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THE MALACHITE JAR

J. S. FLETCHER

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THE RAVENSWOOD MYSTERY
MISTRESS SPITFIRE

THE
MALACHITE JAR

AND OTHER STORIES

by

J. S. FLETCHER

Author of "The Golden Venture," "The Cartwright Gardens Murder," etc.

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THE MALACHITE JAR

I

MISADVENTURE—OR MURDER!

In a private sitting-room of an old-fashioned country town hotel, a man sat at a writing-desk absent-mindedly drawing unmeaning scrawls on a blotting-pad. On the table in the centre of the room lay the remains of the last course of a simple dinner; he himself had almost forgotten that he had eaten any dinner. In fact, he had left untouched most of what he had last taken on his plate—in the middle of a spoonful of apple-tart he had got up from his chair to walk up and down the room, thinking, speculating, racking his brain; just as abstractedly he had sat down at the desk, to lay hand on a pen, and begin to scribble lines and curves. He went on scribbling lines and curves and circles and various hieroglyphics, until an old waiter came in and laid the evening newspaper at his side. He started then and looked up, and the waiter glanced at the table.

"You can clear away," said the absent-minded man. "I've finished."

He remained where he was until the table had been cleared and he was once more alone; then he turned his chair to the fire, put his slippered feet on the fender, and picked up the paper. It was a small, four-page sheet, printed at the county town twenty miles away, and it contained little news which had not already appeared in the morning journals. The man turned it over with listless indifference, until his eye lighted on a paragraph, headed "The Glamstock Mystery." The indifference went out of his face then; he lifted the folded sheet nearer and read with eagerness.

"The mystery attending the death of Mr. Septimus

Walshawe, J.P., of Flamstock, remains still unsolved. That this much-respected townsman and magistrate died of poisoning there is no doubt. It is inconceivable that Mr. Walshawe took his own life; no one who was familiar with him could believe for a moment that a man of his cheery temperament, his optimistic character, and his interest in life could ever terminate a useful and fully occupied existence by suicide. Nor is there any evidence that Mr. Walshawe took poison by misadventure. There is a growing feeling in Flamstock that the deceased gentleman was—to put it in plain language—murdered, but, although the services of a noted expert in criminal detection have been employed in this case, nothing, we understand, has so far transpired which is likely to lead to the detection of the cowardly—and clever—murderer."

The reader threw the newspaper aside with a smile. He was the noted expert in criminal detection to whom the paragraph referred, and, after several days' investigation of the Walshawe case, he was not quite so certain about the facts which appertained to it as the writer of the paragraph appeared to be. All that he was actually certain about was that he was very much puzzled. He had done a good deal of thinking during the last few days; he knew that a lot of thinking was still to be done. And, realising that there was no likelihood of his thinking of anything else that evening, he lighted a cigar, and settling himself comfortably before the dancing flames, fell to representing the case to his own judgment for perhaps the hundredth time.

This was how the case stood. Mr. Septimus Walshawe, a gentleman of about sixty years of age at the time of his sudden death, had lived in Flamstock, a small country town, for twenty-five years. He rented the Manor House, a quaint old mansion at the top of the High Street. He was a man of considerable means, and a bachelor. His tastes were literary and antiquarian. He was the possessor of a notable library; he collected old china, old silver; he had a small but valuable museum of antiquities. He was never so happy as when he was busied about his books and his curiosities, but he was by no means a recluse. From the time of his coming to Flamstock he took a good deal of interest in the life of the town.

He had served on its town council; he had been mayor; he had founded a literary and philosophical institute, and once a year he lectured to its members on some subject of importance. Also, he was a magistrate, and he never failed in his attendance at petty sessions or quarter sessions. In short, he was a feature of the town; everybody knew him; his face and figure was as familiar in High Street as the tower of the old church, or the queer figures which ornamented the town-hall clock.

So much for Mr. Walshawe's public life. His private life appeared to have been a very quiet one. His household consisted of a housekeeper, a cook, three female servants, and a boy in buttons; he also employed two gardeners and a groom-coachman, who drove his one equipage, an old-fashioned landau.

He seemed to have no very near relations—in fact, the only relation who ever came to see him was a niece, married far away in the North of England, who visited Flamstock for a week or two every year, and for the last few years had brought her two small children with her. It was understood by those Flamstockians, who were admitted to Mr. Walshawe's confidence, that this lady would inherit all he had. And she had inherited it now that he was dead, and it was by her express desire and on her instructions that the New Scotland Yard man who toasted his feet at the fire of his private parlour in the Bull and Bucket had come down to Flamstock to find out the truth about the mystery which surrounded her uncle's death.

That Mr. Walshawe's death had taken place under mysterious circumstances there was no doubt. He was found dead in bed at noon on the tenth day of November on a Thursday. The detective had no need to refer to his memoranda for these precise facts as regards Mr. Walshawe's doings for some days previous to the day of his death.

Nothing had occurred which could be taken as presaging his decease; he had shown no sign of illness, had made no complaint of any feeling of illness. In fact, he had been rather more than usually active that week.

On the Monday evening he had delivered his annual lecture at the institute; on the Tuesday he had sat on the bench at the town hall from eleven in the morning till five in the afternoon; on the Wednesday he had lunched at Sir Anthony Cleeke's house, just outside the town; that evening he had entertained a few friends to dinner; one or two of whom had stayed rather late.

The fact that they had stayed rather late had relieved Mrs. Whiteside, the housekeeper, of any fear when Mr. Walshawe did not come down to breakfast at his usual hour next morning. She knew that he had not gone to bed until quite two o'clock.

When breakfast-time had been passed by two hours, however, she went to call him, and, getting no answer, walked into his room to find him asleep, but looking so strange and breathing so uneasily that she had become alarmed and sent at once for medical help.

There was delay in getting that. Dr. Thorney, Mr. Walshawe's medical attendant, was away from home, and his assistant had gone into the country on a round of visits. Consequently an hour elapsed before medical help was brought to his bedside. And when it arrived Mr. Walshawe was dead.

In the opinion of the coroner this was decidedly a case for a post-mortem examination, and it was immediately carried out. Its results went to prove that Mr. Walshawe had died from veronal poisoning. Thereupon the mystery began.

It was not known to any member of his household that he ever took such things. There was no trace of such things in the house. His private apartments were searched from top to bottom; his desks, his drawers, every receptacle, every nook and cranny where drugs could have been concealed, were scrupulously examined. Nothing was found.

Nor could anybody be found who had ever sold veronal or any similar drug to Mr. Walshawe. There were three chemists in Flamstock; none of them had ever known him as a customer for any drug of that sort. Advertisements asking for information on this point were inserted first in the local papers of the neighbouring towns, then in the London newspapers. Had any chemist ever sent veronal to Mr. Walshawe by post?

There was no reply to these advertisements. Of course, as plenty of people were quick to point out, Mr. Walshawe could have purchased veronal when he was away from the town.

But, as a matter of fact, he had not been away from Flamstock for well over a year. And, in addition to that, those who knew him best and most intimately agreed that he was given to boasting of his general robust health, his good appetite, and, above everything, his powers of sleeping. He was the last man in the world, said they, to have need of sleeping draughts; he had been heard to say, a thousand times, that he slept like a top from eleven o'clock until seven. He had said so, Sir Anthony Cleeke remembered, only the day before he was found dead.

It was inconceivable that he should have taken veronal in a sufficient quantity to kill him. Yet the fact remained that he had died from veronal poisoning, and must have taken a considerable dose.

When the man from New Scotland Yard came on the scene, brought there by Mr. Walshawe's niece, he had at first come to an immediate conclusion that the dead man had taken the veronal himself. He had had his own reasons, he said, for taking the drug, and being—possibly or probably—unaccustomed to it, he had taken too much.

But he was faced with the fact that no trace of Mr. Walshawe ever having bought or possessed such a drug could be found. He was also faced with the general habits and tone of the dead man. He was further having it impressed upon him, day by day, that Mr. Walshawe's niece was sure, certain, convinced that somebody had administered the veronal to her uncle in order to do him to death.

She pointed out that there was nothing to show that he was likely to take a sleeping draught; certainly nothing to indicate that he was tired of life. Tired of life, indeed! Why, he was just then full of spirits, full of interests. He was looking forward to attending, on the very day on which he died, a sale by auction at a neighbouring country house, where there were certain antiquities and objects of art which he ardently desired to possess.

He had been talking of them when he lunched at Sir Anthony Cleeke's; he talked of them at his own dinner-party in the evening. No—no; nothing would persuade her that her uncle had done anything to bring about his own death. Nothing!

"Misadventure?" suggested the detective.

"No misadventure!" retorted Mr. Walshawe's niece. "My uncle was murdered. It is your place to find out who murdered him."

This was the problem which vexed the mind of the detective as he sat musing and reflecting in his quiet room at the Bull and Bucket. It seemed to him that he was doing little good. He had been in Flamstock nearly a fortnight, pursuing all sorts of inquiries, following up all manner of suggestions, and he was no nearer any solution of the mystery. Nevertheless, he knew what he wanted. And he muttered a word unconsciously.

"Motive!" he said. "Motive! Motive!"

A tap came at the door, and the old waiter put his head into the room.

"Mr. Peasegood to see you, sir," he said.

The detective, with the alacrity of a man who is relieved at the prospect of exchanging ideas with a fellow-creature, rose.

"Show Mr. Peasegood in, William," he answered.

II

THE LEGAL VISITOR

THE man who came into the room, contenting himself with a nod of greeting until the waiter had gone away, was known to the detective as Mr. Septimus Walshawe's solicitor. He had already had several interviews with him, and they had discussed the details of the case until it seemed as if they had covered every inch of the debatable ground. Yet it now appeared to him that Mr. Peasegood had something new to communicate; there was the suggestion of news in his face, and the detective wheeled an easy chair to the hearth with an eagerness which really meant that he was anxious to know what his visitor had to say.

"Good-evening, Mr. Peasegood," he said. "Glad to see you. Can I offer you anything now—a drink, a cigar?"

Mr. Peasegood was slowly drawing off his gloves, which he deposited carefully within his hat. He also divested himself of his overcoat, and, having run his fingers over his smooth hair, he dropped into the seat and smiled.

"Not just now, Mr. Marshford," he answered. "Perhaps a little later. Business first—eh?"

"There is business, then!" exclaimed the detective. "Ah! Something to do with the case, of course?"

"Something to do with the case, of course," repeated Mr. Peasegood, blandly. "Very much to do with the case."

Marshford threw his cigar into the fire and, leaning forward in his chair, looked fixedly at his visitor.

"Yes?" he said.

"You are aware," continued Peasegood, "of the tenor of Mr. Walshawe's will, which was executed by myself some years ago?"

"Yes—yes," replied Marshford; "of course. That is, I know what you told me—that, with the exception of a few trifling legacies, everything was left to the niece, Mrs. Carstone ? "

" Just so," assented Peasegood. " It is ten years since I drew up that will. I have been under the impression ever since that it was Walshawe's last word as to the disposition of his property."

The detective started.

" And—wasn't it ? " he asked eagerly.

Peasegood smiled in an odd fashion.

" Another will—a later will—has come to light," he replied. He looked narrowly at the detective, and he smiled again. " It is a perfectly good will," he added ; " and, of course, it upsets the other."

" Bless me ! " said Marshford. " I'm sorry to hear it—for Mrs. Carstone's sake.'"

Peasegood laughed.

" Oh, it doesn't make any great amount of difference to Mrs. Carstone ! " he remarked. " Oh, no ! But it may make a considerable difference to somebody else in a way which that somebody else won't quite appreciate ; a very considerable difference."

Marshford looked an inquiry. He was eager with inquisitiveness, but he recognised that Peasegood was one of those men who will tell a story in their own way, and he waited.

" This is how it is," continued Peasegood after a pause ; " And you're the first person I've spoken to about it. This afternoon, just as I was about to leave my office for the day, Mrs. Whiteside called on me."

" Walshawe's housekeeper ! " exclaimed Marshford.

" Walshawe's housekeeper—exactly. She requested an interview. Her manner was mysterious. She was some time in coming to a point—I had to ask her, at last, what she really wanted. Eventually she told me that not many months before his death Mr. Walshawe made a new will, and entrusted it to her keeping."

The detective whistled.

" Just so," continued Peasegood. " I, too, felt inclined to whistle. Instead, I asked to see the will she spoke of. She produced it. I read it hastily. It is a perfectly good will; nothing can upset it. Or, rather, there's only one thing that might upset it—we'll talk of what that is later. But—to give you particulars of it—it was made on the twenty-fourth of last May; it was written out by Walshawe himself on a sheet of foolscap; it is duly and properly signed and witnessed. Quite a good will."

"And its provisions?" asked Marshford.

"Simple—very!" replied Peasegood. "It appoints the same executors—myself and Mr. John Entwhistle. Mrs. Carstone is left the residue of everything—real and personal estate—as before. The trifling legacies are as before. But a sum of ten thousand pounds is left to Jane Whiteside, and a like sum to her son Richard."

Peasegood paused and laughed a little.

"That's the difference," he said—"a little difference of twenty thousand pounds. I said it would make no great difference to Mrs. Carstone. It doesn't. Walshawe, first and last, died worth a quarter of a million. Mrs. Carstone can easily afford to drop twenty thousand. Twenty thousand is nothing to her. But ten thousand is a lot to Mrs. Whiteside—and to her son."

"To anybody but wealthy people!" exclaimed the detective. "Um! Well, that's news, Mr. Peasegood. But—do you think it has any bearing on the mystery of Walshawe's death?"

Peasegood's eyes and mouth became inscrutable for a minute. Then he smiled.

"You asked me if I'd take anything," he said. "I'll take a little whisky, and I'll smoke a cigar. Then—I'll tell you something."

His face became inscrutable again, and remained so until Marshford had summoned the waiter and his demands for refreshment had been supplied, and he kept silence until he had smoked a good inch of his cigar. When he turned to the detective again it was with a smile that seemed to suggest much.

"I daresay you're as well aware as I am that—

especially in professions like yours and mine—men who are practised in deducing one thing from another are apt to think pretty sharply at time," he said. "I thought with unusual sharpness when Mrs. Whiteside revealed the existence of this will and I'd convinced myself that it would stand. Or, rather, I didn't so much think as remember. I remembered—that's the word—remembered."

"Remembered—what?" asked Marshford.

Peasegood bent forward with a sidelong glance at the door, and he tapped the detective's knee.

"I remembered two very striking facts—striking in connection with what we know," he replied, in a whisper. "First that Jane Whiteside's son, her co-beneficiary, is a chemist in London; second, that he was in Flamstock during the evening and night immediately preceding Walshawe's death. That's what I remembered."

Marshford opened his eyes to their widest extent. Once more he whistled.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, supplementing the whistle. "That's—gad, I don't know what that isn't, or—is! Anyway, it's news of rare significance."

"Some people," observed Peasegood, calmly—"some people would call it news of sinister significance. It's news that's worth thinking about, anyway. I," he continued, smiling grimly—"I have been thinking about it ever since I remembered it."

"What have you thought?" asked Marshford.

"Nothing that's very clear yet," replied the solicitor. "But you may be sure that Mrs. Whiteside had long since told her son of the will which she kept locked up in her private repository for such things. He'd no doubt seen it. And a man will dare much for ten thousand pounds."

"You think he—or he and his mother between them—administered the stuff to Walshawe?" suggested the detective.

"I think," answered Peasegood deliberately; "I think that when a man dies as suddenly as Walshawe did, when it's found that he was poisoned, when it's discovered that two people benefit by his death to the extent of twenty thousand pounds, to be paid to them in cash and unconditionally soon after his decease, and when one of these persons is a man acquainted with drugs and their properties—why, then, it's high time that some inquiry should be made.'"

"Did you say as much to Mrs. Whiteside?" asked Marshford.

"No, I didn't," replied the solicitor. "All that I said to Mrs. Whiteside was—to ask her why she didn't bring forward this will at once. She replied that she didn't know that there was any occasion for hurry, and that she'd thought she'd wait until things had got settled down a bit."

The detective reflected in silence for a while.

"What about her manner?" he suddenly asked. "You'd have thought—good heavens!—why, if they're guilty, you'd have thought they'd be afraid to bring that will forward. They can't be—fools?"

"Apart from her mysterious way of introducing the subject, the woman's manner was calm enough," answered Peasegood. "And, as to their being fools, you've got to remember this—the *onus probandi* rests on us if we accuse them. We've got to prove—prove, mind you!—that they, or one of them, poisoned Walshawe, I repeat—prove!"

"The man may be the guilty party, his mother may be perfectly innocent," remarked Marshford.

"And the mother may be the guilty party, and the son as innocent as you are," said Peasegood.

Marshford nodded.

"Anyway, there's a motive," he said. "But I can see certain things that are in their favour. And the first is—since the son's a chemist, his knowledge would surely show him a cleverer way of getting rid of Walshawe than that. Considering that he's a chemist, and, of course, supposing that he's guilty, it was clumsy—clumsy."

"I'm not so sure," replied Peasegood. "You've got to remember this—good sleeper as Walshawe boasted himself to be, there's nobody can prove that he didn't take drugs at times. For instance, that particular night he'd been giving a dinner-party, he sat up, to my knowledge—I was one of his guests—until quite two o'clock. He may have said to himself, as on many similar occasions, " I'm a bit excited. I'll take something to make me sleep," and he may have taken this stuff. You can't prove that he hadn't it by him, any more than you can prove that these people—or one of them—contrived to administer it to him. All you can say is this: Walshawe undoubtedly died of veronal poisoning. There is nothing to show that he ever took veronal. Jane Whiteside and Richard Whiteside benefit by his death to the extent of twenty thousand pounds. They had the opportunity of administering——"

" For that matter," said Marshford suddenly, " Jane Whiteside had abundant opportunities—daily opportunities. Why choose that particular night ? "

Peasegood got up and began to put on his coat.

" I said, to begin with, that Richard may be the sole guilty party," he answered. " He was in Flamstock that night. He came by the six train that Wednesday evening ; he left at eight next morning, having spent the night at the Manor House. And it seems to me that the first thing to do is to find out if Richard Whiteside is in particular need of—his legacy—eh ? "

" Just so—just so," agreed Marshford. " Leave that to me. I shall want his address."

Peasegood laid a slip of paper on the table.

" That's his address," he said. " Be cautious, Marshford. Well, I'm going."

The detective accompanied his visitor downstairs. In the hall, a little, middle-aged, blue-spectacled man, who carried a bag and a travelling-rug, was booking a room at the office window. And when the detective came back from the door, after saying " good-night " to Peasegood, the landlady called to him, glancing at the new arrival.

" Here's a gentleman asking for you, Mr. Marshford," she said.

The little, blue-spectacled man made a bow, and presented the detective with a card.

" My name and address, sir," he said politely, in a sharp, business-like fashion. " Can I have a few words with you ? "

Marshford looked at the card, and read :

" William W. Williams, M.P.S., Dispensing and Family Chemist, The Pharmacy, Llandinas."

" Come this way, Mr. Williams," responded Marshford.

And as he led his second caller up the stairs, he said to himself that the evening was certainly yielding fruit. For he had no doubt whatever that Mr. William W. Williams had come to tell him something about the Walshawe case.

III

THE SCIENTIFIC VISITOR

ONCE within the private sitting-room the caller unwound the shawl and comforter in which he was swathed, and took off a heavy travelling overcoat that lay beneath them. He then presented himself as a little, spare man of active frame and movements. What Marshford could see of his eyes beneath his spectacles, and his mouth beneath his beard and moustache, seemed to show that his mind was as active as his body.

He bustled into the chair which Peasegood had just vacated, accepted the detective's offer of a drink with ready cordiality, and, having expressed his thanks in a set phrase, clapped his hands on his knees and looked searchingly at his host.

" I have come a long way to see you, Mr. Marshford," he said. " Yes, indeed, a long way I have come, sir ! "

" That shows that you want to see me on important business, Mr. Williams," observed Marshford. " I gather that, of course."

" Important business, sir ; oh, yes, indeed ! Of the first importance, in my opinion, Mr. Marshford," replied the visitor. He cleared his throat, as if he meant to indulge in a lengthy speech. " I have read what has been in the papers, sir, about Mr. Septimus Walshawe," he began. " I gathered from the papers that you are in charge of that case ? "

" I am," said Marshford. " And if you can throw any light on it, I shall be much obliged to you."

Williams again cleared his throat.

" I can, sir," he answered. " Yes, indeed I can. I knew the late Mr. Septimus Walshawe, sir, though I have not set eyes on him for twenty-five years. Mr. Walshawe, sir, used to live in Llandinas, and though I have not seen Mr. Walshawe since he left—five-and-twenty years ago—I know something about him which, as I gather from the papers, nobody here in Flamstock knows, and you do not know, either. Yes, indeed ! "

" Yes ? " said Marshford. " What ? "

Williams drew his chair close to the detective's. He wagged his head with a knowing air.

" This, sir," he said. " The late Septimus Walshawe was a victim of drugs—or, rather, of one drug. Of one drug, Mr. Marshford."

" What drug ? " asked Marshford quietly.

Williams slapped his knees, put his face close to the detective's and rapped out one word.

" Opium ! " he said. " Opium ! "

Marshford stared silently at his visitor for a minute or two. Here, indeed, was a revelation which he had not expected—a revelation which might mean a great deal.

" You're quite sure of what you allege ? " he asked at last.

" Allege ! " exclaimed the chemist, with a laugh. " I know ! Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Marshford ! As if I should come all this way, whatever, to talk about something that I wasn't sure of ! Oh, yes ; I know, sir ! "

" What do you know ? " said Marshford.

" I know this," replied Williams. " Mr. Walshawe lived in Llandinas—at a house called Plas Newydd, Mr. Marshford—for five years before he came to live here. Soon after he came into Llandinas, he came to my shop for opium. He told me that he had become accustomed to taking it at times for a certain internal disorder which he had contracted while abroad. I made it up for him in five-grain pills. He had so many a month, and as time went on he began to increase his doses. But when he left our neighbourhood he was not taking so much—not nearly so much—as he did later on."

"How," asked Marshford, "how do you know what he took later on?"

The chemist smiled slyly.

"How do I know indeed?" he said. "Because I have sent him his opium pills to his house here in Flamstock ever since he came here. Yes, indeed; five-and-twenty years I have sent them, once a month. And he needed more and more a month every year. That man, sir, was a victim to the opium habit."

"You sent him a supply of opium pills regularly?" asked Marshford.

"Once a month I sent them—yes," replied Williams. "In a neat box, sir, sealed. Oh, yes; for five and-twenty years, Mr. Marshford!"

"I thought," remarked Marshford, reflectively, "that a confirmed opium-taker showed marked signs of the vice?"

"Not always, sir—not always! He wouldn't," said Williams. "He was a fresh-coloured, lively-looking man when I knew him, and was to the end, judging from the accounts I've read in the papers. No, sir; I don't think he would show the usual signs much."

"You don't think that anybody else would detect it?" suggested Marshford.

Williams looked round him, and sank his voice to a whisper.

"I think that somebody here did detect it—was well aware of it," he answered. "Yes, indeed, I do, Mr. Marshford—oh, yes!"

" Who ? " asked Marshford, bluntly.

" Whoever poisoned him," replied the chemist with another sly smile. " Yes, sir—whoever poisoned him."

Marshford considered this suggestion awhile. It was some time before he spoke ; meanwhile his visitor sat tapping his knees and watching him.

" Look here, Mr. Williams," said the detective at last. " You've got a theory, and you've come here to tell me what it is. I'm much obliged to you. And now —what is it ? "

Williams cleared his throat again with one of his sharp, dry coughs.

" This, sir," he said. " It seems certain that somebody wanted to get Walshawe out of the way. That somebody knew that he took opium in the shape of pills—probably knew how many he took, and the chemical value of the pills, and made the veronal up to resemble the pills—so closely, indeed, that Walshawe didn't know they weren't opium pills. Yes, indeed ! "

" That argues a certain amount of chemical knowledge, Mr. Williams," said Marshford—" I mean on the part of the poisoner."

" Oh, it does ! " agreed Williams. " Or it argues that the poisoner knew where to get veronal made up in the form and of the strength he wanted. Oh, yes ! "

" That's your theory ? " said Marshford.

" That's my theory, sir," answered the chemist. " I formed that theory as soon as I read the case in the papers. And having business in London to-morrow I took this place on my way so that I could tell you what I thought. And I venture to predict, sir, that if you ever do get to the bottom of this mystery, you'll find that theory to be correct. Yes, indeed ! You don't know of anything that fits in with it, I suppose ? "

" I may tell you something about that later, Mr. Williams," replied Marshford. " I suppose you are going to stay the night here ? "

The chemist rose, and began to gather together his belongings.

"I am, sir," he said. "I am now about to take some much-needed refreshment, and then I am going to bed—I have had a long journey, whatever. I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in the morning, Mr. Marshford?"

"Yes, that's it—see me in the morning," replied Marshford. "I'm going to think over what you've told me."

He sat for some time after the chemist had gone away, thinking steadily on the news just given to him. He was beginning to see a clear line now as regards the administration of the veronal, and it certainly seemed to lead to a strong suggestion of the guilt of the Whitesides, mother and son—or, at any rate, one or other of them. It might be that both were concerned; it might be that only the son was concerned. And it might be that the son was innocent and the mother guilty.

"Anyhow," he murmured, as he drew up a chair to the writing-desk, "the first thing to do is to find out all about the son, and I'll set Chivvins on to that at once."

But he had scarcely written a line of his letter when the old waiter put his grey head inside the door again and announced the third visitor of the evening.

IV

THE IMAGINATIVE VISITOR

"MR. PITT-CARNABY, sir," said the waiter, mouthing the double-barrelled name with a reverence which showed Marshford that this latest caller was a person of importance. He bowed the visitor in and moved across the room on pretence of mending the fire. "Followed me straight in, sir—wouldn't wait," he whispered to the detective as he passed him.

Marshford looked up from his writing and recognised an elderly gentleman whom he had once or twice seen in the streets of Flamstock and who was chiefly remarkable for the fact that he always wore a knickerbocker suit and a Scotch cap with ribbons depending from its hinder end. He was a bearded and spectacled gentleman. Marshford, on the rare occasions on which he had seen him, had set him down as being a little eccentric. All the same Mr. Pitt-Carnaby looked business-like enough as he took the chair which had already been twice occupied that evening.

" Allow me to introduce myself," said the third visitor. " I am Mr. Pitt-Carnaby, of the Hollies. I have come to speak to you about Mr. Walshawe's mysterious death. Mr. Walshawe was one of my colleagues on the magisterial bench ; he was also a personal friend of mine. We had many tastes in common—we were, for instance, both collectors of antiquities. Naturally, I have thought and reflected a great deal on the circumstances of his sudden decease."

" I should be very glad of any information, sir," replied Marshford, almost mechanically. He was not greatly disposed to listen to any further theorisings that night, and he wanted to write his letter to Chivvins. " Is there something you can tell ? " he asked.

Mr. Pitt-Carnaby smiled.

" That is a very definite question," he answered. " Perhaps I can't reply to it quite so definitely. However, I will say what I came to say. Has it ever struck you, in the exercise of your calling, that imagination is a very valuable asset ? "

Marshford was not quite clear as to his visitor's meaning, and he said so.

" Some people," continued Mr. Pitt-Carnaby, " bring science—in some shape or other—to bear on these things; I believe that imagination is a surer thing—eh ? "

Marshford began to fear that he was in for a very long dissertation from an obvious crank. Nevertheless, it was impossible to get rid of Mr. Pitt-Carnaby in summary fashion.

" I suppose you have some theory, sir ? " he said, thinking it best to put a direct question.

But the visitor was evidently not the sort of man to be forced into answering direct questions.

" I have allowed my imagination to play around the closing hours of my unfortunate friend's life," he said. " Perhaps the result is a theory, though I won't call it so. Instead, I will invite your attention to a few facts. And please to understand that I am not going to mention any names. If I make suggestions, I shall leave you to follow them up."

Marshford's face lightened; suggestions and facts, especially facts—were things with which he could deal. He left the mantelpiece, against which he had been leaning, and took a chair close to his visitor. Mr. Pitt-Carnaby noticed the sudden revival of interest and smiled.

" Very well ! " he said. " The late Mr. Walshawe was, like myself, a collector of books, curiosities, and antiquities. On the evening before his death he entertained some friends—myself amongst them—at dinner. Our conversation during the evening turned very largely on a sale by auction which was to be held next day at a certain country house in this neighbourhood. Many interesting articles were to be offered; the late tenant of the house in question had been a great collector. Amongst those articles was a jar, fashioned of malachite, which, as you may or may not know, Mr. Marshford, is a mineral, scientifically known as basic cupric carbonate. This jar was of the finer quality of malachite—the malachite found in a certain district in Siberia, which is used in the manufacture of mosaics and ornaments. Also, it had a well-authenticated history—it had once belonged to Peter the Great of Russia, and it was given by him, during his stay in England in 1698, to an ancestor of the gentleman whose effects were being disposed of. Mr. Walshawe was very anxious indeed to acquire this malachite jar. He had a collection of articles which had belonged to Tsars and Tsarinas of Russia during the past two centuries, and he wished to add this to it. Concentrate your attention, then, Mr. Marshford, on the fact that on the evening before his death Mr. Walshawe's mind was fixed on buying a certain malachite jar which was to be offered for sale nearly twenty miles away at about one o'clock next day."

Marshford nodded silently. He was beginning to think that something might come out of this. And Mr. Pitt-Carnaby saw his increasing interest, and went on with his story.

"I repeat," he said, "for it is a highly important point, that Mr. Walshawe was absolutely determined to buy this antique. At dinner that night he talked of it a great deal; he said what figure he would go to—a heavy one. He anticipated a certain amount of opposition, for the jar was famous, and there were likely to be competitors from London, and even from Paris. However, Mr. Walshawe was, as you know, a man of very large means, and he meant to outbid anybody and everybody. When I left him, a good deal after midnight, he was still gloating over his determination to carry home the malachite jar in triumph from the sale."

"And he never went to the sale," remarked Marshford, reflectively.

"He never went to the sale—true!" replied Mr. Pitt-Carnaby. "We know, of course, that when that sale began, my unfortunate friend was dead. But I went to the sale, as also did several of my fellow-guests of the previous evening. We expected to meet Mr. Walshawe there, but he never arrived. One o'clock came—he was still absent. At a quarter-past one the famous malachite jar was put up—Mr. Walshawe was not there to bid for it. There were many competitors—there were competitors from London and from Paris, as we had thought likely. The bidding began at five hundred guineas and advanced to two thousand guineas, at which sum the malachite jar was knocked down."

"To whom?" asked Marshford, eagerly.

Mr. Pitt-Carnaby rose, and picked up his Scotch cap, his stout stick, and his hand-knitted gloves.

"I said I should mention no names," he said with a smile, "but one name I must mention. The malachite jar was sold for two thousand guineas to John Pethington, the house and estate agent in our High Street. Of course, Pethington bought for somebody else. Well, I must now say good-night, Mr. Marshford."

" But," exclaimed Marshford, surprised at this sudden termination of the visit, " but—what do you expect me to do ? What——"

Mr. Pitt-Carnaby wandered towards the door.

" Oh, what you please ! " he answered. " Of course, if I were in your case, I should find out from Pethington the name of the person for whom he bought the malachite jar."

" And then ? " asked Marshford.

Mr. Pitt-Carnaby laid his hand on the door and turned with a sharp look.

" Then ? " he said. " Then you will have the name of the man who poisoned Septimus Walshawe ! "

V

THE PLAIN TRUTH

MARSHFORD looked at his watch when Mr. Pitt-Carnaby had departed. It was close upon ten o'clock He believed that most people in Flamstock went to bed at ten o'clock; nevertheless, there was a possibility that some did not. Anyway, it would do him no harm to take a stroll up the High Street. And he threw the scarcely begun letter to Chivvins into the fire, and, putting on his ulster and a travelling cap, went out into the night.

There were lights in the windows of Mr. Pethington's house, and when Marshford rang the bell, Mr. Pethington, a fat-faced, stolid-looking man, answered the summons in person. As the light of his hall-lamp fell on Marshford's face Pethington silently moved aside, motioning the detective to enter. When Marshford stepped within, Pethington just as silently showed him into a small room near the door. He turned up a solitary gas-jet, and looked at his visitor with the calm interrogation of a man who expects to be asked questions.

"You know me, Mr. Pethington, and what my business is?" said Marshford, in a low voice. "I can take that for granted, of course?"

Pethington leaned back against his desk, and put his hands in his pockets.

"I don't know what it is at present," he answered. "I know what you're after in the town, of course."

"I want to ask a very simple question," said Marshford. "It's one which you'll have to answer sooner or later, and I wish you'd answer it now. For whom did you purchase that malachite jar? You know what I mean."

Pethington showed no surprise. Instead, he merely nodded, as if he had expected to have this question put to him, and he pulled out his watch, noting the time.

"Instead of asking me to answer that question, Mr. Marshford," he said, "I wish you'd just step round to the police-station."

Marshford stared at this unexpected reply.

"Why?" he exclaimed.

"Because I think you'll get an answer to it there," replied Pethington, dropping his watch into his pocket.

The two men exchanged looks. Then Pethington nodded.

"You'll find I'm right," he said.

Marshford went away from the house without a word. He walked rapidly up the deserted High Street towards the town hall, wondering what this sudden development implied. And suddenly, rounding a corner, and in the full light of a street-lamp, he ran into Peasegood.

"I was just coming to you," said the solicitor. "Well, the truth's out at last—just got it. Good heavens, what a world this is!"

"What is it?" demanded Marshford. "You don't mean that somebody's confessed to poisoning Walshawe?"

"That's just what I do mean," replied Peasegood; "the last man in the world I should have suspected, too!"

"Who, then?" exclaimed Marshford.

Peasegood took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Then he spoke one word—a name:

"Thorney!"

"What!" said Marshford. "The doctor?"

"The doctor!" repeated Peasegood. "He's just told the inspector and me all about it. It was by inadvertence. Dr. Thorney, you must know, is an ardent collector of certain things, as Walshawe was. He was bent on having a certain jar of malachite, with a history attached to it, which was to be put up at that sale I told you of. Walshawe was bent on it, too—vowed he'd have it. Thorney—you know that these collectors spare no pains to steal a march on each other—resolved to play a trick on Walshawe. It turns out that Walshawe took opium secretly, in pills—Thorney knew it, and knew where he kept his pills, in a little case on his desk. That night when we all dined there, Thorney got into Walshawe's study by himself, took the opium pills out of the case, and substituted veronal which he'd made up himself. His idea was to make Walshawe sleep far into the next day, until he was too late for the sale. If things had gone as Thorney intended, Walshawe would have slept until the afternoon and been all right after. But Thorney forgot one very important thing."

"What?" asked Marshford, eagerly.

"He didn't know how many opium pills Walshawe did, or could, take," answered the solicitor, "and so you see Walshawe took sufficient veronal to poison him. Misadventure, of course, in Thorney's eyes, but——"

He paused, and looked thoughtfully down the long vista of the High Street as the two men turned away together.

"But—what?" asked Marshford.

"I wonder what the judge will tell the jury to call it?" answered Peasegood.

THE LIGHTHOUSE ON SHIVERING SAND

WHEN Mordecai Chiddock came to join the lighthouse staff on Shivering Sand, Jezreel Cornish was taking his allowance of sleep, and Chiddock, being new to the place, did not know who it was he would meet when Cornish woke up. Otherwise, the boat which had brought him and a month's provisions over from the mainland would never have gone back without him. I have often wondered how it was that I was on duty that morning, instead of Jezreel Cornish. If Jezreel had gone down to the boat, and the two men had met while Chiddock had the chance of getting away with his life, I should have been spared a good deal. But 'tis idle to speculate on the why and wherefore of things.

Until Chiddock came we had never been more than two at the Shivering Sand. That was a bad arrangement, of course, and it was I who got the worst of it. Once Reuben Cleary fell sick, and had to take to his bed. That was just after the monthly boat had been, and until it came again I had to work night and day and nurse him into the bargain. Then there was Pharaoh Nanjulian ; he was a melancholy sort from his youth, and the loneliness and monotony affected his brain. His wits gave out at last, and he used to spend the whole day in singing psalms and hymns, and preaching to the sea-birds. We had great storms that autumn, and the monthly boat came a fortnight late, and found me about done for, what with living day and night with a madman, and doing work for two. And it was because of what I said—not mincing matters—that it was decided to send a third man, so that in such cases as those of Cleary and Nanjulian the other man should not be utterly and badly alone.

Chiddock was the man who was sent. Of course, neither Cornish nor myself knew who would be sent ; all we knew was that the September boat would bring a third keeper off with it. It was a fine, bright morning when he came, and I watched him narrowly as he came on to the platform at the foot of the lighthouse, which you could only make at certain times. He was a thick-set, swarthy man of middle-age ; he had curling black hair and beard, and his eyes were shiftier than I cared about. However, he bade me good-morning civilly enough, and when he had got his own things up from the boat, gave me a ready hand with the month's stores. It was not till the boat was off again that he seemed disposed for conversation.

" My name's Chiddock," he says. " Mordecai Chiddock."

" Mine's John Graburn," I answered him.

He offered me a plug of tobacco, and took a sort of comprehensive glance all around him.

" This," he says, " is a lonelier place than most of 'em."

" You'll make all the more company," I says. " There'll be three of us now."

He gave a glance at the door at the top of the stone stairway, as if he expected to see the third man appear.

" Ah," he said ; " and what sort of shipmate is the other partner on this rock of solitude ? "

" Oh, he's all right," said I, off-hand. " He's only been here this last month, but he's a decent man, is Jezreel."

Chiddock turned round on me like a flash, and I saw a queer look come into his eyes.

" Jezreel ! " he said, short and sharp-like. " That's an uncommon name. I knew a man of that name once. This man's other name, what might it be, now, Graburn?"

" Cornish," I answered, " Jezreel Cornish."

Then I knew that something was amiss, for his cheeks lost all their dark colour and turned a strange pasty white, and I saw sweat burst out on them. He came a step nearer and looked at me with burning eyes, and his lips quivered under his black moustache.

" Jezreel Cornish ! " he says, almost in a whisper.

" Jezreel Cornish ! A tallish, scraggy-built man with a long, sharp nose and red hair and ferrety eyes ; is it a man like that ? "

" And what if it is ? " I said, watching him.

He drew a long breath, and, turning, looked out across the bay after the boat from the mainland, as if he would call her back. But she was already a speck in the distance, and he turned again to me, breathing hard.

" If it is," he says, muttering his words, " if it is, mister—well, then, I wish I was in that craft out there, or on shore, or anywhere, that's all. Jezreel Cornish—ah ! "

I saw his face suddenly change from white to red, and from red to white, and, turning, there was Cornish himself coming down the stairs, yawning and stretching after his sleep. And quick as lightning the newcomer's hand went round to his hip-pocket, and I guessed what he had there.

" If that's a pistol you've got," I says, sharp and quick, " you can leave it where it is. I'm boss here, and——"

He seemed to give no more heed to me than if I had been a child, and he kept his eyes on Cornish with the watchfulness of a dog that expects a blow. And I turned then to look at Cornish, wondering what it was that was about to happen.

He was not a quick man at noticing things, Cornish, and he had got to the foot of the stairs before he looked fully at Chiddock. But when he looked, I saw all the colour go out of his face, too, and when it came back it was a sort of dark-red, and there was that in his eyes which meant murder. He crouched his body up and together, as an animal does when it's going to spring, and he came forward with his sharp teeth showing under his ragged red moustache ; and I knew then that I was going to have a troublous time before the boat came again. For these two, Chiddock and Cornish, stood glaring at each other for all the world like wild beasts that are mad to be at grips, and I could see that it needed but a word to let hell loose between them.

Cornish was the first to speak, and I shouldn't have known his voice; it was so changed and so awful. And it was to me that he spoke, and not to Chiddock.

"Is this the new keeper, Graburn?" says he. "Am I looking at him?"

"You are," I says, "and not any pleasanter than he's looking at you, Jezreel Cornish. And I'm not so blind that I can't see that there's black, cruel, bad blood between you two, and I tell you I'll have none of that sort of thing here; so mind your manners, both of you."

"And he'll be here with us, night and day, shut up with us on Shivering Sand!" says Cornish, watching Chiddock with the eyes of a hungry devil. "Shut up on Shivering Sand, and with me!"

"And with me, and both of you under my orders!" I rapped out sternly. "And I'll see that——"

Cornish spat on the ground at his feet.

"Last time I set eyes on your devil's face, Mordecai Chiddock," he says, in a voice that had suddenly turned as mild as milk, "I told you I'd murder you when the time came for my chance. It's come! I've got you to myself now, and, by God above, I'll kill you!"

What next happened was over in a flash. For Chiddock suddenly whipped the revolver out of his pocket and had Cornish covered. But before he could shoot I knocked it out of his hand, and the next instant had kicked it clean over the edge of the rock into the sea. And with that Chiddock suddenly turned more frightened than before, and it seemed to me that he was going to whimper like a child whose nurse has just checked it. But Cornish only laughed in a sniggering, sneering fashion, and he turned away from us and went slowly up the stairway into the lighthouse, leaving Chiddock standing there before me with his limbs trembling as if he'd suddenly got the ague, and his damp face whiter than ever. When he spoke, his voice was as spiritless as could be, and I saw the man was badly frightened.

"You've left me defenceless, Mr. Graburn," he says in a queer-sounding voice. "He'll kill me!"

"There's going to be no killing while I'm about here, my man," I answered; "and you'd best tell me what all this is about. There's a blood feud between you?"

But, instead of answering me directly, he began to talk and murmur to himself, and I could make nothing of what I overheard; and all the time he talked, his eyes, as restless as a freshly-trapped animal's, were searching the sea all round us, as if he hoped to signal some vessel to come and take him off.

"There's no living soul will come to this rock until the boat comes a month hence, Chiddock," says I. "You can make up your mind to that. So if you want me to help you, you'd best to speak, quick."

He turned then, and glowered at me with a sullen rage burning in his eyes.

"If you hadn't treated me as you have," he said, nodding towards the spot where the revolver had gone, "I'd have shot him there and then, and been free of him. As it is, you'll have to stand between us."

"Jezreel Cornish has no firearms," I said. "There's nothing on the rock but an old fowling-piece, and the powder and shot are in my care, and nobody but me can come at them."

Now, this was not strictly true, because I had a revolver of my own carefully hidden away for emergencies; but I was not going to let anybody know of it. However, Chiddock seemed to think nothing of what I had just said.

"He'll kill me," he repeated, "and it'll be murder on your part if you let him! You'll have to get me away, Mr Graburn; and till you do, how will I get meat or sleep? I'm hungry and thirsty now."

"It strikes me you're a coward!" says I. "Sit you down while I go up and see what Cornish can tell me about this."

He sat himself down on a rock as obediently as a child might, and I climbed the stair and made into our living-room, where I found Cornish eating and drinking as unconcernedly as if nothing had happened. And I liked that mood of his a good deal less than I should have liked a fiery outburst.

" Now then, Cornish," I says, sitting down between him and the door, " what's all this about? I'm head-keeper here, and I'm going to know what you're after."

" What I'm after," he says, coolly, " is killing that man outside, which I shall surely do. There's no hurry. The last time I met him I told him what I should do, and I should have done it then, but he was too cunning, and gave me the slip. That he cannot do this time. He can't swim to the mainland, and he can't fly; he's netted. I can bide my time, but he'll never go off this rock alive!"

" What's he done to you?" I asked him. " As you're so candid about killing him, you might as well be candid about the crime you've got against him."

Before he answered he cut himself a great slab of the corned beef he was eating, and ate heartily of it, just as if he hadn't a trouble in the world.

" That man," he said at last, nodding towards the open door, through which you could see a patch of dancing sea, " that man isn't a man at all; he's a devil! A low, mean, black devil, Mr. Graburn. Him and me was shipmates once, and we were in Valparaiso together, and there we made a nice bit of money—never mind how. I was struck down with a bad fever; the last thing I remembered was trusting him with my money, and his promising to send most of it home to my wife in England. Then the deliriums came on, and I never knew any more until I came to in a charity hospital. The skunk had taken all I had and left me. What's more, he sailed home to England, found my wife, got her to sell up the home and a bit of a little shop she'd got together on pretence of sending the money to me, and persuaded her to trust him with the sending of it—which, naturally, he never did. And when I did come home, my wife was dead—died in the workhouse, where I found the kids. And, of course, I've got to kill him!"

" If all you say's true, Cornish," I said, " he deserves more than that. But I'll have no killing here, understand, now!"

"I don't say that I'll kill him to-day, or to-morrow," he says, paying no more heed to me than if I hadn't been there. "Any time'll do me, now that he's trapped. I'll play with him as a cat plays with a mouse. "I'll make him as he can't sleep o' nights with fear that death's close on him. I shall enjoy thinking what way I'll kill him; I'll invent something good!"

"I'm inclined to think trouble and anger have turned your brain, Cornish," says I.

"You can think what you're pleased to think," he says, still as cold in his manner as a jelly-fish, "but you'll see Mordecai Chiddock's corpse before the boat comes again."

"If his living body's turned into a corpse by you, Jezreel Cornish," says I, "you'll only swing for it."

He laughed at that in his sneering fashion. The sound of it made me frightened, for I could not bring myself to decide whether the man was in his right mind or gone out of his senses like Pharaoh Nanjulian.

"You wouldn't have a chance of escape," I said.

"Who says I wanted one?" he says. "Since I found my wife dead in the workhouse I've only lived to kill Mordecai Chiddock. And I say you shall see his corpse, Mr. Graburn—and I don't care if you see mine after you've seen his. But I tell you, once for all, I'll kill him!"

I left him sitting there, still eating, and went down to the rocks again, to find Chiddock where I had left him. He turned round on me with fright in his eyes. I looked at him, no doubt, with the disgust and repulsion that I felt, for there had been something in Cornish's tone that made me feel him to be speaking truth.

"If what I've heard about you is true," I said, "you're the lowest-down scoundrel I ever heard of, Chiddock. Death's too good for you, it's too easy. You ought to be skinned alive!"

He glowered at me worse than before.

"I knew that you'd side with him!" he growled. "But it'll be found out, and it'll be murder against the two of you—mind you that, mister."

"Leave that to me," says I, and put down at his side some victuals and drink that I had brought out with me. "And in the meantime," I says, "get that food into you and be more of a man. You've come here to work, not to vapour and whine, and I may want more out of you than you reckoned for."

He made no reply to that, but fell upon the victuals like a famished wolf, while I turned back again to the lighthouse. I had a notion in my head, and I was going to put it into shape at once.

There was nothing for it but to keep these two men apart. That Cornish would kill Chiddock I now had no doubt—no more than that Chiddock would have killed Cornish if I had not knocked the revolver out of his hand. Now, that revolver had given me an idea. I, being the only man of the three with a weapon, was certainly master of the situation. And accordingly, as soon as I re-entered the lighthouse, I went to my own chamber, secured and loaded my revolver, and turned into the living-room to speak, with authority, to Jezreel Cornish.

Jezreel had finished his eating, but he still sat at his end of the table, staring moodily at the empty plate. I sat down at the other end; when he at last looked up it was to look straight into the barrel of the revolver.

"What's—what's the meaning of that?" he growled.

"The meaning, Jezreel, my lad, is that," says I, "I'm master here in more ways than one, but especially because I'm the only man of the three that's got a weapon. Now, you and the man outside are not going to meet. It's your turn for duty; you'll go up that stair, and I shall lock you in. When it's your hour for coming off I'll let you out; but you'll not see him, because he'll be locked up, too, until you're locked in your own chamber. You and him, Cornish, are going to do all the work this next month; I'm going to do nothing but play gaoler and cook until the boat comes and takes one of you off. Now you can just go up to your duty, and I'll draw the bolt on you. Get under way, Cornish!"

"And what if I don't?" he says, looking ugly.

"There's no ifs in this case," says I. "Come!"

He stared hard at me and the revolver for a good minute, then he pushed back his chair and got up.

"I want some tobacco out of the cupboard," he says. "I suppose I can get that?"

"You can get what you like out of the cupboard," I answered him, "so long as you get upstairs thereafter. And, remember I've got the drop on you, Cornish.

He mumbled something that I couldn't catch, and going over to the cupboard where we kept our general stores, went in. I was in no fear of his being up to any tricks, but I knew he'd no weapons, and I kept my revolver fixed on his back as he stood with it turned to me. He mumbled and grumbled all the time he was in the cupboard, and his face was angry and scowling when he came out. But he marched straight off to the door of the winding stair which led up to the lantern, and in another second I had turned the key on him.

Now, to make clear the position to you, I ought to tell you what this lighthouse in which the three of us then were, was like. Some fifteen miles from the mainland, it stood on a gaunt, bare rock which rose behind a permanent bank in the sea, that had long been known as the Shivering Sand because of the strange motion of the water over it. It was one of the oldest lighthouses round the coasts, and built after a fashion that helped me to carry out the plan I had formed. The entrance was gained by a stone stairway, which led to a double door some twenty feet above the rock; when you passed that door you found yourself in the living-room, which made a half of the circular space of the lighthouse; the other half was divided into four segments, each forming separate chambers. A winding stair went out of the living-room into an upper room, which we used for stores, material, and such-like; where it passed from one to the other was a strong door, the one that I had secured against Cornish's descent. Above that was a stair of eighty-nine steps to the lamp-room and lantern, from which a revolving light shone out to warn all craft away from us.

So long as I was master I saw no difficulty in keeping Chiddock and Cornish separate. Every door in the place was fitted with good strong locks; on Cornish's I resolved to fit a bolt from a store of hardware which I had by me. After all, the procedure was simple enough. Before I released one man from duty I would lock the other in his room; when the released man was safely locked up I would let the other out. And when the boat came I would take care that both were locked up until I had explained matters and obtained help.

All this being settled, and Cornish safely secured, I went to the door and called to Chiddock, telling him that it would now be safe for him to enter. He came to the foot of the stairway, cringing and fearful; the more I saw of him the more I knew what an arrant coward he was. As things turned out I had to go half-way down the stair and explain what I had done before he would consent to gather his things together and come up. When he got up he looked fearfully around him, as if he expected Cornish to rush out of one of the doors and fall upon him.

"Now, then, Chiddock," I said, showing him his chamber, "this is your room. You know the arrangement. You came here to do one turn of work in three, as things are you'll do one in two. And keep to what I've arranged, or I'll let Jezreel Cornish loose on you."

"He'll not forgive you for baulking him," he muttered. "Look to yourself, mister. You did me a bad turn in knocking that revolver away. It might have saved both of us some trouble, and likely our lives. I know Cornish when he's roused."

I made no answer to that, but went about the job of fixing the bolt on the outside of Cornish's door. And with this and other things the afternoon passed quietly, and at the usual time I began to busy myself in making ready for supper.

Mordecai Chiddock sat watching me as if he meant to eat all that I was preparing for the table. For a man in his position and under such fear, he was the hungriest man I ever met, and when we sat down he fell upon the food and the hot coffee as if he had tasted nothing for years. In fact, he ate so voraciously that I could not help remarking on it. He grinned, showing teeth that would have done no discredit to a tiger.

" If so be as you'd ever been in the fixes I've been in for meat and drink," he said, " you'd take care to stow away all you can get while it's there. I'm neither proud-stomached nor yet haughty, but I like plenty. This coffee of yours is a trifle bitter," he went on, helping himself to sugar with his great fist. " I like mine as sweet as syrup."

It gave me no pleasure to sit at meat with a man who had robbed his mate and his mate's wife and children, and I soon got up and left him to finish, after which I served out our usual allowance of rum. I made no answer when he gave me some sort of pledge or toast ; instead, I carried my tot into my own chamber and sat down on my bunk to drink it at my leisure, and to reflect a little more on the strange things which had happened during that day. After that I remember lying down for my usual forty winks and feeling more than usually sleepy, and then I remember nothing until I woke to find myself staring at Jezreel Cornish, whose sharp nose and ferrety eyes were very close to my face. And then I knew that somehow I had been outwitted and circumvented, and that something dreadful was afoot. For it did not take a moment to realise that I was bound about arms and shoulders with a rope that pressed somewhat unpleasantly, and that my revolver was in Cornish's right hand.

" You made a mistake in letting me go to that cupboard, Graburn," he said, sneering at me. "I drugged the coffee and the rum. And as for locking me up like a gaolbird, you forgot that a man like me thinks nothing of coming down a hundred-foot rope. I told you I should kill Mordecai Chiddock."

" You've murdered him ! " I gasped.

" I'm murdering him," he says, as cool as ever. " He's a-staring at his death in the face. I'm a merciful man, Graburn, I'm giving him time to repent. Come and see him die. And—quick ! "

He suddenly menaced me so meaningly with the revolver that I struggled to my feet and let him half-pull, half-thrust me from the room. He forced me across the living-room, and through the double door, and down the stair upon the plateau of rock into the brightest and silverest moonlight I ever remember—a night so calm and still and beautiful that you'd have wondered any human being could have had anything but good thoughts in his heart between then and sunrise. But Jezreel Cornish was no longer a human being ; the devil had taken possession of him.

" Come and see Mordecai Chiddock being a-murdered of, Graburn," he says, chuckling as if it was all a joke. " Come and hear him a-begging and a-praying for mercy—Mordecai what never had no mercy on man nor woman ! Come, I tell you ! " and he dragged me along as if I had been no more than an infant. " Now look at Mordecai Chiddock, a-facing of his death like the brave sailorman he is ! "

From the point to which he dragged me I could see all the devilish ingenuity of what Cornish had done. In the outline of the rock on which Shivering Sand Lighthouse stood there was a crescent-shaped indentation which might have been cut through as you cut into a cheese with a tin scoop. We stood on the edge of one side of this ; on the other, dangling from ropes which had been fastened about his waist and under his armpits, the bright moonlight shining full upon him, hung Mordecai Chiddock, a swaying, trembling figure against the silent, pitiless rock behind him. And he was up to his waist in the advancing tide, and he would soon be submerged and drowned!

I felt myself seized with a sudden fury at the sight of this specimen of Cornish's cruelty, and turned on him with a feeling that would have manifested itself in an attack on him if I had not been bound.

"You devil!" I cried. "You——"

But he raised the revolver, and for a second I thought my time was come.

"Keep a civil tongue, Mr. Graburn," he said, sullenly. "It doesn't much matter to me whether you live or die, but I don't want to murder you. After all, I'm not murdering Chiddock; I'm carrying out justice on him. Nice to hear him, isn't it?"

The wretch swinging in the rising sea not ten yards in front of us had caught sight of me and burst into frantic entreaties for help. But these entreaties were mingled with the most awful curses and blasphemies I had ever heard, and suddenly Cornish began to add a demoniac laughter and jeering to them. If it had been in my power I would have plugged my ears to avoid the sounds of horror which broke the stillness of the moonlit night and rose high above the gentle lapping of the quietly rising sea. But I had to stand there defenceless and resourceless, to hear and to watch whether I would or not.

There was nothing but Chiddock's head left above the waves at last. I knew exactly where the water would rise to, and that in another five minutes he would have gone. And Cornish knew that too, and an idea seemed to strike him. He laughed aloud—a devilish laugh that made my blood turn to ice.

"He's only a few minutes left," he said. "I'll go nearer and whisper a few words of parting to him. It'll be a friendly thing to remind him of what a lot of friends he'll meet presently."

He made off towards the point where Chiddock was hanging, with the evident intention of calling over the edge into the wretched man's very ears. And as he came near, just as if Providence had it in mind that he should be cheated of seeing his victim die, his foot slipped, or he tripped over the rope by which Chiddock was secured, or something happened which I did not observe. But, anyway, he pitched head foremost over the edge of the rock, and I heard his head strike on the ledge beneath, and saw him cleave the oily-faced water like a plummet. And after that neither I nor any man ever saw Jezreel Cornish again.

It was then that I fainted, hearing a long cry of final despair from Chiddock. It may have been unconsciousness rather than fainting—it was long after daybreak when I came round. I crawled to the edge of the rock, and looked into the cove. Chiddock hung limp against the rock, his head dangling on his shoulder. Somewhere beneath him, in the deep pools, Cornish, no doubt, lay dead also

I could do nothing to help myself ; Cornish had made certain in securing me. During the day I contrived to drag myself into shelter against the fierce sunlight, but I almost went mad with hunger and thirst and horror of my situation. That night no light shone out from the Shivering Sand. But its failure saved me, for the darkened lighthouse roused suspicion, and before midnight a fast Government vessel was at the rock to find one dead man hanging over the waves where another was tossing, and a man who was not far from dead, and utterly delirious, babbling incoherently of what he had seen.

THE VENGEANCE OF LA MARAYE

ALWAYS within the memory of man, and for ever, for aught the islanders knew to the contrary, the folk of La Maraye had paid tribute to the Lords of Brieux. Once a year the headman of the little isle went across to the mainland, and took the steep road to the great fortress-like castle set high on its rock, and sought the presence of its sieur and laid the tribute in silver crowns at his feet, and, after eating and drinking, sailed back to La Maraye to begin the collecting of the tribute for the next year. As it was so it always had been, and always would be.

Yet there had been headmen of La Maraye who had often wondered, as they saw the magnificence of the Castle of Brieux, that their over-lord should ever trouble himself about the hundred silver crowns which he made them pay as often as the feast of St. Luke came round. They were so poor there at La Maraye, subsisting, in truth, on as little as would keep body and soul together, and he, the mighty and puissant Sieur de Brieux, was so rich, every day eating rich food and drinking the best of wines, and for ever wrapped about in luxury and splendour. And sometimes such of them as suffered an enforced idleness, and spent it at the wall of the little harbour, would talk wonderingly of these things, and make many speculations upon them.

" They say that his walls are hung with velvets and tapestries, and that his dinner is served to him on platters of real gold," one would say, as he gazed out across the grey waters, and saw the gleam of the setting sun on the towers and pinnacles of far-off Brieux. " Also that he is served on bended knee, as if he were a king."

" King of La Maraye the Sieur of Brieux always has been, and always will be," said a greybeard. "It is the law."

An impatient-eyed youth looked across at the glittering turrets.

"How came it to be the law?" he asked.

Most of the men present shook their heads, but after a time the greybeard spoke:

"La Maraye was given to the Lords of Brieux many and many a long age ago," he said. "Some say there were not even kings of France in those days, it is so long ago. And many a fair town and village, all along the coast yonder, with farms and lands, the Sieur de Brieux, looking out from his windows, cannot see aught that is not his."

"And do all pay tribute?" asked the young man.

The greybeard answered in one word.

"All."

"Otherwise," observed an elderly man, "how would the Sieur de Brieux exist?"

That was so unanswerable a question that nobody attempted to answer it, but after a while the young man spoke again.

"It costs us hard in our family to save and pay our share of the tribute," he said, "yet a hundred crowns is doubtless nothing to so great a lord. It may be, from what one hears, that he will spend so much on one dinner."

"Thus it is," explained an older man. "Our tribute is of such small account that my lord might play chuck-penny with the pieces of silver, lose them, and laugh at the loss. Therefore he could well afford to bid the headman of La Maraye carry his hundred crowns home again whenever he appears with them before his greatness. But, bethink you, if the Sieur did this to all his tribute-payers, what would he have for himself! One drop in the ocean is as nothing, and one grain of sand on the shore is nothing, but many drops and many grains—eh?"

Then they all turned and gazed once more at Brieux, and thought of the great Sieur de Brieux as of an ogre who sat in his stronghold and saw come to him the drops and tricklings of the life-blood of peoples until they filled a mighty cup of which he might drink at his will.

"Tribute we have always paid, and must always pay," murmured the greybeard. "It is the law; it is destiny."

Had there been travellers in those days sufficiently curious to land upon and explore it, any one so seeing La Maraye would have marvelled at its ability to pay anything at all to the Sieur de Brieux in the shape of tribute. It was an island of about one mile in length and rather more than half as wide as it was long; there was scarcely a tree upon it, and its vegetation was rank and coarse. It stood somewhat high out of the sea, and a cup-like depression filled up a considerable space in its centre, extending from a high ridge on the northward to a flat, sweeping beach which fronted the mainland on the south. On this beach stood the little town and bit of harbour—the town no more than a collection of stone huts, the harbour no more than a protecting wall. Inland, there were a few cots here and there; there were sheep, too, and goats, and cattle; but over everything hung the grey mist of a grinding poverty. People, it is true, ate bread in La Maraye, and occasionally tasted flesh, but for most of them the source and hope of life and sustenance lay in the sea which hemmed them in from the outer world. Their great source of everything was found in the herring fishery; let that once fail, and there would be no tribute money for the Sieur de Brieux.

But within the memory of the oldest man of the island, the herrings had never failed to come, year in, year out; they came like clockwork.

No one in La Maraye had ever saved money. Generation after generation, the folk lived from hand to mouth. There was always a hungry look about their eyes. The prevalent expression of their faces was that of people who are uncertain about to-morrow's bread. Store of money there never was in the island except when the head men scraped the tribute together. When it had been scraped together and placed in the leathern bag in which it was to be carried to the mainland, some of the principal men were allowed to see it, to lift the bag, to dally beside it for a few moments. No one had ever seen so much money in a lump sum before, it seemed incredible that so much could be brought together. Yet, if the headman's tales were true, the Sieur de Brieux had chests full of, not silver, but gold!

In the year 1523 Gaspard Chelandry, who had been headman of La Maraye for some thirty years, died, and Pierre Ploucat was made headman in his place. Pierre was then a man of nearly forty years of age, and he had never been away from the island. Other men, old and young, had, some of them having at various times accompanied the former headman to Brieux, and it might have been better if one of them had been chosen in Gaspard's place. But Pierre owned cattle and sheep, and had the only mill in the place, and he was a man of a domineering nature, liking his own way, and so he was placed in power. And that year, for the first time, the herring fishery failed, and the folk of La Maraye saw famine staring them in the face at close quarters.

Hunger is the most compelling thing in the world. The people of La Maraye began to eat their small resources. They ate all the cattle. They ate all the sheep. They ate the goats. Finally, there was nothing to eat but such fish as the men caught. And in the end Pierre Ploucat called the population together.

"It is no good going on like this," he said. "We have eaten the cattle, the sheep, the goats, and now we shall have none to breed from. It was not a wise thing to do, but no man loves an empty belly. Yet there is now only one thing to do—some of us must take the largest ship and go over to the mainland and buy more stock and grain, and return as quickly as may be, and we must plant, and sow, and breed, and hope for better days next year. There is nothing other to be done."

The folk looked at each other.

"That," said one of the elders of the island—"that needs money. They do not sell stock nor grain nor food over there unless the money is put down before them."

"Then we may as well lie down and die," said several. "We have no money."

Pierre Ploucat raised a hand.

"Yes," he said. "We have money. I have the hundred crowns which have been collected for the Lord of Brieux. Well, the Lord of Brieux must this year wait. We cannot starve and die."

There was a stern determination in Pierre Ploucat's voice, and it was evident that he meant what he said, but the other men gazed at him and at each other doubtfully.

"What will the Lord of Brieux say to that ?" suddenly demanded a voice.

The people turned to see a man who had sometimes accompanied the late headman to Brieux. He was a man with a red beard and a fierce eye ; the eye gleamed and the beard bristled as he went on speaking.

"Pierre Ploucat does not know the Lord of Brieux," he said. "I do. The Lord of Brieux, see you, is a man after this sort. If he were here and saw us starving, saw the children crying for food, and the old men dying for want of it, he would take his hundred crowns and leave us with a curse. That is how he is made. And if we do not pay our tribute, and he finds, as he will find, that we have spent his money, he will send fire and sword upon us and we shall suffer."

"We shall suffer in any case," observed Pierre Ploucat, dryly. "Besides, starvation is unpleasant. And this is our money. We will pay the Sieur de Brieux next year. Double tribute, eh ? He is so rich that he can afford to wait until next year."

The people, especially the women, clamoured excitedly.

"Yes, yes, he is so rich, that Sieur de Brieux, that he can wait until next year ! Besides, it is, as Pierre says, our money. Let us buy food and grain and stock, and tide the winter over. We will pay double next year."

" That seems agreed upon, then," said Pierre Ploucat.

The man of the red beard made a despairing gesture. He lifted his hands and went away, and the rest of them crowded around the headman and begged him to carry out his proposals at once. The ogre of the castle of Brieux whom they had never seen was not to them one-thousandth part so terror-compelling as the demon of hunger in their stomachs whose grip they were beginning to feel.

That very night the best ship of La Maraye slipped out of the shadow of the harbour wall and went off north-by-east before a favouring wind. Now, these ships of La Maraye were small and humble affairs, needing only a few men to navigate them ; consequently, this, the *Belle Susette*, had but five men on board. Of these, three were young and vigorous sailormen ; the others, by name Cornelius Gorron and André Jouvert, were middle-aged persons who had more than once accompanied the recently deceased headman to Biruex and had also visited the market port, St. Lys, to which they were now bound. They carried the money, the hundred crowns wherewith to buy food, and grain, and stock, and the people watched the sails of the ship disappear in the twilight and longed for their return.

When you have the purchase money in your pouch it takes but little time to buy anything, and the *Belle Susette*, laden with good things, should have been back in La Maraye within thirty-six hours of her setting forth. But, though the winds were favourable, the anxious-eyed watchers on the harbour wall saw nothing of her till three days had gone by. Then news spread that a ship was heading for the island, and the little harbour became crowded.

Pierre Ploucat stood in the midst of a knot of men ; close by was the red-headed man. It was he who steadily gazing on the oncoming vessel, uttered a sharp exclamation.

" What—what is it that hangs from the yardarm ? " he cried. " Look, then—look ! "

Those following Red Beard's outstretched finger saw, dangling from the yardarm of the *Belle Susette* certain swaying bundles or figures of unequal size which dipped and bumped with the rolling and pitching of the ship in the most grotesque manner. Pierre Ploucat had unusually sharp and long-sighted eyes; he bent forward over the harbour wall, gazing fearfully. And, presently as the little vessel drew nearer, he said in a horrible, choked voice:

" They are bodies! The bodies of dead men!"

There was a terrible silence amongst the people, and presently the headman spoke again.

" The bodies of Cornelius and André!"

Then, with the veins bursting in his forehead and his eyes almost starting out of his head, he cried out in accents which might have been those of a madman:

" And between them is the body of a dog!"

This strange and awful sight was now visible to the folk of La Maraye as the *Belle Susette* came slowly into the harbour. The bodies of the two commissioners hung from the yardarm; between them, its blackened tongue protruding from its mouth, dangled the body of a great mongrel dog. And Pierre Ploucat, being a man of quick perception, grasped the situation, and shook his fists savagely.

" This is the work of the Lord of Brieux! He murders our brothers and insults their dead bodies!" he shouted.

And, followed by the people, he rushed down to the vessel and on board to the three survivors of that ill-fated expedition, who, looking like men that had gone through the infernal places, were feebly endeavouring to berth their ship.

It was the eldest of these three young men, Jacques Greutier, who told the tale of the justice of the Sieur de Brieux to the white-faced, burning-eyed folk who sat silent with horror.

" See you, then, you others," he said, " it was this way that the thing which has happened came to be. We made a good voyage to St. Lys, and Cornelius and

André "—he pointed to the yardarm with a grimace—" they were speedily buying what was necessary. And by the second day we had a full load. Sheep, and goats, and cattle there were, Pierre Ploucat, and grain, too, and food—ah, it was a fine cargo, and there was money left over. And we were going to sail with that night's tide when down to the ship where she lay at the quay of St. Lys comes a great man, followed by a crowd of men-at-arms bristling with weapons, and all looking as fierce as himself. And when André and Cornelius saw him they turned as white as cheese.

" 'Tis the steward of the Sieur de Brieux ! " says one.

The great man came up to us and looked into the ship.

" You are islanders from La Maraye," he says. " Follow me, the five of you ; and, do you, men," he continues, turning to his bodyguard, " set some of your number to see to this vessel and its load. Let neither vessel nor load be touched till my lord's pleasure is known."

" We were, therefore, fain to leave the ship and follow the steward through the streets of St. Lys, where many saw us for prisoners, and were not slow to make comment upon the fate that awaited us. And so we passed on until we were taken into a great hall, where, on a raised seat, sat the Sieur de Brieux. And when I saw him I trembled all through me, body and soul, for though a noble-looking man, he hath the cruellest and coldest face ever I set eyes on. And as the steward explained why we were brought thither, he looked from one to the other of us as if he would search our hearts, and my vitals felt turned to ice.

" ' What have you to say to this ? ' he says at last, gazing at the two elder men. ' Speak, and quickly ! '

" Then Cornelius made bold to tell him the truth as we all know it, and of your advice, Pierre Ploucat, and his brows grew blacker and his eyes more fiery, and he began to bite his beard with his great teeth, and to shake his head. And after Cornelius had spoken there was for a time silence, and then the Lord of Brieux spoke:

" 'How many men,' says he, 'will it require to navigate your ship back to La Maraye?'

"To that we made haste to answer that three could manage it. Therewith he pointed with his staff to Cornelius and André.

" 'Steward,' says he, 'let your men-at-arms presently hang me these two grey-beards from the yardarm of their vessel, and between them hang a great mongrel dog to show these islanders that to me their lives are no more than those of dogs. That done, unload their vessel of all it contains, and send these three lads back to their island. Which of ye lads is the eldest?'

"To which, trembling, I confessed that I was, and told my name.

" 'Then, Jacques,' says my Lord of Brieux, 'go back with this cargo to La Maraye, and tell the folk that unless they send me the head of Pierre Ploucat and my tribute within a week from now I will fall upon them in such fashion that there will not be one stone left upon another, nor as much as a living babe amongst them!'

"Then they made to drag us all away, but Cornelius turned and raised his hand at the great lord.

" 'Tremble, thou tyrant!' he cries. 'The bloody and deceitful man shall not live out half his days, saith Holy Writ! Thy days are numbered!'

"Then the Sieur de Brieux bade them halt.

" 'Dost thou fling words at me?' he says, with a malignant glare at Cornelius. 'Men, cut me out that fellow's tongue.'

"Which they did on the instant.

"So they carried us down to the ship then, and hanged Cornelius and André there, as you see; and there was this great beast of a dog lying on the quay in the sunlight, and they caught and hanged him, too, and lightened the ship of all we had stocked it with. And when this was done they sent us off, and here we are in grievous plight, as you may see. And it were better that we were dead or drowned—which is the same thing—than that we fall into the hands of yonder lord, who is no man, but a devil!"

There was a long silence when Jacques had finished, and then Pierre Ploucat spoke.

"Into the hands of Sieur de Brieux, man or devil, fall we will not!" he cried. "Listen, men and women of La Maraye! We have lived under this monster's rule, and his forefathers' rule, too long, and it is time we forswore allegiance to him. Speak, then! Shall we say farewell to La Maraye?"

And all there, old and young, even to the children that lisped answered him (and some with tears):

"We will say farewell to La Maraye!"

By the fifth day all was in readiness. Such provisions as were still remaining had been stored on the ships, wherein, too, were placed the poor furniture and belongings of the islanders, the household goods which they would not willingly leave behind. And on the sixth the ships dropped away one by one, all but the *Belle Susette*, on which Pierre Ploucat and some of the principal men were to sail after clearing the little town of anything that might have been overlooked and be worth carrying away. It was that night that the great storm sprung up.

By that storm the headman and his companions were delayed. It raged all that night, and all next morning, and in the grey afternoon they were aware, watching from the harbour wall, of a ship that was driven upon a certain reef or rocks whereon no vessel could live, and ere long they saw it go to pieces before their eyes, and heard the cries of men in mortal fear. And what number of men there were on that vessel they never knew, but only one fought desperately to land, and him Pierre Ploucat tore, half-dead, out of the surf and hauled up the beach. The other islanders came hurrying about them, and Jacques Greutier and Red Beard exclaimed loudly:

"It is the Sieur de Brieux!" they said.

Pierre Ploucat looked long at the unconscious lord.

" It is the judgment of Heaven," he murmured at last. " The prophecy of Cornelius is about to be fulfilled."

Then, observing that the Sieur would never more need the use of them, he made his companions bind him hand and foot, after which, at the head of the harbour and facing the deserted town, he caused to be set up a high mast, with a running tackle at the head ; and in the tackle they placed a rope, and at the end of the rope made a noose, and after that they waited until the Sieur de Brieux was fully conscious.

When he came to himself, and sat up and looked around him, his glance fell upon Pierre Ploucat, who watched him with burning eyes. He strove to rise, and recognised that he was bound, and his face became livid with fear.

" Sieur de Brieux," said the headman, " this is the island of La Maraye, now desolate through your cruelty ; and I am Pierre Ploucat, whose head you desired. Understand that you are about to die ! Behold the gallows ! "

The Sieur de Brieux tried to moisten his lips.

" This is murder ! " he said hoarsely.

" No," answered Pierre Ploucat ; " it is justice. It is the vengeance of La Maraye."

Then they hanged him.

The next day the storm went down, and the last man of La Maraye sailed out into the unknown, and left the corpse of their lord dangling from the high mast in the midst of silence and desolation.

BROWN RAT'S DOCK

As soon as ever I set my two eyes on him I knew that the man who came up to me, as I stood at the entrance gate of Brown Rat's Dock that dark and wet November afternoon, was one of those parties that you cannot help wondering and speculating about as soon as ever you see them. A big, loose-limbed, hatchet-faced man he was, with a reddish goatee beard on his chin, and ferrety eyes gleaming at you from either side of a nose that was as long as it was sharp. There were gold rings in his ears, and his clothes of rough, blue serge and his black, wide-brimmed hat had never been picked up on this side of the Atlantic, nor north of the Equator. And, in fact, I knew him for a stranger as soon as he came slouching along the street, turning his head this way and that, and, for all his sneering unconcern, looking for some place that he wanted.

He stopped dead in front of me, and stared over my shoulder at the slimy quays and the grey stretch of water behind.

" Brown Rat's Dock ? " he says, eyeing me shiftily. " Brown Rat's Dock, I reckon ? "

" You're right," says I, taking him all in. " Brown Rat's Dock it is."

He rolled his quid over in his left cheek a time or two and spat across the causeway into the gutter, and he seemed to be thinking pretty deeply.

" Ah ! " he says at last. " Now, is there e'er such a thing as a smallish warehouse to be let anywhere along one of these quays ? A nice warehouse, and not too small. Likewise, not too big," he adds reflectively. " A sort of betwixt and between, as it were."

" There is warehouses to let," says I. " What might you be wanting to put in one ? "

"General stores," says he, quick enough. "Just general stores. I'm opening out a bit of a trade with Rotterdam," he goes on. "I understand Rotterdam traffic comes in here."

"There's two Rotterdam vessels lying there now," I replies, pointing to the craft I meant. "Will you look at a warehouse?"

"By all means," he says. "That's what I came down for. A nice, middle-sized warehouse."

I went into my lodge, told my lad to mind the gate, and took down half a dozen keys from their pegs. When I went outside again, the stranger was gazing reflectively across the dock—as dismal a view as you could have found 'twixt London Bridge and Greenwich on an afternoon like that. There was fog, and there was rain, and a cold east wind that searched hungrily for the very marrow in your bones; but he seemed to give no heed to any of these things, and just stood staring in front of him, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, making a jingle of what was evidently a quantity of silver pieces. When he saw me with the keys, he started as if he had suddenly bethought himself of something.

"Ah, them warehouses!" he said, and stepped out alongside of me. "We'll go look at 'em. Been here many years?" he asks, as I led him along the quay.

"Matter of five and twenty," says I.

"Ah!" he says. "Now, was you ever acquainted with a man of the name of Sol Marks as had a warehouse in this here dock? Was you?"

"Well enough," says I. "That's twelve year ago."

"Twelve years is right," he says. "It would be twelve years. Sol Marks it was as recommended this here dock to me, knowing as I was wanting a place of business. That was in Buenos Ayres, that was."

"Oh," says I. "I'd often wondered where Mr. Marks had gone to."

"Buenos Ayres," he says again. "Yes, that's where Sol Marks is. Now, I wonder if one of them empty warehouses what you spoke of is the one Sol had?

'Cause from what he described of it to me, that's the sort of place I'm looking for."

" Well, as it happens," says I, " the warehouse that Mr. Marks had is empty just now. And, to tell the truth, it's been empty ever since he left it."

He turned and looked at me with a queer sort of gleam in his sharp eyes. Something in that look made me think he was glad to hear what I told him.

" Is that so ? " he says. " And what might the reason of that be, now ? "

" There isn't as much trade in Brown Rat's Dock as there was, for one thing," says I. " And for another, that particular warehouse wants clearing of something before anybody'll take it."

" Ay," says he. " And what might it be that it wants clearing of, mate ? "

" Rats," I says. And by that time, being at the door of the warehouse we were talking of, I unlocked and threw the door open. " Rats," I says again. " And there they are—some of 'em."

There was gas laid on in that warehouse and as I struck a match and turned a light on the flooring we saw the rats scurrying away in all directions. The strange man paused on the threshold, and looked about him thoughtfully. I expected him to shake his head and to say at once that it was not the sort of place to suit him, being as it was nothing more than a ramshackle old shed with a rotten flooring, but to my surprise he seemed as if he wanted to see more of it, and he walked inside and took closer stock of every corner.

" And this is the identical spot as Sol Marks had ? " he says. " The very spot ? "

" This is it," says I. " And never rented by mortal man since he went."

He smoothed down his goatee beard and put his head on one side.

" It wouldn't do to have a congregation of rats in my trade," he says. " My trade's in provisions."

" Just so," says I. " I'll show you some other places that's in better order."

But the man made no offer to move. He stood there, still staring at the floor.

" No," he says, all of a sudden. " You needn't. I've a bit of a fancy to take the place that my old friend Sol Marks once had. I'll tackle them rats—I'll have the floor up and work in a cement that no rats as ever was born'll get his teeth and claws through. Now, who might have the letting of this here shanty, and what might a likely rent be for it, between you and me ? "

I told him the name of the agent who looked after—or didn't look after—the property along that quay, and said that in my opinion he ought to get it cheap, considering that it had been empty for so many years. He nodded, and putting his fingers in his waistcoat pocket pulled out half-a-crown and slipped it into my hand.

" Then I'll go round and see that man just now," he says, making for the door. " And I'll bid you good-day—you'll be seeing me early in the morning."

It was, however, nearly noon when he came up to the entrance gate next day, and with him came a man who was leading a donkey and cart, laden with a miscellaneous collection of odd tools, and a quantity of spare planking and boarding. The stranger had changed his blue serge for some sort of working clothes, and he looked queerer than before, and there was a kind of eagerness about him, as if he wanted to get going at something or other. He came up to me with a grin, showing his big yellow teeth.

" I've taken that place as was Sol Marks's," he says, " and I'm going to do it up. Do it myself, d'ye see ? I'm a handy man at all sorts of jobs, and there's no need to employ carpenters and plasterers when I can do things for myself. There'll be a load of cement and other stuff coming along," he says, laughing, " and I reckon them rats'll have to quit."

The man with the donkey and cart came back again and went out into the street in half an hour, and the cart was empty. And later on, being down that part of the dock, I looked in at the warehouse that had been Sol Marks's and found the new tenant hard at work. And I noticed at once that the first job he had undertaken was the patching up of the front wall which faced out on the quay side ; there had been a lot of holes in that wall (for the whole shanty was only made of wood laths, overlapping each other), and he was covering them over in a fashion which would prevent anybody looking through them from the outside.

" I'm making the place weather and windproof first of all," says he. " It wants it, now that winter's at hand. To-morrow I'll tackle that flooring. You won't know this place when I'm through with it. If you want anything doing well, do it yourself—that's the motto of Jabez Clarke."

I took that to be his name and called him by it in future—not that I saw much of him the next day or two, except when he went in and out at noon and at tea-time, and when he came in of a morning and left late at night. The cement that he'd talked of arrived in due course and was packed in its bags outside the warehouse and covered over with a big tarpaulin. And passing that way on the third day after Clarke came into occupancy of the warehouse, I gathered that he had begun taking up the old floor—the old, decaying planks were neatly stacked outside.

It was late that afternoon that I had occasion to leave the dock and go upstreet on business. Coming by the corner of the Admiral Benbow, I suddenly ran into a man advancing from the opposite direction, and glancing up at him I recognised Mr. Marks. He recognised me, and held out his hand.

" Hallo, Tyson ! " he says. " Who'd have thought of seeing you ? And yet who wouldn't ? Things move so slowly in this country that I've no doubt you're still at the dock gate ? "

" That's where I am, Mr. Marks," says I. " Still there, sir." He inclined his head towards the Admiral Benbow.

" Come inside and have a glass," says he. " Now I see you closer, you ain't much altered. The fact is," he says, when we had stepped into the private bar, " the fact is, I was on my way to see you, or somebody who might have come into your place. That old warehouse that I had—is it let ? "

" It's been empty ever since you went away, Mr. Marks," I replied, " but it was let three days ago to a friend of your own."

He set down the glass which the barman had just handed him, and stared at me as if he did not understand. He was a florid-complexioned man, Marks, and he turned pale.

" A friend of my own ! " he says. " A friend of——. What's his name, Tyson ? "

" His name's Clarke, sir," says I. " Jabez Clarke."

He jerked his head and then nodded.

" Hatchet-faced man, with light blue eyes and a goatee beard," I says. " Said he knew you in Buenos Ayres."

" Ha ! " he says. " Oh ! And what may Jabez Clarke be doing in that warehouse ? What's he want with it ? "

" He wants it for the provision trade," says I. " But he's doing it up first. At present he's digging up the floor.

Now, those words of mine were innocent enough, but the effect they produced on Mr. Sol Marks was a queer one. He stared at me as if his eyes would come out of his head, and when he picked up his glass again his hand trembled.

" It's the rats that's occasioning him to do that," says I, seeing that he made no remark. " He's going to cement the whole floor and two feet up the wall against them."

Mr. Marks nodded thoughtfully.

" I remember that there was rats in the place," he says. " Ah ! So Jabez Clarke is there, is he ? Yes, I recollect talking to him about that very dock when I met him out yonder—maybe it was in Buenos Ayres, though I should have thought it was Valparaiso."

" He said Buenos Ayres," says I.

" Then Buenos Ayres it would be," says Mr. Marks. " Are you going back to the dock, Tyson ? " he asks, casual like, and by this time to all appearance himself again.

" No, sir," says I. " I'm going upstreet."

" I'll go along and give Clarke a look in," he says. " I was thinking of taking that warehouse again for a while, if I found it empty—maybe Clarke and me can do a deal over it. I only want a corner or so."

We parted outside the Admiral Benbow, Mr. Marks going one way and I the other. We shook hands hearty enough at parting ; there was plenty of grip in his then, but it was cold and limp enough when I next set eyes on him.

That business which took me upstreet kept me away from the dock longer than I had expected. It was dark, and long past dark, when I got back, and who should I run up against in the entrance gate but Jabez Clarke. He was sauntering along in his usual leisurely fashion, carrying a little brown leather bag that he brought with him every day, and he looked as unconcerned as ever.

" Hallo ! " he says. " That you, Tyson ? I saw you was out as I passed your window, leastways, I didn't catch a glimpse of your old phiz."

" Have you seen Mr. Marks ? " I asks him.

" Marks ! " he says, facing round on me with a jump. " What Marks ? "

" Mr. Sol Marks," says I.

" Mr. Sol Marks is in Buenos Ayres," says Clarke. " What're you talking about ? "

" I left Mr. Sol Marks outside the Admiral Benhow an hour and a half agone," says I. " He was on his way to see you."

He looked at me as if he scarce understood my meaning, and then shook his head.

" I've seen nothing of him," says he. " He hasn't been here. Good lord ! So Sol Marks has come across once more, has he ? Ah, he'll be turning up to-morrow morning. Good-night, Tyson."

I wished him good-night, and went inside my lodge. The lad hadn't seen Marks, but then he wouldn't have known him for Marks if he had, and it being dark he'd seen nobody. And I thought no more of Marks or of Clarke that night, nor next day either, and it was only when I came to think of it later on that I remembered that on that day I neither saw Clarke come or go or anywhere on the quayside.

If it hadn't been for Jack Wilks, the stevedore, there might have been a bigger delay than there was in finding out about Marks. On the second day after I'd seen Marks at the Admiral Benbow, Jack Wilks met me in the dock, and we began talking casual-like.

" I see Mr. Marks as used to have a warehouse here," says Wilks.

" Where ? " says I.

" Right where you're a-standing of, night afore last," says Wilks. " Give me a turn, he did, and likewise a bob to drink his health. Didn't look no different, seemed to me."

" Where did he go ? " says I.

" Went to his old shanty what that feller with the nanny-goat beard's a-tinkering at," replies Jack Wilks. " The nanny-goat feller let him in."

I left Jack Wilks, feeling myself a good deal puzzled. Why had Jabez Clarke told me, as cool as a cucumber, that he'd never set eyes on Sol Marks ? And as one idea makes you think of other ideas I began to wonder how it was that Sol Marks had started and trembled—in his fingers, at any rate—when I told him that Jabez Clarke was digging up the warehouse floor. I made up my mind that I'd tell Clarke that Marks had been seen to enter his place, and that I'd no liking to be lied to by him or any other man.

However, I had no chance of saying anything to Clarke that day, nor the next, nor the next after that, because I never saw him. And it was in the fourth day after my meeting with Marks that Jack Wilks, who was just then a good deal about the dock, came up to my lodge.

"Tyson," says he, "there's something wrong about that there warehouse what Mr. Marks used to have, and what the nanny-goat feller took. S'elp me, there is!"

"What?" says I.

"Rats!" he says. "I've passed it twice this morning, and them rats is playing a hell game in it. You better come down."

Finnegan, the dock policeman, was just near, and him and me and Jack Wilks went down to Clarke's warehouse. And sure enough, as soon as we got our noses—or, as I should say, ears—within three yards of it, we heard those rats carrying on inside. They were making the queerest noise, and it seemed as if all the rats in the dock were there.

"By the holy smoke," says Finnegan. "That's the divil's own business that's bein' transacted in this place! Will we be for breakin' in the dure now?"

There was nothing else for it but that, for Jabez Clarke had fitted the door with a patent lock, and he had so repaired the front of the warehouse that you couldn't find a nick or a hole to put your eye to. And Jack Wilks fetched a light crowbar, and we prized the door open, and——.

It seemed to me that the whole of the floor-space was one mass of rats. There looked to be thousands of them—certainly there were hundreds, many, many hundreds! Jack Wilks killed them right and left with his crowbar; their screaming and squealing as they fought for the various holes through which they had entered was like the crying of a score of frightened children. But, except for the dead ones, they were soon all gone, and we looked at the Thing that had brought them there.

That Thing was more or less of a skeleton in a serge suit. As for the head, which they could get at easiest, it was like one of the skulls that you see in the African desert, alongside the great caravan route, picked clean and white. All the same Jack Wilks and I recognised the clothes, and we knew that we were looking at all that was left of—Jabez Clarke !

We looked round about us when we had got our breath again, as you might say. And the more we looked the more we were puzzled as to what had happened that the bones of Jabez Clarke should be lying there at our feet, though what had made his body into bones we knew very well. The warehouse was in a state of disorder ; all the planking had been taken up from the floor, and the floor itself had been disturbed, as if somebody had trenched it carefully. But the skirting boards of the walls were still intact, with the numerous rat-holes in them ; yet, for all that, the dead man had begun the cementing. There was a square space of about eight feet done in the far corner beyond the stove, and the cement had set as hard as marble.

We turned from looking at these things to looking at each other, and then at the skeleton lying there in the recently-dug earth. Out of the black holes we saw the bright eyes of the rats watching us—and watching It, too.

Suddenly Jack Wilks lets off what was something uncommonly like a scream and points to a shining object that lay just alongside the fleshless fingers of the body's right hand. He stooped and picked it up, and the three of us found ourselves staring at a big, flashing diamond. And, recognising that this was a matter beyond us, Finnegan and myself set off for the nearest police-station, leaving Jack Wilks and his crowbar to keep off the rats from what was left of the dead man.

There were some big folks from Scotland Yard with me and Finnegan when we went back—a couple of detectives and a surgeon, who had come down hot-foot in a motor-car—and they took their bearings of that warehouse as if they had been bloodhounds famishing—keen on finding a scent. And first the doctor got down on his hands and knees and spied and peered at the skeleton, doing little touching of it, and presently he looked up at the rest of us.

"This man's been shot!" he says, pointing to a spot on the skull just above and behind the right ear. "And shot at close quarters, too!" And he lifted and moved the skull a little, and showed us that a good-sized patch had been blown out on the other side of the cranium. "That's how he came by his death," says the doctor, getting up and dusting his knees.

There was nothing to be found on or about Jabez Clarke's clothing—nothing but the diamond which Wilks had caught sight of. Leastways, there was nothing but a stump of pencil, and a few coppers, and a circular or two; watch and chain were gone, and so was a purse which I had seen him produce now and then.

The detectives looked over every square foot of that warehouse—top, sides, and bottom. And by-and-by they took to tapping the piece of cementing which had been done, and was now as firm as a paving-stone.

"It strikes me," says one of them, "this bit of work sounds slightly hollow. At any rate, we'll have it up. I suppose there's a couple of picks handy somewhere about the dock?"

Jack Wilks and me set to work on that cement when Jack had fetched the picks. It was the best cement, and as hard set as iron-stone, and some time went by before we had made much impression on it. But suddenly, in breaking away a big piece, Jack Wilks uncovered a man's boot. And there was a foot in the boot, and over the boot the turned up end of a trouser-leg.

It took us nearly an hour to carefully uncover that body, but the work was done at last, and me and Jack Wilks were able to tell the others that they were looking at Sol Marks. And the doctor was very soon able to tell all of us that Sol Marks had been murdered by a blow which had crushed in the back of his head, and had without doubt been inflicted by an iron bar that lay buried in the cement at his side.

Whoever had killed Sol Marks had not killed him for robbery. His watch and chain were on him; there was gold and silver in plenty in his pockets, and in a secret pocket the detectives found a sort of note-book in which were several bank-notes—English and foreign. And in that note-book, too, they found a bit of much creased paper, yellow and dirty, on which was drawn a rough map. You could see at once that it was a map of Brown Rat's Dock and the quays, and the place where we were then standing was marked out with a cross in red ink. We were all looking at this and wondering what it might signify, when a dockside labourer came knocking at the door and calling loudly for Finnegan. And Finnegan went out, and we heard him talking; and in a minute or two back he came, with a queer look on his face.

"Some o' the lads," says he, "is after pullin' a dead man out o' the dock beyond there at Blind Boy's Steps. And, bedad, they say there's di'monds on the body!"

We left Jack Wilks once more in charge of Jabez Clarke's warehouse, and went over to Blind Boy's Steps, which, as a matter of fact, was no steps at all, but a ricketty little footbridge that crossed a narrowing part of the lock, and was that dangerous and dark at night that it had been forbidden to use for some years, though still left there. And on the quayside we found a group of labourers standing round the body of a man who had obviously been drowned, and just as obviously previously stunned, if not killed outright, by falling from the ramshackle bridge upon the stone steps that jutted out beneath it. And at sight of him Finnegan started.

"Be jabers!" says he. "That's the very feller I saw talkin' with Clarke a time or two in the street outside!"

One of the men handed the detectives a little canvas bag.

"It was in his coat pocket," he says. "There's diamonds in it. And there's a gold watch and chain on him, and money."

I recognised the watch and chain as Jabez Clarke's.

But the detectives paid little heed to chain or watch; they were examining the diamonds, some of which were set and some loose. And one looks at the other with a queer sort of wink.

" Come to light after all these years! " he says.

You never get to know the rights or wrongs of these things, but there was no doubt about it that those diamonds had been stolen from a well-known merchant in Hatton Garden twelve years previously. The detectives, after their leisurely fashion, pieced things together, and came to the conclusion that Sol Marks was the thief; that he planted the diamonds in the flooring of that warehouse; that he somehow gave the secret away to Jabez Clarke in Valparaiso or Buenos Ayres—probably in drink; that Clarke's taking and repairing the warehouse was all a blind to get possession of the stones; that Marks turned up just when Clarke had found them, and that Clarke killed him there and then, and disposed of the body in the cement; and finally, that the unknown man had been watching Clarke (for we found out that both had secretly visited the dock at night by way of Blind Boy's Bridge), and had killed and robbed him in his turn. But, like all other such affairs, folk soon forgot it; only the man to whom those warehouses belonged pulled them down and built new ones, and the rats went off farther down the river.

THE BUREAU WITH BRASS HANDLES

FOR three miserable days Manvers had been endeavouring to evolve the idea of a short story. He had thought of this and that and the other, and had found neither subject nor notion. He began to think that his brain had gone to sleep, and that he had better go away somewhere until it woke up again. On this, the third morning of his misery, he determined to think no more. Figuratively, he poured the contents of his ink-pot into the drain pipe and threw his pen into the fire, and, putting on his hat, he went out, determined to see human faces, hear the sounds of life and smell fresh air and flowers.

"I'll go and have a jolly good lunch," said Manvers to himself, "and a bottle of good wine and a good cigar, and then I'll get on the train and go out into the country, and forget that pens and inks and papers and editors and publishers exist."

Manvers lived in a certain palatial mansion of flats in the immediate neighbourhood of St. John's Wood, and as close to Lord's Cricket Ground—where he idled away most of his time in summer—as he could get. He now turned the key in his outer door, and set off down Grove End Road in the direction of the Great Central Railway Station. He meant to lunch at the hotel there, and then to board a train and go into Buckinghamshire. It was April, and there would be things to see in the fields and hedgerows and woods. He had a vague and misty idea about lambs and primroses and wood anemones, and similar country matters. Also, he reflected, there would be such delights as the singing of birds—larks, thrushes, linnets, possibly a very-early-arrived cuckoo. He might, moreover, light upon a really old-fashioned village inn where a draught of cool ale might be obtainable. Yes—

it was much more sensible to go into the country than to sit writing words on paper.

Making his way luncheon-wards through the midst of Lisson Grove, Manvers suddenly halted before the window of a second-hand furniture shop, at which he had sometimes made insignificant purchases during the days when he was furnishing his flat. What made him halt was the sight of an old bureau with brass handles, which stood in the middle of the window as if inviting particular attention to itself. It was a handsome bureau in old oak, and in excellent condition. Manvers gazed at it meditatively and stroked his chin.

" That's just what I want for that recess," he murmured to himself. " It would just about fill it."

Then, remembering that for once in a way he happened to have a fairly decent balance lying in his favour at the bank, he went into the shop, meaning to purchase the bureau. He looked it all over with the knowingness of a connoisseur. It was, indeed, just what he wanted, and a handsome piece of furniture.

" How much do you want for it ? " he inquired.

The dealer meditated. He knew that Manvers was one of those highly objectionable people who always pay cash for everything they buy, and therefore want everything cheap. He also knew that the young gentleman had a dislike to bargaining, and gave a decided affirmative or negative at once to whatever offer was made him.

" Well, seven pound ten to you, Mr. Manvers," he said.

Manvers nodded.

" I'm just going into the country for the afternoon," he remarked. " I shall be home at precisely nine o'clock this evening. Bring the bureau up then, and I'll give you a cheque."

Then he went to lunch, and enjoyed his food and his drink, and afterwards he got on to the train and rode to Chalfont Road Station, and there turned into the lanes and fields, and was thankful that London, after all, lies in the very heart of Arcadia—which is a truth that most people never recognise. And in due course, having found the inn and reported himself at it, he went back to Town and dined, and at nine o'clock went to his flat, very well pleased with himself.

The second-hand furniture man and his assistant had just carried the bureau to the door of the flat when Manvers arrived, and he let them in and showed them where to place the new acquisition. They had cleaned and polished it, and when they had departed, the principal, happy in the reflection that he made a very nice profit, Manvers put a blue jar on the top of it and studied the effect.

" Yes, that's all right," he said. " That's just what that recess needed. That's quite all right.'"

Later on, when he was having his whisky and smoking his pipe, he began to examine his new purchase more carefully than he had had time to do in the morning. It was a very convenient bureau, he decided, and afforded plenty of space. He would put in it a quantity of papers and documents which he had hitherto kept in a tin box. And having an innate belief that if you want to do anything the present is the time to do it, he began to arrange the papers in the various drawers and compartments with which the bureau was filled. It was while he was thus engaged that Manvers began to wonder if this ancient piece of furniture contained a secret drawer.

" Most of them do," he muttered. " In all the romances, and most of the stories, all these ancient things have a secret drawer in which somebody hides something. Then the somebody forgets the something, or dies suddenly, and nobody knows where the something has been put, and—hallo ! "

He had been pulling drawers out and pushing drawers in as he muttered, and suddenly something clicked beneath his fingers, and he saw one half of what had seemed to be the bottom of a drawer just as suddenly slide away from his sight. And beneath it was a cavity, and in the cavity was an envelope, of the size in which bankers send pass-books to people who are lucky enough to have a banking account. Manvers gasped, and then whistled.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if this is the story I have been trying to find? Old bureau—secret drawer—mysterious document! Seems like it. Let's see what the apparently mysterious document is."

He lifted the envelope from the cavity, and carrying it under the light, turned it over in his hand. He was sure, then, that it was a banker's envelope, strongly made, and lined with linen. It was neither gummed down nor sealed, and he turned back the flap and peeped within.

The next instant Manvers found himself sitting in his chair staring at a thick wad of Bank of England notes which lay comfortably in his palm. There was an india-rubber ring round the notes, but he knew they were notes. Nothing in the world rejoices in such beautifully black ink, such delightfully crackly, yet silky paper as the notes which come from the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street. Manvers pinched the end with his left thumb and finger; it was thick and substantial. He laughed half cynically.

"And yet," he murmured, "there are asses in the world who really believe that fiction is stranger than truth!"

Then, coming down from the regions of speculation to those of prosaic fact, he slipped off the india-rubber ring and counted the notes. There were fifty-seven of them, and they were for one hundred pounds each.

"Five thousand seven hundred pounds!" said Manvers. "H'm—a nice amount to find in an old piece of furniture! Now, I wonder to whom all these nice, new, crackling bits of paper belong? However, there ought not to be any great difficulty about finding that out; the numbers will have been taken somewhere, by somebody."

Looking over the notes again, he saw that the numbers ran consecutively. This confirmed him in the belief that they had been paid out *en bloc* at some bank, and would accordingly be easily traced to their source. Putting them carefully in his pocket-book, Manvers made another inspection of the bureau, and after a few moments' investigation, discovered the secret of the false bottom, which yielded to a certain amount of pressure. If he had not thought of giving up that particular drawer to a certain very heavy package of papers, the banknotes might have remained unrevealed for many a long year to come.

" This is decidedly a story," said Manvers, and retired to sleep.

Next morning he went round to the furniture dealer from whom he had bought the old bureau.

" Look here," he said. " I want to know who it was that you bought that old bureau from. You're sufficiently acquainted with me to feel sure that I don't ask out of any idle curiosity. But—I want to know."

The furniture dealer knew that Manvers was a persistent young man ; he also knew him to be honest. He nodded his head.

" Well, Mr. Manvers," said he, " I tell you, as it's you, though I wouldn't tell anybody else, because it's against my rules. But, as you say, I know you. I bought that there bureau, sir, and a quantity of other old furniture of a similar quality—that grandfather's clock is one article, and those oak chairs were in the same lot—from a young lady, who told me that she couldn't afford to keep them. In fact, she told me that she was obliged to sell them. She had a quantity of good old stuff like that, and she sold it to me in a lump, and a very fair price I gave her for it, Mr. Manvers, because it was good. My own impression, sir, was that she had come down in the world. I know she didn't like parting with the old things.

" How long since is this ? " asked Manvers.

" Oh, not long, sir ! " answered the furniture dealer. " That bureau which you bought is the first thing I've sold out of the lot."

" Give me the young lady's address, if you know it," said Manvers.

The furniture dealer hunted in a desk, and finally produced a memorandum book. He turned to a certain page.

"Here it is, sir," he said.

Manvers took the memorandum, and rapidly memorised the name and address which the dealer pointed out. The street was one which goes off Maida Vale; the name was unfamiliar—Miss Grantham.

"All right," said Manvers; "I've got it! Look here—don't sell any more of that furniture until you see me again—to-morrow. I'll—I'll be responsible for it."

Then he hurried away, and the furniture dealer rubbed his chin and began to speculate on things. He decided that Mr. Manvers had found the title-deeds of an immense property in the old bureau, that Miss Grantham was a missing heiress, and that Mr. Manvers would marry her and share her lands and money.

Manvers went straight up Edgware Road to the little street which branched off Maida Vale. It was a quiet unpretentious street, and Manvers made a shrewd guess that the folk who lived in it were not over-burdened with the goods of this world. He soon found the number which he wanted—it was that of a drab-looking, rather shabby house, obviously let off in apartments. And in a corner of the window of the ground floor front room Manvers saw a printed card on which appeared in large letters the single word "Typewriting." Beneath it, in smaller letters, was the name which the dealer had given him—"Miss Mary Grantham."

"That simplified matters," said Manvers as he rang the bell. "That's really lucky."

A slipshod damsel opened the door and gazed at him in silence. In response to his inquiry she drew back into the passage, opened the door of a room, and poked in her head. Manvers caught the click of a typewriter.

"Here's a young man wants to speak to yer, Miss Grantham," said the slipshod one.

Manvers turned from contemplating the street to find himself looking at a girl who had come out of the room and advanced to the door. He had a confused notion that she was apparently twenty years of age, that she was pretty, that she had brown eyes and hair, that she was obviously of gentle breeding, and that her face was somewhat sad and anxious.

She looked at him with timid inquiry, and he hastened to speak as he removed his hat.

"Oh—er—I want some typing done in a rather hurry," he blurted out lamely. "And coming round here I saw your—your announcement in the window. Do you think you could do it ?"

"I should be very glad to do it," the girl answered. "And—I can do it at once."

Manvers noticed with a delight which he could not explain that she had a refined and quiet voice. The furniture dealer had been right—this was somebody who had "come down in the world." He pulled out his card-case.

"Thank you," he said, handing over a card. "Well, do you think you could come or send for the copy about noon to-day ? My rooms, you see, are not far away.

The girl had glanced at the card, and Manvers saw by a sudden flush which rose to her cheeks that she had recognised his name. She looked at him shyly, yet with interest.

"I will come for it myself," she answered. "At—at one o'clock."

Manvers drew back and lifted his hat.

"At one o'clock it will be ready," he said. And he went away wondering what the connection between this girl and the banknotes which he had found in the old bureau really was.

"That is the first chapter of the story ! " he said to himself. "What will the second be ? "

Then he walked home and looked out the manuscript of a story which he could give to Miss Grantham to type. But he knew very well that the typing was a mere pretext, an excuse for getting her to come there. What he really wanted was to see if she recognised the bureau.

When he opened the door of his flat to her a few minutes after one o'clock she was not alone—a boy, so much like her that Manvers instantly set them down as brother and sister, was with her. He was a delicate-looking boy, who looked as if he had been ill recently, and he stared at Manvers with some interest.

"This is my brother," said the girl, as Manvers invited them to enter. "He is just recovering from an illness, and as I shall not be able to take him out this afternoon, as I usually do, I brought him with me."

"He must rest awhile," said Manvers, "he looks tired." And he led them into the room in which the bureau stood, and asked them to be seated. "The copy is ready," he continued, purposely turning away from them and the bureau and busying himself at the drawer of his writing-table. "I will just explain it to you while your brother rests. All that I want——"

He turned to find both of them staring hard at the bureau. They looked at each other, and the girl flushed and turned her eyes to the sheets of paper which Manvers was holding.

"You are admiring my old bureau," said Manvers. "I have only just bought it. Have you ever seen one quite like it before?"

The brother and sister exchanged glances again. The boy laughed gently; the girl seemed comforted.

"We—I—the fact is, I think that used to be ours, Mr. Manvers," she said. "I sold it not long ago."

"Really!" exclaimed Manvers, affecting placid unconcern. "Dear me! Well, I shall take great care of it."

The girl looked at him.

"I am glad it has fallen into good hands," she said simply. "Will you tell me about the copy, please?"

There was nothing to explain about the copy, but Manvers took some little time in explaining it, and Miss Grantham no doubt thought him stupid and preoccupied, for he gave her some unnecessary instructions at least twice over. And then he began to hum and ha, and show signs of uneasiness.

"Um—er—we had better—I mean it is just as well to be business-like," he said at last. "I—I did not say anything about your terms, but I may mention that I always pay cash for all work that is done for me, and——"

Miss Grantham, in a very business-like way, produced a neatly printed card, and laid it on the table.

"Those are my terms," she observed. "Now, when do you want this delivered, Mr. Manvers?"

"Do you think you could complete it by this evening?" asked Manvers, eagerly. "It is, you see, very short, and I should like to send it away to-night, if possible."

"I will bring it to you at half-past six," she answered.

"Thank you, thank you!" said Manvers. "That will be excellent."

When she and the boy had gone he picked up the little card and looked at it, and he smiled.

"That's also excellent," he said. "I am certainly on the way to discovering the mystery of the bank-notes."

For he had noticed that at the bottom of the card there was printed a line in red ink, "References are kindly permitted to——." And then followed some names, one of which, a local solicitor, Manvers recognised as that of an acquaintance.

"That's good—that's good!" he said to himself. "Mitcham will know something. I'll call on Mitcham this afternoon as soon as I've lunched."

Mitcham's office was on the way toward Kilburn. Manvers walked up there, carrying the little card of terms with him. He laid it on Mitcham's desk after they had exchanged greetings.

"I am employing this young lady," said Manvers. "I see she is giving you as a reference. I suppose she can be trusted for good work and punctuality, and so on?"

Mitcham picked up the little card and fingered it, and gave Manvers a queer look.

" If you've seen Mary Grantham, I should think you'd know she can be trusted for anything," he answered.

" That's exactly what I did think," said Manvers quietly. " I only asked you out of mere form. My own impression was that she would do anything she promised to do—and also that she had not always earned her living with a typewriter."

" Quite right," replied Mitcham ; " she hasn't."

Manvers sat down, and drew off his gloves.

" This is as queer a world as it is a small one," he said. " Do you know that only yesterday I happened to buy an old bureau which Miss Grantham and her brother recognised this morning as one which had once belonged to them ? "

Mitcham shook his head, and then nodded comprehendingly.

" Yes, yes," he said. " I know that she has had to sell all her father's old furniture, books, pictures—that girl has had a stiff time, Manvers. I and my wife know all about it. Her father was an old antiquarian who had enough to live on comfortably—well, about three hundred a year, derived from house property, and he made a little more by writing on heraldry. About two years ago something possessed him to sell his house property with the idea of re-investing the money. At last he did so, and one day he went into the City and completed the matter. All that is known of what happened is this. He cashed a cheque for five thousand seven hundred pounds in one hundred pound notes at a certain bank that afternoon, and then seems to have gone straight home to his daughter and son, to whom, however, he said nothing of what he had done.

" That evening he died of apoplexy, never regaining consciousness after the seizure. Through inquiries his doings on that day came to light, but the notes with which he had left the bank could not be found or traced. They never have been. Also they have never been presented for payment at the Bank of England. What the old fellow did with them is a mystery. And, of course, as there was little money, the girl has had a stiff time of it. Lately, the boy has been ill, and times have been stiffer. But she's a good plucked 'un, sir, is that girl, and——"

" Mitcham," said Manvers, with a queer laugh, " you once told me that it was impossible for truth to be stranger than fiction. You said that we professional storytellers dealt too much in coincidences which were improbable, that no such things as we invent could be true. And yet—look here ! "

And he slowly drew forth and held up to the astonished Mitcham a wad of banknotes.

" I found 'em ! " said Manvers, triumphantly. " I, Jeffrey Manvers, found 'em ! And now I'm going to take 'em to the girl and the boy."

Ten minutes later, when Mitcham had heard all the story, he clapped his hands.

" Why, it's a story ! " he exclaimed. " A real story. What do you think ? "

Manvers smiled oracularly.

" I think, Mitcham," he said, " I think that it's the beginning of what I hope may be the most beautiful story I have ever been concerned with. For—I have fallen in love."

THE INFLUENCE FAILS

WILFORD suddenly burst into consciousness of himself—burst into it as a man bursts out of a heavy sleep into alert wakefulness, out of the deadening effects of an anæsthetic into a sharp realisation of life. He shook his head, his shoulders, his whole body ; a quick exclamation came involuntarily from his lips.

" Where am I ? What has happened ? "

Blinking his eyes, Wilford looked around him. He found himself standing in a room which was absolutely unfamiliar to him, never in his life had he been in that room before. It was a large room, a handsome room, evidently the dining-room of the house of some man of wealth and position. The floor was richly and thickly carpeted ; the furniture, somewhat old-fashioned, was substantial and suggestive of an ideal of comfort which is usually associated with the Victorian age ; there was massive silver on the great side-board, and fine oil-paintings hung on the walls ; even in that confusing moment Wilford's essentially commercial mind was keen enough to appraise the value of the contents of the room at many hundreds of pounds. And again he looked around him wonderingly, noting more things and features, but always speculating on his own presence there. He saw that on the heavily-clothed dining-table in the centre of the room there stood a shaded silver lamp ; that within the circle of bright light stood a tray on which had been placed a decanter containing an amber-coloured fluid, a syphon of mineral water, and a tumbler ; noticed that a pair of comfortable-looking slippers were propped up within the fender in such a way as to catch the warmth of the fire in the low grate ; he saw that the hands of the clock over the great marble chimney-piece pointed to a minute before midnight. And, turning from these things, he saw that before the windows of the room heavy silken curtains were drawn, and hung in straight, formal, undisturbed lines; that there were two doors to the room, each door closed as if it had never been opened, and was never going to open again, and once more he asked himself involuntarily:

"Where am I? What has happened? How did I come here?" A sudden grating of a key in a lock made Wilford start nervously. He turned, glancing first at one door, then at the other. The door immediately in front of him opened; a man, tall, finely built, handsome, elderly, whose evening dress showed itself beneath a half-opened overcoat, stepped carelessly into the room. And within that second he saw Wilford, and drew himself up in evident and extraordinary surprise.

Wilford, who stood on the hearthrug between the table and the fire, gazed at the entrant in silence and with a species of appeal in his eyes. He said no word, and did not move—the elderly man, staring at him with keen, cold eyes, took him in at a glance. What he saw was a young man of apparently twenty-one years of age, of medium height, somewhat thin and pale of face, and slight of figure, who, from his attire, seemed to belong to the clerk or shop-assistant class. He also saw that this young man stood before him in attitude which seemed to denote helplessness and perplexity. And, after the first start of astonishment, the elderly man placed his hat and gloves on the table, and spoke in a quiet, if stern voice.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Wilford shook his head hopelessly. Something within him was wondering if he would ever find his tongue. But he found it.

"I do not know," he answered.

The tall man's eyebrows arched themselves in surprise.

"You do not know?" he said. "Then—how do you come to be in this room?"

Wilford shook his head more helplessly than ever.

"I do not know," he repeated.

The tall man, who was watching Wilford with intense attention, paused before he spoke again. Still keeping his eyes fixed upon this strange visitor, he backed to the wall behind him, and his left hand pressed a button in a bracket near the door. The room, until then only lighted by the soft rays of the lamp, was suddenly illuminated by electric light.

" Now," said the tall man, approaching the table again, " tell me—did any one show you into this room, or did you come into it by yourself, and, if the latter, how did you enter it ? "

But again Wilford shook his head.

" I do not know how I came here ! " he said. " I—I have only just found out that I am here. And—I do not know *where* I am."

The tall man, who had kept his right hand in the pocket of his light overcoat all this time, raised the left and pointed to a bell-push near the chimney-piece.

" Will you oblige me by pushing that little knob ? " he said politely, but with a certain air of command. " Push it firmly."

Wilford obeyed this order without demur. He turned to the tall man again as if he were asking for further orders. The tall man was still watching his every movement—or, watching any movement that might be, for Wilford was as quiet as if he had no energy left in him.

" You had better sit down," said the tall man, pointing to an easy-chair.

Wilford sat down obediently. He had hardly taken his seat when the other door opened, and a young man entered the room—a big, athletic-looking young man, clad only in pyjamas and slippers, who glanced first at the big man, then at Wilford, and came to a sudden halt at the end of the table.

" Karsdale," said the tall man, who spoke without taking his eyes off Wilford for even the fraction of a second, " here is a strange affair. When I came in a few minutes ago, I found this young fellow standing on the hearthrug. He tells me that he does not know how he comes to be in this room—in fact, he says he knows nothing except that he is here, and that he does not know where he is. What do you make of it ? "

Karsdale made a critical inspection of Wilford, and at the end of it be rubbed his tumbled hair.

" He doesn't look like a burglar," he said.

Wilford's pale face flushed.

" I am not a burglar ! " he said, indignantly. " I am very poor, but I have never done a dishonest thing in my life. If you think I have taken anything of yours, you may search me. But I haven't."

The tall man suddenly took off his light overcoat, and threw it aside.

" Now, that is a very sensible proposition of yours, my friend," he said. " It is not a pleasant thing to search a man, but you have made the offer, and it may be in your interest if I accept. I want you to understand the position—your position. I am Sir Nicholas Yarminster, with some repute as a physician. I come home at midnight, and find you, a perfect stranger, in my dining-room. I know that in the ordinary way of things it would be impossible for you to be here. You cannot tell me why you are here, or how you gained admission. Do you fully comprehend all that ? "

" I fully comprehend all that, sir," replied Wilford. " I am as much amazed as you can be to find myself here."

" Then we will modify matters somewhat," said Sir Nicholas. " We won't search you ; you shall turn out all your pockets. Karsdale, stand behind the young man, and if he draws a revolver, handle him. Now, sir, come to the table."

Wilford advanced to the table with alacrity. He was already thrusting his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

" I haven't got a revolver, sir," he said. " There's my money, it's all I have in the world, and there isn't two pounds of it. Those are my keys—only I've nothing to unlock with them. That's a pocket handkerchief, those are private letters and my testimonials. That's my penknife, and that's a pocket-comb. That's all I have on me, and——"

His fingers were straying about his waistcoat by this time, and the keen-eyed watcher—who had noticed that Wilford wore neither watch nor chain—saw them go to the watch-pocket. And suddenly Wilford started as if a surprise had come over him.

"What's this—what are these?" he exclaimed. "There's something here that doesn't belong to me—what is it? What's it all mean—what——"

And he drew out and dropped on the table a key and a phial, and stared at them with horror, which both the men who watched him knew to be genuine.

"They're not mine, those!" he almost shouted. "Who put them there? What are they? What is all this? I'm not mad, am I? This isn't—oh, God, gentlemen, what is it?"

The elder man put his hand on Wilford's shoulder.

"Calm yourself," he said. "You are in no danger. Tell me, are you faint—hungry?"

"No, no!" answered Wilford. "I'm not—hungry."

Sir Nicholas turned to Karsdale and nodded at the sideboard.

"Give him a little brandy," he said, and he turned away and picked up the key and the phial.

A moment later, when Karsdale had handed Wilford the drink prescribed for him, he beckoned him aside.

"Look here, Karsdale," he said in a low tone. "I saw at once what this key was. Do you see—it's a duplicate key to the private door there? And this phial contains cyanide of potassium!"

The young doctor gasped.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What does it mean? Is it some diabolical plot?"

Sir Nicholas put the key and the phial in his waistcoat pocket.

"Wait!" he said.

He turned to Wilford, who had dropped back into the easy-chair and covered his face with his hands, and he drew up a chair in front of him, and signed to Karsdale to take another close by. He laid his hand on Wilford's knee in no unkindly fashion.

"Now, my friend," said Sir Nicholas, "let us talk. Don't be afraid. Just answer a few questions. You did not know that that key and that little bottle were in your pocket?"

"No, sir," answered Wilford, with emphasis.

"Never seen them before?" said Sir Nicholas.

"Never!" said Wilford.

Sir Nicholas leaned back in his chair, and folded his arms.

"Now!" he said. "Just tell me who you are—tell me everything you can. And once more—don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid of telling anything, sir," answered Wilford. "I'm only afraid of—of this."

"Of what, now?" asked Sir Nicholas.

Wilford made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"Of this—this mystery!" he said. "It—it frightens me. I—don't know how I got here. Something's—sort of lost. It's as if I'd gone to sleep in one place, and woke in another."

Sir Nicholas nodded at him reassuringly.

"We'll try to solve that difficulty," he said. "Now, tell me who you are, and where you live, and what you do, to begin with."

"My name's Wilford, James Wilford," replied the captive. "I live at present at Sebastopol Place, off the Harrow Road—number 523. I'm a draper's assistant by trade, but the last employer I was with, Mr. Canthread of Kilburn, failed in business six months since, and I've been out of work since then, sir. Those are my testimonials, sir, on the table—I wish you'd read them, and you'd know then whether I'm honest or not."

"Yes, by-and-by," said Sir Nicholas. "So you've had no work for six months?"

"Only odd jobs at clerking, and envelope-addressing, and such-like," answered Wilford.

" And you've no doubt spent all your little savings ? " suggested Sir Nicholas.

" All I've got in the world is on that table," said Wilford. " And I've no friends, neither."

Sir Nicholas leaned forward again and laid his hand on Wilford's knee. He looked searchingly at him.

" How long had you been in my room—here—when I entered to-night ? " he asked.

Wilford moved restlessly in his chair.

" But that's just what I don't know, sir ! " he cried. " I seemed to sort of wake up out of a sound sleep and here I was ! And just then, in you came, sir, at that door."

" Yes," said Sir Nicholas. " Now, tell me—what is the very last thing you remember before that ? "

Wilford's forehead wrinkled. Suddenly it cleared.

" The—very—last—thing ? " he said. " Oh, the very last thing I remember was standing outside the Labour Bureau in the Edgware Road. Oh, I remember that ! "

" When was that ? " asked Sir Nicholas.

" Why," replied Wilford, " it was—was about five o'clock Tuesday afternoon."

" This is Tuesday midnight," said Sir Nicholas. " So that, Karsdale, was seven hours ago. Yes, Wilford—now what were you doing there ? "

" Gone to read the notices, sir, to see if there was any chance of a job," answered Wilford.

" And you don't remember anything after that until you found yourself here ? " asked Sir Nicholas.

" Not a thing, sir," said Wilford.

" What did you think when you found yourself here ? " asked Sir Nicholas, after a pause.

" When you came in, sir, I was just thinking that I must have had an accident and been brought in here," replied Wilford. " But I was—I was sort of dazed, queer."

Sir Nicholas nodded.

" Now, do you remember anything that happened while you were standing outside the Labour Bureau ? " he asked.

Wilford shook his head. But he checked himself on the verge of the negative, and his face brightened.

" Yes, I do ! " he said. " I remember a man staring at me an awful lot. Stared as if I was a specimen, he did ! "

Sir Nicholas turned to Karsdale.

" Karsdale," he said, " I feel as if I should like a cigar. Would you mind fetching a box from my study ? "

Karsdale, anxious not to miss anything, hurried away. As soon as the door had closed on him, Sir Nicholas bent forward to Wilford.

" Now," he said, " what was that man like ? "

" He was a foreign-looking man, with a squint," answered Wilford promptly.

" Do you remember any more ? " asked Sir Nicholas.

" No, sir," replied Wilford ; " that's the last I do remember."

Karsdale came hurrying back with the cigars. Sir Nicholas met him before he was half-way across the room and took the box from his hands.

" Karsdale," he said in a whisper, " I want you to go up and dress. There is no need of any immediate hurry. When you are dressed, come back to me here."

When the young doctor had left the room again Sir Nicholas lighted a cigar and for a few minutes smoked in silence. At last he turned to Wilford, who was watching him with an air of absorbed fascination.

" Now, Wilford," he said, " I want you to be a sensible fellow. Let me tell you, first of all, that there is nothing whatever for you to be frightened about. You must stay here for the night—I will take you myself to a bedroom where you will be quite comfortable. I want you to go to sleep and rest. To-morrow morning I will talk to you again, and if there is anything I can do to help you in the way of getting work I will do it ; in fact, you may go to bed assured that I will find a way to help you. Put out of your mind everything that has happened to-night."

Wilford stood up pale and trembling.

"Sir!" he said. "Sir! Can you—will you—tell me how I came here, and how that key and that bottle got into my pockets? That's what's——"

Sir Nicholas stopped him.

"To-morrow, when you have slept, no doubt I can and I will," he answered. "For the present you must take my word that no harm shall befall you. You are sure you are not hungry? Well—here, take this biscuit canister with you in case you feel hungry in the night. And—yes—you shall have a little more brandy-and-water. Carry it upstairs, and eat a biscuit or two as you drink it, before you get into bed. And now come with me."

When Karsdale returned to the dining-room he found Sir Nicholas pacing up and down, puffing meditatively at his cigar. The great doctor nodded to his assistant and smiled.

"Mix yourself a whisky-and-soda, Karsdale, and sit down," he said. "There is no immediate hurry for any action. Now, what do you think of this night's events?"

The young doctor stared at his senior in astonishment.

"I, Sir Nicholas! I do not know what to think," he answered. "I am—amazed!"

Sir Nicholas sat down and smiled.

"So was I—at first," he said. "Worse than amazed—confounded. Karsdale, it is only by the mercy of God that I am not lying on that hearthrug a dead man!"

Karsdale started.

"You mean——" he exclaimed.

"I mean," said Sir Nicholas, slowly, "that there has been a diabolical plot to murder me, frustrated by God's mercy. Listen. I have worked it all out. That poor lad upstairs was this evening hypnotised. Under hypnotic influence he, with the key furnished him by the would-be murderer, let himself in by my private door there. He was then to pour the cyanide of potassium into that decanter and go. The murderer knew well what he was about—he knew that it is my habit when I come in at that hour to mix myself a pretty strong whisky-and-soda, drink it off at one draught, and go straight to bed."

" Good heavens ! " exclaimed Karsdale.

" So you see what would have happened," continued Sir Nicholas. " But, Karsdale—the influence failed at the last moment ! I do not know how or why it did—but it did. It passed—and there I found the unfortunate subject wondering where he was."

There was a silence for a full minute, and then Karsdale in a hushed voice said :

" This must have been done by some one who at some time had your private key in his possession, and was familiar with your habits. What are you going to do ? "

" A simple thing," answered Sir Nicholas. " The young man upstairs is one of the best hypnotic subjects I have ever seen—I recognised that at once. To-morrow morning I am going to have him hypnotised again, and the suggestion to him shall be that he shall reverse what happened to-night. He will go to the would-be murderer, or at any rate to his house, and we will follow him. And the man to do it is—Dr. Ludovic Motz."

" I have heard of him and his powers," said Karsdale.

" We will ring him up on his night-telephone," said Sir Nicholas. " Come with me into the study."

Karsdale stood waiting and wondering while Sir Nicholas, at the telephone, got through the preliminaries of communication with Dr. Motz. At last Sir Nicholas turned sharply to his assistant. He nodded, signifying that Karsdale was to listen.

" Dr. Motz ? This is Sir Nicholas Yarminster. Dr. Motz, I shall be obliged if you will come to my house. There is a young man who has been here since a little before midnight, and who, when he arrived, was under a state of hypnotic suggestion, which seems to have lasted since five o'clock yesterday afternoon, when, in Edgware Road, he met a man of foreign appearance with a noticeable squint. The influence failed—failed, Dr. Motz ! I shall be glad of your presence, and I am sending my assistant, Dr. Karsdale, in a taxi-cab to fetch you—

he will be at your door in exactly half-an-hour. That is all. Good-bye."

Sir Nicholas hung up the receiver, drew a card from his pocket, scribbled a few words on it, and handed it to Karsdale.

"There, Karsdale," he said. "That's the address. Off you go ; get a taxi from the rank, and time yourself to be there in just half an hour. I'll let you know more when you return."

Karsdale set off into the night, and Sir Nicholas returned to the dining-room, and, taking off his boots, put on the slippers which had been warming so long. Then he lighted a fresh cigar and mixed himself a drink, and picking up a magazine, sat down quietly to read.

Exactly an hour went by, and then he heard the front door open and shut, and then Karsdale's hurried footsteps in the hall. The young doctor entered the dining-room unceremoniously, and seeing Sir Nicholas alone, stopped short.

"Has Dr. Motz not arrived, Sir ?" he said quickly. "He had left the house a quarter of an hour when I got there. I thought that by this time he would have come."

Sir Nicholas Yarminster looked up and smiled.

"No, Karsdale," he said, "Motz has not come, and Motz won't come. Karsdale—Motz was the guilty man ! I knew that more than an hour ago. And why I telephoned to him was to give him the chance to—go. And Motz has—gone. No, Karsdale, Motz will never come !"

And Dr. Ludovic Motz never did come, and nobody knows where he is. But Mr. James Wilford is in clover again, and has a vast respect for the great doctor into whose house he was introduced in such a very mysterious manner.

CONTINGENT ON THE VERDICT

THE COUNTY HOTEL,
GREYMINSTER.
May 8, 19——.

IT is somewhat past midnight, and as people go to bed early in this old-world country town, I dare say that, with the possible exception of a night-porter, I am the only person in this hotel who is not asleep, or, at any rate, desirous of sleeping. For me, however there will be no sleep to-night.

Just outside the door of the bedroom in which I am writing a corridor opens off a main upstairs hall; the entire accommodation in that corridor is specially and particularly reserved for the twelve jurymen who are trying—have for two days been trying—a case at the Greyminster Spring Assizes. These twelve good men and true, as the law calls them, are treated as if they themselves were prisoners. For the time being they are dead to the outside world; they are certainly on view in the Assize Court all day, and we catch glimpses of them here in the hotel, and they are seen going to and fro in their wagonette. All the same, they are kept strictly away from their wives and families, and from business and neighbours, and from everything but the affair which concerns them just now. There are officials who are in charge of them just as warders are in charge of convicts; these men are always with them while they eat and drink and go for fresh air, and they see that they are in their rooms at night, and that no outsider communicates with them. Yes, for the time, to be a juryman is to be a prisoner, with some small privileges. I have watched the faces of these men in court each day. I am sure they will be thankful to be released. And yet they have only been occupied with this case all day for two short days.

This is really nothing—it is nothing at all. There are others who have been occupied with it for long weary days, and wearier weeks, and still wearier months. However, to-morrow—no, to-day, this day!—the case is expected to end.

Right away at the end of Saxonsgate, in which this hotel is situated, stands the fine old Norman castle of Greyminster. Some of it is in ruins, but a considerable part was restored some years ago, and has since then served as the county gaol. And to-night, somewhere within that gaol lies the man whom the twelve jurymen who are so near me are trying. His life, so far as everybody can see, is in their hands; by the middle of this afternoon the case is expected to come to an end, and before evening the verdict will be delivered. Then the suspense of the case will be over for everybody—everybody.

I hope the prisoner in Greyminster Castle is sleeping, that he is sleeping well, even soundly. They say, those who know, that some prisoners do sleep well, eat well, are cheerful, even on the night before a verdict is to be given. Perhaps they are men who are very confident. I do not see, however, how this man in Greyminster Gaol can be at rest. The evidence against him, though entirely circumstantial, is very strong. In that it is circumstantial, lies his only chance. And the charge is —murder.

As I have a special reason for writing all this down in the quietude and terrible silence of this hotel bed-chamber, I will narrate briefly the course of the events which have put Robert Tyler in the cell, and brought me, John Stephen, down here from London, where I live, to hear the trial and to await the end. And as the facts against Robert Tyler are plain and simple, I will endeavour to set them down in very plain fashion.

On Christmas Eve last, December 24, 19—, a young townsman of Greyminster going home, found about midnight, at a certain part of the terrace which stands between the castle walls and the river, the body of a well-known fellow-townsman, one Daniel Cargus. He was quite dead, and had been shot through the heart at close quarters. There were no signs of any struggle; there were no traces of an assassin's footsteps or presence. At first some unthinking people said Daniel Cargus had shot himself, but no revolver was found there. And there was quickly no doubt that the dead man had been shot. The only question to solve was—who had shot him?

In a small country town like Greymister, things can be found out very quickly. Daniel Cargus was a man who dabbled in many things, but especially in money; he was, in fact, a duly registered money-lender. He was not popular, because he was hard and grasping, and it immediately occurred to the police to ascertain if there was any man in the town who had any vindictive feeling against him. They soon discovered that there was. A certain young tradesman of Greyminster—one Robert Tyler—had not been very successful, and he had been obliged to resort to Cargus. There had been some bill-of-trade transactions, and Tyler had not been able to meet his liabilities, and the money-lender had been harsh, and had eventually sold Tyler up, lock, stock, and barrel. And Tyler had taken it very badly, and had been seen in what was evidently a fierce altercation with Cargus, and he had hinted foolishly and madly in public that he would have such a revenge as was little thought of. And Tyler was known to be a man of black temper.

Now mark how badly things went for Tyler, and how damning certain matters of purely circumstantial evidence can be to an accused man. It was well known in the town that Tyler was nursing bitter hatred against Cargus. Tyler was an unmarried man; he had no relatives in Greyminster, and no restraining influence, and since his failure in business he had been drinking heavily, and the worst of his drinking was that he never succeeded in becoming intoxicated, but only got into a sullen, brooding, ugly mood. More than one man who knew him had heard him muttering to himself in these moods, and had dreaded a sudden outbreak of violence, and even worse, and some of them had advised him to leave the town, and had offered to help him to do so, without avail. It was no surprise, said some of these people, to hear that Cargus had been murdered; they had dreaded what Tyler might do.

On the evening of the murder Tyler had been drinking at an inn on the further side of the castle. He remained there until a late hour; when he left he was seen to go along the terrace at the foot of the castle walls. At that hour of night this terrace was scarcely ever frequented, especially in winter, for it was badly lighted, a little dangerous, having poor protection on the river side, and only led to the Bearward, a suburb of the town. Cargus used it every night, because his own house was in Bearward, and it was immediately conjectured that Tyler had met him in the light of the lamp under which the money-lender's body was found, and had shot him there and then in a fit of passion.

The police authorities were at Tyler's lodgings within two hours of the finding of Daniel Cargus's body. He lived with some people of humble means outside the town, and when the police got there, although it was two o'clock in the morning, they found him just leaving the cottage with a travelling-bag in his hand. He was taken into the cottage, and informed of what had happened. He showed great surprise, and protested his ignorance of the event. He explained that he was leaving at that hour in order to walk some miles across country, and catch a very early morning train for a place where he was going to spend Christmas, and it was certain that such a train did stop at a junction six miles away, soon after four o'clock. But when they had taken Tyler to the police-office, and searched him and his immediate belongings, they found in his bag a revolver, one chamber of which had recently been discharged.

Now that revolver was, of course, a great feature in the magisterial proceedings, and has been a great feature at the Assize Court, too. What Tyler has had to say about it is this. When he was sold up by Daniel Cargus, he had very few personal possessions left; in looking through what did remain, he found a revolver and a considerable quantity of cartridges. He said that he had entirely forgotten that he had these things until he found them in a disused trunk; then he remembered that some years—several years—before he had bought them when an ironmonger in the town sold off a quantity of stock very cheaply.

Now, having found them, and having nothing to do at the cottage in which he had gone to lodge until he could start afresh, he had cleaned the revolver, and had sometimes amused himself by firing at a mark in the orchard. He had gone out, he said, to practise that very afternoon, and had fired one shot, when heavy rain came on, and he went indoors. He had then placed the revolver and a number of cartridges in the bag to take away with him.

What Tyler said about the cleaning of, and practising with, the revolver was corroborated by the people of the cottage in general fashion. But, unfortunately, they could give him no support as regards the firing of one shot on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. The man at the cottage was at work; the woman was in Greyminster; the cottage was isolated, remote from other buildings. No one came forward who had seen or heard him fire. And then came the damning fact that the bullet which had passed through Daniel Cargus's heart was discovered in his body by the surgeons, and expert evidence showed that it was, practically beyond all doubt, such a bullet as those in possession of Tyler.

This was the case against Tyler. There are three things on which the prosecution relies:

1. Tyler's grievance, and his threats and hints of revenge.
2. The fact that he entered the castle terrace on the night of the murder.
3. The fact of his being found going away, and having the revolver with him.

There has only been one piece of evidence in Tyler's favour. A respectable man, living in Bearward, came forward, and swore that he had met and spoke to Tyler at the Greyminster end of the terrace at precisely twenty minutes past eleven o'clock on Christmas Eve. He saw Tyler pass on to the market-place. Then he himself went along the terrace to Bearward. There was nobody, either dead or living, on the terrace from one end to another, when he passed.

To this the prosecution allege that Tyler saw Daniel Cargus in the town, followed him back to the terrace, and shot him.

The counsel for the defence to-day pointed out that if Tyler really wanted to murder Daniel Cargus, he could have done so in much more secret fashion ; that he could have concealed the body easily, at any rate for a few hours, behind the brushwood at the edge of the terrace ; finally (a very strong argument), that had he liked he could have been well away from Greyminster by the midnight train.

I do not know how Tyler's trial will end. This morning, when the court sits, the judge will sum up. He will occupy some hours ; after that the jury will retire. I trust and pray that they will find the prisoner not guilty. If they do not, then I shall have to give this document to the judge. That is why I am sitting up all night to write it. This document, if Robert Tyler is found guilty, will establish his innocence.

For it was I, John Stephen, who killed Daniel Cargus !

This will tell why I killed him. I wish I could have the joy and satisfaction of killing such a scoundrel over again ; at the same time, I will not have an innocent man suffer for my legal crime.

I am a native of Greyminster. I was born, educated, and lived in the queer old town until I was fifteen years of age. I know every nook and corner of it—of its ancient castle, its famous churches, its gabled and timbered houses ; I also know most of its people. Yet, although I have been here in the town, staying at this hotel for four days, in order to attend the trial of Robert Tyler, I have not been recognised by anybody. But it is seventeen years since I left—I was a mere boy then, and I am now a somewhat wearied man, and I have grown a beard, which is already streaked with grey. I have spoken to several townsfolk and to people, men and women, who once knew me intimately ; not one of them has shown the least consciousness of my identity. I have sat in the Assize Court for two days, and walked about the town in the interval, a stranger amongst strangers.

When I left Greyminster I went to sea. I followed the sea steadily, learning all I could, and eventually I became a duly qualified engineer. And in such leisure time as I had, either afloat or ashore, I gave all my attention to inventing. Other men used to laugh at me for not enjoying the fun and the pleasures of life when there was a chance, but I never cared for drink and less for gaiety ; I was always best satisfied when I was free to occupy myself with my papers, my models, and my experiments. In my time I have invented several things which are in use in ships, both of the Royal Navy and of the mercantile marine, but they were small matters, all of them, however, useful and labour-saving. But I was always looking forward to accomplishing some great thing.

It is just about a year ago that I returned from a voyage in the China Seas to London with the diagrams, specifications, and model of a certain invention which I knew would revolutionise the steam-carrying service of the world—I mean by water. As a matter of fact, it has already begun the revolutionising process, and before long there will not be a vessel of any importance which will not be fitted with it. I knew very well that there was an enormous fortune in my invention, and I was glad to know it, for I wanted all the money I could get hold of in order to satisfy a certain boyish ambition of which I had never lost sight.

Once upon a time my people had been notable people in the neighbourhood of Greyminster. They had owned a great estate, and a fine manor-house, long since pulled down. They had fallen in the world through various causes—I am afraid that a far too great devotion to the gaming-table and the race-course had been one—and eventually there was nothing left. Indeed, there was nothing of the family left, for I am the very last of it. Now I wanted to revive it, to re-establish it. I wanted to buy up as much as ever I could get of the old acres, and upon them I meant to build a great house in the fashion of that in which my ancestors had lived in the old days. Then I intended to marry the daughter of one of the neighbouring county families, and to re-found the family on new and solid lines. It was a worthy ambition, there was nothing mean about it, and it was always with me in my work.

According to my expert knowledge of marine matters, the great invention which I had at last succeeded in perfecting would very quickly bring in almost fabulous wealth. I had carefully reckoned up that within two years from its being put on the market I should be a millionaire.

But as things were, I was a poor man. Whatever I saved at any time out of my pay went in defraying the cost of my experiments. It occurred to me that I could easily afford to give some capitalist a small share in my invention in return for his advance of the amount necessary to its preliminary introduction. And, as, from previous experience, I had no great liking for patent agents in money matters, I determined to do what I could for myself, and as a first step I inserted advertisements in certain leading newspapers and technical journals offering a share in an epoch-making invention to any capitalist who, upon investigation, cared to take it up.

I had several immediate answers to my advertisement; amongst them, to my surprise, was one from Daniel Cargus, of Greyminster, whom I dimly remembered as one-time mayor of the town, and a man of substance. He intimated that, if my project could bear investigation and seemed satisfactory, he should be prepared to take a share in it, and he asked me to dine with him the next day at a well-known London hotel in order to discuss matters. And as I knew nothing of Daniel Cargus but what I have just said, I wired an acceptance, and next day went to meet him.

Now, all who remember Daniel Cargus will bear me out in saying that his personal appearance was his greatest asset in gaining confidence. He was a tall, handsome, well-preserved man of about sixty ; he had a broad, white forehead, and a long and perfectly-kept grey beard, which gave him a patriarchal appearance ; he was always very well and fashionably dressed, and his manners were bland and courteous. Perhaps his eyes were set rather too closely together, and his big nose was rather too long and sharp, but his general appearance, and his conversation, and his methods, gave confidence. At any rate, he won mine at once.

After dinner, in his private room, I showed Daniel Cargus everything and explained everything. I also told him that I was anxious to get matters adjusted, because I was signed on for a voyage which was to begin almost immediately, and would last for seven months. He thought things over.

" I will tell you what you had better do," he said. " You had better leave all this in my hands. As I have shown you, I have vast experience in all these matters and in company promoting, and I know exactly what to do. While you are away I will get everything done in the matter of patents and of forming the company for manufacturing, in which, of course, I shall see that your interests are protected to the full. You will find yourself a millionaire before very long. Stephen, you are a fortunate man ! I suppose you will follow the sea no more after this voyage ? "

" No, sir, I shall not," said I. " That is, if you can put matters through all right."

" I shall put them through all right," he said. " I have managed bigger jobs than this in my time. Very well, now you leave everything with me, and I will go to work at once. Let me have the addresses of your various ports of call, so that I can report progress to you from time to time. And now, look here, as you've spent so much time and labour and money on this invention, wouldn't you like a cheque on account ? "

I was surprised, and a good deal taken aback by that, and I scarcely knew what to say.

" Why, Mr. Cargus," I said at last, " I scarcely expected to——"

" Oh," said he, pulling out a cheque-book, " have a cheque ! You'll be wanting something for further experiments. Men like you never do stop experimenting. I'll write you a cheque for a couple of thousand to be going on with."

I confess that the idea of receiving so much in the way of first-fruits of my labour was pleasant. I took the cheque, and I signed a receipt which he hurriedly scribbled—as a matter of form, he said. What was actually upon that receipt then I cannot say. I was a fool, and merely glanced at it. My impression was that I was merely signing an acknowledgment that Daniel Cargus had paid me two thousand pounds on account.

I saw him once or twice after that before I left England again. He told me some flattering things, and I sailed full of something more than hope. But there were no letters from him at any of the ports at which we called during the seven months' voyage. Even then I was not greatly alarmed, letters have a habit of going astray when they are sent to out-of-the-way ports.

I got back to England a little before Christmas. And I had not been twenty-four hours on shore when I discovered that my invention was already being manufactured and sold by a company which had its London offices in Cannon Street. Even then I did not suspect that anything was wrong, and I walked down to those offices and into them, imagining that I was the principal person there.

But, poor fool that I was, I was quickly undeceived. The manager, who accorded me an interview after considerable demur, seemed to think me mad on hearing my story.

" It is true that our company acquired rights from Mr. Daniel Cargus," he said ; " but we are quite sure that Mr. Cargus would not sell to us what he had not the right to sell."

I daresay I glared at him.

" The invention is mine ! " I said. " Mine ! "

He looked at me for a minute or two in silence. He seemed to be considering some question. At last he rose.

" Well," he said, " as a favour to you, I will show you an attested copy of the receipt you signed when Mr. Cargus bought your invention. That copy, of course, we naturally possess."

He presently came back to me with a sheet of paper on which was written a statement to the effect that beneath was a true and attested copy of the receipt given by John Stephen to Daniel Cargus. I read the receipt. I was made to say that I acknowledged the receipt of two thousand pounds from Daniel Cargus. That I remembered signing. But it added : " In full satisfaction of and payment for all and sundry my rights, present and future, in my invention : the papers, diagrams, and model of which I have handed over to the purchaser, the said Daniel Cargus."

I tore the paper into fragments, and threw them from me. The manager shrugged his shoulders.

" It was only a copy," he said. " We have others. And Mr. Cargus, of course, has the original. I shall be obliged if you will go now. We cannot have scenes of violence here."

I went. I went out into the crowded street, knowing that I had been tricked and cheated. And there and then I made a solemn vow to have Daniel Cargus's life before the morning of Christmas. It would be right, just, good to rid the world of such a scoundrel. Besides, it was impossible for the world to hold me and him.

I went to my lodgings and carefully worked out in every detail the plan which I meant to adopt. As I have already said, I knew every nook and corner of Greyminster, and especially of the various parts of the old castle. I also knew that Daniel Cargus lived in Bearward, which is west of the castle, and that his office was in the market-place, which is east of the castle, and in the centre of the town. And I came to the conclusion that, like most people who lived in Bearward, he would go home from the town by way of the terrace which overhangs the river.

But I knew more than that. Having explored every inch of the castle as a boy, I knew of a secret hiding-place within the walls of the terrace, and how to reach it unobserved—at any rate, after dark. That hiding-place had old arrow-slits in it—they commanded the terrace at a place where it narrowed immediately beneath the walls to about a yard's breadth. Over the arrow-slits was the one lamp which gave light just there ; its light fell full on any person who approached ; therefore, anyone concealed behind the slit would have such a person in excellent view, even at night.

About three miles from Greyminster, across the river, is the little manufacturing town of Clayford. I went down there three days before Christmas, and put up at the hotel, where they thought I was some one having business in the town. Each night, after dark, I slipped away to Greyminster. The first night I made a general inspection of the castle and the terrace, and the hiding-place. Everything was just as it always had been in my time. However, that night I saw nothing of Daniel Cargus. Nor did I see him the second night. But the third night, having carefully mingled with the Christmas crowd in the market-place, I ascertained that he was in his office, and I went away then and got into the hiding-place, feeling sure that he would go home by the terrace. Even if he didn't, I would wait another opportunity.

Soon after eleven a man, who must have been Tyler, passed, going towards the town. Two or three minutes later a man came from the town, and went towards

Bearward. And a quarter of an hour after that came Daniel Cargus, humming a tune.

I am a crack shot with a revolver, and my hand was as steady as steel. I shot him through his black and false heart. When he had fallen, I wondered that he looked so stately and even noble in the light before him—it must have been his fine beard.

Then, of course, I went quietly away to Clayford, and next morning returned to London. I felt quite certain of my own safety—I had never dreamed of any such thing as the arrest of Robert Tyler.

It is already grey morning. I have no more to write. Whether I give this to the judge to-day is entirely contingent on the verdict of those twelve men who are no doubt sleeping like children in the adjacent corridor. What will that verdict be? If it is " Not guilty," then I am free. But if——. However, what is the good of speculating? The main thing is that I put Daniel Cargus to a merited death, and I would do it again. All the same, Tyler must not suffer for me.

Note by the late Mr. Justice Whitbury endorsed upon the foregoing document, which was found amongst his lordship's papers:

" The trial of the man Tyler, at Greyminster, which is referred to in the enclosed remarkable statement, resulted in a verdict of ' Not Guilty.' Immediately the verdict had been given, a man in court, whom I had observed give great attention to the case, rose suddenly from his seat and fell dead. The doctors said that he had died from heart-failure, consequent upon intense excitement. This document was found upon him in a sealed envelope, which was addressed to me. For certain reasons of my own, and as Tyler immediately left the country, and is doing well in Canada under another name, I never made the contents of the document public.—A. C. W."

ALONE ON A WIDE, WIDE SEA

On that summer morning the lonely island, a tiny green jewel set in the sapphire bosom of the great Pacific, seemed as solitary a thing as the universe can show. There was not a sail visible on all the wide stretch of water; few sails, or smoke-stacks, or anything else, ancient or modern, in the way of shipping, ever came into those latitudes; the island was far, very far, out of any beaten track.

It was a mere speck in that shining waste, a bit of erupted matter, thrown up in the far past from the mysterious depths beneath; and in process of time, by those strange workings of Nature at which man can only guess, had become covered with a rich luxuriousness of tree and plant and flower. In that bright sunlight, that crystalline air, the island was a gem of sparkling colour; its outer ring of vivid green was set in a still wider ring of golden sand; about the sand curled gently a fringe of white spray—and beyond that white, restless, receding and advancing fringe was the brilliant blue of the ocean, which there looked so vast, so awe-inspiring in its silence as to suggest the idea of infinite illimitableness.

But there was human life amidst this apparent solitude.

Out of the belt of green which encircled the island, at a point where a solitary cocoa-palm crowned a low bluff overhanging the yellow sands, a man stepped into the full glare of the sun. He came from beneath the foliage so silently, so stealthily, that the curiously plumaged birds sitting on the surrounding branches made no movement, uttered no cry. Once without the fringe of green he drew himself erect, and, lifting one hand to shade his eyes, gazed steadily and watchfully about him.

He was a fine figure of a man, tall, sinewy rather than muscular, yet evidently possessed of enormous strength ; bright and keen of eye ; swift and sure in his movements. His brown hair and beard, both streaked with grey, were long and unkempt, yet clean and wiry, as if they knew plenty of water but no scissors ; no hat shielded his head from the sun. As for his garments, they were simple —a coarse canvas shirt, open at the neck, a pair of canvas trousers, which had been shortened to the knee. His feet were as bare as his head, and as brown as his strong, nervous hands. In one of those hands—the left—he carried a gun.

The man's keen gaze swept everything about him. He searched the shining expanse of sea mile by mile ; he searched the shores of the island literally yard by yard. And suddenly, as with the instinct of a hunted animal, he unconsciously shrank against the wall of green behind him, and became as motionless as the cocoa-palm in front, a graceful column of slenderness in the airless morning. He had seen something that had no place on the island—his island.

The man gazed long and steadily at that something. He saw an indistinct, a shapeless mass, which lay at the foot of a low ridge of rock some three-quarters of a mile away. The gazer knew every yard of his island : it had been his kingdom for—as near as he could reckon—more than three years, and there was nothing of it that was not known to him. He had not visited this side of his small domain for some days—whatever it was that lay in the shadow of the rocks yonder had not been there then.

As silently and stealthily as he had left it, the man slipped back into the tangled labyrinth of green behind him. There was scarce a rustle of the foliage ; then he was gone. And once more it seemed as if the island were the loneliest spot on earth.

But suddenly the man reappeared. He emerged from the belt of green at the spot where the ridge of rocks ran downwards to the beach. But he was now on the opposite side of the ridge to that on which he had seen the mysterious object lying. And with the stealthiness of a panther he crossed the sand, and, climbing the rocks, gained the ridge and cautiously looked over.

In the shadow of the rocks, stretched in an attitude which betokened infinite weariness, misery, dejection, a man lay sleeping. He was a man of about the watcher's age, but, unlike him, he was not a pleasant man to look at. The sleeper was a sparsely built fellow, sharp-nosed, small-eyed, red of hair and beard, and giving a general impression of craft and meanness. He was dressed in seafaring garments suited to those latitudes, and in his sleep he tossed restlessly, and occasionally he whimpered and muttered. Near him some cases of provisions rested on the sand, together with a beaker of water; there were evidences that he had eaten and drunken before lying down to sleep.

All this the man of the island saw at a glance. And, in spite of all his habitual command over himself, he could not check the sharp exclamation which forced itself to his lips.

" My God, it is Gaston Charette! And marooned! "

He knew the signs well. While he himself had been away on the other side of his island, some stray ship had been in on this side, and had landed the sleeping man, condemned by his shipmates to this terrible fate. And in the watcher's mind there was little wonder that this should be so, for Gaston Charette, thrown by the strange caprice of life here at his very feet, had been his bitter enemy, had done him a vile wrong, and had always been a man of black evil! "

" And now, if I chose, I could end his evil career for ever! " mused the man of the island. " Some would say that he had been sent here by Divine justice, to be delivered into my hands. But one learns much when one lives three years in solitude."

With the same quietness that characterised all his movements, the watcher slowly climbed the ridge, and, lowering himself to the level of the sand, sat down on a rock immediately facing the sleeping man, and, laying his gun across his knees, became as immobile as a graven image.

And there he sat, while Charette tossed and moaned and muttered and whimpered. The man of the island gave no heed to these manifestations. His face was set as if carved ; his eyes were fixed on the far edge of the sea. But he saw neither sea nor sky ; he was thinking.

It was upon this silent figure, so terrible in its sternness of air and expression, that the sleeping man at last opened his eyes. He began to toss restlessly ; he began to moan ; suddenly he awoke. And as he saw the watcher he screamed—a sharp, shrill scream of fear—the scream of the animal safely trapped at last. He sprang to his feet, wringing his hands.

" Pierre Rochelle ! " he cried. " Ah, my God ! It is no dream, it is himself, and he will kill me ! "

Pierre Rochelle looked at the cringing and trembling wretch before him with an unmoved countenance. Then he lifted a hand, and Charette, thinking he was about to raise the gun, screamed again, writhing in his fear. But Rochelle only pointed to the rocks.

" Sit down, Charette," he said, quietly. " I have forgiven you."

Charette glanced at him quickly, uneasily, craftily. He sidled to the rock which Rochelle had pointed out, and sat down, still trembling, and he wiped great drops of sweat from his forehead.

" It—it is good of you to say that, Monsieur Rochelle," he faltered. " But perhaps you only say it to—to tantalise me. You, I see, are armed, and I—I am a defenceless man, and——"

" Silence ! " said Rochelle. " I say I have forgiven you. All the same, you are not the one to be trusted. You have no weapon ? "

" I, monsieur ? No, I——" began Charette.

" There is no need to use any title, high or low, to me. I am plain Pierre Rochelle," broke in the other. "All the same, you will give me every one of your garments to examine. Good!" he continued, when Charette had proved to him that in this instance he spoke truth; "and now, Charette, sit down, and tell me how you came here?"

Charette sat down sullenly, and clenched his fists with anger.

"I am marooned!" he said. "And by my own men—curse them! They left me on this island during the night. It is now two days since they mutinied and put me in irons; then they steamed away right from the beaten routes to find some island where they could leave me. They found this. Malediction! I shall starve. And yet," he concluded, looking doubtfully at Rochelle, "you do not seem to starve."

"No one need starve here," answered Pierre Rochelle quietly. "So you were captain of a vessel, then, Charette?"

"A steam vessel," growled Charette. "The *Esperance*, of Havre, trading in the Pacific. Oh, I shall be revenged! There will be retribution for those dastards!"

Rochelle folded his arms and looked the marooned man squarely in the face.

"And what had you been doing to your men, Charette?" he asked.

Charette frowned, and shrugged his shoulders with an impatient gesture.

"I? Nothing!" he growled. "There was some complaint, but what would you? A captain is captain, and——"

"And should treat his crew with consideration," said Rochelle dryly. "Come, Charette, you know that in the past you were an evil man. I have every cause to hate you, every reason for slaying you now, without mercy, for you treated me—you know how you treated me. Most men, injured by you as I was, Charette, would rejoice if Fate, or caprice, or something equally inscrutable, had thrown you in their way as you have been thrown in mine. They would have shot you as men shoot mad dogs—without compunction, thinking the world well rid of you. Some men, had they been injured by you as you injured me, would have—tortured you. Tortured you, Charette, and gloated over your sufferings!"

Charette, gnawing his fingers, glared uneasily at his former victim.

"I see how it is," he growled surlily. "You are keeping me in suspense to kill me at your leisure. Shoot me now, then, and be done with it! All the same, it will be murder."

Rochelle laughed; the man's dirty soul was so contemptible.

"You are wrong," he said. "I am only telling you of some of your sins, which are many. It was your black, lying, false evidence, Charette, that sent me, an innocent and honest man, far away from France to the convict settlements. I suffered there—my God, how I suffered!"

Charette, who was really beginning to believe that Rochelle was not going to shoot him, and was consequently casting about in his mind as to how he could get the better of him in the situation in which they found themselves, shook his head.

"It seems that I have done you a wrong," he said. "Well, we are all liable to make mistakes. But it appears you managed to get away from those same convict islands."

"I escaped," replied Pierre Rochelle. "I and three comrades. We contrived to procure and fit out a good boat, and we made this island."

"Then there are four of you?" observed Charette, glancing quickly around him.

"I am alone," answered Rochelle. "My comrades are all gone. Up to now I have lived here—at least for three years—with the dead for company."

Charette, who was gaining confidence and impudence every moment, rose up and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, then, what is to be done?" said he. As for me, I shall rig up some sort of a mast, and keep a signal flying by day and have a fire by night."

"You will waste your time," answered Rochelle. "During the more than three years I have been here I have never seen a sail. Once, far away to the southward, I saw the faint trace of the smoke of a steamer. That is all."

"The *Esperance* was here during the night!" exclaimed Charette.

"Yes; but you told me that she steamed two days out of the beaten track to leave you in a prison from which you could not escape," answered Rochelle. "No, you will never leave this island, except by a miracle."

Charette stamped his feet.

"But that boat of yours!" he shouted. "You came in a boat."

"Our boat," replied Rochelle, "was lost by my own great carelessness before the others died. I omitted to make it secure, and it was blown out to sea in a gale."

"What cursed luck!" growled Charette. "But you say, comrade, that one can live on this vile island?"

A look of grave displeasure crossed Rochelle's face.

"It is a beautiful island," he said solemnly. "I have never seen anything more beautiful. And there is food in plenty—fruit and roots, and fish and turtle. And there are fine natural springs of water."

Charette grinned evilly.

"Then I shall cheat those scoundrels yet!" he said, chuckling. "I believe they thought I should starve when they left me here. To be sure, they left me some stores—enough, they said, to last until I could hail a passing steamer, but they had their tongues in their cheeks as they said it. No, no; what they hoped was that Gaston Charette would die of slow starvation!"

Rochelle rose. He looked at the various cases which stood on the sand.

"What you had better do, Charette," he said, "is to bury those cases in the sand. You will not want them. Perhaps, later, they may be useful."

Charette stared.

"Eh, and what am I to live on, then ?" he demanded. "That is, until I find this place out."

"I am going," replied Rochelle, "to take you to my cave as my guest. I have abundance of provisions there. Come !"

Charette stared, gaped, took off his cap and scratched his foxy poll. He seemed to be at a loss to find words. At last he looked up and grinned, making a mock bow.

"I accept your hospitality, comrade," he said. "Agreed ; I go with you to this cave of yours." But to himself he muttered : "I see how it is—solitude has made him mad. Oh, he's quite mad, without doubt, or he would have shot me before now. Well, I shall outwit him."

"You can come back and bury these cases at the bottom of the rocks later on," said Rochelle. "Now we will go."

He led Charette along the stretch of beach in the direction of the cocoa-palm. Mad or not, he took care to keep the marooned man on the side away from the gun. And as they went he pointed out various things—a ridge projecting into the sea from which one could fish with either rod or spear ; a favourite place for turtle ; a natural bath wherein one might remain as long as one pleased without fear of sharks. It was plain that the lonely man had made the most of his opportunities, and, as far as Charette's mean and malignant spirit would let him, he felt an involuntary respect for the being whom he had helped to send into this solitude.

"I suppose, mate, that you would never care to leave this paradise now ?" he said, as they drew near the cocoa-palm. "You are used to it."

"No, you are wrong," answered Rochelle. "It is beautiful, but I should prefer to go back to the world and do some useful work. A man has no business to live such a life of slothful ease as I do here. If I had a boat, I would provision it, and at a favourable opportunity

I would make off for the nearest trade route. I think I could strike it in fifty hours."

"Ah, yes, if we only had a boat!" sighed Charette. "What cursed luck that you should have let the one you had slip you!"

Pierre Rochelle made no reply to this. He turned away from the beach and motioned Charette to enter the belt of green.

"Go before," he said. "There is a well-defined track which leads right across the island to my cave, which is in the cliff."

Charette obeyed.

"Mad or not, he keeps behind me with that gun," he said to himself. Then, aloud, he said, "And how big is this island, comrade? You have, no doubt, prospected it pretty well."

"It is nearly two miles long and a mile across," answered Rochelle. "You can see for yourself that it is rich in fruits—you will not starve here, Charette."

Charette stared about him as they passed along. The virgin scenes around were naught to him in all their smiling loveliness—all that he was interested in was the prospect of food. He gazed with an appraising eye at the graceful cocoa-palms, at the over-laden banana-trees, at the various edible fruits which Rochelle pointed out.

"Yes, comrade," he said; "it is true that a man may fill his stomach with these things, and there is, you say, fish and turtle to be got. Truly, I shall not starve. But I confess to a liking for a little red meat now and then, and I daresay you have no wine-casks in your cellar."

"There is an excellent spring close by my cave," replied Rochelle.

"All the same," said Charette, "I have a taste for—ah, what have we here?"

They had emerged from the groves through which they had been passing, into a small clearing carpeted with thick, carefully-tended grass. This clearing was dark without being gloomy; the graceful trunks of the tall palms resembled the pillaring of some Gothic church; it was a spot in which one had an instinctive feeling that one should bend the head. And in its midst were three graves, and each grave marked by a rude cross.

Gaston Charette uttered an exclamation of distaste.

"Ah, why did you conduct me this way?" he cried peevishly. "I hate your death places as cursedly as I hate your churches and their bells! Let us go on—I always disliked the notion of death."

"That, perhaps, is why you were sent here, Charette," said Rochelle. "Here you will have abundance of time for meditation upon death."

Charette growled, and hurried on to a path which his companion pointed out on the farther side of the clearing.

"Ah, you are grown religious!" he remarked, sneeringly.

"No; I am grown to be my true self," answered Pierre Rochelle. "That is precisely why I do not blow your brains out at this moment, as I could so easily do."

Charette squirmed and shrank, and hurried on in silence. But to himself he said:

"Decidedly he is mad! Madmen are uncertain in their tempers, and he might shoot me at any moment. If I can manage to get that gun, I will shoot him there and then. I prefer solitude on this cursed island to the company of a madman!"

Presently they left the forest and the undergrowth, and came out on the cliffs at the other side of the island. And there was the sapphire sea, and not a sail upon it, not even a wisp of smoke. Looking out upon that sea was the cave of which Rochelle had spoken. He had fitted it out with such comfort as the natural resources of the island afforded, yet, after all, it was a mere hole in the earth for men. But he waved Charette into it, and bowed him to a couch of plaited grass as grandly as if he had been welcoming him to a palace and a fauteuil of velvet. After that he set out the resources of his larder, and bowed the visitor to table as courteously as he had invited him to be seated.

" Eat, drink ! " he said, hospitably. " You are my guest."

Charette ate and drank in silence. When the feast was over, he sat for sometime with his foxy head propped on his folded hands, his elbows supported by his knees, staring at Rochelle. And suddenly he spoke.

" Why," he blurted out, " why do you not revenge yourself, and kill me now that I am at your mercy ? "

" Because," answered Rochelle, " I have learnt that revenge is worthless, and because I want you to live."

Charette made a strange, half-savage gesture, and flung out of the cave to stare at the sea.

After that these two men, so strangely thrown together in this grim loneliness, settled down to such life, such daily occupation, as there was. The one thing that was important was to keep going the fires. Rochelle explained that when he had first reached the island, he and his fellow fugitives had matches ; when they were within sight of the last of them, they hit on the expedient of starting these fires, which were periodically fed at different times of the day and night, so that in the event of one failing another should be kept in. The cutting of wood for these fires was one occupation, fishing and the catching of turtle another, the collecting of fruit another. Every now and then, in order that they might have a change of diet, Rochelle went out with the gun and shot birds. And it was only on these comparatively rare occasions that the gun was ever used.

To Gaston Charette that gun was a thing of fascination. He thought of it by day and dreamt of it by night. He had a strange homicidal tendency, and itched to handle it. But, except on the bird-shooting days, Charette never saw the gun. Pierre Rochelle had some secret hiding-place for it and for the ammunition. Charette used all his craft, his subtlety, and yet could never discover the hiding-place. On the days—few and far between—when birds were wanted, the gun suddenly appeared ; after the birds had been obtained, it disappeared just as mysteriously. Charette was chagrined as much as he was puzzled.

"That is another proof that he is mad," he said to himself. "It is only madmen who are so crafty."

However, one morning, when the two men had been in this strange companionship for nearly a year, Rochelle appeared at the mouth of the cave carrying the gun and two cartridges. He held the gun and the cartridges out to Charette.

"It is time we had birds," he said. "Go you to-day, Charette."

Charette received the gun, with shaking hands. He stepped back, slipped in the cartridges, and looked fixedly at Rochelle.

"Hah!" he said. "Now I can kill you! It is my duty to kill you, for it is plain that you are quite mad, and I have never known when you were not going to kill me. Yes, it is certain you must die!"

Rochelle folded his arms and gazed steadily at his enemy.

"Shoot!" he said.

Charette raised the gun. His eye ran along the glint of the barrel. He felt his throat, tongue, lips, become parched with the lust to kill. But suddenly he flung the gun from him, and with a hoarse cry turned and rushed into the forest. That day Rochelle saw him no more, nor the next day. But early on the morning of the third he came to the mouth of the cave with bent head.

"Monsieur Rochelle," he said, "I have arrived at the conclusion that you are a good man. I implore your pardon. Henceforth I will behave myself."

Rochelle pointed to the gun.

"Then," he said, "you will take the gun and shoot some birds. It is time we changed our diet."

From that time the two men lived in a closer companionship. Charette no longer looked at Rochelle as if he could not comprehend him; they began to converse. And Rochelle, always silently observing the changes in the once evil man's character, began to hope that they were indeed real and lasting.

But Charette was soon to be put to the test.

One morning the two men had gone to that side of the island on which Rochelle had found Charette, their object being to secure a supply of turtle. Rochelle, emerging first from the belt of green, strode, as was his wont, to the cocoa-palm, and gazed long and steadily around him. And suddenly he stretched his right hand, trembling with unwonted excitement, towards the glittering sea, and cried hoarsely :

" Charette ! A ship ! "

Charette looked in the direction pointed out.

Yes, there was a ship, a steamship, too, and at no great distance ; and, what was more, she seemed to be heading straight for the island.

With a quick movement, Rochelle drew Charette back into cover.

" Charette, I know what that ship is—my eyes are remarkably long-sighted. She is a French cruiser—I saw the tricolour. Charette, she is seeking you. Do you not recognise how things are ? Some one of your rebellious crew has told the truth about your being marooned, and this will be one of the cruisers of the Pacific Squadron sent to find you. Now, Charette, you will be set free ! "

Charette clapped his hands.

" Excellent ! " he said. " And you, too, Rochelle. At last——" He stopped, struck dumb by the look on his companion's face. " Eh, what is the matter, then ? " he said. " What is it ? "

Rochelle shook his head.

" I ! " he said. " Set free ! I ? An escaped convict ! No, my friend, if I set foot on that ship, it will be the first step towards the penal settlements, where I knew so much misery ! "

Charette suddenly comprehended. He shook his fists at the trees above their heads.

" Oh, my God ! " he exclaimed. " What is to be done, Rochelle ? They may search the island."

" No," said Rochelle ; " they will not do that if they are in search of you. What must be done is this. When they put off a boat, you must show yourself by the palm there, and wave your jacket to them. They can land beneath the palm. Let them come up. I will conceal myself within earshot. I want to know what they may say. And if, as I feel sure, they are seeking you, then, Charette, go with them at once—at once, do you hear, Charette ? Do not let them pass into the island, for if they do they will find the graves, and then they will find me. And again it will be the penal settlements —the chains, the degradation ! "

Charette seized Rochelle's hand.

" I will obey you," he said, simply.

For two hours the men watched the cruiser approach the island. At last all happened that Rochelle had predicted. A boat put off ; it approached the island. Rochelle turned to Charette, and held out his hand.

" Now show yourself at the cocoa-palm," he said. " and remember, go away with them on the instant. And as this may—nay, will—be our last word—farewell, Charette ! "

Charette was too much mystified to understand matters. He grasped Rochelle's hand, went out to the point beneath the cocoa-palm, and taking off his old jacket, waved it vigorously.

In a few minutes a naval officer, attended by two seamen, came up the beach. He and his men stared curiously at the figure that calmly awaited them.

" Good-day, gentlemen ! " said Charette.

" We are in search of one Gaston Charette, master of the *Esperance*, of Havre," began the officer. " His men——"

Charette stopped him with a bow.

" I am he ! " he said. " I thought I should be sent for in time. I thank you. Come, I am ready, monsieur. I have nothing to carry away—no luggage ! "

The officer looked at him curiously.

" You have been here all alone ? " he said.

" As you see, Monsieur Lieutenant," replied Charette. " And, indeed, I am not a little weary of the loneliness."

The officer pulled out a pocket-book.

"I suppose, Monsieur Charette," he said, referring to some entries, "I suppose you have not noticed on this island any traces of former occupancy. Some years ago, four notorious convicts escaped from the penal settlements in a boat, and it has often been wondered if they made their way to any of these out-of-the-way Pacific islands. You have seen nothing?"

"*Parbleu, monsieur!*" replied Charette, laughing. "I have seen nothing but a waste of ocean, and a few turtles and parrots, and a prodigality of wild fruit ever since I came. Humanity—no!"

"One of those men," said the officer, carelessly, "was the famous Pierre Rochelle, convicted of selling an important naval secret."

"Oh, I have heard of him," said Charette.

"To this day there is a reward of fifty thousand francs for Rochelle's capture," remarked the officer. "But he must have been drowned."

Charette whistled.

"Fifty thousand francs!" he exclaimed. "What a sum! Ah, what a pity we cannot lay hands on the rascal, monsieur! But, as you say, he must have been drowned. And, truly, I am not interested in the convict Rochelle. What I am interested in is boarding your beautiful ship there, and—for the first time since those rascals carried me off mine—dipping my beak into a measure of wine. Shall we go, Monsieur Lieutenant?"

. . . . . .

Pierre Rochelle watched the cruiser pass out of sight. Then he went slowly back to the little burial-place in the forest. He stood before the three graves, and bent his head. And when a long time had gone by he spoke:

"After all," he said, "I am not alone. And I have just seen a once evil man lift himself to a noble deed!"

THE WELL IN GOOD FOLKS' HOLLOW

A STORY OF THE YORKSHIRE MOORS

I

HIGH up above the long sweep of curving coast, in the deepest cove of which St. Gareth's Port lay sleeping in the autumn sunlight, the moors stretched away from the sea for mile upon mile of what at first sight seemed to be unbroken solitude. There were farmsteads and cottages here and there in that wide expanse, but they stood in the deep recesses and hollows which intersected the moorland, or were hidden by the wind-bent groves of pine and fir which rose at intervals above the heather and the gorse.

A stranger, coming to that country from the westward, and pausing on the summit of Aysthorpe Brow to gaze on the far-reaching prospect of land and sea, might have lingered there an hour without seeing aught but the grey ocean and the purple heath. Only a native could point out where toft and thorpe lay hidden, or knew that beneath the sudden fall of the headlands the red roofs of the little fishing town showed bright against the golden shining of the surf-swept shore. Up there, on the summit of the brow, all was loneliness.

Some such thought as this, half-formed and vague, was in the mind of a young man who, one September afternoon, paused on the summit to take his breath after a long, wearying climb, and to look about him. A stranger in that neighbourhood, he was chiefly impressed by the solitude of the moors. A curlew flew by him, calling plaintively; now and then he heard the faint bleating of moorland sheep; once, as he rested, there came to his ear the sharp barking of a dog, far off. But there was not a sign of human life on either hand, nor was there a single sail or wreath of smoke upon the sea which lay beyond the heather, and his unpractised eye failed to detect the spirals of filmy blue which rose, here and there, from the hollows. It seemed to him that he was in the midst of a great loneliness.

" Yes, St. Gareth's Port is in that bay, sure enough," he murmured, as he filled and lighted a well-blackened clay pipe which he had drawn from his pocket. " And they said Aysthorpe Farm was in the moor above it. Anyhow, I'm on the track, and here's for off again."

He swung down the winding road at an easy pace—a strong-limbed, active fellow, clad in the favourite blue of the sea-faring man, sun-burned, wind-hardened, roving of eye, loose of mouth, dare-devil of expression. His hair and eyes were very black, and the sailor's knot of vivid scarlet which he wore at his throat made them all the blacker. There were gold rings in his ears, and others on his fingers ; altogether, he made vivid colour against the background of purple. Noticeable as he was, however, he was not good to look upon, for his handsome features were set in a scowl which seemed to threaten evil to somebody, and as he swung along he muttered continuously.

Half-way down the winding moorland road the traveller suddenly paused . Somewhere near him, on the right, a woman was singing—her voice came clear and sweet through the fine autumn air. It was a strange air that she sang, and they were strange words which came to him :

" This a-night, this a-night !
Every night and alle,
Fire and fleet and candle-light,
And Christe receive thy saule ! "

The man of the black hair and eyes started. He looked at the bank of heather which rose above him.

" If that isn't Judith herself," he muttered, " may I never see ship or sea again ! But it is ! "

Cautiously, and with cat-like movements, he made his way up the shelving bank until he reached the level of the moorland. And there, lying flat on his chest, he peered out between the clumps of heather and gorse at the first signs of human life which he had seen for many miles.

Immediately beneath him, an oasis in the midst of the moorland, lay a green hollow, in which were the remains of what had once been the surface work of a draw-well. There was ruined masonry there, and decayed woodwork; a stunted oak, on which the leaves were turning brown, overshadowed all. Further away, at the end of a narrow valley which led out of the hollow, stood a stone-walled, stone-roofed farmstead, half-hidden by a covert of pine. Here, at last, was the evidence of life.

But the watcher took no great notice of the farmstead in the distance, nor of the old well in the hollow immediately beneath him. His attention was wholly concentrated on a woman who sat on the ruined wall of the old well, and was still singing the weird song with its foreboding refrain. Something in the air and the words made the listener's blood, hot enough always, turn chill, and with a sudden muttered oath he rose to his feet. Another moment, and he had leaped into the green hollow, and was standing, masterful and glowering, before the singer.

The woman, too, rose from the tumble-down stones and faced the man. Her song dropped to silence in the middle of a line, and her left hand went instinctively to her breast.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Oh, God!"

The man laughed. He drew nearer, and when the woman stepped back he laughed again, but his face grew dark with anger even while the laughter was on his lips.

"Ay, me!" he said, sneeringly. "And it's evident I'm not welcome. You don't seem over and above pleased to see me."

The woman drew herself up and looked the man steadily in the face. She was a young and a handsome woman, as dark of hair and eye as he was, and she possessed the figure of an Amazon. Her fine lip curved, and her full, wide bosom heaved as she stood there looking at the breaker-in upon her peace, and the man, daredevil though he was, felt his spirit shrinking. He laughed again, uneasily.

" I say—not over-pleased to see me, Judith," he repeated.

The woman moistened her lips. She spoke with evident effort.

" I prayed God that I should never see you again, Rollo Marvel ! " she said at last, in a low, intense voice. " And I thought the prayer had been answered ! "

Marvel showed his white teeth beneath the dead black of his bearded lip.

" Oh, well, that's one of the many prayers that hasn't been answered ! " he said, sneeringly. " It's a pity you hadn't something better to pray about. It would have been more Christian-like, I should think, to have prayed for the poor wanderer's safe return. However, my girl, here I am. And—there you are ! "

Judith made no reply. She stood watching him, as one animal, taken off its guard, might watch another of whose intentions it is uncertain. And Marvel, affecting unconcern, relighted his pipe, and put his hands in his pockets.

" Yes, I soon found out that you'd come to St. Gareth's Port," he said. " Run away from me, of course. All the same, as I've just said, here I am, and there you are. And you're going back with me, Judith."

Judith laughed. She threw a half-glance over her shoulder at the farmstead at the end of the valley. Then she faced Marvel again, with an expression of contemptuous scorn on her face.

" I'm married ! " she said, quietly.

Marvel's well-blackened pipe, the companion of many months, dropped from his lips and was broken on the stones at his feet. He brought his heel down on the fragments with savage force. When he looked up from the pipe his dark face was working with fierce passion.

" It's a lie ! " he exclaimed.

Judith held up her left hand. The sunlight fell on her wedding-ring.

" I was married to Mr. Thurstan Salkeld nearly two years ago," she said quietly. " That's his house ; and you'd best to keep away from it, Rollo Marvel. My husband is a man who would have a short way with the likes of you."

Marvel stared at her. The stare changed to a glare—the glare suddenly changed to an expression which suddenly brought the first sense of fear into Judith Salkeld's heart. She moved away uneasily. And Marvel saw the movement, and laughed.

" Ho, ho ! " he said. " That's it, is it ? So we've become the virtuous married woman, have we ? Don't want any more to do with the old lover, eh ? All right ! All the same, I'll have by force what I used to have by favour, my girl ! "

As Marvel drew nearer, Judith's right hand, impelled as by some superhuman direction, felt for and grasped a bar of the rusted ironwork of the old well. She forgot her great strength, she forgot everything but the danger before her, and she struck out blindly, fiercely. She heard something ; she felt the hand which had grasped and swung the iron bar thrill, as from some impact—she closed her eyes in a dead silence. The whole world, the soft September sunlight, everything seemed to have sunk into a black, heavy night.

When Judith came to full consciousness again, she was kneeling by the side of a dead man. And throbbing, throbbing pitilessly through her brain was the weird air she had been singing when Marvel appeared before her—the strange words fraught with a new meaning :

" Fire and fleet and candle-light
And Christe receive thy saule ! "

" Oh God !—I've killed him ! I've killed him ! " She sobbed, over and over again, " Killed him ! He's—dead ! '

Rising to her feet, Judith stared wonderingly and helplessly about her. Now that it was all over, the world seemed to be going on just the same as ever. The sun gradually dipping to the western edge of the purple moors, was still shining; the curlews were still calling as they circled above the land; now and then the moorland sheep bleated from afar off. Nature was unchanged; nothing was changed but herself and the dead man who lay at her feet.

"I must do something—I must do something!" she said, clenching her hands. "I can't leave him lying there!"

While she stared wildly about her, as though searching for some inspiration, Judith suddenly realised an immediate opportunity of hiding Marvel's body, at any rate for the moment. The old well, long since disused, was covered in by a mouldy and weather-worn trap-door. Judith had no sooner seen it than she began to tear frantically at the iron ring which was still fastened in the rotting timbers. Rain and damp had caused them to swell, and they fitted tightly in the socket; but with the help of the iron bar which she was still grasping she forced the trap-door open. She bent over the black void which was revealed, and shrank from the noxious vapour and the foul darkness. Even in that terrifying moment her imagination pictured the dead man sinking into the mud and the slime which lay sixty or seventy feet beneath. But there was no help for it, and after a momentary shrinking she seized the inert figure and lifted it as if it had been a child.

When the body had fallen heavily into the blackness of the well, Judith replaced the trap-door and looked around her. Everything was just as it had been a quarter of an hour before. Only a quarter of an hour! She had been happy and without care then. Now—But it was useless to think of that, for the thing was done, and could never be undone. But would she ever have a moment's peace of mind again, as long as ever she lived? She turned away at last from the old well and the green hollow, and went slowly towards the farmstead. Yet as she passed along she turned more than once and looked back. Until that moment the green hollow had always been associated in Judith's ideas with the fairies, the good people, or good folks, as the women of the moorland called them, who were supposed to come there o' nights; henceforth she would only be able to think of it as the place wherein she had taken a man's life. For that was the truth. Yet, as she walked homewards, with downcast head, she found herself repeating the same words over and over again:

"God knows I never meant to kill him!"

II

THE narrow valley into which Judith passed on her homeward way was thickly overgrown with dwarf oaks and bushy alders, and as she reached their shelter a man came out upon the path and confronted her. And at sight of him Judith felt her heart first leap wildly in her bosom and then turn to a lead-like weight. She had been frightened at the sight of Rollo Marvel, but she was much more frightened when she saw Ulf Peterson standing in her path. For Ulf Peterson, nephew to her husband, Thurstan Salkeld, was a thoroughly bad and unprincipled young scoundrel, who had hated her ever since Thurstand brought her, a bride, to Aysthorpe Farm; and though he took good care to treat her with respect, had always been on the look-out to do her injury.

And Judith's quick, womanly intuition told her that this ferret-eyed lad had seen all that had occurred at the old well. He would have no mercy on her. Although he was only eighteen, he had the face of a man who had let cruelty and craftiness bite deep lines upon him. No, she would get no consideration from Ulf. But she faced him bravely, and looked at him with unflinching eyes.

Ulf had planted himself squarely in the path, which was a narrow one, and he betrayed no inclination to move. Judith walked steadily up to him. His eyes—very small eyes, and set close together at the top of a long, sharp nose—looked at her stealthily as she came along; his foxy hair, protruding from beneath his old cap, seemed to bristle aggressively; his thick, loose lips were curved in a cunning smile. It was plain that Ulf considered that he was master of the situation. But it was not Judith's way to let him see that she thought so.

"Stand out of the way!" she said firmly.

But Ulf shook his head. He smiled in a superior fashion, as if pitying Judith's ignorance.

"If I say a word to your uncle, he'll half kill you!" said Judith, menacingly. "Stand out of my way, I tell you!"

But Ulf was still immovable. He lifted a finger and pointed in the direction of the well.

"I don't care for Uncle Thurstan no more," he said. "He'll not lam and larrup me again. I saw what happened between you and the man at the old well. I was watching. And—you've killed him. It's murder! No, I don't care nothing for Uncle Thurstan and his ash-plant now."

Judith realised that Master Ulf was about to mouth the sweets of revenge. He had always been a bad youngster, and, almost grown man though he was, Thurstan Salkeld not infrequently laid a stick about him. Now he was going to make Thurstan smart through Judith. And much as she hated to do so, Judith saw that she would have to temporise with this young savage.

"Oh, Ulf," she said, "it was an accident! If you were watching, you could see it was an accident. You—you ought to speak for me. I've always been kind to you—you ought to take my side."

Ulf showed all his white teeth. They were irregular and sharp, and they made the woman before him think of a sheep-worrying dog which Thurstan had shot not long before.

"No," said Ulf. "You killed him! I won't take your part. I'm going down to St. Gareth's to tell the policeman. You'll be tried, and you'll be hanged, and I'll go to

Grandminster that morning to see 'em put up the black flag. No, no; I've been larruped enough, and now I'll tell on you. That'll pay Thurstan Salkeld out!"

"He'll kill you!" said Judith.

"No, he won't!" retorted Ulf. "'Cause he won't have the chance. He won't be back from Ashbury market till late, and I'm off to tell the police now. And after I've told them they'll see that he doesn't meddle of me. You'll have the handcuffs on you before night."

Judith caught at the lad's sleeve.

"Ulf!" she cried, pleadingly. "Ulf, don't go there until—until your uncle's back. Let me tell him—he'll do something. And he—he shan"t beat you. Listen! You said you wanted to go to America. I'll get your uncle to give you money to go with. He'll do anything I ask him. Wait, Ulf."

Ulf looked at her searchingly, and an evil smile came over his crafty features. "Will you give me all the money you've got now?" he said. "I know you've got some locked up."

"Yes—yes!" answered Judith. "You shall have it."

"And that real gold watch that Thurstan gave you?" continued Ulf. "I must have that, too."

"Oh!" said Judith, with a groan, and wishing that Thurstan had not gone to Ashbury. "Very well."

"Then come and get them now, and I'll say naught until to-morrow," remarked Ulf. "But if Thurstan doesn't give me all the money I want to-morrow I shall go straight to the police."

Judith walked in to the farmstead in silence. Once within the house-place, Ulf strode over to the hearth and took down his uncle's gun. Judith started.

"What are you going to do with that?" she demanded.

"I'm going to be safe," he answered. "I won't trust you, nor yet Thurstan. I shall sleep out to-night, and to-morrow morning I shall come for my money, and if Thurstan tries to interfere with me I shall shoot him with his own gun. So now you get me that money and the watch."

Judith had some gold which Thurstan Salkeld had given her to put away in a box that was kept beneath their bed; she went and got it, and from the box she also took, with many tears, the watch which the young miscreant downstairs had demanded. But she had so much faith in her husband that she believed one word from him would make Ulf not only disgorge his ill-acquired treasure, but hold his peace into the bargain.

But Ulf had different notions. He took the watch and the money, with a grin of satisfaction, and then picked up the gun.

"And you listen to me," he said, threateningly. "I know Thurstan is going to bring a lot of money home to-night. I want five hundred pounds, and I'm going to have it. I shall come into the yard outside at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and Thurstan'll put that money on the horse-block. If he hasn't five hundred, he can give me what he has in cash, and a cheque for the rest. But if he meddles of me I'll use his own gun against him, never mind what happens. And if he won't pay—very well, I go straight to the police!"

Then Ulf marched out of the house-place, leaving Judith to face some hours of loneliness. She threw herself on the long settle and gave way to a flood of tears. She saw no hope anywhere, for she knew that Ulf Peterson was quite capable of pocketing anything that he might be bribed with, and immediately breaking his compact of silence. It was impossible to trust him.

While Judith sobbed and moaned in her lonely house, Ulf marched down the road to the inn at the head of the cliffs, pausing on the way to hide the gun in an outhouse. At the inn he ate bread and cheese and drank ale, and chuckled quietly in a corner. It was while he was thus engaged that a bright idea struck him. He had closely observed the man who had suddenly descended upon Judith at the old well, and had noticed that his clothes were new, that he had gold rings in his ears, and wore a gold chain across his waistcoat. Presumably, then, he had money in his pockets.

Ulf waited until darkness had fallen ; then, returning by quiet ways to the farmstead, he sought and found a long coil of rope and a lanthorn. With these, and having no fear of anything but the fairies who were said to haunt it, he went down the valley to Good Folks' Hollow.

III

THURSTAN SALKELD came home from Ashbury market that night earlier than usual. As a general thing, well-known to Judith and to Ulf, the only two people who lived in the house with him, he was not to be expected much before midnight. There were no railway trains in those parts at that time, and it was a long and trying journey across the moors, and the pony which Thurstan rode was not remarkable for speed, sure-footed though it was. And neither Judith, who had sobbed herself to sleep, nor Ulf, intent on robbing the dead man, dreamed of Thurstan's return until the usual hour.

Thurstan, however, had got away a good two hours earlier than he had hoped for, having made a quick sale of his sheep, and he came riding along to Aysthorpe soon after ten o'clock. He had bank-notes in his breeches pocket and a light heart under his coat, and he whistled as he turned the pony's head into the track which led from the coast road to his farmstead. But as he rode along the top of the Hollow the whistling suddenly ceased, for down by the old well Thurstan had seen the glimmer of a light.

Like all the moorland people, Thurstan Salkeld, big, brawny, six-foot man of thew and sinew that he was, was also full of superstitions, and when he saw the glancing and shifting light he thought instinctively of fairies. But in the same instant he saw the figure of a man roughly outlined against the light, and knowing that he had to deal with flesh and blood, he quietly slipped off his pony and fastened its bridle to the top bar of a gate.

When he turned again in the direction of the well both light and figure had disappeared.

But Thurstan made his way cautiously into the Hollow, keeping eyes and ears open. For some little time he neither heard nor saw anything. At last he stole gently down to the old well, and as he came up to it from behind the stunted oak, the head of Ulf Paterson, lighted by the lanthorn which he carried suspended around his neck, emerged through the boarded mouth.

Ulf, occupied fully in pulling himself up by the rope which he had fastened to the dismantled top-work of the wall, never saw Thurstan until the big farmer had seized him by the shoulder. He started, uttered a faint cry, and screwed round his head, only to recognise the one man whom he did not want to see. Thurstan, who had long and trying experience of his nephew's wickedness, shook him savagely, holding him in a grip from which Ulf knew there was no chance of escaping.

" Now then," said Thurstan, " what devil's work are you up to ? "

Ulf made a desperate and hopeless attempt to wriggle out of his captor's hand. Thurstan increased his hold, and shook him again ; he also accompanied the shake with a hearty kick. Ulf whined.

" Speak out ! " commanded Thurstan.

" You let me be ! " growled Ulf. " You'll be sorry for it if you don't. I know something."

Thurstan, in answer to this, shook his captive again. His disengaged hand held an ash-plant. He raised it threateningly, and Ulf shrank from it.

" There's—there's a man down there ! " he faltered. " A dead man ! "

" None of your lies," said Thurstan. " Come now, out with it ! "

" It's not a lie," asserted Ulf. " It's a man that—that your wife killed this afternoon. I saw her. She struck him with a bar of iron, and pushed him down there. She——"

For a space of time which might have been a thousand years or the thousandth part of a second for anything that he knew, Thurstan's brain seemed to be on fire. His grip on the shrinking lad had relaxed. The hand that had held Ulf released its hold, and suddenly it struck out fiercely and savagely at the lips which had just spoken of Judith.

Ulf screamed and started. His foot slipped on the smooth paving at the edge of the well, and he lost his balance. And before Thurstan had realised what was happening, the lad had plunged head first down the black cavity, the lanthorn still hanging from his neck. There was one wild scream of horror, then a crash, and then silence.

When Thurstan recovered the senses which had temporarily fled, he found himself on his hands and knees at the edge of the well, staring down into its noisome black depths. The light in the lanthorn had been extinguished, and the well was as silent as a grave. Thurstan moistened his dry lips and tried to cry out. When his voice came to him it was cracked and dry.

" Ulf ! " he called. " Ulf ! "

The cry was little more than a whisper. When he called again his voice was stronger, but no answer came. Thurstan got up from his knees, trembling and shaking.

" A-dear—a-dear ! " he muttered. " A bad job—a bad job ! What's to be done now ? "

After a moment's hesitation he ran hurriedly towards the farmstead, and to a stable where he knew he would find a lanthorn. He took it down from its nail and hastened back to the well. And there, fastening the lanthorn about him with his belt, he let himself down into the blackness, sick and sweating with fear at the thought of what he might find.

" I'd ha' given all that ever I had that this shouldn't have happened ! " he muttered. " Whatever is to be done ? "

At the bottom of the well Thurstan found two dead men—Ulf's neck had been broken in the fall. In the other man's dark face, scowling and grim in death

Thurstan recognised the sailor of whom Judith had told him before their marriage, and he began to understand something of the tragedy of the afternoon.

"Dear, dear!" he whispered, as he turned the light of the lanthorn from one dead face to another. "But it's done—it's done!"

Something that lay shining in the slime attracted him; looking closer he recognised it as a gold watch. And with a sudden inspiration he began to examine Ulf's pockets. Presently he found himself staring at another, a smaller, gold watch—the one he had given to Judith. Then he found an old purse, full of gold; he knew the purse for one which Judith kept in the box beneath their bed. Last he found a canvas bag, tightly tied up at the mouth; it, too, was heavy with money. And Thurstan gazed hard at the dead Ulf.

"Come down here to rob the dead!" he said.

Suddenly a terrible fear seized him. How had Ulf possessed himself of Judith's watch and money? Had he—ah, why was he lingering there when Judith might be lying foully murdered in the farmstead?

Thurstan hastily bestowed the money and the watches in his pocket, and, exerting his tremendous strength, pulled himself swiftly to the mouth of the well. He was panting hard when he reached it, but he ran, without pausing to take breath, to the farmstead door. There he stopped, dreading what he might find within. It seemed a long time before he dared to lift the latch and enter, and when he crossed the threshold at last it was on tiptoe.

Judith was sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion on the long settle. There were the plain traces of much weeping on her cheeks, and a tear glistened here and there on her long, dark eyelashes, but she was so soundly asleep that Thurstan knew she had forgotten her troubles for the time. He went out again as quietly as he had entered, and returned to the well. Over the mouth of what was now a tomb he replaced the boarding. Then he picked up the lanthorn, and, climbing out of the Hollow, untied the old pony and went homeward.

Judith was awakened from her slumbers by the sound of the pony's feet on the cobble-stones in the yard. Then she heard Thurstan whistling—whistling merrily. She jumped up, rubbed away the tears and the sleep, and placed her husband's supper on the table.

"I'll say naught to-night," she said. "Let it be, till to-morrow—to-morrow!"

Thurstan affected to see nothing peculiar when he came in. He greeted his wife cheerily, gave her the fairing which he always brought her on these occasions, and sat down to his supper, bidding Judith go to bed. When he was alone he tried to eat, but made no headway with knife or fork, and after a time he carried his plate outside and cast its contents into the pig-tub.

Next morning, very early, Thurstan came in from the yard with a packet in his hand.

"There's a letter here, Judith, that I ought to have left with Mr. Cruddas, at Harlford, last night," he said. "You must get on the old pony and take it to him—I can't go. Slip on your things—I'll saddle the pony now. It'll take you all the morning, but Mr. Cruddas'll give you your dinner, and the ride'll do you good."

Judith made no demur. She finished the poor attempt at breakfast which she was making, and presently rode away across the windswept moors. It was not until she was some miles from Aysthorpe that she remembered that Thurstan had never asked for Ulf.

It was well into the middle of the afternoon when Judith came back. And as she rode along the ridge at the top of the Hollow her heart suddenly failed her, for she saw Thurstan and Stephen Carrick, the shepherd, who lived a mile away in the moorland, busied about the old well. Then she saw that the top-work had gone, and the ruined masonry, and the wall on which she had sat, singing, only the day before; a great heap of stones which had accumulated under the stunted oak had gone, too. She rode on to the house, wondering.

Thurstan came in presently, asking for tea.

"We've been filling up that old well, me and Carrick," he remarked in a casual fashion. " I found the timbers were rotting, and as I didn't want any of the livestock to fall through we've filled it up. A nice job it was! And, Judith, I believe Ulf's run away at last."

" Run away ! " she repeated. She had come home in a dreadful fear as to what might have happened in her absence, though she had never believed that Ulf, having become possessed of money, would face Thurstan that morning ; instead, he was much more likely to spend what he had secured, and attempt to blackmail her later on. " Run away ! Gone ? "

" I've never seen him to-day, and he didn't sleep in his bed last night," said Thurstan, " though that's nothing uncommon. And—he's taken my gun with him. Anyway, it's gone. I wonder if—Judith ! " She started at his sudden exclamation. An idea seemed to have struck him.

" Judith, run upstairs and see if anything's gone out of the box under the bed ! " he said. " It's a poor lock, and easily opened. Here, I'll come with you."

He went up to the sleeping-chamber with her, and he showed no surprise when he found the old purse and gold watch missing. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders.

" We shall hear no more of Ulf," he said. " Make some tea, Judith."

And once more Judith decided to say nothing until the morrow.

IV

THE to-morrow to which Judith was for ever committing her secret never came ; at any rate, it did not come in what might be called a reasonable present. The days went by, and the weeks went by, and the months lengthened into a year, and she remained silent. No one made any inquiries about Rollo Marvel, and Judith, who in calm moments reviewed the situation in cold blood, came to believe that no one ever would inquire for him. She knew his habits, his friends, such as they were ; she knew the conditions of such sea-faring life as he had lived. She had reckoned out all the chances. The probability was that Marvel, landing at Kingsport after his long absence, had heard of her as having gone to St. Gareth's, and had set out across country to find her. Nobody at Kingsport would take the trouble to wonder why he did not return there. There were other seaports along the coast to which he could go for a ship. He had always been a rolling stone, an irresponsible creature. No. As time passed on she grew to feel more and more secure about the man who lay beneath the greensward on which the fairies danced. And, whatever had become of Ulf, she had no fear now of him. Her conscience became more and more satisfied.

Life for Thurstan and Judith went on in a quiet fashion—pretty much as it always had done. He did his work, and she did hers. They were hard-worked folk, and had little time for anything but work and food and sleep. But those who had known them before remarked that both had become very grave and quiet; and Judith noticed that Thurstan, if he ever sat idle by the farmstead fire, had a habit of relapsing into brooding thought; while Thurstan observed that Judith would never be left alone in the house for any length of time. Now, whenever he went to fair or market she went with him; and when the winter days came, and the evenings began to be long, she seemed to dread the darkness. And never, as in the old days, did she carry her sewing or her knitting to the green hollow at the end of the valley. The secret of the old well was heavy on her, in spite of the fact that her fears of discovery were numbed more thoroughly as each successive month went by.

The second spring after the filling up of the well arrived, and with it arrived the time of Judith's annual house-cleaning. At all times but this she dispensed with help, but when the spring-cleaning came on Carrick's wife came to assist in the clearing out, dusting, whitewashing, and liming that made the farmstead sweet and clean for the coming summer. It was the busiest time of the year for Judith, and for the last two years she had welcomed it heartily.

It was on the last day of this particular cleaning-down that Judith was occupied in turning out and polishing an old oak bureau which had been in the possession of the Salkeld family for several generations. It was put to little use by Thurstan and herself, for Thurstan kept his accounts in his head, and there was little writing of letters to be done at Aysthorpe. However, it had a mass of old litter in its multifarious drawers, and Judith, who had paid small attention to it the year before, was suddenly minded to clear it out. She began to rummage and ransack, and, being not over-gentle in her methods, she suddenly pulled open one of those drawers which in ancient bureaus are fitted within another. It sprang open with a click which took her unawares, and she found herself staring at the gold watch which Thurstan had given her and Ulf had forced her to deliver to him as hush-money.

Judith turned faint and sick at the sight of the watch. She sank into a chair, trembling. All the strange mysteries of that tragic autumn day came back to her. How had Thurstan—whose hand, she never doubted, had placed the watch in that drawer—obtained the watch from Ulf? And where——.

But, dreading to sit there and speculate and theorise, she took watch and chain in her hand and set off to find her husband. She found him repairing a fence which overlooked Good Folks' Hollow, and without a word she held out the watch and chain to him.

"Thurstan," she said, "where is Ulf?"

Thurstan pulled himself together and drew a long breath. Then he pointed into the Hollow.

"There," he said, in a low voice, "at the bottom of the old well."

Judith drew nearer and gazed at him steadily.

"Thurstan." she whispered, "did—did you kill him?"

"No more than you killed Marvel, Judith," he answered.

She drew a long breath, too, but it was one of relief.

"So you knew, Thurstan?" she said, in so hushed a voice that her husband scarcely heard. "You knew? You have known all this time?"

"I have known all this time," he said quietly. "Ulf told me. And when he told me I lost control over myself, and struck at him, and in avoiding the blow he slipped and fell into the well, and that was how he came by his death. And there is no need to tell me how the other man died, Judith. I thought it all out, and I understood. And so does God."

Judith drew nearer and put her hand in Thurstan's. She bent her head.

"I have been wrong," she whispered. "I should have spoken long since."

Thurstan drew her into his arms.

"And I couldn't wait any longer for you to speak," he said as he kissed her. "It was I who put the watch in the old desk this morning, when I knew you were going to clear it out. For I was sure that when you found it there would be no more secrets between us."

THE SECRET OF THE STRONG ROOM

THE Barracott Combine had completed its preparations for robbing the safe of the Ilyssium Arena, and Barracott himself, as chief inspirer and director of all that the combine did, was more than satisfied with the excellence of the arrangements. He had spent anxious days and nights in considering details, and in anticipating possible mishaps, and he could see no point where the scheme might go wrong.

It was the policy of the combine to be thorough in its dealings, and its members had taken several months to work out the plan for appropriating the money which on a certain night, would be lying in the strong room of the Ilyssium.

The time had now come—there was nothing to do but to put the plan into operation. It was true that when the carefully meditated *coup* had been successfully carried into effect, the results would not be of any great magnitude ; the total amount to be taken from the safe would not greatly exceed two thousand pounds. But it would be a cash transaction in the strictest sense of the word. There would be no trouble about converting securities, or going over to Amsterdam with diamonds. And, in the opinion of the combine, there would be no risk.

The members of the combine were three—Barracott, Melling, and Proby. They were all young men—each under thirty—and all eminently respectable. All three, if it had been necessary, could have given the highest references and testimonials as to moral character at a moment's notice. No three young men in London could have been found who severally and collectively were, as surface matters go, more likely to steer a straight course to middle-aged success and ultimate honour.

But in point of fact each was impregnated with the criminal tendency to the finest degree, and the union of their crafty and subtle intellects produced a force which was not for the good of the public. The public, and those who represent it, however, cannot see below the surface, and these three young men went about the world unsuspected, trusted, and blameless.

Barracott, leading spirit of the combine, was a bank clerk of twelve years' standing. He had been taken into the London and Universal at the age of sixteen, and there was not a single black mark against him. In the eyes of his manager and superiors he was a model clerk, which means that he was a carefully trained automaton. During the whole of his career he had never been late, never been slack or careless in his work, never wanted a day off on any plausible excuse, never done anything that he ought not to have done. Directors and inspectors turned approving eyes on him; he was sure to be sub-manager and eventually manager, of one of the branches.

And Barracott's private life was just as unimpeachable as his business life. He lived with his widowed mother and his sister in one of the new streets which lie between Clapham Common and Lavender Hill. The mother had some small private means, and the sister was daily governess in a well-to-do merchant's family. The Barracott menage was accordingly a very comfortable one.

On Sundays, Barracott attended his mother and sister to church; he was devoted to both of them. The neighbours held him up to admiration as a model son and brother. He never went raking about, said they. All the amusement he ever went in for was lawn-tennis in summer, and an occasional visit to the theatre, or to the Queen's Hall, in winter. Whenever he attended concert or play, however, his mother and sister were always with him. And to look at Barracott, whether he was on his way to church on Sunday, or to the bank on week-days, you could not have taken him for anything but a respected and self-respecting young man who held proper views of life.

Equally respectable to all outward appearance was

Barracott's old schoolmate, Melling, who occupied a responsible position in the employ of a famous firm of manufacturing chemists. He was one of those young gentlemen who looked prematurely old and grave and wise because they turn bald, and are obliged to wear spectacles, at an early age. Melling had taken some considerable degrees in science, and those who knew him were aware that he had ambitions in the way of doing something great in experimental chemistry. He had rooms near Barracott's house, and if Barracott ever spent an evening away from home, it was understood that he was at Melling's.

In a less marked degree, Melling was just as circumspect in his behaviour as Barracott. He had no opportunity of parading his mother and sister to church, for his people lived away in the country, and he did not go to business in a top hat and gloves, as his friend did. But he was quiet and unassuming, was never seen in bars or billiard-saloons, and was known to be devoted to his profession.

He had a small laboratory in the garden of the house in which he lodged, and on Sunday afternoons Barracott and Proby used to visit him there. The landlady served them with tea in the laboratory, and from what she saw and heard, she believed them all three to be very serious-minded and remarkably clever young gentlemen, who were always talking about 'ologies of which she knew nothing.

Proby was another schoolmate. He was somewhat younger than either Barracott or Melling, and not quite so clever as they, but in the matter of high respectability he was fully their equal. It was the square-toed, black-coated character of Proby's respectability which had gained him his post at the Ilyssium, where he was chief book-keeper and cashier. Markenstein, sole proprietor of the Ilyssium, had picked Proby out of over sixty applicants for the post, and Proby had held it for three years with honour and distinction.

He, like Barracott, was a model of punctuality, correctness, and rectitude. Markenstein, having closely observed him for twelve months—during which time he had taken good care to make himself thoroughly acquainted with his private life and habits—had come to the conclusion that Proby had been specially created for the post which he filled, and had voluntarily raised his salary, a deed which showed that he trusted him thoroughly.

That, in the opinion of the Barracott Combine, was as it should be. The final and most important article of its creed was that if you intend to operate successfully in robbing your fellowmen, you must first build up a character which places you high above all suspicion. When you are known as a model of integrity and respectability, then you may begin to cheat and to rob—taking care that you are not found out.

The first germ of the idea of appropriating the contents of the Ilyssium strong room originated in the scheming and fertile brain of Barracott. Barracott always kept eyes and ears open to what went on at the London and Universal, being firmly of opinion that a man should acquire as much knowledge as he can get hold of. When Markenstein—who had made money in vast amounts out of a bunch of provincial music-halls—built and started the Ilyssium Arena, he began to bank at the London and Universal, and Barracott was quick to notice a certain fact. That fact was that the money from the Ilyssium was only paid into the bank twice a week—every Thursday morning, just before noon; every Monday morning, at the same time. Markenstein himself, attended by a uniformed official, brought the proceeds of three evening performances and one matinee to the bank, in bags as solid as their contents. And each bi-weekly payment amounted, on the average, to two thousand pounds. Therefore, on Wednesday night, and on Saturday and Sunday nights, two thousand pounds in cash lay in the safe which stood in the Ilyssium's strong room.

It was in the laboratory of the respectable house on

Lavender Hill, over the Sunday afternoon cup of tea, that Proby detailed to Barracott and Melling the exact arrangements of the Ilyssium as regards the disposal of the cash taken at each performance. Every night—and at the end of every matinee on Wednesdays and Saturdays—the cash was reckoned up and checked; a certain amount, in smaller silver coins, was reserved for change, and locked up in a safe in the cashier's office; the bulk was carried down to the strong room in the basement, and was placed in the big safe by Markenstein himself. No one, under any circumstances, ever held the key of that but Markenstein. It was he who put the money in the safe, and he who took it out on banking days. The safe itself was built into the wall of the strong-room.

It was in Melling's laboratory, also, that Proby explained the geographical position of the strong room. The Ilyssium Arena was not only a music-hall but a circus. In front of stage and orchestra was a great ring in which equestrian performances could be given. Now and then Markenstein turned it to another use, and gave aquatic performances on it—by an ingenious arrangement it could be flooded with water in a very few minutes. These aquatic performances had become highly popular with the Ilyssium audience, and many of them had run for months.

Underneath this ring, or arena, was a basement which had been specially constructed. In it was a special suite of rooms designed for Markenstein's own private use; they could only be lighted, of course, by artificial means, but by a clever and ingenious arrangement, they were thoroughly and perfectly ventilated. In close proximity was the strong room, a square apartment of some sixteen feet every way. There were three safes in it—two of them contained nothing but books and papers; the third was that in which the money was kept. The door of the strong room was quite ordinary in character, except that it fitted into place by sliding out of and into the wall.

This basement, according to Proby, was gained by only one entrance. A broad corridor ran all round the house on the level of the ring; near the point where auditorium and proscenium met there was a door marked "Private." Entering this door, you found yourself in a narrow passage which led to an iron grille. Passing through that, you came to a circular shaft, some twenty feet deep, in which was an iron stairway, winding round a centre pillar. At the foot of the stairway was another passage leading to a square hall or lobby—on one side of it was the suite of private apartments; on the other, the strong room. When you reached the square hall you were immediately under the middle of the arena overhead.

So much for the position of the strong room; the next thing which Proby had to explain was the method of guarding it and the house at night. The precautions were simple. When the curtain was down, the lights low, the last echoes of laughter or applause died away, and the folk who had been there to spend money, or to make it, gone, the Ilyssium was left to the care of one man, an ex-sergeant of Dragoons, named Quinham, who had been in Markenstein's employ as night watchman ever since the place came into existence. He was a thoroughly dependable man, of high character, fearless as a bulldog; and Proby knew that he was armed. And Proby also knew how he could be disarmed, and put out of reckoning.

Every night, said Proby, carefully detailing all these matters over the Sunday cup of tea in Melling's laboratory, Quinham's supper was handed in as the last of the employees left the house. It was always the same supper—a steak and potatoes and a pint of ale; and it was sent across from a neighbouring tavern at an exact minute, and deposited in a particular place. And there would be no difficulty whatever encountered by him, Proby, in the job of putting into that ale what would make the old soldier sleep during the hours in which he should have been wide awake. He could do it easily.

But it was for Melling to exercise his discretion and his ingenuity, to use his chemical skill in providing a drug which should be tasteless.

Melling said there would be no difficulty about that part of the proceedings—the real difficulty was in deciding upon the exact nature and character of the explosive with which to blow open the safe in the strong-room. There were densely crowded streets all round the Ilyssium, and they could not risk a detonation which would be heard outside its walls. They must be sure, absolutely sure, of the effects of what they used. And so the combine adjourned the discussion of that part of its plan until Melling was in a position to say what his experiments and investigations amounted to. For the explosive was the main thing to be considered ; all the other details were as nothing in comparison. All the same, while Melling was experimenting, they discussed everything else until they were like well-drilled soldiers who know exactly what to do when the first note of the bugle sounds.

And at last Melling was ready. He had found the explosive he wanted, after making two journeys to the continent. It would do exactly what was needed, which was to shatter the door of the safe in such a fashion that the combine could help itself to the contents. Also he and Barracott had already provided themselves with the very latest improvements in the way of drills which would cut through steel as if it were butter. According to their reckoning, there would not be more than an hour's work before them when they had once gained admission to the strong room. And to gain that admission was as easy as gaining admission to the Ilyssium by the simple process of paying for seats.

They settled their plans definitely and finally over the usual Sunday afternoon tea in Melling's laboratory. First of all, they decided that the event should take place next Saturday evening. The time of the year was propitious—it was the middle of November, and the folk who had spent all their money on holidays had made some more, and were beginning to spend it on places of amusement, instead of taking it out of town to riverside resorts and seaside watering-places. There was a particularly good show on at the Ilyssium; the big house was not only packed at every performance, but was actually turning money away. And in consequence of this, Markenstein had started an additional matinee on Thursday, so that the safe in the strong room would hold on the Saturday night the proceeds of five performances instead of four—presumably two thousand five hundred pounds instead of two thousand.

It had been left to Proby to settle the precise details of what might be called the interior arrangements. During his three years' occupancy of his post he had come to know the inside of the Ilyssium as intimately as he knew his own lodgings, and it needed little ingenuity on his part to devise a plan by which he and his two partners of the combine might remain in the house when everybody but Quinham was supposed to be out of it. Barracott and Melling were, early in the week, to book a certain box on a certain tier; it must be that box and no other, because exactly opposite to its door in the corridor was another door which led to a room, not then in use, wherein they could safely hide until Proby let them out at the right moment.

The thing was simplicity itself; all that was necessary was that their watches should agree in time to a minute. At precisely eleven o'clock Proby—just then doing nothing—would pass that door and unlock it with the key at his command, and go forward; at a minute past eleven Barracott and Melling would leave their box and enter the room; a minute later, Proby would repass and lock them in. There was no danger of this part of the scheme falling through; the room had not been used for months, and there was no likelihood of its being wanted for some time. And so all was arranged; and on the following Tuesday Barracott secured the desired box, and on the Saturday Melling met Proby at a neighbouring restaurant, and handed him the phial which contained the drug that was to keep ex-Sergeant Quinham asleep—or, rather, unconscious—for several hours. There was nothing to be done, then, but to wait for night.

And at night, from eleven o'clock onwards, Barracott and Melling were safely hidden in the small room off the corridor, waiting for the sound of the key which Proby would sooner or later insert in the door. So far, all had gone successfully. There had not been a single hitch in the arrangements. The corridor was empty of all but themselves when Barracott and Melling had walked into it from their box; no one had seen them slip into the room. They had scarcely entered it when they heard Proby lock the door on them. So far, so good, said Barracott.

It was weary work waiting, and wondering how Proby was faring downstairs. The room in which they were hidden was filled with old properties and costumes, and was cold and musty; to pass the time they went to the dirty window and looked out upon the lighted and crowded streets far below. And they began to talk in whispers.

"I say," said Melling, "did you notice the number on the door of this room?"

"Number? No!" answered Barracott.

"It was 13," said Melling.

"Well, what of it?" asked Barracott.

"And the number of our box was 13," continued Melling.

"What, then?" said Barracott.

"And this is the thirteenth of the month," replied Melling.

Barracott made an impatient movement.

"Bosh!" he said contemptuously. "You surely don't believe in that old superstition!"

"I didn't say I did," answered Melling. "I merely remarked on the strange coincidence."

Barracott began to chafe his hands.

"I hope Proby won't have to keep us in this hole very long," he said. "The stuff's strong enough, I suppose?"

Melling laughed softly.

" Strong enough to keep Quinham quiet for twelve hours or more," he said. " We can't expect Proby much before half-past twelve."

But Proby and his key came just after midnight. And when he had let them out into the dim light of the corridor he looked at Melling with something of anxiety.

" I say," he said, " I hope that stuff isn't too strong. He was off before he'd drunk half his ale, and he looks as if he was never going to wake."

" Don't fuss ! " answered Melling. " The main thing is that he is off, isn't it ? Let's get to work—I'm chilled through with waiting in that cold room."

" Yes, let's get at it," said Barracott impatiently.

Proby led the way along the corridor.

" May as well have a drink if you're cold," he said, as they descended the stairs. " There's whisky in my office. That's where Quinham is, by the by, so you can take a look at him."

The ex-sergeant lay on a sofa to which he had staggered as the effect of the drug seized upon him. Proby had been considerate enough to dispose his limbs in comfort, to put a cushion under his head, and to relieve him of his collar and necktie. He was unconscious enough, but Melling lifted an eyelid, and made sure, and nodded with satisfaction.

" He's all right," he said. " Come on, let's get at it."

Barracott was looking round the room, noticing everything.

" Isn't there some sort of alarm in the place ? " he said, turning to Proby, who was pouring whisky into three glasses. " A patent alarm, isn't it ? "

" Outside, in the lobby," answered Proby.

" Then in case he should come to sooner than Melling expects, we'll lock him in here," said Barracott. " We're taking no chances."

Melling seized his whisky impatiently and drank it off.

" Come on," he said. " I tell you he can't come to fo hours. I know the effects well enough—he's safe till eight o'clock."

But Barracott locked the door on the unconscious man and dropped the key in his pocket. The three men set off along the corridor to the entrance to the basement. As they hurried over the soft carpeting Proby pointed to a dial set in the wall.

"That's one of the tell-tales," he remarked. "They're all over the house, above and below; it keeps Quinham pretty lively going from one to another."

Melling suddenly paused and looked thoughtfully at Proby.

"I say," he said, "there's a thing we've forgotten. I wonder if a failure to make a record on any one of those tell-tales sets up an automatic warning anywhere?"

Barracott and Proby stared at him.

"There's no such thing known," said Barracott testily. "At least, I've never heard of it, and I've gone into the matter pretty thoroughly. Come on, Melling! You're nervous!"

Melling held out a hand that was steady as a rock.

"No," he said; "I merely thought of it. If there isn't such a thing, I'll invent one. Come on, then!"

There was no difficulty about obtaining access to the basement. Proby, as cashier, had keys to the door, which opened off the corridor, and to the grille at the head of the circular stairway. Once past the door, he switched on the electric light, and Barracott and Melling, who were now on absolutely new ground, began to look about them with inquisitive eyes. Barracott examined the grille with care.

"Let's see that this doesn't close automatically," he said. "Show how it works, Proby."

Proby proved to him that the grille was no more than an ordinary gate, secured by a simple lock, and then led the way down the winding stair. All three found themselves in the square hall which Proby had often described.

"Now, there," said Proby, indicating a door—"there is the suite of rooms which Markenstein had fitted up.

There's a sitting-room, a bedroom, and a bathroom."

"And you say he's never used the bedroom," said Barracott.

"Never to my knowledge unless he takes a nap there during the day sometimes," answered Proby.

"There's no private way into those rooms ?" asked Melling, who had already examined the one door which gave access to them, and found it fast. "No secret way ?"

"There's no way whatever into this basement but the way we've come," replied Proby. "Now, then, here's the strong room, and here's the key. No trouble about that."

And he threw open the door, switched on the electric light, and stood aside for his companions to pass in.

Barracott walked leisurely into the strong room, and, putting his hands in his pockets, looked around him with keen eyes. Before doing anything he wanted to know all about the place in which they were going to operate. There was little to see. A cube of about sixteen feet every way, the strong room was cemented throughout on floor, walls, and roof. On one side, on a stand, was an ordinary-looking safe ; opposite was a similar safe ; similarly placed ; at the farther side of the room, facing the door, was the safe in which the money was kept, built into the solid wall. No other thing was in the room ; nothing relieved the blank expanse of gray wall. But high up above the principal safe, almost at the edge of the ceiling, was an opening in the wall—a circular opening, a foot in diameter, which made a black spot in the prevalent grayness. Barracott pointed to it.

"What's that ?" he asked.

"Ventilating shaft," answered Proby readily enough. "I told you there's a perfect system of ventilation in this basement."

Barracott examined the sliding door.

"There's no need to close this," he said. "Some of these things have a trick of shutting automatically, and not opening again. And as the explosive's well-nigh silent, there's no danger. Now let's get to work."

"We can spread the things out on our overcoats," said Melling, and stripped off his own. He dropped on his knees beside it after he had laid it on the floor, and began to draw certain small but carefully wrapped-up parcels from the pockets. And Barracott followed his example; while Proby, who had nothing to do with that part of the proceedings, moved around and about them, watching. Hands in pockets, a cigarette just lighted between his lips, he lounged up and down. Now that they were fairly at work, it seemed to Proby that the whole affair was of ridiculous ease.

"I'll just see how long it takes us," Proby said, pulling out his watch. "It's now——"

A sudden sharp click underneath Proby's very feet made him jump and the others start. Before one of them could speak the sliding door which they had left half-open shot into its socket with a crash, and they heard the sound of a bolt or bar forced home. Barracott and Melling leapt to their feet. All three stared at each other, and Proby's face turned to the tint of gray ashes.

"What's that?" said Barracott. He sprang to the door, and tried to force it aside by the great knob in the middle panel. "Fast!" he exclaimed, turning to the others. "We're trapped!"

Melling was staring at Proby. His eyes were starting, and his fingers began to work convulsively.

"You've trodden on some spring that's released the door!" he shouted. "Hang you, you said you knew everything—everything!"

And with a howl like that of a suddenly caged wild beast, he flew at Proby and gripped him by the throat. In a second they were rolling over each other and the things spread out on the floor. And Barracott, suddenly grown as savage as they, sprang to them, and, being bigger and stronger than either, deliberately kicked them apart.

"You fools!" he shouted. "What's the good of that? Don't you see we must get out! We must blow that door open at once, or—— Oh, my God! what's that?"

A sudden rushing sound, a sound liquid and soft, but terrible in the stillness, came from somewhere above them, and each turned a white face to the ceiling. And, as they looked, a great jet of water, shining like silver in the electric light, shot out of the circular opening which Proby had called a ventilator, and fell with a mighty splash on the cemented floor at their feet. Without a word spoken, the three men knew their fate. The strong room was going to be flooded, from floor to ceiling, and they would be drowned like rats in a hole, and perish miserably.

Melling went mad on the instant. With another inarticulated howl he flung himself again on Proby, and bore him down into the water, which was pouring into the place in such volume that it was already knee-high. And, being bigger and stronger than the unfortunate cashier, he forced his head and shoulders under water and held him there, howling all the time like the maniac that he had suddenly become.

Barracott paid no attention to his companions. He was working feverishly at the door with a steel bar which he had hastily snatched up from the outspread overcoats. He worked and worked as the water rose higher and higher about his legs ; he might as well have tried to lift the Sphinx out of its sand with a navvy's pick. And at last he threw the bar away from him with a curse, and as he did so the sound of a revolver-shot rang out behind him. He turned sharply to see Melling stagger and drop, a revolver still clenched in his right hand, and a thin trickle of blood reddening the ghastly whiteness of his face. And as he looked, Proby's body, curiously inert and lax of limb, washed up against him. He was alone now, and Death was there in full panoply.

By that time the water was waist-deep, and the rush of it still came steadily through the twelve-inch pipe. Barracott was hard of heart and cool of head. Even in that terrible moment his brain was calculating chances, reckoning up probabilities. He saw now that he and his partners in crime were the victims of some architectural and engineering ingenuity by which the strong room could be flooded. What he wanted to know was, to what height the flood was meant to rise. If to the very ceiling, which was most probable, then he had but a few moments to live ; if only to a height just above the top of the safes, then he might live longer, for he was a trained swimmer. But even then he could not hope to live long, for the air would soon be exhausted.

Barracott was not the sort to die so long as there was the remotest chance of life. He let the water lift him, and lift him, until at last it was on the level of the top of the safes ; and then he climbed on one and crouched there, looking down at the bodies of the dead men, awash beneath him. And suddenly the inrush from the pipe stopped, and instead of water came a welcome flood of keen, cold air. He knew, then, what was in store for him. Sooner or later they would drain the water off, and he would be discovered ; and there would be disgrace and shame, and a prison cell. But there would be life.

. . . . . .

" Yeth, my boy," said Mr. Markenstein, as he discussed the Ilyssium sensation with a bosom friend, over coffee and cigars, " there wath nobody about the plathe that knew the thecret but me and the architect and the engineer, my boy. You thee, when I quitted that thtrong room every night I thet thome machinery. When it wath thet, the mere prethyre of a foot on a thpring in the floor releathed thuffithient water out of our tank to flood the whole plathe and thut the thliding door. Ingeniuth, wathn't it, my boy ? Utheful in cathe of fire, my boy. And, ath it hath turned out, in cathe of burglarth. And did you hear, my dear boy, that when we drained off the water and found that young thcoundrel, the bank-clerk, the poor devil'th hair wath thnow-white, my boy ? Yeth, ath white ath thnow ! The way of tranthgrethors ith hard, my boy, deuthed hard, ethpethelly when they run againtht an ingeniuth man like Ithaac Markenthtein. My boy, help yourthelf to another thigar ! "

REVENGE HAS LONG FINGERS

I

THE *Martin Blake* was somewhat overdue, and Crothers, her owner, had become a little anxious about her. He was not an owner in any considerable way, and the *Martin Blake* was getting an old craft, and for some days there had been very foul weather reported from the Portuguese coast and the Bay of Biscay. Crothers figured that his ship—which was making her way back from a sixtieth or seventieth voyage to the Chinese ports—would be somewhere between Finisterre and Ushant when the storm was at its worst, and his anxiety increased when he got no news of her from any Channel station. Then he suddenly heard that she had passed the South Foreland, and a few hours afterwards she came into the Thames; and Crothers, impatient about news, and having a certain uncomfortable conviction that there was something to hear, borrowed an electric launch from a friend and went down-river to meet her. And as soon as he set foot on board, he was told that Murdoch, the captain, was dead—had died at the time of the storm, a little north of Finisterre. And there they had buried him.

It was, of course, Harding, first-mate of the *Martin Blake*, who gave the news to Crothers. Harding met his employer as Crothers came over the side, and, with little more than a mere greeting, took him down to the captain's cabin. As soon as ever he put his head into it, Crothers felt the sensation which some people get when they enter the house or apartment of a dead man. He looked around him, and then glanced at Harding. And Harding nodded.

Crothers started and frowned.

"Dead!" he exclaimed.

"Dead. He died eight days ago, just as we were getting into the Bay—suddenly. And, of course, we had to bury him."

Crothers looked around the cabin again. He recognised several objects which he knew to be associated with the dead man. Through an open door he saw into Murdoch's berth; some of his clothes were hanging up there. He dropped into a seat, and stared at Harding wonderingly.

"Why on earth didn't you let me know at the first opportunity?" he asked. "Eight days ago, you say?"

Harding shook his head.

"There's been no opportunity, Mr. Crothers. If you'd seen the weather we had across the Bay, and then up-Channel! Fog! Otherwise, we should have been in the Thames before this."

"I know about the weather. Well, so you say he died suddenly. But—of what? Murdoch was—yes, not more than thirty-six, and a strong man. Not the sort of man to go out like the last snuff of a candle, Harding. What was it?"

"I don't know, Mr. Crothers. The fact is, that the steward found him lying dead one morning—in there. I saw him a minute or two afterwards. So did young Lynwood. He looked to be asleep, but he was dead enough."

"Any signs of violence?"

"None. He looked as if he'd gone off in his sleep without a struggle."

Crothers reflected in silence for a while.

"Couldn't you have brought him home for—for a post-mortem?" he said at last.

"No," replied Harding, "we couldn't."

"Well, couldn't you have put in or put back somewhere, so that a doctor, even a foreign one, could have had a look at him?"

"Not in that storm. We had to bury him. You understand—had to! Of course, I have my own idea as to the cause of his death."

"Oh, and what is it?"

Harding nodded his head at a cellarette which formed part of the furnishing of the cabin.

"The fact is, sir, Murdoch had been drinking heavily. He was at it all the way out, and all the way home. He got very bad, in a curious way. He was never violent, never even quarrelsome, but he was just steadily soaking gin into him, and he'd got to be the colour of tallow. Ask Lynwood."

The shipowner ran his fingers through his closely trimmed brown beard, and nodded.

"Ay," he said. "Well, Murdoch had a very bad knock in love matters just before he set out on this trip. I knew of it. It hit him hard. Did he ever mention it to you?"

"Never!"

"All the worse. He told it to the drink instead. Well, the man's dead now. What about his effects?"

"All his private effects are put together, sir, and I'd be glad if you'd go over them with me. After all, there's not much, and no papers that are really private."

"We must send everything on to his folks in the North," observed Crothers. "I know them. Well," he continued, rising from his chair, "of course, you'll get her into dock, Harding, and see to the unloading, and all that. Now let's see the books and papers."

So the *Martin Blake* came into the East India Docks, and was duly delivered of the commodities which she had carried from China, and Harding looked after everything until all was clear. And then he went to Crothers' office in the City and settled everything up, and handed in his resignation. Crothers stared at him.

"Want to leave me!" he exclaimed. "Why, man alive, I was just going to offer you a ship, and a better one than anything you've been on so far! What's the matter?"

Harding gave the shipowner a look that seemed to imply a desire to be frank.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Crothers," he said, "and I'm greatly obliged. But the fact is, that I find I've come into some money during my absence, and I also find that it will take a little time to settle up my affairs—maybe a year. You understand? And when the affairs are settled, I should like to do a bit of sight-seeing in Europe—inland, you know. After that, I'll either decide for a partnership or the old life. If it's to be the old life—well, I shall come to you, sir."

"Oh!" said Crothers, who had listened to this with a somewhat mystified countenance. "Ah! Been left money, eh, Harding? I congratulate you. Well, there'll always be a berth with me if you want it. Let me give you a bit of advice. Don't risk your money in any partnership unless you know all about your partner and the business; and don't keep your purse-strings too loose when you're doing your bit of sight-seeing. Sea-faring men are not over keen in business, you know, and they're apt to be generous in their pleasurings. However, if you want advice at any time, Harding, I'm at your service."

Harding thanked his old employer, and presently went away. And when he had gone, the shipowner wondered for a moment where the mate's windfall had come from. Then he put the whole matter out of his head, saying to himself, with a smile, that no doubt what seemed a good deal to Harding was in reality no great fortune, and that he would be sure to spend it, and would then be glad to return to the sea.

II

It was at the end of a November afternoon when Harding called at Crothers's office, and the dusk had set in when he left. And Crothers himself was beginning to think of a departure to his house in Bayswater, when a clerk entered, and told him that Lynwood, the second mate of the *Martin Blake*, was outside, and asking for an interview. Crothers had him shown in at once, and looked at him with some surprise. The young man was supposed to be in charge of his ship for some days longer, while certain arrangements were being made about her.

"Hallo!" he said. "Is anything wrong?"

The second mate, who appeared to have come in some haste shook his head as he took the chair to which the shipowner pointed.

"There's nothing wrong with the ship, sir," he answered. "All's right there, and Smithson is in charge until I get back. I—I wanted to see you, sir?"

"About what?" asked Crothers.

Lynwood fumbled his cap uneasily. He was little more than a lad, and did not look his three-and-twenty years; and it was obvious to his employer that he was not too glib or ready of speech, and was both shy and nervous when faced with matters which were not of a nautical nature.

"Go ahead, Lynwood!" he said, encouragingly.

The lad drew a breath, and plunged at his subject.

"Well, sir," he said, with a look around him which showed Crothers that he regarded what he had to say as of more than ordinary import and confidence, "Well, sir, it's this way. There's something I've wanted to tell you ever since we got into port, sir; but, as you know, I've never had the chance. It's about—about Captain Murdoch. About his death, sir, and other things."

Crothers straightened himself in his desk-chair, and looked searchingly at his caller. Then he motioned Lynwood to draw his chair nearer to his own.

"Go on, Lynwood," he said. "No one can overhear anything that's said in this room. Now, what of Murdoch?"

The second mate again turned his cap over and over in his hands. It seemed to the shipowner that he was vainly seeking for a lead, or trying to hit on the proper beginning of a story.

"Look here, my boy," he said, "it's evident that you've something to tell. Now, the best way to tell anything is to start at the start! Where does this start?"

Lynwood's face brightened.

"Thank you, sir! I—I think it started—yes, I'm sure it started at Hankow. You see, Mr. Crothers, we were there about three weeks, and Captain Murdoch and Mr. Harding used to play cards in the cabin every night. They played with a Chinaman. The first fortnight he came only now and then; the last week he came every evening. The three of them used to play half through the night; once or twice they played all night."

"What about you?" asked Crothers.

"I never played, sir! It seemed to me, from what little I saw of it, that they played for heavy stakes. After a time, I used to see a great deal of English and American money on the table, and——"

The shipowner lifted a finger.

"Do you know who this Chinaman was?" he asked.

"No, sir. They called him Sah Ping, but I never heard who he was, or what he was. But he was a very well-dressed man of middle age. Of course, this was only my second trip to China; but, from what I have seen of the Chinese, there was one thing about this man that surprised me."

"What?"

"He used to drink with Murdoch and Harding, sir. I mean, from what I saw, he drank as much as they did. And they drank a lot—at least, Murdoch did!"

"Um! So all three drank and gambled on my ship? Well?"

"Well, sir, towards the end of the last week I overheard what seemed to be rows, and once or twice the Chinaman appeared to be protesting; and I heard him say something about having his revenge the next night. And so it came to the last day of all; and—and that is really the big thing that I wanted to tell you about, sir. At least, one of the big things."

"Go on," said Crothers, who was thinking hard.

"Well, sir, on the last day Murdoch had everything made ready for leaving at a moment's notice—steam up, you know, sir, and all cleared. I thought we were off any time, but in the evening, at dusk, the usual time, Sah Ping came aboard again, and I heard him say something about having his revenge at last. And all three of them sat down to the cards and the spirit-case as usual. But I was ordered to keep all in readiness for leaving, and Harding said we should probably be off as soon as the Chinaman had gone ashore. So, of course, I didn't see much of what went on in the cabin. In fact, it was just early morning when all three came on deck. And then——"

" Yes—then ? " said Crothers.

" Well, sir, they all looked a good deal quieter and soberer than I had thought to see them. But if ever I saw a man who was feeling bad things somewhere inside him, that man was the Chinaman ! There was a fellow with a boat close by, and he hailed him and got into it ; but he said nothing to Murdoch or to Harding as he went. Only, when he had got into the boat, he looked up at them—they were hanging over the rail, sir, watching him go—and if anybody—and expecially a Chinaman—had looked at me like that, I—well, I should have felt cold shivers down my spine ! He looked murder, sir ! "

" And what happened then ? " asked the shipowner.

" Then, sir, Murdoch and Harding turned away slowly like, and looked at each other ; and the captain said something to the mate which I didn't catch, and they both went below again. And before day had fairly broken we were off."

Crothers nodded. He had watched Lynwood carefully as the young man talked, and he saw that he had now found his tongue, and only needed encouragement.

" Well," he said, " that's one of the big things. Now then, what's the other ? "

" The other, sir, is that I found out that, in addition to whatever they won in money from Sah Ping they won a great pearl. And, sir, it was Murdoch told me that himself, one night when he was very drunk, and I dare say that he'd forgotten that he told it within an hour. And he did more than tell me about it—he showed it to me. But Harding doesn't know that I know anything about it."

Crothers regarded the young man steadily for a full moment.

" Supposing he had known ? " he asked suddenly.

Lynwood returned the shipowner's steady gaze with a look that was just as steady ; and Crothers gained a new conception of the visitor's mental capacities. It was evident that Lynwood was no fool.

" Well, sir, if I'd known that Harding knew that I knew," he replied slowly. " I—well, I shouldn't have felt safe on that ship any longer."

" Ah ! " said Crothers. He rose abruptly, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and began to pace the room. " Why didn't you tell me all this as soon as you reached port, Lynwood ? " he asked, stopping at the youngster's side and laying a hand on his shoulder. " Why ? "

" Because I've never had the chance, sir. Whenever you were on board Harding never left you, and I was so kept at it until this evening that I couldn't come here. And I thought there was no immediate haste—that it might be wisest, perhaps, to go slow."

" The fact is, Lynwood," said Crothers, resuming his seat, " the real fact is, you suspect Harding, eh ? "

Lynwood faced his employer boldly.

" Has he told you of this, sir ? Has he mentioned the pearl ? " he asked.

" He has not said a word, my lad."

" Well, then—yes, sir, I do suspect him. From what I know, there must have been a heap of money to divide between Murdoch and him. And—the pearl. Mr. Crothers, I judged that pearl to be worth five or six thousand pounds ! I know a bit, a little bit, about pearls."

Crothers remained silent for awhile, idly drawing meaningless diagrams on his blotting-pad. If Lynwood had not been mistaken, there certainly seemed to be something wrong. He had gone carefully through the dead captain's effects with Harding, and he had found no trace of any great amount of money in cash, English or American; and certainly he had seen no pearl. Nor had the first mate said anything to him of the winnings from Sah Ping. But naturally he would not; that would be a private matter between Murdoch and himself.

"So you think that when Murdoch died, Harding collared the whole lot?" he said aloud, suddenly waking out of his reverie. "Eh, that's what you really do think, Lynwood?"

"If he hasn't accounted for it—yes, sir," answered Lynwood.

Crothers rose, and took down his overcoat. The second mate rose, too.

"Very well," said Crothers. "There may be something in it. I can trust you. Harding told me this afternoon that he had come into a little fortune, and he handed in his resignation. Perhaps this money you speak of is the fortune. And he's off. Of course, I know where he hails from, and I understood he was going there. But, you see, my lad, Harding can easily swear that he won money and pearl from Murdoch. I suppose they used to spend some time in playing euchre, eh?"

"Murdoch spent most of his time drinking, sir; and, if the truth is to be told, Harding encouraged him. I never knew of them playing cards after the Sah Ping affair. As a rule, Murdoch wasn't fit to play; and so, of course, Harding had to take charge."

"Ay, well, I'll see if I can make head or tail of it," said Crothers. "Of course, if half that money and the value of the pearl belonged to Murdoch, his people have a right to it, no matter how he came by it. But Harding's a wily chap, my lad! By the bye, was there any trade done with this man, Sah Ping? I don't know his name."

"Not that I heard of, sir. I think they met him at some gambling house, and brought him aboard with them."

"Meaning to get the better of him, no doubt," remarked Crothers. "Well, they must have been pretty smart to beat a Chinee. All the same, I should never care to visit Hankow again, if I were Harding—eh?"

" You wouldn't, sir, if you'd seen what I saw in that Chinaman's eyes," said Lynwood.

Then they went out of the private office together ; in the outer one Crothers stopped by his managing clerk's desk, as if struck by a sudden thought.

" Let's see, Wilson," he said, " we have Mr. Harding's address, haven't we ? Some northern town, isn't it ? Just give me a memorandum of it. I may want to write to him to-night."

" We have it, sir," answered Wilson. " But Mr. Harding's still in town, if you want him. He told me this afternoon that he was staying here on business for a day or two ; in fact, he asked me to dine with him to-morrow. He's at the Eurasia Hotel."

" Oh ! " said Crothers. " Ah, all right, Wilson. The Eurasia ? Very well. If I decide that I want to see him, I'll drop him a note to-night."

Outside, Crothers looked at Lynwood, and then at his watch.

" See here, my lad," he said, " are you prepared to go with me to Harding, and to tell your tale, and to let us have this out ? If so, say the word."

Lynwood nodded slowly, but with emphasis.

" Now that we're in England—yes," he answered. " Yes, I am ! "

Crothers signalled to a passing taxi-cab.

III

THE Hotel Eurasia is one of the modern caravanserai which have sprung up of late years in the heart of London, to become objects of astonishment to folk who remember when it was possible to live in even a large hotel without the certainty of being lost several times a day. According to its advertisements, it affords accommodation for an almost incredible number of visitors. All newcomers are affrighted at its many stories and innumerable corridors ; once away from their rooms, they are sure that they will never regain them. Nevertheless, the management of the Eurasia is so perfect in detail that, by a most ingenious arrangement, the officials can at once tell a caller upon Mr. Smith, Room 571, or Mr. Brown Suite 73, if those gentlemen are in or are out.

And so, when Crothers and Lynwood walked into the inquiry bureau of the Eurasia at seven o'clock that evening, there was no time wasted in answering the shipowner's question as to Mr. Harding. Mr. Harding, Room 253, was in. If they would go into the reception-room, Mr. Harding would come down to them in a few minutes. Crothers and Lynwood followed a page into the reception-room, and gazed upon a few other people who seemed to be waiting for something or somebody and upon many marble pillars and fine pieces of furniture, and the moments passed heavily and slowly until between twenty and thirty of them had gone by, and yet no Harding had appeared. And then a young gentleman in a frock coat, who looked somewhat puzzled and disturbed, entered and made straight towards them, but with a side-glance at an elderly man who was near. He advanced to Crothers.

"I think you asked for Mr. Harding, Room 253?" he said.

The shipowner nodded. The young gentleman turned to the elderly one, made the same inquiry, and got a similar reply.

"Will you three gentlemen kindly come this way?" And he led all three across the hall and into a smaller room, which was obviously an office. There they found two men, just as obviously of the managerial status, who were in evident wonder, if not fright. One of them came hurriedly forward.

"You are the three gentlemen who called for Mr. Harding about half an hour ago?" he asked. "May I—the fact is, something has just happened—may I ask if you are his friends?"

The elderly man drew out a card.

"I think you will know my name," he said. "I called by appointment on Mr. Harding in reference to a matter which we discussed this morning at my place of business in Bond Street."

"I am Harding's late employer," said Crothers, also producing his card. "This gentleman was his junior officer on my ship, the *Martin Blake*. What's the matter?"

"The matter is, gentlemen, that Mr. Harding's dead body has just been found in his room." answered the manager. "It is a most extraordinary affair. We have sent for the police, and we naturally don't want a sensation in the hotel. Half an hour ago Mr. Harding was alive—he replied on his room telephone to your inquiries for him. A few minutes since a page took up a wire for him, and found him dead. At least, he found him stretched across the floor, and being discreet, he came quickly to us."

"Well?" said Crothers. "And—what did you find?"

The manager glanced at his companion.

"There will be a doctor here in a minute, and there will also be the people from Scotland Yard," he answered. "We will go up together, gentlemen. At present, you understand, the room is locked, and one of our private detectives is watching the door."

Crothers drew the famous Bond Street jeweller aside.

"You'll excuse me," he said in a low voice, "but you mentioned that Harding had business with you this morning? Was it, by any chance, about a pearl?

"And a particularly fine one," replied the jeweller, looking rather surprised. "I came here by appointment to settle the deal with him, and——"

Just then the Scotland Yard men came in with a police surgeon, and the manager hastily ran over the facts which he had given to the others. The detectives listened attentively.

"You closed and locked the door as soon as you saw that he was dead?" asked the elder. "And set a man to watch it from outside?"

"Yes, that's so," answered the manager. "One of our own men."

" But the window ? There is a window, I suppose ? "

The manager smiled.

" My dear sir, that room is some eighty feet above ground-level ! "

" Very likely. Still, it is a room with a window in it. However, let us go upstairs."

The manager and his assistant displayed infinite caution and remarkable skill in leading the party to Room 253 in such a fashion as to attract no particular attention from folk staying in the Eurasia, or passing through its apparently interminable corridors. Some went one way and some by another, but in a few minutes all foregathered at the door over which a quiet-looking person was unobtrusively mounting guard ; within another minute they had all passed that door, and were staring at what they had come to see—something lying terribly still in the brilliant white glare of the electric lights. And one amongst them, as soon as he had entered the room, began to draw in the atmosphere of it through his nostrils in short, sharp sniffs.

The room was one of considerable size, and its furnishing had been so arranged as to leave as much centre space as possible. The bed was none of the large old-fashioned affairs, which looked as if they were meant for half a dozen folk, but an elegant article which took up little room ; so was the wardrobe, and so all else—consequently an occupant could move about without perpetually knocking head, shins, or toes against the furniture. There was, in fact, a wide space in front of the fireplace—in which a cheery fire was burning and singing as if in mockery—large enough for a couple of fencers to have crossed foils in with comfort. And in this space, face downward upon the soft, thick carpet, head, arms, and shoulders muffled and enveloped curiously in some white, shining substance, lay the body.

The two detectives and the surgeon moved swiftly towards the inert figure, and with the precaution bred of long experience bent down and looked before they attempted to touch. And the surgeon rose as quickly as he had bent, and flashed an amazed look at the rest as he snapped out one word :

" Strangled ! "

The elder detective straightened himself.

" That's it, doctor ! Strangled ! And do you all see how it was done ? See—he was dressing for dinner—here are all his things laid out. He'd got to the stage of putting on his shirt—arms in the sleeves, body about his head—when the murderer slipped that noose round his neck, and then ! And whoever that murderer was he knew the trick ! Oh, yes, strangled ! "

" Turn him over," said the doctor.

But the elder detective lifted a finger.

" A moment ! " He turned to the manager. " Did that boy of yours find the door open when he saw the body, or had it to be opened ? "

" Open ! It was slightly open, and he looked in, and saw—him ! "

" Very good. Now then, gentlemen, I'll trouble you all to leave us to start our work in our own way. If you who were friends of this man, or knew him, can tell us anything that will help, we'll be glad to hear it later, so don't leave the hotel. But, for the moment, leave us and the doctor."

Crothers and Lynwood, once outside the room, when a little aside, the second mate touched the shipowner's arm. Crothers started when he saw Lynwood smiling in a queer fashion.

" What is it ? " he asked.

" This," said Lynwood. " That is Sah Ping's vengeance."

" What, you mean he did it ! "

" No ; but a Chinaman did. Did you notice me sniff the air when we went into that room ? "

" Well, what of that ? "

" Only that a Chinaman had been in there not long before. That's all, sir. And that was a Chinese coil of rope. And if Harding had that pearl on him—well, his murderer's got it now."

Crothers stared at his companion for a full minute in silence.

"I see—I see!" he said at last. "Well, Lynwood, I guess you'll have to tell the whole story over again. But—it's finished for Harding."

THE WINE CARD

I

At that hour of the afternoon—four o'clock—Crispini's Restaurant was always destitute of life. It was essentially a lunching and dining establishment, almost entirely deriving its custom from the folk who lived in the great barrack-like flats—Medora Mansions—which towered above it on the opposite side of the street. The people of Medora Mansions took their breakfasts and drank their afternoon tea in the privacy of their own abodes; those of them who came to lunch at Crispini's came between one o'clock and three; few lingered over coffee and cigarettes beyond that hour, and by four o'clock the restaurant was empty, save for a waiter or two who remained on duty in case some stray customer should enter in search of a hastily-cooked chop. It was seldom that this occurred; the two hours, between four and six, made at Crispini's a period of somnolent leisure.

On this particular spring afternoon Marco, the only waiter on duty in the front part of the restaurant, had the place all to himself. The bustle and scurry of the luncheon hour was over; nothing remained of it but a memory, delicately suggested by a still perceptible odour of cooked food and full-flavoured cigars. The tables had all been respread in readiness for the diners who would begin to straggle in at six and would be in full force by seven. Far away in the distance a turned-down gas-jet shone on the flasks and bottles of a little bar; behind it the barman read a newspaper which had reached him that morning from far-away Naples. Marco, resting in a corner of the red plush settees which ran round the walls beneath the great gilt mirrors, also had an Italian newspaper on his knee. But Marco was not reading it. His hands, calmly folded, rested upon the newspaper; his chin rested on his carefully laundered shirt-front; his eyes were closed. All the same, he was not asleep. Rather, he was indulging in his favourite occupation at that hour of the afternoon. And that was to weave a day-dream of the happy and much looked for time when, having saved and scraped together enough money in this fog-laden England, he would be able to go back to his sunny Italy and set himself up as the proud proprietor of a snug little *ristorante* among his own people.

Marco knew that little *ristorante*, visionary thing that it was, better, much better, than he knew Crispini's, for all that he had been waiter No. 12 in that establishment for quite seven years. He knew exactly where it would be, how it would be arranged, how he would manage it, what it would yield him. He saw himself, sleek and prosperous, superintending many waiters, he saw his wife wearing gold rings and bracelets, at the receipt of custom, taking the money, bestowing gracious smiles upon incoming and outgoing patrons. The front of the *ristorante* would be in white and gold; there would be real plate-glass windows, and lace curtains, and on each side of the door large jars of yellow majolica would stand, with orange-trees growing in them. And in the street there would be the Italian sunshine, and the Italian laughter, and——

"If only I had all the money that I want!" sighed Marco for the thousandth time.

For it took a long time to save up capital, even in England, where money is much more plentiful than in Italy. Nobody could be more careful and frugal and thrifty than Marco. He knew how to live on next to nothing; how to make his clothes and linen go far; how to hoard up coppers which Englishmen would fling away. He had been saving, saving, saving ever since he came to England with his little portmanteau and his small English-Italian dictionary, and yet he had only accumulated one-half the capital necessary to the realisation of his heart's desire. He had sometimes been tempted to stake a little of his savings on the horse-racing, but had never succumbed—no, there was nothing for it but to plod steadily on, putting away so many shillings at each week-end. If only all the customers would suddenly be seized with a desire to double or treble their tips, now! Then, perhaps——

The swing doors of Crispini's were suddenly thrust open, and Marco started up as two men entered, talking and laughing. One of them Marco recognised as a fairly regular customer: a youngish man with a clean-shaven, sharp-featured face, lighted by a pair of eyes whose keenness was only partly eclipsed by spectacles. Marco, who occasionally speculated on his customers, had always set this one down, because of his features, his manner, and his sober and correct dress, as a lawyer; he had once had to visit a solicitor, and had formed an opinion of the type. The companion of his supposed lawyer he did not know; he, too, was a youngish man, attired in a well-cut tweed suit and wearing a trilby hat; he carried a walking-cane, and sported a brown moustache, and there was nothing remarkable about him except that he stared around Crispini's as a man stares at unfamiliar surroundings. But as he dropped into a seat, which the clean-shaven man pointed out, he lifted his trilby hat, and Marco noticed that his high forehead, on which a mass of chestnut hair clustered thickly, was covered with perspiration.

The man whom Marco knew nodded carelessly to him as he took a seat at the table to which he had already pointed the other.

"Waiter," he said, "we want a small bottle of champagne."

Marco laid down a wine card, and bowed.

"Very sorry, sir, but you must order something to eat with the wine," he said. "We cannot supply drinks by themselves. Biscuits, perhaps, sir?"

"Oh, that keeps you within the law does it?" said the customer. "Biscuits, then, by all means. Here, I know which champagne we want—it's number twenty-six on the card. Bring that."

Marco bowed, folded his napkin over his arm, and went away, leaving the two men talking. When he presently returned, carrying bottle and biscuits, the clean-shaven man was wrapping a handkerchief round his right thumb. He looked up with an aggrieved expression.

"Here, waiter!" he exclaimed, "there's broken glass on this table, and I've cut my thumb on it. Look there, somebody's broken a wine glass."

Marco looked down, and saw a few sharp fragments of glass sparkling on the shining linen. He set the champagne on the next table.

"Please to sit here, gentlemen," he said. "Very sorry, sir, but that is not my table. It is Beppo's. I shall tell him about it when he returns. There is a chemist next door but one, sir, shall I get you a little plaster?"

"No, thank you. I'll see to it when I go out," answered the customer. "Careless fellow; though, Beppo. If I get lockjaw, I shall come on Mr. Crispini for heavy damages."

Marco took this as a joke, and smiled as he poured out the wine. And that duty performed, he retired to a little distance and watched the two men drink. And he noticed that the younger man, the man of the brown moustache, tossed off his first glass hastily, greedily, and held the glass to be replenished.

"What a thirst!" laughed the other.

The moustached man muttered something which Marco did not catch, but Marco observed that his hand trembled as he lifted the second glass to his lips. And for the second or third time since his entrance he wiped perspiration from his forehead. Marco wondered. Certainly, for England, the spring afternoon was a remarkably warm one. But still——

"Here you are, waiter!" said the clean-shaven man, throwing down a sovereign. "The biscuits were excellent."

Marco smiled dutifully as he counted out change. A moment later, the richer by a shilling, he bowed his customers out, and went back to the table they had quitted to clear away the bottle and glasses. And in putting things straight, he moved the wine card which he had laid on the table when they had asked for champagne, and, glancing at it, saw on its lower right-hand corner a thumb-mark, slightly reddened. The gentleman who had cut his thumb had evidently picked up the wine card later on, and had left a bloody imprint upon it.

There was a service table close by on which Marco and his fellow-waiters in that part of the restaurant kept various odds and ends. Marco threw the stained wine card amongst the litter of other things at one corner of it, and took a clean one from the drawer. And presently he sat down again, and picked up the Italian newspaper.

" Ah, if only every customer gave me a shilling tip ! " he murmured reflectively.

And he began to calculate how many shillings there were in the two hundred pounds which it was still necessary he should save before he could blossom out into a frock-coated restaurant proprietor at home there in Italy.

II

HAIRDRESSING was one of the very few unavoidable expenses to which Marco periodically found himself put. Shave himself he could, and did, but it was beyond his ingenuity to trim his glossy black hair and to keep it up to the elegant standard of taste which he prided himself on exhibiting to customers. But between Crispini's and the chemist's shop which he had mentioned to the clean-shaven man who had cut his thumb through Beppo's carelessness there was a toilet saloon kept by two Germans with whom Marco was friendly, and who therefore trimmed him up, when necessary, at a reduced fee. He turned into their establishment on the morning following the episode of the cut thumb.

Hans, the senior partner, was upstairs eating his breakfast ; Fritz, the junior, was disengaged, and reading the illustrated newspaper which he threw aside as Marco entered.

" You hear about our murder ? "' asked Fritz, as he wrapped a dressing-sheet round Marco's neck.

" What murder is that ? " inquired Marco.

Fritz indicated Medora Mansions with the point of his scissors.

" In the flats across there. Yesterday it was. They think in the early part of the afternoon. Mr. Eppstein."

Marco started.

" Mr. Eppstein ! I know him. A fat little gentleman. He was a customer of ours. Most nights he dined in our place."

" He was also a customer with us," said Fritz. " He had his hair cut here two days ago. Well, he is murdered. Stabbed in the back with a stiletto that was his own."

Marco made an exclamation in Italian.

" But who did that ? " he said. " That was a nasty thing to do, too. Did they catch the man who did it, then ? "

" Catch nothing," replied Fritz. He waved the scissors towards the paper which he had just thrown aside. " There is all about it in there," he continued. " He was murdered, they think, as he sat in his room writing at his desk. Stabbed from behind—dead."

" And they don't know who stabbed him ? " asked Marco.

" No ; but there is a clue—a thumb-mark," said Fritz. " On the new white paint of the door it was found. There is a photograph of it in the paper. It is a curious thumb-mark—there is a little scar in it. See ! "

He bent down, picked up the newspaper, and placed it in Marco's hands. And Marco uttered a sharp exclamation, again in Italian.

" Yes," said Fritz. " Now, if they find a man whose thumb makes that mark, eh ? For those experts say that no two marks are alike. Well, you have a dry shampoo this morning, then ? "

" No—no ; I have not the time this morning," answered Marco hastily. "I am a little late to my work just now."

Nevertheless, when he went out of the hairdressing saloon, Marco did not immediately turn into Crispini's. Instead, he hurried along the street to the nearest newspaper shop, and there he purchased a copy of the journal which Fritz had just shown him. And, carrying this tightly folded in his hand, he hastened back to the restaurant, and, once inside, made for the service table on which the afternoon before he had thrown the stained wine card. His heart was thumping within his breast as he began to turn over the odds and ends amongst which he had thrown it—other discarded things of the same sort, menus, forms whereon bills were made out, theatre programmes, a folded newspaper or two. Supposing what he sought had disappeared? That would be terrible, for he already had an idea, a conviction. But the stained wine card suddenly lay there before him, and thrusting it into the breast pocket of his coat, hurried upstairs to a room in which he and his fellow-waiters made their toilets.

Despite what he had said to Fritz, Marco was early at Crispini's and the room which he entered was empty. He went over to the window, and, drawing out the newspaper and the wine card, compared the photographed thumb-mark with the real one which he believed to have been made in his presence. And though he had never had occasion to investigate such a matter before, Marco felt as certain that the two marks were identical as that he stood there in that upper room of Crispini's restaurant. Every line, every convolution, seemed to be the same—and in the very middle of each was an irregular shaped blank, as if in the ball of the thumb of the maker there was a dent, a scar.

The sound of steps on the stairs without made him hurry the wine card into his pocket and toss the newspaper aside. But before he went down to his duties he had contrived to carefully place the card in a protecting cover, and to cut out the photographed thumb-mark.

They were precious—already he saw vague possibilities in his possession of them.

That day, for the first time in his career, Marco was not a model waiter. He made mistakes. He brought one customer Irish stew instead of the cutlets which had been ordered with special care; he served another with clear soup instead of thick; he poured out green Chartreuse for a third until the liqueur ran into a deep pool in the saucer wherein the glass stood, and the customer asked with sarcasm if Marco was dreaming or in love. Finally he made a bad mistake in adding up a bill, and the man who had to pay it said angry things to the head-waiter.

The fact was that Marco was preoccupied. He was busily engaged in considering two matters. One was the ins and outs, the bearings and possibilities, of what had been revealed to him; the other was the double question—would the clean-shaven man come to Crispini's that day, and if he came, what should he, Marco, do? and as he hurried about, striving to do his duty, and much distraught, his eyes were for ever turning to the doors.

The clean-shaven man came at last. He came at a quarter-past three o'clock, when there was but one customer left in the place—a fat old gentleman who lingered over a cigar and coffee. Marco trembled with eagerness; the clean-shaven man gave him a cool nod, ordered an underdone steak, a boiled potato, and a pint of bitter ale. He pulled an evening newspaper out of his pocket and read unconcernedly. Marco glanced at the wounded thumb; it was done up in sticking-plaster.

"I hope your thumb is better?" said Marco politely, as he set down the underdone steak before his customer.

"Well, I haven't developed lockjaw yet," answered the clean-shaven man with a grin. "But you never know what may happen, do you?"

Marco managed to show a sickly smile. He withdrew to his favourite pillar, and leaned against it until the fat old gentleman departed. Then he approached the solitary inmate.

"Sir," he said, bending respectfully over the table, "I should like to have a little talk with you, if you permit."

"Granted," said the clean-shaven man. "What is it?"

Marco felt his heart thumping hard beneath his shining shirt-front.

"Yesterday, sir," he began, "yesterday you come in here with another gentleman, and order champagne. While I am getting it you cut your thumb on a piece of broken glass on the table there. It bleeds—your thumb. While it bleeds you pick up the wine card—your thumb leaves a mark upon it. Is it not so?"

The listener placed half a potato in his mouth, and looked up.

"Go on," he said, "I am listening."

"This morning," continued Marco, "there is news of a murder in the paper—over there in the mansions. Mr. Eppstein. We knew him here—he was fairly regular customer. Mr. Eppstein is found dead—stabbed. The police find a thumb-mark on the fresh white paint. There is a photograph of it in the paper. I see it. I am reminded of your thumb-mark on the wine card. I compare them. Sir, they are the same!"

The clean-shaven man went on calmly eating. Presently he looked up again, and steadily confronted Marco's keen, dark eyes.

"It strikes me that you ought to have been a detective, my friend," he said. "Well, and what now?"

Marco felt surprise.

"But—they are the same—these two marks!" he exclaimed in a hushed voice. "The one on Mr. Eppstein's door, the one on the wine card." He looked round, and seeing that they were quite alone, made a motion towards his breast pocket. "I show them to you," he said.

The customer raised his hand.

"Wait!" he said. "How soon are you off duty here?"

"As soon as you have finished your lunch, sir," answered Marco.

"Then bring me a bit of Stilton cheese and a glass of your best port," commanded the other, "and I'll make an end. After that you can walk round to my office with me, and we'll talk."

Marco bowed, and went off to execute the order. He kept an eye on the customer from that time until they both passed out of Crispini's together. Once in the street, he wondered if he was doing a wise thing in accompanying a man whom he believed to be a murderer to some office where they would most probably be alone. And when his companion, having led him into the main street of that quarter, turned into a doorway, and indicated a narrow stairway which led to unknown upper parts, Marco hung back.

"I like to know where I am going," he remarked demurringly.

The other gave him a sharp look.

"That I told you," he said. "To my office. There you are," he continued, pointing to a list of names painted on the wall of the entry. "There's my name. See it? 'Mr. Leonard Barkill. Estate Agent. Second Floor.' But come up or not, just as you like. I'm quite agreeable to talk here, or in the street, or anywhere."

The man's careless nonchalance disarmed Marco's suspicions. He smiled, in the weak fashion of a man to whom compliance is easier than refusal.

"Very well, I go up with you," he said.

Barkill led the way up the stairs in silence. On the second floor he opened a glass-panelled door which admitted to a small office, wherein sat a clerk, who was busily engaged in typing letters. He led Marco through this into another room, comfortably furnished, closed its door, pointed his visitor to a chair by the side of a desk, and, producing a box of cigars, offered Marco one. The waiter accepted the offer, sat down, and looked inquisitively at the man who seemed to treat this highly important matter in an entirely unconcerned way.

"Well," said Barkill, sitting down at the desk, "so you say these marks are identical?"

Marco spread out his hands.

" As like each other as—as two spoons," he said. " I have examined them, and I can see no difference."

" To be of any use, there's got to be no difference," observed Barkill. " Let me see them."

Marco hesitated.

" You have seen the newspaper already ? " he suggested.

" I haven't. There was nothing of that sort in my newspaper. Come, you'd better show me what you're talking about. And don't be frightened. I'm neither going to shoot, stab, nor strangle you. There's my clerk in the next room, there are people above, below, and around us, and the walls are thin."

Marco drew forth his cherished possessions. From the illustrated newspaper he had carefully cut out the photograph of the thumb-mark ; he now laid it side by side with the wine card before Barkill. And he took good care to keep his own hand on the second exhibit, and to watch Barkill with alert eyes.

Barkill, however, showed no inclination to touch either wine card or scrap of paper. He bent forward over both —bent his head so much, that the Italian could not observe whatever sign of feeling or emotion came into his features. When he lifted it, his face was impassive.

" Um ! " he murmured. " That's interesting. I have a magnifying glass somewhere about—in this drawer, perhaps."

A minute's search brought the magnifying glass to light. Barkill, by its aid, examined the thumb-marks more thoroughly. At last he pushed the glass aside, and looked searchingly at Marco.

" Well ? " he said.

Marco smiled and took the wine card into absolute keeping.

" The fact of the matter," began Barkill ; " the fact of the matter is, you want to know what I am going to give you for that wine card, eh ? "

Marco shrugged his shoulders. Again he smiled. And at last he spoke.

" The thumb-mark on Mr. Eppstein's door and the thumb-mark on the wine card are the same," he whispered. " If I were to take the wine card to the police, now ? "

" Just so. But you'd rather sell it to me, eh ? "

A vision of the *ristorante* materialised before Marco's eyes.

He felt himself turn hot and cold, and he remained silent—still smiling.

" Come ! " Barkill went on. " I know what you fellows are always aiming at. You'd like to go back to Italy and start a little business of your own, eh ? Of course ! Now, then, how much do you want ? "

Marco summoned up all his courage.

" I take two hundred pounds for it," he got out at last.

" And if I give you that ? "

Marco spread out his hands.

" Then I give notice at Crispini's straight off, and I go to Italy next week," he answered.

" And keep your mouth shut," said Barkill.

" I say—nothing," replied Marco. " It is nothing to me."

Barkill rose, and, putting his hands in his pockets, stood looking down at the Italian with a whimsical smile on his keen face.

" No," he said. " No, I suppose it isn't, so long as you get your money. All right—I'll think your proposition over. Now, listen—I shall come to dinner at Crispini's to-night at seven o'clock. I'll see you then."

Marco's eyes suddenly gloomed over. Suspicion looked out of them.

" Maybe you do not come," he said. " Maybe you go away—long way—out of what you call the road."

" And maybe I don't," answered Barkill. " I shall be at Crispini's to-night at seven o'clock. If you don't like that you can go and tell the police just now. But you'd get money from me quicker than you would from them.

Now, you must run away—I'm going to be very busy."

Marco stood up and fingered his soft hat. Barkill waved him to the door.

"Very well," said Marco, "I expect you at seven o'clock, then. If you don't come——"

"Go along, now," said Barkill.

Marco went slowly out. In the street he heard newsboys shouting fresh particulars of the Eppstein murder. He bought a paper and learnt that the relatives of the dead man were offering a reward of a thousand pounds for information which would lead to the arrest and conviction of the murderer.

A thousand pounds!

Marco instinctively looked back at the doorway from which he had just emerged. Once he took a step towards it; then he drew back. He remembered that there was a big police station round the corner. Indefinitely, irresolutely, something in his brain began to urge his feet in its direction.

III

LEFT alone, Barkill, having walked up and down his office two or three times as if in deep thought, sat down at his desk again, and drawing towards him a newspaper, carefully read and digested the story of the Eppstein murder as it had so far presented itself to those who prepare news for the daily press. His mental digest summed itself up in this form:

Mr. Rudolph Eppstein was an elderly bachelor gentleman, retired from business, who lived alone in a flat in Medora Mansions. He was known to be wealthy, and to possess considerable house property in the district in which he lived.

At half-past four o'clock on the previous afternoon, the house-keeper of the flats, going up to Mr. Eppstein's room to make his tea, found him lying across his desk, dead. He had been stabbed through the heart from behind, while in the act of writing, the weapon used being one of a pair of duelling rapiers which stood, with similar weapons as ornaments in an open case on his wall.

There was not the slightest clue to the identity of the murderer. Medora Mansions, one of the largest blocks of flats in the West End, was tenanted by three or four hundred people ; it was a veritable network of corridors and passages, and had no less than sixteen separate entrances, every one of which could be gained from any part of the building.

Mr. Eppstein was a very lonely old man, rarely visited by anybody ; none of the porters, lift-attendants, nobody about the place remembered anything of any visitor of any sort coming to him on this particular day. The medical men who were called to him at twenty minutes to five o'clock were of opinion that he had been murdered at half-past three. The difficulty of finding any clue to the murderer was deepened by the fact that, according to the hall porters and lift attendants, so many people were in and out of the mansions between one o'clock and four that it was impossible to remember particular faces or people.

Nevertheless, there were two clues which might prove useful in tracking and identifying the miscreant.

First. It has been ascertained that during that morning Mr. Eppstein had occupied himself in collecting his quarterly rents. These had been paid him in cheques, in bank-notes, and in cash. Upon his desk, when his dead body was found, were numerous cheques, and a good deal of silver, piled in amounts of twenty shillings ; no bank-notes, or gold, however, was discernible on or in the desk or on his person. A bank deposit book, which he had filled up and lay on his blotting-pad, showed that he was about to pay in £400 in notes, £157 in gold, £7 in silver, and £235 in cheques. The police theory accordingly was that the murderer had seized on the notes and the gold and had left cheques and silver untouched.

Second. Mr. Eppstein's rooms had just been redecorated, and the woodwork had been painted white.

On the outer edge of the door of the room in which he was found was a thumb-mark, well impressed on the paint. Of this photographs had already been supplied to the Press in the hope that its publicity might lead to some result.

A tap at his door roused Barkill from his studies. He looked up, to set eyes on the young man of the brown moustache with whom he had drunk champagne at Crispini's the previous afternoon.

"Hallo!" said Barkill. "That's odd—your coming. I was just going to telephone to you. Come in, Harry."

The visitor entered, closed the door, and looked round him as if he feared the walls and the furniture.

"I say," he said. "I—I want to speak to you. Couldn't you—couldn't you send that clerk of yours off?"

Barkill rose with alacrity. He pointed to a chair.

"I can," he answered. "I'll just sign some letters and send him out with them, and tell him he needn't come back—it's well past five now. Sit down." And he bustled out, to come bustling back five minutes later. "He's gone, and the outer door's fastened, and we're as much alone as if we were at the top of the Monument. Now then, what is it, Harry Berners? But I guess I know what it is before you speak. You've come to talk to me about your uncle's murder."

The visitor started in his chair, and stared. Barkill nodded.

"I know," he said. "Out with it. You can trust me."

Berners swallowed something in his throat once or twice before he spoke.

"That's why I came," he answered. "Len, I'm in—or may be in—a fearful hole! You remember when you met me yesterday afternoon and offered to stand a bottle because you'd had such a good time over Epsom? You remember that I seemed a good deal flustered, and that I said I'd been hurrying to catch a chap?"

"I remember—everything," answered Barkill.

"Well, I hadn't been hurrying to catch any chap," Berners went on. "I'd—I'd been hurrying away from Medora Mansions. I'd—I'd found Uncle Rudolph!"

"Dead?"

"Just as they found him after! All the time I was with you I was thinking of what I'd seen. I'm—I'm a fool—a coward! And it'll be lucky if I don't pay for it."

He stopped to wipe away the perspiration from his forehead, and Barkill studied him curiously.

"Make a clean breast, Harry," he said.

"I will. I'll tell you all. I came to tell you. Look here; I'd been spending a bit too much lately, and yesterday afternoon, I thought I'd come up to Medora Mansions and see if I couldn't touch Uncle Rudolph for a hundred. I came—I went into the place by the Smyrna Street entrance, and as the lift wasn't at hand, I walked up. I went into his rooms as I always do—without knocking. And in that little inner room I found him—just as it says in the papers. At first I thought he was asleep, and I touched him. Then I saw what it was. And—well, I lost my head. I'm a coward—a coward! The only instinct I had was to run. I thought, d'you see, that if I was found there, they'd say it was me, because, of course, I benefit under his will. Anyhow, I got out as fast as I could. I——"

"Wait!" commanded Barkill. "Go slow. Which way did you come out?"

"Aleppo Gardens way. It was nearest. There were a lot of people going up and down the stairs and the lifts just then. That musician chap—Signor Somebody—that lived under Uncle Rudolph, you know, he was giving an afternoon party, I think. I heard music, and saw folks going in there, anyway. I don't think any of the attendants saw me. I got out quick, and hurried off. I scarcely knew what I was after when I met you. You see——"

"Wait a bit! Did you see anybody—did anybody see you in that corridor that leads to Mr. Eppstein's flat?"

Berners rubbed his forehead. His brows contracted.

" I believe—I've some dim recollection that I saw a girl who had a flat in that corridor—I think she's an actress," he answered. " You see, I scarcely ever went to see Uncle Rudolph; he didn't like us to visit him. I hadn't been near him for two years—quite."

" Well ? " said Barkill.

" That's about all. You saw that I was what you called nervy. The champagne pulled me round a bit, but even then I was still shaky. After I left you, I didn't know what to do. Once I thought of coming here, to tell you. In the end I went home and waited. For the news, you know. Of course, it came."

" And so far," remarked Barkill slowly, " so far, nothing has happened ? "

" Nothing. But you've seen the papers—those with pictures in them ? "

" I've seen one."

" You saw that photograph of the thumb-mark ? "

" I did."

" It's mine ! "

Barkill nodded.

" I knew that," he said. " I knew it at once. Don't you remember ? I was with you when you had that accident to your thumb ? I recognised the scar."

Berners dropped back in his chair, turning very pale. The perspiration burst out again on his forehead.

" Good heavens, what shall I do ? " he muttered. " Supposing that's found out ? Supposing that actress girl tells them she saw me——"

" If she was going to tell 'em anything, she'd have told it by now," said Barkill. " They don't seem to suspect you."

" I've seen no signs. But—I had an idea, as I came along to you, that a man was following me. I saw the same man three times, anyway."

" You'll imagine a lot," said Barkill. " Well, it's a pity you didn't give the alarm the instant you made your discovery."

" I know—I know. I'm a fool—I'm a coward ! What had I better do? Shall I go and tell them now? Will you come with me?"

"Ah!" answered Barkill promptly. "Wait! As a matter of fact, I was going to telephone to you just when you came. I want you to dine with me and a friend of mine to-night, at seven o'clock, at Crispini's."

"But, considering the circumstances, wouldn't it look——"

"As you're not known in this neighbourhood I don't suppose there's the slightest chance of your being recognised," said Barkill.

"I'm not in much form for company," observed Berners. "Who's the friend?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, he's a New Scotland Yard man," replied Barkill. "Detective-sergeant Rothenstave."

Berners looked up sharply.

"What's the game?" he asked.

Barkill smiled, and pulled out his watch.

"It's not such a long time until seven," he answered. "You can wait an hour and a quarter. Then I may have something to tell you."

"What—about this?"

Barkill took down an overcoat and began to put it on.

"I'm going out for an hour," he said. "You remain here. I'll lock you in, and if anybody comes, let 'em knock till they're tired. There are some books and magazines there, and a drop of whisky in the cupboard, and cigars on the shelf. And if you want a bit of good advice, don't think any more of this matter until seven o'clock."

And Barkill went out, and locked the outer door behind him.

IV

At five minutes to seven that evening Marco, hovering about his corner of Crispini's, felt pretty much as an actor feels who waits for his opening cue in a new and important part. He made a muddle of the order of one early customer and neglected another, and the manager, who had been keeping a watchful eye on him, spoke to him sharply and decisively in his native tongue as he strolled past.

" You get ze push," observed Beppo cheerfully, as he and Marco foregathered at the little service table. " One more mistake, and you are what zey call fired, eh ? "

" There are more *ristorante* than this in the wide world," answered Marco, in Italian, adding a proverb in the same language which is to the effect that he who knows, knows."

" All-a-right," replied Beppo ; " but you look-a out."

Marco was looking out keenly enough. And presently two well-built, solid, soberly dressed gentlemen entered, and came to a table at which Marco had reserved two places. Marco bustled forward, took hats and coats, made play with the bill of fare, and talked over the table to his customers. But the talk was not of *hors d'œuvres* nor of *entrees*.

" Come yet ? " asked one of the two, as he affected to study the bill of fare.

" Not yet," answered Marco ; " but I let you know which is him as soon as he arrives."

" All right. Well, bring us two nice steaks and chips, and tankards of bitter, to be going on with—eh, Jim ? "

" That'll do me," said the other man. " Underdone, mine."

Marco hurried away to give the order ; he came back to see Barkill entering the restaurant. And, much to Marco's astonishment, Barkill was not alone—there were with him the brown-moustached young man of yesterday, and an older man, a keen-eyed individual who gave everything within ken a sharp and searching glance as he entered. If Marco had been more observant, he might have seen the merest glance of recognition pass between this person and the two men who had just ordered steaks and ale. But he was intent on finding

Barkill a place, and he hurried towards him and his party.

Barkill, however, was steering Berners and the other man into the corner table at which the champagne had been drunk the previous afternoon. He motioned Berners into the corner, pointed the other to the next seat, and himself took the side facing them. Marco came up, expostulating.

" That is not my table, sir," he said. " I keep a table for you—there. This is Beppo's table."

" No matter," answered Barkill, " here we are, and here we'll stop. Now, you fellows, what'd you like? A dry sherry to start out on, eh ? Here, Beppo ! "

Beppo, a short, dark-eyed, black-haired individual, came hurrying from another customer ; Marco retreated, grumbling. He bent over the table to the two men who sat awaiting their steaks.

" That is him with his back to you," he whispered. " Him with the other two. I meant him to sit here, next to you, but he sits there."

" All right," said one of the two. " Don't disturb yourself. We know him. No need for you to bother."

And as Marco turned away, the speaker leaned to his companion, and made an observation at which they both laughed. Simultaneously, the man who had come in with Barkill and Berners leaned across the table to his host.

" This grows interesting," he murmured, as all three put their heads together. " Don't look round, but the two men sitting at the table behind you are two of our men from the Yard. They and I won't let on that we know each other, you know, but I don't know what they're doing here."

" Perhaps I do," said Barkill. " But here's the sherry. Now then, Beppo, what's particularly good to-night ? Where's that bill of fare ? Come, boys, what are your appetites like ? "

Two minutes later the man from New Scotland Yard, turning from watching Beppo's retreating figure, saw another customer enter, and looked at the tablecloth.

" Hanged if there isn't another of us ! " he said in a low voice. " That makes four."

" The more the merrier," said Barkill, sipping his sherry. " I note that none of you know each other."

" Not likely ! " answered the detective. " Um—well, I'm here to please you, but I don't know what the other chaps are here for."

" You'll find out, Rothenstave," said Barkill. " In the meantime, eat, drink and be merry. And you, too, Harry—no long faces."

But Berners motioned to his companions, and bent over the table."

" That man who's just come in," he said. " He was watching your door when we came out of it, Len. He's after me."

" Very likely," remarked Barkill. " And the two men in my rear are after me. So there you are. Eat your dinners—and wait."

The next half-hour went by after the fashion in which any half-hour goes in a restaurant. Barkill and his guests ate and drank ; the two men behind ate and drank ; the man whose appearance had disquieted Berners ate and drank. And Marco and Beppo waited on customers, and one of them watched and wondered, and the manager walked up and down and kept an eye on everybody.

Barkill ate a last crumb of cheese, and pushing his plate away, leaned over the table to Rothenstave.

" Look here," he said. " I want to do things my own way." He turned to Berners. " Harry, you leave me to play this out. Now, Rothenstave, I want you to introduce me to those three professional pals of yours. You see, the place is clearing, there's scarcely anybody here now. Let you and I join those three others over there—I'll stand cigars and drinks. I want to talk to them. But you Harry, stop where you are."

" I don't know what you're after," said Berners, as

Rothenstave rose and went over to the other detective. " What game is it ? "

" A game that I'm playing for your sake, my son," answered Barkill. " Stop where you are, while I talk to these chaps. I know something that nobody knows. There, Rothenstave's beckoning ! "

Berners remained in his corner watching, while Barkill and the four detectives gathered round a table in a neighbouring alcove. Beppo brought cigars and drinks to them ; Marco, aghast and dumbfounded at these extraordinary proceedings, viewed them from beyond his own particular domain. He was puzzled, for he had the remembrance of what he had done after leaving Barkill still fresh in his mind.

Barkill got the four professional heads close to his own.

" Now, gentlemen," he said. " Rothenstave here knows what I want to tell you ; he is in my confidence. We're all here about the Eppstein affair. Now, you two here have come here after me—you were put up to it by the waiter there, Marco—eh ? "

" Well ? " said one of the two addressed.

" Well, you're on a wrong track," said Barkill. He turned to the third man. " And you," he continued, " are watching Mr. Berners there—you followed us from my office. I suppose you've heard something against him ? "

" Never mind what I've heard," answered this man. " We want to hear what you've got to tell us."

" This, then," responded Barkill. " I can't say that I know with absolute certainty who killed Eppstein, but I've a pretty good notion that I know a man who knows something about it. Now, then, don't show any signs of surprise or astonishment, and I'll tell you what I think. I think—steady, now—that that man is the man who just served us with these cigars—the waiter Beppo ! "

The detectives did not even turn an eyelash to where Beppo, idle for the moment, was conversing with a fellow waiter.

"Go on, Mr. Barkill," said one. "We're all alive."

"Very well," said Barkill. "Now for reasons. I am, as you may know, an estate agent. Yesterday, being quarter-day, I went to Mr. Eppstein's flat at two o'clock to pay him certain rents. I paid him a certain amount in Bank of England notes of five pounds each, the numbers of which, according to my custom, I entered up in a memorandum book. I found Mr. Eppstein at his desk—he'd a pretty tidy amount in cheques, bank-notes, gold and silver, lying on it. I had occasion to talk to him for a while, and, during my stay there, he went to his telephone, and asked these people, Crispini's, to send him over a chop for his lunch. As I came away from Medora Mansions, I saw that man, Beppo, carrying a tray in that direction. You're keeping an eye on him, Rothenstave?"

"Go on," said Rothenstave.

"Very well. Now for the next detail. As I said, yesterday was-quarter day. Last night a tenant from whom I collect rents for a house in Ledeker Street, round the corner, came in to pay me a quarter's rent. He paid me seventeen pounds—three five-pound notes, and two sovereigns. I put them away in a cash box. This morning, happening to look at them, I found that one of the notes was one of those which I myself had paid yesterday to Mr. Eppstein. As I told you, I had the number. I have the note in my pocket now. So I went round to see the man who paid it to me. But I couldn't see him until about an hour ago. He's a dependable man—I can trust him. He got that note last night from our Italian friend up the room there—Beppo. Beppo, and two other waiters here, lodge at this man's house, and they pay him monthly. And Beppo paid up last night, with that note. Now, remember, from what I've read in the papers, Eppstein never left Medora Mansions after the time I saw him there. How came that note into Beppo's possession?"

The detectives looked at each other. For a while, nobody spoke. Then Rothenstave said, slowly and reflectively:

"There's just this. If Beppo took Eppstein's lunch across, Eppstein might have paid him with that note. I only say might."

"No," said Barkill. "Eppstein had piles of change on his desk. He wouldn't give a fiver in payment for an eighteen-penny lunch."

There was a brief silence. Then the eldest man spoke, after looking round.

"That's good enough," he said. "Now, then, we'll tackle him straight off with a question. There's nobody here but ourselves now. Rothenstave, you and I'll get up as if to go. While Beppo's helping you on with your overcoat, I'll say a word to him that may frighten him into saying something. Keep where you are, you fellows, but be alert."

Beppo, coming forward sharply in response to Rothenstave's lifted finger, took down the detective's overcoat, and held it up. And the elder man passed behind him, still making some laughing remark, and suddenly turned, and laid a hand on the waiter's arm.

"Come, my man, we're police officers," he said. "Come, now, no nonsense! What about this murder and that money——"

There had been no expectation on Barkill's part of what happened. He could scarcely convince himself that the thing before him was in being before it was over. For Beppo dropped the coat with a scream, and as the official hands gripped him, wrenched one of his own free, and pointed a shaking finger across at Berners.

"It is a lie!" shrieked Beppo. "I did not do it! It was him—there! I catch him at it. He gave me the money to hold my tongue!"

Berners, white and trembling, was quick on his feet. But the watchful officers were quicker, and their hands were on him before Berners had realised the sudden development. There was the fracas of a moment, an overturned chair, the splintering of an upset tumbler and then——

Barkill, staring open-mouthed across the room, was conscious of Berners' face, of his drawn lips, his ghastly eyes glaring direct at himself in impotent rage.

" Curse you ! " hissed Berners. " You've trapped me ! Curse you, I say ! Curse you ! "

But Barkill shook his head with the helpless expression of a man upon whom blank surprise has fallen.

" Before God, Harry," he said dully, " before God, I'd never even suspected you. It's no trap."

An hour later Barkill, coming round the corner of the neighbouring police station into a deserted street with Rothenstave at his side, felt a hand laid timidly on his sleeve. He turned, and in the gaslight saw the eager and inquiring face of Marco.

" Well ? " he growled.

" I like to speak to you about that reward," said Marco.

Barkill glanced round him. The three were alone. Without a word, he kicked Marco fairly and squarely into the gutter, and that over, he and the detective walked slowly off in a gloomy silence.

THE CONVICT AND THE CLERICS

I

To a man who had just succeeded in escaping from prison, Brychester, in the still hours of an autumn morning, presented possibilities and opportunities which Medhurst, who had been a shrewd citizen of the world before he became a criminal, was quick to perceive and to take advantage of. Brychester itself was unique in its arrangements. One of the smallest of English cathedral cities, it was packed into very little room; you could walk round its enclosing walls within half an hour. It only possessed two streets; one ran from north to south, the other from east to west; they met at the Cross in the middle of the city, and there split it up into four quarters. There were little lanes and alleys in those four quarters; there were, also, at the backs of the old houses and mansions, large, roomy, leafy gardens. It was in one of these, a veritable wilderness that Medhurst hid himself about three o'clock in the morning, after breaking out of the city gaol, which stood a mile away beyond the walls.

There had been very little of actual breaking out to be done. Medhurst, recently sentenced to a considerable term of penal servitude, consigned to Brychester Gaol to await eventual delivery to Dartmoor or Portland, had kept his observant eyes wide open from the moment he exchanged his own smart apparel for the dingy, arrow-ornamented garb of the convict. He was naturally a man of resource and ingenuity, and he meant to escape the unpleasant consequences of his misdeeds. Brychester Gaol was old-fashioned; its warders were a little slack in attending to their duties. And Medhurst watched his opportunity, and, by means of a little interference with the lock of his cell, and a watchful observation of the movements of men on night-duty, and a carefully acquired knowledge of the outer works of his prison-house, managed to get free with little difficulty. And here he was, in the earliest hours of an October day, shivering a little, but eager and ready, in the summer-house of a shady garden—wondering what to do next.

Medhurst's great immediate difficulty was that which confronts all convicts who break prison—his clothes. There was another in the lack of money, but the clothes problem was nearest and most important. If he only had clothes he could get away—he had no doubt he could get away even in a penniless condition. Of course, if he had money, he could get away all the more easily. But clothes were the prime necessity—and he reflected that they must be good. He was a man of exceptionally good presence—a tall, well set-up, rather distinguished-looking man, as many people had observed when he stood in the dock. He felt that he would be less conspicuous in really good attire—the use of which would be natural to him—than in, say, the garb of a navvy or of a labourer. One fact was certain, before daybreak he must find garments wherein to get out of Brychester. For reasons into which it is not necessary to enter, Medhurst believed that his escape would not be noticed until six o'clock in the morning. He had, therefore, three hours in which to do something. And, believing that if one has something to do, one should do it at once, he moved stealthily out of his hiding-place and began to examine his surroundings. He was able to make out that the old-fashioned garden in which he stood was one of several lying at the rear of a number of quaint-roofed houses, situate between the high walls of Brychester Cathedral —houses, in fact, tenanted by the principal ecclesiastical dignitaries. Surely, he thought, there must be some means of penetrating into one of these quiet residences, of obtaining sober and befitting raiment? At any rate, seeing that much depended on the matter, he would have a try for it.

It was very quiet, almost painfully quiet, in these cloistered shades. Once or twice Medhurst heard an owl hoot from its retreat in some ruinous building on the outskirts of the city; now and then he caught the screech of a railway whistle far off across the land; every quarter of an hour the silvery chime of the cathedral clock rang above his head. But he heard nothing of the heavy tread of the patrolling policeman; in these quiet gardens there seemed to be small fear of interference. He climbed a wall or two, made his way through a paling or two, looked round the rearward premises of one or two houses, always careful, always watching. And suddenly, in one of the largest houses, he found an open window. It was not much open—only an inch or two—but it gave Medhurst the very chance he wanted. In another minute he had raised the sash, squeezed himself through the aperture, and dropped quietly into what appeared to be a softly carpeted passage.

Medhurst had lately spent so much time in the dark that he had learnt how to see in it. This is an accomplishment which may certainly be acquired by any one who cares to acquire it; all you have got to do is to wait with patience until you perceive that darkness is not quite so impenetrable as you believed it to be. Objects begin to reveal themselves—especially against windows—besides, there are gradations of darkness. Medhurst, bringing his skill to work, quickly found that he was in a side passage which led into a hall; in the hall he had come to a broad staircase. The carpeting of passage, hall and staircase was particularly thick and soft; nevertheless, Medhurst sat down on the bottom steps of the staircase and took off his prison footgear. For he was going upstairs—which is where raiment is usually to be found.

Big man though he was, Medhurst went up the stairs with less noise than a cat would have made. He blessed the builder of the house; here was no inferior wood to creak at the slightest pressure. He blessed the taste of the owner of the house, who evidently loved velvet-pile carpets. And he was beginning to wish that he had a light when he saw one.

It was certainly not much of a light—a mere crack that shone from a slightly opened door. Medhurst tiptoed to it through a silence as deep as that which no doubt reigned in the aisles of the adjacent cathedral. Here, again, was matter for hearty self-congratulation ; the people of the house were evidently all sound sleepers. He arrived at the door, and listened. He peered through the slight opening, and saw that the light came from an oil-stove, partially turned on. He had an idea that this might be a nursery, and he listened more carefully than before, trying to catch the sound of a child's faint breathing. But, as he heard no sound at all, he gently pushed open the door until he could introduce his head and shoulders. And he saw that this was a dressing-room. He hesitated, listened intently, and glided across the threshold.

Always an adept at sizing up a situation, Medhurst saw the splendid possibilities of this as soon as he had given it one quick, all-comprehending glance. He was in the palace of the Lord Bishop of Brychester ! There, duly laid out on a dressing-bench, all ready against the morning's toilet duties, were the episcopal garments—the breeches, the apron, the gaiters, the straight-cut coat. There was spotless linen, the round collar, the episcopal stock—there was everything. It was evident that the bishop, having taken his tub of a morning, had nothing to do but walk into this comfortably warmed dressing-room and array himself in his clothes.

" Bishops, however," soliloquised Medhurst, " have doubtless several changes of raiment. At any rate, his Lordship of Brychester won't find these togs here when he next wants them."

For Medhurst saw his opportunity, his magnificent chance. He would go out of Brychester in episcopal attire ; he would masquerade as the lawful bishop. He knew the bishop by sight—his lordship had visited the gaol during Medhurst's time. In build and appearance the convict and the ecclesiastic were not unlike. Both were tall, well-made, and athletic-looking men. This would do excellently—excellently ! In the darkness of the autumn morning nobody would be able to tell the false from the true during the few minutes at the railway-station which would be necessary. It was a veritable interposition of Providence.

Always keeping his ears cocked, Medhurst swiftly stripped off his convict garb, and got into the episcopal paraphernalia. He had a little trouble with the apron, and with the gaiters, and with the stock, but he was a handy man, quick of ideas and possessed of supple fingers, and in a very few minutes he found himself properly arrayed. There was a full-length mirror on one side of the room. He caught a glimpse of himself in the half light, and he smiled complacently. But he smiled a great deal more when, turning to a dressing-table, he saw, lying upon its spotless cover, a sovereign, a half-sovereign, and a little silver. He gathered the coins together noiselessly, and deposited them in the episcopal breeches, feeling heartily thankful that their owner had emptied his pockets when he went to bed. Here, again, Providence certainly seemed to be favouring him.

Medhurst now wanted nothing but these very essential things; a muffler, an overcoat, and the Doctor of Divinity's hat which bishops always wear. These, he concluded, he would find in the hall, and he was about to set off in search of them when he suddenly caught sight of his convict's dress. It would never do to leave that about. Certainly it would come out in time—in a few hours really—that a convict had broken out of his gaol and into the palace, and had exchanged his clothes for the bishop's. But Medhurst desired that the knowledge should be restricted as long as possible. Here, again, he was favoured by an inspiration and an opportunity. He saw a black handbag, inconspicuous and much worn, on the side of which was painted in faded white letters the words, "The Bishop of Brychester." He lifted this on to a chair, and opened it. Inside it he found a complete Norfolk jacket-suit of dark grey cloth, together with a cap of the same material, and certain accompaniments in the way of shirts, stockings, and ties. This, in fact, was the outfit which the bishop kept in readiness for golfing expeditions. Whenever he took such jaunts there was nothing to do but pick it up, and march off with it. Medhurst saw splendid possibilities in this. Without further delay he crammed his convict garb into an empty space, closed the bag, and carried it quietly down to the hall.

Here Medhurst took a risk. After remaining for some time at the foot of the stairs he ventured on striking a match. One tiny gleam of its light showed him the coat, the hat, the muffler. He put all these things on in the darkness. No sound came from above, or from around; the house was as quiet as ever. And so, fully equipped for his journey, Medhurst sat down on a chair close to the hall door—to wait.

Medhurst knew Brychester. In his pre-criminal days he had often visited the city; in fact, he had spent a week there just before his arrest. And he knew that an express train to London left Brychester station at ten minutes past four every morning, arriving at Victoria a few minutes before six. By that train he proposed to travel—in the character of the Lord Bishop of the Diocese. According to his reckonings nobody would stir in the palace until six o'clock; it would be some time after that before the theft of the bishop's garments was discovered. Before any hue and cry could be roused he, Medhurst, would be safe in town. All that was necessary now was to wait until the cathedral clock chimed four; then he would let himself out, walk quietly through the Close into the little station, take his ticket, and be whirled away.

Medhurst found no difficulty in putting this theory into practice. On the first stroke of four he quietly opened the front door picked up the handbag, and stole quietly away across the Close and through the deserted streets to the station. And there everything turned out even better than he had dared to hope. He had pulled down the beribboned brim of his episcopal hat; he had swathed his face up to the tip of his nose in the episcopal muffler; he had turned the collar of the episcopal overcoat up to his ears. There were few people about in the half-lighted station, and the clerk in the booking-office, and the obsequious porter who possessed himself of the handbag, and opened the door of a first-class compartment, had not a doubt that the gentleman whom they sped on his journey was the Bishop of Brychester.

"And indeed I might almost begin to believe that I am he!" laughed Medhurst, when the train was sliding rapidly away over the dark country. "I am he, at any rate, for two hours. But what's going to happen then?"

As a preliminary to further operations, he searched the pockets of the appropriated garments. He found nothing in them, however, but a few cards in a well-worn case. He was not sorry to find these cards; he foresaw that they might come in useful later on. Then he searched the bag again. There was nothing in it but what he had already seen—and his own broad-arrowed attire. He thought once of throwing that out of the window, then of hiding it under the cushions of the carriage; on second considerations, he closed the bag on it and the bishop's mufti.

The possession of that mufti gave Medhurst a new idea. He wanted to reach the house of an old friend in Kent, a friend whom he could fully trust, and who would certainly manage to get him secretly away to the Continent. This friend lived in a small village near Sevenoaks, a village so small that its inhabitants would certainly be excited if a bishop's apron and gaiters were seen in it. But they would not take undue notice of a gentleman in an inconspicuous Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers. Obviously, then, the thing to do was to make yet another change of attire.

When the express ran into Victoria, Medhurst seized his bag and made for a taxicab which stood almost opposite the point where his compartment had come to a halt. The light was of the early morning order; the chauffeur was half-asleep. He saw what he considered to be an ecclesiastical gent in leggings and a queer hat, and sprang down and opened the door.

" Go round to the hotel," said the supposed dignitary in muffled tones. The chauffeur drove round to the Grosvenor Hotel; his fare got out, took his bag, and spoke one word : " Wait ! "

The chauffeur touched his cap, and Medhurst walked into the hall, to be welcomed by an obsequious official who knew a bishop when he saw one.

" I wish," said Medhurst, " for a room in which I can change my clothes. And perhaps you can send me some coffee up to it ? I—the fact is, I am going into the country this morning to play golf, and I wish to put on more suitable attire. I shall leave my bag here, and call for it—and to change my garments again—towards evening. You will, of course, charge the room to me for the day."

Half an hour later Medhurst, much more comfortable in layman's garb, walked down to the hall, intending to re-enter his cab. But with his hand on the latch, he suddenly came to a dead halt. Through the glass panel of the door, he saw the taxicab moving off. And in it, just settling himself comfortably against the padded cushions was—a bishop !

Medhurst glanced cautiously around him. There was nobody about in the hall beyond a servant or two engaged in domestic occupations. On its stand near the window of the office reposed the register wherein guests signed their names. Medhurst went over to it, swung its heavy covers open, and found the recent entries. There, under date of the previous day, he read one line which, to him, stood out conspicuous from the rest.

" The Lord Bishop of Tuscaloosa and Mrs. Sharpe-Benham."

Medhurst closed the heavy book, and turned away chuckling quietly. He understood the situation now. And he began to thank his stars that an unusually gloomy morning, a sleepy chauffeur, and the presence at the hotel of a Colonial prelate who, no doubt, wished to get to some very early service, had made his own circumstances much easier. It was with a feeling of immense satisfaction that he walked out of the hotel, and strolled off into the unwonted liberty of the streets.

II

THE chauffeur whom Medhurst had bidden to wait outside the hotel, had given no particular attention to his fare. He was not very well acquainted with the peculiarities of clerical attire; certainly he could not tell a dean from an archdeacon, nor an archdeacon from a bishop. All he knew was that there were clergymen who wore what he called leggings, and had the brims of their hats tied to the crowns with bits of ribbon, and that these were big pots in their walk of life.

He saw his fare go into the hotel, and he believed it was his fare who came hurriedly out of the hotel twenty minutes later, who jumped quickly into the cab, and who bade him make all haste to St. Paul's Cathedral. He had not the ghost of a notion that this was not his original fare at all, but was in reality the Bishop of Tuscaloosa, a Colonial prelate, just then in England, who was due at St. Paul's at five minutes to seven o'clock, who had slightly overslept himself, and who, rushing out of his hotel, had leapt into the first vehicle he saw.

And when he set this genuine prelate down at St. Pauls, and had a better opportunity of looking at him, he still believed him to be the man he had taken up just an hour before, when the Brychester express steamed into Victoria. The Bishop of Tuscaloosa glanced up at the clock of St. Paul's, and turned to the chauffeur.

"I think you had better wait for me," he said. "I shall not be here very long, and then I want to be driven elsewhere."

Even then nothing struck the chauffeur as being different. He merely glanced at the tall and athletic figure careering up the steps (Sharpe-Benham had been a noted man in the playing-fields in his ante-Colonial days), lighted his pipe, purchased a half-penny morning paper from a passing itinerant, and settled himeslf down in his seat until the bishop had finished his business or his devotions. He was still reading the latest racing news when, forty minutes later, the bishop emerged from the cathedral in company with another clergyman. The other clergyman, as they came up to the cab, made some facetious remark about the wickedness of keeping taxicabs waiting while the meters ran on unchecked.

" I know—I know," said the bishop. " But the fact is, I am obliged to drive some distance into the East End, and this cab is so good and comfortable that I decided to keep it."

The other clergyman laughed, shook hands, and went off in the direction of the deanery, and the bishop turned to the chauffeur.

" I want you," he said, " to drive me to St. Hedwige's Church at East Ham. That's a long way, isn't it ? "

The chauffeur folded up his newspaper, and crammed it into his pocket.

" Pretty tidy way that, sir," he answered. " Whereabout is this church, sir ? "

" That we must find out when we get to East Ham," said the bishop. " But—I think I must have some breakfast before I go so far." He paused, gazing wistfully around him at the tall buildings. " I suppose there is no restaurant or anything of that sort about here ? " he asked.

" Cannon Street Station Hotel just round the corner, sir," suggested the chauffeur. " Get breakfast there, sir."

" That," replied the bishop, getting into the cab, " will do excellently. We will go there first, then."

The chauffeur drove along to Cannon Street Station, pointed out the hotel entrance to his fare, and prepared to do more waiting. The bishop, who was a man of kindly nature, looked at his driver thoughtfully.

" Perhaps you, too, would like to breakfast ? " he said. " If so, pray do. I suppose I shall be three-quarters of an hour, at any rate."

" Thank you, sir," said the chauffeur. " He glanced at the clock and saw that eight was about to strike. " I'll be back here at twenty-to-nine, sir," he went on. " Ain't had no breakfast meself yet ! " he added, with a grin.

The bishop smiled, nodded, and walked into the hotel. He was shown into the coffee-room with the politeness due to his dignity. He ordered his food, he asked for the *Times*, he settled himself quietly and comfortably to his breakfast, he took his time over it. The waiter who attended to him had given him a seat near the fire ; the bishop, satisfied with his own immediate affairs, did not pay any attention to the other people in the room. And he certainly did not observe a rather large, official-faced sort of person who came quietly in, and, under cover of a general look round, contrived to eye him, the bishop, with a searching inspection.

At a quarter to nine o'clock the bishop laid aside the *Times* on one hand, and his napkin on the other, and inserted his fingers in the pocket wherein he usually carried his ready cash. To his horror, he found that there was no cash there. He hastily felt for his pocket-book, in which he kept a bank-note or two in readiness for possible emergencies. But his pocket was empty—all his pockets were empty. Then he suddenly remembered that, in the hurry incident upon his belated arising that morning, he had left his loose cash, his purse, his pocket-book, all his trifles, on his dressing-table. It was awkward, but it was no great matter, after all. He summoned the head-waiter, who came forward with a respectful presentation of the bill.

" I am sorry, but I have left my purse and all my belongings at the Grosvenor Hotel where I am staying," said the bishop. " I left there very hastily this morning to keep an appointment at St. Paul's. But I have a taxi-cab waiting for me downstairs, and I will send the driver at once to fetch my purse."

The head-waiter replied that that would be quite all right, and the bishop walked out of the room, a little vexed with himself for having slept ten minutes over his time. He went downstairs, and was about to step into the station, where he saw the taxicab awaiting him, when the official-faced person who had eyed him from the door of the coffee-room, and who had exchanged a word or two with the head-waiter when the bishop walked out, came up from behind, and stopped him with a polite but frigid bow.

" May I have a word with you, sir ? " he asked.

The bishop turned in surprise. There was a note of firmness in the man's voice which converted the request into something very like a command. The bishop, a man of spirit, felt his face flush a little.

" You wish to speak to me ? " he said.

" If you please," replied the man. He indicated the door of a side-room, and bowed the bishop within. " I am sorry," he continued, in the same firm and frigid tone ; " I understand your bill is not paid ? "

The bishop's first flush changed to something more vivid.

" Really ! " he exclaimed. " This is——" But there he pulled himself up ; after all, the fault was his own. " I have just explained to your head-waiter that I am sending for my purse," he continued. " I left it on my dressing-table, being in a hurry this morning. I have a taxicab outside—the driver will fetch what I want."

The official-faced person still seemed very firm. He glanced at the episcopal apron.

" You are the Bishop of——" he began.

" I am the Bishop of Tuscaloosa," answered the captive, with some asperity.

" Where is that ? " demanded the inquisitor, more firmly than ever.

" Really, really ! " exclaimed the bishop. " This is—my good man, do you really suggest that——"

" I suggest nothing," replied the other. " I am merely asking for information. You come here, run up a bill, leave without paying it, and—to be plain—I may as well tell you that I am a police-officer. The fact of the case is," he went on, as another formidable-looking person entered the room, " the fact of the case is, the palace of the Bishop of Brychester was broken into early this morning by an escaped convict, who is believed to have got away by the four o'clock train from Brychester in the bishop's clothes. Now you answer the description of that convict."

The bishop felt as if he were suddenly deprived of speech. Just as suddenly he laughed.

" My good sir ! " he exclaimed. " This is ridiculous ! Utterly ridiculous ! I am the Bishop of Tuscaloosa, which is in Canada. I am at present staying at the Grosvenor Hotel ; I have just come up from St. Paul's Cathedral, where I am well known to many members of the Chapter. The chauffeur who is without will tell you that he has just driven me from the Grosvenor Hotel, and——"

The first man made a sign to the second, who left the room, and instantly returned with the driver of the taxicab. The first man directed the driver's attention to the bishop.

" Where did you drive this gentleman from ? " he asked peremptorily.

The driver glanced at all three with signs of rising suspicion.

" Well, from St. Paul's last," he answered, " and before that from the Grosvenor Hotel, and before that from Victoria Station ! "

The bishop started.

" From Victoria Station ! " he exclaimed. " My good fellow, you did not drive me from Victoria Station ! You drove me——"

The driver became actively suspicious ; so far he had not seen the colour of the bishop's money. Besides, he had waited twenty minutes outside the Grosvenor.

" Ho, didn't I ! " he exclaimed. " I suppose I didn't drive you round from Victoria 'rival platform to the Grosvenor, did I, where I waited twenty minutes for yer? Oh, no!" He made a derisive face, seeing how things were going, and turned to the two men.

"He come into Victoria by the Brychester express," he continued. "That what gets in just afore six—course he did!"

The detectives closed in upon the unhappy bishop. There was no doubt in their minds that they had effected a smart, if lucky capture. And it was only in accordance with the nature of things that they convoyed their captive there and then to the nearest police-station.

III

MEDHURST strolled away from the hotel towards Victoria Street, thinking. His next move, he reflected, ought to be towards definite liberty. Already the discovery of his nocturnal doings at Brychester Palace would have been made. Well—it would take some little time for the local police to communicate with London. It would be found out—nothing more easy—that he had left Brychester by the four o'clock train; very good, but even then he reckoned that he still had an hour or two's start of everything. The first thing to do was to get to his trusty friend. And he suddenly remembered that the trusty friend had an office in London, close to the Mansion House. Why not go there instead of running the risk of a railway journey into Kent? The principal stations would be watched; he had better keep away from them until he had effected yet another change of clothes.

Medhurst accordingly made for the City. He turned into the Underground Railway, and took a ticket for the Mansion House. Amongst the early crowd of men going to shops and offices he would feel himself safe; however anxious to recapture him the police might be, they could not set patrols in every street of London. He would stroll about the City until nine o'clock or so, when his friend would be likely to put in an appearance—Medhurst remembered that the friend was an early bird, who came up by one of the first trains. He felt no fear now—it seemed to him that all was going very well indeed.

In the Underground train Medhurst made an interesting discovery. In the breast-pocket of the Norfolk jacket he found a cigar-case. There were four uncommonly fine cigars in it—he at once lighted one, with the keen zest and enjoyment of a man who had not tasted tobacco for long, weary weeks. But, as he was examining the case, before restoring it to his pocket, he found something else. In a slip-pocket, obviously designed to carry stamps of similar small articles, he found a couple of blank cheques of the Brychester and County Bank. Their lawful owner, the bishop, was evidently a careful man, who provided for unforeseen contingencies; he carried a blank cheque in case he should want cash; anybody, of course, will cash a cheque for a bishop.

Medhurst laughed over this discovery. It was, however, of no particular interest to him just then, and he put the cheques back in their place, and the cigar-case in his pocket, and smoked in great contentment until he came to the Mansion House Station. There he got out and went up into the streets, which were already beginning to be busy.

It was immaterial to him where he went for the next hour or so; accordingly he loafed around anywhere, but took good care always to be moving, as if with a purpose. He went along by the Bank, and round by the Guildhall, and into Aldersgate, and through various small streets into Smithfield; there he turned south, and made his way into Ludgate Hill. And loafing about there he paused to gaze into the window of a bookseller's shop, and before he was aware of it he found himself staring at a book which stood with title-page and frontispiece exposed, on a shelf immediately in front of him. The title-page conveyed the information that this was a work on Athletics and Christianity, by the Lord Bishop of Brychester; the frontispiece was a photogravure of the right reverend author. And underneath it was a facsimile of the bishop's signature.

Medhurst was a man of rapid thought, and he was temperamentally quick at seizing opportunities. He saw a fine opportunity immediately before him. In his pocket reposed two of the Bishop of Brychester's blank cheques, there before him was a very good reproduction of the bishop's autograph. A rare opportunity, indeed; for Medhurst was an expert imitator of other people's handwriting. That, indeed, was why he had come into contact with the law. Those who had administered the law in his case had been so struck by his expertness, in fact, that they had judged it well to consign him for a good many years to regions where his ability would be stultified. And the judge who had announced his fate to him had been unkind enough to remark, in dry and laconic fashion, that within the memory of man forgers had made the acquaintance of the scaffold and the hangman.

Medhurst walked into the shop, fingering his loose change. His keen sense of humour made him smile as he bought the bishop's book with the bishop's own money. It was a small, thin, genteel book—merely a reprint of two or three lectures given to young men—and he slipped it into his outer pocket and went away. Pursuing his previous plan, he continued to stroll about the streets, up one, down another, always keeping within easy reach of the block of buildings near the Mansion House, in which his trusted friend had his office. But Medhurst had a task to perform, an adventure to undertake, before he went to his friend—he was going to make use of his criminal facility of imitating penmanship.

He turned into a teashop at last, and ordered a light breakfast. While it was being brought to him he carefully studied the facsimile of the Bishop of Brychester's signature. It was an easy signature to imitate, there was no marked peculiarities in it; it was not the writing of a literary man, nor of a scholar, but rather of a business-like, straightforward sort, without twirls, flourishes, or elongated downstrokes. By the time Medhurst had finished his simple breakfast he knew that handwriting so well, had so photographed it on his brain, that he had no fear of being able to write out a cheque in such accurate imitation of it that the bishop himself would be puzzled in detecting the forgery.

Medhurst went straight to business. He had already thought of a well-known jeweller's shop in Cheapside where he could do what he wanted; it had the great advantage of being practically next door to the block of buildings into which he meant to disappear as soon as his proposed transaction was safely over. He entered the jeweller's shop with all the assurance in the world, and was politely greeted by a manager who, seeing a soberly attired gentleman in a clerical collar, set his customer down as a country parson who had come to town in his rustic garb. But Medhurst quickly disabused the manager of that impression. Drawing out the well-worn card-case, he laid one of the Bishop of Brychester's cards on the glass-topped counter. The manager bowed again, more politely than before, and gave his episcopal visitor a seat.

"I have frequently seen your watches advertised," said the supposed bishop, "and, as I have a little time to spare before going into the country to play golf, I thought I would call and inspect them. The fact is, I want to make a present to my domestic chaplain, who has just been preferred to a living, and I think a good watch—gold, of course—would be the best thing I could give him. As I say, I have noticed your advertisements in the newspapers. I believe you have a very good keyless hunter-watch at about—something under forty pounds?"

The manager hastened to lay before his customer a variety of gold watches of many prices. Medhurst examined them with interest and with care, talking pleasantly all the time. Eventually he selected an elegant and useful article which was priced at thirty-three guineas. And upon that he produced one of the blank cheques. "I will make out this cheque for fifty pounds," he remarked as the manager handed him writing materials. "Perhaps you can give me change?"

"With pleasure, my lord," responded the manager. He had no doubt of his visitor's identity. Had he not received the bishop's card. Was there not lying there beside the bishop's gloves a copy of a book "Athletics and Christianity," with the bishop's name upon it? He handed over fifteen pounds and seven shillings, and thanked his supposed lordship for his custom.

Medhurst made his most dignified bow, and put on his blandest smile. He glanced at a timepiece hanging behind the counter, and began to hurry.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I have left myself little time to catch my train at Cannon Street. I must hasten."

The manager swept round the counter, and opened the door with a deep reverence.

"Just round the corner, my lord," he said. "Your lordship will do it in two minutes."

Medhurst smiled and nodded, and passed swiftly out. He certainly went round the corner which the manager indicated. Then he went round another corner, and round another. And then he plunged into a block of buildings contrived on the principle of a rabbit-warren. Within five minutes of leaving the jeweller's shop he was in the private office of the trusty friend, who had just admitted himself, and now made great haste to lock the door on both of them.

Meanwhile the jeweller's manager, having watched the supposed bishop round the corner, went back into the shop, rubbing his hands with satisfaction at having started the day so well.

Suddenly he caught sight of the book and the gloves—entirely forgotten by Medhurst—which still lay on the counter. He snatched them up, shouted a word to his assistants, and ran after the customer. He careered down Bucklersbury, he shot across Queen Victoria Street, he raced along Walbrook, he made a perilous dash over Cannon Street and into the station. He was almost breathless when he ran up to the barrier of the departure platform, staring about him.

" Have you seen a bishop pass in ? " he panted as he approached the ticket-puncher. " Tall gentleman—Bishop of Brychester ! "

The ticket-puncher gave the jeweller's manager a glance.

" There was a party what called himself Bishop of Brychester arrested here this morning ! " he growled. " Bilked the 'otel, he did. Stuffed himself, and had nothing to pay with—that's what 'e done ! D'yer want 'im ? 'Cause you'll find him round at the p'leece-station."

The jeweller's manager suddenly felt very ill. His head swam. He walked away. Then he recovered just as suddenly. The bilker could not be the same man who had just visited him—impossible ! Still, it would not be out of his way to visit the police-station. He knew some of the officials there, and he went off to them and told his story. What he wanted to know was—how did this extraordinary coincidence come about ?

The police official to whom the manager told his story listened in silence—in silence he remained for some minutes.

" Happened just now ? " he suddenly asked.

" Within half an hour," answered the manager. He smiled bravely. " Of course," he said, " mine was the real bishop. But—who's your man—who's the impostor ? "

The official crooked his finger.

" Come this way ? " he said.

He led the manager to a certain stronghold, wherein the unhappy Bishop of Tuscaloosa was still expostulating with his incredulous guardians. But even as they entered it by one door, there was ushered in at another a very great ecclesiastical dignitary, as familiar in the City as St. Paul's itself, at sight of whom everybody in the room became profoundly respectful.

He advanced upon the Colonial prelate with outstretched hands.

" My dear bishop ! " he exclaimed. " What a lamentable—what a ridiculous mistake ! What an unfortunate——"

The police official who had conducted the jeweller's manager into the room suddenly swept him out of it.

" Quick—quick ! " he said. " Come and describe that fellow you've told me about ! That's the real man ! We must be on to him sharp ! Come on ! Where did you say he was off to ? But, of course, he hasn't gone there—not he ! "

In that the police official was quite right. At that moment Medhurst, who had already effected another change of clothes, was being quietly carried away to a reasonable prospect of ultimate liberty.

THE POWDER MAGAZINE

I

FROM the long stretch of bare highway which connected two coast towns a narrow, deep-rutted lane, little used by man or beast, wound a tortuous course between stunted willows to the margin of a marsh-bounded creek. A stream ran along one edge of this lane; where it wound through the creek to the sea there was little but desolation and loneliness. The creek came to a point there, gradually widening away seawards until its shores, two miles away, formed projections at either end of a bar always marked by a rolling line of white surf. Along these shores there was nothing of human life to be seen at most times. But on one of the projections stood a queerly shaped, low-roofed building which rose but little above the level of the land; narrowly observant eyes might have made out, running from it, a long line of banked-up road which rose above water and marsh until it reached the mainland. This was a military road, fenced, jealously guarded; the low building was a magazine for the storing of explosives. The folk who dwelt thereabouts knew well that a stranger might as easily have climbed to the moon as have drawn near that building unseen, by either day or night.

Thereabouts, however, there was little sign of folk, many or few. The two coast towns on either hand were hidden; the inland village was a good mile away beyond the line of the highroad; from the edge of the creek there was neither roof nor spire to be seen. But there, on the edge itself, stood a ruinous cottage, once a fisherman's, and between it and the powder magazine, a gaunt thing in the loneliness of the marsh, rose the fabric of a deserted mill, marking where a deep stream ran down to the sea. And, at the end of the narrow lane an ancient, half-timbered cottage, thickly thatched, stood amongst a few elders and willows, and was literally the one human habitation to be seen in all that desolate stretch.

Towards this cottage, to which she kept lifting her eyes as to a beacon, a woman came toiling up the mud and sand of the creek one dismal winter afternoon. She was a young, strikingly handsome woman, black of hair and eye, ruddy of cheek ; the rough garments which she wore seemed somehow to accentuate her good looks. On her back she carried a number of lobster-pots which she had brought up from the edge of the sea, and as she reached the ruin at the point of the creek she tossed them from her shoulder with a jerk, and paused, hands on hips, to take breath and wipe the flying salt spray from her flushed cheeks. And as she paused she glanced, unconsciously at the far-off powder magazine, lying drab and silent across the flat marsh. Somewhere in its recesses, or about its outer walls, her husband, a reservist, called back to the colours at the outbreak of war, was on duty, watching the road and the sea and the creek against any possible depredators. Since he had gone she had lived utterly alone in the timbered cottage at the end of the lane, carrying on his trade, which was to drag a living out of the creek and the shore. Her own people and his people, dwelling back in the inland village, had begged her to go to them ; it was not fit, they said, that a woman should be left alone in that desolate place. But Jael Hackett had laughed and announced that she intended to bide where she was until her man came back. She could catch her fish and her shell-fish and send them into the towns for sale. Besides, it was not so lonely in the cottage after all. All day long she could look across the water and the marsh at the powder magazine, and remember that Jim was there, patrolling and watching ; at night she could see the searchlight, going round and round the desolate stretches ; somewhere behind its glare Jim was stirring or sleeping. No ; she could bide where she was ; for her, loneliness had no terrors.

But now, as she stood there beneath the ruined hut, a sudden loneliness, a sudden terror came upon her. Chancing to glance landward, she saw a man appear from behind a stray patch of willows. She knew him from his gait and rounded shoulders, recognising him as Jack Fleet, a fisherman of the nearest coast town. And, of all men of that neighbourhood, Jack Fleet was the last Jael Hackett desired to set eyes on, for he had been madly and badly in love with her in other days, and when she had taken Jim Hackett in preference to him he had said words that made her usually brave blood run cold with fear.

Before Fleet could lift his head, Jael had slipped into the ruins behind her with the swiftness of a shadow. She was in hopes that he would pass the old hut and go on; it might be that he was taking a short cut across the marshes from his own town to the next one.

But, lest he should turn into the hut, she darted up the ramshackle stairs which still remained in it to the upper chamber. As she gained that she heard a sharp whistle from somewhere close by. And, looking through the chamber window, she saw a boat coming round a point of the creek, fifty yards away, and in it a man, who whistled again, and then waved a hand to Fleet as the boat crunched against the gravel.

The rain, which had been threatening for a good hour, suddenly came down from the south-west quarter with a wild rush—came down so heavily and thickly that it blotted out the near and the distant things. Jael had an indistinct vision of the two men meeting and turning landward; a minute later she heard the thud of their feet on the sodden ground outside; then they rushed into the hut beneath her. Silently she slid down to the floor, and through one of the many wide cracks in the decaying beams looked at Fleet's companion. Instinctively she knew him for what she would have called a gentleman. He was stripping off his oilskins; that done, he raised and shook his sou'-wester hat; she saw then that he was well-clothed and well-groomed—a youngish, pink-faced blue-eyed, fair-haired man. Silently, having thrown his wrappings aside, he drew out a silver case and selected a cigarette, the peculiar aromatic smell of which struck the watcher as being something that suggested foreign countries. But when the man spoke it was in good and perfect English.

"You think to-night would be a good opportunity, then?" he asked, glaring at Fleet, who had seated himself in the broken-down window-place and was sucking calmly at his clay pipe. "You think the weather favourable?"

"Couldn't have a better," answered Fleet. "The wind's going to keep where it is for a good twelve hours, so it'll be blowing away from the magazine all the time. This rain'll keep up, too, and it's hard to make anything out very far in rain like this. You can get right up to yon place easy to-night."

"Can you find the path in such weather?" asked the stranger. "You said it was very difficult to find."

Fleet smiled cynically.

"I could find it if the night was as black as pitch, and the weather worse, than it's ever likely to be," he answered. "You leave that to me. All you've got to do is to come to my terms. I sha'n't do it for no less than I've said."

"You said two hundred pounds," remarked the stranger.

"And in gold," answered Fleet, significantly. "No paper, mind!"

"Very good," said the stranger. "You shall have it. Well, then, to-night?"

Fleet's dark face shone with anticipation.

"To-night!" he exclaimed. "Couldn't do better, as I've said. It's dark now at half-past five—be here at six. And—half the money now and the other half when I put you in the right path."

The stranger nodded and produced a canvas bag, which he handed over to Fleet, who hastily untied its mouth. In the dull light Jael saw the gleam of gold—

poured out on the window-ledge as Fleet counted it. Also she heard its metallic ring as the recipient hurried it back into the bag and dropped the bag in his pocket.

"Now, listen," said the stranger. "There will be two of us to-night—myself and another. In case either of us should get lost in coming here—for we shall come by different ways—and arrive at different times, I had better give you a password, so that you will know the other man. Any word will do—say, Submarine. You will remember?"

"I'll remember," replied Fleet. "Now, you understand the conditions? I take you to a point from which you can easily reach the magazine across the ground in front of it: beyond that I don't go. You find your own way back, mind. I don't wait for you. And the rest of the money when I set you on the path."

"Correct," said the stranger. He looked out of the door, and, finding that the storm of rain had lessened, began to put on his oilskins. "We have two hours before we meet again," he remarked. "What shall you do with yourself, my friend?"

"You needn't bother your head about me," replied Fleet, with a grin. "I've a call to make in the village behind here. I shall be about here when you and your friend turn up—trust me!"

He laughed again as he followed the stranger out of the hut, and walked with him down to the boat. But Jael Hackett, when they had gone, slipped down the stairs and out at the door, and, keeping the hut between herself and them, sped towards her own cottage, a hundred yards away, feeling as if no laughter would ever leave her lips again. And presently she darted in at her door and slammed it to, and fell back against it, panting, with her hands pressed tightly to her heaving breast.

II

FROM girlhood Jael had enjoyed a wide-spread reputation for shrewdness and common sense. She had always been quick to see the meaning of things, and by the time she had got her breath back, after that mad run, she had grasped the full significance of the present occasion. And her first action was characteristic. She went across the living-room of her cottage, unlocked a chest and took from it a revolver which her husband had instructed her in the use of before he left home. It was already fully loaded, but she examined it carefully before she slipped it into the breast-pocket of her rough man's coat. And then she turned to the window and looked out on the scene she had just left, and she began to think more quickly and thoroughly than she had ever thought in her life.

Mischief was meant to the powder magazine—that was certain. The man whom she had seen in conversation with Jack Fleet was, of course, an enemy : in those early days of the war there were many enemies left in the two coast towns on either side of her. Doubtless there was some scheme afoot to blow up the magazine ; had not Jim said to her a hundred times that it would have to be well watched ? She saw these men, led by that scoundrel Jack Fleet, making their way across the marshes by the secret path, to the outer works of the place where Jim was on duty. On its destruction Jim would perish—and Jael, as a wife of only a few months' standing, was very much in love with her husband, and had felt it badly when he had been called up to service again. Somehow—somehow—she must stop this venture at the outset ; she must save Jim's life and the nation's goods. There were thousands upon thousands of pounds' worth of explosives stored in that ugly, drab-coloured building, she had often heard Jim say ; she was not going to stand by and see that destroyed while Jack Fleet carried off two hundred golden sovereigns as a reward for his treachery.

But what to do ? That was the question. She must act quickly, and she must act herself ; there was no time to warn the men on guard at the magazine, no time to summon help. Jack Fleet was hanging about, and if he saw her hurry away he would probably associate her flight with his own affairs. Even now, as she stood staring out of the window at the rain-swept, desolate marsh, she saw him coming towards the lane. In another moment he would pass the cottage.

With a sudden inspiration, born of sheer despair, Jael flung open her door and went outside. She pretended to see nothing as she advanced towards the gate of the little garden; it was with well-simulated surprise, not unmixed with confusion, that she lifted her head at the sound of advancing footsteps. She was thankful—her purpose being what it was—to feel her cheeks grow hot as she met Fleet's gaze; that sudden reddening would serve her well. Not unversed in the arts of rustic coquetry, she gave the man a glance that made his pulses leap.

"Well, how you did startle me, to be sure!" she exclaimed, with becoming awkwardness. "I never expected to see you about here."

"I've as much right to be about here as anybody else," growled Fleet sullenly. He, too, was surprised, for that was the first time he had encountered Jael since her marriage, and he had no idea that she lived in the old cottage at which he now stared inquisitively. "I reckon the road's free to all alike, isn't it?"

Jael gave him another coquettish look.

"Well, I don't know that you need be so grumpish about it," she retorted. "I should ha' thought you'd ha' stopped to have a word or two with an old friend."

Fleet, who had kept moving as they talked, took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at her with new interest. His eye brightened and he paused unconsciously.

"You don't want to have no talk with me," he said. "You're Hackett's woman."

"I'm nobody's woman nowadays," she answered, with a forced light laugh. "Hackett, he was called up; he's safe enough in yon magazine place across the flats. And—it's lonesome!"

Just as unconsciously as he had paused, Fleet drew a step or two nearer the garden gate.

" You treated me bad ! " he said, suddenly.

" But there's no call to keep bad blood about it," answered Jael. She gave him a swift look out of her dark eyes, and she suddenly smiled invitingly. " What's the use o' being like that ? " she continued. Come in, and have a drink o' something."

Fleet hesitated no more than the second it took Jael to throw open the little gate. He walked in as if he had succumbed to some spell, and the woman smiled again. She led him up the path and into the porch, and as she motioned to him to enter the cottage she felt her heart beating like a steam-hammer.

" Not a soul about," she repeated mechanically. " So——"

Fleet laughed as he flung his hat on the table. He believed, being a vain man, that he was fully alive to the occasion, and he meant to rise to it. He laughed again as he glanced at the cheery fire, and in the laughter there was a note of confidence that made the woman's nerves tingle. She must act now, she said to herself, and act with quickness and decision. And even as she glanced about her inspiration came.

" Why, you're wet through ! " she exclaimed, laying a hand on Fleet's rough jacket. " Take your coat off and hang it up there by the fire. You may as well be comfortable while you are here."

Fleet laughed again as he adopted the suggestion. He took off the heavy jacket and hung it on a nail by the mantelpiece, while Jael opened a cupboard door and began to move the crockery within.

" Well, I declare ! " she said. " There's not a drop o' spirits left in this bottle ! I thought there was. But there's a bottle or two in the cellar-place there. " Here," she continued, handing Fleet a box of matches, " go down and get what you like ; there's both whisky and rum. I'll put the kettle on and get some water hot."

She pointed to a door that stood a little way a-jar, and Fleet, pushing it open, saw that a few steps descended from it to a small cellar, evidently cut out of the solid rock. He struck a match, and, carefully guarding it, began to descend.

"Dampish place this, my lass," he remarked. "It's——"

The heavy door behind him was suddenly slammed into its frame, and Fleet heard a bolt shot in a socket. And, being a man of ready perception, he knew he was trapped. He understood Jael's blandishments and coquetry now, and for a moment he cursed her for a jade and himself for a fool. Then he struck another match and looked about him.

His heart sank at what he saw; it grew heavy as lead when a second match succeeded to the first. Out of the dungeon into which he had been lured there was no way but by the door. And the door was of stout, heavy oak. he shook it, beat upon it, shouted threats and curses through it, and heard nothing but the subdued rattle of crockery.

Jael was quietly making a cup of tea for herself. She knew well that Jack Fleet was safely caged as if he lay behind the bolts and bars and stone walls of Saxonchester Gaol. Perhaps she would see him taken there later, but for the present she had him. Neither he, nor any half-dozen men like him, could break down that door, now that the iron bar was across it, nor could he wriggle out of the little gate which afforded some ventilation.

It was cold and damp in there—let him suffer. She herself was calm of nerve now that she had done something. She lifted her cup with a steady hand; she ate her food leisurely. And as the dusk gathered she lighted her lamp, and when she had turned up the wick and drawn a curtain across the window she went to Fleet's coat, and took the canvas bag out of the pocket and let the gold roll across the table.

For the moment Jael forgot all else but the money, at which she stared with greedy eyes. There was a goodly strain of covetousness in her nature; she was already telling herself that it should go hard with her if she did not manage to keep the money for herself and Jim. It would buy the new boat that they wanted; it would——

She suddenly remembered that another bag of gold was on its way to the ruinous hut at the mouth of the creek. And two bags of gold were better than one. After a moment's thought she swept the sovereigns back into the bag, locked the bag away in the chest from which she had taken the revolver, and, having once more looked at the bolts of the cellar door, she turned down the lamp, mended the fire, and left the cottage. Outside, she hurried fast across the marshes to the ruins of the mill.

III

WHEN Jael came back to the tumbledown hut at the point of the creek the dusk had settled into darkness, and, as her feet sounded on the gravel outside, the searchlight which woke to life every night from the roof of the powder magazine sent a long, quivering ray across the waste of marsh and sea. She hastened within the hut, and stood listening and watching. The beam of the searchlight travelled slowly across the head of the creek. Now it lighted up the old mill from whch she had just come; now it searched along the low bluffs and starved-looking willows; now it lingered on the cottage in which Jack Fleet was securely caged. Then it swept round to the hut; its glare lighted up the lower room, in which Jael stood shivering, not so much from cold as from excitement. And as the glare lingered she saw, standing close by her, two men.

One of the men she at once recognised as the man she had seen in conversation with Fleet. The other, an older and taller man, stern of expression and grizzled of hair, glanced sharply at the woman as the swaying, searching light penetrated every nook of the hut. His eyes and Jael's met. And as the searchlight moved again, leaving the place in black darkness, Jael spoke. All through her adventures she had clung to the memory of the password.

" Submarine ! " she whispered.

She heard the men move ; then she heard and felt them coming to her in the gloom.

" Who are you ? " asked the elder man, harshly.

Jael had thought out her plan of campaign during her expedition to the mill. Words came glibly to her tongue.

" I'm from—you know who," she answered. " He's had an accident, and he can't come. But it's safe enough with me ; I know the way. So he gave me the word, and sent me. If you're ready——"

" Wait ! " said the man. He muttered something in a low voice to his companion. Then Jael heard the rasping of a match. Instinctively she put out a hand and grasped an arm.

" You mustn't strike a light here ! " she said, warningly. " All this shore's watched from across yonder where the magazine is, and if they see a light in this old hut they'll as like as not fire on it. What do you want a light for ? It'll take us all our time to dodge that searchlight, the way we're going, I can tell you ! "

The two men muttered to each other again ; then the younger one spoke :

" You know the way as well as—the man who sent you ? " he said. " And you know what we're to give you if you show it ? "

" I know the way better than he does, or ever did," answered Jael, confidently. " And you're to give me a hundred pounds in gold. Now then, are you ready ? Because it's no easy business getting across this marsh while that searchlight's on."

The searchlight's quivering beam came again at that moment, slowly shifting back along the head of the creek. And as it lighted up all three faces the two men examined the woman sharply and narrowly. The elder one nodded.

" You'll do," he said, as the ray of light moved on again. " Let us start."

" Wait till that light's passed further on," said Jael. " And you listen to me. If I give the word, down you wherever you are, whether it's mud or whether it's water. If that light catches us, we're done. They'll not take it off us if it's once on. Mind that."

" We understand," replied the younger man.

" All right, then," said Jael. She watched through the open doorway until the long shaft of light had quivered away past the ruined mill to the far end of the creek. " Now then," she continued, " keep close behind me—don't go a step to right or left—and mind all I say."

The men followed her closely and in silence as she moved off into the blackness of the marsh. Each had looked that marsh carefully over from two sides—the mainland and the creek ; each now discovered that its apparently level surface was deceptive. Jael seemed to lead them into pitfalls and declivities at every few steps ; they were constantly up to the ankles, and often to the knees, in water ; now they had to struggle through mud, now through suspiciously loose sand. Although there was nothing of the sort to be seen from outside its limits, the marsh was full of deep channels and spongy morasses ; to the men who followed her it seemed marvellous that Jael should be able to steadily advance along a track of which they could see nothing. But Jael went on in silence, outlined faintly against the sky and the stars ; up and down, in and out, she never faltered. Behind her, the two men breathed heavily ; Jael gave no sign of fatigue."

" The light's coming round again," she said, suddenly. " Be ready ! "

The long arm of light came feeling its way back from the farthest edge of the creek. It crept from point to point, examining clumps of trees, points of land, isolated stacks in the inland fields ; finally, it rested on the gaunt walls of the dismantled mill and stayed there some time, searching the place from ground-level to roof-tree.

" We've got to pass through that mill," said Jael, with sudden abruptness. " At least, you have. That's where you'll have to be most careful. If they caught sight of you there——"

The great beam suddenly moved towards them, lighting up the marsh with vivid illumination. And Jael dropped where she stood, and the men followed suit—to lie half-buried in mud until the brilliant tentacle had quivered around the hollows about them, found nothing, and passed on. Just as suddenly as it had first been turned on when darkness fell, the searchlight was turned off, and the blackness was deeper than ever. Jael made no sign of moving.

" Wait ! " she said. " When they turn it off like that you never know where it's going to be turned on. Keep still a bit. Ah, there you are ; it's gone back to the mill ! "

One of the men lifted his head from the rushes and coarse grass in which he was unwillingly burying it, and looked at the place which the searchlight was now playing upon. He saw high walls, broken and dismantled ; he made out the lower walls and railings of a weir ; in silence he heard a rush of water.

" Why are they giving so much attention to that place ? " he asked.

" Wait till we get there, and then you'll see," answered Jael. She rose slowly and began to move forward again, keeping an eye on the light. But the long arm moved off in the other direction, and then, as if in response to the sudden alteration of a directing mind, lifted itself high into the sky and began to search the heavens.

" It's after them airships now," muttered Jael. " Come on, quick, while there's a chance ! "

The path seemed to improve thereabouts. In another ten minutes she led the two men up to the dismantled mill, and drew them hurriedly behind a protecting wall. Somewhere beneath them a torrent of water boiled furiously in the old mill-race.

"Wait!" shouted Jael, above the roar of the water. "Wait till the light comes round again; it'll show you where you have to cross. You couldn't get across here otherwise without a lantern. You'll see the plank when the light comes, but you'll have to cross in the darkness for all that. And now you can give me the money."

The men talked between themselves; finally the younger spoke.

"You must show us the path first," he called in Jael's ear. "That is the bargain."

"No!" said Jael defiantly. "He said—to have the money in hand first. And you'd best be quick; the light's coming round again."

The elder man spoke sharply to the younger. The younger pushed a bag of coin into the woman's ready hand. And just then the beam of the searchlight came stealing up to the mill, and wrapped it in a sheet of glowing flame.

Jael dragged her companions to a crack in the wall, behind which they sheltered. She pointed outward and downward.

"There!" she cried. "That's the way!"

The two men, staring out on the scene below, shuddered instinctively. Above them rose the high, smooth wall of the old mill; beneath them, at its foot, white-foamed and boiling, the sluice lay deep down between slimy walls. At one end the long-unused wheel projected; at the other heavy, barred gates shut in the seething waters. In ordinary times the stream ran easily away through the cracks of those mouldering gates, but now all the rivulets were in flood, and the body of water which gathered in the weir above was confined in the sluice. On the surface of that sluice refuse in the shape of logs of wood, branches of trees, was being whirled round and round or dashed against the dank walls.

But it was not at the sluice nor at its seething waters that the two men stared with instinctive fear. From the edge of the sluice, almost at their very feet, a narrow plank ran alongside the mill wall. It was not more than fifteen inches in width. It had no handrail; from one end to the other it was a good twenty yards. It looked longer, it looked narrower, and the men drew back, gasping.

"We cannot cross that!" exclaimed the elder. "Impossible!"

"It's the only way there is," said Jael, "and it's safe enough. All you've got to do is to step on to that plank, set your back against the wall behind, and edge your way over. It's quite safe. Don't you see that the wall keeps the wind off you? Stick to the wall with your shoulder and go sideways, and you're across in no time. There's no other way, I tell you!"

The two men looked at each other.

"And beyond," said the younger one suddenly, "what then?"

"As soon as you're across," answered Jael, "you'll strike a fence—a rail fence. Keep alongside it, and it'll bring you right up to the wall of the magazine. But, remember, you'll have to watch that searchlight all the way. Still, there's plenty of cover. Are you going?" she shouted, as the light was suddenly moved onwards. "Now's your chance. Here, I'll set you both on the plank Remember, keep your backs to the wall."

The first man, breathing heavily, allowed himself to be guided on to the narrow plank; the second followed him. In the darkness Jael heard them shuffling their way along. She herself drew back, clutching the bag they had given her and waiting. And suddenly the plank, which she had undermined an hour before, tearing away its foundations with her bare hands until they bled, gave way and turned over, and the men were shot headlong into the black pit far beneath.

Jael laughed as she heard the sharp cry which came from one, the deep groan from the other. She half turned to hurry away. Those two, she knew, were as safely trapped as Jack Fleet himself. They might drown; they might not. There were rings and projections in the slimy walls and in the sluice doors to which they might cling, if they could find them ; but climb out, get out by any means, they could not. No man living could escape from that place unaided. She would leave them to their own devices, their frantic struggles ; and even as she laughed she turned, unable to resist the temptation to wait until the searchlight shone across the sluice again. She wanted to see her victims, and to let them have the pleasure of seeing the woman who had tricked them.

In five minutes the restless searchlight came feeling its way around the old mill again. It settled in a quivering glare on the high, blank wall and the black pool beneath, and Jael, careless now of being seen by watchful sentries, bent over the edge of the sluice and looked down, still laughing. The next instant she dropped, staggering, back against the wall behind her, mechanically clapping her right hand to her left shoulder. One of the men, supporting himself on the fallen plank, had drawn a revolver and fired at her from the pit into which she had trapped him. She dropped her arm presently, and, looking down, saw the blood run off her wrist and fingers. And at that she turned homeward, speeding across the marsh by the way she had come. She cared nothing about the searchlight now, and as she went in and out of the hollows and the pits, its watchful eye continued to catch her up and to throw her hurrying figure into strong relief against the inland darkness.

IV

THAT afternoon Jim Hackett got twenty-four hours' leave. He took it with thankfulness and relief. He had been cooped up in the powder magazine for six weary weeks, and the notion of spending a night and a day with his wife at home was a grand and a welcome one. He smartened himself up and went away laughing.

There was an Army Service Corps wagon going down the military road just then, and Hackett took a lift on it as far as the highway, having no desire to cross the marsh and the creek to his cottage. Where the highway and the military road met stood a wayside inn; Hackett turned into it for a drink. And there, in the ill-lighted parlour, he found an old man who hawked small goods about that neighbourhood, and whose pony and cart stood tied up outside. Hackett, who knew him well and welcomed the chance of civilian talk after his incarceration in the magazine, sat down by him to pass the time of day. The old hawker looked at him curiously.

"Going home?" he asked.

"Just for a bit—till this time to-morrow," answered Hackett. "I can do with it, too; I feel as if I hadn't stretched my legs for a year. There's not much room in yon place."

The hawker looked at Hackett and seemed to meditate. When he spoke again it was with lowered voice, though the two were alone.

"You know me, Jim Hackett?" he said. "I ain't a one to make mischief—never was. A while since—maybe an hour—when I was talking to a man at the end o' your lane, I saw your wife. She was talking to Jack Fleet—him as wanted her before she wed you."

Hackett's heart began to thump. He was passionately fond of Jael, and he believed in her. But he was by nature a suspicious and a jealous man, and he remembered that once upon a time Jack Fleet and Jael had certainly kept company. Strive against it as he would, a black doubt came into his mind. After all, he had been away from his wife for six long weeks.

"Well, what about it?" he growled. "I expect he was passing that way."

"He didn't pass," said the old hawker. "They were talking at your garden gate, and then she opened it and they went into your cottage together."

Hackett sprang up, knocking his glass over.

"It's a lie!" he exclaimed.

The hawker shook his head.

"I'm over-sharp o' my sense to tell lies, my lad," he said, "and too old an' all. I'm telling you what I saw.

You should see to it. The lass is alone, and Jack Fleet's a main bad 'un ! "

Hackett strode out without a word more and marched at top speed down the road, clenching his fists. All the happiness had gone out of him, his mind was as black as the skies through which the searchlight had begun to cast its beams. It was like tearing out his heart by the roots to allow a doubt of his wife to enter into his thoughts. But he believed what the old hawker had told him, and as he went splashing through the mud he asked himself again and again what call there was for Jael, under any circumstances, to take Fleet into the cottage.

It was a long way round by the road to the narrow lane which led to the creek, and the searchlight had swept the marshes from end to end more than once before Hackett came to his garden gate. He opened it softly and stole on tiptoe towards the lighted window. He knew where the blind failed to fit, and he went up and looked in through the uncurtained space. And there, lying on the table beneath the lamp, he saw a man's hat, and hanging from the nail by the mantelpiece a man's coat ; and the living-room was empty.

In that moment Hackett began to see red. He carried a revolver in his hip-pocket, and his fingers went round to it. If Fleet was in that house, he would kill him at sight. As for Jael——

He suddenly turned at the sound of hurrying feet in the lane behind him, and, there, lighted up by the restless searchlight, he saw his wife, and she saw him, and made towards him.

" Jim ! " she exclaimed. " Well, I never ! I was hurrying to the village to get help. Jim, there's Jack Fleet locked up in our cellar, and there's two men down in the mill sluice. I trapped all three of 'em. I believe the men's Germans ; they'd bribed Fleet to show 'em the way to the back of the powder magazine. And, Jim, there's a hundred pounds in gold in the old chest, and here's another hundred in my pocket, and I hope they'll let us keep it. I caught 'em, anyway, and I've got a nice scratch on my arm into the bargain. And—why, how white you look, Jim!"

Hackett lifted his cap and wiped great drops of sweat off his forehead. Then he suddenly snatched his wife in his arms, and Jael cried out as he pressed her to him.

"By God, lass!" he said, in smothered accents, "I thought—I thought you'd happened something!"

Then, with a heart suddenly lightened with great joy, Hackett drew his revolver, and turned with grim satisfaction to interview the imprisoned traitor.

THE JUDGE CORROBORATES

I

EVER since Dickinson had arrested Gamble on a charge of burglary, he, Dickinson, had carried about with him an uneasy conviction that there was something wrong. The arrest had been made very quietly, and without any fuss, as Gamble emerged from the saloon bar of the Pride of London tavern, in Maida Vale, one evening, alone. All that the passers-by had noticed—if they noticed anything at all—was that two well-dressed men went up to and exchanged a few words with a third well-dressed man, who presently turned and walked off with them, as if they were all friends. But Dickinson remembered what Gamble had said—hence his uneasiness.

" You're making a bloomer, my boy ! " said Gamble. " And no error ! But—you'll find that out soon enough. In the meantime——"

In the meantime, of course, there was nothing for it but to accompany the two detectives to the nearest police-station, and to be charged. The charge was that on the night of November 21 last, he, John Gamble, did feloniously break and enter the dwelling-house of Martin Philip Tyrrell, in Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and did steal from thence certain specified property. And once more Gamble had shaken his head—and laughed.

" Not me, sonny," he answered. " On the wrong 'bus this time ! Come off it ! "

The detective who had accompanied Dickinson felt curious, and looked at Gamble, who had a reputation, with something more than interest.

" What's your game ? " he asked, in a quite friendly manner. " Alibi ? "

" Something of that sort, old sport ! " replied Gamble.

"You won't get no conviction against yours truly this journey." Then he turned and glanced at Dickinson, with a sneer. "Think yourself blooming clever?" he remarked. "Well—you ain't!"

Whatever other people might think, Dickinson knew himself to be clever—he knew, too, that he had exercised a vast amount of pains and ability in his conduct of this particular case. It had been put in his hands from the first, and he had followed it up with the patience and intelligence which had earned him high rank in the Criminal Investigation Department. On the face of it, this was a very ordinary case. Mr. Tyrrell's house, a detached one standing in its own garden, had been burglariously entered on a certain dark night, and silver and jewellery stolen. The burglar had done his work quietly and well, and had got clean away without rousing any of the household. But he had left a trace—two traces—of his personality. On Mr. Tyrrell's sideboard stood a decanter of whisky, and glasses, and a jug of water—the burglar had not been able to withstand the temptation to take a drink. He had helped himself—and on the sides of the glass from which he had drunk, and on the jug from which he had poured out water, he had left distinct impressions of thumbs and fingers. And Dickinson, who had an extensive and peculiar acquaintance with the higher class cracksmen of the metropolis, and who spent hours in going through finger-print records, no sooner saw those marks than he said to himself—Jack Gamble!

Jack Gamble also had a reputation. He was a smart chap, who picked up a good living by his wits. When he was not burgling, or thieving, he was engaged in other shady transactions, chiefly connected with horses—sometimes he kept inside the law, and now and then he strayed over the edge. One way or another, he had often been in trouble, and at the time of his arrest outside the Pride of London he had not long been restored to liberty after a term of imprisonment. Dickinson had been keeping a patient eye upon him, and when he saw these finger-prints he felt no doubt whatever that Gamble was going to fall into his hands again. He went off and compared the prints carefully with those in the official keeping, and that done he did a little quiet and secret work in finding out what Gamble's movements had been on the night of the burglary. When he discovered that Gamble had been out most of that night, leaving his lodging at ten o'clock, and not returning until six next morning, he proceeded to act—for Dickinson was one of the most convinced of believers in the finger-print theory and system, and he was able, by enthusiasm, to infect others with his faith.

Nevertheless, now that he had got him safely under lock and key, Dickinson was upset by Gamble's cheerfulness. He kept seeing Gamble. He saw him when Gamble was before the magistrate—who, though apparently not quite such a firm believer in the finger-print theory as he might have been—was sufficiently convinced by the evidence to send Gamble for trial. And Gamble, awaiting removal to a detention prison until the next sitting at the Central Criminal Court, nodded affably to Dickinson, who had gone down to the cells at the police-court to take a look at him.

"Think you're steaming ahead all right, old cock, don't yer?" remarked Gamble. "So don't I! You're going to get thrown clean off the line, presently—see! And, I say!—when will the little affair come off? What—next week? You don't happen to know who the old bloke on the bench'll be, do yer, Mr. Dickinson?"

Dickinson believed in being on good and even friendly terms with the criminals who came under his notice; he adopted a sort of indulgent schoolmaster attitude to them.

"Your case'll most likely come before Mr. Justice Stapleton," he answered good-humouredly, "and you'll have to make that alibi you've been hinting at a pretty good one to convince him, my lad! What're you laughing at?"

For Gamble had begun to chuckle, as if some highly humorous notion had suddenly occurred to him. Before he could explain, certain peremptory officials motioned him and certain other committed and remanded gentlemen to step towards the open door of Black Maria, drawn up in the yard outside. Gamble went off, still chuckling.

" See you later then, Mr. Dickinson," he said as he went. " Meet you at the C.C.C. next week. And you won't have half a surprise, either ! "

That made Dickinson all the more uneasy—and suspicious. Gamble had adopted a queer, half-contemptuous, defiant attitude before the magistrate. He had not even taken the trouble to employ a certain smart man of law who had defended him more than once—and had once actually restored him to such friends and relations as he happened to possess. He had listened to the finger-print evidence and the proof of his being absent from his lodgings with sneering eyes and lips. Asked what he had got to say, he replied that he'd say what he had to say at the proper time and place—" and not half, neither, as they'd find out." Altogether, he had shown such certainty that Dickinson was beginning to feel afraid, and perhaps a little doubtful. But he fell back on the hard theory—*no two finger-prints are alike*—and he was dead certain that the marks left on Mr. Tyrrell's glass and jug were those of Jack Gamble's fingers.

II

It was nothing but expert and circumstantial evidence against Gamble when his case came on at the Central Criminal Court before Mr. Justice Stapleton and a common jury. Indeed, what was really being tried, in the opinion of at least one spectator, was not Gamble, but the finger-print theory.

The finger-prints in question were passing for an hour or two between the bench and the jury-box, the jury-box and the barristers' table ; for another hour or two, experts were giving opinions, pointing out technicalities, expatiating learnedly on the theories and practice of such authorities as Bertillon, Herschel, Galton, and Henry. And Gamble sat in the dock—having been courteously accommodated with a seat in view of the probable length of the case—and listened with a half-scornful, half-bored expression.

Once more he had pleaded his innocence; once more declined to be represented by anybody but himself. But he had asked, with some eagerness, if he could give evidence on his own behalf, and call a witness, and on hearing that he could—a fact of which he was already well aware—had smiled and winked derisively at Detective-Sergeant Dickinson.

It all came to an end at last—the case for the prosecution. Every one of the experts had sworn that the marks of thumbs and fingers on Mr. Tyrrell's property were, in their belief, as experts, correspondent to those stamped by the prisoner in more than one official record. Evidence had been brought forward to show that Gamble was away from his lodgings during the hours at some period of which the burglary had undoubtedly been committed.

It was, perhaps, not a very strong case; the stolen property had not been traced, nor had a single article of it been found in the prisoner's possession; nor was there any evidence to show that he had disposed of valuable goods about that time. But—though nothing of the sort was mentioned in court, in accordance with the strict principles of British justice, which takes every case on its own merits—it was generally known, even by the judge and jurymen, who are supposed to know nothing, that Gamble was an expert in these sort of things as the finger-print experts were clever in theirs, and most persons present expected to hear him found guilty, and sent to penal servitude again.

Except Dickinson. Dickinson, after giving his own evidence, had taken a seat in a corner, from whence he watched the man in the dock suspiciously and moodily.

Dickinson did not like the look of Gamble ; Gamble was altogether too indifferent, too bored, too superior to his situation. He made Dickinson think of a card-player who holds all the aces—and has another card ready up his sleeve.

And when Gamble was called upon for his defence, and made his way from dock to witness-box, smiling, Dickinson felt a bit sick ; he wanted to convict Gamble, and he began to have an idea that Gamble was going to put a stop to that game. Yet—how ?

Gamble took the oath as piously as if he had done little else but practise religious observance all his life. Possibly he felt unusually serious at that moment. At any rate, it was with an air of great decorum that he turned to the judge, who was watching him curiously.

" As I ain't represented by counsel, my lord," said Gamble, " perhaps your lordship'll let me tell my tale in my own way ? Sworn evidence, my lord."

" Certainly, tell your own story after your own fashion," answered his lordship. " You are probably quite well aware that you can be examined by the prosecution on whatever you say ? "

" Quite aware o' that my lord," replied Gamble, cheerfully ; and smiled on the barristers in front of him. " Any of these here gentlemen is quite welcome—or your lordship, either—to ask me any questions as seem to occur to 'em—or to you, either, my lord." He paused, and transferred his smile to the twelve open-mouthed men in the jury-box. " Well, my lord, and gentlemen of the jury, what I have to say to this here charge is—an alibi ! I'm going to prove an alibi, and when I've finished proving it, I expect to be discharged, and no other. Finger-prints or no finger-prints, I wasn't within six miles of St. John's Wood at any time of the night on which this here burglary was carried out. Why ? 'Cause I was somewhere else."

Gamble, from long experience of criminal courts, either as principal actor or interested spectator, was well aware of the importance in oratory of a dramatic pause, and he made one now, leaning over the edge of the witness-box, and glancing around him with a calm and triumphant smile. And suddenly he drew himself up, and began to check off his points on the tips of his stubby fingers.

"To start with, gentlemen," he continued "the charge against me is that I broke into this house in Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, on the night of November 21 last, according to the evidence, between ten o'clock—that 'ud be the evening of November 20—and six next morning. Gentlemen, from ten o'clock in the evening of November 20 until five-thirty next morning, *I was in Wimbledon.*"

Gamble spoke the last word in a thrilling whisper, and the judge started and glanced sharply at him.

"You were—where did you say ?" he asked, bending towards the prisoner.

"Wimbledon, my lord !" answered Gamble, loudly and promptly. "Wimbledon. Where your lordship resides."

The judge started again and frowned. It was quite true that he did live at Wimbledon, in a pretty old house on the common, and his frown meant that he was not quite sure that he was pleased to hear that Mr. John Gamble had been in that select neighbourhood.

"Continue your evidence," he said a little sharply. "You were saying——"

"That I was at Wimbledon that night, my lord," replied Gamble, with a smile which sought out Dickinson in his corner. "At Wimbledon—part of the time, anyway—and t'other part of the time on Wimbledon Common. And, gentlemen," he went on, with a dramatic turn in the direction of the jury-box, "why was I at Wimbledon ? Gentlemen, I'm here to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so—out with it. I went to Wimbledon for an unlawful purpose—which never came off."

Gamble let this soak into the atmosphere with another dramatic pause—made suddenly. He set out again just as suddenly—with an outstretched finger pointed at the foreman of the jury, a fat man whose eyes goggled.

" Mind you," he said, " I'm a-going to tell the truth against myself—to clear myself of this 'ere particular, charge. Now, it's quite true—I ain't going to deny it, for it 'ud be of no use to—I've been in trouble before on little matters of this sort. I got over the results of one of 'em—the last—on'y last October. And says I to myself, ' I'll chuck that game—'tain't no good, when all's taken into account.' But about November 17 or 18—I can't be sure to a day—a friend of mine who knew my abilities in this 'ere line, meets me one day in Long Acre, where I was looking after a bit of horse-flesh, and says he to me, confidential, ' Jack, my boy,' he says, ' if so be as you wants a nice soft job in your line what you could work on your own without a partner,' he says, ' blimey if I can't put you up to the very thing ! ' he says. ' What is it ? ' says I. ' I ain't particular for any job ; but, of course, if it's something very soft—' ' You could do it standing on yer blooming head,' he says. ' It's this 'ere. You know I live down at Wimbledon ? ' ' Certainly I do,' says I. ' Well,' says he, ' there's an old bloke has a very nice house on Wimbledon Common what you may be acquainted with—professional,' he says. ' Which I mean Mr. Justice Stapleton.' "

Mr. Justice Stapleton, who had been obviously fidgeting for some minutes, turned a very red face on Gamble.

" I hope you're not trifling with the Court, prisoner ? " he remarked acidly. " In the circumstances you must have every indulgence, but——"

" It's all gospel truth, my lord," answered Gamble, reassuringly. " Your lordship'll see it in a minute—can't give my evidence no other way, my lord. Well," he continued triumphantly, and the judge leaned back with an air of patient resignation—" well, gentlemen, that's what this here friend of mine—which I shan't give his name and address, nor call him—unless strictly necessary—said. ' Mr. Justice Stapleton,' he says. ' The old bird,' he says, ' is one o' them folks as doesn't draw their front blinds down o' nights, and many's the time,' he says, ' as I've passed the window of his dining-room, and looked in when all the lights was a-blazing, and his lordship getting his grub. And,' says he, ' he's a sideboard that's just creaking under gold and silver cups and plates, and that sort o' thing. I understand,' he says, ' as how his lordship was a bit of an athlete when he was a young 'un, and won a lot o' pots, and then he's won more in steeplechasing. Anyway,' he says, ' there's enough stuff on that sideboard, Jack, to make it worth your while to pay the old chap a quiet visit—see ? '

" Well gentlemen, of course nature is nature, and when I hears this, I thinks to myself—well, it 'ud be no harm to go down to Wimbledon Common and reconnoitre, as they term it. And so, about nine o'clock in the evening of November 20 last—you'll be particular about that date, gentlemen !—I went down to Wimbledon, and I met this 'ere frien o' mine, and we took a quiet walk along by the house he spoke of—your lordship's."

Gamble turned suddenly on the judge, and the eyes of every man in Court turned there, too. It was very evident that Mr. Justice Stapleton was not so much annoyed as puzzled. He was looking at the prisoner with a queer, inquisitive, searching expression, and for an instant seemed about to speak—instead, he signed to him to proceed. And Gamble smiled and proceeded.

" Well gentlemen, it was just as this 'ere friend o' mine—a truthful gentleman, he is !—had said," he continued. " His lordship's house stands back a bit—not much—from the road at the side of the common. His dining-room windows front the road. And, as my friend had said, the blinds wasn't drawn—and we could see right in. Now I'll invite his lordship's particular attention to what me and my friend saw. There was a full blaze of electric-light in the room ; there was also an uncommonly fine fire in a big hearth. The sideboard at the back—black oak—was crammed with gold and silver plate—salvers, cups, vases, such like ; it fairly shone and sparkled in the light. And in that room there were three people—a-sitting in easy-chairs in front o' the fire. Perhaps his lordship'll now take notice of how I describe 'em. One of 'em was his lordship himself, in his evening finery—no need to describe him. Another was a lady —his lordship's lady, I took her to be—she was knitting —made me think of my old mother, gentlemen, she looked that peaceful. And the third——"

Mr. Justice Stapleton leaned slightly towards the witness-box, and appeared to listen eagerly for the next words. Gamble gave him a sharp glance out of his eye-corners as he proceeded.

" The third," he said, " was a tall, very fine-looking old gentleman, foreigner by the look of him, with a pointed white beard and waxed moustaches, and sat between the other two at the hearth-rug, smoking a big cigar. He was in evening clothes, too, and he'd a red riband round his neck, with a sort of star or medal hanging from it. A very peaceful, nice group they was—with their cigars and their glasses."

Mr. Justice Stapleton, with an odd look at the members of the Bar suddenly sat upright again, and plunging his hand through his robes into some inner pocket, pulled out what was evidently a pocket or memorandum book, which he laid on the desk before him. And Gamble paused—but a nod of the judicial wig motioned him to go on.

" Well, gentlemen," he said, eyeing the fat foreman with approval, " me and my friend we saw all this, and then we went on, quietly, and we had a drink or two, and then we went home to his house and took a bit o' supper. And when that was over : ' What d'yer think o' this job, Jack ? ' says he. ' Softish 'un, ain't it ? ' he says. ' Leastways to a gentleman o' your ability,' says he. ' Might be,' says I ; ' but I'd like to take a look round the premises when things is quiet,' I says. ' Just to see how things is, yer know,' I says. ' Well, there ain't neither dog nor cat in that house,' says he. ' His lordship can't abide 'em.' ' Cats,' says I, ' don't count—I've done many a bit o' business with a couple o' cats lookin' on, interested like. But dogs is different. You're sure there ain't no dogs?' 'Not a dog,' says he. 'I knows! Horses is his lordship's 'obby—dogs he will not have!' 'All right,' says I. 'Then we'll just sit here a bit—say till it's past midnight, and then—well, I'll just prospect a bit. Not,' I says, 'as I shall operate to-night, but I'll just take a little look at doors and windows.' So, of course, we had a drop of something comforting on that, and we talked about one thing and another, and at half-past twelve I went back, through them bushes which is so convenient, to take a look round his lordship's house in the dark."

Mr. Justice Stapleton had opened his little book by that time, consulted some entry in it, and shut it up again. He was now leaning his chin on his hand, watching Gamble with a mingling of keenness and amusement, and he so continued to watch him while the accused went cheerfully on his way. And Gamble resumed his candid narrative with something that was very like a wink at the jury.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, leaning still farther over the edge of the witness-box, as if to take the whole Court into his confidence more fully, "you see that I'm being open and truthful with you, from the mere fact that I'm giving myself away! For, of course, the instant I entered his lordship's garden, I was where I oughtn't to ha' been—with intent to commit a felony. Only—I didn't intend to commit it just then—maybe not for a night or two—I only just wanted to look round. And I did look round—careful. I took a look at doors and windows—back, front, and side. I satisfied myself there wasn't no blooming dog. And, eventual, I took a carefuller look at the window of the dining-room, where all that plate was spread out on the sideboard. And while I was engaged at that, and quiet as a mouse, there was a light suddenly shone in on that room, and in walks his lordship there, a-carrying a bedroom candle. And to prove to you—and to him—that I saw him, he was wearing pink and white-striped pyjamas, and he'd a white woollen shawl tied round his throat. I ask you, gentlemen, and I asks his lordship—how could I ha' seen them little details if I hadn't been there ? "

Here followed another dramatic pause, during which Gamble took a calmly disdainful look at Dickinson. Amidst a dead silence, he went on :

" And more than that, gentlemen ! A second later, in comes the other old gentleman," he said. " Him with the pointed white beard and waxed moustache. He was in a dressing-gown—a bright red 'un, with a black cord round the middle. And he'd a candle, too, and I saw at once that both of 'em had been roused by something that I couldn't account for—for I'd certainly made no noise as I knew of, and was only looking through the window. They both talked a bit—then his lordship went out into the hall, and a second later looked in again with a big overcoat on, and a bull's-eye lantern in his hand ; and at that, gentlemen, I made myself scarce, and hopped it out of the garden and in amongst the trees at the other side of the road. I hadn't been there two minutes when a policeman comes along, and I heard his lordship call him from the front door—whereupon I went off across the common, and back to my friend's house. And there I stopped until the workmen's trains started running—and then I took one home to London. And—there you are ! And now I asks all present—how could I ha' been in Avenue Road any time that night, when I was down at Wimbledon, miles and miles away ? And I asks more—I asks his lordship there, as a gentleman, to corroborate what I've said—for he can ! "

The attention of the Court shifted itself from the prisoner to the judge. Every eye was turned on Mr. Justice Stapleton as he slowly drew himself up and looked over his spectacles at Gamble, and from him to the prosecuting solicitor.

" This is certainly a very remarkable statement on the part of the prisoner," he began. " He puts me in a very curious situation. I am really being asked to be witness as well as judge. If this case had been tried by one of my brother judges, the prisoner would, I suppose, have raised the same defence, and called me as a witness on his behalf. Really, I am somewhat at a loss—but I may as well tell you that I believe what the prisoner has just told us to be perfectly true. It is quite true that I have a prejudice—a life-long one, and possibly a very foolish one—against drawing blinds and curtains over my windows. It is also true that I have a quantity of gold and silver plate on my sideboard, and that it can be seen, I daresay, from the road outside at night, when there is a strong light in that room. I don't attach much importance—in the present matter—to these details; the prisoner might easily have gained so much knowledge at any time. But "—here his lordship picked up his little book—" it is impossible to deny that certain events took place at my house on the night of November 20–21 exactly as the prisoner has set them out. On that night I had an old friend of mine, Monsieur Paul Lavonier, a famous French scientist, to dine and sleep there. In appearance he is precisely as the prisoner describes him—he was certainly wearing the collar and star of a much-prized decoration. It is quite true that at, or about, one o'clock in the morning I fancied I heard a sound in my garden, and that I went down to the dining-room; it is quite true that my attire was as the prisoner says. It is true, also, that M. Lavonier came down, also, in such a garment as the prisoner spoke of. It is also true that I put on an overcoat, lighted a lantern which I keep in my hall, opened the front door, and hailed a passing constable, who afterwards looked round the grounds, and found nothing suspicious. And, frankly," continued the judge, glancing with a shrewd and humorous smile, " I do not see how this man who undoubtedly witnessed these things at my house on Wimbledon Common on the night in question, could possibly have committed a burglary in the north of London at the same time. It might be suggested that he left Wimbledon at once on being baffled at my house, at or about one o'clock, and proceeded straight to Avenue Road. But you will remember, gentlemen of the jury, that, according to Mr. Tyrrell's evidence, Mr. Tyrell himself was up until two o'clock that morning, that he only went to bed for two hours, as he had to catch a train at King's Cross, and that burglary at his house certainly took place between two and four. Now there are no trains from Wimbledon to town at that time of night and it is extremely improbable that the prisoner could get from one point—my house, where he certainly was about a quarter or half-past one—to another, many miles away, before four. I am, of course, informally corroborating the prisoner's evidence—I really don't see that I can avoid doing so in this peculiar and extraordinary situation. The case against the prisoner rests entirely on these finger-prints—I shall make some remarks on that matter presently." He glanced at the prosecuting counsel. "Do you wish to ask this man anything ? " he inquired.

"If your lordship pleases," answered the barrister addressed, who was plainly taken aback.

He turned to Gamble.

"Why didn't you tell all this before the magistrate ? " he demanded.

"Because I preferred to tell it here," retorted Gamble.

"Did you know that his lordship was going to try this case ? "

"Not till Dickinson told me—after I'd been committed," said Gamble, pointing at the detective.

"Were you intending to call his lordship as a witness then," asked the counsel.

"What do you think ? " sneered Gamble. "Course I was ! "

"Why haven't you called that friend of yours at Wimbledon ? "

"What ? " exclaimed Gamble. "To give him away for putting me on to the job ? Not likely ; he's a highly respectable man, he is, as keeps a shop down there."

"You need not have let us know that he put you on to the job—this respectable shopkeeper ! " retorted the counsel. "You could have called him to prove that you spent most of that night with him at Wimbledon, without saying why. What proof have you, besides what you've said, that you ever were at Wimbledon ? "

Gamble smiled, and suddenly thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket. There were evidently a hole in its lining, and, after some fumbling and fishing, he extracted something which he held up, and then passed in the direction of the bench.

" That ! " he said. " Ticket from Wimbledon to Waterloo. They didn't take it, and I didn't give it up. Look at the date ! "

There was some consultation between the Bench and the Bar, and then his lordship, taking off his spectacles, turned leisurely to the jury and began to talk about the finger-print system. And Dickinson frowned and nudged a fellow detective, who sat by him. For he knew that Mr. Justice Stapleton was a good deal of a sceptic about that system, and had more than once made caustic remarks about it and its exponents, and he expected what precisely came to pass within the next twenty minutes. For the jury returned a verdict of " Not Guilty," and Gamble walked out of the dock a free man once more.

And, once free, Gamble sought out Dickinson in the precincts of the Court, and openly sneered at him.

" What did I tell yer, Mr. Clever ? " he said, making a face at the detective. " Didn't I say you were making a bloomer this time ? Yah ! "

" It's you that's the clever man, my lad ! " answered Dickinson. " You've done me—and everybody—somehow ! I wouldn't mind giving you a fiver to be let into the secret."

But Gamble only made another face, and took himself off for a much-needed drink.

III

DICKINSON was as certain that Gamble had bamboozled the Court as he was certain that Gamble was the culprit in the Avenue Road affair. But as to how Gamble had managed it, he was utterly at a loss to conceive. He kept an eye on him for some time, and whenever they met, Gamble winked at him derisively. The derision signified not so much a reference to what had just occurred as to the fact that Gamble was going on the straight, and giving Dickinson no chance to get at him. Dickinson, narrowly as he watched and listened, could hear nothing, until, suddenly, he missed his man. Gamble was no longer seen in his usual haunts—he made a complete disappearance. And it was not until he had been gone for some time, and Dickinson had failed to gain news of him, that he heard something from one of those strange individuals who hover between criminals and criminal-catchers, and who, being neither, have none of the honour which exists even amongst thieves. This man, being in conversation with Dickinson, suddenly turned to the subject which still rankled in the detective's mind.

" You ain't seen nothing of Jack Gamble of late, I reckon ? " he observed. " And you won't—no more. Made a clean wipe of the slate, Jack has ; gone to Australia, he has, with a mate—horse-dealing—for good. On the straight, you understand ? "

" That's it, is it ? " remarked Dickinson.

" That's it, sir," asserted the other, and laughed as at some pleasant thought. " He done you a fair treat over that Avenue Road affair, didn't he, now ? Of course, there was them as knew how it was done, me amongst 'em. And now that old Jack's t'other side of the world, I don't mind telling you, between you and me, private.

" It was like this here. When Jack came home after that last stretch, him and another mate of his looked round for some likely cribs to crack. One of 'em was that house in Avenue Road, and another was the judge's place near Wimbledon Common. They settled to do 'em the same night. Jack did the Avenue Road business, right enough ; t'other man went to Wimbledon, and his job didn't come off. It was him—t'other man—as had all the adventures that Jack told in Court ! He primed Jack with all the points next day, down to every detail, giving him that ticket, and it was agreed between 'em that if either of 'em got took in connection with the Avenue Road affair, which it was was to make use of the Wimbledon knowledge to get up an alibi. It happened to be Jack, and him having a particular good memory, he just reeled off all that had happened to the other chap as if it had been to himself, see ? Nice, simple thing—what, Mr. Dickinson ? "

Mr. Dickinson replied briefly that he had always known Jack Gamble to be a clever man, and retired—to visit Mr. Justice Stapleton, and add to that learned gentleman's stock of knowledge.

THE REGISTERED PACKET

I

Martineau had been out of England for two years, teaching English in a Swedish university ; the two years' absence had sharpened his appetite for the sights and sounds of the Old Country. And on this, the morning on which the steamer from Christiania was due to land him in Hull, he was on deck early, casting eager eyes a-head for a first glimpse of the low flats of Holderness and the lighthouse on Spurn Head—beyond those outposts of England there was, he knew, a family party waiting to greet him. But he had scarcely left his cabin and set foot on the planks above, when a North Sea fog came on and wrapped sky, sea, and the faint edges of the rising land in thick, white wrappings, which increased in density with every succeeding moment. A bell tinkled somewhere below him ; the steamer's speed slackened ; a mournful hoot sounded from the syren, to be repeated, regularly and monotonously ; and another early riser, a man with whom Martineau had had some interesting conversation the night before, and who had just come on deck, turned to him with an expression of vexation.

" Awful nuisance ! " he exclaimed. " I know these Humber fogs ! They last ! This'll make us late in getting into Hull—and if we're one hour late in Hull, I shall miss a train for York, and if I don't get a train at York at a certain time, I shall be three or four hours late in getting to Glasgow—and that will be a bigger nuisance than ever ! "

" I'm afraid it's one of those things that can't be helped," said Martineau, feeling that his remark was lame, but that there was nothing else to say. " And it may clear."

" Doubtful ! " answered the other grumblingly. " I've been in this fix before. You crawl up the Humber. You're lucky if something bigger than yourself doesn't run you down—and you land in Hull in the afternoon instead of in the morning. However, what can't be cured—you know the old proverb ? Let's kill time by taking an early breakfast."

Martineau went downstairs with his travelling companion, and trifled away an hour over the breakfast table—chiefly in listening to his chance acquaintance's stories of Russia and Siberia, in which countries he appeared to have spent a good deal of his time. Martineau was interested in him, and all the more so because he found it difficult to place him. The man spoke excellent English—yet Martineau was doubtful if he was really an Englishman. At last he set him down as a cosmopolitan—he certainly seemed to have seen much of the world. As for the rest of him, he was a middle-aged, good-looking person, whose dark hair and beard was just beginning to be shot with grey—which, near his temples, shaded off into white—and in spite of his good looks, his smart clothes, and his air of prosperity, he looked also as if, at some time or other, he had known hardship and privation. Perhaps, thought Martineau, who was still very young, he was some famous traveller ; certainly he knew the Siberian wilds. And in talking of them he seemed to forget the sea-fog, until suddenly, glancing upwards through an adjacent port-hole, he gave an exclamation of relief.

" Clearing ! " he said. " Capital ! I may do it yet ! Come on deck."

The Yorkshire and Lincolnshire banks of the Humber lay open before them when they stepped into the open air—and there, a few miles ahead lay the roofs of Hull, and the square, high tower of her great church. But the stranger groaned as he pulled out and glanced at a fine gold watch.

" No ! " he exclaimed. " I shan't manage it ! At least, I shall just manage—I think—to catch that train to York, by literally flying from the landing-stage to the station. But I've half an hour's business in Hull, and I can't do that and catch that train. And the train must be caught ! "

" I shall be staying in Hull for several hours probably," remarked Martineau. " Can I do anything for you ? "

The stranger nodded as at a good suggestion.

" Thank you—very kind of you," he answered readily. " After all, it's nothing much, and won't take half an hour, though I mentioned that time. It won't take ten minutes—only I haven't got ten minutes to spare—nor ten seconds, I think. It's just to hand in a small packet at any post-office, to be registered. If you wouldn't mind doing that——"

" Certainly ! " assented Martineau. " No trouble at all ! "

The stranger dived down into the inner regions of the steamer, and presently returned carrying a small package, neatly done up in stout, blue wrapping paper. It measured some four inches in each direction ; it was tightly corded and thickly sealed, and it was addressed to the Russian consul in a certain important industrial and commercial city in the Midlands. With it, the stranger brought an envelope which bore the same address.

" That's all ! " he observed, cheerily. " If you'd just hand that in—any post-office—take their receipt and enclose it in this envelope, I'd be infinitely obliged to you—it will put me right for my train—I hope ! Both parcel and envelope are stamped. Sure they won't be a trouble ? "

" Not a bit ! " answered Martineau. " I shall be near a post-office."

" I'm anxious that the package should be delivered this evening," said the stranger. " If we're in Hull by ten-thirty, as we ought to be, now, it will reach its destination in a few hours. Exceedingly obliged to you."

Martineau put package and envelope into a small handbag which he was carrying. He still had it in his hand, when, three-quarters of an hour later, he and the stranger set foot on the landing-stage. The stranger, who appeared to have no luggage but a hand-valise and a great-fur-lined coat, glanced at a clock which confronted them, uttered a cry, and started for the nearest of a line of cabs.

"Ten minutes in which to do it!" he shouted to Martineau as he ran off. "Good-bye! A thousand thanks! Excuse haste—*au revoir*!"

He threw himself into a cab, urged its driver away with voluble words and energetic pointings; in another instant the cab had whirled away towards the heart of the town. And Martineau, feeling a hand on his arm, turned quickly and saw his brother.

"The rest of them?" demanded Martineau, when the hand-shaking and greetings were over. "Are they here?"

"All of 'em, old boy—father, mother, and the two girls—all at the Station Hotel," exclaimed his brother. "Where breakfast's waiting. Come on—where are your traps? I've got a cabby here. Let's be off!"

Half an hour later, Martineau, freeing himself from the last of the motherly and sisterly embraces, was suddenly conscious of a horrible fact. He had left his small handbag, wherein was the stranger's registered packet, in the cab in which he and his brother had hurried to the hotel!

II

It was in a private sitting-room at the hotel that Martineau had rejoined his family after that two years' separation, and to do honour to him they had caused to be spread on the commodious table a typically English breakfast. Although he had already eaten one breakfast on the steamer—three hours before, to be sure—he had no objection to sitting down to another, and when he made that terrible discovery, his fond mother was already pouring out coffee for him while his father was flourishing a carving-knife and fork over a fine York ham. But

Martineau, in the very act of being pushed into a chair by his two sisters, uttered a yell and started to his feet.

" That cab ! " he cried. " It must have gone ! And I must go after it ! "

" What on earth's the matter ? " demanded his brother, while the rest looked aghast. " Have you left something in it ? "

" A handbag ! " exclaimed Martineau, smiting his forehead. " I must be after it—at once ! "

" Anything of value in it ? " asked his father, who knew very well that his son was not carrying gold or diamonds. " If not—let it wait. The cabman will find it and bring it back."

" No ! " said Martineau, darting at his hat and making for the door. " You don't understand. I must go. It's—it's not anythin of mine—it's something—a parcel that was entrusted to me."

" A parcel ? Pooh ? Get your breakfast, my lad ! " exclaimed his father. " I tell you the cabman——"

But Martineau was out of the room and running along the corridor to the big entrance hall of the hotel. His brother caught him up as he was eagerly questioning the hall-porter.

" Drove off, sir, as soon as he'd put you down," this functionary was saying. " I never thought to look inside the cab. I thought if you'd any small article there you'd have brought it out."

" My fault—entirely my fault ! " admitted Martineau. " But—which way did the man go ? "

" Oh, he'd go back to the landing-stage, sir," answered the hall-porter. " He belongs to the rank there. You'd find him there, sir."

" Get me another cab at once, will you ? " said Martineau ; and turned to his brother. " Bob," he said, while the hall-porter hurried outside. " I simply must go ! That parcel must be found—at once."

" I'll come with you," remarked the brother. " What's it all about ? Why such frantic haste ? "

Martineau told all about it as the hastily chartered cab sped towards the river by the nearest route.

" It's inexcusable of me,' he concluded. " You see, the man was so anxious I should get it off by an early post. I suppose I was so excited at seeing all of you."

" Well, don't get excited now," said his brother. " You'll see the man will have found it all right—possibly he'll be driving back with it."

But when they reached the cab-rank outside the landing-stage they saw the man they were in search of. He was leaning against a post, eating bread and cheese out of a bit of newspaper ; his horse, a few yards away, was steadily munching at the contents of its nose-bag. Martineau leapt out of his cab and ran to him.

" I say ! " he exclaimed breathlessly. " You drove me up to the Station Hotel a little while ago. You remember ? "

" What about it, guv'nor ? " asked the man, calmly.

" I left a bag—a small handbag—in your cab," said Martineau. " Have you found it—seen anything of it ? "

The cab-driver quietly swallowed his last mouthful of bread and cheese, wiped his fingers on the newspaper, threw the newspaper away, and, walking deliberately to his cab, thrust first his head and then an arm, inside. He drew out Martineau's handbag and held it up.

" This it, guv'nor ? " he asked. " All right—I hadn't seen it."

Martineau was so relieved, so delighted, that he thrust his hand in his pocket and presented the cab-driver with half a crown. He made for the other cab, the bag in his hand, and was about to order the second driver to go straight to the General Post-Office when his brother made a practical suggestion.

" Better see if that packet's still there ? " he said.

Martineau turned pale at the mere thought that the packet might not be there. A moment later, after a startled glance inside the bag and a desperate rummaging amongst its contents—travelling caps, gloves, wraps, tobacco-pouches, railway-guides, and foreign newspapers, he grew paler still, and turned to his brother with horrified eyes and parted lips.

The packet had disappeared!

III

Martineau's brother, who was of a philosophical turn of mind, and had watched these proceedings as if they were parts of an amusing comedy, laughed.

" You don't mean to say the thing isn't there? " he asked.

" There! " exclaimed Martineau. " It's gone! Gone! "

He rummaged amongst his belongings again wildly, only to stare around him with eyes which were as desperate as surprised, and to repeat his last word.

" Gone! Gone! "

The cabman came lounging over the pavement.

" Anything wrong, mister? " he asked.

" Wrong? " repeated Martineau, who appeared to be taking leave of his wits. " Wrong! Everything's wrong! Where—who—what——"

Martineau's brother came to the rescue. He possessed himself of the handbag, looked into it, closed it, looked into the cab, and turned to the driver.

" Look here," he said quietly. " You said just now that you hadn't seen this bag until this gentleman inquired for it."

" No more I hadn't, guv'nor," answered the man.

" Then, has anybody been in your cab since he got out of it at the Station Hotel? " asked Martineau's brother.

" Ah, now you asks me another question! " said the driver. " And I answers you straight—yes. One party."

" Who was he? " demanded Martineau himself. His wits were clearing now, and he foresaw action. " Quick, man, it's important! "

" Don't know him from Adam! " answered the driver.

"Party as hailed me as I was a-coming out of the hotel yard, on my way back here. Sort of commercial party, which he had a small bag himself, not so unlike that of yourn, guv'nor. Coming away from the station he was, and puts up his hand. 'Drive me down to the corner of Scale Lane,' says he, and gets in. Which I did, gentlemen, and at that corner out he gets, gives me my fare—and no more—and goes off. That's all I knows about it."

"He didn't mention seeing this bag in the cab?" asked Martineau.

"Didn't mention nothing," replied the man stolidly. "Not a blooming thing. Seemed in a mortal hurry, that's all I can say."

"When he got in, or when he got out?" asked Martineau's brother.

"Both!" answered the cabman. "Both!"

Martineau looked at his brother, and then twisted sharply on the cabman.

"Describe him!" he exclaimed. "Be quick! What was he like?"

But there Martineau ran up against a dead wall. The cabman's powers of observation and description were of a strictly limited order. He was sure that his late fare was a commercial-looking gent—but whether he was young or elderly, thin or plump, dark or fair, tall or short, well-dressed or ill-dressed, blessed if he knew. Of one thing he was dead certain—the fare carried a bag and got out at the corner of Scale Lane.

"Where is Scale Lane?" asked Martineau.

The cabman pointed to an opening in the line of houses opposite.

"T'other end of the Market Place, guv'nor," he said readily. "Go past the old church—you'll find Scale Lane right opposite the end of Whitefriar gate. That's where I set this here man down. And down Scale Lane he went—which it leads into High Street."

Martineau set off in the direction indicated, his brother followed. They walked a hundred yards in silence. Then the brother laughed—the laugh of complete incredulity.

"What are you going to look for?" he demanded. "A man carrying a bag? There are, no doubt, hundreds of men in the Hull streets who are carrying bags just now. Are we going to stop every one of them?"

"Look here!" retorted Martineau doggedly. "I've got to find that packet. This man's taken it out of my bag, seen that it was intended for registration, and stolen it because he believed it contained something of value."

"What did it contain?" asked the brother.

"I don't know," replied Martineau. "But—I'm going to find out!"

"Then we shall be kept in Hull all day, and perhaps longer," observed the brother dryly. "The family plan was to depart at three o'clock this afternoon—all the arrangements are made. What *are* you going to do?"

"Find Scale Lane first," said Martineau.

"There was no difficulty about finding Scale Lane. There it was—a narrowish, somewhat ancient thoroughfare at the end of the Market Place. And, as the brother was ready enough to point out, it was in the heart of the busiest part of the town, and there were hundreds of business men about, and some of them—in fact, many of them—carried small handbags.

"Now, if you mean to start questioning every one of these persons," he concluded, "you'd better make a start. Suppose you take one side of the street—I'll take the other." But Martineau had noticed a policeman on point duty, and he made a dash at him. Had he, within the last half-hour or so seen a cab set down a man at that corner?

The policeman, a big, burly Yorkshireman, grinned compassionately because he saw that Martineau was genuinely concerned.

"Why, sir," he answered, "Ah couldn't say that Ah have—'cause Ah've only been on duty here ten minutes! But if you went to the police-station—round there, sir—and asked for the man that was here before me, Ah've no doubt he could tell you; he's a sharp 'un, he is, as keeps his eyes open. Ask for P.C. Stubbings, sir."

Martineau's brother groaned as they made their way to the police-station. There, after much going to and fro, they found another burly individual, just about to repair home, who, after scratching the back of his head for a full minute, was suddenly illumined.

" Yes, Ah did ! " he said. " Four-wheeler—driven by that old Tom Grimes, as keeps his cab in the rank at the landing-stage. Yes ! Ah saw a man get out there—not so long before Ah came away."

" I'll give you five shillings if you'll describe that man ! " exclaimed Martineau. " Tell me exactly what he was like ! "

The policeman looked fixedly at the two half-crowns which Martineau held temptingly in his open palm.

" Well, sir ! " he said, after due thought. " He was what you might call a betwixt and between ! Ah couldn't say he was an old 'un, nor yet a young 'un—middle-aged, like. An' he wore one o' these here soft hats such as gentlemen wear now-a-days, and he'd a darkish overcoat, and carried a little bag—and Ah testify to a umbrella."

" Was it a dark hat, or a light hat ? " inquired Martineau desperately.

" Ah should say it were about the colour of his coat," replied the policeman confidently. " Darkish ! "

" Had you ever seen the man before ? " asked Martineau's brother. " Was he, say, a business man that you knew about that part ? "

" No—Ah never set eyes on th' man before," answered the policeman confidently. " He was a stranger to me."

Martineau handed over the five shillings, and he and his brother went back to Scale Lane. For an hour and a half they wandered about it and the neighbouring High Street, looking—anxiously on Martineau's part, under protest on his brother's—for a man who wore a darkish overcoat and a darkish soft hat. Oddly enough, they never met anybody who at all answered the description. But it had turned out a warm day, and, as Martineau said, the man had probably taken his overcoat off at his office or shop.

"Wherein, of course, he's quietly hidden," observed his brother. He yawned, glanced about him, and pointed to an old-fashioned hotel in the Market Place, into which they had wandered again. "Look here!" he said. "I'm famishing! I never got a mouthful of that breakfast from which you dragged me. Let's go in there and get some lunch."

Martineau was hungry, too—it was already seven hours since his breakfast on the steamer. So he allowed himself to be taken into the ancient hostelry and to be set down to food and drink—and he began to pour out his woes anew as he picked up his knife and fork.

"Such a breach of trust!" he said. "What ever would the man think of me! What ever will he think if that packet never reaches its destination? And it may contain something of great value, and——"

Martineau never finished that sentence. At that instant there came, somewhere from the rear of the hotel, a roar and a shock which shook the old house to its foundations, and set the glass and silver on the tables shivering musically. The sound passed—there was a dead silence; then the metallic clinking of falling glass, then silence again, and every man in the coffee-room rushed out into the open air. And there, drifting away in the wind, were clouds upon clouds of dust.

"An explosion!—somewhere in the High Street!—must be gas!—where is it?" men were asking on all sides. "Sounded like houses falling! Must be one of those old warehouses fallen in!"

Martineau and his brother followed the crowd into the High Street, through the back of the hotel yard. And at once, in front of them, they saw a great gap in the line of buildings where an old warehouse had been literally blown to fragments, and where chasms were torn in the surrounding walls. Fragments of light stuff were floating about in the air—and suddenly Martineau stooped and caught one up and, drawing his amazed brother aside, showed it to him.

A torn fragment of stout cartridge paper, with two thick lines of blue pencil scored across it, and the end of one line which Martineau had read seven hours before, on the steamer, " —USSIAN CONSUL."

Martineau thrust the fragment into his pocket, and dragged his brother away.

IV

A few days later, Martineau and his brother sat in the private room of the Russian Consul in a certain important commercial town in the Midlands, and told him all they knew. The consul, a grave, elderly man, who looked as if he had seen many things in his life, listened as understandingly as imperturbably. And in the end he leaned forward and spoke—as a man speaks who does not intend to tell more than he thinks necessary.

" Gentlemen," he said in low tones, " when a man has been, as I was, in charge of political prisoners in Siberia for many years, he does not fail to make enemies—enemies who do not forget, and who wait for—vengeance! It is evident that I made one—evident, too, that if his packet had reached me, I should not be conversing with you now. It is evident, too, that the man who stole the packet from your bag and subsequently opened it, paid for his theft with his life! And as for the rest, gentlemen—it is, I think—eh ?—a closed chapter! "

THE DETENTION CELL

I

THE LONG ARM OF COINCIDENCE

RATTENBURY—who, in the opinion of most of his acquaintances, was just a bit of a fool, though a good-natured one—was having the day of his life. To begin with, that was his twenty-first birthday—an event to which he had long looked forward with zest and interest. It meant the end of his apprenticeship to the drapery trade; it also meant that he came into possession of a little fortune of some three hundred and fifty pounds, left to him by a maiden aunt who had ordered that it should be paid to her dear nephew Herbert in cash, to do exactly what he pleased with, on the day whereon he attained his majority. And that morning Rattenbury, who had served six years of apprenticeship to Mr. Mellish, draper and silk mercer, of Dorking, had risen with the lark, rejoicing greatly in his freedom, and had departed for the neighbouring town of Guildford, where, by a quarter-past ten o'clock, he had received exactly three hundred and sixty-one pounds—in crisp Bank of England notes—from one Mr. Merkle, a solicitor, and had forthwith walked out into the High Street feeling as if he had suddenly been admitted to the aristocracy of wealth. After which, in order, to carry out a long-meditated plan, he took train for London, his fortune in his pocket.

Rattenbury—having always been restricted in the matter of cash—had several ideas of a luxurious sort. There were certain articles which, in his opinion, every gentleman ought to possess—a gold watch and chain, a handsome ring, a real silver cigarette-case. He proposed to treat himself to these things now that he had come into money, and as soon as he reached London he set out for Regent Street and certain jewellers' shops which he remembered having looked at longingly on one of his very rare previous visits to the metropolis. He inspected several windows narrowly before he made choice of a shop, and if he had not been so absorbed in his pursuits he might have seen that a couple of men—quietly dressed, unobtrusive men—were inspecting him just as earnestly as he was inspecting the gold and silver of the windows. Indeed, these two seemed to have developed some curious and sudden interest in Rattenbury and his movements, and when he finally walked into the establishment of his choice they remained outside and lingered close by until he reappeared. Even then their curiosity was not satisfied; when Rattenbury—who was now sporting a fine gold chain, which had a twenty-guinea watch at the end of it, and an equally fine signet ring, to say nothing of a grey pearl pin in his four-in-hand necktie—strolled away, they strolled a few yards behind, and when, a little later, he walked into the grill-room of a well-known restaurant in Piccadilly Circus, they walked in too, and found a table within easy range of that at which Rattenbury had planted himself. And while they contented themselves with a simple steak and modest tankard, they observed—being noticing persons—that Rattenbury ate and drank of the best, and that he bought himself a shilling cigar when his lunch was over.

"All the symptoms strong on him," muttered one of the watchers to the other. "I don't think there's much doubt."

The other man pulled out a pocket-book, opened it on his knee, within cover of the table, and referred to a slip of paper inside it.

"About twenty-one or two; about five foot nine; sandy hair, slight, sandy moustache; blue eyes; considerably freckled," he read in a low voice. "Probably wearing blue serge lounge suit, bowler hat, and brown boots. Has expensive tastes and might be looked for in fashionable restaurants; is also fond of theatres and music-halls. Um!—we haven't got to the music-hall and theatre stage yet, Jim, but what about the rest of it?"

" Couldn't get a much better correspondence to a description," remarked the other man, eyeing the unconscious Rattenbury closely. " It's all there—right down to the freckles. He'll be on the move presently; you go outside, and I'll follow him."

One man was waiting for Rattenbury when he emerged from the restaurant ; the other was at his heels. At the corner of the next quietish street the two closed on him.

" Excuse me," said one, " a word with you, if you please."

Rattenbury, who had no other perplexity in the world than that caused by the neighbourhood of several equally attractive theatres, at most of which matinées were about to begin, stopped and stared, open-mouthed.

" What's up ? " he asked vaguely. " I don't know you ! "

" No need to be alarmed," answered the accoster. " Just step aside a minute with me," he continued, drawing back into the side street. " Just a question."

Rattenbury was conscious of some superior force which he could not explain, and he did the man's bidding. And then the other man turned on him, with a searching and suggestive look.

" Is your name Cragg ? " he demanded. " Frank Gordon Cragg ? Come, now ? "

Rattenbury, from sheer fright, grew scarlet. He had a trick of blushing at any time ; emotion now produced vivid colour in his naturally fair skin. Also, he had a slight difficulty in finding his tongue readily, and for a second he could only stammer. The other man spoke.

" From Northampton, ain't you, now ? " he said. " Frank Gordon Cragg, Northampton—bank clerk ? "

Rattenbury grew indignant, and found his tongue. He even moved as if to walk away, but the men barred his path.

" You mind your own business ! " said Rattenbury. " What're you interfering with me for ? I know nothing about no Craggs, and I've never been near Northampton in my life ! You keep to yourselves ! "

" Look here, my lad," said the elder of the two men, " don't get excited. We're police-officers, and we want a young fellow about your age, and of your appearance—you answer exactly to the description of him, down to your boots. If you are not Cragg, of Northampton, who are you ? "

" My name's Rattenbury—Herbert Rattenbury," answered the ex-apprentice. " And I come from Dorking. You've made a mistake."

The two men looked at each other, and then at their possible victim.

" Got anything to prove that ?" demanded one sharply. " Any letters or papers ? Let's see them if you have."

Rattenbury's vivid colour died away, and he became unpleasantly pale, and was conscious of a nasty sense of sickness.

" I—I haven't," he faltered. " I—you see, I put on my best suit this morning, to come to London, and I—I don't carry letters or anything in my best coat—spoils the hang of it, you know."

One of the men pushed a knowing finger against the left side of Rattenbury's smart serge jacket.

" What's that ? " he said. " Pocket-book ? "

" It's—it's—it's banknotes," answered Rattenbury. " I—I came into a legacy this morning."

" Look here," said the elder man, " don't make any fuss—you'll have to come with us. You can explain things at the station—if you can. But as you answer in every detail to the description of the young fellow we want, and as you've got on you just what we're told he's got—well, come on, now, quietly. Walk ahead with my friend there—just as if you were out for a nice stroll together—d'ye see ? —and I'll come behind."

" You're making the worst mistake you ever made in your life ! " said Rattenbury. " And you'll find it out ! "

" Glad if you'll prove it, my lad," retorted the man, cheerfully. " Get a move on ! "

Rattenbury moved—in a perfect nightmare of rage, terror, and annoyance. By the time they had reached the station and were closeted with higher officials, he was almost incapable of coherent speech or clear thought. For even his disordered intellect comprehended that things looked suspicious and even black against him. He had to admit that he answered the description of the missing bank clerk to a nicety; that he had bought jewellery somewhat lavishly that morning; lunched extravagantly, and taken a bottle of expensive wine; worst of all, he had about three hundred pounds in notes on him. And, in spite of his stammered explanation, it was plain he was not believed.

"Send for Mr. Mellish, then," pleaded Rattenbury. "Wire to him. He'll tell you who I am, quick enough!"

"Is he on the telephone at Dorking?" asked the only man present who seemed to think there might be something in the victim's story.

"No, he isn't," replied Rattenbury. "We haven't a telephone. Do wire to him, now! Here, I'll pay!"

The official motioned Rattenbury to put his half-crown back in his pocket, and held a whispered consultation, during which they eyed him over from head to foot more closely than ever. After which, while one of them wrote out a telegram, which Rattenbury fondly hoped was to his employer, another conducted the protesting victim to a detention cell and locked him up, kindly informing him that he would come to no harm there, and would be quite comfortable for an hour or two. It was clear, even to Rattenbury's agitated mind, that, in spite of all his explanations and his precise statement about Mr. Mellish, the police did not doubt for one moment that they had laid hands on Frank Gordon Cragg. And for one wild instant Rattenbury's whirling brain really wondered if they might not be right!

II

THE COMPANION IN DISTRESS

THE place of incarceration into which Rattenbury was ushered, quivering with indignation and almost on the verge of tears, was not by any means a fearsome dungeon. He had seen less cheerful apartments—if the word cheerful could in any waay be applied to four bare walls, ceiling, and a floor. There was a room at Mellish's, for instance, sacred to the junior shop assistant and the two apprentices, which was just about as barren and featureless as this. Rattenbury, indeed, when he saw anything at all, saw that he was merely detained in a sort of locked waiting-room, in company with a few hard seats, a table—and a young gentleman of about his own age, who sat on the edge of the table, polishing his nails, and nonchalantly whistling the refrain of the last popular music-hall ditty.

Rattenbury pulled himself up on the threshold and looked inquiringly at this companion in distress. He was a young man of Hebraic extraction, judging by his nose, his colour, and his curly black hair ; of sporting tastes if his loud-patterned check suit and horse-shoe tie-pin were anything to go by. His clothes and boots were good ; his linen clean ; his hat, a Homburg, worn at a rakish angle over his left ear, was new ; altogether he looked as if he would be more in place in one of the outer rings of a racecourse than where he was. But he was evidently of a deeply philosophic nature, and he winked at Rattenbury as though he had known him all his life.

" Cheer-oh ! " he observed. " Make yourself at home, mister—there's lots worse places in the world than what this is—s'elp me if there ain't ! "

" It's a burning shame that I'm here at all ! " burst out Rattenbury, who was only too glad to have a confidant. " It's a disgrace and a scandal, and I'll make those detectives smart for it ! "

The previous tenant-in-chief shut up his penknife with a snap, and regarded his nails critically.

" Ah ! " he said. " You will, will you, mister ? Been a bit too much for you, have they, now ? But you can't make 'em smart for that, you know."

Rattenbury stared at his companion. It was incomprehensible to him that any one could possibly suspect him.

" I've done nothing ! " he exclaimed. " I tell you it's an outrage ! What I believe they call false imprisonment ! "

" Just so, mister," said the other calmly. " It's always an outrage. There ain't no liberty—what you'd call real liberty—in this here country. You do a bit of what you feel inclined, and these chaps, why, they say you mustn't—that's about it ! But there's nobody comes in these delightful little resting-places, mister, unless he's either done something or is suspected of having done it—see ? Which is your department ? "

" What have you done ? " asked Rattenbury.

The companion cocked his hat a bit more and put his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets.

" Bit o' street betting," he answered candidly. " And I'm a guest here because I've a conscientious objection to giving my name and address. Couldn't think of doing that, no how ! I'm a stranger in this part of the little village—and you see how I'm treated. Come up here where there's a likely pitch in a quiet by-street—getting along all right for a day or two—and then they walks me in here ! But, no name and address out o' me—no fear, mister ! "

" What'll they do to you ? " asked Rattenbury, inquisitive enough by this time to have somewhat forgotten his own troubles.

" Oh, well, I shall have to enjoy their hospitality for the night, I suppose," answered the other unconcernedly. " Poorish accommodation, but endurable, you know. And I reckon I'll have to fork out ten quid and the costs to-morrow morning. Don't matter—I have it on me. Nasty thing, of course, to be robbed of eleven or twelve of the best in that way, but, lord bless yer, mister, its all in a life ! And what might your little trouble be, now ? "

Rattenbury was by that time ready enough to pour out his grievance to anybody, and he treated his companion to a faithful account, with full particulars, of all that had happened to him that morning. The Hebraic young gentleman's large eyes became larger and larger and in the end he glanced significantly at Rattenbury's new gold chain, ring, and scarf-pin—and finally at his slightly bulging pocket.

" S'elp me !—and you've got all that little lot on you just now ? " he exclaimed. " They ain't taken it off you ? But, of course, they wouldn't, as things are ! And what you say is gospel truth ? You ain't no blooming absconding bank clerk—what ? "

" I'm just what I said I am ! " protested Rattenbury angrily. " And they'll jolly well know it before long. Our governor'll either rush up here himself, or he'll send Potts, our manager. I say, you seem to know a bit about these things. Can't I do something to these fellows for collaring me like that ? Can't I get damages for—what do they call it ?—false imprisonment ? It's a scandalous thing to collar a gentleman in the open street in that way ! They ought to have known better from my very appearance. Why, I'd just been lunching at the Patazalizzo—where only the nobs go ! Shameful ! "

The companion in distress gave Rattenbury a long look, and sized him up as a fine specimen of the innocent abroad. And he began to rub his nose, as if in deep thought.

" Ah, but you ain't imprisoned, you know, mister," he remarked, after a due interval of cogitation. " You're only detained—on suspicion. They're ways with 'em, have the police. They've only stuck me in here 'cause I won't give my name and address. Time to reflect—don't you see ? When night comes, and they find I'm what you call deaf to their blandishments, and ain't going to split on myself, they'll stick me in a cell, formally charged, till it's time to go before the beak in the morning. But you—you're just kept pending inquiries. And there don't seem to be no doubt that you closely answer the description of this here Cragg. Well, that ain't the 'tecs' ' fault, is it ? They only done their duty, you know. Queer coincidence, to be sure, but if you and this Cragg are so similar in your dials and your clothes, and as you have some three hundred quid on you—why, I ask you, what could they think ? "

" Confound 'em ! " muttered Rattenbury. " I was going to a matinée. It's spoilt my day, has this ! "

" Oh, you'll be out in an hour or two," remarked the other soothingly. " You ain't going to come to no harm. But, I say, mister, when you do get out—as you will—I wish you'd do yours truly a bit of a good turn. 'Cause there ain't going to be no getting out o' this for me before noon to-morrow—not me ! "

" What is it ? " asked Rattenbury, who, in addition to his natural habit of inclination to friendliness, had been somewhat taken by his new friend. " If it's anything possible——"

The Hebraic one assumed a sentimental and even pathetic air.

" I've an old mother," he said. " Good old sort, and given to wondering what's become of me if I don't get home o' nights. Now, I don't want the old girl to be bothering herself, nor yet to know where her pet lamb is. If you'd do the bit o' kindness, mister, and take me a scrap of a note to my brother Benjie, when they turn you out here, I'd take it handsome of you."

" Where'd I find him ? " asked Rattenbury.

" Know Aldgate ? " inquired the pet lamb eagerly. " Well, just near the start of Whitechapel, mister, you'll see a public-house what's called the Duck and Trumpet. You walk into the saloon bar there and ask 'em if they've seen Mr. Benjie Arensberg. He's in and out there, reg'lar, all day is Benjie—you'll be sure to come across him. And then you'll give him a bit of a note—see ? "

" Write it now, then," said Rattenbury. " I'll take it —when I get out of this."

" Oh, you'll be out before long," answered the other. " When your governor hears what's happened, he'll get a move on him."

Then he sat down at the table, and, producing a slip of paper and a stubby pencil, proceeded to write a few lines, afterwards twisting the missive into a threecornered shape. And that done, he looked at Rattenbury with a wink, and without ceremony relieved him of his hat.

" In case of accidents—with them chaps outside," he said ; and carefully bestowed the missive in the lining. " They'd never look in there, and you'll know where to find it. Don't forget, mister, Duck and Trumpet, Whitechapel way, and Mr. Benjie Arensberg."

" All right," said Rattenbury, " I'll do it for you. And I don't care how soon I get the chance. Nice way of spending your birthday, this is ! "

" Let's amuse ourselves," suggested the fellow-captive. He suddenly twisted his hand round to a hip-pocket and produced a pack of cards. " Here," he said, " we'll have a bit of a game—for sixpence. Sixpences ain't nothing between you and me. All friends here, ain't it, mister ? Come on."

III

IN YIDDISH

BY the exceedingly simple operation of cutting through the pack and betting sixpences on which card turned up red and which black, Rattenbury had cheerfully lost a sovereign or so when heavy steps were heard outside the door. His companion swept the cards—and what silver lay on the table—into his pocket, and was gazing abstractedly at space when one of the detectives who had stopped Rattenbury entered the cell and motioned to his captive.

" This way," he said with a grin which seemed to promise something. " There's a wire just come about you."

Rattenbury hurried out, but not before his less fortunate prisoner had got in a low whisper :

" Don't forget, mister ; remember your poor friend."

Rattenbury nodded, and joined the detective, who promptly locked the door, and then led the way to the office where Rattenbury's first questioning had taken place. There were two or three other men there, one of whom was reading a telegram. And he was quick to see that there was an alteration in their manner.

" Here's a wire from Mr. Mellish, of Dorking," remarked the man who held the telegram. He laid it on a desk, and pointed Rattenbury to it. " You see what it says."

Rattenbury glanced at the message with a beating heart. Mellish was a very strict and proper man ; the mere idea that any assistant of his should fall into the hands of the police would—to him—be horrifying. And Rattenbury had had an uncomfortable feeling during his two hours of detention that Mellish might wash his hands of him, and leave him to get out of his trouble as he best could. It was, therefore, with immense relief that he read the message.

" If the man you have is Herbert Rattenbury he is easily identified, as he has a large brown birthmark just above his left elbow."

Rattenbury laughed maliciously as he tore off his jacket and turned up his shirt-sleeve.

" I told you you were making a mistake ! " he exclaimed. " There you are—all for yourselves ! "

The assembled group looked in silence at the unmistakable birthmark, and they remained silent while Rattenbury resumed his jacket.

" I suppose I can go now ? " he asked. " And you'll hear from my solicitor—Mr. Merkle, of Guildford—and quick. This has been an outrage, and——"

" Now, my lad," interrupted the eldest of the men present, " don't you be so ready with your tongue. We've only done our duty, and you've suffered no harm beyond a bit of inconvenience. It isn't our fault if you happen to correspond to the exact description of a wanted man, anybody's liable to a little trouble of this sort. And as there's been one coincidence, there may be another—don't you be quite so hasty."

" What do you mean ? " demanded Rattenbury.

" Coincidence goes a long way," replied the man, "even if it has its limits. For anything we know, this Cragg that's wanted at Northampton may have a birthmark on his left arm. You're certainly the very spit of him in all else, anyhow. Now, before we let you go, you'll just answer a question or two. Where are you going when you get out of this?"

"Where I like!" retorted Rattenbury. "It's no business of yours."

"It's so much our business that if you talk like that you'll probably not get out at all," said the interrogator. "At any rate, not till Mr. Mellish comes here in person. Give me a civil answer. Where are you going?"

"Home, then," growled Rattenbury, "to Dorking. Will that satisfy you?"

"Very well, you can go, then," answered the official.

He turned away almost indifferently, and the others turned away too, and Rattenbury, muttering threats of vengeance, walked out into the street. And he was so full of his wrongs that he failed to notice that when he left the police-station a man, who had been carefully watching him through a half-closed door, also left it, and quietly followed him.

Rattenbury at first went anywhere aimlessly. He was fuming and fretting; it seemed to him that the police still suspected him of being Cragg. In his opinion, they ought to have fallen at his feet with abject contrition and apologies; they ought, indeed, to have offered him monetary compensation. Instead, they had manifested a high and mighty tone which he had found peculiarly offensive and distasteful, and bade him go as if they were conferring some extraordinary favour upon him. He cursed them heartily for spoiling his day out. He had meant to go to the theatre, and wind up his festivities with a nice little dinner somewhere, and now it was getting on for five o'clock, and theatres were no good, and it was too soon to dine. It was all too bad—much too bad—and at that moment he caught sight of the name Aldgate on a motor 'bus which had just drawn up at the kerb.

Rattenbury boarded that motor 'bus; the man who was following boarded it too, and sat behind his quarry during the journey eastward. When Rattenbury at last got off, Aldgate having been reached, the man got off too, and followed him towards Whitechapel. But Rattenbury never looked round; he was too busily engaged in searching either side of the broad street for the Duck and Trumpet. And at last he saw it, and entered a saloon bar—and the follower followed.

There were only two or three customers in the bar—a garishly decorated and roomy place—and as the man who stood behind it was just then doing nothing, Rattenbury approached him and asked, without demur or any lowering of his voice, if Mr. Benjamin Arensberg had been in or was about. The bar-tender laid down an evening paper and glanced at him, taking particular note of the questioner's general appearance and his new jewellery.

"Not this afternoon he ain't, guv'nor," he said. "He was in here a bit before noon, and he might be in any minute. Want him?"

"I'll wait a bit," answered Rattenbury.

He treated himself to a drink, and sat down in a quiet corner; the man who had followed also treated himself to a glass of ale, and carried it to another. Some little time passed; customers came and went, but nobody resembling the young gentleman of the detention cell appeared. And at last Rattenbury boldly approached the bar again.

"Look here," he said, "I can't wait all day—where's this Mr. Arensberg live? Anywhere round here?"

The barman viewed Rattenbury again, reflectively.

"Couldn't rightly say, guv'nor," he answered. "Somewhere about, but I don't know exactly where. Pretty frequent customer, d'ye see—but I couldn't say more. Sure to look in—some time."

"I'll call again," remarked Rattenbury, who had suddenly remembered that he had never seen Whitechapel and was minded to stroll round a little. "If he comes in, ask him to wait a bit—say there's a gentleman wants to see him with a note from his brother."

"Right yer are, guv'nor," assented the man. "I'll tell him."

Rattenbury went out and strolled up the street, looking about him. The man who had followed him all the way from the west presently followed him again. And it was a somewhat curious thing that in the immediate neighbourhood of a police-station, this man, making up his mind to some meditated course of action, stepped up to Rattenbury and tapped him on the sleeve. Rattenbury turned sharply—and, being by that time better versed in knowledge, was immediately certain that he was in the presence of another detective.

"A word with you," said the man. "Don't get flustered—I'm a police-officer, and I've followed you from—you know where. I heard that talk between you and our people just before you were let out. Now, then, why aren't you off home to Dorking, and what're you doing down here? What do you want with that man you asked for just now in that pub? Come on now—you'd better answer, or I shall have to take you back yonder—or in here!"

He inclined his head towards the open door of the police-station, and Rattenbury felt as if some one had poured cold water down his spine.

"Wh-wh-what are you following me like this for?" he stammered. "It's—it's——"

"None of that!" said the man. "We want to know for certain that you're what you say you are. My job was to see you safe home to Dorking, my lad. Instead of going there, as you said, you come down here—asking for somebody at a saloon bar in Whitechapel! Now, then, what's your game? What's that note you spoke of just now to that bar-keeper? Come on, now?"

Rattenbury began to protest, but the man became more insistent.

"You'll have to tell," he said. "Out with it! But I've an idea—you were two hours with that chap in our place. Is it a note from him to somebody ? If it is, hand it over ! "

Rattenbury felt he was in the presence of something stronger than himself, and he produced the note from his hat, still protesting.

" You've no right to interfere with me in this way ! " he exclaimed. " It's only a note I brought from that young fellow to his brother, so that his poor old mother 'ud know where he was—or, rather, that he was all right. You——"

" Poor old mother ! " sneered the detective. " Poor old fiddle-stick ! " He unwrapped the crumpled bit of paper and glanced at a couple of scrawled lines. " Yiddish ! " he muttered. " Here, you come in here with me ; they'll have somebody here that can translate this precious stuff ! "

Rattenbury followed into the police-station against his will, and waited, trembling and indignant, while a man was found who could read and translate the message to Mr. Benjamin Arensberg. That man, when he read it, laughed, and looked Rattenbury up and down.

" There's not much in it—but it's a bit pointed," he said. " This is it : ' Dear Benjie,—This here young schmuck '—that's a sort of lubber, in plain English—' has three hundred of the best on him ; take him somewhere quiet and be nice to him.—Yours, Mosie.' "

The man who had followed Rattenbury looked slowly at him, before taking him by the arm and leading him forth again.

" Look here, young fellow," he said, when they had reached the street, " you're not fit to be let loose in London. What you want is a nurse and a feeding-bottle. Now, then, if you're what you say you are, just hop it home to Dorking, and put that money away. Come on, now—and I'll see you safe there ! "

FEAR

I

EVER since Rickards had been a clerk—three years—in the counting-house of Matchington's factory at Brychester he had spent most of his dinner-hour in strolling about the old High Street of that ancient city. His dinner was an affair of ten minutes at most—eaten hastily in the living-room of his cheap lodgings. His landlady, a hard-worked, practical-minded widow woman, was not disposed to conversation, save on domestic details, and there was nothing to keep him in the house when he had finished his plain fare.

But in the High Street, close by, there was always plenty to attract, at any hour of the day, and particularly at noon, when its broad pavements were gay with life. There were, then, the fine carriages and horses of the quality, folk from the surrounding country, and the townspeople gossiping in groups, and the attractions of the shop windows, and the queer old gabled houses, and the great cathedral church, which dominated everything.

Rickards, a lonely and shut-off man, by nature as much as by necessity, loved to idle away an hour amidst these sights and scenes before going back to his desk and the unending rows of figures. And during the whole of that three years he had never once seen a face which he had known in the old days, on which he had shut the door—for ever, he hoped—when he came to Brychester. But on this day—a bright, sharp, frost-laden day in December—as he turned the corner of High Street, from the narrow alley in which he lodged, he suddenly saw the face of Janvers—the one man in the world whom he least wished to see, and, at the sight, he shrank back into the alley, sick and trembling.

Why Janvers' face should have so frightened Rickards would have been a puzzle to most folks. Janvers was a big, stoutish, jolly-faced man, who from his general appearance you would have taken to be a well-to-do licensed victualler—the sort of man who dresses himself in a semi-sporting fashion, wears a bit of good jewellery, cocks his hat on one side, and is generally not without a cigar in his lips.

He was smoking a cigar now, and laughing and chatting to another man, whom Rickards knew by sight as the principal inspector of police in Brychester. And whatever passers-by might have taken Janvers for. Rickards made no mistake about him. He knew him as one of the smartest and cleverest of London detectives—Detective-Sergeant Robert Janvers, of the Criminal Investigation Department.

That was why he, Stephen Rickards, shrank into the alley, and prepared to go to Matchington's counting-house by another way and without his usual High Street stroll.

Rickards had a past. Ten years previous to that December morning—almost to a day—he had stood in a dock, his head throbbing, his whole body aching in a dull queer fashion, and had heard himself sentenced to seven years' penal servitude—for forgery and embezzlement. His trial had been a mere matter of form, once it had begun—but before ever they caught him he had given them trouble in tracking him down. And Janvers was the man who had taken the trouble in hand, and successfully surmounted it.

Rickards shivered now as he remembered how Janvers had hunted him down, through one thicket of obstacles after another, until he at last laid hands on him and brought him to justice. And he remembered something else—a remark that Janvers had made to him when at last he had got to tight grips with him and was taking him to London. " I shan't lose sight of you, my friend ; neither now nor when you've done that bit of time you're going to get—so remember."

Rickards did remember, and he felt, as he shrank down that alley, as if something had drained every ounce of blood out of him.

For what could Janvers be after in Brychester but —himself? In spite of Janvers' threat, Rickards had got away from him, and from his like. He had served his sentence, behaving himself as a model convict and earning full remission. And in due course, having purged his offence, he had been released and let loose on the world again—a changed man.

Henceforth, he was going straight. He was then little over thirty; there was a chance of quiet and well-behaved life before him if he could only get work somewhere far away from his old haunts and associations. And, profiting by his experiences in the old days when he had led Janvers such a chase before being finally apprehended, he executed a clever disappearance again as soon as the doors of the convict prison opened to let him out.

He had a bit of money safely hidden, and he went away to get it and then, by tortuous byways, made his way to a part of England which he had never been near before—Brychester. And in Brychester he had had the good luck to get a job, without inquiry or question as to character and antecedents, and in that job he had stuck for three years, with satisfaction to himself and his employer. And now—just when he was about to have a more responsible position and a better salary given him —here was Janvers.

It was not in Rickards' power to conceive that Janvers could have come to Brychester for any other purpose than to hound him out. As he hung about the alley his tortured brain began to reckon things out. Perhaps some member of the local police force had recognised him as a man he had seen in the convict prison, had secretly warned the London detective, and had so brought about Janvers' visit. There must be something of that sort.

Anyway, he was unable to see anything in all Brychester just then but Janvers and himself. He had heard so much, known so much, of how the police hunt down a man who has once been in trouble. He had heard of men losing situations because a man suddenly called on an employer and whispered quietly, " That man of yours is an old gaol-bird ; watch him ! " And that, of course, was what would happen in this case.

He went back to the counting-house feeling dead sure that before long Janvers would stroll in and ask for Mr. Matchington. And Mr. Matchington was a man of stern and uncommon probity—Rickards had seen full proof of that. The probability was that if Mr. Matchington found he had a convicted forger and thief on his premises he would fire him out there and then. And with one foot on his office steps, Rickards paused and wondered whether it wouldn't be best to turn back to his lodgings and get the bit of money he had in his box, and draw from the savings bank what other money he had there, and then go right away by the next train. But at that moment Mr. Matchington himself came round a corner, and Rickards, noticing that the cathedral clock was just on the stroke of one, vanished, from sheer habit, into the place which had been his refuge for three years.

II

It was a monotonous job that Rickards toiled at from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon—nothing but entering up figures in ledgers and account-books, and checking other figures or work-tickets and the like. It was not even varied by letter-writing—a smart young woman, who could do shorthand and rattle the keys of a typewriter, did the correspondence. But Rickards, for eighteen months, had been entrusted with the keeping of the bank account—he paid in and drew out, and the firm's cheque-book was in his drawer. And now, as he settled down to his desk, Mr. Matchington called him from the inner office :

" Rickards, I'm going out of town for the rest of the day. Bring me the cheque for the wages and I'll sign it now."

Rickards unlocked the drawer, and took a cheque out of the book. It was a Friday afternoon, and they had a custom at Matchington's on Fridays. The number of work-people employed varied from week to week. On Friday afternoons Rickards got a cheque signed by Matchington, and subsequently filled it up for the exact amount needed to pay the wages that evening. He carried the cheque now to his employer's desk, and Matchington hurriedly scrawled his signature at its foot.

"You haven't reckoned the amount up yet, I suppose?" he said.

"Not yet, sir; the tickets haven't come in," replied Rickards.

"All right. It'll be a bit more than usual," remarked Matchington. "Johnson's had an extra lot of women working. Now, I'm off to get a train, but I shall be here as usual to-morrow morning."

He bustled away out of the counting-house, and down the road to the station, and Rickards went back to his desk with a sigh of relief. On that day, at any rate, Janvers would not be able to tell tales of him to his master. But—he was in the town! And, as luck would have it, Rickards just then glanced out of the window and saw Janvers again—going slowly by, on the other side of the way in company with a man who, though in civilian dress, was plainly a policeman. This man suddenly jerked his thumb in the direction of Matchington's factory—and Janvers turned and took a look at it. Then both men passed on and turned a corner, and Rickards sat down sick and trembling, and was thankful that the smart type-writing young woman had gone to lunch, leaving him alone.

He was putting the signed cheque into his desk when temptation suddenly came to him. Why wait, under this sickening suspense, until the sword fell? Why remain in Brychester, in England, when he could easily and quickly go to the other side of the Atlantic? He was only twenty miles away from a famous seaport, from which, every Saturday morning, steamers left for New

York, and for Boston, and for Canada—he could make his choice of three lines. And there, before him, was the very thing which would help him, not only to get away, but to make a new start in another land—a signed cheque, which he could fill up to suit himself, and would be cashed at sight, without demur, at the bank round the corner. Before Matchington, before anybody, knew anything about it, he could be on board some vessel and steaming down Channel.

One of the factory foremen came in as Rickards sat thinking, bringing a bundle of work-tickets, which he laid on the desk with a slip of paper on which some figures were pencilled.

" I make it ninety-seven, two, six, this week, Mr. Rickards," he said. " Bit extra for those women we've had since Monday."

" All right," answered Rickards. " Come in for the money at five o'clock."

When the man had gone, he mechanically checked the work-tickets. Ninety-seven pounds, two shillings, and sixpence—right. That was the amount for which he ought to make out the cheque. He picked up his pen—and suddenly he thought of Janvers and of all that Janvers could tell, and he laid the pen down again. But only to pick it up once more, and to fill in the cheque for two hundred pounds. And that once done, he went round to the bank and drew the money.

The thing was done then, and from that moment Rickards began to think of himself alone. He did not particularly care, now, if Janvers called. Matchington was away, and before he would be at the office again he, Rickards, would be off for ever—with one hundred and two pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence of his master's money. He let the afternoon wear on. He did his ordinary work; he surprised the young typist by being unusually talkative, and even jocular. And at five o'clock he handed the foreman ninety seven pounds and half-a-crown for the wages, and took the receipt, and shortly afterwards left the office—a thief for the second time in his life. He cursed Janvers as he went away, but he was so obsessed by the idea which had filled him ever since setting eyes on him that it never struck him as strange that the detective had not called to see Matchington.

Rickards had saved a little money during his three years' steady employment, and he had deposited it in a local savings bank, from which it could be withdrawn at a moment's notice. He went round to the bank and drew out all he had there, save a few shillings, making an excuse to the manager that he was going to buy some shares in a building society.

It was no great amount that he had saved—some sixty or seventy odd pounds, but that, with a small sum which he had in a locked box at his lodgings and the hundred pounds which he had appropriated from Matchington, would leave him a nice little capital for use on landing somewhere across the Atlantic. And the next thing was to see about getting there. He bought a local time-table, and studied it while he ate his tea-supper. And in the end he resolved on going quietly away to Chilhampton that very evening. He would sleep there, consider the matter of destination more fully in the morning, and take one of the three Atlantic steamers which were due to leave Chilhampton at noon next day. In order to cover his retreat he sat down after his meal and wrote a letter to Matchington, saying that he had just heard of the serious illness of a relative, to whom he must go at once. He begged to be excused attendance at the office on Saturday morning. Matchington would have that letter by his first post, and would not expect to see him again till Monday. As for the matter of the cheque, he would never detect that until he next examined his passbook, which he might not do for a month.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Rickards, in his best clothes and carrying a small handbag, left his lodgings, making the same excuse to his landlady that he had made in the letter to his employer. He dropped that letter into the pillar-box at the end of the alley, and turned away to the railway station. He was nearly at its entrance when he felt that he would be none the worse for a drink after all the excitement he had gone through.

There was a quiet little tavern close by, and he turned into it, and into a private bar. And there, and alone, was Janvers.

The two men recognised each other before Rickards could draw back. The ex-convict's recognition was, of course, instantaneous; his sudden start helped the detective to an almost as speedy one. For Rickards was a man of marked features, not easily to be forgotten, and Janvers was one of those men who store up memories. Rickards knew at once that he was recognised, and in the same instant he knew something else—*Janvers was not after him*. He had been wrong—wrong.

The detective looked at his old prisoner with a curious smile.

" Hallo ! " he said, almost as if he were greeting an old friend. " I haven't seen you this long while ! Living in these parts ? "

Rickards felt as if his tongue had suddenly dried. For the moment he could only nod. And Janvers saw his embarrassment and, leaning forward, motioned him to take a seat by him.

" Here ! " he said, reassuringly. " All right now, you know. Done with, long since, all that. Have a drink with me—friendly."

He rapped a bell which stood on the table, and Rickards found himself a moment later clinking glasses with the man whose presence in the town had turned his world over

" Got a job this way ? " asked Janvers. " That's right ! Glad to hear it. Sorry enough, you know, for that affair years ago, but—duty's duty ! If not mine, then another's. Happened to be mine. Glad to see you're looking prosperous."

Rickards drank and found his tongue. He leaned towards Janvers.

"I've had a good job here this years, and done well in it, and I'm trusted, and am likely to do better," he said, "and I've never had but one fear, and that's been that somebody that knew would turn up and spoil—everything. Somebody like—you!"

Janvers shook his head.

"Not me, my boy!" he said. "Not my way! If a man's on the straight, he'll get no word against him from Bob Janvers! Not my line at all, my boy!"

"I saw you in the town to-day," continued Rickards. "You were talking to one of our inspectors. I wondered——"

"If I was going to tell aught about you?" interrupted the detective. "Pshaw! Didn't even know you were here! I came to see a friend of mine for an hour or two—that inspector's an old pal—met him by accident. No, no! Even if I had known, I shouldn't have mentioned a circumstance, not me!"

"I remembered what you said, long since," said Rickards. "You said you wouldn't lose sight of me ever—after!"

"Talk, my boy, professional talk!" answered Janvers. "You'd given me a bit of a chase, you know. No, no; safe enough with me. Never a word! Glad to hear you've a good job. Stick to it, my boy! Now I'm off to get the London train. Good luck—and no fear about me, my boy, or any of us."

He nodded reassuringly, buttoned his coat around his big frame, and with a cheery farewell, strode out. The street door banged on him, and Rickards started at the sound, being already worn fine in the matter of nerves. And suddenly he remembered that he had told Janvers a lie in letting him think that all was right with him. For all was wrong—he had robbed Matchington of a hundred pounds.

III

THE widow woman was surprised when Rickards turned up again at his lodgings and said he had missed his train, for he was such a punctual man that it was not like him to miss anything. But in that particular Rickards was telling the mere truth. He had sat in the little bar parlour, alone, after Janvers had left him, staring and staring at nothing—sat so long and so silently that at last the landlord had asked him if he wasn't feeling well.

And at that he had got up and gone silently away to the station to discover that he had remained so long in that abstraction that the last train to Chilhampton had been gone twenty minutes.

That night Rickards never closed an eye. He lay turning in the darkness; thinking, wondering, utterly miserable and afraid.

His crime against Matchington had been committed; nothing could alter the fact. The cheque was in the hands of the bank; nothing that he could do could get it out of those hands. In due time, sooner or later, Matchington would discover what had happened—that Rickards had robbed him. And Matchington had been a good master. But he was a hard man, a man of strict ideas, and he might take it into his head to hunt the thief down—ay, even if Rickards went to the ends of the earth.

And Rickards sweated with fear when he remembered the former hunting to which Janvers had subjected him; that chivvying about from place to place, never knowing when a hand might not be clapped on his shoulder, that ceaseless, never-ending fear of day and night, had been worse, far worse, than the penal servitude which had followed it. And now—it was likely to happen all over again.

It was a long, long night, but the grey dawn came at last, and Rickards, unable to lie in his mental distress any longer, got up, huddled some clothes on him, and went downstairs to light the kitchen fire, and make himself a cup of tea. He was buried in this task when his landlady came down, carrying a candle in her hand, and as its light fell on her lodger's face and head, she screamed:

"Heaven ha' mercy on us!" she gasped. "Man, whatever's happened to you?"

Rickards stared at the woman. And at that she lifted a shaking finger and pointed, first at his head, and then at a cheap mirror which hung on the wall by the mantelpiece.

"Your hair!" she whispered.

Rickards snatched the candle from her and looked at himself. He saw then that his hair, coal-black when he went to bed, had turned grey. But not all over; the strange change had worked itself in patches. Amongst the thick black there were wide streaks of silver grey, irregular and grotesque. And at the temples, forming a striking contrast to his black, somewhat bushy eyebrows, the hair had turned white as snow.

"You ain't ill, Mr. Rickards?" asked the woman anxiously.

Rickards turned away from the glass.

"I haven't felt well since yesterday," he answered. "Pains in my head. It's nothing. I've heard of such things happening before."

He went upstairs then, and when the light came, took a further look at his changed appearance. He had aged twenty years.

IV

WHEN Matchington walked into his private room that morning it was to find Rickards standing there. And Matchington, like the landlady, let out an exclamation.

"Bless my soul!" he said. "What—what's happened?"

Rickards shut the door and looked at his master.

"I want a word with you—privately," he said. "I've got to say it, and it had better be said at once. I've been honest enough all the three years I've been here, but I didn't tell you what I might have told when I came. My real name isn't Rickards—never mind what it is. When I came to you, I'd just done seven years—for forgery and embezzlement."

Matchington stared at his clerk in silence for a full moment. It was his first impression that Rickards had gone out of his mind, and Rickards was quick to see it.

"No," he said. "I'm sane enough. What I've told you is the plain truth."

Matchington sat down at his desk, still staring. It was plain enough to him that the man had gone, and was going, through some terrible crisis of suffering.

"What are you telling it me for—now?" he asked.

"For this reason," answered Rickards. He went on to make a clean breast of all that had happened since noon of the previous day, telling him every detail down to the last word spoken by Janvers. And in the end he pulled out the money of which he had meant to rob Matchington and laid it on the desk before him. "It's all there," he concluded. "And now I suppose you'll give me in charge? And—I wish you'd get it over, for I'm—tired!"

Matchington, a big burly man, had sat like a stone during the whole of his clerk's recital, saying nothing, doing nothing—watching. And he sat silent for a while after Rickards had finished. Then he suddenly glanced at the man's worn face, and leaned forward.

"Is that all?" he asked. "Mind—I'm believing every word you say!"

"It's all," answered Rickards wearily. "All!"

Matchington picked up a couple of his banknotes which Rickards had laid down, and leaned still nearer.

"I'll tell you what it is, my lad," he said. "What you need is a bit of a change and a rest. Here, take these, and go and have a fortnight's holiday, and then come back with all that stuff out of your mind. Come on now!"

With that he thrust the banknotes into the clerk's hand, and gently pushed him out of the room.

BODL

LONDON AND GLASGOW: COLLINS' CLEAR-TYPE PRESS.

NEW 7/6 DETECTIVE NOVELS

Philip MacDonald
RYNOX

"RYNOX" is at that point where one injudicious move; one failure of judgment; one co-incidental piece of bad luck will wreck it. Mr. F. X. Benedik, the senior partner of the firm, is found shot through the head in his study. F. X. is heavily insured. The firm of "Rynox" begins to recover. But the choleric Marsh, who was known to have had an appointment with "F. X.," on the night of his death, and against whom is issued a warrant for arrest, has vanished. Rynox is on the edge of Big Things. And the edge of big things is a narrow edge. And narrow edges are slippery! For the first time Mr. MacDonald has written a crime novel without a detective, but he has never written a more ingenious or engrossing tale. He has entered the business world for his setting and his picture of the great firm of Rynox is perfect to the last detail. Although Mr. MacDonald calls his novel "an exercise in crime" it is not merely a problem of "x's" and "y's"—his every character lives and makes an impression on the memory.

Arthur Mills
INTRIGUE ISLAND

WHEN Ulick Vyse arrived in that island in the China Sea he knew he was running into danger. The previous Secret Service officer who had tried to unveil the plot of an unknown foreign power against British authority had been dead in a month—poisoned—yet Ulick welcomed the opportunity which had transferred him from Cairo where he had just said good-bye to Bettine. And was he not glad to meet again his old friend, "Ginger" Lawford? How could he have foretold the horror of discovering that the wife of the Governor-General was Bettine herself? What irony to have to live as the personal friend of Sir Thomas and his wife, the woman he loved and who still loved him. Then Ming Cha, daughter of the most powerful Chinese on the island, appeared, to complicate matters by falling in love with the handsome young Englishman. But it was the love of Ming Cha which ultimately extracted Ulick from an apparently endless intrigue, and saved the island for the British Empire!

NEW 7/6 FICTION

EDGAR WALLACE

THE CALENDAR

HORSE-RACING is Mr. Edgar Wallace's special hobby. Novel-writing is his business. When he combines the two we look for something great, and we get it in *The Calendar*. Garry Anson, the hero, is on the rocks. He repents of his unsportsmanlike action in telling Lady Panniford that his horse is not being ridden to win. Having no paper handy he writes the message on a hundred-pound banknote with a borrowed pencil, which happens to be indelible. Things and her ladyship conspire against Garry. His fortune runs out and he is debarred from racing wherever the Jockey Club holds sway. He must recover the hundred-pound note. It is snug in the safe in Lady Panniford's bedroom. Here Hillcott, a butler with a doubtful past, is consulted. The story develops with the vigour and thrills which Edgar Wallace can provide so brilliantly—all set against the gay background of Ascot society.

MAY EDGINTON

LAMPLIGHT

ALGIERS Palatial Hotels, white in the moon—palms—guitars and the lights of a yacht on the bay—such is the setting of Miss Edginton's latest romance. The love-theme is not the artificial intrigue of the wealthy cosmopolitan, but the full-blooded passion of two young Britons—Flora Towers, beautiful daughter of money, and Andy Court, a penniless son of the middle-class. He has followed Flora from Lugano, where they met one night by the lake. Now in Algiers they meet again. She thrills and yields to his kisses; but meantime a cloud has crossed her happiness. Cecil Towers, her father, has been at last ensnared by Annette—one of his many mistresses—who has married him. Under her jealous influence the father turns against his daughter, and Flora finds herself alone, but for the friendship of William Haagen, an elegant and very opulent adventurer. Is she to accept his luxury and sophisticated love or the sincere and simple devotion of her Lugano cavalier?