PAST MASTERS 205

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

3 March 2025

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1: The Necklace of the Nine Gems

Ambrose Pratt

1874-1944

Manuscripts: a Miscellany of Art and Letters (Adelaide), Feb 1933

SURINDA RAMA, 27th Sultan of Yannan, had no sooner been invested at Ayudhia with the Sacred and Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems (which as everybody knows is exclusively conferred upon reigning Buddhist princes) than he scandalized the Buddhist world by paying a visit to Surasthra, the apostate Sultan of Malangor who, no more than six months earlier, and repudiated the Lotus-Crowned and espoused the Mohammedan faith.

A few easy-going Pramats here and there were disposed to make excuses for Surinda Rama, knowing him a young man of feeble character entirely dominated by his chief wife—a sister of the Sultan of Malangor. But the majority of Buddhists turned aside or veiled their faces when Surinda's name was mentioned and when, on the third day of his sojourn at Latongkha, Surasthra's capital, it was announced that Surinda's necklace of the Nine Gems had been stolen from the Royal Palace, twenty million followers of the Lord Gautama were soon busily muttering that a divine and well-deserved judgment had befallen the Sovereign of Yannan.

The British population of Latongkha, however, voted the divine judgment a nuisance, for suspicion fell presently upon a member of their nation, a young carpenter named Anson, who had been carrying out some repair work at Surasthra's Palace at the time of the theft; and when Anson proved his innocence these suspicions, by reason of the oblique processes of Oriental reasoning, were promptly transferred to all other members of the white race living in, or within fifty miles of, the capital— including the British Resident himself.

The High Ones in the Palace were less foolish than the whisperers in the bazaars, but when they had thrice whipped their body servants without result the affair assumed a mysterious complexion, and white and brown alike began to feel uncomfortable. When no houses in the city remained to be searched, the British Resident sent to Singapore for a detective, who debated the matter wisely for the space of three days, and then departed whence he came, leaving behind him the trite counsel that if Surinda Rama desired to recover his necklace he must offer absolution and a great reward!

Thus it came about that a proclamation printed in three languages was posted along the highways of Malangor proffering 50,000 ticals to any ''finder" of the Nine Gems and promising immunity from punishment should the finder chance to be the thief.

Next morning, soon after dawn, two men in khaki emerged from a narrow jungle track on the southern outskirts of Latongkha and were about to cross the Pei Ho Road to plunge into the forest beyond, when their attention was attracted by the poster. Arthur Timms, an out-of-luck Australian mining engineer, then serving as an assistant surveyor to the contractors for the new railway from Latongkha to Lahine, read the proclamation with wide-eyed astonishment. "An elephant of a reward to offer for a necklace with only nine gems!" he exclaimed. "In round figures £5,000 sterling! Must be some gems, what?"

His companion and employer, John Frome, an elderly person with hard eyes and a permanently sneering mouth, shrugged his shoulders. "Probably paste," he said drily; "but sacred paste. The necklace has a religious significance far above its market value. The Sultan would stand shamed before his subjects if he returned to Yannan without it. Enough of loitering, Timms, get a move on or we shall find all the coolies asleep in the rentice."

Plodding at the heels of his boss, Arthur Timms gave himself up to vain and rather acrid thoughts. Were it his luck to find Sultan Surinda's necklace he would be able to discard an odious job, to rid himself of a tyrannical taskmaster and to return to God's own country and the sweetest girl on earth. Five years toiling in the jungles of Malaya and on the hot plains of Saigon had imbued him with a smouldering detestation of the tropics; and five weeks of service in John Frome's construction camp had filled his cup of bitterness to overflowing. He became acutely conscious of two master passions as he trudged along the dank and dripping path: love of Mary Wharton, and hatred of John Frome— whose cynical face he longed to strike as often as he looked upon it. Vaguely he contrasted these emotions and not for the first time realized that for several days past the first had held the second in restraint. But would it always function as a brake? John Frome was growing nastier in proportion as the monsoon season receded, and he had begun of late to use a tone to his subordinates difficult for any but a hardy sycophant to brook. No doubt fever was to some extent responsible— anyone could see that the fellow was sick— but not even sickness could excuse his constant taunting references to Timms' subservient position, and the gratitude owed to one who had given employment to another and a failure, out of charity. Timms had been sincerely grateful to Frome once; but it seemed centuries ago. The older man's recent conduct had completely blotted out the sentiment.

Suddenly they passed into a wide clearing, formerly a cultivated settlement, that was now being rapidly submerged by secondary jungle. Near the opposite boundary of the still open space forty-odd natives were squatting or lolling in the shade of a mighty rain tree.

"What did I tell you!" barked Frome, halting in his stride to glare back at his assistant. "Let me see you use the rotan, Timms! Sons of bitches, they are lazier than— lizards— or Australians. Hey, what the hell are you up to, Timms?"

The younger man had turned abruptly from the path and was standing before a dense thorn tree at which he stared intently, apparently oblivious of his master's voice. Following his glance, Frome saw a flutter of black and white amid the foliage.

"I felt sure when we passed here last night it was a bird," Timms called. "The poor thing is caught among the thorns. Looks as though it has been stuck there for days. At its last gasp, I'd say; but it's still alive."

"Easy on, old chap." He was now speaking to the imprisoned bird. "I'll have you out in a brace of shakes."

John Frome saw red. "Timms," he yelled, "I don't pay you to waste my company's time tending sick birds in thorn bushes. You heard me give you an order. Get to it pronto, or take your time!"

Timms also saw red. "I'll take my time all right, you blasted wolf hound," he retorted unamiably.

"Call at the camp this evening for your cheque, you rotten waster, and don't ask me for a reference!"

"I will so, Frome, and I'll pay what I owe you when I come."

Frome scornfully swung on his heel and moved off towards the coolies who were all now working as diligently as ants.

Timms, shaking with wrath, turned to the bird to find he had sacrificed his job for a dying crow: nay, for a crow already dead, for when presently he drew its body from the prickly branches it had gasped forth its last breath. But Timms was too excited to philosophize. He held in his hands not merely the corpse of a crow, but that which had ensnared the bird in the thorn tree and sentenced it to a lingering death— a slender chain of platinum and gold, starred with nine large greenly glinting gems.

Timms forbore to call at the construction camp for his wages. He was afraid of what he might say or do to Frome. He experienced no difficulty in collecting the Sultan's reward, and the next outgoing boat from Penang conveyed him, a happy passenger, to Australia, where he eventually married one Mary Wharton, and is doing so well in business that he sometimes contemplates indulging the luxury of a coat of arms. The design, naturally, would include a crow, couchant, in a field of emerald.

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2: You Can't Touch Dotty

James Hilton

1900-1954

Collier's Weekly, 1 Oct 1938

JOHN CRESSWELL was forty-two, a New Yorker, good-looking, quiet-mannered, cultured, sensitive-minded. He was also, rather surprisingly, a bachelor. Perhaps even more surprisingly (though why, after all?), he was an accountant. You left him alone in a room with a sufficient number of books and papers, and in a week or less he'd locate a missing million in the TVA or a missing nickel in the Standard Oil Company. Therefore, when a New York bank sent him to Hollywood to inquire into the affairs of Suprematone Pictures Incorporated, it did not take him long to reach the embarrassing question: "What about Dorothy Perkins?"

Embarrassing, at any rate, to Mr. Mengelberg, head of Suprematone, for he replied: "Oh, my goodness, you can't touch Dotty."

"Why not?"

"Well, you just can't. She's... she's... well, you know who she is."

Cresswell knew, of course, but the knowledge did not entirely satisfy him. He glanced down at the salary list, confirming that the noughts after Miss Perkins' name were really four and not three. "I should like to meet Miss Perkins," he said quietly.

Mr. Mengelberg, who always agreed with everybody about everything and then went away to act on his own with completely random inconsistency (this had earned him a reputation for tact, quick decision and independence of mind), nodded suavely. "Of course you shall, Mr. Cresswell. And please understand that I welcome this investigation— unreservedly. I want you to meet everybody, ask questions, go everywhere you like... But there's just this snag— if our folks once suspect what you really are, they'll shut up like clams— every one of 'em, from stars down to script girls. So you see how it is?"

"I don't need to meet everybody. But Miss Perkins—"

"Of course. All the same, we want to have things *looking* right, so I've an idea... we'll put you in an office with your name over the door and a secretary... Why, yes... with your accent— English, isn't it?"

"I didn't know I had one."

"Well, the idea's all right, anyhow. You're a visiting producer. From Europe. England. You were with Korda. Everybody's been with Korda, or else Korda's been with everybody— it's the perfect alibi... Gee, that's an idea— see how things come to me?— just like a flash... you'll have a sort of roving commission— go anywhere you like... Now don't tell me you don't know anything about pictures— you don't have to. Ideas, Mr. Cresswell— that's what

counts in this industry. There's no science in it, and not much art as yet, and only as much sense as you could scoop up on a fly's leg. But ideas— why, a good idea can shoot you sky-high any day of the week. See how it is?"

Mr. Cresswell did not entirely see. But he saw a little during his first week in a studio office, during which time he compiled an itemized report to take to Mr. Mengelberg. The two had lunch together with the report on the table between them.

"...considerable wastage of office stationery. For instance, Mr. Mengelberg, I asked for some long envelopes. They brought me a box containing a thousand. Fifty would have been ample...

"...the telephone also. When I visited one of the writers in his office he was talking to his mother in Terre Haute. Quite a long private call...

"...and the spring-water coolers. I don't know why they should be necessary— in New York we drink the city water without harm— but if they are, surely one on each floor is enough..."

Mr. Mengelberg nodded sagely. "Very valuable, Mr. Cresswell. All these things shall be looked into immediately. We'll put a stop to these fellers phoning their mothers... I hope your bank is satisfied that, on the basis of your report, we shall do our best to..."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Mengelberg. That's only the first page of the report." He turned it over. "Now we come to a somewhat larger matter." He paused and asked again that somewhat embarrassing question: "What about Dorothy Perkins?"

Mr. Mengelberg smiled. "She's joining us for coffee in a few minutes. I'll leave the two of you together, then you can ask her any questions you like."

"That's kind of you, but really, you know, the question I'd most like to ask is one that I can hardly put directly to her."

"No?"

"Tell me frankly. Is Miss Perkins worth ten thousand dollars a week?"

"You couldn't get her for less."

"I'm afraid that's not quite the point."

"Look here, Cresswell, I know you're A-1 at the efficiency game, but you can't play it quite the same in a picture studio as in a bank. You're dealing with human beings, Cresswell, not figures in a book. And Dotty Perkins is a human being—"

"I don't deny that. I only suggest—"

"Why, man, she's our biggest star! Don't you know that? Don't you realize what Dotty is— she's a— she's a household word! Folks think of her like they think of— of George Washington or... or..."

"Al Capone?"

"Yeah, Al Capone if you like. You couldn't build up names like that by ten million dollars' worth of advertising! Even the picture industry don't make 'em like that any more! Here today and gone tomorrow, all these new stars; but Dotty and Chaplin and Garbo and Crawford and a few others— those are the names the public don't forget. Why, if Suprematone didn't have her, what *would* we have? And she's loyal, Dotty is— she wouldn't go anywhere else except for more money, and she knows we pay the top prices."

Cresswell digested most of this with a gulp. Then he said: "Tell me something about her— and her career. How did she begin?"

"From the bottom up— like all of us. Drugstore gal in some place. Made her first big hit in *Waste*."

"When?"

"Oh, ten or twelve years ago. *Waste* was one of the last of the big silents."

"And it was a success?"

"Success? It hit the ceiling for two million dollars. And then Dotty wrote another just like it called *Want*, and that made another million."

"You say she *wrote* it?"

"Oh, yes. Dotty used to write her own stuff. Of course she don't do it now— we have the best writing team in the whole industry working for her."

"She's versatile, then."

"Versatile?"

"I mean, she can do a good many different things."

"Oh, you bet she can. I tell you, Dotty's been pretty near everything in this industry except the cop at the gate. She and I knew Hollywood Boulevard when it ended up in a trail through orange groves."

"That doesn't make her so young."

"Or so old, either. You wait'll you meet her. You'll be surprised."

It was a true forecast, for when Mr. Cresswell met Miss Perkins a few minutes later he was surprised. She was not quite like anything he had expected— if, indeed, he had expected anything definite at all except the kind of face that leers from the front covers of film-fan magazines. He was immediately aware of something— of a slightly inane roguishness in the way she greeted him, of a silly little giggle between her deeply scarlet lips, of a queer schoolgirlish charm lingering behind the desperate efforts of a woman of forty to look twenty years younger. Though he didn't realize it until a subsequent meeting, he fell in love with her instantly; and she was the first woman he had ever fallen in love with— all the rest had been girls when he had been a young man.

AS soon as Mr. Mengelberg left them together she started off: "Oh, Mr. Cresswell, I'm so glad to meet you— I've always admired your work— Alex never stopped talking to me about you..."

"Alex?"

"Alex Korda... isn't he a dear? Mengy said you worked with him in England. Funny we never met there, isn't it? I love London— the Savoy Grill and all the cute little streets— don't you love them too? I can't tell you how glad I am we're going to work together at last. Why don't you dine at my house tonight and we can discuss things in comfort?"

He thought: You're an awful little liar, but I really don't mind accepting your invitation... He actually said: "That's kind of you. Thanks. But since we're here, let's begin talking now. This new picture of yours— I wish you'd tell me something about it."

Dotty arranged her pocketbook and gloves on the table before her, sipped coffee, giggled, and began: "You see, Mr. Cresswell, you're an Englishman— you wouldn't know much about our Civil War. It was between the North and the South. The South believed in slavery, but it was all very romantic, and the North was right, but wasn't romantic at all— so there you are, you have your background. I'm a beautiful girl of the South— her father has a plantation— slaves, of course, but he's always kind to them— and she falls in love with a Northern boy who's down there on business— falls passionately in love— not anything sexy, you know, but just passionate— then the war starts and the boy has to go back and fight for the North. Meanwhile the girl meets another boy, a Southerner, and is just about to marry him when the Northern boy gets wounded in battle near the plantation and is carried into her house to die. But he doesn't die—"

"I suspected all along he mightn't."

"Well, naturally, he couldn't, could he? She nurses him back to health and eventually—"

"...marries him..."

"...after a lot of old-fashioned objections from her family, but at length they consent and the happy pair..."

"Yes, I know. But what about the darkies?"

"Oh, there's a chorus of them. They sing plantation melodies."

"And there's a comic darky married to a very fat mammy..."

"You've read the script already?"

"What I really want to know is the idea behind the picture— if there is one."

She laughed. "Dinner is at seven. Not dress. There won't be anyone else."

ACTUALLY, when the time came, there wasn't even Dotty. About eight o'clock, when Cresswell had drunk three cocktails by himself, she telephoned the house from the studio and offered profuse apologies— she was still working on the picture and couldn't get away till ten or thereabouts. Would he care to wait? He said, well no, he didn't think he would— he usually went to bed early— perhaps some other time.

That evening, feeling a little put out, he was better able to attempt a coldly scientific assessment of her value to Suprematone Pictures. He arrived at a full and frank recognition of a fact that had occurred to him as likely even from the beginning— viz.: that Dorothy Perkins was not worth ten thousand dollars a week. Few people in the world were, he conceded: but among those doubtful few there was not even the benefit of a doubt for Dotty.

Wherefore, being an honest man as well as a shrewd accountant, he said the following morning: "This question of Miss Perkins, Mr. Mengelberg..."

"Well?"

"Ten thousand a week is a lot of money. It's just about what I earn in a year."

Mr. Mengelberg looked somewhat shocked by this confession— it seemed to give him a new and poignant interest in Mr. Cresswell. He answered: "I grant you it's not a bad little pay check. But I tell you frankly, if *that's* what you're driving at, I'd rather take a cut in my own salary than suggest one in Dotty's... well, *almost*."

"That's *not* quite what I'm driving at. May I tell you exactly what's in my mind?"

"Sure."

"I've come to the conclusion you've been losing money on Miss Perkins for years."

"But— but—" Mr. Mengelberg spluttered feebly while Cresswell waited: presently he added: "But— you can't say that— maybe some of her pictures haven't been as good as others— but— but— don't you realize?— we've built her up! She's one of our chief assets—"

"I'd call her your chief liability."

"But— but— why?"

"Hardly my job to explain. I'm not a judge of acting. But, as you yourself know, the Perkins pictures don't make profits. And that means that Miss Perkins not only isn't worth ten thousand a week— she's not worth *ten* a week! At least, as a complete stranger to Hollywood and Hollywood finance, that's how it seems to me."

"See here... what have you got against Dotty?"

"Nothing at all, personally. Far from it. I like her. In fact, I think she's charming— *off* the screen."

"She must be charming *on* the screen, or how d'you suppose she ever became a star?"

"I don't know. Public taste changes. I suppose people expect something more sophisticated than the stuff that made Miss Perkins famous ten years ago."

Mr. Mengelberg listened attentively. He always listened attentively to anyone who talked about what the public wanted, because he didn't know himself and always hoped that somebody else might let out the highly lucrative secret. After a moment's reflection he replied, in a somewhat chastened voice: "Maybe you're right, Cresswell. Sophisticated stuff is the goods. I think I'll throw out those two writers and put Lushington on for a few weeks."

"Another writer?"

"Oh, no, he don't write. Just thinks up gags."

"To come back to the point, Mr. Mengelberg... as you know, I'm in some sense a servant of the bank— what I mean is, they'll probably act on any advice I give them. So that it would be— don't you think?— far better if what has to be done is done tactfully. You realize that Miss Perkins' option comes up for renewal next month?"

Mengelberg stared hard for a moment, then said: "You don't really mean that? That we should let Dotty go?"

"I do mean it."

"But... but what about the picture she's working on now?"

"Scrap it if it hasn't gone too far. If it has, finish it off as quickly and cheaply as you can. You'll lose less that way."

"You don't think it's so good, then?"

"I'm no judge, but if you want my opinion, I think it's downright bad."

Mengelberg scratched his head. "Funny... I thought it sounded all right when Dotty told me about it."

"She could make a bus timetable sound all right if she talked about it privately— I'm quite aware of that. Unfortunately, that's not what you pay her a salary for..."

"Yes. I get you. I suppose you're right. But I'm sorry for the gal. She's a human being. It'll be a blow to her."

Cresswell tried to remember that there were millions of unemployed in the country, and that therefore the cruelest blows of all were not those suffered by a woman faced with compulsory idleness after earning half a million dollars a year for over a decade.

NEVERTHELESS it *wasn't* easy to engineer the professional demise of the woman he was beginning to fall in love with, and perhaps for that reason it was just as well that Cresswell had delivered his ultimatum to Mengelberg before his first dinner with Dotty at her Beverly Hills mansion. It was the first of many. They had, he soon discovered, many kindred interests as well as nicely complementary personalities. She liked to gossip, he liked to listen. To his relief, she didn't ask him much about his picture experiences in England, but she led him gently on to talk of the things that he really knew about— books and politics and business and world affairs.

He found, to his surprise, that though she had many acquaintances, there were few intimacies in her present life, whatever there might have been in her past. Perhaps that was because Hollywood was so young, young enough to think of her as old. Once she said: "Marie Dressier and Will Rogers and John Gilbert... *they* were my friends. How can I feel the same about Power and Taylor and that Rainer girl? They wouldn't feel the same about me, anyway. On the screen they think I'm a ham, and off it they think I'm a grandmother. I am too, for that matter. I never told you, did I? I was first married when I was sixteen and my boy's just married and had another boy— so I heard the other day. He's an aviator somewhere in South America— Paraguay or Uruguay, I never can remember which."

Upon the thought of Dotty as a grandmother came perhaps obtusely to Cresswell the realization that he had been in love with her ever since their first meeting. Of course it was absurd. He knew that. An accountant in love with a movie star! Anyhow, he told himself, it didn't and couldn't matter, because in a week's time he would be back in New York.

Afterward Dotty became serious. "John," she said, offering him coffee and cognac in front of a crackling fire, "I'm going to give up the screen after this picture. Do you know that?"

He felt appallingly traitorous, but thought again, as his heart guiltily pounded, of the millions of unemployed.

She went on: "As a matter of fact, Mengy won't take up my option next month. I know that. It means I'm through. I don't think any other studio wants me— at any price. It's all or nothing with people like me. But of course I don't really have to worry. Probably, when I get used to it, I'll be happier than I've been for a long time. All I want is a little house in the country— one maid— I can manage all the rest by myself. There must be lots of little places where I could find something to suit me. Do you think I could afford it?"

He said, gravely and with a touch of irony, that he felt sure she could.

She went on, looking at him with tear-filled eyes: "John, you've been so kind to me... I wonder if you could spare a few minutes to help me figure out how I stand?"

"You mean financially?"

She handed him pencil and paper from a nearby table. "Yes, dear. Something tells me you're good at arithmetic."

"Certainly I'll help you," he answered, disguising his discomfort under a poker-face mask.

"Of course you know my salary. I dare say you think it's a lot, and so it is, but half of it goes out straightaway in taxes. Then there's over a thousand a week in wages— maids, gardeners, secretaries, agents, and so on. I've got some old aunts and uncles in Missouri I send money to— and then there are special police and bodyguards and insurance and what not... Heavens, I'll be able to economize when I leave here, won't I?"

He said he hoped so.

"I always knew I'd have to retire some day, but I never thought I'd get fired." She giggled. "Well, that's what it practically amounts to. I like to call things by their proper names. And people too."

She looked at him, still with those tear-filled eyes even though she was laughing, and under their gaze he felt himself flushing brick-red. Something inside him made him reply in a rush of words: "Dotty, before we go any further... I want you to know the truth... from me... rather than from others after I've gone... I'm not an English producer at all— I'm an accountant from a New York bank sent here to investigate the studio finances."

She stared into the fire. He waited nervously for her to speak. At last she said: "Of course I've known that for some time."

"What?"

"It was sweet of you to try to hide it from me, though."

"What?"

"Might have been embarrassing— for both of us— if we hadn't pretended. Of course it doesn't matter now."

He stammered: "You really are an extraordinary person, Dotty. You'll forgive me for saying it, but if you were half as charming on the screen as you are off it, I'd tell Mengelberg you were worth a million a week."

"Thank you, dear. And now you'll go on helping me about my position, will you?"

"Of course."

She went on: "Coming back to the money question. You know, when I first began in pictures, I could really save— I used to buy stocks and apartment houses and diamonds and things. But I was cleaned out of most of the stocks in

'twenty-nine, and I had to sell the diamonds to pay for losses on the apartment houses. I don't believe I'm worth very much now. I've got a ranch in the valley, but nobody wants it, because the place simply eats its head off in expenses. Oh, and I've got an oil well somewhere— at least, I used to have— maybe they've pulled it down, and a Goya that's worth ten thousand or so. There it is."

She switched a light over a picture on the opposite wall. Cresswell moved over to look at it. After a few seconds he came back. "I'm sorry to tell you, Dotty, it isn't a Goya."

"No? Gee, the man swore it was— you just can't trust anybody nowadays. Well, anyhow, leave it out of count." She went to a bureau and unlocked a drawer. "There's some stocks here— some of 'em may be all right. Do you think I could raise a hundred thousand on the lot?"

After a few minutes of scrutiny Cresswell answered:

"I'm afraid they're worth very much less than that."

"I might have guessed it, mightn't I?"

"Haven't you got any real estate anywhere?"

"Only the ranch, and some corner lots on Pico. All mortgaged."

"I suppose you own this house, though!"

"No— just rented. Six hundred a month. And when I leave I suppose they'll bill me for a couple of thousand for dilapidations. They always do."

"Why?"

"Oh, it's a sort of racket."

"It's not fair."

"I suppose people think it's not fair I should earn as much as I do."

"No reason why you should be victimized, anyhow. Don't pay."

"Then they'll sue, and I can't afford any more court actions."

"Any more?"

"Well, you see, there's a man suing me for fifty thousand, but I think my attorney'll settle for five or so— he says my dog bit him and he's had neurasthenia ever since."

"Another racket?"

"Well, no, not exactly. My dog did bite him. He always bites men with mustaches. But as a rule it doesn't cost me more than a thousand to settle. This fellow's just being obstinate about his neurasthenia."

Cresswell looked doubtful. She smiled and went on: "I don't care. I've had my fun. But I had most of it years ago when everything in Hollywood was on a shoestring. Doing your outdoor scenes on actual street pavements— making up most of the stuff as you went along... somehow one kept fresh, that way. I

got a hundred a week, and every one of those dollars I could have exchanged for gold— that's what money was worth in those days."

"A pity you didn't exchange them for gold."

"I did, for a time. But when Roosevelt said we all had to turn it in, I didn't want to, and then I got scared when it said in the papers they'd search our safe deposits, so I let a man take it into Mexico for me— he said he could change it into English pounds, but he didn't come back... I guess he just sold me another Goya."

Cresswell poured himself out a second glass of brandy. "Of course," he said, "what you need is somebody to look after you."

"Well, I've had enough people to do that in my time— d'you know my attorney says I owe him thirty-two thousand dollars?"

"What for?"

"Some case I had two years ago against an agent."

Something rushed suddenly, effervescently and uncontrollably to Cresswell's head. "Supposing I asked you to marry me, Dotty?"

"Darling! You don't mean it!"

"I did, but if you think it's too ridiculous of me even to have thought of it, please forgive me."

"*Forgive* you? Dearest, you... you don't know how I adore you!"

"You *ador*e me?"

"I adored you right from the moment I met you in Mengy's private lunch-room. I said to myself, 'That's the sort of man I'd marry if he weren't in the picture business.' So you can imagine how I felt when I found you weren't."

"But... But..."

"You see, dear, you're so dependable. That means such a lot— you've no idea. With you I wouldn't have any more worries about whether the new cameraman knows how to hide that bad left profile I have, and whether my publicity man is doing me more harm than good, and whether I was gypped over that page ad in the trade paper, and whether it's the cook who steals caviar out of the icebox—"

"Darling..."

"Of course I'm forgetting the chief reason of all— I love you. I always love funny people— I was once crazy about a snake charmer in a circus... I do love you, John. And that's just why I wouldn't marry you. You don't want to have the bother of a person like me— you don't want to have me depending on you all the time."

"I think you'd do that very nicely in some little house outside New York— say in White Plains or Scarsdale— that is, if you didn't mind being a

commuter's wife and doing without caviar. Maybe, though, we could afford *one* car... how many have you?"

"Four... And— we almost forgot!... there's the income tax."

"Income tax?"

"They haven't yet settled what I have to pay for Nineteen-thirty- three, -four, and -five. It might make you bankrupt, darling."

All Cresswell said, while he kissed her, was:

"You seem to have led the untidiest life of anyone I've ever met, Dotty. But you've found the right person in me, my dear— I happen to be an expert on income tax."

"I think you're wonderful. And I'd love a tidy life myself if only someone would make it tidy and keep it tidy for me."

"I will, I promise you. When will you marry me?"

"Are you sure you want me to, darling? I'll have to finish that damned picture first."

FINISHING the picture kept Dotty very busy during the next few weeks. Cresswell returned to New York, his mission ended, and every day came Dotty's scribbled report on what was happening. It was quite clear to Cresswell, reading between her lines, that Mengelberg was making every possible economy in production and winding up the whole enterprise as speedily as possible. This had been Cresswell's advice and he was glad to think it was being followed.

"Mengy's turned off the writing team and we're making the scripts we already have do— there seems to be about forty of them, so there's plenty of stuff to choose from. And he's put off that French director I didn't like and he's doing most of the directing himself— as a matter of fact he takes my advice in quite a lot of things, he's being such a dear."

Then, a few days later: "We came to some new stuff today that wasn't in any of the scripts and I sat down on the set and scribbled out a scene that Mengy liked a lot— it was kind of human, he said."

Cresswell smiled as he read on. So she was entering the economy crusade with a vengeance? Well, well, no harm in that— it didn't very much matter what happened to the picture so long as it ended quickly. "Quite like old times, John," she wrote. "I've re-written some of the scenes in the plantation house— I never did like the way those writers wrote 'em— kind of too highbrow. And I've written in a new scene where the nurses go through the hospital wards carrying lanterns and the wounded men look up and smile. Maybe Mengy'll let me do a bit of the cutting and take some of the stiffness out that way. I must say it's fun doing things yourself..."

CRESSWELL was still in New York when the Hollywood preview took place. Hiding in a loge seat, he prepared himself for a couple of hours of acute embarrassment.

Nor, to begin with, was he either pleasantly or unpleasantly disappointed. The picture was just about as bad as he had expected it to be. But about two thirds through the picture a change became noticeable. It was a change, not so much in the quality of the story or the dialogue or the acting or anything definite, as in the degree of indulgence one found oneself prepared to accord to it. Suddenly one felt easy-minded, benevolent, cozy about the whole thing, and this coziness, beyond doubt, was evoked by Dotty herself. Her personality flowered; all at once she became as adorable on the screen as Cresswell had known her off it. She giggled, she looked silly, she said and did silly things, but always you could love her.

Never for one moment did you believe in the ridiculous lines she spoke or in the ridiculous situations she got into, yet somehow, more and more convincingly, you believed in her. And by the end of the picture you had wholly surrendered to a mood in which Dotty could go on doing anything she liked, however absurd, and have you adoring her eternally.

TWO weeks later Cresswell met Dotty in New York. They were at a cabin in the Catskills when this wire arrived:

BANNERS PACKING EM IN ALL OVER CONTINENT STOP READY TO MAKE NEW CONTRACT WRITE YOUR OWN TICKET STOP PLEASE RETURN HOLLYWOOD IMMEDIATELY
MENGELBERG

"Well?" Cresswell said, when she handed it to him and he had read it.

She said, with a touch of sadness: "Even if I went back it wouldn't do any good. Now that they've had a success they wouldn't let me be free any more. I'd have to work with all those writers and directors again— Mengy would never let me have my own way except in something he thought didn't matter. We've had our chance, and it was a last one— we both knew that. In a way I'm too old for Hollywood now, but in another way Hollywood's too old for me— it's got too many rules and too many dotted lines and too many experts to draw them. I'd still be happier doing a street scene at the corner of the Boulevard and Vine, with all the crowds watching, than making a seventeenth retake that nobody would know from the sixteenth without the number on it..."

"Well?" Cresswell repeated, handing her back the wire.

She answered, after a pause: "I suppose if I can write my own ticket I can do this to my own ticket too." She tore up the message and threw it into the fire. "But there's one thing I'm really glad about," she added, more cheerfully. "I'm glad Mengy's going to make some money. Maybe he'll make enough to pay off the mortgage to your bank."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," said Cresswell. "The bank won't press him now. There was never anything personal in it, you know— merely a desire to protect the public's money."

Dotty giggled. "Darling," she said, "I think it's you who are adorable. When the movie companies have lost a hundredth part as much of the public's money as the banks of this country have, then it'll be time for the banks to begin to talk...."

———————

3: Sinister Street

Sydney Horler

1888-1954

In: *The Mystery Mission* and other stories, 1931

1: The Street Of Adventure

ALTHOUGH it was so near the Grand Boulevarde, this street had a furtive air. It seemed to Jimmy Ferguson to be peopled by phantoms. He had the impression that an unseen presence was watching him secretly— watching, and waiting for the chance to spring out in attack. Absurd, of course—but there it was.

More annoyed than amused with himself, he hurried on. The street was deserted. The contrast with the throbbing activity of the Boulevard des Capucines, which he had just left, appealed to him as being uncanny. It was as though he had passed from the ordinary world to walk among the dead. Not a taxi could be seen; he had gone forty yards without meeting a soul. The shuttered shops and houses seemed to frown. Occasionally a light gleamed; but even this, as though suspicious or afraid of being seen, was quickly extinguished. In spite of his usual sound common sense, Jimmy had his original suspicion strengthened: he was walking through a quarter in which unseen dangers lurked.

It was an uncomfortable feeling. Staunch admirer of France as he was in many ways, Jimmy was a sufficiently experienced traveller to know that an Englishman could not expect the same protection or help from the Police in Paris as he might confidently count on in London. An Englishman in Paris was forced to depend to a great extent on himself if trouble suddenly arose. At least, if he had any sense, he did so.

He had been a fool, he supposed, to leave the Boulevard and come this way, in the endeavour to make a short cut. The light stick he swung in his right hand was the only thing he could use as a weapon, apart from his fists, and its value in that respect was entirely negligible. Well, he would be back at the hotel soon; he'd had enough of this cemetery of a street. He had turned a corner with the intention of getting out on the crowded Grand Boulevard again when a sound made him suddenly turn.

So quickly that he imagined at first he must either be dreaming or that his thoughts had got the better of him to the extent of self-mesmerism, he saw his former forebodings assume actual materialisation. The sinister character of this gloomy thoroughfare was being unveiled: not a dozen yards away a man was struggling for his life.

Jimmy was half-Scot. True to his paternal blood, he generally paused before taking quick action. Second thoughts are usually best; he had been

brought up on this sound teaching. But every man breaks the rules once in a while. Otherwise he wouldn't be a human being. Jimmy Ferguson did so now. That faint cry for help would have decided him even if he had not already leapt forward. The odds in that desperate if silent struggle were three to one— far too heavy to be tolerated. What followed was never clearly recollected. He must have lost temporary control over himself, he supposed— gone berserker.

All he could remember was avoiding a swift knife thrust that was like the snapping of a snake's fangs, and then hitting out to right and left, dealing an amazing series of blows upon bodies and faces which surged up before him.

Then: "How can I thank you?" said a voice very faintly.

The mists which had been before his eyes cleared sufficiently to enable Jimmy to see three forms sprawling on the ground. A fourth figure— that belonging to the speaker— leaned heavily against the shuttered window of a wine-shop. This was the man, he presumed, to whose rescue he had gone. He took a long, keen look. The man was a complete stranger. This was not surprising, of course: what was somewhat intriguing was that the other should address him in English which held no trace of an accent. For the speaker himself was not English; judged by his appearance, he belonged to some Slav race hard to classify.

"That's all right," Ferguson heard himself replying; "lucky I happened to be passing. Can I do anything further?—try to get you a taxi? I say," as the man, groaning, slipped to the pavement, "are you wounded?"

The answer was gasped. "A knife in the back... but it's not that... my heart...."

He slipped to the ground. The man seemed on the point of fainting. Jimmy felt completely bewildered. If the other became unconscious, he would have to attempt to get him to the boulevards and that would mean carrying a dead weight of at least eleven stone a distance of quite a quarter of a mile. He doubted if the job was possible. And in the meantime what would Messieurs les Assassins be doing? Already a couple of them were showing signs of coming round...

"Bend down!" The whisper, faint but imperative, floated up to him. Stooping, he placed his face close to the lips which started to make an extraordinary request.

"You are an English gentleman and therefore to be trusted. Will you do a dying man a favour?"

"Don't talk about dying, old chap," replied Ferguson, moved to a sudden sympathy, "you'll be all right once I get you home!"

A wan smile flitted across the white face. "No, I'm finished— they've got me as I feared they would. But I'll beat them still— with your help."

With one eye on the prone figures which had commenced to stir, Jimmy endeavoured to pick the man up in his arms.

"I must get you home," he insisted. The other shook his head.

"It's no use," was the reply; "and it doesn't matter about me— now. It's you who must get away. But first I want to give you something— something which you must promise on your solemn oath that you will keep secure—"

The voice broke off in exhaustion as the speaker started to fumble with the buttons of his overcoat. It was soon evident that the task was beyond him.

"Can I help you?" asked Ferguson. In spite of the sympathy he felt, he could not help thinking how absurd the situation was. By waiting there he was exposing himself to a very real danger: the men he had knocked out would be on their feet again very shortly. And then? What a fool to have allowed himself to become mixed up in such an unsavoury mess. This Good Samaritan business could be the very devil sometimes.

"There is a small leather packet in the inside pocket of my coat,' he heard the wounded man whisper; "take it out."

"What now?" Jimmy enquired when the thing was in his hand.

"Your name— tell me your name." The tone, although faint, was imperative— and urgent.

For a moment Jimmy hesitated. He didn't want to have anything more to do with this affair. He couldn't leave a wounded man to die, of course, but the first taxi or car that came along he was going to stop and lift the fellow into it. Once he had got the man to his home, wherever that might be, he would step out of the picture. He was determined upon that. Adventure might be all very well in its way, but Adventure had to carry something of romance with it to appeal to him, and there was no question of romance being connected with this early morning hold-up. It was just sordid crime. No, he was going to get away from it.

Then he heard the wounded man speak again. "Your name and permanent address— tell me them, please!"

In spite of his resolution of a moment before, Jimmy found himself saying: "James Ferguson, 3, Hanover Court, Hill Street, London, W."

"Thank you. How long are you staying in Paris? What is your hotel?"

"I m at the St. George. I don't know how long I shall be staying—another fortnight, perhaps. But, look— here's a taxi; I'm going to put you into it and see you safely home."

The man became excited.

"A taxi— yes!" he said; " but it is you who must take it. You understand, I am serious. This is important— far more important than you can possibly

imagine. I leave that packet in your charge. Guard it as you would your life— quick, stop that taxi!"

So many things happened immediately afterwards that Jimmy's memory became blurred for the second time that night. Obeying the wounded man's furious demand, he rose and stepped out into the middle of the street with the intention of stopping the taxi that, after depositing a passenger some short distance off, now started to sway towards him.

As he lifted his hand, he heard a warning spoken in English. He guessed that one of the stricken assassins had now recovered sufficiently to start punitive proceedings. Already he felt a hand clutching his collar.

Before he could turn, however, a shot rang out. There was a spurt of flame and the member of the hold-up party who had been animated by the unpleasant desire to throttle him sprawled to the ground. Things were developing far too quickly for Jimmy's peace of mind.

The shot had been fired by the man he had rescued. There was no question about that. No doubt he had very adequate reasons for shooting with intent to kill, but a cold sweat broke out upon Ferguson's face when he realised that he had become associated with this man, had become his ally, in fact. His Scottish caution made him feel supremely uncomfortable— where in the devil was all this going to end?

But now the taxi had stopped. This fact was due not to any desire to be civil on the part of the driver, but could be explained simply by the latter's overwhelming curiosity. Jean Laffont liked to know what was going on. So he stopped his squeaky Renault taxi and stared about him. Another man possessing a stronger sense of prudence would have stepped on the accelerator.

Once the taxi had stopped, Jimmy became active.

"Driver," he said in French, " there has been an accident here. A friend of mine was attacked just now by three men. He is badly wounded and I want to take him home or to a hospital— perhaps a hospital would be best."

There is no shrewder judge of character than a Paris taxi-driver. Jean Laffont was familiar with the well-dressed Englishman type who crosses to Paris to spend money. Such a one was often generous.

"M'sieur," he replied, jumping from his seat at the wheel, "I am at your service."

He approached the shot man and bent over him. "M'sieur's friend is dead," he said after a brief examination. Jimmy stepped forward.

"That is not my friend," he replied. "He is over there." Then, turning, he swore in utter perplexity.

For the man he meant to take away into safety had disappeared!

2: Jimmy Takes Chances

THERE was no doubt about it: the fellow had vanished. How he had been able to manage the miracle it was impossible to say—but the startling fact sufficed. Jimmy felt that this was a night on which the end of the world might quite reasonably be expected to happen. Wonders were three a penny; one whisk of the eyeballs and a fresh excitement was provided. Sensations were being absolutely given away. He would probably have dwelt longer on this latest astonishment had not the taxi-driver seized his arm.

Jean Laffont, as already hinted, could not accurately have been described as a fountain of goodwill towards his neighbours, but when he noticed two men springing towards this prospective fare, he took the initiative. Pushing the Englishman unceremoniously into his cab, he mounted to the seat and drove off at such a reckless speed that the wheels threatened to come off.

As Ferguson sank back among the smelly cushions, he found himself still clutching the leather packet which the mysterious stranger had so amazingly entrusted to his care. The situation was far too complex for him to cudgel his brains any further about it for the present. Thrusting the packet into the inside pocket of his coat, he concentrated on the supper and warm bath which would be waiting for him— if only he reached his hotel in safety.

Thanks to the excellent service rendered by Jean Laffont (who kept doubling in his tracks with remarkable resource), the St. George was reached without mishap.

The fee which the driver charged was staggering, but Jimmy paid it without protest. He was fair-minded enough to realise that the man had quite possibly saved his life.

Reaching the small private suite which he had engaged at this quiet, but well-conducted hotel, he had his bath— a much-needed necessity, for after the battle he was a spectacle so deplorable that he did not wonder at the night-porter's stare as he walked through the hall to the lift— and then ate the cold supper which he had ordered before going to the theatre with an appetite to which the recollection that he was lucky to be sitting in that chair added a further relish.

The meal over, he lit a pipe. Irresistibly his mind returned to that silent street of sinister adventure. Only a few seconds' thought brought him to the inevitable conclusion that he had stepped into a piece of reeking melodrama. But this was no figment of the playwright's imagination; it was grim actuality. It was real life. A man had been killed—and the murderer was a person to whom he had given his solemn pledge of help. Even granted that this man had

committed the crime in self-defence— or what amounted to self-defence— the grisly fact remained that he had slain— taken another man's life.

Jimmy during his twenty-eight years— years which had been passed in pleasant ways— had never had occasion before to ask himself if he were a coward. The necessity had simply not arisen. But now the stark question: was he afraid? confronted him.

There was reason enough. In the coat which he wore was something for which murder had already been done. The man who had passed it to him considered it of sufficient value to risk going to the guillotine in order to ensure its safety. It sounded ridiculous said in cold blood, but the facts were plain enough. The problem he had to consider was what was he going to do with the thing?

The common-sense course was to go to the Police early the following morning— the earlier the better— and tell the whole story, however preposterous it might sound to the incredulous ears of a *commissaire*. Whether he was believed or not scarcely mattered— his bond fides could easily be established— he had several friends occupying responsible positions in Paris— and the very fact that he had brought the packet would clinch the matter. But even as he made this resolve, an uncomfortable feeling arrived to keep it company. What about the promise he had made? He had given his solemn pledge to the stranger. The man had put faith in him—principally because he was an Englishman.

"You are an English gentleman and therefore to be trusted," the chap had said.

The uncomfortable feeling increased. The sentence which had come back to his mind savoured to his prosaic way of thinking of hyperbole— an Englishman would never make such a remark himself— but all the same He had made a promise. He had forgotten that a minute before when he had come to a decision about the Police. If he went to the Sûreté, it would mean that his pledge to the joker who had put such faith in him would go phut. The more he thought about it the more he realised that he would have to change his mind: the first proposition was now out of the question: it simply couldn't be done. A promise was a promise. The fact that it had been made to a stranger did not alter the situation. The fellow was relying on him and he could not let him down.

There was a discreet knock on the door. At the sound Jimmy jumped up. It was an instinctive action which made him button his coat so that the packet in the inside breast pocket should be more secure. Then, imagining it was probably the waiter come to take the supper things away, he walked to the door and opened it.

Instead of the waiter, it was the manager of the hotel.

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur Ferguson," he said in English, " but this gentleman, who is from the Sûreté, would like to speak to you." Although his heart missed a beat—several beats, in fact—Jimmy held himself together. "Someone from the Sûreté—that's the Paris equivalent of our Scotland Yard, isn't it?" He pretended to be ignorant.

"Yes—it is the Headquarters of the Police."

As M. Houssiaux replied, his face reflected many emotions. Amongst these Ferguson thought he could read concern for the good name of his hotel and astonishment that of all the guests staying at the St. George, this young English aristocrat of whom he had formed such a high opinion should be called upon in the middle of the night by a man possessing the credentials of the Paris Secret Police.

Jimmy had a twinge of conscience. It certainly was a bit rough on this excellent Frenchman who, no doubt, had been dragged out of his bed to be brought face to face with an embarrassing situation. But a moment's further reflection was quite sufficient to drive home the fact that it would be a jolly sight rougher on himself unless he put up some sort of determined front. He would probably have to lie—a thing for which in the ordinary way he had a very healthy contempt—but in the circumstances he did not see how that could be helped. Anyway, the encounter had to be faced; there was, indeed, no chance of evading it.

"I can't imagine why a gentleman from the Paris Police should honour me with a visit in the middle of the night, M. Houssiaux,"' he said, lighting a cigarette, "but since he is here, he had better come in, I suppose."

The manager bowed.

"I offer you a thousand apologies, Monsieur," he said in a tone of deep contrition; "but that I was assured it was a matter of the deepest importance I should not have considered disturbing you."

"That's all right." His guest accompanied the assurance with a yawn which was more realistic than he imagined: "Fortunately I hadn't gone to bed. Let's have this gentleman in and see what all the trouble's about."

The manager bowed again before going to the door and ushering in a man. "And now, with your permission, I will leave," he said.

"Not at all, M. Houssiaux," said Jimmy; " if you don't mind, I would much rather you stayed. You see," with a grin which represented rather a decent bit of acting, " this is the first time I've been confronted by the Police and I confess I'm feeling rather nervous. Give me your support, won't you?"

"It is an honour to render Monsieur any assistance," was the answer.

"Righto! Thanks awfully."

Putting far more confidence into the words than he actually felt, Jimmy now turned to the man who, after entering the room, closed the door and placed his back against it.

"M'sieur Ferguson?" the visitor enquired.

By what means the knowledge came, Ferguson was unable to understand, but when he looked his questioner straight in the face, a dazzling shaft of conviction smote him.

This man was an impostor— a masquerader!

There are revelations so convincing that reason does not enter into the question. Although he had no definite data upon which to base this opinion, Jimmy would have staked every penny he possessed that his intuition was correct. The man looked the part he had elected to play all right— and yet he was a living lie. He felt it in every fibre of his being. But it would be interesting, if not amusing, to see how far the fellow would go, and to ascertain his real purpose in coming there at that hour. How he had been tracked to the hotel was difficult to understand after the taxi-driver's cross-country tactics; but that, in view of the tracker's physical presence, had now become a mere side-issue. The only thing that counted was the other's plan of campaign. This was certainly worth knowing. The man glanced in the direction of M. Houssiaux, and then at Ferguson.

"Pardon," he remarked, "but my business with you is private." Jimmy lifted his hand.

"But I require this gentleman to be present as a witness," he replied; " you see, I do not happen to have my lawyer present. In case you do not know it, Monsieur, when one is interviewed by the Police in my country one always contrives to have one's lawyer present. It is an old British custom. So, with your permission, M. Houssiaux remains."

"As you will, Monsieur," agreed the other. But the words were accompanied by a smile that Jimmy put aside for future reference. He intended, if the occasion offered itself, to change the style of that smile.

"And now to business," he said sharply; "I understand from the manager of this hotel that you represent yourself as coming from the Sûreté. Before we go any further, I should be glad to see your credentials."

The idea had vaguely suggested itself of provoking the man into some kind of outburst. With his clammy-looking face and general snake-like appearance, the stranger was a person whom he would have avoided in any normal circumstances. The scheme did not fructify.

"My card, M'sieur."

As though he had guessed the forthcoming challenge, the caller held out a piece of pasteboard. On this Ferguson read: M. Paul Villot, La Sûreté.

"That's all right, apparently," conceded the Englishman, speaking in the abrupt, off-hand manner which he hoped the other would believe was characteristic of his race; "and now, M. Villot, what can I do for you? I take it you did not come here at this hour merely to give me a forecast of to-morrow's weather. I can get that from the wireless, you know."

"On the contrary, M'sieur Ferguson."

"I say, one minute; it's a weakness of mine asking questions, but I really should like to know how you got hold of my name? "

For the second time that particularly odious smile bloomed. "We of the Sûreté know a great deal— it is our duty."

"Very well, we'll let that go for a moment. It's sufficient that you know my name correctly. Of course, you could have got it from the hotel register— as, no doubt, you did.... Carry on, M. Villot. Now for the serious charge. And don't be afraid of M. Houssiaux; you couldn't make him blush if you tried."

"M'sieur is pleased to be humorous. Allow me to inform you that I have come to arrest you on a charge of murder."

The words were snarled.

"Murder! M'sieur Ferguson!"

The hotel manager lifted his hands in a medley of horror, astonishment, and protest. It wasn't an easy act to perform in the circumstances, but Jimmy contrived a smile. This was directed at M. Houssiaux.

"Don't let that worry you," he said, " this fellow's bluffing."

"Bluffing!" ejaculated the manager.

"You don't understand the term. Sorry. To put it more plainly, then, this man is telling a lie, for what purpose is not yet clear. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain?" he added, turning to the caller.

M. Villot stamped his foot in a tempest of rage.

"You trifle with me!" he cried; "you insult me —me, an officer of the Sûreté! Beware, M'sieur! I warn you!"

The man's manner was so impressive that Jimmy wondered for a moment if he had made a hideous mistake. It was possible; come to think of it, anything was possible. Although he was unable to imagine how they had done it, there was quite a chance that the police had been able to trace him to the St. George. And as for the charge of murder—well, the fellow he had been fool enough to help had certainly shot a man. Yes, it was quite possible. Just as possible as the chance of this fuming Villot being a real sleuth from the Sûreté. For a second or so, Jimmy faltered. The case against him wouldn't be helped, he knew, by the manner in which he had treated this visitor. The French police did not like being ridiculed; and, judging by his present manner, M. Villot was peculiarly sensitive on the point of his personal dignity. Almost absurdly so. But

all this was merely knock-kneed weakness, he hastily decided. He mustn't cramp his style; that would be fatal. He had started to bluff, and he must keep on bluffing. He simply had to be consistent.

"I regret I do not believe a word you say, M. Villot," he remarked to the visitor. The latter immediately assumed an expression that he might have worn if asked if he minded spending the rest of his existence in the infernal regions. His countenance became a film close-up. But Jimmy was not to be put off by mere facial grimaces. He turned to the third person in the room.

"M. Houssiaux, I intend to do what my common sense should have told me to do before: I am going to ring up the Sûreté and ask them to be good enough to send someone responsible along in order to identify this M. Villot who has had the impertinence to describe himself as having come from Police Headquarters."

The vilified Villot made a noise which could have been caused by two rows of teeth meeting in a gnashing movement.

"You will suffer for this!" he said in a choking voice. Jimmy wouldn't have minded taking a small bet that the other was substantially correct, but all the same he walked to the telephone which was fixed against the opposite wall.

"I want you to put me through to the Sûreté immediately," he said; " yes, the Police Headquarters —it's very urgent."

"M'sieur !" cried a voice. Ferguson turned just at the right moment. M. Villot, as though anxious that no time should be wasted, had evidently grown impatient of delay. He did not intend to wait until colleagues arrived; he wanted the honour of arresting this Englishman, whose every intonation of the voice was a separate insult, single-handed. Unfortunately for the success of this undertaking, the excellent M. Houssiaux, solicitous for the welfare of his guest, even at the expense of offending a police official, gave the view-hulloa. To witness was to act with Jimmy: he was already waist-high in trouble, and he did not see how he could be more badly off. Therefore, on the principle that he might as well do what he wanted whilst he had the opportunity, he dropped the telephone receiver and, dodging the furious attack of Villot, plunked a really hearty wallop on that excitable gentleman's chin. The representative of the Sûreté went to earth with the abandon of a sack of coals being flung down a grating.

"Monsieur!" ejaculated the hotel manager. M. Houssiaux's face mirrored the horror he felt. To hit a policeman in any country is bad; to hit one in France is a direct invitation to calamity. Only the fact that his hotel was being burnt down could have affected M. Houssiaux more.

"I want to call your attention to this, M. Houssiaux," replied the Englishman. He stooped to pick up a wicked-looking, long-bladed knife.

"This slipped out of the scoundrel's sleeve as he fell," he explained; "now tell me: do French detectives generally carry weapons of that description when they come to arrest a man?"

"It is very strange," confessed the hotel manager. ‘

"On the contrary, it is very clear that I was right from the beginning," responded Ferguson; "something told me directly he entered the room that this man was an impostor."

The manager pounced on what he considered to be the weak point in the argument.

"But his card?"

"It's easy enough to have a faked card printed," smiled Jimmy, feeling more and more sure of himself. "But we shall soon see," as the telephone shrilled, " that's the operator through to the Sûreté, I expect."

Twenty minutes later Jimmy found himself being congratulated instead of arrested. There could be no question about this man being a high police official.

"M'sieur, we of the Sûreté are very grateful to you. The man who had the audacity to impersonate one of the most efficient officers in the Secret Police is really a notorious criminal for whom we have been searching unsuccessfully for many weeks. On behalf of the Chief of the Sûreté, I thank you, M'sieur."

"Oh, that's all right," mumbled the Englishman, feeling that more was to come. He was correct.

"At M'sieur's convenience we would be interested to know why this *canaille* should have called on you this morning," continued the detective. Jimmy shook his head.

"That's a mystery which I am afraid I can't explain," he said. The interrogator stroked his long, thin, inquisitive nose.

"May I be permitted to ask if you have laid yourself open to being blackmailed whilst staying in Paris? "

"Certainly not."

"A thousand pardons if I am indiscreet, but such cases have been known," replied the police official in the manner of one familiar with the subject. "And you have never seen this man before?" he continued.

"Never to my knowledge."

"Very well, Monsieur," said the other, as though conceding a point, "this is not the time to pursue further investigations. No doubt you will be willing to call at the Sûreté, say to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock?—I will be there myself to receive you."

"Why? I have told you all that is possible."

This was literally true, for the last thing he contemplated was to narrate the full story of that night's extraordinary events to this police official, Such a recital would mean— amongst other things— delivering up the packet which had caused all the bother. And this he had solemnly promised not to do. No doubt he had been every kind of a fool to give such a pledge— but that did not alter the situation.

The caller's manner became perceptibly more severe. His attitude was one of very thinly-veiled suspicion. The glance which he gave Jimmy from his shrewd grey eyes did not require much interpreting into words:

"There must have been some reason why this criminal called on you in the early hours of the morning and I am going to discover what it is."

That is what Ferguson was able to read in the look and he was therefore not surprised to find the other insistent.

"Of course! But nevertheless the Chief would like to take the opportunity of giving you his personal thanks for your help in this matter— of that I have no doubt. We will say 3.15 if that will suit you better."

"That will suit me quite well," replied Jimmy, who hadn't the slightest intention of keeping the appointment... "At the Sûreté."

"At the Sûreté."

The interview terminated with the police official bowing his farewells to him and to M. Houssiaux who had shown a pardonably human desire to be in at the death. The hotel manager, indeed, came right out of his shell.

"If M'sieur is not too tired, perhaps a whisky and soda as a nightcap—" he suggested.

" An excellent idea— we will drink one together."

Although M. Houssiaux confessed to a partiality to wine yet, like a sportsman, he lowered his Scotch.

"M'sieur is to be felicitated upon the fortunate conclusion to this evening's excitement," he said. Ferguson nodded. He didn't pretend to be rated at Plus in the Intelligence Department, but he could see with both eyes shut what the manager was fishing for. He had remained out of bed with a definite purpose: he wanted to hear the rest of the story— or, rather, the story behind the story. In common with the Sûreté johnny, he had the notion that there must have been a very good reason why a well-known crook should take the risk that the bogus Villot had taken that night.

But Jimmy wasn't telling. Instead, he finished his drink and wished his landlord a very courteous good night. After carefully locking the door and seeing to the window, Jimmy slept the sleep of the just. The whisky had been good.

3: Deep Waters

HE AWAKENED early. Probably he had too many thoughts crowding his brain. In any case, he lay for at least half an hour before it was time to ring for shaving-water, endeavouring to sort out something intelligible from the chaotic medley which, rioting through his mind, made his head reel. Presently something reasonably clear emerged. He had in his custody a packet which he had promised to keep safely. This packet belonged to a complete stranger who was incidentally a murderer. That the thing was of value was proved by the fact that a man, declared on reliable authority to be a dangerous criminal, had paid him a visit shortly after the occurrence in that sinister street. The scheme of the masquerading M. Villot had been rather neatly thought out: to get him into a taxi on the pretence of taking him to the Police Headquarters and then Well, it was pretty obvious what the fellow was after: he wanted the packet, of course.

By the way...yes, it was still in the inside pocket of the coat he had worn the night before. Of course that had been the game! But the blighter jolly well hadn't got it ! It was curious how much satisfaction the knowledge gave to Ferguson as he wriggled his toes beneath the cool sheets. Up till now the victories he had gained over his fellow-men had been almost entirely negligible. For of what did they consist? Merely a few golf matches, rubbers of bridge and so on— nothing of any real importance.

The affair last night was entirely different. He had crossed swords with a man who lived by his wits and he had emerged the victor. Selah! The knowledge was, indeed, distinctly pleasurable. It had a cocktail effect. It gave him so much satisfaction, in fact, that his attractively homely face broke into a broad grin. He knew now why existence had appeared so dull of late; it was simply because he had run up against only one desperate criminal and been entrusted with only one packet of (presumably) fabulous value!

As he rang for his shaving water, Jimmy recalled with something like gleeful anticipation that the play into a part of which Fate had thrust him had only just commenced. He knew he was not being consistent over this; he realised that just a few hours before he had felt strongly like kicking himself for being placed in such a predicament; he remembered he had resolved that the only sensible course to follow was to go to the Police and make a clean breast of the whole business. All this he recalled perfectly well. What, then, had wrought the change? Why did he contemplate flying in the face of Providence?

He could scarcely tell except that he now felt he was getting a kick out of Life which before he would not have believed was possible. The thrill of danger had got him in its thrall; the future beckoned; and one of the chief attractions

about the whole business was that the paths he had to traverse were not only hidden but had no signposts attached. A highly singular condition for a man who was at least half a Scot to find himself in— until it is remembered that nowhere does the love of Romance bloom so extravagantly as across the Border. Och aye!

The feeling of glowing excitement which had come to him so early in the day lasted until after he had eaten an excellent breakfast. Then a preliminary burst of native caution reasserted itself. So long as he remained in Paris he was in danger. Of that there could be no doubt. Yet if the veiled threat of the Sûreté detective had any meaning, the odds pointed to his not being allowed to get away. There was that appointment at the Police Headquarters at 3.15 that afternoon. He did not intend to keep it, but his failure to turn up would probably mean that a search would be started for him. The Police knew that he had a story to tell and they wanted the fullest details. Well, they would have to go and fish for them elsewhere. They had the bogus Villot: they must be satisfied with that. As for the rest, they would have to find it out for themselves.

There were two things to be decided. The first was what should he do with the packet and the second was how should he dispose of himself? Taking the latter problem first, he became more convinced than ever that he would not be allowed to leave Paris. Both the railway stations and the air-ports would be watched. He could try, of course, but—

Pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe, he decided that he did not wish to leave Paris. It was stupid, no doubt, but he wanted to see how future events worked out. Paris was the centre of activities and it would be a shame to leave it.

To find himself, after the doldrums of existence through which he had recently passed, actually participating in something which closely resembled a film, was not to be contemplated. He hadn't asked to come into this business, but now that he was in he meant to remain. It would mean his leaving his present comfortable quarters at the St. George. That was a pity, but it couldn’t be helped. Besides, what was comfort? He had had comfort all his life and would have it again if he came through all right. It wouldn’t hurt him to have to rough it for a bit. He knew what he’d do: he’d find a place up in Montmartre and do a disappearance stunt. He’d leave his address with old Houssiaux— on the strictest understanding, of course, that he was to divulge it to no one— so that in case of anything really urgent cropping up he could be communicated with.

He knew that he was giving way to the craziest notions, but that was the delightful part about it. He had been sane so long that it was the best kind of

mental holiday to do something ridiculous. He could never have believed the joy there was to be found in irresponsibility. So much for himself. But there was also the packet to be considered. This was a different question. He might be willing to take a chance with himself, but he could not allow any risk to be taken with that. He had promised to keep it safe. But here another question arose. He doubted very much if it would be safe with him to London.

To which address? His flat in Hanover Court? Another chuckle came. He hoped he retained his native modesty, but really he was becoming rather cute. There was a strong chance that the Other Side, whoever they might be, apart from the gentleman now in custody, might be able to trace his London address. In which case— no, that wouldn't do at all.

The bank! That was the place to send it— and he'd address it to old Hartley, the manager! What a peach of a joke! Hartley, with his starched-collar dignity and his "Dear Sir (or Madam)" manner, the custodian of—

Jimmy broke off. Hadn't he better see what was inside? No, it was no concern of his. But the sooner he got it off the better.

He rang the bell.

"I want some brown paper, some string, some sealing-wax and a taxi," he told the servant.

"Will that be all, M'sieur?"

"For the moment. But— I say— it's a fine morning, isn't it?"

"The day promises to be very good, M'sieur."

"Then you needn't bother about the taxi— I'll walk. But I should like the paper and string quickly, please."

"But certainly, M'sieur."'

4: The View-Hulloa

WHEN the small parcel was securely fastened and sealed, Jimmy placed it in a pocket of his overcoat and started to walk to the nearest post-office. As the waiter had said, there was every promise of a beautiful day. The morning air was crisp and sparkling. He sniffed it appreciatively as he stood on the steps of the hotel-entrance, looking about him.

The Rue Caumartin was beginning to be crowded. Stimulated by the scene and the atmosphere, Jimmy took his place with the hurrying throng. Instead of turning to the left, which led to the Boulevard des Capucines, he went to the right. The nearest post-office, he had ascertained from Pierre, was situated near the Opera— a mere five minutes' walk.

The fact that a gendarme appeared to eye him curiously as he passed recalled to his mind the disappearance business which he proposed to put in

hand directly he had passed the package over to the safe security of the post-office officials, It ought to be rather a lark— he would do the thing thoroughly. There was a theatrical outfitter's almost opposite the St. George. He would tell the fellow in charge that he wanted to be disguised as a Paris clerk and thus transformed he would get away into the wilds of Montmartre.

He grinned at the thought. There would be a risk of losing the fine outward gloss of his respectability, but he was prepared to chance this. Hang it, one had to take a chance now and then....

He had walked a couple of hundred yards or so when, stepping off the pavement, he collided with a man who apparently had been trying to overtake him. The force of the collision was such that Ferguson was in danger of losing his balance. He recovered himself in time to prevent being biffed into eternity by a vast Voisin which came roaring up the crowded street like a devouring Juggernaut. After breathing a silent prayer of thankfulness at being still allowed to inhale the champagne-like air, Jimmy thought of the package. He clapped a hand on his overcoat pocket. The bulge was not there. The inference was obvious: the man who had purposely thrown him off his balance had improved the shining moment by relieving him of the package. Quick work.

The man had been speedy, but Ferguson did not waste much time either. A mere matter of thirty yards ahead he saw the thief. The latter was hurrying, but a traffic block at a cross-street gave Jimmy his opportunity. Putting ceremony, even courtesy, on one side, he rushed ahead.

For what followed let the excuse be made that his blood was up. There are many kinds of death, but if the choice had been left to him Jimmy would certainly not have chosen having his life crushed out by a heavy French motor-car. That had been a lowdown, filthy idea, compared to which the theft of the package was cleanly. But the combination of the two was sufficient to make any reasonable man raise Hell— and Jimmy Ferguson promptly proceeded to raise it. This was no time for the interchange of politenesses so dear to the Parisian's heart; the moment called for action. Seizing the man by his collar, he swung him round. One glance from the other's eyes and he knew that his suspicions were correct.

"I want what you stole from me just now," he said.

The other burst into a voluble flood. Was M'sieur mad? He did not understand M'sieur. There was a lot more of the same sort— a great deal more. And all the time he was endeavouring to wriggle away from the Englishman's grasp. And all the while a crowd was collecting in the way that a crowd does collect in similar circumstances.

Jimmy did not pay any attention to the crowd; he was too intent on the thief. Throwing open the man's overcoat, he commenced to search with his free left hand for the package. He felt a bulge— and there it was!

"Now clear off before I smash your face in!" he said; "and the next time you try to push me beneath a motor-car, think twice unless you want to end up in a hospital."

As he released his hold on the overcoat collar, the man flung up both arms.

"I have been robbed!" he shouted; "this man is a thief— an assassin!"

An ominous growl came from the crowd whose ranks were by this time closely packed. After placing the package in his pocket, Jimmy faced the throng. He realised it would be pretty hopeless for him to attempt to cut and run; besides, that procedure did not appeal to him. The sympathies of the crowd were with the crook; so much was evident, but he had to try to persuade them otherwise. If this mob closed in on him he would be severely handled; what was more important, the thief would take the opportunity to pinch the package again.

"This is the thief," he said, pointing to the crook; "by rights I should hand him over to the Police but I have given him the chance to escape arrest."

With that Jimmy attempted to leave. But the crowd, as though animated by a single desire, would not give way. The ranks became closer.

"This is a matter for the Police to decide, M'sieur," said a voice that contained more than a suspicion of a sneer. The owner of the voice, a belligerent-looking workman, turned to his companions seeking support. This was soon forthcoming.

If Jimmy had had any doubt before about the voice of the meeting being against him, the chorus of assent with which the fish-porter's proposal was greeted, would have dispelled it. Englishmen in Paris did not seem to be very popular just then. And once the Police arrived, he had no misgivings which side they would take. They would associate themselves with popular opinion. The crook, gaining confidence through the sympathy of the crowd, would probably be believed. In any case, he would have to go along to a police-station and this would mean that all his plans would be knocked on the head. That pet idea of his about leaving respectability and living the carefree existence of Montmartre would be squashed. And worse still: the Police would insist upon examining the package (incidentally, how was he to maintain ownership of a packet the contents of which he could not describe?) and would probably conclude the proceedings by either confiscating it or handing it over to the crook, providing the latter did not possess too bad a record.

The whole thing was terribly complicated— so complicated that it was absolutely imperative that he should get away.

"Let me pass, please," he said. He had about the same success as Canute enjoyed when he told the waves to recede. The spectators pressed their shoulders closer together. It was an impasse— an impasse which was broken by a dramatic and totally unexpected interruption. A voice called from the outskirts of the crowd. It was a girl's voice—very delightful to hear.

"Jimmy!" was the word it uttered. "Let me pass, please. Oh, Jimmy!"

The adjuration was addressed to the crowd and the term of affectionate despair was evidently meant for his own private ear. But Jimmy could not understand it. No girl of his acquaintance was in Paris so far as he knew. What was more, he could not conceive any of the young ladies who permitted themselves to call him by his Christian name behaving in such a manner as this. The only thing he could do, he decided, was to await developments.

A Paris crowd, as the world has been informed so many times already, is highly susceptible. A glance from a pretty eye, and it is prostrate at the owner's feet. Much the same natural phenomenon happened now; this specimen ran true to type. Whilst the crowd— six deep by this time— had surveyed the obvious embarrassment and anger of the imprisoned Englishman callously, it only needed a beautiful girl (and this one was strikingly beautiful) to put in a plea on his behalf and the hearts of stone overflowed with immediate sympathy.

Amid understanding comments the close-packed ranks parted, and the girl was allowed to take the centre of the stage. Her method of approach was fascinating to onlookers and principal alike. She enthralled the bemused Jimmy by rushing up to him and throwing both arms round his neck.

"Oh, Jimmy!" she exclaimed again— and kissed him on the cheek. Whilst the recipient of this honour was rocking physically and mentally, he heard a low whisper: " Play up to me— it's your only chance."

If ever a biographer sits down to tackle the Life and Career of James Annesley Ferguson, it is a fairly safe bet that— providing he knows his job, of course— he will point to the situation under present review as representing the greatest moment in his subject's existence. "Faced by such a crisis," it is probable he will say, "what did Ferguson do?"

Well, what Jimmy did was to rise to the occasion in a manner that astonished even himself.

"Daphne, old girl," he exclaimed in a kind of ecstasy. And not to be thought a shirker, he kissed her back.

It was great stuff. A warm wave of colour flooded the girl's face, but this was the only sign she gave of being in any way confused.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," she went on to say; " where have you been? "'

"That's easily answered," replied Jimmy, speaking in a voice that carried to the outskirts of the crowd; "I was coming along to meet you— as arranged—" (honestly it was pretty difficult trying to invent a coherent story with this ravishingly beautiful creature still holding his arm and looking up into his face as though her very life depended on each word he uttered), "when I had something stolen from me. I gave chase, caught the thief and got my— er— my property back. By this time, these good people," beaming upon the multitude, "had gathered. They seemed more inclined to believe the story of the thief than mine. By the way, where can that chap have got to?"

Turning round, he scanned the crowd for the face he sought, but was unable to find it.

"The man has vanished— which proves that he was guilty!"

The girl had seized triumphantly upon the circumstance and made capital out of it.

"But we're terribly late already— father will be tired of waiting. You will excuse me, won't you?"

The words, uttered in his own tongue and accompanied by a smile which would have caused the heart of a rhinoceros to melt, wrought havoc with the fish porter to whom the remark was addressed. His former belligerency vanished. From an enemy he became an ally whose zeal over-ran his discretion. In a word, he completely lost his head.

"Get out of the way there— make way for Mademoiselle!" he shouted, using his gigantic arms like flails. "Quickly— now! "

Lips which were distracting enough when viewed from a distance were placed close to his ear. Still holding his arm, this celestial intermediary (for Jimmy could not comprehend what else she might be) began to slip through the crowd, the male portion of which raised their hats as one man. One and all paid her homage. This girl might belong to perfidious Albion, but Beauty overcame Race. On the opposite side of the road a closed car was waiting.

"I shall have to drive like the deuce," said this astonishing girl, getting into the driver's seat; "' what are you waiting for, man? Get in, unless you want a bullet in your back !"'

"To have a bullet in my back is one of the things I can most easily dispense with," replied Jimmy.

Feeling that nothing that ever happened in the future would have the power to surprise, let alone to startle him, he got into the car. Without a word of explanation, the girl drove away at a speed which aroused his admiration and dismay in roughly equal proportions.

Across the crowded Madeleine the car shot at a rate and in a manner which was positively hectic. When the comparative peace of the Place de la

Concorde had been reached, Jimmy considered it time to ask this heavenly visitant, who drove a car like a female Segrave, some very mundane questions. Being rescued in this manner was tremendously good fun, of course, but he wouldn’t have been human if he hadn’t felt an overwhelming curiosity.

"Do you mind telling me where we are going? " he ventured. "I am too busy driving to answer unnecessary questions," was the answer.

It was true enough in a measure, of course, for the car was still proceeding at a pace which was highly dangerous to life and limb, but the Scottish strain in Jimmy made him persistent.

"Perhaps you wouldn’t mind me driving and then you could be relieved of the strain. Also, you would be able to tell me a few things I should extremely like to know. Only a few," he added conciliatorily.

The reply was unsatisfactory. "You must wait."

"As you please." But whilst he gave polite subservience to the wishes of the Unknown, Jimmy was doing some very hard private thinking. The girl was undoubtedly English. This, naturally, was a point in her favour. Another recommendation was that, using her wits cleverly, she had rescued him from what was undoubtedly a very awkward position. Why?

There could be only one reason. She knew him although she herself was a stranger. And she knew something else: she knew he had the package— guessed, probably, that he carried it on him.

There was the explanation. It was the package she was after, of course!

As he looked at his companion’s profile— aristocratic, patrician, entirely English— Jimmy found it difficult to credit the evil suspicion. This girl couldn’t be a crook. It was impossible. Yet He would give her another chance.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"To a place where you will be safe. Please do not ask me any more questions, because I cannot answer them."

The words annoyed him. He was being treated like a child who could not be depended upon to look after himself, and he objected to it.

"Isn’t all this unnecessarily mysterious?’ he enquired; "‘ rather hugabooloo, in fact? "

Without slackening speed, the girl turned to look at him. Her beauty was of such transcendent quality that he felt he had been struck a blow.

"I do wish you would stop talking," she answered. The words were uttered with a crisp finality, but there was no bitterness or rancour in them. Then:

"That package! Please give it me."

Her left hand was actually held out.

Jimmy grinned. He had two sources of satisfaction— In the first place he was pleased, as any other man would have been pleased, at finding his first

conclusion justified, and, secondly, the situation appealed to his sense of humour. He wished to goodness the girl wasn't quite so rapturously good-looking, but if she imagined that merely because she was pretty,

"I suppose I do look a bit of a fool? " he remarked as though communing with himself.

"If you weren't a fool you wouldn't have walked down a crowded Paris street with that thing in your pocket," was the comment.

The smile left Ferguson's face.

"I say, whilst I'm awfully grateful for what you did just now— if you'd stop looking so severe, I would pay you one or two well-earned compliments for that, but no matter.... Oh, very well," as what seemed a frown gathered on the face of the listener, "we'll leave it. But as I was saying, whilst I'm sufficiently grateful, I really should like to know what— well, to put it somewhat crudely, what you're getting at? What do you mean, for instance, about a package?"

"Don't be a fool," was the uncompromising retort; "everything will be explained to you at the proper moment. I am taking you to the—"

The sentence was left unfinished. It was as though the girl had realised a possible danger in time.

The feeling was shared. Jimmy foresaw danger, too, and he had no intention of allowing himself to be taken into it. This girl was too uncannily mysterious for his way of thinking; besides, preposterous as it would have sounded to anyone else, her astonishing beauty had an irritating effect upon him. He had an overwhelming desire to make an infernal ass of himself— to remain any longer by her side without attempting to make some sort of love to her was becoming intolerable. Madness, no doubt, but there it was.

He decided to end the suspense. How to get out of the car without breaking his neck he did not know, but he was determined to do it somehow. It seemed ungallant, almost caddish, but there was nothing else for it in the circumstances. If the girl wasn't prepared to give an account of herself, it meant— oh, the devil, he didn't know what it meant. All he knew was that he felt very thoroughly a fool and that he wanted to conclude the sensation.

They were in the Bois by this time. The car suddenly slackened because of the press of traffic. Opening the door neatly, Jimmy stepped out into the road. Without pausing, he swung on to the footboard of a gigantic Renault that looked as if it could do a hundred miles an hour.

"Pardon, M'sieur," he said on a sudden inspiration, "but may I crave your indulgence? I am anxious to get to Paris as quickly as possible. I have just had alarming news about my— sister."

Satisfied that the speaker was not a bandit, the driver slowed down sufficiently to allow Ferguson to take the deeply-padded seat by his side. The next moment the giant roadster began to eat up space again.

Jimmy took a quick look back. He was able to see the girl turning round in her seat, staring back at him. He chuckled. His sudden manoeuvre had surprised her, no doubt. He was sorry, but, really, her personality was such that he was afraid he might have been overwhelmed by it had he remained. And, with that package on him, he couldn't afford to run the risk.

As he continued to stare, he noticed the other car swing round as though the girl intended to give chase, but so rapid was the Renault's speed that he was not able to see anything more.

This particular friend in need was a model of his kind. He contented himself with driving, and did not bother to ask questions. It was not until the Grand Boulevard was reached that he spoke. Even then, the remark was purely pertinent.

"Where may I have the pleasure of dropping you, M'sieur?" he asked.

"My sister is staying at the Meurice," replied Jimmy, feeling that the habit of lying could quickly grow on one.

Outside the famous hotel, the sight of the Renault brought a horde of uniformed servants on to the pavement.

"I am very grateful to you, M'sieur," said Jimmy; "you probably saved my life."

The man in the car looked at him curiously for a moment. He seemed about to reply, but then, contenting himself with raising his hat, he drove away. There are so many mysteries in Paris....

Followed by the retinue of porters, Jimmy walked into the hotel. Without pausing to look for the mythical sister, he emerged at another door and promptly ordered a taxi. He did not think the girl could have kept up with the Renault, but there was just a possibility. That was why he had played the old trick of going in at one door and coming out at another.

Directly the taxi had started— its destination being the nearest post-office— Jimmy put a hand into his pocket. Yes, the thing was still there. Another few moments and he would be free of it. After that he would be able to laugh at these jokers who were running such a hell-for-leather race to get possession of this incubus.

Experience had made him wary; he looked speculatively at the crowd passing on the pavement before he left the taxi when it stopped with a grinding of gears. Then, with a fist ready clenched for any emergency, he darted into the post-office. He thrust the packet into the hands of the nearest clerk.

"Registered post to England," he said.

The clerk took the packet from him over the wire fence of the counter. It was done!

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Jimmy in his native tongue.

"Monsieur?" said the clerk, looking up.

"I was merely talking to myself."

The man returned to his work. In a couple of minutes the packet was weighed and tossed into a large case reserved for registered parcels.

With the official receipt in his hand, Jimmy left the office. He experienced an extraordinary feeling of light-heartedness as he started to walk towards the St. George. He must return to the hotel to make that interrupted departure for the wilds of Montmartre.

Now that he had three separate agencies—the Police, the friends of the dead man, and the girl of mystery— on his track, it was highly desirable, not to say essential, that he should make an early departure. All three knew that he was staying at the hotel. Of this he had sufficient proof. Nevertheless, he must return to the St. George. There was his gear to be seen to and he had to have a talk with old Houssiaux, the manager.

He reached the Rue Caumartin as prosaically as though he were living his old life and not this new abnormal existence. No knife-thrusts, no revolver shots, no chimney-pots or coping stones falling on him from above, no pushings beneath the wheels of gigantic motor-cars— in short, nothing in any way unusual occurred.

Inside the hotel he found the same consoling quietude. There were the customary Americans sitting in the lounge reading the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*, the same placid British matrons performing the same rite towards the *Continental Daily Mail*. There was Pierre, the *valet de chambre* hastening to perform one of his multifarious tasks— and over there by the desk stood M. Houssiaux, greeting a new and varied assortment of guests with characteristic urbanity. The picture was complete. He caught the manager’s eye. Houssiaux hastened forward. "I want a word with you privately," he said.

A slight frown showed on the manager’s face, but he led the way into his private office and turned the key in the door. "

"Have the police been troubling you again, M. Ferguson? " he enquired.

Jimmy threw away the match with which he had just lit a cigarette. The words recalled him to the job on hand.

"They haven’t so far, and I don’t intend to allow them to bother me in the future. That is why I am leaving the hotel."

"Monsieur is returning to London? "

"Eventually. Look here, old chap, I want you to do me a favour if you will."

The manager, had he possessed a tail, assuredly would have wagged it. He knew that the term which his guest had used in addressing him was one observed among Englishmen of Ferguson's class for their friends. He felt honoured.

"I will do anything I can."

"Thanks. I knew you would. It isn't much, after all. I just want you to take particular note of anyone who may call asking for me and send the particulars on."

"Where, M'sieur?"

Jimmy laughed. "I feel I can trust you, Houssiaux. Do you want to hear a very funny story?"

The manager, nodding his head, signified that he was prepared to laugh.

"No, not that kind. A story of murder and sudden death."'

"M'sieur is joking."

"On the contrary, I'm damned serious. Now listen."

He proceeded to give a succinct outline of all that had happened to him during the preceding ten hours.

"But it is incredible," the manager commented at the end. He went further: he held up both hands in protest that anything so bizarre could have occurred to a man who was actually staying at the St. George.

"Well, it happened, anyway. Now you see the position I am in— I have to get away where no one can find me, but I want to know how the game's going all the same. That is where you come in."

"What am I to tell the police?"

"Simply that I have left the hotel. Tell 'em that I gave strict instructions that my letters were to be forwarded to my London address. That ought to put them off the scent."

The Frenchman coughed.

"I know what you are going to say," cut in Ferguson; "you are going to tell me that the wisest course would be for me to make a clean breast of it to the police. Aren't I right?"

"I confess that such an idea did occur to me," admitted Houssiaux. But while his words were grave, his eyes twinkled.

Ferguson pressed a finger against the other's immaculately-fitting morning coat. "But you know as well as I do that if you were in my place you wouldn't do any such thing."

"Not, perhaps, if I were your age," conceded the other.

"Good man! That settles it, then. And now I'll be off upstairs to pack."'

"May I send Pierre?"

"No, I can manage quite well myself, thanks."

He walked to the lift purposely enough, but, once upstairs in his room, Jimmy day-dreamed.

Had he paused to reflect, he would have realised that this was about the worst vice any man of action (such as he was himself now) could have indulged in. Taking the circumstances by and large, it was only about one degree less condemnatory than opium-smoking. But the truth was that Jimmy did not pause to reflect upon the obvious stupidity of his conduct. He was thinking about something else. Now that he had a quiet moment to himself, he was wondering how it was possible for any one human being to be so attractive as that mystery-girl to whom he had behaved so shabbily— so caddishly; yes, so caddishly. After she had taken that appalling risk, after she had— he blushed to recall it— miraculously brought herself to kiss him....

Principalities and Powers, had she really kissed him or was it only a dream? He felt himself becoming hot all over; glowing, in fact. That girl had kissed him. It was astonishing: he put a finger up to the actual spot. It was in vain for his common sense to tell him that she had merely played a part, that the osculatory salute had had about as much significance as a pound of cold tripe. For the moment he was mad— and his madness allowed him to remember only one fact: that the most beautiful girl he had ever cast eyes upon had voluntarily and of her own free will pressed her lips to his face....

And he had responded by running away like a thief!

That brief but potent word pulled him up short. Yet he could not believe that the girl was a crook. Certainly she had been mysterious enough and annoyingly uncommunicative, but it must not be forgotten that her nerves after what she had gone through must have been pretty ragged. She had said something. It hadn't been much. Yet if he had only waited.... Something about taking him to a place where he would be safe. And he hadn't trusted her. He had behaved like a cur. The knowledge was sickening.

He jumped up, intending to divert his thoughts by packing. He pulled shirts, collars and ties out of drawers listlessly: his mood had swiftly changed: he felt that all the zest had gone out of life: this stunt which had promised so well was the purest punk. The champagne he had been drinking had switched into stale beer. There was only one thing which could bring back any interest to him and that was seeing that girl again. Crook or not, he knew he would never be able to forget her. It was a nerve-shaking thought.

Having arrived at this singular and up till now totally unexpected conclusion, Jimmy tossed a pair of shoes into a chair and swore softly but volubly. The devil take Paris! The place was bewitched. He would get out of it and return to the comparative sanity of London. His passport was in order, and as for the police trying to stop him— let 'em try it on. He hadn't committed any

crime, and they would be powerless to hold him against his will. A shower of handkerchiefs joined the shoes. It was whilst Jimmy was stuffing these into a suit-case that a slight sound made him look up. He happened to be facing the door and so was able to see clearly.

The door was slowly opening.

This movement was not normal; on the contrary, there was something distinctly stealthy about it. Jimmy disobeyed all the rules of ordinary human conduct once again. Instead of springing forward with both fists clenched, he remained still and broke into a fit of silent, sardonic laughter.

So the play was on again! He would wait for developments although he had seen sufficient melodrama during the past few hours to last him his life-time. It was losing its hold on him; he was as sated as a dramatic critic forced to go to the theatre every night.

Of course, he did wrong to laugh. The odds against the advisability of laughing at a bedroom door opening in that stealthy manner are very heavy. And, because of this mistake, Jimmy very quickly afterwards found himself outwitted. What actually happened was really surprising: Through the aperture made by the opened door a white hand showed. It held a revolver.

The fact was treated nonchalantly by Ferguson. He had been through so much lately that a mere additional revolver did not appear to matter. What helped in this disregard was the fact that he became instantly far more interested in the hand that held the revolver than in the weapon itself. Revolvers, as such, now mattered scarcely anything in his young life— but white, shapely hands! Ah! that was an entirely different matter. Could it possibly be...?

The iron left his soul; the sardonic feeling lifted from his heart. His dearest wish had been answered by a kindly Providence— the girl who a minute before he had told himself he would never be able to forget, had returned! What mattered that she was pointing a lethal weapon in his direction? This was merely a playful little habit of hers. When he got to know her better, he would be able to cure her of that idiosyncrasy. He called cheerily:

"Do come in!"

With his heart performing a gentle tattoo against his ribs, his voice took on a lilt. A woman entered the room. Immediately Jimmy’s heart dropped several inches. That, at least, was the sensation he experienced. It was not the girl. The intruder, on the contrary, was a complete stranger. Quite a perplexing stranger, too. She wore a mask across the upper part of her face and her manner was distinctly belligerent.

"Put up your hands!" she commanded. She spoke in French, but with a strong foreign accent.

"Don't be a fool!" countered Jimmy. He was angry. To have one's pet dream shattered in this fashion was provoking enough to make a man forget his manners.

"It is you who are the fool!"

The woman softly whistled. From the corridor outside three men emerged. They were dressed as workmen, but their manner left no doubt about their real calling. They were criminals.

"At him!" ordered the masked woman. She turned the key in the lock with her left hand and placed her back against the door. It was then that Jimmy saw red. This thing was getting beyond a joke. He had tried to be patient and forbearing. He had endeavoured to play the game like a sportsman. But this latest development was altogether too much.

Picking up the closed suitcase, as being the first thing to hand, he brought it down on the head of the nearest assailant with a crash that shook the room. The fellow collapsed as though he had been poleaxed. But the force of the blow which he had delivered caused Jimmy to stumble— and before he could regain his balance the other two were on him. To a connoisseur of dog-fights, what followed would have been very satisfactory. The only thing of which this spectator might have complained was that the affair was so quickly over. The handicap was too great. In falling, Ferguson had landed on his head. After that he had been like one bemused; he had fought instinctively, and had put up a good scrap, but his opponents had been not only ferocious but unscrupulous. The end had come in exactly three minutes.

"Be quick!" ordered the woman; "someone may come. All that noise..."

"They will think it was the fool packing," answered one of the men.

He disappeared with his companion to bring in a huge laundry basket. Into this the unconscious body of the Englishman was lowered.

"You know where to take him," the woman said, slipping off her mask. "I will attend to Jean," she added, as the third criminal began to show signs of returning consciousness, "and will join you as quickly as possible."

A few minutes later a large laundry basket could have been seen leaving the tradesmen's entrance of the St. George Hotel. This, carried by two men, was pushed into a covered lorry and the latter drove quickly off.

5: The Black Room

OF the three men who sat in that underground room, the walls of which were hung with black drapings, two looked like human wolves, whilst the third had the shifty eyes and furtive air of a jackal. All three wore the clothes prescribed by modern civilisation, but the lounge-suits were an anomaly in

every case. These covered the body, but they could not hide the soul: the proper dress for these men, one felt, should have been undressed skins. For, although this was the year 1930, these three were in mind and method barbaric savages.

There was a knock on the door, and a gigantic figure entered. He had the squat, bestial features of a low-grade Asiatic.

"He is dead," was the announcement he made.

"A thousand devils!" cried the man who looked like a jackal in spite of his immaculate linen, grey spats, and neat, rimless pince-nez. One of his two companions, a man with a thin, cruel face finishing with a wisp of a beard which was continually caressed by filthy fingers, held up his hand.

"Hush, Labinski," he said silkily, "let Pollak tell us the rest. Did he repent before he— died? "

The Asiatic grinned— horribly.

"No— he was obstinate."

"Then let his end, painful as it no doubt was, be a lesson to all traitors!"

The words were snarled, but it was impossible to decide whether the sentiment was actuated by loyalty to the beastly Cause the speaker espoused, or whether the man was actuated purely by natural savagery and blood-lust. Swiftly he turned.

"Why, what is the matter, Labinski?" he asked.

The man wearing the spats took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Although the room was chilly, beads of perspiration showed on the unhealthily white skin.

"What will be done with the body?" he asked shakily.

The other laughed noisily. "What a man!" he ejaculated with harsh contempt; "tell me, what do you think of him, Palin?"

The third of that unholy trio remained as grim as a granite wall. To one who had ordered ten thousand or so executions, what difference could one more human life make? He kept silent.

"We shall know what to do with the body, Labinski— to-morrow it will be found in the Seine with a suicide’s note in a pocket."

"I don’t like it," whimpered Labinski; "don't forget the Englishman."

A second cackle of harsh, hideous laughter rang through that dreadful room.

"If you are worrying about the Englishman, Labinski, set your mind at rest. According to the telephone message I have just received, he is already on his way here."

"Here?" The craven looked wildly about him.

"You needn't be afraid— he will be unconscious. To Pollak will be entrusted the task of waking him up. Since you are so anxious, you had better remain and see for yourself how effectively we intend to deal with this meddlesome fool. Or, perhaps, your fine scruples will not countenance such a procedure?"

The speaker turned to look as he spoke at his granite-faced companion, and a glance of significance passed between them. Had he but seen it, Labinski would have known that from that moment he was doomed. In the work on which the other two were engaged there was no room for a man who was either a craven or a sentimentalist.

"You had better stay, Pollak." The giant acknowledged the remark with a grin of understanding. The door opened again and a woman swept into the room.

"He will be here any minute— in a laundry basket," she announced.

The man with the wispy beard rose and made her a bow. It was a ludicrous performance, and had she not been so afraid of the man the woman would have laughed in contempt.

"You are invaluable, my dear," he said; "tell us the details."

"It was easy enough," she said, sitting down and taking a cigarette from an onyx case. " The man Ferguson was packing when I walked into his room. When I told him to put his hands up, he seemed too surprised at first to do anything but gape. Then, when the others came in, he showed a bit of fight, but it was soon all over."

"And now he is actually *en route* here safely cached in a laundry basket— that was an ingenious idea of yours, my dear."

"You can reserve the rest of the compliments, Paul," drawled the woman, "for here, unless I'm mistaken, is Ferguson."

A clatter sounded outside and then the door was flung open. Hanging limply between two ruffianly guards was the prisoner, the latter still in a state of semi-collapse. By the blank expression in his eyes, Ferguson showed that he was not fully conscious of what was happening.

"Here he is, Schreiber," laughed the woman; "what do you think of him?"

The man stroked his ratty beard.

"You are a wonder, Nadja," he replied; "some day we must unite— as a combination we should be irresistible."

"Anything but marriage!" scoffed the woman.

"Suppose we get to business," said the grim-faced Palin behind them. " This man," pointing to Ferguson, "is believed to have received a bag of jewels worth, roughly, £100,000, together with certain documents from that traitor, Jubasy. I want to know what he has done with them."

"Pollak should be able to get that information very quickly," said Schreiber. "Wake him up," he ordered the Asiatic.

The latter gave the prisoner's arm a twist. Jimmy, feeling as though he had been through several separate deaths, looked round with puzzled eyes. He could not yet understand what had happened. He realised that he was a prisoner, and hopelessly up against things, but beyond that his befogged mind would not go. First, he saw the woman— she whom he had believed was the mystery girl.

As the seconds of time brought him back his senses, and cleared the mists from his brain, he realised the mistake he had made: this woman was no more like the girl with whom he had driven along the Bois that morning than a peony was like a rosebud. This woman was blowsily voluptuous; what beauty she had left was bedaubed with paint and besprinkled with powder. And, whatever mystery there might be about the girl, there was nothing perplexing concerning this woman. She carried her trade in her face: she was a crook— and worse. It was whilst he was looking so intently at the woman that Jimmy felt his arm violently twisted. He could not stop himself crying out with pain.

"You swine!" he shouted, swinging round. He had scarcely been conscious of a gaoler before (the two men who had brought him to this place had apparently gone again), but now, as he saw the man, he could scarcely repress a shudder. This giant had a nightmare face— hideously ugly, stamped with the marks of bestial vice, scarred by a cruelty incomprehensible to the ordinary mind. Here was a brute without soul or pity. Ferguson raised his hand to strike the beast, but the man merely sneered. The next instant he had caught hold of the prisoner's neck. Jimmy's blow met the air. He had been jerked off his feet and the pain was maddening.

"That will do, Pollak," ordered a voice. "Turn him round."

When he was able to draw breath again, Jimmy found himself face to face with the man who had evidently given the order.

"Why am I brought here?" he asked.

"You will know that soon enough; do not be afraid. But, first, do you acknowledge yourself to be an Englishman named James Ferguson? "'

"Well?"

"You do acknowledge it? Good! But let me inform you, my friend, before we go any further, that it would be advisable to give quick and courteous replies to all questions put to you. As you have already discovered, we possess a means of enforcing our demands. I need scarcely add, I think, that all replies you make must be truthful. We punish lies somewhat severely. And now to proceed," said the man, speaking at a quicker rate. "Your name is James

Ferguson; you live when in London at 3, Hanover Court, Hill Street, London, W. That is correct, I believe?"

"Perfectly correct." By what means he was keeping control over himself, Jimmy did not know. The motive power was certainly not fear. Afraid he was— so damnably afraid, in fact, that even his temper had been overcome— and yet the cause of his level reply was not fear. It must have been the unconscious desire to get even with these devils at a later date that had given him restraint. To precipitate a further row now would be suicidal. This crowd of thugs looked as though murder might be an everyday occurrence with them.

The interrogator continued: "Last night, or rather in the early hours of this morning— to be even more exact, at about twenty minutes to one o'clock— you were walking along this street—" The speaker stopped as a cough, which might have been meant as a warning, broke in. He appeared momentarily confused as he looked at the scowling Palin. Then, recovering himself, he resumed:

"At twenty minutes to one o'clock this morning you were walking back to your hotel when you were handed a package. To give you any further details is unnecessary. All that remains for you to tell us is where that package is at present. Your room has been searched without success. I do hope for your own sake, Mr. Ferguson, that you will not withhold that information from us."

Jimmy gave a gesture of weariness. "Do you mind if I sit down?" he enquired.

The inquisitor smiled.

"Not at all! Pollak, a chair for the gentleman."

Jimmy sat down with a sigh of contentment. His strength was returning; he would want it all before long.

"Since you are so agreeable, might I ask that your man Pollak removes himself a little further away from me? After recent events I am somewhat sensitive of his presence."

The further request received consideration. "Go and stand by the door, Pollak," came the order. "

"Thank you."

"And now for the answer, Ferguson."

Jimmy flung up his hands. "I hate to be unobliging, but I want you to try to understand what I am feeling. A fairly respectable member of society, I am held up and attacked in the room of my hotel by complete strangers. Then I am forced to suffer the further indignity of being knocked unconscious and kidnapped. Finally I am brought before a number of further strangers who ask me a lot of damn-fool questions. You don't mind me enquiring, I suppose, what it all means?"

So much righteous anger did the speaker put into the words that it looked as though Schreiber was momentarily convinced. But the grim-faced watcher made his comment.

"He’s bluffing," he said.

"Of course he’s bluffing," snarled Schreiber. His face livid, he walked up to the prisoner. "Where is the package?" he shouted; "my God, if you don’t answer I’ll have you torn to pieces! Pollak would like the job."

It took every scrap of courage which remained, but:

"I don’t know what the hell you mean!"’ replied Ferguson; " you’re talking like a lot of damned fools. Either that, or you’re mad."

"Pollak!" screamed Schreiber.

"Just one minute," said the prisoner; "although I cannot understand what this means, after a man— masquerading as a detective— came into my bedroom last night, I took the precaution of ringing up the Sûreté, asking for special police protection. Two men were put on the job straightaway, I understand. They probably know where I am at this moment. I don’t want to get anyone into trouble, of course, but I’m completely fed up with you and your ridiculous package. I came to Paris for a holiday, not to get involved in what I imagine to be a sordid robbery. Why not be frank and admit that you’ve made a mistake— that you've got hold of the wrong man?"

Again a swift expression of bewilderment flickered into Schreiber’s face. He spun round on the woman.

"Well— what do you say?"

"Say!" was the sneer; "why, what Palin says— that he’s clever and that he’s trying to bluff you. He’s the right man sure enough— why, there was his name plastered all over his luggage. Do you imagine I should make a mistake?"

"No— I don’t think you would," was the slow agreement. A fourth voice entered into the conversation. "But there must be no mistake— we cannot afford to incur any unnecessary risks."

Ferguson, turning his head, saw a man, looking so respectable in his rimless pince-nez, striped trousers, and neat grey spats that he wondered what such a person could possibly be doing in this galley— until he took a second look at the man’s face. Then he understood.

"Shut up, Labinski, you fool!" angrily called Schreiber.

The other lifted a hand.

"No names, please!" he entreated; "this is not a place to disclose any names."

The prisoner could not resist a thrust.

"I’m not likely to forget yours," he said.

Labinski rushed forward. "You hear what he says!" he screamed in Schreiber's face; "I told you there was danger!"

"Get out of here!" was the angry reply; "get out —you make me sick."

Labinski turned to leave. "The packet— you must get the packet," he said, and his voice was that of a man sweating in an extremity of fear.

"Leave that to me," was Paul Schreiber's confident reply. The speaker turned to the prisoner.

"You have got just five minutes to tell the truth. After that... Pollak! He is eager to get to work."

There was no need for Jimmy to ask himself if the man meant what he said; the expression in his face was sufficient. So far from shirking such a task, he would delight in it. Schreiber took a watch from his pocket and placed it on the table. It seemed an eternity, but at length came the end. "Well, Mr. Ferguson? "

"I'm sorry— but I'm afraid I'm still unable to tell you anything about your ridiculous package."

This time it was the granite-faced Palin who spoke.

"Pollak!" he called.

6: Hylda Tells Her Story

THE girl ground the stump of her cigarette angrily into the ash-tray.

"It is humiliating to confess it, but I have completely failed," she said. "The man is a fool— which, of course, is all the more reason why I should not have allowed him to get away from me."

"Tell me how it happened," said Sir Michael Barrington. The man who occupied a very important position in Paris on behalf of the British Government listened attentively to the story.

"I can quite understand why you were reluctant to tell this man Ferguson more than you did," he said at the end; "you were afraid he would think you were lying."

Hylda Messenger nodded.

"He did not appear to be over-intelligent," she remarked. There was a noticeable coldness in her tone. Which was not surprising, for she felt very annoyed indeed with the particular man she and her Chief were discussing. James Ferguson had not only made a fool of her, but, what was infinitely worse, he had caused her to fall down on a job.

The few— like Sir Michael Barrington— who were privileged to know Hylda Messenger intimately— could understand why she felt so angry. Engaged in the most difficult, onerous and dangerous work on which a woman could be

employed, she followed this hazardous calling with a zeal that astonished even her superiors— and the latter were men who necessarily and systematically drove their staffs hard.

Hylda Messenger was one of the few Englishwomen employed in the Continental Section of the British Secret Service, but her reputation stood remarkably high. Blessed with birth, education and beauty, she had brought off many successes. This recent failure stood out in greater relief in consequence.

"I don’t blame you in the least, my dear," said Barrington kindly; "indeed, I consider you acted with that promptness and decision which appears so characteristic of you. No one can hold you responsible for this man Ferguson deciding to risk his neck by jumping out of a car going at forty miles an hour. But" —and here the speaker looked at the end of his cigarette— "we must find Ferguson. And time is a very important factor. Indeed, I should not be surprised if by now he isn’t dead. Schreiber and his crowd are not very scrupulous."

"If only he had listened to me!"

The girl’s face had gone white— and a great deal of the anger had left it. The man Ferguson might be a fool, but the thought that possibly he was dead was distressing. She had known other men to meet their death in somewhat similar circumstances and the news had never affected her in such a manner as this. She could not understand the fact, but was conscious of it.

"Have you spoken to the French people about this?" she asked.

Barrington nodded. "I have thrown out a hint that some dirty business is being hatched by Schreiber & Co., and that it would be as well for them to keep their eyes open. Beyond that, of course, I could not go because I did not know anything more myself— nothing more definite, I mean. Although time is so pressing, tell me once again what happened last night, Hylda."

The girl gave the information incisively.

"As you know, I made the acquaintance of Jubasy a fortnight ago. He was longing, I am convinced, to get away from Schreiber and the others, but was held by the fear that, although he lived in Paris, Moscow would send some of their agents to kill him. I am afraid I am responsible for his death— if he is dead by this time, as I have little doubt— because it was meeting me (or so he said) which gave him the necessary courage to break away."

"He knew of this trouble which Schreiber and Palin were brewing against London, you think? "

"I haven't any doubt of it from what he hinted. I rather gathered that he himself was down to take a part in it. ‘But I can’t— I can’t!’ he said, when I dined with him a couple of nights ago. He was in a bad state that night, Sir Michael; his nerves seemed shattered."

"I don’t wonder at it. The OGPU has a remarkably effective way of dealing with persons who have been marked down by Moscow. But now come to last night."

"Meeting me appeared to give Jubasy courage, as I have already said. The very fact that I was English seemed sufficient. He told me many times that to have been born an Englishman represented the greatest ambition of his life.

"It was clear that he was worrying about something, and, as I say, I had known for some time that he was struggling between the wish to tell me of this plot which I believe he had been ordered to engineer, and the fear that any betrayal would end in his death."

"One moment," interrupted Barrington; "didn’t he realise that in meeting you so often he might be bringing danger to you?"

"He did. I'll give him credit for that— there were many good points about Jubasy. He was afraid he was being watched— but, naturally, I had to take that risk."

Barrington nodded. The words were very characteristic of the speaker.

"Jubasy did not realise, of course, that you were connected with the Service?"

"No. At least, he never gave me any hint that such a thought had crossed his mind. He believed me to be an ambitious writer, possessing some small private means, who was in Paris collecting material for a first novel.

"Last night," continued the girl, as though eager now to get to the end, "I had arranged to go with Jubasy to the theatre, and to have supper afterwards. The man was trembling with excitement when we met, and I imagined that at any moment he might decide to tell me details of the plot. I think if I had even hinted that I was in touch with the authorities, he might have done so, but I was afraid to take the risk. There was the equal chance that he might think he had been deceived by me."

"Yes, I understand that," remarked the listener.

"I tried to be specially pleasant to him, but as the evening went on, apparently his fear of the punishment which those associated with him held over his head became the controlling factor. At all events, although he was continually hovering on a revelation, he did not say anything definite. But, at the same time, I knew that he carried on him something of importance, for he kept putting a hand to the inside breast pocket of his coat."

"You could not guess what it was, I suppose?"

"I imagined that he had some papers on him— and you can guess, Sir Michael, how I longed to get hold of them!

"When we were nearing the end of supper, I played my last card. I invited him back to my flat."

Barrington, sophisticated man of the world as he was and knowing also something of the undaunted courage of the speaker, could not check an exclamation.

"You really ought not to be doing this kind of work, my dear," he said.

She looked at him enquiringly.

"Does that mean that you are not satisfied, Sir Michael? "' He made an angry reply. "Of course not! You have done brilliantly. Which is a pity in one respect because I suppose you will not be persuaded to give it up."' " Not until I've seen this Jubasy business through, Sir Michael," was the decisive response; "and please allow me to tell you this: that I do not want any help; I intend to do this on my own."

The Secret Service Chief looked gloomy.

"If anything happened to you, my dear, I should never forgive myself. It was unfortunate I was away; Lorymer had no business to put you on to this job, in any case; it is out of your line. It requires a man to deal with these brutes Schreiber and Palin. You must promise me not to do anything foolish."

She smiled across the table at him.

"Hadn't we better concentrate on finding Ferguson first?" she replied. "I was going to tell you what happened after supper last night."

"Yes— I am sorry I interrupted you."'

Barrington's zest for the story temporarily drove out of his mind the anxiety he felt for the radiantly beautiful girl who for the past two years had worked under his orders.

"After looking at me in a way which in ordinary circumstances would have made me feel ashamed, Jubasy replied to my invitation— the excuse I gave was that I wanted him to see some of my English photographs— by saying: 'No— I could not do that. We might be followed and then— no, my English friend, I must not bring danger into your life!' I felt pretty small at his refusal, as you may imagine, but realised it would be foolish to persist. 'In the end I was sent home like a small child. Jubasy ordered a taxi and put me in it.

"I shall never forget his face when he wished me good night."

" 'Good-bye, my English friend, and thank you for the happy hours you have been kind enough to give to me.' "

"But why 'good-bye?' I asked.

"Because I may never have the happiness of seeing you again." He turned away then, and putting up his stick, signalled another taxi.

"You can imagine what I did, Sir Michael. I ordered my driver— who proved to be an exceptionally intelligent man— to follow Jubasy's taxi at a safe distance. Jubasy got out at the end of the Rue de la Loi. I followed, keeping to

the doorways, because it would have been fatal if he had known that I was shadowing him."

"One minute. Let me see where this street is."

Barrington, opening a drawer, pulled out a large map of Paris and opened it on the table. Hylda Messenger bent over him. She was so near that he could detect the illusive perfume she used. Passing fifty-five as he was, Sir Michael became conscious yet again of her irresistible femininity. And that fool Ferguson had run away....

"Here it is." A slim forefinger traced a pattern on the map. "It's on the north of the Boulevard des Capucines and not more than a quarter of a mile away— a dirty hanger-on of a street hiding in the shadows."

"What you might call a Cut-throat Alley?" suggested Barrington and the girl agreed.

"A very good name for it, Sir Michael. It's a horrible-looking street."

"Well, what happened?" Barrington's tone had become brisk again.

"Jubasy dismissed his taxi at the end of the street and began to walk down it on the left-hand side. Suddenly three men set on him. I couldn't get near enough to see them very clearly, but I am positive they weren't the usual Paris street criminals. Jubasy himself was surprised— I am quite certain about that, too— and at first did not attempt to defend himself."

"Which points to the fact, of course, that he knew these men— in any case, they probably weren't strangers to him," commented Barrington.

"They were creatures of Schreiber, no doubt. Schreiber and Palin had decided to take the initiative; already suspecting Jubasy, they were not prepared to run any further risk. Yes, it all seems pretty plain to me— everything except this: what was Jubasy doing in that street?"

"It was my opinion that he had gone there to meet someone."

"Perhaps. In a house, you mean?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. Isn't the Rue de la Loi just the sort of place where Schreiber might have a secret den?— excuse the melodrama, Sir Michael," the speaker added with a short, quick laugh.

"It's quite likely— but in that case why was Jubasy attacked in the street? Why didn't they wait until they had him safely inside the house?"

"Perhaps they noticed me and suspected something," suggested the girl.

"But no attack was made on you in the Rue de la Loi?"

"No," she admitted, "but, then, they hadn't much chance. They were busy with Jubasy until Ferguson, who was walking quietly along, saw what was happening and went to Jubasy's help. I'll say this for Ferguson: he knows how to use his fists; at least, he knew how to use them last night. Although neither

of them knew it, I watched Jubasy give a package to Ferguson and heard what he said: 'You are an Englishman and therefore to be trusted.' "

"You didn't decide to take any part yourself?"

"No— I thought it was too risky. Suppose I had approached Ferguson, and said some lie about the package belonging to me (I don't see how I could have told him the truth— for one thing, he wouldn't have believed me), he might have been polite enough, but it is certain that he wouldn't have handed it over. If only he hadn't been such a fool this morning!" she added bitterly.

"Well, it's no use repining," put in Barrington. "Ferguson is probably still in Paris and we must try to find him. I know it is a great deal easier to say than to accomplish, but, nevertheless, that is the position. A tremendous amount depends on what is in that package and we know that Ferguson possesses it."

At that moment a servant brought in a copy of a Paris evening paper. Through sheer force of habit, the Secret Service Chief glanced at the headlines.

"Hulloa! " he exclaimed, "what's this?"

The girl sprang across and looked over his shoulder, just as she had done when they had examined the map of Paris together a few minutes before.

A couple of seconds' reading told her all she wanted to know.

"Schreiber's got him!" she cried. Sir Michael laid down the newspaper.

"That is what it looks like,' he agreed; "the thing now is how can we get Schreiber?"

"We can't," declared the girl; "we must have evidence— and without sufficient evidence you dare not touch Schreiber whilst the deliberations are proceeding in London. You know that, Sir Michael."

"To my sorrow," was the gloomy reply; "a curse upon all politicians, I say."

Then he caught sight of the girl's face again and hope grew again.

"You have an idea, my dear?"

"Yes, I have an idea. I won't say what it is because I may fail again and then you will be so disappointed with me that you will make me resign from the Service. But to-night I will ring you up."

"What time?"

"Give me until midnight," said this astonishing girl. "I may be able to tell you where they have taken Ferguson."

"The best of good hunting, my dear."

"Thank you, sir,' she replied gravely.

7: Labinski Dines

SERGIUS LABINSKI felt the need of three things. The first was a good dinner, the second a bottle of correspondingly good wine, and the third— well, the

third was the inevitable concomitant of the first two essentials. Labinski, who served Moscow, decided that he would go to a restaurant where he knew he would be sure to meet a pretty woman who would be gracious enough to become a sharer in his evening's amusement.

The Golden Stallion was the latest craze. Managed by a restaurateur whom the British Home Secretary had seen good cause to expel from England's hospitable shores, it combined expensiveness with a lack of— shall we say?— reserve which endeared it to a certain class, who recognised no laws but those dictated by their own desires. Sergius Labinski had dined there before. One dined late at the Stallion— and to be in the prevailing fashion one arrived in a state of rather more than merely conventional *bonhomie*.

To appreciate the estimable Eugene's newest restaurant in a proper light, one needed to view the world through rose-coloured spectacles: in short, and to waste no further words, one needed to have had quite one or two preliminary drinks. Labinski had acted up to this formula. He had done so for more reasons than the one of merely following the fashion. The chief of these was that he was afraid. Fear had claimed him.

He knew— who better?— of how far-reaching was the hand of the Secret Political Police of those he served. Many men before him had disappeared without a trace from the busy life of Paris. One day they had been alive, and the next? Some bodies, not many, were recovered from the Seine, and then the newspapers printed lies about suicide; others were never discovered. Once a man, no matter how high or important was the position he occupied, had served his purpose or come to an end of his usefulness in the opinion of those reigning at Moscow, an end was made of him. It was done with stealth; the blow was always struck without the slightest warning. It was this that made men walk in dread.

But he had eyes to see, and in the faces of both Schreiber and the even more terrible Palin that day he had read what he feared was his fate. A smile crossed his jackal's face as he reflected on the position. They wouldn't win, he reassured himself, remembering the plans he had made to meet just such an emergency as this. But, nevertheless, he felt fear, and to drive out the demon he drank whisky— a considerable amount. He would have drunk his native vodka had it been available.

Then at 9.30, which was about the time to descend on the Golden Stallion in the Rue Pigalle, he got out of the taxi which had brought him from his flat.

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry!"

A girl, looking so ravishingly beautiful in her opera cloak that Labinski, one of whose chief prides it was that he knew feminine beauty when he saw it, opined that this was a moment charged with special significance for him. Her

delicate skin was flushed, her eyes were like stars. She had collided with him and was now apologising in the prettiest manner possible.

"But, Mademoiselle, it was entirely my fault. Is it permitted to ask if Mademoiselle is alone?"

Although this girl was unmistakably English, the "Mademoiselle?" tripped lightly off Labinski's oily tongue.

"Yes, I am quite alone. I was to have met a friend, but I am late and I'm afraid he has got tired of waiting. We were to have dined here. It's rather gay, and awfully jolly, isn't it?— I'm ever so disappointed!"

There was the merest hint of tears lurking behind the words.

"It is the unpardonable sin to allow oneself to be disappointed in Paris. Will Mademoiselle excuse my boldness, and permit me to have the felicity of taking the place of Mademoiselle's missing companion— most ungallant, unseeing and unappreciative of men!"

Starry Eyes wavered. "But— oh, it's awfully good of you, and I should love it, but— well, you see, I don't know you— you're a perfect stranger to me. Excuse me being so frank, won't you? Would you be kind enough to call me a taxi now that my evening has been spoilt. I must go back to my aunt."

If Sergius Labinski had had any lingering doubt about the authenticity of the speaker, the mention of that word "aunt," so sacred to the English, would have dispelled it.

He told himself he read the situation correctly. Here was an English girl of high birth and position who was staying in Paris with an aunt of undoubted starchiness for a chaperone. She had been allowed her freedom for the evening on the strict understanding that she was dining at a respectable restaurant or hotel. Her companion must have been a man of whom her aunt had approved, unless the little minx had told a lie. But the companion— why he had not kept the appointment did not particularly matter— had decided on the Stallion, probably because he had heard talk of it whilst over in London. The whole thing was quite simple.

And now that this prize had come his way, was he going to lose it?

"Mademoiselle, why have your evening spoilt? I implore you to change your mind. I may not be as entertaining as the gentleman you had promised to meet, but, like you, I am quite alone and I know Eugene, the keeper of this restaurant, very well. He will give us a favourite table and special attention. Come, now, take pity on a poor, lonely man; after we have dined, I will order your taxi and see you safely home myself. You can trust me, Mademoiselle, to keep my word."

"Very well, Monsieur, I should hate to go away— and I understand that this is a place where a girl does not dine alone. But I must make one condition— I

pay for my own dinner. In other words, we share expenses— it will be rather fun, don’t you think?"

He pretended to protest.

"Oh, but I couldn’t think—"

"Then I certainly shall not dine with you. I insist upon paying my own whack, as we say in England."

Labinski bent his shoulders in a bow.

"Mademoiselle is a sportswoman in every sense of the word," he rejoined; "shall we go in?"

It all happened within a very few minutes. The girl, breaking clear of the man’s encircling arms, backed to the door. She stood against it.

"I want some information out of you, Sergius Labinski, and I intend to get it," she said.

Labinski blinked in almost ludicrous astonishment. No man, even when he is in an intoxicated condition, cares to realise that he has been outwitted, and it had just dawned on the Russian that he had been completely befooled— out-generalled, moreover, by a girl who had looked the picture of charming innocence.

This same girl, more beautiful than ever, but hardly so ingenuous looking, was now threatening him with a loaded revolver. Her voice was extremely businesslike and her words were very much to the point. Labinski wondered if he were dreaming.

"You are intoxicated, Labinski, but I believe you have sufficient intelligence left to grasp what I am saying. I want certain information from you and if needs be, for a man’s life is at stake, I shall shoot you to get it. This," raising the small revolver a little, "is a weapon specially designed for an occasion of this description— it makes no noise when it is fired."

"You she-devil! And I thought—"

"You imagined that I was exactly what I pretended to be!" The girl gave a low, musical laugh. She pretended thus to be amused whereas her whole being quivered with disgust at the task she had set herself. Perhaps, after all, she would give up this work which was so often sordid and objectionable— but she had to pull this thing through first. Sir Michael Barrington was depending on her.

At midnight— that was to say in twenty minutes’ time— she had promised to ring him up at his house, giving him certain news. There was no time to be lost. She would cut short the verbiage, and come to the point.

"I am a member of the British Secret Service, Labinski, and I want to know what Schreiber has done with an Englishman named James Ferguson."

"How the hell should I know?" he replied coarsely.

"Labinski," said the girl determinedly, "I warn you not to be a fool. You know where Ferguson is and you are going to tell me. You have exactly two minutes— no longer— in which to make up your mind. At the end of that time I shall shoot. It will be easy for me to explain to the police that you induced me to visit your flat and that I had to defend my honour. Two minutes, Labinski. It's a case of a good man's life against your worthless one."

The hand holding the revolver was firm and unfaltering.

WHY he was still alive Jimmy did not know. It might have been due to the message that the man called Palin— hard-looking devil— had received just as the monstrous Pollak was beginning to get busy on him. Palin had been called from the room, but was quickly back, his eyes glistening, although the rest of his face remained a mask. He had spoken in a low tone to Schreiber and the latter had nodded. Then, together, they had made for the door.

"Take him away, Pollak— we'll attend to him when we come back," Palin had said.

He had remembered nothing else for the time being. His strength had failed, and he slipped into oblivion.

When he drifted back on an uneasy tide to consciousness, he had found himself in this black horror of a prison, the roof of which bumped his head when he stood upright. This much he had been able to manage, but only after great difficulty. The cruel handling he had received from Pollak had left him terribly weak. The thought came that even if the opportunity presented itself for escape— which, of course, it wouldn't— he would not have the necessary strength to take advantage of it.

A fresh spasm of pain, coupled with a revolting dizziness, overwhelmed him and he was glad to seek the security of the floor. He felt he was going to die. That didn't worry him. In preference to meeting that unpleasant quartette again, he hoped he would. What was annoying was the manner of his dying. A rat in a trap was an envied creature compared to him. He had been the World's Prize Fool to have allowed himself to be captured.

Looking back, the thing seemed incredible: to be held up in broad daylight in a decent class Paris hotel by a masked woman...! An ironic grin twisted his lips in that Stygian darkness. In spite of all their cunning and ruthlessness, these thugs had had their trouble for nothing.

The package which all the fuss was about was by this time safely on its way to London. With this comforting reflection his thoughts switched to another angle. What part did that mystery girl play in this tangled web of intrigue and crime? Was she working for another gang? That still seemed unbelievable. What was the place to which she had intended to take him? One fact was

certain: if he had stayed with her, he could not possibly have been as badly off as he was at present.

But it was too late to bother about that; it was too late for anything but the prospect of a painful death to which now he had to reconcile himself. That was the only sure conclusion in the general mess-up. Having refused to say what he had done with the package, these thugs would quickly put an end to him. And that it might be quick was the most he could hope for.

But what a finish! After living the most humdrum of existences— pleasant enough, it was true, but still very ordinary— he had been plunged by a turn of the wheel into a blood-red hell, a fantasy of terror ending in Death—his own death... Well since there was no way out, let it come soon— as quickly as it liked. He felt terribly tired....

Through the fog which enveloped his brain he fancied he heard a voice calling his name. Yes, there it was again—

"Mr. Ferguson— Mr. Ferguson."

He sat up, thankful that he had been allowed the freedom of his hands, for the brief sleep had given him a strength which he wanted to use. His former mood of submission born by physical weakness had passed. He had the urge to live again— and in order to live he was ready and willing to kill. In short, he felt he had recovered his manhood. But he must have dreamt about that voice; he couldn’t have heard it. It must have been an hallucination caused by his weakness. Yet there it was again—" Mr. Ferguson! Mr. Ferguson! ’" It sounded real enough now, and held an urgent note which made him answer. ‘"

"Yes— who are you?" he asked. That it was a friend’s voice he knew— he felt that instinctively, apart from the actual words. It was the voice of a friend come to help him. And yet how could that be? What friends had he in Paris?— what friends, that was, who knew of his plight and where he could be found?

The answer to his question came in a circle of light which shone in his eyes. The face of the holder of the electric torch was hidden, but he was able to see a woman’s figure dimly outlined.

"You!" This revelation was staggering. It was the mystery girl. "Hush! You must speak quietly."

There was the sound of a door being gently closed and then quick footsteps walking towards him. His arms were outstretched so that the girl ran into them.

"I have been the most damnable fool— and you are the pluckiest and the most wonderful girl in the world! " he said.

Light had been vouchsafed to him. He was able to see clearly now what he should have seen before. This girl was his friend— and at the risk of her life she had given him a second proof. And what a proof! The first should have been

sufficient— would have been if he had possessed the slightest grain of intelligence. It wasn't the mere fact of her being there which cleared the mists away— the crisis had sharpened his wits so that what had been perplexing before was now perfectly plain and straightforward. This girl's share in the puzzle was clean and legitimate.

"You shouldn't be here— the risk—" he started. No introductory words were necessary; he felt he was addressing someone he had known for many years—an old friend of infinite understanding.

"I had to come,"' was the whispered reply; "I was afraid they would kill you. In a way I should have been responsible... but we must hurry. I have dealt with the guard, but others may arrive..."

"I understand," said Jimmy. "Let me just tell you this first and before I even attempt to thank you: the package is safe. It's in London by this time. I sent it by registered post to my bank manager— the scum here couldn't have got it, anyway."

His faith in her so complete, he wanted to give evidence. What a cursed fool he had been ever to have had any doubt!

"Thank you for the confidence." How attractive her voice was!

"But what you have told me, although reassuring in one respect, is disturbing in another. They would have killed you in revenge for having outwitted them."

" That certainly appeared to be on the programme. How... but I won't start attempting to tell you now."

"No— we must get away: it would be death to be found here. These men are entirely unscrupulous— as I had to be to-night," she added in a lower tone, Then she became practical again. "It is very dark— I had better take your arm," she said. "I hope they didn't hurt you too much?"

"Not more than I could stand," he replied reassuringly.

"Now— no more talking," she said, and started to walk towards the door. The former intense blackness surrounded them, for the girl had switched off her electric torch for greater safety. Outside the door was what seemed to be a narrow landing.

"On the left," his companion said, "is a staircase. We have to go down that— step quietly, and remember there are thirty-five steps. I know," she added, "because I counted them coming up."

Before he could reply she began to lead him forward again. It was an eerie sensation walking down that staircase, which Jimmy knew led either to death or freedom. He found himself counting:

"Eleven...twelve... thirteen...."

He was holding the girl's hand now— his right in her left— and the touch of the warm flesh gave him a confidence which exceeded the strength of giants. He hoped that when the bottom was reached, friend Pollak might be found waiting. And, as though a fairy-godmother, watching from her own particular corner of Magic-land, had overheard the wish, there, looming in front as they neared the bottom was a monstrous shape. It bellowed as it saw them.

Disengaging his hand from that sweet comradeship, Jimmy made a flying leap. He was standing on the fourth step from the floor when he took off, and he landed a trifle above the towering Asiatic. He had made that jump with all the determination that one human being can put into a resolve to kill another.

Yes, certainly, he meant to kill Pollak. The agony he had suffered at the hands of this swine would have supplied sufficient motive force without the knowledge that the man stood between them and liberty.

Luck favoured him— luck, and the terrible zeal which coursed through his body like a raging fever. The man gave ground, staggered and then crashed. And all the time Ferguson's hands were at his throat.... After three minutes Jimmy got up.

"I believe he is dead— at least, I hope so," he said. He was answered strangely.

"Get away— they're here!"

The girl's voice, as it called the warning, held an unnerving fear. He rushed forward just as the blackness was shattered by a vivid flood of light. The electricity showed a hallway filled with men. In the front were two faces he had very good cause to remember.

Schreiber turned to Palin.

"We came back just in time apparently," he said.

Jimmy's heart was bursting and his brain seemed on fire. For this girl to be handled by such a mob! And for them both to be cut off from escape at the last moment— it was enough to send a man mad.

He *was* mad. As he plunged forward all sense left him. He had gone mad. But the odds were too many— one man against six. And the six were not pretty in their methods. ...

8: The Bargain

"YES," said Ferguson, "I will tell you— but on one condition."

"Name it,"' replied Schreiber, sitting as Judge.

"That this lady is permitted to go free and unmolested. I know where the package is, you can send men with me to fetch it, but only on that condition."

A protest came from the other prisoner.

"No— don't promise... I am not afraid."

They were back in that abominable room underground to which Jimmy had been taken first. Their position was one of the utmost peril; both knew that they were very near to death. The story which Pollak had just told of admitting a woman who spoke in Nadja's voice and whom he believed to be Nadja herself— a woman, who, under cover of using her handkerchief, squirted something into his face from a syringe which made him lose consciousness instantly— had roused both Schreiber and Palin to a state of furious anger. Schreiber, indeed, had foamed at the mouth when he spoke to the girl.

"Soon— very soon— you will be required to tell us exactly how you came to know of this house. Already I have an idea, but we shall request you to substantiate it. We do not ask you to disclose your purpose in coming here, for we know already that you are a paid Spy in the odious British Government."

"She is nothing of the sort!" cried Ferguson; "she came here to try to get me away. She is my friend."

Schreiber jumped up, his hands twitching with a frenzied excitement.

"We have overwhelming proof that she is a spy for your cursed Government!" he retorted; "that would not have mattered perhaps if she had not meddled in our affairs. As it is, Pollak shall be given the pleasure of putting his hands round that beautiful white throat..." It was then that Jimmy, his soul sick, made the offer of surrendering the package. Supposing this damnable packet did concern England— as he had a fairly good idea by this time was the case— what mattered that compared with the safety and life of this wonderful girl?

Palin, the grim, pulled at Schreiber's sleeve. The two conferred in a low tone. Then Schreiber, his eyes gleaming, spoke to the male prisoner.

"How far away is the package?"

"Some considerable distance. More than that I do not intend to tell you." "You know that we have means to force you to tell."

"Yes— but the worst you can do is to kill me. If you do that, you will never recover the package."'

The scabrous mind of the Russian showed itself.

"There is the girl..."

Hylda Messenger turned towards Ferguson. Above the ropes which bound her to the chair her face showed pale but resolute.

"If you allow them to frighten you through the thought of me you will be a traitor to your country," she said.

A cold sweat broke out on Jimmy's face. Was ever a man placed in a worse dilemma?

"I have made you my offer," he said to Schreiber; "you allow this lady to leave unmolested and I will give you my word of honour to hand over the package untouched."

Again the grim-faced Palin pulled Schreiber's sleeve.

"There is an obvious difficulty about allowing the lady to leave the house," replied Schreiber, after another whispered consultation.

"She is admittedly a spy— you notice that she does not deny the charge— and she gained admittance here to-night through information which she must have obtained through someone who has become false to our Cause. Directly she was free she would run immediately to her vile employers. Even if she gave a promise—"

"I am not giving a promise," was the firm comment. "You see— she is obstinate. I am afraid we cannot agree to your suggestion."

"Then there is no point in having any further discussion."

"No," replied Schreiber, "further talk is useless. A little action must take the place of words. Strip him, Pollak !"

A grunt from the Asiatic, and a cry from the girl preceded a challenge from the threatened man.

"You won't get anything that way, I warn you."

"We shall see. I have faith in Pollak's resource. Besides, he has to earn his wages; we do not encourage idlers."

Soon the Englishman was naked to the waist.

"The irons, Pollak," ordered Schreiber.

Good God! So that was the idea; they were going to brand him with red-hot irons! The unholy swine! But had he expected anything less? Jimmy Ferguson would not have posed as possessing any more than the average amount of courage— if as much— but faced with this awful prospect he felt, strangely enough, a stiffening rather than a weakening of his will. The girl had said that he would be a traitor to his country... well, he didn't know that England had done a great deal for him except give him a decent enough country in which to live, but he was damned if he was going to let her be done in the eye by these dirty crooks. Let 'em bring on their hot irons... But when Pollak returned, carrying a brazier in which the ends of three short irons showed white-hot, he was shaken—shaken not so much by the brazier from which he purposely kept his eyes, but by the gasp of horror which welled from the lips of the girl.

"Tell them— I'll take the blame !"

The words had been forced from the speaker in an extremity of fear— fear for him. Jimmy laughed.

"It’s only bluff," he said reassuringly. Then came a greater bluff: "They don’t know that the French Police are waiting outside."

Schreiber jumped up.

"You dog, you lie!’ he shrilled, hitting the prisoner across the face with his filthy hand. Ferguson laughed again. If he were to die, he’d make the most of what remained of his time.

"I hinted as much before but you wouldn’t believe me; now let me tell you the whole truth. I made certain arrangements with the Sûreté yesterday when they called on me. With the package safe— it’s somewhere in London, you poor idiot, where neither you nor any member of your gang will ever be able to put hands on it!— the important thing was to rope in you and your Buddha-faced pal there. So the Police and I drew up a little scheme. It was simple enough— and it worked. What I proposed was that I should allow myself to be captured so that I might be followed and this secret headquarters of yours discovered. Just the old decoy plan, you see— it’s remarkable how the old stunts still prove the best."

At the look of amazement which was imprinted on Schreiber’s face, Jimmy laughed uproariously. He could not have been quite normal, he supposed— for if he had not been light-headed, how could he possibly have invented this story which, preposterous as it was, he was evidently making sound convincing? He carried on the joke.

"I suppose you wonder why the Police have delayed coming until now? That’s easily explained. We wanted to bag the whole boiling of you— friend Pollak included. The woman is missing, but we know where she can be found. I shouldn't be surprised if you haven't got out of the habit of saying your prayers— religion isn't fashionable among your dirty lot, I believe— but all the same—"

The rest of the taunting sentence was not uttered. Schreiber, infuriated beyond control, rushing forward, had caught hold of the speaker’s throat with both hands. Jimmy, powerless to defend himself, knew that the end had come. But he had had his laugh. He had put the wind up this beastly mob. The pressure on his throat increased. The figure of his killer was surrounded by a blood-red mist. His heart was about to burst. Then, everything was blotted out....

9: Hylda Writes a Postscript

HE couldn’t quite understand what this meant. He was in bed. Bed? A girl was bending down looking at him. A girl?

"The doctor says you'll do quite nicely now," said a well-remembered voice. He decided that if this was death it wasn't such a bad business. Here he was lying warm and snug, with the face which he had long since decided was the most beautiful he had ever seen, only a foot or so away.

"I think," he said, "I would like to kiss you— in fact, I am sure I should."

A low laugh, remarkably pleasant to hear, answered him.

"The doctor said you were to have anything in reason," remarked the vision. The next moment the face drooped lower. For a fraction of a second a pair of velvety lips touched his....

"In spite of my sins I must have gone, to heaven after all," commented the patient. "Tell me— honestly, I can't decide yet— am I really dead?"

"The doctor doesn't seem to think so."

"Leave him out of it; he's playing far too big a part; I'm already tired of hearing his name. If I'm actually back in the world, there's only one person that really counts— and that's you. Now that I'm beginning to realise I'm still alive, I should like to know what happened—although it doesn't seem very important compared with other things. But, first, please tell me your name."

"Hylda Messenger."

"I couldn't have chosen a better one myself. You spell the Hylda with a 'y,' of course?"

"Strangely enough, yes."

"I knew you did. By the way, do let me introduce myself— James Ferguson, alias the World's Worst Fool. But you know that already."

"I knew that your name was James Ferguson, but I didn't know that you were the World's Worst Fool. In fact, I don't believe it."

"Not after what has happened? "

"Certainly not. I should have explained why I wanted you to come with me yesterday."

"Yesterday! Was it only yesterday? It seems at least a thousand years ago. Just one more question before you go out of my life for ever—what happened at friend Schreiber's to-night?—was it to-night?"

"Last night," corrected Hylda Messenger. "Did you know that you were psychic, Mr. Ferguson? "

"Good Lord, no! It sounds rather unpleasant. Tell me the worst: am I psychic?"

"The evidence is conclusive. When you made Schreiber lose his temper by telling him that the French Police were outside the house, did you know it was the truth?"

"Not on your life! It was the most awful bluff!"

"Well, they were."

"Who?— the Police?"

"Yes."

The patient ran fingers through his crisp, brown hair.

"I didn't know a thing about it," he reiterated; "I was more than a bit mad at the time— the hint of medieval torture struck me as being rather beyond a joke— and so I decided to try to do a little threatening of my own account. But, of course, it was the sheerest bluff."

"All the same, it was the most remarkable coincidence: just as I was afraid Schreiber had killed you, the French detectives came rushing in."

"How did they get there?"

"They had been on the track of Schreiber for some time. No doubt they would give you more details if you asked them."

"Me? No, thanks very much. Once I get my trousers on again— I mean once I get up from this bed of suffering, I intend to cut everything connected with the Police— including murder, sudden death, and Pollak's brazier— out of my life. I'm afraid I'm getting too old for that sort of thing. I can't help it if the critics do say: 'Sad to see how Jimmy's breaking up'— I have definitely made up my mind to leave crime alone for the few years that I may have left."' The solemn declaration was greeted by a smile. "

"You are rather a surprising person, Mr. Ferguson," said the girl; "I never suspected you of possessing a sense of humour."

"Gifts from the gods appear to be descending upon me in large quantities. First, I'm psychic and then I am humorous. I suppose no one goes through a cataclysm of this sort, however, without being ennobled in some way. To begin with, of course, I met you."

From her manner it might have been inferred that Hylda Messenger was relieved to hear the door opening. She turned without making any reply. The man who entered was a distinguished-looking person of late middle-age.

"And how is the patient?" he enquired. "

"He seems to be much better, Sir Michael. If talking nonsense is any criterion, I should say he is practically recovered."

"Splendid! My name is Barrington," explained the visitor, taking a chair by the side of the bed. "I happen to be the Head of that branch of the British Intelligence to which Miss Messenger is attached."

Jimmy subjected the speaker to an almost offensive stare.

"If you will excuse me saying so, sir," he remarked, "you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself!"

Whilst one of the listeners gasped, the other smiled in unruffled good-humour.

"I think I know what you are going to say, Mr. Ferguson," was the reply; "but the real culprit, I am afraid, is Miss Messenger herself. She says she finds the work too interesting to be able to give it up. I agree with you that on occasion— such as the present one, for instance— it's much too dangerous for a girl of her type— especially when, as she did last night, she took a most foolhardy risk. If the Sûreté hadn't taken action when they did... I trust you will believe me, Mr. Ferguson, when I say that I should have been heartbroken if anything—"

"Don't let's talk about it,"' cut in Jimmy decisively; "I'm beginning to feel hungry enough to eat all the food there is in Paris, but before that happens I should like my curiosity satisfied to the extent of knowing what all the fuss has been about. The package is in London. As a matter of fact, my bank manager, the driest stick of a fellow who ever looked cross-eyed at an overdraft, has in all probability locked it in his strong-room by this time. So, until you get back to Town, Sir Michael, you can't hope to know what's inside it."

"We already have that information," was the reply. "Listen, Ferguson— I'll tell you a story which will make any of the Arabian Nights seem dry by comparison. A certain Embassy in Paris contains some very queer fish. They are criminals although they pose as diplomats. The chief of them are the men Schreiber and Palin.

"Some time back we got to hear of a plot this precious gang were planning against England. 'A plot against England ' sounds like something out of a sensational novel, I know, but I can assure you that this conspiracy was really a very serious matter— so serious, indeed, that we asked the co-operation of the French authorities in helping us to scotch it.

"The man who handed you the package a couple of nights ago was named Jubasy. He had been given a position of trust at this certain foreign Embassy, but when he discovered the real nature of the undertaking in which he had been placed in nominal control, he rebelled. His attitude became known to Schreiber and he was murdered. The package which he handed to you as he was dying contained, unless I am very much mistaken, full details of the plot— which, thanks mainly to you, will now be exposed."

"Sounds pretty fantastic to me, but you're in the best position to judge, Sir Michael. I suppose things like that do really happen."

The Secret Service Chief rose.

"You ought to know," he said, smiling, "and now, if you'll excuse me I'll leave you to enjoy your breakfast. I have to see a person named Labinski, who, after last night's happenings, seems inclined to think that something drastic will happen to him unless he has the protection of the British Government."

"Amongst my assets," remarked Jimmy Ferguson, "may be included a strongly developed psychic sense, and a tendency to be humorous under distressing conditions. Also, although I have never even remotely considered the custom of marriage, I could at a pinch support any suitable young lady in that station of life to which she might be willing to consider that Providence had called her. The question is," he added, sitting further up in bed, "whether any girl who has twice kissed a man of her own free will can dare refuse such an offer? "

"That's a problem," replied Hylda Messenger.

But, in common with many other problems, Time solved it. The church was St. George's, Hanover Square.

Sir Michael Barrington gave the bride away.

4: The Ferryman's Dog

William Babington Maxwell

1866–1938

In: *Odd Lengths*, 1907

WHENEVER I hear that song of "Petersham Ferry," or, indeed, any allusion to the characters and habits of Thames ferrymen, I always think of one that I used to know.

This ferry was on the Thames, just below one of the newest locks. There was no lock there when I knew it and used it; and no one guessed that smart villas and trim tennis lawns were so soon to drive the cattle from the fields, or that the poplars on the island in mid-stream were, in such a little time, to give place to a boat-building establishment and fine red-brick boat dub.

Opposite to the end of the path through the meadows where one waited, on the other side of the river, there were a rough stone causeway and landing-steps— built when the Thames was still tidal as high as this,— and a little way up the dusty road, almost hidden by a great chestnut tree, one could see a comer of a small alehouse and the tarred roofs of some boat-sheds.

I said where one waited, for one invariably had to wait: the ferryman always being on the wrong side of the water. His heavy green-painted boat was generally chained to a rusty ring in the steps; his great yellow and green sculls were neatly shipped or sometimes deposited on the top of the causeway; one could even see his coat and waistcoat carefully rolled round his tin tea-can; but the man himself was, as a rule, nowhere to be seen.

When one had hailed him— in the evening there were usually one or two dusty masons or bricklayers homeward bound who would raise the echoes for miles with their "Ferry ahoy!"— he would come sauntering down the road with his little white dog dancing round him, give one shout back, and then whistle with great vigour as he slowly came across. If one was in a hurry, the whole business of getting across seemed maddeningly slow. His short, and apparently languid, strokes as he pulled out and set his barge's nose up stream, his stubborn disregard of the position of his destination, the crab-like drifting of the boat, and its final descent with a scrape of pebbles and rustle of the crushed reeds in the right place after all, as if by the merest chance, were all horribly irritating. But I and the bricklayers, who had, at one time or another, all handled the sculls and learnt how much easier it was to make the wrong end of the island than the right, knew that old Tom was an adept, and would back himself for half a gallon against all comers— over his own course. And if you were not in a hurry, the journey with Tom was often entertaining.

"'Ow's the dog? Ow's Charlie? Ere, Charlie, don't that sniff sweet?" And one of the workmen would thrust a great bough of red May, that he had stolen for

his wife probably, at the sharp nose of the little white dog, who would bark ferociously.

" 'E's fustrate! Don't know 'isself in that 'ere silver bell the young mimes at the great 'ouse give 'im. It's solid silver, sir; and the blue ribbing is the best as they make," the dog's master would say proudly as he pushed off.

" 'Ere, Charlie! Come 'em, my son. Come and 'elp your fether."

Then the dog sprang up between the man's knees, stood on the seat, and, leaning his front paws on one of his master's sunburnt hands, would sway backwards and forwards as the scull moved, whereby simulating that he, too, was rowing.

He was a rough-haired, shaggy-coated dog— always kept scrupulously clean,— an undoubted mongrel, but preternaturally intelligent. His master was a middle-aged man, with a deep, growling voice, a fringe of iron-grey whiskers, blue eyes, and a very irregular set of teeth, the gaps in which seemed to assist him in whistling, for which art he had a reputation. I have never seen a man better or more completely sunburnt: for, as well as colouring his cough skin with the deep tint of old copper, the sun and wind had put a polish on it of which the best meerschaum pipe might have been proud. And, if ever a dog had a devoted owner— from the pampered pets of eccentric spinster patricians to the guides and guardians of ragged blindness in the streets— Charlie was certainly that dog.

"You was at the pub, on the booze again, while we and this gentleman was waiting," the workmen would say.

"No, I worn't," Tom growled. "No more than one glass 'as passed my lips since dinner. Charlie was a-singing to a commercial gent in the front parlour, who had heerd tell of the dawg and sent fur us."

"Less 'ave a song now, then. Tune up, Charlie, ole boy," they would say, and begin to whistle and chirrup and snap their fingers to encourage the performer.

If Tom was in a propitious temper, this rare treat was given us. Charlie would sit up on his haunches on the floor of the boat, and Tom would whistle the verse of a popular song. When he came to the chorus, the dog would suddenly throw back his head and chime in with a most hideous accompaniment. It was not yelping— it was not howling or barking. It was the well-sustained noise that dogs occasionally make on moonlit nights— but to Tom it was singing.

"Brayvo! Encore! Well done, Sims Reeves!" the bricklayers would shout, when they had done laughing at this performance; and, if there were strangers on board, be sure Tom got something more considerable than the usual penny for the voyage.

I remember one summer afternoon, when the cows were standing knee-deep in the water, and the fallen blossoms from the chestnut tree had made the stream white by the stone steps, and when Tom had a heavy boatload to take across. It was the last time I crossed with him. There were a lady and gentleman and a little, yellow-haired girl, who had never met Charlie before, and who were— especially the little girl— highly captivated by him and his tricks. He had just given us a song, and the child had clapped her hands with delight, and then drawn the little creature to her lap, when her mother spoke.

"Isn't it a dear little thing, Edie?" and then, turning to its master,"Would you care to part with your dog, or is he too much of a favourite i"

"Would you feel disposed to buy 'im, marm i"

"Well, I think we might, if you didn't set an exaggerated val-"

"Your pardon, marm," Tom interposed, pulling very short and very hard, "but allow me to ast a question. Would you care to part with that little Missy, if I was to tempt you with an 'ansome orfor?" And two of Tom's bricklaying friends began to laugh behind their homy hands. Tom was evidently in form.

"She wouldn't fret along with me if you was to 'and her over, supposing I made it worth your while, would she i 'Ere, Charlie, come 'ere, sir;" and Charlie bounded over to him. "No, marm; thank ye all the same; my dawg ain't for sale."

"No, I don't wamt no drinks of ye, thank ye. Threepence is my fare, if you please!" he said gruffly to the lady's husband, as that gentleman paid him on landing.

"That was a rare good 'un, wom't it?" one of the dusty workmen said to me, as we walked up the white road from the ferry. "Tom sell 'is dog! Haw, haw! Why, he's knowed for that dog all round the country. It's all he cares about, is Charlie. He got into trouble for pretty near killing a man last autumn for kicking of it when his back was turned. It's a sight to see him combing and washing of it, like a woman with her fust babby. But then it's a'most like a huming creature in its ways, ain't it, sir?"

IT WAS a year before I was back again in that part of the world. Then, one evening, I stood waiting on the little beach among the reeds and long grasses, waiting for the green boat to come over from that too attractive other shore. Presently I saw a man come down to the boat, and at the same moment one of my old friends— a mason— joined me.

"Good evening, sir." He was carrying the same rough bag over his shoulder. Another branch of pink hawthorn was sticking out of it; and he touched his cap as if we had only parted yesterday.

"Why, that isn't Tom? Where's Tom?" I asked, as a strange man came down the steps and got into the boat.

"Tom? Lor', no, sir! Ain't you 'eard about 'im? He's gen'ally about 'ere, too."

Then, as the boat came creeping across, the mason told me about Tom.

"It was last autumn. His old woman had just died— not that that put him out much, but he was a bit in drink— a good bit the night it happened, they said. Anyhow, it came round the bend full steam, and ran him down— cut the boat clean in two. That's a new 'un there. They shouted at 'im, but he was stooping down and playing with the dog— fuddled by the drink and letting his boat drift— and never 'eard 'em till they was into him.

"Well, they fished 'im out down by the island— two men from the pub did— and, so soon as the water run out of 'im and he could speak, he says, 'Where's my dawg? ' The dog was nowhere— that's where the dog was. They seen him swimming round and round old Tom at first, but poor Charlie worn't no better at water than 'is master, and he was down before they got to him. If you'll believe me, sir, he fought like a madman for to go and drown hisself along of the poor beast. He had rheumatic fever and was clean mad— in the infirmary— after that, and, when he came out, you wouldn't have knowed him for the same npan. You dursn't speak to him of Charlie fur your life, fur he took to liquor from the time he come out. It was from them rheumatics, you know. And he's fair gone down now— hangs about, water-jack— earns a tanner with the tow-line and creeps off to the pub— sleeps out o' nights—" And the mason suddenly dropped his voice to a whisper. "There he is, sure enough!"

As the new ferry-boat grounded on the pebbles, a man had risen from the slime and mud, where he had been lying, amongst the rank reeds and docks by the water's edge. A shivering, sunken-chested, drink and mud-sodden wretch, in a hat and ragged black clothes that would have dishonoured a scare-crow, with water oozing and splashing in his great sockless boots— one of those terrible hangers-on of tow-men and lock-keepers who make us shudder as they touch the varnished edges of our skills,— and yet, as he hobbled along to the ferry-boat, I could see that this loathsome wreck was indeed all that one year's misfortune had left of whistling and growling Tom the Ferryman.

We had to wait for two young urchins coming home from school, and, while he stood leaning on the bow of the boat, touching his hat with his trembling hand and whining for a copper whenever I looked towards him,! bad time to take in all the pitiable evidence of his wretchedness.

"Yes, he ain't a beauty to look at now, is he, sir?" said the new ferryman, when we had pushed off.

"Wait a minnit, sir," said one of the boys— a carroty-headed young demon of fourteen— seeing the interest I took in this local celebrity. "We'll show you somethink as good as a play in a minnit."

The ragged water-jack had clutched his coppers tight, and was turning round and round among the reeds, like an animal seeking his lying place, and, directly we had got out a little distance from the bank, the red-haired boy and his companion began calling—

"Chawley! Chawley! Where's Chawley, Tom? Good dog; good dog, there;" and they leaned over the side and barked and yelped, and then pretended to encourage an imaginary dog swimming after the boat.

Directly they called, the man had sprung forward, raving and cursing and howling in a manner that was truly bloodcurdling. Then he waded into the water up to his waist, and stood shaking his clenched fist after the retreating boat, his curses rattling out of a throat dry with passion.

"Go back, Tom! Go back, my man!" his successor shouted. "He'll drown hisself one day along of you boys. Serve you right, I say, and thank you, sir, for catching him one. Now then, stop that snivel, and get up from there."

For a startling box on the ear from the uncourteous stranger he was trying to entertain had seated the red-haired schoolboy in the bottom of the boat.

"Fact is, he ain't safe to play with. If he collars one of you boys, you'll know it, I tell you that He ain't right in his head, sir."

The wretched creature had slunk back to the shore, and was turning round in the slime and the weeds once more, waving his arms and moaning every now and again.

"No. The doctor said undoubtedly he got a crack on his head in going under the tug; only he was that mad at the time they couldn't examine him."

"THANK YOU kindly, sir. I'll give it to him, little by little," said the dusty mason, as we walked away under the chestnut tree by the alehouse. "But it ain't no good, sir. He's fair gone! And how can ye blame the poor devil for coming when he gets a copper or two? He knows he's fairly done. He was in the House all winter, and what with the sleeping out and the drink, he'll be gone come next November. Queer thing, life, ain't it, sir! A strong-bodied man to go to pieces like that in a few months— and all owing to a drowned dog, for it was that 'as done him. There's no doubt it was all that 'as done him!"

And I agreed with the dusty mason that life was— queer; and that this was the quickest down-hill journey that had ever come under my observation.

———————

5: Homing the Goose

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

Sun (Sydney) 24 Dec 1939

ONE of the best things the Christmas season brings is the Good Excuse. Sandy Donovan took advantage of it to post on his door a notice, "Back in 10 Minutes," when he went round to the Most Disreputable Club in Sydney, where he was more likely to stay ten hours.

Three clients had called and waited, accepting the door-sign in good faith, before, at the Most Disreputable Club, the goose intruded itself with the seventh drink.

Donovan, good chap that he was, hardly understood that a goose came into the story; what he did understand was that something was going to be raffled for some good cause. He understood, too, of course, that the good cause was the same shabby member who put the proposition; but, seeing it was Christmas, he said, "Sher'n'ly," as well as he was able and put in his money.

It was after he and his friends, having had a game of dominoes, had returned to the bar, where they were seeing who could lose the most on the poker machine, that Donovan had the news broken to him that he had won the goose.

It was broken to him by Darcy, the shabby raffle-promoter, in a manner that was like an invitation to himself to drink with Donovan at Donovan's expense. Donovan, almost as if he was delighted, issued the invitation. It was Christmas.

As food, Donovan hated poultry of every description, goose being his particular aversion. In a vague way he remembered that geese had something to do with saving Rome, and, with a recollection of the horrors Latin used to give him as a schoolboy, he felt a greater antipathy to geese than ever. It would have been far better if Rome had not been saved. Still he had a look at his goose, dumped in a corner with its head poked out of a slit in the bag. It cocked its eye at its new owner as he approached, and then, stretching its neck, hissed at him.

"Dam' silly bird," said Donovan. "It hisses at the only man in the club who wouldn't want to eat it. What do I wanna goose for?"

"It's only young. It will eat beautifully," said the raffle-man.

Something like a shudder shook Donovan at the thought. "I don't wanna eat it!" he said. "As far as I'm concerned, you can have the damn goose. Here—I'll make you a present of it."

It was after the twelfth drink, when Donovan and his friends were playing a friendly game of crib (with "who kisses Polly" at the end of it) that the goose made a re-entry.

"I put you into the new raffle, Mr. Donovan," he heard someone say, "and you won it again!"

Donovan turned with a cold eye and saw the shabby man beside him. Obviously he expected the goose to be returned to him again, so that he could extract raffle-money once more; and the expectation irritated even the good-natured Donovan. The raffle business was being carried too far. He felt, though he did not say it,— "respectable" having become a difficult word— that he was a respectable business man; and he objected to being made the target for the silver of raffle-investors who would be prepared to eat a goose if they won it.

"All ri', I'll keep it," he said shortly.

The shabby, man's face fell as if somebody in whom he had put all his trust had been false.

"I'll keep it, if I have to eat it myself." said Donovan, with sudden irascibility.

Nevertheless he handed his prize to the most forgetful steward in sight, and proceeded with Christmas.

It has been remarked, I think, that it was Christmas. It was this steward who chased him when he left the club, forgetting a goose being one thing, but not remembering a prospect of a tip being quite another. He was carrying a parcel which said "Ya-wuck! Yawuck!" at intervals. Donovan, swaying a bit uncertainly, found himself with a bag containing a goose in his hand.

"You were leaving it," the steward panted. "Your goose. See you tomorrow, Mr Donovan."

Donovan had not time to get even the soda-water in his speech before, plainly hopeful of the tip his thoughtfulness would bring him in the morning, the steward was gone. He felt like a fool, standing there with his goose in the bag. Only the certainty that he would look more foolish if he tried to throw it away stayed a half-formed resolution.

Again, as he waited for a tram, he had an idea of dumping his burden into a street waste-basket; but the curious looks which bystanders were sending his way deterred him. His trouble almost sobered him.

"Nice goose that," remarked his neighbor on the tram.

"Yes; would you mind if I gave it to you?" Donovan answered, eagerly, preparing to hand the bag over.

The man got off the tram— hurriedly, Donovan thought— wondering how mad he must have seemed, trying to give away a goose like that. He put the abomination under the seat and tried to forget it. He might have succeeded if

the tram-guard had not hauled it out and pursued him with it after he had alighted at the Central Station.

Thoughts full of bitterness were Donovan's as he neared his suburban station with the goose still on his mind if not on his hand. He had dumped it in the small baggage compartment at the end of the carriage and found a seat at the other end. The effort to abandon the thing by leaving it on a seat at the Central Station had proved a failure, owing to the shrill intervention of other passengers. He had an uncomfortable memory of having previously heard a voice say:

"The old pot looks shot. We'll 'ave ter see 'e doesn't forget that goose of 'is; 'is missus might go off at 'im If 'e gits 'ome minus. I allus believe in 'elping n bloke when 'e's potty."

Donovan's desire to get rid of the bird before he reached home now amounted to a passion; yet he felt he must be careful not to reveal it— especially remembering the curious behavior of the man who had hurried off the tram. He must try strategy. Not until the train was about to move off from his station did he rise to his feet, and jump off— at the end remote from that in which the goose occasionally proclaimed its presence by a "Yawuck! Yawuck!"

As the carriages began to move past him, he congratulated himself on his escape. A little too soon. The air seemed to be suddenly full of protesting goose as his deserted luggage, helpfully hurled from the train, caught him full in the face.

People rushed to help him to his feet. Their greatest anxiety a positively fiendish anxiety— seemed to be to see that, he did not forget his luggage.

"Merry Christmas!" cried each of his helpers, as, having aided him through the station gate, they moved off in different directions.

Donovan felt murder in his heart. As he crossed the road, dawdling to allow the other passengers to disperse, he noticed a boy standing under the street light at the corner of the road. The youngster looked curiously at the bag he carried. The goose, indignant at recent treatment, was being particularly offensive.

"Son!" called Donovan, as he came near. "How'd you like me to give you a goose?"

The boy suddenly decided that there was something wrong about Donovan. He edged into the roadway, suspiciously.

"Don't be scared of me, sonny," said Donovan. "It's Christmas. I wanna make people presents."

The boy made up his mind; he turned tail and fled into the darkness.

Donovan could have wept. Why was the world so full of cussedness? If he had really wanted that goose, there would be thousands of people trying to steal it from him.

An inspiration came to him as he passed a fence. He knew there was a poultry yard on the other side. Looking carefully around to see that he was unobserved, he lifted his bundle above his head, resolved to push it over the top of the fence, a high one. The goose "yawucked" horribly.

There was a scrambling sound and a man's head and shoulders appeared over the top.

"HERE! What do you think you're doing? What's that you've got?"

"It's a goose," Donovan explained. "And I don't want it."

"What's wrong with it?" demanded the man on the fence "There's nothing wrong with it I won it in a raffle."

"Oh, a raffle!" sneered the man. "Of course! Well, you' take your b— goose away. I've got prize fowls here, an' you're not going to throw any diseased poultry amongst them."

"Look." explained Donovan, desperately, "it's a perfectly good goose. It's young, and it'll eat beautifully. But I don't want "

"You're either drunk or you've stolen it and got cold feet. My advice to you is to get home— and take the goose with you. If you hang round here, I'll put the hose on you."

The man disappeared.

An idea that he was getting the hose ready caused Donovan to move briskly. The inhabitants of the bungalows seemed to be all hosing their gardens or airing themselves on their verandahs. Donovan felt somehow that he was an object of curiosity. To abandon the burden here was obviously impossible.

At the street corner a ragged individual almost bumped into him. He apologised.

"Could you spare us a sixpence, mister?" said the ragged man. "I'm outer work an' can't git the dole, an' me wife an'—"

A GREAT hope dawned on Donovan. "Here's a bob, my poor man," he said. "An', look! I'll do more than that. I'll make you a present of this goose."

"Er— will you? What's wrong with the goose?" asked the man suspiciously.

"There's nothing, wrong with it." Donovan could have roared the words. "It's a perfectly good goose I don't want it, that's all."

Donovan sensed that the man still had a misgiving but was prepared to take a risk, even as he left the goose on his hands and hurried home. He knew

that the stranger followed him, watching him until he entered his home, evidently to give himself reassurance about a queer transaction.

At home, however, Donovan was at ease. He had got rid of his barnacle. There was no wife present to remark about his lateness, and the smell of whisky he had brought with him; she was going to take the children, he remembered, to see the city shops. He made himself comfortable on the verandah; and; heavy with whisky he dozed.

"Yawuck! Yawuck!"

Donovan woke with a start. It seemed that he was haunted; geese had been in his dreams. There was a crunch on the gravelled path as Donovan leaped to his feet.

"This man says," began the policeman—

"Didn't you give me the goose?" demanded the ragged man. "Didn't you say I could 'ave it?"

"That's right, constable," said Donovan. "I gave it to him. Y'see, I've been winning geese all day in raffles, an' I don't want it."

"Well, that's all right then," said the policeman, handing over the bag he carried. "Here's your goose."

"I'm damned if I want the goose, now. A goose ain't much use to me, an' if a man tries to sell it 'e's liable to be accused of stealin' it and run in. If somebody was to give me a coupler bob he could keep the damned goose."

Donovan broke into a perspiration. "I'll give you two bob — if you take it away."

The man's hesitation was putting Donovan in a frenzy.

"The constable knows you didn't steal the goose. You'll be all right."

"You consider yourself lucky, and get along," said the policeman. He lingered as the man shuffled away. Obviously he had expectations of his own, the gent, being in a giving mood; and the gent., cursing the trouble the bird had cost him, gave him some whisky and a few Christmas shillings for himself.

Then Donovan went to bed to forget a world over which geese were brooding like a nightmare. Not even the late arrival of his wife and family disturbed him.

"Yawuck! Yawuck!"

Donovan sat up suddenly in the darkness, and put on the electric light. Was he dreaming?

"Yawuck! Yawuck!"

His wife; disturbed by the light, moved.

"That's the goose," she said, sleepily.

"What goose?"

"Coming away from the railway station I met a poor man who was trying to sell a goose. He seemed in need of money and all he wanted was five shillings. So I bought it."

Donovan turned out the light and subsided, groaning, amongst the bedclothes.

6: A Spot of Murder

Peter Cheyney

1896-1951

In: *Calling Mr Callaghan*, 1953

From the last Cheyney short story collection, published posthumously.

WHEN Callaghan came into the office, Effie Thompson stopped typing. She said: "Good morning, Mr. Callaghan. There have been a few telephone calls, and your letters are on your desk."

Callaghan said: "Right, Effie. Has Fallon or Craske been through?"

She shook her head. Callaghan went into his office. She followed him with her notebook.

She said: "You're expecting a call from Fallon or Craske? If either of them come through while you're out what shall I do about it?"

Callaghan said: "There's nothing you can do, Efiie. Both those birds ought to be pretty scared by this time— both of them or one of them."

She said: "You don't know which one was really responsible for that fraudulent claim?"

Callaghan said: "No! But with the situation like it is, I bet the guilty one's feeling scared and the innocent one is beginning to get ideas." He lit a cigarette. "Of course," he went on, "there's a chance they were both concerned in it."

He began to dictate his letters.

The telephone jangled. Effie Thompson took off the receiver. She put her hand over the transmitter. She said: "Talk of the devil! Mr. Fallon wants to speak to you, Mr. Callaghan."

Callaghan reached out for the instrument. He said: "Hello, Fallon. What is it?"

Fallon said: "Look, Mr. Callaghan, I've been thinking things over and I think I've got them straightened out. I think I'm in a position to prove that Craske— my partner— has been the person who double-crossed the Insurance Company. I can prove I had nothing to do with it."

Callaghan said: "I'm glad of that, Fallon. You know we never accused you of anything."

Fallon said: "I know. At the same time I realized you probably suspected the pair of us. After all, no Insurance Company likes to pay twenty thousand on a fake claim, and I'm afraid that's what it was."

Callaghan said: "That's what I thought." There was a pause. Then: "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Fallon said: "Look here, circumstances have broken pretty well for me. Craske went off this morning and took the train for Newcastle. So he'll be out of the way. All the books and everything are in the safe down here on the houseboat. I went through them directly he left a couple of hours ago, and with the information that I've got I can show you just how he did it."

Callaghan said: "You want me to come down?"

Fallon said: "Yes. I'd like to do a few more hours' work on the books, but if you could get down this evening about nine o'clock, I think I'd have the whole thing straightened out."

Callaghan said: "All right. I'll be there. I'm glad you've got yourself in the clear, Fallon. I knew it had to be *one* of you, but, of course, there was always the chance that it was *both* of you. I'll be with you at nine o'clock."

"Right ho !" said Fallon. "The houseboat is moored by the landing stage oil the road about a hundred and fifty yards from the Star & Crown. Anybody']l tell you where it is. I'll be there."

Callaghan asked: "Where are you speaking from?"

"From the Star & Crown," Fallon answered.

Callaghan said: "All right." He hung up. He stubbed out his cigarette, lit a fresh one. He said to Effie Thompson: "Fallon says he's got the goods on his partner Craske. He says he can prove it was Craske who pulled that fake claim. Fallon wants to see me. I'm going down to the houseboat to see him at nine o'clock to-night."

Effie Thompson said: "Are you going on your own? It might be a plant, mightn't it? You've only got Fallon's word that it was Craske who was responsible for the fraud."

Callaghan said: "That's true enough. At the same time you've got to take a chance sometime. But thanks for being concerned, Effie." He blew ruminative smoke rings. Then he went on: "I suppose there might be something in this thing called woman's intuition."

She smiled. She said: "Every woman thinks so, Mr. Callaghan."

"All right," said Callaghan. "Take this note down. I'm going out in a few minutes, so I shan't be here when Nikolls arrives. When he comes in give him the note."

She said: "Very well, Mr. Callaghan."

Callaghan dictated the note.

A SHARP WIND was blowing and a few big rain spots fell as Callaghan, leaving the road by the Inn, turned off on to the footpath that ran down to the river's edge. After a few minutes' walking he could see in the dusk the outline of the houseboat moored to the bank in the little backwater.

He paused a moment to light a cigarette, then continued on his way. He reached the houseboat, stepped aboard. There was no sign of life. Callaghan called out: "Fallon!" There was no reply.

He walked along the side of the boat until he came to the main door. It was unlocked. Callaghan pushed it open. It was quite dark inside, the windows being screened by black-out curtains. Callaghan put his hand on to the wall by the door, felt for an electric light switch. He found it, snapped it on. At the other end of the cabin, behind a desk, sat

Craske. The automatic in his right hand was pointed at Callaghan's stomach.

He said: "Come in, Callaghan. Close the door behind you. I want to have a little talk with you."

Callaghan grinned. He said: "So it seems. This is a surprise, Craske."

Craske said: "I bet it is. Sit down, Callaghan, in that chair and keep your hands on the arms. Don't take any chances."

Callaghan said sarcastically: "I don't intend to take any chances."

Craske said: "You thought you were going to see Fallon, didn't you?"

Callaghan nodded. He said: "Do you mind if I give myself another cigarette?"

Craske said: "No, I don't mind anything so long as you don't try anything funny."

Callaghan stubbed out his cigarette end. He produced his cigarette case, lit a fresh cigarette. He inhaled from the cigarette, then he said: "Yes, I thought I was going to see Fallon, and I thought you were in Newcastle. It seems I was wrong."

Craske said: "Yes. But Fallon wasn't kidding you."

Callaghan raised one eyebrow. "No?" he queried. There was a pause. Then: "What's the idea in the gun, Craske?" he asked. "That sort of stuff isn't going to get you anywhere."

"Oh yes, it is," said Craske. "I'm sorry, Callaghan, but I'm going to kill you. You see, I've got to."

Callaghan said: "You don't say! Why?"

Craske said: "I'll tell you. I got the idea some time ago that Fallon was wise to what I'd been doing. I got the idea that he'd been checking up on what had been going on." He grinned. "I knew he'd been going through the firm's books which I had down here over the weekend," he went on. "He thought I didn't know. Fallon's a bit of a mug, you know."

"Callaghan said: "You're telling me. But any man would have to be pretty clever to be your partner, Craske."

"Maybe," said Craske. "Anyhow, I came to the conclusion he was going to do something about it. So I thought I'd give him the opportunity. I told him this morning I was going up to Newcastle. Then I packed my bag and cleared off. I went along to the Star & Crown. I went upstairs to the first floor landing and watched to see if Fallon would come along and telephone after he'd had a chance of going through those books."

"He did. He telephoned from the box downstairs." He grinned. "There's never anybody in the office on the first floor in the morning. I knew that that Manageress is always downstairs in the kitchen at that time. I went into the office. I listened on the extension line. I heard him fixing up for you to come down to-night. I heard what he said."

Callaghan nodded. "Nice work," he said.

"Not too bad," said Graske. "When he'd gone I went downstairs, rang for a car, drove to the station, picked up the Newcastle train. I was careful to let the porter see that I actually caught it. You see I happened to know the train stops for water on this side of the Blackwood tunnel— twelve miles away."

Callaghan nodded. "And when the train stopped you just got out?"

"That's right," said Craske. "I waited till seven o'clock this evening, then I telephoned Fallon at the Star & Crown— I knew he'd be there for dinner— and told him his mother was dying. I made out I was a friend of his mother's. I knew that would move him, and I knew he wouldn't telephone your office because he'd know it'd be closed. Half an hour ago I slipped back here and waited for you. No one saw me."

Callaghan drew easily on his cigarette. He said: "All very interesting. And what's the big idea?"

"The big idea is this," said Craske. "You'll be dead. I was seen on the train going to Newcastle to-day, so I'm all right. Your office know that you had an appointment here with Fallon at nine o'clock. Fallon will say that he wasn't here— he went to see his mother who was dying. Who's going to believe him. His mother's not dying, and she's not even at the address I gave him." He smiled. "I gave him the address of an empty house. You get the idea?"

Callaghan said: "I get it. The idea is that the Insurance Company I'm working for know that I suspected both of you as being in this job. They'll believe Fallon killed me. You'll have an alibi and Fallon's alibi won't stand up— it's obviously a fake."

Craske nodded. He said: "That's right."

Callaghan said: "Nice work I I congratulate you, Craske. Just because Fallon's alibi is so obviously a fake— although it was the truth— the police won't check too carefully on your alibi which looks good although it's a fake. All they'll do is to check you got on that Newcastle train." He nodded

appreciatively. "You know, Craske," he went on, "it's not at all a bad idea. In point of fact it's almost watertight. It's really very hard luck on you that you won't get away with it."

Craske said almost casually: "What's the good of bluffing, Callaghan? You'd better make up your mind to take what's coming to you." He leveled the gun. "I'm going to give it to you in a minute," he said. "Perhaps you'd like to turn round?"

Callaghan said: "I wouldn't even bother. But you'd be awfully silly if you squeezed that trigger before I told you what I'm going to tell you. After all, it's not so bad doing five or six years imprisonment for making a fraudulent insurance claim, but it would be just too bad to be hanged for an unnecessary murder."

Craske said: "What do you mean— an unnecessary murder?" He looked surprised.

Callaghan said: "I'll tell you. I said your idea was very nearly watertight. But you see the unfortunate thing was that Fallon never got anywhere near that empty house where you told him his dying mother was. He was knocked over by a car. The hospital phoned through to my office— my secretary happened to be working late. It's too bad," said

Callaghan, "because you realize that it will be quite obvious that Fallon didn't kill me the only other person who would have a motive for being on this houseboat and finishing me off would be you. That being so, that Newcastle alibi of yours will be closely checked, which it would not be in the ordinary course of events. They'll discover that you never arrived at Newcastle. You won't be able to tell them who you saw there— what you did there.

"I'm sorry about Fallon," Callaghan went on. "The reason I was a bit late getting here was because I went to the hospital. He died at eight o'clock to-night."

Craske sighed heavily. He put the automatic pistol on the desk. He said: "Well, that lets you out."

Callaghan said: "So you've changed your mind, Craske?"

Craske nodded. He grinned. "Why not?" he said. "Now that Fallon's dead, the situation becomes a little easier. Before he had that telephone conversation with you this morning you've admitted that you suspected both or either of us. Now my story's going to be that it was Fallon who pulled that claim on the Insurance Company. You can say what you like about this interview. Who's going to believe you? My story's as good as yours. They'll never be able to convict me of that fraud in a thousand years, and you know it."

He pulled the ammunition clip out of the butt of the gun, threw the clip and the pistol into the desk drawer. He said: "There's another idea, too." He grinned at Callaghan cynically. "Look," he went on, "my story is going to be that Fallon committed suicide. Here he was this evening in a district that he had no reason to be in, getting knocked down by a motor-car. Maybe he threw himself under that car because he knew he was going to be found out. That's a good story too," Craske concluded.

Callaghan nodded. He said: "It's not bad. You're a clever fellow, Craske."

Craske said: "I think so, too!"

"Well," said Callaghan, "it looks as if I can't do any good staying here. I'll be on my way."

Craske said: "Good-night, Callaghan. I'm not going to do a thing. If the Insurance Company put the police on to me, I've got my story all ready for them, and nobody can prove anything different."

Callaghan got up. He stubbed out his cigarette end in the ashtray on the desk. He walked slowly to the door of the cabin. He opened the door, turned. He stood looking at Craske.

He said: "You know, Craske, life is damn funny. When Fallon rang through to my office this morning I didn't actually believe him. I thought it was a plant. I thought he wanted to get me down here to-night to try something on. So I tried a little idea of my own. Would you Like to hear what it was?"

Craske said nothing. He looked at Callaghan.

Callaghan went on: "I left a note for Windemere Nikolls, my assistant, to get down here this afternoon, and if the coast was clear to get a Dictaphone fixed in the wall of this cabin. You might like to know that every word that's been said in here will be produced as evidence. Nikolls got a line running up the bank. He's been sitting there behind a tree with the earphones on ever since I came here.

Craske gasped. He looked at Callaghan as if he had been pole-axed.

"So much for that," said Callaghan. "The other thing is we've got all the evidence we want against you— including Fallon. I shall put Fallon in the witness box against Craske."

Craske said: "What the devil do you mean? Fallon's dead."

Callaghan grinned. He said: "Nuts, Craske! That little story I told you about Fallon being knocked over and killed was phoney. I made that up. Good-night, Craske."

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7: Experiment

Maxwell Struthers Burt

1882-1954

Pictorial Review, June 1921

WHEN SHE HAD reached that point of detachment where she could regard the matter more or less objectively, Mrs. Ennis, recalling memories of an interrupted but lifelong friendship, realized that Burnaby's behavior, outrageous or justifiable or whatever you choose to call it, at all events aberrational, was exactly what might have been expected of him, given an occasion when his instincts for liking or disliking had been sufficiently aroused. Moreover, there was about him always, she remembered, this additional exceptional quality: the rare and fortunate knowledge that socially he was independent; was not, that is, subject to retaliation. He led too roving a life to be moved by the threat of unpopularity; a grandfather had bequeathed him a small but unshakable inheritance.

As much, therefore, as any one can be in this world he was a free agent; and the assurance of this makes a man very brave for either kindness or unkindness, and, of course, extremely dangerous for either good or evil. You will see, after a while, what I am driving at. Meanwhile, without further comment, we can come directly to Mrs. Ennis, where she sat in her drawing room, and to the night on which the incident occurred.

Mrs. Ennis, small and blond, and in a white evening gown of satin and silver sequins that made her look like a lovely and fashionable mermaid, sat in her drawing room and stretched her feet out to the flames of a gentle woodfire. It was seven o'clock of a late April night, and through an open window to her left came, from the little park beyond the house, a faint breeze that stirred lazily the curtains and brought to the jonquils, scattered about in numerous metal and crystal bowls, word of their brothers in the dusk without. The room was quiet, save for the hissing of the logs; remote, delicately lighted, filled with the subtle odor of books and flowers; reminiscent of the suave personalities of those who frequented it. On the diminutive piano in one corner, a large silver frame, holding the photograph of a man in French uniform, caught here and there on its surface high lights from the shaded wall-lamp above. In the shelter of white bookcases, the backs of volumes in red and tawny and brown gave the effect of tapestry cunningly woven. Mrs. Ennis stared at the logs and smiled.

It was an odd smile, reflective, yet anticipatory; amused, absent-minded, barely disturbing the lines of her beautifully modeled red lips. Had any of Mrs. Ennis's enemies, and they were not few in number, seen it, they would have surmised mischief afoot; had any of her friends, and there were even more of

these than enemies, been present, they would have been on the alert for events of interest. It all depended, you see, upon whether you considered a taste for amateur psychology, indulged in, a wickedness or not. Mrs. Ennis herself would not have given her favorite amusement so stately a name; she was aware merely that she found herself possessed of a great curiosity concerning people, particularly those of forcible and widely different characteristics, and that she liked, whenever possible, to gather them together, and then see what would happen. Usually something did— happen, that is.

With the innocence of a child playing with fire-crackers (and it wasn't altogether innocent, either), in her rôle of the god in the machine she had been responsible for many things; several comedies, perhaps a tragedy or two. Ordinarily her parties were dull enough; complacent Washington parties; diplomats, long-haired Senators from the West, short-bearded Senators from the East, sleek young men and women, all of whom sat about discussing grave nonsense concerning a country with which they had utterly lost touch, if ever they had had any; but every now and then, out of the incalculable shufflings of fate, appeared a combination that seemed to offer more excitement. Tonight such a combination was at hand. Mrs. Ennis was contented, in the manner of a blithe and beautiful spider.

Burnaby, undoubtedly, was the principal source of this contentment, for he was a young man— he wasn't really young, but you always thought of him as young— of infinite potentialities; Burnaby, just back from some esoteric work in Roumania, whither he had gone after the War, and in Washington for the night and greatly pleased to accept an invitation for dinner; but essential as he was, Burnaby was only part of the tableau arranged. To meet him, Mrs. Ennis had asked her best, for the time being, friend, Mimi de Rochefort— Mary was her right name— and Mimi de Rochefort's best, for the time being, friend, Robert Pollen. Nowadays Pollen came when Madame de Rochefort came; one expected his presence. He had been a habit in this respect for over six months; in fact, almost from the time Madame de Rochefort (she was so young that to call her Madame seemed absurdly quaint), married these five years to a Frenchman, had set foot once more upon her native land.

In the meeting of Pollen and Burnaby and Mary Rochefort, Mrs. Ennis foresaw contingencies; just what these contingencies were likely to be she did not know, but that an excellent chance for them existed she had no doubt, even if in the end they proved to be no more than the humor to be extracted from the reflection that a supposedly rational divinity had spent his time creating three people so utterly unalike.

The gilt clock on the mantelpiece chimed half-past seven. The jonquils on the piano shone in the polished mahogany like yellow water-lilies in a pool. Into the silence of the room penetrated, on noiseless feet, a fresh-colored man servant. Despite such days as the present, Mrs. Ennis had a way, irritating to her acquaintances, of obtaining faithful attendance. Even servants seemed to be glad to wait upon her. Her husband, dead these six years, had been unfailingly precise in all matters save the one of drink.

"Mr. Burnaby!" announced the man servant.

Burnaby strode close on his heels. Mrs. Ennis had arisen and was standing with her back to the fireplace. She had the impression that a current of air followed the entrance of the two men. She remembered now that she had always felt that way with Burnaby; she had always felt as if he were bringing news of pine forests and big empty countries she had never seen but could dimly imagine. It was very exciting.

Burnaby paused and looked about the room doubtfully, then he chuckled and came forward. "I haven't seen anything like this for three years," he said. "Roumanian palaces are furnished in the very latest bad taste."

He took Mrs. Ennis's outstretched hand and peered down at her with narrowed eyelids. She received the further impression, an impression she had almost forgotten in the intervening years, of height and leanness, of dark eyes, and dark, crisp hair; a vibrant impression; something like a chord of music struck sharply. Unconsciously she let her hand rest in his for a moment, then she drew it away hastily. He was smiling and talking to her.

"Rhoda! You ought to begin to look a bit older! You're thirty-six, if you're a day! How do you do it? You look like a wise and rather naughty little girl."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Ennis. "I wear my hair parted on one side like a debutante to give me a head-start on all the knowing and subtle and wicked people I have to put up with. While they are trying to break the ice with an ingenue, I'm sizing them up."

Burnaby laughed. "Well, I'm not subtle," he said. He sank down into a big chair across the fireplace from her. "I'm only awfully glad to be back; and I'm good and simple and amenable, and willing to do nearly anything any good American tells me to do. I love Americans."

"You won't for very long," Mrs. Ennis assured him dryly. "Particularly if you stay in Washington more than a day." She was wondering how even for a moment she had been able to forget Burnaby's vividness.

"No," laughed Burnaby, "I suppose not. But while the mood is on me, don't disillusion me."

Mrs. Ennis looked across at him with a smile. "You'll meet two very attractive people tonight, anyway," she said.

"Oh, yes!" He leaned forward. "I had forgotten— who are they?"

Mrs. Ennis spread her arms out along the chair. "There's Mary Rochefort," she answered, "and there's Robert Pollen, who's supposed to be the most alluring man alive."

"Is it doing him any good?"

"Well— " Mrs. Ennis looked up with a laugh.

"You don't like him? Or perhaps you do?"

Mrs. Ennis knit her brows in thought, her blue eyes dark with conjecture. "I don't know," she said at length. "Sometimes I think I do, and sometimes I think I don't. He's very good-looking in a tall, blond, pliable way, and he can be very amusing when he wants to be. I don't know."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Ennis wrinkled her nose in the manner of one who is being pushed to explanation.

"I am not so sure," she confided, "that I admire professional philanderers as much as I did. Although, so long as they leave me alone— "

"Oh, he's that, is he?"

Mrs. Ennis corrected herself hastily. "Oh, no," she protested. "I shouldn't talk that way, should I? Now you'll have an initial prejudice, and that isn't fair— only— " she hesitated "I rather wish he would confine his talents to his own equals and not conjure young married women at their most vulnerable period."

"Which is?"

"Just when," said Mrs. Ennis, "they're not sure whether they want to fall in love again with their own husbands or not." Then she stopped abruptly. She was surprised that she had told Burnaby these things; even more surprised at the growing incisiveness of her voice. She was not accustomed to taking the amatory excursions of her friends too much to heart; she had a theory that it was none of her business, that perhaps some day she might want charity herself. But now she found herself perceptibly indignant. She wondered if it wasn't Burnaby's presence that was making her so. Sitting across from her, he made her think of directness and dependability and other traits she was accustomed to refer to as "primitive virtues." She liked his black, heavily ribbed evening stockings. Somehow they were like him. It made her angry with herself and with Burnaby that she should feel this way; be so moved by "primitive virtues." She detested puritanism greatly, and righteously, but so much so that she frequently mistook the most innocent fastidiousness for an unforgivable rigidity. "If they once do," she concluded, "once do fall in love with their husbands again, they're safe, you know, for all time."

She looked up and drew in her breath sharply. Burnaby was sitting forward in his chair, staring at her with the curious, far-sighted stare she remembered was characteristic of him when his interest was suddenly and thoroughly aroused. It was as if he were looking through the person to whom he was talking to some horizon beyond. It was a trifle uncanny, unless you were accustomed to the trick.

"What's the matter?" she asked. She had the feeling that back of her some one she could not see was standing.

Burnaby smiled. "Nothing," he said. He sank back into his chair. "That's an odd name— the name of this alluring fellow of yours, isn't it? What did you say it was— Pollen?"

"Yes. Robert Pollen. Why, do you know him?"

"No." Burnaby shook his head. He leaned over and lit a cigarette. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked. He raised his eyes. "So he's conjuring this Madame de Rochefort, is he?" he concluded.

Mrs. Ennis flushed. "I never said anything of the kind!" she protested. "It's none of our business, anyway."

Burnaby smiled calmly. "I quite agree with you," he said. "I imagine that a Frenchwoman, married for a while, is much better able to conduct her life in this respect than even the most experienced of us."

"She isn't French," said Mrs. Ennis; "she's American. And she's only been married five years. She's just a child— twenty-six."

"Oh!" ejaculated Burnaby. "One of those hard-faced children! I understand— Newport, Palm Beach, cocktails— "

His voice was cut across by Mrs. Ennis's indignant retort. "You don't in the least!" she said. "She's not one of those hard-faced children; she's lovely— and I've come to the conclusion that she's pathetic. I'm beginning to rather hate this man Pollen. Back of it all are subtleties of personality difficult to fathom. You should know Blais Rochefort. I imagine a woman going about things the wrong way could break her heart on him like waves on a crystal rock. I think it has been a question of fire meeting crystal, and, when it finds that the crystal is difficult to warm, turning back upon itself. I said waves, didn't I? Well, I don't care if my metaphors are mixed. It's tragic, anyhow. And the principal tragedy is that Blais Rochefort isn't really cold— at least, I don't think he would be if properly approached— he is merely beautifully lucid and intelligent and exacting in a way no American understands, least of all a petted girl who has no family and who is very rich. He expects, you see, an equal lucidity from his wife. He's not to be won over by the fumbling and rather selfish and pretty little tricks that are all most of us know. But Mary, I think, would have learned if she had only held on. Now, I'm afraid, she's losing heart. Hard-faced child!"

Mrs. Ennis grew indignant again. "Be careful my friend; even you might find her dangerously pathetic."

Burnaby's eyes were placidly amused. "Thanks," he observed. "You've told me all I wanted to know."

Mrs. Ennis waved toward the piano. "There's Blais Rochefort's photograph," she retorted in tones of good-humored exasperation. "Go over and look at it."

"I will."

Burnaby's black shoulders, bent above the photograph, were for a moment the object of a pensive regard. Mrs. Ennis sighed. "Your presence makes me puritanical," she observed. "I have always felt that the best way for any one to get over Pollens was to go through with them and forget them."

Burnaby spoke without turning his head.

"He's good-looking."

"Very."

"A real man."

"Decidedly! Very brave and very cultivated."

"He waxes his mustache."

"Yes, even brave men do that occasionally."

"I should think," said Burnaby thoughtfully, putting the photograph down, "that he might be worth a woman's hanging on to."

Mrs. Ennis got up, crossed over to the piano, and leaned an elbow upon it, resting her cheek in the palm of her upturned hand and smiling at Burnaby.

"Don't let's be so serious," she said. "What business is it of ours?" She turned her head away and began to play with the petals of a near-by jonquil. "Spring is a restless time, isn't it?"

It seemed to her that the most curious little silence followed this speech of hers, and yet she knew that in actual time it was nothing, and felt that it existed probably only in her own heart. She heard the clock on the mantelpiece across the room ticking; far off, the rattle of a taxicab. The air coming through the open window bore the damp, stirring smell of early grass.

"Madame De Rochefort and Mr. Pollen!" announced a voice.

Mrs. Ennis had once said that her young friend, Mimi de Rochefort, responded to night more brilliantly than almost any other woman she knew. The description was apt. Possibly by day there was a pallor too lifeless, a nose a trifle too short and arrogant, lips, possibly, too full; but by night these discrepancies blended into something very near perfection, and back of them as well was a delicate illumination as of lanterns hung in trees beneath stars; an illumination due to youth, and to very large dark eyes, and to dark, soft hair

and red lips. Nor with this beauty went any of the coolness or abrupt languor with which the modern young hide their eagerness.

Mary Rochefort was quite simple beneath her habitual reserve; frank and appealing and even humorous at times, as if startled out of her usual mood of reflective quiet by some bit of wit, slowly apprehended, too good to be overlooked. Mrs. Ennis watched with a sidelong glance the effect of her entrance upon Burnaby. Madame de Rochefort! How absurd! To call this white, tall, slim child madame! She admired rather enviously the gown of shimmering dark blue, the impeccability of adolescence. Over the girl's white shoulder, too much displayed, Pollen peered at Burnaby with the vague, hostile smile of the guest not yet introduced to a guest of similar sex.

"Late as usual!" he announced. "Mimi kept me!" His manner was subtly domestic.

"You're really on the stroke of the clock," said Mrs. Ennis. "Madame de Rochefort— Mr. Burnaby— Mr. Pollen." She laughed abruptly, as if a thought had just occurred to her. "Mr. Burnaby," she explained to the girl, "is the last surviving specimen of the American male— he has all the ancient national virtues. Preserved, I suppose, because he spends most of his time in Alaska, or wherever it is. I particularly wanted you to meet him."

Burnaby flushed and laughed uncertainly. "I object— " he began.

The fresh-colored man servant entered with a tray of cocktails. Madame de Rochefort exclaimed delightedly. "I'm so glad," she said. "Nowadays one fatigues oneself before dinner by wondering whether there will be anything to drink or not. How absurd!" The careful choice of words, the precision of the young, worldly voice were in amusing contrast to the youthfulness of appearance. Standing before the fireplace in her blue gown, she resembled a tapering lily growing from the indigo shadows of a noon orchard.

"Rhoda'll have cocktails when there aren't any more left in the country," said Pollen. "Trust Rhoda!"

Mary Rochefort laughed. "I always do," she said, "with reservations." She turned to Burnaby. "Where are you just back from?" she asked. "I understand you are always just back from some place, or on the verge of going."

"Usually on the verge," answered Burnaby. He looked at her deliberately, a smile in his dark eyes; then he looked at Pollen.

"Where were you— the War?"

"Yes— by way of Roumania in the end."

"The War!" Mary Rochefort's lips became petulant. One noticed for the first time the possibility of considerable petulance back of the shining self-control. "How sick of it I grew— all of us living over there! I'd like to sleep for a thousand years in a field filled with daffodils."

"They've plenty scattered about this room," observed Pollen. "Why don't you start now?"

The fresh-colored man servant announced dinner. "Shall we go down?" said Mrs. Ennis.

They left the little drawing-room, with its jonquils and warm shadows, and went along a short hall, and then down three steps and across a landing to the dining-room beyond. It, like the drawing-room, was small, white-paneled to the ceiling, with a few rich prints of Constable landscapes on the walls, and velvet-dark sideboards and tables that caught the light of the candles. In the center was a table of snowy drapery and silver and red roses.

Mrs. Ennis sank into her chair and looked about her with content. She loved small dinners beautifully thought out, and even more she loved them when, as on this night, they were composed of people who interested her. She stole a glance at Burnaby. How clean and brown and alert he was! The white table-cloth accentuated his look of fitness and muscular control. What an amusing contrast he presented to the rather languid, gesturing Pollen, who sat opposite him! And yet Pollen was considerable of a man in his own way; very conquering in the affairs of life; immensely clever in his profession of architecture. Famous, Mrs. Ennis had heard.

But Mrs. Ennis, despite her feminine approval of success, couldn't imagine herself being as much interested in him— dangerously interested— as she knew her friend Mary Rochefort to be. How odd! From all the world to pick out a tall, blond, willowy man like Pollen! On the verge of middle age, too! Perhaps it was this very willowiness, this apparent placidity that made him attractive. This child, Mary Rochefort, quite alone in the world, largely untrained, adrift, imperiously demanding from an imperious husband something to which she had not as yet found the key, might very naturally gravitate toward any one presenting Pollen's appearance of security; his attitude of complacence in the face of feminine authority. But was he complacent? Mrs. Ennis had her doubts. He was very vain; underneath his urbanity there might be an elastic hardness.

There were, moreover, at times indications of a rather contemptuous attitude toward a world less highly trained than himself. She turned to Pollen, trying to recollect what for the last few moments he had been saying to her. He perceived her more scrutinizing attention and faced toward her. From under lowered eyelids he had been watching, with a moody furtiveness, Mary Rochefort and Burnaby, who were oblivious to the other two in the manner of people who are glad they have met.

Mrs. Ennis found herself annoyed, her sense of good manners shocked. She had not suspected that Pollen could be guilty of such clumsiness; she questioned if matters had reached a point where such an attitude on his part

would be justifiable under any circumstances. At all events, her doubts concerning his complacency had been answered. It occurred to Mrs. Ennis that her dinner-party was composed of more inflammable material, presented more dramatic possibilities, than even she had divined. She embraced Pollen with her smile.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked.

He lifted long eyebrows and smiled faintly.

"Working very hard," he said.

"Building behemoths for billionaires?"

"Yes."

"And the rest of the time?"

"Rather drearily going about."

She surveyed him with wicked innocence.

"Why don't you fall in love?" she suggested.

His expression remained unmoved. "It is so difficult," he retorted, "to find the proper subject. A man of my experience frightens the inexperienced: the experienced frighten me."

"You mean— ?"

"That I have reached the age where the innocence no longer possible to me seems the only thing worth while."

Mrs. Ennis wrinkled her nose daintily. "Nonsense!" she observed, and helped herself to the dish the servant was holding out to her. "What you have said," she resumed, "is the last word of the sentimentalist. If I thought you really meant it, I would know at once that you were very cold and very cruel and rather silly."

"Thanks!"

"Oh, I'm talking more or less abstractly."

"Well, possibly I am all of those things."

"But you want me to be personal?"

Pollen laughed. "Of course! Doesn't everybody want you to be personal?"

For an instant Mrs. Ennis looked again at Burnaby and Mary Rochefort, and a slightly rueful smile stirred in her eyes. It was amusing that she, who detested large dinners and adored general conversation, should at the moment be so engrossed in preventing the very type of conversation she preferred. She returned to Pollen. What a horrid man he really was! Unangled and amorphous, and underneath, cold! He had a way of framing the woman to whom he was talking and then stepping back out of the picture. One felt like a model in all manner of dress and undress. She laughed softly. "Don't," she begged, "be so mysterious about yourself! Tell me— " she held him with eyes

of ingratiating sapphire— "I've always been interested in finding out just what you are, anyway."

Far back in Pollen's own eyes of golden brown a little spark slowly burst into flame. It was exactly as if a gnome had lighted a lantern at the back of an unknown cave. Mrs. Ennis inwardly shuddered, but outwardly was gay.

How interminably men talked when once they were launched upon that favorite topic, themselves! Pollen showed every indication of reaching a point of intellectual intoxication where his voice would become antiphonal. His objective self was taking turns in standing off and admiring his subjective self. Mrs. Ennis wondered at her own kindness of heart. Why did she permit herself to suffer so for her friends; in the present instance, a friend who would probably— rather the contrary— by no means thank her for her pains? She wanted to talk to Burnaby. She was missing most of his visit. She wanted to talk to Burnaby so greatly that the thought made her cheeks burn faintly. She began to hate Pollen. Mary Rochefort's cool, young voice broke the spell.

"You told me," she said accusingly, "that this man— this Mr. Burnaby, has all the primitive virtues; he is the wickedest man I have ever met."

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Ennis.

"The very wickedest!"

Pollen's mouth twisted under his mustache. "I wouldn't have suspected it," he observed, surveying Burnaby with ironic amusement. There was just a hint of hidden condescension in his voice.

Burnaby's eyes drifted past him with a look of quiet speculation in their depths, before he smiled at Mrs. Ennis.

"Roumania has changed you," she exclaimed.

He chuckled. "Not in the least! I was simply trying to prove to Madame de Rochefort that hot-bloodedness, coolly conceived, is the only possible road to success. Like most innately moral people, she believes just the opposite— in cool-bloodedness, hotly conceived."

"I moral?" said Mary Rochefort, as if the thought had not occurred to her before.

"Why, of course," said Burnaby. "It's a question of attitude, not of actual performance. The most moral man I ever knew was a habitual drunkard. His life was spent between debauch and disgust. Not, of course, that I am implying that with you— "

"Tell us what you meant in the first place," commanded Mrs. Ennis.

"Something," said Burnaby slowly, "totally un-American— in short, whole-heartedness." He clasped his sinewy, brown hands on the table-cloth. "I mean," he continued, "if, after due thought— never forget the due thought— you believe it to be the best thing to do to elope with another man's wife,

elope; only don't look back. In the same way, if you decide to become, after much question, an ironmonger, be an ironmonger. Love passionately what you've chosen. In other words, life's like fox-hunting; choose your line, choose it slowly and carefully, then follow it 'hell-for-leather.'

"You see, the trouble with Americans is that they are the greatest wanters of cake after they've eaten it the world has ever seen. Our blood isn't half as mixed as our point of view. We want to be good and we want to be bad; we want to be a dozen utterly incompatible things all at the same time. Of course, all human beings are that way, but other human beings make their choices and then try to eradicate the incompatibilities. The only whole-hearted people we possess are our business men, and even they, once they succeed, usually spoil the picture by astounding open scandals with chorus-girls."

Mrs. Ennis shook her head with amused bewilderment. "Do you mean," she asked, "that a man or woman can have only one thing in his or her life?"

"Only one very outwardly important thing— publicly," retorted Burnaby. "You may be a very great banker with a very great background as a husband, but you can't be a very great banker and at the same time what is known as a 'very great lover.' In Europe, where they arrange their lives better, one chooses either banking or 'loving'." He smiled with frank good humor at Pollen; the first time, Mrs. Ennis reflected, he had done so that night. A suspicion that Burnaby was not altogether ingenuous crossed her mind. But why wasn't he?

"You're a man, Pollen," he said; "tell them it's true."

Pollen, absorbed apparently in thoughts of his own stammered slightly. "Why— why, yes," he agreed hastily.

Mrs. Ennis sighed ruefully and looked at Burnaby with large, humorously reproachful eyes. "You have changed," she observed, "or else you're not saying but half of what you really think— and part of it you don't think at all."

"Oh, yes," laughed Burnaby, "you misunderstand me." He picked up a fork and tapped the table-cloth with it thoughtfully; then he raised his head. "I was thinking of a story I might tell you," he said, "but on second thoughts I don't think I will."

"Don't be foolish!" admonished Mrs. Ennis. "Your stories are always interesting. First finish your dessert."

Pollen smiled languidly. "Yes," he commented, "go on. It's interesting, decidedly. I thought people had given up this sort of conversation long ago."

For the third time Burnaby turned slowly toward him, only now his eyes, instead of resting upon the bland countenance for a fraction of a second, surveyed it lingeringly with the detached, absent-minded stare Mrs. Ennis remembered so well. "Perhaps I will tell it, after all," he said, in the manner of

a man who has definitely changed his mind. "Would you like to hear it?" he asked, turning to Mary Rochefort.

"Certainly!" she laughed. "Is it very immoral?"

"Extremely," vouchsafed Burnaby, "from the accepted point of view."

"Tell it in the other room," suggested Mrs. Ennis. "We'll sit before the fire and tell ghost stories."

There was a trace of grimness in Burnaby's answering smile. "Curiously enough, it is a ghost story," he said.

They had arisen to their feet; above the candles their heads and shoulders were indistinct. For a moment Mrs. Ennis hesitated and looked at Burnaby with a new bewilderment in her eyes.

"If it's very immoral," interposed Pollen, "I'm certain to like it."

Burnaby bowed to him with a curious old-fashioned courtesy. "I am sure," he observed, "it will interest you immensely."

Mrs. Ennis suddenly stared through the soft obscurity. "Good gracious," she said to herself, "what is he up to?"

In the little drawing room to which they returned, the jonquils seemed to have received fresh vigor from their hour of loneliness; their shining gold possessed the shadows. Mary Rochefort paused by the open window and peered into the perfumed night. "How ridiculously young the world gets every spring!" she said.

Mrs. Ennis arranged herself before the fire. "Now," she said to Burnaby, "you sit directly opposite. And you"— she indicated Pollen— "sit here. And Mimi, you there. So!" She nodded to Burnaby. "Begin!"

He laughed deprecatingly. "You make it portentous," he objected. "It isn't much of a story; it's— it's really only a parable."

"It's going to be a moral story, after all," interjected Mrs. Ennis triumphantly.

Burnaby chuckled and puffed at his cigarette. "Well," he said finally, "it's about a fellow named Mackintosh."

Pollen, drowsily smoking a cigar, suddenly stirred uneasily.

"Who?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Mackintosh— James Mackintosh! What are you looking for? An ash-tray? Here's one." Burnaby passed it over.

"Thanks!" said Pollen, relaxing. "Yes— go on!"

Burnaby resumed his narrative calmly. "I knew him— Mackintosh, that is— fifteen, no, it was fourteen years ago in Arizona, when I was ranching there, and for the next three years I saw him constantly. He had a place ten miles down the river from me. He was about four years older than I was— a tall, slim, sandy-haired, freckled fellow, preternaturally quiet; a trusty, if there ever

was one. Unlike most preternaturally quiet people, however, it wasn't dulness that made him that way; he wasn't dull a bit. Stir him up on anything and you found that he had thought about it a lot. But he never told me anything about himself until I had known him almost two years, and then it came out quite accidentally one night— we were on a spring round-up— when the two of us were sitting up by the fire, smoking and staring at the desert stars. All the rest were asleep." Burnaby paused. "Is this boring you?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Ennis; she was watching intently Pollen's half-averted face.

Burnaby threw away his cigarette. "At first," he said, "it seemed to me like the most ordinary of stories— the usual fixed idea that the rejected lover carries around with him for a year or so until he forgets it; the idea that the girl will regret her choice and one day kick over the traces and hunt him up.

"But it wasn't the ordinary story— not by a long shot. You'll see. It seems he had fallen in love with a girl— had been in love with her for years— before he had left the East; a very young girl, nineteen, and of an aspiring family. The family, naturally, didn't look upon him with any favor whatsoever; he was poor and he didn't show the slightest inclination to engage in any of the pursuits they considered proper to the ambitions of a worthy young man. Rather a dreamer, I imagine, until he had found the thing he wanted to do. Not a very impressive figure in the eyes of whitespatted fatherhood. Moreover, he himself was shy about trying to marry a rich girl while she was still so young.

"'She was brought up all wrong,' he said. 'What could you expect? Life will have to teach her. She will have to get over her idea, as one gets over the measles, that money and houses and possessions are the main things.' But he knew she would get over it; he was sure that at the bottom of her heart was a well of honesty and directness. 'Some day,' he said, 'she'll be out here.'

"Apparently the upshot of the matter was that he went to the girl and told her— all these ideas of his; quit, came West; left the road open to the other man. Oh, yes, there was another man, of course; one thoroughly approved of by the family. Quaint, wasn't it? Perhaps a little overly judicial. But then that was his way. Slow-moving and sure. He saw the girl at dusk in the garden of her family's country place; near a sun-dial, or some other appropriately romantic spot. She kissed him nobly on the forehead, I suppose— the young girl gesture; and told him she wasn't worthy of him and to forget her.

"'Oh, no, I won't,' he said. 'Not for a minute! And in five years— or ten— you'll come to me. You'll find out.' And then he added something else: 'Whenever things have reached their limit,' he said, 'think of me with all your might. Think hard! There's something in that sort of stuff, you know, where two people love each other. Think hard!' Then he went away."

A log snapped and fell with a soft thud to the ashes beneath. Burnaby was silent for a moment, staring at the fire.

When he spoke again, it was with a slow precision as if he were trying with extreme care to find the right words.

"You see," he said, "he had as an added foundation for his faith— perhaps as the main foundation for it— his knowledge of the other man's character; the character of the man the girl married. It was"— he spoke more hastily and, suddenly raising his head, looked at Mary Rochefort, who, sunk back in her chair, was gazing straight ahead of her— "an especial kind of character. I must dwell on it for a moment, and you must mark well what I say, for on it my parable largely depends. It was a character of the sort that to any but an odalisk means eventual shame; to any woman of pride, you understand, eventually of necessity a broken heart. It was a queer character, but not uncommon. Outwardly very attractive. Mackintosh described it succinctly, shortly, as we sat there by the fire. He spoke between his teeth— the faint wind stirring the desert sand sounded rather like his voice." Burnaby paused again and reached over for a cigarette and lit it deliberately.

"He was a man," he continued, "who apparently had the faculty of making most women love him and, in the end, the faculty of making all women hate him. I imagine to have known him very well would have been to leave one with a mental shudder such as follows the touching of anguilliform material; snake-like texture. It would leave one ashamed and broken, for fundamentally he was contemptuous of the dignity of personality, particularly of the personalities of women. He was a collector, you understand, a collector of beauty, and women, and incidents— amorous incidents. He carried into his personal relationships the cold objectiveness of the artist. But he wasn't a very great artist, or he wouldn't have done so; he would have had the discrimination to control the artist's greatest peril. It's a flame, this cold objectiveness, but a flame so powerful that it must be properly shaded for intimate use. Otherwise it kills like violet rays. Women wore out their hearts on him, not like waves breaking on a crystal rock, but like rain breaking into a gutter."

"Good Lord!" murmured Mrs. Ennis involuntarily.

Burnaby caught her exclamation. "Bad, wasn't it?" he smiled. "But remember I am only repeating what Mackintosh told me. Well, there he was then— Mackintosh— hard at work all day trying to build himself up a ranch, and he was succeeding, too, and, at night, sitting on his porch, smoking and listening to the river, and apparently expecting every moment the girl to appear. It was rather eerie. He had such a convincing way; he was himself so convinced. You half expected yourself to see her come around the corner of the log house in the moonlight. There was about it all the impression that here

was something that had a touch of the inevitability of the Greek idea of fate; something more arranged than the usual course of human events. Meanwhile, back in the East, was the girl, learning something about life."

He interrupted himself. "Want a cigarette?" he said to Pollen. "Here they are." He handed over the box. "What is it? A match? Wait a moment; I'll strike it for you. Keep the end of the thing steady, will you? All right." He resumed the thread of his narrative.

"In four years she had learned a lot," he said; "she had become apparently almost a woman. On a certain hot evening in July— about seven o'clock, I imagine— she became one entirely; at least, for the moment, and, at least, her sort of woman. I am not defending what she did, remember; I am simply saying that she did it.

"It was very hot; even now when dusk was approaching. The girl had been feeling rather ill all day; feverish. She had not been able to get away to her country place as yet. Into the semidarkness of the room where she was came her husband. That night she had determined, as women will, upon a final test. She knew where he expected to dine; she asked him if he would dine with her.

"'I can't,' he said. 'I'm sorry— '

"Possibly nothing immediate would have happened had he not added an unspeakable flourish to his portrait. He reached out his arms and drew the girl to him and tried to kiss her condescendingly; but I suppose his hands found her, in her clinging gown, soft to their touch. At all events, they tightened upon her in an unmistakable way. She pulled herself away. 'Let me pass!' she said. 'You— you— !'— she could think of no words to suit him. You see, she understood him completely, now. He was a collector, but a collector so despicable that he was even unwilling to trade one article for another. He wanted to keep on his shelves, as it were, all the accumulation of his life, and take down from time to time whatever part of it suited his sudden fancy.

"The girl went up to her own room, and very carefully, not knowing precisely what she did, changed into a black street dress and removed all marks of identification. Her eyes swam with feverishness. While she was dressing, she bathed in hot water her arms where her husband's hands had been. She concluded that it was not what he had done— had constantly done— but what he was that made life unbearable. When she was through she went downstairs, and out of the front door, and walked slowly toward the center of the town and the railway station."

"And is that all?" asked Mary Rochefort, after a while.

"Oh, no," said Burnaby; "it's only the beginning. Mackintosh was in the hills beyond his ranch, hunting horses. He was camped in a little valley by himself. On this particular day he had been out since sun-up and did not get back until

just about dusk. He picketed the horse he had been riding, and built a small fire, and began to cook his supper. All around him, brooding and unreal, was the light you get in high mountain places. The fire shone like a tiny ruby set in topaz. Mackintosh raised his head and saw a woman coming out of the spur of aspen trees across the creek from him. He wasn't surprised; he knew right away who it was; he knew it was the girl. He watched her for a moment, and then he went over to her, and took her hand, and led her to the fire. They didn't speak at all."

"And you mean," asked Mrs. Ennis, "that she did that? That she came all the way out to him, like that?"

"No," retorted Burnaby, "of course not. How could she? She wasn't even sure where he was living. At the moment she was in a hospital out of her head. You see, I didn't know whether to believe Mackintosh or not when he said he saw her that night, although I am sure he believed he did— such things are beyond human proof— but what I do know is that he came straight down from the hills, and boarded a train, and went East, and found the girl, and, after a while, came back with her." He looked at the fire. "They were the most completely happy people I have ever seen," he continued. "They were so calm and determined about themselves. Everything immaterial had been burned away. They knew they were playing on the side of fate. And so," he concluded, "that's the end of my parable. What do you make of it?"

The curtains, stirred by the breeze, tip-tapped softly; in the silence the fire hissed gently. Pollen spoke first, but with some difficulty, as if in the long period of listening on his part his throat had become dry. "It's very interesting," he said; "very! But what's it all about? And you certainly don't believe it, do you?"

"Of course I do," answered Burnaby calmly. "You should, too; it's true."

Mary Rochefort looked up with an exclamation. "Gracious!" she said. "I had no idea it was so late! My motor must be waiting." She got to her feet. She looked very white and her eyes were tired; the translucent quality of the earlier hours was gone. "I'm worn out," she explained. "I've been going about too much. I must rest." She held her hand out to Mrs. Ennis; over her shoulder she spoke to Pollen. "No," she said. "Don't bother. I'll take myself home, thanks."

"I'll see you to your car," he stammered.

She turned to Burnaby. "Good night!" she said. Her voice was lifeless, disinterested; her eyes met his for an instant and were withdrawn.

"Good night," he said.

Mrs. Ennis stood by the door for a moment before she walked slowly back to the fireplace. From the street outside came the whirring of a motor and the sound of Mary Rochefort's voice saying good-by to Pollen.

Mrs. Ennis rested an arm on the mantelpiece and kicked a log thoughtfully with a white-slippered foot; then she faced about on Burnaby.

"I suppose," she said, "you realize that you have spoiled my party?"

"I?" said Burnaby.

"Yes, you!" Her small, charming face was a study in ruefulness, and indecision whether to be angry or not, and, one might almost have imagined, a certain amused tenderness as well. "Don't you suppose those people knew of whom you were talking?"

Burnaby, peering down at her, narrowed his eyes and then opened them very wide. "They couldn't very well have helped it," he said, "could they? For, you see"— he paused— "the girl who came West was Mrs. Pollen."

Mrs. Ennis gasped in the manner of a person who is hearing too much. "Mrs. Pollen?"

"Yes. You knew he had been divorced, didn't you? Years ago."

"I'd heard it, but forgotten." Mrs. Ennis clasped her jeweled hand. "And you dared," she demanded, "to tell his story before him in that way?"

"Why not? It was rather a complete revenge upon him of fate, wasn't it? You see, he couldn't very well give himself away, could he? His one chance was to keep quiet." Burnaby paused and smiled doubtfully at Mrs. Ennis. "I hope I made his character clear enough," he said. "That, after all, was the point of the story."

"How did you know it was this Pollen?" she asked, "and how, anyway, would Mary Rochefort know of whom you were talking?"

Burnaby grinned. "I took a chance," he said. "And as to the second, I told Madame de Rochefort at dinner— merely as a coincidence; at least, I let her think so— that I had once known in the West a Mrs. Pollen with a curious history. Perhaps I wouldn't have told it if Pollen hadn't been so witty." He picked up a silver dish from the mantelpiece and examined it carefully.

"One oughtn't to have such a curious name if one is going to lead a curious life, ought one?" he asked. He sighed. "You're right," he concluded; "your friend Mary Rochefort is a child."

Mrs. Ennis looked up at him with searching eyes.

"Why don't you stay longer in Washington?" she asked softly. "Just now, of course, Mary Rochefort hates you; but she won't for long— I think she was beginning to have doubts about Pollen, anyway."

Burnaby suddenly looked grave and disconcerted. "Oh, no!" he said, hastily. "Oh, no! I must be off tomorrow." He laughed. "My dear Rhoda," he

said, "you have the quaintest ideas. I don't like philandering; I'm afraid I have a crude habit of really falling in love."

Mrs. Ennis's own eyes were veiled. "If you're going away so soon, sit down," she said, "and stay. You needn't go— oh, for hours!"

"I must," he answered. "I'm off so early."

She sighed. "For years?"

"One— perhaps two." His voice became gay and bantering again. "My dear Rhoda," he said, "I'm extremely sorry if I really spoiled your party, but I don't believe I did— not altogether, anyhow. Underneath, I think you enjoyed it." He took her small hand in his; he wondered why it was so cold and listless.

At the door leading into the hall he paused and looked back "Oh," he said, "there was one thing I forgot to tell you! You see, part of my story wasn't altogether true. Mrs. Pollen— or rather, Mrs. Mackintosh— left Mackintosh after five years or so. She's in the movies— doing very well, I understand. She would; wouldn't she? Of course, she was no good to begin with. But that didn't spoil the point of my story, did it? Good-by, Rhoda, my dear." He was gone.

Mrs. Ennis did not move until she heard the street door close; she waited even a little longer, following the sound of Burnaby's footsteps as they died away into the night; finally she walked over to the piano, and, sitting down, raised her hands as if to strike the keys. Instead, she suddenly put both her arms on the little shelf before the music-rack and buried her head in them. The curtains tip-tapped on the window-sill; the room was entirely quiet.

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8: That Spot

Jack London

1876-1916

In: *Lost Face*, 1919

I DON'T THINK MUCH of Stephen Mackaye any more, though I used to swear by him. I know that in those days I loved him more than my own brother. If ever I meet Stephen Mackaye again, I shall not be responsible for my actions. It passes beyond me that a man with whom I shared food and blanket, and with whom I mushed over the Chilcoot Trail, should turn out the way he did. I always sized Steve up as a square man, a kindly comrade, without an iota of anything vindictive or malicious in his nature. I shall never trust my judgment in men again. Why, I nursed that man through typhoid fever; we starved together on the headwaters of the Stewart; and he saved my life on the Little Salmon. And now, after the years we were together, all I can say of Stephen Mackaye is that he is the meanest man I ever knew.

We started for the Klondike in the fall rush of 1897, and we started too late to get over Chilcoot Pass before the freeze-up. We packed our outfit on our backs part way over, when the snow began to fly, and then we had to buy dogs in order to sled it the rest of the way. That was how we came to get that Spot. Dogs were high, and we paid one hundred and ten dollars for him. He looked worth it. I say *looked*, because he was one of the finest-appearing dogs I ever saw. He weighed sixty pounds, and he had all the lines of a good sled animal. We never could make out his breed. He wasn't husky, nor Malemute, nor Hudson Bay; he looked like all of them and he didn't look like any of them; and on top of it all he had some of the white man's dog in him, for on one side, in the thick of the mixed yellow-brown-red-and-dirty-white that was his prevailing colour, there was a spot of coal-black as big as a water-bucket. That was why we called him Spot.

He was a good looker all right. When he was in condition his muscles stood out in bunches all over him. And he was the strongest-looking brute I ever saw in Alaska, also the most intelligent-looking. To run your eves over him, you'd think he could outpull three dogs of his own weight. Maybe he could, but I never saw it. His intelligence didn't run that way. He could steal and forage to perfection; he had an instinct that was positively gruesome for divining when work was to be done and for making a sneak accordingly; and for getting lost and not staying lost he was nothing short of inspired. But when it came to work, the way that intelligence dribbled out of him and left him a mere clot of wobbling, stupid jelly would make your heart bleed.

There are times when I think it wasn't stupidity. Maybe, like some men I know, he was too wise to work. I shouldn't wonder if he put it all over us with

that intelligence of his. Maybe he figured it all out and decided that a licking now and again and no work was a whole lot better than work all the time and no licking. He was intelligent enough for such a computation. I tell you, I've sat and looked into that dog's eyes till the shivers ran up and down my spine and the marrow crawled like yeast, what of the intelligence I saw shining out. I can't express myself about that intelligence. It is beyond mere words. I saw it, that's all. At times it was like gazing into a human soul, to look into his eyes; and what I saw there frightened me and started all sorts of ideas in my own mind of reincarnation and all the rest. I tell you I sensed something big in that brute's eyes; there was a message there, but I wasn't big enough myself to catch it. Whatever it was (I know I'm making a fool of myself)— whatever it was, it baffled me. I can't give an inkling of what I saw in that brute's eyes; it wasn't light, it wasn't colour; it was something that moved, away back, when the eyes themselves weren't moving. And I guess I didn't see it move either; I only sensed that it moved. It was an expression— that's what it was— and I got an impression of it. No; it was different from a mere expression; it was more than that. I don't know what it was, but it gave me a feeling of kinship just the same. Oh, no, not sentimental kinship. It was, rather, a kinship of equality. Those eyes never pleaded like a deer's eyes. They challenged. No, it wasn't defiance. It was just a calm assumption of equality. And I don't think it was deliberate. My belief is that it was unconscious on his part. It was there because it was there, and it couldn't help shining out. No, I don't mean shine. It didn't shine; it *moved*. I know I'm talking rot, but if you'd looked into that animal's eyes the way I have, you'd understand. Steve was affected the same way I was. Why, I tried to kill that Spot once— he was no good for anything; and I fell down on it. I led him out into the brush, and he came along slow and unwilling. He knew what was going on. I stopped in a likely place, put my foot on the rope, and pulled my big Colt's. And that dog sat down and looked at me. I tell you he didn't plead. He just looked. And I saw all kinds of incomprehensible things moving, yes, *moving*, in those eyes of his. I didn't really see them move; I thought I saw them, for, as I said before, I guess I only sensed them. And I want to tell you right now that it got beyond me. It was like killing a man, a conscious, brave man, who looked calmly into your gun as much as to say, "Who's afraid?"

Then, too, the message seemed so near that, instead of pulling the trigger quick, I stopped to see if I could catch the message. There it was, right before me, glimmering all around in those eyes of his. And then it was too late. I got scared. I was trembly all over, and my stomach generated a nervous palpitation that made me seasick. I just sat down and looked at the dog, and he looked at me, till I thought I was going crazy. Do you want to know what I did? I

threw down the gun and ran back to camp with the fear of God in my heart. Steve laughed at me. But I notice that Steve led Spot into the woods, a week later, for the same purpose, and that Steve came back alone, and a little later Spot drifted back, too.

At any rate, Spot wouldn't work. We paid a hundred and ten dollars for him from the bottom of our sack, and he wouldn't work. He wouldn't even tighten the traces. Steve spoke to him the first time we put him in harness, and he sort of shivered, that was all. Not an ounce on the traces. He just stood still and wobbled, like so much jelly. Steve touched him with the whip. He yelped, but not an ounce. Steve touched him again, a bit harder, and he howled— the regular long wolf howl. Then Steve got mad and gave him half a dozen, and I came on the run from the tent.

I told Steve he was brutal with the animal, and we had some words— the first we'd ever had. He threw the whip down in the snow and walked away mad. I picked it up and went to it. That Spot trembled and wobbled and cowered before ever I swung the lash, and with the first bite of it he howled like a lost soul. Next he lay down in the snow. I started the rest of the dogs, and they dragged him along while I threw the whip into him. He rolled over on his back and bumped along, his four legs waving in the air, himself howling as though he was going through a sausage machine. Steve came back and laughed at me, and I apologized for what I'd said.

There was no getting any work out of that Spot; and to make up for it, he was the biggest pig-glutton of a dog I ever saw. On top of that, he was the cleverest thief. There was no circumventing him. Many a breakfast we went without our bacon because Spot had been there first. And it was because of him that we nearly starved to death up the Stewart. He figured out the way to break into our meat-cache, and what he didn't eat, the rest of the team did. But he was impartial. He stole from everybody. He was a restless dog, always very busy snooping around or going somewhere. And there was never a camp within five miles that he didn't raid. The worst of it was that they always came back on us to pay his board bill, which was just, being the law of the land; but it was mighty hard on us, especially that first winter on the Chilcoot, when we were busted, paying for whole hams and sides of bacon that we never ate. He could fight, too, that Spot. He could do everything but work. He never pulled a pound, but he was the boss of the whole team. The way he made those dogs stand around was an education. He bullied them, and there was always one or more of them fresh-marked with his fangs. But he was more than a bully. He wasn't afraid of anything that walked on four legs; and I've seen him march, single-handed into a strange team, without any provocation whatever, and put the *kibosh* on the whole outfit. Did I say he could eat? I caught him eating the

whip once. That's straight. He started in at the lash, and when I caught him he was down to the handle, and still going.

But he was a good looker. At the end of the first week we sold him for seventy-five dollars to the Mounted Police. They had experienced dog-drivers, and we knew that by the time he'd covered the six hundred miles to Dawson he'd be a good sled-dog. I say we *knew*, for we were just getting acquainted with that Spot. A little later we were not brash enough to know anything where he was concerned. A week later we woke up in the morning to the dangdest dog-fight we'd ever heard. It was that Spot come back and knocking the team into shape. We ate a pretty depressing breakfast, I can tell you; but cheered up two hours afterward when we sold him to an official courier, bound in to Dawson with government despatches. That Spot was only three days in coming back, and, as usual, celebrated his arrival with a rough house.

We spent the winter and spring, after our own outfit was across the pass, freighting other people's outfits; and we made a fat stake. Also, we made money out of Spot. If we sold him once, we sold him twenty times. He always came back, and no one asked for their money. We didn't want the money. We'd have paid handsomely for any one to take him off our hands for keeps'. We had to get rid of him, and we couldn't give him away, for that would have been suspicious. But he was such a fine looker that we never had any difficulty in selling him. "Unbroke," we'd say, and they'd pay any old price for him. We sold him as low as twenty-five dollars, and once we got a hundred and fifty for him. That particular party returned him in person, refused to take his money back, and the way he abused us was something awful. He said it was cheap at the price to tell us what he thought of us; and we felt he was so justified that we never talked back. But to this day I've never quite regained all the old self-respect that was mine before that man talked to me.

When the ice cleared out of the lakes and river, we put our outfit in a Lake Bennett boat and started for Dawson. We had a good team of dogs, and of course we piled them on top the outfit. That Spot was along— there was no losing him; and a dozen times, the first day, he knocked one or another of the dogs overboard in the course of fighting with them. It was close quarters, and he didn't like being crowded.

"What that dog needs is space," Steve said the second day. "Let's maroon him."

We did, running the boat in at Caribou Crossing for him to jump ashore. Two of the other dogs, good dogs, followed him; and we lost two whole days trying to find them. We never saw those two dogs again; but the quietness and relief we enjoyed made us decide, like the man who refused his hundred and fifty, that it was cheap at the price. For the first time in months Steve and I

laughed and whistled and sang. We were as happy as clams. The dark days were over. The nightmare had been lifted. That Spot was gone.

Three weeks later, one morning, Steve and I were standing on the river-bank at Dawson. A small boat was just arriving from Lake Bennett. I saw Steve give a start, and heard him say something that was not nice and that was not under his breath. Then I looked; and there, in the bow of the boat, with ears pricked up, sat Spot. Steve and I sneaked immediately, like beaten curs, like cowards, like absconders from justice. It was this last that the lieutenant of police thought when he saw us sneaking. He surmised that there were law-officers in the boat who were after us. He didn't wait to find out, but kept us in sight, and in the M. & M. saloon got us in a corner. We had a merry time explaining, for we refused to go back to the boat and meet Spot; and finally he held us under guard of another policeman while he went to the boat. After we got clear of him, we started for the cabin, and when we arrived, there was that Spot sitting on the stoop waiting for us. Now how did he know we lived there? There were forty thousand people in Dawson that summer, and how did he *savve* our cabin out of all the cabins? How did he know we were in Dawson, anyway? I leave it to you. But don't forget what I said about his intelligence and that immortal something I have seen glimmering in his eyes.

There was no getting rid of him any more. There were too many people in Dawson who had bought him up on Chilcoot, and the story got around. Half a dozen times we put him on board steamboats going down the Yukon; but he merely went ashore at the first landing and trotted back up the bank. We couldn't sell him, we couldn't kill him (both Steve and I had tried), and nobody else was able to kill him. He bore a charmed life. I've seen him go down in a dogfight on the main street with fifty dogs on top of him, and when they were separated, he'd appear on all his four legs, unharmed, while two of the dogs that had been on top of him would be lying dead.

I saw him steal a chunk of moose-meat from Major Dinwiddie's cache so heavy that he could just keep one jump ahead of Mrs. Dinwiddie's squaw cook, who was after him with an axe. As he went up the hill, after the squaw gave up, Major Dinwiddie himself came out and pumped his Winchester into the landscape. He emptied his magazine twice, and never touched that Spot. Then a policeman came along and arrested him for discharging firearms inside the city limits. Major Dinwiddie paid his fine, and Steve and I paid him for the moose-meat at the rate of a dollar a pound, bones and all. That was what he paid for it. Meat was high that year.

I am only telling what I saw with my own eyes. And now I'll tell you something also. I saw that Spot fall through a water-hole. The ice was three and a half feet thick, and the current sucked him under like a straw. Three

hundred yards below was the big water-hole used by the hospital. Spot crawled out of the hospital water-hole, licked off the water, bit out the ice that had formed between his toes, trotted up the bank, and whipped a big Newfoundland belonging to the Gold Commissioner.

In the fall of 1898, Steve and I poled up the Yukon on the last water, bound for Stewart River. We took the dogs along, all except Spot. We figured we'd been feeding him long enough. He'd cost us more time and trouble and money and grub than we'd got by selling him on the Chilcoot— especially grub. So Steve and I tied him down in the cabin and pulled our freight. We camped that night at the mouth of Indian River, and Steve and I were pretty facetious over having shaken him. Steve was a funny cuss, and I was just sitting up in the blankets and laughing when a tornado hit camp. The way that Spot walked into those dogs and gave them what-for was hair-raising. Now how did he get loose? It's up to you. I haven't any theory. And how did he get across the Klondike River? That's another facer. And anyway, how did he know we had gone up the Yukon? You see, we went by water, and he couldn't smell our tracks. Steve and I began to get superstitious about that dog. He got on our nerves, too; and, between you and me, we were just a mite afraid of him.

The freeze-up came on when we were at the mouth of Henderson Creek, and we traded him off for two sacks of flour to an outfit that was bound up White River after copper. Now that whole outfit was lost. Never trace nor hide nor hair of men, dogs, sleds, or anything was ever found. They dropped clean out of sight. It became one of the mysteries of the country. Steve and I plugged away up the Stewart, and six weeks afterward that Spot crawled into camp. He was a perambulating skeleton, and could just drag along; but he got there. And what I want to know is, who told him we were up the Stewart? We could have gone to a thousand other places. How did he know? You tell me, and I'll tell you.

No losing him. At the Mayo he started a row with an Indian dog. The buck who owned the dog took a swing at Spot with an axe, missed him, and killed his own dog. Talk about magic and turning bullets aside— I, for one, consider it a blamed sight harder to turn an axe aside with a big buck at the other end of it. And I saw him do it with my own eyes. That buck didn't want to kill his own dog. You've got to show me.

I told you about Spot breaking into our meat cache. It was nearly the death of us. There wasn't any more meat to be killed, and meat was all we had to live on. The moose had gone back several hundred miles and the Indians with them. There we were. Spring was on, and we had to wait for the river to break. We got pretty thin before we decided to eat the dogs, and we decided to eat Spot first. Do you know what that dog did? He sneaked. Now how did he know

our minds were made up to eat him? We sat up nights laying for him, but he never came back, and we ate the other dogs. We ate the whole team.

And now for the sequel. You know what it is when a big river breaks up and a few billion tons of ice go out, jamming and milling and grinding. Just in the thick of it, when the Stewart went out, rumbling and roaring, we sighted Spot out in the middle. He'd got caught as he was trying to cross up above somewhere. Steve and I yelled and shouted and ran up and down the bank, tossing our hats in the air. Sometimes we'd stop and hug each other, we were that boisterous, for we saw Spot's finish. He didn't have a chance in a million. He didn't have any chance at all. After the ice-run, we got into a canoe and paddled down to the Yukon, and down the Yukon to Dawson, stopping to feed up for a week at the cabins at the mouth of Henderson Creek. And as we came in to the bank at Dawson, there sat that Spot, waiting for us, his ears pricked up, his tail wagging, his mouth smiling, extending a hearty welcome to us. Now how did he get out of that ice? How did he know we were coming to Dawson, to the very hour and minute, to be out there on the bank waiting for us?

The more I think of that Spot, the more I am convinced that there are things in this world that go beyond science. On no scientific grounds can that Spot be explained. It's psychic phenomena, or mysticism, or something of that sort, I guess, with a lot of Theosophy thrown in. The Klondike is a good country. I might have been there yet, and become a millionaire, if it hadn't been for Spot. He got on my nerves. I stood him for two years altogether, and then I guess my stamina broke. It was the summer of 1899 when I pulled out. I didn't say anything to Steve. I just sneaked. But I fixed it up all right. I wrote Steve a note, and enclosed a package of "rough-on-rats," telling him what to do with it. I was worn down to skin and bone by that Spot, and I was that nervous that I'd jump and look around when there wasn't anybody within hailing distance. But it was astonishing the way I recuperated when I got quit of him. I got back twenty pounds before I arrived in San Francisco, and by the time I'd crossed the ferry to Oakland I was my old self again, so that even my wife looked in vain for any change in me.

Steve wrote to me once, and his letter seemed irritated. He took it kind of hard because I'd left him with Spot. Also, he said he'd used the "rough-on-rats," per directions, and that there was nothing doing. A year went by. I was back in the office and prospering in all ways— even getting a bit fat. And then Steve arrived. He didn't look me up. I read his name in the steamer list, and wondered why. But I didn't wonder long. I got up one morning and found that Spot chained to the gate-post and holding up the milkman. Steve went north to Seattle, I learned, that very morning. I didn't put on any more weight. My wife made me buy him a collar and tag, and within an hour he showed his

gratitude by killing her pet Persian cat. There is no getting rid of that Spot. He will be with me until I die, for he'll never die. My appetite is not so good since he arrived, and my wife says I am looking peaked. Last night that Spot got into Mr. Harvey's hen-house (Harvey is my next-door neighbour) and killed nineteen of his fancy-bred chickens. I shall have to pay for them. My neighbours on the other side quarrelled with my wife and then moved out. Spot was the cause of it. And that is why I am disappointed in Stephen Mackaye. I had no idea he was so mean a man.

9: The Call

Algernon Blackwood

1869-1951

Nash's Illustrated Weekly, 6 Dec 1919

THE INCIDENT— story it never was, perhaps— began tamely, almost meanly; it ended upon a note of strange, unearthly wonder that has haunted him ever since. In Headley's memory, at any rate, it stands out as the loveliest, the most amazing thing he ever witnessed. Other emotions, too, contributed to the vividness of the picture. That he had felt jealousy towards his old pal, Arthur Deane, shocked him in the first place; it seemed impossible until it actually happened. But that the jealousy was proved afterwards to have been without a cause shocked him still more. He felt ashamed and miserable.

For him, the actual incident began when he received a note from Mrs. Blondin asking him to the Priory for a weekend, or for longer, if he could manage it.

Captain Arthur Deane, she mentioned, was staying with her at the moment, and a warm welcome awaited him. Iris she did not mention— Iris Manning, the interesting and beautiful girl for whom it was well known he had a considerable weakness. He found a good-sized house party; there was fishing in the little Sussex river, tennis, golf not far away, while two motor cars brought the remoter country across the downs into easy reach. Also there was a bit of duck shooting for those who cared to wake at 3 a.m. and paddle upstream to the marshes where the birds were feeding.

"Have you brought your gun?" was the first thing Arthur said to him when he arrived. "Like a fool, I left mine in town."

"I hope you haven't," put in Miss Manning; "because if you have I must get up one fine morning at three o'clock." She laughed merrily, and there was an undernote of excitement in the laugh.

Captain Headley showed his surprise. "That you were a Diana had escaped my notice, I'm ashamed to say," he replied lightly. "Yet I've known you some years, haven't I?" He looked straight at her, and the soft yet searching eye, turning from his friend, met his own securely. She was appraising him, for the hundreth time, and he, for the hundreth time, was thinking how pretty she was, and wondering how long the prettiness would last after marriage.

"I'm not," he heard her answer. "That's just it. But I've promised."

"Rather!" said Arthur gallantly. "And I shall hold you to it," he added still more gallantly— too gallantly, Headley thought. "I couldn't possibly get up at cockcrow without a very special inducement, could I, now? You know me, Dick!"

"Well, anyhow, I've brought my gun," Headley replied evasively, "so you've no excuse, either of you. You'll have to go." And while they were laughing and chattering about it, Mrs. Blondin clinched the matter for them. Provisions were hard to come by; the larder really needed a brace or two of birds; it was the least they could do in return for what she called amusingly her "Armistice hospitality."

"So I expect you to get up at three," she chaffed them, "and return with your Victory birds."

It was from this preliminary skirmish over the tea-table on the law five minutes after his arrival that Dick Headley realized easily enough the little game in progress. As a man of experience, just on the wrong side of forty, it was not difficult to see the cards each held. He sighed. Had he guessed an intrigue was on foot he would not have come, yet he might have known that wherever his hostess was, there were the vultures gathered together. Matchmaker by choice and instinct, Mrs. Blondin could not help herself. True to her name, she was always balancing on matrimonial tightropes— for others.

Her cards, at any rate, were obvious enough; she had laid them on the table for him. He easily read her hand. The next twenty-four hours confirmed this reading. Having made up her mind that Iris and Arthur were destined for each other, she had grown impatient; they had been ten days together, yet Iris was still free. They were good friends only. With calculation, she, therefore, took a step that must bring things further. She invited Dick Headley, whose weakness for the girl was common knowledge. The card was indicated; she played it. Arthur must come to the point or see another man carry her off. This, at least, she planned, little dreaming that the dark King of Spades would interfere.

Miss Manning's hand also was fairly obvious, for both men were extremely eligible bachelors. She was getting on; one or other was to become her husband before the party broke up. This, in crude language, was certainly in her cards, though, being a nice and charming girl, she might camouflage it cleverly to herself and others. Her eyes, on each man in turn when the shooting expedition was being discussed, revealed her part in the little intrigue clearly enough. It was all, thus far, as commonplace as could be.

But there were two more hands Headley had to read— his own and his friend's; and these, he admitted honestly, were not so easy. To take his own first. It was true he was fond of the girl and had often tried to make up his mind to ask her. Without being conceited, he had good reason to believe his affection was returned and that she would accept him. There was no ecstatic love on either side, for he was no longer a boy of twenty, nor was she unscathed by tempestuous love affairs that had scorched the first bloom from

her face and heart. But they understood one another; they were an honest couple; she was tired of flirting; both wanted to marry and settle down. Unless a better man turned up she probably would say "Yes" without humbug or delay. It was this last reflection that brought him to the final hand he had to read.

Here he was puzzled. Arthur Deane's role in the teacup strategy, for the first time since they had known one another, seemed strange, uncertain. Why? Because, though paying no attention to the girl openly, he met her clandestinely, unknown to the rest of the house-party, and above all without telling his intimate pal— at three o'clock in the morning.

The house-party was in full swing, with a touch of that wild, reckless gaiety which followed the end of the war: "Let us be happy before a worse thing comes upon us," was in many hearts. After a crowded day they danced till early in the morning, while doubtful weather prevented the early shooting expedition after duck. The third night Headley contrived to disappear early to bed. He lay there thinking. He was puzzled over his friend's role, over the clandestine meeting in particular. It was the morning before, waking very early, he had been drawn to the window by an unusual sound— the cry of a bird. Was it a bird? In all his experience he had never heard such a curious, half-singing call before. He listened a moment, thinking it must have been a dream, yet with the odd cry still ringing in his ears. It was repeated close beneath his open window, a long, low-pitched cry with three distinct following notes in it.

He sat up in bed and listened hard. No bird that he knew could make such sounds. But it was not repeated a third time, and out of sheer curiosity he went to the window and looked out. Dawn was creeping over the distant downs; he saw their outline in the grey pearly light; he saw the lawn below, stretching down to the little river at the bottom, where a curtain of faint mist hung in the air. And on this lawn he also saw Arthur Deane— with Iris Manning.

Of course, he reflected, they were going after the duck. He turned to look at his watch; it was three o'clock. The same glance, however, showed him his gun standing in the corner. So they were going without a gun. A sharp pang of unexpected jealousy shot through him. He was just going to shout out something or other, wishing them good luck, or asking if they had found another gun, perhaps, when a cold touch crept down his spine. The same instant his heart contracted. Deane had followed the girl into the summer-house, which stood on the right. It was *not* the shooting expedition at all. Arthur was meeting her for another purpose. The blood flowed back, filling his head. He felt an eavesdropper, a sneak, a detective; but, for all that, he felt also jealous. And his jealousy seemed chiefly because Arthur had not told him.

Of this, then, he lay thinking in bed on the third night. The following day he had said nothing, but had crossed the corridor and put the gun in his friend's room. Arthur, for his part, had said nothing either. For the first time in their long, long friendship, there lay a secret between them. To Headley the unexpected revelation came with pain.

For something like a quarter of a century these two had been bosom friends; they had camped together, been in the army together, taken their pleasure together, each the full confidant of the other in all the things that go to make up men's lives. Above all, Headley had been the one and only recipient of Arthur's unhappy love story. He knew the girl, knew his friend's deep passion, and also knew his terrible pain when she was lost at sea. Arthur was burnt out, finished, out of the running, so far as marriage was concerned. He was not a man to love a second time. It was a great and poignant tragedy. Headley, as confidant, knew all. But more than that— Arthur, on his side, knew his friend's weakness for Iris Manning, knew that a marriage was still possible and likely between them. They were true as steel to one another, and each man, oddly enough, had once saved the other's life, thus adding to the strength of a great natural tie.

Yet now one of them, feigning innocence by day, even indifference, secretly met his friend's girl by night, and kept the matter to himself. It seemed incredible. With his own eyes Headley had seen him on the lawn, passing in the faint grey light through the mist into the summer-house, where the girl had just preceded him. He had not seen her face, but he had seen the skirt sweep round the corner of the wooden pillar. He had not waited to see them come out again.

So he now lay wondering what role his old friend was playing in this little intrigue that their hostess, Mrs. Blondin, helped to stage. And, oddly enough, one minor detail stayed in his mind with a curious vividness. As naturalist, hunter, nature-lover, the cry of that strange bird, with its three mournful notes, perplexed him exceedingly.

A knock came at his door, and the door pushed open before he had time to answer. Deane himself came in.

"Wise man," he exclaimed in an easy tone, "got off to bed. Iris was asking where you were." He sat down on the edge of the mattress, where Headley was lying with a cigarette and an open book he had not read. The old sense of intimacy and comradeship rose in the latter's heart. Doubt and suspicion faded. He prized his great friendship. He met the familiar eyes. "Impossible," he said to himself, "absolutely impossible! He's not playing a game; he's not a rotter!" He pushed over his cigarette case, and Arthur lighted one.

"Done in," he remarked shortly, with the first puff. "Can't stand it any more. I'm off to town tomorrow."

Headley stared in amazement. "Fed up already?" he asked. "Why, I rather like it. It's quite amusing. What's wrong, old man?"

"This match-making," said Deane bluntly. "Always throwing that girl at my head. If it's not the duck-shooting stunt at 3 a. m., it's something else. She doesn't care for me and I don't care for her. Besides—"

He stopped, and the expression of his face changed suddenly. A sad, quiet look of tender yearning came into his clear brown eyes.

"*You* know, Dick," he went on in a low, half-reverent tone. "I don't want to marry. I never can."

Dick's heart stirred within him. "Mary," he said, understandingly.

The other nodded, as though the memories were still too much for him. "I'm still miserably lonely for her," he said. "Can't help it simply. I feel utterly lost without her. Her memory to me is everything." He looked deep into his pal's eyes. "I'm married to that," he added very firmly.

They pulled their cigarettes a moment in silence. They belonged to the male type that conceals emotion behind schoolboy language.

"It's hard luck," said Headley gently, "rotten luck, old man, I understand." Arthur's head nodded several times in succession as he smoked. He made no remark for some minutes. Then presently he said, as though it had no particular importance— for thus old friends show frankness to each other— "Besides, anyhow, it's you the girl's dying for, not me. She's blind as a bat, old Blondin. Even when I'm with her— thrust with her by that old matchmaker for my sins— it's you she talks about. All the talk leads up to you and yours. She's devilish fond of you." He paused a moment and looked searchingly into his friend's face. "I say, old man— are you— I mean, do you mean business there? Because— excuse me interfering— but you'd better be careful. She's a good sort, you know, after all."

"Yes, Arthur, I do like her a bit," Dick told him frankly. "But I can't make up my mind quite. You see, it's like this—"

And they talked the matter over as old friends will, until finally Arthur chucked his cigarette into the grate and got up to go. "Dead to the world," he said, with a yawn. "I'm off to bed. Give you a chance, too," he added with a laugh. It was after midnight.

The other turned, as though something had suddenly occurred to him.

"By the bye, Arthur," he said abruptly, "what bird makes this sound? I heard it the other morning. Most extraordinary cry. You know everything that flies. What is it?" And, to the best of his ability, he imitated the strange three-note cry he had heard in the dawn two mornings before.

To his amazement and keen distress, his friend, with a sound like a stifled groan, sat down upon the bed without a word. He seemed startled. His face was white. He stared. He passed a hand, as in pain, across his forehead.

"Do it again," he whispered, in a hushed, nervous voice. "Once again— for me."

And Headley, looking at him, repeated the queer notes, a sudden revulsion of feeling rising through him. "He's fooling me after all," ran in his heart, "my old, old pal—"

There was silence for a full minute. Then Arthur, stammering a bit, said lamely, a certain hush in his voice still: "Where in the world did you hear that— and *when?*"

Dick Headley sat up in bed. He was not going to lose this friendship, which, to him, was more than the love of woman. He must help. His pal was in distress and difficulty. There were circumstances, he realized, that might be too strong for the best man in the world— sometimes. No, by God, he would play the game and help him out!

"Arthur, old chap," he said affectionately, almost tenderly. "I heard it two mornings ago— on the lawn below my window here. It woke me up. I— I went to look. Three in the morning, about."

Arthur amazed him then. He first took another cigarette and lit it steadily. He looked round the room vaguely, avoiding, it seemed, the other's eyes. Then he turned, pain in his face, and gazed straight at him.

"You saw— nothing?" he asked in a louder voice, but a voice that had something very real and true in it. It reminded Headley of the voice he heard when he was fainting from exhaustion, and Arthur had said, "Take it, I tell you. I'm all right," and had passed over the flask, though his own throat and sight and heart were black with thirst. It was a voice that had command in it, a voice that did not lie because it could not— yet did lie and could lie— when occasion warranted.

Headley knew a second's awful struggle.

"Nothing," he answered quietly, after his little pause. "Why?"

For perhaps two minutes his friend hid his face. Then he looked up.

"Only," he whispered, "because that was our secret lover's cry. It seems so strange you heard it and not I. I've felt her so close of late— Mary!"

The white face held very steady, the firm lips did not tremble, but it was evident that the heart knew anguish that was deep and poignant. "We used it to call each other— in the old days. It was our private call. No one else in the world knew it but Mary and myself."

Dick Headley was flabbergasted. He had no time to think, however.

"It's odd you should hear it and not I," his friend repeated. He looked hurt, bewildered, wounded. Then suddenly his face brightened. "I know," he cried suddenly. "You and I are pretty good pals. There's a tie between us and all that. Why, it's tel— telepathy, or whatever they call it. That's what it is."

He got up abruptly. Dick could think of nothing to say but to repeat the other's words. "Of course, of course. That's it," he said, "telepathy." He stared— anywhere but at his pal.

"Night, night!" he heard from the door, and before he could do more than reply in similar vein Arthur was gone.

He lay for a long time, thinking, thinking. He found it all very strange. Arthur in this emotional state was new to him. He turned it over and over. Well, he had known good men behave queerly when wrought up. That recognition of the bird's cry was strange, of course, but— he knew the cry of a bird when he heard it, though he might not know the actual bird. That was no human whistle. Arthur was— inventing. No, that was not possible. He was worked up, then, over something, a bit hysterical perhaps. It had happened before, though in a milder way, when his heart attacks came on. They affected his nerves and head a little, it seemed. He was a deep sort, Dick remembered. Thought turned and twisted in him, offering various solutions, some absurd, some likely. He was a nervous, high-strung fellow underneath, Arthur was. He remembered that. Also he remembered, anxiously again, that his heart was not quite sound, though what that had to do with the present tangle he did not see.

Yet it was hardly likely that he would bring in Mary as an invention, an excuse— Mary, the most sacred memory in his life, the deepest, truest, best. He had sworn, anyhow, that Iris Manning meant nothing to him.

Through all his speculations, behind every thought, ran this horrid working jealousy. It poisoned him. It twisted truth. It moved like a wicked snake through mind and heart. Arthur, gripped by his new, absorbing love for Iris Manning, lied. He couldn't believe it, he didn't believe it, he wouldn't believe it— yet jealousy persisted in keeping the idea alive in him. It was a dreadful thought. He fell asleep on it.

But his sleep was uneasy with feverish, unpleasant dreams that rambled on in fragments without coming to conclusion. Then, suddenly, the cry of the strange bird came into his dream. He started, turned over, woke up. The cry still continued. It was not a dream. He jumped out of bed.

The room was grey with early morning, the air fresh and a little chill. The cry came floating over the lawn as before. He looked out, pain clutching at his heart. Two figures stood below, a man and a girl, and the man was Arthur Deane. Yet the light was so dim, the morning being overcast, that had he not

expected to see his friend, he would scarcely have recognized the familiar form in that shadowy outline that stood close beside the girl. Nor could he, perhaps, have recognized Iris Manning. Their backs were to him. They moved away, disappearing again into the little summer-house, and this time— he saw it beyond question— the two were hand in hand. Vague and uncertain as the figures were in the early twilight, he was sure of that.

The first disagreeable sensation of surprise, disgust, anger that sickened him turned quickly, however, into one of another kind altogether. A curious feeling of superstitious dread crept over him, and a shiver ran again along his nerves.

"Hallo, Arthur!" he called from the window. There was no answer. His voice was certainly audible in the summer-house. But no one came. He repeated the call a little louder, waited in vain for thirty seconds, then came, the same moment, to a decision that even surprised himself, for the truth we he could no longer bear the suspense of waiting. He must see his friend at once and have it out with him. He turned and went deliberately down the corridor to Deane's bedroom. He would wait there for his return and know the truth from his own lips. But also another thought had come— the gun. He had quite forgotten it— the safety-catch was out of order. He had not warned him.

He found the door closed but not locked; opening it cautiously, he went in.

But the unexpectedness of what he saw gave him a genuine shock. He could hardly suppress a cry. Everything in the room was neat and orderly, no sign of disturbance anywhere, and it was not empty. There, in bed, before his very eyes, was Arthur. The clothes were turned back a little; he saw the pyjamas open at the throat; he lay sound asleep, deeply, peacefully asleep.

So surprised, indeed, was Headley that, after staring a moment, almost unable to believe his sight, he then put out a hand and touched him gently, cautiously on the forehead. But Arthur did not stir or wake; his breathing remained deep and regular. He lay sleeping like a baby.

Headley glanced round the room, noticed the gun in the corner where he himself had put it the day before, and then went out, closing the door behind him softly.

Arthur Deane, however, did not leave for London as he had intended, because he felt unwell and kept to his room upstairs. It was only a slight attack, apparently, but he must lie quiet. There was no need to send for a doctor; he knew just what to do; these passing attacks were common enough. He would be up and about again very shortly. Headley kept him company, saying no single word of what had happened. He read aloud to him, chatted and cheered him up. He had no other visitors. Within twenty-four hours he was himself once more. He and his friend had planned to leave the following day.

But Headley, that last night in the house, felt an odd uneasiness and could not sleep. All night long he sat up reading, looking out of the window, smoking in a chair where he could see the stars and hear the wind and watch the huge shadow of the downs. The house lay very still as the hours passed. He dozed once or twice. Why did he sit up in this unnecessary way? Why did he leave his door ajar so that the slightest sound of another door opening, or of steps passing along the corridor, must reach him? Was he anxious for his friend? Was he suspicious? What was his motive, what his secret purpose?

Headley did not know, and could not even explain it to himself. He felt uneasy, that was all he knew. Not for worlds would he have let himself go to sleep or lose full consciousness that night. It was very odd; he could not understand himself. He merely obeyed a strange, deep instinct that bade him wait and watch. His nerves were jumpy; in his heart lay some unexplicable anxiety that was pain.

The dawn came slowly; the stars faded one by one; the line of the downs showed their grand bare curves against the sky; cool and cloudless the September morning broke above the little Sussex pleasure house. He sat and watched the east grow bright. The early wind brought a scent of marshes and the sea into his room. Then suddenly it brought a sound as well— the haunting cry of the bird with its three following notes. And this time there came an answer.

Headley knew then why he had sat up. A wave of emotion swept him as he heard— an emotion he could not attempt to explain. Dread, wonder, longing seized him. For some seconds he could not leave his chair because he did not dare to. The low-pitched cries of call and answer rang in his ears like some unearthly music. With an effort he started up, went to the window and looked out.

This time the light was sharp and clear. No mist hung in the air. He saw the crimsoning sky reflected like a band of shining metal in the reach of river beyond the lawn. He saw dew on the grass, a sheet of pallid silver. He saw the summer-house, empty of any passing figures. For this time the two figures stood plainly in view before his eyes upon the lawn. They stood there, hand in hand, sharply defined, unmistakable in form and outline, their faces, moreover, turned upwards to the window where he stood, staring down in pain and amazement at them— at Arthur Deane and *Mary*.

They looked into his eyes. He tried to call, but no sound left his throat. They began to move across the dew-soaked lawn. They went, he saw, with a floating, undulating motion towards the river shining in the dawn. Their feet left no marks upon the grass. They reached the bank, but did not pause in their going. They rose a little, floating like silent birds across the river. Turning in

midstream, they smiled towards him, waved their hands with a gesture of farewell, then, rising still higher into the opal dawn, their figures passed into the distance slowly, melting away against the sunlit marshes and the shadowing downs beyond. They disappeared.

Headley never quite remembers actually leaving the window, crossing the room, or going down the passage. Perhaps he went at once, perhaps he stood gazing into the air above the downs for a considerable time, unable to tear himself away. He was in some marvellous dream, it seemed. The next thing he remembers, at any rate, was that he was standing beside his friend's bed, trying, in his distraught anguish of heart, to call him from that sleep which, on earth, knows no awakening.

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10: Haircut

Ring W. Lardner

1885-1933

Liberty 28 March 1925

I GOT ANOTHER barber that comes over from Carterville and helps me out Saturdays, but the rest of the time I can get along all right alone. You can see for yourself that this ain't no New York City and besides that, the most of the boys works all day and don't have no leisure to drop in here and get themselves prettied up.

You're a newcomer, ain't you? I thought I hadn't seen you round before. I hope you like it good enough to stay. As I say, we ain't no New York City or Chicago, but we have pretty good times. Not as good, though, since Jim Kendall got killed. When he was alive, him and Hod Meyers used to keep this town in an uproar. I bet they was more laughin' done here than any town its size in America.

Jim was comical, and Hod was pretty near a match for him. Since Jim's gone, Hod tries to hold his end up just the same as ever, but it's tough goin' when you ain't got nobody to kind of work with.

They used to be plenty fun in here Saturdays. This place is jam-packed Saturdays, from four o'clock on. Jim and Hod would show up right after their supper, round six o'clock. Jim would set himself down in that big chair, nearest the blue spittoon. Whoever had been settin' in that chair, why they'd get up when Jim come in and give it to him.

You'd of thought it was a reserved seat like they have sometimes in a theayter. Hod would generally always stand or walk up and down, or some Saturdays, of course, he'd be settin' in this chair part of the time, gettin' a haircut.

Well, Jim would set there a w'ile without openin' his mouth only to spit, and then finally he'd say to me, "Whitey,"— my right name, that is, my right first name, is Dick, but everybody round here calls me Whitey— Jim would say, "Whitey, your nose looks like a rosebud tonight. You must of been drinkin' some of your aw de cologne."

So I'd say, "No, Jim, but you look like you'd been drinkin' somethin' of that kind or somethin' worse."

Jim would have to laugh at that, but then he'd speak up and say, "No, I ain't had nothin' to drink, but that ain't sayin' I wouldn't like somethin'. I wouldn't even mind if it was wood alcohol."

Then Hod Meyers would say, "Neither would your wife." That would set everybody to laughin' because Jim and his wife wasn't on very good terms. She'd of divorced him only they wasn't no chance to get alimony and she didn't

have no way to take care of herself and the kids. She couldn't never understand Jim. He was kind of rough, but a good fella at heart.

Him and Hod had all kinds of sport with Milt Sheppard. I don't suppose you've seen Milt. Well, he's got an Adam's apple that looks more like a mushmelon. So I'd be shavin' Milt and when I'd start to shave down here on his neck, Hod would holler, "Hey, Whitey, wait a minute! Before you cut into it, let's make up a pool and see who can guess closest to the number of seeds."

And Jim would say, "If Milt hadn't of been so hoggish, he'd of ordered a half a cantaloupe instead of a whole one and it might not of stuck in his throat."

All the boys would roar at this and Milt himself would force a smile, though the joke was on him. Jim certainly was a card!

There's his shavin' mug, settin' on the shelf, right next to Charley Vail's. "Charles M. Vail." That's the druggist. He comes in regular for his shave, three times a week. And Jim's is the cup next to Charley's. "James H. Kendall." Jim won't need no shavin' mug no more, but I'll leave it there just the same for old time's sake. Jim certainly was a character!

Years ago, Jim used to travel for a canned goods concern over in Carterville. They sold canned goods. Jim had the whole northern half of the State and was on the road five days out of every week. He'd drop in here Saturdays and tell his experiences for that week. It was rich.

I guess he paid more attention to playin' jokes than makin' sales. Finally the concern let him out and he come right home here and told everybody he'd been fired instead of sayin' he'd resigned like most fellas would of.

It was a Saturday and the shop was full and Jim got up out of that chair and says, "Gentlemen, I got an important announcement to make. I been fired from my job."

Well, they asked him if he was in earnest and he said he was and nobody could think of nothin' to say till Jim finally broke the ice himself. He says, "I been sellin' canned goods and now I'm canned goods myself."

You see, the concern he'd been workin' for was a factory that made canned goods. Over in Carterville. And now Jim said he was canned himself. He was certainly a card!

Jim had a great trick that he used to play w'ile he was travelin'. For instance, he'd be ridin' on a train and they'd come to some little town like, well, like, we'll say, like Benton. Jim would look out the train window and read the signs on the stores.

For instance, they'd be a sign, "Henry Smith, Dry Goods." Well, Jim would write down the name and the name of the town and when he got to wherever he was goin' he'd mail back a postal card to Henry Smith at Benton and not

sign no name to it, but he'd write on the card, well, somethin' like "Ask your wife about that book agent that spent the afternoon last week," or "Ask your Missus who kept her from gettin' lonesome the last time you was in Carterville." And he'd sign the card, "A Friend."

Of course, he never knew what really come of none of these jokes, but he could picture what probably happened and that was enough.

Jim didn't work very steady after he lost his position with the Carterville people. What he did earn, doin' odd jobs round town, why he spent pretty near all of it on gin and his family might of starved if the stores hadn't of carried them along. Jim's wife tried her hand at dressmakin', but they ain't nobody goin' to get rich makin' dresses in this town.

As I say, she'd of divorced Jim, only she seen that she couldn't support herself and the kids and she was always hopin' that some day Jim would cut out his habits and give her more than two or three dollars a week.

They was a time when she would go to whoever he was workin' for and ask them to give her his wages, but after she done this once or twice, he beat her to it by borrowin' most of his pay in advance. He told it all round town, how he had outfoxed his Missus. He certainly was a caution!

But he wasn't satisfied with just outwittin' her. He was sore the way she had acted, tryin' to grab off his pay. And he made up his mind he'd get even. Well, he waited till Evans's Circus was advertised to come to town. Then he told his wife and two kiddies that he was goin' to take them to the circus. The day of the circus, he told them he would get the tickets and meet them outside the entrance to the tent.

Well, he didn't have no intentions of bein' there or buyin' tickets or nothin'. He got full of gin and laid round Wright's poolroom all day. His wife and the kids waited and waited and of course he didn't show up. His wife didn't have a dime with her, or nowhere else, I guess. So she finally had to tell the kids it was all off and they cried like they wasn't never goin' to stop.

Well, it seems, w'ile they was cryin', Doc Stair came along and he asked what was the matter, but Mrs. Kendall was stubborn and wouldn't tell him, but the kids told him and he insisted on takin' them and their mother in the show. Jim found this out afterwards and it was one reason why he had it in for Doc Stair.

Doc Stair come here about a year and a half ago. He's a mighty handsome young fella and his clothes always look like he has them made to order. He goes to Detroit two or three times a year and w'ile he's there he must have a tailor take his measure and then make him a suit to order. They cost pretty near twice as much, but they fit a whole lot better than if you just bought them in a store.

For a w'ile everybody was wonderin' why a young doctor like Doc Stair should come to a town like this where we already got old Doc Gamble and Doc Foote that's both been here for years and all the practice in town was always divided between the two of them.

Then they was a story got round that Doc Stair's gal had throwed him over, a gal up in the Northern Peninsula somewheres, and the reason he come here was to hide himself away and forget it. He said himself that he thought they wasn't nothin' like general practice in a place like ours to fit a man to be a good all round doctor. And that's why he'd came.

Anyways, it wasn't long before he was makin' enough to live on, though they tell me that he never dunned nobody for what they owed him, and the folks here certainly has got the owin' habit, even in my business. If I had all that was comin' to me for just shaves alone, I could go to Carterville and put up at the Mercer for a week and see a different picture every night. For instance, they's old George Purdy— but I guess I shouldn't ought to be gossipin'.

Well, last year, our coroner died, died of the flu. Ken Beatty, that was his name. He was the coroner. So they had to choose another man to be coroner in his place and they picked Doc Stair. He laughed at first and said he didn't want it, but they made him take it. It ain't no job that anybody would fight for and what a man makes out of it in a year would just about buy seeds for their garden. Doc's the kind, though, that can't say no to nothin' if you keep at him long enough.

But I was goin' to tell you about a poor boy we got here in town—Paul Dickson. He fell out of a tree when he was about ten years old. Lit on his head and it done somethin' to him and he ain't never been right. No harm in him, but just silly. Jim Kendall used to call him cuckoo; that's a name Jim had for anybody that was off their head, only he called people's head their bean. That was another of his gags, callin' head bean and callin' crazy people cuckoo. Only poor Paul ain't crazy, but just silly.

You can imagine that Jim used to have all kinds of fun with Paul. He'd send him to the White Front Garage for a left-handed monkey wrench. Of course they ain't no such a thing as a left-handed monkey wrench.

And once we had a kind of a fair here and they was a baseball game between the fats and the leans and before the game started Jim called Paul over and sent him way down to Schrader's hardware store to get a key for the pitcher's box.

They wasn't nothin' in the way of gags that Jim couldn't think up, when he put his mind to it.

Poor Paul was always kind of suspicious of people, maybe on account of how Jim had kept foolin' him. Paul wouldn't have much to do with anybody

only his own mother and Doc Stair and a girl here in town named Julie Gregg. That is, she ain't a girl no more, but pretty near thirty or over.

When Doc first come to town, Paul seemed to feel like here was a real friend and he hung round Doc's office most of the w'ile; the only time he wasn't there was when he'd go home to eat or sleep or when he seen Julie Gregg doin' her shoppin'.

When he looked out Doc's window and seen her, he'd run downstairs and join her and tag along with her to the different stores. The poor boy was crazy about Julie and she always treated him mighty nice and made him feel like he was welcome, though of course it wasn't nothin' but pity on her side.

Doc done all he could to improve Paul's mind and he told me once that he really thought the boy was gettin' better, that they was times when he was as bright and sensible as anybody else.

But I was goin' to tell you about Julie Gregg. Old Man Gregg was in the lumber business, but got to drinkin' and lost the most of his money and when he died, he didn't leave nothin' but the house and just enough insurance for the girl to skimp along on.

Her mother was a kind of a half invalid and didn't hardly ever leave the house. Julie wanted to sell the place and move somewheres else after the old man died, but the mother said she was born here and would die here. It was tough on Julie, as the young people round this town— well, she's too good for them.

She's been away to school and Chicago and New York and different places and they ain't no subject she can't talk on, where you take the rest of the young folks here and you mention anything to them outside of Gloria Swanson or Tommy Meighan and they think you're delirious. Did you see Gloria in Wages of Virtue? You missed somethin'!

Well, Doc Stair hadn't been here more than a week when he come in one day to get shaved and I recognized who he was as he had been pointed out to me, so I told him about my old lady. She's been ailin' for a couple years and either Doc Gamble or Doc Foote, neither one, seemed to be helpin' her. So he said he would come out and see her, but if she was able to get out herself, it would be better to bring her to his office where he could make a completer examination.

So I took her to his office and w'ile I was waitin' for her in the reception room, in come Julie Gregg. When somebody comes in Doc Stair's office, they's a bell that rings in his inside office so as he can tell they's somebody to see him.

So he left my old lady inside and come out to the front office and that's the first time him and Julie met and I guess it was what they call love at first sight.

But it wasn't fifty-fifty. This young fella was the slickest lookin' fella she'd ever seen in this town and she went wild over him. To him she was just a young lady that wanted to see the doctor.

She'd came on about the same business I had. Her mother had been doctorin' for years with Doc Gamble and Doc Foote and without no results. So she'd heard they was a new doc in town and decided to give him a try. He promised to call and see her mother that same day.

I said a minute ago that it was love at first sight on her part. I'm not only judgin' by how she acted afterwards but how she looked at him that first day in his office. I ain't no mind reader, but it was wrote all over her face that she was gone.

Now Jim Kendall, besides bein' a jokesmith and a pretty good drinker, well, Jim was quite a lady-killer. I guess he run pretty wild durin' the time he was on the road for them Carterville people, and besides that, he'd had a couple little affairs of the heart right here in town. As I say, his wife could of divorced him, only she couldn't.

But Jim was like the majority of men, and women, too, I guess. He wanted what he couldn't get. He wanted Julie Gregg and worked his head off tryin' to land her. Only he'd of said bean instead of head.

Well, Jim's habits and his jokes didn't appeal to Julie and of course he was a married man, so he didn't have no more chance than, well, than a rabbit. That's an expression of Jim's himself. When somebody didn't have no chance to get elected or somethin', Jim would always say they didn't have no more chance than a rabbit.

He didn't make no bones about how he felt. Right in here, more than once, in front of the whole crowd, he said he was stuck on Julie and anybody that could get her for him was welcome to his house and his wife and kids included. But she wouldn't have nothin' to do with him; wouldn't even speak to him on the street. He finally seen he wasn't gettin' nowheres with his usual line so he decided to try the rough stuff. He went right up to her house one evenin' and when she opened the door he forced his way in and grabbed her. But she broke loose and before he could stop her, she run in the next room and locked the door and phoned to Joe Barnes. Joe's the marshal. Jim could hear who she was phonin' to and he beat it before Joe got there.

Joe was an old friend of Julie's pa. Joe went to Jim the next day and told him what would happen if he ever done it again.

I don't know how the news of this little affair leaked out. Chances is that Joe Barnes told his wife and she told somebody else's wife and they told their husband. Anyways, it did leak out and Hod Meyers had the nerve to kid Jim about it, right here in this shop. Jim didn't deny nothin' and kind of laughed it

off and said for us all to wait; that lots of people had tried to make a monkey out of him, but he always got even.

Meanw'ile everybody in town was wise to Julie's bein' wild mad over the Doc. I don't suppose she had any idear how her face changed when him and her was together; of course she couldn't of, or she'd of kept away from him. And she didn't know that we was all noticin' how many times she made excuses to go up to his office or pass it on the other side of the street and look up in his window to see if he was there. I felt sorry for her and so did most other people.

Hod Meyers kept rubbin' it into Jim about how the Doc had cut him out. Jim didn't pay no attention to the kiddin' and you could see he was plannin' one of his jokes.

One trick Jim had was the knack of changin' his voice. He could make you think he was a girl talkin' and he could mimic any man's voice. To show you how good he was along this line, I'll tell you the joke he played on me once.

You know, in most towns of any size, when a man is dead and needs a shave, why the barber that shaves him soaks him five dollars for the job; that is, he don't soak him, but whoever ordered the shave. I just charge three dollars because personally I don't mind much shavin' a dead person. They lay a whole lot stiller than live customers. The only thing is that you don't feel like talkin' to them and you get kind of lonesome.

Well, about the coldest day we ever had here, two years ago last winter, the phone rung at the house w'ile I was home to dinner and I answered the phone and it was a woman's voice and she said she was Mrs. John Scott and her husband was dead and would I come out and shave him.

Old John had always been a good customer of mine. But they live seven miles out in the country, on the Streeter road. Still I didn't see how I could say no.

So I said I would be there, but would have to come in a jitney and it might cost three or four dollars besides the price of the shave. So she, or the voice, it said that was all right, so I got Frank Abbott to drive me out to the place and when I got there, who should open the door but old John himself! He wasn't no more dead than, well, than a rabbit.

It didn't take no private detective to figure out who had played me this little joke. Nobody could of thought it up but Jim Kendall. He certainly was a card!

I tell you this incident just to show you how he could disguise his voice and make you believe it was somebody else talkin'. I'd of swore it was Mrs. Scott had called me. Anyways, some woman.

Well, Jim waited till he had Doc Stair's voice down pat; then he went after revenge.

He called Julie up on a night when he knew Doc was over in Carterville. She never questioned but what it was Doc's voice. Jim said he must see her that night; he couldn't wait no longer to tell her somethin'. She was all excited and told him to come to the house. But he said he was expectin' an important long distance call and wouldn't she please forget her manners for once and come to his office. He said they couldn't nothin' hurt her and nobody would see her and he just must talk to her a little w'ile. Well, poor Julie fell for it.

Doc always keeps a night light in his office, so it looked to Julie like they was somebody there.

Meanw'ile Jim Kendall had went to Wright's poolroom, where they was a whole gang amusin' themselves. The most of them had drank plenty of gin, and they was a rough bunch even when sober. They was always strong for Jim's jokes and when he told them to come with him and see some fun they give up their card games and pool games and followed along.

Doc's office is on the second floor. Right outside his door they's a flight of stairs leadin' to the floor above. Jim and his gang hid in the dark behind these stairs.

Well, Julie come up to Doc's door and rung the bell and they was nothin' doin'. She rung it again and she rung it seven or eight times. Then she tried the door and found it locked. Then Jim made some kind of a noise and she heard it and waited a minute, and then she says, "Is that you, Ralph?" Ralph is Doc's first name.

They was no answer and it must of came to her all of a sudden that she'd been bunked. She pretty near fell downstairs and the whole gang after her. They chased her all the way home, hollerin', "Is that you, Ralph?" and "Oh, Ralphie, dear, is that you?" Jim says he couldn't holler it himself, as he was laughin' too hard.

Poor Julie! She didn't show up here on Main Street for a long, long time afterward.

And of course Jim and his gang told everybody in town, everybody but Doc Stair. They was scared to tell him, and he might of never knowed only for Paul Dickson. The poor cuckoo, as Jim called him, he was here in the shop one night when Jim was still gloatin' yet over what he'd done to Julie. And Paul took in as much of it as he could understand and he run to Doc with the story.

It's a cinch Doc went up in the air and swore he'd make Jim suffer. But it was a kind of a delicate thing, because if it got out that he had beat Jim up, Julie was bound to hear of it and then she'd know that Doc knew and of course

knowin' that he knew would make it worse for her than ever. He was goin' to do somethin', but it took a lot of figurin'.

Well, it was a couple days later when Jim was here in the shop again, and so was the cuckoo. Jim was goin' duck-shootin' the next day and had came in lookin' for Hod Meyers to go with him. I happened to know that Hod had went over to Carterville and wouldn't be home till the end of the week. So Jim said he hated to go alone and he guessed he would call it off. Then poor Paul spoke up and said if Jim would take him he would go along. Jim thought a w'ile and then he said, well, he guessed a half-wit was better than nothin'.

I suppose he was plottin' to get Paul out in the boat and play some joke on him, like pushin' him in the water. Anyways, he said Paul could go. He asked him had he ever shot a duck and Paul said no, he'd never even had a gun in his hands. So Jim said he could set in the boat and watch him and if he behaved himself, he might lend him his gun for a couple of shots. They made a date to meet in the mornin' and that's the last I seen of Jim alive.

Next mornin', I hadn't been open more than ten minutes when Doc Stair come in. He looked kind of nervous. He asked me had I seen Paul Dickson. I said no, but I knew where he was, out duck-shootin' with Jim Kendall. So Doc says that's what he had heard, and he couldn't understand it because Paul had told him he wouldn't never have no more to do with Jim as long as he lived.

He said Paul had told him about the joke Jim had played on Julie. He said Paul had asked him what he thought of the joke and the Doc had told him that anybody that would do a thing like that ought not to be let live.

I said it had been a kind of a raw thing, but Jim just couldn't resist no kind of a joke, no matter how raw. I said I thought he was all right at heart, but just bubblin' over with mischief. Doc turned and walked out.

At noon he got a phone call from old John Scott. The lake where Jim and Paul had went shootin' is on John's place. Paul had came runnin' up to the house a few minutes before and said they'd been an accident. Jim had shot a few ducks and then give the gun to Paul and told him to try his luck. Paul hadn't never handled a gun and he was nervous. He was shakin' so hard that he couldn't control the gun. He let fire and Jim sunk back in the boat, dead.

Doc Stair, bein' the coroner, jumped in Frank Abbott's flivver and rushed out to Scott's farm. Paul and old John was down on the shore of the lake. Paul had rowed the boat to shore, but they'd left the body in it, waitin' for Doc to come.

Doc examined the body and said they might as well fetch it back to town. They was no use leavin' it there or callin' a jury, as it was a plain case of accidental shootin'.

Personally I wouldn't never leave a person shoot a gun in the same boat I was in unless I was sure they knew somethin' about guns. Jim was a sucker to leave a new beginner have his gun, let alone a half-wit. It probably served Jim right, what he got. But still we miss him round here. He certainly was a card!

Comb it wet or dry?

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11: Iron Coffins

H. Bedford-Jones

1887-1949

Adventure, Oct 1937

GIDEON PARR, Gloucester fisherman by trade and Navy man by vocation, perched on the 'midships rail of the Federal sloop *Cumberland* while he stitched up a tear in his clean pair of pants, as preparation for Sunday inspection on the morrow. He had learned to be fore-handed in these small matters. Navy discipline seemed to bear heavily on trifles.

Noon was approaching; as Parr plied the needle and listened to the gab of his mates, he drank in the glorious view with complacent satisfaction that he was not soldiering afar. Here, off the mouth of the James, lay the *Cumberland*; the sailing frigate *Congress* lay to the east of Newport News Point. On farther were the *St. Lawrence* and the steam frigates *Minnesota* and *Roanoke*, with tenders and gunboats all aglitter in the sunlight. The Newport News fort and battery flew the Union flag; the Confederate flag splotched the blue sky southward across the Roads.

"Dull work, this here blockade," said Randall, gun captain in the starboard battery. "Nobody gets out, nobody gets in. We got them Secesh bottled up proper. Wisht I was back six months out o' Bedford and cuttin' in."

Randall was a New Bedford whaler, when he was working.

"All lines out and nary a bite," and Parr scratched bare ankle with bare toe. "And here I set sewing a pair o' britches! Ain't much to brag of, bein' a bluejacket for Uncle Sam. I'd better be on the cod banks."

"Yeah. Ruther be fast to blubber in half a gale than fast to this mud in the doldrums, condemn it!" Randall spat over the rail. "If this is puttin' down the rebellion, we'll all grow barnacles on our starns. Looks like a lot o' smoke, up Norfolk way."

Another man spoke up eagerly. "Mebbe that iron-plated hulk's comin' out. Last we heard the plaguey contraption turn out so heavy she couldn't be navigated."

Randall grunted. "That darky who come aboard yesterday heard some talk about her. She's walled up with two foot of timbers and four inches of iron, Broadsides o' ten rifled guns and Dahlgrens, countin' the pivots. And her engines can move her, he allows."

"She's had the dare and ain't come out; that's proof enough." Parr stitched his final lap and cut the thread with his sheath knife. He squinted across the water. "Now I reckon I can stand my Sunday—hey! Smoke is right. S'pose she's a-coming? No signals from the flagship."

"Aw, that *Merrimac* ain't showing up," somebody scoffed. "Her plates won't hold ag'in ten-inch solid shot! The *Cumberland* could sink her with one broadside while she's wallering, or them steam frigates could stand off and pour a ton of iron into her, The newspapers claim we got an ironclad a-building ourselves, up to Long Island."

"Well, give me wood under me," said Parr. "If we go down, I want a chanct to ride a piece ọ wreckage. You can't ride no durned iron plate."

Randall nodded. "Same here. No iron coffin for me, afloat or ashore! Say, dummed if that smoke ain't comin' out'n the *Elizabeth*!"

"By glory, it is! It's her!" exclaimed someone,

A gun boomed from Fort Monroe. Men leaped to their feet, gazing and pointing. Lieutenant Morris—the commander was aboard the flagship—came leaping from below and hung in the shrouds with his glass.

"It's her!" came from the foretop. "Looks like the peaked roof of a house above water. Two gunboats with her, and a mess o' small craft trailing."

"Clear ship for action!"

MESS was forgotten. The *Cumberland*'s signal gun mingled with an echoing alarm from the *Congress* and the other ships. The bos'n piped, fife and drums beat to stations; all hands jumped to work. Parr, with the rest of Randall's gun crew, crowded at the open port of the ten-inch Dahlgren, staring.

The *Congress* had triced up her ports and was exchanging signals with the Roanoke, as she hauled shorter on her cables. The *St. Lawrence* was showing a glimmer of canvas, the stack of the *Minnesota* was belching smoke, and tugs were making for the *Roanoke*, which had a broken shaft. The ironclad was a long time coming, however; word of her was passed along the gun-deck.

"She's out o' the river!"

"Roundin' Sewall's Point now. Damned if she ain't just a floatin' roof, like a henhouse in a freshet!"

The thing surged into Parr's view, with two steam canal boats, serving as gunboats, churning paddles in her wake, and a flock of small craft hovering at safe distance. There was nothing to her but a peaked roof, a belching smokestack, and the Confederate flag above her unseen bows. Now she swung to the westward as though heading for the *Congress*, but with a slow and deadly deliberation. Likely enough she could not hurry if she wanted to, and this lent her slow approach a more implacable air.

"Going to pay a call on us first," went up the word. "Hurrah! We'll fix her!"

The port in her blunt forward casemate opened; the bow gun poked its long snout through. The ports in her slanting starboard side opened and were punctuated by round circles. She meant business.

Parr wet his dry lips. Standing with his swab in hand, he cast a glance aft along the gun deck. Randall was squinting over the smooth taper of the Dahlgren; the crews were all in position. A serried line of bully mates, grouped about the sleek breeches of the guns— lock lanyards, buckets, tackle ropes, rammers and spongers all in hand. Stripped to the waist, some of them; bearded in black-brown and red, round *Cumberland* caps jaunty on their heads—

"By gosh, she is comin' for us!" said somebody, in a gasping, incredulous voice.

Parr turned, started to see how close she was. That crawling ironclad loomed large and black, a peaked roof sweeping the water, her sunken hull invisible. The ends of that roof were slightly rounded, to enable her guns to pivot, quartering. There was nothing to shoot at save the slanting sides and rounded ends.

The *Cumberland* quivered and shook as her after guns bellowed. Parr saw water spout against the monster's side; as the echoes rumbled the ringing clang of solid shot upon metal drifted in. A roar and the *Congress* began to fire in full broadside. A big gun of the shore battery was blasting away. The *Merrimac* paid no attention, but suddenly she gushed smoke. The sound of the ripping, rending balls could be heard. Then Parr looked no more, but leaped to work.

"Fire!"

The *Cumberland* staggered to the recoil of her guns. Small arms were at work also. The dull reverberating clang of metal from the monster never ceased,

The gun crews worked like mad to reload. Parr plied his swab in the bore; the Dahlgren was loaded and run out again and again. Amid the drifting smoke, voices were heard.

"Ain't nothing to sink her! She's had iron enough to smash her long ago!"

"Ain't a fair fight, I tell you! She'll do for the *Congress* and then come for us—"

"Hey, look at the shot strike her! So hot it smokes her iron—watch it sizzle!"

"Quit gamming and serve the gun," barked Randall. "Move, damn it! Move!"

Almost abeam of the smoke-wrapped *Congress* the *Merrimac* ceased firing and left the two gunboats to engage the *Congress* while she bore deliberately on. Shouts were passed along the gun-deck: three more armed steamers were coming down the James. The *Roanoke* and the *St. Lawrence* had gone aground in the ebb tide. Things began to look bad.

And here came the *Merrimac* straight for the *Cumberland*. Faster the guns were served, but the balls bounced from her like peas. Parr, with the men around him, grew sick while anger and incredulity battled sheer panic. Why, this contraption of the devil could clean out the whole harbor and the fort to boot!

More and more, the guns must be depressed. A pall of powder smoke lifted all around, but glimpses showed Parr that the *Merrimac* was holding on. Her prow, barely cleaving the ripples, headed straight for the sloop; she moved ponderously, with never a voice, never a sign of crew, an iron monster prowling the surface to kill ships. She was not a stone's throw away now, low and ugly.

"By God, she'll ram us! Hurry up, there—" The broadside roared. "Stopped her!"

No. She had slewed briefly, as though staggered by that weight of driven iron clanging into her, but now she came on again. Parr, leaning half out of the port to ply his swab, suddenly saw her right beneath him, huge in the sulphurous eddies. He saw the saucer-like dents in her plating, saw her bow port open and the gun-snout slide out. He caught a wild storm of yells from gun deck and upper deck.

"Look out! She's ramming us!"

ALL in the flash of a split second, while he was still swabbing away. He was done for, he knew it. That huge gun was almost in his face. It belched flame and smoke, sent its thunderous message smashing through the *Cumberland*, evoked shrieks and cries. Parr shook his fist frantically, leaned farther to yell rage and defiance.

The underwater ram of the *Merrimac* struck the hull of the wooden ship with crashing impact. The *Cumberland* was sent careening on her tautened cables, port rail down. Parr was shaken off like a clinging ant by the shock—his hold gone, he pitched clean out the port. With a frantic, desperately spasmodic attempt to leap clear, he found himself in air, falling. A dizzy smash, and he landed hard, half stunned, unable to move.

Shallow water? No, an ebb-and-flow rush of water, but he was not on any ground. He lay lax amid an infernal clang of iron upon iron, a bursting gunfire that deafened him. Close beside rose a sloping black wall with a black open window—he was on the flush iron deck of the monster! Sharp fragments hurt him as he stirred—fragments of shattered iron. The black window was the bow gun-port of this ironclad, the gun withdrawn.

His momentary paralysis did not last. Obviously, the monster was under heavy fire, and was shuddering to the recoil of her after guns. Ricochetting iron

screamed in the air and slashed the water. This open deck, Parr realized with abrupt panic, was no place for him. He scrambled up, to slide overboard and get away—then was halted.

"By cracky, he's alive! Hold on, Yank. Come in here. Quick!"

A grimy, hairy face filled the port above. A long arm jutted out with a revolver.

"You, Yank! Get in out of the rain. Quick!"

Splinters of iron hissed in air. Parr, helpless before that revolver, saw that the *Merrimac* was heading into the James River; her ports were clanging shut. The *Cumberland* was settling by the bow, but her flag was flying, her guns were smoking. The Congress was engaged with the gunboats. The *Roanoke*, *Minnesota* and *St. Lawrence* were all aground now.

"You'll play possum till Gabriel's trump if you don't come here quick—"

A rope sailed from the port, a long arm with sinewy hand reached down. Parr went up the sloping iron at a run, as the line was hauled in. He went up in a slither, too, cursing the iron plates and the tallow that had slushed them down. No wonder the striking balls set off a sizzle!

Then he was caught by wrist and shirt and hair and hauled through the opening. The smoky interior made him think of a Gloucester attic in a fog, except that attics had no splatters of blood, no dead men, no wounded.

"What's your name, Yank?"

"Gideon Parr, of the *Cumberland*."

"Oh! Thought you was from heaven. Hey, the commodore will want to talk with him. Pass him along."

"No, hold on. Ain't associated with a Yank in a coon's age." Faces gathered around, friendly, grinning, interested. Somebody guffawed. "What d'ye mean by boarding us, Yank?"

"Damn you, I fell out the gunport when you rammed us!" sputtered Parr. There was a burst of laughter.

"You must be iron-plated yourself. How d'ye like the fight, anyhow?"

"Ain't a fight," said Parr. "You wouldn't dast swap broadsides if you weren't all covered up."

More laughter, and he resented it sulkily.

"Well, suh," said an amiable voice, "we out-smarted you Yanks, yes suh! You set fire to your *Merrimac* frigate and scuttled her. We raised her, fitted her out, and we've got a one ship navy that'll whip your whole fleet! How do you like the *Virginia*, suh?"

"What *Virginia*?" demanded the confused Parr.

"This ship, suh—the Confederate ship *Virginia*! *Merrimac* no more. You're the only Yankee flavor aboard her now."

"We were aground," snapped Parr. "You didn't have to ram us when we couldn't move."

"Yank, we won't argue. You set over yonder and stay put till we get time to think about you. Your ship's sinking, with a hole in her the size of a hogshead. Reckon were going to touch her up a bit more, just to finish her proper."

The *Merrimac*, or *Virginia*, was turning about, but Parr could see nothing; the ports were all shut. He sat on his hams in the corner indicated, and glowered about miserably. Anyway, they had paid a bit for their fun. Twenty men or more killed or wounded by bullets through the ports, he heard somebody say.

Yes, like an attic, with this peaked seven-foot roof close overhead, gloomy and smothering. The figures of the rebel crew moved, half obscured by smoke. He could hear the voice of the commander from his conning-post—Buck, they called him. Captain Buchanan, somebody said. Bitterly Parr watched the powder-bags and shot being made ready, while the hulk shivered and rumbled to the wrack of her engines.

Orders were passed along. Then men tensed and became silent. Wham-whang! A muffled roar of guns from outside, and then clangors reverberating through the air, the impact of the balls muffled by the thick timbering behind the iron. Once, under a full broadside, Parr felt the monster reel for an instant. It was like a boiler shop, thought Parr in angry disgust; or like a closed attic in a hailstorm with thunder shaking the roof. He began to get a headache. The jar began to shake his very bones.

Suddenly the ports were triced up. Parr leaped to his feet and stared! There was the *Cumberland*, close abeam! Badly gashed, she was down by the bows, but her guns were still smoking. A stir of figures here, and Captain Buchanan was at a port, shouting.

"Haul down your flag!"

"Never!" That was the voice of Lieutenant Morris. "We'll sink alongside—"

Cheers from the *Cumberland* drowned out the words. Then the orders rippled. The guns here began to roar and shake; a broadside poured into the devoted *Cumberland*, and the ironclad passed cumbrously on.

Parr could catch glimpses through the open ports. The *Congress* had slipped her cable and run ashore under the guns of the Newport News battery. He caught sight of the *Minnesota*, grounded. She could wait, gleefully exclaimed the men around, for the tide was on the ebb. They were making for the *Congress* now.

Parr groaned a little and got back into his corner. He had seen enough. This ravaging monster was the boss of the waters, and no mistake about it. He sat

down again, and hunched up with his face in his hands and his head splitting with the noise. He could not look at it. It was the end.

The riddled *Congress* was set afire with red-hot shot. The *Cumberland* was sunk to her rails. The *Minnesota* was hard aground and crippled; wary of shoals, the *Merrimac* pounded her at long range. So it was over at last, with the afternoon, and in the dusk the ironclad put about for the Elizabeth River once more, and home.

No one thought of the hapless prisoner who crouched in a dark corner, futile and glowering. Captain Buchanan had been wounded in the thigh; everyone else was in a bubble of fervent high spirits.

A shell bursting in a port had mowed down a few—what matter? The glow of victory had seized all hands.

Voices ran high and furious. Back in the morning, to finish the *Minnesota* and the other two frigates. The *Virginia* had proved herself right nobly! There was hot, eager talk of going up the Potomac, of calling on Abe Lincoln, of throwing shells into Washington. Why, the war was won right here—the blockade would be broken up in no time!

BEHIND Sewell's Point, the victorious ironclad came to anchor. The shore and the river channel were in a blaze of incoherent, frenzied celebration. Cheers, bonfires, lanterns waving, mingled with the firefly lights of small craft circling around. Guests stormed aboard.

Officers and crew kept open house in celebration. No one remembered the forlorn Yank who was carefully keeping out of the way. Gradually, the promenade grating stretched fore and aft was thinned of its visitors. The weary crew began to seek sleeping quarters. In the darkness, not a soul observed the figure that quietly slid through a port and vanished alongside. And no one observed the visiting skiff that gently slipped away on the current and merged in the obscurity.

"Thank the good lord!" said Gideon Parr devoutly, as he chanced upon a basket of food and drink. Somebody had been out to see the fun, well supplied, and the remains were all that could be desired, especially by a man who had not eaten since morning. Not to mention the whiskey. There was not much of it left, but it was sufficient to merge all the bitterness of Parr's spirit in contentment, and to put all his inhibitions to rest, and to waken in him what he had forgotten.

"My clean pants, by gosh!" he thought suddenly. "These are a mess. If I can just slip aboard the old *Cumberland*, now, I could get my clean ones. All mended up, too. Why, it's easy done. Let the current take me—"

He finished off the whiskey, plopped the bottle overboard — and then stretched out as a challenge came through the obscurity. Those dratted rebels! Sentries all along the shore and the batteries, of course. No risking the oars yet awhile, until he had drifted well outside the point.

All the Roads were black, except for the riding lights of the *Minnesota*, and the redly mounting glare of the doomed *Congress*, staining the distant water and the northern horizon with blood, like an omen of disaster to come. The wide current was swinging him slowly but surely along. No need of working yet. He knew where the *Cumberland* lay.

He was safely away and very glad indeed of it. Then the lurid horizon burst with a flood of crimson. The sullen boom of a volcanic blast rolled across the waters, as the magazine of the burning frigate let go.

The flames winked lower, and the fitful beacon died out. Parr got out his oars and fell to work. His nether garments were badly torn, stiffened with tallow and grease, most uncomfortable; that clean pair of pants aboard the *Cumberland* beckoned invitingly. That they might be extremely wet just now, did not occur to him at all.

Feebly misted lights and a dark hull swung into his view ahead. The set of the current was carrying him straight for the *Minnesota*—she was doomed to follow the *Congress* with morning. He jerked quickly at an oar and pulled hard to round her, but eyes and ears were keen aboard there.

"Boat ahoy! What do you want?"

"Nothing," sang out Parr. No *Minnesota* for him! "Aiming to report aboard the *Cumberland*."

He leaned on his oars to clear her as far as possible. He pulled hard and fast. Without the least warning, he discerned something in the night, looming blackly; then came a swift crashing shock that lifted him off the thwart and rolled him headlong into the bows. The skiff remained aslant, bows grounded high.

Feet scuffed and pounded, voices rang alarm. In the misty gloom, figures thronged about the skiff. A lantern shed light as Parr scrambled dizzily to his feet.

"Tumble up, you!" A bearded face, a leveled revolver, and Parr stared with slack jaw.

About him were ghosts in pea-jackets, but very much in the flesh. A chill, flat iron deck eighteen inches above the water, broken amidships by a huge round affair.

"What the devil is this?" gasped Parr. "What craft is it?"

"The Union ironclad *Monitor*. You hailed the *Minnesota* and then you rammed us, matey. Here comes the lieutenant. You talk to him."

Parr saluted the uniform and stammered out something of his story.

"Your skiffs stove in and useless," said the officer. "The *Cumberland* is sunk, and you can report ashore at Newport after we've finished with this *Merrimac* craft, or we can put you aboard the *Minnesota*."

"But you—you weren't here today, sir" Parr was incredulous, doubtful.

"We just arrived from Brooklyn this evening. Well, what shall we do with you?"

"I aim to fight, sir, but the *Minnesota* ain't got a chance. I got away from the Rebs. Then you got in my way. Now Tm ketched 'twixt wind and water."

"Were all volunteers aboard here. You can be of use if you want to stay."

"Well, sir," and Parr collected his confused senses, "that's what I aimed to do, I guess. Yes, sir. I'd like to, fine."

"Good. You'll be assigned to duty in the morning."

Parr stretched out with the men. A few were inclined to talk—not many, in spite of the fact that his curiosity about this craft was matched by theirs about the day's fight they had missed. They had slept little for forty-eight hours.

"They had been towed out of New York, with a sweeping gale all the way down the coast, seas washing over the turret, officers and men nearly suffocated. Damned glad to sleep here on deck tonight. "This craft? Lieutenant Worden in command, Lieutenant Greene executive officer—the one just now here. Whip the *Merrimac*? Of course. For God's sake close your hatch and let a man sleep, won't you?"

Parr slept like a log, until the squeal of the bos'n's pipe wakened him.

DAYLIGHT, realization, and a slowly gathering dismay—these welcomed him back to the world, as the black outlines of the *Monitor* sharpened in the gray light. He swallowed hard as he stared at her.

A flat deck like a rounded wedge, all clear except for the squat tower amidships, a squat pair of iron smokestacks abaft it, a companion pair of blower pipes, and the pilot's peep-house forward. A dinky craft, overshadowed by the *Minnesota*. A coffin for sure, with men under deck and hatches battened down, and the *Merrimac* pounding her and climbing over her with that ramming beak—ah! Parr suddenly remembered something he had heard last night aboard the ironclad.

"Where are your guns?" Parr demanded of the men around, as he blinked and peered.

"In that turret, matey. Two 'leven-inch Dahlgrens. Slewed over to port now."

"Gawd Almighty! What if the Rebs don't accommodate you by showin' on that side?"

"They don't get choice o' sides. The turret is set on a pivot. We turn those two guns wherever we damn' please. If you don't like our outfit, what'll you do about it?"

"Two guns ag'in a broadside—huh! Well, when you'ye seen as much of the show as I have," said Parr airily, "you won't mind askin' questions. But there's one word you can pass along. Them Rebs on the *Merrimac* said last night they'd lost their ram yesterday. I seen 'em prying around, and I reckon it's gospel. They had a five-foot iron wedge for a ram, and it's gone. Maybe that'll make you feel easier."

The word was passed along, with much scoffing. No one here cared about the *Merrimac* or her ram either. Parr grunted and pitched into his breakfast heartily, and cursed his torn and tallowstiff pants.

The light mist over the Roads lifted and swirled away before a quickening breeze. Sunrise burgeoned in the east, the shores cleared. The three masts of the *Cumberland* were etched on the waters of the James. The hulk of the *Congress* still smoked from the shallows. The two frigates were anchored under the guns of Fort Monroe. All that part of the Roads flying the Union flag signaled disaster and dread suspense.

To the southward, the shore and waters were alive. Boats swarmed, Sewell's Point was massed with people. Behind the point, smoke wreathed the horizon and gathered weight; the *Merrimac* was firing up. The sun started his climb. Six bells, seven o'clock, rang out from the *Minnesota*. Her officers and men crowded rails and rigging, watching Sewell's Point. Parr watched too, cursing the luck that had set him aboard here. He'd've had a swimming chance if he'd gone aboard the *Minnesota* but this ironclad coffin business was not to his notion. Drat that whiskey! The smoke from the low stacks of the *Monitor* blew into his eyes, blinded him, set him to coughing.

Excited voices reached him. The *Minnesota* was all a-welter, with drum-roll and pipe and shouted orders. She had called to quarters. Block and tackle squeaked and rattled as guns were run out. Parr's eyes cleared of smoke. A thrill took him—not of pleasure, either. There she was!

"Clear for action."

Parr jumped to duty. Now, for the first time, he was suddenly glad he was here. He thought of William Randall and his other lost mates—dead or alive, no telling. Then, through his grim eagerness, pierced astonishment at the workings of this queer vessel he was on.

The stacks disappeared; the smoke puffed from their gratings, driven by blowers. The blower pipes were stowed away, too. All hands down hatches to the berth deck; it was close and dusky here, with the hatch gratings for light

and air. The craft was quivering upon the leash of pent steam; the steady roar of forced draught filled everything.

To stations! Up into the turret for the gun crews, or down through the top grating hatch; shot hoisters, cartridge passers, falling to work. Captain Worden mounted the short ladder to the pilot-house to con the ship.

In the turret, a space nine-by-twenty for guns and men. Parr was here, assigned to a gun crew. He eyed the iron walls grimly—eight inches of wrought iron plates. Plenty of light and air from the top grating, but no great store of elbow room. No way of looking out, either, except when the two ports had opened.

A hiss of steam, and Parr jumped a foot as the floor with its ammunition hatch rose slightly; the whole turret rose and turned, with prodigious clank and rumble. Parr's jaws clamped down on the quid he had obtained. If the contraption didn't work when it had to, good night!

He caught another rumble, more familiar. The *Merrimac* had opened fire on the *Minnesota*. And now, of a sudden, the frigate made answer with a roar that echoed in the turret and set the air gushing through the ventilators. Cables rasped through the hawse-holes; the *Monitor* trembled, her propeller whined as she gathered way. She was bearing out! Parr hitched at his trousers, looked for a place to spit, and found none. He was in for it now and no mistake.

The *Minnesota* was still firing. The rumbles from the *Merrimac*, the clangor of metal, sounded nearer. The turret turned a little more, swinging the guns dead ahead. The ports slid up, and the two guns slid their muzzles out into the sunlight. Parr could see nothing. Those muzzles almost filled the ports, giving view only for the lieutenant, stooping to train the guns. An order was shouted from the pilot box.

"Number one, fire!"

The turret reverberated, and the belch of smoke clouded the sunshine. The great Dahlgren thrust back in recoil and cleared the port, enveloping the lieutenant in wisps of muzzle smoke as he peered. A man called out eagerly.

"Did we hit her, sir?"

"Yes. We can't hurt her at this distance. We're going in for close quarters."

"She's hell for ramming, sir," blurted Parr. "Even without the iron ram—"

"Nothing for her to ram, my man," and the lieutenant laughed. "The deck has an overbeam of near four feet. Let her ram and be damned, and we'll blow a hole through her!" The men cheered, and Parr felt wondrously heartened. The officer went on quickly. "She's heading for the *Minnesota* as though to run us down. We'll give it to her again; she's broadside on—"

The turret turned and paused. The guns spoke with twin explosions. Now came a mighty answering roar, a resounding hammer-blow on the turret that deafened the ears. A ranging shot.

"Close the ports!"

Just in-time. A bellow of thunder, a shock of metal dinning on metal, and the *Monitor* rocked in her course. A full broadside, that. The ports opened again, the guns slid out; the two Dahlgrens roared and recoiled. They were at it now, hammer and tongs.

THE crews were smoke-grimed, sweat-streaked. Parr hauled on the tackles with the rest, choked by the smoke and fumes that filled the turret. The action was close, pointblank, savage. The air shuddered with the whanging blows of the *Merrimac*'s guns. The *Monitor*, with the advantage of speed, was steaming around and around the other ship, planting her two steel fists like a boxer.

The turret turned, shielding the open ports while the guns were reloaded. It turned back, with the guns eager. Blind fighting, yes, but for one instant the black sides of the *Merrimac* shadowed the light. The hammer of shot upon her iron roof resounded above the roaring din. She was bound to ram—she did ram! The *Monitor* only heeled a little as the beak clashed and rasped along her overhang. The two Dahlgrens vomited their heavy balls at short pistol range, and the men in the turret cursed at the futility of it.

"Give us the wrought-iron balls, sir, and a thirty-pound charge instead o fifteen, and we'll smash her open!"

"Can't exceed the ordnance manual for these guns," croaked the lieutenant. "A heavier charge might put us out of action."

"Who cares, if we sink her first, sir?"

No; orders were orders. Another ramming now. The two guns bore and bellowed; the hammering and clanging of metal was dizzily deafening. A yell went up—the *Merrimac* had grounded, wallowing like a stranded whale.

In came the *Monitor*, grazing her stern for a try at her rudder. Shots roared slap into her easements.

"That got to her!" yelled the lieutenant, and Parr cheered with the rest.

A man shrieked out, gushed blood, went staggering and falling. A shot? No. A bulge of the iron—a shot had hit outside as he leaned against it. Parr stared, and shifted his cud. The inside bulge was eight inches across. Gosh! Another in the same place—ugh!

The *Merrimac* was off the shoal and heading for the Minnesota, not to be balked of her victim. The *Monitor* swung about and made after. The air rocked to the greatest thunder yet, as the *Minnesota* loosed every gun that would

bear. The Monitor slipped ahead, blocked the way; the *Merrimac* veered. Too late! She was grounded again.

Parr, sweating, dry of throat, kept an eye on the turret lining. He found himself counting the bulges. Shut in here, going it blind, you never knew what would happen. This iron coffin would go down like a stone, if one of those bulges opened up under another shot. And what an infernal racket! Iron upon iron, salvo and tattoo. Off shoals once more! Yells resounded hoarsely, thinly. She was turning tail—give her hell before she got away! After her! The two Dahlgrens vomited and roared.

No—she was veering around. By the warning cries, she was coming back, bent upon ramming again. Now she was pointblank. The open ports were dimmed by her shadowing roof. With a clash and grind, the behemoth climbed over the freeboard, right abaft the turret. An explosion, a crash, frantic cries, came from somewhere forward.

The *Monitor* reeled, was whirled about. The men were sprawling everywhere. The turret engineer and the lieutenant were clawing up to their feet, close against the lining, when a resounding hammer-blow flung them across the deck in a heap, senseless. A new bulge in the metal. Parr, scrambling up, saw it, glimpsed the black mass right outside the port.

"One for the *Cumberland*, by God!" With the croaking yell, he flung himself at the gun-lanyard and perked it. He never heard the report, for another clanging blow shook the turret, but he was aware of the recoil.

The men were up, staring. The port was free of smoke, free of shadow. The *Monitor* had righted, but she was swinging wild, without a helm. What was the matter? Where was the *Merrimac*? A bedlam of voices broke loose. The two officers were given aid, the second in command dived below, at wild shouts from forward.

"For God's sake, orders! Were out of shot—load those guns—"

Lieutenant Green was struggling up. The *Monitor* straightened out. Parr, leaping to the open port, uttered a wild yell.

"She's licked! She's drawing off and she's down by the starn—hurray!"

The second in command came scrambling back. "A shell burst on the pilot house. Cap'n Worden is blinded and hurt, some damage done. I've put him on the sofa in his cabin. He's out; you're in command, sir—"

"Draw off to shoal water near the *Minnesota*," ordered Green, "and hoist shot into the turret."

A dismayed chorus broke out. "You'll not go after her, sir?"

"Were ordered to defend the *Minnesota*. Yes, she's making off—has a bad list, too. That final shot was too much for her. All hands on deck for a swig of air!"

They tumbled up, by deck hatches and turret hatch. Somehow, Parr realized that it was over; his fighting exultation died out, as he filled his lungs with the fresh salty air. Smoke still lingered on the sun-dancing water, but it was clearing fast. Noon was close. The fight had lasted the morning through, he saw to his amazement.

The *Merrimac*! He cheered with the rest, as he saw her bearing up for the mouth of the Elizabeth, and down by the stern too, the flat deck forward of her roof black with men whose feet were awash. Parr shook his fist and yelled with cracked voice.

"Ahoy, you Rebs! How d'ye like this kind of a fight, hey?"

As though she heard him, the *Merrimac* labored to face about, then hesitated, and swung back to her course again. The men yelled afresh. The *Monitor* was churning for the *Minnesota* now, whose men rose up in a mass to cheer her, as they labored throwing over their heavy guns to lighten ship. Parr, staring, heard a voice at his dulled and ringing ears, felt a clap on the shoulder, saw Lieutenant Green there grinning at him.

"How do you like it yourself, aboard here? You did good work, my man. Say the word, and we'll have you transferred."

Parr stared, shook his head.

"I'd ruther be perched on the *Cumberland*'s topmast, yonder, with hell and blazes all around, than cooped in an iron coffin with the Angel Gabriel pounding at her! Thanks, sir. But all I want now is to get my clean Sunday pants and join up with a blue water ship. Only come to think of it, I reckon them pants are clean lost now, durn it!"

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12: The Passion Years

Arthur Gask

1869-1951

Australian Women's Weekly, 26 Dec 1936

English dentist Arthur Gask emigrated with his family to Adelaide, Australia in 1920 at the age of 51. While building his new dental practice he used his spare time writing detective novels, most featuring Gilbert Larose, and went on to be a prolific crime novelist. Although mostly a crime writer, he also tried other genres, such as this romance.

THEY sat on the bed-edge, all pink and white in their *robes-de-nuit*, and they looked pretty enough to eat. Midnight had long since sounded but on, on, they chattered like the race— old daughters of Mother Eve.

"Yes, Mary, they just worship each other, and now they've got the loveliest baby in all the world. And yet it all began to happen only just a year ago to-day. Jim had never seen Della until then, and I was the only one of our family who had spoken to her.

"It seems just like a tale one reads and, of course, it's a very sentimental one, too. Oh, no dear, you take it from me sentiment is not all sickly, and only those say it is who are getting old and sickly themselves. Sentiment's the most beautiful thing in all the world, and when you're first in love, well, the sentiment there is just too holy and too sacred to understand.

"I tell you, when Harold first kissed me it was the most wonderful moment of my whole life, and Mother says one of the next most wonderful will be when they first put Harold's baby in my arms.

"Oh, you goose! You needn't blush! Of course, you'll be married yourself, some day, and a baby's only what every girl who's really in love looks forward to. So. you needn't pretend to be shocked at all.

"Well, about Della and Jim. We were on the racecourse at Flemington, and Jim had plunged on his filly, Rose of Dawn, to win a tremendous lot of money. Yes, it was awfully stupid of him, I know, and I was as angry about it as anything. But then, what can a sister do? I had told him how wrong it was of him, and he had admitted to me that morning how foolish he had been.

"IF he lost, it meant quite the end of everything for him as far as racing was concerned, for he would have to sell up all his horses and never own any more again. And you can imagine what that would have meant to him. dear, when all our lives we have had horses about us and racing is in our very bones. You remember it was Father who bred the great McAlpin, whose children are now scattered all over the world.

"Well, it was just before the race and we were sitting in the members' stand and I was telling Violet Carmichael something of what Jim had done. I didn't tell her everything, by a long way; but I let her know poor Jim would be very hard hit if his filly lost, and that he would have to give up racing altogether and go into a bank or be a curate or do something like that.

"I had just finished telling her when I turned round to find that Della Charter was sitting exactly behind us and must have heard everything. 'The little cat!' I thought, and I was furious. I knew she was the only child of the rich old John Charter, who had made millions of dollars in the wheat pit in Chicago, and I disliked her because she was supposed to be purse-proud, with all the money they had got. I just hated to think she had heard all about Jim's money affairs. So I pretended not to have noticed her, and then, before she could get any opportunity to speak to me, Jim came up and the starting-bell rang for the horses to be sent away.

"Oh, Mary, it was an awful race, and it will haunt me as long as I live! Rose of Dawn should have won easily, but through no fault of hers she was beaten in the very last stride. She got off all right and. coming round the bend, was well up and only just behind the leaders, running on the inside of them all.

" 'She'll win,' " whispered Jim exultingly. " 'She'll leave them standing still, the moment she's called upon.'

"I felt my heart bursting with excitement. We could see them all so plainly, as they came thundering into the straight, and nothing was going as effortlessly as Rose of Dawn.

"But then, suddenly, the awful thing happened!

"LORD RAYLEIGH'S great horse, Leviathan, swerved right in and drove Rose of Dawn almost on to the rails. It was simply ghastly! Her jockey had to snatch her up to prevent a most dreadful accident. He had to pull her up, almost dead, and then, when he brought her round again on the outside, she had lost her good position and was lengths and lengths behind all the other horses.

"I shut my eyes and felt as if I were going to faint, but then, almost instantly, a perfectly thundering shout came up from the crowd and I opened them again to see what had happened.

"Rose of Dawn had been sent after the field again, and she was galloping like the wind. She had her beautiful head low down and was coming with a withering rush that was simply glorious to see. Of course, it looked quite hopeless, for she was much too far behind, but, realising what she was attempting, the very courage of it appealed to everyone and the crowd just roared for her to come on.

"Then almost in a few seconds, so it seemed, she was again among the other horses. One after another she picked them up and passed them as if they were common hacks, until ten yards from home there were only two in front of her and she was close upon the heels of even these. For a moment, then, everyone thought she was actually going to win, for she headed Wild Aster when three lengths from the judge's box, but with a fearful effort the other horse, Poisoned Berry, just managed to keep his head in front, and she was beaten in the last stride.

"Mary, I nearly wept, and poor Jim went white as death. But I saw him draw in his face, as a proud man always does when he meets defeat, and then he looked down and gave me a quiet, brave smile.

" 'It's all right, little woman.' " he whispered. " 'It's all in the game, and it was a great race, anyhow.' Then before I could say a word to try and console him, the voice of Della Charter broke in.

" 'Say, Miss Bevan,' she said in that quiet, slow drawl of hers, 'introduce me to your brother, will you? Sure, that was the most wonderful race I've ever seen, and I guess I've lost more on it than I'll ever lose again.'

"I turned round in a perfect spasm of fury. I would snap her head off, I determined. The tactless and bad-mannered little minx! To break in at a dreadful moment like that, when we were both of us so strung up with emotion that even Jim's voice, as she must have heard, was half-broken in his distress! Yes, I would be down-right insulting to her! I turned round, I say, and then— I saw that with all her quiet drawl, her eyes, like mine, were wet with tears.

"I introduced Jim, like a lamb.

"OH, Mary, do you ever realise what angels we women can be?

"There was Jim in a perfect agony of disappointment and remorse. He was deep down in the depths, and left to himself, with all his courage, would have tought out in dreadful bitterness those next few hours, for there seemed no silver lining anywhere to his cloud.

"But Delia stepped in and took all the sting out of everything. She brought him back to common sense and hope. Indeed, in a very few minutes he was looking at her as if he had somehow, miraculously, something in the world even more interesting than his beloved filly, Rose of Dawn.

"And I don't wonder she fascinated him. She looked so beautiful that afternoon. Excitement had given her a most lovely color, and, with those big grey eyes in that Madonna face of hers, she looked the picture of a very beautiful woman.

"She asked Jim to take her down to tea, and then, to the great envy of all the men, she kept him by her side all the rest of the afternoon. She introduced

him to her father, and Jim made such a hit there that the old man insisted we should both dine with them that night at their hotel.

"Then things began to move very quickly.

"They invited us up for ten days to a house-party at their gorgeous place at Melton Bay, and there we mixed with some of the most wealthy people in Australia. We had a glorious time, and Della, to the great amusement of everybody, made a dead set at Jim.

"THERE was no doubt about it. She singled him out, and the two of them were always to be found together. Jim, of course, was soon hopelessly in love with her, and, as the days went by, he could not help seeing she was not indifferent to him, too.

"But Jim is proud, and suddenly, to everyone's surprise, he took to avoiding her and keeping as much out of her way as possible. I knew what it was at once. He was thinking of Della's money and wasn't going to have it said that he had run after her because she was rich Then poor Della began to look unhappy, but she's quite as proud as Jim and wasn't going to try and lead on any man who didn't want her. So she, in turn, became distant and everybody wondered what had happened and if there had been a quarrel.

"So things were up to the last day before the houseparty was going to break up, and then I, if you please, stepped in. I thought it high time I took a part in the game and went no trumps on a heart hand.

"It was just after breakfast and I went to Jim in the rose-garden, close by a spraying fountain. 'Jim,' I said curtly, 'you're a fool.' He looked at me very curiously. 'Well, what about it?' he asked with a wistful smile. 'Della's in love with you,' I blurted out'— he got very red— 'and everybody seems aware of it but you'— he got even redder still. 'Yes,' I went on angrily, 'and you're making them all laugh at her, because you don't propose '

"Jim simply glared at me. 'You're quite mistaken, Dorothy,' he said sharply. 'She's not in love with me. You women are always imagining things.'

" 'Imagining!' I cried hotly. 'Why, I'm positive about it! I tell you again that you're a fool, for you're in love with her yourself, too.'

" 'I'm not a fortune-hunter, anyhow,' he said, coldly, and without another word he turned and walked away.

"Then, not two minutes after. I met Della and, like Jim, she looked pale and unhappy. Della,' I burst out impulsively 'Jim loves you; but he won't tell you so because you're well-off and he is not.'

Just for one moment she seemed startled and then but for a suddenly heightened color, it might have been she had not taken in what I had said. She looked at me gravely and her beautiful face— she is very beautiful. Mary— had

all the calmness of perfect self-control. 'Yes.' I went on, 'and I've just told him he's a fool. He's down there by the fountain and if he's not weeping, too, it's only because he's a man.'

" 'Thank you, Dorothy," said Della, very quietly. 'I've always thought you were a wise child.'

"She left me at once and turned to go into the garden, but from what they told me afterwards I was able to piece together most of what happened when, a minute later, she came upon Jim. She found him by the fountain, where I had told her he would be, and he smiled gravely as she approached.

"She plucked a little rosebud and she held it out to him in her beautiful white hand.

" 'Isn't it lovely?' she asked, innocently.

" 'Yes, lovely," smiled Jim. I've always thought so.'

"DELLA then blushed crimson. She pretended to smell the rosebud and brushed it over lightly with her lips. Della's got such a pretty mouth, Mary, and if I were a man I should be always wanting to— well, anyhow, Della kissed the rose and held it out again towards Jim. 'You may have it.' she said, ever so softly; "that is, of course, if you really want it.'

"Della says Jim got white as a ghost, but he reached out and took both the hand and the rose. 'Which may I have?" he asked in a whisper, looking her straight in the eyes.

"Then Della says there was a long silence, until Jim suddenly straightened himself up and let go her hand. 'I am too poor to marry a girl like you," he said, gently, and he made as if to turn away. But Della laid her hand upon his arm.

'Riches don't count always, Jim,' she whispered, 'and the richest woman may be the poorest if she's not brave enough to take love when it comes her way.'

"Then, I don't quite know what happened, for they won't, either of them, tell me much; but I expect Jim took her in his arms.

"No one saw either of them again; until just before lunch, and then

they came into the lounge, where we were all waiting for the sounding of the gong. They looked quite cool and ordinary, too ordinary. I thought in a flash. Della came over to me and kissed me. 'Oh. Della,' I exclaimed instantly, 'I'm so glad.'

" 'What about, dear?' she asked, blushing furiously and darting. I saw, a quick glance at Jim.

" 'You darling,' I replied, 'your cheeks smell of tobacco!'

"Everybody burst out laughing, and then Jim kissed her brazenly in front of us all.

" Now, you little fibber,' I asked presently, 'tell me exactly what you did lose that afternoon when Rose of Dawn was beaten.'

"Della looked radiant. 'I lost my heart, Dorothy,' she whispered. 'That was all.'

"Well, they were married six weeks afterwards and this morning, at a quarter past five, I was made Aunty Dorothy. Yes, dear, I think we had better go to sleep now; but isn't my nightie pretty? Those bows— oh, well, you see pink is Harold's favorite color, and soon— but there, you're blushing again. Good-night, Mary, Keep to your side of the bed and pinch me if I snore. Yes, it's a good thing the baby is a boy, for if it had been a girl I'm sure they'd have wanted to call it Rose of Dawn."

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13: The House Hunter

Francis Gribble

1862-1946

Sunday Times (Perth, WA) 2 July 1933

IT was just after the war which had turned the world upside down. Nearly everybody's nerves were shaky. All sorts of people were quarrelling about nothing and making mountains out of molehills.

Carrie Tressider, having made a mountain out of her molehill, alone in her small, pretty and cosy flat at Earls Court, reviewing the recent past and speculating about the immediate future.

Ralph and she had fallen out. He had bounced out of the flat in a fit of temper, telling her she could divorce him if she liked. She had written to him with that end in view. Her solicitor— a man of wide experience these delicate matters— had told her exactly the sort of letter she must write.

"It mustn't be an angry letter," said. "You must be very careful avoid giving the court any reason apprehend that you regard your husband's departure from the conjugal roof as—"

"As a good riddance of bad rubbish," she interjected.

"Yes, that is what I mean," said lawyer. "Spirited phrases of that sort, though quite natural, are better avoided. Some of the judges' are apt suspect collusion when they encounter them. The tone of the letter should be pathetic rather than resentful. What you should tell Mr. Tressider that if he will return to you—"

"All will be forgiven and forgotten," suggested Carrie.

"Well, that expression, replied Perkins, "strikes me as a shade melodramatic. It might, perhaps, think, alienate the sympathy of the court. A simpler appeal— such as one of my clerks could draft for you, in few minutes, if you wished it, would make a more favorable impression. Or I will myself, if you like, dictate something appropriate."

But Carrie would not have that.

"Thank you. I've always found myself able to write my love letters without assistance," she rejoined a trifle tartly; and she went back to Earls Court and composed the following:

My Dear Ralph,

Your prolonged absence from home has been a cause of great pain to me. Things cannot go on like this indefinitely. Perhaps there have been faults on both sides; but I cannot plead guilty to any fault which justifies your desertion of me. Cannot we agree to forgive the past and try to live together again as happily as old? I am willing to overlook everything, and to try to be the best of wives to you, if only you will return and live with me again.

Yours affectionately,

Carrie.

"Yes, that is pretty much the sort of letter required," said Mr. Perkins approvingly. "I doubt whether I could myself have composed anything more appropriate. But you had better not post it until you get home. The Holborn postmark might suggest to the court that it was composed in a solicitor's office, and that is undesirable."

So the letter was posted in Earls Court, and, in due course Carrie received a reply to it, running thus:

My Dear Carrie,

Your letter has just reached me. I am sorry to have to say, in reply, that my decision not to return to you which was arrived at after full reflection, is irrevocable.

Any other course, I am convinced, would, in the long run, conduce as little to your happiness as to mine. Try to believe me when I say that I sincerely wish you the happiness which have I failed to give you.

Yours affectionately,

Ralph Tressider.

"Yes, I think that will do," commented Mr. Perkins when the letter was shown to him. "I should have liked, of course, to see some avowal of a preference for another lady—

"But Ralph's a gentleman. He wouldn't like to hurt my feelings by doing that," Carrie interrupted, and the lawyer went on:

"Perhaps not. Happily, though it is usual, it isn't indispensable. On the strength of that letter, I think we can safely proceed to apply to the court for an order for the restitution of conjugal rights. For the subsequent proceedings, of course, further evidence will be required— evidence which the respondent commonly himself furnishes by forwarding the petitioner compromising hotel bill."

"But suppose he doesn't?"

"He so seldom fails to do so, my dear madam, that there is no need to us to consider that eventuality unless it actually occurs."

But the eventuality did occur. Day succeeded day, and the expected letter enclosing a compromising hotel bill failed to arrive; so that Carrie had plenty of food for thought as she sat alone in her flat on a miserable and foggy November evening. Her impatience was too much for her. She tool her fountain pen and her writing pad and began to scrawl a letter of remonstrance in these terms:

My Dear Ralph,

Mr. Perkins said that you would be sure to send me an hotel bill, but I haven't yet received one from you. Have you forgotten all about it, or did it get lost in the post? Perhaps you forgot to register it. Important letters like that ought always to be registered. It is very inconvenient for me and I think you are very inconsiderate not to—

Then she stopped and put the pen down. Her letter was the faithful mirror of an innocent and candid mind; but she was not sure that it was the sort of letter that Mr. Perkins would approve of. It would be better, she felt, not to drop it into the pillar-box without first showing it to him, so she put away both the pad and the pen and resumed her interrupted reflections.

She certainly was very angry with Ralph; but she was not so sure that she hated him, or even that she disliked him. They had been very happy together before the row; and though she considered that he had behaved very badly— exactly how badly she did not know— she was beginning to be half inclined to believe that the fault was more the girl's than his.

Ralph had held an important post in the temporary civil service. Phyllis Brent had been his personal assistant in a bungalow on the Victoria Embankment; and there was no denying that Ralph had, more than once, taken her to lunch at the Savoy. She was the sort of girl whom men do take to lunch at the Savoy while other girls and women wonder what on earth they see in them. Carrie had come to know about it: and Ralph's explanation that the lunch was only a reward for efficiency— a good conduct prize, so to say— which she had earned by never failing to put the stops in the right places when typing the minutes and memoranda which he dictated to her— had struck her as pitifully lame. First she had lost her temper about it, and then Ralph had lost his.

"I will not have Miss Brent sneered at. She is an extremely efficient stenographer and typist," he had insisted.

"I tell you she's a minx," Carrie had retorted, "and if you can't work in a Government office, helping to win the war, and the peace without getting mixed up with minxes who ask other women's husbands to take them out to lunch, it's high time you resigned your appointment."

"But she didn't ask me," Ralph had rejoined with chivalrous indignation.

"Well, if it was you who asked her, that only makes the matter worse," Carrie had responded fiercely: and so the dispute had become embittered.

Carrie had said that she didn't see what was the use of being married if one's husband carried on like that she'd sooner be divorced and have done with it Ralph had replied that if a divorce was what she wanted, he wouldn't prevent her from getting one. It had been the easier for him to say so because Carrie had a small but sufficient income of her own. The same fact had made it easier for her to take him at his word. So they had parted in anger, with the

word "divorce" on both their lips; and now, it seemed, Ralph was not playing the game. He had not furnished the evidence which she wanted. She had only her suspicions and her moral certainties to go upon. That would not be good enough for Mr. Perkins, and she was not quite sure that it was good enough for her.

"It's a shame," she thought, "obliging me to send a private detective after him. I didn't think he'd behave as badly as that."

"H's such a horrid thing to have to do," was her next thought. "I hate the idea of it. It seems so mean and underhand;" and then her reflections took another course.

Until this trouble. Ralph and she had been very happy together. Was any equal happiness waiting for her in the future?

No doubt she had told Ralph that he wasn't the only man in the world who admired her, and that if she wanted young men to take her out to lunch, she had only to put up her finger and beckon, them. She still flattered herself that that was true, though she had not yet put its truth to the test by angling for invitations. But she realised that being taken out to lunch by young men. was not the whole of life; and she was not in love with any of the young men, and none of them had been so ardent or so disrespectful, as to propose elopement. It was open to her to guess that any or all of them would like to do so; but she could not be absolutely sure. Nor could she, after all, be sure that they would behave any better than Ralph if they did. And if they did not—

Meanwhile she was not only lonely but rather frightened. There had been so many, stories of burglaries in the neighborhood. So many queer characters evaded the caretaker, came up the stairs, and tapped furtively at the door on suspicious errands after her maid had gone home. It might be that they only wanted, as they said, to sell bad note paper at a high price; or to collect subscriptions to charities which she had never heard of; but the sound of their shuffling footsteps scared her. If they came to know that there was no man in the flat—

And there were other grounds for anxiety. In spite of her private income she would no longer be as well off as she had been. It was she, not Ralph, who had taken the flat; she did not see how she could afford to live in it without Ralph after the next quarter-day. Then she would have to let it furnished and go house hunting.

House hunting at the very height of that terrible housing shortage which followed the war— a time when one heard stories of such great men as brigadier-generals dancing with joy if they could succeed in securing accommodation in a coachman's apartments in a mews! The thought of house hunting at such a time was, indeed, a harrowing prospect.

As awful, no doubt, for Ralph as for herself, Carrie next reflected.

"If this place is advertised to let," she said to herself, "he'll probably answer the advertisement. If he does, I shall have to tell him that the references aren't satisfactory."

The thought made her chuckle. For Ralph himself, searching vainly for a place in which to lay his head after his flight from her roof, she could have felt sorry: but for Ralph accompanied by that minx she could not feel sorry. It would serve them right if they had to walk the streets all day and sleep on the Embankment at night.

"Perhaps," she thought, "it was because no hotel could take them in that he didn't send me that hotel bill"; and she brightened a little at that picture of their embarrassment.

And then, suddenly, footsteps on the stairs.

One of those awful men, no doubt, who pretended to sell potted geraniums while spying out the land for the burglars. Carrie's sense of humor fled, leaving only her nervousness behind. The rap at the knocker which quickly followed intensified that nervousness. She lifted the latch cautiously, keeping the chain on the bolt; and then she heard not one voice but two.

"Kind lady, I'm starving, and will you buy some of these flowers," said the first voice, while the second called from a little lower down the staircase:

"Who are you and what the blazes are you doing here? You know perfectly well you're not allowed to come up this staircase;" and then Carrie, feeling reassured, and acting on instinct, opened the door through which Ralph walked, carrying a suitcase.

He had turned up, as it were, like a knight-errant, rushing to the rescue of a damsel in distress; and habit and instinct nearly compelled Carrie to receive him with such a damsel's gushing gratitude. But she checked herself.

"What, Ralph! You here!" she exclaimed in tones which called for explanation; and he felt that he must apologise.

"I'm awfully sorry, Carrie," he said, "but there really was nowhere else for me to come."

She could not help noticing that he had rather a bedraggled look, but still—

"Nowhere else for you to come?" she repeated in puzzled accents, while he strode into the sitting-room and took possession of it

"Nowhere else, Carrie. I give you my word. Get me a whisky and soda and I'll explain," he went on, dropping the suitcase and sinking into an arm-chair.

She mixed the drink for him. Seeing that it was his own whisky and his own soda, he had a clear right to it; and she could, see that he needed it badly. He emptied the tumbler at a gulp and she filled it again. She even put a box of cigarettes on the table. He took one and lighted it. It was really disgraceful, she

felt, that he should behave as if he had only been away for the week-end. He did, at least, owe her an explanation. If he did not offer one, she must ask for one.

"I don't understand this, Ralph," she began; but she felt that the note of severity was a little forced, and wondered whether he perceived it.

Probably he did; but he did not say so, and proceeded with his apologies and his story.

"I'm awfully sorry, Carrie," he repeated, "but you mustn't blame me— you must blame this confounded housing shortage."

So he had suffered. The discovery brought a momentary glint of triumph to Carrie's eyes. It might be hard to say whether it was because he had a sense of humor or because he felt himself so badly beaten that he did not resent it. He was, at any rate, more anxious to tell his story than to quarrel.

"It was all right in the country, of course," he said, "but one can't spend one's whole life vegetating in Cornwall. I wired for a room at the club, and came back yesterday.

"When I got there I found that not a room was vacant. I phoned to five-and-twenty different hotels, and couldn't get them to put me up at any of them; and I actually had to spend the night in a bathroom. All to-day I've been scouring London, looking for lodgings, and I've drawn a blank everywhere. It's cost me a couple of sovereigns in taxi fares. The best I could find was a back attic in a weird slum leading out of the Gray's Inn-road, and they wanted three guineas a week for that."

His look, like his speech, was a long-drawn appeal for pity. He seemed terribly tired, and very grateful for a chance of resting. The pity was beginning to dawn in Carrie's eyes; but he was too full of the long tale of his vicissitudes to notice it. He talked on and got argumentative:

"Now, I ask you, Carrie, was it likely that I was going to settle down in a back room in a slum off the Gray's Inn-road— and pay the ridiculous sum of three guineas a week for it— when I knew that there was room for me here? I suppose you'll say that isn't fair on you. Perhaps it isn't. You wanted this divorce. I'd promised to help you to get it, and so I will. But you must be reasonable and understand how inconvenient it is at the moment. You can't hate me enough to want to see me wandering about the streets like a stray dog and—"

'"You— you don't mean to say you haven't had anything to eat, Ralph," Carrie interrupted.

She had pitied him, as it were, without meaning to. It was so dreadful for anyone to be hungry. And Ralph could not help laughing, and his laugh helped to ease the situation.

"No, no, things aren't quite so bad as that," he said. "I'm not starving. Only homeless. If only you'll put me up for a few days I daresay I shall be able to find something, and then we can make a fresh start with the divorce if you want to."

Carrie felt herself melting-, and much less anxious for the divorce than she had supposed that she was. But she had not received all the explanation that she wanted. She was very sorry for Ralph, but she mustn't let him take an unfair advantage of her. So she put her question:

"And— er— she, Ralph, is she homeless, too? You surely weren't expecting me to—"

He was not; but it was a little difficult for him also to decide how to put things.

"She?" he repeated, waiting for her to give him a lead.

"You know whom I mean, Ralph?"

He did— he no longer pretended that he did not.

"I suppose so," he admitted.

"Where is she? What is she doing?"

"She was married last week. Didn't you see the advertisement in the morning papers?"

Carrie gasped. She felt as if there really was nothing else for her to do.

"Then there really was nothing in it, Ralph?" she stammered.

"Nothing whatever, Carrie. Didn't I tell you so at the time?"

"Yes, but I didn't believe you. Was it all my idiotic jealousy?"

"Just that and nothing more— except that I lost my temper about it."

"And that's the reason why you didn't send me a compromising hotel bill?"

"Yes, Carrie, that's the reason. Is it a good enough one?"

But he did not wait for an answer, and presently she was saying:

"Well, Ralph, I suppose you and I are the only people in London except the profiteers who are rather glad that there's a housing shortage."

———————

14: The Elusive Counterfeits

Elliott Flower

1863-1920

Blue Book, Feb 1909

I WAS awakened by a glare of light and found myself blinking into the bright end of a dark lantern. At first I was too startled and bewildered to move; then I recovered my scattered wits sufficiently to realize that it was unwise to move. The man behind the lantern had every advantage: he could see me clearly, while the light so blinded me that I could see nothing but a shadowy form and the barrel of a pistol ; he was fully awake and I was not yet complete master of my faculties; he was on his feet and I was prone on my back and somewhat entangled in the bedclothes. It was surely a moment when discretion was the better part of valor.

Yet, muddled as I was by the shock of this awakening, I noted two things' the revolver was very small and the hand that held it was unsteady. There was small consolation in this, however, for the revolver was certainly big enough to finish me at close range and the unsteady hand indicated a nervousness that might result in an unpremeditated pressing of the trigger. Evidently, I was dealing with a novice at the business.

"What do you want?" I finally managed to ask.

"The money," was the reply, and, if possible, I was more startled and bewildered than before. The voice was feminine.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed, "you're a woman!"

"If you cry out like that," the shadowy form returned, "you are likely to be shot. It startles me."

I realized that the'caution was justified, so I lay quite still and endeavored to speak quietly, soothingly. My wits were coming back, and I was able to think. "It is somewhat startling to me," I said, "to find a woman with a dark lantern and a pistol in my room. For I know you are a woman. I can't see you while you keep that light shining in my face, but no man ever had such a voice and no man in your business ever carried such a small weapon."

"This is not my business!" There was indignation in the tone. "And it doesn't make any difference whether I'm a man or not: I'm just as determined and desperate as if I were one."

"And more dangerous," I added, my fascinated gaze still on the wavering pistol-barrel.

"I never did anything like this before," she persisted defensively; "it's not my business at all."

"Then why do it now?"

"Because— because— " A moment of hesitation, and then the wavering pistol steadied suddenly. "I didn't come here to talk; I came to get the money."

"My watch and money are in my clothes," I said.

"Not that money." She was recovering her nerve as I regained my wits. "I want the five thousand dollars."

"What five thousand dollars?"

"You know perfectly well, and I'm in no humor for trifling."

I did know perfectly well— at least, I knew that I had that much money in the little safe in my room. I frequently had to keep considerable sums there overnight. I was treasurer of a fraternal organization, and dues and fees paid at the meetings could not be deposited in bank until the next day. Then, my own business occasionally left me with a good deal of cash after banking hours. Indeed, so often had I had a thousand dollars or more in my little safe that the personal guardianship of it had ceased to trouble me. This night, however, I had more than usual. And my visitor evidently knew it.

I had no idea of giving it up without a struggle, but, for the moment, I could parley and watch for a chance to disarm her.

"But I can't do anything while you keep me here," I urged. "And that light is blinding."

"I mean it to be," she returned. "I'm not afraid of a blind man."

"Nevertheless," I said, "you'll have to let me up if you want to get the money. I don't imagine that you are a safe-breaker."

She backed away a little, so that she would be quite beyond my reach. "Sit up!" she ordered. I did so. "Now, get up, and be careful you don't touch the pillow!" As her evident suspicion that I had a revolver under the pillow was wholly unfounded, I had no desire to disobey this injunction.

Even in that moment I was conscious of the fact that a man in his pajamas, facing a woman with a dark-lantern and a revolver, must present a sorry spectacle, but my mind was too busy with other things to give this more than a fleeting thought.

"May I turn on the light?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, after a moment of hesitation, "but don't try any tricks!"

I dared try none; I felt that safety lay only in moving with the utmost deliberation. I don't think I feared that she would deliberately shoot me so much as I feared that she would do so unintentionally if I made any move that startled her. Anyhow, I was very slow, in my movements in turning on the electric-light.

"That's better," she said. "The lantern confused me, but now I can give my whole attention to the pistol— and you."

I saw then that she wore a halfmask, covering her eyes and nose, but I was sure she was pretty. Her mouth and chin, so much of her hair as the hat she wore did not conceal, and her figure all bespoke a young and attractive woman— not the coarse type that one would expect to see in such circumstances, but something more delicate and essentially feminine. It occurred to me that it was very silly to be afraid of such a girl. Nevertheless that little revolver covered me in a most unpleasant way.

"I can't believe that you are a burglar," I said.

"I'm not," she declared.

"You're acting suspiciously like one," I suggested.

"There are reasons for this," she maintained.

"There are reasons for every robbery," I retorted.

"You'll get it back— sometime." She seemed strangely resentful of a term that was certainly justified. "It's only a loan."

"I don't like your security," I said, but neither of us smiled at the attempted witticism, being too deeply occupied in the serious phases of the situation.

"We're wasting time," she said shortly; "I want the money— five thousand dollars."

"If I refuse to open the safe?"

"I'll shoot you."

She tried to say it bravely, but her voice trembled, and I was encouraged in my belief that she would never intentionally use her pistol. It was only necessary, I reasoned, to display a little nerve, so I advanced a step or two toward her.

"Stop!" she ordered.

"Oh, you wouldn't shoot anybody," I said confidently, advancing again.

"Stop! stop!" she cried. "You don't know what you're saying! Can't you see that I have staked my life on this already— that I've counted the cost— that I'll kill myself rather than be caught! If you come another step nearer I'll shoot you and then myself!"

I was convinced she would do it, too— at least, she would try to do it, and, at such close quarters, there was every likelihood that she would succeed. Her tone and manner showed her desperation, and her whole appearance bespoke a woman who was actuated by other than merely mercenary motives. What they were, I could not even surmise, but it was quite impossible that a woman to whom disgrace would mean so much should risk everything in life, even life itself, for a mere monetary reward.

"If you will explain the situation," I said, "perhaps I might help you— might be willing to help you without all this fuss."

"It's not a matter to be explained," she returned, "and I mean that you shall help me. Open the safe, please."

"Don't you think," I argued, "that you'd better retire from this nasty business now, before you get into it any deeper?"

"You are very dull," she complained. "I tell you, this is so important to me that I have staked my life on it. If I have to shoot you, I shall have to kill myself— I know perfectly well that I couldn't get away from here, and I wouldn't want to, then— but I'll do this rather than leave without the money." She glanced at the clock over the fire-place. "You can open the safe in three minutes easily, and that's all the time I'll give you. But don't make any quick moves."

There was a determined tightening of the lips, and the flash of her eyes through the mask was further evidence that I had misjudged her: she would do exactly as she said. I moved over to the safe and fumbled with the combination knob. She came up behind me, so that she could look over me, as I stooped to get the numbers, and see just what I was doing. My position now was as helpless as when I lay in bed. I dared not even turn my head.

She counted the minutes, one, two; then I swung the door open.

"Now, the money," she ordered; "nothing else."

My revolver, if she had only known it, was in the top bureau drawer; I did not lock it up in the safe. But she was taking no chances.

Something very like an inspiration came to me as I opened the moneydrawer, and, after taking the cash from that, I drew some bills from another compartment.

"Have you got it all?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Shut the safe." I did so. "Is there more than five thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Five thousand is all I need. Count out that much so that I can see, and lay it on top of the safe. Then go back to bed."

I obeyed, merely casting one longing look at the top bureau drawer. She caught the glance, stepped to the bureau, found the revolver, confiscated it, and put it in a little hand-bag that I had not before noticed. It was lying on a table, and attached to it was a strap by which it could be swung from the shoulder. Evidently she had divested herself of this, to give her greater freedom, before awakening me, and I was much surprised at this evidence of coolness in view of her extreme nervousness during the early part of our interview. She had planned carefully, at least, and even her nervousness had largely disappeared when she found how completely she was mistress of the

situation— that is, after the safe was opened. She was self-possessed and confident now.

"Put the bed-clothes over your head," she ordered, "and keep them there until the clock strikes. That will be only ten minutes."

I was wholly tamed now, and followed instructions promptly. I heard her moving softly, and I heard the click as she closed the handbag, evidently upon the cash; then there was a dead silence. After waiting a moment, I moved one of my hands slightly. Instantly came the order to "Stop that!" coupled with the warning that another move would bring a shot.

I don't know when she left the room; I shall have to admit that I did not move even a finger again until the clock struck. I knew she would be gone before that, and I told myself that she would not shoot anyway. But, somehow, the darkness of the bed-clothes made me timid. Courage lies largely in eyesight, I find: the danger that you cannot see is always the most fear-inspiring.

Even when I finally heard the clock strike, I made no sudden movement, but drew the bed-clothes down cautiously. She was gone, of course. My first impulse was to give the alarm, but I decided against that and merely sought to discover how she had entered and left the house. I was a little ashamed of the fact that I had been held up in my own room by a girl; I was sure that another in my place would have given no better account of himself, but that would not save me from the gibes of my friends. Besides, I had a much better way of discovering the identity of this extraordinary thief, for she had taken away with her five $100 counterfeit banknotes.

The idea of including these counterfeits with the good money had come to me as an inspiration while I knelt in front of the safe. They had been left with me by Dick Bassett, a friend who had been instrumental in breaking up a gang of counterfeiters, and it had been merely necessary to take them from the compartment in which they lay and add them to the contents of the moneydrawer. Then, of course, I had taken pains to see that they were a part of the $5,000 that she made me count out for her.

They were fair counterfeits, but no more than fair, and it was a practical certainty that there would be trouble the moment she tried to use one of them. It was extremely unlikely that she would discover their spuriousness — the circumstances under which she got them would make her unsuspicious of anything of that sort— but I was sure it would be detected by the first business man to whom one was offered. One hundred dollar bills are far from uncommon, but they are large enough to call for rather close inspection in the business world, especially in the retail business world.

But how was I to know when she tried to put one in circulation? It might or might not get into the papers; the affair might or might not be reported to the police or the government secret service. If offered to a merchant, there was a possibility that he might merely refuse the bill and say nothing about it. But, I reasoned, it was probable that he would make some report, even if he did not seek to have the one tendering the bill arrested; the suppression of counterfeiting was something in which every business man was interested.

"The secret service or the police will hear about it," I decided, "the moment an attempt is made to put any of those bills in circulation, and Bassett ought to be able to get any report that is made to them. I'll see Bassett the first thing in the morning."

This I did, but I saw no reason for telling him the whole story, so I merely said that some one had entered the house in the night and stolen the counterfeits with the good money.

"How did he get in?" asked Bassett.

"I don't know," I answered, and in this I spoke the truth. "He left by the front door, for I found it unlocked, but I am sure he couldn't have come in that way, for there is a chain and a bolt on it. However, I found all the other doors and windows locked."

"You didn't get a glimpse of him?" he queried.

"I didn't wake up," I replied, lying cheerfully to save my dignity.

"Anybody else in the house?"

"Only the cook, and she sleeps on the top floor. They're all away for the Summer, you know."

"What do you want me to do?" Bassett is always direct in his methods.

"Well," I said, "the fact that you were of considerable assistance in uncovering the gang that made these counterfeits ought to give you the inside track with the authorities, and I'd like to hear of it the moment one of these bills appears."

"That's easy," he declared. "I can do even better than that, for I'll tip it off that the bills are again in circulation, and they'll be on the watch for your man."

Somehow, this did not exactly please me. Of course I wanted to recover my money, and I knew that an arrest must follow the discovery of the malefactor, but I preferred to be consulted before such action was taken. I found it difficult to explain this feeling of reluctance, but I had it; the girl certainly had committed a serious crime, deliberately, boldly, and with premeditation, but the circumstances were so extraordinary as to interest me in the girl herself. Her nervousness, her evident desperation, her appearance, her refusal to take more than five thousand dollars, everything, in fact, showed that she was a novice at the business and made her decidedly a mystery. Her assertion that it

was only a loan was silly, of course— merely an attempt to justify herself to herself, I thought — but it served to add to my curiosity and interest. I wished that I could know more about her and her motives before an arrest was made, but my anxiety to recover my money outweighed all other considerations. So I told Bassett to go ahead.

It was the only thing to do, but I was uncomfortable all day. Again and again I told myself that the girl was no more than a common, sordid thief, entitled to no consideration whatever, but always the facts arose to refute this theory. I had no difficulty in justifying my course, but I simply could not help regretting that it was necessary. In brief, my mind was kept busy contradicting itself on all points connected with the case.

IT WAS afternoon of the second day when Bassett came to me with news.

"I have found the counterfeits," he announced.

''All of them?" I asked, noting his use of the plural.

"All of them."

"Hurrah!" I was naturally jubilant, but— "Any arrests?" ! asked quickly.

"Not yet, and, frankly, I don't see where you're any better off than you were before."

This cooled my enthusiasm somewhat . " Where did they turn up?" I inquired.

"In the vaults of the Central Title and Trust Company."

"What!"

"In the vaults of the Central Title and Trust Company."

"You've sprung a puzzle that needs a diagram," I suggested.

"The best I can do is to give you the facts," he replied. "They were in the cash-box when it was taken from the vault this morning. The cashier says there were no such bills when he closed up last night, but they were there this morning."

"The cashier must be mistaken," I said. "Somebody passed them on him yesterday."

"The cashier saysthat his cash was disturbed in other ways," pursued Bassett. "Including these counterfeits, the cash balanced exactly, but he insists that there were fewer large bills and more small bills in the box this morning than there were when he counted up last night."

"What do you make of it?" I asked bewildered.

"I can't make anything out of it," he answered. "The cashier is an experienced man, and it seems impossible that he could have been fooled by those counterfeits. Moreover, he himself called attention to them the moment he opened his cash-box this morning. Yet his claim that the contents of the box

were otherwise disturbed is suspicious: he would naturally want to produce some other evidence that the box had been tampered with after it had left his possession."

"It's incredible," I declared, "that a man should attempt a trick that would so certainly and seriously reflect upon himself."

"It would seem so," admitted Bassett, "but, anyhow, the cashier has been suspended pending an investigation. The vault has not been tampered with, apparently, and the directors can't find anything that puts it up to anybody but him. Of course, the police have been called in. That's how I got wind of it."

"I suppose," I said, "I ought to shed what little light I can on the affair."

"It might help."

"But"— I was thinking of the details to which I should have to confess— "I'll wait a day or so. I can't see how the fact that those counterfeits were part of the plunder secured from me is going to help any. It ought to be easier to trace back from the vault than to follow up from here. Anyhow, I don't want to get mixed up in it unless it's necessary."

Bassett remarked that it was none of his business what I did, but I could see that he thought my course rather peculiar. Nevertheless, I held to my decision: I would tell what I knew whenever I deemed it necessary, but, for the present, I was content to leave everything to the title and trust company. It's facilities were better than mine, and it was busily engaged in finding out what I wanted to know; let it go ahead in its own way.

"But, Bassett," I added, "why should anybody steal counterfeits from me merely for the purpose of substituting them for good money in the company's cash-box?"

"Give it up," replied Bassett.

"Why not take the good money without leaving any counterfeits?"

"Search me," said Bassett.

"And why not take all the money in the box?" I persisted. "Whoever made the substitution could just as well have taken everything."

"That's what makes it look bad for the cashier," said Bassett.

It was very puzzling: I could not keep my mind from the problem, and my business suffered. I even went so far as to scare up a business-excuse for visiting the office of the title and trust company to see if any of the girls and women employed there resembled my midnight visitor, but I gained little satisfaction from this. There were several of her trim figure, but the fact that she had been masked made identification impossible. However, I did learn that no girl or woman had access to the vaults.

The problem had all my waking thoughts that day, and I even dreamed of it that night. The dream was vivid, and the girl with the revolver and the dark

lantern was the central figure in it. I thought she came back, turned her lantern on me for one fleeting instant, and then tried the door of the safe. I noted that she turned to me again when she found the safe locked, hesitated a moment, and switched on the electric light.

It was so very vivid that I was not greatly surprised to find myself looking into that same little revolver when I awoke suddenly The light had been turned on, and the girl was there, masked as before. Moreover, her hand was not so wobbly as on the previous occasion.

"That was a shabby trick you played on me,''she said.

"What was?" I asked.

"Giving me those counterfeit bills."

"I should think they were as good as anything for your purpose," I contended.

"You don't know anything about my purpose," she retorted.

"I don't," I admitted; "I wish I did."

"I need good money," she said, "and I've come back for it— five hundred dollars this time."

"Did you bring back the counterfeits?" I asked.

"How could I?" she demanded.

"I don't pretend to know," I replied, "but I should think anything possible in your case."

"Well, it isn't," she declared.

"At any rate," I said, "you might tell me how you get in here so easily."

"Perhaps I will,''she returned, "when I'm sure that I wont have to come back but I don't care to be diverted from the business of the moment now. I want five hundred dollars in good money."

There followed almost an exact repetition of what had happened on the occasion of the preceding visit. She was as cautious and determined as before, and I had even less chance with her, for I had not replaced the revolver that she had taken away. I had been so chagrined by that affair that a revolver had seemed to me quite a useless possession. As I bitterly reasoned: Why buy something merely for the pleasure of giving it away when you need it most? So I had none, and she got her five hundred dollars, which was about all I had in the safe this time. Then she left as before.

I telephoned Bassett the first thing in the morning.

"Tell the title and trust people to watch their cash-box," I cautioned him.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I have reason to believe it has been, or will be, tampered with again."

"What makes you think so?" he demanded.

"Never mind my reasons now," I said, "but you get word to them before they open the vault. I can't go into details over the wire."

He grumbled something about my being a good deal of a mystery myself, but promised to see to it.

Then I went out and bought a new revolver, determined to sleep with it under my pillow thereafter. I couldn't explain, even to myself, just what good it was going to do me, in view of my previous experiences, but I had to do something of the sort as an aid to the recovery of my self-respect. In truth, I was heartily ashamed of the part I had played in the affair so far; at the same time, I realized that a whole armory of weapons would be of little service to me in an encounter with this girl, for I certainly never would use any of them, except as a bluff, and I was convinced that she was desperate enough to shoot if occasion demanded. Nevertheless, my pride demanded some pretense of preparation for another encounter..

It was afternoon before I saw Bassett. I tried to look him up in the morning, but he was out on some business of his own, and ^message to the effect that he had followed my instructions was the only word I received.

He was all curiosity when I finally found him, and so was I. He began with "What in thunder—"

"First," I interrupted, "was everything in the cash-box all right?"

"Everything," he replied grumpily, "and I had a hard time explaining why I was so anxious. What did you expect?"

"I thought the counterfeits might be gone."

"Counterfeits!" he roared. "Did you think they were still in the cash-box?"

"Why not?" I asked. "The company still retains them, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he answered, "but not in the cash-box."

"Then look for them!" I cried. "Get down there and look for them as soon as you can!"

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Are you crazy?"

"Never mind about me," I retorted; "I'll explain later, but you find out about those bills now."

"Come with me," he urged.

But I refused on the ground that, being unknown to the company, my appearance in the case would call for explanations that would delay matters. "I'll wait here," I said.

Something of my excitement was communicated to Bassett, and he hurried away. I settled myself to await his return with such patience as I could command, but, fortunately, I had not long to wait. He came back in a cab, the horse galloping.

"The counterfeit bills are gone!" he cried.

The possibility of this had excited me, the certainty of it calmed me. "1 thought so," I said.

"They have been replaced with good money," he added.

"I thought so," I said again.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, "you know more about thisthanyou've told!"

"And I know little enough," I maintained.

"You knew that the bills had been taken!" he declared accusingly.

"I suspected the bills had been taken!" I corrected. "I knew that I was robbed of an even five hundred dollars last night in the same mysterious way as before, and the fact that this exact sum was taken led me to think it had something to do with the counterfeits."

"What's the explanation?"

"I don't know."

"I think you're lying to me," said Bassett.

"I've told you the truth."

I had, but not all of it.

"What are you going to do now?" he demanded.

"Nothing just now," I answered. "I'm satisfied to let the company go ahead with its investigation."

"The company," he said, "no longer has a case of robbery against any one; it is almost ready to believe that it never had one, so extraordinary is the whole affair. So far as the company is concerned, there is now only an untrustworthy clerk to be discovered and discharged. The cashier, of course, will be reinstated, as he is clearly not the one."

"Well," I returned, "the name of the clerk is all I want to know, and I don't think the company needs any assistance from me."

Bassett was so disgruntled that he was disposed to charge me with being implicated in the affair. In fact, he declared that it only needed a motive to convince him that I really had a hand in it. "But I can't see where there is anything that you could possibly gain by it," he said bluntly.

"Can you see what anybody else had to gain by it?" I asked.

"No."

"Neither can I."

"But I can see where a man who has lost what you claim to have lost would come to the front and try to do something," he retorted.

"The identity of that clerk is the first thing to be discovered," I argued, "and the company will attend to that."

"Qh, manage your own business your own way!" he exclaimed in disgust, "but I want you to understand that I'm interested in locating those counterfeit

bills, and I'm going to find them. I'm entitled to do as I please about that, for it's my affair quite as much as it is yours."

"Good enough," I returned. "When you locate them I'll have a chance for my money, but I think you'll find that your success also depends upon discovering the identity of that clerk. I may break into the game myself when that point is reached."

"You're an incomprehensible idiot," was Bassett's retort, but, nevertheless, he promised to let me know when he located the missing bills.

That promise rather amused me later in the afternoon, for, on the last delivery, the postman brought me an envelope containing those bills. The address was typewritten, and there was no message.

My first impulse was to send them at once to Bassett, but I decided against that. The recovery of the bills would leave him with no further personal interest in the investigation, and I was beginning to think I could not have too many people engaged on the case. I certainly wanted to recover my own money, but, if possible, without disclosing the details of my own experience and it seemed to me that my best plan was to keep Bassett and the company at work. They knew quite enough for the purpose, I reasoned, and their facilities were infinitely superior to mine. And I shall have to confess to a hope that the money might be recovered without involving the arrest of the girl, although that seemed unlikely.

I saw nothing of Bassett for two days, and he had nothing of importance to report when I did see him. He said he had secured no trace of the missing bills, which did not surprise me, and the company's investigation had merely developed the fact that there were three clerks who might have been able to tamper with the cash-box. "But there's not an atom of evidence against any one of them," he added. "It's the most mysterious case I ever heard of, and you're not the least mysterious feature of it." I argued that my course was a most natural one, in view of the circumstances, but he was not to be convinced. "You're in the mystery somewhere," he declared, "but I'm going to uncover the whole story before I get through."

"Go ahead," I urged. "I wish you would."

"There you go again!" he exclaimed. "Always holding back yourself, but urging me to go ahead! I wish I could understand you."

"I don't wholly understand myself," I acknowledged.

"I should think not," he retorted; "you need a diagram."

I let it go at that, seeing nothing to be gained by entering intoa controversy. Besides, my mental processes did seem to require a diagram. I reasoned, as before, that there was nothing as yet that required me to appear in the matter, but I knew, as I had known all along, that it would be the part of

wisdom for me to tell the whole story. So I continued the victim of an unpleasant and unaccountable mental conflict.

I was wrestling with the problem that evening when a lady called to see me. She was a very young lady— a mere girl, in fact— and there was something in her appearance that made me think of the girl with the pistol. When she spoke I knew her to be the same. Indeed, she made no attempt at concealment.

"I thought I would make a more formal call this time," she said. .

"I ought to have you arrested!" I exclaimed.

"But you wont," she returned confidently.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," she said, "I've come to repay the money I borrowed and tell you why I borrowed it. I'm sure you'll make some concessions to have your curiosity satisfied."

''It certainly has been a puzzle," I agreed noncommittally.

She took a roll of bills from the little satchel she carried and handed them to me. "I haven't included any interest," she explained, " because it was for such a short time, and, besides, you made me a lot of extra trouble by putting in those counterfeits." I think I was more astonished, although less startled, than when I faced her pistol. ''You might ask me to have a chair," she suggested. "I assure you I am quite harmless this time."

Thus reminded of my duty as a host,

I immediately offered her a chair. ''Of course, I ought to have you arrested," I said, more to myself than to her; "such a daring robbery— "

"Oh, no, no, no," she interrupted; "it was only a loan, and I have repaid it. Besides," she added, "you don't know how funny you looked, and I'm sure you wouldn't want— "

"You're quite right," I interposed hastily. "Tell me why you did it."

"Just to help my husband," she answered.

"Your what!"

"Oh, I'm married," she explained.. "It was an elopement, and my father hasn't forgiven us yet. That's why I had to come to you, instead of going to him, when we just had to have some money in a hurry. You see, Tommy was foolish." She paqsed a moment, evidently finding this part of the story difficult, then went on almost defiantly. "I suppose some people would give a harsher name to it, but he was only foolish: he intended to put the money back, and he knew he would have to put it back. He had a little legacy coming."

"So he helped himself from the cashbox," I remarked.

"Not then. This was two months ago, and there was a package in the vault that contained ten thousand dollars in currency, some securities, and various

other documents. There was some trouble over ownership or division of these things, and it was left there— in escrow, I think they call it. Anyhow, they expected it to be settled quickly, but it wasn't for the interested parties finally got into a lawsuit. So Tommy thought he could borrow some money from that package and repay it when he got his legacy."

"Did Tommy speculate?" I asked.

"That's why he wanted the money," she admitted reluctantly; "he had such a splendid tip; but he's never going to do it again. You see," she went on, "the suit was settled out of court unexpectedly, and Tommy heard one afternoon that the package would be opened the next day. That's when he told me about it."

"And sent you here?"

"What! Tommy!" She blazed up indignantly. "He didn't know anything about it. I told him I thought I could get my father to lend it to us, and he let me try that. But I had you in mind all the time. It's neighborhood gossip that you keep a lot of money in the house, and I had heard of it."

"But how did you get in?" I demanded.

She laughed at that. "You have about as much sense as the ostrich," she said. "There are bolts and chains on your front door, but almost any old key will open your hack basement door. I came in that way, locked it after me, and left by the front door, Is there anything else you would like to know?"

"Yes," I answered. "I don't see why Tommy had to disturb the cash-box."

"To get large bills," she explained. "Small bills in that package would have aroused instant suspicion. Then, when we found out about the counterfeits, we thought it best to get them out of the way: we hoped that the company would abandon its investigation when it found there was no loss."

I leaned back in my chair to think it over, and I knew that she was studying my face anxiously. "I think," I said finally, "even taking the most charitable view of the case, that Tommy is not a man to hold a position of trust."

"I'd trust him anywhere," she declared defensively; "but," she added, "he has resigned, and we are going to use what is left of the legacy to make a fresh start somewhere else, unless— " She looked at me inquiringly.

"I can do nothing but congratulate Tommy," I said, "but, for my own peace of mind, I should like to know one thing more. Was I wise or merely a coward that first night?"

"Consider the circumstances," she replied. "Remember the motive and think what failure meant! Would any but a desperate woman have attempted such a thing? You were very wise."

"I feel better," I told her.

BASSETT came to me the next day with news that he considered of importance. "One of the title and trust company's vault clerks has resigned," he informed me.

"Resigned or discharged?" I asked.

"Resigned. There's really no evidence against him, but his resignation looks suspicious. You'd better begin to do something if you ever expect to see your money again. He's going away."

"But I haven't lost any money," I said.

"You— you— what?"

"I haven't lost any money."

"You— you— How about the counterfeits?" Bassett seemed to be somewhat dazed.

"I'll return them to you now," I said. "I don't want to be responsible for them any longer."

"Please take me out of this trance," pleaded Bassett. "I'm getting confused."

"It's simple enough," I explained calmly. "I'm a somnambulist, and I must have hidden the stuff away in my sleep. I found it to-day."

"But I saw those counterfeits myself in the company's office,"heinsisted.

"Quite impossible," I said; "I have them here."

Bassett put both hands to his head, as if to make sure that he had a head.

"I don't know whether I'm crazy or you are," he announced finally, "but I'll tell you one thing: it wont be wise for you ever to appeal to me to testify to either your sanity or your good character."

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15: The Romance of Madame de Chanteloup.

William Edward Norris
1847-1925
Black & White, 11 April 1891

WELL, AFTER ALL, I don't know that there was anything so very romantic about the poor woman's story; not much more, at least, than there is in a score of other stories which have come to the knowledge of an old fellow who has lived, and still to some extent lives, in the world, who has kept his eyes and ears open, who is a bachelor, and who, for some reason or other, has been honoured by the confidence of numerous fortunate and unfortunate persons. When I come to think of it, I am constrained to admit, somewhat unwillingly, that the ensuing narrative is redeemed from being absolutely commonplace chiefly, if not solely, by the circumstance that Madame de Chanteloup's name— so long as it is remembered at all— will be remembered in connection with that of a reigning monarch.

It was not on that account that I personally felt interested in her. In the course of a wandering existence it has been my lot to be brought into contact with many Royalties, and it is a long time since their presence ceased to inspire me with that thrill of awe and admiration which they are able to convey to the great majority of such among their fellow beings as do not hate them on principle. In the city which for upwards of twenty years has been my home it is customary to affirm that *Les rois s'en vont*. I do not know whether this is true or not ; but if it be the case that the form of government which they represent is in a fair way towards being discarded by civilized nations, I really do believe that they will owe their downfall not so much to any sins of their own, or of those who act under them, as to their striking lack of individuality.

Now, that is a defect which nobody could think of imputing to Madame de Chanteloup. Other shortcomings were, truly or falsely, laid to her charge; but after the affair of early youth which brought her into notoriety, and to which I shall have occasion to refer more particularly by-and-by, all who enjoyed the privilege of her acquaintance were compelled to admit that she was not *la première venue*. Her hastily-arranged marriage with that broken-down scamp the Comte de Chanteloup did not prove a happy one— considering what the circumstances and what his character and habits were, it could not possibly have turned out otherwise than as it did— but she managed to make herself respected, she managed to rise above reach of the faintest breath of scandal (even Chanteloup himself, when in a melting mood after dinner, used to describe her, with tears in his eyes, as an angel in the disguise of a beautiful woman), and she accomplished a still more difficult feat than that, inasmuch as she contrived to render her modest abode in the Faubourg Saint-Germain one

of the most exclusive of Parisian houses. When her husband rid society of a singularly useless and disreputable member by breaking his neck over a fence at Vincennes, she preferred residing all by herself in the land of her adoption to returning to her friends and relatives in England. Perhaps she had not a large number of friends or relatives left; perhaps, if she had, they did not solicit her company as warmly as they might have done. Upon those points I cannot speak with certainty; but, having been honoured by admission into the small circle of her Parisian intimates, I can say that we should have been inconsolable had she thought fit to leave us.

After a decent period of mourning, she began to entertain in a quiet way. Her dinners, though unpretending, were irreproachably served; the guests who gathered round her table were almost always notable from one cause or another, and it was seldom that there was not amongst them at least one who wore a scarlet, a violet, or a black cassock. She was excessively and rigidly pious— more so, perhaps, in her actions than in her words; although it was very well understood that the free style of conversation which has become so fashionable in the last years of this century must not be indulged in under her roof. To tell the truth, I think we were all a little bit afraid of her. It sounds rather absurd, no doubt, for a man of my years to talk about being afraid of a woman who might very well have been his grand-daughter; but many people must have good reason to be aware that we do not, as a rule, grow braver as we grow older, and Madame de Chanteloup, with her tall figure, her clearly-cut features, her blue eyes, and a certain air of austerity which she knew very well how to assume, really was not a person with whom it would have been safe to take a liberty of any sort or kind. The mere fact of her youth had nothing to say to the matter.

Other juveniles, however, are considerably less formidable, and I certainly felt that my grey hairs gave me a right to say anything that I might deem fitting to young Eyre Pomeroy when he looked me up, one morning, at my modest quarters in the Rue Tronchet just as I was finishing my mid-day breakfast.

"Look here, Mr. Wortley," began this young gentleman, whose well-proportioned frame, closely-cut black hair and grey eyes would have entitled him to be called handsome even f he had not possessed in other respects the traditional beauty of his race, "I want you to tell me something. I want you to tell me what you know of the Comtesse de Chanteloup's history."

"Oh, is that all?" said I, handing him a cigarette. "Well, I know a good many things about a good many ladies which I don't quite see my way to imparting to an over-grown school-boy like you. Why should I gratify your curiosity with regard to bygone episodes, which Madame de Chanteloup probably would not

wish me to allude to, in the presence of those who happen to be ignorant of them?"

"Only because I am going to marry her, I hope, and because she referred me to you," answered my young friend composedly.

"The deuce you are!— and the deuce she did!" I exclaimed; for I was not a little taken aback by an announcement, which was scarcely less astonishing to me than it would have been to hear that Mr. Pomeroy was about to espouse the Empress Dowager of China. "Mercy upon us! What can have persuaded either you or her to behave in such an unnatural way? I thought you were barely acquainted with her."

He explained that he was better acquainted with her than I imagined, that he had fallen in love with her at first sight (which, if surprising, was at all events not inconceivable), that he had seen her pretty constantly during the few weeks which he had spent in Paris, that he had ended by making her an offer of his hand and heart, and that she had not refused him.

"She did," he added, by way of an afterthought, "make it a *sine qua non* that I should join the Church of Rome— feeling so strongly as she does upon those subjects, one can't wonder at her having insisted upon that— but I told her I had no objection."

"Oh, indeed!" said I. "That, I suppose, was a concession too trifling to be worth disputing about. And you live in Donegal, and your father is a prominent Orangeman. Afterwards?"

"Oh, well, if you come to that," returned Mr. Pomeroy, "we're a branch of the Catholic Church— at least, I've always understood that we claimed to be— and, as she says, the whole question narrows itself to one of acknowledging the supreme authority of the Pope—"

"Your father," I interrupted, "doubtless joins once a year, with religious fervour, in the Orange battle-cry of 'To Hell with the Pope!' "

"I don't believe he does anything so disgraceful and uncharitable; and I dare say the Pope is all right— why shouldn't he be? Well, then, afterwards? Afterwards she told me that there were events connected with her past life which might make it impossible for her to marry me, and that I had better go and ask you what they were. She said you were the sort of old chap who knew all about other people's business."

Of course I was perfectly well aware that Madame de Chanteloup was incapable of having described me in such false and vulgar terms; still it did seem probable that she had wished to cast upon me a task which she had found too painful to undertake on her own account, and the question was whether I was in any way bound to oblige her. Was I to rake up the cinders of a burnt-out scandal for the benefit of this ridiculous youth, who had brought an

introduction to me from his father a few weeks before, and who would most undoubtedly be forbidden by his family to contract any such alliance as that upon which he had set his callow affections? Was I to relate how in years gone by there had been— what shall I call it?— a rather pronounced flirtation between Madame de Chanteloup, then a mere slip of a girl, and the heir-apparent to a certain throne; how there had been a tremendous row about it; how that unconscionable old mother of hers, Mrs. Wilbraham, had threatened to make revelations which could not possibly be permitted; and how, finally, the Comte de Chanteloup had been induced to marry her by the payment of his debts and a large sum of ready money? All things considered, I really did not conceive it to be my duty to do this, and I confined myself to vague references to current rumours, which my young gentleman indignantly scouted .

"What vile lies!" he cried. "I'm glad you don't state them as truths; but if any man ever dares to say they are true before me— well, I'll promise him a bad quarter of an hour. How can she have supposed that I should ever waste a second thought upon the calumnies of reptiles, who most likely have never seen her in their lives ? Why, no man with eyes in his head could look at her and doubt that she was as innocent as an infant."

I shrugged my shoulders and held my tongue. I am old, and even when I was young I had no taste for unnecessary quarrels. Besides, what is the use of arguing with a man who is in love? It was as certain as anything could be that Pomeroy's father would never permit him to marry a Papist with a dubious record; and, that being so, I naturally paid little heed to the rhapsodies with which the boy proceeded to favour me. I had heard that kind of thing so many, many times before! What was really interesting and inexplicable was Madame de Chanteloup's conduct in the matter, and I will not deny that I went that evening to a party at which I thought it likely that she might be present for the express purpose of observing her and giving her a chance to enlighten me.

I can't say whether or not she attended that party for the express purpose of meeting the reader's humble servant; but she behaved very much as though that had been her motive, for no sooner had I shaken hands with my hostess than she sailed straight across the room towards me and beckoned me aside, with a certain imperious air which was habitual to her. She was always pale; but I fancied that she looked rather whiter than usual that evening; so I opened the conversation by saying: "I am afraid you have one of your neuralgic headaches."

"Yes," she answered; "I am in great pain, and I have been in great pain all day. That is one reason why I could not see your friend Mr. Pomeroy when he called. He was with you this morning, I presume?"

I answered that he had been with me, and looked politely interrogative.

"Well," said she; "and of course you told him— all that there was to be told."

"I am not sure that it was in my power to do that," replied I. "I told him of certain rumours which, as you are aware, are *le secret de Polichinelle*, and I should not have informed him of them if I had not gathered that you wished me to do so."

"Of course I wished you to do so. And what did he say?"

"Oh, he simply snapped his fingers at them. He attached no more importance to calumny than he did to such a trifle as changing his religion at your behest."

A faint tinge of colour came into her cheeks and the slightly severe expression of her face relaxed for a moment. She resumed it, however, in order to remark: "You are a sceptic—" (this was quite untrue, but no matter); "you believe a great deal more in politics than you do in religion, and I should never be able to persuade you that a man who adopts the only true faith is not what you would call a turncoat. Perhaps it may have been my good fortune to do Mr. Pomeroy one very real service, although it may be impossible for me to grant him all he asks me for."

"Can you really be contemplating such an unscrupulous trick as that?" I exclaimed; "and can you imagine that it has the remotest chance of success?"

She did not deign to answer; but indeed I required no answer. Her face told me plainly enough that she was actually in love with that impetuous youth, and that she wished, if she could, to accept him. I fancied also that she was not less grateful to me than he had been for merely mentioning as reports what I might almost have ventured, but for my cautious disposition, to affirm as ascertained facts. She dismissed me presently with a friendly little motion of her head, and turned to speak to one of the men who had been hovering near her during our short colloquy. I don't mind acknowledging that I should have been glad if she had been a little more communicative; still I was not altogether sorry that she had refrained from honouring me by asking my advice ; for, had she seen fit to do so, I could not, in common honesty and charity, have counselled her to do otherwise than refuse a suitor whom it would have been wiser to refuse in the first instance. She was one of the best and one of the most charming women in the world but— well, the "buts" appeared to me to be of overwhelming cogency.

Why had she not adopted that easy and obvious plan? Nobody possessing the most elementary acquaintance with her sex would attempt to answer such a question; but, as regards this particular case, I have a theory, which may or may not be correct I think Madame de Chanteloup was a curiously

conscientious woman; I think she would not, under any circumstances, have consented to tell a lie; and I suspect that when young Pomeroy asked her point-blank whether she loved him or not, she felt unable to reply in the negative. Being thus situated, she had (or, at least, so I imagined) imposed a couple of trying tests upon him, half hoping, half fearing that they would prove a little too severe for him to face.

Be that as it may, I neither saw nor heard any more of her or of him for a full week. At the expiration of that time I was strolling down the Champs Elysées one afternoon, on my way back from the Bois de Boulogne, where I had been breakfasting with a few friends, when a pair of equestrians cantered past me, in whom I recognized the fair Countess and her impossible adorer. I was sorry to see them together; for, although I knew that Madame de Chanteloup was in the habit of riding every day, and that their meeting might have been purely accidental, I could not but be aware that she would never have allowed the young fellow to join her if she had not contemplated granting him greater privileges than that; and really, for her own sake, it would have been so very much better to grant him no privileges at all.

That my forebodings were only too well founded was proved to me long ere I reached the Place de la Concorde. Young Pomeroy came galloping back, jumped off his horse, and, gripping me by the arm, said —

"Congratulate me, Mr. Wortley! I know you're a true friend of hers, as well as of mine, and I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that it's all right."

"Do you mean," I inquired, "that you have obtained your father's consent to your marriage?"

"My father's consent? — good gracious me, no! As if I had had any excuse to ask him for it! But I have obtained hers, which is a good deal more to the purpose. She says she's willing to trust me if I am willing to trust her; she says that if I will consent to be received into her Church, and if I will never allude again to that— that infernal blasphemy (for I really can't call it by any other name) which you mentioned to me the other day—"

"And which, of course, you are prepared to treat with the contempt that it deserves," I interjected.

"My dear sir, am I a born fool?"

I thought it extremely probable that he was; but I was too polite to say so, and he went on—

"Is it likely that, knowing her as I do, I should believe there was even the remotest possibility of her ever having done anything of which she ought to be ashamed? Is it likely that I should wish to insult her by prying into bygones which she would rather not talk about? Do you suppose I should enjoy relating

to her the whole history of my own past life? And what business have I to refuse her an indulgence which I claim for myself?"

He proceeded to point out, at great length, and in glowing language, how infinitely higher, nobler, and purer Madame de Chanteloup must needs be than himself. I was not concerned to contradict him ; I do not assert, and never have asserted, that the world's estimate of what is pardonable in a man and unpardonable in a woman is intrinsically just ; only, as we live in the world, we must take it as we find it; and I confess that I was a little disappointed in Madame de Chanteloup, who, I thought, might have spared this youthful enthusiast the inevitable shock which awaited him.

However, as I said before, nobody who understands women, however imperfectly, attempts to account for their conduct, and I own that my heart became softened towards the woman who is the subject of this sketch when I met her, the next day, at the entrance of the church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, where, I suppose, she had been saying her prayers. I was tolerably well acquainted with her features, for which, indeed, I had always had a very sincere and profound admiration; but at that moment they wore an expression which was wholly unfamiliar to me, and which somehow made her look like what I imagined she must have looked like as a child. The poor woman was happy, in fact; Heaven knows that her life had not hitherto been favoured with any too large a share of happiness!

I don't remember what I said to her— something congratulatory and commonplace, no doubt— but it did not matter what I said, for she evidently was not listening to me. Only, as I was helping her into her brougham, she grasped my hand with unusual warmth, and exclaimed, "Ah, Mr. Wortley, the world is not so bad as we try to make it out. There are noble and generous hearts even among men.

I was not aware of having ever maintained the contrary; but I was sorely afraid that she would be driven into doing so before long; for Eyre Pomeroy, however noble and generous he might be, was dependent upon his father, and it was hardly in the nature of things that his fathers nobility and generosity should display themselves in the especial form of which she appeared to be thinking. Still, if my fullest sympathy and my best wishes could have done her any good, they would have been as much at her service as I myself was. Unhappily, neither I nor my sympathy could obliterate an episode of which every proof and detail was easily procurable.

I NEED SCARCELY SAY that the news of the Comtesse de Chanteloup's betrothal to her young compatriot, and of the latter's impending admission into the bosom of the Holy Roman Church, was very soon bruited abroad; nor is it necessary for me to add that this unexpected piece of intelligence set many tongues in motion. I suppose Pomeroy told everybody; probably the Countess herself was too proud to keep silence; anyhow, all Paris was placed in possession of the fact, and very sorry I was that all Paris should thus be entitled to make observations which, had they been reported to the persons chiefly concerned, could hardly have failed to cause them pain. For my own part, I am not ashamed to acknowledge that I hoped the boy would stand to his guns, seeing that, if the worst came to the worst, and his family cast him adrift, his wife's fortune would suffice to keep him and her out of want. He was only a boy, after all, and no doubt, if I had been his father, I should have done my utmost to restrain him from rashly compromising his whole future career but I was not his father; I was both powerless and irresponsible, and I could not for the life of me help inwardly espousing the cause of poor Madame de Chanteloup.

One afternoon an event for which I had been fully prepared took place. My servant brought me a card, which bore the name of Sir Francis Pomeroy, and announced that the gentleman was waiting to hear whether I would receive him. Of course I had to send out a request that he would do me the honour to come in. I did not know much about him; I had met him perhaps half a dozen times in years gone by. I was intimate with some of his relations, and I had written a polite reply to the letter of introduction which had been delivered to me by his son. It seemed probable that he had now come to upbraid me for having led his son into a *guet-apens*. However, the tall, spare, grey-headed gentleman who was presently ushered into my presence proved as reasonable in behaviour as he was courteous in manner.

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you before letting Eyre know of my arrival, Mr. Wortley," he began, "because it will make an unpleasant task somewhat easier for me if I can obtain beforehand from a disinterested source some account of this unfortunate entanglement of his. You will allow that it is an unfortunate entanglement?"

"I don't know that I should describe it as an entanglement," I replied. "I suppose I must call it unfortunate by reason of certain rumours which are tolerably notorious, and which may even have reached your ears."

"They have not only reached my ears," said Sir Francis, composedly, "but I have taken pains to verify them. I have been at our Embassy to-day, and also at the Legation" (for obvious reasons I suppress the nationality of the Legation that he mentioned), "and the result is that I have been allowed to see

documents which place the affair altogether out of the category of rumours. There it all is in black and white— the private or semi-private instructions of the Prince's Government, the pressure brought to bear by our own people, the Comte de Chanteloup's demands, and his formal acknowledgment of the receipt of a sum of money for a specific purpose. I was not, it is true, allowed to take copies of these papers, and I was warned that they could never be made public; but, of course, nothing of that kind is necessary for my purpose. What I have seen amply justifies me in saying that I cannot permit my son to marry a woman with such a record as Madame de Chanteloup's. I won't speak of his proposed change of religion. It is a subject upon which I feel strongly; but the point really doesn't arise, and need not be alluded to. My only wish is not to make myself more disagreeable to Eyre than I can help ; so I should be glad if you wouldn't mind telling me whether he is ignorant of the circumstances, and whether, in that event, you had any good reason for keeping him in ignorance of them."

This was a little awkward, but I made out as good a case as I could for myself, and I tried also— though I knew it would be useless— to make out as good a case as I could for Madame de Ghanteloup. Sir Francis listened to me with perfect politeness and good temper; he even expressed sympathy with the unfortunate lady, who, he said, might very likely have been more sinned against than sinning.

"Only, of course," he added, "it's out of the question for my son to marry her."

"You mean," I could not help observing, "that you will forbid him to marry her. Isn't it possible, though, that he may insist upon marrying her, notwithstanding your prohibition?"

"Such a thing is possible, but I cannot think it at all likely. You see, Mr. Wortley, both you and Madame de Chanteloup have— well, I won't say you have deceived him; but at all events you haven't enlightened bim. It devolves upon me to do that, and, painful though the duty is, I should be inexcusable if I evaded it."

I could not urge him to refrain from doing what any father would have done in his place; but I did venture to remind him that he was not quite entitled to speak of Madame de Chanteloup as a woman of damaged reputation.

"When all is said," I remarked, "there remains a doubt, and I think she might be allowed the benefit of it."

"I have no wish to be uncharitable," answered Sir Francis, getting up; "but what there cannot be the slightest doubt about is that the Comte de Chanteloup was paid to marry this lady, that the money was provided by the

father of the present king, and that Mrs, Wilbraham threatened to make damaging disclosures if the required sum was not forthcoming. From those undisputed facts most people would say that only one conclusion could be drawn."

I was not under any illusion as to what most people would say, and in fact did say, about this melancholy business; yet I felt pretty sure that Eyre Pomeroy would prove less amenable to reason than his father expected him to be. It is perhaps a mistake to be generous and unsuspicious, and I myself may be too old to be either the one or the other; still I admire those qualities in my juniors, and although, as I have said, I had been a little disappointed in Madame de Chanteloup for accepting Eyre, I should have been still more disappointed in him if the revelation which he was about to hear had induced him to break with her. At the same time, it will be readily understood that I did not see my way to lending countenance or encouragement to filial rebellion; so that when, some hours later, my young friend was announced, I began at once by saying—

"If you have come here to ask me to intercede for you with your father, you have come upon a vain errand. I warned you from the first, remember, that you would have trouble with him, and now you must fight your own battle."

"I haven't come upon any errand of that kind, Mr. Wortley," answered the young man gravely and sadly, " and there is no quarrel between me and the governor, who, I must say, has been as— as considerate as it was possible to be. More considerate, perhaps, than some other people."

His tone was so absolutely the reverse of what I had anticipated, that I was fairly taken aback, and, to tell the truth, rather angered into the bargain.

"Meaning me?" I inquired.

"Well," answered the young man, seating himself— and I noticed that there was a drawn look about his face, while all the healthy colour had deserted it— "I think you might have been more candid with me. I can't help saying that I think I might have been more candidly dealt with. If it had been a question of mere gossip, I should have had nothing to complain of; but I don't quite understand my having been allowed to remain in ignorance as to matters of fact."

"Why, God bless my soul, sir!" I exclaimed (for in the days of my youth I had a hasty temper, of which some traces still linger within me), "do you venture to rebuke me because I didn't poke my nose into the byways of diplomacy in order to blacken the fair fame of the very best woman with whom I have the honour to be acquainted? Who are you, pray, that I should stab a friend in the back to save you from committing an act of folly upon

which you were bent? You intend, I take it, to break faith with Madame de Chanteloup. Very well; only, if you are in any degree a gentleman, you will account for your abandonment of her by affirming what, I should think, was perfectly true— that your father's stalwart Protestantism won't admit of a matrimonial alliance between his heir and a Romanist."

The young fellow did not respond to my outburst by any counter-demonstration. "There is no use in using strong language, Mr. Wortley," said he, in the same calm, despairing voice. "I am as unhappy as you could possibly wish me to be; but I am not ashamed. If what my father has told me is true— and I am afraid that is beyond question— I can no more think of marrying the woman whom I love than I could think of disgracing myself and my family in any other way. Surely that must be obvious to you I And I don't think it would be honest on my part to give her any reason except the real one for what you call my abandonment of her."

He was undeniably and exasperatingly in the right. "As you please," I returned. "I can only say to you, as I have said to your father, that there is a doubt, and that, in my opinion, Madame de Chanteloup ought to be allowed the benefit of it. However, it really doesn't signify; because you don't mean to marry her— and, for the matter of that, I never believed that you would. And now, as I have an engagement to keep, and as I presume that you have nothing more to say, I will ask you to be so kind as to excuse me."

But it seemed that he had something more to say; it seemed— to put things coarsely— that he was desirous of employing me as a go-between, and that he thought I might spare him some pain by taking a message from him to Madame de Chanteloup. I need scarcely add that I emphatically declined to be employed in any such capacity.

"You have ridden at a fence which you are afraid to take," said I; "personally I don't care a straw whether you shirk it or break your neck over it. It is no business of mine to find you in courage, or to see you through difficulties."

"I must write to her, then," he replied, meekly. "You may call me a coward if you like; but I daren't trust myself to see her."

So he went his way; and I confess that, after he had departed, my conscience reproached me a little for the severity with which I had treated him. He was not really behaving so very badly; he really had been deceived, and I suppose it was the case that he owed some sacrifice of his personal inclinations to expediency and to the honour of the good old family whose name he bore. Still I could not forget my poor Countess's radiant face as I had seen it when she emerged from St. Germain l'Auxerrois, and I could not for one instant believe that she had ever been a bad woman, though hard facts

demonstrated that she had been what, to all worldly intents and purposes, is the same thing.

On the following afternoon I called at her house. I can't exactly say what my object was in so doing, nor had I any expectation that I could be of the slightest use to her in her distress; but, having heard nothing of or from young Pomeroy during the morning, and being by no means sure that he would not leave Paris without even bidding me good-bye, I yielded to the feeling of restless uneasiness which had oppressed me ever since the conclusion of my interview with him. If the reader likes to assume that I was prompted by mere vulgar curiosity, I make the reader welcome to that assumption: it would not be the first time that such a charge has been brought against me.

Anyhow, my curiosity was not gratified, for I failed to obtain admission into Madame de Chanteloup's drawing-room. Madame la Comtesse, the servant informed me, was *tres-souffrante* ; she had had one of her bad neuralgic headaches all day, and had now gone to bed, giving orders that she was on no account to be disturbed until the evening. So I handed him my card, mentioned that I would return to make inquiries on the morrow, and went my way to the club, where I remained until the clock warned me that it was time to go home and dress for a dinner-party to which I had been bidden.

A fiacre was turning away from my door just as I reached it, and when I was about half-way upstairs I overtook Eyre Pomeroy, who was clinging to the banisters and who seemed scarcely able to put one foot before another.

"What is the matter?" I exclaimed, taking him by the arm; "what has happened?"— for I saw by his ghastly face that some catastrophe must have occurred.

"What has happened?" he repeated, in a strange thick voice. "Haven't you heard?— no, of course you haven't. She is dead, that's all— yes, dead I I don't know whether you can believe it or not; *I* can't, though there isn't a doubt about its being true."

To the best of my recollection, I did not believe it. I thought the lad must have been drinking, or that he was the victim of some hallucination. He was, at all events, incapable of expressing himself coherently. It was only after I had got him into an arm-chair and had made him swallow a couple of glasses of wine that he recovered the use of his tongue; and even then he remained so painfully agitated that I had difficulty in understanding what he said. I gathered, however, that he had, on the previous evening, written such a letter to Madame de Chanteloup as he had intimated his intention of writing.

"I received her answer," he said, "an hour— or perhaps it was two hours ago. Here it is; read it, and you will see— you will see—"

His voice broke, and it was some seconds before he could resume: "Of course, I rushed at once to her house. There was a great disturbance there. I didn't understand what it was about; but they tried to keep me back, and I forced my way in. All the doors were open; the servants were in her bedroom, sobbing and chattering ; I think there was a policeman there too; I saw her lying on the bed, dead and cold. She had been ill and had taken an over-dose of chloral, they said. I think I had better kill myself too; for you will see by her letter that she was innocent and that I murdered her!"

I quieted him as best I could ; but naturally I myself was somewhat overcome, and even if I had had all my wits about me I don't know that I could have said very much to comfort him. Presently he sank back in his chair and motioned to me to read the letter which he had placed in my hand.

I need not quote the whole of it; indeed, I am not sure that, had he been calmer, he would have cared to let me see the opening sentences, which conveyed an assurance of such passionate love as I should scarcely have supposed Madame de Chanteloup capable of penning, and which, even at that sad moment, I could not help wondering at his having had the power to arouse. But, notwithstanding this— or possibly on account of it— the writer acquiesced without a murmur in the sentence which had been pronounced against her, acknowledging that it was inevitable, and only marvelling that she had ever imagined that it might be averted.

"Still," she added, "now that all is over between us, and since you cannot, I think, suspect me of any wish to bring you back to me, I should like you to know that the truth is not quite so bad as you have been led to believe. The Prince paid me great attentions, and my vanity was flattered by them; I liked him very much, though I did not love him; I was scarcely more than a child; I knew nothing of the world, and when he used to talk about a morganatic marriage I saw no impossibility in such an arrangement. Indeed, so far as I had any voice in the matter, I had consented to this when, all of a sudden, I was told that he had gone away, that I should never see him again, that he had even been placed under a sort of arrest, and— that I was to marry M. de Chanteloup. Of course I was very unhappy; but I had always been completely under the control of my mother, who told me this was not a case for argument, that she had done the very best she could for me, and that I must bow to necessity. It was not until after my marriage that I learnt from my husband by what infamous means the transaction which handed me over to him had been brought about. I don't speak of my mother's share in it. She was ambitious; in her eagerness to make what she considered a magnificent alliance for me she probably committed herself to false statements which may afterwards have been used against her, and from which she could find no

honourable way of escape. At any rate, my husband's revelation came far too late to save or serve me. If I had proclaimed my true story from the house-tops, not one person in a thousand would have believed it. But you, I hope, will believe it, and forgive the wrong I was so nearly doing you, as I have forgiven those who have ruined my life."

There was a good deal more; but I could only glance at the remainder of the letter; for young Pomeroy had started up from his recumbent attitude, and his cold, trembling fingers were laid upon my wrist.

"Well?" said he, impatiently. "Speak out— don't be afraid of hurting me. Do you think she did it?"

I was astonished at the question. "Why," I exclaimed, "you yourself told me just now that you were persuaded of her innocence, and I must confess—"

"No, no!" he interrupted, fretfully; "you don't understand me. As if I would let you dare to cast a doubt upon her innocence! What I mean is, do you— do you think she killed herself?"

I could only say, as I had said in a previous instance, that I thought she should be allowed the benefit of the doubt. That is all that I can say or think now; and although Eyre Pomeroy would have been better pleased, I suppose, if I could have given him the more positive assurance which he craved, he did not, presumably, consider that the circumstances would justify him in fulfilling his own threat of self-destruction.

Far from acting so foolishly and wickedly, he has lately gratified his family by making a highly satisfactory marriage, and I should not imagine that he has revisited Père Lachaise since the dismal, rainy day when he followed poor Madame de Chanteloup's remains to their last resting-place in that dreariest of all burial grounds.

———————

16: A Bag of Gold

Beatrice Grimshaw

1870-1953

Blue Book March 1940

NOBODY lives on lovely Sariba— Sariba, sapphire of China straits, second in beauty only to Samarai its neighbor, the Pearl of the Pacific. Sariba, with blue, peaked hills, and sands of coral, and coco-palms, plumed and green, like all the colored pictures in all the boys' books of long ago. Sariba, where sometimes comes a stray trader to visit a little plantation, gather its produce, and hurry away again. Sariba, where once, above the sands of coral, a white woman lived alone; loved, waited, lost and went away forever.... Sariba, beautiful and lonely.

Forty-odd years ago, the Sapphire of the Straits was as lonely as it is today. For that reason, maybe, the Grand Duke Leo of Russia, who had recently made history by becoming "bushed" in the hills beyond Port Moresby and had been saved when almost dead of thirst, by one Jim Rockett, a gold-miner, chose Sariba, before he left the country, for the planting of a secret hoard. And chose Rockett, his good friend by now, for his companion, because everyone said that Jim was a "bonzer bloke" whom you could trust; and everyone knew the miners never talked.

Jim didn't talk. He went with the Grand Duke to the loneliest bay on the great blue island; and there, at night, by the light of an oil lantern, helped him to plant his secret cache. The Grand Duke said he was following the example, in what he did, of no less a person than the lovely Empress of Austria— at mention of whom he stood upright, and raised his hand in salute. And Jim said: "That's right." The Grand Duke, before he went away, told Jim that he would come back again in three years or send a messenger, accredited by his ring. And Jim said, "Good-o!" The Grand Duke said the Grand Duchess was waiting for him in Sydney, where they had broken their round-the-world tour to let him enjoy adventure in New Guinea; he'd have to get back now, but he would always remember Jim, and hoped Jim would remember him. And Jim said "Good-o— that's right."

So Grand Duke Leo went away, and Papua remembered him for a while as the prince who had "got himself bushed," and then forgot him. They didn't even know that the Czar had sent him to Siberia for treason, and that he died on the way, nor that the Grand Duchess was murdered. Jim didn't know, because these things were kept out of the Russian newspapers; but as years went by, he guessed that something must have happened to his Grand Duke friend. For that was a very special cache indeed.

WHEN Rupert Thorn came to Papua forty-odd years after, and went goldmining, Jim was still going strong on the new fields, and Thorn joined in with him on a claim. It collapsed before Thorn had had time to cheat his partner out of the proceeds— which was one of his merry ways; a merry fellow, Rupert. So Jim, before he died of the effects of a blast misplaced, hadn't had time to find out much about Rupert. Liked him, thought him a fellow you could trust. And anyhow he had no one else to speak to, at the end.

So, dying, he told Rupert, and made him promise something. And Rupert promised it readily; he had always been considered a promising youth. And hearing much in the country about a remarkable woman called Nor'west Jane, who lived all alone in her trading-station on a distant island, he managed to beg a passage to Nor'west, and to see Jane.

It was growing dusk on the veranda of the trading-store when Rupert walked up from the beach; but the sea behind him— the lonely ocean seldom stirred by ships, that thrice-locked door that bars away from Papua's islands all the "fever and the fret," the memory of the dull, accursed places where "men sit and hear each other moan"— was silver-washed by sunset. Jane could see, plainly, set against the light, the figure of Rupert. A fine figure, cut out in silhouette. And when he reached the house, swept off his helmet, and asked, with a smile that many women had found irresistible, whether he might come in, Jane, seeing his handsome face, his sculptured nose and mouth and merry innocent-looking eyes, was impressed.

Lombard, the young, clean, lighthaired anthropologist who was so intriguingly unlike any typical professor, had just come in from an afternoon in the cannibal villages that Jane was taming. Britten, a dark, feeble man who existed somehow on an old-age pension, wandering indefinitely about the D'Entrecasteaux and the Louisiades, had followed Rupert up from the schooner, saying to himself that he didn't know what that pretty-girl chap might be wanting with Jane, but anyhow he didn't like the cut of his jib. He said as much to Lombard, at the far end of the veranda, while Jane and Rupert talked.

"I never feel attracted to men with that type of small round head," Lombard allowed. "Anthropologically speaking, such a head is—"

"Speaking as a man who knows a skunk when he sees one," Britten cut in, "it's a rotter's head. —And body," he added thoughtfully.

"Jane doesn't think so," There was something wistful in Lombard's hard face, as he watched the tall handsome woman, with the blue-green eyes, so like the sea she loved, and the coiled red-gold hair, smiling on Rupert.

"It's a damn' pity," Britten remarked, "that that Jack of hers got himself smashed up—"

"On their wedding day," Lombard said, a little quicker than was necessary. "And she sticks to him, in the hospital away down south, as if— as if—"

"I believe he never was much good," the dark man said. "He'd've made love to a broomstick with a petticut on, when he was able to get about, and even now, he'll kiss a nurse as soon as look at her. I been to that hospital once, seeing a mate of mine, and Jack was there; star boarder of the place, you might call him."

"What was he like?" curiously asked Lombard.

"A bonzer chap to look at. And the nurses all buzzin' round him like flies. No, they say there's no chance of his gettin' better, but of course you never know, these days, with all their discoveries."

"Any chance of his dying?"

"Not a hope," coolly answered Britten.... "But they've done their talk; I wonder if you and me comes in with this or not?"

HE was not left in doubt. Jane came striding down the veranda, as if she were about to start immediately for a destination miles away. She checked in front of the two men like a horse pulling up on its haunches. "Here," she said, "let's you two listen to what he says; I reckon we're on to something good at last." Without waiting for the smiling Rupert to speak, she went on: "He says that chap Rockett what died a couple of weeks ago, was his mate, and left him the papers about a bag of pearls that's stowed away underwater off Sariba. He says they was put there by a Russian prince— that feller who come to Port Moresby forty years ago, and got lost and found again— and the Prince put them there because they was losing their color, and they say if you put pearls back where they come from, they get all right. The Empress of Austria, she done it with hers, only somebody pinched them and she never got them again. And the Prince, he said to the Princess, says he, they come from Torres Straits in the first place, because they was Thursday Island pearls, as white as snow—"

The little dark man nodded.

"Thursday pearls are that," he said. "And, says he, the Prince I mean, says he, Papua's all the same; it touches on the straits; so if I sink them somewhere off that savage land, they'll be in their own land, and safe, with no Japs about to know. There was Japs all over Thursday even then. So he puts them away in a gold bag, like them gold-chain bags the old ladies used to have, because, says he, gold do not corrupt; and he sinks the bag where Mr. Thorn knows about it. And he goes away and never comes back, and Mr. Thorn, he says the Prince is dead, and the Princess—"

"What was their name?" the small dark man asked sharply.

Rupert Thorn answered him.

"The Grand Duke and Grand Duchess Leo. He was taken to Siberia and died on the way, about thirty-seven years ago. The Grand Duchess survived him and was killed in the Revolution. They are all dead."

"Oh," said the little dark man. "Grand Duke Leo— he bought the biggest lot of pearls ever matched for a necklace in T.I. There was no such pearls got after. And they went sick, did they? It does happen. The Russians were mad on pearls before the War. Nobody ever bought so many, or such good ones. The Leo pearls— cripes!"

"There," said Rupert gayly, "Mr. Britten confirms all I said."

"Some of it," Britten commented dryly.

"He wants," said Jane, "that I'd lend him some of my diving boys and come along to Sariba. He says he'll pay me what I charge for taking people about, same as I took Mr. Lombard." Her voice softened as she spoke the name; Britten noted that, if no one else did. "That's a pound a day, and expenses. And I says to him, says I, you're a very pretty boy— and so he is. My boys gets the pearls, it's shares, and I'll have my fair whack. I've got my store to see to," she said, turning to Rupert, "and my boys are lifting trocas shell what's ten shillings a kerosene tin at present; and if I'm to lose all that, I must be paid."

"You seem sure you're going to get the pearls," satirically remarked Britten.

"I'm that excited," Jane declared, "that I can hardly stand; because you may think me as superstitious as you like, but I believe it's my luck come at last. I believe that gold bag's bound to do it. The very sound of it—why, me and Jack, we've been taking tickets in the Bag of Gold lottery down south, for seven year, and never got so much as a fi'-pun note out of it, and luck's bound to turn one way if not another; I always thought one of us would win the lottery—"

"What's the prize?" asked Lombard in a superior tone. Lotteries were not much in his line, but he felt curious.

Jane said, breathing hard: "Five thousand pounds is the first. And I always knew— I knew in my bones— that Jack was bound to get that prize day. And now I think we was right in a way we didn't suspect, can have my boys and me," she said, dressing Thorn again; "but you'll have to give me twenty-five per cent, if you get the pearls."

"Ten," said Rupert, with a smile like breaking day. "And too much!"

"Thirty," said Jane, "or you don't get my boys, what can't talk no good English— I've just got that lot; I'm learning them; and when I say I'll learn a boy to talk good English, I'll learn him or I'll kill him. But they can't yet, nor understand it, and if you get diving boys from anywhere else, they'll have it all over Papua before you get the pearls raised. Every Earning mother's son of them's been to Thursday Island, except mine, and there's nothing gossips like a

diving boy, except one of them magpies in the bush. Thirty. And it'll be fifty next time."

"Is there something you want to buy very much, Mrs. Jane?" Rupert asked.

"A husband; that's what I want to buy."

"You, the handsomest woman in Papua— a husband! What's the matter with me ?" Rupert's smile, then, would have melted the heart of any woman between China Straits and Cairns. But Lombard, watching, saw that with that smile, the innocent expression that had been spread upon Rupert's countenance like butter upon bread, faded and disappeared, its place being taken by something that was far from innocent.

"This is where I come in," he thought. And briefly he told Thorn of Jane's situation; of her disastrous marriage, her

invalided husband, her fruitless hopes of an expensive cure. He did not mention that he knew— had reason to know— that only a certain misplaced sense of loyalty held this woman to the man whom she once had yowed to love. Jane was Jane; there was nobody else like her.

And, he thought disconnectedly, lessons in grammar don't take long.

Thorn knew when he was beaten.

"Thirty, if you insist," he said with a cheery smile.

THERE where no one came, at the back of Sariba, it was always quiet. You might be living in the Nineteenth Century, with the enormous peace of the Victorian day, its huge distances, not yet abolished by the power of the plane, its dreaming and its content, wrapped round you like a magic robe of bliss. In forty years and more, nothing had changed. The palms that had watched the Grand Duke Leo hiding away his treasure were fallen, but others had taken their place; the hills behind were uninhabited yet; the tradewinds scoured along the almondwhite beaches, singing like a thousand silver wires, theirs the only voices audible still.

They camped behind the beach: Jane and her island boys and Britten and Lombard, and Rupert Thorn, who had made no objection to the size of the company— seeing, with those small bright eyes of his, that Lombard and Britten meant to come, allowed or not. Britten, indeed, might be useful; it was known that in his long-past youth and middle age, he had been a pearling expert; and Lombard—

Well, Rupert, to whom all women were fair game, thought he would rather enjoy showing Lombard what a man like himself could do with other men's loves.

Jane did seem to be fascinated. A woman runs true, for the most part, to her first choice; Jane had always had a weakness for handsome men, and

Rupert was superlatively handsome. But Lombard, watching with jealous eyes, could not be sure whether Jane's excitement, her constant talks with Rupert, her readiness to believe every word he said ("and half of it, I'm sure, is lying, but I don't know which half," Lombard despairingly thought) was due to love, or the spirit of gambling. Or both.

Anyhow, there was work to do, and Jane and her boys were starting to do it.

Rupert had a map, roughly drawn by the dead miner; it showed, clearly, a certain isolated bay, where there was a ledge of rock covered to a depth of about three fathoms, but not exposed to storm. About the middle of it Rockett had marked a spot where, in a pothole, covered by a stone, the gold bag lay.

IT all seemed very simple; but the first day or two produced nothing but weariness for the diving boys, and impatience among the whites. There were many potholes in the rock, and most of them contained stones—loose stones that, as Jane impatiently said, might very well have ground to powder anything placed in their neighborhood. Also, it was hard to say exactly where the middle of the rock might be; the map was neat and clear, but the Pacific Ocean and its edges weren't.

"If I hadn't've knowed Jim," Jane declared, "I'd've said he was nothing but the two ends and bight of a damn' fool, for putting the things there. But he wasn't that."

"Are you sure?" suddenly and disconcertingly asked Britten. Britten, little old Britten, who was almost done with life; who had gone pearling, and sandalwooding and bêche-de-mering, had commanded schooners and loved the daughters of dark kings; who was content, now, to sit in the shade and watch the wide Pacific sunsets, the while he waited for the last sunset of all Not for a long

time had anyone seen him take part in the affairs of other people as he was doing now. Some memory of past days, some unacknowledged interest, seemed to have set the dead ashes flaring up again. Britten was curiously alive and alert.

"Of course I'm sure!" said Jane the unsubtle, "or I wouldn't be here. Jim was a bonzer bloke if ever there was one."

Britten smoked his pipe and was silent, watching. Lombard, with a mind woven of finer stuff than Jane's, was inwardly conscious of trouble in the air. "I'll get at Britten privately," he thought. "Whatever comes of it, Jane mustn't be disappointed."

But as it happened, events overtook him in their march.

Jane declared: "This job is going to take longer than we thought. Who'll go over to Samarai in the launch and get some bread, and the letters? The Macdhui's just left the wharf; I seen her smoke going out towards Rabaul."

Lombard volunteered. The beautiful stranger was getting on his nerves; he didn't like to see the way Rupert looked at Jane, nor yet the way that Jane, occasionally, looked back at Rupert. Jane was faithful as a dog to her useless husband, but now and then, in looks and laughs, in rare hand-pressures, blushes, merriment that suddenly flashed up and as suddenly died, defeated nature spoke.

"If she were free," he thought, "if she were free—I'd reach out quick; I'd snap the fruit from the bough! "

And so, free or not, would this beautiful conscienceless stranger—as Lombard knew.

He went away in the launch. The Straits, gem-blue, gem-green in the piercing sun, ran quick behind him; the peaky hills, colored like many-hued petunias, opened out. Samarai sparkled close at hand. He went ashore, bought bread, called for the letters, and returned.

The boys were still diving. They had systematically explored almost every pothole in the underwater terrace; and the catch, so far, was represented by a few handfuls of shells. Jane, looking tired and worried, left them at work while, she unfastened Lombard's parcels and took the letters. In the shade of a mighty calophyllum tree, behind the beach, she sat and read, tearing open envelopes, looking at a newspaper or two, flinging scraps of news to the rest of the party.

Before she had finished her mail, a sudden burst of sound came from the rocks. One of the boys, bobbing up with wet woolly head and staring eyes, broke into yells and native talk. The others— all well aware that treasure of some kind was being sought— joined in with excited shrieks. Rupert shouted: "Jane, Jane, come here and tell us what he says; I'll swear he's got something!"

CLUTCHING her mail, Jane hurried to the rock. Lombard, Britten and Rupert were hanging over the verge, striving to pierce the veil of lime-green water that lay three fathoms deep upon the shelf where Grand Duke Leo, forty years before, had cached his lady's pearls. The diver, breathing heavily, pointed to a spot below. He gestured, chattered, step-danced on the burning rock. "He says," translated Jane, "that he's found a hole where there's no loose stones, only one biggish one wedged tight in, and he put his hand under, only he can't lift it; but he swears there's something like a bit of chain below, and he says it's sort of rotected by the rock, lying loose; and e says—"

"Hurrah!" interrupted Rupert, snatching off his Panama and wildly waving it. "Three cheers— damn you, all of you— hip, hip, horray! Join in, join in!"

Nobody joined. Jane was almost crying. "I always knew my luck'd come with the Gold Bag," she half-sobbed. "It's too good— too—"

Lombard looked on, silent, watchful. Britten curtly remarked: "Wait till you get it."

"Well," declared Jane, wiping her eyes, "it shows they wasn't no sort of fools, after all. Here, you,"— to the boy,— "take a hold of this rope and go down again, and don't come up till you've passed it under the stone, even if you drown first."

The boy seemed to understand. He went down quickly, and they watched his brown body, glassed with beads of air, balancing itself head down and struggling to pass the rope beneath the stone. Lombard, watching, wondered if the native mightn't come pretty close to carrying out Jane's command, it seemed so long—though it was in truth less than two minutes— before he had the rope in place, and rose to the surface, gasping and exhausted. Jane wasted no time over him; she snapped out another order, and two more boys seized the rope and began to haul. Up came the stone; it was slung away, anywhere, nowhere; another boy, without even waiting for orders, went down and thrust his arm into the cavity.

There was no need for Rupert's cheerleading when the native rose, leaped out, and flung a mass of weed and tarnished metal at the feet of Jane. Everyone exclaimed. Rupert shouted "Hurray!" Lombard cried out: "Good!" Jane simply screamed. Britten, with his hands behind his back, bent forward, looked at the little heap of crusted, weed-grown links, and coolly remarked: "Got 'em; and now I hope they'll do you quite a lot of good."

Rupert had the trove in his hands. It was not a large treasure to look at; when the weed was torn off, and the dulled links of the bag appeared, you could see that it had been one of the small goldchain reticules carried by fashionable women nearly half a century before. The sides were swelled out just a little— just enough to show that something more precious than the bag itself was guarded within.

Rupert's eager fingers were working at the rusted catch.

"Hold on," came Britten's voice, suddenly and sharply. "There's something you— and Jane— have got to know. I didn't mean to say anything unless you found it, but it looks as if you had."

"It looks like it," Rupert agreed, still eagerly twisting and wrenching.

"Wait!"

"Do you hear him? Wait!" snapped Jane. She didn't understand— she didn't like the tone of Britten's voice; but she did not care to see him ignored. Rupert, flushed, angry, stayed his hand. "What's all this nonsense?"

"No nonsense, and I reckon you know something about it, seeing that you were so keen on keeping it all quiet, and seeing you're not long up from Sydney. There's an owner for this stuff."

"Yes, there is. Me!" declared Rupert, clasping both hands about the bag.

"There's the granddaughter of Grand Duke Leo, living in Sydney today, old and plain, and as poor as Job's turkey, earning her living selling flowers in Martin Place. She uses her title to help her get a bit of bread; she's well known as Princess Leonie, the pauper flowergirl. It's only a few months since she started on it, so I reckon Jim Rockett didn't know; but if he'd been alive today, you know what he'd have done. I heard it from a cobber of mine, an old pearler same as myself; he got sick and went to hospital in Sydney, and it was there he heard it, and saw her. Now, you, what are you going to do about it?"

"Me?" Rupert laughed his innocent childlike laugh. "Findings are keepings! I'm keeping what I found. Lend me a knife, some one; I'll have to cut these links— damn the—"

"Mrs. Jane! What are you going to do ?"

It was plain what Jane meant to do, but it was also plain what that was costing her. Her face was yellow-white as she replied: "The decent thing. I don't handle no jools that belongs to the orphan."

"Then," said Rupert sweetly, "there's just thirty per cent more for me."

"I hope it sticks in your throat and chokes you," Jane revengefully said. She swallowed sharply; her eyes were dim. To see this man, devoid of honesty, carrying off everything, just because he was a crook— it was almost too much. And Jack— and the famous surgeon of Chicago, who was to cure him— who wouldn't have the chance, now!

"Give it here," suddenly said Britten, producing a knife.

"Take care," almost shouted Rupert, as the blade cut through the soft gold.

"It's not as necessary as you think," was the inexplicable reply. Britten had cut the bag open; bright gold gleamed now where the links were severed. From inside tumbled forth, unstrung, a white cascade of pearls. Large pearls. Dirty pearls— but they could be wiped.

Britten had a silk handkerchief. Sitting down on the rock, he poured the pearls into it, held them there, wiped them, and showed them to Jane.

"See?" he said.

Jane's mouth was dry. She swallowed, and said: "They—they look crook."

"Jane, they are crook. They've gone dead. And nothing will ever set them right again."

Rupert, with scarlet face, snatched at the handkerchief. "Give them to me. They're only discolored. I don't understand. Everyone knows that if you put a sick pearl back in its own sea—"

"People who write stories know, maybe. And people who read them. Newspaper chaps. Not pearlers. We know differently. Salt water kills them."

"What! That's damned nonsense. They come out of salt water."

"No. They come out of the oyster. Out of its flesh, out of a pocket in the beard, mostly."

"But the Grand Duke—"

"Grand Dukes and their kind," said Britten with something like a sneer, "know just what's told them. Believe any tale. It's a very general mistake, that about curing sick pearls in the sea. I dare say they weren't so bad when the Grand Duke put them down; but they're past praying for now. And the little Princess won't get any good out of them, any more than you. And if you happen to doubt me, just ask any— any— any of the pearl-buyers of Thursday Island or Broome. And put what they say in your pipe and smoke it."

There was silence for a minute, broken only by the hard breathing of the native boys, and the endless, careless soliloquy of the sea.

Jane spoke first. "If you knew this all along,"— to Britten,— "why did you let me and my whole outfit come along here, and work the guts out of ourselves looking for crook pearls that didn't belong to nobody?"

"I wanted to see," said Britten coolly, "whether you were as straight all through as you look, Jane."

"Yes, and what else?" she persisted.

"And I wanted to show you,"— with a monkey twinkle in his eye,— "who wasn't. In case you needed to know." Carefully, he did not look at Lombard.

Jane said, "Sling them pills back where i they came from," and turned away.

THEY saw her go back to the shady seat where she had left her mail. They saw her take up the letters and go on reading.

It was only a minute before she sprang to her feet with a cry.

"What's bitten you now?" Britten demanded. Lombard did not wait to ask questions. He was instantly at her side.

"Jack!" she said. "Jack!" Her hands were crisped upon the letter she held; she was staring at it as if it had been a snake about to strike. "Read that," she told Lombard. "Read it aloud! "

He had to unclasp her fingers to get the sheet. He read—to Britten alone, for Rupert was nowhere visible.

Dear Jane,

I did not tell you lately how much better I have been, for Nurse Gladys, who is my very good friend, said it was no use unsettling you until we knew.

"We?" said Jane, with heaving breast.

But the fact is that I am now practically cured, and Nurse Gladys and I have decided to throw in our lot together. You can get a divorce as soon as you like. I will send you all the evidence necessary— unless you and that bughunter man—

"He means you! The—"
"Don't worry, Jane.... Where was I ? Oh, yes—"

—Unless you and that bughunter man choose to save me the trouble. Cheerio, Jane; *I* know you never cared much about me.

Your husband for the time being

Jack.

P.S. I won the Gold Bag Lottery last week, as you always said one of us would, some day.

Jane said, dropping her hands and staring out at the silver-dazzled sea: "I always thought me luck was with the Gold Bag somehow or other; and lookit, it's been nothing but a curse!"

Britten was an old, old man; but somehow he managed to remember in that moment that he had once been young. Had loved women, dark or fair; none of them, though, as fair as this tall, golden Jane, from whom the fetters of a luckless marriage were now being roughly wrenched away. So he found an errand out beyond the palms, and did not hear Lombard, suddenly emboldened, say to Jane:

"Maybe the Grand Duke's bag has been a curse to everyone—but not the Gold Bag that Jack won— Jane, Jane!" There was no one to see Lombard's arms outheld; no one to watch Jane, like a homing bird, hesitant, wavering, as might be a bird in the midst of storm, come slowly into their longing clasp.

And nobody, for quite a long time, noticed that Rupert the resourceful had vanished with the twenty ounces of twenty-two-carat gold.

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17: The Spanish Prisoner

P. C. Wren

1875-1941

Blue Book Dec 1933

"I ENJOY these funerals, don't you?" observed Spanish Maine suddenly, as we sat outside the camp watching the ineffably glorious sunset.

It was the sort of thing he would say.

Poor young Schweitzer,— whose funeral it had been,— having decided that he could stand life no longer, had put the muzzle of his rifle into his mouth and his toe into the trigger-guard.

"Did you ever contemplate suicide— really ever get as far as deciding that you would?" inquired Spanish Maine.

"No," I replied, "Did you?"

Spanish Maine laughed.

"Well, naturally I've toyed with the idea lots of times," he said. "Most of us have, nous autres ; and I did once decide that I would... Almost did it, I was so annoyed."

"Annoyed!" I observed.

"Yes. I was so peeved that I nearly cut my throat out of sheer— peevishness. Did you ever hear of Bella Lola?"

"Rather," I replied. "Famous for her jewelry, beauty, amours, dancing and singing,"

"Yes," replied Spanish Maine. "In exactly that order too.... Bella Lola!" he added; I never heard a human voice express a more savage contempt.

For a minute Spanish Maine sat silent, obviously chewing the cud of bitter reflection. Suddenly he laughed, on his usual amused sardonic note.

"And the Spanish Prisoner," he said. "Ever hear of the Spanish Prisoner?"

"Yes, I've heard of him too... Quite well known in England at one time. He used to write letters from a Spanish dungeon, telling how he had been 'guided' to select you as the recipient of his confidence and of great wealth.

"He had languished forgotten in that dreadful dungeon, for unnumbered years, like Monte Cristo's Abbé in the Chateau d'If. And so suddenly had he been torn from his home, that he had had no time to dispose of his property, to make any arrangements, to see his lawyer, or any member of his family— all, alas, now long dead.

"Only one thing had he had time to do, and that was to hide a priceless diamond necklace that had been the pride and joy and ornament of his beloved wife, who fortunately had died before this calamity came upon him. This necklace he had concealed not a moment too soon as his servant came flying to announce that the police were at the door.

"Rushing out into the garden he had hastily concealed it in a place where it could never be found. Never, by any possible chance or any human being, however clever— except the person who had the secret. Such a person could go there and recover it, with the utmost certainty and ease. ...

"And a mere ten pounds would buy the secret! The poor old Spanish Prisoner had not long to live, and ten pounds would buy him the few comforts he needed to solace his few remaining days. A faithful old woman, now a half-witted aged crone, once his housekeeper, could be intrusted with the money. It should be sent to the address he gave.

" 'You will wonder, dear señor,' the letter would say, 'why I have not told her the secret, and got her to dispose of the necklace for me. The answer is that she would be immediately arrested if she attempted to sell so valuable a thing. The necklace would be confiscated, and my poor old faithful retainer cast into such a gaol as this— which God forbid!'"

"That's the man," laughed Spanish Maine, "and he must have done a thriving trade, for he persisted for a quarter of a century or more, and operated in almost every country in Europe. The Spanish Prisoner!"

"Was it he who brought you to the brink of suicide?" I asked.

Maine laughed.

"Swindle me!" he said. "The Spanish Prisoner! Huh! Well, in a way, yes."

This was interesting, for I should not have expected to find Spanish Maine concerned in a swindle— in the role of victim!

"Ever been in South America?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Know Paracaibo in the State of Maraguaya?"

"No."

"Then you don't know the jail there."

"No."

"It's a good place not to know. I do know it."

"Accidents will happen in the best regulated lives," I observed.

"Quite so. This was a grand accident. thing he didn't know I and some really splendid fellows, off about the history of the Rey del Pacifico, were making hay South America. in a café in the Puerto del Sol, and the police barged in. One wretched little yellow-faced spindle-shanked Spiggoty grabbed hold of me, and I knocked him through a window into the street. Then things grew worse. The police got angry, nasty and rough, and we placated hem with water and wine— in bottles and carafes. That made them worse, and soon it was automatics versus knives and iron chairs.

"I don't know how it ended. I ended in the famous La Guira jail of Paracaibo; or rather, I began there—began a new life. Awoke to a new life next day, feeling very bad. ...

"That's a great jail, and when I felt a bit better I wasn't altogether sorry to be there. I like experiences— and this was a real one.... Just for a day or two I thought, until I was brought up for trial, got hold of an advocate, and learned whom to square and the least amount that would square him.

"Yes, I'd seen some queer things in some queer places, but La Guira jail at Paracaibo made the rest seem like girls' school stuff. It was the simplest thing in' prisons ever invented. You were thrown through the gates, the gates were shut, and there you were— in prison. No nonsense about registration, fingerprints, head-cropping, measurement-recording, searching, photographing, convict-dress, numbers, cells— you know the sort of thing."

"H'm," I coughed noncommittally.

"No, they never heard of the Bertillon system there, and wouldn't have given a damn for it if they had. All you'd got to do was to go in; and they saw that you stayed in. There was nothing more to it than that. They didn't even feed you.

"There was one soldier, guard, or warder, or whatever you liked to call him, to every fifty convicts. And there were five hundred of those, more or less.

"It was pandemonium, the nearest thing to hell there could possibly be upon this earth. There weren't even cells.

"There were some stables, and a huge loft over them, all very heavily built of solid stone. There was a vast great flagged hall which, judging by the enormous old fireplace, had been a kitchen or refectory or something. There was what had been a chapel, and some great gaunt echoing cloisters off which opened a number of small doorless, windowless rooms.

"It was an amazing old place, early Spanish, and looked like a mixture of fortress, vice-regal palace, monastery, magazine, barracks—and lunatic asylum. And in it, these five hundred criminals roamed about and lived as they liked, or could."

"What did they live on?" I asked.

"Each other... . No, I don't mean cannibalism— quite! But stealing from each other, working for each other, robbing the newcomer. Alms, partly; pious people used to send food 'for the poor prisoners.' Others, who had money, could buy anything they wanted. That was how the guards lived, for I don't suppose they ever got any pay.

"Oh, yes, a guard would bring you in anything you wanted, on a fifty-percent commission. Luckily for me, I had four very useful things. A good fat

moneybelt, a loaded automatic, a very pretty knife— and a very ugly way with me. Otherwise I should not have survived long in the La Guira jail.

"YES, I'm glad I didn't miss it while I was visiting Paracaibo. I learned a lot there. *Madre de Dios*, they were a collection! Negroes, and every variety of negro half-caste; Indians, and every conceivable variety of Indian half-caste; Spaniards, Portuguese and Venezuelans, Brazilians and all sorts of creatures speaking English, French and Dutch, from the British French and Dutch Guianas. Black men, red men, yellow men, white men, every shade in between, and every language in the Tower of Babel. Priests, pimps, panders and politicians, robbers, thieves, coiners, forgers, murderers, soldiers, sailors, lawyers, tradesmen; really rich men, plump, paunchy and well-dressed ; literally penniless men without a solitary possession in the world, and lucky if the could beg a crust a day; some of the vilest, most utterly revolting criminals, and perfectly innocent well-bred, well-mannered, well-behaved citizens who would not've known how to commit a crime.

"There was drunken roistering and guzzling feasting; there were moans for a cup of water; there were deaths from sheer starvation. A band of well-fed ruffians, smelling of aguardiente, would go round demanding your money or your life. A band of scarecrows, skeletons on whose bones flapped a few foul rags, would follow them, begging for a copper coin, a crumb, a sip of something, for the love of God.

"There were cliques, gangs, factions, feuds and fights— constant fights, varying from pitched battles to single duels. There were robberies and murders. Every crime in the calendar was committed almost daily. And yet the amusing thing was that, although, outside, these crimes were crimes, here in the prison they were not; they mattered not at all. It was a place apart, where there was no law whatever, where there was nothing at all, save imprisonment. It was a society entirely apart from society.

"And thus a curious paradox evolved, that those prisoners were, and doubtless still are, the freest people on earth— within those four walls— for, as I said, we were free to do exactly what we liked.

"And just when I had quite taken stock in this interesting institution, learned its ways, seen all that I wanted to see, and decided I'd had quite enough, the Great Rebellion of Paracaibo broke out.

"But the law had become completely dumb, so far as I was concerned. It knew nothing about me at all. I had never been charged or brought before any magistrate. The police had simply gathered me in, and there I was; there I could remain for the rest of my life, so far as the new authorities were concerned. Trapped!

"But I was going to tell you about the mad Abbé. And he really was an Abbé too, I believe. If not, he was the finest impersonator I've ever seen, on the stage or off, and had got the patter marvelously. The one daigeraca that he wore might very well have been, at one time, the white habit of a monk or friar. You must have seen them about in some of the South American towns— Cistercians, are they?— in a heavy white frock and cowl of some sort of thick wool, vicufia, or something, with a rope round the middle and a big black crass dangling on the chest.

"WELL, this old bird looked like one of those, who'd been buried alive for a quarter of a century, or, at any rate, for years, in La Guira prison. God alone knows how he'd kept himself alive, A most repulsive object, fat and white, like a great slug afflicted with leprosy; and he hadn't a solitary hair on his face or head.

"But, by Jove, he was an interesting chap to talk to. There was not a thing he didn't know about the Incas and the Aztecs and everything else American, from Mexico City to Punta Arenas— Amazon flora and fauna, Maya civilization, Spanish gold-trails, exploration, geography and history, of the whole of South America.

"Yes, it was worth a bottle of wine or a meal a day, to listen to him; especially worth it to a man sufficiently well-educated to understand and appreciate him.

"And by Gad, he needed the meals, poor devil! For he'd lived by his wits, and on charity, ever since he'd been flung into the place, in the prime of life. He soon gathered from the way I lived that I had money and suddenly one day he sprang it on me.

"How I laughed! When he'd finished his story and I'd finished laughing, 'Why, you're the Spanish Prisoner himself!' I said.

"The Spanish Prisoner! And going to work it on *me*!

"It was the old, old story.

"IT was a great Brazilian diamond this time. It had belonged to the Emperor Maximilian of Brazil, the very chap the Legion fought for, and won us the annual Day of Camaron holiday, God bless them.

"Oh, a wonderful great diamond, of the first water. Maximilian had given it to the head of the Abbé's order; and when the Emperor was overthrown and killed, there was a lot of dirty work at every crossroads; and a monastery of this order was either looted and burned, or besieged by Bolivar's troops and defended by the Royalists who had taken refuge there. I forget the patter but,

anyhow, a monk had been intrusted with the diamond and instructions to take it to a place of safety.

"He, poor chap, had succumbed to temptation, and when the Andes were between him and home, he had hidden the diamond instead of taking it to the headquarters monastery at Vallombrosa, or wherever it was.

"Quite good patter, with lots of local color and the usual ending. My Abbé had heard of its whereabouts through the deathbed confession of the monk's nephew, on whose conscience the stolen diamond lay heavily.

"Then, like the dear old Spanish Prisoner, my friend had been falsely accused on some peisct charge, during the discovery of a revolutionary plot, had been suddenly arrested, and thrown headfirst into La Guira jail, before he had had time to dispose of the diamond.

"Not that he had been going to 'dispose' of it in the ordinary sense of the word. Oh, no!... He had only just arrived with it, and was going to take it to the cathedral, or the monastery, or somewhere or other. I forgot the details of the yarn. But there was the diamond— for the taking. And I could take it, provided I would also take the most solemn oath that he could devise, and swear by everything he could think of, that I would take the diamond straight to the Archbishop or Archdeacon, or Archimandrite or Archangel of somewhere or other.

"And I would, of course, give him what I could spare, in return for the honor and privilege and glory that he was conferring upon me in making me the chosen vessel, the appointed and anointed messenger, who was to restore the great diamond to its rightful place.

"Laugh! How I did laugh, as I patted the old dear on the back. I think it was the best entertainment he had given me:

" 'You are the Spanish Prisoner himself!' I said. 'A real old Spanish Prisoner in the flesh. I am glad to have met you!'

"Of course I was not playing my part properly at all. Instead of laughing, my eyes should have sparkled with unholy pleasure and shone with the fierce cold gleam of cupidity. My face should have assumed its most cunning expression. I should have taken a dozen oaths that I would act with the strictest honesty. And then I should have given him his price for his secret, and every assurance of good faith, while firmly intending— when I escaped from jail— to gather in the diamond, and live happy ever after.

"Well, it was all very good fun. Very amusing indeed— especially in that incredible nightmare den of thieves, that combination of Newgate and Colney Hatch. And although I laughed heartily, I played up to the engaging rascal, and made a solemn league and covenant, a soul-binding hell-dooming contract. And when he was satisfied with my oaths, promises and protestations, and

with my little contribution, what did the amazing old lunatic do but— produce the 'diamond!'

"He'd got it there with him, in a dirty *papier-maché* snuff-box, under some snuff.

"THIS gave me another good laugh, to think he rated my intelligence so low as to imagine I'd believe he'd kept a priceless diamond there, all those years, safe, in the middle of the finest prize collection of cutthroats on the face of the earth.

"However, I humored him; and just before I escaped, he secretly and solemnly handed it over to me in the still small hours of one dark morning, when, at length and at last, even that hellish pandemonium was at peace, and quiet for an hour or two.

"It looked like the top of the stopper of a scent-bottle— unless it were sctually one of those glass jewels manufactured as such, for use on the stage or for the adornment of images in the poorest kind of Indian Mission chapel— and it was set in a claw, an ugly clumsy silver sort of brooch thing.

"I put it in my trousers-pocket, smote the old dear on the back, once again hailed him as the Father of Lies and of all Spanish Prisoners, and gave him a few million *mélreis*— value about ten pounds sterling. He was worth it, for he'd whiled away endless hours for me, not only with his funny little swindle, but with really good talk. And, mind you, he was, like myself, a Spaniard and a gentleman....

"How did I escape? Like all great schemes, plans and inventions, it was simplicity itself. Once a year, or once a century perhaps, a Commission used to visit the prison and report upon it.

"Who they were, I don't know. Some gang of rogues as bad as any in the jail. Probably the Chief Judge of the High Court— the whole bench and bar— the Recorder of Paracaibo, with sheriffs, marshals, mace-bearers and the other rag-tag and bobtail. In theory, this precious crew received petitions from the prisoners, took them away with them, and gave them their earnest consideration. In practice, only a few of the most ignorant newcomers, or the permanently mad, took the trouble to do anything of the sort.

"A few wags wrote scurrilous lampoons on the boss of the gang, the Lord Chief Justice or Lord Chancellor, or whatever he was. And others, screeds of horrible blasphemies and invectives. Most of the prisoners took no notice of them, beyond trying to make a touch, or trying even harder to tell them what they: looked like.

"Well, I came to know that the annual, or centennial, visitation was due shortly— and I had an idea and acted on it: I got one guard to buy me a very

nice hat such as worn by the grave and reverend Señors, another, to get me a black frock coat; another, a pair of snappy trousers; another a white 'boiled' shirt, stiff collar and fashionable tie; another, a pair of yellow buttoned boots, such as were worn by all the best people— until I had assembled the sort of outfit that would be worn by a judge off duty, or some sort of rogue on duty!

"And on the great day I rose bright and early, shaved off my beard and mustache, dressed myself in this beautiful raiment— unobtrusively joined the procession, and even more unobtrusively, walked out with it!

"To the eyes of the sentry at the wicket in the great gates, as he stared straight before him, giving his famous impersonation of a soldier standing to attention, I must have seemed, if he saw me at all, one of the Paracaibo legal luminaries, or some such thing.

"Anyhow it worked, or I should not be here now; I should still be there.

"On the *Parana*, by which I crossed to Europe, there was the usual collection of Argentine millionaires, Peruvian and Chilean nitrate kings, pampas cattle kings and silver kings— all sorts of kings. And amongst the women there was one queen. ... La Bella Lola, as she called herself.

"I freely admit that she was then the loveliest woman I had ever seen— absolutely sheerly lovely; and I lost my heart to her as well as my head.

"Being, in those days, a handsome as well as accomplished, agreeable and attractive young man, I soon made Lola's acquaintance and good headway in her gtaces,

"But although I fell desperately in love with La Bella Lola, she did not fall in love, desperately or otherwise, with me.

"We all know that with wise people, time is money. With Lola, love was money. Synonymous! And I hadn't enough ecant compete with the kings at all. When I tried to make love to her, she told me frankly, and coldly, that I tahgoed splendidly, and that she would always be charmed to tango with me, when she felt like dancing. A real snub,

"NOW, perhaps it is unnecessary to tell you, my friend, that I am not often snubbed, nor do I take a snub kindly. In fact, I don't take it at all, I return it. And though I would sooner have loved La Bella Lola than hated her, still, if she wouldn't have the one, she could have the other. I gave the matter my prolonged consideration, and was not satisfied with the small triumph I enjoyed when La Bella— to show off before her large circle of admirers and supporters— wished to dance the tango that same evening with the best tangoist aboard.

"The band struck up the beautiful 'O Donna Carmelita' air, and La Bella, leaning against the rail watching the fairies' path of moonlight across the water, turned to me and said:

"Shall we show these good people how to dance, Señor Maine?'

" 'Why, certainly, señorita,' said I. 'You get hold of a good dancer and— so will I.'

"La Bella Lola didn't speak to me again until the night of the fancy-dress ball, a few days later.

"Fancy dress on this occasion was to be absolutely improvised. No one was to wear a ready-made costume, if you know what I mean. Ladies were to make their own dresses, and men fake up something or other from what they had got.

"I went as a rajah— silk pajamas, gaudy dressing-gown, red morocco shoes, and a turban made from a small towel covered with a silk handkerchief.

"Just as I was leaving my cabin to go to the dining-saloon— for we were to dine in our fancy dress— I remembered my old friend the mad Abbé, and his 'diamond' brooch. It would be the very thing to pin in the middle of the front of my turban!

"I stuck it in, and viewing myself in the wardrobe mirror, I flattered myself there would not be a better improvised turn-out at the ball. I looked the part, a tall slim young rajah, from the top of my turban to the turned-up tips of my morocco-leather shoes.

"I WAS a success and won the first prize.

"Evidently La Bella Lola agreed with the general verdict, for to my immense surprise, quite early in the evening she came up to me and most prettily apologized for having, in some way, offended me. How she had done it she cauld not imagine, but obviously I was annoyed— or hurt perhaps. She could not tell me how sorry she was, and how troubled she had been, to find that I had turned from friendship— kindness— affection— to this distant coldness.

"Promptly I assured her she was mistaken, and gave her to understand that I really hadn't bothered to be distant or cold, and hadn't noticed any change in our relationship—if there had been any relationship at all... .

"But Lola wasn't having any.

"She was, as the vulgar say, 'all over me.' I couldn't understand it, or her. I was puzzled; and when I am puzzled by a woman, I walk warily. At their best they are puzzling enough, God knows, but at their worst—

"So I smiled sardonically and hummed 'Woman is fickle.'

" 'No; I'm not capricious, or changeable, Señor Maine—Manoel! It is *you*,' she said. 'You were friendly and nice and kind and loving, and now—'

"She pouted and made eyes at me. Lovely creature!

"What was the game? I was suspicious. I scented a trap. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. I had publicly scorned her, suggesting that she, one of the most famous dancers in the world, was not goad enough to tango with me; telling her to find herself a partner and T would find myself a good one. And here she was, making up to me, as the schoolboys say, for all she was worth. I might have been a royal prince, or the handsomest millionaire on board.

"No, I didn't get the idea at all.

THEN suddenly it came to me, and I refrained from bursting into a. roar of laughter. But oh, how consumedly I laughed inside, as with a gentle smile I walked wide-eyed into the trap, and played the fatuous ass. Walked into the trap, and sprang it—on her.

"Laugh! ... How many more laughs was I to get from my dear old mad Abbé's lump of glass? For I had seen Lola's lovely eyes stray to the bottlestopper in my turban!

"Well, well, well! ... Now I'd be the Spanish Prisoner myself, for a change. The Spanish Prisoner of Love, prisoner of La Bella Lola.

"She played her part well—nearly as well as the Abbé had played his. And her patter was good too. She never gave the diamond another glance, but simply made love to me—threw herself at my head—told me how she had done her best to refrain from falling in love with me —how she had tried to steel her heart against such folly as romantic love. But how she had yearned, for how long she had yearned, for a real true amant de ceur, a real lover, a heart's love, surrounded though she was—or because she was—by these purchasers of 'love', these swine and apes that wallowed in the mire at Circe's feet.

"Oh, a very good line of patter... . Quite as good as the Abbé's!

"And mine wasn't bad, if I may say so. I played the sensitive proud youth who had nothing in the Tore but a warm loving heart— well, nothing but one other thing— a romantic heart that he had laid at the feet of the loveliest lady in the world, only to see it trampled and kicked aside by her tiny perfect feet.

"Oh, but no! she insisted. She had never dreamed of such a thing! Never trampled it; never kicked it aside. She had not known; not understood. Why, her own heart had— But there, let misunderstandings be forgotten. Love conquers all. Love. ... love... . And what was my other possession beside the noble heart so warm, so loving, so romantic?

"Oh, nothing to be mentioned in the same breath with a loving heart. Only a jewel, bright and cold and hard.

"A jewel?"

"Yes, Quite a decent diamond.... Value? Oh, it was worth quite a lot of money, of course, but its real value was sentimental, It had belonged to Catherine the Great of Russia, and had been given by her to one of her lovers, a noble Englishman, an officer in her service.... Yes, an ancestor, a Colonel Sir Marmaduke Maine. Been in the family ever since, except for a short time when my grandfather gave it to the Emperor Maximilian of Brazil, to be sold for the payment of his troops and the purchase of munitions of war, just as the nobles and gentlemen of England gave their silver plate to be melted down to raise troops for King Charles the First.

"Yes, yes, very romantic and historical and interesting, and that sort of thing. My father had bought it back again, after the fall and death of the Emperor Maximilian. It cost him a lot— almost ruined him. Twenty thousand pounds.

"Did I have it on board?

"Oh, yes.... Hadn't she noticed it in my turban, at the ball the other night?... And so it went on.

"HOW I used to chuckle! Myself playing with La Bella Lola the game that the dear old mad Abbé had played with me— the only difference being that I was getting away with it, and that Lola swallowed it all as gospel truth.

"Nor was the dénouement long delayed, my little vengeance long postponed.

"I became her *amant de coeur*, heart of her heart, the first and last, the one and only true love of Lola's life. And the bottle-stopper became Lola's property!

"Laugh! How I did laugh! And how I blessed the dear old Abbé and his Piece of cut glass that had bought me the 'love' of La Bella Lola, admittedly the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Yes, in those halcyon days life was all love—and laughter."

"It wasn't then that you felt peevish to the point of suicide," I observed.

"No," he answered, "It was when we reached Madrid and Lola discovered the truth about the Abbé's 'bottle-stopper'.

"It was really a perfect Brazilian diamond. She took twenty-five thousand pounds for it— and an exceedingly prompt farewell of me!"

———————————

18: The Etching

Hugh Walpole

1884-1941

Good Housekeeping Apr 1924

BUT CAN you always tell, do you think? That seems to me by far the most difficult thing. After all, when you are married you hide the truth from the general world, whatever it may be, whether it is too happy to be told— people think you conceited if you are very happy— or whether it is too unhappy to be confessed. A confession of failure? Who doesn't hide it if they can?

But that is not exactly what you mean. You were referring to that mysterious Balance of Power. That old over-quoted French proverb, about there being always one who extends the cheek and the other who kisses it, expresses it exactly. And for the outsider it is just that that is so difficult to decide. Women especially are so deceptive. How many adoring wives would slit the throats of their husbands to-morrow could they be certain that they would escape detection, and how many submissive and apparently devoted husbands would poison their wives to-night had they the courage and the security?

I am not railing against marriage, oh no. When it is happy it is happier than any other state the human being is capable of, but it does offer splendid mediums for safe hypocrisies. And the deepest and subtlest of all, of course, are the hypocrisies that deceive the hypocrites themselves.

Take, for instance, the Gabriels. Mrs. Gabriel was a large, four-square genial red-faced grey-haired woman with bright blue eyes and a hearty laugh. She was one of the sensible women of the world— 'A rock of common sense' one of her many women friends called her. You felt that she had not always been thus, but had trained herself, through many difficult years, to self-control. You might guess that she still had a temper, and a pretty violent one too. But no one ever saw it. She said that losing one's temper was a criminal waste of time.

She was rather like a man in her business-sense, in her scorn of emotional trifles, in her comradeship with men, in her contempt for nerves. And she spoke to her husband just as one man speaks to another. 'Shut up, Billy,' she would say. 'All that rot... you don't know what you're talking about,' and Billy would say with a shy, deprecating smile, 'All right, my dear, I'll shut up.' And he invariably did.

Some friends of the family thought her a great deal too 'bossy' to Billy, but so long as Billy did not mind, was it anyone else's business? And Billy did not mind. He simply adored her.

They had been married for fifteen years or more. They were the same age— something over forty. Billy Gabriel was the manager of the Westminster branch of the 'London and County Bank.' Mrs. Gabriel had a little money of her own and they had, alas, no children, so that they were quite comfortably circumstanced and lived in a nice roomy flat in Harley House, Marylebone.

About only two things had there ever been any words between them— about living in the country and about spending money.

Billy would have adored to live in the country. His ideal happiness was to have a pleasant cottage— not too large and certainly not too small— somewhere not too far from London, but with a view (of hills, woods and a stream), a garden and some dogs (Sealyhams preferred). He was a long thin man with sandy hair, mild brown eyes, and a meditative mouth that often seemed about to break into a smile and then did not.

You would have said that he was a shy and timid man. You would have been nearly right— but not quite.

Their disputes over money occurred because, strangely enough, Mrs. Gabriel was inclined to be mean. I say 'strangely' because it was odd that when she was so sensible about everything else she should be a little stupid about this.

It is stupid, when you have plenty of means, no children, and another half who is in no kind of way extravagant, that you should worry and complain about tram fares and seats in the dress-circle. But Mrs. Gabriel had been brought up on very small rations indeed and there is no one so seriously tempted to meanness as he who has had a penurious childhood and then made, or come into, money.

Nevertheless, all the friends of the Gabriels thought them a very happy and devoted couple. Of course he was by far fonder of her than she of him. Anyone could see that with half an eye. She should have married someone with more personality than Billy, and, good little man as he was, there were times, you could see, when she found it very difficult to be patient with him. She was fond of him, yes, but rather as a mother is fond of a disappointing child who will be gauche and awkward in company.

Billy was shy and clumsy in company, but that was partly because Mrs. Billy made him so. She had begun in the early days of their married life to correct him out of sheer love for him and his funny silly little ways. He was so unpractical (outside his work at the Bank, where he was the last word in method and accuracy), so dreamy and, sometimes, so untidy. And he did love to bore people with long endless wandering stories in which really they could not be expected to take an interest, and so she began by checking him when

she saw that other people were becoming bored, and soon it was quite a habit with her. 'Shut up, Billy.... All that rot.... Who wants to listen. . . ?'

And then he was so mild, she was so certain of his affection, he was so proud of her and submitted to her so readily, that she was encouraged to continue her 'bossing.' She ran him completely. She used to like to wonder what on earth he would ever do were she to go away or be ill. But she never went away (without him) and she was never ill (never gave in to illness. She did not believe in such weak pampering). She was like an elder brother— an elder brother who would wonder sometimes how so stupid and imperceptive a creature could have been born into the family. It was his imperceptions that called out her 'managing ways' most frequently. The things that he did not see, the way that he idled his time, dreaming! How he would sit in the evening in their Harley Street flat just staring in front of him smoking his pipe, that smile so nearly there and never quite! Oh, it would irritate her sometimes, she must confess, when she was so busy, to see him sitting there, and she would speak to him sharply and the dream would suddenly fade from his eyes and he would smile up at her (but not with the smile that was so nearly there and never quite) and hurry around and do some of the things that she told him. Oh! he adored her!— and she— well it was a pity for her that she had not married someone with a more remarkable personality.

ii

BILLY GABRIEL was only half awake and he knew it. It is very difficult to be fully awake when your work (and very interesting work too) takes up so much of your day (nine o'clock in the morning until six at night) and when, during the rest of the time, you have a wife who directs your every movement.

Dimly Billy remembered a time when he was not so directed. Oh! but very dimly! He would not say, though, that he was happier then than he was now. No, contrariwise. He was never tired of thinking to himself when he sat in the comfortable Harley Street sitting-room smoking his pipe of an evening how fortunate he was. How fortunate that he, an ordinary unimportant kind of fellow with no especial talent for anything, no good looks, no clever talk, should have found a woman so splendid as Frances to care for him! That had been his first original impulse— a surprised, almost confused, choking gratitude. He had fallen quite naturally from that gratitude into subservience.

He was not as a rule a subservient man. He was not subservient at the Bank, where the clerks were rather afraid of him, nor was he subservient at the 'Twelve,' a little dining-club that met once a month, dined at Simpson's and

played dominoes afterwards. But he just worshipped Frances, and when she said that he was talking foolishly, why then he was talking foolishly!

But was 'worship' quite the word? He would have liked to think that out. One of the minor troubles of his very untroubled life was that he never quite had time to think things out. One could not of course at the Bank think of anything but the Bank's affairs, and then afterwards, in the evening, one was given scarcely time enough: one was just beginning to think when suddenly that rough good-natured voice would cut across one's thought: 'Now, Billy... sitting there with your mouth open, dreaming again! Here, get up and help me with these books.' And of course she was right. One must not sit there with one's mouth open, a habit easily tumbled into were there not a wife to correct one!

But there it was. There was never time to consider whether 'worship' was the word. Probably it was not. 'Worship' implied some kind of tingling breathless excitement, and certainly he felt no tingling breathless excitement when he thought of Frances. Gratitude and admiration, but excitement, no.

But, then, where were the married pair who, after fifteen years of life together, felt excitement about one another? Comradeship, comfort, compatibility— but excitement?

Nevertheless he was aware that had he had time to think about it he would have been certain that he was only half awake.

iii

ONE NOVEMBER afternoon he had, at the Bank, a very bad headache. So bad was it (he suffered from dyspepsia and had eaten unwisely the evening before) that he made a sudden and startling resolution. He would leave the Bank an hour earlier than usual and take a walk. He had not done such a thing for years and he felt quite shy (almost as though he were speaking to Frances) when he said to old Croffett:

'Croffett, I've got a head on this afternoon. I'll chuck it for to-day.'

'Yes, sir?' said Croffett, putting his spectacles up his nose in a mild comfortable way that he had. No one seemed to think it in any way peculiar and, as he stepped out into the street, he wondered why he had not done it before.

When he had walked a little way his headache was very much better. He felt an almost school-boyish sense of freedom and strode along humming to himself. He walked up Kingsway, turned to the left and, after a little while, was outside Mudie's Library.

He stopped and looked in at the windows. He liked Mudie's, the books in those windows always looked cleaner and cheaper than the books in any other window. That was one of his ambitions— to have a library. He would never have one because Frances thought that buying books was an extravagance when you could subscribe to a Lending Library. But he liked to imagine the books that he would have and to stare in at the window and see how much he could buy for five pounds.

He moved up the street and soon was looking at the grey pile of the British Museum. He liked the British Museum. He had a national pride in it. One day, when he had time, he would spend a whole day there and see the Egyptian mummies and the Elgin Marbles. Meanwhile he liked to look at it and admire its strength and security.

To-day, turning aside, he saw suddenly a shop that he had never noticed before. It was a little shop with prints and drawings in the window, and there was something in the way that they were arranged that drew his attention. He went up and looked more closely and then discovered that to the right of the door there was a box and over the box was a notice: 'No print in this box more than Five Shillings.'

Liking the comfortable shape of the shop, the way that the light from a neighbouring lamp-post fell on a splendid chalk drawing of a gentleman in a ruff, the air of comfort and ease that the brightly flaming interior offered him, he stood idly turning over the prints in the box. Another of his ambitions— in addition to the cottage, the Sealyhams and the library— was one day to have 'pictures.' Pictures in the vague, so vague and so impossible that he never breathed this particular ambition to anybody and for himself had scarcely formulated it. He only knew that they were to be real original pictures. Pictures touched, themselves, by the hand of the original artist. None of your copies, no, not even those 'Medici' things that looked good enough until you'd had them a day or two, and then were lifeless and dull. No.... Suddenly his hand stopped. His heart thumped in his breast.

He was looking at a little landscape, a simple thing enough, a hill, a clump of trees, a cow and a horseman. But how beautiful! How quiet and simple and true! And the real thing. Not a copy, although it was not a drawing. In the left-hand corner there was scribbled a name 'Everdingin.'

He went into the shop. A stout rubicund man came to him. He held up his prize.

'That etching? Five shillings. A nice Everdingin that. Cheap at the money.'

Billy Gabriel paid his five shillings, his purchase was wrapped in paper, he left the shop. His heart was still beating. Why was he so strangely stirred? An Etching, was it? Now what exactly was an Etching? Was it a print? He thought

etchings were coloured.... Driven still by a mysterious sense of drama he stopped in a bookshop and bought a little book entitled *Prints and Etchings: All about them*.

Then he went home.

iv

HE SAID nothing to Frances about all this. The china clock with the red flowers struck nine and suddenly he murmured something and left the room. Frances was busy at the rickety but smart bright red-wood writing-table. She simply nodded without speaking. Then he crept across the passage as though he were afraid of something. He did not know that he was creeping. He opened the door of their bedroom and poked his head inside as though he were sure that he would find someone in there waiting for him. Of course there was nothing but darkness. He switched on the light and suddenly there were the two beds side by side with the pink rose coverlets, there the table with the swinging glass and Frances' ivory-topped hair-brushes, there the tall wardrobe that always tippled forward a little as though it were listening, and there his case with his shaving things, the shabby shy humble friend.

He was strangely conscious that he was seeing everything for the first time. Nothing before had ever looked as it was looking now. Very odd. He was as deeply excited as though he had come there to meet some woman. He went to the table with the shabby green cloth near the window and picked up the two parcels. He unfolded the paper from the etching with the greatest care. Revealed, he placed it against a hideous purple flower-vase. It stood there, softly, the hill, the trees, the cow, the horseman. Beautiful. So still, so quiet. Breathing the evening air. He could hear the stream running, could feel the colours withdrawing from the sky, leaving it chilly grey and pure. Soon dark would come and the stars sparkle above the trees and perhaps the moon would shyly appear.

He was lost in contemplation and did not hear the door open. Suddenly Frances' voice broke, scattering the stars, ruffling the stream.

'Why, Billy, what on earth are you doing in here? You ridiculous creature! I want you to come and find out those addresses for me. Why, what have you got there?'

She picked it up. It waved rather helplessly in the air as she looked at it from every corner.

'What an old mess! Wherever did you get it from? What a shabby old thing! Who gave it to you?'

'No one gave it to me. I bought it.'

'You bought it? How much did you give for it?' Her voice was suddenly sharp as she put the etching down on the bed.

'Five shillings.'

'Five shillings? For that! Why, it isn't worth twopence!'

He was surprised at his own anger. He was angry as he had never been in all his married life.

'Isn't it? That's all you know about it.'

'Of course it isn't. Just like you to go dreaming along. I suppose you picked it out of some tuppenny box. As though we had money to throw away!'

And then suddenly she was indulgent. Her broad red-brown face wrinkled into smiles. 'You silly old dear! What a baby you are! Why, I believe you're cross.'

'No, I'm not.' He looked sheepish.

'Yes, you are. Now confess. I can see it.'

She went up to him and kissed him as a mother kisses a favourite child when the child after some little fault is forgiven. Many a time before had just this occurred and he had always been happy at the little reconciliation, delighted at her generosity of soul. But to-night he was not delighted. He was still angry. She was treating him like a child. Scolding him for spending five shillings! After all, it was his money.

'It's a pretty good thing,' he murmured, picking up the etching carefully and placing it once more against the purple vase, 'if I can't spend five shillings without being hauled over the coals.'

So astonished was she that she could only stare. Then she said:

'Why, Billy, I believe you really are angry.'

'Yes, I am,' he answered suddenly turning round and looking at her. 'That's a beautiful thing. A beautiful thing. What do you know about prints? Nothing at all. You just show your ignorance, that's all.'

'And what do you know about prints either, I should like to know?' she cried.

'I know more than you do anyhow,' he answered, 'if you say that's only worth tuppence.'

It became a vulgar wrangle. They were both ashamed and suddenly ceased. They went into the sitting-room and sat silently. When they went to bed they made it up. But she lay awake, wondering what had happened to him, and he lay awake seeing the thing through the darkness— the trees, the hill, the horseman. It was as though he were recomforting it.

HE KNEW in the morning that he was different and would never again be the same man as last night. It was as though he had fallen quite suddenly in love with a woman. But he did not analyse it. He only determined that he would keep it all secret from Frances.

Frances was instantly reassured. For so many years had she been able to manage him that it was not likely that there should be any change now. He was the same old Billy. He would be always the same. And she loved him. And despised him too.

Nevertheless, without knowing it, she did, through the next months, tighten the rein. Her dominance of him had been to her, increasingly, during all these years a luxurious pleasure. Everyone fell in with it so completely. All her friends and all his adopted something of the same attitude to him— 'Poor dear old Billy.' Once, a number of years ago, a woman whom she knew but slightly had said to her, 'You know you bully that husband of yours— and you'll be sorry one day.' Bully him! When she loved him as she did! She laughed at the woman and was careful not to see her again.

Billy, as though he recognised how unpleasant their little squabble had been, was now very sweet and submissive. He gave in to her about everything. When her friends laughed at him he laughed too. Oh, indeed, yes!

Meanwhile he pursued secretly his new passion. His life was changed. He was happy as he had never been before. He bought six etchings— a Palmer, a Daubigny, a Legros, a Hollar, a Strang, and an Appian. None of them very expensive. The Strang cost the most— five pounds. But then he had never spent anything on himself. Why should he not? There was plenty in the Bank. Nevertheless he hid the six etchings and the Everdingin with them. He hid them in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe under his shirts. A poor place, but he had none better. He would go in, for a quarter of an hour, when Frances was engaged elsewhere, and look at them. He also bought five or six books, and read them with great attention. He subscribed to the Print Collector's Quarterly and hid also those numbers.

In the back of Frances' mind the little dispute remained. She would chaff him now, quite often, about 'being an artist.' She told other people, the Burns and the Whimbleys, 'Billy's taken up art . . .' and they all laughed.

In her heart she was not quite comfortable.

The trouble of a passion is that it does not stay where it should. It mounts and mounts, especially when it is starved. Had Billy been a millionaire and able to wander into Colnaghi's and request them to find for him a perfect Whistler 'Venetian set' and all the green-paper Meryons in Europe his passion might have flagged— which is one reason perhaps why millionaires are not, as a rule,

happy people. But he held himself in for a long while, had only his seven, and so his passion fed on starvation.

But it was more than that. Here was something for which all his life he had been waiting as the one man waits for the one woman. He had not known it, but it was so. The love of these things, their personality, the intimacy that he had with them, put him in touch with so much other beauty. He paid secret visits to the National Gallery, to the Tate, to the Wallace Collection. All these years had he been in London and how seldom had he been into these places!

He longed for the country— his cottage, his garden view, his rising hill and shining stream— so passionately that once at night when he was lying in bed and the room was dark he stared in front of him and it all suddenly arose there in its quiet and beauty, as though he had it in his hand.

The six or seven books that he had bought had in them many pictures, and soon he felt that some of these lovely things were really his— 'The Spinning Woman' of Ostade with the bird-cage and the sleeping pig, the Meryon 'Morgue' with its tier upon tier of watching windows, Corot's lovely 'Souvenir d'Italie' with its shimmer of light and colour, Whistler's 'Rotherhithe' so strong and so delicate, best of all perhaps Van Dyck's 'Van Noort,' the living, questing, animal spiritual comrade; these and many, many another.

Then as stage followed upon stage of experience he spent an hour or two every Saturday afternoon in the British Museum Print Room. The luxury, the heavenly luxury of these hours when the stillness settled all about you and you had, actually in your possession, the 'Three Trees' and the 'Notre Dame L'Abside' and the Whistler 'Little Mast.' When he must go he stood up and for a moment had to pull himself together before he moved, shifting from the one world into the other. What drunken happiness! . . .

Frances for a time noticed nothing. She was so sure of him, of his absolute fidelity of body, soul and spirit, that it must be something very serious that could disturb her. Then she wondered. The Saturday afternoons troubled her. He was always late for tea now, and gave her such absurd explanations, that he had missed a bus, been detained by an old friend and so on. Then one night, lying awake, she heard him talk in his sleep: 'Oh, you beauty! You beauty!' he cried.

In the morning she laughed at her fear, but the fear grew.

Then, on a day, she discovered in his drawer underneath the shirts the etchings, now ten in number. She drew them out, one after another, laid them upon the bed, looked at them curiously.

He had a secret then. Whatever else might be true or false, this was certain— he was keeping something from her; he had been keeping something

from her for many months. And if he was keeping one secret, why not another?

About the things themselves she had no right to be angry, so unimportant were they, but they gave her the opportunity to exercise her loving tyranny. She loved him so much— and by how much more since these last days when she had begun to suspect him— that to see him bend to her, submit, to feel his complete subjection and her security of him was an unceasing joy. The more unhappy he was the more she loved him, knowing that soon she would forgive him and load him up with her affection. She saw all the course of the affair stretch like a shining path before her.

So when he came home she, icily calm, took him into the bedroom. In her heart she was smiling. She showed him the etchings laid out upon the bed.

A strange scene followed. He was unlike he had ever been. He was indifferent. He did not care that she should be angry. About what was she making all this fuss? It was true that he had bought these things and hidden them from her. He would have liked to hang them on the walls, but what was he to do? She had made such a silly fuss about that first one that he had shown her that it was not likely that he would run the risk of such a scene again.

He did not look at her while he was speaking, but moved his hands restlessly as though he were waiting to protect the etchings against attack.

His indifference aroused her to a passion. She scolded and rated him, seeking always to see rise in him tenderness for her and love and gratitude. The moment that she saw those things her rage would die. She looked in his eyes, expecting. But they did not come. He hid his head and muttered that the money was his own. Was he never to have any freedom? He was not a child. They had money in the Bank, plenty of it.

She flung away in a tempest of passion.

Later— but on this occasion not until a day had passed— they were reconciled. They kissed, tears filled her eyes, and as her hands touched his well-loved body and her cheek rubbed against his she adored him— as mother, as wife, as comrade. Nevertheless, five minutes later, she spoke to him sharply just to reassure herself that he was hers as he had always been. He answered her mildly enough, but she knew that he was not hers as he had always been. A new period in their married life had begun.

Now she was always trying to bring him back 'to heel,' and he was for ever escaping her. It was the etchings that were responsible. How she hated them!

She thought of them lying there, in the drawer, under his shirts. She wanted to say to him— she knew that it was the wisest way— 'Bring them out, Billy, dear, let's hang them on the walls. Tell me about them. I will share this new interest with you.'

But she could not do this, partly because he had found this new excitement without her and therefore she was jealous of it, partly because she was afraid that if she encouraged him he would spend much money upon them, partly because she felt herself no interest or pleasure in them. If she liked pictures at all she liked pictures with colour. Something gay. These were drab and dull.

And then she had her pride. She must lead. Billy might rule in his Bank, but outside that he must follow her. So she said nothing and he said nothing, and she knew increasingly with every day that she was being deceived, and he knew that she knew.

More and more in public did she laugh at Billy's 'love of art'— and more and more did the Burns and Whimbleys laugh. Once she forced Billy to show his 'silly etchings' to Mr. and Mrs. Whimbley, and how they all laughed! In another place and under another influence they might have admired, knowing nothing about the things anyway, but they always followed Frances Gabriel's lead. She was such a sensible woman. They followed her lead now. They laughed and laughed again. Billy smiled but said very little. Then he went and put them carefully away in the drawer.

And Frances, when the Whimbleys were gone, was ashamed and miserable and angry. Her hatred of the etchings was now a flame.

vi

NOW SHE did not know herself. It was always nag, nag, nag. She must be at him for ever about every little thing— about his clothes, his punctuality, his unpunctuality, the things that he wanted to do, the way that he ate, the way that he did not eat— everything. And always she hated herself for doing it, wondered subconsciously at herself, saying to herself: 'The moment that he looks at me with that old look of love and eagerness and wanting to be forgiven... That moment, I must have that moment...' But he did not want to be forgiven. He submitted, he allowed her to lash him with her tongue, then to excuse him for faults that had never been committed, to make it up with him, to embrace him, then to lash him again.... But he did not ask to be forgiven.

Then suddenly one spring evening in a window in a Bond Street Art shop he saw Whistler's 'Balcony.' A beautiful impression— he had by this time real knowledge— and cheap— One Hundred and Sixty Pounds.

No, but the price did not matter. It was the thing itself. He had seen it before in Exhibitions, in the Leicester Galleries, at the British Museum, but this one was suddenly his— his absolutely as it looked at him out of the window, alive, begging to be taken by him, lovely beyond analysis with its strong arches,

its deep water, its dark velvet piled doorway, the gorgeous pageantry of the Balcony.

One Hundred and Sixty Pounds. They could easily afford it. Only last week when discussing the possible purchase of a car he had said, 'Well, that means two hundred pounds more,' and Frances said, 'Two hundred? What's that? We've got plenty in the Bank.'

They had. He had done very well since the war with his investments and he had bought nothing— nothing really— for himself for years.

He went in and purchased it. He returned home with it under his arm as though Paradise were shining on every side of him.

In his happiness he thought to himself: 'I'll show it to Frances right away and insist that we frame it and put it up. If we do, it will make everything else look awful. Never mind, it's time we changed the furniture a bit. I'll have it out with Frances. She's bound to see how lovely this is. And so we'll make it up. It has been terrible these last months, all the quarrelling...'

He went home singing. He went straight into the sitting-room, where she was writing letters at the bright red-wood table.

He cried out in his happiest voice: 'Here, Frances— see what I've got! Something you'll like!'

She turned, still sitting at the table. She had been missing him dreadfully all day, determining that when he came in she would be loving and kind to him and all the nightmare of the last months should be over. And now, to her own amazement, she said in a hard hostile voice: 'Well, what is it?'

She could see his face fall. Reluctantly now he undid the parcel. He held it up, dark and rich in its gleaming stiff mat. 'Look,' he cried.

It was an etching. She could have struck him in the face. It was as though he were deliberately taunting her.

'Another of those beastly things?' she said furiously.

His anger rose at once.

'If you can't see that that's beautiful it's just because you have no taste— '

She got up. 'How much did you give for it?' she asked, her heart thumping so terribly with love and anger that she could scarcely speak.

'A hundred and sixty pounds,' he answered, challenging.

'A hundred and sixty pounds?'

'Yes. And it's worth two hundred at least.'

'A hundred and sixty— !'

'All right,' he answered roughly, 'if you don't like it you can lump it.'

He left it lying on the table while he went out, brushing past her, to go into the bedroom to wash his hands.

He touched her as he passed and that touch inflamed her from head to foot. With one movement she was at the table, then had the Whistler in her hands, then had torn it, again and again and again, into a hundred pieces. As soon as it was done and the pieces had fluttered to the floor she felt sick, sick with a ghastly trembling anxiety. What had she done and why had she done it? What did she care about the etching or any of the etchings? What did they matter to her? It was Billy who mattered— Billy, whom she loved with every atom of her body, soul and spirit.

She could not move. She stood there, her knees trembling.

He came in. He walked to the table. In the first instant he did not realise. 'What— — !' he cried. 'What— — !' Then he was on his knees, fingering the fragments. Then on his feet he faced her with hatred in his eyes. He was going to strike her, then he stepped right back to the window.

'You're mad,' he said, 'mad. That's what you are. I've known it for months. You've killed that. It never did you any harm. It's murder.... By God, I'll not be with you in the house another five minutes. You're a murderess, that's what you are!'

She broke out then, crying, pleading, supplicating. He did not listen to her. He went out. She heard the bedroom door close. She waited. A kind of paralysis held her. She could neither move nor speak. Ten minutes later she heard the bedroom door open and the hall door close.

Then, crying out, she ran, opened the door, looked at the lift, the grey descending stairs. The place was quiet as a well.

vii

HE NEVER came back. He did not want to. He simply wondered how it was that he had stood her so long and why it was that he had never discovered that he did not really love her. He took a charming cottage in the country, made a beautiful collection of etchings, grew fat, bullied his servants in an amiable kind of way and was immensely happy.

She wrote again and again imploring him to return. Then she tried to see him. She never did. He gave her a very generous allowance.

She made the best of her life but missed him always. She longed for him sometimes so that it was like appendicitis or even a cancer. She will love him to the day of her death.

And why did he leave her? She can't think. She can't understand it at all. Some silly little quarrel about a drawing or a print.

All about nothing.

End