, but I really wish not to discuss this matter."

He nodded gravely.

"I understand that, Miss Boyd. Will you please believe that I am not asking out of idle curiosity? Nevertheless, I am being unpardonably cruel, for I could discover all these things without questioning you. I had met your aunt, by the way; she was always an invalid, and if I remember aright, she died of scarlet fever. There was some story of a burglar having frightened her. Do you live in Eastbourne?"

Her father had a house there, she told him, and he went on to talk enthusiastically of Sussex. He was a Sussex man, and to him there was no other county in the world. He once had a cottage on the downs, but a wandering Zeppelin making for Portsmouth had dropped a bomb, which had left a large hole filled with splinters of furniture where the cottage had been.

"You have built another, doctor?"

He shook his head.

"No. I am going to Eastbourne on business," he said, and did not enlarge upon the object of his visit.

Frank Hallwell was waiting for her at the station—a tall, athletic figure that was good to look upon. In the excitement of meeting him she did not say good-bye to her travelling companion.

"I was a beast to let you go up alone, darling," said the young man as he tucked her arm in his. "I should have taken no notice of your commands. Thank God it is all over."

She heaved a quick sigh.

“Don’t let us talk about it,” she said, and then saw a tall hat shining above the press of passengers at the barriers.

“Do you know him?” she asked. “The man in the silk hat—he travelled down with me.”

Frank Hallwell followed the direction of her eyes.

“Good Lord!” he said. “It is Killer Kay.”

“Killer Kay!” she said, puzzled. “I know his name is Kay, but why ‘Killer’?”

Frank was a rising lawyer in the Public Prosecutor’s office, and was an authority upon her travelling companion.

“They call him ‘Killer’ at the Home Secretary’s office because he has sent more men to the gallows than any three men in this country. There isn’t a criminal in England who doesn’t know him by name, for he is one of the greatest crime experts the world has known. Lombrose and Mantazana were kindergarten pupils compared with Killer.”

She shivered.

“I suppose he is down here in connection with that beach murder that everybody is talking about,” he went on enthusiastically. “I wish I had seen him. I would have introduced you.”

“Frank, please . . .”

He was instantly penitent.

Frank Hallwell lived with his father in a house adjoining the three-acre estate of the late Colonel Boyd.

He had spent the evening with the girl the second night after her return, and was drinking a night-cap preparatory to turning in, when there was announced the man for whom he had devoted two days of fruitless search.

“This is a pleasant surprise, doctor,” he said, helping the visitor to divest himself of his shining oilskins, for half a gale was blowing up the Channel, and the rain splashed ceaselessly against the curtained windows. “I knew that you were here, and I’ve been looking for you. You travelled down with Miss Boyd, to whom, by the way, I am engaged.”

Killer Kay had a smile of infinite sweetness.

“Had I known that you were Miss Boyd’s fiancé, I should have looked you up two nights ago, Hallwell. I only learnt that fact to-night.”

He preceded the young man into his snug study, chose a cigar from the open box with the greatest deliberation, and sank with a little sigh of comfort into a big arm-chair.

"She died accidentally," he said. "I have been experimenting——"

"She—who?" asked the startled Frank.

"The girl on the beach . . . I'm sorry." Kay smiled again at the alarm he had caused. "The local police were satisfied that the girl was murdered. The man in custody swears that the stone fell from the cliff above. Nobody has ever seen stones fall from the cliff, but they do fall at night. I was nearly killed an hour ago by one. They were lovers, and had found what they thought was a cosy and sheltered spot under the cliff. It is a death trap, and if nobody has seen the stones that come down, it is because the cliff chooses the dark hours for its eccentric shedding of rock."

"He is innocent?"

"Undoubtedly. I have examined the body . . . however, that was not what I intended talking about. How is Sir John?"

"Thorley? Did they tell you he was down? Yes, he came this afternoon. Poor chap, he is terribly upset about the whole affair."

Dr. Kay pulled at his cigar, his eyes half closed, a picture of content.

"I wonder if I could meet him?" he asked at last. "I have an idea that he may throw some light upon a very peculiar circumstance attending Boyd's death—his valet would do as well, of course, but I prefer tapping the stream at the source."

"That is easy. He is staying over for a day or so to settle the Colonel's estate. Sir John is being very decent about it all, and has advanced poor Mary a thousand to carry on until the estate is administered. . . . Rich? I think he is very rich. He has a big house in town, an estate in Worcestershire, and a villa at Mentone. He carries very large sums about with him, which isn't very wise. For example, he paid Mary in notes."

Killer Kay was sitting upright, his eyes blazing.

"Notes, eh? Fine!"

"I don't see anything 'fine' about paying in banknotes, doctor," smiled Frank.

"You don't, eh? Well—anyway, we shall see."

Next night he strolled up the long avenue to the Boyds' house, and before he was announced Mary Boyd came out into the hall to meet him.

"I had no idea I was travelling with such a celebrity, doctor," she said, with a faint smile. "I have not told my uncle about your—your profession. He is rather worried just now and I thought it might . . ."

"Exactly, Miss Boyd," Killer Kay smiled. "You are very wise. I suppose you have been very busy?" She nodded. "Signing things, eh? With witnesses?"

She nodded again.

"Uncle John hates lawyers; my own is coming to-morrow, but there were one or two things that concerned poor daddy and which we felt, for the sake of his memory, we ought to keep in the family. . . . I don't know why I tell you this," she added almost sharply, and laughed.

He had thought she was pretty in the train; he saw now that she was beautiful.

"Before we go in, will you do me a favour?"

Her eyebrows rose.

"Why, surely . . . if I can."

"Will you promise me that the next time you come to London you will wire me the train by which you are travelling?"

She stared.

"But how—why?"

"Will you? You promised you would, if you could."

"I will, if it pleases you, but . . ."

"But me no buts," he said good-humouredly, and followed her into the drawing-room.

Sir John Thorley was a stout, red-faced man, with white moustache and heavy white eyebrows. He looked to be a peppery colonel who had served many years in India, and his manner was so irascible as to support this view of him.

"Glad to meet you, doctor," he snapped. "Glad to meet you. Friend of young Hallwell—hum."

He generally added a doubtful "hum" after any phrase which might be construed into a compliment. It was as though he thought he had gone too far, or had offered a larger meed of affability than the object deserved. Very soon he ignored the doctor altogether, and addressed himself solely to the girl.

"It is a big house for a young gal to run," he said, shaking his head. "You'd do better, my dear, if you took a flat in town and put up at an hotel here. I simply can't ask you to stay at my house—simply can't, after—well, you understand. But you mustn't stay here alone in this big house."

"Why not, Uncle John?" she asked, amused for a second (it struck Dr. Kay that she was incapable of being amused for longer in her present frame of mind).

"Why not? My dear good gal, I should be sick with fright. First your dear aunt, then your dear father—no, no, I can't stand it. I must have you where I can see you, hum. After my burglar, my dear . . . no solitude. He killed your poor dear aunt, the blackguard. Gave her a fright, probably infected the house with the beastly scarlet fever that carried her off."

Mary went out of the room a little while later and Dr. Kay seized the opportunity.

"Sir John, where were Colonel Boyd's slippers found?"

Sir John blinked at him.

"Where were . . . don't know what you mean, sir. Boyd's slippers? In his room, sir. Where the devil could they be found?"

"They might have been on his feet," said the Killer gently. "I gather they were soft slippers. I wonder why he took them off?"

"Huh? Never thought of that. Anyway, he was mad. I haven't told her, but he was stark, staring mad. Been drinking heavily. Terrible. Couldn't stop him. Very sad."

He shook his big head, and just then the girl came back and the conversation was changed.

The next morning Killer Kay went to London and spent the day pursuing certain inquiries. In the afternoon he left by the Western Express, carrying with him a Home Office order.

He spent the night in Plymouth, and the next morning a hired car carried him to Princetown-on-the-Moors.

A circle of men slouched round a stone-flagged circle. Between each was a space of four feet. Mostly they kept their eyes fixed on the ground, for there was little or nothing for them to see. One of the sides of the quadrilateral in which they exercised was a high wall of grey stone; another was formed by the end of the ugly chapel, covered with black pitch to ensure the hundred-years-old brick-work from decay. A third side was formed by a companion wall, and the fourth by the stub "B" ward with its yellow grille-protected door.

At three points outside of the circle stood uniformed men—silent, watchful, suspicious. They carried no weapons, but drooping from the side-pocket of one was the worn leather strap of a truncheon. The circle moved at an even pace—brown-faced, unshaven men in shabby yellow, their legs encased in buttoned gaiters, their blue-and-white striped shirts open at their red throats. Perched on each head was a nondescript black cap ornamented with letters of the alphabet crudely embroidered. Tramp, tramp, tramp, the heavy boots crashed on the stone walk.

"Stop talking there!"

A sharp order from one of the watchful officers, every untidy face a picture of blank innocence.

"Halt!"

Those facing in the right direction saw the cause of the order. The deputy-governor had come round the corner of the prison chapel, and convicts must not move when the governor or his deputy are approaching.

"Thirty men; exercise party; all correct, sir."

The senior warder saluted stiffly.

But it was not the sight of the young deputy in his stained trench-coat that generated that electric thrill which ran through the thirty hidden men of Dartmoor. It was his companion.

"*Killer!*"

The word was hissed from man to man for the benefit of those who might not turn their heads.

They knew him by repute, for the most part; some had personal acquaintance with the Home Office expert whose word had sent so many cruel men to the trap.

He stood watching that motionless circle of misery, fingering his chin with a white hand, a look of gloom and doubt upon his face.

"That is Ridgeman—the fellow who is nearest the warder," said the deputy, no less intrigued by the unexpected presence of the Killer than any of the men who stood stiffly to attention.

"Yes—I will talk to him."

The deputy beckoned forward the officer in charge.

"367—bring him to Dr. Kay."

The doctor strolled away from the group, making his way to an open space near the farther wall.

Presently came 367, a little white of face, a little unsteady of hand. He was a small man, grey at the temples.

Dr. Kay nodded to the warder and the man stood back.

"Ridgeman, do you remember breaking into 408 Lowndes Square?"

"Yes, sir. That's what I got my lagging for."

"I know, I know. But do you remember all the particulars of your burglary? You got into the place through the window of the housekeeper's room, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. The room was empty, because the housekeeper was on a visit to the country. Her door was locked. I had to open it with a skeleton."

The Killer gave a sigh of relief and his eyes sparkled.

"That is what I want to know. The door was locked, eh—nothing valuable in the room, eh? Just an ordinary housekeeper's room—with a few nicknacks, I suppose, a picture or two, photographs of the housekeeper's relations?"

Ridgeman, wondering, nodded.

"Nothing else?" The doctor eyed him keenly.

"There was a parcel in red paper——"

"Not on the bed?" The question was shot at the man so sharply that he stepped back as though he were dodging a blow.

"There was a sort of white dressing-gown—no, not a dressing-gown, more like a painter's overall."

"And gloves, eh?" Kay's saturnine face was eager.

"Why—yes, sir. There were a pair of old gloves sticking out of the pocket of the overall."

The Killer rubbed his hands joyously, his thin lips were curled in a smile.

"The only place they *could* be—in the housekeeper's room, Ridgeman—the only place. Now tell me this. Was there any kind of label on the parcel? Did it look as though it had been carefully packed, as it would be if it came from a store or shop? Or was it rough-tied, as you or I might tie it?"

Ridgeman nodded.

"No, sir. It was nicely tied, but the label had been scratched off. I didn't open it. I was out for jewellery. Lady Thorley had a lot. It's a lie what they said at the trial, that I frightened her to death. I didn't go into her room, because I knew she was ill and had a nurse, and besides, all the stuff was kept in a safe in the library. I was working on the safe when Sir John caught me. I was a fool to bash him. I should have got away with twelve months instead of seven years if I hadn't. But it's a lie to say I had anything to do with the lady's death. I never knew she was dead until I came up for trial."

"Thank you, Ridgeman," Kay nodded. "You may not serve your full time."

Ridgeman went back to the circle, and deputy and expert strolled up the slope and into the prison offices.

"Did you find what you wanted to find?" asked the deputy.

"Yes. How many murders are there committed in England in the course of a year?"

The other looked at him, astonished.

"Fifty?" he suggested.

The Killer smiled.

"Fifty are brought to the bar of judgment. I should say that the number is between four hundred and five hundred. It is difficult to estimate. You only hear of the bunglers, the men and women who do their victims to death by violence—the crimes of passion committed by muddle-headed people who invite detection. 'A' uses poison, and is found with the poison in his possession, and there is always a chemist in the neighbourhood to prove the sale. Generally 'A' says he wanted to poison mice or kill a dog. 'B' butchers his wife (because he loves another woman) and throws her down a well. 'C'

lays wait for his enemy (everybody knows of the enmity) and shoots him. 'D' has a quarrel with his girl and kills her. If he doesn't commit the crime in the presence of witnesses, he advertises his guilt by running away. 'E' is a woman who adopts babies for a certain sum and destroys them. And so on. Examine the mentality of these people. Ninety per cent. of them are ignorant, almost illiterate. The great histories of crime that might guide them are closed to them. They must slay in their own primitive ways. But since the instinct for murder is not confined to the low-minded, it follows that there are other methods employed—methods which successfully defy detection. I never see a respectable funeral cortège processing through the street, but I wonder in which of the mourning coaches the murderer is riding."

His voice was earnest, so earnest that the deputy-governor stifled the laugh that was on its way.

"You suggest that murder is practised as a fine art?" he asked.

"Murder *is* a fine art," said the Killer thoughtfully, "and it is so easy! Popular education has brought to the millions a knowledge of science which enables the evil-minded to dispense with poison and axe. It has given them weapons undreamt-of by their grandfathers—a knowledge of micro-organisms that destroy as surely as a bullet; of natural forces that can be employed to cut soul from body more swiftly than the knife or guillotine. Do you imagine that they are not using their knowledge? Of course they are. A man who knows that finger-prints are fatal leaves no finger-prints. A poisoner who knows that arsenic or any other metallic poison endures for years in the body of his victim uses a vegetable poison. The fellow anxious to rid himself of an obnoxious partner contrives it in such a way that he receives most of the condolences."

The deputy-governor smiled again.

"I shouldn't like to come into purview as a murderer, however clever I was," he said.

"Don't," replied Kay grimly. "They call me 'Killer.' I am proud of the name. I'd rather kill bad men than found an orphanage. I find joy in the chase. When the drop falls and the hunt is ended, I'm like a man that is lost."

The deputy walked with him through the immense iron grille that guards the entrance of the prison, and watched his car until it was out of sight.

"The pity is," he said to the governor afterwards, "that most of the Killer's most interesting victims never get as far as Dartmoor——"

Dr. Kay had two calls to make on his return to London. He went to Somerset House and made a search of certain files; then he called at a laundry, and what he learnt at these two places seemed to satisfy him, for he spent the rest of the day in his laboratory, perfecting his new test for the discovery of arsenic in solution.

It was nearly a week after her uncle's departure that Mary Boyd received a letter from him, asking her to lunch with him at a club which had both a man and woman membership.

Half-way to town she remembered that she had not kept her promise to Dr. Kay. She missed her uncle on the Victoria platform, and was wandering about the broad spaces of the station when she saw the telegraph office. Should she wire? She hesitated. It seemed so silly a thing to do; besides, she was in town now, and she had only promised that she would wire him before she left Eastbourne, telling him the time she would arrive. And she was here already.

She half turned to walk away when, with sudden resolution, she entered the office and scribbled on a form:

"Am in town, lunching at the Regal Club."

She had no sooner sent the wire than she regretted her act, and regretted it all the more when, walking from the office, she came face to face with the ruddy-faced Sir John.

"Hello! here you are then—missed you. Who have you been wiring to, my dear?"

"To—to the housekeeper, to tell her what time I shall be back."

She hated herself for lying, but she could not tell him the truth. It felt foolish, it would have sounded imbecile.

"Seen your lawyer, eh? Didn't tell him about your poor father's youthful escapade?"

She shook her head.

The car was passing along Whitehall, and she wondered in which of those gloomy buildings Killer Kay had his office.

"Boys will be boys," said Sir John gruffly, "and if your father had an affair in his youth, it is not for us to tell the prying, spying lawyers all about it—huh?"

She was not in the mood to discuss her father's early follies. It was sufficient that she had signed the deed which would provide for the woman concerned. She had had an unpleasant five minutes when she had learnt that the document had to be witnessed by her servants, but Sir John had assured her that it was not necessary that the document should be read—even she had not read it again after she had perused the draft.

"Here we are," he said, and helped her out of the car as it stopped before the palatial entrance of the Regal.

The lunch was well ordered, for Sir John Thorley was something of an epicure.

They lingered over the dessert, and when the coffee came:

"Don't use sugar—makes you fat," growled Sir John.

She smiled indulgently as he pushed a saccharine tablet along the tablecloth.

"Thank you, Uncle John," she said; "I'm hardly likely to get fat, but ____"

She held the tablet between her finger and thumb above the coffee. Another fraction of a second and it would have dropped.

"Excuse me."

A hand came under hers, and the tablet dropped into a thin brown palm.

She turned, startled, to meet the smiling eyes of Killer Kay.

"Will you go over and see Frank Hallwell? he is sitting at the table in the window," he said smoothly.

"What the devil is the meaning of this, sir?" stormed Sir John, growing purple.

But Killer Kay did not speak until, with a frightened glance at the two men, Mary left them alone.

"It saves a lot of unpleasantness to have the tablet," said Dr. Kay in his suavest voice. "Otherwise it means getting a bottle for the coffee and attracting everybody's attention."

"Will you—please tell me . . ." Sir John's voice was husky.

"Come with me."

The words were a command, and Sir John followed the doctor meekly.

In the vestibule of the club two men were sitting as though they were waiting for somebody. They rose at the sight of Killer Kay and came toward him.

"Here is your man, Inspector," said Kay brusquely. "I charge him with the wilful murder of Isabel Alice Thorley, and further with the wilful murder of Bertram James Boyd."

"So far from Thorley being a millionaire," explained Dr. Kay through his cigar, "he is a very poor man. He had lived unhappily with his wife, who was immensely wealthy and who, unknown to him, had made a will leaving all her property to her brother. Thorley is a governor of the Wormwood Fever Hospital, and it is the practice of that hospital to dispatch to a special laundry any bedclothes that have been in contact with patients suffering from malignant infectious diseases. These articles are packed in antiseptic red paper and are immediately put, paper and all, into a disinfecting tank before they are washed. Three days before Lady Thorley became infected, he called at the hospital and, as was his practice, stopped his little car, which he drove himself, under the open window of the room in which the infected linen was kept. He made a tour of the hospital without attendance, and it is known that he went into the soiled-linen room. After he had gone a parcel containing pillow-slips was missing, though very little attention was given to the matter at the time. The parcel had been tossed into the car through the open window.

"Lady Thorley died of malignant scarlet fever. There is no doubt that Sir John, in the absence of the nurse, for she was suffering from a nervous breakdown at the time, placed an infected pillow under her head. When he found that Boyd had the money, he killed Boyd. He allowed the Colonel to get drunk, dragged him downstairs in the middle of the night and arranged a suicide. Unfortunately for him, Boyd was wearing loose slippers, which fell off in the bedroom when he was lifted. They were found afterwards neatly arranged under his bed. Suicides aren't so tidy as all that."

"Have you analysed the saccharine tablet?" asked Frank in a hushed voice.

Killer Kay nodded.

"If your young friend had swallowed the coffee containing that tablet, she would have died this morning, and the doctors would have diagnosed the case without hesitation as one of acute ptomaine poisoning."

“But why did he want to kill her—the money would have gone to her cousin in Canada?”

The Killer chuckled softly.

“She signed a will in Thorley’s favour. She didn’t know that it was a will. The draft he gave her made provision for a mythical woman to whom Boyd was indebted. The document she signed, and which was witnessed in her presence, was a will. I think I shall hang Thorley, if he doesn’t die of fright.”

But Sir John Thorley was not hanged, nor did he die of fright. In searching him, the jailer had overlooked a small grey pellet in his waistcoat pocket. Sir John found it in the middle of the night.

THE BUSINESS WOMAN

Certain features of the transaction were quite normal—even commonplace. For example, that a young man should fall desperately in love with a girl he met at a tennis dance, that she should be in consequence the fount of wisdom and the perfection of beauty, that he should be prepared to sacrifice the world to please her—all these things were perfectly proper and understandable.

She was adorable. He was at her feet from the moment they met. As for Derek Buller, who condescended to play at Phyllis Court, though he had three hard courts of his own at Hammerton Grange . . .

Mr. Buller was plump and loud and immensely rich. He controlled five financial groups and seldom talked of anything but money.

He knew Mona, reminded her once in Geoffrey's hearing that he had known her when she was so high. He took her arm familiarly and as one with rights. Geoffrey used to sit up at nights, reading the lives of illustrious poisoners and trying to discover a method which evaded detection.

He had driven her home once or twice, had enjoyed the divine honours of a *tête-à-tête* lunch, had listened tongue-tied whilst she criticised his service, and once had touched her hand accidentally in the car. It took him the greater part of a week to make up his mind and to rehearse his speech . . .

Mona Dawson received his declaration in the pretty little drawing-room of her house in Orme Square. Her fine eyes were fixed on his; she reproduced none of the emotional reactions which he had expected. His heart sank and his enthusiasm suddenly went cold in him.

"It is the wrong moment, isn't it? . . . Don't you feel that?"

"I suppose it is."

His voice was very husky, not at all like the voice that he was accustomed to hearing when he ordered his lunch.

"It *is* the wrong moment." She was firm. "I know, because I'm terribly fond of you, and I ought to whoop or droop or do something silly—— Your tie isn't straight."

He fumbled at his collar, feeling extraordinarily inadequate. He cursed his tie . . . perhaps that was the cause. And yet, what was left to him of reason told him that women do not reject the stammerings of love from sheer loathing of a disarranged cravat.

He was good-looking, athletic, a comfortable business man, not without prospects of acquiring the interest held by a vulgar partner who lived in a garden city and probably wore sandals in his spare time.

"Sit down, darling."

She said "darling" so easily and so glibly that it had no qualities of endearment.

He sat on the nearest chair.

"It is the wrong moment—psychologically."

She nodded her pretty head wisely. She had the most marvellous red lips and a round chin and a throat like milk.

"You don't know very much about me except that I play tennis rather well. I'm American—you didn't even know that."

He was baffled. Was there any vital reason why her nationality should be an obstacle to marriage? Was England at war with the United States? He read the newspapers fairly regularly and did not remember reading anything about such a catastrophe. Or was she a descendant of one of those Bunker's Hill fellows?

"You didn't know that?"

She paced up and down the room, her hands behind her; he watched her dumbly.

"I'm a business woman. That is why you've come at the wrong moment. I'm terribly, *terribly* worried . . . not exactly worried."

She paused for a word.

"Scared?" he suggested hoarsely.

She looked at him coldly.

"I am never scared," she said; and then, most abruptly: "How much money have you got?"

"Twenty thousand pounds," he said promptly.

He hadn't twenty thousand pounds or anything like it. But Geoffrey had a sanguine temperament. When he wasn't in debt he was worth twenty thousand pounds. Anyway, he could always sell out his share of the firm for ten thousand—if there was anybody who wanted a half-share of a provision business.

She stopped in her stride and looked at him searchingly.

"Send me a cheque for ten thousand," she said. "I am operating with Stedman's Steel Preferred."

He swayed slightly; the restful room swung giddily before his eyes.

"Oh . . . Stedman's Steel Preferred . . . Stock Exchange and all that," he said.

He had never heard of Stedman or his steel.

If she saw the mute agony in his eyes she did not relent. Ten thousand pounds! There was a big balance in the firm's account. Hulfer was away on his holidays.

"How long do you want the money for?"

Geoffrey steadied his voice. He could be businesslike too. Hulfer said that he wouldn't trust him to buy a pat of butter, but Hulfer must be taught a lesson. And the profits of the deal would go into the firm's account.

If Mona Dawson had said: "Open the window and jump out," he would have done it. He was of that age. And it would be a simple matter to draw a cheque.

"For a week or two," she said.

He thought he saw hope shining in her eyes—the dearest eyes in the world—and a great resolution was formed.

"Yes. I'll send you the cheque to-night," he said, and when she sighed his worst fears were confirmed.

"You think I'm odd and unwomanly and . . . and everything? But you don't know what happiness I shall get out of this—having you with me." She spoke breathlessly. "I never intended asking you to come in, but I've a large interest in these shares, and Buller—John B. Buller—you've heard of him?"

"Not Derek?"

She shook her head.

"No—his father. Ever since dear Daddy died he's been trying to get control of Stedman's——"

He listened like one in a dream to a story of high finance. Until that moment he had believed that such stories were hatched in the brains of young ladies who write scenarios for films. He did not quite understand what it was all about, but had the vague impression that she was being victimised, that a rough-necked old man, sitting in his gilded New York office, was bent upon her ruin; and with that realisation the urge to save her, to fling into the scales his own fortune and the fortune which wasn't his own, grew to an overwhelming volume.

He went home with his head in a whirl and wrote the cheque. The next morning he had a wire from Hulfer, saying that he was returning a fortnight earlier than he had expected.

For the first time in his life Geoffrey Hanibar became a regular subscriber to the financial press. He had had a brief note from Mona, telling him that she had cabled cover (whatever that meant). Stedman's Preferred stood at seven. At lunch that day he met a man wise in the ways of stock markets.

"Stedman's Steel?"

At the frown which came to his face, Geoffrey's heart nearly stopped beating.

"It's queer stock. I hope you're not speculating? If you are you'll get your fingers burnt. There's a terrific fight going on between the Buller and the Dawson crowd. There's some family reason behind it. Leave that stock alone."

"They're at seven," said Geoffrey faintly.

Again that devastating frown.

"That's about as high as they ought to go. I've heard a whisper that there's going to be a bear raid."

"Splendid!" said Geoffrey, without enthusiasm.

It was only now that he realised that Mona was something more than a fragrant lady with a disconcerting habit of hitting a tennis ball just out of his reach. She was a force—a business woman. He glowed at the thought of the trouble which was awaiting Mr. Derek Buller.

Buying an evening paper on his way home, he turned to the financial columns. Stedman's Preferred stood at six—obviously a printer's error. Anyway, it wasn't his favourite newspaper. He sent out for another which more nearly reflected his political opinions; but there was a printer's error here too, for the figure was six. Stedman's Preferred had dropped a whole point.

"How very odd!" said Geoffrey, and laughed hollowly.

The maid, who was serving his soup, was so startled that she nearly dropped the plate.

He had a wild idea of getting Mona on the 'phone the next morning, but that would be hardly fair. She was a business woman, and she might think—anyway, she knew all about Stedman's Preferred—or was it Deferred? He wished he could help her in her battle, but unfortunately, though he had shrewd ideas as to the price at which one could buy Danish butter forward, he knew nothing about steel.

By six o'clock that night anything that looked like steel was extremely unpopular with Geoffrey Hanibar, for Stedman's Preferred had dropped to five and a quarter. On the morning Hulfer came grumbling back to the office it stood at two and a half.

Geoffrey wrote a very carefully phrased letter to his partner.

As to the question of Mona Dawson's future . . . well, that could wait. He would never desert her—if she would wait for him.

He decided this much in the cab between Waterloo and Ave Maria Lane—decided the matter with such instant resolve that Mona Dawson for the moment became a tractable and a docile quantity.

Certainly Mona could wait until everything of importance was settled, and all the jumble and litter of life were sorted and filed away into their proper compartments.

If he had a million. . . . Now suppose some prosperous old gentleman were to see in him a resemblance to a long-gone son. . . . Or a couple of thousand even. People have left wallets in cabs containing tens of thousands. There was no wallet on the floor or even under the cushion, or tucked away behind the fold-up seat—or anywhere.

It is as easy to think in millions. Now suppose he met a bank robber, recognised him, and the bank robber said: "For God's sake let me go—here's a million!" Or two millions. . . .

The cab crawled along New Bridge Street and panted up Ludgate Hill.

He would say to Hulfer:

"Sorry about that business, old boy. I realise that I should not have taken partnership money to speculate with. Here's a hundred thousand."

Or fifty thousand. As a matter of fact, Hulfer would be jolly glad to get his share of the ten thousand back. Mona Dawson had lost more.

Where had that money gone? Who was the wise bird who had sold him Steel Preferred at seven? And who was the hopeless imbecile who would have to sell out at two and a half? Geoffrey Hanibar wiped his face with a large white silk handkerchief.

He paid the cab and glanced up at the first floor, where "Hulfer & Hanibar, Produce Merchants" was repeated three times on three separate windows.

Mona Dawson could wait, and Mr. Hulfer was waiting. Geoffrey braced his shoulders and walked stiffly up the stairs. He turned the handle of the door and stalked in.

The staff looked up from a ledger and smiled wanly. She was an uncomely girl, with protruding teeth and offensively fair hair.

" 'Morning," said Mr. Hanibar, stood for a moment at the door marked private, and, drawing a deep breath, went in.

Hulfer was writing a letter. He glanced up for the fraction of a second, his lips moved but there was no sound.

The junior partner hung up his hat and umbrella on a shabby-looking stand and sat down at his own desk. There were no letters. Even his wastepaper basket had been removed.

He hated Hulfer. He hated his thin, sandy hair and his wispy yellow moustache; he hated his habit of working in his shirt-sleeves winter and summer, and his imitation jade links. And Hulfer wore paper protectors on his cuffs, a vulgar and abominable habit.

Now he carefully wiped the nib of his pen and laid it down, ran his ugly fingers through his hair and leaned back.

"I gotcher letter," he said, in his thin, querulous voice. "I don't know what we're goin' to do about it, 'm sure. You're not a child; you're old enough to know right from wrong. I don't know what's to be done, 'm sure."

He shook his head and stared out of the rain-drenched window.

"If I had my own interest to think about—well, I don't know what I'd do, 'm sure. But I've got a wife 'n' three children and *her* mother—'n' there's bills to meet—Clewford & Hale were here this mornin'—'n' the bank 'n' everything. I'm at my wits' end. Can you get the money?"

"No," said Geoffrey firmly, "I can't. I'm afraid you'll have to prosecute me."

That would settle the matter of Mona Dawson; in that one thunderous cataclysm her wail would be lost.

Mr. Hulfer looked at his partner.

"You'd get nine months," he said, and was almost bright.

Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders.

"It can be nine years as far as I am concerned," he said.

His partner stared at the window and seemed to be calculating something.

"Say seven," he said. "That would bring you out in 1935. My eldest would be eighteen. Lord, how time flies!"

"It's my time you're talking about," said Geoffrey gently. "Probably it will not fly for me."

Mr. Hulfer sat back in his chair, and thrust his hands deep in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"I shall have to give evidence, I suppose," he complained. "I don't know where I'm going to find the time, 'm sure. Whatcher do with the money?"

He was beginning to show a faint interest.

"I speculated—for the firm," said Geoffrey, with great resolution. "If there had been any profits we would have shared them."

Mr. Hulfer's eyebrows went up, and he closed his eyes.

"Don't be silly; there'll be no profits. What did you buy—cheese? I was wondering if you'd gone into the cheese market. I read in the papers there's been a big rise——" He shook his head. "No, it can't be cheese."

"Steel," said Geoffrey in a steely voice.

Mr. Hulfer nearly jumped out of his chair.

“Steel? Good God! What do we want with steel?” he asked, horror-stricken.

“You can’t have cheese knives without steel.” Geoffrey was almost offensive. “They’re complements.”

“Steel!” wailed Mr. Hulfer. “Suffering snakes! Whatcher want with steel?”

There was a long and exciting silence.

“Have you informed the police?”

“No.” Hulfer looked out of the window vaguely. “No, I haven’t done anything. Knocked me off my feet, your letter. And as for being for the firm, that’s all bunkum. I wouldn’t have taken a penny—you know me, Hanibar—not a cent. If it’d been cheese—or even eggs! But steel—you must have been mad!”

Here Geoffrey found an explanation for his act which was quite agreeable.

“I *was* mad. I was not responsible for my actions.”

Here Mr. Hulfer, himself a business man, demolished the possible defence.

“There’s no sense in pleading insanity, Hanibar—not for fraud. For murder, yes.”

Then he turned with surprising rapidity in his swing chair.

“Haven’t you any friends you could borrow the money from? I hear you’re in with that Buller crowd. A man I met on the boat said they’ve money to burn—he’s Steel!”

“He’s Wood,” said Geoffrey.

Another pause, less exciting, more awkward.

“Well, I suppose you’ll be getting along now,” said Mr. Hulfer, and swung back to his task. “They’ll know where to find you. I’ll have to see the lawyers this afternoon.”

As Geoffrey reached the door the voice of his partner arrested him.

“Three years—that’s about all you’ll get. That’s what they gave to the head clerk of Turnbull & Smith, and he took fourteen thousand.”

Geoffrey slammed the door.

He decided to lunch at the club. It would be the last time he would enter the stately portals of that establishment. He wanted to write to Mona, and tell her that the money he had lost had nothing to do with his defalcation. He might ask her to wait for him, though he was less inclined to make this demand upon her loyalty than he had been.

He was desperately anxious to find some formula which would prove that he was a plain, ordinary, systematic embezzler but not a fool. His one fear was that she would be sorry for him. Perhaps, sitting amidst the wreckage of her fortune, she had forgotten all about his humble contribution. It might be wiser to say nothing.

He saw a newspaper bill, "Suicide of Well-known City Man," and wondered whether he was well known enough to qualify for a news-bill all to himself. "Provision Merchant in the Dock"—but nobody really cared what happened to provision merchants.

He walked up the steps into the big marble hall, and there stood Mr. Derek Buller—plump, offensively prosperous. He was standing in his favourite attitude, his stubby legs apart, his hands in his pockets. He was a great key jingler.

"Hullo!" Mr. Buller greeted him with a scowl. "How's the butter-and-egg business?"

Geoffrey did not reply. It occurred to him at that moment that there was a better way of hiding his defalcation than any. That razor of his that he'd bought in Germany—it wasn't sharp enough to shave with, but it would cut a throat rather neatly.

"Come and lunch," said the plump man. "I want to talk to you."

Geoffrey's first inclination was to seize this loathsome figure, hurl it to the ground and trample upon it. His second inclination was to pass on without a word. Mr. Buller assisted his decision by taking him by the arm and leading him to the members' dining-room.

"Seen Mona lately? What a girl—eh? Quite mad . . . unreasonable? No women are reasonable, and Mona"—he clicked his lips—"the limit, eh? Women in business—good God!"

They sat down at a little table, Geoffrey still in some doubt as to the attitude he should adopt.

"You're a friend of hers," Derek went on. "Couldn't you have a talk with her? *Sole Mornay*—and don't forget the butter sauce. Couldn't you say to

her—— No, I don't want pork. Let's have a look at the menu. Couldn't you say to her—— Roast lamb—is it good? Red currant jelly and new potatoes. . . . Well, you ought to have new potatoes. Couldn't you just drop a hint—— No, the last spinach I had here was gritty. I'll write to the committee if it occurs again. I can't stand gritty spinach. Not exactly a hint, but a good heart-to-heart talk . . ."

"About spinach?" asked Geoffrey, when the waiter had departed.

"Don't be absurd—about money."

He leaned over the table and laid four white sausages, which he called fingers, on Geoffrey's quivering arm.

"Money isn't everything, old boy. There's something in the world besides money—the great world, flowers—er——"

"Roast lamb?" suggested Geoffrey, and Derek was pained.

"Never make fun of sacred subjects, old boy. But there is . . . the world . . . life . . . love."

"Oh, that!" said Geoffrey.

Mr. Buller nodded.

"Now, you're a prosperous business man, but you understand what I mean? You've probably been through it. You've got sense."

Geoffrey unfolded his napkin and spread it on his knees.

"What's this all about?" he asked wearily. "In the first place, let me assure you that my word would carry little weight with Miss Dawson; and as for money——"

"I asked her to marry me—that's between ourselves." Derek got very confidential. "But she's got another fellow in her eye." He looked despairingly around the room. "That's not womanly, you know, old boy, having a man in your eye. A girl should wait till she's asked. My dear mother had no idea that my dear father wanted to marry her until he asked her."

"And did he want to marry her?" asked the interested Geoffrey.

Mr. Buller smiled indulgently, and became instantly serious.

"She's in with one of these big market men, crazy about him. Personally, I think he's been advising her. I went to her yesterday and I said: 'Mona, what's the idea? You'll never ruin us; we have had our lesson and we're not

likely to forget it. We thought you sold short. Let bygones be bygones.' But no!" He shook his head.

Geoffrey was bewildered.

"I don't quite understand——" he began.

"She sold her own stock down to two and a half. Is that decent? And we simply had to let go. I'd have given you a tip—but it's too late. Stedman's Preferred went up to ten this morning. She's simply broken my father's heart. Why did she do it? To make a few hundred thousand dollars for somebody who probably doesn't want the money."

Geoffrey gripped on to the edge of the table.

"She told me this morning," said Derek, who never stopped talking. " 'Derek,' she said, 'I've let a friend of mine into this deal, and he's going to make a hundred thousand pounds or nothing.' "

"And has he?" Geoffrey's voice was deep and booming, infinitely more unreal than it had ever been.

Derek nodded vigorously.

"More than that. I don't know how much he was in for, but he must have cleared a packet."

Again the four white sausages descended on Geoffrey's arm.

"Couldn't you go to her and say this . . ."

Geoffrey never knew what he had to say. He could recover from his memory references to steel and love and the world and flowers and bygones, but he had failed to piece them together intelligently when he was shown into Mona Dawson's drawing-room.

She met him with outstretched arms. In her eyes was a soft, almost maternal glow.

"I've killed Poppa Buller," she said. "Isn't it wonderful? My New York agent has cabled me that he took to his bed yesterday morning and refuses to eat. How long can people live without eating, darling?"

BLUE SUIT

Many men had tried to scrape acquaintance with Lucia Bradfield. They had waited for her outside the James Street flat; they had smiled at her in the park, and looked over their shoulders to see if she was looking over *her* shoulder. They had offered to change seats with her, and to lift or lower windows, and had told her many hundreds of times that it was a fine day.

The man in the blue suit informed her one spring afternoon that her stockings were coming down.

It was in the park, a wintry and a blustery day, and he spoke without apology in such a matter-of-fact way; that he might have been informing embarrassed ladies all his life that their stockings were adrift.

He turned his back upon her whilst she restored tension.

"Thank you very much," she said, as she passed him.

"Not at all."

No more than that. He didn't seem terribly interested in her. She wondered why he did not wear an overcoat. The next day she saw him again, and he was wearing an overcoat. She had a feeling that she knew him when he nodded as she passed. It was just a friendly "Hello, you" nod, and he did not smile. He was rather good-looking—a soldier, she supposed. There was a rough-haired terrier who looked at him affectionately.

A week after this she was sitting on a park seat and he sat down beside her, brushing the dog away.

"Down, Joe—go catch rabbits . . ."

Joe ambled off with a sneer; rabbits do not live in Hyde Park.

"Curious dog that," he said. He did not ask permission to light his pipe. "He's not used to ladies. I live in a club."

"Indeed!" She was coldly indifferent, prepared for the next advance, but it did not come. He gazed across the melancholy stretch of green at the dun and purple west. She was only waiting for him to speak again, and she would have taken that as a signal to rise. Not that she objected to being spoken to by a strange man, but she objected to the idea that he might think that she did not object. But he was most irritatingly silent.

Presently he rose, whistled the dog, and went off. This time he smiled, and touched the brim of his hat, but the smile was as mechanical as that touch of brim.

That is how her friendship with the man in the blue suit began, and it developed unexcitingly. He collected stamps, and had been wounded in the war. He rather liked certain things and places which she rather liked. He never spoke on any subject that did not interest her. On the other hand, he did not speak about himself, which was unusual in a man.

One day she thought he looked at her with a new interest, but for all that his speech was more laconic, and once he said, "It's a terrible pity," and she did not know what he was talking about.

Mr. Thirtley knew nothing whatever about these meetings, otherwise he would have understood the lack of sympathy she showed in certain enterprises of his, especially in relation to Andrew Murdoch.

The first time Mr. Thirtley saw Murdoch was at the "Ten-Ace Club." That sombre visitor was playing cards with three very clever young men, who played cards every day except on the Yom Kippur—for they were orthodox, and believed that bad luck followed men who practised their profession on holy days.

As Mr. Murdoch left the club, the genial Thirtley took him affectionately by the arm.

"My dear boy!"—he could be heavily paternal—"my dear boy, how on earth did you get into that company? Dear, dear, dear! They would steal your eyebrows. Have you lost much?"

Mr. Murdoch confessed that he had lost thirty pounds, and his new friend was annoyed. The thought of a person being plucked by any but his skilled hands was almost painful.

"I seldom go to the place. But I am something of a psychologist, and these dens interest me . . ."

He spoke quite a lot about "dens," and himself and his niece, who did not quite approve of card-playing "for money."

"I don't often play bridge," said Andrew Murdoch, with a quick and a confident smile. "Piquet is my game—I'm supposed to be the best player in Sydney. But it is rather awkward in London if you don't know people."

Mr. Thirtley decided that this affluent stranger should know him. And Lucia, of course—he could hardly work this one without Lucia.

Three weeks later, Lucia listened whilst her uncle propounded a plan. And in the end she asked a pertinent question:

"If I don't do this, what happens?"

Mr. Thirtley's large and unpleasant face wrinkled up into a grin.

"Don't be stupid," he said. "Don't annoy me—don't argue with me. Don't get sentimental or sanctimonious. You're not a child. This Australian fellow is easy money. There's no danger, no risk. He's got twelve thousand in the Midland North and he's sweet on you."

"He hasn't got twelve thousand shillings of his own—but you've got fifty thousand, and you're free to come and go," she said coolly. "I have not been working very long at this nefarious profession, but I know 'enough' when I see it. Dartmoor is filled with people who wanted to make the cab-fare to the bank and lost the lot. If he is sweet on me, I'm not sweet on him. And blackmail is dirty—*I* think."

Mr. Thirtley went red to the crown of his bald head.

"It's not blackmail!" he said loudly. "And don't call it that. Gosh! What's the matter with you? Have you gone crazy or something? This last month or two you've been . . . well!"

He was genuinely amazed as he stared at her.

Lucia Bradfield was very pretty and very alluring. From the top of her smooth-cropped head to the under sole of her brocaded shoes, she was a picture of beautiful modernity. The petite figure, the small, childish face, the peculiar grace of every movement—Mr. Thirtley was well aware of her charms, without being impressed by them. He had trained his sister's daughter from her childhood, for, being a far-sighted man, he realised more and more that the old style in side partners led to complications. He had never seen the interior of a prison cell, and had no desire to enjoy that experience. But working Europe without a second pair of hands was a nervous business. As the years progressed, he realised more and more his own limitation. He had no longer the cherubic, innocent face which deceived the moneyed classes of the 'nineties. Into his expression had crept just that hint of slyness which made possible victims button their hip pockets. The partner was a necessity, and so Lucia Bradfield had been taken from school (where his money had kept her, as he told her time and time again) at the age of sixteen.

He was absurdly proud of his work. Lucia was a unique production. Dickens and others of these writing fellows had described the training of

thieves, but that was all imagination and nonsense (he told himself). Those things did not happen in real life. "Bo" Parker, the "con" man, had once trained a girl he was sweet on, but he caught her out of her teens, and when he trained her she went off to work with Mr. Thirtley, and when "Bo" got cross and bloodthirsty, finished by shopping "Bo" and getting him seven years.

Incidentally, "Bo" had pulled down with him one "Crewe" Wall, a master of his art, though this testimony did nothing to lighten his sentence. As to this girl . . . Mr. Thirtley sighed at the memory. She had most unaccountably got religious, and married an evangelical policeman.

Mr. Thirtley was a psychologist, and psychology had been his long suit in the training of his niece.

"You're being difficult, Lucia. I warned you against this. Here's a man ____"

"I'm not at all keen on him, if that is what you're going to say," she interrupted; "but this is a new kind of joke, and my puritan instincts are all sitting up and making faces! I'm sorry. I've helped you with quite a lot of experiments, but none of them has had 'love' in it. And when you ask me to accept the attentions of this man and lay my beautiful head on his shoulder and let him breathe on me, you are going outside the contract."

Lucia *was* difficult. She always was difficult; and John Thirtley was to blame, for if the truth was told, there was the colour of austerity in the constitution of his own tangled nature, and he had excluded from the curriculum all that pertained to love, real and otherwise. But she was more difficult now than ever she had been. He thought of a sometime partner who had got religion. And here was a good killing that asked for the knife. Twelve thousand easy pounds vaguely ear-marked for agricultural machinery.

"Don't let us descend to the intellectual level of back-chat comedians," he said. "Put on your hat—I'm hungry."

All the way to the Empirical Restaurant, Lucia was thoughtful and abstracted. That man in the blue suit . . . she wondered what he would think if he knew. . . . Mr. John Thirtley mistrusted the symptoms of his niece, but was too wise to reveal his pardonable irritation. For his own part, he was uneasy. He hated that reference to the famous "Bo" Parker, who, with a big bank roll (which the lawyers divided neatly), had gone after his car fare, as the saying goes, and had been "caught for seven."

“Pah!” said Mr. Thirtley.

The girl sighed and became aware of him.

“What are you pah-ing about?”

“Silliness—that’s what. Don’t argue with me. This Murdoch man is Cash in Hand.”

“Let’s see,” she said.

Andrew Murdoch was waiting in the marble-panelled vestibule of the Empirical. A lank, clean-shaven man with very serious eyes that lit up at the sight of the girl. Mr. Thirtley he scarcely saw, you might suppose.

“I want to tell you something funny,” he began.

When he smiled he was very handsome; for the sake of her own peace of mind, she hoped he would remain in his more dour mood.

“I’d love to be amused, but I’m famished.”

She walked ahead of him into the jade and silver decorated restaurant. The table had been reserved in a window rather aloof from other tables—Mr. Thirtley had seen to that.

“Now make me laugh,” she said—she was smiling already.

“Most extraordinary thing happened. When I was coming out of the bank, a fellow came up to me—a detective fellow.”

“Eh?” Mr. Thirtley blinked and became alert.

“He was very decent—in fact, he was rather interesting. Apparently our High Commissioner’s office give Scotland Yard the names of all Australians who come to London with a lot of money. I don’t know how they know, but evidently they do.”

“What did he want?”

Mr. Thirtley asked this carelessly.

“Nothing, really. He said that they were expecting a fellow in town—what was the name, again? . . . a confidence man . . .”

Mr. Thirtley could have supplied a dozen names: they hovered about his tongue.

“ ‘Crewe’ Wall—that was the name,” said Murdoch suddenly. “They’re on the look-out for him—the police, I mean. They say he could charm money out of a grindstone—at least, that is what the detective said.”

Mr. Thirtley could have agreed with this judgment. “Crewe” Wall. He scratched his nose thoughtfully. He had been unintentionally responsible for Crewe’s temporary downfall. But he was relieved that the police warning had not embraced himself.

“I’ve never heard of the rascal,” he said. He would have spoken the exact truth if he had admitted that he had never seen the rascal.

After lunch, Mr. Thirtley drove his niece home to their flat in James Street.

“I have asked him to come to dinner, but I rather fancy it was the lure of your bright eyes, darling, that made him fall.”

He was almost gay, though from the conversation at lunch she gathered that he had no reason to be.

“What is this about his winning eight hundred pounds from you at piquet?”

Mr. Thirtley smiled beneficently.

“On balance thirty, on the night’s trading eight hundred. He is the best player in Sydney,” he said, without any hint of sarcasm in his voice. “He is here, as I told you before, on behalf of the Australian Trading Company, and I must confess that I was puzzled when I heard that poor puling infant has twelve thousand pounds that he could draw on his signature—countersigned by the London Manager. But his father is a rich squatter, and has put him into this job——”

She made an impatient gesture.

“Must you tell me that again? You bite into the twelve thousand; he gives a cheque on the account and gives a fair to middling imitation of his manager’s signature on the cheque. You come in to lend him the money to cover the forgery, and we all live happily ever afterwards.”

She talked monotonously, as though she were reciting a lesson.

“And if he doesn’t put his manager’s signature to the cheque, I’m to burst into tears and tell him we shall be ruined. It seems fairly elementary to me, and so full of snags that it is almost childish.”

She raised her hand to check the storm of his anger.

“But you are the best judge, I know. I’ve heard it three-six-five days in the year—except leap year. But I do no weeping!”

He looked at her through narrowed eyelids.

“I don’t quite follow there, Lucia,” he said slowly. “I’m a little dense.”

She was doggedly emphatic.

“I don’t want to do any more of—anything.”

She saw his face go purple, and awaited the outburst, but to her surprise it did not come. Instead, he broke into a cackle of laughter.

“And is this the girl who helped trim the three young men from Hollywood——” he began, but she turned on him in a cold fury.

“I’m through—do you understand that? I’m through! I’m sick and tired of this—I hate it, every minute of it! I didn’t know how beastly it was until ____”

She hesitated here.

“Until?” he asked ominously.

She shrugged her well-shaped shoulders.

“Until I saw just where I was—that’s good enough for you. There are one or two other professions I could follow, and I like this least.”

He smiled mysteriously.

“My little duck”—his voice was very gentle—“you reminded me of fifty thousand pounds in the old stocking, and I’ll remind you of twenty-five per cent. interest that’s coming your way. There’s no reason why that fifty shouldn’t be sixty-two . . . anyway, I don’t suppose it will be necessary for you to do any more than jolly him along.”

“You’ll have to do your own jollying,” she said. “I’m going out for a walk. This place——”

“Stifles you?” suggested the man sardonically. “Lucia, love, I’m stopping your subscription to the lending library—you’re getting full of sentimental clichés!”

Her mind was a storm as she walked quickly through the park. She hated everything. The people who had been drawn to the park by the spring sunshine, the prosperity of those who dwelt in the lordly houses that fringe the park, the dull and honest people who passed her . . . herself most. She hoped she would not see the man in the blue suit, who of late had adopted tweeds and had lost his right to his original title. And even as she hoped, she

sought for him. Her heart gave a little leap when she saw him under a tree, sitting on a garden chair, his terrier leaping up to his hand.

He got up, hauled another chair to the side of his own, waited till she sat down before he was seated.

"Are you terribly honest?" she asked recklessly. "Most men aren't, I know. Or are you just honest, like everybody else?"

This imperturbable man was in no sense surprised by the question.

"I'm afraid I'm terribly honest," he said; and she nodded grimly.

"And you hate thieves, don't you, and tricksters, and the cheap, mean crooks who live by their wits?"

He considered this question. He had a trick of considering even the most unimportant questions with exasperating deliberation. That he should ponder this very vital matter seemed natural.

"I'm not passionately attached to them. Of course, a lot would depend upon the circumstances."

"For God's sake don't be so cautious!"

She was stung to the profanity, and he was not offended.

All she was saying now she had had no intention of saying. She had rehearsed no word that came pouring forth; was unconscious that she had ever given her preposterous offer one mad moment of thought. Yet it must have been all in her, or she could not have said what she did.

"I have never asked you your name, and you've never asked me mine, and I should have hated you if you had been so conventional. But I know you're not married—that you're not a rich man, and that you like me."

He did not answer, but she saw in his eyes that she had spoken the truth, and when she heard his little half-uttered sigh she would have been wild with delight but for what had to come.

"Suppose I were a thief . . . a confederate of thieves, trained to—oh, all kinds of mean crimes? With my eyes open. Suppose I told you that I had been guilty of all kinds of nastiness except one? And I said I was sick and tired of it all, and I want to get out of it? I want to spell life with everybody's alphabet, and not one that's been invented for me. Suppose I said will you take me . . . marry me, I mean . . . and let me keep house without servants. And mend and sew and cook . . ."

Her voice grew husky; she stopped for want of breath. She was looking at him wide-eyed, frantic with fear.

"Yes." He nodded twice. "If you're prepared for . . . meanness too. I don't mean I'm a thief. If you'll forgive me lots of things . . ."

He tried to appear very much at his ease, but when he made an effort to fill his pipe she saw his hand was trembling and she loved him for it.

"I'll see you some time . . . when?"

She was on her feet now, breathless, as though she had run a mile.

"Here." She pointed to the chair. "I'll be here at one o'clock to-morrow, and we'll fix things."

He nodded—the old, curt, friendly nod—but did not attempt to take her hand or seize the opportunity for awkward endearments that the occasion seemed to justify. Only he looked after her for a long time, indeed until she was out of sight; and he had never done that before.

She came back to the flat exalted. . . . Mr. Thirtley heard her singing in her bath, and grinned.

"Tantrums . . . naughty tantrums!" he said.

He dressed—he always dressed for dinner, even when they were alone; one never knew who might call in upon them, and evening dress was very impressive. He saw how bright her eyes were, heard something of the gaiety in her voice.

"Never seen you look better, Lucia . . . marvellous! You being a good girl?"

He fixed his monocle in his eye and patted her paternally.

She nodded.

"Sure I'm being a good girl," she mimicked.

At that moment the flat bell rang, and the maid ushered in Mr. Andrew Murdoch. And Lucia noticed that he was not as attentive to her as he had been at lunch. He gave her the impression of suppressed excitement; talked about his local manager, who was, as they knew, in Paris; talked more about himself; but always he addressed John Thirtley, ignoring the girl almost entirely. After dinner, Mr. Thirtley unfolded the card table, dropped two unopened packs upon the green cloth.

“This is very immoral, but I have a feeling you want to follow up your luck.”

The eagerness which Mr. Andrew Murdoch displayed confirmed John Thirtley’s view.

The girl waited. She had her back to the dining table, her hands gripping the edge, her eyes fixed upon the young man; but never once did he look up.

“Sit down!” Thirtley was irritable. “You’re getting on my nerves to-night, Lucia.”

Meekly she obeyed his instructions, drew a chair to where she could watch the play. And Mr. Thirtley’s play was well worth watching. There never was, in the history of crime, so great an artist as he; no conjurer could change a pack with such amazing speed. You saw the shuffling cards in his hand, but before they were laid on the table another pack had been substituted. Even Lucia, who had watched this artist for years, never knew where the old pack went to, from what strange pockets and hiding-places came the faked deck.

An hour passed, two hours. The frown deepened on Murdoch’s face. The little pile of I.O.U.’s by Thirtley’s side grew higher and higher. It was half past ten; the room was thick with cigar smoke. Mr. Thirtley walked to the window and pushed it open. He came back to find the young man sitting at the dining table, his head clasped in his hands.

“You have had monstrous luck.”

Murdoch could not see the face of his host, did not know, as he chewed his cigar, that that face was one ecstatic smile.

“Seven thousand three hundred is a lot of money . . . really, I almost wish I hadn’t persuaded you to play.”

And then Murdoch did a curious thing; he put his hand in his waistcoat pocket, and took out a square piece of paper. This he unfolded, and revealed to the astonished eyes of Thirtley a £1000 note.

“Can you change this?” he asked. “I’ll give you five hundred on account.”

Thirtley hesitated.

“I’ll change it if you like, but it will do to-morrow.”

Murdoch shook his head unsmilingly.

“I’d like to give you something on account,” he said.

Mr. Thirtley took the note, examined it with an expert eye. Thousand-pound notes are very rare, but this one was genuine.

He went out, closing the door behind him. Lucia slipped swiftly to the young man’s side and shook him by the shoulder.

“You’re not going to pay this——”

“You shut up!”

She stared at Murdoch incredulously. The dull agony had vanished from his face; in his eyes was a sinister light which made her shrink back. “You stay right here and don’t squeal! If you do, I’ll come back and spoil that face of yours. Do you get that, sister?”

She could only stare at him open-mouthed. In another second he was out of the room, and down the passage on the track of his host.

Lucia sat petrified with astonishment and fear. She heard a muttered colloquy, the door was opened violently, and Thirtley was pushed in, his face ashen white. And behind him, carrying a black iron box in one hand and a long-barrelled Browning in the other, was Murdoch.

“You know me, I guess—‘Crewe’ Wall. I’ve been waiting a long time for you, brother—aw, shut up! I know all about it! When you squealed on ‘Bo’ you squealed on me! The only thing I didn’t know was whether you parked your bullion at the bank or in the house. I’ve wasted a whole lot of time making sure.”

He shook the black tin box.

“Squeal again, Thirtley—you and that dame of yours can start afresh, but don’t start on me—see?”

The door behind him, which he had slammed when he came in, was opening slowly. Lucia saw it and at first thought that it was the wind. And then . . .

“Are you two men going quietly, or are you giving a lot of trouble? Put that gun down, Crewe. You know the law. I want you on an old warrant—and you on a new one, Thirtley.”

The man in the blue suit was in the doorway, very earnest, rather urgent. Behind him she saw, like one in a dream, face upon face, all remarkably soldier-like and uninterested. The man in the blue suit slipped Crewe’s gun into his pocket and passed the two men out, one by one.

Presently the room was left empty save for him and Lucia.

“My name is Larry Goldwin,” he said. “I know yours, but you might write down the date of your birth and the name of your father and mother . . . sorry.”

With shaking hands she wrote what he told her.

“Registrars want to know that sort of thing,” he said apologetically. “At one o’clock under the same tree.”

She nodded.

“I hope you’ll get on with the dog,” he said; “I think you will—Joe’s very reasonable.”

BATTLE LEVEL

Dalberry came down the broad and ornate stairway slowly, pulling on his gloves.

The man waiting at the foot of the stairs, gripping convulsively at the wooden pillar, watched the descending figure pleadingly.

"How—is she—all right?" he croaked. "What . . . how . . . is she?"

He was a plain man inclined to baldness, and he was unshaven. Never especially attractive, he was now almost grotesque, for his eyes were red with weeping, and perspiration beaded his face.

"How is she?" repeated Grant Dalberry absently. "Oh, she's all right."

"All right?"

The man grasped his sleeve.

"Are you sure . . . all right? She will live?"

Mr. Dalberry brought his mind back to the moment.

"Live? Of course she'll live, my dear Mr. Goldberg," he smiled. "It wasn't much of an operation, you know, I wonder you did not get your own doctor to do it; it was hardly a case for a surgeon."

"I had to have you, doctor," quavered the other, wiping his face with a hand that trembled and set the fire dancing on the big ring on his finger. "It was . . . my wife. They told me you were the best man in London. They call you 'Mister,' don't they, not 'Doctor'? That's always a high-class sign. . . . My God, I am thankful!"

He shook the other's hand vigorously. His palm was moist and unpleasant, his tears were unrestrained, and affected Grant Dalberry uncomfortably.

He surveyed his host with a curious, searching look. Here was a man, coarse, illiterate, rather impossible from the doctor's fastidious standpoint, hard as nails, yet all broken up by his love for the stout, middle-aged woman who had been recently under the surgeon's hand.

The divinity of love ennobled this commonplace Hebrew diamond merchant, softened his hard corners, and gave to him a strange dignity.

"Wait—wait, doctor!"

Goldberg waddled into his garish parlour, and came back with a little blue leather case.

"You've been very kind to me. . . . Rachel says you've got the patience of an angel. . . . This is something . . . for your wife, if you'll excuse the liberty."

He opened the case under the eyes of the protesting Dalberry.

"I won't take no, sir—I won't indeed! It's nothin'—a few stones, but pretty . . ."

The case held a beautiful diamond pendant.

"My dear good fellow," laughed Dalberry, and pressed the case back into the other's refusing hand, "I appreciate your kindness, but really I've done nothing—and what little I have done, I shall charge you for—and precious heavily!"

But the little man insisted. He followed the doctor to his car, and for five minutes Endesleigh Gardens was edified by the spectacle of a bare-headed and voluble gentleman in a velvet coat engaged in a strenuous argument with a man who looked twenty-five when he smiled.

"They're worth £500," said Dalberry, "and I couldn't think of taking them."

For all his evident amusement he was a little annoyed, since the argument had attracted a small audience. There were the inevitable two small boys all agape, and an unpromising and seedy young man with a crooked nose. It was like Dalberry to notice the crooked nose.

"See here, Mr. Goldberg," he said at last, to end a situation which was fast becoming ridiculous, "I'll take this beautiful thing home and show my wife, and I will let you know to-morrow whether she will accept it."

This was an easy way out. Margaret would as soon think of spending a week-end with this impossible merchant's family as accepting his gifts.

He thought of Goldberg all the way back to his flat. Here at any rate was a man happily married, devoted to his wife though he was childless. Yet this did not seem to have diminished the affection and faith these two unprepossessing people had in one another. He had read aright the terror in the man's eyes at the very prospect of losing the woman who filled his sphere. Dalberry smiled, but it was not a pleasant smile.

The Goldbergs had been fortunate. They were foreordained one for the other. As for Grant Dalberry, he had forced his fate, had conducted a tempestuous wooing, and had carried Margaret Massingham off her feet before he or she had realised that they were people of two worlds, lived and thought two lives, and were possessed of no common interest.

Margaret was a creature of the field, the open air, the countryside. She was at home on the links, was happiest following hounds, and both hated and feared (as a healthy person must) the profession which her husband followed. She never came to his study; his white sterilisers with their glass shelves and orderly array of glittering instruments gave her "the creeps," she said. If he talked "shop," she left the room.

She loathed the atmosphere of pain and sorrow which his patients brought to the big house in Devonshire Street, and in time she came to fear him a little also. All the things he liked, she detested. He was physically a lazy man and would not walk a dozen yards if he could find a taxi; he was neat in his attire and methodical; she was careless and had neither method nor system; and there were no children.

Things had gone from bad to worse. The currents of their divergent tastes led them farther and farther apart. There was no question of ideals. In the bigger matters of life, in their consideration of the great themes, they saw eye to eye. But happy marriages are not founded on a common adherence to grand principles. Two people in complete agreement that it is wrong to murder, iniquitous to commit adultery, and contemptible to engage in swindling practices, may find cause for much unhappiness in the clash of their views on house management.

Grant Dalberry passed up to his study, entered the particulars of the operation he had just performed in his case-book, and, pulling up an arm-chair to the fire, reached for his pipe and tobacco-jar.

Margaret was out, but presently he heard her voice in the corridor, and, remembering the jewel in his pocket, rose and went in search of her. She was in her sitting-room, and he knocked at the door.

She looked at him suspiciously as he entered the room. That was the maddening attitude she had adopted for nearly a year.

They had grown to the point where they were both a little stiff and unnatural in one another's company, and it was a lame narrative he had to relate, the more so since he was endeavouring all the time to tell her of Mr.

Goldberg's gift without dwelling upon the nature of the service which he had rendered to Mr. Goldberg's wife.

"I could not think of accepting such a present," she said decisively.

She looked at the stones glittering on their background of blue velvet.

"It is very beautiful, of course, but—ugh!"

She shuddered and handed back the case.

"Why 'ugh'?" he asked wilfully.

He was in that perverse mood which comes to angry men when they find pleasure in inviting further irritation.

She made a weary gesture.

"My dear boy—let us talk about something else: I haven't very long, because I've to dress for Lady Callifar's dinner. You know very well why I shuddered. There are many reasons why I couldn't accept such a present, and one very good reason why I couldn't wear it. Do you think I should ever get out of my mind the manner in which it was earned?"

He left the room without another word and dined at his club, and in the course of the dinner and the cigar which followed with the coffee he came to a decision.

She hated town, he knew. If she had her way, she would not spend one week in the year in London. She had tried her best to hide the martyrdom of living with him; she should be a martyr no more.

He returned to Devonshire Street a little before his wife reached home, and surprised her by walking into her room almost on her heels.

She was in the act of closing the long french windows leading on to the balcony as he entered, and his professional instinct overcame his natural desire to plunge into the subject nearest his heart.

"You ought not to let the temperature of your room fall," he said. "There is plenty of ventilation, and on a chilly night like this——"

"I did not leave it open," she said. "Jackson must have forgotten to close it. Do you want to see me?"

He nodded.

She sat down, folding her hands meekly on her lap.

“For Heaven’s sake, Margaret, do not act the patient Griselda!” he said roughly.

“What would you like me to do?” she said, a faint flush of anger tinting her cheeks.

She was a beautiful girl, with fine, scornful eyes, a firm chin, and a mouth just a little too resolute. Yet there was in her a gracious femininity which was especially appealing, and doubly appealed at this moment to the hungry heart of her husband.

“I want you to listen,” he said quietly, “and take what I have to say as complimentary to yourself. Madge, you and I aren’t a pair. I’m a difficult sort of man, ten years your senior, and I’m in a profession which makes me a little hateful to you. We are all wrong and time isn’t setting us right. So ——”

“So?” she repeated when he paused.

There was no need to ask the question for she divined his meaning, and, to her astonishment, divined it with a panic sense of dismay and a constricted feeling at her heart.

“I think you and I had better part,” he said gently. “I’m not the man for you. I am fussy; I am lazy. I hate the outdoor life. I loathe walking and riding. In fact, I’m a slug.”

He found no reflection of his smile in her face.

“And I hate medicines and knives and things,” she said, and shivered again. “I can’t help it, Grant. I’m just born like that. I hate suffering and misery and would sooner die than see an operation.”

He nodded.

“You can have Hill Crest and your allowance of course,” he said, “and nobody——”

His eyes had wandered for a fraction of a second toward the door of her dressing-room. It stood ajar, but the window and the door of the room in which he stood were closed, and there was little or no wind. In these circumstances it was, to say the least, remarkable that the door had moved ever so slightly. She looked at him in perplexity.

“Why did you stop?” she asked.

He did not reply. Striding quickly across the floor he pushed open the door of her dressing-room, reached in his hand, and switched on the light.

Then he entered the room.

There was a man in the room, a man poorly dressed and at that moment in further embarrassment than his poverty caused him. Grant noticed the tell-tale jemmy on the dressing-table, but noted sooner the crooked nose of the burglar.

"It's all right, boss," said the delinquent. "It's a cop, an' I'll go quietly."

"I remember," nodded Grant; "you were after the pendant?"

The man nodded.

"This will mean two years for me," reflected the burglar philosophically, "but I'd sooner do five than have to listen to the junk you an' your missus have been talkin'!"

And Mr. Grant Dalberry felt remarkably uncomfortable.

Two years after this domestic comedy there was a great discussion in C 96.

It arose between a young man lately of the University of Oxford and another young man who, a few days before the declaration of war, had found a job driving an ice-waggon for the admirable Messrs. Fratti, and since the argument was on the subject of Italy, it was only natural that the honours of the night rested with the erstwhile servant of the greatest ice-cream merchant in London.

The two young men were spearing sardines out of a tin, and they were both very dirty. They wore soiled khaki clothing and great shapeless comforters about their necks, and though their conversation was carried on in whispers it was not regarded as private. They whispered because the enemy trenches were only one hundred yards away, and the enemy had a listening-post even closer. From Italy the discussion veered round to military systems and to conscription. The Oxford student did not quote Plato, because he was a nice boy and would not take a mean advantage, but the ex-driver of ice-waggons, having no such fine feelings, did quote (inaccurately) certain Socialist converts to Militarism.

The main conclusions which the argument produced were that it takes a lot of men to make an army, and that war is a leveller of classes.

"Look at me," said the driver proudly. "You wouldn't have spoken to me a year ago. Do you mean to tell me that you'd have got out of your bloomin'

motor-car——”

“I haven’t a motor-car, but don’t let that spoil your argument,” said the student.

“Well, out of your carriage,” insisted the other, desiring, after the manner of all great controversialists, to paint his contrasts in the most vivid colours.

“Make it a bicycle,” begged the other.

“Do you mean to tell me that you’d have given me the glad hand, ’Orace?”

Horace (it was not his name) grinned.

“Who knows?” he said diplomatically.

“War’s brought us all to a level,” whispered the driver fiercely. “It’s made a man of me an’ a man of you, me lad. A year ago—why, a year ago the likes of you would have despised me—you’d have spat at me.”

“I don’t spit,” said the student wearily. “Pass the sardines, Henry.”

But the other was too full of his thesis to accept the hint.

“It knocks the fads——”

“Silence!”

It was the sharp voice of the company commander.

The night was very still save for the “klik-klock” of an occasional rifle shot.

Far away to the right came a tremble of sound—a doleful “clong-clong-clong!” The warning was unmistakable. Somebody was hammering vigorously on a suspended brass cartridge case.

“That’s gas,” said the officer to his subordinate. “It can’t be a general gas attack——”

He peered through the sentry’s peephole.

Ahead lay the dark outline of the little rise between the two enemy trenches. It was a night of stars, and there was sufficient light to see what he was seeking.

For a while he saw nothing, and then over the rise there loomed a ghostly mist.

He swung round and hammered at the gong by his side.

“Masks!” he roared. “Stand to!”

A shower of heavy objects fell into the trench and exploded.

“Here they come!” yelled the officer.

“They” came a thousand strong behind the gas—a mass of grey figures with a rush.

The masks at the parapets glared devilishly toward the attacking host; somewhere on the left a machine-gun battery came into action, and a wounded artillery observer, crouching at the bottom of the trench with his lips glued to a telephone receiver, said confidentially:

“Square C 38—drum fire . . . the beggars are in the open, and you’ll get ’em beautifully, Clarence.”

Clarence (whose name was John) growled an order over his shoulder, and two batteries began to drip shrapnel over the venturesome thousand.

* * * * *

“My argument is,” said the ex-driver faintly, “that there’s nothin’ like war for givin’ . . . oh, Lord!”

They were getting him along the communication trench, and the way was rough and the angles very acute, and naturally the stretcher handles were for ever digging into the clayey sides.

“There ain’t no collectin’ station,” said a cheerful individual at their journey’s end.

“Why?” asked the bearers resentfully.

“Because it’s crumped,” responded the informative private triumphantly. “Hit by a bloomin’ coal-box, an’ the ’ole outfit straffed.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” said the indignant leader of Number 1 stretcher, “that there ain’t a doctor for these pore perishers?”

“That’s right,” replied the other.

Somebody came out of the darkness.

“Are these surgical cases?” he asked in a tone of authority.

“Yes, sir,” said half a dozen voices.

“The collecting station has been destroyed, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” said the guide, with reluctant admiration for the enemy’s marksmanship, “properly straffed.”

“I heard of it and came over,” said the stranger. “I have a motor-ambulance on the road. How many are there?”

There were three cases, and they had all received first-aid before they left the trench. There was a sort of hospital on the Arras road, said the ambulance chauffeur. It was nearer than the base hospital. He was half-way to this sort of hospital when he remembered that he had heard it was to be dismantled as being within range of the heavy guns.

He pulled up at the dark building and bustled off to make inquiries and to provide himself with any excuses that might be necessary. Presently he came back to the surgeon who, crouched in an uncomfortable position, was rebandaging one of the wounded men by the light of a pocket lamp.

“It’s all right, sir,” said the chauffeur in a tone of relief. “The hospital’s gone, but there’s a nurse in charge and plenty of stores.”

He assisted to carry the wounded men into the big hall—it had once been a village school. The providential nurse had lit an oil lamp, had pulled a long table to beneath it, and was covering the table-top with a waterproof sheet, for nurses do not require instructions in such things.

“Plenty of chloroform, sister?” asked the surgeon, slipping off his coat.

“Yes, doctor. The last of the stores do not go until to-morrow, and I was left in charge.”

Chauffeur and doctor laid the first of the patients on the table. The nurse disappeared, and came back with towels, dressing-tray, and basins. By the time she had drawn hot water from the big kettle on the still glowing fire in the rear kitchen the surgeon was ready for her.

“Now,” he said, “I think we’ll——”

He stared across the table.

“Margaret!” he gasped.

She was smiling.

“I knew your voice at once,” she said, and took him in with one long and approving glance.

His shirt was stained and torn. He had a day’s growth of beard, and he was lean with much physical exercise.

He looked at her in comic despair.

"I say . . ." he stammered, "this is a little operation, you know. . . . I shall want you to give him an anæsthetic . . . you won't like it . . ."

"Don't be absurd," she scoffed. "Will you use your own instruments or will you use ours? We have some awfully dinky ones!"

* * * * *

The third sufferer was on the table and was talkative.

"War," he said vaguely and weakly, "is grand. . . . Suppose you met me a year ago . . ."

"Give him a whiff or two," said Grant, and straightened his aching back whilst the girl dropped the sickly-smelling anæsthetic on the flannel cone.

"It's rum," Grant went on—he always talked as he worked—"here am I living the very life that I thought I should hate—doing my ten and fifteen miles a day—and here are you. . . . Lord, it is queer!"

She said nothing, watching in wonder and admiration the master-hand in its skilful application.

"I've never seen anybody as clever as you," she said.

"Flatterer," said Grant, without looking up.

"You are wonderful, you know. I've seen big things done in surgery, but you're just—wonderful."

"That will do," he said, signifying rather his satisfaction with his work than an admonishment. "Wake up, Tommy."

He pinched the cheek of the patient, who began to talk drowsily.

"Do you remember that night . . . the burglar with the crooked nose—he got six months, by the way—he was a rotten prophet," he chuckled . . . "and how we talked! You hated medicines like the devil."

"And you were a slug!" she said quickly. "Don't forget that!"

He was polishing the instrument he had used, and laughed.

"You said you would rather die than witness an operation."

"And you said——"

"At it again!"

The man on the table was speaking, half sanely, half in the haze of delirium.

“At it again—still talkin’ junk about what she don’t like an’ what you don’t like . . . you ought to go to war, you ought . . . made a human bein’ of me. . . .”

He subsided into an incoherent mutter of sound.

Grant looked down at the half-conscious patient. His nose was distinctly crooked.

“It has made human beings of us all,” he said, passing round the table to the girl.

He kissed her, and she put her arms tightly about his neck and held his face to hers for quite a long time.

THE AIR TAXI

Beneath them was a dull grey-green carpet, laced with white patterns that changed every second, dissolving one into the other, to appear in newer and more fantastic arabesques. Beneath, too, but nearer, were flying wisps of cloud torn to shreds by the fury of the pursuing sou'wester. Ahead was a more solid sky barrier, the purple and black vanguard of the storm.

The pilot shot a casual, but interested, glance at the clouds above, a tumbling, rolling mass of grey vapour that trailed bedraggled streamers behind.

Then he looked round at the small mechanic, a grimy youth, with a face like Fate. And the pilot grinned.

He was driving into the teeth of a gale, and the humming whistle of his wires had risen to a shriek that sounded clear above the throaty roar of his engines. He watched the blue blur of his tractor screw, only turning his head once: the wink of the Dungeness light came up to remind him that the minutes of daylight left to him were few. Night would come inkily and unpleasantly when he met the purple cloud bank now only a few miles ahead.

The forerunner of the greater storm came in the character of a terrific blast of wind that lifted the machine fifty feet in the air and dropped it as suddenly. The left wing went down and the machine slipped a thousand feet, a terrifying sideways toboggan down an airy chute. The one passenger gripped tightly at the rail and set his teeth, the small mechanic did not move. His eyes were glued to the leather-covered head of the pilot . . . then the airplane righted herself . . .

Below came the matted lights of Folkestone, and no sooner were they over land than the nose of the machine dropped and the roar of the engines ceased.

Not too soon did her wheels touch earth.

The rain was lashing down, stinging the faces of the men, drumming on the canvas wings audibly. The airplane came to a standstill and the pilot, unstrapping himself leisurely, swung to the ground and wiped the rain from his face with a movement that was peculiarly deliberate.

“Peace hath her vic-tories, no less renooned than war-r!” he said, in that queer Glasgow accent which is neither Irish nor Scotch, but has the fascinating qualities of both.

The passenger was stamping his feet on the soddened ground, unconscious apparently that the rain was still pouring down. The force of the storm, as experienced from the firm surface of the earth, was mild by comparison with the howling tornado which is produced when a 100 m.p.h. Liberty engine bucks against a 70 m.p.h. gale.

Therefore, Mr. George Jackson scarcely realised that more than a gentle shower was falling.

“Phew!” he said, relieved; then, looking round with eyebrows gathered in a frown, “This isn’t Croydon?”

“It’s the airth,” said the little man gently, and looked up at the sullen skies.

“It’s no’ so bad,” he said meditatively. “It’s a wee bit saft, but no’ what ye’d call tu-mool-tuous. But the airth is better till yon clood’s awa’.”

Mr. Thomas MacTavish, whom his associates called “Tam”—most of them being wholly ignorant of his surname—had chosen the Claybury Aerodrome for his descent in preference to one nearer London, for reasons not wholly unconnected with a significant noise made by his engine. He had guessed the trouble and chose the first available landing, for he took no uncommercial risks.

He stood looking after the passenger as he squelched across the soddened field, and on Tam’s face dawned the shadow of a smile.

The little mechanic had heaved himself from the fuselage and was walking round the machine, a look of anguish on his face.

“What’s hurting ye, Angus?” asked Tam.

The youth’s name was not Angus; it was, in fact, Henry Jones, and Tam had discovered him in a London slum and had elevated him to the dignity of apprentice aviator.

Henry Jones shook his head.

“This old bus has seen her best days,” he said, and clicked his lips discouragingly. “I never did think much of these Bristol machines,” he added, with gloom. “You mark my words, boss, one of these days there’ll be TROUBLE!”

Tam eyed him tolerantly.

"Ye miserable little devil," he said. "Ye never saw an airplane till I introduced ye to the 'Pride of Glasgow.' Get up, noo, and taxi across to the hangar."

With a deep sigh Henry Jones climbed into the pilot's seat, and if his air was one of magnificent unconcern, his hands trembled and his eyes glittered with bottled excitement.

"And take yer hands off the control, will ye?" roared Tam, who had seen the rudder move.

Henry Jones started guiltily.

"Noo," said Tam, "run along to the hangar, and if ye lift her so much as an inch from the ground, I'll take ye by the scruff of yer neck and the seat of yer pants, and there'll be sair hearts in Limehoose!"

He pulled on the propeller, and, with a splutter that rose to a roar, the converted Bristol fighter skimmed along the ground towards the low-roofed hangars, Tam walking behind, his eyes glued to the wheels.

Only once did the machine lift, and he grinned, for it was Henry Jones's dearest dream that some day he would lift the "Pride of Glasgow" with his own hands and send her zooming to the blue.

In the meantime the passenger had reached the office and had been greeted without enthusiasm by the lean-faced manager.

"A car into town? Yes, I think I can manage that; you'll have to see the passport officer here."

"Who's the passport officer?" snarled Mr. Jackson.

"I am," said the other calmly; "and your bag must be examined by the Customs officer."

Mr. Jackson looked round.

"I am also the Customs officer," added the manager modestly.

"If that fool pilot hadn't come down here I shouldn't have wanted a car," said the passenger, and the manager fixed him with a cold and steely eye.

"That fool pilot," he repeated slowly, "was a gentleman who has so many decorations for good flying that he has to brace his coat to hold them. He was, in fact, the greatest aviator and the greatest fighter that the war produced on our side, and if he came down here you may be sure there was

an excellent reason for his falling short of his objective—and in the circumstances," he added, "I should imagine that you are very lucky to be here at all."

The passenger grumbled something under his breath, and walking to the fire warmed his hands whilst the manager telephoned.

"He isn't attached to a company, is he?" he asked across his shoulder.

"Tam is not attached to anybody but his machine," said Major Burton. "Tam is a one-man, one-machine, company; in fact, he is the only genuine aerial taxi-driver in Europe."

He explained that on his demobilisation Mr. Thomas MacTavish had purchased an airplane from the War Disposal Board, had erected an hangar in a field near his house at Horsham, and had set up in business for himself. His modest advertisement in the *Times* had brought Tam many clients. It had been instrumental in arousing the interest of Mr. Jackson, and was the foundation of the pretty little scheme which he had evolved.

"Is the weather likely to change?" he asked suddenly.

Major Burton nodded.

"I think you will have fine weather to-morrow," he said. "Are you going back by air?"

Mr. Jackson said cautiously that he thought he was; then remembering that there was no need for mysteries, and that the pilot would probably disclose the nature of the engagement, he became more communicative.

Major Burton watched his visitor depart, and greeted Tam as he came into the office to register his arrival and pay his landing fees.

"Your passenger's gone, Tam," he said.

"Oh ay," said Tam. "I've a wee bit of a repair to be done, Major Burton. Do your high-class mechanics work after hours?"

"I dare say they would for you, Tam," laughed Burton good-humouredly.

"I've a mechanic of me own," said Tam, looking reproachfully at the diminutive figure of Mr. Henry Jones. "But he's no' so cairtain aboot his diagnosis. Maybe 'tis the engine that's wrong, says he, and maybe 'tis the wings. Likely enough 'tis the strut, or a malformation of the nacelle, or probably the tractor is losing its pull," he went on mercilessly, "or the carburation is faulty."

Mr. Henry Jones gurgled protestively and hotly.

"When Angus fails me, Major Burton, sir," said Tam, with a gesture of despair, "I feel that the re-sources of science are exhausted. There is a strike of brains, ye ken, Major Burton, sir. I'm thinking that there's a little watter in the petrol tank, but Angus is no' in agreement wi' me."

He stripped his leather coat and appeared dry from shoulder to shoulder to a point below his knee, and there the wetness showed black and shining.

"Who's your gentleman friend, Tam?" asked Major Burton.

"Ma client?" said Tam. "Well, I'm no' so sure. He's engaged me for the roond trip. I picked him up at Tremblay in France, in accordance with telegraphic instructions confirmed by letter, enclosing payment on account."

"Have you ever been bilked?" laughed Burton, as he sat down to make out a receipt for the money which Tam had laid on the desk.

"Major Burton, sir, I am a Scot," said Tam solemnly. "If the passengers no pay when they start, it's ma practice to get it oot of them when we're aboot sixteen thousand feet up, and the 'Pride of Glasgow' is displaying alarming tendencies to fall into a tail spin."

"I ask 'em for it," said Mr. Henry Jones, husky with importance.

"Angus is my ticket collector, cashier, and portable scientist," said Tam, and then dropping his bantering—"Major Burton, sir, do you know High Barnet?"

The Major nodded.

"It's in the north of London."

"Is it likely there's a place there where I could park ma wee greyhoond of the skies?" asked Tam.

"An aerodrome?"

Tam shook his head.

"No, it'll have to be more private than an aerodrome."

The Major pondered.

"Well, there are any number of fields in High Barnet," he said.

"So he said—in fact, he gie me the exact field, but I think I'll go up to-morrow and have a bit of a squint," said Tam.

He fumbled in his side-pocket, produced a fat pocketbook, and after some delay extracted a paper which he examined.

"Here's the hoose—High Lodge, Barnet. And this is the field that ma client said I could come doon in; but to come doon and to get up are two different things, Major Burton, sir, as it's an impairtinence of me to tell ye."

"Why doesn't he let you go to the nearest aerodrome? Have you got to pick him up?"

"At dawn on the 23rd," said Tam dramatically. " 'Tis an elopement, I'm thinking, and I'm seriously considering whether I'll put Angus into a suit of white satin or whether I'll be content with gieing the old bus a new coat of luminous paint. Don't forget your rosette, Angus."

"But, seriously," said the Major, "of course your queer business opens the way to all sorts of remarkable possibilities. Is it an elopement?"

"I'm no' so sure," said Tam cautiously. "It would be a graund adventure. Canna ye see me waiting in the field, tense wi' excitement? Canna ye see Angus here, with a graund boquet of roses stuck in his dairty shairt, and a plug hat on his heid, and the bride dashin' across the field in white satin, wi' a veil of old Brussels lace, and boots to match? Canna ye no' think of them leaping into the fuselage wi' the outraged father dashin' after them? Then up we go, and the old man runs to his hangar, and in a few minutes he is following us in his gold-plated DH.7. Angus puts the machine-gun on him ——"

"Oh no, no," protested his sometime superior; "you're not at war now!"

"Maybe not," said Tam reluctantly, "but it would no' be so difficult to manœuvre overhead and crash him wi' a big chunk of wedding-cake."

He sighed.

"But I'm thinking," he said, shaking his head regretfully, "that 'tis no' an elopement. The man's face is verra seenister, and I'm glad he paid in advance."

Tam, late of the Scouts, had no other call to London than his business. His wife and their one baby were visiting relations in Connecticut, and his house was being run by an elderly but thrifty Scotch lady, of whom Tam was in awe, but Henry Jones in absolute terror, for she had views on ablution which were wholly at variance with Henry's philosophy of life.

Tam was not usually curious about the business of his clients. His interest began and ended when he had picked them up and set them down at

their destination, but he was curious about Mr. Jackson. The fact that he, although a nervous man, had insisted upon taking the trip in the most unfavourable weather conditions, that he had given exact instructions as to where Tam was to wait for him, that he had chosen the hour of dawn for his forthcoming departure, and his strange avoidance of the London aerodromes, all pointed to romance.

Tam found High Lodge without difficulty. It was an old-fashioned Georgian house, with great windows looking out upon a park-like expanse of country, a very large proportion of which seemed to be belonging to the property. Tam had some trouble in making his observations, for a high wall surrounded not only the house but the grounds; but he was gratified to discover that the trees were few and no difficulties about taking off.

Here he might have ended his investigations, and have returned to Claybury, but for the fact, as he discovered from examination of the rough plan which the man had drawn him, that he was to make his landing at a point where he would be screened from the house and observation by a belt of tall elms. For it was in the park that his machine had been ordered to rendezvous.

Tam scratched his chin. He had had a few curious adventures since he had gone into business as an aerial taxi-man, but never before had he hesitated to carry out the services which were demanded of him. He walked round the front of High Lodge in time to see a tall, pretty woman saying good-bye to an elderly man whose car was at the door.

The front of the house, in spite of the extent of the demesne, was within a dozen yards of the roadway. Probably the extra ground had been acquired after the house had been built.

Tam watched the car drive away, and was standing looking after it when a hand fell on his shoulder, and he turned round to meet the suspicious eyes of a man who had "detective" written all over him, from the top of his Derby hat to the square toes of his heavy boots.

"What do you want?"

"Weel," said Tam slowly, "I want a Rolls-Royce car, a hoose in Berkeley Square, a new suit of clothes——"

"None of that," said the other sharply. "What do you want?"

"I want ye to take your hand off my shoulder before I hit ye in the stomach," said Tam; and the man smiled but dropped his hand.

“Do you want anybody in that house?” he asked.

“I canna tell ye till I know who’s in the hoose,” said Tam.

The man bit his lips thoughtfully.

“All right,” he said. “I’m sorry I startled you.”

“Ye didna startle me,” said Tam, “but will ye tell me, sir, why the police are watching this place?”

“You’d better go to the station and ask the sergeant,” said the other shortly and a little unpleasantly.

Tam walked away more thoughtful than ever. He did not ask the station sergeant, nor did he make a call at the local lock-up. He pursued his inquiries in his own peculiar way, and he discovered that the owner of the house was a Mrs. Lockyer. He discovered, too, that she had recently divorced her husband. A villain he was, by all accounts. (His informant on this point was a lank youth who wore spectacles and delivered fish. Tam had trailed him after he had emerged from the servants’ entrance of the house, a gateway about fifty yards along the road.) Apparently Mrs. Lockyer was a rich woman, and she had married a mysterious Mr. Lockyer abroad. Too late she discovered that her husband was a man extraordinarily well known to the police of four countries.

“Why,” said the spectacled young man impressively, “he didn’t dare appear in court when she divorced him. What do you think of that?”

“Ye don’t say!” said Tam. “And what are the police agin’ the hoose for?”

“Because he’s threatened what he’ll do to her,” said the fish man. “The cook told me that he says, if she don’t send him money——”

He explained the presence of the police to Tam’s entire satisfaction.

He went back to Claybury, having made first a very careful note of the topographical features of the country, which meant no more than that he had carefully located the waterways, the pools, and the reservoirs, for it is by water that airmen find their way in the half darkness.

At four o’clock the next morning Tam left the Claybury aerodrome and drove the nose of the “Pride of Glasgow” at such an angle as left Henry Jones a little breathless. Up, up, up he went into the purple night, until the ears of Henry Jones buzzed, and he found himself breathing more quickly; until the fingers of Henry Jones were numbed and blue, despite the fur gloves he wore.

“Ridiculous!” muttered Henry Jones, and referred to the unnecessary height to which Tam was climbing.

Beneath them now was a sparkle of lights that winked incessantly, and through the lights ran the grey streak of the Thames—a ribbon half an inch broad and apparently without break, for they were too high even to see the line of the bridges distinctly. The eastern horizon from that height was rimmed with the orange light of the coming sun, and the sky was a faint grey.

Tam found his water-marks and turned when he was over the city of London, moving north.

The light increased, though it had not yet touched the earth. He had to locate his landing, and he circled above the district where he would descend, waiting for the light to show him more clearly the exact spot. Then he suddenly shut off his engine and came down in a long noiseless, glide, touching earth at a spot which had been invisible to him until he was two hundred yards above it, yet so excellently accurate was his landing that the machine came to a standstill within fifty yards of the spot he had chosen the day before. He climbed down slowly. The ground was good for his purpose, the spot he had chosen was, he knew, as good as any he would have found if he had been permitted to prospect the park at his leisure.

He strolled to the end of the tree belt, and looked toward the house. The big windows showed grey in the dawn-light, but the house was silent and there was no sign of life.

It was nearing six o’clock when he heard a scream. It was faint, and might easily have been confused with a high note of a ship’s syren, for at this hour of the morning distant noises sounded plain and near at hand.

Tam’s eyes narrowed. He took his gloved hands from the deep pockets of his leather jacket, stripped them, and pushed back the leather ear-pieces of his helmet, but he heard no other sound.

Presently he saw a figure coming rapidly across the grass from the direction of the house. It was running, and it carried something in its arms. Tam drew a long breath, and his lined face twisted in a set grin. The runner was breathing heavily as he came up.

“Here you are,” he said breathlessly. “Take this: where’s the boy?”

“Get up, Angus,” said Tam curtly, and Henry Jones climbed into the machine.

“Be careful,” said Mr. Jackson in gasps. “Don’t be frightened of it; it won’t bite you.”

A little wail came from the bundle of clothing he thrust up at the startled boy, and Jackson chuckled.

“Now get away as quick as you can.”

“Oh ay,” said Tam. “But where are ye taking the bairn?”

Mr. Jackson’s face was white and ugly, and he had in his hand a small but useful automatic.

“To a safe place!” he said, and Tam looked at the pistol. A man who would abduct his own child in order to get a pull to squeeze money from its mother would not hesitate to commit a worse crime. He pulled hold of the propeller and leapt up as the machine was on the move. He threw one glance back as he came level with the end of the tree belt and saw another figure before the house.

He was heading now for the wall, but with a push of his stick he sent the “Pride of Glasgow” skimming away from the house along a great stretch of grass-land.

There were trees to be dodged, and yet another wall to be faced; within fifty yards of this latter the nose of the machine shot up, and she roared higher and higher into the air.

The passenger was sitting behind him, and presently Tam felt a touch and took from Mr. Jackson’s hand a sheet of paper on which he had scribbled:

“I will give you a hundred pounds extra for this job.”

Tam nodded, and glancing over his shoulder saw Henry Jones squatting on the floor with a baby in his arms, and inside Tam was one great chuckle of merriment.

Higher and higher drove the machine, and now they were flying over open country. With the sun came a gusty wind which sent the “Pride of Glasgow” see-sawing from side to side. Then Mr. Jackson grew alarmed. Tam felt the grip of his hands on his shoulders and heard his hoarse voice in his ear.

“You’re going westward!”

Tam nodded. Then something touched his cheek; it was the freezingly cold barrel of the automatic.

“Eastward!” roared the voice.

Tam nodded, but still the rising sun threw his shadow upon the instrument board.

Again the grip of the hands on his shoulder.

“If you land anywhere but in France I’ll kill you!”

Tam nodded.

The minutes grew to an hour. The sun was up now, flooding the land with light, but still Tam kept his westward course. Once the man glimpsed the sea to his left, and they sighted a busy port crowded with ships. Tam, glancing backward, saw the change in the man’s white face and the almost diabolical glitter in his eyes.

Westward, westward, still westward, until there came beneath them a great stark plain, sparsely fringed with tiny green squares which represented the farms of those who won a livelihood in this hardy soil.

And then the “Pride of Glasgow” dipped. They were heading straight for a little township, the principal feature of which was an ugly yellow starfish of brick. Nearer at hand, Jackson saw that the starfish was made up of five buildings radiating from a common centre, and he traced about these the black line of a wall.

There was only one clear space within that wall, and it was a limited space, into which none but an airman of Tam’s extraordinary courage and resource would have dared to drop. The tail of the machine missed the top of the high buildings by inches; the wheels crunched to a gravel path, and the “Pride of Glasgow” came to rest with her tractor screw touching the steel bars of a great gate.

“And here we are!” said Tam, turning round; “ ’tis the safest place I ken for a wee bairn! Noo start yer shootin’.”

Mr. Jackson, white and shaking, had no words, and when the warders of Dartmoor Convict Gaol lifted him from the fuselage and greeted him as an old friend, he looked dazedly from Tam to the unshaven convicts at work in the yard, their heads furtively turned to witness this great excitement which had come into their dull lives, and suddenly collapsed.

Tam took the baby gently from Henry’s cramped arms. She was sleeping peacefully.

“Laddie or lassie, I dinna ken what ye are from yer wee face,” said Tam. “Ye’d better say good-bye to yer papa. I dinna think ye’ll see him again for a lang time.”

THE CONVENIENT SEA

There were times when Betty Lanson found Losmouth intolerable; moments when, in the despair and sickening anxiety which dominated her, sleeping and waking, she loathed the placid blue sea and the red Devonshire cliffs and the little greeny-grey quay to which the Brixham fishing boats sometimes came, and wished that not only the vanished river (for Losmouth had once been Lostmouth) but the whole community had never been found.

And yet Losmouth had a loveliness of its own—a mile stretch of amber sands and a glorious countryside that climbed steadily up to the moors, white farmhouses, cornfields, and deep red fallow land.

Even the Towers Hotel had none of the garishness which characterises a modern seaside hostelry, for it was a veritable castle, with a high turret, on the topmost floor of which Betty had her lodging.

"Pretty girl, that." Johnny Didsworth, who had come down for a week-end's fishing, had an eye for beauty. "The head waiter was telling me she's got the whole of the haunted wing to herself—first floor, second floor, third floor—and she lives on the top, dines on the bottom, and does her sewing in between. How's that for a mystery, Cheers?"

Cheers was not greatly interested in women. He was a rather tired young man—if thirty-five can be called young—and was happiest when he was quite alone in the middle of the bay, fishing from his forty-foot motor-boat, or finding solitary ways through the wild and lovely moors.

He was a brown, keen-faced man, his hair grey at the temples, and for the moment he cordially detested his fellow humans. All except Betty, for he had met Betty in the early hours of the morning, bare-legged, wet of face, a bathing wrap round her, coming up from Rock Pool; and it had occurred to him that if any girl looked her best in these circumstances, she must look a little better when she had brought the artifices of the dressmaker and the milliner to her aid.

He saw her sometimes sitting on the circular balcony of what Johnny had flippantly described as the haunted wing. There were ghosts here in plenty, but none known to local tradition. The ghost of the big, puffy-faced man with hard, staring eyes and thick, hateful lips; the ghost of a boy, pale, haggard-faced; and the ghost that had no face at all, for Betty Lanson had never seen the Hon. Jasper Rayshaw, that merciless man, had not even

tortured herself by seeking out a photograph of him. Sometimes she pictured him with a jaundiced face and small, crafty eyes, a thin-lipped man, sour at heart, whose secret private life might be unspeakably vile. Or she saw him as a leering man of middle age, or some deformed thing with a warped mind, whose face changed with every mood.

The dark, sorrowful eyes of Edward Lanson remained steadfast; the puffy cheeks and the heavy jowl of Welford were a permanent memory.

So he had appeared, in his ludicrously coloured dressing-gown, when he had walked into her room and locked the door behind him. She did not remember much that happened after that. There was only the evidence of the butler and the footman, who came on the scene and found a broken door and her brother standing over a quiet figure, a smoking pistol in his hand. They had been guests at Jay Welford's country house.

The shock of the business had nearly killed her. They took her evidence on commission. That was before Jasper Rayshaw had come into the case. She was not in court when Edward was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, but she read the address for the prosecution, delivered with all the vehemence and malignity which Rayshaw could command—as she judged. It was in reality no worse and no better than any speech for the Crown. In some respects it was more sympathetic. But she read into the speech a personal malice, a sheer desire to hurt.

Cheers knew nothing about these ghosts. He was intensely interested in the incidence of deep-sea fishing. Daybreak saw him climbing into his boat with a basket of refreshments; sunset saw the white cutter returning to its berth. When the other guests of the Towers Hotel were strolling from the dining-room to the big ballroom, he was in his pyjamas, winding up his watch, preparatory to a good night's sleep.

She saw him several times, for there were days when the sea was rough and fishing uncomfortable. She was an unseen audience of his little conversation with Johnny, and she disliked Mr. Cheers intensely—if she had room for any other violent dislikes.

When they met it was in circumstances which made it impossible for her to be anything but polite. She had two recreations; she loved to drive out at nights in her two-seater car, and she loved to sail alone on the smooth waters of the bay. She was an excellent yachtswoman and could handle a sail; but there is no way of handling a mast which is broken by a sudden squall, and the fisherman in the long motor-boat drew in his lines hastily and sent the white hull flying to her help.

She was rather breathless. He, who knew very little about women, thought she was frightened, whereas she was only furious that their meeting should bear the hallmark of romance.

He took her on board, and, going into the little dinghy, he cut away the splintered mast, hauled it and its wet sail aboard, and fastened the painter to the motor-boat's stern, and all the time she protested feebly.

"I have to bring it in," he said good-humouredly. "It's a danger to shipping and all that sort of thing. Besides, if it floated out to sea and was picked up, it might start a scare."

"How thoughtful of you!" she said, and he smiled.

"Be as rude as you like," he said cheerfully. "I can well understand your feelings. I should hate to be rescued."

"I'm afraid I have spoilt your fishing." She could think of only the trite and commonplace things to say.

"The fishes spoilt that," he answered.

She should have been grateful to him, but he hardly looked at her. His well-mannered indifference was more exasperating than if he had stared at her.

"You've been here a month, haven't you? Don't you find it very dull?"

"No," she answered instantly; "I see very little of the people at the hotel."

He chuckled at this.

"That's exactly how I feel."

Then, after a little pause:

"The manager was talking about you last night—he always refers to you as 'the young lady,' though there seems to be quite a number of young ladies at the hotel. He was saying how dangerous he thought your night driving was. By the way, your car woke me up the other night."

"I like driving at night," she said quickly. "I—I suffer from insomnia."

She hated him for forcing this explanation from her. It was impertinent of him to refer to her habits, good or bad. She knew the countryside for twenty miles around, and knew it by night—she could almost have driven blindfolded.

“It’s a lovely country,” he agreed. “I saw you the other day outside Ashburton. Your car was standing still by the side of the road, and I nearly stopped to offer you assistance, but I saw you had a man with you——”

He saw her face go pink, then white again.

“You’re almost a professional rescuer, Mr. Cheers,” she said, and he was very amused indeed.

“Aren’t I? As a matter of fact, I very nearly came back. I didn’t like the look of the man who was with you. He was a cyclist, wasn’t he? I saw his machine lying on the bank. The moor is full of tramps at this season, and even a tramp with a bicycle isn’t beyond the bounds of possibility.”

She did not answer; did not, in fact, speak again except to thank him coldly and formally.

An urgent telephoned request came to him from London the next day. It concerned a matter in which he had been interested a few months earlier, and, instead of fishing, he took his car out and was gone the whole of the day. Betty saw him return, and that night for the first time she went down to the dining-room for the evening meal.

It was crowded with holiday-makers—prosperous fathers of families and their unpromising progeny. She sat down at a little table in the bay of a window that looked over the sea. And then she heard his voice.

“Great minds think alike,” he said. “This is the first time I’ve been down to dinner too. Would you be terribly annoyed with me if I asked if I could join you?”

She hesitated, and nodded. There was defiance in her nod, but it stood for permission.

“I promise not to tell you the story of my life.”

He was almost gay as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

“And I won’t ask you for yours.”

He looked out of the window upon the darkening bay.

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

She looked up at him quickly.

“What is convenient?”

“The sea. All the way back I have been making up a story, and the theme of that story is the tremendous convenience of the English Channel. Do you agree, Miss Lanson?”

She was puzzled, a little uneasy, he thought. He changed the subject.

There was no question of indifference now; yet his interest in her could not be regarded as offensive. Her dislike of him was planted in very shallow ground and was easily uprooted. He knew some of her friends. He did not say as much, but she drew inferences from his familiarity with their lives. Most surprising discovery of all, he knew Aunt Anna and had stayed in her stuffy little house in Northampton.

“Whom did she leave all her money to? Her solicitor told me she was worth well over half a million. . . . You! Good lord! What a bit of luck!”

He seemed more impressed by her relationship with the vinegary spinster whose heiress she had been than by the immense wealth which had come to her, and told her stories of the eccentric old woman that were new to her. For she had only seen Aunt Anna once in her life, and the enormous legacy had come to her as a stunning surprise. Or she might have been stunned if she had not been still dazed by the catastrophe which sent Edward Lanson to penal servitude.

If anybody had told her that day that she would reveal her most precious secret, that she would be unburdening her heart to this unpleasant stranger before nightfall, she would have laughed them to scorn; yet here she was, stirring mechanically the coffee that was already cold, and telling him of Edward and Welford . . . an inexplicable and staggering departure from her natural reticence.

Yet there was something about him which inspired confidence; a sympathy and an understanding that she had never met with before in her life.

“. . . I suppose you read the case. . . . I never knew that Mr. Welford had such a dreadful reputation, or we would never have gone there. As a matter of fact, Welford did not know that my brother had arrived. Edward let me go alone; I’d been there half a dozen times when Mrs. Welford was in England —she was in Cannes when this happened—and he had never said a word to which I could take exception. I think Edward heard something about him. He hired a car and arrived about midnight. The butler let him in, and showed him to his room, which was next to mine. Welford knew nothing of this. . . .

Edward always carried a revolver. He had been in the British South African Police for a year, and he was terribly young. . . .”

Mr. Cheers nodded slowly, his grave eyes fixed on hers.

“How tragic—how dreadful! Of course, you didn’t give evidence?”

She shook her head.

“The case was mismanaged. Poor Edward was partly responsible, because he wanted to keep my name out of it. He told the butler that he had a personal quarrel with Mr. Welford over money matters. It was the craziest, maddest thing to say. And they took the body out into the hall, and the butler said that was where it was found. Edward must have persuaded the butler to tell that lie. I knew nothing about it till I read the evidence—that dreadful speech!”

“Of Rayshaw?” said Cheers quickly.

“Rayshaw!” She stared out of the window, her eyes narrowed, her lips set in a straight line. “I hope I never meet him.” Her voice was vibrant with hate.

“He’s not a bad fellow—I know him rather well. As a matter of fact, we’re in the same profession.”

She looked at him, amazed.

“Are you a lawyer?”

“A sort of one,” he said good-humouredly. “Anyway, Rayshaw was only doing his job for the Crown to the best of his ability. I don’t think I should feel very bad about him if I were you.”

He looked at her thoughtfully.

“He’s an odd sort of devil. There may have been a touch of malignity in his speech, but just then he was a pretty sick man——”

She shook her head.

“Nothing you can ever say will make me change my judgment,” she said.

They strolled out on to the long, paved walk between the sea and the hotel, and mostly he talked about fishing and motoring. She was distrait and nervous; he realised that she was only listening to half of what he said. It was when he began to discuss the best route to reach London by road that she gave him her undivided and instant attention.

“Oh yes, you must go through Exeter,” he said, “but you needn’t touch Bristol. You can take the Frome road, but even then you’ve got to go through Bath. Theoretically you can avoid all those towns, but it is dangerous.”

“Why dangerous?” she asked quickly, and he made some vague reply about the state of the secondary roads.

Her second car arrived the next day, a heavy, black-looking limousine. He was in the yard when it was backed into the garage. The elderly chauffeur was evidently a family retainer, for she addressed him by his Christian name. For some reason she was irritated to discover that Mr. Cheers was a witness to the arrival of the car.

“I am taking a long trip through Cornwall and Wales,” she said.

He thought the explanation was unnecessary, and so did she when she got back to her room.

He saw her again that afternoon. She was worried, nervous, jumped, and changed colour when he spoke to her. She did not come down to dinner, but as he strolled along the beach he thought he saw a figure on the top of the turret, silhouetted against the sky. He knew, because the manager had told him, that the advantage of what was known as the turret suite was that the guest fortunate enough to rent it had a tiny roof garden of his own.

In the morning, when she walked down to the quay, she found the motor-boat hauled up on the beach. Two men were painting the white hull black, and she was so surprised at the sight that she stopped and questioned its owner, who was looking on and superintending the operation.

“The white hull frightens the fish,” he said. “At least, that’s my present theory. There must be some reason for their shyness.”

“But you’re having the top painted black, too. It is wicked to paint that beautiful brass-work.”

“I am eccentric,” he said, and offered no other explanation.

He did not go fishing that day, though he could have hired a boat, but spent the afternoon in his room, sleeping, as he confessed without shame when he saw her before dinner.

The old distrust of him had gone. She did not even regret that she had told him so much. There was something very lovable about him, something that completely appealed to her. . . . Once she was on the point of confessing the greatest secret of all, but here her tongue was tied by duty.

He had had the boat put in the water; the paint was of the quick-drying variety, he told her. Towards evening she saw two great hampers brought down and put in the well.

"I'm going for a night's fishing," he said when she questioned him.

Her nerves were all on edge, and although he did not believe that she suffered from insomnia he was satisfied in his mind that she had not slept the previous night. When he suggested just before dinner that she should walk along the beach, she definitely refused, and as definitely changed her mind.

They walked in silence for a quarter of a mile, and then unexpectedly, and apropos nothing, he said:

"You want to forget about Exeter."

She stopped dead.

"I don't know what you mean."

Her face was very pale, and she spoke breathlessly.

"About Exeter," he repeated calmly. "It's almost impossible to avoid Exeter on the way to London, and absolutely impossible to avoid one or the other of the big towns."

She walked slowly on by his side.

"I'm not going to London by road," she said at last.

"Cornwall, I think?" he suggested. "And Wales? In that case you can't avoid Bristol." He paused, and added: "Even if you have a chance of avoiding any town."

It was with an effort that she asked:

"Why your sudden solicitude, Mr. Cheers—I mean, for my route?" And then, as though she feared his reply, she went on quickly: "What time are you going fishing?"

"Upon the convenient sea?" he asked.

Again she stopped, looking at him frowningly.

"I don't understand that convenient sea," she said, speaking with puzzled deliberation. "Why do you repeat it—or is it a quotation from something?"

"I start my fishing at about ten o'clock," was his reply. He ignored her question. "And to-morrow I'll bring you the pick of the basket for your

breakfast. Or are you leaving for Cornwall to-night?"

He pointed out to sea.

"There's a mist coming up. We will call that the convenient mist. There should be a thick fog by midnight. Happily, there is no risk of being run down. Farther out at sea the risk is minimised, because big ships stop and hoot pitiably. There is nothing quite as pathetic as a big ship in a fog, bleating for safety."

"I think we'll go back," she said abruptly, and, turning, she swayed and would have fallen, but he caught her by the arm.

"No sleep and no food, young lady. That is very foolish. Don't you think you'd be well advised——" He stopped.

"To go to bed and eat porridge?" she mocked him. "No, I don't. You're a man, so food is the all-important factor in life."

It was eleven o'clock when Betty Lanson opened the little turret door and walked to the quay. She peered down, and at first she thought that the black boat was gone; presently, however, she distinguished it lying in the shadow of the sea wall. The discovery frightened her. She wanted this inquisitive and knowledgeable man to be far away.

Why his presence or absence should affect her, she could not explain to herself. She went back fretfully to her room, mounting the spiral staircase to the top floor and up a short ladder on to the leaded roof. Here she waited, a cloak over her shoulders, peering northward into the dark.

The Losmouth village church clock struck midnight, but she did not move. Her pulses were racing; almost she could hear the beating of her heart.

It had failed, then! She felt sick at the thought. All the planning and the bribing, all the big money spent, and in the end she had failed. Her intelligence told her that it could not help failing, that the chances of success were one in a million. She had read somewhere that not one prisoner in a hundred years had ever escaped from that moorland prison, though hundreds had tried. Why should her efforts be successful?

And then, in the darkest moment of her despair, she saw far away the flicker of a light. Once, twice, three times it flashed, and in the emotional reaction she would have swooned had she not gripped tightly to the rough-cast battlement. Her knees gave under her as she came down the ladder.

In her bedroom was a small handbag, which she carried down through the little door into the open. A suitcase was already in the car.

She heard her name whispered; it was the old chauffeur.

"I got the car on the road outside, a hundred yards from the hotel, miss."

Her teeth were chattering as she thanked him.

"Here's the handbag. Mr. Edward is coming here first."

"Is it all right?" The old voice was eager and joyful.

"I think so. . . . We'll have to wait."

She herself waited alone in the dark lane. Once she thought she heard the purr of a motor-car, but it died away; and then, when she had almost given up hope, she saw two figures walking quickly along the lane towards her, and shrank back into the hedge. Nearer and nearer they came, and she recognised the walk of the slighter and flew to him, and was caught in his arms.

"You'll have to hurry," said his companion gruffly. "The night officer will be making his round in ten minutes."

She led the way through the garage yard to the turret. There were instructions she had to give, last-minute plans which she had written with elaborate care, which did not even admit of discussion.

He came in—a pale, hollow-faced young man. She was shocked at the change one year had made in him. Incoherently they talked together, clinging to one another like children; and then the gruff voice of the bribed warder whispered a husky warning.

Betty extinguished the light, and they went out through the door. . . .

Boom!

She heard the warder's curse.

"That's the gun!" he almost wailed.

"What is that?" she asked fearfully.

"They've found he has escaped. That's a warning. All the police for miles round will be on the roads."

"I thought that was a possibility."

At the sound of the voice that came from the darkness Betty Lanson almost collapsed. It was Cheers.

“The car is absolutely useless. You’d better put her back in the garage.” His voice was very steady and businesslike. “Is that your brother? Come this way.”

She did not dream of disobeying him, but followed him to the sea wall.

“There are two days’ provisions in the cockpit,” he said, “maps and compass, and I venture to offer a few suggestions as to likely landing-places. As I said, the sea is a very convenient asset.”

He felt her grip at his coat.

“You mean . . . you knew?”

“I mean I guessed. If I’d seen your brother’s face, I should have known, of course. Get down!”

It was a command. The two men obeyed, and slipped over the edge of the quay wall into the boat.

“Can you drive? That’s good. You’ll find a couple of heavy overcoats there. I rather guessed you’d have a friend with you. There’s a self-starter on the dashboard. The compass—you can see the compass—excellent! Good hunting!”

They stood together, the man and the woman, as the black hull glided into a greater blackness, and the sound of the engine became a hum and then ceased altogether.

“That’s why I painted the hull black,” said Cheers. “My instinct is little short of marvellous. Somehow I knew that it would be wanted to-night.”

There was a long silence, which she broke.

“Will they get away?”

“They’ve every chance,” he said. “I hope so for my sake, because I should hate to be disbarred for conniving at the escape of a man I sent to penal servitude.”

She reeled back from him.

“You!”

“My name is Rayshaw,” he said. “Cheers is my nickname. What about running into Torquay to-morrow and having breakfast together? There are one or two interesting things I’d like to say to you.”

The grip on his arm tightened. It was the answer he desired.

THE VAMP AND THE LIBRARIAN

Some clever people can be very, very careless.

Sara Hall was clever, uncannily so. Nobody had ever known Sara to make a false move in the great game of Getting On. Except one.

She bought a subscription to Longton's Library, which was a terrible error of judgment. Longton's was the most fashionable of all the libraries and was extensively patronised by people who were so well off that they could afford to boast that they never bought books. And there was really no reason why they should, because Longton's supplied you with the newest copy of the newest novel, so that subscribers could sometimes read a book before the reviews came out and confirmed them in their appreciations.

Sara, who read very little, explained her eccentricity by remarking in her vague way that one ought to do something for dear Beryl, thereby implying that the fees she had paid were directly helpful to Beryl Markham who, despite her youth and her B.A. degree, was Longton's chief librarian.

Beryl, sitting in her little panelled office, used to catch glimpses of her benefactor, helpless in the face of serried literature, and sometimes—rarely—would emerge from her sanctuary to help her choose a novel which called for no especial genius to understand. Mostly they were stories that bristled with revolvers and reeked of mysteries which remained unsolved until the last chapter.

"It's too good of you, dear," Sara once said. "No, dear, I don't think I shall like that book. I hate 'em with yellow bindings. So Aubrey Beardsleyish. Not that I've even read his poems. . . . Artist, was he? All artists are poets, don't you think? Yes, I'll have that one. It really is too sweet of you, dear. And how horrid to have to work in a snuffy little place like this. With all these books that people take out and bring back. And you never know where they have been, into infectious rooms and all that. I wonder you aren't afraid of catching things. And you're ever so much too pretty to be a shopgirl. What a perfectly awful thing to say! Of course I know you're not a shopgirl, but . . . you know. Don't people make love to you and ask you out to dinner?"

Beryl used to wonder why the girl ever patronised the library at all. Out of curiosity she gave instructions to an assistant:

"Let me see the books that Miss Hall takes out; when they are returned, put them on my desk."

Which was done.

There were certain social functions at which the two girls met. There were others where they might have met if they had wished.

One night the Sandersons, who were both rich and pleasant, gave a dance in their big house in Park View, and because Sara was a mechanical guest at all such happenings she received the usual card.

"I don't exactly know why we ask her, she's not a friend of the Lorlings any more," frowned Mrs. Sanderson, her pen poised. "And besides, poor Mrs. Cathcart . . . I hear that she is suing Sara in the courts for money lent."

"Better ask her," said her good-natured husband. "It will look rather strange if we don't. Besides, the Lorlings aren't in the country now, and you've had her to your dances a dozen times since that affair. Poor little girl! She wasn't to blame if Lorling made a fool of himself over her. And as to poor old Johnny, he lent everybody money."

"Kate Lorling said she lured her husband on, and that he bought her a house in the country and a car. Kate was quite sure——"

"All women are cats," said Mr. Sanderson generally. "You'd better ask her. There's nothing like a vamp to make a party interesting."

Beryl was asked because she was Beryl. And because she was Beryl, Bertie Pollard was invited.

In many ways it was a memorable evening. A momentous afternoon was to follow when Mr. Bertie Pollard went reluctantly to a rendezvous to which at other times he had moved swiftly, eagerly, and expectantly. At the end of the broad park path that follows faithfully the serpentine wanderings of the lake he paused and rubbed his silk hat nervously with his elbow.

There are delicately balanced instruments which detect the faintest of human emotions, and record them in wiggly lines on a tape of paper. There are less delicate detectors of agitation, and a silk hat rubbed the wrong way is a glaring signal of mental distress.

Bertie Pollard thrust his dishevelled hat on the back of his head, set his teeth, and strode down the path, his brow wrinkled in a frown of terrifying fierceness. She was there! That was a cause of thankfulness . . . on the other hand, if she had not been there, he would have been a little more grateful to Providence. Then he could have written explaining everything. He would

rather write than talk. Beside which, if she had not been waiting (in her customary seat near the pond) he would have been fortified by a grievance, could have begun his letter, "I am surprised that you did not seek an explanation, etc.," and might conceivably have carried the matter off with hauteur.

He was a lawyer and therefore easily astonished. Half the letters he dictated in the course of a day to obdurate debtors began by an expression of his surprise that the poor devils to whom he wrote had not fulfilled their obligations to his clients.

But there she was. A slim figure in grey charmeuse, her blessed legs extended stiffly, a newspaper in her lap, and her face shaded by a broad-brimmed hat. She was feeding the ducks. Bertie Pollard hoped that she would extend a little of her charity to him.

"Hello, Beryl!" he greeted her, with spurious heartiness. "How do you feel after your night's dissipation? I didn't see you go . . ."

She folded the newspaper deliberately. Her grave eyes searched his face with a steady scrutiny.

"Bertie, who was that girl you kissed?" she asked directly. "I only caught a glimpse of her. . . . Mrs. Sanderson asked me to go up to see her sleeping babies—she shares the common illusion that her children are more beautiful than other children when they are asleep—but I saw you."

Bertie licked his dry lips.

"I am going to tell you a little story——" he was beginning.

"Will you please remember," she interrupted him carefully, "that I am by profession a librarian? It is my unfortunate task to read almost every new book, and fifty per cent. of the plots turn on a man being suspected because he is caught kissing a strange female, who turns out to be his long-lost sister or the youthful aunt he hasn't seen for years."

"It wasn't my aunt"—Bertie wiped his hot forehead with an air of nonchalance—"and it wasn't my sister. I can't in honour tell you the lady's name, and the kissing episode was really not my fault."

"A vampire?" she nodded. "They have gone out of literature lately, and have restricted their activities to the motion-picture business. How fascinating!"

"Look here, Beryl," said the young man hotly, "I haven't come here to be ragged by you. There is a perfectly natural explanation as to why I kissed

her."

"That is what I am afraid of," said the girl, with a sigh, and looked wistfully across the water; "an unnatural explanation would have worked wonders with me."

"She is in trouble—great trouble," blurted Bertie. "I feel so awfully sorry for her. . . ."

"That you kissed her? And did that help her very much? I don't know how these things affect one. When I am feeling bad, I take a brisk walk and avoid starchy foods. The next time I feel that way, I will ask a policeman to kiss me! Sara Hall hasn't any very great trouble, Bertie. Don't start like a stage villain; of course I knew that it was Sara. And I know what the trouble is. She has spent her allowance and expects to be arrested by her dressmaker, and she hasn't a friend in the world, ow, ow!"

"That is very vulgar, Beryl . . ." sternly, "extremely vulgar to mock—er—people's sorrow. And it is heartless, too, fearfully heartless. I'm very sorry for the girl. Naturally, I being a lawyer, she came to me for whatever assistance I could give her, and I'm doing what I can."

Beryl Markham smiled.

"What is it you can do—kiss the dressmaker?"

Bertie made a movement as if he were about to rise, but she laid her neatly gloved hand on his knee.

"I knew you were going to get up. All misunderstood men do that. 'He rose with an expression of pain,' or, 'He rose with a dignified expression'—every author uses one or the other. The point is, Bertie, are these kisses and sympathetic hugs to be part of the legal assistance you give her? I know nothing about law, and I've never seen a lawyer giving advice to a pretty woman. If she is deaf, I can understand his putting his lips to her shell-like ear; I can even understand his embracing her for that purpose. . . ."

Now he actually rose.

"Beryl," he said stiffly, "you don't realise what you are saying. Do you know that that awful woman Cathcart is threatening this poor girl with imprisonment for obtaining money by fraud? You'd think a widow would have more—more religion."

"Perhaps she doesn't feel religious when she thinks of Sara," suggested the girl. "Personally, Sara is a penance to me. She may make you feel holy ____"

"I shall continue to serve my friends," he said more stiffly than ever, "and no amount of sarcasm will turn me from—er——"

"The path of duty," she murmured helpfully. "I admire your zeal, only—I do not want legal advice, Bertie. I will not return your engagement ring, because that would be so very ordinary, and it would only lead to your returning the trouser-stretchers and the smoker's cabinet I gave you on your birthday. They would be embarrassing to dispose of. Good afternoon."

He had turned on his heel and had stalked majestically away before she had finished talking. She looked after him for a moment, and then, opening her newspaper, began to read the serial. It was a story (or the description was misleading) of Love and Passion.

She sat for a long time with the neglected story of Love and Passion on her lap, wondering. She wondered whether, if she poisoned Sara Hall, any kind of fuss would be made about the happening. Or perhaps if she shot her . . . bad women always came to an untimely end. It was one of the rules of the literary game. Not that Sara was bad. She was one of those skinny, mouse-haired women with dark, sad eyes that seem to hold a whole eternity of sorrow. In reality, if you could read the mystery of those sombre deeps, you would find a long procession of ???'s.

Many of her friends were under the impression that Sara had a soul. When they talked about her, as they did at very frequent intervals, they spoke of her as "poor Sara," and it was a conventional belief that she had "suffered." Nobody could very definitely specify in what respect she had suffered, or could recall any occasion when she was unable to dawdle through a six-course dinner without assistance. She was not averse to sympathy. In an atmosphere which would have been hatefully shocking to many who admired her most, she thrived apace. She had entered the ranks of Poor Brave Things and was, if anything, proud of her unique position.

All this Beryl Markham knew. She was not worried at all about Bertie kissing her. Other men in similar circumstances had kissed Sara Hall and had smoothed her hair and had gazed how-can-I-helpfully into her tragic eyes. And Sara had twiddled the top button of their waistcoats with modestly downcast eyes (raised for momentary and devastating flashes at the victim) and had sighed and pouted and told the man gently, but not offensively, that they must not do that sort of thing, and that she was so fond of their wives that it hurt her to feel that she was being the tiniest bit disloyal to those absent and less attractive women, and in the end . . .

“My dear Sara, don’t worry your pretty little head any more about that silly bill. I’ll send you a cheque to-morrow. . . . No, no, no, pay me whenever you like. . . .”

And so forth.

Beryl frowned at the ducks. They did not remind her of Sara. There were other habitats of a farmyard that did remind her, but not the ducks.

And then she got up briskly, walked to the Mall, and, finding a crawling taxi, drove to Spargott Mansions. As she came to the broad entrance hall, a man came out carrying a trunk. He put it down to rest, and something said to Beryl: “Read the label.” She walked deliberately to where the trunk rested and read. Then she spoke to the man and asked him a question. Then she went up to the flat.

“My *dear*!”

Sara wore a fluffy clinging dress, very simple and very expensive. Her welcome was warm, both her thin white hands met about Beryl’s.

“This is lovely of you . . . you’ve promised to come so often. Really you *are* a dear!”

There was an air of emptiness about the room. The little etceteras she expected to see, the photographs, the precious little ornamentations, were not there. It had the defiant atmosphere of a flat that had been let furnished. And yet the furniture was Sara’s—Beryl knew who bought it. Sara thrust away a book which she had in her hand and jumped up, and she seemed a trifle embarrassed.

“I never dreamt you’d call . . . after all my invitations.”

“I thought I’d come along and see you,” said Beryl. “You were at the Sandersons’ dance last night. . . . Of course you were. I spoke to you. I wanted to see you about Bertie.”

The melancholy eyes neither flinched nor changed their expression.

“Bertie . . . Bertie Pollard? Aren’t you and he . . .?”

Beryl nodded.

“We are engaged, yes.”

Sara shook her head.

“He is a dear boy,” she said, a little sadly, “and I almost envy you, Beryl. I don’t really, because marriage and love and all that sort of stuff is not for

me."

She sighed again, and her long lashes swept her pale cheek. A man would have imagined a tear concealed. Beryl was not a man.

"I had one man . . . he went out of my life," she said, with a little choke.

"Poor dear!" said Beryl sympathetically. "I like Charlie Lorling too ——"

"I don't mean Mr. Lorling," said Sara, with the faintest tinge of acid in her voice. "He was married——"

"I'm so sorry! How stupid of me! You mean poor Johnny Cathcart. He *was* nice—but wasn't he married too?"

"Of course he was." The sadness had gone from her voice. Sara was almost tart. "I don't mean any of those people. How absurd you are, Beryl! I was very fond of his wife, but Johnny was a perfect fool!"

Here Beryl found herself in complete agreement, for poor Johnny, as she knew, had spent hundreds he could not afford to send this plaintive lady to Florida one winter. He had spent them surreptitiously, and Sara, faltering, had accepted his help and had coughed pitiably. The doctors had told her she must spend the winter in Florida or they would not be responsible. And however was she going to afford it? Her income was x and the cost of a winter in Florida was y. Johnny had performed the mathematical feat of reconciling x with y. It cost him the best part of a year's work and the curtailment of his own holiday, for Johnny was a fool, an altruistic, kindly fool.

"Yes, I knew you were engaged." Sara turned to a less embarrassing subject. "Bertie will make a splendid husband, and he is well off, too."

"To be exact, he isn't," said Beryl carefully. "That is why I wanted to see you, Sara. Bertie has very small private means and an excellent income from his practice. But he isn't rich."

Sara shrugged her thin shoulders, undisguisedly incredulous.

"Sara, do you know South America?"

The question was unexpected and, innocent though it was, alarming. Sara's face went pink and then a deeper red and then suddenly white.

"I—I don't. . . . Why? You are thinking of the books I had on South America?" She laughed and was obviously relieved. "No, it is a strange country and a very fascinating one. Are you thinking of going there?" She

looked at the tiny clock above the mantelshelf and stifled a yawn. “My dear, I have to leave you. I must change for dinner. *Will* you do me a favour—do you mind taking this book back to the library? I know it is lazy of me, but the library is so out of the way.”

She picked up a tome from the settee. Beryl read the title: *The Argentine: Its People and History*.

Going down the long, narrow stairway, Beryl was very thoughtful. It was six o’clock when she reached her own little house.

She threw the book she was carrying on to the hall table, and it fell. Stooping to pick it up, a slip of paper fell out. She examined the inscription for a long time and then folded and put it away in her bag, and sat down without attempting to remove her hat or gloves. She sat perfectly still for a quarter of an hour and then she got up and went to the telephone.

“Yes, Beryl.”

There was a note of hauteur in Bertie’s voice, but she did not smile.

“Bertie, I’m in great trouble.”

“What is wrong?” His voice changed instantly, and she loved him for it.

“Will you come to me at Homelands? I have to tell you—I knew I should sooner or later.”

She sensed his agitation.

“But, my dear . . . Homelands. . . . Is anything wrong?”

“Desperately wrong,” she said hollowly. “I am going there now by taxi. Will you follow me as quickly as you can?”

“But what in thunder *is* wrong, Beryl?” he asked frenziedly.

“I can’t tell you. It concerns . . . my brother.”

“But you haven’t a brother,” he almost shouted.

“I have a brother—he has just come out of prison. . . . He has been there for twenty-five years. . . . I have never told you before. . . . Yes, my younger brother. . . . No, he is older than me. . . . Will you come, Bertie?”

She only waited for his answer before she dashed into the bedroom, and found the keys of the old house. Then she flew down the stairs to the street and called the first taxi she saw.

Homelands was ten miles from the centre of the City—it might have been a hundred, for it stood on the edge of a wood, a desolate, shabby little house, that had been her father's. She had found successive tenants for the place, and indeed the rent from this property had seen her through college. Now she could afford to retain it for a summer residence—an inexpensive luxury which her salary, plus a small income, permitted. She was quick, but Bertie was close on her heels. His car drew up at the gate as she was unlocking the door.

"What is the matter, Beryl?" he asked anxiously. "Is your brother here?"

She nodded.

"Will you follow me?" she asked and led the way up the stairs. On the first landing was a stout door, and after a second's hesitation she opened this.

"He is there," she said.

Unsuspectingly he walked through the doorway. He was in a large bathroom, lit by one small window, which, he observed, was heavily barred. But there was no sign of anything that bore the remotest resemblance to Beryl Markham's brother.

"Where——" he began, when he heard the door slam and the sound of shooting bolts.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded angrily, and tugged at the door.

"Bertie, you must stay there until I let you out. It is all for your good. . . . No, I have no brother. I borrowed the convict brother from *Tangled Lives*. It isn't new. There are on an average three returned convict brothers a year."

He stormed and raved, but Beryl did not wait to hear. She went downstairs, lit a spirit stove, and began to prepare a meal. Later she brought him coffee and biscuits and handed them to him through the barred transom.

"Daddy had the locks and the door specially strengthened because we had burglars once. They broke in through the bathroom."

"Beryl, I insist that you let me out! This is disgraceful . . . and it is illegal, too. I never dreamt you would play me such a trick. I have an engagement to-night of the greatest importance."

"It's broken," she said calmly. "You are held captive of my bow until eleven o'clock to-morrow."

“But why—what does it mean? Beryl, be reasonable. It is vitally necessary that I should keep an appointment to-night.”

“It is even more vitally important to me that you shouldn’t,” she said.

He spoke to her earnestly. He begged of her, for the sake of the love he bore her, for her own good name’s sake, to release him. After he had been talking for ten minutes without interruption he found that she had gone. She was garaging his car and did not come up again until it was dark.

“I may as well tell you that I am seeing Sara to-night,” he said, hoping to pique her.

“And it is unnecessary for me to tell you that you’re not,” said she. “Of course I knew you were seeing Sara,” she added scornfully, “and I will add this little piece of information: at this precise moment Sara is searching the town for you! How do I know? I know Sara. She’s calling you frantically on the ’phone, at your club, at every place you are likely to be. And she’ll be up all night looking for you. Did you realise that you were so important in her young life? Well, you are, Bertie.”

“You’re jealous.”

“Horribly so! No, our engagement is through, but if at some future date you should marry a nice girl, I don’t want you to go to her with a bad financial past.”

A long pause.

“You know that you are everything to me, Beryl,” he said huskily, “in spite of this fool trick you are playing. I wish you didn’t feel like this to Sara. She is a greatly misunderstood woman.”

“You’ve lent her money?”

Another silence.

“Yes. I don’t know that it is fair to her to tell you—not really lent. She has a very heavy bill to meet, and her dividends aren’t due until the day after to-morrow.”

“Ha, ha!”

“I hate that sardonic laugh of yours, Beryl. You’ll be surprised to learn that she gave me her post-dated cheque for the money.”

“How much?”

"Ten thousand—it is a lot of money, and I don't think I should have lent it if she hadn't given me her cheque. But you can't let a girl get into serious trouble—it was that money Mrs. Cathcart was claiming—without helping, can you?"

"*I* could," said Beryl's voice, "especially if that girl were Sara."

"Will you let me out, dear . . .? It is very undignified and not quite decent . . . Staying in the same house alone . . .!"

A church clock was striking eleven the next morning when the bolts shot back, and an unshaven and weary and, it may be confessed, sulky young lawyer came out.

"You've behaved abominably," he said savagely. "You've made me look a fool. Why did you do it?"

She was looking very pretty and fresh in the early morning sunlight, and her eyes held a hint of laughter which annoyed him still further.

"I suppose I can go now," he growled. "If this story gets round——"

"Sara left by the eleven o'clock boat train to join *La Plata*, which leaves for the Argentine this afternoon."

His jaw dropped.

"Wh-what?"

"She is travelling as Madame Celli," said Beryl.

"Impossible! She would have told me!"

She nodded.

"If I had told you all this last night instead of locking you up, you would have gone to her, and if she had said it was not true, you would have believed her?"

He did not answer.

"You would have believed her?"

"I suppose I should, but—good God! What about my cheque! If she has gone——"

"She has left no money in the bank, you may be sure. As a matter of fact I know she has gone. I saw the last of her trunks being taken away, and the name on the trunk was Celli. The man told me that the trunks were hers, and besides I recognised the one he was carrying."

He sat down heavily on the top stair and dropped his head on his hands.

“Moses!” was all he could say, and then a pink slip of paper came into his line of vision and he grabbed it.

“My cheque!”

He jumped up and grasped her by the arms and gently shook her.

“Beryl, how did you get it?”

“It was in a book she gave me to take back to the library. She must have been looking at it when I went to call on her yesterday after I had left you. She had just received it? I thought so. She was so flustered that she must have pushed it into the book out of sight. And then my great plan occurred to me. . . . Not mine really. It has been used by five writers in the past four years.”

He kissed her, an act which has been recorded by all writers in all books in all times.

THIEVES MAKE THIEVES

If you had told Mrs. Caling-Apleton that she was a criminal, she would neither have swooned nor wept. She would have regarded you through her jewelled lorgnettes as though you were some prehistoric beastie that had been revivified and escaped from a museum and strayed into her beautiful South Kensington drawing-room. Had you added, in your natural exasperation, that she was a conspirator of a most dangerous type and was qualifying, if she had not already qualified, for a long term of penal servitude in the convict establishment at Aylesbury, she would have thought you were mad, for she stood in such close relationship to the law that she thought she was superior to it. For was not Mr. Arthur Wendle, senior partner of Wendle, Wendle & Crail, both her nephew and her protégé?

When a man wishes to say something rather offensive about a woman, he says that she ought to have been born a man. John Crail often said this of Mrs. Caling-Apleton, and with excellent reason. Yet there was nothing mannish about this interesting lady. She was petite, sharp-featured, inclined to be fluffy. She had been a widow for twenty years, and if there was any grey in her hair, it went the way of other natural tints when the excellent Emil, best of hair-artists, "touched" it into a dull and most convincing tint of gold.

Mr. Crail, who was thirty, good-looking, and caustic, used to say that the firm of Wendle, Wendle & Crail was really Wendle (in small type) and Caling-Apleton (in big). The first of the Wendles had been her brother, the second had been financed from her own account. Mr. Joshua Wendle was thirty-five and dyspeptic, and had been quite disinclined to add the name of Crail to the brass plate which decorated the door of his City office.

"Don't be a fool, Joshua," said his masterful aunt. "It is very necessary that there should be somebody in the firm who understands law. This young Crail is clever, he is willing to pay five thousand pounds for a share of your practice—which shows that even a good lawyer can be a fool too."

So John Crail was admitted and signed an agreement that only an imbecile or a solicitor would have signed on his own behalf. For this is the peculiarity of lawyers, that they are quite incapable of managing their legal affairs.

Six months after his admission he woke to the discovery that he had paid five thousand pounds for the privilege of earning his partner a comfortable competence. He consulted another lawyer, and learned that he had been badly but legally swindled. He was tied by the neck to a business which offered him a meagre salary and a one per cent. return on his investment.

He used to sit in his office late at night and silently curse the name of Wendle. The need for silence disappeared in the third year of his servitude, when Mr. Wendle engaged a new secretary—Miss Elsie Mannering.

She was more than ordinarily pretty; her unromantic age was twenty-four—but she looked eighteen. And she was devastatingly intelligent. She was supposed to be working late one evening when John Crail took her into his confidence. She listened, nibbling the end of her pencil.

"Isn't it queer how silly a man can be?" she asked, and John choked. "But you are! Don't you realise that you can be retired just when they grow tired of you? For example, there's a clause in your agreement that you must not gamble——"

"Good lord!" Mr. Crail's jaw fell. "How did you know?—and why do you say 'they'?"

She smiled—and she was lovely when she smiled.

"I've seen the agreement—and I've heard 'they' talking. I see more of Mrs. Apleton than you—I was down at her place in Egham last week-end, and Mr. Wendle was there. They kept me working from Friday till Monday morning and gave me a pound for overtime!"

John Crail frowned at this.

"But gambling——?"

She nodded.

"It came out over poor Bennett."

It was whilst John was on his holidays that the unfortunate clerk had been arrested and sentenced to six months' hard labour for embezzlement.

"Apparently the bookmaker who came to collect money from Bennett—that was how The Wendle found out about the eighty pounds he had stolen—told Mr. Wendle that you owed him a lot of money——"

"What did they say about it—the old lady and Flossie?"

She did not know till then his nickname for the senior partner, but when she stopped laughing she was discreet.

"I can only tell you that they know," she said, "and I've told you too much already."

They knew indeed. Mr. Wendle was very severe about it—but not too severe. He wasn't quite sure what line his aunt would take. She lost little time in making her attitude clear.

"Anyway, we'll have to get rid of Crail, and it might as well be done sooner as later. He is taking a most extraordinary attitude over the Murdoch Estate. I lay in bed thinking about it the other night. I am really worried, Joshua. I was talking to Sir Hubert Lesford—who is the best authority at the Bar on property . . . naturally, I was only putting hypothetical cases to him . . . in fact, I told him it was a case I had heard years ago. And he was very emphatic. He said that what you have been doing is—well, *he* said it was criminal conspiracy."

Mr. Wendle shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I would not say that our action——"

"*Your* action, Joshua," she corrected. "Whatever happens, my name must be kept out. Crail suspects something—he was almost rude to me the last time I was at the office."

Mr. Wendle was obviously agitated.

"Why not let Crail go?" he pleaded. "Give him his money and let him out in a good humour?"

But the five thousand pounds which John Crail had paid had been transferred to Mrs. Apleton's account to liquidate an old debt.

"No, certainly not. We can get rid of him for nothing. But suppose he makes absurd statements about us—you? The ideal method, of course, would be to discover something that would utterly discredit him. A man who gambles . . . couldn't you have an accountant in?"

The lawyer pursed his thin lips.

"My secretary is a rather clever accountant——" he began.

Mrs. Apleton sniffed.

"She's much too pretty to be clever," she said.

None the less, to Elsie Mannering was given the task of investigation. It was necessarily a slow business, and a month passed before her work was completed. And in a month much may happen.

One morning . . .

Wendle came to the office in an irritable mood. There were several unpleasant letters to deal with, and his secretary was strangely apathetic, not to say weary. She hid a yawn behind her hand.

"My good young woman, don't yawn, please!" he snapped, and the ghost of a smile dawned in her fine eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't leave the office till twelve last night."

Mr. Wendle very much objected to this reminder of his responsibility.

"I have arranged with the cashier that you shall receive fifteen shillings extra pay for the night work," he said impressively—"which, I think you will agree, is rather handsome. Have you found anything?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing. I went through the transfer books——"

He looked dubious at this.

"Ye-es. I don't know whether you have a sufficient knowledge of accountancy to be able to detect anything irregular, even if you saw it."

"I have a diploma in accountancy," she said coldly.

"Yes, yes." He was impatient. "You found nothing—no notes about the Murdoch Estate?"

"No." And then she turned to a personal matter. "To-morrow is Good Friday, Mr. Wendle. You know that I am going on my holidays?"

Mr. Wendle never failed to protest against the nuisance of holidays. Crail was going away too.

"*I* never take holidays. It is not for me to influence you; but if you would care to forgo a week, it might considerably enhance your prospects with the firm," he suggested, but apparently she was not impressed. "You are getting three pounds ten a week," he went on. "That is not bad pay for a young girl. I dare say we shall be able to put you up to four pounds next year. I don't promise, but it is possible. You can hardly expect more."

"I expect nothing. I hope—a lot," she said.

Mr. Wendle thought it an opportune moment to point a moral.

"The ideal existence," he said profoundly, "is a successful business career."

She sighed.

"I wonder? There are mountains somewhere and beautiful plains and rivers, and glorious blue seas where you can bathe and lie on a beach whilst the sun warms you. That seems pretty ideal to me."

Her employer was a little shocked.

"I'm afraid you've been reading novels. That is bad—unsettling. Don't forget Mr. Bennett—a wanderer on the face of the earth."

He seldom failed to bring in the gambling Bennett to support his argument. Happily she was spared a dissertation on the shiftless life, for John Crail came in. He hung up his hat and walked to his desk, apparently oblivious of his partner's presence.

"Good morning, Crail. Mrs. Apleton called you up." There was a certain significance in Wendle's tone.

"How long ago?" asked John carelessly.

Mr. Wendle waited until the door closed on the secretary. The name of Mrs. Apleton frequently provoked his partner to violent language.

"About twenty minutes ago. She said she'd ring you again. She wouldn't tell me her business."

"Naturally."

Irony maddened Mr. Wendle.

"I mean—er——"

John Crail was sorting his letters.

"You mean that she would not tell you her business. One can hardly find fault with her. Particularly as you knew what her business was."

Mr. Wendle was pained.

"You're being rather unpleasant, aren't you?" he asked. "You might at least be polite. I have saved you an unpleasant experience this morning."

Crail looked up quickly.

"Oh! What was that?"

“Bennett came and asked to see you. Of course I sent him packing. You know whom I mean? The clerk who embezzled—er——”

John nodded.

“Poor devil!” he said, not for the first time.

“I really don’t like your moral values, my dear Crail,” said the other with asperity, and John Crail smiled faintly.

“That’s because you know ’em. I am puzzled about *your* moral values, because I don’t.”

Wisely his partner declined the challenge and returned to the question of Bennett.

“He is going to Canada and wanted some sort of recommendation! The nerve! A man who embezzled eighty-two pounds!”

“Oh, eighty-two?” Crail was most offensive when he sounded most innocent. “I thought it was only eighty. You didn’t save me from the experience. I saw him in the street and told him to come in and see me.”

“That’s very unwise—he had a good job——”

Crail snorted.

“Ninety bob a week after twelve years’ service, with a prospect of a ten-shilling rise. He brought up a family on that—good Gad!”

Mr. Joshua Wendle thought an opportunity had arrived.

“There is one thing I have never told you about Bennett’s arrest—I hesitate to tell you now,” he said deliberately. “This man who came to collect Bennett’s debt was a very common fellow, and seemed to be under the influence of drink.”

“You mean tight?”

“He was intoxicated,” said Mr. Wendle primly.

“Oh, I see—just pickled. Well?”

“He said: ‘I shall be coming back here again. I’ve got five thousand pounds to collect from Crail.’ He didn’t even say ‘*Mr.* Crail.’ ”

“Oh, then he *was* tight,” said John Crail calmly. “What does Mrs. Apleton want to see me about?”

“I am not sure.” Joshua was very sure indeed. “I have an idea it is about selling the Beltham Abbey Estate.”

Again he saw an unpleasant smile dawn in his partner's face.

"Beltham Abbey! She wants to sell that swamp to the Murdoch Estate?" he demanded.

Mr. Wendle stiffened.

"I don't know why she shouldn't," he said.

Crail and he were trustees for both estates. He knew Mrs. Apleton to be an enormously rich woman; the Murdochs had just got enough to keep body and soul together—they were a large family. Mrs. Apleton had bought the Beltham Estate and thought she was going to make a garden city out of a large, damp field. She had burnt her fingers, and was now trying to switch her liability elsewhere.

"It was on my advice she bought Beltham," said Wendle shortly.

"Is it on your advice she's selling it?" asked Crail. "They gave Bennett six months for eighty-two pounds. What should we deserve for diddling the Murdochs out of twenty thousand?"

He saw his partner's face change colour.

"I wish you wouldn't jest about such matters, Crail. Yours is a monstrous suggestion. I honestly believe that the Beltham Estate is worth all that Mrs. Apleton asks."

Elsie Mannering came in then, and the question of the Beltham Estate was shelved.

"Mrs. Apleton to see you," said the secretary.

Crail caught her eyes.

"I shall have a letter for you later, Miss Mannering," he said, and she nodded.

"Yes, darling."

The word was out before she could check herself. Nevertheless the face she turned to the startled eyes of Mr. Wendle betrayed no embarrassment.

"*What* did you say?" he asked in horror.

"I said 'Yes—after.' " Her voice was very steady; she seemed rather surprised at his question.

"I thought you said . . . What did you think she said?" he asked John.

“I didn’t take much notice. Why?” John’s face was a mask. He hurried from the room, a puzzled man.

When the door closed on him:

“Angel!” Mr. Crail’s voice was mildly reproachful. “You nearly put your pretty foot in it!”

“I did worse than that,” said Elsie. “I wore my wedding ring to the office this morning! I’ve only had it a week and I hate taking it off. That ghastly old woman out there is out for blood, Johnny.”

Crail scratched his shapely nose thoughtfully.

“I wonder what she wants?”

She had startling news for him.

“She wants the transfer of her securities to the Northern Trust,” she said, and he stared at her.

“Who told you?”

“I saw a letter she wrote to Wendle. Johnny, she’ll still be terribly rich, won’t she?” and, when he nodded: “I’m rather glad of that.”

“She wants to transfer her securities to the Northern Security Trust, does she? Pray hard, Elsie, for a miracle!”

The miracle happened at that moment. The house ’phone bell rang, and she picked up the instrument.

“Will you see Mr. Bennett?”

Bennett? He had forgotten all about the errant clerk.

“Shoot him in.”

Wendle wouldn’t like it, but he had got out of the habit of worrying about what Wendle liked.

Bennett was thinner, his face white and haggard. Prison killed men of his calibre. John Crail grew even more thoughtful as he pointed to a chair.

“I’d rather stand. I hope you don’t mind my coming to you, sir—you’re my last hope.”

His wife and he were leaving for Canada the next morning, steerage. And at the last minute he had had a wonderful chance. His people had been farmers for years and had a place in the north of Scotland. The farm had just come into the market.

"Well?"

Bennett made a gesture of despair.

"I know that it is madness to ask, but I don't want to go to a country I don't know." He hesitated. "Is there any chance of raising the money to buy the farm? It is a lonely place; nobody knows about my past. My wife could buy it in her maiden name."

John Crail thought quickly.

"How much?" he asked.

"It's a bargain, sir—fifteen hundred pounds." He laughed harshly. "I know that it is stupid to ask, but you've been a good friend of mine."

There was no time to lose. Elsie had appeared at the door, and her nod told him that Wendle was returning.

"You know Mrs. Apleton?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; I saw her come in."

"Well, see her go out," said Crail quickly. "When she's gone, come back. Go into my private room and wait."

Bennett had hardly passed through the door when Mrs. Apleton and her nephew came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Crail." There was something very ominous in that good morning.

"Good morning, Mrs. Apleton. What brings you into the City on this beautiful morning?"

"A very serious matter, my dear fellow—very serious." Wendle's voice was shrill.

"Hold your tongue, Joshua! The first thing, and that is the least important, is this letter." She produced a letter from her handbag and threw it on the desk. "I regard this as most impertinent."

Crail hardly glanced at it.

"Oh, the Beltham affair! Well, I really can't let you sell a dud estate to the impoverished Murdochs," he said.

"The impoverished Murdochs!" she scoffed. "They have three motor-cars to my one!"

"They are living beyond your income—that is all," he answered coolly.

"You've never been so ultra-scrupulous before."

He knew instinctively that this was all the merest preliminary to the grand attack. The question of the Murdoch Estate had been fought out before. But it could now be re-fought in plainer terms.

"Mrs. Apleton, I know exactly what you and your nephew have been doing. We are the trustees for a large number of estates. My respected senior partner handles most of them. He would have handled yours, only you were anxious that he should not know too much of your private affairs. For years, as I have discovered, he has been juggling his trusts."

Mr. Wendle protested violently, but was silenced by his aunt.

"He has been juggling the trusts to enrich your already bloated bank balance," Crail went on. "Buying cheaply from one, selling dearly to another. I have calculated that in seven years your estate has benefited to the extent of eighty or ninety thousand pounds by this organised conspiracy."

"That is a most serious accusation——" began Wendle, but was again snapped to silence.

"Now, Mr. Crail"—her voice was like steel—"we will leave the Murdochs."

"Happy Murdochs!" smiled John.

"You hold a considerable number of securities of mine?" she continued, and, when he nodded: "A very large number of these have recently come on the market."

To her amazement, he showed no evidence of confusion or guilt.

"I sold them—yes."

She found a difficulty in asking the next question.

"You have the money in your bank?"

Again he nodded.

"Yes. It is customary to sell securities when one decides upon reinvestment."

Mrs. Apleton consulted a paper.

"Nearly seventy-five thousand pounds?"

"You're nearly four thousand out," he said coolly—"seventy-nine."

She turned red and white; for a moment her nephew thought she was on the verge of hysteria. But she kept a tight rein on her emotions.

"The money is in your bank, and in your own name," she said. "I have made that discovery. I want you now to give me a cheque for the full amount and an order to the bank to deliver the remainder of the securities."

If she expected a gesture of defiance she was to be agreeably surprised. He sat down at his desk, took out a cheque-book, and wrote.

"I am a business woman, Mr. Crail. I take no risks."

"Naturally." He did not look up from his writing.

"I shall require, of course, a full statement, but that will do later."

He tore out the cheque, scribbled a few lines on a note-sheet, and passed both to her. She examined the cheque and frowned.

"Do you bank at Torquay?"

"Yes. I like the climate."

His flippancy jarred, but she was a very relieved woman.

"I have distrusted you, Mr. Crail, ever since I saw you at a fashionable restaurant six months ago with the young lady who was here when I came."

Mr. Wendle's mouth opened.

"Miss Mannering? Impossible! This is monstrous—monstrous! You've been living a double life!"

Crail's cold blue eyes were bright with silent laughter.

"You are understating the facts. I've lived a quadruple life, and three of them perfectly delightful."

He saw Wendle press his desk bell viciously, and then Elsie came in. Wendle could be very dignified.

"Miss Mannering, you will go to the cashier and draw two weeks' salary in lieu of notice."

"She's entitled to four," interrupted Crail.

Mr. Wendle shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well—you may have four weeks; and you need not return to this office."

That was the last Crail ever saw of him or his sharp-featured aunt. He waited until they were gone.

“Why four weeks?” asked Elsie.

“Every little helps,” he said. “Go and get it before he changes his mind!”

He opened the door for her, and then, coming back to his desk, he unlocked a drawer, and, taking out a pad of banknotes, he put them into his pocket. Stepping swiftly to the door of his private room, he beckoned the waiting Bennett.

“Come in. What does that wife of yours look like?” he asked, and the man was taken aback.

“I’ve got her photo on my passport.” He felt in his pocket, and handed the little book to John.

Crail looked at the photograph keenly.

“She’s rather pretty too—looks like any other pretty girl,” he mused. “And that’s your portrait? If I took off my moustache, I’d look rather like you, shouldn’t I?”

Bennett was bewildered.

“Why, yes, sir—you would, in a way.”

There were a number of papers folded inside the book—steamer tickets, he saw at a glance. Mr. John Crail slipped passports and tickets into his own pocket.

“Go to Scotland by the first train,” he said rapidly. “I’ll keep these as a souvenir. You need never mention the fact that I’ve bought them.” From his pocket he pulled a roll of notes and extracted twenty. “Fifteen hundred—and a monkey for luck,” he said.

Bennett stared at the money in his hand.

“I may want to use your passport and your tickets for a poor friend of mine,” Crail went on; “he has got himself into trouble. Well, he’s not so poor, but the trouble is very real.”

The man nodded slowly.

“I see. You can depend on me,” he said.

“And keep straight,” warned Grail solemnly. “Honesty is the best policy. Thieves make thieves. Good luck!”

He gripped the hand of the clerk and hustled him through the outer office. Elsie was waiting for him there—he had a moment to speak to her before he returned to his room for his hat.

"Angel, how do you like the prospect of a long sea journey—steerage?" he asked in a whisper, and she smiled.

"That will be the royal suite—with you," she breathed.

Mr. Wendle was waiting for him when he returned to the room. And Mr. Wendle had been recently shown the copy of some correspondence. He was naturally agitated.

"Crail, you posted a letter to Lady Murdoch last night, they tell me?"

John Crail nodded curtly as he took his hat from the peg.

"Yes. I advised her to get another solicitor. I told her you were trying to rob her. So long!" He made for the door.

"Wait, please!" Joshua was almost frantic with anxiety. "I may want to get in touch with you. It is rather awkward your banking at Torquay. It is Good Friday to-morrow—and then Easter Monday. It will take four days to clear that cheque."

"I know," said John Crail.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
MORRISON AND GIBB LTD., LONDON AND EDINBURGH

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 *Killer Kay* by Edgar Wallace]