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THE QUISTO-BOX

The Quisto-Box : : By

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LONDON: A. M. PHILPOT LTD
60 GREAT RUSSELL STREET W.C.1

Printed in Great Britain by Burleigh Ltd. at the Burleigh Press Bristol

To
DESDA SMART

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THE QUISTO-BOX

I

First Inklings

THE first inklings of the drastic invention left the world frigid.

The real fault lay, no doubt, with the inventor, who, completely absorbed in his invention, and equally completely abstracted from the world, omitted to employ a press agent. What, after all, could one expect? He did not even lecture to learned societies, or arrange a music-hall exhibition of the latest magic that made the philosopher's stone look of as much importance as a safety pen-knife. He just mentioned casually to the few friends in his intimate circle—and, apart from these few friends, he had no acquaintances whatsoever—that he had at last succeeded in what had appeared a Sisyphean task, and that his life's work was at last completed. From this inner circle a few eddies floated outwards. The new discovery had the honour of a few stray words at the Psycho-Analytical dinner between the sorbet and the joint, when it was casually mentioned by Dr. Rabotnik-Smith to Professor Flaxie, only, of course, to be pooh-poohed with magisterial dignity. "X-ray the mind: while you wait in one minute! Stuff and nonsense, I tell you. Why, it requires one month's

careful observation at least; besides, where do we come in? It would mean death to psycho-analysis; and who's heard of Quist for that matter? The man's simply a madman with a complex for mediæval magic."

"What does pork make you think of—now quick," said Rabotnik-Smith to his neighbour, Village Marne, the young student of psychology. "Don't hesitate—don't look at the pork—look at me—be natural, and say exactly what comes to your mind."

"Roast Jews," she retorted, gazing coolly at his unmistakable features. "But what's that you're saying, who is this Quist—and how about X-raying the mind?"

"The only mental X-ray is the sex-ray," snorted Professor Flaxie, "and that's that, and Quist is simply one of your New Thought mountebanks."

In the financial pond of the City the marvellous rumour fell with a plop deadness. The company promoters remained unmoved to the financial possibilities of what, in fact, was one of the most lucrative propositions since steam or electricity. Engrossed in such fantastic schemes as the Timbuctoo Train Company, Limited, and the Bolshevik All-Russian Business Unlimited Trust Association, they ignored the weird little intellectual in that rickety old house in Bloomsbury.

The only person, in fact, in the City to exhibit the faintest interest was Gabriel Zaffrouli, the eclectic and miscellaneous dabbler in financial oddments. Gabriel Zaffrouli, the off-spring of a temporary association between the son of a Jewish banker, who happened to be an earl, and the daughter of a money-lender,

who happened to be a Christian. The blueness of his blood had compensated for its slight lack of formality, and his arrival was greeted with more enthusiasm by his saturnine scoundrel of a grandfather than by his so lamentably careless mother. When old Zaffrouli died he had left Fifty-Fifty, as he facetiously designated the young hybrid, the major portion of his fortune. Fifty-Fifty's education, moreover, had been adapted to his career. Thanks to the gross but healthy advice of his grandfather, he had passed through the most aristocratic school in the kingdom with his normality completely uncorrupted; and after that one term at Oxford, one year in the Sorbonne at Paris studying political economy, one year in the office of a Tammany boss in New York studying political intrigue, six months in Wall Street, and another year in the Deutsche Bank in Berlin—lo and behold! your really up-to-date financial adventurer. Zaffrouli was game for anything. The buying and selling of schemes, businesses, pictures, patents, women, theatres and men. So Zaffrouli wrote to Quist inviting him to dine at the Carlton, only to receive an answer to the effect that Quist never left his house. He was, therefore, compelled to postpone the matter until he should have returned from Central Europe where he was subsidizing a brand-new Republic in opposition to some ragtime Pretender subsidized by the French.

The whiffs of news of what was in reality the most dynamic and stupendous "scoop" that the journalists were ever likely to achieve, duly reached Fleet Street. But Fleet Street remained stolidly torpid. Newspapers sent out their second-best reporters in search of what the sub-editors conceived would simply prove a third-

rate story. But the reporters all returned without the "story." They had one and all been denied admittance to that weird old man in that rickety house in Bloomsbury by a peri housemaid. So they all gave it up. All except Lucian Swode, who, having finished a Continental education, had strolled for a tour of inspection into the journalistic world. And Lucian Swode felt intrigued.

"I think the thing should be followed up," he said to Braser, the news editor. "Is the *Daily Blare* to be stopped by a morose old hermit? There must be some way or other of getting into the house."

Braser wheeled round in his swivel chair, chewed his cigar and brandished a shirt-sleeved arm. "My dear boy, all this psycho-stuff is played out. It ran well while it lasted, of course, but it's stale—dead stale. Grooch has been and got nothing, and the *Daily Blare* would not even be justified in paying you a twopenny 'bus fare to Bloomsbury; but I tell you what you can do: Go bang off to the Savoy and try and interview the American who married the Japanese girl—will make a good splash story, if properly handled——EIGHTY MILLIONS ostracize young couple—how I escaped lynching—you know—right you are—so long. . . . Oh yes—and don't forget to interview Lady Feckles on her approaching marriage with the co-respondent. You might interview Travall, too, if you like—and of course, Feckles—Heading: 'The Three Sides of the Triangle'"

But the whole day, busy as he was in ministering to the pornographic snobbery of the public, Swode felt something in his imagination swinging like a compass to that absurd house in Bloomsbury, where dwelt that absurd old man.

II

The Study

BACKWARDS and forwards on the thick black pile of the discreet carpet, paced the old man. A shrivelled face, an emaciated frame, drained of all the oil of physical vitality, yet lit and animated by some inner flame shining in his eyes; a fakir of science, a monk of abstract thought, he had forfeited himself twenty-five years ago in this stodgy unromantic castle in the heart of Bloomsbury. His whole ego had died long ago, except his intellect. All family ties long since severed; all his emotions not merely dead, but cremated and their ashes flung into nothingness. Had he, indeed, ever had any emotions—not perhaps a mere passion for some woman, but say some ardour for fame—some fine frenzy for humanity? The question is irrelevant. For not even the ghost of some mummified passion had ever for twenty-five years been allowed to stalk even the remotest crannies of this brain that sped night and day, and eighteen hours out of the twenty-four, along the mono-rail flung out by itself into the unknown. What he would do with his invention, if he ever succeeded, was a thought which, had it been admitted, would have disturbed the mathematical unity of his concentration. But isolated, abstracted, undisturbed, he had laboured for twenty-five years to find—what? The master-key to the human mind. No psycho-analytical fumbling with some cypher combina-

tion of the lock of the safe. But hey-presto! while you wait, every thought conscious or unconscious, opened —photographed—recorded—transmitted to the brain of the operator, while the subject remained in the most abysmal ignorance of the manœuvre.

For now, at last, were twenty-five years of intense life crystallized in fifteen pages of manuscript and a little machine which you could carry in your pocket. An aluminium machine, oblong in shape, of an inoffensive exterior, but inside all a-tingle with potency. The root principle of the whole thing was the discovery of the constituents of thought waves. The stuff of thought reduced to a chemical formula. Thoughts magnetized, tapped, recorded, and retransmitted to the brain of the operator, by the pressing of a steel button. The switching on or off at will of a mechanical but infallible engine of telepathy with its wireless waves, its circuits and its exchange. Backwards and forwards on the thick, black pile of the discreet carpet paced the old man. Slowly, tenderly, he picked up the creation which, after a quarter of a century of labour, his brain had at last brought forth. He sat down by the dwindling fireside in the arm-chair with the machine in his lap. Slowly, slowly, a vast dull happiness encompassed him. Slowly, slowly, a tide of completeness of fulfilment began to rise within his soul. And in this vast peaceful tide, slowly, suavely his spirit ebbed away.

III

In at the Death

NO, it was impossible to deny it. The old cook neither liked nor attempted to like the new housemaid. One of the old school was Alice, the cook—frumpish, slatternly, domineering, faithful. One of the new school was Lallie, the housemaid; chic, smart, with a correct and detached demeanour. Alice had been in the Professor's service twenty years. Lallie scarcely as many days.

"Now, then, what about the Master's tea?" snarled Alice. "Past five and not gone up yet! What are we coming to I'd like to know," and she wiped her fingers on the soiled linen of her apron.

"The Professor hasn't rung yet," answered the chic housemaid, "and you know how he hates being disturbed, he may have gone to sleep—he may be hard at work," and she resumed her cool, complacent contemplation of her black shining high-heeled shoes, her black silk stockings, and the immaculate apron that hung over the black skirt.

But Alice kept regarding her with utter disapproval. A smart hussy, no doubt. Eyes a-sparkle with black mischief. A mouth that was always rippling into roguery. A nose whose curious pointed tilt was always ready to poke the veil off any secret.

"The Professor works too hard, in my opinion," said the housemaid after a pause.

"So does all of us," replied the cook tartly, leaning back in her arm-chair, "but we produce something, something that you can see—and touch—and eat—something that keeps body and soul together, as one might say—but the Professor, 'e simply goes potterin' about with a lot of chemmecals and what not, and scribbling stuff on paper that no one can't read"

The housemaid sat bolt upright and crossed both her arms and legs in a highly provocative manner. "Have you ever invented a new dish, Cook?" she said at last. "If so, you'd know what the Professor feels like."

"I invented by accident a new entry nineteen years ago, and I always serves it every Saturday evening—but you'd better take up the tea, my girl, or it will be stewed, and the toast cold, and it's *I* as'll get the blame."

Up the three sombre flights of stairs the housemaid carried the tray. She moved lightly, jauntily, as if carrying tea in an absurdly old-fashioned house in Bloomsbury to an eccentric recluse of a scientist, were no end of a joke, and the deuce of a new sensation.

On reaching the study door, she knocked. No answer. She knocked again more loudly, and yet a third time in an impetuous aggressive fashion, as though decrepit professors had no earthly right to keep crisp vital housemaids kicking their heels outside study doors, burdened with trays of stale tea and overdone toast. Then, opening the door, she briskly entered, deposited the tea on the little round table, and approached the limp figure in the frayed arm-chair.

"Aren't you going to have any tea, sir?" she enquired. But now that she was quite close to the Professor, she knew definitely that he was not going to

have any tea. Nevertheless she took methodical pains to verify what was only too obvious. She lifted up an arm, and the arm limply collapsed. She took hold of his wrist, but could detect not even the most infinitesimal trace of the magic little pendulum of vitality. Whipping out of her pocket a tiny mirror she applied it to his lips. The surface of the tiny mirror remained absolutely unsullied. Then replacing the mirror in the pocket flap of her apron, she neither fainted nor went into hysterics, but simply indulged in a long, low whistle. A whistle of surprise, of surprise and bewilderment, of disappointment, of concentrated meditation. A whistle which would have indicated quite clearly to any skilled interpreter of the language of whistling, that the emotions within the brain of this smartly turned-out housemaid were something like this: "Well, I'm damned! What does he mean by dying like this—and what the deuce am I to do next?"

What, however, she did, was to light a cigarette from a simple gun-metal case, also produced from the neat but capacious flap, sit down in the other arm-chair and contemplate the shrivelled frame that only a few minutes before had been the heroic restlessness of an intellect. Suddenly she caught sight of the little aluminium box glistening in the lap of the deceased. With an automatic movement of curiosity and acquisitiveness she transferred it to her own lap. She began toying with, and examining the trifle. Simple enough in all appearance, but what did it do, and how did it do it? Ah, there was a knob. Applying her right thumb, she pressed it. It yielded, but nothing happened. But yes—yes—yes, something was happening. A series of very slight, very subtle, almost infinitesimal, but

yet at the same time definitely perceptible, electric tingles were running through her body. The sensation was delicious. But she was out for something more than delicious sensations. With a new inspiration she sprang to the secretaire. And, lo and behold, in the sprawling hurried hieroglyphics of the Professor's handwriting, lay a pile of foolscap. Not even troubling to seat herself in the wooden round-backed chair she glanced at the manuscript. Something obviously extremely technical and scientific. On top a new word, that tickled with its novelty the brain of the housemaid. The TELEPATHOSCOPE. and then followed underneath this new and magic word directions bristling with chemical formulæ for the manufacture of this new and magic article. The materialization of spirit with a vengeance. Human thought-waves split up into their chemical ingredients. Thought-waves bottled. Rendered static. And then dynamic. Radium as the motive power. The principle of the gramophone. Thoughts recorded on the minute plate, and then passed from the plate to the brain of the operator.

Not, however, being a practical capitalist like Gabriel Zaffrouli, but simply an impractical and inquisitive minx, the housemaid skipped rapidly over these extremely interesting details. Hang it all! How, after all, did one use this fantastic toy? Ah—there you were: Directions for use. Scarcely half a page. Simplicity itself. The pressing of the small knob with the forefinger, and the contact was established. On whom should she experiment?

She moved towards the limp thing huddled in the arm-chair. She pressed the little stud. But, of course, nothing happened. "No spiritualistic nonsense, any-

way," she murmured. "No planchette monkey-tricks." And then suddenly the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs. In front the flat-footed waddle of the cook, and behind, the quick dapper footsteps of some visitor. She hastily secreted both the manuscript and the machine in her apron. A dull, heavy knocking at the door. For a moment she stood silent, unnerved by the new sensation of a guilty conscience. Then, pulling herself together, she rapped out smartly, "Come in." "This way, sir," said the flat-footed one majestically. A quick, dapper little man, with the swift, brazen eyes of a cardsharper, and the sleek embonpoint of a clubman, allowed himself to be ushered in, while the cook immediately withdrew, partly out of apprehension as to how the Professor would view this new and irregular invasion, partly out of an extremely normal lust to count time and time again the clean, crisp notes which the clean, crisp gentleman had slid so neatly into her dirty flaccid hand.

Advancing into the room the dapper gentleman found himself confronted with the housemaid.

"Yes, sir?" she said mechanically.

"I came to see Professor Quist," said the visitor.

"I am afraid you can't."

"My good young woman—there is the Professor."

"Excuse me, sir, there *was* the Professor," emphasized the housemaid.

"What! Do you mean——?"

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid so, sir," said the housemaid, demurely.

"But this is very sudden and inexpressibly terrible."

"Inexpressibly terrible," echoed the housemaid, mechanically.

"But when did it happen? Have you sent for a doctor?"

"The exact moment when it happened, sir, I have no idea. I can only say that I found the poor Professor like this when I brought up his tea—a great shock, as one might say, sir, and I've had no time as yet to send for a doctor."

"My name's Zaffrouli—I'm a relative of the Professor's," said the visitor urbanely.

"Quite so, sir," said the tongue of the housemaid, while her brain suddenly clicked. "I wonder if it is quite so?" and her hand immediately pressed the spring knob in the little aluminium box reposing neatly in her apron flap.

("Get the little bitch out of the room—want to have a look round") suddenly flashed into her brain.

"This is a great shock to me," continued the bereaved relative, while the new toy transmitted ("Damn the old blighter—how the devil can I get hold of the papers—better say I'm the scientific executor—or is that too risky? The girl's attractive, but never mind that now—later, perhaps").

"I quite understand, sir—you must feel extremely disappointed," ventured Lallie delicately.

"Disappointed—what do you mean?" snarled Zaffrouli.

"I leave that to you, sir—I'm sure you know much better than I do; but perhaps I did not use the right word—it's difficult to use the right word in cases of death, isn't it, sir?"

"Of course, it's very distressing for you, my girl—your place coming to an end like this—you will of

course, stay on till after the funeral, and here's ten pounds in lieu of notice."

"It's very good of you, sir—thank you very much, sir, but hadn't I better telephone for the doctor?"

Zaffrouli agreed while the instrument registered ("I wonder if I've got time—I wonder if I've got time—is she suspicious—no—how can she be—why should she be—chance it—have a look round—anyway")

"By the by, do you know where the Professor kept his papers? You see he left me his scientific executor."

"He kept them all over the place, sir, and whenever I used to tidy them he used to be angry and use bad language, and say that he was never able to find them—he'd write on any old thing—scraps of paper—the backs of envelopes—circulars, and only he knew where everything was—not what you would call a tidy man at all, sir."

"Right! Now you go and telephone for the doctor and I'll have a look round."

"Very good, sir."

"One minute."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll be wanting a new place—I may be able to offer you one—here's my card—you had better come and see me."

Once again she pressed the knob. Once again the machin worked. And the housemaid softly answered, "I should like to sir—but what will the duties be?"

"Simple and congenial," answered Zaffrouli. "I will explain them to you later." He took out his watch. For a moment he looked absent. The machine tingled. ("I wonder how the revolution in Yunkaria's getting

on? The Regent should be being assassinated this very minute.") The girl softly withdrew.

Zaffrouli began a methodical search amid the jungle of scribbled oddments that constituted the archives of the late Professor Jeremiah Quist.

As Lallie Marne descended the stairs, cracking in her hand the ten-pound note and smiling roguishly to herself, she ran plump into the arms of a debonair young man in a blue suit.

"Are you the doctor?" she enquired.

But gently disentangling himself, the young man replied swiftly, "Yes, of course I am—I was just sent for."

("Bluff it out—bluff it out—where have I seen the girl before?") ran the machine.

"At the Psycho-Analytical dinner," answered the girl's brain.

"And where is the patient?" continued the doctor.

"Upstairs in the study, with Mr. Zaffrouli."

The doctor whistled.

"Mr. Gabriel Zaffrouli!"

"The same, sir. Is he also a patient of yours, if I may ask?"

"Not yet," said the doctor. "But I'd better hurry, or I may be too late."

"You need not hurry because you are too late," replied Lalage Marne. "But if you like, sir, I'll conduct you to the study."

("The splash interview's gone West") ran the machine, but the professional manner gravely ejaculated, "Hum, hum, yes, I'd better see him."

The girl tripped neatly in front. The doctor followed briskly.

His personal meditations on the provocative charm of the girl were immediately succeeded by the more practical speculation on what the deuce Gabriel Zaffrouli was up to.

"Dr. Swode, sir," announced the girl, throwing open the door with melodramatic abruptness.

"How the devil?" smothered the doctor.

But they merely saw a dapper and distinguished gentleman walking up and down the room smoking a cigarette.

With great gravity Zaffrouli walked up to the visitor. "I'm so glad you came, Doctor, I'm afraid that the poor Professor is beyond all medical attention, but nevertheless it s a relief. Is life extinct—is there anything one can do?"

With even greater gravity the visitor replied, "I will see." Walking up to the Professor he performed with dignity and deliberation the final tests.

"It is all over," he announced, but the telepathoscope clicked ("It is just beginning—it is just beginning"), while in the brain of Zaffrouli Anglo-Saxon expletives began to formulate themselves with emphasis and gusto.

"Heart failure," he continued.

"Are you the family doctor?" said Zaffrouli urbanely.

"No, I came specially."

"So did I," said Zaffrouli, "but we both came too late."

"I suppose you'll make out a death certificate?"

"Certainly in due course—but who are the next of kin—whom does one communicate with?"

"I have no idea—I personally came on business—too late, unfortunately."

"Hadn't we better put the Professor into his bedroom?" suddenly remarked the housemaid.

The obvious idea was acceded to without question.

When the shrunken little frame had been duly conveyed to the gigantic tomb of a bed, Zaffrouli announced his intention of returning to the study and looking for some important papers.

"Negotiations were concluded," he explained, "for me to purchase the Professor's new invention—of course you knew all about it."

"Not as much as I should like to," replied Swode. "But if you have no objection I will help you."

"Pray don't worry, pray don't worry."

"A pleasure, I assure you."

The housemaid was still standing by the door.

"Is there anything I can do?" she enquired.

Swode crossed the room.

"Yes," he answered like a shot. "Tell me how you learnt my name. Dine with me at Les Petits Maquereaux at eight o'clock to-night—or, look here, I'll tell you what, meet me outside the Palace."

"Righto," she answered.

Swode and Zaffrouli returned to the study.

The Professor's papers were made the subject of a closer methodical search and classification than they had ever been in his lifetime.

But nothing was found—not even a will . . . at any rate during the first period of operations, for Zaffrouli concentrating on preventing Swode from making an effective search, deliberately outstayed him and then renewed his quest with added gusto.

But, having promised to post on a death certificate in due course, Swode rushed off to the office of the

Daily Blare to write the obituary of the Professor. He gave a very vivid account of the Professor's death on the very verge of his triumph, and there were one or two romantic allusions to Gabriel Zaffrouli and his intimate connection with the deceased, and his dramatic presence at the very death.

But the obituary contained no romantic allusions to the smartly turned-out housemaid whom he had seen somewhere before, but the devil alone knew where.

But, nevertheless, the brain of Lucian Swode was full of the wretched girl.

IV

Dinner at Les Petits Maquereaux

LALAGE MARNE, of course, was an adventuress. By that it is not meant that she was either a light-o'-love or a thief, but simply that she was in the habit of pursuing adventures, and that her whole ego throbbed to their thrill. In the tepid atmosphere of normal routine her ego would leak, overflowing its bounds, rendering her a morbid, sulky young creature, objectionable to her acquaintances, and even more objectionable to herself. But beneath the brisk hot and cold of real sensations her temperament balanced itself.

An orphan and an heiress on a small scale, she had spent her youth in the North of England in the malevolent custody of an evangelical aunt. The aunt may possibly have had some justification for being, if not evangelical, at any rate malevolent; for at the age of fifteen Lalage had dressed up as a burglar, calmly gone out of the front door, and coolly broken in at the back entrance; entered her aunt's dressing-room, intimidated her into silence, ransacked the room, stolen her hair, teeth and other precious oddments, served them up for lunch next day in the middle of the entrée (for of course, the wretched woman was too shaken to put in an appearance at breakfast) and calmly announced that she had felt it her duty to prove the necessity of installing on the premises a really modern burglar-alarm. And she had indulged her empirical tempera-

ment in other experiments equally philosophic. In these "stunts" moreover, she would always rise to the occasion. The more fantastic the adventure—the more serious the risk of detection—so much the stiffer was her nerve, so much the cooler her phlegm. She was a keen intellectual, not out of any sense of duty or self-improvement, but simply out of a healthy youthful avidity for new sensations. She had to be up to some mischief or she would die, and of all mischiefs intellectual mischief was the most fascinating.

Emerging at seventeen from the local high-school, she had plunged into the somewhat mixed stream of the provincial university. There she had applied herself with considerable gusto to amateur acting, the theory of criminal investigation, logic, tennis, psychology, jazzing and a few miscellaneous masquerades and adventures. And she always came out at the other end with a sharper appetite for life, a finer moral poise and an increased consciousness of the goodness of both herself and the world.

After all, you know, five hundred a year confers both facility and virtue on the possessor (to say nothing, of course, of the twenty thousand pounds which she was also to touch on attaining the mature age of twenty-five). And then she had outgrown the provincial university, and, shedding the evangelical custody of the malevolent aunt, had migrated to London. London, up to the present, had crystallized into a bachelor flat in Soho, a course of psychology at the London University, and sundry excursions into half a dozen different sets; the caked respectability of one division of her relatives, who with the gradual decay of their income, clung all the more foolishly to their few shreds of

snobbery—the breezy bad form and horsey virility of another branch of relatives, gross but attractive profiteers, vulgar, genial and genuine and yet at times exhibiting the naive bashful touch of a new and almost virgin plutocracy—and then the Chelsea Bohemian set, with their crisp casual jargon of wives, mistresses and lovers; their extraordinarily iron code of retrospective marriage, their feverish, sometimes artificial, ragtime gaiety; their beer, their port, and their whisky; their music and their art; the half-briefed young gentlemen of the Bar, with their chatter, pomp and conceit, and, more important still, their tickets at the Old Bailey for *causes célèbres*—to say nothing of a carefully chosen collection of impromptu acquaintances.

This, then, was the young woman who, having heard casually of the eccentric Quist, and his alleged fantastic discovery, had resolved herself to penetrate the mystery, and smuggling herself into the ogre's fastness in the guise of a chic housemaid, had succeeded in being in at the death of the old inventor, to say nothing of her extremely promising overtures with the intruding financier and the pseudo-doctor.

"Life is beginning to spin once again," she mused as she taxied to her flat. Race up the stairs—Yale key into lock—switch of electric light—hot water from wash-stand—change into smart check tailor-mades and impudent tam-o'-shanter—and then hands gaily dug into side coat-pockets and ostentatious cigarette between her lips, aggressive saunter to the scene of the rendezvous. Scowling at the various halves of assignations stuck uneasily here and there, she swung round the Palace, into Shaftesbury Avenue, down Shaftesbury Avenue, round Church Street and then back again to

the front of the Palace where she pulled out her wrist-watch. Five minutes past eight. Damn the man! Confound his cheek! Ah, there he was! By heaven she would crush him. But an aggresive voice anticipated the crushing. "I look here, you know, I'm not late—you must be fast—my watch is Greenwich time."

"Quite irrespective of whether what you say is true or simply bluff," she retorted, "it would have been far better technique to have apologized prettily."

"I hate technique, and don't know the art of apologizing—even prettily—but I'm sure your watch is fast—I assure you I am not to blame—I never break appointments."

As they walked along to the restaurant she decided that she rather liked this aggressive man.

Yes, the top of life was spinning again, and with the deuce of a twist in its gyrations. A new cavalier by her side, and a new toy in her pocket, which was an infallible passe-partout to the secret places of his mind, and, indeed, to all the mysteries and all the skeleton cupboards of the whole world. No wonder then that the girl imparted to her naturally athletic stride the most charming soupçon of a lateral swagger as she swung along with her companion. Swing doors—small tables—red shaded lamps—walls fantastically decorated, in payment of their bills by artists now well-known, but previously obscure, with the portraits of the vivid beauties of five years past (those blithe and reasonably select damsels who used to float about among the arms of an extremely limited and *recherché* coterie). They were in Les Petits Maquereaux and in occupation of a table at the end which commanded strategically the whole room.

Lalage Marne lighted a cigarette while Swode began to quarrel with the waiter, and shout for hors-d'œuvres, the head of the proprietor on a charger, an evening paper, the menu, and the wine list.

"Have you been long in domestic service?" suddenly ejaculated Swode.

"Rather a leading question, isn't it, Doctor?"

"I press it."

"Well, shall we say ever since you started your medical studies."

Swode laughed with Chestertonian uproariousness.

The girl chuckled with somewhat more delicacy.

But her companion continued quizzing her genially.

"What beats me, I repeat, is how the deuce you knew my name."

"I was once a charwoman at the *Daily Blare* office," she replied swiftly, "and I remember someone pointing you out to me as the very special medical correspondent."

"The answer is good, but is nevertheless disallowed. In the first place the *Daily Blare* have no charwomen under fifty."

"But you are, aren't you, their very special medical correspondent?"

Swode glared benignly.

"And thought you would make a scoop and do a little detective work on your own—and then you ran into me, and hey-presto, I transformed you like a witch from the newspaper reporter on space into an extremely impromptu doctor."

"I took in Zaffrouli, anyhow."

"That doesn't matter a hat-pin—the point is, did you leave him alone with the papers and has he stolen them?"

"What do you know about the papers?"

"I am omniscient."

"Are you a witch?"

"I am, sir. For instance, I know that this particular minute you're thinking that I rather remind you of a girl you once dabbled in four years ago when you were at Oxford."

Swode sat bolt upright, only to relapse immediately afterwards into a position of slightly exaggerated nonchalance.

"Her name began with the letter before 'M.'"

But Swode only answered stolidly:

"The young woman was celebrated and the whole thing common gossip—you've probably had her pointed out to you or anyhow described to you."

But the girl simply answered with an air of crushing superiority, "My dear good man—do you really suggest that it's common gossip that exactly three weeks ago she wrote to you from the Avenida Palace Hotel, Buenos Ayres—and as you destroyed the letter you're really wondering how the devil I know."

She was excited. Her cheeks flaunted the flag of red defiance. Her eyes bubbled black mischief. Swode simply spluttered inarticulately.

A pause—the frank collision of glances. Then Swode, in a slow numbed voice, "Do you really mean that there actually is something in that old blighter's nonsense?" He played with the wine list.

"My dear man, there's everything—the thing works like photography—why even now you're hesitating between Cointreau and Benedictine—balancing your preference against the slightly increased price—cursing yourself for not having brought your own cigars from

the shop at the corner of Piccadilly Circus, but determined to cut a splash whatever happens—if necessary take it out of the waiter."

Swode chortled with hysterical laughter, bawled for the waiter, ordered two Coëntreaux and a Corona Corona and gazed again at the girl with an almost ecstatic respect.

"Tell me all about it."

"Not yet, I don't feel in the mood for talking shop—I'm tired—I want distraction—prattle nonsense to me, there's a dear, about the various people in this land of vice."

It was in vain that Swode persisted in interrogating his companion. Her perverse obstinacy stood impregnable. His only chance was to humour the caprice of this fantastic creature. And gathering impetus and strength the conscripted cicerone paced through the heterogeneous assortment. There was Madeleine Foxthwaite, that lithe blonde with the crisp curls of her hair rioting over her shoulders—Hellenic features—a dead morbid pallor—acted as a decoy to a lucrative gambling hell kept by a disreputable cousin—had gadded off to Moscow with X.Y. Zinski the singer; there was Bramwell-Byron, the prosperous and in fact respectable solicitor, dining with a young Jewish diamond merchant; that hulk of a tramp in the corner was the battered wreck of what had once been Abee Ceedee, the brilliant and blackmailing journalist; there, leaning opposite her latest mannequin, was the most distinguished female of her particular species in the whole of Chelsea—observe the brutal heavy jaw—the slit of a mouth—the oblique length of the eyes—absolutely to type, eh, what?—inveterate, insatiate, the most dangerous of

competitors—but hang it all—enough of them—he had stewed in them for over five years—fed up with the whole rotten lot.

But Lalage whispered brightly, that being young and fresh she was intensely interested in the spectacle of weird beasts at close quarters. She felt extraordinarily on top of the whole of life. The Burgundy was bathing her whole ego in luxurious crimson. With amused superiority she gazed at the menagerie. With ecstasy she absorbed the delicious fire of the liqueur. Yes, this was a distinct advance on the evangelical barley-water of her malevolent Yorkshire aunt. She put her hand again into the side pocket of her jacket. The magic little machine was still there. Mechanically she pressed the knob. ("The invention—the invention—the invention—the girl—the girl—the girl") swam into her brain. "The invention—the invention—the invention—the man—the man—the man" she felt herself answering. Thank Heavens, however, that he had not a similar miracle in *his* pocket.

Swode finished his second liqueur, and having given the scowling waiter the exact legal tip, said in an extremely serious matter-of-fact tone, 'Look here, I want to have a business talk with you about the Professor's invention."

"Well, I refuse to talk business in this ragtime menagerie—come along to my flat—I believe I'm out of whisky, but I can recommend the lime juice."

As they walked towards the door, Lalage suddenly stopped to whisper a few words into the ear of the distinguished Chelsea female. Turning green, the distinguished Chelsea female rose from her chair But Lalage was already out in the cool air of the street.

She clutched Swode's arm vigorously. "Run, can't you run—get me away—why on earth can't you find a taxi?"

On which Swode immediately, with the bawling megaphone of his voice, raised a hundred dead taxis into purring life.

On they swung. Over their shoulders they caught a glimpse of the distinguished Chelsea female, the black commissionaire of the Restaurant, and of course, the mannequin. A hurried address. Off chugged the taxi. Swode's arm tactfully encircled his companion in accordance with the orthodox tradition of taxi-cab etiquette.

"You might tell me what you said to that female," he asked, as the taxi crossed Oxford Street.

"Oh, nothing much—only that such thoughts as hers were forbidden, even in Les Petits Maquereaux."

"The invention again?"

"Not a bit of it, my lord—simply general principles and common sense."

V

Conspiracy in the Flat

SWODE was so thoroughly comfortable and satisfied with life, himself, and this new and indisputably stimulating girl, that he had no idea where the taxi was conveying him. A desirable proximity—a luxurious seat—a swift rhythmical motion through the easy lamp-starred velvet of a London night—that was his existence. And the rest of the world, why it could go to the devil. Suddenly, in some unknown side-street, the taxi stopped. A tall block of flats, with apparently half a dozen entrances. Something vast and impersonal, and therefore extraordinarily private. A miniature metropolis packed with mutual strangers. He was shot up in the lift—disgorged at some floor which he hadn't counted—introduced into some flat or other, first completely dark, and then steadily glaring with electric light—told to hang up his hat and coat—shoved unceremoniously into some room—deposited in the profundities of an arm-chair, and then told to wait just half a minute. Left to himself, he experienced a short reaction. Was he really on the verge of a really exhilarating adventure? Or was he simply making the most banal fool of himself? Should he hold himself in? Should he let himself go? He almost felt a trifle uneasy at being carted off in this cavalier manner to the unknown flat of this unknown girl. Getting up from the chair with an effort, he proceeded to examine the room.

Obviously an extremely philosophic student. The top row of the six-shelved book-case was packed with treatises on psychology and political economy. Underneath was an edition de luxe of Guy de Maupassant; the scabrous flippancies of Willy; the pocket edition of O.Henry; the English translation of Nietzsche (edited by that unfortunate cosmopolitan, the exiled Dr. Levy, that gentlest and mildest acolyte of that most ferocious of prophets); novels galore, from the healthy shocks of Arsène Lupin and Sherlock Holmes, to the moist and esoteric luxuriance of D. H. Lawrence's "Rainbow." The walls were a mixture of student frivolity with just a dash of high art. Pictures from *Jugend* and *Simplicissimus*—extracted pages from *La Vie Parisienne*—Max Beerbohm's caricatures cut out of the album and framed, and a few photographs of the Futurists. A miscellany of photographs was littered all over the place. He was on the verge of trying to fish out the name of his hostess, when she entered briskly with a large tray.

"You're in luck, there is some whisky left after all. Do you like much soda? Righto! Well, here's luck!"

Still standing up they clinked glasses.

"Won't you sit down again? Yes, that's the chair for the most favoured male visitor," trilled the musical voice, with a gay and only half ironic insouciance. "You'd probably like the stove—good—well that's that."

She seated herself on a low cane chair opposite him.

"I'm afraid it's a shockingly disreputable neighbourhood, but it's reasonably central anyway. Have a gasper?"

For a moment she was silent. Then she drained her

glass. "Well, here's to the shade of Quist, anyway! He was rather many kinds of an old dear. A certain amount of technique, too. He did the trick and then just died like that."

"I wonder who gave him a death certificate," murmured Swode, uneasily. "I promised Zaffrouli I'd post on a death certificate."

But the spasm of sentiment for the deceased had passed.

The girl got up vivid with excitement.

"He delivered the goods all right, and I've got them."

Slipping the little box out of her pocket she walked over to Swode. "Look, here you are, this is the real thing, you just press this knob and the thoughts of the other person just swim into your mind."

Swode got up.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I lock the door."

"Quite unnecessary—the front door's locked—and if anybody does come—we've got simply years to put it away."

He held out his hand. "May I have a look?"

"How do I know you won't bag it and do a bolt?"

He looked her doggedly in the face.

"My dear madam, if your miraculous thought-reader is really the slightest bit of good—you would have realized by now that bolting is the one thing in the world furthermost from my mind—press the knob and see what it tells you."

"Now just you sit down and control your thoughts," replied his hostess. "I've invited you here to talk special business, not personal clichés, and now, sir, if

you please, what is your special business, and what do you really want ? "

" To examine the invention."

" You'll give it me back—Honest Injun ? "

" Of course."

Slowly and misgivingly, she placed it in his hand.

He took it and pressed the knob.

A triumphant smile ran over his face. He looked at her with satisfaction and assurance. " The intelligence is excellent," he beamed. For a moment the girl succumbed to the influence of the evangelical aunt. Real shame at the utter nakedness of her mind suffused her whole consciousness.

" The intelligence is as false as the *Daily Blare*," she cried. " The thing is not working, it's out of order, give it to me." And before he knew what had happened she had snatched it from him and replaced it in her pocket. But Swode simply surveyed her manœuvre with a benign grin.

" Look here, just be sensible, listen to the voice of reason."

" All right, teacher. Carry on, father."

" When I suggested the dinner to-night, I was simply acting as a journalist—I saw before me a tremendous scoop for the *Daily Blare*—a raging, tearing, top-hole sensation—but since seeing you I've changed my mind; the thing's too precious for the *Daily Blare* to cheapen and to desecrate. Do you know what you've got in your pocket, my dear child ? Why the most careful man can put his secrets into his Chubb's safe of a mind, and we can burgle it without his having the least suspicion. My dear girl, just think of the practical application of this thing, the financiers, the politicians, why you've got

them all cold; with your patent thought-reader in your pocket you are the mistress of the universe."

The girl gave a serene laugh. "I know all about that, my dear man—you needn't be so dithyrambic—the fault of being a journalist, I suppose; it's a big adventure, and I'm on to it."

"I propose to be your co-adventurer."

"Of course," she replied simply.

"You will trust me?"

"I will take the plunge—I like big risks."

"I'm interviewing old Rummington Pitch, the Cabinet Minister, to-morrow, for the *Blare*—will you lend me the machine?"

"There you are, partner."

Eventually he left the flat.

"By-the-by, you never told me your name."

"Marne!"

He looked disdainful.

"If it's really of any use to you—the other name's Laiage."

VI

Interview with Rummington Pitch

DALLYING with pleasing thoughts both in prospect and retrospect of Lalage Marne, the magic thought-reader, and his approaching interview with Rummington Pitch, Lucian Swode collapsed into a deep and serene slumber. The inrush of the morning sun teased his body into a kind of torpid consciousness, but his mind was still blank. On, on he dozed, a dignified and luxurious log, high up in the block of service flats overlooking St. James's Park, impervious to the insistent hints of the maid that it was time to get up ; too lazy even to realize that in the last twelve hours his life had assumed a new direction and a new colour ; to pick up and adjust the new thread of his existence.

" Ting-a-ling, ling-ting-a-ling, ling-ting-a-ling."

Damn the telephone ! Hang it all, why the deuce had he been half cajoled, half bullied into having the receiver in his bedroom; this invasion of his morning sleep was really too monstrous.

He grasped the receiver.

" Yes ! Hello ! " irritably.

" Good morning ! "

" Who are you—who's speaking ? "

" Never you mind."

" If you don't tell me who you are, I shall ring off."

" If you don't know who I am, I shall ring off—and you can jolly well go back to bed, you sulky wretch."

He grabbed on life again with a sudden clutch.

But the voice had gone. He did not know her number, and she was not in the book. He was not to see her again till one o'clock, when they were to lunch together, and he would tell her the result of his interview with Rummington Pitch. What a fool he had been not to recognize her voice. How she would chaff him about it over lunch. And he? He must have something to justify himself. He must score a sensational success in his interview with the Cabinet Minister. Journalistically, it was a big job with which to be entrusted. But if he could find out what was really going to happen, journalism, all very well, no doubt, in its way, could just go to the devil.

For Europe was again in the throes of one of its routine international crises. The usual imbroglio of the rights of small nations and of big financiers. The usual salad of oil and ethics. Yunkaria was one of the mushroom states of Central Europe for the domination of which the Wernes and the Panacenes had been fighting and intriguing ever since the Treaty of Versailles had established a permanent state of international war. The Wernes were squires and peasants, the purest and whitest of reactionaries, humorously feudal, picturesquely illiterate, stubbornly clerical, and believing, as one of the cardinal tenets of their religion, in their divine and traditional right to rule over the Panacenes. The Panacenes, on the other hand, constituted the majority not only of the towns, but of the whole country. Industrious and progressive, childishly enthusiastic over playing with the new toy of their national consciousness, ultra-intellectual, experimenting in the more advanced forms of trade unionism, addicted

to petty intrigue among themselves, they could yet when occasion demanded it, show the most obstinate and solid of national fronts. So far, however, the principles of elementary justice and decency were swamped in the innumerable gushers of oil that spouted from the wells. Were they to obtain possession of their own country and their own oil, they might go Bolshevist, or at the best contract an economic alliance with Germany. Consequently, the Allies, after the usual tepid resistance on the part of England, and the usual hysterical insistence on the part of France, regarding even a rigged plebiscite as too hazardous a venture, had handed over a third of the country, together with a pound of cheese, to one of their neighbours, and established in the remainder, under a fire-eating Regent, a Wernish reactionary oligarchy of muddled extravagance. But the Panacenes were now beginning to kick and the air of Yunkaria was thick with revolutionary plots, emissaries, strikes, legations, assassinations, and commissions, imprisonment, and kidnapping, while French and Bolshevist money, flowing in torrents into the country, gave to the bright little capital a brisk and hectic vitality.

But what was England going to do? That was the question. Would she be firm in her loyalty to the speculators and militarists of France? or would she, as the bulk of the population desired, adopt a policy of bored neutrality, and leave the rival factions to cut each other's throats in peace?

It all depended on Rummington Pitch, the real, though not the titular head of the new National party. The most dashing politician of his age.

Rummington Pitch suffered, nevertheless, from the

morbid hypertrophy of his own ability. Like some Futuristic dilettante of public life, he had boxed the compass of party politics, in a meteoric career of flashes and eclipses, of bold brilliancies and even bolder failures, and had shown each faction in succession how well he could lead them, if they would only let him, on the path of perpetual triumph. In his youth, he had been somewhat of the *enfant terrible* of politics, extravagantly petted by his friends, extravagantly condemned by his opponents, but yet taken not too seriously either by the one or by the other. In the meanwhile he had gone on adding steadily to his unrivalled collection of ministerial portfolios. But now it seemed that, having sown all the political wild oats which it was humanly possible for a man even of his energy to sow, he was at last settling down. The inventor and patentee of the new National party, he had propelled into the nominal leadership a highly respectable and patriotic peer, tucked safely away in the august staleness of the Upper Chamber, while he himself was free to manipulate, with the touch of genius, his own limelight in the House of Commons, and to present himself to his country as His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Swode reached the *Daily Blare* office at ten o'clock, and sat down to study the leaders of the morning press on the Yunkaria question. But sparks of Lalage Marne were scintillating all about his mind. And every now and again he touched the thought-reader nestling comfortably in his pocket.

Suddenly a page boy invaded his meditations.

"Chief wants to see you, Mr. Swode." He immediately went into the small square room where Rose-

smith, the Editor of the *Daily Blare*, spent sixteen hours out of every twenty-four. Half German, a quarter Yankee, and a quarter Jew, by birth, and completely British by law, he was essentially neither German, Yankee, British, nor Jew, but simply the ideal professional journalist. A man who, realizing the intrinsic sordidness of his profession, nevertheless, as he expressed it, was ready to come right down off the high-brow high-horse, and did so. A man, nevertheless, who worshipped journalism as a career, an art, a science, a serious damnable sacred thing—in itself, something quite distinct from and independent of that other sacred thing—in itself, literature, which he respected and admired from a distance, but which he had no time seriously to serve. The first Editor of the *Daily Blare*, he had survived a numerous succession of proprietors and syndicates, and was now one of the principal shareholders in the Company. Tall of stature, long-faced, long-jawed, sleek in appearance, though somewhat slender, lithe in his movements, racy in his tongue, indefatigable in his physique, there he was, just the same as ever, pivoting round in his swivel chair while he chewed the butt end of a cigar and studied intently a pile of telegrams.

"Good morning, Swode. How are you? Read this—our special correspondent—probably true—am banking on it anyway. Don't fuss about the stamp-mark—sent from over the frontier of course."

Swode read as follows:

Jornewolcs: 3.35. *Prince Matthias murdered Castle Heiligengraal Burgh band revolutionaries. Army fed up and in the market Revolutionaries will probably acquire it. Said to be supported North*

'*European financial group back them anyway.—Smithers.*

"This looks like real business," he murmured. Real business. His mind flashed back to that thought of Zaffrouli's which Lalage Marne had scarcely twenty-four hours ago caught naked and undressed, unconscious and unashamed. "The Regent should be being assassinated now." Yes, the destinies of nations were real business. And what gave the thing so rich a savour of irony was that the unscrupulous capitalist had nevertheless backed the right ethical horse. A really flippant liaison between Mammon and justice.

"It not only looks like real business—it *is* real business, not merely for Yunkaria (who cares about Yunkaria?) and not merely for all the tuppenny-halfpenny Powers round about—but for the big Powers here—for London and Paris; and what's England going to do? I must know the Government policy, because on the Government policy depends the policy of the *Daily Blare* — we've been consistently supporting the Government for some time—and the Government, of course, takes us into its confidence. But see what I mean, one must be systematic, I don't like to advocate anything unless I have cast-iron inside information that what I'm advocating has already been decided on. Well, Pitch has promised us an interview; it's a big scoop. I don't say you'll be able to make him talk, he'll probably have it already prepared in advance, but anyway, it's exclusive to us—do what you can—it's an opportunity."

"Downing Street, I suppose?"

"No, he's got gout—he'll see you in his old private house."

"Right!"

Swode turned to go, but Rosesmith gripped his arm. "By the by, how would you like to 'plane over to Yunkaria and do special correspondent, if there's any fun?" Swode hesitated a moment. How about Lalage? How about the magic thought-reader?

"You needn't go if you don't want to, you know. All expenses paid and sixty a month."

Mechanically the journalist prevailed. And mechanically he answered, "I should like it very much."

Swode taxied to Mayfair with the emotions of a gambler playing with dice loaded for the first time. Would the scheme work? He felt at once immensely superior and immensely nervous.

Pitch received him in his study. He was perambulating the room in a dressing-gown, puffing with gusto at a huge cigar with the ring still on it. In appearance the celebrated infant prodigy of politics, by now nearing fifty and almost grown up, was like nothing so much as a chubby and rebellious schoolboy. But the bright toughness of the eyes was not that of a schoolboy, and the bold domed forehead was that of a philosopher.

Motioning Swode to the yawning mass of an arm-chair, he himself continued his march about the room which he would only interrupt to stand with his back to the fire like some bellicose and defiant sentinel.

The conventional greetings were exchanged and immediately Swode switched on the magic. But all that the magic gave was an absurd anti-climax:

("I wonder if Skiddoo's going to win at Epsom.")

For a moment there was a pause. Then Swode put in in his suavest journalistic manner:

"I understand, Mr. Pitch, that you will be kind enough to favour the *Daily Blare* with a brief exposé of

British policy in connection with the Yunkaria crisis."

("Let's try a *ballon d'essai*") whizzed the magic, but the voice of the Foreign Minister, slightly stuttering, answered as follows:

"British policy in Central Europe follows faithfully certain defined principles. I refer to the principles already laid down in the Treaty of Versailles, with, of course, certain modifications. How, exactly, these principles will apply naturally depends on circumstances; the application, of course, of all principles is shaped by circumstances. In the present case the circumstances are distressing, and the duty of Great Britain is clear—she must strain every legitimate nerve and use every legitimate means to preserve inviolate the sanctity of the Versailles Treaty ("I can't very well tell the fellow that old Bullinghell has already received orders to march into the disturbed area and pacify it with his reinforcements").

"What these legitimate means will be—in what precise form British policy will crystallize, depends, of course, ultimately on Parliament. It is useless, however, to minimize the fact that the pivotal points of British policy in Central Europe are gravely jeopardized by anything which affects the political stability of Yunkaria. I have always regarded Yunkaria as an outpost against the Bolshevik invasion. Is Great Britain to sit tight and let that outpost be scuppered by the sworn enemies of civilization? Besides, there is the question of our obligations to our ally—French interests in that region are very considerable. ("Thank Heaven the Regent signed the oil concession to the Anglo-French group before he was assassinated," whispered the

machine.) They have given considerable economic support to the new country; this country has consequently no alternative but to oppose any alteration in the balance of power. You may say, you may say justly, that the area involved is small, but upset the balance of power in that one district, small as it is, and the reactions will spread infallibly over the whole of Europe. I would consequently define the policy of Great Britain as one of conservatory caution ("That phrase ought to catch on," shouted the machine). England's hands are free, but the path of honour is clear and unmistakable ("I wonder how some of them will take the secret treaty with France at the Cabinet meeting to-night—public will need a little education before they're ready for it"); it is the duty of the Press to show the country which way the path of honour, and, of course, of interest lies."

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs having concluded his pronouncement, looked instinctively round the room for applause. But all he got was the perfectly correct utterance of this perfectly correct journalist:

"Many thanks, Mr. Pitch. Of course the *Daily Blare* is infinitely obliged to you."

"Mind you send round a proof of all this," he glared benignly.

"Without fail."

"And look here, Mr. Swode, it has naturally been my duty to be circumspect in my remarks—but they can rub it in in the leader—we want to stimulate the pulse of the country before we feel it—see what I mean? Give the hint with my compliments to Mr. Rosesmith. Good morning, good morning."

Once alone and in the open air, the first impulse of Swode was to speculate on whether the telepathic messages of the machine were true or false. He would ask Lalage. She would know. But the office. The writing of the story. "Taxi! Taxi!" And before he had arrived at the office he had already transcribed half Pitch's monologue into his writing pad, with an almost verbatim accuracy into the bargain which was subsequently to arouse the half-indignant admiration of the distinguished subject of the interview.

A quarter of an hour after reaching the office he had handed to Rosesmith the completed interview.

"Good story, Swode. Excellent pegs on which to hang a blood-and-thunder leader."

Rosesmith went to the telephone. "Send up Mr. Carbank, will you."

"Made up your mind yet about going to Yunkaria?" he continued affably to Swode. "Let me know tomorrow."

"Righto."

Punctually at one Swode was promenading the Cambridge Circus pavement of the Palace Theatre. Tense with excitement and bursting with success he scanned the passers-by. Pulling out his watch he saw that it was five minutes past one. Perhaps it was fast. No, it wasn't, he had checked it by office time. Ah, there she was! Her check skirt and her raking athletic stride. He pulled himself up just in time to prevent himself from hailing with affection a total stranger. Out with the watch. Eight minutes past one. Would she come or would she not? The normal margin for an assignated female was, of course, half an hour. But there was,

nevertheless, a certain rare and limited class of person who either turned up punctually or not at all. He placed her as one of those. She would never come. Should he go to Yunkaria?

"This is the second time to-day, Swode, you've failed to recognize me—and what makes it worse is that you're eight minutes late."

Flabbergasted by her colossal impudence, he could only shake hands.

"What's the news, and I'm dying of hunger," was flung at him. They were moving into Soho.

"I'm full of news—where would you like to lunch?"

"Leave it to you, partner."

"I want to conspire and hatch State secrets—how about Kettners? Any objections?"

"A good lunch will dispel them. Right you are."

VII

Cabinet Particulier

IN they went radiant and tickled.

Disregarding the lounge rooms on either side, Swode advanced to the foot of the staircase, enquired for Henry, the celebrated head waiter, was told that he had either died or left five years ago, expressed not so much sorrow as his indignation; ordered a special lunch, and was shown with his companion into a small but richly upholstered apartment overlooking Church Street. Hanging up her hat and coat behind the door, Lalage surveyed her surroundings with amused interest.

"I've always wanted to see what one of these places was really like," she observed, settling herself comfortably on the sofa.

"I haven't been here for five years," said Swode, irrelevantly.

"You must instruct me. Am I supposed to strike abandoned postures for the benefit of the waiter?"

"On the contrary, I insist on your putting on your best behaviour. The waiters here are blasé, anyway. Ah! there he is."

"Give me old Quist's box of magic so that I may probe the waiter's thoughts."

"Quite unnecessary."

After due knocking the waiter entered gravely with a tureen of soup. They got up and sat facing each other at the round table. The waiter having served the soup handed Swode the wine list. Without consulting his

companion Swode selected a very special brand of Chablis. The waiter withdrew.

"Well, what is the waiter's diagnosis," queried Swode.

"No answer—the machine's not working."

"My dear child, the machine's working all right, but the waiter has no thoughts. The waiters here are paid not to have any thoughts."

And then oblivious of the thoughtless waiter, the machine, and themselves, they luxuriated silently in the rich cream of the soup.

And then, as they lit cigarettes while waiting for the *Sole au vin blanc* Lalage asked:

"Well, how did the interview go off? How is the health of Yunkaria, and how is old Rummington Pitch?"

"Do you know anything at all about international politics?" answered Swode.

"Well, I always read the *Daily Blare*, but tell me all the news—did it work?"

"It did—but it's a long story."

And then over the *Sole au vin blanc* Swode regaled her with a crisp dissertation on the Yunkaria problem—the interesting and dramatic clash between the rights of majorities and the rights of the French—and then still graver questions were involved—if the Panacenes got fair play in their own land, they were bound to nationalize the oil fields, and he hoped they would—but the Foreign Minister had an anti Bolshevist complex—the *Blare* which always had to run someone was for the time being running Rummington Pitch—Rummington Pitch wanted armed intervention—and the *Blare* was going to help to educate the people into the correct mood.

After due knocking the waiter entered, carrying an extremely dusty bottle of wine. He served, and taking an order for the liqueurs departed.

Swode resumed his disquisition.

Suddenly before his estimated time after due knocking the waiter entered.

"Sorry, sir, I gave you the wrong wine—this wine is a much rarer brand."

"All the better," cried Swode. "We'll see if we can't manage another bottle—bring one up with the next course." Simultaneously they raised their glasses.

"Well," cried Swode, "here's to the shade of Quist.

"Here's to ourselves," cried Lalage.

The sacred gold swam with velvet smoothness slowly down their throats; insidiously lingering—caressing every nerve of the palate.

"By Jove," said Swode, "the waiter's right—this is really very special stuff."

He studied the wine list for a moment.

"By Jove, it is."

"More, please, mine host—the dearer it is the better I like it." They drank with interest, sipping this time like connoisseurs or experimenters.

Then freely, boldly, recklessly, they plunged into the elixir of life.

And then over the red succulence of the fillet Swode concluded his little lecture on Yunkarian politics.

"You see, the point's this—England doesn't want any more wars. She likes Pitch all right, but she is not keen on paying for his little hobbies. Pitch, on the other hand, likes England all right, but he likes his little hobbies even more, and doesn't see why England shouldn't be made to play them too—for her own good *bien entendu* and at her own expense, and he's intrigued

the *Blare* to beat the big drum and work the wretched country up into a state of foaming paralytic jingoism."

"Hear, hear," said Lalage, as she sipped the wine, this time more delicately.

"Now listen," continued Swode. "Here's where all our magic nonsense comes in—news, my child, extra special esoteric news! He's staked his whole political capital in his anticipation of public opinion. He's done two very risky things. He's entered into a secret treaty with France by which he's pledged himself to maintain the *status quo*, in diplomatic language, my dear, which really means to down the Panaceaes, if they choose to rise, and keep the wretched country bound hand and foot at the mercy of the gang of roughs who are muddling it at present."

After due knocking, the waiter ushered in a rum omelette, dressed prettily in its blue transparent flame.

"And what's more," continued Swode, "he's given old Bullinghell secret orders to march on the wretched country and pacify it."

"This wine's positively delightful," murmured the girl.

And indisputably it was. For their egos were floating about on the silken waves of the vintage, pursuing each other, touching each other, clutching each other, wrestling, dancing, soaring, diving with each other. But never an uttered word or a moved limb. Even the evangelical aunt would not have been shocked. But the blasé waiter had he seen them might have wondered why on earth they had come.

"Of course you've told the *Daily Blare* all this," she continued.

"Of course I've done nothing of the kind. In the first place it's your secret rather more than mine. In the second place there's no evidence, and the editor,

who's a hard-headed nut of a Philistine, would think I was dead mad if I told him that my only authority was mechanical telepathy. In the third place if these facts really got loose among the public there'd be the hell of a bloody row: the feeling against secret treaties is stronger than ever. The public may possibly be wangled and bluffed into a war but they won't have it rammed willy-nilly down their throats even by Rummington Pitch, and I don't like the idea of letting the *Blare* down. Besides, who would believe me, the thing's too fantastic; do I believe it myself? I'm hanged if I know; the only truth I really believe in at the present moment is that I am I, that you are you, and that this Chablis is the élixir of life."

"I could go on drinking it for ever," said Lalage. "It's really a very instructive psychological experiment."

"It's a point of honour," laughed Swode, "to finish the second bottle."

With the usual formalities the blasé waiter entered once again and for the last time, bringing cigars, coffee, liqueurs, and the bill. The waiter retired, and they were left free to discuss the Yunkaria problem, which, in point of fact, they did. Swode paraded the room smoking a Partaga. The girl lounged upon the sofa. Her ecstasy bubbled forth.

"I feel positively bacchic—I must do something exciting or I shall explode. I insist on saving the Panâcenes—down with the Wernes—down with the French—down with the treaty—down with Rummington Pitch."

"I repeat I can't let the *Daily Blare* down," said Swode with some doggedness.

But she flung herself in a frenzy upon his conscientious scruples.

"You've got to choose, my dear Swode, between letting the *Daily Blare* down and letting me down—besides, don't be so sordid—the *Blare* and Pitch stand for militarism and tyranny—don't you think you owe some sort of a duty to the cause of humanity—the cause of humour—the cause of me—me—yes—what price Lalage? Where does she come in? I want to make a splash. I want to tear it, as you men say."

But Swode was moodily promenading the room.

The excitement of the girl went on gushing.

"I tell you what, if you let me down, all is over between us."

"This is blackmail," he spluttered.

"Of course it is blackmail," she giggled. "The only question is whether you'll pay it or whether you won't."

"And if I do?"

"I'll give you a blank and post-dated cheque on the bank of Lalage," she laughed.

But while his priggish scruples of honour, his advanced Liberal principles, and the excitement provoked by the girl were wrestling furiously in the Chablis bath of his brain, Lalage went on.

"I've got it. I know who'll help me if you won't—Zaffrouli—Gabriel Zaffrouli."

"That sinister scoundrel," snarled Swode.

"That sinister scoundrel," mimicked the girl. "He's already offered me a place—the duties were to be both simple and congenial—but the real point is this, it only came back to my mind a few minutes ago, Zaffrouli himself is involved in this Yunkaria business—it's he who has been promoting the whole revolutionary movement. The Quisto-box told me so the day the old boy died," and she fondled lovingly the magic casket. "And you won't doubt the Quisto-box, will you? And

he's going to get the oil concession if the revolution comes off—isn't he, Quisto-box?"

"I tell you what," said Swode, "you or he must get hold of a Member of Parliament—get him to put a question in the House, and we might have some humorous developments."

With her brain whirring like the engine of an aeroplane Lalage Marne rang for the waiter.

"Bring me a telephone directory," she ordered.

"And bring me an ABC," ordered Swode.

"What do you want that for?"

"Never mind."

"I'll turn the Quisto-box on you."

"I may have to go to Yunkaria for the *Blare*—I was thinking of abducting you."

Before she could answer, the waiter had arrived. Lalage dived into the Z's. "Gabriel Zaffrouli, 9 Mount Street, 2390 Mayfair, Stables, 2391—Gabriel Zaffrouli, financier, 3 Old Court, E.C. 404 City. Which will it be?"

"The office probably."

"Come along then," cried the girl.

Out they ran boisterously into the hall, laughing, chattering and shouting, thoroughly scandalizing the waiter, and disturbing the philosophical discussions of the various other occupants of the various other rooms.

Lalage picked up the receiver, while Swode hovered over her shoulder with an air of jealous propriety.

"404 City, please. Is this 404 City? I want to speak to Mr. Gabriel Zaffrouli. No, the clerk won't do; it's private and personal. Is that Mr. Zaffrouli? Lalage Marne speaking—Lalage—Ell-A-Ell-A-Gee-E—Greek name. Yes, Lalage Marne—M-A-R-N-E—yes, you do know me? The housemaid at Professor Quist's. No! hold on! My business is much more important; it's

about Yunkaria. I've got definite information—five thousand pounds if it's of use—nothing if it's not. Yes, yes, yes; it's foolish of me to trust you, but I will. Hang on—yes—right. Great Britain concluded six months ago a secret treaty with France by which she bound herself to support the *status quo* in Yunkaria by force of arms if necessary—yes—and she's doing it, too. General Bullinghell has already received orders to march his reinforcements into the disturbed district. How do I know—guess, magic, second-sight; I tell you, you can take my word for it, I give you my personal guarantee. The suggestion from a man well skilled in intrigue' (Swode felt a smart pinch in his arm) 'is that you should try these facts at question time in the House and see what happens. What! Tea at 5.30 at your flat? Charmed, good-bye, good-bye."

"My dear girl," said Swode as they went back to the room, "you're either mad or tight; he'll never believe you. I wouldn't be too sanguine of those questions in the House."

"I'm neither mad nor tight—simply a trifle exalted, but perfectly lucid, I assure you. If we lose, so much the worse, but think of the score if we win!"

"You'd better let me escort you on that call," said Swode sulkily.

"I agree," she answered.

Eventually they left the restaurant.

"I think our behaviour," said Lilage, "was extraordinarily evangelical."

"In that case I am prepared to become converted to evangelicalism straight away."

His grip tightened on her arm and they vanished into the traffic.

VIII

Crisis in the 'Ouse

GABRIEL Zaffrouli had both a natural genius and a natural gusto for politico-financial intrigue. He moved both freely and adroitly in that thick and highly-charged atmosphere of cliques, concessions and conspiracy. A sport better than racing where you backed not horses but Governments, where to arrange for the pulling of your opponent's horse was the orthodox etiquette of the game, and where the stakes were sufficiently grandiose to excite even the most blasé financial appetite. And then the cold intellectual joy of high conspiracy; the icy abstraction of chess brought down to the concrete level by the blood and thunder of melodrama; a melodrama in which at one and the same time he was author, actor, stage-manager, and acutely interested spectator. A hobby too, which made its appeal not merely to the intellect, but also to the imagination. To sit back in his arm-chair slowly relishing the rich almost salty flavour of his cigar, while at the same time he had the consciousness that he, Gabriel Zaffrouli, was personally tinkering and tampering with the wires of history. For he had his vanity, this immaculate personage, with his well-manipulated eyeglass, his pallid dissipated face, and his general air of being a mixture (as in fact, he indeed was) of the extremely shady duke and the extremely up-to-date financier. Into the Yunkaria adventure Zaffrouli had plunged with rather more than his usual interest. He

enjoyed inve.ting in his own personal predilections. And he had a g.nuine predilection for the oppressed but insolent Panacel es. Thos- Panacenes who though in fact nearly alway. in the right, yet somehow nearly always managed by their ungraciousness and aggressiveness to produce the impression that they, at any rate, deserved to be always in the wrong.

And of course he had an even greater predilection for the magic oil of Yunkaria and the judicious exploitation of its inexhaustible supplies. So he had organized a select little practical understanding with Argomewicz, the inventor and patentee of Panacene ultra-nationalism. And Argomewicz in his anticipatory capacity as head of the new Panacene Provisional Government had already granted the syndicate an exclusive concession for the exploitation of all the oil in Yunkaria. A concession which absurdly enough Argomewicz had insisted in drafting in the Panacene language. For the Panacene language artificially resuscitated from its trance of centuries, was always squalling, kicking and advertising its own existence with the clamorous insistence of a spoilt and recent child. And Zaffrouli had already granted the Provisional Government a reasonably substantial loan for emergency purposes. And, being in fact, one of the highest authorities in Europe on the technique of conspiracy, he had conscientiously enough deemed it only part of the duty which he owed to himself and his syndicate, to revise and *viser* Argomewicz's plan, and to temper its rather splashy heroism with a modicum of cold science. And now from the spacious security of his office Zaffrouli was awaiting events. So far, the train had run as per schedule, with the most delightful mechanical precision. The reactionary tough of a Regent had died with exemplary

punctuality. Large stores of arms were already on the way, some of them duly invoiced as hymn books and ecclesiastical vestments to the hostile and notorious Archbishop of the Wernes, with due arrangements, of course, for their interception by the wrong people; but the bulk of them boldly addressed to the Director of Ordnance, again with due arrangements for their interception by the wrong people.

But after the demise of the Regent there had been a strange lull. So far as the schedule was concerned, Argomewicz should already be strutting about in the mediæval palace at Pedaldin, as head of the newly-formed Provisional Government. But so far as Zaffrouli's information was concerned, Argomewicz, damn him, appeared to be scandalously behind time.

"*Aunt Jane's baby arrived,*" was the phrasing of the preconcerted cable.

But alas! alas! and hang the wretched infant, the brat had not yet put in an appearance. The Press, moreover, was not quite as appreciative of the sudden demise of the reactionary tough of a Regent as the Press should have been. The *Daily Herald*, of course, came out boldly enough with:

TYRANNICIDE OF MATTHIAS.

On the other hand, not only the *Morning Post* (for this after-act was only what might reasonably have been anticipated), but even such a paper as the *Telegraph*, designated this salutary political formality as an assassination, and printed the obituary of the gentleman in a mourning border. And what was even more disconcerting, though this general tone of the Press was non-committal so far as any actual intervention was concerned, the *Daily Blare* had in its leader made some pious remarks about the sanctity of the Versailles

Treaty. As though, forsooth, there could be any sanctity whatsoever about a contract which had been violated with regularity by every signatory, and in every conceivable way ever since its creation.

Consequently and naturally, the serenity of Zaffrouli was definitely ruffled. All he could do was to wire Aunt Jane at her two accommodation addresses in Berlin and Geneva.

Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting, worried the instrument. He picked it up.

"Someone insists on speaking to you, sir," murmured the suave tones of his confidential clerk.

"All right—put them through."

At first he could distinguish nothing but ribald laughter and a disgraceful giggle. He spoke angrily and impatiently.

"Yes, yes, yes, of course I'm myself. Who are you? What? I can't hear—spell it—don't be impertinent or I'll ring off. The housemaid? Are you really? What, Yunkaria—how do you know—what guarantee is there—I don't believe a word you say—why on earth should I? But that's no reason why you shouldn't come and have tea with me—Righto!"

But then, after he had rung off and lit a fresh cigar, the fantastic intelligence became invested with a more probable reality; who was more likely than Rummington Pitch to have perpetrated a secret treaty with the foaming jingoes of France? Who was more likely than old Bullinghell to start pacifying the Panacenes as though they were blacks?

With a meditative frown Zaffrouli kept on perambulating his Shiraz carpet. But supposing it were true? How could he prove it? Whose business was it to know? The business of Rummington Pitch, of course. Why not

ask him? Ask him officially in a carefully drafted question in the House? The hussy of a housemaid was right, damn her. But supposing Pitch denied the treaty? Supposing he professed total ignorance of any military movements? The military commander after all always had a discretion. And has not the British Empire been, to quite an appreciable extent, built up by the patriotic insubordination of its generals taking the responsibility of their own private initiative; sacrificing themselves if the venture failed, adding a province to the Empire if the venture prospered? Quite so, but it was nevertheless putting rather a strain even on this excellent principle of Imperialism to apply it to the purpose of simply acquiring a tame vassal state for the exclusive benefit of France. Besides, British capital was very slightly represented in the French company which had acquired the country and its Regent as a going concern. Public opinion was jealous. Pitch would have to be careful. Genius though he might be in the niceties of Parliamentary inexactitude, it might be dangerous for him to risk too sweeping a denial. And even if he were bland and non-committal, the very vagueness of his answer would help to intensify the fumes of public suspicion and mistrust.

Of course the question would need framing with legal precision. Thank Heaven, England still had her lawyer politicians. And the man with the strongest and swiftest brain of the lot was Sir Charles Peters. Completely disinterested, at once blessed and cursed by a Nonconformist kink in an otherwise twentieth-century mind, an invincible believer in the traditional principles of British Liberalism, the one vital hope of the old Radical party, which might even yet spring up again like a giant refreshed from its apparent death-bed, Charles

Peters was obviously the ideal man to frame the question, bait it, steep its point in the deadly poison of the truth, launch it, and ram it home with the impetus of a Dreadnought battleship into the swollen body of the Governmental majority.

But would he accept the information? Information based merely on the cocksure impudence of a saucy housemaid? Well, anyway, it was worth trying. And, if he refused, Zaffrouli, of course, could always fall back on his tame satellites.

Instructing his clerk to telephone Sir Charles that he was on his way on a matter both of urgency and importance, he proceeded to the Temple. As the Rolls-Royce swung along the Thames Embankment he reflected that the mission would require the full maximum of his diplomatic ability. Besides, his acquaintance with Peters was of the slightest description. His solicitors had once briefed Peters in one of those heavy cases complicated with innumerable issues both of fact and of law, where his forensic genius was always at its best. And, after winning the case, Peters had accepted an invitation to dinner, and there the acquaintance had ended.

And, of all politicians, Peters was *par excellence* the one and only really incorruptible. But what if his very incorruptibility should provide the opening? The man himself he could not bribe with a solid million. But he could offer to the man's conscience the prospect of saving England from the fatuity of a new politico-financial war.

Peters greeted him conventionally, but with a certain measure of urbane surprise.

"I'm afraid I can't give you any advice without a solicitor."

"You misunderstand me, Sir Charles. My business is

not personal, but national—the Yunkaria crisis—the unfortunate state of unrest. Some important information has come into my possession, which as a matter of conscience, I feel bound to put before you."

He paused for a moment to excite the interest of his listener. But Sir Charles simply leaned back in his chair and judicially balanced his finger tips. Instead of asking "What is the information?" he calmly waited for his visitor to continue.

"My information," pursued Zaffrouli, "is to the effect that the Cabinet has concluded a secret treaty with France, which binds them to give military assistance to ensure the political stability of the country; in other words, to crush the Panacene national movement."

The square, boyish, clear-cut features of Sir Charles grew more and more intent.

"Assuming that your information is true, Mr. Zaffrouli, the country will not stand such a treaty for a moment." Zaffrouli followed up his point with quiet empnasis.

"On this treaty, Sir Charles, they have already acted—General Bullinghell has already moved his troops into what, I believe, is technically known as the disturbed region, where he is to co-operate with the French."

On receipt of this alarming intelligence the one pure politician in the whole country looked quizzingly at the debonair financial adventurer. But the debonair financial adventurer continued imperturably.

"The situation is critical—any suggestion from me to you as to how to deal with the matter would, of course, be presumptuous; but I feel justified in telling you, as a fact, that unless you act immediately England will be drawn into another unjust military adventure—the future rests in your hands."

"Now tell me—what exactly is your interest in the matter," queried the frank cool voice of Sir Charles.

At this juncture Zaffrondi thought it prudent to put upon the table three-quarters of the truth.

"As you know, my sympathies have always been Liberal—I have always been, if not an active, at any rate always a very sympathetic member of the Eighty Club. In politics I have always been Left; but, of course, it is only fair to tell you that, in this case, I possess certain rather special and specific interests. I am a member of a certain financial group which has entered into negotiations for the assistance of the Panacenes, in the event, of course, of their succeeding—we consequently have our own sources of information—our information can, therefore, be regarded as official."

"Of course," said Sir Charles, meditatively, "one hears such numerous stories nowadays about secret treaties."

"Surely if you simply put the thing in the form of a question, you are not committed?"

"Not technically, perhaps—morally, yes—assuming I am met with a point-blank denial—and even if you are right, the secret treaty may never come to light and you may never get actual proofs of all these military movements—the stultification is serious."

"If you will allow me to say so, Sir Charles, are you not balancing the stultification of yourself against the stultification of the country. What is England's position if she is dragged into this absurd adventure?"

"Quite so, quite so—but if I discharge a broadside at Rummington Pitch I like to be quite certain that my guns are loaded with shells and not with blank."

"Like the guns of General Bullinghell will be when he bombards the Panacené towns."

"" Now, now, Mr. Zaffrouli, you're trying to rush and intimidate me."

" You do me an injustice—I'm simply trying to make you realize with the utmost expedition the gravity of the situation."

Sir Charles Peters began scribbling with a pencil.

After a few minutes he pushed the pad towards Zaffrouli.

" This may possibly do."

Zaffrouli read as follows:

" Has the G.O.C. the British troops in Yunkaria been given a complete discretion as to whether or not to use armed force in co-operation with the French against the Panacenes in the disturbed areas in Yunkaria ? "

The financier looked somewhat disappointed.

" It's not melodramatic," continued Peters, " but in my opinion, it will, nevertheless, prove embarrassing. You see if the facts are as you suggest, and Bullinghell is already operating with the French, even Rummington Pitch will scarcely feel it consistent with his honour to give a flat negative—one must assume then that he will answer in the affirmative—I shall then follow up with this question, Will the Hon. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs undertake that no troops will be used against the Panacenes without a resolution of the House ? ' He will, of course, reply that he is bound to leave a certain margin of discretion to the military authorities on the spot ; at this juncture I fire the big gun : Has there been any written understanding with France of any nature whatsoever with regard to mutual action with regard to maintaining the *status quo* in Yunkaria ? ' Well, I'll do my best— we'll see what will happen—of course, it's a risk, but I'd risk a good deal to save England from another war.

Perhaps you can kindly give me a lift in your car to the House ? "

Two minutes later Zaffrouli was a strained spectator in the gallery of the House of Commons. Question time. The interpellation on the Yunkaria crisis already in progress. The blood-and-thunder contingent of the Tory party asking (apparently as a matter of preconcerted collusion) what measures had been taken to safeguard British interests, and being blandly assured that the British military and diplomatic representatives on the spot were keeping in the closest possible touch with the situation.

And then swiftly springs up the tall, boyish figure of Sir Charles Peters. In cool, clear, challenging tones the first question is flung at Rummington Pitch.

" Has the G.O.C. the British troops in Yunkaria been given by the Government a complete discretion as to whether or not to employ armed force in co-operation with the French troops against the Panacenes in the disturbed area in Yunkaria ? "

A growl of discontent from the blood-and-thunder Tories.

A howl of ecstasy from the Labour members.

Rummington Pitch rises, ruffled and defiant.

" His Majesty's Government naturally presumes that the gallant Commander-in-Chief will exercise his discretion in the very difficult and delicate situation in which he is placed."

Sir Charles jabs his point on to the unanswered portion of the question.

" Have any orders been given by His Majesty's Government to the General with reference to his policy in the present crisis ? "

Pitch remains contemptubusly silent. Renewed howls

from the Labour members. A murmur of suspicion from some of the more moderate and lukewarm supporters of the Government.

Pitch is goaded to his feet.

"That question should be addressed to the Minister of War—such orders as have been issued are presumably confidential."

Cool and vibrant, Sir Charles discharges his second shot.

"Will the Government undertake that no British troops will be employed against the Panacenes without a resolution of this House and notify telegraphically General Bullinghell to the same effect?"

Continued tumult. Old members of the House smell a crisis.

Rummington Pitch hesitates—confers with his colleagues.

"Inasmuch as it is impossible to know what action will be taken by the Panacene revolutionaries it is impossible to give any such undertaking."

Icy and provocative, Sir Charles slowly fires the third question.

"Has there been any written understanding with France of any nature whatsoever with regard to maintaining the *status quo* in Yunkaria?"

Amid the howls of his supporters and his enemies, Rummington Pitch sprang to his feet.

"It is naturally to be expected that the Allied Governments would consult with a view to common action in certain contingencies."

But Sir Charles, having drawn blood, was unsatisfied. "My question was whether or not there exists a treaty concerning Yunkaria between His Majesty's Government and France?"

But Pitch sat still, furious and glaring; the Oppo-

sition howled themselves hoarse with delight, while those Liberals who were supporters of the Government looked shocked and discontented.

A general air of movement began to pervade the House. The reporters and political correspondents began to scribble rapidly.

And then Pitch began to move the adoption of some supplementary war estimates, the total rejection of which was immediately afterwards moved by Sir Charles. A full-dress debate was indicated.

Zaffrouli looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to five. At five that hussy of a housemaid—what was her name? —oh, yes—Lalage Marne, was coming to tea. Had she simply wormed the truth out of some politician who had fallen from grace in the normal way, or was that absurd magic a practical proposition? He must and would find out. Reluctantly he tore himself away in the very middle of Sir Charles's speech—a steel ram of dialectic thrust right up to the hilt into the flabby swollen mass of Pitch's paper majority.

Before entering his car he ran into the nearest telephone box he could find and telephoned his brokers to sell short £20,000 worth of Yunkarian francs.

On his way to Mayfair he was pleased to encounter the news which he had himself contributed to hatching:

SECRET
TREATY
WITH FRANCE?

shouted blatantly the pink poster of the *Star*.

CRISIS
IN THE
HOUSE

announced more amicably the *Evening Blare*.

On reaching his flat he let himself in with his latch-key, and went straight to his study. On the table he found a written telephone message from his office.

"*Aunt Jane confined. French doctor in attendance. Situation serious.*"

For a moment the code worked so well that it took in even the very man who had originated it himself. In point of fact he did possess an aunt answering to the name of Jane, a widow of fifty, buxom, garrulous, and most hopelessly respectable.

And then his thoughts hooked on to the right connection. Argomewicz had been arrested by the French. Immediate action was necessary. Argomewicz was not, of course, as indispensable as Argomewicz personally considered. Nevertheless, he was, from the popular standpoint, the official incarnation of the Panacene national movement. Without Argomewicz the revolution would not necessarily collapse. But it would certainly be severely crippled. Without Argomewicz it would lose a good deal of its momentum and even more of its noise. He must go to Yunkaria at once. Damn Argomewicz. Why must the fellow go and get himself arrested? Bravado, heroism, probably.

"Miss Lalage Marne," announced his butler, ushering in a brisk young woman in a check tailor-made suit.

Crumbling in his fingers the offending missive, he advanced to meet his visitor.

"Good afternoon"

"Sit down, please" He shook hands and motioned her to an arm chair.

"I trust your Aunt Jane is out of danger, Mr. Zaffrouli," said the young woman, "and that the child is doing well? No, I've not been reading that piece of paper, because I've only just arrived here, and in order

partly to gratify your curiosity as to who and what the devil I am, here is my card."

Feeling somewhat dazed, Zaffrouli read as follows:

MISS LALAGE MARNE

The Dove Cot,
Oxborough,
York.

Pantheon Club,
London.

"I confess, Miss Marne, that I am impressed, very considerably impressed."

"That, Mr. Zaffrouli," continued the young lady buoyantly, "is just as it should be. I am principally interested however, in this—did you act on my intelligence?"

"My dear Miss Marne, if you will pardon the observation, you are a trifle casual; you launch me on an intrigue of first-class importance, and then omit to follow it up. The papers are lurid with the crisis—and you—why, you can't even have read one.'

"I apologize. I was engaged on work of national importance."

"I gave your information to Sir Charles Peters—Sir Charles Peters put a few questions in the House—a full-dress debate on the whole matter is now in progress, and the Government will quite possibly resign."

"Then England will not join in the war."

"Highly improbable."

"Then the Panacenes will win their revolution."

"I hope so—of course there'll always be the French."

"Yes—the French are the curse of Europe and of France," said the young woman brightly.

Zaffrouli laughed urbanely, while the butler brought

in China tea, toast, scones, cigarettes and whisky and soda.

"Excuse me," said Zaffrouli, "but why this acute interest in the Panacenes."

"I confess," said Lalage, "that I have rather a pash for the Panacenes—but I have a greater pash still for getting things done or undone, or if you like, smashing up accomplished facts. If the Government comes down I shall feel personally responsible—it's historical—it's a score—it goes to the brain—yes—I'm afraid I'm a born mischief-maker."

The financier smiled appreciatively while he drank slowly and meditatively his China tea.

"Your francs will go down all right," pursued the young woman gaily. "How many did you sell?"

"This is too absurd—how do you know I sold francs?"

But Lalage puffed for a few seconds her cigarette with the most outrageous jauntiness.

"From the same source, Mr. Zaffrouli, that I know that you're backing the Panacenes quite as heavily as you can afford, and that you're worried to death about your poor Aunt Jane. Yes, Mr. Zaffrouli, the Professor's invention works beautifully, I assure you."

"I am interested," said the financier.

"I lent the dear little thing to a friend," went on Lalage; "the friend interviewed to-day Rummington Pitch—Rummington Pitch, apparently, has at last reached the stage where he can control his words—but I'm glad to say he has not yet reached the stage where he can control his thoughts. Rummington Pitch just thought into Quist's machine."

"I repeat, I am very interested in this machine."

"To what extent?" said the girl impudently.

"I should like to test it—may I examine it?"

The girl slowly produced the glittering toy.

"No," she replied coolly.

Zaffrouli checked the angry reply that raced to his lips, and lit a cigarette with great deliberation.

"My dear Mr. Zaffrouli," said the young woman, "will you allow me to assure you that any melodramatic tricks will be utterly useless. In the first place I can, and if necessary, will scream; in the second I have a man of mine waiting outside the window where I am sitting, so if you try to get hold of the thing by force, I will simply throw it out—like this—Catch hold, Lucius!"

The little oblong box of aluminium flashed for a moment in the electric light, flew up in a curve, and disappeared.

"I cannot tell you how much I respect you," said the financier. "We will now talk business—how much do you want for the loan of the machine for the next month or so? That invention will be invaluable to the Panacenes—it must go to Yunkaria."

"Where the old Quisto-box goes, I go. I am prepared to place at your disposal my Quisto-box, my partner, and myself—on terms, of course, and within reasonable limits."

"What terms?"

"I don't know how to bargain, Mr. Zaffrouli; we will say ten thousand pounds."

"You will say ten thousand pounds, my dear lady," said the financier, "but I shall not say anything of the kind."

His features began to assume a sad and dignified expression. He shrugged his shoulders with that particular and most eloquent shrug which he had inherited from his grandfather.

The tintinnabulation of the telephone bell interrupted this display of high-class pantomime.

Zaffrouli took up the receiver.

"No bad news of Aunt Jane, I trust," said Lalage Marne maliciously.

"You will go to Yunkaria to-morrow," said Zaffrouli. "I will take you myself."

"I shall have to have my man along with me, as a chaperon," said Lalage sweetly. "But otherwise I'm absolutely at your service."

The financier nodded.

From the streets there floated up the voices of urchins and of aged men:

GREAT CRISIS IN THE 'OUSE
RESIGNATION OF RUMMINGTON PITCH.

IX

Aunt Jane's Railway Journey

WELL, here we are in Yunkaria! And not merely in Yunkaria, but inside the whirring brain of Argomewicz, Argomewicz, the hero-in-chief and agitator extraordinary of Zaffrouli's revolution. Argomewicz, if not the most important man in Yunkaria, at any rate is the most picturesque, the most flamboyant, the most strident. Possibly too, the most gifted. But on the other hand by no means the best balanced. Fertile as he was in ideas, he was always apt to violate the technique of good conspiracy. Impatient of the black cloak, the side alleys, the prudent whispers of the scientific plotter, he was always apt to break away from the shadows and to don the purple trappings of the hero, while he commanded the operator to switch on the limelight. He had suffered all his life from the disease of nationalism and had flourished exceedingly on the disease. He had lived spiritually on the hypertrophy of his own exacerbated national nerve. His enemies called him a *poseur*, a demagogue, and an adventurer. The taunt was only partially justified. His enthusiasm for the cause of Panacene nationalism was genuine enough. And if in the fantastic dreams of Panacene nationalism which he strove so devotedly to realize, he himself played invariably the chief rôle—Head of the Provisional Government—Premier—Foreign Minister—Plenipotentiary to the Entente—Commander-in-Chief—Dictator—it was not because he loved Yunkaria less and himself more,

but simply because he had so completely identified himself with Yunkaria, and Yunkaria with himself, that he had found it impossible to conceive of the aggrandizement of Yunkaria or rather a Panacene Yunkaria without at the same time thinking of the aggrandizement of Argomewicz.

Hence the *débâcle*. The exuberant fellow had poured out the baby with the bath. The revolution, on paper a masterpiece of intrigue, and scientifically worked out by Zaffrouli (with his Tammany-Germanic training) to several places of decimals, and timed with the precision of a railway time-table, had been launched on a scale not according to plan. The execution, of course, of the Regent, had been swift, painless and devoid of all fuss. The proclamation of a Provisional Government in Pedaldin, the ramshackle heterogeneous capital, had taken place with express certainty. But this greedy baby of nationalism had overeaten himself. The disputed town of Barbar had proved his undoing. Barbar, if you please! A one-eyed hole packed with superstitious shrines, but not boasting in its whole environment one single oil well of sufficient importance to justify the slightest attention on the part of any well-balanced nationalist. Nevertheless, with a band of satellites, the fantastic fool had essayed its capture; and, having previously made one of the most brilliant speeches of his life, a speech immortalized and quite properly so in the history of Panacene literature; a speech which incidentally gave away, albeit in masterly periods, the whole plan of attack, he had been ignominiously caught together with his quixotic minions.

But at the actual moment when we penetrate the brain of Argomewicz, the hero and his gallant minions have started on a railway journey; fished out of their

sleep at two o'clock in the morning and bundled off to some destination or other, the ghost of the executed Regent alone knew where. But never mind the ghost of the executed Regent. The reader wants the whirring brain of Argomewicz faithfully promised at the beginning of this chapter.

THE WHIRRING BRAIN OF ARGOMEWICZ

(Note.—It will please be remembered that these thoughts have been translated from the Panacene into the English language.)

"A good speech—one of the best I ever made in my life—very considerate of them really to allow me to keep my copy—must get it published as a pamphlet—edition de luxe, of course—whom shall I dedicate it to—the Panacene people or that brute of a President? No, he's not subtle enough to apprciate the irony—how uncomfortable these prison clothes are—h'm—purple cloth—call it the royal purple—come in well for my next speech—will I ever make a next speech? Oh, damn it all, they can't hang me—ME—ME! I'm much too important—the country would never stand it—every Panacene man, woman and child will hunger-strike straight away—the English Government will never stand it. But suppose those military toughs hang me first, without confirmation, like the English hanged those Egyptians over the Denshawi incident—they may—they may—they may—just to force the pace. Of course they'll have to refer it to old Bullinghell, who's in command of both armies—don't trust him—a shoddy bastard Cæsar—mixture of smart staff-officer and the Piccadilly Johnny—out for a Wernish Yunkaria all the time—pretended at the beginning to be pro-Panacene—used to come and dine with our leaders—when we had the country after the armistice—then started supplying

the Wernes with money and arms to run the revolution; then fixed up a secret treaty with them—only in draft, though; then someone—who was it now?—fell from grace with a lady, and gave it away to the French. Then the French outbid him and squared the Regent; well, he's playing for big stakes anyway—A Werne Yunkaria—under the British ægis—and himself as the British adviser—a second Cromer—a new province for the Empire—impressively unscrupulous—he dined with me—but he'll hang me without a qualm, but with his best compliments thrown in—possibly let me see the wife, though—pity she's not more enthusiastic over the Panacene national movement—naïve enough to be more enthusiastic over me, poor thing, but if she's enthusiastic over me she must be enthusiastic over Panacenism—when the devil will it be light—they've given me a first-class railway carriage anyway—quite comfortable lying full length—how the officer on guard does snore—shall I wake him and request him not to—no better not—he might shove me into the cattle truck with the others. Wonder how they're getting on in Pedaldin—hope old Krockrock has the situation well in hand—wish I'd taken Barbar—a dear little Panacene town—fine song that—the song of the maiden of Barbar from the middle ages of Panacene history—the time of the second Wernish domination—the exiled Princess who said she would give herself to the first Panacene who ever entered Barbar.

'Whosoever by force
Or of sword or of wit
Shall first enter the fortress of Barbar,
The boasted impregnable,
He shall be given the keys of mine own body,
The boasted impregnable.'"

Humming the ancient ditty with its fierce barbaric lilt, its gay almost jaunty savour of blood, patriotism, sacrifice and lust, Argomewicz fell into a sleep. His aggressively Panacene snores formed a competing discord with the aristocratic grunts that emanated from his Wernish gaoler. And while the train mumbled on over the badly ballasted line (ballasted, of course, by a personal friend of the Minister of the Interior) the soul of Argomewicz swung back into the middle ages, that bright vivid splash in the dark history of the Panacenes when Barbar had been the capital of a Panacene Yunkaria. And he, Argomewicz (but what was his name then he neither knew nor cared), was one of the many would-be lovers of Esothoe Princess of Barbar. Over the wall they clamber in doublet and hose, naked of mail. Muffled swords at their sides and poniards in their teeth. Snake-like they crawled round the mud and sand of the almost dried-up road—half one way—half the other. A harsh sandy bed, uncomfortable and rocking. There rumbles the snore of some torpid sentry. The silent plunge of a poniard. The sentry even more torpid, snores no more. At last the adventurers meet by the western gate. A sharp skirmish with the swiftly overpowered guard. The keys. Open slowly swings western gate. Inward swiftly pour the Panacene soldiery.

" The fortress of Barbar,
The boasted impregnable,
The dear Panacene city,
Polluted by the Wernes,
In swept Panacene soldiers,
Sixteen in number,
Full of sport and gaiety,
With purifying swords and daggers ;

Through Barbar they swept,
The dear Panacene city,
Through the winding street
And the crooked alleys of stone,
And for half a day
The patriotic swords and daggers
Purely played,
And after half a day
The Fortress of Barbar,
The boasted impregnable,
The dear Panacene city
Was purified of Wernes.

But who of the sixteen heroes
Entered the first
The fortress of Barbar,
The dear Panacene city,
Purified of Wernes?
And who had won the keys
Of the Princess Esothoe,
The boasted impregnable?

In the marble aisles
Of the Wernish temple
Gay with Wernish blood
Was set the banquet table.
Thronèd at the top,
Clad in a single robe
Of golden silk made gay with Wernish blood,
Sat the Princess Esothoe,
Holding in her hands
The keys of the fortress,
The boasted impregnable.

Swollen with their passion
For Princess and for Motherland,
Waxed the heroes,
Swollen too
With the red viands and the redder wine.

'I was the first to enter
The dear Panacene city,
The boasted impregnable,
And I shall enter the first,
That dearer Panacene city,
The boasted impregnable.'

So averred each hero
While the tongue hissed like daggers
And the daggers darted like tongues.

Then quelled the brawl
The imperial tones,
Of the Princess Esothoe.

'Heroes mine,
Verily too many,
Are those who have entered first
The dear Panacene city,
The boasted impregnable,
But I shall make the test
Of who has entered first
The dear Panacene city,
The boasted impregnable,
And who shall enter first
That dearer Panacene city
The boasted impregnable.

Yonder in that shrine
Where lie the rotting bones
Of the Wernish saint,
Is space for eight couples,
Yea for sixteen daggers.'
Clad in her single robe
Of golden silk made gay with Wernish blood
And lifting high her goblet
Dark with crimson wine
Again spoke Esothoe:

'Yonder in that shrine
Where lie the rotting bones
Of the Wernish saint
Is there ample space
For four couples and eight daggers,
Nay, for four daggers and for two couples,
Nay, verily, for one couple and for two daggers.'

Then goblet high in her hand
Above the pagan shrine
Where lay the rotting bones
Of the Wernish saint
Stood the Princess Esothoe,
Upon that single robe
Made gay with Wernish blood;
And slowly happily sang:

'Yea, you were the first to enter
The fortress of Barbar,
The boasted impregnable,
My dear Panacene city,

And you shall enter the first
And you shall enter the last,
My dearer Panacene city,
The boasted impregnable!' "

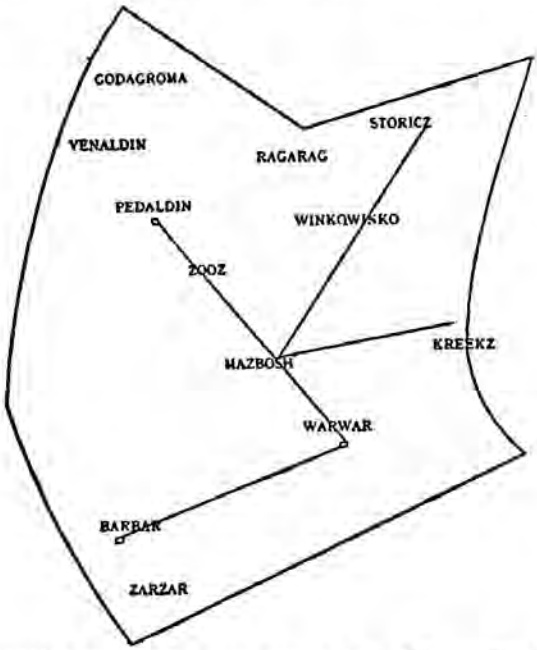
But just as the mediæval soul of Argomewicz was about at last to enjoy the prize of his patriotism, he was conscious of the ejaculation of an obscene oath in the Wernish language from his guard.

In the dingy dawn of to-morrow the train had pulled up at the Wernish town of Warwar; while from the cattle truck in all the full consonantal richness of the Panacene language, there rang forth rugged and provocative the red rhythm of that officially vetoed anthem, the Maiden of Barbar:

" Whosoever by force
Or of sword or of wit
Shall first
Enter the fortress of Barbar,
The boasted impregnable
He shall be given the keys of mine own body,
The boasted impregnable."

X

How Argomewicz came to Pedaldin



STUDY the above map carefully. You will observe that in contour the country of Yunkaria resembles nothing so much as a slightly miscarried crayfish. But we are not for a moment overwhelmingly interested in the mere æsthetics of Yunkarian geography. Nor even in the politics of its geography, and the fine assortment of mutual irredentas that abounded in the numerous salients that penetrated its neighbours from Yunkaria or penetrated Yunkaria from its neighbours.

For the moment we are concerned with the railways, a multifarious concern supported by the capital of every country in Europe except Yunkaria; functioning and misfunctioning in ten official languages and for the present blocked and muddled by partition into half a dozen distinct political zones. Observe! The line from Barbar to Warwar enjoys the honour of being mismanaged by the French and their Wernish satellites. French station-masters, resplendent in brocade or disguised as officers, nonchalantly supervise the manipulation of the trains by their Wernish minions. Only the French Wernish paper franc is officially recognized as backsheesh; in the event of some enterprising trader finding it really necessary to obtain a truck for the purpose of establishing a corner in some staple commodity, imperatively needed by the country, or any of its armies of occupation.

From Warwar however, as is apparent from the map, the line swings back at an acute angle to the recently constructed junction of Mazbosh, and the archaic capital of Pedaldin. This section is managed by the British. The muddle is less intense, corruption is less common and commands a higher price, and the currency is the Anglo-Panacene Wernish paper pound, which, backed as it is by an adequate gold reserve, and whether for the purposes of trade or of backsheesh, circulates equally at par. If, however, your national enthusiasm is more French than British, and you are more interested in oil than in archæology, you swing round to the right and arrive at the economically important town of Creeks, the seat of the Franco-Wernish oil monopoly société anonyme and of hirsute and innumerable brigands, who when not tactfully conscripted by propaganda and machine guns into voluntary labour in the mines, will

cut your throat with all the picturesque trimmings of melodrama, and without the slightest additional charge whatsoever.

The ethnology of these brigands varies according to the political situation. When the Wernes and the French wish to arm them and let them loose against the Panacene towns and villages, they are a possibly primitive, but for that very reason an even more genuine branch of the good old Wernish race, full of good old feudal loyalty and picturesque with good old rugged atavism. Where however, as I am afraid not infrequently happens, their impartial buccaneering gusto leads them by mistake to sack a Wernish instead of a Panacene townstead, or in the hurry of the moment to violate a Wernish instead of a Panacene virgin, their Wernish origin is immediately obliterated by the tarry blotches of black Dugarene blood, which, as all anthropologists are well aware, is the real source of this degenerate but bloodthirsty race.

In their theological views the Dugarenes (as in the interest of historical accuracy we propose to call them) vary between the Holy Catholic and the Holy Fetishisht Church, sometimes, I regret to say, affecting bizarre blend of the two rival creeds, to the equal annoyance of those two distinguished prelates, His Eminence the Roman Bishop and His Beatitude the Fetishisht Patriarch. But let us, returning from these ethnological and ecclesiastical digressions, return to our railway map. Mazbosh! Have you got it? One-third of the way between Warwar and Pedaldin. Mazbosh, that brisk little Panacene town, with its vivid brand-new parochial bustling existence, its white stucco houses—its white stucco mayor. From Mazbosh to the north-east runs the decrepit railway line of a decrepit

French company, to the moribund Wernish town of Winko-Winko and Storwicz, and from there to the frontier.

Having mastered consequently the salient features of this railway, you will, of course, understand the state of mind of Lalage Marne and Gabriel Zaffrouli and a few other conspiratorial friends of Argomewicz, who were ready to plan a melodramatic rescue, if they could only find out the melodramatic destination. But all the resources of the Panacene Intelligence had exhausted themselves in vain. It was in vain that Panacene telephone operators tapped secret messages, and that the Panacene emissaries in the Post Office opened (and of course, reclosed) official correspondence. Nobody knew the destination, or even the fate, of Argomewicz. Was he to be executed or simply imprisoned for life? But nevertheless, without cessation and by telegraph, telephone and special messenger, in cipher and also in clear, by aeroplane, heliograph and even by the post (which, after all, was quicker than the telegraph) came regularly and relentlessly from Krockrock the perpetual slogan:

"Argomewicz must be rescued."

So, after all, it was not unnatural that as they ate their early morning omelette and coffee in the Warwar restaurant, the temper of neither the one nor the other should show its usual serenity.

"This Argomewicz is fatiguing," murmured Lalage Marne, "is he really so important?"

"Not really," said Zaffrouli, "but the fellow's become a local legend, and, therefore, counts practically —if we got him, I don't know what we should do with him—but apparently he really must be rescued."

But Lalage Marne subsided into a hysterical fit of coughing, spluttering and weeping

With a pathetic gesture she indicated that the responsibility lay with the omelette. Eventually the cause of the disturbance—a small pebble—lay on the plate.

"Are our enemies trying to poison us?" whispered the girl weakly.

"No, my dear, it is more likely that you have been eating the words of a man who boasts that he never eats his own."

And taking up the indigestible missive, Zaffrouli unrolled a small piece of paper on which were scrawled some words in some unknown and barbaric language.

"I hate working with Krockrock," said Zaffrouli, "he's too damnably conspiratorial—revolutions are his hobby and film-writing his profession—what can you expect from a man with that record—the purity of his technique is bound to suffer."

"Aren't we going to decipher the message?" said Lalage, after recovering her breath.

"Quite unnecessary," said Zaffrouli, twisting the scroll into a spill, igniting it with a match, and then lighting his cigar with the flaming paper.

"Argomewicz must be saved or the situation is lost."

Lalage proceeded to steady her nerves and her digestion with a liqueur brandy. For a moment her thoughts dwelt on Swode, whom the *Blare* had sent on a special mission into French Yunkaria.

Suddenly there arrived the *maître d'hôtel*, bearing a folded bill on a dingy plate.

As Zaffrouli fumbled in his pocket for a coin the *maître d'hôtel* suddenly ejaculated in guttural French,

"Monsieur will excuse me, but if Monsieur is the American millionaire with the charming secretary, I

have a message for Monsieur: 'The goods must be delivered.'"

Zaffrouli looked at his companion in dumb agony.

Signs of commotion were audible on the platform outside the restuarant.

"The goods train has arrived, Monsieur," continued the *maître d'hôtel*, "and it is of the greatest importance to Yunkaria that the goods should be delivered."

"I can't stand it—I can't stand it," gasped Lalage, and rushed wildly on to the platform.

The long black station was almost entirely deserted. A few porters propelled lazy trolleys. A few officials fumbled with their pencils in mysterious note-books. A few sleepers rising vaguely from the station benches asked the world in general if the morning train for Pedaldin had yet arrived. The drab dirt of the dawn was filtering slowly through the drab dirt of the station roof. A cordon of police sheepishly puffed cigarettes with half-open eyes.

But imperiously and impetuously the young woman proceeded at once to the one first-class carriage in the dirty wheezy train that had just snivelled its way into the inhospitable vastness of the station.

She suddenly found herself in close and almost dangerous proximity to the young swarthy Wernish officer who was descending from the carriage. Her eyes rattled a fusilade of provocation, while with the fine gesture of a tragic actress, she seized both the hands of the surprised but fortunate young man.

"Monsieur," she cried, "I am in sore trouble; will you save me?"

"Madam, I am at your service," replied the officer stiffly, but the Quisto-box indicated that the inside of his brain was functioning on distinctly normal lines.

"I want to see my husband," she continued, with a new and special pathos.

"But which husband, Madam?" replied the officer with a puzzled expression.

Releasing, much against his will, her grip of the young man's wrists, the young woman drew herself indignantly up to her full height.

"I thought everybody in Yunkaria knew Mme. Argomewicz" she replied haughtily.

"I doubt if it's possible, Madam," replied the officer stiffly.

But the Quisto-box suddenly switched into the brain of the young woman the following:

("I want to make love to the girl, but first of all I want a drink").

In prompt obedience to this extremely convenient manifestation of scientific mysticism, Lalage Marne produced from the right-hand pocket of her Norfolk jacket a capacious aluminium flask.

"You have, no doubt, had a tiring journey—permit me to offer you a little refreshment."

And while the voice of the Wernish officer hesitated what exactly to reply, his hands and throat answered definitely in the affirmative.

Lalage pressed her advantage.

"I must see my husband—you cannot refuse that request of a wife."

"It is rather in your capacity as a woman that I can refuse you nothing," replied the officer with typical Wernish gallantry. "There is your husband. I will take it upon myself to grant you five minutes."

Lalage felt a momentary shock.

She had no recollection of her husband, as she had never seen him. Owing, moreover, to the extremely

recent character of the marital relationship, she had omitted either to purchase one of the innumerable picture post-cards of this celebrated nationalist hero, or even to provide herself with a description. Fortunately, however, the field of possibilities was narrowed. There was only one face looking out of the one window of the one first-class railway carriage in the train. In the dim dawn Lalage could only discern what looked like the smooth, clean-shaven face of some perverse and pince-nez'd schoolboy of thirty-five, peering out into the cold morning with an expression at once wistful and imperious, but above all rigid with the fixity of some idea that had congealed in his feverish and agitated brain.

The Wernish officer punctiliously unlocked the door of the carriage. In rushed Lalage—briskly threw her arms around the neck of the morbid schoolboy who was dressed in a hideous and ill-fitting suit of purple. Much to her surprise the heliotrope schoolboy reciprocated the embrace with some vehemence while he murmured in a dazed voice "Esothoe, Princess Esothoe."

"What language do you speak?" hissed Lalage.

"I speak of course, the Panacean language," replied Argomewicz in French. "I also have a tolerable acquaintance with German, Esperanto, Russian, modern Greek, Swedish, and Wernish—but I'm dreaming—you must excuse me—who are you?"

His voice was sweet and melodious, attuned to tones of an almost exaggerated moderation, as though its owner were determined to defend himself in advance against some imputation of being ill-balanced and extravagant, by an excessive display of extremely obvious sanity.

"One of your friends," answered the girl. "Arrangements are being made for your rescue—but we must find

out where they're taking you."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Argomewicz. "You should apply to the Panacean Intelligence—or, of course, the officer who's guarding me—a blockhead, but cautious—he has no business to tell—of course it might be made his business to tell."

The Wernish officer appeared outside the window. Taking her cue with praiseworthy rapidity, the girl once more threw her arms around the neck of Argomewicz. "Officially, I'm your wife," she whispered. "That's how I got in—remember to play your part."

"That means," said Argomewicz sadly, "that I shall only kiss you on your forehead; but how is the revolution—does Krockrock still hold Pedaldin?"

But descending from matrimony the girl was once more on the platform. Once again she seized the two hands of the Wernish officer.

"I don't know how to thank you now—I will try to thank you adequately in the future—but tell me—please, please tell me this one thing—where, where are you taking my poor husband?"

"That, my dear lady," said the officer, "is a question which I cannot answer."

"Be human rather than diplomatic," pressed Lalage, while her fingers touched nervously the spring of the Quisto-box.

"Believe me I am extremely human," said the officer. But the words which tingled into her brain were ("Damn the Government—damn the Government—I don't know—the guard doesn't know—I doubt if the Government knows itself—there's bound to be a muddle—nice instructions to give a fellow—to stand by at Warwar and await instructions—there's bound to be a muddle—and I shall probably be blamed").

The prophetic thoughts of the gallant officer were realized with mathematical accuracy. For there was a muddle, and he was blamed; not merely blamed, moreover, but court-martialled, sentenced to be shot, reprieved at the last moment, and incarcerated in the fortress of St. Golgol, where he finally died of typhus with complications of ennui and despised love. His last thoughts were for the crisp, magnetic young woman who had held his two wrists, oh! so magically, looked into his eyes, oh! so passionately, and told him, oh! so falsely, that she would thank him adequately in the future.

But in the meantime he waited at Warwar for his instructions. And, lo and behold, his instructions arrived not in an hour's time, or even two hours' time, as he had anticipated, but after a delay of only a quarter of an hour. And not in writing, but over the telephone, delivered in drastic and fluent Wernish by some bumptious and offensive staff officer. The instructions were to proceed to Mazbosh and there await further instructions. The Warwar authorities would provide him with the requisite facilities in the way of rolling stock, personnel, coal and water over the strip of narrow-gauge that ran from Warwar to Mazbosh.

And it is to be chronicled that the Yunkarian railway had never functioned throughout all its history with such meticulous precision as on this occasion. For old Krockrock, that king of conspirators, had worked out the time-table, rigged the telephone and the telegraph, provided the personnel, and incidentally, given definite orders for the train to proceed straight through Mazbosh at full speed and without stopping at whatever the risk of collision. At the Panacene town of Zooz there was a short stop for the purpose of switching on to the car the

special Pullman of Krockrock himself, and putting Argomewicz in the Pullman, while, by way of compensation, the gallant Wernish officer was duly shipped to the cattle-truck, where the ribald minions of Argomewicz were still singing the prohibited pæan of Panacene patriotism.

But in the Pullman itself sat, smoked, and intrigued, Krockrock, laconic and august, Zaffrouli blandly explaining to Krockrock that it was the Quisto-box that had really saved the situation, Lalage Marne archly entreating Argomewicz to teach her the first elements of the Panacene language, and incidentally the other and somewhat more permanent wife of Argomewicz, full of the petty banal ties of domestic news. But it must be confessed that our morbid schoolboy of a nationalist hero was paying but a perfunctory attention. For he was inventing, rehearsing, the marvellous speech of combined triumph and thanks, phrased in the flowing rhetoric of the Panacene language which he would shortly be making—clad in the imperial purple of a common prisoner—from the balcony of the town hall in the archaic capital of Pedaldin.

As, however, the train, pulled by one engine in front and propelled by another engine behind, snorted slowly over the last stage of the spiral mountain railway, and the white towers and domes of the city were seen stark and sharp against the blue cup of the inverted sky, while enthusiastic multitudes sprawling all over the railway line began singing the vibrant and vaulting strains of the new Panacene national anthem, and Argomewicz, standing at the window, began acknowledging the salutes with all the airs and graces of a slightly blasé dictator, Krockrock grunted slowly and heavily:

"We must look out for Barlew—he's probably up to mischief."

XI

What General Bullinghell said at Breakfast

THE day after Argomewicz's historic arrival in Pedaldin, his historic reception, and historic speech, Sir Bertie Barlew, the chief British political agent, strolled out of his bath-room whistling jauntily an aria from Bach. To balance his mind before applying himself to the niceties of the political and personal situations, he read, as was his custom, a chapter of "Trimalcheo's Banquet" of Petronius; lounging in the chaise-longue in his bedroom, and puffing complacently at his cigarette. Epicure, æsthete and intellectual, he represented, above all things, the healthy pagan type, tinctured, of course, with a large ingredient of the eighteenth century. Had he lived in the raffiné days of the Roman Empire he would, no doubt, have savoured methodically the delights of such vices as were humanly feasible (without, of course, in any way impairing his constitution); flattered and betrayed a succession of masters; played (and more genuinely than any other part) the rôle of a patron of literature; and then gone down to posterity in a few black and sardonic words of Tacitus. Had he lived in the eighteenth century, a dashing and courtly prelate, he would with equal certainty have intrigued his way through the best alcoves and offices of his country, remained faithful to the party of King and Church for a somewhat longer period than was consistent with a mere sordid expediency; and

achieved a certain measure of fame by his proficiency as a wit. In the twentieth century, however, his gifts as a *viveur* and an intriguer, had not carried him quite as far as might reasonably have been expected. Perhaps it was that he lacked the solidity of the more staple qualities. He was always a man seeing too many points, playing too many games, sitting on too many fences. When crises came he was apt to finesse with the nettle, instead of grasping it with firmness.

The present situation, however, was sufficiently complicated to give full scope to his undoubted gifts. A fortnight ago had taken place the Krock-Argonewicz *coup d'etat*. The new Panacene flag fluttered triumphantly from the town hall, and the whole Panacene population began to play naïvely and frantically with the new toy of nationalism. And, of course, it was very thrilling, very jolly, very intimate; this rebirth overnight into national existence. And how fascinating was the magic halo that played around the word Provisional —Provisional portfolios—the Provisional paper issue—the Provisional Army. And, of course, everybody of any importance occupied some position of importance in the Provisional Government or the Provisional Army. And the absolute dazzle of the apparent realization of the age-long dream!

And while the Panacene patriots held meetings, concerts and thanksgiving services, sang songs, emitted poems and articles in sprouts as plenteous as the oil wells of the country, the new toy was in definite danger of being broken.

After the Panacene revolution Sir Bertie had, with his usual agility, climbed up a fence, on which he sat in comfort while he waited for Bullinghell in conjunction

with the Ethiopian Frenchmen, the Wernish militia, and the Dugarene desperadoes to pacify the Panacenes. Unfortunately, however, three days ago a telegram from the British Cabinet had forbidden Bullinghell from embarking on his campaign of drastic pacifism and definitely enjoined the strictest neutrality.

Having finished the chapter of the novel which was his normal ration, he thought it logical, purely of course, as a matter of mental hygiene, to indulge in another. It was an edition de luxe, privately and extravagantly printed by the translator himself, with parallel English and Latin texts, and on handsome paper as strong and delicate as the finest linen. A fat smile creased the pink cheeks as he gave his mind its matutinal bath of healthy grossness and elegant Latinity. Finally he replaced the book on the shelf, fingering the suave red calf of the binding with an almost sensual pleasure. He then applied himself to concentrated meditation on the local politics. His attitude in this was one of the most absolute impartiality and disinterestedness. The intrinsic merits of the Yunkarian problem left him supremely cold, and the wrongs and merits of both parties left him smiling to himself with an equally callous indifference. His one function, however, was to spot, and having spotted, to back the winner. By temperament, however, a hedger, rather than a gambler, he had hitherto refrained from plunging. Standing comfortably, like some trick circus-rider with one foot on each of the competing steeds, he waited with diplomatic patience for the psychological moment to take a definite stand on the actual winner.

In the meantime he bullied and cajoled both sides. With the Wernish squires and barons and the Panacene traders and demagogues he was equally charming.

Warning them against alienating British sympathies by a superfluity of violence, he professed, nevertheless, a vague and general sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of these ancient nations. But how far in either case he spoke on behalf of himself, and how far on behalf of his Government, was a matter which naturally depended on the eventual outcome of the situation.

"I think the betting's rather on the Wernes," he meditated. "Bullinghell's neutrality is bound to be tendencious—he will probably so rig the situation that it will force him to intervene—besides, the Anglo-French financial group is strongly represented in both the House and the Chamber—if, of course, the Panacenes would demand a British Mandate or become a political and economic annexe of the Empire, it might be possible to do something with them—but they're completely drunk with the sensation of independence—, well, we'll see what Bullinghell has to say at breakfast."

Then suddenly his ego switched itself on a more romantic subject. Who on earth was that English girl in the Norfolk jacket he had seen last night in the Grand Café Pedaldin? Apparently unescorted, and with an air of highly intellectual impudence. Several times he had patronized her with his bland and possessive stare. And on each occasion there had answered him a pair of eyes, quizzing, interested, and above all, audacious. Not morbidly chaste, he fancied, whistling again his favourite aria from Bach. Well, she would probably be coming to his office about her passport. And again a fat smile crossed his pink cheeks.

But what Bullinghell had to say at breakfast drove completely from his mind those quizzing and audacious eyes.

Sir Bertie and the General were both opposite and antipathetic types. Sir Bertie was essentially the adroit promoter of his own career, and possessed a certain impersonal coldness, which could very nearly be confused with toleration. Bullinghell on the other hand, was one of those semi-clever generals, obsessed with the expansiveness of the British Empire, who insist on playing at politics. He also imagined that he had a mission to exterminate Bolshevism from the civilized world, before the civilized world was exterminated by Bolshevism. Incidentally, he regarded the rights of small nations, proportionate representation, and education for the working classes, as applied Bolshevism. He had authentic military ability, nerve, toughness of character, and some brains. Personally, Bullinghell and Sir Bertie hated each other with the pure and perfect hatred of your true soldier and your true civilian. Politically, however, it was their duty to co-operate.

The General was accompanied by his aide-de-camp, who possessed both military and social qualifications, while Sir Bertie had invited his private secretary, a sandy, indeterminate youth, and a positive expert in the art of issuing and not issuing invitations to official functions.

The conversation started with a discussion between the aide-de-camp and the private secretary—the Kanoola incident. The Kanoola incident though, of course, destined never to reach the House of Commons, was a *secret de Polichinelle* throughout the whole country. A regiment of British colonial troops had been bivouacked near a village of Dugarenes. Not having been educated by missionaries, the Dugarenes were foolish enough to indulge in the Dugarene national sport. As you will doubtless find in Baedeker, the

Dugarene national sport is thieving. On one occasion the Dugarene sportsmen made off successfully with a case of whiskey, the regimental archives, and the false teeth of the commanding officer. Which was more important, is, of course, a delicate question of military law. A search party was organized and not only failed to retrieve the spoil, but lost one of its members by a shot in the back.

The regiment held a council of war. The colonel gnashed his gums, and the officers, infuriated by an abstinence from whisky which had already lasted ten hours, engineered a revenge with super-Prussian system. Zero hour was duly arranged, privates' tunics for officers were duly obtained from the quartermaster's stores. At 11 p.m. the regiment adopted the most approved methods of modern nocturnal warfare. Two flanking parties and a main body crawled to within twenty yards of the Dugarene village. Then the party dropped swarming into the village, which they reduced to a condition of complete docility. Segregating the sexes, they performed their pleasant duty with a truly mediæval chivalry. For though they taught a lesson to the men, they did not trouble one single woman. Having then succeeded in finding the case of whisky, they concluded the evening's entertainment by a bonfire on a somewhat extravagant scale. In the morning the Colonials experienced a slight nervous reaction of fatigue, the village of Kanoola had been expunged from the map, and the prestige of the British army had been very sensibly increased.

Viewing the matter as they did from the different standpoint of the soldier and the civilian, the aide-de-camp and the private secretary argued the delicate point.

The aide-de-camp, a tall, toughened, wiry man of thirty-eight, drank his coffee with gusto.

"That's what comes of Wilson and his fourteen points—makes the small nations get uppish—he's done more harm than anyone else in Europe."

"One must be conciliatory," said the secretary tepidly.

Sir Bertie took up the running.

"I must confess, General, it made me ashamed of the decorations I wear—besides this unfortunate piece of exuberance may make all the Dugarenes anti-British—and if you only knew the strain it is giving and returning their hospitality—hasn't anything been done about it?"

"I heard," said the private secretary, "that all their D.S.O.'s were taken away."

"That's all balderdash," snapped the General. "You can't punish a whole regiment—besides the Colony would have seceded from the Empire—the War Office, though, ordered certain degradations in rank—but they will all be promoted back again soon; the two announcements will probably appear in the same number of Routine Orders."

"It's murder," said Sir Bertie, "and, what is perhaps more important, extremely tactless."

A slight explosion emanated from General Bullinghell.

"My God, Barlew, if I weren't your guest, I'd tell you what I think of you. It's all nonsense—ordinary tribal justice—local etiquette if you like—supposing, instead of these Colonials, it had been another tribe of Dugarenes, and supposing one of their men had been killed, wouldn't they have done the same? At any rate, if they could. Well, the Colonials are equally savage, no morbid fancy touches them—diamond cut diamond—that's all there is to it."

At this juncture the conversation having reached a stage of uncomfortable tenseness, was duly changed.

The aide-de-camp and the private secretary authoritatively discussed racing intelligence, while the General and Sir Bertie equally authoritatively discussed dancing girls.

"There's a distinct art in pornographic dancing," said Sir Bertie, "but both that art and all other of the freer arts are handicapped in Pedaldin by the historic traditions of the city—every second place in the city is either a Catholic church—a Greek Orthodox church, or a Lutheran conventicle. If anyone were to open a new restaurant, a new theatre, a new hotel, or a new dancing hall here, there would immediately be a series of indignant protests from all the heads of all the communities; you see, even under the Wernish regime, the Powers insisted on the rights of the various religious communities being respected."

"Camouflaged blackmail, no doubt," said the aide-de-camp.

"Have you seen the cathedral, General?" said the secretary.

"Not yet, I'm not very keen on shrines—but I suppose I ought to."

"The history of the cathedral is extremely interesting," continued Sir Bertie. "Originally, it was a Fetishist Temple, then in the ninth century it was a church, founded by one of the pre-Reformation heretics during the brief but brilliant Panacene revival, then came the Wernish restoration and St. Gudaric, the director of the local branch of the Inquisition (he was canonized, you know, as a reward for the number of heretics he converted to the more orthodox variation), turned it into a cathedral and made considerable en-

largements. At the time of the Russian conquest it became Greek Orthodox, and they constructed the southern transept improvements—including a magnificent suite of subterranean dungeons and torture chambers. During the Turkish conquest it was, for a short time, a mosque—but we needn't worry about that—the problem of St. Gudaric is a definite difficulty in the way of any pacific adjustment of the country; every sect in the country owns some part of it, and the one part of the routine on which each sect agrees is a free fight on every feast day."

"If I had my way, I would blow up St. Gudaric," announced the General.

"Vandalism, General," said the æsthete; "as a piece of architecture representing the different styles of architecture it's unique."

"Are the sects to butcher each other, then, while you admire the architecture?" retorted the Philistine.

After the conclusion of breakfast the aide-de-camp and the secretary adjourned to the adjoining room to play French billiards and discuss further the question of importing into Pedaldin the Zoosh dancing girl, while Sir Bertie and the General proceeded into a small smoking-room.

Having settled himself with his cigar the General proceeded to serious business.

"Now, Barlew, I want to know, will Argomewicz and his push hold the country? If it hadn't been for that monstrous telegram, we could have settled them in five weeks—all the plans had been prepared—but now it's all up in the air."

Sir Bertie toyed meditatively with a picture post-card of Argomewicz dressed in chains and prison uniform.

"They may, General, they may—they're the majority in all the large towns—they're the more enthusiastic—and they have the chance of a lifetime. The French, as you know, have very few troops, and those mostly black and suffering from the more serious of the romantic diseases."

He handed to the General the picture post-card of Argomewicz.

"A most charming scholar and conversationalist, and one of the greatest authorities on nationalism in the whole of Europe," he added parenthetically. "He suffers from the mania of small nations—and knows pat and backwards the history of every irridenta and small nation in the whole of Europe."

The General flicked malignantly with his finger-nail the picture post-card of this maniac of nationalism.

"It all depends, of course," he continued with a sinister snarl, just perceptible in the suave tones of his voice, "on the kind of neutrality observed by the Army—of course, you have your instructions."

General Bullinghell grunted. "If you will permit me to say so, this seems less a case of extending the British Empire than of bolstering up a French hegemony," purred Sir Bertie. "The whole of Yunkaria was assigned to what, to use non-committal language, can be designated as the French zone by the Jarron-Magueneux agreement."

"For the time being, my dear Barlew," said the General, somewhat impatiently, "you needn't bother about the French—their precious blacks were defeated heavily last night by the Panacene army—the *status quo* has been changed since the Jarron-Magueneux agreement—therefore the Jarron-Magueneux agreement no longer exists. If Great Britain intervenes, Great

Britain will demand compensation, and once she's in possession she will be able to obtain what she demands."

"Which will be? — "

"A division of the spoils—half a dozen of the one—half a dozen of the other—divide the country into two zones—we will run one half, hold the balance reasonably fairly between all the damned nationalities and fancy religions, and let the French muddle the other with their usual jobbery and intrigue."

For a moment the two men smoked silently.

The patriotic General already saw himself in anticipation as the benevolent but drastic satrap (no damned nonsense, of course, with a lot of bloody Dagoes) of a new annexe, if not province, of the British Empire.

"Of course," added Bullinghell, "there would have to be an adjustment in the shares of the Yunkarian Oil Company, or whatever its name really is, Great Britain would have to get her fair share."

"This is all very well, General, but how about the French, to say nothing about the Wernes and Panacenes?"

"I've had some conversations with the French political officer—he's not unreasonable—I suggest that you should see the French agent here. As for the Wernes—my political officer has had some unofficial conversations with some of their leaders—their faith in the French is shaken. I tell you there's a big chance. As for the Panacenes, they're all pro-German, and pro-Bolshevik to a man—I decline to have anything to do with them."

Sir Bertie was thinking hard. He, too, saw Bullinghell as the satrap of the new country. But he was somewhat puzzled as to what precise position would be occupied by Sir Bertie Barlew.

Suddenly General Bullinghell came to the point with the most admirable military directness.

"Look here, Barlew, what's the chance of a general bust-up between the Wernes and the Panacenes?"

"Well, of course, there's a provisional frontier, and a certain amount of raiding and skirmishing goes on across it—there'll probably be a battle or two."

"No, Barlew, I mean in the big towns. I mean in Panacene Yunkaria—such a state of affairs, don't you know, as would absolutely force us to intervene temporarily, of course. Do you follow me? Danger to Allied children, Allied women, Allied property."

Sir Bertie was always admirable on the theory of Government.

"If the Panacenes adopt the right policy there'll be no trouble—hang or deport according to the exigencies of the situation a few of the more turbulent of the Wernish leaders—give a few oil shares or jobs to a few of the others—of course, judiciously selected—maintain an iron censorship and have no religious or national demonstrations either by one side or the other, and suppress any counter movement with the kindness of complete brutality, they can get through the next few months."

Bullinghell became impatient. A shadow was being cast over the despotic pomp of the prospective satrapy.

"But the general problem is insoluble, except by intervention."

"Of course it might be put to them," said Sir Bertie dreamily, and again there was a sinister ring beneath the suavity of his slightly drawling diction, "that Great Britain's support would be alienated by any brutal methods or religious intolerance—I have considerable influence with their leaders—at any rate with the more

moderate ones—a man like Trantran, for instance, whom they're putting into the Provisional Presidency —I've never met a more delightfully honest man in this sordid world—yes, I have considerable influence with Trantran."

At this juncture the dialogue of this pair of patriots became so secret, so sinister, and so conspiratorial that its contents remained concealed even from the novelist. It must be remembered, however, in excuse that neither Lalage Marne nor Lucian Swode was there with the telepathic box.

When, however, General Bullinghell left the house of Sir Bertie, he drove, accompanied by his political attaché (and without any casualities) to the Grand Hotel Werne, where he had a long interview in a private room with a few of the more important of those Wernish leaders who were still allowed to breathe the excellent air of Pedaldin. He did not call on any of the Panacene leaders, but as Sir Bertie explained, quite truly, the General had come to Pedaldin on purely private business.

But as Sir Bertie Barlew drove to his office, he caught sight in the Street of St. Gudaric of the girl in the Norfolk jacket whom he had seen in the café. Her swagger and air of intellectual impudence were more pronounced than ever. No escort whatsoever was visible. He shot her a glance of royal and inviting patronage.

XII

The Church of St. Gudaric

I

DURING the next week the national press of Yunkaria was extraordinarily funny. Excitement, self-important and only half-suppressed, began to vibrate from the large hub to the circumference of the small intimate circle of the national life. As the result of the Barbar *débâcle* the aggressive forward policy of Argomewicz suffered a reaction.

HEROES ARE DANGEROUS LUXURIES!

So ran the leading article of the *Shield*, the organ of the moderate party, in its naïve, statesmanlike plea for conciliation with the Wernes. And heroes, being in fact dangerous luxuries, the *Shield* had advocated, and, having advocated, prophesied, and having prophesied, duly engineered the assumption of the Provisional Presidency by Trantram.

Trantram, if you please! The one impeccably honest politician in the whole of Central Europe. No amateur of politics, Trantram, but a man, mind you, who had studied under the best German traditions the technique of administration, well qualified under peace-time conditions to govern the most complicated country. But a man, nevertheless, who, by reason of the political

Puritanism in which he had been brought up, was as ignorant as he was impotent in the very elements of intrigue. Labouring under the illusion that the Wernes could be permanently conciliated by handsome gestures, he had immediately advocated the demobilisation of the Panacene army after the decisive victory of Creekz. It was only when Argomewicz had threatened to commit suicide, over the bosom of his suicided country, as he expressed it in a leading article in his organ, The *Spear*, and after the failure of that exhibition of potential heroism when Zaffrouli had threatened in desperation to withdraw the financial support of his group, that he had consented (temperamentally addicted as he was to all half-way measures) to a gradual and piecemeal demobilisation.

In the meanwhile the Wernish press began to function intensively for the benefit of the Wernish population, of which about two-and-a-half per cent. impaired the picturesqueness of their barbarism by any degree of literacy.

But the leading articles (written by the French political agent and translated by the Wernish French Consul) were duly recited by the village priests at the round gatherings of the village inhabitants, or incorporated with all proper religious trimmings, into the sermons or even into the holy Mass itself. In the towns the same clichés were enunciated in the Lig cafés in the Wernish quarters to fanatical mobs by the professional priests and patriots of the Wernish nation.

The nonsense, though gross, was scientific.

" Listen, oh my brothers, is it not both notorious and official that all the property, land and gold of the Wernes is going to be taken away by law and given to the Panacenes ? Nay, is it not both notorious and official that

slavery is to be re-introduced, and that Wernish men and women will be forced to labour in the oil-fields for the benefit of their Panacene masters? Nay, listen yet to a blacker shame. The shrine of St. Gudaric! What of the shrine of St. Gudaric, the very hearthstone and kernel of the holy Wernish Nation. The leaders of the Panacenes boast freely both in speech and writing that they will turn into a Lutheran chapel the holiest Catholic shrine in Europe. Will you not shed blood in rivers rather than allow so great a profanation? Where are the heroes of the Wernes? Has St. Gudaric no worthy descendants? Are there no Wernes ready, if not to be killed, at any rate to kill others in defence of themselves? Rally, oh my brothers. Your motherland asks you for help. St. Gudaric asks you for help lest his shrine be profaned. The Holy Virgin asks you for help lest she herself be violated."

In this wise would the servants of Christ flagellate the atavisms of their audiences. Of real politics the Wernish proletariat knew nothing and cared less. But their patriotism could be reached by way of their pockets and St. Gudaric was a magic word that would give logic to any absurdity and sanctity to any crime.

II

And these were the meditations of Ludovid, the Wernish patriot. as he sat in his salon awaiting the arrival of the secret Dugarene emissary.

"With the help of the Allies and St. Gudaric I shall be prime minister of the new Wernish state. The Panacenes are dogs anyway. The Wernish peasants will back me to a man. They don't know much about politics,

but they know a man when they see one. Good faithful animals, they do what they're told. And every one of them has his rifle hidden away under the ground. Let me see now—how many shares am I getting in the S.A.E.H.O.? Ten thousand. H'm—Government contracts—in due course, no doubt. May St. Gudaric grant that the old times will return, then we despots can do what we like. Democracy! Ha-ha! Think of giving the Dugarenes votes—why, it would increase the market price of elections to an unheard-of extent. Savage race the Dugarenes—what an idea, even suggesting for a minute that they belong to the Wernish race—but they have their uses—yes, everything according to plan—the procession to-morrow will result in a riot. Lists have been given to the right persons of those Panacene notables who really matter. I wonder if we ought to put Barlew on it? He's so deep an intriguer that I don't believe even he himself knows what he's playing at—well, we'll wait and see."

With all due servility the Dugarene emissary was ushered in A swarthy handsome savage, clad in silk robes, silver chains and leather trappings.

"Greetings from my uncle, the Prince, O Ludovid"

"And a thousand greetings from us to your uncle the Prince, my dear Ranva."

And the greetings were continued according to the custom of the country with due formality for three minutes. Coffee succeeded the greetings and cigarettes the coffee.

For a time the conversation was general. The harvest, the cattle plague, the weather. Then, by insensible gradations, it veered towards the political situation, the imminent danger of St. Gudaric, and the overwhelming religious necessity of obtaining possession of the Pana-

cene oil-fields. The oil-fields were guarded by the Panacene agricultural settlement of Banoola. The conversation stuck for some time over the precise amount of gold to be allocated to the saying of Masses for the souls of these Dugarene warriors, who should have the supreme honour of shedding their life-blood for the sake of St. Gudaric.

By a master-stroke Ludovid was able to preserve the appearance of accepting the fabulous figure of Ranva.

"My dear comrade, I agree with pleasure, but with this reservation: one thousand gold Wernish pounds down—and what of the balance?—why, you must credit us, of course, with all the men and virgins of the wealthy town of Kanoola."

The conversation then became general and finally terminated in the pathetic sentimentalism of a farewell which lasted full twice the length of the original greeting.

Well pleased with his operation, Ludovid went into another room to have tea with his wife and daughter; while his servant, who had been faithfully listening at the keyhole during the whole of the interview, ran off post haste to give a substantially accurate, though, of course, inflated and coloured account of the proceeding to the chief intelligence agent of Sir Bertie.

The reflections of that gentleman were complicated.

"It's a great responsibility; if I let this thing go, the Panacenes will be wiped out—know the Dugarenes well—don't like Bullinghell anyway—crude militarist—wire Foreign Office—I wonder—of course Great Britain—extra block of shares—I wonder—wait a bit—will warn Bullinghell—suggest he should take measures

to preserve the peace—of course he won't do it, but I'll have something in writing to take the responsibility off me, anyway—m' yes—stimulating woman—one must have some relief from politics."

III

During these days Trantram, overstrung in nerve, but immaculate as ever both in dress, ethics and manner, lived for the greater part of the day in the pocket of Sir Bertie Barlew.

The deferential absolutism of Sir Bertie was perfect. "If I may have the honour of tendering advice—and I would remind you that I have had twenty years' experience of Balkan politics—I would advise you not to be led away by the extremists—you must at all costs avoid any conflict—above all things persist in the demobilisation of the Panacene army—that, sir, will show the strength of true statesmanship—you can certainly rely on British intervention in case of necessity—you need have no doubts, I assure you."

"The assurance is unnecessary," said Trantram in perfect English. "I have never entertained the slightest doubt but that Great Britain will punctiliously fulfil her obligations. And the extraordinary thing is that the Wernes state that they have definite information that the Panacenes, who they say are armed to the teeth, are meditating a massacre *en masse* of every Wernish man, woman and child in the whole country. They are asking for arms and British protection."

"Promise it them," said Sir Bertie.

"Shall I let them have it?" said Trantram.

"Promise it them, sir," said Sir Bertie. "That commits you to nothing."

After the departure of Sir Bertie, Trantram meditated a few minutes on the ethics of making a promise which he might possibly be prevented by circumstances from completely fulfilling. He then dictated a despatch which gave his native Panacene secretary, one of those bright young females who feel themselves quite capable, and without the slightest officiousness, of taking a whole country under their brisk national wing—an attack of nervous prostration.

IV

In the meanwhile Argomewicz was hatching a new coup d'état.

"I don't like the atmosphere at all—I'm an expert in massacres, and I smell one in the air."

"Damn Trantram," said Zaffrouli testily. "The fellow's too good to live."

"Too good to let anybody else live, you mean," said Argomewicz. "And the worst of it is he's incurable—he means it, he actually means it—now if it were Barlew, it would be all hypocrisy—a ruse to gain time and then jump on them a thousand times more virulently afterwards."

"I like Barlew," said Lalage Marne. "He rather appeals to me. Of course, I've only seen him once."

"What you really mean, my dear young woman," put in Zaffrouli, "is that you rather appeal to him."

"That is by no means an abnormal state of affairs," said Argomewicz, with some delicacy.

"Oh, the man's gross enough, I grant you," said the young woman with the utmost coolness. "Perhaps it's morbid of me—perhaps it's because I'm so young—but

one feels as though one were entering a huge big spider-web of a brain—a real brain—he's taking me over the dungeons of St. Gudaric to-morrow, anyway."

"Don't disappoint the good fellow, anyway," said Zaffrouli blandly.

"I certainly shall—what do you think," said the girl icily. "I shall have the Quisto-box with me, anyway."

"Allow me to remind you," said Zaffrouli benignantly, "that the purpose of your visit to this interesting country is not to analyse the romantic psychology of the British political agent, but to X-ray the political situation."

"I'll try and remember."

"He won't give you time," said Argomewicz. "I know him."

"Well, good luck to the dungeons—perhaps I shall be in them myself one day."

Lalage departed with a half-suppressed smile.

"Now for heaven's sake, Argomewicz," said Zaffrouli, "keep off heroics—play it like a game of chess or a stock exchange speculation—emotion is fatal both in high finance and high politics—one should keep one's brain well iced—for heaven's sake, I say, let the other side begin it."

"It will need," said Argomewicz, "superhuman powers of restraint to prevent the provisional army from marching on Pedaldin within the next forty-eight hours."

"Well," said Zaffrouli coolly, "you must exercise superhuman powers of restraint, and that's that."

V

On the day appointed for the escorting of Lalage Marne over the dungeons, two hours before the exhibition, Sir Bertie sent to the Grand Hotel Pedaldin his automobile.

As they drove through the main street in the capacious automobile the back seat of which was only two-thirds filled by the heavy bulk of Sir Bertie and the *svelte* athletic figure of Lalage, the girl gazed with astonishment at the blank shuttered faces of the shops.

Here and there were gathered little knots of bystanders. But the usual go and come of the city's thoroughfare was suspended. Scarcely a passenger was sitting in the empty electric tramways.

"Do the Panacenes also observe the feast of St. Gudaric, Sir Bertie?"

"Not normally, of course—they're Lutherans—but the political atmosphere is highly charged."

"If it's highly charged there's liable to be an explosion."

"My dear young lady, are you nervous, with me to protect you?"

("Nothing will happen for two or three hours more," vibrated the Quisto-box.)

Suddenly a narrow stone side-street in the poorer quarters of the city brought them face to face with the domes and spires of what was next to St. Peter's the most famous Christian shrine in the whole of Europe.

As they went up the stone steps Lalage was struck with the extraordinary diversity of the architecture. At the entrance a gold Byzantine cupola surmounted by a small cross played coquettishly with the rays of the sun. Further back a tall slim spire soared away up into

a Gothic infinity. At the side was a squat rugged excrescence of black stone, destitute of all æstnetic attraction, with a wide circular opening in the middle, and in the middle of the round circular opening a high pillar—a rough-hewn irregularity tapering slightly at the top.

As they entered the church they were met by the chief verger, a tall man, with a wild glare in his eyes. He was of middle age, nearly venerable, and carried in his right hand a black shining mace spiked at either end.

With this functionary Sir Bertie gave a short exhibition of his marvellous proficiency in the Wernish language, and showed him a card. At sight of the card the dignity of the verger became transformed into obsequiousness. Ceremoniously he opened the door and ceremoniously he locked it behind him.

"A note from my friend, the Bishop," explained Sir Bertie proudly. But the official news from the Quisto-box ran "Gradual—very gradual."

For half an hour they wandered about the church.

Was Sir Bertie a sinister and middle-aged Don Juan? Not a bit of it. Simply the perfect and paternal cicerone. But there was a certain possessive sleekness in the oily periods of his exposition.

Acolytes, priests, vergers, sacristans clad in purple and black and scarlet and gold and white, some barefoot, some in sandals and some in buskins, flittered like dim and gaudy bats along the apse, aisles, chapels and transepts through which they were passing. Here and there a candle gave a faint illumination in the semi-darkness into which a few blue rays filtered bravely through the stained glass of mediæval windows.

But an hour later, as Sir Bertie explained, the place would be a blaze of light.

The scent of incense swam heavily in the air. Fat unlighted candles glistened like cream on bronze sticks. Everywhere were pictures, statues and images, the statues and images duly bedizened in their best clothes in honour of so important an occasion.

At last they stood before the actual shrine of St. Gudaric himself.

"Is this all?" said the girl in disappointment. "What an anti-climax!"

A high, somewhat narrow chapel. At the end a big brass rail surmounted by red plush. And behind the rail a glass case divided into three compartments in each of which three separate trinities of candles, representing respectively, the Greek, Latin and Dugarene variations of the Christian faith did competitive honour to the shrine of St. Gudaric.

"Of course, the actual bones lie many feet below the surface," remarked the paternal cicerone.

"How do you know? Are there any actual bones?"

"I must admit, my dear Miss Rationalist, that up to the present they have never been excavated—nor are they ever likely to be. The Church would never allow the archæologists to do it. The very idea is sufficient to provoke another war."

"Could they last all this time, anyway?" said the young woman practically. "And when did St. Gudaric live—and who was he anyway?"

"The story of St. Gudaric was as follows," replied Sir Bertie, in his sleekest historical manner. "He functioned about the middle of the fifth century when the Christian faith was just beginning to permeate the savage tribes of Central Europe. He was not a conjurer, and no miracles consequently are associated with his name. He really appears to have been a very healthy

militant robustious kind of a saint, and something in the way of a new political economist. He preached a highly convenient theory of Christian Socialism, which he proceeded to translate in practice by a Robin Hood kind of brigandage. Hence his popularity. He made the rich poor and the poor rich, was the first king of the country, and after a certain amount of bribery and intrigue among the cardinals succeeded, I must admit, with a certain amount of difficulty, in being made a saint, some months after his death. But allow me to invite your attention to the Byzantine architecture—and those tapestries there—St. Gudaric killing a Panacene usurer—and that absolutely marvellous stained glass window."

The girl looked slowly round for some minutes.

"I thought St. Gudaric's would make me feel religious—or, if not religious, at any rate mystical—but it doesn't. Now I wonder why that is."

Sir Bertie laughed sleekly.

"My dear young friend—no greater mistake could be made—the importance of St. Gudaric is not religious, but æsthetic and political. Here you have, not religion, but the corpse of religion bedizened in all the latest fashions, its hair waved as it were by Parisian barbers to the very latest coiffure; swathed in robes that would stifle its very ghost, and exhibited on payment to the pilgrims of the world—the fact nevertheless remains; that for the sake of St. Gudaric, European wars have been made, and for the sake of St. Gudaric the rival sects fight, scratch and bite each other every year. But let me now show you the Dugarene crypt—no, that's quite all right—we have plenty of time—we've got at least a clear hour before the ceremony of the Holy Water begins—and then they'll be at least another

half-hour partitioning off the rival sects into water-tight compartments. If they get through to-day without a disturbance St. Gudaric will have worked the one and only miracle in his distinguished career—no, we shall certainly not need a guide—you must trust yourself to me. I know my way about, I assure you, ha, ha, ha!"

In spite of the nerve on which she always made a point of complimenting herself and boasting to the world, Lalage could not resist a thrill of fear.

Down black corridors illuminated only by the electric torch which with Germanic forethought Sir Bertie had taken with him in the pocket. At last they stood in a round chamber from the centre of which a robust pillar sprouted up into the darkness. In the infinite distance above, vague yells could be heard.

"What time is it?"

Barlew glanced at his wrist-watch shining luminous in the gloom. "Half-past eleven."

The Life Force halted for a minute in its stride.

"The row outside the church will start in half an hour—is there time—is there time—is there time—the Wernes will start sacking the Panacene quarter of Bikro—from which the British soldiers will have been carried away—the attack on Bairoola by the Dugarenes to-morrow—but hang politics—here's the girl—why I might even marry her."

But Lalage was once again her twentieth-century self, and suddenly off she flew, as she had once flown when ten years ago she had won the two-hundred yards race at the Girls' High School in that little Norfolk town. No longer the atavistic woman waiting to be taken. But the twentieth-century conspiratrix playing the game.

But this corridor of blackness was never ending. Had

she lost her way—a girl who had taken the wrong turning in this brusque spasm of unpremeditated virtue? Ah, heavens, the steps. Breathing hard, and clutching for support on to the rail, she clambered slowly up. Would she be in time? Ah, there was the door. Locked—Locked—Locked. With futile fists she battered against the knobs. Then concentrating in one intense effort all the elocution which she had once learnt in the Academy of Histrionic Art, she emitted for the first time in her life a series of admirable shrieks.

VI

"Ya! Ya! Ya! Yum—Yum—Long live the bones of St. Gudaric."

So ran the never ending sing-song of the fasting pilgrims of Zoosh, as, brandishing sticks and knives and clapping hands with the monotonous rhythm of an African tom-tom, they marched through the Pedaldin Road.

So had their ancestors marched each year since the official canonization of St. Gudaric, men, women and children, mostly peasants—some of them sandalled, some of them barefooted—most of them in their rich festival robes and picturesque headgear—some of them scarcely clad at all, except for the grimed sweat of a ten-mile march that lay caked upon their bodies.

"Greetings to the pilgrims from Zoosh," yelled out the Wernish population of Pedaldin. "Long live the bones of St. Gudaric—long live the bones of St. Gudaric."

At the Gudaric Gate the pilgrimage was received by the Panacene Mayor with carefully prepared cordiality. By arrangement between the local and British authorities a platoon of British infantry constituted a guard of

honour. The procession halted. The congestion in the street increased. The men from Zoosh and the local population began to mingle. Dugarenes from the adjacent villages arrived in force. A swarthy half-clad devotee carried in his left hand a sword and in his right a yellow banner on which were emblazoned bones. The bones of St. Gudaric.

From the balcony of the Grand Hotel Pedaldin two American commercial travellers watched the scene, smoking cigars.

"Wal, I guess I don't think much of the Fourth of July celebrations of this here country," remarked one contemptuously.

"America can produce more broken heads to the thousand, I bet," said the other casually.

As he spoke, in due accordance with the rigid etiquette of American smoking, first collecting it into a compact ball, he projected his saliva what, even for an American, was a creditable distance.

The shot was better than he had anticipated, and fell with mathematical accuracy upon the yellow banner of St. Gudaric.

The atavistic ego of a prehistoric priest began to discharge emotions within the brain of the bearer of the yellow banner.

"The bones of St. Gudaric have been profaned," he yelled. "Death to the blasphemer."

The crowd looked round for a victim among its neighbours. But not a heretic was to be seen. There was no suspicion of Mr. James B. Warringford, of Chesapeake, Ohio, inasmuch as there was equally no suspicion of the high pitch to which America had raised the technique of the scientific projection of agglobated saliva.

They began to quarrel among themselves, the Greeks

accusing the Latins, the Latins throwing the blame on the Greeks.

The only emotion of which the bearer of the yellow banner was conscious was that St. Gudaric needed a victim.

From the balcony of the Wernish Club Ludovid nodded to the chief of his hired warriors to restrain the crowd and wait for the appointed hour.

At the head-quarters of the Extraordinary Panacene Self-Defence Committee, Argomewicz, Krockrock, and Zaffrouli sat waiting for the psychological moment.

A body of boy and girl scouts came in with intelligence reports from various stations. Underneath, in a cellar, waited fifty armed men.

"I will not take the responsibility of waiting any longer," said Argomewicz.

Zaffrouli flicked the ash of his cigarette off his coat and gave a negative nod in the direction of Krockrock. More heavily than ever the massive voice boomed out, "Then I will, and if your nerves can't stand the tension, Argomewicz, they will have to break."

VII

"What is that voice, brother?" said the Dugarene beadle, who was squatting on his heels in the vestry outside.

"Maybe the Englishman is sacrificing to the Life Force," murmured his brother sleepily.

"Maybe it is not permitted for Englishmen to sacrifice on the altar of the Life Force," said the beadle.

The agonized stridencies reached their climax.

"Let us open, anyway," suggested the brother.

Slowly—slowly receded the huge bolts. Slowly, slowly swung open the colossal door. Swiftly—swiftly dashed through the stupefied beadles of the prehistoric temple, the twentieth-century girl with her bobbed hair flying in the incense-scented air. The main aisle—the entrance—the street.

"Yum—yum—yum—ya—ya—ya—Long live the bones of St. Gudaric."

The street was packed like a Tube-lift with the frenzied worshippers of the spring festival. In the middle floated the yellow banner, still polluted by the piece of liquefied Americanism which had originally emanated from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Egress was impossible. The Quisto-box pulsed so rapidly as scarcely to be intelligible.

("Death to the dogs of Latins—Death to the dogs of Greeks—Death to the Lutherans—curses on the father and the father's father of the neighbour who is now pressing against me—how hungry I am—how we shall feast after the fast in honour of St. Gudaric—Death to the Panacenes—Death to the whole world except St. Gudaric—Long live the bones of St. Gudaric.")

Slowly, slowly, quicker, quicker, the crowd began to dance, clap and sing. The slow monotonous rhythm of the African tom-tom. A few English soldiers surveyed the scene with supercilious indifference.

"What ho!—call this religion—more like a bloody circus, if you ask me."

Lalage heard them speaking, dashed up to them, gave them the appeal of a comrade, a comrade but a woman withal, a woman in urgent crisis, soliciting help.

"Right you are, Miss—come along with me, Miss—this ain't no fit place for an English young lady."

Down a maze of narrow side-streets with stone pave-

ments and shuttered shops and a miscellaneous press of people hurrying everywhere simultaneously. At length they emerged into the open piazza of the recently named Republic Square.

" For heaven's sake find me a carriage, there's a good boy." In they jumped. A hurried address. Two minutes. The dingy house which was at present the secret head-quarters of Argomewicz rushed to meet them.

" My dear man, you have saved my life—I don't know how much this is worth, but here you are—you're not insulted, anyway."

" God bless you, Miss, not a bit of it—we will drink your health—good-bye, Miss."

Charging like Diana through the superfluous body of boy and girl Panacene Scouts and Guides that seriously forbade her entrance, she entered the room where Argomewicz, Zaffrouli, Krockrock were looking at each other.

" Well, did you get anything out of Barlew ? " said Zaffrouli.

" More than he got out of me, anyway. Now listen, listen hard—there will be a disturbance at twelve o'clock precisely—I don't think that will be very serious, but the real point is this—the real concentration will be massed on the Wernish-Panacene quarter in Bikro, the Dugarenes are coming in, the attack will be at the same time. And to-morrow morning the Dugarenes will attack Banoola—no, I don't think I'm going to faint, but could I have some brandy ? "

Zaffrouli attended to the young woman; Argomewicz began to speak through two telephones at the same time; and Krockrock to scribble messages with both his Brobdignagian hands.

XIII

The Fedaldin Riots

I

THE apotheosis of the bones of St. Gudaric was becoming hectic. The pious stridencies of the sects clashed fiercely. But the doors of the shrine still remained closed.

But the bearer of the yellow banner in spite of the ferocity of his ecstasy still gazed intently at Ludovid on the balcony. Ludovid lit one cigarette from another.

By the magic of this simple gesture, the piety of the banner-bearer thereupon became vindictive.

"Where are the brave men, oh my brothers—will ye not avenge the bones of St. Gudaric against the blasphemer? Death to all the heretics who spit on the bones of St. Gudaric!"

Suddenly from a window appeared a Catholic priest holding in his arms a portrait of the executed Regent.

"Long live the memory of Matthias—long live the memory of Matthias," growled the crowd-beast.

"Oh ye children of the Wernes," proclaimed the priest in softest silkiest tones of ecclesiastical hatred, "where are the heroes? Was Matthias the last of the patriots? Is there no one left to save the country? Is there no one left to avenge the memory of Matthias the Holy?"

And then, crouching and huddled, the crowd-beast began to swing its bulk towards the Panacene quarter—an obscene trinity of greed, piety and lust.

"Long live the bones of St. Gudaric—long live Matthias the martyr—the country is our country and the Panacenes are all dogs."

Organization took place among the monstrous masses. Leaders sprang forward at the heads of small bodies—some by preconcerted arrangement with Ludovic—some as a spontaneous manifestation of individuality.

The main street was clear of blasphemers. But at any rate the Grand Emporium of Pedaldin, a Panacene shop owned by a Panacene Limited Company, was still there. The plate-glass windows dressed to perfection, and the admirable display of goods, stimulated to a yet higher pitch the perfervid patriotism of the crowd. In swept the crowd-beast, smashing the windows, smashing the counters, smashing the assistants, putting into the folds of their robes everything on which they could lay hands, fighting with each other over the spoils, fighting to get into the place, fighting to get out of the place.

Up the Street of St. Gudaric tramped the crowd-beast. Up the side alleys moved the writhing tentacles. Into Panacene houses little knots of Wernes battered their way.

II

From where the first shot came, nobody knows to this day. Both sides, curiously enough, in the International Commission appointed by the League of Nations, re-

pudiated the honour of being the first actually to take the drastic defensive.

According to the colour of the political belief of the historian, it emanated either from the window of the Grand Pastor of the Panacenes or was fired by Ludovid himself from the balcony of the Wernish Club.

The fact, however, remains that within a period of an extremely few minutes firing became not merely fashionable, but positively normal. Here and there, a more technically advanced civilization showed itself by the use of bombs. Ordinary mankind gave expression to its political and religious energy through the medium of knives, cudgels, fists, stones, nails and teeth.

Throughout the city with accumulative intensity the infection spread. A numerous series of miniature pitched battles. At the cross-roads of streets Wernish and Panacene crowds would face each other volleying shots, stones, and those good old national curses that had come down with very little corruption through the course of the centuries.

Through the streets would speed the Red Cross automobiles of the Panacenes, taking to the hospital Panacene and even Wernish victims of the riots; and then returning in a few minutes for fresh patients. A few white-coated doctors and nurses penetrated into the labyrinthine maze of the mixed quarter.

III

Among the casualties were, in many cases, individuals quite beyond and indifferent to the petty internal

politics of this really insignificant state in Central Europe.

But mob-man had really no time to distinguish exceptional cases. Did it matter to the mob-man that the inhabitant of that small detached villa in the little side street was a perfectly harmless old bourgeois who had spent his life in America running a barber's shop and saving a few hundred pounds? Did they know that so long as he was left in peace to enjoy his money he cared nothing about either the wrongs or the rights of either the Panacenes or the Wernes?

"Which is a Panacene house? Surely it should be marked." The bulk of the monster swept slowly on. Part of it had lingered. It split up into three separate beasts. The first beast was tall, fat, half naked and half blind; the second sturdy and of medium size; the third a boy almost beardless but fairly sleek.

"I believe a Panacene lives here, oh my brother."

They battered with their fists on the door. Silence. The crash of a massive piece of wood. Up the stairs they raced, the tall man leading. In the squalid living-room they found the old man collecting his money. Of his family there was no sign.

"Spare us and take half."

"Curse all the Panacenes—curse thy religion, thou son of a whore—long live the bones of St. Gudaric—the Panacenes have defiled the bones of St. Gudaric."

And the curved dirty knife, gashing the stomach, duly avenges the polluted bones of this most fussily-immaculate of saints, who, in every national crisis, insisted on having his honour avenged not once or twice or thrice, but on the most wholesale scale imaginable.

"I wonder where the women are," said the boy.

But the two men were escaping with the hoard of savings.

"Caught in the act—redhanded—you come along with me, my man, and you—and you, too. You don't understand my lingo, but this revolver talks in any language you like under the sun. March 'em off, corporal." The British N.C.O. surveyed the scene. Womenfolk coming out of cupboards threw themselves around his knees. Ululation in an unknown language baffled and distressed him. The criminals in the meanwhile turned to heaven uplifted hands of innocence, expostulation and amazement and positive martyrdom.

"Come along, sergeant," said one of his men. "There's hell let loose in the Panacene Hostel—this ain't nothing to it."

"Righto—one of you can manage these ruffians—good case this for a court martial."

And when the three disintegrated items of the crowd beast were duly awarded terms of fifteen, ten and five years' penal servitude, after having told with tremendous verve a highly plausible story of how, hearing shrieks of atrocity, they had rushed up to render first aid and keep order, they still turned to St. Gudaric the ungrateful, the dirty but uplifted hands of innocence and expostulation, the diseased but respectfully indignant eyes of amazement, nay of positive martyrdom.

IV

In the heart of the Wernish quarter of the town, surrounded by a network of Wernish brothels and

Wernish churches, lay the large building known as the Panacene Hostel. At once club, gymnasium, lodging-house, eating-house, concert room, and lecture hall, it served as a nucleus of the Panacene Nationalist movement. To the Panacene Hostel would resort young Panacene students, men or girls anxious to live cheaply while they earned their living by day in order that they might study by night.

Scarcely had the uproar started in the town when Wernish crowds began to seethe outside the building. Once more were the bones of St. Gudaric and their monstrous desecration overwhelmingly in evidence.

"The country is our country and the Panacenes are dogs," yelled the mass-beast."

"Have at the Panacene girls—they are vicious in their ways," shrieked the Wernish harlots.

"It is there that the Panacenes hatch plots to destroy the liberties of the Wernish nation," hissed a hired priest. "Who of you, oh, my brothers, is willing to strike one blow—one blow only, for the cause of St. Gudaric?"

Snarling, snarling, snarling, with nostrils dilated in anticipation of all the blessings to come, the crowd-beast charged blindly into the yard. A sortie of students met them full tilt, making good gymnastic practice with crowbars and cudgels. Wounded, surprised, discomfited, the beast retreated into the street. A Panacene girl happening to run across the street was seized into the claws of the beast and never heard of any more. But against this insignificant score were many cracked skulls, limp arms, and bleeding noses. Sulky, baulked, the crowd-beast waited for help from St. Gudaric. And at any rate on this occasion, St. Gudaric did not altogether fail to rise to the emergencies of the crisis. For

by a characteristic miracle, he sent a select detachment of police to deal with the disorder. Police, oh yes! but Wernish police, if you please. For Trantram had insisted on maintaining what was substantially the same police force as had existed since the *régime* of the Regent. A few Panacene police, had, in fact, been introduced, but they had been specially stationed in remote and inaccessible portions of the city. As the detachment arrived some semblance of order fell upon the mob. The yelling abated about one half of its volume. Miscellaneous loot was hastily and clumsily secreted in the flaps of robes or the pockets of jackets. The officers of the police held a whispered conversation with some of the leaders of the mob.

Then the officers went back with the exception of one who remained in the capacity of a spectator.

The crowd-beast renewed the attack, battering the door, firing revolvers through the railings, yelling themselves hoarse with loud cries of "St. Gudaric, St. Gudaric, St. Gudaric—police, the police, the police."

From somewhere or other there fell a bomb into the courtyard. Both fair and impartial, the bomb effected equal execution on both sides.

The Wernish mob renewed their cries of assistance to the Wernish police.

And, in their abysmal naïveté the Panacene students, opening themselves the barracade door, they too, called for the police to intervene.

And the police did intervene. For patriotic Wernes that they were, they advanced boldly to the attack of the national foe, firing their rifles whenever they saw a target, and employing the bayonet or clubbed butt, whenever the space was too cramped to admit of proper aiming. At their heels yapped the dog-mob, which

numbered quite a fair sprinkling of harlots and their managers.

Up the first storey climbed sprawling the monster, spreading its bulk along the various rooms, sacrificing to St. Gudaric such Panacenes as had not yet escaped to the upper storey, roaring, roaring, roaring the crassness of its glutted greed.

The caretaker, his wife and child, were the first to be immolated, the officiating functionary being the negro manager of the chief pleasure-house of Pedaldin. The instrument employed was a knife. With cat-like playfulness he dallied with each victim. St. Gudaric thus had time to thoroughly enjoy the spectacle of each single executed heretic. About a dozen other Panacenes were also despatched to St. Gudaric by means of revolvers, clubs, and bombs of the Wernish mob, or the Martini rifles of the Wernish police.

In a library through a glass partition Panacene women could be seen administering first aid to Panacene heretics.

Raising his rifle to his shoulder a Wernish policeman immediately put a stop to so pernicious a practice. He entered the library. Corpses and writhing wounded encumbered the ground. But scarcely troubling to fire at a single wounded Panacene, the Wernish policeman abandoned himself unreservedly to his gallant mood. For he felt it incumbent upon him to offer his company to two Panacene young women who happened to have taken refuge in a small room leading out of the library.

Striding into this room he twirled his moustaches, grinned amiably at both, selected by his glance the prettier of the two, and ejaculated in the Wernish language a declaration of the most intense personal interest. But instead of throwing herself into his arms,

the young woman sank on her knees on to the ground and produced a locket containing, apparently, a photograph of herself, husband, and two children, and requested that she might be excused. As the result of this obstinacy, the Wernish policeman was reduced to making love by rifle, but being anxious, at any rate, at present to intimidate rather than to kill or even wound, he first discharged the weapon into the floor motioning the girl to rise from the ground. With mechanical obedience she complied. And then came the most abject and abominable solicitation of all. For pointing to the portraits of the children, she caressed the face of the policeman with her fingers even as a mother might caress the face of her son.

But the incurably romantic Werne began to fumble with his clothes, and romance would have no doubt run its due and normal course had not the gallant been attracted by a gold chain that hung on the neck of the young woman. He motioned to her to give it to him. And as he examined it with methodical carefulness, ascertaining the carat of the gold, and making abstruse mental calculations as to the price at which it could be sold to a jeweller, the young woman, with great presence of mind, ran clean away.

But while he was scouring the whole building for his lost love, there arrived an English army officer with two revolvers and an abundance of ammunition. Examining the corpses that sprawled about the floor he could not avoid being impressed in each case by the superfluity of wounds that disfigured each body. It was not a matter of wounding purely to kill, but of wounding as a sport in itself. Of wounding as a demonstration of respect to the bones of St. Gudaric.

The English officer gave orders to the Wernes to

evacuate the building. There was little, but not much, delay. On the completion of the evacuation two minutes after the order, the score in casualties was approximately equal, but the ammunition of the officer had been somewhat seriously depleted.

As the British officer left the hostel with his brain all red with the shambles, his eye still gazing at the stuck carcases and battered skulls, he passed string after string of Wernes carrying loot. Clocks, clothes, silks, chairs, tables, bed-linen, food, shoes, stockings, anything whatsoever that could be sold in a shop or that could be used at home by the devout worshippers of St. Gudaric. All kinds of looters. Roughs, porters, dock labourers, café keepers, boys, men, women, and a few Wernish gentlemen and Wernish ladies. At one corner, a fat Wernish shopkeeper was kindly indicating to the mob that here, here, and again here, was a Panacene shop, heretics, dogs, and incidentally commercial rivals.

But the mob soon began to exhibit terror of the British officer, to drop their loot, to skedaddle in panic to the protection of St. Gudaric. And the accent with which his two revolvers spoke the Wernish language became more and more correct with every leaden word.

V

Nor was it merely at the Panacene Hostel that the Wernish police proved the intensity of their religious and patriotic ardour. At every street corner and at every crowd they did their honest best to assist their fellow-patriots and fellow-devotees.

At the cross roads, where hostile crowds faced each other snarling gnashing, fusillading, a Wernish policeman or two would usually be found to keep order and direct operations. With rifle fire directed neither into the air nor into the ground, but bang into the heart of the Panacene crowd, they kept back all sorties of Panacenes, pointed out Panacene shops, and suppressed frequently before they were either started or indeed conceived all reprisals on the part of the Panacenes.

In certain cases, moreover, Wernish policemen indulged in the luxury of private sport. In an almost deserted street a mounted policeman took a pot shot at a range of two hundred yards at an aged Panacene cobbler. He scored a bull's-eye well in the middle of the back.

"I saw you—I saw you," shouted a smart Panacene schoolboy of twelve years old who happened to be passing. But this little schoolboy, precocious, imaginative, and delightfully cheeky and humorous, was never given an opportunity of testifying before the military court as to those interesting things which his eyes had seen. For St. Gudaric, who was after all the patron saint of self-preservation, directed the rifle bullet of the Wernish policeman straight to the back of his skull.

VI

Towards the wealthy suburb of Bikro swam the crowd-stream under the auspices of St. Gudaric. In this crowd were found the toughest ruffians, the sharpest daggers, the most accurate revolvers. In front of them

ludicrously struggled to escape isolated Panacenes. Grotesque indeed, as all quarries are, panting hard, with dishevelled clothing and hats flying off in the wind. Here and there a quarry fell to the ground, and the crowd-torrent swam swiftly over him.

At the cross roads suddenly appeared in a motor car Sir Bertie Barlew with a small escort of British cavalry.

"The British are with us—the British are with us," roared the crowd-beast.

"If they get past, they will sack Bikro, Sir," whispered the officer. "Shall I break them up?"

"No bloodshed at any cost," said the humane diplomat. "Wait a bit."

The roars of the crowd-beast redoubled in intensity.

To gain time he started addressing the crowd in florid periods of Wernish. The usual euphemisms and prevarications to which the Wernish language is admirably adapted, promises of everything, promises of nothing, assurances of sympathy, counsels of moderation.

There whizzed up a despatch rider on a motor-bicycle.

"To British Political Agent from O.C. No. 1 Squadron.—In the centre of the city the Panacene troops are controlling the situation and are retaliating on the Wernes."

Sir Bertie continued with his florid phrases.

His mind was balancing consideration. "If I let the troops fire the Panacenes will back me for the post of Ambassador—but supposing the Wernes win, I shall be intrigued out of the country in two minutes—Scylla and Charybdis—a delicate dilemma—supposing the news isn't true."

What finally clinched the matter was the purely æsthetic objection not so much to bloodshed in the abstract, but to the concrete spectacle before his own fastidious eyes.

"Better shepherd them, I think."

The automobile of His Majesty's Chief Political Agent in Yuzkaria moved slowly into line at the head of the writhing mass. In front and on either side were distributed the cavalry. The crowd-beast started singing the Wernish national anthem.

"The country is our country, and the Panacenes are dogs."

In front and up the side street scurried for refuge a few ridiculous dogs of Panacenes.

In this wise did the somewhat heterogeneous cortège advance into the suburbs under the auspices of the British Political Agent and, of course, St. Gudaric.

VII

While all these pieces of atrocity, justice or humour, as the case might be, were in progress, the machinery of the Panacene Defence organization was functioning. Buttons were pressed, telephone messages were sent in cypher of which the key-word also was communicated over the wire. The fifty armed men from the cellar of Argomewicz's head-quarters were first despatched—rifles, ammunition, bayonets, uniforms all complete. In other parts of the city various bands of defenders each under their leaders, also applied themselves to the work of patriotism. They operated with some pretence of discipline and used their weapons with both hate and

accuracy. No need for them to invoke or even to obtain the blessing of St. Gudaric, or rather of St. Aloysius, their patron saint. They were fighting for basic importances that required no imaginative window-dressing. Their lives, the bodies of their women, their personal property, their personal freedom Ground solid enough, sensible enough.

But refined, civilized though they might be, their atavisms were nevertheless functioning blindly, madly, inside their egos. What matter if St. Aloysius had been refined into the Panacene language, which officiated everywhere throughout the more advanced circles of country as the new national deity? What matter that they were fighting for a brand-new republic instead of for an immemorial kingship? What matter that they were using Martini rifles and Mills bombs instead of spears and battle-axes? The ghost of the very same ancestor who over a thousand years ago had fought in single combat with the Wernish enemy, was dancing over their brain on a black war-horse, chanting over their brain a fiery war-cry.

Blotted out were the lucid intervals of peace when they had lived on terms, if not of enthusiasm, at any rate of toleration with their Wernish neighbours, sponged out of existence the memories of those personal and business friendships which would spring up quite spontaneously in those times and seasons, when the demons of politics and religion ceased from functioning. "The enemy—the enemy as such—the good old, real old enemy—have at him even as he would have at you—curse his religion even as he was cursing yours—and your fatuous saint, even though you did not believe in him, was for what he was worth and as far as he went a thousand jolly times more saint-like, more potent in

miracles, more respectable in his private life than St. Gudaric."

Throughout the operations, though the voice couched in the low hissing tones of melodrama which gave the orders was the voice of Argomewicz, the brain that had planned the staff work was the brain of Krockrock.

The city mapped out into squares. In each square an organized troop was deposited to scatter the Panacene rioters. And the crowd-beast before it split up into ever-diminishing particles, certainly presented to machine gun or rifle fire the most ubiquitous of targets.

In many instances, of course, the Wernes had had the tactical advantage of the first move. But it was not long before the legions of Argomewicz had balanced the score. Soon afterwards the official score showed an overwhelming margin in favour of the Panacenes. At this juncture Ludovid judged it prudent to fly off to French Yunkaria in an aeroplane, while St. Gudaric, who had apparently run completely short of miracles, returned independently to Heaven by the shortest route.

VIII

Only at one spot and at one moment was the issue even for a second ever in doubt. But the situation really had its complication when approaching from a side street a picked platoon of the army of Argomewicz prepared to attack the Wernish crowd moving on the suburb under the apparent auspices of the British cavalry, and the British political agent.

Fawning and cringing round the automobile the crowd-beast licked the wheels with a profusive slaver of flattery and solicitation.

"Your Excellency will save us from our oppressors—we look to Your Excellency and to Eng'and—we live under your auspices—we and our wives and our children and our children's children."

Sir Bertie replied suitably in his best Vernish.

"Shall I keep them back, Sir?" asked the cavalry commander. "If these fellows get to close quarters there will be damage."

The brain of Sir Bertie balanced the situation with mathematical precision. Was it not his duty both to England and himself to be on the winning side? His keen political nose was already scenting that the Panacenes would win. He would desert the exalted military toughs. After all he never really liked Bullinghell with his crude and pinchbeck Cæsaristic flourishes. Besides, the Foreign Office had officially enjoined neutrality. Well, he would be neutral again. But this time on the other side. And this time with a different result.

"I do not think that we should involve ourselves in any way in what appears to be a purely local disturbance, and, after all, you know the Panacenes are the Government—Chauffeur, drive straight home—and as quick as you can."

And sweeping aside the fawning cringing mass, this masterpiece of neutrality drove to his residence in record time.

The cavalry escort trotted after him.

"Old Bullinghell will be furious," muttered the officer, "but it's not my business, anyway."

And so did it happen that the favoured platoon of Argomewicz, the platoon which contained his most

reliable satellites and most chivalrous henchmen, made better rifle practice than it had ever made at the butts, and that the crowd-monster, sprawling, roaring, mangled, bleeding, was split in a very few minutes into a myriad extremely unhappy or defunct individuals.

But Sir Bertie walked into his luxurious flat whistling jauntily his favourite aria from Bach.

"A tiring and exhausting morning," he mused.

Then tinkled the telephone bell. He prepared for Argomewicz his most flowery congratulations. But it was not Argomewicz, but that evasive minx of a young woman.

"My dear Sir Bertie—my most abject apologies—I was really awfully interested in that fascinating temple. I should have liked to have stayed ever so much—it was purely a matter of business—yes, I assure you, very urgent business—you will forgive me, won't you? You will take me again?"

But Sir Bertie did not believe her, though as a matter of historical interest it should be recorded that he did, in fact, take her again to visit that most monumental and instructive piece of archæological symbolism.

When later, Sir Bertie called at Argomewicz's flat he was as charming not merely as any diplomat, but as the sleekest and most amiable angel that ever paid a call in any drawing-room in Paradise.

His huge arm hugged with ursine affection the compact squat form of the little nationalist. "My dear Argomewicz, I cannot tell you how delighted I am—both officially and personally—personally even more, of course. I venture to congratulate myself on the advice I gave you—always avoid bloodshed, at any cost, until you are thoroughly ready—and know what is going to

happen—you waited till just the right moment—you could not have timed it better."

The features of the nationalist smirked into the grin of a perverse schoolboy.

"Our intelligence service is better than it is usually given credit for, Sir Bertie; we have sources of information which are almost incredible."

"I have come to the conclusion," said Sir Bertie, "that it is physically impossible to keep any secret in this country. There is only one girl in Yunkaria who can keep a secret, and she has gone off to London."

"I'm still a bit worried, you know, about the attitude of the military authorities—I feel—if I may speak quite frankly——"

"By all means, my dear Argomewicz."

"—that they are not sympathetic to the Panacene Cause—I feel they have their own policy, which is not the policy of His Majesty's Foreign Office."

The two men gazed at each other intensively.

The dreamy eyes of Argomewicz looked for a moment shrewd, the shrewd eyes of Sir Bertie looked for a moment dreamy.

But the Quisto-box tinkled merrily ("I wonder—how far can he be trusted—will the Panacenes really back me for the Ambassadorship—wires at home—can pull them, of course—but I want the local support").

The features of Argomewicz assumed a very serious expression and the fascinating and melancholy voice was more than ever melancholy and fascinating.

"I need scarcely say, Sir Bertie, that the Panacene Government will always endeavour to remain permanently associated with those who have stood by us in our hour of crisis."

Sir Bertie smiled amiably enough, but just a trifle interrogatively.

"But I repeat the policy of General Bullinghell occasions us the gravest anxiety—his command is very wide—possibly too wide—I am sure that he has no time thoroughly to study the Yunkaria situation—now—if it had been Kasler, the political officer—he is thoroughly *au fait* with every nuance of the Yunkarian problem—and a fine soldier." ("It is really time to plunge," whizzed the Quisto-box. "I'll chance it—I'll chance it.")

But the atmosphere of the room became positively fragrant with the benignity that exuded from the plump and quasi-classic features of Sir Bertie Barlew.

And thus it came about that a certain cypher wire was sent by Sir Bertie to the Foreign Office, as a result of which the Higher Command in Yunkaria was made independent of the Command of Central Europe, that the political situation in Yunkaria was consolidated on a basis satisfactory to Argomewicz, Zaffrouli, and Lalage Marne; that the Wernish squires sulked in their tents from which they could only be enticed by complimentary blocks of shares in Zaffrouli's company; that the Wernish proletariat entered on a new period of intensive work and intensive wages, to say nothing of becoming infected with the virus of advanced trade unionism; that the French threatened for the umpteenth time to withdraw from an Entente when the understanding was all on one side and not on the other; that the United Oil Fields of Yunkaria, with its concession finally ratified, not merely paid fantastic profits to its promoters and reasonable dividends to its shareholders, but laid the basis of the economic prosperity of

the whole country; that President Trantram, at last thoroughly in his element under peace-time conditions, conducted the administration of the country with both correctitude and success; that Argomewicz was induced to accept the post of ambassador to London of the Yunkarian Republic; and that Sir Bertie Barlew achieved the position which he had so thoroughly well deserved of British ambassador to the Yunkarian Republic, a position which he held uneventfully for two and a half years, when, returning to intrigue like a dipsomaniac to whisky, he dabbled once more in a Franco-Wernish plot, was curtly sacked by the Foreign Office and immediately afterward, owing to the powerful intrigues of his best lady politician friend, appointed to the even more important position of High Commissioner to the Colony of Greeyorka, with the salary of three thousand five hundred pounds a year exclusive of house and entertainment allowances, on the strength of which he achieved his lifelong dream of marrying the most dashing, artistic and beautiful young woman in the Anglo-Jewish plutocracy.

But sometimes as he sits in the high teakwood study of his oriental palace, gazing at the photograph of his wife and child, and working out schemes for making the natives pay all the taxation, while the British colonists reap all the profit in accordance with all the best traditions of mandatory trusteeship, his thoughts somehow wander to those days when he paid court to Lalage Marne in the august temple of the Life Force, and then a fat smile creases the still sleek features.

XIV

Down with the French Franc

AS soon as he realized that the Pedaldin riots, thanks to Lalage Marne and her Quisto-box, Argomewicz and his legions and the marvellously tactful neutrality of Sir Bertie Barlew, had been finally suppressed, Zaffrouli dictated various telegrams in cypher to Zurich and Amsterdam. Obediently, mechanically Lalage rapped on to the machine the mysterious message,

SELL KING CHARLES'S BOOTS.

Her knitted eyebrows showed furrows of philosophic enquiry.

"You might tell me, Zaffrouli, please, what are King Charles's boots."

The financier swung round in his swivel chair in the medium-sized sitting-room in the one and only suite that was available either for love, money or political pressure in the Grand Hotel Pedaldin. His monocle was screwed into his eye more quizzically than ever. A thin smile was flickering round his lips.

"My dear girl," he replied, "I will not accuse you of having no imagination, because the accusation would be unjust—but I do suggest that you have no experience of finance."

"I studied political economy at the university," said the girl with some pride.

"One of the axioms of applied political economy," said the financier, "is to follow up an advantage, and

to hit your enemy when he's down. Now just think—apply your mind—you are a young woman primarily out for experience—I on the other hand am a business man primarily out to make money—my company is the United Oil Fields of Yunkaria—registered at Somerset House with a capital of one million pounds in English sterling—the opposition company is a Wernish company with its capital in Franco-Wernish francs."

"But I really can't understand why you keep on worrying—your concession is all right."

The financier smiled more thinly than ever.

"The concession is all right, but the question of the monopoly is a trifle doubtful. I had an interview to-day with the President—talk about Aristides—threw graceful hints about the justice—not the policy—mind you, but the justice of giving the Wernish Company also a concession—well, they can have it, and I only hope they'll have the capital to exploit it."

The page boy brought in the receipts for the various cypher telegrams.

Carefully checking the change, Zaffrouli placed it on the table.

"These, my dear Lalage, are Oliver Cromwell's boots."

"Then I confess I prefer my own," said the girl impatiently.

"No—no—you must not be frivolous. Pay attention, if you please. My intention is to smash the Wernish franc—and if I smash the Wernish franc, I smash at the same time the company whose paid-up capital consists exclusively of Wernish francs—even though the shares actually go up, they will be worthless.

"But King Charles's boots . . ."

"Are Wernish francs—have you followed it now?"

"It would appear," said Lalage, "that King Charles's boots are first cousin to Aunt Jane's baby."

Suavely, imperturbably, Zaffrouli continued:

"Under any circumstances there is bound to be a big drop in the Wernish franc the minute it becomes known that the Panacenes have won. They may try and bolster up the franc by artificial buying—I simply counter the artificial buying by artificial selling—in a few hours several millions of Wernish francs will be offered for sale on the market—the Wernish franc will then start to follow the precedent of the krone, the rouble, and the mark."

"I am not morbidly ethical," replied the girl, "but is this fair—is it romantic—is it sport?"

"It is fair—it is romantic—it is sport—it is, incidentally, complete justice—also it will be advantageous for the British policy, to say nothing of Central Europe—hardship—yes—a few French speculators will be ruined, and their mistresses have to go short of handkerchiefs at thirty golden pounds a dozen—a few Wernish squires will be sold up and their estates split into small holdings for the Wernish peasants—but quite apart from the collapse of the French Company, the bulk of Wernish Yunkaria will be panic-stricken at being saddled with a depreciated currency. They will petition to be taken into your Panacene Yunkaria; besides, one must be patriotic, and ever since the armistice it has been sound imperial etiquette to intrigue against France—as it has been sound French patriotic etiquette to intrigue against Great Britain—didn't Great Britain spoon-feed Feisul with arms and ammunition so that he could proclaim himself King of Syria and defraud the French of their share of the swag; didn't France support the Kemalists against the Greeks so as

to undermine British predominance at Constantinople? Besides it may upset the French franc in Paris—and if the French franc in Paris begins to wobble it will drop—and if it drops they'll get rid of their reactionaries and be reasonable—and to make the French reasonable, with their will or against their will, is the one hope of economic salvation for Central Europe."

The student of psychology lit a cigarette, crossed her legs, and began to meditate.

She was no longer a student of psychology, but a student of high finance, and high finance had not only the magic of abstraction, but the even more compelling magic of concrete and impersonal mathematics made deliciously personal.

She uncrossed her legs and with a bellicose attitude approached Zaffrouli.

"If you don't mind my talking business you owe us ten thousand pounds sterling."

With a seignorial gesture Zaffrouli produced a cheque-book from his pocket.

"No, no, Zaffrouli—I am converted to high finance—be a dear and please sell me two thousand pounds' worth of King Charles's boots."

With a thin smile Zaffrouli handed her the cypher-book.

But the most ironic touch was that after the sale had been completed, and after five days subsequently, Zaffrouli and the financial student had bought back twenty points cheaper all the francs they had previously sold (thus clearing a profit of a paltry £100,000 for Zaffrouli and an infinitesimal £5,000 for the young woman), they actually applied this, as we have seen, fundamentally ethical profit in buying—yes—buying—Wernish francs.

Did they keep them?

Lalage wanted to, but Zaffrouli issued definite and peremptory orders.

"A mere temporary rally, my dear, we must get out of them, at once, in anything you like, most of it in sterling—but one might, perhaps, buy a little land."

So it came about that Zaffrouli purchased, under, of course, the camouflage of the one honest dummy in the whole country, a huge estate in French Yunkaria which he occasionally rents, and Lalage became the owner of a discreet and delightful villa on the top of Mount Gudaric admirably adapted, inter alia, for the study of psychology.

What is the present quotation of the Franco-Wernish franc?

To work out the exact figures requires some knowledge of logarithms.

But since the Wernish peasantry has started using this so admirably suave and crisp paper as spills for lighting cigarettes and for other salutary purposes, there has been a marked increase in the quotation per ton.

Anyway, the question is not of such practical importance. For this so admirably suave and crisp paper has, after all, official circulation only in that barren and insignificant quadrangle of Yunkaria which Argomewicz, Zaffrouli, Krockrock, President Trantram, and, of course, His Majesty's Government and the League of Nations allowed the French Government to keep, not so much as real country, but by way of an interesting territorial souvenir.

XV

The Idea of Supreme Devilry

IT was after the return to London and over a lunch at the Savoy that the idea of supreme devilry really took definite form. In the brain, of course, of Lalage Marne. For the brain of Zaffrouli—a wide spaciousness with the springiness of some extremely practical cat—was too much engrossed in practical things to be capable of so audacious a sweep. Perhaps it was the richness of the meal that brought forth the idea. Perhaps it was the thick luxuriance of the cosmopolitan crowd of guests that brought as it were the world into focus, and encouraged the brain of the girl to operate on the larger scale.

"How petty and insignificant all that Yanakaria business seems now—and the people there think they're the most important country in the whole world—but they really don't matter twopence—why, the population of the whole country is under a million."

"Of course it's a pivot state," answered Zaffrouli. "This *omelette surprise* isn't bad."

But Lalage was so carried away by the swift train of her argument that her stomach, youthful and enthusiastic as it usually was, at any rate for the moment, felt no particular inclination to indulge in lyrical raptures over the *omelette surprise*, which, with its marvellous assembly of heterogeneous solids and liquids,

represented the last word of the new Expressionist gastronomy.

"But the whole thing is so in miniature—the whole country's a vast family party of intimacy and intrigue—it's just like being in a club with opposing cliques. Of course it had its thrills, and Sir Bertie Barlew was not without his interest—but isn't it rather—don't you think—what one might call a doll's house of politics? I want to play about with bigger things—I'd like to make the wheels of civilization hum till they got red-hot."

"And then come off, I suppose," said Zaffrouli, selecting a cigar.

The girl drank her Kümmel, and then continued:

"Well, at present, the train is just going round one of the inner circles of Hell—round and round and round and round—each person on the lines of his own ego—now and again they get certain superficial contacts with the egos of other persons—but they never get right inside—I want the world to know itself and then we'll see what happens."

But the financier was so engrossed in the philosophy of the thick oily beauty of his really marvellous cigar that he merely nodded a somewhat perfunctory assent.

"I want to experiment on humanity," repeated the girl. The financier switched his attention from the thick oily beauty of his really marvellous cigar to the flushed face and sparkling eyes of his companion.

"The portion of humanity on which I am anxious to make experiments is very restricted."

"I daresay it is," replied the girl, "but I am trying to take the cosmic view."

"What's the idea?"

"The idea simply is to put the Quisto-box on to the market."

The financier puffed at his cigar with intensity. But for the moment he had ceased to be the connoisseur of cigars, had equally ceased to be the connoisseur of young women. The financier had become once again the financier. A mathematical brain functioning inside the bowl of an iced imagination.

"One could probably charge a thousand each—at least."

"And damned cheap at the price, too," said Lalage. "The purchaser would certainly get a thousand pounds' worth of thrills out of it."

"The question is," repeated Zaffrouli, "how to manufacture replicas."

"I have got the specification."

"The deuce you have—you never told me before.'

"I forgot."

"Of course, strictly speaking, you stole it."

The girl laughed merrily. "Did I? It really never occurred to me—it was just an adventure—a piece of sport—an experience—am I a thief?"

"Yes."

"But how awful—how positively awful—no—nonsense—nonsense—the idea is ridiculous—what difference does it make anyway?"

"The one practical difference which occurs to me," answered the financier, "is that instead of being able to take out an official patent for the machine it will have to be manufactured secretly."

"But that makes it ten times more exciting."

"It may also increase the profits—the cocaine merchants in Europe, and the various syndicates who introduce a mild amount of moisture into dry America, are entitled to charge bigger profits because the stuff is prohibited than they would if it were an ordinary

respectable trade. Still, there's something in it—there may be a good deal in it. Of course, I must make a memorandum and work out the figures. Of course, there would have to be an agreement between us—a solicitor would have to draw it up—unless you trust me——"

"Swode will do that," said Lalage. "He's a qualified barrister."

"Swode," said Zaffrouli, "I'd forgotten about him."

"I hadn't," she replied sweetly.

And then she swung back to the idea of the Quisto-box. Civilization made to sit up. Millions and millions of people perfectly respectably clothed but wandering about the world, performing married life, love-affairs, the duties of hospitality, politics, business, in the most abysmal state of psychological nudity. Truth—truth at any price. What would happen? How interesting it would be.

And so absorbed was she in this new and fascinating notion of conducting this vast private experiment on the vile body of the whole civilized world that when, after they had adjourned to his flat, Zaffrouli having completed to his own satisfaction the preliminary memorandum of figures, cost of production, gross profits, taxation that would have to be paid anyhow, taxation that could be avoided legally, taxation that could be avoided illegally, attempted to become on his deliberately vast ottoman more gallant than avuncular, she scarcely listened at all to his extremely tactful overtures, but in a kind of absent-minded way just handed him the Quisto-box.

And contrary to the expectation of both of them the Quisto-box flashed a somewhat vague and casual negation couched in these terms.

("I have no morbid scruples—but you make no personal appeal—but what a joke it will be to let old Quisto loose upon the world—good old Quisto—Long live Quisto.")

XVI

On to the Market

THE preliminary preparations for the education of the world took not unnaturally some little time. It was necessary successively to face, and having faced, to solve two problems—the problem of manufacture and the problem of distribution.

So far as the manufacture was concerned, Lalage Marne took the full responsibility. Was she not a Bachelor not merely of marriage, but of science? Was it to be for nothing that she had poured away no small portion of the foaming wine of her youth down the sinks and test-tubes of chemistry? Was it to be in vain that she had tried to prison her passionate imagination in the steely clickings of mechanical formulæ, only to find that even in this metallic maze her dynamic self could yet find a way out? Could not the springs and levers of engineering launch her Freudian "libido" on as freely floating a career in the romantic air as any lyric whatsoever, whether emanating swiftly from Shelley or perpetrated slowly by Pound?

The method of the manufacture of the Quisto-box was in all main essentials the method employed in the commerical exploitation of any modern commodity of commerce. A pin, a steam-engine, or a gramophone—it makes no difference. The division of labour is the thing. And in the case of the Quisto-box the division of labour meant not merely obedience to an economic

truism, but also a course well calculated to preserve the secrecy of the invention.

The ideal factory was found in a small mansion. A compact edifice of about a dozen rooms all complete with garage, boat-house, electric light and green-cushioned lawns rolling straight down to the Thames. Zaffrouli had bought it from a decayed gentleman, who, owing to the increased if not prohibitive price of being a gentleman in modern England, had been forced to sell to crude but industrious profiteers the majority of his immovable properties. Runnylands was approached by one motor road, and the upward or downward stream of the Thames.

Shutting up most of the place, Zaffrouli installed as châtelaine the one and only person among his large retinue of faithful servants whom he really trusted. A dear, funny old woman of fifty-odd. Brusque, breezy, stuffed with common sense and born with an honesty so obstinately rooted into her constitution that it could be perverted by nothing whatsoever. She had sown her romantic oats in the wilds of the Salvation Army, was on bad terms with a few vicars because of the number of illegitimate and unpaid-for children whom she had once looked after for their unbusiness-like mother, and refused to kill; possessed a set of false teeth and one perfectly genuine husband with bad health and Radical proclivities. Presenting to Mrs. Ralston and her husband the furniture of the drawing-room of the decayed gentleman, which was on the first floor, Lalage Marne duly equipped it with all the apparatus of a modern laboratory.

And here every day by boat, automobile, or foot she came with as much punctiliousness as though, forsooth, it had been an office in the City. And here, in the

deserted mansion in the drawing-room of the decayed gentleman, she worked with feverish intensity assembling the various parts which Zaffrouli on her instructions had had independently manufactured.

Each machine was duly numbered like copies of an edition de luxe of a prohibited novel. Duly tested too, before being stored away in tho new American safe. Some of the machines she tested on the Ralstons, some on Zaffrouli, on those occasion when she saw him in town or he motored down to Runnylands; some on the casual occupants of any railway-carriage, and one or two on Swode. The experiment with Swode was indisputably a proof of an extremely fine quality of machine. It took place at the Ambassador Restaurant where they were dining, out of part of the fee of twenty-five guineas she had paid Swode for drawing an agreement between her and Zaffrouli with regard to the exploitation of the Quisto-box.

"The joke of the whole thing," explained the man with great amiability, "is——"

"Yes——?"

"That the whole agreement is void, as being contrary to public policy—a stolen invention—an agreement between the lady shall I say who coquetted with the law, and the gentleman who wished to promote it—just like the agreement I drew the other day between the Scotch whisky distiller and the American bootlegger."

"Then you had no business to charge me any money—I want my twenty-five guineas back, please."

"No good, my dear girl," said the barrister, "in shady deals of this character the man who has, keeps—'*Uti par delictum potior conditio possidentis.*'"

And then starting from that so admirably turned-out

girl at the table next but one, with her so banal and undeserving youth of a companion, the conversation switched on to the night when they had had that uproarious and disorderly evening at Les Petits Maquereaux.

"My dear man, it's too awful—really—you remember that woman—you remember what I said to her."

"My dear young woman, you exhibited both flippancy and nerve."

"I daresay I did—but listen—I don't know whether it's more awful or more funny."

"What is——"

"But she isn't——"

"I tell you she is."

"How do you know?"

"Oh well, I was always brought up to believe it."

"So was the whole of London."

"Well," said Swode, driven back to his last ditch, "all I can say is that if she isn't, she jolly well ought to be."

The laughter of his companion rattled gaily. And then the conversation flew upwards in giddy spirals.

And suddenly instead of talking bright nonsense, Swode began to think.

The conversation sagged.

Lalage began to inspect the ceiling, which mentally she compared to the representation of Heaven as seen in Drury Lane Theatre.

"Look here, Swode," she said, "I want to test this new machine."

"For heaven's sake, don't."

But the spring had already been pressed, and Swode's brain naked and ashamed was exhibited helplessly to the critical gaze of the young woman.

And those nude thoughts ran like this. ("I'm damned if I know whether to marry her or not—like harnessing oneself to an electric power-house—such a powerful individuality would be the deuce of a difficulty to manage—always going full steam ahead, too—Ursula might be a safer proposition, or that American girl.")

But these embarrassed hymeneal ponderings produced on this perverse girl a perverse effect.

"Damn Ursula, my dear Swode, and damn the American girl—I'll take you on appro for two years, we'll marry if we happen to have time, and if it doesn't work, why, we'll toss who divorces the other."

"You don't really attach much importance to the actual technicality," said Swode.

"You bet I do," retorted the girl. "You see it's one of the few stunts which I have not yet tried—I've had a few select acquaintances, but so far never married any of them—besides, you are fighting so damned shy of the whole thing that it's almost a point of honour to do it."

XVII

First Purchase of the Quisto-Box

THE news of Lalage Marne's engagement was greeted by Zaffrouli with a particularly thin smile. But though the Germanic precision of his plan had been rudely dislocated, he did not allow the contretemps to impair either his crisp mental concentration or the suave harmony of his *moral.* After all, you know, the flotation of the Quisto-box was infinitely more important. The million pounds was a necessity—the girl was merely a luxury. A luxury one would like to acquire, a luxury which in due course and after an infinite period of tactful waiting one no doubt would acquire. But the pursuit of no luxury in the world could distract a sane man from his business.

And big business was now mature.

A thousand machines lay in the safe.

The same thousand machines were registered in the ledger. And he was now carefully plotting how to throw these thousand machines loose upon the world. For one thousand pounds per machine. It was only, of course, the first steps that cost trouble or ingenuity. After a time accumulative recommendation would do its work and the Quisto-box would become as fashionable—in the right set—as that *raffiné* cocaine-palace in the wilds of Ealing.

And they had good reason to hope that they would be

able to tap indefinitely the higher strata of their clientele.

For the machines were so constructed that they would function for six months and no longer.

Repeat orders were consequently assured.

And, when they had successfully skimmed the cream of the upper financial strata, it was their intention to place upon the market a cheaper and more popular article, which, while transmitting the broad substance of all thoughts did not, of course, attain to that fine pitch of photographic accuracy that was exhibited by the more perfect specimen.

But the problem was—how to begin?

Eventually, after a concentrated half-hour, with a gold pencil and a writing-pad in a first-class railway carriage, he evolved the following advertisement:

"NOTHING LESS THAN ONE THOUSAND POUNDS CONSIDERED. A limited number of keys to life are on sale by private treaty. Specially recommended to MAGICIANS, ADVENTURERS and JEALOUS SPOUSES.—Reply to Clavis, Box No. 101."

This advertisement he inserted in the following periodicals, *The Occult Review*, *The Winning Post*, and *Eve*.

"Of course the people we really want to get, you know, are the people who read the *Occult Review*, and the *Winning Post*, and *Eve*," he told Lalage Marne with great seriousness.

Replies began to roll in. Facetious, serious, fantastic, hysterical, plaintive, signed with names, signed with pseudonyms care of accommodation addresses—frankly anonymous. Replies, too, from all kinds of people. Clergymen and retired army officers were particularly

frequent. And they not unnaturally demanded special rates in view of the particular services they had rendered to England or humanity as the case might be. Old maids in suburbs and cathedral towns on whom the door of life had been locked with a finality that no key could ever open, wrote letters of wistful pathos. Professional and amateur magicians wrote galore, but so far as producing a thousand pounds was concerned, their magic had apparently failed them. A surburban cynic wrote on a rough piece of paper inside an unstamped envelope the words "silly ass." Many women entirely misunderstood the essentially businesslike and unromantic character of the advertisement.

"I am a widow anxious for spiritual consolation. Are you good-looking? Please send me your photograph. I can't possibly manage a thousand pounds—of course I know that the pound is not what it was and that makes a great difference to me—because I live on my dear husband's investments and get a fixed income—but I might sell some War Loan and raise £500. Will you meet me outside Blackfriars District Railway Station on Monday next at three? I shall be wearing a green mackintosh and a black toque."

At last Lalage came upon a reply that seemed really indicative of actual business.

She tossed it over to Zaffrouli, who broke into one of his thin laughs. "Real business, my dear Lalage—why it's a Scotland Yard plant—I've employed the man myself and I most distinctly remember his writing."

"How frightfully killing."

"It would kill the venture if Scotland Yard got on to it," murmured the financier grimly. "It certainly shows the practical value of being observant." He whistled slowly. "By Jove, it was a narrow shave."

But Lalage was diligently wading through the promiscuous pile.

"Now this really does look genuine—read it."

She tossed it over.

Suspiciously, methodically, Zaffrouli scrutinized it. Grossly scented note-paper. A gigantic monogram. No address on the paper. A heavy sprawling feminine back-hand. Neither beginning nor final salutation. The text was as follows:

"I am interested in the key to life. If I find it useful I am prepared to negotiate at the figure you mention. If you mean to do business come to Flat C, Oxray Mansions, Mayfair, and ask for Miss Jones."

"It's genuine enough," he said slowly, "but Miss Jones is probably a crook—I rather like, you know, the delicate impudence of the pseudonym Miss Jones. Miss Jones to be sure; I will wager a thousand pounds that our friend Miss Jones is in the Distinguished Portrait Gallery of Scotland Yard."

But who was to investigate Miss Jones the genuine? Miss Jones the crook? Miss Jones who had the honour of occupying one of the most prominent places in the Portrait Gallery at Head-quarters? Zaffrouli was too conspicuous a person to allow himself to take personally any direct part.

"How about Swode?," suggested the girl. "I've improved him quite a lot since I let him become engaged to me."

"Swode has initiative," clicked slowly the metallic voice of the financier, "but he lacks finesse—I have no doubt that on paper he could hatch quite a good intrigue—but on the carpet he is too crude—shows his hand too much. I assure you that quite apart from my

personal reasons I do not approve of the engagement. He's not your style. No, there is only one thing for it —you must go yourself and interview this woman."

"But supposing she drugs me or kidnaps me."

"My dear young woman," said Zaffrouli gravely, "I can trust you to look after yourself successfully under any circumstances which it is possible to imagine. I have the sincerest pity for any gang of ruffians who are sufficiently ill-advised to try and play about with you— but if you like, you can take a revolver, and Swode."

"Yes, I'll put both in my pocket," said the girl gaily, "and a Quisto-box."

"No—no—no," cried Zaffrouli, this time really agitated, "leave the Quisto-box till she has paid the money."

XVIII

The Worst Woman in Europe

THE worst woman in Europe sat in her melodramatic den. Not Whitechapel. Not Soho. Not even Maida Vale. But just a boudoir in an extremely capacious flat in a highly respectable side that turned out of Regent Street in the neighbourhood of the Queen's Hall.

But you had only to look at her to realize without any doubt whatsoever that Martha Judasovitch, *alias* Mrs. Humphrey Wernstein, *alias* Celia Jones, *alias* Lucia Swettenham, was only too accurately named the Worst Woman in Europe.

A perfectly sane and lucid monomaniac of vice. The practice—the intellectual steeping—the financial exploitation. And, indeed, it was, perhaps, her consummate avarice that gave this incarnate piece of female bestiality the requisite mental balance.

Just look at her, now! The white bloated face and the swollen supple body. The red flabby folds that purported to be lips. The lax sinuosity of what was supposed to be a mouth. The brutal and business-calculation that glared brazenly from out her green eyes. The thick, slimy creaminess of her voice, that would in case of necessity and with the utmost suddenness assume a crisp, businesslike click. Come now, don't you agree that she is the queen of the world sinister?

She operates on the grand scale, but despises nothing, however degrading, that brings in its market value in hard cash.

Among her more important forms of commercial activity may be mentioned two flourishing export businesses (one to Argentine and the other to the East), two or three gaming hells in London, a temperance hotel equipped with perfectly adequate *cabinets particuliers* for the benefit of the Nonconformists of the most respectable provincial town in the Midlands, a cocaine-palace in Ealing, a palmistry business which showed a small profit on expenses, and a flourishing blackmail business which was furnished with its raw material by the palmistry salon.

Of course, she also undertook special jobs. If you paid her a sufficiently high fee, she would procure the murdering of your worst enemy—anywhere outside England—or alternatively the maiden aunt of the chastest bishop in the country.

She was extremely efficient—dressed luxuriously, and had only occasionally been known to blackmail the more regular and important of her clients.

Now, as a professional criminal of the highest possible class, Celia Jones made it part of her routine business to study methodically all the advertisements in all the papers. Now it also happened that she was one of the few people who subscribed regularly to the *Occult Review*, *Eve*, and the *Winning Post;* to the first journal because she was the proprietress of a palmistry business, to the second because she really liked it on its merits, and to the third because she was, after all, a woman about town. Consequently when she came across the advertisement in the *Occult Review* she thought it was simply hocus-pocus, when she came across it in the

Winning Post she felt interested, and when for the third time she came across it in *Eve* she felt positively intrigued.

"Now I wonder who the devil would advertise in those three papers—must be something in it—but what?"

So she answered the advertisement and duly received a typewritten answer which informed her that, reference her letter of the blank ultimo, Miss Smith would call upon Miss Jones at the place mentioned and at the hour indicated.

Waiting the arrival of Miss Smith, the worst woman in Europe, wearing an elaborate *négligé* and high-laced golden boots, lounged on her divan, with one hand smoking a scented Russian cigarette, and with the other slowly but maliciously pinching a huge black Persian cat.

Punctual to the minute of the named hour arrived Miss Smith.

In disobedience to Zaffrouli she carried with her, not only her automatic, but also her Quisto-box.

Outside in the street Swode waited with a police whistle, a knuckle-duster, and two more revolvers.

"Miss Smith."

"Miss Jones."

"Excuse this *négligé*, but I always lunch in bed."

"Not at all— not at all."

("I could get two thousand pounds for her in the Argentine") vibrated the Quisto-box.

Lalage was on the point of replying that she had no intention of travelling and that she preferred whenever she wanted a lover to select one herself, but by an absolute *tour de force* of superhuman control just managed to restrain herself by the fraction of an inch.

"You came about that advertisement my dear," purred the white sleek mass.

"Yes, my dear *Miss Jones*," answered Lalage.

"Will you have a cigarette?" said Miss Jones.

"Thank you, I prefer my own—if you won't think me very rude."

("She thinks they're drugged—but they're not—not this time") intimated the Quisto-box.

"Now about this key-of-life business," said the white fat voice.

But for the moment the eyes of Miss Smith had wandered on to a handsomely mounted photograph of an exotic-looking man with a Kaiser Wilhelm moustache.

("Judasovitch should be leaving Wormwood Scrubbs in about six months") whispered Quisto.

"Ah, yes," said Miss Smith, nonchalantly as though conquering by some supreme effort her ennui with the stale tepidity of life. "This key-of-life business to be sure—but by-the-by—I'm sure I have met that man in the silver frame somewhere, somehow, isn't he named Judasovitch?"

The green eyes exhaled an aura even more poisonous than usual. A sleek hiss began to manifest itself in the white pulpy voice.

"Look here, Miss Smith, I really didn't invite you to my flat to talk about my friends—you will not misunderstand me, I'm sure—but is there anything in this key-of-life business?"

"My dear Miss Jones," said Lalage, with more than all her sweetness, "how horridly suspicious you are—still I suppose you've got to be, poor thing—is there anything in the key of life? To be sure. Why there is positively everything in the key of life—it's the key of life for instance, which tells me that Mr. Judasovitch—

that Mr. Judasovitch ('I wonder if he played about with the bloody little minx while I was in Holloway') rapped out Quisto-box) has been compelled by the state of his health to take a longish rest-cure somewhere in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill. As a yet further proof of my bona fides, or rather of the *bona fides* of this excellent proprietary article—the key of life—may I also remind you that you lived in comparative seclusion last year in, er, the neighbourhood of Holloway—because the authorities—oh yes, I know it was very inconsiderate of them to have taken exception to you running a convent without a licence."

"If you're a police-spy I'll murder you."

"I'm not a police spy, and you will not murder me anyway—quite apart from whether I could do any good with my little steel friend in my right-hand pocket, my best man-friend is watching the flat. Now, my dear green-eyed monster, just compose yourself, and listen to the voice of reason—the key of life is a machine for mechanical telepathy—look at it—here you are—you press the button—and the machine does the rest. For instance, you're at present thinking how positively invaluable the machine would be at poker—or if you're not quite certain if the owner of a race-horse is having his horse pulled or generously allowing it to win—one thousand pounds, my dear green-eyes—*prix fixe*—no discount—no bargaining—but it's worth a million."

The yellow eyebrows of Miss Jones narrowed furiously.

"Let me test it, and I will buy it."

"But what security have I got—you have a charming voice and your social manner is pleasing—but really, you know, your word is scarcely gilt-edged."

But the voice of Celia Jones, *alias* Mrs. Humphrey

Wernstein, *alias* Lucia Swettenham, became more than ever sweetly fat and slimily creamy with that portentous and almost pathetic sincerity which the negotiation of genuine business produces even in the falsest criminals.

Then taking a gold key from the chain that dangled from her neck she unlocked an escritoire. From the escritoire she took a wad of notes. Folding the notes in half she cut them neatly across with an ivory paper-knife. Six halves of the notes she replaced in the escritoire, while the other six halves she slapped down on the table in front of which Lalage was sitting.

"There you are, my dear, five hundreds and a monkey."

But Lalage gazed blankly at the bisected notes.

"You're a smart young woman in your way," said Celia Jones, "but you really don't seem to have mixed much in circles where one doesn't trust one another as much as one ought to—look here, my dear, you take these half-notes—then get your man friend to put them in his safe—then come back to-morrow and see me—if I'm a buyer it costs me nothing to be honest and give you the other halves—if I'm not a buyer it will cost you nothing to be honest and give me back the half-notes which you've taken—have you got me?"

Lalage whistled with appreciative interest.

"What a delightful idea—how absolutely ingenious."

But the queen of the sinister world lazily murmured,

"Upon my soul, you surprise me, why this is one of the first things one ever learns."

Within two hours the formalities of the first sale of the first Quisto-box that had ever been put upon the market were duly completed.

Lalage rather enjoyed her tea. The woman was

rather witty in her own beastly way, and here, indeed, was fodder for a coltish schoolgirl imagination that wanted as a matter of curiosity to have just one good intellectual nibble at everything there was in the whole wide world.

But the second Quisto-box which Swode had kept in reserve and given to Lalage at the time of the completion of the sale ran as follows:

("By Jove, the palmistry business will wake up and now I'll get to the bottom of Bluddisdon's bloody past."

XIX

Quisto Functions

AS we have a few extra pages at our disposal and feel in the mood for a digression, let us digress. The reader may possibly feel somewhat lacking in the warmer sympathies for Celia Jones, *alias* Martha Judasovitch, *alias* Lucia Swettenham, by reason of her slight lack of ethical finish. But the author confesses to a genuine curiosity to find out what use the "queen of the export trade" made of the Quisto-box. And the only way in which the author can gratify this perfectly legitimate curiosity is to write this chapter. The reader is at liberty to read or skip at his caprice. But in any event this chapter will and must be written.

That very night Celia tried at poker the worth of the dinkie little aluminium machine. And by the virgins of the Argentine and the hygienic temples of Bombay, how it worked! She was playing with one of the best blackguards and poker players in the whole of London, and a few of the more respectable members of the shady aristocracy.

But how superior one felt when without even the clumsiness of those little mirrors in one's ring, or even any complicated system of confederate signalling, one knew one had an infallible insight into all the hands of all one's opponents. Quite apart, too, from mere sordid winning, what an intellectual treat it was to be the detached spectator of their various methods of play. And even sordid winning was quite worth while. How crass and yet how subtle the joy of raising up to the

£100 limit the audacious scoundrel who coming into a jackpot on a "king high" had disdainfully refused to draw a single card. And particularly when all one had oneself was a miserable ace. Miserable—but quite good enough, thank you. And how sweet the relief to be saved from financial waste by running away with an ace high flush when a "full house" happened to be on the scene. Or gracefully retreating with four kings! A rotten hand—a positively ridiculous hand—a completely useless hand—a hand one would ever think of backing on—at any rate when four aces happened to be arrayed against one. Of course one had to lose now and again as a matter of technique. Never be crude when winning money at cards.

"I can't make it out," said the worst blackguard, in the whole of London to his friend the Earl of Shadebury, "I know she didn't cheat—but there's something uncanny about the whole business."

"It's always uncanny to lose three hundred quid," replied the Earl of Shadebury.

On a subsequent occasion Celia allowed herself to be invited to lunch and poker with four of the best card-sharpers that the United States of America had ever let loose in Europe.

"You should control your features more—your game is really too childishly transparent," hissed the white creamy voice at the four steel masks that had never moved a millimetre during the whole game, as she languidly left the room with a cool quarter of their available capital.

And the palmistry department conducted under the name of Mme. Pythia began to flourish more inten-

sively than ever before and to supply finer and finer grades of raw material to the blackmail department conducted under the name of Chantage Anonyme.

More and more numerous clients paid stiffer and stiffer fees for admittance to the dim room of the black curtains and the heavy perfume of the incense, where sleek snakes coiled about the cushions, and the white flabby bulk with the carmine folds of her lax lips and her green cat-like eyes just visible through the slits of her black veil, majestically dispensed the oracle

"The right hand first—an extraordinary hand—a truly remarkable hand. I hardly like to tell you what your hand tells me—well, if I must, I must—what, after all, is Pythia but the mouthpiece of the gods?—and the gods tell me that you have two children, two husbands, one of course divorced, and one lover. No, I'm afraid the oracle doesn't quite reach to their names to-day. Yes, five guineas, please." But even as Pythia spoke, the names of Philip Smetterthwaite, M.P., and John Greensleaves had been duly communicated by the faithful little trick of aluminium and duly recorded by Pythia in her little red note-book, for transmission to Chantage Anonyme "for perusal and necessary action, please."

"The right hand first—an extraordinary hand—a truly remarkable hand. I hardly like to tell you what your hand tells me—well, if I must, I must—what after all is Pythia but the mouthpiece of the gods?—and the gods tell me that you made a lot of money in the War—quite a lot of money—more than you should have made—in a very, very sudden and extraordinary way—am I right? How useless of me to ask—the oracle is

never m stcken, and you are now in danger of losing all tne m'ney which you made in the War, and more."

And the blackmail department throve as it had never thriven b fore, to such an extent, indeed, that Celia Jones en:ered into negotiations for selling the two export b sinesses to a Belgian syndicate. Wealth was redi tributed rapidly and on a grand scale. Profiteers—unfaithful wives—chivalrously faithful lovers—amateurs of exotic sex—millionaires with Colonial pasts—a few politicians—and one or two of the clergy—these were just some of the conscripted patrons of that extremely flourishing business, Société Chantage Anonyme.

Shed no tears, sentimental reader. Celia Jones only operated on the grand scale and among the thoroughly undeserving. Only a comparative few committed suicide. And the majority, developing, after the operation, a kind of posthumous conscience, can really be considered, as, on the ultimate balance of the account, even spiritually richer.

But how about Bluddisdon's purple past? Wait, reader, wait. For the moment our curiosity is sated. Our time is up. Our digression is finished. After all you know we have so far disposed of one Quisto-box. And there remain locked up in the safe in the attic of the mansion of the decayed gentleman nine hundred and ninety-nine.

XX

The Nine Hundred and Ninety-Nine

Shortly after the Celia Jones transaction or e Quisto-box was sold by private treaty to Arg mewicz; Yunkaria having settled down under th pacific regime of Trantram into a period of tepid calm, he was returning by special request to ruffle the serene waters.

As he prided himself on being a psycholo ist, he needed some cajoling before he could be ind ced to purchase a machine. Like a professional musician purchasing s me make or other of pianola.

However, he had unlimited funds at his disposal, and swore with apparent genuineness to complete secrecy.

"I really want it for Barlew," he explained. "The Wernes are as legible as a children's alphabet, Trantram can always be worked out like a sum of ethical arithmetic—but Barlew may need some watching."

"Give him my best love," cried Lalage gaily, "and tell him to give my very best regards to St. Gudaric."

"Don't you want more than one," queried Zaffrouli. "We make a certain discount you know when supplying foreign governments with wholesale quantities—we might even go so far as to let you have a dozen for ten thousand."

"My dear sir," said the little nationalist, "I haven't made myself clear. Don't you see—I'm the only man in the whole country I really trust—I want to feel that I'm the only man in the whole country with this

particular machine, and I rely on your honour not to approach anybody else."

Zaffrouli, pouting his lips, made a short but magnificent gesture with his left hand, which said with definiteness and disdain, "Of course, to the *n*th power —you need be under no apprehension whatsoever."

During the first week trade was neither brisk nor stagnant. Some of the purchasers made no secret of their identity, some made a secret successfully, some made a secret abortively.

Of course, so far as Zaffrouli and Lalage were concerned the real problem was to combine the maximum of publicity with the maximum of secrecy. On the one hand it was necessary to inoculate civilization with at least a thousand of the little aluminium machines, and to pay one thousand thousand-pounds into the firm's banking account. On the other hand, it was equally necessary to keep their own identities shrouded in sybilline secrecy. They were apprehensive, rightly or wrongly, of the State controlling the manufacture and supply. Or of the secret of the manufacture being disclosed. In which case the fantastic profits would dwindle to what, from the plutocratic standpoint which Lalage had now thoroughly assimilated, was little better than zero. The breezy, horsey but entirely reliable Mrs. Ralston was transplanted from the decaying mansion of the decayed gentleman on the river to an obscure house in the obscure suburb of Camberwell. She was given a sufficient sum of money to keep her, her children and her asthmatic husband

with Radical proclivities for a whole year. (The unfortunate woman had not only failed to assimilate, but was congenitally incapable of assimilating the plutocratic standpoint.) She was also given rigid instructions on no account, not even in the event of a genuine emergency, to communicate personally or by telephone with either Zaffrouli, Lalage Marne or even Swode. All she was to do was to collect the various answers to the advertisements from the various newspapers and post them on to a fictitious name at one of the numerous accommodation-addresses still to be found in the metropolis of London, and functioning perfectly satisfactorily in spite of the abortive regulation with regard to keeping a register of the actual names and addresses of the pseudonymous recipients.

From this address the letters would be fetched by Lalage. Subsequently they would be sorted, criticized and dissected by Swode, Zaffrouli and herself. Decision was then to be taken as to which particular enquiries it was desirable to follow up. An assignation would be made. Anywhere. Outside a Tube—inside a Tube—a fancy dress dance—any restaurant or hotel with a minimum of two alternative exits, but, of course, three for choice—a race-course—London—Brighton—Paris—Brussels—any place whatsoever dictated by the whim or caution of the particular moment.

This assignation would be duly kept by Lalage. And again, according to the aforesaid whim or caution of the moment, she would vary her dress, station in life, age or sex. A dear old mid-Victorian lady all complete with pink cheeks, white hair and poke bonnet—a fat publican's wife—a common harlot—a dashing youth about town—a shady princess—a revolutionary emissary.

Usually Swode would be in the background. Lalage, however, made a point of never calling for his assistance or for that of anybody else if she was alone. Even *in extremis*. Just there womanly *amour propre*. And this is the explanation of the unsolved mystery of how the body of that extremely popular French actor (who somehow had quite forgotten that he had come to talk commercial business) came to be found lying on the rails of the Boulogne-Paris line in an extremely unæsthetic and disorganized condition. The incident spoiled Lalage's nerve for twenty-four hours, and even produced a few passing ripples on the serene ocean of her conscience. However, she pulled herself together, assumed a new identity, took out a new passport, decided not to tell anyone, even Swode, and dismissed the whole incident from her mind with the, after all, perfectly logical reflection:

"He really was a trifle too attentive, and it's so very Victorian to have to ring the alarm bell."

But on just a few occasions the fear of just the one way on which even in the distant future she might conceivably be detected, extradited, guillotined (no, what nonsense, at the worst imprisoned—more probably acquitted and with plenty of margin to boot), would leak for a moment or two into her perfectly healthy mind.

After the first week the sales progressed intensively. The majority of the purchasers realizing that a substantial percentage of their magic power lay in complete secrecy had the common sense to be discreet. But

who can stop the tongue of a bored woman from functioning or the pen of an Oxford don from writing philosophic articles?

The invention began to get bruited about in Society, to become a serious topic of conversation in the learned press. The lead was given by Dr. Wickens's articles in *Brain*. Dr. Wickens blessed the Quisto-box, or as in his pedantic scientific jargon he preferred to call it, the psychologoscope, with paternal unction. He had not, of course, invented it. Far be it from him to arrogate a claim which he could not prove. But he could refer, in fact he did refer, to half a dozen papers and innumerable speeches in which he had discussed with a fair modicum of sympathetic enthusiasm the possibility of mechanical telepathy. Consequently though not the inventor he could fairly claim to have been at any rate the prophet.

So concluded an article fairly greasy with the complacency of those who in the end by some fluke or other somehow manage to find themselves in the position of being proved right.

But so far as the learned world was concerned the psychologoscope, for we, too, must for the time being use the jargon of the learned, really came into its own at the special evening of the Brain Society.

The atmosphere was thick with tobacco and hostility. All the cats of academic controversy and personal rivalry had been let loose. There they lay, backs arched, claws unsheathed, purring silken amenities and ready to scratch out each other's dialectical eyes.

Among the scoffing sceptics were, of course, Professor Flaxie and Dr. Rabotnik-Smith. They were backed by that red-haired reactionary, Sir Mayhew Brunthwaite.

After these three dialectical dreadnoughts had successfully demonstrated not merely the scientific impossibility, but the absolute scientific absurdity of any such thing, "Ladies and Gentlemen," Wickens with Socratic meekness suggested that in order to prove the absolute fraud of the whole thing, an experiment might be desirable. He produced this delicate psychological instrument. Round the room passed Quisto-box. Some handled it with fear as though it were a devil which would bite, some with flippancy, some with reverence. "Thought-vibrations!" "Stuff and nonsense—hocus-pocus, I tell you," "Not more wonderful than wireless telephony, anyway," "Can you feel anything?" "One has to be so damnably careful in the borderland between science and mysticism." So ran the cackle of the learned. Finally, with gallant bow and a tug at his pointed beard, Wickens approached Miss Keystone, the newly-appointed reader in Feminine Psychology.

"May I request you, my dear madam, to be so good as to concentrate your thoughts on—on anything you like."

The twisted mouth of the wiry little woman grew more contorted than ever. She was smiling. Triumphantly, challengingly.

"I am ready," she said, "and if you guess it, I'll believe in you."

"Madam," said Wickens, basking blandly in his own dignity, "I demur at the expression 'guess,' as this precise minute telepathetic science has passed from the sphere of tentative hypothesis to the sphere of mathematical certainty. Madam, your thought has been photographed. Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Keystone thought that she would baffle me by a

negative thought, but if you will excuse the pun, it is as easy to take a negative of a negative thought as of a positive thought. The question to Miss Keystone was, 'Concentrate your thoughts on anything you like.' Well, the lady thought she would go in for a piece of misanthropic repartee, and floor the psychologoscope, for what she thought was,

I AM NOT CONCENTRATING ON ANYTHING, FOR THERE IS NOTHING IN THE WORLD I LIKE.

Am I right, Miss Keystone—am I right?"

But even before she could reply, "By Jove, you are," the learned society, reading the affirmative in her grinning Puck-like face, burst out into unrestrained clapping, mixed here and there with a few dissenting growls.

"Hear, hear," "I always said that there was something in telepathy," "Extraordinarily interesting," "Of course, I have nothing against the *bona fides* of the lady, but from the scientific point of view, you know, the thought should have been written down before it was guessed."

But every member of the Society was clamouring to experiment. Finally Professor Flaxie and Miss Keystone both grasping the Quisto-box together prepared to read the thoughts of Dr. Wickens. Wickens peered blandly through his spectacles and caressed with great affection his own beard.

"I am not going to apologize," he said. "After all, you know one can control one's tongue, but not one's thoughts." Miss Keystone's face twisted into a grimace of pink laughter. But Professor Flaxie thundered like some suburban Jove, "How dare you think such thoughts about me, sir? I'll challenge you to a duel—I'll have you up for libel—I—I'll report you to the Committee."

But Dr. Wickens simply answered with his particularly offensive variety of exaggerated meekness.

"I am glad to perceive, Professor Flaxie, that, so far at least as one may judge by your speech, your intonation, and your gestures, you appear to be fully convinced of the scientific efficacy of the psychologoscope—and if you wish to check it I have here written down this particular thought, which I assure you came into being quite outside my own personal volition."

But at this juncture Professor Flaxie snorting that he was not going to stay to be insulted, left the room to catch what he falsely alleged to be the last train to Turnham Green.

The remainder of the grown-up schoolchildren clustered feverishly round Dr. Wickens and Miss Keystone.

"Now what is it—in confidence—I won't tell anyone."

In Dr. Wickens's next article in *Brain* this particular episode was tactfully alluded to as the experiment of the undisclosed Thought. But the harmless juvenile inanity that made Miss Keystone turn pink, and Professor Flaxie green, and which was whispered round the giggling mob of schoolchildren who were playing at being philosophers, was merely this:

FLAXIE IS A SILLY OLD ASS OF A REACTIONARY.

Anyway the result of this extremely stimulating meeting of the Brain Society was not merely the resignation of Professor Flaxie, which was a great relief to everybody, because after all he really was, you know, a silly old ass of a reactionary, but the acquisition by the society of a new machine. It was suggested that Wickens should present his own. He

scoffed at the idea. He needed it for private experiments into the real ethics of the age.

For the details of this investigation those readers, if any, who are interested in moral philosophy are referred to that treatise as sensational as it is monumental, written in that heavy-light style of waggish irony for which Dr. Wickens is so famous, entitled the CURIOUS CASE OF CONSCIENCE.

From *Brain* the Quisto-box sprang with lightning rapidity into the ordinary press.

Every prominent psychologist, divine, scientist, philosopher, man of letters, society woman, jockey, music-hall comedian or captain of industry was promptly interviewed in the particular journal that most nearly approximated to his or her mental level.

Leading articles pullulated.

The *Daily Blare*, which in its search for a new sensation was considering seriously the question of adopting a pro-German and anti-French policy, stunted hard.

Lord Yellowham purchased immediately a dozen machines (at this juncture Zaffrouli put up the price to five thousand pounds, but the sales only boomed more merrily than ever).

And now more than ever did the *Blare* take the Quisto-box under its wing, as at various times in its career it had taken under its wing aeroplanes, pure whisky, Prohibition, the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister's successor, war, peace, Socialism and plutocracy.

But, of course, with all respect to Dr. Wickens, "psychologoscope" was rather a heavy name. Rose Smith sent for his psychological expert. "I want a

name—something crisp and catchy. Oh, I know you've written for *Brain* and all those high-brow papers. Well, you must purge yourself of all that—come down—right down."

With consummate ease the psychological expert did come right down.

In the next issue that awful piece of hybrid terminology TELBRAIN was bombarding the public in stark black heading—DO YOU TELBRAIN?—HOW TO TELBRAIN—WHAT THE BISHOP OF GALLOWSTONE THINKS OF TELBRAIN.

And having once taken TELBRAIN under his wing, Lord Yellowham supported it with all his saffron pomp and energy.

One Telbrain was immediately offered as a prize to the person who should write the best essay on this new invention. Another Telbrain together with ten thousand pounds cash, a box at the opera and a motor-car, were offered, with a magnificent gesture of philanthropy to the person who should first locate the person or persons who instead of presenting the invention to the Nation were actually exploiting it for private deal.

But the splashiest and the most important stroke of all was when a reward of £100,000 was offered, without distinction of age, race, sex, nationality, colour or social class to the person who should first discover the secret of manufacture. It may be mentioned that one of the minor conditions of the offer was that the invention should become the sole property of the *Daily Blare*.

From the *Daily Blare* to the House of Commons both geographically and intellectually was a short step.

"What steps, if any, have been taken by His Majesty's Government to acquire for the nation an invention of such unlimited possibilities for good or evil," was put at question time to the Secretary for War by Lord Bunkerton, the most aggressively moribund member of the Die-Hard section of the Tory Party.

"The matter is under consideration by the psychological experts of the War Office," replied the Minister, impromptu, of course.

"I am glad to hear that psychological experts exist at the War Office," said Lord Bunkerton.

A spasm of cheap laughter which carried off some of the least aggressively moribund members of the Die-Hard members of the Tory Party.

But though the Secretary of State for War gave that non-committal answer, which is the sign manual of British bureaucratic respectability, the Prime Minister had bought one.

Not for his country, not even for the hybrid party which he found such difficulty in controlling. For himself. For his own private use. And quite rightly, too. The mutual coquetting, intriguing, setting to corners of the various members, who together made up the ministerial harmony of all the discords was really intense. It was after all the common sense of self-preservation to provide himself with an engine which would advise him which way to jump, and at what precise minute, so that he could be the first to betray the crew of traitors who were simply waiting for the opportunity to betray him.

Of course his natural *flair* was prodigious. It was

from one point of view more exciting, more interesting, more triumphantly thrilling, to go on as he had always gone on in the past, gambling on the accuracy of his political smell.

But after all you know business is business and politics is politics.

And it was obviously much more businesslike to back a certainty.

But it was not long before he began to yearn fervently for the good old days. He was dining with that swift, dark horse of a hallowed youth, the Lord Chancellor. A society woman who was distressed about the multifarious activities of her husband suddenly threw the new invention into the conversation.

"No woman should be without one," she said lightly. "You men don't require any at all—you know too much already."

"I think all Cabinet Ministers ought to have one," murmured the Lord Chancellor in his slick, languid way. But the Quisto-box in the pocket of the Prime Minister suddenly gave forth ("By Jove, I'm glad I've got one—I wonder what the P.M.'s up to—I wonder if he knows himself"). But from that very minute the Prime Minister, avoiding the Lord Chancellor like the devil, concentrated assiduously on the hostess. At the earliest moment consistent with social decency he ran away. It was too bad. Damn the Telbrain. Damn the *Blare*. Damn the Lord Chancellor. He felt shorn of his prerogative: that keen magical scent of the feelings and prejudices of masses and of parties that had always somehow given him the advantage over people whose mentality was more solid than his own. And the Chancellor was as thick as

thieves with Rummington Pitch. Rummington Pitch would be getting one soon. And probably running an intrigue to get back to office. Five other members of the Cabinet would also be dabbling in that poisonous machine. If they couldn't afford one they would share it with some wealthy giant of big business. The same type of man you know who had got old X out of that divorce case and paid the debts of Y. And the number of peerages which had to be paid away as debts of honour was already a strain.

It was not really against his essentially Radical principles to cheapen the House of Lords. Still all the same it was rather a nuisance.

And some of the Opposition would be getting one soon. At any rate one or two of the Labour members might get the funds from the Trade Unions.

XXI

When Quisto-Box meets Quisto-Box

TO revert to our digression.

Listen to the extraordinary contretemps of Celia Jones, and see whether you do not sympathize with her. Among her clients was the Duke of Bluddisdon. The Duke of Bluddisdon had a purple past. And even his present wasn't as immaculate as his shirt-front. What was his sanguinary past? Oh, merely this. Quite ordinary. But just a trifle uncomfortable. The kind of things that leads not merely to the dock, but also to the pillory of ridicule and the suicide of social dignity. Affairs, of course. But what preposterous ones. Not in his boyhood, but in his mature youth he had been inveigled—without, of course, the slightest responsibility on his own part—into a romance of fairly high temperature with a woman who, quite apart from the seniority of her age, was extremely unappetizing in her physical exterior. And then that shocking affair with his wife's maid. Attractive enough—phew—but the etiquette of the thing was ineffable. And, of course, the usual married woman with the usual fussy husband.

And he had made one or two trifling mistakes about ages. Not intentionally. Of course not. But it was so difficult you know to keep pace with all this new-fangled legislation. And when a girl *would* put her hair up!

Celia Jones stripped him of these facts in a few

sittings. With the "i's" dotted and the "t's" crossed. And all the names and all the addresses.

The raw material was then passed on to the Société de Chantage Anonyme, which gave him information of the amount to the tune of which it was proposed that he should sing.

But Bluddisdon was foolish, mean, lacking in all chivalry. As a matter of common sense he should have paid. For the sake of his own immunity from ridicule. For the sake of his own immunity from prison. For the sake of that silly woman with the fussy husband. And to murder her was really such a lot of trouble. And even though it should cost him more money to avoid paying than it would have cost him to pay, he was determined to be unreasonable. He was morbidly conscientious. Among other fads he had a conscientious objection to being blackmailed. So he went to consult Harry Smith, the best private detective in England.

"It's all Celia Jones," said Harry Smith. "I know her technique—I wouldn't murder her if I could help it, you know; keep that as a last resort, your last card, so to speak."

"What worries me," said Bluddisdon, "is who can have told her—we never told anybody. I don't talk in my sleep, I've never been delirious, I've never even been drunk."

"You've been telbrained," said the detective. "The price you have been asked is four thousand pounds—I will see you through for six thousand pounds—financially I advise you to pay her and not to pay me."

"I will give myself," said Bluddisdon, "the luxury of not being blackmailed."

A cheque was scribbled and receipted.

The detective began to explain.

"I was always a believer in the Golden Rule. It is a speciality of mine to blackmail blackmailers, in this case you must telbrain the telbrainer.

"Some other time after this little contretemps has been adjusted, I will tell you the story of how I not merely successfully, but perfectly respectably, blackmailed a drunken and blackmailing major, but—I suppose you haven't got a machine."

"By Jove, no," replied Bluddisdon, who was very much a healthy Briton. "Uncanny stuff—don't yer know—gives me the creeps."

"If you do what I tell you, you'll give her the creeps and for a long time into the bargain."

"But I haven't got one of those beastly things."

"Never mind, my dear sir, I'll lend you one of the beastly things."

"Thanks."

"Against of course a deposit of five thousand pounds."

Bluddisdon whistled, but he did not wince.

"But supposing she has one of the beastly things, and supposing she uses it and finds out that I have one of the beastly things—what then—when Greek meets Greek—pull devil, pull baker."

"She's sure to have one," said the detective, "if only to find out how much you're really prepared to pay."

"It's a damned nuisance, but I really think it would be simpler to murder her."

'Simpler in the beginning, more complicated in the end, besides in my experience, Duke, I have always

found that murder always involves an undue amount of nervous strain—you don't do it as a hobby, unless you're mad, and if you're sane you don't do it unless there's no other alternative."

Bluddisdon suddenly sat up and smacked his thigh. A triumphant whistle emanated from the ducal lips. "I'm not supposed to be brainy, but I've just had a brain-wave—by Jove I have—I'll present the old bitch with a new evening dress—which I'll have specially made so that she won't be able to hide anything inside it."

The detective gave the Duke of Bluddisdon some elementary instructions in the mechanical use of the Quisto-box. And what was of equal importance some very special directions as to how to coax the conversation into the required channel.

Everything worked out according to Germanic plan.

With one slight exception, however.

For Celia Jones insisted on the little dinner at which they were to discuss matters taking place at Flaridge's! You mustn't, of course, do her the injustice of thinking that she was a mere snob. Not a bit of it. She merely calculated, and after all you know wouldn't you have calculated the same way, if you had been in the golden shoes of Celia Jones, that this particular atmosphere of respectable aristocracy would emphasize effectively to Bluddisdon the advisability of yielding to her financial terms.

"Flaridge's—this is really a bit too thick," spluttered Bluddisdon, as he reported progress to the detective.

"Go right ahead," ordered the detective; "you have no time for fine social shades."

And Bluddisdon went right ahead.

Opposite him at the little table, surrounded by a miscellaneous assortment of members of the stodgy aristocracy and a few third-rate royalties, sat the creamy pulpy mass with the high blonde coiffure and the white lax face. In the right-hand pocket of his dinner jacket nestled Quisto. And very brightly indeed this evening did old Quisto function. Never had he been in more illuminating form. Bluddisdon, of course, following the instructions of Harry Smith, pursued a vein of the most breezy badinage. Brazen impertinence flung point-blank at his companion with the aplomb of a cheeky schoolboy.

"My dear old bitch," rattled his Lordship, as the second bottle of Bollinger foamed gaily into the glasses, "do you know it was the merest toss-up in the whole world whether I paid up like a man—or shot you dead like a superman. By-the-by, do you do much in the murder line?"

"Don't be funny, Bluddisdon," said the queen of the export trade. But the observation of Quisto-box was ("Of course he can't really *know*—a little bit tight—and simply bluffing").

"Many a true word is spoken in jest—don't you know," pursued his Lordship in his most rollicking manner. Miss Jones turned the conversation on to the admirable quality of the champagne. But Quisto-box pursued his comments ("He can't possibly know about that wretched old woman—it was three years ago anyway").

But the tongue of the Duke of Bluddisdon proceeded to get just as tight as he was permitted by the austere traditions of this noble hostelry. But his brain was as clear and his nerve as taut as when he had led his

men over the front in the Ypres salient in the prehistoric days of the war.

Over the coffee and the liqueurs he became positively affectionate. "My dear Celia—we're good pals, aren't we—well, some day you must be a sport and show me your—what do you call them—archives, dossiers; you know what I mean—all the hot stuff about everybody—I'm entitled to it morally, don't you know."

"Not Pygmalion likely," said Celia Jones, who had a snobbish objection to using in Flaridge's the actual good old English word.

"I'm not joking, my dear woman," hiccoughed the Duke. "You ought to show me them, to-night, wherever you keep them. How do I know you haven't got photographs of all the letters you're giving me back."

"On the level, my dear," said the slimy, creamy voice.

But Quisto-box vibrated ("The photograph and everything else will remain tucked away inside the divan").

The Duke of Bluddisdon gallantly escorted Celia Jones to the door of her extremely respectable flat in Wimpole Street.

So far as the payment of the four thousand pounds was concerned, he made an appointment with the good woman, at the highly respectable flat for the following day.

He did not keep the appointment.

But lest the good woman should be disappointed, the appointment was kept by two Scotland Yard officials and Harry Smith, and these persons had with them not only a search warrant, but a few tools for the purpose of breaking open refractory locks.

And in the divan they duly found what the Duke had accurately designated as all the hot stuff about everybody.

Everybody, mind you.

And of course also hot stuff about a few nobodies. But, in organizing the prosecution, which resulted in Celia Jones being sentenced to the moderate allowance of fifteen years' penal servitude, the authorities were extremely tactful. For they merely selected as the instances on which the prosecution was based those cases which involved the merest nobodies, such as a couple of provincial clergymen and a disgruntled army colonel. So everybody—viz., three millionaires with Colonial pasts, ten war profiteers, half a dozen prominent actors, two Cabinet Ministers, one wife of an ex-Cabinet Minister, one celebrated artist, one Colonial Cabinet Minister and his bosom friend and contractor, one archdeacon, ten Members of Parliament, and a few Society beauties and miscellaneous peers of the realm—was perfectly happy and enabled to resume with a clear conscience the crooked tenor of their ways.

XXII

The Quistocracy

AS the weeks went by, as we have seen, the results continued to exceed the most sanguine financial expectations.

America had sat up and taken nourishment of over three hundred Quisto-boxes within a few weeks.

Financial magnates, of course, one or two promoters of new religions, the head of Tammany, some scientific criminals, Mrs. Hotchkiss, the Christian Science emissary, the Universities of Columbia, Princetown, Chicago, editors, doctors, government officials, bootleggers, prohibitionists, detectives, attorneys, lobbymen.

France purchased a somewhat larger quantity, with the result that she immediately produced an unusually good crop of those politico-financial scandals in which she had always so successfully specialized. In Germany the use of these machines was prohibited except by State officials or the holders of special licence.

Spain and Portugal purchased scarcely any.

In Italy the machine had quite a vogue.

About a dozen more were distributed amongst the financiers, the big northern industrialists, the Fascisti, The Camorra, the Mafia, and those remaining Socialists who had not yet been killed off by the Fascisti.

Marinetti and Gabriele d'Annunzio both wrote competing poems on the Quisto-box and both they and Mussolini were each presented with a machine by public subscription.

Bolshevist Russia bought half a dozen, which she paid for handsomely in Tsarist jewels, which were retained by Zaffrouli for his private collection, against of course a proportionate payment to the account of the firm.

About a dozen more or less found their way into the miscellaneous mushroom states that encumber the economy of Central Europe. Kemal Pasha was presented with one by one of his devoted French admirers. A few found their way to the vague and gigantic East. The Japanese Government cabled to its Ambassador to purchase twenty forthwith. With a few exceptions, the British Colonies exhibited towards the dynamic novelty the complete apathy of extremely healthy Philistines.

The League of Nations purchased one only out of its alter an extremely limited budget, at the instigation of the highly imaginative Secretary of the Sub-Committee for the suppression of the White Slave Traffic.

He had the impudence and common sense to suggest that it should be utilized by the permanent Secretariat against the permanent Council of the League.

The Secretary rebuked with grave correctitude this plump and monocled official for even insinuating that the motives actuating the members of the Council were any other motives than those of a detached and rarefied humanitarianism, immediately commissioned him to buy one, and gave him forthwith a contract for twenty-eight years' service. Which was after all a

much more staple proposition than a contract of permanent employment in any of His Majesty's Colonies, Dependencies, or Protectorates.

Even during this preliminary phase of the new development the effects of the Quisto-box on the life of civilization were already marked.

So far as politics were concerned, the possession of the machine was a morbid stimulus to intrigue. But the machine would frequently be found among the opponents of the very politician who was launching the intrigue. So intrigues flourished and intrigues failed on a more intensive scale than had ever been known before in the history of mankind.

And the Press, too, complicated matters so abominably. All the papers had their Telbrain column.

From the *Daily Blare*, with its Tory Democratic Protectionist Free-Trade Imperialist Pacifist but above all *Daily Blare* policy, right down to the proletarian rankness of the *Daily Helot*. Ordinary interviews began to be looked upon as absolutely *démodé*. The aim of up-to-date journalism was now simply to telbrain the victim of its interest.

Unnoticed emissaries began to dog public men on all likely and unlikely occasions.

THE P.M. TELBRAINED

PLOT TO DISH COLLEAGUES

GRAVE NATIONAL CRISIS

In this wise blared the *Daily Blare* on a certain historic occasion.

But the riposte was not long in coming.

THE YELLOWNESS OF LORD YELLOWHAM
INTRIGUE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT
SPECIAL TELVIEW

So countered that tame but not entirely ineffective organ of the Prime Minister, the *Daily Barnacle*.

The result was that while occasionally one witnessed sensational scores and crashes, particularly in France, where Ministries collapsed and were formed every few days, there ensued as often as not a series of extremely melodramatic stalemates.

Social life of course became increasingly dangerous. Some of the prudent politicians thought it advisable to attempt to live in an almost monastic seclusion.

But what use after all was this, when one was liable to have this wretched machination of the Devil actually directed at one in the still slightly august though indisputably cheapened atmosphere of the House of Commons itself?

> "Are not the Honourable Member's real thoughts the diametrical opposite of the official answer which he has just given?"

was one of the impertinences actually put at question time to a most respectable Minister reading off the ordinary Departmental shuffle. Fortunately the Speaker disallowed the question. But the damage had already been done. And the interrogator had been put on to a clue, which, when followed up, as of course it was, with both malice and precision, led automatically to a crushing and complete exposé of the ordinary Departmental shuffle.

Foreign policy of course became increasingly difficult. Secret diplomacy grew not merely open, but positively notorious. And as for international negotiations, why,

the thing was a farce. What use was it for both sides to employ as their ambassadors the most adroit and experienced masters of chicancery and finesse when each one had mathematically photographed the exact bed-rock minimum of the other side's demands?

Social Psychology of course made giant strides. That waggish but sincere investigator, Dr. Wickens, of Oxford, was enabled to take many pleasant trips of exploration into contemporary sociology. One remembers, of course, vividly the intense indignation aroused in ecclesiastical circles by the publication in the *Fortnightly Review* of that diabolical article so placidly entitled:

"CENSUS OF THE SOULS OF A HUNDRED RANDOM CLERGYMEN."

What wonder forsooth if amateurs recoiled in horror at this statistical record of the amount of agnosticism current amongst actual professional believers? Of whom only a publisher's dozen in a hundred believed in the Trinity (and two of these, mind you, only when adorned with the trimmings of Transubstantiation), twenty in the material historic accuracy of the Resurrection and seven in the material historic accuracy of the Garden of Eden.

But at any rate the Church did what it could, and several wretched individuals, inspired with a perfectly genuine humanitarian fire, were tried for heresy before ecclesiastical tribunals.

The chief witness of course in each case was the ironically gentle and maliciously benevolent Dr. Wickens.

And then of course there was Miss Keystone, the

lecturer in Feminine Psychology at the University of London, that crisp, healthy advocate of moderate but advanced sex.

What a furore indeed of mingled enthusiasm and abomination was created by her article!

"TELEPATHIC NOTES ON SOME MISCELLANEOUS VIRGINS."

One remembers, too, particularly, how numerous objects of the experiments wrote feverish but anonymous letters to the *English Review*, which had both published and boomed the pestilential article, some repudiating but most of them warmly endorsing those surprised nudities of thought which had been so accurately photographed.

Strangely enough, however, orthodox morality was vindicated in the end, in two different but nevertheless convincing ways.

Miss Keystone—after a violent controversy in the Press and numerous questions in the House to the Minister of Education arising out of a motion by Lord Bunkerton to reduce the official grant to the University of London—was duly dismissed from her Chair of Feminine Psychology and almost immediately afterwards duly contracted an apparently perfectly legitimate union with Dr. Wickens before one of the Oxford registrars.

Advanced feminists of course contended that some secret pact existed between these two legal spouses. They may be right. But even so this indefinitely temporary union still flourishes. Nevertheless among the true believers of modernity the offspring of this association still find themselves under as it were the cloud of legitimacy.

America, ahead as she is of the world in the drastic investigation of crime, began at first tentatively and afterwards intensively to apply the Quisto-box.

And with sensationally brilliant results that far surpassed the results of the cruder methods of mere torture.

In those few districts that enjoyed the possession of a Quisto-box the blows, badgerings and starvations of the Third Degree were reserved for the simpler and less important cases. In crimes, however, of real magnitude or celebrity the Quisto-box would be employed with subtlety and perseverance. Conversation —conversation—conversation—that was the stunt.

"Come on, Jack, old boy—did you do it—why, of course you did it—don't you worry—we've got you cold—whether you own up or not, it's all the same—the proofs against you are all O.K.—enough to send you to the chair a dozen times over—isn't that so, Jack—yes—she was a fine girl, wasn't she—a regular peach—you always preferred blondes, didn't you—her photographs are splashed to-day all over the Hearst Press—see how good—brought one specially for you—bad luck, wasn't it, that she should disappear like that —bad luck on her—bad luck on you—you've got no notion where she is—of course not—I don't think—hadn't seen her for a week before—quite so—I don't think—what's that you say—put her in the refrigerator in that deserted house in Wonceville in the Adirondacks and flung the key down the well—now I guess that's really interesting—what's that—you never said any such thing—didn't you, old cock—perhaps you didn't —but your mind did—didn't know you had a speaking mind, did you—civilization's moving a bit these days, you know—well, we'll go on a little exploring expedi-

tion straight away to the Adirondacks—we'll let you know the result, you may be interested—Ta, ta, Jack, old boy—s'long." So finished a consummate artist in the technique of murder, who had not left sufficient evidence behind him to hang even a negro in one of the Southern States.

And yet a further stage in the evolution of the American judicial system was reached when the Quisto-box was used publicly and officially in court in a trial by jury. In the case in question there was not one infinitesimal atom of actual evidence, "so it becomes necessary, ladies and gentlemen of the jury," said the prosecuting attorney, "to employ modern methods," and delivering an impassioned harangue on the accuracy of the Quisto-box, "which photographs a man's mind, ladies and gentlemen, just in the same way as a camera photographs a man's body," he handed to the foreman the divinely infallible machine. "Now, sir, I want you to take the machine in your right hand, go right up to the prisoner in the dock, press with your first finger the little spring in the centre, and simply say, 'Tom Jones, are you guilty or not guilty?' and the mind of Tom Jones will tell you, sir, as clearly as I am speaking these words, whether Tom Jones is guilty or innocent."

The foreman solemnly approached—"Tom Jones, are you guilty or innocent?"

And so did each member of the jury, man or woman, going right up to the prisoner in the dock, pressing with the first finger the little spring in the centre, and clearly, simply, saying, "Tom Jones, are you guilty or innocent."

"*So help me God, I'm innocent,*" answered the tongue of Tom Jones on twelve successive occasions.

"I DONE IT—I DONE IT—I DONE IT," answered the mind of Tom Jones on twelve successive occasions.

Of course the defending attorney had protested and continued to protest against the admissibility of the evidence.

But the State happened to be fantastic, newfangled and extremely progressive.

And the accused man happened to be a negro.

And the crime happened to be the usual crime of which negroes in that part of the world make such an inveterate habit of being accused.

So the evidence was duly allowed, and the negro was duly hanged, and a new epoch in criminal jurisprudence was duly inaugurated in this fantastic, newfangled and extremely progressive State.

Apart moreover from its use in finance, crime, justice, politics and sociology, the Quisto-box tended to be a hobby. A hobby, moreover, that was as subtle as it was sensational and as intellectual as it was absorbing.

Things of course had not yet reached the awful pitch where every man who wished to hold his own had to be the possessor of a Quisto-box.

Besides, at this phase of development, secrecy was of the essence of efficiency.

But one or two enterprising firms which had acquired Quisto-boxes would let them for evening parties, and a few millionaires, paying of course a fabulous deposit as security for the safe return of the article, would hire the machine.

A special evening's entertainment would be given, at which the machine would be handed in turn to the guests.

Though secrecy was, as we have remarked, of the essence of efficiency, secrecy at any rate in England and America was extremely difficult to obtain.

Lists of possessors of telbrains were gibbeted day after day in the special Telbrain Column of the *Daily Blare*. When, therefore, the possessor of a telbrain was anxious to conduct some business operation with some prospective victim, he would sometimes find to his annoyance that the victim objected to being victimized and he, too, had provided himself with a machine. If of course he had the money. And even if he had no telbrain, the victim, still, nevertheless, objecting to being victimized, would be awkward, self-conscious, defensive, suspicious, and generally indisposed to transact business.

As a result of this, gradually but quite logically, a new phase commenced. The possessors of Quisto-boxes began to group together to arrange to be allies instead of enemies, to pool their resources to form themselves into a Trust; to arrange for secret, tried and unsuspected emissaries to use the machine for the benefit of members of this new and unsuspected society.

This process of grouping and consolidating resources sprang up independently and automatically both in England and America, and then in obedience to that economic law which teaches that it is more naturally desirable for tyrannies to consolidate rather than to compel them to compete, there began spontaneously to be tentative approaches for an alliance between the English and American Telbrain groups. This grouping was at the beginning purely financial and

among financiers; but, after all, what are modern politics if not the plays, ramifications and interests of some financial caste?

So tentatively and after much cajoling, but yet, nevertheless, quite as a matter of inevitable economic development, the politicians began to come in also.

So there began gradually to form a new economic caste. Sociologists began to contemplate dividing mankind into those who possessed Quisto-boxes and those who did not. Larger and larger loomed the International Telbrain Society. Lord Yellowham at first instituted on the new society a full-dress attack.

"What guarantee have we that this precious and almost superhuman power will not be used for purposes of the grossest, most selfish exploitation by this gang of private magnates? Is humanity to be at the mercy of a clique?"

"Yes," answered Gabriel Zaffrouli, who was one of the leading members of the new society, as indeed he would have been had he had nothing to do with the flotation of the diabolical toy.

"Yes," continued Zaffrouli, as he placidly put his views before the Committee, "humanity is to be at the mercy of a clique and Lord Yellowham will help us. Why? Because he is really one of us. In these crucial times we plutocrats must and shall stick together. I despair of the nation if we do not develop a real class feeling. Oh, yes, I know he's been a bit irritating in the *Blare*. Obstruction, gentlemen, why does anybody obstruct? Because he wants something. Why do people attack a club? Because they want to be members, committee-men, or something. Make him Chairman of the Club and he'll be as tame as

ditch-water—he won't need so very much keeping in order, he's not so turbulent as his brother."

TEL TRUST RE-ORGANIZED
LORD YELLOWHAM INTERVENES
HUMANITY SAVED

So ran the *Daily Blare* comment on this extremely common-sense piece of diplomacy. Possessors of Quisto-boxes were invited to become members of the Telbrain Society. If they did not comply they would be bullied and blackmailed into compliance by means of the most approved methods of *Daily Blare* technique.

XXIII

Cracking of Civilization

THE more intensive and democratic phase, However, was yet to commence.

Up to the present the engines of clairvoyance had simply been the monopoly of a plutocratic caste.

They were now to be rendered accessible to persons somewhat lower down in the financial hierarchy.

The time for the second stage of the plan had now arrived.

Zaffrouli, Swode and Lalage now set themselves to organize the manufacture of a cheaper and cruder article, a machine not indeed sufficiently sensitive to reproduce all the fine-shades of cerebration, but yet quite adequate to transmit the broad colour of emotion, the substantial gist of thought.

After all, you know, it was impolitic to be too exclusive, and it was only logical now to cater for those who instead of thousands had merely hundreds to expend on the poisoning of their own souls.

And inasmuch as wholesale manufacture demanded bolder methods, the various parts of the machine were produced separately in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, by a carefully selected assortment of the cosmopolitan minions of Zaffrouli.

The parts would be conveyed to England and there assembled by Lalage, Swode and the Ralstons in the isolated house that overlooked the river.

Nor was it difficult to find capitalists only too ready to handle this so new and fashionable line of goods and to realize at the same time that it would be against their own business interests to be unduly curious as to the identity of the vendors.

The number of the wholesalers, however, was limited. One for North America—one for South America—one for the United Kingdom—one for Western Europe—one for Eastern Europe and one for the East.

And then this spiritual plague began in truth to pullulate.

It was not merely a boom but an epidemic.

Something what was at one and the same time a necessity and a luxury, a hobby, a sport, a weapon, a pandering to curiosity; a scientific instrument, and yet, withal so perfectly orthodox, a mania which combined at the same time the perverse fascination of the mystical and the uncanny.

It was indispensable. It was something one positively must have, whether one could afford it or whether one could not afford it.

Women sold their jewels and their cars so as thereby to acquire the wherewithal to purchase this damnable machine.

Individuals who could not buy one separately would club together and purchase a Quisto-box collectively.

The disease spread even among the proletariat. Trades Unions, friendly and benevolent societies, workmen's clubs and associations would similarly hire out to their members the sinister trinket.

And not only did everybody have a Quisto-box, everyone was using it. From the King, who unfortunately turned the wretched truth-finder on to the real thoughts of some redly republican Labour

members who were attending a Court function, to waiters in hotels, ladies'-maids in country houses, jockeys on race-courses. With increasing rapidity humanity became one vast agglomeration of psychological nudities.

In matrimonial and non-matrimonial unions drastic developments were produced.

Sons would suddenly wake to the existence of supplementary but more authentic fathers.

Fathers would find themselves bereft of their still living sons. Passée wives *par excellence* suffered dreadfully.

Particularly in those innumerable cases where the husband, even though as a matter of mere technicality he might by some accident or other just happen to be faithful, was as a matter of the actuality of his desires in a chronic state of the most riotous infidelity.

Some continued lives of acute Strindbergian discord.

Some, forced as they were to find some refuge or other, eloped with little boys in the early twenties.

The more prudently practical, reduced to becoming providers for their husbands, thus succeeded in retaining a certain substantial if slightly stale remnant of conjugal affection.

Orthodox intrigues became almost impossible. Of what avail was the most elaborate machination of secrecy, when, returning home, every paramour would as it were be retrospectively caught in the most specific state of flagrant delight. And even if they still persisted they were nevertheless deprived of a great deal of their intellectual fascination. What forsooth

was the earthly use of all this elaborate plotting when a wife suddenly, turning to her husband, would murmur in tones of the most honeyed felinity: "Now, my dear, remember your appointment this evening at half-past seven, and mind you're punctual—I'd hate to think that you were keeping the poor girl waiting!!!"

Similarly a husband would say to his wife who was going shopping in the West End: "Be sure, darling, to give my regards to Bluddisdon, and what time would you like the car outside his flat in Jermyn Street?"

What wonder consequently if many persons led lives of greater limitation than ever before? Except in isolated cases of the grandest passion extra-nuptial love had ceased to be a romance. It had ceased to be even an intellectual sport. It had degenerated into a dull exhibition of purely mechanical athletics.

But if extra-nuptial desires were thus imprisoned, in this very prison they flourished all the more intensely.

Except consequently in cases of abnormal harmony or of mutual freedom spouses would spend week after week frenziedly watching and recording those automatic movements of the brain which no sense of duty, however noble, no ascetism, however rigid, could ever successfully control.

Skeletons, too, of all kinds came sacrilegiously out of all kinds of cupboards. Important skeletons, rotten with disease and crime—trivial skeletons grinning ridiculously, executing sometimes no end of damage among the fastidious collection of the conjugal crockery.

In a nearly first-rate suburb of Paris dwelt a third-rate Roumanian Jew, who in fourth-rate French successfully attempted to write novels of the fifth category.

And the name of this Jew was IODA.

Marcel d'Ioda.

And this third-rate Roumanian Jew had somehow or other managed to marry a really first-class wife.

Now this really first-rate wife was perfectly sensible. And like the majority of sensible women was addicted to an extremely healthy but at the same time extremely keen curiosity. And many times did her curiosity start wandering in a tour of exploration into the Roumanian past of her *littérateur* husband.

And many times was she refused admission at the frontier of the Roumanian past of this Jew.

And one fell evening with the aid of the Quisto-box she crossed the frontier of this Roumanian past.

And lo and behold the circumcisory name of this Jew was not Marcel d'Ioda, but Judasovitch. Not, mind you, one of that highly respectable Galatz family of Judasovitch. But on the contrary a member of the Bucharest branch, which, as everybody knows, is egregiously shady.

And a nephew into the bargain of Herman Judasovitch, the husband of Martha Judasovitch, the queen of the export trade.

And when the sensible first-class wife found out this interesting piece of history she neither divorced him nor even made a scene, but roared with laughter and fell upon his neck and kissed him even as a mother caressing a truant child.

And she chaffed him about his name. And she

mocked him about his lineage. And when they had swell Catholics to dinner she made embarrassing remarks about Uncle Herman and Aunt Martha.

Thus would she dance with pricking pins upon the open sore of the snobbery complex of that limp and weedy scribbler who purported forsooth to be Marcel d'Ioda. And Moses Judasovitch, *alias* Marcel d'Ioda, went into a decline and a coma.

From which he finally emerged. But his capacity, such as it ever was, seriously diminished in every important department. And now unsuccessfully he attempts in sixth-rate French to write novels of the seventh order.

Stripped from all its formal trappings, hospitality suffered.

"So glad to see you," would say the hostess. "It was really charming of you to come."

"My dear Mrs. Mayfair," would say her guest, "I can't tell you how I've been looking forward to this visit."

("I wouldn't have come to your boring show if I'd had anything better to do—you bet your life") would answer Quisto-box. ("What a cad! How I hate him") would think Mrs. Mayfair. And when as usually happened the guest had his Quisto-box, too, the situation was not merely strained but broken.

Few were the friendships that survived the acid test of the Quisto-box. People at last saw themselves as others saw them. The sight was not merely unpleasant, but in many cases ghastly. The numerous pieces of social treason that had hitherto been perpetrated with impunity beneath the camouflage of the

same social set were now placed neatly docketed and labelled on the bare table of the house of friendship.

Ill-bred boors whose dinners were so good exhibited a growing disinclination to entertain the well-bred cadgers who battened on their board.

"Harry's a good fellow but an awful fool—I've been brought up with him all my life, so I suppose I must go on sticking him," would be Quisto'ed. In point of fact, Harry was both a good fellow and an awful fool.

But awful fool though he was, he was not such an awful fool as to continue maintaining a friendship with a man who thought him one.

And supposing Harry was such an awful fool. Did not his friend, he too, have his Quisto-box? And did not his friend know that Harry knew the awful truth about his views about Harry.

All the charm and sweetness had been extracted from the relationship. All that was left was a morbidly sensitive sore of contempt, indignation, embarrassment and hostility.

"My dear old man."

"My dear old boy."

Jovial chuckles—robustious claps on the back.

But what was the conversation which the Quisto-boxes were tapping out to each other?

"You damned hypocrite—so that's what you think of me, is it?"

"So the old fool's tumbled to it at last, has he—well, I can't help it—he really is such a fool—and if he wants to chuck me, well and good."

And not merely Harry. But Tom and Edward and Jack and Charles and William.

However healthy you might be you had some weak spot. About yourself, like Harry—about your family and the source of your tainted money, like Moses Judasovitch *alias* Marcel d'Ioda—your dress was ridiculous, your appearance was grotesque—you did a big trade in the manipulation of aitches—you wore elastic-sided boots—you were a damned sight too young—you were a damned sight too old—you drank so much as to really lose your dignity—you were so preposterously pious that everybody thought you were a hypocrite.

And people who mocked you—as indeed who could help mocking you for these slight blemishes in your otherwise consummate perfection—were friends of yours, forsooth! Not a bit of it! No longer, you damned impostors. Away with them out of my life. At any rate, there were left the dog and the cat. And they were certainly faithful friends.

For the Quisto-box had not, at any rate as yet, been adjusted to the psychology of animals.

Bores wilted rapidly beneath the intensive use of the Quisto box. Club bores—drawing-room bores—family bores.

"Curse the fellow, I shall move a resolution at the next general meeting for Stick-in-the-mud to be muzzled."

"Oh, why did Jenkins let in this awful person—she must have *known* I never want her to call."

"Oh, why has dear James such awful relations—what an impossible woman—she'll probably stay for three hours—the children are playing Red Indians in the garden—such dears—I wonder if they'd mind tomahawking Cousin Kitty—she could be buried quite nicely in the back garden."

Of what use against these obviously authentic manifestations of fundamental emotions were the banal social formulæ and the set smile of the social mask?

So old Dodderham of the Club ceased from pestering members, returned into the empty husk of his dead self and slept innocuously all day in those extraordinarily comfortable arm-chairs, low massive, capacious, yielding—those most deliciously suave prisons of luxury, which are one of the specialities of the Mixed Grill Club.

And the awful person who had been let in by Jenkins, who in the ordinary way would have stayed on and on and on and on and on for ever and ever and ever and ever and ever, was let out by Jenkins in an astonishingly short space of time.

And Cousin Kitty interrupting her disquisition on the imperative need of reforming the social ethics of the stray cats of London, and smitten with a sudden fear that she might really be tomahawked by those bloodthirsty Red Indians and buried quite nicely in the back garden, left all of a sudden in a grotesque hustle of trepidation.

The Quisto-box dislocated somewhat seriously the delicate organism of family life.

In particular did it aggravate the always sensitive relations between the older and younger generations.

It was all in vain for tactful mothers and sisters, after much exercise of diplomacy, bribery, lobbying and backstairs influence, to bring about the signature of some treaty of peace, or at the worst the well-behaved truce of an armed neutrality. In vain would the half-baked Oxford cub control the retorts that came mechan-

ically to his lips when his bourgeois father would embark on some more than usually ridiculous reactionary platitude. The rebellious contempt that was forbidden exit through the lips found its way into his brain and from his brain into the Quisto-box and from the Quisto-box into the brain of his father.

In vain would the same bourgeois father be persuaded to resign himself to his daughter, clad of course in the semi-dress of the period, performing the whole evening with some nonchalant youth the healthy orgies of the jazz or the fox-trot.

"If you must, my dear—I suppose you must—your mother says it's all right."

But the words that presented themselves at the back of his mind and from there solemnly marched to the front of his mind were crude, unmentionable, specific and thoroughly Anglo-Saxon.

Nor was it to be wondered at that many inheritances went west and that deserving but somewhat impatient relatives were penalized in favour of the most grossly undeserving charities. Never mind the stock of ordinary fortune hunting, it was normal relationships, too, that suffered.

Wealthy persons of sound dying age would sometimes catch even the most affectionate members of their family faintly speculating in stray moments on the precise date of their already overdue demise. And in the petty pique of senility would leave important fortunes to such fantastic enterprises as the "Society for Improving the Morals of the Cats of Chelsea" or the "Association for protecting aborigines from traders, diseases, missionaries, mandates and other evils."

Matrimonial proposals suffered under the crushing handicap.

"I love you passionately," said Edwin to Angelina.

"Darling Edwin," said Angelina.

"I wonder if I shall be able to stick it," said Angelina's Quisto-box, "but hang it all, I must get *someone* to pay my debts."

Politics became more and more impossible.

Not merely all the members of the Cabinet, but all the members of the House of Commons, and not merely all the members of the House of Commons, but all the members of all the Party Committees and all the local caucuses were armed with the abominable weapon. In the political as in the romantic sphere intrigue was reduced to a condition of extreme stalemate.

And intrigue being rendered impossible, what was left of politics? All the adventurers and nominees of private interests were unmasked.

And who was left consequently to carry on? The honest men forsooth?

Not a bit of it. For where here and there one met these rare monstrosities the Quisto-box would reveal some kink, crank or fad that rendered the honest man quite undeserving of the slightest practical confidence.

In England, in particular, people became more and more blasé to the silly game of politics.

Political meetings were deserted for cinemas.

It became abnormal to vote at elections.

The use of the accursed thing grew like the mania that it was. Everybody was using it, and the more

everybody used it the more everybody wanted to use it.

And every thought was known to everybody else; before in many cases it was known to the thinker.

The glamour had been taken off intrigue. Matrimonial love was impossible. Family life was impossible. Civilized life generally was becoming impossible.

Even in Philistine England suicides became as frequent as they were in neurotic Russia.

And as for nervous breakdowns, who could afford a Quisto-box and not feel himself drifting slowly at first but afterwards quicker, quicker, quicker to the whirling rapids of mental chaos? Poor young Moses Judasovitch was not the only case, though possibly one of the most humorous and the most typical.

The lunatic asylums and nursing homes began to overflow. Such doctors and nurses as had not quisto-boxed their nerves till they ran away like fantastic engines over any particular line that took their fancy, made fabulous incomes.

America, with its at once pathetically childlike and coldly businesslike gusto for anything really new and modern, was well in the fashion. In America, moreover, this epidemic of automatic exaggerated truth produced a singularly interesting result.

For while on the one hand it was a morbid stimulus to one national nerve it suppressed another and far more important national nerve from its normal functioning:

BLUFFING BECAME IMPOSSIBLE.

And when bluffing became impossible, life in America became impossible.

It was bad enough in all conscience to be compelled, by the Prohibitionists to drink God's own whisky at the Devil's own prices.

It was worse when the same ethical fanatics and the same big owners of wage-slaves began to threaten tobacco with the same fate.

But by far the worst abyss of mental degradation and agony was reached when the normal functioning of the American ego became automatically inhibited.

The whole of what was now the Devil's own country began to suffer from a suppressed Freudian complex.

And this complex overflowed into the national brain, and the national brain overflowed into the asylums and consulting rooms of the physicians and quacks, or just snapped once and for ever with a crisp, decisive click.

In the East, the Quisto-box had spread last of all. But the drastic interference with the normal lives of the inhabitants was as marked and unpleasant as it had been in America.

INTRIGUE BECAME IMPOSSIBLE.

When out of your natural love and affection you were moved to make a handsome present to the particular official with whom it so happened that you had important business, it was no longer a case of the thing being a *secret de polichinelle*, since, after all, what was it forsooth but the ordinary means by which in accordance with all the best traditions of local etiquette the normally honourable inhabitant of the country contrived to explain his point of view to the normally honourable official?

No, sir, the thing was cold, cut and dried with all the most prosaic and irrelevant details.

Such details forsooth as the actual spoken words in which spontaneous favour delicately ran to welcome spontaneous gratitude.

Such details forsooth as the quantity of the notes

and into whose banking account or barbaric hoard the money went—and that rare old carpet—and that dream of a diamond.

So it actually happened that many officials of quite the normal standard of Eastern honour were discharged.

Discharged forsooth!

Why, they were even prosecuted—not formally and tepidly, but to conviction and imprisonment.

And for what offence?

For the offence forsooth of simply following mechanically the ordinary etiquette of the country.

And even if it so happened that by some fantastic miracle you were abnormal and turned up your æsthetic nose at anything in excess of your modern and insufficient salary, and that your soul hated money and found even gifts an abomination, you would nevertheless, absurdly honest man, as you no doubt were, find it increasingly difficult if not impossible to carry out your duties as a friend with those with whom you happened to have official business. And if you were debarred from carrying out your duties as a friend, from jobbing some inefficient waster into the cosy sinecure of a Government appointment, or exempting some charming plutocrat from some official obligation, what forsooth in the name of all that was holy or unholy was the use of being an official at all?

Everybody now belonged to his Telbrain Club. Sometimes small select clubs taken from one particular layer of our social geology. Sometimes composite clubs—where you could pick out here a

lump of the intelligentsia—there a lump of the bourgeoisie—here a fossil of the aristocracy.

And each member had his Quisto-box in his hand. And everybody was turning it on everybody else.

A confused chaos of intersecting vibrations.

A muddled symposium of "wireless" where everybody used waves of the same length.

Nearly but not quite.

For everybody's thoughts had their own particular idiosyncrasy. And everybody knew the secret thoughts of everybody. And so long as they could thus uncover the nakedness of the minds of their relatives, friends and acquaintances, they were almost though not quite indifferent to the fact of the nakedness of their own mind being publicly, as it were, cinematographed.

It was at some symposium such as this that occurred the awful fate of the Russian Intelligentsia

XXIV

The Awful Fate of the Russian Intelligentsia

THE mental excesses of the Quisto-box reached their nadir in Russia. In Russia of course *par excellence* where morbid psychology is at once the routine duty and the routine pleasure of every self-respecting intellectual.

With the hyperæsthesis of their writhing brains they succeeding in raising the use of the Quisto-box to the *n*th degree.

In the hands of sensitives not merely the conscious thoughts but the sub-conscious could be flashed into the green glare of the cerebral limelight.

And one fell day Vladimir Aximanoff succeeded in using it against himself.

And this is what Vladimir Aximanoff found out, as, striding feverishly about that high narrow room on the top storey of that high house overlooking the Neva, the "I" of Vladimir Aximanoff turned the little machine on to the "me" of Vladimir Aximanoff.

"What are you thinking of, Vladimir Aximanoff?"

"What am I thinking of, little brother? Why I am thinking of my own morbidity—of how I, the greatest writer in the world, am yet inferior to everybody else."

"Why, O thou real spirit of Vladimir Aximanoff, do you keep on thinking of your own morbidity?"

"First of all, O little brother, because I am so

thoroughly morbid and secondly because as a matter of philosophic truth there is nothing more interesting than my morbidity in the whole wide world."

"Pull yourself together, Vladimir Aximanoff—try not to be so self-conscious."

And the Me of Vladimir Aximanoff did pull itself together and did in fact make a tense heroic effort not to be so self-conscious.

But the more self-consciously the ego of Vladimir Aximanoff struggled not to be so self-conscious, the more self-conscious did the ego of Vladimir Aximanoff in fact become.

For when—in order of course to see how the secondary self of Vladimir Aximanoff was progressing in this so morbid struggle for psychological health, the primary self of Vladimir Aximanoff turned the Quisto-box on to the secondary self of Vladimir Aximanoff, it was regaled with the awful yet somehow highly fascinating spectacle of the secondary self of Vladimir Aximanoff being self-conscious that instead of being, as it should have been, straightaway square and flush with objective reality, it was on the contrary watching the third self of Vladimir Aximanoff being self-conscious that Vladimir Aximanoff was most ridiculously subjective, and so on and so on through an infinite series of mirrors that kept reflecting one upon the other the grimaces of the mad self keeping watch upon its own madder self. And then as the observing self of Vladimir Aximanoff used upon the observed self of Vladimir Aximanoff with a greater and greater precision this deft engine of introspective torture, he became conscious that the observed self was splitting into a thousand other selves and each of these selves was fighting one with another and they too were splitting into yet smaller

selves and these smaller selves also were fighting with one another.

And there was a bit of newfangled ethics—and there was a bit of atavistic lust—and there was a bit of rationalism—and there was a flowing fire of love for the most marvellous woman in the world—and there was a hissing torrent of hate for that same most marvellous woman in the whole world—and there was comradely affection for his best friend—and there was ironic contempt for his best friend—and there was a wild mystical passion for the redemption of humanity—and there was a narrow water-tight and absolutely self-contained compartment of callous egoism that was content to let not merely the international proletariat but the whole of the silly population of the whole of this boring world go headlong to a million devils if only He, HE, HE, Vladimir Aximanoff, the most important man in the whole cosmos, could somehow attain to a good digestion and a healthy mind—enjoy plenty of coal, food, clothes and a good bed withal whereon to sleep in solitude of nights. And the observer self of Vladimir Aximanoff was sick of the spectacle of the infinite series of split and observed selves all warring with each other, wounding, killing, playing tricks by all manner of devices, fair and foul.

And the self was in point of fact so sick at the spectacle that it threw away the Quisto-box in digust.

But somehow or other the Quisto-box found its way back into his hand.

And he went on watching the spectacle of the infinite slaughter of the infinite mangled selves that somehow on being killed only assumed some other form till his self was on the very point of vomiting out its own existence in the ecstasy of his horror.

But instead of the self of Vladimir Aximanoff follow-

ing this extremely sensible impulse, it allowed itself somehow or other to be washed back again on to the jagged rocks of life by a new cerebral wave.

And then sitting uncomfortably on the jagged rocks of life, he wrote with his stylographic pen on the little bloc-notes which he always made a point of carrying inside his waistcoat pocket, the greatest and most morbid poem in the whole world on the phantasmagoria of his own self.

And he flattered himself that he had more selves than anybody else. And that he had split each of these selves into finer and more minute atoms.

And in these self-flatteries he found—though only for a time—considerable relief.

So much then for the deepest and most subjective ego in the whole of the Russian Intelligentsia.

And how about the shallowest ego in the whole of the Russian Intelligentsia?

Now the shallowest ego in the whole of the Russian Intelligentsia was Zoya Vassilitzky.*

This so admirably decorative young woman had crisp black Bolshevistic hair and the face of a young white sorceress. And the perpetual hobby of this so admirably decorative young woman was to be a sphinx. A mystery that no one could solve.

Not even herself.

But when the Quisto-box came into vogue the thought came to her that now at last she would try and solve this insoluble mystery.

So she turned the Quisto-box upon her own self.

* Cf. the author's Final Solution of the Sphinx, published in the *English Review*, January, 1921.

And lo and behold there was no mystery at all. But merely an admirably decorative young woman dancing *a pas seul* before the circular mirror of her own vanity.

An admirably decorative young woman who put on the pose of mystery just as she would put on a dress of the latest fashion.

An admirably decorative young woman who felt acutely insulted if every man in the whole room was not consumed to the last fibre of his soul by a vehement but hopeless passion for her own decorative self, and an intense but impossible desire to solve the insoluble mystery of her own so decorative self.

And when she found out the awful truth about herself she fell back upon the chaise-longue on which she had hitherto been so gracefully lounging in a paroxysm of rage so genuine that for the moment it actually forgot to be graceful.

Which did not matter very much.

For after all, nobody was looking.

And then for two hours she had an attack of nerves.

And then looking for herself again in the circular mirror of her own vanity she saw that she looked awful.

And that her yellow Rachel powder did not quite suit the exaggerated pallor of her face.

So she rallied with great haste.

And surveyed her own soul in the circular mirror of her own vanity.

And lo and behold she saw once again the insoluble mystery of an admirably decorative sphinx.

And she preferred the vision given back by the circular mirror of her own soul to the monstrous perversion of her self that had emanated from the Quisto-box.

So in a fit of pique she tossed out of the window that churlish, ungallant and positively brutal Quisto-box.

But throughout the whole of the Russian Intelligéntsia went on pullulating the mental horror.

Until they could stand it no longer.

And when they could stand it no longer they had a mass meeting. This mass meeting had been prohibited by the Soviet Government. But now the rigid discipline of the Soviet Government had been disintegrated by this universal cerebral disease.

So all the Intelligentsia came to a certain hall in Moscow, from all the innumerable quarters of the curtailed but still infinite giantess of a country.

All the novelists, all the dramatists, all the journalists, all the doctors, all the school teachers, all the professors, all the students, all the Government officials, all the veterinary surgeons.

And in his capacity as the most morbid man in this vast conglomeration Vladimir Aximanoff was unanimously voted to the chair.

The meeting was conducted in sepulchral silence.

But incessantly nevertheless went on the chatter of the Quisto-boxes of each member.

And a premonition of something drastic and final filled the smoke-infested air.

And beneath the magnetism of this premonition and the mutual magnetism of the thousands of mutually intersecting Quisto-boxes thousands of Freudian complexes sprang from their dungeons immediately to the front of thousands of whirring brains.

Brains whirring, whirring, as they had never whirred before, functioning, functioning, functioning as they had never functioned before, letting loose upon themselves all the hordes of beasts and devils from all the dungeons and from all the caves.

And when all these Freudian complexes were intro-

duced to each other by all these thousands of Quisto-boxes for the time being they were mightily glad.

And the complexes sang together and danced together weird and contorted dances of the brain and competed with one another in the extravagance of their respective morbidities.

"You, too, O little brother, are an egomaniac—I congratulate you; but I am ten times more of an egomaniac than you."

"Melancholia, little sister, what do you know about melancholia—nonsense, I tell you, nonsense, nonsense, nonsense, nonsense—what you flatter yourself is real melancholia is the reddest *joie de vivre* compared to the black thick swamp in which I am sinking, sinking, sinking."

"Introspection, my dear boy, comparatively, possibly, comparatively—but compared to me you're really as objective as the most well-balanced pig in the world rolling comfortably in the mud—ten degrees of self-consciousness did you say—with egos jumping out of each other like Christmas puzzles—pooh, pooh, pooh—what use are you, to be sure? I have twenty degrees of self-consciousness with all my egos neatly arranged as in army formation on the parade ground."

"And I, my poor dear healthy little children, have thirty degrees of self-consciousness," shrilled the thin falsetto waves of the Quisto-box of Vladimir Aximanoff.

"Live for Ideal Humanity," bellowed in unison the Quisto-boxes of some faithful emissaries of the Soviet Government.

"Live for Ideal Humanity be damned," boomed indignantly all the other Quisto-boxes. "We've all got

bourgeois complexes—WE'VE all got bourgeois complexes."

The ghastly truth of a universal thought thrilled like a chorus throughout the room.

"WE'VE ALL GOT BOURGEOIS COMPLEXES—WE'VE ALL GOT BOURGEOIS COMPLEXES."

"WE ALL KNOW WE'RE FRAUDS—WE ALL KNOW WE'RE FRAUDS."

And then from the brain of Vladimir Aximanoff began to emanate the ironic curve of a query.

And the ironic curve of this query was picked up by other brains until it invaded the brain of everybody in the room.

And the query after all was merely this: "What on earth's to happen next? WHAT ON EARTH'S TO HAPPEN NEXT?"

And unanimously came back the silent answer: "We can't get back to healthiness because we're Russian Intelligentsia; and on the other hand we can't get any more morbid than we already are. Alas, alas, alas, for we've reached the blank wall of life—the final cul-de-sac."

And then slowly, silently, insidiously from the Quisto-box of Vladimir Aximanoff permeated the message of redemption:

"Oh, my little brothers and sisters, why not cross the blank wall of life and break through with your broken wills the final cul-de-sac?"

And so did it happen that the instinct of self-preservation manifested itself in the mask of the instinct of self-destruction, and with complete logic into the bargain. For is not the instinct of self-preservation to

" Kill the enemy," and was not in this case the enemy the self ?

And the good old lust of killing leaped up out of its den to provide the red trimmings of fun and ecstasy to this sordid physical operation.

And some with revolvers, and some with knives, and some with merely the frenzied clutch of hands on frenzied throats went on, and on, and on helping their little brothers and sisters to cross the blank wall of life.

And the further they progressed in this humanitarian task the more simple did this humanitarian task become.

So that finally the survivors were able to minister to their own selves.

In this wise did the Russian Intelligentsia break through with its broken will the final cul-de-sac.

XXV

The Sous Quatre Yeux Tea-Rooms

"I WILL meet you outside Lancaster Gate Church at four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, I shall be wearing a green hat, a black beard and a pink buttonhole."

Lalage Marne scanned with interest this application for an interview. The sales were booming. Greater and greater caution was being exercised. The hue and cry after the mysterious promoters of the machines was becoming more and more intense. But the colour-scheme intrigued the young woman. The man who had written it must be rather a superior kind of wag. And she confessed to a weakness for rather a superior kind of a wag.

So she kept the assignation.

She was the only person outside Lancaster Gate Church. An absurd place, really—even for a non-romantic assignation. One was so conspicuous. One felt such a fool too when nobody wearing anything even approaching a green hat, a pink buttonhole and a black beard presented himself. She actually waited ten minutes beyond the stipulated time. But there was still no sign of the green, pink and black. So in high dudgeon she was reduced to working off her baulked excitement by walking with that raking athletic stride of hers all the way back to her old flat in Camden Town.

She had never felt so thoroughly bored in her life.

For she had always so enjoyed the emotional tension of a new purchaser. The ironic joy of turning the Quisto-box on the purchaser during the negotiations. The thrill of ascertaining, and of course it sometimes happened that the purchaser was curious, anxious to follow her, to track her down, to discover her identity, to win the *Daily Blare* reward of ten thousand pounds. But this time, damn it all, there was really nothing doing.

A few days afterwards, however, she had her new sensation. Swode turned up at her flat when she was having breakfast. The journalist was exceedingly perturbed.

"The situation is extremely critical—look at this—A letter from Mr. Ralston."

"DEAR SIR,

I beg to inform you that on the nineteenth of the month, viz., yesterday, Mrs. Ralston was followed to her home from the newspaper office. Since then both she and me are always watched. She has taken to her bed. I got up in the middle of the night and walked by devious turnings in case I should be spied on, all the way to the G.P.O., where I posted this. Please sir, what shall me and Mrs. R. do? My asth— is much worse. I seem to have caught a cold on the way to the G.P.O. Hoping this finds you as it leaves me, and with kind regards from Mrs. R.,

I am,

Yours respectfully,

CHARLES RALSTON."

Lalage Marne whistled merrily.

"Dont be so flippant," said her fiancé, "it's serious."

"My dear man, that's precisely why I'm whistling."

"Zaffrouli's away and won't be back for another week."

"Well, then, we must deal with the matter ourselves. It was George Moore, wasn't it, who said that women must be dressed if only for the pleasure of undressing them. Well, on the same principle, situations should be knotty if only for the pleasure of undoing them."

In one hour the knot had been undone. And so it came about that a thousand-pound note was despatched by registered post to Mr. and Mrs. Ralston, who, without being allowed even the time to buy travelling trunks or clothes, were suddenly whisked off on a grand tour round the world. When after a year they came back Mr. Ralston had been permanently cured not merely of his asthmatic but also of his Radical tendencies.

A few days afterwards Lalage Marne had an adventure; a real adventure of the kind that delighted her soul. It started off, of course, in a thoroughly banal manner. While inspecting the hats in Louise's in Regent Street, she realized that she had aroused the personal interest of a heavily-dressed masher of the most approved Ethel Dell pattern. Under these circumstances, she adopted her usual tactics. She walked on, stopped significantly, and then just at the very second when the heavy masher was on the verge of acquiring her social acquaintance, she resumed the even tenor of her mid-Victorian way. And so she continued right up the Tottenham Court Road. A deliberately alternative policy of glad eyes and frozen

frowns, a deliberately alternative policy of splendid isolation and of unprotected loneliness anxious to be protected.

Suddenly when she and her attendant had almost reached the Mornington Crescent Tube, executing a brisk right-about-turn she sailed right down upon him.

"Look here, my good man, are you going to pick me up, or shall I have to give you in charge for insulting conduct?"

"Deliguted to meet you, I'm sure," said the heavy masher somewhat clumsily.

As they walked down towards Oxford Street, the conversation sagged, as is normal in the first few minutes after an impromptu social acquaintance.

Then hailing a taxi, Lalage Marne instructed the chauffeur to drive to the Sous Quatre Yeux Tea-Rooms. While in the taxi-cab the young woman was on her best behaviour.

"No rough-housing please, at this stage of the proceedings," she remarked with asperity. They went into the tea-rooms, selected an alcove and ordered tea and liqueurs.

A new phase commenced.

The girl, with a switch of her will, pulled herself if only for a few minutes out of that cinema-like effect of a new adventure, when life rushed by like a rail... train, and impressions succeeded each other so swiftly that one had no time to take stock. She turned the Quisto-box on the heavy masher. His tongue was saying something about what a cosy place the Sous Quatre Yeux Tea-Rooms really was. But His Majesty the Quisto-box was saying ("It's going quite all right—she doesn't suspect a thing—I'll turn the machine on her in one minute")

Quisto-box had met Quisto-box.

But for a moment at any rate Lalage Marne had the tactical advantage. For her machine had started first to function. She decided, of course, to retain this tactical advantage. For suddenly accommodating herself to the ethics of the Sous Quatre Yeux Tea-Rooms, she kept pressing the spring of the Quisto-box with one hand while with the other she pressed with the tenderest affection the hand which the heavy masher was on the point of moving to the right-hand pocket of his jacket.

"Do you know, I think you're rather nice," she murmured sweetly.

"Before very long, you'll know for a fact that I'm very nice," replied the heavy masher.

But the answer of Quisto-box was "Hang the girl—why won't she let go of my hand?"

But Lalage went on, just for all the world like a soppy schoolgirl who had never in all the afternoons of her young life been to a tea room of this extremely stereotyped description.

"What a magnetic hand you've got. Do you believe in physical magnetism? Do you know I could go on like this for ever and ever and ever?"

And possessed as she was of the most complete self-control, she switched on the full voltage of her own physical magnetism. Mechanically, and against his will, the heavy masher found himself responding. His hand ceased to make its tentatively courteous efforts to escape. "My dear little girl," he whispered. But Quisto-box elucidated this banal phrase.

("By Jove, how ripping she looks, far prettier than when she first sold me the machine in the British Museum—prettier even than when I let her down outside Lancaster Gate Church.")

For a moment even the steel springs of the brain of Lalage Marne recoiled from the shock as the solution leapt upon her nerves. She remembered the purchaser in the British Museum. Differently dressed, clean-shaven, almost bald. But the moustache was detachable, and the carefully-parted hair—why, it was a wig. And the assignation outside Lancaster Gate Church—why, of course, it was a plant.

In her excitement she withdrew her passionate clutch in order to drain her Benedictine.

The hand of the heavy masher flew to his right-hand pocket.

The hand of the young woman flew to her right-hand pocket.

Quisto-box had met Quisto-box.

But this time on the level. With equal pegging and at equal tilt.

The artificial conversation was suspended.

But in the silence of this silly alcove in these silly tea rooms their brains were active thinking, and even as they thought automatically—willy-nilly speaking.

(" She's found me out.")

(" He's found out that I've found him out.")

(" Well, I've got your name and address, anyway.")

(" How can you prove it ? I'll destroy every trace.")

(" I'll find out, never you fear, if I have to abandon every other piece of business and turn all my office staff on to it—now I wonder where she keeps the stock—in the flat ? ")

(" I'll control my thoughts and won't even think of it—think of this damned scoundrel instead—no, he's not a bit attractive—probably a philistine in anything outside his profession—a sordid detective just out for cash.")

("That's not fair, damn you—I make a real hobby of criminology.")

Suddenly Lalage Marne pressed the knob of the hand-bell that lay upon the table. Tactfully separating the curtains the waitress duly appeared. "The bill, please," snapped out Lalage Marne, while the detective looked dumbfounded and embarrassed.

While the waitress was scribbling, and the detective was paying, Lalage Marne casually and yet swiftly ran up the steps of the basement into a fortunately ready taxi which she took to the Piccadilly Tube.

Thirty seconds later she was inside a telephone box.

A minute later she was connected with Swode's chambers. "Look here—we leave for Berlin to-night—damn your case to-morrow—let him hang—no, I'm not joking—the situation's serious—hugely serious—old Q's in danger—yes, the night train from Liverpool Street—no, Paris is too obvious—no, you silly ass, I'm not going home—yes, I'm all right—had the most exciting day in my life—yes, quite as good as Yunkaria—no, I shall not go to my club—I'll just feed among the lower bourgeoisie at the Popular Café—Cheerio—so long, old man."

XXVI

Valuta

THE smooth brownish red of the Proletariat Theatre of Berlin adequately symbolized the humble arrogance of its name.

The red, of course, of social revolution; but toned and modified almost to the point of austerity. Compactness and yet spaciousness. No plutocratic luxury; but the simple solid freedom and abundance of the seating was a reserved if not indeed formidable manifestation of the divine right of Demos to be as comfortable as he jolly well chose within his own home. Inlet in the smooth red of the burnished walls were boxes. Had not Demos forsooth as well as Plutus his right to boxes. Everywhere the perfection of order. No grimy workmen with pipes and beer but sober men and women soberly attired.

But not even the most popular demagogue could afford to-night to be sitting in the box of Liberty. Merely one Lucian Swode, a certain lawyer, and a certain student of psychology, one Lalage Marne, who had but a few hours ago arrived in Berlin.

"I say, how much did the box cost?" she whispered after the aged attendant had placed their hats and coats in the private lobby, received from Swode an amount in local currency equivalent to a shilling, but which was yet sufficient to keep him and his family for a week, and had withdrawn with dignity after the ex-

pression of thanks, which though intense and amazed, were yet destitute of all servility.

"About two shillings approximately."

"How awful," said the girl, "it's not fair—it seems to be robbery."

"It is," said Swode, "but you can salve your conscience with the thought that it all helps to pay the Reparations Fund."

In the oblong pit beneath the stage the orchestra began to tune up. There they were twenty or thirty of them—men, women, youths, girls all fully equipped with temperaments, nerves, complexes, philosophies, *Weltanschauungen*, musical educations and technique, petty or large ambitions and desires; the composers of unwritten operas, the dignified galley-slaves of music, only too glad to be the honoured artisans of music at a wage approximately equal to five English shillings per week.

The conductor pressed an electric button.

The two halves of the curtain obediently pulled themselves asunder.

No actual scenery, but something more than scenery. The atmosphere which scenery should create, the associations which scenery should suggest; this atmosphere and these associations were somehow there, present in full power and force, intoxicating the emotions, opening the doors of the imagination, playing uncanny tricks with the egos of the spectators.

Black curtains encircled a vastness. In the centre a woman in a simple gown of light blue with hands flung horizontal to either side, each firmly grasped in that of a workman. And on this incarnate trinity of comradeship fell focused the mystic concentrated light.

And then the journalist and the girl student were

drawn into the country of imagination which yet communicated somehow and by a variety of channels with the land of Reality.

"The Valuta—what a sweet name," murmured the journalist's companion as they raced together in the *entr'acte* over the leaves of the German text of the play that lay before them on the ledge of the box.

"Restrain yourself, my dear," whispered the journalist as the curtain went up.

Scene succeeded scene in this intense and yet somehow logical phantasmagoria. All the phantasy of the Germanic imagination armed cap-à-pie with the Sadic wit of Simplicissimus.

There was the Reparations Commission feeding a fettered Germania forcibly with paper. There two grotesque bankers, sometimes on the steps of the Bourse, sometimes jumping up from beneath like a pair of sardonic jack-in-the-boxes, offered devout prayers to the liebe Gott and the Reparations Commission, while from his high stool on his pillar the harsh metallic voice of the recording clerk snapped out, "Ich notiere, ich notiere." There Poincaré held an uncomfortable midnight levée at which the solitary courtier was the ghost of Northcliffe, holding in his hands his bleeding megalomaniac head.

"Turn the Quisto-box on the audience," whispered Swode in one of the *entr'actes*.

"Wait a bit—I'm excited—I want to watch—don't interrupt," hissed Lalage.

From round dim circles emanated rhythmic words. The new song of Germany. The song of the Will. Fiery steel beaten into words and music, and then slowly, slowly loomed clearer, clearer the dim round circles, till they became living men, women and children

massed together on a black scale of steps. And as they chanted their song of Will, the Secretary of the Reparations Commission from some eminence began bombarding them with milliards, and milliards of paper notes. The crowd-mass made heroic efforts to absorb it, to get rid of it through the numerous doors round the stage, but the faster they got rid of it, the faster fell that thin sinister shower, milliard on milliard relentlessly, systematically, for ever and ever, till the whole crowd-mass struggling frantically and abortively perished in the white and all-embracing smother, and German "Schiebers" (with their property invested under the cloak of suitable nominees in American dollars, Swiss francs, English sterling), and French chauvinists executed a triumphant can-can round the litter and the wreckage; and the French franc came in made up like a cocotte, and a perverse and dangerous one at that, and made professional overtures to the American Dollar who, however, indignantly rejected her, drawling impatiently, "Nothing doing, thank you, you're rotten, rotten to the core. The only thing you can propagate on any scale is lies, and in a few months you too shall go the way of the mark."

"Isn't it positively marvellous?" said Lalage, clutching her companion's arm out of sheer æsthetic excitement.

"Undisciplined imagination, violence, and extravagance—that's all there is to it," said Swode petulantly, "but for heaven's sake turn the Quisto-box on to the crowd—now, now—now while the emotion's hot and before it has time to cool. I at any rate have certainly not come here as a dramatic critic - now, now, now—while the emotion is uniform, before it has time to get individualized."

As Lalage pressed the spring the vibrations began tingling with such volume and intensity that at first they were difficult of comprehension. Then from every person in the hall, from all the soberly dressed audience, swam into her brain the torrent of this one emotion: WE WILL, WE WILL, WE WILL. WHETHER WE CAN OR WHETHER WE CANNOT—WHETHER WE SUCCEED OR WHETHER WE FAIL; IN EITHER CASE WE WILL—WE WILL—WE WILL.

As they went out into the buffet to get some refreshments Lalage communicated to Swode the message of the Quisto-box.

But with the implicit faith in the firm infallibility of the Quisto-box, and actuated also, as they subsequently remembered, by a disinterested desire to support the Reparations Fund, they just purchased in the course of their strolls about Berlin a gallery-full of Expressionist pictures, six tailor-made dresses, ten lounge suits, twenty pairs of silk stockings, a couple of castles (with ancestors, feudal retainers and potential Jacquerie all complete), nine delicious pairs of grey suède shoes, a motor car or two, three dozen evening shirts, three travelling trunks, a hundredweight of cigars, a set of silver monogrammed hair-brushes, a block of flats in Moabit, two dozen kid gloves, a raglan, an opera cloak (male), and opera cloak (female), two walking-sticks de luxe, a library full of modern German books (together with a villa in which to store it), a few statues by Herzog, unlimited underwear, half a dozen factories, and a few odd blouses, cafés and coal mines.

In view of the excellent quality of all these goods the actual price was really quite negligible.

XXVII

The Unreadable Cypher

Oi ai lada oia ssisialu
Ensudio tresa sudio mischummni
Ia lon stuaz
Brorr schjatt
Oi a zo tsingulu
Ua sisa masuo tulu
Ua sisa maschiato toro
Oi sengu gadse andola
Oi ando sengu
Sengu andola
Oi sengu
Gadse
Ina
Lewla
Kbao
Sagor
Kado

This was the bizarre concatenation of vowels and consonants that met the eyes of Swode as he waited for his breakfast in the massive sitting-room of his suite in the Adlon Hotel. Neatly typed on a plain sheet of paper. The message must have arrived last night, and Lalage, admirable secretary as she was, must have typed it out for him. A language? Apparently, for you could pronounce each word, some with difficulty, but all with a certain measure of success. But what language? He either knew or could recognize at sight all languages which had any real vogue in the continent of Europe. But what the devil was this? Cypher? A

cypher within a cypher? A cypher within a cypher within a cypher?

Counting up the numbers represented by the consonants, the first word he obtained was a "digit." He then found the particular word in the series of the order of words represented by the number of the digit. Taking this word as the key-word of a Playfair cypher he began deciphering the words, only of course to be confronted with another series of mystic and provocative letters. He then repeated a similar experiment with the final word, this time working backwards, obtained another key-word and applied it again à la Playfair to the result previously obtained. But the jungle of words was simply more tangled than ever.

He suddenly became aware that Lalage, who had entered the room in the charming yellow kimono which she had bought at Wertheim's, was surveying him with the most impish of grins.

"I am baffled by this cypher," said Swode. "When did the message arrive, and who brought it?"

The impish grin became merged into a definitely disrespectful chuckle.

"My dear young woman, you must really control yourself."

The definitely disrespectful chuckle became merged in a laugh that bordered on hysteria.

"My dear Swode, I can't stand it—I can't stand it."

"Have you got an attack of nerves; would you like to see a doctor?"

"But it's really so insulting—the writer will never forgive you." The laugh that bordered on hysteria recovered itself and sank into a dignified guffaw.

"What is more to the point is whether I shall forgive him."

"But it's not a cypher."

"Then what is it?"

"A—poem."

"A poem?"

"Yes, the new abstract poetry, you know."

"But in what language? I'm certain it's neither Volapuk nor Esperanto."

"My dear sir, abstract poetry is written in the abstract language."

"But what is the abstract language?"

"Orar lalla ora ssisiatu
Ensudeo trusa sudio mischummi
I a lon stuaz
Brorr schjatt
Orazo tsingulu," declaimed the girl.

"I should like a translation."

"But there isn't a translation, my dear sir, it's a new movement—never mind whether it's nonsense or not; all new movements start by being nonsense at first, but this is word-music—no known language is good enough for these super-poets—they say that the alphabet contains potentialities in the way of beautiful sequences of sound or expressive putting together of vowels and consonants which you won't find in any of the ordinary languages, stocked in the ordinary poetry shops in the ordinary European countries, so they just switch on the subconscious and invent a new language as they go along. I saw the man who produces it yesterday."

"Some mad mountebank, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, an extremely lucid philosopher of æsthetics dressed in a very nice check suit and a gold chain—serious—why, he's up to the eyes in seriousness. Think of it, he gets as much happiness out of this new theory of verse which he has invented as you

do out of one of the biggest of your journalistic coups."

"Perhaps," said the lawyer with some irony, "you were able to persuade the philosopher to explain to you the meaning of the poem."

"If it's recited properly," replied Lalage proudly, "the meaning is absolutely obvious. Just listen:

Kado mai tinsi
Suya angola——

Well, anyway, it's a sexual duet finishing in a murder."

"How do you know?" said Swode petulantly.

"He told me so himself."

"How does he know?"

"He's the author."

"But how does he know? It's quite incapable of proof—there's no dictionary, there's no academy—I remain sceptical."

"Now don't you think it a brilliant idea—an entirely new departure? I turned the Quisto on him—what did I get. Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba. It's a little child trying to speak—it's the first savage trying to invent the first language. But just listen to this:

Las aliosa ssirio sengen loe
Ai tschirio treva tschirio nyome
Aliosa luya bobando yo-o
Aliosa luya sjujolo yo-o
Aliosa luya dschast jadschast jo-o
Taila taila.

Now what do you think of it?"

Swode sat down at the breakfast which had at last arrived.

"As actual poetry I confess it leaves me comparatively cold. I think the Sitwells are much more funny, but the thing has great potentialities as a cypher. Do you think it would cost much to buy?"

XXVIII

Ethical Phase of Lalage

WHILE the civilized world was rapidly disintegrating beneath the myriad rays of surplus truth that kept on pricking its soul with the poison, Lalage and Swode, having left Berlin, were touring the Continent.

Whether or not they had been married I really forget; it is possible they may have had time to drop in on some British Consul or other.

No official records have been produced anyway, and the question after all is not of sufficient importance to merit discussion.

For it had never been contemplated that what had been intended to be a really bright union should be necessarily protracted into a stale infinity.

Of course, they could go on as long as they chose, but why forge unbreakable chains for those entirely new and independent personalities that would be constituted by their future selves of a few years hence.

For a time they flew high in airy spirals of ascending gaiety.

Playing each one the heavy plutocrat on the proceeds of the secret trade in Quisto-boxes they felt themselves the Lords of Europe. Did not managers address them with all the obsequiousness of oriental courtiers, and did not the most dignified maîtres d'hôtel convey, by the seriousness of their solicitude, that they really were very important people.

"My dear boy," said the student of psychology, "there's no doubt about it—money increases the ego; there's probably some heavy monograph on the subject by some heavy German."

And sometimes indulging the caprices of the rich, they would become once again students and Bohemians, drinking uproariously at student cafés, dancing extravagantly at students' dances, and taking the keenest interest in students' debates. And then after a week in lodgings they would become once more heavy plutocrats.

And now they would go on a walking tour in the Alps, and now they would aeroplane to Warsaw.

And when communication having been established with Zaffrouli he commanded them to return, they lit their cigarettes with the offending missive.

And then smitten all of a sudden with the delightful fascination of a whim which it is perfectly possible to gratify, Lalage dragged her companion back to Yunkaria simply that she might visit Pedaldin, inspect the villa which she had purchased on Mount Gudaric and pay her respects to Sir Bertie.

Sir Bertie, God bless him, resplendent in a buttonhole and new check trousers was in admirable form.

A rare raconteur, adding embellishments with each successive narration, he retailed with gusto the story of how he had recently found himself in London in the company of a gay crowd aud how some extremely jolly woman had insisted on taking him on to a sticky dance given by that sticky die-hard peer Lord Collichoke, and how in the hurry of the moment he had lost his party and arrived before them, and how Lord Collichoke with the well-bred caddishness of a perfect earl had scrutinized him, interrogated him, given him notice to quit,

and how he had written back a crushing and insolent observation, concluding with the observation that used as he was to the lavish hospitality of Eastern Europe he felt some difficulty in accommodating himself to the rigid punctiliousness of these minor functions at home.

And since it had now become for them also a place of genuine historical associations, Lalage visited once more with Sir Bertie the Church of St. Gudaric.

And it happened one morning, at about three fifty-five a.m., that Lalage Marne felt the urge of an insistent restlessness.

And deserting the torpid Swode she stole without compunction his newest tie, his oldest shirt, and a pair of khaki shorts which he had worn at those times during the Great War when he had happened to find himself on any of the fronts.

And seizing a heavy cudgel she sallied out into the air to sooth the anger of her brain.

And the sun like a delicate lover was lifting the veil of night from the face of the world.

And the world lay all cool and clear and virgin beneath that sun which was soon to strike her so hard and fierce with his ray.

And she took the rocky path right up to the summit of Mount Zaron, swinging with her boyish and aggressive stride through many a village where the old men chatted on the grassy roofs and the babies collected diseases amid the mud and flies.

And when she got to the top of the mountain she looked down upon the sea of Zoota, which lay sunken in a deep rift below the surface of the earth, and she looked over the sea at the mountains of Leor, those brown rugged beasts which lay always crouching but never springing as they basked beneath that sun which was

kept by the meteorological laws of the country perpetually and incessantly on duty for nine months out of the twelve.

And a couple of birds were chasing each other in the swift joy of the moment.

And she felt the clear thrill of happiness as she had never felt it before.

She was glad that she was alive and that the world had been brought into existence for her own sublime delectation.

Yes, everything was for the best in the most exciting of all worlds.

Had she not sprung in twelve months from being an insignificant chit of a girl student nibbling tentatively round the ragged fringes of Bohemia into a personage of definite importance and most specific experiences?

Had she not conspired with politicians and financiers of the first order?

Had she not become the most romantic thief in the whole world?

Had she not amassed a fortune sufficient to enable her to enjoy all the elementary luxuries of refined life?

And mere student of psychology that she was, had she not conducted a grandiose experiment de luxe with as her subject-matter the whole of humanity?

She had wanted to see what would happen to humanity if it could see its own naked soul, and, by Pan, she had succeeded.

How interesting it had all been—how thrilling. And the keen vibrating sense of the intellectual, personal duel, the diamond of wit cutting the diamond of wit; the chase and the pursuit and the escape.

But how about the poor subject-matter?

What price poor humanity?

Humph.

The experiment had perhaps been a trifle too successful.

And had not proved quite as enjoyable to the patien as to the operator.

Yes, Humanity was having a bad time—a damn bad time.

And it jolly well looked as if this bad time were absolutely chronic.

And what was to happen now?

Was layer after layer to be stripped off the skin of humanity until nothing was left but the rawness of bleeding flesh?

And was humanity to be allowed to bleed to death in this absurd manner?

And whose fault was it for having prohibited the beastly things?

And whose fault was it for having put the beastly things on the market?

Hers—Lalage's. Yes, she supposed so.

What had life done to her that she should revenge herself in this perhaps slightly excessive manner?

Of course there had been moments in her youth when she had desired the whole world as her plaything, only to find to her intense fury that the whole world was not available for the mere asking.

For when in the first spring of her girlish ambition she had mapped out for herself a programme which included all the sensations which were reasonably healthy, including a judicious assortment of husbands and lovers; the extravagance of plutocratic wealth and intensive intellectual research and a hectic series of blood-and-thunder adventures—she had woken up out of her day-dream to find herself spending her holidays under the

stern tutelage of her sour and evangelical aunt. So she had cursed life and had vowed to be revenged upon life. The world had played her false, so she would punch the world full and hard upon its jaw; she would live the life of her own caprice regardless of all casualties and come what come might.

So she had hoisted the black flag and adventured as an independent buccaneer on the sea of life.

But what was to be the end of it all?

Was humanity to fizzle out and go into permanent hysterics?

And if so, forsooth, what was to happen to her? Was she to be left marooned high and dry upon a rock of isolation, the one sane woman in a world of lunatics?

No—there was no doubt about it—something must be done.

Humanity must be saved, and she, Lalage, would save it.

Yes, at the last second of the last moment of the eleventh hour she would take humanity under her so briskly capable wing.

She would see humanity through.

But what was to be done?

What was the antidote for this most civilized of poisons?

The inventor had not left any formula for one, and it would be mere waste of time now in the very middle of this urgent crisis to embark on new experiments in the pious hope forsooth of a new discovery. No, it was obviously not a case for treatment.

It was obviously a case for surgery.

She must destroy the whole stock.

And not merely the stock but the formula, lying snug and secret in a safe in the river house of which she,

Zaffrouli, and Swode each possessed their separate keys.

Of course it would not be of the slightest use to argue with Zaffrouli.

For if there was one principle in which that gentleman intensely believed—and with all the fervour of a religious conviction—it was that on no account whatsoever should considerations of personal sentiment be permitted to interfere with the intrinsic business situation

Of course the circumstance that a particular operation might happen to be morally wrong, or even indeed illegal, might in certain cases have a certain influence on the actual business risk. And in so far as it exercised this influence—and from that point of view solely—it was worthy of consideration. But apart from that, business was business, and abstract ethics were abstract ethics.

So she would have to betray Zaffrouli.

Treachery.

Extremely gross treachery.

To a colleague, comrade, and co-conspirator who at any rate in all financial matters had always so far as she was concerned been perfectly honourable.

Well, of course one didn't like to let down a pal if one could reasonably help it. But in matters of really high importance it was after all, don't you know, simply too absurd to be morbidly fussy.

So Zaffrouli, bless him, would have to be betrayed.

And he would probably be extremely unpleasant over the matter.

Well, never mind.

She rather fancied this new and rare sensation.

He had been quite an adequately good friend but he would make a positively ideal enemy.

She looked forward with gusto to crossing swords with him in this new duel of which the stakes were neither more nor less than the happiness of the whole world.

Yes, the view-point would change.

Instead of playing with the world she would play for it.

Lalage the free-lance would become Lalage the Redemptress of humanity.

Should she tell Swode?

That was the question. On the one hand it tickled her palate for adventure to engage Zaffrouli single-handed.

And of course she felt equal to it.

But was she really?

After all, she had not merely herself but the whole poor silly world to consider.

And Swode was a sturdy ally in times of need.

And besides, the essence of conspiracy was that there should be someone with whom one could conspire.

So she would—yes, she certainly would—put Swode into the scheme.

She rose from her rocky perch, tingling with a sense of a new adventure and at the same time calm with that particular placidity of soul that comes from making up the mind—rightly or wrongly—but yet in any case, definitely and irrevocably to take some particular course.

So she swung jauntily back to the villa, feeling as healthily mischievous as a young she-devil, who, out of sheer caprice, has chosen to array herself, just for once, on the side of the angels.

And, indeed, so arch was her stride, so blithe her demeanour—so flashing her eye—that once or twice on

the way back it became necessary to brandish her clubbed stick and to point her loaded automatic at one or two of the younger of the male peasantry of the neighbourhood who, quite naturally and quite excusably, appeared inclined to manifest slightly too intimate interest in her so fascinating personality.

XXIX

Saving of Humanity

SWODE greeted Lalage's proposal with a smugly tepid acquiescence which was distinctly annoying. Not only did he thoroughly agree with her but he actually had the effrontery to allege that the same idea had already occurred to him independently.

"Then why on earth didn't you mention it?" Lalage had asked.

"I probably should have in a day or two."

"Or a week or two, or a month or two, or a year or two," she had retorted. "You're simply trying to rob me of the credit of my own benevolence, and I positively hate you when you're smug—when you're beastly I know how to deal with you, but when you're smug you're intolerable."

"We won't argue the point," he had answered with his most offensive blandness. "In theory I am perfectly willing to let you have all the credit for the idea, and I'm sure that I apologize profusely for being sufficiently inconsiderate to have entertained in my brain even for a moment any idea which you chose to fancy was your own original property."

"Well, let's go into Committee of Ways and Means, anyway."

Indeed the problem appeared reasonably simple.

They both had keys to the old house near the river. Consequently all that had to be done was to obtain

access—open the safe—take out the formula—burn it —put all the machines and their component parts into half a dozen sacks—take them out in the middle of the night into the middle of the stream and there dump them.

The only complication was the possible intervention of Zaffrouli.

"Let's chance Zaffrouli," said Swode.

"I would remind you," remarked Lalage, "that it was under Zaffrouli himself that I learned the technique of intrigue—in intrigue, of all things, one should be extremely businesslike, and unless one can possibly help it, chance nothing."

"Of course, he must owe us the deuce of a lot of money by now," remarked Swode.

"I've got it," rattled Lalage, "as simple as the egg of Columbus. You, my dear Swode, will fix up an interview with him to go into the accounts, and I will do the needful down by the river."

"He's expecting us back about this time, anyway."

"And what price the hue and cry after Lalage?"

"My dear boy—isn't that an additional reason for returning? Am I to allow my most excellent theatrical training to be entirely wasted? Rats and super-rats! I tell you I know as much about disguises as Master Harry Smith—and it's positively a point of honour for me to return to London."

And as they rattled across Europe in the privacy of a luxurious coupé in the wagon-lit and the moving world flashed by them like a cinematograph, or even as life itself had been for the last year flashing through the soul of Lalage, they discussed even more elaborately the question both of passports and of disguises.

It was, indeed, fortunate that at the very beginning

of the whole campaign Zaffrouli should have provided them both with so plentiful a supply of surplus passports, of which in many cases, at any rate so far as Lalage was concerned, the names competed with the photographs in bizarre humour.

For instance there was Myriam Slobodinski, aged sixty-three, widow of Moses Slobodinski, diamond merchant, of Fitzhugh's Avenue, Hampstead; with black greasy hair, and obese, with that particularly prosperous type of obesity that is the distinguishing feature of the widows of defunct diamond merchants.

And what, again, was wrong with Anna K. Truebody, American citizen of Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., aged thirty-one, the wife of the apparently still living Phinias Z. Truebody—a smart dashing young woman, with the red hair and the smart features in which, as is well known, the aforesaid Phinias Z. Truebody so consistently specializes.

But perhaps the passport which of all found most favour in the eyes of Lalage was that of Anthony Langford, aged 16, schoolboy, of distinctly roguish aspect, attired in Eton collar, a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers.

But in the Council of War which they held in the Restaurant des Cloux, in Montmartre, they decided against the employment of the legal ego of dear little Anthony Langford.

For Anthony Langford to travel alone might just possibly excite comment.

If, on the other hand, he travelled with Swode, there would arise the complication of the relationship between the two.

"Of course, I might be your tutor," Swode had remarked airily.

"And while you're about it, why not my natural father?" the young woman had answered.

But this foolish suggestion had been brutally crushed, and it was copiously padded out as Mrs. Moses Slobodinski that Lalage left Paris for London.

And it was, indeed, by the merest luck that they arrived in England without misadventure, for Mrs. Moses Slobodinski looked so sinister a personage that she narrowly escaped being searched by the Customs Authorities at Dover.

The Quisto-box, however, came once more to her aid. For when it communicated to her the, after all, entirely false news that she was either a white slave trafficker or a smuggler, she successfully assumed her heaviest manner.

"My good man," she thundered. "Don't stare at me so suspiciously—this gentleman here, who is a London barrister, will vouch for my respectability, and if you're really out to be smart you will find quite a fair amount of cocaine in the long gloves of the woman on my right."

And so it came about that the flabbergasted Customs official did as he was told, and that the demure young person with the china-blue eyes of a naive baby and a Cupid's-bow mouth in which butter had never been known to melt, who had been foolish enough to congratulate herself that no one would possibly think of getting her to take off her gloves, was duly searched and having been duly searched was duly arrested, and having been duly arrested, was, with all the correct formalities, duly convicted.

On arriving in London, Lalage lost no time in depositing, in a public dressing-room, the body of Mrs. Moses Slobodinski and of donning the identity of Anna K. Truebody, of Seattle, Washington.

As she emerged into the street, the disguise was so perfect that for the moment Swode scarcely recognized her.

It was only when he found himself being suddenly accosted by a strange female with an extraordinarily authentic American drawl that he realized the situation.

"You can now come with me," said Mrs. Truebody, "and help me to book a passage to America."

"But why go to America?"

"Because my husband's there—we Yanks, you know, are nothing if not consistent."

"But, my dear girl, you're living with me."

"Then, Mr. Swode, I guess that I am committing infidelity." To the surprise of Swode, however, the young woman only booked one solitary single passage by a boat that left the day after to-morrow.

And when he was on the verge of intervening she made matters considerably worse by booking for him a passage to Alexandria. "Neither of us need ever use them," she remarked, as they passed into the street, "but in cases like this it's always advisable to be prepared for a swift get-away. And if we travel together we might compromise each other—and you had better 'phone Zaffrouli to make certain that the coast is clear for to-morrow."

Over the telephone, Zaffrouli exhibited the blandest happiness at the return of his co-conspirators. When, however, he learned that only Swode was at liberty to dine with him at his house on the following day his happiness became very noticeably tinged with disappointment.

The following evening, on the approach of dusk, Master Anthony Langford, now considerably grown up, and comfortably encased in leather breeches, leggings and jerkin, adorned with a neatly waxed black mous-

tache, but duly disfigured with a hideous pair of motor-goggles, drove a two-seater car from London down to the house by the river.

In one of his suit-cases, however, lay all the paraphernalia of Mrs. Anna K. Truebody.

And also a new number-plate to be used in case of emergency.

And as the road swam smoothly by, and the goal of the river house approached nearer and nearer, this young person experienced to an extent, which even this young person had never before experienced, the thrill of excitement as such—the thrill of approaching change as such—the thrill of for good or for bad definitely closing one chapter of life and definitely opening another.

For a moment the problem of Swode entered her mind.

Should she break with him?

Of course she was still fond of him.

It was, however, one of her most cherished theories that no association between persons of really exuberant vitality had any chance of successful permanency until the man was at least thirty-five (and indeed, probably on the verge of forty) and the woman at least twenty-nine, whether on the way up to thirty, or the way back from thirty.

And if, somehow, sometime, somewhere, the association was bound to terminate, was it not far better—even with all the clean brutality of a surgical operation—to cut the tie, once and for all, when the love was still reasonably warm and the fondness was still reasonably deep, than to await the inevitable approach of tepidity and reaction.

But, bah—hang it all—stuff and nonsense—why fuss

about the purely personal equation when the fate of humanity was at stake ?

The adventure of adventures now demanded her most attentive concentration.

She must keep her nerve taut and her brain well-iced.

The house lay in isolation between two riverside villages, and she slackened the pace of the machine as she drove up the dark solitary badly-kept lane that branched off from the main road.

Flashing her electric torch, she opened the Yale lock that had been fitted on to the door of the deserted house.

Closing the door behind her, she ascended the dark stairs. Be her nerve what it may, and be her electric torch as efficient as one liked, the darkness, if not actually terrifying, was at any rate disconcerting.

Fear of darkness—psychology—atavism—bah, stuff and nonsense—was Lalage of the fear-proof nerves to behave like a child ?

She arrived at the door of the workroom which again was locked.

She produced the key and started fitting it into the lock.

By the most malevolent fluke in the whole world her fingers fumbled and the key slipped.

Endeavouring to catch it, she let go of the electric torch. No, it was not on the mat outside the door.

Down how many steps had it fallen ?

Striking match after match, she went down five steps.

Not a sign.

Bah—was she going to be beaten at the last lap of the last and greatest race of all by the merest thousand-to-one fluke ?

By heaven, she wasn't.

If Chance was against her so much the worse for Chance.

The opposition braced her own resistance, and her nerves fell smoothly into order.

How humorous—why, there was the torch, lying tucked up comfortably in a corner.

And the torch disclosed the key hiding modestly but a few inches away.

And now she strode coolly into the shuttered darkness of the long room.

Thank Heaven that there was oil in all the lamps.

She required ample light for what she was about to do.

She looked at her watch.

Eight forty-five.

Swode and Zaffrouli would just be reaching the entrée.

Oh well—she had the whole night before her, so why hurry?

A cigarette was obviously indicated.

She stretched herself luxuriously in a saddle-bag arm-chair and as the smoke wound its way up in sinuous spirals she gloated with all her feminine malice over the extremity of Zaffrouli's anger when he should find out. Yes, certainly she did enjoy making people angry.

And now to work.

Should she first of all deal with the machines or the formula?

The formula obviously.

That was the creative force.

So be it then.

The safe.

The combination lock.

The combination.

The magic word compounded of the two first letters of each of the three conspirators.

SWALAZ:

There, in the inner drawer, in its linen envelope, lay the few sheets in which scrawled in the illegible caligraphy of the old Professor the prescription for the poison for the mind of man. Poor old Quist. What would he have thought of it all? Perhaps it was as well for him that he had died so artistically at the psychological moment.

Striking a match, she lit separately each page after another. She watched the black charred remnants curl up and crackle. With superfluous thoroughness she applied a match even to these. She ground with her heel what remained into flimsy shreds.

It was all over.

The creative power of Quisto was destroyed.

The dinner between Swode and Zaffrouli proved more interesting than either had anticipated. Swode was received by his host with an amiability that positively bordered on enthusiasm.

Cocktails were served in the library, a square massive apartment.

As he sipped his Martini, Swode—following his invariable instinct on these occasions—prowled about surveying the books.

He could not but exhibit a certain surprise at the number of books in nearly every language of importance on political economy and international politics.

"My dear young man," said Zaffrouli blandly, "don't you know that in the twentieth century political economy and political science have acquired a high status—instead of being merely academic subjects, they have become sub-departments of finance—why, I

always retain the services of a couple of tame economists—one of the Cambridge School and one of the orthodox."

"And how many tame politicians do you retain?" asked Swode.

"The more modern method," said Zaffrouli, "is not to retain them, but to create them."

They lingered for a while over their cocktails while Zaffrouli exhibited with leisurely pride his collection of first editions.

"Surprised a bit that I should be a bibliophile—and you—you think it's a mug's game—don't you?"

"I wouldn't like to put it like that," replied Swode politely.

"Wouldn't like to—but you do," murmured Zaffrouli. "Well, I'm not one of nature's bibliophiles, I confess—but I just set myself to become one and I succeeded—of course the most enjoyable part of the whole business is the auction—it appeals to the competitive instinct—the same with pictures—I care a little but not overmuch for art—nevertheless, I make it definitely my business to understand pictures—and I do . . . it's a point of honour with me always to see through to the extreme end every single thing which I ever take up."

The words were spoken gently, but was there not something just a trifle ominous in the very smoothness of the tone?

The amiability of Zaffrouli increased over dinner.

Without doubt he was the most perfect of hosts, the most sympathetic of colleagues.

And with the technique of the real man of business he avoided all through the meal the slightest mention of the actual piece of business which was the subject-matter of the visit.

When, however, he was introducing his guest to a very special brand of cognac of a very rare antiquity, he concentrated the conversation both with delicacy and persistence on the subject of Lalage.

"Do you know, my dear Swode, I have the greatest possible admiration for our young friend."

"Not more than I have, I assure you," replied Swode, with a slight touch of asperity.

But Zaffrouli continued with the blandest imperturbability.

"And that's why I am so particularly glad that she is so happy with you."

"Thank you," said Swode, with the lameness of complete distrust.

"And what a pity it is," went on Zaffrouli, "that she couldn't be with us to-night—I wanted to hear her own account of her adventure with the detective—and, by Jove, how well she would have told it—and I wanted to give her my personal congratulations."

"Of course, she was extremely sorry that she couldn't come—she was prevented at the last moment."

Unlike, however, Lalage, who had an artistic admiration for a really good lie, and who lied with economy and precision as, of course, every expert in the technique of lying really should, Swode was a clumsy bungler in the art of falsehood.

"Something up," thought Zaffrouli. "Wonder what—let's find out."

His eyes became frozen in their steadiness as pressing the Quisto-Box in his pocket he turned once again the screw of his interrogation, with a manner nonchalant enough, it is true, yet in spite of its nonchalance most definitely persistent.

"Not indisposed, I trust—some other engagement, no doubt?"

"Something or other," replied the tongue of Swode, "but as a matter of fact, she never told me."

But the mind of Swode mechanically answered.

"I hope she's destroyed them all by now, before the old blighter begins to smell a rat."

But the implacable questioner gave to the screw a yet sharper twist.

"You've no idea, I suppose, where she's likely to be—thought of 'phoning her up and getting her to come round—should really very much like a few words with the dear girl to-night."

"I'm sorry," answered the tongue of Swode, "but I really haven't the vaguest," while his naive mind answered with a truthfulness which, under the circumstances, was really just a trifle absurd. "Thank Heaven, the river house isn't on the telephone."

"Oh well, never mind," purred Zaffrouli, "I daresay to-morrow will do. Of course, I should very much like to have seen her to-night. Still, I've no doubt she's got something most important to do. . . . Now, tell me, what are your impressions of Yunkaria? Is Argomewicz going to stay the course?"

"Thank Heavens," thought Swode, "the crisis is over."

And indeed it was.

For when after a few minutes' desultory conversation on the political situation in Yunkaria, Zaffrouli left the room to bring back with him the accounts relating to the Quisto-box partnership, he was away an extraordinarily long time.

So long in fact was he away that Swode became first suspicious and then uneasy.

He would go out on to the landing and see what was the matter.

The door, however, refused to open.

It had been locked from the outside.

The formula having been duly burnt, Lalage considered the question of the disposal of the machines. Should she throw them into the river?

She opened the shutters.

Flush with the house, the stream flowed sleek and deep.

It was easy enough to throw the whole consignment into the water. But Zaffrouli might possibly retrieve them. Of course they might be so damaged as to be of no further use. But on the whole she preferred not to take the risk. The more scientific course was in pursuance of the original plan to put all the machines into sacks, load them on to a punt, take the punt into the middle of the stream, and then dump them at intervals into the centre of the channel.

Whistling jauntily she unlocked the three large cupboards let into the wall of the room, where lay stored the engines of destruction.

Some thousands of the little steel instruments still remained. How they glistened with malice.

Never mind. Let them. Their very minutes were numbered. No longer would they pinprick humanity with their pestilential rays. Half a dozen sacks would suffice. She began filling the sacks, tying the necks with string.

It took longer than she had anticipated.

Never mind. Five were already done and she was well started on the last and sixth. She held a machine

in her hand and was just about to place it in the sack.

"Hands up, my dear Lalage."

The voice of Zaffrouli hissed soft and sinister as he stood in the doorway, his silver-plated revolver pointed plumb at her breast.

"Hands up, I say, and if you think I don't mean business, ask the Quisto."

"That's right," continued the voice, "well above the shoulders and kindly keep them there."

"Well I'm damned," rang out the sharp clear tones.

The tones neither of fear nor of penitence, but of a mutinous schoolgirl caught red-handed in the flagrant delight of some forbidden escapade.

"Damnation is probably only the least of what will happen to you," said Zaffrouli, but in the meanwhile I propose to give myself the pleasure of searching you with complete thoroughness, and as an act of courtesy I would inform you that so far as revolver practice is concerned, I am ambidextrous."

And holding the revolver in his left hand, he slowly and methodically passed his right hand all over her garments and her pockets.

"Now turn round please."

"Ah, yes— —"

He gave vent to the mild chuckle of a man who sees everything work out according to anticipation, as from her right back hip-pocket he extracted a revolver.

"And now, my dear young woman—I should be interested to know what you may happen to have to say for yourself?"

"Only, that in spite of everything, I've really done you down."

"Charming—in spite of everything she has really done me down."

"My dear Zaffrouli, I bet you a hundred quid that you won't laugh like that in a minute."

"I'm in no mood for nonsense—what have you got to say?"

"You can sell these odd machines if you like, but no more—I've destroyed your thunder—I've burnt the precious formula."

Zaffrouli continued to laugh. This time however, with a mild sadness. "My dear young woman, and to think that you were once my pupil—have you no imagination? Don't you know the very ABC of intrigue—did it never occur to you that I might have a copy—in fact several copies—yes—no wonder your swank looks just a trifle crestfallen.

"And now, my dear child, I repeat the question—what have you got to say for yourself? You've been guilty of the most abominable treachery."

The slow sleek menace of his voice intimidated her more than anything else in her whole life.

But she braced herself to such bravery as she could muster.

"The explanation, my dear man, is perfectly simple. The world was going to rack and ruin—I either had to let you down or to let humanity down—and if you thought I was going to let humanity down for your *beaux yeux*, you were really very much mistaken."

"Well," said Zaffrouli gravely, "all I can say is that I'm disappointed in you—I thought that you were the one woman in the world who could really be trusted."

"My good man, I always thought that you knew nothing of women."

"That may or may not be so—but have you any proposition to make as to what I should do with you? I am open to suggestions."

"You can please yourself."

But for all her brave words, the flag of her defiance was flying just a trifle limply.

But Zaffrouli continued with bland gravity.

"I advise you in your own interest to make some suggestion, because I am thinking of murdering you."

But instead of throwing herself on her panic-stricken knees Lalage summoned to her aid all the bravado which by the most superhuman effort she was capable of mustering.

"My dear Zaffrouli—don't be such a silly ass."

But he did not even smile at this so creditable an exhibition of a high and dauntless spirit as he proceeded with cold gravity.

"Neither silliness nor vindictiveness, I'm afraid, but sheer business—you know too much—what guarantee have I that you will behave? I don't say that I've decided—but you will agree with me that it's a question well worth considering."

But the girl had recovered her nerve. Coolly and impudently she would see the melodrama through.

"Never mind me, my dear Zaffrouli, the point above all which I should have thought well worth considering was the risk of being caught—Swode knows I'm here."

"That simply means that one would have to double the stakes. Still it's a matter for reflection . . . of course, if, even at this hour, you were to show any signs of real contrition."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"The more important personal concessions."

He spoke with studied restraint—but the hard lights in his eyes began to sparkle more and more ominously.

"Nothing doing," retorted the girl flippantly. "I am afraid that just at present I happen to be something in the way of a monopoly."

But the stop-press intelligence which was snapped by the Quisto-box in her pocket was "Too attractive to murder—but I must get her—I must get her—I must get her"

But the young woman, being after all, you remember, a student of psychology, knew perfectly well that the more ruthlessly she flouted his amour-propre, the more likely was he to make some mistake, forget some precaution in the rabid mood of the moment.

"I think it fair to tell you," pursued Zaffrouli, "that your conduct has been so unspeakably disgraceful that I consider myself absolved from being a gentleman."

"But why worry about absolution?" replied the girl.

The eyes of Zaffrouli began to stare more and more glassily.

"I advise you in your own interest to accept—you know you're not over-fussy in these matters—look here, join forces with me—a year—as long as you like—the world is at our feet—what couldn't you and I do together?"

But then Lalage, partly out of the natural incorrigibility of her mischief and partly out of a deliberately planned desire to provoke him to the uttermost pitch, was more brutally and wickedly chaste than she had ever been before in all her young life.

"If you merely left me indifferent, the proposition might just conceivably be worth considering, but I think that you will agree with me that it's a trifle awkward that I should find you specifically repugnant."

And without question this extreme piece of discourtesy achieved its desired effect

Instead of being a cosmopolitan financier or even a normal male Zaffrouli suddenly became a baited bull.

And, being a baited bull, he charged heavily on this most impudent of toreadors.

But the toreador ran away, and a helter-skelter chase ensued.

Round chairs, round tables—the door—hang it all—she was anticipated—on to the settee—his hands were clutching at her feet—a desperate jump on to the safe—but the safe was in a corner, and there was nowhere else to go.

She drew back her foot with the object of kicking him fair and square in the jaw.

But the impact produced only a fraction of its calculated effect, for his wrist caught her ankle midway.

She overbalanced and found herself in his arms.

Biting and scratching to the utmost of her ability, she nevertheless felt herself carried to the settee, and placed upon his lap.

Her two arms were twisted behind her back and encircled by the right arm of Zaffrouli, while his left hand caressed her face with ironic suavity.

"Well, I've got you now, my young friend," hissed Zaffrouli.

"Great Heavens—no."

"Don't be foolish!"

"Well, all I can say is, that you seem to be satisfied with very small mercies."

But his eyes simply gloated slowly over her, as he let drop with triumphant certainty, these words:

"There will be a short interval for playful caresses,

and then, if you are still unappreciative, we will see how you respond to my special chloroform love-philtre."

But all the while the brain of Lalage was whirring swiftly and steadily like a hundred horse-power aeroplane. She must win—she must win—she must win—she must catch him—she must catch him. It was not so much the mere honour of her body that was at stake as the honour of her own soul—the honour of her own will.

"Well, my dear Zaffrouli," she rallied, "if it amuses you to pay your addresses to unconscious logs, you really must be getting extremely middle-aged."

But the eyes of the satyr bulged more and more heavily.

"Surrender?"

"Certainly not—but, with luck, the fortress—might possibly be taken by assault."

The laughter of Zaffrouli roared anticipation.

And then did Lalage achieve a more finished piece of acting than ever before in all her life, even in those days when she had been one of the most brilliant students at the Academy of Histrionic Art.

For ever so suddenly she let all her body grow completely lax.

And her eyes became the glazed eyes of the woman who is on the verge of giving.

And her lips pouted upwards in beseeching invitation.

And in that tone as though of an abandoned schoolgirl, which is so extraordinarily successful in the disarmament of even the most cynical of males, she murmured in a low and sugared drawl.

"I want to kiss you, I want to kiss you, I want to kiss you."

And she surrendered her own most particular and private lips to that most repellent of osculations.

And she even personally participated in this obscene and ironic comedy.

And as soon as she observed that the arm of Zaffrouli was no longer pinioning her own arms but was hugging her with a positively ursine ferocity, very gently she caressed his face with her own long fingers. And beneath that caress Zaffrouli, as would indeed any other man in the whole world of the twentieth century, surrendered himself, completely, and shut his eyes in that extremely gross satisfaction which is the nearest that persons of the category of Zaffrouli can approach to actual ecstacy.

And slowly, delicately, insidiously, the long fingers slid down the face to the body, and from the body, oh, ever so silently, they found their way into the right-hand pocket, where lay that revolver which humorously enough Zaffrouli had brought with him for the purpose of his own personal protection.

And even as the features of Zaffrouli were assuming a more and more beatific smile, the fingers of Lalage were caressing the trigger with an affection which was this time extremely authentic.

And beneath the gradual insistence of this caress, the trigger eventually yielded.

But though the grasp of Zaffrouli grew flaccid, his features still continued to express an extremely low beatitude.

But the heroic deed thus neatly accomplished, Lalage did not—no, she certainly did not—experience that radiant jollity which according to her abstract philosophy she unquestionably should have felt.

And while she was not so foolish as to faint, she nevertheless experienced a very unpleasant nervous reaction.

Of course Zaffrouli had no real merits.

What was Zaffrouli, or indeed a dozen Zaffrouli's, when weighed in the balance against the mental health of the world?

Or the sacred independence of her own body for that matter?

Nevertheless, the object in evening dress, with its beatific leer was overwhelmingly repulsive.

And why couldn't one have the thrill of melodrama without its crudity?

It was about ten minutes before she had rallied her somewhat rebellious nervous forces. And then she was herself again, though somewhat sobered.

Well, she must see the night's work thorough.

Zaffrouli, of course, would not meddle in the matter any more—still, one might as well be through.

Having completed the filling of the sixth sack, she took downstairs the whole cargo and placed them in the punt. She pushed off into the sleek blackness of the river.

No one astir, and the Thames her own private property.

The sense of secret quietude began to soothe her.

For some minutes she punted silently down stream along the tall bushes that sentinelled the bank.

Then she struck out into the middle of the stream.

Yes, here it was deep enough.

And six times at discreet intervals was the black purity of the water violated by a hissing splash and a downward plunge.

Humanity was saved at last.

And she had had the most adventurous night of her career—an adventurous night that was unfortunately not yet completed.

Some arrangements would have to be made for the disposition of Zaffrouli.

She returned to the landing stage, moored the boat, and with disgust and reluctance ascended the stairs.

As she entered the room, whom should she see pacing up and down the floor, in a condition of considerable excitement, but Swode, who had telephoned to the police, obtained his release and motored post-haste to the rescue.

Almost automatically, she fell into her old casual manner.

"Hullo! So you're here."

But at the perfectly natural question, "Why did you do it?" she fairly lost her temper.

"Oh, what the devil does it matter why I did it; half a dozen reasons—or at any rate, three—and each perfectly adequate. The fact remains that I have done it, and what are we going to do about it—what are we going to do about that?"

She indicated Zaffrouli.

Swode, however, with his lawyer's knowledge of the political politics of murder, dissuaded her from any attempt to dispose of the body.

"In a case like this, time is the whole show, so why waste it; the place has been taken for two more years and the rent paid in advance. Nobody comes here—no one is likely to come here. I advise you to chance both the body, and even the car, which is a trifle more risky than the body."

But the livid kaleidoscope of impressions went on rattling for some hours to come into the mind of Lalage.

The hurried change from the male travesty into the travelling dress of Mrs. Anna K. Truebody, of Seattle,

Washington, the obscene minute, in which lifting up from the floor the late Gabriel Zaffrouli they placed him in that same cupboard which had previously held the Quisto-boxes, the hurried but not unemotional farewell to Swode—no no, on no account whatsoever must he come with her, quite apart from the danger of detection, she wanted to start an entirely fresh chapter of life—you go one way, my dear, and I'll go the other, you've been a real pal and not a bad lover, and the stunt was a huge success. Good old Quisto! Haven't we led this poor old world a dance? but it's going to be all right now. Cheerio, my boy, so long—run up against you sometime, somehow, somewhere—and then the solitary drive back to London in the car through a night now suddenly grown sinister and all alive with policemen and detectives, the garaging of the car, the strolling into the Regent Palace Hotel at one o'clock in the morning, armed merely with an attaché case, but fortunately enough obtaining a room, and then the vibrating tension of the night—lucidity throbbing at the same time both with energy and fatigue—exhausting dozes on the border line between the sleeping and the waking states; and then, after some white hours of sleeplessness, the black stifling shroud of a nightmare in which curiously enough she found herself killing not poor old Zaffrouli but the malevolent and evangelical aunt who had oppressed her childhood. "I don't like you, I have never liked you, so take that"; the bath and toilet in the morning, the drive in the taxi to Waterloo and the retrieving from the cloak-room of the luggage of Mrs. Anna K. Traebody, of Seattle, Washington; the successful boarding of the boat-train, the racking impatience that the journey to Southampton was not accomplished, as of course it should have been, in two

minutes, and then at last—at last—at last the embarkation on the liner, and being conducted by the stewardess to the luxurious privacy of her state-room.

Lalage spent nearly the whole voyage lounging in her state-room—surrendering herself to the reaction of a luxurious torpidity.

For the time being she had had enough of the world. But as the boat neared that fantastic country which God shares as His own with hustling dyspepsia and naïve ethics, she thought very seriously of a certain warning which Swode had given her in that final and hectic hour.

"If you want to be perfectly safe, I advise you to finish up in Yunkaria—there's no extradition treaty as yet, you see."

Yes, after all, these lawyer lovers had their points.

Well, on this occasion she would adopt, even if only for a time, that most flabby and despicable of all maxims—safety first.

So she arrived at New York merely to double back to Naples.

Within twenty-four hours she was safely esconced in her own special villa on the Mount of St. Gudaric in the ancient city of Pedaldin.

For some months she lived in extreme quietude, watching with complacency the poor old world slowly, steadily, slipping back into the normal.

For the Quisto-boxes that were in existence were fast wearing out.

And no more Quisto-boxes were available.

And the poor old world, like a maniac of drugs, clamoured in vain for that most poisonous of medicines that was no longer forthcoming.

And the fate of the world being thus at last satis-

factorily adjusted, she began once more to ponder about the fate of Lalage.

What was to happen to Lalage?

She craved for something new which she had never had before.

How about the simple life? The really simple life. Tinkaria was all very well in its way, but with its mixture of Balkan barbarism and aggressively pretentious modernity it was neither one thing nor the other.

Well, perhaps she would acquire some healthy Briton.

And she would retire with the aforesaid healthy Briton to some desert island in the Pacific which they would equip with just sufficient of the appliances and appurtenances of civilization to render really comfortable without in any way impairing its charm and character as a genuine desert island.

And there for a space of time she would live with this healthy Briton the primitive and simple life.

And she would be a squaw and a mate and a comrade and a wife and a mistress all in one and without any fuss. And the suns and the moons would succeed each other and the months swim by in smooth swiftness.

And possibly she would become a mother, producing, with assistance of the aforesaid healthy Briton, male twins.

And then she would send the aforesaid male twins back into the world, and she would have one twin educated as a Capitalist, and the brother thereof educated as a Bolshevik, so that in her old and middle age she might be safe in either eventuality.

But yet how long could she actually be happy in the simple life?

The crisis of the world was past, and the world was a dull place without crises.

Her soul fed on excitement as its daily diet—but she had eaten the whole cake and what on earth was left?

In this manner and with that wistfulness that comes as the sequel of all super-excitement, Lalage looked out upon the world which she had destroyed and she had redeemed.

But freed at last from the poison of those ubiquitous rays of surplus and pestilential truth, humanity is now able to resume in comparative normality and comfort that devious route towards that perfect state which it would be so unbearably dull and depressing to attain in this lifetime.

And though Zaffrouli can no longer hunt concessions, Argomewicz still hunts heroic poses, and the Duke of Bluddisdon still hunts women, and Dr. Wickens still hunts philosophic epigrams; and the Great and the Petty Powers still intrigue and combine and quarrel and recriminate and readjust their groupings; and the plutocracy plots to tame the proletariat and the proletariat plots to tame the plutocracy; and honest men are permitted to think the truth about their best friends without thereby forfeiting their friendship, and the delicate and fragile mechanisms of family, romantic and matrimonial associations are once again fostered and protected beneath the shields and screens of secrecy, and America is again permitted to bluff, and the East is again permitted to intrigue; and the mind of man, which is after all more important than the body of man—the mind of man, I say, with its skeleton cupboards, its secret dungeons, its mystic promenades, its luxurious bowers, its intimate theatres, its hidden temples, its steaming swamps, is again itself.

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