CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSE OF SHIRES

ANTHONY, as before mentioned, had no theatrical tastes. Theatres, cinemas and music-halls left him cold, but whatever else one might be it was impossible to be cold in the companionship of Walter Shires, and in company with a stomach that had given up feeling surprised and was settling down to the fact that a half bottle of Burgundy and a liqueur could live in temporary and great contentment with a number of whiskies and sodas.

A band, a blaze of light and a haze of tobacco smoke did not disturb this harmonious relationship, nor did the popping of a champagne cork in a bar where Mr. Brownlow of Oakley Stratton had suddenly appeared without any dog, but flushed and full of good-fellowship. Champagne on top of whisky, it did not seem to matter in the least, and Shires was drinking it, and not only drinking it but calling for more, for a Mr. Bland, who looked like a bishop, was now of their party, also a gentleman by name of Carter, a dead stranger from the Five Towns, who paid for nothing.

"No, no, I insist," said Anthony, flushed and greatly enjoying himself, and another cork went and a cigar-box was handed round. Then he was out in the foyer, alone, the Shires party having vanished like blown-out lights; out in the foyer alone amidst a moving crowd drawn there by the interval, men

and women, and women by themselves and in little groups. A very correct and orderly crowd, but mixed—decidedly mixed. There were men in grey tweed and gentlemen in evening dress and ladies, some quite matronly and evidently in from the country with their husbands. "Highly respectable people," hiccoughed Anthony to himself as he moved slowly about, pursing out his lips, slightly fixed of eye and a cigar between his fingers.

Then, suddenly a bright young woman evolved from the crowd, an impudent-faced hussy but good-looking, with her hand for the tenth of a second on Anthony's sleeve.

"Hello, Dad!" said the girl.

She was swinging away, laughing with her female companion, when something in Anthony's face, manner or general make-up made her pause, and then he and she were talking—shade of Mrs. Harrop!—talking like old friends in an intimacy that threatened to ripen with tropical speed when Shires, coming up, broke the spell.

"Come along," said Shires, "the car's waiting." He linked his arm with that of the other and dragged him away. The engine man was pretty well "tanked" without, however, showing the least outward sign of it; he had saved the old buffer from making a tool of himself, and in the car, now driving towards his home, he talked with all the seriousness of his condition about a certain type of Birmingham woman; in fact, he might have been president of a watch committee or lecturing the

Y.M.C.A., till the car drawing up at his house jerked him from his subject back into the convivial mood.

"Come along in and have a drink," said Shires.

Opening the door with a latch-key and telling the chauffeur to wait, he led the way into a study that was half a library and where a newly tended fire was burning on the hearth.

Here was great peace and comfort and warmth, saddle-bag arm-chairs by the hearth, tantalus case and soda siphon, pipes and cigar-boxes. To Anthony's mind, vague, but still receptive and even cogitative, the contrast between this bachelor interior and his own bleak den in Regent's Park came home in a distorted manner, but no less pungently for that. Then seated on either side of the fireplace they talked. At first Shires did the talking, half comprehended by Anthony, and then the representative of Harrop & Mandelberg did the talking, half listened to by Shires. The conversation ran over women, wine, racing, restaurants and the cities of Birmingham, London and Paris, but always working at the back of Anthony's mind was the contrast, newly discovered, between himself and his host, his house and the house of Shires.

On the Day of Judgment, if the Judge be just, houses and places will be called to account no less than the sinners that inhabit them. What the house in Regent's Park had done to Anthony was less wicked no doubt than what the houses of the

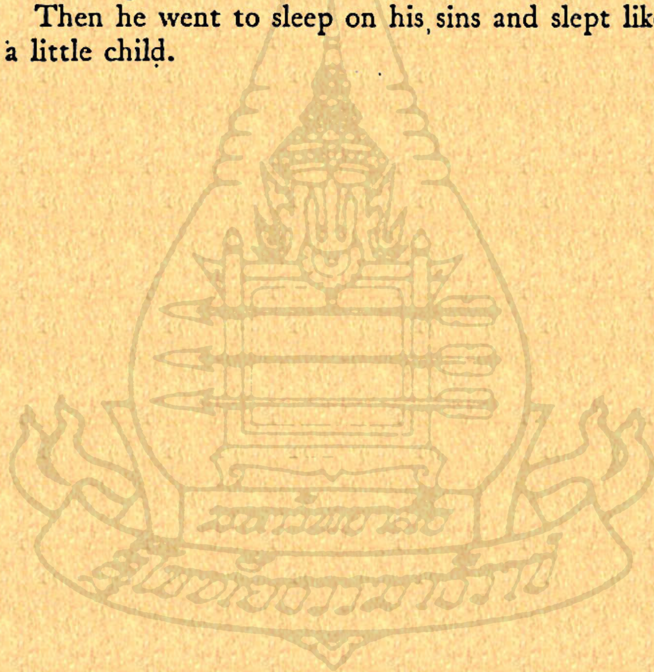
Euston Road, say, are doing to their inhabitants, but in its way it was almost as deadly; ably assisted by Selina Harrop, it had flattened out his life and deflated his heart. It had painted things grey, or at least London colour, and it had done all this so subtly and with such stealth that the last man conscious of the fact was Anthony. It was only at the touch of disaster that he experienced the first vague feeling of revolt against his life and surroundings, and it was only now under the influence of whisky and the house of Shires that he gave his feeling first voice.

His open and innocent soul disclosed itself and told things—domestic worries and the fact that Mandelberg looked upon him as a cypher in the business, the fact that he couldn't smoke cigars in his study because of the curtains, that his wife did most of the ordering of the servants, which was a mistake, for a house can't have two masters, and that life in London was not nearly so pleasant as life in Birmingham—at least such a life as Shires led. The fact that he was a good-natured man who would have made an ideal father but who was blighted and demagnetised by having nothing to love or care for might have been apparent to an acute observer and listener, but Shires wasn't listening, and if he had been listening he wouldn't have understood.

It was half-past one o'clock when the séance came to an end and the two parted, Anthony going off to the hotel in the car that had been waiting since twelve.

He retired to bed hazy but satisfied. It seemed to him as he switched off the light that he had been doing a great deal of business all day, as certainly he had; profitable business, as certainly he hadn't. The music-hall, the band, the girl who had spoken to him, all were mixed up in a goulash with saddle-bag easy chairs, Shires, the affable gentlemen in the smoking-room of the hotel, and a general sense of well-being and comfort.

Then he went to sleep on his sins and slept like a little child.



CHAPTER VII

THE TELEGRAM

He awoke at eight o'clock without any morning reflections to torment him. It was, in fact, the most pleasurable morning awakening he had experienced for many years, marred only by a slight dryness of the tongue, which soon passed.

A valet, who had put early morning tea by his bed, was pulling up the blind and the day outside was bright.

The fact that had stood at his bedside yesterday, the fact that he was as good as ruined, was still there, but shadowy and undisturbing as the fact that some day he had to die.

His good spirits held, and at ten o'clock, having received instructions as to the way from the hall porter, he started for the Burlingham offices on foot. They are situated in Icknield Street, not far from the great Lucas lamp factory and in the region of courts. Courts that have nothing to do with the Court of St. James; mean courtyards surrounded by mean houses and lurking on either side of dismal streets.

It was a quarter-past ten, Shires had already arrived at the office and the business representative of Harrop & Mandelberg was shown right up to a room where, at a roll-top desk and before a pile of morning correspondence, the business repre-

sentative of the firm of Burlingham was waiting to receive him.

"Sit down," said Shires. He finished making a note on the corner of a sheet of paper, put the sheet under a paper-weight and turning in his chair offered Anthony a cigarette, which the latter refused.

"I never smoke before lunch," said Anthony.

"A very good habit," said the other lighting a cigarette; "and now about your business—a moment." A knock had come to the door and a clerk entered with a telegram.

Shires opened it. It was a long telegram in code, and instead of decoding it himself, as was his habit, he sent it out to be dealt with.

"Business," said Anthony when they were alone again. "Yes, Mr. Burlingham, as I told you last night, asked me, or at least suggested, that I should come down here and interview you on a matter that touches us very closely—the matter of a loan."

"A loan," said the other. "Yes, go on."

Anthony went on. He stated the case of his firm as far as he knew it, and never in his life had he found it so difficult to talk—his very respiratory apparatus seemed affected. It was like talking to a stone wall; worse, the man in front of him, expressionless and monocled, seemed surrounded by a cold business aura hopeless to penetrate by words or argument. He listened, or seemed to listen, but said nothing to help. The Shires of this morning contrasted with

the Shires of last night was as a frozen corpse contrasted with a live man.

"And that's our position," finished Anthony.

Shires flicked the ash from his cigarette. He was about to speak when a knock came again to the door and the clerk entered with the decoded telegram.

"A moment," said he. The clerk went out and Shires glanced over the paper in his hands. He frowned slightly as he read and his lips fell apart.

"Damn foolishness!" said he, flinging the paper on the desk. "General election. A general election is being forced over the tariff business; this is first news and private, so keep it to yourself. Tomfoolery!"

"Tariff business?"

"Yes, the protection of industries, the one obvious thing to be done. Idiocy!"

"How?"

"How! Why the blazes doesn't he protect them? What does he want a general election for; he has the power, why don't he use it? General election. Good Lord!"

He flung the paper on the desk as if disposing of the whole affair, and, turning to Anthony, began to talk cold-drawn business.

"It's not the slightest bit of use," said he. "You see the position we're in. You come to us for a loan on top of what we have lent, and I'd give it to you—at least I'd guarantee it to you—because I am an old friend of Mandelberg's and because you are an honest firm producing post-war stuff that's

decent and so keeping up the general credit of the country, for I tell you what's hitting us even worse than the stupidity of this rotten damn system, and that's rotten goods, post-war goods; from pins to whisky you can't rely on anything nowadays, and the foreigners are finding it out; but your stuff is O.K., and if there was a dog's chance I'd draw a cheque on my own bank for the three thou. you want; but there isn't. I look on the money we lent you as lost, or all but lost, for the factory security isn't worth much; and if you want to know why it isn't worth much go and look at the street corners from here to Lozells and the chaps out of work.

"No, I'd have done anything I could for you, but I can't part with any more precious money. If things go as they are going, I'll maybe be wanting to buy a farm in New Zealand. Now, if the Government had said, 'We are going to put up a tariff wall that will protect sick industries without touching the price of food or necessities,' I'd have lent you this money myself—either that or I'd have advised Burlingham to extend the loan, but as it is I can do nothing. You must see for yourself; what's the good of prolonging the life of your firm a few months at the expense of our money? You can't fight the sharp foreign competition that's going on, and you must know it."

"Yes, I see," said Anthony. He hadn't much business acumen, but he could see what the other was pointing out, what Burlingham had pointed out

in London: there is no use pouring water into a sieve. The Harrop firm couldn't, under present wages conditions, meet the dumped foreign stuff; they couldn't fight Robarts and De Losy and God-knows-who. But Anthony, though an indifferent business man, had something of business tenacity in his composition.

"Suppose," said he, "suppose the Government wins the election."

"It won't," said Shires.

"But suppose it does."

"If it does," said Shires, "it will get a mandate from the people to act like a reasonable being, industries in a bad way will pick up and the unemployment roll will shorten. But it won't. The women will knock it."

"How?"

"You see," said the other, "in laying down the bed-plates for an election the Government is laying down the platform for a great big Liberal push. The Liberals have never had such a chance before; they will tell, they have already told the electors that protection of motor parts and pianos will raise the price of butter—it amounts to that, and that's what will fetch the women."

"All the same, one never knows," said Anthony vaguely.

"Yes, one never knows," said Shires; "there's always the chance of a flange that may go any moment holding out a month, and there's always the chance that foolish people may do the right

thing at the right time. Well, I'll tell you this, if the Government wins this election I'll lend you three thousand out of my own money, and I'll tell Burlingham to back you for another five thou., for, if by any chance we win, your little firm will go straight up. I tell you what, I'll write to Mandelberg to-day. Burlingham will come in with you, lending their money and their support, which means a good deal, but we'll want our share of the pie. We won't rook you, but we'll want a partnership in this new business, for if tariff reform wins it will be a new business able to breathe and fight and grow and doubling itself in the first year, if I know anything of trade."

"But won't that be too late?" asked Anthony. "The election mayn't be for a long time."

"The election will be very soon, and your firm can hold on till then. I know all about your affairs. Have to. It's my business to know about the affairs of every firm that uses a wheel or anything connected with it, not to speak of the firms that deal with tubes and piston-rods and boilers. How do you think we'd frame our contracts if we didn't know other people's secrets and costs? Well, there you are. We'll do it if tariff reform wins."

Vague agitation seized the mind of Anthony Harrop. A moment before, and fronting almost inevitable disaster, he had been quite cool; he had come to Shires in a perfunctory way because it was his duty to do so, but hoping for nothing; had

Shires turned him down he would have scarcely felt the blow.

But before this chance of reprieve vague agitation seized the mind of Anthony. He saw for the first time fully the pit he had almost escaped from; he saw himself at the bottom of the gloomy pit on the charity of his wife. What frightened him now and tried his nerves was not the chance of the fall but the chance of escape; it was like having to cross a gulf on a ten-inch plank. The free-and-easy feeling that had come to him after the hope-shattering interview with Burlingham on the day before had vanished.

"It's good of you," said he.

"Not a bit," said Shires. "We don't deal in goodness as a general rule in this shop. We're business men out to make a profit; but I'll tell you straight that all we've been talking about is like what children talk about when they get together and fancy themselves grown-up folk. Bunk. There's, in my opinion, not a dog's chance of the electors seeing sense. However, I don't want to depress you if you have any hopes. Anyhow, the offer stands, and I will write to Mandelberg to-day putting it in black and white."

Anthony rose and took his hat.

"I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Shires," said he, "and I hope when you are in London you will let me return the hospitality you extended to me last night. I will tell my partner of your great kindness when I see him, and I may consider that fact settled."

"Which fact?" asked Shires.

"The fact that you will advance this money on account of a share in our business, should the Government be returned to office."

"Yes," said Shires, "you may consider that settled."

Then the other took his departure, leaving the Burlingham building and turning to the left along Icknield Street and in the direction of the more fashionable quarter of the city.

If the nation supported the idea of a tariff to protect certain industries, including the motor-car industry, then a whole lot of unpleasant things wouldn't happen to Anthony. It was extraordinary that he had not felt the full weight of the coming unpleasantness yesterday, had not felt it till now, had not felt it till a doubtfully fumbling saving hand had materialised above him.

But he felt it now—felt it to the extent of saying to himself, "Well, if worst comes to the worst——" hinting to himself, in fact, that there was always such a thing as suicide, though he had no more idea of committing suicide than he had of taking to aviation for a living if all else failed.

Anthony, besides his suit-case, had brought two overcoats from London—one for evening wear and one slightly heavier with an astrakhan collar. He was wearing the latter now, and the unemployed at the street corners as he passed made remarks about it.

About it and about him

He was a living picture of the elderly capitalist, well-fed, prosperous, easy-going, a picture as repulsive to the socialistic mind as attractive to the mind of a certain type of woman.

But he was unconscious of the eyes that followed him and of the lips that were remarking on him, unconscious of everything but the Circus Maximus in which he was standing, a gladiator facing the retiarius Bankruptcy and the electors of the British Public the audience. Would they turn their thumbs up or down ?

Paying his bill at the "Central," he walked into the station carrying his suit-case in his hand. There was half an hour to wait before the London train started, and he occupied himself for a while watching the station crowd and looking at the papers and magazines on the book-stall.

The Circus Maximus had vanished from his mind, vanished and become part of the mist of a doubtful future forming the background of a very present fact—he was going home.

He didn't want to go home—at least just yet ; like a bird escaped from long confinement in a cage, he was not quite easy in his freedom but not quite prepared to return. The thought of driving up to Marlborough Terrace, dismissing the cab and falling back again into the old routine did not appeal to him in the least. Long years ago he had felt the same dismal repugnance on returning to school, and it came back to him now quite strangely, that feeling, as he stood before the book-stall looking at

the covers of the *Strand Magazine* and the *London Magazine* and *Cassell's Magazine*.

He would go home, of course; but another few hours wouldn't matter—a few hours free in London, untied to anything. He would go to the office to see if there were any letters and he could get a room at his Club, not the Old Travellers' which he usually haunted, but the Chess Players in Westminster Court—and nobody would know. That is to say, his wife wouldn't know. He'd only have to tell a lie. Anthony wasn't a liar and he had never lied to his wife. Untruth was repugnant to his real nature—still, this would be only a white lie, and it would ease her mind at his non-return that night.

He drifted towards the telegraph office, drifted away from it, drifted back and drifted in, took a form, put on his glasses and wrote:

"Harrop, Marlborough Terrace, Regent's Park, London. Detained in Birmingham with Mandelberg on important business, back to-morrow. Anthony."

He handed the form and half a crown across the counter, received his change and walked out.

Ten minutes later, taking his seat in the luncheon car of the express, a feeling of vague unrest came upon him.

He needn't have done that. It would have been sufficient to have said, "Detained, home

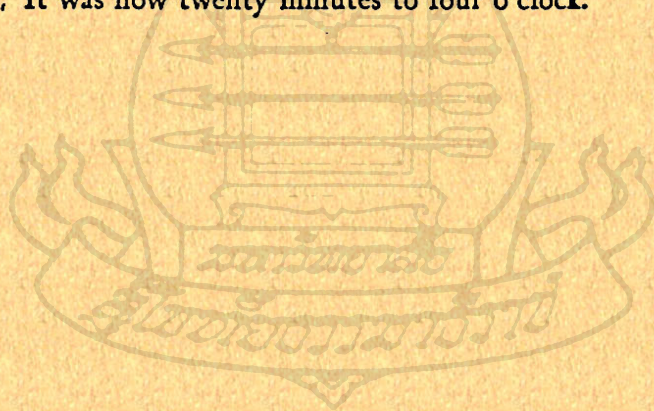
to-morrow." That would not have been an untruth, whereas he had told a circumstantial lie. He was not detained by Mandelberg, nor in Birmingham, nor on important business.

However, she would never know. All the same, he had lied, and his conscience worried him, till the waiter placed a fillet of lemon sole before him and uncorked a half bottle of Château Citron.

At Paddington the vague uneasy feeling came back, not in the form of conscience but fear lest by any untoward chance he should come across Selina or her sister Mrs. Ambrose, or anyone who might "give the show away."

This absurd dread passed before he reached Westminster Court, where he secured a room and, free of impedimenta, started for the office.

It was now twenty minutes to four o'clock.



CHAPTER VIII

ISRAEL MANDELBERG

THIS office, which was situated in Burman's Buildings off Norfolk Street, consisted of three rooms—an outer waiting-room, a room for a clerk, and the partners' room with a door whose ground-glass panelling was marked "Private": old rooms in an old building panelled with old oak and filled with the gloomy light of other days. Here, seated waiting for Mr. Harrop who had not yet arrived or for Mr. Mandelberg who was out at lunch but would be back in a minute, you could fancy anything in a Dickensian way—just the place, as Mandelberg once said, where you might expect to hear the ghost of Charles Dickens talking to Conversation Kenge about the fog outside in the Strand. Mandelberg did not love the office any more than Harrop, but it was reasonable if not cheap and handy as a business place.

This brilliant Jew, who had all but made the little firm a great success, who had fought Foreign competition and Home stupidity, Income-tax men and Super-tax men and Excess Profits-tax men, strikes, ruinous transport charges and dishonest dealers in raw material, was, like Shires, a man with a taste for life as well as business; he was reckoned a good fellow and he had a nose for horses; like Shires he divided business from pleasure.

At four o'clock on this eventful day he was still

engaged in business, seated in the partners' room going over some letters, his hat on the table at his elbow and his cane in the corner by the door.

To him, so engaged, entered Harrop.

Anthony was surprised to find the other—he fancied him still in Manchester—and Mandelberg seemed equally surprised to see Anthony.

"So you're back from Birmingham?" said he.

"Yes, I'm back from Birmingham," replied Anthony not seeing anything strange, for the moment, in the fact that his partner knew where he had been. "I went to Burlingham, as you suggested, and he proposed my going down to see Shires. I did so, and I believe I have done good business."

"Oho!" said Mandelberg. "What's the business?"

"Shires refused to advance a penny as things stand," went on the other. "He pointed out quite justifiably that in the present state of things it would be like pouring water down a sink to advance us money, but he will do so if the Government wins the election."

"What election?"

"The general election. It has decided to go to the nation on the question of a protective tariff for certain industries, ours amongst others."

"I've heard a rumour of that," said Mandelberg, "and if Shires says so it's so, for he has inside knowledge."

"He got a code wire whilst I was with him telling him definitely it is so, but that's private."

Mandelberg got up and paced the floor.

"This is good," said he; "it's great. Of course, if that's the policy of the Government there will be no delay. Shires said definitely he would make the advance?"

"Definitely; he's writing to you, but he said he didn't believe that the Government would win the election."

"Nonsense," replied Mandelberg. "It's a plain common-sense issue, and the British people have their heads screwed on tight; we can't help winning. It's great, it's great—leaving Shires alone, any man will help us once we have a tariff; money will turn fluid as water. It's great. D'you know, it's not altogether a surprise; I felt this morning something would happen. I was hunting for you to know what you'd done with Burlingham. I went to Burlingham only to find he'd gone to Paris, then I went up to your place in Regent's Park and saw Mrs. Harrop; she said you'd gone to Bruin on business."

"Good God!" said Anthony.

"What's the matter?" asked Mandelberg.

"You saw my wife! When?"

"A couple of hours ago."

"Did she seem surprised to see you?"

"No, just the same as ever—she never expresses wild delight when we meet. You know how she feels towards me: I'm not good enough for her in the social way, and I'm a Jew."

"A couple of hours ago," said Anthony, not

heeding the other. "She couldn't have received my wire—she said nothing about a wire?"

"Nothing. What wire?"

"One I sent from Birmingham before the train started saying I was detained in Birmingham with you on important business and wouldn't be back till to-morrow."

"What on earth did you do that for?" asked his partner.

"I didn't want to go home to-night—I'm fed up with things and thought I'd have a night in town away from that beastly house."

"I see," said Mandelberg.

Had he been alone he would have laughed at this artless revelation on the part of the highly respectable Anthony. He frankly detested Mrs. Harrop; how a man could exist tied to such a woman had always been a marvel to him, and it tickled him immensely to think of her face when she opened that wire, as she had certainly done by this.

Anthony had taken his seat in one of the big arm-chairs.

"Two hours ago," said he, feeling like a man in a nightmare trying to solve an impossible sum in arithmetic, "and the thing would take an hour to reach her—maybe more—and I sent it from Birmingham four hours ago, about. I feel as if my head was going."

"It may be delayed but she'd have got it shortly after I left the house," said Mandelberg.

"And it said I was detained with you in Birmingham," repeated Anthony.

"A statement which was obviously impossible," said Mandelberg. "Let's face the situation fully—there's no use in getting rattled; after all, it's only just a taradiddle."

"Yes, but I'll have to explain it to her, and you don't know—you don't know——"

"Oh, I can guess."

Anthony brooded for a moment.

He felt incredibly mean. When he sent the wire he had not felt mean. He had intended to do no harm; the thing was sent as a cloak to no sin committed or intended; it was just a white social lie such as we tell when we instruct a servant to say "Not at home" to a visitor.

Sure that his wife would never know the truth, he had experienced nothing but a slight uneasiness, a regret that he had made the thing so needlessly circumstantial.

Now that his lie was discovered, as surely it was discovered by this, it was a very different matter.

And he would have to face her and own to it. It couldn't be denied, and the reason never could be explained. What could he say? "I was suddenly tired of life and the house, I wanted to stretch my limbs and breathe freely a little longer." Impossible; she could neither understand nor believe that statement—and besides, why Birmingham? Do people go to Birmingham to breathe freely? And why Mandelberg, why the

lie about Mandelberg? No man in his senses lies without a reason.

She would draw the obvious conclusion that he had been doing something that he wished to conceal from her, and from that the obvious conclusion that he was unfaithful to her with another woman.

No doubt she was thinking that now, up there in Regent's Park—would be thinking it all that night and next morning until his return. The momentary impulse came to him to dash from the office, take a taxi and drive home: face the situation at once and not make it worse by a second night's absence from her.

This he might have done had he possessed the nervous energy for the business. It wasn't so much a question of courage, but he was below par at the moment. The events of the night before, the train journey, the train luncheon imperfectly digested, the shock he had just received—all had conspired to reduce him in energy and will power, to deflate him. He rose and stood with his back to the stove, his hands behind him and his shoulders drooped.

Mandelberg went to the cupboard where the whisky for customers was kept and brought him a whisky and soda.

"If I were you," said the Jew, "I wouldn't bother about the thing; you're not the first man that's made a bloomer like that. Just say it was a mistake and you put my name in the wire meaning

Shires. I know it's a pretty rotten explanation; still it's something to say. You aren't sure you wouldn't like to go home now and get it over?"

"No," said Anthony, "I wouldn't. I've had enough for one day. I want a little peace and to get my mind off things." Then as the stimulant began to clutch him: "It's all very well talking, many another man would have been off the track and in the ditch long ago leading the life I've led. I've been lonely. My fault, perhaps—my fault, perhaps—I'm not a man given to making friends beyond a certain point. You're the only real pal I've had. The wife is all right, but she's never been really a companion, and a man wants a bit of sympathy now and then; if we'd had children it would have been different, maybe. I wanted children, but I haven't any—not even a dog to care for. A man wants something to care for and to care for him."

"Cheer up," said the other. "Children are a big gamble; you never know what old ancestor may pop up in a child—some chap that's maybe been hanged for highway robbery or died of booze. Cheer up and we'll go and have a bit of dinner together and go to a theatre. Cheer up and thank God there's a man alive called Baldwin."

Anthony finished his drink and put the glass back in the cupboard.

"You'll have dinner with me," said he. "Come to Westminster Court at half-past seven or so

and we'll have dinner. Can you get there by then?"

"Yes," said Mandelberg, "I'll be there. I'll walk a bit of the way down the street if you'll wait for me."

He put away the letters on the table and locked the whisky cupboard, called the clerk and gave him some instructions about a document that was being drafted, then, accompanied by Anthony, he left the building and turning westward down the Strand walked a few hundred yards with his companion.

This quick mind, sleek and active as a rat, had been turning the matter over and over, looking for a way out, that is to say, a plausible lie. He foresaw a terrible row in the Harrop *ménage* and he didn't want it; the firm had enough serious business on its shoulders without matrimonial disputes being piled on the top of all; yet he couldn't think of a lie that would stop the hole or a subterfuge to whitewash or camouflage the business. Instead of leaving it at that he *would* talk.

"If I had a brother you might say you meant him," said Mandelberg; "but I haven't, and she knows it."

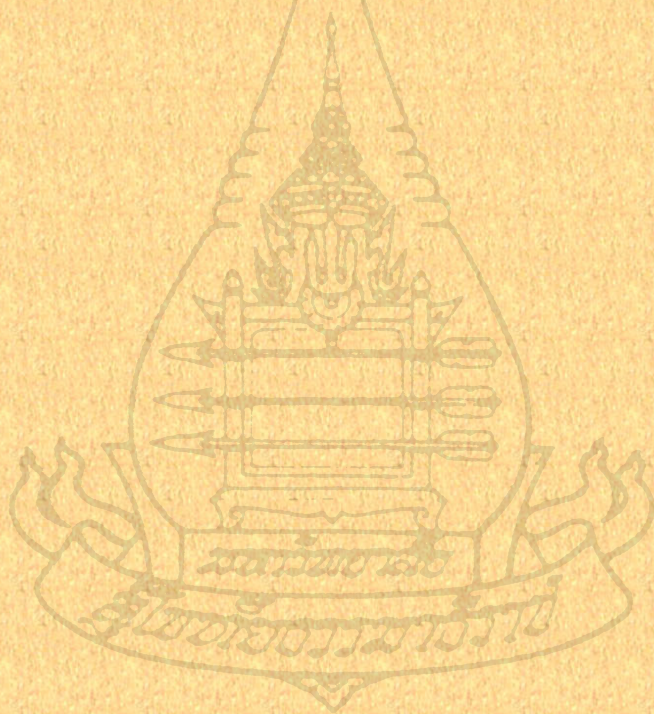
"Oh, damn her!" suddenly broke out Anthony. "Let her go and hang herself. I'm sick of the whole show, the whole business, the whole blessed thing. Let her go and hang herself. *I* don't care."

Mandelberg for the moment was almost shocked. It was so unlike Anthony to talk like that, to burst

out like that. It was quite natural—natural as the turning of the goaded ox, still——

"All right," said he. "Let's forget the whole business. Don't worry. I'll be with you at half-past seven."

He called a taxi and got in and Anthony pursued his way westward.



CHAPTER IX

THE NIGHT CLUB

It was five minutes past eleven and Anthony found himself standing in a long, narrow passage behind Mandelberg, who was talking to a pale-faced man in livery who looked something like a commissionaire—gone wrong.

They had dined at Westminster Court and visited a theatre.

The play had not amused the husband of Selina Harrop. It was about a man and his wife and another man, to say nothing of the other man's wife; the theme infidelity.

Amongst the characters, and even in the bedroom scene in the second act, posed a figure unimagined by the author but clearly visualised by Anthony—the figure of Selina awaiting his return.

She had sat beside him at dinner, she had crowded into the taxi that took him to the theatre and now she was on the stage, sometimes as a detached figure, sometimes merging herself with the outraged and patient wife of the play. Talking to him the whole time and always saying the same thing in the same words: "To-morrow I am going to ask you why you sent me that telegram which was obviously untrue."

There were whole five-minute sections of the performance during which he saw nothing but the dining-room or drawing-room of Marlborough

Terrace, himself and the wife of his bosom, himself trying to explain away that lie: that stupid, silly lie told on the spur of the moment. It was not a question of Selina being angry with him or suspicious, and she was not a woman to make a scene: suspicious she would be, without any manner of doubt, and that was the irritating part of the matter, for he was innocent of ill-doing; but the tragic part was the lie. It is a terrible thing for a grown man to find himself convicted of an obvious and palpable falsehood, even about a trifle.

After the play they had gone to Romano's, and, Mandelberg proposing "a little place where you'll see some fun," they had arrived here in this gloomy passage.

Mandelberg seemed to know the place, and the liveried man, after a moment's conversation, let them pass through a swing-door into a red plush upholstered room that gave on a dance hall. round whose polished floor-spaces little tables were set.

The place was cheerful, clean and brilliantly lit, continental and half-filled with a cosmopolitan crowd of well-dressed people, young men, young women; all these people were young, or nearly all, and Anthony, looking round before taking his seat at the table that Mandelberg had chosen, felt an uplift of the spirit as though infected by the spirit of youth in the air about him.

The band had just ceased and the floor was clear, and a waiter appeared waiting for Mandelberg's order

"This is my show," said he. "Not a bad place, is it? The best run in London. Night Club, yes, but it's quite respectable.' Police! Nonsense, they never touch a place like this, you only want tonic water and a cigarette!—all right. You don't dance? Well, you can sit and look at the fun for a while; it's an interesting crowd to watch."

His bright eyes were casting round as if looking for someone that he knew; the band had struck up, and rising suddenly he went to a table where two women were seated. He was evidently known to one of them, for next moment she rose and the next they had taken the floor.

Anthony, for the first time in his life, wished that he was a dancing man. He applied himself to the tonic water and lit a cigarette. The band and the brightness, the crowd and the something festive in the air all had conspired to lift Selina from his mind for a moment. It was good to be young, he told himself.

Meanwhile the place was filling. A stout woman accompanied by a man had taken the next table; then they moved away, attracted by the sight of friends across the room, and the table was taken by a young man and a girl.

She did not look more than sixteen, her companion did not look more than twenty. He was of the army type, bronzed and healthy and not very intelligent looking.

The band had ceased, but Mandelberg did not return; he was in animated discussion with the

two women and had evidently forgotten his companion. Anthony did not mind—he was observing the two young people at the next table; they were not speaking to each other. Had they quarrelled? No, they just seemed indifferent one to the other, as though they were strangers; indifferent and looking about them at the crowd; the young man was smoking a cigarette and the girl, as she leaned slightly back in her chair, glancing round her with languid interest, now and then pursed her lips as though whistling.

How pretty she was! Old-fashioned, with a dying, fade-away air, and how young to be in a place like this; a child, nothing more.

"Brother and sister," thought Anthony. Then, as an afterthought, "Or maybe his *fiancée*."

He took a sip from his glass and lit another cigarette; as he put down the match and raised his eyes he met those of the girl. She had been looking at him. Then the band struck up and the young man, without a word to his companion, put down his cigarette and walking towards a woman whom he evidently knew carried her off into the dance.

The girl, left alone, looked again at Anthony, smiled ever so slightly, raised her eyebrows as though to say "May I?" left her chair and came and sat beside him.

"It is warm," said she, in a charming half lisp.

"Yes, it is very warm in here," said he. It was the most thrilling moment of his life; he scarcely knew what he said. He could not understand the

situation at all. Her glance, her smile, the way she had crossed over to him, the way she sat now quite at ease looking at the dancers, all were so perfectly natural and innocent! She seemed now to have forgotten him for a moment, and then as he watched her he saw that whilst her eyes were fixed on the moving figures her mind was uninterested—not there, not with him nor in that place at all; and then as he watched her he saw that her appearance of extreme youth was—what? Not fictitious yet somehow illusory—a thing that was, yet was not. Then, all at once, he knew.

This child!

The band had ceased for a moment and the dancers were clapping their silly hands for more. The band went on, and the dance.

"Your companion seems enjoying himself," said Anthony.

"My companion?" said the girl. "Oh, that gentleman I came in with? Yes, I would have danced with him, but my chest is not well to-night —I have had a cold; he was angry with me because I would not dance; he will not speak to me again, so I came and sat with you. You do not mind? A girl can't sit here alone."

"No indeed," said Anthony. "No. I don't mind. I'm glad you came. Have you known him long?"

"That gentleman? Oh, no; we had dinner together, that is all. I couldn't eat and that upset him. Do you often come here?"

"No," said Anthony. "This is the first time I have been here."

If the effect she produced on Anthony was the same as that which she had produced on "that gentleman" we cannot wonder at the latter leaving her in favour of a more powerful charmer.

"A girl can't sit here alone." The innocently frank statement had flattened out things and removed the last rose-leaf of romance; but, apart from that and the fact that she was evidently not at all well with the cold on her chest, there was something about her—a simplicity, let us call it—that one might fancy curiously chilling to "that gentleman," who had picked her up for her pretty face no doubt, given her dinner and an entry into this place, and dropped her.

It didn't chill Anthony. Had she been anyone else of her type and trade he would have moved away from her now and left the place, for he was tired of the dancing, the band and the glare; she held him because she had warmed his feelings towards her in quite an extraordinary way—but not in any way suggested by her trade.

There was something appealing in that air of a tired child, in her youth, in her prettiness and the little movements that talk so loudly and tell character so well: something forlorn about her.

Then, after the first few minutes, she seemed to have sensed his friendship dog-fashion; possibly instinct had told her all about him from the very first and that he was not of the army of those

horrors, the elderly gentlemen who frequent London night society. At all events, and however that may be, they sat beside each other, talking casually and at ease and in all innocence.

Now and then a man would glance at her, but she had no eyes for anyone, no signals in her locker; like a little ship moored in the shelter of a big rock she was content to rest for a while out of commission and with sails furled.

"I say, old man—I say, old man." Mandelberg's hand was on Anthony's shoulder and his jocular whisper in his ear.

He had come to the table for a moment. What a joke! Anthony with a girl!

Having shot his whisper into the ear of the other he straightened himself, and stood for a moment looking at the crowd.

"Get a chair and sit down," said Anthony.

"No," said Mandelberg. "Two's company, and I've got someone waiting for me." Then in a moment he was gone, swallowed up in the crowd, and Anthony and his companion were alone again.

"I say, old man—I say, old man." The laughing whisper still sounded in his ears. It had brought him to his senses, broken some spell, suddenly made the whole place—band, crowd, noise and glare—horribly distasteful.

He rose to his feet and the girl, drawing her light cloak over her shoulders, rose too.

He understood; she couldn't sit there alone, and if he went she would have to go too.

They passed out to the vestibule, where he got his hat and coat, then down the long passage to the street. Here they turned to the right, the girl walking beside him silent, like a faithful shadow.

He wanted to get rid of her and yet he didn't. He had felt something like that before when a dog had followed him through the streets. He had brought it home and Selina had refused to have it, so it had been taken to Battersea.

Why the girl recalled the dog it would be hard to say; perhaps because she had, so to speak, mutely sought his protection in the dance-room, and attached herself to him in a way—because, silent as a dog, she was now accompanying him.

The cold night air of the street made her cough, and she drew her cloak tighter across her throat. She walked slowly, as though her breathing were affected.

"It's cold," said Anthony.

"Yes, it's cold, isn't it?" replied she
the street after that hot room."

"Have you far to go?"

"Rupell Street, Bloomsbury," she replied. She spoke in a dead-tired voice and the cough took her again; the cold of the street after the hot room seemed trying her chest and she seemed fighting against the cough. A taxi was drawing towards them and Anthony hailed it.

He would send her home—pay for the cab and send her home.

He opened the cab door and she got in, and he

got in after her; at the last moment he found it quite impossible to hand the cabman half a crown, or whatever the fare might be, and say, "Drive this lady to Rupell Street, Bloomsbury." He could not offer her charity like that—he could not dismiss her in that brutal way; he would drive her to Rupell Street and drop her there and then go on to Westminster Court.

The cab turned and took a by-street leading to New Oxford Street.

As they turned into the glare of the lamps Anthony found his hand in the little hot hand of the girl.

A tired hot hand that sought companionship, and said in the miraculous dumb language that the hand alone can speak, "I'm sick and tired—and I want to be held."

So a child worn out at some fête, or weary of walking, or ill, takes the hand of a grown-up.

CHAPTER X

SICK ?

The cab stopped at the corner of Rupell Street and they got out. Anthony paid the cabman off; he had intended returning to Westminster Court in the vehicle, but he could easily get another. He would see her to her door. He was troubled in his mind.

Troubled and perplexed and moved in his heart; no other being in all his easy, empty life had moved him like this—out of himself and away from his ordinary appetites and likes and dislikes, and just by a touch, a glance, a word.

He would take leave of her on the doorstep and return to Westminster Court. The bank-notes in his pocket-book recalled their existence to him. A fiver—yes, a fiver—that would be the thing. He found himself forming little sentences about hard times and a little loan between friends. "If I can ever be of service to you, let me know," began one of these sentences, and at the back of his mind there was a vague idea of keeping in touch with her in some way, of not quite losing sight of her.

On the doorstep, and before he could frame speeches, she drew a latch-key from her pocket and opened the door, revealing a narrow hall lit by a single electric bulb. She held the door open for him to enter, and he came in, clearing his throat, but he did not speak. She had closed the door

before the words came to him, and, turning, she led the way upstairs.

The atmosphere of the house was stuffy, and as he followed her up the narrow stairs the recollection came to Anthony of a similar adventure in his youth, almost the same house, the same atmosphere, the same stairs, and the same "beyond the pale" feeling.

Even now, far removed from his youth and with no wrong intention in his mind, that feeling came to him, and with it the recognition of the fact that nothing had changed, that the old hideous treadmill was the same as in the Victorian days—same houses, same stairs, same stuffy atmosphere, same everything—only, the tinkle of hansom-cab bells outside had been turned to the hoot of motor-horns and now there was electric light.

She opened a door on the first landing and showed him into the same room—a front sitting-room that opened into a back bedroom, the rooms divided by folding doors.

On the red tablecloth of the table in the centre of the room lay a letter without a stamp. He could not help reading the name on the envelope—"Miss Grey," nothing more, no address.

"A moment," said the girl.

Anthony sat down on the sofa by the window, his hat beside him and his coat with the astrakhan collar hanging open whilst she vanished into the bedroom. She returned in a moment without her hat and cloak, and taking a matchbox from the

mantelpiece knelt down to light the bit of fire set in the grate.

"There's a letter for you on the table," said Anthony.

"It's only my bill," said the girl.

The wood was damp. He watched her small figure as she bent striking match after match; the thing caught at last, but she did not rise, her shoulders were shaking curiously. She was crying.

Next moment he was kneeling beside her on the hearthrug, his hand on her shoulder, then his arm about her, whilst she sobbed into his coat.

"I'm so ill—so ill—I shouldn't have let you come with me. So wretched—and so ill."

The cough took her, and she coughed and coughed whilst he held her as tenderly as a mother might a child, not knowing what to say or do.

The whole terrible position came to him in a flash—the bill on the table, the man she had been with and who had left her, her evident illness, the way she had attached herself to him in her dumb distress. Unable to pay her way and ill! Unable to pay her way and ill——!

"My dear child, my dear child," said Anthony, "there now, don't—don't cry any more—don't cry any more. I'm just a friend—there now." He helped her to rise to her feet and made her sit on the sofa, taking his seat beside her and holding her hand, whilst she sat with head half averted, her laboured breathing broken now and then by a sob.

Some modern Hogarth or Rowlandson might have

made an excellent picture of the pair under the caption of "The Elderly Roué," or, better still, "Mammon and the Maid." But, indeed, Anthony was feeling very unlike a roué, elderly or otherwise —or Mammon.

"I'm just a friend—nothing more—and I want to help you," said Anthony, patting the hand. "I want to help you in any way I can."

"I know," she murmured. "I knew you were good—it's the pain."

"Where ?"

"In my chest; it gets worse and worse when I breathe."

"Good God Almighty!" cried Anthony. "Why, you ought to be in bed. Chest—haven't you seen a doctor ?"

The word "chest" called up consumption to his mind; it came to him all at once that this illness had suddenly leapt into something of the utmost gravity. It was a "dangerous illness," not a cold or chill. Chest, pain, cough, hot hands, and now that strange, wandering look as she turned her head in speaking.

"Dr. Gregg of Endell Street," she murmured; "he knows me. I'll see him—to-morrow."

"You'll see him to-night," said Anthony. But she did not answer.

"You'll see him to-night. I'll send for him or go and fetch him. Endell Street—I know the place, it's not far from here; what is the number of his house ?"

She could not tell the number—it was the big surgery—the doctor's shop at the corner; but she did not want to send for him. She would see him to-morrow.

"That'll be all right," said Anthony.

He made her get up, half helping her to rise, and, half supporting her, brought her into the bedroom, where she sat down on the edge of the bed. Then telling her to get "right between the blankets" he came back to the sitting-room and stood with his hands behind his back before the miserable little fire.

As he stood he could hear her moving about and coughing.

Before him, on the opposite wall, there was a framed and glazed reproduction of the "Rent Day," one of the prints that some Fine Art Company broadcasted over England in the 'eighties, in return for coupons cut out of the newspapers and eighteen-pence.

It had been hanging there thirty years and more, and the shell box on the table under it had been there as long, no doubt; long past the Great War, past the reign of King Edward, past the late Victorian days, you might have walked into this room and found it the same in all essentials, even to the human occupants, for it was in the late 'seventies that Rupell Street took its definite position amidst the streets of the half-world.

One might wonder what it thought of Anthony to-night standing there on the hearthrug, his hands

behind his back and his lips pursed, his eyes following the vague pattern of the carpet.

The latch-key was lying on the table by the letter. When she was in bed and "under the blankets" he would take the key and slip down to Endell Street and make the doctor come back with him. He dismissed the idea of trying to wake the landlady of the house and get her to send for the doctor; he did not know what sort of dragon he might evoke and, in fact, he did not know where to find her, whether in the cockroach-smelling basement or the upper part. He might ask the girl; but then she did not want the doctor sent for.

No, he would do the job himself.

The events of the last few minutes had brought to him something new and stimulating. It was as though Life had suddenly served him with a drink that was at the same time an eye-opener and a heart-warmer, that had put spurs on his feet and a spear in his hand and a steed under him and said, "Now then, tilt—in other words, toot off for the doctor, open your purse, help all you can, and do all you can to save the girl from the Dragon."

The vague shame that had pursued him up the stairs, even though he was guiltless of evil intent, and the "beyond the pale" atmosphere of the house, had vanished utterly.

The minutes passed, a taxi-horn sounded in the street, voices, the banging of a front door on the opposite side.

He looked at his watch—it was twenty minutes

to two—and coming to the folding doors of the bedroom he knocked, received no answer and came in.

She was in bed, lying on her right side with the clothes half over her head. She seemed asleep, but as he tiptoed up to her he saw that her eyes were open, watching him.

"I'm going out to get you something—something from the doctor," said Anthony, resting his hand lightly on her shoulder. "What's that you say—the hospital! No, no, no, you won't be sent to the hospital—I'll see to that. I won't be long; you'll stay there till I get back—I'll take the key with me."

She nodded.

He left the room, took his hat and the key and, coming downstairs, left the house, closing the door gently behind him.

At the corner of the street he paused; he knew this part of London and soon got his bearings, and seven or eight minutes' walk took him into Endell Street and right in front of a big shop window—a shop window that had become a surgery window, inscribed in big gold letters with the name Dr. Gregg.

He found the night-bell by the door and pulled it, heard the far-off jangle and then stood waiting and listening.

As he stood like this a terrible fact suddenly hit him: he did not know the number of the house in Rupell Street.