THE MASSINGHAM BUTTERFLY

By

J. S. Fletcher

THE MASSINGHAM BUTTERFLY

and other stories

J. S. Fletcher

1863-1935

This ebook produced by Terry Walker, October 2025

London, Herbert Jenkins 1926

Contents

_____

1: The Massingham Butterfly

Being a Chapter From The Reminiscences of Paul Campenhaye, Specialist in Criminology

IT WAS THE SATURDAY morning of the Epsom summer meeting week of 1908— the year in which a rank outsider, Signorinetta, won both Derby and Oaks, to the surprise of everybody and the discomfiture of many. Having little to occupy me just then, I had made the journey to the Downs on all four days, and on that Saturday morning I was still feeling holidayish, and I only looked in at my office in Jermyn Street to glance at whatever letters might be there. There was nothing of importance, and I was just thinking of going to Brighton for the week-end, when my clerk, Killingley, came in with a note.

"From Mr. Penkfether," he said. "Bearer waits."

The fact that the note was from Penkfether made me scent business at once— Penkfether was not the sort of man to send for me at nearly noon on a Saturday morning unless he particularly wanted me. He, as the head of one of the most famous pawnbroking businesses in the West End of London, had as good a notion of the fittingness of things as anybody, and I knew he would not trouble me on the slackest morning of the week without good cause. And almost before I had read the few words, hastily scribbled across a half sheet of notepaper, which asked me to step round to Penkfether's at once, I had left my office and was following the messenger.

That branch— the head one— of Penkfether's businesses is in a certain side street in the immediate neighbourhood of Piccadilly Circus. In appearance the shop is dingy and inconspicuous. Its barred and wired windows reveal little beyond some precious stones and some old silver— I often used to chaff Penkfether about these things, asking him if they were real, or merely property fixed like the coloured bottles in chemists' windows. But inside that shop a lot of big business was done— quietly and unobtrusively. Folks who would never dream of going to moneylenders went to Penkfether's, and Penkfether's safes at one time or another have harboured plate and jewels belonging to some of the best families in England. Heavily veiled ladies occasionally entered the outer shop, and were seen by Penkfether himself in a quiet little room behind a sound-proof room which formed an invisible sanctuary when Penkfether and a client were once within it. And it was in this room that Penkfether was now awaiting me— a little, bald-headed, quick-eyed, middle-aged man, whose suave and gentle manner was much appreciated by those who dealt with him— especially the ladies. But urbane and considerate as he was, Penkfether was as sharp a man at his trade as any man in London.

He greeted me with a queer, suggestive smile as he closed the airtight door upon us, and pointed me to a chair at his desk.

"Campenhaye," he said, plunging straight into business as he took his own seat beside me, "I sent round for you because I'm up against a very queer thing. You know the Marquis of Massingham?"

"I know about as much as the world knows," I replied. "Not over well off; lost a lot of money on the turf at one time; bit of a man about town; married Queenie Primrose, of the Hilarity; owns several thousand acres in Ireland— which I believe, aren't worth much."

"True," said Penkfether. "Also he owns the Massingham Butterfly— which is worth a lot. Ever hear of it?"

"Yes, I've heard of it," I answered, "but without knowing much about it. Isn't it an heirloom? Diamond ornament, eh?"

"It's an ornament which can be used as a pendant or in a lady's hair," replied Penkfether. "I thought perhaps you might have seen the marchioness wearing it."

"Never seen the marchioness since the old Hilarity days," said I. "She used to do a skippingrope turn that— "

"Yes, yes!" broke in Penkfether. "That's as long ago as the flood. She turns all her attention to dogs and horses now. But this Massingham Butterfly— it is, as you say, a diamond affair; butterfly made principally of very fine diamonds. It has a history; it was given to the fourth Marquis of Massingham by Catherine the Great of Russia— he, you may know, was Ambassador to Russia. And he made it an heirloom. Got that?"

"I have," I answered.

"Get this, too, then," continued Penkfether. "The butterfly's worth every penny of twelve thousand pounds. And now I'll tell you why I sent for you. The Massingham Butterfly has been stolen!"

"Carelessness on the part of its present holder, I suppose?" said I.

Penkfether gave me a queer look.

"I didn't say it had been stolen from the marquis," he remarked. "I merely said it has been stolen."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "A subtle difference. Now, supposing you begin your story, Penkfether?"

"Just so," he responded cheerily. "We've come to it. Very well. Here you are. This morning, a little before 11 o'clock, the Marquis of Massingham sent in his card. I knew him because I've done business with him before, though not for two or three years. I had him brought in at once, and he came in looking a bit worried. 'Mr. Penkfether,' he said as soon as he sat down, 'I want to do some business with you. I've had an awfully bad time at Epsom,' he went on. 'The extraordinary results of the Derby and the Oaks have upset all my calculations. I must have a couple of thousand pounds in cash for Monday morning, and I want you to lend me that sum. And for security,' he said, pulling a small parcel out of his pocket, 'I'll leave the famous Massingham Butterfly with you. I believe,' he went on, with a laugh,

'that it's worth a good deal more than the amount I want. How will it do, Mr. Penkfether?' "

Penkfether paused there, and gave me another of his queer glances. Then he slapped his desk.

"Campenhaye," he exclaimed, "I've schooled myself all my life to attain perfection in the art of maintaining a stolid and impassive countenance, and I flatter myself that I've done very well, but I tell you that I never had such a task to keep unmoved as when the marquis made this proposition. It was a wonder he saw nothing. As it was, I had to jump up and affect to look at something in that corner— I was so surprised, so clean bowled out!"

"But why?" I asked.

"Why?" answered Penkfether, almost excitedly. "Why? Why, man, because I had the Massingham Butterfly in that safe at that moment! That's why."

I pulled Penkfether's open box of delicate Russian cigarettes towards me, and lighted one.

"That, I suppose, is the prefatory note to story the second," I said. "Proceed, Penkfether. I assume that the famous butterfly had already been pawned with you."

Penkfether unlocked and turned over the leaves of a private diary which lay, fitted with a patent lock, on his desk. He ran his finger down a page.

"It is three weeks yesterday," he said, closing and relocking the book, "since the Marchioness of Massingham called on me. Now, I know her ladyship much better than I know her husband. I knew her in the old Hilarity days, and I've done business with her since, and I've always found her a perfectly straight and dependable woman. And that's perhaps why, in the transaction that followed, I wasn't quite as careful as I usually am. However, the marchioness wanted to borrow money. She wanted exactly what the marquis wanted this morning— a couple of thousand. And she offered the famous butterfly in pledge. Of course, I immediately asked if the marquis was cognizant of the matter? She answered readily enough that he was, and as I happen to know that she and her husband are on very good terms with each other— it really was a love match, that— I believed her. And we finished the transaction there and then."

"Without your particularly examining the pledge, I venture to suppose?" said I.

"True for you!" answered Penkfether, a little ruefully. "You see, I was very well acquainted with the butterfly. It had certainly never come under my hands before, but I had often seen the marchioness wearing it, at the theatre, and the opera, and so on; and when she produced it, I merely glanced at it, put it back in its case, and locked it up. I got bank notes for the money, handed them over, and the marchioness went away. So now you will understand why I felt intensely surprised when the marquis turned up this morning and wanted to pledge what his wife had already pawned!"

"Just so," I responded. "But you are a good man at thinking quickly, Penkfether."

"I had to think at double-quick time, I can tell you," he said. "I immediately saw all sorts of things. I didn't want to give the woman away; I didn't want to say anything about her coming to me. And, luckily, I managed to say the right thing— it flashed into my mind. 'Won't the marchioness miss the butterfly— right in the middle of the season?' I said half jocularly. 'I have often seen her wearing it.'

" 'Oh, that's all right, Mr. Penkfether,' says he. 'We have a replica of it, don't you know— a paste affair which my father had made in Paris years ago. To tell you the truth,' he added, laughing, 'the counterfeit is so real that I don't believe that my wife could tell which is the real butterfly when real and counterfeit are placed side by side. She has worn the paste thing when she thought she was wearing the real thing,' he went on laughing again, 'and I dare say she's as happy with one as the other.' So he said, and I immediately began to see how matters stood. The marchioness had brought me the counterfeit, the replica, thinking that it was the genuine article, eh, Campenhaye?"

"Perhaps," said I. "Perhaps, Penkfether. The marquis may have made the same mistake, you know."

"Ah, well, I thought of that," he answered. "But as I know that one or other of the two was the genuine article, I lent him the two thousand that he wanted, and he went off. After all, the real Massingham Butterfly is worth a good twelve thousand, and I'd only lent four, and I felt sure that I'd got the real thing. It was either in my safe then— left by the marchioness— or it was on my desk, left by the marquis. See?"

"Proceed, Penkfether," I answered. "I am seeing many things."

"Well, as soon as his lordship had gone," continued Penkfether, "I thought I might as well examine the two articles, to see which was the genuine butterfly. Naturally, I looked at the one last brought first. And I at once found that, whatever the marquis might believe, it was the duplicate, or, rather, counterfeit. Beautifully made— the finest workmanship— but paste. Here it is."

Penkfether pulled open a drawer and revealed two packages of similar size, but done up in differently coloured papers. Opening one, he showed me what appeared to be a beautiful diamond ornament, fashioned like a butterfly of the largest size, the wings spread, the antennae projecting. The body was fashioned of large diamonds, the rest of the creature of smaller ones. The frame was set in delicate gold work. The whole made a very exquisite thing, and it was difficult to believe that it was not what it seemed to be.

"That's the counterfeit," said Penkfether, "or, rather, I should say, that's one of the counterfeits. For— prepare yourself for a shock, Campenhaye! the other, the one brought by the marchioness, is counterfeit, too! Look!"

He rapidly unrolled the other parcel, revealing a second butterfly, so exactly like the first that when they were placed side by side I could not tell one from the other.

"Both paste!" said Penkfether. "Paste! Now, then, Campenhaye, this is where I think you will have to come in. For the next question is— where is the genuine article?"

I made a closer examination of the two ornaments. For the life of me I could see no difference between them. And I asked Penkfether if he could.

"Yes," he answered, "but it's a difference which only an expert could detect. This," he went on, indicating the butterfly left by the marquis, "is the elder of the two— the other, I believe, from certain small evidences which are too technical to explain, to have been made recently."

"How recently?" I asked.

"I should say within the last year or two," he answered.

"And, of course, somebody made it," I said reflectively. "It would narrow things down considerably, Penkfether, if you could tell me who the people are that do this sort of work."

"There are certain specialists in Paris who do it," he replied. "I know of some— I even know of private marks which some put on their work. But there is not the faintest trace of a mark on this work. It has been done secretly."

"Would it be expensive?" I inquired.

"Very expensive— comparatively," he answered. "It would cost two or three hundred pounds to make either of these replicas."

I took another cigarette and thought matters over.

"You have full confidence in both these people?" I asked, after a pause.

"The marquis and marchioness? Yes, I have," answered Penkfether readily. "I believe they're both absolutely honest. I should be very much surprised if they knew anything about this. Nevertheless, I'm in a devil of a queer position, Campenhaye! You see, I've taken from both what is described on the special contract tickets as the diamond ornament known as the Massingham Butterfly. Now, I've no doubt whatever that the pledges will be redeemed. Supposing, later, that these things are found by their owners to be counterfeit, wouldn't there be a strong presumption that one counterfeit, at any rate, had been substituted for the genuine article while that was in my possession? Oh yes," he added, seeing my look of deprecating remonstrance at this suggestion, "I know the reputation of our firm for probity and so on, but that's all as it might be. There would be the fact that I took the Massingham Butterfly and handed back— a paste imitation!"

I spent a few minutes in hard pondering over this question.

"Penkfether," I said at last, "do you think it possible to trace the maker of this— the latest counterfeit?"

Penkfether shook his head.

"Might be— might be," he replied. "Inquiry in certain quarters in Paris might lead to something. I say might."

"You could put me on the edge of what might be a difficult path, but still a path?" I asked.

"Yes, I could do that," he said. "I could give you two or three introductions to certain people."

"Very good," said I. "Now hear my advice. Say nothing at present to Lord Massingham or to his wife. They're not very likely to redeem these things just yet, I suppose?"

"Not for two or three months, certainly," he answered.

"Very good. Then," I continued, "give me the imitation butterfly which you believe to have been the last made, let me have the introductions you speak of, and I will go over to Paris at once— to-morrow morning— to see what I can do. For this, Penkfether, is certain— somebody commissioned the making of that pretty bit of work. And that somebody in all probability holds, or has held, the real Massingham Butterfly."

Penkfether considered this proposition for a moment. Then his face cleared.

"Good!" he said. "We'll try it. You shall have the letters of introduction this afternoon. There's no need to give you any hints or instructions, Campenhaye; the only one word that I will say to you is— 'secrecy.' "

ii

I WAS IN PARIS by the end of the following afternoon, and as I dined that evening, purposely alone, at a favourite haunt, I thought much and carefully over the matter which had brought me to the French capital. It was a quest which might be trying, long, and eventually barren of result. True, I was not exactly in the position of one who seeks a needle in a bottle of hay, for my letters of introduction would doubtless be of some assistance, nevertheless, I had no direct clue, and Penkfether's supposition that the facsimile— carefully bestowed in a secret pocket within my waistcoat— had been made in Paris might be wrong, for it might have been made in London, or Vienna, or Amsterdam. One fact I assumed to be positively certain— this facsimile butterfly had been made in secrecy. For my theory was that some person, probably an expert thief, had somehow contrived to obtain possession of the genuine Massingham Butterfly long enough to enable him to have a facsimile made, and had substituted that counterfeit for the real at a convenient season. There were reasons against that theory. One, for instance, was that it was difficult to understand why, if the thief had once possessed himself of the real butterfly, he should trouble to have an imitation made of it; but when I considered all of them I still clung to it. And with me, personally, the mystery of the affair began to make a strong, growingly fascinating appeal.

I admit that I had been tempted to wonder if the good faith of the marquis and marchioness was to be implicitly trusted. I could see now, if they were not honest, a very serious fraud could be successfully carried out against Penkfether, due, of course, to his own laxity in not examining the first pledge. But I had never heard anything against these two— the mere fact that they were both addicted to betting was no indication of shadiness— and I was inclined to agree with Penkfether in his view of them. And while I had little doubt that there had been fraud of some sort I came to the conclusion that it had been against them. But by whom, and when, and where, and how, and for what reason?

My first inquiries, made under conditions of the strictest secrecy, yielded no result. I told what was necessary of my story to several persons to whom Penkfether's letters introduced me. I showed the counterfeit to several experts. None of them— all makers of such things themselves— knew anything of it. But they were all agreed upon one point— it had been made within the last twelve months, and the work was that of a master hand at his craft.

It was not until the fourth day of my inquiries that I came upon a gleam of light. It was afforded by an old gentleman, a manufacturing jeweller, who at sight of the counterfeit butterfly uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Monsieur," said he, "there is only one man in all Europe who could have made that! He is a man who at one time worked for me, but I have not seen, nor, indeed, heard of him, for some two years, perhaps longer. His name is Roubiaux. He is a genius, and a queer fellow. I would stake much that this was made by him."

"I would give a good deal to be able to ask him to identify this work, monsieur," I answered.

The old gentleman reflected a little, excused himself, and went into his workshop, and eventually returned with a scrap of paper on which an address had been scribbled with the stump of a pencil.

"One of my men," said he, "says that Roubiaux was living at this place a few months ago, and may still be there. Himself he has not seen Roubiaux lately. But if monsieur likes to call there on the chance? And let me tell you, monsieur, that this Roubiaux is, as I said, a queer fellow. Eccentric, you understand, and of the devil of a temper. But— also as I have said— a veritable genius."

I went around to the working class quarter indicated by the scribbled address. The house which I entered was one of the most prosperous in appearance, and its concierge, a shabby old man, looked askance at my fine clothes as I inquired for M. Roubiaux.

"Right at the top, monsieur," said he, pointing upward. "And monsieur may have his journey for nothing."

"You mean M. Roubiaux may not be in?" I asked.

"Roubiaux is always in," he answered grimly. "But Roubiaux only opens his door if he pleases, monsieur."

I took the chance of that, and toiled up several flights of stairs until I reached the proper number. On the door I knocked several times without receiving any reply. And I was about to go away when one of my fortunate ideas struck me. I took out a blank card and wrote a message in French.

"An English gentleman, recommended to M. Roubiaux by M. Virlet, desires to see him in reference to the execution of an important commission."

I thrust the card under the door and again knocked. And suddenly the door was opened and a big, unkempt, bearded man, wearing a loose smock like that of the Parisian ouvrier, thrust himself out, and closed the door behind him, and stared at me.

"I don't admit anyone to my apartment," he said gruffly. "I have a sick wife. Monsieur wishes— "

"To see you about some work, M. Roubiaux," I said.

"M. Virlet— that was the old manufacturing jeweller— gave me your name. I am sorry to incommode you. Perhaps you can call upon me?"

The man hesitated, pulled at his beard, and examined me closely.

"If monsieur will await me at the foot of the stair," he suggested, "I will get a neighbour to sit with my wife, and will join monsieur. There is a café close by where I can take monsieur's orders."

I went downstairs and waited till he came down. In the few minutes which had elapsed he had put on a well-worn suit of blue serge and a red tie; these things, and his big, slouched hat, went well with his black beard, and made a striking figure.

I noticed then, as I noticed afterwards, how remarkably slender and delicate were the fingers which he raised to his beard from time to time. He was big enough to possess the hands of a blacksmith, but those fingers were the fingers of the true artist, nervous, keenly alive to the finest shades of touch and feeling. I fancied them at work on the delicate craftsmanship of the facsimile butterfly in my pocket.

My companion, who had narrowly inspected me at our first meeting, led the way out of the neighbourhood to a more pretentious quarter, where he indicated a respectable café. It was then in the middle of the afternoon, and few people were within. Selecting a quiet corner I invited him to share a bottle of wine and to smoke a cigar. And while a waiter attended to my orders I swiftly considered my plan of campaign. Was I to adopt a bold policy, or was I to try to find out whatever there was to find out— which might be nothing— by finesse? Roubiaux himself, however, gave me an opening.

"Monsieur wishes me to do some work for him?" he said. "On M. Virlet's recommendation?"

"M. Virlet," said I, "says you are a genius. The particular work I was thinking of was facsimile work."

"Oh, I have done much in that line," he responded readily. "I have worked in several mediums, monsieur— metals, stones, mosaic. I can imitate anything— given opportunity, time and materials."

"Materials," I observed, as the waiter poured out the wine, "are of the greatest importance in imitative work?"

"Oh, undoubtedly, monsieur! For myself I should refuse to work unless I were supplied with the best materials to be procured," he answered.

"You could make an imitation of a diamond brooch, or a pendant, or a necklace, that could not be told from its original?" I asked.

"Certainly, monsieur— with the proper materials," he replied. "I have done much work of that sort. Replicas, monsieur understands."

I had determined on a bold stroke— it was best. And suddenly, as he set down his glass over which he had just bowed to me, I took out the counterfeit butterfly, snapped open the case which shielded it, and held the ornament before him.

"Is that your work?" I asked bluntly.

I knew instantly that it was. The artist's pride in a particularly clever achievement of his own immediately flashed into the man's eyes. He was just applying a match to his cigar; in his astonishment he dropped both cigar and match.

"Name of a— " he burst out. "Monsieur, where did you get that?"

"Is it your work?" I asked again.

He laughed as he picked up his cigar.

"My faith, monsieur," he exclaimed, "there is no other craftsman in Europe who could have done it. But how did it come into your possession, monsieur?"

He gave me a long, keen look, and once more I resolved to be bold. I have always been a believer in bold strokes when real business came to be done.

"Listen!" I said. "I will give you 2,000 francs, Roubiaux, if you will tell me when, where and under what circumstances you made this. To be plain— that is my business with you."

I saw that it was only going to be a question of terms. At the mention of money his eyes became greedy.

"So?" he said. "Ah! Well then, monsieur, I often wondered if I should ever be asked. And indeed it is a strange story. I will tell it to monsieur for 3,000 francs."

"Two thousand five hundred, Roubiaux, and not a sou more," I said firmly. "And the money shall be yours as soon as the story is told. See," I continued, producing my pocket book and counting out the necessary notes, "here is the amount. I fold these notes, I put them under this plate. You shall pick them up when I have heard all you have to tell."

He looked at the money as if his fingers itched to handle it, and he nodded his big head.

"I accept monsieur's offer," he said. "And I will tell— everything. Monsieur asks three questions. When? About a year ago. Where? In London. Under what circumstances? Ah, monsieur, under the most suspicious circumstances! Listen then, monsieur."

He lighted his cigar, sipped at his wine, and folding his arms upon the table between us, began to tell his story with evident enjoyment.

iii

"YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, monsieur," he said, "that I have always— that is, for many years— enjoyed a great reputation as an artist in this sort of work, of which you have one of my best specimens in your possession. Therefore, I have been sought after. My work can be seen in the museums and collections of the great cities in Europe. Naturally then, I am recommended— as in the present case— by M. Virlet. All the same, monsieur, I do not know who it was that sent this Englishman who came to me about twelve months ago, and asked me if I could undertake a commission for him. He was a man of mystery, that Englishman, you will understand, monsieur— one of those who speak little."

"Describe him, Roubiaux," said I, thinking it well to acquaint myself with as many facts as possible. "What was he like?"

"A tallish, thin, loosely-built man, monsieur— spare of face, thin of his grey hair and beard, pale of complexion. I should say a savant of some sort, or, at any rate, a student of books, and of something beyond middle age. And evidently of the well-to-do class. And of a businesslike disposition, wasting no words. 'I am well acquainted with your work, Roubiaux,' said he, as soon as he had introduced himself."

"A moment," I said, interrupting him, "did he give you a name?"

"He called himself Mr. White," answered Roubiaux; "but I understood very well, monsieur, that this was but a nom de guerre. To return. 'I know your work,' he said, 'and I want you to do some for me, for which you shall be excellently well paid. Can you make an exact copy, perfect in every detail, of the ornament represented here?' he continued, pulling out a very fine photograph of the original of that facsimile which you, monsieur, have in your pocket. 'Can you make one so exact that none but experts could tell the difference?' he said. 'Of a certainty, monsieur,' I replied, having studied the photograph, 'if I can have the original to work from.' 'That is absolutely necessary?' he asked. 'Absolutely, monsieur,' said I. 'Then,' said he, 'you will have to go to London with me, and we had better arrange your terms.' So we discussed that matter, monsieur, and I confess that he was very generous. He was to pay all my expenses of travelling and lodging, and to give me 4,000 francs when the work was completed; also he was to provide the

expensive materials for the making of the imitation butterfly. And that night I left Paris in company with him for London."

Roubiaux paused here, and having sipped his wine, chuckled to himself as if at some pleasing memory.

"I told you, monsieur, that the circumstances were mysterious," he presently continued. "My faith, one might have been engaged in a conspiracy! I had never been in London before, so I knew nothing of it. Mr. White took me to a French hotel in the quarter of Leicester Square."

"Its name?" I asked.

"The Hotel de Deux Anges, monsieur," replied Roubiaux, promptly. "A small, comfortable hotel kept, of course by compatriots of mine. There he took for me two rooms, one for a bedroom, the other for my workshop. I had brought appliances and tools with me. And then he gave me my final instructions. I should have to work mainly at night, and he would have to remain with me while I worked at it. And that very first night I was there he brought it at midnight, monsieur. But that night we only examined it, in order to see what exact materials I should need. I made a complete list of these, and sent back to Paris for them next day, he giving me the money to pay for them."

"Did they cost much?" I inquired, remembering what Penkfether had said as to the probable value of the counterfeit.

"Two or three thousand francs, monsieur," replied Roubiaux indifferently. "They were of the best material for the purpose, naturally; and in a day or two they arrived, and Mr. White again brought the diamond butterfly, and I entered upon the work. It was his wish that it should be completed within two weeks, and I recognised that I should have to do my best. But after various interviews with the original, so to speak, I was able to work without it, and so I made progress in the daytime."

"Mr. White continued to visit you at night, I suppose?" I said. "Always at night?"

"Always at night whenever he brought the diamond butterfly, monsieur," he answered. "Not otherwise. This, monsieur, was the method. Whenever it was necessary that I should have the original before me, as in the early stages of my work, Mr. White brought it to me at midnight, and I worked through the night. He sat with me while I was so engaged, and it is scarcely exaggeration, monsieur, to say that he never took his eyes off the diamond butterfly. And in the early morning he carried it away with him."

"Did he talk to you about it?" I asked. "Did he tell you its history? Did he give you any idea of its value?"

Roubiaux shrugged his shoulders.

"He was not a man of much speech, monsieur," he replied. "He talked very little. No, he said nothing of the history of the ornament; he merely told me that it

was the property of a noble family whose heads considered it necessary to have an exact duplicate made of it."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "He told you that!"

"He told me that, monsieur; but I had always guessed so much," said Roubiaux.

"And as to the value of the butterfly, there was no need to tell me anything. I can estimate the value of diamonds as well as any man in Europe. I appraised that ornament at somewhere about thirteen thousand pounds in your money, monsieur."

"You are a good judge," said I. "Well, you finished the counterfeit in good time?"

"Within the period specified, monsieur," he answered; "and when it was done Mr. White and I compared it with the original, and he was so pleased that he voluntarily added five hundred francs to my honorarium. I handed my work over to him; he paid me my money. I returned to Paris. And that is all, monsieur, until now."

"A question or two, Roubiaux," I said. "Did you ever see this Mr. White anywhere except at this hotel?"

"Never, monsieur. Besides, I went little outside the hotel. An occasional visit to a café, a little stroll, a theatre, that was all," he answered. "No, of Mr. White I know nothing except what I have told you."

"And have you never seen him since?" I asked.

"Never! I have never heard of him, never heard of the affair, monsieur, until now," he replied, emphasising his last two words. "Now you, monsieur, present yourself with my undoubted handiwork. The original, then, monsieur— what of it?"

"The original, Roubiaux," I answered, "seems to have been stolen, and your admirable replica put in its place. However— "

Then I paid him his reward and left him, having noted his address. And that evening I returned to London.

iv

IN THAT QUIET little room of his behind the shop I told Penkfether the result of my investigations in Paris, and Penkfether's face grew longer and longer, and his expression gloomier and gloomier, and finally he shook his head.

"Oh, well, Campenhaye," he said, "there's only one thing to be done. I shall have to tell all this to Lord Massingham, and the Marchioness will have to come in too. There's no use in further secrecy and concealment. Of course, the real butterfly has been stolen, and by a remarkably clever thief. Now, who on earth could the man have been? You can't think?"

"The description given me by Roubiaux doesn't fit in with that of any crook of my acquaintance," I answered. "But I am not sure that this has been a professional affair."

Penkfether looked at me in surprise.

"Smart work, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "Couldn't be much smarter, I should think."

"That's just why I feel sure that it wasn't the work of a professional thief," I remarked. "I don't think we have a professional thief in London who is capable of quite so much cleverness. Hasn't it struck you, Penkfether, that of late years our criminal aristocracy has been distinguished for paucity of ideas, lack of resource, striking unfertility?"

"What's the best thing to be done?" asked Penkfether irrelevantly. "We can discuss the ethics of crime on another occasion; this is a serious business. I want to know— and Lord Massingham will want to know when he's heard this story— where the original butterfly is. But I reckon it's been broken up and the stones sold— long since!"

"Very well," I said. "Then you had better put the two facsimiles in your pocket and go to Lord Massingham's house. And I will go with you— to tell the Roubiaux story."

We found the marquis in what I suppose he called his study— a small room given up to sporting prints, sporting books, a gun or two, a collection of old fishing rods in one corner, of battered cricket bats in another. He was busily reading Ruff's Guide To the Turf! when we entered, and he pushed it and various sheets of figures aside as he rose to welcome my companion. Penkfether immediately introduced me and the marquis gave me a sharp, scrutinising look.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Campenhaye," he said quietly. Then he turned to Penkfether. "Nothing wrong, I hope?" he went on. "Surely your haven't had to engage Mr. Campenhaye's professional services?"

Penkfether told his story. He had to bring the marchioness into it. As soon as her name was mentioned, Lord Massingham excused himself and left the room. When he came back the marchioness was with him, and I saw at once that there was a perfect understanding between the two— if she had told a small fib to Penkfether about the marquis knowing of her proposed pledging of the butterfly, she had already accounted satisfactorily for it to her husband. And I saw, too, that both were wondering why he had come, and that both believed that Penkfether held both original and duplicate.

"I think I see things," said the marquis cheerfully. "My wife evidently brought you the replica, and I brought you the original. That's it, isn't it?"

Penkfether shook his head, and producing the two butterflies, laid them on the marquis' table. Lord and Lady Massingham looked at them casually, as if at very familiar objects.

"Neither of these things is the original," said Penkfether. "Neither! They are both imitations. Counterfeits, my lord!"

Lady Massingham started; her husband let out a sharp exclamation.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Neither of them the original? Neither the Massingham Butterfly? Impossible!"

Penkfether, who was standing close to me, gave a slight dig with his elbow.

"Let me put a pertinent question to your lordship," he said. "Do you think you have ever— at any time— been able to tell which was the original and which was the duplicate? Could you ever, for instance, had the two been placed side by side, have said off-hand which was which?"

The marquis showed decided uncertainty and bewilderment.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Now you put it to me, Penkfether, I don't think I could."

"Supposing, for instance, that this original had been put into the counterfeit's case and the counterfeit into the original's case," said Penkfether, "what then?"

"I couldn't have said which was which," admitted Lord Massingham frankly.

"Which of these would you have said was the original?" asked Penkfether.

But the marquis shook his head; he was obviously puzzled and beaten.

"Can't say for the life of me!" he replied. "But, then, you say— "

"I say," interrupted Penkfether smiling, "I say— and I know— that neither is the original. This is the duplicate butterfly made for your lordship's father some years ago; this is a second duplicate— made quite recently."

I was watching Lord and Lady Massingham keenly, and I knew at once that neither knew anything about the making of that second counterfeit. They were as innocent as I was. And their exclamations and questions were as obviously ingenuous.

"I will let Mr. Campenhaye tell the rest," said Penkfether. "I put the matter in his hands as soon as ever I discovered that these things are— what they are."

"I should like to ask a question or two," I said, as they both turned to me. "Has the Massingham Butterfly— the undoubted original— ever been out of your lordship's possession?"

"Never!" answered the marquis.

"You have never, for instance, deposited it in a bank or at your solicitors' or in a safe deposit?" I inquired.

"No," he said, "never! I've often thought of doing something of the sort, but it never came to anything. No, it's never been out of my possession since I inherited it— six years ago."

"And where has it usually been kept?" I asked.

The marquis looked at his wife and smiled as he shook his head.

"I'm afraid we may have been careless about it," he said, a little ruefully. "I may as well tell you, Mr. Campenhaye, that we were both naturally careless. Oh,

well, sometimes, I suppose, it was in my wife's jewel case and sometimes it was in that drawer of my desk there. I'm afraid I have a trick of leaving things about, and— "

"I think I will tell my story," I said. "It may suggest something to you."

I told everything that Roubiaux had told me, but I reserved to the last the description of the mysterious Mr. White. Eventually I gave it— carefully watching my hearers. And suddenly both uttered sharp and surprised exclamations.

"Gracious!" cried the marchioness.

"Good lord!" said the marquis.

"You recognise somebody in this description?" I said, with a glance at Penkfether.

The marquis looked at his wife, and they both laughed. Then he rose, picked up the two counterfeit butterflies and signed to us to follow him.

"Come this way, gentlemen," he said.

We all four went through the house to a door at the rear of a long and quiet corridor. The marquis tapped; a querulous, rather irascible voice answered. The marquis opened the door, and motioned us, with a sly smile, to enter. And as we crossed the threshold, in rear of the marchioness, I saw, as I looked over her shoulder, an oldish gentleman, who sat in a book-lined room, half buried amongst books and papers, who was certainly the Mr. White described by Roubiaux, and who glanced at us in anything but a friendly fashion.

"What is it, Massingham?" said this elderly gentleman. "I'm just deep in— "

"My dear uncle," said the marquis soothingly. "I'm sorry to break in upon your learned studies, but this is a matter of importance. Allow me to introduce Mr. Penkfether and Mr. Campenhaye— my uncle, Lord Stephen White-Domville. Uncle Stephen," he went on, giving us a look, "we want to see you about the Massingham Butterfly. I was under the impression that I held the original and a replica, but I find that I have two replicas— here they are. And— I should like to know where the original is?"

The old gentleman— a shrewd, ready old man as ever I set eyes on— put up his glasses and stared hard at Penkfether and then at me.

"I know who you are," he said bluntly to Penkfether. "I've seen your shop. And I suppose you're this sort of a detective that I've heard of, eh?" he went on, turning to me. "Been poking your nose into this, Mr. Campenhaye, have you?"

"I have had a little conversation with one Roubiaux in Paris," I answered in my suavest manner.

"Have you now?" he retorted. "Ah! Oh, well," here he turned to his nephew, and pointed to a safe which was let into the wall. "The Massingham Butterfly," he went on quite unconcernedly, "is in that safe, my dear fellow, and if you take an old stager's advice, you'll either let it remain there or you'll take it to your banker's. The truth is, neither you nor your wife are fit guardians of it. You,

Massingham, used to leave it in an unlocked drawer in your desk, and your wife used to let it lie about on her dressing table. And as that got on my nerves and as I didn't choose to see family heirlooms exposed to the chances of theft and burglary, I took the liberty of employing M. Roubiaux and of substituting for the real thing a counterfeit with which you have been quite as well satisfied. Understand? Anything more? Then please go away, all of you— I am at a very interesting point in my paper on the reason why the early Britons wore no clothes."

We all went out in silence and the marquis closed the door carefully upon his learned relative. And once in the corridor, he looked at us and laughed.

"Penkfether," he said, "I think I'd better square up with you. My agents found me a lot of money unexpectedly yesterday, and I think you'd better have yours. Come along and I'll write you a cheque."

"If your lordship pleases," answered Penkfether.

_____

2: Safe Number Sixty-Nine

Being a Further Chapter From the Reminiscences of Paul Campenhaye, Specialist in Criminology.

IT REQUIRED but a mere glance at the tall, plump, sleek-conditioned man whom my clerk brought into my office one winter afternoon to see that my visitor either was or had been one of the class known as gentlemen's gentlemen. Confidential servant was written all over him; a certain something in his eye suggested that he had all his life been keeping the secrets, as well as brushing the clothes and superintending the linen, of at least a marquis. That eye lighted up as it fell on me; its owner bowed with a mixture of respect and easy familiarity.

"You don't bear me in mind, Mr. Campenhaye?" he said inquiringly as he took the chair to which I pointed. "You've forgotten me, sir?"

I glanced at the bit of printed card which had been brought in to me a few minutes previously.

"Mr. Millwaters?" I replied. "No, I'm afraid I— "

"I was valet to the Duke of Claye, sir, at the time you did that bit of business for his grace," he said, with another smile. "That little affair about the— "

"Oh! I remember— I remember!" I broke in, being too busy for any exchange of reminiscences. "Ah! And you are not with the duke now?"

"No, sir," he answered, "I left his grace three years ago, Mr. Campenhaye. The fact was," he continued with a smirk, "I married one of the upper servants, and went into a different line. The superior lodgings for gentlemen line, Mr. Campenhaye, Ebury Street."

"I hope you are doing well," I remarked, politely.

"Ain't done badly, sir, so far," he responded. "You see, I had a very good stock of furniture that had come to me from various relatives, and as my wife is a first-class cook we considered that if we took a good house in a good neighbourhood— "

"Just so— just so!" I said. "And what brings you to me?"

The ex-valet pushed himself and his chair a little nearer, and his smile became mysterious and confidential.

"One of my lodgers!" he whispered. "A— a dead 'un!"

"A dead man!" I exclaimed. "Recent death?"

"Died this very morning, sir, just after his breakfast," answered Millwaters. "I found him myself. 'Heart failure,' says the doctor. 'Dead,' he says; no need for an inquest, 'cause he'd been attending him for a week, and was with him late last night and he can certify. But there's some mystery, Mr. Campenhaye— some strange mystery!"

"Of what nature?" I asked.

Millwaters scratched the side of his plump cheek, as if he were a little puzzled. I knew what was puzzling him— he did not quite know where to begin his story.

"Begin at the beginning," I said. "If you want any advice, tell me everything, and don't leave out any details that seem of no importance to you."

"Well, it's this way, sir," he responded. "Just about two months ago we had our drawing-room floor to let— very nice set of rooms, with separate bathroom. We advertised them in The Times and The Morning Post, and we soon had a call from this gentleman I'm telling you about— Mr. Robert Walshaw. An elderly man, Mr. Campenhaye; full sixty, I should say. He— "

"Describe him," I said.

"Well, sir, not what you would call a conspicuous gentleman. Middling height, inclined, very little, to stoutness, with a grey beard and whiskers that seemed as if he'd only recently let them grow— short-cropped, anyway. Not what you'd call quite the gentleman, Mr. Campenhaye, you know; at least, not the sort I've been accustomed to serve. I should say a sort of retired first-class commercial sort of gent, sir, of a superior sort. Well-dressed, sir; all his clothes made by one of our leading West End firms— oh yes! Likewise his linen and appointments."

"Go on, Millwaters," I remarked as he paused and looked an inquiry. "I have an idea of the man. So he came to you?"

"Came there and then, sir, the very day he called to look at the rooms. He made no difficulty about terms; said he'd pay every month, and insisted on paying a month in advance. So, of course, we didn't bother about any references, sir."

"I see," said I. "So long as the money is all right, the rest— eh?"

"Well, sir, he was the very picture of what you'd call high respectability," replied Millwaters. "A sort of churchwarden gentleman, sir; all the same, he never went to church, now I come to think of it. But it's his habits that I'm coming to. He settled down quick, Mr. Campenhaye, and fell into what you might call a routine. He brought a quantity of old books with him, and he was always having parcels of books sent to him from all over the country. He spent all his time reading and writing; he's left a pile of writing on his table. All his days were like clockwork— meals to the minute, and so on. But by the end of the first month my wife and me had noticed three things about him; important things, Mr. Campenhaye, so I judge."

"Name them," I said.

"Well, sir, first, he never had a single letter. Second, he never had a caller. Third, he never went out of the house, not once, until after dark. Every night, about 9 o'clock, he'd go out and walk around Eaton Square twice. I've seen him myself, Mr. Campenhaye. Then he came in and went to bed. He was a rare hand at going to bed early and getting up early. He used to get up and begin his writings at 5 o'clock of the morning."

"Did he keep up these habits to the end?" I asked.

"To the very end, sir, even to this morning. Same thing, same routine, day after day; and certainly he never gave us any trouble. He liked good cooking and

he kept some very good wine, and he fancied the best cigars, but he was easily pleased, and never complained, and he gave us no trouble until now."

"And now?" I asked. "You can't help a man's dying suddenly in your house, you know; neither can the man help it."

"Just so, sir," replied Millwaters. "That ain't it. The trouble, Mr. Campenhaye, if I may so express it, is twofold. One side of it is that we don't know who he is, nor who his people are, and— "

"He must have left papers to show that," I interrupted.

"Not a vestige of one, sir!" exclaimed Millwaters. "As soon as the doctor had been and had said there'd be no need for an inquest, me and my wife looked for papers. Mr. Campenhaye, there isn't as much as a single line of writing on a scrap of paper to tell anything. We've gone through all he had— three trunks, a sort of strong-box, a couple of suit-cases. We've turned out all his drawers and so on— there's nothing. There isn't a letter, nor a bill, nor anything to give a clue. But there's something in that strong-box— a nice weight I thought it when it first came— that's enough to make anybody jump when they catch sight of it."

"What?" I demanded.

Millwaters bent forward across the corner of my desk, and spoke one word in a hoarse whisper.

"Gold!" he said. "Gold."

There was something so much more than ordinarily significant in the man's tone that his mere pronunciation of this word gave me a sense of coming mystery. I became interested.

"You mean there is a quantity of gold in his trunks?" I said.

"In that strong-box, Mr. Campenhaye, gold, sir!"

I looked at him a moment in silence.

"Well," I said at last, "after all, Millwaters, there is nothing very remarkable in an elderly gentleman of retiring habits keeping a good deal of ready money in gold by him."

"Not as much as all that, sir," replied Millwaters, with decision. "Nor— in bars!"

I started with genuine astonishment at that.

"Bars!" I exclaimed.

"Bars, sir! Lumps— ingots, I believe they call 'em, Mr. Campenhaye, in that trunk there's half a dozen of those things. And there's a good thousand pounds in sovereigns. I used to wonder why he always paid me in sovereigns, because his bill came to a goodish bit every month— our rooms aren't cheap. Yes, sir, gold! Enough to— to make you see yellow, Mr. Campenhaye!"

"Well," I said, after another pause, "what advice do you want from me?"

"I wish you'd come round, Mr. Campenhaye," he said urgently. "I don't like calling the police in, and I know from experience that you're a rare hand at

ferreting things out. You might be able to make something of it— though, as I said before, there's no papers."

"Very well," I answered after a moment's consideration. "Then we'll go at once."

We were round at Ebury Street in a few minutes. Millwaters' house proved to be one of the best at the Victoria end of the street— a superior place in every way, for which one would expect to pay well as regards accommodation. The drawing-room floor was roomy and well arranged and well furnished. And in the bedroom lay the dead body of the mysterious lodger, still and peaceful, and looking, I thought, pathetically lonely. I looked carefully at the face, a much-lined, worn face, set amidst thin, grey hair, and I noticed that, as Millwaters had said, the beard was of comparatively recent growth.

I need not go into details as to our search in that room. It is sufficient to say that I scrupulously examined every article of clothing, every drawer in the wardrobe, bureau, table, every trunk and box without finding a scrap of writing or anything to show who this dead man was. The trunks, suit-cases and boxes were either very old or quite new. The tabs sewn into the clothing showed that Mr. Walshaw had patronised a well-known Conduit Street firm; the linen had been bought recently in the same neighbourhood. But I knew that there would be no clue there; this particular customer doubtless paid cash, and the firm would know nothing about him.

Nor was there any clue in the contents of the strong-box, a weightily-made affair of oak, clamped with steel. It had taken himself and two men to carry that upstairs, said Mr. Millwaters, and it was the only thing he had found locked when he had taken possession of the dead man's keys— a very small bunch. I naturally examined this box with great care. There was a tray at the top, in which, carefully packed in tissue paper, was a small quantity of very old silver plate, spoons, forks, table appointments. Under the tray, in four strong canvas bags, was a quantity of gold in sovereigns and half-sovereigns. We counted the contents of one bag, and made the amount a little under three hundred pounds. This bag was open; the others were sealed. I came to the conclusion that the four contained about twelve hundred pounds. And— this being the first thing of special significance that struck me— I noticed that all the sovereigns and half-sovereigns which I handled were dated previous to the year 1900.

The bars of gold, dully yellow and unattractive in their unworked state, were underneath the bags, and were also wrapped in canvas. There were, as Millwaters had said, half a dozen of them— specie. And in turning them over we unearthed an old pocket-book of worn morocco leather.

"I didn't see that before," remarked Millwaters. "But I was in a hurry. Open it, Mr. Campenhaye. There may be papers in that."

All that the pocket-book contained, however, was two keys of a complicated pattern. Attached to them was a crumpled label, on which was written, in a crabbed, angular hand, "Safe No. 69."

On examining the metal disc attached to these keys, I found that the number was repeated. Round it was the engraved inscription, "London and Universal Safe Deposit Company, Limited."

"There's a clue, Millwaters," I said. "Your late lodger has something stored with these people. Now, let me see his sitting-room."

"There's nothing there, sir, I'm afraid," remarked Millwaters. "In the way of papers, I mean. Excepting, of course, the papers that he'd written himself— there's plenty of them."

I saw what he meant as soon as I walked into the sitting-room. This, a light, roomy apartment, wore the air of a library and study combined. The walls were lined with books, the centre-table was piled with books. A quick glance at shelves and tables showed that nearly all dealt with archæological and antiquarian subjects. And on the large, neatly arranged desk, which stood between the windows, were quantities of documents and papers, duly docketed, marshalled and tied up, and in an open dispatch box lay a thick pile of manuscript, written in the crabbed hand of the label, which, with its keys, I had already placed in my pocket. I took this manuscript out, and turned to the first page. And then I read a title, written out with meticulous care in neatly arranged lines:

But there was no author's name. There, where it should have been, was a blank. It was evidently to be written in— when?

"That," observed Millwaters at my elbow— "that's what he was always writing at, Mr. Campenhaye. I came to know through watching him as I was in and out. He used to do so many papers every day, sir— the pile's grown since he came here. Those other papers, I think, are his notes. But there's nothing in them, nor anywhere in the desk, about him."

In this Millwaters was right. I searched the desk thoroughly and found no further clue. The dead man had evidently destroyed whatever letters he received as soon as he got them; he had not even kept receipts for the books which were always being sent to him. I spent some time in examining his library, hoping to come across a book-plate, or a name scribbled on a fly-leaf; I found nothing at all. And after a good two hours spent in this way, I was faced by the fact that here was a dead man whose real name might be Robert Walshaw, and might not, and that those who now had to deal with his body and his effects knew absolutely nothing of him, his relatives or his antecedents.

"There's only one thing to be done, Millwaters," I said. "There's a slight clue in this label. I know the manager of the London and Universal, and I'll go down there and see if he can tell me anything. In the meantime, you'd better lock up this room, seal that strong-box and make arrangements with an undertaker."

"I suppose we shall have to advertise, Mr. Campenhaye?" said Millwaters. "There must be somebody belonging to him somewhere."

"Wait until I return," I said. "I may find something out."

I drove straight off to the safe deposit. I had previously done business there, and they knew me well enough to give me information on what was, after all, not exactly my affair.

"Mr. Robert Walshaw!" said the manager. "Oh yes! But we have only seen him, once or twice— twice, I feel sure. He came here and rented a safe— quite a small safe— about three months ago; called afterwards, as I say, twice, and we've never seen him since. Dead, you say, Mr. Campenhaye, and left no clue whatever as to his identity beyond that label? Well, then, under the circumstances, I think we shall be justified in— eh?"

"In opening the safe?" I said. "Certainly! That is what I hope you will do. We must get to know something about him."

Three of us attended the opening of this safe— the manager, the secretary and myself. It was, as the manager had observed, quite a small safe, one of their smallest. All that was seen on opening it was a couple of old, well-worn leather bags, hand-bags. But one bag was filled to the brim with gold, all of a date previous to 1900, and the other contained two packets of cut and uncut diamonds. And here again there were no papers, letters, documents— nothing to tell us more about Robert Walshaw.

We paid small attention to the gold. At a rough guess, I should say there were twelve or fifteen hundred pounds there. But we looked at the diamonds with a good deal of interest, and, in unwrapping the various papers in which they were done up, the secretary discovered a torn label on which was part of an address.

That was easy enough to make out. It presumably meant "Mr. Isador Cohn, Diamond Merchant, Hatton Garden, E.C." And so, when the manager had restored these valuables to the safe, and had sealed it up, I went off to Hatton Garden in an endeavour to find Mr. Isador Cohn, and hear what he knew of the matter. I found Mr. Cohn without difficulty, an elderly man, who at first could tell me nothing, but after a time began to look as if his memory was getting to work.

"I tell you what!" he said suddenly, "I remember that some years ago I sold a lot of stones such as you mention, to a gentleman who said that he was commissioned to buy them for a noble family— they were to be set and kept as heirlooms. But it's— oh, twelve or thirteen years ago. I remember nothing much except that the buyer was a middle-aged, fresh-complexioned man, and that he paid me in bank notes. It was a big transaction; of course, he employed an expert to estimate the value. But I never knew his name— the buyer's I mean."

"How much did the transaction represent?" I asked.

"Oh!" answered Mr. Cohn, with cheerful indifference. "I should think perhaps about twenty thousand. I think it was twenty thousand. I'd almost forgotten the

deal— it was done in a morning. I could supply what he wanted, and he paid cash, and there was an end of it."

So far so good, but I was only at the beginning. And after a hurried visit to the safe deposit, and another to Millwaters, and a third with Millwaters to his solicitors, I packed a bag and caught the evening express to Stilminster, taking with me a page or two of Mr. Walshaw's manuscript.

It was very late at night when I arrived at Stilminster, a small country town, in a purely agricultural district, and I was glad to find a decent hotel, to get some supper, and go to my room. But I managed to interview the landlady for a minute before going upstairs, and to get a morsel of information.

"Stilminster," I observed blandly, "is a very old town?"

"One of the oldest in England, sir," she replied with assurance. "Founded by the Romans in the year seventy-five."

"Many antiquities here to see, of course," I said.

"The town is full of them, sir," she answered. "In summer, and early autumn, we have visitors from all over the world."

"That's deeply interesting," said I. "Now, I wonder if there is anybody in the town— some local antiquary, you know, to whom I could pay a visit to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly, sir," she replied, "there are several. But you'll find none better than Mr. Daniels, the shoemaker, at the corner of Cripplegate. He's a poor man, but a learned one, and if you like to employ him for an hour or two, he'll tell you more about the old place than anyone else can."

"I shall call on Mr. Daniels as soon as I have breakfasted," I said. Then, as a chance shot, I remarked, "By the way, I see that you have had this house a great many years, so I suppose you know the town well. Do you know or remember anyone by the name of Walshaw?"

I saw at once that the name was utterly unfamiliar to her. And she shook her head decisively, and said that there was no one of that name in Stilminster— at least of any note— nor had there been anyone within her recollection.

"The population is only twelve hundred," she remarked, "so we know everybody. I never remember any Walshaw— it's not a name of these parts. It sounds North country."

So when I went around to the shop of the learned shoemaker next morning, I refrained from asking him point-blank if he had ever known a Mr. Walshaw. Instead I engaged him in conversation on the history and antiquities of Stilminster. He was an old, shrewd-eyed, clever-looking man, a working craftsman, and he stitched busily at a boot as he talked to me of the old places of his native town. I soon discovered that he was a born antiquary, and bearing in mind what my object was, I eventually remarked that I wondered he had never thought of writing the history of Stilminster. He laughed cheerily at that suggestion.

"Nay," he said. "I'm no hand at putting things on paper. Of course, the history of the old place ought to be written; there have been little books and pamphlets— plenty of 'em— but never anything considerable. Once we had a man— fellow townsman— who could have done it, meant to do it, and was the very man for the job, mister, but— "

He paused and shook his head over his work, and I waited impatiently for his next words, for I was now sure that I was on the track.

"But he came to a sad end, did that man," he said, after a period of silence. "Went under— a long way under."

"How was that?" I asked.

The old shoemaker lifted his hand and pointed with his awl through the window to a large building across the street, over the principal door of which I saw the word "bank" in old-fashioned gilt letters.

"You see yonder place, mister?" he said. "That's Candew's Bank. Candews are the big folks hereabouts. It's a baronetcy. The present man is Sir Lionel Candew— an old man now. Candews are not only bankers, either; they've a big spinning-mill at Hopton, ten miles away. Spinners and bankers— that's what Candews have been for 200 years. Folk of vast wealth, of course."

He resumed his work, and I kept silent, knowing that he was going to let loose a flood of reminiscences.

"That bank across there is the principal bank in the neighbourhood," he went on. "Everybody goes to Candew's, and the man I was talking of just now, the man who ought to have written the history of Stilminster, he was Candew's manager at that bank, trusted, confidential manager— Richard Maygrove. Until it all came out, anybody that you could ha' met in Stilminster would ha' told you that Richard Maygrove was what we may term a pillar of probity!"

"And what came out?" I asked quietly.

"It was sheer accident that it did come out," said the old man, with a dry chuckle. "At least, so Maygrove said. You see, Maygrove was trusted as I should think never man was before. He'd been in that bank since he was a lad of fifteen. He was sole manager at thirty, and Sir Lionel Candew left everything to him. He was a steady-going, sober chap, Maygrove— bachelor, churchgoer— the only interest he had outside banking was pottering about the old town. Many's the hour I've spent with him. And it was always his intention to write its history. Why, whenever he took his holiday, it was only to go to London to read things up at the British museum and the Rolls House. He thought of nothing but collecting material for that book. And it was while he was away on his holiday one year that the smash came. It was a smash, too. Go out into the street, mister, and every other man you meet can tell you just as much about it as I can."

"I prefer to hear your account," I answered.

"Well," he continued, smiling, "it was young Mr. Francis Candew— Sir Lionel's son and heir— that found things out. He came home from Oxford and, instead of settling down to amuse himself as a country gentleman, he took it into his head to make himself thoroughly acquainted with his father's two businesses. And he did it thoroughly. A smart, shrewd youngster he was— and a hard-headed man of business he is to-day. You'll see him if you're stopping here a day or two, for he's at that bank every day from 11 to 3. Now, while Maygrove was off for his month's holiday, young Mr. Francis went into things at the bank and the result was that Maygrove was arrested on a charge of embezzlement. And there was no doubt of it— not a doubt!"

"Was the amount large?" I asked.

"They tried him on a charge of embezzling some couple of thousands," answered the shoemaker, "but it was hinted by the lawyers that he'd helped himself to between thirty and forty thousand, if not more. And he pleaded guilty."

"Pleaded guilty!" I exclaimed. "Oh, well, I suppose he couldn't do less."

"He not only pleaded guilty, mister, but he openly defied them all— judge, jury and the lot! He acknowledged that he'd got the money; he defied 'em to find it. What's more, he said stoutly in the dock that he'd a good right to it. He stood there, mister, bold as brass— I can see him now, for I went to the trial— and told them that he'd got the money, and it was where they could never touch it: that if accident, in the shape of Mr. Francis, hadn't upset his plans, he and the money would have been clear out of their reach in another month, and that, as luck had gone against him, he would never divulge where the money was— never!"

"Well?" I said. "Of course, he was sentenced. To what?"

"Ten years' penal servitude," said the old man. "It was hinted pretty plainly to him that if he'd only make restitution, there would be a lighter sentence. But he refused steadily, though they put him back for a night to think it over. And when they gave him leave to speak, he told them— pretty plainly, too— why he'd robbed Sir Lionel Candew."

"Ah!" I said. "That's interesting. What reason did he give?"

"One that impressed a deal of folk in his favour, mister. You see, there were two of these Maygroves— Richard and Robert. Richard went into the bank, Robert went to the spinning mill at Hopton; they were twin brothers and sons of a small farmer on Sir Lionel's property. Now, Robert was an inventive genius— always making and contriving things— and when he'd come to be a young man he invented a machine that's in use to-day all over the world— patented, mister, by Sir Lionel Candew. And Richard Maygrove, standing in that dock, openly accused Sir Lionel of stealing his brother's plans, drawings, papers, and patenting the thing himself. His story was that Robert, fully trusting his master, showed all these documents to him, understood that Sir Lionel would protect him, and that Sir Lionel took the whole idea, patented it himself and snapped his fingers in Robert's

face. 'He robbed my brother,' says Richard in that dock, 'as shamelessly as if he'd picked his pocket, and he's made fortune upon fortune out of what he got. And I set to work to rob him and I've done it, and he shall never see one penny of what I've taken. I know what I shall have to pay for letting myself be caught, and I'll pay for it. But there'll be no restitution from me, so you can sentence me as soon as you like.' And sentenced he was, mister— ten years."

I was by that time pretty sure as to where I was. The man lying dead in Millwaters' house in Ebury Street was, without doubt, Richard Maygrove, who, after his discharge from prison, had occupied himself in a return to his favourite pursuits. But there were two or three points which still needed clearing up, and it seemed to me that Mr. Daniels could give me more information.

"How long since is all this, then?" I asked.

"Twelve years," he answered.

"So that Maygrove would be released between two or three years ago," I said.

The old man chuckled.

"Oh, he was released," he said. "I happen to know that the Candews did all they could to track him when he was released, but they never did. He clean disappeared. They say here in the town that he had the money all safely planted in foreign parts and went off with it."

"Very likely," said I, carelessly. "I dare say he did. What became of the other brother— Robert?"

He looked up from his work with another of his shrewd, half-humorous glances.

"There's folks in this town, mister, that would be glad to have that question answered satisfactorily," he said. "Robert disappeared many years ago— ten years before Richard's affair came to a head. And there are those who believe that Robert was in it with Richard."

"The Candews think that, no doubt?" I said.

"What folk like the Candews think they're good hands at keeping to themselves," he said dryly. "I'm not meaning them. What they call the Maygrove mystery is talked of to this day, sir. What Richard did with the money? Where he's got to since he left prison? Bless you! They talk it all out in the bar-parlours every night of the year."

I changed the subject then, going back to the antiquities of Stilminster. And after arranging with the old shoemaker that he should show me around the principal sights at noon, I left him, took a turn along the street, and at 11 o'clock stepped into the bank. I handed my card to a clerk, and I had scarcely had time to glance around at the old-fashioned arrangements of the place, when he was back at my elbow. He indicated a side door.

"Mr. Francis Candew will see you at once, sir," he said.

ii

I WALKED INTO the presence of a not yet middle-aged, handsome man, who, but for his keen eyes and watchful, businesslike air, might have been taken for a well-to-do country squire, for he was attired in hunting rig, and his hat and crop lay ready to his hand on his big desk. But I knew there were no thoughts of horses and hounds in this man's mind as he gave me a searching, interested glance and politely motioned me to a chair.

"Mr. Paul Campenhaye?" he said, looking at my card, which he still held in his hand. "Have I the pleasure of seeing the Mr. Campenhaye— expert in shady matters?"

He laughed a little and I smiled in answer.

"Dear me!" he said. "That's curious. I have heard of you, Mr. Campenhaye, and once recently I thought of requisitioning your services; but I have employed others for many years who have served me very well— only, unfortunately, they seem to have come to a certain impasse."

"I take it that you are referring to the Maygrove affair, Mr. Candew?" I said.

He gave me a quick glance of surprise.

"Ah!" he said. "You know something of that?"

"I am beginning to know something of it," I answered. "I have come to tell you what I know of it."

"I shall be very glad to hear anything you can tell me," he said. "I have been working at it for many a long year, determined to get at the bottom of it. Strange that it should come into your work."

"Accident," I remarked, "pure accident. But I will tell you all I know."

I gave him a clear, brief account of all that had happened to me since Millwaters' coming to my office the previous morning, winding up with a recapitulation of all that the old shoemaker had told me. He never took his keen blue eyes off me from start to finish, and I saw the growing satisfaction in his face as I progressed with the story. In fact, his expression struck me— it was that of a man who has persistently hunted somebody or something down, and who at last saw the end of his search before him. He even sighed with relief when I had finally marshalled the facts.

"Yes!" he said. "There's no doubt the man's Richard Maygrove. Odd! I did everything that mortal man could do to track him from the moment he left Portland, nearly three years ago, and failed. My agents lost him at Waterloo Station— and never found trace of him again. Perhaps you wonder why I was so keen about finding him, Mr. Campenhaye? I'll tell you what the outside public doesn't know. The old man across there— Daniels— said that it was supposed Maygrove robbed us of thirty or forty thousand pounds, didn't he? Ah! We have

never let anybody know what the real amount was. It was nearer two hundred thousand!"

"Two hundred thousand!" I exclaimed. "Amazing!"

"The precise figure was just over one hundred and ninety thousand, seven hundred," he answered quietly. "It was one of the most diabolically clever frauds ever compassed, and, naturally, I have done all I could towards the recovery of our money. Of course, you heard all about Richard Maygrove's speech in the dock?"

"Yes," I answered.

"All empty braggadocio," exclaimed Mr. Candew. "The transaction between my father and Robert Maygrove was a perfectly proper one— Richard Maygrove put forward that plan to excite popular sympathy. That is another reason why I have wanted to trace him; to clear my father's name. I have been working on other lines for years, at great expense. And now— now I see my way to ending the whole thing, thanks to this lucky accident. Mr. Campenhaye, I was going hunting, instead I will go to town with you by the 3 o'clock express. I must see this dead man, and then— "

"Yes?" I said, as he hesitated and smiled a little grimly. "And then?"

"Then," he answered, "you shall hear— and see— more."

I amused myself in studying the antiquities of Stilminster, made the learned shoemaker a little present, ate a hurried lunch, and at 3 o'clock joined Mr. Francis Candew. The railway people had reserved a first-class compartment for him, and in its privacy he gave me a deeply interesting account of how he had detached and brought to light the frauds and defalcations of Richard Maygrove twelve years before. His revelations and particulars showed me that the evil doer must have been a genius in his way, and that the man who tracked him down was no less of a marvel in the intricate paths of high finance.

"But, naturally, everything had been in Maygrove's favour," he said in conclusion. "My father was not a very precise business man; he had two businesses to attend to; he was fond of other matters; he trusted Maygrove implicitly, and he let the affairs of the bank rest in his hands. And so, when I came to the end of my investigations, there, Mr. Campenhaye, was the unpleasant fact that we had been robbed of nearly £200,000!"

"You think that Richard Maygrove appropriated all that for himself?" I asked.

"I know that he handled all that, of course," he replied.

"And the amount which I have seen in his rooms and in the safe?" I said. "What of that!"

"That, I take it, is what he cleverly put aside for himself in his old age," he answered. "According to you, it's about one-sixth of the lot."

"And the rest?" I said. "Have you any hope of recovering that? Have you traced it at all?"

He gave me quite a smile.

"You shall know more about that when I have identified Richard Maygrove," he answered. "I am sure I shall identify this body, from what you tell me. What a world of chance and coincidence! If it hadn't been for the man's love of antiquities and archæology, I don't suppose you'd ever have found out who the quiet old student calling himself Robert Walshaw really was!"

It was long past dark when we reached Ebury Street, and, at Mr. Candew's request, Millwaters took us straight to the dead man. My companion gave him one look and turned to me with a satisfied expression.

"Undoubtedly," he said. He went across the room to Millwaters, who lingered at the door. "I know who this man is," he went on. "He has friends, relatives. They will come for him to-morrow. And, of course, they will relieve you of all further anxiety and responsibility. Mr. Campenhaye, we will go a little farther."

I followed him out to the taxi cab, which we had kept waiting, and he told its driver to go to one of our ultra fashionable hotels. All the way there he kept silence, we exchanged no further conversation until he had spoken to an official, given him a sealed envelope, which I noticed he had brought with him from Stilminster, and had been shown with me into a private sitting-room. Then he turned to me.

"Now," he said, "now you are going to hear and see something. I have come here to see Mr. James Marchdale. Mr. Marchdale is a multi-millionaire, head of the great firm of Marchdales, machine makers, of St. Louis, Missouri. He is at present over here with his wife and daughter; the daughter, as you may have heard, is to be married next month to our Earl of Cherington, one of the poorest, and possibly the proudest peers in England. Mr. Marchdale is, of course, to dower his daughter, the countess-to-be, very handsomely, being, as I said, a multi-millionaire. And incidentally, Campenhaye, Mr. James Marchdale is Robert Maygrove."

The door had opened before I could recover from my start of surprise, and a man entered, an elderly man, strikingly alike to the dead man whom we had just left in Ebury Street. That he was under the influence of a great shock, a sudden fear, was abundantly evident from his pallid face and the perspiration on his brow. He looked at both of us with furtive glances, and his low voice shook as he spoke.

"Mr. Candew?" he said thickly.

Mr. Candew moved forward.

"I am Mr. Candew," he said. "And you are Mr. James Marchdale— in reality, Robert Maygrove. You won't deny that. I have come to tell you that your brother Richard, who was released from penal servitude about three years ago, is dead. He is lying dead— unfriended— at this address, and you must see to his funeral arrangements. But— first a word with me."

The man took the card on which Mr. Candew had scribbled Millwaters' address, and his hand trembled so that he let it fall.

"What— what is this?" he muttered. "This— this, of course, is a shock. It— it— unnerves me, as you see."

"Then I must ask you to pull yourself together," said Candew mercilessly, "for I have serious words to say to you. Now, let me tell you, Robert Maygrove, that I have spent large sums in tracking you. When you disappeared from Stilminster you went across to the United States. From time to time you received capital from England— I know with whom you banked it in St. Louis, how you started your business, how you built it up, how you have become what you are— an American millionaire, about to marry a daughter into our peerage. And I am very sure that your original capital was sent to you, year by year, by your brother, and that it was our money. I have no hold on you. I can't say that you know the money was stolen. But we punished your brother, and he became a convict. Do you wish the Earl of Cherington to know that he is going to marry a convict's niece?"

The man to whom all this was addressed grew paler and paler as Candew proceeded. And at the last words he winced so much that I thought he would cry out. But Candew went on as mercilessly as ever.

"Some £30,000 or £40,000 of your brother's booty lies at his rooms or in his safe, at your disposal," he said. "It represents little of the amount of which he robbed my father and me. You have no doubt kept yourself acquainted with his career— I have, of course, heard before of men who did not mind serving a few years in penal servitude for the sake of a fortune, but your brother evidently kept only a part of his gains for himself. He furnished— somebody else— with the major portion. And— "

"For pity's sake stop!" exclaimed the other. "What— what do you want? What do you propose? I— I didn't know he was dead. I went to meet him the other night, secretly, but he didn't turn up. Don't let this come out, Mr. Francis. My daughter— "

"I want restitution of what is my father's and mine," answered Candew with stern determination.

It seemed to me that I saw Maygrove's breast heave with relief. Mechanically he lifted his right hand to an inner pocket of his dinner jacket.

"How much?" he whispered. "How much?"

"Your brother robbed us of £190,723 10s," replied Candew. "I have carried the precise figures in my head for many years."

I stood wonderingly by as the cornered man sat heavily down at a writing table and wrote out a cheque. He did not look at Candew as he handed it over, but Candew read it over carefully before putting it in his pocket-book. Then, without as much as a glance at Robert Maygrove, he turned to the door.

"Come!" he said to me. "That's all."

Maygrove rose with a sudden exclamation.

"This— this affair!" he said, holding out the card. "What am I to do? I don't want publicity— it mustn't be known! I don't know the ways of this country now and— "

"I will waste enough breath on you to advise you to employ a confidential solicitor in the morning," said Candew, turning from the door. "Tell him everything— and he will manage everything for you."

Then he strode out, and I strode after him amazed and wondering. We had walked away some distance from the hotel before he spoke. Then he lifted his hat, as if to find relief in the sharp winter air.

"There!" he exclaimed, "that's good! After breathing the same atmosphere with that fellow! Campenhaye, that man was as guilty as the other! Did you see his face? A plant— a plant! All through, a wicked plant— and one man, clever enough in his way, didn't mind going into penal servitude to work it! It makes me— sick."

"You've recovered your money, anyway," I said, still wonderstruck at the recent scene.

He turned in the light of the gas lamp and gave me a queer, sidelong look. "I'm afraid you are not a financial expert, my friend," he remarked dryly. "You forget that we have lost a good twelve years' interest on this little sum. And twelve years' interest on £190,000 is— but never mind that! Come and dine with me somewhere."

_____

3: Don Quixote of Scotland Yard

GARNING, one of the oldest, cleverest, most trusted members of that highly important force known as the Criminal Investigation Department, was on his annual holiday, and had come in sight of its last day. Hard as nails and keen as a razor in the exercise of his professional duties, as a good many criminals had known to their bitter cost, Garning, at heart, was a highly sentimental person, and when he went holidaying, he invariably sought out unfrequented lonely places, where he could gaze his fill on mountains, moors, lakes and rivers, solitary farmsteads, and spend his days in gathering wild flowers and listening to the hum of insects and chirping of young birds— he was, in short, a lover of nature. An old bachelor, Garning was very free and unfettered in these annual excursions: his great pleasure was to put himself up at some out-of-the-way inn, where he got good plain food and an airy bedroom, and thence to wander around without aim and object. During his holiday he never allowed himself to think of naughty folk and evil deeds; he was much more concerned about finding the nest and eggs of some rare bird, or watching some particular hedgeside plant break into bloom than about the last nefarious deed which had engaged his attention. But at the end of every period of rest and change he went back to New Scotland Yard keener than ever, and the gentle stroller amongst meadows and uplands became transformed into as sharp a human sleuth-hound as ever set out to track the wrong-doer.

At the end of this particular holiday, Garning found himself for a couple of nights in one of the smallest, most out-of-the-way towns in the far North of England. He had spent three weeks in the solitudes of Cumberland and Northumberland, wandering about as his fancy prompted him. In addition to his nature-loving qualities, however, Garning was a bit of an antiquary. A man whom he met at one of his wayside inns discovered this, and told him that before he left those parts, he ought to visit Coppleby: there, said the man, was a fine old castle, and an equally fine and ancient church, to say nothing of an old moot-hall and many houses which dated from early Tudor times. So Garning made his way to Coppleby, intent on looking round it before going on to Carlisle and there getting an express which would whirl him back to London and duty. It would, he considered, make a handsome wind-up to his annual vacation.

Garning arrived in Coppleby about noon one day, and put himself up at the Brindled Cow— an old-fashioned hostelry of great comfort. He found prime beef and sound ale there, and did justice to both before sallying out to look round the town. Coppleby, he quickly discovered, on emerging from the Brindled Cow, was about the smallest, quietest, sleepiest place, for a real, full-fledged borough, that he had ever seen: you could walk round and all over it in half-an-hour. There was a

river there, with a fine stone bridge spanning it: from the foot of this bridge one main street led to a market-square; beyond street and square there was nothing, except that dotted here and there on the outskirts of the place were nice, quiet, eminently respectable houses of the superior villa-residence sort. On a hill overlooking the square stood the castle; half of it ruinous; down by the river stood the church; meadows of a delightful greenness ringed in everything, and in the near distance the hills were softly blue. This was just the sort of place, thought Garning, to which a man might retire: here the rest of life might be passed very pleasantly. In a short time he himself would be retiring on his well-earned, highly-merited pension; he began to think what he would do with himself if he came to live here at Coppleby. He would get nice, quiet rooms, with a good, homely landlady. He would wander around after birds and butterflies and flowers; now and then he would do a bit of fishing in the river. And he would read books, and the newspapers: when he wanted a little gossip and interchange of ideas with his fellow-beings, he would go into the bar-parlour of the Brindled Cow; it was very comfortable there and just as good as a club. Taking it altogether, Coppleby was alluring to a man of Garning's quiet tastes.

Before evening of that day, Gaming had seen everything in Coppleby. He had gone over the show-part of the Castle and explored the Church, wandered about the old houses, and dawdled on the bridge. And he was so pleased with all he saw that he determined, one full day being left of his holiday, to spend it at Coppleby. He had a comfortable dinner at his hotel that evening, a pleasant chatty talk with the frequenters of the bar-parlour over pipe and glass, and a sound sleep in lavender-scented sheets: it was all excellent. And next morning, after breakfast, a leisurely meal, he stood at the door of the Brindled Cow, looking out upon the quietude of the market-square, when the landlord, obviously as idle as himself, came up to him.

"Quietish spot, this, sir," observed the landlord, who had already discovered that his guest was a London gentleman. "Bit of difference between it and what you're accustomed to, no doubt."

"No worse for that," answered Garning. "To some people, all the better for its quiet." Then, really because he felt he must say something, he remarked, "I suppose it's not always as quiet as this?— you'll have times when there's something doing, no doubt?"

The landlord put his thumbs in the armholes of his ample waistcoat and adopting an attitude of ease, looked up and down the square and the street beyond.

"Oh, well!" he replied, "there's market-day to be sure— Saturday, that is. Pretty busy the town is, that day, of course. Country folk come in— hundreds of 'em. And we've a fair at Lady Day, and another at Michaelmas. And then there's a sitting of the County Court once a month, and the Magistrates once a week— and

that's about all, unless a travelling circus comes along, or something like that. And, to be sure, the Town Council meets once a fortnight. Lively, ain't it?"

"So you've a Town Council in such a small place as this?" questioned Garning. "I shouldn't have thought it."

"I daresay!" said the landlord. "Who would?— to look at it? But as a matter of fact, sir, this is one of the oldest boroughs in the North of England— we've had a Mayor and Corporation ever since the time of Henry the Third: you'd be surprised if you saw our old charters and documents— all preserved, they are, in the muniment room of the Moor Hall. Yes, there's been somewhere about five or six hundred Mayors of Coppleby— it's all set out in the registers. All the same," he added with a dry laugh, "we've got something for Mayor this year that we never had before, and I reckon our grandfathers would have been a bit astonished about it too, if it had happened in their time. But then, of course, it never could have done!"

"Oh?" said Garning. "Something— why, what have you got as Mayor? Must be a man, surely?"

The landlord removed his big hat, smoothed his head, and smiled whimsically.

"No!" he answered. "It's a woman! The Mayor we call her, all the same. Of course, I understand there's other towns where they've had ladies for Mayors, but it was a bit of a startler, you know, in an old-fashioned spot like this. But there it is— the Mayor of Coppleby's a woman!"

"Some lady of position in the neighbourhood, I suppose?" suggested Garning.

"No," replied the landlord. " 'Tis a trades-woman— and one of the smartest, too!" He lifted a hand and pointed down the main street to a building somewhat larger than the rest, over which a big gilt sign swung beneath a gaily-waving flag. "That's her place," he said. "Miss Megleston, Grocer and Draper. Grocery one side— drapery t'other. Shrewdest and sharpest woman I ever came across— brains, sir, brains: that's what's she's got. Made a fortune, that woman has, since she came here."

"Not a native then?" asked Garning.

"No, she's no native," said the landlord. "I don't know where she came from— I don't think anybody does. She came here— let's see, now— yes, it'll be just about nineteen years ago: I know I'd had this house about five years when she came. Before her coming, there was an old chap called Thornthwaite had a bit of a business over there— sort of general stores. He advertised it as a going concern: this Miss Megleston turned up, took a look round the district, and bought it from him. She must have had money, because she started developing it at once, and went ahead fast. And now, Lord bless you! she's got a regular monopoly of the grocery and drapery business in this neighbourhood! She started with three assistants: I should think she's got sixty or seventy now. And of course, she's

bought property, and she's the biggest ratepayer in the place, and lives in a fine new house up there above the Church— Rivermead she calls it."

"And is now Mayor!" said Garning, with a laugh. "Clever woman!"

"Clever enough!" agreed the landlord. "You see," he added significantly, "she's never done naught, but attend to business. Handsome woman— and they say she's had no end of offers of marriage. But no!— nothing but business. And she was little more than a lass when she came here— she stopped with me for a fortnight or so while she got settled down— I should say she was no more than twenty-three or four at that time."

"That would make her about forty-four or five now, then," said Garning.

"All about that," assented the landlord. "And well-preserved, too. There's two or three substantial gentlemen in this neighbourhood that would be glad enough to marry her, at her age. But no, as I say!— naught but business!"

"I should like to see her," remarked Garning. "She's evidently a character."

"Well, that's easy done, sir," said the landlord. "It's the fortnightly meeting of the Town Council this morning at eleven o'clock. If you step across to the Moot Hall yonder, and walk upstairs into the public gallery, you'll see the Mayor of Coppleby in her robes and chain— and very well they suit her, too!"

"Good!" agreed Garning. "Then we'll just try a glass of your very good ale before I go— and drink her Worship's health."

Half an hour later, Garning climbed the oak-balustraded staircase of the Moot Hall, and walked into a small public gallery which overlooked the floor of the Council Chamber. The gallery was already well-filled with townsfolk, men and women, young and old: evidently the fortnightly meeting of the Corporation was regarded as a great and possibly exciting event. Garning slipped into a quiet corner and looked round. The walls of the chamber were ornamented with oil paintings of former Mayors: immediately opposite the gallery in which he and the public sat was a sort of dais, on the panelling of which was displayed the Royal insignia, the armorial bearings of the town and a sword of justice: over these representations was the town's motto, in Latin: beneath them stood the Mayoral chair of state, with chairs on either side for the Aldermen: the floor of the chamber afforded space for the chairs and tables of the Councillors and the desk of the Town Clerk and his assistants. It was all very grand, and it amused Garning to see that a little town of some eight or nine hundred inhabitants had twelve Aldermen and eighteen Councillors to manage its affairs.

There was a gabble of conversation amongst these thirty wise men, and amongst the folk in the gallery when Garning entered— he gathered that there was a lot of excitement going on about the local expenditure. But as the clock struck eleven a dead silence fell over the chamber, a door was thrown open at the rear of the dais, and preceded by a very grand and solemn mace-bearer, there entered a tall, handsome woman, whose commanding figure did full justice to her

velvet and furred robes of office and to the massive gold chain around her neck. Certainly, no mere man, however portly and stately, could have looked more fitted to the office than this woman did, and Garning observed that the spectators in the gallery were well aware of the fact and not a little proud of their chief magistrate. But as for himself, after one sharp, penetrating stare at the robed and enchained figure, Garning sat back in his seat, and began slowly and meditatively to rub his chin— a sure indication, had his neighbours on either hand known it, that his professional instincts had been aroused.

And so they had. In Miss Megleston, Mayor of Coppleby, the astute old detective had instantly recognised a woman whom he had once tracked to arrest, who had skilfully slipped through his fingers almost as soon as he had laid hands on her, and for whom he had never ceased to search, up to that moment without success, ever since the day on which she had so cleverly escaped him.

GARNING remained fixed in that Council Chamber until one o'clock. He heard many affairs of the little town discussed— and paid very little attention to them. Aldermen and Councillors ventilated their views and opinions: there was doubtless a good deal in what each said, with more or less cogency and fluency, but it all went in at one of Garning's ears and out at the other without the brain between taking any great notice. Garning was wrapped up in the Mayor. Now and then she spoke, intervening in this and that, and Gaming quickly recognised that she was a woman of great ability, shrewd, ready, business-like, and possessed of a vast amount of common sense. There were some eleven men on the aldermanic bench on each side of her chair, and some more in front of her, where the councillors sat, but it needed very little attention and observation to decide that intellectually she was head and shoulders above any of them. And when the council rose as the clock of the Moot Hall struck one, Garning went out into the sun-lighted market square rubbing his chin more thoughtfully than ever.

He walked over to the Brindled Cow, and in a quiet corner of its old-fashioned coffee-room sat down to eat his lunch and to let his mind go back to the days in which he and the Mayor of Coppleby had met before— under very different circumstances. It was nineteen— no, close upon twenty years ago. Garning had already made a reputation for himself: he was then a man of thirty-five, and had had several years' experience in the Criminal Investigation Department. A case which, on its surface, seemed very ordinary, had been entrusted to him. There was a City man, one Mr. Versthagen, who employed a smart young woman, Miss Alice Merson, as confidential secretary— at the time of the trouble she had been in Mr. Versthagen's employ for five years, having entered it in her eighteenth year. She was one of those clever young women who could undertake correspondence in French and German, write shorthand at considerable speed, and use a typewriting machine like an expert. Evidently she was nearly as valuable to Mr.

Versthagen as his own right hand, and she not only came to know all his affairs, but to be entrusted with the keeping of his banking account and the custody of his cheque-book. Then one day Mr. Versthagen went away for a brief holiday, leaving Miss Alice Merson in charge of everything at his office: when he returned Miss Merson had helped herself to a thousand pounds of his money, making use of a signed but otherwise blank cheque which he had left her, and had departed, no one knew where. It was at that juncture that Garning came in.

Garning had one of the times of his life in tracking Miss Alice Merson. It was one of the most difficult things he ever did, that getting hold of a clue about her. But he got one at last, and having seized hold of one end of it, he went hand over hand to the other and ran Miss Merson to earth in a quiet lodging in Dover. And he remembered now that he was very much impressed by her when he walked in upon her and found her calmly engaged in innocent needlework. She was obviously surprised, but she was very cool, and she made no fuss whatever when Garning told her his errand and invited her to accompany him. Accompany him she did, quite cheerfully, and Garning installed her in the local police-cells while he went to get his dinner and wire the news of his success to headquarters. But when, an hour later, he returned for his captive, intending to carry her off to London, she was not there. Nobody knew how she had got out of the cells— but the fact remained that she was flown. And from that time onward Garning, in spite of many efforts, had never heard of her. But now— here she was. Mayor of Coppleby, a highly successful business woman, a person of considerable importance— and for all that a criminal, whom it was his duty to bring to justice.

Garning sat a long time over his lunch and when it was over, a longer time still over a cigar. He was thinking— deeply. Sentimental and tender-hearted as he was about birds, and flowers, and animals, and children, he was also a man of the sternest rectitude, unbending, rigid, in his profession. He had known a great many deeply affecting cases in his time and cases in which there had been a good deal to say for the wrong-doer upon whose shoulder he had clapped a startling hand, but he did not remember that they had ever affected him: his sole idea in his professional work was Duty. And as he sat there in the Brindled Cow, a very haven of peace and rest, he began to wish that he had never come to Coppleby, for his coming had brought him face to face with Duty. There it was, plainly set out before him— and nobody knew better than Garning that to do one's duty is not seldom a highly unpleasant and most disagreeable thing.

The striking of three o'clock from the Moot Hall roused Garning at last from his recollections and meditations. He threw away his cigar, and being alone in the little smoking-room, got up and looked at himself in the mirror above the fireplace. He was wondering if he had altered much during the last nineteen years. Garning was a tall, well-made, good-looking man, fresh-coloured, light-eyed: he certainly did not look his fifty-five years: most folk would have taken him for ten

years less. Also, he was a very smart, well-groomed man, meticulously particular about his clothes and his linen. And when, ten minutes later, he walked into Miss Megleston's grocery and drapery establishment in Coppleby main street and asked to see its proprietor, the young man to whom he spoke took him for some country gentleman of the neighbourhood and hastened toward a door in the rear which was marked Private.

Garning presently found himself ushered through that door and heard it closed behind him. At once he saw the object of his thoughts. Miss Megleston, denuded now of her robes and chain, sat at a desk with her back to him, busily engaged with letters and papers. She turned as the door closed and looked inquiringly at her visitor. And in that moment she recognised him— and as she recognised him, her glance went sharply to the door. Then she spoke.

"You!" she said quietly. "You?"

Garning made her a polite bow and smiled a little.

"Just so!" he answered. "I! I suppose I haven't changed very much as you recognise me so readily. Still— it's nearly twenty years since."

"Sit down," said Miss Megleston. She pointed almost imperiously to a chair at the side of her desk, and resumed her own seat as Garning obeyed her command. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"Pure accident," replied Garning. "I've been on holiday, up here in the North, and I just happened to drop into this town for a day or two— to view up. And I went into the Moot Hall this morning and saw— the Mayor of Coppleby."

"You've an excellent memory, Mr. Garning," observed Miss Megleston, dryly.

"Yes— a splendid one," said Garning, simply. "It's been very useful." He laughed a little, and looked at her half-whimsically. "There's a thing I've often wondered about," he continued. "How— how did you get away that morning?"

Something like an amused smile covered Miss Megleston's rather stem features.

"Easily enough!" she said. "They sent a woman to ask me what I would like for dinner— I remember there was a choice of roast pork or boiled mutton and caper sauce. The woman left the door of the— the cell— open. So I just walked out, went along the passage, and let myself out into the street. Who wouldn't?"

"And then?" asked Garning.

"Then? Oh, then," continued Miss Megleston, "then I just walked to the station, caught a train for Folkestone, got on a boat that was just leaving, and crossed over to Boulogne. I didn't stop there, of course; I kept moving, along the coast. And finally I moved back, from Havre to Southampton, and I came right up North. And then I heard of this business and bought it, and I've done extraordinarily well out of it— and I'm Mayor of Coppleby."

Garning, who had listened attentively and with absorbing interest to this frank account, nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "yes— you're a very clever woman. But— there's no Statute of Limitations in criminal proceedings, you know. It's a great pity that— that you ever did what you did. No doubt you feel it to be so?"

"Well, I don't then!" exclaimed Miss Megleston, with a hard look. "I've my own ideas on that point, Mr. Garning. Neither you nor anybody else ever knew the real truth about that affair. But I'll tell you now. That old Versthagen was a mean lying old man! Do you know that he paid me starvation wages from being a girl of eighteen till I was twenty-one, and not very much more after that, for the other two years I was with him? But he was always promising me a handsome present— enough to set me up in business, which he knew I wanted to go into. It never came off. So when I'd that chance, I just helped myself to precisely what he'd promised me— a thousand pounds. And I'm glad I did!"

Garning shook his head.

"I'm a man of plain thought and plain words," he said. "It was a crime!"

"You can call it what you like," retorted Miss Megleston, almost indifferently. "I paid him back."

Garning looked up quickly: for the last few minutes he had been studying the pattern of the handsome carpet at his feet.

"You— paid him back?" he exclaimed. "I— I never heard of it."

"Perhaps not," said Miss Megleston, dryly. "He wasn't the sort to tell you or anybody anything of that sort. But I sent him his thousand pounds, with five per cent. interest on it, through a trusty channel, exactly three years after I started this business, and what's more, I've got his receipt for it: it's there, in my private safe. Like to see it?"

But Garning waved his hand.

"I quite believe you," he said. "I think— yes— I'm sure you're that sort of woman. But that was compounding a felony. Doesn't matter what Versthagen did— he oughtn't to have done it. Why, dear me, you mightn't think it, but I have the original warrant for your arrest in my pocket-book still! Here in my pocket!"

Miss Megleston made no immediate answer. She sat at her desk looking at her captor. Garning, on his part, continued to stare at the carpet. A period of silence followed, broken only by the monotonous ticking of a small clock.

"What are you going to do?" asked Miss Megleston at last.

Garning slowly lifted his eyes from the carpet and looked up— to gaze half-abstractedly at the things in the room, rather than at their owner.

"I've had a pretty long career in— in my walk of life," he said, eventually, and more as if he were thinking aloud than answering the direct question put to him. "I'm a very soft-hearted man by nature but they say the hardest and keenest that ever was in the execution of my duty. Duty! That's what it is— Duty! Now, I've been faced with some queer things in doing my duty, very, very queer and difficult

things, but I've always done it. I've always felt that I've known what to do, leaving my personal inclinations aside— I'd just got to do that— Duty! And now—"

He passed his hand through his hair and his listener began to watch him with growing curiosity.

"Well?" she said, after another period of silence.

Garning suddenly rose from his chair, and thrusting his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, drew out a well-worn pocket-book, into the numerous contents of which he began to delve with fingers that shook a little. Eventually he found and pulled out a folded paper and glanced at its endorsement. He held it up so that Miss Megleston could see it.

"That's what I mentioned just now," he said quietly. "The warrant, out-of-date, of course, but— . Well, I'm going to do nothing— but this." He walked across to the hearth, where a bright fire burned, and dropped the paper into the flames. "That's the end of the whole affair, so far as I'm concerned," he added. "You're safe enough. And it's the end of my professional career!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Miss Megleston.

Garning picked up his hat and gloves.

"Just this," he said quietly. "After that, of course there's only one thing I can do. I'm going straight back to the hotel now, to write out and send in my resignation. I'm done! I'm not to be depended upon any longer. So, of course, I resign. By the bye," he added, as she stared at him, "now that I am retiring, I'm going to live in the country— I've plenty to live on. This place would suit me. You don't know of anyone here who has a comfortable little place to let— with a bit of garden?"

Miss Megleston looked at him again, for some time.

"Yes," she answered. "I have, Mr. Garning. Just the very place to suit a quiet man."

"I'm obliged to you," said Garning. "Perhaps you can let me see it? Any time? Then I'll come to-morrow morning. And as regards— what we've been talking about— I've forgotten it."

Then, without another word, and with a formal exchange of polite bows, which possibly conveyed to each more than words could have done, he went out and back to the Brindled Cow, where, taking pen, ink, and paper, he squared his jaws and set to work on the letter which was to cut him clean away from the old life.

_____

4: The Houseboat

"THAT," SAID MY SISTER PHYLLIS, pointing the ferrule of her sunshade across the river in a definite direction "that, Theodore, is exactly what we are looking for. And, as you see, it is to be had. Do you see what the board says? 'To be let or sold, with immediate possession.' It is the very thing— and the very spot!"

I gazed over the calm bosom of the Thames at the object which Phyllis indicated. I saw a very smart-looking houseboat, of a considerable size. It was newly painted in alternate stripes of green— a delicate shade— and white; it was gaily decorated with hanging plants, all in flower; and it possessed alluring awnings and inviting deck-chairs and lounges; it was moored in a particularly pleasant spot, and in a measure was isolated— that is to say, there was no other houseboat within quite fifty yards of it. I could see that it would be a pleasant houseboat whereon to laze away the summer days; there would be an interesting prospect from its decks and windows, with the tower of Henley Church as a centre point; also it was near enough to the town to be convenient for tradesmen and for trains; our object for at least for a couple of months was to forget that London existed. We desired the river and reflective days, hushed evenings and long nights. We wanted, in short, a period of pure laziness.

That we were able to afford such a period was still a matter mystery to us. In the spring of that year I was a city clerk, glad to know that I was earning £3 a week. Phyllis was a daily governess in Bayswater, at a salary of £50 per annum and liberty to partake of the children's dinner. And suddenly, all because an aged and childless relation, whom we had never seen, died in Australia, and was thoughtful enough to leave his dead brother's two children— Phyllis and myself— all his money, we became possessed of over £200,000 between us. That was why we wanted a houseboat. Some of our friends advised us to travel, but our first instincts were for rest. I wanted to forget the drab days of the city; Phyllis wished to sweep out of her mind the recollection of elementary grammar and arithmetic. Besides, we were fond of the river; we often envied the fortunate people who could spend the summer on its peaceful surface. Now there was no need to envy anybody.

"It is the very thing we want," repeated Phyllis dreamily.

"All right," said I. "Let us go over and take a closer look at it."

There was a boatman close by and we stepped into his craft and were rowed across to the green and white houseboat. As we drew near we became aware of music. Somebody was twanging a zither banjo and singing a melody of Carolina or Virginia in a pleasant tenor voice. And as we came up to the balcony, a young gentleman stepped out, the banjo in his hand, and looked at us pleasantly, smilingly, and also inquiringly. He was a good-looking young man, of apparently

twenty-five years of age. His flannels were immaculate, his hair was beautifully parted in the middle, and his socks were all that they should have been. He made a polite bow to us and I saw that he appreciated my sister's undoubted prettiness.

"Good morning!" I said. "I believe this houseboat is to let?"

"Or to sell," he replied with a ready smile. "With immediate possession. Will you kindly step aboard?"

He handed Phyllis out of our boat with respectful grace, and led the way into a tastefully arranged lounge.

"Yes," he said, "to let or sell. I may as well tell you that I should much prefer to sell. The fact is that I am just leaving England for a long absence abroad, and I should like to have the thing cleared off my hands. I shall be away for quite two years. Let me show you around."

It was a delightful houseboat— a palatial one. There was room on it for eight people and for three servants. It was most comfortably furnished and fitted, and as we went from room to room I saw that Phyllis was becoming more and more in love with it. And, indeed, if we had searched the Thames from London to Oxford we could not have found anything more delightful. The only drawback was in its size, and I said so.

"But we shall not always be alone," replied Phyllis. "We shall ask our friends down at times, Theodore."

"It is a most convenient houseboat for week-end parties," remarked the owner.

"Here, you see, is shore communication by this gangway at the rear, and a road coming right up. You can get everything you require out of the town; the tradesmen's carts are round constantly. I don't think there's a better or more comfortably fitted boat than this on the river."

"And how much do you ask for it for two months?" said I.

"No, for the summer," interjected Phyllis; "all the summer."

The owner of the houseboat smiled. We were back in the lounge by that time, and he pressed pleasant drinks upon us and brought out some particularly good cigarettes. We thought him very agreeable.

"Ah!" he said. "As I remarked previously, I should much prefer to sell. Why not buy? I gather that you are fond of the river?"

"Passionately!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"Well, here is the chance of a bargain. This houseboat," said the owner, "will last for years and years. If there is ever a time when you don't want to use it, you can easily let it. I am willing to sell it just as it stands, furniture, linen, silver, glass, crockery, everything— a bargain."

Phyllis looked narrowly at me. I looked at her and then looked at the tower of Henley church. Long years— I mean a few years— of life on three pounds a week had induced in me a habit of thinking deeply before spending anything.

"Let me speak to my brother a moment," said Phyllis.

The owner of the houseboat rose and opened a door for us. We passed into the drawing-room and Phyllis laid her hand on my arm.

"Theodore," she said, "let's buy it. We may never have such a chance again. Look here, we'll go shares at it. You see, if we buy it, it will be ours!"

"Why, of course, it will," I replied doubtfully, "but—"

"And it's always cheaper to buy property than to rent it," she said, "and we can come here at once. I'm tired of living in the hotel— I want to come here."

We had been residing in a palatial hotel in the Strand for a month while we looked about us, after the fashion of folks who have just come into money, and I confess I felt some sympathy with Phyllis's desires.

"Do let us buy it and have it for our own, Theodore!" she urged.

"Let us first hear what he asks for it," said I.

We went back to the lounge. The owner of the houseboat had picked up his banjo and was lazily strumming its strings. I put the important question to him. He laid the banjo aside and he yawned slightly.

"Well," he said reflectively, "I'll tell you what. As I said, I'm going abroad and I want to get the whole cleared up. I only came down here for the week-end with the idea of putting things into the hands of an agent in the town. As you've chanced to come along, we can settle matters between ourselves. I'll take seven hundred and fifty for the whole thing as it stands."

Seven hundred and fifty pounds is not a great amount in the eyes of two young people who between them possess nearly a quarter of a million. But, having given Phyllis a glance of admonition, I bargained a little. It seemed the most business-like thing to do.

We settled the matter at seven hundred guineas. I drew out my cheque book. The possession of a cheque book was still a new and pleasurable emotion; it gave me positive delight in those days to be able to draw a cheque for hundreds of pounds.

"To whom?" I said.

The late owner of the houseboat drew out a card— Mr. Percival Blaithwaite, 531a, Salamanca Mansions West, and Twilightside, Henley-on-Thames.

"Twilightside," exclaimed Phyllis. "Oh, what a delightful name for the houseboat, isn't it, Theodore?"

Mr. Blaithwaite smiled as he took the cheque.

"You can change it, you know, now that the boat's yours," he said. "It— it has associations for me. Now I'll give you a formal receipt conveying everything to you."

"And when," asked Phyllis, when all these formalities were over, "when can we come?"

"Oh, whenever you like," replied Mr. Blaithwaite. "I'm going to clear off this afternoon. To-morrow? Oh, to-morrow's Sunday, of course."

"And we have an engagement at Brighton to-morrow, Phyllis," said I. "We will say Monday."

"Of course, you will want servants, unless you are bringing your own," said Mr. Blaithwaite. "There's a capital registry office in the town— here's the address. And here's a list of the best tradespeople— I can strongly recommend every one of them."

We parted from Mr. Blaithwaite with compliments and good wishes on each side. He walked up with us to the hotel, where the motor car in which we had gone down from town was awaiting us, and all the way he gave us good advice and sensible tips about our future.

"If you come down early on Monday," said he, "you'll be able to hire servants and give the tradesmen their orders, and get settled down by the afternoon. You see, after all, everything is in such good order that you've really nothing to do but to walk in and make yourselves at home. Well, good-bye— you'll be having tea at Twilightside by 5 o'clock on Monday, and I shall be in Paris, on my way to the Far East."

I do not know if Mr. Blaithwaite actually was in Paris on his way to the Far East at 5 o'clock on the ensuing Monday, but it was quite true that Phyllis and I were at that hour fairly settled down in our houseboat— our own houseboat. We had engaged servants; we had got in our stores; we might have been living there on the quiet waters of the Thames for years. And we were drinking tea in the lounge and congratulating ourselves on our bargain, when we became aware that some commotion had arisen on or about the gangway which communicated with the river at our rear. Our parlourmaid appeared smiling in a queer way.

"Please, sir, there's a lady— says she's come to live here," she announced, glancing first to me and then at Phyllis.

I rose, followed by Phyllis, and went to the gangway. There stood a lady, obviously American, who was accompanied by a very pretty and attractive young maiden, all eyes and smiles, and a tall, broad-shouldered, young giant, who looked as if he had practised athletics all his life. They stared hard at us and we stared at them; we stared also at a fly, from which they had evidently just descended, and at another, in which were accommodated two maids and a tremendous quantity of luggage.

The elder lady looked from one to the other of us. She threw back a voluminous veil.

"This is the houseboat called Twilightside?" she said. "Yes? Well, we did not expect that we should find anybody upon it."

I rubbed my hands and looked hard at the three. The young lady was more than pretty.

"No," I said. "Well, you see we are here."

This was a foolishly fatuous remark. The elder lady bit her lip and stared at me as if she considered me a fool.

"We understood that the houseboat would be at our disposal on Monday," she remarked. "That was what was arranged, wasn't it, Maisie and Charlton? Oh yes, that was quite settled when I took this houseboat."

I heard a stifled cry of horror from my sister.

"Pardon me, madam," said I. "Do I understand that you say that— that you— took this houseboat?"

The lady nodded her much-veiled head with decision.

"Well, took is the wrong word," she answered. "As we reckon to stay in England two years, and we're fond of the river, I bought this houseboat. I bought it on Saturday."

I reached out behind me and caught Phyllis's hand and pressed it. Then I turned to the lady.

"There is some mistake," said I, with a calmness which surprised myself. "I bought the houseboat on Saturday. I also paid for it— cash."

"And I also paid for it," returned the lady. "Cash also. I gave the man— his name was Blaithwaite, wasn't it Charlton?— a cheque on the Credit Lyonnais on this houseboat at precisely 4 o'clock on Saturday afternoon."

"Ah!" I said. "But it was not his to sell at that time. He sold it to me at exactly half-past two."

The lady gasped, and looked at her son and daughter.

"Then— we can't come in?" she said, almost pathetically.

"On the contrary," said I— I was always distinguished for tact and courtesy— "I think it will be far better if you come in. Do come in— and have some tea."

Over the tea we all looked at each other— that is to say, I looked much at Miss Maisie Van Dyne and Mr. Charlton Van Dyne looked with earnestness upon my sister, Phyllis. And eventually, with a mutual impulse, he and I went out on the balcony to smoke.

"Say," said he, when we had lighted two cigars, "I guess that fellow has taken us both in. Was your cheque open?"

"It was," said I.

"So was my mother's," said he. "My opinion is that Mr. Percival Blaithwaite has collected the proceeds of those cheques and is now going away as far and as fast as possible. He is a weak man, he yielded to a sudden temptation. It was a fortunate thing for that very man that two parties turned up on the same day, each wanting this houseboat, in all probability not his to sell."

I had never thought of that. I felt morally upset and almost sick.

"Good Lord," said I. "What shall we do?"

"I guess we'd better go back to London, or to some hotel," said Mr. Van Dyne. "You were here first."

"No, no!" I exclaimed, sorely wrecked with thought. "No, let us think. Let us hear what my sister says."

Mr. Van Dyne readily assented to this proposal and we rejoined the ladies. And we put matters to Phyllis, I having previously informed the strangers that she was renowned for her common sense.

"I think," said Phyllis, "I think that as there is fortunately plenty of room on the houseboat, and as we have both paid for it, we ought to share it. The real difficulty is— the servants."

But Mrs. Van Dyne made light of that. In five minutes she arranged with Phyllis. There was room for one of her maids, the other she packed off to find lodgings in the town. The Van Dyne belongings were transferred from the conveyances to the houseboat, and the cook received instructions to prepare dinner for five persons instead of for two. As one would naturally expect, the conversation that evening ran on the wickedness of Mr. Percival Blaithwaite. There was little mystery as to what had happened on the Saturday afternoon. Mrs. Van Dyne, her son, and her daughter, had come down to Henley to find a houseboat. They had seen, and fallen in love with Twilightside, they had found Mr. Blaithwaite pretty much as we had found him, except that instead of playing the banjo he was packing his bag. They had gone through the same experience with him, they had bought the houseboat for the same price that we had given. And Mr. Blaithwaite had given them the same kind advice about servants and tradesfolk before they returned to London.

"Well, I don't believe that this houseboat ever belonged to that man at all," said Maisie Van Dyne. "I just guess that some day the real owner will come along and he will clear us all out about as quickly as Blaithwaite would clear those cheques. You'll see."

That Mr. Percival Blaithwaite had cleared the cheques Charlton Van Dyne and I found during a little run to town next day. That was all we could learn of him. And as Mrs. Van Dyne wisely said, it was quite enough. He might, after all, be the rightful owner when he sold. Anyway, between us we paid nearly £1,500 for that boat, and there we were going to stop until somebody came along and turned us out.

And we had very pleasant times. We told the Van Dynes all about ourselves and they told us all about themselves. We got on excellently. Maisie Van Dyne and I always went in one direction, Charlton Van Dyne and Phyllis always proceeded in another, and Mrs. Van Dyne stayed at home and read local guide books about the scenery. We had joyful days and delightful evenings, and we were glad that fate had thrown us together. And we were just at the very height of our enjoyment—

for certain special reasons which shall be explained— when what at least one of us had always expected to happen did happen.

It was the evening of a very beautiful day in August. There had been a sort of sentimental sense of the coming of autumn in the air and Maisie Van Dyne and I— who had been down the river— had remarked it. All the same it did not affect our appetites. With rare intuition our cook had prepared a particularly good dinner for that evening— I have memories of a saddle of Welsh mutton which had been well hung— and young Van Dyne and I had, for some reason not quite clear to his mother, insisted upon champagne. And we were a very merry party when the door of that compartment of the houseboat which we called dining-room opened, and in walked an elderly bearded gentleman, who surveyed us through gold-rimmed spectacles with profound astonishment.

"Sakes!" exclaimed Maisie, under her breath. "It's the rightful owner! Didn't I say?"

The elderly gentleman, who was wearing a broad-brimmed slouch hat, took it off after his first sharp glance and made us a profound bow.

"So," he said in deep, guttural accents. "I beg a thousand pardons! I interrupt— I break in upon a family circle, is it not? But this is my houseboat, my dwelling upon the river. I am Mr. Hochenheimer."

Charlton Van Dyne and I arose, Mrs. Van Dyne arose also, and then sank into her chair again and began to fan herself. Charlton glanced at me.

"It's up to you, Fielding," he said curtly. "Sail in."

I glanced at Mr. Hochenheimer. A brilliant inspiration suddenly filled me.

"Sir," I said, "will you take a glass of champagne? And since this is your house will you not be seated?"

"Good words!" he said approvingly. He seated himself, with more bows to the ladies.

"I thank you. Ah, here some mystery is. I come down from London on my return from New York. I say to myself, 'I will go to see my houseboat, my Twilightside; maybe next week I will my friends invite for the jollification.' I arrive, see the lights, I hear laughter, I smell something good, I find ladies and gentlemen dining. Some mystery, hein?"

"The mystery, sir," I said, handing Mr. Hochenheimer a glass of champagne, "the mystery is a deep one. The fact is that this houseboat was sold to me for cash, on the 13th day of June, at half-past two o'clock in the afternoon. At 4 o'clock on the same day it was sold to this lady, Mrs. Van Dyne, of Philadelphia, also for cash. We— we were endeavouring to get some return for our money."

"But we always felt that the rightful owner would turn up," said Maisie, sweetly and tactfully; "and so we have kept everything very, very nice for you, Mr. Hochenheimer."

Mr. Hochenheimer bowed, and silently indicated that he drank to our healths.

"I am sure that my river dwelling is graced by the presence of so graceful and so charming ladies," he said gallantly. "But who sells my property while I am over the Atlantic on my business?"

"A gentleman named Percival Blaithwaite," I replied.

Mr. Hochenheimer shook his head.

"I do not know him," he said. "You will describe him, eh?"

I gave a description of Mr. Blaithwaite which would have done credit to a police advertisement. Long before I had finished, Mr. Hochenheimer began to puff and snort; his well-fed cheeks grew purple, and his beard curled visibly.

"It is Barker!" he exclaimed, smiting his knee. "I know him. Oh, the ingrat! Oh, the scoundrel! He is a youngster I employ in my office at my theatre— you know my theatre, the Hilarity, eh? I give him various little chobs at one time and another. And when I buy myself this houseboat last summer I bring him down with my little parties to make him useful; that is all. Well, gentlemen, you lose your moneys, eh? Ah, my good— no, very, very bad Barker, I shall hunt you all over Europe. Oh, I shall have no mercy on you. I shall—"

Maisie gracefully refilled Mr. Hochenheimer's glass, and, with another inspiration, I handed him the cigar box. Mrs. Van Dyne took a hand.

"Of course we must vacate the houseboat at once," she said. "We must immediately make arrangements."

"Of course," said Phyllis, "we cannot put Mr. Hochenheimer to any inconvenience."

Mr. Hochenheimer looked positively pained. He set down his wine, and lifted his hands.

"My dear ladies and gentlemen!" he said protestingly. "I cannot hear of such a proceeding. Oblige me by considering this houseboat your own until such times as you desire to leave it. I am honoured— I am flattered by your occupancy. I am proud to find such gracious ladies and gentlemen here. It is no inconvenience to me.

"Maybe I have no time to bring my little parties down here. I shall be busy looking for Mr. Barker, eh? No, no! I insist. I beg that you will not disturb yourself. Now I make my adieux, and I go up to the Angel, and put myself up there. But in the morning, if I may have the distinguished pleasure, I invite myself to breakfast, and then we talk some more about catching Mr. Barker, eh? Ah, we catch that fellow, and then we make him jump!"

So Mr. Hochenheimer departed and the three ladies said he was a delightful man. As for Charlton Van Dyne and myself, we went ashore later on to smoke our pipes and we had a conversation, the result of which was that we walked up to the Angel and requested an interview with the proprietor of the Hilarity Theatre, who promptly received us with open arms, and made haste to refresh us. And once more, Charlton, who was more of a man of deeds than words, looked at me.

"Go ahead!" he said.

I glanced beseechingly at Mr. Hochenheimer.

"The fact is, sir," I said, "Van Dyne and I have come up to ask you to have mercy on that chap, Barker, or Blaithwaite. Let him off, sir."

Mr. Hochenheimer gurgled inarticulately.

"You see, sir," I continued, "the truth is that to-day Van Dyne has become engaged to be married to my sister, and I have become similarly contracted to his. Now, if it had not been for Barker, or Blaithwaite, we should never have met, and so we feel a certain amount of indebtedness to him; in short, we feel that he was a sort of Deus ex machinâ in the matter. Let him off, Mr. Hochenheimer."

Mr. Hochenheimer gurgled, chuckled and laid his hands on our shoulders.

"Then you will ask me to the weddings?" he said. "Ah! I will congratulate the so charming brides to-morrow. The villain, Barker, is forgiven— and forgotten."

But Mr. Barker, or Blaithwaite, had not forgotten us. Four days after the announcement of the forthcoming marriages appeared in The Morning Post I received a letter, which bore a continental postmark. Its contents were brief and to the point:

"Sir,— I respectfully offer my congratulations on the double engagement announced in Tuesday's Morning Post. As I was the direct means of bringing the contracting parties together, do you not think that a little pecuniary recompense is due to me? A remittance in Bank of England notes to the Poste Restante at Blankenberghe would reach me. It is the duty of those who are happy to share their happiness with others. I am, sir, your obedient servant,

I carried this precious epistle to Charlton Van Dyne.

His face remained as inscrutable as a sphinx.

"I guess," he said, handing back the letter, "that that man is the most impudent person that ever was born!"

"Just so," said I. "But the question is, shall we make him happy?"

Charlton gave me a queer smile.

"On condition that we don't tell Hochenheimer," he answered.

But we told our wives.

_____

5: The Inner Room

PEMBRIDGE HAD PURPOSELY chosen a late, but not the latest train of the evening by which to go down to Albansbury. The last train was always full of people returning from the London theatres. It would be impossible, travelling by it, to avoid falling under the notice of many eyes, and he had good reasons for wishing to be seen by as few persons as possible.

For several nights he kept a close observation on the great London terminus from which the Albansbury trains started, and the result of it was that he decided on taking the 10.30. From what he has seen not many passengers travelled by that; he would be able to join it, and leave it, in comparative privacy. And on the night which he had selected for the carrying out of his design he walked into the terminus at the last moment, muffled to the nose, purchased a first-class ticket, and slipped quickly into an unoccupied compartment. Half an hour later he was outside the little station at Albansbury, and was striding away towards the dimly lighted road which led to the old house on the far outskirts of the town, from which, granted good luck, he meant to abstract certain valuable matters.

He congratulated himself warmly on the success of his train journey. So far as he could see, he had attracted no notice from passengers or officials; he doubted if anybody, from the clerk who issued his ticket to the collector who took it, had particularly observed him. Nevertheless, still full of caution, he made several turns and twists in small streets before he definitely took the road he wanted.

The design which Pembridge— one of the most accomplished of modern cracksmen, educated, talented, and once a gentleman— had in mind was one on which he had spent much thought and consideration. He was an artist in his way, and nothing that was vulgar or ordinary appealed to him. At the thought of burgling a mere jeweller's shop or abstracting a packet of diamonds from a safe of a Hatton Garden diamond merchant, he would have turned up his nose. Such matters were for those of the craft who had no great imagination, and who, moreover, worked in two's and three's and four's.

Pembridge, being a keen student of human nature, had no belief in the honour of thieves, and he preferred to keep his secrets to himself. What he delighted in was the appropriation of rarities. It was he who cut the famous Murillo out of its frame in the Duke of Frantlingham's house in Park Lane; it was he who took to himself Lady Talberdine's almost priceless collection of old lace; it was he who appropriated that historic relic of Mary Queen of Scots which for three centuries had been the pride of a certain ancient mansion in Lincolnshire.

Anyone who knew Pembridge really well might have observed that, very soon after the news of these serious losses was clamorously voiced in the newspapers, he invariably made trips to the continent or to New York. But nobody knew

Pembridge except the servants who attended him at his elegant and luxuriously appointed flat in Kensington, and they only knew him as a gentleman of forty, who had plenty of money and an excellent taste in books and pictures.

The seed of the design which brought Pembridge to Albansbury that February night was an illustrated article which dealt with the famous library of Prof. Tremenheere, who lived in a pretty, old country house on the outskirts of the little cathedral city. The professor was celebrated as a collector of rare editions, of black-letter folios, of Caxtons, of Elzevirs, of anything that the bibliophile most loves and craves for, and, though he was a shy and retiring man, he permitted an enterprising journalist to write an article about him and his library, and to illustrate it with specially taken photographs.

And Pembridge, sitting one night in his Kensington flat, read that article, and when he had finished it he put the magazine down and began to think in his most concentrated fashion. Before he took the one glass of whisky which he allowed himself as a night-cap he made up his mind that some of Prof. Tremenheere's treasures must be his.

Pembridge always worked with caution, circumspection and deliberation. He had a strong belief in considering every point in an affair before he entered upon action. Accordingly, the first thing upon which he decided in connection with his proposed appropriation of Prof. Tremenheere's treasures was that he had better see what it was that he particularly desired to appropriate; in other words, to ascertain what and which of the valuable books at Saxons would best suit his peculiar market. Therefore, he must, somehow, get himself introduced into Saxons in such a fashion that its master would display its prizes to him.

A man of infinite resource, Pembridge quickly resolved on a plan of action. The practice of his nefarious profession had made him already a fairly well-to-do man; accordingly, in the prosecution of such designs as that in which he was now engaged, he had at the back of him the eminently valuable assets of ready money in abundance and of a truly good wardrobe. To these he added the engaging personality of a thorough man of the world and a cultured manner. And, knowing that he was fully qualified to play any part he cared to assume, he put money in his purse and clothes in various portmanteaux, and, going down to Albansbury, put up at the principal hotel, and let it be known that he was an American gentleman travelling for pleasure, who had heard much of the ancient city, its cathedral, and its Roman remains, and had come to see them.

In three days, through a local antiquary, who found the stranger a most interesting man, Pembridge had obtained an introduction to Prof. Tremenheere, and was in due course admitted within the walls of Saxons.

Pembridge knew quite enough of books to be able to talk well to even so learned a bibliophile as the professor. He was also wise enough to know that bibliophiles, antiquaries and archæologists love nothing so much as talking about

their treasures, and he proved himself such an excellent and appreciative listener to the professor's long and erudite disquisitions that the old gentleman was loth to let him depart. And all the time that he listened Pembridge was keenly and closely observing everything. When he left Saxons he knew precisely what he wanted to steal, and how to steal it.

The professor's house was an ancient stone mansion lying at the foot of the hill at the summit of which stands Albansbury and its cathedral. It was very quiet, very isolated; it could be approached by a country road along which few people were likely to pass at night. A high wall enclosed it and its grounds; the grounds were much covered by trees and shrubs. It was an excellent place for reconnoitring unobserved. But Pembridge was much more interested in the interior of the house, and especially in the library.

This, the professor pointed out with unaffected pride, was a wing recently built out of the older part of the mansion. In this wing there were two rooms, one large, the other small. The large room was lighted by six windows of lancet shape, three on each side; the small room possessed no windows, but was lighted by a dome of thick glass, beneath which was a strong grating of steel. And, needless to say, the small room contained the most precious of the professor's treasures.

Pembridge was quick to see that there was no way of making an entrance into the small room, which was really an annex to the larger one. But he was equally quick to perceive that there would be nothing difficult to a past-master like himself in entering the large room from the grounds outside by way of one of the lancet windows; in fact, as the professor talked to him he settled upon the particular window he would select. He turned his attention then to the door of communication between the two rooms, and to his great gratification saw that it was nothing more than a very heavy and solid ordinary door. Doubtless it was furnished with a patent lock, but Pembridge made little of locks, patented or unpatented; he had never known one yet that had caused him more than a momentary delay.

Everything went in Pembridge's favour that afternoon. The professor was so delighted with his American visitor that he insisted upon his staying to dinner. Pembridge accepted the invitation with becoming modesty; secretly he jumped for joy, for he knew that his acceptance would give him the opportunity of gaining some knowledge of the family and establishment. And he soon found that Prof. Tremenheere's family consisted of himself, his wife, both elderly people, and of a young lady who was introduced as their ward, and that the establishment was made up of three or four female servants; of men servants he neither saw nor heard anything. He went back to his hotel in Albansbury smoking one of the professor's very good cigars, and highly satisfied with the result of his investigation, and within a day or two he departed, remarking that he was going to see other interesting places and people.

And now Pembridge was back in Albansbury, had come back literally as a thief in the night, and was slowly pacing the quiet road that led to the house which he meant to despoil of a few— quite a few— of its master's most cherished treasures.

His mind, like those of all great generals, operators and schemers, was calm and placid, now that the moment of action had arrived, and he enjoyed the cigar he was smoking just as he would have enjoyed it in the peaceful atmosphere of his Kensington flat. All his plans were thoroughly perfected; all the cunning instruments he would need were in their place in the craftily designed special pockets of the great overcoat which he wore; he could lay his fingers on any one of them in the fraction of a second. Indeed, he had worked out his scheme so fully that he had even reckoned up how long the operation of transferring the professor's property to himself would take. And, according to that reckoning, twelve minutes would carry the work through. As soon as it was over he would strike across country to another railway line three miles away, and by 1 o'clock at the latest he would be home again and in bed.

Saxons was all in darkness when Pembridge came up to its gates. He knew how to enter the grounds, and, with the litheness of a panther, he slipped over the wall and became a part of the shrubbery. With equally panther-like movements, he went all around the extreme of the old house. There was not a gleam of light anywhere; there was not a sound to be heard. He smiled as he contemplated the professor's simplicity in not keeping, at any rate, one well-qualified house dog. And then he approached the particular lancet window which he had chosen for his entrance, and his long, sinewy fingers sought and found a certain instrument, which, with his usual sense of artistry and of carefulness in attending to detail, he had forged and tempered himself. There was the slightest, gentlest sound— and then Pembridge glided carefully into Professor Tremenheere's house.

The house was as quiet as the night outside. He stood for a moment in the darkness, listening intently; then his knowledge of the exact geography of the place which he had carefully memorised on his previous visit serving him instead of sight, he went over to the door which shut off the larger room of the library from the house and ascertained that it was closed, and not only closed, but locked from outside. Pembridge had thought of that. Without troubling to use the electric torch which he carried in one of his many pockets he fitted a couple of steel wedges into the door in such a fashion that whoever wished to enter from the hall without would have found it impossible to do so. And that done he went straight to the door of the inner room to commence the campaign.

To Pembridge's intense surprise— a surprise almost amounting to amazement— the door was unlocked. He had fully expected to encounter something very special in the way of patent locks and had come prepared for that

eventuality. But when he turned the handle the door opened quietly and easily. He paused on the threshold, wondering. But he was swift to think at all times, and he decided that the outer door, in which he had placed his steel wedges, must be that on which Professor Tremenheere relied for safety. Anyhow, there was the fact— the inner room, with its treasure, was open to him. He knew exactly where the four volumes which he wanted were kept in a special case, and, drawing his electric torch from his pocket, he slipped into the room in their direction. He remembered the feel of the polished, uncarpeted floor as he set foot on it, and—

The next instant Pembridge found himself sinking swiftly through space— so swiftly that he had no time to clutch at anything which might be there to clutch at. He went down as if, all unawares, he had stepped into the open door of a carelessly-protected elevator, which instantly gave way beneath his weight; the suddenness of it almost jerked him off his feet. And before he had realised what had happened he found that the surface on which he stood, staggering, had come to a sharp stop and was stationary.

Pembridge, up to that moment, had never been in a really tight corner in his life. But he knew that he was in one now, and that it was going to take all the cleverness and ingenuity of which he was capable to get him out of it. In that moment of lightning-like realisation he was conscious that he was in the power of a mind and intelligence much stronger than his own, and for the first time in his life he felt a sudden sense of sickening fear, and as he turned on the light of his electric torch he muttered one word:

"Trapped!"

Holding up the light he looked about him. He saw at once what had happened. The beautifully polished floor, carpetless, unencumbered by furniture, had been so designed that on occasion it could sink deep down below the level of the inner room.

And Pembridge's fear increased when he saw to what depths it had sunk between walls of remarkably formidable-looking concrete. He was at least five-and-twenty feet down— trapped indeed, and as surely as if some giant hand had lowered him into a disused mine and then withdrawn itself. And as he realised how securely he was trapped so he realised the cleverness of the apparently simple old professor, who had devised this ingenious method of securing any marauder who crossed the threshold of the inner room in which his priceless treasures were kept.

"Clever— infernally clever!" muttered Pembridge as he stared about him. "I see the whole trick. When the old chap retires he releases something which keeps this floor in position during the daytime, or when he's about. Accordingly, when any strange foot is set on it down it comes— as it did with me. And how am I going to get out?"

Once more he looked around the concrete walls by which he was surrounded. A spider, or a centipede, or a common house fly might have walked up them, but that operation was not possible to Pembridge. There was not a flaw in them in which he could put the tip of a finger, and, although he was an athletic man, he knew that it was beyond his powers to jump into the air more than four times his own height. No, he said again, he was trapped, fairly trapped.

Pembridge, in the privacy of his luxuriant flat, had often speculated on his doings if anything like this should ever happen. He had never been able to come to any conclusion on that point; now that the dire event had happened he was at a loss as to what anybody, even the most ingenious of men, could do. He could not make a way through the concrete walls; even supposing he managed to tear up part of the very substantial oak flooring, he would probably encounter more concrete. The fact was, he presently informed himself, there was nothing to do.

What he did, however, was to sit down in the angle of his remarkable prison cell and to take a drink from the small flask which he carried in his breast pocket. Then he extinguished his electric torch, folded his arms and faced the situation. One thing was certain— his captor would not leave him there. He would have to be brought to the surface again. Was it worth while bothering about anything until that happened? Could he, however much he thought, alter his present unfortunate situation? No, certainly not. And so, in a spirit of fine philosophy, Pembridge turned up his coat collar about his muffled neck, folded his arms resolutely and went to sleep.

He was suddenly awakened by a blinding flash of light, which shot full upon his head and shoulders. Looking sharply up, he saw that from the domed roof high above him a searchlight was being directed upon the cavity in which he lay. It travelled into each corner, then came slowly back to him, and remained fixed upon him. And Pembridge, realising that behind the searchlight there must be a human intelligence, leaped to his feet and shouted, lifting a hand:

"Hi, there!" he called out, "let me out of this— you've got me fairly enough! Let me out, and I'll—"

The searchlight was turned off as suddenly as it had been turned on, and Pembridge found himself in a deeper darkness than ever. And he also found himself trembling a little and vaguely wondering if his nerves were shaken.

"Anyway, they know I'm here," he muttered. "And if the professor took an inspection of me, he'll know who his visitor is. If I had known what an infernally clever old chap he is at this sort of thing I'd have— — But what's the use of talking like that? It's much more to the point to know what's going to happen next!"

Then Pembridge turned on his electric torch and consulted his watch. Half past three! And down there it was very cold; it seemed to be getting colder every minute. He took another drink from his flask and meditated.

"The old man will send for the police," he said to himself. "The police will find certain articles on me which respectable people do not carry, and they will send for expert help from Scotland Yard. So far, Scotland Yard does not know me, but it will know me forever after this! And just now there seems nothing but the certainty of spending the morning hours in this hole!"

Realising that certainty to the full, Pembridge again composed himself as comfortably as possible in his corner and tried to sleep. But it is difficult to sleep in the chilliest hours of the morning unless one is in one's own bed, and though he dozed at intervals he spent a miserable time until he saw the grey light steal through the thick glare of the dome high above him. As it grew stronger he jumped up, and, by dint of various stampings and clappings, contrived to get some warmth into his body. And he drank the last of his whisky and lighted a cigar and resigned himself to waiting. And while he waited he began to understand how much certainty is to be preferred to uncertainty. For 8 o'clock came, and 10 o'clock, and finally noon, and he was still there, trapped, and in a silence which was driving him frantic.

Suddenly Pembridge heard sounds in the room above— or rather along the flooring which lay between the book-case-lined walls and the edge of the cavity in which, with the rest of the floor, he lay. He looked up eagerly; he would have rejoiced at the sight of his deadliest enemy. But Pembridge saw nothing human; instead he saw a curious, curtain-like mass of black material— which was, in fact, a sheet of thick rubber— being rapidly drawn across the square opening above his head. In another moment he was in darkness. He snapped open his electric torch— the charge had been exhausted during the night. He heard more sounds— whispered instructions— then came silence. And Pembridge began to shout loudly and wildly, for a great fear had come upon him. If he had had a revolver upon him he would have fired every chamber at the strange black curtain above him in his terror. But he never carried a revolver; all his previous operations had been carried out with such certitude that— —

What was this? He was suddenly aware of a strange, curious change in the atmosphere in which he was mocking at breathing. Something which he could not handle was handling him. Something had him by the throat; something was making him stagger, totter, fall. Now he was in his corner again, with his head in the angle— yes, he was going to sleep— to dream— dream.

"He's coming around," said a voice, which seemed to Pembridge to be a long way off and yet quite distinct. "Spray a little more of that essence on his temples. There!"

Pembridge opened his eyes languidly. The first objects he met were his own kit of special tools laid out neatly on a side table in the professor's dining-room, wherein he himself lay on a couch in the midst of a group of much-interested men. Pembridge took a quick glance at their faces and shut his eyes again. The effects of

the anæsthetic were not quite out of his brain, but his brain was clear enough to realise one undoubted fact. He was at last in the hands of justice.

_____

6: The Portrait of a Gentleman

AROUND THE CORNER of Norfolk Street a four-wheeled cab carried a nervous-looking man, who glanced out of the windows as if surprised at the height of the buildings on either side of him. He was an elderly man, thin of face and meagre of figure; the sleeves of his old-fashioned frock coat were all too short to cover his bony wrists; his long, thin fingers clasped and unclasped each other as the cab slackened its slow pace and came to a halt in front of an imposing pile of business offices, at the pavement of which a lift boy, glorious in a new uniform of blue and gold, lounged superciliously. The occupant ran his fingers nervously over his thin face and wisp of grey whisker, and started from his seat as the driver dismounted from his box. He looked doubtfully at an object which filled the opposite seat— a square package done up in what was obviously an ancient bed quilt.

"Here y'are, sir," said the cabman. "Mauldever House."

The elderly man, after knocking his head against the top of the cab, contrived to descend. He glanced at the lift boy, the cabman, and back at his package.

"I want that carried inside," he remarked. "It's a trifle heavy for one. And it mustn't be dropped."

The cabman summoned the lift boy with a turn of his head; together they carried the package into the marble-floored hall, the elderly man hovering about them as if he were afraid of an accident to whatever it was that lay concealed beneath the flowered pattern of the old quilt.

The cabman named a sum which represented about half as much again as was due to him, and his fare paid him without demur, extracting the money from an ancient dog-skin purse. He turned to the lift boy.

"There is where Mr. Sherrington does business, isn't it?" he asked, still doubtful and nervous of his surroundings.

The boy threw open the gate of the lift with a crash which made the caller jump.

"Fifth floor," he said. "Want that up?"

The elderly man jumped again as the lift shot him and his package upward to unknown regions. He was about to remark that he had never previously travelled in that way, when the lift stopped, and the boy, bundling him and his belongings out, shot down again. He caught his breath and looked around him. There was more marble, and there were highly polished doors, and on one of them gleamed a solid plate of gleaming brass, on which, in bold, black letters, appeared the name, "Mr. Mortimer Sherrington."

The caller, drawing another deep breath, knocked at this door, and heard a girl's voice bid him enter. Walking a foot or two across the threshold, and standing in such a position that he could keep an eye on his package, he took a timid

prospect of the interior. At one table, strewed about with books and papers, a tall and slender young lady was arranging a quantity of summer flowers in a Japanese vase; at another a plump and round-faced damsel, who wore her hair over her shoulders, was polishing a typewriter with a scrap of red flannel. There was a map of England on one wall, and an engraving after Dendy Sadler on another, and from a gilt chain in the window a gaily coloured wire cage hung and housed a yellow canary. The caller stared a little and opened his mouth.

"Mr. Sherrington?" he murmured. "Is he— er— is he in?"

"Got an appointment?" demanded the slender young lady, taking in the picture at a glance.

The caller began to fumble in the breast pocket of the ancient frock coat. He pulled out a much-worn pocket book and extracted a card the size of a business envelope.

"No, I haven't any appointment," he answered. "But Mr. Sherrington will know my name. I— I want to ask his advice."

He handed over the card with a stiff little bow, and the slender young lady, taking it unconcernedly, read, "James Cordukes, Surgical Instrument Maker, 45 Middle Street, Leycaster," as she walked to the door of an inner room. She entered this without ceremony and in a moment returned.

"If you'll take a seat Mr. Sherrington will see you in five minutes," she said, and pointed to a chair near the door.

"Thank you," replied Mr. Cordukes. "I— the fact is, I've a little matter outside here which I want to bring in, and it's— it's rather heavy."

The slender young lady cast a glance at the package, she threw half a glance at the satellite of the red flannel.

"Help this gentleman in with his parcel, Miss Meadows," she said.

Miss Meadows assisted Mr. Cordukes to bring in his old quilt and its contents, and he sat down on the edge of a chair, and rested the package against his knees. He was not sure if it would be mannerly to make a remark upon the weather, so he watched the young ladies in silence. Miss Meadows put her scrap of red flannel away in a drawer, and began to operate her machine; the slender damsel, having arranged the flowers to her satisfaction, placed them in a conspicuous place on her table, and took up a notebook which appeared to be filled with the hieroglyphics of shorthand. Above the steady click of the typewriter the canary suddenly burst into song. As it reached its highest note, the door of the inner room opened and a gentleman strode out, and stretched a hand to the caller.

"Mr. Cordukes? Glad to see you, Mr. Cordukes. Come right in and take a seat— glad to see you, sir!" he said, heartily.

Mr. Cordukes stood up trembling a little in his nervousness, and grasped Mr. Sherrington's hand. He found himself inspecting a tall, well-set-up man of early

middle-age, immaculately attired, irreproachably groomed, quick, offhand in manner, with a charming voice and an ingratiating and candid smile.

"You— you remember me, sir?" he said, almost reverentially. "I— I hoped that you would."

"Oh, of course, of course, Mr. Cordukes. Though we've never met before, I never forget a client," answered Mr. Mortimer Sherrington. "Come in, sir; come in!"

Mr. Cordukes laid his hand on the bed quilt.

"I've something here I want to show you, Mr. Sherrington," he said. "It's— a picture."

"A picture, eh? By all means!" said Mr. Sherrington. "Miss Catesby, a hand here. Thank you. Now, Mr. Cordukes."

Miss Catesby and Mr. Sherrington carried the picture into the inner room; Mr. Cordukes, following them, gained a quick impression of almost Sybaritic luxury in the way of thick carpets, easy chairs and the latest in office furniture. He had often wondered about this Mr. Sherrington, who, through an advertisement, had acted as agent for him in the sale of a certain patent; he now came to the conclusion that general agency must be a paying business. He warmed to the feeling of gratification that he had come to Mauldever House.

"A picture, eh, Mr. Cordukes?" said Mr. Sherrington. "And what sort of a picture, and what do you want to do with it?"

Mr. Cordukes began to fumble at the cords— window-blind cords of faded green— with which his homely package was tied up. He laughed nervously.

"Well, sir, the fact is," he answered, "the fact is, I'm retiring from business, and going to live with my son and his wife. And I've been clearing a lot of old stuff out, and in one of my attics I found this picture, which I'd forgotten I had. It's been in our family for a long time. I remember it as a boy. And I was showing it the other day to my neighbour, Mr. Nettleton, the grocer, and 'Cordukes,' he says, 'I shouldn't wonder if that's what they call an Old Master!' 'Wouldn't you, Nettleton?' I says, 'I shouldn't,' says, he 'And if I were you, Cordukes,' he says, 'I should take that picture to London and show it to one of those experts as they call them— that's what I should do,' he says. And as I had a bit of business in town, I brought the picture with me, and I thought I'd bring it to you, Mr. Sherrington, for you'll know about these matters better than I do."

"Well, I'm no expert," said Mr. Sherrington, laughing. "But I've no doubt I can put you on to one, Mr. Cordukes. An old picture, and been in your family a long time, eh?"

"I believe my father had it from his father, sir," answered Mr. Cordukes. "Oh, it's very old! It's— but there it is, Mr. Sherrington."

The man who, as his peculiar clientele knew, undertook to sell, to arrange, to do anything, looked with interest at the old picture, from which its possessor

stripped off the quilt and an inner wrapping of time-stained linen sheeting. He found himself gazing at the portrait of a gentleman in a tie-wig and a scarlet coat— a gentleman of fresh complexion and blue eyes. And, though he was not an expert in the art of judging a picture, Mr. Sherrington knew that he was looking on the work of a master in the difficult trick of depicting flesh tints, and Mr. Cordukes and his property became of great and absorbing interest.

"That looks old enough, to be sure," he said. "Yes, it's old."

"It's all old, sir," said Mr. Cordukes. "Old picture and old frame. That frame was not made yesterday, sir."

"Is it signed? Is there anything on the back? Are there any marks anywhere?" asked Mr. Sherrington. "Here, let's examine it carefully, back and front."

But there was no signature, and there were no marks on the canvas, or stretcher, or frame.

"But there's an air of distinction, a definite dignity, about that picture which seems to say, 'I'm something out of the common,' Mr. Cordukes," observed Mr. Sherrington with enthusiasm. "Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. You're in no immediate hurry about selling this, are you?— no, no, just so, of course not. Well, now I know a famous expert who can tell me in one second what that picture is. Unfortunately, he is just now in Italy. He may be back in a week, or he mayn't be back for a month. Leave the picture with me, Mr. Cordukes, and as soon as my friend returns, you shall hear from me. And if it is an Old Master, and of value, depend upon me, Mr. Cordukes, to get you the very top price for it, sir. How will that suit you, Mr. Cordukes?"

Mr. Cordukes replied that it would suit him excellently. He drank a glass of old brown sherry with Mr. Sherrington, and they exchanged some pleasant reminiscences about their previous business transactions. Mr. Sherrington accompanied Mr. Cordukes to the lift when the caller left, and shook hands with him in his heartiest fashion. And Mr. Cordukes smiled as he walked up Norfolk Street into the sunshine and bustle of the Strand.

"A very pleasant gentleman," he murmured. "A very, very pleasant gentleman!"

ii

THE WORLD-FAMOUS authority on English portrait painting in the eighteenth century, whom Mr. Sherrington had induced to visit Norfolk Street, leaned comfortably back in his host's easy chair, and sipping his second glass of the old brown sherry which Mr. Cordukes had tasted three days before, smiled as he regarded the preseniment of the fresh-complexioned gentleman of the tie-wig and scarlet.

"A Sir Joshua!" he murmured, softly. "An undoubted Sir Joshua. And a Sir Joshua of his best period. Oh yes— without a doubt!"

Sherrington passed over a cigar-box— that which he kept in a special drawer, and only handed out to very special clients. The eminent critic selected a cigar and stroked its silky sides with an appreciative touch of his sensitive finger.

"You're sure it's a Sir Joshua Reynolds?" said Sherrington with the faintest trace of eagerness and anxiety in his voice.

The great man laughed.

"Sure? I'm quite sure!" he answered. "Oh yes, yes! I'd like to hear anybody dispute my word. That, my dear sir, is the genuine product of the pencil of the first president of the Royal Academy. And, as I previously remarked, painted during his best period. Came out of an old country house, you say?"

"It came out of an old country house," answered Sherrington.

The great man lighted his cigar.

"And— its future?" he said, carelessly.

Sherrington turned to his roll-topped desk, and sitting down, pulled out a cheque book and prepared to write.

"I shall see to its future," he replied. "By the by, I wish you would write me a letter, stating your opinion. In the meantime, allow me—"

He rapidly filled in a cheque, dashed off his signature at the foot and presented it to the eminent authority with a polite bow. The eminent authority favoured the cheque with the merest glance and crumpled it into his vest pocket.

"Oh, certainly!" he said.

"And," continued Sherrington, rising and laying out writing materials, "do me the further favour not to mention this find of mine. The fact is, it's not for an English market. I am going over to the other side in a few weeks and it will go with me. I don't want anybody in England to know that it has been found."

The eminent critic smiled, sipped his sherry again, and, taking Sherrington's place at the desk, wrote for a few minutes. He smiled again as he arose, leaving the letter still wet on the desk.

"That," he said, with a vanity which he made no effort to suppress, "that is quite sufficient to guarantee the authenticity of our friend in the tie-wig. By the by, don't forget to exact full value for him whatever pork-packer or canned goods merchant you have in view."

Sherrington drew down an eyelid.

"Leave that to me," he said, quietly.

The great man laughed. He took a third glass of sherry and shook hands and departed. And, walking up Norfolk Street, his fingers strayed to the cheque in his waistcoat pocket.

"A profitable and pleasant half-hour," he mused. "I dare say this little fee is just three times as much as Sir Joshua Reynolds received for his trouble in painting the portrait of a gentleman which I have just had the honour to inspect."

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir," said Miss Catesby, opening the door of Sherrington's private office a few mornings later. "By appointment. Mr. Nemo."

"Bring Mr. Nemo in," answered Mr. Sherrington. And he pushed away the letter which he was writing, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, looked up with interest and curiosity.

A man suddenly appeared in the doorway— a man who was noticeable in more respects than one. He was a medium-heighted, medium-sized man, who carried an unusually large head on slightly-built and stooping shoulders. A mass of tangled grey hair fell over his forehead and almost concealed his eyes; it fell, too, over his neck in another tangled mass.

Beneath his pointed, grey beard there was a vision of a scarlet tie and a flannel collar; the rest of him was hidden by a suit of yellow-brown clothes of a huge check pattern. A pair of impatient fiery eyes looked out through the tangled hair and the pince-nez perched on the bridge of an aggressive nose. As if to show some outward sign of carelessness and independence, Mr. Nemo walked in with his thumbs stuck in the lower pockets of his waistcoat. And, having walked in, he stood still and stared at Sherrington.

"Mr. Nemo?" said Sherrington, as Miss Catesby retired and closed the door.

The caller nodded.

"Umph!" he said.

"Sit down, won't you?" continued Sherrington, pointing to a chair. "Er— will you have a drink?"

Mr. Nemo sat down and looked sternly at his host.

"Well, a drop of whisky, then," he replied. "Scotch."

Sherrington arose and went to a cupboard. He produced a decanter and a glass and a syphon of mineral water, and set them on a table at Mr. Nemo's side.

"Help yourself," he said, hospitably. "There are cigars if you care to smoke."

Mr. Nemo helped himself liberally to the whisky and sparingly to the mineral water. He showed no desire to smoke; instead he produced a snuff box, and, having taken a hearty pinch, put his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat again and stared at Mr. Sherrington. And Sherrington thought it time to get to business.

"Mr. Aarons," he began, trifling with the big ivory paper knife which lay on his desk, "Mr. Aarons tells me, Mr. Nemo, that you're the cleverest man living at the job of executing an absolutely faithful copy of an old picture."

"Umph!" said Mr. Nemo.

"He tells me," continued Sherrington, "that you're so very clever that when you've made a replica of such a picture it is very difficult to tell which is the original and which is the copy. Is that really so?"

"No; it isn't difficult," replied Mr. Nemo. "It's impossible!"

Sherrington stared and then laughed.

"Impossible to tell which is original and which is copy?" he said. "You are as skilful as all that?"

Sherrington nodded his head.

"I see. There are, perhaps, some subjects which you prefer?" he suggested.

Nemo took a gulp at his glass.

"If it's a picture that I can do myself justice with I'll guarantee to make such a copy of it that the artist himself couldn't tell my copy from his own work," he replied.

"That's what I mean."

Sherrington nodded again, and, rising, went across to the picture which Mr. Cordukes had left with him. It stood on a chair in the corner of the room and was still covered with the flowered bed quilt. Sherrington stripped it of its wrappings and stood aside.

"I want a copy of that," he said quietly.

Nemo turned and looked searchingly at the picture.

"Yes," he said.

"You can do it?"

"I can do it."

"Do it in such a fashion that the copy can't be told from the original?"

"I can do it in such a fashion that neither you nor anybody except perhaps one or two experts, and I'm doubtful of them— can tell the painting, the canvas, the stretcher, from what I see there. But I can't find you, nor make you a frame like that. I've nothing to do with frames."

"Never mind the frame. It's the picture I want. Now then, as to terms?" said Sherrington. "How much do you ask?"

"A hundred pounds."

"You shall have it. Now, you'll have to work here. I can't let that picture go out of my offices. There's a room with a splendid light upstairs. You can work there without interruption. You can come and go as you like. Only, I shall want to lock this picture up every night, to hand out to you next morning. What do you say?"

"Let me see the room," said Nemo.

Sherrington took this master of a strange craft upstairs, and showed him a quiet office, neatly furnished. There was a skylight in it of the right sort, and Nemo nodded his head approvingly.

"That'll do. I'll start to-morrow. I'll come to your room for the picture at 10 o'clock every morning and bring it back every afternoon at five. It will take me a

month. Every Friday you'll pay me ten pounds on account; I'll take the balance when the copy is finished."

"Excellent!" said Sherrington. "Excellent! To-morrow morning, then?"

And on the following morning Nemo appeared, bearing with him the various implements and belongings of his craft, and he transformed the upstairs office into a studio, and began his labours. Every morning at 10 o'clock he fetched the picture; every afternoon at 5 o'clock he brought it back. And every Friday afternoon he received ten pounds from Sherrington.

But Sherrington never saw anything of what went on upstairs. Nemo was firm on one point, he would admit no one to the scene of his achievements. He opened his door to nobody; he carried away the key of the patent lock when he went out. Sherrington begged and entreated and cajoled him, but Nemo turned a deaf ear to all blandishments. He should neither enter the room nor see anything until the work was done. And Sherrington had to wait, and during the time of waiting he wrote to Mr. Cordukes, and informed him that he was making inquiries about the picture and hoped shortly to be in a position to give him some definite news concerning it.

On the twenty-seventh day after Nemo had begun his labours he came down to Sherrington's rooms early in the afternoon, and lifted his forefinger to the occupant.

"It's finished," he said brusquely. "Come in and see it."

Sherrington rose with alacrity, and followed the craftsman upstairs. Nemo unlocked the door and waved his hand.

"Of course, you know the original because it's in its frame," he said carelessly. "Otherwise—"

Sherrington uttered an exclamation of profound astonishment.

"By George!" he muttered a moment later. "By George! Yes; you do right to say— otherwise. Otherwise, indeed!"

Nemo was bundling all his apparatus together. He tied a strap round everything and handed the key of the room to Sherrington.

"You're fully satisfied?" he asked.

"Satisfied?" exclaimed Sherrington. "Man, you're a genius! Come downstairs and I'll hand you your cheque and something over."

Nemo took a cheque for seventy pounds with no more than a mere expression of thanks. He swallowed the glass of whisky which Sherrington pressed upon him and turned to go.

"I say," said Sherrington.

Nemo turned. One hand clutched his bundle, the thumb of the other was stuck in his waistcoat.

"Well?" he said.

"I— I wish you'd tell me who you really are!" said Sherrington impulsively. "You know that's not your real name— Nemo. You're a big man— a genius. Who— what are you?"

Nemo made for the door.

"Never mind who I am," he said. "What I am now you know. Once upon a time I was an artist and— an honest man."

Then he went out and shut the door, leaving Sherrington to stare blankly at the inside of it.

"Queer devil," said Sherrington thoughtfully. "Um! Will he keep his mouth shut? But it's quite immaterial whether he does or not. Now for the next move."

Going over to a corner of the room, he took up a package which had been standing there for several days. He carried it upstairs and locked himself in with the pictures. From the package he took an old gilt frame which he had searched many shops to find. And with infinite care he took the original Sir Joshua Reynolds from the old frame and placed it in the new one, which was of an apparently equal age, but of a different pattern. The copy executed by Nemo he placed in the frame taken from the original. This done, he placed the pictures side by side and looked at them narrowly. And as the afternoon drew to a close he took Mr. Cordukes' picture in its new setting downstairs to a taxi-cab and bade the driver go to a certain address in Kensington.

Sherrington, admitted by a smart maid into an equally smart flat in the best quarter of the Royal borough, carried in Mr. Cordukes' property, and, stripping off its wrappings, set it up on the strongest chairs which he could find amidst the gimcracks of an essentially feminine drawing-room. He was looking around the walls when a lady, neither young nor middle-aged, but very handsome, charming, and of a business-like looking manner, entered and gave him the tips of her fingers. She glanced at the Sir Joshua.

"Oh," she remarked. "So that's the picture."

"That is the picture," replied Sherrington.

The lady again regarded the picture.

"And when," she inquired, "when shall you bring the old man to look at it?"

"The day after to-morrow, about this time," answered Sherrington. "You must contrive to be alone."

"All right. But where," said the lady, "where shall we hang the picture?"

Sherrington resumed his inspection of the walls. Finally he decided that the space between the windows was the most fitting wherein to hang an oil painting of the eighteenth century. There was a Japanese panel in that space just then, but it was an easy matter to take it down and put up the Sir Joshua. This done, the lady and Sherrington looked on the result of the transference.

"That's all right," remarked the lady. "It looks quite the part. 'Portrait of an Ancestor,' you know."

Sherrington dusted his hands.

"The important thing," he said, "is— do you know your part? Are you quite perfect in it? You haven't forgotten it?"

"Forgotten nothing," replied the lady. She sat down and folded her hands on her knee, and looked at the ceiling. "You can test me. Here goes. I am Mrs. Ellerton, widow of the late Major Ellerton, who came of a very old Devonshire family. The portrait which hangs on the wall there is of Sir Godfrey Ellerton, an ancestor, and was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds about the year 1760. It has been in the family ever since, being regarded as an heirloom. It is considered by the best judges to be one of the very finest examples of Sir Joshua's art, and the late Major Ellerton was more than once offered very large sums for it. Needless to say, such a picture cannot be sold out of the family."

"Excellent! Excellent!" cried Sherrington. "Those are the facts; you will, of course, present the part in your own way. Till the day after to-morrow at this time, then, Mrs.— Ellerton."

And Sherrington went off, laughing, to write to Mr. Cordukes, at Leycaster, asking him to come up to town at once in order to hear some news of his picture. And, the letter duly dispatched, he went to dine alone at his club, and over his dinner he meditated the best way of turning to advantage the chance which fortune and his own cunning had placed in his hands.

iii

MR. CORDUKES, entering Sherrington's office on the afternoon of the next day but one, looked as homely and unsophisticated as ever. He greeted Sherrington with reverence, and, taking a chair near the general agent's desk, placed his old-fashioned hat on his knees, and blinked through his spectacles. Sherrington bustled into activity.

"Now, about that picture, Mr. Cordukes," he said, pointing to a corner in which Nemo's copy, in the frame of the original, stood on a chair, shrouded by the flowered bed quilt. "About that picture; I've so much to tell you about it that I thought you'd better come up and hear it. I've taken a tremendous lot of trouble about that picture, Mr. Cordukes."

Mr. Cordukes inclined his head.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, sir," he remarked.

"Yes," continued Sherrington, "a lot of trouble. After you left here I had a good look around the— the National Gallery, and— and some of the other galleries, you know, and I came to the conclusion that this was a Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mr. Cordukes. So I got some experts to have a look at it. They thought it was a Sir Joshua, too, though one of them— the best of the lot— was afraid it was merely a contemporary copy of one of Sir Joshua Reynold's paintings."

"A copy, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Cordukes.

"A copy. And," continued Sherrington, "as I thought it was best to be certain of the matter I caused exhaustive inquiries to be made, with a view to finding out if any other picture like this was known. And the day before yesterday, Mr. Cordukes— the day I wrote to you— I discovered— from information received, you know— the genuine Sir Joshua. I am sorry to tell you that yours is only a copy, probably executed by one of Sir Joshua's pupils for some member of the family whose head the original represents. This was often done, they tell me. I've seen the original, Mr. Cordukes. It is a portrait of Sir Godfrey Ellerton, a Devonshire gentleman, and it is now in the possession of his descendant, Mrs. Ellerton, in Kensington, and I should like you to see it."

Mr. Cordukes, who had listened very attentively, without showing any particular emotion, bowed his head.

"Very good, sir; I should like to see it," he said. "Is it very like my picture, Mr. Sherrington? Or, perhaps I should say, is my picture like the original?"

"Like!" exclaimed Sherrington. "They are as like as two peas. You couldn't tell which is which. However, we'll drive down there, and I'll get Mrs. Ellerton to show you the original. Excuse me one moment."

Mr. Cordukes sat in statuesque quietness for a time when he was left alone. At last he rose, and, laying aside his old hat, he went over to the picture and divested it of its wrappings. He gave no more than a passing glance at the gentleman in the scarlet coat and the tie wig; instead of dwelling on the front of the canvas he seemed more interested in the back. But when Sherrington returned Mr. Cordukes was thoughtfully studying the picture from the front.

"Splendid copy! Splendid copy!" said Sherrington. "You'll realise that when you see the original. I understand that copying in those days was quite a fine art."

"It must have been, sir," replied Mr. Cordukes. "Yes, I should greatly like to see the original."

"Then come along," said Sherrington.

Mrs. Ellerton, attired in black, received her callers with great dignity and courteous condescension. Yes, she would be pleased to show them the Sir Joshua Reynolds, which had been in the family ever since it had been painted, about 1760, for the then head, Sir Godfrey Ellerton. And she conducted them to the drawing-room and talked pleasantly of the associations of the picture, and of the Ellerton family, and of heirlooms in general. And Mr. Cordukes listened respectfully, and stared very hard at the gentleman in the scarlet coat.

"Yours is certainly a very fine copy, Mr. Cordukes," observed Sherrington, "a very remarkable copy. As I said at my office, it was probably executed for another member or branch of the Ellerton family, by one of Sir Joshua's pupils. But here is the undoubted original, which, Mrs. Ellerton tells me, has never been out of the family possession."

"Never!" said Mrs. Ellerton. "It has come down as a priceless heirloom."

Mr. Cordukes settled his spectacles more firmly on his nose.

"Just so," he said. "I should say this was certainly the original. Now, I wonder if Mrs. Ellerton would allow us to take the picture down? I have a fancy to examine it more closely."

Mrs. Ellerton glanced at Sherrington. Sherrington shrugged his shoulders and signalled an affirmative reply. Mrs. Ellerton sweetly intimated that the picture was at Mr. Cordukes' disposal, and he and Sherrington took it down from the wall and placed it on a chair. Mr. Cordukes began to examine it back and front; his long, thin fingers seemed to caress or to investigate the rear of the canvas in a particular fashion. And suddenly he turned on Mrs. Ellerton and Sherrington with a curious bland smile and, bodily lifting the picture, made for the door.

"What are you doing? What are you doing, Mr. Cordukes?" cried Sherrington. "Where are you going?"

Mr. Cordukes turned and beamed upon the two startled faces.

"I am going to take my picture to my hotel," he answered.

"Your picture! It's Mrs. Ellerton's picture!" exclaimed Sherrington. "What do you mean, man? Your picture's at my office!"

Mr. Cordukes laughed quietly and went nearer to the door.

"I don't know what it is that's at your office, Mr. Sherrington," he said, "but it's not the picture I brought to you, sir, and you know it isn't. I'm afraid you're a bad man, Mr. Sherrington! The picture at your office has my frame round it, and that frame should be round this, sir! This is my picture! When I brought it to you I contrived a little mechanical spring in the wood on which the canvas is stretched, so that I could always identify it. I knew you'd play some trick on me this afternoon when I looked at the other picture, for the spring wasn't there in the stretcher. But it's here! And I'd shown the trick of that spring to several people, Mr. Sherrington, before I brought the picture to you. I trusted you then, but it is as well I took precautions!"

And, valiantly bearing his precious burden, Mr. Cordukes made his way out and departed, leaving Mr. Mortimer Sherrington and his ally to stare at each other. It was the lady who first broke the silence, and when she found her tongue Mr. Sherrington picked up his hat and fled.

7: A Gentleman of Resource

OLD GEORGE COWDALE, landlord of the Horse and Trumpet, an ancient wayside tavern which stood just outside the village of Hedgington, once a great house of call in the coaching days, and still a favourite place with hunting men, was well known throughout the neighbourhood for his possession of two qualities which some folks called vices— covetousness and curiosity. It was difficult to decide which was predominant; but it is quite certain that when, one fine spring, an unknown gentleman, who evidently had plenty of money and nothing to do, came and put himself up at the Horse and Trumpet indefinitely, and did nothing but eat, drink, and loaf— apparently aimlessly— about the surrounding woods and meadows, Old George grew so inquisitive that he could scarcely keep his tongue still. And one night, when the stranger had been under his roof a week, and had just paid his first week's bill, and given the waiting-maid— George's daughter— five shillings for herself, to buy a pair of gloves with— his curiosity could be restrained no longer. And when the house closed at ten o'clock he made bold to ask the mysterious one into his private parlour to sample a little very old and special whisky, and to try a particularly good cigar. In this case the fly walked into the spider's sanctum without as much as a moment's hesitation. And Old George got his victim into an easy-chair, and set out the decanter and the cigar box, and prepared to eat him under comfortable circumstances.

"And how might you be finding our neighbourhood by this time, sir?" inquired Old George, when the cigars were lighted and the whisky had been criticised.

"I notice you've taken a pretty good look round it."

"Very nice neighbourhood, I'm sure," responded the visitor. "Pleasant, open, fertile country. Good hunting, of course."

"A bit of the best, sir, for that there purpose," agreed Old George. "But, of course, there's no hunting going on at present."

This was as much as to say that the visitor had not come there to hunt; but the hint produced no answer, so Old George tried another tack.

"And we've no fishing in these parts, unfortunately," he said. "Nor yet one o' them here new-fangled golf links. No; I've felt sort of regretful on your account, sir. I said to my wife and daughter when you came and said you was going to stop a bit, 'Well,' I says, 'I don't know what the poor gentleman'll find to do,' I says. 'Welcome he is as the flowers in May,' I says; but the hunting's over, there's no fishing, we haven't a golf club, and he doesn't look like a cricket player. What there'll be to amuse him,' I says, 'I can't think.' But my daughter, she says, 'Never mind, pa,' she says, 'happen he's one o' them gentlemen that catches butterflies.' Not," concluded Old George solemnly, "that I've seen any signs of such a profession on your part, sir— as yet."

"I'm all right," said the visitor, a sharp-eyed, semi-professional looking sort of person of thirty, or thereabouts, who had been listening attentively to his host's remarks. "Very kind of you, but there's quite sufficient to interest and employ me— quite."

"Handsome of you to say so, I'm sure, sir," replied Old George, lifting his glass. "My respects, sir. Ah! And what might you find of interest amongst us, sir? You ain't in the agricultural line, I think. Yet I see you a-looking round some of our land very careful-like, all the same."

"Ah!" remarked the visitor mysteriously. "Just so. You can look at land, you know, without being either a landlord or a farmer or a labourer, eh?"

Old George puffed at his cigar a minute or two, thinking. Then an idea suddenly struck him, and he involuntarily edged his chair a little nearer his guest's.

"You ain't down here a-looking round about a railway?" he suggested in a hoarse and meaning whisper. "Ah, I'd give a good deal if I got a bit of a hint about aught of that sort coming off, mister. I would indeed!"

The visitor inspected Old George at his leisure.

"Ay," he said at last. "You would, eh? Well, of course, you know, between ourselves, a railway's bound to come through you, in the end. But, as I say, between you and me. You understand?"

"Then it is that?" asked Old George excitedly. "You're looking over the course, like? Seeing where the line'll run?"

"There's only one course that a line could take here," observed the visitor calmly.

"I know that, mister!" replied Old George hurriedly. "Them valley meadows. And that's why I'd give something to know— well in advance— if there is going to be a line."

"Why, now?" inquired the visitor.

Old George got his chair still nearer to the guest's.

"I'll tell you," he said in a tense whisper. "Them valley meadows— a mile's length of 'em— belongs to a poorish man in the village yonder— freehold. His folk was landowners once upon a time; that's all that he's got left of the estate. Poor, poor land, mister; but, of course, if a railway came through—"

"Just so!" interrupted the visitor. "And why do you want to know in advance, eh?"

Old George hastened to replenish his guest's glass generously.

"It's like this here," he said confidentially. "Them valley meadows belongs, as I say, to a poorish man— Robert Peacock. I know that he'd be glad to sell 'em— he could do with the money. Now, if I knew there was going to be a railway I'd buy 'em— to sell again, d'ye see, to this railway company. And, of course, if I could buy 'em before Peacock got wind of the railway business, I should get 'em at—"

"Somewhere about prairie value, I should think," said the visitor. He sat for a while, staring at his host, and thoughtfully rubbing his own chin. "Um!" he continued at length. "Ah! And what would you be prepared to give, Mr. Cowdale, for a bit of desired information— on the quiet?"

Old George's small eyes wrinkled themselves up, and he put his head to one side and regarded his questioner knowingly.

"Ah, well, mister!" he said at last. "Him as gave me that there information wouldn't have no cause to regret it, I can assure you! I'm not one as wouldn't do the handsome by them as does handsome by me, sir."

"It would have to be on the strict q.t., you know," remarked the visitor. "Just between— you and me."

"Of course," agreed Old George. "And nobody the wiser. Mum is the word, sir, in cases like them."

"It would be as much as my neck is worth, so to speak, if it came out that I gave company secrets away, you know," said the visitor. "So— you'd have to make it a nice thing, Mr. Cowdale."

Old George waved his hand.

"Now then," he said, "you'll have no occasion to regret. I'm not to a penny, nor yet to a pound, sir."

The visitor rose and drank off the last mouthful in his glass. Then he bent towards his host.

"I shall know something definite and particular to-morrow afternoon," he said, with a meaning look. "And then I'll tell you in one word. One word'll do, eh?"

"One word'll do for me, sir, if it's the right one," said Old George. "One word's as good as twenty— if there's a meaning behind it."

"I'll see you to-morrow evening, then," said the visitor, as he moved towards the door. "Good-night, Mr. Cowdale."

"Good-night to you, sir," responded Old George. "Much obliged, Mr.— — Now it's an odd thing, sir, but I don't think you gave me a name, sir, when you came here?"

"Secret business, you see," said the visitor, stepping back. "But— between you and me— my name's— Walker, London."

"Safe with me, sir, safe with me!" answered Old George. "To-morrow evening, then, sir."

Then Mr. Walker, of London, went upstairs to his bedroom, and winked at his reflection in the mirror.

"A gold mine!" he said to himself.

Next morning, after breakfasting in his usual hearty manner on home-produced eggs and bacon and plump mutton chops, Mr. Walker, of London, prepared himself for going out, and as he walked through the bar-parlour of the Horse and Trumpet, he gave Old George Cowdale a look full of poignant meaning.

"I shan't be in until evening to-day," he said in a whisper as mysterious as the look. "Dinner at the usual time, if you please. I could fancy a roast duck and green peas. And, I say, there'll be a highly secret and important telegram coming some time to-day for me— about what we were discussing last night, you know. Put it safely away till I come in."

"Right you are, mister," answered Old George. "I'll see to it— and the bit of dinner, too."

"I'll tell you what it is," said Mr. Walker, with a sudden burst of friendliness. "You have dinner with me. Make it a couple of roast ducks— and anything else that's nice and handy, and we'll have a bottle or two of that old Burgundy of yours. Then," he added, with a further wink— "then we can talk."

"Greatly obliged to you, sir," said Old George. "Leave it to me, sir— the thing shall be done in style."

"At my expense, you know," said Mr. Walker.

If Old George had taken the trouble to watch his visitor's movements, he would have seen that Mr. Walker made a bee-line for the nearest railway station which was two miles away. There he took a train to Grandminster, the county town, an hour's ride off. And on arriving he went direct to the post-office. There he wrote a telegram addressed to himself at the Horse and Trumpet. It was as concise a message as the telegraph clerk who took it in had ever seen, for it consisted of one word. But Mr. Walker seemed to be highly pleased with himself once he had sent it off, and he went forth smiling— to take a look around at the beauties and antiquities of the ancient city, and, later, to partake of a nice little luncheon in the coffee-room of the leading hotel. Then he idled an hour away in the smoking room over an excellent cigar; after which he took train once more in the direction of the Horse and Trumpet.

But on arriving at the roadside station from which he had set out, Mr. Walker did not immediately repair to his pleasant quarters. Instead, he made his way to the extreme outskirts of Hedgington village, and to an isolated farmstead which stood embowered in apple trees and corn ricks. In its fold Mr. Walker caught sight of a tall, loose-limbed, shabby, untidy man, who was tossing straw to some cattle, and made toward him. The untidy man turned a pair of half-asleep eyes on him, and leaned on his fork.

"Mr. Peacock— Mr. Robert Peacock, I believe?" said Mr. Walker.

"That's my name, sir," answered Mr. Peacock, in a voice which seemed to signify that any name was good enough for him. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"My name's Walker," said the caller. "I'm stopping at the Horse and Trumpet for a week or two. I want to have a bit of a talk with you, Mr. Peacock, on a matter of business— business," he added, with a significant glance, "that'll put a nice bit of money in your pocket."

Mr. Peacock favoured his visitor with a dry smile, and laid his fork aside.

"And I'm sure I could do with it, sir!" he said. "It's a scarce commodity is money wi' me. Come this way, sir."

ii

HE LED Mr. Walker into the farmhouse, and into the best parlour, where, hospitably inclined, he produced a bottle of whisky and suggested refreshment. Over their tumblers, Mr. Walker adopted a confidential tone.

"What I've to say to you, Mr. Peacock," he began, "is in the very strictest confidence. You're not to say a word to mortal soul— as long as you live."

Mr. Peacock twiddled his thumbs.

"All right, sir— if you say so," he remarked. "I'm none a bad hand at holding my tongue. What might it be about, sir?"

Mr. Walker put his head nearer to his host, and went straight into things.

"Mr. Cowdale, of the Horse and Trumpet," he said, "wants to buy those valley meadows of yours, doesn't he? He's been at you already— once before? Now, what did he offer you?"

"Next to naught, sir," answered Mr. Peacock, shaking his unkempt head. "Three hundred pounds! Of course, it's poorish land, but it's been i' our family for generators— we had more once, but it went bit by bit— that's all there is left of what were once, I'm told, a fine property. I wouldn't mind selling, but not at that price!"

"Certainly not," agreed Mr. Walker. "Now then, listen to me. If I could work things so that you'd get, say, twelve hundred pounds, would you agree to pay me two hundred of it? That would leave you a clear thousand— cash!"

Mr. Peacock's dull eyes brightened, and he hastily nodded his head.

"Ay, I'd do that, mister!" he said readily. "A thousand's more than I ever expected to get. And I could do with a thousand pounds! Ay, I'd pay you two hundred willing, if I could get twelve."

"You've got all your title-deeds?" asked Mr. Walker.

"They're all at the lawyers, sir— in Cornbury," replied Mr. Peacock. "They're all right."

"Now, then, listen carefully to me," said Mr. Walker. "To-morrow morning old Cowdale'll come to see you. He'll be at you again about buying this land. You'll say to him— fix what I tell you on your memory, now!— you'll say to him that you've considered things carefully, and you won't take a penny less than fifteen hundred. Then come down, bit by bit, to twelve— and stick there. He'll give it!"

"You're sure o' that, sir?" asked Mr. Peacock.

"I'm so sure of it," answered Mr. Walker, as he produced a pocket-book, "that I'll ask you to read over and sign that bit of paper. You see— it doesn't commit you to anything unless the sale comes off."

Mr. Peacock, who evidently regarded all papers as old-world folk used to regard charms, gingerly took the half-sheet of notepaper which Mr. Walker handed to him, and read its contents half aloud:

"In the event of George Cowdale's buying my valley meadows for the sum of twelve hundred pounds, I hereby agree to pay two hundred pounds to Mr. John Walker on the completion of the transaction."

Mr. Peacock read this over three times, and then reached over to a side table for a bottle of ink and a rusty pen.

"Ay!" he said, "I don't mind putting my name to that there, sir. But, of course, it's all a bit of a mystery to me— all the same, a thousand pounds is a thousand pounds!"

"You'll be handling it by day after to-morrow," remarked Mr. Walker, as he put the signed document carefully away in his pocket-book. "Now, then, remember— not one word about me! Give no reasons of any sort to George Cowdale. Just stand firm on twelve hundred. Be strong with him— take it, or leave it— that's your game. He'll settle at twelve."

"All right, sir," said Mr. Peacock. "Your two hundred'll be there for you, in that case."

They shook hands on that, and Mr. Walker proceeded leisurely to the Horse and Trumpet, where Old George, with an air of mystery, handed over the telegram. Mr. Walker put it in his pocket, unread, and inquired about the dinner. And not until he and Old George had consumed a nice bit of fish, two roast ducks, and a slice or two of old mutton, with a couple of bottles of Burgundy of unusually fine body, and were trifling with cigars, did he mention it, or business. But at last he drew in his chair toward Old George's, whom up to then, he had been entertaining with stories and anecdotes purposely intended to convey to their hearer a sense of the teller's importance as a business man.

"Now, then, Mr. Cowdale," he said in a confidential whisper. "We'll come to our little negotiation. You want one word from me?"

"Of the right sort, sir, of the right sort," answered Old George. "Just to know that things is to be as I fancy they will, you know— that a line's coming through that land."

"Dead secret between ourselves?" said Mr. Walker.

"Till doomsday, sir— and after it and all!" responded Old George. "I shan't say naught."

Mr. Walker refilled his guest's glass with some old port which they were sampling.

"All right!" he said. "Now, then, how much are you going to pay me for that word?"

Old George grew nervous. But he suddenly reflected that no profit can come without outlay, and he had a vision of an opulent railway company paying him a fancy price for Peacock's acres.

"How— how much do you think, now, mister?" he asked.

"I'll name my price, and I shan't abate it one penny," replied Mr. Walker. "A hundred pounds, cash down."

"A hundred pound is a lot o' money," muttered Old George. "I didn't think—"

"Nothing! A mere flea-bite— to what you'll make," interrupted Mr. Walker. "However, that's my figure, sir."

Old George hesitated a moment. Then he got up, went out of the room, and returning after five minutes' space, handed Mr. Walker a wad of banknotes, which that gentleman proceeded to count and to put away.

"Well?" said Old George tremulously. "And— how's it to be, like?"

Mr. Walker drew out the telegram, laid it before his companion, and pointed, with an air of great mystery, to its one word.

"Settled."

"There!" he said. "You see? Now, I promised you one word. I'll throw in three more. Buy at once!"

Mr. Robert Peacock was again engaged in the work of tossing straw to his cattle when, early next morning, the landlord of the Horse and Trumpet, attired in his best clothes and driving his smart dogcart and brown cob, rattled up to the farmstead gate, and came across the fold to him. Mr. Peacock affected indifference; his response to Old George's greeting was low and nonchalant, and he continued to toss straw, while the latter made a few remarks on the cattle, the crops, and the weather. But he was too impatient to beat long about the bush, and he turned to Mr. Peacock with a business-like air.

"Now, Robert my lad," he said, "I've come to see you again about that bit o' land o' yours. It fits right on the back of my orchard, you know, and I think I must have it. Now, then, what can we agree at?"

"Why, I don't know that I'm so ready about selling," replied Mr. Peacock slowly. "I don't mean to sell at aught like what you offered before, anyhow."

"It's worth no more nor what I did offer," retorted Old George stoutly. "And it's none gone up in price, neither, and never will!"

"I'm not so sure o' that," said Mr. Peacock. "There was a man told me one day at market that there might be coal under it."

Old George almost jumped in his shoes.

"Coal!" he exclaimed. "Coal! Naught o' the sort! There's no coal within thirty mile!"

"Ye don't know," said Mr. Peacock, who had invented the coal excuse. "We can't tell what there mayn't be in the bosom of the earth, as you might term it. Anyway, I want fifteen hundred."

Old George's face grew purple and his eyes bulged.

"Fifteen hundred!" he almost shouted. "I never heard tell o' such—"

"I shouldn't wonder if there is coal," said Mr. Peacock. "Why not?"

"I'll give you five hundred— money down," said Old George suddenly. "It's a ruinous, scandalous price, but—"

"No!" answered Mr. Peacock. "I think I'll not sell. Fifteen hundred is my mark."

Old George began to perspire with fear. This was not what he had expected.

"Robert, my lad," he said at last, "yon there man's been telling you a pack o' nonsense! There's no coal in these parts. I've seen what they term a geological map. There's no coal-bed nearer nor Minethorpe. Ye might dig five thousand yards into yon land and never find a cinder!"

"I'll not take no less than fifteen hundred," said Mr. Peacock.

Then they began to bargain. Cowdale went up, and Peacock came down. And at last, standing at twelve hundred, they shook hands, and Mr. Peacock, having treated Mr. Cowdale to a friendly glass, put on his Sunday clothes and accompanied him to the market-town, to see the lawyers and complete the purchase and transfer in legal style.

Next day, Mr. Walker, of London, collected two hundred pounds from Mr. Robert Peacock, and an hour later he brought his visit to the Horse and Trumpet to a conclusion. He and Old George parted on the very best of terms, for Mr. Walker said that the directors would certainly patronise the hostelry where he himself had been so well done to. After which Old George waited— expectantly. The weeks lengthened to months, the months to a year— and there was no sign of any railway construction. Nor did Mr. Walker send the promised particulars, prospectuses, and the like.

It dawned upon Old George at last that he had been done— how, he never could conceive, for Mr. Peacock remained silent and innocent. And in the end there was a name which Old George could never bear to hear— London. For Mr. Walker came from London, and Old George knew that in London there are no fewer than seven million people.

———————

8: First Thoughts Are Worst

FOR THE LIFE OF HIM, Linthwaite could never think why he broke his homeward journey at Selport; he might have spent that, the last day of his holidays, on the piers and esplanades of Marshton-super-Mare in precisely the same fashion in which he had spent a fortnight, strolling here, lounging there, exchanging a trifle of gossip with various barmaids, wishing that he knew some of the pretty girls who passed him. It was not a very exciting way in which to spend two weeks of the year which are really his own, but Linthwaite was not the sort of man to whom excitement and adventure ever comes.

Ten years of humdrum life as a clerk in the one bank of a small provincial town had made him slow in speed and drab in colour. He scarcely knew how to amuse himself. That made his visit to Selport all the more unexplainable. All the same, he broke his homeward journey, he supposed, really that he might spend a few hours in looking around what was undeniably famous as a historic town. He began to look round, in his usual vacant fashion, as soon as he stepped from the train. And the first thing he set eyes on was Chatfield, his own banks manager.

Chatfield had just got out of the train which had come down from the North, in which direction Linthwaite would proceed later in the day. He was not encumbered by luggage; he did not even carry a hand bag. He seemed in a hurry, to be preoccupied. But lifting his eyes, he saw Linthwaite, who was staring fixedly at him, and he started, flushed a little, and came across.

"Going home from your holidays, eh?" he said. "Of course, I'd forgotten. I— I've a little private business down this way."

"Yes, sir," said Linthwaite.

"Family affairs," continued Chatfield, "I— and look here," he went on, first pausing, and then speaking rapidly, "I'd be obliged to you, Linthwaite, if you'd refrain from mentioning at home, in fact, to anybody in Norcaster, that you happened to see me here. Family affairs, you know, private affairs, eh?"

"I understand, Mr. Chatfield," replied Linthwaite. "I shan't say anything, of course."

"Thank you, thank you!" responded Chatfield. "I'm obliged to you. Well, I've a branch line train to catch. Good day."

He hurried off, and Linthwaite turned to see after his portmanteau. But the next moment he felt a tap on his elbow, and he turned round to find Chatfield there.

"Enjoy your holidays?" asked the manager, with a sharp glance. "Look here, we're not at all busy, there's nothing much doing. You can have another week if you like."

Linthwaite smiled in rather watery fashion.

"Won't run to it, Mr. Chatfield," he said, shaking his head. "You know what my salary is, sir."

"All right, all right!" responded Chatfield, hastily. He thrust a couple of fingers into his waistcoat pocket, drew something out, and furtively pressed it into the clerk's hand.

"Here, that'll do you another week! It's all right, from me to you, you know. You've been working hard this last half-year. You'll do with another week. Go and have it."

Then he went off at redoubled speed, and Linthwaite saw him run up the steps of a bridge which spanned the big station. At that he picked up his portmanteau, carried it himself to the cloak-room, deposited it there, and turned aside into a quiet corner to see what it was that Chatfield had left in his hand. He found himself staring at a crisp new Bank of England note for £20.

Linthwaite was by no means a brilliant young man. His thoughts were of the slow and reflective order, taking a long time to come. But he knew when he had food for thought. He had it now, plenty of it. The notion of mental food suggested the other sort of food. So he carefully put the £20 bank note into his purse, turned into the refreshment room, bought himself a pint bottle of ale and a plateful of sandwiches, and, retreating with his provender to a quiet corner, sat down, and proceeded to think.

"Shot if this isn't the queerest do I've had in my bit of time!" he mused. "Why— why— why has Chatfield given me £20 and another week? As if I should spend £20 in a week— me!"

That, indeed, was the absolutely surprising thing. Nobody knew better than Chatfield that Linthwaite's salary was precisely £104 per annum, paid monthly. Out of £2 a week, Linthwaite had to lodge, feed and clothe himself, and to save something for his annual relaxation. He reckoned to set aside £8 to £10 for that purpose, quite a princely provision, in his opinion. And here was Chatfield thrusting £20 upon him as if he, Linthwaite, were accustomed to spending at the rate of three guineas a day.

"That's not it!" he muttered to his bottle of ale, as he carefully poured its contents into a tall glass. "Not it! There's something behind it. What? Hang me, if it doesn't look as if Chatfield wanted me out of the way a week longer. Why?"

In order to solve this knotty problem, Linthwaite considered the actual situation. That situation was this. He himself was senior clerk in the Norcaster Bank. Chatfield was manager; there were two junior clerks, and a youth who had just come to learn banking. The Norcaster Old Bank itself belonged to a family, the Sutton-Preedies. One of them, Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie, lived near Norcaster; he was a country gentleman some thirty years of age, who looked in at the bank now and then, but not often nor systematically.

There were two other Sutton-Preedies, Mr. Gervase's uncles, old gentlemen, who lived in the South of England. During his ten years' knowledge of the bank, Linthwaite had never seen either. To him, and to all the folk in Norcaster, Chatfield was the bank. Chatfield ran the bank; Chatfield did everything. At half-yearly intervals, Chatfield reckoned up the profits of the bank, and divided them amongst its three proprietors, so Linthwaite understood. Chatfield had been doing that for many a long year, apparently to the proprietors' satisfaction. So matters stood, but Linthwaite's slow mind went deeper than these surface things.

"Here we are," he ruminated. "This is Selport. Selport's a hundred and fifty miles from Norcaster, therefore it isn't likely that Chatfield'll go back to-day. I myself couldn't get there before late in the evening, for it's 1 o'clock now. So the bank's left in charge of Williamson and Fowler. All right, of course, for a day, though it's never happened before. But why does Chatfield want me to be off for another week? Not out of love, affection, consideration; he's not that sort. What's up then? Something! And what am I to do?"

Linthwaite looked up at that moment and his glance fell on the word London— truly a word to him signifying much more than a mere name. For, in spite of the fact that he was twenty-six years of age, Linthwaite had never set foot in London. He thrilled at the idea which shot through him— why not go to London? He was within two hours' train ride of it; there would be plenty of expresses from Selport. And in his purse lay the £20 note and three sovereigns and some silver as well. A fine, fascinating idea— a week in London. And, for the first time in his dull life, as much money in his pocket as he ever wished to spend.

Ten minutes later Linthwaite bought a ticket for Paddington, fetched his portmanteau and boarded an express.

ii

TEN O'CLOCK of the following morning saw Linthwaite leisurely eating his breakfast in the coffee-room of a quiet hotel in the neighbourhood of the Strand. He had carefully picked it out the night before, first reckoning up what it would probably cost him to stay in it for six days. He was not going to spend all that £20, not he; some of it he would carry home to Norcaster with him. So long as he was comfortably lodged and fed, so long as he saw the sights— —

He thought of his bank note as he drank his last drop of coffee. He had better get it changed, he said to himself. And he remembered then that in the old-established bank of Felkin, Mundo & Felkin, Lombard Street, on which highly-respectable firm of private bankers the Norcaster Old Bank drew for their London business, there was a one-time fellow clerk of his own— Woodmansey, a Norcaster man who had exchanged provincial for city life.

It was a good idea, that. He would go into the city, call on Woodmansey at Felkin's, and change his £20 note. For Linthwaite, despite all his banking experience, was very green about things in general and it never occurred to him that he could change his note at the hotel office; he fancied that such a transaction, he being a stranger, could only be carried out at a bank.

Woodmansey, a man of thirty, thoroughly sharpened by five years' London experience, but retaining much fondness by his own surroundings, welcomed Linthwaite with warmth. He was, in fact, delighted to see him.

"You'll lunch with me, Linthwaite," he said, peering at the country clerk through the brass network of the counter. "Of course you will! Meet me here at 1 o'clock. Go and look around you in the meantime. Plenty to see— Bank, Mansion House, Guildhall, Royal Exchange— but don't lose yourself. That door— 1 to the minute. We'll have a quiet hour's chat."

Linthwaite accepted this invitation with alacrity. He went off and stared his fill at the various places of interest which his friend had mentioned, and he took care to be on Felkin's steps as the city clocks were striking one. Woodmansey led him off to a noted restaurant and laid himself out to do the honours in approved style. He treated Linthwaite to the best food and drink, and, as Linthwaite was not used to either rich dishes or old Burgundy, he grew talkative and confidential. And, over a cigar and a liqueur, he felt that it would be utterly too bad to keep his recent adventure secret from a good old Norcastrian like Woodmansey.

"You'd never guess how it is that I come to be in London," he said with a vineous leer at his host. "Bet you a fiver that you couldn't hit in a half dozen shots!"

Woodmansey, who knew very well that Linthwaite was on the verge of a confidence, smiled.

"Give it up," he said. "No good at riddles."

"This is a riddle!" exclaimed Linthwaite. "I can't make it out, and I'm no fool, neither. Licks me! Been puzzling at it ever since yesterday at this time. I'll tell you about it as we're old pals; see if you can get through it. You see, old man, it was this way."

Woodmansey, a quiet, crafty fellow, who cherished a firm belief in the old North Country proverb which advises the wise man to hear all and to say nought, listened in attentive silence while Linthwaite told the story of his strange meeting with Chatfield at Selport.

He betrayed neither surprise nor undue interest, he made no immediate comment. When he did speak it was rather in a pooh-poohing fashion.

"Oh, well," he said, "I don't know that there's so much to be surprised at, Linthwaite. Private affairs, you know— he said private family affairs, didn't he? He's not a married man, Chatfield, I think? Well, it may be a love affair. Perhaps he's got a flame down that way, and doesn't want Norcastle people to know he

goes down there. Of course, in that case his behaviour is easily accounted for. Warm man, you know, Chatfield— £20 nothing to him, as I recollect him. Anyway, you'll have your week here, I suppose?"

"You bet!" answered Linthwaite. "And a jolly good week, too. No old banks for me, my son, before next Tuesday morning!"

"Well," said Woodmansey, pulling out his watch, "I'll have to get around to ours, anyway. I shall see you again, of course. Where are you putting up, Linthwaite?"

"Chalgrove Hotel, Surrey Street," answered Linthwaite promptly.

"All right— I'll look you up some night," said Woodmansey. "We might go to a theatre or have a spin around. I'll drop you a note the night before. You won't change from there?"

"Not till I leave, next Monday," responded Linthwaite. "Good enough spot for me."

Woodmansey led him out into Cornhill and gave him some further advice about sightseeing and Linthwaite presently went off, greatly exhilarated by his fine lunch and the consciousness that it had been eaten in a swell city restaurant. He held his head high as he marched away, and hummed a tune which he had heard at a music-hall the night before; in the gaiety of this grand London life he forgot all about Chatfield.

But Woodmansey went back to Felkin's with his gaze turned on the pavement and his eyes meditative and gloomy, and he thought a good deal about what Linthwaite had told him. And when he reached the bank he walked into the room sacred to the partners and there he found Mundo and he told Mundo the whole story as Linthwaite had told it to him.

Mundo, a granite-faced, hard-eyed man, listened to Woodmansey as silently as Woodmansey had listened to Linthwaite. He was some little time before he spoke; when he did speak there was a distinct touch of contempt in his voice.

"That, Mr. Woodmansey, is what I should call bribery," he observed. "For whatever purpose— bribery. Or we could perhaps find a better, a more fitting term— hush money, eh?"

"To hush what?" asked Woodmansey, watching his chief quietly.

"Just so," said Mundo. "Precisely! I quite apprehend you. Er— do we ever speak to Norcaster over the telephone?"

"We have done," replied Woodmansey. "It's a long call— a hundred and sixty odd miles— but we have rung them up now and then."

"Just ring them up and ask if Mr. Chatfield is there," said Mundo. "If he is, make any convenient excuse for the call. Do it at once and come and tell me the result."

Woodmansey returned to the private room in twenty minutes; Mundo looked sharply at him.

"I rang them up," said Woodmansey. "Williamson, the junior clerk to Linthwaite, replied. Chatfield, he says, is away from business for a few days; he doesn't know where he is, though. And he added, further, that Linthwaite ought to have returned from his holidays, this morning, and hadn't, so they were short-handed; also, they hadn't seen Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie for two or three weeks. That's all— and the last two bits of information were gratuitous."

Mundo laid aside a letter which he was writing and put the tips of his fingers together.

"Woodmansey," he said quietly, with a glance at the door, "haven't we discounted a fair lot of paper for these people of late?"

"In the usual way, yes," answered Woodmansey. "But— I thought you were aware of it. Most of the bills— in fact nearly all— are drawn by Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie, and accepted by a firm here in town, of whom I don't think we know anything. Mr. Nicholas Felkin passed them."

"On Sutton-Preedie's name of course!" remarked Mundo hastily. "Oh yes, yes, we've done business with Sutton-Preedies for— oh!— three generations. Certainly, to be sure! All the same, Woodmansey, as— as this all seems a little strange, eh?— and as neither Mr. John nor Mr. Nicholas Felkin are in town to-day, I think— eh?"

"You want me to bring the bills for your inspection?" suggested Woodmansey, quietly as before.

"I think so," answered Mundo. "Yes— if you'll just bring them here for a few minutes."

Woodmansey went out, to return presently with a sheaf of long narrow strips of blue paper. And Mundo silently pointed to a chair at his side and the two men set to work on the suddenly suggested task.

iii

LINTHWAITE was engaged in eating a chop, and nibbling dry toast, and receiving mental nutriment from the columns of a half-penny newspaper when, next morning, Woodmansey suddenly walked into the coffee-room of the Chalgrove Hotel. One glance at the visitor's face showed Linthwaite that it was business that had brought him there.

"Hullo!" he stammered. "You? I say, is anything wrong?"

"Don't alarm yourself," answered Woodmansey, "nothing to trouble you. I want you to come down to our place, though— now, with me. The fact is," he went on, dropping into a chair at the little table which Linthwaite was breakfasting at, and lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, "the fact is, old man, our Mr. Mundo wants to see you privately. It's an odd thing, quite a coincidence, but

Mundo's discovered an— well, we'll call it an irregularity in our dealings with the N. O. B., and—"

"Great Scott! It isn't Chatfield, is it?" exclaimed Linthwaite. "You don't mean that he's— bunked?"

"Don't know anything about him," replied Woodmansey. "It— this may be Chatfield's work; it mayn't. But it's serious. And when Mundo discovered it, late yesterday afternoon, and told me of it, of course, I told him that the senior clerk from the N. O. B. happened to be in town, on his holiday. So he wants to see you. All in strict privacy and confidence, you know, Linthwaite. So come along; it'll be worth your while."

Linthwaite sat staring at his visitor for a moment. Then he leaned towards him across the little table.

"Here!" he said abruptly. "Between you and me, you know, what is it?"

Woodmansey hesitated, then he too leaned forward.

"Oh, well," he answered, "I may as well tell you. You know that we've discounted a lot of bills from your place these last two years, and that we hold a fair lot just now? You know them— bills drawn by Mr. G. S.-P.— you know who I mean— and accepted by Mr. John Remington here in London."

"I know," replied Linthwaite.

"Forgeries!" whispered Woodmansey. "The last lot, any way, and so far as Remington's concerned. He knows nothing of any one of them."

Linthwaite sat up in his chair and gasped. Then he threw his newspaper aside and rose.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "What a sickener. Come on, then. But I know nothing, nothing at all. Naturally, I don't."

"Come and see Mundo, all the same," said Woodmansey. "Of course, there'll be the deuce to pay for somebody over this, but you're all right, Linthwaite."

He drove Linthwaite down to Lombard Street, and on arrival at Felkin's, took him straight to the private room, where the three partners were already assembled, looking unusually grave and severe. With them was another man, a typical city man who, if anything, looked more severe than they did.

"This is Mr. Linthwaite," said Woodmansey.

Linthwaite immediately found himself the object of much concentrated attention. He was given a chair; he was assured that whatever he said or told would be regarded in the light of sacred confidence. It was plainly hinted that he should have his reward. Then began a searching examination. Did he know anything about these bills— a whole sheaf of them? Did he know if they were put through in the usual fashion by Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie, or by Mr. Chatfield? Was he sure that the signatures, the drawer's signatures, were really what they purported to be— the genuine signatures of Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie? Did he know anything that he could tell?

"It will be to your advantage, Mr. Linthwaite," remarked one of the Felkins. "It is useless to conceal from you that this is a most serious matter. The signatures of the supposed acceptor are forgeries! Here is Mr. Remington himself. These things were shown to him last night; he utterly denies any knowledge of them. He has accepted no bills of this firm for nine months; all of these, seven of them, have been drawn— and, unfortunately, discounted by us within the past three months. Tell us anything, Mr. Linthwaite; you shall have your reward."

There was only one thing Linthwaite could tell. He knew nothing about the bills beyond the fact that they had been sent to Felkin's for discount in the ordinary way of business. But he did know about this strange meeting with Chatfield, and Chatfield's suspicious conversation and conduct, and let it all out. It suited his vanity and his innate sense of importance to tell this portentous secret to these big London magnates, and he made the most of what he had to tell. And, as he told, he saw himself being considered a very shrewd fellow, and rewarded with a post at Felkin's which would put, at least, a thousand a year into his pocket.

There was, however, no immediate conferment of rewards and honour upon Linthwaite. When he had finished his story, the three partners and Mr. Remington went apart and conversed for some time in whispers. When they came back to the big desk, the senior partner addressed him.

"I'm afraid we shall have to ask you to cut short your holiday, Mr. Linthwaite," said he. "This affair is of such a serious nature that Mr. Mundo and Mr. Remington must go down to Norcaster at once. Will you oblige us by going down with them?"

Linthwaite paled. He had no objection whatever to saying or doing anything in secret, but he had many objections to facing Chatfield; and he found courage to shake his head.

"I— I'd rather not be brought into it, sir," he answered. "Of course, what I've said to you was strict confidence, and—"

"Don't be afraid," interrupted the senior partner. "I'll explain matters. Mr. Mundo and Mr. Remington are going to see Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie. Nothing will be said about you unless they find that Mr. Chatfield is still absent, and his whereabouts unknown. In that case, of course, you cannot refuse to give information."

Woodmansey, who was standing at Linthwaite's side, nudged his elbow, and Linthwaite took his meaning.

"Very well, sir," he said. "As you wish, so long as you see me all right. I don't want to get myself into any trouble, you know, Mr. Felkin."

Mr. Felkin made no direct answer to this. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Much obliged to you, Mr. Linthwaite," he said, with formal politeness. "Then will you kindly meet these gentlemen at King's Cross station at 12 o'clock? Mr. Woodmansey, as Mr. Linthwaite doesn't know London very well, perhaps you will

have the goodness to return to his hotel with him, and then conduct him to the station? Thank you."

Once outside the bank and in a taxi-cab, Linthwaite turned to Woodmansey with a gasp of astonishment.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, letting the gasp subside into a whistle. "That's the hottest ten minutes I ever had in my life! Forgery! Great Scott! old man, are they suspecting— Chatfield?"

"It's certainly a very strange thing that Chatfield should behave as he is doing," replied Woodmansey. "His conduct— and the fact that these bills are undoubtedly forged— eh?"

"Looks queer, I must say," agreed Linthwaite. "Well, so long as I come out of it all right— but, by George, what a lucky thing I told you, Woodmansey!"

Woodmansey smiled sardonically.

"Deuced unlucky for somebody," he remarked. "Somebody's got to go through it over this, you know."

Linthwaite wondered who that somebody was all the way down to Norcaster. He himself travelled in the third-class luncheon car; the two city magnates journeyed in the first-class. Linthwaite was accordingly alone and had ample time for reflection. And long before they reached the journey's end he had come to the conclusion that Chatfield was a fugitive from justice, and that he, Linthwaite, was about to achieve immense fame, if not vast fortune. Vast! No. He would be quite satisfied with a thousand a year.

On the platform at Norcaster, Mundo summoned Linthwaite to his side and took him out of the crowd.

"Now, Mr. Linthwaite," said he, "just do what I ask you. It's now 5 o'clock and the bank, of course, will have been closed for an hour. But you'll probably find your fellow workers still there; if not, there'll be the housekeeper. Just find out if Mr. Chatfield has returned; if not, if anything's been heard of him. Say nothing there— but come straight back here."

The Norcaster Old Bank was only just round the corner from the station and Linthwaite was not away ten minutes. He returned, swelling with importance.

"Chatfield has not returned and they haven't heard a word of him," he announced. "Neither he nor Mr. Gervase have been at the bank since Monday. They don't know where Chatfield is nor where he went."

The two elderly gentlemen looked at each other. Then Mundo spoke.

"Oblige me by calling me a cab, Mr. Linthwaite," he said. "Get the best on the rank. And tell the driver to take us to Nelthorpe Lodge."

Nelthorpe Lodge, Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie's place, lay some seven miles away in the midst of a bit of lonely country. The house itself was in the centre of thick plantations and shrubberies, and the cab was at its very door before it could be seen from its windows.

"Mr. Sutton-Preedie's down at the stables, sir," announced the butler. "If you'll come in I'll send for him." He ushered the party into a small anteroom and looked interrogatively at its leader. "What names shall I say?" he asked.

"For the present," answered Mundo, "it will be sufficient if you will say that a representative of Messrs. Felkin's Bank desires to see Mr. Sutton-Preedie."

The door closed and a dead silence fell on the room. Mundo and Remington took up attitudes on the hearthrug; Linthwaite went across and half hid himself in the window. It seemed to him that an age elapsed before the door opened again. But suddenly it did open, and he looked up and saw the face of a man who was obviously struck cold with fear.

Mr. Gervase Sutton-Preedie closed the door and moved tremblingly towards his visitors. His face was ashen pale: his eyes, already haggard, looked from one man to the other as the eyes of a chased animal look when the hounds are on him. Yet he tried to control himself— tried even to smile.

"Hallo, Mundo!" he exclaimed. "I— this is a surprise! What, you want to see me?"

Mundo moved a step forward and drew out the fatal bills.

"Mr. Sutton-Preedie," he said coldly, "the acceptance of these bills are forgeries! We wish to know—"

"Look out, sir!" exclaimed Linthwaite. His eyes had been fixed on his employer, and he jumped forward now to catch him as he swayed and fell with a queer, choking sound.

"He's fainted, Mr. Mundo— get help!"

But as Mundo moved to the door, it opened and in came Chatfield, excited and eager. He gave one glance around, and that glance ended in a stare at Linthwaite which the clerk never forgot.

"Too late!" exclaimed Chatfield. He pointed at the bills lying on the table. "So you've found it out?" he said despairingly to Remington. "Heaven, then I've had all my trouble for— this!"

"So it was his work?" demanded Mundo, pointing to the prostrate man. "His— he?"

"I found it out myself last Saturday," answered Chatfield. "And I set off on Monday morning to his uncle's to get the necessary funds to take those bills up before they matured— I've got it in my pocket. But I'm too late, it appears, for you know now— and it's forgery. And, by heaven," he burst out with sudden passion, turning on Linthwaite, "I know how it's come out, and—"

"I think, Mr. Chatfield, you had better get some brandy," said Mundo.

Two days later, Linthwaite, summarily dismissed by Chatfield and panting with fury and indignation, journeyed to London and poured out his woes to Mundo. He had flattered himself all the way to town that Felkin's would reward him

generously. Accordingly, he waxed eloquent in the private parlour, and Mundo at last had to stop him.

"Yes— yes!" he said. "Yes, of course, Mr. Linthwaite, Mr. Chatfield doubtless felt much aggrieved at your breach of confidence, and, as I understand, he acted quite within his rights in dismissing you. As regards ourselves, I fear we have no post to offer you— we never employ young men who cannot keep secrets, and— er— there can be no doubt that you gratuitously and unnecessarily gave away Mr. Chatfield's secret to Woodmansey. However, as you were of some service to us, Mr. Linthwaite, we— in fact, you will find some little token in this envelope, and— er— good morning!"

Then Linthwaite was unceremoniously shown out into the street, where he opened his envelope, and for the second time within a week found himself the recipient of— a twenty-pound note.

———————

9: Bread Upon The Waters

WHEN UNCLE THOMAS Scarterfield died and left his niece, Marilla Vandale, eleven thousand dollars, Marilla was second governess in Miss Dellaby's school for young ladies at Dulwich. She was then twenty-two years of age, and up to that time her life had been about as uniformly grey as the coating of a modern battleship. Indeed, between Marilla and such a vessel there was a striking similarity; she had been a unit, on duty against possible enemy forces for ten years, and if nothing had ever come to open battle, it was, perhaps, because Marilla was altogether too grey and too much camouflaged into the bargain to excite any great notice— she had just slipped quietly along in the waters of life. Sent to Miss Dellaby at the age of twelve, on the understanding that— consequent upon a reduction in terms— she was to make herself generally useful, she had gone through the succeeding processes of half-pupil, half-help, pupil-teacher and governess; and life had been dull, drab and uniform. Marilla had neither father nor mother, brother nor sister. Somebody, she believed, exercised, or had once exercised, some sort of guardianship over her. In time she got an idea that the somebody had paid Miss Dellaby a certain sum of money to take her, Marilla, clean off that somebody's hands— the somebody, at any rate, never once came near her after she had entered the Dellaby portals. Nobody ever came but Uncle Thomas Scarterfield. He was an oldish person, very ancient of fashion, something in the trade line, Marilla thought, and evidently not at all used to young ladies. But he came once a year punctually, asked Marilla how she did, hummed and hahed in the parlour for ten minutes, and, on taking a shy and hurried leave, invariably pressed into her hand a packet of cheap and very sticky sweets, and a crisp, brand new banknote for twenty pounds.

This happened regularly for all the years which Marilla spent at Dulwich. Then, one year, Mr. Scarterfield failed to materialise. In his place appeared a solicitor who announced to Marilla, in Miss Dellaby's presence, that Mr. Thomas Scarterfield was no more, and had left to Miss Vandale eleven thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven pounds, which sum was now at her disposal.

Marilla had a good deal of sentiment in her composition, and she shed tears over the memory of Uncle Scarterfield. They were largely induced by remorse at the thought of how she had made fun of his sticky sweets, which, as soon as his back was turned, she had invariably given to the scullery-maid. In drying her tears— in the privacy of her bedroom and before the mirror— she suddenly realised that she was not merely pretty, but unusually pretty. And thereat she began to think about pretty clothes. It would be ridiculous, after all, to affect deep mourning or even half-mourning, for an old man whom she scarcely knew. When Miss Dellaby, a few minutes later, suggested this tribute to the dead, Marilla made

no answer. She was already determined to get out of the surroundings of the past ten years. She felt like a flower that has been shut under a pot. Fortune had lifted the pot at last and thrown it clean away. Now she was going to burst out into full bloom, to expand, to live, to open her petals to the sun in unchecked freedom.

Within a week unheard-of events took place at Dellaby's. Marilla, who for ten years had been the most subservient and obedient of young women, suddenly assumed an attitude of independence and authority which made Miss Dellaby wonder. She not only announced her intention of leaving at once, but of taking Miss Chillingworth with her— Miss Chillingworth, who had been Miss Dellaby's right hand for twenty years, and had become somewhat faded in the process. Miss Dellaby gasped and protested. Marilla showed firmness.

"I must have a companion," she said, "I can't live alone. Miss Chillingworth is just what I want. She will go with me."

"Miss Chillingworth has been here over twenty years!" protested Miss Dellaby.

"And I have been ten," said Marilla. "So she wants a change just twice as badly as I do. And that's badly enough."

What understanding Miss Vandale and Miss Chillingworth came to Miss Dellaby never knew. But, within a few days of the solicitor's visit to Marilla, they departed in company for Minerva Lodge. Marilla handed Miss Dellaby a cheque in lieu of notice. She enjoyed drawing that cheque. And she enjoyed carrying Miss Chillingworth off to a private hotel, where she took rooms for herself and her companion. There were more cheques drawn during the next week or two— Marilla was fitting herself out; she was equally generous in fitting Miss Chillingworth out, too. The process came to an end one day when, after quite an hour of anxious thought, Marilla decided that there was not one single thing left to do in the refitting line. Thereupon she turned to her companion.

"Now," she said, "we're going to travel."

Miss Chillingworth's delicately pencilled eyebrows arched themselves.

"Travel, my dear!" she exclaimed. "I— I thought you were going to settle down in a nice little flat!"

"That'll come afterwards," declared Marilla. "But we're going to see something of the world first. Not much, but something. It's now the beginning of March— we'll go on to the Continent until May begins. Then we'll come back, get a flat, and see London. But first— out of England! I want to breathe something— quite different."

"I hope it will be safe," murmured Miss Chillingworth. "Those foreigners, you know! Where do you think of going?"

Marilla produced the prospectus of a noted travel agency.

"This is the very thing," she said. "I mapped it all out last night. These people issue tickets for trains, hotels, boats, everything. All you've got to do is to pay your money to them here in London, and they give you books of tickets and coupons;

it's the most delightfully simple thing in the world. This is the trip we're going on— it's a sort of roundabout affair; it takes in Paris, Marseilles, Cannes, Nice, Monte Carlo—"

"Oh, my dear!" said Miss Chillingworth. "That dreadful place!"

"Monaco, Genoa, Pisa," continued Marilla imperturbably. "Then Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice, Milan, Lucerne, Basle, and back to Paris. It takes you just about seven weeks, and you get a few days in each place, and see lots of things in between."

"And I fear it must cost a great deal of money!" sighed Miss Chillingworth.

"It costs money, certainly," assented Marilla; "but I feel sure one will get one's money's worth. I shall buy the necessary tickets to-morrow, and we'll start on Monday. You'd better read over these hints as to what one should take in the way of luggage."

ii

RATHER MORE than a fortnight later Miss Chillingworth, toying with a tea cup on the sun-flooded lawn outside Ciro's, at Monte Carlo:

"Marilla," she cried, "I— I feel as if we'd never lived at Dulwich in our lives!"

Marilla, waking out of a day-dream, nodded comprehendingly. She glanced about her, lazily taking in the details of the scene— the sunlight, the warmth, the scent of rare plants and flowers, the gayly-dressed folk, the black-bearded, white-toothed Algerian moving in and out amongst the crowd, offering bright-coloured prayer-rugs and carpets, the façade of the Casino, the glimpses of deep blue sea beyond its walls.

"I know what you mean," she murmured. "All is very different."

"Different!" said Miss Chillingworth. "Yes, in more ways than one. This place now— why, it's always represented to one at home in England as a— as a— hell! And— it's a perfect paradise! And so— so quite respectable and— and even aristocratic. During the three days we've been here, I haven't seen anything that one could take exception to. Though, of course, it is rather a pity to see people— gamble! But it's all done in such a very, very refined way."

Marilla made no answer. She was dreamily watching the front of the Casino. Suddenly she started into activity.

"Chillie!" she exclaimed. "There he is, once more! He's been at it again!"

Miss Chillingworth knew to whom Marilla referred; knew well enough before ever she turned in the direction in which Marilla was looking. Down the steps of the Casino came, listlessly, almost pathetically, a young man in whom these two ladies had taken much interest since their arrival at Monte Carlo. He appeared to be of about Marilla's age; he was essentially English in all his attributes, and more boyish than was good for him, and morning, noon and night he was at the gaming

tables. Miss Chillingworth and Marilla, to whom the various operations presented a thrilling and wicked fascination, never lingered behind croupiers and gamblers without seeing him amongst them. And he always seemed to be losing his money, but whether he was or not— and he scarcely ever won— he invariably looked bored to death.

"Of course he's lost again!" said Marilla musingly. "And such a child! They oughtn't to let mere infants like that go unattended!"

"I suppose he has a mother— somewhere," remarked Miss Chillingworth. "Whatever would she say, to see all that good money going?"

"I dare say he thinks he may win it all back," said Marilla. "But boys like that ought not to have so much money! However does he come to be throwing it about in that way?"

"Perhaps he's a bank clerk who's run away with thousands of pounds," suggested Miss Chillingworth. "He looks sad sometimes."

"Not so much sad as inscrutable," decided Marilla. "I saw him lose— oh, such a lot— last night, and he merely yawned, and went away with his hands in his pockets."

"Well, surely he can't go on for ever like that!" said Miss Chillingworth. "And what will he do then? They say"— here she dropped her voice to a whisper— "they say that when these gamblers come to the end of everything, they shoot themselves and get quietly buried without any fuss— awful!"

"Isn't it?" assented Marilla. "I hope he won't— he's so very nice-looking."

"I really think his mother ought to be here," declared Miss Chillingworth. "Young men are certainly not to be trusted— alone."

The young man, however, was still alone, and still at his old game when Marilla and Miss Chillingworth repaired to the Casino that night. Virtuous though they were, each was well aware, in secret, that the gaming-tables drew them; they felt that they could stand for hours watching the turns and fluctuations of fortune. Miss Chillingworth said that she was embracing the opportunity of studying human frailty at close quarters; Marilla said nothing— all her eyes were on the apparently apathetic youth.

And there he was, as usual, in his accustomed place. Marilla, from the other side of the table, watched him attentively. If she had known more about such things, she would have known that the infatuated young man was following a system with steady and remorseless persistence. Whatever his system was, it certainly brought him no luck that night; his pile of gold and notes steadily diminished, and at last suddenly disappeared under the croupier's ready rake. Thereat, imperturbable as ever, the luckless one pushed back his chair, and, with his accustomed bored, indifferent air, sauntered out of the place.

Marilla glanced around her. Miss Chillingworth was some little distance away, absorbed in watching an ancient, bright-eyed, much made-up, aristocratic dame,

who was gambling with all the fever and eagerness of a boy. She had forgotten Marilla. And Marilla made off— following the young Englishman. He was tall and fair-headed and broad-shouldered, and hence easily kept in sight. At a distance she tracked him to the terrace, and, emerging upon it, stood for a moment entranced by the beauty of the night and the scene. There was a glorious full moon in the sky, and there was the Mediterranean shining beneath its glow, and there was Monaco on one side of the bay, and Mentone on the other, and the various hotels and houses looked like fairy places in the bewitching light, and in the warm night lay the scent of orange groves and palms.

Marilla came across her quarry suddenly. She had seen him stroll round the edge of a mass of exotic shrubs; following him, she ran right upon him. He was sitting on a garden seat; he was bending forward, his bare head was sunk in his hands. Without a moment's thought, Marilla stepped lightly forward and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't do it!" she said earnestly. "Please don't do it!"

The accosted one dropped his hands and turned an amazed countenance on this unceremonious disturber of his reflections. Seeing a young and very pretty woman, evidently in a state of great concern and gravity, standing at his side, he hastily got to his feet, still staring.

"Eh?" he stammered. "Er— I— er— don't do— what?"

"Shoot yourself, you know," said Marilla hurriedly. "Or— take poison, or— or anything of that sort— don't! Of course, it must be dreadful to lose your money, but then— well, really, I wouldn't, if I were you."

After all, moonlight is not sunlight, and just then a passing cloud veiled the moon somewhat; moreover, Marilla was too serious and too resolved in her own convictions to see anything beyond her own nose— otherwise she might have noticed that while she spoke the young man's face underwent several changing expressions, and that the veriest ghost of a smile began to come about his lips.

"Oh— ah— er— yes, to be sure!" he said lamely. "You wouldn't, eh? Er— well, I say, won't you sit down?"

"If you'll promise not to do anything desperate, I will," said Marilla.

Without waiting for the promise, she sat down, at one corner of the seat; the young man dropped into the other and looked inquiringly at her. In another instant he would have laughed; but Marilla, who up to that time had never exercised nor cultivated a sense of humour, was seriously, profoundly in earnest.

"I've been watching you— for three days," she said. "Oh, what a lot of money you must have lost! And to-night— you lost everything? Didn't you?"

"Absolutely cleaned out," replied the ill-doer, with a well-affected groan. "Went right through it!"

"You've nothing left!" exclaimed Marilla.

"Not one cent in either pocket— left or right!" asserted the youth. "Broke!"

"Whatever would your mother say!" said Marilla, awe-stricken.

The catechised rubbed his chin. He was covertly watching Marilla out of his eye-corners, and he was wishing that she would go on talking for quite a while. But he rubbed his chin again, thinking of her last question. He knew his mother. Still, it was better to dissemble.

"Um!" he answered, assuming doubtfulness. Then, appearing remorseful, he added in a low voice: "Don't— know!"

"I should think she'd be absolutely horrified!" declared Marilla.

The young man said nothing. It was difficult to explain to this evidently highly proper maiden that his mother might cherish quite different conceptions of things, so he remained silent, hanging his head.

"When people get to that stage— here," said Marilla, "they generally— end their lives! You will not do that? Promise me!"

"Er— not just now— not at present," responded the youth fervently. "Honest injun, I won't. Not— er— not now that— that— er— you seem to be so jolly particular about it. All right! Run of bad luck, you know— better luck next time. I say, you stopping here at Monte?"

"There will be no next time!" said Marilla, with Dellaby-taught severity and utterly ignoring the eager question. "You must go away— at once!"

The youth's jaw dropped. He turned an open mouth on Marilla, and saw that her pretty face was governess-like in its sternness.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "Hop it? What, just when— oh, I say, come off it! Besides"— a brilliant and magnificent idea struck him— "can't!" he said triumphantly. "Didn't I say I was cleaned out? Can't be done, you see! Got to wait now for—"

"You must not wait for anything!" interrupted Marilla, more sternly than before. "You were going to say you must wait for money. No! I shall give you the money, and you will go straight home to England!"

The youth's mouth opened wider than ever. He scratched the lobe of his ear. He stared hard and long at Marilla, and suddenly he leaned near to her.

"Do you mean to say that you're so anxious that I shouldn't drop any more at those tables that you want to give me money to go back to England?" he said. "That it?"

"That is it," declared Marilla. "I shall give you the money, and you will give me your promise to catch the first train to-morrow morning."

"I say!" he said. "Are you a sort of— philanthropist? Or, perhaps, a millionaire? Which is it? Besides, if you aren't a millionaire, you might run short, you know."

"I'm not a millionaire," replied Marilla, "but I have plenty of money, because I know how to take care of it. Here," she continued, gravely thrusting a hand into her bag and withdrawing something which she forced on her victim— "here is twenty-five pounds. You will go straight home, away from this temptation—"

"By gad, and it is tempting, too!" exclaimed the youth, with his eyes fixed ardently on Marilla's earnest countenance. "Bit too tempting to leave—"

"Be a man!" said Marilla severely. "Is there nothing to do, nothing to go to, at home in England?"

The youth reflected a moment.

"Oh, well, yes!" he said presently. "To be sure— I shall just be in time— just— for the Grand National! You really want me to go?"

"For your own sake," declared Marilla. "Some day— when you are wiser— you will thank me."

The youth sat and stared at her in dead silence for quite two minutes. And Marilla looked at him. Certainly, she decided, he was a very handsome boy. She began to feel more motherly than ever.

"Do go!" she said suddenly. "Please!"

The youth bent a little nearer.

"Look here!" he said, with more of seriousness in his tones than had been there before. "Do you really mean to give me this money so that I can be off? Then— have you got a lot of your own?— I mean, you won't run short?"

"I have plenty of money," said Marilla. "That is not the point."

"All right!" said the youth. He suddenly thrust the notes in his pocket. "I'm going to take you at your word. Now, then— when and where can I give you this back, in person?"

"Oh," exclaimed Marilla. "I— I would rather— please not to think of that!"

The next instant the banknotes were on the seat between them, and the temporary recipient showed signs of rising.

"Then it's off!" he said. "No business!"

"Oh, please!" pleaded Marilla. "Because—"

"Then you'll have to say when and where!" he commanded. "Why, I don't even know who you are!"

Marilla became aware of brute, masculine force. It was he, now, who was getting the upper hand. Against her will, she drew out a card case and delivered up a card. The masterful one glanced at it.

"What an awfully pretty name!" he exclaimed. "All right— M-Miss Vandale— you'll see me with your five-and-twenty— but— when?"

"I shall be home again in five weeks," said Marilla. She was beginning to feel a little puzzled. This youth, whom she had believed to be on the verge of suicide, appeared to be assuming remarkably business-like airs. "But— please do not trouble to— to give me the money until it is— you know— quite convenient."

The befriended one rose. Marilla rose, too. For a second they looked at each other in the moonlight.

"All right!" he said in a low voice. "You're a most extraordinarily good little sort! I say— I've seen you about. Is that your companion— or what— with you? All

right— let her take care of you. Is she in there— very well, you toddle back to her. I'm off— see you in five weeks."

He gave Marilla's hand a strong firm pressure, and shot away round a corner as if in a desperate hurry. Marilla went slowly back to find Miss Chillingworth. Miss Chillingworth was already seeking her, and was found in a state of apprehension.

"I have been with that young man," said Marilla. "He lost his all at the tables to-night. I have sent him back to England."

"Goodness gracious, child!" exclaimed Miss Chillingworth. "Do you mean that you've given him money? Dear, dear; I'm afraid you'll never see it again!"

"I shall certainly see him again," murmured Marilla.

iii

WHEN, some six weeks later, a servant of the private hotel in which Marilla and Miss Chillingworth were once more safely bestowed in London, after their Continental adventures, came up to their sitting-room with an intimation that Mr. John Sutton had called and awaited Miss Vandale's pleasure, neither had the slightest idea as to who Mr. John Sutton might be.

"It must be a man about that flat we looked at yesterday," said Marilla, after a moment's reflection. "Show him up, if you please."

The maid retired, to return presently and to open the door again with a look on her demure face which indicated that, whether this was a man who had to do with flats or not, he was certainly interesting and notable.

He was, in short, something out of the common in that hotel— one chiefly given up to middle-aged ladies of the spinster type— and his mere presence seemed to radiate fashion and distinction in a spreading, generous way. Once or twice since her escape from the Dellaby dullness, Marilla, Miss Chillingworth in attendance, had peregrinated Piccadilly, and seen gentlemen, old and young, in the very height of fashion, from the crowns of their glossy hats to the soles of their shining boots. These, Miss Chillingworth said, were those highly mysterious personages, the men about town. Marilla thought them very grand indeed as they lounged along the pavement or stood on the steps of their clubs; secretly, she wondered if they spent most of their mornings at their toilet-tables in charge of their valets. And now here was one of these visions before her whose purple and fine linen made all else look dingy, and he was the young man to whom she had given a moral lecture and twenty-five pounds on the terrace at Monte Carlo.

But if this was a young man about town, he was certainly a very shy one. He blushed when he caught sight of Marilla; he became embarrassed. He looked nervously at her and doubtfully at Miss Chillingworth. Marilla blushed too, more from surprise than anything else. The grandeur of her visitor's apparel was disconcerting. She was thankful, however, that she herself was in a pretty morning

gown. She continued to stammer a word or two, and to introduce Miss Chillingworth, to whom the young man made a half-frightened obeisance. Then all three looked at each other. The situation was almost painful.

"We are back again," said Marilla, with a terrible effort. "Come home, you know."

"Er— thought you might have, you know," responded Mr. John Sutton. "Happened to be passing this way; thought I'd look in. Off-chance— you know that?"

"Very kind of you," murmured Marilla.

Mr. John Sutton made a stern attempt to be normal.

"Have a good time?" he inquired, including Miss Chillingworth in his glance. "Knock round anywhere else?"

"Lots of places," said Marilla. "Italy."

"Rome was truly delightful!" observed Miss Chillingworth. "We were greatly privileged. We saw the Pope."

"Oh?" remarked Mr. Sutton. "Good business! Decent old Johnnie, I believe; haven't seen him myself."

"Have you been in Rome?" asked Marilla.

"Once," replied Mr. Sutton. "Two days. Races, you know. Jolly good racecourse they have there. Quite English."

"We visited all the notable sights," remarked Miss Chillingworth, with marked emphasis on the personal pronoun. "The Coliseum, St. Peter's, the Capitol, the Catacombs, the— the— everything! Magnificent! Quite an education. We were sorry to leave Rome."

"Oh, Rome's all right— what I saw of it!" assented Mr. Sutton. "Do you very well at the Regina. You stay there?"

"We stayed at the Continental," said Marilla, "near the station."

"But, after all, there's nothing like good old London!" declared Mr. Sutton with sudden enthusiasm. "Always something going on here. Get a bit pipped in those foreign spots, don't you?"

"We didn't," said Marilla. "We found the time fly."

"Oh, really!" responded Mr. Sutton. "Er— good business! Some people— er— don't, you know."

At this stage Miss Chillingworth remarked that she must really attend to her letters and left the room. Mr. Sutton opening the door for her with great politeness. When he had closed it, he turned to Marilla with a glance in which there was a curious compound of knowingness, shyness and a certain amount of appeal to the fellow-feeling which ought to exist between young people.

"I say," he said in a half whisper. "I've got some money for you!"

"Oh, please, never mind!" she answered. "I— any time, really!"

"No; but I don't mean that," said Mr. Sutton. "That's all right, of course, but I mean— you see, when I got back, I was just in time for the Grand National, and I knew— felt dead certain anyway— that Clear-the-Course would just romp home, and I backed him myself. And— and I put your five-and-twenty on, for you, don't you know. Got tens; and, of course, as you no doubt know, Clear-the-Course came in by six lengths all right, so we raked in a pot of money. And here's yours— two-seventy-five. Good business, eh?"

He produced and offered to Marilla a small roll of new banknotes.

"All correct," he added. "Been in my pocket-book ever since."

Maxilla almost screamed. Her eyes opened in horror.

"And a decent old lot of my own," said Mr. Sutton calmly. "I'd a hundred on. Won a cool thousand over that little do."

"Oh!" said Marilla faintly.

"Quite an inspiration, wasn't it?" he remarked cheerfully. "Don't often get 'em, though. Boot on the other leg, usually, I'm afraid."

He placed the notes on the table by which Marilla sat, and Marilla recoiled.

"I— I can't take that!" she exclaimed. "It's not mine!"

"Not yours!" said Mr. Sutton. "Of course! Why, have you never won anything before?"

"Of course not!" declared Marilla. "Never!"

"Then that's a jolly good beginning," sighed Mr. Sutton. "Wonder if it'll last?"

Marilla suddenly picked up the notes, counted out twenty-five, put it in her pocket and pushed the rest back.

"Take it, if you please," she said peremptorily.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Sutton, with widening eyes. "What?"

"Give it back to the person from whom you got it," ordered Marilla.

Mr. Sutton's elegantly trimmed head wagged decisively.

"Guess not!" he said, with an unmistakable firmness. "Had plenty out of me in my time, that chap— rather!"

"Take it away!" retorted Marilla. "I do not gamble!"

Mr. Sutton glanced round the room, as if in despair. His eye encountered a small wooden box which rested on the mantelpiece. There was a slit in the top, and on the side were gilt letters— London Hospital. Without a word he caught up the objectionable notes and began cramming them into the box. Marilla screamed. But Mr. Sutton laughed, turned his back, and looked at her with eyes of almost malicious triumph.

"Oh!" sighed Marilla. For the second time she felt curiously aware of some sort of masterfulness. "Do— do you usually throw money about like this?"

"You refused to have it," he answered. "So— why not give it away? Those chaps that run the hospitals, they're always advertising for money. Some poor

beggar'll get the benefit of it. Besides, I didn't throw it away! You did that. You threw it back to me. So— there it is. Pleasant surprise for the hospital people!"

Marilla folded her fingers in her lap and looked at him.

"I believe you're a very strange young man," she said, after a brief silence. "Are you?"

"Upon my honour, no!" declared Mr. Sutton fervently, with a most evident desire to be credited. "I'm a very ordinary sort, really. Just like— like all the other chaps of— of my sort, you know."

"What is your sort?" demanded Marilla.

"Oh, nothing out of the common, I assure you, really," said Mr. Sutton. "Not at all bad, you know. And I say, look here. I wanted to know if you couldn't come along for a ride with me in my car, eh? Got to go into the country to-morrow to see a fellow about a horse. Do come! Give you a jolly good time."

Marilla regarded him for a moment from under half-closed eyelids.

"Are you including Miss Chillingworth in your invitation?" she asked demurely.

Mr. Sutton glanced narrowly at the door.

"Well— er— most happy, you know, some other time, you know," he said. "But— er— wouldn't it be rather jollier if— eh?"

He paused, looking at Marilla, with almost infantile confidence. Marilla suddenly laughed— for the first time since his entrance.

"Very well," she said. "What time?"

iv

MISS CHILLINGWORTH was not sure— her knowledge of the ways of the wicked world being uncertain, not to say elementary— if it were proper that Marilla should go motoring alone with a young man who, after all, was a stranger, and whom she had originally met under strange, if perhaps romantic circumstances. But it was of little use to say so; Marilla, in spite of her strict bringing-up under the Dellaby roof at Dulwich, was a young person of character and decision, and Miss Chillingworth had found out during their Continental experiences that she not only liked to have her own way, but took every good care to get it. So she contented herself with a mild remark.

"I hope the young man is quite to be depended upon, my dear," she said.

"I scarcely think of him as a young man," answered Marilla. "He is a mere boy— a child. I think he needs somebody to look after him. But I dare say he can drive a motor car."

Secretly, she was wondering how a youth who confessed to being clean broke, as he had phrased it, at Monte Carlo, and was obviously relieved to have ready money put into his hand wherewith to return to England, should so soon have retrieved his fortunes as to be able to drop two hundred and fifty pounds into a

charity box and own an automobile; there was quite attractive mystery in that; she meant to get at the bottom of it. More evidence of mystery came next day at noon, when Mr. Sutton, now arrayed in motoring outfit, drove a very smart and undoubtedly expensive car up to the door of the private hotel and carried Marilla away.

Every window in the hotel was occupied when they moved off, and Miss Chillingworth, left alone, felt that she herself had gone up several inches in the social scale by her association with so much grandeur. As for Marilla, who had taken great pains to be absolutely correct in the details of her toilet, she stepped into the luxurious car as if she had been doing that sort of thing all her life, and paid no more attention to the watching eyes and open mouths than to the gargoyles of the neighbouring church.

Mr. Sutton took the Bath road out of London, and between the metropolis and Maidenhead he and Marilla did little in the way of conversation. Nor did they waste much time in exchange of ideas over the luncheon table to which they sat down at Skindle's. Mr. Sutton remarked, in business-like fashion, that they'd a long way to go, and he ate and drank in a way which showed that his natural instincts were towards promptitude and celerity.

"Where are we going?" asked Marilla, when they were once more in the car and speeding forward. "Where does the man live whose horse you want to see?"

"Right away beyond Wantage," answered Mr. Sutton. "Pretty country, too— worth seeing. By the way, are you fond of old houses? Romantic sort, towers, ivy, oriel windows— that sort of stuff, eh?"

"I adore anything of that sort," said Marilla with decision. "That's the sort of thing you miss on the Continent. A really fine old English house. There's nothing like it."

"Show you one I know, close by where we're going," said Mr. Sutton. "Regular rummy old spot, picturesque, and all that."

An hour or so later, in the rural stretches of the Berkshire-Oxfordshire borders, Mr. Sutton pulled up his car at the gates of a roadside farmstead, and remarking that this was the place where he wanted to see the man and the horse, excused himself for a few minutes, leaving Marilla to ruminate in the car. Marilla did so quite happily; the surrounding scenery was delightful; a truly English landscape, with an ancient spire in one direction, the tower and gables of a grey-walled house in another, a wealth of green meadows and new-leaved trees all around her, and in the hedgerows the roses and honeysuckle of the dawning summer. She was wondering whether a cottage in the country would not be preferable to a flat in town when Mr. Sutton reappeared.

"All right?" he demanded. "Haven't been bored?"

"Bored?" exclaimed Marilla. "I was thinking I'd like to stop here for ever! It's delightful. What's that old place behind the trees there beneath the hill?"

"That's the old shack we're going to look at," answered Mr. Sutton. "Old spot I spoke of. See it at close quarters presently."

He drove slowly forward and round two or three corners, then, when some farmsteads and cottages came in sight, he stopped the car, and, diving into one of its numerous receptacles, produced an enormous pair of blue goggles and a large, slouched hat, which he proceeded to adjust about his eyes and head, much to Marilla's wonder.

"You do look a sight!" laughed Marilla. "It's as if you were a highwayman— in disguise. I shouldn't have known you."

Mr. Sutton muttered something about the sun and his eyes, and moved forward again through a pretty and picturesque village which drew many admiring comments from Marilla, but got scarcely a glance from himself. He seemed, indeed, to be in a hurry to get through it, and paid little attention to his companion's rapturous enthusiasm over the quaint cottages, trim flower gardens, and general old-world air.

Presently he swung round another corner, drove a little way up an avenue of magnificent beech trees, and then, coming to an opening in the great over-hanging branches, stopped the car and waved a hand.

"There you are!" he said. "Full frontal view. What they call a highly desirable property."

Marilla looked in the direction indicated by that half-careless wave. She found herself gazing on a scene which no other country in the world could show. Before her lay a wide, undulating park, rich in trees and vivid in colour, with a herd of red deer browsing in its shadowy glades, and a shining lake lying full in the sunlight. At its farthest extremity, backed by shelving wood, stood a beautiful Elizabethan mansion, surrounded by gardens and pleasure grounds which Marilla could see, even at that distance, to be veritable haunts of peaceful delight.

"Oh," cried Marilla, "what a perfect dream of a place! It's worth coming a thousand miles to see! You've seen it before?"

"Just about a hundred thousand times. Born round here," answered Mr. Sutton laconically. "Like it, then?"

"Like it?" exclaimed Marilla. "It's the most absolutely charming old spot I ever saw! What is it called?"

"Huntney Court," replied Mr. Sutton, lighting a cigarette. "That's Huntney Village that you enthused about."

"It must be one of the most beautiful bits of England, this," declared Marilla. "How I'd just like to live here in that wonderful old house! Whose is it?"

"Johnnie called Lord Huntney," announced Mr. Sutton indifferently. "Viscount Huntney, to give the beggar his full rights. Village is his, too, and all the land round here— piles of it."

"What a lucky man!" sighed Marilla. "If you were born round here, you no doubt know him? What's he like?"

"What do you think he'd be like?" demanded Mr. Sutton with a quizzical glance.

"I should think he'd be something like his surroundings," said Marilla. "Romantic. Is he?"

"Not a bit," said Mr. Sutton. "Very ordinary chap. All right, you know. Good sort; quite simple. No side on him. Saw him this morning in town."

"Did you really!" exclaimed Marilla. "How awfully interesting! But fancy being in London when he might be here."

"Oh, I don't know," remarked Mr. Sutton. "Can't always be in the same place, you know. So you really like the old shanty?"

"Shanty!" cried Marilla indignantly. "It's a perfect paradise! It makes me think of— of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester and— and those sort of days when everything was poetry and romance, and all that."

"Does it really?" said Mr. Sutton wonderingly. "Good Lord! Glad you like it, anyway. Well, we'd better do a right turn."

But at that stage of the proceedings the luxurious car took a hand. Something proved obstreperous. The car refused to budge. Its owner grew very cross and very red, and began to mutter under his breath. Finally, he got down on hands and knees, and disappeared beneath the machinery. Marilla heard him swearing to himself. Five— ten— fifteen minutes passed; the objurgations became more frequent. But the car remained motionless.

A man came along in a light cart— a man who looked like a tradesman going his rounds. He glanced keenly at Marilla, more keenly at the car and the figure still engaged in studying its mechanism. Marilla saw a look of understanding and recognition come into his eyes. His hand went mechanically to his cap.

"Can I be of any use to your lordship?" he inquired, bending down to the grovelling figure. "I'm going into the village, my lord. Can I send somebody?"

The grovelling figure withdrew a very red and angry face, and glanced at the questioner.

"Oh!" he said. "Er— thank you, Mr. Cutts. Well, you might send that apprentice chap at the blacksmith's; he knows something about this sort of thing. Tell him to hurry up and bring some tools."

The tradesman lifted his whip.

"Very good, my lord," he said. "I'll hasten him."

He drove rapidly away, and a dead silence followed the whirr of his wheels. Then the blue goggles were turned on Marilla, the face beneath them grew redder and redder. Marilla, too, had become uncertain of colour, sometimes she was pink and sometimes pale. But, whether pink or pale, her face was bent on the goggles.

"Oh!" she said at last, in a hushed voice which indicated much concern of mind. "He— he called you my lord."

The blue goggles came off, and a pair of much abashed eyes turned nervously but shakily on Marilla's.

"Yes," assented the supposed Mr. Sutton. "Had me there. I— I didn't want any of these people to recognise me. That's why I stuck these things on. I suppose Cutts knew the car. I say, Marilla. I may call you Marilla, mayn't I? You're not cross, Marilla? You see, I was clean gone on you that night at Monte. Fact! And— and— well, I just wanted you to see this old place of mine to see if you liked it. Do you really, Marilla? But you said you did."

"I do," faltered Marilla. "But, oh, how very naughty you are! I believe you played a trick on me at Monte Carlo. You weren't broke! You took that money so that— so that you could have an excuse to see me again. How wicked of you!"

"Aren't you going to forgive me?" demanded the deceiver ingenuously. He had leaned into the car by that time, and procured himself of Marilla's hands. "Say you are, Marilla, say— yes?"

Marilla let her eyes turn in the direction of the village. The blacksmith's talented apprentice was not yet in sight; nobody was in sight in either direction. She allowed herself to be drawn nearer to this masterful disturber of her maiden peace.

"I suppose I really must," whispered Marilla.

_____

10: All on a Springtide Day

IN THE FAR-OFF DAYS when Henry VII was king of England, there lived in a remote Yorkshire village an ancient gentleman, whose sole worldly wealth was a humble dwelling, a croft of land and orchard garden, a chair or two whereon to sit, a bed whereon to lie, a table to eat at, a shelf of old books, and enough money to keep himself in comfort. Also, ever since he had come into that village— which was a little time after the great battle of Bosworth— he had kept, first at his knee and later at his elbow, a handsome lad who called him uncle and whom he taught to read in the old books, to ride a somewhat ancient steed which picked up a living in the croft, to bend a bow and to fish in the river which ran at the foot of the garden. At the time when this truly amazing chronicle begins, this lad, whose name was Nepotus (having after much thought been invented by the old gentleman himself and, in a way, signifying nephew), was a big fellow of twenty years and as handsome as a young larch tree. He had a truly beautiful face, curling chestnut hair and blue eyes; his figure was the goodliest ever glanced aside at by amorous maidens; he was full of good temper and, in spite of a large appetite, had so far found things go very easily with him. True, he and the good man, his uncle, lived very quiet lives and ate very plainly, but what with a bit of fishing and the care of the garden and the reading of the old books and the hearing of tales of other times the days passed not unpleasantly, nor, let us hope, without profit.

There came a day— it was in the height of a joyous spring— when the old man, who for several days previously had been much wrapped in thought, summoned the young man to his side and gave signs that he was about to pronounce a grave and weighty discourse to him.

"Nepotus," he said, "I am now near unto seventy years, and it is time I considered the end of my days. In plain words, my son, I am about to enter upon the eventide of life. But thou, Nepotus, art yet on life's very threshold. Thou art about to enter upon a scene which I must needs quit."

Nepotus made no reply to this preface; he waited respectfully for the next in order.

"Know thee," continued the old man, "that I propose to end my days in a cloister. I have already arranged with the good monks of Rievaulx to take me into their house. But as for you, Nepotus, you shall go forth and seek your fortune in the world."

This news was welcome to Nepotus. Truth to tell, he had for some time cherished a secret longing to go away from that place and see for himself what the world was like. He had gained some notion of it from the old man's tales and from books and from the gossip of neighbours. He had heard of cities and towns and kings and statesmen, of fair ladies and the making of money— all these matters he

desired to know somewhat of and at close quarters. Therefore, not unpleased, he bowed his head.

"As your worship pleases," he said obediently. "Certes, you know what is best for me."

"I hope it may be for the best," said the old man with a sigh. "But life, as I have seen it, is an uncertain thing— 'tis a lottery. Howbeit, thou mayest draw a rich prize. There is an ancient Latin proverb, which tells us that every man is the master of his own fortune. You, Nepotus, shall at any rate have the chance of making yours. But first let me tell thee somewhat. Know, Nepotus, that thou art not my nephew."

"Sir!" said Nepotus. "You amaze me!"

"Neither my nephew, nor my son, nor my grandson, nor any kith or kin," affirmed the old gentleman, shaking his white beard. "In good sooth, I do not know who thou art. My own notion is that thou art the son of some very great man. Thou mayest be lord for aught I know to the contrary. Thy good looks, thy build, thy hands, thy feet— nay, 'tis very sure thou didst never come of common folk! Hadst a man of quality for thy father, and a gentlewoman for thy mother, or I am a veritable ignoramus— which, by'r Lady, I am not!"

This was strange news to Nepotus and he could do naught but stare. His guardian presently proceeded.

"I will now tell thee thy history," said he. "Know that I, a man of good birth myself, though poor, was once a man-at-arms. I have seen much service. I fought in the Wars of the Roses, neither once, nor twice, nor thrice, but many times I have slain many men— may the Lord give their souls rest! I fought at Towton— never mind on which side, it boots it not— and I fought at Bosworth Field. And it was as I came away from that great battle, having seen the King his Majesty assume the crown which had rolled from Richard's head, that I found thee!"

The old man here paused, and, bidding Nepotus to fill him a cup of sack from a certain flagon which stood on a convenient shelf in the corner, took a refreshing pull at its contents.

"This way it was," said he continuing. "As I rode northward after that great fight, it chanced that hunger and fatigue fell upon me. Wherefore, putting up my horse at a wayside cottage, I sought rest and refreshment. Howbeit, naught did I find in that place, but a man lying dead in the garden, a woman likewise dead in the porch— both slain, moreover, by chance arrow shots, and thee, then a lusty infant of some three years, weeping with loud voice in the houseplace. And there being no human soul or habitation in sight, what could I do but carry thee away on my saddlebow? And here thou art! For I was a lone man, having neither wife nor child of my own, and I took to thee. Moreover, this way did I account for things— thou wert garmented as benefited some child of quality; those dead folk were of the people. Clearly, then, thou hadst been left in their charge by some man who

had gone to the war, and who, I doubt not, never returned. And though I remained in that country many days, no tidings of any seeking for thee could I get— so we came hitherward and here we have remained. But now I must go one way— to my grave; and thou another— to seek thy fortune."

Nepotus, hearing all this, thought a good deal more than he had ever thought in his life— to tell the truth, he never had thought much of anything serious up to that moment. However, the lad was not without sense, and he made a good answer.

"Sir," said he, "I am greatly beholden to your worship for all that you have done for me and I trust that I shall never disgrace you. In what way, now, would you recommend me to begin this fortune seeking?"

"Well said for a practical lad!" quoth the old gentleman. "Here, then, is my counsel. To-morrow morning at sunrise we will set out— our ways will lie together as far as Rievaulx, where I will get me into the calm retreat of the cloister. Thou shalt continue thy journeyings to York, which is, as thou hast heard me tell, a great and wondrous city. There seek out some noble of high rank and ask him courteously to take thee into his service. At discretion tell him thy history. And that thou mayest not go into the world empty-handed, two things will I give thee— this staff and this purse— which purse contains all the portion I can bestow on thee, which is fifty good rose-nobles. Take them with my blessing, and remember to think twice before thou dost spend them!"

Next morning when the sun was shining his brightest, the cocks crowing their loudest and every bird in the valley piping his best, Nepotus and the old man went on their way. At the gate of the Abbey of Rievaulx they took an affectionate farewell of each other; then the old gentleman smote on the door and was presently admitted, and Nepotus, somewhat sad, but yet in high spirits, climbed the hill and went forward to take a look at the world.

ii

THE PLACE in which Nepotus had lived all his life was so remotely situated in a deep vale amongst the North York moors that he had seen very little of life until this moment, and he was all agape with amazement and wonder when, at the top of the hill above Rievaulx, he came into the little market town of Helmsley. That, to be sure, was but a small place, but its great church, its mighty castle, the houses of its folk, and the shops, stalls and booths in its market square, seemed so grand to the poor youth that he had haste to pass through, only pausing to ask his way to York. He glanced back at the town when he got outside it, wondering what York might be if this country place was so considerable; it relieved him greatly to find that villages which he now encountered were little bigger than that in which he had been brought up. And by the time of high noontide, he had grown so used to

seeing strange folk, and to walking through unfamiliar village streets, that at Sutton-in-the-Forest he turned into the tavern, and boldly demanded to eat and drink.

Now, Nepotus was but humbly clad, in garments such as the poorer sort of country folk wore in those days and, though all about him was neat and clean, he was not without patches on his knees and elbows. Wherefore a somewhat sour-faced landlord glanced at him suspiciously.

"Before we set meat and liquor on board for such as thou," said he, "we choose to see the colour of their money. Hast thou such a thing as a groat about thee?"

"A groat!" exclaimed Nepotus. "What is that, good master?"

For, indeed, he knew nothing about money, the old gentleman having kept the purse, and paid everything out.

"I know nought of groats! Give me to eat and drink and I will pay thee with a rose-noble."

The landlord pricked up his ears at that, and glanced at two or three men who sat drinking in a corner of the inn. They, in their turn, stared at the young stranger.

"A rose-noble?" quoth the landlord. "Where should such as thou get a rose-noble? Hast never a rose-noble about thee?"

"Will you give me bread and meat, and ale?" demanded Nepotus, who was not without spirit. "I will show you smartly enough whether I can pay you or not when you have served me."

"Give the lad what he wants," growled a big man who sat by. "He looks honest enough. Art on thy way from market doubtless," he went on, turning to Nepotus. "Hast been selling the pigs, likely."

"I have neither been selling pigs nor buying them," answered Nepotus. "What I would buy is meat and drink, for I am sharp set. And if I cannot buy here, I will go where I can."

Now there was that in Nepotus's speech and manner which showed that he was not of common breed, so the landlord, grumbling somewhat, set before him bread and beef and a measure of ale, after which, planting himself squarely before the table at which Nepotus sat, he demanded the reckoning. Thereupon, Nepotus, fumbling in his purse, extracted one of his rose-fifty nobles and handed it over.

After which there was a great to-do. Gold money was rarely seen in the country in those days, and no man in the inn had set eyes on a rose-noble more than once or twice in his life. Thereupon, amidst a great chattering and babbling, during which Nepotus calmly ate and drank, the coin was passed from hand to hand, bitten by strong teeth, wondered at, gazed upon covetously. But the great amazement was, that a lad so meanly garmented should possess it, wherefore they all turned and stared at Nepotus.

"Hast come honestly by this?" demanded the big man. "Know that I am the constable of this parish, and have been so these thirty years. Yet never did I see a fellow of thy seeming condition offer a gold piece of money for his luncheon. Where got'st thou that piece, lad?"

"What is that to you?" retorted Nepotus, with his cheeks bulging with beef. "Mind your own affairs, master, and let me mind mine. There should be change of money due to me out of my gold piece, pay it over, master host, and leave me to eat and drink in peace."

There was some further talk amongst the other men, but one of them, a very old man, shook his head.

"A' had the law on his side," said he. "Hath tendered a's money, and must have his change. 'Tis the law that. Give him what is due to him, John Bentbridge."

However, John Bentbridge, the landlord, found much ado in finding change for a rose-noble, and it was with much grumbling that he finally placed before Nepotus, a heap of groats, pence, and half-pence. Now, a penny was nearly as large as a saucer in those days, and a half-penny was a formidable thing, and Nepotus stared hard at this seemingly vast accession of wealth.

"Hadst better give me a sack to carry all that in!" he said good-humouredly. "Faith, masters, I had not known there was so much money in the world."

This made the men stare at him all the more; and the landlord and the constable began to put their heads together. For this, indeed, was stranger than the affair of the rose-noble, that one of apparently low degree should be amazed at the sight of halfpence.

But Nepotus, being in good sooth sharp set by his tramp over hill and dale, paid no heed to these village wiseacres, he ate and drank heartily, and when he had finished, swung round his purse which he carried at his girdle so that he might place therein the money which John Bentbridge had given him in change. And thereby began the misfortunes which were first to lead him into the very slough of despond, and afterwards conduct him to such heights of bliss as surely no youth ever dreamed of.

The purse which the old gentleman had given to Nepotus was, like its donor, worn and ancient, and that with the weight of the forty-nine rose-nobles, and the added weight of the massive pence and halfpence, its meshes gave way.

No sooner had Nepotus arisen to his feet, eager to be off about his business, than it burst, and a cataract of coinage, gold, silver and copper, flew forth and rolled here and there amongst the legs of the tables and the feet of the company. And thereupon arose such a commotion as might arise did one fling but an apron full of choice dainties amongst a herd of swine.

There was an upsetting of benches and chairs, a going-down on hands and knees; there were shoutings and cursings as each man scrambled with his neighbour. For a penny-piece was a penny-piece in those days, and, as for a rose-

noble, it was a gentleman's ransom. So each ale swigger strove to pocket something for himself, and above the din rose the protestations of Nepotus and the loud voice of the constable.

"Hark ye all," roared the man of authority. "Let every knave of ye deliver what he hath picked up! John, the landlord shut and bolt thy door! Let no man leave, let none enter. Board the money before me, every one of you, on pain of death and the King's displeasure. And, as for thee, young man— "

But Nepotus, very pale and red by turns, was energetically collecting his wealth, and laying heavy hands on those who seemed slow to hand it over.

"Give me my money!" he demanded fiercely. "I will brain the first caitiff that keeps him a penny of it! Hand it back, I say, you who have recovered it. Forty-nine gold coins there are! Talk not to me of cracks and holes in the floor, thou reprobate! I will crack thy skull, and make holes in thy body, thou thief, if thou—"

"Caitiff— thieves?" shouted the constable. "And what art thou, my young cockerel? Who ever heard of a fellow with clouts on knee and elbow going about with fifty rose-nobles in his pouch? Thief thyself, and shalt to the nearest magistrate."

"Ay, marry!" exclaimed the landlord, "those be good words, enow! Have him to Sir Toby. He'll lay him by the heels, I warrant me. Gold quotha! and enough to pay for my house and liquor!"

Nepotus grew still paler on hearing all this, and he made his first error. For he was young, and his blood was hot, and he had a masterful will. Wherefore, he raised his oaken staff, and made threats with it.

"So I am to be robbed, am I?" he shouted. "Not willingly, my masters! Hand me my money, ye rascals, or—"

"Hand him naught!" commanded the constable, who himself had gathered up as much of the money as he could lay fingers to. "Hear all men in the King's name— 'liver this money to me, to have and hold until we know how it was come by, and, as for thee, thou young ruffiner, shalt with me before Sir To—"

But at that Nepotus made his second error. For, seeing these rustics hand over his gold, his silver, his pence, to the constable, for whose office he had no respect, there being no constable in the hamlet he hailed from— he began to lay about him with his staff, crying out that he was robbed and undone.

The windows were broken, the pots and pans were smashed, the pewter was strewn about the floor, and the landlord's wife, coming in from baking to learn the cause of this commotion, was just in time to catch the mighty form of her husband, who fell into her arms, streaming with blood, the result of a violent blow which had been aimed at Nepotus, but fell on the landlord's nose. Amidst her shrieks, and the good man's groans, and a general chorus of loud vociferations, Nepotus was overcome and bound, and he had the sorrow of seeing his beloved money carefully collected by the constable.

And now Nepotus made his third and greatest error. He had been given much book-learning by the old gentleman and he had picked up more from the monks of Rievaulx, and now, having a vague idea that it might frighten his assailants, he set to and cursed the constable, the landlord and the company, in good, sound Latin, throwing in a few words of bad Greek to make his anathemas the more awe-inspiring.

But in this he took the wrong sow by the ears, as you shall learn at once. For the constable, first opening his mouth in amazement at hearing Greek and Latin pouring readily from the lips of a youth whose jerkin was patched, and whose hose was much mended, presently shook his head with the decisiveness of a wise man.

"Ha, ha!" quoth he triumphantly. "What have we here, my masters? Hebrew, Greek, and who knows what else! I see how it is— this is some renegade young monk that hath robbed his monastry! Ay, and doubtless murdered some poor rustic for the sake of his apparel. Out with him to the stocks! We will lay him by the heels at any rate, until we can put a halter around his neck."

That it came to pass that as the village bell tolled noontide poor Nepotus, sore buffeted, and wholly sick of this strange world, sat in the stock, to be mocked at, and wondered about, by the people who came running from all sides to see him.

iii

HERE, THEN, at the very outset of his ventures, was Nepotus, a prisoner and object of contumely a thing to be jeered at by every mischievous lad who could find a clod of earth to fling at him. Yet the good blood in him asserted itself. He sat up in the stocks, held his bare head high and flashed upon his tormentors a proud look that made some of them wonder at his insolence. In their opinion Nepotus should have slunk and whimpered; instead he stared at them as if they were so much mud beneath his feet.

It was at this juncture that a cavalcade rode into the village. A mighty fine cavalcade it was, of men-at-arms, and serving men, all fine and gay, in brave liveries, and riding proud steeds. But glittering and grand as this cavalcade was, all its brilliance was eclipsed by the rare sight that rode at its head— a fair and lovely maiden of some twenty summers, who was so beautiful that she seemed to put out the light of the sun and to fill everything in that place with a radiance of her own. It matters not to say with close particulars what she was like, suffice it to tell that not one goddess in all Olympus, nor even Helen of Troy herself, could in any way compare to her in face or form.

And she was not only beautiful but proud and masterful, and imperious, and at the very sight of her every man-jack there bent his head, uncapped, to the ground;

all the women made their deepest curtsies and all the children, awe-struck, put their thumbs in their mouths.

"What have we here?" demanded this beauty with one swift glance at Nepotus, who, under its searching sweetness, felt himself grow fiery red. "What is this rabblement and who is yonder good youth?"

And again she looked at Nepotus, and Nepotus looked at her. Now, as I have said, Nepotus was a very paragon of beauty, in a proper, manly way, and the young woman was equally fair in her province, and it was as if flint had struck on steel when their eyes met. Nepotus grew redder than ever, and the lady blushed, too, and she compressed her full nether lip with her pearly teeth and looked away, and her glance fell on the constable, who had straightened himself by that time. Therewith she let out a rapping oath.

"God's death, fellow!" she exclaimed terribly. "Why standest thou gaping there, like the fool thou lookest? Answer me! Who is this youth?"

The constable summoned all the effrontery that was in him and spoke up. A nice tale he told, too, with so many lies in it that Nepotus laughed aloud. And at the laugh the lady turned on him— but her eyes did not seek his quite so readily.

"And what sayest thou, good youth?" she asked. "Say, and fear not."

Nepotus saw no reason for fear and spoke out. And as he told his tale the maiden's eyes began to grow sombre and dark, and her red lips straightened themselves ominously, and, taking their cue from their mistress, all the men-at-arms began to shake their heads and the villagers began to tremble. As for the constable, his spine turned to butter.

"Ha!" she exclaimed, when Nepotus had made an end. "That is more like the truth!" She turned on the constable with a set face. "Set me this gentleman free on the instant!" she said.

Nepotus presently arose, shook himself, and made a deep reverence to his preserver. But for that time his preserver took no heed of him. She lifted a finger to the men-at-arms. Six of them leapt from their horses and gathered at her stirrup. She pointed at the constable.

"Hang me that fat man on yonder tree!" she commanded.

Thereat arose a fine babel of sound. The constable roared, his wife and children screamed, all the village women began to wail and the dogs, which had assembled on every side, began to bark at the tumult. But the men-at-arms, taking no heed to aught but their lady's commands, seized and bound the constable, and in a twinkling slipped a halter around his neck. This seemed greatly to the maiden's relish and she was watching everything with glad eye, when she felt a gentle touch on her arm, and, looking down, in amazement, saw Nepotus' beautiful face turned upward to her own.

"So please you," said Nepotus, "it were ill-done to punish so heavily for so slight an offence. Methinks this man did what seemed to him his office. I beseech

your majesty— for you are surely a queen, being so gracious and beautiful— to let him go. I kiss your majesty's hand"— here he suited the action to the word— "in token of my gratitude. But also I beg the man's life. Natheless," he continued, with a shake of his curly head, "it will be but right that he should give me back my money."

At the touch of Nepotus' lips upon her fair hand the lady blushed as rosy as the morning and she looked down again in a fashion which no man had ever seen her use before. For one moment more they continued gazing at each other— then she turned to the men-at-arms.

"Let the fellow go!" she said. "But first— the money. And now," she continued when the constable had yielded up the rose-nobles, "give this gentleman a horse. And hark ye, varlets!" she exclaimed, turning to the villagers. "Let me hear of your treating strangers again in this fashion and I will hang every mother's son of you to your own door posts!"

During the next hour Nepotus knew not if he was dead or dreaming— if dead, in Paradise; if dreaming, in such dreams as rarely come to mortal. For he rode by his fair preserver's side, and he told her his tale, and the tale which the old gentleman had told him; and the lady said that she had known from the moment she set eyes on him that he was a man of high birth, and it should now be her endeavour to set him on the pinnacle to which he had rightful place. Thus discoursing she led him to her castle, a mighty fair one, overlooking all that country, and there she delivered him to lackeys who provided him with a scented bath and much brave raiment, and, his toilet being made, conducted him with deep obeisances into the presence of their mistress, who was about to sit down to meat.

And now a rare and most wonderful thing happened.

There stood at the side of the table whereat Nepotus and the lady were to dine an ancient serving-man. He was a personage of distinction and wore a silver chain about his neck, and was master of the other lackeys. And no sooner did Nepotus enter the hall than this man, after staring at him in amazement, threw up his hands and exclaimed so loudly that his mistress asked him what ailed him.

"Madam," said he, when he could fetch his breath— "your ladyship will forgive me for my seeming lack of manners when I tell you that in this gracious young gentleman I seem to behold the very presence of one whom I once served. Nay, verily this young lord, whose name I know not, must indeed be the son of my old master, Sir Hugo de Belchamp, for he is his very spit!"

You may be sure that the old greybeard, and the fair mistress of the castle, and the wondering Nepotus had much anxious discourse during that afternoon— the upshot of it being that they decided that Nepotus was certainly the son of Sir Hugo de Belchamp, a great knight, who was believed to have met his death at Bosworth Field. According to the serving-man, many and great estates were

awaiting Nepotus, or Sir Hugo, as we must now call him, and it was arranged that he should travel with a brave retinue, to that part of the country where they lay, there to be received with open arms and the ringing of bells.

But this was not yet to be. For the maiden who had rescued Nepotus from the stocks had no mind to part with him. She was the Lady Algitha; her parents were dead and she herself was absolute mistress of all the land which she could see from her castle, and could hang every man about that land if she were so disposed. She was as impulsive as she was powerful, and as resolute as she was impulsive. And now that Nepotus was in her company he began to feel that if any man had asked him which was his head and which was his heel he would have found it hard to answer. All that afternoon and all that evening the Lady Algitha kept him near her; she conducted him over her castle and through her pleasance; they lingered in a garden full of roses and sweet scents, and it became increasingly difficult for him to keep his eyes off her, and for her to keep her eyes off him. Nevertheless, it was not until evening had closed in and they were alone with the moonlight that they ventured to take each other by the hand.

Nepotus, for the life of him, could never tell how it came to be that he found the beautiful maiden in his arms, pressing her warm lips to his. He had never kissed a maiden before, and he lost his heart, his head and his tongue. But the Lady Algitha's tongue was not easily lost.

"Oh, Nepotus," she murmured, twining her shapely arms about his neck. "How I love thee! How I dote on thee, Nepotus! I shall never call thee anything else— 'tis so sweet a name. I have dreamed of thee so long, Nepotus— for three long years at least, and now thou art come. Nepotus, never will we two part again. Wilt thou wed me?"

Nepotus nearly swooned. But the Lady Algitha's eyes were upon him and her arms about him. He became delirious, yet he found his tongue.

"Oh, heavens!" he murmured. "Do I hear aright? Can such bliss be possible?"

The Lady Algitha drew her head back from his shoulder and looked at him.

"Possible!" quoth she. "Am I not lord, lady, master, mistress? There is no man to say me nay. Thou lovest me?"

Nepotus was about to swear by the moon and stars. Thinking better of it, he caught the maiden to his bosom and kissed her six times. Therewith she took him by the hand and gently led him back to the castle.

"Come, Nepotus," she murmured in her softest accents. "Come, we will lose no time, being young. My chaplain shall wed us on the instant."

Thus did Nepotus become happily provided for on the very threshold of his career. And if there be any who doubt the truth of this chronicle I say to them, as a veracious chronicler, that in those days to which the story relates, this sort of thing happened almost every day.

11: The Monument

SELLATHWAITE, who in his time had been one of the best known men of the criminal investigation department, and, on retiring from its service, had set up a private inquiry office, had been down to York on business, and, on leaving for London by an early morning express, had armed himself for his 200 miles' journey with a liberal provision of newspapers. He was one of those men who buy newspapers in profusion; a man who could extract something in the way of pleasure and interest from the columns of merely local journals; wherever he went— and he was constantly travelling about— he left behind him in railway carriages a discarded heap of print and paper. He sat in a corner of his compartment now with a heap of morning papers at his side— Leeds papers, Manchester papers, Newcastle papers, and two or three local papers which he had picked up from the bookstall out of sheer inquisitiveness.

And as the train moved out of York it was one of these local journals that he first picked up. There was a page of illustrations in it; Sellathwaite's practised eye ran quickly from picture to picture, and suddenly settled on the portrait of a man. He made no sign, uttered no exclamation, but he knew that what he was staring at was the photograph of somebody whom he once knew somewhere. But where? And when? The portrait was that of a good-looking, bearded man of apparently fifty-five to sixty years of age; well-dressed, as far as head and shoulders could reveal such things; prosperous, contented. Beneath it were two or three lines of print, which Sellathwaite read with rapidly rising curiosity.

"Mr. John Rollington, a much-respected resident of Hathersea, who was drowned there yesterday in a brave endeavour to save the life of a child who fell from the end of Hathersea pier."

The name conveyed nothing to Sellathwaite; he had no recollection of having ever heard it before. He repeated it over and over to himself— no, he had no remembrance of any man named Rollington. But he was as certain as he was of his own identity that somewhere, at some time, during his professional career he had come across the man at whose portrait he stared. It was a long time ago, a very long time ago. . . . The express had travelled twenty miles over the dead level of the Yorkshire plain before Sellathwaite, staring all the time at the portrait and exercising his keen, well-trained memory, suddenly remembered things.

He remembered at last, through perceiving a slight scar on the picture face before him— a tiny mark that extended from the left cheek-bone towards the outer angle of the eye above it. He knew, then, this was Robinson, a man with whom he had had some professional dealings twenty years before. Of course! He remembered it all now. And taking a pair of scissors from his pocket, he carefully

cut out the portrait and put it in his memorandum book, and, indifferent to all else, leaned back in his corner and began to summarise his recollections.

Sellathwaite had good reasons to remember Robinson. Robinson had been one of his few failures; Robinson had been a source of chagrin; Robinson had let him in for a severe wigging from his superiors at the Yard. All the circumstances came up again before Sellathwaite vividly. Some twenty years previously a certain case was put into Sellathwaite's hand. There was, in the East End of London, a certain workingmen's friendly society known as the Hope and Anchor Mutual Benefit Association. It was a highly prosperous society; it possessed very considerable funds.

One, John Robinson, was its secretary and treasurer; he was a man of about thirty-six or thirty-seven, a smart, clever man, much respected and greatly trusted; the affairs of the society had been almost exclusively in his care for nearly ten years, and by astute and judicious use of the surplus funds he had greatly increased its wealth and made sure its financial standing. The directors and the members looked upon Robinson as a perfect treasure; his word was law in their circles. Nobody doubted his absolute integrity, and there was, accordingly, a surprise little short of horror when Robinson disappeared suddenly as completely as if the earth had swallowed him, and with him funds to the amount of five-and-twenty thousand pounds.

It had been Sellathwaite's job to find Robinson. It was no easy job; Robinson had evidently made complete and clever preparations for covering his tracks when he took to flight. It was a difficult matter to get a trace of him; yet, by a lucky chance, Sellathwaite did eventually get one, and he got Robinson. He got him in Falmouth, where he found his man living quietly in lodgings. He got him without trouble, merely walking in upon the defaulter as he sat at dinner and revealing himself and his mission. And then Robinson did Sellathwaite— did him brown, as the saying was in those days. Seeming to accept the situation with calmness and quietude, he leisurely finished his dinner, assured the detective that he would give him no bother, and presently set out with him to the local police station.

But as they went along a certain narrow street Robinson vanished into a network of courts and alleys that opened therefrom, and, in spite of Sellathwaite's frantic endeavours and the immediate scouring of the surrounding country, he was never seen again. That time his disappearance was complete and final, and Sellathwaite had a warm quarter of an hour with the authorities, and bore Robinson a grudge which nothing could wipe out. And it was all twenty years ago, and nobody had ever heard of Robinson since he had slipped around that corner in Falmouth. And here was his portrait in a paper, and he was described as a much-respected resident of Hathersea.

"That's my man! Not a doubt of it!" said Sellathwaite to himself. "Dead or alive— that's Robinson!"

Then, glancing round at the two or three men who shared his compartment, he asked abruptly:

"Does anybody here know a place named Hathersea? If so, where is it?"

Two of Sellathwaite's companions showed blank countenances, but the third, evidently a commercial traveller, nodded.

"Little seaside place on the coast, between Bridlington and the Humber," he answered. "One-horse sort of show."

"How would you get to it from where we are just now?" asked Sellathwaite. "I mean, where would you quit this train?"

"Get off at Doncaster— next stop," answered the informant. "Get a train for Hull. Hathersea's about fifteen miles from that."

"Much obliged to you," responded Sellathwaite. "Never heard of the place before. And I want to get there quick."

"You'll be there by noon, if you change at Doncaster," remarked the other. "Plenty of fast trains from Doncaster to Hull."

Sellathwaite changed at Doncaster and sought the next train eastward. He had important business awaiting him in London. But he threw all thought of it aside— his whole energy was just then bent on taking up the trail of twenty years ago, even if it led to looking at a dead man's quiet face.

ii

THE SUPERINTENDENT of police, upon whom Sellathwaite walked in at Hathersea a few hours later, looked up from the card which his visitor handed him with manifest curiosity and interest. He knew Sellathwaite well enough by name; in his time Sellathwaite had been connected with a good many remarkable cases, and his fame as an astute and clever detective had spread through the provinces. It was with the air of one who receives a distinguished guest that he waved Sellathwaite to a chair by his desk.

"It's a strange business that's brought me here," began Sellathwaite. "This is the cause." He produced the portrait which he had cut out of the newspaper. "I understand from that," he went on, "that this Mr. John Rollington was a much-respected resident in your town. So, I suppose, you knew him well?"

"Very well, indeed," answered the superintendent. "So did everybody. There was nobody in the place better known— nor more respected."

"Sort of public character," suggested Sellathwaite.

"Well, in a sort of private way, yes," assented the superintendent, with a smile. "He'd no official status, you understand— just a private resident. But everybody's sorry he's gone. A very sad affair."

"How was it?" asked Sellathwaite.

"This way," replied the superintendent. "Mr. Rollington was, as you might put it, a man of a methodical turn of life. He used to do things at certain hours. Day by day, year in, year out. Of a morning he always took a walk into the country. Of an afternoon he always went down to the pier and the harbour. Every evening he spent an hour or two at the club. Yesterday afternoon he'd gone down to the pier as usual, and was strolling about there, when a small boy who was fishing off the pier-head, fell into the sea. Rollington was a good swimmer. Without hesitation he threw off some of his clothing and plunged in. We believe he struck something— timber or stone. Anyway, he just managed to reach the child, pushed him to a boat hook which a man extended from a lower staking of the pier, and then sank. He never reappeared alive, anyhow."

"They recovered his body?" inquired Sellathwaite.

"Within a very short time," said the superintendent. "And a vigorous effort was made to restore life. But he was dead enough when they got him out; there wasn't a chance. He saved the boy, anyway."

Sellathwaite sat silently staring at the portrait for a little while; the superintendent watched him, wondering what all this was about.

"Look here," said Sellathwaite, with a sudden glance of invitation to confidence. "That man's dead! But I wish you'd tell me all you know of him— all that's known of him here. You know me. I've reasons for asking this— professional reasons. I want to be informed of all that can be told about this man since he came to live here; for, unless I'm greatly mistaken, he hasn't always lived here. He— ah— probably came to live in Hathersea about, shall we say, eighteen or nineteen years ago?"

"Just about that," assented the superintendent. "Speaking from memory, I should say eighteen years. A stranger— complete stranger— when he came. He took a nice little house— 'Seapink Cottage'— overlooking the beach. Settled down there with a housekeeper— an elderly woman who died a year or so ago. Seemed to be a man who had a nice competency— it was understood that he was a tradesman who'd made his little pile and retired from business at an earlyish age, you know."

"Ay!" remarked Sellathwaite ruminatively. "He'd be, then, about— well, he'd be under forty, anyhow?"

"About that, I should say," said the superintendent. "A quiet, unassuming, pleasant-mannered sort of man. Never pushed himself forward, you know. And yet he came, as I say, to be the best known man in the town. Sort of man that does things, you understand; a man who seemed to have a talent for organising."

"He would have," muttered Sellathwaite.

"He was a regular churchgoer," continued the superintendent. "Never missed a service, Sunday or week-day, I believe. So the vicar pressed him into various offices— he was secretary of this and treasurer of that. Then he was an enthusiast

about the Boy Scouts— and he got up our Horticultural Society and reorganised the lifeboat affairs and started a coal-and-blanket distribution every winter, and he was prime mover in our Cottage Hospital scheme; in fact, whatever movement or affair there was he took all the work of it on his own hands. And in time he got to be known to everybody as the 'Monument.' "

"Ay, and why that?" demanded Sellathwaite, with a sharp glance.

The superintendent laughed.

"That arose from a sermon of the vicar's," he answered. "One winter Rollington was particularly busy and energetic in all these various matters. We'd a lot of poverty amongst the fisher-folk that winter, and he worked hard for them. And they gave him a bit of a public dinner, as a sort of compliment, you know, and the vicar spoke of it, and referred to him as a monument of endeavour and example, and so on— and ever after that folks always called him the 'Monument.' "

"You say he seemed to be comfortably off?" asked Sellathwaite.

"I should say more than comfortably off," answered the superintendent. "He lived in a very nice style, kept a good table, could always give his guests a glass of good wine and a good cigar, and spent a good lot of money in the place. I should think there isn't a subscription list for the last eighteen years that hasn't got his name on it for a few guineas, and he was certainly charitable to poor folk. Without any great show and no boasting about it, he gave the impression of being what they call a warm man— a man who had his twelve or fifteen hundred a year to spend."

Sellathwaite glanced significantly at the red roofs of the little town, seen through the big window of the office in which he sat.

"That would be a very handsome income in a place like this?" he suggested.

"You're right," said the superintendent, dryly, "it would."

There was a pause then, broken at last by the superintendent, who gave his visitor an inquiring glance.

"Between ourselves," he said, "what's it all about?"

Sellathwaite glanced at the door. It was shut tight, as both men knew, but the mere fact of his looking at it suggested secrecy and caution.

"Well," he answered at last, "it's between you and me— for a time, anyhow. From this portrait, I believe this man Rollington to be, in reality, one Robinson, the defaulting secretary and treasurer of the Hope and Anchor Mutual Benefit Association, which society he defrauded of something like five and twenty thousand pounds about twenty years ago, and who escaped from my custody after arrest at Falmouth, a few months later, and has never been heard of since. I say, that's what I believe."

The superintendent whistled.

"You don't say!" he exclaimed. "But— only from that portrait?"

"So far only from that portrait," assented Sellathwaite. "But— I never forget the faces of men I've been after."

The superintendent reflected a little.

"He's not buried, of course," he said.

"To be sure," answered Sellathwaite. "And once he is he'll have a much-attended funeral, of course."

"All the town," said the superintendent. He rose from his desk and picked up his cap. "Well," he went on, glancing meaningly at his visitor. "You'd better come and look at him.

"Just so," said Sellathwaite.

He followed the superintendent through the streets of the little town to a quiet house that stood in a trim garden, high above the cliffs. Five minutes later, after being but one moment in an upper chamber, he came down and gave his guide a sharp nod.

"That's the man!" he said.

iii

THE TWO MEN walked away from the quiet house in silence, and the silence continued until they came abreast of the one hotel which Hathersea boasted. There Sellathwaite paused, pulling out his watch.

"I want some lunch," he remarked in matter-of-fact tones. "I've had nothing since breakfast at York this morning, and that was before 8 o'clock. Come in and have some lunch, superintendent, and we'll talk. There's plenty to talk about." He waited then until he and his guest were seated facing each other at a small table in a corner of the coffee room. "Do you fully comprehend what this means, or may mean?" he asked, leaning across the table; "got the full hang of it?"

"Scarcely, but it's not a nice situation," answered the superintendent. "You say he's the man. And— he's dead!"

"Dead— and got to be buried," said Sellathwaite. "But he is the man! And it means— unless we see a clever way out of it— that the man who's been so much respected here amongst you, who's been foremost in good works, who's been held up by your parson as a monument of endeavour and example, will have, dead though he is, to be revealed to everybody who respected him as a defaulting criminal! Nasty!"

"You've no doubt about him?" suggested the superintendent uneasily.

"None!" replied Sellathwaite, with a snap of his firm jaw. "None! He's the man who slipped, literally, out of my hands in a narrow street in Falmouth all those years ago. I see through the whole thing. He was a complete stranger to all of you when he came here?"

"Absolutely!" agreed the superintendent.

"Came here first, no doubt, as a visitor?" said Sellathwaite.

"He did. Stopped for, I think, a month or two in this very hotel, until he found a house and settled down."

"And I suppose you don't get many visitors here? It's not a popular seaside resort?"

"It's not a seaside resort at all, as things go. It's what you see— a little fishing town, with a very small amount of sea trade. If visitors come here at all they're day excursionists from Hull. A very few people do turn up in summer, for a week or two, but I should say they don't number fifty all told. This hotel, of course, is mainly a commercial house."

"He chose his place of retreat well," said Sellathwaite. "And, I dare say, he rarely left it. Never went away much, I suppose?"

"So far as I remember," answered the superintendent after some reflection, "I never recollect his going anywhere at all. He lived the same regular, monotonous life— though fully occupied with the affairs I told you of— all along."

Sellathwaite picked up his knife and fork, and for some minutes ate in silence.

"Well," he observed at last, "I'm going to have that money! That money belongs to the Hope and Anchor Mutual, of course! They've got to have it back— after twenty years. It's a point of honour with me. That affair at Falmouth— letting him get away from my custody— was the biggest mistake I ever made. I got it hot and strong from my superiors, I can assure you, for we never heard a word about him; he vanished as clean as if he'd dissolved into thin air. But— he's dead! And seeing how well he behaved himself here— though, to be sure, on stolen money— I don't want to— you know. What's the old saying, the Latin proverb? 'Say nothing but good of the dead,' eh? Well, I don't want to rake up all this against the man amongst your people, who've respected him. But what's to be done? He'll have left money, of course. Who'll get it?"

"I once heard him say, for I knew him pretty intimately, and used to spend an evening with him now and then— that he hadn't a relation in the world," remarked the superintendent. "Of course, he must have left money. In fact, I've heard him speak about his investments. He struck me, what little I heard from him in that way, as being a very knowing, shrewd man in money matters."

"He was— in his former days!" said Sellathwaite, with a grim smile. "He improved the financial status of that society in splendid fashion. That," he added, smiling still more grimly, "was precisely why they trusted him so implicitly. Of course, he'll have left money. But who's likely to know anything about it?"

"There were— or are— two men in the town who knew him better than anybody else did," replied the superintendent. "One's Dr. Stephenson, the other Mr. Mackereth, the solicitor. They and he were cronies, always together. They may know something."

"Let's have the solicitor," said Sellathwaite. "Look here, this is a quiet place, while we finish our lunch, send him a note and ask him to step around here and see you. I suppose he's not far away?"

"Next street," answered the superintendent. He pulled out his notebook, scribbled a few lines on a blank page, and summoned the waiter. "Have that sent to Mr. Mackereth just now," he commanded. Then, turning to Sellathwaite, as he resumed his knife and fork, he gave him a keen glance. "I suppose," he said, "you'll tell Mackereth everything?"

"Everything," assented Sellathwaite. "Between ourselves."

Mackereth, entering the hotel half an hour later, found the superintendent and a stranger in the smoking-room busy with cigars and coffee. A quiet, unassuming, country-life practitioner, little used to the strange networks of criminology, he listened with amazement as Sellathwaite, whose name he immediately recognised as that of one of the smartest detectives of a few years ago, unfolded his story. The cigar which he had lighted on joining the other two went out, his coffee grew cold, he sat open-mouthed and wide-eyed, staring at the teller of the tale.

"God bless my life and soul!" he exclaimed at last. "You're— you're sure you aren't making any mistake in this, Mr. Sellathwaite? Sure?"

"I never made but one mistake in this, Mr. Mackereth," affirmed the ex-detective. "And that was in letting him slip out of my fingers. But he took the whole thing so quietly, and gave me such emphatic assurance that he'd go with me without any bother, that I let him walk alongside as if we were a couple of friends strolling through the town. And he was gone in an instant like an eel. That was my mistake. But there's no mistake now. The man whom I've just seen lying dead is John Robinson, who carried off five and twenty thousand pounds belonging to the Hope and Anchor Mutual Benefit Association. Mr. Mackereth, I want that money!"

The solicitor, nervously rubbing his hands together, looked from one man to the other. In all his quiet, even-surfaced, legal experience he had never been brought face to face with a situation like this.

"Of course," he said, "of course. If it was their money that he lived on—"

"Whose else?" interrupted Sellathwaite. "He'd none of his own, except, perhaps, some small savings. I knew all about him. Before he became secretary and treasurer of this society he was a solicitor's clerk. You know better than I do what he'd get. His salary as chief official to the Hope and Anchor affair was three hundred pounds a year; he'd not save a lot out of that even in the nine years."

"Did his salary never increase?" asked Mackereth.

"Instead of increase they used to give him a present every year, varying from, at first, fifty to a hundred pounds a year," replied Sellathwaite. "Say, for the sake of argument, that they gave him nine hundred in that way, and that he saved

another nine hundred out of his salary, that wouldn't represent two thousand pounds. And, from what I hear from our friend here, he was a man of twelve or fifteen hundred a year at least— perhaps more. Now, Mr. Mackereth, where's his capital? I'll bet he wasn't living on capital, he was too shrewd for that; he'd live on income. Where's the money? I'm going to have it— for the people from whom he stole it!"

Mackereth, a mild-mannered man, who wore large goggle-eyed spectacles, looked again at his two companions. Finally, he fixed his spectacles on Sellathwaite.

"Well," he said, "I may as well tell you, I have his will."

Sellathwaite threw up his head with a gesture of relief.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "that's better!"

"But," continued Mackereth, "I don't know what's in it."

"You don't?" said Sellathwaite. "Why, didn't you make it?"

"No," replied Mackereth. "He made it himself about a year ago. The fact is," he continued, "at that time he wasn't very well, and he had himself thoroughly examined by Dr. Stephenson, who was very friendly with him. Stephenson told him— what he forgot the other day, poor fellow!— that he'd a weak heart, and warned him against undue exertion or sudden shock. He then made his will himself and had it duly witnessed, and he brought it to me and deposited it in my custody. It is enclosed in a stout envelope, heavily sealed, and is marked, 'Not to be opened by Mr. Mackereth until after my funeral.' So I do not know what its contents are. Except this. He told me that appended to the will was a complete schedule of his properties and investments."

Sellathwaite sat silently considering matters for some minutes.

"Not to be opened until after his funeral?" he remarked at last. "Now, when is he to be buried?"

"Day after to-morrow, in our parish churchyard," answered Mackereth. "It— it will be a sort of public funeral." He glanced appealingly at the superintendent. "Whatever the man may really have been," he added softly, "he was greatly respected here in Hathersea."

"I don't doubt it," said Sellathwaite. "But I'm going to stay here until you've opened and read that will."

And therewith he walked out of the coffee-room and went to the office of the little hotel to book a room for the ensuing three days.

iv

WHEN THE SUPERINTENDENT and the solicitor had left him, Sellathwaite sat down again in a corner of the coffee-room, and, lighting a fresh cigar, gave himself up to speculation and thought. He was more puzzled by the events and revelations

of that day than he had ever been in the whole course of his professional experience. It was not so much that Robinson had continued to remain dead and buried, as it were, for nineteen years as that Sellathwaite found it hard to account for the man's conduct. Robinson was now presented to him as a dual personality. On the one hand, he was without doubt a criminal; on the other, he was a sober, exemplary, well-conducted member of a small community, every unit of which held him in high respect. The more Sellathwaite reflected on these diverse matters, the more he was amazed, and the more he was certain that there was some curious secret in the man's life. But what? And how was he— how was anybody— ever going to get at it now?

That evening, as Sellathwaite sat at his dinner in the little hotel, the superintendent came in and dropped quietly into a chair at his side. He looked as if he had something to talk about.

"Yes," said Sellathwaite.

"Since I left you this afternoon," began the superintendent, "I've been thinking a good deal about him. Brushing up my memory, you know. And I've remembered something— may be a bit in it, and there mayn't be. But I told you he never went away anywhere? However, I've recollected, now I come to think of it, that every now and then he used to go into Hull for the day. And I know where he went."

"Well?" said Sellathwaite.

"He used to go to a certain stock and share broker," continued the superintendent. "Mr. Wallaford, Bowlalley Lane. He once told me of it. Did that for years— three or four times a year. So—"

"You think Mr. Wallaford could tell something," suggested Sellathwaite.

"I think he'd know what nobody else does," answered the superintendent with a meaning smile. "Men don't go for nothing to stockbrokers' offices."

"Good notion!" said Sellathwaite.

He went into Hull next morning, and soon after 11 o'clock found himself in Mr. Wallaford's presence. The stock-broker was an elderly man; the sort of man, Sellathwaite felt, in whom you could repose confidence. And pledging him to secrecy, Sellathwaite told him why he was there. Wallaford showed no great surprise; the smile with which he received the ex-detective's revelations was more cynical than astonished.

"Um!" he said. "Well, the man had a rare instinct for financial matters."

"You had many dealings with him?" inquired Sellathwaite.

"A long series of them, extending over many years," replied Wallaford. "He first came to me about— let's see— yes, eighteen years ago. He used to come, say, every quarter."

"Let me ask you a straight question," said Sellathwaite. "Was he a gambler? For I believe— I'm given to understand, anyway— that you can gamble in stocks and shares as you can at cards and in horse racing. Was that his game?"

"No!" answered the stockbroker with decision. "Not a bit of it! Anything but. He was too keen a moneymaker for that. He was not a gambler— if we call him a speculator, we should in a way be wrong. He'd a positive intuition, an instinct, sure and keen, for buying up shares which, dead certain, became of extraordinary value. It's a positive fact that in all my dealings with him I never once knew him to go wrong— never! Whatever he touched seemed to turn out just as he said it would. In fact, between ourselves, I came to have such a belief in his judgment that I followed it myself, and of course, profited. The man was a wonder! If he'd liked, and had gone in for things in a very big way, he'd have been a millionaire."

"And as it is?" suggested Sellathwaite. "From your knowledge—"

"I should say he's left a lot of money behind him," said Wallaford. "I shall be curious to know. But I guess nobody knew how much he'd got— except himself."

Sellathwaite went away then and back to Hathersea to wait. There was nothing else to do. Often, in the course of his professional experience, Sellathwaite had found himself compelled to wait while some new move developed in the particular game he was playing, but he had never waited with so much impatience and restlessness as on this occasion. For an extraordinary curiosity had seized upon and obsessed him— he wanted to know what it all meant.

But he had to wait until the middle of the next afternoon; wait until the man about whom he was so inquisitive was laid to rest in the little churchyard. He watched the funeral proceedings from behind an ancient yew-tree; it was as the superintendent had prophesied— the man who was regarded as a monument of integrity and high respectability was followed to his grave by half the town. Sellathwaite, who, in spite of his keenness as a criminology expert, had a decided vein of sentiment in him and loved to read poetry in his spare moments, found himself repeating two lines from "Enoch Arden:"

It was over at last, and the ex-detective walked from the churchyard and around to the solicitor's office. Mackereth was pulling off his black gloves. The three men looked at each other.

"Now," observed the solicitor quietly, after he had closed the door of his private office— "now I can open this will."

He went over to a safe, unlocked it, rummaged amongst some papers, and brought out a stout envelope, which he carried to his desk.

"This," he said, exhibiting the envelope to his two companions, "is precisely as he gave it to me— sealed, you see. Now—"

Cutting the envelope open, Mackereth drew out two smaller ones, the flaps of which were left unfastened. One was inscribed "Schedule of my Property;" the other, "My Will." And neither seemed to comprise more than a thin sheet of paper.

"The schedule first," said Mackereth. He pulled out a page of ruled foolscap, ran his eye over it, and glanced at some figures written in red ink at the foot. Then he looked at the two men, who were anxiously watching him.

"The sum total is sixty-five thousand pounds," he observed quietly. "There you are— look for yourselves."

But Sellathwaite only glanced at the entries and figures— his eyes fixed themselves on the other single sheet of paper which Mackereth was unfolding.

"Yes, yes!" he said impatiently. "Sixty-five thousand. But who gets it?"

Mackereth's professional eye ran over the paper he was holding— a sharp glance at the top, another at the foot, and he looked up.

"It's all in strict order, properly made, duly witnessed, perfectly sound. And the real pith of it is set forth in one sentence:

" 'I devise and bequeath all my estate and effects, real and personal, which I may die possessed of, or entitled to, unto the Hope and Anchor Mutual Benefit Association of London. I appoint William Mackereth, of number twenty-four Quay Street, Hathersea, and Charles Wallaford, of number one hundred and seventeen Bowlalley Lane, Kingston-upon-Hull, executors of this my will!' "

Mackereth dropped the paper on his desk and twisted it around so that his two companions could see it.

"That's all," he remarked. And as the two men bent over the dead man's writing he pulled an old-fashioned silver snuff box from his pocket and helped himself to a generous pinch. "Extraordinary!" he muttered. "Extraordinary!" He glanced at Sellathwaite, who just then looked up from the will. "You have seen some strange things in your time?" he said "Can you account for this?"

But Sellathwaite shook his head and picked up his hat.

"No need!" he answered curtly. "Whatever it was that made him do what he did, and live as he did, and— and all the rest of it, he's made restitution. And I'm not going to puzzle my brains any more about it. The next move's yours."

———————

12: The Yorkshire Way

LIKE A GREAT MANY of my fellow Southerners, I have a very little knowledge of the northern counties, and not much more acquaintance with their people— all the same, I had no doubt whatever that the man whom I found awaiting me in my office one morning was a Yorkshire man. There was a certain independence, a positive directness of vision, an atmosphere of something very like aggressive self-reliance about him that assured me he hailed from the broad-acred shire. He was the sort of man who looks you through and through and sizes you up in his own fashion; he had keen blue eyes, a square jaw, homely features and sandy hair. He was obviously wearing his Sunday rig of black coat and lavender-hued trousers, and because he was in London, he sported a silk hat. It was of the fashion of some six or eight years ago, and it was quite a size too small for him; but it was the true hall-mark of respectability, and he wore it with an air. As for the rest of him, he seemed to be about thirty years of age, and he gave me the impression of being the sort of person who would thoroughly do whatever he took in hand.

"How do?" he said, with an off-hand nod, and in an accent of exceeding breadth. "You'll be Mr. Campenhaye, I suppose?"

"At your service, sir," I responded, motioning him to a seat.

"I've heard a deal of you one time and another," he said, leisurely seating himself. "You're the chap that ferrets things out like— mysteries and so on? Now, how much brass might you charge for a job of that sort?"

This, indeed, was the true Yorkshire touch, and it raised a smile on my face. My visitor, however, preserved a proper gravity. He pulled out a little linen or canvas bag from his trousers pocket, and chinked its contents— gold, and plenty of it, too.

"I'm none without brass," he said pointedly. "I'm holidaying here in London, and I always carry plenty with me on them occasions. And there's more where it came from, an' all. But I always like to know what I've got to pay, then there's no misunderstanding, d'ye see? So— how much?"

"That depends on the nature of the services rendered, Mr. — — ," I said. "I— you didn't send in a card, I think?"

"I haven't started on that game yet," he replied. "I shall have cards printed when I get into more fashionable walks of life. My name's Thomas William Crabtree. I'm an under-manager at Hollinsdale's Mill, away at Atherford yonder."

"Yorkshire, of course?" I remarked.

"Ay, it's in Yorkshire," he assented. "You've never been i' Atherford then?"

"I haven't, but I know it well enough by repute," I answered. "Great place for mills, factories, workshops, eh?"

"Biggest in all England," he said with certainty. "And Hollinsdale's is the biggest i' Atherford. I began work at Hollinsdale's when I was thirteen years of age. I have been there twenty years."

"Dear me!" I said. "And— you have something you want to draw my attention to, Mr. Crabtree?"

"How much d'ye charge?" he asked cautiously.

"Leave that," said I. "I couldn't tell you. Don't be afraid. I suppose there is money in question?"

"Oh, ay!" he responded with great and solemn seriousness. "There is money i' question— a deal o' money. It's— it's about a will."

"Ah, a will," I said. "Whose will?"

He had kept his hat on his head up to this point, but he now took it off and laid it carefully on a vacant space on my desk. That done, he ran his fingers through his sandy hair, put his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, tilted his chair back and gave signs of eloquence.

"I'll tell you all about it," he said. "It's a rum 'un— it fair caps me! Ye see, it's about old Mr. Hollinsdale. Everybody i' Yorkshire— ay, and in Lancashire, too— knew Matthew Hollinsdale. He was sole proprietor of Hollinsdale's Mill— there's nigh on two thousand hands as works there— and a very rich man he was an' all— one o' the richest in them parts. He's been Mayor of Atherford at one time, and he were a member of Parliament, too, for a few years; but he got tired o' that job, and he wouldn't stand no more. You understand what sort he was like?"

"Quite so," I answered. "I apprehend Mr. Hollinsdale exactly."

"Ay, but I must tell you a bit 'at 'll make you understand t' old chap still better," he continued. "You see, he never married— lived and died an old bachelor, did Matthew. Now all the close relations 'at he had were a brother James and a sister Hannah. James died comparatively young, as you might say, and his wife died soon after; and they left one bairn, a lad named Edgar. And Matthew took him, and gave him his education, and sent him to one o' these here colleges— Oxford, or Cambridge, or somewhere— and treated him as if he were his own. Ye understand that?

"All right. Now we come to t'other branch— Hannah," he went on calmly. "Now, Hannah, she made what Matthew considered a low match. She would, and did, wed wi' a working man— Simpson Barker, a chap as worked i' her brother's mill. Matthew did all he could to persuade her not, but it were no good. So Matthew, he'd no more to do wi' her— never spoke to her again. However, she's dead and gone, and so is Simpson. And at this time last year, when Matthew were still alive, Hannah's only daughter— Grace Ellen— were earning her own living at another mill in t' town, while her cousin, Edgar, were living in luxury. You ought to make a special note o' that, mister."

"I understand matters perfectly, Mr. Crabtree," I answered. "Mr. Hollinsdale adopted his nephew, Edgar Hollinsdale, and brought him up as a rich man's son and heir; he neglected his niece, Grace Ellen Barker, and left her to earn her own living, eh?"

"That's right; you have it," he said admiringly. "I like talking to a man 'at's quick of understanding. Now, about thirteen months since, it came to old Matthew's ears 'at young Edgar was beginning to grow a bit wild. There were some queer tales got about— he were seen i' London with what they call 'questionable company,' and it was said that him and two or three other rich young fellows i' Atherford were going it pretty hot and strong i' the gambling way, and so on and so on— and, of course, it got to t' old chap's ears. They did say 'at he insisted on paying the young feller's debts then, and that they came to a good deal. However, that were no good, for there were soon some terrible to-do about Edgar and some actress body here i' London, and they said that cost a vast o' money to clear up. And it were just after that 'at old Matthew did what I've come here to tell you about and take your advice on. This is where all t' mystery come in— what I've told you up to now is what you might call the preface."

"I'm all attention, Mr. Crabtree," I assured him. "Proceed."

"Well," he said, wagging his head gravely, "it's just about a year ago this very week, 'at old Matthew Hollinsdale came down to the mill a bit earlier one morning than usual, and called me and Mitchell Sharp, the manager, into his private room. He pulls out a big sheet of paper and lays it on his desk. 'Here, lads,' he says, 'I want you to witness my signature to this here,' he says. 'You must watch me sign it, and you must sign in each other's presence,' he says. However, Mitchell Sharp shook his head, 'I never put my fist to no papers, Mestur Hollinsdale,' he says, 'unless I know what I'm signing— never did i' my life, and never will,' he says. 'Same here,' says I; 'I wouldn't sign naught unless I knew what it were.' 'Oh, well,' says old Matthew, 'it's a new will 'at I've made— but you can keep that to yourselves. I don't want nobody to know aught about it.' Well, of course, we'd no objection after that, and he signed in his place, and we signed in ours. Now, I've pretty sharp eyes, and I took my time i' writing my name, and I managed to see a word or two. And I saw one name in what the old man had written, 'cause he'd written it all out himself. And that name was 'my niece, Grace Ellen Barker.' See?"

"I see," said I. "You saw no more?"

"I saw no more, mister," he answered. "Leastways, naught that I could remember. But, of course, I reckoned things up. And I came to the conclusion that the old chap had got about tired o' young Edgar and his goings-on, and he'd made a will leaving Grace Ellen some of his brass— happen a good deal of it. However, that's neither here nor there just now— I'll go on with t' story. Matthew Hollinsdale put that paper in his inside coat pocket when we'd all signed, and he went out with Mitchell Sharp, and a bit later I saw him leave the mill yard and go

up town. And I didn't see him again until happen two hours later, when I saw him and Sharp talking in the yard. And it was about ten minutes after when the accident happened."

"Accident?" I said. "Serious accident?"

He looked at me silently for a second or two; then he smiled grimly.

"Ay, of course!" he said. "I'd forgotten 'at you most like never heard on 't. They were both killed on t' spot, both Hollinsdale and Sharp— killed as dead as doornails!"

"Dear me!" I exclaimed. "What happened?"

"T' big driving-wheel burst," he answered phlegmatically. "Happen you don't understand what a serious thing that there is— a driving-wheel bursting? Ye see, in a vast concern like ours there's a great wheel as drives all t' rest o' t' machinery— that wheel were a good fifty feet in diameter, so you can reckon what size it was. Well, Hollinsdale and Mitchell Sharp, they'd just gone into t' wheel-shed when t' wheel burst. They were both killed on t' spot— the old man was struck on t' head by a flying piece o' t' wheel, and Sharp— well, Sharp were just all smashed to pieces. Another man was killed, too, and t' wheel-house were same as if it had been bombarded by cannon— ye never saw such a break-up. But we'll pass on to what's more important. They carried Mr. Hollinsdale's corpse into his office, and it so happened that I was left alone with it for a few minutes. So, thinks I to myself, 'Hollinsdale's dead,' I thinks, 'and Sharp's dead, and there's nobody knows aught about that will but me, so I'll take a look at it, and know what it's all about.' And so I pulled some papers out of the pocket I'd seen the old man put it in, and— it wasn't there!"

"Not there?" I said. "Ah!"

"Nor nowhere on him," he continued quietly. "I went through all his pockets— there was naught of that sort. So I thinks to myself: 'He's taken it to his lawyers, or his bankers, or somebody,' and I bothered myself no more. However, when things come to be straightened up, after the funeral, it turned out that the lawyers had a will, but it were not that one 'at Sharp and me had witnessed. It left all to young Edgar, 'cepting a pound a week for life to Grace Ellen. And it had been made many a year previous— long before Edgar started on his games wi' t' cards and t' women and t' drink— d'ye see?"

"I see," I answered. "Well, what happened? Did you tell about the new will?"

He shook his head with a sly look.

"Nay!" he said. "I didn't— not then. I thought I'd let things be as they were a bit. I'm not one for being in a hurry. I thought that missing will 'ud turn up; I felt sure t' old chap had put it somewhere. I waited, d'ye see. I didn't want to shove myself forward. However, it never has turned up."

"Never turned up?" I said. "Then— Mr. Edgar Hollinsdale has come into everything?"

"Ay!" he replied dryly. "An' he's making ducks and drakes of it as fast as he can, an' all. He's done it since t' old man died. And that's why I want to find that will."

He stopped short at that, closed his lips with a sort of grim determination and looked at me. And I looked at him.

"Well," I said. "What now?"

"I've heard about your powers," he observed. "I'll employ 'em. Find that will and make your own price for t' job. I'll pay it."

I laughed outright.

"My dear sir," I exclaimed, "you have heard of looking for a needle in a bottle of hay? Where am I to find Mr. Hollinsdale's will? I've nothing to go on."

"Take your time, mister," he retorted coolly. "Happen I can give you a bit to go on. You see, when no news of that second will came to hand, I began to reckon things up. I knew old Matthew had it in his pocket when he left the millyard, 'cause I never lost sight of him from the time he put it there to the time he walked out o' the gates. So the question is, where did he go while he was away from t' mill? He was away just about two hours— in the town. Now, I set to work— on the quiet— to find out where he'd been seen while he was in the town that morning. See?"

"Well?" I said.

"I had to do it bit by bit," he went on, giving me a wink. "It wouldn't ha' done to attract attention. Well, he was most of that time on 'Change— at the exchange, you understand. Now, he wouldn't put that will away there! He did call at his bank, but I'm sure he didn't leave it with his bankers, or it would ha' been produced. He never went near his lawyers— I do know that, 'cause I've a relation that's a clerk there and I took good care to pump him, and he'd ha' known. So, where did he go?"

"You're arguing that he went somewhere and deposited the will?" I said.

"Why, he must ha' done summat wi' it!" he exclaimed, dropping into the broad vernacular. "Hang it all, he had it on him when he walked out o' t' mill-yard! What did he do wi' it?"

"Well," said I, "he may have changed his mind and torn it up."

My visitor gave me a searching smile and then shook his head.

"No!" he said. "No, that'll not do, mister! He was too much in earnest to do that, were Matthew Hollinsdale. No! While he were out in the town in the morning he put that will somewhere— and I'll lay aught it's there now. Come you down to Atherford, mister, and find it."

I sat watching him in silence for a while. He stared back at me. He was the sort of man who seemed as if he could stare at one forever, and his eyes were as steady as rocks.

"What makes you so anxious to have that will found?" I asked at last. "You don't know that you're affected by it, eh?"

He laughed a little awkwardly, and for the first time his eyes began to search other things than my face; in fact, he looked embarrassed.

"Why, you see, I might be," he said. "I might be, you understand, indirectly. I' fact, mister, I been making up to Grace Ellen for t' past year, and I'm in hopes 'at she'll take me, d'ye see?"

"Ah!" said I. "And, of course, if she considerably benefits—"

"Why," he broke in, "we're old-fashioned folk i' our corner o' t' world. We reckon 'at what belongs to a wife belongs to her husband an' all— see? And, of course, I should like to make certain— what?"

"Are you engaged to Grace Ellen, then?" I asked.

"Nay, I'm not," he answered. "Not yet— no. Ye see, there's another chap been after her this last twelve month. He's a bit above me in what they call t' social scale— he's t' assistant librarian at t' Technical Institute— Sam Parker by name— and he's better educated and that there nor what I am. All t' same I wouldn't trust him— he's a shifty look about his eyes, has t' feller. It's queer how women doesn't see through them chaps! I'm worth ten o' him."

"But you're thinking about Grace Ellen's possible benefit under this missing will?" I said pointedly.

"You're wrong, mister!" he replied with a resolute setting of his jaw. "I'd wed t' lass if she'd nowt but what she stood up in. I'm not the sort 'at 'ud ever wed a woman for brass. All t' same, you know," he added with caution, "if there is brass to come to her I would like to be certain about it."

"You've said nothing to her about this missing will?" I asked.

"I've said naught to nobody," he answered. "Not me! I've done what bit I could to trace it, and as I've failed I come to see if you would do aught. What do you say now?"

I considered matters. Just at that time I had no particular task on hand, and I had been thinking of taking a brief holiday. I had often thought of visiting one of our big industrial North Country towns to get some idea of the life there. Here was a chance.

"Very well," I said. "I'll go down to Atherford in a few days. I shall adopt my own methods of finding out what I can, and if I want you I'll communicate with you. Give me your address."

"Thomas William Crabtree, number three, Cow Fold, Bowler's Green, Atherford," he replied promptly. "Them's my directions. And the brass, mister?"

"Never mind the brass just now," I answered. "We'll see about that later on."

He nodded in a satisfied fashion, shook hands stiffly and solemnly, and, crowning himself with the silk hat, stalked out. But in the doorway he turned, smiling shyly.

"I'd ha' asked you to come out and take a glass," he remarked, "but I'm a t.t.— on principle, you understand— and we're pledged again that sort o' thing. So you must take t' will for t' deed."

"All right, Mr. Crabtree," said I. "I'll drink your health myself when I've done your business."

"Well, ye'll do your best, no doubt," he said gravely. "Ye can't do more."

Then he nodded again and went away.

ii

I WENT DOWN to Atherford a week later, carrying with me two or three letters of introduction given to me by a friend, a member of Parliament for a Yorkshire constituency, who knew several of the leading Atherford magnates. I said nothing to him of my real mission— I gave as reason for visiting this town of factories and workshops a desire to study its industrial conditions at first hand.

The place itself I found to be pretty much what I had expected— a big, modern town, the mills and warehouses of which were palatial, wherein the commercial lords lived in fine houses, the work people in comfortable cottages, where there was every evidence of plenitude of "brass" and where all the folk I encountered seemed singularly self-reliant and independent. I put up at a magnificent hotel, equal to anything in London or Paris, and for a day or two looked around, keeping eyes and ears open. I soon discovered Hollinsdale's Mills— the biggest in the place. I also saw the fine house and park in which the new proprietor, Mr. Edgar Hollinsdale, was now installed. And I soon saw him, a young man in whom the traces of constant dissipation were only too evident. Once or twice in the smoking-room of the hotel I heard chance references to him. Those who dropped them shook their heads and said that he was fast making ducks and drakes of the money his uncle had gathered together.

The men to whom I presently handed my letters of introduction proved to be the very incarnations of hospitality. They made me free of a fine club, exclusive to the richer merchants and manufacturers of the town; they showed me every attention; they vied with each other in exhibiting the sights. For some days I was taken around the place in such a thorough fashion that I began to consider myself an expert in spinning, wool combing, dyeing and in the manufacture of machinery necessary for these various trades. One man in particular, a Mr. Chillingworth, seemed determined that I should know and see every nook and corner of this place, and gave up several hours every day to my service. And it was through a chance remark of his that I got on the track of the real business that had brought me to Atherford.

The good folk of this enterprising town are great believers in education— education of not merely a bookish and scholastic kind, but of that eminently

practical sort which enables youths who are qualifying for the staple industries of the place to learn a good deal of their trades before they actually begin to practise them. Accordingly, they possess a magnificent technical institute, where classes are held and instruction given in these industries by duly qualified persons. To this Mr. Chillingworth took particular pleasure in conducting me. We spent a whole morning in looking around its various departments. And in the palatial chamber, the council-room, he showed me a series of portraits in oil of the chief magnates of the town who had taken a leading part in the foundation of the institute. Amongst these was one which, from its appearance, I took to have been recently hung.

"The late Matthew Hollinsdale," answered my guide. "A prominent townsman in his time. He was one of our members of Parliament from '92 to '95, when he retired— the atmosphere of the House of Commons didn't suit him. He was twice Mayor of Atherford. He was a life governor of this Institute, one of its original founders and a generous contributor to its funds. A very worthy, good man, with a few faults, Mr. Campenhaye. Left a vast fortune to a young fellow, who, I'm sorry to say, is as like to lose it as he's unlikely to add to it. Sad pity!"

"I've heard something of that," I replied. "Didn't Mr. Matthew Hollinsdale meet his death in a rather tragic fashion?"

"He did, sir," answered Mr. Chillingworth. "He did so— very tragic! Bursting of a millwheel— great driving-wheel, you know. He was killed on the spot. Odd thing, too, for if there was a man in all Atherford who was thoroughly and practically acquainted with the machinery which he used in his own trade it was old Matt. He was an expert in machinery. Why, it was only maybe three-quarters of an hour before it happened that I met him in the library of this very place, studying some diagram in some of our reference books! He evidently went straight from here to his enginehouse, and he'd no sooner entered it than he was killed!"

Here was news, but I took good care to show no more than a polite interest in it.

"Dear me!" I said. "Perhaps Mr. Hollinsdale had some fear about that wheel and had come to read up about it?"

"Maybe, sir, maybe," replied my guide. "But he was often in our reference library here. You must see that. We pride ourselves upon having one of the finest collections of technical books in the world."

He presently led me to the library— a fine, well-arranged room— and introduced me to the librarian, an elderly man named Elgood. While we talked to him I looked about me, wishing to see his staff. And I soon picked out the man whom Thomas Crabtree had told me of— a youngish, quiet-looking fellow, whose air and eyes were certainly furtive. He, I decided, must be the assistant librarian, Sam Parker, for, besides him and Mr. Elgood, the only visible staff consisted of two young lady assistants and a boy or two who carried books to callers.

I affected an air of polite interest while Mr. Chillingworth and the librarian were explaining the merits of the library to me, but in reality I was not paying any particular attention to them. I was thinking deeply about the fact which Mr. Chillingworth's chance remark had revealed— namely, that Matthew Hollinsdale had visited the library only a short time before his sudden death. I continued to think a good deal over that fact during the rest of the day, and towards evening I sent a telegram to Thomas William Crabtree, asking him to meet me late that night at a certain rendezvous in the centre of the town. I had not seen him since my arrival in Atherford and I had a special desire to have any meeting with him under quiet circumstances. I had not even let him know that I was in the town, but it quickly appeared that Thomas William possessed eyes as sharp as they were steady.

"Oh, I knew you were on t' job!" he remarked, as we walked up a quiet side street. "I've seen you a time or two going wi' some o' t' swells. Found aught out yet?"

"You mustn't ask me for a report till I'm ready to give it, my friend," I answered. "I sent for you to-night to ask you a few questions. Now, how are things going with Miss Grace Ellen and you and Mr. Sam Parker?"

"Nay," he said, with a shake of the head; "they seem to be about t' same. I couldn't say which on us she fancies. You see, she walks out wi' me sometimes an' wi' him other times."

"Pull your memory together," said I. "When did this Sam Parker begin to show her attentions?"

"Oh, I can tell you that," he replied readily. "It'd be just about a year since— soon after Matthew Hollinsdale's death. I know how it came about, too. Ye see, Grace Ellen she's a very fine soprano voice and she sings in t' choir at Mount Zebulon Chapel. Now this here Sam Parker, he's a bit of a singer an' all, and about that time I'm talking on he joined that choir, too. That's how it came about wi' him and Grace Ellen. He walks her home from t' chapel o' Sunday nights and after t' choir practice on week nights, d'ye see?"

"Did he know her before that time?" I asked.

"No, I'm very sure he didn't," answered Thomas William. "It wasn't choir business 'at brought 'em together."

"And when do you walk her out?" I inquired.

"Oh, why," he said, "ye see I've known her for two or three year— she lives wi' some folks in our fold. Yes, I've walked her out a couple of year— friendly like. But we've never said owt definite, ye know."

"About marriage, you mean?" I remarked.

"Ay!" he answered. "Ye see, I never been one for being in a hurry. I've waited. I been saving up my brass. I don't believe in getting wed till you've plenty of brass put by. So I've said nowt— as yet."

I thought matters over for a few minutes.

"Will you take my advice, Mr. Crabtree?" I asked presently.

"I'll take it if I consider it's good advice, but I willn't if it isn't," he answered. "Let's hear t' sound on it."

"Very good," I said. "Can you see Grace Ellen to-morrow?"

"I can see her any time when we've both done our work for the day," he answered.

"She still works, then?" I asked.

"Oh, ay, she still works," he answered. "T' owd uncle left her a pound a week, as I telled you, but I reckon she puts that i' t' savings bank. She's a hard working lass— no waster!"

"Go and see Grace Ellen to-morrow night and ask her to marry you," I said. "You'd much better get that settled before I find anything out."

He paused in his leisurely walk and looked hard at me in the light of a gas lamp.

"Aw!" he said. "Ay! D'ye think ye're on t' way to finding something out, then?"

"Never mind," said I. "Will you take my advice?"

He seemed to think hard for a minute or two, and at last he nodded his head.

"All right," he answered, "it's about time 'at I did mention t' matter to her, I think. Ye can't let them things hang on for ever. Yes, I'll speak to her on t' subject to-morrow night, then."

"After which," I said, "you'll please stop at your lodgings and wait for me. I shall be sure to come— sooner or later."

"Ah," he said. "I see you've found something out! All right, mister, you'll find me at home."

He went off in evident high spirits, and I strolled back to my hotel, thinking. I had not found out anything, but I thought I might make a discovery next day.

Next day found me, just about noon, in the vicinity of the Technical Institute. I wanted to see Mr. Sam Parker clear of the premises, and I had an idea that he would go to his dinner at 12 o'clock. And I was right. At five minutes past twelve he emerged and hurried off, and I immediately hurried in, and going to the library, asked to see Mr. Elgood. That gentleman received me with polite cordiality, thinking, no doubt, that I wished to resume our conversation of the previous day. But he experienced a considerable shock of surprise when, having first asked him to respect my confidence, I handed him one of my professional cards and told him that I wanted to see him on a professional matter.

"Which I shall more fully explain to you later on, my dear sir," I added. "At present I merely want a little information. Now, will you kindly tell me what system you go on here when anyone wants to consult your reference books?"

"Certainly," said he. "A very simple one. The person desiring a particular work fills in a slip, giving the number and the title of the book, and hands it to one of

the attendants. Then the book is brought to him. That is our ordinary procedure— for ordinary reference books. But for very special works we have another. The reader who wishes to consult such a work writes his application for it in a book. It is then handed to him over the counter. When he has finished with it, he hands it back in person, and the librarian, or attendant, who received it, initials the book as a receipt."

"Very good," said I. "Now will you oblige me with a sight of that book— that is, of the entry book for last year?"

Mr. Elgood at once went over to a shelf, and produced a ledger-like volume, which he threw open before me.

"A book like this lasts several years," he said. "Our very special works are not often consulted. Do you wish for a particular date?"

"Yes," I answered; "I want to see if there is any entry under the date of April 27 of last year."

He rapidly turned over the pages, found one, and ran his finger down a column.

"Yes," he said. "There was only one book consulted on that date— taken out, you see, by the late Mr. Matthew Hollinsdale, one of our council. There's the entry."

I looked eagerly at the line he pointed out. It was simple enough.

"April 27. Marshall's 'Ratio of Weight to Power,' Mr. Hollinsdale. S.P."

"Thank you," I said. "That means that Mr. Hollinsdale took this book out and returned it to—"

"Mr. Parker, my assistant," he answered. "Sam Parker— those are his initials."

"Just so," said I. "Now, can you let me see this book?"

He went to fetch the book himself, and presently brought it back— a quarto volume dealing, as far as I could gather, with the scientific principles of wheels. It contained a large number of diagrams, and in a linen pocket at the end were a quantity of loose drawings, sheets and cards of statistics and tracings.

"That's a very technical book," observed Mr. Elgood, at my elbow, as I turned it over. "A lot of algebraic reckonings in it, you see. I don't believe it's ever been asked for since poor Mr. Hollinsdale had it out. I suppose he was getting anxious about that big wheel of his— he'd been in to consult that book two or three times."

I saw a very broad patch of daylight by then; a mere notion that I had indulged in had become something very like a certainty. I closed the book and handed it back.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, Mr. Elgood," I said. "And now— strict silence! Not a word to a soul, if you please, until I see you to-morrow. Then, perhaps, I shall be able to tell you something that you'll be astonished to hear."

I left him evidently much puzzled by this mystery, and following out a plan which I had already formed, I repaired to a leading solicitor of the town, a man whom I knew would know me by reputation, and with him I was closeted for some time. The result of our discussion was a joint visit to the police authorities; and the result of that was that when Mr. Sam Parker walked into his lodgings late that afternoon he found the solicitor, a detective officer and myself awaiting him.

I knew at a glance that the man was guilty. He knew what we were after. He merely glanced at the solicitor and the detective; them he knew well enough. But his eye fastened on me as the stranger whom Mr. Chillingworth had brought into the library the previous day, and if ever eyes expressed hatred and anger his did. It died out, that sudden glare, in a minute, and he affected surprise.

"What's all this?" he demanded. "What's up? Why—"

"We have just called to ask you a few questions, Mr. Parker," said the solicitor quietly. "You'd better answer them— for your own sake. I think you'll remember that on April 27 of last year the late Mr. Matthew Hollinsdale called at the Technical Institute library and borrowed a book on the mechanism of wheels? You issued it to him. Eh?"

Parker was already fidgeting. He looked as if he would have liked to get out of the room. But the detective had quietly obtruded himself between him and the door. He began to growl and mutter.

"Well, what if I did?" he answered surlily.

"Mr. Hollinsdale, as was his wont when he consulted that book, took the diagram and papers out of the linen pocket; he also drew some papers from his own pocket and made notes on them," said the solicitor. "And when he had finished what he was doing he handed the work back to you, and you initialled the withdrawal book for its receipt."

"And I say again— what if I did?" asked Parker defiantly.

"Merely that in restoring the papers to the linen pocket Mr. Hollinsdale absent-mindedly placed some of his own papers with them," answered the solicitor. "And you found them there. You examined what you found, and you found a will made by Mr. Hollinsdale that very morning. Now, Mr. Parker, we have come for that will. Hand it over."

For a full minute Parker hesitated, pulling at his moustache.

"I've only just found it," he said, suddenly making up his mind to lie bravely. "Only the other day. I'm going to give it to Hollinsdale's solicitors."

"Not at all," said the torturer. "You'll give it to us— now!"

"You'll have to wait till to-morrow," said Parker. "It's locked up."

"Locked up in your box or your desk, no doubt," answered the solicitor mercilessly. "Come now— no nonsense. Out with it!"

Parker moved towards the door.

"Then I shall have to go upstairs," he growled. "Wait there."

"Not a bit of it!" said our leader. "We'll go with you. And when we come down you'll sign a full confession of how you came to handle the will. Otherwise—"

Then Parker caved in and led us upstairs.

Ten minutes later the three of us took a glance at the restored document. Old Hollinsdale had left an annuity of five hundred a year, strictly tied up, to young Edgar the rake; all the rest of his vast fortune was devised absolutely to his niece, Grace Ellen Barker.

I left my companions and went round to Cow Fold. There I found Thomas William Crabtree placidly smoking a pipe in his shirt sleeves. He grinned sheepishly when he saw me.

"It's all right," he said. "Grace Ellen said 'at she never did mean to wed no other than me— she meant to have me all along. And so I told her about this will affair. Any news, mister?"

For answer I forced him into his jacket, took him by the arm, and led him away to introduce me to Grace Ellen.

13: The Cabinet Secret

WHEN MISS MATILDA GRINDLE and Mr. George Pegge had reached the top of the hill and arrived at the seat on which its donor had insisted on painting the legend "Rest and Be Thankful," in large white letters, they sat down without any particular thoughts of either gratitude or recuperation, and Mr. Pegge began to make holes in the turf with the ferrule of his eighteenpenny walking stick, while Miss Grindle contemplated the glories of Slominster, lying in the valley beneath. There was silence between them for a full minute, and then Miss Grindle coughed in a fashion peculiar to people who are about to air their sentiments.

"You forget, George," she said: "you forget that every knight must win his spurs. If you'd read as much history as I did at the high school you'd remember that they all did that. Some fought lions. Some went in search of the—the paynim. Some went to vanquish the Turks. Some— but the principle is there, George. And so I don't think I'm exacting when I tell you that before I can finally and definitely name the day for our— our espousals, George, I must ask you to render some really signal service to the cause which I have so much at heart, and to which I have for one year and three months rendered secretarial duties— honorary, of course."

Mr. Pegge heaved a deep sigh and looked thoughtfully at the deep bands of red and yellow which the departed sun had left behind him over Slominster. He punched more holes in the turf.

"It's all very well, is that, Matilda," said Mr. Pegge. "All very well— especially that part about the chaps of the olden times. But I can't go about in a suit of armour, sticking a lance into all and sundry. Ain't I done a good deal for the cause, as it is? You've never found me behindhand when it came to being steward at meetings and distributing handbills at the doors. And I twice walked in the male supporters' section in big processions. Didn't I—?"

"I know you've been very tractable indeed, George, and I've no fault to find with you," said Miss Grindle. "In time I believe you'll make a very valuable male supporter. But, before I bestow my hand on you— with, of course, my heart, George—I want you to achieve some great deed, some glorious deed, that will make me feel you are really worthy of me! You must remember, George, that I have achieved! There have been two occasions on which I should have repaired to a martyr's cell if some officious person had not paid the fine."

Mr. Pegge sniffed.

"What might you be wanting me to do, Matilda?" he asked anxiously. "You know how things are with me? As soon as ever you say the word, I'll take the house and order the furniture. It'll be the better for my business to be married. A married man—"

"I cannot discuss marriage from the common point of view, George," observed Miss Grindle. "My conception runs upon a higher plane. You must rise to them. And, as to what I want you to do—well, I want you to prove your nerve, your initiative, your resourcefulness, your bravery—"

"Biggish order," said Mr. Pegge doubtfully. "However, I dare say I've as good a stock of those as most chaps. You've got some notion in your head, Matilda?"

Miss Grindle trifled with the enamel badge which hung round her throat. She smiled graciously, after the fashion of old-time ladies who dispatched knights to the arena.

"Well, George, I have a notion," she confessed, "and it is one which, if carried out, will cover you with glory. Next week, George, you are going to Sandle Bay for a brief holiday—ten days, I think?"

"All I can spare just now," said Mr. Pegge. "Especially if we are to be married in the au—"

"We are not talking of marriage, George," said Miss Grindle. "Let us keep to the point. You are going to Sandle Bay next week. So is Mr. Trent-Palethorpe."

Mr. Pegge leaped in his seat.

"What, the Cabinet minister?" he exclaimed.

"The Cabinet minister, Secretary of State for the major colonies, member for the Slominster division— and our bitterest opponent," said Miss Grindle. "Yes."

Mr. Pegge smote his straw hat violently, flourished stick and groaned.

"Matilda!" he exclaimed. "Don't! I don't know what it is, but I daren't do it! I know what it would mean. Oh yes, don't I just? And, Matilda, just think of me, a young man, starting out in life, having my name in the papers! Of course, I should pay the fine, but, even the— oh, no, Matilda, I couldn't really, whatever it may be. I am willing to process again with the Male Supporters— I'll even promise to make a try at a speech, but don't ask me, Matilda; don't ask me!"

Miss Grindle rose and, shaking out her skirts, extended a cool hand.

"Then farewell, George," she said calmly. "Here, where first we plighted our troth—conditionally, George—we will release each other. There is no badge of servitude to return; no mark of bondage, even if it were splendid in rubies and diamonds. Good-bye, George Pegge."

Mr. Pegge looked at the extended hand as if he were doubtful what to do with it. He began to mouth the carved head of his walking stick.

"I expect I shall have to do it!" he said, not too graciously. "And, dash it, if I say I'll do it, I will do it! Now then, Matilda, what is it? Give it a name," continued Mr. Pegge, unconsciously dropping into familiar phraseology— "Give it a name and if I don't do it, I'll— I'll die in the attempt!"

Miss Grindle resumed her seat.

"I knew your soul would respond to the trumpet-call of duty and honour, when you had reflected, George," she said. "I don't respect you any the less for

your momentary faint-heartedness. The bravest of us— I myself— know what it is to quake when the breach lies wide before us! But when the bugle sounds, George—"

"So long as there's the option of a fine—" muttered Mr. Pegge. "Yes, Matilda, and what is it?"

"Merely this, George. There is a certain document which our branch is determined shall be served on Mr. Trent-Palethorpe personally. So far, every attempt to hand it to him has failed. George, that document I shall hand to you!" said Miss Grindle with stern resolution. "You will devise some means of handing it to him; you will give me your word that you have done so, and my hand— accompanied by my heart— is yours!"

Mr. Pegge rubbed the point of his chin.

"But Matilda, how on earth am I to get near a nob like Trent-Palethorpe?" he demanded. "You know what those chaps are! And I know for a fact that he's always accompanied by a couple of detectives. Of course, I know he's going to Sandle Bay to play golf; but the 'tec'll dog every yard he walks, and if I tried even to get a word in with him, they'd run me in. Ain't you got an idea to give away on the point, Matilda? Can't you suggest something?"

Miss Grindle rose, shaking her head.

"No, George. You must do the deed all out of your own initiative," she answered. "I want to prove you, George. The document shall be handed to you on the eve of your departure. Then you will gird on your sword and go forth to battle, to come home victorious or defeated. Let us go, George. I think the grass is getting damp."

It was characteristic of Miss Grindle that, when she had got through with business or conversation connected with the Cause, she was amenable, pleasant, and even sentimental in several other ways; and Mr. Pegge's homeward walk was accordingly made sweet by various little proofs on the part of his companion that she was, after all, a woman. He retired to bed in a state of profound reflection upon feminine complexity.

"But Matilda's all right," he said to himself. "We ain't none of us perfect— not even them as thinks they are. Matilda's got her fads, same as we all have. But she's flesh and blood, is Matilda, when all's said and done. Wish I could think of a way to plant the blooming paper on Trent-Palethorpe!"

But when Mr. Pegge arrived at Sandle Bay, and had taken time to look around him, he found that his anticipation as regards all approach to Mr. Trent-Palethorpe was only too likely to be realised. The secretary for the major colonies was there, it is true, and he was playing golf all day, and every day, and anybody who chose might see him on the links, and follow his round; but as to getting a word in private with him—

"Might as well try to send a love-letter to the Pope of Rome!" soliloquised Mr. Pegge, when several days had gone by, and he was no nearer the attainment of his wishes. "This is a nice way of spending a bit of a holiday!"

Various notions suggested themselves to Mr. Pegge's brain in the privacy of his lodgings. He would pay a day's or a week's subscription to the Golf Club, dress himself up, affect the heavy swell, and hang about the clubroom on the chance of being spoken to by the great man. But he admitted sorrowfully that he had not the manner, nor the appearance. Very well, supposing he shaved off his moustache, smudged his face, borrowed and donned some ancient garments, and went as a caddie! No, that wouldn't do. The regular caddies would find out. Besides, he didn't know a cleek from a cricket bat. But what was he to do? He was losing his sleep, his appetite, his bright eyes. And yet— he knew Matilda, and something had got to be done.

It was not until the evening of his very last day at Sandle Bay that Mr. Pegge got his inspiration. When it came it threw him into a violent perspiration, it was so daring— so— so brilliant. He was pale with emotion as he sat down, determined, resolute, to act upon it then and there. Either it would carry him to victory or he would sink to defeat.

Mr. Pegge wrote a letter to Mr. Trent-Palethorpe, in which he told that right honourable gentleman the plain truth!

It occupied Mr. Pegge one-half of the night to write that letter. He reminded Mr. Trent-Palethorpe that he, George Pegge, was one of his, Mr. Trent-Palethorpe's, constituents, and a young and hopeful tradesman of Slominster. He spoke of the associations of the Pegge family with Slominster for several generations. He assured the minister of his honesty of purpose. And he poured out his soul in ink, and wound up by throwing himself upon the great man's honour and mercy and charity.

Next morning Mr. Pegge carried his letter to the hotel which harboured Mr. Trent-Palethorpe and delivered it to one who promised to hand it to the addressee at once. Mr. Pegge went outside and sat down on a bench, trembling violently. He passed into a state of something very like coma, and he almost fell off the bench when, half an hour later, a waiter from the hotel tapped him on the shoulder.

"Name of Pegge?"

"My name," murmured Miss Grindle's emissary, feeling that the crucial moment had come.

"Mr. Trent-Palethorpe wants to see you. This way!"

Mr. Pegge presently found himself ushered into a private sitting-room, wherein the cabinet minister sat at breakfast. He bowed profoundly, and Mr. Trent-Palethorpe gave him a cheery nod, and then looked at him with critical and intense interest, as he pointed him to a chair.

"Oh," he said, "so you're Mr. George Pegge?"

"I am, sir," replied Mr. Pegge.

"And you think that Miss Grindle really will marry you if I consent to receive the precious document from you?" asked Mr. Trent-Palethorpe.

"Oh yes, indeed, sir!" said Mr. Pegge. "Miss Grindle is a man— I mean a woman of her word."

The Cabinet Minister gazed again at Mr. Pegge and then at Mr. Pegge's letter, which lay on the toast rack.

"By the by," he said, "what— er— what sort of lady is Miss Grindle?"

Mr. Pegge brightened up. Things were not half so formidable as he had feared. He smiled.

"Matilda, sir?" he said. "Well, of course, Matilda's on what you might call the small side."

"Dear me! Is she— er— agreeable, pretty?"

Mr. Pegge sniffed and looked at a corner of the ceiling.

"Matilda's held to be one of the prettiest girls in our town, sir," he said. "What you term a blonde, sir, with blue eyes. And as to what you call agreeableness, sir— well, when Matilda isn't on the ramp, nobody could be nicer."

"And how often is she not on the ramp?" inquired Mr. Trent-Palethorpe. "For, from my epistolary acquaintance with Miss Grindle I have come to regard her as a perfect Amazon, breathing forth fire and destruction, and—"

"Oh, don't you believe it, sir!" said Mr. Pegge. "Matilda's awful when she's on a platform, but that isn't what Matilda is when she ain't busy with the Cause. Now, if you'll permit me, sir, this is Matilda's photo."

And Mr. Pegge, from a brand new pocket-book drew forth a *carte-de-visite* and passed it over with a low bow. And Mr. Trent-Palethorpe took it and gazed at it with feelings of profound astonishment. Could it be possible that this was the Matilda who bombarded him with letters in which—

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed.

He handed the photo back, and again stared at Mr. Pegge with critical interest.

"I say, my friend," he said, "aren't you—aren't you a bit afraid of marrying this young lady?"

Mr. Pegge's light blue eyes became childlike in their roundness.

"What, me!" he said. "Oh no, sir! Me and Matilda understands each other. Of course, when Matilda's on the ramp— well, it is a leetle disconcerting, so to speak. But when she ain't— well, then, sir, Matilda's as reasonable as other young ladies, although she is a bit— well, high-flown in her emotions."

"I see, I see," said Mr. Trent-Palethorpe, rubbing his chin. "I quite see. And when Miss Grindle has become Mrs. Pegge, is she— er— is she going to continue her devotion to the cause?"

Mr. Pegge drew himself up, and the great man, watching him carefully, saw a certain something steal into his eyes.

"When Miss Grindle is Mrs. Pegge, sir," replied Mr. Pegge, "which is to say a wife— and if one may speak of such matters— a mother— she will have other things to think of than Causes. Yes, sir!"

Mr. Trent-Palethorpe held out his hand.

"Well, where's the precious document?" he said. "Oh, that's it! Very well, Mr. Pegge; it shall have consideration. Now you can truthfully tell Miss Grindle that you've won your spurs. And— er— Mr. Pegge, wait a moment."

Mr. Pegge, who was always of a nature obedient to forces which he recognised as being superior to his own, resumed the chair from which he had risen. Mr. Trent-Palethorpe left his breakfast and went over to a side table. He produced from his breast pocket a cheque book, and, tearing out a leaf of its contents, scribbled upon it. Then he folded the leaf in three, and, placing it in an envelope, handed the envelope to his visitor, who stared at him in surprise.

"I should like to offer you a little wedding present, Mr. Pegge," he said. "It may— er— come in handy when Mrs. Pegge has other cares than those of the— shall we say, Cause. And I wish you good luck."

Then Mr. Pegge went out, and elbowed in the doorway a gentleman who was lounging in, to whom, when he had entered, the Cabinet minister turned with a smile.

"See that little chap going out, Pembury?" he said.

"I did," answered Mr. Pembury. "What of him?"

"What of him?" exclaimed Mr. Trent-Palethorpe. "That's the bravest man alive."

_____

14: Ex-Officio

ON THIS, the third day of his retirement from the Force, Pellison, ex-Detective Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, was beginning to realise what it feels like to be a fish out of water. He had nothing to do. During the thirty years of his professional career he had been so strict in the discharge of his duty, so punctilious in doing his work, that he had never learnt to play; the importance of cultivating a hobby had never occurred to him. And now it seemed to him a dreadful thing to rise of a morning with the prospect of a workless day in front of him; two days of enforced idleness had made him fear a third.

"I'll have to find something to do!" he muttered, as he picked up his newspaper after breakfast. "Can't go on doing nothing! But— what?"

Then his eye suddenly lighted on a familiar name in the print before it— the name of the old town, far away in the North, from which, years ago, he had come to London. There it was, in a list of fashionable fixtures.

February 3rd— Hunt Ball at Ashminster, 8.30 p.m.

Pellison dropped the paper to his knee with a sudden feeling of inspiration. Ashminster?— Lord! he hadn't seen Ashminster for— yes, five-and-twenty years! He had gone down, then, to assist at his grandfather's funeral. Ashminster, eh?— well, why not go down now, to see if the old place was still what it had been, if there were any old friends left alive, if— —

Within ten minutes Pellison was packing a bag with necessaries; within twenty he was on his way to the station; within the hour he was in the dining-car of a big North-bound express. It was then ten o'clock; at four in the afternoon he was in Ashminster, treading the queer old streets that led from the railway to the centre of the town. And at the entrance to the Market Place he paused, to gaze wistfully at scenes and landmarks which in his youth had been as familiar as his own ten fingers.

There was very little change in the outward aspect of the place. Truth to tell, Pellison had not expected to see any. There was the old church, with its grey walls, battlemented tower, grotesque gargoyles; there the Market Cross, worn and weather beaten; there the quaint, gabled houses and their twisted chimneys. And there was the ancient Moot Hall, with its pillared front. There were signs of activity there; men were putting the finishing touches to a gaily-coloured canopy over the main entrance; others were laying down a carpet across the pavement; still more were arranging flowers and plants within the big doorway. All that, Pellison knew, referred to the Hunt Ball that night— a great social event in the life of Ashminster, to which all the élite of the neighbourhood flocked every year.

Presently he strolled, leisurely, across the cobbled pavement in the direction of a big, wide-fronted, bow-windowed old house, over the main door of which

swung a gilded crown. There was a sign over that door, too; Pellison's eyes sought for the wording of it.

"The Crown Hotel," he said, meaningly. "George Grandridge! So George is still alive, is he? Um!— he was middle-aged when I was last here. Well—"

With a sudden quickening of his pulses he walked into the hall of the hotel, looking about him. There was bustle and preparation going on there, too, and in the midst of it, directing matters, stood a tall, well-fed and well-preserved silver-haired man upon whom Pellison advanced with outstretched hand.

"Forgotten me!— or not, George?" he asked, laughingly. "Look hard, now?"

The landlord, grasping his proffered hand, stared questioningly at its owner. Suddenly a gleam of recognition came into his eyes.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "John Pellison! Well, well! But it's a good many years—"

"Five-and-twenty!" said Pellison. "Grandfather's funeral, that was. Never been in the old town since, George. And now I've come to have a look round and enjoy myself a bit. You can put me up?"

The landlord pointed a finger to the window of the hotel office, where a young woman presided over a big book. He wagged his head, chuckling.

"If you'd made that request to the young lady there, John," he answered, "she'd ha' said— Full up! And so we are!— it's the Hunt Ball to-night."

"Saw it announced in the Times this morning," murmured Pellison.

"To be sure! Well, every room in the place is taken," continued the landlord. "Always is, every year. Lord Belkington's got six rooms for his party; old Lady Delladale is coming— for about the fiftieth year in succession, I should think!— and she's booked four; Sir Thomas Tolkinson's got three."

"Then you'll have none for me!" said Pellison. "Still—"

"Wait a bit, my boy!" said the landlord, with a wink. "There's a room that I never let to anybody but a friend— private, d'ye see? You shall have that, John— and now come and try a glass of sherry and tell me what you've been doing with yourself all these years. Five-and-twenty, is it? Lord!— how time does fly!"

Over a glass or two of dry sherry in the landlord's sanctum Pellison narrated the story of his career and heard in return a chronicle of the doings of Ashminster since his last visit. He himself had passed through many lively adventures; Ashminster and its folk appeared to have stood still.

"Then there haven't been many changes?" he said, when his host had finished. "Everything much the same, eh? And you said old Lady Delladale was coming to the Hunt Ball?— of course, I remember her! But she wasn't old in my day, George!— I recollect her as a fine, dashing woman. And his Lordship was alive then."

"Dead some years now, his Lordship is," replied Grandridge. "As for the old girl, I daresay she considers herself a fine, dashing woman still, my lad! But she's

all of seventy, John— all of seventy! And yet goes about as gay and spry as ever they make 'em. London in the season— Monte Carlo in winter— she'll be off there as soon as this ball's over— next week she goes, I believe. And always has a smart lot about her! It's only a small party she's bringing over from Delladale Park this time— herself, a Mrs. Browne-Charrington, a Miss Fitzpatrick, and a Captain Lampard. They were all in here only yesterday— came in to lunch when the old lady brought them to look over the town. Raffish lot, I took 'em for! But she always had that sort about her, John!"

"I recollect her as a sporty woman," asserted Pellison. "Dear me! I should like to see her again!"

"You'll see her right enough, my boy!" said the landlord. "We dine here at seven-thirty— an hour before they go across to the ball. I'll tell my head-waiter to give you a nice little table to yourself close by Lady Delladale's, and then you'll not only see her but her pearls as well!"

"Pearls, eh?" said Pellison. "Something special?"

"The famous Delladale pearls," replied Grandridge. "Haven't you heard of 'em? Celebrated enough in London society and on the Continent, too, I reckon. Said to be worth fifty thousand pounds, my lad! Always wears 'em, does the old lady, when she comes to our Hunt Ball!"

"Then you've seen 'em many a time?" suggested Pellison. "Fine sight?"

"I believe you, my son!" said Grandridge, solemnly. "Make a Jew's mouth water, those pearls would! But come along, and I'll show you your room."

Outside in the hall again, Grandridge suddenly gripped his old friend's arm.

"Talk of the— eh," he whispered. "Here is the old lady and her party! Take a look at her!"

He pointed to the door, where a party of four was just entering. Pellison recognised Lady Delladale at once, and marvelled, knowing what he did, that she looked little more than a well-preserved sixty. He glanced from her to her companions— two smart, fashionably-dressed women of indefinite age, and a man, scrupulously attired, carefully groomed, tall, dark, hard-bitten, good-looking. And at him Pellison looked again— and again— and yet again. At the third inspection he turned away, certain that not so many years before he had seen that man at equally close quarters— in the dock of a criminal court.

ii

UPSTAIRS, in the privacy of his bedroom, Pellison, unpacking his bag, let his mind get to work on the man he had just seen. A good many queer characters had passed through his hands at one time or another— crooks, national and international; criminals, casual and habitual; fraudulent debtors; thieves; burglars; doubtful and shady men about town. To which category did this man belong? For

that he had had dealings with him, Pellison was as certain as he was that that was the old Moot Hall clock striking five. Who— which— what was he?

All of a sudden he got it. A mental vision of the dock at the Central Criminal Court came before him, and in it the man whom he had just seen downstairs. Lawson! Richard Lawson. Charged with obtaining jewellery from a Bond Street tradesman by a trick. Convicted. Three years' penal servitude. That was the man! And— that was seven years ago.

It was fortunate, mused Pellison, that he had not been greatly to the fore in that case— he had only been mixed up in it incidentally. It was long odds against this man recognising him— besides, during the last few years, Pellison had grown a beard— now, alas, rapidly turning grey. And there the situation was— the Captain Lampard, squiring it with old Lady Delladale, was Lawson, ex-convict, and there was he, Pellison, ex-detective, in full knowledge of the fact. What to do?— that was the question.

What Pellison did, presently, was to go downstairs, after a little tidying of himself, and get hold of Grandridge again.

"Look here!" he said, when he had got his host in a corner. "I want you to do something for me, and to ask no questions about it; at present, at any rate. I want to have a few words with Lady Delladale— in private! I'll explain why when I see her. Now, as you know her, can you manage it? Say that one who used to live hereabouts and had a great respect for her family would like to pay his respects to her— eh? Old time's sake, you know!"

"Hanged if I know what you're after, John!" said the landlord, highly mystified. "But I suppose you do. Let's see now? Wasn't your father in their employ?"

"He was!" assented Pellison. "My old dad was his Lordship's farm-bailiff for some years."

"That'll do!" said Grandridge. "Wait here a minute, John."

He disappeared up the old, quaintly-balustered staircase, and in a few minutes came to the head again, beckoning Pellison to join him.

"Delighted to see anybody of your name, she says!" he whispered. "There you are— that door, Number Seven."

Pellison tapped at the door indicated and, receiving a cordial invitation to enter, walked in, to find Lady Delladale sipping a cup of tea. She gave her visitor a keen inspection as she pointed him to a chair close by her own.

"So you're a Pellison, are you?" she said. "Dear me, now I come to look at you, of course you are. You must be John!"

"John— at your service, my lady," replied Pellison. "Born and bred on the Delladale estate!"

"To be sure! I remember all of you," asserted Lady Delladale. "And what have you done with yourself? You look well preserved and prosperous!"

Pellison gave his hostess a brief account of himself: her interest deepened.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed. "A famous detective, eh? That's intriguing! You'll have had a good many exciting episodes in your career, no doubt?"

"A great many," replied Pellison. He glanced at the door, making sure that it was securely closed. Then he bent nearer to Lady Delladale's table. "It's precisely because of my experience as a detective officer that I made bold to ask for an interview with your ladyship," he continued. "Although, as I said just now, I have retired, I can't forget that there's such a thing as duty. And— happening to be here— it's my duty to warn you, my lady."

"God bless me, Pellison!" exclaimed Lady Delladale. "To warn me? What about?"

"Your ladyship possesses some very valuable pearls," said Pellison. "I understand they are as valuable as remarkable."

Lady Delladale's glance turned swiftly to the dressing table close by. There, Pellison saw, lay a small oblong green morocco-covered case.

"Well," she said, a little harshly. "What about them?"

"I advise your ladyship to take the greatest care of them, to-night," said Pellison. "Better still, if I may suggest it, I wouldn't wear them to-night. I would hand them over to the landlord, George Grandridge, and see them duly locked up in his safe— I would, indeed, my lady."

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Lady Delladale. "Why! I've worn my pearls at the Ashminster Hunt Ball for—"

"Just so, my lady— but I have reasons for my suggestion," said Pellison. "You know the old proverb about the pitcher going to the well?"

Lady Delladale gave him a scrutinising look.

"Thieves about?" she asked.

"I know something," replied Pellison. "Precaution, my lady, is never wasted."

Lady Delladale set down her tea-cup. Like her visitor she glanced at the door. Like him, too, she bent across the table.

"You were always an honest, straightforward lot, you Pellisons," she said. "And I'm sure you're one of the old sort, John. I'll tell you something— strictly between ourselves. Those," she continued, pointing with a sly smile to the green morocco case, "those are not the real Delladale pearls— the famous set! Everybody thinks they are, but they aren't. What's in there is a marvellously clever imitation set which I had made some years ago. The real set is at my bank in London."

"Good— good!" murmured Pellison, rubbing his hands. "But— nobody knows?"

"Nobody— except myself and my bankers," replied Lady Delladale. "No— do I say, everybody thinks those— in the case there— are the real things. Well!— let them think so. Why not?"

"Those friends who are with you," suggested Pellison. "They think so?"

"Of course! Everybody thinks so!" chuckled her ladyship. "You'll see in the newspapers to-morrow morning that I wore the famous Delladale pearls at the Hunt Ball. Well— I'm not going to make anybody the wiser. Those things will be stared at, pointed at, gaped at to-night— but they're . . . imitation!"

"Even so, my lady, they're worth taking care of," said Pellison, as he rose. "And— there are questionable characters about."

"Forewarned is forearmed," remarked her ladyship. "Thank you for coming!"

iii

PELLISON GLANCED at his watch as soon as he got outside Lady Delladale's room. Five-fifteen. Two hours and a quarter before dinner— time for what he wanted. And to get on with that he hurried downstairs and out into the Market Place and Straight towards the Post Office; although twenty-five years had elapsed since his last visit to Ashminster he had not forgotten his bearings.

The first person Pellison saw— to take any note of— as he hastened along the street was the pseudo Captain Lampard, better known to him now as ex-convict Lawson. Lawson, alias Lampard, came out of a tobacconist's shop, carrying in his hand, neatly done up, what Pellison's sharp eyes saw to be a box of cigars— one of those boxes which hold fifty cigars of a medium size. He and Pellison met in a direct line; their eyes met, too; Pellison's with what anybody would have taken as the glance of a careless observer; Lampard's with indifference. But Pellison could look careless when he was literally careful, and he saw with rejoicing that his man didn't recognise him in the least, didn't attach any significance to him. Well and good, that! thought Pellison and went on to the Post Office, there to interview the telephone clerk and arrange for an immediate long-distance call— to a trusty, well-informed old colleague at Scotland Yard.

It was five-and-twenty minutes past five when Pellison was told that he was through; a quarter of an hour later he came out of the box, to tell the clerk that he should be back again at six o'clock for another similar call. He walked around the Market Place in the interval, mechanically observing the old familiar sights; in reality he was thinking of what he was going to do. The man-hunting fever was in his blood again; it was good to have a bit of the old business to do, even if he was acting ex-officio. And he was impatient; the minutes dragged until six o'clock struck. Then he was back at the telephone, and presently in touch with the centre of things, so far away, and yet so eminently available, and next he was listening intently, avidly to the voice of the man from whom he had sought information and who, in the interval of waiting, had got it for him.

It was a highly satisfied Pellison who, a few minutes later, walked out of the Post Office and turned the corner to the Police Station. The Home Superintendent, knowing him by repute, stared interestedly at him when Pellison had introduced

himself, but still more when the ex-detective told him of the recent episode at the Crown Hotel.

"I know that man!" he exclaimed. "He's been staying at Lady Delladale's for the last fortnight— he and the two ladies you describe. Captain Lampard! And you're sure he's the man you know as Lawson?"

"Certain," replied Pellison. "As soon as I saw him I knew that he had been through my hands— later, I remembered when and why. He is certainly the man who, as I tell you, got three years' penal servitude at the C.C.C. seven years ago for obtaining jewellery in London by means of a trick. That I recollected, but no more. However, I've been in telephonic communication with headquarters during this last hour, and now I know all about him. After serving his three years he was very soon in trouble again and not so long after his release got five years for a somewhat similar offence. He was released on ticket-of-leave about six months ago and since then has completely disappeared. So— there you are!"

"We can pull him up for that, then," observed the Superintendent. "Failure to notify, eh? What do you advise, now?"

"That he's up to some scheme about Lady Delladale's pearls I'm as convinced as that I'm here," said Pellison. "And it wouldn't surprise me if one or both those women, Mrs. Browne-Charrington and Miss Fitzpatrick as they call themselves, were in with him at the job. The thing is to keep an eye on the lot! Now if you have a couple of trusty, experienced men— plain-clothes men— who would go back with me to the hotel— eh? They could pass as friends of mine— if they could dress themselves up a bit they could dine with me— I'll arrange it. Then they'd be close at hand if anything materialises. For you may be quite certain that if this man has designs on those pearls he'll try to carry them out at the Crown— probably has worked the plot up with that very intention."

"I can fit things," said the Superintendent. "I often dine at the Crown myself— my presence'll excite no comment. And I've a man— Wilkins— who's just the sort of fellow you want— smart, well-dressed sort, uncommonly useful for this kind of job. I'll ring him up and tell him to come round ready to go with us. These two women, now?" he continued, after he had been to the telephone. "You didn't recognise either of 'em?"

"No," admitted Pellison. "But I know the type. Sort of— well, I've seen that sort a good bit, at Deauville, and Homburg, and Monte Carlo. Adventuresses, I should say!"

The Superintendent smiled and shook his head.

"We know Lady Delladale pretty well round here," he said, significantly. "Likes that sort of society. Queer taste in an old lady, but there you are!"

"Better not tell her she's old," remarked Pellison, with a wink. "I rather fancy, from talking to her, that she intends to remain stationary at— shall we say fifty?"

"Well, she's shrewd enough," said the Superintendent. "I've had a bit of business with her now and then. Personally, I should say that it would be an exceptionally clever man who could take her in."

"This man is clever," remarked Pellison. "And you may be sure that if he's trying to bring off a big *coup* here, he's arranged everything to the last detail."

"Here's Wilkins!" said the Superintendent, as a smart, alert, well-groomed man walked in. "He'll suit you, I think. Now," he continued, after introducing the two men and giving Wilkins a brief account of what was going forward, "consider us under your orders. What next?"

Pellison marshalled them into the street and thence towards the Crown Hotel. But as they crossed the Market Place he suddenly checked their advance.

"There's the man!" he said in a whisper. "There!— crossing over to the Post Office. There!— that tall chap with the small parcel in his hand. Wilkins! he won't know you. Follow him in there— keep an eye on him— see what he's after! We'll wait about here a bit."

Wilkins went off, in silence, and followed Lampard into the Post Office. In a few minutes Lampard came out and went across to the Crown; Wilkins emerged, too, and returned leisurely to Pellison and the Superintendent.

"Sent off the small parcel by registered post," said Wilkins. He paused, rubbing his chin as if musing over something. "Don't know why he should bother to do so," he added, "but he told the girl it was a box of cigars. Why should he tell her that?"

"I saw him come out of that tobacconist's, over there, with what I took to be a box of cigars," said Pellison. "Well— let's go into the lounge of the hotel and have a drink before dinner."

But Pellison didn't get the chance of ordering drinks. Before he and his companions were seated the hall-porter came up. He drew Pellison aside.

"Lady Delladale's wanting to see you, Mr. Pellison," he said. "She asked— would you go up to her room as soon as ever you came in?"

iv

WITH A WORD to his newly-made acquaintances to sit tight and keep their eyes and ears open, Pellison left the lounge and hurried upstairs to Lady Delladale's room. Lady Delladale sat where he had left her, examining some article of female finery which she obviously intended wearing that evening. She motioned to Pellison to close the door and then, as he drew near, pointed to the dressing-table.

"You saw that green morocco case that was lying there when you were up here, John Pellison?" she asked. "Well, it contained the pearls!— or what passed for the pearls. And— it's disappeared!"

"Yes," said Pellison. "Just so! The circumstances, now, my lady?"

"Simple enough, I should think," replied Lady Delladale. "Not very long after you went out of this room, Miss Fitzpatrick— one of those two women you saw me arrive with— came in to ask me to go into Mrs. Browne-Charrington's room to look at a new gown. I went. I was away, perhaps, ten or fifteen minutes. When I returned the green morocco case was gone. Of course—"

"A moment, my lady," interrupted Pellison. "Were those two women with you in Mrs. Browne-Charrington's room all the time?"

"No! Miss Fitzpatrick, after going in there with me, left the room to fetch a gown of her own. She was away a minute or two, then she returned with the gown."

"You left your door open?"

"Open— slightly, yes. The room I went to is only just across the corridor. Its door was slightly open, too, all the time I was in it. Of course, it wouldn't take many seconds for anybody to slip in here, take the case, and clear out with it."

"A plain question, then, my lady. Do you suspect your friends?"

Lady Delladale gave Pellison a queer look.

"I suspect all three of them," she answered. "Of course they've got the case! The Fitzpatrick woman got it, no doubt, and handed it to Lampard."

"Have you told them of the loss?" asked Pellison.

"Of course! Otherwise they'd have suspected that I suspected them! Yes, I told them at once, and told them, too, to hold their tongues until I could do something. Oh, they think they're safe enough! But— they've got it!"

"My lady," said Pellison, "what do you know of these people? What are they doing in your company?"

Lady Delladale shook her head.

"I'm getting an old woman, John Pellison," she said. "I'm a lonely old woman, too. And I want society; lively, smart society— I dare say I'm a wicked old sinner, but I need and like liveliness. I met these three, the man, the two women, at Bath, not long ago. They amused me— and they're good bridge players, and I'm devoted to bridge. I asked them to visit me— brought them home with me, in fact. But— I don't trust 'em that much, John! I suspected them, only last night, of cheating. And now I'm quite sure they've stolen my green case. They'll have a job to get into it, though," she concluded, chuckling. "It's got a patent lock."

"Will your ladyship give me leave to act?" asked Pellison. "To tell your ladyship the truth, I know the man. He's an ex-convict, named Lawson— and, as a matter of fact, he's on ticket-of-leave at this time. It was because I recognised him on his arrival with you that I came up here to warn your ladyship."

"Do whatever you like," said Lady Delladale. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Nothing— until you come down to dinner, my lady," replied Pellison. "I understand that dinner's served here at seven-thirty. Just before that time, come

down to the lounge— as if nothing had happened. By then I shall have done something."

"Whatever you please," agreed Lady Delladale. "So that's what Lampard is, eh? H'm! I'm not surprised. But I'm not such a fool as I may seem to be, after all."

CHAPTER V

Pellison went back to his professional brethren and drawing them into a corner told them what had happened. The Superintendent's ears pricked— he foresaw big business.

But Wilkins made a grimace which signified understanding.

"That's pretty plain, Mr. Pellison," he said. "The swag's in that parcel the man registered at the Post Office."

"Doubtless," agreed Pellison. "That's the first thing your old and accustomed hand thinks of— to get rid of the swag as soon as he conveniently can after handling it. Probably the younger of the two women took the case out of Lady Delladale's room, and handed it to the man; he had his package all ready, slipped the case into it, and went straight to the Post Office. And— that's where we must go. What time does the mail go out from here?"

"Not till eight-fifteen," replied Wilkins.

"Then we're in plenty of time— the packet's safe there, as it's registered. But," continued Pellison, "they don't know me there, and we must not only see the packet but have it examined."

"I'll manage that," said the Superintendent. "They know me well enough— besides, this is police business. Come on— we'll see the Postmaster." He led the way to the street, and once outside the hotel, turned to Wilkins. "Go back to the office," he continued. "Get hold of Smithson and Buckle. Tell them to come down to the front of the Crown presently and hang around in case they're wanted. Then you come back to us. Better have some reserve force handy, in case we're going to collar all three," he said to Pellison as Wilkins moved away. "And I suppose it'll come to that."

"Suppose so," assented Pellison. "Nice sensation for the Hunt Ball! However, I dare say we can manage it quietly."

"You don't think these three people will slip away," suggested the Superintendent.

"No, they're too sharp for that! They know the swag's safe in the post; they don't know they're suspected. Lady Delladale is too cute to show any suspicion of them before themselves. Only let's see this packet and we have them."

"That's easy," said the Superintendent. "The Postmaster'll do anything I want— when the matter's explained to him."

The Postmaster listened to their story with the passive, apathetic air of the man who from long training has become nothing but an official. And when he had got the hang of it, he went silently away from his room into the Post Office

outside, to return immediately with a neat parcel, sealed and blue-lined, which he laid on the table before the Superintendent and Pellison.

"That it?" he asked.

"That'll be it, sure enough," said Pellison. "Ah! that's significant! Look at the address."

The Superintendent read the address audibly:

"Mrs. Browne-Charrington,

"21 a Mayflower Mansions,

"Hyde Park, London, W.2.

"H'm!" he said. "So that's where they were placing 'em, eh?— to await the lady's return to London. All right! Well, we're going to open this and see if the stolen property's inside."

"No!" exclaimed Pellison. "Something better than that. We'll open it in the presence of the sender. The Postmaster'll let you take charge of it— there's no doubt about what's in it."

The Postmaster made no objection, and the Superintendent, with the packet under his arm, followed Pellison into the street again. Wilkins came up, pointing towards the Crown.

"Smithson and Buckle are down there," he whispered. "Both handy; I've just had a peep into the lounge. I think the man you've described, Mr. Pellison, is in there now, with two ladies. They're all in evening dress, and near the door of the dining-room."

"Couldn't be better," said Pellison. "But it's in your hands now, Superintendent— you take charge."

The Superintendent nodded, and after speaking quietly to two men in plain clothes who lounged aimlessly near the hotel entrance, walked in, with Pellison and Wilkins on his heels. His glance went straight to the corner Wilkins had indicated; there, their backs to the door, and grouped around a small table sat Lampard, Mrs. Browne-Charrington and Miss Fitzpatrick: Lampard was smoking a cigarette; all three had cocktails before them.

"Come on, both of you," muttered the Superintendent. He marched straight across and was at Lampard's side before any of the three noticed him. "A word with you," he said peremptorily. "Captain Lampard, I believe?"

There was a faint cry from one woman, a catching of her breath from the other. But the man turned angrily.

"What the—" he began. Then, as he saw the three men around him, the glare in his eyes turned to a quick look of fear that made Wilkins edge closer and watch more narrowly. "Who are you?" he got out. "I don't—"

"Superintendent of police in this town," replied his questioner, firmly. "These are police officers; there are others outside. Here is a parcel you handed in and registered at the Post Office this evening— I believe it to contain—"

"A box of cigars!" exclaimed Lampard. "I bought it here—"

"We'll see about that," said the Superintendent. "I believe it to contain a green morocco case stolen from Lady Delladale's room here." He was rapidly cutting open the packet as he spoke, and within a few seconds had pulled out of a mass of soft paper the article he had referred to. "Just as I thought," he went on. "I shall take you into custody on a charge of stealing this case and contents, and these ladies, too, as being concerned in the theft. Wilkins— Simpson and Buckle!"

Lampard had got to his feet by that time; the two women, white-faced, were faintly protesting. And Pellison put in a word, nodding at the man.

"You've forgotten me, Lawson!" he said. "But you'll remember your conviction at the Central Criminal Court seven years ago? Ah! I thought so. It was diamonds that time— now it's pearls—"

A sharp gasp from Lampard, a sudden stare, bewildered and annoyed, in his eyes, made Pellison twist round and see what the man was looking at. There, just descending the stairs, was Lady Delladale, gowned for the Hunt Ball— and decorated with her famous pearls. And from one of the women came an angry murmur— the indignant protest of a plotter whose schemes had gone wrong.

"You never got them! She has them on! You damned fool, why didn't you make sure! Anyway, they can't charge us with that!"

Lady Delladale caught the last words as she came up to the group, now increased by the presence of the two plain-clothes policemen.

"No, but I'll charge you all with stealing my green morocco case," she said. "I took care you didn't get the pearls— I had 'em in my pocket. Take them away, policeman, take all three away. I'll dine alone, and I'll go to the ball alone; take them away and lock them up— I'll attend to them in the morning."

And with a whispered word to Pellison which nobody caught but himself, Lady Delladale and the Delladale pearls swept into the dining-room.

———————————

15: The Fifty-Fifty Basis

"AND YOU mean to tell me," said the younger of two men who were sitting over their coffee in a quiet corner of the club smoking-room, "you really mean to tell me— seriously— that you don't know who she is? Come— come!"

"I mean to tell you," answered the elder man, carelessly defiant of the implied unbelief, "and as seriously as you like, that I know no more of who she is, in reality, than I know of the exact identity of the man who made this cigar in some Cuban factory! And that's that!"

"Yet you've published three of her novels!"

"Three of her novels, as you say. All she's ever written."

"And they sell like hot cakes."

"They sell like hot cakes!"

"And her public increases?"

The elder man smiled, and pulling towards him a copy of a leading literary journal that lay on the table at which he and his companion were sitting, turned to an advertisement, and put his finger on a part of it, printed in bold, staring type.

"You see what we say here?" he remarked, "about this last thing of hers. Fortieth thousand! That advertisement was drawn up a week ago. Since then we've sold another five thousand. Yes, each book goes better than its predecessor. The first, The Moth and the Star, sold, roughly speaking, 20,000. The second, The Night and the Morrow, 30,000. I daresay this thing will go up to 60,000."

The younger man laughed, cynically, and taking the paper from the other man's hand, read out the advertisement.

40,000 copies already sold.

Further Large Edition Printing.

The Flower that Once Has Blown

By Cynthia Vandelys.

"H'm!" he muttered. "Of course, I've reviewed all these, as you know. Said what I thought about 'em, too— plainly! Mawk!— sheer mawk! But they—"

"Sell!" said the publisher, quietly. "Mawk or no mawk, they sell! The young lady has hit the target right in the middle of the bull's eye."

"Ah— ah!" remarked the critic, with a sly smile. "You know that much, then, Collison? That she is a young lady?"

"No objection to telling you, Straddle, what I do know— in strict confidence, of course. You're not the sort to rush off and shove it all into print for the sake of a few guineas! I'll tell you the whole story— it's interesting. It's a little over two years ago that I was called upon one morning by a little, insignificant, three-for-a-penny sort of chap who announced himself as Mr. Simpson Jones, solicitor, of

Essex Street. He had a flat but somewhat bulky parcel under his arm. When he'd sufficiently got over his first nervousness at encountering a real live publisher in the flesh, and had found out that I was actually very much like all other tradesmen, he informed me that he was charged with a mission. He was, he said, the trustee of a young lady in the far North of England who was an orphan, not very well off, and who, to eke out her slender means, had, since the death of her mother— her father having been dead some years— occupied herself in discharging the duties of a daily governess in a clergyman's family. And lately, in her spare time, she had written a novel, and, not knowing what to do with it, had sent it to him, Mr. Jones, to see if he could dispose of it for her. Here it was, he continued, in his parcel— a nice, neat typescript of it: he had had it typed himself, having heard from somebody or other that the thing would have more chance that way. Would I look at it? Being, as you're aware, a very polite man, Straddle, I said I should be very pleased indeed to look at it, and thereupon Mr. Jones, who at that moment reminded me of a monthly nurse exhibiting a newly-born infant, stripped off the coverings, and laid on my desk a bundle of some four hundred typed pages, on the first of which was inscribed The Moth and the Star by Cynthia Vandelys."

"Good— good!" chuckled the critic. "Excellent! I mean— hearing about it."

"I inquired if I was to understand that this was the real name of the authoress— Cynthia Vandelys? Mr. Jones replied, hesitatingly, that it was not: it was the name by which the authoress desired to be known. Then I asked if Mr. Jones would tell me his own opinion of the story— if he had read it? Mr. Jones had read it, all of it: it was his opinion that the story would be agreeable to lady readers. Thereupon I told him to come again in a fortnight. When he had withdrawn, I sent the thing to a man in whose judgment as a fiction-taster I have sufficient confidence to base a final decision upon, and asked him to let me have a report within ten days. I got his report in a week, and I can repeat it to you. He said: 'Dear Collison— This is the most sickly-sweet sentimental tosh I ever read, and it will sell like hot cross buns on a Good Friday.' So— I sent a note round for Mr. Jones."

"Go on," said the critic, with a cynical smile. "The story's improving with every sentence."

"Mr. Jones arrived," continued the publisher. "Of course, I didn't tell him what my reader's opinion was. Instead, I told him the usual story about the danger and doubtfulness of publishing a book by an utterly unknown author—"

"Cut that out," interrupted the critic. "We know all that."

"Then I said that I thought I might risk a little on this story, and inquired if he was fully empowered to deal on behalf of its author? He was, and we proceeded to business— at which I found him rather sharper of wit and purpose than I had anticipated. To cut matters short, I agreed to pay a progressive royalty on the

sales of the book, and I got the option, on terms to be agreed, of the lady's next two books. And then, of course, I got the book out— and it sold. Sold from the very start. I had the pleasure of handing Mr. Jones a very substantial cheque at our first settlement, and I have handed him still more substantial cheques at six-monthly intervals ever since. Miss Cynthia Vandelys has had a lot of money from me, through Mr. Jones— rather!"

"And she's still in the background?"

"Still in the wilds of Northumbria! But I doubt if she'll be able to stick there. This last novel is being dramatised. The second one is being filmed. And people are perpetually pestering me with questions about her. Not a post comes in that doesn't bring requests for information and demands for photographs. Women journalists come and plague me about her— I can't tell them anything."

"Literally— nothing?" asked Straddle.

"Literally! I've never seen her— never even seen her handwriting— don't know how old she is— what she's like— or anything about her. Every six months Mr. Jones receives her royalties; every nine months he presents himself with her new novel. But Miss Cynthia Vandelys remains in her original obscurity."

"Famous— yet unknown," remarked the critic. "Ah, well, Collison, there's a lot of consolation to be found in a fat cheque. Still, I think somebody will unearth Miss Cynthia, sooner or later."

ii

THAT AFTERNOON Collison had business in Fleet Street; returning westward after he had finished it, he passed Essex Street, and catching its name at the corner, he suddenly turned down the slope, with an equally sudden idea of calling on Mr. Jones in his office. The conversation with Straddle was still in his mind, and he had a notion about Miss Cynthia Vandelys which he wished to put before Mr. Simpson Jones as her accredited representative.

Mr. Jones's office proved to be almost at the top of the back regions of one of the oldest houses in Essex Street, and Collison, once inside it, was surprised at its shabbiness. It consisted of two small rooms; that into which the publisher first stepped was occupied by a mere boy, who looked as if he had little to do, and was obviously surprised to see a caller; there were a few old law books on a shelf, a few sale bills and legal documents on the walls, a chair and table for the boy, another chair for waiting visitors, and little else. And when Collison was shown into the inner room he found it equally mean and shabby, and Mr. Simpson Jones obviously as surprised to see him as the office boy had been, and not only surprised, but palpably disturbed that the publisher should be there at all.

"I happened to be passing, so I thought I'd drop in," said Collison, taking the only available chair. "I wanted to have a talk with you about Miss Vandelys. I really think, Mr. Jones, that she should be brought into the open."

Mr. Jones's pale face flushed, and he moved uncomfortably in his seat. He was a little, undersized man, of very ordinary appearance, meanly dressed and badly groomed; there was a queer air of something very like poverty about him. But when he replied to the publisher's direct suggestion, his voice, though timid, had a certain distinct note of resolution.

"Oh no, no!" he said. "No, Mr. Collison, that's not at all possible. It's not according to the agreement, sir!"

"I don't remember any agreement that relates to it," answered Collison. "What agreement do you refer to?"

Mr. Jones moved still more uncomfortably, regarding his caller with eyes in which there was an expression of strong distaste for the situation.

"Well, an understanding, then!" he said. "A— a faint understanding, we'll say. That Miss Vandelys's privacy was to be respected. It— it is her strong desire."

Collison remained silent for a moment.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "I dare say that Miss Vandelys, like everybody else, is not averse to making money, by which I mean that, substantial as her earnings are now, they'd be increased by a little publicity. People are beginning to inquire about her, you know. They want to be informed. Who is she? Where does she live? What is she like? All that sort of thing. Now— a little judicious entry into the limelight— eh, Mr. Jones?"

"No, sir," said Mr. Jones, firmly. "No! That is not at all in accordance with my client's wishes. Miss Vandelys—"

"Of course, that's not her real name!" interrupted Collison.

"It's the name, Mr. Collison, by which my client desires to be known as a writer, and wishes to be used in any transactions relating to her writings," replied Mr. Jones, pointedly. "I was about to observe— Miss Vandelys is, by nature, a lady of a retiring nature, a recluse. She has no wish to come into what you call the limelight. She would be horrified if I suggested to her that she should allow herself to be interviewed by these newspaper people, and as to having her picture put in one of the cheap illustrated journals— sir, I dare not mention such a thing to her."

"Sounds very Victorian, Mr. Jones," said Collison. "Mid-Victorian, perhaps. Or goes back still farther— I believe that eighteenth century people of condition were somewhat ashamed of literary notoriety. Perhaps Miss Vandelys is a throw-back to those times."

Mr. Jones fingered the papers on his desk.

"Miss Vandelys, sir, is— what she is," he said. "Her desire is for anonymity. She is quite satisfied with things as they are."

"Good reason to be, in one way!" muttered Collison.

"Precisely so, sir! Miss Vandelys is quite content in the way to which I think you allude. She has earned money by her pen— during the time which has elapsed since I carried her first book to you— in a fashion which has exceeded her anticipations, and she is, as I say, satisfied." He paused a moment, and then looked at his visitor with a sudden smile of confidence. "The truth is, Mr. Collison," he continued, "there are only two people in the world who know that Miss Vandelys does write! I am— one of them."

"And who's the other?" asked Collison.

Mr. Jones smiled again— a queer smile that had something of mockery in it.

"Herself," he answered. "Just that! And— she doesn't intend to reveal her secret to . . . anyone."

Collison got up from the rickety chair on which he had perched himself.

"All the same," he said, "I think she might reveal herself to her publisher! Why, I've never so much as had a letter from her! Odd, isn't it, now?"

Mr. Jones picked up a pen.

"Miss Vandelys's wishes must be respected, Mr. Collison," he said. "She— er, reposes implicit confidence in me as her— shall we say channel? Yes, the channel by which the stream of her genius flows to the public."

"H'm!" remarked Collison, drily. "I should scarcely call Miss Vandelys a genius, I think. From my point of view, however, she's something more comfortable than that— a best seller! This last book is going immensely, Mr. Jones. I suppose she's aware of it?"

Mr. Jones had begun to write, and he scarcely turned his head. But he spoke.

"Miss Vandelys is fully posted up in all business affairs, Mr. Collison," he answered. "She's quite aware. Your advertisements are excellent!"

iii

COLLISON WENT AWAY from that interview feeling that Mr. Simpson Jones had more in him than appeared likely. He was evidently not to be drawn, cajoled, or forced. Whether it was really because Miss Cynthia Vandelys desired secrecy and privacy, however, Collison felt uncertain; there was something about Jones that made him doubtful and suspicious. He began to wonder about Jones's business relations with the young lady whom Jones had grandiloquently styled a genius. Jones was acting as her sole agent; was Jones charging her the usual ten per cent? Now Collison was very well aware of the amount of money he had paid Jones on behalf of Miss Cynthia Vandelys; ten per cent. on that gross amount would be a considerable sum. Yet Jones looked as if he had no money and never had had money!— there was an atmosphere of sordid poverty about him and his office. And Collison was getting curious, and when, a few days later, he chanced across a legal friend of his who had an extensive acquaintance amongst limbs of

the law and asked him if he knew anything of one Simpson Jones, and was told in reply that Simpson Jones was a poor, ineffective fellow who just scraped along, he began to get more curious than ever. But the worst of his form of curiosity was that he had no clear idea as to what it was that he was curious about.

The curiosity, or, as one should say, inquisitiveness, of other people about Miss Cynthia Vandelys increased as the sales of her last book heightened in number. Collison had been a true prophet when he said to Straddle that he anticipated a sale of 60,000 copies for The Flower that Once Has Blown. The sixtieth thousand had been passed within a month of that talk in the club smoking-room, and still the book went on selling. And Collison began to get sick of inquiries about its author. His desk was littered every morning with letters addressed to Miss Cynthia Vandelys, care of James Collison, Esq., not a day passed without some newspaper person, male or female, dropping in to make some inquiry about her; a fourth of Collison's own correspondence was made up of letters begging him to procure her autograph or her photograph or begging— sometimes hysterically— for her address. Collison used to bundle all these things together once a day and send them round to Mr. Simpson Jones, with his compliments; Jones, a model of precision and punctuality, used to return a formal letter next morning stating his receipt of documents relating to Miss C. V., contents of which were duly noted. In his heart of hearts Collison, who, in spite of the fact that he was a publisher, and had some taste in literature, was not sure that he didn't hate Miss Cynthia Vandelys as much as he loathed her novels (or, to be exact, as he loathed the two or three pages in each which he had forced himself to glance at) simply because of the daily annoyance she caused him. But after all, there was no getting away from the fact that he was making big money out of her. Still— why couldn't she be sensible, and come out into the open, and relieve him of all this correspondence and inquiry?

One morning, when Collison had been unusually exasperated by the number of letters addressed to Miss Vandelys, and by the quantity of inquiries about her sent to himself, there got into his office, by some ingenious means, a bright and pushful young thing who promptly told him that she was Miss Sadie Van Dresler, of the Women's Own Particular Paper, come over from New York to interview the leading English lady novelists, and that she wanted, right there, the address of Miss Cynthia Vandelys.

Collison put down his pen, and sitting back in his chair, took a good look at Miss Sadie Van Dresler. She was undeniably pretty. But she was more— it didn't take him more than a second to see that she had brains, and wit, and perseverance, and determination. She was All There! And Collison clutched at her mentality as a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw— only, she was far from being a straw.

"My dear young lady," he said solemnly, "will you listen to me for a moment? I don't know the address of Miss Cynthia Vandelys! I never have known it— I never shall know it! I don't know who Miss Cynthia Vandelys is! This is the million and one'th time I've been asked what you've just asked, and if I'm asked a million times more I can only give the same answer. There!"

Miss Sadie Van Dresler showed a perfect set of teeth, and a couple of real natural dimples.

"Say!" she said. "Is that the real stuff, or is it just—"

"It's the real stuff, all through," interrupted Collison. "Genuine! I don't know anything about her except that her sweet and sickly sentimental stories are brought to me to publish, that I do publish them, and that the public loves them! There is only one man in the world who can give you the information you want, and he's the man who acts as her agent— Mr. Simpson Jones, solicitor, 563A Essex Street."

Miss Van Dresler got to her feet.

"That's business," she observed. "Thank you! I'll go and see this Mr. Jones right now."

"Do!" exclaimed Collison. "And Heaven bless you! Come and tell me if you have any luck."

Miss Van Dresler smiled again and departed. She did not return, but about an hour after she had taken her April freshness out of Collison's room, Mr. Simpson Jones was shown into it. And for a man of such meek and shabby appearance, Mr. Jones was strangely and surprisingly angry and vehement.

"Mr. Collison!" he began, before the publisher could say how-d'ye-do. "Mr. Collison! you have taken an unwarrantable liberty! You have sent a young and pertinacious American female to my office without permission from me! I had the utmost difficulty, sir, in dismissing her. Sir, you will please to understand that amicable as our relations have been so far, any recurrence of this intrusion on my privacy, and any attempt to invade Miss Vandelys's privacy, will be followed, Mr. Collison, by a discontinuance of those relations and a transfer of my client's work to another publishing house."

Before Collison could retort, or expostulate, Mr. Jones had vanished, and, for so small a man, he made a great deal of noise in going out. Collison wished that Miss Van Dresler would re-appear, then he would have asked her to lunch, and heard all about it. Two evenings later, however, he met her at a dinner-party.

"Get anything out of Mr. Simpson Jones?" he inquired when he found a chance.

Miss Van Dresler made a grimace.

"Mr. Jones was one of my very few failures," she answered. "I never talk about my failures. And I'm not sure that I'll have time to get even with him while I'm

across here. But say now! do you think there really is such a person as Cynthia Vandelys?"

iv

COLLISON had never thought of that. He thought of it now, however, though he only laughed at Miss Van Dresler's suggestion. And he thought of it still more next day— indeed, he was thinking of it rather seriously in the middle of the afternoon when a clerk entered his room with a telegram.

Collison had to read that telegram over two or three times before he grasped its full significance. When he at last saw what it really meant, he also saw that in all probability he was on the verge of some further revelations.

Collison, Publisher, St. Martin's Lane, London.
Very serious accident to Mr. Simpson Jones please come at once to his house Summerstay Lodge, near Dorking.
Dr. H. C. Marsland.

It had never occurred to Collison until then that Jones had a house; if he had thought of Jones in that way at all, he would have pictured him as a lodger in some surrounding as shabby and dismal as the office in Essex Street. The address given in the telegram had a ring in it— Summerstay Lodge sounded consequential. But— the present job was to get there. And without any delay Collison hurriedly left his office, and regardless of expense and only anxious to get to Jones's side as quickly as possible, chartered a car from the nearest garage and bade its driver make all speed to Dorking.

Summerstay Lodge proved to be a smart modern house standing in well-kept grounds a little way out of the town. Everything about it suggested well-to-do-ness, if not absolute wealth, on the part of its owner, and Collison began to feel staggered at what he saw: the trim gardens, smooth, velvety lawns, fine old trees, spick-and-span walks, did not somehow fit in at all with what he knew of Simpson Jones: the house itself, when he reached its door, looked far too fine to be the home of the man whose professional work was carried on in that mean office in London. There was mystery here, decided Collison— but he refrained from speculating on its nature, for his sole desire was to see Jones. Jones, he felt assured, had something to tell him.

A middle-aged woman, obviously the housekeeper, opened the front door before Collison could knock or ring, and motioned him to enter.

"Mr. Collison, sir?" she asked expectantly. "Please to come in."

"How is Mr. Jones?" inquired Collison.

The woman shook her head and sank her voice to a whisper.

"Very bad, sir, I fear," she replied. "There's Dr. Marsland, and another doctor, and a nurse with him, and his brother has come, too, and has just gone upstairs. But he's unconscious, sir— or was, the last I heard. In fact, he's only regained consciousness just once, for a few minutes, since he was brought in, and then he asked for you— had just strength to mention your name and address, sir, to Dr. Marsland. Then— went off again."

"What was the accident?" asked Collison.

"Motor accident, sir! He was crossing the road just there at the end of the drive, and a big car came round the corner and ran him down. They carried him in here quite unconscious, and I sent for his brother, from Epsom, at once, and for the doctor. One o'clock it was when it happened, sir. But please to sit down, and I'll let the doctors know you're here."

She opened the door of a room at the end of the hall, and Collison walked into what he conceived to be Jones's study. And once more he was conscious of the extraordinary difference between Jones's office in Essex Street and Jones's home surroundings at Summerstay Lodge. For here was luxury— a wealth of choicely bound books, fine pictures, period furniture, evidences of a rare taste. It was all in beautiful order, too, and Collison contrasted it with the shabby little room in which Jones sat when in town. He turned quickly to the housekeeper.

"Is— is there a Mrs. Jones?" he inquired. "I only know Mr. Jones slightly."

"Oh no, sir!" replied the woman. "Mr. Jones isn't a married gentleman. There's just me and a couple of maidservants. Mr. Jones has only been here about fifteen months, sir— no, it's a bachelor establishment. I don't think Mr. Jones has any relations except the brother upstairs— Mr. Walton Jones. He lives at Epsom— in the grocery line, sir."

She went away then, and Collison waited, looking around. He was beginning to get an idea, vague, formless, but there. Perhaps it wasn't an idea, perhaps it was a growing suspicion. But before it took more definite shape he was aware of sounds in the hitherto quiet house. Doors opened and closed; hushed voices sounded on the stairs and in the hall, and suddenly there walked into the room a man whom Collison saw at once to be a doctor.

"I am sorry to say you are too late, Mr. Collison," he said quietly. "Mr. Jones is dead!"

"I came away within five minutes of getting your wire," answered Collison.

"Just so— I'm sure you would," said the doctor. "I feared it was of little use to send the wire— there was no hope from the very first. He had only one interval of consciousness, and during that he managed to mention your name— Collison— publisher— St. Martin's Lane— send for him. Then he became unconscious again, and continued so till his death, a few minutes ago."

Collison remained silent, wondering.

"I suppose you knew Mr. Jones?" suggested the doctor, after a pause.

"I have had business dealings with him," replied Collison. "They were of a somewhat unusual and curious nature. I think he must have wanted to speak to me about them. However— that's over! But I understand his brother is in the house?"

"Yes, he knows you're here, and he'll be down presently," said the doctor. "He'd only just arrived when you came."

Mr. Walton Jones entered the room as the doctor left it. Except that he was rather older, rather more substantial, much more presentable and far better dressed and groomed, he was very like the dead man. And he was collected and matter-of-fact.

"Of course, I haven't the remotest idea as to why Simpson asked for you, Mr. Collison," he said, after a few preliminary words. "I suppose you have?"

"I think I had better explain matters," replied Collison, and proceeded to tell the whole story of his relations with Simpson Jones. "I imagine he wanted to tell me something about all this— probably to give me the real name of Miss Cynthia Vandelys, and her address. Do you know anything of the lady?"

The grocer slapped his hands on his knees and shook his head.

"Never heard of her, sir!" he declared. "I've no time for novel-reading, and Simpson never mentioned her to me. He was a close man, Simpson, and I can't say that I've seen much of him of late years, though to be sure, since he came to live here I've seen a bit more. No— I know nothing, nothing whatever, of these transactions you tell me of, Mr. Collison. But you say you've paid Simpson large sums of money on this lady's account?— money earned by the sale of her books?"

"Large sums," replied Collison. "Very considerable sums. They were paid to him as her agent."

"Just so," said Mr. Walton Jones. "H'm! Of course, I don't know anything about the book trade— didn't even know these tale-writers could make any money at their job. Now, between ourselves, what do you call very considerable sums?"

"I have paid Mr. Simpson Jones several thousands of pounds on account of Miss Vandelys," answered Collison.

The grocer's mouth opened and his eyebrows arched themselves.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "What! all that to a mere tale-writer! Extraordinary! But— would Simpson get any of that, now?"

"I don't know anything about your brother's business arrangements with Miss Vandelys," said Collison. "Ordinarily, an agent gets a commission of ten per cent."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Walton Jones. "Ten per cent., eh? That's to say that if the sum due to the young lady was, we'll say, ten thousand pounds, Simpson, if he took the ordinary ten per cent. would get one thousand? Was the amount as much as ten thousand, sir?"

"I'm not quite at liberty to say what the exact amount paid to Mr. Simpson Jones as agent for Miss Vandelys is— at present," replied Collison. "But you may take it that it is what I have called it— very considerable."

"Just so, sir! H'm! Ah! To tell you the truth, Mr. Collison," said Mr. Walton Jones in a sudden burst of confidence. "I've been a bit puzzled about poor Simpson. He never did much at his lawyering— scraped along, you know, just scraped along. And I was amazed when, about eighteen months since, he suddenly set up this establishment. Nice place, sir— all up to the mark, as you see. I've never known what he did it on. A close man, Simpson— if he liked."

"Mr. Jones," said Collison, "I must find out who Miss Vandelys really is! Your brother is dead. But he'll have left papers. I must ask you to help me. It's not a question of mere curiosity— it's a question of a valuable literary property— of money! You understand the seriousness of it?"

"Anything to do with money, sir, is always serious!" assented the grocer. "What do you propose, Mr. Collison?"

Collison proposed that as soon as Mr. Simpson Jones had been decently interred, he and Mr. Walton Jones should examine his books and papers at Summerstay Lodge and at Essex Street.

"I'm with you, sir," assented Mr. Jones. "Then we'll say the day after the funeral here, and the next day at Essex Street. Of course, I quite see that you must find out who this young lady is, and where she hangs out. I never heard of her from Simpson, never! But Simpson, poor chap, was close, sir, close! However, there'll be papers, no doubt."

But there were no papers relating to Miss Cynthia Vandelys, anywhere. There was nothing at Summerstay Lodge; nothing in the dingy office in Essex Street. No letters— no manuscripts— no memoranda— no receipts— nothing. There were entries in the late Simpson Jones's pass-book recording his receipt of big money from Collison, but no records of his having paid any to Miss Vandelys. And the office boy knew nothing of Miss Vandelys. The only lady who had ever come there since he'd known it, he said, was the lady what came to clean up once a week.

"Tell you what it is, Mr. Collison, sir," said Mr. Walton Jones, when the search had come to a definite end, with no result. "It's this! There ain't such a person as Miss Cynthia Vandelys! Never was! Those tales, sir, which you sell in such quantities, was written by Simpson Jones— deceased!"

v

THAT WAS just what Collison himself was thinking. There seemed to be no doubt about it. Cynthia Vandelys was Simpson Jones. Simpson Jones was Cynthia Vandelys. Therefore— granting this to be so— the supply of the sweet and sentimental stories which had so attracted a certain section of the novel-reading

public was now dried up, at its source. Unless Simpson Jones, otherwise Cynthia Vandelys, had left a posthumous work, *The Flower that Once Has Blown* was not only the third but the last of a remarkable series.

But there were serious matters to consider— money matters. *The Flower that Once Has Blown* was now in its seventy-fifth thousand. Six months' royalties were due to the author. Moreover, its success had resulted in a new demand for that author's previous productions. Collison had had to get out new printings of *The Moth and the Star* and *The Night and the Morrow*— 10,000 of each, and they were nearly exhausted already. Money! and who was going to get it? Probably the smug and cute grocer man at Epsom, who, Simpson Jones having died intestate, was already proceeding to lay his hands on everything. Collison foresaw complications— but they all appeared likely to end in Walton Jones.

And suddenly, on the very eve of a day on which Walton Jones and Collison were about to fix things on the supposition that Simpson Jones, deceased, was Cynthia Vandelys, there was brought in to Collison a card bearing the name Miss Mary Shepherd. Miss Mary Shepherd followed it— a plain-featured, simply attired, spectacled young woman of probably thirty years of age, painfully shy and nervous, so much so indeed that Collison made haste to put her at her ease; she was, he supposed, some would-be writer who had something to show, though, to be sure, she carried nothing but an umbrella.

"What can I do for you, Miss Shepherd?" he asked, when he had put her in an easy chair at the side of his desk. "Been writing a book?"

Miss Shepherd lifted a pair of timid eyes.

"I— I'm Cynthia Vandelys, Mr. Collison," she answered, simply. "I— I wanted to see you. Because— I suppose you know— Mr. Jones is dead."

Collison sat staring at her for a full minute.

"Good Heavens!" he said at last. "I'm— I'm delighted to see you! But, my dear young lady! why have you never been to see me before?"

Miss Shepherd began to draw patterns on the carpet with the tip of her umbrella.

"Mr. Jones," she answered, falteringly. "Mr. Jones said not to. You see, he did everything, from the beginning. He said we were to preserve the mystery— it was the proper thing to do. I— I always did everything that Mr. Jones advised. I, of course, didn't know anything— I left it all to Mr. Jones."

Collison had another staring fit.

"Look here!" he said suddenly. "Let's talk. Who are you— where do you live— what do you do except writing?"

"Nothing except writing— now," replied Miss Shepherd. "I used to be a daily governess until the first novel sold. I live in Tooting, Mr. Collison, with my mother— just ourselves."

"Listen to me!" said Collison. "Have you got the original manuscripts of your three novels?"

"Oh yes! carefully put away," answered Miss Shepherd.

Collison heaved a sigh of deep relief.

"Now then," he said, "you tell me the whole story of your relations with Mr. Jones— from the beginning. Everything."

"There's scarcely anything to tell," said Miss Shepherd, looking a little surprised. "When I had written the first novel, I didn't know what to do with it. I handed it to Mr. Jones— he lived at that time next door to us; we used to talk to him over the garden hedge sometimes. He got it typed and returned the manuscript to me. Then he came and said you would publish it, and I was to have a royalty. Then, some months later, he brought me the first money— I was almost frightened to death at the sight of so much! And— I think that's all."

"No, there's a lot more," protested Collison. "I suppose Jones has brought you a lot of money since then?"

"Oh yes, every six months! I've been so grateful."

"How did he used to bring it?" demanded Collison. "Did he give you a cheque?"

"Oh no, he always brought it in bank-notes."

"Did he show you any statements from me?"

"No! He used to say that that was what was due to me, and hand me the money— bank-notes for it."

Collison put the tips of his fingers together and leaned forward.

"Now, Miss Shepherd," he said, oracularly. "Just you tell me this! Did you agree to pay Jones anything for his trouble? And if so what?"

"We had a friendly agreement—" began Miss Shepherd.

"A written one?" interrupted Collison.

"Oh no— just verbal. As to what he was to have for his trouble, you know. He was to do everything for me on what he called the fifty-fifty basis. That is, he was to relieve me of all trouble and business arrangements in connection with my work, and he was to have one-half the proceeds and I the other half. He said that was the proper thing, the usual thing. Isn't it, Mr. Collison?"

Collison made no immediate reply to that ingenuous question, but his interview with Miss Mary Shepherd was an extraordinarily long one, and if Miss Shepherd went away from it feeling highly gratified in one respect, she was just as painfully surprised in another. But Jones was dead.

The End