PAST MASTERS 174

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and more

PAST MASTERS 174

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker from short stories in magazines, newspapers and other sources, and all in the Life + 70 years public domain.

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Contents

X. Y. Z.

A Story Told by a Detective

Anna Katharine Green

1846–1935

New York, Putnams, 1883

An Ebenezer Bryce noveletteby the pioneering American crime writer

1. The Mysterious Rendezvous

SOMETIMES in the course of his experience, a detective, while engaged in ferreting out the mystery of one crime, runs inadvertently upon the clue to another. But rarely has this been done in a manner more unexpected or with attendant circumstances of greater interest than in the instance I am now about to relate.

For some time the penetration of certain Washington officials had been baffled by the clever devices of a gang of counterfeiters who had inundated the western portion of Massachusetts with spurious Treasury notes. Some of the best talent of the Secret Service had been expended upon the matter, but with no favorable result, when, one day, notice was received at Washington that a number of suspicious-looking letters, addressed to the simple initials, X. Y. Z., Brandon, Mass., were being daily forwarded through the mails of that region; and it being deemed possible that a clue had at last been offered to the mystery in hand, I was sent northward to investigate.

It was in the middle of June, 1881, and the weather was simply delightful. As I stepped from the cars at Brandon and looked up the long straight street with its double row of maple trees sparkling fresh and beautiful in the noonday sun, I thought I had never seen a prettier village or entered upon any enterprise with a lighter or more hopeful heart.

Intent on my task, I went straight to the post-office, and after coming to an understanding with the postmaster, proceeded at once to look over the mail addressed to the mysterious X. Y. Z.

I found it to consist entirely of letters. They were about a dozen in number, and were, with one exception, similar in general appearance and manner of direction, though inscribed in widely different handwritings, and posted from various New England towns. The exception to which I allude had these few extra words written in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope: "To be kept till called for." As I bundled up the letters preparatory to thrusting them back into the box, I noticed that the latter was the only one in a blue envelope, all the others being in the various shades of cream-color and buff.

"Who is in the habit of calling for these letters?" I asked of the postmaster.

"Well," said he, "I don't know his name. The fact is nobody knows him around here. He usually drives up in a buggy about nightfall, calls for letters addressed to X. Y. Z., and having got them, whips up his horse and is off again before one can say a word."

"Describe him," said I.

"Well, he is very lean and very lank. In appearance he is both green and awkward. His complexion is pale, almost sickly. Were it not for his eye, which is keen and twinkling, I should call him an extremely inoffensive-looking person."

The type was not new to me. "I should like to see him," said I.

"You will have to wait till nightfall, then," returned the postmaster. "He never comes till about dusk. Drop in here, say at seven o'clock, and I will see that you have the opportunity of handing him his mail."

I nodded acquiescence to this and sauntered out of the enclosure devoted to the uses of the post-office. As I did so I ran against a young man who was hurriedly approaching from the other end of the store.

"Your pardon," he cried; and I turned to look at him, so gentlemanly was his tone, and so easy the bow with which he accompanied this simple apology.

He was standing before the window of the post-office, waiting for his mail; a good-looking, well-made young man, of a fine countenance, but with a restless eye, whose alert yet anxious expression I could not but note even in the casual glance I gave him. There appeared to be some difficulty in procuring him his mail, and each minute he was kept waiting seemed to increase his impatience almost beyond the bounds of endurance, I saw him lean forward and gasp out a hurried word to the postmaster, and was idly wondering over his anxiety and its probable causes, when I heard a hasty exclamation near me, and looking around, saw the postmaster himself beckoning to me from the door of the enclosure. I immediately hastened forward.

"I don't know what it means," he whispered; "but here is a young man, different from any who have been here before, asking for a letter addressed to X. Y. Z."

"A letter?" I repeated

"Yes, a letter."

"Give him the whole batch and see what he does," I returned, drawing back where I could myself watch the result of my instructions. The postmaster did as I requested. In another moment I saw the young man start with amazement as a dozen letters were put in his hand. "These are not all for me!" he cried, but even as he made the exclamation, drew to one side, and with a look of mingled perplexity and concern, began opening them one after another, his expression deepening to amazement as he glanced at their contents. The one in the blue envelope, however, seemed to awaken quite different emotions.

With an unconscious look of relief, he hastily read the short letter it contained, then with a quick gesture, folded it up and thrust it back into the envelope he held, together with the other letters, in his left hand.

"There must be another X. Y. Z.," said he, approaching the window of the post-office and handing back all the letters he had received, with the exception of the one in the blue envelope, which with a quick movement he had separated from the rest and thrust into his coat-pocket. "I can lay claim to none of these." And with a repetition of his easy bow he turned away and hurriedly quitted the store, followed by the eyes of clerks and customers, to whom he was evidently as much of a stranger as he was to me. Without hesitation I went to the door and looked after him. He was just crossing the street to the tavern on the other side of the way. I saw him enter, felt that he was safe to remain there for a few minutes, and conscious of the great opportunity awaiting me, hastened back to the postmaster.

"Well," cried I, in secret exultation, "my plan has worked admirably. Let me see the letters. As they have been opened, and through no fault of ours, a peep at them now in the cause of justice will harm none but the guilty."

The postmaster demurred, but I soon overcame his scruples; and taking down the letters once more, hastily investigated their contents. I own that I was considerably disappointed at the result. In fact, I found nothing that pointed toward the counterfeiters; only in each letter a written address, together with fifty cents' worth of stamps.

"Some common fraud," I exclaimed. "One of those cheap affairs where, for fifty cents enclosed, a piece of information calculated to insure fortune to the recipient is promised by return of mail."

And disgusted with the whole affair I bundled up the letters, and was about to replace them in the box for the third time when I discovered that it still held a folded paper. Drawing this out, I opened it and started in fresh amazement. If I was not very much mistaken in the appearance of the letter in the blue envelope which I had seen the young man read with so much interest, this was certainly it. But how came it here? Had I not seen him thrust it back into its envelope and afterward put envelope and all into his pocket? But here was no envelope, and here was the letter. By what freak of necromancy had it been transferred from its legitimate quarters to this spot? I could not imagine. Suddenly I remembered that his hand had been full of the other letters when he put, or endeavored to put, this special one back into its envelope, and however unaccountable it may seem, it must be that from haste or agitation he had only succeeded in thrusting it between two letters instead of into the envelope, as he supposed. Whether or not this explanation be true, there was

no doubt about my luck being in the ascendant. Mastering my satisfaction, I read these lines written in what appeared to be a disguised hand.

"All goes well. The time has come; every thing is in train, and success is certain. Be in the shrubbery at the northeast corner of the grounds at 9 p.m. precisely; you will be given a mask and such other means as are necessary to insure you the accomplishment of the end you have in view. He cannot hold out against a surprise. The word, by which you will know your friends, is COUNTERFEIT."

"Ah, ha!" thought I, "this is more like it." And moved by a sudden impulse, I hastily copied the letter into my memorandum-book, and then returning to the original, scratched out with my penknife the word northeast and carefully substituting that of southwest put the letter back into the box, in the hope that when he came to consult the envelope in his pocket (as he would be sure to do sooner or later) he would miss its contents and return to the post-office in search of it.

Nor was I mistaken. I had scarcely accomplished my task, when he re-entered the store, asked to see the letters he had returned, and finding amongst them the one he had lost, disappeared with it back to the tavern. "If he is surprised to read southwest this time instead of northeast, he will think his memory played him false in the first instance," cried I, in inward comment over my last doubtful stroke of policy; and turning to the postmaster, I asked him what place there was in the vicinity which could be said to possess grounds and a shrubbery.

"There is but one," he returned, "Mr. Benson's. All the rest of the folks are too poor to indulge in any such gimcracks."

"And who is Mr. Benson?"

"Well, he is Mr. Benson, the richest man in these parts and the least liked as I take it. He came here from Boston two years ago and built a house fit for a king to live in. Why, nobody knows, for he seems to take no pleasure in it. His children do though, and that is all he cares for I suppose. Young Mr. Benson especially seems to be never tired of walking about the grounds, looking at the trees and tying up the vines. Miss Carrie is different; all she wants is company. But little of that has her father ever allowed her till this very day. He seems to think nobody is good enough to sit down in his parlors; and yet he don't sit there himself, the strange man! but is always shut up in his library or some other out-of-the-way place."

"A busy man?"

"I suppose so, but no one ever sees any thing he does."

"Writes, perhaps?"

"I don't know; he never talks about himself."

"How did he get his money?"

"That we don't know. It seems to accumulate without his help or interference. When he came here he was called rich, but to-day he is said to be worth three times what he was then."

"Perhaps he speculates?"

"If he does, it must be through his son, for he never leaves home himself."

"Has two children, you say?"

"Yes, a son and a daughter: a famous young man, the son; not so much liked, perhaps, as universally respected. He is too severe and reticent to be a favorite, but no one ever found him doing any thing unworthy of himself. He is the pride of the county, and if he were a bit suaver in manner might have been in Congress at this minute."

"How old?"

"Thirty, I should say."

"And the girl?"

"Twenty-five, perhaps."

"A mother living?"

"No; there were some strange stories of her having died a year or so before they came here, under circumstances of a somewhat distressing nature, but they themselves say nothing about it,"

"It seems to me they don't say much about any thing."

"That's just it; they are the most reserved people you ever saw. It is not from them we have heard there is another son floating somewhere about the world. They never speak of him, and what's more, they never write to him; as who should know better than myself?"

An interruption here occurred, and I took the opportunity to saunter out into the crowd of idlers always to be found hanging around a country store at mail-time. My purpose was, as you may conceive, to pick up any stray bits of information that might be floating about concerning these Bensons. Not that I had as yet discovered any thing definite connecting this respectable family with the gang of counterfeiters upon whose track I had been placed; but business is business, and no clue, however slight or unpromising in its nature, is to be neglected when the way is as dark as that which lay before me. With an easy smile, therefore, calculated to allay apprehension and awaken confidence, I took my stand among these loungers. But I soon found that I need do nothing to start the wheel of gossip on the subject of the Bensons. It was already going, and that with a force and spirit that almost took my breath away.

"A fancy ball!" were the first words I heard. "The Bensons give a fancy ball, when they never had three persons at a time in their house before!"

"Yes, and what's more, they are going to have folks over from Clayton and Lawrence and Hollowell and devil knows where. It's to be a smash up, a regular fandango, with masks and all that kind of nonsense."

"They say Miss Carrie teased her father till he had to give in in self-defence. It's her birthday or something like that, and she would have a party."

"But such a party! who ever heard the like in a respectable town like this! It's wicked, that's what I call it, downright wicked to cover up the face God has given you and go strutting around in clothes a Christian man might well think borrowed from the Evil One if he had to wear them in any decent company. All wrong, I say, all wrong, and I am astonished at Mr. Benson. To keep his doors shut as he has, and then to open them in a burst to all sorts of folly. We are not invited at our house."

"Nor we, nor we," shouted some half dozen.

"And I don't know of any one in this town who is," cried a burly man, presumably a butcher by trade. "We are not good enough for the Bensons. They say he is even going to be mean enough to shut the gates and not let a soul inside who hasn't a ticket. And they are going to light up the grounds too!"

"We can peep through the fence."

"Much we will see that way. If you had said climb it—"

"We can't climb it. Big John is going to be there and Tom Henshaw. They mean to keep their good times to themselves, just as they have kept every thing else. It's a queer set they are anyway, and the less we have to do with them the better."

"I should like to see Hartley Benson in masquerade costume, I would."

"Oh, he won't wear any of the fol-de-rol; he's too dignified." And with that there fell a sudden hush over the crowd, for which I was at a loss to account, till, upon looking up, I saw approaching on horseback, a young man in whom I had no difficulty in recognizing the subject of the last remark.

Straight, slight, elegant in appearance, but with an undoubted reserve of manner apparent even at a distance, he rode up to where I stood, and casting a slight glance around, bowed almost imperceptibly, and alighted. A boy caught the bridle of his horse, and Mr. Benson, without a word or further look, passed quickly into the office, leaving a silence behind him that was not disturbed till he returned with what was evidently his noonday mail. Remounting his horse, he stopped a moment to speak to a man who had just come up, and I seized the opportunity to study his face. I did not like it. It was handsome without doubt; the features were regular, the complexion fair, the expression gentlemanly if not commanding; but I did not like it. It was too impenetrable perhaps; and to a detective anxious to probe a man for his motives, this is ever a most fatal defect. His smile was without sunshine; his

glance was an inquiry, a rebuke, a sarcasm, every thing but a revelation. As he rode away he carried with him the thought of all, yet I doubt if the admiration he undoubtedly inspired, was in a single case mixed with any warmer feeling than that of pride in a fellow townsman they could not understand. "Ice," thought I; "ice in all but its transparency!" So much for Benson the son.

The ball was to take place that very night; and the knowledge of this fact threw a different light over the letter I had read. The word mask had no longer any special significance, neither the word counterfeit, and yet such was the tenor of the note itself, and such the exaggerated nature of its phrases, I could not but feel that some plot of a reprehensible if not criminal nature was in the process of formation, which, as a rising young detective engaged in a mysterious and elusive search, it behooved me to know. And moved by this consideration, I turned to a new leaf in my memorandum-book, and put down in black and white the following facts thus summarily collected:

A mysterious family with a secret.
Rich, but with no visible means of wealth.
Secluded, with no apparent reason for the same.
A father who is a hermit.
A son who is impenetrable.
A daughter whose tastes are seldom gratified.
The strange fact of a ball being given by this family after years of reserve and non-intercourse with their neighbors.
The still stranger fact of it being a masquerade, a style of entertainment which, from its novelty and the opportunities it affords, makes this departure from ordinary rules seem marked and startling.
The discovery of a letter appointing a rendezvous between two persons of the male sex, in the grounds of the party giving this ball, in which the opportunities afforded by a masquerade are to be used for forwarding some long-cherished scheme."

At the bottom of this I wrote a deduction: "Some connection between one or more members of this family giving the ball, and the person called to the rendezvous; the entertainment being used as a blind if not as a means."

It was now four o'clock, five hours before the time of rendezvous. How should I employ the interval? A glance at the livery-stable hard by, determined me. Procuring a horse, I rode out on the road toward Mr. Benson's, for the purpose of reconnoitring the grounds; but as I proceeded I was seized by an intense desire to penetrate into the midst of this peculiar household, and judge for myself whether it was worth while to cherish any further suspicions

in regard to this family. But how to effect such an entrance? What excuse could I give for my intrusion that would be likely to serve me on a day of such tumult and pre occupation? I looked up and down the road as if for inspiration. It did not come. Meanwhile, the huge trees that surrounded the house had loomed in sight, and presently the beauties of lawn and parterre began to appear beyond the high iron fence, through which I could catch now and then short glimpses of hurrying forms, as lanterns were hung on the trees and all things put in readiness for the evening's entertainment. Suddenly a thought struck me. If Mr. Benson was the man they said, he was not engaged in any of these arrangements. Mr. Benson was a hermit. Now what could I say that would interest a hermit? I racked my brains; a single idea came. It was daring in its nature, but what of that! The gate must be passed, Mr. Benson must be seen—or so my adventurous curiosity decided,—and to do it, something must be ventured. Taking out my card, which was simply inscribed with my name, I wrote on it, "Business private and immediate," and assuming my most gentlemanly and inoffensive manner, rode calmly through the gate to the front of the house. If I had been on foot I doubt if I would have been allowed to pass by the servant lounging about in that region, but the horse carried me through in more senses than one, and almost before I realized it, I found myself pausing before the portico, in full view of a dozen or more busy men and boys.

Imitating the manner of Mr. Benson at the post-office, I jumped from my horse and threw the bridle to the boy nearest me. Instantly and before I could take a step, a servant issued from the open door, and with an expression of anxiety somewhat surprising under the circumstances, took his stand before me in a way to hinder my advance.

"Mr. Benson does not receive visitors to-day," said he.

"I am not a visitor," replied I; "I have business with Mr. Benson," and I handed him my card, which he looked at with a doubtful expression.

"Mr. Benson's commands are not to be disobeyed," persisted the man. "My master sees no one to-day."

"But this is an exceptional case," I urged, my curiosity rising at this unexpected opposition. "My business is important and concerns him. He cannot refuse to see me."

The servant shook his head with what appeared to me to be an unnecessary expression of alarm, but nevertheless retreated a step, allowing me to enter. "I will call Mr. Hartley," cried he.

But that was just what I did not wish. It was Benson the father I had come to see, and I was not to be baffled in this way.

"Mr. Hartley won't do," said I, in my lowest but most determined accents. "If Mr. Benson is not ill, I must beg to be admitted to his presence." And

stepping inside the small reception room at my right, I sat down on the first chair I came to.

The man stood for a moment confounded at my pertinacity, then with a last scrutinizing look, that took in every detail of my person and apparel, drew slowly off, shaking his head and murmuring to himself.

Meanwhile the mingled splendor and elegance of my surroundings were slowly making their impression upon me. The hall by which I had entered was spacious and imposing; the room in which I sat, a model of beauty in design and finish. I was allowing myself the luxury of studying its pictures and numerous works of art, when the sound of voices reached my ear from the next room. A man and woman were conversing there in smothered tones, but my senses are very acute, and I had no difficulty in overhearing what was said.

"Oh, what an exciting day this has been!" cried the female voice. "I have wanted to ask you a dozen times what you think of it all. Will he succeed this time? Has he the nerve to embrace his opportunity, or what is more, the tact to make one? Failure now would be fatal. Father—"

"Hush!" broke in the other voice, in a masculine tone of repressed intensity. "Do not forget that success depends upon your prudence. One whisper of what you are about, and the whole scheme is destroyed."

"I will be careful; only do you think that all is going well and as we planned it?"

"It will not be my fault if it does not," was the reply, uttered with an accent so sinister I was conscious of a violent surprise when, in the next instant, the other, with a burst of affectionate fervor, cried in an ardent tone:

"Oh, how good you are, and what a comfort you are to me!"

I was just pondering over the incongruity thus presented, when the servant returned with my card.

"Mr. Benson wishes to know the nature of your business," said he, in a voice I was uncomfortably conscious must penetrate to the next room and awake its inmates to a knowledge of my proximity.

"Let me have the card," said I; and taking it, I added to my words the simple phrase, "On behalf of the Constable of the town," remembering I had heard the postmaster say this position was held by his brother. "There," said I, "carry that back to your master."

The servant took the card, glanced down at the words I had written, started and hastily drew back. "You had better come," said he, leading the way into the hall.

I was only too glad to comply; in fact, escape from that room seemed imperative. But just as I was crossing the threshold, a sudden, quick cry, half joyful, half fearful, rose behind me, and turning, I met the eyes of a young lady

peering upon me from a lifted portière, with an expression of mingled terror and longing that would have astonished me greatly, if it had not instantly disappeared at the first sight of my face.

"Pardon me," she exclaimed, drawing back with an embarrassed movement into the room from which she had emerged. But soon recovering herself, she stepped hastily forward, and ignoring me, said to the servant at my side: "Jonas, who is this gentleman, and where are you taking him?"

With a bow, Jonas replied: "He comes on business, miss, and Mr. Benson consents to see him."

"But I thought my father had expressly commanded that no one was to be allowed to enter the library to-day," she exclaimed, but in a musing tone that asked for no response. And hastily as we passed down the hall, I could not escape the uneasy sense that her eager eyes were following us as we went.

"Too much emotion for so small a matter, and a strange desire on the part of every one to keep Mr. Benson from being intruded upon to-day," was my mental comment. And I was scarcely surprised when upon our arrival at the library door we found it locked. However, a knock, followed by a few whispered words on the part of the servant, served to arouse the hermit within, and with a quick turn of the key, the door flew back on its hinges, and the master of the house stood before me.

It was a moment to be remembered: first, because, the picture presented to my eyes was of a marked and impressive character; and secondly, because something in the expression of the gentleman before me showed that he had received a shock at my introduction which was not to be expected after the pains which had been taken to prepare his mind for my visit. He was a tall, remarkable-looking man, with a head already whitened, and a form which, if not bowed, had only retained its upright carriage by means of the indomitable will that betrayed itself in his eyes. Seen against the rich background of the stained-glass window that adorned one end of the apartment, his stern, furrowed face and eagerly repellant aspect imprinted itself upon me like a silhouette, while the strong emotion I could not but detect in his bearing, lent to the whole a poetic finish that made it a living picture which, as I have said, I have never been able to forget.

"You have come from the constable of the town," said he, in a firm, hard tone, impressive as his look. "May I ask for what purpose?"

Looking around, I saw the servant had disappeared. "Sir," said I, gathering up my courage, as I became convinced that in this case I had a thoroughly honest man to deal with, "you are going to give a fancy ball to-night. Such an event is a novelty in these parts, and arouses much curiosity. Some of the men about town have even been heard to threaten to leap the fences and steal a

look at your company, whether you will or not. Mr. White wants to know whether you need any assistance in keeping the grounds clear of all but your legitimate guests; if so, he is ready to supply whatever force you may need."

"Mr. White is very kind," returned Mr. Benson, in a voice which, despite his will-power, showed that his agitation had in some unaccountable way been increased by my communication. "I had not thought of any such contingency," he murmured, moving over to a window and looking out. "An invasion of rowdies would not be agreeable. They might even find their way into the house." He paused and cast a sudden look at me. "Who are you?" he abruptly asked.

The question took me by surprise, but I answered bravely if not calmly: "I am a man who sometimes assists Mr. White in the performance of his duties, and in case you need it, will be the one to render you assistance to-night. A line to Mr. White, if you doubt me—"

A wave of his meagre hand stopped me. "Do you think you could keep out of my house to-night, any one I did not wish to enter?" he asked.

"I should at least like to try."

"A ticket is given to every invited guest; but if men are going to climb the fences, tickets will amount to but little."

"I will see that the fences are guarded," cried I, gratified at the prospect of being allowed upon the scene of action. "I can hinder anyone from coming in that way, if—" Here I paused, conscious of something, I could hardly say what, that bade me be cautious and weigh my words well. "If you desire it and will give me the authority to act for you," I added in a somewhat more indifferent tone.

"I do desire it," he replied shortly, moving over to the table and taking up a card. "Here is a ticket that will insure you entrance into the grounds; the rest you will manage without scandal. I do not want any disturbance, but if you see any one hanging about the house or peering into the windows or attempting to enter in any way except through the front door, you are to arrest them, no matter who they are. I have an especial reason for desiring my wishes attended to in this regard," he went on, not noticing the preoccupation that had seized me, "and will pay well if on the morrow I find that every thing has gone off according to my desires."

"Money is a powerful incentive to duty," I rejoined, with marked emphasis, directing a sly glance at the mirror opposite, in whose depths I had but a moment before been startled by the sudden apparition of the pale and strongly agitated face of young Mr. Benson, who was peering from a door-way half hidden by a screen at our back. "I will be on hand to-night." And with what I meant to be a cynical look, I made my bow and disappeared from the room.

As I expected, I was met at the front door by Mr. Hartley. "A word with you," said he. "Jonas tells me you are from the constable of the town. May I ask what has gone amiss that you come here to disturb my father on a day like this?"

His tone was not unkind, his expression not without suavity. If I had not had imprinted on my memory the startling picture of his face as I had seen it an instant before in the mirror, I should have been tempted to believe in his goodness and integrity at this moment. As it was, I doubted him through and through, yet replied with frankness and showed him the ticket I had received from his father.

"And you are going to make it your business to guard the grounds to-night?" he asked, gloomily glancing at the card in my hand as if he would like to annihilate it.

"Yes," said I.

He drew me into a small room half filled with plants.

"Now," said he, "see here. Such a piece of interference is entirely uncalled for, and you have been alarming my father unnecessarily. There are no rowdies in this town, and if one or two of the villagers should get into the grounds, where is the harm? They cannot get into the house even if they wanted to, which they don't. I do not wish this, our first show of hospitality, to assume a hostile aspect, and whatever my father's expectations may be, I must request you to curtail your duties as much as possible and limit them to responding by your presence when called upon."

"But your father has a right to expect the fullest obedience to his wishes," I protested. "He would not be satisfied if I should do no more than you request, and I cannot afford to disappoint him."

He looked at me with a calculating eye, and I expected to see him put his hand in his pocket; but Hartley Benson played his cards better than that. "Very well," said he, "if you persist in regarding my father's wishes as paramount, I have nothing to say. Fulfil your duties as you conceive them, but don't look for my support if any foolish misadventure makes you ashamed of yourself." And drawing back, he motioned me out of the room.

I felt I had received a check, and hurried out of the house. But scarcely had I entered upon the walk that led down to the gate, when I heard a light step behind me. Turning, I encountered the pretty daughter of the house, the youthful Miss Carrie.

"Wait," she cried, allowing herself to display her emotion freely in face and bearing. "I have heard who you are from my brother," she continued, approaching me with a soft grace that at once put me upon my guard. "Now, tell me who are the rowdies that threaten to invade our grounds?"

"I do not know their names, miss," I responded; "but they are a rough-looking set you would not like to see among your guests."

"There are no very rough-looking men in our village," she declared; "you must be mistaken in regard to them. My father is nervous and easily alarmed. It was wrong to arouse his fears."

I thought of that steady eye of his, of force sufficient to hold in awe a regiment of insurgents, and smiled at her opinion of my understanding.

"Then you do not wish the grounds guarded," I said, in as indifferent a tone as I could assume.

"I do not consider it necessary,"

"But I have already pledged myself to fulfil your father's commands."

"I know," she said, drawing a step nearer, with a most enchanting smile. "And that was right under the circumstances; but we, his children, who may be presumed to know more of social matters than a recluse,—I, especially," she added, with a certain emphasis, "tell you it is not necessary. We fear the scandal it may cause; besides, some of the guests may choose to linger about the grounds under the trees, and would be rather startled at being arrested as intruders.

"What, then, do you wish me to do?" I asked, leaning toward her, with an appearance of yielding.

"To accept this money," she murmured, blushing, "and confine yourself to-night to remaining in the background unless called upon."

This was a seconding of her brother's proposition with a vengeance. Taking the purse she handed me, I weighed it for a moment in my hand, and then slowly shook my head. "Impossible," I cried; "but"— and I fixed my eyes intently upon her countenance— "if there is any one in particular whom you desire me to ignore, I am ready to listen to a description of his person. It has always been my pleasure to accommodate myself as much as possible to the whims of the ladies."

It was a bold stroke that might have cost me the game. Indeed, I half expected she would raise her voice and order some of the men about her to eject me from the grounds. But instead of that she remained for a moment blushing painfully, but surveying me with an unfaltering gaze that reminded me of her father's.

"There is a person," said she, in a low, restrained voice, "whom I am especially anxious should remain unmolested, whatever he may or may not be seen to do. He is a guest," she went on, a sudden pallor taking the place of her blushes, "and has a right to be here; but I doubt if he at once enters the house, and I even suspect he may choose to loiter awhile in the grounds before attempting to join the company. I ask you to allow him to do so."

I bowed with an appearance of great respect. "Describe him," said I.

For a moment she faltered, with a distressed look I found it difficult to understand. Then, with a sudden glance over my person, exclaimed: "Look in the glass when you get home and you will see the fac-simile of his form, though not of his face. He is fair, whereas you are dark." And with a haughty lift of her head calculated to rob me of any satisfaction I might have taken in her words, she stepped slowly back.

I stopped her with a gesture. "Miss," said I, "take your purse before you go. Payment of any service I may render your father will come in time. This affair is between you and me, and I hope I am too much of a gentleman to accept money for accommodating a lady in so small a matter as this."

But she shook her head. "Take it," said she, "and assure me that I may rely on you."

"You may rely on me without the money," I replied, forcing the purse back into her hand.

"Then I shall rest easy," she returned, and retreated with a lightsome air toward the house.

The next moment I was on the highway with my thoughts. What did it all mean? Was it, then, a mere love affair across which I had foolishly stumbled, and was I busying myself unnecessarily about a rendezvous that might mean no more than an elopement from under a severe father's eye? Taking out the note which had led to all these efforts on my part, I read it for the third time.

"All goes well. The time has come; every thing is in train, and success is certain. Be in the shrubbery at the northeast corner of the grounds at 9 p.m. precisely; you will be given a mask and such other means as are necessary to insure you the accomplishment of the end you have in view. He cannot hold out against a surprise. The word by which you will know your friends is COUNTERFEIT."

A love-letter of course; and I had been a fool to suppose it any thing else. The young people are to surprise the old gentleman in the presence of their friends. They have been secretly married perhaps, who knows, and take this method of obtaining a public reconciliation. But that word "Counterfeit," and the sinister tone of Hartley Benson as he said: "It shall not fail through lack of effort on my part!" Such a word and such a tone did not rightly tally with this theory. Few brothers take such interest in their sister's love affairs as to grow saturnine over them. There was, beneath all this, something which I had not yet penetrated. Meantime my duty led me to remain true to the one person of whose integrity of purpose I was most thoroughly convinced.

Returning to the village, I hunted up Mr. White and acquainted him with what I had undertaken in his name; and then perceiving that the time was fast speeding by, strolled over to the tavern for my supper.

The stranger was still there, walking up and down the sitting-room. He joined us at the table, but I observed he scarcely tasted his food, and both then and afterward manifested the same anxious suspense that had characterized his movements from the time of our first encounter.

II. The Black Domino

AT half past eight I was at my post. The mysterious stranger, still under my direct surveillance, had already entered the grounds and taken his stand in the southwest corner of the shrubbery, thereby leaving me free to exercise my zeal in keeping the fences and gates free of intruders. At nine the guests were nearly if not all assembled; and promptly at the hour mentioned in the note so often referred to, I stole away from my post and hid myself amid the bushes that obscured the real place of rendezvous.

It was a retired spot, eminently fitted for a secret meeting. The lamps, which had been hung in profusion through the grounds, had been studiously excluded from this quarter. Even the broad blaze of light that poured from the open doors and windows of the brilliantly illuminated mansion, sent no glimmer through the broad belt of evergreens that separated this retreat from the open lawn beyond. All was dark, all was mysterious, all was favorable to the daring plan I had undertaken. In silence I awaited the sound of approaching steps.

My suspense was of short duration. In a few moments I heard a low rustle in the bushes near me, then a form appeared before my eyes, and a man's voice whispered:

"Is there any one here?"

My reply was to glide quietly into view.

Instantly he spoke again, this time with more assurance.

"Are you ready for a counterfeit?"

"I am ready for any thing," I returned, in smothered tones, hoping by thus disguising my voice, to lure him into a revelation of the true purpose of this mysterious rendezvous.

But instead of the explanations I expected, the person before me made a quick movement, and I felt a domino thrown over my shoulders.

"Draw it about you well," he murmured; "there are lynx eyes in the crowd to-night." And while I mechanically obeyed, he bent down to my ear and earnestly continued: "Now listen, and be guided by my instructions. You will

not be able to enter by the front door, as it is guarded, and you cannot pass without removing your mask. But the window on the left-hand balcony is at your service. It is open, and the man appointed to keep intruders away, has been bribed to let you pass. Once inside the house, join the company sans cérémonie; and do not hesitate to converse with any one who addresses you by the countersign. Promptly at ten o'clock look around you for a domino in plain black. When you see him move, follow him, but with discretion, so that you may not seem to others to be following. Sooner or later he will pause and point to a closed door. Notice that door, and when your guide has disappeared, approach and enter it without fear or hesitation. You will find yourself in a small apartment connecting with the library.

"There is but one thing more to say. If the wineglass you will observe on the library table smells of wine, you may know your father has had his nightly potion and gone to bed. But if it contains nothing more than a small white powder, you may be certain he has yet to return to the library, and that by waiting, you will have the long-wished-for opportunity of seeing him."

And pausing for no reply, my strange companion suddenly thrust a mask into my hand and darted from the circle of trees that surrounded us.

For a moment I stood dumbfounded at the position in which my recklessness had placed me. All the folly, the impertinence even, of the proceeding upon which I had entered, was revealed to me in its true colors, and I mentally inquired what could have induced me to thus hamper myself with the details of a mystery so entirely removed from the serious matter I had in charge. Resolved to abandon the affair, I made a hasty attempt to disengage myself from the domino in which I had been so unceremoniously enveloped. But invisible hands seemed to restrain me. A vivid remembrance of the tone in which these final instructions had been uttered returned to my mind, and while I recognized the voice as that of Hartley Benson, I also recognized the almost saturnine intensity of expression which had once before imbued his words with a significance both forcible and surprising. The secret, if a purely family one, was of no ordinary nature; and at the thought I felt my old interest revive. All the excuses with which I had hitherto silenced my conscience recurred to me with fresh force, and mechanically donning my mask, I prepared to follow out my guide's instructions to the last detail.

The window to which I had been directed stood wide open. Through it came the murmur of music and the hum of gay voices. Visions of a motley crowd decked in grotesque costumes passed constantly before my eyes. Sight and sound combined to allure me. Hurrying to the window, I stepped carelessly in.

A low guttural "Hugh!" at once greeted me. It was from a mask in full Indian costume, whom I saw leaning with a warrior's well-known dignity against the embrasure of the window by which I had entered. Giving him a scrutinizing glance, I came to the conclusion he was a young and not inelegant man; and impelled by a reasonable curiosity as to how I looked myself, I cast my eyes down upon my own person. I found my appearance sufficiently striking. The domino, in which I was wrapped was of a brilliant yellow hue, covered here and there with black figures representing all sorts of fantastic creatures, from hobgoblins of a terrible type, to merry Kate Greenaway silhouettes. "Humph!" thought I, "it seems I am not destined to glide unnoticed amid the crowd."

The first person who approached me was a gay little shepherdess.

"Ah, ha!" was the sportive exclamation with which she greeted me. "Here is one of my wandering sheep!" And with a laugh, she endeavored to hook me to her side by means of her silver crook.

But this blithesome puppet possessed no interest for me. So with a growl and a bound I assured her I was nothing more than a wolf in sheep's clothing, and would eat her up if she did not run away; at which she gayly laughed and vanished, and for a moment I was left alone. But only for a moment. A masked lady, whom I had previously observed standing upright and solitary in a distant corner of the room, now approached, and taking me by the arm, led me eagerly to one side.

"Oh, Joe!" she whispered, "is it you? How glad I am to have you here, and how I hope we are going to be happy at last!"

Fearing to address a person seemingly so well acquainted with the young man whose place I had usurped, I merely pressed, with most perfidious duplicity, the little hand that was so confidingly clasped in mine. It seemed to satisfy her, for she launched at once into ardent speech.

"Oh, Joe, I have been so anxious to have you with us once again! Hartley is a good brother, but he is not my old playmate. Then father will be so much happier if you only succeed in making him forget the past."

Seeing by this that it was Miss Carrie Benson with whom I had to deal, I pressed the little hand again, and tenderly drew her closer to my side. That I felt all the time like a villain of the blackest dye, it is quite unnecessary for me to state.

"Has Hartley told you just what you are to do?" was her next remark. "Father is very determined not to relent and has kept himself locked in his library all day, for fear you should force yourself upon his presence. I could never have gained his consent to give this ball if I had not first persuaded him it would serve as a means to keep you at a distance; that if you saw the house

thronged with guests, natural modesty would restrain you from pushing yourself forward. I think he begins to distrust his own firmness. He fears he will melt at the sight of you. He has been failing this last year and—" A sudden choke stopped her voice.

I was at once both touched and alarmed; touched at the grief which showed her motives to be pure and good, and alarmed at the position in which I had thrust myself to the apparent detriment of these same laudable motives. Moved by a desire to right matters, I ventured to speak:

"And do you think," I whispered, in purposely smothered accents, "that if he sees me he will relent?"

"I am sure of it. He yearns over you, Joe; and if he had not sworn never to speak to you again, he would have sent for you long ago. Hartley believes as well as I that the time for reconciliation has come."

"And is Hartley," I ventured again, not without a secret fear of the consequences, "really anxious for reconciliation?"

"Oh, Joe! can you doubt it? Has he not striven from the first to make father forget? Would he encourage you to come here to-night, furnish you with a disguise, and consent to act both as your champion and adviser, if he did not want to see you and father friends again? You don't understand Hartley; you never have. You would not have repelled his advances so long, if you had realized how truly he had forgiven every thing and forgotten it. Hartley has the pride of a person who has never done wrong himself. But even pride gives way before brotherly affection; and you have suffered so much and so long, poor Joe!"

"So, so," thought I, "Joe is then the aggressor!" And for a moment, I longed to be the man I represented, if only to clasp this dear little sister in my arms and thank her for her goodness. "You are a darling," I faintly articulated, inwardly determined to rush forthwith into the garden, hand over my domino to the person for whom it was intended, and make my escape from a scene which I had so little right to enjoy. But at this instant an interruption occurred which robbed me of my companion, but kept me effectually in my place. A black domino swept by us, dragging Miss Benson from my side, while at the same time a harsh voice whispered in my ear:

"To counterfeit wrong when one is right, necessarily opens one to misunderstanding."

I started, recognizing in this mode of speech a friend, and therefore one from whom I could not escape without running the risk of awakening suspicion.

"That is true," I returned, hoping by my abrupt replies to cut short this fresh colloquy and win a speedy release.

But something in my answer roused the interest of the person at my side, and caused a display of emotion that led to quite an opposite result from what I desired.

"You awaken a thousand conjectures in my mind by that reply," exclaimed my friend, edging me a little farther back from the crowd. "I have always had my doubts about— about—" he paused, hunting for the proper phrase— "about your having done what they said," he somewhat lamely concluded. "It was unlike you. But now I begin to see the presence of a possibility that might perhaps explain much we never understood. Joe, my boy, you never said you were innocent, but—"

"Who are you?" I asked boldly, peering into the twinkling eyes that shone upon me from his sedate mask. "In the discussion of such matters as these, it would be dreadful to make a mistake."

"And don't you recognize your Uncle Joe?" he asked, with a certain plaintive reproach somewhat out of keeping with his costume of "potent, grave, and reverend signior." "I came over from Hollowell on purpose, because Carrie intimated that you were going to make one final effort to see your father. Edith is here too," he murmured, thrusting his face alarmingly near mine. "She would not stay away, though we were all afraid she might betray herself; her emotions are so quick. Poor child! she never doubted you; and if my suspicions are correct—"

"Edith?" I interrupted,— "Edith?" An Edith was the last person I desired to meet under these circumstances. "Where is she?" I tremulously inquired, starting aside in some dismay at the prospect of encountering this unknown quantity of love and devotion.

But my companion, seizing me by the arm, drew me back. "She is not far away; of that you may be sure. But it will never do for you to try and hunt her up. You would not know her in her mask. Besides, if you remain still she will come to you."

That was just what I feared, but upon looking round and seeing no suspicious-looking damsel anywhere near me, I concluded to waive my apprehensions on her account and proceed to the development of an idea that had been awakened by the old gentleman's words.

"You are right," I acquiesced, edging, in my turn, toward the curtained recess of a window near by. "Let us wait here, and meantime you shall tell me what your suspicions are, for I feel the time has come for the truth to be made known, and who could better aid me in proclaiming it than you who have always stood my friend?"

"That is true," he murmured, all eagerness at once. Then in a lower tone and with a significant gesture: "There is something, then, which has never

been made known? Edith was right when she said you did not steal the bonds out of your father's desk?"

As he paused and looked me in the face, I was obliged to make some reply. I chose one of the non-committal sort.

"Don't ask me!" I murmured, turning away with every appearance of profound agitation.

He did not suspect the ruse.

"But, my boy, I shall have to ask you; if I am to help you out of this scrape, I must know the truth. Yet if it is as I suspect, I can see why you should hesitate even now. You are a generous fellow, Joe, but even generosity can be carried past its proper limits."

"Uncle," I exclaimed, leaning over him and whispering tremulously in his ear, "what are your suspicions? If I hear you give utterance to them, perhaps it will not be so hard for me to speak."

He hesitated, looked all about us with a questioning glance, put his mouth to my ear, and whispered:

"If I should use the name of Hartley in connection with what I have to say, would you be so very much surprised?"

With a quick semblance of emotion, I drew back.

"You think—" I tremulously commenced, and as suddenly broke off.

"That it was he who did it, and that you, knowing how your father loved him and built his hopes upon him, bore the blame of it yourself."

"Ha!" I exclaimed, with a deep breath as of relief. The suspicions of Uncle Joe were worth hearing.

He seemed to be satisfied with the ejaculation, and with an increase of eagerness in his tone, went quickly on:

"Am I not right, my boy? Is not this the secret of your whole conduct from that dreadful day to this?"

"Don't ask me," I again pleaded, taking care, however, to draw a step nearer and exclaim in almost the same breath: "Why should you think it must necessarily have been one of us? What did you know that you should be so positive it was either he or I who committed this dishonest action?"

"What did I know? Why, what everybody else did. That your father, hearing a noise in his study one night, rose up quietly and slipped to the door of communication in time to hear a stealthy foot leave the room and proceed down the hall toward the apartment usually occupied by you and your brother; that, alarmed and filled with vague distrust, he at once lit the lamp, only to discover his desk had been forcibly broken into and a number of coupon bonds taken out; that, struck to the heart, he went immediately to the room where you and your brother lay, found him lying quiet, and to all appearance asleep,

while you looked flushed and with difficulty met his eye; that without hesitation he thereupon accused you of theft, and began to search the apartment; that he found the bonds, as we both know, in a cupboard at the head of your bed, and when you were asked if you had put them there you remained silent, and neither then nor afterward made any denial of being the one who stole them."

A mournful "Yes" was all the reply I ventured upon.

"Now it never seemed to occur to your father to doubt your guilt. The open window and the burglar's jimmy found lying on the floor of the study, being only so many proofs, to his mind, of your deep calculation and great duplicity. But I could not help thinking, even on that horrible morning, that your face did not wear a look of guilt so much as it did that of firm and quiet resolution. But I was far from suspecting the truth, my boy, or I should never have allowed you to fall a victim to your father's curse, and be sent forth like a criminal from home and kindred. If only for Edith's sake I would have spoken—dear, trusting, faithful girl that she is!"

"But— but—" I brokenly ejaculated, anxious to gain as much of the truth as was possible in the few minutes allotted me; "what has awakened your suspicions at this late day? Why should you doubt Hartley now, if you did not then?"

"Well, I cannot really say. Perhaps Edith's persistent aversion to your brother has had something to do with it. Then he has grown cold and hard, while you have preserved your boyish freshness and affection. I— I don't like him, that is the truth; and with my dislike arose doubts, and— and— well, I cannot tell how it is, but I will believe you if you say he was the one to blame in this matter; and what is more, your father will believe you too; for he does not feel the same satisfaction in Hartley's irreproachable character that he used to, and— and—"

A sudden movement in the crowd stopped him. A tall, graceful-looking woman clad entirely in white had just entered the room and seemed to be making her way toward us.

"There is Edith!" he declared. "She is hunting for the yellow domino ornamented with black that she has been told conceals her lover. Shall I go and fetch her here, or will you wait until she spies you of her own accord?"

"I will wait," I uneasily replied, edging nearer to the window with the determination of using it as a means of escape if my companion only gave me the chance. "See! she is in the hands of an old Jew, who seems to be greatly taken with the silver trimmings on her sleeves. Suppose you improve the opportunity to slip away," I laughingly suggested. "Lovers' meetings are not usually of an order to interest third parties."

"Aren't they, you rogue!" retorted the old gentleman, giving me a jocose poke in the ribs. "Well, well, I suppose you are right. But you have not told me—"

"I will tell you every thing in an hour," I hastily assured him. "I am going to meet my father in the library, and after he has heard the truth, you shall be admitted and all will be explained."

"That is only fair," he replied. "Your father has the first rights, of course. But Joe, my boy, remember I am not over and above patient of disposition, and don't keep me waiting too long." And with an affectionate squeeze of my hand, he stepped out from the recess where we stood and made his way once more into the throng.

No sooner had he left my side than I threw up the window. "Now is the time for the real Joe to appear upon the scene," was my mental decision. "I have done for him what he as a gentleman would probably never do for himself—pumped this old party and got every thing in trim for Hartley's discomfiture. But the courting business is another matter; also the interview with the outraged father in the library. That cannot be done by proxy; so here goes for a change of actors."

And with reckless disregard of consequences, I prepared to jump from the window, when a sudden light flashed over the lawn beneath and I saw I was at least twelve feet from the ground.

"Well," I exclaimed, drawing hastily back; "such a leap as that is too much to expect of any man!" And with the humiliating consciousness of being caught in a trap, I proceeded to close the window.

"Joe?"

It was a low whisper, but how thrilling! Turning, I greeted, with the show of fervor I considered necessary to the occasion, the white-veiled lady who had glided into my retreat.

"Did you think I was never coming, Joe? Everybody who could get in my way certainly managed to do so. Then Hartley is so suspicious, and followed me with his eyes so persistently, I did not dare show my designs too plainly. It is only this minute he left my side. If you had been anywhere else I do not know as I should have succeeded even now in getting a word with you—oh!"

This exclamation was called forth by a sudden movement that took place near us. The curtain was drawn back and a tall man dressed in a black domino glanced in, gave us a scrutinizing look, bowed, and dropped the curtain again.

"Hartley," she whisperingly explained.

I took her by the hand; there was no help for it; gesture and a lover-like demeanor must, in this case, supply the place of speech.

"Hush!" she entreated. (Not that I had spoken.) "I dare not stay. When you have seen your father, perhaps I will have courage to join you; but now it would be better for me to go." And her eyes roamed toward the curtain, while the little hand I held in mine grew cold and slightly trembled.

I pressed that little hand, but, as you may well believe, did not urge her to remain. Yet she did not seem in a hurry to depart, and I do not know what complications might have ensued, if another movement in the curtain had not reawakened her fears and caused her, notwithstanding her evident reluctance, to start quickly away.

I did not linger long behind her. Scarcely had the curtain fallen from her hand than I stepped hastily forth. But alas for my hopes of escape! No sooner had I joined the group of merry-makers circling about the open door, than I felt a touch on my arm, and looking up, saw before me the Black Domino. The hour often had struck and my guide to the library was at hand. There was no alternative left me but to follow him.

III. An Unexpected Calamity

FIVE minutes passed, during which I threaded more laughing groups and sauntered down more mysterious passage-ways than I would care to count. Still the mysterious Black Domino glided on before me, leading me from door to door till my patience was nearly exhausted, and I had wellnigh determined to give him the slip and make my way at once to the garden, and the no-doubt-by-this-time-highly-impatient Joe.

But before I had the opportunity of carrying out this scheme, the ominous Black Domino paused, and carelessly pointing to a door at the termination of a narrow corridor, bowed, and hastily withdrew.

"Now," said I, as soon as I found myself alone, "shall I proceed with this farce, or shall I end it? To go on means to interview Mr. Benson, acquaint him with what has come to my knowledge during the last half hour in which I have so successfully personified his son, and by these means perhaps awake him to the truth concerning this serious matter of Joseph's innocence or Hartley's guilt; while to stop now implies nothing more nor less than a full explanation with his son, a man of whose character, manners, and disposition I know little or nothing,"

Either alternative presented infinite difficulties, but of the two the former seemed to me more feasible and less embarrassing. At all events, in talking with Mr. Benson, I should not have the sensibilities of a lover to contend with, and however unfortunate in its results our interview might be, would be at the

mercy of old blood instead of young, a point always to be considered in a case where one's presumption has been carried beyond the bounds of decorum.

Unlocking the door, I stepped, as I had been told I should, into a small room adjoining the library. All around me were books. Even the door by which I had entered was laden with them, so that when it was closed, all vestige of the door itself disappeared. Across the opening into the library stood a screen, and it was not until I had pushed this somewhat aside that I was able to look into that room.

My first glance assured me it was empty. Stark and bare of any occupant, the high-backed chairs loomed in the funereal gloom, while on the table, toward which I inadvertently glanced, stood a decanter with a solitary wineglass at its side. Instantly I remembered what had been told me concerning that glass, and stepping forward, I took it up and looked at it.

Immediately I heard, or thought I heard, an exclamation uttered somewhere near me. But upon glancing up and down the room and perceiving no one, I concluded I was mistaken, and deliberately proceeded to examine the wine-glass and assure myself that no wine had as yet been poured upon the powder I found in it. Satisfied at last that Mr. Benson had not yet taken his usual evening potion, I put the glass back and withdrew again to my retreat.

I do not think another minute could have elapsed, before I heard a step in the room behind me. A door leading into an adjoining apartment had opened and Mr. Benson had come in. He passed immediately to the table, poured out the wine upon the powder, and drank it off without a moment's hesitation. I heard him sigh as he put the glass down.

With a turn of my hand I slipped off both domino and mask, and prepared to announce my presence by tapping on the lintel of the door beside which I stood. But a sudden change in Mr. Benson's lofty figure startled me. He was swaying, and the arms which had fallen to his side were moving with a convulsive action that greatly alarmed me. But almost instantly he recovered himself, and paced with a steady step toward the hall door, which at that moment resounded with a short loud knock.

"Who is there?" he asked, with every appearance of his usual sternness.

"Hartley," was the reply.

"Are you alone?" the old gentleman again queried, making a move as if to unlock the door.

"Carrie is with me; no one else," came in smothered accents from without.

Mr. Benson at once turned the key, but no sooner had he done so than he staggered back.

For an instant or two of horror he stood oscillating from side to side, then his frame succumbed, and the terrified eyes of his children beheld his white

head lying low, all movement and appearance of life gone from the form that but a moment before towered so proudly before them.

With a shriek, the daughter flung herself down at his side, and even the cheek of Hartley Benson grew white as he leaned over his father's already inanimate body.

"He is dead!" came in a wild cry from her lips. "See! he does not breathe. Oh! Hartley, what could have happened? Do you think that Joe—"

"Hush!" he exclaimed, with a furtive glance around him. "He may be here; let me look. If Joe has done this—" He did not continue, but rose, and with a rapid tread began to cross the floor in my direction.

In a flash I realized my situation. To be found by him now, without a domino, and in the position of listener, would be any thing but desirable. But I knew of no way of escape, or so for the moment it seemed. But great emergencies call forth sudden resources. In the quick look I inadvertently threw around me, I observed that the portière hanging between me and the library was gathered at one side in very heavy folds. If I could hide behind them perhaps I might elude the casual glance he would probably cast into my place of concealment. At all events it was worth trying, and at the thought I glided behind the curtain. I was not disappointed in my calculations. Arrived at the door, he looked in, perceived the domino lying in a heap on the floor, and immediately drew back with an exclamation of undoubted satisfaction

"He is gone," said he, crossing back to his sister's side. Then in a tone of mingled irony and bitterness, hard to describe, cried aloud with a glance toward the open door: "He has first killed his father and then fled. Fool that I was to think he could be trusted!"

A horrified "Hartley!" burst from his sister's lips and a suppressed but equally vehement "Villain!" from mine; but neither of us had time for more, for almost at the same instant the room filled with frightened guests, among which I discerned the face and form of the old servant Jonas, and the flowing robes and the white garments of Uncle Joe and the graceful Edith.

To describe the confusion that followed would be beyond my powers, especially as my attention was at the time not so much directed to the effect produced by this catastrophe, as to the man whom, from the moment Mr. Benson fell to the floor, I regarded as my lawful prey. He did not quake and lose his presence of mind in this terrible crisis. He was gifted with too much self-control to betray any unseemly agitation even over such a matter as his father's sudden death. Once only did I detect his lip tremble, and that was when an elderly gentleman (presumably a doctor) exclaimed after a careful examination of the fallen man:

"This is no case of apoplexy, gentlemen!" Then indeed Mr. Hartley Benson shivered, and betrayed an emotion for which I considered myself as receiving a due explanation when, a few minutes later, I observed the same gentleman lay his hand upon the decanter and glass that stood on the table, and after raising them one after the other to his nose, slowly shake his head, and with a furtive look around him, lock them both in a small cupboard that opened over the mantel-piece.

IV. In the Library

MR. BENSON was really dead. The fact being announced, most of the guests withdrew. In ten minutes after he fell, the room was comparatively clear. Only the various members of the family, together with the gentleman I have already mentioned, remained behind; and, even of these, the two ladies were absent, they having followed the body into the adjoining room, where it had been reverently carried by the attached Jonas and another servant whose face I did not see.

"A most unlooked-for catastrophe," burst from the lips of Uncle Joe. "Did you ever suspect he was a victim to heart disease?" he now asked, this time with looks directed toward the doctor.

"No," came from that gentleman in a short, sharp way, which made Hartley Benson's pale face flush, though his eye did not waver from its steady solemn look toward the door through which his father's form had just been carried. "Mr. Benson was sound through and through a month ago. I know, because I examined him previous to his making his will. There was no heart disease then; that I am ready to take my oath upon."

Hartley Benson's rigid look unfastened itself from the door and turned slowly toward the sombre face of the speaker, while Uncle Joe, with an increased expression of distress, looked slowly around as if he half hoped, half feared to behold his favorite nephew advance upon them from some shadowy corner.

"My father consulted you, then?" said the former, in his slow, reserved way. "Did not that evince some suspicion of disease on his part?"

"Possibly; a man in a despondent frame of mind will often imagine he has some deadly complaint or other. But he was quite sound; too sound, he seemed to think. Your father was not a happy man, Mr. Benson."

There was meaning in the tone, and I was not surprised to observe Hartley draw back. "Why," said he, "do you think—"

"I think nothing," broke in the doctor; "only"— and here he brought down his hand vigorously upon the table— "there has been prussic acid in the glass

from which Mr. Benson drank this evening. The smell of bitter almonds is not to be mistaken."

An interval of silent horror followed this announcement, then a vehement "Great Heaven!" broke from the lips of Uncle Joe, while Hartley Benson, growing more and more rigid in his bearing, fixed his eyes on the doctor's face and barely ejaculated:

"Poison?"

"I say this," continued the doctor, too intent upon his own theory to notice either the growth of a terrible fear on the face of Uncle Joe, or the equally remarkable expression of subdued expectation on that of the son, "because long experience has taught me the uselessness of trying to hide such a fact as suicide, and also because, being the coroner of the county, it is my duty to warn you that an investigation will have to take place which will require certain precautions on my part, such as the sealing up of his papers, etc."

"That is true," came from the lips of both brother and son, over whom a visible change had passed at the word "suicide."

"But I cannot think—" the former began in an agitated voice.

"That my father would do such a deed," interposed the latter. "It does not seem probable, and yet he was a very wretched man, and grief will often drive the best of us to despair."

Uncle Joe gave his nephew a strange look, but said no more. The doctor went quietly on:

"I do not know what your father's troubles were, but that he committed suicide I greatly fear, unless it can be proved the acid was taken by mistake, a conclusion which does not seem probable, for from the smell of the decanter it is evident the acid was mixed with the wine, in which I now remember advising him to take the nightly powder I prescribed to him for quite a trivial disorder a few days ago. The only thing that puzzles me is, why, if he meditated death, he should have troubled himself to take this powder. And yet it is certain he did take it, for there is still some of the sediment of it remaining in the bottom of the glass,"

"He took the powder because it was already in the glass," broke in Hartley, in a heavy tone of voice. "My sister put it there before she went up stairs to dress. I think she was afraid he would forget it. My father was very careless about small matters."

"He was careful enough not to poison any one else in the family," quoth the doctor. "There was scarcely a drop left in the decanter; he took the whole dose."

"I beg your pardon, sirs, but is it suicide you are talking about?" cried a voice suddenly over their shoulders, making them all start. Jonas, the servant,

had entered from the inner room, and unseen by all but myself, had been listening to the last few words as if his life depended upon what they had to say. "If it is, why I have a bit of an observation of my own to make that may help you to settle the matter."

"You! What have you to say?" quoth the doctor, turning in surprise at the confident tone of voice in which the man spoke.

"Not much, I am sure," cried Hartley, to whom the appearance at that moment of his father's old servant was evidently most unwelcome.

"That is for you to judge, gentlemen. I can only tell you what I've seen, and that not ten minutes ago. Mr. Hartley, do you mind the man in the yellow dress that was flitting about the parlors all the evening?"

"Good heavens!" burst in uncontrollable agitation from Uncle Joe; and he caught his nephew by the arm with a look that called back the old rigid expression to the latter's face.

"Yes," was the quiet reply; "I remember seeing such a person."

"Well, sirs, I don't know as you will think any thing of it, but a little while ago I was walking up and down the balcony outside there, when I happened to look into this room, and I saw that man in the yellow dress leaning over this very table, looking into the wine-glass Miss Carrie had put there for master. He had it in his hand, and his head was down very close to it, but what he did to it or to the decanter either, I am sure, sirs, I don't know, for I was that frightened at seeing this spectre in the room master had kept locked all day, that I just slipped off the balcony and ran round the house to find Mr. Hartley. But you wasn't in the parlors, sir, nor Miss Carrie neither, and when I got to this room, there was master lying dead on the floor, and everybody crowding around him horror-struck."

"Humph!" ejaculated the doctor, looking at Uncle Joe, who had sunk in a heap into the arm-chair his nephew abstractedly pushed toward him.

"You see, sirs," Jonas resumed, with great earnestness, "Mr. Benson, for some reason or other, had been very particular about keeping his own room to-day. The library door was locked as early as six this morning, and he would let no one in without first asking who was there. That's why I felt so dumbfoundered at seeing this yellow man in the room; besides—"

But no sooner had the good man arrived at this point than he stopped, with a gasp, and after a quick look at Hartley, flushed, and drew back in a state of great agitation and embarrassment. Evidently a suspicion had just crossed the mind of this old and attached servant as to whom the Yellow Domino might be."

"Well, well," cried the doctor, "go on; let us hear the rest."

"I— I have nothing more to say," mumbled the man, while Hartley, with an equal display of embarrassment, motioned the discomfited servant to withdraw, and turned as if to hide his face over some papers on the table.

"I think the man in the yellow domino had better be found," quoth the physician, dryly, glancing from Hartley to the departing form of the servant, with a sharp look. "At all events it would be well enough for us to know who he is."

"I don't see—" began Uncle Joe, but stopped as he perceived the face of Hartley Benson slowly composing itself. Evidently he was as much interested as myself in observing what this not-easily-to-be-understood man would say and do in this sudden crisis.

We were not long left in doubt.

"Doctor," he began, in a slow, hesitating tone, well calculated to produce the effect he desired, "we unfortunately already know who wore a yellow domino this evening. My brother Joe—"

"Hush!" implored his uncle, laying a hand on his nephew's arm with a quick look of distress not lost on the doctor.

"Brother?" repeated the latter. "Pardon me, I did not know— Ah, but I do remember now to have heard that Mr. Benson had another son."

The face of Hartley grew graver and graver. "My brother has been alienated from my father for some time, so you have never seen him here. But to-night he hoped, or made me think he hoped, to effect a reconciliation; so I managed, with my sister, to provide him with the domino necessary to insure him an entrance here. Indeed, I did more; I showed him a private door by which he could find his way into the library, never suspecting any harm could come of son and father meeting even in this surreptitious way. I— I loved my brother, and notwithstanding the past, had confidence in him. Nor can I think now he had any thing to do with the—" Here the voice of this inimitable actor broke in well-simulated distress. He sank on a chair and put his hands before his face.

The doctor had no reason to doubt this man. He therefore surveyed him with a look of grave regard.

"Mr. Benson," said he, "you have my profoundest sympathy. A tragedy like this in a family of such eminent respectability, is enough to overwhelm the stoutest heart. If your brother is here—"

"Dr. Travis," broke in the other, rising and grasping the physician's hand with an appearance of manly impulse impressive in one usually so stern and self contained, "you are, or were, my father's friend; can you or will you be ours? Dreadful as it is to think, my father undoubtedly committed suicide. He had a great dread of this day. It is the anniversary of an occurrence harrowing

for him to remember. My brother— you see I shall have to break the secrecy of years— was detected by him in the act of robbing his desk three years ago to-night, and upon each and every recurrence of the day, has returned to his father's house to beg for the forgiveness and restoration to favor which he lost by that deed of crime. Hitherto my father has been able to escape his importunities, by absence or the address of his servants, but to-day he seemed to have a premonition that his children were in league against him, notwithstanding Carrie's ruse of the ball, and the knowledge may have worked upon him to that extent that he preferred death to a sight of the son that had ruined his life and made him the hermit you have seen."

The doctor fell into the trap laid for him with such diabolical art.

"Perhaps; but if that is so, why is your brother not here? Only a few minutes could have elapsed between the time that Jonas saw him leaning over the table with the glass in his hand and the moment when you and your sister entered this room in face of your father's falling form. He must have been present, therefore, when your father came from his bedroom, if not when he drank the fatal glass; why, then, did he take such pains to escape, if actuated by no keener emotion than horror at a father's suicide?"

"I do not know, I cannot say; but that he himself put the poison in the decanter I will not believe. A thief is not necessarily a parricide. Even if he were in great straits and needed the money my father's will undoubtedly leaves him, he would think twice before he ran the risk of making Carrie and myself his natural enemies. No, no, if my father has died from poison, it was through a mistake, or by the administration of his own hand, never by that of Joe Benson's."

"Ah, and has anybody here present dared to charge him with such a deed!"

With a start both gentlemen turned; an accusing spirit stood before them.

"Edith!" broke from Hartley's lips. "This is no place for you! Go back! go back!"

"My place is where the name of Joseph Benson is uttered," she proudly answered, "whether the words be for good or evil. I am his betrothed wife as you know, and again I ask, who has dared to utter an insinuation, however light, that he, the tender son and generous brother, has had a criminal hand in his father's awful death?"

"No one! no one!" essayed Hartley, taking her hand with a weak attempt at soothing. "I was but saying—"

But she turned from him with a gesture of repugnance, and taking a step toward the doctor, looked him entreatingly in the face. "You have not been expressing doubts of Mr. Benson's youngest son, because he happened to wear a disguise and be present when Mr. Benson fell? You do not know Joe,

sir; nobody in this town knows him. His own father was ignorant of his worth; but we know him, Uncle Joe and I, and we know he could never do a deed that could stamp him either as a dishonorable or a criminal man. If Mr. Benson has died from poison, I should as soon think this man had a hand in it as his poor exiled brother." And in a burst of uncontrollable wrath and indignation, she pointed, with a sudden gesture, at the startled Hartley.

But that worthy, though evidently taken aback, was not to be caught so easily.

"Edith, you forget yourself," said he, with studied self-possession. "The horrors of this dreadful occurrence have upset you. I do not wonder at it myself, but the doctor will not so readily understand you. Miss Underhill has been strangely attached to my brother," he went on, turning to the latter with an apologetic smile that made Uncle Joe grind his teeth in silent wrath. "They were engaged previous to the affair of which I have just made mention, and naturally she could never bring herself to consider him guilty of a crime which, once acknowledged, must necessarily act as a bar of separation between them. She calls him a martyr, a victim, an exile, any thing but what he actually is. Indeed, she seems really to believe in his innocence, while we,"— he paused and looked up at his sister Carrie who had entered the room,— "while we," he went on slowly and sadly, taking this new ally softly by the hand, "know only too well that the unhappy boy was in every respect guilty of the crime for which his father exiled him. But that is neither here nor there; the dreadful subject before us is not what he once did, but whether his being here to-night has had any thing to do with my father's death. I cannot think it has, and yet— "

The subtle inflection of his voice spoke volumes. This great actor had evidently been driven to bay.

"O Hartley!" came in a terrified cry from his sister; "what is this? You cannot think, they cannot think, Joe could do any thing so dreadful as that?" while over the face of Edith passed a look of despair, as she saw the countenance of the doctor slowly fill with the gloom of suspicion, and even the faithful Uncle Joe turn away as if he too had been touched by the blight of a secret doubt.

"Ah, but I wish Joe were here himself!" she cried with startling emphasis. "He should speak, even if it brought ruin amongst us."

But the doctor was a man not to be moved by so simple a thing as a woman's unreasoning emotion.

"Yes, the Yellow Domino would be very welcome just now," he allowed, with grim decision.

"That he is not here is the most damning fact of all," Hartley slowly observed. "He fled when he saw our father fall."

"But he shall come back," Edith vehemently declared.

"If he does, I shall need no further proof of his innocence," said Uncle Joe.

"Nor I, so that he comes to-night," returned the doctor.

"Then be satisfied, for here he is," I exclaimed from my retreat; and drawing the mask over my face, and hastily enveloping myself in the yellow domino, I stepped forth into full view of the crowd around the table.

V. The Yellow Domino

A MINGLED sound of shrieks and exclamations greeted me.

"Joe!" cried Edith, bounding forward.

But I waved her back, and turned with a severe gesture toward Hartley Benson.

"What are your reasons," I demanded, "for thinking the poisoning that has taken place here was the work of the Yellow Domino?"

"Do you ask me?" he retorted, after a moments pause, during which my voice echoed through the room, waking strange gleams of doubt on the faces of more than one person present. "You wish to dare me, then?" he hissed, coming a step nearer.

"I wish to know what the Yellow Domino has done that you or any one should consider him as responsible for the tragedy that has here taken place," I steadily replied.

"Are you not my brother, then?" he cried, in mingled rage and anxiety. "Was it not you I met under the evergreens and supplied with a yellow domino, in order to give you the opportunity of seeing our father to-night and effecting the reconciliation which you had so long desired? Are you not he who afterward followed me to this room and hid himself in the closet from which you have just come, all for the purpose, as you said, of throwing yourself at your father's feet and begging pardon for a past of which you had long ago repented? Or are you some reckless buffoon who has presumed to step into the domino my brother left behind him, and careless of the terrible trouble that has overwhelmed this family, come here with your criminal jests to puzzle and alarm us?"

"I am the man to whom you gave the domino, if that is what you wish to know, Hartley Benson; and I am the man whom you led into the ambush of this closet, for such reasons as your own conscience must inform you. If the Yellow Domino put poison into Mr. Benson's wine, then upon me must lie the burden of the consequences, for I alone have worn the disguise of this mask from the

moment we met under the evergreens till now, as I think may be proved by this gentleman you call Uncle Joe, and this lady you address as Edith."

This mode of attack had the desired effect.

"Who are you?" burst from Hartley's lips, now blanched to the color of clay. "Unmask him, doctor; let us see the man who dares to play us tricks on such a night as this!"

"Wait!" cried I, motioning back not only the doctor, but Uncle Joe and the ladies—the whole group having started forward at Hartley's words. "Let us first make sure I am the Yellow Domino who has been paraded through the parlors this evening. Miss Benson, will you pardon me if I presume to ask you what were the words of salutation with which you greeted me to-night?"

"Oh!" she cried, in a tremble of doubt and dismay, "I do not know as I can remember; something about being glad to see you, I believe, and my hope that your plans for the evening might succeed."

"To which," said I, "I made no audible reply, but pressed your hand in mine, with the certainty you were a friend though you had not used the word "Counterfeit?"

"Yes, yes," she returned, blushing and wildly disturbed, as she had reason to be.

"And you. Uncle Joe," I went on; "what were your words? How did you greet the man you had been told was your erring nephew?"

"I said: 'To counterfeit wrong when one is right, necessarily opens one to a misunderstanding.'"

"To which ambiguous phrase I answered, as you will remember, with a simple, 'That is true,' a reply by the way that seemed to arouse your curiosity and lead to strange revelations,"

"God defend us!" cried Uncle Joe.

The exclamation was enough. I turned to the trembling Edith.

"I shall not attempt," said I, "to repeat or ask you to repeat any conversation which may have passed between us, for you will remember it was too quickly interrupted by Mr. Benson for us to succeed in uttering more than a dozen or so words. However, you will do me the kindness to acknowledge your belief that I am the man who stood with you behind the parlor curtains an hour ago."

"I will," she replied, with a haughty lift of her head that spoke more loudly than her blushes.

"It only remains, then, for Mr. Benson to assure himself I am the person who followed him to the closet. I know of no better way of his doing this than to ask him if he remembers the injunctions which he was pleased to give me, when he bestowed upon me this domino."

"No,— that is,— whatever they were, they were given to the man I supposed to be my brother."

"Ha, then; it was to your brother," I rejoined, "you gave that hint about the glass I would find on the library table; saying that if it did not smell of wine I would know your father had not had his nightly potion and would yet come to the library to drink it;—an intimation, as all will acknowledge, which could have but the one result of leading me to go to the table and take up the glass and look into it in the suspicious manner which has been reported to you."

He was caught in his own toils and saw it. Muttering a deep curse, he drew back, while a startled "Humph!" broke from the doctor, followed by a quick, "Is that true? Did you tell him that, Mr. Benson?"

For reply the now thoroughly alarmed villain leaped at my throat. "Off with that toggery! Let us see your face! I shall and will know who you are."

But I resisted for another moment while I added: "It is, then, established to your satisfaction that I am really the man who has worn the yellow domino this evening. Very well, now look at me, one and all, and say if you think I am likely to be a person to destroy Mr. Benson." And with a quick gesture I threw aside my mask, and yielded the fatal yellow domino to the impatient hands of Mr. Hartley Benson.

The result was a cry of astonishment from those to whom the face thus revealed was a strange one, and a curse deep and loud from him to whom the shock of that moment's surprise must have been nearly overwhelming.

"Villain!" he shrieked, losing his self-possession in a sudden burst of fury; "spy! informer! I understand it all now. You have been set over me by my brother. Instructed by him, you have dared to enter this house, worm yourself into its secrets, and by a deviltry only equalled by your presumption, taken advantage of your position to poison my father and fling the dreadful consequences of your crime in the faces of his mourning family. It was a plot well laid; but it is foiled, sir, foiled, as you will see when I have you committed to prison to-morrow."

"Mr. Benson," I returned, shaking him loose as I would a feather, "this is all very well; but in your haste and surprise you have made a slight mistake. You call me a spy; so I am; but a spy backed by the United States Government is not a man to be put lightly into prison. I am a detective, sir, connected at present with the Secret Service at Washington. My business is to ferret out crime and recognize a rogue under any disguise and in the exercise of any vile or deceptive practices." And I looked him steadily in the face.

Then indeed his cheek turned livid, and the eye which had hitherto preserved its steadiness sought the floor.

"A detective!" murmured Miss Carrie, shrinking back from the cringing form of the brother whom, but a few hours before, she had deemed every thing that was noble and kind.

"A detective!" echoed Edith, brightening like a rose in the sunshine.

"In government employ!" repeated Uncle Joe, honoring me with a stare that was almost comic in its mingled awe and surprise.

"Yes," I rejoined; "if any one doubts me, I have papers with me to establish my identity. By what means I find myself in this place, a witness of Mr. Benson's death and the repositor of certain family secrets, it is not necessary for me to inform you. It is enough that I am here, have been here for a good hour, posted behind that curtain; that I heard Jonas' exclamation as he withdrew from the balcony, saw Mr. Benson come in from his bedroom, drink his glass of wine, and afterward fall at the feet of his son and daughter; and that having been here, and the witness of all this, I can swear that if Mr. Benson drank poison from yonder decanter, he drank poison that was put into it before either he or the Yellow Domino entered this room. Who put it there, it is for you to determine; my duty is done for to-night." And with a bow I withdrew from the group about me and crossed to the door.

But Miss Carrie's voice, rising in mingled shame and appeal, stopped me. "Don't go," said she; "not at least until you tell me where my brother Joseph is. Is he in this town, or has he planned this deception from a distance? I—I am an orphan, sir, who at one blow has lost not only a dearly beloved father but, as I fear, a brother too, in whom, up to this hour, I have had every confidence. Tell me, then, if any support is left for a most unhappy girl, or whether I must give up all hopes of even my brother Joe's sympathy and protection."

"Your brother Joe," I replied, "has had nothing to do with my appearance here. He and I are perfect strangers; but if he is a tall, broad-shouldered, young man, shaped something like myself, but with a ruddy cheek and light curling hair, I can tell you I saw such a person enter the shrubbery at the southwest corner of the garden an hour or so ago."

"No, he is here!" came in startling accents over my shoulders. And with a quick leap Joe Benson sprang by me and stood handsome, tall, and commanding in the centre of the room. "Hartley! Carrie! Edith! what is this I hear? My father stricken down, my father dying or dead, and I left to wander up and down through the shrubbery, while you knelt at his bedside and received his parting blessing? Is this the recompense you promised me, Hartley? this your sisterly devotion, Carrie? this your love and attention to my interests, Edith?"

"O Joe, dear Joe, do not blame us!" Carrie made haste to reply. "We thought you were here. A man was here, that man behind you, simulating you

in every regard, and to him we gave the domino, and from him we have learned—"

"What?" sprang in thundering tones from the young giant's throat as he wheeled on his heel and confronted me.

"That your brother Hartley is a villain," I declared, looking him steadily in the eye.

"God!" was his only exclamation as he turned slowly back and glanced toward his trembling brother.

"Sir," said I, taking a step toward Uncle Joe, who, between his eagerness to embrace the new-comer and his dread of the consequences of this unexpected meeting, stood oscillating from one side to the other in a manner ridiculous enough to see, "what do you think of the propriety of uttering aloud and here, the suspicions which you were good enough to whisper into my ears an hour ago? Do you see any reason for altering your opinion as to which of the two sons of Mr. Benson invaded his desk and appropriated the bonds afterward found in their common apartment, when you survey the downfallen crest of the one and compare it with the unfaltering look of the other?"

"No," he returned, roused into sudden energy by the start given by Hartley. And advancing between the brothers, he looked first at one and then at the other with a long, solemn gaze that called out the color on Hartley's pale cheek and made the crest of Joe rise still higher in manly pride and assertion. "Joe," said he, "for three years now your life has lain under a shadow. Accused by your father of a dreadful crime, you have resolutely refused to exonerate yourself, notwithstanding the fact that a dear young girl waited patiently for the establishment of your innocence in order to marry you. To your family this silence meant guilt, but to me and mine it has told only a tale of self-renunciation and devotion. Joe, was I right in this? was Edith right? The father you so loved, and feared to grieve, is dead. Speak, then: Did you or did you not take the bonds that were found in the cupboard at the head of your bed three years ago to-night? The future welfare, not only of this faithful child but of the helpless sister, who, despite her belief in your guilt, has clung to you with unwavering devotion, depends upon your reply."

"Let my brother speak," was the young man's answer, given in a steady and nobly restrained tone.

"Your brother will not speak," his uncle returned. "Don't you see you must answer for yourself? Say, then: Are you the guilty man your father thought you, or are you not? Let us hear, Joe."

"I am not!" avowed the young man, bowing his head in a sort of noble shame that must have sent a pang of anguish through the heart of his brother.

"Oh, I knew it, I knew it!" came from Edith's lips in a joyous cry, as she bounded to his side and seized him by one hand, just as his sister grasped the other in a burst of shame and contrition that showed how far she was removed from any participation in the evil machinations of her elder brother.

The sight seemed to goad Hartley Benson to madness. Looking from one to the other, he uttered a cry that yet rings in my memory: "Carrie! Edith! do you both forsake me, and all because of a word which any villain might have uttered? Is this the truth and constancy of women? Is this what I had a right to expect from a sister, a— a friend? Carrie, you at least always gave me your trust,— will you take it away because a juggling spy and a recreant brother have combined to destroy me?"

But beyond a wistful look and a solemn shake of the head, Carrie made no response, while Edith, with her eyes fixed on the agitated countenance of her lover, did not even seem to hear the words of pleading that were addressed to her.

The shock of the disappointment was too much for Hartley Benson. Clenching his hand upon his breast, he gave one groan of anguish and despair and sank into a chair, inert and helpless. But before we could any of us take a step toward him, before the eyes of the doctor and mine could meet in mutual understanding, he had bounded again to his feet, and in a burst of desperation seized the chair in which he sat, and held it high above his head.

"Fools! dotards!" he exclaimed, his eyes rolling in frenzy from face to face, but lingering longest on mine, as if there he read the true secret of his overthrow, as well as the promise of his future doom. "You think it is all over with me; that there is nothing left for you to do but to stand still and watch how I take my defeat. But I am a man who never acknowledges defeat. There is still a word I have to say that will make things a little more even between us. Listen for it, you. It will not be long in coming, and when you hear it, let my brother declare how much enjoyment he will ever get out of his victory."

And whirling the chair about his head, he plunged through our midst into the hall without.

For an instant we stood stupefied, then Carrie Benson's voice rose in one long, thrilling cry, and with a bound she rushed toward the door. I put out my hand to stop her, but it was not necessary. Before she could cross the threshold the sudden, sharp detonation of a pistol-shot was heard in the hall, and we knew that the last dreadful word of that night's tragedy had been spoken.

THE TRUE SECRET of Hartley Benson's action in this matter was never discovered. That he planned his father's violent death, no one who was

present at the above interview ever doubted. That he went further than that, and laid his plans in such a manner that the blame, if blame ensued, should fall upon his innocent brother, was equally plain, especially after the acknowledgment we received from Jonas, that he went out on the balcony and looked in the window at the special instigation of his young master. But why this arch villain, either at his own risk or at that of the man he hated, felt himself driven to such a revolting crime, will never be known; unless, indeed, the solution be found in his undoubted passion for the beautiful Edith, and in the accumulated pressure of certain secret debts for whose liquidation he dared not apply to his father.

I never revealed to this family the true nature of the motives which actuated me in my performance of the part I played that fatal night. It was supposed by Miss Carrie and the rest, that I was but obeying instructions given me by Mr. Benson; and I never undeceived them. I was too much ashamed of the curiosity which was the mainspring of my action to publish each and every particular of my conduct abroad; though I could not but congratulate myself upon its results when, some time afterward, I read of the marriage of Joe and Edith.

The counterfeiters were discovered and taken, but not by me.

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2: Raft on the Sargasso

James Francis Dwyer

1874-1952

Blue Book Oct 1934

NOW with ghastly suddenness, the Law and the prey of the Law were placed on an equal footing. The vast hiatus that separated the detective from his prisoner had been closed swiftly by the conduct of the oil-tanker. The old petrol-carrier decided to quit, and the nearest land— five hundred miles away— was the Virgin Islands. The name, to the two men, stressed the remoteness of the haven.

Clinging, one at each end of the pontoon raft, the thick night made them invisible to each other. The detective, by the occasional clink of the loose steel cuff when it struck the zinc floats, sensed the position of his prisoner. The prisoner had the same directional knowledge through a malady of his guard. The Law was slightly asthmatic, and made whistling noises under the influence of fear and the night air.

The detective, one John Manolescu, had shown a certain amount of bravery. Or it may have been the dreadful professional adhesiveness born of his *métier*.

Anyhow, when the captain had shouted: "Over the side!" the detective had fought his way below-deck to get his prisoner.

The lock on the cabin door and his own nervousness had delayed him. When he and his prisoner stumbled out upon the nearly perpendicular deck the boats carrying captain and crew had dived into the night.

A pontoon raft, torn from its lashings forward, had rushed by them as the *Coomassie* dived. Manolescu and his prisoner had sprung for it. They were sucked down; the raft, longing for sea freedom, fighting the suicidal tendencies of the mother ship that had held it for years to her bosom. They were spewed up again, and rode a wild maelstrom for what seemed hours. Then quiet fell upon them. A tremendous quiet! The only sounds were the slopping of the inquisitive waves through the slats of the raft and the air-tight zinc cylinders gurgling joyfully over their first victory with the sea.

Perhaps the dark gods of the big waters were amused. Perhaps they knew of the extradition papers in the inside coat pocket of Detective Manolescu— papers signed and sealed by a judge of the state of Louisiana, who, after a preliminary examination, conducted under the Revised Statutes of the United States in relation to extradition, had surrendered Peter Slavnos, of Chartres Street, New Orleans, and formerly of Jaczkovezdo, Hungary, to the judicial powers of the Supreme Court of Budapest. The charge preferred against Peter Slavnos was murder in the first degree.

The Supreme Court of Budapest would not have bothered about Peter under ordinary circumstances. Hungary was not in a position to send detectives around the world hunting for escaped criminals. But this Manolescu had come to the United States as a sort of bodyguard to a high Hungarian official, and as this official did not require his further services, he was ordered to find Peter Slavnos and bring him home. The simple gesture of demanding a refugee murderer from the powerful United States was in itself fine advertising for Hungary.

Detective Manolescu had been ordered by his superiors to make the cheapest possible return with his prey. The Coomassie was bound for the Black Sea, calling at Trieste. Consular entreaties made the oil-company stretch a point, and Manolescu and Peter Slavnos shared a cabin, And now the dark little gods of the Great Waters had played a trick on the old judge and the Royal Supreme Court of Budapest.

"Listen!" cried Peter Slaynos. "Some one is speaking!"

A voice, megaphone-fattened, came out of the darkness. It gave steering directions to the boats. 'West, sou'west!" came the command. "Captain speaking! Keep together! West sou'west !

The scream of the detective went up from the raft. Threaded with hysteria. "Detective Manolescu with prisoner!" he shouted. "Slavnos, murderer! On raft! No compass! No food! No water! Help!"

Again came the calm advice of the captain, the toneless repetition suggesting a reproof. "West, sou'-west! Keep together! Rescue certain!" Of course he had not heard the scream of the detective Manolescu.

Something that might have been a derisive laugh got mixed with the clink of the steel handcuff. The detective cursed his prisoner with Magyar curse words that have a fine corrosive capacity.

Again he screamed of his unenviable position. "Detective Manolescu! Wait! Wait!"

From a thousand miles away— at least it seemed— came the near-Greeley advice of the captain. "West sou'-west! West sou'-west." The small waves struck up through the slats of the raft with a noise like belly-laughter.

The prisoner made an observation. "Once," he said, and his voice was quite calm, "I caught a fish that had just caught another fish. A cod. Had it in his mouth when I pulled him in."

"Shut up!" snapped the detective. "Listen, swine!"

But there were no sounds except the thick-lipped chatter of the raft with the sea. The plop-ploppety jargon of the. waves as they swirled the raft in a

stately saraband, two-stepped it in a wild rush forward, or banged it down with a spine-shaking wallop into a suddenly formed valley, between waves.

The prisoner had a vision of the Fair Grounds at New Orleans. There, on a spring day, he had ridden with Kolya on a contraption that acted in the manner of the raft. The thing had frightened Kolya. He recalled her sweet, pointed face as she clung to him when the devilish whirling jigger tried to hurl her into space. It was nice to hold her slim body close and listen to her little cries of fear.

Kolya was terrified of many things. Of lightning, of snakes, of the sea. She had a curious fear that the Mississippi would one day lift itself over the levees and come rolling inland to join Lake Pontchartrain. When that fear came upon her he had to hold her till her little heaving breasts became tranquil... He swore softly to himself. Kolya was alone now! Alone in the little two-room apartment on Chartres Street! And he— "Slavnos, murderer!" the terrified detective had called him, Screamed the words to the listening waters.

He tried to forget Kolya by baiting the Law. That fish simile was good. The fool detective was so frightened that he didn't see the analogy. Slavnos decided to try again. It was painful to think of Kolya.

"That fish that caught the little fish and was then caught by me," he began, "was one—"

Again came the stream of green Magyar curse words. A great fear gave a whining note to the voice of the detective. The sinking of the *Coomassie* had brought terror.

LAVNOS was not afraid of the dark sea. Afraid to think of Kolya, but not timid of the waters. He listened to the snaky waves running breathless from the Pole, and he tingled. This sea around him had murdered thousands, millions, but no one could put handcuffs on the sea. No orders from a silly old judge could take it somewhere to be tried for a murder it had committed years before. And the winds that ran with it were its accessories in crime.

Was it crime? He wondered. The sea murdered those who got in its way. Those who mixed themselves up with its wild passionate storms, or those insolent ones who sailed over it in rotten ships like the *Coomassie.* The sea might find some justification for his own crime. It would understand.

Suddenly he felt curiously kin to it. He tore off his coat and impulsively gave it as an offering to the playful waves. The little geysers spouting from the slats that laced the zinc cylinders together, ducked him again and again. And the warm winds dried him with fingers that made him tingle. This sea that was playing with him was the Sargasso! Dear God! A mighty thing that permitted him to ride on its back. He, Peter Slavnos, on his way to Europe to be tried for

murder.... In the dark hours of silence that followed the last whisper of the megaphoned directions he felt strangely humble, and, yet at the same time, exalted.

The light of dawn came slowly, resembling that strange cloudy whiteness of absinthe dropped in water. Peter Slavnos made out the form of the crouching detective; the detective peered at Peter.

Manolescu was suddenly aware of the strength of his prisoner. There was a leopard-like quality about him; muscles moved, like serpents under silk cloths. The detective regretted that he had not snapped the loose handcuff to one of the bars that held the cylinders in place.

When the sun washed away the light fog there were no boats in sight. The raft had the whole floor of the ocean to dance upon. It sloshed and spun and pirouetted like a drunkard. It seemed to be having a fine time.

Manolescu spoke. He attempted to fight the fear that was on him. The fear of the sea, the fear of Slavnos. Slavnos was strong enough to throw him off the raft. The rippling muscles made dumb threats each time his prisoner moved.

"They'll hunt for us," said Manolescu. "Ships that heard the wireless call will be about soon." His words had no body to them. Terror had gnawed the guts out of them.

Peter Slavnos grinned. "Just for the moment I rather like it," he said. "Of course if we get so weak that we cannot hang on to this buck-jumping thing it will be different. Lucky I have the loose handcuff I can snap it to this iron rod."

Manolescu blundered then. "That's a good idea," he said hurriedly. "Why— why don't you do it?"

"Because you have the key," said Slavnos quietly. "If I hooked myself up, it would make me your prisoner."

"You are— you are my prisoner!" cried Manolescu.

"Nonsense!" said Slavnos. "Those porpoises out there are your prisoners also?"

"I'm not talking of porpoises snapped the detective. "I'm speaking of you. I'm going to take you back! Understand ?"

Peter Slavnos laughed. He had read of some body of police— Canadian, he thought— who brought back their man, no matter what happened. Manolescu must have read about those chaps. But the "Get-your-man" fellows were tough. Peter's eyes ran over the body of his companion. Manolescu wasn't tough.

Manolescu noted the appraising glance. Slavnos, he thought, was already plotting to kill him. He told himself that he must not doze. And he should make an effort to keep on friendly terms with his prisoner. He remembered with

regret that he had used the word "swine" when silencing Slavnos in the night. Undiplomatic, surely.

"You— you might get out of it," he stammered, "The corroboration is lacking. A clever lawyer, y know. There's always a chance. That's what I told your wife, The last words I said to her—"

"When was that?" interrupted Slavnos, "When did you see her last?"

"Night before we sailed."

"Where?"

"Your place. Chartres Street."

Peter Slavnos stirred. The serpents beneath the silk cloths moved this way and that. "Did she invite you to call?" he demanded.

"No," said Manolescu. "I thought— I thought that I being a countryman of hers— you see we could speak in our own tongue and all that. I thought she would be comforted."

Manolescu fought the blue eyes that settled on his face. Pair of eagles, those eyes! Trying to pick at a secret within his brain. The gaze fastened on his chin. Peter Slavnos recalled a scratch that Manolescu had on his chin the day they left New Orleans. A vivid red scratch. On the left side.

The eyes forced Manolescu to lift his hand and touch the spot where the scratch had been. He knew that it had disappeared, but the blue eyes were staring at the spot. He knew he was a fool, before he could snatch the fingers away.

"Then," said Slavnos, slowly,— oh, so slowly— "it was not the first time you called ?"

The spirit of murder climbed onto the raft. Out of the hot blue sunshine it came and squatted between the two men. The raft raced up the face of a slippery comber and dropped into an abyss dug by the wave's passage. Manolescu was thrown forward on his hands and knees.

"How many times?" asked Slavnos.

"Four," said Manolescu. He hadn't the power to lie. And fear made him defiant. Fear of expressed fear.

Slavnos turned his head and watched a school of porpoises plowing toward the sun, welcoming it with fine porpoise artistry. And the silence— the silence that fell upon them— was busy. Fearfully busy. The tense questions and answers, the thoughts, the somber fears and the suspicions, quick-breeding like asps, had created a phantom woman. They had brought her into the white sunshine. A slim gypsy woman with Magyar grace. A woman with great dark eyes in which were stored all the joys and sufferings of her race. Long of limb, with little pointed breasts and hands like flowers. Hands with supple fingers that were never still.

Slavnos saw her in the flashes of sunshine that struck slantwise at the rising waves. Manolescu also, although he was fearful that his prisoner would detect what he was staring at.

After a long silence Peter Slavnos spoke. "You thought you would comfort her?" he said, silkily,

The question was a trap. It was a feint to be followed by a blow. Manolescu was wary now. This Slavnos was a killer.

"Let's forget it," he said. "Why argue about something that is— that is neither here nor there. The matter that concerns us is whether we will be rescued."

He thought himself clever. Rather worldly. What were women when one was facing death? Still the vision of Kolya was there in the great sheets of flashing sunlight that struck the wave flanks.

THEY remained silent like two dogs after a snarl. Mentally regurgitating, dragging back question and answer. Manolescu thought the steel cuff on the wrist of Slavnos increased the strength of his prisoner's arm. Of course it didn't, but it brought an impression of force. A downward chop with that cuff would hurt. He winced.

Slavnos had that long red scratch under the mental microscope. Had the detective gone down to the little apartment in Chartres Street to bargain with Kolya? To bargain? He swallowed with a strange lapping sound. Doglike. Somewhere he had read that the wives and sweethearts of the wretches on Devil's Island sell themselves to the guards to obtain better treatment for their convict husbands and lovers... Did Manolescu bargain?... The thought was a cold iron gauntlet that clutched his intestines, producing a terrible nausea....

The waves wrestled with the raft. The sun beat down upon the two men. In the reflected light danced the phantom Manolescu took a bold step. He told himself that he had to fight the fear of Slavnos. Fight it with nonchalance. He must show the fellow that he was not afraid.

Manolescu's tongue tricked him. When his ears registered his remark he was startled. Had he really put such queries? He must have. This is what he had said: "How did you come to meet your wife? She is not of your village. I know Jaczkovezdo very well."

Slavnos grinned. Manolescu didn't like the grin. To him there was a devilish humor about it. It said: "You wish to talk about Kolya? Very well, I will oblige you. Later I will bash your brains out with this handcuff and toss you off the raft."

But Slavnos answered the question. Slowly. "She is not of Jaczkovezdo. She is from the Bakony Forest."

Slavnos wished to speak about Kolya. When he spoke of her he saw her more plainly. When he said "Bakony Forest" she rose on a wave some twenty feet from the raft and smiled at him. She had told him many stories of the great green stretches running up from e Balaton.

And this hound Manolescu wished to hear about her? Well, he would hear everything. Everything. Later Slavnos would think out a plan. He wondered why the authorities had picked a rat like Manolescu to bring a supposed murderer back from foreign parts. A small, mean rat who made secret visits to the wife of his prisoner,

Slowly, hesitantly, he commenced to speak. "She came to our village on a morning, in spring," he said. "She followed a man who was playing a violin. Followed at his heels like a slave. She was a slave."

HE paused, his head thrust forward.

There she was on the water, close to the raft! Just as he had seen her on that wonderful morning in May. Her strange flexible body that he always said he "could fold up like a ribbon of steel and put in his pocket." Quite plain she was. Her long graceful legs, so different to the legs of the women of the village. So very different. Her pointed face. "Fox-face" he called her playfully. Her long brown fingers that were so very much alive, asked Manolescu.

"What is it?" asked Manolescu, "What do you see?"

"I thought," said Slavnos, and his voice was lowered as if he thought sound: might dissipate the apparition. "I thought I saw Kolya as she was that morning. Walking behind that— that dog who owned her. No, she wasn't walking! She was— she was swimming! Swimming through the hot air of the valley!"

Manolescu gurgled. Swimming was the word. That was how she moved in the little apartment on Chartres Street. Swimming!

Momentarily off guard, the detective touched his chin where the red scratch had been. The eyes of Slavnos fell upon the point of contact. Those fine fingers of Kolya! Their beautiful pointed nails. Again the iron gauntlet seemed to twist his intestines.

MANOLESCU was startled by the light in the blue eyes. This fellow was a murderer. He must watch himself.

With simulated calm he prompted: "Yes, yes. She came into the village with a fellow who played a violin."

Slavnos, still staring at the water, continued. It was strange, this appearance of Kolya on the waters. He wondered if the sun had affected his brain. The sun and the absence of food and drink. "They stayed in the village," he said. "I thought it was— I thought it was because I prayed that they would

stay. Prayed all that May night after I had seen her." Again there flashed the vision of her. That confession of how he preyed pleased her. She was smiling at him.

"I was nineteen," he murmured. "She— she was the same age. The man with the violin was fifty. More, perhaps."

The Law, punctilious, offered a correction. "Only forty-nine when he was— when he died," said Manolescu.

Slavnos started, glared at the detective for a full minute, then continued. "He beat her!" he cried. "Beat her every day! Beat her cruelly!" He struck the zinc cylinder with loose handcuff. The muscles bulged as if they heard a cry for help.

Manolescu crouched as the prisoner swung upon him. "He was small like you!" cried Slavnos. "A rat! His head came up to my shoulder! I— I stood beside him on the day that he came to the village so that I could measure his strength."

The detective tried to muzzle the fear that was upon him, Slavnos was going to confess everything! He was going to ell how the germ of murder had sprung into his mind after he had seen the woman. The pointed face, the long graceful legs, and that strange swimming movement of the slim body had implanted the germ. Manolescu's ears were wide. Corroboration. The fine watchword of detectives. He saw in fancy a red-gowned judge paying him compliments after sentencing Slavnos to death. ("And I must compliment the intelligent detective who, in a position of dire danger, did not forget, etcetera, etcetera.")

"Each day at dusk he beat her!" said Slavnos. "He would drink through the afternoon, and then he would beat her. She would run out of the house with that brute staggering after her. She would hide in the woods, and when he slept off his temper she would creep back. I waited—"

Slavnos broke off, got upon his knees, and then sprang upright. Manolescu tried to follow his example, but the surge of the raft threw him back on his haunches. Leagues and leagues away to the south a feather of smoke appeared on the burnished blue, It wavered like the tail of an invisible cat, now erect, now undulating. The raft seemed anxious to see it. It rushed to the tops of waves and hung there while Slavnos and Manolescu, eyes shaded, stared at it. At times the detective whimpered like a small dog kept from its food.

FOR a half hour the cat's tail showed, then it drifted away. Tramp steamer beating down to Rio. The raft flung itself into a watery valley and geysers came up between the slats, The raft was pleased it hadn't been sighted.

Slavnos took up his recital. "I waited in the wood one afternoon," he said, "Waited till he would chase her into the trees. I thought of killing him then." He paused for a moment, then spoke in a voice that showed a faint surprise. "There were girls in that village. Nine cottages had a flower painted on the outside to tell young men that there was a marriageable girl within, but I didn't want those girls. And I had never spoken to Kolya. We had only glanced at each other when we met on the little street. Yet she knew—she knew that I would be there on that hot afternoon ready to kill. She knew!

"She caught hold of me as I rushed out of hiding; she flung her arms around my neck. and dragged me back into the bushes before that drunken dog had seen me. She was strong. Her arms were around my neck! Around my neck."

Manolescu sighed softly. He forgot the taunting feather of smoke. He licked his thin lips, Beard of Christ! The fox woman with her arms around the neck of Slavnos in a shady wood on an afternoon in summer! A blood-vessel within his head started to imitate a metronome, Tick, tick, tick!

"He was hunting for her, but we lay quiet," said Slavynos, "It was sweet there in the wood. She still clung to me, afraid that I would rush out at him. Her breath was on my cheek. My heart was leaping like a salmon,"

SLAVNOS halted and considered the listening detective. It was nice to talk about Kolya. His confession to Manolescu wouldn't matter, He knew that. Kolya smiled at him from the sun-licked waves.

"After that drunken dog went back to his cottage I showed her how to catch the big spiders," said Slavnos, The memory softened his voice. He smiled in a dreamy way. "Did you ever catch them?" he asked. 'No? It is simple. You warm a little lump of pitch and stick it on the end of a string, You drop the string down the hole in which the tarantula lives. At first he will not touch it because he knows by the smell that it is not good to eat, but if you keep on jangling it up and down he gets mad and then he makes a smack at it with his foot. His foot sticks to it, and when he tries to wrestle with the pitch he gets all stuck up. Then you pull him out of the hole and kill him."

Slavnos looked at Manolescu. There was surely some relationship between the spider and the detective, He tried to find the exact connection, failed, then went on with his story.

"Kolya didn't like that game. She had sympathy with the spiders. She would not let me squash them. She was like that. Always like that."

Again he smiled. He was watching the waves. It was nice to think of that quiet wood, Kolya's body close to him, their faces touching, their eyes upon the hole of a tarantula. Silly of the spiders to hit at the pitch. Again came that thought of a possible relationship between Manolescu and the spiders, When

the next apparition of Kolya appeared he would surely understand. The strong sunshine muddled his brain, but when she smiled at him he became suddenly wise.

His dreams were interrupted by a loud cry from the detective. There came a gasped-out question that had upon it the fine fur of vocal terror. '"What's that?" screamed Manolescu. "Behind us! Look! Look!" Spears of horror were those words: "Look! Look!"

PETER SLAVNOS turned. A black plowshare drove up through the glittering water. Tore through it like a broad German halberd—a stout glaive cutting through silver-tinted silk.

Another and another! Four! Five! In line formation. Black axes from the depths. Unclean! Fear-breeding! Suggestive. They spoke of lost seas! Heat. Thirst. Green waters beckoning to the unbalanced brain.

"They think we're all washed up," said Peter Slavnos. "Don't put your legs overboard or Hungary will have to give you a pension. You wouldn't listen to that little story I told you about the fish that caught another fish and was caught by me. Looks as if you're doing something like that."

The black plowshares held the eyes of Manolescu. There was a magnetic quality about the dorsal fins as they sliced the water. A dreadful suggestion of murderous force. Their very gathering seemed to kill all thoughts of rescue. Here were the executioners. There was no reprieve.

Peter Slavnos, watching the swirling fins of the escort, was not depressed. He was startled at his own indifference. This company of sharks knew the waters. They had probably calculated the chances of rescue before they attached themselves to the raft. They understood the resistance of the occupants lacking food and water. Cunning devils. They, with their own shark cunning, knew perhaps the distance between the raft and the nearest ship. They knew of ugly weather ahead that would shake the two weakened men from the buckjumping raft. Yet Peter was amazed to find that, instead of experiencing a fear that would have been natural under the circumstances, he felt a certain exhilaration. A startling exhilaration.

He would speak of Kolya. He would tell this terror-stricken detective more about Kolya. To the devil with the sharks. This confession of his that the detective longed for was something that took his thoughts from the fate that seemed inevitable. And when he thought of Kolya, he was flooded with a belief that he would see her again. A belief that he would comfort her when the fear of serpents, lightning, and the rolling Mississippi came upon her. The good Lord would not leave Kolya alone with her nightmares. The Lord was kind.

Manolescu was watching the black fins, but Peter Slavnos moistened his lips and continued his confession. If Manolescu didn't hear everything the sea would hear. The sea that was also a murderer. The sea might understand and help.

"There was a man in the village who knew more than most," said Peter. "A queer devil of a man. He lived by himself and he sold charms for cattle. And charms for women, so they said. For childless women. Folk were frightened of him. He had a way of looking at you, a way of laughing—so shrill and so high, and no man in the village would contradict him. He knew the history of the Magyars from the days when Zsolt and Taksony led the galloping Magyar horsemen across Europe. He could tell of them so that on wild nights when the wind blew up the valley the listening children saw them. Saw them riding in the black clouds. A devil of a man."

MANOLESCU was trying to listen. For the sharks might not know everything. Now and then the vision of the courtroom in Budapest came into the detective's mind. The congratulations of the judge. Manolescu knew that Peter Slavnos was working up to the murder. The fins were disturbing, but duty told him he should listen to the confession. "He had glass tubes and pots with crooked necks," said Slavnos. 'And in them he made mixtures. Folk bought them for this and that. And, if the mixture didn't cure, the sick persons were afraid to say so. For he looked at them with his fierce eyes and they were terrified.

"Now I'll tell you what he did. Look at me! Never mind the sharks! Listen to this! Get it in your ears and carry it to the court of Budapest. Tell it to the old judges who will sentence me to death! This fellow, this devil of Jaczkovezdo, gave out that he had made a mixture that would make men live for a hundred, two hundred, three hundred years. More! You just ate a handful of it and you were immortal. Or damned near immortal.

"Up and down the village he screamed of it. And no one had the courage to call him liar. No, no! They were thrilled. There was nothing in that village worth living for. Nothing, I tell you! They were all poor, horribly poor. They were frozen in winter and baked in summer. They were drunken, shiftless, and immoral. But they had a desire to live. To live for a hundred, two hundred, three hundred years. Tell that to the judges. Justice ought to know the depths of ignorance! Isn't that so? These sharks they don't know that you— you are the representative of the Supreme Court of Budapest! They don't know that you have papers in your pocket giving you power to take me there and have me tried for murder. The sharks don't know. They're ignorant. Ignorant! And God won't tell them that you're a big detective in charge of Slavnos, a

murderer! Sing it out to them like you called it to the captain of the *Coomassie*! 'Detective Manolescu with prisoner! Slavnos, murderer !'"

The Law was listening now. The voice of the prisoner thundered out over the waters. The Law thought that Slavnos had become insane. But it was a confession. A frank confession. The Law was forced to listen. For a moment the sharks were thrust out of a mind trained to absorb every item that would lead to a conviction.

"That hound who— who owned Kolya wished to live three hundred years!" cried Slavnos. "He had no money! Not a single *kronen*! But he had Kolya! Kolya! And the devil who made the mixture wanted Kolya! Tell that to the judges! Bow before them and tell how this frightening devil at Jaczkovezdo was going to get a soul in payment for making a thieving brutal dog immortal!"

Peter Slavnos paused. The detective turned his back on the swimming escort. He had to hear the end of this. The mood was on his prisoner. If it passed it might never come again.

"And you?" he stammered. "And you?"

"I listened while they bargained!" answered Slavnos. "They didn't know I was there! I listened, I tell you. Then when the stuff was poured out— the stuff that would make one live three hundred years I rushed out at them. Tell it to the judges! Take it all in! I knocked down the fellow who made that mush; and then I caught that other— who would sell Kolya—caught him and poured that stuff down his throat. Poured cup after cup of it. I would give him a thousand years of life! Three thousand! Ten!.... I was liberal. I poured that stuff down his throat with him biting and kicking. Poured it down till he choked and dropped to the floor.... I didn't know that it killed him. Not till you came after me. I just locked the door on them and left them. I met Kolya and we fled. I had heard of America. I had dreamed of it."

A GREAT silence followed the murder story. The sea was glassy. Black clouds shouldered up from over the Caribbean. Manolescu stared at the escort; Peter Slavnos sprawled on the raft and watched for those fleeting glimpses of Kolya that appeared from time to time on the shimmering water. The vision comforted him. Kolya was smiling. Smiling at him.

He pondered over the apparition. Did Kolya think that he would pull through? Could this spirit see the sharks and the black clouds? Or was the whole thing a sort of mirage brought about by the action of the fiery sun on his brain? Perhaps, yet at times he saw her so clearly that he cried out to her. Cried out in a manner that startled Manolescu.

The afternoon dragged on. Manolescu expressed his fear of the night. A storm was coming. And although the sight of the black fins was unnerving, the

thought of their being there and yet invisible was more frightening still. And now that he had the confession of Slavnos it would be unjust for death to rob him of the chance to tell it with fine trimmings in the great hall of the Supreme Court of Budapest. Frightfully unjust....

The raft too was afraid. As the dark closed in it made curious movements. At times it spun in circles at tremendous speed. Slavnos had a belief that some giant of the waters had thrust up a mighty digit on which the raft spun like a plate on the finger of an equilibrist. The movement terrified Manolescu. He squealed as the thing revolved.

Then, stopping suddenly, the raft would plunge forward along a greasy stretch where the waves had been curiously flattened as if by fear of the approaching storm. Lightning slashed the darkness at intervals. It showed the escort, the black fins in the silvered water, quite plainly to the two men... .

Manolescu began to call upon his saints. His words seemed to whip the raft. As his shrieks became louder the thing turned into a buck-jumping horror. The storm lashed it in the manner of a boy with a top.

The detective was thrown across the raft. He would have gone overboard if the strong arm of Peter Slavnos had not clutched him. The fellow's muscles were loosened with fear. He screamed entreaties to his prisoner.

Peter Slavnos rose to the occasion. He twisted the loose handcuff behind a bar joining the cylinders, then snapped the spare bracelet on the left wrist of the detective. The raft could buck over the moon, but it couldn't unship them. He yelled the news to Manolescu, but Manolescu was crazed with fear. He could not understand.

Peter Slavnos was filled with a wild exhilaration, The sea was angry, but not with him. It knew him. "Slavzos, murderer!' That was what Manolescu had shouted. He, Peter, was kin to the sea. Unintentionally he had committed murder. Perhaps the sea had no real intention to kill. It might, like him, have only intended to frighten, but its strength, like Peter's, brought about fatal results...

At moments when the lightning flashed he saw that vision of Kolya. Still smiling. Comforting indeed as the waves sloshed over the raft. Choking, blinding waves. At times they lifted both himself and Manolescu from the slats so that their safety depended solely on the steel handcuffs. When the waves rushed from beneath them the two were thumped down with tremendous force upon the slats. Again and again the racing waves lifted them, to be foiled in the attack by the handcuffs twisted round the bar.

IN the early morning Slavnos, in a lull in the storm, addressed a question to Manolescu. The detective did not answer. The prisoner shook him. With his

free hand he opened the jacket of the other and placed his hand on his heart. Manolescu was dead. The tremendous buffeting had been too much for him.

Peter Slavnos searched the pockets of the dead man. He found the key of the handcuffs. He released his own wrist and sat upright. The sea had gone down. The raft rode easier.

Slavnos was chilled. Something— later he thought it a suggestion that came from the vision of Kolya— prompted him to strip the jacket from the detective. It was quite a task. Then he handcuffed the body to the bar, crawled as far away from it as possible and laid himself down.

He felt very tired and very cold. He thought that death was near. He had no sorrow for Manolescu. In the very height of the storm the detective, fear-maddened, had shouted words at him. He had cried out the name of Kolya. Begged the pardon of Slavnos. Dimly Peter had understood. He was speaking of his visits to the little apartment on Chartres Street. His offers to Kolya had been rejected. Peter, half conscious, recalled the angry red scratch on Manolescu's chin. Kolya's long nails had written an answer for Peter to read. Dear Kolya. Murmuring her name, he slipped into a coma.

The sun came up. The black fins reappeared. Their owners wondered why Detective Manolescu remained on the raft. They knew he was dead. According to all shark experience he should roll off when the raft plunged.

PETER came to his senses in a cozy berth. A dark-faced ship's officer was standing near. He smiled when he saw Slavnos had returned to consciousness.

"That's better," he said, speaking with a foreign accent. "Bad time you have, eh? No *bueno*. No *agua*, no *comidor*! Mucho *malo*! Better now?"

Peter nodded his head slightly. He was too tired to speak.

"This ship," said the officer, "she is *Rocamora*. Barcelone, La Habana. We find you sick, your prisoner dead. Captain read papers in your pocket. Understand? You are *oficial de policia*. Good. Your prisoner he has— what you call them? *Brazalete*, eh? Steel *brazalete* tying him to raft. He kill, eh? No matter much when dead. *Madre de Dios*! Everything finished when man dead. Captain make sailors cut off *brazalete*, bury him in good style. Old Santo Pedro no know him killer. Joke on old Santo Pedro. Captain make damn' fine talk. Say all men equal when dead man. I go now get you food."

The sea had arranged it! The sea and Kolya! The killing of that wretch in the village of Jaczkovezdo had been unintentional, and the sea understood. All the killings of the Great Waters were accidental. The waves thought that the little ships that were built by man were so much stronger than they really were. The waves played roughly with them, and they fell to pieces.

THE talkative officer was the only person on the tramp steamer who could communicate with Peter. The officer explained that they would reach Havana within three days, and that Peter, if he was wise, should rest in his berth and think of all the evil-doers he would catch in the days to come.

"Mucho *malo hombres*!" he said, in an effort to comfort the supposed detective for the loss of his prisoner. '"Thousands! Millions! Catch 'em all! *Si*, *si*! Put de nice *brazalete* on de wrists."

So Peter Slavnos lay in the berth and dreamed of Kolya. He felt that she knew he was safe now, because she did not appear to him as she did when he was on the raft. Dear Kolya....

The *Rocamora* rolled in by the Morro light and nosed into her wharf. A shipping reporter from the *Diario de la Marina* boarded the vessel, and was rushed by the talkative officer to Peter Slavnos. Peter could not speak Spanish, so the officer gave his account of the rescue, stressing his own share in the happening. Peter remained silent. He was thinking out a way of escape. He wished to get to New Orleans with all possible speed. Kolya might be worried about lightning, or there might come to her that strange belief concerning the attachment between the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain.

The excited reporter desired a photograph. He beckoned Peter to follow him. Together they went down the ladder to the pier. The reporter placed Peter in the sunlight while he rushed around looking for the photographer connected with his journal.

Peter Slavnos, blinking in the fierce sunshine, suddenly roused himself. For an instant he saw Kolya! Kolya, urging him to move. Quite plainly he saw her in the white glare of the sun upon the sheds! Without hesitation he turned on his heel and hurried along the wharves. ...

Hours later he came to Machina Wharf where all was bustle and hurry. he finishing touches were being given to a steamer about to move out from the wharf.

Peter inquired her destination, from one of the negroes busy in the loading.

"N'Awlyins," answered the stevedore.

New Orleans! Dear Lord in heaven! Peter Slavnos grabbed one of the boxes and carried it aboard. Dropping it, he walked aft and found a hiding-place. Kolya had surely directed his footsteps to the boat. He was praying as the steamer threshed out to sea....

It was dark when Peter Slavnos passed Jackson Square. He clung to the shadows of the French Market. He had to be careful. Many persons in New Orleans knew that the long arm of the Law had reached out and grabbed Peter.

The air was hot and heavy. A storm was sweeping up from the Gulf. The wind rattled the signs and whipped the branches of the trees. Drops of rain commenced to fall.

Peter Slavnos turned into Lafayette Avenue, then swung into Chartres. Here was the house. A flash of lightning illuminated the building. He hurried up the uncarpeted stairs to the third floor.

The door was ajar. Softly, on tiptoe, Peter entered. There was a light in the bedroom. He crossed the little sitting-room and peeped.

Kolya was on her knees. She was praying. Her sweet pleading voice came to his ears; thrilled, he listened. "Dear Lord, send back Peter to me! He is a good man. I am so lonely. Send him back, dear Lord, for I am afraid. Afraid in the storms and the long nights."

Peter Slavnos stumbled forward and dropped on his knees beside her. For a moment surprise paralyzed the tongue and limbs of the woman; then with a strange piercing cry she fell into the outstretched arms of her husband....

Minutes later Peter Slavnos spoke. "I am supposed to be dead," he said quietly. "The sea arranged it. I have come back to a new life, but we must go away from here where I am known. Pack up what you want and—"

"No, no, I want nothing!" cried Kolya. "Let us go at once! At once, Peter!"

She took his arm and pulled him to the door. Hurriedly they went down the stairs and out into the night. The storm had fallen upon the city, but Kolya was not afraid. Peter was at her side, Peter— whom the dear Lord had sent back to comfort her.

———————————

3: Red Sunset Land

Beatrice Grimshaw

1870-1953

Blue Book Feb 1933

MITCHELL said: "That's Ted Willis in the corner— the one with the straw hat. He had a millet plantation. He went to Papua; got lost up the Mambare River. The chap with the big mustache is Greenhowe— a fine prospector; when the Waria broke out, he was among the first three to get on good gold. He died in 1913— blackwater, I think. The handsome kid next him was Alf Ridgwell; he was about twenty then. The head-hunters of the Hydrographers' Range got his head three years after that was taken. Jimmy Blake — that one— shot himself. He was one of the best, but he couldn't keep off it. Fortescue, this chap in the middle, got a Kuku-kuku spear through him, about the same time, I think, or maybe it was later. Wheeler, in the drill coat, was accidentally drowned off East Cape, they say, but I always thought his boys took him by the legs and held him under. Harvey, the one next the last, was lost with all hands in the Gulf, about Christmas in 1905; the natives said, and maybe they were right, that there were too many cases of 'good luck' on board—"

"What—" I began.

Somebody kicked me. "Native name for whisky. Don't head him off!"

Mitchell went on, holding the faded group photograph in his hand: "Fellow in the corner? That's me; I hadn't shaved off my beard when it was taken. Well, that's the lot. What do you want to know?"

We were three newspaper-men; we had bailed up Fergus Mitchell in the lounge of the Sydney Metropole, anxious to ask him about the old times in the Western Pacific. Mitchell had struck good gold somewhere on Edie Creek, and was down in Sydney spending it. They said he was a mine of stories....

I can see him now: a huge man, hard as teak, with small, pin-point brown eyes that bored through you, and a bloodhound jowl; oldish, but with deep-cut lines in his face that weren't all age; un-selfconscious as a forest tree, primitive as water and as wind. Well-dressed, but you hardly noticed that. Something attractive about him, something terrifying, something— I can only use one word for it— innocent. He had been drinking. He had been seen buying jewelry for lights-o'-love. I knew this; it seemed entirely incidental. Fergus Mitchell was — Other. You couldn't have classed him, socially. The Red Sunset Land had long since wiped out any distinguishing brands. It has a way of doing this. Fergus Mitchell had been living in the western island world— Solomons, Now Hebrides, New Guinea— for half of a long lifetime, and the Red Sunset had claimed him for its own....

There were women in the lounge; I noticed how they followed him with their eyes; I saw how Bob Bradley, my mate, pulled up his collar, and pulled down his tie; how Wilmington bristled with hurt sex-pride; knew how I felt myself. To see one's self, twenty-odd, smart and sharp and good-looking, neglected for an old, nut-crackery fellow of fifty!

"Women!" I thought scornfully, and then: "But they know." And an idea came to me. We hadn't been successful drawing him out. He had produced an old group photograph, some uninteresting pictures of palms and beaches. He was willing to oblige— bored but goodnatured. The other fellows were putting up their copy-paper. I stayed. When they were gone, and I had Mitchell to myself, I asked him, right out, who the eighth man in the photograph was. He'd skipped that one— a dark-eyed, slender fellow, half hidden behind the others. I had a wild idea—

"No, not all dead," said Mitchell to my question. "Will you have another drink? Coffee? So will I. I'm not dead; that's one. And that other—"

Greatly daring, I pushed my chair closer, glanced once more at the bookstall girl, who was eating him with her eyes; at the station-owner's daughters, who were talking to each other and watching him all the time. And I said: "That other— tell me about her."

I expected I don't know what— maybe a punch on the jaw, maybe a cool refusal. ... Mitchell put more sugar in his coffee, and said easily: "Oh, yes. Zita Lomond. I killed a man for her."

And there, in the lounge, with Sydney society coming and going on its way to dinner, to dance, to theater, Mitchell drank his coffee in sips, and told me how he had done murder. I am telling it much as he told me. There were interruptions; we had a drink or two, and Mitchell had more coffee after, black as ink and full of sugar— he must have had the stomach of a bear; and people came sidling past and listened, and slipped away when I glared at them. And Mitchell, smoking and drinking, talked.

I DON'T know (said Mitchell) if you know how those islands get at you. (I did not; I don't now). Tahiti, and the Marquesas, and Samoa— all very well, and the girls near as pretty as they say, and healthy places, and not a snake or a fever mosquito, or a wild cannibal in 'em all. But the West— brandy after tea! Give me the brandy.

There were six passengers on the old *Tamboro* that trip. They didn't run to tourists then. Nineteen-five, it was. You remember that.

(I, said I would remember. He took no notice, and went on.)

We'd left Norfolk Island behind— pretty, gardeny, tea-party kind of place; and things were warming up toward the New Hebrides. When I feel the sun

slapping me on the back, when the ship's officers come out in whites and brass buttons, and the wind-shoots are stuck in the cabins, or used to be before they had fans— looking for all the world like big gun-cartridges,— and the sea hits you in the eye, sparkling furiously, and there's a light-hearted sort of blue in the water, and at night green fire about the bows— well, that's the tropics: another world. Kipling said something about laws of God and man north of fifty-three. He might have said north and south of ten. About the equator— men and things slacken. As if the big bulge of the earth there had stretched 'em, and they must go south, or north, again, to get back.... There were two missionaries, and a Government bloke, and the three of us.

(I wanted to ask a question, but didn't dare.)

I was out on a prospecting trip; and you take it from me, in those big islands which no one's crossed yet,— damn their incompetence and the white livers of 'em, — there's stuff worth prospecting. The missionaries were mishing according to their trade. But he and she, they were just out for thrills. Now, mind you, even now you can get thrills, if you're fool enough to want 'em, all over the western groups. But in nineteen-five, you didn't have to look. The thrills went looking for you.

What do you think ? One of the first ports we came to, when they anchored for the night in a bay that was just like a stage backcloth in a pantomime, and the residents— eleven altogether— came along for a dance and a shivoo— what do you think, but Zita and her husband went off for the afternoon, fishing, and they came upon a native village where the people were friendly; didn't poke any poisoned arrow at you, or bash you with stone clubs, and Lomond found out that they'd been pearling on their own, and he had bought the makings of a bonzer necklace for her, and paid for it in sporting cartridges which he happened to have, and which would buy anything, pigs or wives or— Well, they came back with the pearls; you never saw such a fistful, big as peas, and Lomond didn't show them to anyone on board for fear he'd never get such a bargain again.

(Another unspoken question burned within me. It was answered. Mitchell, smoothing down the short mustache on his upper lip with a magnificent, unconscious gesture, went on:)

I COULD see, even in the moonlight, they were wonderful. (There was a blank, in the story and in his speech. He continued calmly, leaving me to catch up as I could.) I said, "Keep the bag round your neck night and day; there's a queer fish aboard." And she said, "What queer fish? I haven't seen anyone but the passengers." "Yes," says I. And she thought a bit, and said: "If you mean the recruiter we took on at Mermaid Bay, he's a very civil decent man, and I don't

think you ought to—" "No," I said, "oughtn't I? And did you ever hear that he tied a native girl behind his sulky with a rope, and galloped the horse till she was almost dead?" "It's a lie," she said, sharp as mustard.

So I left her there, with that wavy light hair of hers shining something wonderful in the moonlight, like that "white" gold it was, and her eyes— you can't see 'em in the photo; a man could drown in her eyes, black seas with no bottom to 'em, like her heart. There's some women, a man might run out all the line in the world, and the lead would never touch ground, never bring up so much as a grain of sand or gold to show you what was really there. . . .

Lomond came along, smoking a cigar. He was English, about a hundred and fifty per cent— accent you could hang your hat on, wooden face red and shiny with all the good living they used to have in those days; way of half shutting his eyes and looking at you under the lids; I believe it was a touch of short-sight; but it looked like the devil. He was of good family, and knew it. Zita— well, they said things about the time she was on the stage, but not one of them was true, not a damned one; he'd no call to be as jealous as he was.

Well, it was heaven and hell mixed that night, as it mostly is in the Red West, which is what I call that lot of islands past Fiji. Moonlight,— you never saw the like, pouring through you like a waterfall,— all the palms shining as if they'd been dipped in silver paint; the beaches white, and the iron roofs of the settlement just as if snow was piled on every one, and shadows black like black fur rugs, under the walls, and blue ink-like, about the trees.... Have you seen the star a coconut makes under itself on the sand, nights of full moon? Ah— till you have, don't talk.

(I was not talking. He went on:)

There was that feeling in the air that you get; it's part of it the drum-drumming that comes from the villages, like your heart when you hear it in the night; and part of it's knowing that anything may happen anywhere, and part of it's the gorgeous painting of the whole don't-care place, colors splashed....

Well, Lomond had had one too many that night, I think; not too much, that's another thing, but— he started rousting on her. And before me. Fie told her she wasn't on the music-hall stage now, and she would please remember she belonged to a decent family. And some more like that. I would have pasted him one, but she got hold of my arm, and that made him worse. So I saw the only thing I could do was to go for a walk, and I went. Anyhow, I wanted to feel the pepper and ginger of that place in my mouth again; Tahiti's treacle compared— but I said that before.

I went to the native village; I wanted to watch them dance; it was full moon, y'see, and they always reckon full moon puts the ginger into things.... Who, me? Yes, I do believe it. They say nowadays that the moon's radio-active;

that accounts for a lot.... When I came down to the village, they were hard at it; not what you're thinking— native dances aren't all sex-stuff, though of course some of it is, same as the foxtrot you dance with your girl, and maybe not so much. But a lot of it's stuff you could give no name to, something that goes deep, roots down to the wind and the sea and the storms, touches the big power-house that runs the world, whatever it is. That's what catches and holds. I tell you, the Stone Age men that live in those places know a sight of things that you and I forgot a million years ago. Well, I was watching it all, sitting on a log as peaceful as you please, with the feeling of the islands running through me like water through a weir, when all of a sudden the whole thing breaks off; the dancing stops, and the drums give one big roar, and then they're silent. I looked round, and there was Zita coming along in the moonlight, with that rapscallion young recruiter— come to see the dance.

"You get home as quick as you can!" says I. "The natives haven't any love to spare for you, Willis, and you know it; and anyhow, what the blazes do you mean bringing a lady down into this shivoo?"

Willis was looking a bit nervous, grinning and showing his teeth, which he was proud of, and fidgeting with his hands;

But I could see, I don't know how, that he wasn't surprised at the ending of the dance, nor at the way the natives were beginning to mill about, like cattle when they start swimmin' round and round one another in a stream. He must have known, before he brought her along, that they'd shut up the dancing. Then, what the deuce did he bring her for, thinks I.

Zita was half laughing, half scared; she'd come out for a thrill, and begad, she'd got it! They were beginning to start that ugly woof-woofing they do when they're working themselves up deliberately for mischief, and nobody can mistake what that means when they hear it. "What's the matter?" she says to Willis, very quick; and he says: "Why, I reckon they want back the stuff they sold to your husband." "What'll they do if they don't get it?" she says; and he says: "Take our heads to pay."

Now, there was just a grain of truth in all that; natives do go back on a bargain pretty often, or rather, they try to get back the goods they've sold, and keep the price— if they can. I heard afterward that Willis had been trying to get pearls out of them for some time, but they wouldn't have sold him one the size of a pinhead. How he found out about the lot Lomond had secured was simple enough; he'd seen Zita with one— sneaking, I've no doubt.

I said to Willis: "Clear out of it; maybe I can keep them quiet till you're well away; and don't you go bringing—" He didn't hear the rest, because he was legging it up the pathway, with her hand in his, dragging her along.

I saw Willis take something from her, and stick it in his trousers pocket as they ran; but, you'll understand, I only half saw it; I had my hands full at the moment, quieting down the dancers, who weren't at all pleased at having a woman brought down to look on at them. You see, there's dances that's spoiled by a woman's presence, just as a Masonic meeting would be, and they have to start the whole dashed thing over again, as I suppose the Masons would— I'm not one myself.

WELL, when I had them quieted, I got back to the ship, and I said to the captain, who knew me:

"You'd best make some excuse, and take the ship out before morning, because they're liable to try and rush you just before dawn, if they get worked up."

"What about taking away the local whites?" he asks, but I told him: "They're all right; it's only some of your passengers the head-hunter crowd may have got a down on; better get away quietly."

So he took my advice, and we cleared for next port before midnight.

Willis came on with us, and he looked, to my mind, much too like a cat that's got at the cream. I didn't say anything; I thought things would clear up by and by. And at the next port, begad, they did. It was one of the quiet islands, where the natives didn't bother much about the whites— sort of reconciled to let 'em go their way, since they couldn't get rid of 'em, and just keeping on in their own villages, working the gardens and pig-hunting and fishing, and living as peaceable as they could, though I reckon they found things a bit dull, since the head-hunting'd gone out of fashion.

(He stopped to finish his whisky and beckoned to the waiter for another— two more, rather; he seemed to expect me to keep level with him, as a pure matter of courtesy, and any faint attempt I made at paying for drinks was simply swept aside. By this time I hardly knew what he was ordering; the big lounge, full of people, was growing curiously bright and distant to me, as I sat trying to make my glass last out, while Mitchell steadily got through his. It did not seem to affect him any more than the poisonous ink-black coffee he had been drinking a little earlier. "I wonder would anything affect him?" I thought, a little vaguely. "I wonder if I hit him with an ax—" But he was going on:)

We had a lot of cargo to land and take on there; the captain said we'd stay a couple of days. It was a pretty place, that island; green grass like tennis-lawns running right down to the beach, with woods behind, black woods like something in a fairy tale; anything might have come out of 'em, and the smell of the orange trees hit you as you came in, and there were scads of the fruit bobbing about in the water, and windrows of 'em on the sand. I wanted Zita to

come ashore and see it all, so I went to her cabin, and knocked on the door. It was very quiet for a minute; there was no answer, so I reckoned she'd gone out, and I was just going to turn away, when—

(He paused for a moment. "You got a girl ?" he asked, setting down his empty glass. "Well, what d'you think?" I answered indignantly. "I can tell you that—" He hadn't been listening; the question was purely rhetorical.) Just you picture to yourself, (he went on,) her crying. Crying like a little drowned cat that's been left out in the rain.

(There seemed to be a plum in my throat, a plum that swelled and ached. My hand shut itself tightly round the glass. I pictured myself doing terrible things. He went on:) I said through the door, "Zita I " She didn't answer. The door was locked. I went to the steward and said: "Where's the key of Number Ten?"

"Mr. Lomond has it, sir," he told me. "Mr. Lomond's gone ashore."

"You open that cabin," I told him, and I gave him a quid. He opened it, and cut.

Zita was lying in her bunk; she'd a white wrapper on, with lace sleeves, and I could see her arms. I took one look at 'em— and at her neck. "Do you want me to kill him for you?" I says. "No," she says, "no— he thinks he had an excuse. He thinks—" And with that she began to cry again. I said: "What excuse? Sit up and tell me; he's gone ashore, but there isn't too much time." And she said, "Willis—" And I was glad to hear that, because—

(Another of his expressive pauses. He beckoned to the waiter, and went on:)

She told me I was right about Willis. Said he was an infernal humbug, and a cursed brute— or rather, that was what she meant by what she did say. — Yes, of course, two; my friend's having another. — Yes, of course, you are. She said that Willis had been after the pearls all along, that he knew she was carrying them around her neck, and got her down to the village just to scare her and make her give them up, knowing as he did that the natives were sure to go to market about her being there—"

("Excuse me," I put in, "what do you think's the origin—" He did not let me finish.) Good Australian. Ever heard anyone taking pigs to market ? She said that was what he meant all along, and she only found it out when he went ashore with the pearls, and wouldn't give 'em up again. She told me that, sitting up in her berth, with that lacy rag on her, and her hair— women did have hair then— all down and over her; and there were blue shadows under her eyes where she'd been crying; and by God, I swore he'd pay for every tear in good time. Her husband, I mean. Then she told me more, and I forgot all about Lomond. It seems she had gone for a walk with Willis, before she found

out about the earls— I think she was a little attracted y his poisonous sort of good looks; not much, however; she was just amusing herself— and Willis.... Well, her husband came up, and he was only just in time.

Of course, after that, she was scared of her life he would find out Willis had got the pearls from her; nothing'd have convinced him then she wasn't guilty; as it was, he'd knocked her about on the mere suspicion.

"What d'you think he'd do if he found out about the pearls?" I asked.

"He wouldn't believe a word I said, and he'd divorce me for certain. And I don't want to go back to the halls, or worse," she said. "It makes my heart come up in my throat to think of it."

"You're in love with him still," I said.

"In a way I am," she says. "But I'm more afraid of him, and those pearls— if he gets to know I gave them to Willis—" She was scared, and got the wind up properly; silly of her, maybe, but you think of your girl with the wind up about something, and looking at you with eyes

So I said: "Put some powder on your face, and get into your frock, and look like something ; it's going to be all right if you don't give it away." And then I heard the scroop, scroop of the oars of the ship's whaleboat coming back, so I went.... Better have a cigar. They have some here that aren't quite poisonous.

("No, no," I protested feebly, with my head singing, but he did not pay any attention. "Matches," he said, and handed me his box; I don't know how he knew that I could not get mine out.... He went on:)

You want to know why I didn't go to the police? I'll tell you that by and by.... Well, I landed, and went up that grass road that runs off from the sea; like a ride in an English wood it is— except for the oranges; they were rolling about underfoot, and the air was like a perfumer's shop, and hot— hot's a greenhouse when they take you through on Sunday afternoons. I went to a pub.

(He stopped, cut the end off a cigar, and lighted it. I wondered if it was as strong as mine. But I was almost past wondering; a cloud, not all smoke, was gathering between myself and the big room; I could just see the bookstall girl straining her ears to hear, and the squatter's two daughters watching him in a mirror, and laughing unconcernedly with each other, the way girls do when they're trying to attract attention. But they seemed unreal, figures in a dream. Much more real was the scene that Mitchell had painted for me: the hot green alley, with the oranges tumbling down it, and the palms above; the island and the little town and the hotel.)

It was a fair sort of pub— considering. They used to shut some time in the night, sooner or later; and Brock, who was owner and barman, never allowed knifing on the premises. And the gin they sold to the natives— kind that goes

whiff when you put a match to it— was never served to whites unless they were past caring.... Willis was there, with his gear dumped on the floor, getting ready to make a night of it; he hadn't a feather to fly with, but he was setting them up all round, and you should have seen the way Brock shoveled up the pearls he was chucking on the counter; only the small ones, though; the rest—

("Didn't anybody know?" I broke in desperately. He answered: "Everyone knew they were stolen." And I asked:

"Then why did this Brock— wasn't he an honest—")

The bar was in an uproar; Willis was setting them up all around— and you should have seen the pearls he was chucking on the counter.

"As honest as you or me. You don't understand— yet. Well, there were a lot of Frenchmen in the bar; the place is mostly French, y'know, and they were lapping up the champagne, and cursing it at the same time; I'll allow it wasn't first cousin to Pommery. The bar was in an uproar, what with quarreling and singing, and there was an old engine of sorts outside, which Brock kept for his electric light; it went cough, cough, for all the world like a dying man, right through everything; and when the row let up for a minute, as it sometimes did, you could hear the waves bursting on the reef outside, and what they said as plain as anything was, " Don't care. Don't care." Only nobody listened.

I went up to Willis, where he stood like a king in the middle of them, treating and drinking; he wasn't drunk himself— yet, or I'd have had to wait. I was glad about that. When the Frenchies saw me, they stood back, and Brock put one hand under the counter. "You needn't," says I. "It's going to be all right and proper." And with that he took his hand out, and watched me; he looked like a man in a box at the theater who thinks he's a bit too near the stage for comfort...

They were all quiet now, and some of them seemed to be sober who weren't before. You could hear the old engine go cough, cough, and the reef was loud.

I said to Willis: "You're going to fight me."

And he says, "When?" And I says, "Now."

And he says: "I'm game, but you're half as heavy again as me."

"Too right," I says, "but you can choose your weapons."

"Weapons?" says he.

"Yes," says I. "This is going to be a duel; not a murder."

"I can't shoot for nuts," he says, looking at me nastily. He wasn't afraid, but he was beginning not to like it. "You needn't," I said. "Choose your weapon — anything from boathooks to cannon." And the Frenchmen raised their glasses at that, and cheered; it did them more good than you could believe, to think that there was going to be a proper duel on the island, and they could all go.

So Willis said: "I choose the only thing I know anything about, and that's a three-foot clearing-knife."

"Correct," I says. So we all went off to the store to pick the weapons and get them sharpened.

("What is a—" I began. "It's like the thing they call a machete in South America. Blade like the blade of an oar, three feet of it, and a big wooden handle," he explained; and I started to ask, "And had you—" But he went on:)

No, never. But I had done a bit of broadsword, in my time. Not that that was very much good, with the different balance and all. You never saw brighter moonlight; it was just right for the duel. We fixed up to have it down on the beach, where it was as light as broad day, what with the reflection of the sea and the white sand; you never saw white sand like that. The Frenchmen were in heaven. I could have had fifty seconds, and so could he, though neither of us would bother with that kind of truck. But I said he could have a doctor if he liked; and he told me— both of us being very hot about Zita underneath, though we were talking coolly— that it would be a gravedigger would be wanted and not a doctor. And so we went down to the beach.

The Frenchmen made a ring all round us, to look on, and four of them stood inside the ring; I reckon they thought they were seconds, whether we liked it or not; you see, that kind of thing was just strawberry jam to them. They put us into fencing attitudes, and one of them dropped a handkerchief, and called out, "Engage 1" And six of the rest started arguing right away if it had been done properly or not; but Willis and I didn't mind; we were too busy trying to slice one another into bits.

I saw at once he didn't know a great deal about fencing, but the weapons were so odd that I reckoned he had his fair whack at me in any case. Perhaps I put too much of the broadsword into it; anyhow, he got me across the left arm, and drew blood, and the Frenchies wanted to strike up our swords, as they called it, but I cursed them some, and we went on.

They'd all stopped their barracking by now; I think they saw it wasn't going to be a French sort of duel. They were watching us hard, and very quiet. I remembered afterward I'd heard some one breathing pretty loud, and thought it was Willis, until I found out it was me. He gave me some trouble. I reckon he knew he was fighting for his life. There was a good deal of blood on the sand— black it looked in that light— before I saw my chance had come; and then I took it.... Feel my arm.

(I did. It was like ironwood. Mitchell went on:)

I got my chance at last, and struck through his collarbone, and sliced him pretty near in two. If you don't like that whisky, tell me; they have another just as good. Well, drink it then.

The Frenchies raised a cheer, French sort of cheer, rather more like howling of wolves than a good hurrah. They began dribbling away; I reckon they wanted to see whether Brock mightn't stand treat a bit. . . .

WELL, they left me alone with him.

I stood wiping my clearing-knife on a bit of buffalo grass, and somehow it seemed as if a train that'd been carrying me along with all the rattle and banging that trains do kick up, you know— as if it had stopped, and gone on, and left me all alone in the middle of a dead quiet, with the row dying out on the horizon, and me beginning to hear the rustle of the trees again, and the birds singing, and a sort of peaceful feeling getting hold. So I stuck the knife in the sand, and I was starting to go away, when I saw a thing that made my blood creep.

(I was anxious to know what it was that made Mitchell's blood creep. It seemed impossible.)

A half-caste girl, with shoes on, shoes with high heels. And she had come up unknown, and she was stamping with her high-heeled shoe right on Willis' face as he lay there dead in the moonlight. "Stop it, you!" I says. "Stop it be hanged!" she says, for she could speak English as well as you or I. "That man deserted me, and when I came and begged of him, he tied me behind his sulky, and dragged me over the road."

"Stop it," I told her. "I've wiped out all scores." She was sensible enough; she left off, and came away.

("Queen Matilda of England," I began, "trod with her heels on the face of the man who had refused her, when he was lying dead. Did you ever—" And he answered: "Of course I did; but I'm not making it up. I suppose human nature's the same all over the world." He was lighting a fresh cigar; there seemed to be a pause— almost a gap— in the tale. He got his cigar alight, and went on:)

I TOOK the bag of pearls off his body.

I went back to the ship; everybody was asleep, and we sailed at sunup. I didn't see Zita till after breakfast next morning; she was sitting up in the bows, alongside the anchor-chains, well out of earshot of everyone. I reckoned she had heard something, and was waiting for me. So I went up to her, and keeping myself between her and the rest of the ship, I handed her the bag of pearls.

"All there," I said. And they were, because I'd bought the small ones back from Brock, the night before; he was very decent, and made me wholesale prices on the drinks. Zita took the pearls, and slipped them back into her dress,

and I could see her breast heaving up and down, just the way the silver-white seas were heaving round the bow; it was one of those silver tropic days— but you wouldn't know.... And she said: "Thank God!"

But I said: "What about thanking me?"

She said: "How did you get them back?" And I knew by the flicker of her eyelids that she knew; it was all over the island, all over the New Hebrides group, as fast as the steamer went round.

So I said: "You needn't ask that, now or any time; only I'll say this: he didn't deserve to live."

She shook a little at that, and she said: "I can never— never thank you enough." And then she seemed to forget about herself for a minute, which women rarely do, and she said, suddenly: "But you— what'll happen to you?" She was seeing things then; the jail at Long Bay, and a man walking with his arms tied and his eyes bandaged, three steps to eternity. I didn't answer her. Lomond came up to the bow just at that minute, and he said:

"So this is another of your lovers."

Like cold steel his voice was; and yet it was glad, inside. And I think he was seeing the same picture that she did, only he liked it. He didn't know about the pearls, nor just what Willis had so nearly done; he only knew there was jealousy between me and Willis, and I reckon he thought he was going to be rid of both in the best possible way.

I said nothing then, and I said nothing to him all the way back to Sydney. Zita and I saw something of each other, and I made up my mind that she was just the one woman, the one I'd been looking for— looking a bit too industriously, perhaps, all my life, which was twenty-eight years then, and it seemed older than I am now. She used to meet me after dinner, abaft the funnel, and we'd talk, in a hurry, with the wind shouting in the funnel-stays about us, and the engines stamping away below— champity, champity; I can hear 'em now. And see the stars, with the trucks of the masts going penciling through. Zita'd look at them with me, and I'd say: "I'll show you the stars in daylight, when we get to the gold-fields together." And she'd shake her head, but she'd come a bit closer, and say: "Tell me more." And once in a way, I'd see her eyes grow bigger and darker— though you'd think it was impossible— when she thought of what she wouldn't ever speak about: the chance of Long Bay and the little door in the morning.

BUT Lomond was thinking of the same thing, and sometimes he'd catch me alone, and say something that was meant to have a bite in it, or jerk the tie round his neck when he passed me in an alleyway, and grin. And so we got to Sydney, and came in through the Heads. You know how the harbor looks on a

November morning, spring painting everything blue that isn't silver, and silver that isn't gold. And it was spring for me that day.

Lomond came up to me, when we were docking, with the ugliest grin you ever saw on a human countenance. They'd no wireless then, but he says: "I've had you signaled; the police will be on board as soon as the Customs or sooner, and there'll be an end," he says, "to your lovemaking with my wife." He said it right where she could hear, and half the passengers too. Some of them looked scared— that was the few tourists we had; the others, why, they just burst out laughing. It's queer what things people will laugh at.

Now, that saying of his was just the last drop that filled the glass and overflowed it, or the last flake that started the avalanche; you can have it either way you like. Zita had been falling out of love with him ever since we left the islands, and to hear him call her down in public like that— and for something she hadn't done— finished the job. She looked at me, and I knew she was mine for the taking, only she was still a bit afraid— for me. The little door at eight o'clock in the morning, and the cap over the face. . . .

I wouldn't have missed the rest of it for anything; no, not even to have saved her some trouble. You'll see.

The gangway was out, but nobody could go ashore. "Captain's orders," was what the quartermaster said, sticking out his arm. We waited. And in about ten minutes, not hurrying themselves, came two police.

"What's this about?" one of 'em said, as they came up on deck. The captain said nothing. I don't know how much he — anyhow, he left it to Lomond, who was swelling out like something in a picture-show; and he says: "I charge this man"— meaning me—"with willful murder of Sydney Willis."

The two police got a little nearer to me. "Where did this alleged murder occur?" says one of 'em.

"In the New Hebrides, at Dugong Island," says Lomond.

"What have you to say about it?" the policeman asks me; but I noticed he was what you'd call a bit perfunctory, and the other man, who'd opened his notebook, quietly shut it up. "I don't need to say anything," I told him; "but if you want to know, I did kill a man who deserved to be killed about six times over, and I did it on territory that's outside the British Empire."

"You won't get off that way," Lomond said, with a kind of howl. "There's such a thing as law— foreign law. You can be—"

"The only law that runs in the New Hebrides," says I, "is the law of the headhunters themselves. The French are squatting there, and so are we, but nobody owns the place; it's about the last native-owned country in the world, and if you want to make a charge against me, you'd better do it through the cannibal chiefs of Dugong— if they don't eat you first. I think you'd be pretty

safe, though," I said. "Even a Dugong cannibal might hesitate about swallowing you"

The second man put up his notebook. "We'll have it seen to," he said, but he looked just as a dog looks when you show him a bone, and then take it away. They knew there was going to be no sergeant's stripes for them, over that business.

I told Lomond where he could go, and how soon, and that he might get a divorce as quick as he liked, and say anything he chose; we wouldn't contradict him. So she went ashore without him, and I said good-by to her, for the time.

THE big cigar was out. Mitchell held it in two fingers, and looked at it thoughtfully, stroking the cold ash from its tip.

"She was with me," he said slowly, "on the Waria, and when the Lakekamu broke out. She went everywhere, and there never was a better-plucked one since God made women."

The story seemed to have ended. I sat up, and found words.

"But what happened? Did he die?"

"No."

"And she?"

He dived into another pocket, and pulled out a small photograph set in a case. "That's her," he said.

I looked, and saw a small group of men and women, standing under a palm tree: Two doctors in white coats, two assistants of sorts, two nurses, in linen frocks and veils. You couldn't have told one woman from the other, and neither was beautiful.

"Nursing Sister Zita," Mitchell said. "Died on Bokolo, the leper island, four years ago."

"What, of—"

"No— heart-disease, they said." He looked at the dead tip of his cigar, and laid it down. "She wouldn't stick it, when she knew he'd do nothing."

He was yawning; he had suddenly tired of me. I found myself, I do not know how, out on the steps of the hotel.

The lights of Sydney splashed the sky. Trams were roaring past the Metropole down Bent Street; motors squawked. I plunged into the traffic; it seemed safe and homely; it seemed to welcome me.

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4: Letters in the Sand

H. Bedford-Jones

1887-1949

Everybody's Magazine, Feb 1927

A WHITE man lay dead, twisted and contorted on the sand, showing he had died slowly. A bullet had ripped through him from back to breast; with morning the bloody sand had become black with clustered flies, and birds hovered. The sand was firm, salty, baked by the African sun, dampened by the Mediterranean three hundred feet distant.

Around him, as he lay dying, the man had traced letters in the sand, and died in tracing the eighth; his finger was still in its curve, and his outflung arm showed tattooing. Faint marks showed near the letters, as though words had followed them, but if any words were there the wind had effaced them. The eight letters remained, large, deeply ploughed— HTWSSTKS. These things happened on the lonely shore, three miles beyond the village of Temba, with Tripoli a dim blur in the west.

It was a week later, when Widson landed and went to the American Consulate. When he stepped into the office, the consul took one look at him, then bounced up.

"Widson! By all the gods, how are you?"

"Hello, Hank!" The bronzed first officer stepped forward and gripped the fist outthrust at him. "Heard you were here, and took the chance. Out of the service for good, eh?"

The consul looked at his empty left sleeve, and shrugged. "Sure. You're in the merchant?"

"Uh-huh," This brief reference to war years and naval service done, Widson took a cigaret, sat on the desk-comer, and eyed the consul. "First officer, *Bertha J*. We rammed one of your blasted Greek spongers the other night and went down—"

"What? You were on that craft?" exclaimed the consul. "Why, I thought the crew was taken to Malta?"

"They were," said Widson. "But a sponger offered me a lift here, so I took it. I can get a berth anytime, and need a vacation, and thought I'd see you. Can you stand me for a week?"

"You're durned shouting! Got a grip— no, being shipwrecked, you wouldn't. All right, I—"

Widson laughed. "Forget it. I have money, and my duffle-bag."

"Well, I've a spare room for you, and anything you need. Take you right up now. We'll lunch in ten minutes, so let's go— what's the matter?"

Widson's gaze had fallen on a bit of paper on the desk. He turned it about and eyed it.

"What's this?"

"Puzzle— got the whole coast by the ears." The consul laughed. "Come along— tell you about it over luncheon."

TWENTY minutes afterward, over the table in the patio, the consul told his guest about the man who had been found dead in the sand down the coast. When it came to explaining the paper Widson had taken from his desk, he seemed rather embarrassed.

"To tell you the truth, Widson, I was trying tp figure out those letters—"

"Mean to say you don't know what they mean?" demanded Widson.

"Nobody knows." The consul waved his hand. "I've learned the man was an American named Harden— a sort of drifter. Had a U.S. flag tattooed on his arm, so I buried him. He was down here looking for the *Kerguelec* treasure, I fancy. That's why all the fuss about him."

"Spill it," commanded Widson briefly. "Treasure? My nose itches, feller. How come?"

"Your nose isn't the only one," and the consul grinned. "The Kerguelec was torpedoed during the war— Frog boat with a lot of bullion aboard. Recently one or two articles have been picked up along the coast, relics of her. It's thought she may have been carried by currents in among some of the shoals and islands, in which case she'd be easy picking for somebody. In fact, a chap named Erdstrom has been here a month, looking about quietly— calls himself a Swede, but may be anything. I think he's a Frenchman, myself. Told me the other day he'd like to get hold of a white man who'd be reliable, to look about with him. He'd not dare trust a single black, or an Italian either. I think he's figured something from these letters, same as I have."

Widson smiled a little. "What have you figured?" he asked.

"That Harden found the wreck, was shot in the back, and left a message. I can't take it up, of course— my position and all that. If you'd like to spend your lay-off on it—"

"I'm on, by all that's holy!" exclaimed

Widson eagerly. "What d'you figure this to mean, then? We'll split on the proceeds, feller— If you save my hide and gold from the wops and get me away."

"First find your gold. Give me that paper." The consul seized the paper, got out a pencil, and leaned over the table. "Nothing could be made out except these initials, savvy? I imagine they're the initials of words."

"Sure they are," began Widson, then laughed and checked himself. "I've figured out for myself what the words might be— but go ahead."

"Well, the letter K certainly stands for *Kerguelec*," said the consul seriously. "Call the last word 'safe'—that makes '*Kerguelec* safe,' a most important point. Nothing is known about Harden, but the tattooing shows he served in some navy if not ours, so we should adopt proper terms for the directions."

Widson said nothing, listening with an amused twinkle in his eyes. The consul jotted down the message as he had conceived it, and produced this result:

Hold Temba West by South. Sand thick. Kerguelec safe.

"Can't help you much, I'm afraid— one guess is as good as another," he said, tossing the paper across the table. "But help yourself. What would you make of it?"

"Something a lot different," said Widson. "Got a chart of the coast?"

"Yes. Come in the office."

THEY adjourned to the cool office, started the electric fan buzzing, and the consul laid out a large-scale chart of Tripoli and the adjacent coast. The spot where Harden had died was desolate enough, inside the usual shoals and halfsubmerged islets. After a good deal of figuring, while the consul hammered a typewriter, Widson rolled up the chart.

"Looks as though you had hit the message as near as we could tell," he said. "I don't see that I can do any better—" Thekavass, a huge black Sudanese, entered and saluted with word that Mr. Erdstrom was outside. The consul looked at Widson, who nodded. A moment later, Erdstrom entered the room and the consul introduced Widson. The two shook hands appraisingly.

Erdstrom saw a bronzed, alert-eyed, smiling seaman. Widson saw a rather tall, thin man, brow oddly white from much wearing of a sun-helmet, dark and deep-set eyes, mouth rather weak but cruel enough to pass for strength. French? Perhaps; it was hard to say. The consul told who Widson was, and spoke of old acquaintance in the navy.

"I've spoken of him to you," he continued, "and he might throw in with you while he's here, if he'd suit."

"Anyone you'd recommend would suit," said Erdstrom in perfect English. A queer smile touched his eyes, but not his lips, as he regarded Widson. "You understand that I am hunting for this wreck alone, without a single servant?"

"I understand the circumstances," said Widson.

"I can offer you a partnership," said Erdstrom thoughtfully. "If we find the place, there is work to be done; we cannot trust a soul hereabouts. Greek spongers, blacks, Italians— all are to be shunned. We must go to a place I have in mind, and camp— we'll go by boat. I am leaving at nine tonight. I should be glad to have you as companion, if you wish to go."

"Good!" exclaimed Widson, and extended his hand. "Will you call here for me?"

"Agreed," said Erdstrom. He shook hands, and forthwith departed.

When they were alone again, Widson looked at the consul, a slight hardening perceptible in his steely gaze.

"That's Harden's murderer."

"Eh?" The consul started, eyes widening. "Look here, don't go off halfcocked—"

"I'm not," said Widson.

"You are. Erdstrom's been trying to figure out the meaning of that message with me half a dozen times. He had met Harden and liked him. For the past week he's been getting supplies and the right boat— a motor craft—"

"Bosh," said Widson. "He knows what those letters meant. He got the dope from Harden and then murdered him. I'm going into this and I'm going to get Erdstrom's hide."

"But why?" exclaimed the consul. "What's this beggar Harden to you?"

"Nothing— never heard of him before. Just the same, wait and see."

"Better get yourself a sun-helmet," said the consul, but Widson only smiled.

ii

THE level rays of early morning sunlight beat across water and sand— just the two things. Creamy hummocks rose along the shore, hiding everything inland; sand-spits and islets cut off the coast-line; outside, the blue Mediterranean stretched illimitably.

A boat poked along a channel among the islets, touched the shoals, churned her way across, and at length came to rest on the shore of the largest sand-strip, where the yellow sands were heaped high and irregularly. The two men in her, clad in white shorts, shirts, boots and topees, climbed out and pulled her nose up.

All night Widson had scarcely spoken, asking no questions, holding the boat as directed by Erdstrom. He stretched himself and yawned.

"This the place?"

"Yes. Let's have a bite to eat and a talk, sleep until afternoon, then go to work."

"Right."

Their camp was quickly made— a brown tent on the seaward side to get the breeze. A solidified alcohol stove and their supplies were produced; in half an hour they had prepared a meal, and when cheroots were lighted, Erdstrom spoke.

"I suppose you know about the clue left by Harden?"

"The initials? Yes. You knew him?"

"Not at all," said Erdstrom, looking out at the sea. "But the initials showed me all. I had figured the approximate position, and it only remains to see if I fitted the right words to those letters."

Widson carelessly produced and handed over the paper given him by the consul. "Anything like this?"

Erdstrom looked at it, and laughed. "Not bad for a guess. The man Harden was found near Temba, that village along the coast west of here. The bits of identified wreckage showed up near Temba, and the currents are charted. I figure the *Kerguelec* was broken in two, and the two final letters mean '*Kerguelec*'s stem'. Eh?"

"They might also mean King Solomon," said Widson, and Erdstrom met his merry blue eyes with a short laugh.

"Or anything else. Well, here's what I've figured out— we may sleep on it." Erdstrom leaned over and traced the eight letters in the sand. "A dying man," he pursued, "trying to leave a message, would not bother with unimportant words. We may assume that he tried to leave the essentials of his message alone, as one writes in a telegram. Two names are fairly certain, Temba and *Kergudec*. Working from that premise, I make this message."

His finger spelled it out in the sand:

Holding Temba West, Safra South. Try for the Kergudec's Stem.

"Huh?" Widson frowned. "What's Safra?"

"An oasis due south of here— Temba's due west." Erdstrom chuckled, delighted by his own ingenuity. "The lines come together, by the chart, at the north shore of this islet. I must take bearings, of course, and verify it. We'll work out the thing today and then see what luck we have late this afternoon. What d'you think of my reading the riddle?"

"You seem to have read it," said Widson with a nod. "Was that all you had to go on?"

The other man's dark eyes flickered to him sharply, swiftly, but Widson was looking out to sea.

"Of course," said Erdstrom. "With my own previous deductions."

"Well," and Widson yawned, "I'm due for a siesta. Need me to take any noon sights?"

"No, I can handle it."

WIDSON crawled under the tentshelter and threw off helmet and boots. He did not go to sleep at once, however, despite his seeming; he was thinking about that sharp glance from Erdstrom, at his question. Erdstrom had not deduced the gist of that message by a long shot I

"What happened," said Widson to himself, "was about like this. They were working together, and Harden had something definite to go on. Erdstrom wanted the information, got it, and then shot him in the back. To the casual eye, it would seem that Harden left that writing, as he died, to broadcast what he knew and cheat Erdstrom. The large initial letters remained, the rest was effaced. Knowing the secret, Erdstrom could of course set in more or less correct words to the gaps. Well, we'll see later! I've no shadow of evidence— but I'll know I'm right if Erdstrom does go straight to the wreck. That means he discovered Harden's secret and murdered him.

It was long past noon when Widson wakened, to find the other man asleep at his side in the tent's shade. He crawled out and dressed.

The afternoon was declining, and they had not eaten since morning. Widson set to work with the canned heat, knocked up a meal, and called Erdstrom. He had not missed evidences that the latter had been busy during the heat of the day; sextant and compass were in sight, the sand was much trampled, and tracks showed that Erdstrom had crossed the hummocks more than once to the seaward shore of the islet.

"Anything in sight?" asked Erdstrom as he emerged.

"All clear," said Widson. "Come and get it! Ready for work?"

"Ready and eager," returned the other, and joined him in five minutes.

Erdstrom was eager enough, as his manner showed, for beneath his nonchalant air Widson was watching him keenly. The man was excited, anxious to be at the job; obviously, his work had borne results. Presently he unbosomed himself, speaking jerkily.

"Put a stick in the sand, over at the shore— saw it, did you? That marks the spot— the lines cross. Somewhere just off there, we should find the wreck, or part of it. That small islet to the westward makes a channel for the currents."

"All right." Widson stuffed his pipe with befitting care, lighted it, found it drawing well. "Say the word, and we're off. Nothing in sight to seaward. You don't think anyone's watching us?"

Erdstrom smiled, in his rather unhandsome fashion.

"Not much, after the course we took last night getting here! Anyone who could have traced us, would be a wizard. I'm ready— let's be off."

They adjourned to the boat, shoved her out, removed the tarpaulins, started her, heading from the inner channel to the seaward side. Neither man was talkative. If there was not actual dislike between them, there was a suspension of amenities; Erdstrom was nervous, mental, swift to sense unspoken things, and probably divined something odd in Widson's attitude.

Widson reflected that he knew nothing of his companion, beyond what the consul had said. They had not exchanged reminiscences, confidences, hints of previous years; it was as though a blanket hid all the past. More than once, Widson thought of the man lying dead in the sand, a bullet through his back, and the recollection held him alert.

They rounded out into the channel, and reached for the seaward side of the island, where a bit of driftwood showed erect in the sand. No sail marred the horizon. Erdstrom broke out a pair of lashed oars and got them ready, and Widson shut off the engine. Erdstrom laughed.

"It is something to have a man like you, my friend— no orders needed! We work together well. Yes, we'll have to seek along the channel and see what we can find."

Widson nodded and fitted his oar.

THEY cruised up and down, slowly, off the seaward shore, searching the clear waters below them, now and again Widson taking a sounding. The surprising depths of the channel here, which varied from two to forty fathom, showed how the currents scoured through. So far as the treasure was concerned, Widson figured it was all a wild-goose chase—yet there was always the chance.

"Even if we found her," he broke into speech, "the big job would be to locate where the gold lay. We'd have to blow her to pieces, and that'd mean everything down in the sand."

Erdstrom looked at him and grinned. "The bullion? It is in an old wall safe in the captain's cabin."

"How d'you know that?"

Erdstrom shrugged. "I know. And the officer's cabins are not under the bridge, but aft. She was an old ship, you know. I can find my way about her."

"Huh!" said Widson. "You must have known her pretty well."

"I did," said Erdstrom, and then was silent. The curt words, and the look that came with them, served as warning.

Widson was no fool, and had the whole thing clear before him now. The man was French, all right, and knew the *Kerguelec*— knew everything about her. Probably he had been an officer aboard her when she was sunk, otherwise he would not have known where the gold was stowed.

"Sly old fox!" he thought to himself. "Kept quiet all these years, laid low, waited for his time, and now he's out to reap his reward! Well, there's only one way to get a confession out of him— that's to wait for the right moment, take him clear off guard, and surprise it from him. And if I don't pick the right minute, then good night."

They continued their steady and monotonous labor, hour after hour, without result. When the sun was at the western rim of land and sea, Erdstrom threw in his oar wearily and was about to order the return, when he checked himself abruptly and leaned over the rail, staring down. Widson joined him.

"See it?" demanded Erdstrom hoarsely. "Or is it a shadow—"

"Looks like it," returned Widson. "Can't tell now— it'll be dark in ten minutes. Get our bearings— wait, float an oar here to mark the spot!"

Whether that huge and shadowy bulk could be their quarry was impossible to say in the rapidly failing light. Sounding, Widson got a bare nine fathom. He used the line to make fast an oar, then stood up and looked at his companion. Erdstrom's eyes were blazing.

"Go back?"

Erdstrom nodded and relaxed.

The uncertainty of it was maddening, at least for Erdstrom; forced to wait until morning to verify the discovery, his rather volatile nature could not contain itself. Widson prodded him that night, deftly yet accurately, by scoffing at the possibility of having found the wreck so qufckly.

"It couldn't be done," he affirmed. "Such a thing requires days, weeks, often months! We have struck on some thing else. To go rowing about for a few hours and pitch on it, would be a rank impossibility."

"No, no!" declared Erdstrom seriously. "What you say is true, and yet it is such things which do happen, my friend! It's all in the stroke of luck. And I deciphered Harden's message correctly, I think."

Widson wondered just what information he had pumped out of Harden before murdering him. Enough, certainly, to set words to the initials that Harden had left in the sand. Enough to find the wreck after a few hours' search, possibly—who could tell? Or perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps Harden had done the pumping, and had learned too much. The only

important thing, so far as Widson was concerned, was that Harden had been shot from behind— rank murder, that!

Probably Erdstrom had said "my friend" to Harden, too, in that same oily tone of voice. Well, no matter. Widson patted the pistol under his armpit, and fell asleep.

Morning came. They were up before the dawn, both of them, and getting a bite to eat ere the sun rose. When the red disk of it loomed above the waters to the east, they were out in the boat, waiting near the floating oar. And when the level rays began to shoot down and pierce the watery depths, there was no need of looking farther.

The shattered after portion of the *Kerguelec* lay below them.

iii

"WHO'S to go?" said Widson, puffing his pipe alight.

"I must go, of course, since I know just where to look."

So the man would trust him, then! Widson laughed to himself at that. No reason not to trust, of course, until the gold was brought up; just the same, it would be easy, and poetic justice, to leave Erdstrom down there. However, that couldn't be done without evidence, and the moment for confession was still far from here. It would come only with ultimate success or ultimate failure— and must be awaited.

They unlashed the tarpaulin, forward of the engine, and laid bare the diving equipment Erdstrom had rented from some Greek sponger. Widson looked at it and whistled.

"These Greeks don't keep their gear in shape, eh? Let's rig this pump and try her out a bit first— line, too."

They did it, being now resolved cm working through the day, or at least until noon. In an hour's time they had rigged the pump and tested the gear, and Erdstrom was on the ladder ready to screw down his helmet. He had been down before now, he said, and was quite confident.

"Well, mind your signals!" said Widson. "I'll have to pump and haul both, and it'll be a man's job; but I'll not fail you. May be a bit slow getting you up, that's all. I guess we can manage it."

He was not so confident as he appeared, but the event would take care of itself, with luck. He wondered how Erdstrom would feel about going down— if he knew!

Very full preparations had been made by Erdstrom; he had neglected nothing, as though he had known absolutely he would find the wreck here. No doubt he had known it, indeed! He had a dynamite charge prepared, water-

proofed fuse ready, and went down with it as though he were quite certain of the outcome.

Widson had a job to let him down at decent speed and still keep the pump clicking regularly, but somehow managed it. He breathed a sigh of relief when he got the signal that Erdstrom was grounded; now he had only to see that the line paid out clear, and to keep the pumps at work. He could not bother about keeping the lines taut; if Erdstrom allowed any slack, that was his own lookout.

Erdstrom was careful, however. That, reflected Widson, was the man's bane— every point covered, every detail provided for! Suddenly he started at a new thought. Could it be that Erdstrom had trailed Harden here? It was not like the man to go in for impulsive murder, and his knowledge of Harden had apparently been slight. Perhaps he had known Harden better than any one here supposed!

"I've hit the nail on the head," thought Widson, as he pumped mechanically, with one eye on the gauge and the other on the lines, the signal line passing over his arms. "Yes, sir, I've sure hit itl Well, no matter. The main thing—"

THE signal came unexpectedly, and swiftly, for Erdstrom had not been down ten minutes yet. Now Widson gave all his thought to the work in hand; fortunately the depth was so slight as to cause little trouble. He kept the pumphandles going with one hand and hauled in with the other, not trying to keep the lines shipshape. When at length Erdstrom got to the long ladder hooked across the gunnel, he managed to come up it himself, letting Widson pump. Then the helmet came off at last, and Erdstrom shook his head when Widson would have helped him in.

"No, I stay here— we are in luck, and one must push luck while it lasts," he said. "You light the fuse. Everything is fixed, ready! Do you understand? I had only to walk to it— the way smashed open for me! It is like magic, the way things are working out for us! Light it quickly!"

Widson shrugged and obeyed. The order was madness, but Erdstrom, clinging there to the ladder in his diving suit, was mad with excitement; and consequences mattered notiiing to Widson.

Five minutes later, the little craft heaved madly, as a huge bubble of water shot up beneath her and burst. Widson had fully expected to see Erdstrom shaken off, but the man's grip was good. The boat settled, and bits of wreckage came to the surface.

"Quick!" cried Erdstrom, his voice shrilling with impatience. "The helmet and the extra line and sling! We'll have it all done in half an hour or less. Nothing in sight?"

"Nothing," said Widson.

Another five minutes, and Erdstrom was on his way down again, Widson working with both hands at pumps and lines. By a miracle, he got them paid out without a kink.

The pumps clicked regularly, evenly for Widson knew how to handle them. What was going on below, he could not tell, and had no time to be gazing over the side. If Erdstrom fouled his air line, he was lost— but Widson knew he would not foul it. The man had prepared against everything to the very last detail.

"Everything," said Widson, "except the finger of a dying man and letters in the sand. He never dreamed any one would come along and take the part of a dead man, and fasten the murder on him! But it's not fastened yet."

He himself felt curiously aloof from the entire treasure business. It was unreal, almost fantastic, to find it in this manner. Unreal, too, that he should step into a partnership with Erdstrom; the latter could not have proceeded without assistance, but he might have had that without splitting the whole loot. Did he mean to split it? Widson strongly doubted this.

Then the signal, jerking his reflections back to the work in hand. Erdstrom came up very slowly and carefully; slight as the depth was, Widson took no chances of giving him the bends. The game could not be played that way!

Over the ladder and helmet off at last. Erdstrom helped rid himself of the suit before he spoke, then he looked at Widson and laughed.

"No questions? Have you no curiosity, no excitement?"

"Inside, not outside," said Widson. "Got it?"

"Yes. One pull and up it comes— all of it. Me, I am not cold and phlegmatic like you, my friend— where is that wine?"

"Push your luck before you celebrate," said Widson.

Erdstrom drew a deep breath and held his exuberant spirits in cheek. He was laughing, talking, jesting, all at once, and yet he held back from the line. When Widson went to it and gestured, Erdstrom came and joined him, almost reluctantly.

"It is hard to believe, and I have a feeling there is no luck in it," said Erdstrom as he took hold. "Contradict myself? Yes; now that I am certain, now that it is all over except to pull up this rope, I hesitate."

"Remorse, perhaps," said Widson. The other straightened up and stared at him oddly.

"Remorse! For what, then?"

Widson shrugged. "You're a man. Don't all men feel remorse at times— especially at times when they are about to seize upon sudden great wealth or

benefit handed them by fate? We all feel that we don't deserve it, and we hesitate."

"Oh!" said Erdstrom. "Hm! Me, I am not a philosopher. Let us pull up, and then when we are ashore, break out that wine."

SO THEY fell to the line, hauling it in rapidly, and Widson saw his companion had made a shipshape job down below, because everything was clear and the weight came up readily. It grew as they looked down, and Widson perceived it to be a large box or chest.

Presently it was under them, and the weight of it told now, so that the craft tipped and lay gunnel to water; fortunately there was no sea. Widson examined the box and found it to be a chest, the line well fastened to the large handles at either end. The weight was considerable, and he suggested towing it in to shore, but Erdstrom protested vehemently.

"No! Get it aboard and take no more chances! We can lift it—"

"Get it to the stem, then— we can't lift it here amidships," said Widson.

Erdstrom had the strength of three men in him just then, and somehow they managed to get the chest aboard without sending the little craft over. Then Erdstrom went to pieces, momentarily, dropping like an exhausted dog above the dripping thing he had brought up from the deep. Widson said nothing, but got in their anchor, started the engine, and sent the craft in by the channel to the other side of the islet, where they would be safe from observation.

Erdstrom was himself again when they reached camp, hauled up the nose of the craft, and trundled the chest ashore. He got out hatchet, chisel and jimmy, and went at the metal casket viciously, so that the clangor reverberated from the the yellow dunes and the blazing waters. It was nearly noon, but neither man thought of this or regarded it.

Although he wore himself out on that chest, Erdstrom smashed into it none the less, and with a deep breath of triumph, swung back the battered lid. Inside were little cloth sacks, dozens of them, neatly stored away. Water had got into the chest and had turned the papers and documents there into a sodden mass, and the little cloth sacks fell apart when touched; but falling, they revealed gold.

"British gold," said Erdstrom in a low voice, staring at the yellow coins. "Sovereigns! Hundreds of them, thousands of them! And all ours. Where's that wine?"

"Not yet," said Widson, and lighted a cigaret. "Going to take the thing back like this? Let those Italian chaps see it, and good night!"

"No, no! I have suitcases— the ones our provisions were in," exclaimed Erdstrom. "You are right— we must pack it all up at once and then sink the chest. If any one saw, we.should be ruined after all! You are right, right!"

HE FELL to work again, and Widson joined him at the task. Presently they had three cheap wicker suitcases stuffed with gold— they almost fell apart, so heavy was the load— and laid aboard the boat. There remained a few dozen coins, which the two men shared, filling pockets and laughing. Then Widson got the two large bottles of champagne from the locker, and joined Erdstrom in the shade of their little tent.

"*Mon Dieu*! Are you not a little bit elated, excited, happy?" exclaimed Erdstrom as he watched Widson work at the wires of one cork. "Here you have become rich literally overnight; and you do not even snap your fingersl"

Widson smiled. "To some people, money isn't everything," he said. "This wine of yours will be devilish warm— better each of us take a bottle, eh?"

The corks exploded without much urging, and the two men drank. Erdstrom's nervous and intense nature reacted instantly; he had exhausted himself physically, and now he began to soar mentally. Widson knew the moment had arrived, and spoke negligently, lowering his bottle.

"How did Harden know about it?" he asked. "Too bad you had to kill him."

iv

HE RECEIVED an answer, but not the one he expected; gone at once was all his chance of accusing, of learning what had happened. For, like a flash, the heavy champagne bottle flew from Erdstrom's hand and the butt of it struck Widson over the left eye, barely missing the temple.

Knocked backward by the blow, Widson went sprawling under the tent. Erdstrom leaped to his feet, and a pistol whipped out in his hand; he fired point-blank, and the figure of Widson collapsed and went limp.

Erdstrom stood there in the sunlight, pistol in hand, helmet shoved back, and wiped the sweat from his eyes as he peered. A grin showed his white teeth, and he chuckled softly as he put up the weapon.

"So, you fool!" he observed. "And you thought I did not suspect, eh? You did not know that your words in the consulate were reported to me by the servants, eh? Well, your boasting is done, you swine— you and Harden were cut off the same pattern! And I remain, with the gold that is mine."

He picked up his bottle, but it had drained into the sand; he stooped for that of Widson, in which a little wine remained, and gurgled it down. Then he flung the bottle at the motionless shape inside the tent, laughed at sight of the

thin trickle of red against the side of Widson's white shirt, and turned to the boat.

There he had work to do, despite the heat, for he dared take no chances. Widson's death was nothing; even if questions were asked before he could get away with his gold, he could make a statement and be done with it. But, if any Greek sponger or Italian fish-boat happened along, he could never explain this diving equipment. And he knew well enough they were all looking for him, because they would know about his renting the equipment. If they found him here on the spot, he and his gold would be gone. If he got back to Tripoli by nightfall, his game would be won. But he must get back in good shape.

So he fell to work coiling up the lines again, replacing as though unused, making his craft shipshape. The suitcases he left out in the bow, merely flinging a tarpaulin across them. When he had finished the task, the full reaction seized him. He came staggering ashore under the weight of the blinding noontide heat, and made for the tent.

"Out of there, dead dog!" he exclaimed, seizing the ankle of Widson and pulling out the American's body. "Two hours— two hours and I'll get away— must sleep a bit—"

He fell unconscious— the last ounce of nervous force was drained. The sun had all but got him.

Barely an hour later, he came to himself, wakened, dragged out of the shelter and looked around; his face was darkened, his eyes were bloodshot, but the rest had refreshed him. He glanced at the body of Widson, face down, then walked to the boat and set himself at the bow, straining to shove her out. He accomplished it, and tumbled aboard. In the stem was balanced the iron chest, and as she floated a little out with the impetus of his shove, Erdstrom seized on this and toppled it overboard. Then he turned to the engine, and the hot quiet of the inlet was broken by the chattering sputter of the motor. Seated at the side wheel near the engine, Erdstrom turned her and sent her out along the channel, and in two minutes was gone around the spit of sand.

NO SOONER had the sound of his engine died, than Widson's body came alive. Sitting up, Widson emerged from the swarm of flies and then came to his feet. He staggered to the tent, retrieved Ins sun-helmet, and crawled into the shade. There he tore up his shirt and made shift to bandage a nasty bullet-scrape along his ribs with strips of the garment.

"I certainly put my foot into it that time!" he cogitated. "However, he'll be back— I can't lie around wasting time. Push your luck, as friend Erdstrom says!"

He went out, searched and found the side of a box which had contained provisions. With this and his own fountain pen, he retired again to the shelter of the tent.

Some little while later the puttering chug of the motor was heard, and presently the boat poked her nose around the end of the sandspit hiding the channel. She came rapidly, at full speed; Erdstrom was standing at the tiller, bare-headed, his aspect frenzied, and from a livid countenance his eyes flamed wildly.

He shut off the engine too late, so that the craft went plunging at the sandy shore and ran her nose into it, flinging him off balance with the shock. He picked himself up and ran forward to where the suitcases had been covered with the tarpaulin; now only the tarpaulin remained, lying in a crumpled heap. Erdstrom looked at it, then leaped ashore and stood staring around. With a start, he perceived what was before him, and stood gaping.

There where the level sand had been, was now a heaped-up mound, and at the head of it a white flat board bearing letters. The man's eyes widened as he realized some one had been here. He glanced swiftly all about, saw nothing, and stepped closer to the mound, that was so like a grave. When he could read the letters on the board, he perceived it was indeed a grave, and he stood there blankly, eyes distended, staring, thunderstruck by the mystery of the thing. For he read on the headboard:

Here Lies Hiram Widson
This Day Murdered By Erdstrom

A stifled cry broke from Erdstrom, and he whirled about, gripping at his pistol, his eyes probing the white stretch of sand with terror and horror in their gaze. He saw nothing, and checked himself.

"Gone!" he said thickly. "Gone— and yet I put it into the boat— and it's gone! And who has done this thing? Who buried him? Who took it?"

There was a laugh, dreadful upon the empty silence of the place, and a voice spoke.

"Harden. Murdered!"

No one was in sight. Erdstrom cursed, ran to the tent, tore it away, to show only sand. He glared around, his face suffused with blood, purpled. A sudden fierce, wild yell burst from him as he shook his pistol in the air.

"Answer me! Devil, swine, dog— where are you? Where is my gold? Who took it out of the boat?"

A soft, quiet chuckle came to his ears. He whirled again, saw no one— then looked up and his jaw fell. On the crest of the seaward hummock of sand behind him sat Widson, naked to the waist.

With a choking cry, Erdstrom broke into a mad, scrambling rim toward the figure above. He.Tushed.up the hill of loose sand, slipping, struggling along frantically, a storm of curses on Ms lips, frenzy in his eyes. When he was nearly to the top, Widson fell over backward out of sight.

Erdstrom gained the crest, panting heavily, and his jaw fell. There was no one in sight. With one fearful cry, he hurled himself forward, plunged down the declivity at a mad run, leaping in great bounds toward the shore below. He dropped his pistol, tore the shirt from about his throat, passed the bit of driftwood he had set for a marker, and went headlong into the blue waters. For a moment his head bobbed there, and then it went under— and did not come up.

"Poor devil! The sun— and conscience— maddened him," muttered Widson. He shook off the loose sand that had drowned Mm, as he sat on the dune, and for a space sat watching the waters below, but Erdstrom did not reappear.

Presently Widson sighed, rose, and turned toward the boat on the other side of the Islet. When he came to the pseudo-grave, he kicked aside-the sand and disclosed the three suitcases.

v

IT WAS midnight when Widson and three porters reached the consulate and knocked up the representative of the United States. The porters deposited a heavy suitcase each, received a ten-lire note each, and departed into the night. Widson went into the office with the consul, and thankfully threw off the tarpaulin which served him as shirt.

"Hello! Hurt?" exclaimed the consul, who was still sleepy.

"Nope, just barked," said Widson, gratefully accepting the bottle and siphon shoved at him, and pouring a stiff one. "Those three grips have the gold in them, by the way."

"The— *what*?" The consul opened his eyes at this. "Gold? Mean to say you've actually found the stuff? Are you spoofing me?"

"Nope. It's there," said Widson, and downed his drink. "I want you to take charge of it and put the thing through legally— I'm not out for this stolen money stuff, old sport. Savvy? What belongs to me, can come to me; my pants pockets are full anyhow, which is enough for the present. Harden and I share alike in it. Look up his heirs, if he has any. If he has none, his share can come to me. Suit you?"

The consul gulped. "My gosh, man! You've got it— just walk away with it!"

"Damned fine advice from a consular officer, huh?" Widson grinned wearily. "No, thanks. Can't be done in this case. You hew to the line, feller, and I'll take whatever chips fall my way."

"But where's Erdstrom?" The consul looked suddenly startled. "You didn't—"

"Erdstrom," said Hiram Widson thoughtfully, "got a touch of sun. I didn't touch him. Last I saw of him he was traveling eastward— trying to walk to Jerusalem. I fancy he's learned a few things by this time. Well, here's to Harden, whoever he was! Time for refreshment, old chap—"

His head fell forward, and he was smiling when the consul picked him up and called the servants to lug him off to bed.

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5: Revenge

Algernon Blackwood

1869-1951

The Radio Times, 19 Dec 1930

In: *Shocks*, Grayson & Grayson, 1935

A HUNDRED YEARS or so ago Hemmel might have been hanged, drawn, and quartered; today mental experts would probably have judged him insane.

Two curious traits, one physical, the other spiritual, were noticeable about him: his hair at the age of forty-five was as white as an old man's. The spiritual trait was more intriguing, involving a sudden and radical change of personality. At the age mentioned he inherited a comfortable fortune, but instead of enjoying it as predicted— he was a self-indulgent, pleasure-loving man— he spent it entirely on charity, living himself in poverty, even in penury. Withdrawing from his friends, he lived alone for twenty years in a single room, offering no explanation of his conduct. Every penny not needed to keep body and soul together, he gave away. There was no self-conscious philanthropy, no religious excuse of any sort, certainly no love for humanity. He gave, in fact, no excuse of any kind whatever— beyond a comment made to me when once I came across him ill, half starved, obviously not far from death, and urged a doctor, urged at any rate more personal comfort. " I *must* do it," he said, shaking his head of white hair, " or else be damned. Probably I'm damned, anyhow." There was an expression in his eyes I found dreadful; his face, of the kind most might describe as wicked, was tortured, an indescribable horror in it; terror, too, the terror of a haunted man. He recovered that time, however, His mode of living did not alter. His death, when he told me his story, came years later. He continued his painful mode of life to the bitter end. He did not leave enough to pay for a coffin. " I *had* to do it," he whispered with his last breath. " It was not my money, you see. Probably," as the eyes closed and consciousness failed, " I'm damned, anyhow…."

His nephew, an orphan, was ending his minority, and in a month Hemmel, then forty-five, would have to give an account of the estate which, as trustee, he had already half squandered. He would himself inherit this estate if his nephew pre-deceased him. Out of these conditions the hideous project came to birth in his mind. First rejected with horror, then toyed with, then, since it became lodged in his mind, it reached the edge of a possibility. From that to a decision was a step that seemed taken of its own accord, and this Alpine holiday furnished easy opportunity— a slight push at the right time and place, a push that if it failed could be explained as a slip, alone was necessary. That August afternoon, as they scrambled along the Rothwand Ridge, provided both time and place.

Such a day was surely made for innocent happiness and laughter; the blazing sun, the flowers, the white snowfields sheeted against an azure sky, the tinkle of cowbells in pastures far below, these suggested the joy of childhood almost. The soaring peaks held something of fairyland, and young Eric was as gay, certainly, as any child. He was all agog for edelweiss; but edelweiss is not commonly found on grassy slopes— it flourishes in those cold draughts of air that blow upwards from deep, shadowed gulfs. It has this rather unpleasant fondness for edges and ledges of treacherous kind. The boy's eager search in this crystal air at 7,000 feet, was childish possibly, all the pleasure of youth dancing in his heart, as he picked his way, yet heedful of his uncle's warnings, along the perilous Ridge. The contrast of that black, devil's heart, at his heels was terrible, full of terror literally, but he could not know it. As the man watched his prey, step by step, waiting his opportunity, the hatred in him held a touch of mania. Yet it was an impersonal hatred almost, a hatred due to years of toil, responsibility, care, and trouble his trusteeship had caused him, a hatred now intensified because of the awful temptation the lad put in his way. The perversity in his dark soul found odd reasons in support of his frightful purpose.

His hatred of this crystal air was almost devilish. Driving clouds, a misty atmosphere would have suited that purpose better, for modern field-glasses, he well knew, brought distance horribly close, and in the loneliest spot some idle watcher might happen to be covering just that spot. Yet the spot, none the less, presented itself in due course, as he had calculated, and having screwed his determination to the point for days and nights, for weeks, indeed, his resolute, brutal heart did not fail. In this sense, moreover, it did not fail him— that what the heart has long wished, intended, hoped to do, seems done, when it actually comes about, almost spontaneously. The wish, so many times fulfilled mentally and in imagination, seems carried out impulsively, without thought, without preparation, so that the murderer assures himself " I simply couldn't help doing it— I was impelled by a power greater than my will" — and other lying explanations.

The slight push was so easy, so trivial in its execution, as though he merely stretched an arm clumsily to help his own balance, that Hemmel actually gave a hideous little laugh in his soul as he saw the young body totter, then slide backwards over the brink six feet below. Turning, as it thus slid, the face looked back and up into his own, sheer amazement rather than terror in the eyes. It was unquestionable that the boy was aware of the deliberate push, aware that it was purposed, calculated. He just stared without comprehension, without realisation, as the body, twisting a little sideways, fell helplessly into space, the knapsack already hanging vertically in emptiness below him, hat and ice-axe

beside it as they sank, arms spread out in the air, one hand clutching the tuft of edelweiss, the whole of them dropping, quite slowly it seemed, into the gulf of over 2,000 feet. The boy sank out of sight, the eyes fixed upon his murderer's face till they passed below the precipice edge. The last detail Hemmel saw was the right hand clutching the edelweiss. He remembered particularly this bare, sun-burned hand against a background of blue dim forest thousands of feet across the valley. Covering his own eyes swiftly, he sat back rigidly among the rocks behind him, listening, listening, but the depth of that awful drop was too great, and no thud of the body falling upon the glacier could possibly have reached him. He was in a dangerous spot himself, but before he had time to clamber back into safety a feeling of violent sickness came, followed by a sudden darkening of the air, explained by the fact that he had fainted.

With the return to consciousness, realisation came back slowly, blunderingly, as though somewhere among his usual powers lurked a dislocation. A shock of terrific impact had numbed his ability to focus. A considerable time had passed, apparently, for clouds now hid the peaks, dusk had come, and he was shivering with cold. It was when his sight rested on the perilous edge at his feet that his first clear thought came back. It came with a crash; realisation followed quickly. He had murdered; and his second thought was equally clear— there could be no possible evidence against him. He had only to tell his story— a false step while picking edelweiss— and, whether believed or not, nothing could be proved. Moving his heavy nailed boots to rise, a loosened stone slid a short yard, gave one bound, and plunged into space, his eye following it with a shudder, but no sound following its disappearance. Dizziness seized him, as he cautiously heaved his body, stiff with cold, to a safer stance, two other stones following the first….

He had a long way to go, and darkness dropped early from the lowering sky, while the reaction, nervous, mental, physical, found him exhausted before the first hour of the descent was done. His mind, continually, feverishly, rehearsing the story he would tell, took inaccurate note of the rocks. He stumbled more than once, his muscles trembling and unsteady; night was upon him, he sat down to rest, to concentrate upon the route, to eat some food, only to realise that he could not swallow, that the cold rain driven by a rising wind was almost sleet, and that his sense of direction was now completely at sea. Mist and gloom obscured any lights in the valley far below that might have guided him, nor could he recognise the grouping of the rocks about him. All looked unfamiliar, the violent scenery hostile, unfriendly, in conspiracy against his murderer's soul. There was white upon his knees, as he huddled down in what shelter he could find. The sleet had turned to snow.

Aware now that he was definitely lost several hours still from home, he yet stumbled on in the darkness, for the increasing cold made movement necessary to life, only to reach a spot in a couloir, the rocks growing ever steeper, where he could neither advance nor retreat. And here, wedging himself as best he could, his belt tying one arm to a boulder lest the sleep of exhaustion caught him, he faced the night. By the way the icy wind drove up in gusts, as by the sound it made, he knew an abyss yawned just beyond his feet. Coma took charge of his slowly-freezing body….

It was a sound that woke him, perhaps a touch, the stirring, anyhow, of someone near him, and in such close proximity that the sound, the touch, were both registered. Wind roaring among the desolate cliffs, however, made words, if words there had been, utterly inaudible. A dim figure passed, of that he was positive, and it was the proximity that had brought him back to consciousness. His eyelashes, frozen together, only permitted blurred sight at first, but he made out what seemed the outline of a peasant lad, a rescuer, anyhow, though no one but a native could have been among these high, lonely rocks at such an hour and in such weather. His voice trying to articulate " Help! Help!" made no sound, yet there before him stood the peasant, dimly discernible in the gloom, an arm stretched out already to help him rise. The body, partially frozen, responded at first without control, but the other's arm guided him, its touch secure, its leading slow and skilful. There was no stumbling as they crept back to safer ground through the blackness, buffeted by the wind, fine snow driving against their faces stingingly.

Hemmel, fighting an icy horror in his soul, strove to force some sequence into the content of his mind. He was saved now, if by merest chance, for no light, no cry, had led the fellow to where he lay. A local guide perhaps, possibly a crétin, but a mountaineer certainly, for he knew the way and led with confidence. Movement, hope, relief now brought back some attempt at thought, as circulation restored a little warmth and strength, and he found himself hideously rehearsing his story again, yet so clumsily that, if uttered, it could only have betrayed him.

"There can't— there *can't* be any evidence—" in his terror he heard his voice say the words aloud. But the fellow did not notice, the wind, moreover, tore the feeble sound away. Gratitude rose in him next, followed by a vile computation of what he might have to pay, then by an even viler reflection that he would now have money. He made an effort to see his rescuer's face, but the darkness made it impossible, and only the general outline of a young peasant, muffled, the touch of that steady, guiding arm, were perceptible. A dreadful nausea took him and again, a nausea of body and soul combined, so that he dropped to rest on a boulder, the guide waiting patiently, still without

speaking. There were attempts at speech, on both sides apparently, but the hurricane smothered all sound.

It was during one of these short pauses to rest, Hemmel beginning to fear he must give up finally, that voices rose faintly from below with a wild swoop of wind, and that lights flickered and disappeared. Their meaning, however, was plain, even to the exhausted man, and he struggled to his feet with a last effort. His guide made a sign as well. The rescue party that must have left the village hours before were close at hand; they would have food, brandy, blankets. He was saved now beyond a doubt. Yet his real saviour, he well knew, was this sturdy, silent peasant who had stumbled upon him by chance or providence.

"They're coming!" he tried to shout into the wind, shouting again to guide the searchers, and just saw the lanterns wave in reply as he collapsed. His guide beside him came close, bent over him. There were words, but Hemmel could not catch them. It seems a moment of unconsciousness came over him, for the next thing he knew was that the guttural patois of men's voices sounded close, brandy was at his lips, strong arms wrapped him round. He opened his eyes, he saw the lanterns swinging; in their flickering light he saw the figure of the peasant who had led him into safety, standing a little to one side. For the first time he saw the face, the features showing plainly.

The figure faded, the lanterns flickered elsewhere. But the search party who carried him down in the light litter, and to whom in semi-delirium he gabbled again and again, his lying story learnt by rote, paid small attention to his actual words. They admitted to no other figure. They listened with kindliness and sympathy, the three of them, but assured him there had been no fourth. They had found him quite alone, there was no peasant who had guided him. The good God, they urged, had guided him, for no man without divine assistance could have come, in storm and cold and darkness, the way Hemmel certainly had come. Hemmel himself knew otherwise, though he spoke no further word. In the flickering lantern light he had seen the face of his rescuer, he had looked up into the smiling features, into the kind, forgiving eyes of the boy he had murdered for his money.

6: The Coup

W. Douglas Newton

1884-1951

The Popular Magazine 23 July 1915

THE aviator regretted the military proscription that forbade him cigarettes on active service. This aviator used cigarettes as an actor-manager used limelight— that is, to accent the value of dramatic moments. And just now he was experiencing such a moment. He had flown in a number of contests and under all manner of splendid conditions, and he had used his cigarette with such effect that even newspaper men had made epigrams about it. He had, however, never started to fly under conditions so dramatically spectacular as on this occasion when he must fly without a cigarette, and he felt that he was not obtaining the most savor out of life.

There was a royal personage and an assortment of generals to see him start, and every one of them had a name that was going to appear in the history they were now making. Behind each of them trailed a penumbra of officers who appeared to have made their costumes deliberately gaudy so that on a future day a historian might be able to write of any one of the generals that "his simple and plain-cut uniform was in sharp contrast to the brightness and glitter of his staff." It was curious how one got this effect, though every man on the field was garbed in a field uniform that looked like a color scheme made up of snuff and chalk. There was a peppering of officers about the big clearing, too, a sick biplane in the throes of misfiring, and a string of portable hangars with planes folded inside them. The place was germed with soldiers. They stood in ranks under the trees, they spilled themselves over the clearing doing many things with wooden gestures. Now and then a squad would cut across the muddy grass, their legs going all together like the beat of a metronome. The trees cut off the field from the world like a curtain. The sky was flat and gray, and it seemed that it had been cut so that the trees might be inlaid upon it. Beyond the trees, and even, it seemed, beyond the sky, there was an eternal and frightful uproar of great guns. The aviator knew by the mad incoherence and the huge and utter senselessness of the sound that a great battle was in progress. He knew he was going to fly over that monstrous battle. He felt that it was not at all improbable he would be the means of winning it. He had been deliberately chosen for this great moment and this great end. That was why he wanted the cigarette. It was the most important and dramatic moment of his career.

The royal personage and the generals had spoken to him, remembered his past achievements, and impressed upon him the gravity and wonder of this flight he was about to make. Thanks to them, he quite understood that a

nation was depending solely on him. Now royalty and the generals were impressing the importance of the occasion on the observer. The aviator was a little contemptuous of observers, mainly because they were usually cavalry officers, and because they were unable to fly a machine as he flew one; but mostly because they were able to make military sense out of the jumble of lozenges and dots and blobs that form the aviator's eye view of a battle area, and he was utterly incapable of doing so. They were necessities whose importance was a trifle exaggerated, and thus he was nettled to note that the generals were in danger of making the observer imagine that a nation depended solely on him, too. He began to wish that he had taken a stiff course in military topography and scouting, so that he could go up alone, earn his laurels without division.

He busied himself in the padded luxury of his seat in an ostentatious preparation for his flight. He touched the buttons of the nest of drawers under the steel dashboard. He knew everything was ready, but it gave him a sense of efficiency to look again. The vacuum flask with its hot drink was in its holders; the chocolate cubes in their tinfoil were easy to the reach ; the petrol-saturated sponge for cleansing the goggles was inevitably to hand; the tiny flask of brandy, the first-aid packet, even the half lemon to stay the thirst, were all as they should be. Against the luxurious upholstering that extended from the club-chair seat along the sides of the limousine the revolver swung from its holster, eager to the fingers.

At the observer's post behind all was in readiness, too. The flask, chocolate, and the rest were all in their places. The large-scale ordnance map, on its rollers with the pad beneath it to give firmness to the recording pencil, could be swiveled over the observer's lap at a touch; even the sharpened pencils of various colors that were to mark the map with the various positions of hostile troops swung from their strings, ready for immediate use. The bombs on their drum were poised for the pressure of the foot lever that would set them free—all was ready.

Still the generals endangered the modesty of the observer. Still they seemed determined to make him think that a mere passenger who could perceive, at so many hundred feet up, that a worm with kinks in it was a battery moving into action, was more important than the man who drove the machine and who couldn't tell the difference between a flanking force and a convalescent camp.

But the aviator was soon able to show them their mistake. In a minute the observer had saluted with a perfection that made the aviator sneer, had marched to the machine and climbed into his seat behind. That was the flyer's

chance. Without parade, he got his engine going. He let the huge and exquisite thing race for a moment, in spite of the silencers, his attuned ear sensing its growth of power. Then, on the high beat of speed, he started the propeller, and, with a swinging rush, lifted the "bus" sheer off the ground. He hoped the medal-spotted generals would appreciate the skill of that, for it was a fine feat; his wheels could not have touched ground for more than a few yards. Then up he went, up in a vivid spiral, climbing the sky in a ladder of flight, in seven minutes his dials showed seven thousand feet; and after that he steadied, went shooting like a star across the trees into the noise of the battle.

As the trees were topped, the huge sound of fighting blew into their faces like a gale. It flung itself at them, strove to exterminate them by mere force of incredible uproar. Monstrosities of slaughter must be going on just beyond the trees, was the first thought. Beyond the trees the ground was bare, and a dreary swing of flat land slipped toward a drab horizon smoldering in haze. In its giant stride, the hundredhorse-power engine swept the machine across the plain, leaped at the haze. And the haze was war.

The observer suddenly called out, and for a moment the aviator wrenched his eyes from the multiplicity of gauges and controls to look earthward. Even over the telephone he had heard the note of elated satisfaction in the observer's voice. The plane had passed the steaming line of the enemy's battle front now, and was working down to scouting level as it turned and swept the area behind that line from end to end. The aviator looked downward, steadily probing the surface of the earth to find out what had made the observer so happy. He saw what he had seen on many a battlefield— clusters of mushroom men, worms of men, all set on the green and dun array of lozenges that were the fields of the battle area. The clusters and worms looked like every one of the clusters and worms he had ever seen, just as futile and as uninspiring as ever. He frowned. He would have given half his skill to wrench some meaning out of that huddled array. He frowned again; he was wondering what was lacking in his intellectual make-up that prevented hi« making sense out of the military array mottling the earth beneath. He called into the free end of his telephone :

"What's doing? Anything going forward?"

"*Anything*!" called the thin, excited voice. "Anything! Man, it's everything. Those big pots were right. It's big, man! The biggest thing of this war. Big! Lord, it's too big for the world."

The aviator cursed him for an excited and indefinite enthusiast.

"Yes," he shouted back, his voice fighting the back draft of the propeller. "Yes, I can guess all that from your chuckles, but what does it mean?"

"Mean! What does it mean? But, man, surely *you* can see that!"

"The feller's an infernal prig," considered the aviator.

"It's written across the whole world," chuckled the observer, "like a large-size advertisement for soap. Why— why— it just jumps up at you. The biggest, greatest, most magnificent thing, most magnificent coup for the Flying Arm in this war. And *we're* in it. It's ours. Man, it's ours, and all its glory."

"Idiot!" snarled the aviator's mind. "If you must talk, why not talk facts?"

"Majors, crowns, and medals, and mention in the dispatches, pensions, big talk in all the newspapers, heroics no end— that's what it means. We'll be great national celebrities. We're going to win this battle where we might be beaten; we're going to win this war. The whole bloomin' hope of the nation is now with us."

"Triple idiot," thought the aviator, but he began to glow, began to get excited. He was out for all these glorious things; he began to see them coming on him in a shower. But he wished the fool would tell him something definite.

"Yes!" he snapped again across the telephone. He wished he could see the man and wrench something from him face to face. "Yes, but what does it mean, how does it effect our force, what are these chaps about to do, and what ought our men do while they are doing it?"

" 'Ware, 'Archibald,' " yelled the voice across the phone. "They're going to kill us dead if they can. And I don't blame 'em. We just kill them if they don't."

Somewhere ahead of the swooping plane there broke out the thin scream of an upsoaring shell. Four hundred yards away, well off the line of flight, too, the air abruptly shattered; a vivid spark like the flash of magnesium burst from nothing, and a dull green coronal of smoke gushed out from its edges. The eyes of the aviator came back to his work again. He banked his machine with a delicate and superb skill, flew by the smoke in a great double "S." Even as the gout of green fume hung in the air six more of the anti-aircraft shrapnels flicked upward by "Archibald," burst in the precise places where the aeroplane was not. With the grace of a Russian dancer the machine flitted, pirouetting, among the hanging clouds of the shell smoke.

"Good man !" snapped the voice of the observer. "Now turn, go back straight for a mile, then turn, and do the ground again. I've got to get this thing as precise and certain as a blue print. And for the Lord's sake be careful. They're going to do their best to stop us. They've got to. It means the end of them if we get this news off and safe— the end of them if we make our scoop, the annihilation of our army if they wing us. They're going to try hard. Look out for 'em."

In a long curve of delight the plane came about, flowed round, swooped forward again on its return journey. But the aviator was not pleased with the sweet working of his machine. He was scowling; his excitement at the huge

meaning behind his movements, his burning desire to know just what great thing they were doing, just what honors and glories he was even now piling up for himself chafed his spirit and made him angry. Why should this barrack-room observer act like a minor sphinx? Why shouldn't he know what was going on? Why should he be baffled in this way? He would have spoken his mind savagely, but events were keeping him busy.

They were flying low on a scouting level, and the enemy beneath were making it hot. Anti-aircraft guns from a dozen positions were pumping shell after shell at them, all the infantry in the lines seemed to have taken fire, and the atmosphere became lethal with the perpetual upspouting of bullets — and it is riflemen in mass that form the terror of the flyer. An "Archibald" on a bumping motor lorry was trying to follow them along a tortured road. In a minute there would be planes up from the enemy's drome, probably mounted with a spitting mitrailleuse for their destruction. The course of events was lively. The aviator had uses for every fiber of his wits.

"Back now!" came the tantalizing voice of the observer over the phone. "It's great; it's vast! Our names are in history, man, after this. We'll get government grants. We'll have made the greatest victory of modern time possible; saved the greatest debacle. Oh, you can't tell how vast it is. And I've got it all right, I think, but go over the ground just once. Must be sure of it. *Must*!"

"Sure of what!" snarled the aviator. "Sure of what— what is it?"

Two rifle bullets, one after the other, went through the rubberoid skin of the planes with a double "zug." Somewhere close up to them a shrapnel went off like the smashing of a hundred plates; the aviatbr never saw the explosion, but an acrid whiff of cordite stung the back of his throat, and he heard the soft bullets smacking on the steel plates of the fusilage ; hot specks of brass from a struck cable strainer whipped his cheek, too. The steel of the fuselage roared again as the spate of a mitrailleuse caught it for a fraction. Then the plane was rushing onward again in the smooth waters of the air, not at all damaged.

The great plane kicked a little against his wrists as the air punch from the exploding shell hit the machine, but the aviator's wrists were those of a jockey, and he eased the bus steady, as a jockey masters a nervous horse. The shells, with their sparkling come and go of core, hung in air about him, but he swung his course consummately and escaped. He was thrilled. The excitement, the knowledge of the "big" thing he was accomplishing, the hope of the "big" and glorious rewards made his blood race.

"How goes it?" he shouted into the phone. "How goes it?"

"Oh, fine !" answered the voice in a muffled accent, and the aviator knew the meaning of that; could see the observer hanging over his powerful glasses,

hanging over the map on the rollers, could see the swift play of the colored pencils as corps, batteries, brigades, regiments, and squadrons were ranked on the ordinance surface. "Oh, fine !" cried the thick voice. "I'm dotting my 'i's.' But I've got it all safe. No mistake. We've made our scoop."

"How do we scoop?" cried the excited pilot.

"One minute," answered the observer. "I must get it all down, sure. Turn home at that village. And get up, too, man. The place is a measles of guns."

As the plane went up and round, the atmosphere began to quiver with explosion. The air all about them flowered with the sinister blooms of shrapnel smoke. The air was tingling with the whistling upshoot of nickeled bullets.

The steel sides of the plane began to sound like a galvanized roof in a hailstorm. There was the "cluck" and ring of bullets on the whirling propeller. A cable stung and parted, and as it curled up it snatched a strip out of the aviator's leather helmet and drew blood from his head. But he was round, mounting, flying home.

He was exultant, though he knew he was not yet safe. It was not shrapnel alone that the enemy used. Every now and then his ear caught above the rush of the wind the thick and clogged detonation of a high-power shell. Once he scudded through the tail of their thick and greasy smoke, and it nearly choked him to unconsciousness. But he was exultant. They had made the scoop of the war; they were henceforth to be creatures of fabulous glory and fabulous reward.

Now and then the beggars came close. A big shell smashed, with almost stunning effect, right overhead. The plane swung and dived under the air disturbance, but his jockey ship soon righted that; the cables sang and thrilled with the vibration; the plane surface was flecked and gashed with shell fragments, and the plates on the body clanged. But the aviator managed his machine like a great general. He handled her superbly ; he swung her easy, and brought her clear.

And he knew he could, and would, bring her through. Giant success was speeding them forward. They could not fail now; they could not make mistakes; they could not be beaten. They swam at swift gait through the thinning strings of shrapnel smoke; the whistling of the bullets died; the heavy thudding of the great shells sagged behind. They were away and safe. They were taking the greatest news of the war to headquarters safely. They were planing straight to splendor and to glory. Not Castor and Pollux riding the wind to the victory of Regillus could have made progress so intense with vast purpose and immortal honor as their progress back to headquarters with the greatest news of the war, with all the means and chances of great victory.

Down, down in one long volplane that sang through space like a chord of undying music they passed over the plain; they leaped the trees. The flying ground burst to life as they rushed earthward. Officers and men ran about in the manner of excited ants. The generals were running, the royal personage was running. The news was certainly vast. It was news of victory or annihilation, as the observer had said. The movements of the generals proved that.

The mind and heart of the aviator went wild with joy. He knew Fame stood ready with her laurels, he knew that Fortune was unclasping her purse, he knew that the immortal pen of History was entering his name on the scroll of transcendental and valorous events. He reached the ground, stopped his machine, sprang to his feet, waved the scampering generals on with a joyous arm.

"A coup !" he yelled. "A coup! The greatest news of the war."

There was cheering all over the flying ground. The generals ran forward, some smiling, some endeavoring to be dignified and to scowl down this theatrical, Robert Browning method of gloating over success. The aviator yelled his joy again. Then he stopped. All the generals had stopped. They were looking, with startled eyes, at the aeroplane, at the observer's seat. A hand of ice caught at the aviator's heart. He swung about, glared at the observer.

The observer was lying back in his seat; the jerk of landing must have flung him back. His neck was stretched upward in a dreadful manner. Practically all of his face, certainly all his forehead, had been carried away by a shell fragment. The aviator remembered the big shell that had burst above them, remembered that the observer was the only one who knew what was going on behind the enemy's line. He gulped; and then gulped again. After all— after all, there was the map.

He almost flung himself across to the observer's perch to get hold of the map— the map that would tell the tale of the great coup.

Where the map had been a few ragged strips of printed, linen-backed paper fluttered in the wind. There was no map. The shell fragment that had slain the observer had torn the map away, dashed it in strips across the heavens. Nothing remained.

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7: Circumstantial Evidence

Edgar Wallace

1875-1932

The Strand Magazine Aug 1922

COLONEL Chartres Dane lingered irresolutely in the broad and pleasant lobby. Other patients had lingered awhile in that agreeable vestibule. In wintry days it was a cozy place; its polished panelled walls reflecting the gleam of logs that burnt in the open fireplace. There was a shining oak settle that invited gossip, and old prints, and blue china bowls frothing over with the flowers of a belated autumn or advanced spring-tide, to charm the eye.

In summer it was cool and dark and restful. The mellow tick of the ancient clock, the fragrance of roses, the soft breeze that came through an open casement stirring the lilac curtains uneasily, these corollaries of peace and order had soothed many an unquiet mind.

Colonel Chartres Dane fingered a button of his light dust-coat and his thin patrician face was set in thought. He was a spare man of fifty-five; a man of tired eyes and nervous gesture.

Dr. Merriget peered at him through his powerful spectacles and wondered.

It was an awkward moment, for the doctor had murmured his sincere, if conventional, regrets and encouragements, and there was nothing left but to close the door on his patient.

"You have had a bad wound there, Mr. Jackson," he said, by way of changing a very gloomy subject and filling in the interval of silence. This intervention might call to mind in a soldier some deed of his, some far field of battle where men met death with courage and fortitude. Such memories might be helpful to a man under sentence.

Colonel Dane fingered the long scar on his cheek.

"Yes," he said absently, "a child did that— my niece. Quite my own fault."

"A child?" Dr. Merriget appeared to be shocked. He was in reality very curious.

"Yes… she was eleven… my own fault. I spoke disrespectfully of her father. It was unpardonable, for he was only recently dead. He was my brother-in-law. We were at breakfast and she threw the knife… yes…"

He ruminated on the incident and a smile quivered at the corner of his thin lips.

"She hated me. She hates me still… yes…"

He waited.

The doctor was embarrassed and came back to the object of the visit.

"I should be ever so much more comfortable in my mind if you saw a specialist, Mr.— er— Jackson. You see how difficult it is for me to give an

opinion? I may be wrong. I know nothing of your history, your medical history I mean. There are so many men in town who could give you a better and more valuable opinion than I. A country practitioner like myself is rather in a backwater. One has the usual cases that come to one in a small country town, maternity cases, commonplace ailments… it is difficult to keep abreast of the extraordinary developments in medical science…"

"Do you know anything about Machonicies College?" asked the colonel unexpectedly.

"Yes, of course." The doctor was surprised. "It is one of the best of the technical schools. Many of our best doctors and chemists take a preparatory course there. Why?"

"I merely asked. As to your specialists… I hardly think I shall bother them."

Dr. Merriget watched the tall figure striding down the red-tiled path between the banked flowers, and was still standing on the doorstep when the whine of his visitor's machine had gone beyond the limits of his hearing.

"H'm," said Dr. Merriget as he returned to his study. He sat awhile thinking.

"Mr. Jackson?" he said aloud. "I wonder why the colonel calls himself 'Mr. Jackson'?"

He had seen the colonel two years before at a garden party, and had an excellent memory for faces.

He gave the matter no further thought, having certain packing to superintend— he was on the eve of his departure for Constantinople, a holiday trip he had promised himself for years.

On the following afternoon at Machonicies Technical School, a lecture was in progress.

"… by this combustion you have secured true K.c.y… which we will now test and compare with the laboratory quantities… a deliquescent and colorless crystal extremely soluble…"

The master, whose monotonous voice droned like the hum of a distant, big, stationary blue-bottle, was a middle-aged man, to whom life was no more than a chemical reaction, and love not properly a matter for his observation or knowledge. He had an idea that it was dealt with effectively in another department of the college… metaphysics… or was it philosophy? Or maybe it came into the realms of the biological master?

Ella Grant glared resentfully at the crystals which glittered on the blue paper before her, and snapped out the bunsen burner with a vicious twist of finger and thumb. Denman always overshot the hour. It was a quarter past five! The pallid clock above the dais, where Professor Denman stood, seemed to mock her impatience.

She sighed wearily and fiddled with the apparatus on the bench at which she sat. Some twenty other white-coated girls were also fiddling with test tubes and bottles and graduated measures, and twenty pairs of eyes glowered at the bald and stooping man who, unconscious of the passing of time, was turning affectionately to the properties of potassium.

"Here we have a metal whose strange affinity for oxygen… eh, Miss Benson?… five? Bless my soul, so it is! Class is dismissed. And ladies, ladies, ladies! Please, please let me make myself heard. The laboratory keeper will take from you all chemicals you have drawn for this experiment…"

They were crowding toward the door to the change room. Smith, the laboratory man, stood in the entrance grabbing wildly at little green and blue bottles that were thrust at him, and vainly endeavoring by a private system of mnemonics to commit his receipts to memory.

"Miss Fairlie, phial fairly; Miss Jones, bottle bones; Miss Walter, bottle salter."

If at the end of his collection he failed to recall a rhyme to any name, the owner had passed without cashing in.

"Miss Grant—?"

The laboratory of the Analytical Class was empty. Nineteen bottles stood on a shelf and he reviewed them.

"Miss Grant—?"

No, he had said nothing about "aunt" or "can't" or "pant."

He went into the change room, opened a locker and felt in the pockets of the white overall. They were empty. Returning to the laboratory, he wrote in his report book:

"Miss Grant did not return experiment bottle."

He spelt experiment with two r's and two m's.

Ella found the bottle in the pocket of her overall as she was hanging it up in the long cupboard of the change room. She hesitated a moment, frowning resentfully at the little blue phial in her hand, and rapidly calculating the time it would take to return to the laboratory to find the keeper and restore the property. In the end, she pushed it into her bag and hurried from the building. It was not an unusual occurrence that a student overlooked the return of some apparatus, and it could be restored in the morning.

Had Jack succeeded? That was the thought which occupied her. The miracle about which every junior dreams had happened. Engaged in the prosecution of the notorious Flackman, his leader had been taken ill, and the conduct of the case for the State had fallen to him. He was opposed by two brilliant advocates, and the judge was a notorious humanitarian.

She did not stop to buy a newspaper; she was in a fret at the thought that Jack Freeder might not have waited for her, and she heaved a sigh of relief when she turned into the old-world garden of the courthouse and saw him pacing up and down the flagged walk, his hands in his pockets.

"I am so sorry…"

She had come up behind him, and he turned on his heel to meet her. His face spoke success. The elation in it told her everything she wanted to know, and she slipped her arm through his with a queer mingled sense of pride and uneasiness.

"…the judge sent for me to his room afterwards and told me that the attorney could not have conducted the case better than I."

"He is guilty?" she asked, hesitating.

"Who, Flackman… I suppose so," he said carelessly. "His pistol was found in Sinnit's apartment, and it was known that he quarrelled with Sinnit about money, and there was a girl in it, I think, although we have never been able to get sufficient proof of that to put her into the box. You seldom have direct evidence in cases of this character, Ella, and in many ways circumstantial evidence is infinitely more damning. If a witness went into the box and said, 'I saw Flackman shoot Sinnit and saw Sinnit die,' the whole case would stand or fall by the credibility of that evidence; prove that witness an habitual liar and there is no chance of a conviction. On the other hand, when there are six or seven witnesses, all of whom subscribe to some one act or appearance or location of a prisoner, and all agreeing… why, you have him."

She nodded.

Her acquaintance with Jack Freeder had begun on her summer vacation, and had begun romantically but unconventionally, when a sailing boat overturned, with its occupant pinned beneath the bulging canvas. It was Ella, a magnificent swimmer, who, bathing, had seen the accident and had dived into the sea to the assistance of the drowning man.

"This means a lot to me, Ella," he said earnestly as they turned into the busy street. "It means the foundation of a new life."

His eyes met hers, and lingered for a second, and she was thrilled.

"Did you see Stephanie last night?" he asked suddenly.

She felt guilty.

"No," she admitted, "but I don't think you ought to worry about that, Jack. Stephanie is expecting the money almost by any mail."

"She has been expecting the money almost by any mail for a month past," he said dryly, "and in the meantime this infernal note is becoming due. What I can't understand—"

She interrupted him with a laugh.

"You can't understand why they accepted my signature as a guarantee for Stephanie's," she laughed, "and you are extremely uncomplimentary!"

Stephanie Boston, her some-time room mate, and now her apartmental neighbor, was a source of considerable worry to Jack Freeder, although he had only met her once. A handsome, volatile girl, with a penchant for good clothes and a mode of living out of all harmony with the meager income she drew from fashion-plate artistry, she had found herself in difficulties. It was a condition which the wise had long predicted, and Ella, not so wise, had dreaded. And then one day the young artist had come to her with an oblong slip of paper, and an incoherent story of somebody being willing to lend her money if Ella would sign her name; and Ella Grant, to whom finance was an esoteric mystery, had cheerfully complied.

"If you were a great heiress, or you were expecting a lot of money coming to you through the death of a relative," persisted Jack, with a frown, "I could understand Isaacs being satisfied with your acceptance, but you aren't!"

Ella laughed softly and shook her head.

"The only relative I have in the world is poor dear Uncle Chartres, who loathes me! I used to loathe him too, but I've got over that. After daddy died I lived with him for a few months, but we quarrelled over— over— well, I won't tell you what it was about, because I am sure he was sorry. I had a fiendish temper as a child, and I threw a knife at him."

"Good Lord!" gasped Jack, staring at her.

She nodded solemnly.

"I did— so you see there is very little likelihood of Uncle Chartres, who is immensely rich, leaving me anything more substantial than the horrid weapon with which I attempted to slay him!"

Jack was silent. Isaacs was a professional moneylender… he was not a philanthropist.

When Ella got home that night she determined to perform an unpleasant duty. She had not forgotten Jack Freeder's urgent insistence upon her seeing Stephanie Boston—she had simply avoided the unpalatable.

Stephanie's flat was on the first floor; her own was immediately above. She considered for a long time before she pressed the bell.

Grace, Stephanie's elderly maid, opened the door, and her eyes were red with recent weeping.

"What is the matter?" asked Ella in alarm.

"Come in, miss," said the servant miserably. "Miss Boston left a letter for you."

"Left?" repeated Ella wonderingly. "Has she gone away?"

"She was gone when I came this morning. The bailiffs have been here…"

Ella's heart sank.

The letter was short but eminently lucid:

"I am going away, Ella. I do hope that you will forgive me. That wretched bill has become due and I simply cannot face you again. I will work desperately hard to repay you, Ella."

The girl stared at the letter, not realizing what it all meant. Stephanie had gone away!

"She took all her clothes, miss. She left this morning, and told the porter she was going into the country; and she owes me three weeks' wages!"

Ella went upstairs to her own flat, dazed and shaken. She herself had no maid; a woman came every morning to clean the flat, and Ella had her meals at a neighboring restaurant.

As she made the last turn of the stairs she was conscious that there was a man waiting on the landing above, with his back to her door. Though she did not know him, he evidently recognized her, for he raised his hat. She had a dim idea that she had seen him somewhere before, but for the moment could not recollect the circumstances.

"Good evening, Miss Grant," he said amiably. "I think we have met before. Miss Boston introduced me— name of Higgins."

She shook her head.

"I am afraid I don't remember you," she said, and wondered whether his business was in connection with Stephanie's default.

"I brought the paper up that you signed about three months ago."

Then she recalled him and went cold.

"Mr. Isaacs didn't want to make any kind of trouble," he said. "The bill became due a week ago and we have been trying to get Miss Boston to pay. As it is, it looks very much as though you will have to find the money."

"When?" she asked in dismay.

"Mr. Isaacs will give you until to tomorrow night," said the man. "I have been waiting here since five o'clock to see you. I suppose it is convenient, miss?"

Nobody knew better than Mr. Isaacs' clerk that it would be most inconvenient, not to say impossible, for Ella Grant to produce four hundred pounds.

"I will write to Mr. Isaacs," she said, finding her voice at last.

She sat down in the solitude and dusk of her flat to think things out. She was overwhelmed, numbed by the tragedy. To owe money that she could not pay was to Ella Grant an unspeakable horror.

There was a letter in the letter-box. She had taken it out mechanically when she came in, and as mechanically slipped her fingers through the flap and extracted a folded paper. But she put it down without so much as a glance at its contents.

What would Jack say? What a fool she had been, what a perfectly reckless fool! She had met difficulties before, and had overcome them. When she had left her uncle's house as a child of fourteen and had subsisted on the slender income which her father had left her, rejecting every attempt on the part of Chartres Dane to make her leave the home of an invalid maiden aunt where she had taken refuge, she had faced what she believed was the supreme crisis of life.

But this was different.

Chartres Dane! She rejected the thought instantly, only to find it recurring. Perhaps he would help. She had long since overcome any ill-feeling she had towards him, for whatever dislike she had, had been replaced by a sense of shame and repentance. She had often been on the point of writing him to beg his forgiveness, but had stopped short at the thought that he might imagine she had some ulterior motive in seeking to return to his good graces. He was her relative. He had some responsibility… again the thought inserted itself, and suddenly she made up her mind.

Chartres Dane's house lay twelve miles out of town, a great rambling place set on the slopes of a wooded hill, a place admirably suited to his peculiar love of solitude.

She had some difficulty in finding a taxi-driver who was willing to make the journey, and it had grown dark, though a pale light still lingered in the western skies, when she descended from the cab at the gateway of Hevel House. There was a lodge at the entrance of the gate, but this had long since been untenanted. She found her way up the long drive to the columned portico in front of the house. The place was in darkness, and she experienced a pang of apprehension. Suppose he was not there? (Even if he were, he would not help her, she told herself.) But the possibility of his being absent, however, gave her courage.

Her hand was on the bell when there came to her a flash of memory. At such an hour he would be sitting in the window-recess overlooking the lawn at the side of the house. She had often seen him there on warm summer nights, his glass of port on the broad window-ledge, a cigar clenched between his white teeth, brooding out into the darkness.

She came down the steps, and walking on the close-cropped grass bordering the flower-beds, came slowly, almost stealthily, to the library window. The big casement was wide open; a faint light showed within, and she

stopped dead, her heart beating a furious rat-a-plan at the sight of a filled glass on the window-ledge. His habits had not changed, she thought; he himself would be sitting just out of sight from where she stood, in that window-recess which was nearest to her. Summoning all her courage, she advanced still farther. He was not in his customary place, and she crept nearer to the window.

Colonel Chartres Dane was sitting at a large writing-table in the center of the room; his back was toward her, and he was writing by the light of two tall candles that stood upon the table.

At the sight of his back all her courage failed, and, as he rose from the table, she shrank back into the shadow. She saw his white hand take up the glass of wine, and after a moment, peeping again, she saw him, still with his back to her, put it on the table by him as he sat down again.

She could not do it, she dare not do it, she told herself, and turned away sorrowfully. She would write to him.

She had stepped from the grass to the path when a man came from an opening in the bushes and gripped her arm.

"Hello!" he said, "who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Let me go," she cried, frightened. "I— I—"

"What are you doing by the colonel's window?"

"I am his niece," she said, trying to recover some of her dignity.

"I thought you might be his aunt," said the gamekeeper ironically. "Now, my girl, I am going to take you in to the colonel—"

With a violent thrust she pushed him from her; the man stumbled and fell. She heard a thud and a groan, and stood rooted to the spot with horror.

"Have I hurt you?" she whispered. There was no reply.

She felt, rather than saw, that he had struck his head against a tree in falling, and turning, she flew down the drive, terrified, nearly fainting in her fright. The cabman saw her as she flung open the gate and rushed out.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"I— I think I have killed a man," she said incoherently, and then from the other end of the drive she heard a thick voice cry:

"Stop that girl!"

It was the voice of the gamekeeper, and for a moment the blood came back to her heart.

"Take me away, quickly, quickly," she cried.

The cabman hesitated.

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

"Take—take me away," she pleaded.

Again he hesitated.

"Jump in," he said gruffly.

THREE WEEKS later John Penderbury, one of the greatest advocates at the Bar, walked into Jack Freeder's chambers.

The young man sat at his table, his head on his arm, and Penderbury put his hand lightly upon the shoulders of the stricken man.

"You've got to take a hold of yourself, Freeder," he said kindly. "You will neither help yourself nor her by going under."

Jack lifted a white, haggard face to the lawyer.

"It is horrible, horrible," he said huskily. "She's as innocent as a baby. What evidence have they?"

"My dear good fellow," said Penderbury, "the only evidence worth while in a case like this is circumstantial evidence. If there were direct evidence we might test the credibility of the witness. But in circumstantial evidence every piece of testimony dovetails into the other; each witness creates one strand of the net."

"It is horrible, it is impossible, it is madness to think that Ella could—"

Penderbury shook his head. Pulling up a chair at the other side of the table, he sat down, his arms folded, his grave eyes fixed on the younger man.

"Look at it from a lawyer's point of view, Freeder," he said gently. "Ella Grant is badly in need of money. She has backed a bill for a girl-friend and the money is suddenly demanded. A few minutes after learning this from Isaacs' clerk, she finds a letter in her flat, which she has obviously read— the envelope was opened and its contents extracted— a letter which is from Colonel Dane's lawyers, telling her that the colonel has made her his sole heiress. She knows, therefore, that the moment the colonel dies she will be a rich woman. She has in her handbag a bottle containing cyanide of potassium, and that night, under the cover of darkness, drives to the colonel's house and is seen outside the library window by Colonel Dane's gamekeeper. She admitted, when she was questioned by the detective, that she knew the colonel was in the habit of sitting by the window and that he usually put his glass of port on the window-ledge. What was easier than to drop a fatal dose of cyanide into the wine? Remember, she admitted that she had hated him and that once she threw a knife at him, wounding him, so that the scar remained to the day of his death. She admitted herself that it was his practice to put the wine where she could have reached it."

He drew a bundle of papers from his pocket, unfolded them, and turned the leaves rapidly.

"Here it is," and he read:

"Yes, I saw a glass of wine on the window-ledge. The colonel was in the habit of sitting in the window on summer evenings. I have often seen him there, and I knew when I saw the wine that he was near at hand."

He pushed the paper aside and looked keenly at the wretched man before him.

"She is seen by the gamekeeper, as I say," he went on, "and this man, attempting to intercept her, she struggles from his grasp and runs down the drive to the cab. The cabman says she was agitated, and when he asked her what was the matter, she replied that she had killed a man—"

"She meant the gamekeeper," interrupted Jack.

"She may or may not, but she made that statement. There are the facts, Jack; you cannot get past them. The letter from the lawyers—which she says she never read— the envelope was found open and the letter taken out; is it likely that she had not read it? The bottle of cyanide of potassium was found in her possession, and—" he spoke deliberately— "the colonel was found dead at his desk and death was due to cyanide of potassium. A candle which stood on his desk had been overturned by him in his convulsions, and the first intimation the servants had that anything was wrong was the sight of the blazing papers on the table, which the gamekeeper saw when he returned to report what had occurred in the grounds. There is no question what verdict the jury will return…"

IT WAS a great and a fashionable trial. The courthouse was crowded, and the public had fought for a few places that were vacant in the gallery.

Sir Johnson Grey, the Attorney-General, was to lead for the Prosecution, and Penderbury had Jack Freeder as his junior.

The opening trial was due for ten o'clock, but it was half-past ten when the Attorney-General and Penderbury came into the court, and there was a light in Penderbury's eyes and a smile on his lips which amazed his junior.

Jack had only glanced once at the pale, slight prisoner. He dared not look at her.

"What is the delay?" he asked irritably. "This infernal judge is always late."

At that moment the court rose as the judge came on to the Bench, and almost immediately afterwards the Attorney-General was addressing the court.

"My lord," he said, "I do not purpose offering any evidence in this case on behalf of the Crown. Last night I received from Dr. Merriget, an eminent practitioner of Townville, a sworn statement on which I purpose examining him.

"Dr. Merriget," the Attorney-General went on, "has been traveling in the Near East, and a letter which was sent to him by the late Colonel Dane only reached him a week ago, coincident with the doctor learning that these proceedings had been taken against the prisoner at the bar.

"Dr. Merriget immediately placed himself in communication with the Crown officers of the law, as a result of which I am in a position to tell your lordship that I do not intend offering evidence against Ella Grant.

"Apparently Colonel Dane had long suspected that he was suffering from an incurable disease, and to make sure, he went to Dr. Merriget and submitted himself to an examination. The reason for his going to a strange doctor is, that he did not want to have it known that he had been consulting specialists in town. The doctor confirmed his worst fears, and Colonel Dane returned to his home. Whilst on the Continent, the doctor received a letter from Colonel Dane, which I purpose reading."

He took a letter from the table, adjusted his spectacles, and read:

DEAR DR. MERRIGET,

It occurred to me after I had left you the day before yesterday, that you must have identified me, for I have a dim recollection that we met at a garden party. I am not, as you suggested, taking any other advice. I know too well that this fibrous growth is beyond cure, and I purpose tonight taking a fatal dose of cyanide of potassium. I feel that I must notify you in case by a mischance there is some question as to how I met my death.

Very sincerely yours,

CHARTRES DANE."

"I feel that the ends of justice will be served," continued the Attorney-General "if I call the doctor…"

IT WAS NOT very long before another Crown case came the way of Jack Freeder. A week after his return from his honeymoon, he was sent for to the Public Prosecutor's office, and that gentleman interviewed him.

"You did so well in the Flackman case, Freeder, that I want you to undertake the prosecution of Wise. Undoubtedly you will gain kudos in a trial of this description, for the Wise case has attracted a great deal of attention."

"What is the evidence?" asked Jack bluntly.

"Circumstantial, of course," said the Public Prosecutor, "but—"

Jack shook his head.

"I think not, sir," he said firmly but respectfully. "I will not prosecute in another case of murder unless the murder is committed in my presence."

The Public Prosecutor stared at him.

"That means you will never take another murder prosecution—have you given up criminal work, Mr. Freeder?"

"Yes, sir," said Jack gravely; "my wife doesn't like it."

Today, Jack Freeder is referred to in legal circles as a glaring example of how a promising career can be ruined by marriage.

———————

8: The Strange Disappearance of Miss Edith Marless

Valentine Williams

1883-1946

The Strand Magazine April 1937

Savile Row tailor H B Treadgold has a knack for criminal detection; his exploits appear in, among other books, Treadgold Cuts In *(H&S, 1937)*

"All criminals make mistakes: that is why crimes are solved. It is when the investigator also blunders that you have the insoluble crime."

—The Maxims of H.B. Treadgold.

I HAD gone round to Savile Row, one day after lunch, to be measured for a suit and, the operation over, was sitting with Mr. Treadgold over a glass of the 1900 port in his office, when Gallup came in with a card. H.B. glanced at it, then flicked it across the desk to me. I read, Sir Hector Foyne, Foyne Hall, near Lowcester, Devon, and in the corner "Travellers' Club." Gallup said, blinking at us through his gold spectacles, "It's not a customer, Mr. Horace. He wishes to consult you privately. He's a friend of Lord Hannington."

H.B. grunted. "Well, we'll have to see him, I suppose. Old Buzzy Hannington has been getting his duds here ever since my Guv'nor's day. When I ring, Gallup."

He took down *Who's Who* from the rack of reference books on top of the desk as the manager withdrew. "Another little problem, I guess,— George," he remarked cheerfully, fluttering the leaves. "Let's see just who the party is. Ah, here we are! Old family— he's the tenth baronet— and a retired diplomat, though not a very prominent one. Aged sixty-two and twice married; his present wife's Italian, I see. No children; his heir's his cousin, Major Gerald Foyne, Royal Artillery, retired. Well, let's have him in!"

The visitor seemed embarrassed at finding me there, but Mr. Treadgold reassured him. "This is Mr. Duckett, my solicitor," he said. "You can speak freely in front of him." Somewhat reluctantly the other put down his hat and took the chair I brought forward. He was a distinguished-looking man with aristocratic features and rather an unyielding air. "Mr. Treadgold," he began diffidently, "my old friend, Lord Hannington, to whom you rendered such signal service in the matter of a certain missing will."

Old H.B. is the most modest of men, but like the rest of us is not averse from a word of praise. His healthy face flushed a brighter pink. "It wasn't so difficult, my dear sir— merely a matter of clear thinking."

"This is precisely what's required in my case," Foyne answered. "Mr. Treadgold, I find myself in a quandary. A tenant of ours, a woman friend of my wife's, has disappeared."

The other fingered his neat grey moustache. "A married lady?" he inquired, not without a certain irony.

"So far as I'm aware, Miss Marless is unmarried," was the rather stiff rejoinder. He cleared his throat. "I should explain that the present Lady Foyne— the first died twenty years ago— is my second wife and considerably my junior in age. We have no near neighbours at Foyne and I was therefore rather pleased when, some weeks ago, my wife suggested lending one of the lodges on our place to a certain Edith Marless, an Englishwoman she had met in the South of France. I suffer from asthma and dislike leaving Devonshire, where the air agrees with me, but Lady Foyne, whose lungs are not strong, is in the habit of passing several weeks every winter on the Riviera. At Mentone this year she made friends with this Miss Marless. One day last March, when I was up in town, Miss Marless dropped in unexpectedly on my wife at Foyne Hall. On her explaining that she was looking for a place in which to spend the rest of the summer, Lady Foyne offered her the use of the west lodge, subject to my consent. I raised no objection— as I say, I was very glad for my wife to have the companionship of her own age."

"How old is Lady Foyne?" Mr. Treadgold asked.

"Twenty-seven. Edith Marless might be a few years older." He paused. "We saw her last on Sunday evening when she dined with us and my cousin, Major Foyne, who's stopping at the Hall— she had then been at the west lodge for about four weeks. She spoke to me of a leak in the roof of the cottage and I promised to drop in and see about having it repaired. I was busy all next day, but on the Tuesday morning, that's to say, yesterday, I walked down to the west lodge. There was no answer to my knock and, thinking she was out, I was going away when I noticed that two days' newspapers were still outside the door. A moment later young Maggs, who delivers milk and who happened to be passing, called out to me that he'd been unable to obtain an answer on the previous day. On that I climbed in through a window and found the place empty. The bed had not been slept in, and all her clothes were still there. But the lady had vanished without trace and we have neither seen her nor heard from her since. Evidently, since the milkman was unable to get an answer on the Monday morning, she must have gone away some time on the Sunday night, after dining with us at the Hall."

He made a break. "Frankly, I'm not sorry to see the last of her. She's not the type of woman I have much use for, one of these abrupt, rather gawky women, all hands and feet. But I could have put up with that if my wife had

derived any benefit from her company. On the contrary, although they were constantly together, this Marless woman seemed to upset her. Normally, my wife has a happy and charming disposition. But since Edith Marless came to the west lodge, she's been brooding and highly nervous. This woman's word seemed to be law with her— there was no arrangement my wife wouldn't upset on her merest whim."

Mr. Treadgold shrugged his shoulders. "Then why worry? I should think you were well rid of her."

The baronet sighed. "This woman's disappearance has had the most inexplicable effect upon my wife. She neither eats nor sleeps and if I remonstrate with her, she flies out at me. She's obviously on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown; unless we can clear up the mystery of her friend's disappearance, 'pon my soul I fear for her reason."

"What do you know about the Marless lady?" Mr. Treadgold inquired.

"Very little. I understand she has no relations living, and spends most of her time abroad. I wouldn't describe her as a very cultured person, exactly, and she certainly had very little money— most of the clothes she had, Lady Foyne gave her. She kept no servant and did her own housework. She preferred it so, although we would willingly have given her the services of one of the maids from the Hall."

"Didn't anyone see her leave the village?"

Sir Hector shook his head. "Our place is outside Foyne village and except for the Hall, which is separated from it by an extremely long avenue, there are no houses within a mile of the west lodge."

"She must have taken the train, left by car, or something?"

"Of course. But the last train leaves Foyne at 9.5 on Sunday evenings, at which time she was at dinner with us at the Hall, and I have established that she certainly didn't travel by the first, or any other train on the Monday morning. And she didn't hire a car in the village." He paused with an embarrassed air. "What I am about to reveal to you now," he went on, "is in the strictest confidence for the simple reason that I don't feel justified in disclosing it to my wife in her present state. On two occasions within the last month a young man was seen, entering or leaving the lodge in the middle of the night. Our butler, Penny, saw him the first time. It was at about a quarter to one in the morning— Penny's motor-bike had broken down and he was walking home. He was taking the short cut to the Hall by the west lodge and the back avenue when he saw this fellow slip out of the garden gate and run off down the road. A week or two later, Bent, my gamekeeper, was crossing the Park just before dawn when he heard the gate at the west lodge squeak and caught a glimpse of a man standing there; when Bent looked again the

man was gone— by his silhouette he seemed to be young and active, Bent says. You know how reticent villagers are about such things, and, of course, these stories came to my ears only after the lady had disappeared. But they suggest to me that she had a lover..."

"And that she's eloped with him. Well, what do you want me to do?" Mr. Treadgold broke in briskly.

"Come down to Foyne. Make your own inquiries. Trace the missing woman and her lover or, failing that, gain my wife's confidence and find out what hold this woman had over her. I shall be happy to put you up for as long as you like— Mr. Duckett, too, for that matter."

"You're too kind. But surely this is rather a matter for a firm of private inquiry agents, if not for the police."

Our visitor started back. "At all costs, the police must be kept out of this."

Mr. Treadgold frowned olympically. "If you really desire my assistance, Sir Hector," he remarked stiffly, "I'd suggest that you keep nothing back."

Foyne coloured, shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said. "I suspect that this woman has been blackmailing my wife— at any rate, notwithstanding the fact that I allow Lady Foyne a hundred pounds a month pin money, her account at the bank is £387 overdrawn."

"So! Did she tell you this herself?"

"No. I only discovered it yesterday, when I happened to see by accident a letter from her bank manager."

"Have you spoken to her about it?"

"I thought I'd wait until I'd consulted you."

Mr. Treadgold nodded approvingly. "Forgive the question, but have you ever had to complain of your wife's attitude toward others men?"

"Never, notwithstanding our difference in age." He cleared his throat and went on severely. "My wife's trouble is gambling. After continually paying her gaming debts, last year I put my foot down and refused to allow her to return to the Riviera unless she gave me her word not to play. When she came back from Mentone in March she assured me she'd kept her promise."

"Quite. And rather than admit she'd failed you, she's borrowed from this Marless woman to pay her losses."

"Edith Marless never created the impression of being a person of substance..."

"She might be a woman money-lender. Or she might have found out where Lady Foyne had raised the wind— by pawning her jewels or something."

"Lady Foyne's jewels are intact."

"By borrowing from a friend, then— maybe a man. Whatever it was, the information seems to have been worth several hundred pounds to your wife."

He paused. "Frankly," he went on, "the case is not one which appeals to me. But you're a friend of Lord Hannington, and since you claim my aid you shall have it. When do you return to Foyne Hall?"

"By the ten o'clock from Waterloo in the morning."

"We'll meet you at the booking office at 9.50. That's to say, I will," he added, looking at me.

"I never missed the chance of being in on one of your cases yet, H.B.," I told him firmly.

Mr. Treadgold's powers of observation are extraordinarily alert. We had an instance of it next day when, having left the London express at Lowcester, we were driving in Sir Hector's elderly Rolls from the junction to Foyne, a distance of ten miles. Nearing Foyne, at a village called, I think, Underhill, the closed gates of a level crossing halted us. "I suppose that Miss Marless doesn't hail from these parts?" Mr. Treadgold suddenly remarked to our host.

"Not that I ever heard of. Why?"

A shabby garage abutted on the railway. Mr. Treadgold nudged Foyne, and pointed to the sign over the door. "J. F. Marless, Auto Repairs, Cars for Hire," we read. "I was just wondering— you know the way local names keep recurring," my friend observed gently.

"Marless isn't a local name," said Sir Hector, "though I admit it's an odd coincidence— it hadn't struck me before. The Marless who keeps that garage hails from the Midlands, I believe."

Foyne Hall was a delightful old timber-fronted mansion, standing in the centre of an immense park dotted with centurion oaks. A great surprise awaited us— me, at any rate: Lady Foyne, who came out from one of the rooms leading off the hall as we entered the house, proved to be one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my life. Her profile was of classic Italian loveliness— it reminded me of the head on one of those old Sicilian gold coins— her eyes were dark and expressive, and she moved with a simple grace that set off her perfection of line. But it was obvious she was suffering from some great nervous strain— the hand she gave me was cold to the touch. The butler, she told us, would show us our rooms, after which lunch would be waiting for us.

She had plenty of pluck. From a bronzed man in flannels, who took us into the library for a glass of sherry before lunch and who introduced himself as Gerald Foyne— I remembered that he was the baronet's heir and was staying in the house— we discovered that Sir Hector had made no secret of Mr. Treadgold's mission. At lunch we talked of indifferent things, principally about Biarritz and the Basque country, from which Major Foyne had recently returned; but no sooner had the servants left us to our coffee than Lady Foyne

opened up. "My husband told me on the telephone yesterday," she remarked to Mr. Treadgold with the very slight foreign accent which, in my opinion, only added to her charm, "that you have come down here to clear up the mystery of Edith Marless's disappearance. But Sir Hector— from the best of motives, I know— has made a great deal out of a very little. Edith Marless was always an unaccountable person. She has no ties— she's free to go and come as she likes. No doubt, she was bored with our so quiet life down here and"— she made an expressive gesture of the hands—"she just went away."

"Leaving all her clothes behind her!" Mr. Treadgold suggested mildly.

Major Foyne spoke up. "You make it sound as though she bolted in her nightie," he observed. "Actually, the things she left behind were the clothes that Lady Foyne had given her. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Lady Foyne. "After all, she had some things of her own."

"And, in the circumstances, she didn't want to be beholden to you. I must say I think it does her credit," the Major put in.

"I wish one of you would tell me just what she looked like," Mr. Treadgold requested.

"She was quite tall," said our host, "almost as tall as Gerald there, and handsome in rather a bold way with strongly marked black eyebrows and good teeth and eyes. She wouldn't have been bad-looking, really, if she'd only carried herself better, but she slouched about with those big feet of hers. And that husky voice! I hate a woman with a husky voice."

"You're giving Mr. Treadgold a very misleading portrait," his wife corrected him. "Actually, Edith wasn't interested in clothes. That's probably because she never had the money to buy any nice ones, I imagine."

"You met her at Mentone, I think?" said Mr. Treadgold.

Sir Hector answered for his wife. "They were at the same hotel."

"Which hotel was that?" my friend inquired.

A little colour warmed the ivory pallor of Lady Foyne's cheeks. "The Oriental," she replied in a low voice. She paused and went on: "I do hope that you're not going to set them all talking in the village, Mr. Treadgold. After all, Miss Marless is a friend of mine, and she's perfectly at liberty to leave us if she wants to." Suddenly she rounded on her husband. "Why did you bring him here?" she cried passionately. "Why did you bring him? The tears gushed from her eyes and, springing from her chair, she ran out of the room."

Our host sighed. "Go after her like a good chap, will you, Gerald?" he said and, as the Major hurried out, "There you are!" he went on to us. "Every time there's any question of investigating this business, she has these storms."

At Mr. Treadgold's request, after lunch Sir Hector took us down to the west lodge. It was a tiny stone cottage set in the middle of a garden front and back

with a front door opening in two halves and diamond pane windows. The ground floor consisted of a sitting-room with a kitchen and pantry leading off while a wooden stair mounted from the sitting-room to a bedroom with adjoining bathroom on the first floor. Distempered in cream throughout, with its beamed ceilings and furniture of cottage oak, it was an altogether charming and snug little place.

Whatever else had happened to the lady, she had clearly left in a hurry. The bedroom revealed no sign of dressing gown or nightdress, but the tenant had abandoned sundry pots of cosmetics, two or three boxes of powder and a lip-stick on the dressing table. She had even left her handbag, a large affair of shiny leather surmounted by her initials E. M. Save for a handkerchief and a crumpled cigarette, it was empty.

With a brooding air Mr. Treadgold poked about among the objects on the dressing table. "I don't see any hair-pins," he commented.

"She had an Eton crop," our host explained.

"And no flowers in any of the rooms."

Sir Hector shrugged his shoulders. "She wasn't that kind of woman."

Two minutes sufficed for my examination of the premises. But Mr. Treadgold took much longer. Sir Hector and I went out among the sweetly fragrant stocks in the front garden. With a glance at his watch our host said, "Bent, the gamekeeper, will be at home having his dinner now. I think I'll step over to the other lodge, where he lives, and fetch him— I dare say Mr. Treadgold would like a word with him about the young man he saw hanging round here the other night. The butler didn't have a proper view of him but Bent did, as it was getting light at the time." He opened the gate and strode off through the ferns.

Left alone, I strolled through the kitchen and out at the back. Here, in the foreground, was a small vegetable garden and, beyond it, clumps of currant, gooseberry and raspberry bushes. A path divided the garden into two, and a high beech hedge separated the whole plot, cottage and land, from the surrounding park. I sat down on a bench at the door, and lit a cigarette. Behind me I heard sundry clanking sounds where Mr. Treadgold was rooting about in the kitchen. Presently, there were voices and turning round, I saw Sir Hector and a sunburned, elderly man in breeches and leggings entering the lodge from the front.

I went into the sitting-room. The gamekeeper was saying in his broad Devonshire accent, "'Twor jest afore daybreak I zee 'un at the gate, a dark young chap, tallish, wi' a sca-arf around 'is neck 'stead of a collar. First off, I thought it wor one o' t' village lads after Squoire's conies. I turned me 'ead to

whistle the dog on to 'im, but w'en I looked again 'e wor gone. I reckon 'e 'eared me swishin' through the ferns an' made hisself scarce."

"It was no one you know, was it?" Mr. Treadgold asked.

The man shook his head warily. "I reckon it worn't no one from these parts—'e wor dressed like a gen'elman, barrin' 'is sca-arf."

On this Mr. Treadgold let the gamekeeper go and, putting his hand in one of his jacket pockets, remarked slowly to us, "You know, a man has been at the lodge."

"How do you know this?" the baronet demanded.

Mr. Treadgold opened his hand and showed two parts of a pipe broken across the stem. "These were in the refuse bin in the kitchen," he declared, and added, "This can scarcely be a pipe discarded by one of the villagers. It's an expensive briar such as they sell in the West End of London for a guinea or twenty- five shillings. And I found these, too."

Open-eyed, Sir Hector stared at the fragments of stained and crumpled paper the other held out. "Shaving papers?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Treadgold nodded. "Used, too." His finger indicated the dark smears where the razor blade had been wiped.

"You mean that this fellow was in the habit of spending the night with her?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" He paused. "The first thing we have to do, it seems to me, is to try to find out something about the Marless woman's background. Could I borrow your car for the afternoon?"

"Of course. Do you want me to go with you?"

"I needn't trouble you. We shall be back for dinner, but, in the meantime, please say nothing up at the house about our discoveries."

While our host departed to give the necessary orders, Mr. Treadgold smoked a meditative pipe in the back garden. From the kitchen threshold I saw his portly figure disappear among the raspberry bushes. He was still there when the Rolls arrived. Red- faced and perspiring, he joined me at the car. "To the village post office," he told the chauffeur.

I imagine that Mr. Treadgold's call to Mentone was the first of its kind that the Foyne postmistress had ever been asked to put through. However, with surprising rapidity the communication was established, and through the closed doors of the booth I heard H.B. asking, in his careful French, for the Hotel Oriental. His face was stern as he left the box.

"Well?" I questioned.

"Wherever Lady Foyne met Miss Marless, it wasn't at the Oriental at Mentone— at any rate, not under that name. They assure me they've never had a guest called Marless."

We went out to the car again. "I'd like you to drive us to the Marless garage at Underhill," my companion informed the chauffeur.

"What's the idea, H.B.?" I asked him.

Mr. Treadgold has a way of twinkling his very blue eyes at you. He twinkled now and said, "Did you ever hear how Dickens chose the names of his characters?"

"He wrote them down from shop fronts, didn't he?"

My friend nodded. "Quite right, George!"

"Well?"

"Here's a lady who wants to change her name. Driving from Lowcester Junction to Foyne Hall, her car is stopped at the level crossing just as ours was. Looking about her, she sees a name over a garage..."

"By Jove, H.B., that's ingenious!"

His laugh rang a trifle grim. "It may also be wrong. Perhaps she really has a background in these parts. Let's see what Mr. Marless has to say."

But Mr. Marless, a depressed little man in grimy jeans, could throw no light on the missing woman's identity. He had never even heard of a Miss Marless over at Foyne Hall and, so far as he knew, he had no relatives in the county— he was from Castle Bromwich, Birmingham way, himself. Foyne was a matter of a mile and three-quarters from Underhill, he said in answer to Mr. Treadgold, and his was the nearest garage to Foyne, barring Porter's garage at Foyne itself.

Had he recently hired out a car to any lady from Foyne? was my companion's next question. Porter's did all the hiring trade at Foyne, was the garagist's somewhat glum reply. He did use to have one customer from over Foyne way, a young chap with a motor bike, who wanted a lock-up, which Porter's didn't have. "Leastwise, that's what he tells me," Mr. Marless added with a roguish air, "but it's my opinion he wuz a married man what didn't want his missus to know what he wuz up to, gallivanting off on 'is motorbike at all hours of the night." Mr. Treadgold seemed to stiffen. "That must be young Wright," he said, turning to me with an amused air.

I had no idea what he meant, but I gave no sign— H.B.'s methods of gleaning information are frequently tortuous.

"That ain't the name," said Mr. Marless promptly. "'Is name's Johnson, and I ain't likely to forgit it, seein' as 'e 'opped it with 'is machine last Sunday night owin' me a matter o' fifteen shillun'."

"Johnson, eh?" Mr. Treadgold remarked casually. "And he lives at Foyne?"

"I didn't say so," was the sharp answer. "I said 'e lived over Foyne way; but I don't know nothin' about 'im— neither where he lives, nor yit where he works."

From the ensuing interrogatory— which Mr. Treadgold was careful to make appear as desultory as possible— it emerged that the young man in question had first brought his motor-cycle to the garage about two months before. Marless described him as a "spry young spark" with dark hair who "talked like a Londoner." His comings and goings at the garage were veiled in obscurity. The forecourt of the garage, where the lock-ups were situated, was always open and, as Johnson had his key, he had unrestricted access to his machine at all times. Except on the occasion of his first visit, he was never seen in the day-time. At any hour of the night he might be encountered, or heard, taking his machine out or bringing it in, but at irregular intervals— sometimes, nothing would be seen of him for a week. The garagist had no record of the young man's movements during the week before he went away— all that Mr. Marless could say was that on the Monday morning he had found the key in the door of the lock-up and the motor-cycle gone. Johnson had not been seen since.

Mr. Treadgold was immersed in thought as we drove back to Foyne Hall. He bade the chauffeur drop us at the west lodge, where he dismissed the man. In that remote corner of the park, the silence of the mellow summer evening dropped about us like a curtain as the Rolls glided away. My companion walked through the house to the kitchen where he stopped and confronted me. "A dark business, George," he muttered, and his face was grave. "Take a look at this!"

He drew me over to the sink and pointed downward with his finger at the linoleum below it. I saw some red drops congealed there. "Blood!" he said.

I started. "Good God, H.B.!"

"Now this!"

He had taken a key from his pocket and unlocking the drawer in the kitchen table, produced from it a very soiled face towel. The towel was stained with blood. "It was in the refuse bin with the other things," he explained briefly.

I was staggered. Dropping into a chair, I stared blankly at him. "Are you trying to tell me that this poor woman has been murdered?" I gasped.

He took a moment to reply, staring so fixedly past me into the garden all shimmering in the evening light that my blood ran cold. "There's something freshly buried out there," he said at last. Then from a cupboard where wood and coal were stored he brought forth an iron shovel. "That's damp earth on it!" he exclaimed.

Stupidly I gazed at the shovel. I was speechless.

"Yet I may be wrong," he said. "A theory is forming in my mind, so fantastic, so incredible, yet supported by such irresistible indices..." He broke off. "Come! Bring that shovel, and dig!"

He led the way into the back garden. "Don't walk on the path!" he barked, and I perceived that he had stepped among the potatoes, and was following the path along. A moment later he stopped and pointed downwards. The path was of pounded dirt. A footprint was clearly visible there. What do you make of that?" he demanded.

"It looks like a tennis shoe!"

"The pattern's characteristic. It's the mark of a rope sole." He glanced at me sharply. "Did you notice the shoes that Major Foyne was wearing to-day?"

"I can't say I did!"

He clicked his disapproval with his tongue. "George, where were your eyes? I doubt if there's another pair of shoes like it in the whole of the county. They were *espadrilles*— Basque sandals— with rope soles. Everybody wears them at Biarritz, in the Basque country, where the Major's been staying."

I stared at him in bewilderment. "Are you asking me to believe that Major Foyne killed this woman?"

"In crime investigation, George, I believe nothing until I know. All we know at present is that Edith Marless has disappeared, the young man, Johnson, too, and that something has recently been buried in the garden." His hand pointed forward along the path. "See, there's another footprint. His track leads to the raspberry bushes."

Between two raspberry bushes it was evident that the soil had recently been disturbed. We faced one another over the new-made grave. The perspiration was pouring down my face; my shirt was sticking to my back. I quailed to think of what horror the freshly turned clods concealed. I said hoarsely, "Sir Hector thinks this woman was blackmailing his wife. Which of them killed Edith Marless? The Major may have disposed of the body, but it doesn't say that he killed her. He's pretty friendly with Lady Foyne, it seems to me— she may have called him in to get rid of the corpse. Or is the young man Johnson the murderer, and the other two discovered the body and buried it to avoid a scandal?"

Mr. Treadgold gazed at me sombrely. "If my theory is right, it isn't the woman's body..."

"You mean, it's Johnson's."

He nodded. "If it's anyone's."

"But the garagist over at Underhill told us that Johnson decamped on his motor bike on Sunday night!"

"Quite! And Edith Marless disappeared at the same time."

"Then it's she who's buried here."

He shook his head obstinately. "Not if my theory's right. Give me that shovel!"

Cold with suspense, I let him take it from me. In a fascinated silence I watched him make the earth fly, the sweat rolling down his crimson face. Suddenly with a low cry he fell on his knees and began scratching with his hands. "What is it?" I gasped.

"A box," he grunted; but his air was jubilant.

He lifted something from the hole he had dug. It was an ordinary cardboard shoe-box. Kneeling on the damp earth, he whipped off the lid. To my astonishment the box contained nothing but two bottles filled with a dark liquid that looked like blacking, and a stiffly wired pink brassiere.

I glanced at Mr. Treadgold. His face was radiant. "I was right," he cried triumphantly, and shook his finger at me. "In crime investigation, George, always suspend judgment until you know. All criminals make mistakes; that's how crimes are solved. It's when the investigator also blunders that you have the insoluble mystery." Thrusting the things back in the box, he sprang to his feet, then paused, as if struck by an afterthought, and, replacing the box in the hole, shovelled the earth over it again and stamped it down.

I found my tongue at last. "But, H.B., what does it mean?"

His grin was mischievous. "As it says in *Tristram Shandy*, 'This rich bale is not to be open'd now.' A fairer hand than mine shall untie it! Come, let's go to the house!" Catching me by the arm and taking great strides with his long legs, he fairly ran me up to the Hall.

The sound of a piano greeted us as we entered the house. "Where's Sir Hector?" Mr. Treadgold snapped at the butler who advanced to take our hats.

"He went to the Home Farm, sir," the man replied. "But her Ladyship and the Major are in the drawing-room. I just took in tea."

Lady Foyne was at the piano in the large, cool drawing-room. She was playing Reynaldo Hahn's "Si mes vers avaient des ailes," and singing the words softly under her breath. Major Foyne stood with his back to the fire, watching her.

A note jarred as she broke off on our appearance. When she saw the look on Mr. Treadgold's face, she rose up abruptly.

He said harshly, "Who was this man masquerading as a woman down at the west lodge, madam?"

A sudden light broke in upon me: the pipe, those shaving papers!

Lady Foyne seemed to shiver, but answered boldly enough, "I don't know what you mean!"

"You know very well. There was no such person as Edith Marless. Edith Marless was a man."

"You're talking nonsense!"

He laughed grimly. "At any rate, she was a lady who shaved habitually, who smoked a pipe. And why did she have no clothes of her own? Why was she able to leave her wardrobe behind when she fled on Sunday night? Because the only clothes she possessed were men's! And why did she refuse to keep a maid? To guard her secret, of course! Answer me, please! Who was this man?"

The Major spoke. "You'd best tell him, Livia!"

But she burst into a storm of tears, dropping back upon the piano seat, her head bowed down upon her white arms.

"Don't get this wrong, Mr. Treadgold," said Major Foyne. "She's always played the game by my cousin— she may have been indiscreet, but believe me, it was nothing more. She met this fellow Ronald Braydon at Monte in February. He was a professional dancer, a gigolo: she gave him presents, lent him money— she's not terribly experienced, you know. Last month he turns up here disguised as a woman, tells her he's in trouble and will have to disappear for a bit. It wasn't the first time he'd masqueraded as a girl— at one time he was a female impersonator in a concert troupe. At first Livia— Lady Foyne— wouldn't hear of it, but he told her it'd be only for a few weeks and threatened her, if she didn't help him, to go to my cousin."

"And how do you come into this?" Mr. Treadgold demanded sternly.

"Livia and I have always been pals," said the Major simply. "I've a tremendous admiration for the way she's played up to old Hector, who's not so easy to live with, let me tell you. Directly I came back from Biarritz last week I saw that something was wrong with her. Braydon kept squeezing her for money— he had a motor-bike tucked away somewhere, Livia told me, and after dark used to go over to a pool-room at Lowcester where they ran a roulette game. On Sunday, after he dined here, things came to a head. He wanted more money, but she was overdrawn at the bank and desperate. After he'd gone I got the truth out of her. Then I went down and had a talk with the young man."

Mr. Treadgold smiled. "I'm afraid you were rather rough with him. There's a certain amount of blood about."

Foyne shrugged broad shoulders. "I didn't like the way he spoke of Lady Foyne, so I dotted him one. I'm afraid I broke his pipe off short in his mouth, too."

"And you cleaned up after him, eh?"

"That was next day. That night I left him spitting blood on the floor. I told him, if he weren't out of the place before it was light, I'd turn him over to the police and chance his blabbing. He tried to brazen it out, but I guess he thought better of it. At any rate, when I returned just before daybreak he'd gone. I tidied up after him and buried his bottles of hair-dye— he's normally fair, it

seems— and his artificial bosom: they were the only things that might have given the show away." He looked at Mr. Treadgold boldly. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Lady Foyne spoke at last. "I told you it was no good, Gerald. You frightened him away, but he'll communicate with my husband, and if he doesn't, Hector is bound to hear the truth from this gentleman."

"Not from me, Lady Foyne," Mr. Treadgold declared firmly. "Normally, I'm a believer in frankness between husband and wife but, seeing that you've been no more than ill-advised, I doubt if the truth would be palatable to a man like Sir Hector, and as far as I'm concerned, it can remain buried with the last surviving vestiges at the bottom of that hole in the garden. You can inform your husband that I've withdrawn from the case, and if you care to add that I'm not interested in an adventuress who imposed on your good nature to borrow money and then bolted with her lover, I believe you'll hear no more of this affair." He gave her his gentle smile. "But in future don't play with fire!"

A little colour warmed the creamy pallor of her lovely face. She gave him her hand. "I shall take your advice, Mr. Treadgold— all of it."

He turned to me. "Come, George," he said placidly, "if we hurry we may catch that afternoon train back to town."

9: Hollywood Methods

Anonymous

Huon Times (Tasmania) 16 Aug 1929

MR. EDWARD MINCHIN, of Minchin's High Class Employment Agency, had been at his job for over forty years, but Priscilla Clegg, tall and slim and twenty-five, taught him that there were still a few things he didn't know about girls. 'She's used to looking after herself,' he decided, studying the imperious angle of the chin.

'You supply secretaries and companions, don't you?' began Priscilla. 'Well, that's what I want.'

'A lady secretary, of course.'

'No, the other kind. Quite young. And preferably tall and strong. Have you anyone like that on your books?'

'There's a young man who called only yesterday. Name of Devrell. No previous experience, but if the work isn't too technical or complicated he might suit.'

'It isn't in the least technical. Does he live in London?'

The young man named Devrell did.

'Then you might ask him to call.'

'Very good, Miss Clegg.'

Jimmy Devrell found the letter from Minchin on his plate at breakfast time.

Exactly two hours later he arrived at Number 16, Molyneux Terrace, a massive Georgian house with a front door in keeping. A maid opened the door to Jimmy, left him while she made inquiries, and came back to say that Miss Clegg would see him in the library. Miss Clegg was seated behind a large roll-top desk.

'Good morning,' she said. 'Please sit down. You've come from Mr. Minchin, of course.'

'I have,' said Jimmy, 'but I'm still very much in the dark.'

'I think,' said Miss Clegg, 'you'd better tell me a few things about yourself first. Then, if it's worth while. I'll explain what the work here would be.'

'There's very little to tell,' said Jimmy. 'My father went smash rather badly and died, and I had to drop my own plans altogether.'

'What were they?'

'I wanted to take up experimental scientific work. But I'd no special qualifications, and it ended in my falling back on Minchin.'

Priscilla Clegg rested her elbows on the desk, and her small, imperious chin on her linked hands.

'This is the position, Mr. Devrell. My father left me a good deal of money— about fifty thousand pounds— invested in various shares. My Uncle Jacob, though he doesn't even know what those shares are, wants me to put the money in other companies which will bring in a bigger income. He's connected in some way with the Stock Exchange, and he and his son Horace are the only relatives I have.

'They're both frightfully clever,' she went on, 'and they dazzle me with all sorts of stories about the fortunes which can be made. They stir up all the gambling instinct I've got— and there's a good deal of it. But I don't— can't entirely trust them, and I want someone near at hand who'll act as an antidote, someone cautious and logical who'll pull in the opposite direction.'

'Couldn't your lawyers help?'

She shook her head. 'They're old and pompous, and afraid of committing themselves. And they wouldn't be available when I needed them most.'

'Do you think I'd be equal to the job?'

For a long moment she didn't answer. Then she said quietly, 'I think so.'

'What about the secretarial work? Is that more or less nominal?'

'Far from it. The begging appeals alone will keep you busy.'

'And the salary?'

'I forgot! It would be eight pounds a week. You'd have as many meals as you cared to in the house, of course, and you could begin to-morrow. Would that be satisfactory?'

There was no hesitation whatever about Jimmy's reply.

He found the roll-top desk and a stack of correspondence awaiting him on the following morning.

'You're to work here for the present, please,' said Miss Clegg. 'I've shifted my private papers into the bureau by the window. By the way, I'm expecting Uncle Jacob. If I should be out he'll probably come in and introduce himself. All those letters need looking through and classifying, and afterwards I'd be glad if you'd check some figures. Figures,' concluded Priscilla Clegg, in a burst of feminine exasperation, 'which come to different totals every time they're added up!'

Jimmy worked uninterrupted and undisturbed until half-past eleven, when the door opened and a massive and amiable-looking gentleman of about fifty appeared. He glanced towards the roll-top desk, saw Jimmy behind it, smiled, and came farther into the room.

'You're Mr. Devrell, I take it?' he began. 'The bright new broom with no fluff on it. Daresay you've heard of me— Jacob Clegg, of Throgmorton Street.'

He shook hands, drew up a chair, and sat down.

'You're a busy man, and no doubt you expect to be busier still. Allow me to give you one or two useful hints.'

Jimmy prepared to listen. There seemed no alternative.

'My niece,' continued Uncle Jacob, 'is frankly a creature of moods, and your chance of holding down your job here for more than a month or so is negligible. That being the case, you'd do well to remember two things— that Jacob Clegg judges quickly and doesn't often made mistakes in his judgment, and that there's always a place for a young fellow with brains and grit in my office. Get me?'

'I think so. Thanks very much, but—'

'Mind you, young man, it's a confidential offer, to be treated as such. Good-bye for the present.'

He got up, shook hands again, and walked briskly out of the room.

Jimmy leant back in his revolving chair and for the next ten minutes, lost himself very effectively in a jungle of speculations. He was to lunch at the house, and had expected to lunch alone. But the table was laid for two. Neither Miss Clegg nor her uncle appeared; instead, a slifft, dark young man came into the Toom almost on Devrell's heels.

'The new secretary, of course?' he said, with a smile that emphasised the family likeness. 'The pater was chatting to you this morning, wasn't he? He's a friendly old buffer, even if he isn't always on the spot when a bit of tact is needed. Found plenty to do?'

'Plenty,' said Jimmy. 'Personally— I'm not running down my cousin; in her own way she's one of the best— I'd hate having to work for a woman. There's a tame-cattiness about the position that plays the devil with one's self-respect. Still, five hundred a year— or is it six— isn't to be sneezed at.'

'I haven't sneezed,' said Jimmy.

The conversation shifted to other matters. Horace Clegg shifted it. His flow of small talk appeared limitless. He seemed to have seen every play in London, and to know every actor and actress playing in them.

'A bright crowd,' he said. 'If you ever find yourself with a slack evening we might trot along together and meet a few.'

'Thanks,' said Jimmy. 'I'll remember.'

He went back to his desk after lunch, equipped with further material for thought.

SEVERAL WEEKS passed before Uncle Jacob appeared again. 'Been terrifically busy, my boy,' he explained. 'By the way, if you've any money to invest, I can put you on to a good thing.'

'What's that?' asked Jimmy. The cheque for his first month's salary was in his pocket-book. He had a feeling that old Clegg had guessed as much.

'Flexo, Limited. Glass you can bend. Some Austrian scientist or other has re-discovered it, and a syndicate is putting up the stuff on the market. The half-crown shares will touch a quid before the end of the year.'

Jimmy shook his head.

'Meaning that you're no gambler?' said Uncle Jacob. 'Neither am I. But I hate to see boneheads grabbing up handfuls on Tom Tiddler's ground, and the really brainy youngsters being left in the cold. How would it be if I applied for a hundred shares in your name? Then you could take 'em or leave 'em as you thought fit.'

'I'd prefer to leave them,' said Jimmy.

But when, a couple of days later he saw that Flexos were already quoted at six-and-six he couldn't escape a twinge of regret. And the next week the shares touched fifteen shillings, the week after nineteen.

Horace was the next to mention them.

'What about those Flexo Ordinaries of yours?' he began.

'Haven't any,' said Jimmy shortly. 'Rot! The Guv'nor bought a hundred for your benefit. I thought you and he talked it over?'

'We did, and I told him I'd no money to invest.'

'A little thing like that wouldn't worry the old man if he's taken a fancy to a chap. At the present moment you're the registered owner of shares worth seventy-two pounds ten more than they cost. They may go higher, but there's a risk they won't. So he's sent me along with a cheque for the difference.' Jimmy shook his head.

'The money isn't mine.'

'Whose is it, then?'

'I didn't authorise, Mr. Clegg—'

'He didn't need authorising. The thing was just a friendly deal that cost nothing at all.'

Horace produced a cheque, laid it on the desk, and turned away. Jimmy slipped the cheque in his pocket-book. Then he took up the morning paper and studied the share list with fresh interest.

That afternoon Priscilla came into the library. Their usual meetings were entirely formal and businesslike. He had settled down into the paid servant and gave no sign that he had any other ambitions.

'Mr. Devrell,' she began, ''do you remember our first conversation about antidotes, and— and influences pulling the other way?'

'Of course.'

'Well, I want you to pull now.'

'I'm ready,' he said grimly. 'It's the old trouble, those wretched investments. It exasperates Uncle Jacob to think of all that money in a girl's hands locked up in shares that he doesn't even know the name of. Cousin Horace is as bad. The thing has become an obsession with them.' She crossed to the bureau under the window, unlocked it, and took out a foolscap envelope.

'Now listen. Here's a list of the securities. The certificates themselves are in a safe deposit in London, the dividends are paid into my bank direct. I've forgotten what the companies are, and I don't want to remember.'

'Am I to keep this?'

'Please. And here is the key of the bureau, too. That's all.'

'Thanks very much,' said Jimmy.

When she had gone he glanced at the envelope and discovered that the flap had not been fastened. He sealed it and looked round for a convenient hiding-place. There was a flat slab, designed as an emergency table, which slid out of the desk. On the spur of the moment he drew it entirely from its slot, pushed the envelope into the space behind, and pushed the slab home again. He had a feeling that he was behaving exactly like a film-star in some preposterous movie-drama. But at the back of his mind there was also a conviction that there was a good deal more Hollywood stuff to come, and that it would come soon.

It may have been that conviction which impelled Jimmy to linger in the unlit library an hour later than usual that night. He had drifted into a doze when the click of the opening door roused him.

The visitor was Uncle Jacob. He shut the door and crossed briskly to the bureau. There was a second click and the flap swung back. Hollywood was Teally justifying itself at last. But Jimmy was considerably more angry than amused. He watched Uncle Jacob making a swift search, and wondered what exactly would happen if he leapt to his feet and flung himself upon the old scoundrel.

But what he actually did was to switch on his desk-lamp and inquire politely, 'Can I be of any service?'

Old and a scoundrel though he might be, Uncle Jacob's nerves were in good order. Beyond a faint start of surprise he registered no particular emotion.

'Frankly,' he said, 'I can't say, though if I'd known sooner you were there I sliould'nt have wasted my time fooling with this duplicate key. It's one Priscilla's father gave me, and theoretically oughtn't to be in my possession. But—'

'What were you looking for?'

'An envelope containing a list of her holdings in various companies. I suppose you haven't unearthed It?'

'I haven't.'

'You couldn't, for instance, tell me whether she's any shares in the Eastern Irrigation Syndicate? Or Lancashire Hardware? Well, well, I'll have to inquire at her bank, where I believe the certificates are.'

'Possibly. But I wouldn't call after business hours with a duplicate key. There might be a risk of your motives being misunderstood.'

Uncle Jacob laughed good-humoredly. 'Very sound advice, my lad! And now I must be going. Good-night. Don't let your imagination bolt with your common sense.'

Jimmy returned to his rooms that evening with a conviction that he and Uncle Jacob weren't likely to come face to face again for a considerable time.

He was wrong; he did not know Uncle Jacob. That gentleman met him on his way to the house on the following morning.

'I'm not going to pretend that this encounter is accidental,' he began. 'It isn't. I want to apologise further, to explain.'

He took Jimmy's arm affectionately and embarked on a synopsis of his adventures since he had first come to London. It was a more amusing than creditable story; the real mystery was why he should trouble to tell it at all. Jimmy escaped at the end of twenty minutes, leaving Uncle Jacob to continue his walk in the opposite direction. He reached the library to find that his roll-top desk had been very thoroughly and scientifically explored. But the list of securities was still safely behind the flap. He had hardly slid it into position again when Priscilla came into the room.

'You've been here two months, haven't you?' she began abruptly.

'Nearly,' Jimmy agreed. 'Any special reason for asking?'

'I've been wondering if it wouldn't be hetter for you to find other work. Not because you've failed me in any way, but because the experiment hasn't turned out as I expected. It's only made Uncle Jacob twice as persistent, twice as determined to get his own way.'

'And me twice as determined that he shan't have it.'

'You've still the list of securities?'

'Yes.'

'May I have them, please?'

'You may not, Miss Clegg.'

Surprise and indignation brought a rush of color to her cheeks. 'I don't think you quite understand.'

'I understand perfectly. You want me to give you back that precious list because your uncle and cousin are constantly worrying you about it. You could

get a duplicate from the strongroom people without my knowledge, but you won't do that because it wouldn't be playing the game. You want me to go because of the same family pressure. I'm not going to give up the paper, or to accept dismissal, if there's any ejecting done it will be by main force. In other words, your amiable relations will have to fight in the open.

'And I hope,' he continued grimly, 'they'll appreciate the novelty.'

Priscilla gazed at him dumbly. She was still gazing when the door opened again, this time to admit Uncle Jacob and Horace. From her start of surprise Jimmy deduced that she hadn't expected them. He also deduced that they had been listening outside the door, and timed their entrance accordingly. Horace glanced at his cousin with eyebrows raised inquiringly, and then turned to Jimmy.

'And I to gather that you aren't thinking of leaving us?'

' "Us" is hardly 'accurate,' said Jimmy. 'I am employed by Miss Clegg.'

'Anyhow, you haven't resigned?'

'I haven't.'

'Then you're a bigger fool than we thought. You'll need references before—
'

'One minute. Are you two butting in on behalf of Miss Clegg?'

'What's that?' snapped Uncle Jacob. 'Yes, certainly.'

'Good!'

'What the devil do you mean by that?'

'It gives me an opportunity of putting over a few plain facts.' Jimmy turned to Priscilla, and spoke in a quiet, almost confidential voice.

'These two men are a pair of unprincipled rogues who are out to get possession of your money. You may have suspected it before, but I doubt if you've an inkling of the swindles they've been mixed up in, together and separately, during the past five years. If either of them would care to have his record made public—'

'Priscilla, are you going to stand there and allow your only relatives to be' blackmailed by a penniless blackguard?' interrupted Uncle Jacob, fiercely. Priscilla, whose face had gone white, made no reply.

'They began,' Jimmy continued, 'by trying to get rid of me, first with the offer of a job, next with seventy-odd pounds and a cock-and-bull story that it was the profits of an investment. Afterwards they ransacked the bureau for the list of investments.'

'But it was locked, and I had the key.'

'It was in the lock when I first came. They'd have no difficulty about taking a wax impression and having another key made. When they couldn't find the paper there they had a shot at my desk.'

Horace stepped between Jimmy and the girl.

'Look here, Pris, this has gone far enough! The blighter ought to be slung straight out into the street.'

'Why not get on with it, then?' suggested Jimmy.

If a large and imperfectly-controlled dog is a nuisance, a large and imperfectly-controlled temper is worse. And that was Cousin Horace Clegg's little weakness. He swung round, gripped Jimmy's shoulder, and shouted, 'Out you go then!'

Jimmy knocked him down. Whereupon Uncle Jacob took a hand. His temper was more disciplined, but Horace was his only son. Moreover, he had in the past taken lessons in the are of self-defence. His first blow, which glanced off Jimmy's cheek, was a little wild, but not otherwise discreditable.

Jimmy did not knock him down; he merely dealt him a swinging slap which filled Uncle Jacob's eyes and sent him staggering backwards into a chair. On which chair he very sensibly remained, conscious that no sportsman shoots a sitting pheasant or hits a sitting man.

Cousin Horace, on his feet again, tried a bull-like rush. Jimmy stepped aside. He tried another rush.

Jimmy said. 'All right, then, if you will have it,' and blacked his left eye.

Horace then abandoned the Queensbury rules and tried to hit Jimmy with a mahogany-framed footstool.

Two seconds later he found himself on his back again.

'Had enough?' Jimmy demanded.

Horace blinked and fingered a cut lip.

'Had enough?'

'Curse you, yes!'

'Then clear out, both of you.'

Horace glanced towards Priscilla, who had been standing motionless. Uncle Jacob's eyes were on her top.

'Please go,' she said, in a voice that was almost a whisper.

'Priscilla ? ' began Uncle Jacob. Horace jerked his father's arm and. mumbled, 'Come on.'

They went.

Jimmy said nothing until the front door had slammed behind them. Then he said, 'It's all very mad and bad, isn't it? I'd better give you back your list of shares, hadn't I?'

He dragged out the flap and extracted the envelope.

'You haven't looked at the list?' she asked. 'No; why should I?'

'I thought you must have been interested.'

She drew out the sheet of paper as she spoke, and handed it to him.

'Why, it's blank!' gasped Jimmy. 'What on earth was the idea?'

'I hate telling you,' said Miss Clegg, in a flat voice, 'but after our first talk I wanted to make sure that— that—'

'That I wouldn't let you down?'

'No, to see what would happen. When I gave you that envelope there wasn't any list of investments in existence. It wasn't needed. Nearly all the old shares had already been sold, and the money reinvested. In Flexos,' she added casually.

'Is that so?' said Jimmy, equally casual.

'Uncle Jacob mentioned that you were buying them,' she went on, 'and I'd a sort of intuition as well that they were the only genuine thing he'd ever recommended, or ever would recommend.'

'Were you among the first applicants?'

'Yes.'

'And you've still got them?'

She shook her head.

'I changed my mind, and sold out when they touched eighteen shillings. At present the money's just waiting at the bank.'

Jimmy gazed at her dumbly. Some section of his mind busied itself trying to work out how much profit she must have made, but got no assistance from the rest of his brain. Her voice roused him.

'There was something else you wanted to see me about.'

'I didn't say so?'

'But there was?'

He didn't deny it; he could only wonder how she knew.

'Tell me,' she persisted.

'I was going to ask you to marry me. I've been hopelessly in love with you for the last two months. After all,' he concluded bitterly, 'it's the natural end of a film story.'

'A film story?'

'Hollywood stuff, you know.'

Priscilla Clegg laughed, a queer, unsteady little laugh.

'Would it be Hollywood stuff if I told you that that's just what I've been hoping you'd do, ever since that first morning?'

'Absolutely,' said Jimmy, and took her in his arms.

'Poor boy,' she murmured, touching his bruised chin with her fingertips.

'Have you hated me frightfully?'

Jimmy's answer was worthy of a close-up.

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10: Coincidental Acquaintance

Mary Wingrove Bathon

1855 - 1934

King Island News (Tasmania) 15 July 1925

I had to make two corrections to this story. The author was printed as Windaroga Bathon, "Windaroga", obviously a mistake for Wingrove. Also a character is printed as "Polly Len Eyck" of New York; whereas the Dutch surname of ten Eyck is an established New York name dating from the days of Nieuw Amsterdam. These were clearly typeseting errors.

IT WAS a New Orleans June morning. To those who know that means many things. Work and play both seem better than they really are, when viewed under the influence of such a dawn. It was indeed but little later than that.

Rayburn opened, the window beside the piano to listen to the mocking birds in the trees on the sidewalk, as he watched tho rays of the sun come dancing up the street. Lighting a cigarette by way of dessert to his breakfast of coffee he stood at tho window inhaling the fragranco of the jasmine-laden air.

He did not know that Leland had come into his studio until he turned away from tho window recess and seated himself at the piano. It was somewhat disappointing to find him lying there on the couch. He had intended that this particular morning should mark the accomplishment of considerable hard work, as his symphony was to be produced At the opera on Sunday week and he WAS eager to search out and make the minor corrections it needed.

"Go on, if yo' ah goin' toe wohk," Leland called, as Rayburn looked up and caught his eye. "Ah hev not been able toe sleep all night," he continued, "so Ah name in heah. Ah heahed yo' play last night after yo' came home. Ah did not know yo' could play thet way."

It astonished Rayburn that he should be so unceremonious, in view their short acquaintance. He concluded Leland was, perhaps, attracted to him In the same unknown manner as he bad been to Leland when they met for the first time in the old absinthe-room around the corner of Bienville-street the night before. They had created some sort of a bond between themselves by imparting to each other the knowledge that they had both arrived in New Orleans, strangers in a strange land, the same week.

It was quite a coincidence, they thought, as they continued to speak to each other of their own affairs. Leland of his native Baton Rouge, the legal career he wanted in a larger field than his birthplace, and Clayburn of "dear old Now York," and the musical success he hoped to achieve in New Orleans because it was not, like New York, too large a field.

It was pleasant to learn that one had his lodgings and office in the same building that contained the other's rooms and studio. When Cheylard, who had

introduced them, departed, they continued to speak of the coincidences that seemed to have thrown them together. And, if I have been correctly informed, they also settled between them every question that had arisen in the legal and musical world in recent years, as men are wont to do at twenty five years of age. Leland was not much older than that and Rayburn not much younger.

His desire for the work was strong upon him, and, after seeing Leland arrange his pillows, fold his arms across his chest, and close his eyes, he started in at his symphony. When Rayburn remembered him again at 10.30, as he threw down the finished score of music with a tired sigh of relief, Leland was sound asleep.

Softly closing the door behind him, he walked down to Canal street and had his usual morning meal at Moreau's. He could not refrain from thinking of his Creole acquaintance, as the musical tones of Leland's voice, innocent of r's and drawlingly soft, echoed through his cars.

Leland and his personality possessed some strange fascination for him, as he hurried home out of the blazing sun, and he looked forward to a pleasant hour with him in the cool, shady studio, if he should find him thero on his return. He opened Leland's door as he passed his rooms on his way upstairs to see if he was there. Glancing in he shrank buck as if from an unexpected sight. A man in tears is a pitiful sight. A positive wave of personal pain swept over him as he tried to decide whether to speak to him or to quietly recloso the door.

Leland was lying on a couch, face down, with his arms buried in the pillows, sobbing and weeping with an anguish evidently impossible to control.

Rayburn could not enter the room. Closing the door, he passed up to his own studio. Arranging the Venetian blinds to shut out the glare of the sun, he re-seated himself at the piano and sent his fingers wandering over the keys in idle improvisations. His eyes strayed to his writing table and sought out once more the letter he had received from New York the night before, naming, at last, a day for his marriage to the girl he had waited and worked for so long; and then a feeling of wonder and pity for Leland crept through him and into the chords he was playing.

Suddenly the door opened, and Leland came in, calm, outwardly, at least.

"Rayburn," he said as he seated himself, "wuh yo' evuh in love?"

"Yes," replied Rayburn over his shoulder. He dared not let Leland see the happiness on his face. "I am now," he added.

"Ah yo'?" asked Leland.

"Yes," Rayburn said, "I am to bo married in October. I'll tell you of it, so that my happiness may cheer you a little. Your voice sounds sad my friend. Cheer up!"

"Theah is no moh cheah up foe me!" Leland answered. "Ah've staked an' lost."

"Have you? Tell me about it if you wish," Rayburn said, gently.

"Theah is noethin' toe tell. Ah met a gyuhl from New York up home in Baton Rouge about three yoars ago. It was the usual stohy only— Ah think Ah loved huh moh than any man evuh loved befoh."

"Yes, I know," Rayburn said. "Go on. Did she love you?"

"Yess. She did then. But she went home. About a yeah ago she she asked me toe come heah an' mek a name fob mahself. Thet's how Ah happened toe come to New Orleans. We hev been writin' too each other all along, of co'se."

"Well?" Rayburn asked. Unconsciously he began to play a "De Profundis" from a mass service.

"Well, Ah got a lettuh from huh las' night. She says she's changed huh mind. She says she loves some one else, an' is goin' toe be mah'd to him, not toe me. Ah don't know who it is."

"I am awfully sorry," Rayburn said, quietly. "Believe me, old chap."

"I am almost ashamed to think of my own great happiness," he added, quite simply.

"Keep on playin'," Leland said, "Ah like thet aih."

"She says it's an old schoolmate of huh's, "he continued, "who is at present in New Orleans, an' thet she fin's . she has really loved him foh some time. She says she has known it foh some time, but has not hed cou'h'ge toe tell me until now. Aftuh three yeahs! Think of it!"

"An old schoolmate!" Rayburn repeated, reflectively. "Yes," ho continued, "old loves are the best. The girl I am going to marry is an old schoolmate of mine."

"What's huh name, Rayburn?" Leland asked listlessly.

"Polly ten Eyck."

"Yo' don't mean it!" Leland cried. "Good God!"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nothin', only I know Miss ten Eyck," Leland said in a tense voice, as he dragged himself to his feet.

"Do you? Where did you meet her? When she was South here a few years ago?"

Rayburn still kept his face turned away from Leland, telling himself that he would not intrude his happiness upon him.

"Yess," Leland answered. "She is— she is a very nice gyhul, Rayburn."

Leland started for the door.

"She will mek yo' ve'y happy," he said, drearily.

"I think, so too," Rayburn said, gazing dreamily away through the window blinds into the sunshine of the streets.

"Yass," Leland said, mechanically as he left the room. "Ah ought toe know," he said to himself, under his breath, "considuhin' that Ah hev been in love with huh mahself for thuh pas' three yeahs!"

11: The Ebony Frame

Edith Nesbit

1886–1924

Longman's Magazine Oct 1891

In: *Grim Tales*, 1893

TO BE RICH is a luxurious sensation— the more so when you have plumbed the depths of hard-up-ness as a Fleet Street hack, a picker-up of unconsidered pars, a reporter, an unappreciated journalist— all callings utterly inconsistent with one's family feeling and one's direct descent from the Dukes of Picardy.

When my Aunt Dorcas died and left me seven hundred a year and a furnished house in Chelsea, I felt that life had nothing left to offer except immediate possession of the legacy. Even Mildred Mayhew, whom I had hitherto regarded as my life's light, became less luminous. I was not engaged to Mildred, but I lodged with her mother, and I sang duets with Mildred, and gave her gloves when it would run to it, which was seldom. She was a dear good girl, and I meant to marry her some day. It is very nice to feel that a good little woman is thinking of you— it helps you in your work— and it is pleasant to know she will say "Yes" when you say "Will you?"

But, as I say, my legacy almost put Mildred out of my head, especially as she was staying with friends in the country just then.

Before the first gloss was off my new mourning I was seated in my aunt's own armchair in front of the fire in the dining-room of my own house. My own house! It was grand, but rather lonely. I *did* think of Mildred just then.

The room was comfortably furnished with oak and leather. On the walls hung a few fairly good oil-paintings, but the space above the mantelpiece was disfigured by an exceedingly bad print, "The Trial of Lord William Russell," framed in a dark frame. I got up to look at it. I had visited my aunt with dutiful regularity, but I never remembered seeing this frame before. It was not intended for a print, but for an oil-painting. It was of fine ebony, beautifully and curiously carved.

I looked at it with growing interest, and when my aunt's housemaid— I had retained her modest staff of servants— came in with the lamp, I asked her how long the print had been there.

"Mistress only bought it two days afore she was took ill," she said; "but the frame— she didn't want to buy a new one— so she got this out of the attic. There's lots of curious old things there, sir."

"Had my aunt had this frame long?"

"Oh yes, sir. It come long afore I did, and I've been here seven years come Christmas. There was a picture in it—that's upstairs too—but it's that black and ugly it might as well be a chimley-back."

I felt a desire to see this picture. What if it were some priceless old master in which my aunt's eyes had only seen rubbish?

Directly after breakfast next morning I paid a visit to the lumber-room.

It was crammed with old furniture enough to stock a curiosity shop. All the house was furnished solidly in the early Victorian style, and in this room everything not in keeping with the "drawing-room suite" ideal was stowed away. Tables of papier-maché and mother-of-pearl, straight-backed chairs with twisted feet and faded needlework cushions, firescreens of old-world design, oak bureaux with brass handles, a little work-table with its faded moth-eaten silk flutings hanging in disconsolate shreds: on these and the dust that covered them blazed the full daylight as I drew up the blinds. I promised myself a good time in re-enshrining these household gods in my parlour, and promoting the Victorian suite to the attic. But at present my business was to find the picture as "black as the chimley-back;" and presently, behind a heap of hideous still-life studies, I found it.

Jane the housemaid identified it at once. I took it downstairs carefully and examined it. No subject, no colour were distinguishable. There was a splodge of a darker tint in the middle, but whether it was figure or tree or house no man could have told. It seemed to be painted on a very thick panel bound with leather. I decided to send it to one of those persons who pour on rotting family portraits the water of eternal youth— mere soap and water Mr. Besant tells us it is; but even as I did so the thought occurred to me to try my own restorative hand at a corner of it.

My bath-sponge, soap, and nailbrush vigorously applied for a few seconds showed me that there was no picture to clean! Bare oak presented itself to my persevering brush. I tried the other side, Jane watching me with indulgent interest. The same result. Then the truth dawned on me. Why was the panel so thick? I tore off the leather binding, and the panel divided and fell to the ground in a cloud of dust. There were two pictures— they had been nailed face to face. I leaned them against the wall, and the next moment I was leaning against it myself.

For one of the pictures was myself— a perfect portrait— no shade of expression or turn of feature wanting. Myself— in a cavalier dress, "love-locks and all!" When had this been done? And how, without my knowledge? Was this some whim of my aunt's?

"Lor', sir!" the shrill surprise of Jane at my elbow; "what a lovely photo it is! Was it a fancy ball, sir?"

"Yes," I stammered. "I— I don't think I want anything more now. You can go."

She went; and I turned, still with my heart beating violently, to the other picture. This was a woman of the type of beauty beloved of Burne Jones and Rossetti— straight nose, low brows, full lips, thin hands, large deep luminous eyes. She wore a black velvet gown. It was a full-length portrait. Her arms rested on a table beside her, and her head on her hands; but her face was turned full forward, and her eyes met those of the spectator bewilderingly. On the table by her were compasses and instruments whose uses I did not know, books, a goblet, and a miscellaneous heap of papers and pens. I saw all this afterwards. I believe it was a quarter of an hour before I could turn my eyes away from hers. I have never seen any other eyes like hers. They appealed, as a child's or a dog's do; they commanded, as might those of an empress.

"Shall I sweep up the dust, sir?" Curiosity had brought Jane back. I acceded. I turned from her my portrait. I kept between her and the woman in the black velvet. When I was alone again I tore down "The Trial of Lord William Russell," and I put the picture of the woman in its strong ebony frame.

Then I wrote to a frame-maker for a frame for my portrait. It had so long lived face to face with this beautiful witch that I had not the heart to banish it from her presence; from which, it will be perceived that I am by nature a somewhat sentimental person.

The new frame came home, and I hung it opposite the fireplace. An exhaustive search among my aunt's papers showed no explanation of the portrait of myself, no history of the portrait of the woman with the wonderful eyes. I only learned that all the old furniture together had come to my aunt at the death of my great-uncle, the head of the family; and I should have concluded that the resemblance was only a family one, if every one who came in had not exclaimed at the "speaking likeness." I adopted Jane's "fancy ball" explanation.

And there, one might suppose, the matter of the portraits ended. One might suppose it, that is, if there were not evidently a good deal more written here about it. However, to me, then, the matter seemed ended.

I went to see Mildred; I invited her and her mother to come and stay with me. I rather avoided glancing at the picture in the ebony frame. I could not forget, nor remember without singular emotion, the look in the eyes of that woman when mine first met them. I shrank from meeting that look again.

I reorganized the house somewhat, preparing for Mildred's visit. I turned the dining-room into a drawing-room. I brought down much of the old-fashioned furniture, and, after a long day of arranging and re-arranging, I sat down before the fire, and, lying back in a pleasant languor, I idly raised my eyes to the picture. I met her dark, deep hazel eyes, and once more my gaze was held fixed as by a strong magic— the kind of fascination that keeps one

sometimes staring for whole minutes into one's own eyes in the glass. I gazed into her eyes, and felt my own dilate, pricked with a smart like the smart of tears.

"I wish," I said, "oh, how I wish you were a woman, and not a picture! Come down! Ah, come down!"

I laughed at myself as I spoke; but even as I laughed I held out my arms.

I was not sleepy; I was not drunk. I was as wide awake and as sober as ever was a man in this world. And yet, as I held out my arms, I saw the eyes of the picture dilate, her lips tremble—if I were to be hanged for saying it, it is true. Her hands moved slightly, and a sort of flicker of a smile passed over her face.

I sprang to my feet. "This won't do," I said, still aloud. "Firelight does play strange tricks. I'll have the lamp."

I pulled myself together and made for the bell. My hand was on it, when I heard a sound behind me, and turned— the bell still unrung. The fire had burned low, and the corners of the room were deeply shadowed; but, surely, there— behind the tall worked chair— was something darker than a shadow.

"I must face this out," I said, "or I shall never be able to face myself again." I left the bell, I seized the poker, and battered the dull coals to a blaze. Then I stepped back resolutely, and looked up at the picture. The ebony frame was empty! From the shadow of the worked chair came a silken rustle, and out of the shadow the woman of the picture was coming— coming towards me.

I hope I shall never again know a moment of terror so blank and absolute. I could not have moved or spoken to save my life. Either all the known laws of nature were nothing, or I was mad. I stood trembling, but, I am thankful to remember, I stood still, while the black velvet gown swept across the hearthrug towards me.

Next moment a hand touched me— a hand soft, warm, and human—and a low voice said, "You called me. I am here."

At that touch and that voice the world seemed to give a sort of bewildering half-turn. I hardly know how to express it, but at once it seemed not awful— not even unusual— for portraits to become flesh— only most natural, most right, most unspeakably fortunate.

I laid my hand on hers. I looked from her to my portrait. I could not see it in the firelight.

"We are not strangers," I said.

"Oh no, not strangers." Those luminous eyes were looking up into mine— those red lips were near me. With a passionate cry— a sense of having suddenly recovered life's one great good, that had seemed wholly lost— I clasped her in my arms. She was no ghost—she was a woman—the only woman in the world.

"How long," I said, "O love— how long since I lost you?"

She leaned back, hanging her full weight on the hands that were clasped behind my head.

"How can I tell how long? There is no time in hell," she answered.

It was not a dream. Ah, no— there are no such dreams. I wish to God there could be. When in dreams do I see her eyes, hear her voice, feel her lips against my cheek, hold her hands to my lips, as I did that night— the supreme night of my life? At first we hardly spoke. It seemed enough—

"...after long grief and pain,
To feel the arms of my true love
Round me once again."

It is very difficult to tell this story. There are no words to express the sense of glad reunion, the complete realization of every hope and dream of a life, that came upon me as I sat with my hand in hers and looked into her eyes.

How could it have been a dream, when I left her sitting in the straight-backed chair, and went down to the kitchen to tell the maids I should want nothing more— that I was busy, and did not wish to be disturbed; when I fetched wood for the fire with my own hands, and, bringing it in, found her still sitting there— saw the little brown head turn as I entered, saw the love in her dear eyes; when I threw myself at her feet and blessed the day I was born, since life had given me this?

Not a thought of Mildred: all the other things in my life were a dream— this, its one splendid reality.

"I am wondering," she said after a while, when we had made such cheer each of the other as true lovers may after long parting—"I am wondering how much you remember of our past."

"I remember nothing," I said. "Oh, my dear lady, my dear sweetheart— I remember nothing but that I love you— that I have loved you all my life."

"You remember nothing— really nothing?"

"Only that I am yours; that we have both suffered; that— Tell me, my mistress dear, all that you remember. Explain it all to me. Make me understand. And yet— No, I don't want to understand. It is enough that we are together."

If it was a dream, why have I never dreamed it again?

She leaned down towards me, her arm lay on my neck, and drew my head till it rested on her shoulder. "I am a ghost, I suppose," she said, laughing softly; and her laughter stirred memories which I just grasped at, and just missed. "But you and I know better, don't we? I will tell you everything you have forgotten. We loved each other— ah! no, you have not forgotten that—

and when you came back from the war we were to be married. Our pictures were painted before you went away. You know I was more learned than women of that day. Dear one, when you were gone they said I was a witch. They tried me. They said I should be burned. Just because I had looked at the stars and had gained more knowledge than they, they must needs bind me to a stake and let me be eaten by the fire. And you far away!"

Her whole body trembled and shrank. O love, what dream would have told me that my kisses would soothe even that memory?

"The night before," she went on, "the devil did come to me. I was innocent before— you know it, don't you? And even then my sin was for you— for you— because of the exceeding love I bore you. The devil came, and I sold my soul to eternal flame. But I got a good price. I got the right to come back, through my picture (if any one looking at it wished for me), as long as my picture stayed in its ebony frame. That frame was not carved by man's hand. I got the right to come back to you. Oh, my heart's heart, and another thing I won, which you shall hear anon. They burned me for a witch, they made me suffer hell on earth. Those faces, all crowding round, the crackling wood and the smell of the smoke—"

"O love! no more— no more."

"When my mother sat that night before my picture she wept, and cried, 'Come back, my poor lost child!' And I went to her, with glad leaps of heart. Dear, she shrank from me, she fled, she shrieked and moaned of ghosts. She had our pictures covered from sight and put again in the ebony frame. She had promised me my picture should stay always there. Ah, through all these years your face was against mine."

She paused.

"But the man you loved?"

"You came home. My picture was gone. They lied to you, and you married another woman; but some day I knew you would walk the world again and that I should find you."

"The other gain?" I asked.

"The other gain," she said slowly, "I gave my soul for. It is this. If you also will give up your hopes of heaven I can remain a woman, I can move in your world— I can be your wife. Oh, my dear, after all these years, at last— at last."

"If I sacrifice my soul," I said slowly, with no thought of the imbecility of such talk in our "so-called nineteenth century"— "if I sacrifice my soul, I win you? Why, love, it's a contradiction in terms. You *are* my soul."

Her eyes looked straight into mine. Whatever might happen, whatever did happen, whatever may happen, our two souls in that moment met, and became one.

"Then you choose —you deliberately choose— to give up your hopes of heaven for me, as I gave up mine for you?"

"I decline," I said, "to give up my hope of heaven on any terms. Tell me what I must do, that you and I may make our heaven here— as now, my dear love."

"I will tell you to-morrow," she said. "Be alone here to-morrow night— twelve is ghost's time, isn't it?— and then I will come out of the picture and never go back to it. I shall live with you, and die, and be buried, and there will be an end of me. But we shall live first, my heart's heart."

I laid my head on her knee. A strange drowsiness overcame me. Holding her hand against my cheek, I lost consciousness. When I awoke the grey November dawn was glimmering, ghost-like, through the uncurtained window. My head was pillowed on my arm, which rested— I raised my head quickly— ah! not on my lady's knee, but on the needle-worked cushion of the straight-backed chair. I sprang to my feet. I was stiff with cold, and dazed with dreams, but I turned my eyes on the picture. There she sat, my lady, my dear love. I held out my arms, but the passionate cry I would have uttered died on my lips. She had said twelve o'clock. Her lightest word was my law. So I only stood in front of the picture and gazed into those grey-green eyes till tears of passionate happiness filled my own.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, how shall I pass the hours till I hold you again?"

No thought, then, of my whole life's completion and consummation being a dream.

I staggered up to my room, fell across my bed, and slept heavily and dreamlessly. When I awoke it was high noon. Mildred and her mother were coming to lunch.

I remembered, at one shock, Mildred's coming and her existence.

Now, indeed, the dream began.

With a penetrating sense of the futility of any action apart from *her*, I gave the necessary orders for the reception of my guests. When Mildred and her mother came I received them with cordiality; but my genial phrases all seemed to be some one else's. My voice sounded like an echo; my heart was other where.

Still, the situation was not intolerable until the hour when afternoon tea was served in the drawing-room. Mildred and her mother kept the conversational pot boiling with a profusion of genteel commonplaces, and I bore it, as one can bear mild purgatories when one is in sight of heaven. I looked up at my sweetheart in the ebony frame, and I felt that anything that might happen, any irresponsible imbecility, any bathos of boredom, was nothing, if, after it all, *she* came to me again.

And yet, when Mildred, too, looked at the portrait, and said, "What a fine lady! One of your flames, Mr. Devigne?" I had a sickening sense of impotent irritation, which became absolute torture when Mildred— how could I ever have admired that chocolate-box barmaid style of prettiness?— threw herself into the high-backed chair, covering the needlework with her ridiculous flounces, and added, "Silence gives consent! Who is it, Mr. Devigne? Tell us all about her: I am sure she has a story."

Poor little Mildred, sitting there smiling, serene in her confidence that her every word charmed me— sitting there with her rather pinched waist, her rather tight boots, her rather vulgar voice— sitting in the chair where my dear lady had sat when she told me her story! I could not bear it.

"Don't sit there," I said; "it's not comfortable!"

But the girl would not be warned. With a laugh that set every nerve in my body vibrating with annoyance, she said, "Oh, dear! mustn't I even sit in the same chair as your black-velvet woman?"

I looked at the chair in the picture. It *was* the same; and in her chair Mildred was sitting. Then a horrible sense of the reality of Mildred came upon me. Was all this a reality after all? But for fortunate chance might Mildred have occupied, not only her chair, but her place in my life? I rose.

"I hope you won't think me very rude," I said; "but I am obliged to go out."

I forget what appointment I alleged. The lie came readily enough.

I faced Mildred's pouts with the hope that she and her mother would not wait dinner for me. I fled. In another minute I was safe, alone, under the chill, cloudy autumn sky— free to think, think, think of my dear lady.

I walked for hours along streets and squares; I lived over again and again every look, word, and hand-touch— every kiss; I was completely, unspeakably happy.

Mildred was utterly forgotten: my lady of the ebony frame filled my heart and soul and spirit.

As I heard eleven boom through the fog, I turned, and went home.

When I got to my street, I found a crowd surging through it, a strong red light filling the air.

A house was on fire. Mine.

I elbowed my way through the crowd.

The picture of my lady— that, at least, I could save!

As I sprang up the steps, I saw, as in a dream— yes, all this was *really* dream-like— I saw Mildred leaning out of the first-floor window, wringing her hands.

"Come back, sir," cried a fireman; "we'll get the young lady out right enough."

But *my* lady? I went on up the stairs, cracking, smoking, and as hot as hell, to the room where her picture was. Strange to say, I only felt that the picture was a thing we should like to look on through the long glad wedded life that was to be ours. I never thought of it as being one with her.

As I reached the first floor I felt arms round my neck. The smoke was too thick for me to distinguish features.

"Save me!" a voice whispered. I clasped a figure in my arms, and, with a strange disease, bore it down the shaking stairs and out into safety. It was Mildred. I knew *that* directly I clasped her.

"Stand back," cried the crowd.

"Every one's safe," cried a fireman.

The flames leaped from every window. The sky grew redder and redder. I sprang from the hands that would have held me. I leaped up the steps. I crawled up the stairs. Suddenly the whole horror of the situation came on me. "*As long as my picture remains in the ebony frame.*" What if picture and frame perished together?

I fought with the fire, and with my own choking inability to fight with it. I pushed on. I must save my picture. I reached the drawing-room.

As I sprang in I saw my lady— I swear it—through the smoke and the flames, hold out her arms to me— to me— who came too late to save her, and to save my own life's joy. I never saw her again.

Before I could reach her, or cry out to her, I felt the floor yield beneath my feet, and I fell into the fiery hell below.

HOW did they save me? What does that matter? They saved me somehow— curse them. Every stick of my aunt's furniture was destroyed. My friends pointed out that, as the furniture was heavily insured, the carelessness of a nightly-studious housemaid had done me no harm.

No harm!

That was how I won and lost my only love.

I deny, with all my soul in the denial, that it was a dream. There are no such dreams. Dreams of longing and pain there are in plenty, but dreams of complete, of unspeakable happiness— ah, no— it is the rest of life that is the dream.

But if I think that, why have I married Mildred, and grown stout and dull and prosperous?

I tell you it is all *this* that is the dream; my dear lady only is the reality. And what does it matter what one does in a dream?

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12: Habit

Geoffrey Soutar

fl 1934

The Evening Standard (London) 2 June 1934

Daily News (W Aust) 6 June 1938

I can find just two stories by this otherwise unknown author, both published in the UK in 1934. The other, "The Old Optimist", appeared in The Passing Show*, 8 Dec 1934.*

THE brutal murder of his cashier placed portly Mr. Willebrandt in a limelight he had never known before. He felt grieved over old Hunt's dreadful end, but the improvement of his sales, because of the publicity he was receiving, greatly offset the loss of an excellent employee. Customers with a morbid curiosity came in his shop on the pretext of buying with the intention of hearing a first hand account of the finding of the body. Willebrandt was loth to tell the story; He always made a sale before allowing the awed customers to hear a word about the tragedy.

On the afternoon two days after the crime that Inspector Bryant entered the jeweller's shop, there was a small crowd gathered around the showcase behind which Willebrandt presided.

"A very nice stone, madam," the jeweller was saying. "Ten guineas is a reasonable price."

"Oh, Mr. Willebrandt," said a stout, over-dressed woman, "is that stone like any that Mr Hunt was carrying?"

He ignored the remark and pointed to the jewel.

"Did you say that you would take it, madam?"

The stout lady was on tenter-hooks. "Oh, yes. Please put it aside for me."

"I presume that you will pay for it now?"

"If you wish it. Here, I have it exactly, how fortunate," she tittered as the money was receipted. "Now, please, Mr. Willebrandt, tell me, was it a ghastly sight?"

The sale having been consummated, the jeweller slowly nodded his head.

"Madam, it was terrible. I could hardly recognise poor Hunt. In fact, if it hadn't been for an old silver ring he always wore, I shouldn't have been able to identify the body.'

"What a terrifying experience for you. Do tell me how it all happened, right from the beginning."

Mr. Willebrandt fingered the bottom of his waistcoat and ap peared moved by the memory. He glanced at his audience to make sure that they were in the proper mood to appreciate his graphic ac count of the discovery of the burnt car with the charred, broken body of his cashier inside.

"Mr. Hunt always used my car, when he carried any quantity of stones and my chauffeur, whom I trusted implicitly, drove him. This time, the chauffeur was absent and I ordered a clerk to do the driving. I thought the boy was reliable. I didn't dream that he would turn thief and murderer..."

AT that moment there was a movement behind the stout lady. The inspector, who had been waiting on the edge of the group, shouldered his way to the show counter.

"I'm Inspector Bryant," he addressed the jeweller and showed his credentials. "I'd like to have a word with you, Mr. Willebrandt."

The portly jeweller was flustered at the interruption.

"Certainly, certainly— er— will you come this way?" he stammered. "In the office we shall not be interrupted."

In the sanctity of his. office Willebrandt regained some of his composure.

"Please take a chair, Inspector. I suppose you want to ask me some questions about poor Hunt? It is really very trying for me, I have been questioned by the police so much already."

He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and settled himself with a deep sigh in the chair behind his desk. The inspector remained standing while he made some reference to his notebook.

"I believe I am right, Mr. Willebrandt, in saying that Hunt left these premises at ten o'clock in the morning of the fourteenth; that was the day before yesterday?"

"Yes, Inspector, Mr. Hunt carried our rough stones to the cutters once a month. He always made a point of leaving at ten o'clock so that he could be back in- the shop in time for a full afternoon's work on his books; they are made up twice a month."

"He has worked for you for some years?"

"About twenty-five, never missed a day," the jeweller declared em phatically. "He was a fine worker; always, entered the shop on the stroke of nine. He was very punctual and an excellent man. I feel his loss very badly."

The inspector murmured something under his breath and then asked: 'Was there ever any ques tion about his bookkeeping?"

Willebrandt seemed horrified at the suggestion. 'On the contrary,' he said, 'Mr. Hunt kept his books in the best of order. He was very set in his ways and I could always depend on find ing anything I wanted, and at any time; and I never found occasion to question either his system or his figures."

Bryant, grunted to himself and scribbled in his notebook.

"Tell me about the boy who drove the car. Has he been with you very long?"

"No, only a few weeks, but his references were in perfect order when he came to us."

"Only a few weeks," Bryant said pointedly. "You entrusted him with driving your cashier, an old man, who was carrying uncut diamonds of considerable value?"

Wiliebrandt was uncomfortable.

"But I was sure the boy could be trusted. And, Inspector, a boy would have great trouble in disposing of the stones. I can't understand it at all."

The Inspector moved nearer to the jeweller. "Are you going to collect insurance on the stones if they are not found?"

The jeweller was aghast, and once more he began to wipe his forehead with his handkerchief.

"That is all for the moment," said the inspector. "You will be within reach if the police need you?"

"Certainly, inspector."

Bryant moved to the door, but before leaving he consulted his book again.

"Mr. Hunt lived at a flat, 2a, Conway-street. Is that right?" he asked.

"Yes, that is correct, inspector. Good day, inspector."

After Bryant had gone he shut the door and did not go out into the shop again that day. His mind was too troubled to think of selling ten guinea solitaires to stout, over dressed ladies.

IT was almost dark when Bryant left the shop. He crossed the pavement and stepped into the waiting police car.

"Any developments?" the sergeant, sitting next to the driver, asked.

"Very little more than we know already," the inspector said. He leaned back in his seat and was silent for a few moments.

Then he addressed the driver: "Drive over to 2a, Conway-street.'

"Conway-street?" queried the sergeant over his shoulder.

"Yes, the home of the late Mr. Hunt," said Bryant. "Sergeant, did you see the body of the deceased?"

"Proper burnt-up mess, it was, Inspector."

"Did you see the skull?"

"Pretty badly smashed in!"

"You didn't notice the teeth, though— they were in a pretty decent condition for an old man."

He paused a moment.

"Oh, well, I sup pose that one of the admirable Mr. Hunt's habits was to brush them three times a day."

They found 2a, Conway-street, to be the upper flat in the second house of a row of red brick buildings, just outside the Metropolitan Area. The caretaker, a garrulous woman who seemed over-ready to give lengthy answers to any questions the inspector put to her, conducted them up the stairs.

"Who attended to the cleaning of Mr. Hunt's flat?" asked Bryant.

"I did," started the caretaker, "and it was a pleasure, I must say. Such a nice old gent, 'e was, and never made a bit of trouble. So tidy, 'e was, always a place for everything. 'E always left the. same time every evening. I always knew where I was with Mr. Hunt, I did..."

She would have continued extolling Mr. Hunt's virtues but the inspector bluntly in terrupted.

'What time did he leave on the fourteenth, the day before yester day?'

"Same time as always, sir, 'air past eight."

"Anyone been in his room since?"

"No, sir; I thought as 'ow I ought to clean it a bit, but when I got to thinkin' about 'is death, I couldn't bring myself to go in."

When they reached the upper landing the caretaker opened the door of Hunt's flat with a pass key.

"You had better come in too," the sergeant said to her, and she timid ly followed behind the two men.

THE flat consisted of a liv ing-room, bedroom and a kitchenette. The inspector passed through the front room to the bedroom. The first thing to catch his attention was a suitcase on the bed.

"Did you say that nobody has been in the flat since the morning of the tragedy?" Bryant said to the caretaker.

"Not to my knowledge," she replied quickly, as if she resented any doubt the inspector might have of the truth of her statement.

"Then why is this suitcase on the bed?" he demanded. "It is only half packed, I see. I thought you said that Mr. Hunt was a tidy in dividual and never left anything lying around."

The caretaker was perturbed. "I can't say 'ow it got there, sir. Probably Mr. 'Unt put it there 'im self. 'E did mention two or three days ago that he was going on an 'oliday. Maybe 'e was packing when 'e found it was time to leave the 'ouse and just left it there to finish when 'e came 'ome.'

"Quite possible," said Bryant, and led the way back to the other room.

He looked around and made a mental note of the furnishings. There was the usual arrangement of table, chairs and sideboard. In one corner was a writing desk with an orderly array of letters and papers. Bryant glanced through these and found nothing to interest him.

He turned his attention to the mantel shelf; there was a mirror above, and a little to one side hung a small wooden cuckoo clock, of the weight and chain variety. In front of the fireplace, which had not been made up since Hunt left the house, there was a pair of slippers. The inspector pointed them out to the caretaker.

"Hunt's slippers, I suppose," he said shortly. "Yes, sir, 'e always left them like that."

"It seems quite evident that there is always something that Mr. Hunt was doing always," mused the inspector. He turned to the sergeant, who had been standing in the doorway: "There is nothing here that is of any use to us. We might as well go back to the Yard."

As he was leaving, Bryant glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Almost seven o'clock," he said. "I think I've done enough for one day."

Unconsciously he looked up at the cuckoo-clock over the fire place to verify his own watch. He had half turned to follow the sergeant, who was already at the foot of the first flight of stairs, when, suddenly, his expression changed.

"Sergeant," he almost shouted, "come back here. Hurry!"

"What is it, inspector?" the ser geant called up.

"Stand at this door and don't let anyone pass. I'm going to search this flat!'"

It was Hunt himself the inspector found. A gaunt, grey-haired man of fifty, pale and shaking, as he crouched in the corner of a cupboard in the bathroom.

BACK at the Yard, Bryant was explaining:

"It was quite a clear case. Hunt finished off his driver with a hammer; quite easy, even for an old man. The boy was evidently nervous at the responsibility of carrying such a valuable consignment and was off his guard. Hunt then changed all marks of identification— such as the old silver ring he wore— set the car on fire and hid out until he thought the coast was clear. He then sneaked back to his flat, unseen by his caretaker, meaning to stay there only long enough to pack a bag. Once out of the country he would have no difficulty in realising on the diamonds, knowing the business as he did. Well, I surprised him in the middle of his packing."

"But Bryant, you haven't ex plained how you knew that Hunt was still in his flat."

"That was simple,' he chuckled. 'Everybody that I questioned in my investigations tried to impress on me what a reliable man Hunt was. So much that towards the end I felt like shooting anyone who men tioned 'habits' to me again. And yet — it was one of Hunt's habits that gave him away.' 'Hunt had a clock, worked by a weighted chain. To wind it, you pulled the weight to the top.

"Now, it seems that one of Hunt's wretched habits was to pull the weight up everytime he saw that it was near the bottom— many people do the same thing; you might even call it a wind-the-clock mania.

"When I left, I happened to look at this clock, and it struck me that the weight was at the top. Some one must have been in the room a moment before we arrived and purely by habit, wound it up."

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13: The Two Jacks.

Hume Nisbet

1849-1921

Clarence and Richmond Examiner (NSW), 20 July 1901

ETHEL WOODYETT, the Darling Downs squatter's daughter, was slightly coquettish, as pretty and spirited girls generally are before they discover their masters. Men came to and departed from that hospitable station, gentlemen tourists and globe-trotters; and each in their turn did homage to the little Queensland fairy who had never known care nor sorrow. They were like her subjects, and trembled, while she smiled with heart-whole content and rejoiced in her youthful power.

This was until she had reached her seventeenth year. Then she began to grow softer and more sympathetic to those whom she had formerly sent away in such dejection. Jack Lefroy, her father's gentlemanly but reckless manager, she spoke gently to instead of with her former scorn of careless girlhood. She knew he worshipped the ground she walked over, and would let no one else groom, feed, or saddle her horse. She honoured his respect as she pitied his hopeless affection, but while she said 'Poor Jack!' admired his handsome figure and strong noble face, she sighed that be did not come up to her ideal, as her first fancy.

By-and-bye, her type of hero came along, and having been waiting for him, she straightway fluttered to his feet and began to invest him with all the virtues of the heroes of romance she had read about. The Hon. John Brand was certainly a noble looking man. Dark, pale-cheeked, thoughtful and exceedingly well groomed, he was exactly the kind of man, only an inch shorter than Jack Lefroy, who stood six feet two in his stockings. He had a handsome, well filled-out figure; not yet too fat; white and even teeth, with thin, straight nose, and the most silky of black moustaches and beard.,

The Hon. John Brand bore the reputation of a mighty hunter. He had brought to England trophies of his skill, and prowess from India, Africa, and the Rocky Mountains. He did not boast about these deeds, and indeed was exceedingly hard to draw out. His valet, however, spoke freely about his master's indomitable courage in the kitchen, and in the stockyard; so that all the maids admired the stately gentleman, and all the men looked on him with envy.

IT WAS a delicious spring morning, and the horses of Ethel, with her stately cavalier, were bounding over the grassy downs. The Hon. John Brand rode easily and gracefully as he did everything, and as Ethel watched him furtively, she felt satisfied, safe, and happy. She was taking him to a stalagmitic cave in

the ranges, which was one of the few sights of the district. He had not yet told her his love, but she was sure he did love her, and that the confession might come any time, perhaps in the cave. His eyes and ardent attentions were pretty plain confessions already.

'We are almost at the gully where the cave is, Mr. Brand, and fifteen miles from civilisation.'

'They have not seemed five, Miss Ethel; but why don't you call me Jack?'

'I might call you John, but I don't think I could say "Jack" to you,' answered Ethel, shyly.

'Well, John be it, dear' Ethel. Do you often come here !"

'No, John,-nor would I now unless I was with a brave man.'

'Oh? Why?'

'Because the natives are still some-times troublesome in these parts.'

'Indeed!' stammered the Hon. John, growing a shade paler, while his lower lip trembled. 'Is that why you told me to bring my gun and revolver?'

'Yes,' answered Edith, noticing his agitation, and hastening to reassure him. 'But don't be at all uneasy about me. I feel perfectly safe with you,'

They had now reached the entrance of the cave, and the great hunter looked round eagerly, and seemed most uneasy about his fair charge. But the gully was still and peaceful, and only the parrots chattered on the gum branches; so be dismounted, and, assisted Ethel to do likewise, then, tying up the horses, they prepared to enter.

At this moment the most savage and startling yells rose from every side of them, while a shower of spears sped from the unseen enemies and rattled against the rocks behind.

'Merciful heavens,' shrieked the Hon. John Brand, as he dropped on his face, and rolled instantly into the cave, in an apparent paroxysm of mortal agony, leaving Poor Ethel outside.

She was a brave girl, and ready witted. With her first sensation of spirit anguish, for she believed her noble lover had been mortally wounded, came to the heroic instinct to punish his murderers. Seeing that he had left his Winchester and revolver behind him, she at once secured these and darted into the cave entrance and sheltered herself behind a rock.

'Ah, my dear love!' she murmured passionately as she brought her repeating rifle to her fragile shoulder, and took aim at the scrub that seemed moving. Then she added prayerfully, as she poured bullet after bullet outside: 'Ah, God spare his brave life.'

No sound from within, and the smoke obscured the entrance, which she watched with lynx eyes, holding her revolver firmly at the cock. Was he dead, that he made no groan or movement?

'Mr. Brand— John— oh dear, dear Jack, speak to me if you can.'

No answer to her frantic appeal. The silence of disaster reigned inside that dismal darkness.

What is that? Shots in the gully? Ay— someone is coming to the rescue, and shooting as they speed near.

The gunpowder smoke drives into the cave and at inst leaves her vision clear to what is occurring outside. Here comes poor Jack Lefroy, emptying his revolver to right and left, in heroic style, with the reins in his glistening teeth and his blue eyes blazing.

'All safe, little girl?' cried Jack, loudly,

"I am, but I fear Jo— Mr. Brand is killed.'

'Let's find out, the danger is past,' said Jack Lefroy shortly, as he struck a match on his riding pants and held it up.

The Hon. John Brand was discerned in the act of getting up. He had heard the magical words: 'The danger is past,' and recovered his senses quickly, he was likewise unwounded.

'Oh!' cried Ethel in disgust. 'Take me home, Jack Lefroy,' saying which, she swept out of the cave with her father's manager; leaving the mighty lion and tiger hunter to come after as he best could.

The next day the Hon. John Brand went forth with his valet, to pastures new.

THREE MONTHS after this, Ethel changed her name from Woodyett to Lefroy. Her Jack— the real Jack, was able to satisfy Squatter Woodyett as to his future prospects, his father being the Earl of Mayblossom, and himself the eldest son.

He never told his wife, however, even when she became Countess Mayblossom, and would thus have forgiven her lord any trick for love's sweet sake, that he had been at school with the Hon. John Brand, and therefore, knew his peculiarities. Nor did he tell her that the natives were a friendly tribe whom he had bribed to act this little drama, so that he might win his love. He believed in the old adage that all is fair in love; but he was wise in his generation, and preferred not to dispel this one delusion of his beautiful and dearly-adored spouse.'

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14: A Southern Moon

Hume Nisbet

North Queensland Register (Townsville) 3 May 1893

MRS LAVINA ALGAR learned back on her canvas chair under the Branch Bank verandah one warm Australian night about the end of December, with the full moon playing upon and spiritualising her delicate beauty, and making a silver halo round the outer edges of her fragrant and massy, golden hair; while Reginald Cleaver, the new cashier looked down upon that radiant vision of dainty and perfumed womanhood with a great deal more of warmth and enthusiasm than perhaps Mr. Algar, the staid bank manager and husband of the beauty, might have cared to encourage had he observed it. But as at the moment he was engaged elsewhere the young man could be as daring as he well pleased to be, so long as the object of his present enthusiasm did not object.

They had known each other four weeks and a half now— ever since he had been appointed to his post; and as his duties were pretty light in this up-country branch establishment the weeks had been spent, with only the necessary daily breaks, almost entirely in the young lady's charming society. So that being Australian born and bred Mrs. Algar had grown very familiar with her gentlemanly lodger, and spoke to him as if she had known him from the days of his early childhood; that is to say, they had long ago dispensed with all starchy formalities in addressing one another, and called each other by their Christian names of 'Reginald' and 'Lavina' which sounded much freer and heartier than Mr. Cleaver and Mrs Algar.

When John Algar was present it was Reginald, or Lavina; but tête-à-tête, as they were on this night, he called her by the pet name she had given herself, which was Nina, as she called him Volto, so that they might have something different to what the rest of the world knew them by. It was foolish no doubt, yet innocent enough as far as it went— as was her habit of calling her husband 'Bruno' behind his back— common enough also with young ladies who haven't much to occupy their minds, in their intercourse with young gentlemen friends.

John Algar, the bank manager, was an angular, loud-voiced, consequential man, of about fifty— grey-haired and bearded, with small, keen, grey eyes, that generally impressed people with his business acumen. He hadn't a very agreeable manner— these strident, bombastic, and argumentative men seldom have— and for that reason customers trusted him all the more, and considered him the right man for the place. It is astonishing how much these socially uncomfortable men impress the world with their honesty.

Reginald or 'Volto' Cleaver was one of those carefully-groomed young men who look well under any circumstances, with prettily trained moustache, slender white hands, and modulated voice: one of the young gentlemen who are turned out wholesale from Nature's modern jerry workshop, who look as harmless about a drawing-room as tame cats, and are as necessary to the idle fair sex as a three-volumed romance of fashionable life

Mrs. Lavina was twenty three, that is twenty-seven years younger than her husband, and the most accomplished and lady-like female in the township. She always had her costumes direct from London and as up to date as possible, she was very slender, very fair, and took great care of her complexion, so that Volto almost forgot when he saw her first that he was six weeks' distance from home; and since she had exhibited those pretty Colonial arts and graces, so much less formal than the home airs, he had lost all desire ever to again inhale the yellow fogs, and felt that Australia was quite good enough for him. In fact, for the first time in his young life, he felt that existence along with Nina would be delightful anywhere, and found himself so much engrossed with her that he forgot to think at all about himself.

This was the state of affairs on this moonlight night, with that green expanse of bush and ocean stretching in front of them, over which her limpid, grey-green eyes looked dreamily, while he stood, his face in shadow, watching her intently. He had come out to smoke a cigar after dinner, and she had come to keep him company while Bruno was, as usual, in the office attending to business; all according to Nature's laws youth in the moonlight put middle-age at the coffer.

'What is wrong with you to-night, Volto? You are very silent, and have not lit your cigar yet,' observed the lady, as she turned her large eyes from the landscape, to that shadow face speaking in the soft, tender tones which seems to mean so much more than is uttered.

'I was thinking, Nina,' replied the young man, with a heavy sigh.

'About what?'

'The moonlight and you.'

'Yes!' murmured the lady, echoing his sigh. 'It is lovely, is it not?— the moonlight, I mean.'

'And you?'

'Hush! or Bruno may hear you.'

'Then let us go into the garden, Nina, for I have a lot to say to you.'

Mrs Algar took up a little lace shawl from the ground where she had thrown it, and drawing it over her slender shoulders she raised herself with a graceful movement, and taking his arm, she went with him down the verandah steps and into the shadows of the trees beyond. As they did so, John Algar

came from the French door of the dining room, looked after them for a moment or two, then with a grunt went back again to his work.

For the next half-hour the murmur of their subdued voices came wafting in with the perfume of the exotics, a large spider completed the web he had begun before they left and which ere they could enter again they would have to break through, for he had barricaded the doorway, and as the dew fell upon his web it looked like a close curtain of silver and gems.

Inside the bank the manager had also completed the task which had occupied him for several of the nights the young couple had been sentimentalizing outside, and had carefully replaced his cashier's key to his room, after locking the desk where he kept his set of books. A delicate task Mr. Algar had been engaged upon, which required a small bottle of acid and a good deal of practice of Reginald's handwriting; however it was at last very neatly accomplished, and the manager reappeared again at the verandah and called out with those strident honest tones of his:

'Where are you, Lavina?'

'Here, John!' came back the liquid accents of his youthful spouse.

'All right, dear, don't disturb yourself; I am going into the town for a little while, but I'll be back for supper.'

As John Algar went out the back way, 'Nina' and 'Volto' returned by the front, and after ruthlessly demolishing that foolish spider's web, they made themselves comfortable in the drawing room, she sitting down to the piano while he leaned over her tenderly, feeling as nearly happy as it was possible for sinful mortal to feel at any time, while she played soft chords to him and looked at him now and again with the tender glance which made him so completely her slave.

They did not speak much during that interval of waiting, and only when the sound of her husband's loud footsteps were heard, as he entered the house, was the spell broken. Stooping over her, he kissed her and whispered:

'I love you, Nina; I love you.'

'Hush! Volto— or Bruno will hear you.'

John Algar came in, loudly slamming the door behind him, and sat very grimly all through the supper; so that Reginald Cleaver hardly dared to look at him and shortly afterwards retired to his bedroom in a tumult of remorse and passion which kept him awake nearly half the night. He had kissed her for the first time, and she had not resisted, so she must love him although she had not yet said so. How beautiful she was!— on the morrow perhaps she would give him the assurance he wanted.

At breakfast, however, Nina did not look at him neither did she speak, but kept her lovely head bent over plate in a confused shy way that was very

charming, and when afterwards he was asked into the manager's room and found there a couple of strangers watching him curiously, he was so engrossed with that charming picture that he hardly looked at them or listened to the loud coarse voice of his superior, but gave up his keys and permitted one of the strangers to go for his books without thinking there was anything unusual in the request and action.

'This that your handwriting, young man?' asked one of the strangers, blandly, pointing to a portion of the open ledger.

'Yes,' replied poor Volto promptly.

'Look more carefully at it, young man. Now are you quite sure ?'

'I think so,' again replied the cashier, not so positively as before.

'You are a fool, young fellow, and might have lagged yourself with that answer of yours,' said the stranger contemptuously, 'only that you have had a guardian angel near you since you came here—'

'Lavina!' murmured the young man, and then he blushed, vividly.

'No, donkey, your guardian angel didn't go by the feminine title of Lavina; he's a male, and answers to the name of Jack Ridgway, detective— that's myself.'

'Officer, what is the meaning of all this balderdash? Arrest that young scoundrel at once!' shouted the manager impatiently, yet with a frightened glimmer in his small gray eyes.

'It means that I have been watching your little game for a long time now, Mr. John Algar, bank manager and thief, and that this person may thank his lucky stars that I was on the spot, otherwise his flirtations with pretty Lavina might have cost him dear enough, Jim, look after the lady while I attend to the master.'

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15: A Christmas Mystery

William John Locke

1863-1930

The Red Magazine Dec 1909

"I cannot tell how the truth may be:
I say the tale as 'twas said to me."

THREE MEN who had gained great fame and honour throughout the world met unexpectedly in front of the bookstall at Paddington Station. Like most of the great ones of the earth they were personally acquainted, and they exchanged surprised greetings.

Sir Angus McCurdie, the eminent physicist, scowled at the two others beneath his heavy black eyebrows.

"I'm going to a God-forsaken place in Cornwall called Trehenna," said he.

"That's odd; so am I," croaked Professor Biggleswade. He was a little, untidy man with round spectacles, a fringe of greyish beard and a weak, rasping voice, and he knew more of Assyriology than any man, living or dead. A flippant pupil once remarked that the Professor's face was furnished with a Babylonic cuneiform in lieu of features.

"People called Deverill, at Foulis Castle?" asked Sir Angus.

"Yes," replied Professor Biggleswade.

"How curious! I am going to the Deverills, too," said the third man.

This man was the Right Honourable Viscount Doyne, the renowned Empire Builder and Administrator, around whose solitary and remote life popular imagination had woven many legends. He looked at the world through tired grey eyes, and the heavy, drooping, blonde moustache seemed tired, too, and had dragged down the tired face into deep furrows. He was smoking a long black cigar.

"I suppose we may as well travel down together," said Sir Angus, not very cordially.

Lord Doyne said courteously: "I have a reserved carriage. The railway company is always good enough to place one at my disposal. It would give me great pleasure if you would share it."

The invitation was accepted, and the three men crossed the busy, crowded platform to take their seats in the great express train. A porter, laden with an incredible load of paraphernalia, trying to make his way through the press, happened to jostle Sir Angus McCurdie. He rubbed his shoulder fretfully.

"Why the whole land should be turned into a bear garden on account of this exploded superstition of Christmas is one of the anomalies of modern

civilization. Look at this insensate welter of fools travelling in wild herds to disgusting places merely because it's Christmas!"

"You seem to be travelling yourself, McCurdie," said Lord Doyne.

"Yes— and why the devil I'm doing it, I've not the faintest notion," replied Sir Angus.

"It's going to be a beast of a journey," he remarked some moments later, as the train carried them slowly out of the station. "The whole country is under snow— and as far as I can understand we have to change twice and wind up with a twenty-mile motor drive."

He was an iron-faced, beetle-browed, stern man, and this morning he did not seem to be in the best of tempers. Finding his companions inclined to be sympathetic, he continued his lamentation.

"And merely because it's Christmas I've had to shut up my laboratory and give my young fools a holiday— just when I was in the midst of a most important series of experiments."

Professor Biggleswade, who had heard vaguely of and rather looked down upon such new-fangled toys as radium and thorium and helium and argon— for the latest astonishing developments in the theory of radio-activity had brought Sir Angus McCurdie his world-wide fame— said somewhat ironically:

"If the experiments were so important, why didn't you lock yourself up with your test tubes and electric batteries and finish them alone?"

"Man!" said McCurdie, bending across the carriage, and speaking with a curious intensity of voice, "d'ye know I'd give a hundred pounds to be able to answer that question?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Professor, startled.

"I should like to know why I'm sitting in this damned train and going to visit a couple of addle-headed society people whom I'm scarcely acquainted with, when I might be at home in my own good company furthering the progress of science."

"I myself," said the Professor, "am not acquainted with them at all."

It was Sir Angus McCurdie's turn to look surprised.

"Then why are you spending Christmas with them?"

"I reviewed a ridiculous blank-verse tragedy written by Deverill on the Death of Sennacherib. Historically it was puerile. I said so in no measured terms. He wrote a letter claiming to be a poet and not an archæologist. I replied that the day had passed when poets could with impunity commit the abominable crime of distorting history. He retorted with some futile argument, and we went on exchanging letters, until his invitation and my acceptance concluded the correspondence."

McCurdie, still bending his black brows on him, asked him why he had not declined. The Professor screwed up his face till it looked more like a cuneiform than ever. He, too, found the question difficult to answer, but he showed a bold front.

"I felt it my duty," said he, "to teach that preposterous ignoramus something worth knowing about Sennacherib. Besides I am a bachelor and would sooner spend Christmas, as to whose irritating and meaningless annoyance I cordially agree with you, among strangers than among my married sisters' numerous and nerve-racking families."

Sir Angus McCurdie, the hard, metallic apostle of radio-activity, glanced for a moment out of the window at the grey, frost-bitten fields. Then he said:

"I'm a widower. My wife died many years ago and, thank God, we had no children. I generally spend Christmas alone."

He looked out of the window again. Professor Biggleswade suddenly remembered the popular story of the great scientist's antecedents, and reflected that as McCurdie had once run, a barefoot urchin, through the Glasgow mud, he was likely to have little kith or kin. He himself envied McCurdie. He was always praying to be delivered from his sisters and nephews and nieces, whose embarrassing demands no calculated coldness could repress.

"Children are the root of all evil," said he. "Happy the man who has his quiver empty."

Sir Angus McCurdie did not reply at once; when he spoke again it was with reference to their prospective host.

"I met Deverill," said he, "at the Royal Society's Soirée this year. One of my assistants was demonstrating a peculiar property of thorium and Deverill seemed interested. I asked him to come to my laboratory the next day, and found he didn't know a damned thing about anything. That's all the acquaintance I have with him."

Lord Doyne, the great administrator, who had been wearily turning over the pages of an illustrated weekly chiefly filled with flamboyant photographs of obscure actresses, took his gold glasses from his nose and the black cigar from his lips, and addressed his companions.

"I've been considerably interested in your conversation," said he, "and as you've been frank, I'll be frank too. I knew Mrs. Deverill's mother, Lady Carstairs, very well years ago, and of course Mrs. Deverill when she was a child. Deverill I came across once in Egypt— he had been sent on a diplomatic mission to Teheran. As for our being invited on such slight acquaintance, little Mrs. Deverill has the reputation of being the only really successful celebrity hunter in England. She inherited the faculty from her mother, who entertained

the whole world. We're sure to find archbishops, and eminent actors, and illustrious divorcées asked to meet us. That's one thing. But why I, who loathe country house parties and children and Christmas as much as Biggleswade, am going down there to-day, I can no more explain than you can. It's a devilish odd coincidence."

The three men looked at one another. Suddenly McCurdie shivered and drew his fur coat around him.

"I'll thank you," said he, "to shut that window."

"It is shut," said Doyne.

"It's just uncanny," said McCurdie, looking from one to the other.

"What?" asked Doyne.

"Nothing, if you didn't feel it."

"There did seem to be a sudden draught," said Professor Biggleswade. "But as both window and door are shut, it could only be imaginary."

"It wasn't imaginary," muttered McCurdie.

Then he laughed harshly. "My father and mother came from Cromarty," he said with apparent irrelevance.

"That's the Highlands," said the Professor.

"Ay," said McCurdie.

Lord Doyne said nothing, but tugged at his moustache and looked out of the window as the frozen meadows and bits of river and willows raced past. A dead silence fell on them. McCurdie broke it with another laugh and took a whiskey flask from his hand-bag.

"Have a nip?"

"Thanks, no," said the Professor. "I have to keep to a strict dietary, and I only drink hot milk and water—and of that sparingly. I have some in a thermos bottle."

Lord Doyne also declining the whiskey, McCurdie swallowed a dram and declared himself to be better. The Professor took from his bag a foreign review in which a German sciolist had dared to question his interpretation of a Hittite inscription. Over the man's ineptitude he fell asleep and snored loudly.

To escape from his immediate neighbourhood McCurdie went to the other end of the seat and faced Lord Doyne, who had resumed his gold glasses and his listless contemplation of obscure actresses. McCurdie lit a pipe, Doyne another black cigar. The train thundered on.

Presently they all lunched together in the restaurant car. The windows steamed, but here and there through a wiped patch of pane a white world was revealed. The snow was falling. As they passed through Westbury, McCurdie looked mechanically for the famous white horse carved into the chalk of the down; but it was not visible beneath the thick covering of snow.

"It'll be just like this all the way to Gehenna— Trehenna, I mean," said McCurdie.

Doyne nodded. He had done his life's work amid all extreme fiercenesses of heat and cold, in burning droughts, in simoons and in icy wildernesses, and a ray or two more of the pale sun or a flake or two more of the gentle snow of England mattered to him but little. But Biggleswade rubbed the pane with his table-napkin and gazed apprehensively at the prospect.

"If only this wretched train would stop," said he, "I would go back again."

And he thought how comfortable it would be to sneak home again to his books and thus elude not only the Deverills, but the Christmas jollities of his sisters' families, who would think him miles away. But the train was timed not to stop till Plymouth, two hundred and thirty-five miles from London, and thither was he being relentlessly carried. Then he quarrelled with his food, which brought a certain consolation.

The train did stop, however, before Plymouth— indeed, before Exeter. An accident on the line had dislocated the traffic. The express was held up for an hour, and when it was permitted to proceed, instead of thundering on, it went cautiously, subject to continual stoppings. It arrived at Plymouth two hours late. The travellers learned that they had missed the connection on which they had counted and that they could not reach Trehenna till nearly ten o'clock. After weary waiting at Plymouth they took their seats in the little, cold local train that was to carry them another stage on their journey. Hot-water cans put in at Plymouth mitigated to some extent the iciness of the compartment. But that only lasted a comparatively short time, for soon they were set down at a desolate, shelterless wayside junction, dumped in the midst of a hilly snow-covered waste, where they went through another weary wait for another dismal local train that was to carry them to Trehenna. And in this train there were no hot-water cans, so that the compartment was as cold as death. McCurdie fretted and shook his fist in the direction of Trehenna.

"And when we get there we have still a twenty miles' motor drive to Foullis Castle. It's a fool name and we're fools to be going there."

"I shall die of bronchitis," wailed Professor Biggleswade.

"A man dies when it is appointed for him to die," said Lord Doyne, in his tired way; and he went on smoking long black cigars.

"It's not the dying that worries me," said McCurdie. "That's a mere mechanical process which every organic being from a king to a cauliflower has to pass through. It's the being forced against my will and my reason to come on this accursed journey, which something tells me will become more and more accursed as we go on, that is driving me to distraction."

"What will be, will be," said Doyne.

"I can't see where the comfort of that reflection comes in," said Biggleswade.

"And yet you've travelled in the East," said Doyne. "I suppose you know the Valley of the Tigris as well as any man living."

"Yes," said the Professor. "I can say I dug my way from Tekrit to Bagdad and left not a stone unexamined."

"Perhaps, after all," Doyne remarked, "that's not quite the way to know the East."

"I never wanted to know the modern East," returned the Professor. "What is there in it of interest compared with the mighty civilizations that have gone before?"

McCurdie took a pull from his flask.

"I'm glad I thought of having a refill at Plymouth," said he.

At last, after many stops at little lonely stations they arrived at Trehenna. The guard opened the door and they stepped out on to the snow-covered platform. An oil lamp hung from the tiny pent-house roof that, structurally, was Trehenna Station. They looked around at the silent gloom of white undulating moorland, and it seemed a place where no man lived and only ghosts could have a bleak and unsheltered being. A porter came up and helped the guard with the luggage. Then they realized that the station was built on a small embankment, for, looking over the railing, they saw below the two great lamps of a motor car. A fur-clad chauffeur met them at the bottom of the stairs. He clapped his hands together and informed them cheerily that he had been waiting for four hours. It was the bitterest winter in these parts within the memory of man, said he, and he himself had not seen snow there for five years. Then he settled the three travellers in the great roomy touring car covered with a Cape-cart hood, wrapped them up in many rugs and started.

After a few moments, the huddling together of their bodies— for, the Professor being a spare man, there was room for them all on the back seat— the pile of rugs, the serviceable and all but air-tight hood, induced a pleasant warmth and a pleasant drowsiness. Where they were being driven they knew not. The perfectly upholstered seat eased their limbs, the easy swinging motion of the car soothed their spirits. They felt that already they had reached the luxuriously appointed home which, after all, they knew awaited them. McCurdie no longer railed, Professor Biggleswade forgot the dangers of bronchitis, and Lord Doyne twisted the stump of a black cigar between his lips without any desire to relight it. A tiny electric lamp inside the hood made the darkness of the world to right and left and in front of the talc windows still darker. McCurdie and Biggleswade fell into a doze. Lord Doyne chewed the end of his cigar. The car sped on through an unseen wilderness.

Suddenly there was a horrid jolt and a lurch and a leap and a rebound, and then the car stood still, quivering like a ship that has been struck by a heavy sea. The three men were pitched and tossed and thrown sprawling over one another onto the bottom of the car. Biggleswade screamed. McCurdie cursed. Doyne scrambled from the confusion of rugs and limbs and, tearing open the side of the Cape-cart hood, jumped out. The chauffeur had also just leaped from his seat. It was pitch dark save for the great shaft of light down the snowy road cast by the acetylene lamps. The snow had ceased falling.

"What's gone wrong?"

"It sounds like the axle," said the chauffeur ruefully.

He unshipped a lamp and examined the car, which had wedged itself against a great drift of snow on the off side. Meanwhile McCurdie and Biggleswade had alighted.

"Yes, it's the axle," said the chauffeur.

"Then we're done," remarked Doyne.

"I'm afraid so, my lord."

"What's the matter? Can't we get on?" asked Biggleswade in his querulous voice.

McCurdie laughed. "How can we get on with a broken axle? The thing's as useless as a man with a broken back. Gad, I was right. I said it was going to be an infernal journey."

The little Professor wrung his hands. "But what's to be done?" he cried.

"Tramp it," said Lord Doyne, lighting a fresh cigar.

"It's ten miles," said the chauffeur.

"It would be the death of me," the Professor wailed.

"I utterly refuse to walk ten miles through a Polar waste with a gouty foot," McCurdie declared wrathfully.

The chauffeur offered a solution of the difficulty. He would set out alone for Foullis Castle—five miles farther on was an inn where he could obtain a horse and trap—and would return for the three gentlemen with another car. In the meanwhile they could take shelter in a little house which they had just passed, some half mile up the road. This was agreed to. The chauffeur went on cheerily enough with a lamp, and the three travellers with another lamp started off in the opposite direction. As far as they could see they were in a long, desolate valley, a sort of No Man's Land, deathly silent. The eastern sky had cleared somewhat, and they faced a loose rack through which one pale star was dimly visible.

"I'm a man of science," said McCurdie as they trudged through the snow, "and I dismiss the supernatural as contrary to reason; but I have Highland blood in my veins that plays me exasperating tricks. My reason tells me that

this place is only a commonplace moor, yet it seems like a Valley of Bones haunted by malignant spirits who have lured us here to our destruction. There's something guiding us now. It's just uncanny."

"Why on earth did we ever come?" croaked Biggleswade.

Lord Doyne answered: "The Koran says, 'Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us.' So why worry?"

"Because I'm not a Mohammedan," retorted Biggleswade.

"You might be worse," said Doyne.

Presently the dim outline of the little house grew perceptible. A faint light shone from the window. It stood unfenced by any kind of hedge or railing a few feet away from the road in a little hollow beneath some rising ground. As far as they could discern in the darkness when they drew near, the house was a mean, dilapidated hovel. A guttering candle stood on the inner sill of the small window and afforded a vague view into a mean interior. Doyne held up the lamp so that its rays fell full on the door. As he did so, an exclamation broke from his lips and he hurried forward, followed by the others. A man's body lay huddled together on the snow by the threshold. He was dressed like a peasant, in old corduroy trousers and rough coat, and a handkerchief was knotted round his neck. In his hand he grasped the neck of a broken bottle. Doyne set the lamp on the ground and the three bent down together over the man. Close by the neck lay the rest of the broken bottle, whose contents had evidently run out into the snow.

"Drunk?" asked Biggleswade.

Doyne felt the man and laid his hand on his heart.

"No," said he, "dead."

McCurdie leaped to his full height. "I told you the place was uncanny!" he cried. "It's fey." Then he hammered wildly at the door.

There was no response. He hammered again till it rattled. This time a faint prolonged sound like the wailing of a strange sea-creature was heard from within the house. McCurdie turned round, his teeth chattering.

"Did ye hear that, Doyne?"

"Perhaps it's a dog," said the Professor.

Lord Doyne, the man of action, pushed them aside and tried the door-handle. It yielded, the door stood open, and the gust of cold wind entering the house extinguished the candle within. They entered and found themselves in a miserable stone-paved kitchen, furnished with poverty-stricken meagreness—a wooden chair or two, a dirty table, some broken crockery, old cooking utensils, a fly-blown missionary society almanac, and a fireless grate. Doyne set the lamp on the table.

"We must bring him in," said he.

They returned to the threshold, and as they were bending over to grip the dead man the same sound filled the air, but this time louder, more intense, a cry of great agony. The sweat dripped from McCurdie's forehead. They lifted the dead man and brought him into the room, and after laying him on a dirty strip of carpet they did their best to straighten the stiff limbs. Biggleswade put on the table a bundle which he had picked up outside. It contained some poor provisions—a loaf, a piece of fat bacon, and a paper of tea. As far as they could guess (and as they learned later they guessed rightly) the man was the master of the house, who, coming home blind drunk from some distant inn, had fallen at his own threshold and got frozen to death. As they could not unclasp his fingers from the broken bottleneck they had to let him clutch it as a dead warrior clutches the hilt of his broken sword.

Then suddenly the whole place was rent with another and yet another long, soul-piercing moan of anguish.

"There's a second room," said Doyne, pointing to a door. "The sound comes from there." He opened the door, peeped in, and then, returning for the lamp, disappeared, leaving McCurdie and Biggleswade in the pitch darkness, with the dead man on the floor.

"For heaven's sake, give me a drop of whiskey," said the Professor, "or I shall faint."

Presently the door opened and Lord Doyne appeared in the shaft of light. He beckoned to his companions.

"It is a woman in childbirth," he said in his even, tired voice. "We must aid her. She appears unconscious. Does either of you know anything about such things?"

They shook their heads, and the three looked at each other in dismay. Masters of knowledge that had won them world-wide fame and honour, they stood helpless, abashed before this, the commonest phenomenon of nature.

"My wife had no child," said McCurdie.

"I've avoided women all my life," said Biggleswade.

"And I've been too busy to think of them. God forgive me," said Doyne.

THE HISTORY of the next two hours was one that none of the three men ever cared to touch upon. They did things blindly, instinctively, as men do when they come face to face with the elemental. A fire was made, they knew not how, water drawn they knew not whence, and a kettle boiled. Doyne accustomed to command, directed. The others obeyed. At his suggestion they hastened to the wreck of the car and came staggering back beneath rugs and travelling bags which could supply clean linen and needful things, for amid the poverty of the house they could find nothing fit for human touch or use. Early

they saw that the woman's strength was failing, and that she could not live. And there, in that nameless hovel, with death on the hearthstone and death and life hovering over the pitiful bed, the three great men went through the pain and the horror and squalor of birth, and they knew that they had never yet stood before so great a mystery.

With the first wail of the newly born infant a last convulsive shudder passed through the frame of the unconscious mother. Then three or four short gasps for breath, and the spirit passed away. She was dead. Professor Biggleswade threw a corner of the sheet over her face, for he could not bear to see it.

They washed and dried the child as any crone of a midwife would have done, and dipped a small sponge which had always remained unused in a cut-glass bottle in Doyne's dressing-bag in the hot milk and water of Biggleswade's thermos bottle, and put it to his lips; and then they wrapped him up warm in some of their own woollen undergarments, and took him into the kitchen and placed him on a bed made of their fur coats in front of the fire. As the last piece of fuel was exhausted they took one of the wooden chairs and broke it up and cast it into the blaze. And then they raised the dead man from the strip of carpet and carried him into the bedroom and laid him reverently by the side of his dead wife, after which they left the dead in darkness and returned to the living. And the three grave men stood over the wisp of flesh that had been born a male into the world. Then, their task being accomplished, reaction came, and even Doyne, who had seen death in many lands, turned faint. But the others, losing control of their nerves, shook like men stricken with palsy.

Suddenly McCurdie cried in a high pitched voice, "My God! Don't you feel it?" and clutched Doyne by the arm. An expression of terror appeared on his iron features.

"There! It's here with us."

Little Professor Biggleswade sat on a corner of the table and wiped his forehead.

"I heard it. I felt it. It was like the beating of wings."

"It's the fourth time," said McCurdie. "The first time was just before I accepted the Deverills' invitation. The second in the railway carriage this afternoon. The third on the way here. This is the fourth."

Biggleswade plucked nervously at the fringe of whisker under his jaws and said faintly, "It's the fourth time up to now. I thought it was fancy."

"I have felt it, too," said Doyne. "It is the Angel of Death." And he pointed to the room where the dead man and woman lay.

"For God's sake let us get away from this," cried Biggleswade.

"And leave the child to die, like the others?" said Doyne.

"We must see it through," said McCurdie.

A silence fell upon them as they sat round in the blaze with the new-born babe wrapped in its odd swaddling clothes asleep on the pile of fur coats, and it lasted until Sir Angus McCurdie looked at his watch.

"Good Lord," said he, "it's twelve o'clock."

"Christmas morning," said Biggleswade.

"A strange Christmas," mused Doyne.

McCurdie put up his hand. "There it is again! The beating of wings." And they listened like men spellbound. McCurdie kept his hand uplifted, and gazed over their heads at the wall, and his gaze was that of a man in a trance, and he spoke:

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given—"

Doyne sprang from his chair, which fell behind him with a crash.

"Man— what the devil are you saying?"

Then McCurdie rose and met Biggleswade's eyes staring at him through the great round spectacles, and Biggleswade turned and met the eyes of Doyne. A pulsation like the beating of wings stirred the air.

The three wise men shivered with a queer exaltation. Something strange, mystical, dynamic had happened. It was as if scales had fallen from their eyes and they saw with a new vision. They stood together humbly, divested of all their greatness, touching one another in the instinctive fashion of children, as if seeking mutual protection, and they looked, with one accord, irresistibly compelled, at the child.

At last McCurdie unbent his black brows and said hoarsely:

"It was not the Angel of Death, Doyne, but another Messenger that drew us here."

The tiredness seemed to pass away from the great administrator's face, and he nodded his head with the calm of a man who has come to the quiet heart of a perplexing mystery.

"It's true," he murmured. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. Unto the three of us."

Biggleswade took off his great round spectacles and wiped them.

"Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar. But where are the gold, frankincense and myrrh?"

"In our hearts, man," said McCurdie.

The babe cried and stretched its tiny limbs.

Instinctively they all knelt down together to discover, if possible, and administer ignorantly to, its wants. The scene had the appearance of an adoration.

Then these three wise, lonely, childless men who, in furtherance of their own greatness, had cut themselves adrift from the sweet and simple things of life and from the kindly ways of their brethren, and had grown old in unhappy and profitless wisdom, knew that an inscrutable Providence had led them, as it had led three Wise Men of old, on a Christmas morning long ago, to a nativity which should give them a new wisdom, a new link with humanity, a new spiritual outlook, a new hope.

And, when their watch was ended, they wrapped up the babe with precious care, and carried him with them, an inalienable joy and possession, into the great world.

16: Ladies In Lavender

William J Locke

The Red Magazine, Dec 1908

A 2004 movie starred Judy Dench and Maggie Smith; and Daniel Brühl as Andrea.

AS SOON as the sun rose out of the sea its light streamed through a white-curtained casement window into the whitest and most spotless room you can imagine. It shone upon two little white beds, separated by the width of the floor covered with straw-coloured matting; on white garments neatly folded which lay on white chairs by the side of each bed; on a white enamelled bedroom suite; on the one picture (over the mantel-piece) which adorned the white walls, the enlarged photograph of a white-whiskered, elderly gentleman in naval uniform; and on the white, placid faces of the sleepers.

It awakened Miss Ursula Widdington, who sat up in bed, greeted it with a smile, and forthwith aroused her sister.

"Janet, here's the sun."

Miss Widdington awoke and smiled too.

Now to awake at daybreak with a smile and a childlike delight at the sun when you are over forty-five is a sign of an unruffled conscience and a sweet disposition.

"The first glimpse of it for a week," said Miss Widdington.

"Isn't it strange," said Miss Ursula, "that when we went to sleep the storm was still raging?"

"And now— the sea hasn't gone down yet. Listen."

"The tide's coming in. Let us go out and look at it," cried Miss Ursula, delicately getting out of bed.

"You're so impulsive, Ursula," said Miss Widdington.

She was forty-eight, and three years older than her sister. She could, therefore, smile indulgently at the impetuosity of youth. But she rose and dressed, and presently the two ladies stole out of the silent house.

They had lived there for many years, perched away on top of a projecting cliff on the Cornish coast, midway between sea and sky, like two fairy princesses in an enchanted bit of the world's end, who had grown grey with waiting for the prince who never came. Theirs was the only house on the wind-swept height. Below in the bay on the right of their small headland nestled the tiny fishing village of Trevannic; below, sheer down to the left, lay a little sandy cove, accessible farther on by a narrow gorge that split the majestic stretch of bastioned cliffs. To that little stone weatherbeaten house their father, the white-whiskered gentleman of the portrait, had brought them quite young

when he had retired from the navy with a pension and a grievance—an ungrateful country had not made him an admiral—and there, after his death, they had continued to lead their remote and gentle lives, untouched by the happenings of the great world.

The salt-laden wind buffeted them, dashed strands of hair stingingly across their faces and swirled their skirts around them as they leaned over the stout stone parapet their father had built along the edge of the cliff, and drank in the beauty of the morning. The eastern sky was clear of clouds and the eastern sea tossed a fierce silver under the sun and gradually deepened into frosted green, which changed in the west into the deep ocean blue; and the Atlantic heaved and sobbed after its turmoil of the day before. Miss Ursula pointed to the gilt-edged clouds in the west and likened them to angels' thrones, which was a pretty conceit. Miss Widdington derived a suggestion of Pentecostal flames from the golden flashes of the sea-gulls' wings. Then she referred to the appetite they would have for breakfast. To this last observation Miss Ursula did not reply, as she was leaning over the parapet intent on something in the cove below. Presently she clutched her sister's arm.

"Janet, look down there— that black thing— what is it?"

Miss Widdington's gaze followed the pointing finger.

At the foot of the rocks that edged the gorge sprawled a thing checkered black and white.

"I do believe it's a man!"

"A drowned man! Oh, poor fellow! Oh, Janet, how dreadful!"

She turned brown, compassionate eyes on her sister, who continued to peer keenly at the helpless figure below.

"Do you think he's dead, Janet?"

"The sensible thing would be to go down and see," replied Miss Widdington.

It was by no means the first dead man cast up by the waves that they had stumbled upon during their long sojourn on this wild coast, where wrecks and founderings and loss of men's lives at sea were commonplace happenings. They were dealing with the sadly familiar; and though their gentle hearts throbbed hard as they made for the gorge and sped quickly down the ragged, rocky path, they set about their task as a matter of course.

Miss Ursula reached the sand first, and walked over to the body which lay on a low shelf of rock. Then she turned with a glad cry.

"Janet. He's alive. He's moaning. Come quickly." And, as Janet joined her: "Did you ever see such a beautiful face in your life?"

"We should have brought some brandy," said Miss Widdington.

But, as she bent over the unconscious form, a foolish moisture gathered in her eyes which had nothing to do with forgetfulness of alcohol. For indeed there lay sprawling anyhow in catlike grace beneath them the most romantic figure of a youth that the sight of maiden ladies ever rested on. He had long black hair, a perfectly chiselled face, a preposterously feminine mouth which, partly open, showed white young teeth, and the most delicate, long-fingered hands in the world. Miss Ursula murmured that he was like a young Greek god. Miss Widdington sighed. The fellow was ridiculous. He was also dank with sea water, and moaned as if he were in pain. But as gazing wrapt in wonder and admiration at young Greek gods is not much good to them when they are half-drowned, Miss Widdington despatched her sister in search of help.

"The tide is still low enough for you to get round the cliff to the village. Mrs. Pendered will give you some brandy, and her husband and Luke will bring a stretcher. You might also send Joe Gullow on his bicycle for Dr. Mead."

Miss Widdington, as behoved one who has the charge of an orphaned younger sister, did not allow the sentimental to weaken the practical. Miss Ursula, though she would have preferred to stay by the side of the beautiful youth, was docile, and went forthwith on her errand. Miss Widdington, left alone with him, rolled up her jacket and pillowed his head on it, brought his limbs into an attitude suggestive of comfort, and tried by chafing to restore him to animation. Being unsuccessful in this, she at last desisted, and sat on the rocks near by and wondered who on earth he was and where in the world he came from. His garments consisted in a nondescript pair of trousers and a flannel shirt with a collar, which was fastened at the neck, not by button or stud, but by a tasselled cord; and he was barefoot. Miss Widdington glanced modestly at his feet, which were shapely; and the soles were soft and pink like the palms of his hands. Now, had he been the coarsest and most callosity-stricken shell-back half-alive, Janet Widdington would have tended him with the same devotion; but the lingering though unoffending Eve in her rejoiced that hands and feet betokened gentler avocations than that of sailor or fisherman. And why? Heaven knows, save that the stranded creature had a pretty face and that his long black hair was flung over his forehead in a most interesting manner. She wished he would open his eyes. But as he kept them shut and gave no sign of returning consciousness, she sat there waiting patiently; in front of her the rough, sun-kissed Atlantic, at her feet the semicircular patch of golden sand, behind her the sheer white cliffs, and by her side on the slab of rock this good-looking piece of jetsam.

At length Miss Ursula appeared round the corner of the headland, followed by Jan Pendered and his son Luke carrying a stretcher. While Miss Widdington administered brandy without any obvious result, the men looked at the

castaway, scratched their heads, and guessed him to be a foreigner; but how he managed to be there alone with never a bit of wreckage to supply a clue surpassed their powers of imagination. In lifting him the right foot hung down through the trouser-leg, and his ankle was seen to be horribly black and swollen. Old Jan examined it carefully.

"Broken," said he.

"Oh, poor boy, that's why he's moaning so," cried the compassionate Miss Ursula.

The men grasped the handles of the stretcher.

"I'd better take him home to my old woman," said Jan Pendered thoughtfully.

"He can have my bed, father," said Luke.

Miss Widdington looked at Miss Ursula and Miss Ursula looked at Miss Widdington, and the eyes of each lady were wistful. Then Miss Widdington spoke.

"You can carry him up to the house, Pendered. We have a comfortable spare room, and Dorcas will help us to look after him."

The men obeyed, for in Trevannic Miss Widdington's gentle word was law.

ii

IT WAS early afternoon. Miss Widdington had retired to take her customary after-luncheon siesta, an indulgence permitted to her seniority, but not granted, except on rare occasions, to the young. Miss Ursula, therefore, kept watch in the sick chamber, just such a little white spotless room as their own, but containing only one little white bed in which the youth lay dry and warm and comfortably asleep. He was exhausted from cold and exposure, said the doctor who had driven in from St. Madoc, eight miles off, and his ankle was broken. The doctor had done what was necessary, had swathed him in one of old Dorcas's flannel nightgowns, and had departed. Miss Ursula had the patient all to herself. A bright fire burned in the grate, and the strong Atlantic breeze came in through the open window where she sat, her knitting in her hand. Now and then she glanced at the sleeper, longing, in a most feminine manner, for him to awake and render an account of himself. Miss Ursula's heart fluttered mildly. For beautiful youths, baffling curiosity, are not washed up alive by the sea at an old maid's feet every day in the week. It was indeed an adventure, a bit of a fairy tale suddenly gleaming and dancing in the grey atmosphere of an eventless life. She glanced at him again, and wondered whether he had a mother. Presently Dorcas came in, stout and matronly, and

cast a maternal eye on the boy and smoothed his pillow. She had sons herself, and two of them had been claimed by the pitiless sea.

"It's lucky I had a sensible nightgown to give him," she remarked. "If we had had only the flimsy things that you and Miss Janet wear——"

"Sh!" said Miss Ursula, colouring faintly; "he might hear you."

Dorcas laughed and went out. Miss Ursula's needles clicked rapidly. When she glanced at the bed again she became conscious of two great dark eyes regarding her in utter wonder. She rose quickly and went over to the bed.

"Don't be afraid," she said, though what there was to terrify him in her mild demeanour and the spotless room she could not have explained; "don't be afraid, you're among friends."

He murmured some words which she did not catch.

"What do you say?" she asked sweetly.

He repeated them in a stronger voice. Then she realised that he spoke in a foreign tongue. A queer dismay filled her.

"Don't you speak English?"

He looked at her for a moment, puzzled. Then the echo of the last word seemed to reach his intelligence. He shook his head. A memory rose from schoolgirl days.

"*Parlez-vous français?*" she faltered; and when he shook his head again she almost felt relieved. Then he began to talk, regarding her earnestly, as if seeking by his mere intentness to make her understand. But it was a strange language which she had not heard before.

In one mighty effort Miss Ursula gathered together her whole stock of German.

"*Sprechen Sie deutsch?*"

"*Ach ja! Einige Worte,*" he replied, and his face lit up with a smile so radiant that Miss Ursula wondered how Providence could have neglected to inspire a being so beautiful with a knowledge of the English language, "*Ich kann mich auf deutsch verständlich machen, aber ich bin polnisch*."

But not a word of the halting sentence could Miss Ursula make out; even the last was swallowed up in guttural unintelligibility. She only recognised the speech as German and different from that which he used at first, and which seemed to be his native tongue.

"Oh, dear, I must give it up," she sighed.

The patient moved slightly and uttered a sudden cry of pain. It occurred to Miss Ursula that he had not had time to realise the fractured ankle. That he realised it now was obvious, for he lay back with closed eyes and white lips until the spasm had passed. After that Miss Ursula did her best to explain in pantomime what had happened. She made a gesture of swimming, then laid

her cheek on her hand and simulated fainting, acted her discovery of his body on the beach, broke a wooden match in two and pointed to his ankle, exhibited the medicine bottles by the bedside, smoothed his pillow, and smiled so as to assure him of kind treatment. He understood, more or less, murmured thanks in his own language, took her hand, and to her English woman's astonishment, pressed it to his lips. Miss Widdington, entering softly, found the pair in this romantic situation.

When it dawned on him a while later that he owed his deliverance equally to both of the gentle ladies, he kissed Miss Widdington's hand too. Whereupon Miss Ursula coloured and turned away. She did not like to see him kiss her sister's hand. Why, she could not tell, but she felt as if she had received a tiny stab in the heart.

iii

PROVIDENCE has showered many blessings on Trevannic, but among them is not the gift of tongues. Dr. Mead, who came over every day from St. Madoc, knew less German than the ladies. It was impossible to communicate with the boy except by signs. Old Jan Pendered, who had served in the navy in the China seas, felt confident that he could make him understand, and tried him with pidgin-English. But the youth only smiled sweetly and shook hands with him, whereupon old Jan scratched his head and acknowledged himself jiggered. To Miss Widdington, at last, came the inspiration that the oft-repeated word "*Polnisch*" meant Polish.

"You come from Poland?"

"*Aus Polen, ya*," laughed the boy.

"Kosciusko," murmured Miss Ursula.

He laughed again, delighted, and looked at her eagerly for more; but there Miss Ursula's conversation about Poland ended. If the discovery of his nationality lay to the credit of her sister, she it was who found out his name, Andrea Marowski, and taught him to say: "Miss Ursula." She also taught him the English names of the various objects around him. And here the innocent rivalry of the two ladies began to take definite form. Miss Widdington, without taking counsel of Miss Ursula, borrowed an old Otto's German grammar from the girls' school at St. Madoc, and, by means of patient research, put to him such questions as: "Have you a mother?" "How old are you?" and, collating his written replies with the information vouchsafed by the grammar, succeeded in discovering, among other biographical facts, that he was alone in the world, save for an old uncle who lived in Cracow, and that he was twenty years of age. So that when Miss Ursula boasted that she had taught him to say: "Good

morning. How do you do?" Miss Widdington could cry with an air of triumph: "He told me that he doesn't suffer from toothache."

It was one of the curious features of the ministrations which they afforded Mr. Andrea Marowski alternately, that Miss Ursula would have nothing whatever to do with Otto's German grammar and Miss Widdington scorned the use of English and made as little use of sign language as possible.

"I don't think it becoming, Ursula," she said, "to indicate hunger by opening your mouth and rubbing the front of your waist, like a cannibal."

Miss Ursula accepted the rebuke meekly, for she never returned a pert answer to her senior; but reflecting that Janet's disapproval might possibly arise from her want of skill in the art of pantomime, she went away comforted and continued her unbecoming practices. The conversations, however, that the ladies, each in her own way, managed to have with the invalid, were sadly limited in scope. No means that they could devise could bring them enlightenment on many interesting points. Who he was, whether noble or peasant, how he came to be lying like a jellyfish on the slab of rock in their cove, coatless and barefoot, remained as great a puzzle as ever. Of course he informed them, especially the grammar-equipped Miss Widdington, over and over again in his execrable German; but they grew no wiser, and at last they abandoned in despair their attempts to solve these mysteries. They contented themselves with the actual, which indeed was enough to absorb their simple minds. There he was cast up by the sea or fallen from the moon, young, gay, and helpless, a veritable gift of the gods. The very mystery of his adventure invested him with a curious charm; and then the prodigious appetite with which he began to devour fish and eggs and chickens formed of itself a joy hitherto undreamed of in their philosophy.

"When he gets up he must have some clothes," said Miss Widdington.

Miss Ursula agreed; but did not say that she was knitting him socks in secret. Andrea's interest in the progress of these garments was one of her chief delights.

"There's the trunk upstairs with our dear father's things," said Miss Widdington with more diffidence than usual. "They are so sacred to us that I was wondering—"

"Our dear father would be the first to wish it," said Miss Ursula.

"It's a Christian's duty to clothe the naked," said Miss Widdington.

"And so we must clothe him in what we've got," said Miss Ursula. Then with a slight flush she added: "It's so many years since our great loss that I've almost forgotten what a man wears."

"I haven't," said Miss Widdington. "I think I ought to tell you, Ursula," she continued, after pausing to put sugar and milk into the cup of tea which she

handed to her sister—they were at the breakfast table, at the head of which she formally presided, as she had done since her emancipation from the schoolroom—"I think I ought to tell you that I have decided to devote my twenty-five pounds to buying him an outfit. Our dear father's things can only be a makeshift—and the poor boy hasn't a penny in the pockets he came ashore in."

Now, some three years before, an aunt had bequeathed Miss Widdington a tiny legacy, the disposal of which had been a continuous subject of grave discussion between the sisters. She always alluded to it as "my twenty-five pounds."

"Is that quite fair, dear?" said Miss Ursula impulsively.

"Fair? Do you mind explaining?"

Miss Ursula regretted her impetuosity. "Don't you think, dear Janet," she said with some nervousness, "that it would lay him under too great an obligation to you personally? I should prefer to take the money our of out joint income. We both are responsible for him and," she added with a timid smile, "I found him first."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," Miss Widdington retorted with a quite unusual touch of acidity. "But if you feel strongly about it, I am willing to withdraw my five-and-twenty pounds."

"You're not angry with me, Janet?"

"Angry? Of course not," Miss Widdington replied freezingly. "Don't be silly. And why aren't you eating your bacon?"

This was the first shadow of dissension that had arisen between them since their childhood. On the way to the sick-room, Miss Ursula shed a few tears over Janet's hectoring ways, and Miss Widdington, in pursuit of her housekeeping duties, made Dorcas the scapegoat for Ursula's unreasonableness. Before luncheon time they kissed with mutual apologies; but the spirit of rivalry was by no means quenched.

iv

ONE AFTERNOON Miss Janet had an inspiration.

"If I played the piano in the drawing-room with the windows open you could hear it in the spare room quite plainly."

"If you think it would disturb Mr. Andrea," said Miss Ursula, "you might shut the windows."

"I was proposing to offer him a distraction, dear," said Miss Widdington. "These foreign gentlemen are generally fond of music."

Miss Ursula could raise no objection, but her heart sank. She could not play the piano.

She took her seat cheerfully, however, by the bed, which had been wheeled up to the window, so that the patient could look out on the glory of sky and sea, took her knitting from a drawer and began to turn the heel of one of the sacred socks. Andrea watched her lazily and contentedly. Perhaps he had never seen two such soft-treaded, soft-fingered ladies in lavender in his life. He often tried to give some expression to his gratitude, and the hand-kissing had become a thrice daily custom. For Miss Widdington he had written the word "Engel," which the vocabulary at the end of Otto's German grammar rendered as "Angel"; whereat she had blushed quite prettily. For Miss Ursula he had drawn, very badly, but still unmistakably, the picture of a winged denizen of Paradise, and she, too, had treasured the compliment; she also treasured the drawing. Now, Miss Ursula held up the knitting, which began distinctly to indicate the shape of a sock, and smiled. Andrea smiled, too, and blew her a kiss with his fingers. He had many graceful foreign gestures. The doctor, who was a plain, bullet-headed Briton, disapproved of Andrea and expressed to Dorcas his opinion that the next things to be washed ashore would be the young man's monkey and organ. This was sheer prejudice, for Andrea's manners were unexceptionable, and his smile, in the eyes of his hostesses, the most attractive thing in the world.

"Heel," said Miss Ursula.

"'Eel," repeated Andrea.

"Wool," said Miss Ursula.

"Vool," said Andrea.

"No— wo-o," said Miss Ursula, puffing out her lips so as to accentuate the "w."

"Wo-o," said Andrea, doing the same. And then they both burst out laughing. They were enjoying themselves mightily.

Then, from the drawing-room below, came the tinkling sound of the old untuned piano which had remained unopened for many years. It was the "Spring Song" of Mendelssohn, played, schoolgirl fashion, with uncertain fingers that now and then struck false notes. The light died away from Andrea's face, and he looked inquiringly, if not wonderingly, at Miss Ursula. She smiled encouragement, pointed first at the floor, and then at him, thereby indicating that the music was for his benefit. For awhile he remained quite patient. At last he clapped his hands on his ears, and, his features distorted with pain, cried out:

"*Nein, nein, nein, das lieb' ich nicht! Es ist hässlich!*"

In eager pantomime he besought her to stop the entertainment. Miss Ursula went downstairs, hating to hurt her sister's feelings, yet unable to crush a wicked, unregenerate feeling of pleasure.

"I am so sorry, dear Janet," she said, laying her hand on her sister's arm, "but he doesn't like music. It's astonishing, his dislike. It makes him quite violent."

Miss Widdington ceased playing and accompanied her sister upstairs. Andrea, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders, reached out his two hands to the musician and, taking hers, kissed her finger-tips. Miss Widdington consulted Otto.

"*Lieben Sie nicht Musik?*"

"*Ja wohl*," he cried, and, laughing, played an imaginary fiddle.

"He *does* like music," cried Miss Widdington. "How can you make such silly mistakes, Ursula? Only he prefers the violin."

Miss Ursula grew downcast for a moment; then she brightened. A brilliant idea occurred to her.

"Adam Penruddocke. He has a fiddle. We can ask him to come up after tea and play to us."

She reassured Andrea in her queer sign-language, and later in the afternoon Adam Penruddocke, a sheepish giant of a fisherman, was shown into the room. He bowed to the ladies, shook the long white hand proffered him by the beautiful youth, tuned up, and played "The Carnival of Venice" from start to finish. Andrea regarded him with mischievous, laughing eyes, and at the end he applauded vigorously.

Miss Widdington turned to her sister.

"I knew he liked music," she said.

"Shall I play something else, sir?" asked Penruddocke.

Andrea, guessing his meaning, beckoned him to approach the bed, and took the violin and bow from his hands. He looked at the instrument critically, smiled to himself, tuned it afresh, and with an air of intense happiness drew the bow across the strings.

"Why, he can play it!" cried Miss Ursula.

Andrea laughed and nodded, and played a bit of "The Carnival of Venice" as it ought to be played, with gaiety and mischief. Then he broke off, and after two or three tearing chords that made his hearers start, plunged into a wild czardas. The ladies looked at him in open-mouthed astonishment as the mad music such as they had never heard in their lives before filled the little room with its riot and devilry. Penruddocke stood and panted, his eyes staring out of his head. When Andrea had finished there was a bewildered silence. He nodded pleasantly at his audience, delighted at the effect he had produced.

Then, with an artist's malice, he went to the other extreme of emotion. He played a sobbing folk-song, rending the heart with cries of woe and desolation and broken hopes. It clutched at the heart-strings, turning them into vibrating chords; it pierced the soul with its poignant despair; it ended in a long-drawn-out note high up in the treble, whose pain became intolerable; and the end was greeted with a sharp gasp of relief. The white lips of the ruddy giant quivered. Tears streamed down the cheeks of Miss Widdington and Miss Ursula. Again there was silence, but this time it was broken by a clear, shrill voice outside.

"Encore! Encore!"

The sisters looked at one another. Who had dared intrude at such a moment? Miss Widdington went to the window to see.

In the garden stood a young woman of independent bearing, with a pallette and brushes in her hand. An easel was pitched a few yards beyond the gate. Miss Widdington regarded this young woman with marked disfavour. The girl calmly raised her eyes.

"I apologise for trespassing like this," she said, "but I simply couldn't resist coming nearer to this marvellous violin-playing— and my exclamation came out almost unconsciously."

"You are quite welcome to listen," said Miss Widdington stiffly.

"May I ask who is playing it?"

Miss Widdington almost gasped at the girl's impertinence. The latter laughed frankly.

"I ask because it seems as if it could only be one of the big, well-known people."

"It's a young friend who is staying with us," said Miss Widdington.

"I beg your pardon," said the girl. "But, you see my brother is Boris Danilof, the violinist, so I've that excuse for being interested."

"I don't think Mr. Andrea can play any more to-day," said Miss Ursula from her seat by the bed. "He's tired."

Miss Widdington repeated this information to Miss Danilof, who bade her good afternoon and withdrew to her easel.

"A most forward, objectionable girl," exclaimed Miss Widdington. "And who is Boris Danilof, I should like to know?"

If she had but understood German, Andrea could have told her. He caught at the name of the world-famous violinist and bent eagerly forward in great excitement.

"Boris Danilof? *Ist er unten*?"

"*Nicht*— I mean *Nein*," replied Miss Widdington, proud at not having to consult Otto.

Andrea sank back disappointed, on his pillow.

v

HOWEVER much Miss Widdington disapproved of the young woman, and however little the sisters knew of Boris Danilof, it was obvious that they were harbouring a remarkable violinist. That even the bullet-headed doctor, who had played the double bass in his Hospital Orchestral Society and was, therefore, an authority, freely admitted. It gave the romantic youth a new and somewhat awe-inspiring value in the eyes of the ladies. He was a genius, said Miss Ursula— and her imagination became touched by the magic of the word. As he grew stronger he played more. His fame spread through the village and he gave recitals to crowded audiences— as many fisher-folk as could be squeezed into the little bedroom, and more standing in the garden below. Miss Danilof did not come again. The ladies learned that she was staying in the next village, Polwern, two or three miles off. In their joy at Andrea's recovery they forgot her existence.

Happy days came when he could rise from bed and hobble about on a crutch, attired in the quaint garments of Captain Widdington, R.N., who had died twenty years before, at the age of seventy-three. They added to his romantic appearance, giving him the air of the *jeune premier* in costume drama. There was a blue waistcoat with gilt buttons, calculated to win any feminine approval. The ladies admired him vastly. Conversation was still difficult, as Miss Ursula had succeeded in teaching him very little English, and Miss Widdington, after a desperate grapple with Otto on her own account, had given up the German language in despair. But what matters the tongue when the heart speaks? And the hearts of Miss Widdington and Miss Ursula spoke; delicately, timidly, tremulously, in the whisper of an evening breeze, in undertones, it is true— yet they spoke all the same. The first walks on the heather of their cliff in the pure spring sunshine were rare joys. As they had done with their watches by his bedside, they took it in turns to walk with him; and each in her turn of solitude felt little pricklings of jealousy. But as each had instituted with him her own particular dainty relations and confidences— Miss Widdington more maternal, Miss Ursula more sisterly— to which his artistic nature responded involuntarily, each felt sure that she was the one who had gained his especial affection.

Thus they wove their gossamer webs of romance in the secret recess of their souls. What they hoped for was as dim and vague as their concept of heaven, and as pure. They looked only at the near future—a circle of light encompassed by mists; but in the circle stood ever the beloved figure. They

could not imagine him out of it. He would stay with them, irradiating their lives with his youth and his gaiety, playing to them his divine music, kissing their hands, until he grew quite strong and well again. And that was a long, long way off. Meanwhile life was a perpetual spring. Why should it ever end?

One afternoon they sat in the sunny garden, the ladies busy with needlework, and Andrea playing snatches of dreamy things on the violin. The dainty remains of tea stood on a table, and the young man's crutch rested against it. Presently he began to play Tschaikowsky's "Chanson Triste." Miss Ursula, looking up, saw a girl of plain face and independent bearing standing by the gate.

"Who is that, Janet?" she whispered.

Miss Janet glanced round.

"It is the impertinent young woman who was listening the other day."

Andrea followed their glances, and, perceiving a third listener, half consciously played to her. When the piece was finished the girl slowly walked away.

"I know it's wrong and unchristianlike," said Miss Widdington, "but I dislike that girl intensely."

"So do I," said Miss Ursula. Then she laughed. "She looks like the wicked fairy in a story-book."

vi

THE TIME came when he threw aside his crutch and flew, laughing, away beyond their control. This they did not mind, for he always came back and accompanied them on their wild rambles. He now resembled the ordinary young man of the day as nearly as the St. Madoc tailors and hosiers could contrive; and the astonishing fellow, with his cameo face and his hyacinthine locks, still looked picturesque.

One morning he took Pendruddocke's fiddle and went off, in high spirits, and when he returned in the late afternoon his face was flushed and a new light burned in his eyes. He explained his adventures volubly. They had a vague impression that, Orion-like, he had been playing his stringed instrument to dolphins and waves and things some miles off along the coast. To please him they said "*Ja*" at every pause in his narration, and he thought they understood. Finally he kissed their hands.

Two mornings later he started, without his fiddle, immediately after breakfast. To Miss Ursula, who accompanied him down the road to the village, he announced Polwern as his destination. Unsuspecting and happy, she bade

him good-bye and lovingly watched his lithe young figure disappear behind the bounding cliff of the little bay.

Miss Olga Danilof sat reading a novel by the door of the cottage where she lodged when the beautiful youth came up. He raised his hat— she nodded.

"Well," she said in German, "have you told the funny old maids?"

"*Ach*," said he, "they are dear, gracious ladies— but I have told them."

"I've heard from my brother," she remarked, taking a letter from the book. "He trusts my judgment implicitly, as I said he would—and you are to come with me to London at once."

"To-day?"

"By the midday train."

He looked at her in amazement. "But the dear ladies—"

"You can write and explain. My brother's time is valuable— he has already put off his journey to Paris one day in order to see you."

"But I have no money," he objected weakly.

"What does that matter? I have enough for the railway ticket, and when you see Boris he will give you an advance. Oh, don't be grateful," she added in her independent way. "In the first place, we're brother artists, and in the second it's a pure matter of business. It's much better to put yourself in the hands of Boris Danilof and make a fortune in Europe than to play in a restaurant orchestra in New York; don't you think so?"

Andrea did think so, and he blessed the storm that drove the ship out of its course from Hamburg and terrified him out of his wits in his steerage quarters, so that he rushed on deck in shirt and trousers, grasping a life-belt, only to be cursed one moment by a sailor and the next to be swept by a wave clean over the taffrail into the sea. He blessed the storm and he blessed the wave and he blessed the life-belt which he lost just before consciousness left him; and he blessed the jag of rock on the sandy cove against which he must have broken his ankle; and he blessed the ladies and the sun and the sea and sky and Olga Danilof and the whole of this beautiful world that had suddenly laid itself at his feet.

The village cart drew up by the door, and Miss Danilof's luggage that lay ready in the hall was lifted in.

"Come," she said. "You can ask the old maids to send on your things."

He laughed. "I have no things. I am as free as the wind."

At St. Madoc, whence he intended to send a telegram to the dear, gracious ladies, they only had just time to catch the train. He sent no telegram; and as they approached London he thought less and less about it, his mind, after the manner of youth, full of the wonder that was to be.

vii

THE LADIES sat down to tea. Eggs were ready to be boiled as soon as he returned. Not having lunched, he would be hungry. But he did not come. By dinner-time they grew anxious. They postponed the meal. Dorcas came into the drawing-room periodically to report deterioration of cooked viands. But they could not eat the meal alone. At last they grew terrified lest some evil should have befallen him, and Miss Widdington went in to the village and despatched Jan Pendered, and Joe Gullow on his bicycle, in search. When she returned she found Miss Ursula looking as if she had seen a ghost.

"Janet, that girl is living there."

"Where?"

"Polwern. He went there this morning."

Miss Widdington felt as if a cold hand had touched her heart, but she knew that it behoved her as the elder to dismiss her sister's fears.

"You're talking nonsense, Ursula; he has never met her."

"How do we know?" urged Miss Ursula.

"I don't consider it delicate," replied Miss Widdington, "to discuss the possibility."

They said no more, and went out and stood by the gate, waiting for their messengers. The moon rose and silvered the sea, and the sea breeze sprang up; the surf broke in a melancholy rhythm on the sands beneath.

"It sounds like the 'Chanson Triste,'" said Miss Ursula. And before them both rose the picture of the girl standing there like an Evil Fairy while Andrea played.

At last Jan Pendered appeared on the cliff. The ladies went out to meet him.

Then they learned what had happened.

In a dignified way they thanked Jan Pendered and gave him a shilling for Joe Gullow, who had brought the news. They bade him good night in clear, brave voices, and walked back very silent and upright through the garden into the house. In the drawing-room they turned to each other, and, their arms about each other's necks, they broke down utterly.

The stranger woman had come and had taken him away from them. Youth had flown magnetically to youth. They were left alone unheeded in the dry lavender of their lives.

The moonlight streamed through the white-curtained casement window into the white, spotless room. It shone on the two little white beds, on the white garments, neatly folded on white chairs, on the white-whiskered

gentleman over the mantle-piece, and on the white faces of the sisters. They slept little that night. Once Miss Widdington spoke.

"Ursula, we must go to sleep and forget it all. We've been two old fools."

Miss Ursula sobbed for answer. With the dawn came a certain quietude of spirit. She rose, put on her dressing-gown, and, leaving her sister asleep, stole out on tiptoe. The window was open and the curtains were undrawn in the boy's empty room. She leaned on the sill and looked out over the sea. Sooner or later, she knew, would come a letter of explanation. She hoped Janet would not force her to read it. She no longer wanted to know whence he came, whither he was going. It were better for her, she thought, not to know. It were better for her to cherish the most beautiful thing that had ever entered her life. For all those years she had waited for the prince who never came; and he had come at last out of fairyland, cast up by the sea. She had had with him her brief season of tremulous happiness. If he had been carried on, against his will, by the strange woman into the unknown whence he had emerged, it was only the inevitable ending of such a fairy tale.

Thus wisdom came to her from sea and sky, and made her strong. She smiled through her tears, and she, the weaker, went forth for the first time in her life to comfort and direct her sister.

17: Boys Will Be Boys

Irvin S. Cobb

1876-1944

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WHEN Judge Priest, on this particular morning, came puffing into his chambers at the courthouse, looking, with his broad beam and in his costume of flappy, loose white ducks, a good deal like an old-fashioned full-rigger with all sails set, his black shadow, Jeff Poindexter, had already finished the job of putting the quarters to rights for the day. The cedar water bucket had been properly replenished; the jagged flange of a fifteen-cent chunk of ice protruded above the rim of the bucket; and alongside, on the appointed nail, hung the gourd dipper that the master always used. The floor had been swept, except, of course, in the corners and underneath things; there were evidences, in streaky scrolls of fine grit particles upon various flat surfaces, that a dusting brush had been more or less sparingly employed. A spray of trumpet flowers, plucked from the vine that grew outside the window, had been draped over the framed steel engraving of President Davis and his Cabinet upon the wall; and on the top of the big square desk in the middle of the room, where a small section of cleared green-blotter space formed an oasis in a dry and arid desert of cluttered law journals and dusty documents, the morning's mail rested in a little heap.

Having placed his old cotton umbrella in a corner, having removed his coat and hung it upon a peg behind the hall door, and having seen to it that a palm-leaf fan was in arm's reach should he require it, the Judge, in his billowy white shirt, sat down at his desk and gave his attention to his letters. There was an invitation from the Hylan B. Gracey Camp of Confederate Veterans of Eddyburg, asking him to deliver the chief oration at the annual reunion, to be held at Mineral Springs on the twelfth day of the following month; an official notice from the clerk of the Court of Appeals concerning the affirmation of a judgment that had been handed down by Judge Priest at the preceding term of his own court; a bill for five pounds of a special brand of smoking tobacco; a notice of a lodge meeting—altogether quite a sizable batch of mail.

At the bottom of the pile he came upon a long envelope addressed to him by his title, instead of by his name, and bearing on its upper right-hand corner several foreign-looking stamps; they were British stamps, he saw, on closer examination.

To the best of his recollection it had been a good long time since Judge Priest had had a communication by post from overseas. He adjusted his steel-bowed spectacles, ripped the wrapper with care and shook out the contents. There appeared to be several inclosures; in fact, there were several— a sheaf

of printed forms, a document with seals attached, and a letter that covered two sheets of paper with typewritten lines. To the letter the recipient gave consideration first. Before he reached the end of the opening paragraph he uttered a profound grunt of surprise; his reading of the rest was frequently punctuated by small exclamations, his face meantime puckering up in interested lines. At the conclusion, when he came to the signature, he indulged himself in a soft low whistle. He read the letter all through again, and after that he examined the forms and the document which had accompanied it.

Chuckling under his breath, he wriggled himself free from the snug embrace of his chair arms and waddled out of his own office and down the long bare empty hall to the office of Sheriff Giles Birdsong. Within, that competent functionary, Deputy Sheriff Breck Quarles, sat at ease in his shirt sleeves, engaged, with the smaller blade of his pocketknife, in performing upon his finger nails an operation that combined the fine deftness of the manicure with the less delicate art of the farrier. At the sight of the Judge in the open doorway he hastily withdrew from a tabletop, where they rested, a pair of long thin legs, and rose.

"Mornin', Breck," said Judge Priest to the other's salutation. "No, thank you, son. I won't come in; but I've got a little job for you. I wisht, ef you ain't too busy, that you'd step down the street and see ef you can't find Peep O'Day fur me and fetch him back here with you. It won't take you long, will it?"

"No, suh— not very." Mr. Quarles reached for his hat and snuggled his shoulder holster back inside his unbuttoned waistcoat. "He'll most likely be down round Gafford's stable. Whut's Old Peep been doin', Judge— gettin' himself in contempt of court or somethin'?" He grinned, asking the question with the air of one making a little joke.

"No," vouchsafed the Judge; "he ain't done nothin'. But he's about to have somethin' of a highly onusual nature done to him. You jest tell him I'm wishful to see him right away— that'll be sufficient, I reckin."

Without making further explanation, Judge Priest returned to his chambers and for the third time read the letter from foreign parts. Court was not in session, and the hour was early and the weather was hot; nobody interrupted him. Perhaps fifteen minutes passed. Mr. Quarles poked his head in at the door.

"I found him, suh," the deputy stated. "He's outside here in the hall."

"Much obliged to you, son," said Judge Priest. "Send him on in, will you, please?"

The head was withdrawn; its owner lingered out of sight of His Honor, but within earshot. It was hard to figure the presiding judge of the First Judicial District of the State of Kentucky as having business with Peep O'Day; and,

though Mr. Quarles was no eavesdropper, still he felt a pardonable curiosity in whatsoever might transpire. As he feigned an absorbed interest in a tax notice, which was pasted on a blackboard just outside the office door, there entered the presence of the Judge a man who seemingly was but a few years younger than the Judge himself— a man who looked to be somewhere between sixty-five and seventy. There is a look that you may have seen in the eyes of ownerless but well-intentioned dogs— dogs that, expecting kicks as their daily portion, are humbly grateful for kind words and stray bones; dogs that are fairly yearning to be adopted by somebody— by anybody— being prepared to give to such a benefactor a most faithful doglike devotion in return.

This look, which is fairly common among masterless and homeless dogs, is rare among humans; still, once in a while you do find it there too. The man who now timidly shuffled himself across the threshold of Judge Priest's office had such a look out of his eyes. He had a long simple face, partly inclosed in gray whiskers. Four dollars would have been a sufficient price to pay for the garments he stood in, including the wrecked hat he held in his hands and the broken, misshaped shoes on his feet. A purchaser who gave more than four dollars for the whole in its present state of decrepitude would have been but a poor hand at bargaining.

The man who wore this outfit coughed in an embarrassed fashion and halted, fumbling his ruinous hat in his hands.

"Howdy do?" said Judge Priest heartily. "Come in!"

The other diffidently advanced himself a yard or two.

"Excuse me, suh," he said apologetically; "but this here Breck Quarles he come after me and he said ez how you wanted to see me. 'Twas him ez brung me here, suh."

Faintly underlying the drawl of the speaker was just a suspicion— a mere trace, as you might say— of a labial softness that belongs solely and exclusively to the children, and in a diminishing degree to the grandchildren, of native-born sons and daughters of a certain small green isle in the sea. It was not so much a suggestion of a brogue as it was the suggestion of the ghost of a brogue; a brogue almost extinguished, almost obliterated, and yet persisting through the generations— South of Ireland struggling beneath south of Mason and Dixon's Line.

"Yes," said the Judge; "that's right. I do want to see you." The tone was one that he might employ in addressing a bashful child. "Set down there and make yourself at home."

The newcomer obeyed to the extent of perching himself on the extreme forward edge of a chair. His feet shuffled uneasily where they were drawn up against the cross rung of the chair.

The Judge reared well back, studying his visitor over the tops of his glasses with rather a quizzical look. In one hand he balanced the large envelope which had come to him that morning.

"Seems to me I heared somewheres, years back, that your regular Christian name was Paul— is that right?" he asked.

"Shorely is, suh," assented the ragged man, surprised and plainly grateful that one holding a supremely high position in the community should vouchsafe to remember a fact relating to so inconsequent an atom as himself. "But I ain't heared it fur so long I come mighty nigh furgittin' it sometimes, myself. You see, Judge Priest, when I wasn't nothin' but jest a shaver folks started in to callin' me Peep— on account of my last name bein O'Day, I reckin. They been callin' me so ever since. Fust off, 'twas Little Peep, and then jest plain Peep; and now it's got to be Old Peep. But my real entitled name is Paul, jest like you said, Judge— Paul Felix O'Day."

"Uh-huh! And wasn't your father's name Philip and your mother's name Katherine Dwyer O'Day?"

"To the best of my recollection that's partly so, too, suh. They both of 'em up and died when I was a baby, long before I could remember anything a-tall. But they always told me my paw's name was Phil, or Philip. Only my maw's name wasn't Kath— Kath— wasn't whut you jest now called it, Judge. It was plain Kate."

"Kate or Katherine— it makes no great difference," explained Judge Priest. "I reckin the record is straight this fur. And now think hard and see ef you kin ever remember hearin' of an uncle named Daniel O'Day— your father's brother."

The answer was a shake of the tousled head.

"I don't know nothin' about my people. I only jest know they come over frum some place with a funny name in the Old Country before I was born. The onliest kin I ever had over here was that there no-'count triflin' nephew of mine— Perce Dwyer— him that uster hang round this town. I reckin you call him to mind, Judge?"

The old Judge nodded before continuing:

"All the same, I reckin there ain't no manner of doubt but whut you had an uncle of the name of Daniel. All the evidences would seem to p'int that way. Accordin' to the proofs, this here Uncle Daniel of yours lived in a little town called Kilmare, in Ireland." He glanced at one of the papers that lay on his desktop; then added in a casual tone: "Tell me, Peep, whut are you doin' now fur a livin'?"

The object of this examination grinned a faint grin of extenuation.

"Well, suh, I'm knockin' about, doin' the best I kin— which ain't much. I help out round Gafford's liver' stable, and Pete Gafford he lets me sleep in a little room behind the feed room, and his wife she gives me my vittles. Oncet in a while I git a chancet to do odd jobs fur folks round town—cuttin' weeds and splittin' stove wood and packin' in coal, and sech ez that."

"Not much money in it, is there?"

"No, suh; not much. Folks is more prone to offer me old clothes than they are to pay me in cash. Still, I manage to git along. I don't live very fancy; but, then, I don't starve, and that's more'n some kin say."

"Peep, whut was the most money you ever had in your life— at one time?"

Peep scratched with a freckled hand at his thatch of faded whitish hair to stimulate recollection.

"I reckin not more'n six bits at any one time, suh. Seems like I've sorter got the knack of livin' without money."

"Well, Peep, sech bein' the case, whut would you say ef I was to tell you that you're a rich man?"

The answer came slowly:

"I reckin, suh, ef it didn't sound disrespectful, I'd say you was prankin' with me— makin' fun of me, suh."

Judge Priest bent forward in his chair.

"I'm not prankin' with you. It's my pleasant duty to inform you that at this moment you are the rightful owner of eight thousand pounds."

"Pounds of whut, Judge?" The tone expressed a heavy incredulity.

"Why, pounds in money."

Outside, in the hall, with one ear held conveniently near the crack in the door, Deputy Sheriff Quarles gave a violent start; and then, at once, was torn between a desire to stay and hear more and an urge to hurry forth and spread the unbelievable tidings. After the briefest of struggles the latter inclination won; this news was too marvelously good to keep; surely a harbinger and a herald were needed to spread it broadcast.

Mr. Quarles tiptoed rapidly down the hall. When he reached the sidewalk the volunteer bearer of a miraculous tale fairly ran. As for the man who sat facing the Judge, he merely stared in a dull bewilderment.

"Judge," he said at length, "eight thousand pounds of money oughter make a powerful big pile, oughten it?"

"It wouldn't weigh quite that much ef you put it on the scales," explained His Honor painstakingly. "I mean pounds sterlin'— English money. Near ez I kin figger offhand, it comes in our money to somewheres between thirty-five and forty thousand dollars— nearer forty than thirty-five. And it's yours, Peep— every red cent of it."

"Excuse me, suh, and not meanin' to contradict you, or nothin' like that; but I reckin there must be some mistake. Why, Judge, I don't scursely know anybody that's ez wealthy ez all that, let alone anybody that'd give me sech a lot of money."

"Listen, Peep: This here letter I'm holdin' in my hand came to me by to-day's mail— jest a little spell ago. It's frum Ireland— frum the town of Kilmare, where your people came frum. It was sent to me by a firm of barristers in that town— lawyers we'd call 'em. In this letter they ask me to find you and to tell you what's happened. It seems, from whut they write, that your uncle, by name Daniel O'Day, died not very long ago without issue— that is to say, without leavin' any children of his own, and without makin' any will.

"It appears he had eight thousand pounds saved up. Ever since he died those lawyers and some other folks over there in Ireland have been tryin' to find out who that money should go to. They learnt in some way that your father and your mother settled in this town a mighty long time ago, and that they died here and left one son, which is you. All the rest of the family over there in Ireland have already died out, it seems; that natchelly makes you the next of kin and the heir at law, which means that all your uncle's money comes direct to you.

"So, Peep, you're a wealthy man in your own name. That's the news I had to tell you. Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune."

The beneficiary rose to his feet, seeming not to see the hand the old Judge had extended across the desktop toward him. On his face, of a sudden, was a queer, eager look. It was as though he foresaw the coming true of long-cherished and heretofore unattainable visions.

"Have you got it here, suh?"

He glanced about him as though expecting to see a bulky bundle. Judge Priest smiled.

"Oh, no; they didn't send it along with the letter— that wouldn't be regular. There's quite a lot of things to be done fust. There'll be some proofs to be got up and sworn to before a man called a British consul; and likely there'll be a lot of papers that you'll have to sign; and then all the papers and the proofs and things will be sent across the ocean. And, after some fees are paid out over there— why, then you'll git your inheritance."

The rapt look faded from the strained face, leaving it downcast. "I'm afeared, then, I won't be able to claim that there money," he said forlornly.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know how to sign my own name. Raised the way I was, I never got no book learnin'. I can't neither read nor write."

Compassion shadowed the Judge's chubby face; and compassion was in his voice as he made answer:

"You don't need to worry about that part of it. You can make your mark— just a cross mark on the paper, with witnesses present— like this."

He took up a pen, dipped it in the inkwell and illustrated his meaning.

"Yes, suh; I'm glad it kin be done thataway. I always wisht I knowed how to read big print and spell my own name out. I ast a feller oncet to write my name out fur me in plain letters on a piece of paper. I was aimin' to learn to copy it off; but I showed it to one of the hands at the liver' stable and he busted out laughin'. And then I come to find out this here feller had tricked me fur to make game of me. He hadn't wrote my name out a-tall—he'd wrote some dirty words instid. So after that I give up tryin' to educate myself. That was several years back and I ain't tried sence. Now I reckin I'm too old to learn.... I wonder, suh— I wonder ef it'll be very long before that there money gits here and I begin to have the spendin' of it?"

"Makin' plans already?"

"Yes, suh," O'Day answered truthfully; "I am." He was silent for a moment, his eyes on the floor; then timidly he advanced the thought that had come to him. "I reckin, suh, it wouldn't be no more'n fair and proper ef I divided my money with you to pay you back fur all this trouble, you're fixin' to take on my account. Would— would half of it be enough? The other half oughter last me fur what uses I'll make of it."

"I know you mean well and I'm much obliged to you fur your offer," stated Judge Priest, smiling a little; "but it wouldn't be fittin' or proper fur me to tech a cent of your money. There'll be some court dues and some lawyers' fees, and sech, to pay over there in Ireland; but after that's settled up everything comes direct to you. It's goin' to be a pleasure to me to help you arrange these here details that you don't understand— a pleasure and not a burden."

He considered the figure before him.

"Now here's another thing, Peep; I judge it's hardly fittin' fur a man of substance to go on livin' the way you've had to live durin' your life. Ef you don't mind my offerin' you a little advice I would suggest that you go right down to Felsburg Brothers when you leave here and git yourself fitted out with some suitable clothin'. And you'd better go to Max Biederman's, too, and order a better pair of shoes fur yourself than them you've got on. Tell 'em I sent you and that I guarantee the payment of your bills. Though I reckin that'll hardly be necessary— when the news of your good luck gits noised round I misdoubt whether there's any firm in our entire city that wouldn't be glad to have you on their books fur a stiddy customer.

"And, also, ef I was you I'd arrange to git me regular board and lodgin's somewheres round town. You see, Peep, comin' into a property entails consider'ble many responsibilities right frum the start."

"Yes, suh," assented the legatee obediently. "I'll do jest ez you say, Judge Priest, about the clothes and the shoes, and all that; but— but, ef you don't mind, I'd like to go on livin' at Gafford's. Pete Gafford's been mighty good to me— him and his wife both; and I wouldn't like fur 'em to think I was gittin' stuck up jest because I've had this here streak of luck come to me. Mebbe, seein' ez how things has changed with me, they'd be willin' to take me in fur a table boarder at their house; but I shorely would hate to give up livin' in that there little room behind the feed room at the liver' stable. I don't know ez I could ever find any place that would seem ez homelike to me ez whut it is."

"Suit yourself about that," said Judge Priest heartily. "I don't know but whut you've got the proper notion about it after all."

"Yes, suh. Them Gaffords have been purty nigh the only real true friends I ever had that I could count on." He hesitated a moment. "I reckin— I reckin, suh, it'll be a right smart while, won't it, before that money gits here frum all the way acrost the ocean?"

"Why, yes; I imagine it will. Was you figurin' on investin' a little of it now?"

"Yes, suh; I was."

"About how much did you think of spendin' fur a beginnin'?"

O'Day squinted his eyes, his lips moving in silent calculation.

"Well, suh," he said at length, "I could use ez much ez a silver dollar. But, of course, sence—"

"That sounds kind of moderate to me," broke in Judge Priest. He shoved a pudgy hand into a pocket of his white trousers. "I reckin this detail kin be arranged. Here, Peep"—he extended his hand—"here's your dollar." Then, as the other drew back, stammering a refusal, he hastily added: "No, no, no; go ahead and take it—it's yours. I'm jest advancin' it to you out of whut'll be comin' to you shortly.

"I'll tell you whut: Until sech time ez you are in position to draw on your own funds you jest drap in here to see me when you're in need of cash, and I'll try to let you have whut you require— in reason. I'll keep a proper reckinin' of whut you git and you kin pay me back ez soon ez your inheritance is put into your hands.

"One thing more," he added as the heir, having thanked him, was making his grateful adieu at the threshold: "Now that you're wealthy, or about to be so, I kind of imagine quite a passel of fellers will suddenly discover themselves strangely and affectionately drawed toward you. You're liable to find out

you've always had more true and devoted friends in this community than whut you ever imagined to be the case before.

"Now friendship is a mighty fine thing, takin' it by and large; but it kin be overdone. It's barely possible that some of this here new crop of your well-wishers and admirers will be makin' little business propositions to you—desirin' to have you go partners with 'em in business, or to sell you desirable pieces of real estate; or even to let you loan 'em various sums of money. I wouldn't be surprised but whut a number of sech chances will be comin' your way durin' the next few days, and frum then on. Ef sech should be the case I would suggest to you that, before committin' yourself to anybody or anything, you tell 'em that I'm sort of actin' as your unofficial adviser in money matters, and that they should come to me and outline their little schemes in person. Do you git my general drift?"

"Yes, suh," said Peep. "I won't furgit; and thank you ag'in, Judge, specially fur lettin' me have this dollar ahead of time."

He shambled out with the coin in his hand; and on his face was again the look of one who sees before him the immediate fulfillment of a delectable dream.

With lines of sympathy and amusement crosshatched at the outer corners of his eyelids, Judge Priest, rising and stepping to his door, watched the retreating figure of the town's newest and strangest capitalist disappear down the wide front steps of the courthouse.

Presently he went back to his chair and sat down, tugging at his short chin beard.

"I wonder now," said he, meditatively addressing the emptiness of the room, "I wonder whut a man sixty-odd-year old is goin' to do with the fust whole dollar he ever had in his life!"

It was characteristic of our circuit judge that he should have voiced his curiosity aloud. Talking to himself when he was alone was one of his habits. Also, it was characteristic of him that he had refrained from betraying his inquisitiveness to his late caller. Similar motives of delicacy had kept him from following the other man to watch the sequence.

However, at secondhand, the details very shortly reached him. They were brought by no less a person than Deputy Sheriff Quarles, who, some twenty minutes or possibly half an hour later, obtruded himself upon Judge Priest's presence.

"Judge," began Mr. Quarles, "you'd never in the world guess whut Old Peep O'Day done with the first piece of money he got his hands on out of that there forty thousand pounds of silver dollars he's come into from his uncle's estate."

The old man slanted a keen glance in Mr. Quarles' direction.

"Tell me, son," he asked softly, "how did you come to hear the glad tidin's so promptly?"

"Me?" said Mr. Quarles innocently. "Why, Judge Priest, the word is all over this part of town by this time. Why, I reckin twenty-five or fifty people must 'a' been watchin' Old Peep to see how he was goin' to act when he come out of this courthouse."

"Well, well, well!" murmured the Judge blandly. "Good news travels almost ez fast sometimes ez whut bad news does— don't it, now? Well, son, I give up the riddle. Tell me jest whut our elderly friend did do with the first installment of his inheritance."

"Well, suh, he turned south here at the gate and went down the street, a-lookin' neither to the right nor the left. He looked to me like a man in a trance, almost. He keeps right on through Legal Row till he comes to Franklin Street, and then he goes up Franklin to B. Weil & Son's confectionery store; and there he turns in. I happened to be followin' 'long behind him, with a few others— with several others, in fact— and we-all sort of slowed up in passin' and looked in at the door; and that's how I come to be in a position to see what happened.

"Old Peep, he marches in jest like I'm tellin' it to you, suh; and Mr. B. Weil comes to wait on him, and he starts in buyin'. He buys hisself a five-cent bag of gumdrops; and a five-cent bag of jelly beans; and a ten-cent bag of mixed candies— kisses and candy mottoes, and sech ez them, you know; and a sack of fresh-roasted peanuts— a big sack, it was, fifteen-cent size; and two prize boxes; and some gingersnaps— ten cents' worth; and a cocoanut; and half a dozen red bananas; and half a dozen more of the plain yaller ones. Altogether I figger he spent a even dollar; in fact, I seen him hand Mr. Weil a dollar, and I didn't see him gittin' no change back out of it.

"Then he comes on out of the store, with all these things stuck in his pockets and stacked up in his arms till he looks sort of like some new kind of a summertime Santy Klaws; and he sets down on a goods box at the edge of the pavement, with his feet in the gutter, and starts in eatin' all them things.

"First, he takes a bite off a yaller banana and then off a red banana, and then a mouthful of peanuts; and then maybe some mixed candies— not sayin' a word to nobody, but jest natchelly eatin' his fool head off. A young chap that's clerkin' in Bagby's grocery, next door, steps up to him and speaks to him, meanin', I suppose, to ast him is it true he's wealthy. And Old Peep, he says to him, 'Please don't come botherin' me now, sonny— I'm busy ketchin' up,' he says; and keeps right on a-munchin' and a-chewin' like all possessed.

"That ain't all of it, neither, Judge— not by a long shot it ain't! Purty soon Old Peep looks round him at the little crowd that's gathered. He didn't seem to pay no heed to the grown-up people standin' there; but he sees a couple of

boys about ten years old in the crowd, and he beckons to them to come to him, and he makes room fur them alongside him on the box and divides up his knick-knacks with them.

"When I left there to come on back here he had no less'n six kids squatted round him, includin' one little nigger boy; and between 'em all they'd jest finished up the last of the bananas and peanuts and the candy and the gingersnaps, and was fixin' to take turns drinkin' the milk out of the cocoanut. I s'pose they've got it all cracked out of the shell and et up by now— the cocoanut, I mean. Judge, you oughter stepped down into Franklin Street and taken a look at the picture whilst there was still time. You never seen sech a funny sight in all your days, I'll bet!"

"I reckin 'twould be too late to be startin' now," said Judge Priest. "I'm right sorry I missed it.... Busy ketchin' up, huh? Yes; I reckin he is.... Tell me, son, whut did you make out of the way Peep O'Day acted?"

"Why, suh," stated Mr. Quarles, "to my mind, Judge, there ain't no manner of doubt but whut prosperity has went to his head and turned it. He acted to me like a plum' distracted idiot. A grown man with forty thousand pounds of solid money settin' on the side of a gutter eatin' jimcracks with a passel of dirty little boys! Kin you figure it out any other way, Judge— except that his mind is gone?"

"I don't set myself up to be a specialist in mental disorders, son," said Judge Priest softly; "but, sence you ask me the question, I should say, speakin' offhand, that it looks to me more ez ef the heart was the organ that was mainly affected. And possibly"— he added this last with a dry little smile— "and possibly, by now, the stomach also."

WHETHER or not Mr. Quarles was correct in his psychopathic diagnosis, he certainly had been right when he told Judge Priest that the word was already all over the business district. It had spread fast and was still spreading; it spread to beat the wireless, traveling as it did by that mouth-to-ear method of communication which is so amazingly swift and generally so tremendously incorrect. Persons who could not credit the tale at all, nevertheless lost no time in giving to it a yet wider circulation; so that, as though borne on the wind, it moved in every direction, like ripples on a pond; and with each time of retelling the size of the legacy grew.

The *Daily Evening News*, appearing on the streets at five P.M., confirmed the tale; though by its account the fortune was reduced to a sum far below the gorgeously exaggerated estimates of most of the earlier narrators. Between breakfast and supper-time Peep O'Day's position in the common estimation of his fellow citizens underwent a radical and revolutionary change. He ceased—

automatically, as it were— to be a town character; he became, by universal consent, a town notable, whose every act and every word would thereafter be subjected to close scrutiny and closer analysis.

The next morning the nation at large had opportunity to know of the great good fortune that had befallen Paul Felix O'Day, for the story had been wired to the city papers by the local correspondents of the same; and the press associations had picked up a stickful of the story and sped it broadcast over leased wires. Many who until that day had never heard of the fortunate man, or, indeed, of the place where he lived, at once manifested a concern in his well-being.

Certain firms of investment brokers in New York and Chicago promptly added a new name to what vulgarly they called their "sucker" lists. Dealers in mining stocks, in oil stocks, in all kinds of attractive stocks showed interest; in circular form samples of the most optimistic and alluring literature the world has ever known were consigned to the post, addressed to Mr. P. F. O'Day, such-and-such a town, such-and-such a state, care of general delivery.

Various lonesome ladies in various lonesome places lost no time in sitting themselves down and inditing congratulatory letters; object matrimony. Some of these were single ladies; others had been widowed, either by death or request. Various other persons of both sexes, residing here, there, and elsewhere in our country, suddenly remembered that they, too, were descended from the O'Days of Ireland, and wrote on forthwith to claim proud and fond relationship with the particular O'Day who had come into money.

It was a remarkable circumstance, which speedily developed, that one man should have so many distant cousins scattered over the Union, and a thing equally noteworthy that practically all these kinspeople, through no fault of their own, should at the present moment be in such straitened circumstances and in such dire need of temporary assistance of a financial nature. Ticker and printer's ink, operating in conjunction, certainly did their work mighty well; even so, several days were to elapse before the news reached one who, of all those who read it, had most cause to feel a profound personal sensation in the intelligence.

This delay, however, was nowise to be blamed upon the tardiness of the newspapers; it was occasioned by the fact that the person referred to was for the moment well out of contact with the active currents of world affairs, he being confined in a workhouse at Evansville, Indiana.

As soon as he had rallied from the shock this individual set about making plans to put himself in direct touch with the inheritor. He had ample time in which to frame and shape his campaign, inasmuch as there remained for him yet to serve nearly eight long and painfully tedious weeks of a three-months'

vagrancy sentence. Unlike most of those now manifesting their interest, he did not write a letter; but he dreamed dreams that made him forget the annoyances of a ball and chain fast on his ankle and piles of stubborn stones to be cracked up into fine bits with a heavy hammer.

We are getting ahead of our narrative, though— days ahead of it. The chronological sequence of events properly dates from the morning following the morning when Peep O'Day, having been abruptly translated from the masses of the penniless to the classes of the wealthy, had forthwith embarked upon the gastronomic orgy so graphically detailed by Deputy Sheriff Quarles.

On that next day more eyes probably than had been trained in Peep O'Day's direction in all the unremarked and unremarkable days of his life put together were focused upon him. Persons who theretofore had regarded his existence— if indeed they gave it a thought— as one of the utterly trivial and inconsequential incidents of the cosmic scheme, were moved to speak to him, to clasp his hand, and, in numerous instances, to express a hearty satisfaction over his altered circumstances. To all these, whether they were moved by mere neighborly good will, or perchance were inspired by impulses of selfishness, the old man exhibited a mien of aloofness and embarrassment.

This diffidence or this suspicion— or this whatever it was—protected him from those who might entertain covetous and ulterior designs upon his inheritance even better than though he had been brusque and rude; while those who sought to question him regarding his plans for the future drew from him only mumbled and evasive replies, which left them as deeply in the dark as they had been before. Altogether, in his intercourse with adults he appeared shy and very ill at ease.

It was noted, though, that early in the forenoon he attached to him perhaps half a dozen urchins, of whom the oldest could scarcely have been more than twelve or thirteen years of age; and that these youngsters remained his companions throughout the day. Likewise the events of that day were such as to confirm a majority of the observers in practically the same belief that had been voiced of Mr. Quarles— namely, that whatever scanty brains Peep O'Day might have ever had were now completely addled by the stroke of luck that had befallen him.

In fairness to all— to O'Day and to the town critics who sat in judgment upon his behavior— it should be stated that his conduct at the very outset was not entirely devoid of evidences of sanity. With his troupe of ragged juveniles trailing behind him, he first visited Felsburg Brothers' Emporium to exchange his old and disreputable costume for a wardrobe that, in accordance with Judge Priest's recommendation, he had ordered on the afternoon previous, and which had since been undergoing certain necessary alterations.

With his meager frame incased in new black woolens, and wearing, as an incongruous added touch, the most brilliant of neckties, a necktie of the shade of a pomegranate blossom, he presently issued from Felsburg Brothers' and entered M. Biederman's shoe store, two doors below. Here Mr. Biederman fitted him with shoes, and in addition noted down a further order, which the purchaser did not give until after he had conferred earnestly with the members of his youthful entourage.

Those watching this scene from a distance saw— and perhaps marveled at the sight— that already, between these small boys, on the one part, and this old man, on the other, a perfect understanding appeared to have been established.

After leaving Biederman's, and tagged by his small escorts, O'Day went straight to the courthouse and, upon knocking at the door, was admitted to Judge Priest's private chambers, the boys meantime waiting outside in the hall. When he came forth he showed them something he held in his hand and told them something; whereupon all of them burst into excited and joyous whoops.

It was at that point that O'Day, by the common verdict of most grown-up onlookers, began to betray the vagaries of a disordered intellect. Not that his reason had not been under suspicion already, as a result of his freakish excess in the matter of B. Weil & Son's wares on the preceding day; but the relapse that now followed, as nearly everybody agreed, was even more pronounced, even more symptomatic than the earlier attack of aberration.

In brief, this was what happened: To begin with, Mr. Virgil Overall, who dealt in lands and houses and sold insurance of all the commoner varieties on the side, had stalked O'Day to this point and was lying in wait for him as he came out of the courthouse into the Public Square, being anxious to describe to him some especially desirable bargains, in both improved and unimproved realty; also, Mr. Overall was prepared to book him for life, accident and health policies on the spot.

So pleased was Mr. Overall at having distanced his professional rivals in the hunt that he dribbled at the mouth. But the warmth of his disappointment and indignation dried up the salivary founts instantly when the prospective patron declined to listen to him at all and, breaking free from Mr. Overall's detaining clasp, hurried on into Legal Row, with his small convoys trotting along ahead and alongside him.

At the door of the Blue Goose Saloon and Short Order Restaurant its proprietor, by name Link Iserman, was lurking, as it were, in ambush. He hailed the approaching O'Day most cordially; he inquired in a warm voice regarding O'Day's health; and then, with a rare burst of generosity, he invited, nay urged, O'Day to step inside and have something on the house— wines, ales, liquors or

cigars; it was all one to Mr. Iserman. The other merely shook his head and, without a word of thanks for the offer, passed on as though bent upon a important mission.

Mark how the proofs were accumulating: The man had disdained the company of men of approximately his own age or thereabout; he had refused an opportunity to partake of refreshment suitable to his years; and now he stepped into the Bon Ton toy store and bought for cash— most inconceivable of acquisitions!— a little wagon that was painted bright red and bore on its sides in curlicued letters, the name Comet.

His next stop was made at Bishop & Bryan's grocery, where, with the aid of his youthful compatriots, he first discriminatingly selected, and then purchased on credit, and finally loaded into the wagon, such purchases as a dozen bottles of soda pop, assorted flavors; cheese, crackers— soda and animal; sponge cakes with weather-proof pink icing on them; fruits of the season; cove oysters; a bottle of pepper sauce; and a quantity of the extra large sized bright green cucumber pickles known to the trade as the Fancy Jumbo Brand, Prime Selected.

Presently the astounding spectacle was presented of two small boys, with string bridles on their arms, drawing the wagon through our town and out of it into the country, with Peep O'Day in the rôle of teamster walking alongside the laden wagon. He was holding the lines in his hands and shouting orders at his team, who showed a colty inclination to shy at objects, to kick up their heels without provocation, and at intervals to try to run away. Eight or ten small boys— for by now the troupe had grown in number and in volume of noise— trailed along, keeping step with their elderly patron and advising him shrilly regarding the management of his refractory span.

As it turned out, the destination of this preposterous procession was Bradshaw's Grove, where the entire party spent the day picnicking in the woods and, as reported by several reliable witnesses, playing games. It was not so strange that holidaying boys should play games; the amazing feature of the performance was that Peep O'Day, a man old enough to be grandfather to any of them, played with them, being by turns an Indian chief, a robber baron, and the driver of a stagecoach attacked by Wild Western desperadoes.

When he returned to town at dusk, drawing his little red wagon behind him, his new suit was rumpled into many wrinkles and marked by dust and grass stains; his flame-colored tie was twisted under one ear; his new straw hat was mashed quite out of shape; and in his eyes was a light that sundry citizens, on meeting him, could only interpret for a spark struck from inner fires of madness.

Days that came after this, on through the midsummer, were, with variations, but repetitions of the day I have just described. Each morning Peep O'Day would go to either the courthouse or Judge Priest's home to turn over to the Judge the unopened mail which had been delivered to him at Gafford's stables; then he would secure from the Judge a loan of money against his inheritance. Generally the amount of his daily borrowing was a dollar; rarely was it so much as two dollars; and only once was it more than two dollars.

By nightfall the sum would have been expended upon perfectly useless and absolutely childish devices. It might be that he would buy toy pistols and paper caps for himself and his following of urchins; or that his whim would lead him to expend all the money in tin flutes. In one case the group he so incongruously headed would be for that one day a gang of make-believe banditti; in another, they would constitute themselves a fife-and-drum corps— with barreltops for the drums— and would march through the streets, where scandalized adults stood in their tracks to watch them go by, they all the while making weird sounds, which with them passed for music.

Or again, the available cash resources would be invested in provender; and then there would be an outing in the woods. Under Peep O'Day's captaincy his chosen band of youngsters picked dewberries; they went swimming together in Guthrie's Gravel Pit, out by the old Fair Grounds, where his spare naked shanks contrasted strongly with their plump freckled legs as all of them splashed through the shallows, making for deep water. Under his leadership they stole watermelons from Mr. Dick Bell's patch, afterward eating their spoils in thickets of grapevines along the banks of Perkins' Creek.

It was felt that mental befuddlement and mortal folly could reach no greater heights— or no lower depths— than on a certain hour of a certain day, along toward the end of August, when O'Day came forth from his quarters in Gafford's stables, wearing a pair of boots that M. Biederman's establishment had turned out to his order and his measure— not such boots as a sensible man might be expected to wear, but boots that were exaggerated and monstrous counterfeits of the red-topped, scroll-fronted, brass-toed, stub-heeled, squeaky-soled bootees that small boys of an earlier generation possessed.

Very proudly and seemingly unconscious of, or, at least, oblivious to, the derisive remarks that the appearance of these new belongings drew from many persons, the owner went clumping about in them, with the rumply legs of his trousers tucked down in them, and ballooning up and out over the tops in folds which overlapped from his knee joints halfway down his attenuated calves.

As Deputy Sheriff Quarles said, the combination was a sight fit to make a horse laugh. It may be that small boys have a lesser sense of humor than horses have, for certainly the boys who were the old man's invariable shadows did not laugh at him, or at his boots either. Between the whiskered senior and his small comrades there existed a freemasonry that made them all sense a thing beyond the ken of most of their elders. Perhaps this was because the elders, being blind in their superior wisdom, saw neither this thing nor the communion that flourished. They saw only the farcical joke. But His Honor, Judge Priest, to cite a conspicuous exception, seemed not to see the lamentable comedy of it.

Indeed, it seemed to some almost as if Judge Priest were aiding and abetting the befogged O'Day in his demented enterprises, his peculiar excursions and his weird purchases. If he did not actually encourage him in these constant exhibitions of witlessness, certainly there were no evidences available to show that he sought to dissuade O'Day from his strange course.

At the end of a fortnight one citizen, in whom patience had ceased to be a virtue and to whose nature long-continued silence on any public topic was intolerable, felt it his duty to speak to the Judge upon the subject. This gentleman— his name was S. P. Escott— held, with many, that, for the good name of the community, steps should be taken to abate the infantile, futile activities of the besotted legatee.

Afterward Mr. Escott, giving a partial account of the conversation with Judge Priest to certain of his friends, showed unfeigned annoyance at the outcome.

"I claim that old man's not fittin' to be runnin' a court any longer," he stated bitterly. "He's too old and peevish— that's what ails him! For one, I'm certainly not never goin' to vote fur him again. Why, it's gettin' to be ez much ez a man's life is worth to stop that there spiteful old crank in the street and put a civil question to him— that's whut's the matter!"

"What happened S. P.?" inquired some one.

"Why, here's what happened!" exclaimed the aggrieved Mr. Escott. "I hadn't any more than started in to tell him the whole town was talkin' about the way that daffy Old Peep O'Day was carryin' on, and that somethin' had oughter be done about it, and didn't he think it was beholdin' on him ez circuit judge to do somethin' right away, sech ez havin' O'Day tuck up and tried fur a lunatic, and that I fur one was ready and willin' to testify to the crazy things I'd seen done with my own eyes— when he cut in on me and jest ez good ez told me to my own face that ef I'd quit tendin' to other people's business I'd mebbe have more business of my own to tend to.

"Think of that, gentlemen! A circuit judge bemeanin' a citizen and a taxpayer"— he checked himself slightly— "anyhow, a citizen, thataway! It shows he can't be rational his ownself. Personally I claim Old Priest is failin' mentally— he must be! And ef anybody kin be found to run against him at the next election you gentlemen jest watch and see who gits my vote!"

Having uttered this threat with deep and significant emphasis Mr. Escott, still muttering, turned and entered the front gate of his boarding house. It was not exactly his boarding house; his wife ran it. But Mr. Escott lived there and voted from there.

But the apogee of Peep O'Day's carnival of weird vagaries of deportment came at the end of two months— two months in which each day the man furnished cumulative and piled-up material for derisive and jocular comment on the part of a very considerable proportion of his fellow townsmen.

Three occurrences of a widely dissimilar nature, yet all closely interrelated to the main issue, marked the climax of the man's new rôle in his new career. The first of these was the arrival of his legacy; the second was a one-ring circus; and the third and last was a nephew.

In the form of sundry bills of exchange the estate left by the late Daniel O'Day, of the town of Kilmare, in the island of Ireland, was on a certain afternoon delivered over into Judge Priest's hands, and by him, in turn, handed to the rightful owner, after which sundry indebtednesses, representing the total of the old Judge's day-to-day cash advances to O'Day, were liquidated.

The ceremony of deducting this sum took place at the Planters' Bank, whither the two had journeyed in company from the courthouse. Having, with the aid of the paying teller, instructed O'Day in the technical details requisite to the drawing of personal checks, Judge Priest went home and had his bag packed, and left for Reelfoot Lake to spend a week fishing. As a consequence he missed the remaining two events, following immediately thereafter.

The circus was no great shakes of a circus; no grand, glittering, gorgeous, glorious pageant of education and entertainment, traveling on its own special trains; no vast tented city of world's wonders and world's champions, heralded for weeks and weeks in advance of its coming by dead walls emblazoned with the finest examples of the lithographer's art, and by half-page advertisements in the *Daily Evening News*. On the contrary, it was a shabby little wagon show, which, coming overland on short notice, rolled into town under horse power, and set up its ragged and dusty canvases on the vacant lot across from Yeiser's drug store.

Compared with the street parade of any of its great and famous rivals, the street parade of this circus was a meager and disappointing thing. Why, there was only one elephant, a dwarfish and debilitated-looking creature, worn

mangy and slick on its various angles, like the cover of an old-fashioned haircloth trunk; and obviously most of the closed cages were weather-beaten stake wagons in disguise. Nevertheless, there was a sizable turnout of people for the afternoon performance. After all, a circus was a circus.

Moreover, this particular circus was marked at the afternoon performance by happenings of a nature most decidedly unusual. At one o'clock the doors were opened; at one-ten the eyes of the proprietor were made glad and his heart was uplifted within him by the sight of a strange procession, drawing nearer and nearer across the scuffed turf of the Common, and heading in the direction of the red ticket wagon.

At the head of the procession marched Peep O'Day— only, of course, the proprietor didn't know it was Peep O'Day— a queer figure in his rumpled black clothes and his red-topped brass-toed boots, and with one hand holding fast to the string of a captive toy balloon. Behind him, in an uneven jostling formation, followed many small boys and some small girls. A census of the ranks would have developed that here were included practically all the juvenile white population who otherwise, through a lack of funds, would have been denied the opportunity to patronize this circus or, in fact, any circus.

Each member of the joyous company was likewise the bearer of a toy balloon— red, yellow, blue, green, or purple, as the case might be. Over the line of heads the taut rubbery globes rode on their tethers, nodding and twisting like so many big iridescent bubbles; and half a block away, at the edge of the lot, a balloon vender, whose entire stock had been disposed of in one splendid transaction, now stood, empty-handed but full-pocketed, marveling at the stroke of luck that enabled him to take an afternoon off and rest his voice.

Out of a seemingly bottomless exchequer Peep O'Day bought tickets of admission for all. But this was only the beginning. Once inside the tent he procured accommodations in the reserved-seat section for himself and those who accompanied him. From such superior points of vantage the whole crew of them witnessed the performance, from the thrilling grand entry, with spangled ladies and gentlemen riding two by two on broad-backed steeds, to the tumbling bout introducing the full strength of the company, which came at the end.

They munched fresh-roasted peanuts and balls of sugar-coated popcorn, slightly rancid, until they munched no longer with zest but merely mechanically. They drank pink lemonade to an extent that threatened absolute depletion of the fluid contents of both barrels in the refreshment stand out in the menagerie tent. They whooped their unbridled approval when the wild Indian chief, after shooting down a stuffed coon with a bow and arrow from

somewhere up near the top of the center pole while balancing himself jauntily erect upon the haunches of a coursing white charger, suddenly flung off his feathered headdress, his wig and his fringed leather garments, and revealed himself in pink fleshings as the principal bareback rider.

They screamed in a chorus of delight when the funny old clown, who had been forcibly deprived of three tin flutes in rapid succession, now produced yet a fourth from the seemingly inexhaustible depths of his baggy white pants— a flute with a string and a bent pin attached to it— and, secretly affixing the pin in the tail of the cross ringmaster's coat, was thereafter enabled to toot sharp shrill blasts at frequent intervals, much to the chagrin of the ringmaster, who seemed utterly unable to discover the whereabouts of the instrument dangling behind him.

But no one among them whooped louder or laughed longer than their elderly and bewhiskered friend, who sat among them, paying the bills. As his guests they stayed for the concert; and, following this, they patronized the side show in a body. They had been almost the first upon the scene; assuredly they were the last of the audience to quit it.

Indeed, before they trailed their confrère away from the spot the sun was nearly down; and at scores of supper tables all over town the tale of poor old Peep O'Day's latest exhibition of freakishness was being retailed, with elaborations, to interested auditors. Estimates of the sum probably expended by him in this crowning extravagance ranged well up into the hundreds of dollars.

As for the object of these speculations, he was destined not to eat any supper at all that night. Something happened that so upset him as to make him forget the meal altogether. It began to happen when he reached the modest home of P. Gafford, adjoining the Gafford stables, on Locust Street, and found sitting on the lower-most step of the porch a young man of untidy and unshaved aspect, who hailed him affectionately as Uncle Paul, and who showed deep annoyance and acute distress upon being rebuffed with chill words.

It is possible that the strain of serving a three-months' sentence, on the technical charge of vagrancy, in a workhouse somewhere in Indiana, had affected the young man's nerves. His ankle bones still ached where the ball and chain had been hitched; on his palms the blisters induced by the uncongenial use of a sledge hammer on a rock pile had hardly as yet turned to calluses. So it is only fair to presume that his nervous system felt the stress of his recent confining experiences also.

Almost tearfully he pleaded with Peep O'Day to remember the ties of blood that bound them; repeatedly he pointed out that he was the only known

kinsman of the other in all the world, and, therefore, had more reason than any other living being to expect kindness and generosity at his uncle's hands. He spoke socialistically of the advisability of an equal division; failing to make any impression here he mentioned the subject of a loan—at first hopefully, but finally despairingly.

When he was done Peep O'Day, in a perfectly colorless and unsympathetic voice, bade him good-by— not good-night but good-by! And, going inside the house, he closed the door behind him, leaving his newly returned relative outside and quite alone.

At this the young man uttered violent language; but, since there was nobody present to hear him, it is likely he found small satisfaction in his profanity, rich though it may have been in metaphor and variety. So presently he betook himself off, going straight to the office in Legal Row of H. B. Sublette, Attorney-at-law.

From the circumstance that he found Mr. Sublette in, though it was long past that gentleman's office hours, and, moreover, found Mr. Sublette waiting in an expectant and attentive attitude, it might have been adduced by one skilled in the trick of putting two and two together that the pair of them had reached a prior understanding sometime during the day; and that the visit of the young man to the Gafford home and his speeches there had all been parts of a scheme planned out at a prior conference.

Be this as it may, so soon as Mr. Sublette had heard his caller's version of the meeting upon the porch he lost no time in taking certain legal steps. That very night, on behalf of his client, denominated in the documents as Percival Dwyer, Esquire, he prepared a petition addressed to the circuit judge of the district, setting forth that, inasmuch as Paul Felix O'Day had by divers acts shown himself to be of unsound mind, now, therefore, came his nephew and next of kin praying that a committee or curator be appointed to take over the estate of the said Paul Felix O'Day, and administer the same in accordance with the orders of the court until such time as the said Paul Felix O'Day should recover his reason, or should pass from this life, and so forth and so on; not to mention whereases in great number and aforesaids abounding throughout the text in the utmost profusion.

On the following morning the papers were filed with Circuit Clerk Milam. That vigilant barrister, Mr. Sublette, brought them in person to the courthouse before nine o'clock, he having the interests of his client at heart and perhaps also visions of a large contingent fee in his mind. No retainer had been paid. The state of Mr. Dwyer's finances— or, rather, the absence of any finances— had precluded the performance of that customary detail; but to Mr. Sublette's experienced mind the prospects of future increment seemed large.

Accordingly he was all for prompt action. Formally he said he wished to go on record as demanding for his principal a speedy hearing of the issue, with a view to preventing the defendant named in the pleadings from dissipating any more of the estate lately bequeathed to him and now fully in his possession— or words to that effect.

Mr. Milam felt justified in getting into communication with Judge Priest over the long-distance 'phone; and the Judge, cutting short his vacation and leaving uncaught vast numbers of bass and perch in Reelfoot Lake, came home, arriving late that night.

Next morning, having issued divers orders in connection with the impending litigation, he sent a messenger to find Peep O'Day and to direct O'Day to come to the courthouse for a personal interview.

Shortly thereafter a scene that had occurred some two months earlier, with his Honor's private chamber for a setting, was substantially duplicated: there was the same cast of two, the same stage properties, the same atmosphere of untidy tidiness. And, as before, the dialogue was in Judge Priest's hands. He led and his fellow character followed his leads.

"Peep," he was saying, "you understand, don't you, that this here fragrant nephew of yours that's turned up from nowheres in particular is fixin' to git ready to try to prove that you are feeble-minded? And, on top of that, that he's goin' to ask that a committee be app'inted fur you— in other words, that somebody or other shall be named by the court, meanin' me, to take charge of your property and control the spendin' of it frum now on?"

"Yes, suh," stated O'Day. "Pete Gafford he set down with me and made hit all clear to me, yestiddy evenin', after they'd done served the papers on me."

"All right, then. Now I'm goin' to fix the hearin' fur to-morrow mornin' at ten. The other side is askin' fur a quick decision; and I rather figger they're entitled to it. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Whutever you say, Judge."

"Well, have you retained a lawyer to represent your interests in court? That's the main question that I sent fur you to ast you."

"Do I need a lawyer, Judge?"

"Well, there have been times when I regarded lawyers ez bein' superfluous," stated Judge Priest dryly. "Still, in most cases litigants do have 'em round when the case is bein' heard."

"I don't know ez I need any lawyer to he'p me say whut I've got to say," said O'Day. "Judge, you ain't never ast me no questions about the way I've been carryin' on sence I come into this here money; but I reckin mebbe this is ez good a time ez any to tell you jest why I've been actin' the way I've done. You see, suh—"

"Hold on!" broke in Judge Priest. "Up to now, ez my friend, it would 'a' been perfectly proper fur you to give me your confidences ef you were minded so to do; but now I reckin you'd better not. You see, I'm the judge that's got to decide whether you are a responsible person— whether you're mentally capable of handlin' your own financial affairs, or whether you ain't. So you'd better wait and make your statement in your own behalf to me whilst I'm settin' on the bench. I'll see that you git an opportunity to do so and I'll listen to it; and I'll give it all the consideration it's deservin' of.

"And, on second thought, p'raps it would only be a waste of time and money fur you to go hirin' a lawyer specially to represent you. Under the law it's my duty, in sech a case ez this here one is, to app'int a member of the bar to serve durin' the proceedin's ez your guardian ad litem.

"You don't need to be startled," he added, as O'Day flinched at the sound in his ears of these strange and fearsome words. "A guardian ad litem is simply a lawyer that tends to your affairs till the case is settled one way or the other. Ef you had a dozen lawyers I'd have to app'int him jest the same. So you don't need to worry about that part of it.

"That's all. You kin go now ef you want to. Only, ef I was you, I wouldn't draw out any more money from the bank 'twixt now and the time when I make my decision."

ALL THINGS considered, it was an unusual assemblage that Judge Priest regarded over the top rims of his glasses as he sat facing it in his broad armchair, with the flat top of the bench intervening between him and the gathering. Not often, even in the case of exciting murder trials, had the old courtroom held a larger crowd; certainly never had it held so many boys. Boys, and boys exclusively, filled the back rows of benches downstairs. More boys packed the narrow shelf-like balcony that spanned the chamber across its far end— mainly small boys, barefooted, sunburned, freckle-faced, shock-headed boys. And, for boys, they were strangely silent and strangely attentive.

The petitioner sat with his counsel, Mr. Sublette. The petitioner had been newly shaved, and from some mysterious source had been equipped with a neat wardrobe. Plainly he was endeavoring to wear a look of virtue, which was a difficult undertaking, as you would understand had you known the petitioner.

The defending party to the action was seated across the room, touching elbows with old Colonel Farrell, dean of the local bar and its most florid orator.

"The court will designate Col. Horatio Farrell as guardian *ad litem* for the defendant during these proceedings," Judge Priest had stated a few minutes

earlier, using the formal and grammatical language he reserved exclusively for his courtroom.

At once old Colonel Farrell had hitched his chair up alongside O'Day; had asked him several questions in a tone inaudible to those about them; had listened to the whispered answers of O'Day; and then had nodded his huge curly white dome of a head, as though amply satisfied with the responses.

Let us skip the preliminaries. True, they seemed to interest the audience; here, though, they would be tedious reading. Likewise, in touching upon the opening and outlining address of Attorney-at-Law Sublette let us, for the sake of time and space, be very much briefer than Mr. Sublette was. For our present purposes, I deem it sufficient to say that in all his professional career Mr. Sublette was never more eloquent, never more forceful never more vehement in his allegations, and never more convinced—as he himself stated, not once but repeatedly— of his ability to prove the facts he alleged by competent and unbiased testimony. These facts, he pointed out, were common knowledge in the community; nevertheless, he stood prepared to buttress them with the evidence of reputable witnesses, given under oath.

Mr. Sublette, having unwound at length, now wound up. He sat down, perspiring freely and through the perspiration radiating confidence in his contentions, confidence in the result, and, most of all, unbounded confidence in Mr. Sublette.

Now Colonel Farrell was standing up to address the court. Under the cloak of a theatrical presence and a large orotund manner, and behind a Ciceronian command of sonorous language, the colonel carried concealed a shrewd old brain. It was as though a skilled marksman lurked in ambush amid a tangle of luxuriant foliage. In this particular instance, moreover, it is barely possible that the colonel was acting on a cue, privily conveyed to him before the court opened.

"May it please Your Honor," he began, "I have just conferred with the defendant here; and, acting in the capacity of his guardian *ad litem*, I have advised him to waive an opening address by counsel. Indeed, the defendant has no counsel. Furthermore, the defendant, also acting upon my advice, will present no witnesses in his own behalf. But, with Your Honor's permission, the defendant will now make a personal statement; and thereafter he will rest content, leaving the final arbitrament of the issue to Your Honor's discretion."

"I object!" exclaimed Mr. Sublette briskly.

"On what ground does the learned counsel object?" inquired Judge Priest.

"On the grounds that, since the mental competence of this man is concerned— since it is our contention that he is patently and plainly a victim of senility, an individual prematurely in his dotage— any utterances by him will

be of no value whatsoever in aiding the conscience and intelligence of the court to arrive at a fair and just conclusion regarding the defendant's mental condition."

Mr. Sublette excelled in the use of big words; there was no doubt about that.

"The objection is overruled," said Judge Priest. He nodded in the direction of O'Day and Colonel Farrell. "The court will hear the defendant. He is not to be interrupted while making his statement. The defendant may proceed."

Without further urging, O'Day stood up, a tall, slab-sided rack of a man, with his long arms dangling at his sides, half facing Judge Priest and half facing his nephew and his nephew's lawyer. Without hesitation he began to speak. And this was what he said:

"There's mebbe some here ez knows about how I was raised and fetched up. My paw and my maw died when I was jest only a baby; so I was brung up out here at the old county porehouse ez a pauper. I can't remember the time when I didn't have to work for my board and keep, and work hard. While other boys was goin' to school and playin' hooky, and goin' in washin' in the creek, and playin' games, and all sech ez that, I had to work. I never done no playin' round in my whole life— not till here jest recently, anyway.

"But I always craved to play round some. I didn't never say nothin' about it to nobody after I growed up, 'cause I figgered it out they wouldn't understand and mebbe'd laugh at me; but all these years, ever sence I left that there porehouse, I've had a hankerin' here inside of me"— he lifted one hand and touched his breast— "I've had a hankerin' to be a boy and to do all the things a boy does; to do the things I was chiseled out of doin' whilst I was of a suitable age to be doin' 'em. I call to mind that I uster dream in my sleep about doin' 'em; but the dream never come true— not till jest here lately. It didn't have no chancet to come true— not till then.

"So, when this money come to me so sudden and unbeknownstlike I said to myself that I was goin' to make that there dream come true; and I started out fur to do it. And I done it! And I reckin that's the cause of my bein' here to-day, accused of bein' feeble-minded. But, even so, I don't regret it none. Ef it was all to do over ag'in, I'd do it jest the very same way.

"Why, I never knowed whut it was, till here two months or so ago, to have my fill of bananas and candy and gingersnaps, and all sech knickknacks ez them. All my life I've been cravin' secretly to own a pair of red-topped boots with brass toes on 'em, like I used to see other boys wearin' in the wintertime when I was out yonder at that porehouse wearin' an old pair of somebody else's cast-off shoes— mebbe a man's shoes, with rags wropped round my feet to keep the snow frum comin' through the cracks in 'em, and to keep 'em from

slippin' right spang off my feet. I got three toes frostbit oncet durin' a cold spell, wearin' them kind of shoes. But here the other week I found myself able to buy me some red-top boots with brass toes on 'em. So I had 'em made to order and I'm wearin' 'em now. I wear 'em reg'lar even ef it is summertime. I take a heap of pleasure out of 'em. And, also, all my life long I've been wantin' to go to a circus. But not till three days ago I didn't never git no chancet to go to one.

"That gentleman yonder— Mister Sublette— he 'lowed jest now that I was leadin' a lot of little boys in this here town into bad habits. He said that I was learnin' 'em nobody knowed whut devilment. And he spoke of my havin' egged 'em on to steal watermelons frum Mister Bell's watermelon patch out here three miles frum town, on the Marshallville gravel road. You-all heared whut he jest now said about that.

"I don't mean no offense and I beg his pardon fur contradictin' him right out before everybody here in the big courthouse; but, mister, you're wrong. I don't lead these here boys astray that I've been runnin' round with. They're mighty nice clean boys, all of 'em. Some of 'em are mighty near ez pore ez whut I uster be; but there ain't no real harm in any of 'em. We git along together fine— me and them. And, without no preachin', nor nothin' like that, I've done my best these weeks we've been frolickin' and projectin' round together to keep 'em frum growin' up to do mean things. I use chawin' tobacco myself; but I've told 'em, I don't know how many times, that ef they chaw it'll stunt 'em in their growth. And I've got several of 'em that was smokin' cigarettes on the sly to promise me they'd quit. So I don't figger ez I've done them boys any real harm by goin' round with 'em. And I believe ef you was to ast 'em they'd all tell you the same, suh.

"Now about them watermelons: Sence this gentleman has brung them watermelons up, I'm goin' to tell you-all the truth about that too."

He cast a quick, furtive look, almost a guilty look, over his shoulder toward the rear of the courtroom before he went on:

"Them watermelons wasn't really stole at all. I seen Mister Dick Bell beforehand and arranged with him to pay him in full fur whutever damage mout be done. But, you see, I knowed watermelons tasted sweeter to a boy ef he thought he'd hooked 'em out of a patch; so I never let on to my little pardners yonder that I'd the same ez paid Mister Bell in advance fur the melons we snuck out of his patch and et in the woods. They've all been thinkin' up till now that we really hooked them watermelons. But ef that was wrong I'm sorry fur it.

"Mister Sublette, you jest now said that I was fritterin' away my property on vain foolishment. Them was the words you used— 'fritterin'' and 'vain

foolishment.' Mebbe you're right, suh, about the fritterin' part; but ef spendin' money in a certain way gives a man ez much pleasure ez it's give me these last two months, and ef the money is his'n by rights, I figger it can't be so very foolish; though it may 'pear so to some.

"Excusin' these here clothes I've got on and these here boots, which ain't paid fur yet, but is charged up to me on Felsburg Brothers' books and Mister M. Biederman's books, I didn't spend only a dollar a day, or mebbe two dollars, and once three dollars in a single day out of whut was comin' to me. The Judge here, he let me have that out of his own pocket; and I paid him back. And that was all I did spend till here three days ago when that there circus come to town. I reckin I did spend a right smart then.

"My money had come frum the old country only the day before; so I went to the bank and they writ out one of them pieces of paper which is called a check, and I signed it— with my mark; and they give me the money I wanted— an even two hundred dollars. And part of that there money I used to pay fur circus tickets fur all the little boys and little girls I could find in this town that couldn't 'a' got to the circus no other way. Some of 'em are settin' back there behind you-all now— some of the boys, I mean; I don't see none of the little girls.

"There was several of 'em told me at the time they hadn't never seen a circus— not in their whole lives. Fur that matter, I hadn't, neither; but I didn't want no pore child in this town to grow up to be ez old ez I am without havin' been to at least one circus. So I taken 'em all in and paid all the bills; and when night come there wasn't but 'bout nine dollars left out of the whole two hundred that I'd started out with in the mornin'. But I don't begredge spendin' it. It looked to me like it was money well invested. They all seemed to enjoy it; and I know I done so.

"There may be bigger circuses'n whut that one was; but I don't see how a circus could 'a' been any better than this here one I'm tellin' about, ef it was ten times ez big. I don't regret the investment and I don't aim to lie about it now. Mister Sublette, I'd do the same thing over ag'in ef the chance should come, lawsuit or no lawsuit. Ef you should win this here case mebbe I wouldn't have no second chance.

"Ef some gentleman is app'inted ez a committee to handle my money it's likely he wouldn't look at the thing the same way I do; and it's likely he wouldn't let me have so much money all in one lump to spend takin' a passel of little shavers that ain't no kin to me to the circus and to the side show, besides lettin' 'em stay fur the grand concert or after show, and all. But I done it once; and I've got it to remember about and think about in my own mind ez long ez I live.

"I'm 'bout finished now. There's jest one thing more I'd like to say, and that is this: Mister Sublette he said a minute ago that I was in my second childhood. Meanin' no offense, suh, but you was wrong there too. The way I look at it, a man can't be in his second childhood without he's had his first childhood; and I was cheated plum' out of mine. I'm more'n sixty years old, ez near ez I kin figger; but I'm tryin' to be a boy before it's too late."

He paused a moment and looked round him.

"The way I look at it, Judge Priest, suh, and you-all, every man that grows up, no matter how old he may git to be, is entitled to 'a' been a boy oncet in his lifetime. I— I reckin that's all."

He sat down and dropped his eyes upon the floor, as though ashamed that his temerity should have carried him so far. There was a strange little hush filling the courtroom. It was Judge Priest who broke it.

"The court," he said, "has by the words just spoken by this man been sufficiently advised as to the sanity of the man himself. The court cares to hear nothing more from either side on this subject. The petition is dismissed."

Very probably these last words may have been as so much Greek to the juvenile members of the audience; possibly, though, they were made aware of the meaning of them by the look upon the face of Nephew Percival Dwyer and the look upon the face of Nephew Percival Dwyer's attorney. At any rate, His Honor hardly had uttered the last syllable of his decision before, from the rear of the courtroom and from the gallery above, there arose a shrill, vehement, sincere sound of yelling— exultant, triumphant, and deafening. It continued for upward of a minute before the small disturbers remembered where they were and reduced themselves to a state of comparative quiet.

For reasons best known to himself, Judge Priest, who ordinarily stickled for order and decorum in his courtroom, made no effort to quell the outburst or to have it quelled— not even when a considerable number of the adults present joined in it, having first cleared their throats of a slight huskiness that had come upon them, severally and generally.

Presently the Judge rapped for quiet— and got it. It was apparent that he had more to say; and all there hearkened to hear what it might be.

"I have just this to add," quoth His Honor: "It is the official judgment of this court that the late defendant, being entirely sane, is competent to manage his own affairs after his preferences.

"And it is the private opinion of this court that not only is the late defendant sane but that he is the sanest man in this entire jurisdiction. Mister Clerk, this court stands adjourned."

Coming down the three short steps from the raised platform of the bench, Judge Priest beckoned to Sheriff Giles Birdsong, who, at the tail of the

departing crowd, was shepherding its last exuberant members through the doorway.

"Giles," said Judge Priest in an undertone, when the worthy sheriff had drawn near, "the circuit clerk tells me there's an indictment for malicious mischief ag'in this here Perce Dwyer knockin' round amongst the records somewheres— an indictment the grand jury returned several sessions back, but which was never pressed, owin' to the sudden departure frum our midst of the person in question.

"I wonder ef it would be too much trouble fur you to sort of drap a hint in the ear of the young man or his lawyer that the said indictment is apt to be revived, and that the said Dwyer is liable to be tuck into custody by you and lodged in the county jail sometime during the ensuin' forty-eight hours— without he should see his way clear durin' the meantime to get clean out of this city, county and state! Would it?"

"Trouble? No, suh! It won't be no trouble to me," said Mr. Birdsong promptly. "Why, it'll be more of a pleasure, Judge."

And so it was.

Except for one small added and purely incidental circumstance, our narrative is ended. That same afternoon Judge Priest sat on the front porch of his old white house out on Clay Street, waiting for Jeff Poindexter to summon him to supper. Peep O'Day opened the front gate and came up the graveled walk between the twin rows of silver-leaf poplars. The Judge, rising to greet his visitor, met him at the top step.

"Come in," bade the Judge heartily, "and set down a spell and rest your face and hands."

"No, suh; much obliged, but I ain't got only a minute to stay," said O'Day. "I jest come out here, suh, to thank you fur whut you done to-day on my account in the big courthouse, and— and to make you a little kind of a present."

"It's all right to thank me," said Judge Priest; "but I couldn't accept any reward fur renderin' a decision in accordance with the plain facts."

"'Tain't no gift of money, or nothin' like that," O'Day hastened to explain. "Really, suh, it don't amount to nothin' at all, scursely. But a little while ago I happened to be in Mr. B. Weil & Son's store, doin' a little tradin', and I run acrost a new kind of knickknack, which it seemed like to me it was about the best thing I ever tasted in my whole life. So, on the chancet, suh, that you might have a sweet tooth, too, I taken the liberty of bringin' you a sack of 'em and— and— and here they are, suh; three flavors— strawberry, lemon and vanilly."

Suddenly overcome with confusion, he dislodged a large-sized paper bag from his side coat pocket and thrust it into Judge Priest's hands; then, backing

away, he turned and clumped down the graveled path in great and embarrassed haste.

Judge Priest opened the bag and peered down into it.

It contained a sticky sugary dozen of flattened confections, each molded round a short length of wooden splinter. These sirupy articles, which have since come into quite general use, are known, I believe, as all-day suckers.

When Judge Priest looked up again, Peep O'Day was outside the gate, clumping down the uneven sidewalk of Clay Street with long strides of his booted legs. Half a dozen small boys, who, it was evident, had remained hidden during the ceremony of presentation, now mysteriously appeared and were accompanying the departing donor, half trotting to keep up with him

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