

"WONDERFUL stuff, seccotine," remarked the ship's bore. "I can assure you fellows that I've mended broken china in such a way that it defies detection."

"I can well believe it," yawned the doctor. "What about a rubber?"

"It never lets you down," pursued the other earnestly.

The fair-haired man in the corner smiled slightly.

"Let us say very rarely instead of never," he remarked in his faint, rather pleasant drawl. "I can remember a certain occasion when it let some people down rather badly."

.. "Then it must have been used wrongly," affirmed the seccotine supporter. "If you put it on too thick——"

"Laddie" interrupted the doctor wearily, "I believe you hold shares in the damn' stuff. Am I right in scenting a yarn?"

He turned to the fair-haired man, who shrugged his shoulders.

"It might amuse you," he said. "The night is yet young, and the deck is an unsafe place for a bachelor."

"Four long ones, steward," said the doctor firmly. "Now, sir, your reasons for mistrusting that excellent household commodity, if you please."

The fair-haired man lit a cigarette with care.

"Your sins be on your own heads," he remarked. "I warn you I'm no story-teller. However, to begin at the beginning. I'd better give it a title. I shall call it *The Episode of the Kodak, the Volcano, and the Parasol with the Broken Head.*"

"Glass or china?" interrupted the seccotine maniac eagerly. "It makes a difference, you know."

The doctor grew profane.

"Steel," he groaned. "Tin. Asbestos. Besides, how do you know it was the parasol at all? The kodak might have been seccotined, or even the volcano."

The interrupter looked pained and subsided.

"And having given it its title," continued the fair-haired man, "we will commence the yarn."

"The first character in order of entry is the lady. We will call her *Verriker*—Mrs. *Verriker*. I noticed her the first night I arrived at Parker's Hotel in Naples. She was sitting in the lounge drinking her coffee, and she was the type of woman who took the eye. Most excessively so, in fact. I put her age at about thirty, and most of the other women in the place were

staring at her as if she had an infectious disease, and surreptitiously trying to copy her frock. She was obviously English, though she was reading a French book. And she was really most extraordinarily pretty.

"The lounge was crowded, and I took one of the few vacant chairs which chanced to be opposite her. I had noted her wedding ring, but there appeared to be no sign of a husband. There was only one cup on the tray in front of her, and she somehow gave one the impression of being alone."

The fair-haired man gazed thoughtfully at the bubbles rising in his glass.

"Well, gentlemen," he continued, "rightly or wrongly, it has always seemed to me that a pretty woman alone is one of those things that should not be. It is an unnatural state of affairs and cries aloud for rectification. And though on the one occasion that evening when I caught her eye she looked straight through me, yet I went to bed with the definite impression that in this case the rectification was not going to be very difficult. Impossible to say how these impressions arise, but . . . However, I won't labour the point. I will merely say that the following morning I was privileged to be of some small service to her. It appeared that she was unable to make a messenger from one of the shops understand what she wanted, so what more natural than that I should act as

interpreter? She confessed so sweetly that she could hardly speak a word of Italian, that it was a real pleasure to help her. And the fact that I had overheard her the previous evening speaking fluent Italian to the concierge in no way, I may say, destroyed that pleasure."

"Dirty dog," chuckled the doctor.

The fair-haired man looked pained.

"The best of us lay ourselves open at times to be misconstrued," he murmured. "However, I will endeavour to bear it with fortitude. She was quite charmingly grateful to me for my small assistance, and since it transpired that she was devoted to oysters we went out and had lunch at that excellent little inn close to Lake Avernus. It appeared that the worthy Mr. Verriker, who answered to the name of John, was at the moment engaged in some business transaction in Rumania. It further appeared that the business transaction was likely to be of considerable duration. Dear old John was so extremely thorough in everything he did; if a thing was important he would never dream of handing it over to a subordinate. In fact, during the next week I got to have quite an affection for John. I saw his photograph—a large, somewhat placid-looking man, considerably older than his wife. Fifteen years, to be exact; he was just forty-five.

"She used to smile so sweetly when she mentioned him. His passions apparently,

apart from business, were golf and photography. Every week-end, when they were at home, was devoted to these two hobbies. A little dull, perhaps, since she detested them both, but as long as dear old John was happy nothing else mattered. When business was completed in Rumania he was going to join her in Naples, and they were then going on a photographic tour through Southern Italy and Sicily preparatory to returning to London. Of course, John couldn't be too long away from his office there, but he did want a complete rest and holiday; he'd been working far too hard just lately.

"In fact, at the end of ten days, during which we did the museum, and the aquarium, and the tour to Baia, and Capri, I'd got a fairly vivid mental picture of John. I felt that he talked at breakfast and was not beyond sleeping after dinner, but was withal a tower of probity and common sense. Dear fellow! Long might he continue in Rumania. . . ."

The fair-haired man drained his glass and lit another cigarette.

"And now I must introduce Bill. I may say that from the very beginning I disliked Bill. He was one of those men whom every man and a few women spot at once as being—well, not quite all right. It wasn't that he was out of the second drawer; his birth left nothing to be desired. But there was something wrong with him: you fellows all know

that indefinable thing which a man can spot at once in another man. He was very good-looking, but, in spite of his birth, he wasn't a sahib. And he was evidently an old friend of Mrs. Verriker's. We were sitting together in the lounge when he arrived, and I suddenly heard her call out, 'Why, it's Bill!'

"She introduced us, and during the next ten minutes I could feel him sizing me up. I noticed he called her by her Christian name—Sylvia; and for ten minutes or so we stayed there chatting. Then he got up to go and see about his room—he was staying at Bertolini's, since he couldn't get a room at Parker's—and I didn't see him again until just before dinner, when I met him in the bar. There was no one else there, and after a while he led the conversation round to Sylvia Verriker. Had I known her long? Did I know her husband? and questions of that sort. I told him that I had not known her long, and that I did not know her husband, and all the time I knew he was trying to find out exactly on what terms I was with the lady. He was clumsy about it, and once or twice he went over the borderline of what may be said and what may not. Of course, he got nothing out of me, and after a while he switched off the lady and started on her husband.

" 'Extraordinary fellow, John Verriker,' he

informed me. 'Simply rolling in money. . . . Great big fat chap, always pottering round with a camera, or else fozzling vilely on the golf links. Adores her; positively eats out of her hand. The Queen can do no wrong sort of business.'

"He looked at me and grinned."

"'Just as well—what?'

"Jove! how I disliked that man. That grin and that remark gave him away so utterly and so truthfully. You must remember we were complete strangers to one another. But in addition to giving him away as an outsider it also gave Mrs. Verriker away as a naughty little woman. Presumably in the past John had paid other visits to Rumania or equally convenient places, and she had not allowed the grass to grow under her feet. And as I watched them at dinner—he dined at her table—I foresaw complications. Not with dear John, but between that damned fellow Bill and myself. He seemed so extremely proprietary.

"Well, I abominate complications in an affair of that sort, and I realised that something would have to be done. I couldn't leave Naples—I was there on business—and Mrs. Verriker knew I couldn't. And since she was a clever little woman, I was not surprised to hear after dinner that she had just received an invitation to stop with some friends in Florence, and was leaving by the early train herself, while Bill was going on to Palermo and possibly Taormina.

"I listened with becoming politeness to their plans and even went so far as to see her off next morning in the Rome express. We duly went through the formalities of finding out when she would arrive in Florence, though I knew she had no more intention of going there than I had. And then just as she was getting into the train there occurred a trifling incident. She dropped her parasol.

"Amazing what may depend on a little thing, isn't it? A man's life hung on that."

He smiled slightly and pressed out his cigarette.

"I thought it was about time to wake you up," he continued. "I've been intolerably dull up to date, but it was unavoidable if you were to get the hang of the thing. If Sylvia Verriker hadn't dropped her parasol and chipped a big piece off the tail of the parrot that formed the top, I shouldn't be telling you this yarn. I picked up the broken piece and she put it in her bag. Seccotine would do the trick and what a nuisance it was, etc., etc.

"I suppose it must have been four weeks later when the story starts again. I had practically completed the business which had brought me to Naples, and I was sitting in the bar one evening talking to two or three men when I heard a loud and jovial voice outside the door saying—'By Jove! Kitten. A bar! What about a drink?' And in walked John Verriker.

“ I should have known him at once from his photograph, even if his wife hadn't followed him in. He was just what I had imagined him to be, and his voice exactly fitted him. For a moment or two I waited in order to get my cue from her, but the instant she saw me she bowed and smiled. So I got up at once and was introduced to John. He put out a hand like a leg of mutton, insisted that I should join them in a drink, and was immensely grateful to me for having helped his Kitten when she'd been here before.

“ ‘ Been all over the place in Rumania, ’ he remarked, ‘ and I'm glad I didn't take her. Hotels there are positively alive. You get to be deuced agile with a cake of soap, I can tell you. ’

“ She shuddered.

“ ‘ John, dear, you *don't* mean fleas ? ’

“ He let out a bellow of laughter.

“ ‘ But I *do* mean fleas. Battalions of 'em. Still, I've done a pretty good deal, Kitten, pretty good. And I've got my eye on that little thing at Cartiers, my pet. You know the one you mentioned to me before we left London. ’

“ She smiled at him adorably and he turned to me.

“ ‘ We're just off on a good holiday jaunt round Sicily. Are you keen on photography ? ’

“ I told him that I didn't even know which end took the picture.

“ ‘A hobby, sir,’ he remarked, ‘and a science in itself if it is taken seriously.’

“ I assured him that I could well believe it, and for ten minutes he boomed on serenely about enlargements and cloud effects, while I listened with what politeness I could. And it was only when she got up to go that he stopped.

“ ‘I’m really rather tired, dear,’ she said. ‘I think I’ll have dinner in my room.’

“ ‘Where have you come from?’ I asked, for want of something to say.

“ She looked me straight in the face.

“ ‘From Rome to-day. We spent last night there. And from Florence the day before.’

“ Then she smiled and held out her parasol.

“ ‘Do you remember the accident? I never got it mended till John came, and now you can hardly see the break, can you?’

“ ‘As good as new, Kitten. Wonderful stuff, seccotine, Mr. Straker, provided you don’t use too much. I assure you that I’ve mended china and things with seccotine——’

“ ‘John, dear,’ murmured his wife, ‘I *am* so tired.’

“ John was all solicitude, and they went out. For a moment I caught her eye, and then I joined my friends.

“ ‘Damned pretty woman,’ said one of them, ‘but that bullock of a husband seems a Number One bore.’

“And it must truthfully be conceded that dear old John was. He attached himself to us, and how I got through that evening I don't know. His wife did not appear again, and for three mortal hours I endured a monologue on her charms, fleas in Rumania, photography, and the relative merits of pitching as against running up at golf. But particularly the wonderful qualities of his Kitten, until in sheer desperation I escaped and went to bed.

“The next day it was the same. He buttonholed me in a corner of the lounge and talked without stopping for an hour. They were staying on for a week; he particularly wanted to make some camera studies of Vesuvius and Solfatara at dawn and sunset, and other appalling hours.

“‘Dear old John is so energetic, Mr. Straker, she murmured as he bustled away to get some details out of the concierge.

“‘Do you rise at dawn and go with him?’ I asked.

“The little devil looked at me and winked.

“‘So you really did go to Florence?’ I pursued, a little gauchely.

“‘Of course,’ she said with uplifted brows. Where on earth did you think I went?

“But at that moment John returned and I was saved the necessity of replying.

“‘My dear,’ he cried, ‘who do you think has just arrived? I saw him get'ing out of the

hotel bus. Young Trannock. And there he is.'

"And young Trannock was none other than Bill. He came across as soon as he saw us, and shook hands.

"'What a pleasant surprise,' he murmured. 'I'd no idea you were here.'

"'This is magnificent,' boomed John. 'He's a camera fiend, too, Straker. I've just been fixing up a conveyance to get me out to Solfatara to-morrow morning at dawn, Bill. Of course you'll come?'

"I must say that that one moment atoned for much. Bill's face was a perfect study. The last person he'd counted on finding in the place was me; when I'd last seen him I'd had no idea my business would take so long. And the prospect of Solfatara at dawn, leaving me in undisputed possession, so to speak, was more than he could bear. However, to give him full credit, he carried it off very well. Nothing would please him more than to go to Solfatara at three o'clock in the morning with John.

"'No guides,' went on John. 'No one to worry one. You've been there, Straker, of course? Amazing place, isn't it? Those boiling lava pools, bubbling and smoking; the ground ringing hollow under one's feet. They tell me that they give it about another thirty years before it erupts again.'

" He babbled serenely on, completely oblivious of the situation right under his nose.

" ' Straker's no photographer, Bill. He can look after Sylvia while we enjoy ourselves.'

" He bore Bill away with him to the bar still discussing stops and speeds.

" ' How lucky that Bill likes photography,' I murmured.

" ' He loathes it,' she answered, laughing helplessly. ' But it's useful.'

" ' You know, Sylvia,' I said severely, ' you're an extremely naughty little woman. Do you usually have these—shall we say—overlaps?'

" She wasn't offended in the slightest.

" ' My dear man,' she remarked, ' it's entirely your fault. I'd no idea you were going to be here so long.'

" ' I wasn't exactly alluding to myself,' I retorted. ' I was thinking more of John.'

" ' John is very fond of Bill,' she murmured. ' In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he didn't ask him to come with us on our trip. What a pity you aren't a photographer. You might have come too.'

" ' You'd better take care, my dear,' I warned her. ' There are certain circumstances in which I would prefer to have your excellent John doing havoc with a cake of soap in the far-off Balkans.'

" ' Dear old John,' she laughed. ' I know how to manage him.'

“‘Quite obviously,’ I agreed. ‘But accidents will happen, and from the little I’ve seen of him I would prefer not to be around when one does.’

“Which was no more than the bare truth. In spite of his placid good-humour, and his unrivalled propensities as a bore, it struck me that John Verriker, once he was really roused, would be an ugly customer. Clearly he had not the faintest suspicion as to his wife’s fidelity, and so long as she ensured that he was safely in Rumania, or some other far removed and suitable spot, he was never likely to entertain the faintest suspicion on that score. ‘But for Trannock to go on a trip with them seemed to be playing with fire.’”

The fair-haired man glanced at his watch.

“By Jove! it’s late; I must be getting on with it. . . . I don’t know if you gentlemen know that part of Italy; probably you do. But if you don’t, Solfatara—the worthy John’s destination on the following morning—is worth a little description. It is the crater of a once active volcano which can now be walked over with safety except in certain spots. You enter by a fine avenue of acacia trees, and then, after a few hundred yards, you start over the volcano proper. If you drop a stone on the ground it rings quite hollow; in fact, you are walking over what is practically a skin a few feet thick. Below that skin is the boiling foundation, which

bursts out in certain places like a witch's cauldron. There are holes here and there where the mud seethes and bubbles, and the ground is cracked and split. And it's dangerous to go too near these holes.

"A strange place; an eerie place; with little eddies of white vapour bursting out of fissures in the hills around, and over everything the acrid smell of sulphur. Go there when you're next in Naples, but take a guide and don't venture too near those boiling, hissing mud holes, where the temperature is more than 150 degrees centigrade. If the ground does give way,—and it's under-cut near the edge of some of the holes—it's a dreadful, frightful death. And it's the death that Bill Trannock died on the morning that he and John Verriker went to Solfatara.

"It seemed that in his curiosity he approached the very edge of one of the pools. And suddenly there was a ghastly scream as the ground collapsed under his feet. For a few unspeakable seconds he writhed in the boiling liquid, and then it was over.

"Such was the story John Verriker told us on his return. His face was grey and his eyes, set and grim, never left his wife's face. And she, half hysterical with the horror of it, sat and stared in front of her.

"It was an accident, of course, but it necessitated a lot of explanation with the authorities.

And since Verriker couldn't speak a word of Italian, it devolved on me to act as interpreter for him.

"It appeared that he was engaged in fixing his camera preparatory to taking some exposures, when he happened to turn round. And he saw that Trannock was dangerously near the edge of one of the pools. He shouted a warning, and at that very moment it happened. There was nothing to be done; even if he'd had a rope it would have been useless to throw it. Death in a temperature of 150 degrees centigrade is not far off instantaneous.

"Such was the story as told by John Verriker, first to us and then to the authorities. His voice never varied; his eyes still seemed to hold the horror of what he had seen. And they seemed to hold some other look as well—a strange brooding look—a look to which I held no clue. It was a trying day, as you can imagine, and I would willingly have got out of it personally. But one can't go and leave people in the lurch.

"I hardly saw her; she had retired to her room, but he seemed to want to talk to me. Not that he talked much; but we sat together in the lounge, and I read the papers. And it was after a long silence that he suddenly got out of his chair.

"'I'm going to develop a photograph; one I took this morning,' he said heavily. 'And to-

night the plate will be dry. And after it's dry I will make a print of it, and I will develop the print. And I think it will amuse you.'

" He walked off, leaving me staring after him. After all, I hold no brief for Trannock ; as I've told you, I disliked the fellow. But, dash it all, the poor devil had died the most agonising death only that morning, and even for a photographic maniac it struck me as being a bit callous. Still, perhaps it would take his mind off the tragedy.

" I didn't see him again until after dinner, and then he came up to me in the lounge. He seemed more dazed and heavy than ever—almost as if he had been drinking. He hadn't been, but in the light of what came after I think he must have been mentally stunned. I can conceive of no other reason to account for his asking me to be present.

" He led me upstairs into his sitting-room. The electric light was burning, and on the table stood an unlit red lamp, such as is used in a dark room. Then he shut and locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

" 'I will get my wife,' he said, and I don't mind admitting, gentlemen, that I instinctively glanced round the room for a weapon of some sort. A guilty conscience makes cowards of us all, and for the first time a wild suspicion had entered my brain that somehow or other John Verriker had found out. But how?

And, if so, could it be that the events of the morning had not been an accident ?

“ My thoughts were interrupted by his return with his wife through a communicating-door from the next room. And I saw at a glance that she was as bewildered as I. She was watching him a little fearfully, as if she had suddenly found a new John Verriker. And once when his back was turned her eyes met mine in mute inquiry. But I could only shake my head ; I knew no more than she.

“ ‘ I have a little story to tell you,’ he began suddenly. ‘ It’s about a man—a poor damned fool of a man—who married a girl just fifteen years younger than himself.’

“ His wife gave a little, uncontrollable start, but she said no word.

“ ‘ He loved this girl,’ went on John Verriker, ‘ he adored her. And what is more, he trusted her—I said he was a damned fool, didn’t I ? ’

“ And now the woman on the sofa was beginning to shake and tremble.

“ ‘ One day,’ continued the inexorable voice, ‘ the man went to Rumania on business. He hurried through the business as quickly as possible, because he wanted to get back to the wife he adored and go on a little holiday trip they had planned together. She was going to be in Naples—that was the original idea—and he was going to meet her there. And then she changed her mind and went off to stay with a

girl friend in Florence—or so she wrote to the man. And the man believed her; why shouldn't he? Did he not find her in Florence on his return from Rumania? So they travelled together back to Naples from Florence, preparatory to starting on their little trip—this damned fool and his wife.

“ ‘They arrived in Naples, and the day after their arrival another man came, who knew them both. He was a friend—a great friend of the girl; this fool of a man knew that. But that is all he knew—then.’

“ ‘For a moment the man's voice shook, and his great fists clenched at his sides.

“ ‘Yes—that's all the fool knew then. And it's all he would know now but for a little accident; one of those things where the clever people slip up and the fools learn the truth. They went to the bar—the fool and the other man—and there they found an American. And the American, who was globe-trotting, started to talk about Vesuvius and volcanoes generally. Quite natural; quite an ordinary conversation, wasn't it, seeing that they were in Naples? And from volcanoes they came to eruptions, and from eruptions to the big recent one of Etna.’

“ ‘I looked at the woman, and her face was the colour of putty.

“ ‘The other man,’ continued John Verriker, ‘had just come from Sicily, and told us of the

very interesting excursion he had made from Taormina to Etna. He had taken some photographs—did I tell you he was a photographer? Incidentally, the fool was keen on it too. And the other man showed the American some photos he had taken. One in particular to illustrate the enormous depth of the lava. He'd had no idea until he'd seen it that it was so deep; no more had the American. And no more had the fool. He was staggered when he looked at the photograph; but it wasn't the lava that seemed suddenly to knock the foundation out of his life. Dimly he heard the other two go on talking; with a hand he vainly tried to steady he held that snapshot and stared at it. But not at the lava; at something else. Surely he must be mistaken; surely this monstrous thing could not be? But in his heart of hearts he knew it was so, right from the beginning. To make quite sure, however, he went up to his wife's room, and there, having found what he sought and driven in the last nail of proof, he sat down to face things out.

“ ‘The fool was going to Solfatara the next morning with the other man, and gradually a plan dawned in his mind. Not a nice plan, but when a fool realises his folly he ceases to be nice. And at Solfatara something happened—an accident—’

“ He laughed harshly, and his wife gave a sudden little cry of terror.

“ ‘ Ever considerate, the fool was sure the girl he adored would like a nice pretty picture—one that would make a pair with the snapshot of the lava at Etna. So he took one, choosing his moment with care ; and he developed it. And here it is.’

“ He took a plate from his pocket and adjusted it in a printing frame.

“ ‘ And now, with your permission, the fool will make a print of it, and develop that print in front of you.’

“ With a sudden tightening round the base of the scalp, I watched his preparations. He switched on the red lamp, turned off the other, and put in a piece of printing paper. Then, switching on the light again, he exposed it. And while he exposed it I looked at his wife, and she was half fainting. He put the print into the dish, quite calmly and methodically ; he poured the chemicals over it.

“ ‘ Come and see,’ he said.

“ His wife made no movement, but I, impelled by a sort of unholy fascination, went over and stood by his side. It came out of the paper, did that photograph—suddenly and dramatically, as with all gaslight exposures—and, my God ! gentlemen, it gave me a shock.

“ There was the pool, seething and smoking, and in the centre of it—caught at the psychological moment—was the distorted, agonised

face of Bill Trannock. It must have been taken from close range, literally as he died.

“ ‘Tear the damned thing up, man,’ I shouted. ‘It’s horrible.’

“ But he only laughed.

“ ‘It makes a pair,’ he said harshly. ‘In this the pool at Solfatara; in the other the lava at Etna. But in both something else.’

“ He laid the Etna snapshot on the table, and at last I understood. There on the edge of the Etna photograph, thrown on the ground, and overlooked when the picture was taken, was the handle of a parasol. And the handle consisted of a parrot with a big bit chipped out of the tail. There in the centre of the Solfatara photo was the handle of a parasol. And the handle consisted of a parrot with a big bit chipped out of the tail.

“ He dragged his wife to her feet, and forced her to the table. ‘I mended it for you in Florence; I broke it again last night. And here it is.’

“ He pulled the handle out of his pocket and put it between the two snapshots. And there it lay, that darned red and green bird with the broken tail, giving its mute and damning evidence. Many parasols have parrots for handles; but it is inconceivable that you should have two broken in the same place.

“ And a moment later Sylvia Verriker gave a little moan and slipped to the floor. She had fainted, but for a while we paid no attention. We just stood there staring at one another.

“ ‘ This morning ? ’ I said at length.

“ He looked at me heavily.

“ ‘ Have you not told the police that it was an accident ? ’ he said. ‘ Let us leave it at that. ’ ”

The fair-haired man lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

“ I’ve often wondered,” he continued. “ Wondered about that and other things. No ; I’m wrong. Not about that. I am as sure that John Verriker murdered Trannock at Solfatara that morning as I am that we are shortly going to have a nightcap. But what I have wondered since, and what I wondered then, is whether he had any suspicions about me. In fact, I don’t mind telling you that I wondered it so acutely that night that I left the next day. It struck me that this photography question might become a mania. Two were enough ; a third would be quite uncalled for.”

He turned to the seccotine maniac.

“ You see, it does sometimes fail to stick.”

The other nodded profoundly.

“ Not if it’s put on right. Now with china——”

The ship's doctor arose in his wrath.

"There will be a third in a minute, sir. And it will be of you, drowning in a bath of it."