PAST MASTERS 211

Harold Mercer
C. S. Montanye
Abraham Merritt
F. Scott Fitzgerald
Edward Dyson
Beatrice Grimshaw
Arthur Machen
W. S. Gilbert

and more

PAST MASTERS 211

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

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Contents

1: The Understudy / *Ward Edson* 3
2: An Exchange of Courtesies / *Robert Grant* 8
3: If I Could Live Again / *Beatrice Grimshaw* 23
4: Alleys of Darkness / *Robert E. Howard* 28
5: The Honourable Tony / *Frances Noyes Hart* 40
6: Blackout / *Ethel Lina White* 70
7: The Fakir of the Forest / *Alice Perrin* 82
8: Entrance and Exit / *Algernon Blackwood* 94
9: The Magic Mule / *Albert Dorrington* 98
10: "O Russet Witch!" / *F. Scott Fitzgerald* 108
11: New York Tale / *Mark Hellinger* 133
12: Angela / *W. S. Gilbert* 136
13: The Fool-Killer / *O. Henry* 140
14: How Satan Cheated Sarah Muldowney / *Hermione Templeton Kavanagh* 146
15: The Exalted Omega / *Arthur Machen* 158
16: Murder at Moberley Flats / *Harold Mercer* 175
17: Three Lines of Old French / *Abraham Merritt* 180
18: Crepe For Suzette / *C. S. Montanye* 197

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1: The Understudy

Ward Edson

Edward Dyson, 1865-1931

Punch (Melbourne) 20 Nov 1902

SHE WAS a pretty girl, even her enemies admitted that. She had quite an attractive figure. A testimony to that effect had been provided by the committee of elderly gentlemen of the Society for the Suppression of Interest on Theatres, who had seen her as one of the pink boys in the Christmas pantomime. The committee in its report described Daisy as a "lure."

Daisy Capulet had a charming, rich voice. She danced well; she was intelligent, had a sense of humour quite remarkable in a member of a comedy company, and scores of people had declared their unalterable conviction that she was bound to get on.

Aleck Short was among the many who believed Daisy was destined to be a glittering star in the theatrical firmament. Already she was the bright particular star of his life. His love for her was a dog-like devotion, the kind of love with which popular sentimentalists in fiction always endow their large, strong, quiet Scotch heroes. Aleck was neither large, strong nor Scotch, but he was very dog-like in his attitude towards Daisy Capulet. He was always at heel, always eager to fetch and carry, and always in the habit of humbly admitting his own unworthiness.

"It's like my beastly cheek to bother you at all, Daisy," he was in the habit of saying, "but I'm awfully fond of you, and I can't help it. I'm just nobody in particular, and you're so beautiful and clever."

Short had an idea that all the world was amazed at the loveliness and the amazing gifts of Miss Daisy Capulet, and it seemed to him that the fact of the management not having given her leading parts was absolute proof of the utter incompetence, if not the complete mental derangement, of said management.

The management was not wholly blind to Daisy's attractiveness and her ability, but it was a wily management, and did not excite itself in giving the young lady what it vulgarly termed swelled head.

Daisy admired Short. He was a good-looking fellow, he dressed nicely, and his hand was open and free. When they walked together people looked after them, and the popular opinion was that they were a well-arranged couple. Miss Capulet noticed this, and it pleased her vanity, of which weakness she had a fair amount. Nobody thought any the less of her on this account, for it is only in highly moral story books for the young that a due proportion of vanity is regarded as something shameful in a character.

"I suppose I'll marry Aleck some day," she said, "but there's lots of time. Meanwhile I want to make my way in the profession. I want to be famous, if only for a little while. And I shall be!"

Daisy's eye would flash, and she would stamp her foot at this as if encountering unmannerly opposition.

"I tell you I shall be! I only want a chance. Just a little chance! If that wretch Crammer would only lift me out of the ranks and give me a part, just a tiny little part, anything that will give me an opening for doing something, I'd be satisfied, but he won't, the beast— he's got me set."

"Wait, dear," Aleck once replied, in his troubled. way, "it's bound to come in time. They're not so blind, but—"

"I say they are blind— all blind, stupid, dunderheaded idiots. Why else would they keep that May woman chirruping her little songs and limping her little dances, and simpering her silly lines, while I come on in the chorus and count for no more than one of the lanterns?"

Aleck took her woes very much to heart. Daisy was evidently fretting over the delay of her opportunity, and they never met without a reiteration of the old grievance. His was not a keen mind, but he schemed heavily in the hope of helping her up. At length he hit upon an old idea. He wrote anonymous letters to the management, praising Daisy, and bribed certain mall Pressmen on small papers to print appreciative references to her voice and figure.

Short said nothing of his bright idea to Daisy, but hastened to put it into execution. He wrote letters, purporting to be from various persons in various suburbs, congratulating the management of the company on the possession of such a jewel as Miss Daisy Capulet, and continued doing so for some time.

One afternoon, Daisy, looking very flushed and very angry, entered his office, and rudely slammed a rough bundle of letters down on the table before him.

"There!" she cried. "Your letters. A pretty mess you've got me into."

"Why, Good Heavens, Daisy! How— why— what—"

"It's no good your denying it. They are your letters !"

"But, my dear—"

"Crammer called me into his office this morning, handed me those, letters, and said : 'Return them to your friend, my dear. Tell him we can run this little business on our own, without the advice of any chuckled-headed tin idiot who's suffering from a bad mash.' Yes, that's what he said— 'chuckle-headed tin idiot.' And so you are."

"I— I did it for the best, Daisy."

"For the best! And now I'll never get a look in, if I live till I'm eighty."

Daisy dropped into the nearest chair, and wept with the heartiness of a girl who can trust her complexion, and Aleck sat before her, gaping, stammering, apologising, and having the worst time of his life.

"But I thought it would help you. I did, upon my word. And it must have" helped you a little, or they wouldn't have made you Jane May's understudy."

"A nice fat lot of good that will do me," snapped Daisy, through her tears. "May has got a constitution like a carthorse. Once give an actress an understudy, and she becomes imperishable— you couldn't kill her with a hundred ton gun. Making me May's understudy will just finish me. I'll die of heart-sickness, induced by hope deferred."

Short's contrition was painful to behold, and now commenced a long time of waiting.

Through two local seasons and two seasons abroad Daisy remained in the ranks, coming on with the flock, undistinguished, excepting for her natural charms, and watching Miss Jane May all through the long weeks for some sign of sickness or breaking up. But May fattened and grew more shamelessly healthy and selfishly strong every day, while poor Daisy was actually losing flesh from sheer exasperation, and carrying about with her a worn and worried look.

Aleck was struck to the heart when he saw Daisy on her return from the provincial tour. She looked quite haggard and old, though still only in her teens.

"It's that May woman," moaned Daisy, " she's positively killing me. She goes on like a machine. I've understudied every part she's done, and I've watched and waited like a condemned prisoner expecting a reprieve in the hope that she'd fall ill for a day— just for one day, but she won't— the wretch, she won't! I believe she knows I'm eating my heart out, and she remains well to spite me."

"There, dear, why bother about it? Why worry?" pleaded Aleck.

"How can I help worrying? My only hope lies in something happening to that woman— if she'd break a leg, if she'd get drunk! She adds teetotalism to her other vices. Nothing will ever happen to her, and I see myself a grey, broken old woman, hardly able to walk, tottering on in the chorus with creaking joints, still waiting for May to give out. And she won't. She's indestructible!"

The young man tried his best to comfort her, pointing out all the possibilities.

"See, dear," he said, "there are so many chances of her being injured in town. She may get run down by a cab, or a bicycle, or a cab or tram, or a chimney may fall on her. You never know your luck in these large cities."

"No, you don't. But if a chimney falls on anybody it will be me!"

But in spite of it all Daisy continued to hope, and to watch and wait, and continued to be mortified by May's unreasonable health and preposterous strength, and poor Short found but little comfort in her society, although he loved her still.

He continued to waste his time pondering over the case, devising wild schemes for helping Daisy. In his imagination he headed bands of desperadoes that carried May off and imprisoned her for a year in a cave in the bush, commanded a pirate lugger that transported her to a South Sea island, where she was eaten by an appreciative tribe, and as a sort of Sherlock Holmes, proved her guilty of various crimes, for which she suffered long terms of imprisonment. In her absence, of course, Daisy rose to great glory, and became the most entrancing light opera artiste of this or any age.

"I'd do anything to help you, dear— anything!" he said.

"Then rid me of this woman," replied Daisy, in her most theatrical tones.

Shortly after this a marine picnic for the opera company was organised, and Aleck received an invitation.

The day was spent upon the sea in a frisky excursion steamer, and a most delightful day it was to all but Daisy and Aleck, who reflected his sweetheart's depression, and couldn't quite rid his mind of his wild schemes for helping her to the opening she so ardently longed for.

Miss Jane May was of the party, and one of the happiest of a particularly cheerful crew. The sun was setting, and the steamer was heading for home, when suddenly Aleck came upon Miss May in an exposed and very dangerous position, the sea wind blowing through her loose hair.

Like a flash an abominable idea struck into his soul. The least touch would send her into the sea. Of course she would be picked up, no harm would be done, but she might not be able to appear that, night. It might so easily be an accident.

Short made a little run forward, his foot slipped on the wet deck, and he collided heavily with the young woman. There was a shrill scream, and May disappeared over the side.

Aleck had made no plan, but, starting up, he tore off his coat and plunged into the sea after the struggling woman. He could swim like a fish, and soon found the actress. To his great astonishment she lay composedly in the water, and when he came near she said quietly: "You look after yourself, young fellow; I'm all right. I can just live and eat in the water. I could dress my back hair here if I only had a mirror."

For a second time Aleck's wits worked quickly. This would never do. He insisted upon rescuing Miss May. There was a struggle. He did rescue her, and everybody else said it was a most gallant rescue, but for ever after the actress insisted that he was a great blundering ass, who had nearly drowned her. Anyhow, when the boat reached them Miss May was half full of sea water, and quite unconscious.

Miss Daisy Capulet played Miss Jane May's part in *The Slippery Slavey* that night, and played it so well that the part was for the first time a tremendous

success, and the audiences saw nobody but Daisy Capulet as Saucy Sue for many a night.

Daisy became a person of great consequence and great salary, and married a popular tenor.

As for poor Aleck, well, of course, a great actress couldn't marry a no-account man like Short. Anyhow, he ought to have been satisfied if he wasn't—didn't he get the Royal Humane Society's medal for saving life at sea?

2: An Exchange of Courtesies

Robert Grant

1852-1940

The Saturday Evening Post 26 Nov 1904

IN THE OPINION of many persons competent to judge, "The Beaches" was suffering from an invasion of wealth. Unquestionably it had been fashionable for a generation; but the people who had established summer homes there were inhabitants of the large neighboring city which they forsook during five months in the year to enjoy the ocean breezes and sylvan scenery, for The Beaches afforded both. Well-to-do New England families of refinement and taste, they enjoyed in comfort, without ostentation, their picturesque surroundings. Their cottages were simple; but each had its charming outlook to sea and a sufficient number of more or less wooded acres to command privacy and breathing space. In the early days the land had sold for a song, but it had risen steadily with the times, as more and more people coveted a foothold. The last ten years had introduced many changes; the older houses had been pulled down and replaced by lordly structures with all the modern conveniences, including spacious stables and farm buildings. Two clubs had been organized along the six miles of coast to provide golf and tennis, afternoon teas and bridge whist for the entertainment of the colony. The scale of living had become more elaborate, and there had been many newcomers-people of large means who offered for the finest sites sums which the owners could not afford to refuse. The prices paid in several instances represented ten times the original outlay. All the desirable locations were held by proprietors fully aware of their value, and those bent on purchase must pay what was asked or go without.

Then had occurred the invasion referred to-the coming to The Beaches of the foreign contingent, so called: people of fabulous means, multi-millionaires who were captains in one or another form of industry and who sought this resort as a Mecca for the social uplifting of their families and protection against summer heat. At their advent prices made another jump-one which took the breath away.

Several of the most conservative owners parted with their estates after naming a figure which they supposed beyond the danger point, and half a dozen second-rate situations, affording but a paltry glimpse of the ocean, were snapped up in eager competition by wealthy capitalists from Chicago, Pittsburg, and St. Louis who had set their hearts on securing the best there was remaining.

Among the late comers was Daniel Anderson, known as the furniture king in the jargon of trade, many times a millionaire, and comparatively a person of leisure through the sale of his large plants to a trust. He hired for the season, by long-distance telephone, at an amazing rental, one of the more desirable places

which was to let on account of the purpose of its owners to spend the summer abroad. It was one of the newer houses, large and commodious; yet its facilities were severely taxed by the Anderson establishment, which fairly bristled with complexity. Horses by the score, vehicles manifold, a steam yacht, and three automobiles were the more striking symbols of a manifest design to curry favor by force of outdoing the neighborhood.

The family consisted of Mrs. Anderson, who was nominally an invalid, and a son and daughter of marriageable age. If it be stated that they were chips of the old block, meaning their father, it must not be understood that he had reached the moribund stage. On the contrary, he was still in the prime of his energy, and, with the exception of the housekeeping details, set in motion and directed the machinery of the establishment.

It had been his idea to come to The Beaches; and having found a foothold there he was determined to make the most of the opportunity not only for his children but himself. With his private secretary and typewriter at his elbow he matured his scheme of carrying everything before him socially as he had done in business. The passport to success in this new direction he assumed to be lavish expenditure. It was a favorite maxim of his-trite yet shrewdly entertained-that money will buy anything, and every man has his price. So he began by subscribing to everything, when asked, twice as much as any one else, and seeming to regard it as a privilege. Whoever along The Beaches was interested in charity had merely to present a subscription list to Mr.

Anderson to obtain a liberal donation. The equivalent was acquaintance. The man or woman who asked him for money could not very well neglect to bow the next time they met, and so by the end of the first summer he was on speaking terms with most of the men and many of the women. Owing to his generosity, the fund for the building of a new Episcopal church was completed, although he belonged to a different denomination. He gave a drinking fountain for horses and dogs, and when the selectmen begrudged to the summer residents the cost of rebuilding two miles of road, Daniel Anderson defrayed the expense from his own pocket. An ardent devotee of golf, and daily on the links, he presented toward the end of the season superb trophies for the competition of both men and women, with the promise of others in succeeding years. In short, he gave the society whose favor he coveted to understand that it had merely "to press the button" and he would do the rest.

Mr. Andersen's nearest neighbors were the Misses Ripley-Miss Rebecca and Miss Caroline, or Carry, as she was invariably called. They were among the oldest summer residents, for their father had been among the first to recognize the attractions of The Beaches, and their childhood had been passed there. Now they were middle-aged women and their father was dead; but they continued to occupy season after season their cottage, the location of which was one of the

most picturesque on the whole shore. The estate commanded a wide ocean view and included some charming woods on one side and a small, sandy, curving beach on the other. The only view of the water which the Andersons possessed was at an angle across this beach. The house they occupied, though twice the size of the Ripley cottage, was virtually in the rear of the Ripley domain, which lay tantalizingly between them and a free sweep of the landscape.

One morning, early in October of the year of Mr. Anderson's advent to The Beaches, the Ripley sisters, who were sitting on the piazza enjoying the mellow haze of the autumn sunshine, saw, with some surprise, Mr. David Walker, the real-estate broker, approaching across the lawn-surprise because it was late in the year for holidays, and Mr. Walker invariably went to town by the half-past eight train. Yet a visit from one of their neighbors was always agreeable to them, and the one in question lived not more than a quarter of a mile away and sometimes did drop in at afternoon tea-time. Certain women might have attempted an apology for their appearance, but Miss Rebecca seemed rather to glory in the shears which dangled down from her apron-strings as she rose to greet her visitor; they told so unmistakably that she had been enjoying herself trimming vines. Miss Carry-who was still kittenish in spite of her forty years-as she gave one of her hands to Mr. Walker held out with the other a basket of seckel pears she had been gathering, and said:

"Have one-do."

Mr. Walker complied, and, having completed the preliminary commonplaces, said, as he hurled the core with an energetic sweep of his arm into the ocean at the base of the little bluff on which the cottage stood:

"There is no place on the shore which quite compares with this."

"We agree with you," said Miss Rebecca with dogged urbanity. "Is any one of a different opinion?"

"On the contrary, I have come to make you an offer for it. It isn't usual for real-estate men to crack up the properties they wish to purchase, but I am not afraid of doing so in this case." He spoke buoyantly, as though he felt confident that he was in a position to carry his point.

"An offer?" said Miss Rebecca. "For our place? You know that we have no wish to sell. We have been invited several times to part with it, and declined. It was you yourself who brought the last invitation. We are still in the same frame of mind, aren't we, Carry?"

"Yes, indeed. Where should we get another which we like so well?"

"My principal invites you to name your own figure."

"That is very good of him, I'm sure. Who is he, by the way?"

"I don't mind telling you; it's your neighbor, Daniel Anderson." David Walker smiled significantly. "He is ready to pay whatever you choose to ask."

"Our horses are afraid of his automobiles, and his liveried grooms have turned the head of one of our maids. Our little place is not in the market, thank you, Mr. Walker."

The broker's beaming countenance showed no sign of discouragement. He rearranged the gay blue flower which had almost detached itself from the lapel of his coat, then said laconically:

"I am authorized by Mr. Anderson to offer you $500,000 for your property."

"What?" exclaimed Miss Rebecca.

"Half a million dollars for six acres," he added.

"The man must be crazy." Miss Rebecca stepped to the honeysuckle vine with a detached air and snipped off a straggling tendril with her shears. "That is a large sum of money," she added.

David Walker enjoyed the effect of his announcement; it was clear that he had produced an impression.

"Money is no object to him. I told him that you did not wish to sell, and he said that he would make it worth your while."

"Half a million dollars! We should be nearly rich," let fall Miss Carry, upon whom the full import of the offer was breaking.

"Yes; and think what good you two ladies could do with all that money-practical good," continued the broker, pressing his opportunity and availing himself of his knowledge of their aspirations. "You could buy elsewhere and have enough left over to endow a professorship at Bryn Mawr, Miss Rebecca; and you, Miss Carry, would be able to revel in charitable donations."

Those who knew the Ripley sisters well were aware that plain speaking never vexed them. Beating about the bush from artificiality or ignoring a plain issue was the sort of thing they resented.

Consequently, the directness of David Walker's sally did not appear to them a liberty, but merely a legitimate summing up of the situation.

Miss Rebecca was the spokesman as usual, though her choice was always governed by what she conceived to be the welfare of her sister, whom she still looked on as almost a very young person. Sitting upright and clasping her elbows, as she was apt to do in moments of stress, she replied:

"Money is money, Mr. Walker, and half a million dollars is not to be discarded lightly. We should be able, as you suggest, to do some good with so much wealth. But, on the other hand, we don't need it, and we have no one dependent on us for support. My brother is doing well and is likely to leave his only child all that is good for her. We love this place. Caroline may marry some day" (Miss Carry laughed protestingly at the suggestion and ejaculated, "Not very likely"),

"but I never shall. I expect to come here as long as I live. We love every inch of the place-the woods, the beach, the sea. Our garden, which we made

ourselves, is our delight. Why should we give up all this because some one offers us five times what we supposed it to be worth? My sister is here to speak for herself, but so far as I am concerned you may tell Mr. Anderson that if our place is worth so much as that we cannot afford to part with it."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't do at all! Our heartstrings are round the roots of these trees, Mr. Walker," added the younger sister in gentle echo of this determination.

"Don't be in a hurry to decide; think it over. It will bear reflection," said the broker briskly.

"There's nothing to think over. It becomes clearer every minute," said Miss Rebecca a little tartly. Then she added: "I dare say it will do him good to find that some one has something which he cannot buy."

"He will be immensely disappointed, for his heart was set on it," said David Walker gloomily. His emotions were not untinged by personal dismay, for his commission would have been a large one.

He returned forthwith to his client, who was expecting him, and who met him at the door.

"Well, Walker, what did the maiden ladies say? Have one of these," he exclaimed, exhibiting some large cigars elaborately wrapped in gold foil. "They're something peculiarly choice which a friend of mine-a Cuban-obtained for me."

"They won't sell, Mr. Anderson."

The furniture king frowned. He was a heavily built but compact man who looked as though he were accustomed to butt his way through life and sweep away opposition, yet affable and easy-going withal.

"They won't sell? You offered them my price?"

"It struck them as prodigious, but they were not tempted."

"I've got to have it somehow. With this land added to theirs I should have the finest place on the shore."

The broker disregarded this flamboyant remark, which was merely a repetition of what he had heard several times already. "I warned you," he said, "that they might possibly refuse even this munificent offer.

They told me to tell you that if it was worth so much they could not afford to sell."

"Is it not enough? They're poor, you told me-poor as church mice."

"Compared with you. But they have enough to live on simply, and-and to be able to maintain such an establishment as yours, for instance, would not add in the least degree to their happiness. On the contrary, it is because they delight in the view and the woods and their little garden just as they see them that they can't afford to let you have the place." Now that the chances of a commission

were slipping away David Walker was not averse to convey in delicate language the truth which Miss Rebecca had set forth.

Mr. Anderson felt his chin meditatively. "I seem to be up against it," he murmured. "You think they are not holding out for a higher figure?" he asked shrewdly.

David shook his head. Yet he added, with the instinct of a business man ready to nurse a forlorn hope, "There would be no harm in trying.

I don't believe, though, that you have the ghost of a chance."

The furniture king reflected a moment. "I'll walk down there this afternoon and make their acquaintance."

"A good idea," said Walker, contented to shift the responsibility of a second offer. "You'll find them charming-real thoroughbreds," he saw fit to add.

"A bit top-lofty?" queried the millionaire.

"Not in the least. But they have their own standards, Mr. Anderson."

The furniture king's progress at The Beaches had been so uninterrupted on the surface and so apparently satisfactory to himself that no one would have guessed that he was not altogether content with it. With all his easy-going optimism, it had not escaped his shrewd intelligence that his family still lacked the social recognition he desired. People were civil enough, but there were houses into which they were never asked in spite of all his spending; and he was conscious that they were kept at arm's length by polite processes too subtle to be openly resented. Yet he did resent in his heart the check to his ambitions, and at the same time he sought eagerly the cause with an open mind. It had already dawned on him that when he was interested in a topic his voice was louder than the voices of his new acquaintances. He had already given orders to his chauffeur that the automobiles should be driven with some regard for the public safety.

Lately the idea had come to him, and he had imparted it to his son, that the habit of ignoring impediments did not justify them in driving golf balls on the links when, the players in front of them were slower than they liked.

On the way to visit the Misses Ripley later in the day the broker's remark that they had standards of their own still lingered in his mind. He preferred to think of them and others along the shore as stiff and what he called top lofty; yet he intended to observe what he saw. He had been given to understand that these ladies were almost paupers from his point of view; and, though when he had asked who they were, David Walker had described them as representatives of one of the oldest and most respected families, he knew that they took no active part in the social life of the colony as he beheld it; they played neither golf, tennis, nor bridge at the club; they owned no automobile, and their stable was limited to two horses; they certainly cut no such figure as seemed to him to

become people in their position, who could afford to refuse $500,000 for six acres.

He was informed by the middle-aged, respectable-looking maid that the ladies were in the garden behind the house. A narrow gravelled path bordered with fragrant box led him to this. Its expanse was not large, but the luxuriance and variety of the old-fashioned summer flowers attested the devotion bestowed upon them. At the farther end was a trellised summer-house in which he perceived that the maiden ladies were taking afternoon tea. There was no sign of hothouse roses or rare exotic plants, but he noticed a beehive, a quaint sundial with an inscription, and along the middle path down which he walked were at intervals little dilapidated busts or figures of stone on pedestals-some of them lacking tips of noses or ears. It did not occur to Mr. Anderson that antiquity rather than poverty was responsible for these ravages. Their existence gave him fresh hope.

"Who can this be?" said Miss Carry with a gentle flutter. An unknown, middle-aged man was still an object of curiosity to her.

Miss Rebecca raised her eyeglass. "I do believe, my dear, that it's-yes, it is."

"But who?" queried Miss Carry.

Miss Rebecca rose instead of answering. The stranger was upon them, walking briskly and hat in hand. His manner was distinctly breezy-more so than a first meeting would ordinarily seem to her to justify.

"Good afternoon, ladies. Daniel Anderson is my name. My wife wasn't lucky enough to find you at home when she returned your call, so I thought I'd be neighborly."

"It's very good of you to come to see us," said Miss Rebecca, relenting at once. She liked characters-being something of one herself-and her neighbor's heartiness was taking. "This is my sister, Miss Caroline Ripley," she added to cement the introduction, "and I am Rebecca. Sit down, Mr. Anderson; and may I give you a cup of tea?"

Four people were apt to be cosily crowded in the summer-house. Being only a third person, the furniture king was able to settle himself in his seat and look around him without fear that his legs would molest any one. He gripped the arms of his chair and inhaled the fragrance of the garden.

"This is a lovely place, ladies," he asserted.

"Those hollyhocks and morning-glories and mignonettes take me back to old times. Up to my place it's all roses and orchids. But my wife told me last week that she heard old-fashioned flowers are coming in again. Seems she was right."

"Oh, but we've had old-fashioned flowers for years! Our garden has been always just like this-only becoming a little prettier all the time, we venture to hope," said Miss Carry.

"I want to know!" said Mr. Anderson; and almost immediately he remembered that both his son and daughter had cautioned him against the use of this phrase at The Beaches. He received the dainty but evidently ancient cup from Miss Rebecca, and seeing that the subject was, so to speak, before the house, he tasted his tea and said:

"It's all pretty here-garden, view, and beach. And I hear you decline to sell, ladies."

Miss Rebecca had been musing on the subject all day, and a heartfelt response rose promptly to her lips-spoken with the simple grace of a self-respecting gentlewoman:

"Why should we sell, Mr. Anderson?"

The question was rather a poser to answer categorically; yet the would-be purchaser felt that he sufficiently conveyed his meaning when he said:

"I thought I might have made it worth your while."

"We are people of small means in the modern sense of the word," Miss Rebecca continued, thereby expressing more concretely his idea; "yet we have sufficient for our needs. Our tastes are very simple. The sum which you offered us is a fortune in itself-but we have no ambition for great wealth or to change our mode of life. Our associations with this place are so intimate and tender that money could not induce us to desecrate them by a sale."

"I see," said Mr. Anderson. Light was indeed breaking on him. At the same time his appreciation of the merits of the property had been growing every minute. It was an exquisite autumn afternoon. From where they sat he could behold the line of shore on either side with its background of dark green woods. Below the wavelets lapped the shingle with melodious rhythm. As far as the eye could see lay the bosom of the ocean unruffled, and lustrous with the sheen of the dying day.

Accustomed to prevail in buying his way, he could not resist saying, after a moment of silence:

"If I were to increase my offer to a million would it make any difference in your attitude?"

A suppressed gurgle of mingled surprise and amusement escaped Miss Carry.

Miss Rebecca paused a moment by way of politeness to one so generous.

But her tone when she spoke was unequivocal, and a shade sardonic.

"Not the least, Mr. Anderson. To tell the truth, we should scarcely understand the difference."

ii

ONE SUMMER AFTERNOON two years later the Ripley sisters were again drinking tea in their attractive summer-house. In the interval the peaceful current of their lives had been stirred to its depths by unlooked-for happenings. Very shortly after their refusal of Mr.

Anderson's offer, their only brother, whose home was on the Hudson within easy distance of New York, had died suddenly. He was a widower; and consequently the protection of his only daughter straightway devolved on them. She was eighteen and good-looking. This they knew from personal observation at Thanksgiving Day and other family reunions; but owing to the fact that Mabel Ripley had been quarantined by scarlet fever during the summer of her sixteenth year, and in Europe the following summer, they were conscious, prior to her arrival at The Beaches, that they were very much in the dark as to her characteristics.

She proved to be the antipodes of what they had hoped for. Their traditions had depicted a delicate-appearing girl with reserved manners and a studious or artistic temperament, who would take an interest in the garden and like nothing better than to read aloud to them the new books while they did fancy-work. A certain amount of coy coquetry was to be expected-would be welcomed, in fact, for there were too many Miss Ripleys already. Proper facilities would be offered to her admirers, but they took for granted that she would keep them at a respectful distance as became a gentlewoman. She would be urged to take suitable exercise; they would provide a horse, if necessary; and doubtless some of the young people in the neighborhood would invite her occasionally to play tennis.

Mabel's enthusiasm at the nearness of the sea took precedence over every other emotion as she stood on the piazza after the embraces were over.

"How adorably stunning! I must go out sailing the first thing," were her words.

Meanwhile the aunts were observing that she appeared the picture of health and was tall and athletic-looking. In one hand she had carried a tennis-racket in its case, in the other, a bag of golf clubs, as she alighted from the vehicle. These evidently were her household gods.

The domestic vision which they had entertained might need rectification.

"You sail, of course?" Mabel asked, noticing, doubtless, that her exclamation was received in silence.

Aunt Rebecca shook her head. "I haven't been in a sail-boat for twenty years."

"But whose steam yacht is that?"

"It belongs to Mr. Anderson, a wealthy neighbor."

"Anyhow, a knockabout is more fun-a twenty-footer," the girl continued, her gaze still fixed on the haven which the indentations of the coast afforded, along

which at intervals groups of yachts, large and small, floated at their moorings picturesque as sea-gulls on a feeding-ground.

"There is an old rowboat in the barn. I daresay that Thomas, the coachman, will take you out rowing sometimes after he has finished his work," said Aunt Carry kindly.

"Do you swim?" inquired Aunt Rebecca, failing to note her niece's bewildered expression.

"Like a duck. I'm quite as much at home on the water as on land. I've had a sailboat since I was thirteen, and most of our summers have been spent at Buzzard's Bay."

"But you're a young lady now," said Aunt Rebecca.

Mabel looked from one to the other as though she were speculating as to what these new protectors were like. "Am I?" she asked with a smile. "I must remember that, I suppose; but it will be hard to change all at once." Thereupon she stepped lightly to the edge of the cliff that she might enjoy more completely the view while she left them to digest this qualified surrender.

"'No pent-up Utica contracts her powers,'" murmured Miss Rebecca, who was fond of classic verse.

"It is evident that we shall have our hands full," answered Miss Carry. "But she's fresh as a rose, and wide-awake. I'm sure the dear girl will try to please us."

Mabel did try, and succeeded; but it was a success obtained at the cost of setting at naught all her aunts' preconceived ideas regarding the correct deportment of marriageable girls. The knockabout was forthcoming shortly after she had demonstrated her amphibious qualities by diving from the rocks and performing water feats which dazed her anxious guardians. Indeed, she fairly lived in her bathing-dress until the novelty wore off. Thomas, the coachman, who had been a fisherman in his day, announced with a grin, after accompanying her on the trial trip of the hired cat-boat, that he could teach her nothing about sailing. Henceforth her small craft was almost daily a distant speck on the horizon, and braved the seas so successfully under her guidance that presently the aunts forbore to watch for disaster through a spyglass.

She could play tennis, too, with the best, as she demonstrated on the courts of The Beaches Club. Her proficiency and spirit speedily made friends for her among the young people of the colony, who visited her and invited her to take part in their amusements. She was prepared to ride on her bicycle wherever the interest of the moment called her, and deplored the solemnity of the family carryall. When her aunts declared that a wheel was too undignified a vehicle on which to go out to luncheon, she compromised on a pony cart as a substitute, for she could drive almost as well as she could sail. She took comparatively little interest in the garden, and was not always at home at five-o'clock tea to read

aloud the latest books; but her amiability and natural gayety were like sunshine in the house. She talked freely of what she did, and she had an excellent appetite.

"She's as unlike the girls of my day as one could imagine, and I do wish she wouldn't drive about the country bareheaded, looking like a colt or a young Indian," said Miss Rebecca pensively one morning, just after Mabel's departure for the tennis-court. "But I must confess that she's the life of the place, and we couldn't get on without her now. I don't think, though, that she has done three hours of solid reading since she entered the house. I call that deplorable."

"She's a dear," said Aunt Carry. "We haven't been much in the way of seeing young girls of late, and Mabel doesn't seem to me different from most of those who visit her. Twenty years ago, you remember, girls pecked at their food and had to lie down most of the time. Now they eat it. What I can't get quite used to is the habit of letting young men call them by their first names on short acquaintance. In my time," she added with a little sigh, "it would have been regarded as inconsistent with maidenly reserve. I'm sure I heard the young man who was here last night say, 'I've known you a week now; may I call you Mabel?'"

As to young men, be it stated, the subject of this conversation showed herself impartially indifferent. Her attitude seemed to be that boys were good fellows as well as girls, and should be encouraged accordingly. If they chose to make embarrassing speeches regarding one's personal appearance and to try to be alone with one as much as possible, while such favoritism was rather a fillip to existence, it was to be considered at bottom as an excellent joke. Young men came and young men went. Mabel attracted her due share. Yet evidently she seemed to be as glad to see the last comer as any of his predecessors.

Then occurred the second happening in the tranquil existence of the maiden ladies. One day at the end of the first summer, an easterly day, when the sky was beginning to be obscured by scud and the sea was swelling with the approach of a storm, Dan Anderson, the only son of his father, was knocked overboard by the boom while showing the heels of his thirty-foot knockabout to the hired boat of his neighbor, Miss Mabel Ripley. They were not racing, for his craft was unusually fast, as became a multi-millionaire's plaything. Besides, he and the girl had merely a bowing acquaintance. The Firefly was simply bobbing along on the same tack as the Enchantress, while the fair skipper, who had another girl as a companion, tried vainly, at a respectful distance, to hold her own by skill.

The headway on Dan's yacht was so great that before the two dazed salts on board realized what had happened their master was far astern.

They bustled to bring the Enchantress about and to come to his rescue in the dingy. Stunned by the blow of the-spar, he had gone down like a stone; so, in all

probability, they would have been too late. When he came up the second time it was on the port bow of the Firefly, but completely out of reach. Giving the tiller to her friend, and stripping off superfluous apparel, Mabel jumped overboard in time to grasp and hold the drowning youth. There she kept him until aid reached them. But the unconscious victim did not open his eyes until after he had been laid on the Misses Ripley's lawn, where, by virtue of brandy from the medicine-closet and hot-water bottles, the flickering spark of life was coaxed into a flame.

It was an agitating experience for the aunts. But Mabel was none the worse for the wetting; and though she naturally made light of her performance, congratulations on her pluck and presence of mind came pouring in. David Walker suggested that the Humane Society would be sure to take the matter up and confer a medal upon the heroine. The members of the Anderson family came severally to express with emotion their gratitude and admiration. The father had not been there since his previous eventful visit, though once or twice he had met his neighbors on the road and stopped to speak to them, as if to show he harbored no malice in spite of his disappointment.

Now with a tremulous voice he bore testimony to the greatness of the mercy which had been vouchsafed him.

The third and last happening might be regarded as a logical sequel to the second by those who believe that marriages are made in heaven. It was to ponder it again after having pondered it for twenty-four hours that the Ripley sisters found themselves in their pleached garden at the close of the day. That the event was not unforeseen by one of them was borne out by the words of Miss Carry:

"I remember saying to myself that day on the lawn, Rebecca, that it would be just like the modern girl if she were to marry him; because she saved his life, I mean. If he had saved hers, as used to happen, she would never have looked at him twice. I didn't mention it because it was only an idea, which might have worried you."

"We have seen it coming, of course," answered Miss Rebecca, who was clasping the points of her elbows. "And there was nothing to do about it-even if we desired to. I can't help, though, feeling sorry that she isn't going to marry some one we know all about-the family, I mean.

"Well," she added with a sigh, "the Andersons will get our place in the end, after all, and we shall be obliged to associate more or less with multi-millionaires for the rest of our days. It's depressing ethically; but there's no use in quarrelling with one's own flesh and blood, if it is a modern girl, for one would be quarrelling most of the time. We must make the best of it, Carry, and-and try to like it."

"He really seems very nice," murmured Miss Carry. "He gives her some new jewel almost every day."

Miss Rebecca sniffed disdainfully, as though to inquire if love was to be attested by eighteen-carat gold rather than by summer blooms.

The sound of steps on the gravel path interrupted their confabulation.

"It is Mr. Anderson, pere" said Miss Carry laconically.

"He is coming to take possession," responded her sister.

The crunch of the gravel under his solid, firm tread jarred on their already wearied sensibilities. Nevertheless they knew that it behooved them to be cordial and to accept the situation with good grace. Their niece was over head and ears in love with a young man whose personal character, so far as they knew, was not open to reproach, and who would be heir to millions. What more was to be said? Indeed, Miss Rebecca was the first to broach the subject after the greetings were over.

"Our young people seem to have made up their minds that they cannot live apart," she said.

"So my son has informed me."

Mr. Anderson spoke gravely and then paused. His habitually confident manner betrayed signs of nervousness.

"I told him this morning that there could be no engagement until after I had talked with you," he added.

One could have heard a pin drop. Each of the sisters was tremulous to know what was coming next. Could he possibly be meditating purse-proud opposition? The Ripley blue blood simmered at the thought, and Miss Rebecca, nervous in her turn, tapped the ground lightly with her foot.

"The day I was first here," he resumed, "you ladies taught me a lesson. I believed then that money could command anything. I discovered that I was mistaken. It provoked me, but it set me thinking. I've learned since that the almighty dollar cannot buy gentle birth and-and the standards which go with it."

Unexpectedly edifying as this admission was, his listeners sought in vain to connect it with the immediate issue, and consequently forebore to speak.

"The only return I can make for opening my eyes to the real truth is by doing what I guess you would do if you or one of your folk were in my shoes. I'm a very rich man, as you know. If your niece marries my son her children will never come to want in their time. He's a good boy, if I do say it; and I should be mighty proud of her."

Miss Carry breathed a gentle sigh of relief at this last avowal.

"I don't want her to marry him, though, without knowing the truth, and perhaps when you hear it you'll decide that she must give him up."

Thereupon Mr. Anderson blew his nose by way of gathering his faculties for the crucial words as a carter rests his horse before mounting the final hill when the sledding is hard.

"I'm going to tell you how I made my first start. I was a clerk in a bank and sharp as a needle in forecasting what was going to happen downtown. I used to say to myself that if I had capital it would be easy to make money breed money. Well, one day I borrowed from the bank, without the bank's leave, $3,000 in order to speculate. I won on that deal and the next and the next. Then I was able to return what I'd borrowed and to set up in a small way for myself in the furniture business. That was my start, ladies-the nest-egg of all I've got."

He sat back in his chair and passed his handkerchief across his forehead like one who has performed with credit an agonizing duty.

There was silence for a moment. Unequivocal as the confession was, Miss Rebecca, reluctant to believe her ears, asked with characteristic bluntness:

"You mean that you-er-misappropriated the money?"

"I was an embezzler, strictly speaking."

"I see."

"Perhaps you wonder why I told you this," he said, bending forward.

"No, we understand," said Miss Rebecca.

"We understand perfectly," exclaimed Miss Carry with gentle warmth.

"It's very honest of you, Mr. Anderson," said Miss Rebecca after a musing pause.

"I've never been dishonest since then," he remarked naively. "But a year ago I wouldn't have told you this, though it's been in the back of my mind as a rankling sore, growing as I grew in wealth and respectability. I made a bluff at believing that it didn't matter, and that a thing done has an end. Well, now I've made a clean breast of it to the ones who have a right to know. I should like you to tell Mabel."

As he spoke the lovers appeared in the near distance at the edge of the lawn, coming up from the beach. "But I don't think it will be necessary to tell my son," he added yearningly.

"Certainly not" said Miss Rebecca with emphasis.

The sisters exchanged glances, trying to read each other's thoughts.

"It's a blot in the 'scutcheon, of course," said Miss Rebecca. "It's for our niece to say." But there was no sternness in her tone.

This gave Miss Carry courage. Her hand shook a little as she put down her teacup, for she was shy of taking the initiative. "I think I know what she would say. In our time it would probably have been different, on account of the family-and heredity; but Mabel is a modern girl. And a modern girl would say that she isn't to marry the father but the son. She loves him, so I'm certain she would never give him up. Therefore is it best to tell her?"

Daniel Anderson's face was illumined with the light of hope, and he turned to the elder sister, whom he recognized as the final judge.

Miss Rebecca sniffed. Her ideas of everlasting justice were a little disconcerted. Nevertheless she said firmly after brief hesitation:

"I was taught to believe that the sins of the fathers should be visited on the children; but I believe, Carry, you're right."

"Bless you for that," exclaimed the furniture king. Then, groping in the excess of his emotion for some fit expression of gratitude, he bent forward and, taking Miss Rebecca's hand, pressed his lips upon her fingers as an act of homage.

Miss Carry would have been justified in reflecting that it would have been more fitting had he kissed her fingers instead. But she was used to taking the second place in the household, and the happy expression of her countenance suggested that her thoughts were otherwise engaged.

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3: If I Could Live Again

Beatrice Grimshaw

1870-1953

The Wireless Weekly, 30 Aug, 1941

THE LOUNGE-ROOM smelt of furs and tweeds; of the tea that had just been cleared away; of lavender powder and of eau-de-cologne. An old-lady sort of smell. The women who sat knitting and talking in little groups were all old. Fifty, sixty, seventy.

They were old, or elderly, in this branch of the Red Cross. It had happened so. Even the two or three men who belonged to it, as contributors and occasional helpers at bridge rallies, were bald and grey-haired. Nobody minded. They liked each other. They thought each other sensible.

Into the overheated room, flinging doors open and bringing with them a whiff of fresh frosty air, suddenly came two young people. Mark Lyster, handsome, black-haired and hawk-featured, with a little evil lurking in each topaz-bright eye. Mark, who was lame, ever since he'd missed that high dive, before the war, else he had not been there helping Cecily to bring in a pile of wools and flanelettes for the workers.

Cecily didn't make pyjamas or knit socks. She served in a soldiers' canteen, and the soldiers were grateful to her, because of the pleasing effect of her platinum-fair hair, and ivory skin, and light blue eyes, behind the counter. Lily, she ought to have been called, they said, and, indeed, she was a lily of a girl, almost too fair and, as far as anyone knew, too good to be true.

Mark was not at all too good to be true. He was supposed to be training for radio work, having a quite exceptional broadcasting voice, but he had done the voice— and himself— no good by too many gay nights in Sydney, and he was known to be, although extremely clever, not entirely reliable.

At the University, they had thought him likely to make discoveries in that strange universe of waves and wave-lengths that has dawned upon the world of recent years. But now they only shook their heads, and said it was a pity he couldn't have gone to the war. Done him good, they said. He was constitutionally "broke," and just now, as he had told Cecily on the stairs, worse broke than ever.

"But I've made a sort of discovery," he told her, watching with delight the effect of the corridor electrics on her wonderful silvery hair. "Money in it— I think."

"What's it about?" she asked eagerly. She knew she wouldn't understand— she wasn't clever like

Mark— but she wanted to know all the same.

"Wave-lengths," he answered. "What to do with them. It's— it's very scientific. I couldn't explain it to you. But a lot of these old trouts and their men friends are interested they've been putting up cash —and they're coming to the laboratory on Friday afternoon to see the result."

"May I—" she began. He interrupted her. "There, don't try to carry that bundle. Give it to me. My job. Carry your burdens for you always, eh?"

Cecily flushed. She knew all about Mark. A perfect lamb, but a lamb (according to other girls) who was rather too fond of bleating out a half proposal and then kicking up his heels and frisking away.

But there was no time to say anything more. Mark was already carrying the parcels into the lounge, and the "old trouts" were dropping their knitting to look.

Afterwards, leaving them sewing and knitting, the two young people escaped from the atmosphere of tea and furs and lavender into the frosty freshness of the suburban road. Yellow leaves filled the gutters. Someone beyond a wall was burning more leaves. The tang of autumn filled the air. Death, death of the year— but they were young.

Cecily got out her question at last. "May I come too?"

Mark looked at her, slim and silver-fair in the gilt thin air of the Australian autumn day.

"If I could lay my hands on a couple of hundred." he thought. "Here and there— quietly, of course. She would never know. And it would do for a start. But— Cecily present? Better not. She'd see nothing, of course: all the same—"

He said: "Not this time, sweetest. Another, maybe."

She was vexed. Her small pink mouth set itself in a determined line, but she said nothing. They walked on.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON. The light in the big laboratory subdued; only a single lamp of low voltage burning. One could barely see the dulled steel of dynamos, catch faintly the glimmer of dials staring with white eyes.

In the middle of the floor, a long, dark shape showed up like, a corpse. It was a leather covered couch, placed there by Mark a couple of hours before. Standing beside it, he addressed the little crowd in his best broadcasting voice.

"You remember what I told you. Perhaps you only half believed it. Well, it's true. "You've all been longing to get away from the world of to-day— and what a world it is!— back to the golden age you used to know.

"Of course, you never really hoped to see it again. But science has taken a step forward. All the past is contained in the ether— every word, every action of your life. And I've found out the way to bring it back to you.

"I've discovered the secret of— shall I call it—reversing the waves. For you. I can make you, in a single half-hour, live over all the good old times you thought were lost forever."

Some of the elderly women were quietly crying now. One or two of the men blew their noses. One asked a scientific question, answered by Mark with such a spate of technicalities that the questioner humbly withdrew.

Nobody else asked anything— for the moment. They were all back, in their imaginations, in the golden 'nineties, and before. They were seeing, vaguely, the Diamond Jubilee procession. They were thinking of croquet matches played with people long since dead on lawns long since built over with workmen's flats.

They were remembering the triumphant blare of the "Wedding March," recalling the smell of orange blossoms and of iced plum-cake. Each, in his or her own mind, was busy making selections. Mark said: "You will lie down one by one on this couch with a metal bracelet on your wrist. There'll be no discomfort. You won't feel the current I shall use. As for the rest, I can't explain it. But you'll glide into a sleep in which the whole of your life, day by day and hour by hour, will reappear— will actually be lived again.

"The clock will be turned back— if one may use a clock as a simile for the waves that fill the ether, that hold in them your past, for they'll be reversed for you. All will return. All."

A woman asked: "How long will it last?"

Mark looked at her appraisingly

"Seventy years, Mrs. Julius," he said. "For you. For these onlookers, twenty minutes or so."

Mrs. Julius opened her mouth and shut it again. Another woman fidgeted in her chair. An elderly man seemed about to ask something. but thought better of it. People looked at each other and swiftly looked away.

"The five pounds deposit that you each made to me." Mark said, "was meant to cover expenses. I'm not asking for the other ten until you leave here, satisfied. I hope, with the wonderful journey into the past that you're about to make—"

Someone interrupted. "Do we understand that there's no picking and choosing? Do we have to go right through?"

"Certainly," Mark agreed. "Science can do much, but it can't pick bits here and there. It's all or nothing. And now, who's the first?"

He looked around the shadowy room with a smile. But he was far from feeling gay. This was the crucial moment, the moment on which he had counted.

A stir of conversation began— "Didn't quite understand—" "Of course, would be delighted, but that last war—" "So much trouble when the 1899 'flu epidemic came—" "When my wife died, it was— I can't tell you—".

Mark was watching them. He knew what underlay all this. Young as he was, his keen intelligence cut like a sword into the thoughts of the ageing weary folk who had made so many fatal mistakes in their time, committed so many mean, unsuspected sins. It wasn't all jubilee processions and wedding marches in their minds, now. They hadn't expected— they didn't want— it was quite too wonderful, but—

In short, they were refusing. There were a couple of girls, whom Mark had asked for good measure. He knew many things about them. He had reason to. They had been as keen as the rest until the fatal fact became known, the undesired necessity for living every moment over without selection. Now they were whispering like all the others.

It worked. He'd known it would. He was remembering, in the moment of triumph, the old German fairy tale of the Mill That Ground Old People Young— the mill that never had any clients, once they learned the conditions. His mill— and it had worked. Nobody would question anything, and he was some hundred pounds to the good.

Then suddenly out of the shadows came a voice he knew. Cecily was there. Wrapped in white furs against the chill of the great unheated room, half hidden in a corner. she had escaped his notice till that minute.

Cecily had come after all, and she was offering to go through his mill.

Of all the people there, young and old, she was the only one who was innocent enough to offer herself. To stand there ready to relive every moment, every hour, of her white unspotted life. To take advantage of the wonderful discovery that involved the turning back of the waves of time—the discovery that he had not made.

Oh give him his due; Mark was clever He had seen the shadow of that discovery, far ahead; he had known that it would be made some day, by some man better than himself. But it was not. never would be, his. And here was Cecily, giving him away.

Quickly, he tried to save the situation.

"No," he told her. "No. Wouldn't do. You're not a suitable subject. I told you that— I—" where was his self possession, his steady broadcasting voice? His words trembled, fell uncertainly upon the chill and troubled air.

But nobody noticed. Disappointed, they were filing out, talking nervously to each other, everyone explaining to his neighbor— of course, without explaining— why he or she had refused the ordeal. Cecily was standing in the doorway, a puzzled look upon her face.

They were quite alone now. He took three steps towards her. "You— little— white lamb!" he said. And suddenly his arms were around her.

They went down the stairs together. "Do you think you could marry a crook?" Mark asked her.

She answered, "Who is the crook?"

And he told her swiftly. "No matter— no one will ever know, sweetest."

In his mind he was already giving back the money.

The other people went on talking. You could hear them a long way down the street. They had not done explaining— yet.

And you! What would you have done?

4: Alleys of Darkness
Robert E. Howard
(as by Patrick Ervin)
1906-1936
The Magic Carpet, Jan 1934

Although mostly identified with his fantasy stories, Howard also wrote adventure stories too.

WHEN the gong ended my fight with Kid Leary in the Sweet Dreams Fight Club, Singapore, I was tired but contented. The first seven rounds had been close, but the last three I'd plastered the Kid all over the ring, though I hadn't knocked him out like I'd did in Shanghai some months before, when I flattened him in the twelfth round. The scrap in Singapore was just for ten; another round and I'd had him.

But anyway, I'd shaded him so thoroughly I knowed I'd justified the experts which had made me a three to one favorite. The crowd was applauding wildly, the referee was approaching, and I stepped forward and held out my glove hand—when to my utter dumfoundment, he brushed past me and lifted the glove of the groggy and bloody Kid Leary!

A instant's silence reigned, shattered by a nerve-racking scream from the ringside. The referee, Jed Whithers, released Leary, who collapsed into the rosin, and Whithers ducked through the ropes like a rabbit. The crowd riz bellowing, and recovering my frozen wits, I gave vent to lurid langwidge and plunged outa the ring in pursuit of Whithers. The fans was screaming mad, smashing benches, tearing the ropes offa the ring and demanding the whereabouts of Whithers, so's they could hang him to the rafters. But he had disappeared, and the maddened crowd raged in vain.

I found my way dazedly to my dressing-room, where I set down on a table and tried to recover from the shock. Bill O'Brien and the rest of the crew was there, frothing at the mouth, each having sunk his entire wad on me. I considered going into Leary's dressing-room and beating him up again, but decided he'd had nothing to do with the crooked decision. He was just as surprised as me when Whithers declared him winner.

Whilst I was trying to pull on my clothes, hindered more'n helped by my raging shipmates, whose langwidge was getting more appalling every instant, a stocky bewhiskered figger come busting through the mob, and done a fantastic dance in front of me. It was the Old Man, with licker on his breath and tears in his eyes.

"I'm rooint!" he howled. "I'm a doomed man! Oh, to think as I've warmed a sarpint in my boozum! Dennis Dorgan, this here's the last straw!"

"Aw, pipe down!" snarled Bill O'Brien. "It wasn't Denny's fault. It was that dashety triple-blank thief of a referee—"

"To think of goin' on the beach at my age!" screamed the Old Man, wringing the salt water outa his whiskers. He fell down on a bench and wept at the top of his voice. "A thousand bucks I lost—every cent I could rake, scrape and borrer!" he bawled.

"Aw, well, you still got your ship," somebody said impatiently.

"That's just it!" the Old Man wailed. "That thousand bucks was dough owed them old pirates, McGregor, McClune & McKile. Part of what I owe, I mean. They agreed to accept a thousand as part payment, and gimme more time to raise the rest. Now it's gone, and they'll take the ship! They'll take the *Python!* All I got in the world! Them old sharks ain't got no more heart than a Malay pirate. I'm rooint!"

The crew fell silent at that, and I said: "Why'd you bet all that dough?"

"I was lickered up," he wept. "I got no sense when I'm full. Old Cap'n Donnelly, and McVey and them got to raggin' me, and the first thing I knowed, I'd bet 'em the thousand, givin' heavy odds. Now I'm rooint!"

He throwed back his head and bellered like a walrus with the belly-ache.

I just give a dismal groan and sunk my head in my hands, too despondent to say nothing. The crew bust forth in curses against Whithers, and sallied forth to search further for him, hauling the Old Man along with them, still voicing his woes in a voice like a steamboat whistle.

Presently I riz with a sigh and hauled on my duds. They was no sound outside. Apparently I was alone in the building except for Spike, my white bulldog. All at once I noticed him smelling of a closed locker. He whined, scratched at it, and growled. With a sudden suspicion I strode over and jerked open the door. Inside I seen a huddled figger. I jerked it rudely forth and set it upright. It was Jed Whithers. He was pale and shaking, and he had cobwebs in his hair. He kind a cringed, evidently expecting me to bust into loud cusses. For once I was too mad for that. I was probably as pale as he was, and his eyes dilated like he seen murder in mine.

"Jed Whithers," I said, shoving him up against the wall with one hand whilst I knotted the other'n into a mallet, "this is one time in my life when I'm in the mood for killin'."

"For God's sake, Dorgan," he gurgled, "you can't murder me!"

"Can you think of any reason why I shouldn't put you in a wheel-chair for the rest of your life?" I demanded. "You've rooint my friends and all the fans which bet on me, lost my skipper his ship—"

"Don't hit me, Dorgan!" he begged, grabbing my wrist with shaking fingers. "I had to do it; honest to God, Sailor, I *had* to do it! I know you won—won by a mile. But it was the only thing I *could* do!"

"What you mean?" I demanded suspiciously.

"Lemme sit down!" he gasped.

I reluctantly let go of him, and he slumped down onto a near- by bench. He sat there and shook, and mopped the sweat offa his face. He was trembling all over.

"Are the customers all gone?" he asked.

"Ain't nobody here but me and my man-eatin' bulldog," I answered grimly, standing over him. "Go on—spill what you got to say before I start varnishin' the floor with you."

"I was forced to it, Dennis," he said. "There's a man who has a hold on me."

"What you mean, a hold?" I asked suspiciously.

"I mean, he's got me in a spot," he said. "I have to do like he says. It ain't myself I have to think of—Dorgan, I'm goin' to trust you. You got the name of bein' a square shooter. I'm goin' to tell you the whole thing.

"Sailor, I got a sister named Constance, a beautiful girl, innocent as a newborn lamb. She trusted a man, Dorgan, a dirty, slimy snake in human form. He tricked her into signin' a document—Dorgan, that paper was a confession of a crime he'd committed himself!"

Whithers here broke down and sobbed with his face in his hands. I shuffled my feet uncertainly, beginning to realize they was always more'n one side to any question.

He raised up suddenly and said: "Since then, that man's been holdin' that faked confession over me and her like a club. He's forced me to do his filthy biddin' time and again. I'm a honest man by nature, Sailor, but to protect my little sister"—he kinda choked for a instant—"I've stooped to low deeds. Like this tonight. This man was bettin' heavy on Leary, gettin' big odds—"

"Somebody sure was," I muttered. "Lots of Leary money in sight."

"Sure!" exclaimed Whithers eagerly. "That was it; he made me throw the fight to Leary, the dirty rat, to protect his bets."

I begun to feel new wrath rise in my gigantic breast.

"You mean this low-down polecat has been blackmailin' you on account of the hold he's got over your sister?" I demanded.

"Exactly," he said, dropping his face in his hands. "With that paper he can send Constance to prison, if he takes the notion."

"I never heered of such infermy," I growled. "Whyn't you bust him on the jaw and take that confession away from him?"

"I ain't no fightin' man," said Whithers. "He's too big for me. I wouldn't have a chance."

"Well, *I* would," I said. "Listen, Whithers, buck up and quit cryin'. I'm goin' to help you."

His head jerked up and he stared at me kinda wild-eyed.

"You mean you'll help me get that paper?"

"You bet!" I retorted. "I ain't the man to stand by and let no innercent girl be persecuted. Besides, this mess tonight is his fault."

Whithers just set there for a second, and I thought I seen a slow smile start to spread over his lips, but I mighta been mistook, because he wasn't grinning when he held out his hand and said tremulously: "Dorgan, you're all they say you are!"

A remark like that ain't necessarily a compliment; some of the things said about me ain't flattering; but I took it in the spirit in which it seemed to be give, and I said: "Now tell me, who is this rat?"

He glanced nervously around, then whispered: "Ace Bissett!"

I grunted in surprize. "The devil you say! I'd never of thought it."

"He's a fiend in human form," said Whithers bitterly. "What's your plan?"

"Why," I said, "I'll go to his Diamond Palace and demand the confession. If he don't give it to me, I'll maul him and take it away from him."

"You'll get shot up," said Whithers. "Bissett is a bad man to fool with. Listen, I got a plan. If we can get him to a certain house I know about, we can search him for the paper. He carries it around with him, though I don't know just where. Here's my plan—"

I listened attentively, and as a result, perhaps a hour later I was heading through the narrer streets with Spike, driving a closed car which Whithers had produced kinda mysteriously. Whithers wasn't with me; he was gone to prepare the place where I was to bring Bissett to.

I driv up the alley behind Ace's big new saloon and gambling- hall, the Diamond Palace, and stopped the car near a back door. It was a very high-class joint. Bissett was friends with wealthy sportsmen, officials, and other swells. He was what they call a soldier of fortune, and he'd been everything, everywhere—aviator, explorer, big game hunter, officer in the armies of South America and China—and what have you.

A native employee stopped me at the door, and asked me what was my business, and I told him I wanted to see Ace. He showed me into the room which opened on the alley, and went after Bissett—which could not of suited my plan better.

Purty soon a door opened, and Bissett strode in—a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, with steely eyes and wavy blond hair. He was in a dress suit, and altogether looked like he'd stepped right outa the social register. And as I looked at him, so calm and self-assured, and thought of poor Whithers being driv to crime by him, and the Old Man losing his ship on account of his crookedness, I seen red.

"Well, Dorgan, what can I do for you?" he asked.

I said nothing. I stepped in and hooked my right to his jaw. It caught him flat-footed, with his hands down. He hit the floor full length, and he didn't twitch.

I bent over him, run my hands through his clothes, found his six-shooter and throwed it aside. Music and the sounds of revelry reached me through the walls, but evidently nobody had seen or heard me slug Bissett. I lifted him and histed him onto my shoulders—no easy job, because he was as big as me, and limp as a rag.

But I done it, and started for the alley. I got through the door all right, which I was forced to leave open, account of having both hands full, and just as I was dumping Ace into the back part of the car, I heered a scream. Wheeling, I seen a girl had just come into the room I'd left, and was standing frozen, staring wildly at me. The light from the open door shone full on me and my captive. The girl was Glory O'Dale, Ace Bissett's sweetheart. I hurriedly slammed the car door shut and jumped to the wheel, and as I roared off down the alley, I was vaguely aware that Glory had rushed out of the building after me, screaming blue murder.

IT WAS purty late, and the route I took they wasn't many people abroad. Behind me I begun to hear Bissett stir and groan, and I pushed Spike over in the back seat to watch him. But he hadn't fully come to when I drawed up in the shadows beside the place Whithers had told me about—a ramshackle old building down by a old rotting, deserted wharf. Nobody seemed to live anywheres close around, or if they did, they was outa sight. As I clum outa the car, a door opened a crack, and I seen Whithers' white face staring at me.

"Did you get him, Dennis?" he whispered.

For answer I jerked open the back door, and Bissett tumbled out on his ear and laid there groaning dimly. Whithers started back with a cry.

"Is he dead?" he asked fearfully.

"Would he holler like that if he was?" I asked impatiently. "Help me carry him in, and we'll search him."

"Wait'll I tie him up," said Whithers, producing some cords, and to my disgust, he bound the unconscious critter hand and foot.

"It's safer this way," Whithers said. "He's a devil, and we can't afford to take chances."

We then picked him up and carried him through the door, into a very dimly lighted room, across that 'un, and into another'n which was better lit—the winders being covered so the light couldn't be seen from the outside. And I got the surprise of my life. They was five men in that room. I wheeled on Whithers. "What's the idee?" I demanded.

"Now, now, Dennis," said Whithers, arranging Bissett on the bench where we'd laid him. "These are just friends of mine. They know about Bissett and my sister."

I heered what sounded like a snicker, and I turned to glare at the assembled "friends". My gaze centered on a fat, flashy- dressed bird smoking a big black cigar; diamonds shone all over his fingers, and in his stick-pin. The others was just muggs.

"A fine lot of friends you pick out!" I said irritably to Whithers. "Diamond Joe Galt is been mixed up in every shady deal that's been pulled in the past three years. And if you'd raked the Seven Seas you couldn't found four dirtier thugs than Limey Teak, Bill Reynolds, Dutch Steinmann, and Red Partland."

"Hey, you—" Red Partland riz, clenching his fists, but Galt grabbed his arm.

"Stop it, Red," he advised. "Easy does it. Dennis," he addressed me with a broad smile which I liked less'n I'd liked a scowl, "they's no use in abuse. We're here to help our pal Whithers get justice. That's all. You've done your part. You can go now, with our thanks."

"Not so fast," I growled, and just then Whithers hollered: "Bissett's come to!"

We all turned around and seen that Bissett's eyes was open, and blazing.

"Well, you dirty rats," he greeted us all and sundry, "you've got me at last, have you?" He fixed his gaze on me, and said: "Dorgan, I thought you were a man. If I'd had any idea you were mixed up in this racket, you'd have never got a chance to slug me as you did."

"Aw, shut up," I snarled. "A fine nerve you've got, talkin' about men, after what you've did!"

Galt pushed past me and stood looking down at Bissett, and I seen his fat hands clenched, and the veins swell in his temples.

"Bissett," he said, "we've got you cold and you know it. Kick in—where's that paper?"

"You cursed fools!" Bissett raved, struggling at his cords till the veins stood out on his temples too. "I tell you, the paper's worthless."

"Then why do you object to givin' it to us?" demanded Whithers.

"Because I haven't got it!" raged Bissett. "I destroyed it, just as I've told you before."

"He's lyin'," snarled Red Partland. "He wouldn't never destroy such a thing as that. It means millions. Here, I'll make him talk—"

He shouldered forward and grabbed Bissett by the throat. I grabbed Red in turn, and tore him away.

"Belay!" I gritted. "He's a rat, but just the same I ain't goin' to stand by and watch no helpless man be tortured."

"Why, you—" Red bellered, and swung for my jaw.

I ducked and sunk my left to the wrist in his belly and he dropped like his legs had been cut out from under him. The others started forward, rumbling, and I wheeled towards 'em, seething with fight. But Galt got between us and shoved his gorillas back.

"Here," he snapped. "No fightin' amongst ourselves! Get up, Red. Now, Dennis," he begun to pat my sleeves in his soothing way, which I always despises beyond words, "there ain't no need for hard feelin's. I know just how you feel. But we got to have that paper. You know that, Dorgan—"

Suddenly a faint sound made itself evident. "What's that?" gasped Limey, going pale.

"It's Spike," I said. "I left him in the car, and he's got tired of settin' out there, and is scratchin' at the front door. I'm goin' to go get him, but I'll be right back, and if anybody lays a hand on Bissett whilst I'm gone, I'll bust him into pieces. We'll get that paper, but they ain't goin' to be no torturin'."

I strode out, scornful of the black looks cast my way. As I shut the door behind me, a clamor of conversation bust out, so many talking at wunst I couldn't understand much, but every now and then Ace Bissett's voice riz above the din in accents of anger and not pain, so I knowed they wasn't doing nothing to him. I crossed the dim outer room, opened the door and let Spike in, and then, forgetting to bolt it—I ain't used to secrecy and such—I started back for the inner room.

Before I reached the other door, I heered a quick patter of feet outside. I wheeled—the outer door bust violently open, and into the room rushed Glory O'Dale. She was panting hard, her dress was tore, her black locks damp, and her dark eyes was wet and bright as black jewels after a rain. And she had Ace's six-shooter in her hand.

"You filthy dog!" she cried, throwing down on me.

I looked right into the muzzle of that .45 as she jerked the trigger. The hammer snapped on a faulty cartridge, and before she could try again, Spike launched hisself from the floor at her. I'd taught him never to bite a woman. He didn't bite Glory. He throwed hisself bodily against her so hard he knocked her down and the gun flew outa her hand.

I picked it up and stuck it into my hip pocket. Then I started to help her up, but she hit my hand aside and jumped up, tears of fury running down her cheeks. Golly, she was a beauty!

"You beast!" she raged. "What have you done with Ace? I'll kill you if you've harmed him! Is he in that room?"

"Yeah, and he ain't harmed," I said, "but he oughta be hung—"

She screamed like a siren. "Don't you dare! Don't you touch a hair of his head! Oh, Ace!"

She then slapped my face, jerked out a handful of hair, and kicked both my shins.

"What I can't understand is," I said, escaping her clutches, "is why a fine girl like you ties up with a low-down rat like Bissett. With your looks, Glory—"

"To the devil with my looks!" she wept, stamping on the door. "Let me past; I know Ace is in that room—I heard his voice as I came in."

They wasn't no noise in the inner room now. Evidently all of them was listening to what was going on out here, Ace included.

"You can't go in there," I said. "We got to search Ace for the incriminatin' evidence he's holdin' against Jed Whithers' sister—"

"You're mad as a March hare," she said. "Let me by!"

And without no warning she back-heeled me and pushed me with both hands. It was so unexpected I ignominiously crashed to the floor, and she darted past me and throwed open the inner door. Spike drove for her, and this time he was red-eyed, but I grabbed him as he went by.

Glory halted an instant on the threshold with a cry of mingled triumph, fear and rage. I riz, cussing beneath my breath and dusting off my britches. Glory ran across the room, eluding the grasping paws of Joe Galt, and throwed herself with passionate abandon on the prostrate form of Ace Bissett. I noticed that Ace, which hadn't till then showed the slightest sign of fear, was suddenly pale and his jaw was grim set.

"It was madness for you to come, Glory," he muttered.

"I saw Dorgan throw you into the car," she whimpered, throwing her arms around him, and tugging vainly at his cords. "I jumped in another and followed—blew out a tire a short distance from here—lost sight of the car I was following and wandered around in the dark alleys on foot for awhile, till I saw the car standing outside. I came on in—"

"Alone? My God!" groaned Ace.

"Alone?" echoed Galt, with a sigh of relief. He flicked some dust from his lapel, stuck his cigar back in his mouth at a cocky angle, and said: "Well, now, we'll have a little talk. Come here, Glory."

She clung closer to Ace, and Ace said in a low voice, almost a whisper: "Let her alone, Galt." His eyes was like fires burning under the ice.

Galt's muggs was grinning evilly and muttering to theirselves. Whithers was nervous and kept mopping perspiration. The air was tense. I was nervous and impatient; something was wrong, and I didn't know what. So when Galt started to say something, I took matters into my own hands.

"Bissett," I said, striding across the room and glaring down at him, "if they's a ounce of manhood in you, this here girl's devotion oughta touch even your snakish soul. Why don't you try to redeem yourself a little, anyway? Kick in with

that paper! A man which is loved by a woman like Glory O'Dale loves you, oughta be above holdin' a forged confession over a innocent girl's head."

Bissett's mouth fell open. "What's he talking about?" he demanded from the world at large.

"I don't know," said Glory uneasily, snuggling closer to him. "He talked that way out in the other room. I think he's punch- drunk."

"Dorgan," said Bissett, "you don't belong in this crowd. Are you suffering from some sort of an hallucination?"

"Don't hand me no such guff, you snake!" I roared. "You know why I brung you here—to get the confession you gypped outa Whithers' sister, and blackmailed him with—just like you made him throw my fight tonight."

Bissett just looked dizzy, but Glory leaped up and faced me.

"You mean you think Ace made Whithers turn in that rotten decision?" she jerked out.

"I don't think," I answered sullenly. "I know. Whithers said so."

She jumped like she was galvanized.

"Why, you idiot!" she hollered, "they've made a fool of you! Jed Whithers hasn't any sister! He lied! Ace had nothing to do with it! Whithers was hired to throw the fight to Leary! Look at him!" Her voice rose to a shriek of triumph, as she pointed a accusing finger at Jed Whithers. "Look at him! Look how pale he is! He's scared witless!"

"It's a lie!" gulped Whithers, sweating and tearing at his crumpled collar like it was choking him.

"It's not a lie!" Glory was nearly hysterical by this time. "He was paid to throw the fight! And there's the man who paid him!" And she dramatically pointed her finger at Diamond Joe Galt!

Galt was on his feet, his small eyes glinting savagely, his jaws grinding his cigar to a pulp.

"What about it, Galt?" I demanded, all at sea and bewildered.

He dashed down his cigar with a oath. His face was dark and convulsed.

"What of it?" he snarled. "What you goin' to do about it? I've stood all the guff out of you I'm goin' to!"

His hand snaked inside his coat and out, and I was looking into the black muzzle of a wicked stumpy automatic.

"You can't slug this like you did Red, you dumb gorilla," he smirked viciously. "Sure, the dame's tellin' the truth. Whithers took you in like a sucklin' lamb.

"When you caught him in your dressin'-room, he told you the first lie that come to him, knowin' you for a soft sap where women's concerned. Then when you fell for it, and offered to help him, he thought fast and roped you into this deal. We been tryin' to get hold of Bissett for a long time. He's got somethin' we want. But he was too smart and too tough for us. Now, thanks to you, we got

him, *and* the girl. Now we're goin' to sweat what we want out of him, and you're goin' to keep your trap shut, see?"

"You mean they ain't no Constance Whithers, and no confession?" I said slowly, trying to get things straight. A raucous roar of mirth greeted the remark.

"No, sucker," taunted Galt; "you just been took in, you sap."

A wave of red swept across my line of vision. With a maddened roar, I plunged recklessly at Galt, gun and all. Everything happened at once. Galt closed his finger on the trigger just as Spike, standing beside him all this time, closed his jaws on Galt's leg. Galt screamed and leaped convulsively; the gun exploded in the air, missing me so close the powder singed my hair, and my right mauler crunched into Galt's face, flattening his nose, knocking out all his front teeth, and fracturing his jaw-bone. As he hit the floor Spike was right on top of him.

The next instant Galt's thugs was on top of me. We rolled across the room in a wild tangle of arms and legs, casually shattering tables and chairs on the way. Spike, finding Galt was out cold, abandoned him and charged to my aid. I heered Red Partland howl as Spike's iron fangs locked in his britches. But I had my hands full. Fists and hobnails was glancing off my carcass, and a thumb was feeling for my eye. I set my teeth in this thumb and was rewarded by a squeal of anguish, but the action didn't slow up any.

It was while strangling Limey Teak beneath me, whilst the other three was trying to stomp my ribs in and kick my head off, that I realized that another element had entered into the fray. There was the impact of a chair-leg on a human skull, and Jed Whithers give up the ghost with a whistling sigh. Glory O'Dale was taking a hand.

Dutch Steinmann next gave a ear-piercing howl, and Bill Reynolds abandoned me to settle her. Feeling Limey go limp beneath me, I riz, shaking Steinmann offa my shoulders, just in time to see Reynolds duck Glory's chair-leg and smack her down. Bissett give a most awful yell of rage, but he wasn't no madder than me. I left the floor in a flying tackle that carried Reynolds off his feet with a violence which nearly busted his skull against the floor. Too crazy-mad for reason, I set to work to hammer him to death, and though he was already senseless, I would probably of continued indefinite, had not Dutch Steinmann distracted my attention by smashing a chair over my head.

I riz through the splinters and caught him with a left hook that tore his ear nearly off and stood him on his neck in a corner. I then looked for Red Partland and seen him crawling out a winder which he'd tore the shutters off of. He was a rooin; his clothes was nearly all tore offa him, and he was bleeding like a stuck hawg and bawling like one, and Spike didn't show no intentions of abandoning the fray. His jaws was locked in what was left of Red's britches, and he had his feet braced against the wall below the sill. As I looked, Red gave a desperate

wrench and tumbled through the winder, and I heered his lamentations fading into the night.

Shaking the blood and sweat outa my eyes, I glared about at the battlefield, strewn with the dead and dying—at least with the unconscious, some of which was groaning loudly, whilst others slumbered in silence.

Glory was just getting up, dizzy and wobbly. Spike was smelling each of the victims in turn, and Ace was begging somebody to let him loose. Glory wobbled over to where he'd rolled offa the bench, and I followed her, kinda stiffly. At least one of my ribs had been broke by a boot-heel. My scalp was cut open, and blood was trickling down my side, where Limey Teak had made a ill-advised effort to knife me. I also thought one of them rats had hit me from behind with a club, till I discovered that sometime in the fray I'd fell on something hard in my hip pocket. This, I found, was Ace Bissett's pistol, which I'd clean forgot all about. I throwed it aside with disgust; them things is a trap and a snare.

I blinked at Ace with my one good eye, whilst Glory worked his cords offa him.

"I see I misjudged you," I said, lending her a hand. "I apolergize, and if you want satisfaction, right here and now is good enough for me."

"Good Lord, man," he said, with his arms full of Glory. "I don't want to fight you. I still don't know just what it was all about, but I'm beginning to understand."

I set down somewhat groggily on a bench which wasn't clean busted.

"What I want to know is," I said, "what that paper was they was talkin' about."

"Well," he said, "about a year ago I befriended a half-cracked Russian scientist, and he tried in his crazy way to repay me. He told me, in Galt's presence, that he was going to give me a formula that would make me the richest man on earth. He got blown up in an explosion in his laboratory shortly afterward, and an envelope was found in his room addressed to me, and containing a formula. Galt found out about it, and he's been hounding me ever since, trying to get it. He thought it was all the Russian claimed. In reality it was merely the disconnected scribblings of a disordered mind—good Lord, it claimed to be a process for the manufacture of diamonds! Utter insanity—but Galt never would believe it."

"And he thought I was dumb," I cogitated. "But hey, Glory, how'd you know it was Galt hired Whithers to throw my fight to Leary?"

"I didn't," she admitted. "I just accused Galt of it to start you fellows fighting among yourselves."

"Well, I'll be derned," I said, and just then one of the victims which had evidently come to while we was talking, riz stealthily to his all fours and started

crawling towards the winder. It was Jed Whithers. I strode after him and hauled him to his feet.

"How much did Galt pay you for throwin' the bout to Leary?" I demanded.

"A thousand dollars," he stuttered.

"Gimme it," I ordered, and with shaking hands he hauled out a fold of bills. I fluttered 'em and saw they was intact.

"Turn around and look out the winder at the stars," I commanded.

"I don't see no stars," he muttered.

"You will," I promised, as I swung my foot and histed him clean over the sill.

As his wails faded up the alley, I turned to Ace and Glory, and said: "Galt must of cleaned up plenty on this deal, payin' so high for his dirty work. This here dough, though, is goin' to be put to a good cause. The Old Man lost all his money account of Whithers' crooked decision. This thousand bucks will save his ship. Now let's go. I wanta get hold of the promoter of the Sweet Dreams, and get another match tomorrer night with Kid Leary—this time with a honest referee."

5: The Honourable Tony
Frances Noyes Hart
1890-1943
McCall's May 1923

"YOU ACTUALLY MEAN to tell me that you don't want to get out of this dripping hole?"

"My dear old ass, why on earth should I want to get out of it?"

Anthony Christopher Stoningham Calvert faced the incredulous glare of the freckle-faced young gentleman from Ohio with engaging candour. Four years of soaking in tropical pest holes and rioting from Monte Carlo to Rio, from Shanghai to Singapore, since they had met, and yet there he sat, sprawled out full length in his great cane chair, as cool and shameless and unconquerably youthful as though he had just been sent down from Oxford for the first time. Even in the light that filtered in through the cane shutters, green and strange as the pallid glow that washes through aquariums, it was clear that time had found no power to touch that long grace, that bright head with its ruffled crop of short hair, those gay eyes, wide set and mischievous in the brown young face, those absurd dimples, carved deep into the lean curve of the cheek. Young Ledyard gave a bark of outraged protest, his pleasant face flushed and exasperated under its thatch of sandy hair.

"You mean it? You aren't coming back with me?"

"Not for all the gold in the Indies, my dear kid— or out of them either, if it comes to that." The Honourable Tony, as he had been dubbed by a scandalized and diverted public, grinned alluringly through the vaguely sinister light at his onetime comrade at arms. "The whole thing is absolutely ripping, I tell you, and the only thing that I ask is to spend the next sixty years doing precisely what I'm doing now."

"I don't believe you," rejoined his baffled guest flatly. "Why in God's name should you want to rot your life away in a little backwater Hell, when I can give you a first-rate job twenty-four hours after we land in America?"

"But, my dear fellow, I wouldn't have your job as a birthday gift. You may be the heir apparent to the greatest rubber business in the whole jolly globe, but try to bear in mind that you see before you the chief, sole, and official British Imperial Adviser to the fattest little Sultan in Asia— who incidentally eats up every word of wisdom that falls from his adviser's lips and sits up and begs for more, let me tell you."

"And let me tell *you* that it's common gossip in every gutter in Singapore that your Sultan's a black-hearted scoundrel who's only waiting for a chance to double-cross England and do you one in the eye."

"What happens to be the current gutter gossip about his adviser?" inquired that gentleman blandly.

Ledyard's jaw looked suddenly aggressive.

"Never mind what it happens to be. What I want to know is why your friend Bhakdi isn't back in his dirty little capital trying to straighten out some of the messes he's got himself into instead of squatting up here in the jungle hunting tigers?"

"Because his invaluable adviser advises him to stay precisely where he is," explained the Honourable Tony cheerfully. "Just between us, there are several nasty bits of international complications and one or two strictly domestic ones that make a protracted absence from the native heath highly advisable— oh, highly. Besides, you'd hardly have us trot back without a tiger, would you? I assure you that so far we haven't bagged a solitary one. Not a tiger, Bill, not a tiger!"

"Oh, for the love of the Lord, shut up! I tell you this whole thing's a rotten, ugly, dangerous business, and I didn't come crawling up through Hades to have you turn it into a joke. I can't stay jawing about it, and you know it— it's going to be a darned close squeak to make connections with the steamer as it is. Are you coming or are you not?"

"I are not. Do quiet down and tell me why it is that you're totally unable to distinguish between comic opera and melodrama? This whole performance is the purest farce, I swear! Wait till you see his Imperial Majesty— as nice a buttery, pompous little blighter as you'd want to lay eyes on, who's spent six months at Cambridge and comes to heel like a spaniel if you tell him that anything in the world 'isn't done.' He has a solid gold bicycle and four unhappy marriages and a body-guard with bright green panties and mother-of-pearl handles to their automatics! You wouldn't expect even a Chinaman to take that seriously, would you?"

"I should think you'd go mad in your head trying to get along with a bounder who doesn't know the first thing in the world about your code of standards or— "

"William, you are the most frightful donkey! The only code that I've recognized since I pattered off the ancestral estate is the jolly dot-dash thing that they use for telegrams. I've finally got our Bhakdi to the point where he drills his troops in pure British and plays a cracking good game of auction bridge without cheating— civilization's greatest triumph in the Near or Far East. Personally, I ask no more of it!"

Ledyard mopped his brow despairingly. The dim room with its snowy matting and pale green cushions looked cool enough, but the heat outside would have penetrated a refrigerator. Just the other side of those protecting shutters the sun was beating down on the quiet waters until they glared back

like burning silver— the tufts of palm and bamboo were hanging like so many dejected jade banners in the breathless air— the ridiculous little houses were huddled clumsily together on their ungainly piles, shrinking unhappily under their huge hats of nippa thatch.

"It's a filthy, poisonous hole!" he protested fiercely. "It beats me why you can't see it. If anything went wrong here, you wouldn't have a white man in a hundred miles to turn to. You needn't laugh. There's nothing so howlingly funny about it. What about that Scotch engineer who was so everlastingly intimate with your precious Bhakdi's next-door neighbour?"

"Well, what about him? The poor chap fell down a shaft and broke his neck."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, believe me, that's not what they say in Singapore! Calvert, for God's *sake*, get out of this infernal place. Every inch of it smells of death and damnation. How any one who calls himself an English gentleman can stick it for a minute—"

"But I don't call myself an English gentleman," the Honourable Tony assured him earnestly. "God forbid! I call myself an out-and-out waster exiled for ever from the Mother Country by a cruel and powerful elder brother. The only trick in it is that I'm simply cuckoo with ecstasy over the entire situation. Not according to Kipling, what? No, the glittering prospect of spending the remaining years of a misspent life in the largest rubber factory in Ohio leaves me considerably colder than ice."

"I suggested Ohio because I happen to be in charge of that plant myself," returned Ledyard stiffly. "If you'd rather have a go at one of the others—"

"But, my good child, it seems impossible to make you understand that the factory has not been built for which I would exchange one single baked banana soaked in rum and moonlight. Think of the simply hideous sacrifices that I'd make, can't you?— taking advice instead of being paid good round guineas for giving it— working for one beastly hour after another instead of slipping from one golden minute to the next— drinking nasty chemical messes in constant terror of sudden death or prison bars, instead of tossing off bumpers and flagons and buckets of delectable fluids that smell like flowers and shine like jewels— dragging around to the most appalling festivals where pampered little females tip up their ridiculous powdered noses and distribute two minutes of their precious dances as though they were conferring the Order of the Garter, instead of—"

Ledyard looked suddenly three shades hotter beneath his freckles.

"Thanks— glad to know how much you enjoyed your visit."

"I enjoyed every minute of it to the point of explosion, as you are thoroughly well aware. If I live to ninety-two, I shall remember the excellent yarns that your father spun over those incredibly good cigars and that simply immortal corn pudding, and the shoulders on the little red-headed creature in the black dress

at the Country Club— good Lord, William, the shoulders on that creature! After four years of not especially pretty smells and not especially pretty noises, what do you think that those July evenings under the awnings on your veranda meant to a God-forsaken flying chap back from the wars, William?"

William looked frankly unappeased.

"A hell of a lot of difference it makes what I think! I know one God-forsaken flying chap who thought it wasn't good enough for him, by a long shot. Not while he could hop off and rot his soul out in a water-logged bamboo shack in Asia!"

The owner of the bamboo shack settled deeper into his chair with a graceless and engaging grin.

"My dear chap, it was Heaven, pure and simple— but a dash too pure and simple for some of us. Every man his own Heaven, what? Well, you're sitting in mine at the present. Of course it mightn't suit any one with even an elementary code of principles, but having none of any kind or description it suits me down to the ground and up to the sky."

"Oh, bunk!" commented Ledyard with fervent irritation. "You've got all the principles you need; do you think that I'd have come chasing up this unspeakable river in everything from a motorboat to a raft after any howling blackguard?"

"Well, it's rather one on you, isn't it, dear boy? Because it's so absolutely what you've up and gone and done— though through no earthly fault of mine, you know! Rather not. Didn't I spend four jolly busy years trying to get it through your thick skull that I was ninety-nine different varieties of blighter, and that nice little American kids with freckles on their noses shouldn't come trotting around my propellers?"

"Hey, how do you get that way?" The nice little American kid raised his voice in poignant irritation. "Kid! If any one ever took the trouble to give you two looks they'd think you'd bounced straight out of rompers into long trousers without waiting for knickerbockers. Kid!"

"Old in iniquity, William, old in iniquity," explained the Honourable Tony blithely. "Physically I grant that I'm fairly in the pink, but morally I'm edging rapidly into senile decay. I pledge you my word, which is worth considerably less than nothing, that I haven't as many morals as I have side whiskers. And even you, my dear old chap, will be willing to admit that I don't go in heavily for side whiskers. Take a long piercing look."

Ledyard scowled wretchedly at the impish countenance blandly presented for inspection.

"The trouble with you is that you simply can't take it in that any one on the whole bally globe could prefer a Bengal tiger to a British lion and a bird of paradise to an American eagle. You see before you a foul monstrosity who

would trade all the British Isles for twenty yards of jungle, and gloat over his bargain. Have a cigarette?"

"No, I won't have a cigarette. You make me so sick and tired with all that jaw about what a devil you are that I could yell. Once and for all, are you going to drop it and come back with me?"

"Once and for all I am not going to move one quarter of an inch. Stop jawing yourself for a minute, and try to see it my way. If you'd been chivvied about for your entire life by a lot of frenzied vestals for aunts who were trying to guide you to what they unfortunately considered grace, and three simply appalling bounders for brothers who set up the most frightful howl over the Bolingham name and the Bolingham honour and the Bolingham fortune every time the youngest member of the Bolingham family picked a primrose, you'd good and well think you were in Heaven if you could get out of earshot of their ghastly voices."

"Damn it all!" cried young Ledyard violently. "You haven't got the nerve to sit up there and tell me that you call this filthy water-hole Heaven?"

"Oh, I haven't, haven't I?" The Honourable Tony regarded the flushed countenance with pensive amusement. "I say, you Americans do have the most amazing cheek! Who ever asked you to come puffing and blowing into my own particular earthly Paradise and start in slanging it all over the shop? Filthy water-hole, by Gad! You won't recognize Heaven when you have the milk and gold and harps and honey stuck under your silly nose."

Ledyard rose sharply to his feet.

"All right, I'll be off, then, and not waste any more of the valuable time that you're employing so profitably. As you suggest, no one asked me to hurl myself into your affairs, and you've managed to make it good and clear that I was a lunatic to think that you'd take advice or help from me or any other well-meaning fool on the face of the earth. If you'll get hold of one of those black swine that make up your circle of friends, these days, and tell them to get my men and the raft—"

"My dear old chap!" The Honourable Tony was at Ledyard's side in two great strides, his arm was about Ledyard's shoulders in the old, remembered gesture of gay affection. "For God's sake, do try to remember that I am simply a feather-headed goat who can't for the life of him say three consecutive inoffensive syllables— I give you my word that I was born with both feet in my mouth—actually! As for your taking the time and trouble to come tooting up that frightful river in order to throw me a life-line, I could sit down and howl with emotion whenever I think of it— no, I swear that's the truth! Do sit down again like a good chap— it's absolute rot to talk about going before sundown; the sun would simply melt you down like a tallow candle. Besides, the jetty-eyed companion of your travels isn't back from her interview with His Majesty, and

you can hardly abandon her to our tender mercies— oh, well, hardly! I say, didn't you gather that she was going to romp straight back to our sheltering wings as soon as she'd presented the heart-wrung petition?"

"If you believe two words the lying little devil says, you're a worse fool than I am!" said Ledyard gloomily.

The Honourable Tony shouted his delight.

"Where's all this hundred per cent. American chivalry? What an absolutely shocking way to talk about a perfect lady who touchingly relies on your being a perfect gentleman. 'Meestair Billee Ledyar', allaways, allaways he conduck heemself like a mos' pairfick genteelman!'"

He shouted again at the sight of Meestair Billee Ledyar's revolted countenance.

"Calvert, when I think what I've been through with that beastly limpet, jabbering all day and hysterics all night— it's nothing short of a miracle that I didn't bash her head against the anchor and feed her to the crocodiles. Who the devil is she, anyway?"

"Daisy de Vallorosa? My dear chap, why ask me?"

"Well, I do ask you. She seems to know who you are all right!"

"Does she, indeed? Upon my word, that's interesting!"

He cocked his head attentively, guileless and inscrutable.

"Yes, she does indeed. Come on— let me in on this! Did she honestly come up here to get help for a brother dying in the tin mines, or is this a rendezvous that the two of you fixed up in Singapore?"

His host looked shocked but magnanimous.

"William, William— no, frankly, you appall me! What a sordid mind you have under that sunny exterior; out upon you! I never make rendezvous— absolutely not."

"Well, she swore that she'd met you and Bhakdi at a special concert while he was visiting Singapore."

"Oh, extremely special," murmured the Honourable Tony, a reminiscent gleam in his eye. "Rather! She sang some little songs that were quite as special as anything I've ever heard in my life, and at one time or another I've heard a good few. Bhakdi was most frightfully bowled over; he gave her two hammered gold buckles and a warm invitation to drop in on him at any time that she was in the neighbourhood. I rather fancy that that's what's at the bottom of all this; taking one thing with another, I'm inclined to believe that Necessity became a Mother again when our little Daisy barged into you, and that the expiring brother is simply one of her inventive offspring. Hence, death and the tin mines! By the way, just how *did* the young female barge into you?"

"She had the next seat on the train from Singapore, curse her!" replied Ledyard vindictively. "And she sat there as good and quiet as pie, squeaking out,

'Yes, I sank you' and 'No, I sank you' every time I asked her if she wanted the window up, or the shades down or— or anything. I tell you butter wouldn't have melted in her nasty little painted mouth! Then when we found that you and Bhakdi had lit out after tigers, and I decided that I'd just have time before the next boat to hire a crew and hunt you down, she went off into twenty-one different kinds of hysterics until I promised to bring her along, too. 'Five meenit— only five small lil' meenit to spik weeth the gr-reat, the good Sultan, and the gr-reat, nobl' Honable Meestaire Tonee Calver', and her Manuelo would be restore once more to her arms.' When I think that I fell for that I could choke down a quart of carbolic straight."

"Oh, I can quite see how it came about— quite, quite!" murmured the Honourable Tony, pensively sympathetic.

"Believe me, you can't see the half of it!"Ledyard ran a frenzied hand through the sandy hair. "Listen, how about getting away now, before she turns up?"

"Well, upon my word, you unprincipled young devil, I've yet to hear a cooler proposition! Damme if you don't curdle the blood— damme if you don't. Are you asking me to sit by and condone a callous desertion of this young female to the lures of a wily and dissolute potentate?"

Ledyard faced his delighted inquisitor unabashed.

"Oh, go on— I'll bet that's what she's after— and if you ask me, he's plenty good enough for her. She's probably a cousin of his; any one with all that fuzzy black hair and those black saucer eyes and nasty glittery little teeth—"

"Wrong again, dear boy. The lady is undeniably the legitimate offspring of Lady Scott's English maid and a Portuguese wine merchant, born in Madeira. She is also a British subject, being the legitimate widow of the late Tommy Potts, one-time pianist of the Imperial Doll Baby Girls."

"Widow?" demanded Ledyard incredulously.

"Widow and orphan, William. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Tommy, alas, passed away while they were touring New Zealand, in a distressingly complicated attack of appendicitis and D. T.'s. She didn't tell you?"

"No, she did not tell me," replied William somewhat aggressively. "See here, how do you happen to know so much about this Portuguese Empire Doll Baby?"

"A trifling matter of a passport, William. Purely as a business matter it became my painful duty to excavate the lady's buried past."

Ledyard eyed him suspiciously.

"I believe she's gone on you and you know it," he said gloomily. "Anyway, if she doesn't turn up pretty soon, I'm going to pull out, and that's that. You and Bhakdi can fight it out between the two of you— I'm through chaperoning Daisy de Vallorosa Potts from now on."

"Sorry, but you're going to have to chaperon her clear back to Singapore," the Honourable Tony assured him inflexibly. "If there's one thing that I simply cannot and will not stick it's cheap powder, and if there are two things that I simply cannot and will not stick— it's cheap perfume. The less they cost, the more they use. Lord, Lord, the perfume that little hussy uses!"

"If she's a British subject, it's your job to look out for her. She's under your protection."

"My dear kid, I wouldn't disturb this enchanting existence by lifting a finger to protect Queen Victoria from Don Juan."

"Well, she'd better step lively," remarked her late escort ominously. "I'm not joking, you know— if I don't make connections with that boat in Singapore, I'm as good as disinherited! My Governor's not so gone on you that he'd consider you any excuse for missing two boats, you know."

"Not for missing one, you young ass." The gay eyes dwelt on him deeply for a moment, mocking and affectionate. "Your very able parent was one fellow who never entertained any illusions as to my intrinsic merit, wasn't he?"

Ledyard drew a long breath, his face a little pale.

"Yes," he said slowly, "he was. That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. It's hard to talk to you about anything like that, Calvert!"

"Like what?"

The tone was hardly encouraging for all its amiability, but young Ledyard pushed doggedly ahead.

"Like that— anything serious or intimate or real. You make it darned difficult, let me tell you."

"Then why do it?"

"Oh, not because I want to!" His angry, tired young face bore unmistakable testimony to that. "Believe me, if I were consulting my own pleasure I'd have told you to go to the devil the first time you tried any of that condescending impertinence of yours on me."

"Is it beside the mark to ask you just whose pleasure you *are* consulting, then?"

Young Ledyard set his teeth hard.

"Pattie's," he said, very distinctly.

The Honourable Tony did not stir, but the eyes that he fixed on Pattie's brother went suddenly and incredibly black. After a long pause he repeated, evenly and courteously,

"Pattie's?"

"Yes, Pattie's. That's half of why I came— the other half, if you want to know, is because I'm fool enough to care more about you than any other man I ever met— than any other two men."

The wide eyes were suddenly blue again.

"Thanks," said the Honourable Tony, and there was something startlingly sweet in his smile. "Thanks awfully. It's quite mutual, you know— any three men, I should say offhand. Suppose we simply let it go at that? And do try one of these cigarettes; they really are first-rate."

"I can't let it go at that, I tell you— I wish to the Lord I could. Pattie had it all out with Dad, and she made me swear that I'd run you down when I got out here and bring you back. She said that if I couldn't work it any other way I was to tell you that she said 'Please.' I'm at the end of my rope, Calvert— and Pattie says 'Please.'"

The Honourable Tony raised his hand sharply, staring through Pattie's brother as though he saw someone else. Possibly he did see someone else— someone as clear and cool in that dim, hot room as a little spring, someone who stood there very small and straight with young Ledyard's sandy hair clasping her brows like a wreath of autumn leaves, and young Ledyard's gray eyes turned to two dancing stars, and young Ledyard's freckles trailing a faint gold powder across the very tip of her tilted nose— someone as brave and honest as a little boy and as wistful and gentle as a little girl, who stood clasping her hands together tightly, and said "Please."

"No, by God!" cried the Honourable Tony loudly. "No!"

"Don't yell like that." Ledyard rapped the words out fiercely. "I'm not deaf— all you have to say is 'no' once. If it's any satisfaction to you to know it, I'm through."

He rose to his feet and his host rose, too, swiftly, catching at his arm.

"Rather got the wind up, haven't we, old thing? No, don't jerk away; it's simply rotten bad manners, and throws me off my stride completely when I'm preparing to do the thing in the grand manner— apologies, and *amendes honorables* and every mortal trick in the bag. You're absolutely right, you know. It's far too hot to start shouting, and I swear that I'll keep quiet if you will. We might toss off a stirrup cup of quinine, what?"

"I believe that you'd laugh at a corpse," said Ledyard fiercely.

The Honourable Tony eyed him for a moment strangely— and then shrugged his shoulders.

"At a corpse— exactly. And there you are!"

"Well, where am I? D'you want me to tell Pattie that all you have to say to her is 'No, by God'?"

"I want you to tell Pattie just exactly nothing whatever; say that I was off tiger hunting with the Sultan, and that you couldn't get track of me to save your soul."

"Thanks; I don't go in for lies— more especially not with Pattie."

"I see." The Honourable Tony, his hands deep in his pockets, evidently saw something not entirely flattering, judging from the curl to his lip. After a minute,

however, he dismissed it with another careless shrug. "Oh, spare your conscience by all means. Give Pattie my love, then, and tell her that I'd like most awfully to run up and wipe her out at tennis, but that I'm so indispensable here that I can't possibly make it."

"That all?"

"Quite all, thanks."

"But, good Lord, I tell you that she *wants* you—"

"You misunderstood her."

"Don't be a fool. She told me—"

The Honourable Tony jerked forward suddenly, his fingers biting into Ledyard's arm, his low voice savage as a whip.

"Drop it, will you? *Drop it!*" At the sight of the blank and stricken amazement in the other's eyes he broke off sharply, his fingers relaxing their grip. "Oh, Lord love us, we're both fit for a madhouse! Throw some water over me— pound my head against the wall— do something but stand there staring like another lunatic. Pull your jaw back, there's a good kid."

Ledyard stared at him wretchedly.

"But, Calvert, I swear that I don't understand. I thought— we all thought— that you— that you cared for her—"

"My dear fellow, what in the world has that got to do with it? The more I cared for her the less likely I'd be to go within a thousand miles of her. For God's sake, and Pattie's sake, and my sake, try to get this straight. I am absolutely no good. I don't mean that I'm one of your deep-dyed, hair-raising villains— no such luck; I'm simply a waster and rotter of the very first water who's gone to and fro over the face of the earth doing the things that he ought not to have done, and leaving undone the things that he ought to have done for more years than he cares to remember. You're worse than mad to tempt me to forget it; don't do it again, there's a good chap. And while you're about it, try and remember that the best there is isn't half good enough for Pattie."

Ledyard swallowed hard.

"I don't care— you can talk till you're black in the face, and I won't believe that you know yourself. If it came to a show-down, you'd be as good as the best."

"Thanks. As it's not likely to, you can take my word for it that I'm not of the stuff of which heroes are made, even in a pinch. Now that that's settled, how about hunting up the little Vallorosa hussy? It's getting on a bit."

"I hope to the Lord she's decided to settle here for life."

"Oh, rot. Tell you what, if the young thing doesn't turn up pretty promptly, we'll call out the royal, holy, gold-fringed, pearl-tasselled, diamond-studded red parasols, and romp over in time to cadge some light refreshments from His Majesty. He has a cognac that will make you sit up and yelp with excitement;

Napoleon— the real stuff, I pledge you my word. I suppose that it will be simply thrown away on you; half a nip of prune cordial sets the good old world going round for you Yankee martyrs these days, what?"

"Help!" invoked Ledyard with gloomy fervour. "Glad to know you get the comic sections regularly."

"My priceless old thing, we get nothing whatever regularly; that's one of the unholy charms. When my royal master and pupil feels any craving for mail and newspapers and other foreign frivolities he summons about twenty of the stalwart flowers of the masculine population and bids them oil and decorate and adorn themselves as befits the occasion and pop into the old lacquer sampans and yo heave ho on business of state. A few days or a few weeks later they turn up like Santa Claus bearing gifts, and I take all the pretty envelopes with an English postmark and put them in a nice tin can with a nice round stone, and drop 'em out of the window plop into the jolly old river— returned unopened, with many, many thanks! You never can tell when one of the tricky little devils might read 'Anthony, come home, all is forgiven.'"

"But, my Lord, they must be worried half frantic! How do they know whether you're alive or dead?"

"My dear chap, the only thing that the Bolinghams have ever worried about as far as little Anthony Christopher's concerned was that he mightn't have the grace to die before one of his waggish pranks landed him in jail or actually cost them something in pounds and shillings instead of mere lamentations! That's why I gratified them by throwing over my share of the title when I came of age. Lord Anthony, what? No, thanks. But it's all too clear that you don't know Aunt Pamela and Aunt Clarissa, the last of the Bolingham vestals, or those splendid fellows, Roderick, Cyril, and Oliver."

"Good-night, I'd hate to be as bitter as that about my worst enemy." Ledyard's honest drawl was chilled and thoughtful.

"Bitter? About my priceless family?" His careless mirth flooded the quiet room. "No, I swear that's good! Why, my child, I revel in 'em; I have ever since Oliver used to jerk me out of bed at two in the morning to wallop the everlasting soul out of me because he'd lost at *écarté*— ragging along all the time about how it was his sacred duty as head of the Bolingham family to see that I learned not to disgrace it again by getting in through the scullery window at nine o'clock of a fine August night. I wasn't more than three feet high, with a face no bigger than a button, but I couldn't keep it straight then and I can't keep it straight now when I think of that enormous red mug of his with all those noble sentiments pouring out of it— and the harder he walloped and the nobler he gabbled, the more I knew he'd lost. I was Satan's own limb even in those days, and he generally managed to dig up some excellent and fruity reason for improving the witching hours with a boot-strap, but it undeniably was one on both of us that

the night that he lost one hundred and thirty-seven golden guineas I'd been in bed in a state of grace since early dawn, with a nice bit of fever and a whopping toothache."

"And just what did he do about that?" inquired Ledyard grimly. He did not seem to be as carried away by the humour of the situation as the Honourable Tony, whose carved dimples had become riotous at memory.

"Oh, you simply have to credit Noll for resource— he trounced the skin off me for adding hypocrisy to my list of iniquities! And there was I, innocent as a water baby of guilt or guile for twenty-four priceless hours— you'll have to admit that it was a good one on me. I've taken jolly good care from that day to this that I didn't let a night come around without deserving a simply first-rate caning, let me tell you!"

Ledyard made a gesture of fierce disgust.

"Do you mean to tell me that your own brother beat you night after night and no one lifted a hand to stop him?"

"Oh, well, come, who do you think was going to stop him?" inquired the Honourable Tony with indulgent amusement. "After all, the noble Duke had a fairly good right to see that a cheeky brat learned all of the sacred traditions of the family from the sacred head of the family, hadn't he? Well, rather! All the more to his credit that the little jackanapes wasn't his own brother."

"Wasn't?" echoed Ledyard blankly.

"Oh, come, come— you don't mean to say that no one's told you the true history of the little black sheep rampant on the Bolingham arms? No? Oh, I say, I *am* let down— I thought all you chaps used to jaw about it for hours between flights! No one even said a word about it down the river? Well, there's glory for you; it begins to look as though I'd won your kind attentions under entirely false pretences, my dear kid. All the time that you've been thinking me a purely blue specimen of the British aristocracy I've been a black skeleton and a dancing sheep and a mere paltry half brother to His Grace the Duke of Bolingham— and it begins to look as though I were an impostor to boot. I say, I *am* sick."

He looked far from sick; leaning back in the long chair with his brown hands clasped behind his bright head, he looked radiantly and outrageously amused.

Ledyard gave a vicious kick to an innocuous rattan stool.

"I don't know what you're driving at, but if you're implying that the reason that I was misguided enough to choose you for a friend, was that you happened to have a duke for your father, you can shut your mouth and eat your words. I'd always understood that you were Bolingham's son, but I don't give a curse if he picked you out of an ash-can, and you know it. Dukes mean nothing in my young life, let me tell you. If you aren't Bolingham's son, who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Bolingham's son, all right enough, only unlike Noll and Cyril and Roddie, I don't happen to be able to claim the Lady Alicia Honoria Fortescue as

my mother. No, no, nothing to bring the blush of shame to that ingenuous brow, William. The lady died some eighteen years before I arrived on the scene, so neither of us can be blamed, you'll admit. My mother's name happened to be Biddy O'Rourke, and I'd be willing to take an oath that she was prouder of that and being able to dance longer on her toes than any one else in the London music halls, than of the minor matter of bearing the title of Duchess of Bolingham and having forty-two servants call her 'Your Grace.' Your Grace! I shouldn't be surprised if it fitted her better than the Lady Alicia Honoria."

"You mean he was married to her?"

"Rather— rather, my young sleuth! There was all too little doubt on that score to make it pleasant for any one but the unregenerate Duke and his Duchess. It seemed to afford them considerable amusement."

"I didn't know that dukes married— married artists." Young Ledyard eyed his host with suspicion; he had fallen victim more than once to the soaring flights of that gentleman's imagination.

"They don't; that was exactly what furnished all the ripe excitement. He not only married her, but he was most frightfully set up about it— fairly swollen with pride. Nothing damped them, as far as I can learn; Society and the Court and the whole blooming family went off their heads with excitement and cut her and insulted her and disowned her— and she laughed in their faces and danced on their toes. She thought that the whole thing was the most stupendous joke; Bunny says that there never were five minutes after she came to Gray Courts that you couldn't hear her laughing or singing somewhere about the place— and sometimes doing both at once."

"Who's Bunny?"

"Bunny was her maid— afterward she was my own private slave until the magnificent Noll showed her the gates of the ancestral home after she'd locked me up in her room one night when he was out hunting for me with the boot-strap! She went off into the most stunning hysterics right outside the door and called him a bloody roaring monster what ought to have his heart cut out for laying a finger on an innocent lamb. And when they fished the innocent lamb out from under the bed and informed him between larrups that his Bunny had been hurled into outer darkness by two footmen and an under-gardener, he let out the last howls of his life. He'd reached the mature age of six and a half, but he hasn't lost or found anything since worth a single solitary howl!"

"Why didn't your mother and father stop them?" demanded Ledyard, looking stern and sick and still faintly incredulous.

"Because the only active interference they were capable of at the time would have been with a Ouija board," explained the Honourable Tony affably. "Exit Biddy, Duchess of Bolingham, laughing, on the day that young Anthony Christopher Stoningham Calvert makes his first bow to a ravished family. I'll

wager that before she slipped off she realized that it was a good one on all of us, too!"

"Well, but what happened to your father?"

"Oh, the Black Duke, as he was impolitely referred to, hadn't extracted any amusement from life before he discovered his Biddy, and once she was gone, he evidently considered it a dingy affair. He slunk around the empty corridors for a bit hunting for the echo of her laughter, but he got tired of that game, too, and died of pneumonia and boredom without making any particular fuss— though Bunny swears that after everyone in the room thought he was gone for good and they all were filing out of the room on the tips of reverent toes, he flung back his head and gave one great roar of laughter— the kind of a roar that he used to give when he'd come on little Biddy in a dark hall, dancing out an imitation of the Bolingham vestals at their weekly task of patronizing the parish poor. Bunny said that it fair scared the breath out of their bodies, but when they went back he was lying there as dead as last year's wild boar."

"Calvert, are you making this up?"

The Honourable Tony turned his head sharply toward his interlocutor, his dark eyes narrowed to slits. After a moment's cold scrutiny of the troubled countenance, he shrugged his shoulders with a not highly diverted laugh.

"My dear kid, I suppose that I've asked for this by over-valuing your powers of discrimination! Just as a tip, though, I may pass on to you the information that even the clown in the circus is apt to draw the line at playing the giddy fool over his mother. I might add, moreover, that my fertile imagination would balk at inventing any one as delightful as the lady who did me the honour to be mine."

Ledyard, flushed to the bone, met the ironic gaze with considerable dignity.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "As you imply, I'm a tasteless fool."

"And so you're in excellent company!" his host assured him. "I will now rapidly descend from the ancestral high-horse and prove to you, strictly as a matter of penance, that I am not invariably a liar. If you'll wait just half a shake, I'll present you to Biddy, ninth Duchess of Bolingham."

He vanished into the room at the back with a reassuring gleam over his shoulder at young Ledyard's startled countenance, and was back in rather less than half a shake with a shabby black case in his hands. He put it carefully on the table between them, touched a spring, and stepped with a low bow.

"There!" he announced. "Madame Biddy, the American kid with the freckles— you know the one. Mr. Bill Ledyard from Ohio, the Duchess of Bolingham— from Ireland."

Out of the black velvet frame there smiled, wicked and joyful, a tiny vision of gold and ivory and sapphire. The head, with its froth of bright curls, lightly

tilted— the nose tilted, too— and the lips tilted, too— there she sat laughing down the years, gay as a flower, reckless as a butterfly, lovely as a dream.

"Buffets and insults and three inimitable step-children and four incomparable sisters-in-law— and then some artist chap came along and painted her like this!" The Honourable Tony leaned over, touching the gauzy folds of the dress with a light and caressing finger. "She's a bit incredible, after all, you know! They were going to crush all that life and laughter clear down into the earth, and away she went dancing through their fingers into the dust that was just a flower garden to her. She's more alive this minute than they'll ever be in all their everlasting stale lives. Ah, Biddy darlin', look at you now after flirtin' with the fine young man from America, and you with the blessed saints to teach you wisdom all these weary long years."

Ledyard stared down at her, young and awed and tongue-tied.

"She's— she's the prettiest thing that I ever saw— honestly."

"Oh, prettier than that, young Bill. She's the prettiest thing that ever lived— or ever died. And she was such a lovely little lunatic herself that we get on famously. We know what a joke it all is, don't we, Biddy? God be praised, we even know when it's on us. There now, back you go, mavourneen, while Mr. Billee Ledyar' and I start out hunting for another lady. Bill, take a look across the *kampong* at the sun while I hunt up my helmet— if it's lower than Bhakdi's roof you'd better be off. It goes down like a rocket in these parts, once it gets started."

Young Ledyard flung open the great wooden door that had barred out the heat, and a little breeze came dancing in, barely stirring the strange glossy leaves that clustered about the ladder-like steps. The sky was blue as steel; behind the black shadow of the Sultan's residence there were livid streaks— the world was silent and alien as a dream. He shivered strongly, and stepped back into the room.

"The sun's set," he said. "There's someone coming across from that shack you call a palace."

The Honourable Tony strolled leisurely out of his bedroom.

"Ghundi!" he commented after a brief inspection. "The incomparable Ghundi."

"Who the devil's Ghundi?"

"He's my head boy, William, and the delight of my soul; the only honest man I ever knew, saving your presence. I've taught him English, and he's taught me considerably more than that— oh, considerably. What tidings, Ghundi?"

The bronze statue saluted with a grave and beautiful precision.

"Master, the Great One says that the white woman stays. Let your friend return down the waters without her."

The Honourable Tony lifted his brows.

"Stays with the Great One, Ghundi?"

"With the Great One, Master."

The Honourable Tony glanced pensively at the dark bulk of the palace.

"So much for that!" he murmured gently. "Bear my compliments to the Great One, Ghundi. Is all in readiness at the beach?"

"The raft waits, Master. Go swiftly, or your friend will stumble in the night."

"Excellent advice! Latch the door after you, and on your way, William; I'll come as far as the beach. No, this way. The air feels cool as water, doesn't it? Smell that breeze; it's straight down from the jungle."

"It smells of poison," cried young Ledyard fiercely. "The whole place is rank with it— it's crawling. Calvert— Calvert, come back with me. I swear I'll never let you regret it; I swear—"

"And here we are. Gad, we're just in time if you want to tell the raft from the river. In you go, my lad, and off you go. Lord love you for coming!"

"Calvert, I won't— I'm not going."

The Honourable Tony laid his hands lightly and strongly on the boy's shoulders, pushing him relentlessly toward the water.

"My dearest kid, don't be an ass. If you stayed one minute longer, you'd ruin the best memory of my life. I mean it. Off with you."...

He stood with one arm flung up in a reassuring gesture of farewell until the bamboo raft with its sandy-haired occupant vanished around the dim curve of the river. The night was falling with the velvet precipitation of the tropics— even while he stood its dark mantle was about him; new perfumes stole from its folds, troubling and exquisite, and one by one its jewels shone out— the small, ruddy fires of the *kampong*, an occasional lantern swinging hurriedly by and, square by square, the distant windows in the Sultan's residence, flashing aggressive as a challenge. He lowered his arm somewhat abruptly. Very gay to-night, the Sultan's residence; gayer than was its wont— gay as for some high festivity. The imperial Bhakdi was not greatly given to such prodigal display of oil and tallow; his mentor eyed the illumination critically, and then, with the old indifferent shrug, swung leisurely off through the blackness toward the shadow deeper than the surrounding shadows that was home. He ran lightly up the crazy steps, felt for the latch— and drew back his hand as sharply as though he had touched hot coal. He had touched something more startling than any coal; the groping fingers had closed on emptiness. The latched door was open.

"Ghundi!" His voice cut sharply into the dark space that a few minutes before had been a room, green-cushioned, white-matted, commonplace, and serene. "Ghundi!"

Silence— haunted and ominous. The Honourable Tony leaned against the door frame and addressed the shadows.

"Of course, this is frightfully jolly! I'd have laid out a mat with welcome drawn up all over it if I'd had the faintest notion of what was in store for me— though that would have been a bit superfluous, come to think of it! You seem to have managed nicely without any mat at all. I hope you've made yourself quite at home?"

Silence. The Honourable Tony did not move, but he raised his voice.

"Mrs. Potts! I say, I hope you've made yourself quite at home?"

From the hushed depths came a small, frantic commotion.

"Ah, be qui-*yet*!" The desperate whisper came toward him in a rush. "Be qui-*yet*, I do implore!"

"Oh, my dear girl, come now! Silence may be golden, and all that— and naturally I'm enormously flattered at finding you lurking around the corners of my humble abode, but before we do away with the human voice entirely, why not have a go at straightening out one or two minor matters? The first being just precisely what in the devil you're doing here instead of on Ledyard's boat?"

"Meestaire Honable Tonee, on my knees I pray to you, be more quiyet! Lissen, lissen, come more close. I tell you evairy thing. No, come more close. Do not let them see— do not, do not let them hear. Ah— ah— more sof', more still! So!"

Out of the blackness the suppliant whisper drew him like a taut thread— nearer, nearer— he stumbled over something small and yielding, swore and laughed in the same quick breath, and felt two fluttering hands clutch at him, closing over his wrist in frantic protest.

"No, no, do not laff— hush, do not laff, I say."

"Well, but what in *hell*?" inquired the Honourable Tony, softly enough to satisfy even his exigent audience. "No, I say, drop it, there's a good little lunatic! I'm after the matches; they're on this table somewhere—"

"Honable Tonee— lissen— eef one of those matches you should light, we die."

"Oh, we do, do we? Well, death will be a blessed relief for one of us and a just retribution for the other. Why hasn't someone killed you for using that simply frightful stuff long before this, Daisy?"

"What stuff ees that? Ah, ah, Honable Tonee, I am a-frighten to die; I am a-frighten!"

"But after all, that hardly alters the merits of the case, now does it? Though even death doesn't seem to quite expiate the crime! Do you bathe in it?"

"But in *what*? Lissen— I tell you, lissen—"

"Lissen yourself, my child; it's I who am going to tell you. Apparently you've had no guidance whatever so far, but precisely here is where you acquire a guardian angel. Daisy, little girls have been boiled in oil for less than using one drop of the noxious fluid in which you are drowning."

"No, I do not onnerstan'— no, but lissen, I beg, I pray— you mus' hide me, Honable Tonee, you mus' hide me fas' before he come to keel us both."

"Hide you?" The Honourable Tony yielded to unregenerate mirth above the terrified murmurs of protest. "My dear Potts, you might precisely as well ask a thimble to hide a perfume factory! Actually, you know, when I was clean over there by the door, it fairly bowled me off my feet."

"Hush— oh, hush— eet ees my pairfume?"

"It is indeed— it most emphatically is."

"You could know eet from that door?"

"I could know it from the far edge of the *kampong*."

"Then they fin' me— then, oh, they fin' me!"

At the sick terror of that small wail the Honourable Tony stirred.

"I say, you're not really frightened, are you?"

"I am vairy frighten' to die," his visitor told him simply. "You are not?"

"Well, I'd be jolly well let down, I can tell you! It would upset my schedule no end; so if it's all right with you we might go on living for a bit."

"But that I think we cannot do," said the small, chilled whisper.

"The deuce you say!" commented the Honourable Tony pensively. He swung himself up onto the table, and sat staring into the darkness for a minute, his head cocked on one side, swinging his long legs over its edge. "Look here, suppose we stop entertaining each other and bag a few of the blood-curdling facts. What do you say to diving in again at the beginning of all the small talk, and telling me just exactly what you're doing trotting into my humble dwelling and turning it into a cross between a madhouse and a cemetery? The woman's touch, so long lacking, what? Do stop crying; nothing in the whole world's worth crying about like that— not even that infernal perfume!"

"I cry becaus' vairy greatly I am afraid," she explained gently. "An' vairy greatly I am sorry that I bring to your poor abode such pain an' grief an' danger. I make you all excuse; I did not know wair else to go— no, truly, truly I did not know—"

"But why in the name of grief didn't you go to the boat?"

"Honable Tonee, eet was gone, eet was gone!"

"Oh, rot! The boat was here until a few minutes ago. Look here, my dear child, if you're trying any of your little tricks on me, I can save you any amount of time and trouble by tipping you off to the fact that you're heading straight for a wash-out. This whole performance looks most frightfully dodgy and I'm beginning to be pretty fairly fed up. From brother Manuelo on—"

The limp bundle shivering quietly beneath his fingers shivered more deeply still, and sighed.

"About Manuelo, that was a lie."

"Well, it's gratifying to have my worst suspicions confirmed, naturally! But of all the confounded cheek—"

"Eet was jus' a lie that Manuelo he was my brothair. Manuelo, he ees the belove' of my heart."

"The devil he is!" The Honourable Tony's voice was edged with mild interest. "And may I ask why the brotherly transformation?"

"What ees that?"

"Why the lie, Daisy?"

"Because men, too well do I know them. Ah, ah, too well! Eef I say to Meestair Ledyar', to that black devil out from hell, to your own self, Honable Tonee, that eet ees tryin' to save the belove' of my heart that I go crezzy in my haid and die two thousan' death from terror, you think they lissen to me then? You think they help me then? Well, me, I think not."

"And me, I think not, too!" agreed the Honourable Tony promptly. "Quite a student of human nature, in your quiet way, aren't you, Daisy? I say, do let's have some light on this! I don't think that Manuelo would fancy it for a moment if he knew that we were all huddled up here in the pitch-black whispering things at each other."

"Manuelo, one thousan' time he have tell me eef he fin' me with a man alone, he cut the heart out from our body."

"Perhaps it's all for the best that he's going to remain in the tin mines," suggested the Honourable Tony philosophically. "No cloud without a silver lining, what? However, I'm going to humour Manuelo to the extent of seeing that we have all the light that a large lamp can cast over what I trust is going to prove a brief interview. Do stop whimpering, there's a good child!"

"Honable Tonee, thees lamp you mus' not light. See, no longer I cry— no longer I make one soun'— only thees lamp you mus' not light. No, wait, you do not onnerstan'—"

"You're putting it conservatively, Daisy!"

"Wait, then, I tell you— all I make clear— but no light. Eef there is a light, he know you are here; eef he know you are here, he know that I, too, am here— an' eef he know I, too, am here, then we die. That ees clear now?"

"Well, frankly, it still leaves a bit to be desired. One or two minor gaps— who is it that's going to slay us when he comes to the conclusion that we're both here, Daisy? Manuelo?"

"No, no, no— Manuelo, I tell you, he dyin' in those tin mines."

"Oh— well, then, candidly, you have me. If it isn't Manuelo, my mind is a perfect blank as to who would profit by doing away with us. Unless— you haven't misled me about Mr. Potts, have you?"

"Ah, what now?"

"Mr. Potts is still dead?"

"Honable Tonee, eet ees not well to mock— eet ees not well to laff! He was dead like I say; eet ees not good to mock the dead."

"He has my abject apologies. But that brings us back to the murderer."

"Murderair?"

"By all means— the cove who's going to dash in and dispose of us if I light the lamp."

"Honable Tonee, you know well eet ees he, that mos' accurse' black devil of all black devils to whom I pray to save my Manuelo."

"Daisy, it can't be our royal Bhakdi that you're referring to in these unmeasured terms?"

And suddenly she clung to him, weeping abjectly through her clicking teeth.

"No, no, nevair say hees name— nevair spik it! Wair ees there I can be hid— wair ees there I can be hid far away? I am a-frighten to die— Manuelo— ah-h— Manuelo!"

The Honourable Tony felt for the small, untidy silken head in the darkness, patting it with deft but reluctant fingers.

"My dear kid, if it's Bhakdi who's been frightening you into this state, it's a good deal simpler than one, two, three to straighten it out. Tell you what: you curl up in this wicker chair— there, put your head back, and take a long breath— and I'll stroll over to the royal residence and put the fear of God and England into the little blighter. Don't howl; it's going to be absolutely all serene, I swear—"

But at that the soft convulsion of weeping deepened to mysterious vehemence.

"No, no, nevair stir— nevair— nevair! He mus' not know I come here; he mus' not know I have see you— eef he know that, you die—"

"Daisy, you've been running in too much to the cinemas. What you need is a good stiff dose of 'Alice in Wonderland.' 'Off with his head', what? My good child, the little bounder eats out of my hand— either or both. He—"

"No, no, no, he keel you," the frantic, obstinate little voice stammered in desperate urgency. "That he tell to me— that he say to me— he keel you."

"But in the name of the Lord, why?"

"Becaus' I tell to heem that if once more he lay on me hees black an' dirty han's I go to you for help. Ah, Maria, hees han's— ah, Manuelo, Manuelo!"

"Daisy— Daisy, this is all simply too good to be true; no, honestly, I'm wrenching my mind out of its socket trying to believe you. You'll swear he said that he'd kill me? But why? Why?"

"Becaus' ovair me he ees gone crezzy." The tear-sodden whisper was charged with mournful pride. "Ovair me he ees gone crezzy mad. He tell to me that he marry with me— that the jewels from hees las' two wive he give to me for prezzens—"

The Honourable Tony yielded to another gale of delighted mirth.

"Well, upon my word, you couldn't ask for anything fairer than that! Why not accept?"

"Hush— hush— more still! You have forgot Manuelo?"

"To be entirely candid, my child, I had forgot Manuelo. It's delightful to know that you haven't, however! Well, but then how in the world did you get here?"

"I have jump out from a window."

"From a— Daisy, you're making this up!"

"No, no— for why, for why should I make thees up, Honable Tonee? Lissen, he have lock me up in a great ogly room, until I come back into my sense, he say, becaus' so bad I cry an' scream, an' cry an' scream— lissen, so then I jump from out that window. Ah, ah, Dios, eet was too high, that window; my haid eet ache, my haid eet ache so bad, while I have crawl an' crawl through all the black— but that boat he was gone away, Honable Tonee, an' me, I am a-frighten till I die, becaus' I do not know wair to go. Lissen, I am a mos' bad girl— I bring to you danger an' worry, but my haid eet hurt, and I do not know wair—"

"My dear Daisy, you knew exactly." The Honourable Tony administered a final reassuring pat, and swung off from the table. "You showed really extraordinary judgment, not to go into the matter of taste. This is Liberty Hall, my priceless child; you should feel entirely at home with practically no effort. Before you settle down definitely, however, we might run over our lines in case the Imperial Bhakdi takes it into his head to drop in on us before we've worked out any very elaborate campaign for Liberty and Manuelo, the heart's belove'. D'you think he's liable to dash over before I could hunt up Ghundi and a sampan, and head you down stream?"

"No, no— no, no, no— do not leave me! No, I die when you shall leave me!"

"Oh, come!" remonstrated the Honourable Tony blithely. "That's spreading it on fairly thick, you know— I don't believe that Manuelo would pass over that kind of thing for a minute. Look here, I'll be back before you can get through Jack Robinson—"

"No! No!"

It was indecent for any living creature to show such abject terror, more like a tortured and frenzied kitten than a sane human being. The Honourable Tony shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it's quite all right with me, you know! I simply thought if the little beggar was roving about it might be tidier and simpler to get you out of the way— though it would be any amount jollier if you were around, naturally. We could do something nice with a screen— or there's the other room; on the whole, that has more possibilities. By Gad, we can get some simply stunning effects, with practically no trouble at all. I've an automatic in there."

"Ah-h-h!"

"My dear kid, don't go off like that again, or I won't let you put a finger on it. In the extremely remote event that I am dragged kicking and screaming from the scene of action, however, you could do some very amusing tricks with it, including potting our imperial friend. Are you a good shot, Daisy?"

"No, no— what you say now? Do not let heem come; do not let heem— no thing could I shoot— no thing—"

"Well, there's one thing that any duffer in the world can shoot," said the Honourable Tony soothingly. "There's absolutely no use shaking like that; not as long as any stupid little girl in the world can shoot herself! It's a simply ripping pistol, Daisy." He put one arm about her, light and close, and she relaxed against it with a strange, comforted little moan. "So that's that; of course there's not half a chance in a thousand that the little beggar won't grovel all over the place; I'll tell him that if he lays one finger on a British subject, I'll take jolly good care that England turns it into an international matter—"

"Oh, for that, he does not care!"

"How do you mean, doesn't care?"

"No, for Englan' he does not care— no, not that! When I say to heem that great Englan' will protec' me, he laff right out an' say, 'Englan', bah!'"

"Oh, he said that, did he?" inquired the Honourable Tony grimly. "Well, that's not a pretty thing for any fat little Sultan to say." He grinned suddenly into the darkness. "'Englan', bah!' Come to think of it, I've murmured something fairly like it myself once or twice. But then I'm not a fat little Sultan; I happen to be an Englishman! Daisy, will you swear not to howl if I tell you something?"

"What now?"

"Well, now it begins to look as though things were going to happen. There's a fair-sized cluster of lights bearing down this way from the royal imperial palace at a good fast clip, and I'm rather inclined to think that it's time for little girls that have heart's beloveds in the mines to be trotting off to a more secluded spot. How about it?"

"Yes, yes, I go." There was a strange and touching docility in the small voice. "Wair now do I go, Honable Tonee?"

"Here— this way— where's your hand? Quiet, now; sure you aren't going to howl?"

"No; no."

"That's right; here's the door— nothing in the world to howl about, naturally. Wait, and I'll find you a chair; or you can curl up on the bed if you'd rather. That comfortable?"

"Oh, that— that is mos' comfortable."

"Good. Now for God's sake, emulate the well-known mouse! The revolver's on the table. No— no— don't touch it now. Oh, Lucifer, that perfume! It'll be

our ruin— a headless jackass could smell it in Singapore. Here, let's have your handkerchief— quick! Steady on there. We're about to receive callers, Daisy!"

There was the sound of feet on the rickety steps— the sound of hands at the outer door. The Honourable Tony bent down swiftly; kicked off one shoe— the other— ripped off the white linen coat and the blue silk scarf, and strode leisurely across the threshold of his bedroom door with his head on one side and his hands in his pockets.

"What in the devil?" he inquired amiably of the bronze statue standing in the pool of light at the head of the stairs. The statue stirred, and behind it other lights gleamed and danced in darkness. "Oh— it's you, Ghundi! What's the row?

"Master, the Great One bids that you bring the woman and come swiftly to the palace."

"Bring what woman?" inquired the Honourable Tony, lazily diverted. "I say, Ghundi, the Great One hasn't been having a go at that brandy again, has he?"

The statue did not move but in the pool of light its eyes shone, eloquent and imploring.

"Master, jests will not serve you now. She was seen to enter here by the little son of the head-beater. The Great One says to make all haste."

"Well, inform the Great One from me with cordial salutations that haste is totally foreign to my nature," remarked the Honourable Tony affably. "If the largest tiger in the jungle was sitting a paw's length off, I couldn't possibly move rapidly— it's a most frightful handicap, I can tell you! As for the little son of the head-beater, let him be well beaten and allowed no fish for three days, or he will grow up to be as great a liar as his father. Shocking what these infants go in for! Did he mention the lady's name?"

"Master, master, it is well known that it is the white woman who came up the waters with your friend. You do ill to delay."

"Ghundi, it's never Mrs. Potts? Not the ravishing Mrs. Potts? You know, that's pretty priceless in itself. Now suppose you collect all your little playmates out there and totter back to the Great One and inform him as gracefully as possible that the ineffable Potts has gone down the waters that she came up, reluctantly escorted by Mr. Billee Ledyar'. Present my condolences. She just caught the boat by the skin of her little white teeth. I agree with the Great One that it's a thousand pities that she caught it at all."

"Master, I am your servant. I have served you well— I have loved you better. My heart is yours to use for your meat, my skin for your carpet; for them I care nothing. If I return without you, they slay me— if I remain with you, they slay me— it is all one. But you— you are my master— you are my son— you are my father. Delay no longer; the woman was seen to enter here— she has not come out."

The Honourable Tony did not stir from his careless station before the bedroom door, but something leapt across the guarded space to that dark and lonely figure— something more warm, more friendly, more reassuring than any touch of hands.

"Ghundi, there are two fellows this side of Heaven that I'd give a good bit to take there with me when I go. That sandy-haired young lunatic who came up the waters is one of them— and you're the other. Now cut along back to the Great One, like a good fellow, and tell him that I was as good as tucked in for the night when you found me, with a nice little flicker of fever. If I wasn't cagy about this dashed night air I'd nip over with you and explain; as it stands, I'll trot over the first thing in the morning. Good-night, old chap; wish the Great One happy dreams."

Ghundi's grave voice was suddenly heavy with despair.

"Master, she is here. The air about us cries it to all who breathe."

"Absolutely sickening, what?" agreed the Honourable Tony. "Jockey Club, I understand. I picked up her beastly little handkerchief on the beach path, coming back from the boat— it's fairly sopped in it. Here, catch— I was going to send it back to her, but God knows when it would reach her. The Great One might fancy it; compliments of the season— corking souvenir, what?"

Ghundi stared down at the wet white ball in his clenched fist.

"Master— I was told to search—"

"And that'll be about all of *that*," remarked the Honourable Tony. A peculiarly ingratiating smile curved the corners of his lips, and he took both hands from his pockets and made an expressive gesture toward the long windows above the water. "A little more chatter like that and out you go to the crocodiles. Come on now, cut along like a nice chap— my head's buzzing no end, and I'm mad for sleep. I'll have my tea at seven on the tick. And some of that jolly sticky preserve—"

The dark, troubled face was lit suddenly by a smile, gleaming white as a benediction, grave and tender and indulgent.

"Where you go," said Ghundi, "there may I be to serve you! Farewell, little master."

He turned back to the dancing lights below him with a sharp word of command, and as quietly as he had come was gone, passing silently down the rickety steps into the night. There was a swift murmur of protest from the waiters, quelled; the light shuffle of feet; the rustle of parted leaves— silence. The Honourable Tony stood for a moment listening for any echo of the small dying sounds— whistled the opening bars of "Where Do We Go From Here, Boys?" twice over with fine accuracy and restraint, shoved open the bedroom door, and yielded himself unreservedly to joyous retrospection.

"My word, fairly neat, eh, Daisy? What price the bit about the handkerchief? And the buzzing head, what? I swear I had no idea I'd be so good. Fancy what a loss to the stage— or Scotland Yard— no, no, more sport keeping out of Scotland Yard; well, then, so that's that. Now what?"

There was a small sound that might have been a shiver, and a whisper, strange and lonely as a dream, answered him.

"Now then, farewell, Honable Tonee."

"Farewell? Thinking of leaving me, Daisy?"

"Yes. Now I am thinkin'— of leavin' you."

"My poor kid, you'll shiver your pretty teeth out if you keep up like this; I swear I ought to be drawn and quartered for a thumping brute. After all, it isn't as much of a lark for you as it is for me, is it? Now just what *are* we going to do about you?"

"Honable Tonee, eet ees not for me I shiver; eet ees for you. Becaus' you do not onnerstan'— becaus' you laff— becaus' you do not know that all, all ees end. That is mos' terrible— that you who are good an' great an' love' by all those Saints do not know that eet ees end. Of all those Saints and you I ask pardon— I ask pardon, pardon that thees I have done to you—"

"My dear little lunatic, you've done nothing in the world to me; the blighter knows that if he laid a finger on me he'd be as good as cutting his throat. While I'm not much given to swanking about it, half of the big sticks in England are my cousins and my uncles and my aunts, and though it's rather a grief to us all, they'd simply chew him up if he administered as much as a scratch to anything as sacred as a Bolingham hide. No, I'm a good deal righter than rain and you take a weight off my mind about the sentiments of all those Saints; the question before the house is, what about you?"

"Me? Oh, me, eet ees no mattair. Me, I am through."

"Daisy, I'm just a bit afraid you're right. We might as well face the fact at the start that I'm no match for the entire Imperial army, even if an important item of their defence does consist of green panties. You wouldn't consider chucking it?"

"How, chuckin'?"

"You don't think that Manuelo would understand if you took the two last wives' jewels and—"

"Ah," moaned the little voice in the darkness, "that ees a wicked, that ees a black an' ogly thing to say. Me, I am no good— me, I am no good at all— but that you should have nevair say to me—"

"My dear," said the Honourable Tony gently, "you're as good as gold, and I'm a black-hearted scoundrel that Manuelo ought to flog from here to his tin mines. In this world or the next, he has my congratulations; tell him from me that he's a lucky devil, won't you? Now then, I'm off for the other room. I'll light the lamp,

and give a cracking good imitation of an earnest reader for the benefit of any callers. In case it doesn't meet with the proper applause— just in case, you know— here's the revolver. You might bolt the door after I'm gone; that way you'll have any amount of time. Not going to be lonely, are you? You can hear me just as well as though I still were in the room. Moreover, I'm leaving a lady to take care of you."

"A ladee?"

"The Duchess of Bolingham. Feel this little black frame? Well, she's in there; hold on tight to her. You two are going to adore each other."

"No, but I do not onnerstan'; what, what ees thees?"

"This is my mother, Daisy; her first name is Biddy. I think she's going to want you to call her by her first name."

"But she ees daid, your mothair?"

"Dead? That's the most idiotic description of Biddy; however, there may be something in what you say, though you'll never get her to admit it. Now, then, quite all right? Sure? Good-bye, little Daisy."

"Honable Tonee."

He had to bend his head to catch that faint and wavering whisper.

"Yes?"

"Honable Tonee, becaus' thees room eet ees so black an' still— not, not that I am a-frighten, but becaus' thees room eet ees so black an' still, would you be so vairy kin' to kiss me good-bye? Manuelo— Manuelo, he would onnerstan'. You do not think that ladee would be angery?"

The Honourable Tony bent his bright head to the dark one, and laid his gay lips swiftly and surely on the small painted mouth.

"That lady would be terrible in anger if I didn't. Daisy, what nice perfume! Nicest I ever smelled in all my life. I'm going to get bottles and bottles of it. All right now, little thing? Good-night then— Biddy, you look after her; show her all the prettiest places up there— mind the two of you keep out of mischief! Slip the bolt behind me, Daisy."

With a last touch on her hair, light and caressing as his voice, he was gone through the darkness. He pulled the door to behind him noiselessly, and stood leaning against it for a moment with bowed head, listening. Silence— a faint patter of feet— the heavy grating of the bolt driven home. He raised his head.

"Good girl!" said the Honourable Tony clearly.

He swung across to the table, felt for the matches, and lit the lamp deftly and swiftly, pulling the long chair into its friendly aura and distributing the cushions with a rapid dexterity that belied the lethargy that he had maintained tigers incapable of disturbing. But then, a little wind had just passed through the quiet room— a little wind that blew in heavy with darkness and fragrance and something else— heavy with a distant murmur of voices, and far-off footsteps

coming nearer through the night. It passed as it came, but the flame in the lamp flickered and burned brighter, and the flame that danced in the eyes of the gentleman reclining in the long chair flickered and burned brighter, too, though they were discreetly lowered over the account of a highly unsavory Bazaar murder in a two-month-old paper from Singapore. Even when the footsteps were on the rickety stairs he continued to read; even when they were on the threshold he only bent his head a little lower, intent and absorbed; even when the knocks rang out, ominous and insistent, he did not lift those dancing eyes. He flipped over the first page of the Singapore paper with a dexterous thumb and finger, and lifted his voice in welcome leavened with surprise.

"Come in!" called the Honourable Tony to those who stood in darkness. And the door opened and they came in.

First there came a small, plump, swarthy gentleman in immaculate white linen of an irreproachable cut. He had small neat feet shod in the shiniest of patent-leather boots, and small fat hands adorned with three superb emeralds, and a set of highly unpleasant little cat whiskers curling into a grizzled gray at the ends. About his throat was a scarlet watered ribbon from which dangled a star as glittering as a Christmas tree ornament, and about his head was wound a turban of very fine red silk pierced by a brooch in which crouched another emerald large as a pigeon egg, flawed and sinister and magnificent. In one fat little hand he held a pair of white kid gloves and a small handkerchief badly crumpled; in the other a swagger stick of ebony banded with smooth gold. He walked on the tips of his patent-leather toes, and behind him came ten gigantic figures in incredible green uniforms with gold-laced jackets that were debtors to the Zouaves, and fantastic caps strapped under their chins reminiscent of the organ-grinder's monkey and the dancing vaudeville bellboy. Lanterns light as bubbles swung from their great paws and in the gilded holsters at their waists the mother-of-pearl handles of the famous automatics gleamed like the Milky Way. They padded behind their master, silent as huge cats, and smiled at one another like delighted children. His Imperial Majesty, the Sultan Bhakdi, accompanied by the Royal Body Guard, was making a call on the British Adviser.

The British Adviser rose easily to his feet.

"Your Majesty!" he saluted, with precisely the correct inflection of gratified amazement.

"Excellency!" His Majesty's accent was a trifle more British than the Honourable Tony's, but he purred in his throat, which is not done. "We were alarmed by the good Ghundi's report of your health. You suffer?"

"Oh, Ghundi's overdone it!" protested the Honourable Tony, all courteous regret, but the carved dimples danced. "I'm no end sorry that you've had all this bother. It's frightfully decent of you to give it a thought; nothing in the world the matter but a rather stiff nip of fever. I was going to turn in in another minute,

and sleep it off. I beg any number of pardons for this costume; it's hardly one that I'd have chosen for such an honour."

"Hardly!" agreed the Sultan cordially. "Hardly! However, as the visit was unheralded, and as the defects of the costume may be so easily remedied, we dismiss it gladly. Come, we waive formality; we have been bored most damnably without you and the excellent bridge. The mountain comes to Mahomet; my good Mahomet, on with your boots, on with your coat, and out with your cards. We will drive off this pestilential fever with three good rubbers and four good drinks. Ahmet will fetch your coat. It is in your room? Ahmet!"

The Honourable Tony moved more swiftly than Ahmet. He laid one hand on the handle of the bedroom door, but he did not turn it.

"I'm absolutely sick over making such an ass of myself," he said with pleasing candour. "But I do honestly feel too rotten bad to last out even a hand. I'll be fit as a fiddle in the morning, and entirely at Your Majesty's disposal; but for to-night I'm going to ask you to excuse me."

"But to-night we will most certainly not excuse you," His Imperial Majesty replied amiably. "No, no, on the contrary. Rather not, as you say. To-night, Excellency, we are quite through. We have been culpably lenient and indulgent in the past; we have overlooked one hundred stupid impertinences and five hundred impertinent stupidities, but your bridge— your bridge was impeccable and we have long desired to perfect our game. Now, however, you outreach our patience. Stand aside, I beg you. When Ahmet fetches your Excellency's coat and your Excellency's boots, he will also fetch your Excellency's lady."

The Honourable Tony gave a shout of astounded delight.

"My hat!" he cried. "But this is simply gorgeous. All this time that I've been ragging you you've been plotting a bloody revenge?"

"Revenge," replied His Imperial Majesty, with an impatient flick of the white gloves, "is an incident. I wish the woman. Stand aside!"

"It's a dream," decided the Honourable Tony, cocking his head with Epicurean satisfaction. "No, by Heaven, it's better than a dream. Just what are you going to do if I don't stand aside?"

"Shoot you where you stand. Come, come— we are over-patient."

The Honourable Tony sighed beatifically, as one whose cup of joy was full to overflowing.

"Oh, come now, if you ask me, you're dashed impatient. Shooting me down in this damn casual way— what d'you think the British Government's going to make of it?"

"Nothing," replied the British Government's loyal ally blandly. "Nothing whatsoever. In due time the proper authorities will be informed that you were lost overboard on an expedition after crocodiles, and owing to the unfortunate

proclivities of those depraved reptiles, your body was not recovered. I do not imagine that the loss will afflict the Government so deeply as you imagine."

The Honourable Tony's manner changed abruptly from enchanted amusement to the cold insolence of a badly spoiled young man dismissing his valet.

"And that's enough," he said. "Take your army and be off. You're dashed amusing, but you overdo it. If an apology from you were worth the breath you draw, I'd have one out of you for the country that I represent and its representative. As it is, I give you fair warning to clear out; I'm about fed up."

"Till I count three to stand aside," remarked His Imperial Majesty conversationally, abandoning the royal "we" as though it were no longer necessary in so informal a discussion, "I shall regret the bridge."

"You can count to three thousand if you can get that far," the Honourable Tony informed him politely. "But while you're about it you might remember that we're in the twentieth century, not the Adelphi Theatre."

"We are in Asia," said His Imperial Majesty. "Life is good, Excellency, and Death, I am told, is a long and dreary affair. The woman is not worth it— a gutter rat out of the music halls. It is her good fortune to amuse me. Stand aside, I beg!"

"My mother was from the music halls," said the Honourable Tony. "I have half a mind to mop up the floor with you before I turn in."

"You are a brave man," said His Imperial Majesty equably. "And a fool." He turned to the black and emerald giants, and they quivered slightly. "Attention!"

The giants ceased quivering and stood very straight.

"Ready!" said Bhakdi softly. The pearl-handled automatics flashed like jewels.

"Aim!" said Bhakdi with a flick of the handkerchief toward the slim figure framed in the doorway.

"You ought to be jolly grateful to me for teaching you all those nice words," remarked the figure reproachfully. "They sound simply corking when you snap 'em out like that."

"I count," said Bhakdi. "One."

"I wish you could see yourselves," said the Honourable Tony admiringly. "For all the world like a lot of comic-opera pirates panting to get into the chorus when the tenor says 'go.' 'For-I'm-the-big-bad-black-faced-chief'— you know the kind of thing."

"Two," said Bhakdi.

"I say, you *are* going it!" cried the British Adviser. In the gleam from the lanterns his hair was ruffled gold and his eyes black mischief. "Aren't you afraid of its being a bit of a let-down to the Imperial Guard after all this?"

"Three!" said Bhakdi, and he flicked the handkerchief again. "Fire!"

There was a rip and a rattle of sound along the green line— from the other side of the bolted door there came a faint reply, precise and sharp as an echo. The Honourable Tony sagged forward to his knees, still clutching at the handle, his face lit with an immense, an incredulous amazement.

"By God!" he whispered. "By God, you've done it!"

And suddenly in the lean curve of his cheek the dimples danced once more, riotous and unconquered.

"I say," he murmured, "I say, Biddy, that's— that's a good one! Comic opera, what? That— that's a good one— on me—"

His fingers slipped from the door, and he was silent.

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6: Blackout

Ethel Lina White

1879-1944

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Produced by Michael Cox and Roy Glashan

THE blackout over London was nearly absolute. When Christina drew aside the window curtains of the sitting room, at first she could distinguish nothing. It was as though a wall had been built up outside the glass. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she saw the dimmed lights of traffic and glow-worm gleams speckling the pavement, cast by the electric torches of invisible pedestrians.

In spite of dangers and difficulties, the nation was carrying on as usual. Young people made dates— and kept them. Old people went out after dark; they were not to be stampeded out of their habits.

Christina was acutely affected by the Blackout, because it was a definite physical handicap. She had dark blue eyes and had to pay for their beauty with the defective vision which often accompanies that color. But although it was dark when she returned from the munitions factory where she worked, she made the journey with other employees, while the route had grown familiar. Once she was back in the flat, she settled down for the evening and refused all invitations.

That evening, she peered out at the dark, withdrawn world beyond the window as though it were a hostile judge concealing unknown peril. Her nerves were somewhat frayed, owing to lack of sleep.

She went to bed late because she was afraid of a recurrent nightmare. It was always the same dream. She found herself walking down an unknown road, in absolute darkness— with the knowledge that she had a long distance to go. Suddenly— she felt herself gripped by invisible hands— then the horror always shook her awake.

She was furious over this leakage of energy at a time when she needed all her reserves of strength. Recently she had the honor of a personal interview with a Mr. T.P. Fry— a younger member of the firm which owned the factory. It look place in his private room, when the august man explained the facts.

"Every country in war time," he said, "is subject to the abuse of sabotage. The scum of a nation will always seize its chance to profit. To protect our interests in the factory, we have organized some of our most trusted workers as counter-espionage agents."

Christina thrilled as she listened, although his next sentence conveyed a warning.

"The work requires courage and discretion. You remain anonymous and— in your own interests— you must not try to make contacts. You should take extra precautions against accidents inside the factory and not go out in the blackout, if you can avoid it. You may be followed by malcontents... No extra pay— but I hope there will be a bonus at the end of the war."

AFTER the minimum of reflection, Christina volunteered for the special service. Instead of dull routine, she felt elevated to something in the John Buchan tradition. At first, although she was especially zealous in the prevention of carelessness; she made no exposures. But— as though her vigilance had been marked as inconvenient to the cause of sabotage, a few days previously, she had been nearly the victim of an accident.

One of the girls had turned faint and in the general rush to help her, Christina had been pushed up against a machine... For a terrible moment, her heart felt iced, before a worker switched off the mechanism.

When she went over the incident, she felt doubtful about one of the Good Samaritans who had dragged her to safety. Meta Rosenburg was a thin attractive brunette, slant-eyed and over-painted. She was always expensively dressed, when she discarded her slops, while her style of living indicated an income which could have a tainted source.

Christina shared the expenses of a flat with Ida Brown— a plump reliable girl. That evening, she was looking around at the comfort of the room with its fire and softly-glowing lights, when the telephone bell began to ring. As she went to answer it, a warning sense reminded her that ambushes were always prepared by fake invitations. Primed by her intuition, she was scarcely surprised to hear Meta's deep husky voice at the other end of the line.

"I'm throwing a sherry-party. Come over."

"No thanks." she replied. "I don't drink."

"But you must come. Montrose is here. He wants to know you."

Christina's heart beat faster, for— like all the girls at the factory— she was attracted by Montrose. He held an important position and was tall and handsome. There was also a legend about him that he had been an air-ace before a smash which took mysterious toll but thoughtfully left no visible marks.

"Montrose?" she repeated. "How do you get to know everyone?"

"Wait to be introduced," replied Meta derisively.

"Is it safe to pick up strangers?"

"Not safe, no. But the other way's too dull... I shall expect you."

Before she could protest, Meta rang off.

"You shouldn't keep on saying 'no,'" advised Ida Brown, who always listened to telephone conversations. "No wonder you are getting queer and jumpy."

"I'm not... Or am I?"

Suddenly weary of mental isolation and wholesale suspicion, Christina wanted reassurance from Ida.

"Snap out of it. Go to this sherry-party."

"I don't know where she lives."

"I'll look her up in the telephone book."

"Thanks... I will."

Christina told herself that it was important to reassure Ida, lest— in perfect innocence— she might start the first fatal whisper. In reality, however, it was the thought of Montrose's handsome face which lured her out into the blackout.

SHE put on an ice-blue frock and made up her face with delicate care. While she was slipping on a near-white coat, Ida came into the bedroom to tell her the number of her bus.

"I've written down the address and put it in your gas-mask carrier." she explained. "You get off at the terminus."

Her journey was reduced to such a simple and effortless proposition, that she felt ashamed of her former hesitation. But as she stood in the doorway of the entrance-hall of the Mansions, waiting to accustom her eyes to the darkness, a man nearly knocked her down.

Both laughed at the encounter, but she fell exactly as though she had bumped into the Invisible Man. It was with a return of her old inhibition that she snailed along the pavement, There was neither moon nor stars, while the air seemed tangible as a black curtain. When she had to cross the road, she trusted to the eyes of other pedestrians to detect the colors of the traffic lights— reduced to thin crosses of red or green.

She reached her starting point, only to realize the handicap of her poor eyesight. Other people boarded the vehicles while she remained on the pavement, running from bus to bus, as fresh ones drew up at the halt. Unable to see their numbers, she always left it too late and boarded them, to be told by the conductor "Full Up."

She was thinking rather desperately of Montrose when someone flashed a torch over the face of the crowd. It cursed him as one man, although— as the bus was stationary— there was no risk of an accident. Christina blinked at the tiny searchlight with a sense that her identity had been revealed. Her mind flooded with morbid wonder as to whether Ida were in league with Meta to lure her into a trap.

Her turn had come at last. She felt herself borne upwards to the step on a human surge and then pressed forward Into a darkened interior.

"Where's the empty seat?" she appealed. "I can't see a thing."

Helpful hands passed her along the aisle and drew her down on a seat beside a stout woman who smelt strongly of cloves.

"There you are, lidy."

With the comfortable sensation of being enclosed in the safety of on ark— tossing on a stormy sea— she felt the bus move onwards. From now on, the driver would have the headache. She was merely another fare— his responsibility.

They journeyed on through the black blanket, occasionally stopping with a back-breaking jerk, to avoid some too optimistic pedestrian. Presently, as the stout lady continued to overlap her, Christina fell as though she were slowly smothered by a feather-bed. Her chance of release came when a semi-visible young man who sat on the opposite side— level with their seat— leaned across the aisle.

"Change places with me, mother," he urge. "I want to sit by my young lady."

"Right you are, duck," consented the lady.

Christina waited for the exchange to be made before she spoke softly to her slimmer neighbor.

"I'm afraid I must break it to you. I'm not your friend."

"I know," said the young man. "I had to lake a chance on you. I saw your face when someone flashed a torch. I knew I could trust you."

ALTHOUGH his voice was uneven— either pitched to a crack or blurred to thickness— his accent was educated and inspired her with the confidence engendered by the snobbish tradition of the old school tie.

"What do you mean?" she asked distantly.

"When I tell you, you'll think me mad," he said.

"I do already... Or drunk."

"Not drunk. No. I'm drugged... Like a fool. I had a drink with a man. He's following me on this bus... But you must see who you are backing— and use discretion."

Before she could protest, he lit a cigarette. In the flame of the match, she saw a face which was too charming and delicate for a man. Its oval shape— combined with fair hair and large blue eyes— suggested some universal Younger Brothers who needed coddling and protection.

"I seem to know your face," she said. "Are you at Fray's Munition Factory?"

"Yes," he replied eagerly. "I'm a draftsman there. You've probably seen me in the Canteen."

Then he lowered his voice to whisper.

"Are you one of Us?" he asked.

She scented a trap in time to avoid It

"Yes. I work there," she said coldly.

"Then you are in this too... Listen carefully. I've a letter here. It's desperately important. Secret Service. I got involved— never mind how... You must take it to

Bengal avenue, sixth house on left. It's the second stop. The man is waiting to pounce on me when I leave the bus. But he won't suspect you."

Christina grew wretchedly uncomfortable as she listened. If she had not been enrolled for confidential service at the factory, she would have been immune to suggestion. Now. however, she was susceptible, because she admitted to herself that the young man's story could be true. Stolen documents, espionage, secret agents— these were the phantasy of Peace, but the commonplace of War.

She struggled desperately to get free of the coils.

"Don't talk like a film," she said. "I can't swallow that melodramatic stuff from a stranger."

"But you dare not refuse!" The young man's voice was stern. "It is not for myself. It is for England... Do you remember the address?"

"Of course not. I don't need it."

HEEDLESS of her refusal, he tore a leaf from his notebook, and after scrawling on it, stuffed it inside her gas-mask carrier.

"That's enough to remind you," he said, blinking his eyes. "My head's beginning to buzz. Thank heaven I lasted long enough to contact you. Look! That man— by the door He's waiting for me."

The vehicle was too dimly lit to distinguish faces, but straining her eyes in the gloom, Christina saw a tall man whose hard felt hat was jammed over his eyes. He was strap-hanging near the door; but as the bus slackened speed, he stepped out on to the platform. As he was above average height; he had to stoop slightly to scrutinize the passengers who were getting off at the stage. This crouching posture gave him an appearance of tense vigilance which made the girl think of a jungle beast on the hunt.

"I'll call the conductor," she whispered to the young man.

The words roused him out of his lethargy.

"For heaven's sake, no," he implored. "Don't start anything like that. The chap would plug him— and then us. We haven't got a chance in the dark. It's up to you. You— must— "

Suddenly his head jerked forward and then drooped, while his eyes closed, As she listened to his heavy breathing, Christina wondered what she ought to do. Self-interest, as well as common-sense, told her to keep out of the mess and continue on her way to the sherry party. On the other hand, in a remote lighted corner of her brain, was a reminder that Meta's Invitation might be a trap. In such a case, this mission— which involved her in no danger— might be a providential intervention.

There was third consideration which outweighed the others. The youth had spoken the truth when he said that she dared not accept the responsibility of inaction, if there was the slightest chance to prevent some vital leakage.

"Your friend's having a nap," grinned the conductor as he came up the aisle.

"Not mine," she said quickly.

As she disclaimed him, the man in the felt hat was swift to seize his chance.

"That's all right, mate," he said to the conductor. "My pal and I will see him home. He's had one over the eight."

THIS dramatic fulfilment of the young man's fears spurred Christina to immediate action. She dared not extract the secret document from the young man's gas-mask carrier, lest she should fumble and attract the attention of the nearest passenger. Such an action might look like an attempt to rob a drunken man. Snatching up the young man's gas-mask carrier from, the seat— in exchange for her own— she groped her way to the door, where she waited for the next stop.

Fortunately the conductor did not remember her stage, since in the blackout, one girl looked much like another. He lowered her down on the pavement as though she were a precious consignment. Then she heard the ping of his bell and the bus rolled on its way.

In contrast with the subdued lighting of the vehicle, the surrounding blackness seemed pitch black as the depths of a coal mine; out after flicking her torch about, she discovered the name "BENGAL AVENUE," printed on the corner of a wall. The bus had dropped her on the left-hand side of the road, so she had only to walk straight ahead.

It was also a very lonely locality, for as she followed long stretches of stone wall, partially revealed by the light of her torch, she met no one, she heard no footsteps— no voices— no hoot of passing car.

"Everyone might be dead," she thought.

For the sake of morale, she told herself that there was light and life inside each blacked-out exterior. Civilization still functioned, for she had only to ring at a door to get in touch with humanity again. Probably, if she cared to deliver her document personally at No. 6— instead of dropping it into the letter-box— she would meet with a welcome.

"I suppose he lives here with his family," she thought.

In order to settle this point, she scraped his identification card from a pocket of the carrier— fishing out two Yale latchkeys, to get hold of it.

"Why two?" she wondered.

She knew the reason— or thought she did— after she had read the particulars about the young man in the bus, by the light of her torch. She discovered that his name was "Ivor Thomas" and that he lived in a North London

suburb. Apparently No; 6 was an accommodation address, or belonged to a close friend, since he appeared to possess its key as well as his own.

She plodded on doggedly through the darkness, although she was beginning to wish she were not pledged to the adventure. At the back of her mind was a feeling of apprehension, while she was also teased by a sense of familiarity.

"I know this place," she thought "But when have I been here before?"

The answer crashed from the depths of her inner consciousness. This was her nightmare. There was the same long endless road— the utter blackness— the total loneliness. It only lacked the horror of gripping hands.

But those came later— in the dream...

She began to run— the fixity of her purpose propelling her on instead of turning back. It was panic flight which burned itself out, for when she was forced to stop, her heart was leaping as much from exertion as fright. She had reached No. 6, which was also named "Elephant House" and had two roughly carved elephants surmounting its gate-posts, to demonstrate its claim to the title.

WITH the feeling that her ordeal was nearly over— for her run back to the bus-stop would seem much shorter— she pushed open the heavy gate. As she groped her way up the drive, the small dancing light of her torch revealed a general appearance of desertion and neglect. The front-door steps were dirty and the brass knocker had not been cleaned recently.

It was no surprise, therefore, to find that the slit to the letter box was blocked.

"I must unload this darn document," she decided. "It's too jolly risky to carry it round with me."

Once again she hooked up the two Yale keys, one of which fitted the lock. It turned easily as she pushed open the door and stepped inside into total darkness.

The precaution of shutting herself in, after she had slipped the key back in the carrier, was a test of her courage: but It was not until she felt secure from outside observation, that she flashed her light around.

The next second, she suppressed a scream as she stepped backwards in an instinctive movement to save herself from being trampled underfoot. Towering above her— from the wall— was the head of an enormous bull-elephant with gleaming tusks and upraised trunk. It dominated the most extraordinary hall she had ever seen.

It was screened with fretted woodwork and hung with the stuffed heads of wild beasts, as well as weapons.

"What a place," she murmured. "The home of Anglo-Indians, I should think. Wonder if the sahibs are at home."

Flashing her torch, first low and then high, she saw a dusty Indian carpet— partially covered with drugget— and a flight of stairs leading to a landing on which was posed a black marble statue. Beyond was a shorter flight of steps, the top of which was wiped out by shadows.

"Hullo! Any one there?"

Christina's hail was weak and tremulous, revealing that she was afraid of the empty house.

There was no answer to her call. Feeling that she had fulfilled her duty in England, she listened to the warning voice which told, her to get out of the house and rush back to safety.

"Run— run."

She was about to place the document on a carved teak table, when she noticed that she had torn a corner of the envelope in her extraction of the keys from the carrier. As she stared at the flimsy paper, she was assailed by doubt. It looked so unofficial that she told herself that she must see the contents before she left it.

Feeling guilty of crime, she ripped open the envelope— to reveal what she dreaded to find— tracings.

They confirmed her lightning suspicion. Ivor Thomas was a rat who was stealing the factory's secrets.. The men in the bus were trailing him; but to save himself from being caught with the evidence, he had fooled them and tricked her into taking it to his hiding-place.

Slipping the document into her coat pocket, she was about to rush from the house when she was startled by a noise from above. It was a heavy thud, as though a statue had crashed down from its pedestal. With a recollection of the figure on the landing, she flashed her torch upwards.

What she saw drained the blood from her heart... A stiff, white, shapeless bundle— like a corpse— was rolling down the stairs.

AT that moment, she understood this hypnotic force of shock. She wanted to flee, but her muscles were locked so that she could not stir, although the thing was drawing nearer to her. Bumping from stop to step, it reached the landing, where it lay— formless, without face or limbs, muffled in its burial clothes.

As she stood and stared, suddenly Christina thought she detected a quiver in the object... Goaded by the elemental duty to make certain whether life was really extinct, she began to mount the stairs.

Kneeling beside the human parcel, she wrenched away a fold of linen and exposed the shriveled, sunburnt face of an elderly woman with an arrogant nose. Her brave old eyes smoldered in token of an unbroken spirit as Christina

first tore away the scarf over her mouth and then dragged from her blackened lips the pad with which she had been gagged.

The woman drew a deep breath, gasping like a fish.

"Thank Heaven, I'm a nose-breather," she gasped. "I was choking. I heard you call— and I managed to make it under my own steam."

"Who are you?" asked Christina.

"Miss Monteagle. This house belongs to my brother— the General. We were in Cornwall when war broke out and we stayed on. I came up to see the house... I was attacked by thugs. Two of them." Her face grew suddenly tense as she added, "I can hear them in the cellars. Get help at once."

"But I can't leave you..."

"Quick. No time to loosen knots. If you can't make it, hide. Watch your chance to escape... Cover my face."

Although Christina lacked Miss Monteagle's uncanny faculty of hearing, she realized the urgency. After winding the corner of the sheet around the elder woman's head, she rushed down the stairs. The hall was clear, but before she could reach the door, a series of knocks on the wood, told her that Ivor Thomas was outside.

She was caught between two fires. The thugs had heard the summons and the sound of their footsteps in the distance was audible to her. Desperately flashing her torch around, she darted behind the velvet curtain which muffled a door— praying the while that the men would not come that way.

Her petition was mercifully granted, for the men entered through a low door at the rear. Although she could see nothing, Christina guessed that they carried a lamp from the faint glow which sprayed around the corner of the portière. Then she heard the catch withdrawn and someone entered the house.

"Has the girl left the plans?" asked Ivor Thomas— his voice cracking with excitement.

Without waiting for a reply, he dashed to the letter-box.

"Hell, it's nailed up," he complained.

"Sure, we had to pick an empty house," growled one of the men. "What's this about a girl?"

It was no satisfaction to Christina to learn that her suspicions were confirmed, since she was trapped and unable to save the plans. As Thomas told his story, she realized that he was cowed by the other men and eager to justify his action.

"The girl will come back when she finds the key," he assured them. "She fell for it all right. Besides it worked. The dicks had to let me go. The laugh was on me."

"Did they follow you?" asked a new voice.

"Hell, no. Why? They found nothing on me."

AS she listened. Christina noticed the difference between the voices of the two men. One was gruff and fierce, but the other frightened her more, because of its flat unhuman quality. It was as though a dead man spoke from the grave.

She trembled violently as this second man made a discovery.

"I can see high heels in the dust. That girl has been here. Look around."

Even as Christina realized the horror of the situation, Miss Monteagle came into action! Risking a broken neck, she flexed her muscles in a supreme effort to distract attention. The men In the hall heard a thud from the upper darkness— outside the radius of their lamp— followed by the gruesome spectacle of a corpse-like object rolling down the stairs.

As Thomas gave a high, thin scream, like a trapped rabbit, Christina recognized her signal to escape. Not daring to creep towards the entrance, lest a man should turn his head, she leaped lightly over the thick pile of the carpet. Drawing back the catch of the lock, she slipped through the gap and drew the door softly to— fearing to shut it.

Once she was outside, she began to run, her high heels turning perilously on the slippery drive. She lost precious time in opening the heavy gate and barely reached the road before the sound of heavy footsteps in the distance told her that she was being followed.

Maddened by terror, she rushed on wildly, praying for help; but the road was as deserted as before. There was no welcome torch-light advertising an A.R.P. Warden on his round— no resident returning to his home. It was useless to scream— hopeless to hide in a garden; she knew that the glimmer of her white coat was visible and that if she tore it off her ice-blue frock would betray her.

Realizing that capture was inevitable, she determined that the men should not get the drawings; and since she could be tortured into revelation of their hiding-place, she must put them in a safe place.

Suddenly she remembered that— on her way to Elephant House— she had passed a pillar-box. Running blindly and keeping to the outside edge of the pavement, she collided with it before she saw it. The crash of the impact winded her completely, but before she collapsed, she managed to push the envelope through the slit.

Then she felt herself gripped by unseen hands, in ghastly fulfilment of her nightmare.

AFTER an interlude of strain and semi-suffocation, when— blinded by a coat over her head, she had been bumped along through the darkness— she realized that she was back in the hall of Elephant House. She looked around her fearfully,

hardly daring to glance at a white shape doubled up at the foot of the stairs, because of its hideously unnatural posture.

With the exception of Thomas, the men had concealed their faces with dark scarves, while their eyes gleamed through slits in the material; but she recognized their tones.

It was the dead voice that spoke to her.

"Where is that envelope? If you don't talk, I can make you."

"Oh, I'll talk," she said with faint triumph, "I posted it in that pillar-box."

"Very clever," he sneered. "You may like to hear you've killed a man by that master stroke."

"Who? How?"

"The postman... If we force the box, it might attract attention. We will let him unlock it for us and then make sure he won't talk."

Christina stared at him in horror.

"It's all my fault. My fault."

She sat thinking, thinking— until her brain ceased to function. She had grown dead to emotion when she was startled back to life by the sound of knocking at the front door. It was so loud and persistent that the dead voice whispered a command.

"Gag the girl. Open the door, Thomas, and stall."

Nearly choked by the handkerchief which was roughly forced down her throat, Christina was dragged back into the shadow. She heard the door being opened a few inches and then Meta Rosenburg's voice.

"Where's Christina Forbes?" she demanded.

"Never heard of her," replied Ivor Thomas.

"You will... The police are here. Come on, boys."

At the sound of a shot, Christina closed her eyes. She kept them closed throughout the sensational fight which followed and did not open them until her gag was removed by her rescuing hero— Montrose.

LATER in the evening, she sat in Meta's flat. Montrose was there, as well as Miss Monteagle, who smoked a cigar and drank most of the sherry. The postman had already finished his round in safety, after having delivered an unstamped envelope to the detectives from the Munition Factory.

"Sorry my diversion failed to let you get clear away," remarked the sporting lady to Christina. "You made a hell of a noise. I'll never take you stalking... Lucky I didn't break my neck. I've broken every other bone, huntin', but I'm reserving that for my last fence."

"You were wonderful," Christina assured her, although her eyes spoke to Montrose.

"Want to know how the Master Minds found you?" cut in Meta. "Thomas left your gas-mask behind in the bus, since he was bound to be searched. He reckoned that when the conductor found it and took it to Lost Property, there would be nothing to connect it with him. But an A.R.P. Warden was on the bus and he spotted it and looked at your identification card. He's a bright local lad and knows me my sight— so when he found an envelope with my address on it, it seemed a good excuse to bring it round, as my flat was near."

As she stopped to refill the glasses. Montrose finished the tale.

"Meta got rattled as you hadn't turned up, while your gas mask proved you were on the bus. Fortunately we discovered a scrap of paper stuck in your carrier, with 'Bengal 6' scrawled on it. That gave us the Idea where you'd got out."

"It's wonderful," repeated Christina, still looking at Montrose. "The funny part is, I suspected Meta, when really she is one of Us."

Meta burst out laughing.

"Us?" she repeated. "You're too nice to be a mug. That sabotage-espionage is T.P.'s bright stunt to make the girls careful with the machinery. I know, because he's a relative of mine. Of course, the firm employs trained detectives."

"Oh," Christina's mouth drooped with disappointment. "It was such a thrill to feel part of the war."

"Never mind," said Miss Monteagle. "I'm dated, so I can afford to spout Kipling, although I can't say I'm quoting word for word.

"Two things greater than all things are.
The first is Love and the second is War,
And since we know not what War may prove...."

Intercepting the message flashing between Christina and Montrose, her bass voice softened to the tones of a girl who had vanished into the past, as she finished the quotation:

"Heart of my heart, let us speak of Love."

7: The Fakir of the Forest

Alice Perrin

Alice Robinson Perrin, 1867-1934

The Grand Magazine Feb 1922

"THIS JUNGLE is a bad jungle," complained Ayah, "full of evil spirits. All say it. Were it not better to move on quickly, lest misfortune befall the camp?"

She was a buxom brown being loaded with silver ornaments— anklets, armlets, bracelets; toe-rings, finger-rings, earrings; a jewelled stud in one nostril. Her petticoat swirled voluminously, her shawl was gaily bordered, and she smelt of camphor and cardamoms. How she hated camp life! the long marches, the makeshift accommodation, the lack of bazaar society, above all the difficulty of obtaining the rich, highly spiced food she preferred. But for her devotion to the memsahib she would never have endured this barbarous manner of existence that not only damped one's spirits and upset one's digestion, but brought one (as in the present instance) within regions that were beset with demoniacal dangers as well.

The memsahib seated on the veranda of the little forest rest-house, made no reply to Ayah's warning; she was engrossed with a letter that had but recently arrived by hand from the camp of some sahib in the neighbourhood, a venturesome sahib, so the messenger had informed the servants, who had come forth from the station to shoot wild beasts.

Ayah shuffled her bare feet and coughed artificially. If only the memsahib would pay attention! Ever since the arrival of the camp on the outskirts of this particular bit of forest, Ayah had been perturbed by reports of the ill-fame of the locality. The head cartman had declared that he knew it well, and that nothing would induce him to go one yard beneath the trees, even should the sahib order him to do so. The cook, too, corroborated the cartman's statement that this area was full of ghosts and demons; and the inhabitants of the miserable little village that lay a mile or so away had also told tales, when they brought in primitive supplies, of people being spirited away never to be seen or heard of again; though a patriarch, whose curiosity had impelled him to visit the camp, had spoken of an antidote in the person of a fakir who had the power to render himself invisible at will, and had been known to protect and aid lost wanderers, guiding them back to safety. He himself, he avowed, had in his youth seen service as *shikari* with a sahib who was lost in the jungle for three days and three nights, at the end of which period the sahib had returned to his camp exhausted, and in company with the mysterious guide. The patriarch had also related to the company how the fakir had been supplied with food and with fuel, that he might cook himself a meal, but in the morning he had vanished, and

the spot whereon the fire had been lighted was found to be covered by a miraculous growth of young green grass.

Undoubtedly this jungle was bewitched, and Ayah felt it her duty to acquaint the memsahib with its evil atmosphere. She repeated all she had heard, loudly, and with emphatic gestures, concluding with the horrible apprehension that the sahib who had ridden forth on his work but an hour or so since, might never return!

Mrs. Leyland listened vaguely to these outpourings. She herself was distressed and perturbed, but for a different reason. The letter she held crushed in her hand was from a man whom she believed and hoped she was never to meet again, but who now, by all the laws of mischance, was actually within reach of the camp. From her own point of view there would seem to be truth in Ayah's contention that some evil influence dominated the place!

As Ayah padded away grumbling and disgusted with the memsahib's lack of response, Mrs. Leyland smoothed out the crumpled note and read it again. Her small, sweet face was troubled, clouded with fear; what wicked fate had brought Anthony Dane to India on a sporting expedition, and, moreover, had led him to the station that was her husband's official headquarters; there, very naturally, to be supplied with an introduction to the forest officer as the individual who could best help him in his quest for big game?

According to his note, which was addressed to herself, he had been overjoyed to discover that the forest officer's wife was none other than his old friend, Miss Bengough, whom he had known so well in England before her marriage! How curious, and what a piece of luck! He looked forward eagerly to meeting her again, and making the acquaintance of her husband. His camp was within easy reach of theirs, he would ride over this evening in the hope of seeing them....

The faint breeze of the Indian day had died down, long shadows came creeping over the bare stretch of ground in front of the wooden rest-house, the hot weather was at hand, and a warm stillness lay over the little encampment, broken only by the crackle of dry foliage, and at intervals the cry of a brain-fever bird. Lydia Leyland would have revelled in the peace, the remoteness from the world, had it not been for this bombshell of a letter reviving memories, recalling a secret, filling her with apprehension. She only trusted that the writer of it would appear before her husband's return, that she might know how she stood in regard to the past, ascertain if the man meant mischief. That he was not to be trusted she knew, to her cost. What a fool she had been to conceal the unhappy episode from Tom, her dear true-hearted man! Yet, had she told him, what would he have thought of her with his rigid standards of honour and truth?—and who would have anticipated that any reminder of her mad folly could follow her like this, to the end, so to speak, of the earth?

She sat tremulous, expectant, her pulses throbbing, hearing the sound of bird and insect life around her, yet listening only with strained impatience for the beat of horse hoofs in the distance. Time seemed non-existent as she waited; she could hardly have told whether hours or minutes had elapsed before a horse and rider came into view, and she recognized the lean, long-limbed figure seated so easily in the saddle, self-confident, purposeful as ever. As he approached she caught the gleam of the light eyes set deep in the resolute face. How well she remembered those eyes! Once they had had power to hold her heart, to deaden her conscience, to wipe out her sense of loyalty to the man she had promised to marry, the man who was now her husband.

He said nothing as he dismounted; came in silence up the shallow steps to where she stood in the veranda, her heart beating painfully with dread. Then he held out his hand and looked into her eyes, his own half-laughing, questioning, provocative.

"Well," he said at last, "to think of our meeting again, and in such different surroundings— who would have believed it! You expected me? I see you got my letter—"

She tore her hand from his grasp, turned from his gaze, and pointed to a chair.

"Now you are here," she said, controlling her voice. "I suppose I must ask you to sit down."

Instinctively she moved her own seat to the opposite side of the folding-table as Dane settled himself comfortably in a deep camp chair; he stretched his legs, put his hands in his breeches pockets, and regarded his hostess with whimsical attention.

"You don't seem as pleased to see me as I am to see you! That's not kind of you, Lydia!"

"How can I say I am glad to see you?" she burst out. "And please don't call me by my Christian name."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

She felt, helplessly, that she had made a false start; she should have welcomed him with surface politeness, ignoring the past— should have behaved as if there had been no past beyond ordinary acquaintanceship.

"Can't you understand," she said piteously, her lips trembling, "that I hate to be reminded of my— foolishness?"

"Why make a mountain out of a molehill? Why shouldn't we renew our old friendship, especially if—" He paused, and a mischievous gleam shot into his handsome eyes.

She did not speak, and he went on:— "especially if Dick— Jack— Bob— I've forgotten his name, knows nothing about what happened at home?"

In desperation she lied. "Of course he knows, of course I told him!"

"Oh!" He gave a low, soft whistle, whether of surprise or incredulity she could not tell. She dared not look at him. "So you told him that while he was waiting in India for you to come out and marry him you fell in love with another man! Did you tell him before or after you were married?" He asked the question with an insolent air of interest.

"Oh! be quiet!" she cried angrily.

"Well, you *know* I would have married you if it had been possible, and you can't look me in the face and say you wouldn't have married me in spite of your engagement, had I been free. Come, now!"

"You never told me you were married until— until—" she put her hand to her throat; the words seemed to choke her.

"Until we had fallen madly in love with each other. Yes, I know. And finally you decided that you did not love me sufficiently to chuck the world for my sake, and there was an end of it. After all we did nothing so very dreadful, and I dare say you were right to choose matrimony without love instead of the other way on. I have never quite forgiven you, but, all the same, I hope you are as happy as you of course deserve to be, buried in the jungle as a respectable married lady!"

"Yes, I *am* happy," she said loudly, defiantly. "I love my husband. I know now that I loved him all the time, all through our long engagement and separation. It wasn't *love* that I felt for you, and thank goodness you *weren't* free to marry me." She stopped, breathless.

"You say it wasn't love that you felt for me?" he inquired, as if he had not quite understood her words.

"No, it was not. I know it now."

Deliberately he took a leather case from his breast pocket, opened it, and drew out a letter.

Lydia's heart sank. Her own letter. The only letter she had ever written to this man, unwisely, in a moment of madness.

And he had kept it— brought it here to-day. Even devil though he was, how could he have done anything so cruel!

"Now then—" He spread out the letter. She leaned forward over the table, in a futile attempt to snatch it from his hand. Of course he frustrated the effort.

"Don't be silly! I only wanted to remind you that you were not speaking the truth just now. Listen—"

He read out a sentence that stabbed her memory.

"Oh, stop!" she besought him, as he read on. "I was a fool, a wicked fool. Why can't you let me alone? What is your object in coming here to torment me like this?"

Slowly he folded up the sheet of paper and returned it with care to the leather case.

"My object?" he said. "Perhaps an instinct of sport; also a fellow may have some sense of sex pride. Would you wish me to imagine that you were making a fool of me all that time? That you deliberately embarked on a hot flirtation while your heart was honestly given to the man you had promised to marry? If you think I have forgotten that you allowed me to believe you loved me heart and soul, until you discovered that immediate marriage was impossible for us, you are very much mistaken. You are the only woman I have ever really loved, or ever shall love, and I have *not* forgotten— neither have I forgiven!"

"What have you to forgive!" she gasped. "You deceived me, led me to be untrue to my future husband, and now you come to terrify me— — "

"Why should you be terrified if What's-his-name knows all about it?"

He grinned maliciously, and she realized that he had not for one moment believed her false statement. Was he capable of an intention to make the truth known to Tom? What would he gain by such heartless revenge. She saw Tom's faith in her shattered, the destruction of her married happiness and peace, the loss of all she most prized in existence; and she had only herself to blame. If Tom knew, even if now she told him herself, he might forgive her, might condone her disloyalty, but would their life together ever be quite the same again? Tom had never doubted but that she had endured their long separation in the same steadfast, faithful spirit as he himself had done. Any revelation to the contrary would wound him past healing, however he might strive to understand. It was unthinkable! She felt that she would do anything, almost anything, to avert such revelation, and she divined with horror that Dane scented this feeling. He meant to take vindictive advantage of it— somehow!

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "What is it you want?"

"Merely a little reparation on your part for the lack of cordiality in your reception of me to-day," he said, suavely. "You can have the letter if you want it very badly, but only on condition that you come to my camp and fetch it yourself. After that, if you like, I will go away."

"And— and if I refuse?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh! well, then I stay. I should like to meet your husband, and perhaps you would prefer me to give him the letter as a proof, *as a proof*, mind, of your constancy to him during your long engagement?"

"Are you human?"

"Quite human," he replied, "or I shouldn't want to get my own back."

"Tom would kill you if he knew!"

"Ah! yes, Tom— *that* was the name! Very likely he would want to kill me, and you too, if he is also human. But he doesn't know, and if you do as I ask, he need never know. You can bury the past if you choose. Is it worth while?"

He rose, standing before her smiling, relentless. She covered her eyes with her hands. The shriek of the brain-fever bird rent the silence. The sun was

sinking fast; at any moment Tom might return, and it would be beyond her strength to act a part in the presence of her tormentor.

"How could I come to your camp?" she said wildly. "It would be quite impossible."

"Not at all," he argued. "A short ride, say, after tea, when your beloved is out, as he is this afternoon, apparently."

"I don't ride." She felt faint with despair, and her own voice sounded to her as though someone else had spoken.

"Then why not walk? I'll come and meet you— like old times, when we used to meet in the woods, eh? Don't you remember— how each of us used to start at a certain time and meet at a certain spot, punctual to the minute?" He took a few steps nearer to her and repeated: "Don't you remember?"

Quickly she moved away, and called to a *peon* who sat snoozing outside beneath a tree. The man sprang to attention, and she bade him order the sahib's horse.

Dane made her a little ironical bow. "Thank you, I understand. I am dismissed. All the same you will come? Listen— I will start to-morrow at four o'clock, and I will walk along that path." He pointed to a narrow track which skirted the forest, a track that was visible for some distance before it was lost to view by a bend of the trees. "It leads towards my camp. If I don't meet you, I will start at the same hour next day; and, well yes, on the third afternoon, too, if you have not come."

His horse was led round the corner of the bungalow, but still she did not speak, and he waited.

"Is it too much to ask?" he went on, a tender inflexion in his voice. "Just a walk, a meeting, for the sake of old days, and in return I give you a letter— a letter I have treasured, that I still treasure. You can't think I shall like parting with it? It is all I have of you, except memories. But there— you want it back, you know you do, even though"— he paused, then added slowly, looking at her sideways— "even though your husband knows everything?" He went down the veranda steps. "*Au revoir!*" he called over his shoulder.

She stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the darkening edge of the forest as Dane mounted his horse and rode away. Once he looked back, but Mrs. Leyland was no longer to be seen in the veranda.

IT WAS dark when Tom Leyland returned to the camp. He found his wife lying on her bed; the lamp in her room burned dimly; it had not been turned up.

"Hullo! Anything the matter?" he inquired anxiously.

"Just a little headache," she told him. "It's nothing. I didn't know it was so late."

Reassured he went off to his bath, and she forced herself to rise. During the interval between Dane's departure and Tom's return she had suffered agonies of mental misery. At one moment she resolved to confess her secret to her husband; then, again, she was for holding her peace, doing nothing; perhaps Dane had only been bluffing, amusing himself? But no, she could not risk betrayal, the strain would be too great. If he should fulfil his threat— what then? For three days at least she was safe; she would give herself time to think, strive to summon all her courage, and if she could not bring herself to face confession, well, there was always— the track at the edge of the forest! Once the letter was in her possession, and Dane had taken his departure, there would be nothing further to fear. Yet— how could she feel certain that he would keep his part of the bargain? She knew he was capable of anything. . . .

Heartsick and wretched she sat through dinner that evening, pretending to eat, now talking fast to conceal her distress, now listening with simulated interest as Tom told her of his doings that afternoon.

"We may have to stay here a bit longer than I expected," he said. "There's a lot to be seen to. Luckily this is a decent little bungalow. You don't mind, do you? You won't feel bored? I shall have to be out all day for the next three days."

She started involuntarily. To her the words sounded ominous— "*the next three days*!"

Controlling herself she answered easily:

"Of course I don't mind. I know it can't be helped, and I've plenty to do. But the servants don't seem to like this part of the jungle. Ayah was full of alarms this afternoon— she came to me with all sorts of tales about demons and ghosts and people disappearing in the forest, and something about a fakir who could make himself invisible."

"Oh! that's an old jungle story! I remember hearing about the gentleman last year. His invisibility is the only true part about him I should imagine; and as for demons and ghosts, where aren't they, according to the natives? Ayah will have to put up with them, even if they happen to be more numerous here than in any part of the forest. If she had mentioned tigers and leopards there would have been some sense in her attack of nerves. I came across some big pug-marks to-day. If there was time I would have the fellow tracked, though probably he's miles away by now. Tigers travel so quickly."

"Oh! Tom, be careful!" said his wife in sudden alarm. "Do go on the elephant while we are here!"

"I shall have to; a horse would be no use where I have to inspect."

"And take a rifle."

"Of course, that's a sure way of seeing no big game— like umbrellas."

"Umbrellas?" queried Mrs. Leyland.

Tom laughed. "Oh! well, you know what I mean; take-out-an-umbrella-and-it-doesn't-rain sort of thing."

He lit a cigarette as the servants left the room, and leaned back in his chair contented, well fed, without a care; the light from the table lamp fell on his frank, pleasant face reddened by the sun; he smiled tenderly at his wife.

"Headache quite gone?" he asked.

"Quite," she said with an answering smile; but she clenched her hands beneath the table, worn out as she was with her efforts to speak and behave naturally. The sight of him seated there so unsuspecting, so ignorant of what she ought to tell him, was almost more than she could bear. Supposing she were to blurt it all out then and there! She visualized the change in his happy face, his amazement, his recoil, his suffering; she could not deal him such a blow; yet something impelled her to speak of Dane— the words seemed to force themselves from her dry lips.

"A man called here this afternoon—" she began.

Tom looked up. "A man called here? Who was he?"

"A— a globe-trotter, a Mr. Dane. He said he had been given an introduction to you— he's out here shooting—"

"Oh! hang these chaps! I suppose he wants me to show him some sport, put him in the way of bagging a tiger. I hope you told him I'm up to my eyes in work. Where is his camp?"

"I don't know where exactly; not far off, I believe. I had met him before— at home."

"Oh, well, if he is a friend of yours—"

"But he isn't— he isn't!" she protested, speaking excitedly; then she bit her lips, holding herself in, fearful of what she might say next.

"All right," he said, slightly surprised; "don't worry. We needn't bother about him. Anyway I couldn't do anything for the next three days, and I don't want to stop here longer than I can help, there's too much to do farther on."

There it was again— three days— three days. She felt if she opened her lips again she must scream.

Tom took his cigarette from his mouth and regarded her with concern.

"Why, darling— you're shaking— what's the matter?" He rose and came to her side, felt her hands and her forehead. "Why, you're stone cold!" he said. "You must be in for a touch of fever. Let me take your temperature— where's the thermometer— the quinine—"

She burst into tears, her head on his shoulder. He fussed over her, petted her, blamed himself for allowing her to get up for dinner when she had owned to a headache. Persuaded her to go to bed, called Ayah to bring hot bottles, gave her a dose of quinine, could only be induced to leave her when she declared she felt better and inclined to sleep. He tiptoed from the room, bidding

Ayah sit by the door till he came to bed, and to call him at once should the memsahib need anything.

For a moment Ayah lurked in the room before obeying the sahib's order.

"It is even as I said— this is a bad place," she whined. "There is misfortune in the air. All say it— and I die of fear. The cartman and the cook—"

"Oh, go— go!" cried the memsahib, cowering beneath the bedclothes. And, muttering to herself, Ayah stepped over the threshold to squat in the veranda with much jingling of jewellery and stifled yawns.

Lydia ached all over; cold water seemed to be trickling down her spine; undoubtedly she was "in for a touch of fever," as Tom had feared. She only prayed that as her temperature rose she might not lose control of her tongue. Soon Tom would be coming to bed— what if she talked, betrayed her secret!

Later, when he crept cautiously into the room, she feigned deep slumber, holding her breath, as for a moment he bent anxiously over her. It seemed an eternity before he lay down, taking care not to disturb her, before his regular breathing told her that he slept. Once Tom fell asleep it took much to rouse him. She sighed with relief; but now she had reached the hot stage of the malady, and until dawn she lay burning and aching, her pulses racing, her head feeling as if it must burst.

Mercifully, before Tom awoke, the worst was over, blessed moisture had broken out on her skin, and by the time the early tea-tray appeared she was sufficiently herself to assume cheerfulness, to assure Tom she had slept splendidly, and that there was absolutely no need for him to put off his inspection as he suggested.

"But I shall have to be out all day," he said doubtfully. "And I might be late getting back. I hate leaving you alone."

She pleaded, protested, promised to stay quiet, to take care of herself, declared she should only worry if Tom neglected his work for her sake; finally she succeeded in convincing him that he would *not* be behaving "like a brute" if he left her, and diverted his attention to the orders that must be given for the stocking of his tiffin-basket. At last he went to dress, then came to bid her a reluctant farewell, and a few minutes later she heard the sounds of his departure outside— the hurried footsteps of the servants, the *mahout's* order to the elephant to kneel, the great beast's ponderous movements, the familiar swish of its trunk, and the slow pad-pad of its feet as it lurched heavily away.

Exhausted, she lay, hardly thinking, hardly feeling, until Ayah came to tell her that her bath was ready; she dawdled over her dressing, could not eat her breakfast, only drank thirstily. Afterwards she sat idle in the veranda, and all the time her mind worked in a hopeless circle. What was she to do!— she would wait till to-morrow. No, if she did, something might prevent Tom from going out. To-day he could hardly avoid being late; she knew he had many miles to

traverse. Hours passed, and the drowsy silence of the mid-day heat encompassed the camp, servants and animals slept— and presently, from sheer fatigue, her own eyelids drooped.

She awoke with a start— what was the time? Her watch had stopped. She hastened into the dwelling-room to find that it was nearly four o'clock. Unsteadily she went into her bedroom, and as she put on her hat with trembling hands, the sight of her face in the looking-glass startled her— so white— so haggard. But was it any wonder! On reaching the veranda steps she hesitated, nearly turned back, then looked about her, cautiously. No one was stirring, the *peon* on duty dozed beneath his tree. Now was her time— if she was to go at all. She heard the clock within the bungalow strike four.

Once or twice, as she crossed the open space in front of the rest-house, she glanced back; then she ran till she knew she must be concealed from view by a thick clump of thorn bushes. Pausing to take breath, she decided to walk a little way into the forest, and then to keep parallel with the track that could be seen from the bungalow; else one of the servants might catch sight of her, and follow with the idea of protecting the memsahib on her walk; or point out the direction she had taken should Tom return earlier than he was expected.

The undergrowth was not very heavy; ordinarily she would have found it easy enough to get along, but the attack of malaria, though not severe, in addition to her distress of mind and the lack of food, had weakened her, so that every step was an effort. Nevertheless, she pressed on, anxious to reach the bend in the forest edge that would permit of her regaining the open track unseen from the bungalow. Now it was not far off. The gloom of the forest frightened her; once or twice she halted, peered this way and that, listened intently with nerves ajar. Furtive sounds seemed to be pursuing her. Something rustled loudly in the undergrowth; and in a panic she dashed forward, caught her foot in a trailing creeper, and fell.

For a space she knew nothing; then, as she struggled to her feet, she was conscious of a dull pain in her head— had she struck her head, in falling, against a tree? Blindly she took a few steps, but she had lost her sense of direction, could not tell which way to turn, and the forest was growing darker, darker. A dim recollection floated confusedly through her mind of Ayah standing in the veranda talking some nonsense about people being lost in the forest, spirited away, never to be seen or heard of again, unless— what was it?— unless a ghostly fakir came to their aid, guiding them back to safety! She had always been afraid of fakirs; semi-mad creatures who appeared to her scarcely human when occasionally they hung about the camp. Tom would talk to them, give them *baksheesh* when they held out their begging bowls making weird sounds; for her part she could feel no interest in them. They only filled her with horror and disgust.

AGAIN she stepped forward, stopped, frozen with fear. What was that?— a human form outlined against the trunk of a tree, a gaunt, half-naked figure, with long matted hair and ash-smeared body gazing at her with bloodshot eyes! It moved, beckoning to her Eastern fashion, palm downwards, and slowly, involuntarily, as if impelled by some mysterious influence, she felt herself drawn towards it. The figure walked away, looking over its shoulder, and helplessly she followed, spell-bound. It was like a nightmare. Unaccountably her weakness seemed to have left her; she felt light in body, able to move quickly as though treading on air. She saw nothing but this faint, dim outline ahead of her, turning and beckoning, drawing her in its wake.

Then all at once there was light— she was out of the forest, out on the dusty track, and before her, across the open space, was the bungalow, home-like, familiar, a welcome sight in the rays of the setting sun. She passed her hand over her forehead that ached distractingly, looked about her, bewildered, for the fakir. He had vanished.

With feeble steps she crossed the open space, and staggered up the steps of the veranda. The bungalow was quiet, deserted, but she was vaguely aware of some disturbance at the back of the building; servants were chattering excitedly, running to and fro. She steadied herself against the camp table; something lay on the table— it was a leather case, the letter-case she had seen in the keeping of Anthony Dane! Who had put it there? Her hand crept towards it; she heard the scrape of her nails on the wooden surface of the table as she grabbed at the case. Trembling all over she opened it, looked inside, picked out her own letter from among other papers, and tore it into shreds, again and again; then, with the swiftness and the cunning of a thief she darted towards a plant that grew in a pot at the head of the steps, and pressed the scraps of paper deep into the mould. Only afterwards did she see that her hands were stained, stained with something that would not rub off like the mould; horrified she looked at the letter-case on the table; the case was stained too, and there was a dull red smear on the table.... Fainting, she sank into a chair.

When she opened her eyes she was lying on her bed. Tom was beside her; how thankful she was to see him! She smiled at him, tried to speak, heard herself stammering. Tom spoke soothing, endearing words, held a glass to her lips, and she drank obediently.

Strength and memory returned to her slowly.

"What— what happened?" she said.

"Never mind now. Thank God you are safe. Don't try to talk; drink some more of this."

"I was lost," she quavered; "lost in the forest!"

"Darling, what possessed you to go out alone like that! The servants said they did not know you had gone out. They could not find you when—" He checked himself, and went on hurriedly: "You must have had a fall; there's a big bruise on your forehead."

"What were you going to say? Do tell me!" she entreated as he hesitated. "That case on the table— I— I touched it—" She shuddered, looked at her hand; the stain had been wiped off. "Was the case really there? Is it there still?"

"Yes," said Tom reluctantly. Then he made up his mind to tell her of the horrible thing that had happened; sooner or later she would have to hear of it.

"It must have been soon after you went out for a walk that a villager came into the camp with that letter-case. He said that as he was coming along the track through that bend in the forest he saw a sahib walking a little distance in front of him; he thought the sahib was me, as he knew our camp was here—"

He paused, unwilling to continue.

"Yes?" cried Lydia breathlessly. "Yes?— Go on!"

"I hate telling you, but it seems that a tiger sprang out, and killed the poor chap, carried him off before the villager's eyes! The letter-case was left lying on the track. It belongs to the man you told me of, who called here yesterday— Dane."

For a few seconds silence followed. Then to Tom's Leyland's alarm and dismay, his wife sat up and burst out laughing.

"That story was true!" she cried, rocking herself to and fro in delirious mirth. "I saw the fakir of the forest; he turned me back, took care of me, and if you will look in the flower-pot—"

She fell back on her pillow babbling senselessly.

IT WAS a long illness. Mrs. Leyland nearly died during the difficult journey from the camp to the station where doctors and nurses were forthcoming. When she was fit for the voyage her husband took her home to complete her recovery. He never spoke to her of the tragedy in the jungle, and she hoped he imagined that her illness had wiped it from her memory; yet sometimes she wondered if there could be another reason for his silence on the subject— that she had, in her ravings, told him her secret? But if she had, she felt she was forgiven.

8: Entrance and Exit

Algernon Blackwood

1869-1951

The Westminster Gazette, 13 Feb 1909

Collected in: *Ten Minute Stories*, John Murray, 1914

THESE THREE— the old physicist, the girl, and the young Anglican parson who was engaged to her— stood by the window of the country house. The blinds were not yet drawn. They could see the dark clump of pines in the field, with crests silhouetted against the pale wintry sky of the February afternoon. Snow, freshly fallen, lay upon lawn and hill. A big moon was already lighting up.

"Yes, that's the wood," the old man said, "and it was this very day fifty years ago— February 13— the man disappeared from its shadows; swept in this extraordinary, incredible fashion into invisibility— into *some other place*. Can you wonder the grove is haunted?" A strange impressiveness of manner belied the laugh following the words.

"Oh, please tell us," the girl whispered; "we're all alone now." Curiosity triumphed; yet a vague alarm betrayed itself in the questioning glance she cast for protection at her younger companion, whose fine face, on the other hand, wore an expression that was grave and singularly "rapt." He was listening keenly.

"As though Nature," the physicist went on, half to himself, "here and there concealed vacuums, gaps, holes in space (his mind was always speculative; more than speculative, some said), through which a man might drop into invisibility— a new direction, in fact, at right angles to the three known ones— 'higher space,' as Bolyai, Gauss, and Hinton might call it; and what you, with your mystical turn"— looking toward the young priest— "might consider a spiritual change of condition, into a region where space and time do not exist, and where all dimensions are possible— because they are one."

"But, *please*, the story," the girl begged, not understanding these dark sayings, "although I'm not sure that Arthur ought to hear it. He's much too interested in such queer things as it is!" Smiling, yet uneasy, she stood closer to his side, as though her body might protect his soul.

"Very briefly, then, you shall hear what I remember of this haunting, for I was barely ten years old at the time. It was evening— clear and cold like this, with snow and moonlight— when someone reported to my father that a peculiar sound, variously described as crying, singing, wailing, was being heard in the grove. He paid no attention until my sister heard it too, and was frightened. Then he sent a groom to investigate. Though the night was brilliant the man took a lantern. We watched from this very window till we lost his figure against the trees, and the lantern stopped swinging suddenly, as if he had put it

down. It remained motionless. We waited half an hour, and then my father, curiously excited, I remember, went out quickly, and I, utterly terrified, went after him. We followed his tracks, which came to an end beside the lantern, the last step being a stride almost impossible for a man to have made. All around the snow was unbroken by a single mark, but the man himself had vanished. Then we heard him calling for help— above, behind, beyond us; from all directions at once, yet from none, came the sound of his voice; but though we called back he made no answer, and gradually his cries grew fainter and fainter, as if going into tremendous distance, and at last died away altogether."

"And the man himself?" asked both listeners.

"Never returned— from that day to this has never been seen…. At intervals for weeks and months afterwards reports came in that he was still heard crying, always crying for help. With time, even these reports ceased— for most of us," he added under his breath; "and that is all I know. A mere outline, as you see."

The girl did not quite like the story, for the old man's manner made it too convincing. She was half disappointed, half frightened.

"See! there are the others coming home," she exclaimed, with a note of relief, pointing to a group of figures moving over the snow near the pine trees. "Now we can think of tea!" She crossed the room to busy herself with the friendly tray as the servant approached to fasten the shutters. The young priest, however, deeply interested, talked on with their host, though in a voice almost too low for her to hear. Only the final sentences reached her, making her uneasy— absurdly so, she thought— till afterwards.

"— for matter, as we know, interpenetrates matter," she heard, "and two objects may conceivably occupy the same space. The odd thing really is that one should hear, but not see; that air-waves should bring the voice, yet ether-waves fail to bring the picture."

And then the older man: "— as if certain places in Nature, yes, invited the change— places where these extraordinary forces stir from the earth as from the surface of a living Being with organs— places like islands, mountaintops, pine-woods, especially pines isolated from their kind. You know the queer results of digging absolutely virgin soil, of course— and that theory of the earth's being *alive*— "

The voice dropped again.

"States of mind also helping the forces of the place," she caught the priest's reply in part; "such as conditions induced by music, by intense listening, by certain moments in the Mass even— by ecstasy or—"

"I say, what *do* you think?" cried a girl's voice, as the others came in with welcome chatter and odours of tweeds and open fields. "As we passed your old haunted pine-wood we heard *such* a queer noise. Like someone wailing or crying. Caesar howled and ran; and Harry refused to go in and investigate. He

positively funked it!" They all laughed. "More like a rabbit in a trap than a person crying," explained Harry, a blush kindly concealing his startling pallor "I wanted my tea too much to bother about an old rabbit."

It was some time after tea when the girl became aware that the priest had disappeared, and putting two and two together, ran in alarm to her host's study. Quite easily, from the hastily opened shutters, they saw his figure moving across the snow. The moon was very bright over the world, yet he earned a lantern that shone pale yellow against the white brilliance.

"Oh, for God's sake, quick!" she cried, pale with fear. "Quick! or we're too late! Arthur's simply wild about such things. Oh, I might have known— I might have guessed. And this is the very night. I'm terrified!"

By the time he had found his overcoat and slipped round the house with her from the back door, the lantern, they saw, was already swinging close to the pine-wood. The night was still as ice, bitterly cold. Breathlessly they ran, following the tracks. Half-way his steps diverged, and were plainly visible in the virgin snow by themselves. They heard the whispering of the branches ahead of them, for pines cry even when no airs stir. "Follow me close," said the old man sternly. The lantern, he already saw, lay upon the ground unattended; no human figure was anywhere visible.

"See! The steps come to an end here," he whispered, stooping down as soon as they reached the lantern. The tracks, hitherto so regular, showed an odd wavering— the snow curiously disturbed. Quite suddenly they stopped. The final step was a very long one— a stride, almost immense, "as though he was pushed forward from behind," muttered the old man, too low to be overheard, "or sucked forward from in front— as in a fall."

The girl would have dashed forward but for his strong restraining grasp. She clutched him, uttering a sudden dreadful cry. "Hark! I hear his voice!" she almost sobbed. They stood still to listen. A mystery that was more than the mystery of night closed about their hearts— a mystery that is beyond life and death, that only great awe and terror can summon from the deeps of the soul. Out of the heart of the trees, fifty feet away, issued a crying voice, half wailing, half singing, very faint. "Help! Help!" it sounded through the still night; "for the love of God, pray for me!"

The melancholy rustling of the pines followed; and then again the singular crying voice shot past above their heads, now in front of them, now once more behind. It sounded everywhere. It grew fainter and fainter, fading away, it seemed, into distance that somehow was appalling…. The grove, however, was empty of all but the sighing wind; the snow unbroken by any tread. The moon threw inky shadows; the cold bit; it was a terror of ice and death and this awful singing cry….

"But why *pray?*" screamed the girl, distracted, frantic with her bewildered terror. "Why *pray?* Let us *do* something to help— do something…!" She swung round in a circle, nearly falling to the ground. Suddenly she perceived that the old man had dropped to his knees in the snow beside her and was praying.

"Because the forces of prayer, of thought, of the will to help, alone can reach and succour him where he now is," was all the answer she got. And a moment later both figures were kneeling in the snow, praying, so to speak, their very heart's life out….

The search may be imagined— the steps taken by police, friends, newspapers, by the whole country in fact…. But the most curious part of this queer "Higher Space" adventure is the end of it— at least, the "end" so far as at present known. For after three weeks, when the winds of March were a-roar about the land, there crept over the fields towards the house the small dark figure of a man. He was thin, pallid as a ghost, worn and fearfully emaciated, but upon his face and in his eyes were traces of an astonishing radiance— a glory unlike anything ever seen…. It may, of course, have been deliberate, or it may have been a genuine loss of memory only; none could say— least of all the girl whom his return snatched from the gates of death; but, at any rate, what had come to pass during the interval of his amazing disappearance he has never yet been able to reveal.

"And you must never ask me," he would say to her— and repeat even after his complete and speedy restoration to bodily health— "for I simply cannot tell. I know no language, you see, that could express it. I was near you all the time. But I was also— elsewhere and otherwise…."

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9: The Magic Mule

Albert Dorrington

1874-1953

Sydney Mail 28 Sep 1927

KITTY ARDEN had bought the mule. It was tied in the schooner's forepart for the sea-birds to inspect and admire. Kitty's husband. Phil, had asked her to buy the mule. He needed it for his claim at Beetle Creek. Owing to the shortage of labour in New Guinea, and the unwillingness of the natives to work in a mine, Phil had been forced to haul up his wash-dirt single-handed. Now with a windlass properly rigged a mule can be made to haul up clay and rocks till the cows come home.

So Kitty Arden had bought Little Willy at a horse bazaar in Brisbane. He was a small, blonde mule with slim, dainty feet that appealed lo Kilty's aesthetic temperament. Little Willy had been auctioned from a mob of other mules, dark, sinister creatures with hoofs the size of pancakes. One of these hulking creatures had tried to bite Kitty when she leaned over the rail to pat Willy's neck.

Mary's father, Nick Tolliver, owned the schooner. Nick had a share in Phil's claim at Beetle Creek. He too was certain that a young, upstanding mule would prove a blessing to the overworked Phil. A woman could drive Little Willy, he averred, if she used him kindly and kept her hatpin to herself.

During the long, slow voyage from Brisbane the mule's appetite had almost caused a famine on board the schooner. Little Willy ate all his fodder during the first week. After consuming a small cargo of beans in the forehold, the point arose in Tolliver's mind whether the mule would eat bananas or go on a hunger strike. The schooner's after-part was loaded with bananas. When a sailor lost his foothold aloft he fell on bananas.

In consideration of the mine at Beetle Creek, Nick didn't want the mule to die. In his best bedside manner he made offering of a big ripe bunch the size of a piano case. Little Willy accepted the bananas sadly and with ears flattened. But the next day and the next his attitude towards bananas sharpened, as the market, reports are fond of saying. The crew admitted ruefully that Nick had a bedside manner with mules. At the end of the voyage not a scrap of anything eatable remained on hoard. It was discovered, on a rough calculation, that, if the bananas Lillle Willy had consumed had been placed end on end they would have reached halfway from Gulgong to Kilaloe.

Phil Arden was waiting on the jetty at Beetle Creek when the schooner, with the mule on board, made fast. To the sunburnt Kitty Phil appeared drawn and nervous. His young eyes were full of trouble.

'How's the mine, dear?' Kitty asked, with her arms about his shoulders. 'Hope your iuck hasn't run away?'

Phil wiped his hot brow as he turned to greet Nick Tolliver. Crowds of natives swarmed over the beach, watching at a distance and sullenly expectant. A few carried spears, but the headmen and chiefs had come unarmed.

'A week ago,' Phil staled hoarsely. 'I was away in the bush cutting props for the workings. When I returned to the mine I found that some of these people had carried away nearly two hundred ounces of gold. I had hidden it in a tool chest under the reef. Confound these Kooma natives!'

Kitty's face paled at Ihe news. Here was the price of Iheir new home gone for ever.

'The mean, sneaking loads!' she quavered, holding Phil's trembling hand. 'And what in the name of old hals can they do with gold dust, anyhow?'

'Sell it for rum,' her falher growled. Turning to his crestfallen son-in-law, he bade him cheer up and keep a stiff lip before llie Kooma headmen. No use getting mad with them. Now that the mule had come and Kitty was here a better watch could be kept over the mine.

A great commotion was happening on the beach. A crowd of warriors bearing a palm-lined litter approached the schooner. Reclining on the litter was a small fat native wearing a bundle of heron plumes and hornbill heads in his thick hair. In his right hand was a short spear.

'It's old Chuka, chief of the village,' Phil told Nick Tolliver. 'Sick, as usual, and wants medicine.'

'Let him come aboard, dad,' Kilty interrupted hastily. 'It's a chance to make friends with him and his people.'''

'Oh, Chuka's welcome,' Nick Tolliver grunted. 'The old fellow's been a patient of mine for years,'' he told his daughter. 'Cured the old wop of 'flu once. A most awful liar. Steals my empty medicine bottles, too. Still, it's just as well to keep friendly. He's been soaking Dutch arrak, by the look of him.'

Chuka was borne to the gangway, his warriors indicating by their gestures thai, he wished lo come aboard. Tolliver nodded briskly from above.

'Hullo. Chuka!' he greeted, scanning the old chief's gin-inflamed eyes. 'Sins finding you out, eh? Come along; I'll put, you right in no time.'

Ohuka's fat jowl expanded in a grin as they bore him up the gangway and placed him in a deck-chair under the awning.

Nick Tolliver waved Ihe bearers back to the jelly, he did not want their pilfering fingers aboul his schooner.

'I'll send the old man ashore when he's oiled up,' he told them. 'Off with you, now! I'm busy.'

Kitty had drawn a canvas hood over the mules box. The sun was hot. and Little Willy objected to the swarms of big brown flies that had journeyed from the bush to lickle his ears.

Tolliver helped carry Chuka below to the cool little stateroom where he kept his medicine chest and clean whisky. After a dose of oil mixed with a comforting stimulant Chuka was soon snoring on the couch under thie open port window. Kitty remained on deck with Phil. Bolh were interested in the crowds of natives collecling on the jetty. The women's shrill voices made known the fact that not a single yard of red twill had come ashore.

Nofki. Chuka's own medicine man and witchi doctor, hatangued a group of headmen on the folly of allowing their beloved chief to partake of the white man's mixlures.

A fiery-eyed little man with the neck of a rooster was Nofki. His soul was torn by jealousy at the thought of Nick Tolliver's usurpation of his own particular healing powers. With his bony fingers Nofki plucked the string of sharks' teeth about his wizened throat as he foretold of the dire calamity that would fall upon Chuka as the result of Tolliver taubada's spells and incantations, his turning physics.

The headmen listened to Nofki's predictions in frozen silence. It was not by their wish that Chuka delivered himself periodically to the white man with the magic bottles that cured the arrak sickness. It was Chuka's wish. Te ko, na shon! The taubadas were full of magic! For had they not seen a white soldier man take off his right arm and hide it beneath his bed? Even Nofki could nol equal thai for magic.

PhilL translated to Kilty the gist of the headmen's argument. Instantly her mind seized the point of the witch doctor's jealous fury. She had been more than angry at Phil's loss. It now occurred to her that the old chief in the stateroom might be used to bring pressure for the return of the lost gold. It was more than likely that Chuka had himself participated in the mine robbery. Neither Phil nor her father could use force against these hefty spearmen, she told herself. But it was possible to play on their superstitious fears. And Kitty Arden, who had experienced hard times in Sydney during Phil's struggle at the mine, was eager to use her wit and her last ace to bring back the lost gold to her husband.

Kitty tiptoed to the stairhead and addressed her father below. Her voice was no more than a whisper. 'I want Chuka's ornaments, dad; I want to borrow them.'

'Ornaments!' Tolliver repeated darkly. 'What in thunder?'

'I want his spear, his snakeskin belt, and all his head plumes,' she interrupted. 'He will get them back when I've done with them. Be quick, dad; there's a kettle boiling in my little head,' she added with a playful grimace.

Nick's experience of his daughter's humours was profound. He knew when the kettle was boiling and when to made haste. Moreover, she was nol the woman to start skylarking at a time when Phil, was in the dumps over his bad luck. Them was always a reason for Kitty's boil-overs. Very gently he raised the chief's spear from where it lay beside the couch. Unclasping the snakeskin belt from the bulging waist was a task requiring skill anf finesse. It was Kitty's fingers that liberated the gorgeous hornbilled heron plumes from the tangle of ornaments in the chief's mop of hair.

Nick followed his daughter on deck, scarce daring to ask a question as she approached llie canvas-covered mule. Little Willy appeared interested in her movements. He looked at the gorgeous heron plumes with the eye of a dandy.

'The difference between some men and mules is in front of the collar.' she expounded philosophically as she adjusted Chuka's hornbill plumes between Little Willy's straight, listening ears.

'Mother of Moses!' Nick gasped, 'the girl's gone dippy!'

He drew away with a groan of despair as she buckled the chief's snakeskin belt around the mule's ribs. Very dexterously she fastened the spear-handle between the belt and the animal's skin. Chuka's necklace of coral and sea-shells was fastened about his neck. The canvas hood had concealed Kitty's actions from the mob of natives on shore. She made a sign to her astounded husband.

'Litlle Willy's going to walk down the gangway alone.' she announced. 'H's his birthday, not ours!'

Phil scratched liis head dubiously.

'All right, dear. But I don't quite grasp what's in your mind.' he protested faintly.

Tolliver backed away from the plume-decked mule with the snakeskin belt and the spear. The difference in Chuka's appearance and the mule's was negligible. He confessed. It wasn't hard for some fellows to look like mules. All they had to do was to gel inside the right collar.

Touched with a bamboo, Little Willy stepped to the gangway. With the plumes frisking his ears, the blood of Willy's Spanish ancestors responded to the magic thrill of so much finery. Also, there was wafted upon the breeze a smell of the green earth and the tender young shoots of the forest glade.

'Gee up!' Kitty hissed in his ear. 'Gee up. Willy, and keep on geeing!'

The mule reached the jetty at the moment Nofki, the wild doctor, had concluded his final warning anent the magic of Tolliver's potions.

'Woe, children of Kooma!'' he wailed. 'My warning hath fallen on foolish ears. Harm will yet come to Chuka! There are devils on this ship ready to eat his body!'

The hoofs of the mule touched the jetty with a sounding bang. Already he sniffed some delicious shrubbery across the beach. Pawing the air in sheer lightness of heart, Little Willy cast himself heels first into space.

In other countries, and among other people, the mule's gaiety and abandon might have proved startling enough. But to the headmen and warriors of a Papuan settlement a mule was a bolt from the blue. In their virgin remoteness within the Huon Gulf they were familiar enough wilh the glittering, flame-hued feathers of the paradise birds, the lyre-winged beauties of the forest. They knew the four-legged wallaby and the scarlet-crested parakeet. But they had never seen a Spanish mule wearing a chief's head plumes, his spear, and his snakeskin bell.

Little Willy pranced and shot his heels skyward, and then fetched up with a snort of surprise in front of the paralysed wild doctor. It was also Nofki's first mule. In the turn of a toe the beach had become a raving rabble of natives, all heading for the foresl. Back to the village they ran, the witch doctor leading the way.

After endless days aboard Tolliver's schooner Little Willy became infected with the spirit of motion that had seized the simple people of Kooma. He followed on the heels of the fast-moving witch doctor. They raced through gullies and over the scrub-covered ranges, the mule betraying a yearning for the companionship of the tufty-headed medicine man.

The village of Kooma came into view, with Nofki at the head of Ihe slampeding natives. The witch doctor ran in the direction of his own palm-thalched dwelling, terror in his streaming hair and eyes.

'We are undone!' he panted to the few headmen who stayed near him. 'Look and believe thine eyes!'

Little Willy had pulled up at the door of Chuka's big house that occupied the centre of the village square. The door was open, as Chuka's bearers had left it. The earth floors were covered with mats. On the rough slab walls hung a number of native weapons and trophies. Above a throne-like seat, where Chuka often held council with his followers, were clustered a dozen bunches of ripe guavas and bananas. With neck outstretched and breathing cautiously, Little Willy stepped into the deserted house and reached for an appetising- bunch of green and yellow fruit.

Now, in spile of his sudden terror and surprise at seeing a mule, Nofki was no fool. All his life he had had fools for clients, and had grown wise on the folly of others. During the run home his monkey brain had been searching for the deep down meaning of the mule's make-up. By the time Litlle Willy had helped

himself to his fifth banana the witch doclor had got his second wind. He stood in the shadow of Chuka's house and observed Little Willy, his ears and hoofs, his tail, and his hairy hide.

Nofki drew a deep breath, and then with a sudden effort pulled the plank door of Chuka's house towards him, closing if almost without sound. Lillle Willy was now a prisoner!

The headmen, cowering at odd corners of the village square, followed the witch doctor's movements in superstitious honor. Unmindful of their shouted warnings, Nofki bent near a cranny in the plank door and registered each bite and mouthful on the part of the mule inside. Gaining courage, the headmen joined him one by one at his post of observation. Some were armed, and now craved the privilege of killing the strange devil creature.

'Let us strike wilh our spears when he cometh forth,' the bearer of a shining weapon begged. 'One touch on his long neck, O Nofki, just one touch!'

The witch doctor scowled at the spearman. 'Fool!' he snarled. 'It is no devil. It is but the magic of the sea captain on the little ship.'

The headmen gaped at him. 'Can you not see,' Nofki went on, 'that the white man. Tolliver, hath changed the body of our chief, Chuka, into this four-hoofed creature? See how he swallowelh the ripe nabanos! Look through this space in the door,' he invited them blandly. 'Look well at the creature's belly and his mouth, and thou will look upon our chief. No other man in the forest or the valley could swallow nabanoes in such numbers as our beloved Chuka.'

The headmen peeped, one by one, through the crevice in the door. The front hoof of Little Willy was resting on the throne-like seat in his effort to pull down the last of the bananas hanging above.

The headmen watched spellbound. Even the most critical was forced to admit that Tolliver had practised his magic on their beloved ruler. The position. they argued, was not without peril to their tribe. How could this four-footed animal, that most certainly contained the spirit of Chuka, rule in Kooma? Doubtless the great wisdom of Chuka was still embodied in this strange creature. Even the white man's magic could not destroy their ruler's spirit. Yet.... something must be done.

They appealed to the witch doctor. Where was his magic, his spells and potions distilled from alligators' blood and the fat, of his own ancestors? The witch doctor knitted his brows as he faced the owner of the shining spear.

'Thou art right, Booda. By magic only can our chief be returned to his rightful shape. It can be done only with the help of the yellow dust thou stolest from the white man's mine. Bring hither the yellow iron!' he commanded wilh unexpected severity.

Booda of the shining spear was afflicted with a sudden shaking of the knees. Recovering himself under the scowling glances of the headmen, he loped

hurriedly across the square and disappeared within a palm thatched hovel on their right. In a little while he was back with a heavy goal skin bundle on his shoulder. The witch doctor scanned it greedily, and dug his talon fingers into the shining heap of yellow riches critically.

'This is the medicine, good Booda, for stricken spirits,' he intoned dreamfully, his fingers closing on the shining gold. 'In my hands it will change the tail of a sheep into the wings of birds.'

'Greal is Nofki!' murmured the headmen.

'Into the wings of birds,' the witch doclor repealed in silent rapture as he gripped the bundle from Booda's shoulder. Staggering with his burden to the door of Chuka's house, he made a sign to the headmen.

'Go to thy homes,' he ordered. 'I alone must make offering to the spirits of Chuka's ancestors. In the dawn of to-morrow our chief will be with us at the council seat. Go, now.'

THE first breath of night saw the witch doctor leading the mule from Chuka's house. They descended a rocky slope that led to the village of Momba in the north. Fastened with a rawhide thong on the back of the mule was the goatskin bundle. Once within the friendly stockades of the natives of Momba, Nofki could live at ease on the proceeds of the yellow dust stolen from Phil Eden's mine. He could become a chief among the simple villagers. The gold would make friends everywhere, even among the white settlers. He laughed at the trick he had played on the headmen. As for Tolliver, who held Chuka in his keeping, he would never see Nofki again!

How clever they had tried to be, he chuckled. It was Tolliver or the white woman who had dressed this four-fooled animal in Chuka's trappings. They had foreseen that the natives would leap to the conclusion that Chuka had been spirited into the body of this stupid animal. Almost he had believed it himself.

'Hurry, thou beast of the bone feet! Hurry!'

He struck Little Willy a sounding blow with a short bamboo he carried. The mule had halted to nip the sweet herbage on the range side. The blow from the bamboo sent it at a fast gait down the track.

At the foot of the range they came to the beach. Here a narrow inlet separated them from the good Government road to Momba and safely. The channel gleamed darkly in the starlight. A high tide had flushed it, and the sound of lapping water gave pause to the hurrying witch-doctor. Mixed with arrak, water was good: but under a man's feet it was sometimes a death snake. Yet he must go forward. In a couple of hours the headmen of Kooma would be scouring the forest and beach for him and the mule. Scant mercy would be shown him once his trickery was discovered. Visions of their slim bamboo head-knives startled him inio action.

'On, beast that hath no name! Lift thy legs!'

The bamboo slammed and cut at the quivering ribs. Little Willy did not approve of bubbling, tree-shadowed inlets. With the tide water swirling about his legs he saw the reflection of things that startled his nerves. He saw a shadow, topped by a livid smear of light, not twenty yards away. From the crest of this smear of phosphorescence protruded a sabre-edged fin.

Nofki was staring at the bush-flanked road that led to safely. Almost he could hear the whizz of the bamboo head-knives in his rear. Again he struck at the mule's ribs, as he had often struck at men and women who sometimes jibbed at his orders. Little Willy moved forward under the slashing canestrokes until the tide water reached his girth. Beside him, the sinnet halter twisted round his wrist, the witch doctor led the way. In mid-channel his eye fell on the livid wedge of sea fire streaming in his direction.

Nofki was no warrior. All his life he had lived on the superstitious fears of the villagers. In the bat of an eye he saw that a twenty-fool reef shark had found its way into the channel.

The hairs of Little Willy's neck stiffened in terror. Nofki obeyed a lightning impulse to reach the opposite bank of the channel. The mule hung back, rearing and pounding the floor of the channel with its hoofs. A squeal of rage came from the witch doctor as the shark flashed in. For one smothering instant man, mule, and shark thrashed together in a blinding smother of foam and out lashing hoofs.

Little Willy's panic fear did not blind him to the folly of getting his slim legs mixed up in the scythe-like jaws of the reef monster. Willy knew razors from jazz bands; he knew also that if he remained still he would become mule pie for the shark. So Willy danced like the little devil he really was, his sledding hoofs reaching the soft white throat and belly beneath him.

Considered as a side-show it was enough for any self-respecting shark. So the mule was allowed a flying chance to return to the bank. In the triangular scramble Nofki had let go the halter or he would have been jerked to safety by Little Willy's shoreward rush. He turned to the opposite bank wilh a despairing yelp. But the shark had gained its second wind in the deepening flood, although the hoofs of the mule had bent its steering gear.

There was some consolation, however, in the sight of the two-legged figure yelping and kicking in the neck-high water. He caught Nofki, as the cricket reporters say, at point, and held him firmly.

CAPTAIN NICK TOLLIVER threw himself into the only deck-chair the schooner possessed. Kitty sat on the port rail, breathing the soft night air, while Phil sprawled at her feel, a touch of fever in his blood brought on by the worries of his mule and his mine.

'I like a good mystery,' Tolliver growled, 'but this mule act is worse than anything Shakespeare ever put up. We've simply paid our money to get slung.'

'That's a fact, Phil agreed gloomily. 'And don't forget we've still got Chuka on our hands. Poor fellow snored all the sea-birds away this afternoon. At first the silly things didn't mind it. Then, after deciding the noise was something to do with gun-cotton or a non-stop-native sermon, they flapped off, like that blessed mule.'

'And the things that blessed mule could eat, lad,' Tolliver related mournfully. 'With my own eyes I've seen him lick up a plate of fried eggs from the galley.'And them derned deck hands used to give him beer,' Nick lamented, 'Anyway, it wasn't my fault he fell a victim to bananas.'

Kitty peered over the rail into the darkness of the forest, a feeling of hopeless inertia closing about her. She had lost their mule, and Phil had lost the results of a year's hard toil. Always her little plans miscarried. Phil slept feverishly on the hard deck. In spite of his joke about the sea-birds, she felt that his spirit was crushed by suffering and disaster.

'Never mind, girl,' her father whispered at her elbow. 'The best of plans go wrong. In a week or two Phil will be fit for another go at the mine.'

Kitly sobbed quietly, her cheek resting on the schooner's rail.

'Always Phil must have another go at the mine,' she answered passionately. 'Never a rest for sick boys in this country. They're worse off than mules!'

Across thie spreading dawn a ghostly outline that was like a mule bulged on the skyline. Very slowly the mule outline approached the schooner, limping, halting at times to sniff the air. Like a homing spirit he came to the beach, looked up with flattened ears at the silent schooner, and then hung his head dejectedly. The scramble at the inlet with a razor-jawed fish had temporarily unsettled Little Willy. For the moment he was inclined to take his amusements sadly.

'Dad! Here's Willy! He's come back!'

Before Nick Tolliver could restrain her Kitty was down the gangway and cleaving across the beach to where a lame, wet animal was standing on its halter dejectedly. The mule blinked at Kitty in the dawn light, ears slightly bent in token of recognition. To Willy it seemed a cold, cheerless world with long, long intervals between bananas.

Kitty hugged his head and his ears in the sheer delight of his return. After all, they could get along at the mine now that Willy was here to give a pull. Her glance fell suddenly on the ugly goatskin bundle, fastened wilh rawhide thongs to his back. Chuka's spear and snakeskin belt were still in place.

Her busy fingers plunged instinctively into the ugly goatskin bundle. The swiff contact with the cold, wet dust inside was like a shock from the outer spirit world.

'Daddy,' she called out softly, 'you can send Chuka home. I've got another patient there— a cut leg, but nothing serious. There's two hundred ounces of red gold in this parcel!'

AN hour after dawn Chuka came, on deck, smiling sleepily. He was much better, he declared to Tolliver, he could now return to his people with a firmer step. Real was the magic of the white man's medicines! The old chief halted on the gangway to say that none of his warriors would ever again put their fingers into the yellow sand within the mine.

The sight of his gold put Phil on his feel quickly. Kitty was the best girl in the world. But if all the gold in Papua were offered him he could not explain how the fool mule had gone among the natives and recovered the stolen metal. Having no immediate explanation on hand, Kitty wisely held her tongue. There was a ghost of a suspicion in her mind that the witch doctor had tried to lead Little Willy astray. If only mules could tell!

When Kitty sent the dressed-up mule down the gangway she knew Nofki would accuse her father of changing the shape of their sick chief. There had been an idea at the back of her head that the natives in their superstitious fear might be led to return Phil's stolen gold. She had been prepared to bargain with Nofki and the headmen for the safe delivery of Chuka in his natural state, and not as a mule. And as Chuka was on board the schooner she had fell determined to keep the old chief until her husband's hard-won earnings were replaced. But mules and witch-doctors have ideas of their own. And Kitty Arden was glad to let it go at that.

A WEEK later, when the natives of Kooma beheld Little Willy hauling up buckets of wash dirt from the while man's mine, they knew that the spirit of the witch doctor had passed into his body. Even a native could see that the mule had Nofki's eyes and appetite. To a man the villagers felt thal Nofki was now well employed and kindly treated by the busy little while lady who shared her husband's camp in the far hills. The spirits, they inferred, arranged these things very well in Kooma.

10: "O Russet Witch!"

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896-1940

In: *Tales of the Jazz Age*, 1922

MERLIN GRAINGER was employed by the Moonlight Quill Bookshop, which you may have visited, just around the corner from the Ritz-Carlton on Forty-seventh Street. The Moonlight Quill is, or rather was, a very romantic little store, considered radical and admitted dark. It was spotted interiorly with red and orange posters of breathless exotic intent, and lit no less by the shiny reflecting bindings of special editions than by the great squat lamp of crimson satin that, lighted through all the day, swung overhead. It was truly a mellow bookshop. The words "Moonlight Quill" were worked over the door in a sort of serpentine embroidery. The windows seemed always full of something that had passed the literary censors with little to spare; volumes with covers of deep orange which offer their titles on little white paper squares. And over all there was the smell of the musk, which the clever, inscrutable Mr. Moonlight Quill ordered to be sprinkled about-the smell half of a curiosity shop in Dickens' London and half of a coffee-house on the warm shores of the Bosphorus.

From nine until five-thirty Merlin Grainger asked bored old ladies in black and young men with dark circles under their eyes if they "cared for this fellow" or were interested in first editions. Did they buy novels with Arabs on the cover, or books which gave Shakespeare's newest sonnets as dictated psychically to Miss Sutton of South Dakota? he sniffed. As a matter of fact, his own taste ran to these latter, but as an employee at the Moonlight Quill he assumed for the working day the attitude of a disillusioned connoisseur.

After he had crawled over the window display to pull down the front shade at five-thirty every afternoon, and said good-bye to the mysterious Mr. Moonlight Quill and the lady clerk, Miss McCracken, and the lady stenographer, Miss Masters, he went home to the girl, Caroline. He did not eat supper with Caroline. It is unbelievable that Caroline would have considered eating off his bureau with the collar buttons dangerously near the cottage cheese, and the ends of Merlin's necktie just missing his glass of milk— he had never asked her to eat with him. He ate alone. He went into Braegdort's delicatessen on Sixth Avenue and bought a box of crackers, a tube of anchovy paste, and some oranges, or else a little jar of sausages and some potato salad and a bottled soft drink, and with these in a brown package he went to his room at Fifty-something West Fifty-eighth Street and ate his supper and saw Caroline.

Caroline was a very young and gay person who lived with some older lady and was possibly nineteen. She was like a ghost in that she never existed until evening. She sprang into life when the lights went on in her apartment at about

six, and she disappeared, at the latest, about midnight. Her apartment was a nice one, in a nice building with a white stone front, opposite the south side of Central Park. The back of her apartment faced the single window of the single room occupied by the single Mr. Grainger.

He called her Caroline because there was a picture that looked like her on the jacket of a book of that name down at the Moonlight Quill.

Now, Merlin Grainger was a thin young man of twenty-five, with dark hair and no mustache or beard or anything like that, but Caroline was dazzling and light, with a shimmering morass of russet waves to take the place of hair, and the sort of features that remind you of kisses— the sort of features you thought belonged to your first love, but know, when you come across an old picture, didn't. She dressed in pink or blue usually, but of late she had sometimes put on a slender black gown that was evidently her especial pride, for whenever she wore it she would stand regarding a certain place on the wall, which Merlin thought most be a mirror. She sat usually in the profile chair near the window, but sometimes honored the chaise longue by the lamp, and often she leaned 'way back and smoked a cigarette with posturings of her arms and hands that Merlin considered very graceful.

At another time she had come to the window and stood in it magnificently, and looked out because the moon had lost its way and was dripping the strangest and most transforming brilliance into the areaway between, turning the motif of ash-cans and clothes-lines into a vivid impressionism of silver casks and gigantic gossamer cobwebs. Merlin was sitting in plain sight, eating cottage cheese with sugar and milk on it; and so quickly did he reach out for the window cord that he tipped the cottage cheese into his lap with his free hand— and the milk was cold and the sugar made spots on his trousers, and he was sure that she had seen him after all.

Sometimes there were callers— men in dinner coats, who stood and bowed, hat in hand and coat on arm, as they talked to Caroline; then bowed some more and followed her out of the light, obviously bound for a play or for a dance. Other young men came and sat and smoked cigarettes, and seemed trying to tell Caroline something— she sitting either in the profile chair and watching them with eager intentness or else in the chaise longue by the lamp, looking very lovely and youthfully inscrutable indeed.

Merlin enjoyed these calls. Of some of the men he approved. Others won only his grudging toleration, one or two he loathed— especially the most frequent caller, a man with black hair and a black goatee and a pitch-dark soul, who seemed to Merlin vaguely familiar, but whom he was never quite able to recognize.

Now, Merlin's whole life was not "bound up with this romance he had constructed"; it was not "the happiest hour of his day." He never arrived in time

to rescue Caroline from "clutches"; nor did he even marry her. A much stranger thing happened than any of these, and it is this strange thing that will presently be set down here. It began one October afternoon when she walked briskly into the mellow interior of the Moonlight Quill.

It was a dark afternoon, threatening rain and the end of the world, and done in that particularly gloomy gray in which only New York afternoons indulge. A breeze was crying down the streets, whisking along battered newspapers and pieces of things, and little lights were pricking out all the windows— it was so desolate that one was sorry for the tops of sky-scrapers lost up there in the dark green and gray heaven, and felt that now surely the farce was to close, and presently all the buildings would collapse like card houses, and pile up in a dusty, sardonic heap upon all the millions who presumed to wind in and out of them.

At least these were the sort of musings that lay heavily upon the soul of Merlin Grainger, as he stood by the window putting a dozen books back in a row after a cyclonic visit by a lady with ermine trimmings. He looked out of the window full of the most distressing thoughts— of the early novels of H. G. Wells, of the boot of Genesis, of how Thomas Edison had said that in thirty years there would be no dwelling-houses upon the island, but only a vast and turbulent bazaar; and then he set the last book right side up, turned— and Caroline walked coolly into the shop.

She was dressed in a jaunty but conventional walking costume— he remembered this when he thought about it later. Her skirt was plaid, pleated like a concertina; her jacket was a soft but brisk tan; her shoes and spats were brown and her hat, small and trim, completed her like the top of a very expensive and beautifully filled candy box.

Merlin, breathless and startled, advanced nervously toward her.

"Good-afternoon— " he said, and then stopped— why, he did not know, except that it came to him that something very portentous in his life was about to occur, and that it would need no furbishing but silence, and the proper amount of expectant attention. And in that minute before the thing began to happen he had the sense of a breathless second hanging suspended in time: he saw through the glass partition that bounded off the little office the malevolent conical head of his employer, Mr. Moonlight Quill, bent over his correspondence. He saw Miss McCracken and Miss Masters as two patches of hair drooping over piles of paper; he saw the crimson lamp overhead, and noticed with a touch of pleasure how really pleasant and romantic it made the book-store seem.

Then the thing happened, or rather it began to happen. Caroline picked up a volume of poems lying loose upon a pile, fingered it absently with her slender white hand, and suddenly, with an easy gesture, tossed it upward toward the

ceiling where it disappeared in the crimson lamp and lodged there, seen through the illuminated silk as a dark, bulging rectangle. This pleased her— she broke into young, contagious laughter, in which Merlin found himself presently joining.

"It stayed up!" she cried merrily. "It stayed up, didn't it?" To both of them this seemed the height of brilliant absurdity. Their laughter mingled, filled the bookshop, and Merlin was glad to find that her voice was rich and full of sorcery.

"Try another," he found himself suggesting— "try a red one."

At this her laughter increased, and she had to rest her hands upon the stack to steady herself.

"Try another," she managed to articulate between spasms of mirth. "Oh, golly, try another!"

"Try two."

"Yes, try two. Oh, I'll choke if I don't stop laughing. Here it goes."

Suiting her action to the word, she picked up a red book and sent it in a gentle hyperbola toward the ceiling, where it sank into the lamp beside the first. It was a few minutes before either of them could do more than rock back and forth in helpless glee; but then by mutual agreement they took up the sport anew, this time in unison. Merlin seized a large, specially bound French classic and whirled it upward. Applauding his own accuracy, he took a best-seller in one hand and a book on barnacles in the other, and waited breathlessly while she made her shot. Then the business waxed fast and furious— sometimes they alternated, and, watching, he found how supple she was in every movement; sometimes one of them made shot after shot, picking up the nearest book, sending it off, merely taking time to follow it with a glance before reaching for another. Within three minutes they had cleared a little place on the table, and the lamp of crimson satin was so bulging with books that it was near breaking.

"Silly game, basket-ball," she cried scornfully as a book left her hand. "High-school girls play it in hideous bloomers."

"Idiotic," he agreed.

She paused in the act of tossing a book, and replaced it suddenly in its position on the table.

"I think we've got room to sit down now," she said gravely.

They had; they had cleared an ample space for two. With a faint touch of nervousness Merlin glanced toward Mr. Moonlight Quill's glass partition, but the three heads were still bent earnestly over their work, and it was evident that they had not seen what had gone on in the shop. So when Caroline put her hands on the table and hoisted herself up Merlin calmly imitated her, and they sat side by side looking very earnestly at each other.

"I had to see you," she began, with a rather pathetic expression in her brown eyes.

"I know."

"It was that last time," she continued, her voice trembling a little, though she tried to keep it steady. "I was frightened. I don't like you to eat off the dresser. I'm so afraid you'll— you'll swallow a collar button."

"I did once— almost," he confessed reluctantly, "but it's not so easy, you know. I mean you can swallow the flat part easy enough or else the other part— that is, separately— but for a whole collar button you'd have to have a specially made throat." He was astonishing himself by the debonnaire appropriateness of his remarks. Words seemed for the first time in his life to ran at him shrieking to be used, gathering themselves into carefully arranged squads and platoons, and being presented to him by punctilious adjutants of paragraphs.

"That's what scared me," she said. "I knew you had to have a specially made throat— and I knew, at least I felt sure, that you didn't have one."

He nodded frankly.

"I haven't. It costs money to have one— more money unfortunately than I possess."

He felt no shame in saying this— rather a delight in making the admission— he knew that nothing he could say or do would be beyond her comprehension; least of all his poverty, and the practical impossibility of ever extricating himself from it.

Caroline looked down at her wrist watch, and with a little cry slid from the table to her feet.

"It's after five," she cried. "I didn't realize. I have to be at the Ritz at five-thirty. Let's hurry and get this done. I've got a bet on it."

With one accord they set to work. Caroline began the matter by seizing a book on insects and sending it whizzing, and finally crashing through the glass partition that housed Mr. Moonlight Quill. The proprietor glanced up with a wild look, brushed a few pieces of glass from his desk, and went on with his letters. Miss McCracken gave no sign of having heard— only Miss Masters started and gave a little frightened scream before she bent to her task again.

But to Merlin and Caroline it didn't matter. In a perfect orgy of energy they were hurling book after book in all directions until sometimes three or four were in the air at once, smashing against shelves, cracking the glass of pictures on the walls, falling in bruised and torn heaps upon the floor. It was fortunate that no customers happened to come in, for it is certain they would never have come in again— the noise was too tremendous, a noise of smashing and ripping and tearing, mixed now and then with the tinkling of glass, the quick breathing of the two throwers, and the intermittent outbursts of laughter to which both of them periodically surrendered.

At five-thirty Caroline tossed a last book at the lamp, and gave the final impetus to the load it carried. The weakened silk tore and dropped its cargo in

one vast splattering of white and color to the already littered floor. Then with a sigh of relief she turned to Merlin and held out her hand.

"Good-by," she said simply.

"Are you going?" He knew she was. His question was simply a lingering wile to detain her and extract for another moment that dazzling essence of light he drew from her presence, to continue his enormous satisfaction in her features, which were like kisses and, he thought, like the features of a girl he had known back in 1910. For a minute he pressed the softness of her hand— then she smiled and withdrew it and, before he could spring to open the door, she had done it herself and was gone out into the turbid and ominous twilight that brooded narrowly over Forty-seventh Street.

I would like to tell you how Merlin, having seen how beauty regards the wisdom of the years, walked into the little partition of Mr. Moonlight Quill and gave up his job then and there; thence issuing out into the street a much finer and nobler and increasingly ironic man. But the truth is much more commonplace. Merlin Grainger stood up and surveyed the wreck of the bookshop, the ruined volumes, the torn silk remnants of the once beautiful crimson lamp, the crystalline sprinkling of broken glass which lay in iridescent dust over the whole interior— and then he went to a corner where a broom was kept and began cleaning up and rearranging and, as far as he was able, restoring the shop to its former condition. He found that, though some few of the books were uninjured, most of them had suffered in varying extents. The backs were off some, the pages were torn from others, still others were just slightly cracked in the front, which, as all careless book returners know, makes a book unsalable, and therefore second-hand.

Nevertheless by six o'clock he had done much to repair the damage. He had returned the books to their original places, swept the floor, and put new lights in the sockets overhead. The red shade itself was ruined beyond redemption, and Merlin thought in some trepidation that the money to replace it might have to come out of his salary. At six, therefore, having done the best he could, he crawled over the front window display to pull down the blind. As he was treading delicately back, he saw Mr. Moonlight Quill rise from his desk, put on his overcoat and hat, and emerge into the shop. He nodded mysteriously at Merlin and went toward the door. With his hand on the knob he paused, turned around, and in a voice curiously compounded of ferocity and uncertainty, he said:

"If that girl comes in here again, you tell her to behave."

With that he opened the door, drowning Merlin's meek "Yessir" in its creak, and went out.

Merlin stood there for a moment, deciding wisely not to worry about what was for the present only a possible futurity, and then he went into the back of

the shop and invited Miss Masters to have supper with him at Pulpat's French Restaurant, where one could still obtain red wine at dinner, despite the Great Federal Government. Miss Masters accepted.

"Wine makes me feel all tingly," she said.

Merlin laughed inwardly as he compared her to Caroline, or rather as he didn't compare her. There was no comparison.

ii

MR. MOONLIGHT Quill, mysterious, exotic, and oriental in temperament was, nevertheless, a man of decision. And it was with decision that he approached the problem of his wrecked shop. Unless he should make an outlay equal to the original cost of his entire stock— a step which for certain private reasons he did not wish to take— it would be impossible for him to continue in business with the Moonlight Quill as before. There was but one thing to do. He promptly turned his establishment from an up-to-the-minute book-store into a second-hand bookshop. The damaged books were marked down from twenty-five to fifty per cent, the name over the door whose serpentine embroidery had once shone so insolently bright, was allowed to grow dim and take on the indescribably vague color of old paint, and, having a strong penchant for ceremonial, the proprietor even went so far as to buy two skull-caps of shoddy red felt, one for himself and one for his clerk, Merlin Grainger. Moreover, he let his goatee grow until it resembled the tail-feathers of an ancient sparrow and substituted for a once dapper business suit a reverence-inspiring affair of shiny alpaca.

In fact, within a year after Caroline's catastrophic visit to the bookshop the only thing in it that preserved any semblance of being up to date was Miss Masters. Miss McCracken had followed in the footsteps of Mr. Moonlight Quill and become an intolerable dowd.

For Merlin too, from a feeling compounded of loyalty and listlessness, had let his exterior take on the semblance of a deserted garden. He accepted the red felt skull-cap as a symbol of his decay. Always a young man known, as a "pusher," he had been, since the day of his graduation from the manual training department of a New York High School, an inveterate brusher of clothes, hair, teeth, and even eyebrows, and had learned the value of laying all his clean socks toe upon toe and heel upon heel in a certain drawer of his bureau, which would be known as the sock drawer.

These things, he felt, had won him his place in the greatest splendor of the Moonlight Quill. It was due to them that he was not still making "chests useful for keeping things," as he was taught with breathless practicality in High School, and selling them to whoever had use of such chests— possibly undertakers.

Nevertheless when the progressive Moonlight Quill became the retrogressive Moonlight Quill he preferred to sink with it, and so took to letting his suits gather undisturbed the wispy burdens of the air and to throwing his socks indiscriminately into the shirt drawer, the underwear drawer, and even into no drawer at all. It was not uncommon in his new carelessness to let many of his clean clothes go directly back to the laundry without having ever been worn, a common eccentricity of impoverished bachelors. And this in the face of his favorite magazines, which at that time were fairly staggering with articles by successful authors against the frightful impudence of the condemned poor, such as the buying of wearable shirts and nice cuts of meat, and the fact that they preferred good investments in personal jewelry to respectable ones in four per cent saving-banks.

It was indeed a strange state of affairs and a sorry one for many worthy and God-fearing men. For the first time in the history of the Republic almost any negro north of Georgia could change a one-dollar bill. But as at that time the cent was rapidly approaching the purchasing power of the Chinese ubu and was only a thing you got back occasionally after paying for a soft drink, and could use merely in getting your correct weight, this was perhaps not so strange a phenomenon as it at first seems. It was too curious a state of things, however, for Merlin Grainger to take the step that he did take— the hazardous, almost involuntary step of proposing to Miss Masters. Stranger still that she accepted him.

It was at Pulpat's on Saturday night and over a $1.75 bottle of water diluted with vin ordinaire that the proposal occurred.

"Wine makes me feel all tingly, doesn't it you?" chattered Miss Masters gaily.

"Yes," answered Merlin absently; and then, after a long and pregnant pause: "Miss Masters— Olive— I want to say something to you if you'll listen to me."

The tingliness of Miss Masters (who knew what was coming) increased until it seemed that she would shortly be electrocuted by her own nervous reactions. But her "Yes, Merlin," came without a sign or flicker of interior disturbance. Merlin swallowed a stray bit of air that he found in his mouth.

"I have no fortune," he said with the manner of making an announcement. "I have no fortune at all."

Their eyes met, locked, became wistful, and dreamy and beautiful.

"Olive," he told her, "I love you."

"I love you too, Merlin," she answered simply. "Shall we have another bottle of wine?"

"Yes," he cried, his heart beating at a great rate. "Do you mean— "

"To drink to our engagement," she interrupted bravely. "May it be a short one!"

"No!" he almost shouted, bringing his fist fiercely down upon the table. "May it last forever!"

"What?"

"I mean— oh, I see what you mean. You're right. May it be a short one." He laughed and added, "My error."

After the wine arrived they discussed the matter thoroughly.

"We'll have to take a small apartment at first," he said, "and I believe, yes, by golly, I know there's a small one in the house where I live, a big room and a sort of a dressing-room-kitchenette and the use of a bath on the same floor."

She clapped her hands happily, and he thought how pretty she was really, that is, the upper part of her face— from the bridge of the nose down she was somewhat out of true. She continued enthusiastically:

"And as soon as we can afford it we'll take a real swell apartment, with an elevator and a telephone girl."

"And after that a place in the country— and a car."

"I can't imagine nothing more fun. Can you?"

Merlin fell silent a moment. He was thinking that he would have to give up his room, the fourth floor rear. Yet it mattered very little now. During the past year and a half— in fact, from the very date of Caroline's visit to the Moonlight Quill— he had never seen her. For a week after that visit her lights had failed to go on— darkness brooded out into the areaway, seemed to grope blindly in at his expectant, uncurtained window. Then the lights had appeared at last, and instead of Caroline and her callers they stowed a stodgy family— a little man with a bristly mustache and a full-bosomed woman who spent her evenings patting her hips and rearranging bric-à-brac. After two days of them Merlin had callously pulled down his shade.

No, Merlin could think of nothing more fun than rising in the world with Olive. There would be a cottage in a suburb, a cottage painted blue, just one class below the sort of cottages that are of white stucco with a green roof. In the grass around the cottage would be rusty trowels and a broken green bench and a baby-carriage with a wicker body that sagged to the left. And around the grass and the baby-carriage and the cottage itself, around his whole world there would be the arms of Olive, a little stouter, the arms of her neo-Olivian period, when, as she walked, her cheeks would tremble up and down ever so slightly from too much face-massaging. He could hear her voice now, two spoons' length away:

"I knew you were going to say this to-night, Merlin. I could see— "

She could see. Ah— suddenly he wondered how much she could see. Could she see that the girl who had come in with a party of three men and sat down at the next table was Caroline? Ah, could she see that? Could she see that the men

brought with them liquor far more potent than Pulpat's red ink condensed threefold?...

Merlin stared breathlessly, half-hearing through an auditory ether Olive's low, soft monologue, as like a persistent honey-bee she sucked sweetness from her memorable hour. Merlin was listening to the clinking of ice and the fine laughter of all four at some pleasantry— and that laughter of Caroline's that he knew so well stirred him, lifted him, called his heart imperiously over to her table, whither it obediently went. He could see her quite plainly, and he fancied that in the last year and a half she had changed, if ever so slightly. Was it the light or were her cheeks a little thinner and her eyes less fresh, if more liquid, than of old? Yet the shadows were still purple in her russet hair; her mouth hinted yet of kisses, as did the profile that came sometimes between his eyes and a row of books, when it was twilight in the bookshop where the crimson lamp presided no more.

And she had been drinking. The threefold flush in her cheeks was compounded of youth and wine and fine cosmetic— that he could tell. She was making great amusement for the young man on her left and the portly person on her right, and even for the old fellow opposite her, for the latter from time to time uttered the shocked and mildly reproachful cackles of another generation. Merlin caught the words of a song she was intermittently singing—

"Just snap your fingers at care, Don't cross the bridge 'til you're there— "

The portly person filled her glass with chill amber. A waiter after several trips about the table, and many helpless glances at Caroline, who was maintaining a cheerful, futile questionnaire as to the succulence of this dish or that, managed to obtain the semblance of an order and hurried away....

Olive was speaking to Merlin—

"When, then?" she asked, her voice faintly shaded with disappointment. He realized that he had just answered no to some question she had asked him.

"Oh, sometime."

"Don't you— care?"

A rather pathetic poignancy in her question brought his eyes back to her.

"As soon as possible, dear," he replied with surprising tenderness. "In two months— in June."

"So soon?" Her delightful excitement quite took her breath away.

"Oh, yes, I think we'd better say June. No use waiting."

Olive began to pretend that two months was really too short a time for her to make preparations. Wasn't he a bad boy! Wasn't he impatient, though! Well, she'd show him he mustn't be too quick with her. Indeed he was so sudden she didn't exactly know whether she ought to marry him at all.

"June," he repeated sternly.

Olive sighed and smiled and drank her coffee, her little finger lifted high above the others in true refined fashion. A stray thought came to Merlin that he would like to buy five rings and throw at it.

"By gosh!" he exclaimed aloud. Soon he would be putting rings on one of her fingers.

His eyes swung sharply to the right. The party of four had become so riotous that the head-waiter had approached and spoken to them. Caroline was arguing with this head-waiter in a raised voice, a voice so clear and young that it seemed as though the whole restaurant would listen— the whole restaurant except Olive Masters, self-absorbed in her new secret.

"How do you do?" Caroline was saying. "Probably the handsomest head-waiter in captivity. Too much noise? Very unfortunate. Something'll have to be done about it. Gerald"— she addressed the man on her right— "the head-waiter says there's too much noise. Appeals to us to have it stopped. What'll I say?"

"Sh!" remonstrated Gerald, with laughter. "Sh!" and Merlin heard him add in an undertone: "All the bourgeoisie will be aroused. This is where the floorwalkers learn French."

Caroline sat up straight in sudden alertness.

"Where's a floorwalker?" she cried. "Show me a floorwalker." This seemed to amuse the party, for they all, including Caroline, burst into renewed laughter. The head-waiter, after a last conscientious but despairing admonition, became Gallic with his shoulders and retired into the background.

Pulpat's, as every one knows, has the unvarying respectability of the table d'hôte. It is not a gay place in the conventional sense. One comes, drinks the red wine, talks perhaps a little more and a little louder than usual under the low, smoky ceilings, and then goes home. It closes up at nine-thirty, tight as a drum; the policeman is paid off and given an extra bottle of wine for the missis, the coat-room girl hands her tips to the collector, and then darkness crushes the little round tables out of sight and life. But excitement was prepared for Pulpat's this evening— excitement of no mean variety. A girl with russet, purple-shadowed hair mounted to her table-top and began to dance thereon.

"Sacré nom de Dieu! Come down off there!" cried the head-waiter. "Stop that music!"

But the musicians were already playing so loud that they could pretend not to hear his order; having once been young, they played louder and gayer than ever, and Caroline danced with grace and vivacity, her pink, filmy dress swirling about her, her agile arms playing in supple, tenuous gestures along the smoky air.

A group of Frenchmen at a table near by broke into cries of applause, in which other parties joined— in a moment the room was full of clapping and shouting; half the diners were on their feet, crowding up, and on the outskirts

the hastily summoned proprietor was giving indistinct vocal evidences of his desire to put an end to this thing as quickly as possible.

"... Merlin!" cried Olive, awake, aroused at last; "she's such a wicked girl! Let's get out— now!"

The fascinated Merlin protested feebly that the check was not paid.

"It's all right. Lay five dollars on the table. I despise that girl. I can't bear to look at her." She was on her feet now, tagging at Merlin's arm.

Helplessly, listlessly, and then with what amounted to downright unwillingness, Merlin rose, followed Olive dumbly as she picked her way through the delirious clamor, now approaching its height and threatening to become a wild and memorable riot. Submissively he took his coat and stumbled up half a dozen steps into the moist April air outside, his ears still ringing with the sound of light feet on the table and of laughter all about and over the little world of the cafe. In silence they walked along toward Fifth Avenue and a bus.

It was not until next day that she told him about the wedding— how she had moved the date forward: it was much better that they should be married on the first of May.

iii

AND MARRIED they were, in a somewhat stuffy manner, under the chandelier of the flat where Olive lived with her mother. After marriage came elation, and then, gradually, the growth of weariness. Responsibility descended upon Merlin, the responsibility of making his thirty dollars a week and her twenty suffice to keep them respectably fat and to hide with decent garments the evidence that they were.

It was decided after several weeks of disastrous and well-nigh humiliating experiments with restaurants that they would join the great army of the delicatessen-fed, so he took up his old way of life again, in that he stopped every evening at Braegdort's delicatessen and bought potatoes in salad, ham in slices, and sometimes even stuffed tomatoes in bursts of extravagance.

Then he would trudge homeward, enter the dark hallway, and climb three rickety flights of stairs covered by an ancient carpet of long obliterated design. The hall had an ancient smell— of the vegetables of 1880, of the furniture polish in vogue when "Adam-and Eve" Bryan ran against William McKinley, of portieres an ounce heavier with dust, from worn-out shoes, and lint from dresses turned long since into patch-work quilts. This smell would pursue him up the stairs, revivified and made poignant at each landing by the aura of contemporary cooking, then, as he began the next flight, diminishing into the odor of the dead routine of dead generations.

Eventually would occur the door of his room, which slipped open with indecent willingness and closed with almost a sniff upon his "Hello, dear! Got a treat for you to-night."

Olive, who always rode home on the bus to "get a morsel of air," would be making the bed and hanging up things. At his call she would come up to him and give him a quick kiss with wide-open eyes, while he held her upright like a ladder, his hands on her two arms, as though she were a thing without equilibrium, and would, once he relinquished hold, fall stiffly backward to the floor. This is the kiss that comes in with the second year of marriage, succeeding the bridegroom kiss (which is rather stagey at best, say those who know about such things, and apt to be copied from passionate movies).

Then came supper, and after that they went out for a walk, up two blocks and through Central Park, or sometimes to a moving picture, which taught them patiently that they were the sort of people for whom life was ordered, and that something very grand and brave and beautiful would soon happen to them if they were docile and obedient to their rightful superiors and kept away from pleasure.

Such was their day for three years. Then change came into their lives: Olive had a baby, and as a result Merlin had a new influx of material resources. In the third week of Olive's confinement, after an hour of nervous rehearsing, he went into the office of Mr. Moonlight Quill and demanded an enormous increase in salary.

"I've been here ten years," he said; "since I was nineteen. I've always tried to do my best in the interests of the business."

Mr. Moonlight Quill said that he would think it over. Next morning he announced, to Merlin's great delight, that he was going to put into effect a project long premeditated— he was going to retire from active work in the bookshop, confining himself to periodic visits and leaving Merlin as manager with a salary of fifty dollars a week and a one-tenth interest in the business. When the old man finished, Merlin's cheeks were glowing and his eyes full of tears. He seized his employer's hand and shook it violently, saying over and over again:

"It's very nice of you, sir. It's very white of you. It's very, very nice of you."

So after ten years of faithful work in the store he had won out at last. Looking back, he saw his own progress toward this hill of elation no longer as a sometimes sordid and always gray decade of worry and failing enthusiasm and failing dreams, years when the moonlight had grown duller in the areaway and the youth had faded out of Olive's face, but as a glorious and triumphant climb over obstacles which he had determinedly surmounted by unconquerable will-power. The optimistic self-delusion that had kept him from misery was seen now in the golden garments of stern resolution. Half a dozen times he had taken

steps to leave the Moonlight Quill and soar upward, but through sheer faintheartedness he had stayed on. Strangely enough he now thought that those were times when he had exerted tremendous persistence and had "determined" to fight it out where he was.

At any rate, let us not for this moment begrudge Merlin his new and magnificent view of himself. He had arrived. At thirty he had reached a post of importance. He left the shop that evening fairly radiant, invested every penny in his pocket in the most tremendous feast that Braegdort's delicatessen offered, and staggered homeward with the great news and four gigantic paper bags. The fact that Olive was too sick to eat, that he made himself faintly but unmistakably ill by a struggle with four stuffed tomatoes, and that most of the food deteriorated rapidly in an iceless ice-box: all next day did not mar the occasion. For the first time since the week of his marriage Merlin Grainger lived under a sky of unclouded tranquillity.

The baby boy was christened Arthur, and life became dignified, significant, and, at length, centered. Merlin and Olive resigned themselves to a somewhat secondary place in their own cosmos; but what they lost in personality they regained in a sort of primordial pride. The country house did not come, but a month in an Asbury Park boarding-house each summer filled the gap; and during Merlin's two weeks' holiday this excursion assumed the air of a really merry jaunt— especially when, with the baby asleep in a wide room opening technically on the sea, Merlin strolled with Olive along the thronged board-walk puffing at his cigar and trying to look like twenty thousand a year.

With some alarm at the slowing up of the days and the accelerating of the years, Merlin became thirty-one, thirty-two— then almost with a rush arrived at that age which, with all its washing and panning, can only muster a bare handful of the precious stuff of youth: he became thirty-five. And one day on Fifth Avenue he saw Caroline.

It was Sunday, a radiant, flowerful Easter morning and the avenue was a pageant of lilies and cutaways and happy April-colored bonnets. Twelve o'clock: the great churches were letting out their people— St. Simon's, St. Hilda's, the Church of the Epistles, opened their doors like wide mouths until the people pouring forth surely resembled happy laughter as they met and strolled and chattered, or else waved white bouquets at waiting chauffeurs.

In front of the Church of the Epistles stood its twelve vestrymen, carrying out the time-honored custom of giving away Easter eggs full of face-powder to the church-going debutantes of the year. Around them delightedly danced the two thousand miraculously groomed children of the very rich, correctly cute and curled, shining like sparkling little jewels upon their mothers' fingers. Speaks the sentimentalist for the children of the poor? Ah, but the children of the rich,

laundered, sweet-smelling, complexioned of the country, and, above all, with soft, in-door voices.

Little Arthur was five, child of the middle class. Undistinguished, unnoticed, with a nose that forever marred what Grecian yearnings his features might have had, he held tightly to his mother's warm, sticky hand, and, with Merlin on his other side, moved, upon the home-coming throng. At Fifty-third Street, where there were two churches, the congestion was at its thickest, its richest. Their progress was of necessity retarded to such an extent that even little Arthur had not the slightest difficulty in keeping up. Then it was that Merlin perceived an open landaulet of deepest crimson, with handsome nickel trimmings, glide slowly up to the curb and come to a stop. In it sat Caroline.

She was dressed in black, a tight-fitting gown trimmed with lavender, flowered at the waist with a corsage of orchids. Merlin started and then gazed at her fearfully. For the first time in the eight years since his marriage he was encountering the girl again. But a girl no longer. Her figure was slim as ever— or perhaps not quite, for a certain boyish swagger, a sort of insolent adolescence, had gone the way of the first blooming of her cheeks. But she was beautiful; dignity was there now, and the charming lines of a fortuitous nine-and-twenty; and she sat in the car with such perfect appropriateness and self-possession that it made him breathless to watch her.

Suddenly she smiled— the smile of old, bright as that very Easter and its flowers, mellower than ever— yet somehow with not quite the radiance and infinite promise of that first smile back there in the bookshop nine years before. It was a steelier smile, disillusioned and sad.

But it was soft enough and smile enough to make a pair of young men in cutaway coats hurry over, to pull their high hats off their wetted, iridescent hair; to bring them, flustered and bowing, to the edge of her landaulet, where her lavender gloves gently touched their gray ones. And these two were presently joined by another, and then two more, until there was a rapidly swelling crowd around the landaulet. Merlin would hear a young man beside him say to his perhaps well-favored companion:

"If you'll just pardon me a moment, there's some one I have to speak to. Walk right ahead. I'll catch up."

Within three minutes every inch of the landaulet, front, back, and side, was occupied by a man— a man trying to construct a sentence clever enough to find its way to Caroline through the stream of conversation. Luckily for Merlin a portion of little Arthur's clothing had chosen the opportunity to threaten a collapse, and Olive had hurriedly rushed him over against a building for some extemporaneous repair work, so Merlin was able to watch, unhindered, the salon in the street.

The crowd swelled. A row formed in back of the first, two more behind that. In the midst, an orchid rising from a black bouquet, sat Caroline enthroned in her obliterated car, nodding and crying salutations and smiling with such true happiness that, of a sudden, a new relay of gentlemen had left their wives and consorts and were striding toward her.

The crowd, now phalanx deep, began to be augmented by the merely curious; men of all ages who could not possibly have known Caroline jostled over and melted into the circle of ever-increasing diameter, until the lady in lavender was the centre of a vast impromptu auditorium.

All about her were faces— clean-shaven, bewhiskered, old, young, ageless, and now, here and there, a woman. The mass was rapidly spreading to the opposite curb, and, as St. Anthony's around the corner let out its box-holders, it overflowed to the sidewalk and crushed up against the iron picket-fence of a millionaire across the street. The motors speeding along the avenue were compelled to stop, and in a jiffy were piled three, five, and six deep at the edge of the crowd; auto-busses, top-heavy turtles of traffic, plunged into the jam, their passengers crowding to the edges of the roofs in wild excitement and peering down into the centre of the mass, which presently could hardly be seen from the mass's edge.

The crush had become terrific. No fashionable audience at a Yale-Princeton football game, no damp mob at a world's series, could be compared with the panoply that talked, stared, laughed, and honked about the lady in black and lavender. It was stupendous; it was terrible. A quarter mile down the block a half-frantic policeman called his precinct; on the same corner a frightened civilian crashed in the glass of a fire-alarm and sent in a wild paean for all the fire-engines of the city; up in an apartment high in one of the tall buildings a hysterical old maid telephoned in turn for the prohibition enforcement agent; the special deputies on Bolshevism, and the maternity ward of Bellevue Hospital.

The noise increased. The first fire-engine arrived, filling the Sunday air with smoke, clanging and crying a brazen, metallic message down the high, resounding walls. In the notion that some terrible calamity had overtaken the city, two excited deacons ordered special services immediately and set tolling the great bells of St. Hilda's and St. Anthony's, presently joined by the jealous gongs of St. Simon's and the Church of the Epistles. Even far off in the Hudson and the East River the sounds of the commotion were heard, and the ferry-boats and tugs and ocean liners set up sirens and whistles that sailed in melancholy cadence, now varied, now reiterated, across the whole diagonal width of the city from Riverside Drive to the gray water-fronts of the lower East Side....

In the centre of her landaulet sat the lady in black and lavender, chatting pleasantly first with one, then with another of that fortunate few in cutaways who had found their way to speaking distance in the first rush. After a while she glanced around her and beside her with a look of growing annoyance.

She yawned and asked the man nearest her if he couldn't run in somewhere and get her a glass of water. The man apologized in some embarrassment. He could not have moved hand or foot. He could not have scratched his own ear....

As the first blast of the river sirens keened along the air, Olive fastened the last safety-pin in little Arthur's rompers and looked up. Merlin saw her start, stiffen slowly like hardening stucco, and then give a little gasp of surprise and disapproval.

"That woman," she cried suddenly. "Oh!"

She flashed a glance at Merlin that mingled reproach and pain, and without another word gathered up little Arthur with one hand, grasped her husband by the other, and darted amazingly in a winding, bumping canter through the crowd. Somehow people gave way before her; somehow she managed to-retain her grasp on her son and husband; somehow she managed to emerge two blocks up, battered and dishevelled, into an open space, and, without slowing up her pace, darted down a side-street. Then at last, when uproar had died away into a dim and distant clamor, did she come to a walk and set little Arthur upon his feet.

"And on Sunday, too! Hasn't she disgraced herself enough?" This was her only comment. She said it to Arthur, as she seemed to address her remarks to Arthur throughout the remainder of the day. For some curious and esoteric reason she had never once looked at her husband during the entire retreat.

iv

THE YEARS between thirty-five and sixty-five revolve before the passive mind as one unexplained, confusing merry-go-round. True, they are a merry-go-round of ill-gaited and wind-broken horses, painted first in pastel colors, then in dull grays and browns, but perplexing and intolerably dizzy the thing is, as never were the merry-go-rounds of childhood or adolescence; as never, surely, were the certain-coursed, dynamic roller-coasters of youth. For most men and women these thirty years are taken up with a gradual withdrawal from life, a retreat first from a front with many shelters, those myriad amusements and curiosities of youth, to a line with less, when we peel down our ambitions to one ambition, our recreations to one recreation, our friends to a few to whom we are anaesthetic; ending up at last in a solitary, desolate strong point that is not strong, where the shells now whistle abominably, now are but half-heard as, by turns frightened and tired, we sit waiting for death.

At forty, then, Merlin was no different from himself at thirty-five; a larger paunch, a gray twinkling near his ears, a more certain lack of vivacity in his walk. His forty-five differed from his forty by a like margin, unless one mention a slight deafness in his left ear. But at fifty-five the process had become a chemical change of immense rapidity. Yearly he was more and more an "old man" to his family— senile almost, so far as his wife was concerned. He was by this time complete owner of the bookshop. The mysterious Mr. Moonlight Quill, dead some five years and not survived by his wife, had deeded the whole stock and store to him, and there he still spent his days, conversant now by name with almost all that man has recorded for three thousand years, a human catalogue, an authority upon tooling and binding, upon folios and first editions, an accurate inventory of a thousand authors whom he could never have understood and had certainly never read.

At sixty-five he distinctly doddered. He had assumed the melancholy habits of the aged so often portrayed by the second old man in standard Victorian comedies. He consumed vast warehouses of time searching for mislaid spectacles. He "nagged" his wife and was nagged in turn. He told the same jokes three or four times a year at the family table, and gave his son weird, impossible directions as to his conduct in life. Mentally and materially he was so entirely different from the Merlin Grainger of twenty-five that it seemed incongruous that he should bear the same name.

He worked still In the bookshop with the assistance of a youth, whom, of course, he considered very idle, indeed, and a new young woman, Miss Gaffney. Miss McCracken, ancient and unvenerable as himself, still kept the accounts. Young Arthur was gone into Wall Street to sell bonds, as all the young men seemed to be doing in that day. This, of course, was as it should be. Let old Merlin get what magic he could from his books— the place of young King Arthur was in the counting-house.

One afternoon at four when he had slipped noiselessly up to the front of the store on his soft-soled slippers, led by a newly formed habit, of which, to be fair, he was rather ashamed, of spying upon the young man clerk, he looked casually out of the front window, straining his faded eyesight to reach the street. A limousine, large, portentous, impressive, had drawn to the curb, and the chauffeur, after dismounting and holding some sort of conversation with persons in the interior of the car, turned about and advanced in a bewildered fashion toward the entrance of the Moonlight Quill. He opened the door, shuffled in, and, glancing uncertainly at the old man in the skull-cap, addressed him in a thick, murky voice, as though his words came through a fog.

"Do you— do you sell additions?"

Merlin nodded.

"The arithmetic books are in the back of the store."

The chauffeur took off his cap and scratched a close-cropped, fuzzy head.

"Oh, naw. This I want's a detecatif story." He jerked a thumb back toward the limousine. "She seen it in the paper. Firs' addition."

Merlin's interest quickened. Here was possibly a big sale.

"Oh, editions. Yes, we've advertised some firsts, but-detective stories, I-don't-believe-What was the title?"

"I forget. About a crime."

"About a crime. I have-well, I have 'The Crimes of the Borgias'-full morocco, London 1769, beautifully— "

"Naw," interrupted the chauffeur, "this was one fella did this crime. She seen you had it for sale in the paper." He rejected several possible titles with the air of connoisseur.

"'Silver Bones,'" he announced suddenly out of a slight pause.

"What?" demanded Merlin, suspecting that the stiffness of his sinews were being commented on.

"Silver Bones. That was the guy that done the crime."

"Silver Bones?"

"Silver Bones. Indian, maybe."

Merlin, stroked his grizzly cheeks. "Gees, Mister," went on the prospective purchaser, "if you wanna save me an awful bawln' out jes' try an' think. The old lady goes wile if everything don't run smooth."

But Merlin's musings on the subject of Silver Bones were as futile as his obliging search through the shelves, and five minutes later a very dejected charioteer wound his way back to his mistress. Through the glass Merlin could see the visible symbols of a tremendous uproar going on in the interior of the limousine. The chauffeur made wild, appealing gestures of his innocence, evidently to no avail, for when he turned around and climbed back into the driver's seat his expression was not a little dejected.

Then the door of the limousine opened and gave forth a pale and slender young man of about twenty, dressed in the attenuation of fashion and carrying a wisp of a cane. He entered the shop, walked past Merlin, and proceeded to take out a cigarette and light it. Merlin approached him.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

"Old boy," said the youth coolly, "there are seveereal things; You can first let me smoke my ciggy in here out of sight of that old lady in the limousine, who happens to be my grandmother. Her knowledge as to whether I smoke it or not before my majority happens to be a matter of five thousand dollars to me. The second thing is that you should look up your first edition of the 'Crime of Sylvester Bonnard' that you advertised in last Sunday's Times. My grandmother there happens to want to take it off your hands."

Detecatif story! Crime of somebody! Silver Bones! All was explained. With a faint deprecatory chuckle, as if to say that he would have enjoyed this had life put him in the habit of enjoying anything, Merlin doddered away to the back of his shop where his treasures were kept, to get this latest investment which he had picked up rather cheaply at the sale of a big collection.

When he returned with it the young man was drawing on his cigarette and blowing out quantities of smoke with immense satisfaction.

"My God!" he said, "She keeps me so close to her the entire day running idiotic errands that this happens to be my first puff in six hours. What's the world coming to, I ask you, when a feeble old lady in the milk-toast era can dictate to a man as to his personal vices. I happen to be unwilling to be so dictated to. Let's see the book."

Merlin passed it to him tenderly and the young man, after opening it with a carelessness that gave a momentary jump to the book-dealer's heart, ran through the pages with his thumb.

"No illustrations, eh?" he commented. "Well, old boy, what's it worth? Speak up! We're willing to give you a fair price, though why I don't know."

"One hundred dollars," said Merlin with a frown.

The young man gave a startled whistle.

"Whew! Come on. You're not dealing with somebody from the cornbelt. I happen to be a city-bred man and my grandmother happens to be a city-bred woman, though I'll admit it'd take a special tax appropriation to keep her in repair. We'll give you twenty-five dollars, and let me tell you that's liberal. We've got books in our attic, up in our attic with my old play-things, that were written before the old boy that wrote this was born."

Merlin stiffened, expressing a rigid and meticulous horror.

"Did your grandmother give you twenty-five dollars to buy this with?"

"She did not. She gave me fifty, but she expects change. I know that old lady."

"You tell her," said Merlin with dignity, "that she has missed a very great bargain."

"Give you forty," urged the young man. "Come on now— be reasonable and don't try to hold us up— — "

Merlin had wheeled around with the precious volume under his arm and was about to return it to its special drawer in his office when there was a sudden interruption. With unheard-of magnificence the front door burst rather than swung open, and admitted in the dark interior a regal apparition in black silk and fur which bore rapidly down upon him. The cigarette leaped from the fingers of the urban young man and he gave breath to an inadvertent "Damn!"— but it was upon Merlin that the entrance seemed to have the most remarkable and incongruous effect— so strong an effect that the greatest

treasure of his shop slipped from his hand and joined the cigarette on the floor. Before him stood Caroline.

She was an old woman, an old woman remarkably preserved, unusually handsome, unusually erect, but still an old woman. Her hair was a soft, beautiful white, elaborately dressed and jewelled; her face, faintly rouged à la grande dame, showed webs of wrinkles at the edges of her eyes and two deeper lines in the form of stanchions connected her nose with the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were dim, ill natured, and querulous.

But it was Caroline without a doubt: Caroline's features though in decay; Caroline's figure, if brittle and stiff in movement; Caroline's manner, unmistakably compounded of a delightful insolence and an enviable self assurance; and, most of all, Caroline's voice, broken and shaky, yet with a ring in it that still could and did make chauffeurs want to drive laundry wagons and cause cigarettes to fall from the fingers of urban grandsons.

She stood and sniffed. Her eyes found the cigarette upon the floor.

"What's that?" she cried. The words were not a question— they were an entire litany of suspicion, accusation, confirmation, and decision. She tarried over them scarcely an instant. "Stand up!" she said to her grandson, "stand up and blow that nicotine out of your lungs!"

The young man looked at her in trepidation.

"Blow!" she commanded.

He pursed his lips feebly and blew into the air.

"Blow!" she repeated, more peremptorily than before.

He blew again, helplessly, ridiculously.

"Do you realize," she went on briskly, "that you've forfeited five thousand dollars in five minutes?"

Merlin momentarily expected the young man to fall pleading upon his knees, but such is the nobility of human nature that he remained standing— even blew again into the air, partly from nervousness, partly, no doubt, with some vague hope of reingratiating himself.

"Young ass!" cried Caroline. "Once more, just once more and you leave college and go to work."

This threat had such an overwhelming effect upon the young man that he took on an even paler pallor than was natural to him. But Caroline was not through.

"Do you think I don't know what you and your brothers, yes, and your asinine father too, think of me? Well, I do. You think I'm senile. You think I'm soft. I'm not!" She struck herself with her-fist as though to prove that she was a mass of muscle and sinew. "And I'll have more brains left when you've got me laid out in the drawing-room some sunny day than you and the rest of them were born with."

"But Grandmother— — "

"Be quiet. You, a thin little stick of a boy, who if it weren't for my money might have risen to be a journeyman barber out in the Bronx— Let me see your hands. Ugh! The hands of a barber— you presume to be smart with me, who once had three counts and a bona-fide duke, not to mention half a dozen papal titles pursue me from the city of Rome to the city of New York." She paused, took breath. "Stand up! Blow'!"

The young man obediently blew. Simultaneously the door opened and an excited gentleman of middle age who wore a coat and hat trimmed with fur, and seemed, moreover, to be trimmed with the same sort of fur himself on upper lip and chin, rushed into the store and up to Caroline.

"Found you at last," he cried. "Been looking for you all over town. Tried your house on the 'phone and your secretary told me he thought you'd gone to a bookshop called the Moonlight— "

Caroline turned to him irritably.

"Do I employ you for your reminiscences?" she snapped. "Are you my tutor or my broker?"

"Your broker," confessed the fur-trimmed man, taken somewhat aback. "I beg your pardon. I came about that phonograph stock. I can sell for a hundred and five."

"Then do it."

"Very well. I thought I'd better— "

"Go sell it. I'm talking to my grandson."

"Very well. I— "

"Good-by."

"Good-by, Madame." The fur-trimmed man made a slight bow and hurried in some confusion from the shop.

"As for you," said Caroline, turning to her grandson, "you stay just where you are and be quiet."

She turned to Merlin and included his entire length in a not unfriendly survey. Then she smiled and he found himself smiling too. In an instant they had both broken into a cracked but none the less spontaneous chuckle. She seized his arm and hurried him to the other side of the store. There they stopped, faced each other, and gave vent to another long fit of senile glee.

"It's the only way," she gasped in a sort of triumphant malignity. "The only thing that keeps old folks like me happy is the sense that they can make other people step around. To be old and rich and have poor descendants is almost as much fun as to be young and beautiful and have ugly sisters."

"Oh, yes," chuckled Merlin. "I know. I envy you."

She nodded, blinking.

"The last time I was in here, forty years ago," she said, "you were a young man very anxious to kick up your heels."

"I was," he confessed.

"My visit must have meant a good deal to you."

"You have all along," he exclaimed. "I thought— I used to think at first that you were a real person— human, I mean."

She laughed.

"Many men have thought me inhuman."

"But now," continued Merlin excitedly, "I understand. Understanding is allowed to us old people— after nothing much matters. I see now that on a certain night when you danced upon a table-top you were nothing but my romantic yearning for a beautiful and perverse woman."

Her old eyes were far away, her voice no more than the echo of a forgotten dream.

"How I danced that night! I remember."

"You were making an attempt at me. Olive's arms were closing about me and you warned me to be free and keep my measure of youth and irresponsibility. But it seemed like an effect gotten up at the last moment. It came too late."

"You are very old," she said inscrutably. "I did not realize."

"Also I have not forgotten what you did to me when I was thirty-five. You shook me with that traffic tie-up. It was a magnificent effort. The beauty and power you radiated! You became personified even to my wife, and she feared you. For weeks I wanted to slip out of the house at dark and forget the stuffiness of life with music and cocktails and a girl to make me young. But then— I no longer knew how."

"And now you are so very old."

With a sort of awe she moved back and away from him.

"Yes, leave me!" he cried. "You are old also; the spirit withers with the skin. Have you come here only to tell me something I had best forget: that to be old and poor is perhaps more wretched than to be old and rich; to remind me that my son hurls my gray failure in my face?"

"Give me my book," she commanded harshly. "Be quick, old man!"

Merlin looked at her once more and then patiently obeyed. He picked up the book and handed it to her, shaking his head when she offered him a bill.

"Why go through the farce of paying me? Once you made me wreck these very premises."

"I did," she said in anger, "and I'm glad. Perhaps there had been enough done to ruin me."

She gave him a glance, half disdain, half ill-concealed uneasiness, and with a brisk word to her urban grandson moved toward the door.

Then she was gone— out of his shop— out of his life. The door clicked. With a sigh he turned and walked brokenly back toward the glass partition that enclosed the yellowed accounts of many years as well as the mellowed, wrinkled Miss McCracken.

Merlin regarded her parched, cobwebbed face with an odd sort of pity. She, at any rate, had had less from life than he. No rebellious, romantic spirit popping out unbidden had, in its memorable moments, given her life a zest and a glory.

Then Miss McGracken looked up and spoke to him:

"Still a spunky old piece, isn't she?"

Merlin started.

"Who?"

"Old Alicia Dare. Mrs. Thomas Allerdyce she is now, of course; has been, these thirty years."

"What? I don't understand you." Merlin sat down suddenly in his swivel chair; his eyes were wide.

"Why, surely, Mr. Grainger, you can't tell me that you've forgotten her, when for ten years she was the most notorious character in New York. Why, one time when she was the correspondent in the Throckmorton divorce case she attracted so much attention on Fifth Avenue that there was a traffic tie-up. Didn't you read about it in the papers."

"I never used to read the papers." His ancient brain was whirring.

"Well, you can't have forgotten the time she came in here and ruined the business. Let me tell you I came near asking Mr. Moonlight Quill for my salary, and clearing out."

"Do you mean, that— that you saw her?"

"Saw her! How could I help it with the racket that went on. Heaven knows Mr. Moonlight Quill didn't like it either but of course hedidn't say anything. He was daffy about her and she could twist him around her little finger. The second he opposed one of her whims she'd threaten to tell his wife on him. Served him right. The idea of that man falling for a pretty adventuress! Of course he was never rich enough for her even though the shop paid well in those days."

"But when I saw her." stammered Merlin, "that is, when I thought saw her, she lived with her mother."

"Mother, trash!". said Miss McCracken indignantly. "She had a woman there she called 'Aunty', who was no more related to her than I am. Oh, she was a bad one— but clever. Right after the Throckmorton divorce case she married Thomas Allerdyce, and made herself secure for life."

"Who was she?" cried Merlin. "For God's sake what was she— a witch?"

"Why, she was Alicia Dare, the dancer, of course. In those days you couldn't pick up a paper without finding her picture."

Merlin sat very quiet, his brain suddenly fatigued and stilled. He was an old man now indeed, so old that it was impossible for him to dream of ever having been young, so old that the glamour was gone out of the world, passing not into the faces of children and into the persistent comforts of warmth and life, but passing out of the range of sight and feeling. He was never to smile again or to sit in a long reverie when spring evenings wafted the cries of children in at his window until gradually they became the friends of his boyhood out there, urging him to come and play before the last dark came down. He was too old now even for memories.

That night he sat at supper with his wife and son, who had used him for their blind purposes. Olive said:

"Don't sit there like a death's-head. Say something."

"Let him sit quiet," growled Arthur. "If you encourage him he'll tell us a story we've heard a hundred times before."

Merlin went up-stairs very quietly at nine o'clock. When he was in his room and had closed the door tight he stood by it for a moment, his thin limbs trembling. He knew now that he had always been a fool.

"O Russet Witch!"

But it was too late. He had angered Providence by resisting too many temptations. There was nothing left but heaven, where he would meet only those who, like him, had wasted earth.

11: New York Tale

Mark Hellinger

1903-1947

The Daily Telegraph (Sydney) 16 March 1937

IT WAS still hot. The sun had gone hours before but the night was airless. In the park, the leaves hung still. The smell of hot tar and grass wasn't exactly pleasant.

Here and there the blackness of the park was relieved by a splotch of color. Somebody sleeping on the grass. Now and then low voices could be heard — and, somewhere a woman was calling hysterically for "Junior."

The young man sat alone on the bench. He sat sideways, so that he used one whole section of it. In the murky dark you could see his fedora, tilted back on his forehead. Now and (then he wiped his face and neck with a handkerchief. If you looked closely you could see the mole on his left nostril.

He thought it over. Get drunk— or go to bed. If he went back to the apartment and turned in, the heat would keep him awake. If he got drunk, he'd have to fight a hangover in the morning. Altogether a very serious problem.

He studied the old man who shuffled up the path. A bum. You could spot one even in the semi-dark. No hat. Dirty white hair. The left pants leg torn at the knee. Shoulders drooping. Head darting back and fourth to spot suckers. A bum. The old man approached the bench.

"No," said the young man.

"I beg your pardon," said the old man. "I didn't say anything."

"Well," grunted the young man, "I'm turning you down before you begin."

"May I sit down?"

"The place is yours, old boy." The old man sat close to the young man. He mopped his brow and sighed.

"Terrible weather," he murmured. "Humidity is frightful."

There was something about the old man's voice. Something that didn't sound like a bum. Something that told you the old man hadn't always been a bum. The clothes were bum's clothes. And so was the man's attitude. But the voice held a certain softness, a gentility, a dignity that .made it sound as though it had once been on speaking terms with culture.

The young man turned. "Here's two bits," he said. "Never mind the sob. You'll find a saloon right through that entrance over there."

The old man's shaking hand held the coin. In the haze, the young man saw his eyes glisten. "Am I," the old man asked softly, "a bum?"

"Aren't you?" shrugged the young man.

"I hope not." There was a new note in the old man's voice. "I didn't think I was, but now I don't know. I've been trying to tell myself that everything would be all right if I could only get home again.

"But I've been called a bum by at least fifty people in the last three weeks. So maybe you're right. And maybe all the others are right, too."

The young man tried to chuckle. "Never mind the weeps, pop. I was only kidding." He wished the old man would go away. And he wished, too. that he had been more civil. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"In Ohio. If I can ever get eleven dollars together, I'll go home by bus. You see, I came here seven years ago with my daughter. Now I hate New York— but I can't leave it. It won't let me."

"Where's your daughter? She leave you?"

The old man sighed again. It was evidently something he didn't like to talk about. "I don't know why I should explain this to you, young man. You're probably laughing at me inside. But— well, my daughter is dead."

"Gee, pop, that's too bad. I really mean it. How come?"

The old man leaned back. "It's short," he observed, "and it's not very sweet. About eight or nine years ago, my daughter began to tell her mother of her ambitions. My wife listened, and soon she promised to try to sell me the idea.

"It seems that an artist must come to New York. Why, I don't know. We had no money to speak of, and I refused the girl for more than a year. But then I gave in. We came to New York so that she could have her big chance. Her mother stayed back home.

"We were in New York a few months when the girl fell in love. She never confided in me. Told me nothing, in fact, until it was too late."

He waved a hand. "It's the oldest story in the world. The man she fell in love with was absolutely no good. He treated her cruelly. Promised to marry her, but never kept his word. He gave her a complete run-around, and I found out about it only when it was too late to help. The baby died— and my daughter lived only four days afterward."

The young shook his head. He appeared nervous.

"Since that time." the old man went on, "I've spent every penny I owned in an attempt to find the man who caused her death. I don't know his name. All I have is a small photo, and a description.

"My money is all gone now. I haven't heard from my wife in more than six months. I've given up all thoughts of killing this fellow, because I no longer have the energy nor the money to hunt for him.

"I'd be satisfied to go home now— if I could."

The young man gulped. "What," he quavered, "what was your daughter's name?" The old man removed a half-smoked cigar from his pocket and struck a match. In the flickering saffron light he peered closely at the young man.

"Say!" he cried suddenly. "You have a mole on your left nostril! You have black hair, too! Just a minute now! Just a?"

The young man leaped to his feet. He tossed a bill in the old man's lap. "Here's 20 bucks, pop," he stated shakily. "I've got a date."

He began to walk rapidly away. "If I were you," he flung over his shoulder, "I'd get home as soon as I could."

The old man's bony fingers straightened out the crumbled bill. He got up as though to follow the young man, but he didn't have the strength to continue. He flopped back on the bench and sat there, shaking his head sadly.

An hour later the old man shuffled along until he reached 59th Street. He nodded to the bum who stood there. Together they began to walk away. The old man displayed the 20 dollars.

"As soon as they ask what my daughter's name was," he said quietly, "I know they have a guilty conscience. I light a match, describe the face I'm looking at—and the rest is easy. This last guy was a cinch."

He stopped for a moment.

"The way I tell that story," he opined, "always makes me feel that I missed something in life. Maybe I should have got married and really had a daughter!"

12: Angela

An Inverted Love Story

W. S. Gilbert

Willam Schwenk Gilbert, 1836-1911

The Century Magazine, Sep 1890

I AM A POOR paralysed fellow who, for many years past, has been confined to a bed or a sofa. For the last six years I have occupied a small room, giving on to one of the side canals of Venice, and having no one about me but a deaf old woman, who makes my bed and attends to my food; and there I eke out a poor income of about thirty pounds a year by making water-colour drawings of flowers and fruit (they are the cheapest models in Venice), and these I send to a friend in London, who sells them to a dealer for small sums. But, on the whole, I am happy and content.

It is necessary that I should describe the position of my room rather minutely. Its only window is about five feet above the water of the canal, and above it the house projects some six feet, and overhangs the water, the projecting portion being supported by stout piles driven into the bed of the canal. This arrangement has the disadvantage (among others) of so limiting my upward view that I am unable to see more than about ten feet of the height of the house immediately opposite to me, although, by reaching as far out of the window as my infirmity will permit, I can see for a considerable distance up and down the canal, which does not exceed fifteen feet in width. But, although I can see but little of the material house opposite, I can see its reflection upside down in the canal, and I take a good deal of inverted interest in such of its inhabitants as show themselves from time to time (always upside down) on its balconies and at its windows.

When I first occupied my room, about six years ago, my attention was directed to the reflection of a little girl of thirteen or so (as nearly as I could judge), who passed every day on a balcony just above the upward range of my limited field of view. She had a glass of flowers and a crucifix on a little table by her side; and as she sat there, in fine weather, from early morning until dark, working assiduously all the time, I concluded that she earned her living by needle-work. She was certainly an industrious little girl, and, as far as I could judge by her upside-down reflection, neat in her dress and pretty. She had an old mother, an invalid, who, on warm days, would sit on the balcony with her, and it interested me to see the little maid wrap the old lady in shawls, and bring pillows for her chair, and a stool for her feet, and every now and again lay down

her work and kiss and fondle the old lady for half a minute, and then take up her work again.

Time went by, and as the little maid grew up, her reflection grew down, and at last she was quite a little woman of, I suppose, sixteen or seventeen. I can only work for a couple of hours or so in the brightest part of the day, so I had plenty of time on my hands in which to watch her movements, and sufficient imagination to weave a little romance about her, and to endow her with a beauty which, to a great extent, I had to take for granted. I saw— or fancied that I could see— that she began to take an interest in *my* reflection (which, of course, she could see as I could see hers); and one day, when it appeared to me that she was looking right at it— that is to say when her reflection appeared to be looking right at me— I tried the desperate experiment of nodding to her, and to my intense delight her reflection nodded in reply. And so our two reflections became known to one another.

It did not take me very long to fall in love with her, but a long time passed before I could make up my mind to do more than nod to her every morning, when the old woman moved me from my bed to the sofa at the window, and again in the evening, when the little maid left the balcony for that day. One day, however, when I saw her reflection looking at mine, I nodded to her, and threw a flower into the canal. She nodded several times in return, and I saw her direct her mother's attention to the incident. Then every morning I threw a flower into the water for 'good morning', and another in the evening for 'goodnight', and I soon discovered that I had not altogether thrown them in vain, for one day she threw a flower to join mine, and she laughed and clapped her hands when she saw the two flowers join forces and float away together. And then every morning and every evening she threw her flower when I threw mine, and when the two flowers met she clapped her hands, and so did I; but when they were separated, as they sometimes were, owing to one of them having met an obstruction which did not catch the other, she threw up her hands in a pretty affectation of despair, which I tried to imitate but in an English and unsuccessful fashion. And when they were rudely run down by a passing gondola (which happened not unfrequently) she pretended to cry, and I did the same. Then, in pretty pantomime, she would point downwards to the sky to tell me that it was Destiny that had caused the shipwreck of our flowers, and I, in pantomime, not nearly so pretty, would try to convey to her that Destiny would be kinder next time, and that perhaps tomorrow our flowers would be more fortunate— and so the innocent courtship went on. One day she showed me her crucifix and kissed it, and thereupon I took a little silver crucifix that always stood by me, and kissed that, and so she knew that we were one in religion.

One day the little maid did not appear on her balcony, and for several days I saw nothing of her; and although I threw my flowers as usual, no flower came to

keep it company. However, after a time, she reappeared, dressed in black, and crying often, and then I knew that the poor child's mother was dead, and, as far as I knew, she was alone in the world. The flowers came no more for many days, nor did she show any sign of recognition, but kept her eyes on her work, except when she placed her handkerchief to them. And opposite to her was the old lady's chair, and I could see that, from time to time, she would lay down her work and gaze at it, and then a flood of tears would come to her relief. But at last one day she roused herself to nod to me, and then her flower came, day by day, and my flower went forth to join it, and with varying fortunes the two flowers sailed away as of yore.

But the darkest day of all to me was when a good-looking young gondolier, standing right end uppermost in his gondola (for I could see *him* in the flesh), worked his craft alongside the house, and stood talking to her as she sat on the balcony. They seemed to speak as old friends— indeed, as well as I could make out, he held her by the hand during the whole of their interview which lasted quite half an hour. Eventually he pushed off, and left my heart heavy within me. But I soon took heart of grace, for as soon as he was out of sight, the little maid threw two flowers growing on the same stem— an allegory of which I could make nothing, until it broke upon me that she meant to convey to me that he and she were brother and sister, and that I had no cause to be sad. And thereupon I nodded to her cheerily, and she nodded to me, and laughed aloud, and I laughed in return, and all went on again as before.

Then came a dark and dreary time, for it became necessary that I should undergo treatment that confined me absolutely to my bed for many days, and I worried and fretted to think that the little maid and I should see each other no longer, and worse still, that she would think that I had gone away without even hinting to her that I was going. And I lay awake at night wondering how I could let her know the truth, and fifty plans flitted through my brain, all appearing to be feasible enough at night, but absolutely wild and impracticable in the morning. One day— and it was a bright day indeed for me— the old woman who tended me told me that a gondolier had inquired whether the English *signor* had gone away or had died; and so I learnt that the little maid had been anxious about me, and that she had sent her brother to inquire, and the brother had no doubt taken to her the reason of my protracted absence from the window.

From that day, and ever after during my three weeks of bed-keeping, a flower was found every morning on the ledge of my window, which was within easy reach of anyone in a boat; and when at last a day came when I could be moved, I took my accustomed place on my sofa at the window, and the little maid saw me, and stood on her head (so to speak) and clapped her hands upside down with a delight that was as eloquent as my right-end-up delight could be. And so the first time the gondolier passed my window I beckoned to

him, and he pushed alongside, and told me, with many bright smiles, that he was glad indeed to see me well again. Then I thanked him and his sister for their many kind thoughts about me during my retreat, and I then learnt from him that her name was Angela, and that she was the best and purest maiden in all Venice, and that anyone might think himself happy indeed who could call her sister, but that he was happier even than her brother, for he was to be married to her, and indeed they were to be married the next day.

Thereupon my heart seemed to swell to bursting, and the blood rushed through my veins so that I could hear it and nothing else for a while. I managed at last to stammer forth some words of awkward congratulation, and he left me, singing merrily, after asking permission to bring his bride to see me on the morrow as they returned from church.

'For', said he, 'my Angela has known you very long— ever since she was a child, and she has often spoken to me of the poor Englishman who was a good Catholic, and who lay all day long for years and years on a sofa at a window, and she had said over and over again how dearly she wished she could speak to him and comfort him; and one day, when you threw a flower into the canal, she asked me whether she might throw another, and I told her yes, for he would understand that it meant sympathy for one sorely afflicted.'

And so I learned that it was pity, and not love, except indeed such love as is akin to pity, that prompted her to interest herself in my welfare, and there was an end of it all.

For the two flowers that I thought were on one stem were two flowers tied together (but I could not tell that), and they were meant to indicate that she and the gondolier were affianced lovers, and my expressed pleasure at this symbol delighted her, for she took it to mean that I rejoiced in her happiness.

And the next day the gondolier came with a train of other gondoliers, all decked in their holiday garb, and on his gondola sat Angela, happy, and blushing at her happiness. Then he and she entered the house in which I dwelt, and came into my room (and it was strange indeed, after so many years of inversion, to see her with her head above her feet!), and then she wished me happiness and a speedy restoration to good health (which could never be); and I in broken words and with tears in my eyes, gave her the little silver crucifix that had stood by my bed or my table for so many years. And Angela took it reverently, and crossed herself, and kissed it, and so departed with her delighted husband.

And as I heard the song of the gondoliers as they went their way— the song dying away in the distance as the shadows of the sundown closed around me— I felt that they were singing the requiem of the only love that had ever entered my heart.

13: The Fool-Killer

O. Henry

William Sydney Porter, 1862-1910

The Sunday World (New York), 15 April 1906

DOWN SOUTH whenever any one perpetrates some particularly monumental piece of foolishness everybody says: "Send for Jesse Holmes."

Jesse Holmes is the Fool-Killer. Of course he is a myth, like Santa Claus and Jack Frost and General Prosperity and all those concrete conceptions that are supposed to represent an idea that Nature has failed to embody. The wisest of the Southrons cannot tell you whence comes the Fool-Killer's name; but few and happy are the households from the Roanoke to the Rio Grande in which the name of Jesse Holmes has not been pronounced or invoked. Always with a smile, and often with a tear, is he summoned to his official duty. A busy man is Jesse Holmes.

I remember the clear picture of him that hung on the walls of my fancy during my barefoot days when I was dodging his oft-threatened devoirs. To me he was a terrible old man, in gray clothes, with a long, ragged, gray beard, and reddish, fierce eyes. I looked to see him come stumping up the road in a cloud of dust, with a white oak staff in his hand and his shoes tied with leather thongs. I may yet—

But this is a story, not a sequel.

I have taken notice with regret, that few stories worth reading have been written that did not contain drink of some sort. Down go the fluids, from Arizona Dick's three fingers of red pizen to the inefficacious Oolong that nerves Lionel Montressor to repartee in the "Dotty Dialogues." So, in such good company I may introduce an absinthe drip— one absinthe drip, dripped through a silver dripper, orderly, opalescent, cool, green-eyed— deceptive.

Kerner was a fool. Besides that, he was an artist and my good friend. Now, if there is one thing on earth utterly despicable to another, it is an artist in the eyes of an author whose story he has illustrated. Just try it once. Write a story about a mining camp in Idaho. Sell it. Spend the money, and then, six months later, borrow a quarter (or a dime), and buy the magazine containing it. You find a full-page wash drawing of your hero, Black Bill, the cowboy. Somewhere in your story you employed the word "horse." Aha! the artist has grasped the idea. Black Bill has on the regulation trousers of the M. F. H. of the Westchester County Hunt. He carries a parlor rifle, and wears a monocle. In the distance is a section of Forty-second Street during a search for a lost gas-pipe, and the Taj Mahal, the famous mausoleum in India.

Enough! I hated Kerner, and one day I met him and we became friends. He was young and gloriously melancholy because his spirits were so high and life

had so much in store for him. Yes, he was almost riotously sad. That was his youth. When a man begins to be hilarious in a sorrowful way you can bet a million that he is dyeing his hair. Kerner's hair was plentiful and carefully matted as an artist's thatch should be. He was a cigaretteur, and he audited his dinners with red wine. But, most of all, he was a fool. And, wisely, I envied him, and listened patiently while he knocked Velasquez and Tintoretto. Once he told me that he liked a story of mine that he had come across in an anthology. He described it to me, and I was sorry that Mr. Fitz-James O'Brien was dead and could not learn of the eulogy of his work. But mostly Kerner made few breaks and was a consistent fool.

I'd better explain what I mean by that. There was a girl. Now, a girl, as far as I am concerned, is a thing that belongs in a seminary or an album; but I conceded the existence of the animal in order to retain Kerner's friendship. He showed me her picture in a locket— she was a blonde or a brunette— I have forgotten which. She worked in a factory for eight dollars a week. Lest factories quote this wage by way of vindication, I will add that the girl had worked for five years to reach that supreme elevation of remuneration, beginning at $1.50 per week.

Kerner's father was worth a couple of millions He was willing to stand for art, but he drew the line at the factory girl. So Kerner disinherited his father and walked out to a cheap studio and lived on sausages for breakfast and on Farroni for dinner. Farroni had the artistic soul and a line of credit for painters and poets, nicely adjusted. Sometimes Kerner sold a picture and bought some new tapestry, a ring and a dozen silk cravats, and paid Farroni two dollars on account.

One evening Kerner had me to dinner with himself and the factory girl. They were to be married as soon as Kerner could slosh paint profitably. As for the ex-father's two millions— pouf!

She was a wonder. Small and half-way pretty, and as much at her ease in that cheap café as though she were only in the Palmer House, Chicago, with a souvenir spoon already safely hidden in her shirt waist. She was natural. Two things I noticed about her especially. Her belt buckle was exactly in the middle of her back, and she didn't tell us that a large man with a ruby stick-pin had followed her up all the way from Fourteenth Street. Was Kerner such a fool? I wondered. And then I thought of the quantity of striped cuffs and blue glass beads that $2,000,000 can buy for the heathen, and I said to myself that he was. And then Elise— certainly that was her name— told us, merrily, that the brown spot on her waist was caused by her landlady knocking at the door while she (the girl— confound the English language) was heating an iron over the gas jet, and she hid the iron under the bedclothes until the coast was clear, and there was the piece of chewing gum stuck to it when she began to iron the waist,

and— well, I wondered how in the world the chewing gum came to be there— don't they ever stop chewing it?

A while after that— don't be impatient, the absinthe drip is coming now— Kerner and I were dining at Farroni's. A mandolin and a guitar were being attacked; the room was full of smoke in nice, long crinkly layers just like the artists draw the steam from a plum pudding on Christmas posters, and a lady in a blue silk and gasolined gauntlets was beginning to hum an air from the Catskills.

"Kerner," said I, "you are a fool."

"Of course," said Kerner, "I wouldn't let her go on working. Not my wife. What's the use to wait? She's willing. I sold that water color of the Palisades yesterday. We could cook on a two-burner gas stove. You know the ragouts I can throw together? Yes, I think we will marry next week."

"Kerner," said I, "you are a fool."

"Have an absinthe drip?" said Kerner, grandly. "To-night you are the guest of Art in paying quantities. I think we will get a flat with a bath."

"I never tried one— I mean an absinthe drip," said I.

The waiter brought it and poured the water slowly over the ice in the dripper.

"It looks exactly like the Mississippi River water in the big bend below Natchez," said I, fascinated, gazing at the be-muddled drip.

"There are such flats for eight dollars a week," said Kerner.

"You are a fool," said I, and began to sip the filtration. "What you need," I continued, "is the official attention of one Jesse Holmes."

Kerner, not being a Southerner, did not comprehend, so he sat, sentimental, figuring on his flat in his sordid, artistic way, while I gazed into the green eyes of the sophisticated Spirit of Wormwood.

Presently I noticed casually that a procession of bacchantes limned on the wall immediately below the ceiling had begun to move, traversing the room from right to left in a gay and spectacular pilgrimage. I did not confide my discovery to Kerner. The artistic temperament is too high-strung to view such deviations from the natural laws of the art of kalsomining. I sipped my absinthe drip and sawed wormwood.

One absinthe drip is not much— but I said again to Kerner, kindly:

"You are a fool." And then, in the vernacular: "Jesse Holmes for yours."

And then I looked around and saw the Fool-Killer, as he had always appeared to my imagination, sitting at a nearby table, and regarding us with his reddish, fatal, relentless eyes. He was Jesse Holmes from top to toe; he had the long, gray, ragged beard, the gray clothes of ancient cut, the executioner's look, and the dusty shoes of one who had been called from afar. His eyes were turned fixedly upon Kerner. I shuddered to think that I had invoked him from his

assiduous southern duties. I thought of flying, and then I kept my seat, reflecting that many men had escaped his ministrations when it seemed that nothing short of an appointment as Ambassador to Spain could save them from him. I had called my brother Kerner a fool and was in danger of hell fire. That was nothing; but I would try to save him from Jesse Holmes.

The Fool-Killer got up from his table and came over to ours. He rested his hands upon it, and turned his burning, vindictive eyes upon Kerner, ignoring me.

"You are a hopeless fool," he said to the artist. "Haven't you had enough of starvation yet? I offer you one more opportunity. Give up this girl and come back to your home. Refuse, and you must take the consequences."

The Fool-Killer's threatening face was within a foot of his victim's; but to my horror, Kerner made not the slightest sign of being aware of his presence.

"We will be married next week," he muttered absent-mindedly. "With my studio furniture and some second-hand stuff we can make out."

"You have decided your own fate," said the Fool-Killer, in a low but terrible voice. "You may consider yourself as one dead. You have had your last chance."

"In the moonlight," went on Kerner, softly, "we will sit under the skylight with our guitar and sing away the false delights of pride and money."

"On your own head be it," hissed the Fool-Killer, and my scalp prickled when I perceived that neither Kerner's eyes nor his ears took the slightest cognizance of Jesse Holmes. And then I knew that for some reason the veil had been lifted for me alone, and that I had been elected to save my friend from destruction at the Fool-Killer's hands. Something of the fear and wonder of it must have showed itself in my face.

"Excuse me," said Kerner, with his wan, amiable smile; "was I talking to myself? I think it is getting to be a habit with me."

The Fool-Killer turned and walked out of Farroni's.

"Wait here for me," said I, rising; "I must speak to that man. Had you no answer for him? Because you are a fool must you die like a mouse under his foot? Could you not utter one squeak in your own defence?

"You are drunk," said Kerner, heartlessly. "No one addressed me."

"The destroyer of your mind," said I, "stood above you just now and marked you for his victim. You are not blind or deaf."

"I recognized no such person," said Kerner. "I have seen no one but you at this table. Sit down. Hereafter you shall have no more absinthe drips."

"Wait here," said I, furious; "if you don't care for your own life, I will save it for you."

I hurried out and overtook the man in gray half-way down the block. He looked as I had seen him in my fancy a thousand times— truculent, gray and awful. He walked with the white oak staff, and but for the street-sprinkler the dust would have been flying under his tread.

I caught him by the sleeve and steered him to a dark angle of a building. I knew he was a myth, and I did not want a cop to see me conversing with vacancy, for I might land in Bellevue minus my silver matchbox and diamond ring.

"Jesse Holmes," said I, facing him with apparent bravery, "I know you. I have heard of you all my life. I know now what a scourge you have been to your country. Instead of killing fools you have been murdering the youth and genius that are necessary to make a people live and grow great. You are a fool yourself, Holmes; you began killing off the brightest and best of our countrymen three generations ago, when the old and obsolete standards of society and honor and orthodoxy were narrow and bigoted. You proved that when you put your murderous mark upon my friend Kerner— the wisest chap I ever knew in my life."

The Fool-Killer looked at me grimly and closely.

"You've a queer jag," said he, curiously. "Oh, yes; I see who you are now. You were sitting with him at the table. Well, if I'm not mistaken, I heard you call him a fool, too."

"I did," said I. "I delight in doing so. It is from envy. By all the standards that you know he is the most egregious and grandiloquent and gorgeous fool in all the world. That's why you want to kill him."

"Would you mind telling me who or what you think I am?" asked the old man.

I laughed boisterously and then stopped suddenly, for I remembered that it would not do to be seen so hilarious in the company of nothing but a brick wall.

"You are Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer," I said, solemnly, "and you are going to kill my friend Kerner. I don't know who rang you up, but if you do kill him I'll see that you get pinched for it. That is," I added, despairingly, "if I can get a cop to see you. They have a poor eye for mortals, and I think it would take the whole force to round up a myth murderer."

"Well," said the Fool-Killer, briskly, "I must be going. You had better go home and sleep it off. Good-night."

At this I was moved by a sudden fear for Kerner to a softer and more pleading mood. I leaned against the gray man's sleeve and besought him:

"Good Mr. Fool-Killer, please don't kill little Kerner. Why can't you go back South and kill Congressmen and clay-eaters and let us alone? Why don't you go up on Fifth Avenue and kill millionaires that keep their money locked up and won't let young fools marry because one of 'em lives on the wrong street? Come and have a drink, Jesse. Will you never get on to your job?"

"Do you know this girl that your friend has made himself a fool about?" asked the Fool-Killer.

"I have the honor," said I, "and that's why I called Kerner a fool. He is a fool because he has waited so long before marrying her. He is a fool because he has been waiting in the hopes of getting the consent of some absurd two-million-dollar-fool parent or something of the sort."

"Maybe," said the Fool-Killer— "maybe I— I might have looked at it differently. Would you mind going back to the restaurant and bringing your friend Kerner here?"

"Oh, what's the use, Jesse," I yawned. "He can't see you. He didn't know you were talking to him at the table, You are a fictitious character, you know."

"Maybe he can this time. Will you go fetch him?"

"All right," said I, "but I've a suspicion that you're not strictly sober, Jesse. You seem to be wavering and losing your outlines. Don't vanish before I get back."

I went back to Kerner and said:

"There's a man with an invisible homicidal mania waiting to see you outside. I believe he wants to murder you. Come along. You won't see him, so there's nothing to be frightened about."

Kerner looked anxious.

"Why," said he, "I had no idea one absinthe would do that. You'd better stick to Würzburger. I'll walk home with you."

I led him to Jesse Holmes's.

"Rudolf," said the Fool-Killer, "I'll give in. Bring her up to the house. Give me your hand, boy."

"Good for you, dad," said Kerner, shaking hands with the old man. "You'll never regret it after you know her."

"So, you did see him when he was talking to you at the table?" I asked Kerner.

"We hadn't spoken to each other in a year," said Kerner. "It's all right now."

I walked away.

"Where are you going?" called Kerner.

"I am going to look for Jesse Holmes," I answered, with dignity and reserve.

14: How Satan Cheated Sarah Muldowney

Hermione Templeton Kavanagh

1876-1933

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WHETHER it was the onraysonable unscrutableness of Pether Muldowney that first riled up the temper of Sarah Muldowney or whether it was the high-handed obthrusiveness of Sarah Muldowney that started the acraymonious ambayguity in Pether Muldowney, the sorrow one of me knows. Only this is sartin: that same provoking question tossed from family to family from day to day at some time or other, started botheratious disputations under every thatched roof in Ballinthubber.

Now, isn't it a worruld's wondher how the example of the quarrels and contintions of one family will creep sly and unrecognized intil the neighbors' houses, lighting up dissinsions when laste expected? Ould Nick himself from their first falling out med a tool and a torch out of the squabbles of the Muldowneys.

Look how clever Sattin conthrived the McCarthys intil their first blazing althercation! It was one winther's evenin' afther supper when Faylix McCarthy, a proud although at the same time a sinsible, quiet man, contented with the worruld and filled to the chin with peaceable intentions and butthermilk and oatmale stirabout, sat readying his pipe before the sparkling fire. His wife, Julia, brushed around busy washing up the pots and pans and clacking out a bit of a song the while.

"Isn't it a pity," says Faylix, offhanded, "isn't it a shame the way Sarah Muldowney harries and haggles the life out of her husband, Pether?"

Why Julia took offense at thim worruds she never afther could explain.

"Isn't it a shame," says Julia, a bit sharp over her shoulder, "isn't it a pity the way she's druve to it? And isn't it a misfortune," she flashed back at him, "that men are the same the worruld over?"

Up to that minute, yer honor, there wasn't a ha'porth of hard feelings betwixt them. But pushing Faylix down that way into the same place and pit with Pether Muldowney was like touching a sudden red coal to the back of his neck. So he gives his head a sudden jerk up, and then he says, and his hand thrimbled as he put the light into his pipe while he was talking, "I saw Dominic Flaherty this morning and he dhriving his two pigs with a rope on their legs, and the three of them on their way to the butchers at Fethard. The bastes wor pulling, one ayst and the other west, and dodging up every lane and crossroad and into every hole in the hedge. And I says to Dominic, says I, ' 'Tis yerself, Dominic, has as tayjus a job as if ye wor striving to manage a headstrong woman.' "

At that, Faylix guffawed a little forced and aggrayvatin'. Julia didn't laugh. She waited a minute, wiping her bare arms with the dishcloth, her lips tight. Thin she says, "I'll be bound, the likeness ye just give is a foine example. For isn't it the poor wives that, loike those same condemned bastes, are being druve and browbate and parsecuted and disthroyed and kilt intirely all the days of their lives?"

And Faylix answered Julia, but what he said is no matther, for the same or something like it was tould by every other husband in Ballinthubber to his wife while they war disputin' about the Muldowneys, and what Julia said agin to Faylix, sure yer own wife has said to yerself maybe time and agin and what she said, wives'll kape saying to their husbands till the day of judgment.

But no matther which of the Muldowneys was to blame at the beginnin', sure wasn't the counthryside scandalized and heart-scalded at the way they kep' it up till the ind. Discontent grows into a habit; happiness is often a bright habit, and ill-nature is always just a drab habit. And there's some people never exhillerayted onless they've just been slighted or insulted, and there's them agin that in their saycrit heart of hearts find sport and diversion out of a quarrel.

It was like that with the two Muldowneys. Not that they ever lifted a hand to aich other or called hard names outright. As Father Delaney would say, the pair war too scientufic for the loikes of that. There war not two combat'tants in Ireland more ayqual for aich other. It was Pether Napoleon Bonypart Muldowney against Sarah, the Juke of Wellington Muldowney.

Pether was the quiet, careful, cowld-eyed kind. It's seldom he'd say a worrud while Sarah was having her full fling at him. He'd rile the heart in her with his silence. This was his way of fighting. He'd sit calm and agyravatin' at the hearth, his right leg trun over the other, his head slanted to one side, his saygull's icy eyes blinkin' at the rafters, and he humming a bit of a song.

The most cutting, irritaytin' maddening things Sarah's tongue could manage he'd fence back at her by dhroppin' the corners of his lips or winking humorous his eyelids or tossing his shoulders and shutting his eyes. So when she'd get all heated up and bilin' like a taykettle and she'd find that she hadn't raised a hair on him, this is what she'd do, and it inded the quarrel: Sarah would go out into the road and stand weeping and crying over her gate. If any passing sthranger or neighbor would stop to ask her grief, all she'd say was, "Go in an' ask himself! I'll not tell on him, since whatever he's done, he's me wedded husband!"

Ye'll say that Pether was clever, and indade, he had to be so, for it was a toss-up betwixt them as to which had the most injaynius tictacks.

The most valuable thing I've learned since ever I was able to whirl me two fists before me face in a battle is to beware of an enemy that smiles when he fights, and Sarah was a swate-worded smiler. Though her temper was sharp as a knife and hot as a flame of candle, she'd smile a harmless-sounding question at

anyone. That same question was dangerous as the jagged razor me own wife cuts the thread with: however careful I shave, I'm sure to put a gash on meself afther. If Pether'd try to answer one of Sarah's questions, whichever way he'd rayply, he'd cut himself to the bone.

A woman may trajuce a man about his shortcomings till she's black in the face, and he'll maybe hould himself in, but the minute his wife begins trajucing her husband's relaytions, it's few husbands can stand that and stay peaceable. Sarah had a jaynus for columniaytion of the breed and brood of the Muldowney's. It's often she bested him that way outrayjous, and when she'd see Pether's face grow scarlet, she'd know she'd won.

The way the last quarrel started betwixt them was this away: For a week, the two had been cooing and fluthering about aich other like a pair of turtledoves. Of a wet Monday morning afther breakfast, they war sitting looking at the lowering clouds and listening to the abusive chilling winds that came hollerin' down the chimney.

"It's a dayspictable thing," he says, "to be shut up in the house on a day like this with no one to talk to."

Of course, he didn't mane it althogether as bad as it sounded, but he didn't say it quite pleasant for all that— just a thrifle peevish. No one could tell by lookin' at Sarah how the woman was bridlin' when she heard that raymark, for she only rocked back and forth a little faster in the rush chair, smiling before she spoke.

Sarah knew that Pether hated to be corrected in his prowninciation, especially when he was feeling a bit sour over something else. It's belittling to anyone at any time. And Sarah was altogether too clever for a front attack on Pether, so she kem at him from this wake side. "Don't say 'dayspictable,' Pether avourneen," she smiled. "It sounds so wulger. Say 'dayspictatory'!"

"I said 'dayspicatory'; I never said 'dayspictatable' in me loife," answered Pether. Well, the argyment begun and from argyment to battle never amounted to more than a short step.

That last time Sarah got worsted bad, so what does the woman do but jump furious from the chair and pack up in a bundle all the clothes she had in the worruld— and it wasn't such a killin' big bundle at that— and with her foot on the thrashold and a hand on the latch, it's what she said to her husband: "To the ructions I pitch you, and all the Muldowneys: and hadn't one of my daycint bringing up the hard luck to marry into such a family of good-for-nothing tinkers! And I'm off now over the mountains to my sister Peggy, who had the luck and the grace to marry into the rayspectable family of the O'Callaghans."

She shut the door quick then, the way she wouldn't be giving him the satisfaction of hearing the answer himself'd make; but she was sorry for that afther, bekase, as she wint thrudging up the road, she heard Pether back in the

house roaring and screechin' with the laughter at some of his jokes an' thin the heart was fair burning out of her to know what owdacious slandher the rapscallion had med up and said about her.

But for all that, Sarah never turned her head; she only guv her petticut another hitch an', with her chin up in the air an' her best foot for'rad, marched on like a major down the road.

Didn't I meself heard Father Cassidy say from the altar only last Sunday that there wasn't a lazy bone in Sattin's body; that night and day, the Ould Boy never slept but conthrivin' against and temptin' everyone in the world, and particular the Irish. And as Mrs. Murtaugh and meself were walkin' down the lane from the chapel that day, my wife says to me— yer honor knows that Mrs. Murtaugh was an O'Grady and that the O'Gradys the world over are faymous for their wise cogitaytions and wonderful concatinaytions— she says, "Isn't it a pity and a scandal, Jerry Murtaugh, that whin the Satalites are by night and by day lepping and limber and ayger afther yer own immortal sowl, and you to be using the bad langwidge ye did yestherday whin the pony kicked ye in the knee?"

With that, she turned facing me in the lane and pinted a warnin' finger at me chist. "Jerry Murtaugh," she says, "ye're gettin' as free and careless about yere precious sowl as if it only belonged to a common Far Down or a Connaught man." And by that, she put a seriousness on me that I feel in me bones this minute.

Faix, when I've finished aylucidating to ye what happened to the Muldowneys, yer Honor'll say, too, "Ah, thin, isn't Father Cassidy the larned man, and isn't Mrs. Jerry Murtaugh the deep rayligious woman!"

Well, as I was telling you: it wasn't her prayers that Sarah was sayin' ayther, as she wint whirling along, though she might betther have been doing that same (for the road before her was wild and lonesome enough, and many's the turrible tale was told about it), but instid of doing that, every har-rd word and scorching wish she could lay her tongue to, Sarah was pelting at the image in her mind of her husband, Pether.

"Oh, wasn't I the bostheen of a fool to be wastin' me chanst on him an' the loikes of him— I that had ivery boy in the parish afther me. But I'm done with him now. And I wish I was Sayzer's wife, so I do, so I could turn him into a pillow of salt, the big lazy sturk, I'd— I'd sell him to Sattin for sixpence this minnit, so I would."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than pop! a wondherful thing happened. Believe me or believe me not, but it's no lie I'm tellin' ye: the road in front of her shplit in two halfs accrass, and the ground opened before her, and up through the crack sprung a tall, dark, slim, illigant-lookin' juntleman, an' the bow that he med there in the middle of the road was ayquil to the curtchy of a Dublin dancin' masther.

For a minute, Mrs. Muldowney could do nothin' but ketch her breath an' stare at him with every eye in her head, an' she said aftherwards that he was the foinest lookin' mortial man she iver set her two livin' eyes on, barrin' her own first cousin, Tim Conners.

He was dhressed from head to foot in glossy black. His knee breeches were of satin, an' his swallowtail coat an' low weskit were of shiny broadcloth. There would be no manner of doubt in the mind of any sinsible person who it was. Sattin himself stood ferninst her. But Sarah Muldowney came and sprung from the proud conquering race of the Fogartys on her mother's side, and the world can tell the Fogartys know no fear.

Clicking his heels together again, the juntleman med a second polite bow and then spoke in a deep solemn voice: "The top of the day to ye, Mrs. Muldowney ma'am," says he. "I didn't hear quite plain the price you was settin' on your husband, Pether. I'll pay you any raysonable sum for him, an' it'll be cash on the nail, ma-am. So spake up!"

To be sure, while you'd be giving two winks of your eye, Mrs. Muldowney was flusthrated. But it's she was the woman that was quick at a bargain, and handy at turning a penny. And now was her chanst.

"I was just sayin' that I'd sell him to Sattin for one pound tin this minute. An' by the same token, who are you, sir, that comes poppin' up out of the lonesome road like a jack in-the-box, frightenin' daycint women out of their siven wits? I said two pounds tin, that's what I said."

"It's little matther what me name is, Sarah Muldowney," spoke up the juntleman. "You'll be introjuced to me proper enough afther a while. For the prisint, it's satisfied yez'll have to be to know that I'll buy Pether from ye, an' I'll pay ye the two pound tin in goold suverings the succond ye hand him into me power. Are ye satisfied?"

Now, the good woman, seeing how aisy Sattin was with his money, felt the heart inside of her scorching up with vexation to think she'd named so small a sum, so shaking her head slow and sorrowful, it's what she said: "Throth, thin, I'm not satisfied. You have no idee how lonesome I'd be without Pether an' what I'll do at all, at all the sorrow one of me knows. An' will ye hurry up now with your answer, for if any one of the neighbors were to see the both of us collogueing out here together, I wouldn't give a button for me repitation. So if ye're willin' to give the three pounds tin—"

"What!" shrieked the dark man, an' he guv a lep up intil the air. "Three pound tin, ye schaymer of the worruld, ye said one pound tin at first."

"Tin fiddle-sthicks! Three pound tin and not a fardin' less. An' how dare the loikes of you be callin' a daycint woman loike me a schaymer," she shouted, clapping one hand in the other undher the nose of the sthranger, an' she follyin'

him as he backed step by step from her in the road. "Kape a civil tongue in yer head while ye're talking to a lady, or I'll malevogue ye, so I will."

"Hould where ye are, Mrs. Muldowney," said the flustherayted man, and he backed up agin a rock. "I'll own I was a thrifle quick-tempered, but I meant no offense, ma'am, an' if you'll bring Pether to this spot on the morning of the morrow and hand him over to me here, I'll guv ye the three pounds tin down on the nail."

So Sarah waited for no more, but off she skelped and, without stopping to ketch her breath, hurried by every short path till she came in sight of her own door. Then the clever woman slackened her pace, the way she would be thinking and planning out some nate, cunning schame to deludher her husband into going with her on the morrow.

Just as Sarah left Pether in the mornin', that's the way she found him whin she opened the door; with his two feet upon the fender and his hands deep in his breeches pockets. "Pether avourneen," she says, and you'd think butther wouldn't melt in her mouth, her worruds were that swate. "Pether," says she, "it's a foine job of worruk I have for ye up the mountainy way."

"Have ye now?" grunted Pether without lookin' round. "Well, I wouldn't be puttin' it past ye. It'll rain tomorrow or maybe even snow, so kape the foine job for yerself. Think shame on ye, woman, to be sendin' yer own husband out into the cowld an' the wet to be ketchin' his death from the dampeness."

"Oh no, wait till ye hear what it is," chuckled Sarah, as she untied her cloak and hung it careful on a peg behind the dure. "It's dhry as a bone an' snug and warrum as a roasted petatie ye'd be."

Pether cocked his ear in lazy curiosity. "I wondher!" was all he said.

"But maybe I'd betther not tell ye what it is," Sarah wint on, "bekase it's a job for a sober, daycint man; there's such a temptation for the dhrink in it, so I think I'll be givin' it to Ned Hanrahan."

Pether straightened his back at that an' took his hands out of his pockets. "Tut, tut, what's that ye're sayin?"

"I was sayin'," herself answered careless, readying the pot for the petaties, "that little Michael Callahan will be movin' his still from Chartre's wood to a foine cave up in the mountain, an' he wanted the two of us to help him. He has two cartloads of kegs and one of bottles and jugs, and all of them filled with the foinest of mountain dew. But of course you wouldn't want to be doing the loikes of that."

Pether was on his two feet in an instant, ivery hair on his head brustlin'.

"Death alive, woman!" he cried. "You'll be the ind of me one of these days. Sthop that hugger-muggerin' an' hurry the supper an' hurry on with me now, or he'll have someone else in our places." From the minute he got Sattin's

message, a raymarkable change kem over the lad; he lost every tinge of his onscrutableness.

It took all the wit and injaynuity of Sarah Muldowney to kape her husband Pether in the house till the mornin' of the morrow. And thin, at the first shriek of day, they were off together, he flyin' up the road with all the strength in his legs, an' she pelthin' afther him. The two of them nayther sthopped nor stayed till they came within sight of the Devil's Pool, and there, by the powers, standin' in the middle of the road, straight as a ramrod, with his arrums fowlded, stood the polite dark juntleman.

Whin our two hayros came up to him, Sarah took Pether by the arrum the way she would be houldin' him back, an' it's what she said to him: "Pether darlint, this is the juntleman I was tellin' ye about who has the foine daycint job of worruk for ye to do."

Pether glowered, dumbfounded, from one to the other. "Michael Callaghan, ye said! Well the Divil himself is in it if this long-legged rapparee is little Michael Callaghan!"

At those worruds, the dark man put his hand on his chist and bowed.

"I don't blame ye, Misther Muldowney, for bein' a thrifle surprised," he said, with a sootherin' smile like a peddler's, "but to tell ye the truth, your good wife and meself med a pleasant little bargain about ye."

The next minute, Pether was rubbing his eyes, thinkin' he was in a dhrame, for what did he see but his own wife, Sarah, go smirking up to the dark sthranger, an' whin she did that, he saw that same juntleman houlding out half the full of his hat of silver shillings to her, and whin she'd dhropped the last one of thim into her petticut pocket, it's what she said: "Yes, Pether asthore, the kind juntleman offered me three pounds tin for ye, an' I tuck it. An' he wouldn't give a penny more for ye, an' I wouldn't take a penny less."

"An' now, Misther Muldowney," says the juntleman, "since ye're paid and settled for, fair and honest, will ye plaze put on that shuit of clothes that's lyin' there on the ground beside ye, an' we'll be off together."

Looking to where Sattin pointed, Pether an' Sarah spied a shuit of clothes made of iron an' it sizzling red-hot in the grass with the flamin' sparks coming out of the armholes of the weskit.

Oh, thin wasn't Muldowney indignant. "So this is the foine, dhry, warrum job yez have for me, is it?" he says, nodding sarcastic toward the shuit. "Well, before I put on thim clothes, will somewan plaze expatiate to me whereabouts in the bounds of mathrimony it says that the faymale partner has the mortial right to sell her husband's four bones to Beelzebub?"

That pint of law sthruck Mrs. Muldowney and Sattin flat; an' for a minute they could only stand gawpin' at aich other.

"Would ye be goin' back on the bargin your wife med, shameless man? Would ye be makin' little of her givin worrud? Are ye a man or a mouse, I dunno?" he says.

"It'd be just like him to be makin' little of me," snuffled Mrs. Muldowney.

"An' if it comes to that," blustered Sattin, "if anyone was goin' to sell ye, will ye tell us who had a betther right to do it than yer own wife? You an' your pints of law! Didn't Joseph's brothers put sivin coats on him an' sell him for a mess of porridge to the Aygyptians? Answer me that," Sattin cried, triumphant.

At that, he swelled out his chist an' took a deep, proud breath till the stomachs of him glowed red like a furnace.

"Oh hasn't he the larning!" cried Sarah. "Why don't ye spake up, Pether Muldowney— haven't ye the face to say that Lanty and Cornalious, thim two bagabones of brothers of yours have more right to sell ye than I have?"

"How d'ye know they were goin' to sell me?" cried poor Pether. "An' I don't know anything about Joseph an' his sivin coats of colors an' his mess of porridge, but I do know that the price of three pounds tin on me head is belittlin' an' insultin' to a Muldowney. Ye shouldn't have taken a penny less nor six pounds for me, so ye shouldn't, he says, turnin' hot on Sarah. You an' your little three pounds tin! Sure, didn't Teddy Nolan only yisterday get foive pound eight for the fractious red cow that used to be jumpin' the hedges an' ateing the cabbages. To think that a Muldowney wouldn't bring as much as an ould cow," he said, halfcryin' with wexation.

While Pether was saying thim things, a new idee came to Sarah, an' it's what she said: "There's rayson in what he says, Sattin. Pether may not be worth six pounds tin, but you might well have guv it."

"He that has all the riches of the say at his disposhiall," chimed in Pether, raysentful.

Sattin stood lookin' from one til the other, his eyes bulgin' and his jaws dhroppin'.

"Thrue for ye, Pether," spoke up Sarah, bridlin'. "I'm beginning to think that the schaymer has chayted us."

"I'll not stir a foot with him," says Pether dayfiant, claspin' his two hands behind his back.

Sarah sidled over to her husband.

"Small blame to ye if ye don't," says she, "afther the way he's thrated us. Will ye give us the six pounds?" says she. "Don't go with him, Pether, if he belittles ye," she says.

"WHY," says Sattin, "you owdacious ringleader of a woman!"— an' the eyes of him were blazing with angry astonishment— "ye offered to sell him to me for sixpence. I heard ye well, though I purtended not to."

"I didn't!" shouted Mrs. Muldowney, her two fists on her hips.

"Ye did, ye runnygade!" roared Sattin, an' the breath came puffing out of him in blue smoke.

"Oh, vo! vo! Will ye listen to what he's afther callin' me! Oh, thin, Pether Muldowney," she says, turning bitter on her husband, "aren't ye the foine figure of a man to be standin' there in the middle of the road like a block of wood listening to this sheep-staylin', undherhanded, thin-shanked, antherntarian thrajucing yer own wedded wife, and you not lifting a finger till him! If ye wor worth two knots of sthraw, ye'd break ivery bone in his body!" says she, beginning to shumper.

I KNOW the saying is that to be quick in a quarrel is to be slow in a fight. One who is clever with his fists isn't handy with his tongue. Such a one is like cantankerous little Manus Hannigan, who makes the boast that he has started more fights and fought less himself than any other man in the Province of Munster. But it wasn't that way at all with Pether. Such a rayproach of backwardness never darkened the honor of any of the Muldowneys. The lad was ready with his fists and as proud of them as is the juty of every Tipperary man to be. So at the taunting of his wife, every drop of blood in Pether's body flared up intil his face, and what does he do but rowl up the wristbands of his jacket an' go squaring off at Sattin in the middle of the road.

"Before we begin," says Beelzebub— an' there was an anxious shadow came intil his eyes, for the Muldowneys as far back as anyone can raymimber were renowned gladiathors— "before we attack aich other," says he quick, side-steppin' an' backing away from Pether, "do you bear in mind that she thried to sell ye to me for sixpence."

Sarah hid her face in her apron, an' she wailed, "Oh, murdher asthore, will ye listen to that! I didn't, Pether! An' what's his repitation for voracity agin my repitation?"

At the mintion of his repitation, it was plain to be seen that Sattin winched.

"Will ye guv me back me three pounds tin, ye robber of the worruld?" says he, thrimbling with anger.

"Tut tut!" cried Sarah, tossin' her head. "We hear ducks talkin'. Didn't I kape me part of the bargain?" says she. "Isn't Pether there in the road ferninst ye? Why don't ye take him?" Beelzebub had no time for rayply, bekase Pether, with his two big fists flying around and round aich other, was dancing forward and back, and circling from the right to the left, and this way and that, whichever way Sattin twisted himself, an' all the time makin' false lunges at the middle of the black lad's chist.

"Howld still, Pether Muldowney, unfortunate man!" cried Sattin, all out of breath. "Do ye see Father Delaney comin' down the road behind ye?"

At that, Pether and Sarah turned to look, and as they did, crack! they heard the ground open, an' before they could twist their heads round again, Sattin was gone.

The two hayros stood a minute, gaping at the spot where the inimy of mankind had disappeared. Sarah was the first to speak, an' it's what she said, taking hould of Pether by the arrum: 'Come on home, avic! Did ye see how the conniving villyun thried to chate us? Oh, but ye're the brave lad! Give me yerself yit!"

With that, the two of them, arrum in arrum, as loving as a couple of turtledoves, wint down the road together, an' they never sthopped till they came to the big, flat stone by O'Hanrahan's spring; thin a sudden fear took the breath out of Sarah.

"I niver counted the shillings whin the ould targer handed thim to me," she says, "and how do I know whether he counted thim right? It'd be just loike one of his thricks not to."

"We'll sit right down here on the rock, an' we'll reckon thim together before we go a step furder," says Pether, anxious.

And so they did. And Sarah made a wide lap to hould the money, but with her hand over her pocket, she hesitated a moment, for her mind misgave her that something was wrong. An' sure enough, the two poor crachures got a bad turn, for whin Sarah pulled out a handful of the money, it wasn't money at all, at all, that was in it, but only a fistful of bits of broken glass. An' whin she had her pocket emptied, the sorra thing was there but a lap full of broken bottles.

While the pair of thim, blazin' with anger, sat staring at aich other with faces red as a couple of thrumpeters, far down the road split the wild screech of a laugh.

"D'ye heard him there?" whuspered Sarah. "Oh, the dasayver of the worruld! D'ye think if ye were to slip back, ye might ketch him, Pether?"

Pether shook his head, and a throubled frown wrinkled his forehead.

"I misdoubt it," says he, "an' besides, I was just thinkin' what'll become of us all, at all whin he ketches the both of us on the day of judgment. I hate to be thinkin' of it," he says.

"Oh ho, have no fear, Pether avic," says Sarah, soothin'. "I've hit on a jewel of a schayme that'll break the black heart of him, an' it's this: Do you Pether asthore, lave off the onscrutableness an' answer me back once in a while, an' as for meself, you'll niver hear anither crass worrud out of me two lips till the day I'm buried, onless ye dayserve it. An' now, Mr. Sattin, what d'ye think of that?" says she, shakin' her fist down the road.

Pether gave his knee a thraymendous slap. "Oh, ye phaynix of a woman!" says he. Wid that, he laned over an' guv her a kiss on the lips that might have been heard three fields away.

"That's the first in fufteen years," says he, "but it'll not be the last by any manner of manes; bekase I think the Divil niver comes betwixt a man an' his wife tell they lave off kissin' aich other."

"Arrah, go on, ye rogue!" says Sarah, smilin' an' givin' him a poke wid her elbow. "Come along home now; I'll put on the kettle, an' we'll begin all over again from this day out."

And they riz up thin and started for home, but afther a step or two, Pether turned and shook his fist down the road.

"Oh, aren't ye the outraygeous, chaytin', dispectable villyun!" he shouted. "No, I mane dayspictory," he corrected himself.

"Ye never said 'dayspictable' at all," soothed his wife. "Ye said 'dayspictatory' the first time ye mintioned it," she says.

There's many a couple believe that when they've had a bad quarrel, they're ruined and kilt forever. Only yestherday morning, Bridget Cronin, twistin' up her hair with thremblin' fingers, rushes over to me own wife and she says, savage, "I'm going over to me own mother's house and take the childher. I'll not live another day undher the same roof with Marty," she rages.

"Why, thin, what murthering thransaction has poor Marty done?" asks me wife, wondhersthruck, for Marty is the broth of a lad.

"Why, this avening, the baby was peevish, and by accident, I let the stirabout scorch in the pot and the petatie cake burn a bit in the ashes. An' what do ye think he says to me at last? Why, that he'd betther be bringing his own mother over to tache me how to manage. He said that, Mrs. Murtaugh, an' all I've done for that man! Do ye think I ought to lave two of the childher with him? He's so fond of Eileen, and he'll be that lonesome avenin's," she says, beginning to cry. "I wisht I was dead; thin he'd see," she sobbed.

And Marty stood inside the byre, leaning on his arrums over the stone wall, glooming down intil the road with a face on him as if he wor looking at thim shoveling clay down on his own coffin, whin ould Mordacai Cannon, hobbling up, axed him, "Is there anyone sick in the house, Marty?"

"No, it's a dale worse nor sickness," mourned Marty. "Sickness can be cured," he says, lifting open jaws up to the sky. "Bridget has just tould me she didn't love me, an' would hate the ground I'd walk on till she died. If it warn't for the childher, I wouldn't care a rap what happened to me."

And Mordacai caught him by the sleeve and led him, shamefaced, intil the house and thin hobbled over and led Bridget, crying, intil the house, an' he waited a minute till he saw the two of them standing houlding aich other tight in the middle of the kitchen, and he went down the lane on his shaky legs, chucklin' to himself. "They wor wantin' to die!" he crowed.

Whin Marty, fifteen minutes afther, went out into the fields, light as a skylark, two long tear sthreaks ran, the one on ayther side of his nose, the length of his face.

Sure, isn't it the rain that sweetens the green-growing world, and that's the way it is, yer honor. Sure, afther a quarrel, all the couple nade do is to raymimber that love is worth more than pride. I meself heard a middle-aged, sinsible-looking man sitting in this same jaunting car, boasting that he and his wife never had a cross word in all their lives. "God pity ye," says I.

For I knew it's little happiness two could have living together all their lives who had as little deep feeling one for the other as never to touch a sensitive narve.

So, although the Muldowneys rayformed entirely, still and all they had their fallin's out. Only Sarah never scolded Pether afther that day, except when she thought he dayserved it, and undher them sarcumstances, all sensible wives should do that same, and whin she did begin on her husband, she 'rated him in a hot-tempered, outspoke tongue-lashin' way, as was her natural ordinary jooty.

As for Pether, whether he dayserved the lambasting he got or not, he never again met it with smirks an' smilin's an' shrugs an' onscrutableness, but with beggings off an' excuses an' barefaced daynials, as any level-headed, sinsible, wife-fearing husband is expected to do, and if they didn't live peaceable all the days of their lives afther, at any rate, they lived happy and continted.

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15: The Exalted Omega

Arthur Machen

Arthur Llewellyn Jones, 1863-1947

In: *The Children of the Pool and Other Stories*, 1936

ONE DARKENING autumn evening, not long ago, a man stopped a moment in his quarter-deck walk up and down his sitting-room in Gray's Inn Square and gazed out of the window at the trees, tossing and restless before the west wind, with a look of vague perplexity, in which there was a slight hint of uneasiness. Not more than a hint; it was rather the air of a man who is confronted by a minor difficulty or obstacle in some little plans he is making, or in the train of thought he is following; and to be precise, with J.F. Mansel, the personage in question, it was hardly so large a matter as that. The fact was that Mansel had been a good deal struck by an odd book he had once read, the "Adventure" of two English ladies in the gardens of Versailles. Most people, I suppose, have read the book in question, and have puzzled their heads over it, and tried to find some plausible explanation of its story: a day in the French Revolution returning over the gulf of years; the image of the lady sketching in the garden, the lady who must have been Mary Antoinette, the hurrying messengers, perturbed footmen, stolid gardeners; all, as it appeared, going about their affairs, quiet or unquiet, as they had gone about them on that October day in 1789.

But Mansel was not thinking, as he stared out of the window, of the men and women whose apparitions, as it seemed, had been called up to puzzle the two scholastic Englishwomen and their readers. For the moment, it was not the ghostly people, but the ghostly landscape of the vision— or whatever it was— that slightly troubled him. He recollected that either Miss Moberly or Miss Jourdain— or was it both ladies?— had noted at the time of the strange experience, as they walked by woods and groves that are not marked in the modern maps of Versailles, since they have long ceased to exist, that the scene had something unusual in its aspect, that the trees were more like the pictured trees in a tapestry, objects on the flat, than the stout growth of the common wood. And, as it happened, Mansel looking out of his window on that familiar scene— the plane trees of the Inn Garden, and the turf beneath, and a glimpse here and there of Raymond Buildings on the other side of the lawn— was reminded of the Versailles manifestation. There was, he hesitated, something not altogether solid and satisfactory in the sight before him. It looked, he felt, as though leafage and tree trunks, green turf and grey bricks of Raymond Buildings wavered together, as he had seen vistas and towers wavering on the theatre backcloth, in the old days when things, perhaps, were generally more cheerful, and he had been used to go to the play. He glanced again, and doubtfully supposed it was all right, because it must be all right; and then turned from the

window to the fireplace, and sat down in the ugly, comfortable arm-chair, which he had brought up from his old home in the west, quite a long time ago. There was a little round table beside the chair, one of those papier mâché pieces of the 'thirties and 'forties, that people are beginning to esteem curious. It had a painting of woods, and a lake, and distant mountains on it, with an inlay of mother-of-pearl and a cusped and gilded edge. It had been in his Aunt Eleanor's drawing-room at the Garth. Aunt Eleanor's work-box usually stood on it, and obstructed the view of the painted scene, somewhat to the distress of Johnny— as they called him then. He wanted to stand by the gleaming lake, where the sunset light shone on the water through a cleft in the trees. He desired also to track a path— he saw the entrance and the beginning of it— that wound through the dark, rich wood; there to gather unknown purple flowers that drooped in the shade, and at last, perhaps, to come out and ascend the shining mountain-tops: which he called The Land that is Very Far Off.

The work-box had vanished long ago; he thought that Cousin Emma had taken it away with her after the funeral; and when Emma died thirty— or forty?— years ago, there had been a sale and everything was scattered. He rather missed the work-box now, and wished he had secured it; but Durham was a long journey. There was a book on the table, the *Secret Counsels of a Certain Exile.* He laid a hand on it to take it up, but let it stay beside the lake, and sat back in his chair, and half-dozed and half-waked, and scarcely distinguished between a broken dream and a confused waking. Outside, the September evening darkened, and the leaves stilled as the west wind sank to peace. The jangle of the 'buses, the cry of the newsboys, the traffic of Theobald's Road, sounded very faintly; now and again there was a dull thud as the last clerks to go banged the outer doors of the lawyers' offices on the stairs. The place grew heavy with the silence, and the lamps began to flicker in the square.

Mansel lay back in the soft comfort of his arm-chair. When he woke, or half-woke, he found his room dark about him, and didn't trouble to light the candles— he had never used gas or electricity in his rooms. He would soon get up and light two candles on the mantel-shelf; but, as he considered, there was nothing particular to do, and he might have supper instead of dinner; there was a 'bus that would take him from the corner of Theobald's Road down to Shaftesbury Avenue. He thought of the jolly hours when, perhaps, "things had been more cheerful," long ago, soon after he had come to live in the inn: great evenings at the Café de l'Europe in its golden days. Indeed; why shouldn't he go there to-night for his supper? It might be, likely enough, that he might meet Tom, or Dick, or Harry there; or, perhaps, all three of them; and the old quartet would be assembled again, and the old jokes and passwords recalled, and the band in its balcony would play the tunes from *The Belle of New York*. The recollection merged into a dream: there he was at the table in the corner, with

his old friends about him, and nothing said about his long absence, and the band blared away as in the merry time. There was the question of a dream within the dream. For as he sat and talked and laughed with his friends: it suddenly struck him that, after all, it was not as it had been: there was a sad and heavy background, or a cloud that drifted across his happiness, that he had known nothing of long ago. Let go: but, what if he had dreamed all those years of heaviness, as he slept in his chair in the inn? They had never been, perhaps; he had met Tom, and Dick, and Harry last night, and he would meet them to-morrow. He shook his head, as if to drive the shadow away, and rattled the lid of his *krug*, and left it open, to show the waiter that he wanted more Munich beer. He had quite forgotten that Tom, and Dick, and Harry had been dead for years, that friendship had failed before life failed; and that the Café de l'Europe had closed its doors twenty years before.

The scene of the café had dissolved, and formless sleep had come heavily upon him, when he started up, roused by a woman's voice, raw and raucous. As he woke, he heard the words:

"Quiet? Mahvlessly quiet, I'm sure. In fact, I should call it bloody quiet." She shrieked like a macaw.

The voice burst through his head, like an express train whirling and thundering through a station. He staggered up out of his chair, and stared, distraught, about him. For a moment, swift and gone as a flash, though he had not lit those candles after all, the room seemed glaring bright, and all disturbed and quaking, till his chairs and tables and bookcases shivered and settled down into their accustomed places. They were his chairs and tables? The garden was in moonlight; and he crept cautiously about the room, and satisfied himself that each piece was in its accustomed place.

MANSEL had long been aware that the sharp outlines of life and time and daily event were becoming blurred and indistinct for him. He was apt, he knew quite well, to confuse the years and those who passed through them. He would assign in thought this or that friend to a year long before the time when the two first met; he would think of men talking together who, in fact, had never encountered; a whole group of interests were antedated or postdated. Edwardians wandered back into the Victorian years and sometimes a young countryman of his boyhood in the west would stray into the café and seem familiar with the place and with those other men whom he had never met, or even heard of. And, then, Mansel would question himself: "After all, wasn't there a night when Vaughan joined us and came up to my rooms afterwards? He did come up to town once, I'm sure. Or, did I dream it all?" He was never quite sure. He felt that his lonely habit and silent days were more and more closing in upon him like a cloud; but by the time he had realised the danger— if it were a

danger— his resolution and will to live clearly and in the light of the day had weakened and dissolved. Once or twice, old friends had looked him up and tried to rouse him and to renew laughter and life within him. But it would not do. Mansel remembered very well who they were, or rather, who they had been; for they had become strangers, or ghosts that spoke of ghostly meetings that had lost all savour. The talk would die down, the man would feel his cheerful intent sink away from him, and go as quickly as he could, and hardly summon a conventional smile as Mansel closed his outer door.

"Poor Mansel!" he might say afterwards. "I could do nothing with him. He's not interested in anything. I tried him with the sort of talk that used to set him on fire; but no good. He might as well be dead, it seems to me."

So, one by one, his friends dropped away and left him alone, wondering what had happened to dry up all the springs of joy. Indeed, the question was an obscure one. There had been no tragedy, no violent disappointment or loss, no specific malady of mind or body, to be ascertained, defined, and encountered with remedies. He had been conscious of a savour gradually departing from the whole body of life, so that a grave book or a gay gathering had become alike flat and meaningless. Walking up and down his rooms, laying down the law, arguing, growing heated about the essence of poetry or the demerits of Meredith: that had been fine, relishing sport once on a time: and now it was nothing. He would look at old note-books he had filled, and wonder what possessed him to write down all those futilities. And then; the last cheerful evening that he had attempted with his old friends, who drank a little and laughed a great deal; that held no cheerfulness for Mansel. He asked with Johnson: "Where's the merriment?" and stole away home very sadly, and sat alone in the dark room. And one of these old friends talking to another, said: "I don't know what's happened to Mansel. He may have sinned against the light or he may be suffering from some obscure form of liver. I feel sure he hasn't taken to drinking methylated."

MANSEL was a good deal vexed with that sudden shriek of a woman's voice that had made him start up from his dreams and drowsy recollections. He could not make it out. There was nobody in any one of his three rooms; he was sure of that. He found his outer door shut fast. The only other person to have a key was his laundress, and she only came in the morning. Besides; she did not talk like that. Her voice was soft and heavy and suety; and she was particular as to what she said, in the presence of her clients, at all events. The voice could not have come across the landing; where the rooms were inhabited by another lonely bachelor. It might have been somebody wandering about the place, looking for rooms, and standing on the landing itself. There was certainly that small opening contrived in the wall, by the door, to enable the tenant, summoned by a knock,

to stand in the darkness and inspect his caller, displayed in the light of the window or the lamp. The raucous cry that had roused him might, perhaps, have penetrated through the hole in the wall. He hoped that no such company might come about his stairs again.

But here he was disappointed. Again and again, and constantly, his journeys into the past, and dreams and meditations were broken by a hubbub of voices, shouts of laughter, always accompanied by that glare of light in the moment of awakening, the sense of disturbance and confusion in the objects about him. He was perplexed and frightened, and wondered whether he were going mad, for it was clear that there was no ordinary explanation of the strange trouble. He thought of consulting a doctor, but he knew he could never summon up the resolution for such an encounter. And so he grew into the sense of being hemmed about by these dismal visitants, creatures, he supposed, of his own morbid fancies or diseased body. They were not real; he was sure of that. In the darkness of the night, as he came up from the wood of the purple flowers, and stood in the sunlight on a shining, happy hill— perhaps the true Land that was Very Far Off— a shriek of laughter would shatter his dreams, and he would start up in terror, and his gloomy bedroom would be ablaze.

And, then, the trouble began to beset his day-dreams in another form, without the violence of the awaking. He heard the woman, her voice subdued, though it still grated on his ears, murmuring, murmuring, and a gruff man's tones, assenting or objecting or denying. It would seem that this muffled talk went on, day after day, night after night; and by degrees Mansel got the impression that he was listening to the plot of a deadly business. There were mysterious allusions to "a bottle party," which conveyed nothing to him; and someone called "Cousin Jerome" was to get a drink from the right bottle; and the man's voice, answering, it seemed, a question, said "eighty thousand at least, perhaps more." And, then, again the words came: "No danger, no danger. No weed killer for me, no fly-papers, or any damn childish tricks of that sort. You have only to hang the leg of mutton long enough; and the juice of it will have no taste or smell or colour. The place will be all shut while we are away in the country. If anything gets through closed doors and windows; I daresay rats die under the floor now and then."

And one… night or day, he could hardly tell which; as if the low voice were speaking in his very ear: "Old Mansel will never tell." And then they laughed, quite quietly for once: and those five words struck through his soul with unutterable horror.

He thought that one misty evening he must have left his rooms and wandered out of the inn to escape that instant horror that beset him. He could not tell the way he took, but he thought he remembered crossing a bridge, and straying on through unknown places, till he found himself in a maze of streets

almost deserted; streets of little houses; dismal, monotonous, and yet pretentious. There was one house with a great green bush growing up from the area, and here he stopped, and somehow found himself within it. He was in a small room on the ground floor; a shabby and flashy room with flaring, foolish ornaments above the empty grate, and a gaudy linoleum on the floor. At the gimcrack table there sat a party of seven people, there were six men and a woman; three on each side; and at one end, a stout, dark, middle-aged woman, with black and greasy hair elaborately done in a sort of structure on top of her head. She wore a black and shiny and belaced dress, shabby and pretentious like all else in that place. The others bent their heads in an attitude of profound attention; the woman at the head of the table seemed to gaze before her, as if she saw nothing. She held up her hands in the Jewish attitude of prayer; and began to sway gently to and fro. The light was dim, for there was only one gas jet burning, and that was turned low, but Mansel noted big rings studded with apparent emeralds, rubies, and diamonds thick on her fingers. One of the men at the table got up and sat down again, and a gramophone began to discourse, "Abide With Me."

The dark woman spoke in a thick, unctuous voice:

"I get a message for Sam. Is there anyone here named Samuel?"

A man looked up eagerly, and stuttered, as he answered.

"I haven't been called Samuel since I was a nipper nine years old. My name is Albert Samuel Morton, right enough, but I always call myself Albert Morton. Who can it be?"

"I get a message for Sam. Ask him if he remembers Aunt Clara. Clara? Clara? I am not certain about this name."

"It's not Clara," said the man, excitedly. "I had an Aunt Sarah, all right."

"It comes through clearly now. Ask him if he remembers his Aunt Sarah, and her china dogs."

"So she had!" exclaimed the man. "On her mantelpiece in the parlour. I can remember them. It's wonderful."

"The message says: 'Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves!'"

"That's Aunt Sarah, right enough!" The man bubbled with amazement and delight. "Why, that was a regular saying of hers. My dad always called her 'Saving Sarah'! Isn't it wonderful? Well, I'm glad to think she's not forgotten me."

There were more messages of much the same character. Most of them seemed to find an echo in the breasts of those present. There was one woman who could not remember any "Cousin Joshua," who seemed distressed about some matter which he said she would understand. The woman reflected, and said: No. No, she couldn't recollect any Cousin Joshua.

"Perhaps," said the lady at the head of the table, "he died when you were very young. There may have been something painful, which prevented his friends talking about him."

The woman's face was blank; then she started slightly, and kept silence; looking a little frightened.

There was a pause. The gramophone had run down. The dark woman had seemed to deliver her last message with a certain difficulty. Her voice faltered; she paled through her paint. There was silence in the dim room.

The woman shuddered as if an electric shock had passed through her. She shook from head to foot. Her face was twisted all awry. And then she suddenly bent forward, and began to scribble with a pencil on a piece of paper that lay on the table before her. Her crooked face was all ghastly and twitching, as she rather struck with the pencil than wrote; and in a few seconds, it seemed, there was a harsh noise in her throat, and she fell sideways from her chair to the floor, in some kind of fit or seizure, that was very dreadful to behold.

The clients started in alarm from their places. Someone turned up the gas, and the two women of the party approached the epileptic fearfully. A bell was rung, and a timid, shadowy little man came running upstairs and looked into the room, a sluttish servant following on his heels. Two or three of the party carried out the dark woman, still struggling and foaming. One of those who was left picked up the paper that had fallen to the floor. He scanned it curiously under the gas, now flaring.

"You can't get much out of that," he said, in a disappointed tone. "A lot of marks that don't look as if they meant anything, and something about 'grows my spirit,' and more marks. The fit was on her, no doubt."

He laid down the paper on the table, and turned to go.

Mansel, vague as usual, supposed he must have found his way out with the rest of the party. No doubt, he mused and wondered over the strange ending of the evening as he made his way back to the inn, and took no note of the streets through which he passed; for his next impression was of the familiar room. It was silent at first; and then he caught once more the mutter of those evil voices.

ii

THERE CAN be no doubt, I am afraid, that Mrs. Ladislaw sometimes cheated. Her mediumship had often been assailed, and not merely by the incredulous outsiders who take a pleasure in turning on their torches at inopportune moments, and in grasping at ectoplasm and giving it another name. Eminent Spiritualists had exposed her in their papers. It is true, that other eminent Spiritualists had at first taken her part, and had called for justice and for the spirit of English fair play. There had been the spirit paintings, for example, which

were supposed to blaze out suddenly on a blank sheet of paper. It seemed alright at first. There was the paper laying white and virgin, on the table before Mrs. Ladislaw; and half a dozen coloured chalks beside it. She would lay a large, fat hand upon it and the chalks, and go into a mild trance; then, the hand was lifted, and a glowing work of art appeared on the page. But an elderly and honoured Spiritualist first of all recognised the picture submitted to him as an indifferent copy of a coloured plate that had appeared in a Christmas Number many years before. There was a controversy about this in the *Metapsychical Review* and in *Daybreak.* It was pointed out that the subject matter of the picture was beside the point; the question was how had it appeared on a piece of blank paper in the course of a few seconds. How, if not through the agency of Red Bull, Mrs. Ladislaw's control? This question was answered before long in a sense which seemed to make the aid of Red Bull superfluous and unnecessary. Then, there were questions on slips of paper, which were placed in a casket, and duly sealed by one of the sitters, who had brought with him an old armorial signet ring, with an elaborate coat engraved on it. At the next séance, the casket was passed round, and it was clear that the seal had not been tampered with in any way. It was then solemnly broken by the owner of the jewel; and inside the box, there were the slips of paper with the questions, and answers, more or less coherent, written beneath in scrawling, untidy script. This interesting manifestation was repeated several times and made a considerable impression. It seemed quite clear that on each occasion the seal was absolutely undisturbed; and people of some intelligence were beginning to be interested, when one of these thought of turning the mysterious casket upside down, and discovered the secret in the construction of the bottom of the box. It slid open, in response to judicious pressure on one side of the four knobs or feet on which it rested. So, on the whole, it was felt in the higher circles of Spiritualism that Mrs. Ladislaw must be dropped; that she must be seen no more at the College of Research, or at the Spiritualist Institute.

So she carried on her business in some obscure street in South London, and, on the whole, satisfied her local clients very well. They were not critical; they had never heard of the *Metapsychical Review*, they accepted the messages they received, and when the lights were turned quite out, they enjoyed the marvellous things that happened. None of them carried an electric torch to the dark seance; none of them raised objections if the spirit of a Roman Cardinal uttered the blessed word "Benedictine." So Mrs. Ladislaw sank to the lower levels of necromantic culture, and was heard of no more amongst literate Spiritualists. And yet, a few who had seen her in her more prosperous days maintained that, in spite of all, there was something strange about the woman, something not altogether explicable. They confessed that she was, beyond doubt, an arrant cheat: "there can be no doubt that Eusapia Palladino cheated,

and cheated almost openly at times," one of them reminded me, and he went on: "Mrs. Ladislaw's childish tricks don't deceive me for a moment. They were old tricks that were going in the 'sixties, as you can see if you look up the newspaper files of the time. They were exposed then, and were forgotten, and this woman, whose mother may have been in the business for anything I know, brought them up again, and ran them till they were exposed a second time. But it wasn't all cheating; not quite all. I remember sitting with her at the Institute, seven or eight years ago. It was a summer afternoon, and the seance room was in full light. There were about a dozen people there. Mrs. Ladislaw was doing the Red Bull act. She had passed round the half-sheet of note-paper that was to show the picture in a minute or two, so that everybody might see that it was absolutely blank and clean. It went round from hand to hand, and people looked at it hard, and held it up to the light, and felt the texture of the paper to be sure that it was one piece, not two. One man pulled a magnifying-glass from his pocket, and went over the surface inch by inch. Two or three were trying what they could make of the coloured chalks, turning them over, and weighing them in their hands: I don't know what they thought that would do, I am sure. I wasn't bothering about the chalks or the paper myself, you see, because I know how it is done.

"Anyhow: pretty well everybody was busy investigating and testing and the rest of it, with their eyes fixed on the table, or the paper going its round, and two or three of them were arguing in low voices about the fluidity of matter.

"You don't know Séance Room 5 at the Institute? Well, the table runs down the room between the fireplace and the window. I was sitting half-way down with my back to the fire-place. I was looking at Mrs. Ladislaw, dark and greasy, who was sitting straight up with her fat hands flat on the table before her. She was doing the dignified and impassive very fairly well: presently, as I knew, when those keen fellows had finished investigating, she would begin her trick.

"Her face changed. She turned her head a little, and I saw her staring at the wall behind me. She went white. Her mouth dropped open. She was glaring with terror at something that was happening at the back of my head. Naturally, I looked round to see what had frightened the woman.

"In the middle of the mantelshelf behind me was one of those infernal Greek Temple clocks, in black and green marble, with rows of pillars and gilding where it had no business; an ugly, heavy thing. It was at this clock that Mrs. Ladislaw was staring: frozen with fright. And then I saw the clock rise high from the mantelpiece and sail gently down onto the floor. Mrs. Ladislaw fell forward with her face on the table, in a faint.

"The séance broke up in confusion. The women looked after Mrs. Ladislaw. In the process, the picture that was to have appeared if things had gone better fluttered from somewhere onto the floor, and there was some argument as to

what this proved. I got up, and looked at the clock, which was sitting on the carpet. I lifted it up— heavy goods— and put it back in its place. No; no wire, or thread, or anything of the sort, and if there had been, it wouldn't have accounted for anything. If that lumping thing had been twitched from the mantelpiece, it would have fallen with a crash. It *sailed* down, quite gently, like a feather. You can call it a Poltergeist case, if you think that makes it any clearer. I don't. I don't know how in the least it was done. But, as I was saying, I've always thought since then that there was something odd about the old swindler that she didn't understand herself. I never saw anybody look so frightened as she did."

It is to be assumed that this tinge of interest in "the old swindler" led this cautious and sceptical investigator of obscure things to keep in some sort of touch with her down in the lower levels to which she had drifted. Anyhow, it was through this man, Welling, that I was made acquainted with a very queer business, in which Mrs. Ladislaw played a part— a principal part perhaps it might be called, but I don't know about that.

A month or so before, Welling had sent me a singular script, an example, as he said, of what is called "automatic writing." A lady living in a small town in Somerset had discovered that she possessed this gift. She had sat down at her desk with pencil and paper before her, intending to make a list of goods she required from the grocer. She took the pencil in her hand, and, as she declared, it "ran away with her," and proceeded to scrawl and scribble away at a great rate. The slip of paper was soon exhausted, Miss Tuke supplied another, and again the pencil raced away. It had covered six or seven sheets before the impulse or whatever it is ceased. And this had happened several times when Miss Tuke communicated with my acquaintance, Welling, and asked his opinion: should she persist, or resist the impulse when it next occurred?

"I told her," said Welling, "to go on if she liked; provided she regarded it as a parlour game, without any consequence, and quite devoid of any sort of authority. The scripts? Oh, the usual thing: pious exclamations— I understand Miss Tuke is a Wesleyan— and moral maxims, and all sorts of vagueness, and words running into each other, and some repeated three or four times. But this last thing she sent me is a bit of a curiosity; it seems to be Latin tied into knots. I haven't time to disentangle them. But the lady assures me that she doesn't understand it, as she knows no language but her own."

I took the slip home, and found it was much as Welling said: scraps of Latin that read as if they had been taken down from dictation by somebody ignorant of Latin. I corrected the text without much difficulty, and it gave up a number of admirable sentences that might have been extracted from the Fathers: "Jordan was driven back that Israel might enter the land of promise: in like manner it is necessary that the river of our sins be turned back if we would come into that

holy land of our inheritance": and a good deal more in that vein. How Miss Tuke came by it all, we never knew. I gathered from Welling that there was no reason to doubt her word, that she knew no Latin. He was inclined to think that she had read it all without understanding it when she was a child, and that it had been preserved, imperfectly enough, in her subconscious memory: a guess, nothing more. And soon after, Welling told me that Miss Tuke had written to him to say that she had given up her "sittings" with pencil and paper, as she thought it was an unsuitable employment for a middle-aged woman.

And all this leads up to something much more significant; at least, so it strikes me. One day, not long ago, Welling called on me, and began at once on Miss Tuke's Latin script.

"You know how you made sense of that stuff. Well, look here. This is worse, and I wonder whether you will be able to make anything of it. Here you are; see what you can do." And he handed me a sheet of paper that gave the effect of a child's scribble.

"And what is one to make of that trident thing or whatever it is?" He was evidently a good deal interested. And I was more than interested when I saw the device which he had called "that trident thing."

It was the oddest looking document. At the head of the paper, the word "quotient" was repeated six times. Then came "poison" scrawled in large, loose letters. Then the word "ore" was written twice, followed by "or," and then "oar" was written three times. Then "quite" and finally, the words, "grows my spirit."

It was not difficult. It was, clearly, an attempt at a familiar phrase in *Hamlet*, "the potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit"; written, apparently, by a person in delirium. "Quotient" for "potent" was odd; but there were similar mistakes in the more subdued scripts of Miss Tuke: the effect being, as I noted in some of her communications, that of a dictation taken down by somebody who failed to catch the exact sound of individual words, and had no notion of the meaning of the complete sentence.

But all this was a very minor matter. It was the symbol that I found exciting. It was dashed all over the paper, sometimes obscuring the writing. It was not exactly a trident. I should have described it as a small Greek omega, at the end of a stick. The two outer lines of the letter were curved inwardly; the middle line, which in a trident is equal in length to the others, was barely indicated. The "stick," as I have called it, was about an inch and a half long.

"Now," I said to Welling, "would you tell me about it, and where it comes from?"

"Well, it's rather queer. You remember me talking to you about that medium, Mrs. Ladislaw, and the clock business?

"Well, for that reason I kept something of an eye on her doings. You know she's been down in the world some time now. She lives somewhere in

Stockwell, and has séances there, and makes what she can; the old game, the old tricks. There was one of these séances a week ago; and people were getting messages from Aunt This and Uncle That, and they were satisfied, and everything was going all right, when quite suddenly, Mrs. Ladislaw began to twist her face about and scribble away on this bit of paper. And then she went into a fit, and a pretty bad one. A man I know was there, and brought this along, thinking it might interest me. What do you think of it?"

I told him that, apart from the *Hamlet* quotation, there were some interesting points that I should like to go into at leisure. I promised to let him know if there were anything of real consequence involved, and so sent him on his way.

IT WAS the omega mark that concerned me. About twenty-five years ago, I was living in Verulam Buildings, Gray's Inn. In summer, it was often my habit to take a turn about the Square, on fine nights, after the gates were shut; and I soon became aware of a small nocturnal population, who were never seen about the inn at daytime. There were three of four— perhaps five or six— of them; and they prowled in a hapless, aimless, hesitating fashion; stopping now and then and looking vaguely about them, and then moving on, dragging one foot slowly after another. They never spoke to each other, or seemed aware of one another in any sort of way. It is a race that has long been familiar in the Inns of Court. Dickens, who knew all about them, thought that it was the gloom and isolation of the sets of the inns that had reduced them to their dismal apathy and misery. It may be so, or it is possible that the solemn air of antiquity and retirement in the heart of London appeals to men of retired and melancholy habit. I have been long absent from the courts and squares and buildings, and I do not know whether the silent men still resort in these places.

It was an accident that introduced me to one of them. One June night, about ten o'clock, when the sky was still luminous, I was strolling round the Square, and was just passing one of the brotherhood of the night, when he slipped on something on the pavement, and fell sideways, very awkwardly. I helped him up at once, and put him on his feet, and he gave a cry of pain as I did so. He had sprained or strained his ankle muscle, and was evidently in anguish when he tried to set the foot on the ground. I told him to lean on me, and I would see him home. He said his name was Mansel, and he gave me his number; one of the top sets on the west side of the Square. I got him up the stairs with a good deal of difficulty, took his key and supported him to his arm-chair by the fire-place. Then I suggested fetching the doctor from Warwick Place; but he wouldn't hear of that. "We will see how it feels after a good night's rest. I don't like sending for the doctor; you never know what they may say."

I expressed my doubts as to the effects of the night's rest, and proposed that I should leave him in his candle-lit room.

"I wish you would sit down and keep me company for an hour, if you can spare the time. Light your pipe— I've seen you smoking in the square— and if you don't mind going to that cupboard, I think you'll find some whiskey there, and glasses, and a jug of water."

The whiskey bottle was unopened and dusty, and I searched at his direction in a drawer for the corkscrew. I set a glass beside him, and was about to pour, when he checked me with a gesture, and a "help yourself." And then, relenting, he said: "I think I will have a little to-night. I am still feeling rather shaky." But he stopped me when about a tablespoonful had gone into the glass, and added water largely, and so made himself a ghostly and ineffectual drink.

We began to talk. He told me he had been living in the inn for four or five years; he didn't seem certain as to the precise duration of his residence.

"One gets a little vague, don't you think, living in these old rooms, looking down on the trees," he apologised, "and, somehow, I have rather fallen out of the way of seeing people, and getting about, and so forth, and so forth. One drifts along from day to day, rather sluggishly and ineffectually, I'm afraid … and, the edges get dulled, I suppose."

He was a man in the early or middle thirties by his looks: a slight, dark man, with small features, and nothing very distinctive or distinguished about him.

He was difficult to talk to. He never read the papers, he told me. He spoke with a glint of fervour about his old home in the west, of waterbrooks in still hidden valleys, of the wild outlands where no one came, of the sun shining on the bracken on the mountain-side, of the grove of ash trees and their magic.

"*Hic vox sine clamore sonat; hic saltat et cantat chorus nympharum eternus*." He spoke as if he were quoting some familiar text.

He drifted on, in his own terms, rather sluggishly and ineffectually. I noted that book-cases, well filled, took up a great part of the wall space.

"You have at least good company there," I said, pointing to the shelves.

"Well, I have read a good deal in my time. Yes; I used to be a considerable reader— of a very unsystematic kind, I may say. I never read a book that I didn't want to read. Nobody shall shove books down my throat…. But I find myself losing the habit of reading; I can't get the relish that I used to find in it. What did I say just now? The edges are dulled…. When a man finds *Tristram Shandy* flat, you know? I remember when I first read it, and for long after that, it was pure sorcery to me; a spell, a spell."

He took up the book from the little table by his chair, and handed it to me as if in illustration of what he had just said. It was an early nineteenth century edition, rather shabbily printed.

I turned over the leaves of the great fantasy, and something on the fly-leaf caught my attention: an odd mark or symbol; the mark that I have described as an omega on a stick. We talked a little longer, and then I left him, with the hope that he might find the remedy of a night's rest efficient in the cure of the twisted ankle. He looked a disconsolate figure in his chair in the dim room, with the misty night in the plane trees of the inn garden as a background.

The next day my business took me up north, among the singing voices of Northumberland. I was away for nearly a week, and when I got back there were evening engagements and amusements to occupy me. I must have been ten days before leisure and a pale green sky led me to take my stroll about the Square. Three or four of the usual nocturnal company were dawdling and creeping round the pavement in the usual manner; but there was no sign of Mansel. I knew it would be of no use to ask about him from these men; it was not likely that any one of them would know his name. I went up his stair, and knocked at the black door. There was no reply, no sound. I waited and knocked again and louder: still, nothing. For a third time I beat my summons, and then there were slow footsteps sounding along the passage. The door was opened; and there stood Mansel, carrying a candle; and the light of it showed a face of strong distaste for the caller; for any caller. But he relaxed a little when he saw me, and asked me to follow him. He was still limping from the injury of ten days before. No doubt, he had tried neither care nor cure.

"It hasn't troubled me much," he remarked when we sat down. "If I had wanted to get about it would have been tiresome, I daresay. But then, I never do want to get about. I hardly ever go beyond the inn gates. I have seen it all, I don't want to see it again."

He spoke a little of his reading, which had become, he repeated, distasteful to him.

"You get to the end of it all," he murmured. "Or, so I have found. Everywhere, you come to a blank wall. Every path and track you take ends with a blank wall. Not read everything? No indeed; I have neglected vast deserts of dullness. Would you advise me to try Mommsen, or Professor Freeman, or Darwin? Science deals with surfaces; what have I to do with surfaces?"

—I was saying that Dickens knew about the solitaries of the Inns of Court. As Mansel was talking his weary nonsense, about coming to the end of everything, of being brought up by a blank wall whatever track he took, I was reminded very strongly of Mr. Parkle's friend in "Chambers."

One dry hot autumn evening at twilight, this man, being then turned of fifty, looked in upon Parkle in his usual lounging way, with his cigar in his mouth as usual, and said: "I am going out of town." As he never went out of town Parkle said: "Oh, indeed! At last?" "Yes," says he, "at last. For what is a man to do? London is so small! If you go west, you come to Hounslow. If you go east, you

come to Bow. If you go south, there's Brixton or Norwood. If you go north, you can't get rid of Barnet."

It struck me as odd that two such different people as the actual Mansel and the Dickens' character should reach the same end by their varying ways. The blank wall loomed equally before them. I hoped that Mansel would not find at last the same end as Parkle's friend; the end of a suicide's rope.

I tried to stir the man a little out of his apathy. I misquoted a well-known passage of a well-known writer; and he flickered into a faint gleam of interest.

"Not quite that, is it? 'We are all as God made us, and many of us a great deal worse.' Surely. 'and often a great deal worse'? Would you mind verifying? There's the book, at the end of the second shelf."

I verified the Don Quixote quotation; and he nodded a very brief satisfaction at having the phrase correctly. I was putting the book back in its place, and it slipped from my hand to the floor. As I picked it up, I noticed again the mark of the omega; this time on the title page.

"May I ask," I said, "if this odd omega in your books has any particular meaning?"

He smiled faintly. "That," he explained, "is a bit of schoolboy nonsense. I don't recollect whether it was because I was proud of having learnt the Greek alphabet; but I got into the way of putting that thing in my books instead of my name or initials, and I kept it up afterwards. You would find it in every book on the shelves, and sometimes I've used it to mark a passage, in the margin. Indeed, I used to sign my letters to old friends with the Omega Exalted, as I called it."

I stayed on at Gray's Inn for the next six or seven months, and I suppose I repeated my visit to Mansel three or four times. I could not say that I was welcome, but I was not exactly unwelcome. It was a pang for him to open his door, but he was not displeased to let me in. There was no change in him, no sign that he would revive, and live again like other men. Then I left London, and remained away for many years, and I cannot say that Mansel was much more than a dim image in my memory. On my return, finding myself one day in Holborn, it struck me that I might make some enquiries. They told me in the inn that Mr. Mansel was understood to be very infirm; that he had not been seen outside his chambers for years and years. I thought I had better not look him up; he would not remember me or desire to do so.

A YEAR AGO his laundress found him dead in his chair next to the fire-place. It appeared on examination that his heart had given out. He had left his money and his goods to a distant cousin in the west, who came up to town, did what was necessary, and went down again to some obscure retreat by the sunset.

Mansel's books and furniture— there was nothing of value— were sold and dispersed.

The inn painted and papered the set of rooms on the top floor of the Square, and made them look as gay as they could look. But they did not let readily. There were plenty of applicants, but I gathered that people who came in a hurry to secure chambers giving on the garden, drew back when they were taken into the set. Something seemed amiss; they could not say what. They didn't "fancy" the place. Everything in the way of decoration, it was allowed, was extremely bright and cheerful. One prospective tenant, it was a lady, was seized with a fit of shivering and said she felt as if icy water were trickling down her spine. It must have been nine or ten months after Mansel's death that the set was taken by a young couple, who seemed to think themselves lucky, and made no complaint as to "something" or anything. The gentleman was connected with finance, and the lady was gaiety itself. She had a loud and cheerful voice, and a louder laugh, and expressed herself, so it was said, with considerable freedom. These people laid themselves out to brighten things. They gave frequent parties, a little on the loud side, it was thought, for the Inn, and the porters at the Holborn Gate were busy long after midnight.

And then, all this liveliness came to an end in a very tragic manner. In the middle of a "bottle party," when everything was at a high pitch, one of the guests, a Mr. Jerome Platt, understood to be a cousin of the host's, suddenly complained of agonising internal pains. He was taken to the hotel where he was staying, and doctors were summoned, and everything done that could be done. But Mr. Platt died the next day; of acute ptomaine poisoning as the evidence at the inquest demonstrated. He had dined at a fashionable West End restaurant before going on to the party at Gray's Inn. There were no complaints from any other of the diners.

By the end of the month, old Mansel's rooms were again vacant. The bright tenants, very naturally, as people said, felt they could not go on living in a place where such a terrible thing had happened. They were supposed to have gone abroad within three weeks of the disastrous "bottle party."

And as to that very different party given by Mrs. Ladislaw, and the end of it, and the scribble on the paper? So far as I can make out from what Welling has told me, the Ladislaw séance must have taken place a day, or perhaps two days, before that grim gathering in Gray's Inn. Mansel had been dead for many months: what are we to infer? Had he anything to do with the seizure of the medium, and with what was written by her?

There is one point that should not be forgotten. I noted that, in Welling's opinion, the corrupt Latin "messages" written by Miss Tuke might very well be subconscious memories, imperfectly preserved, of something she had read without understanding years before, and which had entirely disappeared from

her conscious mind. So, perhaps, with the "exalted omega." Mansel's books had been dispersed. None of them was of any interest to the big second-hand booksellers, to the dealers in rarities; the volumes would therefore tend to find their way to the small shops and the poorer neighbourhoods. Mrs. Ladislaw might very well have passed such shops on her marketing rounds; she might have turned over the books in the threepenny and sixpenny boxes— and she might easily have seen old Mansel's omega mark; very likely without consciously noting it.

IT IS DISTINCTLY POSSIBLE that this is the solution of the problem; though here also there are lurking difficulties and obscurities.

16: Murder at Moberley Flats

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

World's News (Sydney) 9 Nov 1932

AS Ormond turned the corner the signs of sensation around the front of Moberley Flats came into view. There were vehicles drawn up there; and the variegated admixture which always makes a suburban crowd, babbling and whispering, was between them and the building entrance. Across the street curious people stood in watching groups; but what Ormond noticed most was the peaked police caps showing in the crowd.

With a heart that jumped painfully within him, he leaped back; and his heart began a new series of gymnastics. He turned quickly into a shop entrance, with face bent towards the displayed goods, and another policeman headed tor the disturbance, almost brushed the back of his coat in passing. Giving him time to reach the corner, he moved sharply off, putting the scene behind him as quickly as he dared, since it would be fatal to attract attention. He turned into the next street and crossing it, made his way down a lane. A panic was upon him; his only idea was to make a twisted trail to baffle pursuit.

So he had killed Hermia; it was not all the nightmare he had hoped. That crowd before Moberley Flats could mean but one thing— the discovery of the body. However a man may desire to die, he will still struggle against death That is why Ormond fled at a time when death would be an easy escape from the nightmare that had fallen upon him.

He had murdered Hermia! It seemed unbelievable. He was very fond of Hermia, and he had certainly had no intention of even hurting her. Poor little, irresponsible Hermia! Of her love for him he had a thousand proofs. She had given up her brilliant stage career for him, because going on tour meant severance; in spite of his comparative poverty, she had given ardent and wealthy suitors the go-by for him. But apparently she could not break from the raffish, party-loving set with which she had become associated; and Ormond, thinking of the future, saw disaster in the extravagance of the life they were living.

Hermia was frequently repentant. She would agree with him that it was all foolishness, when a great deal of money had gone foolishly; declare that all she wanted in life was himself, and suggest that they should break away— go to Brisbane, where he had better prospects, and they could settle down, away, from unsettling friends, to a quieter domesticity. Then another party would loom, and, if Ormond opposed it, she would remind him of the bright life she had sacrificed for him.

It was this changeableness that irritated Ormond almost beyond endurance. In that last argument he had put his hands on her throat. It had been a bluff—he had not meant even to hurt her. It had startled him when she vent limp before him, falling back on the couch.

As Ormond recalled the scene, he held out his big, strong hands in front of him, accusingly. His grip must have been more powerful than he intended.

He thought, at first, that she was shamming, but terror rose within him when, as he shook her she remained inert, her pretty head waggling in a horribly uncontrolled fashion.

"Hermie! Don't be foolish! What's the matter, darling?" he had cried. Kissing her in a frantic effort to force an acknowledgment that this was all pretence.

Then panic came upon him. He was thinking only of Hermia when he fled from the flat; a doctor was necessary. It was as he stood at the doctor's door that a full realisation of the consequences to himself came to him. If he took the doctor to the flat, and efforts to restore Hermia were unavailing, he would be a self-confessed murderer.

The doctor was out, but was expected back any moment, so Ormond waited, all the time haunted by the horror of his position, all the time trying to build a hope that this was all a nightmare; he had left the flat too precipitately. Hermia was really shamming, and he would find her all right when he returned. But the assurance was a weak one.

"A woman may be dying. The doctor's wanted at once," he said, calling the nurse-attendant after waiting impatiently for some time.

"He ought to be back now; but If it's so urgent there's Dr. Paton at Brandon Flats."

He felt like a man reprieved when he left; yet he hurried to the other doctor's address. It seemed like an intervention of fate when he found that doctor absent, too. He had tortured himself unnecessarily; he would return, before he worried further about doctors, to find Hermia safe and well.

So well had he recovered himself that the sight of the sensation-drawn crowd before Moberley Flats was like a blow to him. When he found himself in Victoria Street it seemed that his mind had only just recovered from a state of numbness, in which that swift instinct of flight had been the only clear thought.

Now he wished he had stayed; had gone back again to kiss the cold cheek of the woman he loved, and give himself up as her murderer. Her cold cheek! He shuddered at the thought.

What had life left for him now? How, in any case, could he endure to go on living with the knowledge that lie was a murderer? To live as a hunted man would be a horror in itself; but there would be forever the pathetic eyes of the life-loving Hermia, whom, loving, he had slain.

But suicide, perhaps, would be better than surrender to the cold formalities of justice and the shameful ending.

A shock came to him when he saw the figure of a policeman at the corner of the street. He turned quickly to walk in the other direction, and, afar off, saw another policeman approaching.

A taxicar driver pulled up to allow him to leap in. Leaning back, with the blind drawn down, he swept past the policeman on the corner, and felt relieved.

As the taxi raced towards Watson's Bay, a new thought came to him. If the hue and cry was out for him, an anticipation of suicide would naturally come to the police. To go to the Gap would be to walk into the arms of the law, The thought postponed that swift idea of suicide that had come to him. He must escape, first, the possibility of the long-drawn torture of imprisonment and trial and a hateful end. Brisbane, the objective of many past hopes, leaped into his mind again He would probably end things when he got there: but if he died, it would be by his own hand.

Again the idea of the twisted, baffling trail came to him. The taxi-car dropped him in Oxford Street, neat Centennial Park, and immediately he leaped on a tram, which took him into the city. It was with many misgivings that he approached the bank; even as he put over the cheque which would close his account and place in his pocket the money he had preserved for the establishment of himself and Hermia in real domesticity, a moment's delay filled him with an apprehension that the bank officials had been warned and that they were detaining him whilst the police were notified of his presence

But there was no trouble. Of course, the police would not know where he banked! A minute later, relieved, Ormond was ringing up his office with the information that he would not attend again. The protests from the other end filled him with suspicion

"It can't be helped. I've got to go to Melbourne— at once. I'm going by car," he added.

"Where are you ringing from?"

There seemed a suspicious anxiety in the demand.

"Burwood," he lied, glibly; but he remembered immediately he left the booth that an inquiry of Exchange might locate his call. He leaped into another taxi.

His plans were quickly formulating themselves. At the railway booking office at Challis House, into which he dashed with some trepidation, lest a police watch should be there, he leaned well back against the partition whilst he secured his ticket for Brisbane, so that the clerk would not see him. The taxi then took him to St. Mary's Cathedral, outside which, as if he intended to enter, he waited until the taxi had gone. A few minutes later he was in the Gardens. It

was the safest place to spend the time of waiting. The police would never think of looking for him there.

It was a bright day, with the Gardens looking at their best; and yet a day of torture to him. Always the reproachful eyes of Hermie haunted him.

Was it all worth while, this frantic effort to escape from justice? In his mind's tumult the idea of surrender came with a suggestion of peace, only to change to the contemplation of immediate suicide. But he might be checked in that, and that would lead to his arrest. No, he would get away to Brisbane, and then....

Brisbane! If only they had gone before, together, happiness and hope with them! At times his thoughts were those of simple anguish for his loss.

He paced unfrequented paths, and as the day progressed he found an abandoned evening paper, of the early edition, left on one of the lawns. He scanned it eagerly for a report of Hermia's death, expecting scare headlines. There was nothing.

Perhaps the police had secured the suppression of the news, hoping it would give him a sense of security that would lead to his capture.

As he walked along the palm paths near the hothouses, he paused with a sudden shock. Coming down the path from the upper Gardens were two men he recognised as detectives.

He dashed into the shrubbery, finding a bush that offered adequate cover. Behind it he stood, peering out furtively, with panting heart.

The detectives passed. But the sight of them had awakened fresh fears. Why, if he went to join the train at the Central he would be walking right into a trap. He could picture the crowds, with the police mixing amongst them; the sudden fall of a hand on his shoulder....

The taxi he took carried him to Mosman; there he found another, which would take him to Hornsby. He bad the blinds drawn, and every time he saw a policeman his heart jolted.

At Gordon a fresh shock came to him as, with a rush, a car swept past his taxi. A P.D car, in a hurry. Perhaps Hornsby was a trap, just as the Central Station would have been. Desperately be resolved to risk that possibility.

It was only at the last minute that he dashed towards the station. A policeman was standing at the station gate.

He hesitated when he saw him, and the officer of the law turned in his direction.

Again panic, seized Ormond. It was a mad panic which carried him, before he knew what he was doing, across the overhead bridge and into a train just leaving for Sydney.

It was a relief to feel the wheels moving; but with the sense of safety from pursuit came a new reaction. Life was a torturing emptiness— something

unendurable If he threw himself from the train— that would be an easy, swift way out.

The resignation to his fate brought a calm upon him. He was almost happy in the prospect of ending the uncertainty. when be reached Sydney

It all happened with astonishing swiftness. A girl who had been huddled despondently on a seat leaped suddenly before him almost at the moment he noticed her presence.

"Ormond!"

"Hermia! Why, how the deuce—"

"They said you had gone to Melbourne at the office; but I knew it would be Brisbane. I came to the action hoping to catch you. I was determined to find you and ask you to forgive me. I know I have worried you, but you know I didn't mean to do it— I love you. And when I found you'd really left me—"

"But I thought— I thought I had killed you! I was coming back; but when I saw that crowd around the flats— I thought they had discovered your body."

"That crowd! The time-payment, people made a raid on the flats to seize the furniture— that's what drew the crowd. You poor boy! I had no idea that my acting was so good!"

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17: Three Lines of Old French
Abraham Merritt

1884-1943

All-Story Weekly, 9 Aug 1919

In: *The Fox Woman and other stories*, 1946

"BUT rich as was the war for surgical science," ended Hawtry, "opening up through mutilation and torture unexplored regions which the genius of man was quick to enter, and, entering, found ways to checkmate suffering and death— for always, my friend, the distillate from the blood of sacrifice is progress— great as all this was, the world tragedy has opened up still another region wherein even greater knowledge will be found. It was the clinic unsurpassed for the psychologist even more than for the surgeon."

Latour, the great little French doctor, drew himself out of the depths of the big chair; the light from the fireplace fell ruddily upon his keen face.

"That is true," he said. "Yes, that is true. There in the furnace the mind of man opened like a flower beneath a too glowing sun. Beaten about in that colossal tempest of primitive forces, caught in the chaos of energies both physical and psychical— which, although man himself was its creator, made of their maker a moth in a whirlwind— all those obscure, those mysterious factors of mind which men, for lack of knowledge, have named the soul, were stripped of their inhibitions and given power to appear.

"How could it have been otherwise— when men and women, gripped by one shattering sorrow or joy, will manifest the hidden depths of spirit — how could it have been otherwise in that steadily maintained crescendo of emotion?" McAndrews spoke.

"Just which psychological region do you mean, Hawtry?" he asked.

There were four of us in front of the fireplace of the Science Club — Hawtry, who rules the chair of psychology in one of our greatest colleges, and whose name is an honored one throughout the world; Latour, an immortal of France; McAndrews, the famous American surgeon whose work during the war has written a new page in the shining book of science; and myself. These are not the names of the three, but they are as I have described them; and I am pledged to identify them no further.

"I mean the field of suggestion," replied the psychologist.

"The mental reactions which reveal themselves as visions— an accidental formation in the clouds that becomes to the overwrought imaginations of the beholders the so-eagerly- prayed-for hosts of Joan of Arc marching out from heaven; moonlight in the cloud rift that becomes to the besieged a fiery cross held by the hands of archangels; the despair and hope that are transformed into such a legend as the bowmen of Mons, ghostly archers who with their phantom

shafts overwhelm the conquering enemy; wisps of cloud over No Man's Land that are translated by the tired eyes of those who peer out into the shape of the Son of Man himself walking sorrowfully among the dead. Signs, portents, and miracles, the hosts of premonitions, of apparitions of loved ones— all dwellers in this land of suggestion; all born of the tearing loose of the veils of the subconscious. Here, when even a thousandth part is gathered, will be work for the psychological analyst for twenty years."

"And the boundaries of this region?" asked McAndrews.

"Boundaries?" Hawtry plainly was perplexed.

McAndrews for a moment was silent. Then he drew from his pocket a yellow slip of paper, a cablegram.

"Young Peter Laveller died today," he said, apparently irrelevantly. "Died where he had set forth to pass— in the remnants of the trenches that cut through the ancient domain of the Seigneurs of Tocquelain, up near Bethune."

"Died there!" Hawtry's astonishment was profound. "But I read that he had been brought home; that, indeed, he was one of your triumphs, McAndrews!"

"I said he went there to die," repeated the surgeon slowly.

So that explained the curious reticence of the Lavellers as to what had become of their soldier son— a secrecy which had puzzled the press for weeks. For young Peter Laveller was one of the nation's heroes. The only boy of old Peter Laveller— and neither is that the real name of the family, for, like the others, I may not reveal it— he was the heir to the grim old coal king's millions, and the secret, best loved pulse of his heart.

Early in the war he had enlisted with the French. His father's influence might have abrogated the law of the French army that every man must start from the bottom up— I do not know— but young Peter would have none of it. Steady of purpose, burning with the white fire of the first Crusaders, he took his place in the ranks.

Clean-cut, blue-eyed, standing six feet in his stocking feet, just twenty-five, a bit of a dreamer, perhaps, he was one to strike the imagination of the *poilus*, and they loved him. Twice was he wounded in the perilous days, and when America came into the war he was transferred to our expeditionary forces. It was at the siege of Mount Kemmel that he received the wounds that brought him back to his father and sister. McAndrews had accompanied him overseas, I knew, and had patched him together— or so all thought.

What had happened then— and why had Laveller gone back to France, to die, as McAndrews put it?

He thrust the cablegram back into his pocket.

"There is a boundary, John," he said to Hawtry. "Laveller's was a borderland case. I'm going to tell it to you." He hesitated. "I ought not to, maybe; and yet I have an idea that Peter would like it told; after all, he believed himself a

discoverer." Again he paused; then definitely made up his mind, and turned to me.

"Merritt, you may make use of this if you think it interesting enough. But if you do so decide, then change the names, and be sure to check description short of any possibility of ready identification. After all, it is what happened that is important— and those to whom it happened do not matter."

I promised, and I have observed my pledge. I tell the story as he whom I call McAndrews reconstructed it for us there in the shadowed room, while we sat silent until he had ended.

Laveller stood behind the parapet of a first-line trench. It was night — an early April night in northern France— and when that is said, all is said to those who have been there.

Beside him was a trench periscope. His gun lay touching it. The periscope is practically useless at night; so through a slit in the sandbags he peered out over the three-hundred-foot-wide stretch of No Man's Land.

Opposite him he knew that other eyes lay close to similar slits in the German parapet, watchful as his were for the least movement.

There were grotesque heaps scattered about No Man's Land, and when the star-shells burst and flooded it with their glare these heaps seemed to stir to move— some to raise themselves, some to gesticulate, to protest. And this was very horrible, for those who moved under the lights were the dead— French and English, Prussian and Bavarian— dregs of a score of carryings to the red wine-press of war set up in this sector.

There were two Jocks on the entanglements; kilted Scots, one colandered by machine-gun hail just as he was breaking through. The shock of the swift, manifold death had hurled his left arm about the neck of the comrade close beside him; and this man had been stricken within the same second. There they leaned, embracing— and as the star-shells flared and died, flared and died, they seemed to rock, to try to break from the wire, to dash forward, to return.

Laveller was weary, weary beyond all understanding. The sector was a bad one and nervous. For almost seventy-two hours he had been without sleep — for the few minutes now and then of dead stupor broken by constant alarms was worse than sleep.

The shelling had been well-nigh continuous, and the food scarce and perilous to get; three miles back through the fire they had been forced to go for it; no nearer than that could the ration dumps be brought.

And constantly the parapets had to be rebuilt and the wires repaired — and when this was done the shells destroyed again, and once more the dreary routine had to be gone through; for the orders were to hold this sector at all costs.

All that was left of Laveller's consciousness was concentrated in his eyes; only his seeing faculty lived. And sight, obeying the rigid, inexorable will commanding every reserve of vitality to concentrate on the duty at hand, was blind to everything except the strip before it that Laveller must watch until relieved. His body was numb; he could not feel the ground with his feet, and sometimes he seemed to be floating in air like— like the two Scots upon the wire!

Why couldn't they be still? What right had men whose blood had drained away into a black stain beneath them to dance and pirouette to the rhythm of the flares? Damn them— why couldn't a shell drop down and bury them?

There was a chateau half a mile up there to the right— at least it had been a chateau. Under it were deep cellars into which one could creep and sleep. He knew that, because ages ago, when first he had come into this part of the line, he had slept a night there.

It would be like reentering paradise to crawl again into those cellars, out of the pitiless rain; sleep once more with a roof over his head.

"I will sleep and sleep and sleep— and sleep and sleep and sleep," he told himself; then stiffened as at the slumber- compelling repetition of the word darkness began to gather before him.

The star-shells flared and died, flared and died; the staccato of a machine gun reached him. He thought that it was his teeth chattering until his groping consciousness made him realize what it. really was— some nervous German riddling the interminable movement of the dead.

There was a squidging of feet through the chalky mud. No need to look; they were friends, or they could not have passed the sentries at the angle of the traverse. Nevertheless, involuntarily, his eyes swept toward the sounds, took note of three cloaked figures regarding him.

There were half a dozen of the lights floating overhead now, and by the gleams they cast into the trench he recognized the party.

One of them was that famous surgeon who had come over from the base hospital at Bethune to see made the wounds he healed; the others were his major and his captain— all of them bound for those cellars, no doubt. Well, some had all the luck! Back went his eyes to the slit.

"What's wrong?" It was the voice of the major addressing the visitor.

"What's wrong— what's wrong— what's wrong?" The words repeated themselves swiftly, insistently, within his brain, over and over again, striving to waken it.

Well, what was wrong? Nothing was wrong! Wasn't he, Laveller, there and watching? The tormented brain writhed angrily. Nothing was wrong— why didn't they go away and let him watch in peace?

"Nothing." It was the surgeon— and again the words kept babbling in Laveller's ears, small, whispering, rapidly repeating themselves over and over; "Nothing— nothing— nothing— nothing."

But what was this the surgeon was saying? Fragmentarily, only half understood, the phrases registered:

"Perfect case of what I've been telling you. This lad here— utterly worn, weary— all his consciousness centered upon just one thing — watchfulness... consciousness worn to finest point... behind it all his subconsciousness crowding to escape... consciousness will respond to only one stimulus— movement from without... but the subconsciousness, so close to the surface, held so lightly in leash... what will it do if that little thread is loosed... a perfect case."

What were they talking about? Now they were whispering.

"Then, if I have your permission—" It was the surgeon speaking again. Permission for what? Why didn't they go away and not bother him? Wasn't it hard enough just to watch without having to hear? Some thing passed before his eyes. He looked at it blindly, unrecognizing. His sight must be clouded.

He raised a hand and brushed at his lids. Yes, it must have been his eyes — for it had gone.

A little circle of light glowed against the parapet near his face. It was cast by a small flash. What were they looking for? A hand appeared in the circle, a hand with long, flexible fingers which held a piece of paper on which there was writing. Did they want him to read, too? Not only watch and hear— but read! He gathered himself together to protest.

Before he could force his stiffened lips to move he felt the upper button of his greatcoat undone, a hand slipped through the opening and thrust something into his tunic pocket just above the heart.

Someone whispered "Lucie de Tocquelain." What did it mean? That was not the password. There was a great singing in his head— as though he were sinking through water. What was that light that dazzled him even through his closed lids? Painfully he opened his eyes.

Laveller looked straight into the disk of a golden sun slowly setting over a row of noble oaks. Blinded, he dropped his gaze. He was standing ankle-deep in soft, green grass, starred with small clumps of blue flowerets. Bees buzzed about in their chalices. Little yellow-winged butterflies hovered over them. A gentle breeze blew, warm and fragrant.

Oddly he felt no sense of strangeness— then— this was a normal home world— a world as it ought to be. But he remembered that he had once been in another world, far, far unlike this; a place of misery and pain, of blood-stained mud and filth, of cold and wet; a world of cruelty, whose nights were tortured hells of glaring lights and fiery, slaying sounds, and tormented men who sought

for rest and sleep and found none, and dead who danced. Where was it? Had there ever really been such a world? He was not sleepy now.

He raised his hands and looked at them. They were grimed and cut and stained. He was wearing a greatcoat, wet, mud- bespattered, filthy. High boots were on his legs. Beside one dirt-incrusted foot lay a cluster of the blue flowerets, half- crushed. He groaned in pity, and bent, striving to raise the broken blossoms.

"'Too many dead now— too many dead," he whispered; then paused. He had come from that nightmare world! How else in this happy, clean one could he be so unclean?

Of course he had— but where was it? How had he made his way from it here? Ah, there had been a password— what had it been?

He had it: "Lucie de Tocquelain!"

Laveller cried it aloud— still kneeling.

A soft little hand touched his cheek. A low, sweet-toned voice caressed his ears.

"I am Lucie de Tocquelain," it said. "And the flowers will grow again — yet it is dear of you to sorrow for them."

He sprang to his feet. Beside him stood a girl, a slender maid of eighteen, whose hair was a dusky cloud upon her proud little head and in whose great, brown eyes, resting upon his, tenderness and a half-amused pity dwelt.

Peter stood silent, drinking her in— the low, broad, white forehead; the curved, red lips; the rounded, white shoulders, shining through the silken web of her scarf; the whole lithe sweet body of her in the clinging, quaintly fashioned gown, with its high, clasping girdle.

She was fair enough; but to Peter's starved eyes she was more than that — she was a spring gushing from the arid desert, the first cool breeze of twilight over a heat-drenched isle, the first glimpse of paradise to a soul fresh risen from centuries of hell. And under the burning worship of his eyes her own dropped; a faint rose stained the white throat, crept to her dark hair.

"I— I am the Demoiselle de Tocquelain, messire," she murmured. "And you—"

He recovered his courtesy with a shock. "Laveller— Peter Laveller — is my name, mademoiselle," he stammered. "Pardon my rudeness— but how I came here I know not— nor from whence, save that it was — it was a place unlike this. And you— you are so beautiful, mademoiselle!"

The clear eyes raised themselves for a moment, a touch of roguishness in their depths, then dropped demurely once more— but the blush deepened.

He watched her, all his awakening heart in his eyes; then perplexity awoke, touched him insistently.

"Will you tell me what place this is, mademoiselle," he faltered, "and how I came here, if you—" He stopped. From far, far away, from league upon league of space, a vast weariness was sweeping down upon him. He sensed it coming— closer, closer; it touched him; it lapped about him; he was sinking under it; being lost— falling— falling—

Two soft, warm hands gripped his. His tired head dropped upon them. Through the little palms that clasped so tightly pulsed rest and strength. The weariness gathered itself, began to withdraw slowly, so slowly— and was gone!

In its wake followed an ineffable, an uncontrollable desire to weep — to weep in relief that the weariness had passed, that the devil world whose shadows still lingered in his mind was behind him, and that he was here with this maid. And his tears fell, bathing the little hands.

Did he feel her head bent to his, her lips touch his hair? Peace came to him. He rose shamefacedly.

"I do not know why I wept, mademoiselle—" he began; and then saw that her white fingers were clasped now in his blackened ones. He released them in sudden panic.

"I am sorry," he stammered. "I ought not touch you—"

She reached out swiftly, took his hands again in hers, patted them half savagely.

Her eyes flashed.

"I do not see them as you do, Messire Pierre," she answered. "And if I did, are not their stains to me as the stains from hearts of her brave sons on the gonfalons of France? Think no more of your stains save as decorations, messire."

France— France? Why, that was the name of the world he had left behind; the world where men sought vainly for sleep, and the dead danced.

The dead danced— what did that mean? He turned wistful eyes to her.

And with a little cry of pity she clung to him for a moment.

"You are so tired— and you are so hungry," she mourned. "And think no more, nor try to remember, messire, till you have eaten and drunk with us and rested for a space."

They had turned. And now Laveller saw not far away a chateau. It was pinnacled and stately, serene in its gray stone and lordly with its spires and slender turrets thrust skyward from its crest like plumes flung high from some proud prince's helm. Hand in hand like children the Demoiselle de Tocquelain and Peter Laveller approached it over the greensward.

"It is my home, messire," the girl said. "And there among the roses my mother awaits us. My father is away, and he will be sorrowful that he met you not, but you shall meet him when you return."

He was to return, then? That meant he was not to stay. But where was he to go— whence was he to return? His mind groped blindly; cleared again. He was

walking among roses; there were roses everywhere, great, fragrant, opened blooms of scarlets and of saffrons, of shell pinks and white; clusters and banks of them, climbing up the terraces, masking the base of the chateau with perfumed tide.

And as he and the maid, still hand in hand, passed between them, they came to a table dressed with snowy napery and pale porcelains beneath a bower.

A woman sat there. She was a little past the prime of life, Peter thought. Her hair, he saw, was powdered white, her cheeks as pink and white as a child's, her eyes the sparkling brown of those of the demoiselle— and gracious— gracious, Peter thought, as some *grande dame* of old France.

The demoiselle dropped her a low curtsy.

"Ma mère," she said, "I bring you the Sieur Pierre la Vallière, a very brave and gallant gentleman who has come to visit us for a little while."

The clear eyes of the older woman scanned him, searched him. Then the stately white head bowed, and over the table a delicate hand was stretched toward him.

It was meant for him to kiss, he knew— but he hesitated awkwardly, miserably, looking at his begrimed own.

"The Sieur Pierre will not see himself as we do," the girl said in half merry reproof; then she laughed, a caressing, golden chiming, "Ma mère, shall he see his hands as we do?"

The white-haired woman smiled and nodded, her eyes kindly and, Laveller noted, with that same pity in them as had been in those of the demoiselle when first he had turned and beheld her.

The girl touched Peter's eyes lightly, held his palms up before him — they were white and fine and clean and in some unfamiliar way beautiful!

Again the indefinable amaze stifled him, but his breeding told. He conquered the sense of strangeness, bowed from the hips, took the dainty fingers of the stately lady in his, and raised them to his lips.

She struck a silver bell. Through the roses came two tall men in livery, who took from Laveller his greatcoat. They were followed by four small black boys in gay scarlet slashed with gold. They bore silver platters on which were meat and fine white bread and cakes, fruit, and wine in tall crystal flagons.

And Laveller remembered how hungry he was. But of that feast he remembered little— up to a certain point. He knows that he sat there filled with a happiness and content that surpassed the sum of happiness of all his twenty-five years.

The mother spoke little, but the Demoiselle Lucie and Peter Laveller chattered and laughed like children— when they were not silent and drinking each the other in.

And ever in Laveller's heart an adoration for this maid, met so perplexingly, grew— grew until it seemed that his heart could not hold his joy. Ever the maid's eyes as they rested on his were softer, more tender, filled with promise; and the proud face beneath the snowy hair became, as it watched them, the essence of that infinitely gentle sweetness that is the soul of the madonnas.

At last the Demoiselle de Tocquelain, glancing up and meeting that gaze, blushed, cast down her long lashes, and hung her head; then raised her eyes bravely.

"Are you content, my mother?" she asked gravely.

"My daughter, I am well content," came the smiling answer.

Swiftly followed the incredible, the terrible— in that scene of beauty and peace it was, said Laveller, like the flashing forth of a gorilla's paw upon a virgin's breast, a wail from deepest hell lancing through the song of angels.

At his right, among the roses, a light began to gleam— a fitful, flaring light that glared and died, glared and died. In it were two shapes. One had an arm clasped about the neck of the other; they leaned embracing in the light, and as it waxed and waned they seemed to pirouette, to try to break from it, to dash forward, to return— to dance!

The dead who danced!

A world where men sought rest and sleep, and could find neither, and where even the dead could find no rest, but must dance to the rhythm of the star-shells!

He groaned; sprang to his feet; watched, quivering in every nerve. Girl and woman followed his rigid gaze; turned to him again with tear-filled, pitiful eyes.

"It is nothing!" said the maid. "It is nothing! See— there is nothing there!"

Once more she touched his lids; and the light and the swaying forms were gone. But now Laveller knew. Back into his consciousness rushed the full tide of memory— memory of the mud and the filth, the stenches, and the fiery, slaying sounds, the cruelty, the misery and the hatreds; memory of torn men and tormented dead; memory of whence he had come, the trenches.

The trenches! He had fallen asleep, and all this was but a dream! He was sleeping at his post, while his comrades were trusting him to watch over them. And those two ghastly shapes among the roses— they were the two Scots on the wires summoning him back to his duty; beckoning, beckoning him to return. He must waken! He must waken!

Desperately he strove to drive himself from his garden of illusion; to force himself back to that devil world which during this hour of enchantment had been to his mind only as a fog bank on a far horizon. And as he struggled, the brown-eyed maid and the snowy-tressed woman watched— with ineffable pity, tears falling.

"The trenches!" gasped Laveller. "O God, wake me up! I must get back! O God, make me wake."

"Am I only a dream, then, *ma mie*?"

It was the Demoiselle Lucie's voice— a bit piteous, the golden tones shaken.

"I must get back," he groaned— although at her question his heart seemed to die within him. "Let me wake!"

"Am I a dream?" Now the voice was angry; the demoiselle drew close. "Am I not real?"

A little foot stamped furiously on his, a little hand darted out, pinched him viciously close above his elbow. He felt the sting of the pain and rubbed it, gazing at her stupidly.

"Am I a dream, think you?" she murmured, and, raising her palms, set them on his temples, bringing down his head until his eyes looked straight into hers.

Laveller gazed— gazed down, down deep into their depths, lost himself in them, felt his heart rise like the spring from what he saw there. Her warm, sweet breath fanned his cheek; whatever this was, wherever he was — she was no dream!

"But I must return— get back to my trench!" The soldier in him clung to the necessity.

"My son"— it was the mother speaking now—"my son, you are in your trench."

Laveller gazed at her, bewildered. His eyes swept the lovely scene about him. When he turned to her again it was with the look of a sorely perplexed child. She smiled.

"Have no fear," she said. "Everything is well. You are in your trench — but your trench centuries ago; yes, twice a hundred years ago, counting time as you do— and as once we did."

A chill ran through him. Were they mad? Was he mad? His arm slipped down over a soft shoulder; the touch steadied him.

"And you?" he forced himself to ask. He caught a swift glance between the two, and in answer to some unspoken question the mother nodded. The Demoiselle Lucie pressed soft hands against Peter's face, looked again into his eyes.

"*Ma mie*," she said gently, "we have been"— she hesitated —"what you call— dead— to your world these two hundred years!"

But before she had spoken the words Laveller, I think, had sensed what was coming. And if for a fleeting instant he had felt a touch of ice in every vein, it vanished beneath the exaltation that raced through him, vanished as frost beneath a mist- scattering sun. For if this were true— why, then there was no such thing as death! And it was true!

It was true! He knew it with a shining certainty that had upon it not the shadow of a shadow— but how much his desire to believe entered into this certainty who can tell?

He looked at the chateau. Of course! It was that whose ruins loomed out of the darkness when the flares split the night— in whose cellars he had longed to sleep. Death— oh, the foolish, fearful hearts of men! — this death? This glorious place of peace and beauty? And this wondrous girl whose brown eyes were the keys of heart's desire! Death— he laughed and laughed again.

Another thought struck him, swept through him like a torrent. He must get back, must get back to the trenches and tell them this great truth he had found. Why, he was like a traveler from a dying world who unwittingly stumbles upon a secret to turn that world dead to hope into a living heaven!

There was no longer need for men to fear the splintering shell, the fire that seared them, the bullets, or the shining steel. What did they matter when this— this— was the truth? He must get back and tell them. Even those two Scots would lie still on the wires when he whispered this to them.

But he forgot— they knew now. But they could not return to tell — as he could. He was wild with joy, exultant, lifted up to the skies, a demigod— the bearer of a truth that would free the devil-ridden world from its demons; a new Prometheus who bore back to mankind a more precious flame than had the old.

"I must go!" he cried. "I must tell them! Show me how to return— swiftly!"

A doubt assailed him; he pondered it.

"But they may not believe me," he whispered. "No. I must show them proof. I must carry something back to prove this to them."

The Lady of Tocquelain smiled. She lifted a little knife from the table and, reaching over to a rose-tree, cut from it a cluster of buds; thrust it toward his eager hand.

Before he could grasp it the maid had taken it.

"Wait!" she murmured. "I will give you another message."

There was a quill and ink upon the table, and Peter wondered how they had come; he had not seen them before— but with so many wonders, what was this small one? There was a slip of paper in the Demoiselle Lucie's hand, too. She bent her little, dusky head and wrote; blew upon the paper, waved it in the air to dry; sighed, smiled at Peter, and wrapped it about the stem of the rosebud cluster; placed it on the table, and waved back Peter's questing hand.

"Your coat," she said. "You'll need it— for now you must go back."

She thrust his arms into the garment. She was laughing— but there were tears in the great, brown eyes; the red mouth was very wistful.

Now the older woman arose, stretched out her hand again; Laveller bent over it, kissed it.

"We shall be here waiting for you, my son," she said softly. "When it is time for you to— come back."

He reached for the roses with the paper wrapped about their stem. The maid darted a hand over his, lifted them before he could touch them.

"You must not read it until you have gone," she said— and again the rose flame burned throat and cheeks.

Hand in hand, like children, they sped over the greensward to where Peter had first met her. There they stopped, regarding each other gravely— and then that other miracle which had happened to Laveller and that he had forgotten in the shock of his wider realization called for utterance.

"I love you!" whispered Peter Laveller to this living, long- dead Demoiselle de Tocquelain.

She sighed, and was in his arms.

"Oh, I know you do!" she cried. "I know you do, dear one— but I was so afraid you would go without telling me so."

She raised her sweet lips, pressed them long to his, drew back.

"I loved you from the moment I saw you standing here," she told him, "and I will be here waiting for you when you return. And now you must go, dear love of mine; but wait—"

He felt a hand steal into the pocket of his tunic, press something over his heart.

"The messages," she said. "Take them. And remember— I will wait. I promise. I, Lucie de Tocquelain—"

There was a singing in his head. He opened his eyes. He was back in his trench, and in his ears still rang the name of the demoiselle, and over his heart he felt still the pressure of her hand. His head was half turned toward three men who were regarding him.

One of them had a watch in his hand; it was the surgeon. Why was he looking at his watch? Had he been gone long? he wondered.

Well, what did it matter, when he was the bearer of such a message? His weariness had gone; he was transformed, jubilant; his soul was shouting paeans. Forgetting discipline, he sprang toward the three.

"There is no such thing as death!" he cried. "We must send this message along the lines— at once! At once, do you understand! Tell it to the world— I have proof—"

He stammered and choked in his eagerness. The three glanced at each other. His major lifted his electric flash, clicked it in Peter's face, started oddly— then quietly walked over and stood between the lad and his rifle.

"Just get your breath a moment, my boy, and then tell us all about it," he said.

They were devilishly unconcerned, were they not? Well, wait till they had heard what he had to tell them!

And tell them Peter did, leaving out only what had passed between him and the demoiselle— for, after all, wasn't that their own personal affair? And gravely and silently they listened to him. But always the trouble deepened in his major's eyes as Laveller poured forth the story.

"And then— I came back, came back as quickly as I could, to help us all; to lift us out of all this"— his hands swept out in a wide gesture of disgust—"for none of it matters! When we die— we live!" he ended.

Upon the face of the man of science rested profound satisfaction.

"A perfect demonstration; better than I could ever have hoped!" he spoke over Laveller's head to the major. "Great, how great is the imagination of man!"

There was a tinge of awe in his voice.

Imagination? Peter was cut to the sensitive, vibrant soul of him.

They didn't believe him! He would show them!

"But I have the proof!" he cried.

He threw open his greatcoat, ran his hand into his tunic- pocket; his fingers closed over a bit of paper wrapped around a stem. Ah— now he would show them!

He drew it out, thrust it toward them.

"Look!" His voice was like a triumphal trumpet-call.

What was the matter with them? Could they not see? Why did their eyes search his face instead of realizing what he was offering them? He looked at what he held— then, incredulous, brought it close to his own eyes, gazed and gazed, with a sound in his ears as though the universe were slipping away around him, with a heart that seemed to have forgotten to beat. For in his hand, stem wrapped in paper, was no fresh and fragrant rosebud cluster his brown-eyed demoiselle's mother had clipped for him in the garden.

No— there was but a sprig of artificial buds, worn and torn and stained, faded and old!

A great numbness crept over Peter.

Dumbly he looked at the surgeon, at his captain, at the major whose face was now troubled indeed and somewhat stern.

"What does it mean?" he muttered.

Had it all been a dream? Was there no radiant Lucie— save in his own mind— no brown-eyed maid who loved him and whom he loved?

The scientist stepped forward, took the worn little sprig from the relaxed grip. The bit of paper slipped off, remained in Peter's fingers.

"You certainly deserve to know just what you've been through, my boy," the urbane, capable voice beat upon his dulled hearing, "after such a reaction as you have provided to our little experiment." He laughed pleasantly.

Experiment? Experiment? A dull rage began to grow in Peter— vicious, slowly rising.

"Monsieur!" called the major appealingly, somewhat warningly, it seemed, to his distinguished visitor.

"Oh, by your leave, major," went on the great man, "here is a lad of high intelligence— of education, you could know that by the way he expressed himself— he will understand."

The major was not a scientist— he was a Frenchman, human, and with an imagination of his own. He shrugged; but he moved a little closer to the resting rifle.

"We had been discussing, your officers and I," the capable voice went on, "dreams that are the half-awakened mind's effort to explain some touch, some unfamiliar sound, or what not that has aroused it from its sleep. One is slumbering, say, and a window nearby is broken. The sleeper hears, the consciousness endeavors to learn— but it has given over its control to the subconscious. And this rises accommodatingly to its mate's assistance. But it is irresponsible, and it can express itself only in pictures.

"It takes the sound and— well, weaves a little romance around it. It does its best to explain— alas! Its best is only a more or less fantastic lie— recognized as such by the consciousness the moment it becomes awake.

"And the movement of the subconsciousness in this picture production is inconceivably rapid. It can depict in the fraction of a second a series of incidents that if actually lived would take hours— yes, days— of time. You follow me, do you not? Perhaps you recognize the experience I outline?"

Laveller nodded. The bitter, consuming rage was mounting within him steadily. But he was outwardly calm, all alert. He would hear what this self-satisfied devil had done to him, and then—

"Your officers disagreed with some of my conclusions. I saw you here, weary, concentrated upon the duty at hand, half in hypnosis from the strain and the steady flaring and dying of the lights. You offered a perfect clinical subject, a laboratory test unexcelled—"

Could he keep his hands from his throat until he had finished? Laveller wondered. Lucie, his Lucie, a fantastic lie—

"Steady, *mon vieux*"— it was his major whispering. Ah, when he struck, he must do it quickly— his officer was too close, too close. Still— he must keep his watch for him through the slit. He would be peering there, perhaps, when he, Peter, leaped.

"And so"— the surgeon's tones were in his best student- clinic manner— "and so I took a little sprig of artificial flowers that I had found pressed between the leaves of an old missal I had picked up in the ruins of the chateau yonder. On

a slip of paper I wrote a line of French— for then I thought you a French soldier. It was a simple line from the ballad of Aucassin and Nicolette—"

And there she waits to greet him
When all his days are run.

"Also, there was a name written on the title-page of the missal, the name, no doubt, of its long-dead owner— 'Lucie de Tocquelain'—"

Lucie! Peter's rage and hatred were beaten back by a great surge of longing— rushed back stronger than ever.

"So I passed the sprig of flowers before your unseeing eyes; consciously unseeing, I mean, for it was certain your subconsciousness would take note of them. I showed you the line of writing— your subconsciousness absorbed this, too, with its suggestion of a love troth, a separation, an awaiting. I wrapped it about the stem of the sprig, I thrust them both into your pocket, and called the name of Lucie de Tocquelain into your ear.

"The problem was what your other self would make of those four things — the ancient cluster, the suggestion in the line of writing, the touch, and the name— a fascinating problem, indeed!

"And hardly had I withdrawn my hand, almost before my lips closed on the word I had whispered— you had turned to us shouting that there was no such thing as death, and pouring out, like one inspired, that remarkable story of yours— all, all built by your imagination from—"

But he got no further. The searing rage in Laveller had burst all bounds, had flared forth murderously and hurled him silently at the surgeon's throat. There were flashes of flame before his eyes— red, sparkling sheets of flame. He would die for it, but he would kill this cold-blooded fiend who could take a man out of hell, open up to him heaven, and then thrust him back into hell grown now a hundred times more cruel, with all hope dead in him for eternity.

Before he could strike strong hands gripped him, held him fast. The scarlet, curtained flares before his eyes faded away. He thought he heard a tender, golden voice whispering to him:

"It is nothing! It is nothing! See as I do!"

He was standing between his officers, who held him fast on each side. They were silent, looking at the now white-faced surgeon with more than somewhat of cold, unfriendly sternness in their eyes.

"My boy, my boy"— that scientist's poise was gone; his voice trembling, agitated. "I did not understand— I am sorry— I never thought you would take it so seriously."

Laveller spoke to his officers— quietly. "It is over, sirs. You need not hold me."

They looked at him, released him, patted him on the shoulder, fixed again their visitor with that same utter contempt.

Laveller turned stumblingly to the parapet. His eyes were full of tears. Brain and heart and soul were nothing but a blind desolation, a waste utterly barren of hope or of even the ghost of the wish to hope. That message of his, the sacred truth that was to set the feet of a tormented world on the path to paradise— a dream.

His Lucie, his brown-eyed demoiselle who had murmured her love for him — a thing compounded of a word, a touch, a writing, and an artificial flower!

He could not, would not believe it. Why, he could feel still the touch of her soft lips on his, her warm body quivering in his arms. And she had said he would come back— and promised to wait for him.

What was that in his hand? It was the paper that had wrapped the rosebuds — the cursed paper with which that cold devil had experimented with him.

Laveller crumpled it savagely— raised it to hurl it at his feet.

Someone seemed to stay his hand.

Slowly he opened it.

The three men watching him saw a glory steal over his face, a radiance like that of a soul redeemed from endless torture. All its sorrow, its agony, was wiped out, leaving it a boy's once more.

He stood wide-eyed, dreaming.

The major stepped forward, gently drew the paper from Laveller.

There were many star-shells floating on high now, the trench was filled with their glare, and in their light he scanned the fragment.

On his face when he raised it there was a great awe— and as they took it from him and read this same awe dropped down upon the others like a veil.

For over the line the surgeon had written were now three other lines — in old French:—

"Nor grieve, dear heart, nor fear the seeming—
Here is waking after dreaming.
— She who loves you, Lucie."

That was McAndrews's story, and it was Hawtry who finally broke the silence that followed his telling of it.

"The lines had been on the paper, of course," he said; "they were probably faint, and your surgeon had not noticed them. It was drizzling, and the dampness brought them out."

"No," answered McAndrews; "they had not been there."

"But how can you be so sure?" remonstrated the Psychologist.

"Because I was the surgeon," said McAndrews Quietly. "The paper was a page torn from my note book. When I wrapped it about the sprig it was blank — except for the line I myself had written there.

"But there was one more bit of— well, shall we call it evidence, John?— the hand in which Laveller's message was penned was the hand in the missal in which I had found the flowers— and the signature 'Lucie' was that same signature, curve for curve and quaint, old-fashioned angle for angle."

A longer silence fell, broken once more by Hawtry, abruptly.

"What became of the paper?" he asked. "Was the ink analyzed? Was—"

"As we stood there wondering," interrupted McAndrews, "a squall swept down upon the trench. It tore the paper from my hand; carried it away. Laveller watched it go; made no effort to get it."

"'It does not matter. I know now,' he said— and smiled at me, the forgiving, happy smile of a joyous boy. 'I apologize to you, doctor. You're the best friend I ever had. I thought at first you had done to me what no other man would do to another— I see now that you have done for me what no other man could.'

"And that is all. He went through the war neither seeking death nor avoiding it. I loved him like a son. He would have died after that Mount Kemmel affair had it not been for me. He wanted to live long enough to bid his father and sister goodbye, and I— patched him up. He did it, and then set forth for the trench beneath the shadow of the ruined old chateau where his brown-eyed demoiselle had found him."

"Why?" asked Hawtry.

"Because he thought that from there he could— go back— to her more quickly."

"To me an absolutely unwarranted conclusion," said the psychologist, wholly irritated, half angry. "There is some simple, natural explanation of it all."

"Of course, John," answered McAndrews soothingly—"of course there is. Tell us it, can't you?"

But Hawtry, it seemed, could not offer any particulars.

18: Crepe For Suzette

C. S. Montanye

1892-1948

Thrilling Detective, Oct 1948

IT WAS one of those warm spring nights when everyone was going somewhere. I sat in a taxi with Libby Hart, bound for the Paladium, a stone's throw from Columbus Circle where a big ice pageant, called *Frozen Follies of the Year*, was due to be unveiled at eight-forty-five.

The star of the hard water carnival was Suzette Darcy. And Libby Hart's interest in the skate opus, I happened to know, had to do with this same Miss Darcy. Lib's sweatshop, which kept her in alligator shoes and free cosmetics, was known to the trade as Arcady House, manufactured first aids to fading faces. The girl friend did publicity for the outfit, and Arcady House was about to present Miss Suzette Darcy with a cash donation for her signed approval of Perfect Petal Cream, the emollient that made tired eyes pack their bags and leave.

Libby had a pair of Annie Oakleys in her hand bag— the reason for the taxi and the ice show. Though I, as a sport writer for the half-hour I took Mrs. Hart's only daughter across to a java joint and bought two cups of the Brazilian brew. As we went in I saw Lieutenant Larry Hartley, of the Homicide Division, at the end of the counter, dunking a doughnut. He glanced up, smiled at Libby, and nodded to me.

"Hello, Castle. Been over to the ice cube festival? Sharp show, eh?"

Hartley wasn't a bad sort. Off and on I'd been tossed in with him on certain murderous matters that had occasionally cropped up. I liked Hartley more than I did his superior, Captain Fred Mullin, a bulldog technician who growled like a man.

Lib inquired, as we found a booth and edged in, "Isn't that your policeman friend?"

"One of them. But don't be alarmed. I have nothing in common with the Lieutenant."

Libby's dark eyes glinted. "You'd better not have! You promised me you were through with crime. Remember?"

When we'd finished our java and the half-hour was up, we found that to reach the Paladium dressing rooms we had to go down the block and around the corner. Every cab in mirthful Manhattan seemed to have converged on the stage door, when we spotted it. Taxis mingled with chauffeur-driven limousines and hot rods that only determination kept out of the junk yard. The stage door was ganged up with well-wishers, bobby-sox autograph addicts, and florists' delivery boys. Replacing the legendary doorman, of suspenders and sour disposition, an

impressively uniformed party examined Libby's credentials. He went into conference with a backstage board of directors and they finally decided to pass us in.

"Third floor," he said. "Take the elevator down the corridor."

We did, getting out on an overhanging cement tier patterned with doors. The lighting was indirect. Small sofas and chairs, for the comfort and convenience of visitors, were scattered along the way. It was luxuriously different from the backstage world of the ordinary side-street playhouse. The layout was de luxe, from the shining chromium knobs on the stainless steel doors to the clubroom atmosphere. Suzette Darcy's dressing room was at the end of the tier, near a flight of fire-exit stairs. No one could miss it. The star's name was gold-leafed neatly over a pearl button.

Libby put a gloved thumb on that. I said, "You don't need to ring. She's expecting us— the door is open."

She pressed the button anyway, giving me a quizzical stare.

"Stop drooling, Johnny. And when I introduce you, look, don't touch!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Libby rang again— and again. Then she began to frown, drawing her arched brows together and pursing her lips.

"Wait here," she said finally. "I'll go in. If she's decent, I'll call you."

No more than two or three minutes elapsed. During it I listened to a murmur of voices coming out of the rooms on the tiers below. Gay, happy voices. Excited voices belonging to the members of the troupe. Overjoyed voices, because the show was in the bag for a protracted New York stay. Suddenly I heard something else— a muffled, strangled scream from beyond the doorway through which Libby had gone!

In a flash I darted inside. Electric lights dazzled me for an instant. Mirrors on nearly all the walls reflected my image, but I didn't stop for any self-admiration. Two dames were stretched out on the deep rug that covered the dressing room floor.

One was Libby Hart, and one glance was enough to show me she had fainted.

With the other gal it was different.

Suzette Darcy, still in her radiant finale costume, lay huddled between one mirrored wall and a mahogany dressing table that looked as long as a freight car. Her complexion was white where the makeup ended. So white that the ugly crimson stain soaking the front of the costume, and trickling down over one folded arm, was like a bright ruby-red river in the light. It was no faint.

And one glance here was enough to tell me the copper-haired skating star had done her last twirl. The Minnesota sensation had been booked for the long

sleep— by someone who evidently had used a gun holding large-sized slugs. It was the kind of slumber that no alarm clock could disturb. Susy was dead!

ii

IN a tiled Hollywood bath off the dressing room I found an ice-water spigot and glasses. I filled one, snatched up a towel, slopped it in cold Croton and applied it to Libby Hart's complexion. It worked. She sat up, shaking the dampness out of her eyes and face.

"What happened?" she asked wonderingly. "Somebody turned off the lights and—"

Then she got Miss Darcy in focus and started an encore. I used the towel again and hoisted her up off the rug.

"We're getting out of here— at least you are, fast! Come on— pull yourself together."

Libby buckled slightly at the knees, but managed to keep going as I led her toward the stainless steel door. When I reached it, I put a handkerchief over the knob and pulled it open. That gave me a perfect view into slate-gray eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes which belonged to a small pretty blond girl who wore a smart broadtail coat and no hat. She wasn't smiling. There was grim determination on her vermilion lips.

She looked at Lib, then at me, and asked: "Do you know if Miss Darcy's busy?"

Libby choked. I answered casually, "Miss Darcy isn't doing anything at the moment."

"In that case," the blond said, "I'll go in. I am Nan Tinsley."

She made a move to pass me. I put a hand on her arm. A nice, soft, rounded arm.

"Sorry, but you'd better not go in. Miss Darcy's just been murdered!"

The slate-gray eyes went wide and dark. The mouth lost its fixed smile. Nan Tinsley shifted her gaze quickly to Libby. The girl friend's horror-stricken expression was all Nan Tinsley needed for confirmation. The next moment she had spun around on her high heels and was streaking down the cement-lined tier.

When I got Libby Hart in a taxi five minutes later, she still was in a daze, still shaken. I patted her hand before I closed the door.

"I'll phone later, honey."

The taxi chugged off and I hot-footed it back to the dressing room and took a look around. On the dressing table were samples from Arcady House. I noticed a pound jar of cold cream in a handsomely decorated container before I glanced about in search of the gun. There wasn't any sign of it in either the dressing

room or the bath. The killer must have walked in, banged away, shoved the smoker in his clothes and walked out.

Then I remembered the difficulty Libby and I had getting past the stage doorman. At the same minute I recalled the fire-exit stairway a couple of strides from the dressing room door. It would have been no trick for anyone to have come up them for target practice and left the same way.

I went back and looked at the dead girl. The folded-back arm caught and held my attention. The hand, graceful and white, was half turned over and half open. Its palm glistened oddly.

Swallowing, I leaned to get a better look. After that I used the telephone in the corner of the room to make two calls. One was to the city desk at the *Orbit*. The other was to Police Headquarters.

Within twenty minutes the dressing room was full of uniformed authority—the flashlight brigade, fingerprint experts, Captain Fred Mullin and his two trained yes-and-no men, Dave Wheeler and the same Larry Hartley who had been at the coffee joint. They were flanked by a stenographer, and a specialist from Ballistics.

I was high on Mullin's Hate Parade. It had to do with a piece I'd once written for the *Orbit* dealing with antiquated police routines as practiced by the captain, with the aid of pieces of hose and thousand-watt electric light bulbs.

Mullin hadn't enjoyed my sarcasm. He hadn't forgotten, either. I knew he was waiting for a chance to get even.

"So you're the party who telephoned?" A pleased smile began to spread over his granite pan. "I've been waiting a long time, Castle."

"Not for this one," I interrupted pleasantly. "I've got an alibi that's practically foolproof."

I gave it to him on a plush-lined platter. The smile faded. He barked orders and swung around on me again.

"I'm not through with you yet," he growled. "Stay put."

I sat down, chain-smoked, and watched Homicide at work. Doc Bagby, the medical examiner, was busy over a couple of tables that had been drawn together. Hartley and Wheeler were hunting for the gun. The fingerprint gang threw powder around and the photographers exploded flashbulbs.

I did some heavy thinking. Suzette had been on the stage at eleven-thirty. At midnight she was dead. In those thirty minutes she had gone back to her dressing room, but she hadn't had time to peel off her costume or get into a robe. The killer could have been waiting for her, either in the bathroom or in full view. He must have blasted her fast and left in a hurry. Why? What was his motive? Why should anyone want to knock off a dame as charming and beautiful as Suzette Darcy?

Mullin consulted with his entourage and came back to me.

"Where's the gun, Castle?" he snapped.

"What gun?"

"The one you must have found while you were moseying into my business—here."

"No rod, Captain. Not even one you could hang a curtain on." I got up. "Have a frisk—free."

Mullin's fishy eyes drilled into me. He put a big hand between my shoulders and pushed.

"Get out of here! The more I look at you, the less I want to see of you!"

"In my book," I said putting on my hat, "the feeling's pari-mutual!"

Instead of taking the elevator, I opened the fire-exit door and took the stairs. Dim lights burned on each landing. On the ground floor the door I figured led to the side street was locked. Back up a flight, I headed for the stage door, forcing my way through a crowd of the morbidly curious outside it, and turned toward Broadway.

I hadn't gone half a block before I had a feeling that I was being tailed. Someone had pulled away from the knot of people at the stage door and was ambling after me. I slowed down until he walked under an arc light. I had a view of a big, stoop-shouldered, slow moving guy, familiar from the dented-in crown of his dicer to the baggy ends of his trousers. Georgie Bister, Nick Caduro's jack-of-all-trades.

I braked at the corner, waiting for Bister. That evidently disconcerted him. He was grinning sheepishly when he reached me.

"Hello, Castle. Nice night, ain't it?"

"Why the tail?"

Bister threw away the match stick he'd been munching on.

"Tail?" he repeated, then as if remembering, he said, "Look Castle, Nick asked me to give you a message in case I saw you. He wants you to drop around to his place for a drink."

"Tell him thanks. I'm on the wagon."

That didn't do. Bister shook his head slowly. "Look, Castle. I don't want no trouble. I hate trouble. Nick said, when I saw you, I should bring you up to his apartment."

"And if I don't want to go?"

Georgie patted his pocket significantly. "I guess you'll go, Castle."

He stopped a cab, held the door open for me to get in and in less than ten minutes the meter-cheater pulled up in front of a massive brick building on Central Park West, called the Stanwich Arms. Bister followed me into an elevator and out of it on the fifteenth floor. We went down a hall to a door. Georgie rang the bell and Nick Caduro answered the summons.

"Why, it's Castle!" He held the door wider. "Come in."

The shiny-haired bad man had taken off dinner coat and vest. The glossy white of his dress shirt now accented his swarthy complexion. He led the way into a living room where some inferior decorator had been allowed to run loose, and waved me into a chair.

"What's the idea, Nick?" I tried to sound indignant, but I was worried. I didn't like making early morning calls on characters of Caduro's type. He told Bister to shake up some alcohol and hooked his thumbs in the black silk of the suspenders holding up his high-waisted pants.

Then he said, "I hear how the babe who laid 'em in the aisles at the Paladium tonight got herself shot up." Caduro's tone was quietly conversational.

"Friend of hers, Castle?"

"I never saw her until tonight."

"But you called on her in her dressing room. Georgie saw you and your doll at the stage door. He heard who you were asking for. After awhile you came out and put your gal in a taxi. Then you went back. You were there a long time before the badges arrived. Right?"

"Georgie has twenty-twenty vision. So what?"

"So you'd better let him check on what you've got in your pockets," Nick purred. Bister came away from a mahogany bar and waited for me to get out of the chair.

He said, "Hold your arms up and out," and began to feel through my pockets.

Caduro's order for the feel around had an angle. Bister was frisking me to find out if I'd found anything in Suzette Darcy's dressing room and brought it away with me. Such as a murder gun, for instance. Or some bit of evidence not turned in to Mullin.

Georgie made it complete. He checked my belt, even ran his fingers over the cuffs of my trousers. I took off my shoes at his request and he examined the interiors and heels. Finally Bister straightened up.

He shook his head.

"Clean, Nick." It was impossible to tell from Caduro's basilisk stare whether he was disappointed or not. His thin smile still displayed his square, white teeth.

He said, "Sit down, Castle. Have a drink."

"I don't use the stuff," I told him. "Besides, I'm overdue on a date—with a single bed. If you don't mind, I'll be running along. Nice to have seen you."

For a minute the smile faded. His glinting eyes narrowed slightly. He shrugged and nodded.

"I'll see you out." We walked to the foyer, with Bister peering after us. "By the way," Nick went on casually, "if I were you, I wouldn't nose around with this Paladium thing too much, Castle. I like your slant on sports, the way you write for the *Orbit*. I'd hate to be reading some new guy's stuff."

He stopped at the hall door and slid a cigarette between his lips. I didn't say anything. Caduro began to smile again.

"Another thing. I wouldn't mention the fact you stopped in here tonight, either. To anyone." He opened the door, stepping aside to let me pass. "Because," he added softly, "you never know when you might get an attack of dropsy, and fall right out of circulation!"

iii

NEXT morning the front pages of the metropolitan press headlined the mysterious killing of the coppery-haired Suzette Darcy.

Bill Jamison, the *Orbit*'s top crime narrator, had turned in his usual good job on the dressing room smear. The way I got it, from Bill's story, Mullin's score on his preliminary investigation had been a hundred per cent zero. Homicide had been interviewing people to find suspects, with no results.

When I got down to the office, Jamison was at his desk, wearing a green eyeshade and a frayed look. He grinned when I dropped down on the edge of his desk.

"They tell me you found the body, Johnny. You didn't run across a motive at the same time?"

"No. What do you think?" Jamison shrugged. "Could be anything. Love affair that went wrong, blackmail—whatever brings on sudden death. I learned one interesting thing. Do you know whose dough was backing the skating show?" I stretched for an answer.

"Tinsley?" Bill pushed up his eyeshade. "Right. How did you learn that?"

"Just a guess. I saw him there last night. Tinsley's a Minnesota taxpayer. Susy came from there. What about Tinsley?"

Jamison looked at his notes. "He's been a widower for ten years. He's worth twenty million. He's the party who bought the Emory Emeralds from some Indian potentate for his late wife. Six perfect green stones, each worth a flock of coin. I suppose you know, Johnny, that Mrs. Tinsley's jewel collection was second to none in this country. The emeralds, in a short necklace, were the top item. You can get the dope from the morgue files. I did."

I asked, after a long pause, "Where would Nick Caduro fit in?"

"That punk!" Bill took off the eyeshade. "You don't mean he's in on this?"

"Nickie boy was at the ice frolic last night. He knew an about me being in the Darcy dressing room. He was so interested, he sent his trigger-man, Georgie Bister, to invite me up to his apartment in the Stanwich Arms for a drink. After Bister frisked me, Caduro told me I was due for lead poisoning if I mentioned my call."

Jamison's eyes began to gleam.

"Caduro, eh? Johnny, if that mug is interested, it might mean plenty."

"Keep me out of it," I said. "I like breathing!" As an afterthought, I asked, "Say, where does Tinsley hole in?"

"Hotel Republic," Bill answered. "He's got the gold suite there. You're not thinking of stopping in to see him, are you?"

"No— not him."

I called Libby at Arcady House, made a dinner date, and glanced at my watch. A few minutes after eleven— a good time for a pre-lunch call.

The lobby of the Hotel Republic, midway up aristocratic Park Avenue, looked like a Hollywood movie set. Telephone calls announcing my presence were relayed back and forth until finally a desk clerk, a wistful-eyed party in a cutaway coat, informed me I could use one of the elevators. The gold suite did business on the twentieth story. A man-servant with the same droopy eyes as his boss ushered me into a lounge room with a view.

Five minutes later the door opened and Nan Tinsley entered. The little blond was wearing a dragon-embroidered Chinese housecoat instead of a broadtail coat. Bare feet were in silver sandals. In the morning sunshine her gold hair glimmered like the stuff at Fort Knox.

He looked at me and I saw recognition in the slate gray eyes.

"Oh!" she said. "I'll make this brief, Miss Tinsley. I stopped around to ask you a few routine questions."

"Are you with the police? I was told you were a newspaper reporter who wanted an interview— about my— ah— about television."

"That's right. But my interest in Miss Darcy's murder has a police connection. I'm trying to turn up some clues I can hand Homicide, to help them as well as my paper."

"What do you want to ask me?" She was beginning to chill.

"You wanted to see Miss Darcy last night. What about?"

"That was a personal matter." Her tone was suddenly defensive.

"Don't let's beat bushes, Miss Tinsley," I said. "Murder's murder, and nothing's personal when investigations get underway. Be frank with me and I'll save you a lot of assorted headaches."

"I don't understand," she said.

"The police would like to know why you went to see Suzette Darcy. If I mentioned your call, Captain Mullin of Homicide would want you at Headquarters for some chitchat. Mullin is a most unsympathetic individual. And, there'd be a lot of newspaper reporters with their ears hanging out. They'd have you all over the front pages with pictures. You know—'Millionaire's Heiress Tied In With Paladium Pass-out.' "

The slate-gray eyes darkened. Slender fingers began to move up and down the sash of the Chinese housecoat. She helped herself to a cigarette from a

crystal container, took a drag on it, and looked at me thoughtfully. "There's no mystery about it," she said finally.

"I'd known Miss Darcy for quite awhile. She came from a town near where I live in Minnesota. I merely wanted to congratulate her."

She made it sound authentic, but something told me there was more to it than that. I looked at her quizzically. She began to smile. A pleasant smile that said: "Kick that around. What are you going to do about it?"

I got up. It looked like a blank— until I reached the doors. The sad-faced servant who had let me in opened them suddenly and coughed.

"There's a telephone call for you, Miss Nan. Will take it in here?"

"Phone call?" The blonde mashed out her cigarette.

"Mr. Caduro is on the wire."

I bowed out, something tingling from the end of my spine to the top of my scalp. Caduro! Telephoning Amos Tinsley's daughter! I began to understand how far in on the tangle the patent-leather-haired hooligan was!

I was out to the street under the Republic's bronze canopy when Larry Hartley started up the steps. The lieutenant gave me a glance sharp enough to shave with.

"I've been looking for you, Castle. The captain wants to split some more conversation with you— concerning last night. I'll only be a minute here. Wait!" He went through the revolving door. When he came back his face was expressionless. "Okay, Johnny. Let's go."

Captain Mullin was in one of his moody humors. Which meant that instead of employing his usual hillbilly tactics, he would try to be cute and clever. On him it wasn't becoming.

"So you were pegged coming out of the Hotel Republic," Mullin said, when Hartley told him where he had found me. "Out of your territory, isn't it? What were you doing up there?"

I answered. "I'll have to see a mouthpiece before I answer questions. Or am I under arrest?"

"You will be if you don't stop trying to be foxy with me," he growled. ''I'll tell you why you were there. You went up there to see Amos Tinsley." As the captain unloaded that he looked as smug as a rabbit that had just pulled a magician out of a hat.

"Tinsley wasn't in," Hartley murmured, over Mullin's lumpy shoulders. "I telephoned up to find out."

The head of Homicide fastened his fishy eyes on me. He put one half-soled eleven on the slide of his desk and tried to look tough. That didn't require much effort.

"I'm warning you, Castle. You're attempting to solve the Paladium thing on your own. You want a beat for your paper, and the hell with the New York Police Department."

I didn't say anything. Hartley looked out the window. Mullin went on:

"It's your duty as a citizen to turn any evidence you have over to me. I see now it's the same old stuff. You're playing solo and trying to make a monkey out of me, trying to solve the thing yourself, to show what bright little boys newspaper guys are and what a lot of eggheads are cops."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him nature had beaten me to it, making a monkey out of him. But I didn't. Instead, I gave him one of my friendliest smiles and shrugged. I said innocently:

"I don't know what you're talking about, Captain. It's all Russian to me. And I haven't gone far with my lessons with Pal Vishinsky!"

He let that slide. "What did you want to see Amos Tinsley about?" he demanded. "How did you know he was a friend of Suzette Darcy's? Who gave you the slant on that?"

My ears went up. So the Flour King wasn't just somebody who came from Minnesota where the dead Susy had lived, but had been a friend of hers. I thought, stick around Headquarters and you learn things.

"That's no secret," I said, "It's public knowledge that Tinsley backed the ice show. Or isn't it?"

The telephone rang and Mullin reached for it. Before he picked it up he growled:

"You don't want to do business with me? You're lone-wolfing it again, huh? All right, Castle. I warned you to lay off. Don't, and see what happens to you! That's all for now."

I got up.

"Drop over to my place some night soon," I invited.

"What for?" Mullin grunted. "We'll open a gas jet," I said— and left fast.

Riding across town in a taxi, I was thinking hard. What the icicle-eyed Captain Mullin had let out of the bag concerning the Flour King, late of St. Paul, and his friendship with the glamorous Suzette had started a train of thought that gathered speed at every whistle stop. I had a double choice. One, to try and see Tinsley and in someway dig information out of him. The kind it was likely Mullin hadn't got. The other angle was Tinsley's attractive daughter. The first score had been all in her favor. But I had a stronger in now. The Caduro tie-up seemed to be as good as three kings and a pair of aces. At Longacre Square I dismissed the taxi and headed for a telephone booth in the nearest drugstore. My dime gave me the voice of the old manservant who had admitted me to the gold suite earlier. He said Mr. Tinsley was out. He didn't know what time he'd be back.

"Let me talk to Miss Tinsley," I said.

"I'm sorry, sir. She isn't at home, either."

"You wouldn't know where she went? This," I lied smoothly, "is an old family friend from St. Paul."

"Which friend?" The voice in my ear dripped honey. I remembered then that he probably had been with the Tinsley's for years and knew all their pals. So I slipped the receiver back on the hook and went back to the newspaper office.

Jamison's desk was vacant. There was a load of mail on mine, mostly from fight managers seeking free publicity for aspiring hopefuls. I sorted through it, pushed it aside and thought hard. I was still trying to find an answer when Jamison came in.

"Break?" I asked.

Bill shook his head. "What's the matter with that cement-head called Mullin? All of a sudden it's minimum coverage from now on. For security reasons, he says. I can't even learn if he's got the gun. It's a blank wall."

Jamison lighted a cigarette and slumped down in his chair.

"I've got an angle," I said slowly, "I don't know how to play it. Tinsley's daughter knows something, but won't spill. I saw her after I left here this morning. Somebody was telephoning her when she handed me my hat. The name was Caduro!"

Jamison's head snapped up with a jerk.

"You're kidding!"

"I'm leveling. What can Nan Tinsley have in common with that bandit? I'm sure I can shake a lot of valuable talk loose if I can see her again and get her started. How?"

"Why don't you get Beth to phone her? Maybe the butler's suspicious of a man's voice. Maybe he has orders."

"It's a notion." I said, and went out to the switchboard. Beth Wheaton, one of the plug swingers who sailed from Brooklyn and got most of her comedy via the radio, glanced up when I parked.

"Oh, Mr. Castle. You're wishing a number, maybe?" Dialect went with the question.

"How would you like to earn a five spot?"

"Make it dollars instead of spots and I'll say yes. You want me to call your girl friend and tell her you're working late tonight?"

"I want you to call up the Hotel Republic and talk about Miss Nan Tinsley."

"Oh, society stuff he asks for."

I took a bill out of my leather and let her see its denomination.

"Okay, Mr. Castle. What do I say and how do I say it?"

I gave her a quick briefing— and waited. The Brooklyn accent wasn't too good, but the droopy-eyed servant evidently wasn't suspicious. Beth thanked him and pulled the plug out.

"Miss Tinsley," she said, "is at the matinee at the Fine Arts Theayter. She's not returning for dinner. Lucky dame!"

iv

THE playhouse had a quarter to five curtain. I was propped in the lobby fifteen minutes before the audience came out. The show was heavy, drawing-room drama that looked good for a summer run. Finally the patrons began to come through the lobby doors. They were nearly all out before I had a glimpse of Nan Tinsley, alone, and bee-lining for a taxi. I went after her.

The taxi stopped, and she got in.

So did I.

I pulled the door shut and said to the hackie, "Riverside Drive. I'll tell you when to stop."

Then I turned and looked into gray eyes full of sparks.

"What's the meaning of this?" Nan Tinsley demanded.

"Plenty. You held out this morning. I gave you an even break and you tried to cheat. This time it's going to be different."

"Yes?" The sparks burned out, but her pretty face still remained as informative as a piece of stone.

"I've learned a couple of things. About your father being friendly with Suzette Darcy. So far that's been under the counter. The police haven't released it. I'll have to if you don't open up."

She drew her red underlip between her teeth. I made sure the glass partition between the front and back of the cab was shut. I breathed in the smell of white lilacs. It came from the green dress and smartly tailored coat Nan Tinsley was wearing.

"Take me back to my hotel!" There was a snap in her voice. "I have a dinner date!"

"With Nick Caduro?" She didn't answer. She didn't have to. From the flash of her eyes I knew I had scored. I said to the driver, pushing the partition open, "Take us down to Centre Street, Police Headquarters."

He gave me a fast glance, and turned at the first corner going the right way. Nan Tinsley's lips were a stubborn red line. Her gloved fingers wove together. I waited. Five blocks. Then ten. I had figured she was obstinate enough to keep silent the whole way when she suddenly cracked.

"You're not really going to take me to the police?" she asked abruptly, a catch in her voice. "What do you want to know?"

"Take us uptown again," I directed the driver, shoved the partition shut again and turned back to the blonde. "What did you go up to Suzette Darcy's dressing room for? And don't say congratulations or autograph."

It took a long time coming. Nan Tinsley wasn't the kind who folded fast. But finally she drew a deep breath and straightened.

"My father was at Headquarters this morning. He must have told them about the Emory Emeralds. If they know, everyone else will—sooner or later. I wanted to ask Suzette to return them. They belonged to my mother. Maybe you've heard of them. They're famous and worth a lot of money. My father had no right to give them to Suzette. They really belong to me— my mother wanted me to have them! Dad knows that, but— but—"

"Your father thought they'd go good with copper hair?" I put in. She was started now, and she answered that question without hesitation.

"It isn't entirely his fault! Suzette Darcy had been working on him ever since she first saw the emeralds. And Dad—well, he's not as young as he once was and I suppose he was flattered by her attention. You know how men get. He did anything she asked—anything and everything. I didn't care about the money he spent, but when he started giving her something that belonged to me, I thought it was time to call a halt."

"The cops could get you a Grand Jury indictment on that one statement!" I murmured.

"I didn't kill her!" The gray eyes flashed again. "All I wanted to do was see her. She was carefully avoiding me. I wanted to tell her she couldn't keep the emeralds, that they weren't my father's to give! That's why I went to her dressing room last night."

It added up. An old man's infatuation for a glamorous gal who was on the make. This motive was one hundred per cent sound. The emeralds had been green lights to Death!

"What about Nick Caduro?" I asked Nan. "Where does he come in?" Her lips tightened. The stubborn look froze her face again. But I knew the system now. When she shifted her gaze, I made a show of reaching out to push the partition back. That did it.

"Mr. Caduro's a private detective I hired the other day."

I could only stare. I wanted to laugh, but I didn't. It wasn't a gag with her, either. Her tone was as serious as a major operation.

"Private detective?" I ejaculated, and she must have sensed my surprise. "How did you meet him? What did you hire him for?"

She pressed her fingers together. "At first I thought I should have helped to get the emeralds back. I didn't know what Suzette would do. If she refused to return them, I decided to have them taken away from her. I don't know much

about police methods, but I had an idea a private detective was what I needed. So I engaged Mr. Caduro's services."

"But where did you find him?" I insisted, really interested.

"I don't mind telling you. I was in the cocktail lounge at the hotel. Last Tuesday, about five o'clock. The house detective stopped at my table for a minute. I knew him because he had found a suitcase that had been misplaced when we checked in."

"What did you say to the house detective?" I asked.

"I asked him if he could recommend a private detective agency. He gave me two or three names, then went away. He hadn't been gone more than a minute or two before Mr. Caduro, who had been sitting nearby, got up and came over."

I nodded.

"Nickie boy had overheard you. Opportunity never has to knock twice for him. So he told you he was a private detective and would be glad to offer his services. What did he do for credentials and an office address?"

Nan Tinsley said that Caduro had shown her a badge, and had explained that he was preparing to open larger offices and that until he decided on a location he was operating from his suite in the Stanwich Arms. I could imagine the suave, convincing way he had worked himself into her confidence.

"And," I said, "you hired him and told him about the Emory Emeralds. What did he say?"

"That he'd get them back for me. All he wanted was a five-hundred-dollar retainer."

Light began to shine through. Caduro, in the role of a private eye! A fortune in emeralds handed him! The kind of grab that comes once in a lifetime! Custom-made and built to size!

No wonder, I told myself, the sloppy Bister had given me the frisk in Nick's apartment. That was sufficient to show me Caduro hadn't got his hands on the green gems.

But because he'd had an idea that I might have found them in the dressing room— that fact brought a swarm of ideas and questions buzzing through my brain.

Someone had murdered Suzette Darcy for the Emory Emeralds! But hadn't been able to get away with them. Something, somewhere, had gone wrong. They had put on the kill, but had failed to collect. The finger of suspicion leveled at Caduro. He knew about the famous gems, knew who had them. Yet if his gun had hurled the slug into the ice star, there hadn't been a pay-off for him— yet.

"Can I go back to the hotel now?" Nan Tinsley's voice had a quaver again.

I said, "Sure," and gave the driver the Hotel Republic as a new address. Then I said to Nan, "But you're not keeping any engagement with Mr. Caduro, if you

have one, tonight. I'm going to introduce you to a girl friend of mine, a Miss Hart. I'll see that she keeps you out of trouble."

Nan's brows went up. "What kind of—" she began, stopping when I clipped it off short and said, "Private eye trouble! In the fashionable raiment of Nick Caduro."

Then I explained, giving her a quick sketch of the gent and his activities while the taxi rolled toward Park Avenue and the hotel....

MY WATCH showed it was almost seven o'clock when I got back to my rooms in a building which at one time had been a livery stable. Some smart operator, realizing each stall would make a three-room suite, had done some remodeling. The agent who had rented me the place said it was lucky. There was a horseshoe in every room.

The minute I unlocked the front door I realized I'd had visitors. The place looked as if a junior cyclone had hit it. Someone had given it a complete going over. Every drawer had been emptied on the floor. The mattress had been slashed and pulled apart. Feathers from the pillows lay like snowflakes in the bedroom. Even the pictures had been dragged down from the walls.

Bister? It was the sloppy type of job a sloppy guy like Georgie would do.

So Nick still thought I had the green flash?

That was reassuring in one degree. It meant Nick Caduro would stick around awhile longer. And I needed time to work on an idea that had popped into my mind after I had got Libby on the phone and blarneyed her into playing chaperon for Nan Tinsley that evening. Lib hadn't liked it. And with her sneaking suspicion that I was up to my old tricks of crime busting again, it had required a lot of soft talk and hard logic to get her to agree.

I put out the lights and left the mess in my rooms as was. It wasn't hard to figure how my visitor had got in. I'd never bothered to put a burglar-proof lock on my front door. All that would have done would have been to send uninvited callers around to the rear windows. There were a mere five feet from the areaway. When I went out I cased the block.

When Mullin thought I was chiseling on the police he had a habit of sticking a shag on me. It was likely, also, that the unconvinced Caduro might have Georgie hidden out somewhere nearby to watch everything I did, whom I knew. But nobody tailed me to Broadway and the cafeteria where I had some quick cuisine.

The case of the murdered skating sensation was going around in circles. The same kind of dizzy whirligigs Suzette had cut on the ice of the Paladium stage. Only one thing was definite. The Emory Emeralds were still missing.

I doubted, even after what Nan had said about her father seeing the police, that Amos Tinsley had mentioned the gems to Homicide. After all, a man like the

Flour King had some pride. And the fact that Hartley had gone back to the Hotel Republic, probably for more questioning, might or might not confirm the notion that Tinsley had kept quiet about the emeralds. What I had in mind was a long chance.

I hadn't forgotten Suzette Darcy's folded-back pale white hand. The hand I'd looked at when I had first seen her crumpled figure on the dressing room floor.

The recollection of it came back, swiftly and sharply.

It was a hundred-to-one bet, but sometimes long shots upset the dope and breeze in. I paid my check and started toward Columbus Circle.

v

FIFTEEN minutes later I had reached the Paladium. The place had been closed until a new star could be found for the ice pageant. The huge building was in darkness. Passing the gay posters of Suzette Darcy, I went on around to the stage entrance. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago the place had been the scene of gaiety and excitement, then of confusion and morbid curiosity.

I looked for a watchman. The outer doors were open, the inner locked. A dim light burned in a cement-floored recess. An elderly man, in a tilted back chair, slapped his feet on the cement when I walked in on him.

"Police business."

I made it authoritative, giving him a flash at my police card. I put the card away and slid a bill out of my hip pocket wallet. That interested him. He looked from the money to me, then back at the cash again.

"About last night?" he asked.

When I nodded he said, "There's nobody around now. They took the cop off this afternoon."

I handed the money over. "I've got to go up for a while. Okay?"

"Sure. I'm making my rounds now. Take all the time you want."

He unlocked the inside doors and pulled a switch.

More small, wan lights flickered on inside. I found the stairs and went up to the third tier, my footsteps making hollow echoes. The stainless steel door of the star's dressing room was shut, but not locked. I felt around inside until I found the wall switch. That turned on a couple of lamps and filled the mirror walls with my reflection. Except that the dressing room had been cleaned up of exploded flash bulbs, cigar ashes and fingerprint powder, everything was as it had been when I had charged in after hearing Libby's anguished scream.

I glanced at the floor where Suzy had reposed. There was still a blood stain on the rug. My gaze went to the dressing table, the Arcady House products, and on to the door of the adjoining bath. I moved slowly over to that.

As I reached it I felt a cool current of air on my ankles. Then the almost soundless click of the door latch!

Turning, I looked into the round, black O of a .45-caliber Colt automatic, gripped in the hand of Nick Caduro. It was leveled at my heart and steady as a rock. Behind the dapper Nickie, Georgie Bister, a match stuck in one corner of his seamy-lipped mouth, was watching and enjoying every minute of it.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Castle," Caduro said. "Remember?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Sit down. I want a little conversation with you."

I dropped down in the same chair I'd warmed while waiting for Homicide the previous night. Caduro lowered the gun to a new level.

"What have you got to say, Castle?" His tone was like the steel he held. A chill that started at my scalp this time worked down all the way to my shoes. I felt an inner cramp, quick and twisting. Caduro's eyes were as deadly as the weapon he gripped.

"You could have asked me to show George around the premises," I began, trying to keep my voice steady. "He didn't have to pull my place to pieces."

Bister laughed. Caduro snapped, "So you got to the Tinsley dame and stalled her on me? She broke the date I had with her and I don't need a blueprint to tell me why."

He took a step closer, a muscle in his cheek twitching. "Let that ride. You know what I want!"

"Sure, emeralds. The Emory Emeralds. But what makes you think I have them? I was clean when Georgie went through me in your apartment. They weren't in mine. So that's that."

Caduro's lips folded back in a thin, dangerous smile. "Sure. But you're not clean now. What did you come back here for tonight? I'll tell you. You found the emeralds last night. You were too smart to walk out with them then. So you stashed them in here somewhere. Where?"

Bister moved away from the door. His right hand dropped carelessly in the pocket of his overcoat. The match stick in the corner of his mouth stopped bobbing and weaving. Caduro's eyes peered at me. The cold chill spread, wrapping around me like an icy blanket.

"If the emeralds were here when the Darcy girl was bumped," I heard myself saying, "why weren't they picked up then?"

"Because," Caduro rasped, "Bister's a mouse! The gal screamed and he got scared! So scared his gun went off— this gun!"

"That's right," the rum-dum mumbled. "Why didn't she keep her mouth shut? She wouldn't have got hurt. All I come for—"

"Shut up, you dummy!" Caduro cut in.

"Knowing about her won't do him no good where he's going," Bister whined. "Come on, Nick. Put him away and let's get out of here. I'm worried about that watchman."

Caduro's .45 burrowed into my chest. He was so close I could feel his breath on my hair and face. There was murder in his mind.

"Last half of the last inning, Castle. Where's the stuff?"

I could almost feel his finger get set on the trigger. Something came up in my throat, a lump that I couldn't swallow. My heart slowed to a waltz time tick and then began to rhumba. After all, I told myself, what was my life compared with some green stones? And how did I know the idea I had dreamed up was the right one? Even if I told Nickie about it, and it proved to be correct, he certainly wasn't going to turn me loose. Not now.

"Try that big jar of cold cream over there," I managed to say. Caduro stepped back. Bister gulped. It sounded like a seal swallowing a fish.

"What's it—a rib?" Georgie laughed. "Last night, when I was up here"— I squeezed the words out painfully— "I noticed one of her hands. Something glistened on it. Cold cream. There wasn't any on her face—"

Bister's exclamation rang like a bell."The dame was standing right over there near that jar when I came in!"

"Get it!" Caduro's command cracked like a whip. "What are you waiting for? Bring it over here!"

The sloppy Bister went for the Arcady House container like a terrier after a rat. Another order from Nick and Georgie brought a folded towel in from the bath. He stretched that out flat on the floor. Caduro handed him the jar.

"Dump it." Bister complied, but with not too much success. The thick, white stuff didn't spill easily. Georgie kept rapping the sides of the can with his big hand.

"Reach in, you dope !" Nick snarled."Feel around!"

Georgie did. My heart stopped its pounding when his fingers waded around and began to come up with something. The lamplight flashed on what looked like green glass when Bister wiped the cold cream from it. Caduro, turning sideward, bent over to see better. The big, untidy hoodlum's breathing sounded like a calliope warming up.

But all I could think of was that I had been right about when the Emory Emeralds had been cached. I hoped I was going to be right about the impulse beating at the back of my brain. It was now or never! I gripped the arms of the chair and shot out of it.

Nick's position made him a perfect setup for attack. Bent sideward, he was not only off-balance but in mowing him down he would fall on top of the crouched-over Georgie. A carom shot, if I ever saw one!

My shoulder hit him like a bowling ball between the Number Two and Three pins. It wasn't so much strength as swiftness and surprise. With a ripped-out oath Nickie boy slammed into Bister and both went down, faces to the rug. The cold cream jar rolled merrily away while I grabbed for the gun that had bounced out of Caduro's hand.

It was about ten inches from the tips of my fingers. I had to work fast. I was just touching the stock of the rod when Caduro wriggled out from under me and used a knee. It was an agonizing jolt. It made me clamp my teeth down on the groan that burst out of my throat. But I kept on reaching.

I had the gun the next minute. It was off safety and ready to use! The room danced before my eyes. I was full of pain. But I hardly felt the pain when I saw Caduro scramble to his feet and start to come at me.

With a tremendous effort I got the gun up and pressed the trigger.

The roar sounded as if an artillery barrage were being laid down in the room. I kept on pumping the gun madly, wildly, until suddenly, and without notice, the lights went out and the noise stopped. I seemed to shoot down a chute— into a lot of waiting black coal. Only, as the radio comics Beth Wheaton listened to would have said, it didn't hurt because it was soft coal. Soft as fleece....

WHEN I came out of it I thought somebody had turned the clock back. Because I was still in the dressing room, but it was full of uniformed authority again. I was laid out on an upholstered settee and Lieutenant Hartley was busy chafing my wrists. Over his left ear I saw Captain Mullin. That stocky figure was across the room. The emerald necklace hung suspended from one of his stubby fingers. Somebody must have cleaned off the cream while I was sleeping. Now it sparkled and scintillated like Cartier's front window.

I looked past Mullin. A couple of plainclothes men were giving first aid to the Messrs. Caduro and Bister. Both had been shot, Georgie in the legs and Nickie boy in the arms. Wheeler was trying handcuffs on them for size, and Georgie was bleeding out a full confession in a mumble-jumble of words.

"Feeling better, Johnny?" Hartley picked up the flask that had left a sting in my mouth.

"I'm okay. What happened?"

"Nothing much except that two of your six shots rang bells. Good thing for you the watchman was handy, heard the racket and came in. Looks like you decided to pass out or something at the wrong moment. But it's all in and on the books, now. We've got the gun, the guy who murdered Suzette Darcy— and the motive!"

I sat up and lowered my feet to the floor. That felt steady under them. Caduro threw a venomous glance at me, but I didn't pay any attention. I was

more interested in Captain Fred Mullin, the smile on his granite pan, and the hand that he held out as he flat-footed over to me.

"Much as I hate doing it," he rumbled, "I've got to hand it to you, Castle. With my help you sewed this case up to the Queen's taste. How about a lift downtown— or anywhere else that you may want to go?"

"Thanks," I told him. "All I want is a telephone and a call to the gold suite at the Hotel Republic. When I get my gal friend there on the wire, Captain, you can speak your piece— for me."

Mullin rubbed his chin and looked puzzled. "Yeah? What do you want me to tell her?"

I grinned and reached for the telephone. "What a swell guy I am, and how you did all the heavy work on this one. I didn't have a thing to do with it. Right?"

He nodded, and I got the number.

End