

*Ethel Lina White*



**DIANA THE  
HUNTRESS**

*and other stories*

# DIANA THE HUNTRESS

## *and other stories*

**Ethel Lina White**

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker  
December 2024

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*Ethel Lina White, 1879-1944*

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## Introduction

ETHEL LINA WHITE was born in Abergavenny, Wales, to a well-off family, and took to writing for school papers and the like at an early age. She moved to London and joined the civil service, but left in 1919 to pursue a career as a full-time writer, having by then sold a number of short stories to newspapers and magazines.

Her first novel was published in 1927. Major success began with her novel *Some Must Watch*, a crime thriller filmed as "The Spiral Staircase", and was cemented with *The Wheel Spins*, filmed in 1938 with great success by Alfred Hitchcock as "The Lady Vanishes".

She wrote 17 novels and probably 100 or more short stories. Strangely, her short stories were never collected into book form, and I can find no full bibliography.

Recently, in close collaboration with Roy Glashan of *freereads.com* ("*Roy Glashan's Library*") I have been collecting her stories. Roy Glashan has access to overseas sources that I do not from here in Australia. A substantial selection of her stories has now been published in e-book form, in two styles: *Roy Glashan's Library* has them in individual stories, often complete with original illustrations; while I have preferred to arrange them in e-book collections:

*The Uninvited Guest*, and other stories, 2023; 12 stories

*The Ghost Gavotte*, and other stories, 2023; 18 stories

*Diana The Huntress*, and other stories, 2024; 30 stories

These collections together contain 70 stories, and are available free in Kindle, Epub, and Adobe pdf formats. The first two volumes had their stories arranged "as found", in no special order; the third has its stories in chronological order.

*Terry Walker*  
*December 2024*

## 1: The Advertisement Baby

*The Royal Magazine, May 1906*

*A very early story, before she began writing such thriller novels as "The Lady Vanishes"*

SYLVIA REED longed for a vocation, and accordingly selected hospital work. She was drawn to this particular branch of usefulness by a genuine desire to alleviate pain, and the potent attraction of the uniform.

If her pretty blue eyes noted her picturesque reflection in the mirror with complacency, the girl's satisfaction was tempered with an absolving leaven of high-born resolutions. These she cradled in hope, and as she unfortunately failed to add perseverance, it sang the usual lullaby to her aspirations.

Sylvia missed her star, but gained an earthly paradise.

When the pretty probationer was flirting round with her duster, she was incidentally slipping into the good graces of one of the medical staff of the hospital. So she finally left the hospital before her time of probation was over, and vanished in a cloud of rice into private life.

Never did a matrimonial venture start more brilliantly.

Jayne saw only sunshine in Sylvia's volatile nature, and basked in its rays, unconscious of gathering storms.

ONE fine day, about three months after their marriage, he descended to the breakfast-room in a particularly amiable mood.

The room was flooded with sunshine, and Sylvia looked daintily pretty in her fresh white dress. The canary sang in the window, and a pot of snowdrops on the table suggested Spring. Sylvia broke off one to fasten in her husband's buttonhole before she attended to his wants.

Jayne studied the charming face, half of which was hidden from his gaze by a tea-cosy possessed of an alarming sense of propriety. There was a pleased air of excitement lurking in her smile, and a sparkle in the pretty eyes.

Every man knows the symptoms. She was enthralled in the joys of a secret.

Jayne's grave features relaxed as he noted her evident enjoyment.

"Now, I wonder," he observed indulgently, "what is the reason of this sudden excitement?"

"Excitement! What reason! I'm not a bit excited." Jayne laughed.

"Is it an idea for a sweet dress, or a dream of a hat? Or, stay— have you heard of a new cook?"

"No, dear, don't be silly. I didn't mean to tell you, but I suppose I must, just to stop your nonsense. I was thinking how nice it is to see one's name in print."

Jayne roared outright.

"Why, it's never been trying to write?"

"Yes, it has, and," defiantly, "it has *succeeded!*"

"Oh," she went on, enjoying her husband's amazement, "it was not a scrap difficult either— only took about three minutes, and— oh, you poor dear, you do look astonished. Here it is!"

His astonishment increased as he took the page she showed him. It was an advertisement for some patent soap. In black letters above was printed:

***A Doctor's Wife Writes:***

*I have much pleasure in testifying to the excellence of your soap.*

*Signed.*

*Sylvia Jayne,*

*Harley Street, London.*

Jayne stiffened with displeasure, but Sylvia did not notice it as she prattled on dreamily:

"Of course, it's only a little thing, but it gives me such a funny sort of pleasure. When I look through the *Sketch* and all those papers, I just long to have my photo in, and know everyone is looking at it. But, of course," she added wistfully, "there's no chance of that."

No answer came to destroy her reverie, and she continued in ungrammatical eloquence:

"But this is something the same. Just fancy, perhaps I shall see people in 'buses and trains reading this, and they will never think that the person who wrote it is sitting by them. And doesn't it look nice— 'A doctor's wife writes'?"

"Sylvia!"

"Why, Leslie!"

"*Never* let me hear any nonsense of this kind again. It shows a senseless vanity and a lack of stability that I am ashamed to see in you. I had no idea you were so petty!"

Sylvia looked up. "It's not my character that's at fault. It's you. You don't understand me."

She ran out of the room, and banged the door.

ALL the morning Sylvia indulged in the luxury of playing the misunderstood. After lunch she sallied forth to see a friend, a rich spinster, with a comfortable love for humanity, only excluding the animal man.

"My dear," she said solemnly, "I see a sad significance in this morning's episode. When a man fails to understand the hidden springs of your nature it shows something is missing. It's men, my dear, who make creation miserable, nothing else. Why, even the martyrs at the stake did not suffer a bit once the

nerve tissues were destroyed. It is always such a blessed comfort to me to remember that."

Sylvia walked home in a rebellious frame of mind, but was surprised to find that Leslie, though graver than usual at dinner, made no allusion to the morning.

"He did not mean what he said," was her final deduction.

SHE was passing through a phase of disease which attacks most women of her temperament, and as she had no means of an outlet, it was a dangerous malady. Had she been rich or influential her society functions would have graced the columns of the fashionable papers, or she would cheerfully have been torn to pieces on the staircase at a fashionable crush for the pleasure of seeing her name next morning in print.

After the first outburst the course of events flowed on as smoothly as before. The only difference was that each had discovered at least one clay toe in the feet of their idol. Jayne deplored a tendency to vanity on his wife's part, and she sadly felt Leslie's temper was defective. Sylvia's final conclusion was that her husband did not like to be *told* of her small recreations, which were otherwise legitimate, so she broke out from time to time in elegantly-worded testimonials, from which she derived a seraphic happiness worthy of a better cause.

These she carefully concealed from Leslie, so there was no renewal of the scene until a month later.

Breakfast was again the fateful meal. Jayne was reading a newspaper article which wrestled with the theory as to whether matrimony was an economy.

"It depends on the wives we choose, my dear," he said approvingly. "Everyone may not be so fortunate as I."

Sylvia coloured with pleasure. "And you don't even know how very economical I am. Why I get some things for *nothing*!"

"My dear, the bills come in regularly."

"But I tell you it's a fact. That tin of oatmeal— you are eating some at present— is a sample tin."

"But I understood samples were rather diminutive."

Discretion had a brief but desperate struggle with Sylvia's thirst for appreciation. Then, unhappily, it was overthrown. The girl lowered her voice.

"If," she asserted, "you want to get a big tin, you just write an advertisement— Oh, Leslie, what's the matter?"

Jayne suddenly rose from the table, and strode into the kitchen, followed in trembling apprehension by the culprit, who vaguely wondered if he contemplated suicide, or intended ordering a fresh consignment of porridge.

"Mary," he said, addressing the awe-struck domestic, "bring that packet of patent oatmeal."

He received it from the girl's fingers with a tragic mien, stepped to the kitchen range, and flung it on the fire. Without a word he left the kitchen, feeling pleased at the way in which he had disposed of the matter. Actions, he argued, spoke louder than words.

"Well," gasped Mary, "what a wicked waste!"

But Sylvia flew upstairs in a perfect passion of tears. "Only too late I've discovered it," she sobbed; "tied to a man with a temper. But I won't be bullied, or give in. I'll continue to assert my individuality."

AN acute observer might have noticed an unusually hard look about Sylvia's mouth after that episode. But not one would have guessed that the corroding word written in her heart, of which the look was the outward and visible sign, was— Oatmeal.

Leslie Jayne's friends described him as the essence of refinement, while his enemies stigmatised him as "mean." As a matter of fact, he had a marvelous sense of the fitness of things, with a microscopic eye for details. His mental retina was at present occupied with the letters "M.D." after his name, and a visionary doctor's brougham. Anything that came between him and these cherished objects disconcerted him greatly. It was with a shock of positive horror that a few mornings afterwards he saw on a hoarding in Charing Cross Road a huge poster of a pretty woman, whose rippling curls hanging down to her waist were due, according to the wording underneath, to a world-famed hair-restorer. No need of the name to tell the original! It was Sylvia, his Sylvia! During the rounds at the hospital, one of his colleagues mentioned the poster, which had caught his eye.

"I wanted to ask you," he began, "is that your wife?"

But Jayne had already gone. He reached home that night in a white heat of rage. His wife was silting by the drawing-room fire, book in hand. She raised her eyes, and they looked at each other, defiance meeting with anger.

Jayne glanced round the pretty apartment, which was destined to be the scene of another sordid strife between outraged sensibilities and domestic relations. Their wedding presents strewn around them, mute witnesses of the day when their married life began, failed to draw them from the fray, while a few streets away the wretched poster flapped in the wind, the inadequate cause of another matrimonial shipwreck.



Jayne went up to the fire, and kicked a piece of coal.

"I've seen that poster," he said icily.

"Most people have by now," was the triumphant reply.

"Have you lost all sense of decency?"

"Have you lost all pride in your wife's appearance?"

"Don't be absurd! That's not the point."

"But it is. You don't care about me now. You don't admire my hair. *Once* you said it was the prettiest hair in London; now everybody admires it but you."

"Apparently everyone will have a chance of admiring it now," groaned Jayne.

"You haven't a scrap of pride in me. Mr. Adrian Rose, the artist, said he would love to paint me; he admires me, and *he's* an artist."

"Don't be hysterical."

"It's a comfort to think *someone* appreciates you, if your husband does not," and Sylvia subsided into tears, while Jayne hastily went out, banging the door.

TEARS and bangings were the keynote of the next few days; but about the fourth morning Sylvia appeared with a bright face. She was cheerfully ready to eat her own words. Her hilarity positively grated on Jayne, who was suffering from a bad attack of toothache.

"Leslie," she said bravely, "I've determined never to send another testimonial— never, if it displeases you, though I don't see why it should."

"That's right," was the somewhat grudging reply.

"So no harm's done, dear."

"That poster?"

"Too flattering! No one will recognise it."

The effort which it cost Sylvia to make this assertion was greatly to her credit.

"Have you been sending any more of these beastly things away?" asked Jayne, preparing to issue pardon.

"Only one. But the funny part is, I was writing about a cure for stammering for Aunt Lena, and sending a testimonial for the cough medicine which did you so much good, and I muddled them up, and the testimonial reads: 'You've cured my husband of stammering!' Isn't it funny? Especially as you do stammer a little."

Jayne rose to his feet. "Do you know what you've done?" he demanded. "This time you've made me an object of ridicule. You've degraded the medical profession. And you crown your confession with duplicity; you feign sorrow

and repentance. I cannot find a home here, and if I go outside every wind blows these wretched advertisements to me. I'm heartily sorry for the day I met you."

In his eloquence, Jayne had forgotten the primary cause of his displeasure. He only realised that he was a long-suffering individual with a grievance, who was goaded to fury by a disobedient wife. A good measure of his anger melted during the day, but he dreaded the evening interview with the tearful Sylvia. So, accordingly, he sent a telegram to say he would be detained in town that night.

It put the finishing stroke to the girl's misery. Her husband's hasty words had filtered through a nature already riddled with emotions. She had intended to put everything right, and banish the clouds that had settled on the household, but had only received the knowledge that she was an undesirable superfluity.

She fled in tears to her spinster friend, who gave her good advice—"to go to bed, and sleep on it." Unfortunately, she only followed half, for she wooed sleep in vain. She tossed and turned, and exhausted herself by violent fits of crying. As she had eaten nothing all day, the strain presently reacted on the overwrought brain. She was sure her husband hated her, and wished he had never seen her. She felt these words whirring through her brain, till she was conscious of nothing else.

AT six next morning, a miserable, white-faced girl crept down the steps into the fog without. She made no plans, and had but one fixed resolution, namely, that she must leave her husband.

At the door, as she paused for breath for a moment, a broad form hurried through the gloom, and, with a feeling of gratitude, she recognised the face of Adrian Rose, the artist.

"What! Going off so early?" he inquired.

"Yes, but," looking helplessly at the *Bradshaw* she carried, "I'm not sure about the trains."

"Ah! You've had bad news, I'm afraid?"

"Yes," was the faltering reply.

The two heads bent over the railway guide, and Sylvia indiscriminately sorted a name out of the tangle. Any kind of refuge would do.

"Here you are, the 7.45. We had better take a cab. I'm going off by the early train myself."

So a hansom soon rattled away with the two travelers, and Sylvia thanked Fate for the cavalier who had come to her rescue, unwitting of the fact that

this incident would prove an effectual barrier against her reentering her Paradise for many a long day.

WHEN Jayne reached home the next night, he encountered the curious gaze of a frightened-looking maid.

"Missus went away this morning, but I think she left you a message."

Yes, there was the inevitable note, pinned in time-honoured fashion to the cushion, incoherent, scarcely legible: "After your cruel words, I can no longer stay with you. I am leaving you, for ever!"

Jayne laughed uneasily. "Hysteria again. She will be back to-morrow."

Then he rang for the housemaid.

"Did your mistress take any luggage?" he inquired.

"No, sir; I didn't know she was going. She didn't have even a cup of tea. I'm sure I was surprised when I saw her outside talking to Mr. Rose."

Jayne's face grew white, but he made no sign, and the servant warmed to her tale.

"There they were, sir, looking out trains in a *Bradshaw*, and they went off in a cab together."

Then Jayne shut the erring Sylvia from his heart.

IN a week's time she had repented, and she wrote a letter of apology, begging forgiveness. Her husband tore it up unopened. A second letter shared a similar fate, and when the prodigal wife hurriedly returned to town, she found the house shut up.

All they could tell her was that the doctor had taken abroad a globetrotting patient, and left no address.

Thrown on her own resources, and deserted by her husband, Sylvia hardly knew what to do. Her pride prevented her from appealing to her relatives, but she had a friend to whom she turned— the rich spinster. She gathered the poor girl into her fold, like a brand snatched from the burning, until the time when Sylvia was again able to take up her part in life's struggle.

WHEN Jayne returned to England, after a year's absence, he was astonished to find that no one seemed to be conscious of his domestic troubles, and it was popularly supposed that his wife was still abroad. He also heard casually that Rose had married a pretty American two days after Sylvia had left him. Ostrich-like, he had thought to escape his trouble by burying himself; but now, in the face of the doubts which persisted in rising, he wished he had not so hastily destroyed all communication. For appearance' sake, it would be as well to

investigate the story. His cautiously-worded advertisements failed to discover his missing wife. Sylvia had completely effaced herself.

ONE cold, grey morning Jayne wended his way Citywards. London was wrapped in a cold, grey fog, and the chill bit into his bones, and made his face blue. At the Marble Arch he took the Twopenny Tube, and as they rumbled swiftly on, he glanced at a girl opposite.

She was reading a popular magazine, and as she turned over the paper cover, the inner leaf was exposed to his view. A flood of bitter memories swept over his mind; then suddenly— from the tangled shadows of the past— he awoke to consciousness.

His own name was staring him in the face!

Jayne strained his eyes incredulously.

It was the picture of a baby, clad in its own birthday suit from Nature, and underneath was printed:

*Leslie Jayne, aged fifteen months, brought up on — Food since the age of three months.*

Above was the inscription. How proud Sylvia had been of the phrase, "A Doctors Wife writes"!

Anyone glancing at the man sitting motionless, staring out at the curved walls that sloped in front, would never have guessed at the storm of chaotic feelings that raged behind the rigid face.

It was atrocious! Hateful! The woman was past all shame! To break out again— to defy all decent feelings of reticence, to expose her son— his son— to the gaze of every Tom, Dick, and Harry— and without a rag to cover him. His fingers itched to tear the paper from the unconscious reader's hands. When she looked up inadvertently, and saw a strange man glaring at her, the poor girl was quite alarmed.

At last the Bank was reached. Jayne could hardly wait until the lift transported him to the higher regions again. Oblivious of his business, he rushed to the nearest newsagent's, where he feverishly turned over the papers. His search was unavailing— no similar advertisement could he find.

The boy's sarcasm began at last to penetrate his consciousness, and, as he groped, he was hardly aware of the changes, which turned his anger to impatience, which in turn melted again into anxiety.

"Like the whole shop, sir? *Nothing* to pay!" quoth the youth, but Jayne took no notice. With a cry of triumph he swooped upon a number, and hurriedly

throwing down half-a-crown, he departed, leaving change and reputation behind.

Once outside, he hailed a cab; he felt he dared not trust himself to look at the thing while curious faces surrounded him.

At St. Paul's Churchyard he got out, and, obeying an impulse, walked up the steps into the Cathedral. With the exception of a few scattered groups, the great building was empty. The pillared heights, the light filtering through the stained-glass windows, and the solemn quiet took the last shreds of fever out of the man's mind. He opened the page calmly.

Yes, it was a baby of which anyone might be proud. What a bonny little fellow it was, with its rounded limbs and laughing mouth, showing the dear little teeth. Just such a son as he could have wished for, and with his name, too! So she had called him after his father!

As he again scanned the tiny features, a strong sense of familiarity quickened the doctor's recollection. Where had he seen this portrait before?

Memory showed him an old, faded photograph of another baby, which was cherished by a mother with tender eyes. A deep feeling of shame swamped his thoughts, as he realised how he had slipped, through countless acts of pettiness, from his childhood's throne of innocence.

The grave eyes of the other baby looked at him in reproachful wonder. Only *this* one, his son, had curly hair, a golden halo of curls, such as he had never possessed. For the first time in many months, a feeling of tenderness crept into Jayne's heart, as he thought of Sylvia's golden tresses, of which he had been so proud.

The baby looked as if he had come straight from the Garden of Eden. The thought struck Jayne that if, like another Eve, Sylvia had clothed the child only in its halo of curls, she had no Adam to work for her. He had never bought a single garment for that wee atom. Then came the question— where was she living? What was she doing? He remembered the unopened letters, with anguish. Might there not have been some grave mistake? He had refused all explanations, but now, how to find her?

Suddenly, with a gasp of relief, he peered again at the page. Yes, there was the address, in little black letters, in the corner. Oh, the blessed advertisement paragraph!

The black type swam before his eyes, and then blurred into a white mist. Mechanically, he took out his note-book— a somewhat superfluous act considering the address was branded into his brain. As his eye traveled over the list of engagements, he gave a start. In half-an-hour he had an appointment with one of the greatest authorities in the medical world— an appointment that he had deemed himself both proud and happy to obtain.

Jayne frowned. Sylvia was always getting in between him and his profession, ever since the days when, as a pretty probationer, she had wooed his thoughts from fractures and temperatures. And now she was exerting the same baleful influence through his boy!

He stopped from force of habit to calculate. It would make but little difference whether he sought out his missing wife now or a couple of hours later. He looked again at the portrait, and then, as though illuminated by a flash of lightning, the wasted years stood sharply before him. For the first time a glimmering suspicion asserted itself that he might have offered other sacrifices up to his profession than time and labour. Was not Sylvia included in the category?

Suddenly, little baby fingers seemed to pass over the cherished appointment, wiping it out, and though Leslie knew it not, some of the old, selfish nature died at that moment. A few minutes later Leslie was in the train, speeding out towards Sydenham, chafing at every stop. He had a nightmare feeling of oppression as he walked along the dreary suburban roads. At length he stopped before a small semi-detached villa. The door was open, and an untidy servant wrangled with a tardy errand-boy. Pushing aside the astonished pair, he burst into the small sitting-room. Kneeling on the rug was Sylvia. The golden hair, her pride, hung in tangled curls over her black dress; the firelight kissed it into a copper glory, and she was laughing as the fingers of a beloved little tyrant pulled down the tresses. At the sound of footsteps, she looked up hurriedly, clasping the baby to her heart.

He saw her face, sweeter than of yore, with the lines of care and resolution marring the empty prettiness of feature.

Suddenly Sylvia raised her eyes and saw her husband looking at her in the old, fond manner. Instantly the past three years were wiped out. With outstretched hands and the red staining her face, she ran towards him.

"How did you find me?" she cried.

A cloud suddenly blotted out the sunshine on Jayne's face.

"By this," he said grimly, throwing the paper on the table.

Their hands never met. The moment had passed and the wretched advertisement still lay between them.

Sylvia started back. With a hunted movement she seized the boy and strained him to her.

"You want baby!" she cried. "You have come to take him away from me. You never shall— there!"

It was the old Sylvia breathing defiance, and Jayne's heart hardened. From the shelter of his mother's arms the baby looked at the intruder with the

ineffable *hauteur* which is the exclusive property of infants under the age of two.

Jayne cleared his throat. "Listen!" he said. "When you left me I had, perforce, to come to certain monstrous conclusions. It was not my fault"— the old Jayne struggled hard to assert himself— "you thrust it upon me. Now, I was wrong. I await your explanation, and if— as I believe— it will be satisfactory, my home is waiting for you and— baby. There is only one obstacle." He paused, and both looked at the piece of paper. He struck it violently. "This! This wrecked our lives for three years. I see, in spite of all you have gone through, the old craving for cheap notoriety remains. Now, where will it end?"

"It has ended!"

Sylvia drew herself up, her eyes shining.

"Leslie, have I ever lied to you?"

"Never!" he admitted.

"Then listen. When I left you I saw everything in its true light It *was* vanity— all vanity! And I was sorry. I *never* wrote another advertisement. But—" she strove to hide her tears— "things grew so bad lately. I was penniless, so I remembered and wrote this. They sent me £5 for it. But I've written my last advertisement. I swear it— my very last!"

Then suddenly Jayne snatched up the paper and threw it on the fire.

And, a minute later, they had forgotten all their troubles in one long embrace.

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## 2: A Flutter in Souls

*Pearson's Magazine*, August 1908

OUTSIDE the great gales of Ripley Court, the Curer of Souls and the Curer of Bodies shook hands with the grip of a short friendship, yet long sympathy, founded on the tie of Oxford associations and a common object. They— the two energetic microbes, who were doing their best to effervesce the ditch-water of Ripley village to the bubbling zest of soda-water— differed in every respect.

The representative of the Church Militant bore the look of a man who had been beaten in a hard fight by unfair methods. His black coat seemed weighed down with depression, and his hat was even more crushed than is demanded by clerical etiquette.

"You'll have no luck with her, Brady," he said. "I've tackled her repeatedly. She's hard as nails."

"Then she needs hammering, and by my grandmother's parrot, she shall have it. You've been on the wrong lack entirely."

The speaker's face kindled in the glow of the hanging lamp. Tall, and of striking personality, Terence Brady looked more like a Bond Street exquisite than a country doctor. Of mixed parentage, the English mother within him had decreed he should thus array himself in the frock coat of etiquette as he paid his formal call on the lady of Ripley Court; but inside this frigid casing his Irish father was whirling his shillelagh with mad glee in expectation of a fight.

Terence Brady's long legs propelled him up the drive to the time of a double two-step, while his eager thoughts winged on before him; then there was a minute of tiresome delay, while the man with the mission provided the man at the door with his name for the purpose of a formal entry.

Yet his real entry was anything but formal. As the drawing-room door opened, the mistress of the great house looked at Brady with a glance of welcome, for she thought he was afternoon tea. Her face dropped when she saw only a visitor, and her attention was momentarily distracted from the game of diabolo with which she was busily engaged. The spool descended, and, finding no cord to meet it, dashed, like a great white moth, towards a pink-shaded lamp. Contrary to the nature of the flame, it seemed for once to reciprocate this passion, for it shot up to meet it.

The next minute there was a feminine shriek, and the overturned lamp was spreading a pool of liquid flame over the flimsy tablecloth.

As the girl rushed away from the scene, the two men dashed towards it. But the waiting-man was naturally slower than the man who acted, and to Brady's lot fell the burning honours of extinguishing the flaming mass. Thus,



dashing, flushed, and eager— in a circle of limelight— Terence Brady made a dramatic entry to the acquaintance of Miss Vivien Primrose.

"Real Irish luck," said Terry inwardly, as in one brief moment he found he had wiped out quite thirty minutes of frigid overtures, and was nearer the object of his quest. It was pleasant to sit in an easy-chair while a remarkably pretty girl alternately thanked him and fussed over him, and Terry, who liked all young things, from children to new potatoes, was especially tolerant to the charm of youth in women.

"I'm sure you have burnt your arm, and I shall never forgive myself if you have. Do turn back your sleeve and see," cried Vivien, as she laid impetuous fingers on his frock coat.

"Not a bit. I haven't so much as scorched myself," answered Terry, stoutly resisting her overtures. "And, in any case, I'd like to keep the scar as a memento of a charming lady. Now, do look. That kettle is boiling over with impatience to make your acquaintance."

As Miss Primrose busied herself with the tea-equipage, the doctors keen blue eyes looked with surprise at this young lady who had been represented to him as an armour-plated virago. The sole heiress to her father's wealth, seen through the golden mist of a fortune her claims to beauty had been exaggerated, but even Terry, who was not prepared to admire her, found her pretty.

"A dimple, *too*," thought he with delight, as he noted the treacherous pit that has swallowed up the common-sense of so many men. "She can't be such a Tartar with a dimple."

Vivien started the conversation with hunting, but before long, as they exchanged ideas, they found that, so far from following the fox in spirit over the red earth, they were soaring up into the clouds. So many thoughts in common, so many mutual tastes, so many experiences to relate, that they were soon borne along on the full spate of friendship.

But, little by little, Terry turned the talk to the subject of his visit. It was his pet theme— the Cottage Hospital. He deplored the fact that the wives of the righteous county folk allowed this full-grown adult scandal to stand unchallenged in their midst. He observed that when he tried to drive home the facts of the case to these smug gentry, men who had approved of him because he rode straight had resented the fact that he could talk straight as well. They could afford to hunt, but when it came to a question of putting their hands to their pockets, they pleaded poverty. Was it not a shame?

Miss Primrose assented, and then gently tried to switch the conversation on to the number of unpaid hunt subscriptions. But Terence was firm. He insisted ongoing into details of the exact state of dilapidation and discomfort

that reigned at the miserable travesty of a hospital, and at his downright words Vivien shuddered. He imagined it was from sympathy, and instantly he saw himself, twenty years later, when he had raked in fame and a fortune, coming to claim her and her stately home, while apparently she remained still the pretty golden-haired girl of twenty-three.

"And what we want," concluded Terence vehemently, "is to pull down this rotten old shell— this plague-spot— and erect a splendid new building. It must, and it *shall* be done!"

Vivien's eyes sparkled. "Why don't you do it yourself?" she asked.

"/?" Brady roared with laughter. "/ do it? Whom do you think I am?"

"The nephew of the Duke of Wesson, to begin with—"

"To end with, a poor devil of a doctor, without a shirt to his back."

Vivien smiled at the extravagant statement of the tall young exquisite, who was intently-regarding her with eyes that were bluer than her own.

"No, Miss Primrose," announced Terry firmly, "I'm not the man to do it. But it's hanging like a load on my back, and I stumble over it at every step I take."

He paused, evidently more impressed by the pathos than the impossibility of this particular feat. "Now, is it fair? It's your responsibility that I am bearing. You are the largest landowner in the district, all your interests are here, you have no ties, you have the means. And clearly you are the obvious person to wipe out this disgrace for ever, and preserve it as a living monument of your generosity, enshrined in all the grateful hearts of the county."

He stopped, panting, and then looked at Vivien in dismay. The soft curves of her mouth had been sucked into a hard red line, and her eyes were glassy. The flow of friendship had been turned off at the main.

"I am very sorry, Dr. Brady," she said coldly, "but I must decline to take up your magnificent project. It is against my principles."

"Principles!"

"Yes." She winced slightly before Terence's accusing eye, for she knew what he meant.

"I know it will seem strange to you," she began, "but I've not been brought up in the English way. If I appear harsh, let me assure you I am not really. My heart is in the right place."

"As a medical man, I should be much more interested if it were not. Pray proceed."

"And I've thought and studied the question, and gone *really* deeply into it, you know— political economy, and so on. And, indeed, doctor, you do no good in prolonging useless diseased lives. It would really benefit humanity if such cases were allowed to die out, just as you weed a garden, instead of

being nursed back to sickly life, and allowed to be perpetuated. I don't suppose you will see my point, but— I feel very strongly— and though I give to other things— indeed I do, very largely— I never subscribe a farthing to any hospital."

Terry's teeth snapped. He looked at the pretty appealing face, with its peach colour rubbed in by perfect health, and the memory of the Rev. Noel Bigg's words came back.

"May I ask if you have ever been ill?" he inquired sternly.

"Never."

"Well, you may have read and thought a great deal, but it is evident you have never *lived*. Good evening. Miss Primrose. I am sorry I troubled you. And let me, as a friend, wish you the best that can befall you for your ultimate salvation— a thundering long illness."

Vivien staggered at the words. Then she drew herself to her full height, and swished round her superfluous draperies in order to obtain a few meretricious inches.

"Thank you," she said, ringing the bell. "In return for your kind wish, I desire you to forget that— I have ever had the honour of your acquaintance."

"Certainly, madam. It is granted. I look forward to the pleasure of an introduction to Miss Primrose."

Then, with a courtly bow, he left the indignant lady.

THE Rev. Noel Biggs was enjoying a well-earned smoke before the fire in his shabby rooms that evening, when the door burst open to admit Terence's broad form, still gorgeous in his war-paint. He sank down with a groan, and Biggs noticed that his face was white and drawn.

"Well, the first round of the fight is over, old man," remarked the doctor, "and I have had the half-nelson. I was not only kicked out, but in future I am denied even the honour of bowing to Miss Primrose. The history of this evening is completely wiped out, and all I know is— that I have had— a free tea— somewhere."

As he spoke the last words, his head toppled weakly over his chest, and his tall hat rolled forward on to the mat. The curate sprang to his side in sudden alarm. He propped up his friend's head, and then made a violent search for stimulant. The contact of the glass against his teeth made the doctor open his eyes, and he drained it before he spoke.

"Sorry to be such an ass. See here! It happened at the very beginning, and I had to sit it out an infernal time, in order to take advantage of a good beginning."

He rolled back his sleeve, and displayed the inflamed surface of an ugly burn.

"Why didn't you mention the fact?" asked Biggs, aghast.

Terence smiled drily. He had poured out his heart to Miss Primrose in their early confidences, and made her a present of his soul, turned inside out, but in the interests of self-respect the line must be drawn somewhere. Irish linen is a valuable asset, in a desperate financial strait, and he— the reckless, handsome, smartly-garbed professional man— with native impudence, had spoken the truth to Miss Primrose in the matter of his wardrobe. He was without a shirt to his back!

A few days later the doctor effectually settled the vexed question of his parentage, as he drove along the flat road, back from a troublesome case. He was in deep depression, although by this time circumstances had permitted him to bridge the gap in his raiment. But not even this fact could dispel his gloom.

"This settles it entirely," he mused. "An Irishman would have got drunk, and then forgotten her. I'm English, through and through."

In spite of his melancholy, his frame stiffened with pride at this thought, but then he groaned aloud at the recollection of a fluffy-haired fairy, who, in spite of her precocious depravity, had destroyed his peace of mind. To his surprise, his groan was echoed, and he awoke to the fact that a bundle of clothes was lying under the hedge.

In an instant Terence had thrown the reins to his small boy, and was kneeling by the prostrate form. As he looked, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head in surprise.

This was Vivien— but not the dainty, waxen beauty, who looked as if she had just stepped out of layers of tissue paper.

She wore a green, weather-beaten skirt, and a white flannel blouse, both of which were mud-spattered and torn. Her hat had gone, and her hair fell in untidy wisps round a scratched face. Her boots were unspeakable, and round her neck was slung a bag. As the doctor stared, the girl opened her eyes, and with a sigh of relief he realised that they, at least, were unchanged.

"Thank goodness for somebody at last," she said. "I suppose I've fainted, for I've hurt my foot or something. We were paper-chasing, and I was a hare, and my papers gone."

Then she suddenly remembered the position, and coloured faintly.

"I am exceedingly sorry to detain you," she said in icy tones. "On your way home will you kindly call at Ripley Court, and ask them to send a carriage to me?"

The doctor hesitated. Then a sudden, reckless flash fired his eye. He shook his head.

"Sorry, but I daren't do it. It would be as much as my place is worth."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"This. Though I have not the honour of Miss Primrose's acquaintance, I have heard that she is an exceedingly autocratic personage, with strong views on the subject of illness and injuries, and I would not dare to enlist her aid for any maimed traveller found on the high road."

Vivien stared, not understanding his drift.

"Don't talk nonsense while I'm in pain. I'm Miss Primrose."

"You are in pain? Then that's the first consideration. Allow me."

In spite of her protests, the wretched boot was soon massacred, and even Vivien could but admit that the doctor's deft touch did much to soothe the ache of her ankle, as he again sacrificed his unlucky wardrobe to the extent of his handkerchief in the cause of bandages.

"That better?" he asked.

"Thank you, yes. I am obliged. Now I wish to go home to Ripley Court."

The doctor instantly felt her pulse.

"Delirium often follows a broken bone," he observed, "but in your case it has come on with unusual rapidity. Were you not a young girl, I should suspect you of being a hard drinker."

"How dare you speak so to me? To *me*?"

"To you? There, now, that's what I want to find out. Who are you?"

"You know perfectly well. Miss Primrose."

But Terry shook his head with conviction.

"My dear young woman," he said, "consider the absurdity of your assertion. Although I have not the honour of knowing Miss Primrose, your appearance does not justify your claim to be such a very grand lady. But, here goes."

Before she was aware, Vivien was swung into the air and on to the front seat of the dog-cart.

"Where are you taking me?" she gasped.

"To the only place in which I can offer you shelter for the night— the Cottage Hospital."

Although Vivien's face grew vivid with temper, a sudden gleam of respect glinted in her eye. She realised that her foe was engaging in warfare on rather a magnificent scale.

She looked between the horse's ears to the long line of hills.

"Will you tell me what you know of Miss Primrose from hearsay?" she asked.

"Certainly. I know she is young and wealthy. Everyone knows that. And I know— I *dare* to know— that she possesses beauty and— Dr— innate goodness. But, to diagnose her complaint, she has broken out in a nasty eruption of selfishness and inexperience, and I believe that one good dose of personal experience would put her right again."

"I can corroborate your information on the first point," was the dry answer. "Miss Primrose *has* immense wealth at her disposal, which is a tremendous weapon in her hand. She could effectually crush anyone who stood in her way by the force of her money and influence, ruin his career, and drum him from the county."

Terry's eyes flashed in reply.

"It all depends on the odd trick," he remarked inconsequently.

In the distance a white blur of buildings peered through the evening haze. Vivien turned once more to the doctor.

"Can you afford to play?" she asked. "You stand to lose much."

"And, by heaven! I stand to gain more. The stake's a woman's soul!"

The excitement that seethed through his veins pulsed down the reins to his horse, and they made a clattering halt before the door of the hospital. As the boy rang the bell, Vivien again spoke.

"Your lead, doctor. You may trust me not to betray myself, and make myself the laughing-stock of the place."

But she shivered with depression as she rested in the dim reception-room. It had never been her lot before to enter such a gloomy place. Then a harassed nurse-matron, in a soiled uniform, came bustling in.

"This is too bad of you, doctor," she said. "I simply *can't* take in another case. My 'pro' has nearly collapsed, and we're worked off our legs. Besides, we really haven't the accommodation."

"Oh, yes you will, Miss Finlay," urged Terence. "Just to oblige me. This is only a sprain, and I can't communicate with her friends till the morning. It is purely a personal matter."

The matron grunted. Then she led the way to a low-ceilinged room, which was crammed with beds and screens. Several women sat about in shawls, and a child was whimpering.

"We might squeeze her in a corner for to-night," she said.

The formality of enrolling her name was dispensed with in the rush that followed, for Vivien, who had now merged her individuality into "the Sprain," was denied the dignity of a "case." She was merely told to lie down on a lumpy bed in a corner, while her foot was properly bandaged. Vivien submitted with a rigid face, but when Terry finally took up his hat to depart, she cried out in a kind of panic:



"I *can't* spend the night here with all these people. The air will be poisoned. You must open all the windows."

"A draught would be fatal to some of the cases. Of course there ought to be proper ventilation, but there isn't. Everything that should be right here is wrong. It won't do you any good, but it will do you less harm than the others."

The matron's face flushed with temper.

"It's a perfect scandal!" she cried. "I wish I had some of the wealthy people here— say Miss Primrose— for one night only."

Terence's lips twitched. "You never know your luck," he observed.

Then they left her, and Vivien turned to look, with eyes of loathing, at the ceiling with its scaly growth of peeling plaster above her bed. All around her rose a chorus of groans and complaints, but she lay stiffly staring at the circle of gas-jet with fixed eyes. Later in the evening a cup of tea and some thick bread and-butter were brought for her refreshment by a weary-eyed "pro," but she turned from it with disgust. One thought only possessed her, and she turned it over in her brain until, from constant friction, it glowed to red-hot madness.

"I *won't* spend the night in this vile hole, I will get out, I will, I *will*!"

She stared at the ceiling in a mad longing to grip it in her fingers and peel off the roof. She yearned for the strength of a Samson, wherewith to pull down the walls. Then she raised her head and took stock of the window by her side. It was heavily barred.

Below, at right angles, ran a line of buildings, the out-patient room, and the mortuary. Vivien marked the untidy tangle of their thatched roofs with satisfaction. Then, looking round the room stealthily, she searched for her silver match-box, and approached the window. A minute after there was the scrape of a match, and yet another, and two flaming grubs flitted through the air, to alight on the far side of the roofs below. A soft breeze fanned their hot heads, and instantly a tiny scarlet worm began to eat its way through the dark mass of thatch, leaving a fiery trail in its wake.

Meantime, Terry had driven off through the dark lanes, in a fit of mad excitement, his cart swinging from side to side dangerously. Turning a sharp corner by the mill, it was by mere luck that he managed to check himself at the shout of two men. In the glow of his lamps he recognised his friend the curate, but he hardly heeded the hard-visaged man who accompanied him. It was Jasper Bailey, a close-fisted, long-lipped, retired banker, against whose money-bags Terence had run his head when he had tilted at him in his desperate efforts to obtain a subscription. The quarrel that ensued from Terry's importunity had made this man his own especial enemy.

The curate raised his eyebrows at the mare's heaving flanks.

"Are you red-hot from a murder?" he asked. "What's up?"

"The price of bread. Stand clear!" was the wild answer.

"Things bad at the hospital?"

"No, something more important. As for the hospital, I will keep it going in the faces of all the misers in the country, if I have to sell every worthless thing I possess, beginning with my soul."

There was a rattle of wheels, and he was gone.

"Drink!" observed Mr. Bailey sourly. "He will soon come to the end of his tether here."

It was not until the doctor had reached his rooms that his mad fit suddenly dropped from him. Then, with the bitterness and feminine fluency of his Saxon mother, he cursed the influence of his Hibernian father. He saw what he had done in its true light. On the mad chance of trusting to a girl's sense of generosity, he stood to lose everything.

Terence paced up and down his room, longing for daybreak, yet dreading its advent. Unconscious of the time, he pulled aside the heavy curtains in the hope of seeing the sun tipping the east with gold. But, to his surprise, the night was illuminated by a false dawn that reddened the sky. Then as a torch shot up in a cascade of flame, Terence, racing madly for his boots, realised that the hospital was on fire.

When the doctor arrived, panting, on the spot, it was already a scene of mad confusion and activity. The alarm had been given in time, and the majority of the patients had been removed to a huge barn, which was hastily converted to a temporary shelter. With a deep feeling of thankfulness, Terence learnt that the fire had broken out in the wing removed from the main wards.

But, if no lives were lost, it was clear that the hospital itself was doomed. In spite of the efforts of the firemen, the flames leapt over to it, licking it greedily as a preliminary to devouring the plague-spot in deadly earnest.

As a group of farmers watched the spectacle, the doctor suddenly rushed up to them, his face working in the red glare, with the twitchings of a lost soul.

"Are you sure they have removed every patient?" he asked. "One is missing."

"Sure, for certain, sir. Not even the cats left."

"But she's missing. I can't run any risks."

As he spoke, with glorious inconsistency he ran the greatest risk which falls to a man's lot, for he dashed into the blazing shell where charred beams were already beginning to drop. For five lurid seconds he galloped through the Inferno of smoke and flame, his eyes raking every corner of the place. He



had scarcely reached the outside air again when, with a sudden crash and a leaping pillar of flame, the roof fell in.

Close on daybreak, when Terence, heavy-eyed, smoke-grimed and baffled, returned to his rooms, leaving behind him the blackened rafters of a skeleton building, a disreputable young female limped up the drive of Ripley Court. She slipped into the side entrance and stole upstairs. The mistress of the house had returned with the milk.

For a week Vivien nursed her indisposition and her scheme of revenge for the annihilation of the doctor. Instead of awakening her conscience, the sufferings of the unhappy patients had served to aggravate her own. But on the eighth day a box arrived, bearing a Bond Street label, and Vivien appeared again, if not to the light of day, at least to the light of night, clad in a creation to dazzle all eyes at the Hunt Ball.

This was the most important social function of the year, and when Vivien and her chaperon arrived at the Assembly Rooms, they found half the county putting the last touches in the cloakroom. It seemed to the girl that the buzz of conversation was unusually animated, and she had barely succeeded in catching a snapshot vision of her face in one of the glasses when a matron bore down on her.

"Do you think he will have the face to turn up to-night?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Dr. Terence Brady, of course!"

"Why not?" asked Vivien quietly.

"What! Haven't you heard? Its all over the place! He has done for himself, and will be turned out of the county."

Vivien staggered. Accustomed to a sense of her own importance, she had scarcely supposed that she was a person of such consequence in celestial regions that the very stars had fought for her, and thus accomplished the doctor's downfall without her personal intervention.

"Tell me all," she cried.

"Well, it's this fire at the hospital. You know how mad he was to get a new building. He increased the fire insurance, and directly after, on the night of the fire, was seen driving away from the place, half drunk, and swearing that he had sold his soul to keep the hospital solvent. Mr. Bailey can testify to this, and even his own friend, the curate, cannot deny it. And to make things blacker, he introduced some unknown woman there that night, as an accomplice, I suppose, to start the fire. Anyway, in the morning she had vanished. Plain enough, isn't it?"

Vivien walked off to the ballroom with her head in a whirl. It was clear that her share in the affair was not so impersonal as she had imagined.

The band was beginning to tune up, and the usual groups of people hung around the door, all intent on the process of booking up. The same topic of conversation was on every tongue— the disgrace of the formerly popular Terence Brady.

"He has been warned not to put in an appearance to-night," remarked Mr. Bailey in his acid voice. "We thought it best to save him that much."

Then a sudden hush fell over the talk, as, standing in the doorway, the grand picture of a man in his hunt evening dress, stood Terence Brady. Vivien, watching his flushed face and blue eyes, thought she had never seen anyone face a situation with a braver carriage.

Taking a card, the doctor approached the nearest woman and asked for the pleasure of a dance. She was but an insipid miss of eighteen, but her refusal was decisive. He promptly turned to the next lady, to meet with the same rebuff. It was plain that before carving him up as a dish for the dogs of disaster, the county was having a trial performance, and to the feminine section had fallen the honour of exercising their dainty penknives in the first "cut."

Brady realised as much in a flash. Then, holding his head high in a spirit of bravado, he went in rotation down the line of ladies, his smile becoming gayer and his bow lower as he acknowledged each fresh snub.

With wonder in her heart Vivien watched him. Twice he had braved fire for her sake, but she knew that this reception, paradoxically enough, constituted, by reason of its very coldness, his hottest ordeal.

The band struck up for a waltz. Terence had completed his tour of the ladies and his ordeal was over. For one moment his nerve failed, as he stood in indecision, partnerless and alone, in the middle of the room.

Then his eyes suddenly flashed. He had faced the music, and he meant in return to get his worth out of the band. Crossing the room to where his friend, Noel Biggs, regarded him with sorrowful eyes, he laid his hands on his shoulders. The next minute the scandalised crowd was aware that he was spinning round in the whirl of a waltz with his clerical partner. In spite of them all he was not to be done out of his last dance!

As the waltz proceeded and the couples revolved in rapid rotation, it became evident that events were moving yet faster, and that each bar of the music was leading up to a crushing finale. A group of men watched the graceless doctor with angry amazement, and then, after a short consultation, Mr. Bailey, in his capacity of M.C., walked up to Terence. He stopped dancing, and, by common consent, half the dancers stopped as well, anxious to assist at a scandal of unusual magnitude.

Bailey tapped Terry on the shoulder.

"I must request you to leave the ball-room," he said. "Exception has been taken to your presence."

"I gathered as much. On what grounds?"

"You would be wiser not to ask, but if you wish to know, owing to your connection with a case of arson."

Terry laughed.

"Keep your eye on the law of libel. Do you suggest I made a bonfire of the hospital and burnt up half my personal effects which happened to be there on loan?"

"No, sir." Mr. Bailey's temper got the better of his prudence, as, by mockery of eye and voice, Terry goaded him beyond his self-control. "But it is believed that you instigated the outrage, and in order to clear yourself, you will have to produce the nameless female you introduced into the building on the night of the fire."

For the first time since that fateful night Terence looked straight into Vivien's eyes.

"That's the trouble," he said ruefully. "I don't know her."

"You brought her there yourself. This is not a time for quibbling!"

"But you see," persisted Terry, "we were never introduced." Then he shot Vivien a sudden glance of audacious confidence. "And if I had been," he added, "I should try to keep a good thing to myself."

There was a long pause, and in the silence Vivien's inflamed sympathy told her that Terence had thrown down his last card.

The game was finished.

She turned to Mr. Bailey.

"A short explanation from me will clear up all this mystery," she remarked. "But, first of all, I must ask you kindly to reverse the ordinary order of etiquette. Will you introduce me to— Dr. Terence Brady?"

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### 3: Le Roi est Mort

*The Pall Mall Magazine*, January 1910

"SHE'S, she's— I don't know how to put it. But *you* know! She's not like other girls." The boy twisted his Panama hat between his kneading fingers. He was merely an ordinary, tanned youth in a white drill suit; further, something in copra. But, to Venetia South, he was invested with the sinister dignity of the Man with the Scythe. For he had borne the news that meant the deathblow to her career.

*Deposed!* The word burnt its way like a slow-match through her brain, as she languidly waved her fan, in apparent unconcern. In the rush of the warm Trade-winds among the plumed palms she heard its echo. The faraway murmur of the surf-song hummed the refrain. *Deposed!*

Hers had been a long reign. Ever since she had come to pass the days of her grass-widowhood on the little tooth of coral-reef, round which the great wash of blue Pacific curled and licked in unceasing swirl, she had established a rule of absolute and despotic monarchy. All the mankind of the island had laid their hearts at her feet, and then under them. All their womankind had acknowledged her power in a universal vote of enmity.

She rocked to and fro, her fan timing each jealous stab at her heart. A bewitching woman— despite the tide of her beauty was just on the turn. In defiance of custom, she wore a loose muslin robe, in the native style, and a wreath of scarlet flowers was bound in her hair.

"You can't think how ripping she is!" went on the boy. "She's so *different*, you know. Such slang— like a man— only she's every bit a girl. But there's not much chance for me. She's all the rage everywhere, and now Jardine has cut in—"

"Jardine!"

The fire suddenly broke through the smouldering grey ash. Venetia's eyes blazed, and her self-control vanished.

"Rather! Jardine's great at present."

Mrs. South looked at the boy with unconscious scrutiny— every detail of his appearance photographing itself indelibly on to her brain. She noticed the crop of freckles on his face— the gold stopping in a front tooth— the way his eyebrows met. Insignificant in himself, this was the straw that had marked the turn of the current.

When he had called that afternoon, she had gone through her usual course of procedure. Two fingers, a cup of tea, a draught to sit in. Then, stifling her yawns, she had waited for him to come to the inevitable point, and declare his love. And he had declared his love— his love for another woman.

WHEN, at last, the boy had left her, Venetia sat for a long time brooding, her chin down, and her head flat, in the attitude of a hooded cobra about to strike. Clairvoyant at last, she wondered she had not marked before the slow ebb of the high tide of popularity. She had never troubled to join in the social life of the island. The island had to come to her. She remembered now that fewer men had drifted into her bungalow during the past weeks. She had even received a call from a woman, and had let that omen, as significant of coming disaster as wax-moth in a hive, pass unnoticed.

Stung to a sudden frenzy, she sprang up and burrowed into her dark jungle of a room. Hopeless confusion reigned over everything. Several packs of cards, a bridge-scorer, cigarettes, loose music, empty tumblers and straws, dead flowers, red-skinned bananas, and cushions all lay scattered like the débris after an earthquake. A gilt clock from the Louvre had long lost its French vivacity, and settled down for life at four o'clock. Over all was a litter of photographs. All were portraits of men, and, with one exception, there was no duplicate. That exception, however, was significant, for the same face was pictured in nine different photographs.

Taking up one, Venetia looked at it closely. It represented a man with handsome, impassive features and sleepy eyes.

It was now nearly two years since Lord Jardine had stopped at the island for afternoon tea. When the yacht had called for him, six months later, he was still drinking tea, and had languidly waved his spoon in dismissal. Apparently the lying French clock and Mrs. South's charms had settled his course of inaction.

But Venetia, as she scanned the sleepy eyes, acknowledged the humiliating truth that, for once, the island gossip was at fault. Jardine, with his impassive calm, had completely baffled her resources.

Without warning, she felt an unaccustomed scalding behind her eyeballs, and a couple of tears ploughed their way through the layer of pearl-powder on her face. The next minute this advance-guard to an hysterical outburst was swiftly brushed away, as the woman caught sight of a white clad figure swinging up from the beach. It was the Trents' new governess, and the girl to whom the fickle island had transferred its allegiance.

As she approached, Mary Moon looked at the flower-wreathed bungalow with unwilling curiosity. Ever since her arrival she had heard rumours of the sinister and alluring charms of Mrs. South, but she had turned an indifferent ear to these lurid anecdotes. She was too soaked through with the charm of this tropical Paradise, too intoxicated with the delight and freedom of her new life, to worry her head about this enchantress of the island, who was apparently in the wholesale line of the Circe business.

It was only since her rapidly-increasing friendship with Lord Jardine that doubts had clouded her serenity. She had looked at the inscrutable face of the big man— thought of the stories, and wondered— wondered. Then, she had tried her hand at cross-examination, with disquieting results. Jardine had hedged at first, but, presently, growing careless, had let slip admissions that testified to his appreciation of the charms of Mrs. South. Finally, with a yawn, he had dismissed the subject with the two words, "Ancient history."

As the girl looked askance at the bungalow, some one hailed her. "Do come in!"

It was Venetia South's voice that called from the verandah.

THE SOCIETY ISLANDS have been well-named, after all, although the connection with their Royal Geographical sponsor is chiefly to be traced in their remarkable and alarming degree of latitude.

Yet, in spite of the universal friendliness, Mary Moon hesitated. Secure in her new-born happiness and *joie de vivre*, she was conscious of the fact that, if she owned the universe, she was not quite mistress of herself. Jardine's careless words had implanted a sting, and she felt the first stirring of jealousy.

Her eyes strayed past the gleaming emerald of the lagoon to the foaming outline of the reef. Outside were the breakers and the sharks.

Then she accepted her rival's challenge in a brief word, "Thanks!"

The woman looked at her closely and critically, as she stumbled over the threshold into the darkened room. She was a typical English girl— bonny and jolly— with ripe cheeks and trim waist. Venetia summed up her points coldly and dispassionately, bending her will to purge her mind of prejudice.

It was with a feeling of triumph that she put out of Court the two qualities she most dreaded— youth and freshness. Lord Jardine had not been attracted by the charms of Sainte Mousseline. There were plenty of young and beautiful girls in the island, and white muslin, although common enough, was more in request with the frivolous islanders— when embroidered.

Then, as she scanned the girl's trim outline, her neat, shining hair, and linen dress, she arrived at her conclusion. Mary Moon had won her supremacy by the potent power of starch. The fibres of her moral nature had been permanently stiffened to resist the soporific spell of the island, just as her skirts bore witness to drastic treatment at the wash-tub. She shone by contrast. At home, Jardine would have passed her without a backward glance. Here, after flabby morals and flimsy draperies, she was a spice of ginger in the midst of the universal insipid sweetness.

Venetia drew a long breath, for she was ignorant of the antidote to this Dew infusion.

MEANTIME, Mary had taken keen stock of Mrs. South. The instant she had entered the room she had been assailed with a strong feeling of repugnance. The air was soaked with perfume; it clogged every square inch with its clinging odour. Accustomed as she had grown to the scent of the South Sea Islands, with its dominant note of tieré flower and copra, Mary longed for a fan to sweep away this reck of a personal essence.

It seemed to her, instinctively, that it had been sprayed about after each fresh exodus to sweeten the air of the bitter reproaches and curses of the victims of this Belle Dame Sans Merci. She knew that within these walls men's hearts had been bandied about in at game of pitch-and-toss— that youths had been stripped of their faith in womankind— that lives had been ruined and ambitions shipwrecked.

But, although she dimly felt the atmosphere of the room, in her young common sense Mary was inclined to believe that Mrs. South's reputation had been grossly exaggerated. To her critical eyes she looked incapable of playing the part. A wild-haired woman, with a powdered face, lying in a crumpled wrapper against a pile of amber cushions. She noticed, with stern disapproval, the yellow stain of cigarettes on her finger-tips, the dark pouches under her eyes, and the good four inches of open-work stocking on the couch— unconscious that Mrs. South's minimum display was usually five.

The woman watched the girl's changing face, as her gaze roved over the picture-gallery of men's portraits. She smiled as she saw the frown and start with which Mary Moon encountered, in succession, the nine photographs of Lord Jardine.

"You're looking at my collection?" she asked. "I'm getting overstocked. Shall have to make a clearance, when I've the energy. Jardine, now— he's the worst offender. Always a fresh one. I suppose you've also loads? No? Then *do* take one— any one— to help me out! Choose!"

From the expression on the girl's face she saw that her shaft had gone home.

But Mary stood her ground. "I was looking for a portrait of your husband— that's all."

This time it was Venetia South that frowned.

"I haven't one— a photograph, I mean. But I wear his miniature, of course. The proper place for a husband is hanging round your neck."

"Like a millstone?"

Mrs. South concealed her annoyance with a laugh.

"Oh, my dear Ralph is more like a rolling-stone. Never at home. But, tell me— how do you like the island?"

"Perfect. I've never had such a glorious time before!"

Mary forgot her surroundings as she broke into a burst of enthusiasm. The dark walls seemed to fade to a mist, and she saw through them again the deep wash of the blue Pacific, the glorious orange sunshine, and the dazzling purity of the powdered coral beach.

Venetia, feeding her with careless question, heard more than her words, for her strained ear caught the bubbling undercurrent of the triumph-song of a woman in love.

She broke into the rhapsody with a jarring laugh.

"Goodness, how you enthuse! 'Thank God for life—thank God for love!'"

Mary, riding on the full wave of happiness, suddenly experienced a bitter flavour, like a swimmer who has swallowed a mouthful of salt water. She looked at Venetia, and noted for the first time, with an unreasonable pang of envy, the length of the lashes that outlined her eyes and the delicacy of her taper fingers.

"Very charming!" went on Venetia. "But have you ever thought that it all leads to nothing? All this picnicking, flirting, and lotus-eating? There's Jardine, for instance— He's been slacking here for nearly two years, but he's no earthly good to any one. He'll never marry in the island— now, will he?"

Mary faced the question squarely. "No. I suppose it is unlikely."

"Undreamt-of. Well, of course, it's all right for me, with an encumbrance already, but for an unmarried girl like yourself one naturally asks, 'What's the good of it?'"

Mary rose to her feet. She only wanted to break loose from this dark den, to breathe in the scented air, and to fall again under the spell of the eastern Pacific island.

Yet, at the doorway, something urged her to stop.

"I don't think you would talk like that," she said, "if you realised what— this— *means* to me— what sort of a time I've had before. At home— there was no money for dances or enjoyment. We just had to be educated to be independent. Then years teaching at a school, slaving all the time, indoors and out. Goodness! I feel a brute now when I remember how I bashed those wretched girls at hockey! Then, I had a slice of luck— a good private engagement. An easy time, but— my word!— the snubs. Only the governess! You know the sort of thing. And now, *this*— this glorious life; the freedom, the equality, the absolute perfection of living! But— I'm talking rot! Good-bye!"

As the girl stepped out into the rainbow-tinted world she was unconscious of the drift of her words. But Venetia understood. She had made an appeal.



THE WOMAN'S MIND swung back to the days of her own girlhood, passed in the lively society of a garrison-town, and contrasted it with the grey ash-path over which Mary Moon's feet had prated So far— she had had everything! For nearly two years Jardine had been her possession, even though he preserved the copyright of his emotions. Should she grudge three months of him to the girl— six, at most?

She fought it out during the days that followed, but when the moon had ridden into the sky for the seventh time she declared the ultimatum of that empty week. War to the knife!

During those long, idle hours the truth had slowly eaten down to the bone, like acid. She was deposed! Only one or two courtiers of her defaulting retinue had straggled in to see their former idol, and, in their manner, she had read the writing on the wall. They were frankly sympathetic, and, telling her she looked a wreck, advised a change, unconscious of the change that had wrecked her life. She looked at herself in the mirror afterwards, and loathed the white-faced woman that glared at her from the glass.

Small wonder that her charms deserted her after days of pacing her room like a caged animal, and dining principally off her finger-nails! Woman-visitors, however, she had as a crowning insult; and, although she hated their society, they served as her scouts and spies. They arrived primed with gossip as to the career of Mary Moon, the number of her dresses, the snowball-growth of her conquests, the infatuation of Lord Jardine. No one knew how hard the deposed queen took her reverses; it was impossible to tell from the weary set of her jaded face. In those days, when the grasshopper was a burden, she seemed beaten to the world. The fickle island society had hailed a new sovereign, and was shouting on all sides, "Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!"

But, for all her inaction, and the verdict of the club gossip, Venetia South had not received her *coup de grâce*. She lay in her den— *perdue*— like a wounded tigress, but her mind was busy with schemes for a last desperate rally. She knew that it was impossible to regain her position by a slow siege; the facile fancy of the South Sea Islanders must be taken by assault. She fixed the date of the encounter and the battle-ground without hesitation. At the bachelors' ball she would make her last bid for supremacy.

But the weapon? For days Venetia ransacked her wardrobe, until her floors were layers deep in littered laces and muslins. She could find nothing to suit her ends. White she tabooed, for she guessed instinctively her rival's choice, and she dared not risk a brush with her glorious colouring. The rest of her things were rags, off-colour and shop-soiled, like the spoils of a remnant sale. She longed, from the depths of her soul, for a Paris creation, with which to kill competition, after the manner of a Kipling heroine.

Then, thrown back on her resources, she ransacked a pile of old *Sketches*. The total yield of their torn and soiled covers was a coloured picture of the dancer, "Eldorado," who had set the Thames on fire and made things hot generally in London, a few years previously.

Venetia stared at the costume with fascinated eyes. It was absolutely alluring and startling. The daring draperies, their filmy transparencies, their foaming poppy sheen, their spangle of barbaric gilding, inflamed her imagination.

She sat brooding over it for hours. Should she copy it? In England— apart from the lime-light— the costume would be frankly impossible. Here, under tropical skies, the temperature was, presumably, warmed to sufficient height to resist a shock.

Venetia tore her eyes from the tempting thing. She knew that to appear at the dance in that costume was to play the game with loaded dice or marked cards. Then, as she met the sleepy stare of Jardine's pictured eyes from nine different points of view, her last atrophied scruples were sloughed like an old skin.

THE magic of a tropical clime was at full strength on the night of the ball. The sky was pricked with golden stars, fireflies caught in the purple web of darkness. Down below, however, the fireflies flashed free, as lights darting hither and thither proclaimed the festive exodus from villa and bungalow to the illuminated club-house.

Mary Moon was one of the earliest to arrive. She looked a charming English export in her white dress, which, although a day behind the fair in England, was the latest fashion that had arrived at the Eastern Pacific.

As she surrendered her card to an Increasing ring of partners, her thoughts reverted to the last time that she had worn that gown, at a county ball, at home, when she had been a most tenacious wallflower.

The contrast heightened her triumph. Then, as Lord Jardine commandeered her card, the rose on her cheek deepened. It was evident that he also anticipated pleasure from the evening, for his glance was almost alert.

As they began to skirmish over the number of dances a name caught her ear. She turned, and saw a couple of women, who were gossiping to a youth.

"Fancy! I hear Mrs. South is turning out to-night!"

"Silly woman! She'd better lie low, if only to save her face!"

"Oh, you never know!" laughed the boy. "There's life in the old dog yet."

The old dog! Thus yapped the puppy. Yet, in feeling a pang of pity for her prostrate rival, Mary could not quite banish a guilty sense of joy on the score of

the Jardine episode. Then she noticed that the boy, who was underhung, had further slipped his lip.

"By Jove!" he murmured, gazing at the doorway.

Instantly the women's heads swung round as on a pivot. At the same instant, Jardine drew a quick breath. Glancing up, Mary saw that he, also, was staring in the same direction. She turned swiftly, with a sense of coming disaster.

Attired like a pagan goddess, an Eastern dancing-girl, an oriental queen— whatever they chose to label her— Venetia South swept into the room, and at her appearance every scruple was licked up in the fierce flame of admiration that she kindled. Mrs. Grundy died before that scorching ray. The women gazed at her with fascinated envy, and the men slipped back to prehistoric aeons, and invoked, with unconscious faith, a pagan deity.

"By Jove!"

It was the murmur on every lip, bare or thatched.

Mary Moon stared with wide-eyed dismay. Was *this* the woman whose charm she had despised? She failed to recognise the yellow-faced, faded belle in this glorious creature. She was barbaric, splendid, wicked. Every bit of her—the garlands of scarlet blooms on her dishevelled hair, the flaming draperies that apparently hung together by enchantment, the rouge that blazed on her cheeks— was a challenge to the senses and a menace to the conventionalities.

Then, the low-drawn breath was relaxed, and a buzz of voices hummed free. Mary heard the low whisper of the planter's wife behind her.

"That's playing the game *too* low. If I catch my old man dancing with her—"

But she spoke to the empty air, for the youth had gone blundering over to Mrs. South.

With a sinking at her heart, Mary looked at Jardine. She hardly recognised him. His cool, impassive face had broken up before a flush of deep excitement. His eyes were alert. For the first time Lord Jardine was awake.

Hardly conscious of his action, he handed her back her card, with a mutter of thanks. Then he steered into the throng in the direction of the maelstrom that spun round Mrs. South. The next instant they were whirling round the room in the embrace of a waltz.

The girl hardly knew how she blundered through the dance. An east wind had swept through the tropical warmth of the ball-room, blighting her triumph. She could only feverishly wait for the next valse, against which Jardine had placed his initials.

It came at last. The band struck up, and Jardine floated by— again with Mrs. South.

Mary sat alone for the space of a minute only, before another partner secured her, but in that moment the iron entered her soul as she caught the flash of exultation in the eyes of her rival.

Venetia glanced at the white, girlish figure almost with derision. In the intoxication of her triumph the game appeared too simple, the foe too unworthy. A mere school-girl to flatten! A bread-and-butter flapper! She had crushed her to powder beneath her French heel. The world had come back at the first crook of her finger.

She laughed aloud, and Jardine laughed in answering excitement.

"Let's sit out!" he said. "I have something to say."

She looked with triumph at his transformed face. With an inch less bodice and two shades in depth of colour, she had achieved instantaneous success after two years of failure.

Yet when they sat alone under the murky glow of a swaying Chinese lantern, Jardine played idly with her fan and remained silent. The whisper of the far-away valse murmured a benediction. The sleeping island turned in her slumber, and they caught the perfume of her heaving breaths. Magic was loose in the air.

"*What* a night!" breathed Venetia. Then she promptly put the test-question that was hot on her lips.

"How do you think your new flame is looking? Miss Moon."

Jardine roused himself with an effort.

"Who? Oh, yes! Mary Moon. Quite nice. An ordinary enough little girl! See scores of them in England."

Venetia relaxed her breath. Her task was accomplished, and Mary Moon had taken her proper place in the scheme of things.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked, as, in spite of his tense expression, Jardine seemed looking into space.

He gave a laugh.

"Sorry! My thoughts were thousands of miles away. Odd to think that somewhere on the atlas— high up above all this waste of blue paint— is grey, drizzling England. Bet you anything, it's raining! Slippery pavements. Hansoms and taxis. The lights of Leicester Square. Can't you see them?"

"No!"

Venetia's voice was sharp. Jardine was in love with her. His every look in the ball-room proclaimed his newly-lit passion. She had brought him here to make his lips redeem the promise of his eyes.

"No," she repeated. "We're here. That's enough. *Here*, in this enchanted island. You and I. Why do you bother about England?"

"Why not? I'm going back."

The scented universe slipped under Venetia's feet. The stars above wheeled dizzily in their struggle to preserve their places.

The woman's voice came in a thin scream.

"You're not going back? You're *not!* You— you *couldn't* be so cruel as to desert us— this lovely island!"

"This lovely island, as you call it, is about played out. I'm fed up with reef and palm. I go by the next boat. Surely, you never imagined I should stay here always?"

VENETIA gasped under the blow. She could not imagine the island without Jardine. Its charm peeled off at a touch. It stood revealed as an isolated, aching spot of exile. Blue, heaving hummocks of Pacific Ocean rose interminably to separate her from the fog-bank of far-away England.

Utter bewilderment swamped her faculties. She could not think. She tried to grapple with the appalling fact.

*Jardine was going away!*

Then she broke out into an incoherent torrent of entreaties, exhorting the charm of the islands.

"You won't go. This is nothing but a freak. You've eaten 'foi,' and you'll be back next boat. Think of the freedom, the glorious climate! You'll miss that. And the picnics, the reefing, the bathing, the delightful time you've had lately with that jolly girl, Miss Moon! That fresh, *charming* girl! She's brought new life into the island."

In her desperation she was pushing forward her rival into the game, like a little white pawn— exploiting her charm, her attraction. Anything to pin Jardine to the spot!

He shook his head.

"It's awfully good of you to be so persistent, Venetia. You've all been perfectly ripping. But— if I wanted to— and I'm fogged on that point— I couldn't now. Couldn't stay. I'm drawn away— dragged home!"

There was silence. Then Venetia whispered huskily:

"*Who* has done this? A woman?"

"Yes. *You!*"

Venetia's brain reeled. Roller after roller of blue ocean passed before her eyes in never-ceasing movement.

Then she made a great bundle of the tattered remains of her traditional furniture, every remnant of her inherited dignity, every vestige of her school polish, every shred of her social training, and threw it to the winds. She caught at his arm.

"Take me with you!" she cried.

Jardine paused. Then, very carefully, he detached her clinging fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said coldly, "but there are two impediments to the course you propose."

"What— what?"

"To begin with— your husband."

"*That*— for him!"

Captain South was disposed of in a snap of two fingers.

"Secondly— my wife."

"Your *wife*! You are married?"

Venetia turned on him, with concentrated rage.

"You have *dared* to deceive me all this time!"

"If it comes to that, it's never been published in England."

Jardine's cool voice fell like lumps of ice on her hot heart.

"As a matter of fact, I came a mighty cropper over my marriage, and fled the country to escape the consequences of my folly. Came here to forget, and thought I had. Till tonight. Venetia, you graceless woman, you little know what you've done for me! When I saw you to-night— I saw more than you. Saw a pale image of the woman who has wrecked my life, broken me to bits. Eldorado, the dancer, and my wife!"

For a moment there was silence. Venetia swayed in her feat, as if to faint. Then, gathering together her forces, she rose and left him brooding in silent resentment.

HE WAS awakened. He had to return— return to the old slavery, the old enchantment. Against his will, he had been aroused. But he could not sleep again.

The instant Venetia South appeared in the ball-room she was surrounded by eager suppliants. The band blared a triumphant *valse*. In one corner sat a neglected white figure. The fickle islanders had again made history. Their new queen was deposed, their old sovereign restored.

"*Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*"

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#### 4: The Young Pretender

*The Lady's Realm*, March 1910

THE Macdonald baby inched three steps down the path, and fell with a stagger into the outstretched arms of his maiden aunt.

"Doesn't he walk grandly?" she asked proudly.

"To my mind, he doesn't look quite respectable," answered the young lawyer severely. "If I walked like that, my reputation would be wrecked."

"But he's so wee, and he's only just got his balance."

"For the matter of that, I've never got properly on my feet."

Tom Oxford looked rather wistful as he referred to his pecuniary position. For the maiden aunt of the Macdonald baby was just twenty, and had soft brown hair, that curled over a charming face, tanned by years of hatless golfing. In short, she was as sweet and brown as Macdonald's World-famed Chocolate, which, in spite of its purely local reputation, was a concern flourishing enough to make an heiress of Jean Macdonald.

Little wonder, then, that Oxford had left his stuffy office to the mercies of his staff— consisting of a youth of fourteen years— and was assisting at the drunken gymnastics of the young Macdonald.

The sun blazed down on yellow bracken and purple heather; a breeze from the sea freshened the warm air; white gulls swooped across the blue sky. Yet, in the midst of this riot of beauty and colour, Oxford's heart was heavy.

Jean glanced at his handsome cleanshaven face.

"It's downright sinful to look poor-hearted on such a bonny day," she announced severely. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was only thinking that this young rip will be grown up and breaking the law, instead of my back, before I shall get the price of my articles back out of it."

"You should study hard. A full head makes full pockets."

"It doesn't. As well say a heavy heart makes heavy pockets. This place is lawyer-ridden. I can't get a chance."

Jean's face grew grave; she shrewdly suspected that Oxford's head was not quite equal to his heart. His generosity and good-nature were colossal; but, in worldly wisdom, the Macdonald baby was infinitely more guileful, and better able to look after his own interests.

"Ah well," she said consolingly, "you never know. Your chance will come, and when it does— grab it! Why, what's that?"

Oxford straightened his aching back as he picked up the grovelling baby for the twentieth time; then, as his eyes rested on the pitiful object before him—

although he was the toughest forward that ever butted in a football scrum,—they grew dim. True to dramatic traditions, his chance had appeared.

It was a brown dog— undoubtedly intended by Nature to be big, but compelled by man to be undersized. His coat was caked with mud; every rib in his hollow sides could be counted by one possessed of sympathy and an elementary knowledge of arithmetic. Yet, even though he dragged his hind legs after him with the stiff gait that told of miles of weary tramping—there was a kind of pitiful bravado about him, the ghost of a swagger—that was infinitely sadder than cringe.

Resolved at all costs to keep up appearances, he advanced warily, wagging his tail.

"Poor brute!" cried Oxford, commandeering Baby Macdonald's biscuit to throw to the dog. The animal's self-control went to pieces at the taste of food, and he fell upon it with ravenous yelps and gulps.

Jean's brown eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, he's *starving!*" she cried, as she emptied the bag of biscuits on the ground, even while her thrifty soul reminded her of the sin of wasting biscuits at sixteen pence the pound.

The man and girl watched in sympathetic silence while the dog finished his meal, while the Macdonald baby saw his lunch disappear with even intenser interest.

Then Oxford spoke.

"Well, he's plainly lost. What's to be done with him? I can't possibly do with another dog. Overstocked, as it is."

"I'm glad you know it at last. Well— *look* at him! We can't turn him adrift again, to be kicked from pillar to post. On the other hand, no one could possibly keep a wretched object like that. I'll take him to the vet's and have him painlessly destroyed. I'll pay to have it done," she added, with an effort.

Oxford groaned. He knew that Jean's suggestion was both kind and practical. He knew that she was right, yet he protested.

"No, no!"

"All right! You shall pay, then!" said Jean, with obvious relief.

"No, no!"

"What on earth d'you want?" asked the girl, impatiently.

Oxford did not know himself. He only whistled miserably. He knew even less poetry than he did law, yet two lines written by a large-hearted man suddenly swam into his brain:

*Young blood must have its course, lad,  
And every dog his day.*



He looked again into the dog's eyes. There was just the ghost of a grin about his jaws, that told of a sense of humour. He was no dog with a past. He had been kicked into the gutter from the very start; yet, given a chance, his eyes told so plainly that he could be such a devil of a dog. And he wanted his chance— he wanted his day. He did not want, through the vet's kindly ministrations, to be shot into the grey realms of Shadow-land, there to hunt vainly for what he had missed in this world—a little human kindness.

"I wish— I wish he wouldn't look at me with such *doggy* eyes," protested Oxford miserably. "I can't stand a dog that's doggy. It's like people that are human— you understand."

Jean nodded. She was no whit moved— more, in fact— for she knew what had to be done.

Oxford raised his eyes and looked at her. For once he passed her pretty face, and studied her costume, chosen without regard to cost, but with keen regard to wear. For the first time he thought of the chocolate-built wealth of the Macdonalds with relief; for the first time he understood why chocolate had been invented.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "*You* shall keep the dog. It's providential. You're looking out for one?"

"Yes— a good one. Not a lost mongrel."

Then Oxford fell.

"This *is* a good dog," he said, with unholy fervour. "If I'm a judge of a dog, it's a clinker. And you'll get it for nothing. Think, what a bargain!"

Jean's soft eyes grew keen. Her father had an open nature, but a close fist; her mother was the soul of kindness, and an excellent housekeeper. Speaking roughly— only it was impossible to speak roughly of anything so soft and brown— Jean favoured both.

"Is it really a good dog? What is it?" she asked instantly.

Oxford looked at the unspeakable object, tried hard to put a name to him, and was plucked hopelessly. He fell back on a flood of inspired eloquence.

"He's worth heaps. At least, he'll be, later on. This is the rough material; but wait until you see the finished article. You must not judge him now. Think what feeding will do for him! Why, where would you be without your porridge?"

"His coat is thin in places. His hair is coming off," continued Jean.

"So's the baby's. Are you going to drown *him*?" was the fierce counterattack.

They turned and looked at the infant, whose bald head gave him the look of a shaven convict. Although no beauty, the young Macdonald was a fine

sportsman, however, for he had forgiven the matter of the biscuits, and was vigorously licking the dog's coat.

Jean snatched him up hurriedly.

"I don't know much about dogs," she continued, "but I don't like the looks of him. Still, if you guarantee that he's worth keeping, I'll take him home."

"You'll never regret it. Miss West— the Dog Girl— would rush you for five pounds, at least. It's something for nothing."

"I'll take him."

Whistling to the waif, Jean carried off the baby.

Oxford caught the dog's eye, as he trotted to heel. A look of understanding passed between them. Oxford knew; the dog knew also. He was an accessory to the fact. He had crept into the shelter of a home on false pretences.

The young lawyer, when he heard the rain pattering on his roof that night, heaved a sigh of relief to think that the poor beast was not once more dragging his stiff limbs through the mud. But with the next day's awakening came the usual crop of recollections and misgivings. In spite of poets, breakfast is about the best thing that comes in the morning.

Oxford was his nearest approach to a hard-headed lawyer just after his tub; his tender heart and violent sympathies froze just a little under the treatment of cold water. He frowned as he gulped down his oats, mindful that he had sowed them in a wild state, only too freely, the preceding day. Then, no longer held in the thrall of two brown doggy eyes, he brought his fist heavily down on the table.

"Oh, what a fool I've been!" he groaned.

In imagination he rehearsed the scene. He had played Mercy to Jean's Justice, and, in his eagerness to avert the sentence of death on a starving cur, in his reading of the part, he had represented Mercy as a brazen liar. He thought with concentrated bitterness of Jean's sweet, candid face.

"She'll have done with me for ever," he said. "She'll never forgive me when she knows she's been done. I'll have to put things straight. I'll see Jean first thing, and get the beastly dog chucked out again!"

When he arrived at his office, however, he found that the unexpected had happened in the shape of a client. He brought with him business that took Oxford away for a week, so that the foundling entirely escaped his mind, until, on his return journey, the rawboned form of John Macdonald entered his carriage.

Oxford greeted the Chocolate Man respectfully; then inquired after his daughters and the grandson.

"Fine— all of them. But you've not asked me about my new grandson, and I doubt but that he'll be the pick of the bunch," said Macdonald, with a twinkle

in his eye. "Jean's wonderfully set on him. She's given him the whole of her— except, maybe, a bit over to spare for the man that put her on to a good thing. Mind, I'm saying nought one way or the other."

Then he burst into a jolly laugh at Oxford's scared face.

"Are you talking about the dog?" faltered the lawyer.

"Nobody's talking about anything else at present. You'd best be over early to see him."

Oxford took the advice, and called that evening, filled with the virtuous intention of proclaiming his error and ejecting the Pretender. He could not help feeling uncomfortable, however, at the thought of the week that had elapsed; he had an idea that it was a mistake.

Jean met him with unvarnished delight.

"I'm so glad you've come. Prince Charlie's dying to see you!"

Oxford stifled a groan. His fears were confirmed. He had allowed the audacious cur to get his low-born paw into this respectable family with a vengeance. Prince Charlie, indeed! Must he have nothing less than a title?

The next minute the impostor himself blundered into the room, dragging a raw-boned flapper— John Macdonald's second daughter, Flora— in his train. There was no doubt that the week had done much for him; yet even, as Oxford's heart hardened at the sight of his blatant prosperity, he headed for the young lawyer and nearly bowled him over in his plebeian joy. After all, there was nothing of the mushroom snob about him.

"Hold hard! hold hard!" protested Oxford. "Don't be so demonstrative," he added as the dog kissed him, foreign-fashion, on either side of his face.

"Remember, you're a British dog, not a French poodle."

But in the depths of his heart Oxford was not so certain of the fact; he suspected that Prince Charlie's cosmopolitan pedigree included a little extract from every known brand of dog.

Then he cleared his throat for action.

"Would you be very disappointed if anything— went wrong with him?" he asked. "I mean— distemper, or so on," he added lamely, alarmed by the spark of sudden suspicion in Jean's eyes.

"It'd kill me now. I'm so ambitious for him. I'm going to have him entered for the show, and he'll win all sorts of prizes for me."

Oxford gasped. This was going too far. He would have to put a stop to this state of affairs.

"You can't," he objected. "You've got to give his pedigree and have him entered in the Stud-Book, and a lot more."

"I'll get that done all right, somehow. You can do anything with money. And I don't mind spending a little to make lots," was the shrewd answer. "Now, tell me, can he get a first, second, and third?"

"In different classes."

Again Oxford fell, and gave himself up to the delight of joint sympathy with Jean, as, in blissful pride, they discussed the dog's future.

When, at last, he tore himself away, he remembered ruefully that he had not said a word of his proposed warning. He turned, and spoke reproachfully to Prince Charlie, who had followed him to the door.

"Look here! Dog to dog— have you played the square game? I just helped you in, as a decent outsider; nominated you as plain Tom, Dick, or Harry. This Prince business is your own affair. You did that off your own bat, you bounder. Well, play your game, and remember, you take the consequences."

Prince Charlie wagged his tail.

"Knew you wouldn't split on a pal," he said plainly, with his doggiest look.

For the next ten days Oxford called daily on the Macdonald family, for the sole purpose of confession. But, every time, he felt that the penance awarded would be so severe that he waited for a better chance of absolution. At first he went in fear and trembling, expecting to be greeted with the dreaded news that the dog's true value had been gauged by a discerning outsider. But, as time went on, and his South Sea Bubble remained unpricked, he grew quite callous over the claims of the impostor.

One afternoon when, as usual, he had left his office in charge of his staff, and was munching Jean's shortbread with the appetite of a better man, Flora looked from the window, where she was stationed with Prince Charlie.

"Ring for another cup, Jean. Paul West's on the doorstep."

Oxford's heart gave a sudden leap. Exposure had come at last. Before the Dog Girl's shadow darkened the doorway he knew that he was doomed, and his bountiful tea was the criminal's last breakfast.

Like her father before her, Paul West had gone to the dogs.

It was the natural sequence, for when the brandy-sodden Army officer had died he left his daughter nothing but his debts and a knowledge of things canine. At the age of fifteen, the courageous orphan had earned a livelihood by taking out dogs for airings. At the age of twenty-five she took out licences instead. Those ten years left her still in the same line, but at the other end—the head of a thriving business.

There was nothing of the orthodox sportswoman about her appearance; the most masculine thing about her was her billhead— "Paul West."

Dog-whip in hand, and clad in russet tailor-built tweeds, she advanced, and Oxford's heart sank at the sight of her fair, dainty face, alive with keenness and

self-reliance. He was rather afraid of the Dog Girl at all times. He knew that when she admired a dog the next step was its immediate acquisition. He also knew, by masculine intuition, that she admired him, and felt uncomfortable. That might have been the reason for the curious fact that whereas the Dog Girl liked Oxford because he was good-looking, Jean disliked the Dog Girl because—she was good-looking.

Paul West advanced, and greeted Jean with her set professional smile, that invited confidence, and Oxford with her private one, which wrecked his—pretty grin though it was.

"I called about the dog you were thinking of buying," she said, addressing herself to Jean.

"Thanks, very much, but I have one. Mr. Oxford picked him up for me. He says he is a real find."

The Dog Girl looked blank at this poaching on her preserves.

"Really! I had no idea that I'd a rival in my business. Is that the dog under the table?"

She whistled, and Prince Charlie emerged at the note, wagging his tail.

Another crisis had occurred in his adventurous life.

There was silence for two minutes, while Oxford sat in stony despair, waiting for the blow to descend. The very marrow in his bones seemed iced. He held his breath, while Paul West's keen blue eyes traced back every ramification and cross of the mongrel's family tree, and unprobed the secrets of his mixed origin. When she had presumably satisfied herself on every point she turned and raked Oxford with the fire of her glance.

"H'm! Since when have you become an expert in dogs? Didn't know it was your line."

"Oh— I've— I've been always keen on them."

Oxford had meant to bluff, but he went to pieces before the penetrating quality of that blue-eyed battery.

"Ah, an amateur in the true sense. By the way, what's the dog's name?"

"Prince Charlie," interposed Jean proudly.

"Oh, the Young Pretender!"

There was a note in her laughter that irritated Jean.

"I'd accept Mr. Oxford's opinion on a dog before any one's," she said hotly.

"I mean to exhibit Prince Charlie at the show. What d'you think of his chances?"

Again the Dog Girl laughed.

"Oh, don't ask me! I'm naturally prejudiced. Besides, he'll find his true level at the show. D'you know what class to enter him in? Oh, I mean nothing. Well, it's no good trying to interest you in my Ayrshire now, so I'll say good-bye. Mr. Oxford, I ought to owe you a grudge for spoiling a deal."

"Wait a minute, Miss West. I'm going your way."

Springing to his feet, Oxford walked off with the Dog Girl, regardless of Jean's frown.

Directly they were in the street, he came to the point. There was not an ounce of fight left in him; Paul West had a wonderful talent for bringing to heel.

"I saw that you saw, just now," he began lucidly. "It's no good trying to bluff you. I got Miss Macdonald to take that wretched cur under false pretences, and she will be pretty raggy when it all comes out at the show. You didn't give me away just now, so I'm going to throw myself on your mercy. Can you— *can* you help me out of this hole?"

The Dog Girl looked at him keenly.

"Why should I help you?" she asked.

"No earthly reason at all. I only thought— well, you know— I thought perhaps you might, somehow."

"As a matter of fact, I never do anything for nothing," went on the Dog Girl. "I'm a business woman, working for my living. I haven't a father who makes chocolate. But I will help you all the same, purely as a personal favour to yourself."

As she looked sideways at Oxford, her blue eyes behind their long lashes were like love-in-a-mist, and the man wished, uncomfortably, that she were not so pretty.

"I suggest," she went on, "that we form an alliance. In my professional capacity, I propose this. Presumably, the dog goes for walks. Well, he can be lost, and found again by a competent person— say, my man. He understands that sort of thing very well. I, in turn, will dispose of him to some one out of the district. It will be in the way of business, and I shall get what I can out of it."

Oxford nodded. Apparently, all the girls he knew were on the make. Still, it was also good business for him, and he gripped her hand warmly.

"You are a brick!" he said. "You've taken a load from my mind."

The Dog Girl gave a short laugh.

"Don't be too sure!" she said. "It's unwise to trust to the generosity of a woman. They're handicapped by being feminine."

As usual, it was in the morning that the first misgivings visited Oxford as to his bargain. The post brought him two letters. One— on tinted paper, with coloured adjectives to match, expressive of grief and anger— announced the loss of Prince Charlie; the other— in the Dog Girl's neat handwriting— was marked "Private and Confidential."

Oxford eyed it doubtfully, and then frowned at the superscription; it seemed to leave the little pink letter out in the cold.



Although he had passed his final fully two years before, on receipt of that letter he first became a lawyer— fully-fledged, on the spot. It aroused all his native caution, and directly he had read its contents, which merely announced the seizure of Prince Charlie, in true professional style, he burned it without delay.

Then he looked at the case squarely, without blinkers. He realised that he had done an exceptionally foolish thing in making a compact with Paul West. He had put a weapon into her hand, which she would not scruple to use in any subsequent break. He did not blind himself with any bluff about masculine superiority. He knew that the Dog Girl's brain was infinitely clearer and better than his own, and he resolved to meet her on her own ground, and not to be rushed.

That the way of the transgressor is hard, he testified in the following week; his feet pressed no primrose path, but trod warily to avoid a succession of traps. When he called at the Macdonalds, his facile nature found a sudden difficulty in feigning spurious sympathy over Prince Charlie's loss, for he was too large a shareholder in the genuine article to succeed in this line.

The whole house was in mourning. He had a snapshot vision of Flora flying upstairs to hide her tear-swollen face. Jean, however, proved to be made of sterner stuff, for she viewed her loss as a cause for grievance rather than grief. She very soon gave Oxford to understand, clearly and definitely, that he could only retain her favour by finding her dog.

This was rather a facer for the young lawyer. All his spare time— which amounted to his entire day— had to be spent in a fruitless search. He told himself bitterly that it was indeed mad dog's work— especially as Jean persisted in regarding his inevitable failures as a sign of incompetency. Under the influence of her veiled impatience, he grew ashamed of his own stupidity, and would have given much if only there had been a dog to find.

"If she drives me much harder, I'll not trust myself," he told himself gloomily. "I'll be bound to produce him, and then—"

Meantime, to complicate matters, the Dog Girl, having got her dainty foot in, was plying her hunt with relentless vigour. Every day brought notes from her— bulletins as to Prince Charlie's condition, and invitations to visit him at the stables. These incriminating documents were promptly destroyed; but Paul did not stop there. She began to call at Oxford's rooms. Her repeated failures to find him at home were enough to have broken a weaker spirit; but the slight tailor-built figure of the Dog Girl— a string of dogs at her tail— continued to be a daily visitor to the street.

Oxford grew thin under the strain, as people will in a siege. He took to dodging down back streets, and nearly developed a permanent squint in his efforts to look in opposite directions.

At last a message over the telephone brought temporary relief. Paul West called up to say that she had sold Prince Charlie to a Doctor Emil Riscoe, who would take him back to London the next day.

With a sigh of relief Oxford rang off. He thought again of the dog who had caused such a ripple of excitement in his placid life.

"Well, what does it amount to?" he asked after his pipe. "No one's scored but Prince Charlie. He's used us to play his game. Here am I, with two girls—Jean getting madder daily, and Paul West to be choked off. Pretty girl too! While that old beggar of a dog turns up without a shadow of backing, and is now a respectable whitewashed member of society, going up to London for the season. Blow him, the dear old fellow!"

The very next day, after the long strain of acting an emotional part, Oxford was recalled from this artificial state to the natural man by a very bad shock. He was at the Chrysanthemum Show, loafing round contentedly, presumably to see if Prince Charlie were disguised as a bloom, when, with a guilty start, he ran across Jean, who instantly began to put him through the usual catechism. He was lying fluently, when the Dog Girl passed, in company with a tall spare man, whose closely-shaven hair and thin lips gave him a sinister air.

Jean broke off to look after him.

"D'you see that dreadful man?" she asked. "It's a Dr. Riscoe, from London. He's a vivisectionist. It makes me cold just to look at him. What a *mercy* to think that Prince Charlie is not in his clutches. I'd rather have him lost! But—what's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a bogey!"

Oxford stared at her stupidly. For a moment he felt sick with anxiety, while the great yellow and bronze "'mums" swam before his eyes like Chinese lanterns. He could only think of one thing. The poor Young Pretender had been betrayed by treachery to an untimely fate, on which he could not trust himself to dwell. Just a rough brown dog, with a wet nose and doggy eyes; a stray whom no one would miss; a fit instrument to further the ends of science. Oxford's blood boiled, and he—the kindest-hearted of men—in one inward comprehensive swear damned the whole of humanity, past, present, and to come. Then, with a muttered excuse, he rushed over to the Dog Girl.

Her eyes shone with triumph, and she shook off her escort with alacrity. Regardless of Jean's indignant glances, Oxford steered her behind a screen of green chrysanthemums, and then promptly opened fire.

"That dog," he said curtly— "I want him back."

Paul's face fell. "You can't. He's sold."



"Yes— nicely sold. So am I. So am I, to trust to a woman. But I'll stop it. That infernal butcher shan't have him, I swear."

The Dog Girl whistled.

"Oh, so that's it. Well, stop yapping, and listen to sense. Dr. Riscoe has bought Prince Charlie merely as a pet. He does not practise on dogs. Besides, do you imagine I would sell a dog for experimental purposes? I'm too fond of them— goodness knows!"

"Yes, yes— granted! I want Prince Charlie back, all the same."

The Dog Girl's blue eyes were reproachful.

"Don't you trust me?"

"No. I don't say you're wilfully deceiving me, but you're deceiving yourself. You'll make a few pounds out of this deal, and you're so anxious to touch your blood-money, that you'd believe any lie. Yes, I know I'm no gentleman. I believe in calling a spade a spade, that's all!"

The Dog Girl turned away.

"I fail to understand your interference," she said stolidly. "I have sold a dog— *my* dog, in the way of business. I have a perfect right to do so. If you dispute any point, you're welcome to invite another claimant— say, Miss Macdonald— to inspect the animal, when I shall inform her as to how it came into my possession."

Oxford quailed. He realised that he was too deeply dipped to declare open warfare.

"I apologise," he said abjectly. "Let me buy the dog back. I'll offer a higher figure than that doctor."

"No. I refuse to make money out of my friends. You have enough dogs as it is. Shake hands and part friends. I'm acting in your interests."

With a smile, the Dog Girl left him. She was far too well versed in the arts of warfare to part with such a valuable hostage.

Oxford left the show in a brown study and a blue funk— an undesirable colour-scheme. He was too engrossed to stop to appease Jean, who, cherry-checked with rage, never wished to see him again, and wanted to see him just to tell him so.

That night, when the majority of the law-abiding citizens of the town had turned in, Tom Oxford stole out of his rooms and walked in the direction of Miss West's stables. He came back at a sprint, rushing through the silent streets as though possessed, with a dim shape pelting at his heels. Into his fire-lit room they bundled, and then he switched on the light, and laughed aloud.

"Quits with the law at last. Make yourself at home, old chap. We're all bachelors here."

Prince Charlie stood up and tried to wash Oxford's face, which badly needed it after rubbing a cobwebby wall. There was no doubt that he had improved wonderfully under Miss West's expert care, but he was overjoyed to be freed from petticoat government. Then he fell to eating his supper, not at all excited by his change of quarters. Perhaps he knew from the first that he was destined to a life of vicissitudes. Here he was at last in Oxford's rooms, where he might have been from the first, only that it was his fate to embroil others in complicated difficulties for his sake.

Oxford actually read law next day, partly in feverish atonement for his breach, and partly because he was afraid to go out. Moreover, he had to settle the difficult question of an asylum for Prince Charlie.

He had just left the room to wash his hands, when his landlady appeared at the bathroom door, her mouth screwed to the proportions of a pea.

"A young woman is in your room to see you," she said sourly.

Oxford hurried back to find that in his absence Paul West had stormed his stronghold. Her pretty mouth was firm.

"I've come for the dog," she said. "Dr. Riscoe leaves at noon."

"You have the advantage of me," was the glib answer.

Paul whistled, and Prince Charlie instantly padded into the room. She put her hand on his collar.

"Thanks. That's all. Kindly let me pass."

But Oxford stood with his back against the door.

"You don't go out of this room with that dog!" he said.

"I don't go without."

"All right, stop!"

Paul sat down calmly in his best chair, while Oxford regarded her with angry eyes.

"As I remarked before," he said, "I'm no gentleman. I'm a cad. And, while I'm perfectly willing to allow you to stop rent-free, I warn you I don't include board."

"That's all right. You won't starve me out. I have a very powerful chaperon called Mrs. Grundy."

"Oh, hang the scandal!"

Oxford broke off with a violent start as a knock was heard on the door.

"Two ladies to see you," announced his landlady's voice. "The Miss Macdonalds."

With a sinking heart Oxford opened the door an inch and slid into the passage.

"I can't say how sorry I am," he faltered. "But I'm engaged with a man."

No sooner had the lie left his lips than Prince Charlie, excited by the sound of voices, gave a sharp bark.

"That's Prince Charlie!" screamed Jean, with conviction. "Let me in, this instant!"

The next second the room was invaded. As the two rivals confronted each other, Jean hotly aggressive, and Paul coldly defensive, the wretched Oxford realised that the worst had happened.

Jean stretched out an accusing finger at the dog, and then turned to Oxford.

"You stole him!" she said fiercely.

"I did."

"For *her*!"

She pointed to the Dog Girl. "From her."

"There! You admit it!" Jean ignored the distinction.

"Oh, don't trouble to explain. I quite understand. Come, Flora, we need stop no longer."

"No, no!" cried Oxford. "You're under a misapprehension. I had no intention of making a present to Miss West at your expense. If I could only explain—"

"Please do!"

"Yes, do!" echoed the Dog Girl.

Oxford's jaw fell.

"I— I *can't*!" he stammered.

Jean whistled, and, with a single backward glance, Prince Charlie trotted off with the Misses Macdonald. He would have liked to stay, but his star called, and he had to follow.

White to the lips, Oxford rammed on his hat, and the next minute a violent slam told the Dog Girl that he had left the house.

That night Oxford made a clean breast of it to Jean— spoiling a good many sheets of paper in the process. But at last the letter was finished— a clear, concise statement of facts. He felt it better that Jean should know the full measure of the fraud he had practised on her than that she should suspect him of an amorous understanding with the Dog Girl. Then he posted the letter and awaited results.

There were none. Day succeeded day, and he received no line from Jean Macdonald. At last, anxious to learn his fate, and also worried on the dog's behalf, he screwed up his courage and called at the house.

He was shown into the state apartment, a hideous early Victorian parlour. This was a sure sign he was in disgrace, and he waited for several minutes. From upstairs he heard voices raised in sisterly conversation that sounded like

a quarrel. Then there was a patter of footsteps, the rustle of a dress, and the door opened. His heart sank into his boots with dread; then, as he looked up, his nerve returned, but his face fell in its place. For, instead of the pretty Jean, he was confronted with the angular form of Flora, her freckles swamped in a deep unlovely blush.

"Jean's sorry, but she's not in."

"She is," said Oxford savagely. "Lies are sinful, Flora. You've got a message for me. Now, I want it exactly. Don't be polite and translate."

Flora's eyes lit up; they had grown up before the rest of her face, and had triumphantly passed the ugly, awkward stage.

"All right. You shall have it. She says that you're not only caddish, but you've been absolutely dishonest over the dog, and that as you've been reading law for five years you probably won't know the penalty for false pretences and misrepresentation, but that if you'll ask your office-boy he'll tell you."

Oxford swallowed the insult; Jean, in the original, was certainly staggering.

"That finishes me," he said. "But, Flora— what about Prince Charlie? Has she fired him out again?"

"No, no. She's not cruel. But, now she knows he's a mongrel, she's bought another dog—a *good* one— from Peel's."

It was Oxford's first crumb of comfort, for the muffled padding of weary feet plodding through the mud had been beating ceaselessly in his ears.

"That's better," he said. "Well, I must be off. Hulloo, Flora! what's up? Why, you're crying. I say, you are a brick. I believe you're sorry for me!"

"I'm not!" was Flora's indignant reply, leaving it an open question which of the three charges she denied. She blinked rapidly as she proceeded:

"It's so— so *rotten* about the dog. Of course, he's fed and all that; but— it's different. Nobody pets him now. They treat him as an impostor. They don't even call him Prince Charlie. And— he *feels* it so. I'm sure he knows. He thinks he's in disgrace, and he tries to make friends, but they won't. They won't let even Baby play with him. He's only got one left— me!"

Flora openly choked. It was not a pretty action, but Oxford looked at her with affectionate sympathy.

"I'd like to see him," he said.

When the girl reappeared with the dog, Oxford saw that her words were true. Prince Charlie, though outwardly well-groomed and fed, was a different animal. The savour had gone out of his life. He missed the breath of popularity. He approached cautiously with a depressed air, and stood wagging his tail, evidently desperately anxious to propitiate the powers whom he had unwittingly offended.

"Prince Charlie! Prince Charlie!" called Oxford softly.

Instantly two great paws were on his shoulders, and, with a delighted yelp, the dog rapturously licked his face on one side, just as Flora impulsively kissed the other.

"Oh, you call him *that*!" she cried. "I'm so glad. He's still got you!"

Then, in shamed silence, they fell to petting him. In the midst of his adversity two loyal supporters remained to the Young Pretender.

For a whole fortnight, Oxford devoted himself solidly to his work, and it was wonderful what an amount of satisfaction he derived from his industry. But on the day of the Dog Show, the whole town took holiday, and he found it impossible to read. That evening, as he passed the Masonic Hall, from whence a pandemonium of barks and wails arose, urged by an uncontrollable impulse, Oxford paid his shilling, and found himself in the crowded alleys, lined with every kind of canine exhibit. His handsome face grew gloomy as he watched them, and noticed how they expressed their different personalities. A bashful prize-winner rubbed shoulders with one plainly eaten up with pride, while other dogs, hysterical at their detention, could not disturb the slumbers of their philosophic neighbours.

"Flora was right, dear girl!" mused the man. "Prince Charlie would never have stood the public showing-up. Thank goodness I told the truth."

Then he did a quick two-step and reversed as quickly, as he nearly ran into the two Misses Macdonald.

He looked steadily at Jean; the flush on her brown cheek rendered her charming.

"Congratulate me!" she cried. "My dog has taken a prize. I am so proud and happy!"

"Good. I'm glad your new dog— or rather your new investment— has turned out so well. D'you know, Miss Macdonald, you are looking radiant, and getting wonderfully like your father?"

To the ordinary eye, the speech was a gross libel, for, whereas Jean was soft and brown, the Macdonald was hard and red.

But, in that sudden moment of clear vision, the young lawyer had touched the spot.

Heedless of Jean's undutiful dissent, he turned to Flora, and studied her with the same clairvoyance. He saw her as she would be in a few years— a beautiful woman. And in that moment he blessed the interval that must elapse before the transformation, for they were so many years to mark time— to work to make a position.

Flora met his gaze with a smile. Apparently, she, in her turn, was clair-audiant above the din, for she raised her hand.

"Hark! I can hear him barking. He misses us. Come and see him!"

The sisters dragged off Oxford in triumph, bumping him through the crowd, and only releasing him before a dog lying on his bed of straw— his coat shining, his tongue lolling, his nose moist, and his eyes doggier than ever— a very devil of a dog. Above his head was the blue label bearing the words "First Prize." The claims of the Young Pretender were settled for ever. Prince Charlie had come into his own.

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## 5: A Stranded Soul

*The Idler*, April 1910

THE painted face on the canvas looked down, with supreme superiority, at the painted face of the lady. Each returned stare for stare, with interest. But the scrutiny of the fifteenth-century portrait was of so piercing a quality that the twentieth-century lady paid her the compliment of putting up her lorgnette, behind which screen of vantage she continued the critical battery.

There was nothing to distinguish Lady Rosemary Vine from any other of the feminine throng that filled the picture gallery. In her spreading hat and Directoire gown, she was merely one of a crowd, just as the pretty artifice of her face proclaimed her one of a type—the feather-bed section of Society.

Therefore it was a distinct tribute to the penetration of Dr. Hardcastle Pepper that, when he stopped before the slender figure in kingfisher-blue, he was instantly able to put the correct name to her.

"Lady Rosemary!" he exclaimed. "Who on earth would have expected to find you here? Didn't know pictures were in your line."

"Well, they're certainly out of my line of vision, if you stand blocking my view," was the pettish answer. Then, as the young man jumped back hastily, she relented.

"You're about right," she said. "Show-Sunday and the Private View is about the utmost I can rise to. And both upset me. Headache and heartache, over the gowns. I always break the Tenth Commandment, I mean. No, I popped in here, this afternoon, just to recover myself."

Dr. Pepper raised his eyebrows interrogatively. Possibly he questioned her misapplied energy.

"Um?" he enquired lucidly.

"A motor smash," explained Lady Rosemary. "Congratulate me, I've had one at last. Now I may consider myself blooded. No, I wasn't hurt a bit—wasn't it sweet luck? Just the shock."

"Anyone else damaged?"

"I believe the taxi-driver was, but I didn't stop to see. You ought to know by now how sensitive I am to suffering!"

Pepper smiled slightly.

"I hardly think you are of the stuff martyrs are made of," he remarked.

"You're right, and I'm proud of it," was the light answer; "so you need not look so knowing."

But Lady Rosemary was wrong, for Dr. Pepper was one of those men who know too much to be knowing. He had taken her measure accurately. He knew that she ran a nervous system in place of a soul, and that her brain was of



about equal consistency with a muffin. But he also knew that if her mind was shallow her dimples were deep. So he placed her at her true value—that of a pretty woman.

Therefore he smiled at her indulgently.

"Well, who is this luckless female you're quizzing so cruelly?" he asked, turning to the portrait.

"Just exactly what I want to find out. Look her up, will you?"

Dr. Pepper began to turn over the pages of his catalogue.

"Why this keen interest?" he enquired.

"I don't know— but it's her eyes. I know her face as well as I know my own— which is admitting a great deal."

Pepper stopped in his search.

"Can't you place her?" he asked. "A mutual friend, perhaps?"

But Lady Rosemary shook her head.

"No, it's no mere acquaintance like that. It's someone I have known *intimately*. I seem to have seen those eyes ever since I've known anything. Only— they didn't look like that then. They're different now. They look as if they were reproving me for something. They're *angry* with me!"

Pepper watched her with interest as her eyes dilated in the effort of recollection. The sight of mental strain on her face was unusual.

"An early nurse or governess, perhaps?" he hazarded.

Again the woman shook aside the suggestion.

"No, no," she cried impatiently. "I shall remember presently."

Then her habitual insolent stare came back to her china-blue eyes as she regarded the portrait.

"Quaint type of woman was in then," she reflected. "She wouldn't have a show nowadays. We're certainly grown better-looking now. Good crop of hair—not half her own, I'll be bound! And, mercy, what a figure! Imagine *her* in a Directoire!"

"Should be sorry to," was the non-committal answer, as the doctor glanced from the sturdy grace and noble proportions of the portrait to the tightly corsetted form of Rosemary.

"Thank Heavens, I didn't live then," continued Lady Rosemary complacently. "Those weird clothes don't give chances. Aren't they ghastly? That tight, stiff bodice and bulgy skirt, and that plaid arrangement caught up with a brooch the size of a plaster!"

"A brooch?" interrogated Pepper. "Where?"

Lady Rosemary bent to adjust a fold of her gown.

"A great silver brooch, shaped like a shield, with an embossed thistle, on her left shoulder," she answered glibly.



"That's not in the picture," said Pepper; and Lady Rosemary looked up impatiently.

"Yes, it is— well, it's very odd," she said, with a half laugh, as she gazed at the painted drapery unredeemed by any ornament. "That smash must have affected my nerves. I'm *positive* she was wearing the atrocity I mentioned. Possibly it's under the plaid— the sly creature! She may have the grace to be ashamed of it! Oh, what on earth's the matter with the light?"

As she spoke the electric light gave a sudden quick quiver.

"Very trying," assented the doctor. "It's really scan—"

The light gave another flicker, and at the same moment the room seemed also to shake itself and go out for the fraction of a second.

Lady Rosemary turned to her companion triumphantly.

"I was right about the brooch," she said. "You can see it for yourself."

But the doctor did not reply. To her astonishment Rosemary found that she was looking into a strange face— the face of a girl, whose complexion was thickened and pock-marked, and whose hair was strained back from the roots.

She rubbed her eyes, and then opened them again. Still the vision persisted. Again and again she repeated her action, pressing her fingers into her eye-balls— as a dreamer struggles to get free from the grip of a nightmare. But no awakening rewarded her.

Then, realising the futility of her efforts, she looked around her. The picture gallery was gone, and she was in a great, bare room, low of ceiling, and uneven of flooring, its planks strewn with rushes. In an ingle-nook a fire was burning that threw a long procession of shadows on to the arrased walls— shadows that chased each other round the room in a never-ending string— now rising to giant stature, now dwindling to mis-shapen pygmies. In a deep alcove she caught the outlines of a monumental bed.

Outside was a sound of pitiful wailing, as of a lost soul that strove to force its way within— as naked boughs from the trees rapped their bony knuckles on the glass, and maddened drops of rain dashed themselves hopelessly against the pane. A scene of dread and desolation.

There were many forms moving about that dim room, but Lady Rosemary could not take them in at first. Her attention was attracted by a nearer object. Lying on her shoulder, fastening together the folds of a tartan-plaid, was the large silver brooch, whose description she had supplied to Pepper with the accuracy of a lost-property official.

She drew a breath of wonder. Acting on an impulse, she crossed to the dim oval mirror that hung slanting on the wall. She looked at herself. Then she fell back with a cry. Small wonder that the pictured eyes of the portrait had touched a chord of memory, for they had gazed at her from the depths of many

a clouded glass. With a pang of dismay she realised that they were her own eyes. Lady Rosemary Vine and the portrait in the gallery were one and the same.

A terrible suspicion stole over her, steeping her in fear—undiluted fear that ate into her heart like acid. When the gallery light had flickered out it had gone, not to come back. At least, not to her. She had slipped off somewhere from the environment of time and space, and was sandwiched here between these dreadful, strange surroundings.

Rosemary stood holding her head between her hands.

Her mind worked rapidly, at raging pressure, and, as if to make amends for its former passive state, it was rapidly travelling in two opposite directions. For a giddy second of time Rosemary lived in the Present and the Past. She knew that she was back in an hour of a past existence— one of those hours that is locked up securely within every brain, whence it can only slip out in the mangled, flattened shape of a dream or a blurred and colourless pigment of imagination. And she also knew that she had been hurled back on the vivid crest of a lurid, palpitating Moment, vibrant and thrilling with suppressed issues— one of those moments that break from the ever-flowing galvanic current of events in electric sparks of fire.

With a loosening of her knees she realised it, and the cowardice that was embodied in her twentieth-century embodiment cried out in fear at the knowledge.

"I must get back— I *must* get back!" she moaned.

*What* was coming? The elusive memory poured into her mind for a moment, flooding it with blind terror, then withdrew, leaving only the residue of trembling anticipation.

A sudden red glare from outside lit up the sky, and against the lurid light Rosemary saw, outlined on the window, the dark tracery of a crown and a shield.

The torchlight telegraphed its meaning. The Event was drawing nearer. The stranded woman dug her nails into her palms in her longing to escape.

Then something brushed against her. She felt the soft caress of fur, and heard the ghost of a murmured apology. Into the fifteenth-century room stole the perfume of a Bond Street essence.

There was a slight jar at the contact, and for the fraction of a second the weird room quivered and broke, and she saw dimly— as one sees a reflection on a rain-spattered pane— the picture gallery. She saw shadowy forms that drifted by like wraiths, their enormous hats and mammoth muffs accentuated by the fog of years.

Then her eyes were drawn to a figure that stood and looked at her with a blank stare of scorn— a form in kingfisher-blue, that wore her own gown.

Rosemary stretched out her hands, and exerted all her strength in a stupendous effort to snatch at her own time again— to get back to her dear familiar century. Yet, as she cried out, the low dark walls snapped down with the fiendish spring of a trap, and she was back in the hateful room— screaming, screaming!

But not alone! Other voices were shrieking round her in a hideous chorus of fear. Rosemary saw that the dreaded Moment had made gigantic strides onward. The red torchlight from without had deepened in intensity, so that the shadows that fled across the walls were tipped with blood.

As the confusion deepened, Rosemary saw that the dim forms that had peopled the room had sharpened to distinct personalities. Girls, with tightly coiffured heads and quaint costumes, ran to and fro aimlessly, wringing their hands. One seized hold of her for a moment, and at the convulsive contact Rosemary realised with a new fear that she was no longer a passive spectator. She was in the scene herself.

Then in the midst of the confused tangle of forms she had an appalling vision of a man, distraught and half clad, whose fair hair clustered under the brow of a poet.

As she caught the hunted glare of his eyes she felt the swift pang of remorse she had experienced in the midst of the exhilaration and excitement of her first otter hunt. *One* against many! A pang contracted her heart.

The shadows wiped out the face, and she noticed, with dull curiosity, that two of the maidens were grovelling on the floor, groping among the rushes, which they piled up in high heaps. Then she found she was with them, helping them to raise a plank that gave under her shaking fingers.

Haste, haste! Not an instant to be lost! As it suddenly heaved up in the air, ominous sounds were heard outside— the shuffling of footsteps, the metallic grate of steel on steel, and the yelping of murderous voices.

Again the wild terror swamped her in a tidal wave of dreadful anticipation. She knew that she had lived this moment before, and that it presaged some terrible event. In that far-off Past it was linked with a part that she only had played.

"I must get back quickly, *quickly*, before it happens!" she said over and over again.

She knew that the picture gallery was near her— around her. Piercing the red shadows of her prison with burning eyes she thought she discerned the filmy outlines of a hat— the hat of a modern woman. But she could not reach it. It was *outside*!

In a wild fury she strained and tore at the plank. As it finally opened a dark cavity was disclosed. Into the depths they pushed a man— the man with the hunted eyes and dread white face. The bay of the voices outside grew deeper, and the man looked around him at the sound with the stare of a trapped animal. This was the quarry.

Deeper into the hole he lowered himself, until his face swam out of sight into the darkness. As the fierce cries without grew yet nearer Rosemary gave a sudden shiver. For, flake by flake, the caked scales of years were rubbing from her memory. Another second, and she would— remember.

Then a woman, who knelt on the floor desperately raking together the rushes, looked straight at her, with impelling eyes, full of terror and command. Her voice throbbed through the air with its burden of entreaty.

*"Catherine, keep the door!"*

She called to the fifteenth-century Catherine. But it was the twentieth-century Rosemary who obeyed the command. For, at the words, the woman *knew*.

It was inevitable. It had happened before. Therefore it must happen now.

She fled to the heavy door— to fall back in dismay. There was neither bolt nor bar. The voices were so near they seemed to split her ear-drums— she could almost feel the hot breath of the panting murderers.

Then, with a shriek, she thrust her arms through the staples of the door.

Something snapped. A pain, like a red-hot iron, ran up her arm.

"—dalous the way these lights keep flickering," finished the doctor.

It was over. Her tense second had been lived between the breath of two syllables.

Lady Rosemary found that she was back in the picture gallery. The warm air was around her, the fashionable crowd hemmed her in on every side, and the odour of hot toast stole from the direction of the tea room.

"Isn't it?" she assented placidly.

The second had passed her by and left her unscathed. She was totally unconscious that to her had been vouchsafed the mystery of a revelation. The revelation of a wandering soul, which, sent spinning through countless ages in its quest of development to Life or Death, had been arrested, for an infinitesimal fraction of space, in its course of retrogradation, and whirled back to the moment when it had attained the zenith of its powers.

But she was unconscious of:the manifestation. Not a pang disturbed her placid face. The pity of it!

"Well, have you placed this righteous-looking creature?" she asked the doctor.

"Just reached her. Wonder who she's by? By Jove, the man can paint eyes! You'd be hypnotised if you looked at her too long. Now, here she is. Catherine Douglas. Tradition says she barred the door against the murderers of James I. of Scotland with her arm."

"Horrors!" Lady Rosemary stifled a yawn. "What a perfectly ghastly idea! Pity she lived then. She was wasted in those days. She'd make a ripping Suffragette nowadays. Imagine her scrapping with a policeman!"

Her speech jarred on Pepper.

"She was a noble woman," he said warmly. "What modern woman would have the courage to bear the pain of having her arm forcibly snapped in two. Just think—"

A faint cry from Lady Rosemary interrupted him.

"Don't, *don't*," she said faintly. "I wish you would stop. You make me think I can *feel* it. A dreadful pain is shooting up my arm!"

Pepper smiled indulgently.

"Those nerves!" he said. "Those petted, pampered nerves! My dear lady, when you cannot even bear to *hear*— Hello!"

While he spoke Lady Rosemary had suddenly lurched forward, her face blanched and her eyes closed. He was just in time to catch her as she slid heavily to the floor.

"Almost inexplicable!" he remarked, two minutes later. "Of course, the motor smash *is* the explanation. It admits of no other. But the extraordinary part is that a woman of her type, who cannot bear a finger ache without chloroform, should have been walking about this gallery chatting to me for over an hour without being conscious of any serious hurt."

Then his face grew suddenly thoughtful as he added slowly

"Her arm *is* broken!"

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## 6: The Master Microbe

*The Lone Hand*, Sydney, Australia, 2 May 1910

"If you could have seen her," said the little man.

Sark swung back his chair impatiently.

"It passes my understanding," he remarked, "how a man of your intellect can waste his time over a woman who has nothing to recommend her but physical proportion, allied to a certain amount of driving power."

Hare paid no heed to the words.

"If you could have seen her," he said, "when she was playing golf, just now. The sun shone on her hair, and her scarlet skirt fluttered against the green. She—she's a beautiful picture."

"A beautiful cinematograph," corrected Sark, savagely. "Can't the woman ever keep still?"

He continued to frown, as he noticed the pained lines, settling like a flock of vultures, round his friend's mouth, for the affection between the strangely matched pair was deep-seated. A confirmed celibate himself, he had viewed his friend's infatuation with keen annoyance, which changed to contemptuous amusement, as Hare's persistent attentions received but a cool reception at the hands of Miss Evangeline Pope. She was the very latest thing in physical culture, as expressed in five feet eleven of splendid flesh and blood, embellished by a wealth of corn-coloured hair, and clothed by Burberry. When she competed for the golf championship of the north, Fate had landed her at Sark House as the guest of Mrs. Kent, Sark's widowed sister.

Hare resumed his tale.

"I tried to play golf this morning. Thought, perhaps, it would please her. I made a shocking mess of the ground, and a thorough-paced exhibition of myself. Sark, tell me, how can I win her good opinion?"

Sark chuckled sardonically. "Do nothing of the kind. With a purely elemental woman of her type, there is but one method to adopt and that is the method of the Stone Age. Club her, or, in other words, let her see that you are master."

Hare flushed at the derisive words, while his lips twisted to the semblance of a smile.

"You force me to the humiliating confession," he said, "that if I were to try conclusions with Miss Pope, my only chance would lie in ju-jitsu, which would be hardly cricket." Then he suddenly dropped his strained banter, and groaned aloud. "Why am I blasted with this vile, undersized body? A man! I am a mannikin. You haven't heard Evangeline's latest, by the way. I am not supposed to know. She refers to me as—the Microbe."

The grim amusement faded from Sark's face. "She paid you a compliment when she called you a microbe, old man," he said, gently, "for she attributed to you the germ of unlimited power. As for games, if you cannot play yourself, you have taught hundreds of wretched youngsters the way."

Hare's face lightened slightly at the allusion to the Homes which the large heart, cased in his boyish frame, had urged him to provide for many a forlorn gutter-snipe; and it brightened as Sark continued, "I see, I shall have to play the part of maiden aunt on your account, Arthur. To-morrow, when you and I explore the caves in my wonderful mountain, I shall have to depart from the habits of a lifetime, and include her in the party."

As Hare stammered out his thanks, a girl's shrill whistle was heard in the garden below. Hare pricked up his ears at the sound; and, immediately after, a scuttle of feet, a violent draught, and a loud bang of the door proclaimed the passing of Arthur.

Left alone, Sark crossed to the window, and gazed at the distant mountain, which rose in an indigo barrier against the sunset sky. He was a tall, gaunt man, with a massive brow and prominent light-blue eyes. A puzzle to the world in general, by reason of his retirement and eccentricity, since the time he had baffled the medical world by remaining in a trance for eight days, apparently he was a puzzle to himself. His strange eyes, roving restlessly in his impassive face, seemed to be constantly searching for the solution of the mystery of those lost days, in which his Ego had lain submerged. His rugged face softened as he murmured, "Poor old Arthur. Quite hopeless."

Ten o'clock next morning found Sark, Hare, and the girl half-way up the mountain, bound for the caves. They were a silent party, for the girl, visibly annoyed by the presence of the Microbe, pointedly addressed her remarks to Sark, who proved unresponsive.

After a bard scramble through heather and bracken, at last they emerged on the stony mountain-side. Half an hour later, they stopped, hot and breathless, before a wall of rock. Sark led them to a split in the side, which widened to a steep shaft. As they gazed down the tunnel, a damp, earthy smell rushed up to meet them, like a whiff from a vault. Lighting candles, Sark swung himself into the hole, and the others followed.

It was a stiff scramble, but Hare's timid offer of help was scornfully rejected by the golf champion.

"*You'll* find it difficult to keep your feet, yourself," she remarked.

But, as she spoke, a stone rolled under her heel, and she pitched heavily forward. Sark managed to catch her before she reached the bottom, but the force of the shock caused him to stagger backwards, till he collided violently with the opposite wall.

"You must kindly refrain from flinging yourself at my head in future," he remarked, as he picked himself up, "even as a proof of feminine independence, although I admit there is a great deal of force behind your argument."

The caustic note in his voice testified to his annoyance, and he abruptly led the way down the tunnel. The apology on Evangeline's lips melted into an exclamation of wonder as the tunnel turned into a passage, which instantly led into another, and yet another, in bewildering repetition. The bulging sides, low walls, floor and roof were all of a curious chalky whiteness.

Hare turned to his companion. "Is it natural?" he asked. "And are you leading us round and round?"

Sark stopped in his walk. "Part of each," he said. "The whole mountain is honeycombed with these natural passages, but they have been cut and intersected with the workings of old quarries. I'm taking you to the great central cave; and if you don't wish to be put very effectually in pawn, stick close to me."

As he spoke, he retraced his steps, and dived into a cutting a couple of yards lower down the passage.

"I took the wrong turning there," he remarked. "That comes of talking."

"Hut where is the chart?" asked the girl. "You cant possibly remember your way without one."

Sark rapped his massive forehead. "It's here," he said, with a chuckle. "No other man in the country could tap this route except by chance. Only the wild foxes and I. It's there. I never forget. Once anything gets into my memory-box, there it stops. Nothing escapes. Except those eight days," he added, in a different voice.

Hare started. It was the first time he had heard Sark allude to his illness.

Then, suddenly, a low, humming murmur began to fill the passages with a hollow boom, as of a monstrous wave flooding each chamber of the honeycombed mountain with sound, and sucking back again, dragging a sullen echo in its train.

"Thunder," said Sark, shortly.

Hare glanced at Evangeline. The strange silence of this white tube, the face of Sark that glimmered weirdly in the dim light of the candle, and then the clamour of the subterranean artillery, were all getting on his nerves. He had the uncanny feeling of being entrapped in a vast, endless burrow, and he longed to rush back again to the open air. But the girl needed no sympathy.

"Lucky we're under cover," she remarked.

Again the trio plodded on their way, Sark picking out the track with apparent caprice through the labyrinth of winding cuttings, while the thunder



growled round them, like an imprisoned beast of prey. At every step. Hare's distaste increased.

Presently, the tunnel, which had been so low as to enforce the necessity of crouching, widened and rose to massive proportions. Higher and yet higher the roof reared itself, and with a cry of wonder they found that they were on the threshold of a vast stalactite cave.

Dimly seen in the flickering light of the candle, at first it only suggested majesty and mystery. But through a crack in the central dome, suddenly, a vivid flash of lightning bathed the interior in a violet glow, and instantly they had a vision of white fluted pillars fading away in the distance, like a forest of pines. Then, as a terrific bellow of thunder was belched out of the leathern lungs of the Storm Fiend, the cave shrank back again to a glimmering spectacle of spectral column and arch.

The girl cried out in wonder at the sight; but Hare did not heed her words, for he was gazing at Sark in some alarm. In the vivid glare of the lightning, his friend's features appeared unusually white and tired, while the eyes glowed feverishly in the drawn face.

"Good Heavens, man!" he exclaimed. "What have you done to your wrist?"

Sark raised his hand languidly, and displayed the ugly, gaping mouth of a crimson cut.

"I must have grazed myself when Evangeline bowled me over," he said. "I thought something felt uncomfortable, but I did not take the trouble to locate it. It's no matter."

"Of course not." Hare's voice was sharp; but, when he bound up the wound with his handkerchief, his touch was as gentle as a woman's, while the girl looked on uncomfortably, like a ministering angel ousted through foreign competition.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said. "Now, don't you think we had better explore?"

"I don't go a step until I have had lunch." replied Hare, fumbling with the straps of the basket.

The girl's lip curled. Her chief complaint against the Microbe, in addition to his inconvenient devotion, was the very short measure that Nature had allowed for his manufacture. Now, by his indifference to this natural miracle, he was giving indication of being also made of shoddy material.

Yet, when the basket was unpacked, and her wants supplied, Hare only waited to see the imprisoned sunshine of the South make golden bubbles in Sark's glass. Then he stole away, bent on an exploration of the cavern, his keen features lighting with pleasure as he discovered each fresh marvel of the formation of the stalactites.

He wandered farther away from the group, thoroughly absorbed in his occupation, and heedless of the intermittent growling of the thunder and the steady drip of falling water. Suddenly, the cave was rent by a shriek. Turning hastily, Hare ran in the direction of the sound, a premonition of horror chilling his heart.

Before he reached his companions, the lightning flickered on the group, and he saw that Evangeline was on her knees, shaking the limp form of Sark. In the sudden glare, his friend's face took on the yellowed look of a wax-work. The ridge of his nose rose like a hook, and his chin dropped in a horrible wobble.

EVANGELINE looked at him in horror. "What is it?" she cried. "He turned like that quite suddenly."

Hare's voice shook. "He's worried me the whole morning," he replied. "He's been seedy all the week, and the stiff climb, the thunder, and the loss of blood have bowled him over. I thought the champagne would put him right."

"Is he dead?" asked Evangeline, in a Frightened whisper.

Hare, busy over the prostrate figure, made no answer. He felt the pulse, gazed into the glassy eye, and finally, dragging it to a recumbent position, he wrapped his great-coat round the stiff form. Then, at length, he spoke—his voice panting with his exertions.

"No; he's not dead, thank Heaven," he said. "You remember hearing of his strange attack, three years ago, after influenza. Well, I don't want to alarm you, but I'm afraid that another—in short, he is in a trance."

In the sudden relief, the girl spoke flippantly.

"Well, I must say, he's chosen an inconvenient time to have one. I had better contribute my cape as well, to keep him warm. When will he wake up?"

Hare moistened his dry lips, full of pity for the unconscious girl. "It may be fairly soon. Of course, we have no reason to expect otherwise." Then he added, quietly: "The other one lasted eight days."

"*Eight days!*" The first premonition of alarm flickered in the girl's eyes. "Then we must leave him here, and send someone to fetch him home. Ugh! How ghastly he looks! Like a corpse. Come away from this place. It is dreadful. Hurry!"

From the half-hysterical note in her voice, Hare knew that the dreadful truth which was sucking the vitality from his brain with its octopus-like pressure had now flicked across its first tentacle to the girl, who strove desperately to ignore its existence.

But he realised that subterfuge would not avail them.

"My dear girl," he said, simply, "I can't tell you how sorry I feel for you, but you must be brave and face things. *We don't know the way out.*"

For a minute, the girl sat in rigid silence, as though from some recess in the pillared heights she had caught a glimpse of the Gorgon's head. For the first time, the splendid tide of youth and Strength that coursed through her veins had beaten against a rock. Something stood in her way—something dark and terrible, that she dared not mention, lest it should suddenly spring at her when it heard its name.

*Death.*

Then she jumped to her feet. As Sark had remarked, she was an elemental creature: and, child-like, she strove to dissipate her terror by venting her rage on the first unoffending person. She turned to Hare. "Do something," she commanded. "Don't sit there. *Do something!*"

"I must think first," he answered.

She stamped her foot. "Oh. if only I had a *man* with me." she cried.

The insult, which at another time would have filled Hare with helpless rage, failed to reach him, for he had gone down to the depths, whence the bitterest words lack weight to sink. He felt that some fiend had presented him with the pieces of a diabolical puzzle, and the pieces were joining together with relentless rapidity. The impossibility of rescue, since no one had known of the goal of their destination, and the absence of design in the haphazard labyrinth, the clue of which lay in the frozen shell of Sark's head, dovetailed into their inevitable fate. In imagination he already beard the pattering of rats' feet. Then he realised that his companion was speaking to him.

"If you have done your thinking, perhaps you will do something," she suggested. "Take one of those candles, and see if you can find a way out."

Hare sprang up with alacrity. "You won't be afraid to be left?" he asked.

She smiled acidly. "Of course, if you really want company I will come," she said. "Otherwise, I can dispense with your—er—protection."

Her tall form towered over the little man, but he barely heard the words. Leaving the dim vault behind him, he plunged into the first of the low white warrens, carefully noting his route for future reference. The passage corkscrewed immediately, and a sudden sense of loneliness fell on him like a shower of blight. As the sound of his footsteps echoed weirdly down the passage, it seemed as if the crusted silence protested against the sacrilege of being thus broken. He carefully searched the ceiling, the walls, and the floor for some familiar feature, but the blank whitish surface only dazzled his eyes with its monotony, and he groaned at the hopelessness of his task.

The passage suddenly forked in two. Hare stopped to consider. Then he raised his candle, on the faint chance that the flicker might betray a current of

air. To his surprise, the blue flame slightly wavered, and he struck out towards the left, with a sudden hope spurring on his steps. The idea was so simple that he cursed his benumbed brain for not having thought of it before. The air was not unpleasant in the tunnel, and by following the draught he was bound to reach an outlet.

He almost ran down the passage to the next cutting, and this time the flame shot out perceptibly towards the left. Hare's heart leaped within him as he pressed on. The maze soon began to thicken, and at every second yard a fresh route had to be chosen, but, in spite of the detours, he knew that he was steadily pressing in the one direction.

Suddenly, the man gave a shout of delight, for a rough projection of plaster in the form of a rude Maltese cross had caught his eye, and he remembered distinctly passing it in company with Sark. He turned round, and raced down a long corridor, his shadow leading the way. A faint bluish light had crept round the corner in front, that fought the candle's rays with its cold intensity, and the man hailed the blessed daylight with a glad shout. He rushed round the corner, his heart pumping with excitement, and then he stopped short in dismay. Before him stretched the great central vault, with the daylight struggling in through the gash in the centre. With a revulsion of feeling, he realised that he had been walking in a circle.

He looked round the desolate place with a feeling of mad hatred. Beneath the great dome, the cloaked figure of Sark lay in its rigid sleep, but the shadows had wiped out the best of the scene with its sooty fingers. At last he spied the girl's form in the twilight, her knees drawn up to her chin, and her eyes tightly closed. It seemed to Hare that she no longer looked tailor-made, but merely a bundle of clothes.

When she had been left alone, the utter loneliness of the spot had soaked her through and through. The horror of the position no longer stalked her warily, but, coming out into the open, had boldly swooped down on her as its prey. It seemed to her that the great white pillars had wavered into life, and advanced towards her in a measured march. When she saw the peaky face of Hare, looking more pinched than ever under its jaunty tweed cap, she hailed the little man with a sense of unaccustomed relief.

"I must get out," she cried, shaking Hare's arm convulsively; "I *must*. I shall go mad if I don't, I tell you. It's terrible—*terrible!*"

Hare realised with a fresh feeling of horror that she was on the verge of violent hysterics. He knew the theoretical treatment of such patients, but the little man's dread of Evangeline was stronger than any other feeling. As he glanced at Sark's stiff figure for inspiration, in imagination he could see his friend grappling with the situation with careless scorn.

"Let her see you are master. It is the only way to treat an elemental creature like that." He recalled the words, but was only conscious of an overwhelming desire for flight.

A long, sobbing breath from Evangeline warned him that action was imminent. Then, with a shock of surprise, he realised that a thin, metallic voice, that he failed to recognise for his own, was speaking.

"My good girl, don't begin to cry! If a woman only realised what a spectacle she presents when she weeps, she would refrain from such a daring experiment."

The girl's sensibilities were already passing beyond her control; but feminine Vanity, the last to desert the human frame, caught the words. With a sudden shock, she came back to earth.

"I wasn't going to cry," she said in an injured voice.

But Hare did not hear her words, for he was transported out of his present sense of peril by an overwhelming breath of triumph.

"I have done it," he told himself. "I have actually done it."

His success went to his brain, making the little man reckless. He longed to test his newly gained power further.

"Sit down," he commanded sternly, "and finish your lunch. It is strange how few people realise that dying is quite an easy affair, simply the effort of a minute, as opposed to the long strain of living decently. Particularly for a chap like me, with a properly developed brain in a mis-fit body, who has, in consequence, to be the butt for idiots all his life. You will be better after lunch."

Evangeline protested faintly against the aspersion that her courage was of the purely animal kind that has to be sustained by chicken and champagne; but her remonstrances were stamped out by the transformed Hare.

But as he watched her, as she ate her food in a dazed manner, his wild spirits gave way to sudden depression. What was the good of her altered attitude, that had been the instant consequence of his acceptance of Sark's advice? The feeling of freedom and mastery that had bubbled through his veins like strong wine, now began to leak steadily away as the remembrance of their plight came back to him. The girl watched his face curiously.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

Hare smiled. Two hours previously, Evangeline had not credited him with possessing the ordinary feelings of a man. Now she was not only endowing him with intellectual mechanism, but was manifesting an interest in its working. So his answer came from the depths of a full heart.

"I was thinking what a *pity* it is!"

Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Isn't it?" she cried. "Isn't it dreadfully hard? Think! I have everything—youth, strength, good looks, lots of friends, the championships, everything. The world was at my feet, and now—"

As her voice failed from emotion, Hare's prim tones broke in.

"I wasn't thinking of you," he observed. "I was thinking of myself."

"*You!*" All the old scorn of the physically perfect woman for the undeveloped Microbe was breathed in her voice.

"Certainly," returned Hare, his militant instincts uppermost. "Your loss will be a purely sentimental one. A splash at first, and next year, your partners will be sitting out with other women, while they speak of you as 'that poor girl.'"

She wriggled at his words. "And how will the world feel your loss?" she enquired haughtily. "As a valuable ornament gone—like the Venus' arms?"

"Don't you think that tone is a little out of place at this present moment? If you really wish to know, eight hundred poor little atoms will miss me. A large portion of my worldly goods goes annually in keeping up the Homes, but—ass that I was I omitted to put the thing on a sound financial basis. They should have been permanently endowed. Oh, fool, fool!"

He had forgotten her presence, and she stared at him in wonder. She had heard Sark allude to his wealth, and the very riches seemed to stamp him with vulgarity. Now, as she thought that this slight man, with the brooding eyes, controlled the destinies of hundreds of little human beings, she felt suddenly cheapened.

A long silence fell on the pair. Presently the girl began to shiver, and Hare crossed over to Sark's cloaked form, and picked up the girl's golf cape.

"You'll want this yourself," he said, tossing the wrap over to her.

But she came by his side, and stood looking down at the frozen form.

"Just to think it is *there*, inside him," she cried. "The secret that we're longing to get at. I wish I had a galvanic battery, and could make him speak for a minute!"

Hare took no notice of the girl. As his eyes roved over the corpse-like figure of his friend, noting the limp hands, the purple mounds under his yellowish eyelids, and the bony framework of his face, his brains suddenly felt as fresh as though newly pared. He turned to the girl.

"*He has spoken*," he said quietly. "I believe I have the clue."

Evangeline started back in sudden fright, terrified lest the little man's brain should have given way under the strain.

"What do you mean? Speak! Shall we get out? Shall we get out? Speak! What do you mean? I never heard him. But you have a clue? Oh—"

"If you don't stop chattering this instant, you may stop here forever," said Hare sternly. "I have a clue, but it takes some working out. Sit still, and not another word, until I speak to you."

She opened her mouth to remonstrate. But she closed it again; and, flopping down on the nearest stone, she fixed her eyes on the little man opposite. Then the silence in the cave was only broken by the long-drawn puffs of Hare's pipe. In almost reverential wonder for the workings of the brain, the girl watched the finely cut face start out of the shadow, in the light from the glowing bowl. There were concentrated lines of thought on his brow, and his eyes were groping in the realms of theory.

Presently, he got up, and walked up to Sark's body. He bent over it for a few minutes, then crossed the cave, and groped about near the outlet. Dropping to his knees, he writhed about, shooting out his head like a tortoise. Then, with a cry of triumph, he swooped down on something. The next instant, he sprang to his feet, and darted out of the cave.

Jelly tore after him.

"Don't leave me," she wailed. "I never spoke. Don't leave me!"

The thrill in her voice tore at Hare's heart-strings. He longed to turn and vow that neither life nor death could ever part them, but his instinct warned him to refrain.

"I will be back in a minute," he said condescendingly. "Be a good girl till then."

So the famous golf champion again subsided on a stone to await the Microbe's return. Ten long minutes crawled away, and then at last, he reappeared. His face was flushed, and there was the nearest approach to a swagger in his walk.

"Pack up, and let's be moving," he said. "The sooner we can bring help to poor old Sark, the better."

The girl clasped her hands. "You have discovered the way?" she breathed. "It is like magic. I never thought anyone could be so clever."

Hare smiled. "Your first lucid remark, a little time ago," he observed, "was a regret that you were not imprisoned in company with a man. As a matter-of-fact, you can congratulate yourself that you were not shut up with a rudimentary intelligence, backed up by so many pounds of brawn and muscle."

"I owe you everything, and I know it," she answered.

"Do you find the debt irksome? If so, we will cry quits directly."

"No," she said softly, "I think—I think I like to owe it to you."

Out of the dread white cavern they passed. As they bore away the candles, the awful pillars faded away to darkness.

Hare stepped ahead briskly, for the first few hundreds yards of the endless passages, taking the turnings with confidence, But as they proceeded farther on the way, he slackened his pace, and went along slowly, holding his candle first above his head, and then to the floor. Several times, he crawled on his hands and knees, his nose almost scraping the ground. Once he left her alone, while he dived in turn down several intersecting passages.

With breathless interest, and full of blind faith, the girl followed every movement. Only once did she dare to speak.

"Is the clue all right?" she asked.

"Splendid," beamed Hare. "It's slow work, but when we least expect it, we shall find ourselves outside."

That was what actually happened. In three minutes, the endless whitish walls darkened into rock, and the passage widened abruptly. Then round the bend, formed in black stone, and its edges serrated by a fringe of ferns, glimmered a patch of the blessed blue sky.

With a cry both ran forward to clamber up the steep ascent. As a matter of fact, it was Evangeline who dragged up Hare; but neither was conscious of the fact. For both stood out on the mountain side, with a freshly washed world lying green and glistening at their feet, while great white clouds flapped with a tremendous swirl, as of white linen, against the blue drying-ground of the sky.

The grass was whitewashed with daisies, and the strong breeze blew into their pale faces and filled their lungs with great draughts of oxygen. Hand in hand, they gazed on the scene, as if they saw a new world.

THEN the golf champion spoke. "Isn't it beautiful!" she cried. "You have given it back to me. Tell me, how did you find the way?"

But Hare shook his head. He felt it would spoil their beautiful romance to tell her how his glance had fallen on the bandage on Sark's hand. Of how his brain had seized on the possibility that the slowly-forming drops of blood must have ebbed from the wound at intervals. Of how, with infinite difficulty, he had traced back that faint trail of blood that Sark himself had laid. It seemed cheap and commonplace, compared with the miracle of the other trail he had followed, at Sark's instigation, that had led through the outer barrier of rocks and briars, right to the sanctuary of Evangeline's heart.

So he—the most obvious of men—was actually guilty of the impropriety of a *double-entendre*, as he answered evasively, "Oh! From something Sark let drop."

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## 7: Diana The Huntress

*The London Magazine, Sep 1910*

"ANOTHER engagement! I'm sick to death of hearing of them! Brayne to the ginger-haired Ford girl. I thought he was one of your men, Virginia? How on earth have you managed to mull it again?"

Virginia's fingers tightened round the arms of her cane lounge-chair. From the slight contraction of her mouth it was plain that the news had hit her hard.

She was a tall girl, of gracious figure, with greeny-grey eyes, and the tint of the apple eaten by Eve deep-grained in her ripe cheek. A sea-green ribbon was woven in her red hair.

"I leave it to you, partner," she answered, speaking with an effort.

The reply seemed to enrage her companion— a blonde of slight build. In her white dress she looked more youthful than Virginia, and one had to get past the tulle veil that swathed her hat to credit the fact that she was her mother.

"It's appalling!" Mrs. Lake rattled her bangles angrily. "Girls taking advantage of this unusually gay season, and going off like flies in winter, and yet you remain, sticking on my hands like a porous plaster. You seem to start well in the running. It passes my understanding how you let the chances slip through your fingers? Goodness knows, you're old enough to have learned wisdom! You're in your twenty-eighth year."

"That's a most unsporting way of saying a girl is twenty-seven."

"Girl! A woman!"

"Rub it in!" Virginia straightened her figure in the lounge-chair. "Look here, mother— woman to woman, then! Without gloves. Don't you think that I'm as anxious as you are to get married? You don't give me pressing invitations to minister to your old age. I suppose you've settled never to have one. Doesn't all this come harder on me? Give me credit for having tried. D'you know my name at the club? One of your special friends told me— Diana!"

Mrs. Lake looked blank.

"Well, complimentary, surely! A goddess, wasn't she? The sporting one, with the goody-goody character? H'm! Not very appropriate, considering that you're no good at games, and nearly every man in the place has flirted with you."

"It fits me to a hair, my dear mother. The men chose that name well. Diana was a huntress!"

Mrs. Lake took the bitterness in her daughter's voice as a personal slight.

"Quite right, too!" she said. "It's your duty to find a mate. It's the whole scheme of Nature. Really, it's quite impious of you to take that tone."

"All right, I'll turn religious, and grab."

"Then you'd better be quick, for there's not much left to grab," was the nettled reply. "This afternoon, in fact, at the shrimping picnic. I've heard that Kingdom is off next week. He's got a billet in India. Every other possible man is now snapped up, so he seems your last chance this year, and by next you'll be earmarked as a failure. For mercy's sake, take it! It's common talk he's been hanging round Viva Smythe lately."

Virginia took no notice of Mrs. Lake's remark. Her eyes were fixed on the white road outside the bungalow. A man, with dark, carven features, that looked classic under his white panama, was passing in the shade of the trees. His face lit up as he bowed to the ladies on the passion-flower wreathed verandah, and Mrs. Lake noticed that the smile lingered on Virginia's lips after he had passed. Bitterly she regretted the scarcity of men, which resulted in a mere schoolmaster being admitted to their set.

"Are you listening?" she asked sharply. Virginia started.

"Oh, Viva Smythe? But do you think she is a serious rival? She's such a very pretty girl, and Lord Bristol has paid her so much attention lately that she would hardly notice a mere engineer."

"She's sense enough, pretty or not, to realise her goods in the best market. Looks are a perishable commodity. She won't turn up her nose at Kingdom. Not she! Once the fleet goes, she knows she'll be stranded, high and dry, for the winter, on the shelf. Besides, Bristol is simply amusing himself. A mere hanger-on. When a man of his stamp has the pick of the pretty women of the place to flirt with, it isn't likely he will concentrate on one."

"She may be in love with him, though!"

Something in Virginia's voice made Mrs. Lake stare at her daughter.

"I don't pretend to understand you, Virginia," she said, at last.

"You can't be a fool. It's against Nature. When I was seven years younger than you, I couldn't count my proposals on my fingers, and your poor father had brains, if nothing else. Why are you a failure?"

Virginia's sole answer was to press her lips together more closely. With an uneasy flicker of suspicion, Mrs. Lake's thoughts flitted to the schoolmaster with the handsome face.

She snorted violently as a protest against such an outrage of Nature, and then went indoors to paint her face with the quintessence of art— her starched, muslin frills whispering spitefully to each other as she moved.

Virginia remained staring at the great wash of peacock-blue ocean that pounded in on the beach in a thick, creaming slab of white foam. She had grown so thoroughly sick of this sun-steeped place— this beauty-spot, dropped on a corner of the Devonshire coast, with its superfluity of women, its scarcity

of males, and the competition therefor. No floating population swept through it habitually, to freshen its secluded but sophisticated circles. But in the summer, during the visit of the fleet and the Territorial camps, it broke into a brief but fevered round of gaiety. These were the days of corn in Egypt— the days of marriage and giving in marriage, when the visitors, charmed with the beauty and the unconventional hospitality supplied the capital, and the local girls put in unstinted quantities of sweated labour.

Sick of it all! Virginia recalled Patrick Kingdom's face, with its rounded, determined features, thickly peppered with freckles. A man to be trusted by men and women alike. That way lay freedom!

As she gazed out into the great blue-and-white world, she whispered a word. Her thoughts were on a man, but the name on her lips was none of his. It was her own— "Diana!"

THE beach presented a gay sight that afternoon, as groups of white-clad men, and girls— gay in coloured muslins and flower-wreathed hats—laughed and chatted against the background of dark cliffs.

When Virginia Lake arrived in the company of her mother, a tall man, with slack, handsome features, stopped chattering to a little circle of four or five girls, and lazily surveyed the red-haired Amazon in her sea-green gown.

"Diana looks ripping this afternoon," he remarked to his circle.

Other flannel-clad men might prowl the beach partnerless, but Lord Bristol was never in the position of a poor tiger with no Christian. At the present moment he had collected round him quite a little Sunday-school of the prettiest.

"Yes; got up to kill!" remarked a girl in mauve.

"Good luck to her hunting!"

"When Di 'pics,' Kingdom packs. That's what always happens on these picnics. She'll run the poor man to death, as usual!"

Bristol's languid voice broke into the laughter.

"Girls, girls, leave her a rag! Why have you all such a down on Diana? To my mind, there's something stimulating about a red-haired girl. You never know when she's going to box your ears. I've half a mind to chuck the whole lot of you and take on Di this afternoon."

His lordship had discovered that there was no censorship of speech in this stranded townlet, and availed himself of the name of Liberty, to take liberties. The women, ever since his arrival, in doing their best to spoil a sound-cored nature, had, so far, only affected his manners.

"What if she does chase the men?" Bristol continued. "Very sporting of her. Haven't you chased me the whole morning, Viva? You only ran me to earth at the club because I was due there for a drink."

Viva Smythe contorted her really beautiful features to a grimace.

"Oh, you!" she said.

A belated hamper arrived at that moment, and had a flattering reception. Boats were pushed off, and soon the party was skimming over the sapphire water to the island.

Virginia dipped her fingers into the warm sea. She was seated in the same boat as Kingdom and the schoolmaster, Madder— a tactful arrangement which she had stage-managed herself by shamelessly beckoning the men.

Kingdom ducked his head to get under the shade of her hat.

"Spare me a few minutes, some time, will you?" he asked. "I want to tell you something."

He looked earnestly into her greenish eyes, and Virginia swallowed something in her throat before she answered:

"All right!"

Turning quickly to Madder, she devoted herself to him until they reached the island.

Bristol, who was helping Viva over the slippery, seaweed-covered rocks, turned and watched Virginia as she and Madder scrambled off together.

"Deuced handsome chap, the schoolmaster!" he commented. "Bit unscrupulous of Di to use him in the game. When she's brought Kingdom to the scratch, she'll give him what our American friends call 'the frozen mitt.' "

"Do you mean she is leading him on just to make Pat Kingdom jealous?" asked Viva quickly, a shade of anxiety to be detected in her voice.

"Shade of Kipling! Where were you raised?"

*"If She grow suddenly gracious, reflect, is it all for Thee?"*

*The Black-Buck is stalked by the Bullock, and Man by Jealousy."*

Bristol's laughter reached Virginia, as she probed in a pool for treasures.

"I'm glad someone is enjoying the picnic," she said. "Nice, simple taste. I shall suspect him soon of a secret passion for cold rice-pudding."

Madder looked down at her intently. The fine lines of his face relaxed to an unusual softness.

"Why not?" he asked. "Life's all right. It's the grizzlers who are wrong. Virginia, it's awful cheek on my part, but-well, somehow, from the first, it struck me that you'd missed it. I used to wonder why. This is such a ripping place. And you've everything— perfect health, good looks (excuse me), means,

and so on. Lately, I've thought I've hit it. I seem to know what's wrong with you. The truth, now! Don't you need a friend?"

Virginia gave a short laugh.

"No. I need a husband."

She laughed again at the look of dismay that clouded Madder's expressive face.

"I'm sorry. I seem to have blundered. I— I quite thought you were lonely," he stammered. "I've tried to be your friend, as you know, but I fancied that she—"

"She!" Virginia turned quickly. "Do you mean to tell me that you're like all the rest? That you're going to be married?"

Madder nodded.

"She'll be coming here almost directly. Time, too! She's a Sister of Mercy, and has been killing herself in an East London parish— slaving until there's nothing left but starched linen and soul."

Virginia averted her head.

"How delightful!" she said at last. "I'm very glad to hear of your happiness. Only hope it will last! Look at this lovely piece of seaweed— all rose colour and delicate tracery. Up it comes! And now it's nothing but a slimy tangle. Such is life! Well, well, I suppose you couldn't prevail on your fiance to bring along a Brother of Mercy for me?"

Madder stared at the violet sea-line, with sombre eyes. Virginia, looking up, saw the pain in his tightly drawn mouth. She stretched out her hand to him.

"I wish you happiness with all my heart," she said, in a low voice. "Indeed— indeed I do! Forgive me for just now. I didn't mean one word, really. But I seem to have come to a crisis in my life. It's a case of keeping my nerve, and I'm all on wires. I had to let out, or scream. I'm better now. And you've always been a real friend."

Madder's face brightened as he gripped her hand.

"Quite understand," he said gruffly, his thoughts winging to the club gossip. "Nothing like a safety-valve. Glad I've been of some use. Here comes Kingdom, so I'll clear."

His classic features looked slightly knowing, as the young engineer forged his way to Virginia's side.

With the advent of Kingdom, the real interest of the picnic began. The pleasure-makers, so far, had pretended to be satisfied with the simple joys of shrimping, but their sophisticated souls were waiting for the spice of human interest. Scandal was their bread of life, and so hot was the popular excitement that, almost directly, they had the couple on toast. Their every movement was

watched from afar, and their expressions commented on by those who passed within easy range.

Mrs. Lake clasped the hand of her chief friend— a pretty, rouged lady—who apparently seemed to own only a Christian name.

"Oh, Dot, here they come! Tell me, for I can't see so far! Do you think she's brought it off?"

Her curiosity was shared by the rest of the picnickers. Virginia and Kingdom were subjected to a battery of furtive glances during the row back to the beach, but they bore the scrutiny with wooden faces.

When tea was finally a thing of the past, and the sun had fallen into the heart of the flaming sea, the party began to break itself into couples for the homeward stroll through the shadows.

Bristol, searching for Viva, whose pretty face gave her first place in his facile fancy, was staggered to see that Kingdom had forestalled him.

He gave a low whistle of pure astonishment as they walked off, Viva's face, lost under the shadow of her wisteria-loaded hat, turned up towards Kingdom.

Wheeling round, he found that he was left alone on the beach with Virginia.

He accepted the change with his usual philosophy.

"What luck!" he said. "First time I've seen you to-day. You have been in such demand. Ripping time we've had. I expect you'll never forget this picnic? As for me, I shall think of it, this time tomorrow, when I'm off for my cruise."

"Your cruise, yes. You must have had a sea-gull's feather in your pillow. But is it really true that you're coming back again?"

"Rather! As you know, I've been pretty nearly everywhere— no ties, and can't stick ordinary society— but I've never struck a spot I like so well as this."

"It's not always so gay. Isn't Viva Smythe a pretty girl?"

"You're all pretty girls here. Ah, well! So Kingdom goes next week, too? Lucky beggar— he may not go alone?"

Bristol lost no time in working round to the point on which his idle curiosity had been aroused.

"No; I should say there would be a captain and crew, merely to look after the boat. It's usual."

Bristol only laughed at the rebuff.

"D'you know, Miss Lake," he said, "when I saw you this afternoon, I thought you looked different, somehow. It was the expression of your eyes. I've seen it before, and it puzzled me where. Now I know. It's the look that every man-jack on the Stock Exchange wears during a critical deal."

Virginia's face had grown a trifle pale, and her voice was ominously quiet.

"Thank you for your interest. So you imagined that I had some big deal on today? Any betting on the result, as is usual in these cases?"

"If there were, I'd lay my money on you, Di!"

Lord Bristol had gone too far. For the first time during his stay, he realised that there was a limit.

He positively quailed as Virginia turned swiftly on him, in white-hot fury.

"What did you call me?" she asked.

"Nothing. I said 'Why?' Only that. Oh, Miss Lake!"

He started to run also; and then, conscious of the ridiculous picture they presented, slackened his pace. He, alone, of all the male picnickers, walked home without a girl.

VIRGINIA was buried under her curtains that night, when she received a visit. Mrs. Lake ran into her room in a muslin wrapper, and with her fleece of yellow hair screwed in curling-pins round her lean face. She stood at the foot of the cot, and clutched the rail with nervous fingers.

"D'you know what I've heard?" she cried shrilly. "That cat, Dot, screamed it from the road as she passed just now. Kingdom has proposed to Viva Smythe tonight!"

"Ah!"

It was almost a sob that broke from Virginia's lips.

"A nice laughing-stock you've made of yourself; it's all over the place already. You've let every chance slip. I see nothing for you now but to marry that wretched schoolmaster."

Virginia forced herself to speak, with stiff lips.

"That wretched schoolmaster, as you call him, is engaged to marry another woman. She is a Sister of Mercy."

"Mercy!" Mrs. Lake unconsciously snatched at the last word. "What! You've lost him, too? Virginia, you're an utter fool!"

When Virginia was left alone, she lay staring, half the night, into the darkness. Apparently the game was ended and lost. Yet her eyes preserved their look of anxious strain. She still faced east.

SIX months later Lord Bristol found himself back in the place— that paradise of good links and pretty girls. He stood at the door of a ballroom, watching the couples revolve, before he himself joined in the whirl. His eyes dwelt approvingly on the dainty gowns of the women, for he had lately been where dress was considered— and was— a mere trifle. He hummed the air of the *valse*. Although his collar rubbed his neck, it was good to wear evening-clothes once more.

A man hailed him with a shout: "Back again, Bristol? You look fit as a fiddle after your cruise. Nose nicely skinned!"

"Rather! I sloughed my old skin after surfing. The Pacific tossed me up like a pancake, and I was shark-bait many a time, but I put in a clinking time, roughing it. It's great to be back again to slack. Hallo! That's another new face. Pretty girl, too! Introduce me."

"You didn't put off the old man with the skin," grinned Beer, as they stalked the muslin-clad debutante.

Three dances passed before Beer again met Bristol. He noticed directly that some of his lordship's exuberance had fizzled flat.

"Pipped?" he inquired. "What's up?"

Bristol rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Don't know! This is such a slow affair. Not a bit like the thing I've looked forward to lately. Doesn't seem like the dances we had before my cruise. Such a stuffy set! I've danced with nothing but flappers and their mothers. Bread-and-butter and stale crusts. What's become of all the pretty, jolly girls—the Fords, the Duroys, Viva Smythe?"

Beer laughed.

"Ah, you came here in our festive days. All the girls made hay then. Regular clearance sale. All the old stock gone, and nothing but new lines. Viva Smythe is in India, and half the others are either on their honeymoons, or else deep in trousseaux. But there's still one of the Old Brigade left— Diana! By Jove, she looks stunning tonight!"

Beer's admiration was genuine, although his blood was lukewarm after many years of married life. But to Bristol, fresh from the wastes of blue waters, Virginia, as she drew near, seemed a goddess. Her eyes were brilliant with excitement and her copper hair was a flaming glory.

In another minute she was floating round the room with Bristol. After the schoolgirl debutantes, who trod on his toes, it was pure bliss to dance with a perfect partner, and several vales slipped by before they stopped for breath. It was not until they sat in a shaded alcove, under a palm, that Bristol with a guilty pang remembered his parting haired girl.

"You don't know how good it was to see you again," he said, "I was feeling horribly depressed, like a Rip Van Winkle, among all those children. Yet— the last time we met you were thirsting for my blood. And all because I called you a pretty name— Diana. And Diana, I believe, is the same as Pallas Athene— the Goddess of Wisdom."

The speech seemed to amuse Virginia.

"And yet, my mother tells me once daily, and twice on Sundays, that I'm a fool, and a perfect fool."



"Then I, for one, suffer fools gladly. But why does she slate you?"

"Because I'm not Mrs. Johnson, Keith, Harrow, Brayne, Madder, Way, or Kingdom."

"Good heavens! That crew! Not one fit to lace your shoes! It's just struck me. You were right. It was absurd to invent a new name for you when your own just expresses you. Virginia. To me, you are just the girl. The girl."

History repeats itself. When the dance was over, Mrs. Lake, panting with excitement and a tight lace, padded into her daughter's room. Virginia stood in her shimmering white dress by the open window.

"Virginia! I didn't see you the whole evening. Who did you have supper with?"

"Lord Bristol!"

"But— but you had six *valse*s with him. I counted."

"And sat out all the rest. Anything wrong with him? It will be best china and teacake to-morrow, mother, or the nearest we can do as a substitute. He is coming to see me— and you."

"Virginia!" Mrs. Lake's voice skipped an octave. "Don't tell me that you— you have secured Bristol! A non-marrying man. An undreamt-of parti! While prettier girls have had to put up with subalterns and naval sprats! How on earth did you manage it?"

Virginia gave a happy laugh of triumph.

"It was a great game," she said. "It was almost too much for me. Once, I nearly lost my nerve, and let go. Madder saved me then. So much was at stake. It was so awful to remember every year told, and to run the risks of being left— lonely all my life. And it was touch-and-go over Viva Smythe. If Pat Kingdom had not proposed, and cleared her out of the place, I stood to lose all. She was such a pretty girl."

Mrs. Lake's perceptions were keen.

"Do you mean to tell me that Kingdom proposed to you, after all, at the picnic?" she asked. "You refused him? And Viva had him on the hop?"

Virginia looked at her mother and smiled. At that moment Mrs. Lake felt very young and inexperienced.

"Have you noticed, mother, that when a butterfly has a garden of flowers, he flits from one to the other? Shut him in a room with one rose, and he settles on that."

Mrs. Lake gasped as the darkness grew luminous. She thought of the men who had been attracted to her daughter and lost by tactless handling. The Club stories recurred to her— tales of men alarmed by vigorous pursuit, or shocked by sudden exhibitions of temper, fleeing, in pique, or for shelter, to other girls. Now, she seemed to see Virginia in another guise— shadowy and all-

pervading— playing the part of Providence or universal matchmaker, under the guise of a neglected maiden.

"Darling!" she cried. "How I misjudged you! You are my own daughter, and a wonderfully clever woman!"

Virginia's face clouded at her mother's praises. She drew away from the embrace.

"No, no!" she cried vehemently. "You are wrong. Do you think I played for money, or a coronet? I played only for Love. I played the great game that Eve teaches to all her daughters, when they love with all their strength!"

She stood up, tall and triumphant, her eyes burning, and the tint of the apple glowing red in her cheek.

It was the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

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## 8: "Fog-Folk"

*The London Magazine*, Jan 1911

"PETER PAN" was being presented on the boards of the Shamrock Theatre for the first time, but already, in theatrical parlance, he had got "over the footlights," and gripped at the hearts of his audience. Pale, perspiring men and women snatched at the fluttering skirts of their departed childhood, as they fell under the spell of the immortal youth of "the boy who would not grow up."

Outside the building, posters announced "Standing room only!"

Passers-by gaped at these placards, for of late all theatrical enterprise in Polegate had proved a frost. The shadow of the strike fell too heavily over the spirits and pockets of the population for pleasure. The township was passing through a period of unusual strain and anxiety. The heat was not alone responsible for the waxen hue of the faces that glimmered wanly in the darkened building; half their pallor was the result of the poisonous white-lead of care.

It was one man's work, just as Polegate was a one-man show. The township had been spawned, like a mushroom, in a single night. It was the creation and plaything of one Adam Cave, a financial genius with a flair for pockets, who had appeared from nowhere ten years previously, and, seeking the market where he could best bring his heaven-born brains, had brought them to hell.

He found the village in the state of a half-witted bucolic lout, and he had endowed it with a soul— to be damned. By affinity, the flinty streak in his nature seemed to nose out the unsuspected veins of metal lying buried under the earth, and he at once began operations. In an incredibly short time he had something new to show to the late-opened eyes of the rustic land owners, in the shape of a "corner."

When most of the land had passed into his possession mines were sunk and factories erected. After the first burst of prosperity his iron fist was felt in earnest. He had his people on toast. The curses of sweated labour, piece-work and the bonus-system were rife. Men were sucked dry, and then thrown aside like squeezed oranges. Now that they had risen, he fought the strike single-handed from afar, pitting his wealth against the undermining force of want.

But for a few hours, at least, his victims had forgotten their troubles in the story of undying youth. When Peter Pan finally flew out of the window, followed by the floating children, the curtain fell to deafening applause. Lights went up; people remembered they were hot; one heard the sound of fans as they smacked the air.

Wedged high up in one of the circles sat a girl, whose face was alive with joy, as her white teeth crunched candies. She was a slip of a thing, with eyes

blue as cornflowers, and hair the colour of bottled sunshine. Impervious alike to heat and depression, her laugh had rung out continuously during the first act.

For five and a half days in the week Jacqueline Eves was a machine, working hard with brain and fingers in a large office. Sunday was passed principally in bed. But on Saturday night she lived her brief hour of crowded existence.

A man by her side had kept time to her mirth with roars of delighted laughter, and as the curtain fell he turned to her impulsively:

"Dandy play, eh? They call it a kiddies' piece, but I reckon it means more to us grown-ups!"

The girl hesitated before replying. The little stenographer who earned her wage had not been wrapped up in cotton-wool like a peach, and she sized up the stranger before beginning a chance acquaintance. The man, who had evidently dropped into the theatre to fill up an odd hour, was in full motoring rig, but there was something about the goggle-disguised face that inspired confidence, and, at the same time, awakened a chord of memory.

"Sure!" she responded, nodding her head. "It does take one back. It sets me in the orchard again, swinging light up in the apple-blossom."

"Ah! Not raised here?"

"My, no! I come from the country, miles back."

The man laughed delightedly.

"Don't I know it? Gee-whiz! Have I forgotten little Jack Eves, the prettiest kid of all the bunch at Teacher Weston's school? I can see you now— curls, pink pinny, and all!"

Jack wrinkled her brow.

"But— who are you?" she asked.

"Sha'n't say. I remembered you, and you oughtn't to forget me. Can't guess? Why, you used to be smart as paint!"

"What was your favourite game?" inquired Jack craftily.

"Fog-folk!"

In an instant, Peter Pan had gripped hold of Jack and swung her through the short-cut, back to her childish days. She sat again in the schoolhouse and felt the blistering heat from its roof of corrugated iron. Small though she was, she sat at the top of the form and put out her tongue at the great, loutish lad who always stuck at the bottom, Cyrus Nobody, a waif and the butt of the whole village.

All day long she bullied the uncouth creature, but when evening fell he came into his own, and she sheltered under the protection of his bulk when he took her home to her mother.

Once again she saw the low line of scrub that melted into the grey haze of evening. The stunted trees and bushes took on queer shapes and waved shadowy arms out of the mist. She and Cyrus hailed them as Fog-folk, and shouted defiance at them, even as they fled by, shrieking with entrancing fear.

She squealed like a little bunny.

"Oh, Cy, Cy, fancy it being you— after all these years! It makes me feel I just want to spin like a humming-top. And at the play, too, when everything takes you back and makes you a child once more. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I guess that's so. And what about you, Jack? Married?"

"I allow I've more sense, thank you. I'm in business— a stenographer, and I've had two rises already."

"Never! But you always were a powerful speller. Beats me how you do it. Never could spell, and can't now. But I've done well, too, Jack. I was a clod, so I went in for land— what I understood. I've grown warm. I've—"

"Hush! The curtain's going up!"

Again the story gripped them as the child within each woke up at the pull of memory. No matter what the age or clime, the appeal to childhood was universal— in Red Indian, pirate, mermaid and pillow-fight.

Half way through the act, however, there was a disturbance. A hugely built man in rough clothes, groped his way up through the circle, stumbling in the dim light and swearing audibly. Jack touched her companion's arm.

"Horrors, he's coming here! It's Bully Jones— and not sober, either, I'm sure. What's he doing at a piece like this? They oughtn't to have let him in. Afraid to stop him, that's what they are! Cowards!"

"Hush!"

An angry whisper whirled through the theatre.

The intruder squeezed himself violently into the few inches of space by the side of Cyrus; then, expanding his chest and squaring his elbows, he proceeded to make room for himself by the simple means of pressure.

Half-stifled murmurs of protest arose all along the crowded bench. Cyrus held himself in by an effort, until the close of the act. Directly the lights went up he turned and faced the intruder.

Small wonder that Bully Jones inspired fear in the breast of the pallid-faced theatre attendant. As he leered aggressively around, his sprouting beard, broken fangs and massive bulk gave him the ferocious appearance of a cave man.

"Stop barging, can't you?" shouted Cyrus angrily. "Can't you see I have a lady here? Clear out of this seat, you clown!"

The man grinned insolently.

"No names— no pack-drill!" he responded. "Paid my check, I have, and I'll keep my seat, thank you."

He gave an extra lunge at the words, and the murmur of indignation grew.

"Chuck him out!"

But no one moved, all the same. In a primitive place like Polegate the arrangements were not above reproach, and the attendant remained deaf to all complaints.

Jack touched Cyrus's arm.

"Turn him out yourself, Cy!" she commanded in her old imperious way.

Cyrus rose obediently at the words, and took the bully by the shoulders. The next minute he staggered before a mighty blow that cut his nose and completely wrecked his headgear and goggles. Jones's reply had been simple but effective.

"That's to begin with," he remarked amiably. "Smash your head next time!"

A chorus of voices broke loose, urging Cyrus on to reprisal. Jack's eyes sparkled with excitement. The pretty stenographer, in her war with the world, had developed somewhat of a militant spirit, and her heart warmed towards her old chum in his character of public champion.

Then, to her dismay, she saw that Cyrus had hurried towards one of the exits, his handkerchief to his face. Hardly able to believe the evidence of her eyesight, she hurried after him.

"Cy, Cy, stand up to him! You're never going to let him give you best? Go back! You're never afraid?"

The man's back was turned to her. She faintly heard his voice, coming in a choking whisper:

"Yes. Mortal afraid!"

She could hardly credit her ears. From such a muscular giant the cowardice was stupendous. She pushed him aside contemptuously.

"You coward! Fight, or I'll never look at you again!"

Stung by the words, Cyrus turned round with sudden resolution.

"Come on!" he shouted, clenching his fists.

The crowd broke into a shout of approbation, and Jack's eyes sparkled once more. Then a man standing near called out something she could not hear. His words were the signal for another outburst.

Jack shivered involuntarily. She thought there was a different note in that tumult. The good-natured uproar had merged into one prolonged yell, through which throbbed the undercurrent of a deep growl. It seemed to the girl there was something sinister and menacing in the sound.

Looking around her, she noticed that some of the audience were rising in their seats. As she stared in wonder at the sight, the clamour broke out in louder swell, booming and threatening.

Instinctively, she recognised the cry— the call of a pack that sights its quarry. It was the dreadful cry of the mob.

She gripped Cyrus's arm.

"What's wrong?" she cried. "Who are they after?"

"Me!"

In incredulous dismay she turned and looked at her companion. In that moment she understood his fear. Free from his disguising headgear she saw him plainly, and at the sight his cowardice became stamped with motive. The face that was revealed was one familiar to her through the medium of many papers and magazine pages— a remarkable countenance, battered and seamed like that of a Caesar on an old coin, yet bearing in every deep-cut line the impress of ruthless power.

"Adam Cave!" she screamed in terror.

The subdued hum of the crowd answered her, like the pinging of a hive of furious bees.

The man turned to her.

"Hide your face, quick, girl! You mustn't see what's coming!"

But Jack remained staring round. In the surging mass of humanity boiling furiously around them she picked out faces she knew. It was incredible to think that if one could tear apart this composite monster—the mob—it would be dissected into such inoffensive mortals as Peel, who sold groceries, and Ditch, who dealt in leather.

Then she flung a look at Cave, standing at bay. He threw her an answering smile.

As his graven features broke up, memory gripped her. She saw again the clownish Cyrus with his elemental, unchecked strength and his undivined possibilities. Before her, in this alien man, was the finished product, but Cyrus, her childish friend and schoolmate, had furnished the raw material.

She seized his hand.

"Come with me! For our lives!" she panted.

"Too late! Let go!"

As he spoke, a vivid red light flickered over his face, giving him the appearance of a lost soul in the pit. Jack threw a startled glance over her shoulder, her knees loosening with fright. Other people turned as well at the sudden glare, and instantly a fresh shout rang through the building. One word only, but the insensate fury on every face was sponged cleanly away.

"Fire!"

A cloud of smoke belched from one of the wings, followed by a fork of spitting flame. At the sight the whole house broke up. Like a flash of lightning, conducting from one person to another, had come the overwhelming, shattering force of panic. Before its current wits and nerves were crumpled up, flattened and tossed aside, like scraps of tissue paper in a maelstrom.

Jack lost her wits with the rest and began to swell the clamour with her frightened cries. An arm closed round her, and she felt herself wedged behind a pillar, while Cyrus's huge form shielded her like a buttress.

"Hold tight! Close as wax. They're coming. Oh, Lord!"

The rush had begun. Like a herd of stampeding cattle, people plunged and struggled, butting their way through the crowd, in their frenzied efforts to escape. A few who tried to call for order were swept aside in the fighting throng. The manager attempted to shout something inaudible from the front, but was driven back by the flames, which were eating their way, with appetite, through the dry wood. The fireproof curtain made a spasmodic effort to descend, but its mechanism, stiff from disuse, failed to respond, and it hung askew in jaunty despair.

Jack hid her face. Already had begun the sickening jam. The theatre was poorly provided with ordinary doors and had nothing in the shape of an emergency exit. The place had been run up with the rest of the township, in the night, and it was clear that the contractor, in his passion for low estimates, had held human life yet cheaper. The whole building was a death-trap.

Cyrus shifted his weight against the encroaching numbers.

"We'd best get out of this," he said. "Now, then, don't loose me, if you want to see your daddy again!"

With desperate eyes he looked around, for to swell the numbers of the packed fighting press below was merely to ask for death—and a very ugly one. Far off, at the top of the gallery, he spied a small window, and towards this he steered his way.

"A thread of a chance," he muttered, "if only she has the nerve."

He looked hopelessly at the girl's white face and glazed eyes.

"Pull yourself together, dear," he urged, as he managed to hoist her through the narrow frame on to the leads outside. Half blinded by the red haze, Jack drew back in a panic; their faces seemed to be turned towards the very core of the fire.

Cave was seized with a sudden inspiration.

"It's only a game, dear," he said, "just a game. The Fog-folk are after us. Look snappy, or they'll have you!"

What followed was the work of Peter Pan. Instantly the stunned girl, waiting for a flaming death, responded to the call of the game. A mist of



memory clogged her faculties. Peter Pan fluted on his pipe, and she became a little child.

Dropping instantly to her knees, she crawled along the gutter between two roofs that were warm to her touch; a shower of sparks fell on her hair, and dense clouds of smoke forced her to screw her lids tightly together. But she heeded none of these things in her dazed condition.

"It must be a dream!" she whispered. "I shall soon wake up. Nothing to be afraid of!"

Then she felt herself dragged to her feet. She found she was standing, with Cyrus, flush with a fiery cauldron. It was a peep of Hades. A pall of smoke hung over every side, but directly barring her path was the gulf of spraying sparks, beating up from a flaring sea.

Cave pressed her forward towards the red haze.

"Come on, Jack! Jump!"

For one moment the girl hesitated.

"Come on, Jack. It's the best part! We open the window, and fly. Fly!"

The spell of Peter Pan was deeply laid. Without another quiver of fear, Jack leaped into the void, with the floating sensation of dream adventure. One giddy leap through the hot air, and she felt herself gripped violently and her fall broken, as she came heavily to earth, on a heap of rubbish and dead leaves.

"Dangerous here! Hurry on!" shouted Cy.

Up the slope of the roof he dragged her, and over the bristling parapet. Below lay a black gulf, but the man pressed on.

"Don't be afraid, Jack. You can't fall in a dream!"

Of course not. The girl laughed in answering excitement. In the friendly darkness, and strung up to concert-pitch, she advanced with perfect ease, where in daylight and cold blood she would never have stirred one foot. They slid down the steep slope— down, down— to unknown depths. The girl felt her feet shoot into vacancy, just before Cyrus jerked them back again into the narrow ledge of the gutter.

Another long, blind crawl, the sloping roof on one side, and on the other, the Never-Never Land. Then up again, like enchanted cats, swarming along the slates, to glissade down on the other side, in an entrancing slide.

Jack's world, that expressed its thoughts in the sprawling angles of shorthand and rattled out its sentences in the clattering voices of typewriters— that began every Black Monday and ended every payday— that world rolled completely away. She lived in dreamland, high up on the housetops, while an alien sky pulsed and throbbed in reddening patches overhead.

In the very height of the mad adventure Cyrus stopped short and pulled Jack gently down under the shelter of a clump of chimneys.

"Safe!" he panted. "There's a fire-escape at that corner, but you'd best rest before you try it. My, you're a sport!"

Jack gave a violent start. With the sudden jump that a sleeper experiences before dropping off to slumber she came back from the Land of Nod. At last she was awake.

She shivered, as a crowd of facts marshalled themselves before her. She—Jacqueline Eves— had been in a fire, faced a lynching mob, braved unknown perils, and was now perched sky-high, in a chimney-nest, in the unspeakable company of the Polegate bogey-man— Adam Cave. Yes, it was she—Jacqueline Eves, stenographer— with her weekly wage to her name and the fear of the Lord inside her.

Pinching did no good. She drew away her hand with a cry.

"Hallo! What's up, Jack?"

"Don't call me Jack, you— you horror!"

"Bless my soul! You were glad enough to see old Cy a bit back."

"You aren't Cy. You're Adam Cave. Oh!"

"Yes, I'm Adam Cave now!" The man laughed in triumph. "Think of it. Me—the booby, the clown, with every soul's hand against him! But it was always there, like a big lump swelling up like yeast, inside me. When they chivvied me and clouted me, I knew. Couldn't do book-learning, wasn't handy about the place. But they couldn't keep me under. I had to rise!"

The great, battered face was radiant with pride. The fronts of the jerry-built houses opposite, dyed scarlet by the glow, threw back their reflected light on to his rigid mask of power.

"So I hooked it. Made my first bit of a gamble— a mere fleabite, but it gave me something to play with. After that it all came my way. Couldn't lose. Seemed to smell money in every deal. And all the time I never looked at a woman, Jack. I just sweated on to make my pile, and reckoned at the end I'd look up that little kid with the yellow curls and pink pinny, that would have grown up a big girl. Jack, I've got the money. It's all for you."

Adam Cave, millionaire, who thought in thousands, and who had made a town as a child builds a card-castle, leaned eagerly towards the girl, a slip of a nobody, who typed in an office. A fitting sequence to the piled-up events of a mad night!

Yet it fell to Jack to cap the situation.

With a shrug of her shoulders, she dismissed the gorgeous prospect.

"Marry you! You! I wouldn't be seen dead in a ditch with you!"

Cave reeled under the unexpected blow.

"But— you— you can't really mean it! Say, Jack, you aren't giving me the cold shoulder? Haven't you tumbled to it? I'm Cy and I'm Cave. I'm rich. I've money, and money's everything. It talks, and there's no back-answering it."

But the narrowed imagination of the little stenographer was slow to grasp the possibilities of his wealth.

"Depends on how the money's made," she answered. "My people have always been respected. What they made has been made honestly. D'you think I'd touch money made like yours, with a long pole? D'you think I want a husband who goes out whole and's brought back in pieces?"

Cave quailed before the words. He knew the girl would never forget the episode of the mob, and that she could only remember that the millionaire had been— so nearly— something less than a man.

Powerless to say a word in his defence he chafed under the verdict. Dumbly he felt its injustice. It wasn't fair. He knew it. What chance had he? Nobody's brat, kicked into the gutter for cradle, brought up by hand and on the tip of a boot— what wonder if, in the rough-and-tumble of existence, he developed a dorsal fin instead of a heart? Done harm? Of course. So had others to him. Trodden on them? He had taken his trampling first, and hadn't whined. It was all a question of who was top-dog.

He looked drearily at the houses opposite. The glow was dying down, and grey shadows licked their faces like the spasms drawn by torture.

"You're very hard on me, Jack," he said at last. "But it wasn't my fault. There was something inside me. I had to rise. Good? Bad? Wasn't either. Strong— just strong. Folks stood in the way. A stream in flood sweeps all flat. But you don't call it names."

In imagination, the brown, roaring rush of a swollen river, mud-stained, foam-flecked, debris-laden, boiling on in relentless fury, passed before his eyes. Then he turned to the girl, a sudden flicker of hope in his face.

"Jack," he said coaxingly, "tell me what you'd like best in all the world."

Jack yielded to the persuasive tone. Her eyes narrowed as she gazed in front of her.

"I reckon, one day, I'd like a little house in the country, with flowers all around, and chickens, carpets in every room, a piano in the parlour, and— oh, dear heart, think of it!— my very own kitchen!"

The little office-girl's cheeks glowed as the glorious vision of pots and pans was vouchsafed to her.

Cave gulped.

"Room in it for two, Jack? Room for— old Cy?"

"For Cy? Why, yes!"

The man gave a wild shout.

"For Cy! Good old Cy! Then it's Cave you hate? Well, there'll have to be an end of him. Stay here!"

It was some minutes before Jack, lost in her domestic dream, realised that she was alone. She rose to her feet and stared at the flickering town. In the distance she saw a head silhouetted blackly against the lurid sky. As she looked it dropped behind a roof.

A sudden fear gripped her. What had he said? An end of Cave?

With unsteady feet she lurched down the gutter, retracing the perilous path. But the spell of the dream had vanished, and in its place she felt the awful clutch of vertigo. Instinct urged her to look upwards, while her muscles, hardened by gymnasium work, responded to her will. With sore knees and broken finger-nails she scrambled down the last roof. The glare grew suddenly vivid. Then, with a sob of relief, she saw before her the stooping form of Cave.

He greeted her with a shout of horror.

"How did you get here?"

"I had to come! Oh, Cy, Cy, don't!"

Cave pressed her fingers.

"There, there! I'm not going out that way. There's going to be an end of Cave, that's all. See this?"

He showed her the bundle in his band.

"My watch, cigar-case, metal-bound pocket-book. Enough for identification marks. Folks will think I got trapped and made into toasted cheese. The Trust'll go to pieces when it's known Cave's kicked the bucket. The State will fight over the money."

Then he patted his pocket.

"Enough here for a fresh start. You and me, and the country cottage—kitchen and all. Let's bury poor old man Cave, and then we'll skedaddle down the chute over there. Street's black as currants with folks, too busy with the fire to notice us. Now, then, Jack. Stand clear!"

The girl pressed forward. The fire had nearly burned itself out. The air was interlaced with the jets of water from the hose, and the clouds of smoke, no longer feathered with tips of fire, were clogged with damp.

Into the heart of the glowing shell Cave heaved his bundle. The two stood in silence, and then the man spoke.

"Seems a pity," he said, in broken tones. "He was a big man. Took a long time to make him, and now he's all gone to waste."

Then, as his sombre eyes fell on the girl, his voice was tinged with the first hint of future hope.

"What's it the sky-pilots say, Jack? 'After death the resurrection.' That's it. I'm strong. I'll rise again. But it shall be honest, this time. Not because folks are

weak, but because I'm strong. You shall die a rich man's wife, after all. I'll come to the top again."

The tears came smarting to Jack's eyes. She also knew that she was the witness of the funeral of a man— a bad man, but a big. Mechanically, the words passed through her brain: "Of your charity, pray for the soul of Adam Cave!"

The man turned away from the ruin.

"He's gone by now," he said. "Nothing left."

He shivered forlornly— an unborn soul, waiting for the Stork.

"Seems lonesome," he said pitifully. "Who am I now?"

"You're Cy. My Cy!"

Then the light broke out on the man's face. He had fallen "out of the Everywhere" straight into a woman's heart.

Life had come again.

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## 9: The Suicide and the Saint

*Australian Town and Country Journal (Sydney) 1 Feb 1911*

*Surely published in a British magazine first, but I couldn't find a reference. It's quite an early short story. Her first was published in about 1906.*

THREE small daughters of Eve were discussing fig-leaves on their way home from school. Or, rather, two talked while the third listened with all the bitterness of our First Parents as they looked back at the Garden. Like them, she was barred out.

The little girl who held the conversation made stabs and imaginary diagrams in the air, while her face lit up with eagerness. She was the daughter of a famous barrister, and, like her father, knew how to make the best of a thin case.

"Dear, ducky little bows here, that sweet shade of faded rose— it's got a French name you know— and a lace panel down the front— so!"

The other child sniffed. She had fat, golden curls and looked very opulent but she was conscious that her account of her costume for the breaking-up party had been eclipsed by this vivid description.

"H'm! It sounds just like your summer dress done up, Alys," she said, suspiciously. "Now, mine is a new four-guinea dress from Long's."

Alys swiftly shifted her ground.

"What are you going to wear, Juliet?" she asked, swooping down on the silent child in her father's best manner. Juliet's thin cheeks grew scarlet. "I— I don't know!" she stammered. She saw her companions exchange glance of meaning.

"I must hurry home," she continued desperately. "It is nearly four."

As she ran down the avenue she heard a burst of childish laughter behind. Instantly her finger-nails made dints in the palms of her hands. That gurgle of mirth was the thing she dreaded more than lightning or ghosts.

She could not remember the time when she was not a laughing-stock. Grown-ups always had smiled when they saw her, but they did it in a sneaky, half-veiled manner that she had learned to endure. It was , the open, brutal derision of her school-fellows that made her daily martyrdom. She had had seven years of it. Seven years of pure, undiluted misery! All because her mother had the spirit of a pioneer, and instead of experimenting on insensate puddings, muddled in dress, and then lacerated her daughter's soul by forcing her to wear unholy mixtures.

Mrs. Arum-Lake said that her child was just like a wall-flower, because she was so brown, and quaint, and sweet. Everybody else thought she was going to

be a wallflower— sure enough!— when she grew up, but meantime only considered her odd.

Juliet's depression did not last long. She had run away instinctively at the first smell of powder like some oft-hunted quarry. In reality, her fortunes seemed on the mend. It was some time since her mother had broken out badly, and her clothes had been fairly normal. Moreover other children in the school now wore djibbahs, although the articles in question were severely edited edition of her weird sack.

But, best of all, she was going away next term to a convent school where all the pupils were forced to dress alike. How Juliet gloated over the hideous serge uniforms that would be her daily wear for years and years! Marguerite, enthusing over her jewels, was a bad second to her! No one would pick her out among that crowd of girls as an ear-marked child of a cross between a High Arter and a Simple Lifer. She would be merely one bead on a necklace; one pebble on a beach. The glory of it! The world was painted rose-color, and the stars shook hands with the daisies at the mere thought of it.

As Juliet entered the house, she heard her mother's high-pitched voice.

"At least, no one can say my child has been made a martyr to dress!"

Mrs. Arum-Lake was entertaining a crony in the drawing-room, but her conversation could be enjoyed equally well on the front door-mat.

Juliet stopped to listen with apprehension.

"The folly and cruelty of some parents! I could weep when I think how they cram their children's sweet, tender little toes into stiff boots and bury their poor little heads under hot, heavy hats. I, myself— in person— was present at the toilet of a modern baby yesterday. My dear, it wore a corset. A corset! To support its back and protect it from cold, the foolish mother said. I asked her how she dared to usurp the functions of Nature— the universal Mother. Ah, well! I, at least have considered her demand in this dress for Juliet."

Juliet gasped at the words. Her party-dress! A tremendous lump of the repressed and devitalised Nature in her small frame heaved and expanded at the thought. In an agony of suspense she tore up the stairs and burst into the drawing-room. Her mother— an amber-haired lady in a peacock-blue dress and countless chains looked up and smiled.

"What ah outburst of physical energy!" she exclaimed. "I could sing when a child bursts open a door. Shut it again, Juliet. There's a draught. Don't slam it!" The one breath of spring air was barred out of the stuffy, lily-scented room.

"Would you like to see your new dress, precious?" asked Mrs. Arum-Lake, groping among layers of white tissue-paper.

At first Juliet thought she was only looking at a portion of the costume that her mother displayed. When she grasped the stunning fact that she was

viewing the whole, her heart seemed to contract. This time, her mother had done her very worst. It was mere morsel of clothing— a thin, white silk tunic braided with silver, in a key pattern. Pulled out to its utmost, it did not reach the knee.

"Mother!" Juliet's voice was husky. "I shall show all my legs!"

"The most beautiful part of a child."

Mrs. Arum-Lake looked affectionately at her daughter's knobby knees.

"You will have to, wear silken tights under it as a concession to your schoolmistress's indecent susceptibilities. Now kiss me, and thank me my little Grecian maid!"

"Mother!" Juliet turned white, and when a dark, skinned child throws pale, the result is rather awful. Her mother shrieked at the bilious hue.

"The child's ill!" she cried, ringing the bell. "Nature is speaking her mind as to what she thinks of our modern diet. Perkins, rhubarb, and magnesia for Miss Juliet!"

There was very little Nature left in Juliet by the end of the week. Mental agony and lowering medicines had reduced her to the least state of resistance. At her best, the child was no fighter. Seedy from her birth, she had been moulded like putty by her parent. Her faint protests were never even heard; they were drowned at utterance in her mother's unceasing flow of language.

"I can't wear it! I can't wear it!" Over and over, she sobbed the plaint, to herself. "Can't!" Not "Won't" like a normal naughty child, with healthy notions of rebellion.

Two days before the party, Mrs. Arum-Lake watched her child as she sat in a red pool of setting sunlight. A paper lay on the carpet. Juliet had let it slip from her limp hand and was staring at the flaming sky. Mrs. Arum-Lake glanced at the heavens also, divided it into shades, giving each a name from her paint-box, and then sucked in her breath at the brooding mystery in her child's eyes.

"Something has slipped from the sunset into my darling!" she whispered. "A wonderful gift for me to give my child. The Soul! Hush, the angels are whispering to her!"

She did not know that even at that moment her child was planning to open the door and set free that soul. Juliet had found the solution to her trouble" in one word. Suicide!

In the paper she had just read was a paragraph, headed "Suicide at Eleven." It related how another morbid miserable child before her, after eating out her heart with jealousy of her baby-brother, had swallowed rat-poison, and for the sum of a few pence attained the dignity of death. Juliet gloated over the details with envious yet sad feelings. She wallowed gloomily in the stricken parents' sorrow and the flowers brought by the child's school mates.



She went to bed with sulphur in her milk, brimstone from the Pit in her heart, and under her pillow the death story of one Grace Kemp— suicide, aged eleven.

THE FOLLOWING day a certain Lady Eleanor Jamaica— the daughter of a Duke, and a very great lady in every respect— was driving among the dykes. Suddenly she pulled up short, apparently to admire the scenery.

There was a touch of Holland about its flat grey washes. A brown swollen stream was rolling heavily along its willow-fringed bed. The sole touch of color was given in a sheet of daffodils. But, as the indignant mare knew perfectly well, Lady Jamaica saw none of these things. Her worst enemy could not call her artistic, even as her best friend could not call her beautiful. She was big and weather-beaten, with tomato tints in her complexion and a faint moustache on her upper lip.

She screwed up her eyes in the direction of the river, as if she were doing perspective drawing. Kneeling down on the marshy ground was a small, brown-clad child. As Lady Jamaica watched she scrambled to her feet, crossed herself, and then deliberately waded into the stream. Lady Jamaica threw the reins to the groom, jumped from the cart, cut over the ground, cleared the ditch, grabbed the child, and swung her back on the bank, with the swiftness of a cinematograph film. The child felt horribly light and limp, and seemed to cower in her ladyship's number eight doeskin gloves

"What are you doing, you little idiot?" asked Lady Jamaica angrily, giving her a slight shake. "There's a deep hole just there. You'd have been drowned."

"I know!" answered the child. "Why did you stop me? I was only committing suet-side."

"Good Lord!"

It was a genuine appeal. Lady Jamaica stared at the child with open, startled eyes. One would like to say she saw a pale, pure face like a snowdrop, with great black-ringed eyes— which, by the way, no snowdrop ever had. As a matter of fact, she saw a thin, miserable, brown child, with red-rimmed eyes— crying favors that, color— and knuckle-stained face. She looked so starved and bullied that Lady Jamaica's thoughts flew to the N.S.P.C.C. of which she was president.

"Tell me, little girl," she said gently, "has your mother done anything to you? Yes. What is it?"

"She makes me wear funny clothes, and the other children laugh at me all day— and I want to die!"

"Heavens!" Lady Jamaica appealed again. "I thought only Russian children talked like that," she added, with splendid patriotism. "Tell me all about it!"

Juliet sobbed out the whole story from her poisoned babyhood down to her last mutilated hope. These are big words, but it seemed like that to her. Poor innocent! If she could have heard Lady Jamaica's laughter when anyone came a cropper in the hunting-field, she would have known the folly of making such a confidence.

"I see!" she said, at the end. "Well, you mustn't die. It's very wicked to want to. We'll find a way out."

"You can't," was the hopeless reply. "Only a miracle could save me from wearing that dress, and I'm old enough to know miracles don't happen."

"Then you must be older than the Saints and Apostles," answered Lady Jamaica.

She was genuinely surprised at herself. She— who smacked her own children at the first hint of insurrection, to be found arguing with a child!

"But I've proved it," went on Juliet. "I turned Catholic, like our washer-lady. I stole nine candles from the larder, and said a Paternoster for each one I burned. A Paternoster is an "Our Father." It's Latting. "Pater" means "our", and "noster" means "father," you see; But— nothing happened. And I'll kill myself before I wear that dress," and my soul will be lost for ever and ever"

"Well— I'm—" Although Lady Jamaica stopped in time, it was clear that Juliet would be in aristocratic company. "Miracles do happen, child!" she said stoutly. "Fairies make them happen. Now, look at me! Don't you think I look just like a fairy?"

Juliet looked intently at the jolly red face and the driving coat, and answered firmly, "NO."

"You ungrateful monkey! Well— I'll tell you my secret, I'm a saint. But I've more magic than Ariel and. Puck, and all that gang, combined. Now, tell me exactly what your party dress is like. Into the cart with you! Suicide is off for to-day."

As they bowled along, Juliet gave a vivid description of the Greek tunic, every harrowing detail of which was nailed to her memory. It brought back her sorrow so vividly that she shivered, and clung to her companion, when they reached her mother's house.

Lady Jamaica gently disengaged herself, feeling choky "at the pressure of the feeble, clawing little fingers. "Now be a good kiddie! It's coming right. I'm really a saint, and saints work miracles, you know. You must wear whatever your mother tells you to-morrow night, and trust me to help you. Your mother won't be able to scold or keep you from going to that convent. And the children won't laugh at you. You'll be the happiest little girl at the party. Trust me!"

Lady Jamaica rattled off, feeling very blank. It was one thing to make splendid promises to cheer up a child's heart, and another to make them good. She bit her nails thoughtfully— a trick for which she daily smacked her children. Fortunately, however, she was a lady of strong common sense, and by immediately discounting all improbable schemes arrived the sooner at a possible solution.

She barred all fantastic notions that might entail consequences on herself or the child. To forcibly kidnap the youngster for the date of the party or to appeal to the generosity of the other children was ridiculous. To argue with Mrs. Arum. Lake was merely to court a snub. To ask the schoolmistress to postpone the party until the next term was to lay that good lady open to criticism.

It was a hard nut to crack, but Lady Jamaica had excellent teeth. Before she reached the stables her mind was made up. She climbed the stairs to the nursery. A fight was in progress, so she sat down like a good sportsman,, and watched with interest, until the better man won.

There were three children— all healthy and rough, and without a nerve in their bodies. They were called Tom, Dick, and Harry. Dick, by the way, was a girl, and the roughest and noisiest of the batch.

When the noise had subsided, Lady Jamaica put the question to her offspring. It was anything but a proper suggestion, but it was received with loud acclamations. She left the room, feeling that she had conquered the Opposition, and that the path was clear for instant operations.

"Fair, play!"she said. "I couldn't let down my own, even for the sake of that poor mite."

THE WHOLE of the next day, Juliet lived in a fevered dream. She looked forward to the hour of dressing with mingled feelings of apprehension and excitement. Yet, in spite of her doubtful moments, on the whole she trusted in the powers of the red-faced lady in the dog-cart, who called herself a saint. Her heart was entirely full of confidence when the washing was over, and in scanty petticoats and with cold, mottled arms she ran into her mother's room at the maternal call.

Upon the bed lay something in tissue paper.

Her dress.

Juliet's heart beat fast as the wrappings were laid aside. Now for a glorious transformation! Now for a mother's astonishment and defeat! Now for the rout of the material at the invasion of magic! Room for the miracle!

The dress was shaken out, and with it all the life died out of Juliet's face. She bit her tongue in her disappointment. It was the Greek tunic. No miracle

had happened. Her saint was an impostor. She had played her false. She stood, mute and frozen, while her petticoats were drawn off and the tights coaxed on. She was almost dead to feeling when at last she saw herself in the long glass. A pathetic little figure-of-fun in the white tunic, silver bay leaves filleted round her head, and silver braids criss-crossed round her thin little shanks.

The numbness lasted all through the drive, but when she had reached the Assembly Rooms and had left her wrappings in the cloak-room, her casing of ice suddenly fell away at the sound of a two-step and the chatter of children's voices.

She clung to the maid's hand in an agony of shyness. How could she enter that big electric-lit room? How could she run the gauntlet of scornful eyes? How could she show her legs to the public?

The maid gave her a kindly push and shot her through the doorway. The room seemed full of smart people, for the party was a large one, including the outside children who attended the dancing classes with their parents and friends. Juliet stood still for a dreadful moment. She thought that a howl of laughter had greeted her appearance. She hardly dared raise her eyes as she bitterly reviled the saint who had cheated her out of that kindly brown stream and the glory of suicide.

Then she noticed that a school-fellow was standing near her. It was the child with the fat golden curls— Em Miller— and she looked more opulent than ever in a frilly blue silk dress. Juliet gave her a look of heart-felt envy, as she waited for the inevitable chuckle of derision. To her surprise, none came. Em looked at her sourly, and with something that seemed curiously like jealousy. As Juliet blinked with surprise, Alys— the barrister's daughter— ran up in all the glory of her done-up dress.

"Have this with me, Juliet," she said. "There aren't half enough boys."

With spinning head, Juliet pranced off with her partner. On such occasions she danced with the teachers only, as none of her schoolfellows had the courage to foot it with such a little guy. She jigged away merrily— a queer feeling in her mind. Something had happened. Was it a miracle? This was totally different from the reception she had expected.

Alys, who by virtue of her conversational skill was a power in the school, was most affable.

"So you've one of those sweet dresses," she observed, as they stopped, panting. "But Juliet, my dear," she added, with a remembrance of her mother when the famous barrister golfed, "Why don't you pad your calves?"

Juliet did not reply. She was studying the room.

Three white figures went rollicking by, bucking and plunging like young colts! Short, white Grecian tunics gave free play to their splendid rounded

limbs as they jumped in the dance. They were Tom, Dick and Harry— the children of Lady Jamaica and the grand-children of the Duke of Peppercorn. Nor did the wonder end there. There were a few other white tunics to be seen in the room, all of which were worn by the pupils who were considered the cream of the dancing class.

Juliet forgot about the miracle. She only knew that she was no longer a pariah and a butt. She was among the Elect. This was her last party and she was going to enjoy it. Now she knew what legs were for. They were made for dancing— not to be looked at. Splendid things, legs!

IS IT tame to have to explain the stage-management of a modern miracle? Why relate how Lady Jamaica disposed of her children's healthy objections to making fools of themselves by that artful suggestion, "Wouldn't you like to go to the party dressed in bathing costumes?"

Why describe her mortified feelings as she saw the sailor suits; and Liberty smock deposed in favor of these circus trappings? Why touch on the diplomacy that caused the costumes to be hurriedly made by the gossipy dressmaker, whose clientele copied the great lady in every respect?

At all events, she was repaid with interest as she watched a happy-faced child footing it gaily among the dancers with wrinkled, white-silk legs. Once Juliet looked up, and saw the jolly red face beam at her with the benevolent pleasure of an old-world saint.

Her ladyship's satin gown was torn from musical chairs. She had barged one of the masters so hard that he had forgotten she was a woman, and had floored her, to her pure and simple joy.

As she smiled, her head was encircled by a rakish ring that had escaped from its moorings. It might have been the extra plait that her maid pinned on nightly.....

Or it might have been a halo.

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## 10: Down the Red Lane

*The Lady's Realm*, October 1911

"JUST another spoonful, Peterkins, angel! Come, one. Send it 'down the Red Lane!' My Pearl of Babies, stoke up. Oh— you little— aggravation!"

The complaint was justified, for the Pearl of Babies instead of responding to the appeal, turned the contents of his mouth on to his plate— a refined action to show that the previous consignment had not yet reached its destination.

Norah groaned.

"Was there ever such an unfeeling infant? Peter Ferdinand Henbane Fitzbattle, is there anything remotely resembling a heart underneath your Jaegar? Don't you realise the issues at stake? Let me remind you that Mr. Inspector Spy comes to-day with his horrid weighing-machine, and all. Inspector Spy the Fourth. Oh, wouldn't I like to prepare an oubliette for him, just?"

Now, when a beautiful young woman in the hey-day of her youth talks to a conversation-proof infant merely for the sake of hearing her own voice, it is clear evidence of deadly boredom.

This was true in Norah's case. No convict at Portland lived a more restricted, uneventful life— yet, unlike him, she clung to her fetters. For they represented a job, and she had known the heart-sickening lot of being out.

Norah's step-father, Dr. Rice, on his death, left behind him a lot of children and debts— and Norah. The youngsters were planted out in orphanages and the debts cold-shouldered by the relatives. But as no one seemed anxious to receive Norah in any capacity, she set about saving the situation by advertising for another, of a different kind.

Indeed, there had only ever been one soul who was desirous of acquiring her as a personal asset, and that was a certain Dr. Norman, who once came as assistant to her step-father. He was a pale, long-chinned man, a glutton for work, and with ideas on every subject under the sun, including the domestic details of a home. To make matters worse, he was invariably right.

When he proposed to Norah, however, thinking she would jump at the chance to escape the position of drudge in the doctor's poverty-stricken family, he broke his record. This time he was wrong, for she refused him on the spot.

The world is admittedly everyone's oyster, but Norah was not long in discovering that it will not open to a woman's weapon— her hat-pin. She went through the mill at the Registry Office, and it was not until after long lean weeks of ill-success that the unexpected happened, and she found herself under consideration.

Her astonishment was all the greater as she soon gathered that it was no ordinary situation that was on the books. Nor was her perspective charge an ordinary infant. He was not only an infant with a future, but an infant with a past. Litigation had raged fiercely round his puny form, which alone stood between a gigantic fortune and a flock of hungry human vultures.

FOR A whole week, Norah was interviewed by dry and legal gentlemen, and pompous laymen, with "Trustee" written large on their important faces. They all stared at her unblinkingly, and pelted her with strange and probing questions. At the end of the time, to her infinite surprise, she found herself appointed lady-nurse to Peter Ferdinand Henbane Fitzbattle, then resident at Clodoch Towers, Cumbs.

The lawyer-in-chief, who did the most of the talking, explained his decision.

"We are overlooking your lack of previous experience for the reason that you seem to possess the qualities which are a *sine qua non*. You have a long line of predecessors, all highly-trained women, who have either failed to please the infant, or have been unable to stand the absolute isolation. Remember, you will have no separate existence. You live only through your charge. There will be a nursery staff to do all menial work, but you are required not to leave the child, night or day. Doubtless you followed the Fitzbattle case through the Press, and understand that it is of tantamount importance that the boy lives to attain his majority. Too many people have a stake in his death."

"It sounds like a novel or play," faltered Norah, a little dashed by her future prospects.

"H'm! It has its dramatic elements. For instance, the stipulation that you first taste all the infant's food."

That was enough for poor hungry Norah.

"I swear," she said fervently, "that I'll devote myself body and soul to keeping the breath in the body of this child of Promise."

The lawyer actually smiled at her eagerness.

"If you can keep the position, it will mean provision for your old age," was his alluring bribe. "And we trust you to do so."

NORAH soon found out that the lawyer had shown an unexpected talent for fiction in his last speech. Once installed in Clodoch Towers, she was well-housed, well-fed, and well-paid, but she was certainly not trusted. Every week brought its representative from Messrs. Lawyer, Trustee & Co., on a surprise visit of investigation and inspection.

She soon made a grievance of this constant suspicion. She brooded over it daily, although, as a matter-of-fact, it was really the appalling loneliness that

had affected her nerves. When the train shook her off at the tiny station of Clodoch, apparently the county of Cumberland had snapped to, like a trap, and shut her out of the map.

She very soon understood why the high-trained legion before her had thrown up the sponge, and only one thing prevented her from following their example. That thing was a person, and that person a Personage—the Infant.

In the beginning, Norah had left him out of her reckoning altogether. She was not particularly fond of children, and had brought up her step-father's pretty, healthy brood on the sound general principle of "a word and a blow, and the blow first."

To her intense surprise, she became the instant slave to this miniature Croesus, with his skinny, ill-nourished form and his cynical old man's face. She grovelled abjectly to obtain his favour. At first, he looked sourly at her peach-like complexion, for, true to type, he already possessed the impaired digestion of the millionaire, and he knew that peaches were taboo. After a time, however, he grew to approve of the incense she offered, and abused her devotion shamefully.

When the maid brought the message that morning to the nursery that the customary inspector had arrived, in addition to her indignation, Norah had experienced a sharp qualm of anxiety. The infant was not only her Heart's Beloved. He also represented her job.

A doctor this time! She worried herself to a pulp because the millionaire would not put on flesh. Would it be her fate, because of his deficit in avoirdupois, to find herself again fired?

She turned and addressed her charge, almost passionately.

"Peter, why can't I make you *fat*? Listen! I want you to send all the milk and all the pudding and all the bananas in the world down the red lane. Wouldn't you like to be fat like this?"

She puffed out her cheeks and distended her chest— a perfectly fiendish abuse of her beauty, but which pleased the infant sufficiently to command a repeat-performance.

Norah strained him to her.

"Eat, eat, *eat*!" she commanded. "Eat everything you can see— everything you can reach!"

"Eat you!"

Peter caught her finger in a really hard nip, but Norah did not rebuke his playful attempt at cannibalism.

"That's right, darling. Send me 'down the red lane!' Only grow fat. *O-oh!*"



THE DOOR had opened and Norah looked to find herself confronted by her stepfather's former assistant— Dr. Jasper Norman.

Her first glance told her that he had kept on being right ever since their parting, and, what was more, had made it pay very well. One could tell by the smart cut of his very professional attire that if he had not yet attained the honour of hanging out a plate in Harley Street, he no longer lived in the neighbourhood of Queer Street.

For his part, he looked at Norah with genuine pleasure, putting up his glass to focus her to better satisfaction. The pretty red-haired girl of old had attracted in spite of her untidy toilet, but now, in the spotless severity of starched linen, she looked a gorgeous white Goddess.

"This is capital!" he said approvingly. "It's an unexpected pleasure to find you here, expressing yourself in what is essentially woman's work. Er— where did you train? You should have consulted me."

At his professional voice, all Norah's former antagonism to her stepfather's superior assistant was revived.

"Train?" she asked. "At home with the youngsters. Don't you remember?"

Dr. Norman's face fell visibly.

"You've had no hospital training? Dear, dear! Very irregular!"

"What's the odds? If I've not buried ten, it was the nearest thing. Did you ever know such children for being in the wars?"

Her mouth relaxed to a smile as she thought of the happy, healthy brood of Hooligans, but the young doctor saw no humour in the reply. He looked with positive horror at the puny infant.

"He does you no credit," he said drily. "He looks like a slum-child. What do you feed him on?"

Norah reddened with indignation at this reflection on her idol's appearance.

"What food?" she asked slowly. Then with mischievous inspiration she thought of the rations she daily sampled for Peter.

"He has what I have myself," she answered, after the orthodox manner of her stepfather's surgery "mother."

The further drop of Dr. Norman's jaw rewarded her for much.

"Not really? You are serious? Dear, dear! And what have you had for lunch to-day."

Norah, who had the digestion of an ostrich, told him, and from the green hue that spread over his face, one would have thought that it was he who had tackled the indigestible food.

He looked with pained eyes at Norah, and his shocked expression relaxed.

"This is an appalling state of affairs," he said. "Surely you realise you can't bring up a complicated organism like this wealthy microbe, by rule of thumb. But you must keep this post. I'll prepare feeding-charts and a complete set of rules for your guidance, dealing with every subject from the temperature of the room to action in any emergency. Before I leave, I'll bring it in here and explain it to you. No, not a word. I'm only too glad to help you. You have been much in my thoughts since we parted."

The young doctor was about to say "in my heart," but he pulled himself up in evident doubt whether it was professional to possess the internal organs to which he daily ministered.

Norah collapsed before his authoritative manner. Was history to be repeated? Was there no escape from this autocratic young doctor, whose mission apparently was to put her in the wrong, and then set her right? Was she to brook being ordered about in her own nursery?

Before she could decide which great gun of her wrath to train upon him he caught up his hat.

"Well, that's settled. As I have to leave early, I must ask for something to eat before I go. And in view of what you told me about your lunch, may I plead for something wholesome and digestible?"

As he waited to let the reproof sink home, his eyes suddenly brightened in a very unprofessional manner.

"I'm so glad to see you still wear my brooch!" he said softly as he went out of the room.

Gasping with wrath, Norah put up her hand to her collar and removed her sole trinket. It was a gold safety-pin and had been presented to her by her step-father's neat assistant in the double capacity of a present and a hint.

She reflected, heedless of the fact that she had run the pin into her thumb. Did the wretched man preen himself on the fact that she wore it for sentimental reasons? If so, she would show him his mistake. When the baby was swathed in complicated outer layers of wool, for his airing, Norah carefully stuck the brooch on his fleecy chest to testify her indifference to this link with the past.

It was a trivial action, but to live in complete isolation with a small tyrant is apt to develop the petty side of a woman's nature. Norah, who in the old days possessed the glorious, slap-dash faults of a large nature, from taking on the existence of an oyster, had grown prone to exaggerate trifles. Her tussle with the doctor had now grown to the proportions of a civil war. She positively gloated over the memory of her visit to the housekeeper when she countermanded the tempting menu prepared for Dr. Norman in favour of a large rice pudding.

"In accordance with his wishes," she added. "Be sure to tell him that!"

IT WAS a very tempestuous walk that day. For the first time in his life, Peter found himself neglected. Norah bumped him along at record speed, wheeling the perambulator herself, to work off some of her annoyance. She turned the matter of Dr. Norman's coming lecture over and over in her mind, until it glowed red-hot from the force of friction.

It was just as they turned back through the lodge gates, that an idea came into her mind. She looked with sudden interest into the face of her second nursemaid, who had halted to post a letter in the pillar-box.

"Who's that to, Mary?" she asked, halting also.

"My young man. Him what's the postman," added the girl, in what should have been unnecessary explanation. Mary was a bit of a flirt.

"Oh! Would you like to see him tonight?" asked Norah softly. "Well, then, I want you to take the big key of the outer nursery door to the locksmith, to—to have the wards straightened. You needn't come back until nine o'clock. Go for a walk with your postman."

Mary marvelled at the extra extension, for the white goddess of the nursery was a bit of a martinet.

No sooner were they inside the house than Nursemaid the Second was packed off with the key, and Nursemaid the First ordered to lay instantly a lavish tea.

Norah waited with sparkling eyes until every eatable was safely on the nursery-table. Then she crossed to the outer door which was only closed at nights, and gave it a slam. The spring-lock snapped to, and they were prisoners.

She airily explained the incident to Nursemaid the First, who was outside, clamouring for admission.

"No, I can't open the door, for I haven't the key. I've given it to Mary. She won't be back till nine, and it's no good trying to find her. It doesn't matter at all. We've everything we want, and it's only for a few hours. Just explain matters to Dr. Norman and say I'm sorry to miss seeing him again."

Then she waltzed back to Peter and they had tea in style. Contrary to her expectations, Doctor Norman did not attempt to batter in the door. His soul—this is the most polite way of putting it—was too sorely wounded over the matter of the rice-pudding, for he liked good fare, although he insisted on its agreement with digestion. Too stiff-necked to complain or protest, lest he should seem to eat his words, he stuffed his paper of instructions in his pocket, and then prepared to stuff himself with cold rice-pudding. He told himself

bitterly that it was the last time he would take the faintest interest in any woman, other than a case.

MEANTIME, in the nursery, Peter watched Norah with growing disapproval. She absolutely talked him off his head, and she kissed him past bearing. He began to entertain fears that she was growing flighty, in which case, he would have to pack her off, like the rest. Perhaps he had been too lenient with her, on the score of her good looks.

Presently he became aware that she was hammering away at him with a question, the repetition of which was growing a nuisance.

"Heart's Desire, where's Nurse's gold brooch?"

To put an end to the nuisance, he at last answered her languidly, "Down er wed lane."

"Down the red lane?" The answer was repeated in a shrill falsetto, quivering with excitement. "Peter, darling, tell me again, *where?*"

Cross at her density, he played down to her intelligence. Opening his mouth, he popped one finger inside, in pantomimic display.

Norah gave a piercing shriek. There was no mistaking his meaning. This was the consequence of her extravagant exhortation to "eat everything he could see." The logical infant had begun on her brooch.

She sat for a moment in frozen horror. When she rushed to the door, at first her numbed brain could not grasp the reason why the handle would not turn. She battered on the heavy oak panels and started to scream at the top of her voice, but common-sense urged her to desist before she was specially bruised or hoarse. Help would not come that way. Her staff would be far away in the kitchen wing. She had planned for isolation, and she got it with a vengeance. It was on her own head.

She turned to look anxiously at Peter who was picking a toy to bits on the rug. It struck her with a pang that he looked paler than usual. His mouth was surely pinched. As she looked, he gave the fretful whimper she had learned to associate with internal pain.

Her heart gave a sickening thud. *What* was she to do? How soon would he be seized with a convulsion of pain? Must she stand by, in her ignorance, and see him suffer, while by the irony of fate, she had just rejected, with scorn, a paper of instructions that told her how to meet every emergency.

As she thought of it, she hit her head like a distraught creature.

"You ignorant, petty fool!" she cried. "Why did you despise his help. He knew. He always knows!"

Then, with a sudden inspiration she dashed over to the tea-table, her face alight with relief. Of course, the baby must be induced to sickness— no difficult matter, for he had a positive talent for it.

Salt-and-water. Mustard-and-water. Norah's knowledge was narrowed down to these two mixtures. But although the lavish tea included every luxury from the cook's larder, mustard and salt were not included among the tit-bits.

In an agony at her failure she rushed back and began to work furiously at the wretched millionaire. She rubbed him till he howled, tickled the back of his throat, while he bit her finger, and finished up by nearly standing him on his head, all the time weeping bitterly and invoking some mysterious deity who went under the name of "Tummy."

Under the treatment, Peter turned blue and black, and then stiffened in her arms like a poker.

Unable to diagnose this result of temper, Norah shivered as if in an ague. Was this a rigour to herald death? At the thought, her sorrow and devotion for her charge was overwhelmed by a sharp spasm of fear. She had forgotten. This baby was not only the apple of her eye. He was a sacred Trust. In imagination she saw the accusing faces of that awful body of men— dry and legal, fat and solemn— Messrs. Lawyer, Trustee & Co. What would they say when they knew that by her carelessness she had killed her Charge? The very thought goaded her to temporary insanity.

The next minute, as a result, the indignant millionaire received an additional shock. For, after folding him in an embrace, strong enough to strangle the powers of Death at work in his puny frame, she shamelessly abandoned him, in a compromising and inelegant manner. Instead of using the door, like honest folk, she went out of the window.

Her breath came in uneven puffs, when her knees left the sill and she felt her feet swing into space. The ivy that covered the walls was centuries old, but her weight was noble, and she felt her body creep with goose flesh whenever a tuft gave way in her hand.

IN THE room below— quite a respectable drop— Dr. Norman sat and sulked over the triple cause of a wasted chart, a milk pudding, and Norah. Presently the sound of scuffling came to his ears, and he looked up to see a pair of Oxford shoes dangling in space. The shoes were followed by about six inches of leg, and the Doctor looked shocked—needless to say not at the limbs, but at the small hole in one of the stockings.

"That's Norah!" he said tersely.

His diagnosis was correct. For the rest of Norah, in a swirl of white linen and dishevelled tresses swung down on to the ground. Almost in a flash; she had stormed his window, and explained the situation in breathless sentences.

The doctor appeared to grasp the position immediately. He seemed to agree that no time was to be lost, for he did not stop to argue about adopting such slow processes as attempting to force the heavy old door, or rousing the household in search of ladders. Without a word, he followed Norah up the ivy.

Without a connected word, the couple wormed their way upwards.

Although fairly safe, the ascent was no filbert-cracking job, and the air was filled with their exclamations and groans, as they pressed upwards to the moribund millionaire.

When their feet were safely planted on the nursery floor, the doctor turned to Norah and handed her something that he had held tightly clasped to him, during their ascent. With a pang of concern, she wondered if the shock had proved too severe for his brain. For he stood and offered her— a rice pudding.

"The one you ordered for me," he said, fortunately, in sane tones. "Quite Providential, really! Now, fill him up with this, every cranny and corner. No emetics here! Your plan is to load him up with stodge."

Norah's eyes were beaming with gratitude as she took his offering towards the common weal.

"Oh, the comfort of having you!" she cried. "I believe, in future, I shall always *reverence* rice pudding!"

Very soon, however, the tears stood once more in her eyes, for not a morsel of the stuff could she get her charge to swallow. After the affair of the window, he had definitely done with her for ever. He was proof to entreaties, bribes and cajolery. When they tried drastic methods, he bottled up his throat with his tongue, after a patent method of his own, and started to choke.

Dr. Norman looked on with some impatience. "You seem to have no influence over him," he said at length, in disapproving tones. "I see I must try."

His methods were unusual, but justified by their success. He flopped down on hands and knees and barked. The millionaire condescended to look in his direction. When once he grasped the fact that the doctor was a hungry dog who wanted to eat his pudding, he promptly started to put a spoke in his wheel, by eating the pudding himself.

As spoonful after spoonful disappeared, Norah felt a sudden rush of thanksgiving that thawed the ice round her heart. She saw nothing amusing in the spectacle of an immaculately-clad young medico, whose dignity was his god—putting up his hands to beg and whelping like a poodle. She asked herself how she could ever have despised this pearl of mankind.

WHEN PETER Ferdinand, gorged at last to repletion, fell asleep in the doctor's arms, he turned to her and spoke in the old way.

"We must leave the issues to Nature. By the way, do you still forget to darn your stockings?"

"I got that hole in the ivy coming down," answered Norah, meekly.

"I'm delighted. I felt sure of it. You have made so vast an improvement."

It was just like Dr. Norman to construct the whole of her moral character out of a trifling detail. He looked at her so kindly that she poured out her fears.

"There'll be an inquest, I suppose, if anything! And what will become of me? Manslaughter? Prison? Anyway, who would employ a person who had killed a future millionaire?"

"Come, come!" Dr. Norman still spoke professionally. "If the patient pulls through"— he ignored the alternative— "it strikes me as an excellent plan to take joint-charge of him. I think I could work it with the trustees. This is too lonely for you alone. Together though— I could supply the knowledge and you seem to have gained his affection. We'd have to be married, though."

Norah's voice broke, as she answered him.

"But he doesn't seem to care for me now. He turns from me, and—I did love him so!"

As usual, there was a masculine conspiracy to put her in the wrong. For Peter, waking at that instant, and finding his highly salaried attendant idle, instantly made work for her by holding out his arms.

As she caught him to her, the door opened and in walked Mary, the Nursemaid.

"There was nothing wrong with the key, Miss. And, please, the postman wants to know if this is yours. He found it in the pillar-box by the gate."

With a cry, Norah snatched the golden safety-pin. Peter Ferdinand had seized on her metaphor to her confusion. His "red lane" had been the red pillar-box, down whose open mouth he must have dropped the pin, as they halted at the gate.

For half a second, the all-knowing young doctor looked rather foolish. Then he laughed, till he cried. The baby, for his part, cried— I should like to say until he laughed, but laughing was not his line.

And Norah? In the revulsion of her feelings, she kissed them all round. First Peter, then Mary, and then....

But as the object of a story is to tell a tale, but not tales, this is a good place to leave off.

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## 11: The Formula

*The Lady's Realm*, Feb 1912

"ONE gets tired of hearing the trite remark that often the bravest deeds are those that receive no recognition," observed the Colonel, "For my part, I'm prepared to include the noble army of obscure heroes in my creed. But— when I look back on the dark days of the Mutiny, the one man I would like to decorate had his name blackened by two of the vilest charges it is possible to bring against an Englishman. What was more, he had to plead 'Guilty.' "

The keen eyes of the veteran grew slightly misty, as he looked away from the trim lawn, flanked with brilliant flower-beds, and bristling with an eruption of croquet-hoops, to the far country, where the vivid green of June— blazing in the sun— burned into a blue smoke of distant hills.

The lads by his side gazed with curiosity at his wrinkled face, tanned by tropical suns to the colour of strong tea, its hue only just beginning to fade before the yellow peril of liver. They were nice, pink-and-white-boys, both— in training at a military college; at present they played polo very well and very gamely for their country, just as later on, they would fight for her very badly, as they had been taught— and very gamely.

In spite of their visible impatience the Colonel began his tale in the slow, meditative manner of one, who, having run through his portion of time in the course of a long life, does not scruple to draw on eternity.

"This man of whom I'm thinking," he began slowly, "answered to the name of Ansom. At least, he did, before the bad business. I doubt if he had any chance of doing so afterwards, as his name was then judged unworthy to be uttered by decent lips.

"No, my lads, calm yourselves! He was no soldier. Your profession is not going to be dragged in the dust in this story. He was an anomaly for India, being neither military, Government, trader, nor missionary. He was well-known to both English and natives in the sense that they were familiar with his tall, slouching figure, his thin, monkish face, and his moral peculiarities. Otherwise he was little known.

"Although he was no parson, he was commonly called the *padre*. It was the popular way of reconciling his solitary habits and his strict and minute code of rectitude with the personality of an ordinary Briton.

"His was a curious face; in a manner of speaking, transparent— for in moments of stress you saw through it, as through a glass darkly, the muscles throbbing in his cheeks, like the springs of a steel trap. His eyes were prominent, and ever shifting in their sockets, following every flicker of his nerves.



"As a matter of fact, he was an abnormally conscientious man, who followed a rigidly Christian line of conduct, not through loyalty to the Leader, but through a most real and potent fear of the Devil. He honestly believed the doctrine that if his hand offended, it were better plucked off than left to spread rot amongst the sound members. And he was ever on guard to preserve the scrupulous cleanliness of his tongue, for he held that to utter a single lie, or the name of his Maker in vain, was to instantly consign both his body and soul to everlasting damnation.

"A curious creed in these slack days when no one fears penalties. Wait and hear what it cost him, in the year 1857 on that memorable evening on the 10th May, when the call of the church-bells was the signal for the smouldering native rebellion to break into the first spurt of the fire at Meerut. You've often heard the tale of how the 3rd Native Cavalry stormed the gaol where the eighty-five martyrs of the greased cartridge affair were confined, and then started to slaughter every white person in the town.

"Thus it chanced that barely had the sun-baked soil of India sucked up its first drop of European blood, when an Englishwoman was galloping for her life, through the network of native streets, the special quarry of a man of the 20th Sepoys, which was the first regiment, you remember, to fire on its officers.

"This man had recently been in England, and whilst there, had received much flattering attention from a certain family called Tallboys, on account of his abnormal skill at cricket. While he won their local matches for them, he received some coaching on his own account, in the Gracious Game, for Mary Tallboys, the daughter, was indiscreet enough to flirt seriously with her visitor.

"When she joined her brother in India, not long afterwards, she found that the values were shifted. The taint of the tar-brush put the Indian on the black list of her acquaintances, and she took the first chance of repairing her error, by ruthlessly cutting her former friend— a mean action which naturally implanted in his heart an ever-growing sense of injury and desire for revenge.

"She paid dearly for her English snobbery, for on that night of the 10th May, the values were again shifted, and at the sight of a superior officer, shot on parade like a rabbit, the Sepoy sloughed his whole skin, with its little bit of England grafted on to native stock, and with atavistic celerity reverted to that primeval period when we were all stark savages.

"Picture then, this poor, silly county-bred girl, her English roses still fresh upon her plump cheeks, her blue eyes glazed with fright, flying before the pursuit of a brown devil, who brandished his sword in the rays of the setting sun, and yelled for vengeance!

"It is supposed that, out of sheer panic, she struck the Delhi Road— only conscious of one desire to escape from a nightmare, where, in the flicker of an eye-blink, a quiet Indian town was changed to a reeking shambles. She was leading well, when the horse of her pursuer slipped and stumbled and fell, both animal and rider rolling over together. It was a bad toss, and by the time he was remounted the Sepoy had lost sight of his quarry for the moment, in the network of streets. He appealed to the passers-by, but with little success, for the lust of slaughter was already sending them hot-foot on similar errands of blood. Thus he received two reports— one that an Englishwoman, riding like the wind, had whirled along the Delhi Road, before one could stop her; the other, that she had passed into the house of Sahib Ansom.

"Thus my man comes into the story. The tale of what followed was related to me by a native who had the words from the Sepoy's own lips. So graphic and picturesque was his account that I feel I was a spectator of the whole scene.

"At the check, the Sepoy stopped in momentary hesitation. Every school-boy at 'hare-and-hounds' knows the value of a long start. It is almost impossible to overtake the quarry if the pursuit has been delayed too long. He knew that the Englishwoman rode better horse-flesh than his, and was, in addition, a lighter weight. It was just humanly possible for her to win through the thirty-odd miles to Delhi, before he coursed her down. On the other hand he dared not lose the chance of finding her in Ansom's house, like a rat in a trap.

"A sudden impulse fired his brain. He entered the shuttered house to find Ansom, pallid from the heat of the long day, and clad for coolness, in his sleeping-suit, lying on a long cane-chair, smoking a cigar. The Sepoy's keen eyes noticed that the weed had burnt irregularly and that at his entry, the muscles of Ansom's face twitched convulsively, like a dying snake that awaits the sunset.

" 'He knows,' he said to himself.

"He stood before Ansom, the blue turban of a Mohammedan on his head; the sun came in through the chink in blood-red streaks, playing on the brass-work on the great curved blade— destined to rip up many an English body. He looked at the pale, throbbing face of Ansom and he laughed in his beard.

" 'Now shall I know the truth,' he said. 'This is one who fears to tell a lie, lest he burn in the hottest hell. Which way went the Englishwoman? Speak!'

"There was a pause during which Ansom looked at the speaker, as though deprived of all power of volition or thought. Then the pupils of his blank, staring eyeballs split, so that one could see the thoughts racing hither and thither, as they pulsed from the frenzied brain.

"The Sepoy laughed.

" 'Quick! Time presses. The truth, and you shall go unscathed! Lie, and' — he raised his heavy blade— 'you shall go straight to the God you worship, your lie wet on your lip.'"

The Colonel stopped and moistened his throat with the mineral waters prescribed to appease his tyrannous liver.

"It is rather interesting," he said, "to try and follow the working of Ansom's mind at that moment. I can see that you fine fellows wonder at his hesitation. Sooner than betray a woman, you'd be split up as cheerfully as one splits an infinitive. But I want you to remember that Ansom's religion was a real thing to him— as real as the stripes on the Union Jack to you. He honestly believed that a lie would send him to everlasting damnation.

"The Sepoy had him pinned down with a prong, as one nips a viper in the cleft of a forked stick. The whole thing happened in about two minutes, so I leave you to imagine how he stoked his brain to action, all engines throbbing at full steam.

"Then he opened his lips.

" 'I will tell you the truth,' he said, and his voice sounded like a bray.

"He stopped, and glanced involuntarily at the clock on the shelf, and then his eyes shot a scared look in the direction of the Delhi Road. The Sepoy stood like a brown image, but his glance flickered after Ansom's, quick on its train like intelligent lightning.

" 'I will tell you the truth,' again said Ansom.

"He stopped to moisten his lips, now dry as chaff, with his tongue. It was his honour against his soul. A woman's life against his dread of eternal death.

"*Which* would win?

" 'I will tell you the truth,' he said the third time, as though he would gain moments that were more precious than rubies.

" 'On my word of honour— as an *English gentleman*— the Englishwoman is here, in this room, in that locked press.'

"With quivering hand, he barely indicated the tall carved cupboard behind him, while his eyes shifted involuntarily in their former direction.

"There was a moment of silence, after the words of betrayal were uttered. Ripples of agonised torture passed over Ansom's face— pale shadows of the pains that rent him within. One could see that the Fiend had clapped his hand on him and dragged him down to a smoking hell.

"Then the Sepoy burst into ironic laughter. He laid his hand on the press.

" 'And the key? In the tank yonder? So, so. And how long before we recover it, or force the lock, to find the press *empty*? And while the precious moments pass, the woman will be flying ever farther from me, down the Delhi Road. Already the start is great!'

"He turned and looked into Ansom's eyes.

" 'You have lied, and lied transparently, after the manner of your kind, who are but men of glass. Have I not lived in England? And do I not know that formula— that sacred formula — "An English gentleman"? Had you sworn by your God, I might indeed have questioned— wondered. But it is not with that *sacred* oath— "The word of an English gentleman" that a sahib sells his countrywoman.'

"He raised his blade.

" 'But from your lie have I the truth. You have valued your honour and a woman higher than your God and your soul. So— die!'

"Had I been there I should have held it a great moment. Even though the lie were in vain it was a magnificent triumph that one of our race had bought a woman's life with his soul.

"But hot on that splendid moment came a scene of shame, the bare thought of which hurts. For as the wind of the sword whistled through the air, Ansom fell to the ground, and clasped the Sepoy round the knees.

" 'It is the *truth*!' he cried. 'Test it! Spare my life. Oh, spare my life!'

"The look of grudging admiration passed from the Indian's face.

" 'The Englishman kneels.' He laughed shortly. 'Your life? Yes. On this condition.' He pointed to a photograph of Queen Victoria the Good which stood on the shelf. 'I would have made you defile your flag, but you have not one here. But, destroy that picture of your Queen and spit on the pieces!'

"The muscles of Ansom's face worked as though urged by machinery. Like a whipped cur, he crossed to the shelf. He took and defaced that piece of cardboard that stood to him for pride of country, while the Sepoy stood and laughed.

"He sheaved his sword.

" 'Keep your life, dog!' he said. 'You have bartered your soul for a woman, and your sovereign for your life. Praise be to Mahomet I am no Englishman!'

"He vaulted into his saddle and his hoofs could be heard thundering on the dry road at a rate sufficient to overtake any fugitive. Four hours later, he came upon her riderless horse, cantering along the road, and found that he had been fooled. Before his return, the woman, disguised as a native had been smuggled across to the British lines, where alone safety was to be found that night of dread. Oddly enough she survived all the horrors of the Mutiny, and in the end married a V.C."

The lads stared as the Colonel ended his tale.

"What do you mean? She was in the press the whole time?"

"She was in the press."

"Then the skunk betrayed her."

The lad's voice was full of incredulous disgust.

"Everyone thought as you do, Sawyer. The disgrace of that deed was blazened from station to station and stuck to his memory after he took vows and ended his life in a monastery. Yet that's the man for my ribbon and cross!"

The Colonel stopped to laugh at the disgusted faces.

"Come, lads. I had the story from his lips. He's had a rough passage, but he's passed over now, and let's hope it's been made up to him! When the Englishwoman fled to Ansom's house, he was resolved— even as you or I— to save her, at all personal cost. Remember what that cost implied to *him*! When the Sepoy put that question to him, he was resolved to damn his own soul to save her life. But then he saw this point.

"Would a *lie* be sufficient to save her? Had he said that she was far away on the Delhi Road, it was more than probable that the Sepoy would instantly have doubted, and searched the place. Although the man had credited him with truthfulness it is not in Oriental nature to have real belief in veracity. Ansom understood human nature, and he knew the subtle workings of the Indian's mind, who read human nature as you read a primer. He guessed that the Sepoy knew what an Englishman valued most, and that the truth— too hideous from its cowardice and treachery in the form he presented it— would fail to gain credence, and pass for a lie. Therefore he deliberately threw the Sepoy off the trail with those furtive glances, as if he knew that every moment was precious. And therefore— he pleaded for his life, because *he* alone could save the woman. Had he been granted the boon of death, she would have been left to perish miserably in the locked press."

There was a long pause. Then the elder lad spoke thoughtfully:

"How do you know his tale was true, Colonel? He valued his soul very high, and he held a lie to be the price of it. Well, when all was said and done, it was his own score. He managed to save his soul."

"That's so. That's the view every man and woman in India who heard the story took of his conduct. Then how do I know he told me the truth? By this."

The Colonel's voice rose an octave.

"Before Ansom was a Christian, before he was an English gentleman, he was a *man*. I know he loved that woman, in secret, with all the depths of his soul. Yet— he faced the agony of suspense when her life hung in the balance. Again— he grovelled in the lowest depths of shame, when he renounced and insulted his country and his Queen. Lastly— the supreme test of all— he faced that woman when he opened the press— the woman who had heard herself betrayed, and could neither understand, forgive nor forget. The woman he loved.

"Lads! I tell you that man had passed through triple damnation. Having counted the cost, he had been in three separate hells. How then— should he fear— *one*?"

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## 12: The Adventure

*The Lady's Realm, October 1912*

A CRASH, followed by a low groan, rang through the building.

A girl, who stood on the dirty stone stairs, clasped her hands at the sound. "An adventure!" she whispered. "It must be murder!"

But her voice lacked conviction. Even as she spoke, she laughed—the incredulous laugh of youth, that merely quested for a thrill.

All day long, her blood had rioted for an adventure. Spring pricked in the pulse of the year. Blades of purple and yellow crocuses pierced the sod of the City parks. The clouds were travelling at a tremendous pace over the pale blue of the sky.

From the top of her motor-bus, she had marked the stir of life in Nature and humanity, and it had moved her to discontent. She knew that things happened here—were happening even now, all round her. Crimes and adventures shot through the drab of uneventful existence with a streak of scarlet. But never to her; others lived—while she merely existed.

Thus it was, that, when the dusk gathered at the end of the street, in violet shadows, she found herself in regions where she had no earthly business to be—shamelessly chasing her dog up the stairs of a block of bachelor chambers.

She clasped him to her, when the sudden noise startled her from the chase, she had, herself, stage-managed. For several minutes she remained in a rigid attitude—half afraid that someone would come and discover her presence. She had slipped behind the back of the preoccupied commissionaire at the door, when she started her escapade, and she had met no-one in the course of her graceless journey.

Two minutes ticked slowly by and the sound was not repeated. Either no-one else had heard the disturbance, or else part of the building was unoccupied, during a process of re-decoration. She noticed a ladder reared against the wall, on an upper landing, while the air was pungent with a whiff of new varnish.

Tired of waiting, she turned at last regretfully towards the staircase.

"Nothing's going to happen after all!" she said disconsolately.

But she had only taken two steps when she halted, appalled by the programme before her. Outside was the drab street, a fourpenny meal—tea and toast—at a cream-and-gold Lyons, and a decorous 'bus waiting to jog her safely home to the suburbs. To round off the glorious day thus, reeked of sacrilege to the Spring.

In contrast to this dreary prospect there was a sense of guilty exhilaration about these forbidden precincts—this maiden's Thibet. She felt sure that



behind these doors were rooms that had grown familiar to her through their presentment in West-End theatres. From her place in the pit, the little Colonial had often followed, with breathless interest, heightened by her inexperience—adventures of these Society people, who were so totally unlike the rough type of humanity she knew.

Now as she gazed around her, her imagination told her that in this building lived the counterparts of these stimulating-folk. This was the stage in real life; if she were only bold enough to ring up the curtain, the play might begin.

The Spring had her well in thrall, for a sudden gleam of audacity lightened her childish face.

"I *will*," she said. "There was a noise, and I can pretend—"

Without a pause for further reflection, she rapped sharply at the nearest door, and then fell back, aghast at the sound.

She heard the murmur of masculine voices. Before she could turn to fly, in sudden panic, the door opened, and she found herself looking into the face of a young man. It was too late to recoil; she had forced her adventure.

At first sight of him, she felt overwhelmed by her luck. Tall, handsome and well-dressed—the tenant of this room seemed expressly created to figure in a romantic episode. She decided that in the role of hero, he would be quite as good as Alexander—only better, and equal to Waller—only superior.

Then her heart sank to observe that he evidently did not share her rapture for his features were stiff with annoyance.

He stared at the pretty pink face and the homely grey gown as though he viewed a ghost.

"Well?" he queried abruptly. Thora's courage, ebbed under his hostile eye.

"I thought I heard something," she stammered appalled to find he did not take things for granted in the happy way of stage tradition.

"Heard something?" He stared. "How *could* you hear any sound—from the street? Blair, come here!"

The sight of the second man did not tend to reassure her. The lower part of his sinister face appeared to be swathed in a thin bluish scarf, so strongly marked were the signs of shaving in contrast to his pallid skin.

"But I wasn't in the street. I was *here*," she confessed.

Both men continued to regard her, without the smile she had grown to regard as the normal thing.

"You have no business here," said the sinister one severely. "I think you owe us some explanation. Please!"

Thora looked down at the floor. She felt sure they had exchanged meaning glances and she was not surprised. Well-brought-up girls do not, as a rule,



amuse themselves by giving runaway knocks at the doors of bachelor chambers.

In her anxiety to clear herself of the charge of frivolity, she blurted out her preconcerted story, in all its absurdity.

"You're quite mistaken in what you're thinking. Common humanity only led me to your door. I felt it my duty to see if murder were being committed!"

The men stared at her helplessly for a second, then simultaneously burst into a fit of laughter.

"What were you going to do?" asked the younger man, at last, controlling his voice with an effort. "Take us in charge? Where are the bracelets?"

A fresh spasm of laughter doubled him up as he looked at the slight, girlish figure.

"Of course I wasn't going to do anything so silly." Thora's stiff voice suddenly began to run up and down its register, like quicksilver. "I-I merely meant to give the alarm. They would hear this in the street."

From the bag on her arm, she produced a policeman's whistle.

As the man regarded it with mock awe, she turned to him, appealingly.

"If you are a gentleman," she said—drawing on the theatre for inspiration, "you will kindly let me go now."

Then her voice gave way completely.

"I know I've made an awful fool of myself," she quavered. "But—can't you *understand*? It seemed like an adventure. I've never had one. And I've longed for one all my life!"

Confidences are indiscreet, but this time, Thora's impulse was justified by its success. The younger man forgot his mirth, and looked at her with sudden interest.

Under his gaze, the girl felt a faint thrill. Was this the prelude to a romance? It seemed to her that the instruments were tuning-up; at any moment the overture might begin.

A door banged overhead, and footsteps, were heard coming down the stone steps. The man startled at the sound and looked at his sinister companion.

Then with an abrupt movement, he turned to Thora.

"I believe some good angel sent you here," he said, speaking rapidly. "Do you really want an adventure? I can give you one now, and what's more, you'll help me out of a deuce of a hole. Will you? It's only to come inside and say you're my cousin. Play up to me, I give you my word of honour it's all right."

Thora hesitated. Now that the adventure she longed for, was being thrust upon her, she shrank back in indecision. Every scrap of home training, every "extra" at her finishing school and every ounce of maidenly prudence seemed

to drag at her with irresistible force, straining to tug her feet down the staircase, away from temptation. But the magic of Spring rioted in her blood, clamouring for the claims of youth.

The man read her prolonged silence aright.

"Just look at me," he said quietly. "If you can trust me, then come! If you have any doubt, remain outside!"

The words appealed to Thora. Her confidence returned at the sight of his finely-cut face, tanned the colour of tea, and the candour of his blue eyes. She made her decision.

One hour of life!

"I trust you!" she said simply.

With an exclamation of relief, the men almost snatched her into the room and dumped her into a chair by the fire. One tore at her hat-pins in his efforts to remove her hat, while the other dragged to her side a table with unused tea-equipment.

"Look as if you'd been here ages," whispered the younger man. "Oh, and call me Jim!"

Thora nodded. She clasped her dog to her, enchanted with the wild rush and whirl. In one moment she had been transplanted from the commonplace world that pays two-and-six for the pit, and bundled behind the foot-lights. Her half-glance told her that this room was just such a one her fancy had painted—luxurious and artistic. She felt a positive thrill of joy to see the electric lights had the red shades hallowed to stage-settings.

There was a fumbling at the door handle and a head looked round the portière. With instinctive sense of drama, Thora stiffened for her cue. The moment had arrived.

Glancing round, she saw the other two actors had already got into their stride. The sinister one was lighting a cigarette, while her hero dug at the fire in the most natural manner.

The head at the door was followed by the body of the intruder.

Thora was seized with an involuntary spasm of antipathy; she felt glad that she had been roped into this conspiracy to baffle his curiosity. His pallidly unhealthy face, creased with disfiguring lines, bald head and prying eyes, shielded by rimless pince-nez, gave him something of the look of a vulture craning for garbage.

"Hello!" he said. "What was the row just now? Heard a crash and came down to hold an inquest. What's up?"

Thora reddened slightly as her hero threw her an amused smile. With a nod, he indicated a heavy oak chair that lay overturned in a corner.

"*That's* your crash," he said. "Blair and I were at grips over the hanging of—a certain lady."

He jerked his head towards the picture of a woman that hung on the wall. Thora had taken it for a fancy head, barely suggested by scratchy crayon lines and splashes of rose-madder draperies. But the eyes were alive and alluring—the eyes of a syren.

Who was this woman? The girl felt a throb of senseless jealousy as Blair spoke for the first time.

"I was trying to depose her," he said. "Bad art! Milton insisted on her retaining the place of honour. I bowled him over, and the chair."

"H'm!" The intruder seemed to sniff the air.

"And where's Maude?" he continued.

Maude? Again Thora felt the vivid morbid interest. Was this the name of the woman whose picture hung on the wall? She began to understand something of the nature of the mystery. She asked herself what she had to do with it, as she hung on Jim's answer.

"Hanged if I know!" he said carelessly. "Not here at all events."

"But I thought I heard—" continued the spy.

Jim cut him short.

"Considering I've been entertaining a lady—my cousin from the country—here to lunch—is it likely I should have other visitors? Sorry I can't ask you to stop, Candy! I'm neglecting my guest."

For the first time, Candy turned his short-sighted glare on Thora. He had ignored her presence before and there was a sceptical grin on his face as he acknowledged her existence.

He gave a slight start as he gazed, and the insolent light in his eyes faded to a stare of wonder. There was no mistaking the genus; country parsonage was written all over her person. Her little fresh face was so utterly unsophisticated, her grey dress so simple, her hair so pretty and yet so badly-done, that Candy glanced at Jim, almost with respect, for the possession of such an immaculate relative.

He took off his hat hastily.

"I beg your pardon," he said vaguely. "Er—early for the Academy, hey? So you've been here since the morning, hum?"

It was a thrilling moment for Thora for it seemed that the three men hung upon her answer. This was her cue to bolster up imposture. Although ignorant of the issues at stake, she was certain that much depended upon her.

"Let me see!" She spoke slowly and naturally. "What time was it I came, Jim? Change of air has made my watch mad."

"Twelve, you graceless country person! You've done me out of a meal. I've had a composite breakfast and lunch for your sweet sake."

Candy turned away, his interest vanished.

"Well, I was going to spend a couple of hours here before leaving for the Hook," he said. "But as you're engaged, So long!"

As the door slammed, Jim turned impulsively to Thora.

"You ought to be on the stage!" he said. "How can we thank you? And how clever of you not to commit yourself over the time!" Thora rose to her feet, feeling a little overstrung, and suddenly fearful of the outraged proprieties.

"I must really go," she said stiffly. "I have no business to be here."

"Of course you haven't," agreed Jim, in shocked tones.

All the same he hastened to shut the door which Blair darted forward to open.

"By the way," he continued, "my name is Milton. I really cannot allow you to call me 'Jim' any longer. So now we're properly introduced, or shall be, when you've told me who you are."

Thora moved an inch away from the door, her mind at work on three facts. Firstly, this was the most interesting man she had ever met; secondly, this time to-morrow she would be on the sea, the steamer's nose turned towards Canada; thirdly, who was Maude?

She yielded to the appeal in Milton's eyes, and sank back into her chair. She noticed that Blair seemed annoyed at her action, for he started to pace the room like an impatient caged beast.

"My name is Thora Steel," she began, "and my father is a clergyman."

She stopped, bewildered by the men's suddenly stifled laughter.

"I believe you." Milton assured her quite unnecessarily. "Well, look upon this as a sort of district visit, quite in your line. Besides, I have a parson relative, too, to make you feel at home. There he is on the wall. We'll look on the Reverend Clifford as our chaperon."

Thora had hardly glanced at the narrow fanatical face in the photograph, when an exclamation from Blair startled her. She noticed that his face looked still more ghastly.

"For Heaven's sake, Milton, stop!" he muttered. "This is going too far!"

Thora looked from one man to the other, misgiving again stirring in her heart.

"I think I'll go," she murmured.

"Not yet!" Milton's smile again reassured her. "It's too cruel to leave us in the lurch. This old Blair thinks I'm too rapid in my friendships, that's all. What were you saying?"

"We live on a station in Canada," Thora again took up her tale. "Father is the only parson for miles around. It's like being buried. I've had a short holiday here—staying with an aunt in Streatham. This time to-morrow I shall be on my way back. So you see, it was my last chance, and I did so want an adventure!"

"Quite so." Jim nodded. "But the voyage. Plenty of chance there." Thora hung her head. "I'm such a wretched sailor," she faltered, feeling her answer a bad blot on romance. "I never leave my berth."

"Hard lines." Her words seemed to please her companion, as though he disliked the thought of possible ocean flirtations. "Well, now you've had an adventure of sorts. Something to talk of, I suppose. I should rather like to know what you've made of it."

Thora looked at the alluring face on the wall that presented such an odd contrast to the Rev. Clifford.

"It's simple," she said, with evident pride in her powers of deduction. "I suppose you're in love with that woman—Maude, and you're expecting her to come here every minute. That horrid man, who came in just now, has some sort of claim on her—her husband very likely. You were afraid he would come in and stay until she came. That's why you kept me here, as a blind, and also to send him away. I've been a sort of catspaw, I suppose. And now, since she may come any minute, I'll go."

The two men exchanged rapid glances, and Milton looked at the clock.

"Stay just half an hour longer!" he pleaded. "That chap may come back yet. Besides I've something I want to say."

He lowered his voice.

"You think I'm in love with Maude!"

"Why not? She's beautiful enough. And it's no concern of mine. We're strangers."

"Not now." The note in Milton's voice suddenly dissipated her wretched pangs of jealousy. "D'you know, I've never met anyone like you before? Maude! I'm surfeited with Maudes. Wish to be quit of her for ever! Perhaps you understand now why I was so anxious that man should not find her here. She's in Society, you know. There'd be scandal. I did not wish to be compromised for the sake of a burnt-out flame."

Thora's ingenuous face betrayed her relief.

"It is so horrid to feel you've been used in another woman's love affair," she said. "And if you really like—I'll stay just a little longer."

It really seemed to her only a little longer that she stayed, although the clock told another tale—the minutes slipped away so quickly in the red-lit room. Undeterred by the presence of Blair, who fidgeted with a book, Milton and Thora talked with lowered voices. It seemed to the girl that nothing she

said was too trivial to arouse Milton's interest. He asked so many questions and received her confidences with such sympathy, that her head was turned with conquest.

Woman-like, she resolved to test her power.

"Now, tell me something," she commanded. "About Maude!"

"*Maude?*" Involuntarily, Milton gave a violent start, and he glanced sharply towards a heavy curtain that screened an alcove at the end of the room.

Thora followed the direction of his gaze. She was positive that she could discern a slight bulge behind the portière that might have been the outlines of a human figure. At the sight she was seized with a sharp revulsion of feeling. Milton had deceived her.

As he noticed her stare, he gave her a slight nod.

The feeling of fear that had filtered through the girl's mind gave way to a rush of indignation. It was infamous to reflect that all along he had known that there was an eavesdropper—an unseen witness of their tender conversation—possibly some woman who laughed in her sleeve.

"Is there a woman behind that curtain?" she demanded haughtily. "Is it—" she had difficulty in forcing herself to utter the hateful word. "Is it—Maude?"

Milton glanced at Blair. Then once more he nodded.

"Hush!" he said. "If you must really go now, I'll see you a little way."

He seized his hat and muffler as he spoke, and moved towards the door. But Thora did not move. "I feel, in the circumstances," she said haughtily, "I ought to see the woman for whose sake I have lied."

Milton read the injured pride and jealousy in the immature little face.

"Not for *hers*!" he said quickly. "For mine. Listen, Thora! Haven't I made it plain? I've done with her!" He snapped his fingers. "Done with her for ever. It's been your score all along. A bit of a comedy if you think of it. Like the screen scene from 'The School for Scandal.' Here she's been, cooped up behind that curtain, cramped and uncomfortable, yet not daring to show her face. She knows I'll never return to her—*now*!"

His eyes were ardent. Young though she was, Thora knew that only some overpowering emotion could have brought the flush to his face.

"Look here, Thora," he proceeded. "At the beginning of this adventure you trusted me. Now I'm going to trust you with my secrets."

Heedless of Blair's smothered ejaculation, he continued.

"I want you to leave this room, perfectly satisfied that all is above-board—that I've no shady corners I wish to keep dark from you. Personally, I would rather you did not raise that curtain. At the same time, sooner than doubt me, I *wish* you to look. The choice I leave with you!"



Thora's heart swelled with triumph. This was the culminating point in her adventure—the real romance. Incredible though it seemed, the strong attraction she had felt for this man had been duplicated within him. It had been a fusion of two live wires. And in earnest of his passion he had sacrificed this woman to her.

Moved by overpowering curiosity, she walked towards the portière. The two men drew near also. Blair's lips worked nervously in his anticipation of a scene, but Milton merely smiled. He twisted the muffler in his hand, but that was his sole sign of any suspense.

Thora's hand was outstretched. Then it fell nervelessly to her side. A sudden distaste seized her. This shady episode in a man's history was no concern of hers. Her whole nature recoiled before stirring up muddy depths.

"I—I'd rather not look!" she said.

Milton drew a breath of relief.

"I felt sure you wouldn't. I'm glad of it. And now come away!"

Thora could understand now his anxiety to get her out of the room away from Blair and the woman. When they were outside on the landing, she turned to him, half dreading the words she felt sure he would utter. To her surprise, he merely rang for the lift. Chilled with disappointment, she looked timidly at him as they shot downwards. He seemed suddenly to have grown older and played out—a mere shell of a man. The tears started to her eyes. She had had her vision of walking slowly down those stone stairs, with him—treading on air—while she listened to his promise to come to her in her exile—like the fairy-prince of romance.

Side by side, they walked soberly out of the building and into the quiet street. Then the man spoke in a formal voice. "I should like to say something. Will you promise me never to embark again in such an adventure? I have sisters like you—dear little souls!—but terribly young and inexperienced. I should be sorry to have seen them in your shoes to-day. Be grateful Fate led you to my door—and no-one else's in this building!"

Thora could hardly believe her ears. Her unconventional eager lover had suddenly merged into a prig. She felt she was being blamed.

"But—but it was *you* who asked me to come in," she faltered.

"Well, I hadn't sized you up then. What would a man think of a girl who knocked him up on a flimsy pretext? But there's no harm done. I promise you I will keep this little indiscretion of yours a dead secret. If you are wise you'll never mention this to a living soul, or you might find yourself compromised."

"Thank you. I can keep my own counsel."

Thora reared her head proudly in the air, while she bit her lip to keep back her tears. Her adventure had proved to be nothing but a hollow fraud, with a sermon for its epitaph.

Then she was aware that Milton had taken her hand.

"Good-bye. I shall often think of you, dear little Sweet Seventeen!"

He turned and left her. Smarting from the blister on her self-respect, Thora walked away into the violet twilight, disconsolate for the moment, and crushed and disillusioned, even though her life was in the Spring, and Summer lay before her.

MEANTIME, Milton had gone back to the flat as quickly as the lift could take him. He seemed no whit surprised to find Blair alone. Glancing at his ghastly face, he poured out some brandy.

"Here!" he said roughly. "It's all right. She'll never split. I've left her crushed and humbled to the dust. There was humour in some of my remarks." He smiled grimly at the recollection. "It was the devil's own luck her turning up like that. No-one else would have kept that hound Candy from nosing round. She'd have whitewashed the Fiend himself!"

Blair nodded as he gulped down his drink.

"What induced you to play the fool like that at the end?" he asked thickly. "You stood to ruin all."

Milton suddenly wiped his face.

"Because it was the only thing to do. It was vital to our interests that she should leave this room *satisfied* there was no secret or mystery. Good lord! My relief when she decided not to look. I didn't want to—"

He broke off to drink some more brandy.

"Besides there was no risk," he continued quietly, taking no heed of the look of horror that deepened in the other man's face.

"Didn't you notice I was ready for her?" He picked up the muffler, with trembling fingers. "Pity she'll never know she's had the adventure of her life—poor innocent! If she'd drawn that curtain, she'd never have drawn another breath!"

Then squaring his shoulders, he walked towards the curtain.

"Pull yourself together, Doctor!" he commanded. "You'll have to work now like the devil!"

He spoke truly. There was devil's work to be done.

For, as he drew the portière, a silent huddled figure fell limply forward upon the carpet—all that was left of the murdered woman—Maude.

The pictured eyes of her injured husband, the Rev. Clifford, stared at her dispassionately and pitilessly, from the wall. And the man whose youth and life



she had wrecked, staggered back, in momentary recoil, at the fresh sight of his victim. The red-shaded lamps of stage-tradition, threw a rosy glow on the final tableau.

And a block away, a little girl, in a grey gown, crossed the road in safety, under the sheltering palm of the police.

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### 13: Evil Be To Him Who Evil Thinks

*Lady's Realm, February 1913*

HE dropped it by the hedge, just as her foot slipped down the bank of the ditch. In an instant she picked it up again, with apparent unconcern—but too late for concealment.

The two young men, who were her companions, exchanged a look of horror. The elder swung her to a foothold on the browned grass of the field.

"Gloriously unconventional, all this!" he observed in formal tones. "By the way—would you mind? But what did you say your name was?"

The girl laughed.

"Hermione Rackham. And I didn't say it!"

Only convention—the lack of which Withers had just applauded—preventing him from groaning aloud. For as she uttered her name, his worst fear was realised.

Through their own folly, the young men had impaled themselves on the horns of a desperately awkward, and possibly dangerous, dilemma—where their future prospects were concerned. Even those who entertain angels unawares must have their satisfaction diluted with a wholesome feeling of awe. But in assuming that Miss Rackham was a common-or-garden dinner guest, Withers and Budd—ultra-smart and correct bachelors—had pledged themselves to literally entertain one who, by the flashlight of that unlucky incident, stood revealed as a stranger to celestial circles.

Outwardly, it was impossible to suspect her of a hidden bar sinister. Her oval face, its pallor accentuated by her dark eyes and waving hair, suggested purity and refinement in every line. Her trim costume, which combined utility with elegance, made her a striking figure on the field. Small wonder, then, that Withers and Budd followed her, instead of the hounds, in a breathless scamper over the fields, and, at the first check, instituted themselves her guides cross-country.

Her pluck in negotiating obstacles, together with her staying powers, strengthened their fascination, and when they finally stopped, hot and winded, after having lost the hare, they all felt the glow of old-established friendship that comes from hours spent together in the open.

The last meet of the Harriers was the occasion for the social event of the year; an exclusive dinner, followed by a dance at Maple Hall, to those fortunate followers whom the Heather family considered worthy of the privilege. It was this highly-coveted honour that the reckless bachelors had conferred on the Unknown.

When Withers asked her, she raised her eyes, shining with pleasure.

"But can I accept on your invitation? Oughtn't Mrs. Heather to invite me?" she gasped out, still panting from her exertions.

Withers rushed to his doom.

"I assure you my cousin gives me a free hand in this matter. We make this affair informal, although, of course, no Dick, Tom or Harry on the field can slip in without being personally vouched for. My relatives are great sticklers."

"But how do you know I'm respectable or presentable?"

The question, asked in joke, was accepted as one.

The memory of this conversation recurred to Hermione as they plodded heavily, in their mud-caked boots, back to the lane.

"I'm just living for to-night, when you're to act as my social god-fathers."

In spite of the black shadow that draped her, her sparkling eyes were those of a beautiful girl, and Budd, in realising the fact, proved himself both youthful and masculine. He rose creditably to the test.

"I only hope you won't object to your name, and howl at the cold water. After all, meeting strangers is rather chilly work."

"I shan't object as long as you don't get into hot water."

"Why on earth should we?"

Hermione Rackham looked thoughtful.

"Honestly, I suspect you of being rather reckless," she said, glancing at his dare-devil blue eyes. "But I've accepted this charming invitation solely on the strength of Mr. Withers' word. I'm positive he could never do anything that wasn't the pink of propriety. Just look at that! Was it really once a boy, with a dirty collar and inky fingers?"

She nodded towards Withers, who was striding ahead, his profile outlined coldly against the blue sky.

Budd laughed.

"Beautiful, isn't he? Don't make fun of him for being so elegant. We're rather proud of him. A man with a future, only, unfortunately, just at present, there's a hitch.

"What's that?"

"Well, he's in diplomacy, you know." Budd spoke as though it were pork or leather. "And there's a lot of wire-pulling. Old Withers was to have had a splendid post jockeyed, or something. He'd have been made. Then his father goes and quarrels with Maybrick, the swell who engineers these things. So poor Withers is dropped, with only himself to depend on."

"Only that! Poor fellow!"

"Oh, well, it's hard lines. He's keen on Marie Heather, and the family won't hear of anything, unless he gets a clinking billet. Besides, he means to do well for himself."

"And no man does any good, unless he is an egotist, or is any good, if he is one," observed Miss Rackham drily. "Anyway," she added with a sigh, "your egotist is very good-looking."

Withers waited, to hold open the gate that led into the rutted lane. He spoke to Hermione with cold courtesy.

"Your car been following, with the rest, by the lanes. It will soon be round. Sorry we lost. You deserve a pad."

Then the chilly perfection of his face was broken into a beautiful smile of respectful homage and greeting.

Hermione turned swiftly to see what vision of radiant womanhood had exacted this tribute. But, contrary to the spirit of Romance, it was directed towards an elderly man, whose face, bleached and fragile as white egg-shell, was scored with lines of irritability and nervousness.

He acknowledged Withers' greeting with the curtest nod, as he climbed into a dogcart and drove off, in company with a dark, bearded man.

Withers' face clouded with disappointment.

Budd hastened to explain, in response to Hermione's look of interest.

"That's the great Maybrick I told you of. That man's got fine houses, and diamonds and motor-cars sticking out of his pockets, to give away to lucky people who can conjugate avoir and être, and smile nicely when they say, 'How-d'ye-do?' Those are the sole requirements for diplomacy, eh, Withers?"

"Funny, Budd?" Withers forced a smile. "No, the whole art is to keep a silent tongue. Eh, Budd? That's Lacroix with Maybrick," he added, turning to Hermione. "Foreign Office, you know. Both staying at Maple Hall."

"What interesting people the Heathers seem to know!" cried Hermione rapturously. "How glorious to think I'm going to their dance to-night. And all through you."

As she jumped into her smart car, her smile, directed at Budd, was, like most feminine missiles, badly aimed, for it hovered over the unresponsive Withers.

Left alone, the two young men faced each other ruefully.

Withers spoke first:

"Budd, this, is horrible! We've made a ghastly mess of it."

"You—Withers. One of your brilliant ideas to invite her."

"I admit it." The egotist unconsciously claimed a monopoly in brilliancy. "But I took it for granted that she was Colonel Long's niece. She was so charming, too. Who would have thought it of her?"

Budd nodded.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather when she made that slip at the fence. That first gave it away. I never noticed anything wrong before."

Withers bit his nails—an inelegant trick for a future diplomatist.

"Well, we've got to get out of it. She cannot—must not come to-night. It would simply ruin my prospects."

Budd scratched his healthy young cheek. Apparently, bad manners were catching.

"How can we avoid it?" he asked. "We can't drop her again, like a hot penny. It would be beastly bad form."

"Bad form?" Withers caught at the word. "But isn't it the worst possible form to introduce this—er—fascinating, but impossible young female into an exclusive family like the Heathers without credentials? They would be furious. Talk about letting loose a tiger among a flock of sheep. They'd never forgive me. And —there is Marie."

Budd nodded sympathetically.

"I know, old man. You're in a deuce of a hole. All the same, Withers, I am going to play the game. It's only cricket. I shall stick to this poor girl. We've let ourselves in through our own folly. After all, she's only a woman. Very likely, she errs through ignorance. And we're men."

He threw out his chest. His ruddy face was lit up with the chivalry that animated the knights of old—now resting, stony and cross-legged, in ancient English churches.

Withers could not be behind Budd in this new attitude, although he felt his knees give, in subtle sympathy with the crooked legs of those old stone Crusaders, when he thought of the coming ordeal.

Walking back to the Hall, he began to exercise his talents for finesse.

"We must formulate some plan, Budd. She must have no introductions. We must keep her dark. I fancy, if possible, we shall have to divide her up between us for the evening."

Budd whistled ruefully.

"It won't be a festive time. Tame sort of dance. I shall have to cut half my usual partners. What will the other girls say? What will Marie Heather think?"

Withers looked in positive pain. The recollection of a pair of dark, lustrous eyes, that had lured him to indiscretion, brought no comfort.

When they reached Maple Hall, the heavy velvet portière had barely fallen behind them, on entering, when the spirit of the house had them in thrall. Those muffling barriers that shut out every draught, were symbolic of the Heather attitude towards Society—Seclusion.

Mrs. Heather raised her eyes with the slow, languid grace that denoted a Heather. Her daughters followed suit, like a flock of sheep. All the Heather women were true to type—well-bred, cool and exclusive, with the long nose that stands for ancestors, when seen on the faces of Heather women, but merely means Jewish blood, when worn by those of lower origin. Marie Heather, although plainly one of the flock, possessed the necessary youth that labelled her a lamb, her carefully combed white fleece tied up with the blue ribbons of a family pet.

She gave Withers a look of welcome from pretty turquoise eyes. Mrs. Heather adjusted her lorgnette, which was a visible note of interrogation—the inevitable prelude to a question.

"Where did you part company with that very charming lady we saw you piloting this morning?"

Withers exchanged a guilty glance with Budd. It was evidence of his unimpeachable taste that they had accepted the lady without comment.

Budd answered him, with misplaced but admirable enthusiasm. He did not shirk the first obstacle.

"She's a stranger, staying at the hotel for a day or so. We've asked her for the dance to-night. Pressed her to accept. Withers gave his word that he was your representative."

Mrs. Heather smiled graciously.

"We shall be charmed to welcome a guest of Martin's."

Budd drew a breath of relief. Miss Rackham was formally accepted. But Withers' rigid face did not escape the attention of his own sex.

A man addressed him confidentially.

"What's up, Withers? You don't seem too happy. Nothing—er—wrong about the lady?"

"No. Oh, no. Should I ask her here if there were?"

"Then why do you look down your nose?"

Budd broke in with reckless daredevilry.

"Fact of the matter is, old Withers is a stickler for propriety, and this charming and fascinating lady has somewhat compromised herself in his eyes. This morning she slipped by a fence, and—dropped— something."

A smile appeared on every face, as a youth voiced the general reflection.

"Honi soit qui mal y pense."

Lacroix—the Frenchman—looked up with a puzzled air. Even the idiocies of English slang held no mysteries for him, but his linguistic talent failed to interpret this unknown tongue...

But the others translated with ease.

Withers raised his brows coldly at this offence against good taste. His sense of delicacy was aggrieved.

"Canaille!" he muttered.

Again, Lacroix looked puzzled.

"Come on, Withers! We must be off to change."

Budd took his friend's arm and led him up the staircase. At the top he paused, and glanced back down at the hall.

"Look at them sitting there," he said bitterly, "smiling as though butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Yet they can make that poor girl's evening a perfect torment to her. All the refined tortures. Laceration of the nerves. Mutilated pride and hope. Yet she's a good and pretty young girl, as God has made her. Women are fiends."

Withers nodded assent. The Heathers were the cream of Society; they were utterly separated from the milk of human kindness.

"We must preserve her from their clutches," went on Budd. "Withers, it's up to us! Remember, I'm counting alone on your coolness of head and nerve."

Withers envied his friend's lightness of heart as the cheery whistle died away down the corridor. As he changed, drearily, he could hear the Woman's Champion singing lustily in his bath. The strains reproached him for his own dull weight of apprehension.

"Worth a thousand of me," he said to the nerve-stricken face in the glass. "No sign of the white feather about him!"

Feeling unable to face Marie Heather's tranquil eyes, in his present state of unrest, he worked himself up to a positive fever by pacing the limited length of a bachelor's room like a convict in his cell.

When he left his refuge, at the sound of the dinner-gong, he wondered how Budd had filled the interval.

"Like one of the French aristocrats," he reflected enviously. "Laughing, jesting—packing a lifetime of mirth into the few remaining minutes."

His forecast was correct in every particular. Budd had laughed, jested—and packed. At the present moment he was in the train, whirling back to town.

"Poor fellow, he was so upset at having to go!" explained Mrs. Heather. "But he had a telegram. Most important business. And his aunt is dead."

The future diplomatist smiled grimly. Budd had been desperate, when he made assurance doubly sure by that inartistic excuse. But the next moment anger overcame criticism. Now that Budd had deserted him, his position was not only difficult—it was hopeless. How could one man keep guard over a dangerous guest for the space of a whole evening?

He stopped cursing Budd's cowardly defection. He shot him out of his mind like a piece of rubbish. There was a consolatory touch in the reflection that his

self-depreciation was vain. By standing his ground, he had proved himself a better man than the splendid Budd.

Although Marie was by his side, he ate his dinner with the sensation of a criminal enjoying his last meal. Tomorrow would see him cast out from the charmed circle of Exclusives.

Opposite to him was Maybrick. The great man, under the stimulus of the general excitement, had relaxed his rule of silence, and was relating anecdotes—all names carefully suppressed—in which he had triumphed over minor difficulties, by the exercise of superhuman tact and finesse. As usual, he took not the slightest notice of Withers, but he seemed to throw these exhibitions of skill carelessly at his sleek, well-brushed head.

"Take that!" he seemed to say, derisively. "Take that, you ornamental puppy, who imagine that a Gibson profile and a few French idioms are the only qualifications for a diplomatic career."

Withers grew more and more moody. He mentally put the all-conquering Maybrick in his shoes—reversing the usual order of promotion—and wondered how that brilliant brain would tackle his problem.

Unresponsive to Marie's prattle, he sank deeper in abstraction. Following the lines of a French idiom, he found himself on the trail of an idea that gave furiously to think.

When the band struck up in the hall, as a signal to the dilatory dancers, Withers took up his station near the door of the ladies' cloak-room. His imperturbable expression gave no clue to the anxiety that racked his heart. No one could suspect that the calm, immaculate youth was desperately assuming the pose of a Machiavelli.

Presently Hermione Rackham entered the ball-room. Withers shivered at the sight of her, as though her pockets—which she did not possess—were stuffed with parcels of dynamite. Her beauty, enhanced by her gown of buttercup colour, looked exotic and Southern, but the light in her eyes was dimmed. In spite of her regal appearance, the gay confidence of the morning had departed. She glanced around her with the timid scrutiny of a wild animal, that fears a hidden trap.

At the thought of the contrast, Withers forgot his diplomatic schemes. Budd's sermon on the staircase recurred to him. Even though it was the Devil that rebuked sin, some of that fine deserter's phrases stuck. His joy for finesse evaporated before the recollection that here was a woman—and a woman in trouble. It may be that at that moment he had something more in common with an old stone Crusader than his rigid exterior.

Unfortunately for modern romance, the words with which he introduced himself as *preux chevalier*, lacked nobility.



"May I—'m—pleasure? Would you mind sitting it out? I have something I have to say—about myself. I'm afraid I must be an egotist—for once."

"Do! For once!"

In spite of Hermione's smile, it was evident she welcomed him as a friend.

"Where's Mr. Budd?" she asked, as Withers ushered her to an alcove.

"Gone away, I'm sorry to say. But, first of: all, I'm in a hole."

"So am I. Are you going to hide me in alcoves all the evening?"

"Far from it. There'll be a crowd of partners fighting for introductions before long. But—to return to myself, I made a bit of a blunder this morning. Over you"

"Ah!"

"Fact is, I'm in diplomacy. I've practically the refusal of a most important appointment."

Again Hermione smiled.

"And, in my position, that's a lot of social skill required. Got to remember faces, spot nationalities, and so on. Well, I flatter myself I can size up anyone on the spot, and when I first saw you this morning, I said to my companions, 'I'll bet you whatever you like, that's a Frenchwoman!'"

"I'm sure I don't look a bit French."

Hermione drew herself up, with a gesture of offended national pride.

"Oh, a wee bit, you know. Dark, spirituelle; and so on. But I admit I went chiefly by your dress. It had a Parisian air."

"A leather-bound skirt and nailed boots," said Hermione, suspiciously. But she was plainly appeased, and Withers hastened to follow up his advantage.

"They'll rag me no end when the truth leaks out. So I'm going to beg you to play up to me, and let me introduce you as the Marquise. No-one knows you, and it will be a fine score to take them in."

Hermione shook her head doubtfully. "But I know no French."

"Neither do they. Lacroix always speaks English, for he can't make head or tail of their French, nor they of his. They're rotten linguists. Insist on speaking English, and just say, 'Dieu!' and 'Ma foi!' and shrug occasionally! No one knows, until they try, the value of a good spoof. This may be a valuable opportunity for me to test human credulity."

Hermione looked reflectively at a pot of arum-lilies.

"Dieu! The Marquise wishes now to dance, ma foi!" she said presently.

The Marquise danced a lot. She was besieged with partners directly she appeared in the ballroom. As the evening wore on, her cheeks grew flushed with exercise, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure. The old radiant look of confidence returned. Her popularity increased in proportion to her added beauty. Everyone wished to dance with the Marquise. No-one attempted to

reproduce Withers' reproduction of her full title, for it had a "ll" in it, and ended in "on"—pitfalls both, for blunt Anglo-Saxon tongues.

It was late in the evening before Withers was able to secure another dance with Hermione. Much water had flowed under the bridge since then, much champagne been drunk, many collars ruined. He pressed her hand.

"Congratulations. You've been a perfect success. A complete take-in. It just proves the value of bluff. Now, I'm going to leave you, once more, in a hole, while I forage for an ice for you."

Hermione sank back in the alcove, grateful for the rest. She had barely settled herself among the cushions, before her solitude was broken in upon by two elderly men. Their faces were flushed— but not with dancing—and they talked rapidly, in French, with much gesticulation. They were the great Maybrick and Lacroix.

At the sight of Hermione they broke off for a minute, but the Frenchman was plainly impatient to finish what he had to say.

Once again, he turned on his gigantic volume of talk in a sputtering flow of whispers, broken occasionally by the fluent, but more guttural interruptions of Maybrick. The noisy strains of the orchestra nearly drowned it, and the cheerful clamour of humanity, stamping in a two-step in close proximity to the alcove, made listening a fine art.

Presently, Hermione's face, which had grown dreamy, brightened into life as Withers, armed with a cherry-and-white ice, approached.

"Here you are, Marquise," he said.

The effect of his words was both electric and gratifying. The two great men, whose attention he had tried to woo for a week, sprang to their feet with an exclamation.

"Marquise!" cried Maybrick. "Is this lady French?"

Withers nodded. But in spite of his calm face his heart sank. He had never foreseen this contingency. The flock at Maple Hall was so select and well-chosen, that he had overlooked the possibility of Hermione's coming into contact with one of her foster-nationality. He had forgotten Lacroix. If he had remembered him, Lacroix was a non-dancing man, who effaced himself in card-rooms.

Exposure seemed inevitable.

Then he noticed that the agitation of the two big men exceeded his own. Maybrick had quite a pretty flush on his dyspeptic face, although his expression was distinctly ugly.

"Then—you have overheard our conversation?" he said, turning sharply on Hermione.

She answered promptly.

"Every word."

Lacroix made a gesture of despair. He thought he had gauged the linguistic incapacity of Maple Hall—the elder residents of whom could talk correct French about gardeners and penknives with other English people, who spoke equally correct French—unfortunately extinct in France—and the younger folk, who having been educated abroad, had congregated there in batches, and staunchly refused to speak other than their native tongue.

Maybrick, also, whose caution had outlived the attack of the champagne, did not forget this fact. He knew that only a native could have disentangled their fragments of rapid talk in the din.

And here—before them—was that selfsame native.

Withers, who stood petrified, saw with astonishment that Hermione was playing his own game of bluff.

"Yes, I heard. Every word. Valuable information, as you know. But everything has its price. You have a post that will just suit Mr. Withers. What will suit him, will suit me. For I'm engaged to be married to him."

Cold fluid seemed to be pouring down Withers' back as he heard the words. He had a vision of Marie Heather, daintily blonde, charmingly correct, white-fleeced and tied up with blue ribbons, like a valentine. In the baby-shop, her cradle must have borne the ticket, "Wife for a Rising Diplomatist."

Meantime, the dark-browed damsel, who was making diplomatists, faced Maybrick, with militant aspect. She stopped Lacroix's stream of expostulatory French with a gesture.

"I deal only with Mr. Maybrick. You know what I know. You know others will be glad to know it, too. Well, you know what will stop my tongue and make me in the secret. That post for Mr. Withers. And in writing, too!"

Maybrick paced the narrow space, his brow creased into angry lines. It was clear that he found the position impossible.

It was at this point that Withers, the unemotional, who had been having inspirations badly all day—counting from his unlucky invitation—received his crowning inspiration. He saw a way out of the entanglement. His level head distrusted the situation. He did not believe that important posts were to be bounced out of diplomatists by farce-like incidents. Hermione did not even know what post she demanded. At any moment the bubble might be pricked.

But, he saw his chance to demonstrate his special aptitude for such a post.

"Mr. Maybrick," he said, with his best smile, "this has gone on too long. I throw myself on your discretion. Your secret is still unknown. This lady does not know one word of French."

For the second time that evening the effect of his words was magical. Astonishment struggled with relief on the men's faces.

"But I gather, from the conversation, that you must have introduced this lady as being of French extraction," remarked Maybrick. "You called her 'Marquise.' May I ask your object?"

Withers saw his chance.

"For Mr. Maybrick that question is unnecessary. This lady, whose acquaintance I made this morning by a happy chance, has already told you the reason—if any—with her own tongue."

A delicate shade of meaning underlined the words. Then he ironed all traces of anxiety from his features and awaited results. He could say no more. Everything depended on Maybrick's acumen..

He relied on a safe quality. The champagne had done its worst by now. He saw the light of comprehension dawn in Maybrick's keen eyes. It melted into approbation.

He held out his hand.

"Excellent! Mr. Withers, I congratulate you. And I should like a little chat with you to-morrow."

Withers thanked him with his eyes, which was the only form of gratitude available for what had not been promised with lips. Yet, in that careless nod, he knew a post had been given him.

The statesmen walked away, arm-in-arm. It was noticed when they re-entered the ball-room that they shook with laughter.

Left alone with Hermione, Withers faced her with some trepidation. In the hour of his exultation he remembered that he was a gentleman. Indeed, his constant recollection of this fact was his sole sign of low-breeding.

"I have to thank you sincerely for your intervention," he said. "With your permission, we will keep up the comedy of the Marquise till the end of the evening. Mr. Maybrick and M. Lacroix will respect our confidence. I have nearly won my bet, and shall owe you a debt of deepest gratitude. For the rest, of course, you were jesting. My personal affairs could not be allowed to interfere with matters of international importance. But, thank you, a thousand times, for your generous impulse. It was quite dramatic."

Sinking to his knees, he kissed her hand.

Hermione reddened at this act of homage.

"Was it so generous of me?" she asked. "You heard me tell them we were engaged."

In spite of the shock of reaction, Withers remembered again, in good time, that he was a gentleman.

"I am only too honoured," he said courteously. "Since you announced the engagement, I shall hold myself bound, until you—ahem!—throw me over!"

Hermione looked at him keenly. Then she burst out laughing.

"You are bold. I might take you at your word. And what would Miss Marie Heather think? But, no. You are safe. I'm sharp-witted enough, in spite of all, and I know what I owe you. I felt frightened out of my wits to-night when I got here, and heard the women in the cloakroom talking of M. Lacroix. They said, 'He'd be impossible if he were not French. Only French people can drop their aitches and remain distinguished.' "

She fixed her dark eyes on Wither's abashed face.

And now, Miss Rackham's speech, which hitherto has been edited, out of consideration for the compositor, shall be reproduced, exactly as it left her charming lips, since she dropped her first aspirate by the ditch.

"You've be'aved like a gentleman. I guessed directly you 'ad invented this French title to save people being 'orrid to me. I've 'ad an 'appy evening. That was w'y I tried to do you a good turn just now. But as for being engaged to you—I'm already engaged to a man who's worth a 'undred of you!"

In his relief, Withers forgot that he was a gentleman.

He gripped her hands.

"'Ard lines. Oh, 'ard lines!" he said.

He had paid her the greatest possible compliment. For he, the cultured and correct—was unconscious of any lapse.

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## 14: The Open Door

*The Cornhill Magazine*, Oct 1913

FOR five weeks, Mark Collier had been a happily blinded Samson— unconscious of his infirmity. It was not until he stood in the chancel of the church, awaiting his bride, that his sight was suddenly returned to him, in a bewildering shaft of light.

The truth was appalling. He realized, with merciless clarity, that he did not love the woman he was about to make his wife, that the whole idea had been a ghastly mistake— that the mere thought of marriage with her was sacrilege of his finest instincts.

The shock of the discovery was like a physical blow. He caught his breath quickly, and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, everything seemed to have undergone a subtle transformation.

He marked each detail of his surroundings, photographing every object on his sensitized brain, with the fidelity of a dying man, who yearns to carry with him, into the Unknown, some dim remembrance of the dear and familiar. He noticed the smudge of footmarks on the red carpet, the cloud of floating motes, the slight powder of dust on the palms, that formed part of the stereotyped decorations.

The light that streamed in through the stained-glass windows had dyed the faces of some of the congregation with patches of color. The nose of his future mother-in-law was stamped with a violet lozenge. The eldest daughter—a beauty of her year, who, faithful to the family traditions, had married a rich husband, displayed delicate cheeks barred after the fashion of an Indian squaw, with orange and vermilion streaks. The bald head of an august uncle was speckled with vivid green splashes,

The change was merely the effect of a sudden ray of sunlight. Yet as Collier looked at them— the ghastly truth still paralyzing his senses— he shuddered involuntarily. The unnatural decoration of the faces of his future relatives united them with a tribal likeness, and flashed on his excited mind some suggestion of rites— savage, inchoate, alien to civilization.

The ray of sunshine died, blown out by the lips of the wind. The church again shrank back into neutral shadows. With the departure of the light, sensation left Collier. He remained dulled and quiescent, his turgid mind dimly conscious of some muffled misery. A narcotic-steeped hand was clasped on his brain.

He found himself trying to remember a dream. The night before his wedding-day he had been visited by one that had left him vaguely troubled and perplexed, like a King of old.

Ordinarily, he was obsessed by no nocturnal fancies; when he closed his eyes, he simply went out— like the flame of a candle.

He groped after the recollection. What was the unpleasant impression that had undermined the entrenchments of repose, thrown up quickly by Nature for the protection of his slumbering Ego?

Somewhere, at the back of his consciousness, a spark fused; all along the train laid to some remote brain-cell he could feel the faint crackling. At any second would come ignition.

It came. Then he remembered.

He had dreamed of the interior of a prison— a sunken mud-plastered hole, strengthened with ribs of stone. The sole ray of light that cut the darkness was thickly clogged with atoms of decomposition. By this dusty illumination, he saw the prisoner.

No definite terms could describe him. He was pure negation. His face was gray, as though covered with the deposit of the ashes of burnt-out passions. Yet one last fire flickered through the clogging layers, for in the prisoner's eyes glimmered a poignant memory of past freedom.

In his dream, Collier asked questions, which were answered by some shadowy companion.

"Has he been here long?"

"A lifetime."

"Does he never hope to be free?"

"Never."

It was then that he noticed a door at the back of the prison, which seemed to be outlined with a luminous blue pencil. It was the blessed outside daylight, cleaving the fissures.

"Look!" He stammered in his excitement. "The door! Surely it is open?"

The quiet voice answered.

"It has been open for years."

"But the prisoner? Does he not know?"

"He knows. But he has lost the will to step outside. That is the true servitude."

With a start, Collier realized that he was no longer dreaming, but standing in the church, in full view of the scented, fashionably dressed throng. The organist was dreamily plucking at the keys of his instrument, shelling each note for the honey that lay at its core. *Salut d'Amour*. At any moment, the bride would appear.

Collier shot a hunted glance around him. In every direction it seemed that some smartly garbed form barred his way. A knowledge was growing upon him that was cramp of the soul.

*He— and he alone—* was the prisoner.

He was the last to realize this truth, which was the common property of the world. Some men had given jocose warnings; some women had murmured cryptic utterances. Others had merely looked at him with eyes of pity and wonder. All recurred to him now— the spoken word and the unspoken sympathy.

His capture had been inevitable. For years, he had lived in solitudes so deep that he could hear the humming of the globe as it spun round on its axle; where the heavens, at night, were so perforated with constellations, that they almost seemed the canopy of day, pinpricked with stars of blackness. He had learned, through constant observation and companionship with the wild creatures of the woods, his relationship to the brute— and then the bar to affinity in the sure knowledge of his soul.

He had returned from the wilds— an elemental organism, stripped of any shell of worldly experience— to fall an instant victim to a pretty face, a sartorial instinct, and the spell of juxtaposition.

To a woman, marriage is generally a question of alternatives; to a man, in the main, it is a question of choice. Yet looking back, Collier could trace no signs of conscious volition on his part. There had never been one moment of genuine attraction— one step taken on his own initiative. He had merely followed a lure.

A lure. The word bore some similitude to her name. Laura. He pictured her as she would appear in a moment or so— in shimmering bridal array. The scent of orange-blossom filled his nostrils with its promise; and he saw its fulfilment in a barrow-load of unripened fruit under the flaring glare of naphtha lights. All thought of this marriage filled him with sick terror. He had been trapped. He was the prisoner.

A pang of overwhelming poignancy rent his whole being, to be swiftly followed by the nausea that rides hard at the heels of pain. He tried to clench his hands inside his tight gloves.

*"I cannot marry this woman. I will not!"*

The words, bursting from his heart, died on the threshold of his lips, in abortive silence.

A woman's face, feline in type, with the ghost of a smile in her light hazel eyes, smirked at him from the congregation. It was the last face to be distinctly impressed upon his vision. Dimly he became aware, when he shifted his eyes from hers, that a furtive smile slipped before his gaze, in fugitive manner, ever



eluding him, end broken and flickering like the film of a cinema. The smart congregation had noticed his plight. It was amused by the visible mental disquiet of the bridegroom.

The knowledge stung him to anger. In these scented, simpering units, congregated to gloat over the struggles of the victim, he recognized some part of the social system that was collected to insure finality of his doom. Escape from some deserted City church— some registry-office might be barely possible. Not here. "Gathered together here in the sight of God"— the man who had known God in the wilderness dared not follow the thought— "and in the face of this congregation."

He felt his sleeve plucked. His best man was speaking. Part of the flickering smile was concentrated on his grinning lips. "Buck up! She's overdue. The bolt will be shot now before you know where you are."

Collier nodded. The aridity of his throat forbade speech. The old stale attempt at humor that compares a bridegroom to a condemned criminal, on this occasion redeemed itself through its aptness. He felt the agonized pang of the soul born under the curse of Cain— the sense of futility of escape— the hopeless waiting for the final doom, At any moment—comparatively remote or perilously near, but alike in being inevitable— the solid globe would slip from under his feet— roll away like an orange, and leave him— Where?

His head swum in the grip of vertigo, as the memory of a past illness, when his life had been in danger, recurred to him. One day, to beguile his convalescence, the nurse had shown him his temperature-chart, with its black dots, connected by neatly ruled lines. As he scanned the series of mountain peaks and valleys, he noticed a gap, where the black line shot down, far below the level of the others. The nurse explained. "That was your relapse. You just sank as low as was humanly possible. Collapse. The least bit lower, and you'd have slipped through our fingers."

The thought gripped him. Had the dot been a hairbreadth lower where would he have fallen? He was assailed with the sudden giddiness of one who looks down into space, at the mere sight of two inches of blank paper at the bottom of the chart.

*Where?* He was still asking himself the question, when he heard a rustle at the church door— caught some glimpse of shimmering white. He could not see plainly. He seemed to be standing on a thin crust over nothingness. Was it Laura? The tension was growing unbearable— akin to mental and spiritual vivisection. At any moment the end might come.

"The bridesmaids!"

In the best man's husky whisper came the tidings of momentary reprieve. Collier felt his brow break into beads of moisture. As he put up his hand to wipe

them away, he was conscious that some one was watching him with scornful amusement.

The discovery led to another. A sinister change had taken place within the building. The faces of the congregation had run into each other, until they blended into one gigantic face— painted, coiffured, hatted. It was the face of the fashionable crowd, and on its colossal lips the fugitive smile had settled, like some homing bird of prey.

The transformation appalled him. He had lost the touch of humanity. He felt himself alone— fettered— the victim of some sacrificial rite. A prisoner with no hope of escape— the prisoner of whom he had dreamed.

It was in this second of blank despair, that the incredible thing happened. He found himself staring at it, in incredulous surprise.

Before him, was the open door.

It was set in the wall, not ten paces away. Evidently not often used as a means of egress, for the large-leaved ivy that clustered round it was cobwebbed and compressed. And through it, he saw a stormy blue sky, rocking under the impact of tumultuous clouds. The wind slammed them together, as it tore through space, in a mad orgy of freedom.

Collier inflated his lungs, as a man who had been long submerged. He rose from the depths. Here was the way of escapes Even now it was not too late!

In imagination, he made the trial flight, his heart beating like a pioneer aeronaut relying on the power of untested apparatus. His course was simplicity itself. A few swift paces would bring him to the door. He had but to pass the portals, to find himself in the tiny paved yard— and then...

Then into the thick of the traffic surging round the church— into the heart of the struggling mass of that humanity that he had lost in the sacred building— that offered a human warren to the human quarry. The crowd would swallow him up, would shield him and hide him.

His thoughts winged swifter. The first vehicle would whirl him into the current of traffic— like a stray leaf sucked into the maelstrom. He seemed to see a mighty roaring river raging along in the grooved channel of the roadway, and fed on every side by trickling streamlets. Taxis were transmuted from mere petrol-fed mechanisms, suggestive of industrial unrest, to symbols of the magic of motion. First came the spin to the railway station— then the mighty engine dashing to the quay, where the impatient ocean licked its stones. Last of all, the steamer ploughing her way through the foaming billows, tearing out the heart of each emerald wave— her nose pointed towards far horizons Outside! The whole world lay outside. It opened its mighty arms to him. It spoke of width, of depth, of breadth. It showed him its secrets— hamlets and valleys tucked away

in its mighty heart— where a hunted man could hide for ever. It shouted to him to break free— to be free!

Three minutes passed. Collier realized that he was still standing in his place, his heels clamped to the red carpet. He stared at his feet, encased in their tight boots, as though they were objects for curiosity or wonder. Shapeless, unwieldy lumps of leather! Would they never move?

It is so simple—the parallel of bathing in Jordan in preference to a pilgrimage to mighty rivers. Only a few steps— no feat of difficulty— merely the action of a moment. He would count. One. Two. Three. There was the magical number that should find him outside the door.

He moistened his lips. One. He felt himself panting under the strain of some mighty effort— the tugging at interlaced roots, at deeply buried fibres. Two. The shock of sudden upheaval— a mad rush through space— an ecstasy. Three...

He gazed about him stupidly. He was still standing in his place. He had not moved an inch.

His chin sank lower, at the knowledge of his failure. His will was atrophied. His limbs, like paralyzed members, awaited the spur of mental volition. He was a prisoner.

Confronting him, were two truths. Or rather, both appeared truths. Yet, since one was the converse of the other, one of the two must be falsehood, masquerading as one of the eternal verities.

He faced them squarely. The truth that it was never too late to withdraw, even at the eleventh hour. The truth that it was too late, for this reason.

*No man had done it before.*

He realized that a life-sentence of imprisonment was compressed into that creed of negation. No men had chosen to exercise his privilege of free-will. It was the victory of passivity over activity.

The minutes passed. He stayed in his place, staring at the open door.

Presently, he became aware that some part of the scrutiny of the spectator had become relaxed. The focussing power of the gigantic orb of the face played with diminished pressure. The congregation, on its part, was feeling some sense of discomfort, proceeding from overstrained and dissatisfied curiosity.

The bride was unusually late. Collier realized the fact from the impatient manner in which the best man consulted his watch. The organist, seeking fresh inspiration, availed himself freely of the privileges granted by the letters *D.C.* Everyone was growing weary.

A rush of wild hope shot through the veins of the prisoner. Men had been saved before by a miracle. Was it conceivable that a miracle was to be wrought on his behalf?

He snatched greedily at the crazy notion, half-fearful to entertain it. Familiarity with it, however, engendered fresh confidence. It was possible for Laura to fail him. Woman— the bound and cloistered sex— was not a prisoner. Many a bride had drawn back at the eleventh hour, and radiated in the limelight of newspaper publicity. He knew now that Laura did not love him. The certainty that she merely respected his wealth became his, with the recognition of the knowledge that he did not love her.

His eyes brightened, and he drew himself together. His best man looked at him in involuntary admiration.

"Awfully annoying for you, old man. I'll slip down and find out what's keeping her."

The prisoner smiled at the receding back of his personal gaoler. He was lapped in placidity. He believed in the miracle with the steadfast credulity of a Lourdes pilgrim. He had called up a force— he had evoked the mighty name of freedom

Freedom! He looked through the open door.

There was no sense of repose outside. Everywhere was a strenuous, moving, fighting world. For one moment the sun tunnelled through the piled-up purple mounds that banked the sky— in a sweeping ray. The next— it recoiled in momentary shadow, as the wind pelted its face with hurled balls of clouds. No still lagoons of swimming space. The whole air seemed full— crammed to overflowing. Leaves, straws, twigs, scraps of paper were whirled aloft in the aerial currents. Birds skimmed and swooped. Wireless messages, shrilling through space, met in solid syllabic tangles—parts of speech strayed from context, broken free from syntax. The vault of Heaven hummed with crazy spinning motion. All the prison doors were opened. One heard the clang of iron barriers slamming outwards. Freedom.

The face of the prisoner glowed. His eyes blazed.... Suddenly, the candle in his face was blown out. He stood mute, blank, empty. The best man had returned and whispered a few words.

"All right! Some important bit of her finery never turned up. She'll be here now, any minute!"

The prisoner nodded. Involuntarily he looked again towards the door, It was still open.

"Buck up!" The best man was offering sympathy. "A man only goes through it once."

Again Collier nodded. Some of the light came back to his face. He experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. The trite words had brought comfort.

He saw now that the whole of his anguish admitted an explanation. His sensations throughout had been purely normal, analogous with those of one who takes an anesthetic for the first time, or who has been within an ace of being drowned. He was merely feeling what every son of Adam has felt, when he stands before the altar— the shrinking from the sentence of finality. This psychic discomfort, which ordinarily affects an average person so slightly as merely to express itself in self-consciousness or nerves— was felt by him— a glutton in sensation— in its full elemental severity.

He told himself that he loved Laura. He had loved her the whole time. And she loved him. He welcomed the thought of marriage.

Primed with fresh confidence and hope, he withdrew his eyes from the door— to fix them upon a girl, who sat near, a few paces away. He wondered why her features also had not been welded into the face. Scrutiny of her plain working-dress, however, revealed the reason. She was no part of the fashionable congregation. Possibly a typist, or a milliner's assistant, who had strayed into the church for a few minutes.

He continued to look at her. Her eyes were brown in color— brown as a clear peaty pool in the hollow of a hillside. The warm fires of honesty, affection, and truth glowed within their depths. They were akin to the eyes of the primitive women he had known in the old days of freedom and solitude— women of the prairie and forest— women brown and white— with their souls scoured by the winds and their hearts warmed by the sun.

He looked again. The eyes vanished and he was gazing into the peaty pool, hearing the limpid gurgle of the sweet water— feeling the cool air stirring in his hair. Woman or pool— he knew not which was which. For both were Nature.

He was roused by the blare of the Wedding March. In the gloom of the aisle he saw a tall white figure, leaning on her father's arm. She advanced with slow grace. His bride was coming.

His eyes, still washed with the brown waters of the peaty pool, received but a blurred and misty vision.

He shrank back, in instinctive recoil. His mind, thrown out of gear by shock, worked madly, at furious pressure, like a derailed engine with wheels still revolving in the air. Free! He must be free! What force kept him standing there, awaiting a woman, whom he knew he would grow to loathe. Morality? When every vow would be mere lip-effort, uttered within the walls of a sacred building— the ineffable Name itself invoked as witness. He was horror-stricken with the sense of sheer blasphemy.

What kept him? While the door was Still open? Merely the shell of an empty convention, homage to the precedent of the stereotyped. While a man

might protect itself from the menace of death, he was forbidden— if the formalities be infringed— to protect himself from the sacrifice of his life.

The bride drew nearer in her stately advance. It was the culminating moment of her life; it marked the apex of achievement.

Collier stared at her, with the cold speculative eyes of one stranger who challenges another. He saw her features distinctly— as distinctly as he had seen those of the brown-eyed working-girl. He had expected to see them melt into a state of flux and run into the gigantic lineaments of the composite countenance. Such a transformation seemed inevitable in one who represented the very essence of conventional Society.

But no change took place. Rather a revelation. For, as the bridal procession drew nearer, Collier stared at her with hypnotized fascination. At last he knew her— as she really was. For he saw that the face of Laura was, in miniature, the replica of the gigantic face of the congregation— inhuman— artificial— appalling.

It was the quintessence of realization. Like a wild creature, enslaved in the snare, he strove impotently to escape. Something, older than Adam, freer than the wind, blinder than instinct, raged within him. Even now— even while the bride advanced— it was not too late. The open door...

He turned, as in mute appeal— towards the brown-eyed girl. To his dismay he saw that she had left her seat, and was moving towards the door in the wall. It was evident that the call of duty, together with the unpunctuality of the bride, was to cheat her of a spectacle.

A desolating feeling of desertion swept over Collier. He was an infant that sees itself abandoned by its natural protector. Bereft of her presence, he was something ineffably weak and feeble. Sorrow was merged into a sense of unbearable tension. What if she closed the door behind her? It stood to him as a symbol of freedom. He tried involuntarily to cry out in warning.

It seemed to him that her journey towards the exit was life-long. Her protracted progress drained the exhausted reserves of his self-control. Unable to bear the suspense of watching, once more he turned towards his bride.

He was just in time to see the change. It came swiftly, without warning, bearing its message of finality. Collier knew that the end had really come.

Like a jam of frozen waters that splits into fragments before thaw, the composite face cracked— shivered— and then broke up into hundreds of units— each perfect and complete. Once again Collier saw the familiar features of friend and acquaintance. They seemed to close round him— to hem him in on all sides.

The congregation was waiting. The bride stood at his elbow.

The clergyman cleared his throat.

Yet, ere the opening words were intoned— the prisoner turned his head— and saw.

The door was swinging to.

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## 15: The Hoof Slide

*The Lady's Realm, April 1914*

"I DON'T care what a man is, as long as he can ride straight!"

Lady Nina Glendower tilted her bowler hat and stared meaningfully at the handsome young farmer. That he did not miss her drift was evident by his conscious laugh.

"Well, I must say," he confessed, "when I'm leading the field in a hard run or riding one of my gees to win in a point-to-point, I don't feel exactly inferior to any belted earl."

"Not you! 'A man's a man for a' that.' I always say straight out what I think."

Lady Nina kicked vigorously at the blistered paint on the gate to emphasise her freedom of speech. Young, beautiful and ignorant, she considered herself privileged to ride rough-shod over the conventions. The presence of a gardener at work close by hampered her no more than the fact that she was conducting her flirtation practically under the windows of the lodge.

Edmund Saxon hesitated before replying, although shyness was alien to his nature. Then, with customary bluff, he rushed in boldly.

"Seems to me all such rot! Here's you— smart as paint, young, set on riding and all that. Here's me— a two-year-old in sound condition, so to speak, keen as mustard on everything you like. We've been on the land every second as long as your people. Yet, every dead-alive big-bug in the county, as well as the batch of them underground, would be galvanised to life with a shock of horror if they heard that you and I— well— wanted to get married!"

Lady Nina coloured slightly at the audacious speech, but she tossed her head.

"The deuce take the county!"

She spoke recklessly for effect, but Saxon applauded her unconventional words.

"I admire your spunk! But the question is— Are you prepared to back it?"

"Why not?"

"This way?"

"What's the odds?"

Their lips met in a kiss.

The gardener looked up at the sound, then spat on the ground contemptuously. But Lady Nina heeded him less than the clods he turned. Her attention was attracted by a second witness of the tender scene.

A woman, mounted on a piece of horseflesh that seemed, like the Fuzzy, to be "all 'ot-sand and ginger," sped by with a clatter of hoofs. The girl had only time for a snapshot vision, but it was enough to make her stare after the



retreating rider. The beauty of the woman's face was arresting, although its lines had been marred by Anno Domini— and something worse— and the curves of her figure, set off by the tight black habit, were magnificent.

Nina caught her breath.

"Whoever's that?"

"Mrs. Sam Leek. They keep a pub— 'The Royal George'— a few miles back. She rides in every race-meeting and show. There's not a man or woman to touch her for a hundred miles round."

Nina's face darkened at the animation in his voice.

"Aren't you drawing the long bow?" she asked.

"Not me! She'd ride the Fiend, if she could get a bit in his mouth, and there's not a man but would follow her down to the Pit itself, where it's to be feared she's heading."

Again Nina felt chilled. Saxon seemed to be unconscious of her titled self. She was suddenly filled with a feeling of jealous enmity against this publican's wife.

"She stared at me as if I were a mite in a cheese," she said haughtily. "Did you notice? The cheek!"

"Ah! That's because I was with you."

In that sentence, Saxon, with native egotism, summed up the situation, as he bracketed the two women together in the running. Lady's Nina's face instantly grew dark with anger.

The young farmer was quick to notice the change.

"Of course she's nothing to me," he added hastily. "She's over forty, and married. Besides, she boozes. Oh, I say, don't go!"

He gazed blankly at the retreating form of Lady Nina. Then, mounting his cob, he rode away over the grassy border of the road.

Gradually his serenity returned as his thoughts dwelt on his latest conquest. In his flirtation with Lady Nina Glendower he was flying higher than any airman, and there was a smile of triumph on his tanned face as he cantered homewards.

Presently he came to earth again as a bend of the road brought into view the figure of a woman, seated on the edge of a horse-trough, while her steed cropped the grass at the road-side.

Saxon's face lit up at the sight. The next second he was off his horse and seated by the side of Mrs. Sam Leek.

"Waiting for me?" he asked, with a confident smile.

"Oh, go to blazes!" The coarseness of the woman's speech— its accent tinged with the local dialect— was strangely at war with the beauty of her reckless blue eyes.

"Think I'd cool my heels for you?" she continued. "I don't go in for cubbing. My old man's worth twenty of your sort."

Although Saxon's face lost some of its confidence, he still continued to gaze with infatuated eyes.

"Your riding at Newton Abbey, Friday, was top-hole," he said. "Congrats. You took the water-jump in style to make a dead man sit up and cough. I'd give something—. Look here! Why haven't you ever a decent word for me? You've plenty of honey for other chaps. Why am I black-listed?"

Mrs. Leek smiled, and much of the coarseness of her face faded in the wonderful fascination of her expression.

"You hang up your hat at too many houses, Eddy. Think I'd enter the running with every half-baked girl in the county? By the way— who's your latest? The flapper you were kissing by the gate?"

Back came the swagger to Saxon's movements.

"That? Flapper indeed! Nineteen, if a day, and a fine girl. *That*, if you please, is Lady Nina Glendower— the eldest daughter of the Duke of Roseminster. You see, my lady, finer folk than you are only too glad to snap up your leavings!"

There was no finesse about Saxon; his surface veneer of breeding was sloughed at first tilt with Mrs. Leek— revealing the coarse grain of his nature.

His boast only made the woman rock with laughter.

"You young fool!" she gasped at length. "*You* and a duke's daughter! She's just pulling your leg. It's common talk Lord Townley is coming down the week-end to settle up affairs. The match has been rumoured in the papers weeks past. She's flirting with you to keep her hand in. In love with a back-door acquaintance! If she could buy you at her price and sell you at her own she'd do well out of the deal."

Again she shrieked at the sight of Saxons crestfallen face. Then she put one roughened hand on his coat-sleeve.

"Look here," she said, "I've a sneaking liking for you, because you've a straight nose and a decent seat. Take my tip, old man! Marry some girl in your own sphere— say, your cousin, Miss Preece. She'd make a champion farmer's wife. Moreover, she's fool enough to jump at you. But, if you want to save your face, drop these rotten ideas of rising above your station. It don't pay to be a thruster. Forgotten your pilling over the Hunt?"

Saxon rose hastily and mounted his cob. Mrs. Leek's words had brought up a painful recollection of his surprise when the surrounding gentry, who met him with utmost cordiality at hunt breakfast and ploughing-matches, resented his ambition to wear the pink.

"He laughs best who laughs last," he growled. "It would be a slap in the face for you, my girl, if Lady Nina bolted with me. What will you bet I don't cut out this lord of yours?"

"I'll bet my head!"

Saxon rode off with feigned hilarity. In spite of his tall words, he knew Mrs. Leek had scored. Yet she sat for fully ten minutes afterwards, her eyes charged with anxiety and her head held tightly between her hands, as though she feared to lose it with her wager.

Meanwhile, the girl whose name had been bandied over the horse-trough, trudged up the drive. She always rode cross-saddle, and her long coat, that showed her boots, gave a boyish look to her appearance. As she passed the gardener he touched his hat respectfully, but the look he bestowed on her back was significant. Although the family had been barely a fortnight in the place the Duke had taken for the hunting, every dependent had already formed an opinion on Lady Nina Glendower.

"That a dook's daughter!" the man commented. "My Liz's more of a lady than *her*. Making herself cheap with all the village lads like a common wench!"

But the puppy that Nina had just hoisted up persisted in washing her face all the way to the house. He knew of the two days and nights, after he had taken poison, when she had nursed him hours at a stretch, the tears trickling down her nose, as she strove to drag the wobbling paws back from Shadowland.

Her father and stepmother were standing on the old stone terrace when Nina approached. Both regarded her with a fixed expression of stony disapproval.

"Where have you been, Nina?"

The duke— who appeared to be made of the same material as the terrace— spoke coldly.

"Rotting about."

The duke's expression changed to a look of tense anxiety. His eldest daughter— fully fledged beauty though she was— in running to an excess of animal spirits at the expense of her brains, seemed unlikely to bring credit upon his name.

The light of rebellion was kindled in her eyes by her father's next words.

"Townley is coming to-morrow, Nina. I have sanctioned his visit, and I hope that you will— er— keep yourself in hand, so that matters may be satisfactorily concluded."

"Townley!" Nina made a hideous grimace. "He's not my sort!" she objected.

"A matter for congratulation, and a testimonial to his breeding. And— one word more. We leave here next week."

Nina faced her parents with startled eyes.

"But, Dad— why? This is such a ripping hunting country. And we've only just come. Why?"

"Because of a certain undesirable piece of news that has just been brought to my notice."

The girl collapsed before her father's penetrating stare. It was evident that he had already heard of her flirtation with the young farmer. Simulating an air of bravado, she ran out of the room.

Her eldest step-sister— a pretty girl of seventeen— was having her hair dressed for dinner, when Nina burst in upon her toilette.

"Heard we're off, Lav? Know why? I hardly know whether I'm on my head or heels."

"You might get a clue by keeping your eye on your hat," replied Lavender coolly. She was curiously like a pink edition of her grey father.

"Townley's coming to-morrow, Lav!"

"I know. You may go, Perkins!"

"Look here, Lav! Would you grab at your first offer?"

"Certainly not, unless it were worth my while."

"There you are. It's not. So I pass!"

Lavender's calm voice shattered her premature triumph.

"But I certainly should, if I were *you*. You see, you've been already talked about, and once in connection with a chauffeur."

Lady Nina gasped at the matter-of-fact words. For the first time in her life she suddenly felt cheapened. Without replying, she rushed away to her own room.

The new feeling of inferiority hurt her pride terribly. As she looked in the glass, and took stock of her rich young beauty, she contrasted her position with that of her sister, Lavender.

"I must be a throw-back," she said at last. "I don't seem born to all this. Lavender and the kids get more respect than me. Wonder why? Well, there's Townley!"

She gave a groan, as her mind reverted to the Saxon era. Her last flirtation would soon be as much a thing of the past as any page of back English history. She thought of Townley well-born, well-bred, well-educated, and then her eyes were attracted by her favourite picture that hung above her head— the portrait of a famous highwayman.

It seemed to her that the bold, handsome face bore a strong resemblance to Saxon. She had a sudden vision of breaking free from the old, restricted life, and riding out into the world, with this caped hero, Gretna Green in front, dimly seen through a golden haze of romance.

She gave a cry of triumph. In the midst of her dejection a thought had struck her. She chided herself for her folly in not realising the fact before. All her life she had kicked against the pricks, but she had meekly put her head into the halter, all the same. Yet all the time a door to freedom stood before her gaze. Outside was open country. She had only to bolt.

In an instant she snatched up a writing-pad and hastily scribbled a few lines.

When the missive was delivered to Edmund Saxon by that evening's post, he raised his brows at the handwriting, which would have disgraced a kitchen-maid. But his face flamed with excitement as he tore it open and read its contents.

*Dear Edmund,*

*It has been brought home to me to-day. I'm out of place here— a misfit. They want to dispose of me, but I decline to have my life made by others. I'll make my own. This is my decision. Sooner than serve in Heaven, I'll rule in Hell. If you care to meet me to-morrow, we'll ride to Slowton and get married there, by special license. And the country may go hang! Yours, Nina.*

In a frenzy of triumph, Saxon tore to his writing-desk, and covered page after page with his thick, characteristic writing. He smiled grimly as he gave his letter to a man for instant delivery. It struck him that the handsome head of Mrs. Sam Leek was even then tottering on its shoulders.

THE air was raw and sprayed with mist next morning when Lady Nina Glendower, accompanied by a groom, went for her morning ride. At the bend of the drive she twisted her head round for a last view of the house. Never again, she told herself, would she place foot inside.

She broke off in her whistle to make a remark.

"*Après moi, le déluge.* You don't know what that means, Foote, but it exactly expresses the present position. Some Johnny or other— I forget who— said it. And now I say it."

"After me, the deluge. A remark made by a dissolute French monarch before the French Revolution," answered the man, glibly.

"Gracious, Foote. Why you know more than me."

"I received a Board School education. And I've learned much living with the aristocracy."

The usual veiled impudence was in the man's voice. Nina was conscious of it, and it spurred her on to action.

"Well, do you know enough to go home and spin some fairy-tale about a dropped shoe? I'd sooner your room than your company this morning, Foote. Here! This'll help you to oil your brains."

A coin passed, and then Nina cantered forward alone into the mist—revelling in her first ecstasy of revolt. She never stopped when she reached the crossroads, where Saxon was waiting for her.

"Follow me, if you can," she shouted, as she tore past.

"To the end of the world." Saxon's reply was the essence of romance, as he thundered after her.

They made a perfect pair as they galloped away over the moor, both young, handsome and in love— the girl with liberty, the man with social advancement.

Lady Nina pulled up at last.

"Feel on oats to-day, as if I could last for ever. But we mustn't wind our horses. What did you think of my note?"

"It made me the happiest man on earth. I suppose your governor'll do something for us?"

"What's the odds? I guess I'm brainy enough for a farmer's wife, anyway? Here, what are we stopping for?"

Saxon had drawn rein in front of an inn, over the door of which hung the painted head of a Hanoverian monarch. It was "The Royal George."

At the sound of the clatter of hoofs, a head looked through the window, and next minute Mrs. Leek appeared at the doorway.

Nina stared at her with the same intense curiosity. In the strong morning light, and apart from her horse, the woman seemed made of coarser clay. She looked a strapping plebian in her huge-patterned check dress.

"Morning, Mrs. Leek. Whiskey-and-polly for me, and a glass of cider for the young lady," sung out Saxon.

It was his moment of triumph. He had stopped especially at the "George" to proclaim his win.

A dull mottled red ran up the woman's face.

"Won't you come in and have something to eat as well?" she asked. "It may be you've far to go!"

As Saxon hesitated, Lady Nina slipped from her horse. Besides her hunger, she had a thirst for knowledge, and she wished to see more of this strange woman, who appeared to have the mankind of the county to heel. She was possessed with a sudden longing to get at grips with her.

They followed the publican's wife into a small, musty parlour undusted, and smelling of beer.

Mrs. Leek noticed Lady Nina's start of disgust.

"Pretty ghastly, eh?" she remarked. "I've got a girl, but I don't know what to tell her to do, and I'm in the saddle or behind the bar, all day. Wasn't brought up to house-work. Spent my time in the stables."

"And to good advantage, I hear."

Lady Nina spoke with cold politeness. Again, to her intense astonishment, she scented a rival in this impossible woman.

Mrs. Leek laughed.

"I don't do it for my health. You'll ride yourself, one day, with practice. But you've not had your drink yet. I've champagne fit for— well, special occasions— in the cellar. If Mr. Saxon will come with me to reach some down, we'll see what it's like!"

One eyelid fell in a barely perceptible wink as she spoke.

To Nina's anger, Saxon responded to the signal. There was a light in his eyes she had never seen there before as he sprang to his feet. With bitter jealousy, the girl saw that he welcomed the chance of a few minutes' privacy with Mrs. Leek.

"Come on," he said, "and afterwards we'll drink the health of— my future wife!"

Nina saw them disappear through the door. Then, hot with indignation, she hurried out of the stuffy parlour. She had barely reached the road, when she heard the sound of footsteps, and Mrs. Leek ran out of the house.

She put her hand on the horse's bridle.

"Mount this instant," she said. "Ride straight home and pray you'll be there in time before the door slams in your face!"

Nina gasped with surprise.

"What d'you mean?" she cried. "Where's Saxon?"

"Locked in the cellar."

The girl turned white with passion.

"How dare you?" she cried, stamping with rage. "Give me the key this instant. You've been drinking! I tell you we're to be married this morning."

"That'll you'll never be!"

"Why, what's he to you?"

"Ask yourself that!"

Girl and woman— they faced each other— a pair of combatants in the grey November fog. Then Nina spoke slowly.

"Oh, how I *hate* you! I've never hated any woman so much in my life."

The woman winced sharply, as if struck.

"My girl— that's what a kid thinks when its mammy stops it from playing with fire."

There was a sudden softening of the coarse voice.

"Look at me!" she suddenly commanded.



Nina gazed at the handsome, dissipated face, with loathing. She marked the puffy bags under the violet eyes and the red stain of the face, inflamed by spirits.

The woman noticed the shudder.

"Ah, you don't like it? And you didn't like my house. I tell you, even as I and mine are, so will be you and yours! Have you one useful gift to make you fit to be a poor man's mate? Heaven help you, if not. For you're marrying a man who's not in love with you!"

"He is. I tell you, he is!"

The girl's voice rang out, half in defiance, half in appeal.

"He's not. Meet the truth, girl, and don't shy! If I were of equal birth with you"—the woman smiled a crooked smile—"and I beckoned him away from you, which of us would he choose?"

For some minutes Lady Nina stood thinking. It was the blackest second of her young life, when she faced things squarely. Then, with hanging head, she turned towards her horse. It was her answer.

She rode slowly away, while the woman watched her in silence. Before the mist had swallowed her up she returned flushed and panting.

"I was thinking," she said, "of what you said about closed doors. I'm afraid of my father. Will he hear of this? There may be a scandal if it leaks out."

The woman laughed grimly.

"Don't fret," she said. "Someone'll pay the piper, but it won't be you. You're up against me, and my reputation's good to knock you out of the running. Saxon's visit will be put down to me. The fun's begun already. My old man heard him in the cellar, and they're at each other, hammer and tongs. We'll have a free-fight, directly, but Saxon has a cousin who will nurse him up, and I'll give as good as I get. But you'll be out of it."

Well out of it. With a shudder of disgust, Lady Nina saw the sordid scene.

"I'll go back and tell your husband," she cried. "I can't let you pay for me. I'll stand my corner."

But the woman's rough hand tightened on her wrist.

"Go home!" she shouted. "All your talking wouldn't do a ha'porth of good. Besides, maybe, I've not done all this for you. Perhaps, it's done for the sake of an old grey house, down in a southern country, a house that's big enough to hold this village. It's a house like the one you and yours have lived in for generations. Remember that house always! And remember, too, that you've been entered in a race for posterity, where each rider cuts off with a fine, unsullied name, and sees it safely handed down to the next starter, when his course is run. Just now, my girl, you jibbed. You're headed straight again. Keep the track, and Heaven keep you from the cropper others have come!"



Then the woman's voice suddenly changed. Its coarse accent fell away, like an old garment, leaving it bare as at the birth of speech.

"Besides, it doesn't pay," she said, in the new voice. "Remember, if we fall in the race, though we win, the hoof-slide is scarred on the course! And few of us win through!"

Lady Nina blinked away the tears that started to her eyes, for she knew she was face to face with one of the "lost legion."

"Oh, you poor soul!" she cried, as she stopped to kiss the handsome, drink-marred face.

IT WAS a very crest-fallen colt that meekly returned to stables, after three hours of liberty. Lady Nina returned from her ride alone, a trifle pale and subdued, and entirely bereft of her usual swagger. She accepted Lord Townley's proposal to go for a spin in the car with alacrity, and came back in it, formally engaged, to her own, and her family's pleasure.

The duke, in particular, unbent, to express his delight.

"The fact of the matter, Nina," he explained confidentially, "I have been worried on your behalf, because of a certain strain—ahem! Your mother, now; you've been told she died at your birth. In reality, as all the country knows, but has forgotten, I hope, she eloped with a groom in my employ when you were two years old. Of course I divorced her immediately. I can tell you no more of her, but you know where such marriages lead— to the down-grade!"

Nina opened her eyes yet wider. Pity in a vague kind of way for the unknown parent filled them, also surprise. But the duke, who was searching her face with anxious eyes, to his relief saw no light of comprehension dawn there. Her father's anxiety to leave the district and the dissipated hostess of the "Royal George" were two isolated facts— not to be connected with a back-page of stale history to a glare of ugly significance.

When they breathed on the mirror of her mind, and thereby dulled her wits— the gods were kind.

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## 16: The Flying Leave

*The Cornhill Magazine, Feb 1917*

IT was upon the last day of his flying leave that Captain John Falconer suddenly realised that he wholly loathed the bare idea of returning to the trenches.

The blow fell unsoftened by a pang of prescient warning. Fresh from the great spade war, he had enjoyed every moment of his holiday by reason of the incisive contrast. The train that bore him from one adjacent country into another had magical qualities, for it passed the boundary of the fifth dimension and whirled him into a new world, while the other blew out in a puff of smoke and a last crackling roar of artillery. At Victoria Station, he stepped from night into day.

Lying back in his lounge-chair and fortified by a good dinner, he gazed around the drawing-room with his newly stimulated appreciation. The sense of security, the absence of noise, the comforts of home— each contributed to his all-pervading happiness. It was good to look at familiar faces after daily lightning glances at the great scarred countenance of General Death. There was a smile upon his lips as he turned to answer a girl's question. 'When are you going back to the trenches?'

'I'm due back to-morrow.'

He paused to admire once more the somewhat unusual beauty of the girl. With flaming hair, the colour of an autumn leaf, and amber eyes, she exacted a toll of fugitive glances, by reason of her vital brilliancy.

Hitherto, Falconer had paid homage to no woman— only answering the call of one— mighty and mail-clad— who stood waist-deep in the green-white circlet of her seas. But while he now paid tribute to Yvonne Parmiter's charm, he could not avoid wonder as to the source of the intermittent trouble that clouded the clarity of her eyes.

She echoed his word.

'To-morrow? So soon? Will you— mind?' Those around looked at him: the women with admiration, the men with some envy. The perfect physical fitness that was the heritage of his personal hardships, marked him as one apart— one who was living, in reality, and sowing a rich harvest of experience and memory.

'Mind!' He laughed. 'Rather not! It's a grand life, I wouldn't miss it for worlds. Indeed, we all of us pity those who stay at home.'

Every word was uttered in honest faith.

'But the change,' the girl persisted. 'It is so impossible to realise.' She furrowed her brow in an effort to capture the idea. 'To-night, you are here. We are here. And to-morrow, we shall all go out, just like the flame of a candle,

and you'll be there. To-morrow, the trenches will be the reality. Home will be only the dream.'

Falconer nodded.

'That's so.'

His lips moved stiffly. It was at that moment that he fell into hell— to find, like many another of his comrades, that it was but a few spadefuls deep.

Suddenly he visualised it, with merciless clarity. Mud. There was nothing but mud— earth and water still writhing— mingling and separating— in the giant throes of creation. Again he crawled over it upon hands and knees until he was cased inside a pitch plaster. He sank thigh-deep and felt his boots plucked off by the suction of its foul noisome lips. He had helped to dig out its victims, buried to their waists and shoulders. He thought of his last dug-out, where a spring rose nightly, like a vile caricature of Undine, turning his straw bedding to oozing filth. He recalled snapshot nightmare patches of slumber, when the air seemed to materialise to black honey, and he fought with fear of suffocation. A mean, foul, muddy hell— such as made its victims yearn— Tomlinson-wise— for the clear red pit-coal fires of tradition.

Yet for months Falconer had dwelt therein, finding the life good, upon the whole, and meeting hardships with fortitude and optimism. It was true that he went to the war animated with that nervousness that is not incompatible with courage and had felt the heroic thrill of the conquest of fear. His name had been mentioned in a dispatch.

Yet he had been spared the reaction that is the inevitable aftermath of overstrained nerves. While his comrades, in rotation, had collapsed under exhaustive nerve-drainage, he had been invulnerable. The enemy had reserved him for a long-range target, striking at him in the midst of his enjoyment of the security of home.

A clod of mud had found its billet in his brain.

The mellow chimes of a clock aroused him from his reverie. It was a sinister reminder of the passing of the flying leave. To-morrow, he was due back in hell.

He gazed round the room with brooding eyes, marking the signs of external comfort, which, by comparison with his muddy trench, seemed transmuted to luxury— the pile of the carpet, the delicate hue of the hangings— the glint of many an ornament gleaming under the rose-shaded electric globes. He stared at the dainty gowns of the women— the indifferent faces of the men.

In a gust of anger, he hated them all. He was a damned soul who had just heard the recalling whistle of his overseer. There were but three prime factors of existence— to be warm, clean, and safe. These care-free, over-washed men and women were spending their energies in the pursuit of trifles, blindly

unconscious of their possession of the fundamental essentials. And to keep the roof whole above their heads— and others of their kind— he must go back to rot in that slimy pestilential foulness.

It was not fair. His madness waxed, inflamed by the bitter sense of injustice of the labourer who has borne the heat and burden of the day. He had spent a couple of days of his flying leave in London, and while there, had thrilled with the stimulating sense of acquitted duty. Upheld by conscious rectitude, he had faced pertinent questions posed by recruiting-posters; lying back in his stall, at places of amusement, he had listened, outwardly stolid of demeanour, but inwardly elated, while he was vocally thanked from the stage.

He had done his share. Let one of these others take his place for awhile!

'Halloa, Falconer! Your leave's running rather dry.' Falconer looked up at the man who had addressed him with feelings of unconcealed aversion. Charteris was a lawyer of some distinction, with an undertow of sinister repute that avoided the reproach of open scandal. The soldier instinctively distrusted the sagging lines of his tired face— plain traces of the collapse of misspent power. He hated even to see him in the proximity of Yvonne Parmiter, although Charteris was for many years married. Moreover, he had known too many women and held them light.

'How d'you feel?' Charteris gave his habitual croaking laugh. 'Rather like a schoolboy at the end of the holidays?'

From sheer force of habit, Falconer dissented.

'Not much! I couldn't stick the life here now. Besides, I never cared a rap for going back to school. Except'— he added in a different voice— 'once.'

'Ah?'

The question was perfunctory; but, seized with a sudden need for self-expression, Falconer caught at the opportunity. He craved the relief of utterance. For a few minutes, at least, he would escape the strain of pretence, and in re-living the minor pangs of his boyish tragedy, he could re-live the major tragedy of to-day.

He began to speak rapidly.

'It was this way. I thought it was going to be my last term, and, in my youthful exuberance, I took my toll of last grudges on the place. I forget exactly what I did, and when I heard that, after all, I was to go back, I magnified the thought of my mischief into crime. The fear of its consequences poisoned my whole holiday. I brooded over it, day and night. I dreaded going back— I positively dreaded it.'

The note of actuality in his voice was arresting. His account of the charge in which he had won recognition had been terse as a telegraphic dispatch. Yet now, he was plainly in the grip of a real agony.

'Nonsense!' It was Charteris who objected. 'The average boy isn't a nerve-centre. Probably, you had five bad minutes of funk just as your train came in.'

'No!' Falconer's voice was sharp. 'I was— in those days— highly strung as a hare, for ever on the hop. I tell you, I used to make pictures in my mind of my return. I can see them now.'

Instead— he saw mud— a desolation of sodden flats intersected with interminable trenches, where rain-drilled pools reflected a leaden shell-stabbed heaven.

He tightened his mouth to hide the involuntary quiver of his lips.

'The last day came. My time was up, even as now. I was standing, just as we are now, in this drawing-room, watching the rains. An express shot by, and suddenly, my whole brain caught on fire. I saw my future written in one word, Escape.'

'Ah!' Charteris awoke to interest. 'The wonder is that you ever thought of it before. In every impasse there is always the way out.'

The heaviness of his features broke into mobility as his eyes caught, for a second, the downcast face of Yvonne. 'Kipling was right,' he went on, 'when he wrote of the magic of the locomotive. "Unseen, romance brought up the 9.15." Hulloo! There goes the Folkestone boat-express.'

With a long-drawn shriek, a golden streak, luminous and explosive, tore across the darkness.

Charteris laughed at Falconer's involuntary start.

'Remind you of a Jack Johnson?'

'Not the least resemblance.' Falconer laughed. 'But, seeing that train, brings it all back again. I remembered a maiden aunt, a foolish soul, devoted to me, who lived in a creeper-bound house, absolutely buried in a Devonshirecombe. My refuge. I thought of no side-issues. I just fixed my thoughts on her. And that express seemed to me like a bridge from me to her.'

'Go on!'

Charteris's unwonted interest was sustained.

'It was then, or never. That very night, in fact.... By the way, has it ever struck you that this is an unusually easy house to escape from, as there are practically no alternatives? You could not undo all the bars and bolts of the big entrance without waking up the stone Crusaders in the church yonder, and the back regions are always infested with crowds of yelping dogs. There only remains the small side-door. Have you ever noticed it, Miss Parmiter?'

'Yes. At least— I think so.'

'Everything depended on whether that door would be left open — that is, whether that key would be left in the lock. Nine times in ten, it is. The chances

were all in my favour. But occasionally the Governor, in an unusual fit of fussiness, for some occult reason, pockets the key.

'I waited until the house grew quiet, until the very last inmate had gone to bed. One by one, I accounted for them; listening for their footsteps and verifying them safe within bounds by the slam of their doors. After all my vision of travel in a lightning express, the only train that stopped was the 4.15, due at the Junction, forty minutes away.

'I packed my bag, and waited. Presently, the last sound in the house died away. Then silence. And then the house woke up and began to talk. You know those myriad noises that make you strain your ears, for you know that you are just upon the point of distinguishing words that never come?'

'I know.' It was Yvonne who spoke. In the pallor of her face her eyes shone with yellow-brown lustre. 'You wait, and listen in the darkness, and all the time, all around you, that great Whisper.'

Falconer nodded.

'Presently— the time to start. I opened the door and crept down the passage, fearing every step, lest a creaking plank should betray me. I reached the staircase and peered into the black well of the hall. I could only just distinguish the door....

'Would it be open? I asked myself the question a hundred times as I crept down the stairs, but I had no real anxiety. I knew that it would be open. There was no reason to doubt. I firmly believed in my luck. All the same, when I reached it, my hands trembled so violently that I could hardly try the latch.

'And ... I found it locked.'

He breathed heavily, again savouring the accumulated disappointment of the years. His last hope gone. His flying leave at an end. And ahead— mud! Wastes of churned-up mud!

'What happened afterwards?' Yvonne had also caught her breath.

Falconer laughed.

'Oddly enough, I really forget. Of course, I went back. And I am fairly positive that nothing was half so bad as I expected. It never is.'

The clod of mud in his brain stirred, momentarily threatened by the solvent of returning sanity. He held out his hand.

'And now, I must wish you all "Good-bye." I must get a long night. I shall be off before you're up to-morrow.'

He formed an heroic central figure in that cheery drama of farewell, a counterpart in living bronze to his forebears, those stone Crusaders at rest.

Half an hour later, he was alone in his own room, prowling around it, restlessly fingering the ornaments and staring at the pictures, unable to control his movements. Although the radiator was turned on, he lit the gas-fire and

held out his hands to the ruddy glow of the asbestos. He pressed another switch and flooded the room with extra light. He wanted heat and brightness to excess. To-morrow he would be back in a deliquescent trench.

The thought was unbearable.

Presently, he turned off the lights again, and, opening his window, looked out into the night. It lay below him, earth-scented, faintly luminous and thrilling with the last vibrations of the world's many voices— thready echoes from tropical bazaar and filmy splashing of polar seas mingling in an English garden.

Filled with a passionate yearning for its peace and beauty, he drew a long breath. He could not leave his country.

Involuntarily, he thought of another spot that he loved. A northern vale, remote and rarely visited, where the silvery ribbons of foaming streams fell sheer down the green and purple hills and the brown surface of the tarn reflected the trees in pellucid sepia. Dry ling underfoot, silence unbroken save by nature's orchestration. Fur, fin, and feather and the rough comfort of the primitive inn. In one word— sanctuary.

As he watched, a whistling scream awoke every slumbering Dryad in her tree. With a rattle of metal and a pall of fire-sprayed smoke, the express shot by in a roar of thunder.

The sight fired the torch in Falconer's brain.

In that second, he captured the elusive fragment of thought that had evaded him in the drawing-room.

A parallel. At last, he saw everything clearly, reading the cryptic script of the 'Book of Destiny.' From the beginning, this minute had been foreseen. His boyish flight was no childish freak, but a carefully planned trial essay— preparation for the real performance. In every detail, the parallel was perfect.

He would escape.

But, this time, the door would be open.

A tempestuous storm of exhilaration rushed through him. wrecking all proportions into chaotic ruin. Side-issues were nonexistent, the far future a blank. Yet, moved by some blurred scruple, he snatched at a writing-pad and scrawled a few lines.

I am leaving earlier than we planned so as to save the mater another good-bye. Thought it best. Don't worry about me: am feeling splendidly fit after my good time here, but am anxious to be back again.

He laughed as he wrote.

Slowly the night wore on, and, in its passage, proved the truth of the saying that the future is but the past entered by another door.

It seemed to Falconer that every detail of his early escapade was duplicated. He waited, with the same strained eagerness, for the household to answer to his call-over. He heard his father's heavy stump and the outburst of simulated high spirits under which he concealed his real feelings. Falconer was touched by the noisy laughter and pointless jest; the poor old governor was taking it hard. He felt, too, how his mother paused perceptibly by his door, fingering the handle as though she would fain turn it.

To keep the old childish lump from arising in his throat, he began to pack his bag, whistling softly the while. He did not know that the tune was not the inevitable 'Tipperary,' but 'Forty Years On.'

Presently, his preparations were made, and he took up the timetable that hung from a nail in the wall. Even in that remote spot, train services were mutable.

Yet, upon the whole, he was not surprised to read that, even after the lapse of years, the only train that stopped at the Junction was timed for 4.15.

The faithfulness of the repetition was even more forcible as the hours wore on. The interminable vigil, when he fretted against the strain of inaction—when every second was a slice of hell sandwiched between each clock-tick. And then the noises of the night, rising one after the other, to merge into the general under-chorus. Here and there, he traced back one to its source: the distant hoot of an owl, the patter of a mouse, the squeak of a bat, the snapping of a board.

One voice was silent—the trumpet-call of her who stood amidst the foaming seas, her mighty heart giving back an answering throb to every wave that buffeted her sides.

That voice he heard no longer.

Slowly, the hands of his watch crawled on until they reached the hour of his start. He threw a last farewell look around his room, then opening the door, stole, with beating heart, into the corridor. As he cautiously felt his way in the darkness, the warrior of a campaign shrank down to the little frightened schoolboy of so many years ago.

Every board seemed to snap underneath his weight in just the same startling manner; the handle of every door turned audibly as he passed by; unseen people stalked him down the length of the passage. When he reached the landing and looked down into the gulf of blackness below, the familiarity of the scene gave birth to a tremour of apprehension.



The parallel was growing too perfect. What if it persisted in following in the lines of the abortive experiment right up to its conclusion?

Last time, the door had been locked.

The suggestion was appalling. The whole concentrated dread of return fell upon him, engulfing him, paralysing every faculty. With the ineffective strength of a sleep-bound dreamer, he struggled vehemently to break free. At any cost, he must escape. Never before had the Flemish mud choked so vilely— never was the northern valley so dear and so remote.

He scarcely knew how he descended the staircase. It seemed to him that something vital within him had dragged forwards the leaden limbs of a dead man. He reached the bottom and there stood awhile, straining his vision to the utmost.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw, against the darkness of the walls, a lighter patch, with the tracery of naked boughs outlined against a star-spangled sky.

At last the drama had freed itself from the spell of the past and had boldly broken into a new and startling development.

The door was already open.

Scarcely able to credit his good fortune, he stared at it. It seemed to symbolise his success— to show that the gods of chance had breathed their benison upon his flight.

But while his thanksgiving was still a breath fluttering upon his lips, he shrank into the shadow, at the sound of a footstep without.

The patch of sky was eclipsed by the bulk of a heavily coated man's form. A whisper, audible by reason of its very force, reached his ears.

'Why haven't you come? The car's in the lane. I've been waiting.'

Charteris's voice was easy of recognition. It was instinct, however, that told Falconer the name of the second shadow that materialised from the darkness.

'I— I couldn't make up my mind.'

From the quiver in her voice, Falconer felt that Yvonne's indecision was piteous. It moved the other man to scarce-concealed impatience.

'I thought we had settled all that, for once and for all.'

'I know, I know. But I want to think again. It means a lot for me.'

'Very well, then. Take ten minutes.' Charteris turned on his heel. 'You are a free agent, and your choice must be freewill. If you do not come at the end of that time, I shall go off alone.'

The words suddenly recalled Falconer to a sense of his own crisis. His train would soon be due at the Junction. Ten minutes' delay would nibble away a fatal deficit in his margin of time.

As he caught his breath in the anger of baffled purpose, hope revived once more. There was no reason to despair. The girl would go. Many a barely noticed hint and rumour recurred, all pointing to the inevitable conclusion. From Charteris's recent words, it was evident that she had already made up her mind. Her present misgiving was but the automatic recoil.

Quivering with impatience, he stood, waiting for her to move.

The minutes slowly ticked away, yet no second blot obscured the sky.

The door stood open in vain.

Every nerve in Falconer's frame chafed at the torture of delay. He writhed with the agony of some small wood-creature snared within sight of its hole. Would she never stir? His whole fate was interdependent with hers, yet she remained passive, squandering the last precious minutes in inert caprice.

With the whole force of his nature, he prayed that she would go.

The answer to his appeal came with startling celerity. Throwing back her head with a movement of resolution, Yvonne sprang to her feet. No hesitation was in her step as she passed towards the door.

It was his own savage throb of joy that awoke the submerged soul of Captain John Falconer....

In the cumulative horror of that moment of realisation, he watched Yvonne.

Her hand was on the latch. For a space, she paused. Then— she closed the door. Upstairs she sped, the key tightly clasped in her hand, leaving Falconer standing once more inside the locked door.

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**17: Pink Tulips**

*The Windsor Magazine*, April 1922

"I BELIEVE in fairies. I— I've seen them!"

"I'm sure you have."

Edgar Nelson responded conventionally, while his eyes said plainly, "Little liar!" At the same time he was conscious that Fay Pearson spoke with intention to irritate rather than to deceive.

"Of orthodox type, I suppose?" he asked drily. "Butterfly wings, gauzy skirts, and silver wands?"

"No. Not a bit like that. You mustn't believe all you read, even if it's in the financial papers. This is what happened. I was sticking the peas, when I felt suddenly that someone was watching me. You know the feeling?"

"No."

"Ah, you're not psychic! I looked up and saw the most extraordinary little man. He wore an absurd brown cap and a tight brown suit with silly little splashes of white. He had beady brown eyes, a beaky nose, and a snappy mouth. I saw him as plainly as I see you."

Something in her eye made Nelson glance sharply at his white spats and brown suit, which, with silent but eloquent voice, rose up and called a good tailor blessed. But his nose was Roman, his eyes were compelling, and his mouth denoted strong character. He did not in the least resemble her ridiculous fairy."

"Yet, all the same, you stung him for the three wishes?"

"Rather. In classic style I hailed him: 'Fairy! The wishes are on you!' But he only gave me one. You could see he was one of the stingies by the set of his lips."

Nelson tightened his own firm mouth.

"Not at all. You were on the make— 'something for nothing.' I consider you got most generous treatment. You can't expect pre-War conditions even in Fairyland."

"I suppose not. Besides, now I think of it, he looked like a business fairy. Business would spoil a fairy's temper, wouldn't it, cheating and haggling all day?"

Nelson's face, which had grown dark, suddenly brightened, as though he beheld the exact spot where the rainbow ended.

"Your sad story reminds me of one of my own. I once saw a fairy."

"You couldn't; you're not psychic."

Fay spoke sharply, for she alone knew of the countless times he had proved unresponsive when she had willed him to look up at her casement window.

"What was your fairy like?" she asked grudgingly.

"Beautiful. An exquisite, if reduced, edition of woman. No one could mistake her for a man. Golden hair, rose-petal cheeks, violet eyes."

"What did she wear?"

"Skirts, gauzy yet adequate. A womanly toilette— Parisian in its simplicity. My fairy had a dash of Eve, and knew that her mission was to attract."

"H'm! Did the attractive fairy grant you a wish?"

"No."

"There you are! She resembled the attractive type of woman who takes all and gives nothing."

"Pardon me, I addressed my fairy in terms of business, which is the most courteous language that I know. 'Madam, with reference to your esteemed wish, I beg that you will allow it to mature until your further convenience.' "

"And did she understand all that?"

"Naturally. In Fairyland they understand fair dealing, truth, and honour, and business is merely the prose of all that."

"She should meet my little brown business fairy. What colour was her dress?"

Nelson's severe face was irradiated by his smile.

"Pink."

"That's Mrs. Lemon's favourite colour— my boss, you know. Good morning!"

FAY, who was breeched and booted as befitted Mrs. Lemon's gardener, covered the path with steps twice as long as her natural stride, just to show what a fine man she was. But she pulled the sacking from her frames with unnecessary vigour.

The frames were full of cuttings of pink geraniums, for Mrs. Lemon had a passion for pink. There were rose silken curtains at her windows, and she sorrowed for her late husband in mourning of the deepest pink.

Fay did not like her employer, because she treated her gardener as a man in every respect but one. She expected her to grow flowers exactly like those unnatural beauties printed on the covers of the packets of seeds, to have a back which never ached, and no delicate feelings over worms. On the other hand, she paid her the salary which corresponded to these handicaps of sex.

"Gardener!"

Fay turned at her employer's clear voice. She studied her as she came down the path.

Mrs. Lemon was sufficiently young and pretty to awake desire in the heart of a man. In every respect she corresponded to Nelson's description of his fairy.

Blue eyes, pink cheeks— one slightly pinker than the other, for the widow was careless— and a frock which might have been cut out of a sunrise, double width and on the cross.

"What vegetables for to-day, madam? Sea-kale or purple sprouting broccoli?"

"Again? Why is there never any choice?"

"Season." Fay played her useful trump. "I can't give you peas in April."

Each looked warily at the other. Nina Lemon knew little about a garden, and Fay only a little more. She had previously been on the land, and had acquired her present post through the misrepresentation of a kindly but unmoral friend who put her plight before the eternal truth.

But, with prayer and fasting and unstinted labour. Fay was learning more every day. The garden was no longer a job to be held down, but a passion. She loved its every season— loved it in all weathers, loved its weeds as well as its fruits. In short, loved it.

Of late, her dread of dismissal was sharpened with foreboding. Owing to the unfortunate fact of common ancestry, Nina Lemon was showing a streak of Adam and was reading books on gardening. As her knowledge was theoretical, she knew what results to expect, while Fay, who was practical, knew that those good things only happened in the books.

The widow's blue eyes rested on the central bed of tulip.

"Gardener, I hope those tulips will be out by Sunday. I've week-end visitors."

"Certainly, madam."

"I hope I shall not be disappointed again!"

She turned away, once more mollified by the exquisite order of her garden. Fay drew a sigh of relief. She had her orders. Pink tulips by Sunday. And that was that.

AS she gave her lawn its first cutting for the season, she thought of fairies. She wished fervently that they were true— useful little green and brown men who would swing from that tree and, in return for a bowl of porridge, mow the grass while she slept.

She had introduced the topic merely as a fanciful offence to the prejudices of the matter-of-fact Nelson, who always wore creased trousers and white spats, carried a creased *Times*, and caught the nine-fifteen. He angered her by the disapproval in his eye and the chill in his voice.

"Why does he look at me as if I'd cut down the cherry tree and was lying good and hard? I've never been rude to him until to-day. Guess the cap fitted for that brown fairy. Wish he was the grass! There— and there!"

NELSON caught his train that morning, but only by an acrobatic feat. He had lingered, snared by the young golden-brown foliage of the oaks against the blue sky and the foam of cherry-blossom. He might give the impression of having been flattened in a letter-press and afterwards smoke-dried, but there was the stir in his heart and the quiver of his pulse which trembled to life every year with the green tip of the first snowdrop.

He was feeling the response to the Spring— hearing the fluting of Pan as prelude to the Big Adventure.

And still Romance passed him by. Every December, after a successful business audit, he smoked out the Old Year and welcomed in the New— alone.

There was the usual reason for his composite nature. As the son of a sugar broker and a dark-eyed girl who wrote sonnets, he was the battle-ground of two opposing personalities. If father were evident on the strong surface current, the undertow was pure mother.

HE returned that evening to the tick, but in a state of nervous irritation. He wanted— something.

As usual, he shed his business armour and, incredibly loose in an old velvet smoking-jacket and ancient slippers, he strolled into his beloved garden.

It was a gracious spot, mellowed by time. with quaint grass-plots and flagged pathways, their cracks cemented with tiny rock flowers. The perennials which made it a jungle of old-fashioned blooms were still tidy cropped clumps, but the apple-blossom was out in pink and white snow, and the grass starred with daffodils.

It was perfect, yet incomplete. When God made the Garden, He created someone to walk there, and then someone else.

The worst of it was that Nelson always expected so much. No girl fitted his fancy. He wanted some white stray from the past— some gracious lady of powder and patches, who once had actually paced between these same hedges of clipped yew. At this point Reason asserted herself and told Nelson the only remedy of marriage.

Pipe in mouth, he strolled into the lane, grappling with the situation. Narrowed down, he only knew two women, and those but slightly, owing to his hermit-like seclusion— the pretty pink widow and the gardening girl.

He shook his head at the thought of Fay. He did not like her appearance. She always wore big boots, a smock, and a slouched hat pulled down over her eyes. She would have been an easy model for a beginner to draw, because she showed so few features— just a chin and mouth and part of a nose. One couldn't fall in love with that.

Moreover, as a real gardener himself, he judged her by her works and found them evil. He had seen some of her first failures on the rubbish heap—boxes of pathetic seedlings, whose stems, through over-long exposure under glass, had been drawn out to white threads. On the evidence of those slaughtered innocents, he held her the equivalent of a baby-farmer.

So he strolled along, thinking solely of the pretty pink widow. He resolved to call at The Beeches on the next Sunday. The tender green of the hawthorn hedges was blurred to vague grey, and upon the sharpened air stole a faint perfume of primroses. He felt sopped through with pleasing melancholy.

He passed the thatched cottage where Fay lodged, oblivious to the dim white figure, with unbound hair, who leaned out of her lattice.

Fay, relaxing after her labours, was also responsive to the twilight spell. Putting off her boyhood with her boots, she was yearning, like Juliet, to write a name in the stars, only, as yet, the name was unknown. She dreamed of someone splendid and romantic— quite different to a man who wore white spats and caught the nine-fifteen.

Yet, as Nelson stopped to light his pipe she studied his face with sudden interest. He had good eyes and a finely-cut mouth. At that moment he looked a man one could grow to like. Besides, he was the only man she knew. She almost wished he did not dislike her so thoroughly....

And so to bed.

SHE WAS up with the dawn to inspect the tulip bed, for the widow wished for pink tulips by Sunday, and Fay had rather less control over the sun than over her mowing machine. To her joy, there were numerous splits in each pale-green calyx, according to time-table.

Suddenly her smile vanished.

"White! Yes, every one. Like pink sugar-almonds when you've sucked them. In mercy's name, what shall I do?"

Nelson, who was enjoying his first pipe in his dew-spangled garden, was arrested by the sound of sobs. It was a shock to discover the gardener, her head buried on the top bar of the gate, crying into her sleeve like a Victorian maiden.

"Can I help?" he asked awkwardly.

"No." Fay raised streaming eyes. "Nobody can help me. You see, Canute couldn't!"

"Couldn't what?"

"Reverse the course of Nature, and you can't, either. He couldn't turn back the tide, and you can't turn white tulips into pink!"

"So that's the trouble." He walked inside and inspected the bed. "Yes, they're white, sure enough. Look up your order! It may be the florist's funeral."

"That makes no difference. She wanted pink tulips by Sunday, and if there are none, I'll be fired. And— and I do love the garden so!"

"Yes— as a woman loves the bird on her hat. And you water it with the sun on it and give the poor flowers measly sprinkles just to draw their roots to the surface. And prune ramblers instead of cutting out. And give foul feeders, like roses, nothing but water. Oh, yes, I dare say you do love the garden! *Umph!*"

The last exclamation is what Nelson actually uttered, but in it he managed to embody the drift of the other sentences. Because he was a real gardener, he hardened his heart.

"Sounds to me like a fairy's job. Didn't you vow you'd seen one? Better get him to make delivery of his wish."

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## 18: Snapragon and Ghost

*The Windsor Magazine*, Dec 1922

"I'VE brought you a Christmas present, Leslie— a ring which has the power of granting wishes."

The girl eyed the trinket as trustfully as a wild animal regards a trap. It was a half-hoop of diamonds, and much resembled an engagement ring.

The man smiled as she drew it on her index finger.

"I wish— I wish for an old-fashioned Christmas— snow, snapdragon, and ghosts!"

She crossed to the open window.

"Look! Nothing's happened!"

Below them stretched a dun, tideless sea, pricked with lamp-posts, above was a bagging ceiling-cloth of smoke-clogged vapour, and all around were the honey-combed cells of the block of flats.

Then from the invisible street arose a boy's thin treble. He kept the tune, also his accent, which was the canned twang of cities.

"Good King Wenceslas went forth—"

Leslie winced as she slammed down the window. She was a well-grown girl, with crystal-clear eyes and a youthful blur on her cheeks. With the same furious energy she wrenched off the ring.

"Take it back, George! It's very kind of you, but it's not pukka magic. Give it to someone who has the power to make it work."

"Very well. I will take it back— for the present. But you did not try the right finger for the spell."

He spoke with meaning, while he invited her scrutiny, with no fear of the stock-taking. He kept his goods in his hop window, with the approved labels: "Virility," "Pep," "Clean Living," "Open-Air Life," all achieved by Turkish baths, a smile which had paid him better than his education, and a stomach which was still taking its punishment.

But Leslie was not conscious of his presence. She was conscious only of the mass of humanity all around her, below and above her, of air thickened with voices, staled with breath, fouled with footsteps.

It was one of her bad days, which came when she was run down mentally and physically— days when she hungered for wide spaces and panted to climb to the chimney-pots of the world and hurl herself into the blue.

The high rental of the flats was justified solely by locality. Leslie believed that in the beginning an honest architect built an honest house, suitable to the good old Victorian days when families were twelve to a score of years and Providence looked after the future. That mischievous urchin, the architect's

son, spoiled the original plan by ruling small squares all over it. When he achieved manhood, he chanced upon his childish drawing and found therein the essentials of good modern architecture.

So he partitioned each room into three, filched odd fragments therefrom, which were kitchen and bathroom, and gave each its own front door. And the rent of the house was the rent of each flat thereof.

Leslie took four wide strides which brought her up flush with the yellow wall.

"George," she said vehemently, "if anyone could look down— down, this city must seem like a black fly-paper, all buzzing with wretched little limed folks!"

He laughed as her voice broke in a croak.

"You've the grandfather of all the colds. Better not talk, old dear. You've got to be fit for Christmas."

"Christmas? There's no such word *here*. It's just a date on the calendar— December the twenty-fifth."

He whistled softly, for Leslie was usually too vital and tonic to be the victim of nerves. Then he gave a sigh of relief as the door of the bedroom was opened and his sister Beryl came in, armed with a couple of thermos flasks.

She was a beautiful blonde, with a permanent wave in her hair and a fish-bone in the throat of her natural impulses. She kept her emotions in cold storage and her money in the bank, for she lived by virtue of co-operative housekeeping with Leslie, who had no head for applied arithmetic.

She raised her brows imperceptibly. Her brother replied by wireless—

"Stuck!"

"I'm through with my packing, Leslie." Her voice held the clear diction of an occasional actress in straight drama. "What about yours, Leslie?"

"Plenty of time. I'm only taking a grip."

Beryl glanced at her sharply.

"Anything wrong?"

"Nothing. Just Christmas. It makes me think back, and then I get soggy and sentimental... Christmas in the country, with red firelight and decorations, and the smell of cooking, and the family coming home for the holidays. That's inside. Outside is a white world, with the light streaming from the church window, where they are practising the carols. 'Peace on earth'—"

Something more than a relaxed larynx choked Leslie's voice.

Peace on earth? With Caruso on the gramophone at No. 11, a jazz on the pianola at No. 13, and at No. 15 a ladies' tea-party, with a little quiet conversation with ladies just across the way in Mars; a child crying at No. 12, a

Pom yapping for the moon at No. 14, and at No. 16 a sick man making the best of it by trying to die.

Beryl, who was sound-proof, began to laugh.

"Snow and holly and tame robins buttoning up their little red waistcoats! Be honest, woman! You lived in the West. Wasn't it a warm wind, and muddy lanes, and charcoal in the turkey to keep it from going?"

"Mostly," admitted Leslie. "But once in a while we did have old-fashioned weather, with skating and frost flowers on your window. I keep thinking of *that*. Oh, dear heart! I do want it all back again!... Give me those flasks, and I'll heat up the coffee."

She felt that she must escape, if only for a few minutes, from those others. In half an hour the three would be penned in a railway carriage, on their way to the South Coast hydro. There they would follow the Spirit of Mirth through the trail of the programme of festivities, and howl "Auld Lang Syne" with a collection of overfed, sentimental strangers.

Leslie panted anew for the mountain-top. Meantime the Child would be reborn. And there was no manger at the hydro, only a feeding-trough.

The kitchen, like the rest of the flat, had yellow walls, black painted woodwork, and hangings of Chinese blue. It was a dishonest little crook of a room, and uncongenial to Leslie, who was a real homey person.

It had no qualities. No flames roared in the heart of its stove, which displayed the mysteries of its art of creation through a transparent panel. Behind plate-glass shelves were tins of sophisticated food, each with its artistic label, no jars of flour, spice, or plums, no smell of freshly-baked apple dumplings— nothing to regale the appetite, nothing to satisfy the Christmas spirit. It was a kitchen in name only.

At first Leslie had enjoyed the novelty of sharing the flat with Beryl Webb. Clad in wondrous cretonne overalls splashed with peacocks and parrots, and lighting rather more cigarettes than she smoked, she had designed her wallpapers with that youthful zest which made earning her living only another adventure. The flats then were to her only so many stories to the stars, for she was in love with the topmost tenant.

Douglas Burns had a flat among the chimney-pots, with an armchair, a flying-pan, and a varied assortment of pipes. Unlike George Webb, he offered no surface attractions, but presented a problem in raining to discover what went to his making.

A shortish, square-built man, with a rough-hewn face and a quiet voice, yet a fairy, for all that— one of the scientific genus who unite oceans and remove mountains. In other words, an engineer.

When Leslie had inherited her legacy, she had made no difference in her life. Presently, however, she found that life had altered in its attitude to her. Small incidents, trivial yet cumulative, had culminated in Christmas Eve, when she found herself bounded on the north, south, east, and west by George Webb, while Burns had withdrawn to the back of Godspeed.

Leslie shut the kitchen door with a sense of relief. This room contained two of her treasures— relics of the past. One was the dress-cupboard, which she had chosen from the wreck of her old home— a wondrous substantial ark of mahogany lined with cedar-wood. The other was her picture of the highwayman, masked and mounted, in caped coat and three-cornered hat, waiting for the stage coach.

He had waited for it for over a hundred years, there in the triangular patch of pines on the blasted heath, with the thin nail-paring of a moon, which would never swell to the full, riding in the amethyst sky.

The coffee got outside the pan as Leslie brooded over the picture. Within the limits of its frame were frosty space and romance and the spirit of the old-time Christmas, when lawlessness was adventure, and one tied up one's gifts with a true lover's knot.

"Holloa! Still stirring the Christmas pudding in the old home town in the West?"

As Beryl salvaged the coffee, her smile was acid as citron.

"I can see you, Leslie, the stock-coloured supplement of the Christmas number. You are the girl with the curls, in the full evening-dress of serviceable tulle, who's just finished her stunt of wreathing the church pillars with holly.... My grief! That broken-nosed highwayman has a look of Douglas Burns. By the way, he's just blown in."

With a lightning transposition of values, the little yellow mouse-trap was charged with a rich, full-flavoured Dickens atmosphere of roast goose and nut-brown ale, mistletoe and ice, snapdragon and ghosts. Leslie remembered that her highwayman was probably a pock-marked, unfragrant rascal, and that in another hundred years the block of flats and the South Coast hydro would be growing crusted and historic.

Her eyes were bright with anticipation as she followed Beryl into the sitting-room, where the two men were talking in jerks and not looking at each other.

Burns threw her a swift glance, tapped out his pipe, and rose.

"Well, I must be off. Just dropped in to wish you a good time and a merry Christmas, and all that sort of thing."

The glow faded from Leslie's face. It was always like this, the eager throb of welcome ending in the formal handshake of farewell.

"Are you going away for Christmas?" she asked.

"I shall probably pad the hoof. Moors."

"Moors! Fine. I'd love to do that. Just sun and wind and no one to see you but God."

"If you wish to test that theory, just try stealing a sheep. My word, you've a ripe, old-fashioned cold! Don't forget to take a flask of brandy."

"Thanks. That completes my collection of the hundred best remedies. I'm going to follow my granny and tie an old stocking round my throat."

"Well, don't talk, or your voice will go. Cheerio!"

"Time to pack, Leslie!"

They chased her out of the sitting-room as though she were an infectious germ.

She packed mechanically, her thoughts far from tissue-paper, face-foots, and boot-trees. In the same dream she put on her hat and coat and filled her flask with brandy. There was a little thrill of pleasure in following Burns's advice.

Hearing Beryl call, she hastened to fasten her grip. To her annoyance, she had packed too tightly, and the wedged sides refused to meet. Some bulky garment had to be discarded.

"Coming!"

Hurriedly dragging out a thick quilted silk dressing-gown, she rushed into the kitchen, where her summer things were stored away in the press. She stepped inside it, and as she was groping with frantic haste to find a muslin wrapper, she heard Beryl's voice the other side of the door.

"She's in the bedroom. Quick, George! Have you asked her?"

"Began to. Nothing doing— at present."

"*George!* She never turned you down?"

"She didn't have the chance to turn me down." The splendid George spoke with a certain irritation. "I saw she wasn't in the mood with that rotten cold."

"Well, *I'd* have snapped her up before she got to the hydro. There's plenty of competition for an heiress. I've had my work cut out keeping others off the grass."

Leslie shrank back into the unresponsive arms of the summer dressing-gown she had just located. In view of the extreme awkwardness of the situation, she had to remain an unwilling audience. She felt grateful that the cupboard door was closed, so that it was outlined by only a mere crack of light.

Beryl's last words had evidently given George food for reflection. He leaned suddenly against the cupboard and took out his pipe.

"Does the strong silent gorilla blow in often?"

"Burns? Not now. He was very keen at one time, but I rubbed it in that Leslie was very awake to fortune-hunters."

"Oh!" gasped the wrapper, thrilled to its very hem.

"That's a nasty knock for me, old dear!" George's laugh was half shamed, half cynical. "Burns doesn't seem a bad sort. A bit keen on him yourself, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Beryl's voice was careless. "He's— rather a lamb. We ought to be starting. Leslie! Leslie!"

Leslie, gasping among the summer finery, was not answering to her name. The circumstances put it out of the question. Moreover, her mind, was a jungle of rioting emotions through which one truth soared triumphant.

Douglas Burns had not changed towards her. Both had been pawns in Beryl's fingers, ambitious of a dowried wife for her brother, and for herself a lover caught on the rebound.

She heard Beryl's voice, now blurred as though by distance. Apparently they had left the kitchen, for the pencil of light had disappeared.

"I can't find Leslie anywhere in the flat. Do you think she has gone out to get a taxi?"

"Probably. Where's her grip?"

Leslie held her breath. She had left it under the kitchen table.

"I don't see it," replied Beryl.

"I should say she's gone on to make the train early and reserve seats. Sherlock's my middle name. We'd better thither, in any case."

Leslie waited until a distant slam told her that the flat was empty and locked for a week. She was trembling with varied emotions, but prudence told her that she must follow them as soon as possible to the station. Although she had to go through with the festivities at the hydro, she would be on guard. The holiday would give her time to think of how she should salve the wounds to Burns's self-respect. Already the future seemed powdered with star-dust.

She pushed the door, but, to her surprise, it did not swing open. She tried again with fingers which suddenly grew hot and ineffective. The door had a spring lock, but she had been careful not to fasten it.

The gramophone in the next flat broke into a band record of carols. The tea-party ladies grew more festive, for no tea was drunk at that party.

Leslie's heart dropped a beat. She put her shoulder against the door and pushed with all her strength. It did not yield.

At that moment the gramophone broke into a wailing chorus, as though heavy with the burden of old sorrows and old sins—

"Oh, the mistletoe bough!

Oh the mistle-to-e bo-ouh!"



The blood left Leslie's heart and rushed to her head. She remembered now how George had pressed against the door, also the dulled voices and the darkness. She was locked in the cupboard, like the little bride of over a century ago who had hidden in the oak chest on her wedding night, in the full tide of her youth and love and life.

And now, in tones of unutterable dolour, the gramophone was telling the end of the years-long search— a mouldered veil, a withered wreath, a handful of— bones.

A careless wish dropped into the dun, stagnant pool had found a fertile breeding-spot. Leslie heard a strange voice croaking—

"You fool! You *asked* for it— an old-fashioned Christmas!"

She felt her breath beginning to break in little panting half-sobs, like a distressed runner, and she knew that, at all costs, she must stem the rising tide of hysteria. She must feel no pity for that little human mouse caught in a trap baited with moon-cheese.

"I must think— think good and hard."

But every thread she followed led her back to a locked cupboard door.

To-night was Saturday. The hydro party would not be home until the following Tuesday week, for they had booked to stay for the New Year ball, which had to be held upon the Monday. Their daily servant was due back on the day before them, in order to air and clean the flat. All letters would be forwarded by the hall-porter. Consequently the flat would be hermetically sealed for nine days. And much could happen in those nine days.

She swiftly wrenched her thoughts back to George and Beryl. When they found that she was not on the train, they would institute an instant search.

Barely had she drawn her first breath of relief, when the cloud of doubt began to dim her clear picture of rescue. She saw the scene at the station— a chaos of luggage, and passengers fighting for fragments of porters and stray inches of cubic space on the last fast train to the south.

Beryl and George would naturally conclude that Leslie had already taken her seat in some other coach, if they thought of her at all, which was unlikely. George covered his responsibilities with his hat, while Beryl was a limpet who concentrated on finding a rock. Leslie had to rule out the first possibility. No one could miss her at the station.

She bit her lip fiercely as she felt anew the frightened flutter of her heart. She had but to wait for the arrival at the hydro. And then?

And then Leslie— who knew at least the upper strata of Beryl's mind— began to feel curiously cold. She was no spoon-fed babe, but an independent, vigorous young woman, with a temperamental tug, a tongue between her teeth, and money in her purse.

Let that same young woman loose, turn her round three times, take off her blinkers, and it's Lombard Street to a china orange that she will swerve off in a bee-line to anywhere but her appointed destination.

Beryl would conclude that Leslie had yielded to impulse and cut out the hydro to follow her nose.

But, apart from Beryl, there remained George. Leslie, drowning in deep waters, was clutching at straws and feathers. If George wanted her money, he could only possess it through a personal medium. Less than an hour ago he had offered her a ring.

Yet if they plucked the City apart in sections, to discover its secret hiding-places, it could not help her, for the one place which they would not search would be the flat, knowing it empty as a shelled pod.

Leslie went under. It was no use cheating herself. She was doomed to die, like a poisoned rat in a drain, of hunger, thirst, or suffocation. She was a sacrifice to appease the old-fashioned Christmas spirit, which checks the feasting and joust by the lights burning blue to herald the ghost.

Her self-control snapped suddenly. She ran amok like a rogue elephant in a jungle. Pressed as she was within a few inches of space, she rained pitifully futile blows upon the door and sides of the cupboard, as effective as pennies dropping on snowdrifts.

She tried to scream at the top of her voice, but all she could achieve was a broken wheeze, like the dying effort of a cut windpipe. Her hands, fighting the air, got entangled with the sheaves of hanging dresses, flimsy scented summer things, and she tore them down and stamped them under her feet like an infuriated animal, not knowing what she fought.

It was a severe, but brief struggle. Choked and exhausted, she stopped battering, and slid to her knees. Perhaps it was her own attitude which reminded her of those wondrous winged guests who, not so long ago, stood at each corner of her crib. They had faded as she grew older and had flirted with a score of Johns, an occasional Mark and Matthew, and once a unique Luke, all of whom, later on, had stood between her and a Hun bullet.

Although she had grown hazy about her bodyguard, and was generally too tired for more than a prayer done into shorthand, she still felt the protection of something strong and pure. And now her whole soul rushed from her body in appeal to those four guardian angels.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Bless the bed that I lie on; Four corners to my bed, Four angels guard my head...."

It may be that their memories were longer than hers, for certain it was that at that moment, while the taxi was honking its way through the traffic, George turned to Beryl.



"We've got to buzz back, old child! I must have left my note-case on the mantelpiece when I took out my pipe."

Leslie could hardly credit her ears when the click of the opening door aroused her from her stupor. She heard a familiar voice—

"Strike a match, Berry. I don't know where you keep your switch."

A George to the rescue— George with the noble torso and the virile clean-cut face tanned with the great out-of-doors, George, worthy namesake of a saint who spiked dragons!

Leslie sprang to her feet and hammered with all her force, which was little enough, for her elbows were jammed tightly against the back of the cupboard and allowed no purchase for her blows. Her fists fell dead upon the solid barrier of the two woods. Yet, to her joy, she heard George question—

"What's that? A sort of noise, like— like pecking."

"Someone chopping suet in the next kitchen, of course. Oh, do hurry!"

"Coming!"

Leslie drew an agonised breath. It was her very last chance. She *must* make them hear.

"Beryl! George! Help!"

To her horror, her lips gaped soundlessly, like those of a goldfish in a bowl. Only the thread of a whisper spluttered out in her throat. In her paroxysm of screaming her voice had petered out completely.

Then she heard her own name mentioned. But this time she did not crouch among the dresses, spilling her laughter down their empty sleeves.

"Berry, suppose Leslie doesn't show up at the station? She's a rum kid. What's the plan?"

"Wash her out and carry on as arranged." Beryl's voice was ruthlessly decisive as she reverted to the special pleading of the oldest criminal in the world: "*I'm* not responsible for Leslie."

As the door banged to in the adjoining kitchen, someone chopped suet with almost passionate energy.

Leslie only desisted when her hands were sore from bruises. By this time she supposed that George and Beryl would be far away. She did not know how long she had been beating at the door.

All around her people were laughing, in training for the great festival of joy. The gramophone was being very funny over a gorgonzola cheese. The tea-party ladies had reached the top note of hilarity in the compass of their tonic.

Leslie began to laugh, too, noiselessly.

"I *asked* for it. No, no! Stop!"

She began to grope in the darkness, exploring every inch of the closet for some hidden spring which she knew perfectly well was not there. Presently her

finger sank nearly to its tip into a hole bored with a red-hot poker through the two woods. Leslie remembered even now the time it had taken to penetrate the thick mahogany, and the slippening she had received over a paternal knee.

When she crouched, the hole was on a level with her eyes. Although she could see nothing, it brought her some vague comfort, as a link with the outside world of living people.

The gramophone was working overtime, in honour of Christmas Eve. The carols proved a popular record, for once again Leslie heard the sorrowful story of the Mistletoe Bough.

As she listened, she lost all sense of time and place. In a light-headed half-dream she saw pictures which ran parallel to her own plight, just as though she looked in a mirror which flashed back an unfamiliar reflection. She blended into the little bride of the romantic past, in snowy brocade and floating veil, even while she was vividly conscious of herself— Leslie Mason— wearing the smartest of travelling suits under her fur coat.

She chuckled involuntarily as the radiant girl shook back her powdered curls and leaped lightly inside the old oaken chest. An unuttered scream stabbed her throat like a sword as the heavy lid crashed down. She stretched out her arms in a panic of fear. And it was only Leslie Mason, walled up among the summer gowns of the twentieth century, many of them bearing the tag of Rue de la Paix.

The thrill of terror awoke her to wide-eyed despair. She began to wonder how long it would be before Beryl recognised the truth that her disappearance was no impulsive freak. Sooner or later they must grapple with the fact that, within a few ticks of the clock, nine-and-a-half stone of beautiful girlhood, plus some very expensive clothes and a considerable sum of money, had been snuffed out like a blown candle.

There would be paragraphs in the newspapers— Beryl being interviewed, in her best frock, and with a stationary drop on her lashes. Inquiry agents would circulate those descriptions which fit every blonde woman who wears the orthodox clothes. No one would look in the cupboard. It held only Leslie's gowns— last summer's drift of stranded chiffon and lace.

But one day inevitably someone would make the gruesome discovery.

"Oh, the mistletoe bough!"

Even while Leslie wondered how long it took to die of starvation, she knew that she would not go out that way. Her breath was growing shallow, and every expansion of her lungs was an effort. She could feel large drops of sweat starting out on her forehead, while her heart leaped like a wounded bird.

She could not tell how long she had been using up the atmosphere, but it was plain that it was nearly exhausted. It seemed semi-solid, weighing down upon her like a sodden clout.

As she struggled to free herself from her fur coat, her hand pressed something in her pocket. It was the flask of brandy.

"Not much good now. But— it was sweet— of him— to think of me."

She caressed the flask foolishly, childishly. Douglas Burns had passed from her mind in the stress of her anguish. She wondered where he was— whether he had started on his journey; she wondered, too, whether she would still be somewhere in the universe, a vagrant whisper in the wind, free to fan his brow and tell him her love.

Her thoughts, which were growing misty again, suddenly cleared. A spot of light was glowing through the hole in the closet. Someone had entered the room unnoticed.

Automatically she thought of burglars, and, forgetful of her plight, her first feeling was fright. A great throb of surprise and joy shook her when she saw that the intruder was Burns. She remembered that he had once told her that he had a key which fitted their lock.

He was ready dressed for his journey in tweeds and nailed boots. But she did not question what brought him to the flat. A sense of peace and security had fallen like balm upon her tortured spirit. She *knew* that everything would be well.

Her angels had not cheated her. Since George had failed them, they had sent a worthier champion, who would hear her dumb voice and see through locked doors.

Burns marched directly to the mantel-shelf which held the sole photograph of Leslie— a snap with the sun full upon her nose, making a white blob of it, yet joyous with her own attractive grin and breeze-ruffled hair.

He looked both sheepish and sentimental as he put it inside his breast-pocket. "Going to borrow you for the week-end, little girl. Walk will do you good."

A wave of faintness swept over Leslie. She strove desperately to unscrew the top of her flask, but before she could raise it to her lips, her head fell forward on her breast, and the flask slipped noiselessly down on to the litter of gowns.

But, even as her eyes closed, she knew that it was all right. Burns was there. And the Providence which ordains a safety-door when the proper channel is blocked, and permits eyes to speak and fingers to see, flashed the message through the last receptive faculty. His hand upon the door-knob, Burns stiffened, threw up his head, and sniffed the air.

*"Brandy?"*

Casting around to locate the odour, he walked to the cupboard and unlocked the door.

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**19: Fate**

*The Sunday Constitution Magazine, Atlanta, 10 Aug 1924*

CLIFTON RAY sang in his bath.

Although vocal exercise is as essential to tub ritual as soap and loofah, he had a special reason for his jubilant howl.

Tomorrow he was going away to meet Stella.

History repeats itself. As he splashed and gurgled, his memory reverted to the last occasion when he had sung in his bath as a preliminary to meeting Stella, and— had not met her.

Today he could afford to smile at his past bitter agony of disappointment. It was over two years ago;— and thousands of miles away in his lodgings at Acton.

He remembered the bath— a deep one, enameled dark green. The wallpaper was covered with indigo splotches, intended for seaweed, and their reflections in the wavering olive water unpleasantly suggested tentacles aquiver to wind themselves round the limbs of the bather.

But this special morning, two years ago, the dark, sinister bath seemed asparkle with sapphire and foam, and he shouted like a young lord of creation. Overnight, at a Chelsea hop, he had proposed to Stella and had been— nearly— accepted.

She, too, had been borne along on the flood of mutual attraction; only she was pulled in the undertow of an opposing current. On the morrow she was going on tour to the Argentine, with a revue company, and her eyes were blinded with star dust.

She refused him, but refused him with a kiss. Then, lip to lip, youth had called to youth, so that she had relented and promised her final answer, a few hours hence, at the railway station.

On his return, Clifton, fearful to oversleep, had paced his rooms until the fateful dawn. As recorded, he sang in his bath. He caught his train with several minutes to spare.

And then— he ran into the unforeseen— a blinding fog on the line. The train crawled or passively waited the will of adverse signals. When at last he arrived at Victoria, he realized that it would be a close shave if he reached Euston in time.

The tubes were congested with the usual bottled-up crowds, resultant of fog. He decided it would be quicker to cross London in a taxi.

It proved not to be quicker. The roads were up and a block in the traffic held him motionless for minutes, raging in his cab like a trapped tiger. He looked at his watch; its hands were spinning around the dial.

He wondered if it would be quicker to leave his taxi and run to the station. It would have been quicker; one leap and fate would have collapsed like an overblown paper bag.

He let the fateful moment go by. When at last he reached the station Stella's train was still waiting.

But, as he dashed on the platform, the whistle shrilled, the green flag was waved, and the tail lights of the train disappeared round the curve of the rails.

THEY wrote. There followed the complete tragi-comedy of letters, which crossed or got lost, or were forgotten to be posted.

Then the revue company went on the rocks in the Argentine, and its members were disbanded, with some disastrous results. But Stella had more than a pretty face; she had sufficient sand in her character to avoid the moral shipwreck of her companions. After a series of adventures she worked her way back to England. She wrote.

This was fate's signal to act. Clifton got promotion which took him from the city counting-house of the export firm where he worked as a clerk, and sent him to be assistant manager of one of the company's copra trading stations in a Pacific island.

He wrote.

Stella found England rather empty. She signed a contract for an Australian tour. She had won slight promotion from the chorus. She was given a song, although she could not sing, and a dance which she executed well. She also went on being beautiful, which she did better than anything else.

In his Pacific exile Clifton became obsessed of a jealous dread of the lords and millionaires who, to his ingenuous mind, followed the limelight lure of every actress. About this time Stella grew moody on the subject of the legendary beauty of dusky tropic belles.

They stopped writing.

A week ago the long silence was broken in a letter from Stella. It gave the date, five weeks hence, when she sailed from Sydney to London.

She said stage life had proved a disillusion and she was tired— tired. She called it "fed to the back teeth." In London there lived a certain worthy man of substance whose repeated offers of marriage she had always refused, because— well, because. If upon her return to England she became Mrs. Horace Smith, she intended to make this good, true man a good, loyal wife and forget all others.

Only she still loved Clifton, always, always.

"O, Clifton, come!"

Clifton took the letter straight to his chief, who had the reputation of being the biggest blackguard in the Pacific. Probably for this reason he understood and made every allowance for human nature. He arranged for a substitute and gave Clifton two months' leave of absence.

This time no slip could intervene.

The tramp steamer, the *Prince of Wales*, due for departure tomorrow, lay rolling in the dark blue trough of the waves outside the island. She would make Sydney within three weeks. This gave Clifton a margin of a clear week in which to get married and then return in triumph with his queen.

The whole island throbbed with a real romance.

So— Clifton Ray sang in his bath.

THIS time he could not sit down in his tub. Its bottom of spiked coral lay so far below him that the pale green water shaded down to a deep peacock blue. For his bath was a semi-inclosed pool in the Pacific ocean.

It was not too safe a spot for a morning toilet, for an occasional triangular fin was apt to appear outside the guardian reef. But the jade water of the safe inner lagoon was tepid and always fringed with a scum of refuse, so that Clifton had chosen this rocky basin, in preference, for his morning dip.

As he swam and sang he felt almost intoxicated with life. In a burst of jubilation he dived deep into the sparkling water. The crystalline light grew gradually to a grass-green gloom; he could see fish of grotesque shapes and brilliant hues darting from the caves and spiny projections of the coral reef.

Deeper yet. Tomorrow he was going to meet Stella.

From a cleft in the reef something had moved. A tangle of dark tentacles was slowly spreading out in the jade water, as though blindly seeking.

For a moment Clifton trod water as he stared at the waving trailers. He supposed it was seaweed. Yet it looked sinister and instinct with slimy life. He decided to dive no deeper. He was still comfortably remote from the object.

Suddenly a black whip shot out, within a foot of his head.

For a ghastly second he stayed paralyzed; then the spell was broken and he clove his way to the surface in a cone of silver bubbles.

Despite the sun, he shivered as he dressed. From the length of that one tentacle he knew he must have disturbed an octopus or devilfish of unusual size. He resolved to warn Findlay, his deputy, against bathing in the pool until his boys had fished up the monster. This must be done immediately, since Stella was an expert swimmer and would revel in his private bath.

"Stella!"

He shouted her name and the warmth returned to the sunshine.



He returned to his bungalow, littered with masculine lumber, and instead of the corrugated iron dwellings of the trading station at the other end of the island, he had elected to occupy a native hut, walled with saplings interwoven with sennit and thatched with plaited pandanus leaf.

In his fancy he transformed it for his bride. They would bring, from Sydney, a pink shaded lamp, big cushions, new records for the gramophone, and a trouser-press. He could think of no further details of feminine refinement, but trusted that Stella might supply a few ideas.

This morning he could not capture his usual rapture of anticipation. Every time he thought of that whiplike tentacle, almost grazing his cheek, he felt a chill at the base of his spine.

The fate he had escaped so narrowly tinged his mind with a faint melancholy.

"If I had gone out, now!"

DURING the rest of the day he was too busy for forebodings. His deputy, young Findlay, had to instruct in the details of the business.

After dinner, as they sat outside in the veranda smoking, Findlay suddenly recollected a message from Clifton's chief.

"By the way, just as I was leaving, some steam yacht put in at the harbor. Some swell party from Raratonga. Chief told me to let you know, in case you'd care to come over to the station. He was going down then to the harbor. He said he'd shake you down and you'd be on the spot, ready to sail tomorrow."

Clifton started up, his eyes inspired, his face rapt and almost beautiful.

"That's an idea! No!" He sank limply back again. "Better not."

"Why? What's bitten you?"

"Nothing."

Clifton was drenched anew with foreboding. Suddenly he thought of Acton. He knew things would go wrong.

He started as Findlay touched him on the arm.

In a clearing of the palms stood a native girl of unusual beauty. Her features, which were nearly free from negroid taint, looked ivory in the uncertain light. Her eyes of plum purple black were heavily fringed; her hair waved strongly about her shoulders. She wore a violet lava-lave and a single scarlet hibiscus flower over her ear.

As she smiled at them, in invitation, she looked the spirit incarnate of the tropics.

Clifton shook his head and she drifted back into the shadows.

Findlay made no secret of his disappointment.

"What'd you shoo her off for? That was the prettiest jane I've seen."



"Was she?" Clifton yawned. "Brown girls aren't in my line."

"Mean to say you've never fallen for these island belles?"

"Not me. You see, my boy, I'm just going to be married."

"Poor devil!"

"Poor what? I say, I'm marrying an actress."

This time Clifton did not miss his effect.

"An actress? You? Got her photo?"

"Two. Come inside."

He swelled with pride as they examined Stella's photographs by the light of the insect-clogged kerosene lamp. One was a really beautiful studio portrait, while the other showed her in a charming and frank revue costume.

True to youthful type, the boys reserved their deepest admiration for the Stella of the beautiful legs.

"Of all the luck!" Findlay pounded Clifton on the back. "Good old bean. She's a ripper."

"Rather. And out of all those lords and millionaires, she chose plain me. What's yours?"

Back again on the veranda, their high spirits gradually petered out into silence.

Clifton's depression spread to Findlay.

"Hell! How will I ever stick in this bally spot? Ever seen it on the map? It's absolutely ghastly. Just a black dot, shoved inside acres of blue paint."

"O, you'll shake down. I did."

"You're different. You're going to be married."

"Yes. Perhaps. Yes, of course, I am. Findlay, I've the most awful hump. Ever had a presentiment?"

"Rather. A bullet head means nothing. I don't mind telling you, I'm psychic."

"Well, once before, when I was going to meet Stella, something cropped up and stopped me. And I've an awful conviction that once again something will happen."

"Rats. What?"

"Don't know. But I know this. I'm taking no risks. I'm not going to sleep tonight. And I'll own up; I wouldn't go down to the station tonight, because I was afraid we might meet some of the yachting crowd and get asked to the cabin."

IT was true Findlay was psychic. He suddenly shed his depression and came to life.

"Afraid, Ray?"

"Yep. Last time a millionaire's yacht put in, there was fizz going and we all got lit and there was no end of a stormy night on the beach. Great it was." His face again assumed fleeting beauty. "And I knew that if there was 'boy' going tonight I couldn't resist it, and then I might get tight and miss the boat."

"Wouldn't they wait?"

"Wait? You don't know Captain Pearl. Cargo's all and the bally passenger just ballast. He'll wait for no one this side Jordan."

Findlay rose.

"You're perfectly right, old thing. Take no risk. Best thing I can do is to leave you alone. If I don't show up again tonight you'll know I've run up against some of the yachting party."

"Good luck, old bean," said Clifton wistfully.

The solitude of the hut remained undisturbed. Clifton sat chain-smoking, watching the stars marching in companies across the ebon skies. His brain was stimulated to extraordinary clarity, although he could not control its operations.

Of a sudden, he felt lonely. For a year he had lived on a tooth of coral sticking up through thunderous plains of ocean and had been unconscious of exile. For the first time he shivered under the solitude, not of one night, but of three hundred and sixty-five lonely nights and days.

It crushed him down. All around, in the swell and whisper, seemed to be something big which pervaded the darkness.

Fate? He thought vaguely of it as blind, blundering, with a million arms. Why else had fate separated him and Stella by merely a few yards of asphalt pavement and then thrown them together from the uttermost parts of the globe?

Yet now, in the dark immensity, he sensed a definite Brain, which shaped a human destiny.

He, grew rather frightened. In some confused way he wanted to propitiate that power, so that it would not crush him again. He was a trader and he wished to drive a bargain for his happiness.

What had he to trade?

He would make Stella a thundering good husband. But any beast of the jungle will protect its mate.

He would be honest and upright in business. But that was the dictate of self-interest.

He would— he hunted for a word— he would be decent.

Decent. But— suddenly, he found he was growing sleepy. The stars were multiplying and shifting over the heavens like metallic seed blown by the wind of eternity.

He caught himself up sharply in the middle of a nod.

This would never do. He dared no sleep. He....

His head fell forward on his breast. The cigarette slipped from his fingers to the crushed white coral gravel.

He was back in Acton, packing for a journey, with Stella at his journey's end. He could not finish his task. Time was passing, yet fresh articles lay always beside him, and not one could be left behind. He knew the train was waiting at the station, but still be packed, packed.

The dream shifted. He was on his way to the station, an endless nightmare journey. His taxi first broke down in shapeless rubbish and then changed to a donkey cart. Presently he was afoot, running to catch the train, and the houses and lamp posts ran by his side.

AFTER hundreds of years he reached the station. It lay atop of thousands of steps. He toiled up, just in time to see the train shoot past him— its lighted windows running together in a golden streak.

He woke, with a shout of horror, to find himself in his chair, outside his hut. "Hell! I've been asleep!"

He glanced at his watch, and then held it to his ear. It was still ticking. Five o'clock.

He drew a sigh of relief. He had two and a half hours in which to catch his boat.

Then he realized that he ached in every joint and that his teeth chattered from cold. He stared around him in petrified dismay.

The whole island was wrapped in a thick white fog which blanketed the sea. Every landmark was obliterated. The trunks of the palms showed only as faint gray filaments.

The fog. The unforeseen.

The island was, luckily, no paradise of creeper-laced forest heights and plummy waterfalls. He had but to follow the track by the sea and he could not fail to reach the other end. It was only his knowledge of the possibility of losing all sense of one's direction, in a London fog, within hail of one's doorstep, which made him respect three miles of muffled landscape.

He stepped out briskly, whistling, his eyes glued to the blurred white track where the coral spine of the island had chafed its scanty covering threadbare. He had only to hold to that.

Presently he stopped whistling in order to hurry while the going was good. At every step the fog was growing denser, building a solid wall of vapor across his path, so that he could see but a few feet distant.

He looked at his watch. It was best to hurry, for he was beginning to grow anxious about the track. Yesterday it had been one well-defined line, but today it had sprouted numerous unremembered tributaries.

After a while it forked distinctly. Clifton stopped to ponder and then cursed himself for his own question. He knew that what he needed was confidence—the surety that he was plowing the right furrow. That— and the knowledge that he had time in hand.

On that score, his watch reassured him with a margin of nearly an hour and a half.

"I can do it on my head."

He plodded on, following the path which he definitely knew to be right. After ten minutes or more it seemed to him he was striking upwards, away from the coast. He stopped to listen for the voice of the sea, but could only bear a muted whisper everywhere.

In a sudden panic he retraced his steps to the fork and took the alternative track.

That the first path was the right one, he discovered later, when he found himself slipping downwards on a perilous crack in the rocks. Flurried by the loss of time, he panted up the incline at top speed until he had found the fork— but not the original fork.

His confidence lasted until the new path entirely disappeared into the rough.

He wiped his face and looked at his watch. His nerve's were beginning to betray him, for its hands had started their old trick of spinning around the dial. He must hurry. Time was rushing away.

At the knowledge, his judgment entirely deserted him. Trusting to his sense of direction, he left the safety of the track and cut blindly across the rough in the direction of the sea, in the hope of picking up his original path.

Only, he did not go in the direction of the sea, for the ocean had entered into the illusionary game, lapping and murmuring in his face when it was in reality sucking at the cliffs behind him.

He went to pieces completely, coursing round in frantic and futile circles. He felt he was blundering in a lost world, somewhere in the fourth dimension, where Acton and a Pacific isle were one and the same place. At last he stopped, beaten to the knowledge that he was hopelessly lost.

He sat his jaws tighter. To abandon method now was to court madness. If he struck out doggedly, in any given direction, he was bound, in time, to reach the primitive harbor. Even if he had failed, he must not give in. He must fight to the limit— and beyond.

AT that moment the mist began to drift and swirl across his vision. A wind was springing up, shredding the fog to tatters. The wall of solid cloud before him ripped as though scratched with a talon, revealing a slice of heaving, soupy ocean, covered with white wisps, like the tangled hair of old drowned women.

And, just below him, reeling in the combers, blind drunk, was the *Prince of Wales*. Once more he was left behind.

The mist shifted yet more, revealing fresh vistas. Clifton gaped in astonishment as a familiar shape loomed at the end of one gap. It looked like his own hut, apparently not more than a quarter of a mile away.

New hope shot through him. Those blind wanderings, which had led him in exactly the opposite direction to his objective, might prove his salvation. The *Prince of Wales* was hugging the coast; she would pass close to the bluff where his hut was situated. If he could reach the reef where his canoe lay beached he could row out to the steamer.

He began to run. In five minutes he had run straight into his dream. It was a pure nightmare effort, with leaden soles and stabbing breath, while palm trees floated by his side and columns of mist whirled like dervishes before him.

He had gained on the steamer. The hut was taking definite form, when two flying figures rushed out of the mist, cut across his path, and disappeared to view.

He saw one merely as an opaque silhouette, with flying hair and bare limbs. The other, however, in her scarlet bathing pareo, stood out in sharper relief. He recognized her as their nocturnal visitor— the flower-decked siren.

The mist swallowed them up immediately, but he located them by their laughter. They were climbing down to Clifton's private bathing pool.

He was plodding on, now almost dead to sensation, when he was, arrested by a grim memory. The horror that lurked in that pool. He must warn those girls.

He shouted. Again and again. But there was no answering hail. Stung to desperation by the thought of the *Prince of Wales* forging ahead of him, he ran on, only to stop again in indecision.

Was it necessary? All natives had nine lives in the water; they feared nothing that was in the sea. He ran on again.

Once more he halted. He thought of that girl as she stood, only last night, in the bath of moonlight, beautiful, and athrill. An exquisite work of the Creator. At the lowest value a life. And he thought of that same warm creature struggling in the tentacles of the loathsome pulp.

It was no good. It was a life. He could never be happy with Stella, if this morning's memory stood between them. He had to be— decent He had to warn that damned Kanaka girl.

"Of all the blooming luck"— he did not call it 'blooming'— "of all the—"

Somewhere, out there in the fog blanket, the *Prince of Wales* was heading for Sydney and Stella. Every minute she was tearing out the heart of an emerald wave, spitting it out again in a spill of foam.

He had lost Stella again.

He lost his manhood in that minute when he was all a man. As he slid down the weed-covered ledges, he half sobbed like a small boy whose treasures have been filched.

"Damn! Damn!"

The sun broke through the mist just as he reached the reef. It fell on a girl who stood, with arms extended ready to plunge into the pool. Those arms were ivory white and the hair that veiled her shoulders a golden fleece.

She turned, at his loud cry.

"Stella!"

They were in each other's arms, at last, clinging together as though they could never be parted. Stella laughed and cried— and because that was not enough, talked through both her tears and laughter, for so much time had been wasted and there was much to say.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come to Sydney. And then I made friends with some angelic Americans and they brought me over here in their yacht. I couldn't risk losing you again. Why didn't you come last night? I waited and waited, until too late. I sent a message by your boys. This morning I just couldn't keep still, waiting to see you, so I came for a swim. O, Clifton! I felt, if you came to me, you were fated to miss the boat!"

Clifton strained her to him closer.

"Yes," he said brokenly, "fate."

He glanced at the pool which sparkled in sapphire fire. Deep down under its surface, a long strand which looked like floating seaweed, showed as a dim purple shadow.

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**20: The Island**

*The Plentywood Herald, Montana, 9 and 16 Dec 1927*

IF you would conjure up the devil, you must eat an apple before the looking glass, while you comb your hair, at midnight, on All Halloween. Although it was not October, Carol Storm tried to work the spell out of sheer boredom. In her bedroom at the Ocean hotel.

Her surroundings were not conducive to superstitious rites. The electric light fell on the usual drift of a society woman who is living beyond her means. On the toilet table was a litter of trifles— tortoise-shell, crystal, and gold. Cast garments— fragile as a butterfly's wing— lay strewn on the carpet, thick as autumn leaves.

Yet in spite of the smother of luxury, there was a dominant vital quality in Carol, suggesting a force which stretched beyond stuffy scented rooms and was rooted in the cool depths of dew-drenched woods.

In her eyes was a look which was older than Eve and freer than the wind, as she bit her apple with strong white teeth.

A clock began to strike.

"Eleven, twelve."

The devil is a gentleman— so he was punctual to the minute.

Carol gave a gasp, as in the pool of her mirror she had a snapshot vision of a white face with blurred features and black-ringed eyes.

"Oh!"

Her fright turned to amusement at the sound of a slam. Laughing, she crossed to the door which she had forgotten to shut.

"Only some one who's mistaken his number. Just my luck. Even the devil turns me down."

Carol was wrong. For the devil had seen her and marked her for his own.

Carol saw the devil again, next noon. In the restaurant. He was a shy little man, with a pale puffy face and scared eyes. He seemed anxious to avoid the attention of the waiter during the progress of his solitary meal.

Carol's eyes danced as she spoke to her husband, who was eating his lunch in moody silence.

"Chris! Do you know who that man is?"

"That?" Chris wrinkled his handsome nose. "Yes, by sight. From the provinces. Very uncommon name. Brown."

"Brown? Thrilling. He's incognito."

Christopher looked at her, the dawn of suspicion in his glance. Yet no man had less cause to be distrustful of a beautiful wife.

"Look here, Carol! Do you know anything of this man?"



"Not me. I want to know. I'm interested. Tell me lots. Is he red or black? Odd or even?"

"He's unmarried, if that's what you're driving at. But he's rich enough to afford to keep a harem of wives. Or, even you."

"Am I so specialized?" asked Carol

Her eyes grew misty as she wondered for the thousandth time exactly where she and Chris had gone wrong.

The first months of their marriage had been a glorious barefoot scamper— now it was a hobble in corn plasters. There was the perennial friction about money which she was totally unable to understand— since she had been educated on the principle that debt is merely rather amusing.

Carol had not begun too well. She was brought up in a rose-lined bandbox— termed an apartment— where her mother flirted everlastingly, under pink candle shades, and all the candles were burned at both ends.

Christopher's friends had warned him that no good could come out of that rose-flushed flat. So when Carol— lavish with her new happiness— spilled it royally about her, smiling on every man where she saw only Chris— she aroused the jealousy of the possessive male.

Life became a vicious circle. Because Carol had nothing to do, she did so many things. All these things cost money, which Chris tried to make. And when he tried to make money, he always lost more.

Adamlike, he blamed her for it all.

Carol noticed the fine lines spraying around his eyes and her heart ached at recognition of his defeat. She longed to kiss away the worry— regardless of the crowd.

She loved him so much, yet she could never tell him so— chilled by the resentful granite of his eyes.

She forced herself to speak lightly; since sympathy was an insult to his manhood.

"Been making a lot of money in the city, this morning. Chris?"

"No. But I've been losing a lot."

"Poor boy. How?"

"Tried to take something for a walk. It wouldn't interest you. And you wouldn't understand."

"Thank you for your confidence. I'm touched."

Bitterly she wondered if the end would find them like this— ever apart. Would she go into the darkness still inarticulate— while their souls winged to opposite poles?

She toyed with her lipstick, to hide the quiver of her lips. It was one of her mother's tricks, which Chris detested.



He noticed that her eyes were still absently lined upon the rich provincial—John Brown.

"Have you met this Brown?" he insisted.

"Of course." She laughed. "He came to my room last night. I invited him.... Chris, don't be so childish! A mistake, of course, and I'm only joking. Let me tell you who he really is!"

Christopher paid no heed to her protest. His lips bitten to a line, he arose from his unfinished meal and strode from the restaurant. As he passed John Brown, who was counting his cherry stones, he muttered under his breath.

"The devil!"

THAT afternoon Carol felt a strong reluctance to join the baskers who displayed the latest fashions in pyjamas and beach suits, as they grilled on the scorching golden sand.

The pale green mirror of the sea was unbroken save for one long glassy emerald roller. As she gazed at it, Carol was rent with almost overpowering nostalgia for the mountain cool of sunlit pine woods and the amber chute of a river in flood.

She wanted wild nature— not this fashionable farce of playing on the fringe of a tame ocean. All her crowd were staying at the Ocean hotel— whose guests were millionaires only— and the Storms. There was eternal slacking, eternal dancing, eternal flirtation: every minute was time for cocktails or Charleston.

Carol clenched her hands. All she wanted was her own man. And, while Chris sat at her elbow, he was a million miles away, while every man in the crowd offered himself as substitute.

She did not change into her beach suit after lunch, to the dismay of the sun bathers.

"No." She shook her head at their entreaties. "I'm going for a walk by myself."

"Why— on earth?" they asked.

"I want to find out if I still have a shadow." said Carol. "There's always such a crowd that I've not seen mine for years."

They all laughed. Remembering the pink-shaded flat, no one accepted her explanation.

"Where's your husband?" asked some one.

"Gone back to the city to make some money. That's all men care for— money."

Carol's lips were bitter as her voice.

"Yet she's some gold-digger, herself!" murmured a sunburnt beauty in an undertone.

"And she can spend," agreed her neighbor; for still the pink standard persisted.

As Carol walked by the fringe of the ocean, insensibly the discontent was smoothed from her face. She took off her hat to receive twin kisses from Cancer and Capricorn, which the north wind had borne in his mouth, to cook.

Once the huddle of striped bathing tents was passed, the beach was deserted, save for a small boy who was dazzling a smaller girl with the display of grubby treasures in his pockets.

Something in his bullet head and resolute lips reminded her of Chris. Her heart softened as she saw him in the guise of a small boy trying to impress her with his wealth of candy and birds' eggs.

"I understand." She nodded to the dimpling sea. "It must make a man feel sore when he's nothing to offer his woman. But, Chris, darling idiot, all I want is you."

She approached the rocks of the headland and rounded the horn of the bay. Her shadow which had been a black, distorted dwarf, now stretched ahead and grew taller as though it were the visible symbol of her released spirit.

On this side of the cape, nature appealed to her elemental savagery. Black cliffs shadowed a chopped peacock-blue sea. Gulls mewed above the thunder of the surf.

Then she caught her breath at the sight of the indigo hump of a lone islet rising from the plain of the ocean. According to her mother, who should know— and probably knew better— Carol was nineteen. She presented the appearance of the early twenties. But at sight of the island, she looked her true age, which was about four thousand years old.

In spite of her French heels, her short orange georgette frock, her vanishing-cream and sunburn powder— she was a cave-woman who saw before her the sandy bottom of her own home cave.

Her eyes shone, her cheeks burned. On that island she and Chris might find each other again.

In her eagerness to tell her husband of her wish to rent the island, Carol ran all the way back to the hotel, taking off her shoes and stockings, so that the warm sand sprayed under her flying feet.

When they told her at the bureau that Chris had not returned, she made her own inquiries about the island. It was for sale; and might be rented for a term. It offered no attractions or any kind for visitors.

She ate her dinner alone— with a couple of men— a glass in her hand and a dream in her eyes.

Her husband had not come, when, weary from dancing, Carol went to her room. The night was too hot to sleep and she tossed in miserable suspense, sick with worry over Christopher.

Their lives seemed dangling on the lip of disaster.

Just before dawn she went to her window and looked out over the sea. A thin white line seemed to crawl eternally over a sheet or black enamel. The sky sagged down, darkly purple as an overripe fig. There was a throbbing, universal mutter of distant thunder.

Suddenly Carol felt an uncontrollable urge to cut her way through the cool of the ocean under the low hanging sky, the stars tangled in her hair.

She yielded to the impulse with the same elemental passion with which she had recognized the island. Although she had no clear recollection of stealing from the hotel, she awoke to the fact that some one— barefoot and exultant— was flying over the tingling sand.

That some one was not Carol Storm, but her own shadow, slipped away to frolic in the darkness out of which it was created.

On the edge of the sea, she nearly collided with a man. It was her husband. As she recognized him, she quivered with shame of her mad adventure. But, to her astonishment, he expressed no surprise.

The normal order of things was swamped in a sense of unreality as he gripped her in his arms.

"Chris!" she cried in alarm. "What are you doing here?"

"Going for a swim."

He spoke thickly as he pushed her from him.

"Good-by, old girl. Good luck!"

In an agony, she clung to him.

"Chris! You're not. You're not!"

"Let me go!" He fought with her. "You don't understand. It's the end. I'm broke."

Her arms tightened around him.

"I do understand," she cried. "And, if you go. I'm coming, too. If there's land the other side, we'll make it— together."

"Don't be a fool, Carol. I tell you. I'm finished. But there are plenty of men to marry you. Men with money."

"Chris! You must listen to me!"

She pressed her hands upon his shoulders, forcing him to meet her eyes. She knew that, when day dawned, this scene would seem an incredible dream.

"You must listen," she implored. "I love no one. No one but you!"

He was arrested more by the passion in her voice than by her words.

"I— I believe you do care a bit, kid," he said brokenly. "But it's so darn hard to believe!"

"Then I'll make you." Carol felt strong and confident, now that the silence was broken. Unconsciously, she drew him away from the line of crawling foam.

"You think," she said, "that I care only for luxury and— other people. It's not true and I want to prove it to you. Listen! We're going to camp out on an island. Just you and I."

The stars were dawning in the lightening east as she told him of the island.

"See!" she pleaded, "how bumble I am. I only ask you to put me to the test."

Suddenly Chris gave a boyish laugh of adventure.

"Right. We'll try the island!"

The dawn wind stirred their hair. Those who had tossed wakeful, turned on their pillows and slept. Some who lay sick to death rested even better.

The darkest hour was past.

THE Storms rented the island for a problematical fortnight. They brought with them a sophisticated camping outfit, a stove, and a store of tinned luxuries.

On their first evening they dressed for dinner and made continuous conversation. Chris was bored and uneasy, as he still listened for the shrilling of the telephone bell. For weeks he had lived at the end of a wire.

But when he was sleeping Carol came into her own. She stole from the tent and climbed to the highest peak of the island, whence she could faintly see the lights of the Ocean hotel like a swarm of golden bees.

She taunted them with exultant freedom, until the sun clove the skyline like an angel with a flaming sword, cutting them off from the mainland.

Singing with joy, Carol dived into the mist-feathered ocean.

On the third day, Chris caught a fish. It was a very small fish, but as he possessed no scales, he was obliged to estimate its weight.

As the fish grew daily heavier, so his zest in life returned, until the inspired morning, when Carol engineered a criminal accident with their oil and called upon Chris to make a fire out of sea-drift.

In his first pungent whiff of smoke, Chris was healed of the smart of his financial cropper.

After the rite of the fire, they both had the freedom of the island. Days slipped into weeks imperceptibly as an incredible dream. There was no yesterday and no tomorrow.

Each dawn, Carol— awakening to fresh rapture— sighed. "This can't last a minute longer!" Yet every night found them sleeping under the stars.

The weather remained perfect and their efforts to adapt themselves to their primitive conditions were crowned with almost miraculous success. They imported poultry and planted vegetables— and everything thrived. They even talked of getting a cow.

And as the days passed they learned that wealth is merely a question of relative expenditure and income. Their small residue remained at the bank, untouched, as the interest sufficed for their needs. Carol, who never passed a week without a mannequin display, dressed like her husband. In sleeveless sweater and shorts.

Both bore signs of the change. They scaled heavier, although they wore in perfect physical trim. Carol's cheeks glowed like ripe apricots under her tan and Chris— a chocolate husk— looked her fitting mate.

Yet, although it was Eden, it was not perfect, while Christopher's jealousy persisted. He could not purge his heart of the old distrust. In the rosy canopy of sunset, he saw the remainder of the pink-shaded flat.

Every day he questioned his wife about the possibility of visitors from the mainland. He was suspicious of her during his absence; he had known her as a beautiful worldling and he found it impossible to credit her with content without a sentimental stimulus.

The injustice fired Carol to a growing flame of resentment. There were times when she had to clench her hands, lest she strike the unworthy doubts from his lips with a blow.

IT was Chris who first glimpsed the dangers of this reversion to original type. One morning as he looked affectionately at the second helpings of bacon frizzling in the smoky pan, he made his complaint.

"Carol, do you remember we made a pact not to revert?"

"I do." Carol tossed her cropped hair, which shone like burnished feathers, guiltless of the trace of permanent wave. "We made a vow to look after our nails and not to drink with our mouths full. I know I'm the worst offender. What have I done now?"

"Something that must never happen again." Chris pointed an accusing finger at her. "Woman! You swam this morning with nothing on."

"Man! I'd the whole ocean on." Carol's laugh was shameless. "Besides, there was no one to see.... But, you're right. Promise to hit me if I revert again!"

"Hit you? No blooming fear. That's rather too natural to be safe. We've got too near the bone."

Carol stared at him in surprise.

"What on earth do you mean, Chris?"

"I mean we've got to guard against being too natural. All this time we've been slipping back. We've left the middle ages far behind us and are somewhere in the Saxon era, at the present moment. But, if ever we lapse into savages, we shall never be able to live down the beastly shame. See?"

"I suppose so. The fact is there was never anything between me and a cave-woman but a manicure set and afternoon tea. But in future I promise to be a perfect Victorian lady, what are you going to do today?"

Chris stopped in his occupation of tying food in a handkerchief.

"I'm off to the other aide of the island to break up that old boat. Firewood for the winter. Bully. Pity we shan't be here then."

"No, of course we shan't." They had to throw dust in the eyes of the jealous gods. "But we shall just go on living from day to day, until we wake up to find spring is here."

"Fathead. Say, Carol. I could built clinking winter quarters. My cave ancestor hadn't my advantages of trench warfare. Coming with me?"

Carol shook her head. "No, I've got other fish to fry. Will you be gone all day?"

"Yep."

For the first time he asked no questions. Of late he was deaf to his friends' warnings, because he was hearing the big voices— sea and wind— the call of the open.

Carol walked part of the way with her husband. Her eyes were filled with great content.

Rain had fallen in the night and the tea was a milky churn of gooseberry green. The wind blew from the pole.

"Perfect," she said.

The first signs of discontent showed in Christopher's face.

"We've made a scratch or two. Very tin-potty. I'd like to colonize on a big scale."

Carol went back, singing, to her work. Weeks ago she had sown seeds in a secret hollow. She intended, today, to bed out her plants on a natural terrace above the sea. When Chris returned in the evening she would greet him with the surprise of a flower garden.

But— even then— the shadow of the devil lay black across the island.

THE devil— whose other name was John Brown— had made his money in chain grocery shops. While he was conducting his business, he was confident and pushing; but every social adventure plunged him into his native timidity.

He lived quietly in a leafy eastern town, so that he was awed by the luxury Of the Ocean hotel, whenever he visited the coast.

On the occasion when he had entered a lady's bedroom, by accident, he had suffered agonies of confusion. At lunch the following day he saw the beautiful lady into whose privacy he had blundered and he was certain that she recognized him.

Fearful of complaint, he left the hotel within an hour.

However, during the summer he summoned up courage to pay many week-end visits to the Ocean hotel. He took simple pleasure in being recognized by the manager and in finding that waiters coveted his service and tips.

One morning, toward the end of summer, he indulged in the novel adventure of hiring a rowing boat. After hours of prodigious exertion he sighted a desert island which he explored with the boyish zest of Robinson Crusoe.

He was blissfully clambering over the slippery rocks— barefoot and with trousers rolled to the knee— when he saw an object which made his timid heart beat faster.

It was a notice board which read:

"PRIVATE. TRESPASSERS PROSECUTED."

As he mopped his brow, he heard the sound of a woman's singing. In desperate fright he slipped between two boulders and into a shallow pool of sea water.

Peering through the screen of seaweed, he watched the approach of the goddess of the island.

In spite of the change in her, he recognized her at once. She was more beautiful than ever, for she had sloughed the hard boredom of a woman of fashion like a cast skin. In her eyes glittered the jubilation of the morning star.

"Oh, lord," muttered the devil. "Here I've put my hoof in it again!"

When the sound of singing had died away into the distance he managed, by much hazardous scrambling over the rocks, to reach his boat by a short cut. It was not until his return to the hotel that he realized that the adventure had cost him dear.

He had lost his emerald ring. And since it might be anywhere in the pockets of seaweed which covered the rocks, or lying at the bottom of the sea, its recovery was hopeless.

THE ring might have lain, undiscovered for a thousand years but for the fact that the devil was in it all. Carol had conjured him up, so had to pay the price.

She found the ring gleaming in the bottom of her husband's private bait pool. Its discovery was the perfect finish of a wonderful day.



A recollection of the bad old days was connected with an emerald ring. She had coveted one which was displayed in a shop window, but Christopher refused to buy it for her. She was cut to the quick, not by his refusal, but by his words.

"Ask some other fool!"

She never forgot that he had played her so low.

Now this ring which glittered in Christopher's own treasury was testimony that he, too, remembered and wished to make amends. While she had been hugging her absurd little secret of the flower garden, he had planned a far more dramatic surprise.

She forgot her flowers and sat dreaming while the sun laid a golden pathway over the ocean. Presently she awoke to the fact that Chris would soon be home and find no dinner in the pot.

She did her best, but the devil was in it all. In her flurry she upset her pans and burned their contents. When Chris arrived— tired and hungry, thinking of the good meal which awaited him— he saw only a sketchy repast extracted from tins and smelt the odor of singed soup.

Carol almost choked him with the rapture of her greeting. His own response was but feeble, for he was still sad over the lost illusion of dinner.

"What's bitten you?" he asked "You're all up the pole."

"This!"

He stared at the emerald lying on her palm and then at her flushed, excited face.

His own grew black as thunder.

"What man has been here?" he shouted.

"Man? Chris! Your mad!"

"Not me. I smelt a rat when you wouldn't come with me this morning. Some chap's been here and given you that."

His words stung Carol to blind fury.

In a trice she slipped back to a time when the sun was young and the great lizards and prehistoric beasts wallowed and fought in their primeval slime.

With all her force she struck her husband in the face. The ring caught his mouth, cutting his lip.

At the taste of blood he saw red. He rushed at her. The fiery sun set on a dun sea boiling in foam over sunken rocks and on two figures locked in elemental combat....

It was over within two seconds. Sick with shame for their outraged code, they turned away, each unable to meet the other's eye. They shrank to lady and gentleman, products of an overcivilized generation, stranded by some strange chance on a barren rock.



For their own magic island had sunk into the sea.

THEY left the island next day. During the remainder of their stay they manufactured perpetual conversation. Once again the silence had fallen.

A few weeks after their return to the city they again met the devil. Business had called John Brown to the capital. As he entered the restaurant of his hotel, his eye fell on the couple at the next table.

The man was engrossed in his food— the woman concentrated on her cigarette. Both were married— for they had nothing to say to each other.

At that moment the woman looked at the devil.

Her eyes, though brilliant and beautiful, to him were terrible. They were blasted. And he had seen them brimming with the glory of the dawn. As his eyes fell on the hand, he noticed that she wore an emerald ring.

A terrible doubt clouded his mind. He remembered his own ring which he had lost on the island and his sense of guilt at being an intruder in a private paradise.

If this were his property it had brought with it no blessing, but a curse. He felt apprehensive whenever he looked at the beautiful lady, as though the ruin of her happiness was his own handiwork.

He knew that he was fanciful, but the morbid dread throbbed like a festering wound: he felt he could not sleep unless his doubts were laid to rest.

Greatly daring, he approached a casual acquaintance and asked for an introduction to the Storms.

In the impaired state of their finances the young couple was not averse to wealthy new acquaintances. They were rather pathetic in their semi-isolation, for they were still too honest to command respect as splendid spendthrifts.

John Brown sat with Carol, in the lounge, lost with wonder at having netted this brilliant firefly as his companion. She laughed as his eyes strayed furtively at her hand.

"You're looking at my ring. It's treasure trove. I found it in a pool on a desert island. Very wrong of me to freeze on to it, but how can it belong to any one but the devil?"

Her word suggested a fresh train of thought.

"I've a confession to make," she said. A few months ago you came, by accident, into my room at the Ocean hotel, just as I was working a spell to call up his satanic majesty. And isn't it a shame? Ever since, I have called you 'The Devil'!"

John Brown licked his dry lips.

"I hope you've libeled me. One tries, in a small way, to do good. It must be terrible to be the Father of all Evil!"

He tried to think of the many charities to which he subscribed, especially those which did not publish the list of donors. But he drank in every word, as Carol flippantly related the story of their adventure on the island.

"A glorious rag," she said in conclusion, "but my complexion never got over it and never before have I inflicted this history on such a patient listener."

John Brown's throat was sanded as he put the dreaded question.

Carol's face clouded.

"That part of the story is not for publication. But it had to end. Winter was upon us."

"Yet," said John Brown, "everything may depend on the manner of the end. Had it, by any chance, to do with this?"

As he touched the emerald ring she gave a cry.

"How could you guess? Yes, it had everything to do with the end. I cannot tell you any more than that the devil himself must have dropped it in that pool. For it killed all the happiness of a perfect world and ruined two lives just as they were beginning again."

"Ah!"

John Brown seemed to shrink under his starched shirt-front.

Carol's voice changed.

"I can't think what possessed me to bore you with this," she said lightly.

"Your confidence is safe with me," remarked John Brown. "We're strangers. We may never meet again."

"I'm glad," she bit her lip, "for I've said too much."

"Then won't you say something more? Tell me, is there a chance of future happiness for you?"

"No."

"Not if your husband could be given a straight explanation of how you got the ring?"

Carol stared.

"You're uncanny with your guesses. But the ring's not the trouble now. He knows that he judged too hastily. But we're divided by a memory. We're like prisoners in this rat-trap of society and debt— and we dare not be natural with each other."

The first gleam broke through the dead eyes, as though she felt the heated air cooled by the current of the mountain breeze.

"If only we could begin all over again!" she sighed. "Another chance! Out in the open, with the wind sweeping through us, things might come right. But— it's impossible!"

There was scarcely a pause. But, in that moment, John Brown made a lightning decision. Not for nothing had he made a fortune in sugar and tea.

Because he had brought sin and sorrow into a brand new world, he had to make amends.

"That reminds me," he said. "I've an option on some land in Florida. Part of it is swamp and still has to be drained. Tremendous work, but excellent prospects— cotton, sugar cane, and so on. I want to put in a married man as manager because of the loneliness. Now, how does it strike you as a business proposition?"

Carol's face flushed deeply— her lips trembled.

"May— may I tell Chris?" was all she said.

Sunk in his corner seat, John Brown watched them meet. As they turned and advanced toward him, he saw that their faces were those of banished souls who have sighted Eden.

SO, now you know that the devil is a pleasant, retiring individual, who eats the three hundred and sixty-five breakfasts of bacon and eggs and goes to church on Sunday. You had better beware! For all you know, the devil may be your next door neighbor.

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## 21: The Purple Bus

The Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate, Inc., 1935

LUCY TREE had been warned not to go on her Journey. She had received three successive anonymous letters, each containing the same message:

*"Stay at home. You will not reach your Journey's end."*

In spite of the hint her heart beat faster when the Royal Purple bus, by which she was traveling, left the Chiswick High road and swung round the curve into the Great West road.

Lucy took off her beret, revealing a curious bleached lock in her brown water-waved hair, and sank deeper into the padded violet seat. She was under the spell of motion, gliding on and on through a muffled countryside which held the unreal quality of a dream. Before her unrolled the map of Old England, hiding small towns and ancient villages in its fold.

She wished the journey would last forever. For she was not only returning to work but she was faced with the threat of a painful ordeal at its end.

Although she looked a typical smart, modern girl of attractive appearance, in one respect her character was distinctive. She held rigid principles in an age of compromise. It was therefore inevitable that she should clash with one of the old gang at the school where she was a sports mistress.

The atmosphere of the place was soaked with snobbery and its head was dominated by her lifelong friend, Miss Yaxley-Moore, a lady of aristocratic birth and terrific personality, who filled the post of matron.

Miss Yaxley-Moore was arrogant, and infallible in her judgment, which no one dared to oppose. She was responsible for the health of the school. But, although she took temperatures with the importance of a Harley street specialist and splashed her conversation with medical terms. Lucy soon discovered that she was both incompetent and lazy.

After a few minor scraps they came to grips over a fat pupil, the daughter of a very important man. Just before the school broke up Lucy ordered this girl off the hockey field on the grounds of physical unfitness. Miss Yaxley-Moore clung to the creed that noblemen must be flogged to demonstrate their superior caste to the soft youth of the L.C.C. and she brought up her heavy guns.

In spite of her opposition the young games mistress won the battle and a doctor was called to examine the fat girl. He diagnosed a chest complaint, complicated by a weak heart. As a trained nurse could not be procured until the following day he instructed the icy matron how to sustain the girl's strength during the night.

Morning, however, found the patient in a state of inexplicable collapse. When she was revived she asked for Lucy, on whom she lavished the usual schoolgirl worship.

"Darling," she whispered, "let my people know. Old Glaxo" — she referred to Miss Yaxley-Moore — "swore to the doctor she'd given me drops and things every two hours. But I got nix. I called and called, and she only snored."

"Leave it to me, dear," promised Lucy. "Don't worry. Just get well."

Acting on impulse, she opened the medicine chest which was the private property of the matron. Almost the first thing she saw was a small bottle. The fat pupil's name was written on the paper, while the wax which sealed it was unbroken.

In a white heat of indignation she rushed to Miss Yaxley-Moore and delivered her ultimatum.

"I'm keeping this," she said, clutching the bottle. "But if I find you here when I return after the holidays I shall show it to the doctor."

Then Lucy went out to Switzerland for the winter sports, and, with the resilience of youth, forgot the affair. On her return to England she was shocked to read in an unforwarded letter that the fat pupil had died before Christmas.

She worried ceaselessly over the news, for her principles would not let her ignore its gravity. She boarded the Purple bus with the determination to stir up a scandal which would permanently remove the matron from the scholastic sphere.

But in reality she had done more than that, for she had stirred up the lowest, muddiest, strata of buried human nature. Ever since Miss Yaxley-Moore had brought home news of the impending scandal her half sister, Miss Bat, had brooded ceaselessly over the threat of disgrace to her name.

MISS BAT was a lady of means and long pedigree of which she was inordinately proud. For forty years she had lived, dangerously, by herself, for herself, and on herself, ingrowing and buried. During the holidays only she grudgingly shared her home with Miss Yaxley-Moore, who had no income.

After the first jolt of hearing of the pupil's death, Miss Yaxley-Moore brazened the affair out, for she foresaw a future of enforced and congenial leisure as her half sister's pensioner.

"If Sir Felix brings the matter into court," she declared, "my defense will be that I used my own judgment, as in my opinion it was dangerous to waken the girl from her sleep. But whichever way the cat jumps you must face the fact. I shan't get another post."

Miss Bat said nothing. But through silent days and sleepless nights the dusty machinery of her brain ticked ceaselessly on until she lost all sense of proportion in one fixed purpose.

For forty years she had saturated herself with the pride and importance of her position as Miss Bat of Sundial house until it had become acute monomania. In addition her avarice was awakened, for she would have to support Miss Yaxley-Moore.

She determined that Lucy Tree must not return to the school. She must be tricked into breaking her journey at Sundial house. In this connection Miss Bat worked out an ingenious ruse, with her half-witted maid, Olive, as her tool.

The rest would be easy, for there would be nothing to connect a fatal accident— which could be made to suggest suicide— with herself. Lack of motive and her position raised her above suspicion.

She plotted ceaselessly until near the end of the holidays, when Miss Yaxley-Moore broached the subject of sending in her resignation.

"You will do nothing of the kind," declared Miss Bat. "You will return two days earlier than the others and find out the time and route of this girl's return. You will telephone these to me and I also want a minute personal description. Remember, also to drop hints of an unhappy love affair out at the Swiss winter sports."

"And what about me when she finds me still at the school?" demanded Miss Yaxley-Moore.

"She will not come back," was the grim reply.

HAPPILY unconscious of the menace to her safety, Lucy rolled on toward Bath, where she reached her destination.

It was very warm inside the Purple bus and the windows had become steamy with moisture. Presently she felt obliged to appeal to a little lady who sat in front.

"Do you mind if I open a window?"

As the lady was frail and elderly she was pleasantly surprised by the reply in a crisp, educated voice:

"Please do. Let me help you. The window is rather stiff."

Lucy did not know how the accident happened, but as she leaned forward the old lady turned her head so that her glasses were swept off by the girl's arm.

She stopped down and picked them up from under her seat. Although the frame was intact, one pebble was smashed completely and the other badly cracked.

The lady put them into her bag with a slight exclamation of impatience.

"Tiresome," she said. "How careless of me!"

"No," confessed Lucy. "It was my fault. I'm terribly sorry."

"It doesn't matter much. I have a spare pair at home and I shall soon be there."

As she spoke the Purple bus stopped and the conductor made an announcement:

"Moone. We stop here twenty minutes for tea."

The passengers consulted their watches and began to scramble through the doorways. Lucy lingered and watched the elderly lady as she groped her way between the seats.

Feeling rather guilty, she took her arm.

"Please let me," she said. "Perhaps— we might have tea together?"

"Thank you," replied the lady. "I'm almost blind without my glasses. Can you see an old Tudor building just across the road? That is the best café."

As they entered the Elizabethan house Lucy gathered the impression that her companion was known and respected in the neighborhood.

The café, which was low-beamed and of irregular shape, was already filled with the other passengers from the coach. As Lucy looked around to find an empty table the little old lady spoke:

"There's a wee room at the end which may be empty. They always crowd in near the door. I'll order the tea now."

Lucy went through the café and opened a door at its far end leading to the inner room.

It was small and dimly-lit by a wrought-iron lantern. The sunken floor was stone-flagged and the atmosphere held the chill of ages.

With a slight shiver Lucy crossed to the fire, over which sat a big fat country girl. Her neck and chin were swathed in a gray woolen scarf and she plainly had a heavy cold. As Lucy drew near, to her disgust, the girl coughed explosively right into her face.

She withdrew quickly just as the door opened and her friend of the Purple bus entered, accompanied by a waitress with the tea tray.

Instantly the girl rose respectfully to her feet. The lady smiled at her and gave her a gentle nod of dismissal.

"Good evening, Olive. Wouldn't you rather have your tea outside?" She handed the girl a coin and added in a benevolent voice. "You have a shocking cold. What's the matter with your neck?"

The girl stared at her with blank, stupid eyes.

"Please, mum," she replied, "I've got the mumps."

The broad foolish smile lingered on Olive's face as she went into the large room.

Her patroness also beamed with anticipation as she took up the teapot.

"How refreshing the tea smells. Weak or strong?" she asked. "But, my dear, whatever is the matter?"

"Matter?" echoed Lucy in a distracted voice. "I'm sunk— that's all. That girl has mumps. I've never had them, and they're contagious. I'm a teacher. This means I must stay in quarantine for about a month before I dare return to the school."

"Oh, I'm sorry." The old lady's voice was gentle. "I don't want to advise you badly, but you will probably not develop mumps. You look remarkably healthy. Why not return to your school and say nothing about it?"

"I couldn't do that," declared Lucy. "That wretched girl sprayed me when she coughed. It would be criminal to risk infecting children."

She was in a real dilemma, for the end of holidays always found her bankrupt. She had practically no money in her possession and she would have to pass the night in some hotel.

"I don't know what to do," she burst out suddenly. "It's no good going on to Bath, as it's farther to return. And I can't go back to my sister's house in London, for she has children."

The little lady cleared her throat.

"May I introduce myself?" she asked. "I'm Miss Bat of Sundial house, Paddiscombe, which is the next village. Perhaps you'd like to spend the night with me? That will give you time to make your plans."

Lucy studied Miss Bats' face. With the confidence of youth she believed herself to be a judge of character. Miss Bats' face passed the test. She had mild brown eyes, which were an infallible indication of a kindly nature, her ears were not low-set, and her lips were not thin, although her gentle mouth was a trifle weak.

"Thanks so much," she cried impulsively. "I'd love to come."

Miss Bat rose to her feet.

"My name is spelt with one 't'," she explained. "A small matter, but it means everything to me in a world of changes."

In that sentence she gave Lucy a clue to her nature which was worth more than any physiognomy chart.

As they rolled on through dark macabre country she felt more and more depressed, and disproportionately apprehensive of the future, as though an actual voice were warning her not to leave the safety of the Purple bus.

Her mysterious warning had been disastrously fulfilled. She certainly would not reach her journey's end. When the bus stopped at Paddiscombe, outside an ancient inn, she followed Miss Bat out of the bus.



"Is that all?" asked Miss Bat, in rather a strained voice as Lucy's small suitcase was dumped down on the damp stones.

"Yes," replied the girl. "I sent my trunk luggage in advance."

Miss Bat's lips tightened. "It has just occurred to me that we had better establish Olive's mumps. These country folk are very ignorant over illness. Suppose you send a vague telegram to your school so as not to burn your boats. Then, tomorrow morning, I'll go over to Moone by the early bus and investigate the matter. I know where Olive lives."

The good sense and kindly thought of Miss Bat's speech inspired Lucy to fresh hope. With luck she might return tomorrow to her post.

"That's frightfully decent of you," she exclaimed. "You're right. I did fly off the handle... Which way?"

"To the left, please."

In spite of the fresh development, however, Lucy had the exact sensation of being entrapped in some nightmare.

Presently they reached a small shop, which Miss Bat informed her was the post-office. Her head had begun to ache so badly that she was scarcely conscious of her action as she mechanically scrawled a telegram to the school:

"DETAINED. BAD NEWS. WRITING."

It was not until they were once again outside that she realized that Miss Bat had dictated the message.

"I'm letting myself be run by a little cardboard lady," she thought with a faint flicker of amusement.

Suddenly Miss Bat pulled her arm.

"Here we are at the Sundial house," she said, her voice full of pride.

Lucy looked up at the outlines of a beautiful Elizabethan mansion, set flush with the road. She had vaguely dreaded something damp and ivy-bound, so her spirits rose at the sight.

"I've given my maid a holiday," explained Miss Bat as she unlocked the massive front door, which was white with age. "That is why I had tea at the cafe. But she will be back tonight."

In the light of a lamp Lucy saw an oak paneled hall and the sweep of a gracious staircase. Then her hostess led the way down a short passage.

"We will go into the library, which is in a back wing," she said. "Since motoring has become popular I can no longer use my beautiful front rooms."

Lucy followed Miss Bat into a long, narrow room, furnished in Victorian style, with faded grass-green carpet and curtains and book-cases filled with

nineteenth century authors. There were two narrow windows on one side and on the other a half glass door. A fed caked fire glowed in the steel grate.

Miss Bat turned up the wick of the lamp on the bureau and opened a drawer, from which she took another pair of glasses.

"There," she said, laying the smashed pair in their place, "now I can see again. The blessed relief not to feel helpless... Do you like my house?"

"It's wonderful," Lucy assured her. "You must be very proud of it."

"I am. We have lived in it for over two hundred years. My family goes back even farther. That is our tree."

She nodded towards a dim framed chart which hung on a corner of the wall outside the radius of the lamp.

"In these upstart days," she continued, "I feel that a long pedigree means everything."

"I don't agree," remarked Lucy thoughtlessly, as she remembered the snobbish atmosphere of the school. "I can't see why any one has a right to feel elevated just because she stands on a pile of moldy bones."

Moldy bones? The tinted glass hid the venom of Miss Bat's gaze. But presently Lucy became uneasily conscious of her acute scrutiny.

"Are you looking at my bleached streak?" she asked with a forced laugh. "It's genuine and quite amusing. I'm proud of being distinctive."

In spite of Miss Bat's hospitality she was aware of a cold, unfriendly atmosphere. There was something about the house and its mistress which affected her unpleasantly.

Springing to her feet, she lit a cigarette and began to pace the library.

"Does this door lead to the garden?" she asked.

"No, the courtyard," replied Miss Bat, a gleam suddenly lighting her eyes. "And now I'm going to put a hot water bottle in your bed. Will you give me your nightgown to wrap round it?"

Hiding her amusement at the old maidish precaution, Lucy began to fish among the few articles in her suitcase while Miss Bat stood by and watched her. She realized at once that the fatal bottle of medicine was not there.

She had intended to remove the evidence, thus drawing Lucy Tree's string. The unsupported charge would have no weight with the school authorities. But when the wretched girl had sent on her luggage in advance she had sealed her own doom.

Miss Bat hated this girl who dropped ash over her carpet and dared to deride the priceless heritage of ancestors.

Moldy bones. At that moment she thought of the well.

The well was only a few yards distant, sunken 60 feet deep, in the center of the courtyard, and used only in severe drought. It was impossible to see it in

the dark and it lay directly in the girl's path. A few of her quick strides would end in a sheer drop down to a circle of inky water.

It would not take long. However frantic her efforts, she would soon be overpowered by the intense cold. Directly it was safe Miss Bat intended to raise the alarm.

There would be no further need to worry about the bottle of medicine after her death. Lucy's luggage would be sent back to her family, who would attach no importance to it.

—And everything was ready. That morning Miss Bat had escorted Olive to the bus for Paddiscombe and given her instructions. When she was gone she had herself removed the cover from the well and then had started out to Marlborough, where she boarded the Purple bus.

Lucy was ungratefully relieved when Miss Bat went from the room. She lit another cigarette and roamed about.

Presently, at the end of her resources, she carried the lamp to the dark end of the library in order to examine the family tree. She glanced first at the original ancestor and his date and then looked downward to find Miss Bat's name.

It was a distinct shock to discover that it paired with the ramification of "Yaxley-Moore," and she nearly dropped the lamp.

"What a mess," she thought. "I seem to remember now old Glaxo boasting of her ancestral home in a Wiltshire village. Of course, Miss Bat wouldn't know me from a bar of soap or I'd have been the last person she'd befriend. But I can't stop now."

Feeling very guilty and only grateful that she had not tasted Miss Bat's bread and salt, she had fastened her suitcase and was in the act of pulling on her beret when Miss Bat returned.

"Are you leaving me?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Lucy, speaking quickly in her confusion. "You must think me a terrible weathercock, but— but I've just remembered something important. I'm bound to get to Bath tonight. Of course. I'm just as grateful to you for your kindness as if I'd stayed."

As she foresaw. Miss Bat was too well bred to persuade her to stay.

"As you wish," she said. "But you'd probably like to wash. One feels so soiled after a motor Journey."

"Thanks, I'd love to," cried Lucy.

Miss Bat opened the door which led out to the courtyard and pointed to a lighted door, directly opposite the library, on the other side.

"That is the maid's bathroom in the kitchen wing," she said. "There is plenty of hot water there. If you cross the yard you will save the long walk round by the hall and passages."

As she spoke the feeble glow from the library lamp shone on a yard or so of damp flagstone and made the surrounding darkness the deeper.

"I'll go and look at the time table," she continued. "You should have plenty of time to catch the next bus to Bath."

But Miss Bat did not keep her promise. She knew that Lucy was booked to eternity. Creeping upstairs to her own room, she waited for the sound of a cry.

Eager to wash off her grime. Lucy stepped quickly into the courtyard. Already her spirits were beginning to soar at the prospect of release. She could see the light in the opposite wing, in a dead line from where she stood, and she headed toward it, walking directly toward the well.

It seemed that nothing could save her from the sudden ghastly drop and the choking death in the black icy water. Then suddenly she felt the end of her cigarette scorching her fingers and threw it hastily away.

But, to her amazement, instead of lying in her path, a red glowing stub, it disappeared entirely.

She stopped dead and struck a match. To her horror, its wavering flame revealed a distant gleam of water, far below, almost under her feet.

Springing back with a cry. she rushed to the library. Her heart was pounding, while her head whirled with crazy suspicions and fears.

"She meant to murder me," she whispered. "No. It's impossible. Yet, suppose it's all been a trap. Suppose it's all been a trap. Suppose she broke her glasses on purpose and then pretended to be blind."

Her knees shook under her from the severity of her shock as she crossed to the bureau and examined the broken pair of spectacles. Even as she had suspected the frame contained only ordinary tinted glass instead of strong magnifying lenses.

"That proves it," she whispered, throwing the spectacles on the ground. "It was a trap."

Her one wish was to get quickly out of the tainted house. Snatching up her bag, she rushed through the hall and reached the road just in time to signal to the Purple bus as it roared round the bend. Two minutes later she was inside—warm and secure— while the village slipped behind her and faded like an evil dream.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON the Purple bus, on its way from Bath, dropped a fare in the village of Paddiscombe. Miss Yaxley-Moore swaggered into the Sundial house and faced her half-sister with a brazen smile.

"Well," she said, "I'm here. My luggage follows. Tree stopped off and saw the doctor on her way to the school and he got on to Sir Felix that night. Since then things have moved quickly. The case is coming into court."

As Miss Bat said nothing, she peeled off her gloves and sat down before the fire.

"Yes," she repeated, "I'm here. Even if I'm a guest of his majesty for a period I shan't be too proud to return to you. You've got me for keeps."

"And suppose I refuse?" asked Miss Bat in a high thin voice.

"You can't. People will talk."

The beaten expression in the other woman's eyes betrayed that she had gauged the depths of her half-sister's monomania. She was still Miss Bat of Sundial house— two hundred years old— and she must continue to command public respect. Nothing was left to her but to try and salve the pride of her name.

And her punishment was a life sentence— an enforced partnership of hatred. Only the ticking of the clock broke the silence as the two women sat and faced each other in the fading light.

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## 22: The Gilded Pupil

*The Hardin Tribune-Herald, USA, 27 June and 10 July, 1936*

THE essential part of this tale is that Ann Shelley was an Oxford M.A.

Unfortunately, so many other young women had the same idea of going to college and getting a degree that she found it difficult to harness her qualifications with a job. Therefore, she considered herself lucky, when she was engaged as resident governess to Stella Williams, aged 15— the only child of a millionaire manufacturer.

It was not until her final interview with Stella's mother, in a sun room which was a smother of luxury, that she understood the exact nature of her duties. Lady Williams— a beautiful porcelain person, with the brains of a butterfly— looked at her with appealing violet eyes.

"It's so difficult to explain, Miss Shelley. Of course, my husband considers education comes first, but what I want is some one to exercise a moral Influence on Stella. She— she's not normal."

"Thymus gland?" hinted Ann.

"O far worse. She won't wash."

Ann thought of the times she had been sent upstairs to remove a water mark, because she had overslept, or wanted to finish a thriller, and she began to laugh.

"That's normal, at her age," she explained. "School girls often scamp washing."

Lady Williams looked skeptical, but relieved.

"The trouble began," she said, "when she was too old for a nurse. Nannie used to wash and dress her, like a baby. But she refuses to let her maid do anything but impersonal things, like clothes. It's her idea of independence. She's terribly clever and socialistic. She'll try to catch you out."

"That sounds stimulating," smiled Ann.

All the same, she was not impressed pleasantly by her new pupil. Stella was unattractive, aggressive, and superior. Her sole recommendation to Ann's favor was her intelligence, which was far above the average.

On her first Saturday half holiday, Ann walked out to the grounds of Arlington Manor— the residence of the earl of Blankshire— to visit her old governess, Miss West. It was a May day of exciting weather, with concealed lightning bursting through a white windy sky. She thrilled with a sense of liberation, when she turned in to the road through the woods, where the opening beeches were an emerald filigree against the blue shadows of the undergrowth.

Miss West's cottage suggested a fairy tale, with its thatched roof and diamond-paned windows. It stood in a clearing, and was surrounded by a small garden, then purple with clumps of irises.

Ann's knock was answered by the maid, Maggie— a strapping country girl. She showed the visitor into the bed-sitting-room, where her mistress, who was crippled with rheumatism, was sitting up in bed. Miss West was an old woman, for she had also been a governess to Ann's mother. Her mouth and chin had assumed the nutcracker of age, so that she looked rather like an old witch, with her black blazing eyes and snowy hair.

Her dominant quality was her vitality. Ann could still feel it playing on her, like a battery, as they exchanged greetings.

"I love your little house," she remarked later, when Maggie had brought in tea. "But it's very lonely. Are you ever nervous?"

"Nervous of what?" asked Miss West. "There's nothing here to steal, and no money. Everyone knows that the earl is my banker."

This was her way of explaining that she was a penniless pensioner of the earl, whom she had taught in his nursery days.

"Every morning, some one comes down from the manor with the day's supplies," she said. "At night, a responsible person visits me for my orders and complaints... O you needn't look down your nose. The earl is in my debt. He is prolonging my life at a thrilling expense to himself, but I saved his life, when he was a child, at the risk of my own."

Her deep voice throbbed as she added, "I still feel there is nothing so precious as life."

Later, in that small bewitched room, Ann was to remember her words.

"Life's big things appeal most to me," she confessed. "Oxford was wonderful— every minute of it. And I'm just living for my marriage with Kenneth. I told you I was engaged. He's a doctor on a ship, and we'll have to wait. In between, I'm just marking time."

"You have the important job of moulding character," Miss West reminded her. "How does your gilded pupil progress?"

"She's a gilded pill," Ann grimaced.

"Is Oxford responsible for your idea of humor?" asked Miss West, who had a grudge against a university education.

"No, it's the result of living in a millionaire's family. Please, may I come to see you, every Saturday afternoon? You make me feel recharged."

Although Miss West had acted like a mental tonic, Ann was conscious of a period of stagnation, when she walked back through the wood. She taught, in order to live, and went to see an old woman, as recreation. Life was dull. It might not have appeared so flat had she known that she was marked down

already for a leading part in a sinister drama, and that she had been followed all the way to the cottage.

FOR the next few weeks life continued to be monotonous for Ann, but it grew exciting for Stella, as, gradually, she felt the pull of her governess' attraction. Ann had a charming appearance, and definite personality. She made no attempt to rouse her pupil's personal pride by shock tactics, but relied on the contrast between her own manicured hands and the girl's neglected nails.

Presently she was able to report progress to the young ship's doctor.

*"My three years at Oxford have not been wasted," she wrote. "The gilded pupil has begun to wash."*

In her turn, she became fonder of Stella, especially when she discovered that the girl's aggressive manner was a screen for an inferiority complex.

"I always feel people hate me," she confided to her governess, one day. "I'm ashamed of having a millionaire father. He didn't make his money. Others make it for him. He ought to pay them a real spending income, and, automatically, increase the demand, and create fresh employment."

Ann found these socialistic debates rather a trial of tact, but she enjoyed the hours of study. Stella was a genuine student, and always read up her subject beforehand, so that lessons took somewhat the form of discussions and explanations. Ann was spared the drudgery of correcting French exercises and problems in algebra.

But her gain was some one else's loss. She had no idea how seriously she was restricting the activities of another in the plot.

Doris— the schoolroom maid— hunted daily amid the fragments in the wastepaper basket for something which she had been ordered to procure. And she searched in vain.

WHEN Stella's devotion to the bathroom was deepening to passion, she began to grow jealous of her governess' private hours.

"Do you go to the pictures on Saturday?" she asked.

"No. I visit an old witch, in a cottage in the wood."

"Take me with you."

"You'd be bored. It's my old governess."

"Your governess? I'd love to see her. Please."

Ann had to promise a vague "some day." Although she was sorry to disappoint Stella, she could not allow her to encroach on her precious liberty.



By this time, however, her time-table was an established fact to the brains of the plot. Therefore, the next Saturday she visited Miss West she was followed by a new trailer.

She noticed him when she came out of the great gates of the millionaire's mansion, because he aroused a momentary sense of repugnance. He was fair and rather womanish in appearance, but his good looks were marred by a cruel red triangular mouth.

He kept pace with her on the opposite side of the street when she was going through the town, but she shook him off later on. Therefore it gave her quite a shock when she turned into the beech avenue— now a green tunnel—to hear his footsteps a little distance in the rear.

Although she was furious with herself, she hurried to reach the cottage, which was quite close. The door was opened before she could knock, because her arrival was the signal for Maggie's release. It was Ann herself, who had suggested the extra leisure for the maid while she kept the old lady company.

Miss West, whose bed faced the window, greeted her with a question.

"When did you lose your admirer?"

"Who?" asked Ann, in surprise.

"I refer to the weedy boy who always slouches past the minute after your knock."

"I've never noticed him... But I thought I was followed here today by a specially unpleasant-looking man."

"Hum. We'd better assume that you were... How much money have you in your bag?"

"More than I care to lose."

"Then leave all the notes with me. I'll get the manor folk to return them to you by registered post... And, remember, if the man attacks you on your way home, don't resist. Give him your bag— and run."

"You're arranging a cheerful program for me," laughed Ann.

WHEN nine struck, Miss West told her to go.

"Maggie is due now any minute," she told her, "and so is the housekeeper from the manor. Good-by— and don't forget it means 'God be with you.'"

Ann was not nervous, but when she walked down the garden path she could not help contrasting the dark Green twilight of the woods with the sun splashed beech avenue of the afternoon. Clumps of fox-gloves glimmered whitely through the gloom, and in the distance an owl hooted to his mate.

She passed close by the bushes where a man was hiding. He could have touched her, had he put out his hand. She was his quarry, whom he had followed to the cottage, so he looked at her intently.

Her expensive bag promised a rich haul. Yet he let her go by and waited, instead, for someone who was of only incidental interest to the plot.

A few minutes later Maggie charged down the avenue like a young elephant, for she was late. She had not a nerve in her body, and only three pence in her purse. As she passed the rhododendron thicket a shadow slipped out of it like an adder— a black object whirled round in the air— and Maggie fell down on the ground like a log.

THE mystery attack was a nine days' wonder, for bag-snatching was unknown in the district. But while Maggie was recovering from slight concussion, in the hospital, Ann had the unpleasant task of mentally bludgeoning her pupil out of a "rave." After the weekly visit of the hairdresser, Stella appeared in the schoolroom with her hair cut and waved in the same fashion as Ann's.

"Like it?" she asked self-consciously.

"It's charming." Ann had to be tender with the inferiority complex. "But I liked your old style better. That was you. Don't copy me, Stella. I should never forgive myself if I robbed you of your individuality."

Stella wilted, like a pimpernel in wet weather.

"I'm not going to have a crush on you," she declared. "Too definitely feeble. But we're friends aren't we? Let's have a sort of friend's charter, with a secret signature, when we write to each other. Like this." She scrawled a five fingered star on a piece of paper and explained it eagerly. "My name."

Ann was aware that Doris, the schoolroom maid, was listening with a half grin, and she decided to nip the nonsense in the bud.

"You'll want a secret society next, you baby," she said, as she crumpled up the paper. "Now, suppose we call it a day and go to the pictures."

Stella especially enjoyed that afternoon's entertainment, because the film was about a kidnapped girl, and she was excited by the personal implication.

"If a kidnapper ever got me, I'd say 'Good luck' to him. He'd deserve it," she boasted, as they drove home. "They wouldn't decoy me into a taxi with a fake message."

Ann's private feeling was that Stella's intelligence was not likely to be tested, since she ran no possible risk. Lady Williams was nervous on the score of her valuable jewelry, so the house was burglar proof, with flood-lit grounds and every kind of electric alarms.

Besides this, Stella either went out in the car, driven by a trusted chauffeur, or took her walks with a pack of large dogs.

So it was rather a shock to Ann when the girl lowered her voice.

"I'll tell you a secret. They've had a shot for me. They sent one of our own cars to the dancing class, but I noticed Hereford wasn't driving so I wouldn't get in. I wouldn't tell them at home because of mother."

Ann, who was still under the influence of the picture, was horrified.

"Stella," she cried, "I want you to promise me something. If ever you get a note signed by me take no notice of it."

"I promise. But if you signed it with our star, I'd know it was genuine. And if you were in danger nothing and no one would stop me from coming to your rescue."

"Single-handed, like the screen heroines who blunder into every trap?"

"Not me. I'll bring the police with me... Isn't that our schoolroom maid coming down the drive? Isn't she gorgeous?"

Doris, transformed by a marine cap and generous lipstick, minced past the car. She had to be smart, because she was meeting a fashionable gentleman with a cruel red mouth.

When she saw him in the distance she anticipated his question by shaking her head.

"No good swearing at me," she told him. "I can't get what isn't there. But I've brought you something else."

She gave him a sheet of crumpled paper on which was the rough drawing of a star.

THE next time Ann went to the cottage in the wood the door was opened by the new maid— an ice-cold competent brunette, in immaculate livery. There was no doubt she was a domestic treasure, and a great improvement on Maggie, but Ann was repelled by the expression of her thin lipped mouth.

"I don't like your new maid's face," she said to her old governess when Coles had carried out the tea table.

"Neither do I," remarked Miss West calmly. "She's far too good for my situation— yet she's no fool. My opinion is she's wanted by the police and has come here to hide. It's an ideal spot."

"But you won't keep her?"

"Why not? She's an excellent maid. There's no reason why I should not benefit by the special circumstances, if any. After all, it's only my suspicion."

"What about her references?"

"Superlative. Probably forged. The housekeeper hadn't time to inquire too closely. The place isn't popular, after the attack on Maggie."

"But I don't like to think of you alone, at her mercy."

"Don't worry about me. She's been to the cupboard and found out it's bare. I've nothing to lose."

Ann realized the sense of Miss West's argument, especially as she was in constant touch with the manor. Not long afterwards she wondered whether she had misjudged the woman, for she received a letter, by the next morning's post, which indicated that she was not altogether callous.

Its address was the cottage in the wood.

*Dear Madam, it ran,*

*Pardon the liberty of my writing to you, but I feel responsible for Miss West in case anything happens to her and there's an inquest. I would be obliged if you would tell me is her heart bad and what to do in case of a sudden attack. I don't like to trouble her ladyship as I am a stranger to her and Miss West bites my head off if I ask her. I could not ask you today because she is suspicious of whispering. Will you kindly drop me a line in return and oblige.*

*Yours respectfully,]*

*Marion Coles*

Ann hastily wrote the maid a brief note, saying that Miss West had good health— apart from the crippling rheumatism— but recommending a bottle of brandy, in case of emergency. She posted it and forgot the matter.

MEANWHILE, Miss West was finding Coles' competency a pleasant change. On the following Saturday, when she carried in her mistress' lunch, Miss West looked, with approval, at her spotless apron and muslin collar.

After she had finished her well-cooked cutlet and custard, she lay back and closed her eyes, in order to be fresh for Ann's visit.

She had begun to doze when she heard the opening of the front door. Her visitor was before her usual time.

"Ann," she called.

Instead of her old pupil, a strange woman entered the bedroom. Her fashionably thin figure was defined by a tight black suit and a halo hat revealed a sharp rouged face.

As Miss West stared at her she gave a cry of recognition.

"Coles!"

The woman sneered at her.

"Here's two gentlemen come to see you," she announced.

As she spoke, two men, dressed with flashy smartness, sauntered into the room. One was blond and handsome, except for a red triangular mouth; the other had the small cunning eyes and low set ears of an elementary criminal type.

"Go out of my room," ordered Miss West. "Coles you are discharged."

The men only laughed as they advanced to the bed.

"We're only going to make you safer, old lady," said the fair man. "You might fall out of bed and hurt yourself. See?"

Miss West did not condescend to struggle while her feet and hands were secured with cords. Her wits told her that she would need to conserve every ounce of strength.

"Aren't you taking an unnecessary precaution with a bedridden woman?" she asked scornfully.

"Nothing too good for you, sweetheart," the fair man told her.

"Why have you come here? My former maid has told you that there is nothing of value in my cottage."

"Nothing but you, beautiful."

"How dare you be insolent to me? Take off your hats in a lady's presence."

The men only laughed. They sat and smoked cigarettes in silence, until a knock on the front door made them spring to their feet.

"Let her in," ordered the ringleader.

Miss West strained at her cords as Coles went out of the room. Her black eyes glared with helpless fury when Ann entered, and stood—horror stricken—in the doorway.

"Don't dare touch her," she cried.

The men merely laughed again, as they seized the struggling girl, forced her down on a bedroom chair and began to bind her ankles.

"Ann," commended the old governess. "Keep still. They're three to one. An elementary knowledge of arithmetic should tell you resistance is useless."

The pedantic old voice steadied Ann's nerves.

"Are you all right, Miss West?" she asked coolly.

"Quite comfortable, thanks."

"Good." Ann turned to the men. "What do you want?"

They did not answer, but nodded to Coles, who placed a small table before Ann. With the deft movements of a well trained maid she arranged stationery—stamped with Miss West's address and writing materials.

Then the fair man explained the situation.

"The Williams' kid wot you teach is always pestering you to come here and see the old lady. Now, you're going to write her a nice little note, inviting her to tea this afternoon."

Ann's heart hammered as she realized she had walked into a trap. The very simplicity of the scheme was its safeguard. She was the decoy bird. The kidnappers had only to install a spy in the Williams' household, to study the habits of the governess.

Unfortunately she had led them to an ideal rendezvous— the cottage in the wood.

"No," she said.

The next second she shivered as something cold was pressed to her temple.

"We'll give you five minutes to make up your mind," said the fair man, glancing at the grandfather's clock. "Then we shoot."

Ann gritted her teeth. In that moment her reason told her that she was probably acting from false sentiment and a confused sense of values. But logic was of no avail. She could not betray her trust.

"No," she said again.

The second man crossed to the bed and pressed his revolver to Miss West's head.

"Her, too," he said.

Ann looked at her old governess in an agony, imploring her forgiveness.

"She's only fifteen," she said piteously, as though in excuse.

"And I'm an old woman," grunted Miss West. "Your reasoning is sound. But you forget someone younger than your pupil. Your unborn son."

Ann's face quivered, but she shook her head. Then the old governess spoke with the rasp of authority in her voice.

"Ann, I'm ashamed of you. What is money, compared with two valuable lives, not to mention those still to come? I understand these—gentlemen do not wish to injure your pupil. They only want to collect a ransom."

"That's right, lady," agreed the fair man. "We won't do her no harm. This will tell the old man all hell want to know."

He laid down a typewritten demand note on the table and added a direction to Ann.

"When we've gone off with the kid, nip off to the old man as fast as you can go and give him this."

"With her legs tied to a chair?" asked the deep sarcastic voice of the old woman.

"She's got her hands free, ain't she? Them knots will take some undoing, but it's up to her, ain't it?"

"True. No doubt she will manage to free herself ... But suppose she writes this note and the young lady does not accept the invitation? What then?"

The fair man winked at his companion.

"Then you'll both be unlucky," he replied.

ANN listened in dull misery. She could not understand the drift of Miss West's questions. They only prolonged the agony. Both of them knew they

could place no reliance on the promise of the kidnappers. The men looked a pair of merciless beasts.

If she wrote that note she would lure her poor little gilded pupil to her death.

She started as her governess spoke sharply to her.

"Ann, you've heard what these gentlemen have said." She added in bitter mockery of their speech. "They wouldn't never break their word. Write that note."

Ann could not believe her ears. Yet she could feel the whole force of her vitality playing on her like an electric battery. It reminded her of a former experience, when she was a child. Her uncle, who was paid for her education, was an Oxford don and he raised an objection against Miss West because she was unqualified.

In the end he consented to give his niece a *viva-voce* examination, on the result of which depended the governess' fate.

Ann passed the test triumphantly, but she always felt, privately, that Miss West supplied the right answers, as she sat staring at her pupil with hypnotic black eyes.

Now she knew that the old magic was at work again. Miss West was trying to tell her something without the aid of words.

Suddenly the knowledge came. Her old governess was playing for time. Probably she was expecting some male visitors from the manor, as the earl and his sons often came to the cottage. What she, herself, had to do was to stave off the five minute sentence of death by writing a note to Stella, which was hallmarked as a forgery so that the girl would not come.

As she hesitated she remembered that she had extracted a promise from her pupil to disregard any message. The question was, whether it would be obeyed, for she knew the strength of her fatal attraction, and that Stella was eager to visit the cottage.

Hoping for the best, she began to write, disguising her handwriting by a backward slant.

"*Dear Stella—*"

With an oath the man snatched up the paper and threw it on the floor in a crumpled ball.

"None of them monkey tricks," he snarled. "We know your proper writing. And sign it with this."

Ann's hope died as the man produced the letter which she had written to Coles about Miss West's health and also Stella's rough drawing of a star.



She was defeated by the evidence— a specimen of her handwriting— for which Doris, the schoolroom maid had searched in vain— and the secret signature.

"I— can't," she said, feebly pushing away the paper.

Again the pistol was pressed to her head.

"Don't waste no time," growled the fair man.

"Don't waste no time," echoed Miss West. "Ann, write."

There was a spark in the old woman's eyes and the flash of wireless. Impelled to take up the pen, Ann wrote quickly, in a firm hand, and signed her note with a faithful copy of the star.

The men hung over her, watching every stroke and comparing the writing with Coles' letter.

"Don't put no dots," snarled the fair man, who plainly suspected a cypher, when Ann inserted a period.

He read the note again when it was finished and then passed it to his companion, who pointed to a word suspiciously. The old woman and the girl looked at each other in an agony of suspense as they waited for the blow to fall.

Then the fair man turned sharply to Miss West.

"Spell 'genwin'." he commanded.

As she reeled off the correct spelling he glanced doubtfully at his companion, who nodded.

"O.K." he said.

Miss West's grim face did not relax and Ann guessed the reason. She was nerving herself for the second ordeal of Coles' inspection.

Fortunately, however, the men did not want their female confederate's opinion. The job was done and they wanted to rush it forward to its next stage. The fair man sealed the note and whistled on his fingers.

Instantly the weedy youth who had followed Ann to the cottage appeared from behind a clump of laurels in the drive, wheeling a bicycle. He snatched the letter from Coles and scorched away round the bend of the road.

Ann slumped back in her chair, feeling unstrung in every fiber. Nothing remained but to wait— wait— and pray Stella would not come.

The time seemed to pass very slowly inside the room. The men smoked in silence until the carpet was littered with cigarette-stubs and the air veiled with smoke. Miss West watched the clock as though she would galvanize the minute hand.

"Don't come," agonized Ann. "Stella, don't come."

But absent treatment proved a failure for Coles, who was hiding behind a curtain, gave a sudden hoot of triumph.



"The car's come."

"Push the girl to the front," commanded the fair man.

He helped to lift Ann's chair to the window so that she saw the Williams' Lanchester waiting in front of the cottage. Stella stood on the drive and the chauffeur, Hereford, was in the act of shutting the door. He sprang back to his seat, backed, saluted, and drove swiftly away.

Ann watched the car disappear with despairing eyes. She could not scream because fingers were gripping her windpipe, nearly choking her. But Stella could distinguish the pale blue of her frock behind the diamond paned window and she waved her hand as she ran eagerly up the garden path.

Had Ann been normal she might have guessed the truth from Stella's reaction to the scene when she burst into the room. Instead of appearing surprised, she dashed to Ann and threw her arms around her.

"They didn't fool me," she whispered.

Then she began to fight like a boxing kangaroo, in order to create the necessary distraction, while the police car came round the bend of the drive.

The prelude to a successful raid was Mr. Williams' call for prompt action, when his daughter brought him Ann's note.

"It's her writing and our private star," she told him. "But— read it."

He glanced at the few lines and laughed.

"An impudent forgery," he said.

"No, it's an S.O.S. It looks like a second try for me."

After she had told her father about the first unsuccessful attempt to kidnap her, he realized the importance of nipping the gang's activities in the bud.

This seems the place to print the note, which was the alleged composition of an Oxford M.A.

*Dear Stella,*

*Miss West will be pleased if you will come to tea this afternoon. Don't waste no time and don't run no risks. Let Hereford drive you in the car. To prove this is genuine I'm signing it with our star, same as you done, one day in the schoolroom.*

*Yours,*

*Ann Shelley*

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### 23: Lightning Strikes Twice

*The Glacier County Chief*, Montana, 11 and 18 Nov 1938.

THE temperature was so high in the city that someone tried to fry an egg on the pavement. The baked air was stagnant and reeked of petrol. The traffic shrieked in competition with the din of a pneumatic road drill. Yet Hermione Heath, the young film actress, drew a breath of rapture as she gazed at the squalid street.

She had just left the Old Bailey where she had been on trial for murder.

"No," she protested, as her agent beckoned to a waiting taxi, "I want to walk. I want to feel free."

"And you want to escape the cameras, don't you?" he asked. "Directly the pressmen find out we've fooled them, they'll be swarming back through this alley."

Hermione— it was not her real name, but she had grown used to being called by it— leaped instantly into the cab.

"This seems all queer and wrong somehow," she said in a troubled voice, as her agent drew down the blinds. "You've always tried to get me publicity."

"Not this kind of publicity, my dear."

"You mean—?"

As he did not reply, she nerved herself to ask another question.

"Will this affect my career?"

"I'll tell you that later," he replied. "There's a clause in your contract which covers this— kind of thing. That will let them out, if they want to get rid of you."

"Why should they? I've been proved Innocent."

"Yes, you've been very lucky."

"Lucky?" Her voice broke. "I wouldn't wish my worst enemy my luck. But I mustn't talk about it. I must forget."

In spite of her determination, as she sat back in her corner, with closed eyes, her mind was flooded by unhappy memories. She had been a victim of the most damning circumstantial evidence that fate could contrive against an innocent person. Thoughtless words and unfortunate incidents had dovetailed together to lend ominous significance to her discovery of the body of the murdered financier.

She had gone gaily to his West-End flat, expecting to find a cocktail party. Instead, she found her host lying on the floor, shot through the heart.

The shock was so severe that she was instantly panic-stricken, when she incriminated herself with every possible indiscretion. After she had left her blood-stained fingerprints to testify against her and further advertised her identity by dropping some personal property, she ran away. Later, she was

numbered to a state of mental collapse when her memory could not function properly... She had endured weeks of torturing suspense. She had lost all hope. She had gone through hell.

Today, she was free. And now— in the first flush of liberty— she faced a new threat, the ruin of her career.

Although she was only a starlet, she was rising steadily in her profession. It absorbed her to the exclusion of other interests, so that she could not contemplate life apart from the studio.

"If I'm going to be thrown out," she said, "they might as well hang me and call it a day."

"Keep your chin up," advised her agent.

Luckily, there was no further call on her fortitude. When they reached the offices of the film company, the personage who controlled Hermione's destiny received her with a smile and extended hands.

"This is splendid to see you again," he said. "Now don't begin to cry. I want to discuss your new picture."

After this promising beginning, he broke the news that, although she could not play lead, he might use her in a minor part, but her chance would come later, if she justified his confidence.

"Best to let some of the mud settle," he said. "We must consider the susceptibilities of the public. That chap was such a stinking character."

Although the counsel for the defense had demonstrated the slight nature of Hermione's acquaintance with the murdered financier, she knew that it was impolitic to protest. She was forced to eat crow, while the chief laid down the law.

"In future, no wild parties, no car-offenses, no more shady friends. We may have to sell you again to the public. Remember, even the smell of a second scandal would finish you. And now, what about taking a real holiday out of the public lens?"

"Switzerland is quiet in the summer," suggested the agent.

"Fix it ... Goodby, my dear."

Although she was dismissed, Hermione lingered to ask a question.

"You do believe I'm innocent?"

"Of course... only don't do it again."

His words rang in her ears, making her unduly sensitive to the congratulations of her friends.

The next afternoon, when she boarded the Continental express at Victoria, she felt acutely self-conscious because her departure was so purposely inconspicuous.

THE first week slipped quickly and happily away. After her long ordeal, she was grateful merely to be alive amid such beauty and peace. No one recognized her or asked for her autograph. Most of the guests at her hotel were drifters— stopping for only a night or two.

Wearing shorts and dark sun glasses, she spent her time alone— either climbing steep, wooded heights to reach an "Aussicht," or mooning beside the jade-green river. Presently, the solitude which had been so healing to her shattered nerves, began to lose its benefit. With restored bodily health, her mind began to work again.

"Don't do it again."

The sentence rang in her ears as she went over and over the wretched business of her trial, until the injustice of her position seared her sense of rectitude. It seemed to her that, even on this holiday, she was still being penalized for a crime she had not committed.

It was as though she had been struck by lightning— unexpected, unmerited, unexplained.

"Why should it have happened to me?" she asked herself. "I've done nothing to deserve this."

She had grown so used to regard herself as invisible, that it came as a surprise when she realized that one person had guessed her identity. Their first meeting took place on a mountain railway. At first, she barely noticed the red-haired young man, with bare knobby Scotch knees, who sat on the opposite seat of her carriage.

She was gazing at the range of great snow mountains glittering against a deep blue sky, when the young man spoke to her.

"Aren't you Hermione Heath?"

She hesitated, as she did not wish to be pestered by a fan, but before she could reply, the young man went on.

"I was furious with you over your trial. You mucked up everything as though you were working in with the cops to give them a case in the bag. Surely you know the elementary rules on finding a corpse?"

"No!" gasped Hermione. "W-what are they?"

"First, touch nothing. Second, ring the police. Haven't you read any detective thrillers?"

"No."

"Then may heaven have mercy on your soul. You almost deserve all you got. I write them. And what's the good of me trying to educate the public when you deliberately work for a conviction?"

His abuse was incense to Hermione and exhilarated her more than the challenge of the snow mountains. Here, at least, was someone who recognized her for what she really was, a blundering fool, but innocent.

Hermione answered his questions with real relief. In spite of his blunt words, his hazel eyes held sympathy and understanding.

"What's your real name?"

"Amy Barker."

"Hermione wins with me. My name is Andrew Mackintosh. It ought to register— but it won't. I'm staying at your hotel, although you've not noticed me."

"I've noticed no one. I've kept thinking of—"

"I know. You kept thinking of poor little Hermione Heath. You've got to forget the little fool... Don't you hate your face?"

"Should I?" Her voice was startled. "What's wrong with it?"

"Definitely nothing. But I know / should get dead sick of mine splashed all over the screen."

"I don't. I'm clear on that point anyway. Film-acting is under my skin and it's also my big gamble. I spent my last shilling in dramatic training. It's mighty important for me to cash in on it."

"I understand. In fact, this holiday must put you together again. But it won't, unless you forget everything... Suppose we stick around together?"

During a week of perfect weather which followed their first meeting, they spent most of their time in the open air. With the object of giving her no time to think, Andrew ruthlessly took the pampered starlet for stiff mountain scrambles. He made her eat plain picnic lunches, perched on a boulder beside some boiling glacier-fed river.

"You get to know a person better in one day spent in the country than if you met her in drawing rooms for a year," he explained.

His exact word was "matey"— but he looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

He did not let her relax until his last afternoon, when they made a tour of the lake in the little steamer.

Hermione watched the shores with the sensation of being in a happy dream. There were fantastic houses and gardens where late crimson roses shed their petals and strangely remote people drank tea in the dense shade of chestnuts.

Châteaux with pointed towers and flights of stone steps leading down to deep peacock-blue water; cream-and-coral villas, spun about with delicately wrought-iron verandas and flights of filigree stairs which spiralled from balcony to balcony.

Presently the residences were spaced at longer distances as they reached a desolate area of reeds and bushes, where the river flowed swiftly into the lake. Near its outlet stood a small, white-shuttered villa, apparently encircled by a thick girdle of closely-clipped shrubs, which overhung the water.

"It's like a house built of toy bricks," exclaimed Hermione. "And the green stuff is like artificial moss. It fascinates me. I can't imagine anyone living there."

"I expect it's a weekend residence," exclaimed Andrew. "Most of these places are shut."

On the second-class deck two women were also talking of the villa.

"That belongs to a rich business man," one informed her companion in rapid French. "He manufactures chocolate. Or it might be watches. That's his '*nid d'amour*.' Always a lady. He is very attractive, you understand."

Although she could not hear, at that moment, Hermione suddenly shivered, as though a brain wave had touched her dormant memory of the murdered London financier.

"Don't look like that," said Andrew sharply.

"I can't help it," she confessed. "I'm afraid of the past. But I am more afraid of the future. That terrible thing happened to me in one second—just by opening a door. It can happen again."

"It can't. By the law of averages, it is impossible. Lightning never strikes the same place twice."

"That's not true. I remember reading about a woman who had just won a prize in a sweep and the account said that she had also held a winning ticket in the previous draw. When you consider the millions of tickets, that seems impossible. But it happened... Andrew, why did this happen to me?"

"Perhaps to test you," he replied. "If we had only soft pleasant experiences, we should degenerate to spiritual slugs. These tough breaks develop initiative, resource, courage."

"But all I did was to crash. I'm ashamed. I'm so used to being directed—told to do this or that... Oh, Andrew. I'm going to miss you."

That evening she went with him to the station. While they waited for the train, she looked so unhappy, that he tried to cheer her.

"I shall be at Victoria to meet you soon. We're not going to let this drop are we?"

"I shall count the days."

"Good." His face grew suddenly grave. "Hermione. I've been thinking about what you said this afternoon. I want you to promise me that if you are ever in a fix, like the last, you will fade away at once. Scram— disappear into the blue and leave no traces behind."

"I promise. But, of course, it won't happen again."

"No. You got me rattled by suggesting it. You see, you couldn't risk a second show-up."

"No. I should be finished in films."

"Much worse than that. A repetition of the first affair might be regarded as proof of homicidal mania. I'm frightening you, but you frightened me first. So remember this. You've brains inside your head, not pulp. Use them— and don't crash again."

SHE missed him even more than she feared. It was difficult to force enthusiasm for the beauty which surrounded her now that the human element was lacking. The mountains were beginning to assume the aspect of prison walls, when her holiday came to a premature end. The circumstances were exhilarating, for London came on the hotel telephone just as she was finishing her coffee on the veranda. "London" proved to be her agent, who told her that production was to begin immediately on the picture which had been shelved owing to her trial. The choice of lead lay between another promising young actress and herself.

"I must be frank," he warned her. "Clara's their best bet. No scandal about her. But give them all you've got and they're bound to admit it's your part. Come by tonight's express as you won't have to change. I'll meet you at Victoria and take you out to the studio for the test. Don't let me down, or it will be a walkover for Clara."

When he rang off, Hermione felt dizzy with excitement. She rushed about, making arrangements for her departure, but there was little to do. After every detail had been discussed, there stretched before her most of the morning and all the afternoon.

"I've got to walk, or I shall blow up," she thought.

She decided to take the steamer to the town at the end of the lake and then walk on to the first village, where she would await its arrival on its homeward trip.

When she reached the little medieval town, she loitered over her lunch, but, in her impatience, the hands of her watch seemed to crawl. It was a relief to set off along the lake-promenade, lined with small chestnut trees, beginning to brown. She walked quickly and got to the village, to find the quay deserted. The steamer was not due for some time, so she began to explore.

It interested her to see the backs of the houses, or rather, their entrances. Many were impressive, with glass corridors or covered courtyards leading to the front door. Their gardens, too, were beautiful, with vivid emerald grass and brilliant flowers.



While she was admiring a border of dahlias in the garden of a villa, named "Mon Asile" an Alsatian dog watched her through the green-and-gilt railings. Having decided that she had no design on the family security, he butted the gate open with his head and made it plain to her that she might take him for a walk.

"No, my lad," she told him, shaking her head. "You're pedigree, by the look of you. I'm taking no chances. Some one might think I was enticing you away."

As he continued to plead, she weakly compromised by throwing her stick for him to retrieve. Apparently he could not get too much of this game, which lasted for several hectic minutes, but he behaved like a gentleman when, at last, she took her property from him and ordered him not to follow.

Leaving him sitting obediently inside his own garden, she swung along the deserted shore road. On one side was a 12-foot wall, topped with the trees of an estate— on the other, the sheet of sunlit water. Her objective was the river, which was boiling out in a greenish-white stream over the sapphire lake.

Presently she reached the unreal little villa, encircled with shrubs, which had impressed her with such a sense of artifice.

"It's either hollow inside and stuffed with shavings," she told herself, "or it's a block of solid plaster. No, I'm wrong. They've got a telephone there— and it's ringing like mad. Why doesn't someone answer it?"

The sound of the bell continued to whirl in her ears as she picked her way down a path between willows and rank undergrowth, in order to reach the river. Soon, however, the track came to an end amid a stretch of reedy-swamp, with gaps of water, so that she was forced to turn back.

To her surprise, the telephone bell was still ringing when she came again to the white villa. It was obvious that no one was in the house and she marveled at the patience, or laxity, of the exchange. She lingered to gaze at the shuttered windows, when, suddenly, she heard the piteous wail of an animal.

"Oh. dear," she cried in dismay. "They've left a cat locked in and it's only Monday today. It'll be there for days... What on earth can I do? I can't break in. It's against the law."

Although the unanswered telephone stressed the fact that the villa was deserted, she rang the bell and knocked loudly upon the door. No one came, but she did not expect admission. Only the cat scented rescue, for its mewing sounded closer, while she could hear it scratching the panels.

It was against every humanitarian scruple to leave an animal to starve to death, yet the position seemed hopeless to Hermione. A glance at her watch told her that she had time, but little to spare.



At that moment to add to her worry, a further complication ensued. She felt a tug at her stick and turned to see the Alsatian dog waiting expectantly in the road. He had trailed her from "Mon Asile," and now— with insane optimism— had chosen this moment to ask her for another game.

"You keep out of this," she said, surrendering her stick to keep him quiet. "Oh, I wish I could get in."

IN desperation and without the faintest hope of forcing an entry, she turned the handle of the door. To her intense surprise it was neither bolted nor locked. While she was pushing it open, a small gray-and-white cat shot through the aperture and dashed into the road, evidently bound for his home in the village.

Hermione remained on the step gazing before her. Instead of a darkened interior, she saw a gleaming black-and-white marble hall, with glossy buttercup walls and yellow rugs. The light streamed in through the door of the salon, which was just beyond. Only a section of it was visible, revealing the telephone on the floor.

She was compelled by strong curiosity to peep in at the salon. She reminded herself that not a soul was near. Closing the front door to keep the dog out she approached the salon.

It was full of sunshine, while the walls and ceiling were mottled with dancing water reflections from the lake. The unshuttered windows were hung with ice-blue satin curtains, patterned with white roses—the gilt Empire furniture was covered with royal blue-and-white striped brocade. Everything was gay and brilliant—with the exception of a man's body, lying outstretched on the carpet.

She stared at it with a feeling of terrible familiarity. This seemed a colored and almost cheerful version of her recent grim experience. A sunny room, instead of the dark stuffy flat— a debonair corpse in place of the other horror with his gross body and distorted face.

The dead man was slim and elegant with silver hair and black eye-brows. He wore a tussore suit with a brown silk shirt and socks. A tangerine carnation was in his buttonhole and a monocle had fallen from his eye. There were signs of a struggle, but on his mouth was the ghost of a smile— protesting and surprised— as though his visitor had gone rather too far beyond the limit of good taste.

Hermione stared— petrified by the sight of blood oozing from a wound in his heart. At that moment, her dominant sensation was incredulity, although— in itself— the happening was not altogether improbable. Any dissolute person, who plays also with souls, may run the risk of violent death,

while it follows logically, that some one must discover his body. The amazing element centered in the fact that she— Hermione Heath— should be the victim of an extraordinary and almost impossible coincidence.

Lightning had struck the same place twice.

As she realized it, she felt about to be overwhelmed by an avalanche of terror which would sweep away her wits, as in the first catastrophe. But even while she trembled on the brink of panic, she remembered Andrew.

He had warned her that she must not risk a second scandal and he had told her what she must do. She must touch nothing and go away immediately.

Merely to think of him strengthened her with the knowledge of invisible comradeship. She lost the sense of being overwhelmed by Fate's betrayal as she regained mastery over her nerves. Checking an impulse to stop the maddening ringing of the telephone, she hurried from the room.

JUST as she reached the vestibule, she heard a ring, followed by a double knock upon the front door. The desperation of the crisis cleared her brain, so that she guessed what had happened. The bell had been ringing for some time and the exchange operator, when she realized that something was out of order, had rung up the police station.

The man who had been sent to investigate the mystery must not find her in the house. She glanced at the closed windows of the salon and decided that the official might enter while she was trying to open one of them. The white marble staircase was nearer, so she sped noiselessly over the thick black carpet up to the shuttered gloom of the landing.

Trembling violently, she waited for him to make the discovery... Then suddenly the shrilling of the bell was cut off as the official talked to the police station.

She strained her ears to listen. Fortunately, he did not speak in a patois, so that she was able to understand the drift of his statement.

"Herr Silbermann shot in his summer residence. The disorder indicates murder. Come at once to watch the house from the outside, so that no one can leave it. The miscreant may be hiding. No, I cannot search yet, lest some one should slip out, while I am upstairs. Here, I can guard the front door as well as the body. Stop anyone you meet on the road who is running, or hurrying, or agitated, or who is at all suspicious."

Hermione bit her lip and clenched her hands. She was caught in a trap. But there might be a way out. There must be one. She thought she remembered a spidery iron stair which spiralled from the top veranda down to the garden. If she could descend unseen, she might hide in the shrubbery until the relief

police reached the villa— and then choose the psychological moment to make a dash for the quay.

Holding herself in dread lest a board should creak, she opened a door. Her heart sank at the darkness within. If the upper story were still closed, it would be difficult to unshutter a window without betraying her presence by a noise. But she had to go on. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she groped her way safely through a bathroom to the principal bedroom.

To her joy, the windows were open, so that it, too, swam with sunshine and water reflections. Drawing aside an orchid-pink satin curtain, she stole cautiously out.

In that moment of exposure, she felt certain that someone must see her from the lake. It was possible, too, that the spiral stairs were visible from a corner of the salon, where the policeman guarded the body. But although she knew that she was incriminating herself more deeply with every action, she crept down the steps and reached the ground.

WITHOUT giving herself time to falter, she dived underneath the nearest shrub. If she could crawl under its shelter to the left of the villa, she could reach the road without having to pass the open front door.

At first, however, the task seemed impossible. It was difficult to make any progress through the dense mass of interlacing twigs. She was stifled by heat and lack of air and almost choked by layers of dust and rubbish. To test her endurance still further was the additional fear of making any sound.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, she dragged herself through the hedge until she reached a shrub behind which she could crouch while she waited. It was then she glanced at her watch and realized that she could catch the steamer only by making a sprint.

It was the last boat back to the town where she was staying. If she lost it, she would also lose the express back to England and her chance of making a test for the new picture. Any attempt to hire a car in the village would attract attention to her presence as a stranger when the least publicity would be fatal. No one had seen her come— and no one must see her go, except in impeccable circumstances.

Even as the thoughts were whirling through her mind, she noticed that the dog was nosing among the bushes, as though he were on her trail. He was bound to find her, then he would give away the secret of her hiding place.

But his presence made no difference now except to precipitate the crisis. Circumstances forced her out into the open to make a dash for the steamer. On her way she was bound to be stopped and questioned by the police. The

passport, which—in accordance with the regulations of her regional ticket—she carried always with her, would be examined and her identity revealed.

Unless she could think of some, expedient whereby she could run without attracting attention, it was indeed the end of Hermione Heath.

In that moment she knew that she was being tested. Her whole future depended on her own initiative and brains. No one could direct her now.

Andrew's phrase, "a spiritual slug," stung her memory as she wrestled with the psychological aspect of the situation.

Just as the dog leaped toward her in joyful welcome, the inspiration came.

"The dog. If I saw a man running in the street, I should turn and stare. But I should take no notice of a man running with a dog."

LEAPING over the low parapet of the garden, she snatched up her stick where the Alsatian had dropped it and held it out in invitation to him to follow. She had two bits of luck, she was still wearing shorts with a sleeveless jersey—and the road curved just beyond the villa, so that any one around the bend could not see the point where she began her run.

Shouting encouragement to the delighted dog, she raced at top speed, while snatches of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" floated through her mind. "Shot and Shell."

Two men, wearing dark caped uniforms and peaked caps, cycled toward her. "Boldly they rode." She was passing them. They did not stop her, but they might be following her. She dared not turn her head to find out, but dashed on. "Into the jaws of death."

Another policeman—this time, on foot—came around the next corner. He looked keenly at her and she heard him stop, as though to look after her. "Into the gates of hell... On... On..."

She had run herself nearly to the point of collapse. Her heart was leaping—her lungs felt punctured—when suddenly she saw below her the quay and the little steamer. The gangway was on the point of being hauled away, but she dashed across it just in time.

The paddles churned the water and the boat steamed away. Hot and panting, Hermione stood on deck and watched the shore glide past her. The Alsatian was trotting back to "Mon Asile" and his dinner. Under the trees, people drank afternoon tea.

A sense of deep relief enfolded. She knew that she was safe. It was as though she had presence of a day in the near future, when she was to read in her paper a Continental item which stated that the police had arrested the murderer of the late Herr Silbermann.

Even then, in the villa of the deceased, the policeman was questioning his colleagues.

"You met no one on the road?"

"No one," was the reply. "Only the priest on his bicycle and a kennel-maid exercising a hound."

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## 24: The Royal Visit

*The Glacier County Chief, Montana, 2 and 9 Jun 1939*

VIVA RICHARDS had one of her hunches about the Royal Visit to Tudor Green, and, as usual, she managed to infect her policeman-husband with her own foreboding. No one could understand the secret of her influence over him. Besides being an Oxford Boxing Blue, he had a trained mind, while she was small, nervy and as full of superstitions as an old wife.

But for all that, she had her big husband by the short hairs.

It was grilling weather towards the end of August, so that he was glad to get off the baked pavements of High street into the cool of his home. Viva—looking like a high school girl in her tight dark-blue frock, with white collar and cuffs, had tea waiting for him on the daisied lawn at the back of the cottage.

She flew at him, kissed him, rescued the dish of plums from the wasps, poured him out a cup of tea and then looked at him with dark, tragic eyes.

"Bread and butter always tastes of grass out-of-doors." she said mournfully. She added in the same breath, "Hugo, I'm so unhappy about the Royal Visit."

P.C. Richards groaned, for he was sick of the subject. He considered that the residents of Tudor Green had swollen heads and had lost their sense of proportion over the civic honor. Besides, the affair was only small beer—a rushed visit of under half-an-hour. The prince was actually scheduled to fulfill an important engagement at a large industrial city, but with unselfish good nature had consented to break his Journey to lay the foundation stone of the new hospital.

"I'm unhappy, too," Richards informed his wife. "I have to be on duty. But I can't see why you're mourning."

"Because— Hugo. I know there's going to be a terrible tragedy."

He ran his finger uneasily round the inside of his collar, as though it had suddenly grown unbearably tight. Although he always laughed at Viva's presentiments, he had noticed that there was usually a logical origin in a tangible fact behind her tangled fancies and intuitions.

"What makes you think that, infant?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. One can never be certain, for warnings are such shadowy things. But I think it's this burglary at Sir Anthony Kite's."

He laughed indulgently, for it was obvious that, this time, she had strayed too far from any connecting sequence.

"It's queer," she went on. "I feel it must be leading up to something." Then her voice changed to professional interest. "Do you expect to make an arrest?" she asked.

"No, to you. There's not a clue. And the stolen notes are all old ones, so we can't trace their numbers."

BOTH he and his superior— Sergeant Belcher— were annoyed by the affair, for burglaries were practically unknown in Tudor Green, while the special circumstances made it appear an outrage. Sir Anthony Kite, who was a well known London ear specialist, had retired to live in the little old-world town. but, owing to his persistent interest in his profession, he saw local patients at his private residence, besides giving his services to the hospital and clinic.

It was really a gesture of benevolence to the community, so that he was both bewildered and hurt when he came downstairs, on the preceding morning, to find that his study had been entered, through the French window.

Apparently, the burglar had either been disturbed or in a panic, for he had roughly forced a drawer in the desk and grabbed its entire contents, which included private papers and records, besides treasury notes to the value of 52 pounds.

Viva noticed her husband's frown and changed the subject.

"Mrs. Greenwood-Gore has a Union Jack dress for the ceremony. Red, blue and white. It positively shouts loyalty. It sounds pretty grim, but she carries it off. She is so lovely."

She could afford to be generous in view of her husband's antipathy for the local beauty and social leader of Tudor Green.

"Why don't you like her, Hugo? She's always gracious to you." she reminded him.

"She's gracious enough to talk to me, but she rarely takes the trouble to listen to what I have to say. Because I'm a policeman, I suppose... Well. I must toddle back to the station."

Viva walked with him to the front gate, where they lingered to get the effect of the decorations of High street. They were on a lavish scale and presented a regal spectacle of fluttering scarlet and gleaming gold.

Even as they admired them, a cloud passed before the sun, so that the bright colors were suddenly dimmed, while the gilded crowns turned dull, as though tarnished by the poisoned breath of anarchy.

Richards felt Viva's sudden shiver and knew that she was reading an omen of evil in the eclipse.

IN spite of the heat, he hurried back to his work. Notwithstanding his common sense, he felt vaguely apprehensive, as though he, too, had prescience of certain seemingly disconnected events which were already beginning to fit themselves into a dark and abominable conspiracy.

When he reached the station, he found his superior officer, Sergeant Belcher, listening with the grim expression which betrayed opposition, to Col. Clarence Block ... The sergeant was not only a popular local sportsman, but a native of the place, and he instinctively distrusted a newcomer to the district.

Colonel Block suffered from that handicap, but, against precedent, he had forced his way to the top, through sheer pressure of wealth and a plus-personality. Consequently he had crashed the position of chairman of the reception committee, on the occasion of the Royal Visit, to the annoyance of the mayor, who was a dignified, silver-haired lawyer, of long pedigree.

The sergeant addressed Richards skeptical grin.

"Extra work for you, Richards. The colonel's got the wind up about this Royal Visit."

The support of Viva's presentiment came from such an unexpected quarter, that it stunned Richards to silence. He could only stare as Block began to explain.

"I've made myself personally responsible for the safety of His Highness, so I'm insisting on extra precautions. I've just carried my meeting, in the teeth of strong opposition. Now I want the co-operation of the police."

"I can't see what there is to worry about in a loyal little town like ours." objected the sergeant.

"Then you can't see further than your nose. Don't you realize that the prince is going to a big Industrial center, with a strong communist element? Of course, the police will concentrate on making that borough safe for him... But if a mad dog escapes their roundup, if he has any sense, he will come to our little show, where he'll have the chance of a lifetime."

"Hum... What do you propose?"

"I'm going to have all the Territorials on the ground, so as to crowd out the general public. And I'm going to limit strictly the number of those present in the enclosure, for the ceremony."

"All right for your friends, colonel, but rough on the townspeople who've spent their money on decorations."

"They can line the route. And you needn't talk of my friends. They'll soon be my enemies, for I'm going to boil down the list of invitations to the bone. But my back is broad and I'm used to taking hard knocks."

P.C. Richards looked at him. He noticed the strong featured face, the bull-neck, the aggressive lips, the dark blood-shot eyes, the coarse hairs which covered his hands— and decided that his claim to resistance was no idle boast.

The colonel continued to lay down the law.

"There is to be no broadcasting. No photographers and no pressmen, except the local rag. And no planes are to fly over the ground."



"Then you had better speak to your son, colonel."

Block scowled as he walked to the door.

"If that young cub of mine breaks the regulations," he said, "I'll make a point of being on the bench, to give him the maximum sentence."

The sergeant grinned at Richards as the door slammed, for the strained relations between Block and his only son was common knowledge.

"Too gentle for this world," he remarked. "The angels must be calling him. There's the telephone. Take the call, Richards, and if it's Sir Anthony again, I'm not to."

Richards grinned, for the ear specialist had been continually ringing up the station, to inquire if the police were on the track of his burglar. On this occasion, however, and to Richards' astonishment, he had some news for them.

"My casebook has just been returned to me by post," he said in his dry, clearly articulated voice. "Apparently the perverted person who stole it has some muddled idea of making a gesture."

"But it's very satisfactory," remarked Richards heartily. "The loss of confidential documents must be the worst part to a professional man."

"I'm glad I've raised your spirits... But my 52 pounds were not returned."

"I'll be round now to examine the postal wrapper."

"I have already done so. The only deduction from the postmark is that the criminal is spending my money in London."

P.C. Richards rang off, wiping his brow. His only consolation was that, at long last, he must go home to Viva.

WHEN he walked home, in the greenish dusk, he chose the back way beside a small brown river; shaded with masonry, which flowed through part of the town. Even here, his luck was out, for instead of avoiding people, he ran into Mrs. Flora Greenwood-Gore.

A flawless blonde— ageless and childless— she was the wife of an important man. Even the prejudiced Richards had to admit her beauty as he looked at her perfect complexion and violet eyes. He noticed that she was wearing a frock printed with poppies and cornflowers on a white ground, before she drew his attention to it.

"My royal reception dress. My husband says the colors are too daring."

"They've done more than dare. They've hit me in the eye," said Richards.

As she was not married to him, there was no reason for Mrs. Greenwood-Gore to smile at his joke. She went on talking in her habitual monologue.

"Oh. by the way, a man we knew in the Transvaal has just flown over to see me. I had to go out, so I sent him over to your wife, as he met her uncle at the Cape. I'll ring up when I get home and you can send him over..."

She passed on, leaving Richards indignant with her autocratic management.

WHEN he reached the small, cream-washed building which held all he loved most, the French windows of the drawing room were open and the light fell on a patch of vivid green grass. As he lingered, he could tell, by the halting sound of voices, that both Viva and her visitor were finding it difficult to sustain a conversation.

He plunged to the rescue, when Viva gratefully introduced him to the South African. He was a dried-up man with a nasal voice and no entertainment value, so that Richards was justified in not realizing his supreme importance in the development of future events.

There was nothing to tell him that had that especial man not called that evening, the course of history would have been changed.

To make amends for his first stiffness, he produced whisky, which presently unloosed the stranger's tongue. Even then, he was not a success, for he annoyed the Richards family by tactless praise of Mrs. Greenwood-Gore.

"Loveliest woman I've ever met. They were big people in Jo'burg, but she hadn't a scrap of side. Always the same to everyone. And she's not altered a bit. I do admire the way she puts it over."

"She certainly throws her weight about," said Viva coldly.

The stranger glanced at her quickly and then a change came over his expression. For the first time. Richards really understood what is meant by a poker face.

"Are you folks keen on flying?" he asked.

"Not me," replied Richards. "A policeman has to stand on his famous flat feet."

"Only way to get about. The drawback is the engine noise. You see, my job is in the cyanide works at Jo'burg, where the din is chronic. All the workers wear these."

He scooped out of his pocket a couple of curiously-shaped rubber plugs and tossed them down on the mantel shelf.

"Never without them. Always wear them flying... Isn't that the phone?"

"I'll go," cried Viva joyously.

The South African's face lit up when she returned from the hall with her message.

"Mrs. Greenwood-Gore is waiting for you."

He was as eager to go as they to speed his parting. The instant he had gone. Richards dropped heavily down in his shabby varsity chair, which he had brought down from Oxford.

"The end of a perfect day." he sighed. Then he glanced at the mantelshelf and added. "That darned fool has left his gadgets behind. Well, he can fetch them himself. I'm not going to turn out again even to save the whole of the empire."

HIS ill temper and Viva's nerves were partly due to atmospheric, for during the night, they were disturbed by a flickering sky and the mutter of distant thunder. In the morning it was pouring with rain and all day a succession of storms kept rolling up over the hills.

As though the electric weather affected the general temper, the final meeting of the reception committee was an explosive affair. Colonel Block read out his revised list of those persons privileged to attend the ceremony, regardless of angry mutters of protests from those who were disappointed.

He was supported in his tactics by Admiral Stel— one of the oldest residents who was virulently anti-communist.

The vicar arose to make a protest. "I am sure we all appreciate your difficulties and your courage in tackling them." he said to the colonel. "But there is one person who should be present. Surely you could squeeze in Miss Spenser?"

There was a hum of approval, for the little spinster was a devoted parish worker and a zealous member of the Primrose league.

"It would break her heart to be left out," continued the vicar. "She has all the portraits of the royal family in her parlor. The memory of the occasion would remain with her always. Besides, in view of her deafness, she is deprived of so much amusement."

He looked for support towards Flora Greenwood-Gore, whose fair face wore its habitual expression— serene yet remote— as though she dwelt on another plane. When she smiled and bowed her head, the applause grew so vigorous that the colonel had to give way.

"All right, since you insist, she shall have her ticket. And while we're on the subject, I have a special announcement to make. There will be no admission without a ticket. It doesn't matter who the individual or what the circumstances."

"I second the measure," approved the mayor. "It would take time to check a list at the entrance. In view of the rush, everything must go off without a hitch."

Unfortunately, after the concession, the meeting was marred by another incident. The admiral who was so staunch a supporter of home interests that he had not left Tudor Green for years rose on his gouty feet.

"I have been informed," he said, "that the presentation silver trowel and mallet to be used at the ceremony were not supplied locally. In my opinion, it is scandalous to spend one penny of the rate-payers' subscriptions out of the town."

"It was considered necessary," explained the mayor soothingly, "to avoid suspicion of favoritism."

"In any case," interrupted Colonel Block, "the expense will be carried by me, as my contribution. I'm entitled to choose my own firm, aren't I? I don't truckle to local graft."

After that implicit insult, it took all the mayor's diplomacy to prevent the meeting from degenerating into a dog fight. At its conclusion, the colonel made a final arbitrary announcement.

"The invitations will not be sent by post. They must be applied for, personally, at my house. I shall initial them myself and hand them to the rightful persons."

MISS SPENSER lost no time in applying for her precious card. She enjoyed the experience as a little social occasion, for she met others who were at the colonel's imposing mansion on the same errand. While they waited, they were invited into the dining room for refreshments and the spirit of the house was hospitable and friendly.

It was fortunate that she had a taste of pleasure, because within five minutes of leaving she was the victim of a disagreeable incident. She went home by the short cut, a paved passage running between the garden walls of some large houses. At its darkest part, a youth rushed past her, snatched her bag and ran off with it.

She went immediately to the police station, to report her loss.

"Luckily, there was only a little money in it," she told Sergeant Belcher. "A trifle over four shillings. But my card-case and latchkey were inside. I shall get the lock changed instantly, but I do hope my cards will not be used for an improper purpose."

Then she gave a cry of dismay.

"Oh dear, Oh dear. My card of admission was there too. I shan't get another. The colonel warned me not to lose it. He will be so angry with me."

"Did you get a view of the young man?" asked the sergeant.

"The merest glimpse as he rushed under the lamp. Of course I could not be certain, but I thought he looked like young Block. Only that is too ridiculous."

"Well," remarked the sergeant; after the distressed lady had gone, "it seems one of two things. Either the dictator is so annoyed at being crossed over Miss Spenser's ticket that he arranged to have it pinched—or else the son did it on his own. He's been left out of the show and he may be planning some fool revenge on his dad."

P.C. Richards went home in a disturbed frame of mind. He kept asking himself a question. Could there be any connection between the loss of Sir Anthony's 52 pounds and Miss Spenser's 52 pence?

If such were the case, there might indeed be some foundation for Viva's miserable hunch. But although he thought until he was stupid, the two thefts remained poles apart, and he could conjecture no point of fusion.

He did not tell Viva about the incident until the next morning. She made no comment, but he was dismayed to notice her pale face as she poured coffee.

P.C. Richards found the light duty, which was his lot at Tudor Green, an arduous test of endurance. Of course, he told himself that he was worried solely about his wife and he watched the clock— or rather, his wrist— until he was able to get back to the cottage.

He was glad to find his father-in-law, Dr. Buck, having tea with Viva. He was a brisk, sensible man, with a tight pink clean-shaven face, and he would certainly disclaim the responsibility for his temperamental daughter. On this occasion, however, his gossip; had done nothing to relieve her symptoms, for her small face was pinched with anxiety.

"Have you heard about the admiral, Hugo?" she asked.

"No," replied Richards. "What about him?"

"He's fractured his leg. Daddy has just been called in to him. He fell down his front steps."

"Rather early in the day for that."

"No," said the doctor, "he was quite sober. The steps were greased. I nearly slipped on them myself."

"Who could have done it, Hugo?" asked Viva.

Richards tried to hide his uneasiness.

"Some silly practical joke," he declared. "But I'm off duty now and I want my tea..."

Although he refused to discuss the incident, he followed his father-in-law to the front gate.

"You might send over a bromide for Viva," he said. "She's got jim-jams."

"Even I have diagnosed them," remarked the doctor dryly. "I'll let you have a draught."

THE sedative did its work, for Viva had no warning dream to relate on the following morning. The sun was shining from a clear blue sky and she felt cheerfully normal. During the morning she remembered that she had not even tried on the new frock which had been bought for the ceremony. It required to be shortened, and she grew so interested in her appearance that she had not time for apprehension.

She was dressed and seated at luncheon table when Richards entered the room.

"Aren't you cutting it rather fine?" she asked

Then she noticed that he had made no comment on her new finery, although he was usually responsive.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied with forced lightness. "Bad show for Flora Greenwood-Gore. That's all. She's going to miss the fun."

"You mean— she won't be at the ceremony? Why?"

"Got a telegram, early this morning, saying her mother was dying and asking her to come immediately. Her husband is away, so she wired him where she'd gone, before she left. He rang up the old folks to find out exactly what was wrong ... and nothing was."

He stopped speaking, and gazed at his wife in consternation. She sat motionless, her fork poised in the air, while she stared fixedly at him as though her wits had deserted her.

"What's the matter?" he asked sharply. "Say something, but don't look like that."

"Dear Brutus," she murmured.

"My dearest girl, it sounded like you said 'Brutus.' Or am I imagining things?"

"No, I said it. Hugo, don't you remember Barrie's play, where a lot of ill-assorted people were invited to a house, because they had something in common?"

"Yes. But—"

"Don't you see? Someone has prevented Miss Spenser, the admiral and now Mrs. Greenwood-Gore from coming to the ceremony. There's an object behind it— and I'm terribly afraid. What have those three people got in common? What?"

Although he was six feet of stodge, P.C. Richards felt himself beaten by his wife's hunch. He became conscious of something secret and diabolical creeping in the darkness, like a slow train of gunpowder eating its way to the explosion.

He glanced at the clock distractedly.

"If you are right," he said, "we've got to find it out in double quick time. We must be in our places in 15 minutes."

"I know. Think. Hugo."

"It beats me. I could find points of resemblance between the admiral and Miss Spenser. They are both elderly and rheumatic and amateur gardeners and Primrose leaguers and deaf. It's Mrs. Greenwood-Gore that's the complication. She has everything they haven't got."

The telephone bell began to ring, but he shook his head impatiently.

"Shut up," he muttered.

"Answer it," commanded Viva suddenly. "I feel it may be important."

Obediently, he took the receiver off the hook. He was strung up to a pitch of nerves when he wanted to swear at the sound of Mrs. Greenwood-Gore's voice at the end of the line. She was furious over her grievance and insisted on telling him what he already knew, in spite of his efforts to interrupt her.

"I've rung up the police station," she said, "but I can get no responsible person. They say the sergeant has left for the ceremony. So I appeal to you. You must find out who sent that telegram and prosecute the person."

"I'm not sure a practical joke is within our province," he told her.

"Thank you. Now I have your promise, I feel satisfied."

"I'm afraid you didn't hear. I said it's not within our scope—"

"I hope so, too. Goodby."

P.C. Richards rang off and stared at his wife as though he could not believe his ears.

"Viva," he shouted. "I've got it. I now know what they have in common... They are all deaf."

Viva shook her head.

"Not Mrs. Greenwood-Gore," she protested.

"But she is... That South African chap— Yes, that's the idea."

Dashing across to the mantelshelf Richards began to turn over the ornaments.

"Where are his gadgets?" he panted. She instantly picked up a vase, turned it upside down and shook out the plugs. "Why do you want them?" she asked.

"Because I want to make myself deaf. It seems to me that there's going to be a planned disturbance at the ceremony— probably some noise. That's why they've eliminated all the deaf people. They might not react to the distraction—whatever it is... Well, they'll have me now."

"What will you do?"

"Just act on the spur of the moment. Come along. The car's outside."

Standing in the over-heated enclosure. Viva heard the cheers which were inaudible to her husband. He had motioned a constable to stand by him, but otherwise, he could only wait and watch.

THE great moment was at hand. The cheers grew louder as the prince entered the enclosure. He was accompanied by the mayor and mayoress, who had met the royal train at the station, and he wore the rosebud which had been presented by their grandson.

Colonel Block— as chairman of the reception committee bowed himself forward with a few words of welcome, to superintend the laying of the foundation stone. There was no time for speeches and the short ceremony was soon over. Having done his part, the prince glanced at his watch and then smiled at the company, with his customary charm.

At that moment, there was an unexpected commotion. With a threatening snarl, which grew louder every second, an airplane swooped down out of the clouds and dived lower and lower over the ground, while the roar of its engine increased. Instantly, every head was turned in its direction while every face looked upwards.

There were two exceptions to the general company of sky-gazers. P.C. Richards heard a deadened noise, but the sound reached him a fractional period later than the rest of the crowd. It was in this interval that he, alone, saw what was about to happen.

Colonel Block whipped a knife out of the handle of the silver trowel, as though it were a sword-stick and poised it, ready to stab the prince in the back.

The blow never fell. While the company, including the prince, were still engrossed by the antics of the airman, who was flying in dangerously low circles. P.C. Richards and the other constable had gripped their prisoner and run him out of the enclosure, with the minimum of commotion.

The incident passed with such despatch that afterwards, no one could claim truthfully to be an eye-witness of the outrage ... The prince laughed and hurried back to his car. There was a second outburst of cheers along the return route to the station. Soon afterward he was back in the royal train, only conscious of an amusing break in the boredom of a municipal ceremony.

THAT evening, at the cottage, there was a festive meal, when P.C. Richards returned— full of importance— after the excitement of the proceedings at the police station.

"The Blocks," he explained to his wife, "are paid agents of the Wrecker gang, whose aim it is to upset the peace and security of the world. Father and



son worked together, hand in glove. The feud was a dodge to throw dust in our eyes.

"Of course, they were going to be very well paid for bumping off a royalty. The son did all the active part. He stole Sir Anthony's casebook and Miss Spenser's bag and he greased the admiral's doorsteps. As you saw, he did the flying stunt for which his father was going to inflict a heavy penalty, according to plan."

"That was a smart idea," remarked Viva, "If you watch a crowd when a plane flies low overhead, I defy you to find anyone who does not look up instinctively."

"Exactly. Block's part was to strike instantly in the confusion and then to slip the knife back, before the murder was spotted. When it was discovered, it would be difficult to associate him with the crime, as they all had an equal chance."

"But wouldn't the knife be traced to him, as he ordered the trowel?"

"He would probably take it away during the uproar. Remember, there were no brainy C.I.D. men present, to take command and order everyone to be searched and all that. I don't see why anyone would suspect the trowel. And if it were found, he would probably be able to prove delivery of an innocuous duplicate and swear to substitution on the part of persons known, in order to frame him."

"But when did you get on to the idea that Mrs. Greenwood-Gore was deaf?" asked Viva.

"When she began to guess at what I was saying on the telephone. I wonder why we never spotted it before that she was deaf. It explains why she goes on talking and never seems to listen. Sheer bluff. My own idea is that she is much older than anyone knows and like many beautiful women she can't stick the thought of age or infirmity. You remember how the South African talked about her putting over 'something.' That chap knew."

"Well, it's all very clever of you, darling," said Viva. "But don't forget Block had to steal Sir Anthony's casebook to find out all the cases of deafness in the district!"

"What of it?" asked her husband.

"Well— wasn't that my hunch?"

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**25: Mabel's House**

*The Winnipeg Tribune, 20 Apr 1940*

"LOOK," said Mary. "There are the lights of Mabel's House."

"They're cheerful," said John. "Shan't be sorry to get back to a home-fire myself."

The young people were tired from trudging along the semi-obliterated moorland road, as well as disheartened by an unsuccessful quest. All the afternoon, they had been searching for Mary's lost dog, Dopey.

Yet, although it was growing dark, with a biting wind and a scurry of snow flakes. Mary stopped to gaze up at the lighted windows of "The Chestnuts."

"Could you find anything more hopelessly commonplace than that house?" she asked. "And the mayor isn't a bit like a Great Lover, with his red face and his bawdy jokes. But he's been faithful to one woman, John, I want our love to be like that."

John pressed the hand tucked through his arm to show that he understood, As they stood in the keen blue twilight, they were a well-matched pair—endowed with health, good-looks and youth— and fit pioneers for the New World which held their future.

In spite of the fact that "The Chestnuts" was within the Municipal radius and had main-water and electricity, its position was both exposed and lonely. It was the last impost of the town, for beyond it stretched the moor—now practically deserted because, of the snow, On the other side of it was a half-mile of road, dimly-lit with widely-spaced lamp-posts, which linked it up with the residential suburbs of Pooksmoor.

Although it was the most romantic dwelling in the district— and a monument to a lover's fidelity— its appearance was prosaic. Solidly-built of grey stone, with a short drive of red gravel and a belt of laurels to screen its lawn from the road, it looked exactly what it was designed to be— a prosperous middle-class residence.

Over thirty years ago the Mayor of the town had built it for the girl he was going to marry. Just before their wedding, however, she had died from undiagnosed appendicitis and was buried in her wedding dress.

The Mayor never lived in the house, but he kept it exactly as it was— as a shrine to her memory. With the exception of silver plate and jewelry— which might attract burglars— he arranged all her wedding presents about the rooms. Nothing was changed nor allowed to deteriorate from disuse. A woman cleaned and aired it regularly, but no one else was allowed to enter it.

This was the Mayor's private sanctuary, which he visited regularly, so that passers-by were used to seeing its lighted windows and hearing the music from

the wireless. But although he remained unmarried, he did not behave as though his life were blighted. He found occasional consolation in liquor and always kept whisky on the premises. A telephone, too, was installed, so that he could be informed of any business or municipal development that might arise during his absence from his office.

AS the lovers lingered on the snowy road, the music ceased and the upper windows were plunged into darkness. Shortly afterward, the lower lights were switched off and they heard the slam of the front door. Then the Mayor crunched down [he drive and pushed open the gate. He was a huge, bull-necked man. athletic still in spite of his over-weight. His face was red and his walk not quite steady, but his smile beamed genuine welcome.

"Still courting?" he shouted. "When are you young people going to do your duty?"

"Were going to be married in the New Year," Mary told him.

"Directly afterward, we're sailing to Canada," added John.

"So you're getting used to snow, eh? But you mustn't go on the moor alone, Mary, until this confounded Convict 193 has been caught."

"Isn't he a nuisance?" she agreed. "John won't let me stir without him. Our farm's in a very lonely part, so I must get used to taking risks. I'm not afraid."

"This chap's a human tiger." remarked the Mayor, "leaving behind him a trail of victims.

"Only last night I was betting the governor of the prison that he'd slip through their fingers. He's got his belly full of food and clothes no one can identify. All he needs is cash to make a getaway."

Then he wrinkled his brow.

"I'd a queer notion, just now." he said. "I wondered if he has used this place. He's hidden somewhere this bitter spell."

"Too near the town, sir," objected John. "Besides, isn't it burglar-proof?"

"Technically only. He could easily pick one of these old-fashioned locks, And tonight, the whisky either underproof or someone has watered it. Maybe I'm losing my grip. I've half a mind to come out to Canada with you."

"The town couldn't spare you sir."

"That's right, The town made me, so I have to stick to the town. Besides I couldn't leave this."

He Jerked his thumb towards "The Chestnuts" Then, because his whisky had made him sentimental, he retold them the story with which they were so familiar.

"I was about your age, John, when I bought this house. It was the last word in modern improvements then. Mabel was proud of it. We went up to London

together to buy our furniture and she was in most days, arranging things and finishing the twiddle bits. We used to sit here in the evenings. We would turn on the lights and put a record on the gramophone and pretend we were married. All the family-life I ever had. You know how it ended."

"What was she like?" asked Mary softly.

"She was a real woman. Your the nearest to her I've met. But my girl was a lady and wore white petticoats with lace frills."

The Mayor grimaced at Mary's dark-blue trousers and leather coat, as he made two vague semi-circles with his hands.

"Mabel came out here and here," he explained. "But her waist was only twenty inches. She'd the sweetest temper, but she was the boss. If she lived, there would be no more wet Lodge-nights for me."

Suddenly Mary dared to say what was in her mind.

"Mr. Mayor, I know it sounds precious, but— Mabel is a real person to me. She's been sort of an inspiration, when people make love sound cheap, with their silly jokes. I never pass here without thinking of her. Before I go to Canada, may I go over to her house alone? Indeed, its not idle curiosity."

There was a long pause before the Mayor spoke in a choked voice,

"Nobody has ever gone there except me and the woman who cleans. But— yes. I'm going up to London for a couple of days and you shall have my key."

He lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper as he placed the key in her hand.

"I could have sold the house times and times again," he confided. "But I kept it empty, for us to meet. It's a fancy of course, but when I sit there, in her drawing-room and look at her photograph, I don't feel quite so lonely. You listen to me both of you. It may sound funny talk from an old chap that gets tight, but love is the only thing that counts."

He glanced at his watch and added in a matter-of-fact manner. "I'm expecting my car. Can I give you a lift back?"

They refused this offer from an instinctive feeling that he wanted to be alone. As they watched his Rolls-Royce drive off amid a whirl of snowflakes, John spoke to Mary.

"Poor old chap. He's rich— and we've not even begun to be poor— but we've everything."

"Except Dopey," Mary reminded him.

WHILE Dopey possessed all the endearing canine qualities, he had one grave fault; he was gripped periodically by a pioneer spirit which caused him to forsake home and family, in search of a new empire.

It was true that hitherto he had always returned— thin and hungry and ready to admit that, in spite of all its faults, the old country home was best. But this time his return was so long overdue that Mary had almost given up hope.

When she reached home that evening she ran into the house, calling out her usual question. "Has Dopey come back?"

"Not yet," her mother told her. "But he will"

She spent another broken night, listening for his return. Every time she awoke, she strained her ears for the sound of his bark, and once she went downstairs and opened the front door, in the hope of finding him outside.

The next afternoon the baker knocked at the door.

"Dog still missing?" he asked. "Wonder if it was him I heard this morning when I was doing my round on the moor. I fancied there was a sort of whining coming from the old shepherd's hut."

"Thanks. But I've heard so many of these tales. Dopey seems to have been everywhere except at his home."

But when he had gone, she told herself that, in spite of so many false rumors, this latest story might be actual fact. If Dopey had crawled to the hut and was lying there, starved and exhausted, she was leaving him to die.

At last she could endure the suspense no longer. John was away at a market and there was no one she could ask to accompany her. Besides the hut was about a mile out on the moor and not much daylight remained.

FROM the moment she pulled on her snow-boots, she began a relentless race with time. Soon she was running past the select residences of the suburb. The houses with their snow-capped roofs and white-muffled gardens looked snug and comfortable in contrast with the leaden sky and the drift of flakes which powdered her hair and Hew into her eyes.

She was almost blinded when she reached the stretch of lonely road which led to "The Chestnuts." On one side was the high stone wall of Pooksmoor Park and on the other flowed the cold gray slide of the river.

The present gripped her and her mind was possessed only by Dopey and his need. The moor rose in a long, gruelling climb and when the summit was reached it dipped down again to a deep fold in the landscape.

It was a relief to jog down the hill, holding her side, until she reached the slatey trickle of a small river at the bottom. It looked bitterly cold, for icicles formed a stiff fringe dropping from the arch of the bridge, but she had grown so hot that her hair was plastered in damp rings on her brow.

On the other side, the moor rose in a steeper slope, like a white wall. Once again she toiled upward, impelled by thoughts of her dog and repeating his name foolishly, as though it were a spell.

"Dopey, Dopey "

Suddenly there was a break in the clouds and the sky grew lighter. To her joy, she realized that the storm was about to clear. As she climbed higher, she could see the stone pile of the ruined hut standing out against the skyline.

Without a thought of personal peril, she left the tracks and plowed over snowy mounds of heather, calling the dog's name.

THERE was no answering bark to encourage her. Appalled by the silence and dreading what she might discover inside, she forced herself to enter the aperture of the ruin.

At first, it was almost a relief to find the place empty. At least, Dopey had not starved to death in the cold. The next moment she awoke from her dream of hope to the dull ache of yet another disappointment.

"I might have known it," she thought bitterly. "Just some of the baker's fun. The sooner I get hack the better."

For the first time she remembered that an escaped convict was somewhere at large and that the light was fading rapidly. She was about to reach the road again, when she chanced to look across the white wilderness, stretching deeper into the heart of the moor.

On the opposite rise, silhouetted blackly against the sky, was the figure of a man.

Although he was a considerable distance away, he stood out clearly, magnified by atmospheric conditions. There was something so menacing about the solitary shape— brooding over the waste— that her heart began to flutter with fear.

"It might be any harmless country man," she told herself. "It need not be the convict."

As she watched him, the man suddenly disappeared from view, as though he had dropped down to the ground. It was an ominous development, for it seemed to signify that he knew he was being observed. In that case, it was certain that she, in her turn was visible to him.

As she strained her eyes, she distinguished something dark moving over the white surface of the opposite slope. There appeared to be no doubt that the man was running in an effort to overtake her.

If it were really a race between them, he was bound to win in spite of her long start. She was already tired from her sprint against time. Even if she could out-distance him on the moor, which was chiefly downhill, there remained the long stretch of lonely road between the stone wall and the river.

Although it seemed madness to forsake the road and run the risk of being lost, just when dusk was falling, she decided to drop down into a gully and

chance her luck in reaching the bottom without a broken limb. Running some way down the slope, so that she, too, might be lost to view, she turned to the left and ploughed over the snow until she reached the steep side of a cleft.

In her excitement, she lost all sense of danger, as she slipped recklessly down the almost vertical incline—rolling, bumping, sliding. More than once she came perilously near to breaking her neck, but she always managed to save herself from disaster, up to the moment when her heels slid under her and she shot headlong into a narrow lane.

SHE scrambled to her feet, to find that she was miraculously intact. The moor now rose high above her, shielding her from observation. Although she sank up to her knees in drifted snow, she knew that she would cut off two-thirds of the distance covered by the winding moorland road.

The next twenty minutes were a test of strenuous endurance. Every muscle, nerve and sinew was strained to its utmost as she ploughed a way through the choked gully. Presently, to her joy, the surface grew better as the lane began to wind upwards, until she saw the chimneys of Mabel's House.

Soon afterwards she reached the tradesmen's entrance at the back, where she stopped to consider her next step. Although she hoped the man had given her up as lost quarry, she had to be certain that she had shaken him off. Keeping in the shadow of the garden wall, she crept forward until she was able to peer around the corner.

To her horror, she saw the back of a man. He was crouched on a spot from where he could watch the house, the moorland road and the approach to town. Although he was dressed in ordinary country clothes, waterproof and tweed cap—there was such a suggestion of vulpine cunning in his pose that she knew instinctively that he was Convict 193.

Suddenly she remembered that the Mayor had given her a key to the house. Fortunately it was buttoned up inside an inner pocket of her leather coat and had not been shaken out by her fall. Opening the back gate with the utmost caution, and stooping until she was bent nearly double, she worked her way around the side of the house until she reached the front door.

The key turned easily in the lock and she slipped into the hall, taking care to shut the door with the minimum of sound.

BEFORE she shut out the dying daylight she had seen the outline of the telephone on the hall-table. Groping through the darkness she rang up the Exchange.

"Police station," she whispered. Her call was put through without delay. Breathless with haste, she gasped out her story. To her dismay, the official at



the other end of the wire appeared maddeningly sceptical and was concerned chiefly in repeating her statement to ensure accuracy. At the end, he told her to hold the line while he was reporting the matter and left her in an agony of suspense.

When he returned, his manner was different and showed that he had changed from a machine to a human-being.

"There's nothing to worry about," he assured her. "We have the matter in hand. Police cars are already on their way to 'The Chestnuts.' And we've got through to the prison. Now what about you. miss? Are you safe?"

"Perfectly safe," she replied. "He doesn't know I'm here. Besides, how could he get inside a locked house? He couldn't suspect I had a key."

"Is there any room where you can lock yourself in?" he asked,

"I shouldn't think so. The house has been empty for years and the locks must be rusty.

"Try them at once. If you can't find a key that turns, hide yourself at the top of the house. And mind you don't show a light, or make any noise."

After the man had rung off. the darkness did not seem quite so secure to Mary.

She groped her way to the nearest door, but, as she had expected, the key was rusted in the lock. She tried two others, with the same result. Then something seemed to stir behind her in the darkness, as suddenly she remembered the Mayors remark about the vulnerability of the house.

At the thought of all the unshuttered windows on the ground floor, a gust of fear shook her, as a terrier worries a rat. With an instinctive craving for reassurance, she stole back to the telephone and gave John's number to the exchange,

AS a matter-of-fact, he was expecting her to ring him up. He had just returned home and was unlacing his boots when he heard the bell. Stumbling across to the instrument, directly he recognized her voice, he broke in excitedly.

"Isn't it great about old Dopey?"

"Dopey?" she repeated dully.

"What? Don't you know he's come back? Where are you?"

"Mabel's House.... I've been chased by the convict. He's outside now—watching the road for me."

John's face paled as he listened to her breathless tale. It seemed to him that there remained one chance only to save her and that was to put up a desperate bluff. She must attempt to confuse the criminal and make him



suspect a trap, in order to gain those priceless minutes of respite before the arrival of the police.

While he hesitated, he was goaded on to action by the merciless logic of the situation. The convict was still uncaptured mainly because he had left no witness in a fit state to give information about him. He had broken in, robbed and beaten up his victims, leaving them unconscious and in several cases, on the point of death; but by the time the crime was discovered, he had traveled miles from the scene. It was certain that Mary would not be spared the fate of those others.

The muscles throbbed in his cheeks as he cleared his throat.

"Mary," he said thickly, "I want you to snap on all the lights in the house. At once."

He heard her gasp in dismay.

"You must be mad!" she cried. "The police told me to hide in the dark."

"That's no good. You must trust me. Your only chance is to fool him. Turn on the wireless, too. Make him think the Mayor's in the house."

"I— I dare not. It's just telling him I'm here."

"Mary— he knows that already."

Again he heard the faint wail of dismay which told him that she realised her peril.

"All right," she said faintly. "I will. I only hope you are right."

"That's my brave girl. I'm coming to you now."

As he rang off, Mary felt desolate and abandoned to her fate. She was alone in a strange, hostile darkness, while outside stretched the menace of the twilight moor. Sure that she was signing her own death warrant, she switched on the nearest light.

Immediately she found herself transported back into another world of more than thirty years ago. The hall was a formal polished place which faintly reproached her for a breach of decorum in entering unannounced. Its floor was composed of alternate black and white marble flags, covered with red and blue Turkey rugs. There was a massive mahogany hall-stand, while a big carved bear from Switzerland held out a salver for her visiting-card.

In spite of her panic, she was sustained by a strong sense of unreality which made her feel that she must be exploring a house in a dream. It was almost with a throb of anticipation that she opened two other doors and switched on the lights. The dining-room with its suite upholstered in dull purple leather and its gilded walls must have been a daring departure from convention.

As she gazed at it, Mary could almost imagine that she was accompanied by an invisible hostess who was proud to do the honors of her house. Then the present returned in a rush of fear. John had said "All the lights."

In a panic, she darted up the first flight of stairs, which— like the square landing at the top— was carpeted with thick blue Axminster. Panting like a hunted fugitive, she left behind her a betraying trail of light.

Out of the darkness flashed the grandeur of the spare room, with its walnut suite and amber satin bedspread and curtains. Then Mary was arrested by what was evidently Mabel's room, The carpet had a mauve ground— covered with pink roses— and the furniture was French.

When she entered the drawing-room she felt that she had reached Mabel's own domain. This was where she used to sit with her lover and dream of the future. Soft lights, low music and all around her accumulated treasures. She fell safe there, since it was impossible that it could be the scene of outrage or crime.

Mary was struck by the fact that everything was arranged as though the mistress of the house was still in residence. A copy of *Punch* lay on the divan, beside a piece of drawn-thread work, stretched on a frame. On a small table was a big box of chocolates, tied with a festive yellow ribbon. The clock kept perfect time, while the calendar in its silver frame was up-to-date with the month.

An enlarged photograph of Mabel hung above the mantelpiece. She was a pretty girl with a good crop of hair piled high on her head in a profusion of rolled curls. Her eyes were maternally kind, her lips sweet yet firm, while from her full bust and rounded chin it was easy to see that she indulged a weakness for cream-puffs.

Underneath the photograph was placed a vase of Neapolitan violets which perfumed the air.

Gazing at the portrait, Mary lost all sense of peril as she thought of the woman who had planned this mom. Unlike a modern girl, she had never earned a penny. Marriage was her natural goal. And now, when she ought to be fussing over her grandchildren, she was only a memory kept ever green by the Mayor's devotion— expressed in a house.

Suddenly remembering John's instruction, Mary turned on the wireless and the strains of a Mayfair hotel orchestra flooded the air. Up in London, fashionable folk were dancing at their tea. It was impossible to realize the fact as she examined the relics of Mabel's last visit to her house. The linen of the needlework was yellow and the chocolates looked like fawn wax.

The copy of *Punch*— then the current number— was dated January the third, 1901. Seated on the divan, Mary began to turn its pages. Soon she lost all sense of her surroundings in her enjoyment of the jokes, so that she never heard footsteps— muffled by the thick pile of the carpet— which were mounting the stairs.

A smile was still on her lips when she looked up at the sound of the opening door.

WHILE the police were dashing along the snowy roads, and while John was getting out his motor-cycle in an effort to overtake them, the convict stood staring up at Mabel's House. He had ceased to watch the moor, for he knew now that the would not come that way.

There was nothing in his appearance to suggest his prison association, while his description— issued by the police over the air— might have been that of any listener. Unfortunately it was not possible to establish what he wore. His first escapade was an attack on a lonely house, where he stocked himself with food and clothing: but as the maltreated tenant was still unconscious in hospital, no one knew what was missing from his wardrobe.

Pursuing the same tactics of cunning and cruelty, Convict 193 had reached the fringe of civilization, he could walk through the streets of Pooksmoor by night and reach the railway station unchallenged, since he had no blemish or peculiarity to betray him; but he still lacked the money to pay his fare. Once he was in London, he could get in touch with his gang and get the benefit of their resources.

Therefore— his need of money was urgent and desperate; and when he saw Mary's outline against the sky his hopes flamed high. He knew that no woman in her senses would walk for pleasure on the moor in the present circumstances. The conclusion was that she was a cottager who was venturing to the town, to buy household stores, in which case she would have a purse, which was as good as his.

This time, however. It was essential not only to silence her for good, but to conceal her body so that it would not be discovered until after his train had arrived at the London Terminus.

When he failed to overtake her on the moor, he thought, at first that she had doubled on her track and returned to some cottage tucked away in a pocket of the waste; but, during the last few minutes, her disappearance was no longer a mystery.

He knew exactly where she had gone— just as he knew that she was inside the lonely house....

HE was about to steal around to the back, to force a window, when suddenly, he was arrested by a flood of light from the ground floor. One after another, the windows became glowing frames of illuminations. Then— muted by the screen of glass— the faint sound of music became audible.

Growling like an animal— baffled by guardian bars, when on the spring—he cursed his luck. In spite of telephone-wires and curtained windows, he believed this house to be temporarily empty. Two nights before, emboldened by its darkness, he had forced an entry, but only to find a completely bare larder.

All he had gained was a lodging for the night and a tot of whisky. On this occasion, he had left no traces of his visit and had craftily filled up the bottle of spirits with water. Now— all the evidence pointed to occupation. The woman could not be alone. If she were hiding from him, she would not betray her secret by flashing him a signal.

Suddenly he scented a plot. She had been sent out on the moor, on purpose to lure him to this place. Inside was a posse of warders from the prison, waiting to seize him directly he ventured near.

For several minutes he lingered, staring up at the windows in the hope of solving the mystery. As the time passed and nothing further happened, he began to reject the possibility of a planned capture. The fact that he had not been re-arrested was proof that his movements were unknown. Certainly the police would not expect to find him so near the town.

The explanation was that the woman did not know that she had been followed and was turning on the lights in the normal way. Meanwhile, he had to get money. The chances were that the woman might have some, either on her person or hidden in the house.

Creeping around to the back of the house, he peered through every window in turn. Kitchen, scullery and larders— all were dark and silent. There was no evidence of the servants such as the importance of the house would entail.

He decided to pick the old-fashioned lock of the side-door through which he had made his previous enhance. Although it was an elementary operation for his talents, some skill and patience were needed. Engrossed by his task, he never noticed when the police closed in on him, from two sides of the house.

JOHN— when he arrived on the scene a few minutes later—dashed upstairs in search of Mary. He expected to find her badly shaken by her ordeal; but, to his great relief, he burst open the drawing-room door, to find her smiling over a copy of *Punch*.

"They've got him!" he shouted. "Thank God you had the courage to turn on the lights."

"I was a bit scared," she confessed.

He felt her shudder in his arms: but the next minute, her face grew radiant with happiness.

"Oh, John," she cried. "I've just remembered something marvellous. I didn't realize it at the time. But when I rang you up, you told me that Dopey has come home."

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**26: Caged**

*The Herald*, Montana, 11 and 18 July 1940

WHEN the wind was in a certain quarter, Kathy could hear the roaring of the lions in Lord Hammersmith's private zoo.

The sound was faint and fitful— little more than an ominous mutter in the distance. She strained her ears to catch it, for she welcomed it even as a sleepless person greets the first cock-crow. To her, also, it was a symbol of hope— telling her that no night could last forever.

Sometime, somewhere, another day would dawn.

Alan— who was superintendent of his uncle's collection of wild animals— was there in the darkness, localized by that snarling cough which throbbed like a nerve in the air. It linked them together in a wireless wave. So long as he was in her life, some glimmer of happiness remained.

Yet when she listened to the steady blast of snores from the other bed, she had to admit the truth. Like the caged lions, she too was behind bars. While her second husband— Hector Mint— lived, she could never be free.

As she lay sleepless, she wondered whether she were being punished for her youthful folly during her first year in a woman's college at Oxford. She had grasped life too adventurously and too greedily. Impatient of the future, she had eloped with a fellow undergraduate.

While she was an orphan, with no one to consider over her marriage, her husband came of a poorish family that resented the wreck of his academic prospects. Therefore, when they flaunted authority, they were left to face the consequences alone.

They took them on the chin, gaily and recklessly. They snaffled odd jobs, loved a little, starved a little and laughed through everything. Una was born without christening mugs or press announcements and was accepted as part of the joke. Eventually, just as Dick was beginning to shape as a promising freelance Journalist, he was killed in a road smash.

In order to provide a home for Una, Kathy started a guest house, which was foredoomed to failure through lack of capital. As she tried to do the work of a staff, she was on the verge of complete collapse when Hector Mint arrived with his offer of a home.

She had known him at Oxford where he was a figure of civic importance whom she regarded as a sort of benevolent uncle. It was not until she married him that she realized the dark jungle of his heart. She discovered that she had always been his secret obsession and that his mind was twisted with jealousy of her first husband.

It was their youth he envied and those mad adventurous years of young love. He could not forget those or forgive the past. Although he gained

possession of Dick's widow, the undergraduate triumphed from the grave, because Una was his child. From the first, Kathy had been completely honest with Mint. She made it plain that Una's welfare was her chief consideration, but in return for it, she tried to fulfill her part of the bargain cheerfully and generously. She refused to regard herself as a martyr, for her joyous and elastic spirit persisted. So long as the sun burst through the clouds, or one daisy cropped up in the lawn, she could smile and keep her chin up.

Like her mother, Una could take punishment— and there was plenty of a mean kind for her to take. Although her stepfather provided her with a technically good home, she never had pocket money, parties, presents or pets. Fortunately, she was a vigorous, fearless child, possessed of a special radiance— probably the heritage of her hearted birth. As Kathy thought of her she tried to forget the snores as they rose in an elephantine trumpet from the other bed.

"I've kept Una," she reminded herself. "I didn't have to lose her to an orphanage. She's worth it all."

SHE came down to breakfast in a gallant mood. There was a rare treat store for Una and herself as Lord Hammersmith had invited them to visit his zoo, that morning.

As she seated herself, she noticed that Una was struggling to eat her porridge without sugar, in token of punishment. Although she boiled inwardly, she never fought Una's battles, as she felt it was better for the child's happiness not to poison the atmosphere with constant quarrels which could do no good.

"Been bad again?" she remarked cheerfully. "Little silly. Well, sailors don't care, do they? I won't have sugar either. If we are too fat, the lions may want to make a meal of us. I heard them roaring in the night. That means fine weather."

"They kept me awake," complained her husband. "That zoo's a scandal. It's a rich man's hobby, or it would be made illegal. It's a source of danger to the district. Eventually one of the wild beasts is bound to escape."

"Escape." The word echoed in Kathy's mind as she gazed at Mint. He was a big burly man with a broad florid face and grizzled curly hair which grew low on his forehead. Twinkling blue eyes gave him a misleading air of geniality which tempered an imposing personality. He looked a model householder and British taxpayer as he read the newspaper and ate the conventional breakfast or bacon and eggs.

The house was family property which had descended through several generations, so the room had the fine proportions and solidity of an earlier age. The old-fashioned furniture was good— the Georgian table silver shone.



Outside the huge windows were lilacs, laburnams and maytrees, tossing in the breeze.

Kathy suppressed a sigh. When nature was so lavish, life could be beautiful, if only one had freedom to enjoy it. Then she thought of Alan whom she was going to see within a few hours— and the smile returned to her lips.

As though he could read her thoughts, Mint spoke.

"Lucky for that young Easter that his line is zoology. He's his uncle's heir on condition that he carries on the zoo. He's made for life. If he doesn't muck about with women. Hammersmith would never stand for a scandal."

His words sounded so suspiciously like a warning that Kathy wondered whether Mint were also Jealous of Alan. She thought she had concealed this new love of hers which was so different from that first selfish rapture of youth. Then, she had wanted to take and share— but now she gave her heart without thought or hope of return.

"No woman who cared for him would let him ruin his life for her," she said.

"You should know how it works out."

As her husband's eyes drilled her face. In an effort to interpret its expression, Una broke the silence.

"Molly Dean's daddy has bought her a lovely big Alsatian dog. May I have a dog, Minty?"

"What did you call me?" asked her stepfather.

" 'Daddy'... Can I have a dog, daddy? It needn't be a rich Alsatian. I could find a poor little hungry puppy and bring it home."

"If you do, it will be drowned at once. Animals are dirty and unhealthy. I won't have one in my house."

Una stared at her stepfather with puzzled eyes, as though unable to credit such brutality; but she made no attempt to press her claim.

At that moment, Kathy saw red. Biting her lips to control her anger, she snatched up the newspaper and began to read it mechanically. Mint wiped his mouth and rose from his chair with a jocular warning.

"Keep your eye on Una. There have been ugly accidents at zoos. Remember the lady of Riga who went for a ride on a tiger?"

"What happened to her?" asked Una curiously.

"They returned from the ride with the lady inside— and a smile on the face of the tiger."

Mint grinned like a great feline, while Una joined in his laughter to show that she approved the tiger's sense of humor.

KATHY drove the car over to Lord Hammersmith's estate by way of lanes and secondary roads, so as to enjoy the beauty of the countryside. The memory



of that morning would have to be stretched out over so many dreary routine hours, that she wanted to make it nearly perfect. Buttercup-meadows were sheets of gold, glittering in the sunlight— the beechwoods were in new leaf and carpeted with bluebells. Larks sang as they soared and the air held the fragrance of May.

When they reached the lodge gates of Lord Hammersmith's park. Alan was waiting for them on the road. Their greetings were formal— the conventional meeting of any casual young man, on his best behavior, and a married lady who was chaperoned by her small daughter. But no social code could disguise the revealing light in his eyes or the glow in her face.

Freed from domestic tyranny, Kathy reveled in her brief spell of liberty; she felt joyous and reckless of the future as they walked up the chestnut drive.

"Lions, first," commanded Una. "I love cats."

The zoo was a comprehensive collection of wild animals, although their numbers were limited. The specimens were housed in beautiful surroundings, while the beasts were in perfect health and condition as a tribute to Alan's expert knowledge.

The lions lived in semi-natural quarters. At the back of their huge cages were low openings leading to the dens scooped in the sides of a ravine which was guarded with spiked bars. When they reached it, all the animals had withdrawn to the gloom of their lairs, with the exception of one majestic lion who lay close to the bars of the outer cage, blinking in the sunlight.

"May I speak to him?" asked Una eagerly.

As she ran towards the lion house where the keeper was standing, Alan lowered his voice.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked. "Has she been crying?"

Kathy's heart sank at this further proof of a visible change in Una.

"No," she replied, trying to speak lightly. "Una doesn't cry. She's a tough guy and can take it. But there was a spot of bother at breakfast. She wants a dog."

"I'll give her one."

"No. My husband wouldn't let her keep it."

"Why not?"

"I suppose he doesn't like animals."

His lips tightened as he looked down at her. It seemed to him that she had shrunk since their last meeting. Flyweight— instead of featherweight. Her dark hair which she wore in a long curling bob, framed a pale face, now too small for her gray-blue Irish eyes.

"I wish she were mine," he said impulsively.

She knew that he was really thinking of herself. The same instinctive feeling told her that both she and Una could be safe and happy in Alan's care. As she felt herself slipping out to deep waters, she floundered desperately back to the shallows.

"You don't know your luck," she assured him. "Una's like me at her age, and I was a little devil on wheels. I—"

She broke off as Alan gripped her wrist.

"Don't speak or move," he said in a low, strained voice.

Looking up she saw that he was staring at the lion house. The keeper, too, was gazing in the same direction. Their eyes were fixed on Una.

She had slipped her hand between the bars and was scratching the lion between his eyes.

THAT moment seemed to draw itself out to an eternity. Everyone stood as though petrified. The landscape appeared frozen to flat dead shades of blue and green—the trees ceased to wave in the breeze. Kathy felt that the scene could not be real but that they were all confined inside some incredible painting.

Then Una withdrew her hand—and the spell which bound them was snapped. The lion who had been blinking benevolently, became aware of his audience. Turning his head he broke out into a shattering roar as Una scampered back to her mother.

"Cats like being tickled," she explained nonchalantly.

"Yes," agreed Kathy faintly, "but the animals are very shy and nervous. Don't touch them again, or you will frighten them."

"Oh, poor little things." Una's voice was compassionate, "I guess I seem terrible to them, 'cause I've got boots to kick with and they've only got bare feet."

"Go and see the sea lions fed," suggested Alan.

As Una dashed away with the keeper, Kathy spoke to Alan.

"Is that a savage lion?"

"No," replied Alan. "Jupiter's on the tame side. He will let both me and the keeper stroke him. But he wouldn't let a stranger take a liberty."

"He never touched Una."

"I know. I'm still knocked sideways. The whole thing is incredible.... I suppose it was her complete confidence. She must have a natural power over animals. I saw the whole thing. She slipped her hand in between the bars so quietly that she was rubbing him before he realized that it was there. He liked her touch, so he kept quiet. But if we'd startled him, there would have been a

ghastly accident. As it was, I expected every second to see him snap her arm off."

"Don't. It was all my fault. I should have watched her. I was warned."

Reaction had set in as she began to feel the effect of her recent shock. While she fought her emotion, Alan's self-control suddenly slipped like a sandbank undermined by the suction of flood water.

"Darling," he said roughly, "you must leave that man. Don't pretend any more. I know it's hell. He's eating you up. You and Una must come with me."

She pushed him away as he tried to take her in his arms.

"No," she said, "my husband would not divorce me, so we could not get married. The scandal would finish you. I won't let another man ruin his prospects for me."

"I have my profession. I can get a job,"

"A job? So did Dick. And he lost it again. Over and over, Oh. my dear, you don't know what it means."

ALL around them was a rolling expanse of park where the zoo buildings were erected. Kathy could see the domed roof of the elephant house in the distance and the glitter of an enormous aviary shining through a belt of trees. Although the house was hidden, its approach was indicated by a vista of shaven turf leading to a square of fountains. Yellow irises fringed the margin of a lake whose glassy surface reflected patches of blue sky.

This vast estate would belong to Alan, in the future, provided he did not blot his copybook. To save him from his own generous impulse, she tried to appear hard and calculating.

"It's a matter of finance, baby. I'm 28, but I'm far older than you in experience. I've been through all this before. I can't risk poverty again, for Una's sake. When I married again, I deliberately chose security, in her interests. We must not meet again. It's not fair to you."

She shuddered involuntarily at a familiar trumpet from the elephant house— reminding her of duty.

"It's not fair either to my husband," she said firmly, staring miserably at a huge leaden statue of Pan, playing inaudible pipes to a greened unicorn. "I made a bargain— and I must keep it."

"You're mad," protested Alan. "You can't go on with it."

"Hush— here's Lord Hammersmith."

IN other circumstances Kathy would have shrunk from the ordeal of meeting the formidable uncle. The peer wore a disreputable hat— burred with fishing flies— and a linen coat with a tangerine rosebud in his buttonhole. His

features— verging on the nutcracker— were beakjly aristocratic and his eyes arrogant. Kathy received the imoression that if his family honor were reatened he would cheerfully feed the source of danger to the lions.

When he heard of Una's escapade, he did not conceal his anger.

"Gross negligence," he fumed. "Suppose this child's arm had to be amputated. There would have been an outcry in the press and fools would have howled for a beautiful creature to be destroyed, when he only obeyed his natural instinct."

"So did Una," said Kathy. "She really loves animals."

"Hum. She certainly has the magic touch. I must meet this hypnotic young lady."

As they neared the sea lion's pool, Una ran up with a request,

"I've seen the lions, now I want to see the unicorns."

Kathy was thrilled to remark how her radiance gradually melted Lord Hammersmith's resentment. He made the round with his visitors and at the end of the tour, invited them to stay to lunch.

She declined the invitation for herself, but consented to let Una stay.

"Please send her home when she's demoralized the whole zoo," she said. "I can drive myself back."

After Lord Hammersmith made it clear to his nephew that his duties would not permit him to act as deputy chauffeur to their guest, he did Kathy the honor of acting as her personal escort to the lodge.

"When will you pay us another visit?" he asked.

"Not for a long time," she replied. "I don't like zoos."

"I agree." His worldly old eyes approved her. "They can be dangerous."

She resented the meaning in his voice.

"There is no danger here for me," she said proudly. "Especially when all the poor animals are confined in cages."

"Unhappily, caged animals have been known to escape," remarked Lord Hammersmith grimly.

KATHY drove home recklessly, her eyes blind to the beauty of the apple blossom in cottage gardens and the hedges powdered white with May. After she had garaged the car, she approached the solid gray stone house slowly and reluctantly. The slam of the front door, as it closed behind her, reminded her of the clang of iron bars.

Once again she was caged. The hall was dark after the sunshine as the blind was drawn over the stained glass window. She was about to go up to her bedroom, when she was arrested by an unusual noise.

It was a cross between a rattle and a gasp and sounded somewhat as though a kettle were boiling over. As it appeared to come from her husband's study, she hurried to the door and flung it open.

Mint was slumped back in his chair, fighting for breath. His face was gray and dripped with sweat— his mouth gaped open like a gasping fish

"He's dying."

As the thought flashed through Kathy's brain, she rushed into the dining room and snatched up the whisky decanter. Supporting her husband's head, she managed to dribble some of the spirit down his throat, drop by drop. It was a slow business, for most of it slopped down his neck, but gradually his heart began to respond to treatment.

After he regained consciousness he recovered rapidly from his fainting fit. By the time the doctor arrived, he was almost normal, although his face was still a bad color. Feeling limp and shaken after her second shock, Kathy left the men together, at her husband's request, and went into the drawing room.

The reek of whisky was still in her nostrils, as, for the first time, she was able to realize the situation, together with its possibilities.

"If I had stayed for lunch— "

She dared not dwell on the consequences, lest she should be compelled to admit the horror of her own regret. As she tried to wrench the thought from her mind, Mint entered the room.

"What did the doctor say?" she asked.

"The verdict is satisfactory," he replied. "My condition is static. I have the family heart. I thought I had escaped. It was an unpleasant experience, but I've had my warning."

"I thought your family were all long-lived."

"That is true. We have iron constitutions, but we suffer from valvular disease. It is chiefly dangerous in case of ignorance. When one knows one's vulnerable, one is naturally careful to avoid violent exertion or shock. All my father's family lived to be 90 or more."

It was in vain that Kathy struggled to force her concern and show a decent interest. She knew that she could not speak naturally, when she thought of the years that stretched ahead. Years and years of dissension and misery. As though he guessed her thoughts, her husband probed her face with his bright little eyes.

"If you had not come in at this minute, you would be a widow," he reminded her.

Suddenly she found courage to make an appeal;

"Hector," she said, "you say you owe your life to me. I am going to ask for something in return for it. A very little thing."

"What?\*

"A dog for Una."

"Certainly not. You couldn't have done less than you did, without being a murderess. Are you going to use a normal instinct as a bargain basis?"

"No... but Hector, if we are to have a long life together, it won't be worth living if we cannot put more happiness into it. I must be to blame, too. Will you tell me where I have failed you?"

Mint's smile was add.

"You failed me before you married me," he replied. "You cared more for that wretched youth's little finger than for my whole body. You can't undo the past."

THE following days were charged with misery for Kathy. She knew that if she were to avoid an inevitable crash, her future meetings with Alan must be mere casual encounters, in the presence of others. Such a ban meant that loss of much of her remaining happiness. She suffered as acutely from the sudden deprivation as a drug addict from the abrupt cessation of his source of supply.

Although she tried to appear bright for Una's sake, she felt like a butterfly trying to soar with sodden wings. To add to her depression, the weather changed overnight. A heavy downpour of rain was followed by damp days with a drift of almost invisible moisture. Indoors, every surface was sticky to the touch, while the humidity converted open air exercise into punishment.

Her spirits had sunk to zero on one unusually dark day when the sky was covered with layers of black clouds. The weather was so unnatural and the atmosphere of the house so repressive, that she felt almost suicidal as she glanced at the paper. Its headlines announced the verdict on a woman who was on trial for poisoning her husband. It found her "Guilty"— but owing to the brutality of the man— recommended her to mercy.

Kathy found herself hoping that the woman would get off scot-free. She mooned about in a kind of bad dream where she was only partially conscious of her surroundings. When she paid her morning visit to the kitchen she displayed none of her usual warm humanity which her husband criticized as lack of dignity. As a rule, she took an interest in the maids' remarks, but that day she scarcely heard what they said.

She was also blind to the signs of suppressed excitement in Una during tea-time. The child's face was flushed and her eyes were bright with defiant exultation.

Kathy started nervously when the telephone rang in the hall.

"Expecting a call?" asked Mint.

"No," she replied indifferently.

A MINUTE later the parlor maid appeared to tell her that she was wanted "on the phone." She almost ran from the room, her heart leaping in anticipation. Directly she recognized Alan's voice, it seemed to her, in her strung up condition, to be a prelude to disaster. She felt certain that he was about to rush over and force an issue with Mint.

"That you, Kathy?" He spoke breathlessly, as though he shared her excitement. "I'm coming over. At once."

"No," she cried, "you must not come. I don't want you. I—"

"But it's urgent. I've something to tell you."

He rang off before she could protest further. As she laid down the receiver, she looked up to see her husband standing beside her.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Alan Easter. He says he's coming over."

"And you tried to stop him. Why? Your manner was most odd. Almost vehement. One would think he had designs on our valuables. Is there anything in this house that he covets?"

"Yes," she replied recklessly. "Una."

"Really? Only Una? When this young man arrives. I must have a little enlightening chat with him."

She read the threat underlying his jocose voice. When Alan came he meant to provoke a distressing scene. Indifferent to the drizzle, she rushed from the house and walked up and down the sodden red gravel and squelching lawn.

"I must warn him," she thought. "I must send him away."

As she pushed open the heavy front gate, to see whether the car were in sight she heard footsteps behind her. She turned to see the parlor maid who was holding a newspaper over her head to protect her starched frills from the rain.

"Please madam," she said primly, "Cook wants to know what you've done with the joint?"

"Joint?" repeated Kathy blankly. "Why?"

"It's gone, madam. The whole of it— ribs and sirloin together. And Cook wants to know what's for dinner."

The last sentence recalled Kathy to her domestic responsibility. Her husband was a heavy eater and she knew that there would be pandemonium if an inadequate meal were provided.

She must ring up the butcher and arrange for an express delivery, she said. "Perhaps I had better drive over myself. I'll speak to her."



DIRECTLY she opened the front door she became aware that her husband had been informed already of the mystery. He seemed to be holding a kind of furious investigation in the hall, where the staff was collected. Una was hiding behind the cook and appeared terrified by his questions.

Kathy flew to her defense.

"Don't be silly, Hector," she said, trying to speak lightly. "Why have you picked on poor Una? She's not responsible for everything that goes wrong. A stray dog must have stolen it.

"Dogs don't open frigidaires," stormed Mint. "Una, did you steal the joint? Now— no lies."

Kathy stared at the child incredulously. To her dismay, Una's face was scarlet and her lids drooped to hide her guilty eyes.

"Yes," she admitted in a shaky voice. "I took it for my dog."

As they all stared at her, she burst into tears.

"I don't care," she sobbed. "He's my dog. I found him. I saw him from the staircase window crawling over the back garden. He's all muddy, but he's a lovely big Alsatian when he's clean. I took the joint out to him— and he was so glad.

"Where is he?" shouted Mint.

"In the woodshed. I brought him a pan of water and some straw and I left him in the dark. He's asleep and you're not to disturb him. He's too tired."

Mint's face was livid with rage as he snatched a heavy stick from the hall stand.

"I'll soon have him out," he said to Una. "I warned you I'll have no dog here."

Kathy caught his arm as he strode towards the side door.

"For pity's sake, let the poor creature rest," she said. "Tomorrow we can decide what to do with it."

Without speaking, he flung her aside and went out of the house. As Una rushed after him, the cook caught her up in her arms, where she struggled in a passion of anger and grief. The other well-trained maids looked on in an uncomfortable silence which was broken by the parlor maid.

"Excuse me, madam, there's a car in the drive. Shall I say 'Not at home?'"

Looking up, Kathy saw Alan standing at the open front door. He seemed an answer to prayer as she ran towards him and panted out her tale. He was quick to catch its drift, for he broke into her explanation.

"A big dog? Where?"

"The woodshed in the back garden. That way."

He shouted to her as he sprinted around the side of the house.

"Everyone stay indoors."



Kathy returned to the drawing room and dropped limply down on the divan. For the present, she had forgotten the complications of the situation. She merely accepted the fact that her troubles were over because Alan was there....

Suddenly she opened her eyes at the sound of a long-drawn howl in the distance.

IT was followed by silence. As she waited— listening— her scalp tightened and her temples grew cold. Then the room seemed to break apart and the fragments to whirl around her. Sometimes she knew she was staring at the cream wallpaper— at others her surroundings were blacked out.

After a long while, she became conscious of Alan kneeling beside her and chafing her hands.

"Did you hear?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"Yes, I know. It was a wolf. Is Hector dead?"

"Dead from shock. It never mauled him. I was at his heels and I saw the whole thing. It sprang, but he collapsed first. I called it off at once, but he was dead.... Was his heart weak?"

"Yes."

IN imagination Kathy reconstructed the grim tragedy. The big bully bursting into the shed to drive out an exhausted starving dog, only to be confronted by a nightmare vision; green eyes glowing like points of fire through the gloom and a dark shape reared up to spring.

Then she vaguely realized that Alan was speaking.

"The wolf escaped from our zoo some days ago. I was away on the continent and knew nothing about it until I returned today. I came out to warn you about it, for I was afraid it might be a shock if I told you over the wire. But I suppose you heard the rumors?"

"No... Yes." answered Kathy. "I remember now the maids were excited over something this morning, but I didn't listen."

She broke off with a faint scream.

"Where's Una?"

"In the kitchen with the cook," Alan told her. "I've just been talking to her."

"She might have been killed," shuddered Kathy. "She went in to that wolf. She thought he was an Alsatian dog. Why didn't he attack her?"

"Because he was gorged with meat, besides being exhausted. He was probably glad to be back in shelter. He's used to captivity."

"He sprang at Hector— yet he never touched her?"

Her eyes were awed as though she glimpsed a miracle. Although he did not share her exaltation, Alan felt he could not drag her down to a commonplace level.

"Do you remember how Una stroked the lion?" he asked. "She has a certain quality which wins the instinctive confidence of animals. She is fearless and she loves them. They know that. All the same"— his voice sank to a mutter— "I'm thankful she threw Pluto the joint first."

Then he rose to his feet.

"I must ring up the zoo and have the motor lorry sent out with his cage," he said. "My uncle will be glad there was no tragedy. Pluto is an unusually fine specimen and he would have been upset if I had been forced to shoot him."

"No tragedy?" Kathy's eye reproached him. "You forget— Hector is—"

As they looked at each other in silence, Una burst into the room. She was transformed with her old radiance which lit up her whole face. Her cheeks were flushed— her eyes beamed with happiness.

"Cook says Minty's dead," she cried joyously. "I can have a puppy now."

Before Kathy could protest, Alan took the child in his arms.

"Why should we be hypocrites?" he asked. "We can learn from Una. She sees only the truth. You are free."

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**27: Blackout**

*The Winnipeg Tribune, 28 Sep 1940*

THE blackout over London was nearly absolute. When Christina drew aside the window curtains of the sitting room, at first she could distinguish nothing. It was as though a wall had been built up outside the glass. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she saw the dimmed lights of traffic and glow-worm gleams speckling the pavement, cast by the electric torches of invisible pedestrians.

In spite of dangers and difficulties, the nation was carrying on as usual. Young people made dates— and kept them. Old people went out after dark; they were not to be stampeded out of their habits.

Christina was acutely affected by the Blackout, because it was a definite physical handicap. She had dark blue eyes and had to pay for their beauty with the defective vision which often accompanies that color. But although it was dark when she returned from the munitions factory where she worked, she made the journey with other employees, while the route had grown familiar. Once she was back in the flat, she settled down for the evening and refused all invitations.

That evening, she peered out at the dark, withdrawn world beyond the window as though it were a hostile judge concealing unknown peril. Her nerves were somewhat frayed, owing to lack of sleep.

She went to bed late because she was afraid of a recurrent nightmare. It was always the same dream. She found herself walking down an unknown road, in absolute darkness— with the knowledge that she had a long distance to go. Suddenly— she felt herself gripped by invisible hands— then the horror always shook her awake.

She was furious over this leakage of energy at a time when she needed all her reserves of strength. Recently she had the honor of a personal interview with a Mr. T.P. Fry— a younger member of the firm which owned the factory. It took place in his private room, when the august man explained the facts.

"Every country in war time," he said, "is subject to the abuse of sabotage. The scum of a nation will always seize its chance to profit. To protect our interests in the factory, we have organized some of our most trusted workers as counter-espionage agents."

Christina thrilled as she listened, although his next sentence conveyed a warning.

"The work requires courage and discretion. You remain anonymous and— in your own interests— you must not try to make contacts. You should take extra precautions against accidents inside the factory and not go out in the

blackout, if you can avoid it. You may be followed by malcontents... No extra pay— but I hope there will be a bonus at the end of the war."

AFTER the minimum of reflection, Christina volunteered for the special service. Instead of dull routine, she felt elevated to something in the John Buchan tradition. At first, although she was especially zealous in the prevention of carelessness; she made no exposures. But— as though her vigilance had been marked as inconvenient to the cause of sabotage, a few days previously, she had been nearly the victim of an accident.

One of the girls had turned faint and in the general rush to help her, Christina had been pushed up against a machine... For a terrible moment, her heart felt iced, before a worker switched off the mechanism.

When she went over the incident, she felt doubtful about one of the Good Samaritans who had dragged her to safety. Meta Rosenberg was a thin attractive brunette, slant-eyed and over-painted. She was always expensively dressed, when she discarded her slops, while her style of living indicated an income which could have a tainted source.

Christina shared the expenses of a flat with Ida Brown— a plump reliable girl. That evening, she was looking around at the comfort of the room with its fire and softly-glowing lights, when the telephone bell began to ring. As she went to answer it, a warning sense reminded her that ambushes were always prepared by fake invitations. Primed by her intuition, she was scarcely surprised to hear Meta's deep husky voice at the other end of the line.

"I'm throwing a sherry-party. Come over."

"No thanks," she replied. "I don't drink."

"But you must come. Montrose is here. He wants to know you."

Christina's heart beat faster, for— like all the girls at the factory— she was attracted by Montrose. He held an important position and was tall and handsome. There was also a legend about him that he had been an air-ace before a smash which took mysterious toll but thoughtfully left no visible marks.

"Montrose?" she repeated. "How do you get to know everyone?"

"Wait to be introduced," replied Meta derisively.

"Is it safe to pick up strangers?"

"Not safe, no. But the other way's too dull... I shall expect you."

Before she could protest, Meta rang off.

"You shouldn't keep on saying 'no,'" advised Ida Brown, who always listened to telephone conversations. "No wonder you are getting queer and jumpy."

"I'm not... Or am I?"

Suddenly weary of mental isolation and wholesale suspicion, Christina wanted reassurance from Ida.

"Snap out of it. Go to this sherry-party."

"I don't know where she lives."

"I'll look her up in the telephone book."

"Thanks... I will."

Christina told herself that it was important to reassure Ida, lest— in perfect innocence— she might start the first fatal whisper. In reality, however, it was the thought of Montrose's handsome face which lured her out into the blackout.

SHE put on an ice-blue frock and made up her face with delicate care. While she was slipping on a near-white coat, Ida came into the bedroom to tell her the number of her bus.

"I've written down the address and put it in your gas-mask carrier." she explained. "You get off at the terminus."

Her journey was reduced to such a simple and effortless proposition, that she felt ashamed of her former hesitation. But as she stood in the doorway of the entrance-hall of the Mansions, waiting to accustom her eyes to the darkness, a man nearly knocked her down.

Both laughed at the encounter, but she fell exactly as though she had bumped into the Invisible Man. It was with a return of her old inhibition that she snailed along the pavement, There was neither moon nor stars, while the air seemed tangible as a black curtain. When she had to cross the road, she trusted to the eyes of other pedestrians to detect the colors of the traffic lights— reduced to thin crosses of red or green.

She reached her starting point, only to realize the handicap of her poor eyesight. Other people boarded the vehicles while she remained on the pavement, running from bus to bus, as fresh ones drew up at the halt. Unable to see their numbers, she always left it too late and boarded them, to be told by the conductor "Full Up."

She was thinking rather desperately of Montrose when someone flashed a torch over the face of the crowd. It cursed him as one man, although— as the bus was stationary— there was no risk of an accident. Christina blinked at the tiny searchlight with a sense that her identity had been revealed. Her mind flooded with morbid wonder as to whether Ida were in league with Meta to lure her into a trap.

Her turn had come at last. She felt herself borne upwards to the step on a human surge and then pressed forward Into a darkened interior.

"Where's the empty seat?" she appealed. "I can't see a thing."

Helpful hands passed her along the aisle and drew her down on a seat beside a stout woman who smelt strongly of cloves.

"There you are, lidy."

With the comfortable sensation of being enclosed in the safety of an ark—tossing on a stormy sea— she felt the bus move onwards. From now on, the driver would have the headache. She was merely another fare— his responsibility.

They journeyed on through the black blanket, occasionally stopping with a back-breaking jerk, to avoid some too optimistic pedestrian. Presently, as the stout lady continued to overlap her, Christina felt as though she were slowly smothered by a feather-bed. Her chance of release came when a semi-visible young man who sat on the opposite side— level with their seat— leaned across the aisle.

"Change places with me, mother," he urged. "I want to sit by my young lady."

"Right you are, duck," consented the lady.

Christina waited for the exchange to be made before she spoke softly to her slimmer neighbor.

"I'm afraid I must break it to you. I'm not your friend."

"I know," said the young man. "I had to take a chance on you. I saw your face when someone flashed a torch. I knew I could trust you."

ALTHOUGH his voice was uneven— either pitched to a crack or blurred to thickness— his accent was educated and inspired her with the confidence engendered by the snobbish tradition of the old school tie.

"What do you mean?" she asked distantly.

"When I tell you, you'll think me mad," he said.

"I do already... Or drunk."

"Not drunk. No. I'm drugged... Like a fool. I had a drink with a man. He's following me on this bus... But you must see who you are backing— and use discretion."

Before she could protest, he lit a cigarette. In the flame of the match, she saw a face which was too charming and delicate for a man. Its oval shape— combined with fair hair and large blue eyes— suggested some universal Younger Brothers who needed coddling and protection.

"I seem to know your face," she said. "Are you at Fray's Munition Factory?"

"Yes," he replied eagerly. "I'm a draftsman there. You've probably seen me in the Canteen."

Then he lowered his voice to whisper.

"Are you one of Us?" he asked.

She scented a trap in time to avoid It

"Yes. I work there," she said coldly.

"Then you are in this too... Listen carefully. I've a letter here. It's desperately important. Secret Service. I got involved— never mind how... You must take it to Bengal avenue, sixth house on left. It's the second stop. The man is waiting to pounce on me when I leave the bus. But he won't suspect you."

Christina grew wretchedly uncomfortable as she listened. If she had not been enrolled for confidential service at the factory, she would have been immune to suggestion. Now, however, she was susceptible, because she admitted to herself that the young man's story could be true. Stolen documents, espionage, secret agents— these were the phantasy of Peace, but the commonplace of War.

She struggled desperately to get free of the coils.

"Don't talk like a film," she said. "I can't swallow that melodramatic stuff from a stranger."

"But you dare not refuse!" The young man's voice was stern. "It is not for myself. It is for England... Do you remember the address?"

"Of course not. I don't need it."

HEEDLESS of her refusal, he tore a leaf from his notebook, and after scrawling on it, stuffed it inside her gas-mask carrier.

"That's enough to remind you," he said, blinking his eyes. "My head's beginning to buzz. Thank heaven I lasted long enough to contact you. Look! That man— by the door He's waiting for me."

The vehicle was too dimly lit to distinguish faces, but straining her eyes in the gloom, Christina saw a tall man whose hard felt hat was jammed over his eyes. He was strap-hanging near the door; but as the bus slackened speed, he stepped out on to the platform. As he was above average height; he had to stoop slightly to scrutinize the passengers who were getting off at the stage. This crouching posture gave him an appearance of tense vigilance which made the girl think of a jungle beast on the hunt.

"I'll call the conductor," she whispered to the young man.

The words roused him out of his lethargy.

"For heaven's sake, no," he implored. "Don't start anything like that. The chap would plug him— and then us. We haven't got a chance in the dark. It's up to you. You— must— "

Suddenly his head jerked forward and then drooped, while his eyes closed, As she listened to his heavy breathing, Christina wondered what she ought to do. Self-interest, as well as common-sense, told her to keep out of the mess

and continue on her way to the sherry party. On the other hand, in a remote lighted corner of her brain, was a reminder that Meta's Invitation might be a trap. In such a case, this mission— which involved her in no danger— might be a providential intervention.

There was third consideration which outweighed the others. The youth had spoken the truth when he said that she dared not accept the responsibility of inaction, if there was the slightest chance to prevent some vital leakage.

"Your friend's having a nap," grinned the conductor as he came up the aisle.

"Not mine," she said quickly.

As she disclaimed him, the man in the felt hat was swift to seize his chance.

"That's all right, mate," he said to the conductor. "My pal and I will see him home. He's had one over the eight."

THIS dramatic fulfilment of the young man's fears spurred Christina to immediate action. She dared not extract the secret document from the young man's gas-mask carrier, lest she should fumble and attract the attention of the nearest passenger. Such an action might look like an attempt to rob a drunken man. Snatching up the young man's gas-mask carrier from the seat— in exchange for her own— she groped her way to the door, where she waited for the next stop.

Fortunately the conductor did not remember her stage, since in the blackout, one girl looked much like another. He lowered her down on the pavement as though she were a precious consignment. Then she heard the ping of his bell and the bus rolled on its way.

In contrast with the subdued lighting of the vehicle, the surrounding blackness seemed pitch black as the depths of a coal mine; out after flicking her torch about, she discovered the name "BENGAL AVENUE," printed on the corner of a wall. The bus had dropped her on the left-hand side of the road, so she had only to walk straight ahead.

It was also a very lonely locality, for as she followed long stretches of stone wall, partially revealed by the light of her torch, she met no one, she heard no footsteps— no voices— no hoot of passing car.

"Everyone might be dead," she thought.

For the sake of morale, she told herself that there was light and life inside each blacked-out exterior. Civilization still functioned, for she had only to ring at a door to get in touch with humanity again. Probably, if she cared to deliver her document personally at No. 6— instead of dropping it into the letter-box— she would meet with a welcome.

"I suppose he lives here with his family," she thought.



In order to settle this point, she scraped his identification card from a pocket of the carrier— fishing out two Yale latchkeys, to get hold of it.

"Why two?" she wondered.

She knew the reason— or thought she did— after she had read the particulars about the young man in the bus, by the light of her torch. She discovered that his name was "Ivor Thomas" and that he lived in a North London suburb. Apparently No; 6 was an accommodation address, or belonged to a close friend, since he appeared to possess its key as well as his own.

She plodded on doggedly through the darkness, although she was beginning to wish she were not pledged to the adventure. At the back of her mind was a feeling of apprehension, while she was also teased by a sense of familiarity.

"I know this place," she thought "But when have I been here before?"

The answer crashed from the depths of her inner consciousness. This was her nightmare. There was the same long endless road— the utter blackness— the total loneliness. It only lacked the horror of gripping hands.

But those came later— in the dream...

She began to run— the fixity of her purpose propelling her on instead of turning back. It was panic flight which burned itself out, for when she was forced to stop, her heart was leaping as much from exertion as fright. She had reached No. 6, which was also named "Elephant House" and had two roughly carved elephants surmounting its gate-posts, to demonstrate its claim to the title.

WITH the feeling that her ordeal was nearly over— for her run back to the bus-stop would seem much shorter— she pushed open the heavy gate. As she groped her way up the drive, the small dancing light of her torch revealed a general appearance of desertion and neglect. The front-door steps were dirty and the brass knocker had not been cleaned recently.

It was no surprise, therefore, to find that the slit to the letter box was blocked.

"I must unload this darn document," she decided. "It's too jolly risky to carry it round with me."

Once again she hooked up the two Yale keys, one of which fitted the lock. It turned easily as she pushed open the door and stepped inside into total darkness.

The precaution of shutting herself in, after she had slipped the key back in the carrier, was a test of her courage: but It was not until she felt secure from outside observation, that she flashed her light around.

The next second, she suppressed a scream as she stepped backwards in an instinctive movement to save herself from being trampled underfoot. Towering above her— from the wall— was the head of an enormous bull-elephant with gleaming tusks and upraised trunk. It dominated the most extraordinary hall she had ever seen.

It was screened with fretted woodwork and hung with the stuffed heads of wild beasts, as well as weapons.

"What a place," she murmured. "The home of Anglo-Indians, I should think. Wonder if the sahibs are at home."

Flashing her torch, first low and then high, she saw a dusty Indian carpet— partially covered with drugget— and a flight of stairs leading to a landing on which was posed a black marble statue. Beyond was a shorter flight of steps, the top of which was wiped out by shadows.

"Hullo! Any one there?"

Christina's hail was weak and tremulous, revealing that she was afraid of the empty house.

There was no answer to her call. Feeling that she had fulfilled her duty in England, she listened to the warning voice which told, her to get out of the house and rush back to safety.

"Run— run."

She was about to place the document on a carved teak table, when she noticed that she had torn a corner of the envelope in her extraction of the keys from the carrier. As she stared at the flimsy paper, she was assailed by doubt. It looked so unofficial that she told herself that she must see the contents before she left it.

Feeling guilty of crime, she ripped open the envelope— to reveal what she dreaded to find— tracings.

They confirmed her lightning suspicion. Ivor Thomas was a rat who was stealing the factory's secrets.. The men in the bus were trailing him; but to save himself from being caught with the evidence, he had fooled them and tricked her into taking it to his hiding-place.

Slipping the document into her coat pocket, she was about to rush from the house when she was startled by a noise from above. It was a heavy thud, as though a statue had crashed down from its pedestal. With a recollection of the figure on the landing, she flashed her torch upwards.

What she saw drained the blood from her heart... A stiff, white, shapeless bundle— like a corpse— was rolling down the stairs.

AT that moment, she understood this hypnotic force of shock. She wanted to flee, but her muscles were locked so that she could not stir, although the

thing was drawing nearer to her. Bumping from stop to step, it reached the landing, where it lay— formless, without face or limbs, muffled in its burial clothes.

As she stood and stared, suddenly Christina thought she detected a quiver in the object... Goaded by the elemental duty to make certain whether life was really extinct, she began to mount the stairs.

Kneeling beside the human parcel, she wrenched away a fold of linen and exposed the shriveled, sunburnt face of an elderly woman with an arrogant nose. Her brave old eyes smoldered in token of an unbroken spirit as Christina first tore away the scarf over her mouth and then dragged from her blackened lips the pad with which she had been gagged.

The woman drew a deep breath, gasping like a fish.

"Thank Heaven, I'm a nose-breather," she gasped. "I was choking. I heard you call— and I managed to make it under my own steam."

"Who are you?" asked Christina.

"Miss Monteagle. This house belongs to my brother— the General. We were in Cornwall when war broke out and we stayed on. I came up to see the house... I was attacked by thugs. Two of them." Her face grew suddenly tense as she added, "I can hear them in the cellars. Get help at once."

"But I can't leave you..."

"Quick. No time to loosen knots. If you can't make it, hide. Watch your chance to escape... Cover my face."

Although Christina lacked Miss Monteagle's uncanny faculty of hearing, she realized the urgency. After winding the corner of the sheet around the elder woman's head, she rushed down the stairs. The hall was clear, but before she could reach the door, a series of knocks on the wood, told her that Ivor Thomas was outside.

She was caught between two fires. The thugs had heard the summons and the sound of their footsteps in the distance was audible to her. Desperately flashing her torch around, she darted behind the velvet curtain which muffled a door— praying the while that the men would not come that way.

Her petition was mercifully granted, for the men entered through a low door at the rear. Although she could see nothing, Christina guessed that they carried a lamp from the faint glow which sprayed around the corner of the portière. Then she heard the catch withdrawn and someone entered the house.

"Has the girl left the plans?" asked Ivor Thomas— his voice cracking with excitement.

Without waiting for a reply, he dashed to the letter-box.

"Hell, it's nailed up," he complained.

"Sure, we had to pick an empty house," growled one of the men. "What's this about a girl?"

It was no satisfaction to Christina to learn that her suspicions were confirmed, since she was trapped and unable to save the plans. As Thomas told his story, she realized that he was cowed by the other men and eager to justify his action.

"The girl will come back when she finds the key," he assured them. "She fell for it all right. Besides it worked. The dicks had to let me go. The laugh was on me."

"Did they follow you?" asked a new voice.

"Hell, no. Why? They found nothing on me."

AS she listened. Christina noticed the difference between the voices of the two men. One was gruff and fierce, but the other frightened her more, because of its flat unhuman quality. It was as though a dead man spoke from the grave.

She trembled violently as this second man made a discovery.

"I can see high heels in the dust. That girl has been here. Look around."

Even as Christina realized the horror of the situation, Miss Montegale came into action! Risking a broken neck, she flexed her muscles in a supreme effort to distract attention. The men in the hall heard a thud from the upper darkness— outside the radius of their lamp— followed by the gruesome spectacle of a corpse-like object rolling down the stairs.

As Thomas gave a high, thin scream, like a trapped rabbit, Christina recognized her signal to escape. Not daring to creep towards the entrance, lest a man should turn his head, she leaped lightly over the thick pile of the carpet. Drawing back the catch of the lock, she slipped through the gap and drew the door softly to— fearing to shut it.

Once she was outside, she began to run, her high heels turning perilously on the slippery drive. She lost precious time in opening the heavy gate and barely reached the road before the sound of heavy footsteps in the distance told her that she was being followed.

Maddened by terror, she rushed on wildly, praying for help; but the road was as deserted as before. There was no welcome torch-light advertising an A.R.P. Warden on his round— no resident returning to his home. It was useless to scream— hopeless to hide in a garden; she knew that the glimmer of her white coat was visible and that if she tore it off her ice-blue frock would betray her.

Realizing that capture was inevitable, she determined that the men should not get the drawings; and since she could be tortured into revelation of their hiding-place, she must put them in a safe place.

Suddenly she remembered that— on her way to Elephant House— she had passed a pillar-box. Running blindly and keeping to the outside edge of the pavement, she collided with it before she saw it. The crash of the impact winded her completely, but before she collapsed, she managed to push the envelope through the slit.

Then she felt herself gripped by unseen hands, in ghastly fulfilment of her nightmare.

AFTER an interlude of strain and semi-suffocation, when— blinded by a coat over her head, she had been bumped along through the darkness— she realized that she was back in the hall of Elephant House. She looked around her fearfully, hardly daring to glance at a white shape doubled up at the foot of the stairs, because of its hideously unnatural posture.

With the exception of Thomas, the men had concealed their faces with dark scarves, while their eyes gleamed through slits in the material; but she recognized their tones.

It was the dead voice that spoke to her.

"Where is that envelope? If you don't talk, I can make you."

"Oh, I'll talk," she said with faint triumph, "I posted it in that pillar-box."

"Very clever," he sneered. "You may like to hear you've killed a man by that master stroke."

"Who? How?"

"The postman... If we force the box, it might attract attention. We will let him unlock it for us and then make sure he won't talk."

Christina stared at him in horror.

"It's all my fault. My fault."

She sat thinking, thinking— until her brain ceased to function. She had grown dead to emotion when she was startled back to life by the sound of knocking at the front door. It was so loud and persistent that the dead voice whispered a command.

"Gag the girl. Open the door, Thomas, and stall."

Nearly choked by the handkerchief which was roughly forced down her throat, Christina was dragged back into the shadow. She heard the door being opened a few inches and then Meta Rosenberg's voice.

"Where's Christina Forbes?" she demanded.

"Never heard of her," replied Ivor Thomas.

"You will... The police are here. Come on, boys."

At the sound of a shot, Christina closed her eyes. She kept them closed throughout the sensational fight which followed and did not open them until her gag was removed by her rescuing hero— Montrose.

LATER in the evening, she sat in Meta's flat. Montrose was there, as well as Miss Monteagle, who smoked a cigar and drank most of the sherry. The postman had already finished his round in safety, after having delivered an unstamped envelope to the detectives from the Munition Factory.

"Sorry my diversion failed to let you get clear away," remarked the sporting lady to Christina. "You made a hell of a noise. I'll never take you stalking... Lucky I didn't break my neck. I've broken every other bone, huntin', but I'm reserving that for my last fence."

"You were wonderful," Christina assured her, although her eyes spoke to Montrose.

"Want to know how the Master Minds found you?" cut in Meta. "Thomas left your gas-mask behind in the bus, since he was bound to be searched. He reckoned that when the conductor found it and took it to Lost Property, there would be nothing to connect it with him. But an A.R.P. Warden was on the bus and he spotted it and looked at your identification card. He's a bright local lad and knows me my sight— so when he found an envelope with my address on it, it seemed a good excuse to bring it round, as my flat was near."

As she stopped to refill the glasses. Montrose finished the tale.

"Meta got rattled as you hadn't turned up, while your gas mask proved you were on the bus. Fortunately we discovered a scrap of paper stuck in your carrier, with 'Bengal 6' scrawled on it. That gave us the Idea where you'd got out."

"It's wonderful," repeated Christina, still looking at Montrose. "The funny part is, I suspected Meta, when really she is one of Us."

Meta burst out laughing.

"Us?" she repeated. "You're too nice to be a mug. That sabotage-espionage is T.P.'s bright stunt to make the girls careful with the machinery. I know, because he's a relative of mine. Of course, the firm employs trained detectives."

"Oh," Christina's mouth drooped with disappointment. "It was such a thrill to feel part of the war."

"Never mind," said Miss Monteagle. "I'm dated, so I can afford to spout Kipling, although I can't say I'm quoting word for word."

*"Two things greater than all things are.  
The first is Love and the second is War,  
And since we know not what War may prove...."*

Intercepting the message flashing between Christina and Montrose, her bass voice softened to the tones of a girl who had vanished into the past, as she finished the quotation:

*"Heart of my heart, let us speak of Love."*

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## 28: The Baby Heir

*Daytona Beach Morning Journal, 30 September 1941*

WHEN Annabel was nervy she would look at Wotherspoon about twenty times a day and murmur "How many people would like to kill you, Angel?"

And about twenty times a day, she declared with a determined thrust of her jaw. "But Belly won't let them."

"Belly" was the unrefined version of her poetical name decreed by Baby Wotherspoon. He had a heavy-handed way of dealing with human prejudices and destinies. It did not disturb him that his birth had upset a score of financial interests.

His millionaire father was a member of a large family. He liked none of them sufficiently for preferential treatment, but he was clannish and believed that money should not pass to strangers. Consequently, he had willed his wealth equally among Charities and his relatives.

Under this scheme, no one could be actually wealthy, but the inheritance was highly acceptable. Therefore when old Wotherspoon's third wife died in presenting him with a 10-pound son, the event was a family calamity.

There was a mighty battle for John Jasper's infant life, as he had contracted heart trouble in his sensational journey to this world.

Among the nurses, Annabel worked at top strength to keep him alive, so it was not astonishing that the millionaire offered her the job of permanent nurse to the important heir.

It was practically a death-bed charge, for old Wotherspoon's last illness developed a few months later. By that time, Annabel had become the abject slave of John Jasper, so she accepted the trust.

ANNABEL had no illusions about her job. The remuneration was high, but she knew it could not compensate her for the sacrifice of her youth and liberty. She was also attractive and vivid—red-haired, with beautiful coloring and short features; yet her charm had to be wasted while she was exiled in Sir Simon Wotherspoon's house—"Four Winds," in the bleak and lonely north.

As the most important relative, Sir Simon had been selected the baby's guardian. He was a retired Harley Street specialist and was responsible for John Jasper's health—an arrangement which did not interfere with his writing of a medical manual—while young Wotherspoon paid the expense of his establishment.

At first, Annabel was stimulated by the solitude and the stretch of open landscape. There were only two habitations in an extensive area—"Four Winds" and the cottage of a Professor Deane. A ribbon of lane wound from the



York Road up to Sir Simon's house, continued for half a mile to the Professor's residence and then came to an end.

"Four Winds" was rather like a fortress, enclosed within a 10-foot wall, with two entrances. In front of it, there was a rolling view of field divided by stone walls. Behind it, lay the moor. The back gate led out to a rough path which sloped down to a steep gully through which flowed a swift mountain stream. This was spanned by a plank bridge and then the track rose up to the Danes' cottage.

The Professor and his wife Judith always used this short-cut across the moor when they visited Sir Simon. Every evening, they arrived after dinner, for a game of bridge with Sir Simon and his secretary—young Fish-Baker. It was the sole social engagement and one from which Annabel was excluded.

The house was not large and was practically divided between Sir Simon and the nursery. The work was done by a married couple—the Limes—while Annabel had a long-faced girl called "Horsington" as a nursery-maid.

In spite of her loneliness, she was not attracted to their only neighbors. The Professor was a sapless dreary man whom Annabel regarded as still-life; his wife, on the other hand, seemed driven on by a gale of mental and physical energy. She was thin, dark and possessed of a red-lipped, long-lashed beauty. During the day, she always wore shorts or slacks, but in the evening, she languished in rest-gowns of glamorous Hollywood tradition.

Annabel suspected that she was interested only in men and resented her as competition, for she never failed to crab her job.

"It's an appalling life for any girl," she declared. "You will become mental. No one can remain normal in this shattering loneliness."

"I'm married." Judith gave a triumphant laugh. "That makes all the difference... When I heard you were coming, I was afraid we might develop a triangular situation. It would have been ghastly if my husband had fallen for you."

Annabel had to bite back her true opinion of the professor's power of fascination.

"I can't imagine your husband falling in love," she said.

"Neither could I. I was one his students. Wasn't it gloriously romantic?"

ANNABEL liked the secretary no better than the Danes. Fish-Baker had a small, pursed mouth and a snobbish sense of social values.

The first night she was at "Four Winds," Sir Simon visited her nursery.

"I want you to know exactly what you are taking on," he said. "This baby is a Power in the financial world and not altogether a welcome one. In arranging for

his future, his father altered his policy in respects which tangled up other interests. There are people who would gladly see this child dead."

"Oh, Sir Simon," gasped Annabel. "Can you tell me of special precautions to take?"

"Certainly. They may sound theatrical, but this is a melodramatic situation. To begin with, you cannot rule out the possibility of poison—in case of the Fifth Column operating in the kitchen. You must prepare his food and taste everything before you give it to him."

"Of course."

"Then there is the risk of kidnapping. He must never be left alone. It is not necessary to take him outside the house. He can get good moorland air from his veranda."

That interview was the prelude to a strange, withdrawn life for Annabel. Her world was enclosed in four walls, and her interests focused on John Jasper—his weight, his diet, his temperature and all that was his. She slept in his room, had her meals in the day-nursery and only left him in charge of Horsington while she took her daily walk on the moor.

OCTOBER passed with a shrill wind which scoured the moor and bleached the heather to the semblance of a tossing dun sea. The change in the landscape paired with a corresponding difference in Annabel, She slept badly, lost her appetite and her color and suffered from nerves.

The truth was that Annabel was weighed down by a guilty secret.

She was a skilled nurse, trained in orthodox methods; but now that she was facing a crisis, she had allowed her instinct to triumph over her professional experience. Experiment had proved that Baby Wotherspoon thrived only in defiance of the laws of health.

He could digest any food he fancied, while he threw up his proper nourishment. A breath of pure mountain air was enough to make him sneeze—and a cold was a menace to his heart. Even his personal taste was peculiar, for he preferred the advertisement photographs of motor-cars to the pictures of Snow-White & Co., on the white walls of his nursery.

It cost Annabel a terrible pang to outrage her code. But she had taken an oath that John Jasper should live and flourish to the confusion of his foes.

She had the sensation of living on the crust over an active volcano, for she knew that Sir Simon would dismiss her without a character, if he discovered her disobedience. But it was not the thought of her professional peril which appalled her.

She dared not face the chance that she might be parted from Baby Wotherspoon because she was certain that she—and she alone—could rear him to boyhood.

THE October winds screamed themselves into silence and November—gray and sullen—set in with sheets of steady rain. The weather was depressing to a normal person, while it appalled Annabel as a direct menace to the baby's health. To shield him from the peril of the raw air, she turned the nursery into a fortress from which even Horsington was excluded and she alone remained on guard—to the exclusion of her own daily exercise.

Fortunately, Sir Simon was of set habits, so she was able to open the windows in readiness for his bi-daily visits; but she lived in constant fear of spies who might report the ban on ventilation. In her extremity, she sank to the deception of making a dummy bundle and placing it in the perambulator on the veranda.

OWING to the constant strain on her resource, she had forgotten Sir Simon's warning about treachery. It was the professor's wife who recalled to her the danger of Fifth Column activity. One afternoon, Judith Dane managed to storm the nursery and sink bonelessly down on a rug.

"Warm," she said appreciatively. "Glad you're not a bleak, antiseptic nurse. I adore a rug."

"Then you're lucky." Necessity drove Annabel to lie. "The windows are shut while I get up the temperature."

Looking slender and attractive in black slacks and a blue-green pullover, Judith stared at the baby. She merely saw an overweight infant with a tendency to baldness. Annabel—who was also watching him—considered him a cherub, with adorable dimples in his hands and an enchanting chuckle. With the exception of his beloved "Belly," he addressed everyone as "That." His other word was "No."

He grinned at Judith's ultra-scarlet lips—clutched his nose tightly with both hands as though to keep it safe—and declared "No."

"I agree," said Judith. "It's 'no' every time... Did I ever tell you, Nurse, that I was a swell at biology? I was the professor's star turn. Well, speaking from a scientific angle, it is a crime to keep this child alive. He's far from being a 100-per cent specimen and he's stopping the survival of better lives."

Annabel controlled her fury by a laugh.

"You're talking high and don't mean one word," she said.

"Of course not. Perhaps I mean something else... A lot of people would like to see this child out of the way."

"Murder him? Oh! No, no."

"Kidnap him. He'd fetch a heavy ransom. His estate could stand the shock."

"But that would be murder. He couldn't live without me. The shock would be too much for his poor little heart."

"Then I'll give you a hint. On the first of December, the Trustees will pay their visit of inspection. They are relatives who have been cheated out of their expectations. Wouldn't it be an ideal time for one of them to arrange for the baby to be stolen, while he is here with the rest? He'd have a foolproof alibi."

"They'd find it impossible to kidnap John Jasper with me in charge of him. Besides, Sir Simon would also be on guard."

"But he's a relative too." Judith's voice was loaded with meaning. "Do Harley Street specialists make enormous fortunes? Their expenses must be staggering. Oh, by the way, one of the crowd is a real stinker. You can pick him out at a glance. I'm saying no more."

ALTHOUGH Annabel tried to ignore Judith's warning as the invention of a neurotic woman, some of its poison remained. When she lay awake at night, her mind throbbed with feverish suspicions. She began to wonder whether the lonely house had not been chosen by Sir Simon to facilitate a kidnapping plot. Horsington too, was a queer, silent creature. There was some mystery about her, for Annabel sensed that she resented her menial position. Although she tried to appear uneducated, she had once quoted from a literary classic, in an unguarded moment.

Annabel began to wonder if anyone in "Four Winds" could be trusted.

Above all, loomed the ordeal of the Trustees' visit. As the date drew near, the wind veered to the north and the weather became bitterly cold. Apart from the increased menace to John Jasper's chest, Annabel was grateful when a first flurry of white flakes shook from a leaden sky. Actually, the snow would prove her ally, if it kept the Trustees away.

"They won't be able to make it, if we're snowbound," she remarked hopefully to the secretary, the day before the official visit.

Fish-Baker glanced out at the white waste of moor and grimaced.

"It's only drifted to any depth on the moor. It would have to lie a jolly sight deeper to keep them away. The York Road will be clear and they can jam the lane in good cars. Under the hat, there's a carrot dangling in front of their noses."

"What do you mean?"

"None of them would lose their trustee-fee. Without betraying a confidence, I can tell you the figure is definitely stiff. The old bloke was so keen

on protecting our young boss that he put all the family to check up on Simon. Hence these periodic inspections. I prefer to call them 'Suspections.'"

"Isn't one of them rather a swine?" she asked. "Oh! you mean Reginald. Definitely. Been in the Army once—and quod twice."

Suddenly, as though some connection of ideas had been established in his mind, his eyes grew shrewd.

"If you ever think about easy money," he said in a low voice, "you've only to make a contact. Nothing to do—merely relax your vigilance."

Annabel's face flamed with fury; but before she could speak, Fish-Baker began to laugh.

"Only testing your loyalty. It's in my book of words—'Suspect the nurse.' By the way, old Simon asks me to tell you the arrangements for tomorrow. The trustees will have lunch directly after arrival—inspect the heir—and go back after tea. Horsington will be wanted to help with the meals. And there'll be another guest. Sir Donald Frost is coming to examine young Wotherspoon."

Sir Donald Frost. The name sang in her head. He was the nurse's pole-star— young, good-looking, in the first flight and still rising. As a probationer, she had waited in hospital-corridors, merely to see him pass.

But now her jubilation was mixed with fear lest her unorthodox methods might be exposed. She went to bed praying for snow, snow and more snow, to keep the invaders away.

SHE awoke to a white blanket spread over the countryside, but the weather conditions were not bad enough for the trustees' meeting to be canceled. The party, however, had evidently not realized the full difficulty of their passage through the blocked lane; but they arrived eventually in three powerful cars with chains.

Even in the nursery, Annabel could hear the noise of their voices and laughter as Sir Simon greeted them. Lunch was very late and proved a protracted meal, for there followed a long and nerve-wracking period of waiting. Annabel had to strain her ears for the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs, so that she could rush to open the windows of the nursery.

To add to her worry, John Jasper was beginning to display an ominous interest in the snow. For the first time in her experience, he asked to be taken outside. Apparently he wanted to go skiing, tobogganing and all the other dashing things, for he grew very cross at being thwarted. When he cried, he roared and bellowed, so he had to be appeased, lest he should strain his heart.

Annabel was near the limit of her resources when—as the gray daylight began to fade—the nursery was invaded by the relatives. At first, she saw them as a prosperous hostile crowd, among which she picked out Sir Donald. His face

was thinner and his figure a trifle more important, but he was no less handsome. His black hair shone as though burnished, when he bent over the baby's case-sheet, produced by Sir Simon.

"Nurse." he said in his fruity voice. "We are ready."

With a feeling of desperation, Annabel wheeled forward her precious charge. He became instantly the center of a circle, while Sir Simon presented him formally to the Trustees. Sir Donald concentrated on his examination—the relatives stared at the baby—and Annabel watched their faces.

Suddenly Annabel noticed an unnatural element—sheer gloating cruelty in the eyes of a vulture-faced man with red-lined cheeks. He caught Fish-Baker's attention and winked at him. As the secretary winked back, Annabel recalled his remark about "easy money!"

Instantly her suspicions flared up again. Fish-Baker might not be a perfect fool, but he could be a perfect tool and used as a pawn in another's game. As the possibility of collusion flashed across her mind, the sinister Reginald—"Major" no longer—spoke to Baby Wotherspoon in a jocular vein.

"You may not know it, old boy, but you keep a damn good cellar. You do yourself proud. Simon, old boy, what about going downstairs for another spot?"

His sneering tone hinted that Sir Simon was taking advantage of her preferential position. To ease an awkward situation. Sir Donald began to congratulate Sir Simon on the baby's progress.

"His health shows an all-round improvement. Best of all, his heart is beginning to compensate... You've done excellently. Nurse."

AS a medical man. Sir Donald recognized the helper to whom the credit was due; as a critic of feminine beauty, his smile approved an unusually attractive girl. Thrilled by his look as well as by his praise, his words rang in Annabel's head after the relatives had gone out of the nursery.

As she mechanically closed the windows, John Jasper was reminded of his thwarted desire for winter sports.

"No," he yelled, meaning 'snow.' "No."

Suddenly Annabel had an inspiration. Opening her store-cupboard, she rolled out a huge bale of cotton-wool from which she made pneumonia-jackets.

Unrolling a few yards, she spread them over the carpet.

"Come and play with Belly in the nice warm snow," she invited.

The experiment proved a great success, for the baby soon shouted with laughter. Engrossed in her game, Annabel did not hear Sir Donald's quiet, professional tread as he returned to the nursery.



"What are you doing with that dangerous stuff?" he asked in a horrified voice.

Flushed with stooping, Annabel looked up into his disapproving face. Her lips trembled as she began to explain the incident. Instead of making any comment, he glanced around the room.

"You've got the window closed," he remarked. "What's the temperature?"

After reading the thermometer he crossed to the window and threw it open. His face set in a professional mask, he asked another question:

"Do you smoke?"

"Yes," she confessed. "I couldn't survive without my daily dozen of cigarettes."

"You will have to, in future, with all this inflammable stuff about."

"Oh, but I take no risks. I—

"You must consider the baby's safety before your nerves. Remember—no smoking."

DIRECTLY she was left with the baby, Annabel closed the window, but she did not latch it—in readiness for future emergency. Her mind was a turmoil of emotions as she raged against the embargo on smoking. Cut off from social life, she depended on tobacco as an essential nerve tonic. As she grew calmer, however, she was chilled by a menace which dwarfed her personal grievance.

Sir Donald had stormed her fortress when her weak spots were exposed. He evidently considered her untrustworthy—and there were bound to be unpleasant repercussions.

While the party downstairs lingered over their tea, the short winter twilight deepened into darkness. Annabel rang the bell but no one answered its summons. Before she went to find Horsington, she looked around the nursery, to make sure that everything was safe and in order.

The fire was screened, the window closed and John Jasper was taking a nap in his day-bed.

She met Horsington in the hall and told her to sit with the baby.

While she lingered in the hall in the hope that Sir Donald might come out of the drawing-room, she heard a scream from above. Dashing upstairs, she collided with Horsington on the landing.

"Baby's gone!" she screamed. "There's a ladder at the window!"

STUNNED with shock, Annabel staggered into the nursery. She stared first at the empty day-bed and then at the ladder-head before she crossed to the window. As she looked down at the illuminated snow, she saw footprints leading down to the front gate.

Horsington rushed down the back-stairs and threw open the landing window. Tearing after her, Annabel stared down on the strip of path lighted by the back-lobby lamp.

It revealed only a white unbroken surface.

Suddenly Annabel realized that Horsington was speaking to her in an insistent tone. It suggested the necessity for speed.

"Will you tell the master? Or shall I?"

With an effort, Annabel wrenched herself out of her frozen trance or horror. Feeling that the situation was too monstrous to be real, she went down to the drawing-room and blurted out her tale. Although she was dimly aware of a storm of excitement breaking all around her, she answered Sir Simon's questions with unnatural calm. It was not until the others had rushed outside, leaving her alone, that she awoke to the shock of realization.

*Baby Wotherspoon had been kidnapped.*

With a professional horror of hysterics, she pressed her hands to her lips, forcing back her screams. Rushing blindly up the stairs, she ran into the nursery, where the sight of the empty bed made her break down utterly. Unable to endure it, she went down to the back-stairs landing and stood by the open window. Above her the stars glittered in the black sheet of the sky—below, stretched the blank white path. Then she laid her head down on the sill and tried to stifle her sobs.

For the second time, Sir Donald stole on her unawares.

"Well," he said, speaking in a matter-of-fact voice, "it's a planned job. The ladder had been placed under the window in readiness, for it was covered with snow. The footsteps led down to the front gate. From there, the kidnapper must have gone by car down the lane to the York road. There are only the marks of car-tires there, while there are no prints of any kind in the lane that goes on to the cottage."

"What is Sir Simon doing?" asked Annabel dully.

"Hitting the trail in the hope of catching up. But that stout man insisted that the cars should be searched first, in case the child was packed into the luggage-boot. He argued that they were all under suspicion until proved innocent."

"No," said Annabel, "I'm the only one to blame. I should never have left him. I didn't latch the window after you."

"After me?"

"Yes... I disobeyed all Sir Simon's orders. He didn't bring Baby on. It was all my work—my instinct. I found out that the ordinary rules did not apply to him. He made his own rules, bless him. But if I hadn't kept him happy, he would have been too bored to go on living. I had to stimulate his brain or it would have degenerated. Do you understand?"



"Yes... Perfectly."

"But what's the good of it all now? He can't live without me. Nobody will know how I loved him from the very first. He was such a darling little John Bull, with all the odds against him, poor fat mite. But he hung on... I'll never forgive myself. I've just taken a vow never to marry or have a child—because I let him down."

"Steady on. Have a cigarette?"

Sir Donald put the cigarette between her shaking lips, lit it—and then threw the match through the open window.

The next second, he gave a shout. Underneath their eyes, the snowy path was on fire!

IT blazed fiercely for about a minute, sweeping downwards in a line before it died, revealing dark pits in the snow.

Instantly Sir Donald realized the explanation of the phenomenon.

"The kidnapper's trail," he said in an excited voice. "He covered it with cotton-wool. We must follow it up. Quick."

Although she wore thin white shoes to match her overall, Annabel rushed after him down to the lobby. Outside, the path which led to the moor was scored with the impression of boots when they kicked aside the rags of charred wool. The roll had lasted until outside the radius of the light—when, having served its purpose, it came to an end.

Treading in Sir Donald's footsteps, like the page in the carol, Annabel followed the beam of his torch as it picked up the trail. It led them down to the bridge across the gully and then over the moor, up to the Danes' cottage.

"Oh, no!" tried Annabel. "We've gone wrong. It couldn't be them. They've nothing to gain."

"Come on," insisted Sir Donald "I'm going to rush them!"

After hammering upon the cottage door, he pushed it open and went into the empty hall.

"I've come for the child!" he shouted. "Thanks for the trail."

As they waited, he touched Annabel's arm and pointed to the pads of melting snow which still lay on the dark-blue carpet. Then Judith came out of a room, holding a bundle in her arms. Her eyes flashed defiance and her lips were a scarlet line in her ghastly face.

"I did it. You know why. My husband knows nothing."

Sir Donald took no notice of her. Instead, he turned to Annabel and pushed her towards the door.

"We must get him back at once," he said. "You'd better take him."

As Annabel looked with anguish into Baby Wotherspoon's poor blue face, his rigid limbs suddenly relaxed as though he recognized the touch of his beloved's protecting arms.

"He knows me," she said.

Together they crashed across the snowy moor back to "Four Winds" where Sir Donald issued another order.

"Carry on. You know what to do. I'm going back to the cottage. I want a chat with that charming couple—just for the records."

WHEN he returned to the nursery, Annabel sat before the fire, feeding John Jasper who sipped milk and brandy with real appreciation of his cellar.

"You darling little boozer," murmured Annabel, adoring him with her eyes, before she spoke to Sir Donald. "What happened? I still can't believe it of them."

"Naturally," he agreed. "While everyone suspected the relatives, no one remembered the Charities who were equally disappointed by the baby's birth. They were—and are—above suspicion. But the Professor had been building his hopes on taking control of the new Wotherspoon's former will. Apparently the disappointment turned him slightly mental. He planned the kidnaping—taking advantage of the trustees' meeting and the snow—and he forced his wife to play her part."

"Forced her?" repeated Annabel incredulously.

"Yes, he may look meek, but he's a dominant partner. I knew her when she was a beautiful brilliant student. I was shocked by the change in her."

"But how did they steal John Jasper?"

"Inside work. Real fifth column. Horsington is Dane's daughter by his first marriage. Directly it was dark, she stole through the front door, followed the path which was already beaten in the snow by the visitors, as far as the gate, and from there struck out towards the ladder. She placed it outside the window and then returned to the house, still keeping in her tracks. Fortunately for her, you played into her hands by asking her to watch the baby. Otherwise she would have made her chance. As it was, she gagged the baby, placed him on the veranda—in a perambulator underneath a dummy bundle—opened the window and then screamed."

"He was there—all the time?" gasped Annabel.

"Yes. No one would waste time in searching the room with a ladder stuck outside an open window. Directly she got rid of you and she guessed that everyone would be safely outside at the front of the house, she threw the roll of cotton-wool down the back-stairs and followed herself with the baby. The Professor and his wife were already on the moor by the back gate, waiting for

her to signal with a light. They rushed up to the lobby where one of them grabbed the baby while the other drew out the roll of cotton-wool behind them as they went down the path, covering up their footprints. A most ingenious idea, for in the dim lamplight the deception was perfect. It looked a soft unbroken surface."

"But they knew they must be found out."

"Why? They planned to remove the cotton-wool before it was discovered. Once they had established their alibi—no trail on the lane or the short cut—their footsteps would be accounted for in the normal way, for they would make them coming across for their nightly bridge."

"What were they going to do with my baby?" asked Annabel in a low voice.

"I'm afraid they counted on his dying from shock," replied Sir Donald.

"Anyway, they meant to park him in the snow all night and bring up his body in the morning. Their story would be that they found it on their doorstep."

"Fiends."

"I agree. Of course, the Professor took the detached scientific view—divorced from humanity. One life against millions, you know... Sir Simon will suggest that they leave the country. By the way, he wants to unload young Wotherspoon on me. I live by the sea on the south coast, which will suit him better. I must ask him to choose his own nurse."

As though in answer to his question, John Jasper looked drowsily up at the face bending over him and spoke in recognition of his Beloved.

"Belly."

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## 29: The First Day

*The Herald-News, Montana, 26 Nov and 3 Dec 1942*

VIVIEN heard the clock strike 7, but she dreaded to open her eyes. Last night she had gone to bed, as usual, in her small room overlooking the courtyard, at the Hotel Monopol.

She knew that when she forced her lids apart, she would see the same familiar surroundings— the dark polished wood, the crimson-patterned wallpaper, the veneered walnut suite, the lemon-chrome curtains... But she knew too that she would awake in another world.

During the hours of darkness, the old life of carefree security had passed away, leaving her stranded in a new Dimension—where she would shrink from shadows and where no locked door could bar out the enemy.

It was her first day in the underground "V" army.

Until recently the war had not invaded her orbit and instinct warned her to remain aloof. She rarely listened to the radio or read newspapers. As the squeeze gradually tightened, she closed her ears to rumors, since it was wiser to live one day at a time and concentrate on her job of running the hotel.

In spite of Anglo-American birth, she was in a privileged position, for her maternal grandmother was the sister of old Fritz Steiner, who owned the Monopol. Orphaned in babyhood, she lived in Austria for most of her life. The only time she stayed in England with her father's brother, an Oxford don, the academic atmosphere had not proved congenial. Consequently, when war broke out, she chose to remain in Austria with her friends.

In appearance, she was 100 percent Aryan, with pale gold hair, worn in a long pageboy bob, and flax-blue eyes. Always cheerful, with a smile for the most difficult patron, she was also briskly efficient and an ideal hotel-worker. She made no secret of her nationality and only laughed good-naturedly when either of her countries was attacked.

"Oh, we're not quite so bad as that," she would say. "Don't forget I'm half British and the other half is American."

They always shared her joke, for, since the exact relationship was forgotten, to them she was old Steiner's granddaughter.

Although she never mentioned it, she thought of the "V" army as a sort of super-race apart from ordinary life. It was not until she met a certain hotel guest, who called himself "John Vanderpant," that she realized that girls like herself were somehow finding the courage to chalk up "V" signs, listen in to *verboden* radios and even commit acts of sabotage.

VANDERPANT was presumably engaged in business and he often stayed for a night at the Monopol in the course of his travels. During their brief meetings, their relationship was that of hotel manageress and patron. But she was drawn instinctively to him and she was sure that he felt the same attraction.

Through thinking constantly of him and watching him unobtrusively, her intuition bridged the gulf between them, so that it was no surprise one evening when he took the fateful first step which could place him in the power of the Gestapo. They were sitting together in the deserted lounge, drinking coffee and smoking, when he touched the initial brooch pinned at the neck of her gown.

"What does this 'V' mean to you?" he asked.

" 'V' for 'Vivien,'" she replied. Then she lowered her voice. "What does it mean to you? You can trust me. I'm English, too."

"Too?" he repeated with his acquired Continental grimace. "Well, since you've guessed my dark secret, call up your Gestapo."

When they had finished laughing at the absurd suggestion, he began to tell her about the "V" organization.

"Think of it as a trunk with branches and twigs, because they might be 'persuaded' to reveal the identity of the branches. So the hang out of a twig is a very hush-hush affair and is changed constantly. When we want to contact him, we use our Intelligence—ordinary people of all grades—who pass on our messages. You see, it would be too risky for me to try the direct approach. I might be already under suspicion and my work is too important for me to be liquidated before I've had a run for my money.";

"What is your work?" she asked.

"I rake in new recruits. Great sport. If I slip up in sizing up my man or woman, I can be handed over on a plate to the police. I get a terrific kick out of it."

"Don't," she shuddered. "That's not funny... Have you come here to try and contact anyone in this hotel room?"

"Yes. You."

While she was still gasping with horror, he explained.

"You are ideally placed to receive messages and pass them on, with all the comings and going at the Bureau. No one would suspect old Steiner's granddaughter."

She listened in incredulous dismay. His words had shattered her sense of security by suggesting her inclusion in the ranks of those heroic girls who seemed to be made of different clay from herself. As she looked around the lounge, at the mirrors, the palms, the showcases—the idea seemed both monstrous and fantastic, while she was safe in this warm well-lit place of

shoddy splendor... She thought of the Concentration Camp and shuddered again...

"No, no. I couldn't. I'm afraid."

"Good." His voice sounded relieved. "'I've tried to recruit you and I've failed. Perhaps I'm glad to fail."

"Do you despise me?"

"Definitely no," he assured her. "A timid recruit is a positive danger. You can't force these things. When it grips you, you won't be able to resist it. It'll be part of you."

She looked into his shining eyes with a faint pang of jealousy. She felt that she had been offered something big and worthwhile—and she had rejected it.

"What do you get out of life?" she asked.

"Excitement."

"No happiness? Won't there ever be a woman?"

"No. Verboten."

"Not even a woman who worked with you and shared your danger?"

"No." Then suddenly he smiled. "Who knows? One day, perhaps, when all this is over, there may be a cottage in the country or a flat in town. Whichever she prefers. Some day..."

SOME day... After that, it was only a question of time before her first day... She opened her eyes. Jumped out of bed and began to dress.

"Perhaps it was those drinks," she thought. "I'm not used to so many. I must catch John before he goes and ask him for time. I'm not backing out. All I want is time; time to get steady and used to the idea."

She felt relieved by her decision although she was oppressed by a sense of urgency. John was due to leave the hotel early, and she might have missed him. In her impatience the lift could not take her quickly enough down to the ground floor, and directly she reached the lounge she ran across to the bureau.

"Has 52 checked out yet?" she asked.

"No," replied the clerk, glancing at the clock. "He's cutting it fine. I know my lord made a night of it for I had the joy of letting him in. You must pardon my indiscretion if he is a friend of yours."

"Every patron is a friend of the hotel, Georg," she told him.

As she looked at the youth, she realized his secret hostility bred from a sense of grievance. He was rather like a kewpie, with very light curly hair, slanting eyes and a broad permanent smile. Unfortunately, he was not so good-natured as he appeared, while he was too slack to be entrusted with authority.

Her other helper, Edda, was older than herself, but she too could not be allowed much contact with the guests, because of bad manners and a

disagreeable personality. Although she was pure Nazi, she was dark and pallid with mean, pinched lips. Not only was she envious of Vivien's blonde coloring but she was also jealous of her position as old Steiner's official granddaughter.

Her insolence usually took the form of sardonic servility. That morning, she carried Vivien's coffee and dry roll to the desk and laid them beside her with a stressed "Service." As she did so, John entered the lounge. His hat was on and he carried his coat and suitcase.

Because she knew that both her assistants were watching her, Vivien felt her face flush.

"Give me 52's bill, Georg," she said sharply.

As she crossed the lounge, she noticed a change in John. His lips were stern and he looked at her indifferently as though she were a stranger. Taking the account from her, he glanced at the total with a shrug—as though to indicate he was stung—before he spoke in a peremptory whisper.

"Something broke, last night. I'm going hell-for-leather to contact someone... This item is wrong, Fräulein... Listen. At noon today a man will tap by a showcase. Pass him and whisper, 'Tonight at eight, 103, Postgasse.' He's six foot, very fair, blue eyes, blonde hair with shaven sides, well dressed, scar over his eye."

While he was murmuring the description, he opened his note-case, thrust some dirty notes into her hand—and dashed through the revolving doors... Her chance of reprieve was gone.

"Who's after him?" asked Edda.

"Not me."

Vivien felt too laden with heavy responsibility to snub the girl for her implied suggestion. John had accepted her as a new recruit to the "V" army and had given her a definite job. The lives of others might depend on whether she kept a cool nerve and a clear head. Yet her brain, whirled when she tried to memorize the simple address.

In her confusion, she took up her cup so carelessly that the coffee slopped into her saucer and her roll fell to the carpet, Georg scooped it up and returned it to her with a low bow.

"There's this consolation, it can't fall butter-down," he remarked.

"Soon, there will be butter for all," said Edda. "You are nervous this morning, Fräulein. Didn't you sleep well? You should when your stomach is full and your conscience clear."

Vivien ignored the remark and hurried away, eager to escape Edda's malicious gaze. She always worked at high pressure, but that morning she was grateful for the shortcomings of a skeleton staff. While she was engaged with the floor-housekeeper and the chef, she forgot the ordeal ahead of her. But in



her constant visits to the bureau— which was the nerve-center of the hotel— she was conscious of Georg and Edda as potential spies.

As the morning wore on the tension grew almost unbearable. She longed for noon, even while she dreaded the passing of every minute.

"First time I've seen you watch the clock," remarked Georg. "He's a lucky fellow."

"That's not funny, Georg," she said coldly. "We are here to work."

"Pardon, Fräulein," broke in Edda gleefully, "but you have made a grave mistake in the menu. We have not served this sauce for years. It needs a lot of butter."

Vivien bit her lip as she penciled the correction.

"I've gone to bits," she told herself. "What can they think of me?"

She was aroused by the sound of a sharp tapping upon glass. Looking up, she noticed a tall heavily-built man who was rapping impatiently upon a showcase to attract attention. She was glancing at him indifferently— since showcases were Edda's business— when, suddenly her heart gave a leap as she recognized John's description of the anonymous agent.

This man had a fair skin which was florid and red-veined. Ice-cold blue eyes and closely shaven hair under his smart hat. She searched for the distinctive scar and found it when he turned his head— a smallish red angry crisscross under his left eye.

"It must be X," she thought.

Then she glanced at the clock for confirmation and discovered the time was nine minutes to 12. She told herself that either the clock was slow or the agent was too early. But the discrepancy was a bad jolt and made her hesitate to contact him.

Now that the minute was upon her, she dared not leave the bureau. Guilt made her feel an object of general suspicion. Everyone knew and everyone was watching her. Everyone was waiting for her to make that fatal move which would land her in a Concentration camp.

The tapping grew so insistent that it goaded her from the safety of her base. Edda went on typing her menus and Georg continued to add up his columns. In proof that they were legitimately occupied. It was up to her to give a demonstration of the swift service which was the Monopol's policy.

"If I make a mistake," she thought desperately, "I'm for it. He'll ask questions. Questions about the address and who gave it to me. All sorts of questions. How can I explain it away with George and Edda listening?"

Before she could solve her problem, she had reached the showcase. The man pointed to a cigar, grunted and flicked a coin down upon the glass. As she



swept it up, she realized that lives might depend on the message and whispered rapidly.

"Tonight at eight, 103, Portgasse."

THEN she waited... Nothing blew up. Indeed the man's reaction was as unusual as to justify her soaring confidence. Instead of staring blankly and asking her to repeat the words, he eyed her keenly and then turned nonchalantly in the direction of the restaurant.

She returned to the bureau with a springing step. Now that her message was delivered, she felt that she had exaggerated the risk. John would not entrust a dangerous commission to an untried recruit. In short, there was nothing to this spy business. It was merely as a matter of pabulum that she asked Georg a question.

"Is that man staying at the hotel for the night?"

"Yes," replied Georg, "I booked him while you were upstairs with the boss. He's got 88."

"Good. Did you get top price?"

"Unfortunately, no. I could tell he was Prussian and naturally he must have our best suite."

"Naturally."

As she was reflecting on the excellence of the agent's disguise, he strolled into the lounge, to get an aperitif. His hat was now removed, revealing a completely shaven scalp.

"Blond hair." The words slipped back into her memory, awakening a dormant suspicion. She watched the man throw back his drink and then— in an effort to allay her subconscious worry— she began to look through a pile of spiked papers.

Presently she heard a faint drumming and glanced up to discover its cause. The carpet beside the showcase had worn so threadbare that it had been cut away to reveal the parquet flooring. Upon this strip of waxed board, a man was doing a sort of elementary tap dance, as though to register impatience.

He was signalling with his feet. As she grasped the fact, she realized that this was the agent she had been told to expect. He was tall and very fair, with bright blue eyes. Although his head was partially shaven, the hair on top was flaxen while over one eye was a livid white scar.

She looked at the clock and saw that it was on the stroke of twelve.

It was the worst moment of her life. She had made a ghastly blunder, even if it were no fault of hers. The mistake was due to the fact that Fate— in a freakish mood— had contrived the same description to cover two men. Staring at him with horrified eyes, as though she had condemned him to death, she

realized that not he alone, but other victims, would pay the penalty of her error.

The crisis sharpened her wits. She knew that it was impossible for her to slip away, in order to warn the agent at 103 Postgasse. The entire management of the hotel depended upon herself, so that such unprecedented action would focus on her the limelight she must avoid. Probably too, she would be followed and so give the whole show away. As she knew no telephone number to ring, the only chance to save the "twig" was through the blonde stranger.

After first glancing swiftly around, she caught his eye and— daring greatly— made the Victory sign with her fingers.

"Are you the gentleman who booked a room over the phone?" she asked in her high official voice "I terribly sorry but there has been a blunder. I forgot to reserve it... Georg, who has 88?"

"Herr Von Ringner," replied the clerk glibly.

As she stared at the agent, willing him to understand, she felt the flash of his response.

"Oh, bad luck," he said with a shrug. "I left it to a pal to ring you up about it. Did he leave any message for me?"

"No, Fräulein," broke in Georg. "The calls have been only for our clients. There has been nothing for this gentleman.

"On the contrary," Vivien informed, "I took the message myself, when you were not in the lounge."

"If there is one, it will be here," declared Edda, almost snatching at the spiked memoranda, in her eagerness to prove that Vivien had made another slip.

Instantly Vivien removed it from the girl's grasp.

"Allow me to know my own business while you attend to yours," she said.

Her brain worked feverishly while her fingers rustled the pile of flimsies. She believed that the "V" agent understood that Von Ringner had received the information which was meant for him, but that was a minor point. The essential was to give it to him also and in such a manner as to awake no curiosity or suspicion in Georg or Edda.

Suddenly she took a bold step.

"I've found it," she said, removing a slip from the bottom of the papers and reading it aloud. "It says, 'Tonight at 8, 103, Portgasse.' Your friend wants you to ring him... Here it is— you might forget the address."

The man glanced at the slip, on which was scrawled "Ring Laundry"— folded it and placed it in his notecase.

"Won't you have another room?" asked Vivien, as he turned to go. "We have some very good ones vacant. Georg—"

"No thanks," cut in the agent.

When he had gone through the revolving door, she shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing but the best will suit his Highness. Who does he think he is?"

"Maybe he has a lady," sniggered Georg.

"Maybe. Pity you let the other suite, Georg. We might have rushed him for the top price."

She was grateful for Georg's characteristic suggestion because it was proof of a normal atmosphere. She had carried through a daring bluff in the presence of her assistants— and it had sounded so like ordinary routine business that she doubted whether either could remember the message or the address.

During the hours when luncheon was being served, she had no time to think of anything besides work. She was constantly between the kitchen and restaurant— serving, giving directions and exploiting the personal element.

She was watched closely by Edda who had to help wait whenever the number of guests was above the average. Her mind was poisoned with envy as the younger girl welcomed the patrons. She hated her for her blonde coloring, her flair as hostess, but— above all— for her black satin gown.

She could not guess that the positions were reversed and that Vivien would have been profoundly thankful to change places with her assistant. During the slack hour after luncheon, she was back in the Bureau, she had too much time to think and realize her position.

She had saved the others at the price of her own safety.

After the Gestapo had raided the deserted 103, Postgasse, they would inevitably demand an explanation from herself. They would not believe her protestations of ignorance of any fairy tale about a message given to her by an anonymous stranger. To them, she would be merely a girl who knew something— and who must be persuaded to talk.

As the minutes crawled by she began to feel on the verge of hysteria. Her nerves frayed by the strain of waiting for catastrophe.

When the lounge was beginning to fill with afternoon patrons, she noticed a girl who was greedily sucking up raspberry syrup at one of the small tables. Her short fur coat, the tilt of her veiled hat and the way she crossed her legs were all familiar, but she could not place her immediately. She frowned, because it was her boast never to forget a face. But within a few seconds her professional prestige was restored.

She recognized the girl as the daughter of a well-to-do business man and— incidentally— a minx. She was fond of sweets and had patronized the Monopol Cafe regularly until recently. Presumably her absence was caused by illness, for her full cheeks were pale and her little dark eyes no longer shone with vitality.

Vivien noticed also the nervous twitch of one eyelid as she approached the girl.

"You've deserted us," she said reproachfully. "Why? Is the syrup better somewhere else?"

"Oh, no," the girl assured her. "It's divine. I've missed it terribly. But I've been away in— in a holiday camp."

The explanation was overheard by Edda who commented on it when she returned to the Bureau.

"That little fool is learning sense," she whispered spitefully to Vivien.

"'Holiday camp?' Another name for it is 'Concentration Camp.' "

The blood seemed to drain from Vivien's heart as she listened.

"What did she do?" she asked.

"Nothing, so to say. She was having a drink with a pick-up when the Gestapo pulled him in and her as well. It took time to persuade them that she didn't know the man from Adam, but they let her go. She was lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Naturally. It is bad policy for the Gestapo to admit mistakes. They were rather rough with her, trying to make her talk— but of course she has forgotten all that."

Only yesterday, Vivien would have heard such a tale in silence and then tried to forget it, with all the other things which must not be remembered... Since then, a gulf had been crossed and this story was her own— with one ominous difference. The girl was innocent of intrigue while she was deeply involved.

Their fates would be the same. She shuddered as she thought of 'rough treatment' and wondered whether she could endure protracted pain. Her chief dread was that an admission might be wrung from her when she was in a dazed condition. Then she realized that Edda was speaking.

"What a fool to pick up a stranger! You and I, Fräulein, are too wise. We know that the hotel is packed with Gestapo agents posing as business men. Sometimes I wonder if your brooch keeps them guessing. Of course, here we know it is your initial."

The words made her realize that while she was facing the gravest peril, there might be worse to follow—the bitterness of betrayal by someone very dear... Suddenly she could endure the confinement of the Lounge no longer. Although she remained miraculously fresh with the minimum of air and exercise, she occasionally took a walk during the afternoon.

"Carry on, Edda," she said. "I am going out."

TOO overwrought to wait for the lift, she ran up to the first floor. Old Steiner was his own best patron, for he occupied a vast apartment, furnished with stuffy Victorian splendor. He was bedridden but, in spite of his age, his vast bulk had not shrunk. Just as in his youth he prided himself on filling out his coat, he boasted now of the size of the coffin he would require.

"I'm going to the shops, darling," Vivien told him. "Can I get anything for you?"

"No, my dear," he replied, "but you can do something for me." He pointed to her initial brooch. "Don't wear that again. Didn't you know it is the Victory sign? I hear the Gestapo are testing the loyalty of all the hotel staffs, while they pose as guests. There is leakage everywhere, messages and thus and thus... You might give a wrong impression with that brooch and sometimes it is difficult to explain. Authority has a mouth— but no ears."

Vivien had never seen his jovial face so grave... Suddenly the sour atmosphere of the sealed room swept over her like a stinking dun wave. She felt on the verge of fainting as the spark of suspicion, smoldering in her brain since she had heard Edda's story, now flared up in distrust of John.

She remembered that she had accepted him without credentials, other than his alleged British birth. That claim might be false, and even were it genuine, nationality excludes no one from the ranks of traitors. As a matter of cold fact, she had been attracted to him so strongly that she had walked voluntarily into his net.

"I must get away at once," she told herself in a panic.

She kissed her great-uncle fondly and when she reached the door, she looked back at him, wondering if she would ever see him again. Then she rang for the lift which jerked her up to her room. Without a plan and not daring to pause for reflection, she rammed on her hat and dragged on her coat. Her sole provision for the future was to put her passport and money into her handbag. Then she ran downstairs, hurried through the Lounge and passed through the door out of the Monopol.

When she was in the street she boarded the first tramcar. She did not know its destination, but, when the conductor came to collect her fare, she had presence of mind to say "All the way."

"It will take me somewhere 'out,'" she thought. "I must think— I must think."

Instead, she found herself incapable of clear or consecutive thought. With a vague sense of relief, she watched the shops slide past the window. She was in motion, and that fact suggested flight and inspired her with an illusion of freedom. She was escaping from the Gestapo. Never, never would she return to the Concentration Camp.

In a half-comatose state, which was the aftermath of her brainstorm, she gazed through the dirty glass at the parks, the avenues, the groups of statuary and fountains. Large houses, which still appeared grand and imposing when veiled with the first blur of twilight, gave way to meaner streets and blocks of apartment flats.

Suddenly she thought of old Steiner, and for the first time she realized that he might pay the penalty of her disappearance.

"They won't believe he knows nothing," she thought. "I must go back— at once."

BECAUSE she was going to her doom, the return journey seemed much shorter. After she had leaped off the tram, she waited only a few minutes before the return car clanked along the misted road. She boarded it and then sat, sunken in depression, until brighter and more frequent lights flashed past and she realized that they were passing through the main avenues.

It was while they were waiting for the traffic signals to change color that something happened— something hideously unnatural as an evil dream, where a friend turns suddenly into an enemy. Suddenly she saw John in the street, standing on the pavement curb. Acting on impulse, she jumped from the car and ran toward him. Apparently he recognized her for he half waved to her before he hailed a taxi and was driven away.

"He can't look me in the eyes," she thought bitterly. "Well, that's told me all I want to know."

When she entered the Monopol, she was dead to sensation. Sustained by courage bred of force of habit, she smiled and chatted to acquaintances on her way through the lounge. Afterwards, she put on her overall, as usual, and helped the chef in his preparations for the dinner. When the meal was being served, she was kept busy in the restaurant, greeting old patrons, laughing at their jokes, consulting the tastes of new clients.

Again she watched the clock as the hands left the numeral eight and began to travel imperceptibly around the dial. When they reached the half hour, she knew that at any moment, she might be interrogated.

But although she expected a summons, when it came, it took her by surprise. She was listening with unfeigned interest to a stout man's account of his triplets and looking at the snaps of three super babies, when the waiter touched her arm.

"Pardon, Fräulein," he said. "A gentleman wishes to speak to you in the Lounge."

Her heart leaped and then seemed to stop as she forced herself to walk out of the restaurant. When she entered the Lounge, it was nearly deserted, so the



first person she saw was the Prussian, Von Ringner. Because her sight suddenly blurred, his figure appeared magnified and unhuman as a statue, devoid of all natural feeling.

"You asked for me," she said with desperate courage.

His smiling eyes menaced her with the terror of a cat playing with its prey.

"Fräulein," he asked softly, "who gave you that message for me?"

She moistened her lips to utter— for the first time— the lie that must be repeated, while her endurance availed, or to the end.

"I don't know. I never saw him before."

His smile broadened as he patted her shoulder.

"Wise girl," he said, "you know when to forget. Good. I will buy you something pretty."

Snapping his fingers at Edda— who produced a withered bunch of Neapolitan violets from the flower-stall— he presented them to Vivien, clicked his heels and marched out of the lounge.

SHE stood staring after him in dazed wonder as she fastened the violets to her dress. While she was fumbling with them, John passed through the revolving doors and walked towards the girls. He was the picture of a smart and larky businessman as he greeted her with a familiar grin.

"I see you've been decorated. Who's my rival? Well, I've had a successful day. What about a drink?"

As Vivien walked beside him to a table in a distant corner, he spoke to her in an undertone.

"Never run after me again in the street. It might give a wrong impression and attract unwelcome attention to yourself. I'm not safe to know intimately."

"You cut me," she reproached him.

"You? Never. I only want to protect... But I gather, from the violets, that your gentleman friend approved your discretion?"

"Yes. I can't understand it. John, I made a terrible blunder."

"I know and it's all been taken care of. Our Mr. X reported to me. It was stinking luck—the sort of thing which would happen once in a hundred times. After this, I shall have to work out a fool-proof method of identification."

"Was the nice second man Mr. X?"

"Of course. We don't mention names. He tumbled to your bluff and called the tea party off. He told me you were like an oldtimer. Nice work."

"The snag was this," went on John, "it put you on the spot. Von Ringner would know that no girl would dare play a practical joke on him and he would make it his business to find out who was behind you. I couldn't stand for that... I've been on the job all day, saving you. My hat, what a day."

"What happened?"

"Nothing much. Von Ringner and Co. turned up at 103 Postgasse, on the stroke of 8. They found it dark and shut up. A man stood in the doorway, expecting them. He pushed a parcel into Van Ringner's hand, whispered what it was and then cleared off."

"Wasn't he followed?"

"Definitely no. Von Ringner loves his stomach— and the Black Market penalties are stringent. You see I fixed up a pleasant and natural solution of the mystery. Pood. Food— the one subject about which no questions are asked."

John tossed off his drink and laughed again.

"Hell look on it as a bribe— necessarily anonymous. He'll probably connect it with the next person to hint at preferential treatment. But nothing will be said. Some other blighter will get the credit for my day's hard labor... And how. Every hour of the day. I've bought, I've begged. I've borrowed—I've even stolen. Nothing too small to swell the main amount. You must bribe handsomely or not at all."

"What was it?" asked Vivien.

"Butter."

As their laughter rang out, she looked at him with shining eyes.

"What a thrill it is," she whispered. "And you and I are in it together."

Turning to a guest who drew near— as though to share the joke— she pointed to a vile caricature of an Englishman in an illustrated paper.

"Mr. Vanderpant was showing me this funny picture," she said. "But he won't believe me when I tell him I'm English."

Then the man joined in their laughter... But the eyes of both John and Vivien were dreamy. He was thinking of the future. Some day... And she was hearing faint faraway thuds, all beating in time together.

A vast underground army was marching on to Victory.

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**30: You'll Be Surprised**

*Daytona Beach Morning Journal, Fl., 24 Dec 1943*

"SURPRISE," murmured Celia as she touched the latchkey in her coat pocket. The contact gave her a throb of delight because it anticipated the moment when she would go out of the wind and rain, into the warmth and light of home. She was rushing into her future, all unconscious of peril— a peril against which she had been duly warned....

This warning had been following her during her 10 months' theatrical tour of America, tracking her faithfully but doomed always to be one stage behind. Even at that moment it was drawing nearer to her and approaching its journey end— when it would be too late....

The railway terminus was not calculated to raise dim spirits. It was vast, ill-lit, and minus the bustle and excitement of travel which had animated it during the day. But if the platforms were deserted, the refreshment buffet was crowded with passengers surging to the counter to be served. Celia's arm was jolted, and her coffee slopped into her saucer, but she continued to smile at the young man beside her.

"Is this strange stuff English tea?" he asked.

"That old crack," groaned Celia "Typical of your mentality. You know jolly well it is coffee."

It was customary for the young American— Don Sherwood— and Celia to insult each other consistently.

It had cost Don an effort to ask his first personal question, for he knew nothing about Celia.

"Are you married?"

"Gosh, no. I share a flat with my twin sister—Cherry. You've got to be a twin yourself to know how close you are to each other. She's my other half. When she got married, even Jas couldn't maul up things between us...."

"Have you wired her you're coming?" asked Don.

"That would spoil everything. It's a tradition in our family never to write or phone.

"Sounds risky to me. How d'you know your sister will be home?"

"I know because Jas— her husband— has a government job in London."

"If I were fond of any one, I wouldn't like to go without news of her for ten months," said the young man.

"Actually, it's never been so long before," she said. "But I know Cherry is all right because we're identical twins. There's a current of sympathy between us and if she were ill or in trouble, I should feel miserable."

"I suppose we must say good-by."

"What a relief." The words were mechanical for Celia's voice trembled as she asked a question. "Will you miss me?"

Celia's hazel eyes were soft as she looked at Don's clear cut features— his firm lips and well-shaped head— as though to preserve a memory. In his turn, he gazed fondly at her— a ginger haired girl, hatless, and wearing her first fur coat.

A coat which within the next ninety minutes would be connected with in episode of unimagined horror.

"I have a reservation at a hotel," Don told her. "My first commission will be to see Madame safely home."

AS the taxi bore them through be curtain of rain, Celia realized bat they had reached a closer stage in their friendship.

"Rents are cheap because the neighborhood is going down, but it's very respectable.... We're a big family and Daddy is one of those doctors who never get paid. At home, we were always in a crowd."

"So the twins cut loose and went on the stage?" prompted Don.

"Nearly there," she told him. "This is our road."

"You girls seem to take every chance," he scolded.

He felt her shudder.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know. Something terrible seemed to rush over me."

"Well, we'll soon find out about that," said Don.

Suddenly she stopped to thrust her latchkey into his hand.

"Open the door for me," she said, "and tell me exactly what you see. I'm afraid to look."

Filled with uneasy curiosity, Don unlocked the door and pushed it ajar while Celia closed her eyes. A private house had been converted into flats and the staircase which led to the upper stories had been boarded up, with a separate entrance. Only room was left for a minute vestibule and a narrow passage on to which the rooms opened. The nearest door was set corner-wise to the lobby, whose walls were hung with grimed gilded paper. Its floor was covered with a plaited mat whose pattern was nearly rubbed off; an enormous blue jar held peacock feathers, and a tarnished brass model of a dragon reared itself on top of a sham red-lacquer antique chest.

"It's our Chinese ante-chamber.... Everything's all right. Cherry is here, for the light is on."

"You were an angel to see me home," she whispered. "Good-by, darling."

Don knew that she had forgotten him in the rapture of her homecoming, so he closed and relocked the door, mechanically slipping the key into his coat pocket.

"SURPRISE."

Celia's lips shaped the word as she peeped around the open door of the lounge, expecting to see Cherry smoking upon the divan. She looked at the tawdry black and gilt brocade suite— the purple satin curtains and the large cushions of which the girls had been so proud.

Walking on tip-toe in the hope of surprising her sister, Celia opened the door of the next room, which was hers, only to find it in darkness. The bathroom and then the kitchenette were also unlit, so there remained only the big bedroom at the end of the passage.

Celia entered it confidently, expecting to see both Cherry and James. This time she met with a double disappointment as she gazed around her at the familiar old-rose carpet, the twin beds with dusty-pink satin coverlets and the veneered walnut toilet-table with its big triple mirrors. Then she picked up from the floor a sapphire-blue velvet robe, rimmed with white fur.

She had arrived at the flat without even a dressing-bag, sure of obtaining necessities for the night from her sister.

She was still wearing the fur coat she had bought in New York—recklessly spending all her surplus salary. She took it off and opened the door of her own little room.

The light from the passage showed her an uninviting interior— a stripped bed and a clutter of clothing thrown over every surface and piece of furniture. Too careful of her new property to add it to the communal lumber, she opened one-half of the wardrobe and hung it on an empty peg.

She was entering the lounge when she was startled by a dull thud— suggestive of the fall of some heavy object. It was impossible to locate it, so she stood, listening for it to be repeated.

AS she sat and smoked her spirits began to droop from combined frustrated hope and fatigue. She was further depressed when she gazed around her with eyes which seemed to be newly-scaled. The room was more than untidy.

When she crossed over to the side table, she found evidence of further deterioration. There were too many bottles stacked amid a thick litter of cigarette-stubs, while every glass was dirty.

Too tired to wash up, she searched amid the empties in the sideboard cupboard until she found a few tiny glasses of continental origin which were reserved for best occasions.

After she had sipped a small gin and lime, she felt brighter.

Then she remembered the sudden thrill of expectation which invariably heralded their reunion and she smiled.

"Yes, at this moment Cherry is feeling very happy over me."

Even as the thought flashed across her mind. Cherry sat up in her bed at the nursing home and brushed shed her red hair back from her brow.

"Nurse," she cried, "I'm distracted about my sister."

The night nurse looked at her in surprise.

"I know she is in trouble." went Cherry. "We are identical twins and very close. It's like this. She went to America before I knew at my young gentleman was on the way. Directly after, my father-law died and left us his furnished house at Purley. Of course, I wrote her telling her our new address. But now I'm wondering if she got the letter."

"If she hasn't got it, she'll go to our old flat," she said.

"If she does, the hall porter can tell her where you live now," argued the nurse.

"There's no porter. The man who bought it made us an offer for our furniture as he was letting it out in furnished flats."

"Does your sister know about the baby?" she asked.

"No," replied Cherry— her habitual smile breaking through— "I left him out of the letter. When Celia comes to Purley, Jas is going to tell her I've broken my leg and send her on here. But now I'm afraid. I kept seeing her in a terrible tainted place— all alone and in danger."

AS though the twins had been actually talking over an invisible telephone, the word 'tainted' slipped into Celia's mind. It made her feel unclean and suggested the remedy of a bath.

"Go away at once." The warning seemed to ring in her ears. "Go before it is too late."

"Nerves," she told herself as she resolutely turned on the tap, while the dingy cell filled with steam, mercifully dimming her vision. She undressed as though she were racing against time while the sense of being an intruder grew stronger.

"I pay some of the rent, so it's my own flat," she argued.

As she soaked in the hot water, the teasing feeling that she might be surprised destroyed any sense of relaxation and further stimulated her brain to unpleasant activity.

"It doesn't add up," she decided. "Cherry is too thrifty to go out and leave lights burning. Besides, she's untidy but she's not dirty. This place is filthy.

"I'll wear Cherry's robe," she thought with a pleasing memory of the warmth of its quilted satin lining.

When she reached the big pink bedroom, she went first to the toilet--table and combed out her ginger curls.

"Cherry's changed her makeup," she reflected. "Why, what's this? Has she dyed her hair?"

Although it was possible that Cherry had become a temporary brunette, an unpleasant suspicion began to shape in her mind. Hoping to disprove it, she rushed to the wardrobe which was crammed with clothes.

The first frock she saw told her the truth.

"That's not Cherry's frock. She's terrified of green. Nothing would induce her to wear it.... This isn't her flat any longer. The furniture is ours but strangers are living here.... Horrible strangers.... I must get away at once."

Half sobbing from lack of breath, she wriggled into her frock and then looked around for her precious fur coat. Rushing down the passage in a fury of impatience to escape, she burst through the door and tugged at the wardrobe... The next second she stifled a scream at the sight of a stiff white shape which had toppled sideways from the enclosed half of the clothes closet and was now propped up against her coat. It looked wedged into position, but as the door swung open wider, lack of support caused it to fall outwards.

Its chill and rigidity told her that it was a dead body and for a ghastly second she feared it might be Cherry. Her relief was almost overpowering when she exposed the henna-tinted hair of a middle-aged woman whose congested face and protruding eyes proclaimed that she had been strangled.

"Murder," gasped Celia.

In spite of the waves of terror which rolled over her, her brain still functioned and she held on to one clear purpose— to escape. Only a few yards divided her from the front door but— before she could reach the corridor, she shrank back into the room, just as a man entered the flat.

HE was tall, bull-necked and broad-shouldered and he wore country clothes— baggy plus-fours and a belted tweed coat. He turned into the lounge, but— to her dismay— he left its door open, so that he could see any one who entered or left the apartment.

Suddenly two persons— a woman and a young man— entered the flat.

"Where the hell have you been?" growled the big man.

"Chasing Ronnie round the locals," explained the woman, speaking with what Celia termed 'coal in her throat.'

Celia was beginning to conclude that they could know nothing of their ghastly tenant, when Ronnie spoke nonchalantly. "Who's the stiff?"

"Fricker's maid," replied the big man. "Came here all browned off and grumbling about not enough pie."

The big man turned to Ronnie. "Can you shift her? Got a car?"

"Can do," said the youth obligingly. "Pinched a Fiat yesterday. I'll run it round at two precisely, pick up the lady and shove it into the river from the first wharf. Tide should be about high."

Celia's knees shook as she listened, for the name of 'Fricker' had given her the clue to the identity of the people in the next room. During the homeward voyage, she had heard a brief radio announcement of the murder of Lady Fricker—a well known society hostess, notorious for her jewels. The pick of these had been stolen and their owner strangled, presumably to get the string of pearls she wore always, to preserve their virtue.

"They can't stay cooped up for hours on end," Celia reasoned. "The woman will go into her room and the men will wander."

As though to strengthen her hope, Ronnie spoke to his companions.

"Got a date. I'll be seeing you. Two sharp. Time for a quick one."

Biting her lip, Celia heard him cross over to the table where she had left her glass.

"It's only one more dirty one," she thought. "He won't notice it." The big man didn't.

Unfortunately its small size attracted the attention of the youth.

"What's the idea of thimbles?" he grumbled. "Holding back on your pals?"

"Well." The woman's thick voice choked in her surprise. "Where did that come from?"

"Search me." The youth sniffed noisily. "Some one's used it. Who's been here?"

"Only the Frenchy. We locked up when we went out to collect you."

SUDDENLY the front door-bell rang loudly. There was an urgency in its peal which filled Celia with hope.

"Don't answer it."

"Fool," said the big man contemptuously. "One might think you had something to hide."

Peeping through the crack, Celia watched him open the front door. The next second she felt electrified with joy at the sound of Don's voice.

"May I speak to Miss Steel?"

"Sorry," said the big man. "Afraid you've come to the wrong flat I'll ask my missus." He raised his voice. "My dear, do you know any one name of 'Steel' living in the building?"

"Yes," called the woman. "They had this flat before us. Two girls in the profession."

"Well, I guess she's moved since she gave me the address," he remarked, speaking with a stressed American accent "Like a dame. Sorry. So long."

"Don never spoke with that accent," Celia reasoned.

She realized that she was now in even graver danger when the big man returned to the lounge.

"I'm wondering about that dame he was chasing," he said. "Some one's been drinking out of that glass."

"I'll look 'round," said the woman.

"Bath's full of water and the light is on," she panted. "She's been here all right."

Stimulated by the urgency of her plight Celia's brain began to race. She knew that she must act swiftly and play 'Simple Sailor' with all the histrionic talent she possessed. But first of all it was vital for her to reach the big bedroom before the woman went on with her search. She must make them believe that she had fallen asleep and knew nothing about the murdered woman in the small room.

"If they know I've been here, I'm sunk," she told herself

TAKING a chance, she sped noiselessly down the passage to the big room and dashed to the nearest of the twin beds. After rucking up the silk spread and punching a hollow in the pillow, she dragged on the blue velvet robe over her frock, since there was no time to change. Then, with a feeling that she was going to enter a tiger's cage, she rushed into the lounge, shouting her sister's name.

"Cherry! Cherry!"

"Cheerio, people. I suppose you're pals of Cherry's. Where is the old girl? Tight as usual? I'm just back from the States and I've come straight from the railway station."

She got no response to her overture as they continued to stare at her with a cold impersonal gaze.

"My robe," the woman shouted. "Take it off, you— You've stolen my perfume, too. What are you doing in my flat?"

"Your flat?" asked Celia. "Do you mean my sister and her hubby aren't living here now? O, my godfather, it looks as if I'd made a mistake. Listen, people."

She told them the story of the actual facts, hoping desperately that its truth would make it convincing, even while she tried to pose as a hard-boiled gold digger.

"Ta for the lend," she said coolly. "Well, I must be toddling. My mother told me not to stay out late."

The men neither removed their eyes from her face nor moved from their positions, leaving it to the woman to protest.



"No, sister, it's not as simple as that. We got to know more about you. What else have you helped yourself to?"

"Frisk me and find out," said Celia, grateful for the education of the screen.

"You bet your life I will. But first you've got to tell me where you've been and what you've done here."

"Let's think." Celia puckered her brow. "Well, I had a drink or two— and a smoke or two— and a bath. Only one bath. Then I went to Cherry's room and had a lay down on her bed, and did a spot of shut-eye. I woke up when I heard my Yank ask for me at the front door."

Celia spoke casually, but she remembered Ronnie's argument that her silence was proof of ignorance and she felt that she was playing her trump card. She noticed the swift interchange of the men's glances although the woman appeared unimpressed.

"I'll check up on that," she said.

Left with the two men, Celia was conscious of a difference in their manner. She was sure that she had convinced them that she had blundered in by mistake and that her glaring indifference to discovery was proof of her lack of guilty knowledge.

"Didn't you want to see your Yank again?" asked the big man.

"You bet I'm going to see him." said Celia. "This is the lowdown. I'm aiming to marry the guy and I thought the robe would give him the wrong impression."

The big man nodded to Ronnie who gave her a playful slap.

"Clear out," he said. "Make it snappy."

Celia could hardly believe in her good fortune. In another minute she would be out of the terrible flat rushing to the shelter of the police station. Rushing down the passage, the woman gripped her arm and wrenched her away from the front door.

"Your mother wouldn't like you to get wet," she said with heavy sarcasm. "Where's your coat, dearie?"

"I— I haven't one," stammered Celia.

"Where's your coat?" persisted the woman. "You told us you came straight from the station. You couldn't make a journey with no coat."

"Of course not," Celia's brain whirled as she lied clumsily. "I must have left it in the taxi."

"Why did you take it off in the taxi?" asked the youth, with a leer. "Too hot in December?"



"Don't be a sap." Celia felt as though she were left to carry on the show in a blazing theater. "I told you I was going to marry the guy. I've sold him the yarn I'm a doctor's daughter and been to High school."

"And that's exactly what you are, dear," said the woman— poisoned honey in her voice. "You've been putting on an act. You know where your coat is. You know it is hanging in the wardrobe in the next room.... So you know what else is there...."

THE silence that followed was broken only by the beating of the rain against the window. Staring at the impassive faces, Celia found it difficult to believe in her fate.

"So what?" asked the woman.

"I must make the party for two," said the youth indifferently.

Celia had an agonized recollection of the purple face and bulging eyes of the murdered maid who was to be her fellow guest at the "party:" but even as the picture— which forecast her own end— flashed through her brain, the big man's arm shot out, cracking her on the jaw....

Darkness fell. She knew that she was dead, for she felt the wire biting into her throat: and then she saw stale river water bubbling up past a glass prison.... But instead of the peace of the grave, there was pandemonium all around her— shouts, blows, curses, and once, the sound of a shot Then— as she struggled back from annihilation to reality, she became aware of a whirling confusion. Gradually, as her brain cleared, she saw a wrecked room— men in uniform— and lastly, Don. She felt his arm around her as he pressed a glass to her lips.

"Throw it back," he invited.

She obeyed, although her jaw was swelling rapidly and a tooth felt loose.

"What happened?" she mumbled.

"I pocketed your latch-key by mistake," he told her. "When I found it, I thought I ought to bring it back at once. Didn't seem too safe to mail it, apart from the waste of time. Then the chap told me you were not at the flat, but I could see your bag lying behind the dragon on the chest.... Well, I knew if I started anything, they'd only plug both of us. So I put on a dishonest-to-goodness American accent hoping to fool you, in case you were listening, and I went off to collect reinforcements. We had the key so we were able to take them by surprise and that started the party. And what a party."

As he paused, a young constable— whose blackened eyes gave him an oddly glamorous appearance— crossed to the divan.

"Are you ready to tell us what happened, miss?" he asked.

Aware that she was about to present the C.I.D. with the Fricker murder gang on a platter, Celia spoke with stressed nonchalance— chiefly to keep herself from bursting into tears.

"Don't waste time on me. Just go into the next room and see what's inside the wardrobe.... You'll be surprised."

**End**