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THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

AND OTHER STORIES

by

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

Author of

"Quinneys'," "The Actor," etc., etc.



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THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

I

MY brother Henry and I were on our way to Sherton Abbas in Dorset, when we took a wrong turning after leaving Belminster, and crawled on through deep, winding lanes in the hope of "wriggling," as Henry said, to our destination.

Spring was dancing into West Dorset, and to our eyes seemed more joyously at home than in East Devon. Outside of the beauty spots and the eerie splendours of Dartmoor, we had not felt too happy in Devon. We saw jerry-built houses eyeing impudently dear old cottages even as smart youth looks at shabby age, seeming to say: "This is our day, not yours. Away with you!" That morning we had stopped the car to admire a fifteenth-century manor house, still habitable, but abandoned. A stout yeoman farmer, whose family (so he told us) had lived in it for many generations, had built on the other side of the road a slate-tiled, plate-glass-windowed, pretentious monstrosity of which he seemed inordinately proud. We had a word with him. He said indifferently: "The old house is falling down." My brother, blinking at the new house, replied pleasantly: "I'm not surprised."

This incident saddened us. Half of the money spent upon the new house would have restored the old. However, humming along through a charming pastoral country, with the quick breathing of spring distinctly audible, we became happy again. Presently we stopped to ask the way in a quaint village. A stream of clearest water bordered this village street, and each thatched cottage had its own tiny bridge. Here we discovered that we had indeed wandered far from our right road, and more lanes, apparently, had to be traversed. A dear old gammer, actually wearing pattens, was sure we could not miss our way.

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"You do 'zactly as I tells 'ee. Fust turnin' to right after you passes church; second turnin' to left till you comes to Sandyball pond; and there, to be sure, bang atop o' Springhanger Hill, you sees—Salutation."

Salutation!

The name wooed my fancy. "Salutation" might well be an old inn with old wine in its cellars, smiling a benediction upon tired wayfarers. She rambled on:

"'Tis the notablest house in these yere parts."

"It must be. Who lives there?"

"There be what they calls a caretaker livin' in gate-house. You leaves that on right, see, an' keeps on an' on till you strikes the Lunnon road."

We passed Sandyball pond and climbed Springhanger Hill, stopping the car opposite the gate-house. That alone would have arrested the attention of any lover of good architecture, being solidly built of Ham stone, with a high wall of the same stone running to right and left of it. The gateway was beautifully arched, but the gate itself, or rather door, of solid oak and iron-studded, was not more than six feet high. We could see over it, through the arch, a delightful forecourt and part of the main house. It is as difficult to describe a house as a person, and charm in either is indescribable. Salutation struck both my brother and me as did the chapel at Amboise in Touraine, a tiny gem of Gothic architecture, suggesting, not a chapel, but a cathedral. Salutation seemed to us a stately house in miniature. This was due to its perfect proportions. Henry said: "We lost our way to find this."

Upon the gate was pasted a notice: "For Sale."

We were sensible that this was more than coincidence. For a month I had been touring through the West of England, looking, and looking in vain, for just such a house. The few that appealed to me were prohibitively high in price; the many that did not appeal kindled a futile rage. One real estate agent remarked acidly: "You will never find what you want at your price."

We stepped nimbly out of our car and read the notice. An order to "view" the property could be obtained from a firm of solicitors in Sherton Abbas. No price was mentioned.

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"Let's ring the bell," suggested my brother.

We had to pull it. A deep note boomed upon the air, and then a civil middle-aged woman opened a side-door and asked what she could do for us. We told her that we were on our way to Sheraton Abbas, that we had no order to look over the property, but were anxious to save a return journey, if she could strain a point and oblige us.

"I shall be only too pleased," she replied.

She left us inside the forecourt whilst she fetched the keys of the house. The north front was facing us with its three gables, its mullioned windows, its lofty, delicately-moulded chimney-stacks. A flight of broad steps led up to a porch, quaintly pilastered. We judged the building to be late sixteenth century and in perfect preservation. And it justified its name, seeming to salute us with grave dignity and pleasure.

The inside of the house was as satisfying as the outside. We were captivated by what our guide called the oak parlour, which originally must have been the entrance hall, running across the house from north to south, with a fine fireplace at one end and a glorious oriel window at the other. The porch, probably an addition, was not in the centre of the house, but at the side, and you passed from a small hall, with a staircase leading to a gallery, under the stairway into the big living-room. We noticed two interesting screens with fluted pilasters and a ceiling which my brother pronounced to be Jacobean, not Elizabethan. The escutcheon on the stone chimney-piece, so the caretaker told us, blazoned the Coryton arms, but the name told me nothing. In a few minutes we learned that the property had passed out of the Coryton family in the early 'seventies. We wandered from room to room, more and more delighted with this wonderful "find." It is true there was no electric light, but the bathrooms and kitchen were up to date.

By this time the caretaker had told us her name, Sarah Covel. She was the wife of the gardener, and she had served the owners of Salutation—two elderly spinsters—as cook. She looked what we discovered her to be later on, an old-fashioned family retainer. Finally she left us to explore the garden by ourselves.

The garden was delightful, but on the formal side. Tall

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elms flanked a lawn sloping gently to a bowling-green which would serve as a tennis court. The pleasance was surrounded with clipped yew hedges, undulating, with here and there remarkable specimens of topiary work. Over and beyond the south hedge we could see one of the famous vales of Dorset. The upper portion of this garden was protected from the north and east winds by a spinney, and, looking along a grass path and through a wrought-iron gate, we caught glimpses of narcissi and daffodils. We passed through the gate and into the spinney, where we made a notable discovery.

II

HIGH red sandstone rocks stood between this spinney and the road. Ferns, moss, lichen, and many familiar saxifrages grew on these rocks, and out of one bubbled a glorious spring, feeding a long deep pool. At the lower end of this we found a rivulet feeding another pool encircled by irises and sweet-smelling rushes. Following the rivulet, we came upon a succession of pools, much overgrown by the commoner weeds, and a cascade. Below the cascade, again, was a pond with an islet in it. You could cross to the islet over an ingeniously constructed stone bridge. This water garden was designedly wild. At the right season fox-gloves, bluebells, oxlips would bloom amongst the bracken and grass.

Henry exclaimed: "What a paradise for children!"

I agreed. And it must have been created for children, a long labour of love. In my quest for a home I had to consider my own child and grandchild. What I had to leave would pass at my death to my daughter, who had married a soldier, a lover of country life and country sports. I stress this point because it has a bearing upon my story.

At the head of the first pool, in a niche, we found a leaden *Amorino*, almost hidden by ferns and creepers. My brother was much interested, and waxed sarcastic at the expense of some former owner who had placed the tiny god in such an inappropriate spot. He carried a broken bow and an empty quiver.

"He belongs to the formal garden," said Henry. "Where are the other *Amorini*? This little chap is most exquisitely modelled. I feel quite sorry for him."

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We passed on. Presently we returned to the gate-house, where Mrs. Covell had prepared tea for us, another surprise. We sat down in a snug parlour and bombarded the poor woman with questions. We had made certain that the price of Salutation would be beyond my means. Did Mrs. Covell know what her ladies were asking for it? She did.

Four thousand pounds!

I nearly fell off my chair. The price seemed incredibly low. Eager questions followed. Mrs. Covell answered them discreetly. It occurred to me afterwards that she didn't volunteer information. But why should she? Certainly we could detect no wish on her part to deceive us or to hide disabilities. Apparently Salutation had passed from owner to owner during the past fifty years. Why? Well, it was remote from the travelled roads; no charrs-à-bancs roared past the gate-house; tradesmen did not call for orders; the nearest railway station was seven miles away. Her ladies had moved to Weymouth because they had been unable to afford a car. The place was dull in winter-time.

To all this we agreed, and to me, a writer seeking sanctuary, the disadvantages were alluring. In a word, I had fallen head over heels in love with both house and garden.

We journeyed on to Sherton Abbas, where we passed the night. Next morning, betimes, we called upon the solicitors and saw the head of the firm, a cheery old fellow who looked as if he appreciated a glass of sound port. He seemed to be as honest as Mrs. Covell.

"Cheap, gentlemen, yes—the biggest bargain in the county—but the servant question—I have a client who will hand over to you a large house for nothing, if you will keep it in repair. I can only assure you that Salutation is in excellent condition; the title is perfect; there is an abundance of water; rates and taxes are low; drains were thoroughly overhauled two years ago."

"Would your clients let the place to me for a year with option of purchase?"

"No, no." He made a deprecating gesture. "My clients are elderly and infirm. Their medical attendant lives at Weymouth. They want to buy a house there. I'm sure you understand."

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I was not quite sure that I did, but his manner was reassuring.

I bought the place within a fortnight.

III

THE cautious will say that I should have paused at a big bargain. Possibly. I left the matter in the hands of my solicitors, who were astonished at the low price, as I was. They conjectured that dry-rot might be found in ancient beams. On their advice a capable London man was despatched to Salutation. He overhauled everything and reported favourably.

I took possession.

For many years I had been a collector of old furniture. My brother, who is a painter by profession, loves a garden. He is an old bachelor. He promised to see me comfortably "settled." My daughter could not leave her husband and child, but she hoped to come to us as soon as we were ready to receive her. She appeared to be even more excited than I was.

The servant problem, which had worried me, settled itself. I had my own faithful man-servant, who would have followed me to Timbuctoo, and I engaged the Covels as cook and gardener. Mrs. Covel had a niece in our village who would help in the kitchen and sleep "over home": she found in another village an elderly housemaid, who occupied a room in the gate-house.

A delightful month followed, so pleasant, indeed, that a man of my age and experience should have sacrificed to the gods. However, "I tremble in sunshine" is a tag that I hold in contempt. We get little enough sunshine in England; let us enjoy it while it lasts. My brother and I moved in as soon as two bedrooms and the oak parlour were furnished. The parson called, and we made the acquaintance of our nearest neighbour, whom I shall call the *malicious* lady. She happened to be a sporting widow, and (to use her own word) "knowledgable" about matters that wise men leave in the hands of women. She managed her own household admirably. She regarded us with the kindest eyes. Nevertheless, as will be seen, she deserved the adjective which I have chosen carefully.

She rode over on one of her hunters, a big, cock-tailed

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beast that looked a "customer." And so did she. I heard afterwards that she could "show the way" to some of the young fellows of the Blackmore Vale Hunt, and it is my opinion that a woman who rides hard to hounds will hunt anything; the ardour of the chase is in her blood.

As soon as I saw her I marked a malicious twinkle in her eye, as she sat bolt upright in her saddle, looking down on two elderly adventurers.

"So you two have been bold enough to buy this lovely old house?"

My brother laughed, indicating me.

"*He* is the hero."

She was good enough to say that she had read and liked my books, whereupon, being still a fool, I asked which of the many novels she liked best. She couldn't remember the name of one. Covel took her horse to the stables, and she strolled into the garden with us.

"Why," said I, "do you think me—bold?"

She never craned at what some women might have considered a stiff fence. "Oh, well, I applaud boldness. I wanted to buy Salutation myself, but I funk'd it."

"Funk'd—what?"

"Surely you know?"

Her tone was incredulous. I inferred that she knew everything that might be reckoned of local importance. As I remained silent, she added, with slight confusion: "On my honour, I never believed the ridiculous stories myself. Give a dog or a house a bad name——"

I pretended to misunderstand her. "But the name is so exactly right."

"Salutation—yes. I see you don't know. As you must know sooner or later, I had better tell you that in the village it is believed that your house is haunted. Rubbish, of course, but it means bother and trouble."

We asked for details, the more the merrier. At the moment I was amused. It might have occurred to us that such a house could not be of its period lacking a ghost, but, somehow, ghosts had not entered our commonplace minds.

She enlightened us. Half a dozen previous owners, most reluctantly, had resold the house, generally at a slight loss. The spinsters—who were friends of hers—had never seen or

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heard anything to disturb their peace, except their own maid servants. And these, one little fool after another, had given notice. Our huntress, again, with a spice of malice, said truthfully enough :

"We are so dependent upon the natives, who have not been spoiled yet. My house is not haunted, but I can't keep a well-trained London servant. We are remote from the 'picture palaces' and the shops. I don't think my younger maids have ever strayed as far as Sherton Abbas. No complaints ! I have had a little trouble in training them. And the supply exceeds the demand. They won't come to you. If they do, they won't stay. Don't you hate me ?"

We laughed at her jolly voice and face.

"If we hate you," said my brother, "it is because you are exciting our curiosity and not satisfying it."

"I can't satisfy my own curiosity. I have never been able to get my teeth"—she displayed an honest row—"into reliable information. The house was Coryton property, and regarded as a dower house. Coryton widows lived here in the odour of sanctity quite peacefully. But since——"

"Yes ?"

"It is a fact that subsequent owners have never been able to stick it for more than three years. Shall I give you three years ?"

"Without the option of a fine ?"

"The fine has been a slight loss over what seemed to be a good investment."

Then she apologised handsomely and needlessly. She was in the right of it. We were bound to hear of the 'trouble' ; we thanked her for being so candid. When she rode off she left us relieved in mind.

Henry said to me : "We guessed that there must be a fly in our amber, and the fly, apparently, is not visible to her sharp eyes."

"A good sort. All the same, she will be disappointed if—we do stick it out ; and, of course, we shall."

IV

I REMEMBER we had a word or two with Mrs. Covell, who, as cook and housekeeper, was giving more than satisfaction. Unfortunately old-fashioned servants have a trick of saying

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what they think will please the "quality." Our good Sarah was no exception to this pre-war rule. But we squeezed something, not much, out of her. She blamed, not the gaffers and gammers of the village, but the young people. Indeed, we pinned her down to a sort of indictment against the children. She affirmed that neither money nor sweets would coax a village child into our garden. Having no children of her own, she spoke with slight acrimony of "mischievous" boys and girls. They, years and years ago, had seen "something" and heard "noises."

What had they seen? What had they heard?

To be honest, I have forgotten what Sarah told us. I decided at the time that she was repeating, under pressure, a farrago of inconsequent imaginings. But she made it plain why Susie (her little niece) slept "over home," and why the elderly housemaid had insisted (unknown to us at the time) on sleeping in the gate-house.

My brother said: "We must hunt for this 'trouble' in the garden."

I had not begun my regular work; Henry was not painting. We had installed electric light and central heating, and were busy from morning till night either in the house or the garden. We had set to work in the spinney, weeding and cutting down the undergrowth, restoring it, so far as we could, to what it must have been in former days. Springhanger Hill well deserved its name. We discovered several springs of beautifully soft water. Our rivulet was named the Niger; the cascade we spoke of as Victoria Falls. Inevitably the big pond was marked on the map of fancy as Lake Nyanza.

Our first task, I remember, was to free the *Amorino* from the clinging embrace of ivy and ampelopsis. And here we had to reconsider hasty judgments. Obviously the spot where we found the little god had been chosen deliberately. A niche had been made for him in the sandstone. He stood upon a square block of Ham stone. Scraping away moss and lichen, we found a date—nothing else—1870. This date kindled my imagination. Love had designed this water garden. Might we infer that love, as symbolised by the *Amorino* with his broken bow, had been driven out of it, that it had remained neglected for fifty years?

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Who could answer this question? Nobody in the village. So it drifted out of our minds.

And now I must set down the first intimation—if you can call it that—of the presence in the spinney of something uncanny.

I had a wire-haired terrier, Snudge, an old and tried friend. In his youth Snudge, in moments of exuberance, would go “mad dog,” careering round me in circles, too excited even to yap. As he declined into the vale of years, he abandoned these exercises, following me about with grave dignity, mending his paces to suit mine. Snudge approved of Salutation. We made together a visit of inspection, and he would stop now and again, with uplifted paw and head, to survey critically his new home. It is said—with what truth I know not—that dogs are sensitive to evil influences. It may be so. I affirm that Snudge was happy at Salutation, and that he investigated—on his own initiative—every inch of the property. When Henry and I started work in the spinney, Snudge accompanied us, watching our labours with unflinching interest. There were no rats or rabbits to distract his attention, and no flirtatious lady friend to tempt him to “show off.” To our amazement, and apparently without rhyme or reason, he would go “mad dog,” circling, not round us, but round the pools and trees, behaving, as we told him, exactly like a tipsy puppy. My brother insisted that the spring which fed the ponds and rivulet was the Fountain of Youth. Snudge slaked his thirst at it. I must add that after his attacks of seeming inebriety he would return shamefacedly to me and cock his head, as if to say: “There’s no fool like an old fool, is there?” We told him that he was growing senile.

Once he went “mad dog” in the house. We had begun to furnish the upper part of it. At the south-west end two small rooms had evidently been used as nurseries, because iron grilles, ornamental as well as useful, could be swung against the windows and the main door that led to the gallery and staircase. Sarah Covell told us that the spinsters had never furnished these rooms, and they were the only rooms in the house that needed painting and papering. We decided that these should be done up for my grandchild and her nurse. Henry charged himself with designing a

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suitable scheme of decoration. Leading out of the end room was a powder-closet, the old wig and powder chest, a fixture, proclaimed it to be so. We were taking measurements when Snudge went "mad dog" in the powder-closet. I supposed that a rat might be lurking under the oak chest. None of us was too old for a rat hunt, but no rat was there. We ordered Snudge out of the powder-closet, and he obeyed reluctantly. And then, entirely ignoring us, he sat down opposite the closet, staring at it and wagging his stump of a tail. I was so impressed that I said to my brother: "I believe he sees something."

To this my brother replied brutally: "What rot!"

V

OUR parson was a youngish man, a good square peg in a square hole, and we liked both him and his wife. They had two children of six and eight respectively, Wiggles and Peter Paul. The parson had wished to baptise his boy Peter; his wife insisted on Paul. They had compromised on the double name, and used it. We became firm friends with these children, bespeaking ahead their agreeable society for my grandchild. They were jolly little dears, neither blessed nor cursed with too lively imaginations. I'm afraid that some of our quips were wasted on them and their parents, but Wiggles accepted my brother as a "joky man," and grinned at his jokes even when she didn't understand them. We regarded the rosy, sturdy pair as the right playfellows for Bambine, my grandchild. Bambine refused to answer to her own name of Dorcas (and I don't blame her); she had assured us solemnly that she was too old to be called "Baby," so we fell back on Bambine. The child had been born under unhappy conditions. My son-in-law had been terribly wounded in 1916 and was in France. Joan, my daughter, nearly died, and the child looked for a couple of years like a snowflake out of a blinding storm. She lay, I recall, in her mother's arms with never a whimper or wail, and that far-away expression in her great dark eyes which seemed to say: "Yes, I have seen you; I belong to you, but I'm going to melt away soon." However, she lived and thrived. Still, we detected in her something eerie and elfin, and it was a grief to my daughter that

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Bambine had no brother or sister to play with. Wiggles and Peter Paul would teach her how to climb trees and lead her—we hoped—into wholesome mischief.

Neither the parson nor his wife ever mentioned to us that Salutation was supposed to be haunted. From my knowledge of them, I imagine that, being new-comers and matter-of-fact persons, the story, if it reached their ears, was dismissed as preposterous. Their children, at any rate, were easily tempted into our garden, and became frequent visitors. The water garden delighted them, and the names we gave to the rivulet and pools were chosen by Henry to stimulate their interest in geography.

VI

BEFORE we knew where we were, flaming June stole startlingly upon us. Meanwhile other neighbours had called, eyeing us, so we decided, with more interest than we as strangers could reasonably hope to inspire in them. They were too polite to ask questions. And our malicious lady was away. Superabundant vitality, after a season's hunting, had whirled her to the Riviera and thence to Paris. From these neighbours we gleaned a few ears of wheat. There had been a hunting couple—we wondered why the stables were in such sound condition—a Lady Sophia McFadden, a brace of Rumfords, and a K.C. whose name has escaped me. From the testimony of the ladies, all these persons had "adored" Salutation.

To our visitors we admitted that we "adored" our house and garden. I particularly dislike the verb, but as a solid possession Salutation had a strangle-hold on my affections. Many of my friends set an inordinate value upon what belongs to them, and my brother and I have always envied them this sense of overvaluation, because we stray in the opposite direction. The fact that a coveted object becomes mine arouses in me hypercriticism.

Still, I repeat that I was superlatively happy as the owner of this ancient house and garden. And from all I could learn, former owners had experienced the same joy and pride. Also I was beginning to hope that my brother would be beguiled into living permanently with me.

Just before our malicious lady returned to Dorset I had

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a strange experience. I suffer occasionally from pain which attacks relentlessly the fifth cranial nerve. The pain spreads to ear, eye, teeth and throat, and while it lasts is agonising. Fortunately I can deal with it. My doctor prescribes a sedative. As I have never taken drugs, I am, I suppose, responsive to it. I swallow a tabloid, lie down, and am asleep in a few minutes. As a rule, when I wake up the pain has gone.

About the middle of June, upon a heavenly day, severe pain came on after luncheon. I swallowed my tabloid, seized a rug and a pillow, and laid me down in the spinney close to the first pool. With the tinkle of the rivulet in my aching ears, I glided into the suburbs of slumber. I was not yet fast asleep. Above the lullaby of the tiny brook I could hear the fluting of the warblers, and smell the pungent fragrance of camomile, which grew thickly on the grassy bank where I was lying.

And then I had a sort of dream within a dream. I seemed to wake out of untroubled sleep to find myself free from pain and free, gloriously free, from fleshly trappings. In this my dream I could see myself, a discarnate spirit, gazing down upon the tired body which had served me faithfully enough for sixty years. And I was acutely conscious that it was mine, and little more than a bundle of shabby clothes to which I had no wish to return. At this moment I heard a laugh, so fresh, so spontaneous, so mirthful, that I turned my head away from my own body. And as I did so, the thought came to me: "Hullo! I am out of my body, but I'm still in the spinney, and how lovely it looks!" This impression of sharpened vision was intensely vivid. But not, as an experience, entirely new. As a boy, after a dangerous illness, during which I drifted about as near as mortal can drift to the farther shore, I came back to an entrancingly new world. I recognised it as the old world incomparably renewed for me. For many years afterwards I remained inarticulate, unable to put into words my impressions, but I spoke of this singular experience to my mother shortly before she died. I was then a man of fifty, but time had not blurred my vision of what I had seen forty years before. My mother listened to me attentively as I attempted to describe how a boy who had been

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raised almost from the dead, saw with clearest definition scenes familiar to him from childhood, but transformed into unearthly beauty. I told her that my senses had been quickened, so much so that I became intoxicated with life. The fragrance of the flowers, the crystalline sparkle of the dew upon their petals, the fluting of the birds, the conviction that I could see beneath the surface of things what I had never seen before, a sense of touch so delicate that I could, if I chose, play with a soap-bubble without breaking it—these imaginings I told to my mother, ending upon a personal note: "I saw you, mother, coming to me across the lawn, and you floated to me. You were my mother—I knew that—but you were transfigured. It seemed to me that you were the same age as I, and yet neither child nor woman. But it was you, really you."

My mother smiled: "It may be like that with all of us," she whispered, "when the mists roll away."

I have said that I heard a laugh, and presently I saw a little girl in pink gingham hiding from me, finger upon lip. She glanced at me roguishly. So vivid was the dream that I made certain some child from the hamlet had strayed into our garden. Both my brother and myself had made friends with the children belonging to our neighbours, and although our privacy was dear to us, I could not but regard this little trespasser as a welcome visitor, because, obviously, she made so sure of her welcome. Yet I failed to recognise her. What struck me first, and with astonishment, was the fact that she wore old-fashioned clothes, a Victorian frock bunched out at the waist, with short sleeves and low neck. At that moment I saw the boy, who looked much the same age, six or seven. The boy was hiding in a clump of bamboo. And he, too, wore just such a tunic as I had worn fifty years ago, and reminded me most uncommonly of my own robustious self. He ran forward, saying: "Don't you want to play with us?"

Oddly enough, I did want to play with them. He seemed to put into words an unformulated wish, and more than a wish. In a jiffy we three were darting all over the garden. In our vagabondage we came upon Henry hard at work under his sketching umbrella. As soon as we saw him, the little maid took my hand.

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"Shush-h-h!" she whispered. "We mustn't awaken him."

Awaken him? Yes, in my dream I felt as she did. Henry was asleep; we were awake, uproariously so. I found myself laughing as loudly as they did. But—and this was the strangest part of my dream—I seemed to remain myself. I had the activity and resiliency of a child, the joy of a child in mere movement, and with it my own mentality. And they knew this, because, when we had romped till we were tired, the little girl said shyly: "Aren't you a story-teller?" When I owned up, each seized a hand and led me, pulled me, to a leafy sanctuary. "Tell us a story," they said. I sat down, with the children, cross-legged, in front of me.

"Once upon a time . . ."

But this indeed was a story without an end, for I awoke suddenly to find myself clothed in the tired flesh and shabby clothes I had regarded with such disdain.

VII

I SHRANK from telling Henry this curious dream. Two words drop often from his lips—"punk" and "tripe." He applies these nouns, which are not in my vocabulary, to pictures, plays and current fiction "pot-boiled" to tickle the palates of the many. I made certain that he would say to me: "You were doped, old chap." Indeed, before the week was out I had wandered regretfully to that conclusion. The impression made upon my mind began to fade away.

Some ten days later Henry came to me when I was at work. We have always respected each other's hours of work, and, looking back, I recall an uneasy conviction that Henry was neglecting his work in my interests. My garden seemed to allure him irresistibly. He painted in it when he ought to have been painting out of it, and he worked in it.

"Look at these," he said.

He laid upon my desk a tarnished silver penny, a musical-box, a tiny sailing ship hermetically sealed in a small bottle, a Nailsea paper-weight, and an oblong cake of something or other enclosed in tin foil.

"Treasure trove," he added.

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The "treasure" had been found by him on the islet in the middle of Lake Nyanza, buried some two feet underground in a tin can. The silver penny, so we decided, had never been in circulation. It was dated 1869. The Nailsea paper-weight, if you turned it upside down, produced the illusion of a miniature snowstorm. When we wound up the musical-box, it tinkled out protestingly the hackneyed air from "Il Trovatore," "*Ab, che la morte.*" The last—and least interesting—object proved on close inspection to be a bit of Callard and Bowser's toffee.

My brother filled a pipe. "Children buried these," he said. "But—what children? The question bites."

"I can tell you. A boy and a girl played in our garden just fifty years ago. They buried this treasure. The girl had corkscrew curls, a pink gingham frock with short sleeves and low neck, blue eyes, fat, rosy, dimpled cheeks, and a delightful laugh. The boy wore a tunic with buttons down the middle, and he limped slightly."

"Really? Now, how on earth do you know all that?"

I told him my dream, noting that he allowed his pipe to go out. When I finished he made no comment, and began to pace up and down the oak parlour. We had made it our living-room because it happened to be big enough to hold all my books and my modest collection of early English porcelain. The oriel window, too, was exactly the right place for my big desk.

Henry came back to me as I was winding the musical-box, which may have cost a shilling in 1869. I perceived at once that he was incredulous. And how could I blame him? But he wanted to spare my feelings. We have much in common. He seeks from Nature, painting out of doors, what is beautiful to him, reproducing faithfully delicate colours and entrancing curves; and I, according to my lights, have tried to set down the more gracious curves of life, shrinking from what fails to appeal to me. But the essential difference between us is this: he paints what he sees, whereas I, as an imaginative writer, am more captivated by fancy than fact. The two are not irreconcilable; the ideal animates the real.

Henry began tentatively: "We decided, didn't we, that the water garden had been laid out for children? Children interest us. I want to find out more about the children who

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played here fifty years ago. But—the other thing—these dear little spooks of yours——”

He picked up the Nailsea paper-weight and turned it upside down. The miniature snowstorm obscured the tiny landscape.

“A savage,” he continued, “would be confounded by a trick.”

“You think my imagination is playing tricks with me? Perhaps. Let’s leave it at that for the present.”

We did.

However, what happened next was not so summarily pigeon-holed. Dismissing my dream, our thoughts turned again to the former owners of Salutation, and, in particular, to the two spinsters at Weymouth, living not a dozen miles away.

Henry agreed that it would be interesting to call on them.

We did so, a delightful excursion to the sickle-shaped bay, with the prospect of a dip into blue water and an invitation to drink tea with the two ladies afterwards.

We found them slightly agitated, and I wondered whether conscience was pricking them. They had just moved into a new house overlooking the sea. The elder of the pair admitted that leaving an ancient house had been a trial and tribulation. She said firmly: “We love the place; we were happy there.” I was tempted to mention our malicious lady, but refrained, saying instead: “You had trouble with your young maids.” The spinsters nodded, glancing at each other.

I plunged.

“The garden is reputed to be haunted. Did you see or hear anything?”

“Nothing that frightened us.”

“Or our guests,” added the younger sister.

“We paid no attention to village gossip, apart from the fact that it made the servant question difficult.”

After a pause I essayed another by-path to fuller confidence.

“We found the formal garden and forecourt in good order, but the water garden had been neglected——”

A shot, this, into the “brown,” which ruffled a few feathers.

“We had only one gardener,” said the younger sister.

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The elder sister flushed, conscious that our eyes demanded more than this.

Henry murmured: "And the *Amorino* with the broken bow—he was not placed in his niche by you?"

"Oh, dear, no. Perhaps we ought to tell you the little we do know, so little and—and so—bewildering."

"We should respect," I hastened to assure her, "any confidence that you placed in us. We, too, are bewildered."

In a few words I told them about Snudge and my dream, *being careful to avoid comment or explanation*. They listened quietly, showing sense and sensibility. When the elder began to speak, I supposed for an instant that she wished to change the subject. Her first words were disconcertingly irrelevant: "My sister took up photography many years ago. May I show you some of her work?"

She rose from her chair and fetched a large album which she laid upon my knees. I could see at a glance that the "work" was first-rate, and said so as I turned page after page. Here were studies, admirably selected, of "still life" as it is found in the gardens of England. I recognised a clump of fern mirrored in the *Amorino's* pool.

"I often worked in the water garden," said the younger sister. "I never saw any children, but I heard little gusts of laughter, so faint, so unreal, that I discredited my own ears. Always it came unexpectedly. I never heard it when I wished to hear it. Twice, at least, I fancied that light footsteps were audible. My sister, when I told her, said that I imagined things."

I looked at Henry, but his attention was fixed upon the speaker. She went on:

"I was glad to imagine them. Still, it distressed my sister. I have never been very strong. And then an extraordinary thing happened. I prepare my own plates. I have experimented much with them. Nobody touches my camera except myself. Nobody, so far as I know, ever went into my dark room. One afternoon I developed a photograph which I will show you."

She left the room and returned within a minute or two, carrying an unmounted photograph and a magnifying glass. She placed both in my hands, and I noticed that her fingers trembled.

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"Do you see anything?"

"Yes," said I. I passed photograph and lens to Henry.
"Do you see anything?" I asked.

He took his time, as is his habit, slightly frowning.

"I can make out what might be a small boy peering out of some reeds. The features are hardly distinguishable. It is possible, I suppose, that a child might have been there?"

"No, no—quite impossible. You must take my word for that."

"I do," said Henry.

"My sister raised your question. I—I think that I satisfied her. I had been in the glade below the pool for an hour at least. I had wandered about it and stood near those reeds, which are sweet-scented, as perhaps you know. I had picked one and crushed it up in my hand, not two minutes before I took the photograph. No child could have slipped into the reeds or out of them without being seen by me. That is really all we have to tell you, but I must admit that this strange experience preyed upon my mind. I—I wanted to see that child again."

The elder sister broke in: "I insisted upon our leaving Salutation. We said nothing to our neighbours. You may accuse us of being cowards. We had other reasons."

Soon afterwards we took our leave. Both my brother and I agreed that the ladies were fashioned out of sound Victorian stuff, no shoddy in their make-up. We asked a few questions about other owners. Had they gleaned anything from them? No. Salutation had been bought, as we bought it, in the good faith that it was what it appeared to be—a bargain.

As soon as we were alone, Henry said to me: "I believe that your dream was a sort of revelation. I wonder——"

He paused, looking hard at me.

"Yes?"

"I suggest an experiment. You and I have put from us any suspicion that evil lurks in the garden. Most haunted houses are shunned because there is something presumably malefic about them. A newborn child is hurled into the fire. The child haunts the room where it was murdered. It becomes what Bretons call a *revenant*. Personally I have thought that if there is any truth in these stories, it is hard

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luck on the hapless victim. Why should he or she be earth-bound? According to theosophists, elementals hover about this plane for sheer love of it. I can't understand an innocent child hovering about a fireplace where it was burned alive."

"I think as you do. But this—experiment?"

"Take another tabloid, lie down in the spinney, go to sleep, and see what happens."

It is annoying to record that nothing happened. I can only suppose that what my brother designated vaguely as "revelation" may come to us under conditions of which we know little or nothing. Sceptics scoff because the more remarkable materialisations recorded by spiritualists take place in the dark. I am not a spiritualist, nor is Henry, but as an honest man, carrying an open mind, I think that the scoffers are illogical. They might as unreasonably demand that photographic plates should be developed in sunlight.

However, for the moment we let the matter sink into abeyance.

Next day Joan and Bambine arrived in high health and spirits. Purposely, I had said little about the house or garden, and nothing, need I add, about the misadventures of former owners. Joan's husband was coming to us later on.

We took our guests to the freshly-decorated nurseries, where I had given my brother a free hand. He is so devoted to children that I regard it as little short of tragedy that he has none of his own. Secretly I am of opinion that he ranks higher than her father in the affections of Bambine.

He had painted in the garden, upon coarse canvas, a series of scenes from the old nursery books, using as a background the water garden, but, in his own whimsical fashion, bringing familiar characters into the twentieth century. Puss-in-Boots, for example, was driving a high-powered car, certainly at excess speed, along the path which led to Victoria Falls. Unless Providence intervened, a watery grave awaited Puss in Lake Nyanza. Mother Goose was in an aeroplane just above the reckless cat's head. The Marquess of Carabas, smoking a gasper with aristocratic nonchalance, surveyed through a monocle the impending catastrophe attired in a one-piece bathing suit. Bluebeard's

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wives displayed shingled pates. Little Red Riding Hood, in a hunting kit worthy of Melton, was astride the Wolf, leaping an obstacle which suggested to me Becher's Brook. These scenes formed a deep freize round the day nursery. Below, the walls had been distempered a red amber. Both nurseries were small, which accounted possibly for the fact that they had not been occupied for many years, and my brother had designed for them miniature furniture painted dark blue. He expected a glad acclaim and got it. Above the mantelpiece of the day nursery he had hung a beautiful oval frame of carved and gilded wood which held a sheet of dull steel. Presently this challenged attention.

"Nuncle, what is that?"

I accuse my brother of talking "at" children, but never "down" to them. His tricks are of his own devising. He treats youth with courtesy, talks to it as he talks to me, and seems to take for granted that every word he says is understood. When he talks "at" them, he addresses his remarks to me, as if they were not present. I shall try to indicate his methods, with the premise that they are not mine and cannot be annexed with any success by me.

Bambine stared at the sheet of steel, which served as a dim and shadowy mirror. Henry spoke to me, not to her.

"Children," said he, in a grave voice, "ask such silly questions. Are they born with brains? Or do you think that they pick 'em up as they go along?"

Bambine grinned.

"Now, that looking-glass," continued my brother, "answers the fat-headed question which has just been asked. If Bambine looks into it—and it is carefully placed at an angle so that she can do so—she will see herself as she really is."

Bambine surveyed herself.

"I suppose it is me." She stuck out her little tongue. "Yes, it is me, but such a funny me."

"The poor child," continued Henry, in the same reflective tone, "has no idea how funny she is. Probably she will be astonished to hear that this magic mirror came from far Cathay. It is not flattering. It is the only looking-glass in all the world which reveals the truth."

During this talk Joan and the elderly nurse were in the

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night nursery. This was fortunate, because the mirror, cunningly placed by my brother to stimulate the imaginations of children, was destined to confound our own.

Bambine went to my brother and gripped his hand. "I saw myself, but who is the other little girl?"

She showed no surprise or alarm at seeing another child. Curiosity, nothing else, prompted her question.

She continued: "A pretty little girl, so funnily dressed, all in pink. And she smiled at me and beckoned. Who is she?"

Henry, in emergencies, rises to his full stature. I was dumb with amazement, but at the back of my mind I was thinking of Joan and the nurse, and thanking God that they were out of the room. I heard my brother say calmly:

"You saw little Miss Nobody from Nowhere. She is rather a nuisance, Bambine. I often see her myself. Sometimes she sits next to me at tea. It is nearly time for tea. And, by the way, you will never guess what we are going to have for tea. You shall be allowed three guesses, and the right guess will earn this sixpence."

Three guesses were made. Henry slipped the sixpence back into his pocket as he turned to me. "Children," said he, "are, as I feared, singularly brainless. It doesn't seem to have occurred to Bambine that at tea we shall have, as we always do—bread-and-butter."

I thought he had saved the situation, but Bambine said in a loud voice: "May I ask Miss Nobody to sit next me at tea?"

"If you like. Perhaps she has had her tea. By the way, I heard to-day that a circus is coming to Sherton Abbas."

"Nuncle!"

"I may have been misinformed. If it comes, we must on no account miss it."

Bambine said dreamily: "I fink the smell of a circus the most d'licious smell in the world."

She had forgotten, temporarily, the little girl in pink.

VIII

As soon as I was alone with Henry, I said eagerly: "What do you make of this?"

"I make no hand of it," he replied. "And unanswerable questions had best be left till the Day of Judgment."

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“Are they unanswerable?”

“It comes to this. You accept—I accept—evidence of something supernatural. Bambine saw the child of your dream. Bambine may be clairvoyante. It is certain that others have seen or heard this something which stirred up gossip and gave a delightful old place a bad name. What you think, I think; I am worried just as you are.”

My thoughts, easily divined by him, can be set down. After a long quest I had found a home that suited me, and I was sure that it would suit Joan, that she would love it as I did. At sight of it she had clapped hands, exclaiming: “Oh, I could live here for ever and ever!”

I knew her well enough, however, to be sure that she would leave by the next train if anything happened to distress or frighten Bambine.

Ought I to tell Joan?

Henry detests futile speculation. When others talk round a subject, he remains silent. Nobody bustles more quickly into the thick of a verbal scimmage. I have heard him say again and again: “Let’s get at the marrow of this.”

I wanted his advice, asked for it, and accepted it. He counselled silence; he emphasised our own peace of mind. He ended positively: “There is nothing evil here. At our leisure we can delve into the history of the house; I look forward to that. As for Bambine, she is going to have the time of her life, spooks or no spooks.”

He predicted truly about the child. She went crazy over the garden, and mutinied when ordered by Nurse to get ready for the afternoon “promenade.” We pacified Nurse and cajoled Joan.

“We don’t leave the garden, why should she?”

Joan said seriously: “You are a couple of hermits, and I despair of both of you.” Then she laughed and kissed me. “Really, Daddy, your garden is enchanted, and Nuncle, of course, intends to encourage Bambine to defy Nurse and me.”

“Providence created uncles for no other purpose,” said Henry. “I regard children as much wiser than we are, because they know what they want. This garden is Darkest Africa. Let Bambine explore it in the true spirit of adventure.”

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Joan said reflectively : " I can't understand why you got this place for tuppence-ha'penny."

We didn't enlighten her, and Mrs. Covell, warned by us, said no disturbing word. Once again nothing happened. Fate, or Destiny, boils her pots slowly. If you watch them, they never come to the boil. I had made sure that Bambine would ask more questions about a little girl in pink and a little boy who limped. No, she romped about with Wiggles and Peter Paul and was as lively as a grig. A grig is a baby eel, an elusive little creature.

Finally, after many flounderings, we touched bottom. Salutation, according to our malicious lady, had been the dower house of the Coryton family. In 1870 the eldest son of the seventh baronet and his wife were living in the house. They had spent money upon it and laid out the water garden. In 1871 Mr. Harry Coryton succeeded to the family honours and estates.

We hastened to Sir Bernard Burke. But his invaluable book had been in my possession many years, a pre-war edition. Sir Harry Jocelyn Coryton, of Coryton Court, had married, in 1863, Priscilla Ann, daughter of Augustus Manvers, Esq., of Sutton Manvers, Somerset. Two children had been born to them : Harry Sutton, b. October 2nd, 1864, d. April 23rd, 1870 ; Ann Georgina, b. October 2nd 1864, d. April 23rd, 1870.

Twins had died upon the same day. But how—and where?

Excitement quickened when we learned that Sir Harry Coryton and his wife were still alive, and living at Coryton Court, sixteen miles from us, a very old couple and apparently much impoverished. No other children had been born to them, and the Coryton estates, at their death, would pass, so I was told, to a distant kinsman. Our parson, who was not in our confidence, looked up his parish register. The twins had not died at Salutation, and were not buried in the churchyard of the village.

This information was picked up leisurely. From the first we were aware that our neighbours, gentle and simple, eyed us with polite curiosity. I have no doubt that we provoked a certain amount of exasperation because we " came short " at flies more or less skilfully thrown under our noses. We were shy fish, which sharpened the wits of the anglers, who

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tried lure after lure with patience and persistence. The malicious lady said to my brother: "I am sure that some men are so self-centred that they deliberately pretend to be blind and deaf."

My brother smiled at her. "Yes," he replied, "but, oddly enough, I have never met a self-centred woman who pretended to be dumb."

IX

WHAT did happen within a day or two constrained Henry and me to practise what he called "high mendacity." Easy lying comes pat to elderly lips, and I have wholesouled admiration and respect for all middle-aged, kindly persons who fib generously and ingeniously to spare the feelings and blushes (if there are any left) of the young people. My brother is a past-master of this art, because, I suppose, he is a painter. Put it as handsomely as you please, there is a smack of imposture about the fellow who takes a blank canvas and a paint box and in the course of an hour or two produces an article which he brazenly sells for ten or fifteen guineas. My brother accuses me of similar malpractices, so we cry quits.

At the end of the first week the lot of us were sunning ourselves in a fool's paradise. The few neighbours whom my daughter had met aroused no curiosity in her because they restrained their own. I had counted on this. If, as was possible, henbane percolated to a lively intelligence, Henry and I were prepared with the antidote of ridicule. What did happen caught us napping.

Joan looks at Bambine from the modern angle. She treats her naturally, as a vixen treats her cub. Her protective instincts are as strong, no doubt, as Mother Eve's, but she has grasped the essential truth underlying all forms of education—children must be taught to teach themselves. Bambine refused to believe that nettles could not be picked with impunity. "You pick one and see," said Joan. When the incredulous baggage was stung, Joan did not ~~kiss~~ a fat hand to make it well. She rubbed into it the juice of the dock.

I was at work, when Joan came to me with apologies for disturbing me. "I must speak to you about Bambine."

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"Yes?"

"The child is an unblushing little liar."

Thus the impending sword fell, decapitating our plans. I could deal with the gossip of neighbours; I was aghast at this charge brought against an innocent child. To gain time, I said lightly: "Nonsense!"

"Daddy, she is. Do you think I would come to you if the matter wasn't really serious? I am terribly worried about it. Johnnie will be horrified."

Johnnie (her husband) was with his regiment—second-in-command—so I left him there, trying to marshal my thoughts.

"Tell me."

"I had it from Nurse first and then from the child herself. You know that I agree with you about encouraging in children their imaginative faculties—up to a point. When Bambine told Nurse the day before yesterday that she had been playing with a little girl in pink, whom she pretended to see in Nuncle's magic mirror, I laughed."

"Yes, yes. If this thing is serious, and I can see by your face that you think it is, I will send for your uncle. He—well, he is a bit of a liar himself, in the imaginative way, and——"

I was sparring for time, as you will guess.

Joan said calmly: "I have always thought that Bambine inherited her imagination from you. Shall I ask Nuncle to come here?"

"Do."

Delighted to be left alone for a minute or two, I pulled myself together. My thoughts took a swallow's flight to York, hovering above Johnnie. When I entrusted my ewe lamb to him, I did so without misgiving. Still, he is cut to the cavalry pattern, an out-and-out soldier and sportsman, but easily prejudiced against persons and places. My imagination is fairly vivid, but somehow I could not see myself talking with Johnnie about the Coryton twins. And, to be honest, the Coryton twins were exercising my imagination more than I cared to admit.

The sight of my brother's placid face reassured me. He has a way of his own with women which I describe as reticulated. He spins webs, gossamer threads of fancy,

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most entangling and quite invisible to the grosser vision.

He sat down and filled his pipe. "Let us take our time over this," he said comfortably.

I condense Joan's narrative, to which we listened without comment. Bambine had refused to play with Wiggles and Peter Paul, on the plea that she had a better engagement with her new friend in pink and that friend's brother, to whom apparently she was engaged to be married. Bambine's story had been told to Nurse with such a wealth of corroborative detail that the worthy woman was dumb-founded. The affair had ended in ructions. Peter Paul and Wiggles had jeered at Bambine till the poor child burst into tears. Nurse, very properly, had sent for the mother. Unhappily, Bambine, bitterly sensible that she was regarded as a gilt-edged liar, had piled Pelion upon Ossa, not only sticking stoutly to her incredible story, but—in the face of solemn warnings from Mummie—embroidering her theme with such brazen effrontery that she had been put to bed. To make matters worse, she had added, with shameless ingratitude, that she was quite prepared to leave her family and live for ever and ever with her new friends. With tears in her voice, my daughter ended on E in alt.

"You know what Bambine is to me. I nearly died when she was born; she nearly died. B-b-because of that, I thought, I b-b-believed that I was the g-greatest thing in the world to her."

"So you are," I said hastily.

"Is the poor darling the most dreadful little liar that ever lived, or is she mad? I ask you. And I shall ask Johnnie."

I am reasonably sure that Johnnie—had he been in my place, knowing what I knew—would have there and then embarked upon a sea of speculation whose tides would have swept him and his family back to York. Perhaps the sanest and truest argument used by spiritualists against sceptics who demand first-hand evidence of life beyond the grave is that the many are not yet prepared, or worthy, to receive what has been vouchsafed to the few, and only to them under bewildering conditions. Not being Johnnie, and having nothing to say, I glanced nervously at Henry. Joan did the same.

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"What do you think, Nuncle?"

"I must call you Pontica."

"Pontica?"

"Yes. You have reverted, like a rhododendron, to type. I suppose if you saw a mouse you would jump on to that table and scream."

Mentally I ejaculated: "Spider."

"I should do nothing of the sort."

Another filament followed the first.

"I am glad that I resisted the blandishments of your sex, because, had I married, I should have reverted to type."

"What can you mean?"

"Well, Pontica, if you were my wife, there is enough of the cave-man in me to send you to bed and then smack you soundly."

If I had said this, Joan would have burst into tears, but Henry spoke so whimsically that she laughed. He had diverted a mother's thoughts from her child to herself. Bambine left the stage, so to speak, till Henry brought her back.

"Dorcas," he continued, "is not the *bambina* that her mother is. Leave Dorcas to her elders and betters—us."

Joan laid a hand upon his knee. "Nuncle, you can account for this?"

"So easily. Bambine knows that her grandpapa is a story-teller. She is treading in his footsteps. She may beat her grandsire at his own game. 'To tell his grandchild stories much fancy he'd displayed, Until at last the old man was outfibbed by the maid.'"

"Oh, dear, why didn't I think of that?"

"Ah, why didn't you? We will deal with Bambine. Possibly her fairy tales will be taken down by your father and illustrated beautifully by me. Go upstairs, kiss her soundly, distract her mind by washing her face, and bring her down here."

Joan scurried out.

X

I CONGRATULATED an accomplished liar, fervently grateful.

"The red herring did its work," he observed dryly. "But all the same, we are skating over thin ice. I mix my

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metaphors because I'm so mixed myself. Bother these Coryton twins ! ”

“ They are charming. ”

“ Why are they here ? Can we send for the parson, provide bell, candle, and book, and exorcise the brats ? ”

“ We must go to Coryton Court. ”

“ Yes, and deliver the treasure trove to the old people. An ‘ Open-Sesame, ’ surely. ”

We talked on till Bambine came in alone, slightly defiant. It may have occurred to her that she had said too much, so she stuck her thumb into her mouth to stop further leakage. I took her on my knee and removed the thumb. My brother produced a chocolate, caused it to vanish, found it in Bambine’s ear, and popped it deftly into her mouth. Whilst she was consuming it, he addressed me.

“ Bambine, ” he said solemnly, “ is a good little girl, and I always believe what she says. Have you noticed how large her eyes are ? Bambine sees more than Peter Paul. Bambine, too, has sharp ears. She hears more than Wiggles. Once upon a time there was a little girl who could hear the grass grow and knew what the bunny-rabbits were saying—— ”

“ I fink I can do that, ” said Bambine calmly. “ And I sawed a brownie once. May I go into the garden ? ”

“ Presently ”

“ I promised to go into the garden to play with Harry and Ann. ”

Harry and Ann !

That she should know the names of the Coryton children confounded us. What followed was even more confounding. Conceding that the child was clairvoyante and clairaudiente, although quite unconscious of such powers, conceding also that she could take our thoughts, what we knew or imagined, and put them into her own childish words, how could she know, unless the knowledge came direct from the twins, *what we didn’t know*, what neither of us had ever conjectured ?

“ Ann and Harry, ” she said presently, “ don’t say their prayers. ”

This statement made little impression at the time. The life of a happy child is a pæan of thanksgiving and praise

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from morning till night, but Bambine went on earnestly :
“ And they never go to church—never, never, never ! ”

If Henry is right in his contention that children have a wisdom peculiarly their own, this second statement should have challenged attention. It merely tickled my humour, because I had a nightmare vision of the Coryton twins walking sedately into the village church, and of the congregation rushing madly out of it, headed by our malicious lady.

“ They love the garden,” said Bambine. “ They don’t *want* to leave the garden. Last night Ann slep’ with me, an’ we tickled each other. Ann is a tickler. But often they play in the garden all night. That must be fun.”

She sighed deeply. I was convinced that she was contemplating a nocturnal flitting, and wondered whether she would have the wit to accomplish it. To beguile her thoughts from such an escapade, I said lightly :

“ When I played with Harry and Ann, I noticed that Harry limped. Has he said anything about that to you ? ”

“ ‘Course he has. Mummie says it’s rude to make pussonal remarks, so I purtended not to notice it ; but Harry says that he broke his leg in the garden, and one leg is a teeny-weeny bit shorter than the other.”

“ Well,” said my brother judicially, “ all this is very interesting.”

“ You *do* believe what I say, Nuncle, don’t you ? ”

“ Yes, yes. And now, Bambine, I want you to believe me. It is not very kind of you to refuse to play with your own guests. We think it rather beastly. We have made new friends here, but how would you like it if we gave all our time and attention to them ? ”

Bambine nodded demurely.

Henry held up an admonitory finger, waving it portentously under Bambine’s nose.

“ It is quite likely that Harry and Ann might refuse to play with you if they found out that you were a selfish little girl, only thinking of your own good times. So run into the garden, and be extra nice to Peter Paul and Wiggles. And—bide a wee !—you can talk to us about your new friends, but as—as they don’t seem willing to be friendly and jolly with some of the others—why, if I were you I should not

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talk about them to—to the others. Off with you!”

She smiled at us and scuttled away.

We sat on, talking and smoking, in no mood to return to our work. Fortunately Joan had to go into the village. She dropped in for a minute, and we lied to her superbly.

“Bambine,” explained my brother, “is a dear, honest little soul. Be easy in your mind over that, and leave her alone. Her active brain has conceived a sort of fairy story. If you were unwise enough to try to kill her faith in these invisible playmates, you might distress her dreadfully and cripple her confidence in you.”

I rubbed this soothing ointment in.

“Don’t be a Pontica.”

“If you call me that, I shall be furious with you.”

Really she was very pleased with both of us, and slightly ashamed of reactionary tendencies. As the door closed behind her, Henry said ruefully:

“We’re up against it. For the moment all is well. But when Johnnie comes——”

“Yes—a court-martial.”

“Salutation in the market again!”

XI

THAT afternoon our malicious lady called upon my daughter and drank tea with us. She carried a nose cocked at a provocative angle. However, she got precious little out of us, and we did get something out of her. She happened to mention that the Corytons had sold Salutation in 1872. According to her—and we salted her remarks—the old couple were cantankerous and unapproachable.

“A pair of wicked old pagans,” she declared. “They want to be left alone, and they are left alone. Why such people are permitted to live to extreme old age is what we all ask.”

Henry suggested slyly: “Perhaps they live on because they *are* left alone.”

One for her nob—that.

Despite her inquisitiveness and the too flaunting conviction that Salutation would not shelter us much longer, we liked her. She asked us all to dine, and claimed to be distantly of kin to Johnnie. But I fancy they had never

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met. This cousinship alarmed me. She might say things to Johnnie which she hardly dared to say to us. On the other hand, it was consoling to reflect that Johnnie would reply "Tosh!" if a kinswoman inflicted on him what he might consider silly gossip.

After tea I wrote a guarded letter to Sir Harry, telling him of the treasure trove and offering to return it to him or Lady Coryton. I was tempted to tell him everything, but, on Henry's advice, I resisted this temptation. I worded my letter carefully. He and his wife would see, unless they were blind and doddering, that my sincere sympathy had been quickened. I stated that I had bought Salutation and loved it, that I was aware that he and Lady Coryton had lived there with their children, and that the date on the silver penny warranted the supposition that the children had buried the "treasure" where we found it.

I posted the letter myself.

A telegram reached me at ten next day, asking me to go to Coryton Court at the earliest moment convenient to myself. Sir Harry offered to send a car.

We took the road within half an hour, despatching another telegram to say that we were coming. I asked Henry to accompany me, because I needed his companionship and support. Somehow I felt nervous and tired. For a couple of nights I had slept badly. The apprehension that circumstances would be too strong for me, that I should have to begin all over again a quest for a home, that I should never find a house so right as Salutation, made me restless. The conviction that my brother felt as I did, and was as subject to the charm of the old place as I was, added to my aggravation. I knew that he wanted to live there with me. We couldn't live there if it was banned by my daughter.

A double lodge on each side of high iron gates flanked the entrance to Coryton Court. It was significant that the gates were locked, and the old woman who hobbled out to unlock them seemed to glare at us. The broad drive, moss-grown, passed through an avenue, now marred by many gaps. We could see the house on a slight eminence, Palladian in character and looking indescribably desolate. Impoverishment cannot rob an ancient house of dignity, but neglect and indifference do so unmistakably. I felt that

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the owner of Coryton Court could have no respect for it or for himself, and no sense of obligation to his successor.

An old butler opened the front door—cautiously. No doubt he had orders to admit us, but he did so deprecatingly. We found ourselves in a cheerless hall, but I could see at a glance that some fine pictures hung upon the walls, and that the furniture was valuable. Obviously Sir Harry could have sold, had he so chosen, some of his pictures and kept his house in decent repair. The condition of the pictures was shocking. I saw Henry scowling at a full-length Reynolds almost falling out of its frame.

Sir Harry and Lady Coryton received us in what I took to be the smallest and shabbiest of many reception rooms. Certainly at first sight they looked cantankerous, but not unapproachable. Old as they were, they darted at us, much agitated, speaking both at once.

“So good of you to come! We are immensely interested in what you have found.”

I took from a small handbag the treasures and laid them on a table. Moved by a common instinct, my brother and I walked to a window, turning our backs upon host and hostess. I heard a little gasp from Lady Coryton, and a startled exclamation from the old gentleman. The next moment he spoke warningly:

“Prissy—Prissy!”

I dared not turn round. I knew that my eyes were wet, I knew that the old woman was crying, and I wished myself ten thousand leagues away. Our presence became profanation. Henry admitted to me afterwards that he contemplated bolting through the window. But it happened to be shut, although the July day was uncomfortably warm. As I entered the room, I marked the lack of fresh air. I thought to myself: “Here these two persons have buried themselves alive.”

I determined not to stir till I was spoken to. And then, fluttering upon the silence, came the pathetic tinkle of “*Ab! che la morte. . .*”

I regard music as a God-given source of happiness and comfort to us. To some it is inspirational. Certain airs have a magical effect upon memory. If I heard unexpectedly one of the many Mozart melodies played to me by

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my grandmother when I was a boy, I should not only see her upright at her piano, but the room in which she was playing and the gown she wore at the time. I conceive that a tune played fifty years ago by every barrel-organ in England had this effect upon Lady Coryton. The air quavered away as the frail fingers relaxed their grip of the tiny handle.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Sir Harry.

We turned then swiftly enough, and I saw that Lady Coryton had fainted, and that she was slipping from the enfeebled arms of a man past eighty. We saved a fall in the nick of time, and laid her upon a sofa.

"She is dead," said Sir Harry savagely.

The rancour in his voice impressed me tremendously. When he greeted us his general appearance repelled me. Well, I was expecting that. Old age is repellent, terribly so when humanity fades from it. It is beautiful so long as kindness and benignity remain. Both these old people must have been handsome in their youth. Vitality still sparkled in their eyes, but a vitality that seemed to have no justification. I thought of Juvenal's line: *To live when life is not worth living*. The savage inflexion of tone conveyed to me the conviction that Sir Harry cursed his wife for dying. I may have been wrong.

He bent over her, muttering. Suddenly she opened her eyes, smiling faintly. There had been no time to administer restoratives.

"Are you all right, Prissy?"

She nodded, turning her head to the table. Half apologetically she said to me: "I had not heard that air for fifty years."

Henry suggested that we might open the window, and this was done. I was wondering whether we ought to go. Sir Harry had become impassively grim. Lady Coryton had half closed her eyes. I was about to make a sign to my brother when she said quietly: "Please tell us where you found these little things."

XII

DURING the journey between Salutation and Coryton Court we had beguiled the way by discussing whether or not we

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should take the old people into full confidence. That, we felt, depended entirely upon them. However, it was understood that Henry should have the "honour" and drive the talk as far as he could in the right direction.

He adopted what I have called his spider methods, and I listened to him, wondering whether his technique as a story-teller was not better than my own. Frozen by the cold, cynical eyes of Sir Harry, I'm sure that I should have described too curtly where and how the "treasure" was trove. My brother most artfully, and addressing Lady Coryton in a very quiet voice, sent forth his first thread of narrative from the spinney, describing how we had discovered the spring and rivulet, and wandered down the latter upon an exciting voyage of discovery.

"We guessed," said he, "that the little pools and islands, the ruined bridges, the overgrown paths, had been designed to amuse, and perhaps educate, children. Looking forward to entertaining my brother's grandchild, we set to work to remake and restore your designs. We thoroughly enjoyed doing so."

Sir Harry grunted; Lady Coryton sighed. But presently, as Henry lingered purposefully upon our labours, she let fall little exclamations of assent or dissent. Finally she said timidly:

"I should like to see what you have done."

"No," snapped Sir Harry.

This was discouraging, but I made sure that Henry had enmeshed him. I decided that the old fellow was struggling to escape from the web. More, he was in the barbed-wire entanglement of his own habits. My brother described the discovery of the biscuit tin, concluding politely:

"We could not return the little things to you then because we had no idea to whom they belonged. Yesterday a neighbour of ours told us that you had sold *Salutation* in 1872."

"Harry," said Lady Coryton, "I should like you to show these gentlemen the miniatures of the children." She added tremulously: "To—to please me."

He hesitated, eyed us malevolently, and stood up. I rose with him, expecting a gruff word of thanks and an intimation that we might go. Impatiently he waved me

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back, crossed the room, and unlocked a massive Queen Anne escritoire. Out of a drawer he took a leather case, opened it, and placed in my hand two miniatures enclosed in one frame.

They were the children of my dream.

You will say that I ought to have been prepared for this. In a sense I was; in another sense I was not. So far as I know, the middle of the nineteenth century held no miniature painters of note, certainly not one with the distinction and quality of Cosway or Engleheart. Nevertheless, the artist had painted two portraits of beautiful children. But the little girl was figged out in a sort of "party" frock, an affair of frills and furbelows, her hair had been "crimped," coral beads encircled her neck. Here was no sprite of the garden, but a prim little Victorian miss wearing her best clothes and a "visiting" smile.

In silence I handed the case to my brother.

"Angles and angels," he muttered.

He owned up afterwards that this was high mendacity, a shaft discharged at Sir Harry, intended to provoke him. It did.

"Angles, yes," he growled, "typically so, but angels—what sentimental balderdash! They were two jolly, healthy little devils. Hang it! Do I look like the father of angels, sir?"

Henry ought to have been in the Diplomatic Service. He replied suavely: "I had not the honour of knowing you, sir, sixty years ago."

The old man snarled.

Lady Coryton said softly: "They were angels to me."

Again I wished myself anywhere in the wide world except in this room. The situation had become too intimate, and intimacy between this stricken pair and two strangers was intolerable. One is conscious sometimes of mental impotence, which with many people takes the form of shyness. I have never suffered from shyness, but confronted with bewildering conditions I feel and behave like an idiot. It was not the unbridgable gulf between me and this cantankerous old gentleman that affected me. No, I was palsied by the conviction that a moral Atlantic surged between him and his wife. She had shared his life—

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if you can call it that—for sixty years; she had become, inevitably, like him, simply because he happened to be the dominant partner. She must have drifted, poor, unhappy soul, along the line of least resistance, isolating herself with him till they stood together, cut off from the world about them, derelict—marooned. And love, the greatest thing in the world, had been diabolically transmuted into hate. These two had loved each other and their children with a strength and tenacity rare indeed. Love had whirled them from heaven into hell. The man might not be aware of this; the woman was. And I was staring at her stupefied.

One lobe of my brain repeated dully: "Sentimental balderdash!"; the other lobe echoed this. If I told Sir Harry my dream, or repeated Bambine's story or the village gossip, he would shatter my nerves with ironical laughter.

Fortunately, Henry is of less plastic clay. He has never essayed the "problem" picture. He can draw imaginative scenes to amuse children, not to please himself. He prefers to depict swaying weeds in pools, shadows on sand dunes, and the baffling curves of water rippling over wet sands, and there is only a limited public for his stuff. At this moment, as he told me afterwards, he was engrossed with Lady Coryton, and as cynically indifferent to Sir Harry as Sir Harry, no doubt, was to him. I heard him say:

"My father must have thought me a little devil, but there is less devil in me because my mother saw me as—"

"As an angel," suggested Lady Coryton.

"Did she?" cackled Sir Harry.

"Of course she did," murmured Lady Coryton.

"Your mother," said Sir Harry, "willed wings to sprout on you?"

He put this question so insolently that I judged him to be unbalanced. Such a man, whatever his faults might be, was incapable of being blatantly discourteous to a guest in his house. But Sir Harry had left his house; he was soaring into the blue, as, indeed, I was. So I made allowance for him.

"I hope she did," replied Henry calmly. "I have not seen them myself; I have to limp through life, like your little boy——"

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“Like my——”

The old man choked. His face flushed so deeply that I apprehended a seizure. With a tremendous effort he turned to my brother and said viciously: “How the devil do you know that my boy limped?”

XIII

IN attempting to describe this poignant scene I am conscious of my inability to convey the tension between conflicting characters and temperaments. Looking back with what detachment I can achieve, I can only conjecture that my brother and I, showing too plainly, perhaps, sympathy for Lady Coryton, had enraged her lord and master. We were three against one, and he knew it. With a scornful laugh he answered his question. “Somebody told you that he limped.”

“Yes. My brother here and my great-niece, a child of six.”

Sir Harry turned to me. “Who told you that my son was a cripple?”

Once again the rancour in his voice betrayed his feelings. It had been hateful to him that his son should be called a cripple. I remained tongue-tied. A parrot inside my head kept on repeating: “Sentimental balderdash!”

Lady Coryton asked quaveringly: “I—I don’t understand. Who could have told a little girl of six that my child limped fifty years ago? How many people are left who know that I had a boy?”

“Or a little girl who danced about a garden in pink gingham.”

“In pink gingham——” faltered Lady Coryton.

We had crossed the Rubicon. Retreat, a gentlemanly retreat, was cut off. Henry, masquerading as Fate with a pair of shears, had snipped the thread that I was clutching. I knew that Sir Harry wanted us to go. I knew that I wanted to go, having outstayed my welcome. That was my thread leading to an emergency exit.

“Tell them,” said Henry. “Tell the incredible story. It is not our affair whether they believe it or not. After all, we believe what we want to believe, and that—*that* is salvation or damnation.”

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I began haltingly.

"I must ask you," said I, "to take our word of honour that we had never heard of the children when we bought Salutation. The place had passed through many hands. We were astonished at our luck in buying so much for so little."

Lady Coryton was sitting up, feverishly alert. Sir Harry, whether designedly or not, had assumed a bored expression. Possibly the pink gingham frock meant nothing to him. Possibly, too, all his hopes and ambitions had been centred upon the boy. His eyes were smouldering with resentment.

Lady Coryton said quickly: "We sold it for seven thousand pounds, didn't we, Harry?"

"Did we? I have forgotten."

"I paid four thousand pounds."

"Really?"

"That doesn't strike you as odd, sir?"

"It doesn't strike me at all. I'll say this: you got it cheap."

I went on, slightly nettled.

"But, knowing the charm of the place as you do, isn't it strange that no owner or tenant after your occupancy lived there for more than three years?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It struck us as so strange that we tried to find out the reason—and we did. Salutation, according to local gossip, is haunted."

"Tchah! So is every old house in Dorset."

"Please go on," panted Lady Coryton.

"I bought the house, Sir Harry, and at first I was not affected by local gossip. We were told nothing definite. Our predecessors had had difficulty with servants; the house, too, is remote, off the main roads. My brother and I moved into it without the slightest apprehension that we should see or hear anything that could not be accounted for naturally. For some time nothing happened."

Sir Harry jumped up. To do him justice, he was, I think, more concerned with his wife than with us. She was leaning forward, gazing intently at me, trembling with excitement.

"I am sorry," said the old gentleman with dignity. "You have done us a service, at some inconvenience to yourselves,

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and Lady Coryton and I hope that you will stay to luncheon. It might interest you to see the house and some of the pictures. But Salutation—and everything that concerns Salutation—has ceased to exist for us. We left it fifty years ago ; we cannot go back, even in fancy. It may well be haunted, not by what fools call ghosts, but by the broken hopes, the sorrows, the dreadful misery that we endured there after our children died. To me that house is accursed. My wife shares my view.”

Did she ?

I glanced at her face, the colour and texture of ivory. Whilst her husband was speaking she lay back again on the sofa. His vehemence, the passion in his still strong voice, seemed to calm her. She had folded resignedly her trembling hands ; her eyes dimmed. At his last positive affirmation she Lowed her head.

We refused the perfunctory invitation to luncheon, and took our leave. I imagined—it may have been imagination—that Lady Coryton pressed my hand at parting. The sadness on her face was the enduring impression that I carried with me as we sped away from this house of desolation. I couldn't speak for a few minutes.

My brother muttered, half to himself : “ We are up to our necks in Greek tragedy.”

XIV

I RETURNED to Salutation horribly depressed and tired. My mind had been poisoned. My lovely house *was* accursed. Others must have fought against this conviction just as I did, and they had yielded, as I was yielding, to amorphous fears which an outsider would have ridiculed and condemned.

Lying, as we had to lie, was no counter-irritant. Naturally enough, Joan asked questions. I replied that business had taken us to Sherton Abbas. It had, indeed, taken us through Sherton Abbas, so her curiosity was easily allayed.

Joan is really a sw— No, let a fond father restrain himself. When a man assures me that his dearest girl is “ perfectly sweet,” I question his truthfulness. If he tells me that the darling was born with a hare-lip, I accept that as a fact unhesitatingly. Henry says that Joan bullies me.

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I am sadly conscious that she has the whip hand when we are jogging down the beaten tracks of domestic life. Her un-friends admit that she is very agreeable when she has her own way. And every nice woman knows that the more experienced male mind can be warped to serve feminine ends, not necessarily selfish ends.

I believe that I should have screamed if Bambine, or anybody else, had mentioned the Coryton twins that afternoon. To escape from my own house I took our party to the sea, where I snoozed on the hot sand and regained some measure of resignation.

Before going to bed that night I stood, as usual, at my bedroom window, which faces south, and looked down over the garden, even more fascinating by moonlight. To think of it as "accursed" was ridiculous. Instinct revolted against such a wicked indictment. The old man was accursed, not Salutation. A grim determination to remain in my sanctuary took hold of me. I would defy our malicious lady and Joan, if Joan, as I so greatly feared, became in her turn a victim and a coward. Why should I consider Joan and Bambine? After my death they could do what they pleased. During my lifetime, and at my age, I was justified in considering myself.

I went to bed in this valiant mood and fell asleep. I was awakened just after midnight by a knocking on the door. Joan rushed in. In a second I was wide awake, distressingly so.

Bambine had vanished!

Instantly I guessed where she was—in the garden, playing with the twins. From the passage came gurgling noises.

"Nurse," said Joan gaspingly, "is in hysterics."

"Nurse," I replied angrily, "is an old fool! If you will kindly empty a jug of cold water over her, I—I will fetch Bambine."

Joan, under this cold douche, became less hysterical herself.

"Fetch her?" she repeated. "You—you know where she is?"

"Yes—in the garden. Now, Joan, you will please do exactly as I tell you. We can go into explanations later on. You will take Nurse to the nursery quietly. I won't

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have the whole household disturbed. I will bring back Bambine."

In the big crises of life I flatter myself that I have my way. Joan obeyed me. I slipped a dressing-gown over my pyjamas, thrust my feet into slippers, and hurried downstairs, accompanied by Snudge. A hasty glance through my bedroom window had revealed nothing. That was to be expected. I knew that I should find the truant in the spinney.

I crept into it, with Snudge at my heels, treading noiselessly, slipping from tree to tree till I saw the upper pool and its *Amorino*. At the same moment Snudge dashed away from me. I stood still at the edge of the rivulet, listening. I had heard a laugh.

Between the first pool and the second is a glade, and on each side of the rivulet are clumps of king fern and giant maidenhair. Between these my brother had planted forget-me-nots. This tiny glade we considered to be the prettiest part of the garden, because it was so secluded, so complete in itself. Our finest oak stood at the lower end, a hoary sentinel. Under its great branches the moss grew thickest and greenest. Upon the moss Bambine was dancing. And Snudge had gone "mad dog." He was racing round the child, barking whenever she laughed, and leaping up, not at her, but at something invisible to me. Bambine was barefoot and in her nighty. However, the night was so warm that my dressing-gown felt oppressive.

I watched the child, entranced and—shall I add?—awed, for the sprite seemed pure spirit, a little Euphrosyne, light on her toes, hardly touching earth, flitting from moonlight into shadow, an ethereal nymph, a dryad. And my *Amorino*, with his broken bow and empty quiver, looked on poutingly, as if he, too, was longing to join these revels.

Suddenly Bambine saw Snudge. She stood still, called the dog, and bent to pat him. Snudge fawned upon her, and the spell seemed to be broken. The Sand Man was beckoning. She rubbed her eyes and slowly sank down upon the soft moss. Snudge curled himself up against her body. . . .

When I reached her she was asleep. I picked her up without awakening her and carried her to the nursery.

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Snudge followed at heel. Two anxious but relieved women accepted as truth a happy lie.

"I found her fast asleep in the spinney. Shush-h-h!"

"You think," whispered Joan, "that she has been walking in her sleep?"

"What else can I think?"

Bambine was tucked up in her cot. Joan passed a maternal hand over relaxed limbs, and followed me into the gallery.

"If she has taken cold——"

I said nothing.

"Her little body is quite warm, astonishingly so. That is astonishing, isn't it?"

"How do we know that she didn't run or dance in her sleep?"

Joan shot a glance at me, which I countered with a yawn. Lying to women is uphill work, whatever modern husbands may say to the contrary.

"Bambine has never walked in her sleep before, Daddy, and the child is so well. I—I can't account for this."

I retreated into my own room, and lay awake, trying to assimilate my own righteous fibs. I told myself that I couldn't keep it up. I felt easy in my mind about the Recording Angel. I was piling up the good marks with him. But I distrusted my staying powers; I was dismally sensible that Joan's suspicions were aroused.

I hoped that Bambine would awake next day blissfully ignorant of what she had done. It was, so I decided, quite probable that she had strayed from the nursery asleep. She might prattle to Nurse and Mummie about a funny dream——

Not so. The elf had the pluck to make full confession. She woke up to find herself in the nursery. How did she get back there?

Joan came to Henry and me after breakfast, and told us that Nurse had given notice.

"What—Boadicea" (I called her that) "is leaving you and Bambine! Why?"

But I knew why well enough.

"She says that this house is haunted—and everybody knows it. She says that Bambine has seen the ghosts, that

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she escaped last night to play with them in the garden. Her story has frightened Nurse out of what wits she has, and—I must be honest with you, Daddy—I—I am rather frightened myself.”

Perhaps I ought to have made a clean breast of it there and then, but so much was at stake. Anyway, I temporised, going very easy with Joan.

“Is Bambine the worse for her adventure.”

“N-no.”

“Try to tell me exactly what Nurse says.”

Nurse, at first, had lied, but not convincingly.

XV

IN high mendacity (as practised by experts) Ananias, I am sure, could give half-thirty at least to Sapphira. Women over-lie, and it takes a woman to expose them. Joan made mincemeat of Nurse's reasons for leaving an excellent billet. Then the truth—or what Nurse believed to be the truth—burst into coloured sparks. All the imaginings of credulous ignorance took concrete form. They were hurled at my head. Doors opened and shut mysteriously in the house itself. A kitchen-maid, in the service of the spinsters, had seen a grey lady flitting about the passages. Somebody long ago had encountered a Cavalier carrying his head under his arm! Murder had been committed in the best bedroom! Skeletons lay beneath the cellars!

I exclaimed, unconsciously quoting Sir Harry: “What balderdash!”

At any rate, further dissembling was impossible. I had to tell my tale, and I never told a tale worse—at least, Henry said so afterwards. He admitted, however, that I was convincing. Joan sucked in every word; Henry puffed at his pipe.

I concluded irritably: “Nurse can go to Jericho, and the sooner the better.”

“I suggest,” said Henry, “a place not quite so far off—Mrs. Covell's parlour. Mrs. Covell, mark you, has lived here happily for several years. She has seen nothing to disturb her peace or imperil her wages. Let her talk to Nurse. Dash it all, we're sensible people, who take life as we find it, and life here has been very jolly and satisfying. Bambine

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is as gay as a gazeka. Let us mark time, and—well, look for sign-posts.”

Joan nodded. I had a word with Mrs. Covel, and she had a word or two with Nurse, who, under the combined pressure of four sensible persons, consented to stay on “to oblige.” I had the notion that she was rather ashamed of herself.

But the mischief had been done; my halcyon days at Salutation were numbered. I knew that Joan was staying on merely “to oblige.” She mentioned lightly that in case of sudden illness there was no good doctor nearer than Sherton Abbas, and pointed out to me that with advancing years the distance from the golf course might prevent me from taking my favourite exercise—and so forth.

Bambine made matters worse. The child sneaked into my bedroom when I was dressing for dinner.

“I popped out of bed to tell you somefink. It’s a secret.”

We shared many secrets, I’m proud to say, so I inclined an attentive ear and took the elf upon my knee.

“There is too much popping out of bed,” said I.

“Are you very angry with me?” she asked. “You see, Gran, I ’member puffec’ly crawlin’ downstairs and through the big window into the garden. Harry an’ Ann was waitin’ for me, and—oh, it was such fun! Then I saw Snudgie, an’ Mummie says you found me fast asleep an’ carried me back to the nursery. Was I very heavy?”

“No. Now, Bambine, tell me the secret. It shall be a dead secret between you and me.”

“A *dead* secret! Well, Gran, Harry an’ Ann say that the garden belongs to them. Isn’t that a story? It’s yours, not theirs, isn’t it?”

I thought helplessly of Henry. Why wasn’t he here to cope with this inquisitress?

“M’yes,” said I.

Fortunately Bambine shot off at a tangent. “I want to know, Gran, *who they are*. They just laugh at me when I ask them. I s’posed that they might come here by car. Gran, *they have never seen a car!* I—I can’t b’lieve that. And why do they wear such funny clothes?”

I glanced round. Dared I fetch Henry? No. Where was “Boadicea”?

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"I shall be late for dinner," said I, "and if Mummie catches you in here——"

"She won't. Nurse is in Mummie's room. I purtended to be fast asleep. We're quite all right." She cuddled up closer. "Harry an' Ann *are* queer. They do go on so 'bout this garden being theirs. I asked 'em where their Daddy and Mummie lived."

"Did you? What did they say to that?"

"They just laughed. They—they didn't seem to care much. Ann said they left their Daddy an' Mummie in Tilly."

"Where?"

"In Tilly. 'Course you know where Tilly is."

"I—I don't. I haven't the remotest idea."

"Oh, Gran! And I thought you knew everyfink! Now, I've got such a splendid plan. You said *you* played with Harry an' Ann."

I regretted having made this damaging admission, but I murmured cautiously that I had.

Bambine went on: "You can jump about in the garden all night, if you want to, can't you? If you slipped out to-night, you'd find 'em, an' then you might ask 'em where Tilly is. I want to know why they left their Daddy an' Mummie in Tilly——"

At this moment the gong, that is sounded five minutes before dinner, boomed out.

"Shush-h-h!" said I. "I'll pop you back into bed before we get caught."

She agreed that this might be wise.

I went down to dinner, wondering where Tilly was. Smoking a cigar after dinner with Henry, I repeated my talk with Bambine. Certainly Henry's wits are sharper than mine, but then the *Amorino* had interested him—as a work of art, I mean—far more than it had interested me. To me it was merely a symbol placed in its niche by two unhappy parents.

Joan was not with us. I fancy that "Boadicea" and she were "on guard." And "Boadicea" was having her supper.

"Tilly," said Henry, "is obviously Italy."

I was ashamed of not having thought of this.

"It must be Italy. That *Amorino* came from Italy. If

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we have not been enslaved by some strange concatenation of circumstance and coincidence——”

“ But these names——”

“ I know. Still, it is conceivable that one of the ancients of the village knew the Coryton twins, and actually saw a small girl in pink gingham and a boy who limped. Such a memory might have been passed on and on till finally it reached Bambine from some village child—Susie, for instance.”

“ But my dream ? ”

“ Yes, yes, we are groping helplessly in the dark. The twins may have died in Italy. To commemorate their memory, Sir Harry or Lady Coryton would be quite likely to buy that *Amorino* and place it in the water garden.”

For the moment we left it at that.

I was tempted to write to a friend of mine, once a rabid agnostic and materialist, but now convinced—against his will, so he assured me—that the dead can communicate with the living, and world-famous as a teacher and preacher of the higher truths of spiritualism. This friend happened to be in London, but I knew how importunate were the claims of thousands upon his time and attention, and how generously he responded to them. He would come to us if I asked him, but I didn't.

Instead I went on, as Henry said, looking for sign-posts in a very deep and twisting lane.

XVI

A FEW days later Joan, Nurse, and Bambine left Salutation. Bambine howled with rage. Mentally, so did I. Even Henry was so distressed that he found himself unable to paint. We wandered about together, talking things over with exasperating repetition, unable to blame Joan, miserably aware that in her place we should have done the same. She took the child to Bembridge, where (she hoped) sea breezes and other children would blow the Coryton twins out of a bewildered little pate. We knew that Johnnie, when he heard the story—whether he believed it or not—would side with Joan.

Henry said to me irritably: “ Salutation is a wash-out for them.”

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And thus all my pleasant plans for the future crumbled away.

Our malicious lady guessed something, and assumed a triumphant expression. I dare say a garbled version of Nurses giving "notice" reached her ears. She was certainly "nice" to us, and proposed an expedition or two to local points of interest. Henry was rather short with her.

"Salutation is so satisfying that we hate leaving it."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you thinking of leaving it?" she asked.

I replied hastily: "My brother and I are perfectly happy in the garden."

I thought that she looked slightly disappointed.

About a week later she brought us exciting news. She bustled on to the lawn, where we were having our tea.

"I was telling you about the Corytons the other day. I heard this morning that Sir Harry died suddenly last night—a sort of seizure. He was eighty-seven. Nobody seems to know whether or not he could leave the Court to his wife for the rest of her life."

I dissembled with her. "Well, well, eighty-seven is a ripe age."

We were pleased with her when she riposted: "Those whom the gods love don't live quite so long."

I touched a waistcoat button and bowed. A good gossip carries more than a well-turned arm up her sleeve.

Presently she went her way.

Henry said: "Are you going to the funeral?"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Lady Coryton would hear that you were there. It—it might lead to something."

I did attend the funeral, and half the die-hards in Dorset were there. It leaked out afterwards that Sir Harry had added a codicil to his will: "Give my neighbours, whom I have not entertained for fifty years, the best wine in my cellars." He was laid to what is called "rest" in a mausoleum. Joan will know, when she reads these lines, why I attended the funeral. I wanted to find out if the twins were in the mausoleum. They were not. Sir Harry, I learned, had been cremated. Lady Coryton, so the old butler informed me, was in bed, prostrated by grief.

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Within forty-eight hours everybody in the West Country was chattering about the late baronet and his money affairs. My widow—I use the possessive pronoun because she attached herself to me like a barnacle—had said that he was impoverished. Those who were lucky enough not to know him may have said the same about that noble and puissant prince, the late Marquess of—. Between him and Sir Harry Coryton lively journalists established a striking parallel. The Coryton estates and the Court passed to the old man's next-of-kin (whom he had never seen); a large private fortune, accumulated by a miser, was left unconditionally to Lady Coryton. Even the gaffers in the ale-houses mumbled to each other: "Ah-h, now, whatever will she do wi' it?" Nobody knew, and very few cared. The old lady—so my widow assured me—would join her husband (wherever he might be) within a week or two.

She didn't. Within a week or two she sent for Henry and me, and we found her, under all the circumstances, singularly alive, and, I am tempted to add, pathetically so. I told her everything, and she accepted the bewildering story as true. I would set down, if I could, what she told us, but hers was a long and disjointed narrative, and we had to wander with her down many byways, lost now and again in labyrinths of irrelevancy and reminiscence. One fact stood out—she had loved a man who unquestionably was not quite sane, and he had loved her, but with an insensate jealousy from the first. Even as a young man he had immured her and the children at Salutation. She said tenderly: "We were so happy there, but I knew it was a selfish happiness. I—I couldn't make Harry see that. We lived for ourselves and the children. He had no faith in religion, none. The children were brought up as joyous little savages. After the boy broke his leg his robust health failed. Eventually my husband called in a great London doctor, who advised us to go to Italy for the winter. And there, as perhaps you know, they were drowned."

She made an odd, despairing gesture, and we guessed that half a century ago life had ebbed out of her and with it all that life holds.

She went on presently, dry-eyed, but with a quaver in her voice: "My husband never rested till the bodies were

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recovered. He insisted that they should be cremated. We brought back the ashes and placed them in that block of Ham stone upon which the *Amorino* stands. I was against that, but he—he had his way. We lived on at Salutation for nearly two unhappy years, till Harry's father died. Then we sold the place and moved to the Court."

XVII

BACK in our oak parlour, Henry and I had to admit that we were in a blind alley. I could see no way out of it. Two little spirits were earth-bound in my garden, and I was at their mercy. Absurd as it may sound, I had the feeling that the tiny pagans were laughing at me. My mother—had she been alive—would have entreated our parson to "lay" these small ghosts, but my faith in the powers of the clergy is less strong.

In the end our malicious lady triumphed. Salutation was offered for sale again, and the tongues of the gossips must have ached. I betook myself to the Sheraton Abbas solicitors, and repeated not too convincingly the Joan objections to the place.

"One must have fresh fish—and the time wasted going to and from the nearest golf course—and—the eternal servant question— But—it is in the heart of a good hunting country, and——"

"Yes, yes, we have sold it before, and I make no doubt we shall sell it again."

They sold it.

XVIII

LADY CORYTON bought it, and the Sheraton Abbas solicitors congratulated me with effusion upon having made a reasonable profit upon a not too wise investment. I was sensible only of the loss of my dream-house, and was, I fear, very crusty with them and on no good terms with myself. My horizon brightened when Lady Coryton took over, at a fair valuation, much of my furniture, including carpets and curtains. I stored what was left and went abroad with Henry. We admitted that we had no stomach at the moment for home-hunting.

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Henry summed up: "We shall never be greeted by another Salutation."

Just before I left England I received a kind letter from Miladi asking me to come to see her if I happened to find myself in Dorset. I wrote in reply, as courteously as I could, pledging myself to do so *if*—. The "if," to me, was as wide as the Atlantic. Henry, impassioned optimist, annoyed me by saying, "We shall get over this," and I answered too tartly: "You are speaking for yourself."

Touraine, however, that blessed land where one can laugh and do nothing in a Rabelaisian spirit, softened many acerbities. We took, furnished, a maisonnette not far from Blois, overlooking the Loire. The great river swept out of my mind vain regrets, a purging flood, as all rivers are, if we regard them symbolically. Henry began painting again, and I wrote a book (to please myself) wherein I strayed from the beaten track into hamlets that have changed little since French kings rode through them.

If Henry were less of an Englishman, I might have stayed indefinitely in this sweet country, so restful, so softly sunny. I think, too, that Joan became alarmed, roused to mild protest by Johnnie and Bambine. Our malicious lady—whom I shall never speak of again with the damning adjective—wrote in her most sprightly vein: "Surely we have not seen the last of you." I was so touched by her insistence that we should pay her a visit that once more I pledged myself *if*—. And by this time nothing much wider than the English Channel lay between promise and performance. We crossed it soon afterwards.

Within a month I found myself passing through the gate-house. Mrs. Covell smiled demurely at me, but I dared not ask her questions. Obviously she was now the keeper of the gate, and I wondered whether her hand in the kitchen had lost something of its cunning. She told me that Covell was working in the garden with a man under him.

I found Lady Coryton ethereally serene, exactly what an old gentlewoman should be in the still evening of life. Leaning upon a crutch stick, she took me into the garden, where we sat down in sight of the *Amorino*!

It was another *Amorino*!

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The laughing sprite carried an unbroken bow and a quiverful of darts. I marked at the same time that the pool at his feet had been embellished by the addition of a tiny fountain which tinkled musically and joyously. As the drops of spray fell upon the pool, I was reminded of the pattering of fairy feet. When I put this thought into words, Lady Coryton smiled, laying her thin white hand upon my arm.

"They are still here," she whispered. "It makes me so happy. And I am teaching them all I did not teach them in their life-time. They know that there are planes beyond this, fuller and even more joyous lives than theirs."

I glanced at her delicate face, marvelling at the change in it. She looked sublimated beyond expression and, in an amazing sense, youthful. I found myself wondering whether she was of this earth. Had she passed from it, and after passing rejoined her children? I dismissed swiftly the possibility that she had indeed drifted into second childhood. Her blue eyes were more clearly sane than my own; there was no sign of decrepitude, except the crutch stick, which I accepted as a wand. It occurred to me, as a reasonable hypothesis, that very old people after death would regain their youth as slowly and as certainly as she had done.

I think she guessed my thoughts, for she went on in the same lowered tones: "I am living, kind sir, and you helped to raise me from the dead."

She laughed, turning from me to the *Amorino*. He appeared to be laughing, too.

We must have sat there for nearly an hour. She asked many questions about Bambine, and her curiosity in regard to my own feelings about leaving Salutation rather astonished me.

"You loved it, children and all?" she asked; and when I said "Yes," she nodded.

Before I left she showed me what she had done in the water garden, arousing in me, I must confess, both envy and cupidity. I promised to come and see it again in the spring, when the daffodils were a-frolic. She told me that it was now as she had originally planned it. Her evident anxiety that I should approve was touching in its sincerity. I did approve, but I should have lied splendidly if I hadn't.

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She waved me adieu from the steps of the quaintly pilastered porch, a diminutive figure, lilac against the warm gold of the Ham stone. She had told me that Harry and Ann loved colours and hated black. I never saw her again.

XIX

SHE died a few months later. I happened to be in London at the time, and was confounded to learn that she had left Salutation to me, and all that was in the house. Her solicitors handed me a letter upon the day of the funeral. There hung about the notepaper a faint fragrance of orris root which brought her vividly to life again. She wrote as follows :

“ I have nobody very near of kin to me, so I have left Salutation to you because you loved it. The ashes of the children are to be buried with me, but not in that dreadful mausoleum. I think, my dear friend—indeed, I am sure—that when I go, which will be very soon, my children will go with me. Will you yourself place in the Ham stone below the *Amorino* the treasure trove, which you will find in a drawer in my bedroom ? ”

Henry and I re-buried the treasure. Within a few weeks we moved into the house, and have been there ever since. Perhaps—who shall say ?—the garden has lost some of its enchantment, but not to Wiggles and Peter Paul. They often play in it, and other children have played with them.

Last summer Joan, Johnnie and Bambine came to us. This was a test visit. I had told Joan that Bambine would expect to see Harry and Ann. If she failed to see them, we might assume that they had flitted away for ever. Joan imposed conditions.

“ I have never spoken to Bambine,” she said, “ about the Coryton twins. I hoped that they would fade out of her memory. Two years and more have passed. Physically she is much more robust. She may have forgotten. Promise me that you will not mention the children to her.”

I promised.

Bambine occupied the nurseries as before, but no magic mirror hung above the mantelpiece. And Snudge, alas was no more. How children and dogs remind us of the

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flight of time! Bambine did not miss Snudge, because she brought with her a tike of her own, of a famous fox-drawing strain. The dog reminded me of Johnnie; he had the same determined jaw.

Henry and I took the little girl into the water garden, where we watched her with alert eyes and ears. She stared at the *Amorino*, but said nothing; she was delighted with the fountain. Then she scampered from pool to pool, the tike barking at her heels. Goldfish distracted her attention. She came rushing back to us to say that she couldn't remember them. We had sat down in the glade among the tall ferns and foxgloves, expecting to see her peer here and there, and pause, possibly, at the spot where she had fallen asleep after her midnight revels.

"I have not forgotten the cascade," she panted, "but wasn't it much, much larger?"

We assured her that it wasn't.

Presently she asked after Wiggles and Peter Paul, but her recollections even of them were hazy. Finally we played the trump card up my sleeve. We took Bambine to the stables, and there, in a loose box, stood a Shetland pony. Johnnie's daughter gazed at it in ecstasy.

"That," said Henry, "is my present to you, Bambine."
"Nuncle!"

The pony was a happy thought of Henry's, and, I believe, it served its purpose. Certainly it obsessed Bambine for the first forty-eight hours, passed by me in fear and trembling.

Of the Coryton twins not a word.

Had the child forgotten them? I am inclined to think she had. An indiscreet allusion might have recalled them. If she ever thought of them, they must have seemed creatures of a dream. She once said to me: "I have seen a gnome." When I asked her to describe it, she replied gravely: "I have forgotten what it looked like."

They forget so easily.

But I shall not forget those joyous creatures that danced about me, whirling me out of myself, transporting me to a diviner air. If they were of the earth, and so loath to leave it, was not that nearly all which I had in common with them? And so their innocent spells still linger in my garden, and work their will on me. Perhaps they come

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back now and again, but not in the broad light of day. When the moonbeams flicker through the glade and silver the placid surface of the *Amorino's* pool, I think they are hiding in the bracken. I seem to hear rustlings and the soft pad of feet upon the moss. Once, as an experiment, I passed the whole night in the glade upon a not too comfortable camp bed, and I slept dreamlessly till the warblers awakened me. Next morning Henry eyed me with slight derision, but the garden remains enchanted for him.

Joan and Johnnie have surrendered unconditionally. Henry, with a sense of humour to which I cannot attain, told me that he had detected in Johnnie's eye a proprietary gleam as my son-in-law critically surveyed the stables. I said testily : " Why ? "

He replied : " Why not ? "

But Joan, I am sure, when she inherits my small kingdom, will keep up the garden as the children loved it.

And, really, that is all that matters.

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MISS HONOR STACEY took the bungalow for three months without making preliminary inquiries about it. Artists do business in this haphazard fashion sometimes, and often impulse serves them faithfully. The bungalow did not face the sea; it stood apart from the others in a reservation, destined, so said the optimists, to be the site of a huge hotel. Pessimists did not believe that Melchet could develop into a fashionable resort.

Nature had endowed Melchet with a steep, shingly beach and an undertow—making bathing dangerous for children and all unable to swim. Nature had flanked the village with steep sandstone cliffs, as dangerous, owing to unexpected landslides, as the undertow.

If Melchet ever developed into a town it would have to retreat from the sea and build itself up on salt meadows that had been part of the Channel in the days of Henry II. On the other hand, Nature had been kind in giving it a soft climate and views over land and sea of surpassing loveliness. There were an ancient harbour and a shipyard, old houses, downs covered with crisp turf (admirably adapted for a golf course), and an estuary where visitors could bathe and boat and fish in brackish water.

Honor fell in love with the place at sight. The summer months and the summer trippers had gone. Bungalows were "to let" cheap—at a nominal price.

On this account she was able to pick and choose what she believed to be the best. An old fisherman, who carried the key, and kept "Hermitage" in order, opened wide two big doors.

Honor expected to see a big room holding a few chairs, a table, and possibly a cupboard. Instead, she beheld a charming interior with nothing to offend her critical eye. Tongue-and-groove pine lined walls and ceiling. From the ceiling hung the model of a Spanish galleon, high-pooped, with bellying sails upon which were armorial bearings.

Upon the walls were a few eighteenth century prints, half

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a dozen miniatures, a copper warming-pan, and a small collection of samplers. Her eyes lingered upon a divan piled high with downy cushions. Above this was a shelf which displayed a small cast of the Venus of Milo, brass candle-sticks, a Florentine plate, and two small busts of Beethoven and Mozart.

Standing still, agape with pleasure and incredulity, Honor noted an old bureau, an ancient dresser, a gate-leg table, and an oak bookcase. She felt certain that the last held the right books, the books that she would want to read when daylight failed and the long autumn evenings set in.

The old fisherman said nothing.

Honor passed into a tiny kitchen, admirably ordered, and thence into a bedroom as eloquent of good taste as the sitting-room.

The rent was negligible. Honor asked eager questions which evoked no answers that were adequate. She grasped the fact that she could take the bungalow or leave it. She took it, paying a month's rent in advance.

On her return to the Melchet Arms, where she was regarded as the last rose of summer, she told the landlady, Mrs. Lampard, what she had done.

"Well, I never——! You've been an' taken *that*?"

"Why not? Is there anything against 'Hermitage'?"

"Nothing, Miss, but talk, so far as I know."

"Tell me what you know about the talk. Who lived there? Who furnished it so delightfully? Why was such furniture left in it?"

Mrs. LAMPARD answered these questions at length. It appeared that two years previously a painter of the name of Trevis had built the bungalow for a studio, which accounted for its facing north instead of south. Trevis went away and came back with a wife. At this point Honor interrupted:

"You say he was a painter. I paint, but I have never heard the name Trevis. What did he paint?"

"Pictures," replied Mrs. Lampard.

"Marines?"

Marines to the good Mrs. Lampard were amphibious animals, half soldiers, half sailors—not to be found in

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Melchet. Finally Honor understood that Trevis had painted Mrs. Trevis.

Mrs. Lampard added hesitatingly that she believed Mrs. Trevis to be a model, and presently it leaked out that Melchet had accepted Mrs. Trevis as model rather than wife. She wore a wedding-ring, but in Mrs. Lampard's opinion was not quite the "class" of her husband. It transpired that often Mrs. Trevis took off the circlet of bondage *and everything else*.

Anyway, from the first appearance of Mrs. Trevis in the village tongues wagged freely simply because she was such a beauty. Nobody knew anything about her except that she "did" for Trevis, inasmuch as no servant was engaged. The couple made no friends and no enemies. Weekly bills were paid regularly. At this point Mrs. Lampard paused.

"Is that all?" asked Honor.

"No, Miss. One day—one night, I should say—Mrs. Trevis *disappeared*."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes, Miss—*vanished*, if you know what I mean?"

"But I don't. You mean, I suppose, that she ran away from Mr. Trevis?"

"The body was never found. Folks round here, and all the fishermen, made certain that the pore creature just walked out of the bungalow and bang into the sea. The tide carried her away, what we call Melchet 'race.' If you get into that, Miss, you're a goner."

"I shan't get into it," said Honor.

"Mr. Trevis was in a rare state of frustration, but——" Once more Mrs. Lampard paused, dropping her voice.

"I shall not repeat anything you may be good enough to tell me, Mrs. Lampard."

"Thank you, Miss. We was terribly upset, all of us. The police came nosy-Parkering about, asking questions which nobody could answer. There was an inquiry held in this house. A lawyer came all the way from London town to speak up for Mr. Trevis, but the pore gentleman had to speak up for himself; and he didn't do that any too well. Soon afterwards, he left us—under a cloud, Miss, if you know what I mean."

Honor said uneasily:

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"You thought he had murdered her?"

"Some thought that. Speaking for myself I didn't know what to think. I—I liked Mr. Trevis; I was ever so sorry for him. At the end of the inquiry he acted as if he was clean off his head with misery and remorse——"

"Remorse?"

"It seemed they had their tiffs and turns, as we all do."

Honor was thrilled, unable as yet to marshal her thoughts, but sensible that she had taken a bungalow with a dark shadow upon it which touched her—chillingly.

"And since——?"

"Well, Miss, they say that 'Hermitage' is haunted."

"I suppose 'they' would say that. I wondered why the rent was so low. All this happened two years ago. Of course the bungalow has been let?"

"Oh, yes, but folks won't stay in it."

"Really? This is very exciting. Has anything been seen?"

Mrs. Lampard shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not a talker myself, never was. When neighbours talk to me about queer smells and all that, I say: 'Stuff an' nonsense!'"

"How wise of you. Personally, I don't believe, or disbelieve in ghosts. If I saw one, I should ask what it wanted, if I could do anything for it."

"Lor', Miss, you *are* brave!"

"Am I? At any rate I have no regrets at taking 'Hermitage'. I shall move in as soon as possible."

She did.

With her went an Airedale terrier—Jock. If there was anything to be smelt in "Hermitage", Jock, sniffing conscientiously here and there, betrayed no uneasiness. Honor expected that she would have to buy many small things; she bought nothing but food. Fuel was supplied by the local Gas Company. Honor slipped a shilling into the meter, lighted her stove, and enjoyed a cup of tea out of an orange-coloured cup. Apparently Trevis had taken nothing from the bungalow except the wearing apparel that belonged to himself and Mrs. Trevis.

It was certain that the furnishing of "Hermitage" had been a labour of love. Not one object "barked" at another. It was significant that the miniatures and the prints had been

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left. Inside the bureau Honor found a lovely little inkstand of old Worcester china and all the dainty adjuncts which embellish the writing-table of a gentlewoman. In a cupboard were two Georgian decanters. The napkins and table linen were of French blue; the sheets were superlatively good.

"Mr. Trevis must have had money," thought Honor, as well as taste."

She polished up the warming-pan and the brass candlesticks; she cooked a modest supper, ate it with appetite, and then sat down to read a book by Pater, which she found in the bookcase.

Jock curled himself up beside her and snoozed.

Pater, for once, failed to beguile her. She laid the book aside and thought steadily and lucidly about the man who had furnished "Hermitage".

Honor was nearly thirty, although she didn't look it; she happened, too, to be a bird of passage, flitting here and there, painting seascapes, sand-dunes, and water-meadows—selling them at small prices. She admitted frankly that she was a boiler of pots, who had to pay her way with brushes and palette. She reckoned herself to be a woman of experience, albeit a looker-on at the great game of life. Men accepted her as a pal. She loved work and independence too well to think seriously of marriage. In her salad days she had come within an ace of marrying a man who might have made her miserable. It was so easy for a woman to be made miserable by a quite decent sort of man.

Trevis must have made his wife miserable. If Mrs. Trevis were not his "class," Stevenson's "barrier of associations that cannot be imparted" stood between them. A girl taken from the people would act blindly upon impulse. It was humanly certain that Mrs. Trevis had walked out of the bungalow and "bang" into the Melchet "race" after a "tiff and a turn" that patience and intelligence might have endured philosophically—

Honor went to bed and slept soundly.

She awoke refreshed, with a mind free from cobwebs spun by gossip. After breakfast she decided to make an inventory of everything in the bungalow. Probably there was such an inventory in the possession of the old fisher-

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man, but he had forgotten to mention it. Also, being a book-lover, she proposed to dust the books and make a list of them. Behind a row of novels on the top shelf she found a framed photograph of a man, wearing loose and well-cut tweeds.

Was it Trevis ?

Ten minutes later Mrs. Lampard assured her that it was.

Honor returned to the bungalow. She placed the photograph upon the gate-leg table and stared at it. It seemed to stare back with faint derision. It seemed to say : " I hid that confounded presentment of myself behind those books. Why couldn't you leave it there ? "

Honor might have replied : " I wanted to make your acquaintance. I feel that I have done so. Is this a bad photograph of a good man, or a good photograph of a bad man ? "

Across the right-hand corner, in delicate handwriting was one word :

Letty's.

So her name was Lettice, an old-fashioned English name which suggested prim topiary gardens, not kitchen gardens. Perhaps SHE pronounced it " Lettuce."

Honor found half a dozen books with an inscription upon the title-page : " To Letty, from Frank." One of these books was a pocket dictionary——! Letty's spelling may have been faulty. Another book, similarly inscribed, happened to be entitled : " Dainty Dishes." This book, not the dictionary, bore marks of usage, being well-thumbed by thumbs not immaculate.

Honor thought : " She stood over the stove with this in her hand. Evidently she did her best to tickle his palate. Perhaps she failed to feed the brute as he expected to be fed."

But Francis Trevis, unless the photograph belied him, did not look a brute. Indeed, the " animal " which appeals to many women seemed to be conspicuously lacking. Honor could not envisage him as a " cave man." There was a faint resemblance to Shelley, the poet. The eyes, set far apart, were heavily lidded ; the eyebrows were arched. Thinking of Shelley, Honor murmured : " You look a sensitive plant, too sensitive, I dare say."

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She left the photograph on the table and went back to the bookcase. Upon the fly-leaf of another presentation copy to Letty these lines from Swinburne arrested attention:

I thank with deep thanksgiving whatever gods may be,
That no man lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
And that the weariest river winds safe at last to sea.

Again Honor stared at the photograph, half-hypnotised, thinking distressfully: "*She*, not you, reached the sea." And, once again Francis Trevis smiled back derisively.

What has been set down may account for what followed. Honor knew that she was obsessed by Francis Trevis, unable by any effort of the will to drive him out of her normally sane and sensible mind. During two days she was unable to work, which was unusual and disconcerting, because daily work had become a habit. During two nights she slept intermittently, troubled by dreams that she couldn't remember when she woke up, conscious only that they revealed dimly Trevis and herself. She began to wonder if nightmare had driven other occupants out of "Hermitage"; she decided that she, at any rate, would not so be driven out of this "dream" cottage.

UPON the third day, she penetrated the reserve of the old fisherman and caretaker. He had ceased to fish, but he kept pleasure boats in order, mended nets, and did odd jobs of rough carpentering. His name was Vallis.

"Tell me, Mr. Vallis," she asked, in a beguiling voice, "has Mr. Trevis ever come back since the tragedy?"

This was not the opening gambit. Honor had employed the old man to overhaul her sink-pipe and to readjust a plate-rack; she had coaxed him into talk about Trevis; she had learnt that they had gone a-fishing together.

Mr. Vallis pondered.

"Ah-h-h now, some fools say that he has. I don't hold wi' they mumbudgetters. I says this an' sticks to it. Mister Trevis 'd never come nigh Melchet wi'out droppin' in on me. 'Cos, why? We was, and is, good friends."

"I can quite understand that he wouldn't come back. I wonder he hasn't sold 'Hermitage'."

"That ain't none o' my business. But, this silly talk about ghosts and ghostesses fair turns my stummick, it do."

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"You will hear none of that nonsense from me, Mr. Vallis. Between ourselves, Mr. Trevis is now a friend of mine."

"Lard save us! You knows 'un?"

"I only know him through the books and the things that he must have loved. There are worse ways of knowing, and liking, a man. I like you because there is a smell of tar and a tang of the sea about you."

A wintry smile, a frosty gleam in blue eyes, acknowledged this little compliment.

"Speakin' o' smells, Miss, you ain't noticed anything in this yere bungalow?"

"Only the sink-pipe. What sort of smell did you think I might have noticed?"

"They fools do say that 'Hermitage' fair stinks at times o' scent, the sort o' scent used by women no better than they oughter be."

"Musk?"

"They may call it that; I dunno'."

"I hate musk. It's like garlic. If you can detect musk in a scent there is too much of it used. Still, what you tell me is interesting. An appeal to the mind may be imaginary, but a strong appeal to the nose——!"

"I says if you ain't smelt it, 'taint there. 'Tis a fact, all the same, that that there 'ooman smelt stronger o' scent than I do of honest terbaccer."

SHORTLY afterwards Mr. Vallis went his way, having finished his job. Honor brewed a cup of tea and sat down at the bureau to write a letter.

Suddenly, she smelt musk at a moment when she was engrossed with her letter. Being essentially practical, she laid down her pen, sniffed, and exclaimed: "Am I the victim of suggestion?" Sceptics will affirm that she was. They shall be dealt with presently.

Honor whistled for Jock. In a jiffy his two front paws were on the laid-back lid of the bureau. He sniffed and glanced up at his mistress, saying in dog-talk: "I don't like this smell, do you?" Honor patted him.

"The smell is there right enough," she thought. However, she finished her letter and posted it. When she got back to the bungalow it was nearly dark. She lighted a

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small gas fire and sat down to warm herself, for she felt chilly and depressed. There was no smell of musk in the room.

"That there 'ooman."

It was not a courteous way to speak of the dead. Evidently Mr. Vallis did not hold the "beauty" in high esteem. Honor wished that she had tried to draw him out, but an old sea otter is not easily drawn. Twice, during their previous talk, he had shied away from mention of the "ooman", turning quickly to the man. He was willing to talk about him.

Honor had placed the photograph, after cleaning the silver frame, upon the bureau. She didn't like the frame. It was made of silver and much too ornate. Probably the "ooman" had bought the frame, possibly the only object in the bungalow that she had bought. It was exasperating to realise that the bungalow, within and without, revealed Trevis with sharpest definition; it left Mrs. Trevis, absolutely unrevealed, at the bottom of the sea!

Only negative evidence was forthcoming. Mrs. Trevis had not read the books given to her by Trevis; a volume of poems by Rupert Brooke was uncut. Honor found the inside lid of the bureau spotted with ink marks. Gentlewomen are "nice" about these trifling matters. In the kitchen the pots and pans were dented from hard usage. Honor decided that tenants of the baser sort, since the disappearance of Mrs. Trevis, might have splattered ink about and played havoc with saucepans of aluminium.

She sat on, thinking of Trevis, till she dozed off, vaguely conscious that she was half awake, hearing the boom of the waves as they broke upon the shingle not two hundred yards away, hearing too the mournful wail of the sou'-westerly wind, and the patter of rain upon the corrugated iron roof.

A dirty night.

On such a night, as Honor knew, Letty had disappeared. Trevis, so it transpired afterwards, had left the bungalow before she did. He returned to find her gone. At the inquiry he had admitted that there had been "words" between them. He admitted also that he had plunged into a wet, cold night, to cool himself. Somebody had seen him striding along the high road—alone. The rest was a matter of surmise.

Half asleep, half awake, Honor became aware of a desire

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to write to Trevis. An overmastering impulse to take a pen in hand possessed her. However, fully awake, she settled back in her comfortable chair, resisting the impulse as absurd. She had nothing to write about. Then she remembered some trivial letter that ought to be written to a tradesman, of no importance whatever.

She stood up, lit the gas, opened the bureau, and sat down to it. She was aware of vibrations coursing up and down her arm from the wrist to the elbow joint; she perceived that her fingers were quivering; once more she smelt the pungent, saccharine smell of musk. Instantly, she closed the bureau, apostrophising herself scathingly:

“Honor—you are a fool.”

She walked into the kitchen and set about preparations for supper, rubbing her arm, banishing uncanny thoughts by repeating; “Pins and needles, you silly ass.”

She was now on terms with herself, humorously so, and intent upon peeling potatoes. The door between the kitchen and the sitting-room was closed. Jock had remained near the gas fire.

While peeling the potatoes, she heard him growling. A second later she heard him pawing at the door. When she let him through, he did not fawn upon her, but marched to the outer door.

Honor spoke to him:

“What is it, Jock? What’s wrong, old dog?”

Jock whimpered, growled, and barked. Then he cocked his short ears, listening.

Honor thought that she was unreasonably terrified. Some women—and many men—may not agree with her. It is reason, not unreason, that terrifies us. A fool “going over the top” does not know enough to be afraid. Honor knew that Jock heard what was inaudible to her. She was physically, not mentally, alarmed. Jock had good manners; he did not bark at the postman or the milkman. A drunken tramp might be outside—

Yes; a man was walking up the path leading to the back door. She heard a tap; and the tap was reassuring, the firm tap-tap of a visitor who expects that the door will be promptly opened. Honor opened it and screamed.

Trevis, or his ghost, stood before her!

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It was not his ghost. Honor, reeling back in sheer terror, realised as much when the faithful Jock made his teeth meet in Trevis's pantaloons, fortunately baggy. Trevis spoke to the dog before Honor could open her mouth. Jock knew that he had made a mistake when Trevis bent down to pat his head.

"You are Mr. Trevis," said Honor.

"I am. I have startled you. I beg your pardon. It is nearly seven, and I saw a light in the window and supposed that old Vallis was pottering about."

"I am your tenant," said Honor. "Miss Honor Stacey."

"The painter?"

"I spoil a great deal of canvas. I'm surprised that you have heard of me."

"I know your work. Please forgive this unwarrantable intrusion, Miss Stacey. Perhaps you will allow me to pay my respects to-morrow. It never occurred to me that the bungalow would be let, out of the season."

"Do, please, come into the sitting-room. If you wish to stay here, I am willing to give up my tenancy."

Trevis hesitated, and then followed her into the sitting-room. He glanced about him and sat down. He saw his photograph upon the bureau.

"You recognised me because you found that. And, yet, if you recognised me, why did you scream?"

"I thought you were a ghost."

"A ghost?"

Honor remembered what she had said to Mrs. Lampard. It was humiliating to reflect that she had screamed instead of politely asking the ghost what she could do for him. Evidently Trevis expected her to explain. She began haltingly, picking her words, but Jock's behaviour encouraged her. He made friends with Trevis. As a rule, he ignored strangers. Now he looked at his mistress as much as to say: "This man is all right. Don't shilly-shally with him! I vouch for him." Accordingly, Honor was emboldened to speak out, but she was careful not to mention Mrs. Trevis. She ended disarmingly:

"You see, I felt that I knew you. It was a sort of obsession. You may call it curiosity, but I am not a very

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curious person. I had been thinking about you a few minutes before you tapped on the door. You were the very last person in the world I expected to see."

"I am going to surprise you," said Trevis. "Possibly you will think me mad, but I came back here, *I was lured back*, by you. It is true that it never entered my head that you were my tenant, living at 'Hermitage' You say that I came to you in your dreams. You came to me."

"Mr. Trevis——!"

"I repeat that somehow, in obedience, possibly, to a natural law that we don't yet understand, you projected yourself into my dreams. Now that I have met you I recognise *you*."

"Oh-h-h-h!"

"I have been living near London. For the past two nights I have dreamt of you. A woman came to me and beckoned; an insistent voice called me back to Melchet—to this village where I suffered terribly, to this village where half the people believe that I murdered my wife. I was horribly troubled by my dreams, by this voice beseeching me to do something I hated to do. I called myself an idiotic fool——"

"So did I," whispered Honor.

"And, yet—I came. I said to myself that I had slunk away like a coward. The thought of that rasped me. The voice that called was the voice of friendship. To-day, this morning, I made up my mind to come here, to meet you if you were here. But, it never occurred to me that I should find you in *my* bungalow. I reached Melchet not half an hour ago. It was my intention to go straight to Mrs. Lampard's hotel. Instead I sent my traps there, and walked through the rain straight to *you*. Why?"

Honor said quaveringly:

"Not half an hour ago I had an overmastering impulse to write to you. I hardly dared admit that to myself. My arm tingled; my fingers trembled. If I had obeyed that impulse I should have written automatically; I should have written against my will."

"Or in obedience to your subconscious self."

He stood up.

"To-night," he said, "I hope that we shall sleep soundly,

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undisturbed by dreams. To-morrow, at any hour that suits your convenience, I will call upon you."

"Shall we say half-past ten, Mr. Trevis?"

"I shall be punctual. Good night."

A ROUGH night blew and rained itself out. When Honor took Jock for a run before breakfast, the skies were clearing fast; the water-meadows were bathed in sunshine; and soft zephyrs kissed her cheeks caressingly as if entreating her to forgive the violence of their assault only twelve hours before.

A glorious day for painting—and Honor longed to be at work. In the incomparable freshness of the morning all that had oppressed her passed away. She could look forward calmly to meeting Trevis. If he wished to move into the bungalow, she would move on down the coast. She wondered if he was as keen to "get to work" as she was? After the strange intimacy of their first meeting would there be a reaction? Or, would he tell her his story?

Before he came, punctual to the minute, she put away his photograph. She had seen him; she could now think of him as he was, not as she had conceived him to be. He was older, a little grizzled, but less care-worn than she had expected. His eyes were not unlike Jock's eyes—

They met with constraint on both sides. Trevis said abruptly:

"You will stay here, Miss Stacey, as long as you like. I am lucky to have such a good tenant. Perhaps you will show me some of your work."

Honor replied in much the same civil tone:

"I have been too idle since I came here, but, now——"

He guessed her thoughts.

"I understand. Last night we—you and I—wandered out of this work-a-day world——"

"Yes; we did."

"One returns, thank God, to eggs and bacon for breakfast."

"Have you?"

She regretted the words as they escaped from her lips. A sincere answer would re-establish intimacy. If he desired that, it ought to be expressed first by him, To her sur-

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prise, he ignored the question, staring at the bureau, which was shut, as usual.

"Do you use that bureau, Miss Stacey?"

"Not often. I'm afraid I'm a shocking correspondent."

Curiosity, nothing else, asked another question.

"There is something uncanny about the bureau, Mr. Trevis. Are you aware of that?"

"No—tell me."

She told him about the smell of musk.

"I believe that this pungent smell has started a lot of ridiculous gossip and given 'Hermitage' a bad name. Still, it is odd that after two years the scent should cling to it so persistently. I have examined everything in it. Sandal wood and cedar retain their distinctive perfume, but oak——?"

At once Trevis went to the bureau, opened it, and sat down in front of it.

"I smell nothing."

"I smelt nothing at first. You will if you sit there long enough."

He nodded perfunctorily. Honor could not determine whether or not he was interested. She decided presently that he was, but not in her question. When he spoke, he betrayed excitement.

"I had forgotten. Why did I forget?"

He turned to her abruptly:

"Miss Stacey, will you do me a favour? I have thought of something of supreme importance to me, something too intimate and sacred to speak about. Will you leave me alone in this room for five minutes?"

"Why, of course."

"That is very kind of you. I will call you back in less than five minutes."

Honor went into the kitchen, closing the door. Perhaps she made an unnecessary noise with her pots and pans, because a man—any man—might think a woman capable of "peeping" and listening.

Ten minutes elapsed before he called her.

INSTANTLY she marked a pathetic change in him. He was sitting on the divan, pallid and limp, with his head between

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his hands. Apparently, he was hardly aware that she had entered the room. Honor hastened to him, sat beside him, and laid her capable little hand upon his sleeve.

"You called me," she whispered. "I am here."

He sat up stiffly erect.

"I can explain the smell of musk," he began tensely. "It happened to be scent used by Mrs. Trevis. She—she scented her notepaper—and—and everything else. My God! How that cursed scent brings back everything connected with her."

His voice was on the edge of breaking. Honor pressed his arm, as she spoke firmly:

"Mr. Trevis, if you would like to go away without saying anything, it might be better for you."

He looked at her steadily. Then he continued in a less agitated voice.

"Bless you! You are a good woman. It will help me far more to talk to you: I ran away before. Behind these two pilasters," he pointed to the bureau, "are two thin secret drawers. I showed them to my wife when I bought the bureau for her. She liked the secret drawers better than the bureau. When the tragedy happened, I forgot all about them. I have just found two sachets in them—and a letter. You have not lit your fire. If you did so, if this room were warmer, we should smell musk. So you see the smell of musk can be accounted for. There is nothing 'uncanny' about that. The letter," his voice quavered, "you shall read for yourself. It was placed there—hidden there—deliberately."

He took the letter from a pocket and handed it to her.

Dear Frank:

I'm fed up. I'm going to off it here and now. I shall go back to Paris to a man I always liked ten times better than I liked you. I'm taking nothing but my money. Because you have been beastly to me I shall be beastly to you—that's that. You tore me from Paris and made me live with you in the dullest, dearest hole I ever struck. You thought you were going to educate me, to turn me—ME—into a lady. I can't forgive you that. And I mean to get my own back, to have my own little

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revenge. I've fixed things so cleverly—you thought me a fool, didn't you?—that the idiots in this God-forsaken place will think that you have pushed me into the sea. Well, Mr. Trevis, I'm not going into the Channel yet awhile. I'm going to cross it. Sooner or later you'll find this, and I hope it will be later. When you read it you will be wiser about women. Yes; you'll know quite a bit.

Yours, never no more,
LETTY.

It was ill-written and ill-spelt.

"You married *her*?" murmured Honor.

"We were not married, Miss Stacey. I offered to marry Letty when I asked her to leave Paris with me. To my surprise she refused. I have thought since that she may have married years ago, and that she left her husband just as she left me. She was my model. I fell in love with a lovely body; I was besotted enough to believe that her mind and soul matched it. I have no excuse to make—*none*. She wanted to punish me for my folly; she has done so——"

"But—you look so unhappy."

He turned on her savagely.

"Think of the wasted years, the disillusionment, the humiliation! Since she left me I—I have accomplished nothing. I believed that I had hounded her to her death. It is an enormous relief that she is alive and perhaps happy, leading her life that was never my life. But what I have done grinds me small indeed. I was mad enough to sacrifice for her my good name, my position, and what measure of fame I had achieved."

"Fame——?"

"My name is not Trevis. I am Francis Herrington."

Honor gasped.

"The—the A.R.A.?"

He nodded.

Honor said:

"I—I wondered why you had not exhibited for at least three years."

"Now you know. Fortunately, few know. I was clever enough to hide myself. In justice to myself and her—"

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and her—I will add this : I saw her as a subject for what I believed might be a masterpiece. I could never paint it ; I tried again and again. People have been good enough to say that such portraits as I have painted show character. You paint. You must feel at times that something, some indefinable quality, comes out in your work that surprises you, because it is right—inevitable ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ In my attempts to present her in pure perfection, I found myself portraying her imperfections. She saw them too, and railed at me. I believe she came to me in the hope that I would make her famous. She used to look at that cast ”—he pointed to the Venus of Milo—“ and say : ‘ Make me talked about like her. ’ It couldn’t be done. ”

He stood up.

“ What did Kipling write ? Yes, yes—‘ *e learned about women from ‘er.* ’ ”

“ Mr. Herrington, you will go back to your work, won’t you ? ”

“ Does it make the very smallest difference to you whether I do or not ? ”

“ It does ; indeed it does. You see—I understand. ”

“ How do you understand ? What do you understand ? She and you stand at opposite poles. ”

“ Perhaps that is why I understand. I knew you before I met you ; what is in this bungalow told me so much. And you have done fine work. I see you marching on, not looking back. ”

He took her hand.

“ Thank you, ” he said gravely. “ Are you going to work this morning ? ”

“ I thought I would walk out, with Jock. I’m sure I shall find something inspiring. A river winding safe at last to sea—— ”

“ Might I come with you, Miss Stacey ? I might help you in your choice of the right spot to study a river winding safe at last to sea. ”

She hesitated.

“ I am coming, anyhow, ” he said masterfully.

UNA AND THE LION

I

ROSY-CHEEKED BELLAMY, the well-known novelist, pulled the strings on this occasion quite innocently and with the best intentions. He had returned from a lecturing tour in America, where many friends had entertained him handsomely, and on taking leave of each he had said with his cheery smile: "Mind you look me up, if you come to London." Unfortunately, in London Bellamy was a man of engagements. He happened to be staring ruefully at his engagement book when Professor David P. Kircheberg, of Chicago, was ushered into his library. The Professor was tall, thin, stiff in deportment, and shy; but it was impossible to be shy with Bellamy, who was hailed from Sandy Hook to the Golden Gate as "Genial George."

"Delighted to see you, my dear fellow. What favouring gale blew you over here?"

Kircheberg explained that he had been chosen as a delegate to some congress of men of science. He asked curtly: "Have you read the morning papers?" When Bellamy admitted that he had merely glanced at the sporting and financial news, Kircheberg seemed less stiff and shy. After a few minutes talk Bellamy asked his visitor to lunch with him at his club. He was surprised when Kircheberg suggested a quiet restaurant.

"Right. We'll lunch *chez* Clarice. The food and wine are quite good."

It was nearly lunch-time, so they walked together to the restaurant, where Bellamy's guest did good work with an Englishman's favourite tools—a knife and fork. He commended the *sole Diapnoise* and some *Berncastler Doktor*. Bellamy was very pleased with him.

"I can do so little for you," he said regretfully. "I go

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out of London this afternoon. You're a famous biologist, eligible for membership at that temple of silence and snooze, the Parthenon. Get some old boy to put you up."

"I'm leaving London for Paris to-morrow," said Kircheberg calmly. "I quite understand, Bellamy, that you can't play about with me."

Bellamy smiled.

"Tell me what I can do," he asked genially, "and I'll do it."

Kircheberg said with emphasis:

"My hobby is dancing. I want to have a good time, to-night, at one of your best night clubs."

"The devil you do! That's easy. I belong to the Niphétos. Of course you have a dancing partner?"

"No."

"You are counting on me to dig up a star performer?"

"Not a professional, please. Find me some nice young lady who can dance. If we were in Chicago, I could fix you up, over the telephone, in five minutes."

"M'm. Can't be done in five minutes in London. Of course I know half a dozen Unas who would be proud to be seen with such a lion as you."

"If you put it that way, Bellamy, I'd sooner Una didn't meet me as a lion. My name in English is Churchill. Could I drop the Kircheberg for one night only?"

He spoke seriously. At once Bellamy thought: "He thinks a Hun name is against him. Perhaps it is." But Bellamy knew that Kircheberg had done his bit in the war. He was a dyed-in-the-wool American. More, Bellamy had stayed at the Kircheberg "home" in Chicago. The Professor's father was a "prominent citizen"; the Professor himself had achieved fame in his own country and, being blessed with independent means, was able to take up original research work. Bellamy said pleasantly:

"You're my guest to-night. I'll find a dancing partner, send you a ticket for the Niphétos, and so on and so forth. Where can I ring you up at tea-time?"

Kircheberg named a modest hotel.

Soon afterwards the two men took leave of each other.

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II

BELLAMY dropped in to his club to glance at the papers and received the surprise of his life. Professor David P. Kircheberg was a head-line! Apparently he had made a most disconcerting discovery. *The Thunderer*, ever cautious, put into one pregnant sentence (read gaspingly by Bellamy) what it refused to accept as more than hearsay.

“Professor Kircheberg, so we are informed, has patented, or is about to patent, a tiny machine which reveals and records the *thoughts* of any person with whom he happens to be talking. If there is such a machine, we can only say that the domestic peace of the whole world is gravely imperilled.”

“Gosh!” exclaimed Bellamy, so loudly that a Regius Professor of Greek glared at him. Bellamy, in lieu of apology, handed him the paper, and pointed a quivering finger at the paragraph.

“You said ‘Gosh,’; I say ‘Tosh’!” growled a sometime Senior Classic.

“Kircheberg has been lunching with me,” murmured Bellamy. “A shy bird, most modest and unassuming—the last man whom I should accuse of attempting to imperil the peace of the world.”

“Well, well—everything is possible in this impossible world.”

Ultimately, they left it at that. Bellamy went to the telephone, chuckling. He knew well a shy young lady, who danced like a sylph. She might rise to a fly skilfully presented; inasmuch as shy people do, on occasion, jump with alacrity out of humdrum conditions.

“Is that Miss Sainsbury?”

“Yes.”

“George Bellamy is speaking. I say, Una——”

“Why do you call me Una?”

“Because I want you to meet a lion. Are you at a loose end to-night? You are. Good! Do you consider yourself a sport? What? Oh, more of a spore than a sport. My dear, I am appealing to your sense of humour. Will you

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take on a strange young man, very distinguished, a *pukka sabib* ? ”

“ What is his name ? ”

“ Churchill. ”

“ Churchill. Not, not—— ”

“ Not the Chancellor of the Exchequer. My man is an American, who has just crossed the Atlantic to dance with you. Dine with him—at my expense—do a show, and then go on together to the Niphétos. He entertained me in America, and I want to entertain him, but I’m leaving London this afternoon. He doesn’t roar; he coos. I vouch for him. Please do this as a great favour to me. . . . ”

In the end Bellamy prevailed. He had a way with him. And he decided that it was “ up ” to him to do the Professor “ top-hole. ” Accordingly, he ordered dinner for two *chez Clarice*, bought two stalls at the *Jollity*, and enclosed them, with a Niphétos ticket to Kircheberg.

“ I wish with all my heart that I could join you. I am sending my car to your hotel at seven sharp; I have ordered your dinner. Miss Sainsbury will play Una. She is aware that Mr. Churchill is a lion. ”

“ Good dancing——! ”

III

MISS SAINSBURY insisted, however, upon one change in the programme. She offered to call for Mr. Churchill in her car at his hotel.

She did so.

Mr. Churchill was blushing when he stepped into the limousine, and Miss Sainsbury’s cheeks were less pale than usual. He grasped a slim hand.

“ This, ” said he, “ is English hospitality at its best. ”

Miss Sainsbury replied nervously :

“ George Bellamy is such an old friend. ”

They talked of George as the car sped along, but each was mentally appraising the other. Each, indeed, carried credentials on his or her face. Miss Sainsbury looked and was “ nice ” in every sense of that abused word, *nice* especially in her tastes and predilections. Shyness could not altogether daunt her adventurous spirit. Ever since she had sucked in George’s “ fly, ” she had wondered whether

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or not he was an accomplished purveyor of fiction. Knowing George, it was quite likely that he had, when in America, sung her praises to this stranger. George was quite capable of embroidering such a theme, and arousing an expectation difficult to satisfy. Still, George was a gentleman. He would not make her the subject of a wager. Probably he had been beguiled into asserting that some English girls could dance as well as Americans. And then he had pledged himself to introduce Mr. Churchill to Miss Sainsbury if that young man came to London. . . .

The Professor, in his turn, was fully alive to the outward charm and distinction of his dancing partner. He had expected to meet an up-to-date young woman of a commonplace type, a good sort. There were many such in Chicago. Within a minute he had appropriated George's name for her—Una.

Una—a maid of "singular excellence."

When her cloak slipped from her shoulders, he beheld a frock of white and silver that Una might have worn. They walked into the restaurant to the table reserved by George. Each was tingling with excitement. Una's knight, so she remarked, wore the right sort of armour, and, being a "gentle knight" from the Home of the Brave he had presented his lady with an ingratiating bunch of roses. . . .

They sat down.

"This," said Mr. Churchill, "is a great adventure. Bellamy spoke of you as Una."

"He spoke of you as a lion——"

"That makes me feel an ass, Miss Sainsbury."

"Please tell me what you have done?"

"I am a biologist; and I have earned a local measure of fame as a microscopist."

"Are you of kin to the English Churchills?"

"I—I make bold to call myself a sort of cousin German."

"It's a great name."

"It is."

An obsequious waiter proffered two cocktails.

Una and the lion clinked glasses.

"Together, Miss Sainsbury, we may encounter and defeat the dragon."

"What dragon?"

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"Boredom. During the past forty-eight hours I have been bored to tears."

Una looked sympathetic.

"I am ashamed to confess it, Miss Sainsbury, for I hold that a young man should never be bored; to be bored indicates the hall-mark of the bore."

"I suppose that applies to young women?"

"No. A man has more initiative, a wider freedom in the choice of his company. For instance, I have been imposed on *you*."

"By a friend who knew both of us."

"True. If I bore you, you will wreak your vengeance on him."

Una said gracefully:

"I think he is reasonably safe."

Presently, whilst they were eating the fish, Una said unexpectedly:

"I wonder if you know Professor David Kircheberg, who seems to have invented an appalling machine that reveals the thoughts of others. Everybody is talking about him."

"It is rather awful to think, Miss Sainsbury, that everybody must be talking *to* him."

"Yes—he may be talked to death. He and his machine ought to be destroyed by the League of Nations. Don't you agree with me?"

"I have heard of Kircheberg. In fact I—I have met him."

"Do describe him to me. *The Thunderer* says that the domestic peace of the whole world is imperilled."

"But—you believe in telepathy?"

"Of course I do."

"Huxley, if I'm not mistaken, ridiculed telepathy. If thought, under certain conditions, can be transmitted, why shouldn't it be recorded. Science is making giant strides. I never attempt to describe persons, Miss Sainsbury. But I can say to you that in my opinion Kircheberg is a lucky and overrated young man. Now, for the sake of an amicable argument, tell me why you think that he and his machine should be destroyed?"

"Heavens! We should all be living in a Palace of Truth. Would you like it if I could read your thoughts?"

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"My thoughts are at your disposal."

"I might be horrified if I could read them."

"If you could, I should be constrained to govern them. Really, our thoughts, far more than our acts, 'our angels are, or good or ill, the fateful shadows that walk by us still.' The world, even in our generation, has been absurdly terrified of automobiles, flying machines, and wireless. A machine that recorded thoughts might turn out to be the guardian angel of a higher morality, of an immeasurably advanced civilization."

Una was visibly impressed.

"I had not thought of that."

"Why do we govern our actions and let our thoughts run amuck?"

"I—I don't know."

"You don't know simply because it has never occurred to you, till this morning, that our thoughts might become common property."

Before she could answer him, he had turned the talk into another channel. No man could talk better than he upon any subject with which he was familiar, but he wanted her to talk about herself. Presently she did so—quite unconscious of his dominating influence.

They were in their stalls at the *Jollity*, when the curtain rose.

IV

THEY went on to the *Niphétos*, the most select of all night clubs. Here Miss Sainsbury was greeted by several friends. Nobody, apparently, knew Mr. Churchill.

He danced divinely!

So did Una.

When they sat down after the first dance, he asked a question:

"Can you read my thoughts?"

"Are they—governed?"

"Under strictest supervision. I am thinking, Miss Sainsbury, that this is the jolliest evening of my life. I—I wish I could read your thoughts."

"I'm trying to keep them in order, but it's difficult."

"A Roland demands an Oliver."

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"I am thinking what I ought to give George Bellamy as a small token of my gratitude. I must promise to buy his next novel."

"I shall order a ton's weight."

"Are you, by any chance, a multi-millionaire?"

"I'm the richest man in this room in my appreciation of what Bellamy has done for me."

For two persons afflicted with shyness it must be admitted that they were getting on together passably well. Nevertheless shyness assailed them as their thoughts, so to speak, romped out of hand.

"I shall not leave for Paris to-morrow," said the lion.

Una blushed.

Perceiving that blush, the lion was emboldened to continue:

"We might dance here to-morrow."

"We might," she whispered, "if—if I cancelled another engagement."

"Will you?"

"Perhaps," she sighed.

At this moment, an imposing person entered the room. He had the air of a magnate. A club servant cringed before him. Surveying the company with lordly indifference he perceived Professor Kircheberg of Chicago. He advanced leisurely.

"You? Here?"

"Why not? Let me introduce you to Miss Sainsbury. Mr. Gump, of Chicago, President of the Gump Banking and Trust Corporation."

"I am supping here," declared Mr. Gump. "You two must sup with me. I take no refusal. It is settled—eh?"

"You are very kind," said Una, hesitatingly.

"Kind? It is an honour to entertain Professor David Kircheberg. I have come from the Mansion House. I should not have been surprised, my young friend, to meet you there. Surely, surely, you were invited?"

"I—I refused the invitation," growled the Professor, hardly daring to look at Miss Sainsbury.

"I can quite understand why," replied Gump.

"Now, excuse me. I must order a supper worthy of the occasion."

UNA AND THE LION

He bowed to Miss Sainsbury, and went his way.

Una gazed at the lion.

"You—you are Professor Kircheberg."

"Surely in England, I can call myself Churchill. Kirche—church—Berg—hill."

"Oh-h-h!"

Shyness descended on them like a pall. Una spoke first:

"Have you invented this machine?"

"*The Thunderer* is on the fence about that."

"Perhaps you are carrying it in your pocket?"

"Search and see, Miss Sainsbury."

His tone was slightly ironical and defiant. Each sat stiffly upright, glaring and blinking.

"I—I believe you—you have been experimenting on *me* with your hateful invention."

"I can read your thoughts without it."

She riposted smartly:

"Thank you. I shall tell George Bellamy my thoughts of you and him—to-morrow. Will you be good enough to order my car?"

He laughed.

"You dare to laugh?"

"'And if I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep,'" quoted the Professor.

The band was playing a haunting waltz.

"One last turn before we part, Miss Sainsbury."

"No."

"Your thoughts say—'yes.'"

She slipped up on that.

"Your machine *is* in your pocket."

"Perhaps. Shall we test it? On my honour, I have not been experimenting on you. Bellamy and I agreed that my name might spoil an otherwise enchanting experience for me; so I anglicised it—a venial offence, you must admit?"

"I admit nothing."

"Shall we test my machine? We can do so without observation. Let me place my hand lightly on your wrist. Then we shall see what happens."

Curiosity assailed Miss Sainsbury. Possibly, too, she was incredulous of anything happening.

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"Some of my friends might see your hand on my wrist."

"And I fondly believed that Mrs. Grundy was dead. I suggest an alternative. Let me place my shoe against your shoe?"

She nodded, half smiling, half frowning. The professor had to move his foot about six inches. As he touched her satin slipper, she winced.

"Be brave, Una," he whispered. "Now—turn your hand palm upwards. So. Are you ready?"

"Ye—es."

"Think what you please."

A counsel of perfection! Shyness does not, perhaps, reach to the extremities. A bold pump was pressing against a little slipper—in the interests of science, of course. Professorial eyes rested upon a white wrist, where warm blood ebbed and flowed pulsatingly.

"Contact is established," said the lion. "Don't speak! Think! Think furiously!"

V

UNA was thinking furiously, but she recalled what the lion had said earlier in the evening. Thoughts likely to be revealed to others must be governed. The thought that was chasing all other thoughts out of her head was the conviction that she had spent three delightful hours in the company of this remarkable young man, who might have been passing the same evening with the Lord Mayor of London. She had drifted into his life; she was drifting out of it. Suddenly, she became conscious of a strange and not disagreeable languor. If she closed her eyes, she would fall asleep. . . . She closed them.

She came back to full consciousness to find herself alone in the whirling crowd. The familiar strains of the waltz fell upon her ears. A waiter stood before her.

"Your car, Mademoiselle, is waiting for you."

"Thank you," she replied perfunctorily.

Still dazed by the unexpected disappearance of the lion, she saw the approaching figure of Mr. Gump.

"All is arranged," he said.

He sat down in the Professor's chair, smiling blandly.

"I shall sit here, till our young friend comes back."

UNA AND THE LION

He was such an overwhelming personality that she dared not reply: "Then you will sit here till the crack of doom." She opened her lips, and closed them. She was aware that Mr. Gump seemed to be benevolently amused.

"Tell me what you think of our brilliant professor. You are old friends——?"

She replied frigidly:

"I met Professor Kircheberg for the first time at seven this evening."

"You captured the lion of London, or did he capture you?"

Miss Sainsbury rose with dignity.

"My car is waiting for me, Mr. Gump. Professor Kircheberg will explain why I cannot sup with you. Will you take me downstairs?"

"Certainly, but not with pleasure."

He escorted the young lady downstairs, found her car, opened the door, and saw her safely into it. She vouchsafed him a wintry smile.

As the car rolled slowly forward, the farther door was opened, and, before Miss Sainsbury could protest, Professor Kircheberg had seated himself beside her.

"How dare you?" she gasped.

"Forgive me, dear Una, but I read your thoughts."

"I—I don't believe it."

"I did. My little experiment was entirely successful. You attempted to govern your thoughts, didn't you?"

"Ye—es."

"In your thoughts you admitted to yourself, very reluctantly, it is true, that you had passed, shall we say, an agreeable evening in my company. As I put it—contact had been established, and contact was not displeasing to you."

She made no reply.

Suddenly she laughed.

"You are too much for me, Professor Kircheberg. Will you show me this wonderful machine?"

"Do you want to read my thoughts?"

"Turn and turn about is only fair."

"I agree. I will slip my machine into your right hand. Hold it tightly. Then you will take my hand, and will—

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will as hard as you can to read my thoughts. As soon as we reach your house, if you will invite me into the hall, you can open the box and read what you find recorded. But I warn you—you may be shocked."

"Oh-h-h!"

"Angry——"

"I must risk that."

He put into her right hand a small metal box. An instant later her left hand lay firmly clasped in his. It was reassuringly warm—and soft.

"Take your time," he whispered.

Thus they sat till the car drew up at a house in Brook Street.

"Don't look at the box, Una, till we are alone."

She withdrew her hand, saying:

"My car can wait a minute and take you back to your hotel."

"I would sooner walk; it isn't far."

"As you please."

She slipped the metal box into her vanity bag, took from it her latchkey, and entered the house, followed by the Professor, who glanced about him with interest. Obviously Miss Sainsbury belonged to the comfortably well-to-do class.

"My mother goes to bed early, Professor. As I have deprived you of your supper, the least I can do is to offer you some sandwiches and a whisky and soda."

She led the way into the dining-room, switching on the light. Then she hesitated, unable to read the expression on his face.

"Is it all a joke?" she asked.

There was a faint inflection of distress in her voice, an almost pathetic note of interrogation, as she stood before him seeking his eyes, trying to read an inscrutable countenance.

"Opinions differ," he replied "about what is or is not a joke. I say this—I was never so serious in all my life as I am now. I give you my word of honour that in that box you will find the truth, my thoughts of you set down. Open it."

She took the box from her bag, and stared at it,

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"It looks like a cigarette case."

"Please open it."

She opened it.

"It is a cigarette case."

"Yes."

"You *have* played a silly joke on me."

"Everything that I have done can be explained. On that piece of paper in the box you will find recorded my thoughts about you. Wait! If you believe me capable of playing a joke on you, don't read what I have written. Give me back my box and I will march out of this house at once."

Una read two pencilled lines.

"An ass, masquerading as a lion, fell desperately in love with Una at sight."

Una said nervously:

"I have read what you have written, and now I will listen to your explanation."

"Standing, Miss Sainsbury?"

She sat down; so did he.

"I woke up this morning, horrified to discover that nearly all the morning papers had taken a little molehill of an invention and turned it into a mountain. I knew that I should be pestered to death by reporters, questioned by every man, woman and child I met. I left my hotel and went to another, taking the name of Churchill. Then I made arrangements to leave London for the Solomon Islands. But I wanted something to take the taste of this horrible publicity out of my mouth."

"I—I thought Americans liked publicity."

"Some loathe it; I'm one of them. Bellamy had told me in Chicago to look him up. I called on him. He did the rest."

There was a pause; the man looked at the maid; the maid looked down her nose.

"But—your invention?"

"Ah! It wouldn't interest you, a mere gadget, an accessory to a microscope which records *reflections* on a series of tiny sensitive plates, a miniature cinematograph. Whether or not some reporter has tried to humbug the great British Public I shall never know. If he mistook my

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word 'reflections' for his word 'thoughts,' that is his affair. I have written to *The Thunderer*, explaining the blunder, but I shall be unmercifully chaffed for the rest of my life. Are you very angry with me?"

"You read my thoughts half an hour ago," she said slowly.

"Yes. They were inscribed upon your face."

"Can you read them now?"

"No."

"I am thinking that I shall cancel my engagement for to-morrow night, if—if you decide not to go to the Solomon Islands." Then, moving to the table, she said demurely: "I wish I could offer you more than sandwiches."

"They will taste mighty good," said Professor Kircheberg.

THE SECRET PROCESS

I

"I'VE got it, old man, I've got it."

"Yes, yes," said Hendry soothingly. He was thinking that poor Bancroft had indeed "got it."

"Nobody knows," babbled on the sick man, staring with fever-haunted eyes at his friend and nurse.

"Nobody knows," repeated Hendry, in a tired voice. He was quite worn out, working hard by day, and nursing this dying man at night. He felt sure that Bancroft was dying. The doctor, of course, used the stereotyped phrases about life and hope. And Mary—God bless her—who attended to Bancroft during the daytime, declared her conviction that their patient must pull through. But the man was exhausted by the ravages of double pneumonia now rapidly approaching its crisis. After that crisis, would he have strength to rally? He had been worn out before this illness attacked him, a wraith of a man, falling a victim to a chill which a stronger constitution would have thrown off easily.

The two men lived together, and worked hard for a great firm, famous for its reproductions of engravings and mezzotints. Each man had been fired by the ambition to discover some method by which a complex and expensive process could be simplified and cheapened. Already foreign competition was cutting deep into the profits of the firm.

"I've got it," said Bancroft for the thousandth time.

"What have you got, old man?"

Bancroft had never answered this question. In his delirium he had laughed wildly, winking at Hendry, and then chuckling to himself with almost insane hilarity. Now, suddenly, to Hendry's astonishment, he answered lucidly, although with slight impatience:

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"The formula."

Hendry leant forward, speaking very quietly :

"What formula ?"

"The formula for the new process. Pots of money in it, old man. Stumbled on it by a bit of luck, wrote it down, what ? And then hid it—hid it ! In a safe place, you bet !"

Had a measure of consciousness returned to him ? Hendry saw clearly enough that it was not so. Bancroft was burning with fever. These were the babblings of a dying man, obsessed by the passion which, indirectly, had laid him low. Hendry asked a question :

"Where have you hidden it ?"

He asked the question idly. Long ago, so he thought, he had taken Bancroft's intellectual measure. It was quite impossible to believe that Bancroft could succeed where he, infinitely cleverer, had failed. He asked the question, not out of curiosity, but merely to satisfy and calm his patient. The attack of fever would culminate soon in a terrible sweat. Then Bancroft would fall asleep to wake up an attenuated ghost of his former self, too weak to speak at all.

Bancroft answered in the same even voice :

"I hid it in the laboratory. It's there right enough."

"Yes, yes."

"Ho ! You don't believe me ?"

"I do, old man, I do."

"No, you don't. Seeing's believing—what ? I say, suppose it's not there ? Suppose it's gone ?"

His tone grew acutely anxious.

"It's there right enough," murmured Hendry.

Bancroft made a desperate effort to get out of bed. Hendry was obliged to exercise considerable force to restrain him.

"I must see if it is there, old man."

"You can't, Jim. You're not up to that. Lie still, for God's sake !"

Bancroft struggled and lay still. Then he said imploringly :

"You go, old man. It may be stolen—see ? You nip down ! Look in the right-hand drawer ! You'll find an envelope in the middle of a bundle of papers. It's in that."

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Hendry humoured him. He went out of the room, closed the door, and smoked half a cigarette, listening to make sure that Bancroft remained in bed. Men in delirium are often strangely acute. The small laboratory which they used in common was at the end of a strip of garden, a disused tool-house. After five minutes waiting, Hendry entered the sick-room.

"It's there," he said gravely, "Don't worry!"

Bancroft smiled feebly, closing his eyes.

II

MARY arrived at eight the next morning. Hendry was due at the factory at nine. As a rule he would talk for a few minutes with Mary, telling her about Bancroft. Then he would go his way, always wondering whether Mary really cared for Jim. Was pity for this weakling warming into love? That question consumed him, for he wanted Mary himself, wanted her with ever-increasing passion. She liked him apparently, in a cool maidenly fashion; she attempted to play the mother to both. And it was reasonably certain that she liked the pair better than any other young men of her very limited acquaintance.

She arrived punctually, trim and sweet as usual, carrying a bunch of violets. When she saw Hendry's haggard face, she said dolorously:

"Oh, dear! Are you going to be ill, too?"

"I'm not that sort," said Hendry curtly.

She hesitated; then she held out the violets with a charming smile.

"I brought these for you."

He looked into her clear eyes, as he accepted them. She added softly:

"You are a trump, Tom."

She vanished into the sick-room. Hendry put on his hat, and walked into the garden, a wilderness of weeds and broken crockery. He was smiling derisively as he filled his pipe strolling towards the shed at the farther end. Just to make sure, he intended to open the right-hand drawer. There would be no envelope.

He unlocked the door. As he did so, his expression changed. Frowningly, he surveyed the familiar objects,

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the jars of acid, the sheets of copper, the presses, the big camera—all of them bought and paid for by the most rigorous self-denial upon his part and Jim's. What fools they had been, groping blindly after this will-o'-the-wisp of fortune! Was it likely that they, hampered by poverty and lack of leisure, could succeed, when the head of the firm—a genius in his way, with all modern appliances at his hand—had given up so futile a quest in despair.

He opened the drawer. Yes; in a bundle of papers, there was an envelope unsealed!

A few seconds later, he was reading a formula, holding it in fingers which trembled with excitement. He said aloud, gaspingly:

“By Jove! he has got it.”

He replaced the envelope and walked to his work. But all day long the terms of the formula danced before his eyes. A huge note of interrogation formed itself in his brain.

“Would the formula work?”

Obviously, Jim had stumbled upon something. By the luck of things, by sheer accident, perhaps—some blunder in the manipulation of acids—he had achieved an unforeseen result which might revolutionize the present process. So much he knew, no more! To put the matter to the proof meant much laborious work undertaken with makeshift apparatus at odd hours. Patents, too, must be secured in England and foreign countries. He thought of poor Jim coping with these difficulties, swamped by them, accepting in the end some pittance of a reward from the hands of his chief.

And there might be nothing in it!

And, oddly enough, Jim's luck might have fallen to him, because they had worked upon parallel lines. He was thinking these things over, when his chief entered the department of which he happened to be foreman. Hendry liked and respected his chief.

“How is Bancroft?”

“At death's door,” replied Hendry.

“Poor fellow! This has been tough on you, Hendry. You look fagged out. Take this afternoon. Climb on to a bike, and get a whiff of country air.”

“Thank you, sir; you are very kind.”

THE SECRET PROCESS

III

HE spent the afternoon in the laboratory. For at least a month before Bancroft's illness, Hendry had kept out of the laboratory. He perceived at a glance that Bancroft had been testing the formula. After careful search, he discovered a proof, which he examined under a strong magnifying glass. Outwardly, it appeared to be exactly the same as the thousands turned out by the great machines belonging to the factory. Hendry, however, knew better. His experienced eye and brain identified the proof as the result of a new process, infinitely cheaper and better. With a pencil and paper he made a few calculations which quite confounded him.

Jim had indeed got it!

That same night, Mary never went home. She and Tom Hendry fought together for the life of their friend. The doctor, hastily summoned at midnight, worked with them. The crisis came and passed.

Before leaving, the doctor said a word to Hendry, as they stood together on the landing——

"He has no strength left, not an ounce. He might sink at any moment. Send for me, but, frankly, I can do nothing."

A few days passed. Bancroft lay in bed, breathing feebly, almost unconscious. Then, very slowly, life seemed to come back to him. As soon as possible he was removed to a convalescent home, but on the eve of his departure Hendry made a notable discovery. Bancroft's memory for the events preceding his illness had gone. His mind showed itself as the mind of a child.

Meanwhile, Hendry had spent every leisure hour in the laboratory working out in slow practice the terms of the formula. The day came at last when he stood triumphant—as Bancroft must have stood—staring at a proof of his own which, given better conditions, was incomparably finer than any work turned out by his chief.

Till now, no thought of stealing the property of another had entered his head. Jealousy, it is true, had ravaged him, but he had worked out the formula with the determination of achieving success for Bancroft, a success which might be

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handed to him cut and dried when his friend was restored to health and strength.

Would he be so restored ?

The answer was extremely doubtful. He spent a Sunday afternoon at the convalescent home. The matron and the nurse were very pessimistic. Bancroft, so they said, would do no more work with either hands or brain. He had been strained to breaking point. And he had broken.

Hendry decided that he must act for Bancroft. At any moment some other lucky fellow might stumble upon Bancroft's discovery. What a grim jest that would be !

At this stage of the proceedings, Hendry, even if mistaken, was entirely honest. But his investigations in the laboratory had confirmed his first impression, that Bancroft had profited by his (Hendry's) initial experiments, and he felt certain that Bancroft, if he recovered his memory, would be the first to admit this. Finally, he went to his chief, exhibiting his own rough proof as work accomplished in a small and ill-equipped laboratory. His chief leapt to the conclusion that the discovery was Hendry's, and Hendry succumbed to the temptation of not enlightening him. To introduce Bancroft's name would start endless complications. His chief offered cordial co-operation. Hendry was to be given a free hand with the firm's plant. If he succeeded, commercially, the head of the firm promised a junior partnership and a percentage upon all profits. The firm would secure the patents. Nothing could have been fairer.

"Get to work at once !" said his chief.

IV

OF course, the news leaked out, and came eventually to Mary's ears. Every man and woman in the vast factory knew that Hendry was at work upon a secret process which might make a rich man of him. Mary's father managed one of the departments. It was he who told Mary. She felt hurt that Hendry had not told her, and said so. His modesty, however, was disarming, and a pleasant surprise to her.

"I take no credit for it," he said, haltingly. At that

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moment the impulse surged strong within him to confide in her, but he resisted it.

"You are quite wonderful," she exclaimed.

Her nice eyes shone kindly upon him, as he shook his head. She continued vehemently :

"You had this on your mind when you were nursing poor Jim. He used to be mad about this new process."

"Talked about it to you, did he ?"

She laughed.

"He talked of hardly anything else, but I knew that it was hopeless. Poor old Jim ! In his delirium he went on raving about it. I daresay he was repeating what you had told him when you worked together in that dirty old shed." She added softly : "I used to be jealous of that dirty old shed."

Hendry nodded impassively, but he wondered whether it was Jim or himself who had inspired jealousy. Mary continued softly : "Anyway, Tom, I forgive you for not telling me ; and I do rejoice ; I do indeed."

"You are a dear and a sweet," said Hendry.

"You will tell me things now ?" she pleaded.

"Yes ; I will."

At the factory, he was working furiously. His chief had installed a new plant for his special use, everything of the best, the freshest films, the purest acids, new tanks, and the finest lenses. So much was at stake that this was insisted upon.

And then the absolutely unexpected happened.

The results were nil !

Hendry was in despair, perceiving suspicion lurking in the corner of shrewd eyes. He had made no mistakes. He was sure of that. He had succeeded beyond his hopes in the tentative experiments in his own laboratory. With everything at his disposal—he had failed.

"Have another go at it," suggested his chief.

He tried again and again. Failure gibbered at him ! It was mysterious beyond words, so inexplicable that the man's confidence in himself oozed from every pore of his skin. For chemistry has inviolable laws. Given the right conditions, the right results must follow.

Hendry wondered whether he was losing his reason.

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During this dark hour, Mary stood stoutly by him. Her father, brutally outspoken, said scornfully :

"Tom discovered a mare's nest."

"I don't believe it."

"Then, my dear, he's a fraud, playing with time and money that isn't his. He may lose his job over this."

This crowning misfortune was spared him. Perhaps his chief may have been too shrewd an observer not to perceive that the young fellow had staked everything upon success. At any rate he acquitted him of experimenting deliberately at another's expense. Hendry went back to his own department.

Mary wept. When Hendry beheld her face, he knew that she cared for him, and he had a vision of himself as she beheld him which he could contrast cruelly with the true portrait. A sudden revulsion swept prudence to the winds. To have her under false pretences seemed dastardly. He took her hands, gripping them fiercely :

"You care ?"

"Of course I care. I am more miserable than you."

"It meant such a lot," he faltered.

"Yes."

"It meant—you," he whispered.

She hesitated for one moment, gazing at him searchingly, seeing that he would not speak, and that she must.

"You have me," she answered bravely, "if—if you want me."

"As I am ?"

"As you are, dear."

"Then, by God ! you must see me as I am."

He told his story, extenuating nothing. At the end he said firmly :

"I swear this. I had no intention of robbing poor Jim. I took up his job where he left it, for his sake at first, then for my own, and lastly for yours. I meant to tell you, but I couldn't."

She was about to speak, but he stopped her with a gesture.

"Not now, Mary. Take your own time !"

He rushed from her, the most unhappy young man in the kingdom.

THE SECRET PROCESS

V

NEXT day, he saw Jim Bancroft. The matron prepared him for a change. Intelligence flicked faintly in his friend's eyes. Hendry was torn in two. If Jim recovered his memory, he must tell him. What an ordeal! Yes; that would be his punishment—the loss of Mary and Jim. He could feel the last twist of Fate's abominable screw. Mary would turn to Jim. And yet, his heart warmed within him as he listened once more to the articulate prattle of his former comrade. Jim talked like a child of his food and the flowers, but it was really Jim speaking, not some attenuated counterfeit presentment of him! And he looked stronger. The doctor in attendance at the home spoke much more cheerfully:

"His memory may come back quite suddenly. We know nothing of these obscure cerebral lesions, this odd disintegration of certain brain cells. A shock sometimes restores the normal functioning. Perhaps you could suggest to him some master interest, something which engrossed his energies and attention before he was taken ill."

"I'll try," said Hendry.

He went back to Bancroft, who was lying in a pleasant garden. Jim smiled at him. Hendry sat down, taking Jim's hand.

"Jim, old man——"

"Yes?"

"Where did you hide the formula—the *formula*?"

Bancroft's face clouded; his forehead wrinkled; his eyes now clear again seemed to grow dim.

"What formula?" he repeated.

"Your great discovery, Jim. The discovery which was to make you rich and famous. You got it, didn't you?" He repeated the words slowly, with tremendous emphasis.

"You got it."

"I got it," repeated Jim. "Yes, I got it. What did I get, Tom?"

"It will come to you. Keep your eyes on mine! I'm going to say something which will help you."

Word for word he repeated the terms of the formula. Jim listened painfully alert. Then Hendry thrust his hand

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into his pocket and pulled out the sheet of paper. In a clear, hard voice he exclaimed :

" Jim, you wrote that and hid it. Take it ! Look at it ! And then answer ! Where did you hide it ? "

Jim took the paper, stared at it in silence for at least a minute. Then he answered slowly :

" In the right-hand drawer."

His eyes closed ; his head fell back. A nurse hurried up.

" He's fainted," she said. " What has happened ? "

" I think," said Hendry, " that his memory has come back."

Late that night, he returned to London carrying to Mary the news that their friend was himself again. Perhaps Mary divined what had passed through his mind : all that the recovery of Jim's memory meant. She saw, also, that Hendry was unfeignedly glad.

" It's splendid," said Hendry.

" You will have to tell him."

" Certainly. Old Jim will forgive me. It will be a harder matter telling the chief."

" Must you tell him ? "

" Yes."

VI

He did not see Mary till another fortnight had passed, for she went away. Hendry told his chief the facts. We cannot blame that great man for thinking of his own interests. He said cheerfully :

" Not another word, Hendry. I think you have paid in full. Perhaps Bancroft, when he is fully recovered, will explain the mystery. He can have the same chance that we gave you."

Ultimately, this came to pass. Jim's acceptance of his friend's confession brightened some drab weeks. He stoutly refused to believe ill of his pal. Hendry had acted for the best. Nothing would budge him from that comfortable position. As for the formula, it was O.K. As soon as possible he would accept his employer's challenge.

" The thing," said he, " is a cert."

" I thought so, too, Jim."

" But I got it. You missed something."

" No."

" It's quite obvious you did, old man."

THE SECRET PROCESS

These weeks of waiting were drab, because Mary made no sign, imposing silence. She admitted to Hendry that her view of him was obscured. The old friendly relations were resumed.

The mystery of the new process now deepens. Bancroft given the same admirable conditions, failed as lamentably as Hendry. His chief may be pardoned for exhibiting impatience and slight temper. Oddly enough, Hendry was more disconcerted even than Bancroft. He was furious with his friend for accepting failure meekly. He said obstinately:

"You got it, and you've lost it. Now you must find it again."

Bancroft, still a weakling, went back to his regular work, which was trying enough to absorb his energies. Hendry spent every spare hour in the laboratory.

There inspiration descended upon him. It remains a nice question amongst experts, to-day, to determine to whom the credit is really due for the discovery of the Hendry-Bancroft process. Bancroft's original formula was workable in the old shed—and nowhere else! Any attempt to use it upon a commercial scale had failed.

Why?

Hendry triumphantly answered this question.

For two years, Bancroft and he had used the same acids, notably perchloride of iron. It occurred to Hendry that the specific density of this much used acid might have changed. That was his inspiration. Analysis revealed the truth. The acid used had absorbed a certain quantity of copper. When the right quantity of copper was added to fresh perchloride of iron, the problem of failure was solved.

The Hendry-Bancroft process is too well known to be described at further length here. To-day Hendry and Bancroft are rich men, partners in the great firm which profited so greatly by their discovery. Bancroft is regarded as the golfing partner, but his handicap is 18. When Hendry asked Mary the reason which constrained her to become his wife, she replied sensibly:

"From the way you stuck to that old shed I knew that you would stick to me, through thick and thin."

Hendry did.

TOO MUCH MUMMIE

I

HENRY RITCHIE, M.R.C.P. (and other initials), was depressed; Henry betrayed signs of deep-seated irritability; and Christmas, the festive season, was at hand—! Accordingly, Ann, a sensible wife, kept out of his way, told the children not to “bother” Daddy, and saw to it that he was well fed at dinner. After dinner she put before her man a decanter of vintage port, almost the last bottle of a dozen presented by her father, an admirable judge of nectar. When Henry tasted the wine a smile flickered about his firm lips.

“Ann—is this bribery and corruption?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Mrs. Ritchie. “Enjoy your port, Harry, and then, presently, perhaps, you will uncork yourself.”

“Wonderful woman! Why aren’t there more wives like you?”

She laughed pleasantly. After a pause devoted to conscientious sipping Henry lay back in his chair, murmuring piously:

“Thou who hast given so much to me, give one thing more—a grateful heart.”

“Your heart *is* grateful.”

“It functions intermittently. This weather is very depressing. It affects my patients. That reacts on me. England, so it appears, is at this moment a radiating centre of bad weather—and bad temper. Still a fine Christmas is predicted. My thoughts should dwell on that, but they don’t. Ann, I’m rattled.”

She inclined an attentive ear.

“Badly rattled,” he repeated. “I could write a comedy, or a tragedy, entitled ‘The Doctor’s Dilemma,’ which

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would make G.B.S. sit up and howl because my theme had not occurred to him."

"Ah! Would you call it 'Too much Mummie'?"

Ritchie laughed.

"Ann, you are too much for me."

"Not at all. You are suffering from an overdose of Lucy Parrant. We must admit that she's a mothering darling, with a talent almost amounting to genius for unpicking your stitches."

"Your price is above rubies."

"I have eyes and ears. Perhaps if you took me into consultation——?"

"By Esculapius! I will."

"If I can't help, I can sympathise."

"Bless you! Come into my den."

She followed him into the consulting room, where he took from a drawer of his desk a case-book, a big diary furnished with lock and key. Ann eyed it whimsically as a chamber into which even Fatima would not have dared to peep. Harry was a Bluebeard about his "cases." He might discuss them with qualified practitioners, but never, never with the wife of his bosom. Always, during their married life, he had kept from her professional worries, an abstention which she appreciated.

Mrs. Parrant, John Parrant (the lady's husband), and Jacky Parrant (her son) were friends and neighbours. Parrant had bought a house at Rudford-on-Sea because the bracing air of that prosperous resort had been prescribed by a London physician for a delicate boy, an only child. Soon afterwards Jacky was sent to a local boarding-school, one of the best in the kingdom, where he was welcomed on merits; for his delicate health was the only thing against him. Ritchie happened to be the school doctor as well as the medical attendant of the Parrant family. The three were hailed at once as "darlings" by Ann Ritchie, but described more adequately by her husband as "porcelain." Three fragile persons fussing over each other in a disarming fashion. Everybody who knew them wondered what would happen if one of the three died. . . .

Ritchie laid down his case-book.

"The written word remains," he remarked. "I find

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that I 'vetted' the trio when they first sent for me, a year ago, and I made this note: 'Nothing much amiss with Mrs. P.'

"And the others—?"

"Are her victims. What made you guess that I was suffering from an overdose of Mummie?"

"I had a hint from the matron of the school."

"M'm. A square peg in a square hole. And she told you that Mummie was unpicking my stitches?"

"Yes."

"It's true. All three are bundles of nerves, very sensitive to suggestion. Organically they're sound enough. Away from his mother, Jacky responds to treatment. If she were out of the way he would be robust in six weeks. The same applies to Parrant. But when I tell John that he's much stronger—which he is—Mummie assures him that he isn't; and so he goes round and round in a vicious and enfeebling circle. Jacky has given Mummie dead away; and the matron, not above eavesdropping in a worthy cause, confirms what I feared. Alone with the kid Mummie asks criminally wicked questions: 'Don't you lie awake, darling?—Have you had your indigest lately?—Does Matron make you change your stockings if they get damp?—I'm sure you must be very very tired, pet, when you come in from playing footer?—Do you ever have a bad taste in your mouth?'"

"Exasperating!"

"A common experience, as any G. P. will tell you. That's why we hate tender loving wives and mothers who usurp the functions of doctors and trained nurses. And now Christmas is coming."

"Christmas?"

"Jacky will go home for the holidays; he will be overfed, over-excited, and over-fussed—After his holidays he will come back to school a little wreck."

"Have you spoken to Lucy?"

"Good Lord, yes. She smiles at me and tells me that no man can understand the feelings of a mother or share her anxieties. She says that love is the finest tonic in the world. It's my opinion, Ann, that her love will bury prematurely the two persons to whom she is devoted. I ought to kill her to save the other two"

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"If you have done all you can——"

"Ah! That 'if' is keeping Lambourne awake at night too." Lambourne was the principal of Jacky's school. "Lambourne is sorely tempted to tell Mummie to take Jacky away. There is no other good school in Rudford. The family would have to leave the place."

"We should miss them," sighed Ann.

"Confound 'em, we should."

After a pregnant pause Ann murmured:

"The problem is to get rid of Mummie?"

Ritchie nodded.

"If you will leave it to me, Harry, I might manage that."

"How?"

"I propose to treat Lucy homœopathically. Temperament must be dealt with temperamentally."

"Right! You go ahead. But I married you because you were not temperamental——"

"Harry! What a bouquet!"

"Like will not meet like when you tackle Lucy Parrant."

II

Mrs. RITCHIE called that afternoon upon Mrs. Parrant with the intention of presenting a draft upon sympathies ever on tap. At first sight of her friend, Lucy yelped:

"Ann—what is the matter?"

Ann sank into a chair.

"You don't look yourself at all."

"I'm not feeling myself, Lucy. Tell me, dear, do you ever wake up in the night trembling with—with nervous apprehensions which you cannot control?"

"You poor darling—yes; of course I do. The French have the word for it—*malaise*."

"Just worry."

Ann half closed her eyes and lay back in her chair. Lucy regarded her with increasing anxiety. After another pause, she took a limp hand, saying protestingly:

"But I can't understand *your* worrying——"

"Nor can I."

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"Surely your clever Harry——"

Ann sat up.

"Lucy—not a word to him. I have never been like this before *him*, never. He would be terribly upset. This afternoon I felt that I must confide in somebody, and then I thought at once of you."

"Ann—I'm so pleased. It's very nice and friendly of you; and to think that I thought you so superior, I—I mean so—so *immune*—that's the word—from worry and all that. What can I do to help?"

"It's such a comfort to be alone with you, Lucy."

"Does your head ache, dear?"

"If I said 'no,' you wouldn't believe me."

"I'm going to get some Eau de Cologne. Sit quite still, Ann."

Mrs. Parrant flitted from the drawing-room. Before she returned with the Eau de Cologne and a cambric handkerchief she told her parlourmaid that she was "Not at home" to other callers.

She found Ann stretched upon the sofa! Ann had to swallow an Aspirin; Ann submitted charmingly to the touch of ministering fingers. She could see that Lucy was thoroughly enjoying herself, and would enjoy herself more when curiosity was slaked. Ann always found pleasure in giving pleasure to others; so she too was having a good time playing sofa-lizard.

"I'm terrified of a nervous breakdown——"

"Ah! Don't I know that terror? You have done too much, Ann."

"We had no holiday this summer."

"Why ever not?"

"I hate to tell you. You see Harry is so obstinate about getting a 'locum' who might not understand his pet cases. Both John and your Jacky were pet cases. He has no anxiety about either now."

"You don't say so."

"Yes; he is quite happy about them."

"What a relief to hear you say that!"

"But he is not so happy about you, Lucy."

"He is clever. I'm not quite happy about myself."

"In a sense you three challenged his cleverness. And,

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of course, you captured *us*. It was wonderful to meet three persons so devoted to each other. Three sensitive plants——!"

"We are."

"Each one dependent upon the other two——"

"Quite——quite."

"I sometimes wonder how my Harry would get along without me."

"My John simply couldn't get along without me."

"But they would have to. If we fussed ourselves into the grave——"

"Ann——!"

"You are so unselfish, you might do it, and hardly know that you were doing it. Harry says you are burning the candle at both ends."

"Does he? If he says so, it must be so."

"I know what I need, Lucy—a complete change and rest."

"Away from your husband——?"

"Yes. Wives may be too devoted. Then husbands take their devotion for granted."

"There's something in that, dear."

"There's disaster in it. Of course Harry would miss me terribly if I left him for a little holiday."

"Ann, if you feel like that you ought to take your little holiday."

"If I could find a friend to go with me, a real friend, I would."

"That would make a great difference."

"Somebody kind and sympathetic. It's perfectly heavenly to lie here and rest—rest—rest."

Lucy stroked her friend's forehead.

"You are smoothing away the wrinkles."

"You have so few, Ann."

"More than I ought to have at my age. And if a woman gets pale and jaded and dowdy——"

"Ann—am I pale and jaded and dowdy?"

"Lucy, it's no use kidding ourselves that we look as we did. How could we after what we have both been through? And looks count so enormously with men. A complete change and rest would mean a beauty sleep for me."

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"You are surprising me this afternoon. Yesterday you looked the picture of health."

"Bother yesterday! What shall I look like to-morrow? What shall I feel like when I catch Harry staring at my hard old face?"

"Dear Ann, you do need a holiday."

"We both need a holiday," said Ann firmly.

III

WHEN Mr. Parrant returned home, after his rubber at the Club, his wife failed to ask him if he were tired, a notable abstention. During dinner she never mentioned Jacky. After dinner, she spoke at length of Mrs. Ritchie.

"Ann," she said tearfully, "is an overworked woman."

"What?"

"I say she is—and I know."

"She can knock my head off at golf and tennis."

"She overdoes—at everything. And so do I."

John looked and expressed his astonishment; Lucy continued:

"Ann Ritchie needs a rest-cure."

"I can't believe it."

"I tell you I know."

"Then there is nothing more to be said."

There was much more to be said.

"Ann is dreading Christmas."

"Dreading Christmas—? Why?"

"Oh, you know——"

"But I don't."

"Christmas is terribly hard on women. As Ann says, it's the season of dietetic indiscretions, over-excitement, and overwork. Also—bills. The Ritchies are not too well off; they couldn't afford a holiday this year."

"Dear! Dear! Why wasn't I told this before? Lucy, do you think that Henry would accept from me a grant in aid?"

"My own John—how sweet of you to think of that!"

"What tosh! But would he?"

"I—I don't know. There's a lot of sickness about; Henry couldn't leave Rudford. John, I've had rather an unhappy afternoon with Ann——"

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"Poor little woman!"

"But there was one ray of sunshine. She told me that Henry is quite happy in his mind about you and Jacky."

"We're right as rain, both of us."

"Such a relief to hear that from her. But Henry is not so optimistic about me."

"What?"

"You see, dearest, I've not had time to think about myself. Waking and sleeping I have had to think of you and Jacky. Was that very selfish of me?"

"Lucykins——!"

"Now I'm worrying terribly about Ann. If she broke down——"

"You are giving me the surprise of my life. We owe a lot to the Ritchies. I agree that it would be perfectly awful if Ann broke down. But, at the moment, I can only think of you. You have worried your dear little self to fiddle strings over Jacky and me. Now, at long last, we have a clean bill of health, thank the Lord—and Ritchie! Luce, darling, what's wrong with you. Tell me, blessedest."

"Nothing. I'm just a wee bit tired, as Ann is."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"What an understanding person you are!"

"I'm concentrating on this. Tired? You must be tired out."

"I do feel that I should like to lie down and rest—rest—rest."

"That settles it. This is my affair."

"Your affair?"

"I pay the piper and I call the tune. You are fond of Ann, aren't you?"

"She has been sweet to me. I would do anything for Ann—anything."

"Right! Now we know where we are. I feel a beast. I shall fine myself heavily. You and Ann are going to have a rest-cure at my expense. You and Ann are booked through to the Riviera, *train de luxe*, a day's shopping in Paris, and then a sun-cure at San Gervasio, or any other quiet, restful spot."

Lucy sat up, open-eyed.

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"You are suggesting that I should leave you, that Ann should leave her husband at Christmas?"

"Exactly. I'll have a word with Henry. You leave this to me."

"It sounds—heavenly, but——"

"Not a word!"

"We must talk it over."

IV

NEXT day, John Parrant called upon Ritchie, but not professionally. When Ritchie, who was expecting him, dissembled and assumed the G.P.'s manner, John exclaimed gaily:

"Come off it, Henry, I'm not here to jaw about myself; I've come to square up accounts, to meet my obligations in a Christmasy spirit. Have you got that?"

"Not yet."

"You will in two two's. I've had a brain-wave. Yesterday your Ann came to see my Luce. They had a heart-to-heart. We're jolly lucky in our wives, old man. Ministering angels, both of 'em, but they've overdone it. You can take that from me with or without salt."

"What are you getting at?"

"A clean bill of health for Ann and Lucy. They've earned a rest. I want to give these two dears a holiday, a Christmas holiday. I want 'em to bask in the sunshine on the Côte d'Azur."

"On the—what?"

"At San Gervasio—sunny, recuperative spot. They will do nothing all day and be perfectly happy."

"Steady on! You are suggesting that your Lucy should leave you and Jacky, and that my Ann should leave me and the children at Christmas?"

"Why not?"

"Simply this: they would refuse to leave us."

"So I should have sworn yesterday, but to-day——"

"Is this cut and dried?"

"It will be, if you consent. That's why I'm here. Aren't you worried about Ann?"

"N-n-no."

"You ought to be. I made it plain to Lucy that if you,

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you prescribed this—beneficial change, she would have to play up and play the game.”

Ritchie smiled.

“This is very generous of you, John.”

“Pooh!”

“As you say they have earned a rest. It would be churlish to refuse such a kind invitation. Ever so many thanks.”

“I am to tell Lucy to fix things up with Ann at once?”

“Yes.”

“Doctor’s orders, what?”

“Certainly.”

“You know, Henry, I feel that humanly speaking Jacky owes his life to you. I’m awfully bucked at being able to do something for your blessed Ann. This is going to be a jolly Christmas——”

“Don’t say that to Lucy.”

“Not on your life.”

He drifted out, carrying a high head. Ritchie filled a pipe, half-smiling, half-frowning. Christmas without Ann would not be very jolly. Still——

She came in, smiling gaily.

“Has everything turned out according to plan?”

“Ann, I touch my cap to you. Will you be bored stiff?”

“Oh, no, I shall be too busy.”

“Talking to Mummie?”

“Recreating Mummie.”

“That can’t be done.”

“I quote you, Harry, we become what we think we are. It will be my job to fill Lucy’s pate with new thoughts. I promise you this—you shall be in at the death.”

“The death?”

“On the stage when the curtain falls on our little comedy.”

“What an actress you are, Ann.”

“If I have turned into a comedy what threatened to be a tragedy, you can call me anything you like.”

“I shall call you a miracle-monger.”

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V

NEVERTHELESS Lucy remained on the fence for an exasperating forty-eight hours. Then she surrendered unconditionally, because John, on his own initiative, bought two first-class tickets to San Gervasio.

"Does he want to get rid of me?" asked Lucy, on the verge of tears.

An accomplished actress replied discreetly:

"I'm sure that Henry has put the wind up John. He must have made it plain to him that anything might happen if they lost us."

"If they did," wailed Lucy, "would they marry again?"

"I hope so."

"Ann——!"

"Nobody knows better than you that men must be mothered from the cradle to the grave."

"I suppose you are right, dear. And yet, when I think of another woman in *my* place, I—I—really I refuse to think about it."

"One mustn't be dog-in-the-mangerish. Sharing your feelings about our successors in office I, for one, shall make a sustained struggle to carry on."

"How well you express yourself!"

"I'm a practical woman, with a fair share of justifiable vanity. Marriage is a dip into the lucky bag. You and I know, I say we *know*, that both John and Harry might have done worse; they might be less lucky next time. And so, out of consideration for them, we must, I repeat, carry on. I have mothered Harry and the children; now I must mother myself."

"We will mother each other," said Lucy thoughtfully.

At the last moment, however, John came within an ace of upsetting the apple cart. He seemed to Lucy to be speeding her away with almost indecent haste. He paid little or no attention to last instructions.

"You will wear your goloshes, darling, and if you have any neuritis send for the masseuse at once. I have made a list of the little medicines which are in the corner cup-

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board. On Christmas Day I do hope and pray that you and Jacky will be careful. He ate mince-pies *and* plum-pudding last year, and I was up with him all night. . . .”

John said cheerfully :

“ Now, Luce, don't you worry about us. Jacky and I are going to have great times——”

“ John ! Without——ME ? ”

“ I—I mean, darling, that I shall try to take your place. We must make a desperate effort not to miss you too much. Jacky and I are going to buck up. We shall laugh and grow fat.”

“ You wouldn't dream of taking him up to London to a pantomime ? ”

“ If—if we feel up to it, why not ? ”

“ Heavens ! The last time you took him to Drury Lane the child came back crying——! ”

“ He was only six.”

“ I shan't go. I can't trust you, John.”

To soothe and placate her, a distracted man incontinently promised more than he could be expected to perform. Worse followed. Jacky, thankless imp, shed no tears when the devastating truth was broken to him.

“ I shall be quite all right,” he declared philosophically. “ I shall look after the old man, Mummie.”

“ You mustn't call him that.”

“ He calls me that ; I like it. We're going to have such larks.”

Larks——!

“ What larks, boytie ? ”

“ Oh, you know. It will be an awfully jolly rag, 'cos we *are* pals.”

“ Will it be Christmas without Mummie ? ”

Jacky considered this, having what is rare in school-boys, imagination.

“ Without you, Mummie, we shall feel like Robinson Crusoe and his Man Friday. Yes,” he grinned disarmingly, “ we shall play desert island. I say, you might give us a raft as a Christmas present——”

Lucy felt marooned, not he.

“ Your dear father will send me a wire every day. Let me see your tongue, darling.”

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"Mummie, you saw it day before yesterday. Are you a fuss-pot?"

"Who says I'm a fuss-pot?"

"Crawley *major*. I punched his minor's head 'cos he called me, 'Mummie's pet lamb,' the silly goat!"

"I can't leave my lambs," thought Lucy.

But Ann, and Ann's wiles, prevailed.

John saw Lucy and Ann off at the station. At the last moment Lucy poked her head out of the carriage window.

"Take Jacky's temperature every night. You won't forget?"

"Cheerio!" replied John.

VI

He walked slowly back to an empty house still filled by an unseen presence. Lucy's mothering hands were in evidence everywhere.

What a little woman——!

He sat down to smoke a pipe. He had been rationed in tobacco, but not, *not* by Henry. Filling his pipe he saw a neat chemist's parcel on his desk, and under it a sheet of notepaper upon which was inscribed:

"Your bismuth lozenges; I nearly forgot them."

Henry had not prescribed bismuth lozenges.

John sat down in his own arm-chair. Beneath that chair Mummie had placed his slippers and a pair of dry socks. . . .

What a little woman——!

On the morrow, Jacky would be with him.

Sitting there alone, an odd sense of irresponsibility assailed him. For the first time in many years he was "on his own." He could do what he liked—smoke a chain of pipes, for instance, dine at the Club, shake a cocktail, play bridge till midnight—He sat on, smoking and thinking, till Henry dropped in. Immediately it occurred to John that Henry, not he, had taken upon himself all responsibilities.

What a man——!

Henry's shrewd eyes noticed the small chemist's parcel and the slippers.

"Are you," he asked lightly, "prescribing for yourself?"

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"Bismuth lozenges," said John. "What about a whisky and soda?"

"No objections," replied Henry. "What about a round of golf this afternoon?"

"You are taking an afternoon off?"

"Yes."

"Can you stay to luncheon?"

"I can and will."

They lunched well. They said handsome things about their absent wives, which justified, perhaps, coffee, cigars, and old brandy afterwards. They played a fair round of golf. Before parting Henry said a word:

"Were those bismuth lozenges for Jacky?"

"No. Lucy, bless her, bought them for me."

"M'm. I bear no rival near the throne. You forgot to take your lozenge after luncheon."

"Gosh! So I did."

"Go on forgetting. Has Dr. Lucy prescribed any medicine for Master Jacky?"

"There's a cupboard full of family stuff upstairs."

"Lock the cupboard and lose the key."

"What ho?"

"John, have you whole-souled confidence in me?"

"My dear old chap! You know I have."

"Then believe this—hug it tight! There is nothing the matter with either you or Jacky. I say that both of you are on the high road to good health. Don't give the boy medicine, and don't talk to him about his petty ailments or your own. Be in the open air as much as possible, eat and drink what you like in moderation, and have a good time."

"Heartening advice, I must say."

"No cotton wool!"

"If Lucy could hear you——!"

"Lucy can't hear me. So long!"

VII

JOHN played bridge that night till nearly one, and slept like a dormouse after it. Fellow-members, perhaps, were extra nice to him, because his gudewife was awa'. A local magnate offered him some pike-fishing—

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After breakfast, he fetched Jacky from school. As soon as they were alone the boy said, with a twinkle in his eye:

"Will you call me Friday? May I call you Crusoe?"

John grinned.

"I twig. Good for you, Jacky."

"Do you want to see my tongue?"

"No; I'd sooner hear it."

Together they explored the desert island, quite forgetting that it looked like the villa of a prosperous stockbroker. Lucy, enjoying her shopping in Paris, would have returned home by the next train had she seen them "camping out" in the kitchen garden, cooking and eating sizzling rashers, making raids upon the larder, spoken of as the ship's "cuddy," and, later on, getting together the right gear for pike-fishing.

"I'd love to kill and eat a big pike," said Friday.

"Cannibal! Don't you know that a big pike was once a small jack?"

"Crusoe! What a rotten joke!"

In this spirit, two motherless boys embarked upon the Christmas holidays. The days flitted by. Telegrams were exchanged every twenty-four hours, monotonous in their wording. All was well with the Parrants. Ann wrote to Henry: "Lucy is becoming fat, frisky and flirtatious." Henry wrote to Ann: "The Parrant children are responding to treatment—three rousing cheers!"

Upon the eve of Lucy's return home, Crusoe and Friday made a bonfire. Upon it, with sacrificial rites, were placed goloshes, a respirator, a box of lozenges, and nearly everything that was in the corner cupboard. At the last moment a clinical thermometer was hurled into the flames.

"What will Mummie say?" asked Friday.

"If she says anything," replied Crusoe valiantly, "we'll put out our tongues. They tell the tale."

"What tale?"

"A wagging and waggish tale dealing with two gentlemen adventurers who escaped from the durance vile of cotton wool."

"We forgot the wool."

"So we did. Fetch it."

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An expensive package of medicated wool joined the clinical thermometer.

VIII

LUCY and Ann were received by John, Jacky, Henry and his children with royal honours. A strip of Turkey twill embellished the stone steps leading to the front door of the Parrant house. On each side of this were pots gay with paper flowers. John sounded the gong; Jacky touched off a miniature cannon loaded to the muzzle. The taxi almost skidded. It happened to be drizzling at the moment, and Lucy's eyes rested upon two capering figures not wearing overcoats——! When the first fervent greetings were over, the common inspection followed and a chorus of mutual admiration and congratulation.

"We have put on pounds and pounds," said John.

"Mummy looks lovely," declared Jacky.

The Parrants dined that night with the Ritchies, a *partie carrée*. The ladies wore frocks bought in Paris. They dined well and wisely. When the port had circled once, Henry held up his glass.

"I propose the toast of the evening, my wife, and distinguished colleague—Doctor Ann Ritchie. Tell 'em, Ann."

But they drank the toast first.

"You tell 'em," said Ann.

"Right."

"What can there be to tell?" demanded Lucy.

Henry looked at John.

"Are you satisfied John, with your condition, physical and mental?"

"My dear old chap, thanks to you, I feel a new man. Jacky is another boy."

"Fine! And you, Lucy, how do you feel?"

"John says that if I feel half as well as I look there is absolutely nothing the matter with me."

"Splendid! Now for full confession. I, your doctor, had given you three up as—incurable."

"Incurable? Heavens!"

"Yes—you three engaging persons were killing each other. And you, Lucy, were the greatest criminal of the three. I had a conviction that if I killed you the other two

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might survive. When I was in despair Ann glimpsed a way out of the wood. Ann plotted and planned removing *you*. Her woman's wit diverted your motherly instincts from John and Jacky to herself. You were fussing them to death; more, you were actually dosing them with patent medicines. So Ann, with no hint from me, dealt with you homœopathically, and carried you off to San Gervasio. During your absence, without any treatment other than suggestion, John and Jacky have become normal, healthy persons. Nature, not I, has worked her spells on you. Love, my dear Lucy, *in excess* may defeat its own ends. That's all."

Lucy flushed and looked down her pretty nose, speechless with surprise.

John saved the situation. He burst out laughing, as he turned to his disconcerted wife.

"Luce—it's true; we can't get away from it. Do we *want* to get away from it? *Do we, darling?*"

"N-n-no," she faltered.

"We have been gloriously—spoofed."

"Ye—es."

"I'm going to kiss Ann, and if you're half a sport you'll kiss Henry."

"Help yourself," said Henry.

WHEN THE CORK FLEW OUT OF THE BOTTLE

I

AUTHENTIC pessimists are born not made. Whatever their condition in life may be, they confront it—valiantly often—under the ineradicable conviction that ill must be the final goal of good. Even in rare moments of exultation, when they find themselves, perhaps, singing in a bath, they feel that such ebullitions of gladness are:

*Short swallow flights of song, that dip
Their wings in tears, and skim away.*

Of this atrabiliar kidney are the incurables with whom fortunately, we are not concerned. Circumstances had turned James Crimble into a pessimist. He admitted frankly that he had selected the wrong parents who had pitchforked him at an early age into a job which he hated and despised. The iron of an ironmongery business entered into his soul. When his father died, James had to support an infirm and querulous mother. No walking out with young women for him—! No “nights off” in the company of light-hearted youths—! He would say to his friend, Arthur Lush, an impassioned optimist: “I was born under-dog, Artie.” Artie would reply: “Same here, old bean, but a little bird yips into my ear that I shall be top-dog some day. Alice thinks so too, bless her!” Then James would groan inwardly, and wonder whether somewhere in this troublous world an Alice might be waiting for him. In his land of dreams he was not a pessimist. In his land of dreams he was never alone and never “down-hearted.” When he fell asleep in an uncomfortable bed, he was straightway transported into a paradise by the sea, where he beheld himself on the “prom,” suitably attired, a gentleman adventurer, free to roam where Fancy listed. That captious and captivating nymph was kind to James—

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in his dreams. She upheld the Doctrine of Compensation. "Things," somehow, never went wrong. And yet, each morning, as he emerged from the suburbs of slumber, half-awake and half-asleep, he would think: "My dreams will never come true, *never!*"

He had enlarged his vocabulary. In him the ardour of the chase was confined to hunting the right word, especially in Cross Word Puzzles. His "boss" approved of such mental exercises on the part of a salesman, but he disapproved of time squandered in competing for prizes during business hours. In his dreams James won these prizes. Presently, it occurred to him that he was living—as he interpreted the word—in Fancy's realm. He put this, after his own fashion to Artie:

"I'm centripetal; you're centrifugal."

"You wait a mo', till I put a cold towel round my think-box."

James explained.

"I buzz round myself; you buzz round others."

"That's quite right."

"My energies turn inwards; your energies turn outwards."

"I must say you're a rare talker."

"Not at all—I'm a thinker. I live in my thoughts; you live in your actions."

"Does that worry you any?"

"Self-absorption is bad. How's Alice?"

"Alice? I'm off with Alice; I'm on with Doris, a perfect peach."

"How many girls have you been engaged to?"

"Not more than a dozen."

A thinker tried to assimilate this almost actionable statement.

"Perhaps," he said reflectively, "you are true as steel to the One and Only."

"Pardon——?"

"To my notion most men are. They hunt for the right girl; they cotton to the wrong girl, believing her to be the right girl. When they discover that she is the wrong girl, they start hunting again for Miss Right."

"There's an awful lot in that," declared Artie. "You

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know, Jimmy, if you talked to girls as you talk to me, you'd make a hit."

"Young ladies are beyond my horizon," replied James, mournfully.

"You've said that before. What I say is—that if a fellow don't keep his hand in, just *practising*, if you like to put it that way, he'll lose the use of it. Got it?"

"You mean atrophy, degeneration of any organ from disuse."

"If you ain't a corker——!"

"I'm not a corker; I'm one of the corked."

"Well, one fine morning, the cork 'll fly out of your bottle, and that will be a day of surprises for you."

The cork *did* fly out of the bottle.

II

JAMES WON £500 in a Cross Word Puzzle Competition.

Fortune, so it is affirmed never comes to any man with both hands full. This tag is on all fours with another: "Of two lovers one kisses and one turns the cheek." An impartial observer wandering down the fragrant lanes of England and watching osculating pairs of lovers must come to the conclusion that this tag is unconvincing. So is the first. Fortune, after a man has been bludgeoned by Misfortune, is often prodigal of her favours, and being a goddess why shouldn't she be? Mrs. Crimble died thoughtfully two months before James won his big prize. A good son mourned a loss which he was incapable of considering as a gain. The small sum that he had saved was spent upon a tombstone and the funeral. Having his evenings to himself, he worked harder than ever at the Cross Word Puzzles. For the big prize he had sent up fifty solutions, well aware that had he rung the changes on twenty "alternatives" he couldn't have paid the necessary postage.

He found himself alone in the world with a "monkey," and unable to determine what he ought to do with it. Artie made a suggestion.

"Take a holiday—a week or fortnight in London town. Do yourself top-hole, have a good time, see the sights."

"Why not?" replied James.

The idea burgeoned in his thoughtful mind, as he gazed

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sorrowfully at his wardrobe. A glance at a shaving-glass was more reassuring. He owned what young ladies call an "interesting" face, a face that indicated "sensibilities." He looked, indeed, amazingly intelligent, which he was, so far as his lights, provincial dips, carried him. Heretofore they had not carried him far on any road.

London——! The world's metropolis——!

His portrait was published in *The Daily Banner*, as the winner of the £500 prize. Oddly enough, it was exactly like him, so like that when he registered his remarkable name at a modest hotel in Bloomsbury the clerk in the office, an "also ran" in the Competition, exclaimed genially:

"Are you *the* Mr. Crimble? Yes; you are. I recognise your face. Heartiest congrats."

"Thank you," said James.

"We like, sir, to entertain as guests public characters."

James blushed. He was wearing a new blue serge suit, with black-and-white tie, handkerchief and socks to match. This kit had been described by a salesman as "classy;" it had "vogue." More, it imposed upon James a brighter outlook on life.

The clerk continued volubly:

"We have another celebrity staying with us—Mrs. Mullett."

"The name sounds familiar."

"Familiar! It is, or ought to be, a household word throughout the kingdom. Mrs. Mullett's face is known to millions. She removed from that face, sir, a heavy moustache, a disfiguring growth. Mrs. Mullett is now the personal friend and benefactress of hundreds of thousands of women who have suffered from face-fungus. Yes, sir—Mrs. Mullett, famous traveller and scientist, discovered a herbal ointment used by the women of the Malay peninsula to remove hair, a cherished tribal secret. She is pledged not to reveal that secret, but she can and does sell the herbal ointment."

"Advertising, on a big scale," observed Mr. Crimble, "cuts heavily into profits."

The clerk agreed. James was consigned to the care of the lift-boy who whirled him aloft; he felt that he was soaring into an ampler ether, a diviner air.

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He dressed for dinner.

This thrilling experience seemed to demand a cocktail. Having sipped the cocktail with the air of a connoisseur, James scrutinised the Wine List. A golden sherry, alluringly entitled "Amoroso," seemed to be the right nectar to "bin" under a new dinner jacket. A waitress informed him that it was a "favourite" with the gentlemen boarders, and not prohibitively expensive at a shilling a glass. Mr. Crimble ordered one glass to be served after the soup and hinted that he *might* drink a second if he felt like it.

In the dining-room he identified Mrs. Mullett at once. She sat alone, becomingly garbed (James's word) in black *crépe de chine*. She might have been a year or two older than James, say thirty. Her skin was delightfully white and smooth; she had classical features. James beheld her as a woman of the world, perfectly at her ease, quite unconscious of her fame. He noticed that the other diners—respectable middle-class folk—stared at Mrs. Mullett. Some stared at him. Obviously the clerk had mentioned the fact that *the* Mr. Crimble was a guest in the hotel, to half a dozen boarders. This established a subtle bond of union between himself and Mrs. Mullett. Was there a Mr. Mullett? Incidentally, the consciousness that he, a salesman in an ironmongery establishment, was now in the public eye, constrained James to bespeak the second glass of sherry. After dinner, in the Lounge, he intended to smoke a cigar. . . .

Suddenly Mrs. Mullett shot an appraising glance at James. *He knew that she knew.* She seemed to smile faintly as if saluting another celebrity. Under the influence of the "Amoroso" James smiled back, thinking to himself: "*Entente cordiale*, what?" It would be quite in order, he decided, to engage Mrs. Mullett in conversation if the opportunity presented itself. Artie Lush, of course, would make that opportunity, being a "dasher" at the fair. Artie, too, so James reflected, as he attacked a fillet of eel masquerading as a sole, would have half a dozen commonplace phrases on his tongue's tip, such as: "Seasonable weather for the time of year," or other "bromides"—part of the verbal stock-in-trade. James used less moth-eaten modes of address. . . .

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For the moment he was puzzled by his own impulses. Why did he wish to make Mrs. Mullett's better acquaintance? Was it a case of like to like? Or—humiliating thought!—was it the call of experience to inexperience? He had a vision of Mrs. Mullett, striding through the jungles of the Malay peninsula—! She must have had adventures—adventures came to the adventurous. *Be bold!* In drab and dreary procession the days of his life flitted past. This was his first good time. . . .

His second glass of sherry brought inspiration. He beckoned to a waitress.

"Can you bring me," he whispered, "a paper, any paper, that contains the advertisement of Mrs. Mullett?"

"'Course I can—in two jiffs."

"Pert hussy," thought Mr. Crimble. Then, swiftly, he found extenuating circumstances. The girl had read in *The Daily Banner* what had been set down about *him*; she recalled the headline: "Salesman in a small provincial shop wins Five Hundred Pounds." She had treated him as a salesman; she had bestowed upon him the unsolicited tribute of the "glad eye"; she wanted to "oblige" a man of no "class."

The waitress brought a paper, opened at the right page. She whispered gigglingly:

"Haven't tried the ointment meself, but, Lawsy! I don't need to."

"Many thanks," replied James, with dignity.

Certainly the "ad" had cost money. Apparently Mrs. Mullett had scoured the globe in her quest for hair-destroying *formulæ*. Disappointment, it seemed, had dogged her steps from England to far Cathay. Hair could be removed painlessly and easily, *but it grew again*. The British Public was solemnly adjured not to waste time and money over preparations that removed hirsute growths, and then caused them to reappear thicker than ever to the intense mortification of the gulled and unhappy fools who put faith in them. Mrs. Mullett *guaranteed* satisfaction. She was the happy recipient of thousands of grateful letters from clients, some of them of high rank, and the long advertisement, worded in the first person, ended: "Yours for prompt and lasting service—ALICE MULLETT."

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Alice!

A mouthful of *mousse* of chicken (really rabbit) nearly found its way into James's windpipe. Alice to him was the generic name of all the young ladies with whom he might have philandered in the dead and mouldy yesterdays. Artie Lush had created for James an imaginary "Alice," an enchanting creature, a constant companion in his dreams. Still, the dream Alice bore no resemblance whatever to Mrs. Mullett. . . .

Presently Mr. Crimble sauntered into the Lounge, and lit a cigar.

III

MRS. MULLETT appeared later. As she passed James, a faint fragrance permeated the ambient air which suggested to a lover of literature perfumes of Araby. The lady sank cosily into a chair near a small table. She didn't glance at James which was disconcerting. According to Artie women, since the War, had claimed (and earned) the right, if they were pleased to exercise it, of making the first advance. As Artie put it: "They know what they want, and they're out to get it."

A waitress brought a cup of coffee and placed it upon the table which stood between James and Mrs. Mullett.

He had forgotten coffee.

"One cup of coffee for me, please," he said firmly; but he thought he detected a derisive smile on the face of the attendant. It might be a solecism to order "*one* cup of coffee." Did any gentleman want *two*?

"Black or white?"

"Black," said James, in no uncertain tones. He had made up his mind what to do. Moving his chair nearer to the table, he said politely:

"May I put my coffee, when it comes, on your table?"

"Certainly. The table belongs to the hotel."

It was difficult for a novice, unaccustomed to feminine ways, to follow up his opening gambit. He had moved a pawn; she had said: "Check." And she might have meant "Check!" What would Artie do? He was capable of addressing a young lady, like Doris, for instance,

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as "angel-face" before he knew her name. James murmured humbly :

"If I have been guilty of an impertinence, please forgive me."

Mrs. Mullett laughed.

"You know who I am?"

"Yes."

"And I know who you are—Mr. Crimble."

Thus the ice was broken.

James pulled himself together for a worthy effort. He couldn't quite "place" Mrs. Mullett, but she seemed a perfect lady. Visions of her in a Malayan jungle vanished. Judging by appearances she looked a stay-at-home creature, fond of small comforts, sipping her coffee daintily. She took from a vanity bag a cigarette case and an amber holder. As she selected a cigarette, James struck a match.

"Thanks," she cooed.

IV

SHERRY is a blended wine. Nobody, outside the trade, knows what may be put into "Amoroso" at a shilling the glass. Possibly, ethers that stimulate powers of speech. Mr. Crimble was pleasurably aware that he was "in great form"—at his best. It would be tactful, he decided, not to mention the Malay peninsula at first, but he must "orientate" the talk. A voice seemed to whisper: "Young man, go East."

He was emboldened to display his verbal wares, inasmuch as Mrs. Mullett appeared to be an appreciative listener. He "tried on" certain words seldom used except in CrossWord Puzzles. The management of the hotel supplied a select orchestra of three young ladies, one of whom played the violin. James spoke of the "guc," a rude Shetland fiddle. Mrs. Mullett had never heard of it. James touched lightly upon "stelas," upright slabs of stone, frequently crowned with a rich anthemion. He saw that a "celebrity" was impressed.

"How clever you are, Mr. Crimble."

A modest young man disclaimed this.

"I have had opportunities for study, Mrs. Mullett."

"Yes?"

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"I am a country mouse. This is my first visit to the metropolis."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; it is a great privilege, Madam, to talk to a lady like yourself, a famous traveller and scientist."

Mrs. Mullett smiled, almost pathetically.

"I feel," continued James, in a voice mellowed by the "Amoroso," "that I ought to hold my tongue and listen to you, if—if you would deign to speak of your travels in wild and distant lands."

"Wouldn't that be talking shop?"

James was challenged.

"I define 'shop,'" he said diffidently, "if you use the word in its stigmatical sense, an offence against good breeding, as conversation between two persons interested in 'shop' in the presence of a third person who is not interested."

"I quite agree, Mr. Crimble."

"In the present case, Mrs. Mullett, it is surely permissible to assume that you are interested in your own wonderful life and your own thrilling experiences. I, too, am profoundly interested in them."

"You are very kind."

"I am, I trust, reasonably intelligent. I have, I admit, a thirst for information. I am painfully aware that what I don't know would fill an encyclopædia. Home-keeping youths have ever homely wits."

"There must be exceptions to that rule."

"If it bores you to speak of your travels——"

"Not at all."

"You—you penetrated into jungles—*alone!*"

"Oh, no. I had my carriers. It was safe as safe——"

James winced. "Safe as safe" was not an expression worthy of a famous traveller. She continued quickly:

"I have had no thrilling experiences."

"Snakes—? Wild beasts—? Wild men—?"

"They—they keep out of the way, you know."

"Perhaps Mr. Mullett was with you?"

"He was. He—he died out there."

"Pardon! I didn't know."

"When he died, I—I came home, and—and here I am."

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This was anticlimax, accepted as such temporarily by James. No doubt Mr. Mullett had been the traveller and scientist. The widow wore his halo. *She had to wear it.* Mr. Mullett, of course, had discovered the herbal ointment. . . .

"Mr. Mullett was a scientist——?"

"He was a missionary."

She sighed, and remained silent.

V

A FEW minutes later they were dancing together. James danced indifferently, but Mrs. Mullett assured him that he had aptitude. When they paused for a moment James spoke of Terpsichore and the phorminx. . . .

That night, in the land of his dreams, he danced with a flesh and blood "Alice" through poisonous swamps and impenetrable forests. *Lianas* were brushed aside as if they were spiders' filaments. . . .

He awoke determined to see more, much more, of Mrs. Mullett. After shaving, he scribbled a few lines in a notebook :

"Romance is the subtle, invisible stairway between the worlds of fact and fancy."

That day was spent with Mrs. Mullett. It began impressively. He accompanied her, after breakfast, to an office where she signed innumerable letters. Apparently clerks opened her letters, read them, and answered them. Then SHE signed them : "Yours for prompt and lasting service—ALICE MULLETT."

Together, they visited the Tower of London, Westminster Cathedral, and the National Gallery. After dinner, they went to the Coliseum——!

Incredible! Too good to be true! The miraculous transmuting of a pessimist into an optimist, of lead into gold!

A thinker came to the conclusion that Alice Mullett was a dual personality. The purveyor of the herbal ointment, the benefactress of hirsute womankind, stood immeasurably apart from "Alice," who seemed to be keen as he was upon "having a good time." Her yesterdays had been dull and drab. There was no doubt about that. She spoke of her

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upbringing in a small provincial town, of her "people," who were chapel-goers, austere in their ways, kill-joys. . . .

James supplied the *lacunæ* in her text. Evidently she had married a missionary as a young girl. As evidently, the unsightly growth upon her upper lip had been a terrible disability. She had come back to England, eager, almost crazy, to set aside the past, to enjoy the present and the future. After leaving the office, she said with a smile :

"You know now that I'm a company. It is not good business to mention that. The Co. does everything ; I just sign the letters. Perhaps I ought to tell you that my 'ad' was not written by me. I'm not clever, as you are. I am just lucky."

"It was all luck my winning that big prize."

"If you had not won it we should never have met."

She insisted upon paying her share of expenses.

VI

A WEEK glided by. By this time James knew "Alice" even as Artie Lush, let us say, knew his Doris. He thought of her as a "perfect peach." He had cast to the void Cross Word "teasers"; he avoided highfalutin phrases. He talked to Alice as she talked to him, simply, ingenuously, and sympathetically. Nevertheless he bought a book dealing with the Malay peninsula. When he mentioned this to Alice, she exclaimed : "What a pity ! I could have lent you that." She refused to discuss the book critically. . . .

Long before the week was up, she asked him a question difficult to answer.

"Are you going back to the shop ? Can't you be on your own, as I am ?"

James had a glimpse of the gulf between them. He hated his work—and said so.

"Surely you can find another job in London ?"

"They don't want country bumpkins."

"You aren't a country bumpkin."

"I am a good salesman."

"Try to get work in London. *Do!*"

"I—I suppose I could work for you."

"In the office ?"

"Yes."

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"There's no vacancy."

"But you can pull strings. Perhaps you don't want to pull them for me?"

"I do. You know I do. I've never had a friend like you, never."

"Why do you like me?" he asked abruptly.

"'Cos you're a dear—and so clever, so unlike other men."

What would Artie Lush have said to that?

He knew that he was desperately in love with Alice Mullett. But he wanted Alice not Mrs. Mullett. He dared not make love to Mrs. Mullett. As a pessimist he had said to himself: "Mrs. Mullett has honoured me with her friendship; she's somebody; I'm nobody. Whatever happens I have had one good time." But this line of argument didn't apply to Alice. If Alice had nothing but the clothes she stood up in he would ask her to marry him; he would "love" to slave for her. . . .

Meanwhile Mrs. Mullett had shown to him with pardonable pride some of the letters received from grateful beneficiaries.

"The herbal ointment," said she, "is expensive, but it never fails."

"How did you get hold of the secret?"

"I didn't. Will you keep that a secret?"

"On my sacred Sam, I will."

The thinker who used an expression too often on the lips of Artie Lush, had ceased to think about himself.

"Mr. Mullett got hold of it."

"Husband and wife are one," remarked Mr. Crimble.

"That's as may be. Anyway, he got hold of it; and he, not I, saw that there was money in it, big money."

Big money! Bother big money!

"You must be —rich."

"Rich? No. I'm provided for. That means a lot."

"Almost everything," murmured James.

"Almost, not quite," she faltered. "It's been rather lonely for me. The publicity is painful. I—I hate jokes about it. It makes me very unhappy when people stare at me as if I had been a bearded woman in a circus. The boarders in the hotel don't want to *know* me. I—I under-

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stand that. I should like to change my name and live quietly in the country, but the letters, you see, have to be signed—and there it is. Let's talk of something else."

She wanted to change her name.

In one week James would have to return to the ironmongery business. There were only five days of that precious week left, when a most regrettable incident took place. One of the boarders in the hotel, a loud-voiced gentleman with aggressive manners, poured henbane into Mr. Crimble's ears. He was the sort of person who scrapes acquaintance with everybody. He scraped acquaintance with James.

"And what do you think," he asked, "of our Merry Widow?"

Artie Lush could deal with such fellows. Doubtless he would have answered: "What I think of the lady you mention is none of your damned business." James said politely:

"Are you speaking of Mrs. Mullett, sir?"

"Yes; I am. You look an innocent sort of country lad, and we all know you've five hundred of the best to burn. Take my tip and steer clear of fakers."

"That is a libellous word——"

"Oh hell!"

"Mrs. Mullett," said James, inwardly quivering with indignation, "is a personal friend of mine, I—I know her. I don't know you—and I don't want to know you."

The affair might have ended there, but the loud-voiced gentleman happened to be a bit of a bully and on the large size. Withering scorn filled Mr. Crimble's quiet voice; and he was slenderly built, narrow of chest, altogether negligible from a physical point of view. The loud-voiced gentleman eyed him insolently:

"You silly young ass! This woman, for all her demure face and sly ways, is a *ruddy* adventuress."

He used another adjective, sanctified by Mr. G. B. Shaw.

James saw red. He had never struck a fellow-man in anger, but he recalled what Artie Lush had said: "If you ever have to hit a chap, hit first and hit *hard*." Mr. Crimble hit as hard as he could, landing on a bulbous and inflamed nose. He had no recollection whatever of what followed.

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When he recovered consciousness, he found himself lying on his bed, and the hotel clerk was bending over him.

VII

"WHAT's happened?" asked James.

"You've been man-handled. I know all about it. The other fellow got the worst of it in the end. I mean we've kicked him out of the hotel. Two impartial witnesses of the scrap testified that he insulted you; you struck him; then he set about you. The sympathy of our crowd is with *you*. I daresay you could do with a stiff whisky and soda? No. Well, keep quiet for a bit. He got you—on the point."

In less than five minutes, James was in a chair, still dazed, but not much the worse for the hot encounter.

"Does Mrs. Mullett know?" he demanded.

Mrs. Mullett, it appeared, knew everything. Indeed, she had come into the Lounge at the very moment when first aid was being administered (by the Management) to her champion. Mrs. Mullett had burst into tears—!

"Please tell the lady that I'm quite all right," said James.

"She talks of leaving us," said the clerk, "and I don't blame her. She could put that big brute into court, and we hope she will. A fine 'ad,' I say."

James made no comment, and the clerk, shortly afterwards, withdrew.

A thinker was left with his thoughts.

His mind functioned furiously. He believed, poor fellow, that Mrs. Mullett would leave the hotel, and he, who had struck so feebly in defence of her honour, would never set longing eyes on her again. All said and done, he was the innocent cause of more hateful publicity for her. . . .

A tap on the door disturbed these harassing reflections.

"Come in."

Alice entered and closed the door.

"You mustn't come in here," faltered James.

"Yes, I must—and I shall. I know what that beast called me."

James staggered to his feet. Alice flung her arms about his neck and kissed him as he had never been kissed before. He returned her kisses with compound interest. They clung to each other; Alice was sobbing hysterically.

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Suddenly, she released herself.

"I can go now."

"Where?"

"Anywhere—away from you."

"Alice——!"

"I'm what he called me. I'm an adventuress; I'm a liar; And you will hate me because I hate myself."

The astounded James demanded an explanation, which "dripped" out of her. Boiled down her story was as follows: She had never been out of England——! She was just a peg upon which to hang a profitable advertisement. No unsightly growth of hair had been removed from her upper lip. Her face had been her fortune; her face established confidence. Really she had sold her face for fifty pounds a month. The Company had attended to everything else. But—the herbal ointment *did* extirpate hair. . . .

James listened in half-stupefied silence, but he grasped the essential fact: Alice, the Alice of his dreams was not Mrs. Mullett.

He glanced, apprehensively, at her wedding-ring.

"And Mr. Mullett, the missionary——?"

"He was invented by the Company."

"You are not a—widow?"

"No."

"You are sick of this hateful business? Would you like to get out of it?"

"I can go back to service——"

"What——! You—you have been in service?"

"I was a parlourmaid, really a tweeny, in a dissenting minister's house. I—I felt that I would do anything to escape from that. I—I prayed that I might escape—and my prayers were answered."

"I understand. Now, you really mean to go away, to cut loose from—from the Herbal Ointment?"

"Yes—yes—yes."

"Right. We'll go away together."

"Jimmie——!"

"I have supported a mother. I can support a wife."

She fell, joyously, into his outstretched arms.

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Fortune stood by them. The Company, on its own initiative, behaved handsomely. Alice's face and signature were withdrawn from the advertisements. She accepted gratefully a cheque for five hundred pounds. Mr. Crimble sought and found remunerative employment as a salesman in an emporium where his diction is certain, in due time, to secure recognition and preferment.

They are not courting—publicity.

A SENSE OF MISDIRECTION

I

BEFORE the war Tom Nottage served a short apprenticeship to a firm of brokers on the Stock Exchange. He joined up early in 1915; he did his "bit," and more than a bit, being twice wounded and mentioned in despatches. But he hated war, although war aroused his fighting instincts. For more than three years he had been ordered about, disciplined, made to feel that he was a mere pawn. In 1918 he returned to his former employers, and in due time became an authorized clerk. Even then, earning every farthing of a generous salary, he had to carry out orders; he remained subordinate to the will and intelligence of others. Magnates nodded to him, attracted by a jolly face and a breezy manner. When he was nearly thirty-five he married a clever typist-secretary who worked hard for the same famous firm. She had grey, steadfast eyes, a firm chin, and a *sense of direction*. Her chief had discovered this. And he, a successful man, contended that it was a gift or an instinct, something that couldn't be acquired.

After a brief honeymoon Mr. and Mrs. Nottage returned to their clerical duties. Business had drawn them together; business kept them together. And then unexpectedly Tom inherited ten thousand guineas, bequeathed to him by a maiden aunt who, as she stated in her will, singled out Tom from other nephews with equal claims upon her consideration, simply because he alone was in business and presumably able to take care of money. The head of the firm said to Mrs. Nottage: "You see, Nancy, your sense of direction has not failed you."

Nancy pointed out to Tom that here was a golden opportunity to secure a junior partnership in the firm; but, unfortunately, the firm didn't want a junior partner. When this was made plain to Nancy, she tendered more good advice:

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"Stay where you are, Tom. Invest this money under the chief's directions and watch it."

Tom grunted. On such an important matter he could not see eye to eye with his wife. He was a loyal husband; he demanded loyalty from her, but her loyalty was not always "on tap." For instance, before his aunt's legacy was paid he bought a "two-seater" and attempted to drive it. He ditched the car, which turned turtle. Nancy and he hurtled into a hedge, escaping serious injury. But was that the moment for a loyal wife to exclaim: "You got rattled; you turned to the left when you ought to have turned to the right" To this Tom replied tartly: "Yes, I did, and you—you—can you make an omelette without breaking eggs?" Relations were strained between them for nearly half an hour.

"I have had ten years' experience on the Stock Exchange, why should I ask others for—directions?"

"Because," replied Nancy, "the chief has had thirty years' experience. You have made good with him, acting under orders."

Tom made no reply, but he felt aggrieved. Did the wife of his bosom think that he was unable to invest his own money? What a consolation to reflect that his aunt had not shared this view. She, discerning woman, had acclaimed in him resource and initiative. Secretly he thought: "I'll show Nancy a thing or two! I'll justify Aunt Janetta's choice of me!"

Accordingly he became a member of the House, and opened an office of his own, anticipating protest from Nancy; but she said nothing to which a sensitive man could take exception. Tom admittedly was popular in many markets; at his golf club, after a round, he would talk stocks and shares to fellow-members with loose cash to invest.

He started "on his own" as a broker. Having no children, he suggested to a willing helpmate that she should join him in the office as typist and book-keeper. That would give her occupation and save him the salary that otherwise he would have to pay to some pert young woman.

"And who, Tom, will look after our flat?"

"We can go back, dearest, to a boarding-house as

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before. We will hunt up a select private hotel. I shall increase my *clientèle*. Persons of considerable means live in private hotels. In plain English, there's money in it."

Nancy acquiesced. After all, she reflected, Tom had ideas. A private hotel is a happy hunting-ground for clients. Golfers, too, are simple souls, easily persuaded to change their investments if something "sound" is put before them. An eighteen-handicap man, who does a medal round under ninety-five, becomes automatically an optimist. Nottage and his wife played bridge. He suggested joining a smart bridge club.

"We could not afford the points, Tom. Sixpence a hundred has been our limit. We are not good players; we should lose rubber after rubber because you overcall your hand so consistently; and I—well, I never can remember when all the trumps are out."

"We should increase our circle of friends, Nancy. As good and cheerful losers we should be popular. Popularity is a broker's greatest asset. Yes, I look ahead; I have always done so. We shall entertain quietly at some good restaurant. When the cigars—I must buy a better brand—are alight the talk will drift to my subject."

"What subject?"

"My dear Nancy—investment! Properly considered, there is high romance in lively markets."

"You can't talk shop at your own table."

"That is a reflection on my manners. I see that I must put you wise. Imagine me, for the moment, selecting a cigar for my friends—men of the world. Imagine, too, that I have inside information that Imperial Tobaccos are about due for a substantial rise. Do I say so blatantly?"

"Where, dear, would you get your inside information?"

"Good Lord! Where does anyone get inside information?"

"Exactly! That is what I want to know."

"Where do birds get worms? They pick 'em up. A Tom like myself, on chatty terms with Dick and Harry, picks up information here, there and everywhere—Where was I? Ah, yes! As I pass round my cigars I say: 'I never smoke a Corona de Corona——'"

"You never do, Tom."

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"Please! I say: 'I never smoke a Corona de Corona without thinking of my friend Sir George Parkinson——'"

"Is he your friend?"

"Really, Nancy, I must beg you not to interrupt me like this. I am trying—not very successfully, I admit—to put you wise. This is an imaginary conversation."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"I tell an anecdote about Sir George Parkinson or any other heavy swell, which subtly—*subtly*, mark you—not merely indicates my powers as a *raconteur*, but—give me your undivided attention—challenges the interest of my guests in Sir George's rise to fame and fortune because he bought Tobacco's—and held on to 'em—when Tobaccos were about to boom. I have been speaking off-hand, but you grasp my idea. When I reach my climax my guests—not I—want to talk shop. As their host I consent to do so. Have you got it?"

Nancy nodded.

"That is how *big* business is done."

"I see."

But she displayed, so Tom thought, no enthusiasm. Her faint smile was maternal. With such a smile fond mothers listen to the prattlers in the nursery. Nottage patted her cheek.

"You're a good little thing, Nancy, but you don't know your own hubby."

II

DID Tom Nottage know himself?

It was hopeless, of course, for him to attempt to compete with long-established firms who did business along old-fashioned, conservative lines. Clients who invest money in gilt-edged securities seldom change their investments. Tom hoped to collect in due time a *clientèle* of the get-rich-quick complexion, men who went in and out of speculative deals. For a year or more he worked indefatigably and feverishly "on his own," with Nancy hovering in the background and watching his sense of direction. He attempted to "specialize" in several markets, which is a contradiction in terms. Silently Nancy specialized in one market—the Nottage market—to which ten thousand fat little guinea-pigs had

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been carried. She suffered horribly because she knew that these guinea-pigs had been driven to the wrong market : and she dared not say so to Tom, because she loved him devotedly. As his confidential clerk she had to take down, type out, copy and despatch his misdirections. Each day, and every hour of the day, she beheld Tom wandering in a vicious circle of markets, picking up "tips" that somehow were seldom "winners."

It became obvious to her that her husband's spirits rose with a rising market. Inflated prices inflated him. He was a victim to what Monsieur Gaston le Bon terms *la psychologie de la foule*, freely translated by Nancy as "fool psychology."

He did capture a *clientèle*, although he mispronounced the word. Believing in himself, he imposed that belief on others. At his club, on the golf course, over many cigars, Mr. Nottage inspired optimism and confidence. He had the patter of Capel Court at a voluble tongue's tip ; he had the air of being "in the know." And his clients soon discovered that he did give serious consideration to their business, which, very rightly, he regarded as his own. He wrote them long letters, bristling with technicalities ; he carried in his pocket lists of their securities ; he begrudged neither time nor trouble in digging out "facts" that concerned the more speculative counters ; he boasted that he could read between the lines of any report or prospectus and "assay" the "ore"—whether rich or poor in quality—which eludes the grasp of the common or garden shareholder.

Optimists have an underlying streak of obstinacy. Tom was no exception. When he became mournfully aware that he had "put" a client into a "loser," he went on hoping that it would turn out a "winner." He would say pleasantly : "This, you know, is a lock-up." *Per contra*—to use his favourite expression—when shares commended by him were on the up-grade, he would urge taking a profit, saying : "Small fishes are sweet. I should never forgive myself if you were left with the 'baby.'"

Let us draw the veil over these ineptitudes, summing up the situation.

Mr. Nottage had a sense of misdirection.

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III

THE conviction that this was so forced itself upon Mrs. Nottage. Clients—she read and answered all letters—were becoming restive and importunate. Mercifully, no serious damage had occurred to affect the interest that each good fellow took in Tom's lively talk. They held on grimly to falling shares; they smacked their lips over the small fish that tasted sweet. But Mrs. Nottage knew that the frail barque that carried Tom's fortunes was near the reefs. If he lost his clients, if he lost his own money, bankruptcy must follow. He was not capturing new clients. Dick would say to Harry: "My broker, Nottage, is an honest chap, but I've dropped a bit lately. It's quite all right. Nottage says that I shall get it back. No complaints!" But such talk did not encourage Harry to entrust his affairs to Tom. The ten thousand guinea-pigs now numbered seven thousand. Mrs. Nottage felt that Aunt Janetta must be turning in her grave.

She had to talk things over with somebody. In her misery and despair she turned to Alfred Hayley, who had distinguished himself at Rugby football and could hold his own in any "scrums" of turbulent jobbers. Alf was Mr. Nottage's authorized clerk, who had access to the House, although not a member. Alf happened to be of kin to Mrs. Nottage. He was grateful to her, as she well knew, because she had suggested him to Tom as an intelligent and pushing young fellow. Human nature being what it is—a bundle of inconsistencies—Tom questioned Alf Hayley's push and intelligence merely because Mrs. Nottage laid emphasis upon them. When he promised to engage Hayley, he said to Nancy: "Your cousin may be the most remarkable young man in the City of London, but I hope he understands that he will have to take his orders from *me*?"

"Why, of course!" replied Mrs. Nottage.

The cousins were alone together after an unsatisfactory day's work. Tom had gone to his club.

"Alf—"

"Yes, Nancy?"

"I *must* speak to you. I can't bottle it up any longer.

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Sit down—light your pipe—say nothing till I've got this load off my chest."

Alf sat down, quite by accident, in his chief's chair. Nancy talked for five minutes without stopping, telling young Hayley what he knew already. It came to this: Tom's business compass was hopelessly out of order.

"What can I do?" asked Nancy passionately. "What can *we* do, Alf?"

Alf could pause as well as push. He filled his pipe.

"Yes," he replied presently, "we know. He hits the wrong nail on the head—and hard—nearly every time. He has a mania for buying on top of the market. If I say a warning word—*one* word—he scowls at me. So I hold my tongue; so do you. He has extraordinary aptitudes for selling the good stuff and holding on to the rubbish."

Hayley cited a case or two, ending up:

"I'll say this for him. He's such a good loser that people take him to be a winner, and he's a born salesman. If he puffed the right goods he'd be paying big super-tax."

"We are losing clients, we are losing our own money, and if I rub that in I—I break his heart, poor dear!"

A tear trickled down her cheek.

"If he would take a partner——" suggested Alf.

"Say at once—if he would acknowledge defeat. He won't."

Alf stretched out his sturdy legs and half closed his shrewd eyes. Mrs. Nottage went on:

"He is feeling the strain, Alf. That cough of his——"

"What about it?"

"It won't go. He needs a rest, a holiday. Alf, if we could get him away, if he had to stay away—why, you and I, I believe, might save the ship."

Alf sat up, alert to his finger-tips.

"Nancy, you have inspired me with a great thought. Together, standing shoulder to shoulder, you and I, the crew, must maroon our skipper."

"Alf!"

"It can be done, 'because it must be done."

"How?"

"Where there's a will there's a way."

"What does 'maroon' mean?"

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"It means—isolation. Men are marooned on desert islands. Napoleon was marooned on St. Helena, kept out of mischief. It has just occurred to me that I know of a desert island——"

"If you are heartless enough to joke about this——"

"God forbid! Nancy, a bed might serve at this pinch as a desert island. I suggest to you that if we could get Tom to bed—and *keep him there*——"

"Alf, you're crazy. There isn't an idle bone in Tom's body, and, barring this bothering little cough, he is very well. He never goes to bed till eleven, and he gets up earlier than you do."

"I think," said young Hayley meditatively, "that too early rising is bad. People suffering from swelled head ought to be put to bed till the swelling is reduced. In Utopia there would be asylums for megalomaniacs."

"We are not living in Utopia, but in a private hotel in Cromwell Road."

"There must be beds in a private hotel in Cromwell Road."

Again he lay back and half closed his eyes.

IV

WHEN he sat up for the second time, Nancy detected a twinkle in his eye, but he spoke gravely :

"You can't work this on your own, old thing. The problem is—to get Tom to bed and keep him there. He is a fairly good subject for suggestion. His trouble, as I diagnose it, is this : He accepts too readily the suggestions of others——"

"Does he ? Not mine, nor yours."

"I mean public not private opinion. He is astoundingly sensitive to enthusiasm ; he is at the mercy of our boosters. He rushes in with the crowd. Afterwards, when he knows that he's slipped up, there must be a reaction, eh ?"

"There is."

"Mercurial, what ?"

"He gets very blue sometimes when he's alone with me."

"Splendid ! I'm sure that outside business matters he is as wax in your capable hands."

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"He does give way in little things."

"Exactly; this is where the little cough comes in. Who is his doctor?"

"He hasn't got one."

"Fine! It would be quite impossible to keep him in bed for, say, a fortnight, except under doctor's orders?"

"Quite."

"We're fairly up against it, Nancy, but I have in mind a G.P. who, in the interests of all concerned, including his own, might lend a helping hand. What price—McMonagle?"

"Dr. McMonagle——? He plays golf with Tom; and he is one of our clients——"

"And a canny Scot. He is getting rather uneasy. Only the other day he dropped in when Tom was out. You turned him over to me. Tom put him into Oils, because there was a flash in the pan in Oils. Shares for which he paid $6\frac{1}{2}$ are now quoted at $3\frac{1}{2}$. This is the moment to average, but Tom has cold feet about Oils. He's mad on Tins. Now, Nancy, if you can get Tom to bed, I think—I don't know—I think I can persuade McMonagle to keep him there for a fortnight. You must insist on Tom's seeing a doctor; you must make him suggest that his friend, McMonagle, should 'vet' him. The rest lies on the laps of the gods."

"Dr. McMonagle is his friend."

"I am counting confidently on that."

At this same moment, Mr. Nottage, at his club, was saying to a potential client:

"Look at the price of Tin. I have inside information that the demand for Tin is grotesquely in excess of the visible supply. Tins are high, I grant you, but they're soaring, soaring!"

"But my broker says——"

"Of course, I know what he says. You do business with Topgood and Toplift, good old-fashioned people. I have no doubt that Tins scare them stiff, but they don't jolly well scare me. I bought Tins to-day for myself. What do you say? Shall we have a game of billiards?"

"You're full of 'pep,' Nottage. A sound mind in a sound body."

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"Never felt fitter in my life. Come on, a hundred up—loser pays for the table and the cocktails."

"One moment. What Tins did you buy?"

"Bambolangs. Tell old Topgood to rake in a few at about 5 $\frac{1}{2}$. We shall see them at seven before we know where we are."

"Dash it! You gave me the tip. Buy me a hundred, and ever so many thanks."

"But—old Topgood—?"

"Hang old Topgood! He's too old. There's too much Topgood and not enough Toplift in that firm. Waiter! two Martini's with a dash."

That is how Mr. Nottage did business. With the right sense of direction he, too, might have soared higher than any Tins.

V

THAT same night, at the private hotel in Cromwell Road, Mr. Nottage played bridge; and overcalled his hand, as usual. Afterwards, a spinster, one of his clients, slightly upset him by insisting on talking shop at a moment when she ought, as Tom observed to Nancy, to have been slipping into her bedsocks. Nancy may have been tempted to say: "You talk shop with Miss Simkins after dinner, why shouldn't she talk shop with you?" But instead, she murmured anxiously:

"You have a troublesome little cough, Tom."

"Tchah!"

"I worry about it."

"Bless you, Nancy, who hasn't a cough in this beastly treacherous weather? I shall throw it off."

"But—you haven't. You strong men are so weak about that."

"Weak?"

"I mean, perhaps, obstinate. There is a very malignant form of flu about. It begins with a cold in the head; then it settles on the bronchial tubes; lastly it attacks the lungs. Somebody was saying to me only the other day, that this form of flu does in people who are below par."

"I ask you—am I below par?"

"If you ask me, I must say that you are. You have lost

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your nice fresh colour ; you complain in the morning of a taste in your mouth ; you cough in your sleep ; you told me that you felt very tired after your golf last Sunday, when you played with—with—whom did you play with, dear ? ”

“ I played with McMonagle. Yes ; he beat me five up and four to go.”

“ Did you tell Dr. McMonagle that you felt tired ? ”

“ No, I didn't. When I lose a game of golf, I don't tell the other chap I'm off my game. I—I don't grudge him his triumph. And besides, if I spoke to McMonagle about feeling tired, he might think I was cadging for a medical opinion. That never occurred to you, I dare say.”

“ Is Dr. McMonagle a clever doctor ? ”

“ Licentiate of Edinburgh, and all that. Why do you ask ? ”

“ Well, I—I just thought that if you were taken seriously ill, I should send for Dr. Lovibond. So handy in emergency cases. He could be at your bedside in two minutes.”

“ Lovibond ! You would send for that old dodderer when my life might be at stake, merely because he boards in this hash-house ? Now, we'll settle this here and now. If I'm laid by the heels, you phone up McMonagle. Have you got that for keeps ? ”

“ Yes,” said Nancy humbly.

“ Good ! Now—about my cough. It does hang on.”

“ And you remember, last year, that poor Mr. Sitwell had just such another *neglected* cough. He was about your age and build. When he was cremated I thought what a good valuable life had been sacrificed to sheer obstinacy. He called in a doctor too late.”

Tom nodded gloomily.

VI

Two days later he was in bed. Heaven may have helped two persons who sorely needed help. A pea-soup fog settled upon the metropolis, and was more poisonously thick in Cromwell Road than anywhere else. Tom, gallant fellow, went to the City without an overcoat, because Nancy had irritated him at breakfast by saying that his cough was worse. She did not say “ I told you so ” when he returned from old Broad Street coughing his soul up. And this

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remarkable abstention had its effect upon a man who at the moment was looking and feeling most uncommonly sorry for himself.

Three days later Dr. McMonagle paid his first professional visit to Mr. Nottage.

What had Alfred Hayley said to him ?

Here we must tread delicately. Professional honour is dear to professional men. Young Hayley, indeed, said little, but he said enough. He treated Dr. McMonagle as Mr. Nottage's friend ; he over-emphasized, perhaps, the fact that Mr. Nottage was below par and suffering from a troublesome cough ; he predicted that Dr. McMonagle would be called in. So far, so good. It was not so easy to touch lightly upon Mr. Nottage's sense of misdirection. That—and here young Hayley wandered from the path of Truth—was, so he said, merely a *temporary* indisposition. He ended genially :

"Mrs. Nottage is a marvel. She has her finger on the pulse of the market. It is a gift ; and a gift denied expression by her husband. She ought to be the dominating partner in this business. In the absence of Mr. Nottage she could pull it together. She knows that. So do I. When Mr. Nottage knows it, he will admit it, because he's a good sportsman. Really, he's too keen. You have played golf and bridge with him—he presses ; he overcalls ; he overworks ; he hasn't taken a holiday since he opened this office ; he takes to heart his clients' losses——"

"Thank you for telling me this, Hayley. If Nottage calls me in, what you have said may help. A jaded man is not fit to do business."

Dr. McMonagle "vetted" Mr. Nottage next day, and—leaving out of consideration what young Hayley had told him—came to the conclusion that his patient, however impatient, must remain in bed for a fortnight.

"But—my business ?" asked Tom.

"Mrs. Nottage must attend to that."

"I shall have to give her a power of attorney ?"

"Certainly."

"And I am to lie in bed for two weeks !"

"At least. Lie low, unless you want to lie still permanently. I'll call again to-morrow."

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VII

WITH Tom marooned, Nancy and Alf went to work. Together they overhauled the holdings of all clients. Rubber, after long years of inactivity, was just beginning to show its great characteristic—resiliency. Young Hayley had specialized in rubber. On the first of November, 1925, Mr. Nottage was marooned. Trembling with fear and audacity, Mrs. Nottage drove seven thousand guinea-pigs into the rubber market. She coaxed and cajoled every client to follow her example, calling upon Mr. Hayley to furnish technical details. Mr. Nottage was forbidden to talk business, but his wife told him, quite truthfully, that business was booming. At the end of the fortnight he was allowed to leave his bed, but not his room. When he left his room, he travelled to Torquay to spend, under Dr. McMonagle's orders, a recuperating fortnight with a married sister.

Throughout November rubber soared high and ever higher.

Tom stayed more than a fortnight with his sister. Illumination was coming to him. The reports from the office were confounding. Two extra clerks had been engaged; the staff had to work overtime; clients, old and new, were buying rubber. Tins were stagnant.

"If you feel up to it, darling" (wrote Nancy), "you might try a little outside touting. Can't you interest some of your sister's friends in rubber? That is where you are so wonderful."

Tom took the field, after reading half a dozen pamphlets thoughtfully sent to him by Nancy. Enthusiasm in a rising market came back to him. He could say, and did say, to his sister's friends: "I'm here for a holiday, but are you interested in Rubber? No? You surprise me. America is short of Rubber; America must have Rubber. I tap inside information. The dividends of certain companies are going to be—*stupendous*. For instance, strictly between ourselves—"

Names of companies would be whispered with reassuring comments on advance sales, original cost per acre, acreage under cultivation, estimated crop reports, and so forth.

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When Tom was contemplating a return to London, Alf Hayley wrote a letter entreating him to stay where he was.

"I cannot exaggerate," wrote Hayley, "the results of your personal work in Torquay. Nancy and I doubt if you can measure them yourself. Your sister's friends must be legion; and, of course, they pass on to their friends the information that must be radiating from you. So far, to a man, the Torquay clients are becoming rich beyond the dreams of middle-class avarice. For all our sakes—carry on!"

Tom carried on.

VIII

WHEN he strode into the office, the picture of high health and prosperity, he had been absent from his desk for more than six weeks.

He sat down in his chair and gazed at Nancy. Young Hayley was in the House, in the thick of the Rubber scrum.

"Nancy——"

"Yes, Tom?"

"A man, unless he is a blithering idiot, can fool himself part of the time, but not all the time. We were on the rocks when I left this office and took to my bed. We are now on the high seas, thanks to you——"

"And Alf——"

"Alf, I take it, received instructions from you?"

"No, Alf was in Mincing Lane for five years before he came to us. Alf really knows about Rubbers and Teas. He says that we must get our clients out of Rubbers and put them into Teas and Oils."

Tom winced.

"Perhaps he is right; I—I don't know. Anyway, it comes to this: you and Alf between you seem to have a——"

"A sense of direction?"

"I can call it nothing else. Who knows how you got it or where you got it? I seem to have been born with a sense of misdirection. It's humiliating, Nancy, to have to say this, but it's true. Oh, my dear, at this game of ups and downs you're a champion, and I'm a rabbit."

"You have great gifts for selling——"

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"The wrong stuff. That's that," he smiled at her pathetically, "but—cheerio! I can't make you legally my senior partner, because a woman is not allowed to be a member of the Stock Exchange, but from this moment, as between you and me, you are the senior partner in the firm of Nottage and Wife, or Wife and Nottage. Sign, seal, and deliver our articles of partnership."

They kissed each other, but Tom marked an odd expression upon his wife's face. She looked up at him whimsically.

"If I should have to leave the firm——?"

"Nancy! You don't, you can't mean——?"

She smiled maternally. Then, with her steadfast eyes on his, she whispered:

"I shall always be tremendously interested in the business, but I want, Tom, a little home of my own. And before long I must have one. Take a partner. Take Alf. He can put in a little money, not much, and his sense of direction. You will do your best work—outside; you will successfully build up the *clientèle* of Nottage and Hayley."

And so it came to pass.

Dr. McMonagle is the accredited medical attendant of the Nottage family.

BUSTER, BUTTERFINGERS AND GINGER

I

WHEN is cricket not cricket ?

This question bit deep into the mind of three would-be jokers in short skirts, including one who had no right to wear them.

The victim of a plot, originally intended to disconcert and discomfit eleven males, was Grace (named after the famous "doctor") Preston, who had disappointed her father five minutes after she was born. Colonel Preston had played cricket for the Gentlemen of England. He spoke of himself as a Cricketer and an Imperialist. He had been an enthusiastic admirer of Mr. Rudyard Kipling till that gentleman, in an unguarded moment, spoke of "flannelled fools." The Colonel snorted at the phrase. He refused, henceforward, to read Kipling ; he scowled when the great name was mentioned.

In the same spirit of resentment, he scowled at a girl who ought to have been a boy. Being a gentleman he dissembled with his wife, who indeed disarmed resentment with apologies. To the rector of the parish, an old friend, he was outspoken :

"I had picked the right house at Harrow, I——"

The parson, also a cricketer, smiled.

"You saw your son at Lord's——!! I understand everything ; but—better luck next time."

The luck refused to change. Mrs. Preston, with every wish to oblige, failed disastrously. Three more daughters succeeded Grace.

To do the Colonel justice, he refused to bow beneath his bludgeonings. His four daughters were "entered" to the national game at the earliest possible age ; they lisped cricket long before they could spell the entrancing word.

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It is said in Dorset—even to-day—that Grace, upon her sixth birthday, was presented with the smallest pair of pads and the tiniest batting-gloves in the world—! The firm of Wisden built a bat for her.

II

Colonel Preston had inherited a large Georgian house encompassed by a small park, which held, of course, a cricket pitch. Each year, as soon as the summer holidays began, he had what he called "our cricket week." When his girls grew up, the quality of the cricket suffered, because they began to take part in it. As soon as Grace became Captain of her school XI, she was encouraged to entertain friends who could play the game. Finally, the "feature" of the week was a match between "Broomsticks and Bats", the trousered being handicapped by having to use a broomstick. The Colonel, true to his ideals, refused to invite bumble-puppies to his house; and his male guests wearing famous ties and hat-ribands dared not disgrace them. And so it came to pass that Grace's XI, however carefully selected, were invariably defeated.

She spoke of this, mournfully, to Butterfingers, her sister, and Second in Command. Butterfingers was so called derisively, because she never missed a fairly possible catch. She was the youngest of the four Misses Preston, and still at school.

"We shall be hammered again this year," said Grace.

"Yes; it's a sitter. And if we don't win one match soon we shall never win it."

"Why not?"

"You ask Ginger——"

"Don't be sloppy!"

"I'm not sloppy; but I can detect sloppiness in others. You have made up your mind to marry Ginger and that will put the kibosh on everything. Wait—! I've a brain wave. If Ginger doesn't play against us, we might win."

"We should win."

Ginger was a deadly bowler on a slow wicket and a run-getting batsman.

Grace considered her sister's suggestion, sorely tempted, as she heard Butterfingers continuing:

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"Last year, I thought of 'doping' Ginger, but it was too risky. One word from you, old thing——"

"But I want to *down* Ginger. Really if I were offered the choice of marrying him or bowling him first ball I—I don't know what I'd do."

"You can't bowl him, and you *can* marry him."

Grace held her tongue, because head and heart were at civil war. She certainly liked Ginger too well for her peace of mind, because her mind told her that the young man was autocratic both on the cricket field and off it. He "skipped" her, a corroding fact. And he was disarmingly unaware of this. Blest (or cursed) with independent means, he could do what he pleased where he pleased. To make the situation more delicate he was *persona gratissima* with Colonel Preston. Out of many suitors for the hand of his eldest daughter, the Colonel had picked HIM as the potential father of great cricketers. Already Ginger dared to call the veteran—Daddy.

"You sink your pride," counselled Butterfingers, "and tell Ginger to get a tennis elbow from Harrods or somewhere."

At this moment inspiration descended upon her. She began to laugh hysterically.

"Anything tickling you?" asked Grace.

"An enormous 'if.' We may win our match, *if* things go right. If I say another word they will go wrong."

III

Butterfingers, not Grace, had bespoken the services of a distinguished school-fellow who came of a cricketing family, Miss Betty Hatherfield, who had a young brother, a star performer at one of the less well-known public schools, a promising "colt," likely to play for Cambridge some day and possibly for England. Inasmuch as the Hatherfields lived in Lancashire (and were not mentioned in Kelly or Burke's "County Families") Colonel Preston knew none of them except Betty. Betty had stayed with Butterfingers; Butterfingers had stayed with Betty. The two corresponded; and of late Betty had written with ever-increasing enthusiasm of young Buster, who, according to her, pos-

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essed a mastery of the ball, quite uncanny in one of tender years and cheeks, virgin of a safety razor.

To see Betty at once was Butterfingers's first objective. They met, by the luck of things, at the Eton and Harrow match. Buster was not there.

"You are coming to us, Betty, on the 25th."

"You bet your socks."

"You must bring Buster with you disguised as your sister. His complexion knocks spots out of yours and mine. He will look a perfect darling, and win our match for us, unless you are a colossal liar. I have the whole thing cut-and-dried. I shall arrange that you and he are given the bedroom and dressing-room at the end of the east wing. Then you can 'vet' him."

"Butterfingers——!"

"It can be done and it must be done. Buster, if it's his day out, will establish confidence in us. Our bowling has wrecked our chances. It's perfectly hateful to admit it, but we tire too soon. Ginger knows that. He counts on tiring us stiff before we bat; and he counts too upon the moral effect of a big score. Always it has been a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose match for the men. They know we're outclassed although we play with bats. They have to bang the ball with the broomsticks—and they do it."

"They won't bang Buster's balls."

"Not if you've told half the truth. Has he really seam-swing?"

"Yes—and a back-kick off the pitch. But, my dear, he won't come. He's gone stark, staring mad over tennis."

Butterfingers pricked both ears.

"Tennis——? Could he take on Ginger at tennis?"

"He could give Ginger half-fifteen and romp home."

Butterfingers gurgled.

"You must make him come. If he's half a sport he will come."

Buster did come.

IV

HE came because he was suffering from calf love for Butterfingers, and calf love has been cruelly belittled by everybody except the psycho-analysts. Betty, a slave to the

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doctrine of expediency, and quite conscienceless where cricket was concerned, dangled her friend as a bait.

"If you down Ginger——"

"I've never met the blighter; I've heard of him, of course. What ice does he cut with Butterfingers?"

"He could support her in the position—to quote the Colonel—which she adorns as his daughter. Behold him, as your hated rival."

"Is he a swine?"

"You can form your own opinion about that when you meet him."

"As a girl I should give myself dead away. It's simply—imposs."

"You're a rotten funk. Butterfingers sets an inordinate value on pluck. If you don't take a wicket—if you make a blob, you'll score heavily with her as a sportsman."

"She looks on me as a boy."

"This is a Heaven-sent opportunity to play the man in my frocks."

"In your frocks?"

"In my *best*. What a sacrifice! We'll do a bit of rehearsing here. You can change into girl's kit at Uncle Arthur's flat in London. It will be a glorious rag. If it comes off you will go up to Cambridge trailing clouds of glory. Butterfingers will be your friend for life."

Buster surrendered.

He had masqueraded as a girl at a fancy dress dance and in private theatricals. But this was a serious affair. For a full fortnight Betty coached him in his part, shortening his stride, and teaching him a maiden's tricks with a powder puff and a lip-stick, not to mention the nice conduct of knife and fork.

"You mustn't whack into your food."

"I shall have to leave the dining-room with the women."

"Until quite lately you have always done that."

"Suppose some silly ass makes love to me——?"

"You will deal with him faithfully."

"Suppose some girly girl kisses me——?"

"You can accept such a salute in the Early Christian spirit and as a tribute to your aptitude as an actor."

Buster grinned. Unquestionably he was warming to his

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part, much heartened by a letter from Butterfingers which began: "Dearest boy," and ended: "Yours till we climb the golden stairs and after." In London the metamorphosis was accomplished. In defiance of the law, Buster, in Betty's prettiest frock, walked with his sister the Ladies' Mile. More than one man eyed him admiringly. He could hardly help admiring himself when he passed plate glass windows in Piccadilly. Betty said solemnly:

"You have the 'come hither' in your eye. I wish that I looked half as alluring as you do."

"Cut out all that tosh."

"I'm speaking warningly; I am indeed. You are the typical *garçonne*. I'm a beastly foil to you. Ginger, who is 'hot stuff,' may fall for you."

"Gosh!"

"Don't clench your fists like you are doing now if he does. Smile at him derisively; tell him that you're not a baby-snatcher. You might hum 'Here we go gathering nuts in May'."

"You're putting the wind up me, Betty."

"Anyhow it's a wonderful adventure."

V

THE Colonel welcomed two young ladies on their arrival. Certainly he stared rather hard at Buster, but he was thinking to himself: "This kid is built on the lines of Atalanta." Buster found himself blushing under his host's keen scrutiny, and looked down his nose when that gallant officer pressed his slim hand.

Immediately Butterfingers bustled her two guests up to their bedrooms on the plea that luncheon would be served in a few minutes. Alone with Betty, and Buster, she exclaimed rapturously:

"You're—IT."

"Yes; that describes me," said Buster.

"Nobody knows. After luncheon we shall play tennis; after tea there will be practice at the nets. You can send down a ball or two to me—not the best in the basket."

Buster winked. Butterfingers walked round him.

"He's the pick of our bunch, Betty. Billina—we shall call you Billina—I want to kiss you."

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"Help yourself," replied Billina boldly. "I'll take all the kisses I can get from girls, but none from men."

"Then for Heaven's sake don't wink at them, you naughty little darling. I shan't kiss you, but I'll powder your pert nose."

She did so delicately.

At luncheon it was noticed that Miss Billina Hatherfield gave undivided attention to her food, answering many questions in shy monosyllables. She owned up to being "useful" at tennis. Betty, at the right moment, said loudly :

"Billina is a corker at singles, quite as good as the ordinary man."

Ginger rose to the fly.

"I should like to take on Miss Billina and give her fifteen."

"I—I should be scared stiff," faltered Billina, in a soft contralto voice.

Promptly Grace arranged the match, offering to back Billina for half a crown. The Colonel was interested.

"Now, Ginger, lay me two to one on yourself—and I'll take you."

"With pleasure, Daddy. Two to one in—Bradburys?"

The Colonel nodded. Other bets were made. It was significant that the men backed Miss Billina in a chivalrous spirit, simply because she appeared so shy and modest. Obviously Ginger thought that he had a "sitter."

He was not quite so sure of this when he watched Billina play her first set in a "four." It was disconcerting to see this Atalanta sprint up after delivering a service remarkable for pace and length. Weak returns were severely punished. The Colonel said in his hearty voice :

"She looks and plays like a jolly boy."

Ginger nodded.

"I shall come down to the nets to-night."

"So shall I," said Ginger.

Grace, who was Billina's partner, whispered :

"Ginger is puffing savagely at his pipe. You must crumple him up from the start. Go all out. He hates losing."

Let it be recorded, briefly and kindly, that Ginger was defeated and humiliated. The imps of comedy so ordained

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it. He was fighting a battle with the knowledge that victory against a girl could not add one leaf to his laurels, whereas defeat would lay him in the dust. Consequently he played badly, driving his balls fiercely into the net or out of court. When the match was over, the Colonel jumped up:

"Three rousing cheers for Miss Billina."

Ginger, however, accepted defeat like a sportsman. He shook hands with the victrix and congratulated her.

"Why isn't your name Suzanne?" he asked.

"I played above my form," said Billina bashfully.

The authentic Buster, admiring an Olympian at a respectful distance, experienced pangs of pity. He wondered why Grace wanted to "crumple up" such a splendid fellow.

"You'll beat me easily next time, Sir George."

VI

At the ladies' nets, that evening, Billina both bowled and batted under the critical eyes of several men who were flannelled but not fools.

"Where did she learn that stroke?" asked Ginger, when Billina made three forcing shots in succession.

"The Hatherfields," replied Grace, "are as mad about cricket as we are. They have a pro of their own."

"She's a little wonder," said Ginger.

Before dinner, during dinner, and after dinner, bets were registered. The sums wagered were insignificant, but more than money was at stake. Billina retired early to bed with the other girls. The men sat up late. To them the morrow's match was not to be taken seriously. Ginger, it was remarked afterwards, smoked three of the Colonel's biggest cigars and drank three whiskies-and-soda. He listened, rather moodily, to the chatter, thinking of Grace. She had not been too kind to him; he had detected a frosty indifference unreasonably alien to her.

Was there another man?

This dismal possibility—and nothing else—made him refill his tumbler and light another cigar. "Daddy," as usual, was jawing about cricket. He announced presently that the "glass" was falling—!

"If we have rain——?"

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A spirit of contrariety took possession of the youthful baronet.

"If we do, sir, let us play, rain or shine. Are we made of sugar? Golfers don't knock off when it rains. . . ."

"My dear boy, think of the pitch."

"Oh, hang the pitch!"

This was rank blasphemy. Worse followed.

"Cricket is becoming senile, too many drawn matches. If I had my way, I'd widen and heighten the wickets, or cut down the width of the bat."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes; I'd put some snap into the game. I think I shall chuck cricket after this season. As for the match to-morrow, I vote we let the girls win, poor little dears!"

The Colonel was aghast.

"If Grace heard you, George, she'd never speak to you again."

The other men supported their host, staring astounded at a traitor. Ginger drained his glass, glanced at his watch, bade the company 'good night,' and made a lamentable exit.

"Badly pipped," was the judgment passed on him.

"Fellow must be mad," growled the Colonel.

VII

THE Colonel's barometer was not to be trusted. Grace, indeed, when a small girl, had propounded a riddle. "What goes up when the rain comes down?" The Colonel replied: "Umbrellas," Grace riposted: "No—your glass, Daddy."

On the morrow a July sun swam lazily in azure and stainless skies. The Colonel, after careful inspection of the pitch, decided that it was a batsman's wicket. Nevertheless, Grace, after winning the toss, elected to put in the men.

"You're a fool, child," snapped her father.

"I don't get all my wits from you, dearest," said Grace sweetly.

"Well, I blame your poor mother for this."

Even Ginger protested.

"It will be a sweltering day, Grace."

"I hope so."

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"If you love leather-hunting——"

"I have this in common with you: I love having my own way."

She led ten players into the field, little knowing that one of her team was a boy. The men brandished the broomsticks, serviceable weapons made for the purpose, bound like bats and spliced. Grace had made her plans, but she led Billina aside.

"We must establish a rot, if we can, from the start. You send down your teasers. Place the field."

Billina did so.

As Grace had foreseen the two batsmen who had watched Billina bowling easy balls of a decent length at the nets were not anticipating anything else. And, as every cricketer knows, it is not easy to play oneself comfortably "in" with a broomstick. More, Ginger had instructed his henchmen to make runs quickly, and to steal them whenever possible.

The first ball was a wide; the second ball as it left the bowler's hand seemed to be exactly like the first, but it broke back sharply. The confounded batsman flicked at it too late and was caught in the slips. Derisive cheers greeted him on his way to the pavilion. His successor, however, was more careful. Billina bowled a maiden over. Grace at the other end sent down easy stuff deliberately, encouraging the enemy to smite at the ball, which travelled twice to the boundary. The last ball of her over was hit hard and stopped miraculously by Billina at cover point. Ginger muttered to the Colonel:

"Never in my life have I seen a girl field a ball like that."

"A Royce in petticoats!"

Billina's second over captured another wicket. A discomfited Etonian remarked to Butterfingers:

"How the devil does she do it?"

"Ask me something easier."

Close to the pavilion, the Etonian met Ginger.

"She's a bally conjurer with the ball," he remarked mournfully.

Ginger strode on, drawing on his gloves. Back of his mind lay the conviction that Miss Billina Hatherfield was lucky. He refused to believe in her skill. This conviction

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was confirmed, as he played back to her a perfectly straight, good-length ball.

Over.

Obviously, the other batsman wanted to stay at his own end. Three "two's" in succession were added to the score; and then Ginger stood up to receive Billina's second ball.

It bowled him clean——!

He lifted his cap to her, as he turned from contemplating his shattered wicket. The ball had swerved late as it left clever fingers, curving inward from the off; then it had kicked in to the leg stump. To comfort him, Butterfingers remarked genially:

"That might have defeated Jack Hobbs."

"Thank you," said Ginger politely.

He was feeling sore, although he didn't show it to the jubilant Colonel, whose eye rested paternally upon Billina.

"I wish she were my girl——!"

"I'm beginning to wish she were mine," said Ginger.

The Colonel was visibly impressed.

What followed may be set down in a few words. Long before the luncheon hour, the Broomsticks were dismissed (or despatched) for a first innings of forty-nine runs, half of which were stolen. There was no exciting leather-hunting till Billina went in to bat. Then she and Grace formed a happy partnership which lasted for an hour. During that hour—luncheon was served at half-past-one Ginger's suspicions were aroused. Grace noted with chagrin that her lover's eyes rested continuously upon Billina. He applauded all her best strokes. Once, at a critical moment, Billina cut a ball hard into his hands. Ginger dropped too hot a catch.

Did he do it deliberately?

At three in the afternoon, the Broomsticks began their second innings. They had to make ninety-nine runs to save a single innings defeat.

They failed to do it. The spectators howled themselves hoarse. Four stalwart maidens carried Billina off the field.

The Colonel kissed her *coram publico*!

Ginger disappeared.

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VIII

HE sought and found his trusty man-servant.

"You saw the match, Wakeling?"

"Yes, Sir George."

"It was wangled. I'm almost sure that Miss Billina Hatherfield is a boy."

Wakeling gasped.

"If you say so, Sir George, it must be so. What a game!"

"Quite. Not yet played to a finish. How can we get proof? You are a man of resource, Wakeling. I must weigh in at tea. Whilst I'm at tea, you must make a reconnaissance. It is possible that the maid who waited on Miss Billina Hatherfield shares my suspicions of her sex. If the coast is clear, you might find a clue in the young gentleman's bedroom——"

"Demeaning work, Sir George, if the young gentleman is a young lady."

"You take it from me, he isn't. What does a boy do when he is at a loose end? He shoves his hands into his trouser pockets. Three times I saw Miss Billina Hatherfield attempt to shove her hands into pockets which weren't there. Does a young lady wipe a too moist forehead with her fingers? Never! She uses a hanky. Lastly, have you ever seen a girl swig off at one go a large tumbler of shandy-gaff?"

Wakeling said solemnly:

"You can count on me, Sir George, to do what I can."

Ginger returned to the tea tent and paid marked attentions to Billina.

Wakeling was waiting for him when he went upstairs to dress for dinner.

"She," declared Wakeling, in no uncertain tones, "is a He."

"How do you know? We must know for certain, before I act."

"I sneaked into her, *bis* room. The other servants were downstairs having their tea. Under the bed was a suitcase. Young gentlemen are very careless. I found the key of the suitcase under some pocket-handkerchiefs. I took the liberty of opening the suitcase, Sir George."

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"Quite justifiable under the circumstances."

"The suitcase is full of a young gentleman's clothes, everything that might be needed for a week-end visit."

"Good! At dinner, or after dinner, when you can snatch the opportunity, you will take that suitcase and place it under my bed. Twig?"

Wakeling smiled discreetly.

Ginger managed to sit next Miss Billina at dinner; and he positively overwhelmed her with attentions—and questions, awkward questions. Both the Colonel and Grace were glaring at him, but he alone at the big table seemed unaware of this.

"I want to give you a hat," he said, in a loud voice.

"What for?"

"Because you so nearly achieved the hat-trick. Tell me, where do you buy your hats?"

Billina said demurely:

"Mummy buys my hats. I—I have too many hats."

"Really? You're the first girl I ever met who had too many hats. Still, perhaps you would prefer——"

"I should prefer a new tennis racquet."

"You shall have it."

"That's jolly decent of you."

In the pause that followed Buster blushed. Ginger was gently pressing her foot under the table. An audacious boy returned the pressure. Evidently wicked baronets did these things, even when they were half engaged to other girls—! As Grace's potential brother-in-law, Buster waxed indignant. He decided to tell Butterfingers. Tangle-toes was not cricket. Sweetly dissembling, and not withdrawing his foot, as he ought to have done, Miss Billina whispered brazenly:

"There is a moon to-night."

"Let's make it a honeymoon."

Miss Billina withdrew her foot.

IX

WHILST the men were sipping the Colonel's vintage port, Buster and Butterfingers took a squint at the moon, which silvered delightfully the Colonel's water garden. Butter-

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fingers, being a loyal little soul, refused at first to believe a shocking tale.

"He did *this*," said Miss Billina, "I take my Sam, he did."

"I won't have it. How dare you?"

"I only wanted to show you *what* he did."

"If Grace had seen him——! Buster——this is awful. I could cry like a child. I shall tell her, but she won't believe such rank treachery. How can I make her believe?"

"Seeing is believing. If——"

"Yes. Go on——"

"If you went back to the drawing-room, and left me here, Ginger, with a hint from you, would join me. Then Grace and you could join us. Standing behind that hedge, Grace might tumble to what sort of rotter he really is. But I rather funk it."

"You will smack his face, if——"

"You bet! Good and hard. But where do I come in if I do this?"

"You want to haggle?"

"Darling Butterfingers. I adore you. I want—you—you—you. You like me, don't you? I came here for your sake. Haven't I made good?"

"You silly child!"

"I'm eighteen and so are you."

He took her hand in his.

He kissed her.

Butterfingers returned his kiss. Then she spoke with finality:

"Now, Buster, be good. Consider yourself paid in full. Really and truly I've kissed Miss Billina, not Master Buster Hatherfield. We are tremendous pals, neither more nor less. I'm sure that I shall be ashamed of myself when I see you in your right kit. Pals, I repeat, we are. Leave it at that."

"Right-O!" sighed Buster.

Butterfingers jumped up.

"I shall pop off."

She fitted away. The *amorini*, guarding the lily pool, winked at each other. They were almost giggling when

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Ginger slipped through the cypress hedge and sat down beside a very nervous but cheeky boy.

"Darling——!"

"Oh-h-h!"

"I knew I should find you here, waiting for me."

"Be good," panted Buster, imitating the tones of Butterfingers.

For answer the stalwart Ginger, pinned Buster's arms to his ribs, lifted him up, and kissed him furiously.

"You—beast!"

"You Beauty!"

Alas! Poor Buster! He wriggled and squirmed in vain, hugged and squashed into impotence. Beside himself with humiliation, he stammered out:

"Lemme go. I'm—I'm a man, not a silly girl, you blighter."

Ginger laughed. Then the crowning indignity came to pass. Miss Billina, in flowered chiffon that wilts beneath hard usage, was laid across Ginger's knees and—soundly smacked.

At this moment Grace stepped from behind the hedge, followed by Butterfingers. Ginger released Miss Billina, who fled. Butterfingers, guessing the truth, raced after him.

"You unutterable cad," said Grace biting.

Obviously, she had seen but had not heard. Ginger grinned at her.

"What an escape I've had."

"Softly—softly. Oh, Gracie, how could you do it? And I counted you the most honourable of women——"

"Heavens! What have I done?"

"You have not played cricket. Personally, I was willing to make you a present of this match. But—to win it by fraud—! Dis—graceful——!"

"Are you quite mad?"

"I shall limp to the grave; you have pulled my leg out of all shape, but, possibly yours is paining you a little."

"You are mad."

"Only with love for you, darling. Forgive me. I believed you guilty of a most heinous offence. You are inno-

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cent. With whom, do you think, was I struggling just now ? ”

“ With Betty’s sister.”

“ With Betty’s *brother*.”

“ I had not the remotest idea of it. ”

“ I spotted him as a boy this afternoon.”

“ Ginger——! ”

“ The punishment fitted the crime. Let us forgive and forget, but I want to say something, to get it off my chest. You take cricket too seriously.”

“ You say that ? ”

“ I do. It’s the greatest game in the world, but it is a game. I have work to do ; and I mean to do it. Will you help me to do it, you dear woman ? ”

She smiled at him.

Before they returned to the drawing-room, Grace said confidently :

“ That naughty boy must get out of his sister’s clothes before more mischief is done.”

“ Then he will have to hide himself in bed.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because I have his kit ; and I shall keep it from him till he apologises on bended knee to both of us.”

Buster had to do it, amid roars of laughter.

RESTITUTION

I

EVEN in these post-war days younger sons of impoverished Scotch dukes have a market other than the Matrimonial Exchange and Mart. Billets were found for Jock and Jim Skelpic, known at Eton as The Heavenly Twins. The adjective was used derisively, for the Etonians were black-avized, hard-featured, hard-muscled Highlanders—tough customers.

They were tougher after the war.

Jock found a job in The United Motors Works. He could drive a "demonstration" car to perfection. And he could drive a bargain. Profiteers from the North who believed too fondly that a cadet of an ancient family must be a "soft thing" had reason to modify this belief after buying a car from Jock.

Jim was private secretary to Sir Otto Godolphin-Osborne, *né* Mandelbaum. Sir Otto, a naturalized subject, had changed his name in 1915. He had assumed a famous name. Why not? As he put it: "Der best ees goot enough for me." The younger son of a duke had been engaged by Sir Otto to attend to matters beyond (or below) the ken of a man absorbed in international business. The financier spoke of Lord James Skelpic as Master of the Horse. Jim, so to speak, pranced in front of Sir Otto's procession. Of the business transacted in the City or elsewhere Jim knew, or was supposed to know, nothing. Thanks to Jim's energies Sir Otto entertained in Lancaster Gate and in the Highlands of Scotland persons of importance who appreciate the best cooking and rare wines. Cabinet Ministers like to sip cabinet hocks seldom sipped outside the Fatherland. Magnates hasten to meet Cabinet Ministers. It is safe, perhaps, to affirm that more business is done when smoking the finest cigars than at any other time. And such business is not invariably "straight." A certain Captain of Industry

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never makes a "deal" after luncheon. His working hours, so he says, are from eleven till one.

The brothers shared a flat in Mayfair. Upon the death of their father, each had inherited ten thousand pounds. They regarded this, being twins, as joint capital. Half of it had been invested by Sir Otto in one of his get-rich-quick enterprises. Some of these ventures, apparently, impoverished everybody except Sir Otto.

II

THE twins were smoking pipes together after dinner. Jock had noticed that Jim was not treating his Dunhill with the consideration it deserved. Clouds of smoke indicated a mind ill at ease.

"Anything wrong?" asked Jock, curtly.

Jim laid down a red-hot pipe.

"Yes. I've funk'd telling you. We've been robbed, old thing; skinned alive."

"By whom?"

"By my chief—damn him!"

Jock looked incredulous.

"By Sir Otto Godolphin-Osborne?"

"Let us speak of him by the rogue's right name, Mandelbaum. Hot stuff! So hot that he'll freeze when he reaches his ultimate destination. I was warned to have nothing to do with him."

"Cut that out and carry on."

"I trusted him," said Jim. "Of course, I was a fool, but not altogether a fool. I thought to myself: 'It won't pay *him* to swindle *me*.'"

"And he has?"

"He has."

"How, and when, and where?"

"It's a long yarn. Boiled down to essentials we have lost our ten thou.—every bob. I handed it over, you understand, to a man who is under obligations to me. He told me not to worry. I didn't. The cash was planked into one of his innumerable enterprises. He tells me cheerfully that he has dropped a million since Christmas."

"If that is true," said Jock, pensively, "we have no kick coming."

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"But it isn't true."

"How do you know?"

"Read this."

Jim took from the pocket of his dinner-jacket a press-clipping. Jock read as follows:—

The pearl necklace which belonged to the late Marchioness of Beaudesert was secured at Christie's for ten thousand guineas by Sir Otto Godolphin-Osborne.

Jock whistled. Jim continued:

"Mandelbaum—even dogs will refuse to defile his grave—bought that necklace with the money he stole from us, almost the exact sum."

"Plucked us clean, eh?"

"You're a sportsman, Jock. I expected ructions. You trusted me; I trusted him. I feel very chilly without those feathers, a naked gander. But I propose to get back our plumage—with your kind assistance."

"Mine? I don't know your dirty dog."

"Do you know his wife?"

"Not outside the picture papers."

"Good! The mere thought of our pearls on her neck makes me sick. Now—sit tight and hark to me. Those pearls were bought ten days ago. Mandelbaum had the cheek to show them to me, but I didn't know then that our ten thou. was up the spout. He locked them up in a small secret safe which stands in his private room. He went to Paris last week. When he got back he gave the pearls to his wife. She told me so with fat chucklings. She intends to wear them night and day. Only this morning did I learn that our certificates were so much waste-paper."

Jock nodded as Jim paused to refill his pipe. The twins were not like each other physically. Jock was sturdily built; Jim was tall and lean. Jim went on:

"Mandelbaum is giving a party at his place on the river to-morrow night. I shall be there. The lawn runs down to the Thames. A road runs parallel to the tow-path across the river. Opposite Mandelbaum's boat-house is a big clump of brush. Farther on at the top of the reach, is Shepperford Ferry."

"I know the ferry."

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"I want you to ride a motor-bike down to that clump of brush to-morrow night, arriving there about nine-thirty. You can hide the bike in the brush. Then you will cross the ferry, turn to the right, and walk through a white gate. You will turn down a small path that leads to the boat-house. In the boat-house are a skiff, a canoe, and a punt. You will have time to bore holes in the canoe and the skiff just above the waterline."

Jock sat up, puzzled but interested.

"Presently," continued Jim, "you will hear me laugh. When you do, you will slip on a crape mask and pull a pistol out of your pocket."

"I catch on. I'm cast for the villain in the film."

"Yes; you will hold up her ladyship and me. I shall spring like a tiger upon you. You will biff me, not too hard, on the head. I shall fall stunned at my lady's substantial feet. You will demand the pearls and get them. Then you will punt yourself across the river, jump on to the motor-bike, and be awa' whilst my lady is screaming for help or administering first aid to me. I shall sleep—soundly, I hope—at Shepperford Lodge. We shall foregather here next day and divide the spoil. Got it?"

"Sounds too easy."

"Simple as Simon, simple as the mugs whom Mandelbaum has swindled."

"But how will you make sure of getting her ladyship near the boat-house?"

Jim winked impudently.

"You can leave that to me, my dear. Don't biff me too hard."

"Other guests may be about."

"Not if I know myself and them. This is a small party three or four well-nourished Israelites and their wives. The unexpected—rain, for instance—may burke our plan. But the barometer is at Set Fair. Don't call it Robbery under Arms, but Restitution. We shall get our own back with interest. Those pearls were a big bargain. Mandelbaum was offered by a dealer a thousand more than he gave."

"Can we sell them?"

"Of course we can—later on."

"Um!"

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"Are you getting cold feet?"

"No."

"The thing is cut and dried if you play up."

"Very promising, I must say."

"You're in?"

"I am."

III

LADY GODOLPHIN-OSBORNE'S river parties were recorded in the *Press* as "select." As a rule *la haute* Bayswater was leavened by *la basse* Mayfair. Pukka dukes and duchesses gave Shepperford Lodge a miss. All Sir Otto's guests were well "done" in every sense of the word. The pains which attach themselves to persons born with the name of Mandelbaum are negligible if the pleasures of their tables are adequately emphasized.

Upon this particular evening the dinner was superlative. Everybody might have exclaimed on leaving the dining-room: "Fate cannot harm me, I have dined to-day."

After such a dinner it is overdoing it to obtrude other forms of entertainment. A gorged python is not amused by parlour tricks. Sir Otto's cigars and old brandy challenged the attention of the men; gossip tickled agreeably the ears of the ladies. Mrs. Bergenstresser in *fulgurante*, wearing diamonds and sapphires, chatted with Lady Hydrangea Schmaltz, who brought her husband, a comparatively young man of seventy-five. Lady Godolphin-Osborne, in cyclamen-coloured satin *romain*, walked the length of the pergola with Jim Skelpic.

Jim admired her pearls.

She said to Jim, acidulously:—

"I hear what Rachel Bergenstresser say to you at dinner."

Jim smiled at his hostess.

"Did you? I didn't. Tell me what she said."

"*Schrecklich*—!"

"What does that mean?"

"You pretend—always you pretend. What she say to you was intend for me. Ya—for me. I hear dat fat woman say to you: 'I am broud, Lord Shames, of being a Bergenstresser. I am not ashamed of being a Bergenstresser.'"

RESTITUTION

Jim said, soothingly :

"I didn't quite catch what she said. Being a Bergenstresser, she spoke with her mouth full of peas, delicious peas. If she really doesn't mind being a Bergenstresser, ought we to interfere about it?"

"Ach! 'Ow you lofe your shokes."

Jim gripped opportunity.

"Let us wander away from Mrs. Bergenstresser. Let us listen together to the song of the river—*au clair de la lune*."

"Where is my Otto?"

"At work. Come."

They descended some steps, crossed a velvety lawn, and approached the boat-house. They had dined at nine; it was now nearly eleven. Near the boat-house a clump of rhododendrons screened a garden seat. Peace brooded upon the river and the landscape.

Jim laughed.

"You laugh?"

"I laugh, dear lady, because I am happy."

"Why are you happy?"

"Because I am alone with you."

At this moment Jock appeared. Jim, without hesitation, went on :

"My mistake. Apparently, we are not alone. The inconvenient third has obtruded himself. Don't be alarmed! Let me deal with him."

The masked Jock held an automatic in his hand.

"I want your pearls," he said, politely. "I mean to have them. Hand them over. Don't scream!"

Jim jumped.

He was biffed on the head with the butt end of the pistol and fell senseless at the lady's number eight shoes.

"The pearls, please."

A terrified woman unfastened the string and handed them to the villain. He took them, bowed, and bolted.

Lady Godolphin-Osborne screamed.

A man in a mask punted himself across the river before two or three portly gentlemen reached the boat-house. Mr. Adalbert Bergenstresser, greatly daring, seated himself in the canoe, which sank harmlessly. Sir Otto administered first aid to Jim. In due time a constable arrived.

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IV

NEXT afternoon the twins met at the flat.

"You hit damned hard," said Jim.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

Jim rubbed a still sore head as he poured himself out a glass of barley-water. The Shepperford doctor had vetoed spirits. Jock produced the loot.

"A very even bunch," he observed.

They were. Too even, Jim decided. He examined them carefully. The best imitation pearls can defy the observation—not the examination—of experts. In weight, in lustre, there is no difference. But Jim, it will be remembered, had seen and handled the Beaudesert string.

"I believe they're sham!" he exclaimed.

"That," said Jock, calmly, "is my impression."

Much can be forgiven the twin brethren because they laughed uproariously.

"As we were," said Jock, when the ebullition passed.

"No," Jim answered. "The situation has changed. These pearls look like the Beaudesert pearls, but they are, as you say, too even. Had the Beaudesert lot been as even and as perfectly matched they would have fetched twenty thousand pounds. I heard a dealer assert that positively. Mandelbaum, for reasons of his own, took the real pearls to Paris and had them copied on the quiet. Why?"

"Ask another."

"I will presently. For the moment let us concentrate on this point. My lady believed these pearls to be real. I was not at my best and brightest when the police turned up, but I listened to the general cackle. My lady howled like a wolf bereft of her cubs. Why didn't Mandelbaum tell her and the police that the stolen pearls were sham?"

"Search me."

"I'm searching my own memory. I was almost concussed. Yes, yes—I have it. To calm his wife, Mandelbaum said in my presence: 'Don't get eggzited, Rebecca, die bearlz was insured, my lofe, against all loss.'"

"Well, I'm hanged."

"Mandelbaum ought to be hanged—high as Haman, from whom, probably, he is lineally descended."

RESTITUTION

"The pearls *were* insured," said Jock.

"How do you know?"

Jock picked up an early edition of an evening paper.
"Read that 'par.'"

A daring hold-up has deprived a lady of title of a superb string of pearls lately sold by auction at Christie's for ten thousand guineas. We are authoritatively informed that the gems were fully insured.

"Authoritatively——!" murmured Jim.

"Miching mallecho somewhere," said Jock.

Jock, still staring at the pearls, sat down in an arm-chair. Jim, singularly alert, remained standing.

"The affair has become one screaming note of interrogation," he said, in a low voice. "I had the real string in my hands a few hours after it was bought. I said at once: 'Lady Osborne will be a happy woman.' And my Chief replied sharply: 'I may not gif dem to her.' There, of course, he slipped up. He has been skating lately on thin ice. And he thinks me a fool. Mind you, nobody really knows how he stands—except himself. But I have a notion that he may have bought the Beaudesert pearls for two reasons. Number one—to bolster up his credit; number two—to get possession of portable property."

Jock nodded, much impressed.

"Credit is his life blood. And credit with such a manipulator as our dear Otto is largely a matter of public confidence. Would a man on the verge of bankruptcy give his wife a ten-thousand-guinea necklace?"

"A real thruster might."

"Give him his due, he is a thruster. Now, mark this: business has brightened since he bought the pearls—all along his not too particular lines. I'm inclined to think he bought the pearls intending to bolt with them. His market, rising unexpectedly, has made him change his plans. But everybody knew that he had bought the pearls. To satisfy the credulous public he gave this necklace to his wife. The Beaudesert pearls are where I saw him put them—in his private safe. His little game is plain enough. He'll claim the insurance money. If he gets it, we have

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helped him to swindle the insurance people out of ten thousand guineas."

Jock groaned.

"Cheer up!"

"I can't stick the insurance company being robbed by us."

"Keep your powder dry! I feel as you do about that. All the same, the divine law of self-preservation is still animating me. Our Otto has downed us twice. I take him on again to-morrow morning."

"Can I weigh in?"

"No. It will be a fight to a finish with no seconds in the ring."

Jock jumped up.

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm trusting to the inspiration of the moment. We have a strangle-hold on him if he applies for this insurance money. I think he will apply for it to-morrow."

"If he doesn't——?"

Jim shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. After a pause he picked up the bogus pearls and thrust them deep into a pocket.

V

THE private office of Sir Otto was luxuriously furnished. To reach it a visitor had to pass through the secretary's room. That communicated with main offices reassuringly dingy and, indeed, dirty. Gleaming nickel, plate glass, and mahogany as accessories to sharp practice, have a transpontine glitter which arouses suspicion in the honest soul of John Bull.

Sir Otto was a collector of precious objects. The senses of taste and sight and smell were over-developed in a man who had started life in a shipping office in Hamburg. When he was pleased with himself, he rubbed softly a nose remarkable even in Hamburg. When he was perturbed in mind, he would remove his spectacles and polish the lenses. Without specs he could see farther into doubtful enterprises than Anglo-Saxons with normal vision.

His private safe was enclosed in a red lacquer cabinet, Chinese, of the eighteenth century.

RESTITUTION

It was his habit to spend an hour, from ten till eleven, with his Master of the Horse.

Jim found his Chief in high good humour when he was greeted by that great man at ten sharp the next morning. For half an hour they talked about a place in Inverness. Jim was instructed to find out, not from the agents, the exact condition of moor and forest.

"The rent will be enormous," said Jim.

Sir Otto rubbed his nose. For two years he had not taken a Highland shooting. The inference was obvious.

"I anticipate goot times, Shames."

Good times for Sir Otto meant bad times for so many unimportant people that Jim winced. More, he was not yet accustomed to being addressed as "Shames" by a Hun. He said to Jock, "Shame on Shames!"

"For you, sir?"

"Ya—for me. For you too, Shames. You lose money. Same here. Soon we make money, moch money. Your friends, too, dey lose money, but I make dem money. I sink or schwim mit my friends."

He went on rubbing his nose.

"Heard anything about my lady's pearls?" asked Jim.

"Ach! Dose bearls! Perhaps der bolice will get dem. I leave soch matters to dem. It ees no longer my beesness."

"Really? No longer your business?"

"No. Because, Shames, I am insured. Der insurance people will stimulate der bolice. I haf made my glaim. Soh!"

"Just so," said Jim.

He rose and strolled to the door between the private room and his own room. He opened it. Nobody was in his room. From the main offices beyond floated the hum of many voices, the buzz of busy bees collecting honey for Sir Otto.

"I haf not done mit you yet, Shames."

It was significant that with his secretary Sir Otto spoke English with a strong German-cum-Yiddish accent.

"I have not done with you," replied James, coolly.

To Sir Otto's amazement Jim locked the door and slipped the key into his pocket.

"Where," he asked, firmly, "are the Beaudesert pearls?"

Sir Otto removed his spectacles.

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"Are you crazy, my young friend?"

"The string that was stolen," continued Jim, very quietly, "was sham. I know it—and you know it."

Sir Otto blustered as he cleaned the lenses of his spectacles.

"Und how do you know it?"

"Never mind that. I do know it. Also I know *you*. You're up against it, Sir Otto. If I should tell the insurance people what I know, there would be trouble, very serious trouble, for you."

"*Gott in Himmel!* Blackmail!"

"No. Restitution. I'll hold my tongue, but I demand from you what I invested with you."

"——! ——!! ——!!!"

Students of German profanity can fill in the blanks.

Jim murmured, suavely:

"Ten thousand guineas."

"——! ——!! ——!!!"

"I don't understand what you're saying, Sir Otto, but I'm sure it's something personally offensive. I raise you. I now demand eleven thousand guineas."

"——! ——!! ——!!!"

"Twelve thousand."

Sir Otto became dumb. Even his enemies admitted that he had *fais*, that curious sense of danger so lively in the fox and wolf. He knew that Jim knew. And he recognized in Jim the will to win, which other and greater Huns believe to be the inalienable possession of their race. He grasped the conviction that it was impossible to argue with Jim. He glanced at the bell on his Louis XV. desk.

"Touch that," said Jim, pleasantly, "and I go straight from here to the police."

Bluff! But could Sir Otto recognize it as such?

"Don't move! I'm about to make a reconnaissance. How thoughtful of you to leave the safe open!"

Jim walked straight to the safe, pulled out a drawer, and drew forth a small chamois-leather bag. He held it up.

"These are the Beaudesert pearls."

Sir Otto remained speechless for almost a minute. Jim, master of the situation, dictated terms.

"Write me a cheque payable to 'Self' for the sum I mentioned last. Endorse it. I'll send somebody out to cash it.

RESTITUTION

Then I'll replace the pearls, and take leave of you, my benefactor, for ever and ever. You deliberately downed me. I have downed you. You Huns always make this mistake: you underrate the intelligence of others. The Devil seems to have you in his special care. Your rigged markets are booming. *Tant mieux* for you—and me. Get a move on!"

Sir Otto spoke querulously:

"Und you go on mit your blackmailing?"

"Use that word again and I'll punch your head! This is restitution. I trusted you, and you robbed me. Now you will have to trust me. Make out the cheque. I'll fetch one of the clerks."

When Jim returned with an elderly clerk the cheque was ready.

"Slip over to the bank, Isaac, and bring back the cash in hundred-pound notes."

Isaac went his way. Jim played with the chamois-leather bag. He opened it and allowed the pearls to trickle through his fingers. Sir Otto glared at him. Jim said, lightly:

"The sham lot you got in Paris are too even."

He replaced the pearls in the leather bag and tied the string.

"Before I put these back into the safe I want you to write a letter to the insurance people. You can state simply that the pearls have been returned to you, and that my lady and I were the victims of a very rough practical joke. I'll post your letter. Please write it at once."

Hypnotized by Jim, Sir Otto did so. Jim dropped the bag into the drawer and took the letter. Immediately afterwards the elderly clerk came back with the notes.

Restitution was made.

VI

THE brothers met again before luncheon.

When Jim had told his tale, the cash was divided.

"Where are the sham pearls?" asked Jock.

"In the shammy leather bag."

"What?"

"Yes. I would give up making execrable puns to see the Mandelbaum face when it looks into that bag!"

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"But the Beadesert lot?"

"They are here."

VII

UNHAPPILY, nobody saw Sir Otto's face when, as a lover of beautiful and costly objects, he tried to hearten himself by looking at the Beadesert pearls. Perhaps the blow to his pride was at the moment even heavier than the one inflicted on his pocket. *Deutschland über alles* occurred to him as a singular perversion of fact, so far as he, a son of Hamburg, was concerned. He returned to Lancaster Gate that night a sadder and a wiser man.

My lady rushed at him as he crossed the hall and flung her arms around his neck. No doubt it served him right, but he was disconcerted and displeased.

"My Otto!"

"*Potzwellen*, Rebecca, 'ow you incommode me!"

"*Die bearls*," she gasped, hugging him tighter.

"*Die bearls*," he repeated, half-smothered, in quavering tones. Destiny was kicking him too hard. Was it joy or anguish that informed his Rebecca's voice? Were the police lurking behind the arras? Was he doomed, after all, to appear in the dock? He disengaged himself.

"Look, my Otto, look! Regale yourselluf!"

Dim and dazed eyes saw a lustrous string of pearls.

"*Gott!*"

Rebecca Godolphin-Osborne, *née* Mosenthal, had to relapse into German. The pearls, it appeared, had reached the happy wearer of them after five o'clock in a sealed parcel delivered by hand. Upon a half-sheet of notepaper a few words were typewritten:

Returned—with thanks.

LATER that evening Lady Godolphin-Osborne, with tears in her eyes, made a discovery. This time, as the lawful wife of a naturalized subject of England's king, she spoke in English:

"I am so habby, my Otto, that my bearls abbear to me more beaudiful dan dey used to was!"

"Soh!" growled Sir Otto.

THE MAN THE DIARY CALLED "X"

THE chill light of a dank afternoon in late November was failing when the jury delivered their verdict. They found that the deceased, Colonel Harvey Verequer, had shot himself with his own hand, and the motive for the rash act had been given by his grief-stricken widow with hesitation and reluctance.

Nearly everybody present accepted the verdict as inevitable. The Colonel had been found by his butler dead in his library. A Service revolver lay upon the carpet beside him. The door of the library had been locked; the windows were shut and bolted. His widow testified that he was a sufferer from an incurable disease. On the other hand it was shown that Colonel Verequer was a man of moral and physical courage, a fighter all his life, and a devoted husband and father.

He had said to a famous specialist :

"How long do you give me?"

And the specialist had replied :

"Ten years, if you take reasonable care of yourself."

Whereupon the Colonel said gallantly :

"I give you my word of honour that I shall take unreasonable care of myself."

The case aroused interest, because a large sum of money was at stake. Colonel Verequer, a man of modest means, had inherited late in life a considerable property, which passed at his death to a male cousin. Immediately the Colonel had insured his life for thirty thousand pounds, and his life at the time when the insurance was taken out was passed as a fairly good life. He could just afford to pay, each year, a considerable premium out of income; he knew, none better, that his insurance company was not liable for one penny if death came to him by his own hand.

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The merciful qualification would have been added to the verdict, if Colonel Verequer had not been known throughout his county as pre-eminently sane and mentally well-balanced. If he had killed himself, he had done so in complete possession of his faculties. Regardless of her personal interests his daughter, almost passionately, maintained this.

The household servants spoke of their master as quiet, temperate and just in his dealings with them; he never lost his temper; he never "fussed"; he had accepted, all his life, good and bad fortune with philosophical serenity.

It was admitted at the time that the insurance company behaved with consideration. They had no wish to evade their obligations. Their representative testified, handsomely enough, to their distress when confronted with the facts. It seems to them, and to everybody who had known the Colonel, almost incredible that he should have deliberately impoverished his own wife and daughter, when he had made great personal sacrifices on their behalf to secure them against poverty.

The facts of the case prevailed.

The widow accepted the facts; his daughter, Viola, refused to do so.

"He didn't kill himself, Mother. You, who knew him so well, must know that."

Mrs. Verequer said feebly:

"You are too young, darling, and too inexperienced to realise, as I do, that the strength of a chain depends upon its weakest link. The bravest of us have our weak moments, when we are at the mercy of some uncontrollable impulse. A spasm of excruciating pain, to which your father was subject, might have made him temporarily insane."

Viola resented being called young and inexperienced, but she held a tongue which too often outwagged discretion. She believed that she knew her father better than her mother did. All her life Mrs. Verequer had travelled along lines of least resistance, which indicated that many links in her chain were weak.

She belonged to the generation of women, now almost

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extinct, who accept in what they call the Christian spirit the bludgeonings of inscrutable Providence. She had many friends, she was greatly beloved by her humbler neighbours, because she refused to think ill of anybody. In her gracious way she turned aside from and refused to look at the seamy side of life.

VIOLA took after her father, understudied him, admired him, and had been taught by him to sharpen her wits upon the whetstone of personal experience.

The Colonel's old batman, now his butler, a faithful friend during many years, refused also to accept the verdict of the coroner's jury. Viola could talk to him—and she did. Hindle dismissed contemptuously the theory that there had been an accident. He testified at the inquest that his master was an expert in the use of firearms, and extremely careful when handling them. Out shooting, he loaded for the Colonel. He repeated for the benefit of the jury his master's injunctions :

"Take the cartridges out of my guns when going through, or getting over, any fence. Never point a gun, even if you know it to be unloaded, at anybody——" and so on and so forth. His testimony was so convincing that the family solicitor did his best to silence him. In that gentleman's considered opinion Hindle, quite unwittingly, had forced upon a reluctant jury their verdict.

To Hindle Viola said uncompromisingly :

"If it wasn't an accident, my father was murdered."

"Yes, miss."

"And you and I, Hindle, must find the murderer."

"Yes, miss. But how and where?"

"I don't know yet."

At the inquest, the coroner asked if the Colonel had any enemies. Mrs. Verequer replied unhesitatingly : "Not one." The local Superintendent of Police quashed with his evidence any possibility of a verdict of murder against a person or persons unknown. Had he been able to show that the Colonel had received any visitor the inquest would have been adjourned, pending further inquiries.

The Colonel had gone to the library after tea. He was seen alive by his wife and daughter in the drawing-room

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at six o'clock. He had asked testily not to be disturbed; he had told Hindle that he was "not at home" to anybody.

At half-past seven the ladies went up to their bedrooms to dress for dinner. At a quarter to eight, the upper housemaid, going to the library to "tidy up" had found the door locked. No shot was heard by anybody in or outside the house. But the library was at the end of a wing, far from the servants' quarters.

Hindle had burst open the door. Within a quarter of an hour a doctor was on the spot, followed immediately by the Superintendent. The doctor testified that the Colonel had been dead at least an hour, possibly more. The Superintendent helped to carry the body into another room, and there and then had made the most careful examination of the premises. He had to satisfy the Chief Constable of the County that he had done his duty thoroughly, and the Chief Constable was satisfied.

After the funeral Mrs. Verequer took to her bed in a state of nervous collapse. The cousin, to whom the Colonel's property passed, happened to be out of England and unable to attend the funeral. The family solicitor suggested to Viola that she should go through her father's private papers, which would be found, so he said, in perfect order. He offered to do this himself, but Viola, at her mother's wish, undertook the task, and being a young woman who never postponed what was disagreeable, set about it within twenty-four hours.

The papers were in order. Hindle gave to Viola a small key, taken from his master's watch-chain.

"The key of his diary, miss. The Colonel told me to give it to you."

"To me, not to my mother?"

"To you, miss. *His* instructions."

Viola was surprised. She had forgotten that her father kept a diary; and she took for granted that it would be little more interesting than his game-book, a chronicle of everyday doings. As she took the key from Hindle's hand, wondering vaguely why there should be a key, the butler said quietly:

"You may find something in it, Miss Viola."

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AGAIN she was surprised. Her father was a man of many keys, although he refused to lock up his wine.

"Perhaps," said Viola. Then she added impulsively: "You know, Hindle, you ought to have given me this before, because *if* there is any entry in my father's diary which might give us some—some *clue*, that entry ought to have been put into evidence. Mind you, I don't believe there is such an entry."

Hindle replied doggedly:

"That's as may be, miss. I obeyed orders. The Colonel said to me: 'You give the key of my diary to Miss Verequer after my funeral.'"

"When did he say that?"

"About three months ago."

"Evidently, then, he wished me to open his diary and read it."

"I think that was my master's idea, miss."

Viola made a gesture; Hindle left the library. The girl hesitated a moment before she sat down at her father's desk. The horror which the room inspired in her mother had been overcome by an effort of will. It had ceased to be the room in which her father came to a violent end; it remained what it had always been, a sanctuary of happy memories wherein father and daughter had passed delightful hours. Trophies of the chase surmounted dwarf bookcases. In one of these were other diaries. Occasionally the Colonel would pull out a slim volume and refer to it if he wished to recall a place or a date. An inquisitive housemaid could have done the same.

Viola unlocked the diary and glanced at the first entries, mostly shooting engagements during the month of January. Upon the 5th of the month was a memorandum:

"Heard from 'X,' answered his letter."

Who was "X"? Had her father bought this diary on account of "X"? She turned a few more pages till she found another significant entry.

"'X' has written again. I dealt with him faithfully." In March he had written: "'X' is becoming troublesome. Is he a blackmailer?"

Unable to read on leisurely, Viola turned to the last entries. Five days before his death she found this:

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"Sorely against my better judgment I have consented to see 'X.'"

Viola began again, jotting down upon a sheet of note-paper all references to "X"; and there were not many. The most important was as follows:

"For the sake of others I have done a foolish thing; what will come of it?"

This entry had been scribbled hastily in pencil on, or immediately after, the 7th of April. Viola opened a drawer of the desk and referred to the Colonel's cheque book. On the 6th of April he had drawn a cheque, payable to "Self," for £250.

She jumped up and rang the bell. Hindle answered it. As he approached her, she said excitedly:

"I believe that Father was blackmailed by some person who is called in the diary 'X.' Have you the remotest idea who 'X' is?"

Hindle remained silent. Viola, with something of her father's voice and manner, bade him sit down.

"You were in my father's confidence; he regarded you as a faithful friend. You must speak out, Hindle, if there is anything to say. You know that my father never spent money upon himself. This large sum was sent secretly to somebody." She paused expectantly. "Your silence gives you away. You do know something which you don't like to tell me."

Hindle muttered heavily:

"It was so long ago."

"You must tell me everything."

She thrust into the old butler's hand her transcripts from the diary, which Hindle read before he spoke.

"It can't be," he said slowly.

"Let me, please, form my own opinion about that."

But it was difficult to form any opinion from what she heard, partly because at the moment she was too distressed to think collectedly.

"X," according to Hindle, might be a man with claims upon the Colonel's purse and one too, who, if his story were true, presented claims upon Viola. As a subaltern Colonel Verequer had had an "affair" with an unscrupulous woman older than himself. Hindle affirmed that the Colonel had

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treated her handsomely, far better than she deserved. She jilted him for another man. "X" was the son of this woman; and she had written to the Colonel some three years after their final separation to tell him that he was the father of the child, having meanwhile imposed paternity upon the other man with whom she had quarrelled. She swore that she had done this out of her love for the Colonel.

THIS son was thrust upon Colonel Verequer at a moment when his engagement to Viola's mother had just been announced. Apart from the preposterous claim, the woman was in sore distress—half-starving. Paternity of the child was repudiated, but the Colonel helped the woman—and went on helping her. Hindle ended irritably:

"My master was too kind to her."

Viola nodded.

"She died," concluded Hindle. "And on her death-bed she told her son that the Colonel was his father. I happen to know, miss, that your father saw the boy—he was then about fifteen—and told him, too kindly again, the truth. But the boy was a wrong 'un, like his mother. The Colonel had him educated. It was money chucked away, miss. I knew that, and so did the Colonel. Likely as not this big sum was paid over to keep the young man out of some trouble. The Colonel hated to speak of him, even to me. That's all I know."

"Did he come here?"

"Not to my knowledge. I never saw him."

"Thank you, Hindle. I must think over what I ought to do."

Hindle left her alone with ravaging thoughts. To whom could she apply for advice and help? Her loyalty to her father never wavered for an instant. Knowing him so well, she understood him. He had paid in full for a youthful lapse; he had been the victim of a wicked woman, whose wickedness had passed to her son. To make the story public, as she would do if she sent for the Superintendent of Police, would be a sort of soul's betrayal of her father. To do nothing, to accept meekly the verdict of the jury, was almost as repugnant.

Finally, her tormented mind dwelt wholly upon the

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most important entry in the diary. Her father, against his better judgment, had consented to see "X." Had he seen him? When and where?

Next day, still in a quagmire of perplexity and indecision, Viola found help when it was least expected. Sir Basil Verequer arrived from Sicily. Viola had met him half a dozen times. He was only distantly of kin to her, a second or third cousin, bewilderingly "removed." Still, he was a Verequer, and the head of the family. Mrs. Verequer was too ill to receive him.

As soon as he was alone with Viola, he said courteously:

"I have lost no time in coming to you, Viola. I had a great respect and affection for your father. This is not the moment to talk business, but I realise that my duty is plain. Had you been a boy this property would have passed to you. The money that should have come to your mother and you from the insurance people will be paid by me."

"Sir Basil——!"

"Please drop the 'Sir.'"

"You are wonderfully kind and generous. You hardly know us. I—I don't think we could accept such a sum. Put it as delicately as you like, it would be—charity. We—we shall have enough to live on. How glad I am that you are here. Why didn't I think of you before? You can help me—and you will. My father did not kill himself."

Sir Basil winced. He had read everything printed in the papers; he had seen his own lawyer. He repeated gently much that Mrs. Verequer had said.

"But you don't know what I know," said Viola.

In less than ten minutes he did. It was an enormous relief to Viola to tell the story to a sympathetic listener, but while telling it, she realised that it might not sound very convincing to him.

"If your father was pestered by this man, that might have been an additional reason for——"

"I suppose everybody will say that. I believe that this man came to my father secretly, that father let him in, that he killed father and got away."

"Leaving no trace behind him? The windows were

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bolted ; the door was locked. And the motive—? Obviously, it was to this man's interest to prolong, not to shorten, the life of his benefactor."

"I have thought of all that."

"I quite understand how you feel."

"If this man believed that my father had provided for him in his will, if my father refused to help him any more, we *do* have a motive for the crime."

Sir Basil looked impressed. He was thinking that Viola might have been baptised Portia.

"Hindle," he said after a pause, "knows, I suppose, the name of this man?"

Hindle, it appeared, knew the name of the woman. During the time when her son was being educated, he bore her name. It was extremely probable that he had changed it for excellent reasons not unconnected with the law of the land.

"I think of him as 'X,'" said Viola.

She had received her kinsman in the library, which now belonged to him, but which temporarily she had made her own, because she believed that she would find in it some clue to the mystery. So far, she had only found the diary. She showed it to Sir Basil.

He read carefully all the entries. Being a methodical man, he did what Viola, in the excitement of the moment, had left undone. He turned over the remaining blank pages. An ejaculation escaped him.

"You have not read this."

Upon the penultimate page was a letter. Evidently the Colonel had not quite blotted his writing, for this penultimate page was stuck to the last page, and for that reason had escaped Viola's notice :

DEAREST VI,

I have told Hindle to give you the key of my diary. He will tell you about "X." Burn the book after you have read it. Bury my secret with me. I only write these lines to warn you that an unscrupulous rascal may pester you. He may have the effrontery to pass himself off as your half-brother. If he should attempt to do so, or to worry you in any way, you can threaten to send for

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the police. They know all about Mr. Hubert Dennet, as he now calls himself. I turned down this soiled page of my life long ago. Keep it turned down for your mother's sake—and mine.

Your loving father,

H.V.

"Mr. Hubert Dennet," said Viola, "was *not* mentioned in my father's will."

"Probably, if we attempt to find him we must look for him under another name," said Sir Basil.

"Yes; he remains 'X' to us."

At Viola's request Sir Basil promised to remain for a few days in his own house as a visitor. Immediately he made the more intimate acquaintance of Hindle, who, by some process of his own, succeeded where Viola had failed. Sir Basil became the third person in a trinity that rejected the verdict of the jury. And he, like Viola, shrank from calling in the trained services of the police. Soiled Verequer linen must not be washed in public.

Nevertheless, upon his own responsibility, Sir Basil called upon the Superintendent. The Superintendent had made the usual tests for finger prints. A photograph of the pistol had revealed the thumb print of the doctor, who had picked up the weapon and examined it. One cartridge had been fired.

Hindle testified that the pistol was kept loaded in its box, as a protection against burglars, a fact known to the Superintendent, inasmuch as he had authorised the Colonel to keep the weapon in his possession. The Colonel, a good sportsman, liked to overhaul his firearms. He refused to leave them in the gun-room.

Sir Basil refrained from mentioning Mr. Hubert Dennet. His first visit to the local police station was regarded by him as a reconnaissance. Perhaps he wished to satisfy himself that the Superintendent was efficient. In less than five minutes he decided that he was. As he walked back through the park he thought: "I am on a blind trail, wandering in a vicious circle. How am I to find 'X'?"

Upon his return to the house, he tried to "reconstruct"

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the crime. The library was at the end of a long corridor. The windows looked out upon the park and garden. A door from the corridor opened into the garden. It was conceivable that the Colonel had agreed to meet "X" at a time when he had given orders that he was not to be disturbed.

In November it is dark at six o'clock ; gardeners are not about. Any stranger, carefully instructed, could approach the house by the main drive, pass into the garden and thence into the corridor, where the Colonel would be waiting to receive him. He could come and go unperceived. But he could not pass through bolted windows, or a door locked on the inside ; he couldn't escape by a narrow chimney.

Next day, without consulting Viola, Sir Basil wrote to a personage in London demanding the *dossier* of Hubert Dennet. It came by return of post, sealed and registered.

Dennet was known to Scotland Yard as a dealer in cocaine, but so far he had been clever enough to escape arrest. During the preceding month of April he had been seen in the company of a notorious burglar ; he knew several " fences." In June he had gone abroad, impersonating a young man of fashion. He had come back, looking much the worse for his trip ; in September he was living in a room near Long Acre. Upon the margin of the official document, the personage had made this comment : " A slippery customer. Have nothing to do with him."

Sir Basil reflected that Dennet must be a man of resource to keep out of the clutches of the police. He decided to tell Viola what he had done ; he showed her the *dossier*.

Upon the day following he returned to London.

BEFORE he left the house, he had a word apart with Hindle.

" This fellow is desperate. He may do what the Colonel foresaw as possible ; he may come here, carrying a pitiful tale to Miss Verequer. Criminals are reckless because they are never quite sane. I don't want to frighten a charming young lady——"

" Can you ? " asked Hindle. " She doesn't know what fear is. I can promise you this, sir, if that scallywag comes here he'll have to deal with Thomas Hindle."

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"Stout fellow! You'd clap him into the cellars and wire for me?"

"That's my idea, Sir Basil."

"I can't congratulate you upon it. A fish must be played. A hook must be baited. In this case Miss Verequer is the bait. He mustn't catch a glimpse of the hook."

"You can tell all this to my young mistress, sir. She won't be frightened."

Surrendering to second thoughts Sir Basil did tell Viola, adding emphatically:

"The odds are about a thousand to three that he won't come."

"I hope the odds are less, Basil. This seems to be our only chance."

"If you give him a little money, he will come again; and then I may be here. We are weaving ropes out of sand, Vi, but we have nothing else to make them of."

"Ropes," said Viola, "is the right word. But he, not we, will weave the rope that will yet hang him."

"Amen to that," said Sir Basil.

MEANWHILE, Mrs. Verequer remained in her room, a willing prisoner. It was difficult for her to confront life without her husband. To come downstairs, to accept the condolence of well-meaning neighbours, to order meals, was beyond her strength. She seemed to cling desperately to Viola, who was in constant attendance. Viola wondered whether a mind never too strong had weakened irreparably.

Mrs. Verequer had not seen Sir Basil, but she said [to her daughter:

"I am glad he is nice to you. If you married him I should have no anxieties about your future, darling."

"But, Mother, he *is* married and the father of three children. He left them in Italy to come to us."

"Yes, yes; how tiresome of him——! My memory is failing."

It was impossible even to mention the tragedy to such a distracted creature. Already she had accepted it, and tried to make the best of it. Her beloved husband had been spared suffering. God knew what was best.

THE MAN THE DIARY CALLED "X"

Important business delayed Sir Basil in London for nearly a week.

He had been gone six days, when Hindle came to Viola, presenting a card upon a salver. Viola happened to be with her mother. She glanced at the card upon which was inscribed. "Captain Verequer," and then at Hindle. His was the face of a graven image.

"I will see the gentleman," said Viola.

"It's HIM, miss," said Hindle in a hoarse whisper, as soon as they were alone. "I've shown him into the drawing-room. I'll remain in the hall, handy, if you need me."

Viola nodded. Her heart was thumping against her ribs, but Hindle couldn't hear that. He was saying to himself:

"She's the Colonel's daughter—every blessed inch of her."

Walking slowly ahead of Hindle Viola passed into the drawing-room and closed the door.

At first it was difficult not to believe that Hindle had made a mistake. As Viola approached, a man who might be any age between twenty-five and thirty-five bowed politely, murmuring his regret at intruding upon her.

"I knew your father," he went on quietly: "he befriended me. I had, may I say, a claim on him that he was the last man to repudiate. As we have never met before I have brought, as my credentials, these letters, written at different times by your father to me."

Viola took the letters, and glanced at one. It was dated some years back, and began: "My dear boy." It was just such a letter as any kindly man might write to a young fellow about to push his way into the world. It ended: "You can count on me to do what I can for you. I shall want to help you if you try to help yourself."

Viola could hear her father speaking. A glance at another letter sufficed. It was written in the same paternal tone, but it began "Dear Hubert."

Viola, acutely sensible that her heart was still thumping, dissembled.

"It is rather an odd thing, Captain Verequer, but my father never mentioned you to me."

"I think I can explain that."

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She glanced about her, raising her voice.

"This room is cold. Will you come into the library?"

"Certainly."

He followed her down the long corridor. As they crossed the hall, Viola beheld the tails of Hindle's coat vanishing behind a door. She turned, as she passed into the library, to look at her visitor's face. If he were guilty this must be a terrible ordeal for him. He glanced about him unconcernedly, slightly overplaying his part, because he must have known from the papers what had happened in this room. Viola indicated a chair, and seated herself, waiting for him to speak first.

"WHAT I am about to say is in confidence. Your father never mentioned me to you because—I wish that I could spare you this shock—I am his son. I never knew, or suspected that till my mother, who was dying, told me."

In a stifled voice Viola heard herself saying:

"You have come to claim me as your half-sister?"

"Pardon me. If my father, and benefactor, had wished me to claim blood-relationship with you, he would have spoken to you about me. I wanted to find out whether he had or not. I am going to ask one more question of some importance to me. When you have answered it, I will go away."

"Ask your question."

"The terms of your father's will have not yet been published. Was there provision made for me under the name of Hubert Dennet?"

"None. If your name is Hubert Dennet, why do you now call yourself Verequer?"

"Because my assumption of your name secured me admission to this house. I had my card printed for that purpose."

Certainly, his voice was disarming. Viola wondered what she would have done, or said, had she not read her father's diary and the *dossier* furnished by the personage? Dissembling was almost too great a strain. Nature, not Art, made her voice quiver.

"Did my father acknowledge you as his son?"

"Not directly. He knew that I knew. Being under

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tremendous obligations to him I respected his silence. I must go on respecting it. Good-bye, Miss Verequer, and thank you."

He rose.

"One moment. I am rather dazed. When did you see my father last?"

"Some two years ago, or more. I was hoping to meet him again upon the day that he died."

"What do you say?"

"A meeting had been arranged. I was unavoidably detained in London. When I picked up the paper next morning, I read with horror what had happened. I was bowled right over."

Viola felt stunned, compassless in a troubled sea. She regarded this man as a liar of the first magnitude, and yet she felt almost sure that he had been in London when the tragedy took place. His next words confirmed this.

"I had the most important business—for me—on hand. I had spent the whole of the previous day with some friends. They had asked me to 'come in' upon a proposition which meant money; and I needed money badly. I had to answer them definitely next morning. I met them tongue-tied. I was thinking of the death of my father. I lost a great opportunity."

At this moment the door opened and Hindle appeared.

"Yes, Hindle—?"

"Sir Basil Verequer has motored down from London. He asked me to tell you that he was here."

"Please ask Sir Basil to join us."

Hindle vanished. Viola turned to her visitor.

"Sir Basil is my friend, and the head of our family. Am I to introduce you to him as Captain Verequer or Mr. Hubert Dennet?"

"I shall be happy to meet Sir Basil under my own name, Hubert Dennet."

A minute or two elapsed before Sir Basil came in. Small talk was unachievable by Viola, and Dennet's last remark indicated a prospective gain rather than a retrospective loss; it indicated, also, a far more important matter, that an "alibi" could be established, if an "alibi" were

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needed. Accordingly, Viola held her tongue. Dennet, quite at his ease, surveyed the room with curiously alert eyes. To the girl watching him he seemed to be interested in it as the scene of a tragedy in which he had taken no part. That was her impression.

Sir Basil came in, greeted Viola affectionately, and said : " I had to use your telephone."

Viola presented Mr. Hubert Dennet. She beat no bushes, adding tensely :

" Mr. Dennet has shown me some letters written by my father to him. From these letters I have gathered that my father educated Mr. Dennet, and befriended him afterwards. Mr. Dennet wished to know if he was mentioned in my father's will. He claims to be my father's son."

Sir Basil smiled ironically.

" Indeed." He turned to Dennet. " You claim to be the son of the late Colonel Verequer ? "

" Yes."

" You are not in the least like him, if you will allow me to say so."

" Certainly. You can say what you like, Sir Basil."

Sir Basil paused. When he spoke again his voice had hardened.

" Depressing weather, isn't it ? "

" Is that unusual at this time of year ? "

Harmless remarks ; but they clashed in Viola's ears. She knew that two men were crossing swords ; she was to witness a duel between them. Physically, the pair were well-matched, of medium height, of spare build, keen-eyed, alert to their finger-tips. It occurred to Viola that Mr. Hubert Dennet did not look as if he " trafficked " in cocaine. Sir Basil's next question was not so harmless.

" Tell me—is it possible to open a door, that door, let us say," he pointed at the door by which he had just entered, " from the outside when it is locked on the inside ? "

" What a singular question to put to me ! "

" Is it ? I will put the same question in another way. Is it possible to lock a door from the outside when the door is unlocked and the key of it is inside ? "

" I don't know."

" I think you do. I have reason to believe that I am

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speaking to an expert on these matters. Yesterday afternoon I was in Scotland Yard. An official showed me a clever tool which can turn any key inside a lock when used from the outside."

"I have never been to Scotland Yard, Sir Basil."

"No——? But they have there—I saw it myself—the dossier of Mr. Hubert Dennet."

An accomplished fencer acknowledges a successful thrust. Mr. Dennet laughed.

"As soon as you mentioned the Yard I expected that. A soldier of misfortune, Sir Basil, stands before you."

"You can sit down, if you like. I shall."

Sir Basil selected a chair. Viola did not notice that it happened to be between the door and Mr. Dennet. With a shrug of the shoulders, Mr. Dennet sat down also. Sir Basil glanced at his watch. Mr. Dennet glanced at the windows. They were shut. He said politely:

"I have sat down, Sir Basil, but I see no reason for prolonging this interview, if the conversation is continued on the lines chosen by you."

"The reason for prolonging this interview, sir, is approaching us. It will be here directly. I speak now as a magistrate. Sit where you are. Don't move. It would be dangerous for you to do so."

"Is this melodrama?"

"No; comedy which lies on the surface of tragedy. Ah! I sent my car to the village. The 'reason' is here."

As he spoke, Hindle opened the door.

The Superintendent of Police entered the room. As Hindle withdrew, he looked at Dennet and nodded.

"You can come with me, my man. I am sure you will come quietly."

"You arrest me——? On what charge?"

"I arrest Claude Jackman, *alias* Walter Sims, *alias* Tom Gadd, on a charge of burglary, committed two weeks ago in Wimbledon. We have got you at long last, Tom."

Tom stood up. He glanced at Viola and then at Sir Basil; he spoke to Sir Basil:

"That drug-soaked madman gave the show away, I suppose?"

"He did."

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"I ought to have known that he would." He turned to the Superintendent jocularly :

"Lead on, Macduff."

"A creditable exit," murmured Sir Basil, as the Superintendent and his prisoner passed out of the library.

Within five minutes a grateful girl learnt that the head of the family had spent a week in London on her business, not his own. Finally, he had found a miserable wretch dying in a room that had been taken by "Gentleman" Gadd, as he was known to his intimates. Tom, it appeared, had been at school with Dennet; and Tom had stuck to Dennet, as such men do, too long. In his own interests, so said Scotland Yard, Tom should have abandoned a "dope" fiend. He refused to do so. Let that be recorded to his credit.

"A madman," said Sir Basil, in conclusion, "came here to extort money out of your poor father. By the ill luck of things your father had been cleaning his revolver. It lay loaded upon his desk. There was a struggle for possession of the weapon. According to Dennet your father snatched up the revolver in self-defence. Somebody pulled the trigger. Dennet had a tool in his pocket belonging to Gadd which enabled him to lock the door from the outside. He had all the cunning of a madman and the *expertise* of a burglar. He reached London and told Gadd what had taken place. Then he fell desperately ill from an overdose of some drug.

"Gadd was a madman to leave him, but that is just where these clever criminals slip up. Both men were in urgent need of money. The burglary for which Gadd has just been arrested was not successful. Probably he knew that London was too hot for him. He came here, impersonating Dennet, to get money out of you."

"He would have got it," said Viola, "if I had not read the diary."

"He might have got it out of me," said Sir Basil. "I have Dennet's deposition in my pocket, Viola. The insurance company will raise no question as to its validity."

"Is the man—dead?"

"He is dying. He did give away his pal, but all these

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drug fiends are irresponsible. It is humanly certain that remorse drove him to overdose himself. Thank Scotland Yard, not me, for this clearing up of a heart-breaking mystery. I pulled a few strings; they did the rest.

"Gadd left London yesterday. Last night, the truth was extorted from Dennet. It reached me this morning. I raced down here—in the nick of time; I telephoned for our Superintendent."

"Scotland Yard knew that Gadd had come here."

"No; I guessed that."

"Dennet will be tried, if—if he recovers."

"He won't recover. You must try to forget, Vi, that he ever lived."

"I shall never know his real name."

"Your father didn't want you to know it. He called him—'X.'"

HIGH STAKES

“WE have forgotten Father,” gasped Christine Langworthy.

She was the first to return to earth after soaring into the blue with Syd Gannaway, who had not the privilege of “father’s” acquaintance. The young people had met at a dance and elsewhere. They “fell” for each other irresistibly. Feet, hands, and hearts seemed to move together in rhythmic harmony. Syd had acquired the habit of doing things in a hurry, and, in consequence, not doing them too well, being the sort of young man who often misses his train because he runs it too fine.

He might have learnt wisdom in the hunting-field, where stiff timber must be taken coolly; but Syd was not a chaser of foxes. He hunted that “varmint,” Success, and so far he had to confess, with a disarming smile, that he had been rather “out of the hunt,” albeit a thruster. Wanting to get rich quick, he had got poor slow.

He had “rushed” at Christine and captured her, much to her surprise and his.

“Father” confronted the pair as a barbed-wire entanglement. He was a City magnate, who lived in Portland Place. He had never met Syd; and he put an inordinate value upon his own possessions, particularly Chrissie, an only child and the apple of his eye. An Atlantic tossed between Syd and Mr. Langworthy. Could it be bridged?

That question had to be answered. For the moment it was agreed that a premature engagement must remain a romantic secret. They would meet where and when they could—on the sly.

“If Father knew you——,” sighed Chris. Suddenly her eyes brightened and her cheeks flushed as she exclaimed:

“You must *get* to know him.”

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"How?"

"We shall find a way. Father *must* cotton to you on his own. He will."

"Why should he?"

"If—if you played golf with him, or bridge, if—if you joined his club."

"Blessedest, your father is unapproachable by the likes of me."

"We must talk to Basil Peek about this. I have a hunch that he can help us."

CAPTAIN PEEK was a cheery, optimistic soul and (in Syd's considered opinion) an accomplished man of the world, having independent means which enabled him to know many men and many cities. Our lovers entertained the captain at luncheon in a quiet restaurant, where Ulysses listened to a tale that provoked pity and sympathy because there was no self-pity in it, no whining about bad luck, no blaming of others. First and last Syd blamed himself.

"I'm not a fool, Buck, you know that; and I'm not a slacker. What's wrong with me, old bean?"

The Captain accepted this question as a challenge. He had been nicknamed "Buck" at school because he appeared spick and span at all times and was not too modest about his achievements in the playing fields, a blood at Eton—and afterwards.

"Hate to hit a man when he's down," said Buck.

"You may hit me bang over the ropes, if you can."

"Right. I will. A man is taken at his own valuation. Consistently you've undervalued yourself. Why did you take him, Chrissie?"

"I don't know, Buck."

"Perhaps you thought that if you didn't, no other girl would."

"Syd has a way with him."

"Quite. There are possibilities about Syd. If I had a free hand, and if you backed me up, Chrissie, Syd might be steered. To get you two into blue water with a favouring breeze astern would be a job after my own heart."

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"You start in now. I said to myself: 'Buck will buck me up.' You have. There's something about you that inspires confidence."

"And I'll bet a Bradbury you don't know what it is?"

"You'd win your bet."

"It's self-confidence. I believe in myself. You tried journalism; you read for the Bar; you are now a sort of go-between brokers and clients, introducing fresh business. You have a knack at drawing up a prospectus and a gift of the gab, but you queer your pitch simply because you can't dress your part. On your word of honour, have you ever owned a kit that you could carry with reasonable pride into the Royal Enclosure at Ascot?"

"I never go there."

"Don't side-step; you know what I mean."

"I haven't got anything that you'd wear, Buck."

"Now, Chrissie, speak up! Aren't you ashamed of your old rag-bag?"

"Perhaps I know what's inside it."

"Good for you, but that doesn't apply to your father and others. Have you any ready money, Syd?"

"My old Aunt Agatha left me five hundred pounds. It was paid in to my account a few days ago."

"The directing finger of Providence is plainly visible. If you will give me a free hand, I'll begin by starting you out sartorially—*right*. If I wore your clothes, the last ounce of self-confidence would ooze out of my pores. I can take you to my own snip in Savile Row; and he may drop dead when he sees you. I can teach you to wear what he will provide—no cushy job. Manners don't make the man. Your manners are O.K. Have they made you? You'll cock your old head at a different angle when I've licked you into shape. Even the waifs and strays must wonder how the devil the crows are kept off the wheat when you come to town."

"Buck—I've never thought of this."

"Bless your innocent heart! I know you haven't. I hate to send your valiant soul down into your boots—which, by the way, are the worst ever—but my heart bleeds for Christine. Now, what about it?"

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Syd looked at Christine, who nodded.

"There is something in what Buck says," she murmured. "You don't look prosperous, darling. I don't mind a bit, but there it is."

"Next to you," growled Syd, "I think I love my old hartogs better than anything else I've got. I—I can't see myself dolled up."

"You can't, but I can," said Buck. "This is going to be a 'try on' and a 'try out.' I have something else up my sleeve. Your father, Chrissie, belongs to my club—Black's. He plays bridge there. As you suggest, Syd must join the club and cut in at his table."

"Father plays for high stakes," murmured Chrissie.

"I can't afford to join a club like Black's," said Syd.

"Yes, you can; and luckily there's no waiting list. I shall put you up this afternoon. You will find yourself a member before your new kit is ready. You play a very sound game of bridge. You will make a bit at that, and increase your *clientèle*, because between rubbers you will talk shop. Got it?"

"Aunt Agatha will turn in her grave."

"If she can change her position, she can change her mind. Syd won't get father's blessing till he asks for it, will he, Chris?"

"You jolly well know that I haven't the cheek to ask for it. Mr. Langworthy would hand me a lemon."

"As a go-between, whose business it is to establish confidence, you must be made to look prosperous. Black's is going to be your fishing ground. I shall scatter ground-bait."

"Ground-bait?" repeated Christine.

"I shall tell the Election Committee that my candidate has come into a legacy—just that. When you start fishing, Syd, you will find that Tritons are as easily hooked as minnows. If you place yourself unreservedly in my capable hands, I shall be best man at your wedding within a year."

Christine nodded again and smiled, as Syd exclaimed dramatically:

"By the Ten Plagues of Egypt, I will."

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CAPTAIN PEEK strolled into Black's that same afternoon and found Mr. Langworthy, as he expected, drinking a cup of tea before sitting down to his bridge. Buck hailed him cheerily :

"How are you ? You look very well."

"Then I look better than I feel."

"Of course you know Sydney Gannaway ?"

"No, I don't. Who is he ?"

"A great pal of mine, sir, one of the best. We were at Eton together. Gannaway has come into a bit of money, and he wants to join this club. He's a very clubbable chap, a sound bridge-player, and we ought to have him here. I'm wondering whom I shall ask to second him."

"If he's a friend of yours," replied Mr. Langworthy, "I shall be very happy to do so."

"Ever so many thanks. I'll put his name down at once."

Next morning Buck and Syd went to Savile Row, where the Captain solemnly apostrophised the head of a famous establishment :

"I am handing over to you," he said, "a gentleman whom you must turn out properly. When you have done with him, he must be a credit to you and to me."

"I quite understand, sir."

"Good. Let's get to work."

ASTOUNDING success crowned their joint efforts. At a full-dress rehearsal Buck nodded approvingly.

"You are now fit to be seen. In your business a man must be fit to be seen before he is fit to be heard. Tomorrow you will lunch with me at Black's. I shall introduce you to some of my friends, and, incidentally, you will meet at luncheon your seconder."

"I forgot all about him. Who is he ?"

"Langworthy."

"Buck !"

"Yes ; I have soaped your ways. I'll call for you here at a quarter to one—and 'vet' you."

"Langworthy seconds me when he has never met me ?"

"Langworthy accepts you, Syd, on my recommendation. I have window-dressed you. Now—we shall see what

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happens. You must play your part for all you're worth. By the way, between pals, what are you worth?"

"I inherited from my father ten thousand, which is invested in sound industrials. I make a bit as half-commission man to Anstruther and Tremlett, half-commissions on new business introduced by me. I also do a column of financial notes. I'm not a gambler."

"Yes, you are. You've fallen in love with a rich man's daughter. That may be the saving of you. You might have fallen in love with a pretty typist. Then you would have eaten humble pie for the rest of your life, and pinched yourself and her into an early grave. In my opinion, tomorrow will see your first appearance on a London stage in a part worthy of you. It is up to you to deliver the goods."

In this spirit two gentlemen adventurers leisurely ascended the steps of Black's Club, and passed into the hall. At the last moment, before leaving Gannaway's rooms, Buck took a pear-shaped pearl pin from its case.

"You must wear this, old bean. I lend it to you for six months. It may bring you luck. A pearl of real quality is a credential. Not a word! You placed yourself unreservedly in my hands."

Mr. Langworthy shot an appraising glance at his unknown candidate—and smiled pleasantly.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Gannaway."

"I—I have met Miss Langworthy, sir, at a—at a dance."

"Well, I hope you'll meet her again."

"I shall see if our bit of bread and cheese is ready," said Buck.

During his short absence, Mr. Langworthy talked graciously to Syd and seemed to take for granted that his membership was secure.

"In less than a month you will be one of us."

They lunched in the beautiful coffee-room, where, quite obviously, Captain Peek's guest challenged attention. Magnates passing by paused to greet fellow-members, and to all and sundry Mr. Sydney Gannaway was presented as a candidate at the forthcoming election. After luncheon, Syd decided to "throw himself to the dog" in the offices of Anstruther and Tremlett—another exciting experience.

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Then the two gentlemen adventurers would meet again before dinner and compare notes. For the moment we will leave the captain at Black's and accompany Syd to the City of London.

When he walked into the dingy offices not far from Capel Court, all the clerks whom he knew well blinked at him.

"Have you backed a winner?" they asked.

"A winner has backed me," replied Syd with dignity.

"Are you going to be married this afternoon?" asked another waggishly.

"Not this afternoon," murmured Syd. "Is the Chief in? If so, I should like to see him."

Mr. Anstruther surveyed his outside broker with amusement.

"My dear Gannaway, my heartiest congratulations."

"They are—premature."

"You have not been near us for three weeks. I can guess what has happened. You have come into a fortune, and we shall lose your valuable services, eh?"

"Were they valuable? I have come into a bit of money. I am changing my methods, Mr. Anstruther, scrapping the out-at-elbows tout."

"'Tout' is an ugly word, Gannaway. You interest me. You look pink with prosperity."

"I have made a discovery. With you as an object lesson I should have been in easier circumstances long ago. *You* deal with big men. It is easier to deal with big men. They can appreciate brains; they are less suspicious; they have a wider vision. I have wasted valuable time telling the man in the street what I know, and what I know he is incapable of understanding."

"That is perfectly true. You have special aptitudes for presenting facts, both on paper and *via voce*, with convincing accuracy."

"My job. Unfortunately, straitened means prevented my presenting myself as—well, as I am presenting myself to-day. You may not see me for another three weeks, but I shall be at work."

He achieved a dignified exit, carrying his head at the right angle.

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Two hours later, Captain Peek assured him that he had made a "hit" with "Father."

"Your election is certain, Syd. The old lad is on the committee. He will introduce you to the other old dogs. Five years hence you will find it difficult to compute what you owe to me. Meanwhile, brush up your bridge."

"I shall drop what is left of Aunt Agatha's legacy."

"If that happened—which is most unlikely—you would get it all back, with compound interest, in commissions."

WITHIN three weeks Syd was duly elected a member of Black's.

Buck introduced him to the worth while members, who were unanimous in pronouncing Syd to be an addition to the club and an ornament to the card-room. When questions were put to him, the Captain murmured confidentially:

"Syd Gannaway has better brains in his little finger than I have in my head—and I don't wear a small-sized hat. You might do worse than consult him about your investments. He's in with Anstruther and Tremlett—big people. He has made money for me."

But there was a fly in the ointment. Syd, honest fellow, was living, and living uncommonly well, upon his wits, but he was uncomfortably aware that he had won the friendship and consideration of Christine's father under false pretences. Mr. Langworthy had "cottoned" to Syd. They played golf together as well as bridge. And, finally, under the impression that club gossip was true, Mr. Langworthy bestowed a tremendous mark of confidence upon the young man. He talked to him about his business.

"Is it true what I hear about you, Gannaway?"

"What have you heard, sir?"

"I'm told that you're in with some big people—Anstruther and Tremlett?"

"In a humble way," replied Syd. "I work for them on the outside. Why do you ask?"

"They undertake important flotations?"

"No. They underwrite important flotations."

Now Mr. Langworthy had been losing money, because for two years he had been fighting a bunch of younger men, rivals in his industry. He had cut prices and profits; he

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had refused all offers of compromise, being a very obstinate man, set in ways that were ancient rather than modern. He poured all his troubles into attentive ears, and then, to the astonishment of Syd, asked for his advice. It was a tremendous opportunity for young Mr. Gannaway, and he hugged it.

"I can get you out of this, sir," he observed calmly.

"How? Unless I—I climb down?"

"Give me a week to get the details. I should like to read your last report and theirs. Who are—they?"

"One is a member of this club. I'm not on speaking terms with him. His name is Forsyth. Do you know him?"

"I shall make his acquaintance at once. Would you consider an amalgamation scheme, if—if *they* climbed down?"

"You work that, and I'm your friend for life. I could get you on the board; you would have to buy a few shares."

"Certainly," said Syd.

"My boy, you go ahead—full speed."

Syd talked it over with Buck, who grinned paternally.

"You are making good, Syd. I knew you would. Everything is turning out according to plan. Old Langworthy is as solid as the rock of Gibraltar. You tell him that you want to be in this. Say, in your lightest manner, that you're prepared to take hold and win through if he lets you have ten thousand of his ordinary shares, which, till now, he has kept in his inside pocket. He won't let you have 'em, but it will make the right impression."

"Buck——"

"You're gasping. Ask and ye shall receive. Consorting with the right people has given you the right look. Forsyth is a canny Scot. Ask him to dine. Give him the best. But nose out first all the details about his business."

Within three days Syd was in possession of the details. The artful Buck went to Forsyth.

"I want you to meet my friend Gannaway."

"Why?"

"You take what I say for what it's worth. Gannaway is a coming man. He's a man of many friends, as the Spanish say. He can rake chestnuts out of the fire. You talk to

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him about your business and see what happens. His knowledge of your business may surprise you."

"He looks smart enough."

"He's even smarter than he looks."

ACCORDINGLY, it came to pass that Syd met Forsyth, and asked him to dine. Perhaps after dinner the best club port served its purpose. The subtle ethers in a great wine bring out what is best in those who drink it. Syd astounded Forsyth when he said carelessly:

"This cut-throat competition must come to an end."

"You say that to old Langworthy."

"I have."

"What!"

"He's as obstinate as you are. Such a pity! You passed your last dividend. Why pass the next?"

"We shall," said Forsyth mournfully. "Has Langworthy instructed you to—approach me?"

"Most certainly not. I don't take instructions from any man. I'm on my own."

"I beg your pardon."

"Not at all—natural question. It's my business to study the business of others. Perhaps I have a nose for opportunities. When I hear of a passed dividend, I sit up and take notice. Try this cigar."

"Thanks. I'm fed up with existing conditions, but I don't see my way to alter them."

"No? Well, I do. I've made up my mind that I should like to own a parcel of shares in Langworthy, Forsyth and Co., Limited. I should like to draw up the prospectus; and I should like to be a director of the new company. But of course there are other pebbles on the beach. You say 'Nothing doing,' and we'll talk of something else."

"Look here, Gannaway; you've rather sprung this on me, but no complaints about that. My partners are as fed up as I am. Would you like to have a talk with them?"

"Only if they wish to have a talk with me—on conciliatory lines. I'm a man of peace."

"Lunch with me in the City to-morrow and meet my partners."

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"Would they entertain an offer to buy them out, lock, stock and barrel?"

"You are prepared to make such an offer?"

"Tentatively. The capital could be found easily enough."

"Possibly; but we're in this up to our necks—sink or swim."

"I'll lunch with you to-morrow," said Syd.

Somehow Syd impressed the partners. He had a way with him hard to define or analyse; and he could talk the patter of Capel Court. After luncheon he visited a very famous firm of solicitors, who specialise in big flotations. They, too, were astonished at his appearance, at his air of prosperity; they were still more astonished to learn that a young man whom they regarded as an "outsider" not only looked but talked like an insider.

"I mean to be in this," said Syd.

Within a week he went back to Mr. Langworthy and handed him a typewritten document, which was a masterpiece in its way.

"You can take it or leave it, sir."

"This is illuminating, Gannaway. I [don't have to climb down; I am left with a controlling interest. Do you mean to tell me that Forsyth and the others will come in on these terms?"

"Yes, I do."

"You are a very remarkable young man. I am beginning to think that I am under deep obligations to you. What is the next move?"

"I want you to dine with me at Black's to meet Forsyth. Sooner or later you must bury the hatchet; why not sooner?"

"Name the night, my boy. I see that you have counted yourself in as a member of the new board."

"Yes," said Syd unconcernedly. "I want ten thousand of the Ordinary One Pound Shares. I shall pay spot cash for them. You see, sir, I believe in you, and I believe in Forsyth, and I believe in amalgamation."

To his surprise, Langworthy made no protest, although the Ordinary Shares were not being offered to the public. The Eight per cent. Preference Shares would be gobbled up

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and go to a premium. At least, that was the opinion of Anstruther and Tremlett. Syd was putting all his eggs into one basket, but, as a director, he could watch that basket. Nevertheless, Mr. Langworthy was frowning.

"You think I've opened my mouth too wide?" asked Syd.

"I'm thinking of something else, Gannaway. I'm worried, my boy, badly rattled. What would you do if you received an anonymous letter?"

"I should burn it."

"I have done that. But I can't burn my own thoughts and misgivings so easily."

"If I can help you——"

"It will help me to take you into my confidence. This anonymous letter was well written, well expressed. I am convinced that it came from a friend."

"Perhaps it did."

"It was signed 'A Friend.' A friend, Gannaway, warned me that my daughter, Christine, was carrying on a clandestine love affair."

Syd nodded.

"I have not spoken to her yet, or to anybody else. She is an independent young woman—goes her own way, and all that. Perhaps I've been too engrossed with my business affairs. Obviously if she is doing this thing—and my suspicions are aroused—she has picked what I call a loser, whom she doesn't dare to present to me."

"Yes."

"What would you do?"

"I should mark time."

"I hate marking time."

"Then tackle her. You may be mistaken."

"I'm reasonably sure she is meeting somebody."

"He may be a winner, not a loser. Perhaps you have set your heart on her marrying a swell."

"A swell! I've rubbed it well into her that I want her to marry a worker, like myself, a live wire. You've put your finger on the sore spot. If my friend who wrote that letter is right, she is meeting a swell, a popinjay, described in the letter as one of the smartest young men about town. Now, why the devil can't she cotton to a fellow like you?"

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"You must ask her that question, sir. Give her a chance. Scrap all preconceived ideas. I suppose she could march out of Portland Place, and marry this fellow, whether you approved him or not?"

"Of course she could."

"But she hasn't?"

"Not yet. Gannaway, she's hiding something from her old dad, and he knows it. I couldn't face my egg this morning; I revoked yesterday afternoon at bridge; if we play golf to-morrow I shall fozzle all my shots."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead."

"If there is a young man—and she must own up if you tackle her in a conciliatory spirit, as I tackled Forsyth and Co.—say genially that you wish to make his acquaintance. Ask him to dine. That commits you to nothing. To make the situation less awkward, ask me to meet him. But, first and last, trust her."

"By Jove—I will! Are you engaged to-morrow?"

"I thought of asking Forsyth to meet you to-morrow."

"Make it the day after. I must meet that Scot with a clear head on my shoulders. I shall go for this domestic problem bald-headed. If you don't hear from me to the contrary, weigh in at eight-fifteen to the tick."

"Right," said Syd.

At eight-fifteen a very smart young man found Mr. Langworthy alone in his big drawing-room—and badly dithered. As the door closed behind a portly butler, Gannaway's host growled out:

"I—I don't know the fellow's name. Christine owned up at once. But she refused to say who he was. She knows that you know. That's all. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my temper, but I did."

"Good."

"I am prepared for anything. Still—her kisses were reassuring. I dare swear that she's talking to the confounded fellow downstairs. Is he ashamed of his name? These up-to-date young women——"

Christine entered. She greeted young Gannaway demurely, and turned to her father, a-dimple and a-twinkle.

"Dinner will not be served for ten minutes, Father."

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"Come off it. Clear up this silly mystery here and now."

"Before Mr. Gannaway?"

"He's my friend, and soon I hope he will be my business associate. You can say what you like before him."

"All right. I will. You see, I fell in love with a man who would have been labelled by you at sight as a failure; and he fell in love with me. But I knew all along that he wasn't a failure and I was perfectly certain that you would like him, and—and appreciate him at his true worth, if you made his acquaintance on your own. That was the problem that confronted both of us. Well, we solved it. You have met him; you do like him; and you know, better than anybody else, that he is not a failure. I want to marry Syd Gannaway; he wants to marry me. What have you got to say about it?"

Mr. Langworthy stared and glared at the artful pair. At this moment the butler announced that dinner was served. Christine said sweetly:

"Bring three cocktails, Branksome."

Branksome disappeared.

"Am I to leave the house?" asked Syd.

"Am I to go with him if he does?" asked Chris.

Mr. Langworthy pulled himself together—no mean achievement. He had been had; his leg had been pulled—unmercifully; but, oddly enough, he was conscious of rejuvenation, and he wanted his dinner. He growled out:

"You think yourselves two very smart young people?"

"Syd *was* the worst-dressed man in London."

"Who wrote that anonymous letter?"

"I did, sir. May I remind you that you pronounced it to be the letter of a friend?"

Mr. Langworthy laughed as Branksome appeared with the cocktails.

That night, alone in his bedroom, Syd looked lovingly at his hartogs, murmuring to himself:

"I shall be wearing you again—soon."

HESTER FEATURES HERSELF

WHEN that brilliant journalist, Angus Murray, died after a long and most expensive illness, his daughter Hester, an only child, was barely of legal age. A few days after the funeral, her uncle, Dr. Murray, offered her a home in a London suburb. Her aunt said, not too cordially: "You can help *me*, dear, in the house." That meant domestic drudgery without a compensating salary. The offer was refused gratefully but unmistakably.

Hester inherited a cottage of character in Surrey and about five hundred pounds. Her uncle made it plain that she couldn't go on living in the cottage (where, indeed, she had been born) and that it must be sold or let furnished, at the earliest possible moment. It was let, eventually.

"If you refuse to come to us, what will you do?" asked her uncle.

"I shall go 'on my own.'"

"You propose to fight for your own hand?"

"I can make a living as a stenographer and a typist."

"Your father, Hester, had an immense experience of life; he must have passed on some of it to you."

"Daddy, bless him, had a bad memory."

Dr. Murray, lacking in a sense of humour, looked puzzled.

"I mean," continued Hester, "that Daddy forgot his bad times when he was with me. As you know, he was the most generous of men. That has turned me into a pincher. I shall pinch and pinch till I find myself back in my cottage."

"You ought to marry, child."

"That 'ought' might turn out a 'cross.' After living with Daddy, who was a priceless darling, I have become rather critical of men. I have had three proposals, Uncle, but apparently—and it is so disconcerting—the men who

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want to marry me are the men whom I should hate to marry; so there it is."

"Your father, Hester, was a free-lance journalist and much too independent in his views, as I often told him. He might have been an editor of a big paper. That, however, is neither here nor there. You took down and typed your father's articles——"

"And his plays, which were too good to be accepted."

"I suggest to you that you cannot compete against the professional London typist."

"I know. I shall hunt up some nice quiet West Country town, where living is very cheap."

"You are an impassioned optimist, like your father."

"I love to hear you say that."

A modern maid had her way. Within two months Hester found herself in Farmouth, that sunny seaside town between Torquay and Plymouth. She "took" a bed-sitting-room in the house of a widow, Mrs. Tuffin, who was glad to receive a charming young lady as a paying guest. Mrs. Tuffin remarked to a neighbour that Hester's credentials were inscribed upon her face, which was not quite satisfactory to the local gossips. They wanted details about a stranger, whose attractive head was carried at an angle that excited comment.

Hester, however, refused to gratify curiosity, an abstinence that provoked more comment, not ill-natured, from Mrs. Tuffin.

"I make no doubt I shall know everything later on," she observed to the dear vicar's wife. "To be sure, the little I do know is quite in her favour. Above her mantel-piece hang two miniatures and some silhouettes of ladies and gentlemen. Vanished pomps of yesterday, I said to myself when I saw them."

Hester inserted a notice in the *Farmouth Evening Echo* setting forth her qualifications as a typist, but the notice was not noticed. One or two of her father's friends sent her manuscripts, because she had asked them to do so, but she understood that these were crumbs thrown to importunity. She wrote also to several well-known novelists, stating terms low enough to challenge attention. Only one replied, saying courteously that he had a typist of his own.

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Very soon she made acquaintance with two young men, also paying guests of Mrs. Tuffin, and both golfers. Hester had aptitudes for the ancient game, but she couldn't afford to become a member of the local club, although Arnold Tavender pointed out that it would *pay* her to do so, inasmuch as it might lead to business. Hester retorted that it might lead to bankruptcy.

Tavender was in a stockbroker's office. The other young man, Eustace Ponting, was junior partner in an old-established firm of wine merchants. He, too, confided to Hester that golf brought grist to his mill; and Tavender hinted that Ponting liked to play with the more elderly members to whom vintage port was compensating after missed putts and sliced drives.

Hester, alert to the humours of life, came to the conclusion that Mr. Ponting lost a few half-crowns to veterans with the canny purpose of booking an order from a triumphant "rabbit." Of the two young men she liked Tavender the better, because Ponting was slightly patronising in his manner, but Ponting, unquestionably, was much the handsomer—and he knew it.

She kept both at a distance, thereby evoking from Mrs. Tuffin the affirmation :

"She's quality."

Within six weeks the young men were accepted as pals. Each talked shop. Tavender had ambitions; he might slip into a good billet in the City. A prosperous uncle had his eye on him. Ponting aspired to be senior partner in his business.

EACH insisted that personality made for success; each laid stress upon publicity, citing Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and the Gish sisters as illuminating examples of what "featuring" could accomplish.

"But how do *you* feature yourself?" asked Hester of Eustace Ponting.

Secretly she was amused rather than edified. She had listened to such talk before from young men who came to her father's cottage—would-be painters, musicians, actors and novelists, all paragraph-hunters and, in Hester's eyes, parasites upon the failing energies of a journalist. Still, she

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could understand their pronouncements upon *art* and *artists*. But Tavender and Ponting were middlemen, hardly to be ranked higher than tradesmen.

Ponting answered her.

"Well, Miss Murray, strictly between ourselves, I don't feel quite at home outside a horse; but I hunt one day a week, and try to push along, because it pays a wine-merchant to be seen in the hunting-field. It's 'featuring' for me."

"Ride a cock horse," murmured Hester.

"For the same reason I joined our Yacht Club. I prefer to look at the Channel from the Marine Parade, but I toss about on it from a sense of expediency."

Hester laughed. Ponting looked pained.

"In our business people used to come to us; now we have to go to them. The squires don't lay down port as they used to. Some of the big London firms have taken to flash-sign advertising. It pays. In one word—publicity."

Tavender, with an eye on Mincing Lane as the Mecca of his dreams, talked in the same strain:

"I have to increase our *clientèle*. It's hard work. You see, I'm a shy man. Bridge, now! I love bridge. But I play at the club with a lot of old bumble-puppies because between rubbers I—I——"

"Talk rubbers," suggested Hester.

"That's good. Yes, I specialise in Rubbers and Teas. As often as not, Miss Murray, some stand-offish old bird asks me about an investment likely to rise, merely because he's lost five bob in the course of the evening. And nine times out of ten he demands a gilt-edged industrial, but he *buys* one of the speculative counters. Funny world, isn't it?"

"But jolly," said Hester.

"What I say is this: one must push and keep on pushing. The man with push gets there."

"In a word—as Mr. Ponting says—publicity."

"Just so. It goes against the grain with me, but I have to do it."

"One must learn before one can live," said Hester thoughtfully.

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MRS. TUFFIN, good worthy soul, bestowed confidence upon Miss Murray, partly, it may be presumed, in the hope of eliciting confidence from her.

"If I read novels, as I should like to do, where would I be? Why, in the workhouse. It is a mournful pleasure to speak out to a clever young lady like you. Really, it's heavy on my conscience that I'm a regular churchgoer, because in my line of business it pays. Often I should feel less of a miserable sinner if I stayed away, tired as I am after a hard week's work. When I doll myself up of a Sunday morning I just know that it's self-advertisement. Now you're thinking to yourself: What a whited sepulchre!"

"Oh, no. I would go to church on week-days if I could get work from people who saw me there."

Mrs. Tuffin glanced maternally at her paying guest. She was aware that Hester's machine ticked intermittently, but she supposed that Miss Murray had means. Suddenly, with a flash of insight, she made as sure that she had ends. Hester was thinner and paler; faint lines could be detected about her eyes and mouth.

"You don't *have* to work, do you?" asked Mrs. Tuffin.

Hester remained silent for a moment.

"I want to work," she said slowly, "but so far my advertising has not paid for itself."

"Oh, dear! If you were better known——"

"Featured."

"Yes, Miss Murray. Why, if you fell off the pier and were rescued by young Mr. Ponting, and had your photo in the *Echo*, you'd be turning work away."

"I shouldn't mind falling off the pier, Mrs. Tuffin, if I were sure that I should be rescued by Mr. Ponting."

Mrs. Tuffin observed that she was only joking. Then she cited the case of a doctor in the town, who had almost starved because he was a stranger. A car had been overturned at the corner of the street where he had hung out his sign. The doctor administered first aid to the driver of the car, who happened to be a county magnate. From that auspicious moment the young man had prospered. He was now the leading physician in Farmouth.

Hester listened attentively to this story. It seemed to have personal application. She "sensed," as the Americans

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say, that will-o'-the-wisp, Opportunity, flitting about round the corner. Lying awake that night, confronting as valiantly as she could the fact that she was eating up her small capital, Opportunity winked at her.

She saw herself with chill detachment as a nobody sinking into a Slough of Despond. What everybody said so positively was true. Self-advertisement turned nobodies into somebodies. But self-advertisement through the channels of a newspaper was in her case a waste of money. She had believed that pluck, intelligence and hard work would build up a nice little business; she called to mind a friend of her father's, who had begun humbly as a typist and was now a large employer of typists, supervising their work and making a handsome income.

The lady in question had told Hester what she had done to secure success. She admitted that she had pestered—quite charmingly, so Hester guessed—all her friends to find her work. Fortunately, first-class typists at that time were not thick as bees upon Michaelmas daisies. Good work, cleanly and carefully done, was at a premium in pre-War days. . . . The same lady had advised Hester to find some prosperous town where there would be little or no serious competition. . . . She had found such a town; she was in it and helplessly out of it, because she was unknown. . . .

At this moment Opportunity popped in, gaily, comically and *convincingly*. It is no exaggeration to say that Mrs. Tuffin's paying guest chuckled herself to sound sleep that night and awoke briskly alert next morning.

THREE days passed uneventfully.

On the morning of the fourth day Mrs. Tuffin placed on a sideboard the letters of her guests, glancing at each in turn, as was her habit. She gasped as she beheld a square, cream-laid envelope with a coronet upon the flap. She exclaimed: "Bless me!" when she read an address in bold handwriting:

To The Lady Hester Murray,
c/o Mrs. Tuffin,
27, Marine Parade,
Farmouth, Devon.

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She was still staring at it when Tavender came into the room. Mrs. Tuffin pointed a trembling finger at the letter and exclaimed :

“ Do look at this ! ”

Tavender looked and looked again.

“ I am not surprised,” he said. “ Haven’t we all thought, Mrs. Tuffin, that this young lady was something of a mystery ? ”

“ I said she was—quality.”

“ If I were you,” continued Tavender, speaking in a constrained tone, “ I should give that letter to Miss Murray after breakfast. She may offer a word of explanation ; she may not. To us, I need hardly remind you, she must remain—*Miss Murray*.”

“ You could knock me down with a spillikin,” declared Mrs. Tuffin, as she thrust the confounding letter into the pocket of a black silk apron.

Presently Hester appeared, calm as usual. If she noticed a subtle change in her landlady’s manner, if she observed that Arnold Tavender was gobbling his eggs and bacon in silence, with a perplexed frown upon his normally smooth brow, she made no comments. She appeared, indeed, to be exactly what she had been upon other mornings.

AFTER breakfast Mrs. Tuffin slipped the letter into Hester’s hand, saying in a voice that quavered :

“ This came for you, Miss Murray. I—I didn’t leave it on the sideboard. I—I thought, perhaps——”

“ Thank you,” said Hester, taking the letter and glancing at the superscription. As her eyes fell upon the address she ejaculated a significant “ Oh-h-h-h ! ” She went on hurriedly :

“ There has been a *mistake*. Why is it, Mrs. Tuffin, that people whom one ought to be able to trust so often let us down ? ”

Mrs. Tuffin was too flustered to cope with this question. She contented herself by observing plaintively :

“ I need hardly say that I’m the last person in this world to pry into what doesn’t concern me.”

“ You are a dear,” murmured Hester.

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She was turning away without another word. Mrs. Tuffin couldn't bear that.

"Miss Murray?"

"Yes?"

"If you will pardon me——"

"Certainly."

"It can't be true, is it, that you really need work?"

"I do indeed, Mrs. Tuffin. I have come here to earn my living. I need work—and I am leaving no stone unturned to get it. If—if another letter should come here—*mis-directed*, may I count on you to give it to me once more when we're alone?"

Mrs. Tuffin nodded, almost speechless. Hester retired to her room.

Was it coincidence that at dinner Mr. Ponting paid particular attention to Miss Murray? In marked contrast, Mr. Tavender seemed unhappy and ill at ease. After dinner Mr. Ponting played Rubicon Bezique with Hester, and remarked genially that she was the better player. Later on, when the game was over, he said without any tincture of patronage:

"Would you care to do a little typing for us?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Ponting."

"Hitherto, in our business, I have written all our letters. It is high time we employed up-to-date methods. Could you come to the office to-morrow morning?"

"With alacrity."

That was all, but it was enough, as an enterprising young lady thought to herself, wondering whether Mr. Tavender wrote all letters for his firm.

As a matter of fact he didn't.

Within a week, another letter gave confirmation strong to Mrs. Tuffin's conviction that she was entertaining an angel out of the Englishman's Bible. This second letter was addressed in different handwriting:

To The Right Honourable
The Earl of Invercauld,
c/o The Lady Hester Murray,
27, Marine Parade,
Farmouth, DEVON.

THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

Mrs. Tuffin, alone in her dining-room, apostrophised a right honourable nobleman :

"Nice sort of earl you must be ! Wouldn't I give your lordship a piece of my mind, if you were here !"

Mrs. Tuffin had not much mind to spare, but she could be generous with it when maternal feelings were lacerated. The letter was again slipped into Hester's hand ; and once more the young lady seemed to betray slight annoyance. However, she thanked Mrs. Tuffin, laughed, and put her finger to her lower lip.

THAT same afternoon Mrs. Tuffin called upon the vicar's wife and was pressed to remain to tea. What passed between the matrons must remain a matter of surmise.

Meanwhile, Hester was "making good" in the dingy offices of Messrs. Skilbeck and Ponting. She had to admit that her stenography was halting, but it quickened under Mr. Ponting's kindly patience and encouragement. Letters were dictated by the junior partner, taken down, typed, copied, and posted. At Hester's suggestion old Mr. Skilbeck allowed her to put in order bills and correspondence. He told the junior partner that Miss Murray was a 'treasure,'

"And a lady," he added.

"I should think so," said Mr. Ponting.

For her work, which exacted two hours each day, Hester was suspiciously well paid. She protested when the junior partner named a sum in excess of current rates.

"It's too much, Mr. Ponting."

"Not for *your* services," he replied effusively.

Overhauling the correspondence in Mr. Ponting's private room, Hester found a Peerage. Being alone at the moment she chuckled, feeling reasonably secure in a position almost, but not quite, impregnable. Murray happens to be a name that belongs to more than one noble family. The Duke of Atholl is a Murray ; and so are the Earls of Mansfield and Dunmore and—Invercauld. There was an authentic Lady Hester Murray. Fortunately for our Hester, Sir Bernard Burke is too chivalrous a gentleman to publish the dates of birth of ladies. Had it not been for this omission, Mr. Ponting would have learnt that the Lady Hester Murray was on the wrong side of forty.

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FINDING the Peerage, Hester sighed. Obviously Eustace Ponting knew. She had hoped that he didn't, that his kindness and consideration were spontaneous. Mrs. Tuffin had babbled. Probably Arnold Tavender believed Miss Murray to be a lady of rank, and governed himself accordingly. He held aloof and treated her with formality. In a spirit of mischief she set herself the task of breaking down ridiculous barriers. Meeting him in the hall and asking for a match to light a cigarette, she said lightly :

"I am working for Mr. Ponting."

"So he told me."

"Aren't you pleased that I have found work at last?"

He smiled feebly. Hester continued :

"Why shouldn't I work for your firm?"

"Because we have a typist, fiddle-headed, incompetent baggage!"

"Well, I hope you are as nice to her as—as Mr. Skilbeck is to me."

"If I could wangle it so that our young woman was sacked, as she deserves to be, you could take her place, if you wanted to."

"Poor thing! I shouldn't like to do that. And soon I shall be ever so busy. Mr. Ponting is recommending me to some of his customers. I'm so happy about it—and grateful."

"*You* like working?" he asked incredulously.

His emphasis of the pronoun settled the matter; he knew.

"I love it. As my father used to say, work, and work alone, justifies and explains existence."

"Your father said that?"

"He did."

Tavender stared at her, murmured something inaudible, and hurried away.

This budding stockbroker had also dipped into Burke, and he had exchanged a word or two with a Scots baronet whom he met at the Farmouth Club. The father of the Lady Hester Murray had been known in the Highlands as "The Cock of the North." My lord had mortgaged his estates

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and squandered a fine fortune in riotous living. It was indeed surprising that such a spendthrift should contend that work justified and explained existence.

Hester, of course, slipped up on this. She knew all about the late Lord Invercauld, who happened to be very distantly of kin to her. She knew also that the authentic Lady Hester was living quietly in Edinburgh, and that her brother, the present holder of the title, much impoverished, "ran" a ranch in Western Canada.

Both Tavender and Ponting, talking the matter over, agreed that the extravagance of the late earl, not long deceased, accounted adequately for "Miss" Murray's appearance in Farmouth. Each applauded the young lady's courage and independence. More, everybody to whom the good Mrs. Tuffin had babbled shared this opinion, and said that it behoved him or her to help "Miss" Murray to retrieve the position that was rightfully hers.

Miss Sacheverell, for instance, who was putting together an anthology, entrusted her precious manuscript to Miss Murray. An Archdeacon, when the piteous tale reached his venerable ears, begged Hester to card-index his library, presenting her with a cheque which was more than double what she expected.

Before many weeks had flitted by, Hester found herself overworked and overtired. She was contemplating engaging an assistant, when Eustace Ponting proposed marriage. He made his offer prematurely. Hester had guessed that he was in love with her and, on that account, had given him no encouragement.

Modern maids deal, each after her own fashion, with these exigencies. Hester had come reluctantly to the conclusion that it might be better for a young woman in her position to be loved rather than to love. If Eustace Ponting really loved her, she might learn to love him. If she married him, she would win security; and what security means to penniless girls they alone know.

She refused him with such delicate consideration for his feelings (and her own) that he may have taken "perhaps" for granted. He said cheerily: "I quite understand; we carry on as before."

Hester said with decision: "I hope so." The gossips,

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including Miss Sacheverell and the Archdeacon, believed that a handsome pair *were* "carrying on." Tavender was of the same opinion.

Invitations to tea and luncheon assailed a high-born damsel. She declined them, pleading work as an excuse. The gossips were confirmed in their conviction that the sister of a nobleman had no wish to make the intimate acquaintance of mere commoners!

By this time Hester was getting frightened at the publicity which she had achieved. Her experiment had turned out too big a success. When she walked along the Marine Parade, eyes were focussed upon her. When she went a-shopping, tradesmen were obsequious. Farmouth, gentle and simple, accepted her as Lady Hester Murray.

With fortune at the flood, Hester found and engaged a capable assistant, and worked in an office of her own. Suddenly the tide turned. Mrs. Tuffin took Hester aside and showed her a paragraph in the *Evening Echo*.

"Some of our fellow-townsmen—and townswomen—will not be surprised to learn that the Earl of Invercauld is in Farmouth. On arrival at the Hotel Windsor last night his lordship expressed the hope that he would capture with rod and line both pollack and bass."

"I thought you would like to see it," said Mrs. Tuffin. "Perhaps the Earl might be persuaded to stop here. I should do my best to make him comfortable."

After the first shock Hester pulled herself together, saying quietly:

"Thank you for showing me this. I am sorry that Lord Invercauld has come to Farmouth. Please don't ask me any questions. It is unlikely that he would come here."

Mrs. Tuffin accepted this as final. Probably brother and sister had quarrelled. She hoped that they would make it up. Nothing would make her believe that a belted earl had come to Farmouth for the fishing.

Hester rushed upstairs and flung her aching head upon a pillow. Lord Invercauld might or might not read the paragraph. If he did, he would ask why his visit excited no surprise in Farmouth. Then he would learn that his

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sister was the talk of the town. Hester quailed at the thought of what would happen next.

Five minutes later she sat up, half laughing, half crying, as she glimpsed a way out of the wood.

"It's my only chance," she murmured. "And I haven't a moment to lose."

Nevertheless, many moments were spent on justifiable prinking.

LORD INVERCAULD *had* come to Farmouth to catch bass from the rocks, but the guiding finger of Providence is indicated. He happened to be a keen sea-angler; and a friend had told him that Farmouth was famous for its bass fishing.

He was ten years younger than his sister; and he had landed at Southampton a few days previously. He was thinking lazily that he would not dress for dinner, when a servant told him that a Miss Murray wished to see him upon business of private importance.

"Miss Murray?"

"Miss Murray, my lord."

"I know a dozen Miss Murrays. What does this Miss Murray look like?"

"She looks a perfect lady, my lord."

"Really? All right. Show her up. Wait. I don't want to dine in the dining-room. I'll have a tray here. I think I can tackle a lobster, a cut off the joint, and a tankard of your lightest lager."

"Very good, my lord."

WITHIN a minute Hester was ushered in. As soon as they were alone Invercauld asked bluntly:

"Are you one of my innumerable cousins?"

In Scotland Hester might have claimed kin. Being in Farmouth she said shyly:

"You have never seen me before, Lord Invercauld, and it is likely that you will never see me again."

"In that case, Miss Murray, sit down, please, and let me make the most of the happy chance which brought you here."

She sat down.

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"Chance brought *you* here?" she said tentatively.

"No—my little two seater."

"May I ask if you have read this?"

She handed him the evening paper.

Invercauld read the paragraph and whistled, staring at his visitor.

"Apparently," he said slowly, "the good people of Farmouth were *expecting* me. Why?"

"I am a typist and stenographer," said Hester. "I am building up a decent living."

Invercauld bowed with transpontine politeness. The bow conveyed somehow his surprise that she was a typist and his conviction that she could make a decent living anywhere.

"My small business is imperilled because you are here."

"Miss Murray, will you be offended if I tell you that you are a most interesting note of interrogation? Why does my presence in Farmouth imperil your business?"

"I hate to tell you, but I must. My name is Hester Murray. I have made good simply because a lot of snobs are convinced that I am your sister, Lady Hester Murray, masquerading as a typist."

"What a jolly rag——!"

"You call it that. It is almost a matter of life and death to me."

"Forgive me! I saw the funny side first. I am tempted to claim the privileges of a brother. Come now, will you dine with me and tell me all about it? And then to-morrow I'll leave Farmouth, if my presence here distresses you. What do you say?"

She stared at him. He was not too prepossessing in appearance, being short of stature, freckled, and ginger-haired. Still, he had good manners, and a leg for a kilt.

"I am trying to think what the gossips will say."

"If you will dine with me, hypothesis will become conviction."

"It *is* conviction. It will be another sort of conviction if you give me away, as you have a perfect right to do."

"I repeat—dine with me, but in the presence of the waiter I shall call you Hester. You will have to call me—Archie."

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He laughed.

"I *will* dine with you," said Hester impulsively.

"Thank you, Hester."

"Thank *you*, Archie."

He got up and rang the bell to order dinner for two.

THE little dinner may be described as a success. Emotion had sharpened Hester's appetite; Invercauld, during a long day's fishing, had eaten a few sandwiches and done without tea. Assuredly an appreciation of God's good creatures opens mouths and hearts. The waiter in attendance, one of the leading gossips of Farmouth; never doubted that brother and sister were meeting joyously after a distressing and long separation. He said as much, and more, to the proprietor of the hotel.

To relieve any anxiety on the part of the motherly Mrs. Tuffin, Hester telephoned to her that she was dining with Lord Invercauld.

Mrs. Tuffin ejaculated. "Thank God!" and straightway shared the uplifting news with Messrs. Ponting and Tavender, Ponting beamed; Tavender scowled.

Warmed by good food and sound wine, Hester told her story convincingly. Invercauld was amused and touched. He sipped his coffee, contrasting possibly the speaker with his sister, too stout a pillar of the Kirk of Scotland. When Hester finished, he held out his hand across the table.

"I have only one regret," he said.

"Yes——?"

"I wish you were my sister. Tell me, why can't you be my sister for a few days? We can fish and play golf together."

"Oh-h-h! Archie——!"

"Dear little Hester!"

"I never had a brother," she sighed. Swiftly her voice lost its soft inflections as she abandoned the present and faced the future.

"You must go away to-morrow. I know what to do, and, thanks to you, I can do it. Yes; you have soaped the ways. Within twenty-four hours I shall tell Mrs. Tuffin that you are a kinsman and a friend."

"A kinsman?"

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"My great-grandfather was a Murray of Glenfask."

"You don't say so? We are, sure enough, cousins."

"Only north of Tweed. Mrs. Tuffin, poor dear, spread a report which she must contradict. Letters addressed to you and your sister might easily be sent to a kinswoman."

"What a clever darling!"

"Must I call you Lord Invercauld?"

"Quoth the raven: 'Never more'!"

He asked her many questions, alert to her answers. Then in turn she began to question him—what did he do on his ranch in Canada?

"I don't make much," he admitted modestly, "but I save some bawbees."

"I'm a pincher, too. You see, I have the duckiest cottage, and I want to get back to it."

"My heart's in the Highlands," said Archie. "I, too, hope to go back to the old place some day. My solicitors think it can be done if I live on fifteen hundred a year for ten years."

"Fifteen hundred a year—! Surely you can do that?"

"In Canada, not in England. I had to come over on business. I return to the ranch in a few weeks' time. Perhaps you thought I was safely out of the way?"

"Yes; I did."

"I'm jolly glad I've met such a jolly cousin. It's lonesome out there. Will you write to me now and again?"

"Perhaps."

"Address me Major Murray, Kicking Horse Ranch, Calgary."

"Major Murray?"

"I got my majority in the War and a bullet in the hip. I limp, Hester, in every sense of the word, to my objectives."

"Why did you drop your title out there?"

"It's cheaper, and it saves bother, too."

THEY laughed, pleased to discover that they had much in common. Archie went on to speak of his ranch. He admitted that it could hardly be termed a gold mine, but it engrossed his energies. He preferred an open-air life to any other.

"You'll agree with me that it's not easy to make money."

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Hester said hesitatingly :

"It would be easy for you to marry it."

To her surprise he took this seriously.

"I ask you—is it likely that a rich girl would marry me for myself?"

"Quite likely."

"Many thanks. Anyway, I should loathe living on a rich woman's money, and that's that. Would you marry, not for love, but for all the things you haven't got?"

"*The possibility has entered my mind.*"

"You don't look that sort at all. As we're brother and sister, let's play swaps. Two or three rich girls *have* hurled 'emselfs at my ugly head. I speak of it with humiliation. Now, how many rich men have offered to marry you?"

"Not one; nobody really rich. A man in this town wants to marry me, because he believes I'm your sister. Another man, whom I respect more, won't ask me for the same reason."

"You like him?"

"Not half as much as I like myself."

As she spoke she stood up, after glancing at her wrist watch.

"Ten o'clock! I must fly. I had no idea it was so late."

Then she thanked him, almost pathetically, for being so nice to her. Invercauld offered to walk as far as Mrs. Tuffin's.

"No—it's not two hundred yards from here."

He accompanied her no farther than the door of the hotel, passing through the Lounge. The proprietor (and many others) eyed them with interest. When Hester held out her hand, he pretended not to see it.

"I say, Hester——"

Deliberately he raised his voice.

"Yes—Archie?"

"I don't think I shall move on to-morrow."

She frowned. Did he rate another day's fishing higher than her expressed wish that he should leave Farmouth. He said quickly :

"Let's have a game of golf, old thing?"

She hesitated.

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"Oh, Archie! What price my work?"

"Bother your work! You don't see me every day. I'll meet you on the first tee at ten-thirty to the tick."

"All right."

He laughed gaily and kissed her *coram publico*. It was a cousinly kiss, but Hester quivered.

"I shall tell Aunt Babbie," said Archie, "that Farmouth agrees with you."

"Give Aunt Babbie my love," replied Hester, "and tell her that Farmouth agrees with you."

The proprietor bowed her out.

The sea-breeze cooled her cheeks before she reached Mrs. Tuffin's house, and the ozone in it may have fortified her resolution to pull down the curtain of the comedietta. The parlourmaid who opened the front door grinned at her. Perhaps she forced Hester's hand when she said:

"I was quite willing to sit up for you, my lady. Mrs. Tuffin told me to do so."

"Why," asked Hester, "do you call me 'my lady'?"

Having no answer ready, the parlourmaid smirked and blushed.

"I am *Miss Murray*."

"Very good, Miss. *My* mistake."

"Not yours," said Hester.

She could hear a buzz of voices in the drawing-room, but as she entered that Victorian parlour silence greeted her. She guessed that she had provoked the buzz. Mr. Ponting was present and Mr. Tavender, playing piquet together. At the end of the room were two elderly spinsters and Mrs. Tuffin. Hester approached her landlady.

"A minute ago," she said, "Daisy addressed me as 'my lady'. I asked her why she did so, but she was too confused to answer me. Can you explain, Mrs. Tuffin?"

Everybody in the room looked at Mrs. Tuffin, and she also smirked and blushed, as she faltered:

"Aren't you Lady Hester Murray?"

"Lady Hester Murray, who happens to be a kinswoman of mine, is forty-three, and she lives in Edinburgh. A letter was delivered here addressed to Lady Hester, presumably by mistake. Another letter addressed to Lord

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Invercauld followed it. At dinner to-night, Lord Invercauld and I laughed over this, and he was kind enough to say that he wished he was my brother."

Mr. Tavender made a remark that brought down the curtain.

"If I were he, Miss Murray, I should be glad that I wasn't."

Archie remained more than a week in Farmouth, because it agreed with him so well. He and Hester are now in Canada. She calls herself Mrs. Murray out there, and both she and Major Murray are living quite happily upon fifteen hundred a year, and saving.

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I

FERBANE, as a journalist, was earning enough for one but not quite enough for two when he became engaged to Miss Elsie Cutting, the daughter of his landlady, who had known happier days. It is to her credit that when she found herself an impoverished widow, she turned Magnolia House into a lodging-house and herself into a fairly competent lodging-house-keeper. Within a year she had come to the conclusion that in her line of business it was easier to please young bachelors than old spinsters. She specialised, so to speak, in city clerks, who spoke of her behind her back as "Mother Cutting." She "mothered" all of them.

Jim Ferbane, perhaps, was a favourite, because he was remotely connected with a West Country baronet. Jim had an aquiline nose and thin, sensitive nostrils; he could wear shabby tweeds "with an air." He had a soft, finely-modulated voice.

Elsie and he fell ears over head in love at sight.

Mrs. Cutting, constrained to accept facts however unpalatable, sanctioned the engagement. She could not envisage Jim as a money-maker. Incidentally, one of the lodgers, a clerk with get-rich-quick potentialities, left the house in a huff unable to endure the sight of Jim as his successful rival. Mrs. Cutting commented on this to Elsie.

"You could have had *him*—"

"I know."

"It was your first really good chance."

"I daresay—"

"You prefer to carry on with Mr. Ferbane."

"He is such a dear. Carrying on, you know, is a business expression. It means carrying over. No settling day in sight."

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"I fail to follow you, child."

"I mean, Mother, that Jim can't afford to marry me. But his stock is booming."

"This is the first I've heard of it."

"You can take it from me, dear, that Jim is making good."

Mrs. Cutting shrugged her shoulders. Elsie was a typist and stenographer "on her own." No wise mother argues with these independent creatures, and some of them talk a city patter hard to understand. Elsie, if she chose, could marry Mr. Ferbane and march with him out of her mother's house. That would mean the loss of three lodgers.

Next day, Jim had to be explicit with Elsie's mother, who asked tartly :

"Can you tell me, Mr. Ferbane, of any change in your fortunes which justifies this engagement to my daughter? "

"There has been a change, a slight increase of salary? "

"Permanent? "

"Not exactly."

"Under the circumstances I think I have the right to demand full confidence."

Jim nodded.

"Yes; I understand. But you see what I am planning is in the nature of secret service. My success depends largely upon not letting my left hand know what my right hand does. Still—to you——"

He paused.

"I mind my own business," replied Mrs. Cutting, "but this is my business."

"True enough. Strictly between our two selves (I have not breathed a word to Elsie)—I will tell you, only you, that I have a queer sort of gift for Cross Word Puzzles."

Mrs. Cutting looked astounded. Cross Word Puzzles, from her point of view, afforded entertainment to many persons with time to waste upon such innocent amusements. Both she and Elsie "did" these puzzles. Elsie "competed." Elsie had wasted not only time over them but shillings which she could ill spare. At the same time Elsie had pointed out to her mother that the hunt after the right word enlarged the vocabulary of a typist and stenographer. Certainly it had done nothing else.

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"You have won a big prize?"

Mrs. Cutting spoke incredulously, well aware that if the young man had won anything worth having she would have heard of it.

"Only Elsie. I have a gift, Mrs. Cutting, not for winning these very tricky competitions but for inventing them."

"Inventing them?"

"Yes. Really it's my job to see to it that nobody wins the big prize. The second prize is divided up between a number of competitors who make one or more mistakes. You understand, of course, that space in a big paper is valuable. It must be paid for. Our competitions are a small gold mine to us. I am not at liberty to tell you how many postal orders for a shilling pass under my nose. If I did you would be amazed."

"Really—? Well, I don't understand how you can prevent somebody winning the big prize?"

"Because the odds are tremendously against anybody doing so. I see to that," Mr. Ferbane chuckled humorously, "that is where I come in. My puzzles appear so easy. But there are always at least eight words in each upon which changes can be rung. Do you happen to know how many changes can be rung upon a peal of eight bells?"

"I do not."

"Nor do I. Tens of thousands. If a clever competitor sent in all the possible solutions to one of my puzzles he would bankrupt himself in shillings."

"I'm still in the dark."

"I'll give you one example. In the middle of my last puzzle I had a word of eight letters. My clue was a seaside place in England. Black squares enclosed on three sides the first three letters. The last five letters were M—O—U—T—H. A child could have guessed those. But the first three letters might have been SID—YAR—FAL—WEY—LYN—PLY—and half a dozen more. In the same puzzle were three words of four letters each. Take one—a useful vegetable product, obviously beginning with C—O—R. But the last letter ended in a cul-de-sac. It might be K, or N, or D. Cork, corn and cord are vegetable products. Now ring the changes on all these and where are you, I ask?"

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"I should be in a lunatic asylum," said Mrs. Cutting. "However, you have told me what I wanted to know. You are being well paid for this, but I should imagine that the British Public, however stupid it may be, will get fed up with these puzzles. Then your increased salary will be cut down again."

"I shall think of something else, Mrs. Cutting. Meanwhile, I am putting by for a house and lot. Please remember that our Chief and you are the only persons who know that every week I do a puzzle with a thousand guinea prize tacked on to it. I hand my solution to the Chief, and he locks it up in his safe. Now and again, not too often, it is politic to send in a puzzle that is solved. The happy solver gets his thousand guineas and a lot of publicity."

"How does he get publicity?"

"His name and address are published. Why, if you won one of these big prizes more than a million of our readers would be interested in *you*. Begging letters would reach you by the next post."

"What an advertisement for Magnolia House!"

"You bet. All the same, you were wise to give up competing."

"From what you say I'm beginning to think I wasn't."

"Bless your dear simple heart! Haven't I made it plain that you wouldn't have a dog's chance?"

"One never knows one's luck."

"I know mine when I look at Elsie."

II

JIM bought a modest engagement ring, and the young couple were content with that. Each was saving money against "settling day." Each faced the future confidently, believing that happiness must be earned. We can leave them, for the moment, blissfully unconscious of what the future held in store for them, and return to Mrs. Cutting.

The loss of a well-to-do lodger, who might have been a son-in-law, was borne with equanimity, but, unhappily, the announcement of Elsie's engagement fell with devastating effect upon two other gentlemen who settled their weekly bills with satisfying regularity. They left Magnolia House within three weeks—!

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The General Strike followed. Industrials dependent upon coal "slumped." To the consternation of Mrs. Cutting an expected dividend was "passed." Her lawyer explained to her the vital connection between iron, coal and steel. He made it plain that if she sold her shares she would do so at a loss. When the strike was over, dividends would not be passed—and so forth. . . .

Mrs. Cutting was sorely disconcerted. The strike became an issue personal to her. It became even more so when she found herself "rationed" by her coal merchant. Lodgers demanded plenty of hot water in their baths. She began to miss her country customers, who came up to London for a week's shopping. A restricted train service did not encourage good sensible people to leave home.

In a few weeks tradesmen for whom the passed dividend had been earmarked began to press claims with a smug civility not to be mistaken. Finally, a harassed woman was assailed by insomnia.

Jim Ferbane's bed-sitting-room adjoined her bedroom. Lying awake, tingling with suppressed irritations (for she kept her troubles to herself) Mrs. Cutting could hear the clicking of the young man's typewriter. It clicked intermittently. Trains, rumbling underground, would arouse her from uneasy dozings. Her brain seemed to be more active whenever her body lay still. The spectre, Poverty, gibbered at her, as a bell from a neighbouring church tolled the slowly-passing hours. It was incredible that she should be disturbed by these familiar noises. Still—it was so. In the mornings she fell asleep and awoke weary and intolerably limp.

Eventually, she had to discharge an upper housemaid and quietly took her place. When Elsie—absent every day at the office—discovered this, she protested vehemently, but Mrs. Cutting replied: "I shall not engage the first hussy that presents herself. I am managing very well. A char-woman comes in twice a week to do the heavy cleaning." Elsie said quickly: "But you don't *have* to do this." Whereupon Mrs. Cutting dissembled, and Elsie murmured that evening to Jim: "Mother is taking to pinching in her old age. I believe she likes it."

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III

JIM and Elsie always went off to their work immediately after breakfast, leaving the coast clear for Mrs. Cutting's activities. She "did" three rooms, her own, Elsie's, and Jim's. The under housemaid was busy enough attending to the rest of the house and couldn't endure being "fussed," so wisely her mistress left her alone.

It is possible that Mrs. Cutting liked "doing" Jim's room. She overhauled his wardrobe without arousing his suspicions; she lingered now and again over photographs and books. In some of the books were book-plates, the Ferbane coat of arms. Above the mantelpiece hung a line of tiny portraits in silhouette, black touched up with gold lines. There was a mezzotint of Admiral Ferbane, who fought under Nelson, and two miniatures of Ferbane ladies. All this was grist to a fond mother's mill. Obviously the Ferbane's were of good, sound stock, nothing aristocratically vicious about any of them. Jim's modest possessions revealed him to Mrs. Cutting illuminatingly. She had noticed in the bedrooms of gentlemanlike clerks objects that provoked frowns and sniffs. One audacious youth had removed an ormolu clock that wouldn't go, and placed under a sacrosanct glass shade the soiled satin slipper of some dancer. He boasted that he had drunk champagne out of it—! Jim owned no such questionable trophies.

Mrs. Cutting decided that Elsie was lucky in getting Jim. It was certain that the child would never have any "trouble" with him, nothing which she vaguely designated as "nasty." She decided, too, that he would make good in his profession. He might become editor of the *Banner*, or write a novel, or even a play. But Elsie affirmed that her Jim would not soil his nice clean mind by attempting to write what London playgoers demanded.

"The dear child might have done so much worse," reflected Mrs. Cutting.

Jim's desk was fairly tidy for a literary gentleman. Upon it lay "returned" scripts, the short stories written slowly at night, when the typewriting machine ticked intermittently. Mrs. Cutting knew that he wrote and rewrote his "stuff," and that about one story out of four was

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“accepted.” Jim liked to read these stories aloud to Elsie and her mother. Elsie pronounced them “lovely”. Mrs. Cutting, nourished on the Works of Miss Charlotte Yonge, said kindly that nobody need be ashamed of writing them.

By the desk stood a huge wastepaper-basket.

Mrs. Cutting emptied it, as usual, upon a Thursday morning in September.

At that moment some imp of comedy took possession of a good and God-fearing woman. No other hypothesis can explain adequately what followed. Perhaps she was at a low ebb physically and mentally. She saw a lot of torn paper, covered with pencil scribblings. She remembered that Jim had left Elsie on the previous evening with the remark: “I’ve work to do that must be turned out to-morrow.” She had heard his machine clicking at two in the morning.

Conviction, somehow, settled upon her that she was staring at a scrap-heap which concealed One Thousand Guineas. She recalled the intermittent clicking, which had not lasted long; but long enough, so the imp suggested, to make a fair copy which was now in his Chief’s safe.

Mrs. Cutting’s first thought—so she admitted afterwards—was humorous. Jim, to quote Elsie, took liberties with the leg of his future mother-in-law. He chaffed her slyly; he poked fun at her Victorian ways. The Thousand Guinea Puzzle would appear on Saturday. Readers of the *Banner* were able to devote the whole of Sunday to the task of solving it. Mrs. Cutting’s own lodgers would attempt the impossible task. Indeed, to secure favour with them, an up-to-date popular dictionary had been bought by a thoughtful landlady and placed in the “Lounge.”

What fun it would be, to be sure, to present the confounded Jim with a successful solution! And what “publicity” for her!

Having turned the wastepaper-basket upside down, she reflected that the more finished efforts would be found at the bottom of the heap. Being in no hurry she took her time, making haste methodically, piecing together innumerable sheets of foolscap.

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Doing this, with a pertinacity worthy of a better cause, Jim rose steadily in her estimation as a resourceful personality. Obviously, as a framer of these puzzles, he wished to eliminate the professional solver without discouraging the less literate rank and file.

Finally, alone in her own room with a paste-pot, she put together what seemed to be the real, right thing. Jim, in his enthusiasm, secure, too, in his conviction that a young and silly housemaid would never have the wit to explore his wastepaper-basket, had worked out his final problem in ink. Previous efforts had been made in pencil.

Mrs. Cutting chuckled.

IV

UPON the following Saturday a Win-a-House or a Thousand Guineas problem was presented to a million readers of the *Banner*. No one, it may be presumed, studied the "clues" with greater interest than Mrs. Cutting. Once again, she decided that her future son-in-law was a clever fellow. More, it was humanly certain that the solver of a problem so difficult would secure immeasurable *publicity*.

She could not doubt that she would secure even more publicity when she returned the First Prize to Jim's Chief with an explanatory letter.

She filled in the coupon, observing all the rules imposed, pinned it to a postal order for one shilling, wrote her name and address in block letters upon the back of the envelope, posted the precious missive herself, and awaited, with more chucklings, the publicity that must be hers by right of woman's wit.

Everything turned out, at first, according to plan.

One week later, Mrs. Cutting was announced as the only competitor who had sent in a correct solution; to her, therefore, was awarded the First Prize of a House and Lot in Suburbia, or, if she preferred it, a cheque for One Thousand Guineas.

To make matters easier the imp in possession saw to it that Jim was temporarily out of action. His Chief had despatched him to Glasgow on business connected with a famous trial. Elsie, too, since her engagement, had wasted

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no time over Cross Word Puzzles. And so it came to pass that a lodger in wild excitement spread the good news from basement to garret of Magnolia House.

He happened to see Elsie prinked for Morning Church.

"I say," he gasped. "Do you know that your mother has won the 'Win-a-House Competition'."

"Impossible!"

"Here! Look for yourself."

Elsie looked. Then she sank into a chair. She saw "writing" on the wall of the "Lounge." A message seemed to be traced by the Finger of Providence. Nothing stood between her and "settling day" except the lack of a house and lot.

She was not, as a rule, emotional, but she burst into tears. The lodger exclaimed solemnly:

"This is perfectly splendid, Miss Cutting. I mean it's so exactly right for you and Ferbane, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's really too good to be true," sobbed the happy Elsie.

"But it is true. There can be no doubt whatever about it. Surely your mother has seen the paper?"

Dabbing at her eyes, Elsie considered this. Likely as not her mother had not seen the paper. Perhaps she was so inured to disappointments that she had not taken the trouble to look at it.

"Let's tell her. Do you mind my coming? I saw the wonderful news first."

Elsie raised no objections. Mrs. Cutting was found on a landing upstairs, also prinked for Divine Service and carrying an ivory prayer book that had belonged to her mother.

To Elsie's amazement she betrayed no excitement. She had seen the paper, but she kept this to herself. She said calmly:

"We shall be late for church, child."

"Heavens! I can't go to church. Can you?"

"Church," replied Mrs. Cutting austerely, "would seem to be indicated as the fitting place in which to offer up our thanksgivings."

"That had not occurred to me," said the lodger.

"Do you realise, Mother, what all this means?"

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"Better than you do, my dear. Are you coming with me?"

"No, I'm not. I've been crying, and I look a sight. Besides, I couldn't pay attention to the Service. You're a wonder, Mother; you are indeed. I wish I were like you, but I'm not. Houses and Lots don't drop out of my skies every day."

Mrs. Cutting went to church.

During a dull sermon she had leisure to reflect upon the horrible disappointment that she had imposed—thoughtlessly, it is true—upon a good daughter. Jim's absence had, as he would have put it, "queered her pitch." She had intended to tell Jim the truth on the Saturday night. The more she considered the matter, the more difficult it became to tell Elsie till Jim returned on the following Tuesday. Wisely, or unwisely, she decided to mark time. However, a word of warning would not be amiss. Accordingly, just before luncheon, when her astounding good luck would provoke general congratulation, she spoke that warning word.

"We mustn't count our chickens till they are hatched. There may have been a mistake. There may be other claims."

"Oh, no. It is such a coincidence that you should win this big prize offered by Jim's paper. I have been thanking God, Mother, that Jim has nothing to do with these Puzzles, because if he had he would be accused of giving away the solution."

"I never thought of that," said Mrs. Cutting uneasily.

Publicity overwhelmed her on Monday morning. A reporter, from the *Banner*, called at Magnolia House. A paragraph appeared in an evening paper. Before nightfall several persons eagerly demanded board and lodging. Two begging letters came by the last post.

So far, so good; Mrs. Cutting's desire for publicity had been abundantly gratified. Indeed she looked and felt like a prizewinner. But Elsie was sorely puzzled, because her mother, as a rule practical in all things, had not made up her mind whether she would accept the title deeds of the house and lot or a cheque for a thousand guineas. To add

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to her bewilderment Mrs. Cutting expressed no wish to see the house and lot, saying blandly :

"Let us wait till Jim returns."

Now foresight is proverbially better than hindsight. It did occur to Mrs. Cutting after Jim came back from Glasgow on Tuesday afternoon that she ought to have insisted on seeing Jim's Chief, and, taking him into full confidence, might have secured his confidence and, up to a point, his co-operation.

Jim burst into her sitting-room before Elsie returned from her work. And what a Jim—! He looked, travel-stained, haggard, and white to the gills.

"I have lost my job," he said excitedly.

Even then it didn't occur to Mrs. Cutting that too often the innocent have to expiate the sins of the guilty.

"I am sacked," continued Mr. Ferbane. "I am utterly discredited. I leave my Chief's service without a thread of character."

"Won't you sit down and explain?"

Jim glared at her.

"I suppose you are aware, because you must have read it on the printed page, that no member on the staff of the *Banner* is allowed to compete for our prizes. My Chief did not know that I boarded with you, but somebody put him wise to that. As soon as I reached Fleet Street he sent for me. He accuses me, ME, of having betrayed his trust—and so I have. I'm not a fool. I know that somehow, somewhere, you got at my private papers, scraps that I should have burned, and pieced them together. It's useless to deny it. This particular problem was insoluble. The man who won the second prize had three mistakes. Three more competitors had four. Seventy thousand competed. Pray don't interrupt me. You have won this prize. My Chief can't prove that you haven't won it fairly. And besides, it isn't his policy to repudiate payment. Now, I want to ask you one question before I leave your house—*Is Elsie in this?*"

Mrs. Cutting replied with dignity :

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself to ask such a question. I—I—" her voice faltered, "wanted to play a little joke on you. I'm afraid it has fallen rather flat."

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"You call this a joke?"

"It was intended as such. You, and Elsie, have accused me of having no sense of humour. In a gentlemanly way, I admit, you have ridiculed my old-fashioned ways. I wanted to get even with you, to enjoy a laugh at your expense. I have not the slightest intention of accepting this prize."

Jim was too dazed to say anything.

"I will own up to this and no more," continued Mrs. Cutting. "I did hanker after a little publicity—and I have got it. Now, perhaps you will be good enough to call a taxi, and we will go together to your Chief."

Jim sat down and began to fill his pipe.

"I know my Chief and you don't. He may be very rude to you; he won't accept your story. When I swore by all the gods that I was innocent he smiled at me pityingly and told me that I was too innocent to serve him."

"Oh, dear," sighed Mrs. Cutting.

"Thanks to you I am not likely to be serving anybody else. I must break off my engagement with Elsie simply because I have no prospects whatever to offer her."

At this moment Elsie appeared.

Within five minutes she was in possession of the facts, and aflame with indignation because it leaked out that her lover had asked if she were "in this." She eyed Jim disdainfully:

"You ought to have guessed that it was a joke. To accuse my mother and then—*me*. Do we look criminals? Do we?"

Somehow Jim felt that the ladies had turned the tables on him, a disconcerting experience for any man. He stammered out:

"I don't think you've quite got it. I—I've lost my job. A joke is no joke when it inflicts serious injury upon another person."

"Tupper!" exclaimed Elsie. "Please don't inflict moth-eaten tags on me. It's easy enough for a man to get a job, or a girl, but it's not so easy to keep either of them. I am intensely humiliated. Why did you surrender? I believe an action could be brought for defamation of character. You have behaved like a worm."

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"Possibly. Let me tell you that subordinates in newspaper offices are worms. I feel like a worm at this moment. All I can do is to wriggle out of this room."

He went out, carrying his head at an angle not affected by worms. Elsie turned upon her mother.

"Now that we are alone, I must say that your idea of a joke is not mine. I suppose even a joke, good or bad, must be judged by its results. Jim has lost his job; I have lost Jim; but you are left with the House and Lot."

"Oh, dear," wailed Mrs. Cutting.

"*And your publicity.* I forgot that. Yes, Mother, you come out of this rather well, but I'd take the thousand guineas if I were you."

Overcome by her emotions Miss Cutting rushed out. The door slammed behind her.

"Cross Words," murmured Mrs. Cutting.

V

THE Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Banner* happened to dine that evening at his club, the Gridiron, and he dined well. After dinner he exchanged a few words with a fellow member who was a Cabinet Minister, kind words, which gladdened two stout hearts. Accordingly, the Great Man returned to Fleet Street on excellent terms with himself, his paper, and all the world.

As soon as he was seated at his vast desk, an acolyte informed the high priest that a lady of the name of Cutting desired to see him for five minutes on a matter of urgent private importance.

"Cutting? Cutting? The name seems oddly familiar, but it conveys absolutely nothing to me beyond its obvious association with some press-clipping agency."

"Mrs. Cutting, sir, has just won our 'Win-a-House' Cross Word Competition."

"So she did, or didn't." He scowled at his acolyte. "I can't see Mrs. Cutting. You may tell her with or without my compliments that I have business of urgent public importance to attend to."

"Very good, sir."

Left alone, the Great Man lit a fresh cigar, still scowling, unable to purge his mind of a very regrettable incident

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which he had cast as rubbish to the void that afternoon. In less than a minute the acolyte came back.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but Miss Cutting——"

"Miss Cutting——?"

"A young lady, sir."

"Well——?"

"She will wait till you have leisure to receive her."

"Tchah! Tell her to go to—— No, stay! What is she like? A powdered lip-sticked minx?"

"Far from it, sir. She looks a most capable young person."

"Show her in."

Elsie entered demurely, bright-eyed, alert to her fingertips, but not defiant. She wore a trim blue serge suit and a becoming "cloche" hat. She was well-shod and well-gloved.

"Sit down," commanded the Autocrat, indicating a not too comfortable chair near his desk. Importunate visitors never lingered long in it. "I can guess why you have come here."

"Do you know, sir, that I am, or rather I was, engaged to be married to Mr. Ferbane?"

"Um! I didn't know that. Go on."

"You discharged him this afternoon, because you thought he was an unscrupulous rascal."

"Either that or a negligent fool. I have no use for either."

"Nor have I."

Shrewd eyes twinkled at her.

"So that is why you are no longer engaged to James Ferbane?"

"It is the other way about. You lost Mr. Ferbane because you thought him a knave, and I've lost him because I thought him a fool. He happens to be neither."

"Really? I hardly know you well enough, Miss Cutting, to accept unhesitatingly your word for that."

"Perhaps not, but you know *him*. Has he ever let you down before?"

"Men in my service are not given the opportunity of letting me down twice."

"You don't look a hard man," said Elsie thoughtfully.

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"No flowers, Miss Cutting."

"You guessed right about one thing," continued Elsie. "The prize was not won honestly. The solution, torn up, was found by my mother in Mr. Ferbane's wastepaper basket. The final rough copy was in ink. So my mother, out of a pile of scraps had little difficulty in piecing it together. Then she was tempted——"

"This is a painful story for you."

"Not at all. Why do you publish Cross Word Puzzles?"

"To increase the circulation of the paper."

"Incidentally, too, you must be snowed in with postal orders."

The Great Man smiled. He was beginning to be interested in the story and the story-teller.

"You want what every editor wants—publicity. My mother, who keeps a lodging-house, hankered after the same thing. Well, she has achieved her ends as you have achieved yours. To-day, we have no apartments to let, except Mr. Ferbane's bed-sitting-room. Mother never intended to keep the prize. She would have told Mr. Ferbane on the morning when the result was published, but you had sent him to Scotland. She ought, of course, to have taken you into her confidence, but unfortunately, she had not seen you. If you saw her, you would know at a glance, being the man you are, that she is incapable of being the woman you think her to be."

"Um! After meeting you, I should like to meet your mother. You say she refuses to accept this big prize?"

"That goes without saying."

"Perhaps when you say so it does. But I am placed in rather an awkward position. The prize has been awarded, and my decision is final. As there was no correct solution sent in, except your mother's, the second prize will be given to the person who is entitled to it. Nobody, therefore, will be wronged, if matters are left where they are. If I take back this First Prize my books will show a thousand guineas in excess of my balance. Many persons have access to my books, including my auditors. The story would have to come out sooner or later."

Elsie smiled, displaying an ingratiating row of teeth.

"That would mean more publicity for you and mother."

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The Autocrat laughed. Elsie laughed with him, because she knew that the situation was saved. At this moment the acolyte appeared with a formidable pile of "proof" which he placed at his Chief's side and then withdrew. As the door closed behind him, Elsie jumped up.

"Sit down, Miss Cutting. That entrance and exit were stage-managed. I have to get rid of bores discreetly. You are not a bore. But, very regretfully, I must ask you to leave me after I have delivered my—my ultimatum."

"Certainly."

"You have paid me one or two little compliments which I appreciate. I pay you the compliment of believing your story——"

"Thank you, sir."

"But I decline to publish it, and I decline, again regretfully, to give your mother further publicity. In my considered opinion she has earned the First Prize. If she hasn't, you have. I repeat, my decision in this matter is final. You can tell your mother from me that if her conscience forbids her accepting a House and Lot, she can pass both on to you and James Ferbane. You can tell him also from me that he is reinstated."

"But, at the moment, we are not on speaking terms."

"I understand—cross words! They must not be taken too seriously, except by readers of the *Banner*. Good night."

As he rose, he held out his hand. Elsie gripped it in fervent gratitude. Then she hurried to the door.

"Wait——!"

Elsie turned to behold the Great Man standing erect by his chair. Expressively he raised a finger to his lips; he whispered dramatically:

"Mum."

"I have not called her that for years," said Elsie, "but I shall do so to-night."

THE CLADDAGH RING

I

WHO was she?

Her body was found a mile below Halton-on-Thames upon a bar of gravel which stretches nearly across the big bend of the river. A local angler discovered it before breakfast. Before tea-time all the gossips in the town were wagging their tongues.

Was it a case of murder or suicide?

Apart from the articles of clothing, the "clue" that might lead to swift identification was a Claddagh ring, much worn—two hands grasping a heart with an almost obliterated crown—found suspended by a silken string beneath the girl's shift. Such rings were once common enough in Ireland and Brittany; and they were used as engagement rings by the peasantry of the two Celtic countries.

An evening paper gave two columns of speculation (admittedly mere conjecture) to what had become the talk of a small town. No young girl was missing; nobody—so far as could be ascertained—had seen any young woman wearing a navy-blue "costume" with a red *cloche* hat. It was surmised that she might belong to either the lower or upper middle class, possibly a clerk or a typist, inasmuch as her hands, pretty hands, were not the hands of a servant or of one accustomed to hard, manual work.

Next day it became known that there were scalp wounds which might—so the examining doctor said—have been inflicted just before or just after death. If the girl had flung herself into the river, a swift current might have dashed her against the stone piers of Halton Bridge. The "post mortem" afforded negative evidence; she had not suffered violence other than the scalp wounds, she was not ill-nourished; there was no reason to suppose that she was in destitute circumstances. The coroner pointed out to the

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jury the significant fact that there were no identification marks on the clothing or linen. Had these been removed purposely? On the other hand, she might well be a seamstress who had made her own clothes. No money and no trinkets were found on her person. If she were carrying a "vanity" bag it had probably sunk to the bed of the river.

The injuries to the head and face made ordinary identification difficult. The jury were unable to agree upon a verdict; at the request of the police, further proceedings were stayed, pending developments which publicity might bring about.

The body had been in the water some three or four days. The actual cause of death as shown by the condition of the lungs was drowning, but the scalp wounds might have been inflicted before the body was flung into the river, whilst the girl was still alive.

II

WITHIN forty-eight hours the facts, such as they were, had become the common property of the nation. It is not generally known that a number of persons disappear annually, and that no trace of them is found. This particular case, for instance, brought to the public the knowledge that no less than four girls were missing who might be wearing navy-blue costumes and red *cloche* hats. None of them, however, was known to be in possession of a Claddagh ring.

In her bedroom, Marjory Dingle read the *Daily Banner* and shivered with apprehension, because she, *and she alone*, could make a guess at what had happened. Her mother, an Irishwoman, had owned a Claddagh ring. And, oddly enough, her mother to the day of her death had believed that the ring was unlucky. She had kept it locked up in a desk and refused to talk about it. At the mother's death, the ring, with a few other trifles, passed into the possession of Marjory. She was tempted to wear it, but found it too big. So she left it in the desk. About a year later she used the ring to test the so-called telepathic powers of a travelling couple who filled a booth at a local fair. Marjory had heard from a friend amazing tales:

"The woman, who wears black velvet, is blindfolded. Then her husband collects objects. He says: 'What have

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I here ? ' and she answers back, quick as quick, ' You have a brooch with an amethyst, one little pearl is missing, and one pearl is injured.' And she is right every time. You come with me to-night and see."

" Just a clever trick," declared Marjory.

Without saying a word to her friend, she slipped the ring into her purse and took it to the crowded booth. In silence she handed it to the man.

" What have I here ? " he asked.

The woman, standing on a small stage some yards away, hesitated.

" What have I here ? " he repeated.

" An old ring—two hands hold a heart. I see, very dimly, a crown. I have never seen a ring like this before. It—it isn't a happy ring."

That was all—and quite enough, too, as Marjory remarked to her friend, who enjoyed a small triumph. That night Marjory locked up the ring in her desk and forgot all about it till she became engaged to be married to James Purmain, a bagman. James was a well-set-up young fellow, with good prospects. He bought a pretty ring for Marjory, and in a moment of impulse she showed her Claddagh ring to her lover, who forthwith slipped it on his little finger, which it fitted perfectly. James, too, recognised it as a Claddagh ring, having seen its like in a shop in Grafton Street, Dublin.

" It's a lucky ring," he said.

" Mother didn't think so."

" Oh, what did she say about it ? "

" Nothing. It belonged to her mother."

" These rings are curios—worth money. Shall I sell it for you ? "

" I don't like to sell it. Fits you well, Jim."

" Let me wear it."

Eventually she gave it to him. Nothing could shake her conviction that the ring broke their engagement. After what she described as " an awful tiff and turn " she tore off her engagement ring and threw it at him. He picked it up and put it into his pocket. White with rage, he walked out of the room. He was too agitated to think of the Claddagh ring ; but, writing next day from a town many miles away,

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he offered to send it—or bring it back to her, a hint of reconciliation. Marjory replied :

“ I never want to see that ring again—or you.”

III

MARJORY stared at a picture of the Claddagh ring, published in the *Daily Banner*. Such rings, no doubt, have a strong family resemblance, but Marjory believed that she recognised hers. She read, for the fourth time, a sentence printed beneath the illustration :

“ This old ring, much worn, is for the moment the only clue in the possession of the police. Any reader of these lines who can furnish information concerning this ring should communicate at once with the Superintendent of Police, Halton-on-Thames, Surrey. . . .”

Presently Marjory opened the desk that had held her ring for many years and took from it a photograph of Mr. James Purmain. It is significant, perhaps, that she had not returned that. James, she decided (too hastily perhaps), had a frank, open countenance. It was impossible to think of him as a criminal deliberately compassing the death of a fellow-creature. And yet—James had a quick temper. They had parted in hot anger. He had cooled off in twenty-four hours ; she hadn't. They had quarrelled about another man.

Ought she to communicate with the police ?

She kept on repeating : “ Mother said it was an unlucky ring.” The lady in black velvet had said the same.

An overwhelming impulse seized her to seek out James. Marjory was living in Hammersmith with her aunt, her father's sister, who had offered her a home after her mother's death. Out of her salary as a saleswoman in a Kensington emporium, she paid for her board and lodging, and supposed herself to be independent. At the emporium a gentleman in a frock coat, the head of her department, could, if he would, give her news of James. She began to rehearse the scene : She saw herself humbly approaching the great man : “ I beg your pardon, sir—please excuse me—but is Mr. James Purmain in or near London ? ” No, no—too abrupt. Authority might reply : “ Why do you

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ask me?" Then she would stammer and be confused, provoking questions difficult to answer truthfully. If she addressed a letter to James, care of the great firm for which she worked, it would be forwarded. . . . The Managing Director had dealings with James. . . .

James might not answer her letter. If he did, he would jump to the conclusion that she was whistling him back, and she would sooner perish at the stake than have him think *that* of her . . . !

Not altogether without the assistance of the expert who had written the article on the Halton Mystery in the *Daily Banner*, Marjory attempted to reconstruct the crime. The expert held that murder had been committed. When James had picked up her engagement ring she had detected a murderous gleam in his eye, not altogether displeasing. He *must* care for her, otherwise he would not have been so furious. If he hadn't cared, he would have passed the remark: "Thank you, Miss Dingle; all said and done, I call it a good riddance." That was what a perfect gentleman would say to a young lady whom he regarded as a nuisance. Deep down in the depths of her heart festered the awful thought that she had been something of a nuisance to James.

Marjory seemed to *know* what had happened; another case of the preconceived idea. She was innocently unaware that, quite apart from the *expertise* of the newspaper correspondents, she was calling upon powers of imagination stimulated by a long course of reading "thrillers"; and, when perusing (her word) tales of crime and mystery, she had never permitted her critical faculty (if she had any) to interfere with her enjoyment and appreciation of the "story." Things happened, so she believed, because they "had" to happen. A writer must know far better than she did what he was writing about. . . .

In this humble spirit she embarked upon a troubled sea of speculation. Her Claddagh ring held her in a ring fence. The ring, hateful object, had caused this sad "mishap." Thanks to our reporters of current crime, thanks, too, to what may be termed the *capitalisation* of romance, Marjory, in common with about a million young women in this dis-united kingdom, confounded violence with passion. Passion

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in a sort of way excused violence. James was a red-blooded man. . . . James, poor fellow, could go "crazy mad" with jealousy. . . . Then, in the heat of the moment, he might "do in"—anybody.

Girls, of course, were mostly fools in their dealings with gentlemen friends; they couldn't help being "flirty"; they wanted to make sure that they were loved—passionately. Again, if a girl, with a reputation to lose, strayed *one* inch from the path of propriety, a too-ardent lover might demand—a yard. Marjory had kept James in proper order. Still—there had been moments, delightful moments, when he really ought to have guessed that she loved him passionately. But afterwards, reacting to her own emotions, she had been cold; and then he had "picked" at her, accusing her of being lukewarm, capricious and heartless. It had not been easy to "manage" James. . . .

She beheld James turning from her to another girl in a navy-blue costume and a red *cloche* hat. James liked young ladies to be "posh." He expected them to "doll themselves up" for him. He was quite cross with Marjory if she appeared with a ladder in her stockings or wearing soiled gloves. Anything of that sort provoked at once a tiff and turn. . . . She beheld him "taking" Miss X on the river or walking with her on the towpath in the still summer evenings. He just loved that. They would travel down to Halton together, one out of a hundred similar pairs, and have a "lovely" time. But Miss X, like herself, would suffer from a commercial traveller's intermittencies of attention. When James happened to be in the Midlands, Miss X would feel lonely, "at a loose end," nowhere to go, nothing to do, *bored*—! It was likely that Miss X had "carried on" with somebody else. Girls were such "sillies" about that. Somehow, if one had saved up to buy a new hat, which went out of vogue before you knew where you were, it was really a wicked waste of money if it hung upon a peg behind the door; and if a nice young fellow offered to take you to the "pictures" or a dance, and if that cost you nothing except a peck on the cheek at parting and gurgled thanks, why—what about it? *Cheerio!* Roll on next Saturday night!

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Sooner or later the inevitable row had followed—reconciliation on both sides—and violence. All seemed crystal-clear to Marjory, whose large heart held pity for man and girl. It might—it might have happened to her, if the falling out with James had taken place upon a towpath, instead of in her aunt's sitting-room. . . .

James had given Miss X the Claddagh ring; probably she had asked for it. James was too much of a gentleman to give another girl "her" engagement ring—a solacing thought! Likely as not there had been a bit of a struggle. Miss X might have smacked his face under great provocation, or hit him with her umbrella. . . . A push, a scream, and the girl was in the river—! *James couldn't swim.* But he could run like a hare to catch a train. . . . When the red *cloche* hat sank for the third time—it always sank at the third time—James had "legged it" for the station. . . .

Marjory went to bed with these speculations (and many more) simmering in her active mind. She remained awake, in torment, till about two. Then she fell into troubled sleep and even more troubled dreams. The dreadful scene upon the towpath was replayed vividly between James and herself; she found herself in the river, struggling desperately, sinking, gasping for breath. She awoke, half-strangled, singularly alert, recalling everything. Her first reflection was "Gracious! I'd sooner it was her than me." Her second thought established itself securely: "I don't blame Jim—he was crazy mad with jealousy."

IV

At breakfast, an informal meal, Marjory (outwardly cool and collected) read the *Daily Banner*. No news. No developments. If the police—both the police!—had unearthed any incriminating evidence, it was not to be used as a "hand-out" for the gentlemen of the Press. A distinguished criminologist gave his views of the "mystery," and, incidentally, indicted scathingly the "pictures" and sensational literature, which he held to be largely responsible for these murders of young women. He had a word to say about "sex," which brought a blush to Marjory's cheeks. Her mental comment on the article was: "Blood-thirsty beast! Probably a hateful old man!" To her good

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aunt she said nothing. Providentially the aunt had never known of the Claddagh ring. That alone, an amazing bit of luck (perhaps it wasn't luck), furnished another thrill. Marjory asked herself why she, like her mother, had regarded the ring as a secret possession? Simply because it was so ordained by an inscrutable Providence. . . .

Presently, the good aunt, fussing about the kitchen and seeing her niece absorbed in the newspaper, said:

"Have they got the murderer, Margy?"

"No, Auntie."

"If they do get him he'll hang for this—and serve him right!"

"Oh-h!"

"But before I strung him up I'd give him a dose of the cat."

"Auntie—!"

"That's how I feel about it, my girl."

Marjory respected her aunt as a sensible, God-fearing woman. If she felt that way, Jim was doomed.

"Young women," continued the aunt austerely, "ought to be more careful about the young men with whom they keep company. They ain't. That's that. A lot of men are just wild beasts on the p-prowl. Settin' of caps to catch 'em was bad enough in my time, but this settin' of knee-caps fair furs my old stomach."

"I never wear these short skirts."

"I wasn't thinking of you. All the same——"

"Yes?"

"S'pose it had been you—man-handled and dumped into the river—! Wouldn't I want to play hangman?"

"There may have been—provocation."

"On both sides, I make no doubt. Well, it's sure as sure that this queer ring they talk about will put a rope round the murderer's neck. Bless me, you've gone the colour of skilly! Finish your breakfast, and hop off."

Marjory did so.

V

SHE reached the emporium ten minutes ahead of time—according to plan. Her mind was made up. She must get in touch with James. Whatever happened, he must know

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that she would never help to place a rope round his neck—a rope where her fond arms had been. . . ! She had dismissed, as inexpedient, her first idea of speaking to the head of her department, who was something of a “nosey-parker,” anyway. No, she would march straight to headquarters, to the chief cashier’s office, carrying a high head.

There a surprise awaited her. A young lady, who looked like a real lady, treated her courteously.

“Mr. James Purmain—yes. He travels for Bunting and Boscombe. Oddly enough, we expect him here to-day.”

Marjory gasped. Expectations, she swiftly reflected, were not always realised.

“Reely; I—I didn’t know that Mr. Purmain was in Town.”

“A note or a message can be delivered on arrival.”

“Thank you ever so much. I’ll scribble a note, if I may.”

The note ran as follows :

Miss M. Dingle would like to see Mr. Purmain, for a few minutes only, on a *business* matter. At closing time. Miss D. will be under the third lamp-post to the left of the side-door of the Emporium.

P.S.—I hope you will not fail to be there.

Three times that same morning Miss Dingle was rebuked for inattention to customers, whom she served automatically. One, an opulent lady, spoke of the Halton Mystery. According to her—and authority informed her tones—Miss X had been identified. Marjory would have swooned had she lived in early Victorian days. Instead, she exhibited a fur mantle, priced at one-hundred-and-ten guineas, so inartistically that a potential sale was wrecked. Later on a fellow-assistant said sympathetically : “You look as if you was sickening for something, Miss Dingle.” To this Marjory replied tartly : “Looks are deceiving, which you may have heard before.”

During the lunch hour, the first editions of the evening papers confirmed what the customer had said. Miss X had been identified by grief-stricken parents. The young lady, apparently, had left home to visit friends in the country. She was a respectable girl and (one up for the coroner !) a dressmaker. She had left her home in Clapham in high

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spirits, looking forward to her annual holiday. Her parents had never seen or heard of the Claddagh ring. Their daughter had several gentleman friends, but she was not engaged to any of them. She had not gone to her friends in the country. A suit-case, with her name on the label, was found at Waterloo Station.

A "leaderette" in one paper may be quoted in full :

"The Halton-on-Thames mystery is being cleared up. There can be little doubt that the unfortunate Miss Ethel Marley was done to death by some man whom she met secretly. She, and many other young women, will not have died altogether in vain if they serve as a solemn and awful warning to the innumerable girls, not unhappily confined to any one class, who carry on clandestine affairs in a spirit of adventure, which too often, as in this case, end in grievous misadventure."

One up for Auntie !

Marjory never knew how she got through that abominable afternoon. It did occur to her that Mr. Purmain might be feeling even more dazed than she was. Would he attempt to escape ? Could he—if he tried ? The young ladies in the "Furs and Mantles" chattered unceasingly of the murder with a lively personal apprehension that "it" might have happened to one of them. All agreed that hanging was too easy a death for Miss Marley's "gentleman" friend. Unquestionably he *couldn't* have been a gentleman !

At closing time, Miss Dingle was once more rebuked for negligence and inattention to duty. This, however, had a tonic effect, bracing enfeebled tissues of mind and body for the overwhelming meeting with James. But—would he wait for her if she were late ?

VI

SHE saw him before he saw her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Purmain."

"Good afternoon, Miss Dingle. May I suggest that we talk business in Kensington Gardens ?"

"P-please," faltered Marjory.

In silence they walked side by side to the Gardens.

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Glancing at her companion out of the corner of her eye, Marjory decided that James had a "hunted" look. Certainly he was thinner and paler; the expression upon his face was hard. . . .

A July sun was still high in the heavens as they skirted the Round Pond, seeking some unoccupied bench under the trees. Children were sailing toy ships upon the pond. . . .

"This will do, Miss Dingle."

"Yes, Mr. Purmain."

They sat down. What James thought is of little consequence; Marjory was incapable of sustained thought. One insistent question bobbed about in her mind, like a corpse at the end of a rope.

"Where is that ring I gave you?" she asked.

James laughed harshly.

"Changed your mind, eh? Want it back, what?"

"N-n-no—n-not at all. I—I w-want to see it."

"Why?"

Marjory, on the edge of tears, began to tremble. James, not unobservant, saw that she was profoundly moved. Her pretty little face was piteous, because from her large experience of "thrillers" she had made certain that Mr. Purmain (already in the dock) was "fencing" with prosecuting counsel.

"If you let me see it," she panted, "I'll just take one good look at it and—and buzz off."

"Queer, I must say. You want to see a ring which you told me you never wanted to see again."

"Ye-es."

"And if you can't see it, what next?"

Words, grim, terrible words, flashed into Marjory's mind: "We find the prisoner guilty, my lord." With a desperate effort she pulled herself together, for she made sure that she was about to faint. James said in a kinder voice:

"What is the matter with you?"

"I'm not thinking of myself at all. I'm—I'm thinking of you. I—I want to help *you*—I—I swear I do!"

"Help *me*?"

She nodded, writhing in anguish. Rehearsed lines forsook her, as she burst out vehemently:

"I only want to tell you that I would never communicate

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with the police—not if it were so. That's all. Now—I'll go. Good-bye."

"Sit down," replied James, in an odd voice. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but are you mixing me up with this Halton-on-Thames affair? Murder cases ain't to my taste, Miss Dingle; give 'em the go-by. But I do remember now something or other about a Claddagh ring. They're not so uncommon as you seem to think. Give you my word, I do, that till this moment it never entered my head that you, you could link up your ring with the ring found on that girl."

"The photograph was exactly like it."

"Sure of that?"

"Quite."

James pulled his glove off his right hand. Upon his little finger Marjory saw, with joy inexpressible, a Claddagh ring.

"Jim—!"

"Wait! Look at it."

"Heavens! It isn't my ring."

Well might she apostrophise heavens that had fallen upon a defenceless head.

"No; it isn't. I swapped your ring for this. Why? Because you were right about its being unlucky. Sit tight, Marjory. Let me get my bearings. Let's have this out. We must go bang to the outside edge of things. Honest, dear, did you think that I'd done in this Miss What's-her-name?"

"Miss Ethel Marley—yes."

"Bless you!"

"What—!"

"I say—bless you! If you aren't the sweetest thing that ever lived. You got it somehow into your dear head that I'd committed an awful murder—Gosh! Do you know that a big reward is offered for information that may lead to the apprehension of the murderer?"

"I didn't think of that, Jim."

"Bless you again! My stars! So your one and only brain-wave was to save me—if you could?"

"I—I knew, of course, that the man must have acted under—provocation."

"What a big word for such a small mouth. Marjory—"

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darling lamb—there's no two-two's about it. You love your old Jim, don't you ? ”

“ P'raps I do. Jim, why aren't you ready to kill me 'cos I thought such wicked thoughts of you ? ”

“ I'm ready to hug you to death, but we met to talk business, and business it is, very ugly business, unless you've made a big mistake. We may earn this reward——”

“ Jim—— ! ”

“ Marjory, I got to hate that ring as you did, as your mother did. I got to think that it had come between us. What did we quarrel about ? Nothing.”

“ He was nothing and Mister Nobody — to me.”

“ Why didn't I know that ? I acted like a jealous fool and scared you out of your wits.”

“ That's true as true. I thought you were going to do me in ; yes, I did.”

“ You poor little dear ! ”

“ Well—no complaints about that. It just told me you cared. Jim, I was never quite sure that you did care till then——”

“ If you girls don't beat the band — ! Feeling that way, why didn't you make it up next day ? ”

“ I'm an obstinate fool, always was. Obstinate and conceited—and proud. I couldn't bring myself to apologise first.”

“ Wipe all that out ; scrap it ! We begin again, don't we ? ”

“ If you say so, Jimmie, why, of course we do.”

“ Then let's get down to brass tacks. Business first and pleasure afterwards in a less crowded spot than this. What price a first-class railway carriage ? ”

“ What can you mean ? ”

Mr. Purmain glanced at his wrist-watch.

“ I mean that you and I are going to communicate with the police at once, without losing a minute. We'll nip down to Halton. If you identify the ring as yours, I shall have something of interest to say about the man with whom I swapped it for this, a fellow in my line of business—and a dirty dog, too, if faces mean anything. Now—get a move on.”

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VII

WHAT followed is part of the criminal history of England. Marjory identified the Claddagh ring as hers. The information given by James led to the apprehension of the murderer, who was hanged most deservedly. It will be recalled that before he went to the gallows, he made full confession, and that confession may or may not have served as a warning to other young women. Ethel Marley had taken with her, on her holiday, her little savings. Part of those savings had been spent upon the red *cloche* hat; she had secretly engaged herself to a glib, plausible scoundrel already married. He slipped up, as most of them do, upon a tiny bit of peel; some weeks before her tragic end, her lover had given to her the ring which she wore upon a piece of silk round her neck. He forgot this scrap of incriminating evidence. She had met him, to pass a few hours with him, before going on to her friends. To the relief of the girl's parents, her reputation was cleared, inasmuch as the man confessed that she refused to have anything more to do with him as soon as she discovered that he was married. There had been a struggle and the man, realising that he had inflicted lethal injuries, flung the dying woman into the river. . . . He admitted that he had robbed her of her savings. . . .

A brief conversation between Marjory and James was not reported. Marjory had expressed a wish that the death penalty would be commuted.

"I believe," she affirmed solemnly, "that the ring made him see red, as you did."

"I did see red for one second."

"So did I. I'd have flung a hatchet at you, Jim, instead of the ring, if—if that had been in my hand."

"I'd half a notion to wring your neck."

"Whatever made you think of exchanging it?"

"Ah! That makes a fellow sit up and think. I went on wearing the ring, and every time I looked at it I—I just hated it. Then I met this fellow. We were travelling down to Birmingham together. I didn't like his looks, but he noticed the ring and spoke first. He said that Claddagh rings were lucky. He travelled for a cheap jewellery firm. Out of a case he fished his ring, and he told me that it was

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a reproduction, not the genuine article. He had about a dozen of 'em. Then and there I offered to swap, even up. He said: 'Done!' I slipped on his ring, mighty pleased. From that moment, explain it how you please, I stopped having hateful thoughts of you."

"You'll go on wearing it, won't you?"

"You bet! Come to think of it, this is on all fours with that mummy case at the British Museum. The mummy that was burnt caused two deaths; the mummy case broke the leg of the man who helped carry it into the Museum."

"Jim——!"

"There it is. Take it or leave it. Some things seem to be cursed. I shall wear this ring, because your two hands have my heart, Margy, for keeps; and the crown above does, somehow, stand for the—reward."

"Yes."

"I wonder what the police will do with the ring?"

"So do I."

• • • •

What the police did with it is known. It may be seen by the curious at Scotland Yard, in what to criminologists is the most interesting museum in the kingdom.

THE SOUL OF THE GUITAR

CHAPTER I

PETER PARVIN was approaching the dangerous age. He had asked himself the question: "Is my innings nearly over?" Charming women, of course, replied: "Certainly not," but that uncompromising old friend, his shaving-glass, whispered: "Nearly."

Another tag occurred to Peter: "A man is as old as he feels." In his less robust moments Peter felt "fed up" with life as he had lived it, a slave not only to duties which he performed perfunctorily, but to such elegant accomplishments as croquet, chess, and the solving of acrostics. He functioned in a groove. He hated to get out of it. Discomfort in any form, terrified him.

And yet—there were intermittencies when Peter felt as young as Peter Pan, enterprising as Aladdin with the magical carpet beneath his feet. Certain writers could whirl him anywhere and everywhere, quickening sluggish pulses, banishing stiffness of mind and body. Borne upon the aeroplane of fancy, Peter outstripped even Dumas in pace. Then, as he turned the last page, he would murmur to himself: "Why haven't I done these things? I might have been such a devil of a fellow."

At his club fellow-members spoke of Peter as a queer fish, but he was not the less liked on that account. His father had been a "squarson"—half-squire, half-parson. Peter would say: "You see, I preach what my father did not practise; and I practise what he did not preach." When ladies entreated him to be more lucid, he became interjectional: "Civil war—active mind in indolent body—sense at cross purposes with sensibility—look at high road, walk the low—bundle of contradictions—!"

"But you don't preach, Peter; that is why we love you."

"I preach to myself, a negligible congregation."

Nobody denied that he was a man of facets, clean-cut

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and polished, an agreeable oddity. A score of women had tried to beguile him into marriage. How such a man escaped their snares nobody could explain except Peter.

"The sort of a woman who appeals to me wants a husband who is one hundred per cent. MAN. I'm twenty-five per cent. boy, twenty-five per cent. girl, and fifty per cent. fool."

"If you were fifty per cent. fool you'd have been captured by the first minx who made eyes at you."

"I was."

"How did you cut loose?"

"How did I? Yes; it comes back. I made furious love to her younger sister. There was a row. I did the gentlemanly thing: I offered to marry both of 'em and live in Salt Lake City."

But now, past forty, too often slipped, subject to occasional twinges of sciatica, albeit with nothing organically wrong about him, Peter told himself that women were beyond his giddy horizon. He had heard the expression from an Etonian. It fell upon attentive ears as a bit of significant slang.

"Out of the mouths of babes—! My horizon is giddy. Always, but always, it has been giddy. I have sat at ease in my chair, but my heavens, the heavens of my dreams, have reeled about me."

Peter had an uncle and aunt, also Parvins, who regarded him with aloof eyes. Uncle Joe made money, plenty of it. He lived with Aunt Phoebe, his sister, in a dingy house in Cavendish Square. Peter occupied a smart flat in Mount Street. Peter was aware that Uncle Joe eyed him with whimsical interrogation. Peter couldn't quite understand him; and he, possibly, although a shrewd judge of character, couldn't understand Peter. It seemed to be reasonable to Peter that Uncle Joe should leave him most of his money, after he had provided adequately for Aunt Phoebe. Peter was Uncle Joe's only nephew and the head of the Parvin family. Afterwards, Peter wondered why he had counted so confidently upon being his uncle's heir, or (at least) his residuary legatee. One day, Uncle Joe had said to him:

"What I have left you, Peter, under the terms of my will, may make a man of you; I hope it will. But you had bet-

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ter understand here and now that conditions are attached to the legacy. And they are ironclad ; I have seen to that."

Peter nodded, thinking to himself :

" Rum old lad ; he means well."

Uncle Joe took little interest in sport, art, or the other sex ; he did business in the City. What he did, or how he did it, had never concerned Peter.

When Uncle Joe died, all his money was left to his sister Phoebe. To Peter he bequeathed his business offices, situate in Parvin Buildings, a freehold property not far from Mincing Lane. The conditions attached to the strange legacy were indeed ironclad :

" I hope," so the testator caused to be written in his will, " that my nephew, Peter, will do business in my offices ; they will cease to be his if he doesn't."

Whereupon Peter remarked to the family solicitor :

" Uncle Joe has left me a poke without a pig to put into it."

This summed up the situation. Peter could have let the offices for a substantial rental within a week, but if he let them he forfeited them. Fortunately rates and taxes were to be paid by Aunt Phoebe, and Peter betook himself to her without loss of time. She received him pleasantly enough.

" You are disappointed, Peter ? "

" Well, I am. Is this a grim joke ? "

" Not at all. I am pledged not to help you ; you must help yourself. Unless you have squandered your patrimony you must have capital which you can put into some sound business. You have played the fool for nearly forty years, but you are not a fool."

" If I try to do business, Aunt Phoebe, I shall be done. I know just enough to know that."

" You know more than I thought. Still, you must make a beginning."

" But—how ? "

" I suggest that you should act as my agent, collect my rents, keep an eye on my tenants, lease any offices that may chance to fall vacant, and watch for opportunities. I shall pay you a small salary. If you do this, you will get in touch with business men. Of course, if you prefer it, you can renounce this legacy and go on living an idle life."

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"Thank you, Aunt Phoebe. With your permission I'll sleep over this, if I can. I'm ashamed to tell you that I've never seen Parvin Buildings."

"The sooner you look at them the better."

Next day, Peter saw his offices in company with a jobber, George Custance, who happened to be a member of Peter's club. Of stocks and shares, and bulls and bears, Peter knew nothing. After his father's death, he had sold the "squarson" property; and the money had been invested by the family solicitor in gilt-edged securities. Upon the accruing income Peter had lived, making occasional raids upon his capital. He supposed—he was not sure—that he had about five-and-twenty-thousand pounds available for business purposes, if there was in the City of London any business in which he could embark without gravely imperilling his capital.

Custance and he went over Parvin Buildings. Uncle Joe had bought the property cheap; and he had spent no money upon modern improvements.

"This is a rookery," said Custance.

All the offices were furnished alike; and the tenants resembled rooks, being for the most part black-avized gentlemen, who dealt in rubber, tea, copra, coffee, and other un-English commodities. It was a shock to Peter to discover that his uncle had made his money in outlandish countries, but it was certain that the old man had not "rooked" the rooks. Custance assured Peter that the late Joseph Parvin's name stood high in the City as a synonym for integrity and enterprise. As much could not be said of the tenants, who, for the most part, appeared to be birds of passage.

"Obviously," said Custance, "the old man screwed big rents out of them, payable in advance. Such fellows don't ask for lifts and plate glass windows. They want offices in a hurry."

Nevertheless Uncle Joe's own offices were large and well-proportioned. From the size of them, Custance made certain that Uncle Joe had done "big business." He added disconcertingly:

"You can make no use of all these rooms."

"I've been challenged," said Peter thoughtfully. "My

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leg, George, has been pulled—and I don't like it. Do you believe in the life after death ? ”

“ Eh ? ”

“ Has it occurred to you that Uncle Joe would be ticked pink if I renounced my legacy ? Such an act would confirm his preconceived notion of me as a rotter and justify what he has done. He would lie easily in his tomb. I propose to make him squirm a bit.”

“ How ? ”

“ I shall live here—”

“ What ? ”

“ Why pay the exorbitant rent of a flat in Mount Street when I own, rent and tax free, these handsome rooms ? I shall act as my aunt's agent. In an atmosphere of work I may find work to do. I shall be in the hive if not of it.”

“ You will be in the soup. You can't *live* here. It's a howling wilderness after six in the evening.”

“ I can live here, and I shall,” declared Peter.

TIME passed before Peter was able to move in, but Aunt Phoebe raised no objections.

“ Do what you like,” said she. “ You're on ‘ appro.’ ”

When he changed his quarters, he took with him his servant, Catchsyde, like his master inasmuch as he, too, preferred to travel along lines of least resistance. Incidentally, Peter had to sweeten his man's salary, for Catchsyde had never functioned either as cook or housemaid. He agreed to keep the rooms in order and to cook breakfast. For a season Peter wisely decided to lunch and dine at his club. He pointed out to Catchsyde that already he was making money by the simple process of saving it. Catchsyde replied respectfully :

“ You'll never stick it out, sir.”

He had affection for Catchsyde as an ex-service man, badly wounded during the Great War, and in consequence out of a job after it. Catchsyde, in spite of his easy-going ways, despised the dole, but he had to admit that working for Peter was pretty soft. And Peter treated him as a comrade.

The “ move ” was exhilarating and served one purpose. Peter gave undivided energies to turning his uncle's offices

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into a charming residential flat. And he had the feeling that Uncle Joe must be getting uneasy. A safe was redecorated to look like a lacquer cabinet. When Peter arranged on top of it his collection of Derby bisque figures, modelled by Spengler, Farnsworth, Hill and Coffee, when, at last, he sank into the easiest of chairs and gazed affectionately at his books and prints in colour, groans of protest seemed to be wafted from distant Brookwood. Custance said, "You're as mad as a hatter," to which Peter replied gravely, "Perhaps, but it's bothering the old man."

His neighbours, all men of business, regarded Peter as a lunatic. As a rule, however, he left Parvin Buildings at an hour when the busy bees were buzzing into the hive, and he came back long after they had buzzed away. At the main entrance, upon a huge board, were inscribed the names of many firms. His uncle's name was amongst them. As a sop to the old fellow's lacerated feelings, Peter allowed it to remain there. He discovered the nature of the late Joseph Parvin's business. He had been a company promoter and a director in many companies; he had served faithfully his own interests and the interests of others; his name had been a synonym for sound finance. During the first month or two, black-avized gentlemen knocked at Peter's door. A few of them insisted on seeing Peter, if he happened to be at home. To all of them, Peter said gravely: "My uncle is doing business elsewhere, but I can't give you his address." One or two replied briskly: "But you, you do business, too?" And then Peter would stupefy them by asking: "Do you play chess or croquet? I specialize in them."

Nevertheless, these black-avized gentlemen interested Peter. He beheld them as bold buccaneers with the salt of the Spanish Main on their beards. Apparently, Parvin Buildings was their "pitch." Some of the names on the big board were stimulating to the imagination; they suggested traffics and discoveries in the Argentine, the Brazils, the Malay Peninsula, and far Cathay (wherever that is). Alone in his room at night, in a wilderness not of howls but of impressive silences, Peter would wing his way to these distant lands, regretfully aware that he could only visit them in fancy because he was such a martyr to seasickness.

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Catchsyde picked up crumbs of gossip, and served them to his master on an Early Georgian salver.

"They do business, sir, in tea, coffee, rubber and what-not. I'm a bit surprised, sir, that your uncle had his offices here."

Peter, on intimate terms with a faithful retainer, replied promptly :

"My uncle, it seems, bought this building cheap. Still—what do you mean ?"

Catchsyde lowered his voice :

"I mean, sir, that our building is known hereabouts as the Den of Thieves."

Peter laughed.

ONCE more, his fancy was beguiled. He accepted Catchsyde's statement as authoritative. He knew that one of the offices was a bucket shop ; he knew that names on the board were changed with disconcerting frequency. Birds of prey, the *Rapacidae*, seemed to pounce upon Parvin Buildings, settle there, and swoop off again. Custance admitted that the place was getting a bad name, although rents soared ; but he added consolingly : "You don't *do* business here, so what does it matter ?"

"Only this ; I sniff romance. I am not sure that I'm not developing predatory instincts. As a boy I yearned to be a smuggler or a highwayman. If my neighbours are pirates, I should really like to make their better acquaintance."

It was written in the Book of Destiny that he should.

As the weeks flitted by, as spring was merging into summer, Peter spent his afternoons playing croquet and his evenings playing chess, but the morning hours were more and more devoted to reading. He bought books that dealt exhaustively with the Back of Beyond ; he read them with ever-increasing pleasure. Possibly adventure came to him, because he was so engrossed with the adventures of others.

About the middle of May, the *señores* Davila and Rodriguez called upon Peter. They informed him that they had come from Aguaruna, a small republic in Central America, on purpose to see his uncle. Once again, Peter had to explain that his uncle was dead and that he, the nephew, could not do business on behalf of Miss Parvin.

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"You are here, and not in business, *señor*?"

"I do one thing for my aunt. I collect her rents and I let any offices that may happen to be vacant."

"We require a small office."

One small set of offices, immediately above Peter's quarters, happened to be vacant. Also, they were the cheapest and the most shabby in the building. Catchsyde took the *señores* upstairs and showed them the premises. After some haggling, Davila paid a week's rent in advance, saying as he did so:

"We shall not be your tenants for long. I am truly grieved that your uncle is dead."

Peter decided that the man spoke sincerely, although he disliked his looks. When the *señores* took their leave, with many protestations of esteem, he dismissed them from his mind.

Some three days later, Catchsyde said to his master mysteriously:

"Do you ever lie awake at night, sir?"

"Never."

"I'm a light sleeper, sir. In the office just above our rooms they do business at queer hours. Last night, sir, I took it upon myself to make a reconnaissance. There seemed to be a rumpus going on. I heard voices speaking some outlandish tongue; and—this bit me—I heard a woman's voice."

"We mustn't be indiscreet, Catchsyde."

"Certainly not, sir. My curiosity was aroused, because the three of 'em were quarrelling. But I couldn't understand a word that was said."

"I'm afraid," said Peter, "that we must leave it at that."

Now offices in old buildings have much in common. For instance, the door into Peter's residential flat was exactly like the door above and the door below. Each door opened into a small hall that might serve as a waiting-room. Two days later, Peter was in the hall, about to go out and wondering whether he should arm himself with a stick or an umbrella. Catchsyde was not there to decide this important matter. Suddenly the door opened, and a woman confronted him. Peter smiled at her, because she was young,

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good-looking, and slightly breathless. The lady apologized, speaking in good English with a foreign accent :

"Pardon! I make a mistake. I must go higher, yes. *Alma de mi vida!* What steep stairs!"

She put a small, gloved hand upon a heaving bosom.

"You are Mr. Peter Parvin," she said.

"At your service. Rest for one moment."

To his surprise she sat down quietly, took a small fan from her bag and unfurled it.

"You are so kind. Yes; I rest for one moment."

Peter felt absurdly shy. His visitor was the more self-possessed of the two. He was aware that she eyed him interrogatively and critically; and it flashed into his mind that she might be simulating a distress which a healthy young woman could hardly feel after three flights of stairs. She might be anybody or nobody. She might be married or single. But she seemed singularly out of place in Parvin Buildings. Having surveyed Peter, she glanced at the tiny hall.

"You live here?"

"I do."

Her laugh tinkled.

"That amuses you, *señorita?*"

Peter could talk Spanish fairly well, and the "*señorita*" was intended as a lure.

She fanned herself, smiling coquettishly.

"You know my name?" said Peter.

"Why yes. You make talk—I—I mean, you make gossip, no? You live here and you do no business."

She spoke lightly, as if mildly amused. All symptoms of breathlessness had vanished. Peter decided that a woman's curiosity, nothing more, accounted for this visit. Perhaps she wanted to see what manner of man elected to live in such a place. Anyway, she had aroused his curiosity. Was she the woman whose voice Catchsyde had heard at one in the morning?

"I inherited these rooms," he said gravely, "and I'm away during the daytime. At night, I might be in the depth of—of some equatorial forest."

She took him up, vivaciously:

"You have slept in such forests, no?"

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"Not yet."

"You are wise to keep out of them." She stood up. "Your little hall is charming. It pleases me ver' much."

"May I show you my sitting-room?"

As he spoke, he opened the door, fearing that she might go prematurely. Instinct warned him that this visitor was alone with him for a definite purpose; she had effected an admirable but unconvincing entrance. To retard her exit engrossed Peter's attention. If she had been in such a deuce of a hurry to reach the offices upstairs, why was she lingering here?

She peeped into the sitting-room, and gave an exclamation of pleasure:

"*Dios!* How well you English install yourselves!"

To test her appreciation, he indicated with a gesture his more intimate belongings, books, prints and porcelain. As she glanced alertly from side to side, he noticed that she was simply dressed. And every word she uttered revealed her as a creature of taste and understanding. Finally, she looked at her wrist watch.

"I am late, *señor*, for an appointment upstairs."

"I kiss your hands," said Peter in Spanish.

She smiled, flitted past him, and vanished.

Peter sat down.

Had she been playing decoy to his pigeon?

Was she merely some shameless adventuress?

He stood up, sorely perplexed, conscious that this witch had cast a spell upon him. As she passed she had smiled enigmatically. She had left nothing behind her except a faint perfume which suggested *stephanotis*.

At this moment, Peter saw her fan.

He picked up the fan and examined it carefully, being something of a connoisseur in fans. He saw that it was old and valuable. Acting on impulse, he decided that the fan must be restored to its owner at once. The fan, moreover, justified mounting a flight of stairs without further waste of time. A minute later, he was tapping on the door above his own upon which were inscribed the names Rodriguez and Davila. When the door was opened, not too quickly, Peter beheld the *Señor Davila*, who was evidently expecting somebody else.

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"I have picked up this fan," he said discreetly. "It is Spanish; it may belong to some client of yours."

The client appeared.

"My fan!" she exclaimed. "I—I must have dropped it on the stairs."

In silence Peter handed the fibber her fan.

"A thousand thanks."

Peter bowed. A minute later he was back in his chair, more bewildered than ever.

He realized that he had embarked upon the high seas of adventure. Parvin Buildings had been transmuted into the Spanish Main. Somehow, Davila seemed to have been cast for the part of a pirate king. The lady with the fan was at his mercy—!

Furtively Peter pinched himself to make sure that he was awake. Having satisfied himself on this point, he remembered that he had an engagement, that afternoon at Ranelagh, to play croquet, an important match. Croquet could not be considered seriously at such a moment. When Catchsyde came in, the engagement must be cancelled. The lady with the fan might come back.

It occurred to Peter that she would have come back for her fan, had he waited patiently. He was sure that she had left the fan designedly. On the other hand, he now knew that she was linked, by hook or crook, with the *Señores* Rodriguez and Davila, and that she had lied about the fan. It was reasonable to suppose, therefore, that she did not wish these two gentlemen to know that she had paid a visit to their neighbour living just below them.

When Catchsyde returned from his morning's marketing, Peter asked him if he had heard anything more after he went back to bed. Catchsyde, a cautious man, *thought* that he had heard footsteps on the stone stairs and, shortly afterwards, the sputterings of a taxi. Peter said nothing about his mysterious visitor. She did not visit him that afternoon.

Next day, on his way to his club, he passed a music-hall, the Acropolis. He paused for a moment to glance at some photographs of a famous Russian dancer. Then his roving eye caught a line :

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The Soul of the Guitar.

Next to the dancer, smiling at him out of a gorgeous Spanish frame, was the Lady with the Fan; and her name was—*Pepita*.

He hurried into the entrance hall and demanded a stall for that evening's performance. As he paid for it he asked a very elegant young gentleman a question:

“Who is the Soul of the Guitar?”

The elegant young gentleman became temporarily entangled with a telephone; when he disentangled himself he replied graciously:

“We know nothing about her. She came from Madrid; she has made something of a hit; she refuses to be interviewed; she has been with us just one week.”

Peter strolled on to his club. In that sanctuary of gossip, curiosity for once was left unsatisfied. Nobody had heard of *Pepita*.

He lunched alone—and abstemiously, as was his wont. When a fellow-member, also a croquet player, passed his table and said, “Are you playing this afternoon?” Peter answered absently, “Yes, worse luck! Croquet is a silly game, isn't it?” An enthusiast had no answer pat to such a question; he lifted grizzled brows and went his way. He didn't know—how could he?—that Peter was taking stock of himself, calmly weighing abilities and disabilities. He foresaw that he was about to “take on” two citizens of some Central American republic, who would stick at nothing—and probably stick everything—if they were interfered with. Peter was not what the lady novelists term a “dead shot.” He hated killing “things.” Once he had been sent out stalking. Towards four in the afternoon, he found himself within eighty yards of a fine ten-pointer; and a rifle was thrust into his hand with the sibilant injunction: “S-s-shoot!” Peter, to the amazement of stalker and ghillie, had replied, “I can't.” *And he couldn't.* His host roared with laughter, and sent Peter on to the hill with a camera, where he “snapped” several “monsters” much to his satisfaction. At his public school Peter had been a “rabbit” at games, but late in life he had distinguished himself at croquet. He was now a “two-bisquer” which meant that he could engage on more or less equal

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terms champions of the game, if they gave him two bisques. To the solution of the difficult acrostics in *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* he brought an ingenious and patient mind; at chess he was well up in the second class, and a successful solver of problems.

Immediately after luncheon, Peter walked to a florist's shop and ordered a bouquet of stephanotis and maiden-hair to be delivered before eight at the stage door of the Acropolis.

He lost his match at Ranelagh.

He dressed and dined at his club.

Had Peter never heard of or seen Pepita till she glided on to the stage, it is likely that he would have surrendered unconditionally to her grace and charm. Enthusiasm, particularly in a theatre, is contagious. The huge audience acclaimed a new star with no uncertain voice. They "rose" at her. Peter was thrilled. Proprietary interest in this witch stirred within him, because through his glasses, he saw that she was wearing a sprig of stephanotis. He had left his card with the florist; and on it in pencil was scribbled the number of his stall. Pepita seemed to be looking for Mr. Peter Parvin. However, he was aware that a performer on a brilliantly lighted stage looking out into a darkened auditorium can see nothing but a dim sea of faces.

She wore a Spanish frock and a *mantilla* of black lace. Her hair was piled high upon her small head after the Castilian fashion, held in place by a comb that might have been worn by a great lady painted by Velasquez. Indeed, she looked as if she had just stepped out of the seventeenth century. In the centre of the stage stood a leather chest—a *baule*—of the same period. Behind her hung black velvet curtains.

Pepita opened the chest which long ago might have held the *donas* presented by a bridegroom to his bride and took from it three guitars which she laid upon the top of the chest after she had closed it.

"A clever bit of business," thought Peter.

Evidently the house shared his opinion, for, after the first burst of applause, they watched her in silence. Peter was too interested in the woman to be critical of what followed. He decided that she must be a novice, certainly not

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accustomed to playing in public. Her eyes appealed shyly to the immense crowd, as she said in a clear soft voice :

“ I will play first on my baby guitar. You must not expect much from a baby.”

She took a tiny guitar from a green silk covering, smiled at it maternally, and kissed it.

Peter was conscious that she played and sang, nothing more. And she seemed to be playing and singing to him with such simplicity and pathos that he forgot time and place. Her performance was over before he realized what he thought of it.

As the curtain fell, an attendant brought him a note. It was written in Spanish. Pepita thanked Don Pedro Parvin for his beautiful flowers and expressed a wish to see him in her dressing-room for five minutes. She instructed him to present himself at the stage door, which he did immediately.

“ I was expecting you,” she said, speaking her own lisping tongue. “ We have five minutes—no more. Don’t talk ; I have much to say. You guessed, of course, that I was playing a little comedy this morning, my *métier* ; I should have come back for the fan, if—if,” she smiled roguishly, “ your curiosity had not overpowered you. I ask for your help. You are a gentleman.” She used the word *Caballero*, which means a fine horseman. “ Also, you represent Parvin Buildings ; and you are not a man of business. How I hate business !”

Peter bowed.

“ There is no time for explanations. Have I made a mistake in asking you to help me ?” she cooed at him.

“ You have not,” said Peter valiantly.

“ Good !” she clapped her tiny hands. “ You will now, please, go back to your stall. I will find a way, a safe way, to meet you again. Do not try to meet me. I tell you this. I am a prisoner ; I want to escape ; I—I must escape,” she became slightly excited ; “ and I tell you that we are in danger meeting like this. But it had to be. Good night, my friend.”

She held out her hand ; a *caballero* kissed it.

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CHAPTER II.

REACTION set in before midnight. Alone in his room, a solver of acrostics tried to find lights. He could only see uprights—Peter and Pepita, an alliteration in names startlingly significant. Pepita held Peter phonetically. *He was hers.* Considered acrostically, the first upright might be “danger.”

DANGER—PEPITA.

The word “danger” had seemed negligible in Pepita’s dressing-room and afterwards in the auditorium. In an empty building at midnight, it was not negligible. Peter possessed no firearms; he had never fired off a pistol. During the War he had served his country in his country. He had volunteered for active service in 1914. A Medical Board, exacting in those early days, had rejected him as a combatant, but he had secured a billet at the Admiralty, where he did excellent work. He remembered that he had been very nervous when he saw, for the first time, a Zeppelin over his head. Bombs had fallen from the yellow terror within measurable distance of where he was standing. Peter shuddered at what was left of a fellow-creature upon the pavement. And, at the time, he had wondered whether he could have gone “over the top” had he been called upon to do so.

Pepita invited him to go over the top in her agreeable company—confounding but true.

Why had she selected him of all men as her champion? To what hair-brained adventure had he pledged himself?

He mixed himself a stronger nightcap than usual, aware as he did so that pot-valiance was ephemeral. Before going to bed, he locked up in his despatch box, Pepita’s note.

After a fashion peculiarly his own, Peter beheld himself as the Knight of La Mancha, astride the Rosinante of his imagination, faring forth to tilt against windmills, with the worthy Catchesyde mounted on an ass bringing up the rear as Sancho Panza. Pepita, clever girl, had divined somehow what was quixotic in him. In effect she had challenged him to do what he had thought of doing, what he had done, in

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his dreams, times out of number. Possibly the Imps of Comedy were exploiting him for their own ends.

"What am I up against?" he asked.

NEXT morning, tentatively, he had a word or two with Catchsyde.

"You fought in France?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you in a blue funk?"

"Yes, sir—first, last and all the time. When I got me discharge I says to meself, 'Never again.'"

This was not encouraging.

"I was thinking last night," said Peter, after a pause, "that we, you and I, are rather at the mercy of the criminal classes, if—if they wanted to help themselves to anything of value belonging to me."

Catchsyde was reassuring.

"Burglars, sir—? They'd never bother about the likes of us. Our plate's in the bank; you have no joolery; and if you have in mind, sir, that little affair of the other night, upstairs, why I say it ain't none of our business. If there are crooks in Parvin Buildings, me and you can leave 'em to the police."

"Yes, Catchsyde, yes; but see to it that a couple of stout bolts are placed on the inside of our outside door: a reasonable precaution in any case."

"Very good, sir."

"That will do for the present."

Three days passed without Peter hearing from Pepita. But Davila and Rodriguez called upon him, apparently with no other object than to ask him to reduce their rent. From their ceremonious talk, not conducted in Spanish, Peter gleaned information, not much. The *señores* admitted frankly that they were delayed in England; they spoke of their own country as the land of *mañana* (to-morrow); and they ended pathetically upon another cliché: procrastination, they pointed out, was not only the thief of time but of money. Under all the circumstances would Mr. Parvin charge them a lower rental. It was humiliating for Peter, but he had to admit that his aunt had acquired a habit, now chronic, of raising rents. She never lowered them. Mr.

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Parvin promised to consult his aunt, although he assured the *señores* that it was a waste of time and stamps to do so. They went away, profusely and perspiringly polite.

As soon as they had gone, Peter opened his windows.

He disliked and distrusted Davila even more than he disliked and distrusted Rodriguez. A vivid imagination was palsied at the link between such a brace of oily rogues and Pepita. Nevertheless, Peter had to admit that they were men, distressingly hirsute, stoutly muscled, fine animals from the animal point of view. There was no indication of poverty about their outward appearance. They smoked large cigars. Peter had never met their like, except on the films. They were the crooks that one expects to meet on the films and—happily nowhere else.

All the same they are common as blackberries in Central America.

THE next meeting, so fraught with consequences, between Peter and Pepita took place in Kensington Gardens ; and the lady was late for her appointment. A taxi dashed up ; Pepita dashed out of it.

"We can talk," she said excitedly, "in the taxi. Nobody has followed me."

In a few sentences she told Peter that she had taken a taxi in the Strand, driven to the Galleries Lafayette in Regent Street, dismissed the taxi, and taken another when she came out of the shop, having bought in the shop (and put on) another hat, a veil, and a shawl.

"We are going to drive round the Park," she announced.

"You are watched ?"

"Always, but always. To-day, I have escaped for an hour or two. They may suspect what they like, but never will they suspect that I am with you."

"My dear young lady, all this howls for explanation."

"Doesn't it ? Ah ! How safe I feel with you ! Do you like me in my new hat ?"

"Perhaps I should like you even better without it."

She removed a glove from her left hand. Upon the third finger was the symbol of liberty or bondage—a wedding ring. Peter gazed at it with mixed feelings.

"You are married ?" he said.

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"I show you this, my friend, because you are a friend, a fine man like your good uncle."

"Whether or not you have picked a fine man remains to be seen, but tell me what you want."

"I told you I wanted to escape—"

"From the *señores* Rodriguez and Davila?"

"*Ay de mi!* From them and from others. I am in chains; I am the little fly in the spider's web. As for Rodriguez and Davila, scum of the earth, they are spies paid to watch me—and they do. Be sure of that. I spit on them."

"I hope to do so myself, later on."

"To make matters worse, Juan Rodriguez is my foster-brother, and as false to me and mine as Iscariot. My father, Don Ramon Estudillo, was a great friend and supporter of the lately deposed President of Aguaruna; my mother was an English woman. That is why I speak English fairly well. Last year my father fell a victim to the devilish plots of his enemies, and was imprisoned, but he had good friends in London; among them your uncle."

"My uncle?"

"Yes—he financed my father. If you knew your uncle, I need hardly tell you that he had no business dealings with dishonest men. Had your uncle been alive when I came to London, I might have done what I set out to do. Instead of him I find—you."

Was there derision in her voice? She looked forlorn and unhappy; and as she spoke she twisted nervously the circlet of bondage. It was difficult to believe that such a slim, girlish creature was married, but Peter accepted unhesitatingly the evidence of the ring. He found himself admiring her delicate fingers.

"You found me," he repeated, not too hopefully.

To his delight, she beamed at him.

"I was lucky, no?"

"Tell me, *señora*, you believed that my uncle would help you?"

"I did. *Que lastima!* He is dead. Still I find you and I like you. You have faith in liking at sight?"

"Of course. I believe, too, in love at sight, but—"

She interrupted simply:

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“*Ay!* We must talk business—”

“Right! My uncle’s nephew wants to help you and your father, *señora*, but you must tell me everything. I suppose you escaped from Aguaruna when your father was taken prisoner?”

“Yes; I escaped to San José de Guatemala, where I found some kinsmen who are, unhappily, very poor. They were so good to me, but I had to support myself with my one little talent. I can play the guitar and sing our songs. The Guatemalans were pleased with me and my songs. And you—?”

Soft, liquid eyes gazed up at him.

“You cast a spell on me,” admitted Peter. “But—to be honest—I hardly heard your songs. I was thinking of the lady with the fan. All the same the audience accepted you as the Soul of the Guitar—and so do I.”

“*Bueno!*”

She smiled and sighed, as Peter went on:

“I wish I were like my uncle, *señora*. How did you expect him to help you?”

“With money. Money, and nothing else, can get my poor father out of prison. Then he will be in a position again to make money for his friends. He made big money for your uncle.”

“I understand. My congratulations! You undertook in Guatemala a public engagement that must have been disagreeable to you?”

“At first—yes. But I pleased the public; and it is so nice and jolly to please. I—I began—how you put it?—at the bottom of the tree in a small *cabaret*—”

“What pluck!”

“We never know what we can do till we try. *Dios!* A year ago would I have dared to ask a stranger to help me? Ah, no. But, in San José, look you, I learned to study faces, to know what is good and evil. A woman always knows, but sometimes she may fool herself, as I have fooled myself, alas, over Davila and Juan Rodriguez. Well, *señor*, in San José de Guatemala I have great luck. A man hear me sing and play, and he offer me an engagement in Madrid, with Paris, perhaps, to follow, if—if I make good, and then—and then—London, the city of my dreams.”

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"Where your dreams came true?"

"No; because your good uncle is dead. You see," her voice grew confiding again, "during all this time Juan Rodriguez acted as confidential agent between my father's friends and me. You do not know our little republic, but, believe me, an ex-president's friends are powerless because they fall with their chief. Nothing is left to them, neither money nor credit. They have to rely on their wits. It was Juan who put the idea into my head to come to London to see your uncle, but he told me that my father wished it. That was enough for me. Davila, too, was introduced as my father's friend. You have seen him. It is difficult, maybe, for you to believe that such a man could be the friend of my father, but at twenty, well, one believes what one wishes to believe—"

"And at forty," added Peter.

"They paid my expenses to Madrid. In Madrid I had another small triumph; and there I accepted this London engagement. Rodriguez takes and keeps nearly all my money. Last week, I found him out. We had a terrible scene in the rooms above your flat after my performance."

A sob escaped her. Peter pressed her hand, and remembered what was on it.

"And your husband?" he asked.

"My husband—?"

"Yes; is he in prison too?"

"If he were not he would be here, wouldn't he?" she asked innocently.

Peter blushed, not too happy about his own thoughts. Pepita's story sounded incredibly true. Such fluctuations in fortune did happen in Central America.

"What is Rodriguez's game?" asked Peter.

"He deserted a sinking ship; rats do. He is now in the pay of the present President. When I taxed him with his double-dealing, he laughed at me. He told me that in England a singer in music-halls is not accepted as an ambassadress. What I had done had wrecked my father's prospects. I had achieved, so he informed me, a personal success; and he advised me to rest content with that and make the most of it. He holds my credentials. Both he and Davila are hard at work trying to sell concessions; they

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boast that they are succeeding; they jeered at me till I could have killed them. If I'm driven to it, I shall."

"But—they might kill you first."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

Again Peter had to pinch himself to make sure that he was in a taxi and within hail of a policeman.

"Do I understand," he asked nervously, "that the alternative to what I call battle, murder and sudden death is escape from these rascals?"

"*Ojala!* It is you, *Don Pedro*, who can save me, and restore me to the arms of—"

"Your husband."

She nodded hopefully.

"But this," said a man who was not feeling quixotic at the moment, "seems to me to be a case for the police. Demand their protection—"

Pepita smiled.

"And what would happen? I tell you. Your police are fine big men, but stoopid, no? Still, I know that your head of police is not stoopid. I go to him; maybe you take me to him—?"

"That was the idea," admitted Peter modestly.

"And then he will turn me over, me and my affairs, to an enemy, the Consul-General of Aguaruna. Nothing, nothing would please Rodriguez and Davila more than that. I, Pepita, would be playing their game. Likely as not I should be sent back to Aguaruna—and join my father in prison. But, understand me," her teeth clicked like castanets, "I have done one thing which I set out to do—I *am here*. And I, nobody else, represent my father's interests. I am loyal, my friend, to my father. I must escape from these wicked men. And then I must earn money to save my father, big money. You see—?"

Peter saw a pea-soup fog ahead of him, but he didn't say so. He spoke cheerily:

"Thanks. I do see a windmill looming up ahead of me. I'm not an expert on windmills. You must give me time to take in all that you have told me. My first suggestion, about the police, is scrapped. You want to be free to earn money. How much money?"

"All I can get, my dear friend."

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"Quite. And your credentials are in the hands of two unscrupulous ruffians. It is no use escaping from them, unless you escape with these credentials in your possession."

Pepita gazed at him admiringly.

"You are as clever, *señor*, as—as you are good."

"That's as may be," said Peter hastily. "Have you any scheme by which you could reasonably hope to get possession of your papers?"

"Of course."

"Tell me."

"The papers are in the office, in a small safe. You have a fine opportunity. You sleep in that ugly building. You—how you call it?—yes; you 'crack' the safe, and take the papers."

Something "cracked" in Peter's ears. Was it the crack of doom? Pepita had spoken seriously. Evidently the girl had no sense of humour. She believed that he, Peter Parvin, a law-abiding subject of King George, would be willing, and perhaps eager, to crack safes at her bidding.

"I would do it myself, if I could," she added simply.

Peter glanced out of the window and stared at the Serpentine; he saw a policeman; he saw couples sitting beneath the trees; he saw waifs and strays asleep on the grass; and he saw sheep. These familiar sights were heartening. Possibly, amongst the waifs and strays might be found an expert cracksman—resting for the moment but ready for a congenial job. A man of resource could find anything or anybody in London, if he knew where to look for them.

"I pop out here," said Pepita briskly. "I walk back to my hotel. We meet again, no? same time and same place, the day after to-morrow. By then, yes, you, my knight, will have put on your armour."

"Rain or shine, Pepita, I shall be there. If it is raining, I shall put on my aquascutum."

She held out her left hand, still unglowed. Peter pressed it, but he did not kiss it.

WITHIN half an hour, Peter called upon his aunt, who was generally at home at tea-time. She received him civilly enough. He beat no bushes.

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"I am up to my neck, Aunt Phoebe, in a bog."

"Alone, Peter?"

She eyed him sharply. Being a spinster, she held *en grippe* encrusted bachelors, regarding them as selfish and self-centred.

"No—there is a charming young woman bogged down with me."

Miss Parvin sniffed, but her shrewd eyes brightened.

"I have a premonition, Peter, that you have made a fool of yourself, but go on."

"You were in Uncle Joseph's confidence—?"

"Up to a point, yes."

"Did he ever speak to you about a certain Don Ramon Estudillo, whom at one time or other he—*financed*?"

"Yes, he did. Why?"

"I want to know if Don Ramon inspired confidence in Uncle Joseph?"

"He must have, or your Uncle would not have lent him money."

"Was the money repaid?"

"With good interest, yes."

"Do you know that at this moment Don Ramon is in prison, in Aguaruna, where a revolution has taken place?"

"There must have been half a dozen revolutions in Aguaruna in the last twenty years."

"Really? And yet, Uncle Joseph, a shrewd man of business, risked his money in such a distressful country."

"Your Uncle Joseph, Peter, was so different from you in character, temperament *and intelligence* that it is futile to try to make you understand him and his methods. He made money because he risked money. He backed men, not horses, because he was a judge of men. And he had in him, what is lacking in you, a spice of the devil."

"Of the devil—?" repeated Peter.

"I mean by that he was adventurous. He made money in wild countries where you, for instance, would have lost it. He was a man of initiative. He gripped opportunities which you would blink at. He loved a fight for a fight's sake."

"This," said Peter, "is illuminating. Believe me, Aunt Phoebe, I did not know this; I am sorry that I never

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even suspected it, till Pepita told me that Uncle Joseph had befriended her father."

"Pepita—?"

"That is the name of the young lady, the daughter of Don Ramon, who—who is bogged with me. Before I tell you her unhappy story may I ask where this spice of the devil in our blood came from?"

"The Parvins are a Devon family. They lived in or near Bideford. A Parvin sailed with Drake. Your uncle liked to believe that he was descended from that Parvin, but his knowledge of you made him doubtful upon that point!"

"If I had known," sighed Peter.

"If you did not know your uncle, that is your fault, not his. The Parvins moved from Devon into the Midlands at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They appear to have made money by marrying it. Your uncle pulled himself out of cloying clay, and, fortunately, for me, he pulled me with him. I understood him; you never could—and you never will. Now, tell me as briefly as possible, why you are bogged down in London with Don Ramon Estudillo's daughter?"

Thereupon Peter told his tale; and he told it fairly well if not briefly. As he warmed to his narrative, Miss Parvin opened twinkling eyes; when he finished, she exclaimed: "Peter—you surprise me."

"I have surprised myself."

"Let me get clear certain points of interest. This young woman's father and her husband are in prison. She brought with her papers, credentials, which she affirms were stolen from her by tenants of mine. They have also robbed her of her money?"

"Yes."

"And she expects you to recover her money and papers, to unmask the villains, and to rescue her from their clutches?"

"In tabloid form you have it, Aunt Phoebe."

"Is she crazy or are you?"

"You have formed your opinion of me; I should like you to meet *her*, but that may be difficult—and dangerous."

Aunt Phoebe lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, but she conveyed no impression of being mentally or physically relaxed.

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"Ring the bell for tea," she said sharply.

Peter did so.

Miss Parvin made the tea and poured it out ; she deigned to ask Peter if he had been successful at croquet. Peter intimated that his mind was off croquet.

"You mentioned the word—concessions. A man in prison cannot make concessions. What has Mrs. Pepita promised you ? "

"Nothing."

"Obviously, she knows that you are not a man of business. 'Nothing for nothing, and very little for sixpence' was your uncle's motto and mine."

"Pepita offers me excitement."

Miss Parvin chuckled.

"I hold a watching brief for you, Peter, you have offered me excitement. It will be exciting to me to see what you make of this and what this makes of you. I predict, regretfully, that you will do nothing."

"I might bring Pepita to see you."

"By all means, if it is not too dangerous."

Peter left Cavendish Square not upon the happiest terms with himself.

CHAPTER III

ONE woman believed in him ; and another, his own flesh and blood, did not. This thought, supplemented by Aunt Phoebe's buttered toast, took the edge off his appetite for dinner. After dinner, instead of playing chess, he studied in the club atlas the small republic of Aguaruna, and thence, by an easy transition, read what was said about it in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Politically, Aguaruna had always been in a state of flux. It was more interesting to learn that the soil was exceedingly fertile, producing magnificent crops of sugar, cotton, rice, tobacco, coffee, and rubber. The mountains held gold, silver and other minerals. All tropical fruits grew to perfection. "Aguaruna," concluded the writer, "may be described as an El Dorado of commercial possibilities."

Peter left the library and sauntered into the smoking room. Was it destiny or luck that he found there Angus

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Murdoch, a world's vagabond, whom he knew slightly and had always desired to know better.

"Ever been to Aguárana?" asked Peter, dropping into a chair beside Murdoch.

"Let me think—yes; I have been there three times. A land of misrule. No security for life or property. I remember one bit of its history tickled my fancy. After the Spanish tenure, the first ruler was a stout fellow; he was murdered by the second ruler, a forger. Number three deposed number two, and was polished off in his turn by number four, and so on, and so forth. . . ."

Peter offered the traveller a better cigar than he was smoking; graciously accepted. More details about Aguárana were forthcoming. And these details confirmed Pepita's story. Murdoch had met Don Ramon Estudillo; and he knew that he had fallen from power together with the deposed President. Finally, a shrewd observer summed up the situation:

"Money, cold cash, calls the tune. The late President was reasonably honest, too honest, but like some of the later Roman Emperors he was at the mercy of his Praetorians. If you could see them—! They fight for the highest bidder. When the party in power is ousted by force, everything is taken from them; they are lucky if they escape with their lives. Not a country for you, Parvin. By Jove—!"

He stared at Peter.

"I wondered why you were interested in Aguárana. Now I know. But, in the name of all that is incredible, you can't be *the* Parvin, the One and Only Englishman who took money out of Aguárana?"

"My Uncle Joseph. I haven't his—er—character, or temperament, or—er—intelligence."

"I hope, my dear fellow, that you have inherited his money."

"No. You say you knew Don Ramon?"

"I knew him and his pretty English wife."

"She is dead. Did you know his daughter?"

"I remember a lively kid. I wonder what's happened to her. So you are Parvin's nephew. I can give you one sound tip: have nothing to do with that God-forsaken country."

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Peter asked no more questions.

When he was back in his rooms, he tried to collate the information he had gleaned ; he made notes ; he attempted as we all do, to form judgments on insufficient *data*. His aunt predicted that he would pursue a policy of masterly inactivity ; Murdoch had eyed him compassionately as a weakling. Was Pepita the only person in the world who detected beneath a mild and unassuming exterior latent powers of resource and initiative ?

Had he such powers ?

He decided to test them. If Catchsyde, something of a Sancho Panza, could conduct a reconnaissance, "on his own," why should he hesitate to tread warily in his footsteps. In his desk lay a large bunch of keys, duplicate keys, that opened every door in the building.

"I—I swear," muttered Peter, "that I'll take a squint at the safe before I'm ten minutes older."

HE had handed over to the *señores*, the keys of their office, the key of the safe, and the combination that opened it. Peter's heart began to beat faster when he considered the possibility that his tenants had not changed the combination. From his own safe, he took the duplicate keys, and jotted down the letters of the combination which he found in a note-book. By this time, he was trembling with excitement, and rather enjoyed it. He opened his door, and peered about him. All was quiet. He ascended the stairs,—stone steps do not creak,—and in less than a minute he found himself in the inside office and standing opposite the safe. It was an old-fashioned article which any craftsman with proper tools could have cracked without difficulty. It had the ordinary knob surrounded by a lettered disc. Indeed, it was almost a replica of the safe in Peter's rooms, probably bought at the same time.

Peter adjusted the letters and pulled the knob.

The heavy door opened.

He unlocked the inner doors.

He saw many papers, a few letters, and a fat package of bank-notes. All of these he stuffed hastily into his pockets ; and then locked the safe. In his own room, at his leisure, he would examine the "loot."

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He turned to leave the office. As he did so, he saw to his consternation that the outside door was being pushed inwards. Retreat had been cut off. In one second he would be confronted by Davila or Rodriguez—!

Catchsyde, arrayed in pyjamas and woollen socks appeared.

"Damn you, Catchsyde," said Peter testily; "*how dare you startle me like this?*"

"Lord save us, sir. I went all over queer seeing you here. I heard a noise; and I thought they were at it again."

"You suffer from curiosity?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've just robbed a safe."

"Mr. Parvin—!"

"Now—you're an accessory after the fact. Over a toddy, which I need badly, I'll tell you all about it. Apparently you are a bit of a liar. You told me you were a funk. A funk wouldn't have tried to follow two jaguars into their den. I'm rather proud of you, old man."

Catchsyde said deprecatingly:

"I wasn't going into their den, sir. But, after hearing a noise, I found our door on the jar, and our keys a-hanging in the lock. That was surprising, because I've always known you for a gentleman as minded his own business."

"Till quite lately, Catchsyde," said Peter earnestly, "I've had no business worth the minding. Let us go back; you may catch your death of cold."

Over two toddies, Catchsyde was put in possession of the essential facts. And then master and man examined carefully what had been taken from the safe. Alas! Pepita's credentials were not there. But very soon Peter made the discovery that Messrs. Davila and Rodriguez had been corresponding with the parties in power in Aguaruna and the parties out of power.

"Traitors black as the Ace of Spades," said Peter.

They had received money from both sides. Peter counted the notes, amounting to nearly five hundred pounds. Then he grinned cheerfully at Catchsyde.

"Our reputations are at stake."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not speaking of being

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caught, hauled before an unsympathetic judge and jury, and condemned to penal servitude. No. I mean that I, as principal, and you, as assistant, have been challenged to show the stuff we're made of; and, strictly between ourselves, I don't know yet whether we're all wool or shoddy."

Catchsyde replied cheerfully :

"I, for one, sir, am not downhearted. Is she a very beautiful young lady, sir?"

"You shall go to the Acropolis at my expense and form your own opinion. Meanwhile I regard this as loot taken from pirates. You agree? Good! There will be a rare hullabaloo to-morrow morning. Will they call in the police?"

"If they're dirty thieves—no, sir."

"We know they're dirty thieves. What will they do? They may suspect me; they may guess that I have duplicate keys. I am now in a position to dictate terms to these blackguards."

"It's a rare bit of sport," said Catchsyde. "If you'll excuse me, sir," he added respectfully. "I must say I didn't think you had it in you."

"My Uncle Joseph must be as surprised as you are. However, if a man risks his life in the hunting field, which so many good fellows do, why should not I risk my liberty for the sake of the Soul of the Guitar?"

"That's quite right, sir."

They talked on till it was long past midnight.

KNOWING Miss Parvin's habits, Peter had no hesitation in presenting himself at ten next morning, which provoked from a woman of business the derisory remark: "Really, Peter, I had no idea you were such an early riser." Peter smiled at her. He had walked from the City to Cavendish Square, and felt the better for it.

"My dear Aunt, I'm a Gentleman Adventurer of England."

"You are—what?"

"I hold shares in the Hudson Bay Company. All shareholders are styled 'Gentlemen Adventurers of England.' Are you a shareholder, too?"

"Yes, I am, although it's no business of yours."

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"Indirectly it is, because I have come to see you as a fellow adventurer, as a descendant of the Parvin who sailed with Drake."

"He was not the talker you are."

"I'm meeting Pepita this afternoon. Will you give her a cup of tea if I bring her here at five?"

"Yes; I will give Don Ramon's daughter a cup of tea. Let there be no nonsense talked about the 'Soul of the Guitar.' There is an air of excitement about you, Peter. Don't tell me you have got hold of those credentials."

"I haven't."

"I thought not."

"But I have something better."

He carried a small leather *attaché* case, which he unlocked, taking from it the—loot.

"In *your* safe I found letters and cash, incriminating evidence that these two scoundrels are traitors. If a search is made of your premises all this loot would incriminate me, you understand—"

He paused, still smiling. Miss Parvin stared at her nephew.

"You—you have *stolen* this?"

"Softly. I have taken from a brace of thieves weapons of offence and defence."

"You—you burgled that safe?"

"I opened it with your keys. At this moment, probably, the *señores* are forming their own opinion of what I have done. I am grieved, Aunt Phoebe, that I am not with them. It would be so rejuvenating to see their faces."

Miss Parvin burst out laughing. It was rejuvenating to see Peter's face. Business instincts, however, tempered hilarity. She read some of the letters and counted the cash. She was not laughing when she finished.

"They will kill you, Peter, if they guess that you have done this."

"Killing me," said Peter lightly, "won't help them. They will have to kill you, too."

"Me?"

"If you consent to take charge of the loot, as I hope you will. If you refuse I shall take it to my bankers. Then the baffled villains will have to kill them."

Aunt Phoebe smiled.

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"You can leave the loot with me, Peter. I suggest that you ought to have rescued Mrs. Pepita first."

HE returned to his rooms. Catchsyde received him and reported. The *señores* had come and gone. When they left their office the outside door had slammed.

"You heard them descending the stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"They didn't pause at my door?"

"No, sir."

"If this were an ordinary case of burglary, it is certain that the matter would have been reported first to me?"

"Yes, sir. To you or to the caretaker."

But the *señores* had not confided their loss to the caretaker. Catchsyde had seen him, chatted with him, just before his master arrived. He was placidly unaware of what had taken place.

Peter stirred uneasily in his chair. He ought—as his aunt pointed out—to have got possession of Pepita before he opened the safe. He was so distressfully conscious of this that he blurted it out to Catchsyde, who once again said, "Yes, sir." Peter's knees became as wax when he envisaged the *señores* alone with Pepita, demanding from her explanations. A burglar would have taken the cash and left the letters. The *señores* had hurried to Pepita, believing that she, and she alone, might be *made* to explain.

Peter groaned.

"You're thinking of the police, sir."

"I'm thinking," said Peter wildly, "of the Soul of the Guitar. I've bungled this, Catchsyde, horribly. I knew that I was fifty per cent fool, but I'm fool all through."

Catchsyde looked sympathetic, but remained silent. He had not seen Pepita.

"If I had warned her—!"

He jumped up and began to pace the room restlessly.

"If she doesn't keep her appointment with me—?"

Catchsyde assimilated these "ifs," and said a cheering word:

"Our dagos, likely as not, are jabbering together under a tree in one of the parks. I daresay they're counting their petty cash. But—"

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"Yes?"

"They won't go for the young lady yet; they'll watch her a bit more closely. She gave 'em a miss on Monday. I think, sir, if you make no objections, that I'll shadder you this afternoon. I might come in handy-like."

"I see; you think they'll shadow her?"

"That's what I should do, if I was them."

Peter's face brightened, as he gazed affectionately at his man. Catchsyde added apologetically:

"I'm in this, and I want to stay in—make a job of it. We began at the easy end."

"Yes; I suppose we did."

After much talk it was agreed that master and man should travel together to Lancaster Gate. Peter would push on into Peter Pan Land; Catchsyde would follow, at a distance, and remain within sight of his master. If Peter waved his handkerchief, Catchsyde would interpret that as a signal, not necessarily an S.O.S. signal, and join up forces. An ex-service man stood to attention, and saluted. Peter returned the salute.

Alone with his books, which he glanced at yearningly, Peter admitted to himself that he felt like a shorn lamb upon which the wind blew tempestuously. But—an uplifting thought—he was not dismayed about himself, but severely critical of his misconduct of the "affair." A nodding acquaintance with the films and detective stories rubbed it into his intelligence, such as it was, that he was more fitted to play the part of the egregious "Watson" than "Sherlock Holmes." Holmes, and all such heroes, would regard his well-meant efforts with disdain. However, like Holmes, he sought to soothe his nerves with tobacco, not shag. He could hear Catchsyde whistling at his work, and envied him.

History repeated itself up to a point. Pepita arrived at the meeting-place, fairly punctual and not breathless. One glance at her expressive face told Peter that she, at any rate, was in ignorance of what had happened. She paid and dismissed her taxi. He looked about him.

"I have not been followed, Don Pedro."

"One would like to make sure of that."

It was impossible, so Peter decided, to make sure.

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There were many people in the gardens on a fine afternoon, nurserymaids, children, and the ordinary pedestrians.

"We will find another taxi. I am taking you to my aunt's. There we can talk."

Looking about him, Peter had not seen Catchsyde. If Catchsyde was not visible to a peering eye, it might be inferred that other "shadowers" would find it as easy to see without being seen. It was understood between Peter and Catchsyde that if he took a taxi, he would not wave his pocket handkerchief. Within a couple of minutes, he had hailed a passing "empty," and was well on his way to Cavendish Square. He had time to tell Pepita what he had done.

"Don Pedro," she exclaimed ardently, "you are the most wonderful man in all the world."

Peter was prepared to be embraced on both cheeks by an impulsive creature who regarded him as a kind and clever father. Pepita, however, made no such demonstration. She sat beside him quivering with excitement; he thought he could hear her heart beating, but really it was his own not too reliable organ thumping against his ribs.

"Have you seen Rodriguez and Davila?" he asked.

She hadn't. And not seeing them, she had thought it unnecessary to take the former precautions.

Peter pressed her with questions to which she replied quickly and vehemently. Rodriguez, from the moment when she left America, had constituted himself Chancellor of her modest Exchequer. He paid all bills, made engagements and arrangements, collected her salary, and allowed her a little pin-money. This had worked well enough, so long as she regarded him as her devoted foster-brother. The transition to tyrant and bully and traitor had been so swift that she was left gasping.

"And your engagements?" asked Peter.

"I must keep them. My public has been so kind to me."

Wild thoughts coursed through Peter's head. He tingled all over with indignation. Had Pepita been unmarried, he might have cut the knot that bound her to Rodriguez by offering marriage. However, it was consoling to think that the *señores* at the moment were without money. As

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a plan formed itself in his now feverish mind, he heard Pepita's soft voice :

"You know, Don Pedro, I have an idea—"

"You are full of ideas ; so am I. Tell me your idea."

"I think that thieves have fallen out. Davila has accused Rodriguez of robbing him ; Rodriguez, being such a thief himself, must believe that Davila burgled the safe."

"You're a marvel. Why didn't I think of that ? They may be killing each other at this moment."

"Quite likely," said Pepita cheerfully.

They laughed, nudging elbows.

In this happy and hopeful spirit two simple souls reached Aunt Phoebe's house in Cavendish Square. A minute later they were safe and snug in a large mid-Victorian drawing-room.

"Your aunt," whispered Pepita, "is she—formidable, no ?"

Peter grinned.

"My aunt," he said, "ought to have been born with a moustache ; she may grow one yet. Be prepared, *Señora*, to meet a dominating personality who, hitherto, has regarded me as a worm."

"I shall hate her, if she thinks ill of my knight."

"As your knight," replied Peter, "she eyes me with unrestrained amusement."

Aunt Phoebe bustled in.

In the patter of the stage, Pepita "put it across" Miss Parvin. She achieved this feat without the aid of a guitar. A long beguiling glance shot straight to its target.

"She's a child," thought Aunt Phoebe.

After polite salutations, as soon as the ladies were seated, Peter said the reassuring word :

"The *Señora* thinks that Rodriguez and Davila are sticking knives into each other."

"*Dios me perdona !* I hope so."

Aunt Phoebe made a gesture, which waved aside hypothesis.

"Have you any sort of plan, Peter ? You have made me your accomplice. In the eyes of the Law I'm a receiver of stolen goods. That is almost incredible to me, but it is so."

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"The Parvins have sporting instincts."

"Um! I'm glad to meet this young lady. Having met her I'm not quite so astonished at what you have done. Now—break it to me quietly what you intend to do."

"You must have guessed."

"Not yet."

"There is only one thing to do. You are, indirectly, under obligations to Don Ramon; you can cancel them by keeping his daughter under your roof—"

Pepita's startled face aflame with protest told Miss Parvin that Peter's plan was his own. He continued:

"She insists on keeping her engagements with the public. You can send her in your car to the theatre and bring her back. With her own money, stolen from her, and in your possession, she can buy at Marshall and Snelgrove's just round the corner whatever she needs. As soon as possible she will return to Aguaruna. Catchsyde and I will accompany her."

"What a man!" ejaculated Pepita.

Aunt Phoebe smiled grimly.

"Sounds very simple, Peter," she said.

"If you can propose a better plan, my dear Aunt—"

Pepita remained speechless, gazing at her knight as if he were Bayard or Du Guesclin.

"You suggest that this young lady should remain in my care till you can get her out of this country; you return with her to Aguaruna, where both you and Catchsyde will share Don Ramon's prison."

"No use borrowing trouble. My object in going to Aguaruna is not merely to escort the *Señora*, but to effect, if I can, Don Ramon's escape from prison. You forget that I shall carry with me five hundred pounds."

"Yes; I had forgotten that. Do you realize, Peter, that in this mad enterprise the odds are immensely against you?"

"If I win through, so much the greater glory."

"He will win through," affirmed Pepita.

"We must have tea," said Miss Parvin.

They had tea. Throughout that informal meal, Peter made it plain to his aunt that he had found his mission in life and that nothing would turn him from it. He was in

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the mood to take one of Pepita's gloves, borrow a stout safety-pin from his aunt, and pin the dear gage to his hat! Such talk as this, in such a room, swept Miss Parvin back to the days of her youth when she and her brother had plotted and planned to escape from the holding clay of the Midlands. But, if she listened to Peter, she looked at Pepita and at Pepita's left hand. It was difficult to believe that this girl was married. Curiosity on that point distressed Miss Parvin. Finally, when tea had been taken away, she said pleasantly:

"I do ask you to stay with me, my dear, till we know where we are."

"Miss Parvin—!"

"Don't thank me—yet. We will have a talk together. I can supply what you will want for to-night. I will take you to the theatre myself and bring you back. Meanwhile, Peter can return to Parvin Buildings. Catchsyde may have something to tell him."

"You're not a brick," declared Peter, "you're a cart-load of bricks, Aunt Phoebe. You are right; I must see Catchsyde at once."

CHAPTER IV

HE travelled by tube to the City. Parvin Buildings held no tenants. As he entered he happened to see the caretaker quietly smoking his pipe. Peter passed him with a cheerful nod. Obviously, the police had not been called in.

Peter went upstairs two steps at a time, feeling a paladin. He let himself into his rooms and rang the bell.

Catchsyde answered it promptly.

"What price dagos, you old graven image?"

"They followed her, sir. They saw you; but they didn't see me."

Peter filled his pipe, as he listened to his man's narrative. The *señores* had hung about in the offing. Fortunately, they had not been able to secure a taxi when their quarry eluded them after joining Peter. But Catchsyde was of the opinion that they must have identified his master.

Then Peter told his tale, smacking his lips over it. When he finished, Catchsyde said calmly:

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"Decks cleared for action, sir."

"What do you mean by action?"

"Why, sir, it's a fight to a finish betwixt you and them. They dassn't tell the police. There's no two ways about it; their backs are against the wall. They know they're done in, unless they do us in. It wouldn't surprise me a little bit if they made a dart to-night. If they was white men, we might deal with them, but they're—dagos."

"The young lady is safe anyhow."

"We can't call in the police, neither," said Catchsyde.

Peter admitted that such a course would be asking for trouble. He invited his man to sit down and light his pipe. The goddess, Nicotina, was kind to Sir Walter Raleigh. As the smoke from his calumet dissolved into air, he may have ascended with it into the empyrean of fancy. Peter knew that his imagination was soaring. The *señores*, smarting under a common loss, had quite probably fallen out and then fallen in again, as each maintained his innocence; after kissing each other they had colloqued, seeking together *motif* for the robbery. Pepita's fib about the fan had not imposed on the *señores*. She had sought and found a champion in the person of Peter, nephew of Don Ramon's good friend. . . .

To this conclusion Peter travelled swiftly, but rather late in the day. Catchsyde, a man of no education, had grasped the truth sooner than he; and Catchsyde apprehended violence. Peter hated violence.

Suddenly the outside bell tinkled. Peter jumped up.

"Good Lord! They're here."

"I needn't answer the bell," suggested Catchsyde, in a heavy whisper.

Temptation assailed Peter. In the words of a once popular music-hall song, he felt that "This was the time for disappearing; take a header, down you go." And yet, at the same moment the conviction smote him that if he took the header, he would not bob up again "serenely from below." His self-respect was at stake.

"Answer the bell. If—if it is the enemy, Catchsyde, show 'em in. You can remain in the hall—handy, in case of violence."

Catchsyde hesitated for an instant—and obeyed.

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Rodriguez and Davila entered. The mere sight of the scoundrels enraged Peter, but he dissembled with them, returned smile for smile, and invited them to sit down, facing him. When they did so, they had their backs to the hall; and Catchsyde, when he left the room, had not closed the door.

"You have come about the rent?" said Peter.

"No."

Davila spoke, the better educated of the two.

"No, *señor*, we have come here to ask a question."

"Ask as many questions as you like."

"The *señor* Rodriguez is the foster-brother of the young lady who is known in London as the Soul of the Guitar. She is in his charge—"

"Is she?" asked Peter.

"Yes. In England, young ladies do what they please. It is not so with us. We guard and protect our women."

"With their consent?"

"With or without their consent. This afternoon you met this young lady by appointment. Possibly, she has made, without telling us, some appeal to you. Your uncle was her father's friend. Anyway—you met her, together you got into a taxi and disappeared. She has not returned to her hotel which we have just left. Naturally, we are anxious; and so we have come here quietly, after business hours, to ask you where she is."

"She isn't here," said Peter calmly. "If you have any doubt of that, search these rooms. You are right in what you say. Don Ramon's daughter has appealed to me. I suggested that she should demand the protection of your Consul-General, but he, so it seems, is her father's enemy. From what she told me, I gathered that she needed protection. Well, she has it. I—I have seen to that. She is with friends."

"Is she foolish enough to regard us, her compatriots, as enemies?"

"Yes—she does."

"We are not her enemies. She came here, we came here, to do what we could for her father. But his, *señor*, is a lost cause; we found that out. The President of Aguaruna is firmly established in power. If Don Ramon acknowledges

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him, the President may pardon him, and restore to him his estates."

"You don't say so?"

"It is a fact. Only yesterday, I had that assurance from his representative here."

"Really? This is interesting. You are in touch with him?"

Davila smiled; the more truculent Rodriguez scowled.

"We have now, *señor*, to speak of another matter. Last night, our offices, just above you, were broken into; the safe was opened; valuable papers and money were taken."

"You astonish me. Last night—! Why, I was here; I heard nothing. This concerns me. You ought to have told me the first thing this morning; why didn't you?"

Davila stared hard at Peter's ingenuous countenance. Innocence seemed to be inscribed upon it in indelible ink.

"We have not called in the police."

"But—how extraordinary! In my own interests, you will allow me to 'phone them at once. Not a minute should be lost. A burglary in Parvin Buildings—! Such an outrage has never been perpetrated before. Catchsyde—Catchsyde—!"

"Shush-h-h," entreated Davila.

Catchsyde appeared. Peter addressed him excitedly:

"There has been a burglary, Catchsyde. These gentlemen have been robbed of money and papers."

"Gawd help us!" ejaculated Catchsyde.

"'Phone for the police!"

Davila held up his hand. Both the *señores* looked distressed and puzzled. Fortunately, perhaps, for Peter they had never met his like before. The glance that Davila flashed at Rodriguez seemed to say: "*Dios!* have we made a mistake?" Rodriguez shrugged his shoulders.

"You are very kind, *señor*," said Davila, "but it is for us to call in the police."

"All right. Don't 'phone the police, Catchsyde. Bring some whisky and soda instead—and cigarettes."

"Very good, sir."

As Catchsyde left the room, Rodriguez growled out in Spanish:

"Pepita has done this."

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To his discomfiture, Peter said in the same tongue :

"Impossible, *señor*."

"She is capable of anything," said Davila. "She has fooled us, and she has fooled you. You will tell us where she is ; and we will go to her."

"You believe that this young lady burgled your safe ?"

"No, *señor* ; but she is Don Ramon's daughter ; she is half-English, too. She persuaded some Englishman to do it for her."

Peter laughed heartily.

"You laugh— ?"

"Yes ; I laugh, because I understand why the *Señor* Rodriguez scowled at me just now. He thought—you thought, possibly, that I—I had committed this robbery. But I give you my word of honour that opening safes is not one of my accomplishments. Strange as it may seem to you, I was educated at a school where I learned nothing useful."

He laughed again, as Catchsyde came back with a tray.

He put it down and went out.

"Quite possibly," said Peter, "you suspect him, my good, worthy man."

"We shall find out who robbed us, and kill him," said Rodriguez savagely. "Meanwhile, *señor*, you will tell us where the *señorita* is."

"The *señorita* ? You mean the *señora* ?"

Peter asked this question with such convincing sincerity that the last suspicion fled from Davila's mind.

"Pepita Estudillo is unmarried. She represented herself to you as married ?"

"She did," said Peter thoughtfully. "Tell me—why ?"

He gazed at them blankly.

"Because she is a little liar, like all women."

"*Señor*— !"

"She has lied to us ; she has lied to you."

"Calm yourself with a drink and a cigarette."

"You will tell us where she is first," growled Rodriguez.

"Please," added Davila.

"And if—if I refuse ?"

He stood up, approached the tray, and poured himself out a whisky and soda. He held up his glass.

"I drink to the Soul, the virgin Soul, of the Guitar.

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You will find her at the theatre to-night. Her *dueña* is with her."

"Her—*dueña*?"

"As a *caballero* that, surely, was my first duty—to find her what we call a watch-dog. If you won't drink, may I offer you a cigarette?"

"You say she will be at the theatre?"

"What a disappointment it would be to the public if she were not. Really, the public, not to mention the management, would protect her, if she called upon them to do so. I am one of the public. Yes; you will find her at the theatre, but whether she will consent to see you is another matter. It is later than I thought. I promised to meet the *señora*, I mean the *señorita*, at the theatre after her performance, but I must have a cutlet at my club first."

The *señores*, after refusing a last offer of refreshment, withdrew. Catchsyde showed them out; Peter sank back in his chair, wiping his forehead, as the Count of Monte Cristo always did in emotional moments. Catchsyde came back, grinning:

"You'll excuse me for saying so, sir, but you're a champion. Bluffed 'em."

"Thank you," said Peter, "but somehow, old chap, I have lost my appetite for dinner. Still—put out a clean white waistcoat."

So Pepita was unmarried—!

That thought obsessed her knight as he dressed for dinner. She had slipped on a wedding-ring to protect herself against unwelcome attentions from him. Cynics may laugh at Peter's point of view, holding the opinion that the plain gold ring is a lure rather than a preventive to an encrusted bachelor. But cynics did not know Peter, or rather he refused intimate acquaintance with them. "The child," thought Peter, "regards me as a man old enough to be her father. And so I am." Obviously, too, the *señores* regarded the *señorita* as a pawn to be pushed here and there, to be used and abused in furtherance of their traitorous plans. It was amusing to reflect that these dour gentlemen had been bluffed by one whom they regarded as a simpleton.

Appetite for his cutlet returned to him as he ascended the

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steps of his club. Removing his coat and muffler, he encountered Murdoch. Peter decided that this second meeting was no coincidence; and proposed that they should dine together. In a sporting spirit he suggested that they might toss a coin to determine who paid for the dinner. Murdoch fished half a crown out of his pocket.

"Woman," said Peter.

A good omen. Woman it was.

They dined at a small table. Peter's solemn face provoked a question.

"I say, Parvin, where did you lose that disarming smile of yours?"

"I will tell you," replied Peter.

He told his tale not too well, but it seemed to interest and astound Murdoch even as it had interested and astounded Aunt Phoebe.

"I must let this soak in, Parvin."

Murdoch sipped a noble red wine, staring at Peter's whimsical face.

"Would you like," asked Peter, "to renew acquaintance with Don Ramon's daughter? She comes on at nine-fifteen. Shall I secure *two* stalls?"

"If you can get them."

Two stalls were reserved by the hall porter.

Murdoch ordered a modest pint of the best port.

"I mustn't fuddle my poor wits, Murdoch. I may need 'em after the show."

"You expect trouble after the show?"

"I expect to find Davila and Rodriguez at the theatre. They won't attempt violence there. Their objective, for the moment, is to discover Pepita's sanctuary. They may lie low to-night, and follow my aunt's car as they followed Pepita's taxi this afternoon."

"Yes; it's a thousand to three they will."

"I shall try to bluff them again, as I did before dinner. Will you stand by?"

"With pleasure."

"You know everything, Murdoch. Tell me what you would have done, had Pepita, bless her! appealed to you?"

"I should have appealed on her behalf to Caesar. I mean—Authority. All the same, Estudillo's daughter has

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intelligence enough to grasp the fact that our Foreign Office is Laodicean in these matters; Even in Pam's time that *Civis Romanus sum* stunt was hot air. Pepita is not a British subject. What I might have done cuts no ice; what you have done interests me enormously. These rascals robbed a young girl of her papers, her money, and her hopes; you have robbed them. As yet they are not sure of that. I shall order coffee and a cigar, but no old brandy."

THE two stalls at the Acropolis were far back but central. Murdoch seemed to be more interested in the audience than in the performers, a troupe of clever acrobats. Perhaps he had seen too many monkeys in tropical forests swinging from branch to branch. Pepita was billed to appear after the acrobats. In the programme Peter read a short notice advertising the fact that the engagement of the Soul of the Guitar would terminate in two weeks.

She came on.

Murdoch gripped his arm :

"She's a darling, Parvin."

"Wait till you hear her sing."

She sang delightfully, although her voice was too small for the huge Acropolis. Nevertheless, quality carried it to the back of the pit and gallery. Under cover of the applause that greeted the first number, Murdoch said :

"A swan song. She sings like a doomed bird."

"Doomed ?"

"I speak figuratively. She represents a race that is petering out."

Was this an allusion to his own name ?

Pepita picked up her baby guitar and played softly an air unfamiliar to English ears, a haunting refrain in a minor key. With a larger guitar she repeated the simple theme with variations. When she played the same air for the third time on the biggest guitar, the orchestra accompanied her. The message to the audience went home. The still, small voice of the soul had revealed itself as if it came from an innocent child; and it gathered strength and volume till, at last, it thundered and crashed as great combers crash with the resistless force of the ocean behind them, upon granite rocks. . . .

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"A clarion call," observed Murdoch.

The final effect was to come. As the volume of sound diminished, nearly all lights were extinguished. Pepita could be seen, a dim shadow. She snatched up the tiny guitar, and played *pianissimo* the introductory theme. With the last notes, she vanished. As the lights went up, Peter said excitedly :

"This is new."

"No," replied Murdoch, "it is so old that we have forgotten it."

Pepita sang three more songs. But Peter tore himself away from the last.

"I'm going to the stage door," he whispered. "You follow in five minutes and wait for me."

Murdoch nodded.

Peter hastened to the back of the building, where his eyes were gladdened by the sight of his aunt's closed car. The door-keeper glanced at his card. Evidently, he had instructions.

"This way, sir."

"I know the way." Peter slipped a coin into the man's hand. "If a friend of mine, a Major Murdoch, is sent for, please show him in. Major Murdoch will be at the stage door in a minute or two."

"That will be quite all right, sir."

Peter found his way to the dressing-room, where Miss Parvin was sitting alone with the dresser.

"She was wonderful to-night, Aunt Phoebe. I wish you had been in front."

"I think I am in front," said Miss Parvin.

Pepita danced in.

"Was I good? Did you like me, Don Pedro?"

Had she forgotten the *señoras*? Apparently she had. Passing from a well-lighted thoroughfare into a mean street, Peter had glanced from right to left. He had expected to detect Rodriguez and Davila lurking in the shadows; but he had not seen them. Where were they? He asked Pepita if he might present Murdoch. Pepita clapped her hands.

"*The famous traveller—?* I shall be enchanted."

The dresser, who belonged to the theatre, was sent to the

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stage door, as Pepita explained that her dressing-room had to be vacated within half an hour.

"Major Murdoch," said Miss Parvin, "can return with us to Cavendish Square, if you have anything of importance to tell us."

"I saw Rodriguez and Davila before dinner. They are bloody but unbowed."

Murdoch was ushered in and presented to the ladies. He wasted no time in compliments. Possibly a glance at Miss Parvin satisfied him that she was a woman of commonsense.

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss Parvin. I ask permission to join this protection syndicate as confidential adviser."

"I think we need sound advice, Major Murdoch."

"Murdoch and I will go now," said Peter. "We shall secure a taxi, and draw up behind your car, Aunt Phoebe. You mustn't drive direct to Cavendish Square, because it is certain that you will be followed."

Aunt Phoebe nodded. Murdoch was talking to Pepita, still aglow with her evening's triumph.

"I want you," went on Peter, "to drive to a small restaurant in Soho, whose proprietor happens to be a friend of mine. When you step into your car, you will say 'Home' to your chauffeur in a loud voice. In Regent Street, you will instruct him to drive to the address I have written down on this paper. Let him get nearly as far as Oxford Circus. You will find Murdoch and me at the restaurant door. We shall sup together in a private room; you will leave the restaurant by the back door which opens into another street. Has your shover been long in your service?"

"Ten years."

"You can trust him?"

"I can."

"Capital. Here is the address."

Within two minutes Peter and Murdoch were back in the dingy street. Peter had a word with the chauffeur; Murdoch went in search of a taxi. When he rolled up in it, long before the ladies appeared, Peter slipped away down the street. Before he left Murdoch he whispered: "Nothing will happen here." From his tone, it might be surmised that something would happen later on.

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Presently the ladies passed through double swing-doors. They were escorted to the car guarded by two cavaliers.

"Home," said Miss Parvin.

As soon as Murdoch and Peter were in their taxi, Peter said with a chuckle: "I saw Davila. In two twos you and I slip out of this, and walk to the field of battle."

"You think there's going to be a battle?"

"Of wits. We shall fight on ground chosen by us, a big advantage."

Peter stopped the taxi. As he stepped on to the kerb, he could see the tail light of his aunt's car. It was hidden a moment later by a passing taxi.

"They're in that," said Peter.

He turned sharply to the right and on till he reached Dean Street, and thence into the heart of Soho, pausing at the door of a small Italian restaurant. The *padrone* welcomed them.

"*Va bene, signori*, all is prepared."

"I 'phoned him from the club," said Peter. He shook hands with the *padrone*, telling Murdoch to remain at the entrance till the ladies arrived and adding in a whisper: "The others will come later." Peter talked fluent Italian. As he ascended a narrow flight of stairs, Murdoch overheard words which indicated Italian food—*zuppa di pesce—fritto misto*.

Pepita and Aunt Phoebe arrived in five minutes.

The *padrone* showed the party into his best private room. Miss Parvin eyed it with interest.

"Are we in Bohemia?"

"Bohemia," replied Murdoch, "lies in our hearts, Miss Parvin."

"It is too early to sup," said Peter. He looked at his watch. "If our visitors come at all, they ought to be here immediately."

"*Madre de Dios!*" ejaculated Pepita.

"We are going to do," said Peter, "what ought to have been done at first. The Central Americans are bargainers. In this case, after some haggling, I hope that we shall be able to impose our terms. Ah! I was not mistaken."

Voices were heard from below. The *padrone* rushed in.

"Two *signori* wish to see the Soul of the Guitar."

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"Please tell the *signori* that we were expecting them and will be delighted to receive them. When they go, you can serve our little supper. Meanwhile, Giuseppe, put two bottles of your best champagne not on but near the ice."

"I am ever so proud," murmured Pepita, "that my mother was English. It amazes me that she didn't marry an Englishman."

The little witch looked at Murdoch, but she kissed the tips of her fingers at Peter. At that moment, he noticed that she had removed the wedding-ring. Miss Parvin sat down.

Davila and Rodriguez made a dignified entrance. Peter did the honours.

"This, *señores*, is the *dueña* whom I have provided for your compatriot; and this is Major Murdoch, who knows Aguaruna well. Perhaps you have met him before. He is another friend. You can talk frankly before him?"

"We are here to talk to Pepita. Why have you left us?" he asked, turning to her.

"*Ohé!* Why? Because it is not fitting that a young lady should be in the care of two men."

"You mock at us. Do you know that we have been robbed of valuable papers and money?"

"So I have been told. *Que lastima!* What a bore for you. I sympathise, because I, too, have been robbed of valuable papers, no?"

"They are valueless, Pepita. They are promises to pay made by a man who has nothing to pay with, a man who is in prison. Rodriguez and I have been robbed by some man whom *you* have cajoled to do such dirty work."

"Are your own hands clean?" asked Peter.

Rodriguez glared at his foster-sister.

"If I send a cable to Aguaruna to-morrow—?"

"Have you enough money left, Juan, to send a cable?"

"The cable will be sent, unless—"

"Unless something happens," concluded Peter. He confronted Davila, who had not sat down. "May I assume, *señor*, that your papers were also promises to pay, records, some of them, of concessions made by you and guaranteed by the President of Aguaruna? I am merely guessing."

"Something of the sort," admitted Davila.

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"And if I told you that they were valueless—"

"*Virgen santisima*—!"

"Let us be perfectly calm. I make allowances for you. To-day, you have been too concerned with this loss of papers and cash to do business?"

"That is true, but—"

"You have not read the evening paper?"

"No."

"In a word, you are not in touch with your own country. Permit me to read you a paragraph in the 'Stop Press' column of an evening paper."

He took from his pocket a paper and read aloud:

"The President of the Republic of Aguaruna was deposed to-day. The former President has been reinstated."

"What are your concessions worth?" asked Peter. "Now tell me, how much money has been taken from you?"

"Five hundred pounds."

"Almost enough," said Murdoch drily, "to secure a revolution in Aguaruna—"

Pepita had jumped up as soon as Peter read the paragraph. She rushed to him.

"Let me read this blessed news."

He thrust the paper into her hand.

"There."

She read the blessed news, showed it to Miss Parvin, flung her slender arms about her *dueña's* neck, and burst into tears.

"If you are sending a cable to-morrow," suggested Peter, "convey, *señor*, my warmest congratulations to Don Ramon Estudillo."

Davila and Rodriguez muttered Spanish words that may not be set down. Peter went on imperturbably:

"You have backed, *señores*, the wrong horse; and, wherever you go after you leave England, I advise you, for your own sakes, to keep out of Aguaruna. Now, it is for us to impose terms. Part of the stolen money belongs to this young lady, who has earned it. Your papers, I repeat, are valueless, except as incriminating evidence against you. You may take it from me that I have sufficient influence at our Foreign Office to secure your deportation as undesir-

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able aliens. I can have you sent back to Aguaruna. The *señorita* sought our protection ; and she will have it till her father takes charge of her. To-morrow, at ten-thirty, you will give up your office in Parvin Buildings. And then I will accompany you to the offices of Thomas Cook and Sons, where I shall buy you tickets to Panama. After the boat has sailed, you will receive fifty pounds apiece from the purser. If you accept these generous terms in the right spirit, you shall have a further grant in aid to relieve immediate necessities. If you refuse—”

“ Yes ? ”

“ I shall send for the police. Please remember that you are in the presence of ladies ; and keep your hands out of your pockets.”

Davila said hoarsely :

“ We must accept your terms, *señor*. It is—destiny.”

“ Quite,” agreed Peter. “ There are pens and ink here. I will draw up an agreement between us, because Destiny shines upon one man one day and rains upon him the next.”

He rang the bell, before he moved to the writing-table. The *padrone* answered it promptly.

“ *Amico mio*, bring me twenty pounds in notes.”

Before Giuseppe returned, a practised writer had written what was necessary. He read it aloud :

“ We, the undersigned, admit that we brought the *señorita* Pepita Estudillo to England in the hope that we might raise funds which would restore to power the lately deposed President. Being unable to accomplish this, we entered into negotiations with the representative of Aguaruna now in London. In consideration of twenty pounds, the receipt of which we acknowledge, in consideration too, that our tickets shall be bought to-morrow from London to Panama, and that the sum of one hundred pounds shall be paid to us by the purser of the ship, as soon as we are in blue water, we agree to leave England and never to return to it. We herewith relinquish any claims whatsoever upon the salary of the *señorita* aforesaid, and, at her wish, we leave her in the safe-keeping of her own personal friends.”

Giuseppe entered with the notes upon a salver.

“ Giuseppe,” said Peter, in his lightest tone, “ be good

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enough to witness the signatures of these gentlemen ; and take a good look at them, so that you will know them again, if you see them."

He handed a full pen, with a smile, to Davila, who shrugged his shoulders and signed. Rodriguez, scowling fiercely, attached his autograph to the paper. Giuseppe witnessed it. " *Bueno !* " said Peter. " There is a wonderful sherry here, *señores*, with the happy label—*Sol de Andalucía*. Shall we drink to our next merry meeting—to-morrow ? "

" A thousand thanks, *señor*, no. "

" Show these gentlemen out, Giuseppe. Call a taxi, if they need one. "

The *señores* retired.

Peter crossed the room to Pepita, apparently convulsed by her emotions. She was holding the evening paper tightly crushed against her heart.

" Calm yourself, Pepita. "

" *Ay de mi !* Oh ! you English ! "

She thrust the paper at Murdoch.

The stop press column had no mention of Aguaruna. It was filled with racing and football news.

" Spoofed — ! " exclaimed Murdoch.

" Another bluff, " admitted Peter, " which served its simple purpose. I wanted this, " he tapped the agreement. " We can use this against them, if they make further trouble. Probably they will discover the truth to-night, but they will cool off before to-morrow. "

" You mean to meet them to-morrow ? " asked Pepita anxiously.

" I wouldn't miss our meeting for the world. Now, let us enjoy our supper. "

Aunt Phoebe nodded majestically.

" I wish, " she said regretfully, " that your Uncle Joseph were here. "

Giuseppe appeared with the *zuppa di pesce*.

" Did those gentlemen say anything to you ? " asked Peter of the *padrone*.

" Yes ; they ask for an evening paper. But I—I am not giving away evening papers to gentlemen who are not gentlemen. "

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"Quite right. Fetch the champagne, my friend."

It was a memorable supper.

After the *fritto misto*, Miss Parvin declared her intention of being present when the *señores* came to Peter's rooms. Protest was wasted. Murdoch said: "You must count me in, too, Parvin." Aunt Phoebe affirmed that she wouldn't miss the "fun" for anything. More, she was the owner of Parvin Buildings, and wanted to see undesirable tenants off her premises. When the *zabaglione* was served, she and Murdoch talked together. Peter gave his attention to Pepita.

"Why," he whispered, "did you pretend that you were a *señora*?"

"You must guess my reasons," she replied demurely.

"You thought, perhaps—"

"I was too excited to think, Don Pedro, and so were you. How brave and dear you have been!"

Peter blushed, as he stammered out:

"I have had till now no adventures, none. All this has been rejuvenating to me."

"And to your aunt, too, no?"

"Pepita, tell me this. If we get these rascals out of England, what are your plans?"

"*Ojala!*—my plans? I must earn money enough to get my poor father out of prison. With us, as you see, it is always a question of money. I am going to play in your big towns. I hope to play in Paris, and again in London, later on."

"You will want a business manager. Dare I apply for that honourable post?"

"Make your application, Don Pedro, after to-morrow."

More might have been said, but Aunt Phoebe discovered that it was past midnight. Her car was at the back door. The gentlemen accompanied the ladies to Cavendish Square. Peter was left alone with Murdoch. For a minute or two they walked up and down with eyes keenly alert, making sure that they had not been followed.

"Pepita squeezed my hand," confessed Peter.

"I don't think," said Murdoch gravely, "that it has occurred to either you or Pepita that Don Ramon Estudillo may be executed, as Rodriguez hinted, if a cable *is* despatched to Aguaruna to-morrow."

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"Good Lord!" groaned Peter; "I am out of the frying-pan and into the fire!"

"You have done what you could," said Murdoch. "If they turn up at ten-thirty, if they accept tickets to Panama, as I think they will, will you let me take an active part in this adventure of yours?"

"My dear fellow—"

"I make no promises, but I'll see what I can do. Lunch with me at the club."

They shook hands and parted.

AUNT PHOEBE arrived at ten, next day, and seated herself in a hard, upright chair, looking, so Peter thought, uncommonly like an uncompromising chairman of a Board of Directors.

"What are your intentions in regard to this young *unmarried* lady?" she asked.

"She admitted to you that she was unmarried?"

"Tchah! Anybody but you would have seen through a trick so childish. But—answer my question, Peter."

"My intentions, which will become attentions, are honourable, my dear Aunt. I adore her; I am her slave."

"Don't drivel! You will tell me next that you fell in love with her at sight."

"I did; I'm not ashamed of it. You always wanted me to go into business. To-day, I hope to accept a situation as Pepita's business manager. I must make good as that."

"Can you?"

"That remains to be seen. Somehow I can see myself as Pepita's lover, but I cannot envisage her in love with me. As an adventurer of England I must try to win her. Any objections?"

"Um! And if I objected, what would you say?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. I should feel that further talk between us about Pepita would be futile."

"Really? I need not remind you that I'm a rich woman."

"No," Peter smiled, "and I was thinking as I shaved this morning that some of your money came out of Aguaruna. Murdoch says that Uncle Joseph was the only Englishman who took money out of Aguaruna, a great

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tribute. I have a dismal premonition that I may put money into that land of misrule, another happy phrase of Murdoch's, *and not take it out.*"

Aunt Phoebe said severely :

"You will oblige me by doing nothing of the sort without consulting me and—and Major Murdoch."

At this moment, Catchsyde ushered in Pepita.

"You disobedient child!" exclaimed Miss Parvin.

"I kiss your feet," said Peter, in Spanish. "You have come here to tell me that I may act as your agent and manager?"

"I came—I couldn't keep away—because I am sure, Don Pedro, that you are in danger. You have been in danger ever since you met me."

"That is perfectly true."

"Are you armed?"

"I have a croquet mallet in the hall, a very serviceable weapon."

Murdoch joined them and expressed no surprise at seeing Pepita. Peter could see that he was looking at the comfortable appointments of the sitting-room with the eyes of a man who has roughed it all his life, but he made no comments.

At ten-thirty, Rodriguez and Davila arrived. Davila bore himself jauntily, bowed to Peter, and lightly touched his chest, after the fashion of a fencer who acknowledges a "hit."

"My congratulations, *señor*. But, after all, the victory is with us. Our friends, not yours, remain in power. For the rest, we are as anxious to return to Aguaruna as you are to be rid of us. A boat leaves Plymouth the day after tomorrow. If the *señorita* has any message to send to her father, I will undertake to deliver it in person."

He smiled evilly at Pepita.

"Thank you," said Peter. "Are you ready to accompany us to Thomas Cook's offices?"

"We surrender the keys of our own."

He placed them on a table, as Peter turned to his aunt.

"You will wait for us here?"

Miss Parvin nodded. Peter opened the door; the *señores*

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passed out; Murdoch and Peter followed. Miss Parvin, after a glance at Pepita's troubled face, thought to herself:

"Is this climax or anticlimax?"

PETER returned alone within an hour.

"I have escaped," wailed Pepita; "and my father remains in prison—at their mercy."

"Your father," replied Peter, "is a man of many friends. And so is Murdoch. All will be well."

"*Ay de mi!* If I could think so."

"If you won't dry your eyes, Pepita, will you allow me to dry them for you?"

She smiled faintly. Peter whispered something to his aunt, who nodded.

"We will take you home, child."

"To my hotel?"

"My house is your home till these knaves are on board ship."

Accordingly, Pepita was taken back to Cavendish Square, where she retired to her bedroom. Peter, after a short talk with Miss Parvin, non-committal on her part, walked to his club, not very happy in his mind, uneasily sensible that the methods of Don Quixote were out of date. Waiting for Murdoch he kept on muttering to himself:

"Is this, after all, a misadventure? Have I made an egregious ass of myself?"

Murdoch was late, but hungry. He ordered a thick steak, fried onions and old ale, adding unselfishly: "I wish you had my appetite."

"Pepita," said Mr. Parvin dolefully, "knows that I have put a noose round her father's neck!"

"Rot! You must have a cocktail at once. Have you got the loot?"

"It is in the hall in a small *attaché* case."

"Good! Whilst our steak is being grilled, I will take you, Parvin, off your gridiron. I have spent a profitable hour with a man whose name I'll keep to myself. He has promised to pull strings; he is pulling them. You ought, in the first instance, to have gone to him, but you don't know him. Our rascals will meet Don Ramon even sooner than they think; meet him *and pass him* in mid-ocean—"

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“Murdoch—!”

“You see the President of Aguaruna will be only too glad to get rid of Don Ramon and at the same time to do a favour to our Government. I shall see the Consul-General this afternoon, who must be squared. From now on regard this affair as comic opera. We defeat the enemy with their own ill-gotten gold. Do you think you can tackle the steak?”

“I think I can,” said Peter cautiously.

“Not a word to Pepita or anybody else till the villains are out of England. I have arranged to have them watched; one good turn deserves another. You know, Parvin, I have got quite a kick out of this.”

“A kick may be coming to me,” observed Peter.

ACTING upon advice from Murdoch, Peter kept away from Pepita for three anxious days and nights. “I shall call to see you,” he wrote, “when I can relieve all your anxieties—yours devotedly, DON QUIXOTE.”

Upon the morning following a journey to and from Plymouth, Peter met the Soul of the Guitar in Kensington Gardens. They sat upon a bench, not far from the Round Pond, where toy boats were putting bravely to sea.

“Murdoch and I saw the *señores* on board. By now they are off Ushant. Your father, Don Ramon, sails for England within a few days. In less than a month you will be in his arms. Perhaps you will be able to persuade him to live and work here. Part of his property has been restored to him on the condition that he does not go back to Aguaruna.”

“You—you have done this?”

“I wish I could say so. You must thank Murdoch. I made a sad mess of things, Pepita, I exposed you and your father to real danger—”

“You exposed yourself.”

After a pause she said quietly:

“How peaceful it is here, Don Pedro—how tranquil! I don’t think my father will need coaxing to remain in England. He may ask me to leave the stage—”

“You have had a success.”

“For a moment, yes. But success means travel. I am not a bird of passage. I think I could sing my best in a

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little garden of my own, to the people whom I loved. I sang yesterday to your aunt. I love her, because she has been so kind to me. You do not love your aunt, no ? ”

“ Between ourselves, she has never approved of me ; she thinks me a fool, and I am.”

“ I do not think so ; perhaps I am a fool, too, but anyway, I have had enough of excitements.”

“ *Caramba !* ”

“ Why do you say that ? ”

“ Because *I* haven’t.”

She sighed.

Peter wanted to make love to Pepita, but he found himself almost speechless in her dear presence, the bold lover in imagination only. He heard her soft voice, as if at a distance :

“ What excitements do you want ? ”

Desperately, he answered her :

“ All the excitements, Pepita, that are enshrined in a word of four letters—love. Life has not been exciting for me, because I have loved too well my own comfort, my easy ways. You whirled me out of all that. I love you ; I want you—and, of course, you look upon me as Don Quixote.”

Pepita glanced about her. Couples sat under the trees ; couples walked upon the green turf ; a nurserymaid was approaching pushing a perambulator.

She slipped her hand into his.

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AUNT PHOEBE rebuked them for being late for luncheon, but her shrewd eyes twinkled as she said :

“ I forgive you, Peter, because you are a gentleman adventurer ; and I forgive Pepita because she has changed you from a mouse into a man.”

After luncheon, she asked a question :

“ Have you destroyed those documents which you stole ? ”

“ A mouse might have done so,” replied Peter. “ No, Aunt Phoebe, I have not. They are on their way to Aguaruna, addressed, under seal, to the President. He will have to guess who sent them. Murdoch says that he may want to visit Aguaruna again ; and he has no wish to meet

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the *señores*. According to Murdoch, these documents are so incriminating that the President, not a humane man, may deem it expedient to hang Davila and Rodriguez."

"It is much cheaper," said Pepita, "than keeping them in prison—and safer."

"I regard you two," said Miss Parvin, "as children. If you have made any sensible plans for the future, I shall be glad to hear them."

"I have tasted blood," replied Peter; "and I have lived in Parvin Buildings. I am going to ask you, Aunt Phoebe, to allow me to pull down Parvin Buildings and to put in its place Parvin House, which, if you will allow me to employ the best men, shall be an enduring monument to Uncle Joseph. I have jotted down a few figures for you. It is a disgraceful fact that Parvin Buildings is known in the City of London as the Den of Thieves."

"I didn't know that."

"You can take my word for it."

"Um! Oddly enough, your uncle would have done what you suggest had he been less old and less tired."

"I can double your rentals. You will have permanent tenants—"

"I understand, but your legacy will vanish automatically in a cloud of dust."

"I want to be your first tenant."

"What?"

"Don Ramon is a man of business; he knows about rubber, tea and coffee. Pepita thinks that he will take me on as a junior partner."

"You—in business?"

"Why not?" asked Peter audaciously.

It took time to answer that question. But it was answered, and satisfactorily, within twelve months.

