WAX

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by

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I. — INTRUSION

AS the Town Hall clock struck two, the porter of the Riverpool Waxwork Gallery stirred uneasily in bed.

"What's the matter, Ames?" asked his wife sleepily.

"Nothing," was the reply. "Only, I remember taking a candle with me into the Horrors, and I can't rightly say as I took it out again."

Instantly there was an upheaval under the quilt, followed by an eruption of blankets. Then an elephantine hump, silhouetted on the reflected light of the wall, told Ames that his wife was sitting up in bed.

"That Gallery's our bread," she declared. "Besides, think of my poor figures trapped in a fire. You get up, Ames, and make sure the candle's out."

"Oh, I doubted it. I remember. Lay down again."

But Mrs. Ames had surged out of bed and was slipping into her shoes. Having achieved his object, her husband drew the blanket over his head. Salving his conscience by repeating, "I doubted it," he went to sleep again.

With her tweed coat buttoned over her nightdress, and her hat, adorned with an eye veil, perched on top of her curlers, Mrs. Ames went out into the night. She was not nervous of the darkness, while the Gallery was only the length of a short street away.

Directly she turned the key in the great lock and pushed open the massive mahogany doors, she felt that she was really at home. She had brought her pocket-torch, for she knew that if she switched on the light, a policeman might notice the illumination and feel it his duty to investigate. And, as she was one of those free and fearless souls who strew the grass of public parks with chocolate paper and cigarette stumps, she had an instinctive distrust of the law.

She entered the Gallery, and then stood on the threshold—aware of a change. This was not the familiar place she knew so well.

It seemed to be full of people. Seen in the light from the street lamp, which streamed in through the high window, their faces were those of men and women of character and intelligence. They stood in groups as though in conversation, or sat apart in solitary reverie.

But they neither spoke nor moved.

When she had seen them last, a few hours ago, under the dim electric globes, they had been a collection of ordinary waxworks, representing conventional historical personages and Victorian celebrities. Only a few were in really good condition, while some were ancient, with blurred features and threadbare clothes.

But now, they were all restored to health and electric with life. Napoleon frowned as he planned a new campaign. Charles II. mistook her for an orange-girl and ogled her. Henry VIII. shook with silent laughter.

Mrs. Ames felt absurdly abashed by the transformation. She knew she had only to snap on the light to shatter the illusion. Restrained by the memory of the policeman, she did her best to put the figures back in their proper places.

"Hallo, dearies," she called. "Mother's popped in to see you."

Her voice echoed queerly under the domed mahogany roof. She had a vague impression that the Waxworks resented her liberty, as she hurried towards the Hall of Horrors.

A crack of light which outlined its doors told her that her husband had been too optimistic about his memory. This smaller Gallery had not been wired, for it held no lurid attractions. She rushed inside, to see a guttering candle stuck upon the floor.

Although no damage had been done, her indignation swept away imagination. But after she had blown out the flame, she became dimly afraid of her surroundings.

There was no special reason for her to feel nervous. The Hall of Horrors housed only a small number of selected murderers, whom, normally, she despised. These figures were not spectacular, like her cherished Royalties. They wore dull coats and trousers, and could easily be mistaken for nonentities such as Gladstone and Tennyson.

But, as she threw her torch over them, a pinprick of light gleamed in each glassy eye, imparting a fiction of life. They seemed to be looking at her with intent and furtive speculation, as though she were the object of a private and peculiarly personal inventory.

Suddenly she remembered that she was among a company of—poisoners.

Although she was furious with herself for her weakness, her nerve crashed. It was in vain that she reminded herself that these were, in reality, her very own Waxworks. She treated them as her children. It was true that they were a neglected family, for she was an amiable sloven; but, occasionally, she brushed their clothes and hair, or cleaned their faces with a lick of spit.

Now, however, as she hurried down the Gallery, she felt that they had grown alien and aloof. They seemed to regard her with unfriendly eyes, as though she had interrupted some secret and exciting mystery.

They resented her presence. At this hour, the gallery belonged to Them.

Mrs. Ames lost no time in taking their hint. She shuffled through the door, locked it behind her, and ran down the street in flapping shoes. Less than five minutes later, she woke up her husband, to relate her experience.

"I was never so scared in my life. They weren't like the Waxworks I knew. All the time I was there, they were watching me, just as if it was *their* place, and I'd no right there...Go on, laugh. *You've* been safe and warm in bed, after trying to burn the gallery down...But you listen to me, Ames. I tell you, those figures

were up to some business of their own. And I felt in *my* bones that it was no good business either."

II. — LEGEND

BEFORE ever she saw her, Sonia Thompson looked upon Mrs. Cuttle as a predestined victim.

She was stupid, complacent, blind. She possessed what other women coveted, but had not the wit to appraise its value, or the imagination to guard it. And she was at the mercy of unscrupulous persons.

Of course, the first suggestion was the result of idle gossip. The impression it made upon Sonia was probably due to the fact that she was both physically tired and mentally excited, and therefore, strung up to a condition of sensitised perception.

When, afterwards, she looked back on her first night at Riverpool, it always appeared intangible as the dust of a dream, so that she could not be sure of her memory. Every place seemed to be dark, and buildings rocked. There was confusion of senses, and optical illusion, in which men were transformed into waxworks and waxworks into men.

She had travelled direct from Geneva, and she still swayed with the motion of the train when she signed the register of the Golden Lion Hotel.

"Sonia Thompson." She lingered for a moment to look at it.

"Wonder if that name will ever be famous," she thought.

The coffee-room had a sunken floor, dark flock wallpaper, and was dimly lit. Apparently the windows were hermetically sealed, and the odours of heavy Victorian dinners—eaten long ago—were marooned on the warm still air. Directly she had gulped down a quick meal of bacon and eggs, Sonia went out to explore the town.

It was between nine and ten, when Riverpool looked especially dreary, with shuttered shops and deserted streets. A fine spit of rain was falling which slimed the cobbles of the road. She wandered rather than walked, while the Channel steamer pitched again under her feet, so that—occasionally—she reeled in a nightmare of wet heaving pavements and flickering lights.

It was in a sober and stationary moment that she found herself standing outside the Waxwork Gallery.

The place had a sinister reputation. Built in 1833, it had been unlucky almost from its beginning. The speculative builder who erected it had hanged himself in the Hall of Horrors. During the Hungry Forties a tramp had been found inside—dead from starvation. In the Naughty Nineties a painted woman of the town had been murdered in the alcove, wherein was staged—appropriately—the final tableau in the career of Vice.

Only recently, there had been a fresh link in the chain of tragedies. A stranger—a commercial traveller—had sought a free lodging in the Gallery, and had paid his bill, according to precedent. The porter discovered him in the morning, lying in Virtue's bed; and the worthy patriarch had a corpse for a bedfellow.

The post-mortem disclosed cirrhosis of the liver. A letter, vowing ferocious vengeance, and signed, "Your loving husband," indicated an unfaithful wife. The combined effect of rage and drink had been a fit.

Although Sonia knew nothing of its history, she felt the pull of some macabre attraction which drew her inside the Gallery. Directly she passed through its massive doors, she was further excited by its peculiar and distinctive atmosphere—sour-sweet, like the stale perfume of a soiled lace handkerchief.

The building was large and dim, panelled with mahogany and draped with tawdry black velvet, filmed with dust. One side had been built into alcoves which housed tableaux depicting scenes in the careers of Virtue and Vice. In spite of being faintly lit with a few pendant electric globes, it smelt of gas.

At first blink, Sonia thought the gallery was full of curious people. Then she realised that she was being tricked in, the usual way. She spoke to the commissionaire at the door, before she discovered that she was asking her question of a dummy.

Apart from the Waxworks, the place seemed to be empty. No other visitors inspected the collection, which was large and

second-rate. She picked out Henry VIII., in a buff suit padded and slashed with scarlet; Elizabeth, in grimed ruff and blister-pearls; Mary of England, pasty as dough, but resplendent in new plum satin.

As she paused before Charles II., who had preserved his swagger and leer, although his white velvet suit had yellowed to the tint of parchment, a second trick was played upon her. Two figures seated in a shady corner suddenly came to life, and moved, swiftly and silently, towards the exit.

Sonia could see only the back of the man, who was tall and broad-shouldered. His lady, too, had the collar of her coat drawn up to the level of her eyes; but under her tilted cap was a gleam of conspicuous honey-gold hair.

They threaded their way expertly through the groups of Waxworks, and had slipped through the door almost before Sonia could realise that they were not a delusion.

She was staring in their direction when Mrs. Ames came out of the Hall of Horrors. As usual, she was doing duty for her husband, who was in bed with seasonal screws.

Sonia turned at the sound of flapping footsteps, and saw a tall stooping woman, with big regular features, large mournful eyes, and a mild sagging face. She wore a dirty smock of watercress-green, and a greasy black velvet ribbon in her grey hair, which was cut in a long Garbo bob.

In her relief at meeting someone who was definitely human, Sonia spoke to her with enthusiasm.

"What a marvellous place. It has atmosphere."

"It has *not*." Mrs. Ames' voice was indignant. "Besides I like it. It's healthy."

"No, no. I meant—tradition, background. One feels there are stories here...Who was that couple who went out just now?"

"Couple?" repeated Mrs. Ames. "I saw no couple."

"But you must have seen them," insisted Sonia. "They had to pass you. A tall man with a white muffler, and a lady with fair hair."

Mrs. Ames' face remained blank.

"You must have been mistaken, or else seen ghosts," she said. "Plenty of ghosts here—or ought to be. Would you like a catalogue, miss?"

"Why?" Sonia spoke absently, for she was still baffled by the mystery. "All the figures are labelled."

"Only for the public. The intelligent visitors always like to have them explained."

Sonia was not exactly impressed by this test of intelligence. She looked at Mrs. Ames, and decided that if her face were lifted and made of wood, it would be a handsome figure-head for a ship. She saw it, wet and magnified, rising and falling triumphantly through a smother of green sea—and again, the Channel steamer pitched under her feet.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that a journalist should not neglect any chance of learning some local history.

"Perhaps you could show me round instead?" she asked.

As a coin was slipped into her palm, Mrs. Ames revived like a wilting flower after aspirin has been added to its water. She swept, like an argosy in full sail, towards Henry VIII., and introduced him with a grand flourish.

"This is the finest figure in our collection. Henry Rex Eight. Magnificent torso. I've sat for the figure myself, so I should know."

"And where is his collection of wives?" asked Sonia.

"Only *six*, miss," remarked Mrs. Ames stiffly. "And he was *married* to all of them. Not many gentlemen, to-day, as can say as much...This is Charles the Second."

"And I suppose he was another pure and virtuous king?"

"Well, miss "—Mrs. Ames hesitated—"if he wasn't a king, perhaps we might call him a naughty boy. But, whatever he did, he *paid* for it. He was executed at Whitehall...This is Elizabeth. A very clever queen. She never married, but had lovers, so they called her 'Good Queen Bess.'...Bloody Mary. When she was dead, they cut open her heart, and found 'Calais' written on it."

Sonia began to feel that her shilling was not wasted on Mrs. Ames. The woman was a character and probably had a Past. Her voice was educated, although the foundations of her history had slipped.

"Is this the oldest figure in the collection?" she asked, as she paused before a pathetic waxwork, with a blurred pallid face, and a robe of moth-eaten black velveteen.

"One of them," replied Mrs. Ames sadly. "Mary of Scotland. But she's worn the worst. She—she's got to go. But we keep putting it off."

She gulped as though she were discussing the fate of some pet animal, while Sonia sighed in sympathy.

"Poor doomed Mary," she murmured. "She reminds me of my favourite doll. I wouldn't go to sleep without her. They burned her because they said she was germy, and gave me a new one which I slaughtered on the spot. But Mother always knows best...I do feel for you about poor Mary. I expect she's real to you."

As a wave of sympathy spread between them, Mrs. Ames relaxed into gossip.

"As real as the townspeople. In fact, some of the Waxworks remind me of them, and I get quite mixed. Henry the Eighth is the spit of Alderman Cuttle. He's got the big shop, like Selfridge, and he's going to be our next mayor. He's a terror for the ladies. I could fall for him myself. And Elizabeth's got the same red hair and sharp face as Miss Yates. She's Alderman Cuttle's secretary, but she means to be the second Mrs. Cuttle."

"Is the Alderman's wife dead?" asked Sonia.

"Not *yet*."

"What's Mrs. Cuttle like?"

"Like a sack of potatoes, except she hasn't got their eyes. She'll need them. She was only a nurse, but she pulled the Alderman through a bad illness, and he married her. And now she stops the way. I wouldn't be in her shoes for all her fine house."

Mrs. Ames sniffed ominously and passed on to the next figure.

"This is Cardinal Wolsey. I expect you recognise him, for he's the advertisement for woollen pants. He said, 'If I had served—'"

"Yes, thanks," interrupted Sonia, "but I've seen enough. I've had a long journey. I'll just rest for a minute and then I'll go."

As she dropped down on a wooden chair, she realised that she was desperately tired and not quite normal. The lack of ventilation had drained her of her energy; but, while her legs felt leaden, her brain ticked away feverishly.

Her nerves quivered to the spur of sharpened senses; she became aware of hidden life—a stealthy movement behind a curtained alcove—the stir of a whisper.

"Do you get many visitors?" she asked.

"Now and again," was the vague reply. "The fact is, miss, the Gallery's got a—a bad name. They say you can't stay here all night and live to tell the tale."

"That's intriguing." Sonia felt a flicker of reviving interest. "Some one ought to test that theory."

"Someone did. Last month. And they found him, next morning, dead as frozen mutton. He threw a fit and passed out."

"Oh, tough luck. Coincidence, I suppose. Curious. It might be an idea for a newspaper. Perhaps I'll try it out and write it up, myself."

As she spoke, Sonia had the feeling that the Waxworks were listening to her. The Gallery had suddenly grown still and silent as a stagnant pond.

"Are you a writer?" asked Mrs. Ames.

"Yes, I'm on the staff of the Riverpool *Chronicle*. At least, I will be. To-morrow. I really must push off now."

She sprang to her feet, and then staggered in momentary vertigo. The walls of the gallery rocked and there were rushes of darkness. Afterwards, she believed that she was gripped by a premonition of the future, for she was filled with horror of the Gallery.

She saw the Waxworks, not as harmless dummies, but as malign agents in a corrupt traffic, while Mrs. Ames' face—wooden

and gigantic—tossed in the swell of a grey sea. It dwindled to life size, and she realised that she had grasped the woman by her arm.

"A bit dizzy?" asked Mrs. Ames.

"Only a black out," replied Sonia. "I'm quite fit now, thanks. Good-night. I'll come and see you again."

Directly Sonia had gone, Mrs. Ames glanced at the clock, and then closed the Gallery. It was a simple business; she merely rang a hand-bell, and the public—represented by a few couples—immediately took the hint.

It was a curiously furtive and speedy exodus. They slipped out of corners and alcoves, and reached the door by circuitous routes. Each respected the anonymity of the other. No greeting was exchanged, although they might probably speak in the street.

For the Gallery had sunk to be a place of assignation—of stolen meetings and illicit love. People no longer came to view the carefully renewed bloodstains in the alcove—which, officially, could not be washed out—or to shudder at the builder's rope, which was the star relic in the Hall of Horrors. They came only to whisper and kiss.

It is true that it witnessed the course of true romance when sweethearts sought sanctuary from the streets. It is also true that every one looked respectable and behaved discreetly. A middle-aged pair might be obviously prosperous tradespeople; but, if the man were Mr. Bones the butcher, the inference was that the lady was Mrs. Buns the baker.

Mrs. Ames watched the last couple steal through the door, with a sentimental smile which said plainly, "Aren't we all?" Then she rang her bell again, shouted "Every one out?" and switched off the light.

On the threshold, she turned back to speak to her beloved Waxworks.

"Good-night, dearies. Be good. And if you can't be good, be careful."

III. — THE ALDERMAN GOES HOME

SONIA had barely returned to her hotel when she saw a ghost.

The Golden Lion was an old coaching inn, and, although large and rambling, had been modernised only to a limited extent. Instead of a lounge, there was an entrance hall, with uneven oaken floor, which led directly to the private bar.

Sonia sank down on the first deep leather chair, and was opening her cigarette case, when she recognised, a few yards away, the spectre of the Waxworks.

He had not materialised too well. In the dim gallery, he had been a tall romantic figure. Here, he was revealed as a typical Club man, with a hard, clean-shaven face and black varnished hair. It is true that his profile had the classical outline of a head on an old coin; but it was a depreciated currency.

"Who is that?" she whispered, as the waiter came forward with a lighted match.

"Sir Julian Gough," was the low reply.

"Of course. Isn't his wife tall, with very fair hair?"

"No, miss." The waiter's voice sank lower. "That would be Mrs. Nile. The doctor's wife. That's the doctor—the tall gentleman with the white scarf."

Sonia forgot her exhaustion as she studied the communal life of the bar. Dr. Nile was a big middle-aged man, with rather a worried face and a charming voice. Sonia decided that, probably, he was not clever, but scored over rival brains by his bedside manner.

"I wonder if he knows what I've seen to-night," she thought.

On the surface, the men did not appear to be hostile. They exchanged casual remarks, and seemed chiefly interested in the contents of their glasses. Sonia decided that it was a dull drinking scene, as she listened sleepily to the burr of voices and the clink of glasses. The air was hazed with skeins of floating smoke and it was very warm.

She was beginning to nod over her cigarette, when she was aroused by a shout of laughter. A big burly man, accompanied by two ladies, had just rolled into the bar. Although he was not in the least like Henry the Eighth, she recognised Alderman Cuttle by Mrs. Ames' description. He was florid and ginger, with a deep organ voice and a boisterous laugh.

"Well, ma. How's my old sweetheart tonight?" he roared, as he kissed the stout elderly proprietress on the cheek.

"Not leaving home for you," she replied, pushing him away with a laugh. "Brought the beauty chorus along?"

"Just these two girls, ma. Miss Yates has been working late and can do with a gin and it. And Nurse Davis works all the time. Eh, nurse?"

As he spoke he winked at the nurse. She was a mature girl of about forty-five, plump, with a heart-shaped face and a small mouth, curved like a bow. She wore very becoming uniform.

As for the other "girl," Miss Yates, Sonia could not imagine her meagre painted cheeks with a youthful bloom. She looked hard, ruthless and artificial. Her sharp light eyes were accentuated by green shading powder, and her nails were enamelled ox-blood. Her best points were her light red hair and her wand-like figure.

She wore what is vaguely described as a "Continental Mode" of black and white, which would not have been out of place in Bond Street.

As she watched her thin-lipped scarlet mouth, and listened to her peacock scream laugh, Sonia remembered the stupid shapeless wife at home.

"Poor Mrs. Cuttle," she thought. "That woman's cruel and greedy as Mother Ganges."

With the alderman's entrance, fresh life flowed into the stagnant bar. There was no doubt that the man possessed that indefinite quality known as personality. His remarks were ordinary, but his geniality was unforced. He seemed to revel in noise, much in the spirit of a boy with a firework.

His popularity, too, was amazing. The women clustered round him like bees on a sunflower; but the men, also, plainly regarded him as a good sport. It was obvious that he had both sympathy and tact. Although he regarded the limelight as his special property he could efface himself. Sonia noticed that he, alone, listened to Dr. Nile's longwinded story about an anonymous patient without a trace of boredom.

He fascinated her, so that she could not remove her gaze from him; but, while the amorous alderman flirted as much with the plain elderly barmaid as with the others, he showed no interest in herself.

Sir Julian had already remarked that she was an attractive girl, for he repeatedly tried to catch her eye with the object of putting her into general circulation. But the alderman cast her one penetrating glance from small almond-shaped hazel eyes. It was impersonal, but appraising—and it might have reminded Mrs. Ames of the scrutiny of the poisoners in the Hall of Horrors.

"Thinks me too young," thought Sonia. "How revolting."

As she pressed out her cigarette, the landlady looked across at her young guest.

"Did you have a nice walk?" she asked professionally.

"Yes, thanks," replied Sonia. "I discovered your Waxwork Gallery."

As she spoke, she had an instinctive sense of withdrawals and recoils, as though she had thrown a stone into a slimy pool, and disturbed hidden forms of pond life.

"That's rather a low part of the town," said the landlady. "I'm ashamed to say I've never been in the Gallery myself."

"Neither have I," declared Sir Julian.

"Oh, you should drop in, Gough," remarked the alderman. "I do, myself, from time to time. Just to keep old Mother Ames on her toes. Civic property, you know...Ever been there, Nile?"

"Once, only," replied the doctor. "Ames called me in to see that poor chap the other day. He wanted to know if he was dead."

Sir Julian burst into a shout of laughter.

"That's a good one," he said. "They wanted to make sure he was dead, so they called in the doctor. No hope for him after that."

Sonia saw the sudden gleam in the doctor's sleepy brown eyes. She noticed, too, that Cuttle did not join in the amusement, which was short-lived.

"What did the poor fellow really die of, doctor?" he asked.

"A fit. He was in a shocking state. Liver shot to bits, and so on."

"I know that. But what caused the fit?"

"Ah, you have me there, Cuttle. Personally, I'd say it was the Waxworks."

"How?"

"Probably they frightened him to death."

"Rot," scoffed Sir Julian.

"No, sober fact," declared the doctor. "You've no idea how uncanny these big deserted buildings can be at night. There are all sorts of queer noises...When I was a student, I once spent a night in a haunted house."

"See anything?" asked the alderman.

"No, for a reason which will appeal to *your* sense of humour, Gough. I cleared out just before the show was due to start. I wasn't a fool, and I realised by then that—after a time—one could imagine *anything*."

"Now, that's interesting, doctor." The alderman put down his glass and caught Miss Yates' eye. "Time to go Miss Yates."

The red-haired woman got down from her stool and adjusted her hat.

"Now, don't you two hold any business conferences on the way home," advised the barmaid archly.

"No," chimed in the landlady. "You must behave, now you're our future mayor. You'll have to break your engagement with the lady."

"Lady?" repeated the alderman, in a voice rough with sincerity. "I'm not going to meet a lady. I'm going home to have supper with my wife."

The women only screamed with sceptical laughter. As she went out of the hall, Sonia heard their parting advice.

"Good-night. Be good."

"And if you can't be good, be careful."

It struck her that the stale vulgarism might have been the spirit of the place...

Secrecy.

Directly Alderman Cuttle was outside the hotel, he slipped his great hand through his companion's arm. Linked together, they strolled slowly down the deserted High Street, talking in whispers.

At the black mouth of the Arcade they parted. Miss Yates' arms clasped the alderman possessively around his neck as he lowered his head.

"Good-night, my darling," she said.

"Good-night, my girl. You won't forget what I told you?"

"Do I ever? Can't you trust me by now?"

"I do, my sweet. I do."

Their lips met in a kiss. The tramp of official footsteps sounded in the distance, but the alderman did not break away. When Miss Yates had dived into the Arcade, he strolled on until he met the approaching policeman.

"Good-night, officer," he said.

"Good-night, sir."

The man saluted respectfully, but the alderman dug him in the ribs.

"At my old tricks again, eh, Tom?" he chuckled. "Do you remember you and me with that little red-haired piece at the lollypop shop?"

"You bet," grinned the policeman. "You always were partial to red hair, Willie. I remember, too, as you always cut me out."

"That's my Mae West curves." The alderman slapped his broad chest. "We've hit the high spots, eh, Tom? But we're both married now. And there's no one like a good wife. Always remember that, Tom."

The policeman looked puzzled. He and the alderman had attended the local Grammar School, and, in spite of the difference in their social positions, had remained friends. But, even in the old days, he had never been able to fathom the depth of young Cuttle's sincerity; and now, after many years, he remained the same enigma.

"I want you to know this, Tom," went on the alderman. "The people here call me a gay boy. Maybe. Maybe. But, next year, when I'm mayor, remember what I'm telling you now...I've always been faithful to my wife."

He added with a change of tone, "Good-night, officer. Cigar?"

"Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir."

The policeman stared after the retreating figure. The alderman's deep organ voice had throbbed with feeling, even while a dare-devil had winked from one hazel eye. He told himself that William Cuttle still had him guessing.

Almost within the next minute he was a spectator of a distant comedy. The alderman had met one of his numerous flames, and was chasing her round a lamppost.

The girl was Caroline Brown—Dr. Nile's dispenser and secretary. Of mixed parentage—Scotch and Spanish—she had the tremulous beauty of a convolvulus. But, while the surface was mother, the under-tow was pure father.

She drifted round the lamppost before the alderman's clumsy rushes, like a flower wafted by the west wind; and, when at last he caught her, all he got was a stinging slap in the face.

With peals of laughter she broke loose, while he strolled on, chuckling, and humming snatches of "Sing to me, gipsy."

His house was situated in the best residential quarter of the town. It was a large, solid, grey stone building, surrounded by two acres of well-kept garden. Everything was scrupulously tidy. The drive was cemented, and the lawn—decorated with clumps of non-seasonal enamel crocuses—was edged with a low railing, painted metallic-silver.

The taste was his wife's. Like a good husband, he gave Mrs. Cuttle a free hand both with exterior and interior decorations.

Whatever the result from an artistic standard on a raw autumn night, his home appeared comfortable and prosperous. Mrs. Cuttle had the reputation of being a careful housekeeper, but economy was not allowed to spoil his welcome. An electric lamp outside the front door lighted his way up the stone steps, guarded with lions; and, when he was inside, the centrally-heated hall was thickly carpeted and curtained from draughts.

Cuttle rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he looked around at well-polished furniture and a pot of pink azaleas on a porcelain stand at the foot of the staircase.

"Louie," he called. "I'm home."

At his shout, Mrs. Cuttle came out of the dining-room. She was stout, with a heavy face, dull hair, and a clouded complexion. She wore an unbecoming but expensive gown of bright blue chenille-velvet.

It was she who presented the cheek—and her husband who kissed. But he did so with a hearty smack of relish.

"It's good to come back to you, my duck," he told her. "What have you got for me to-night?"

"More than you deserve so late. Curried mutton."

The alderman sniffed with appreciation, as arm-in-arm they entered the dining-room. It was typical of the prosperous convention of a former generation, with a thick red-and-blue Turkey carpet, mahogany furniture, and an impressive display of plate upon the massive sideboard.

The table was laid as for a banquet, with gleaming silver, elaborately folded napkins, and many different kinds of glasses. Vases were stuffed with choice hot-house flowers which no one looked at or admired. The central stand, piled with fruit, was evidently an ornament, for it was studiously ignored by the alderman and his wife.

The supper was being kept hot on a chafing-dish and they waited on themselves. Both made a hearty meal, eating chiefly in

silence. Cuttle was the type of man who did not talk to women when they represented family, and his wife was constitutionally mute. Sometimes she asked questions, but did not seem interested in his replies.

"Why are you late, Will?"

"Business?"

"How is it?"

"So-so."

"Did Miss Yates stay late, too?"

"Did you ever see a dream walking? Did you ever hear of staff working overtime? No."

"What d'you think of the mutton, Will? It's the new butcher."

"Very good. Nothing like good meat. Gough was telling me Nile wants to put him on fruit. Pah. Pips and water."

"Sir Julian could do with dieting. His colour is bad. Is he still meeting Mrs. Nile in the Waxworks?"

"I never heard that he did." The alderman yawned and rose. "Well, my love, I'm for bed."

Mrs. Cuttle looked at the marble clock.

"It's too soon after a heavy meal. Better let me mix you a dose."

"No, you don't, old dear." Cuttle roared with laughter. "You had your chance to poison me when you were nursing me. Now I'm married I'm wise to your tricks."

"A few more late suppers and you'll poison yourself," said Mrs. Cuttle sharply.

"Well, I don't mind a pinch of bi-carb, just to oblige a good wife. I never knew such a woman for drugs. How would like it if the worm turned and I poisoned *you* for a change?"

"You couldn't if you tried. You've got to understand how poisons work."

The alderman looked thoughtful. He was a good mixer, and he had the local reputation of being able to talk on any subject.

He gave his wife a playful slap.

"Be off to bed. I want to look up something."

His own study was unlike the rest of the house, being bare and austere, with walls of grey satin wood and chromium furniture. The touches of colour were supplied by a dull purple leather cushion and a bough of forced lilac in a silver stand.

Mrs. Cuttle dimly resented this room. She had nursed her husband in sickness and in health, chosen his meals, mended his pants. She believed she knew him inside out, but for this hint of unexplored territory.

The alderman walked directly to the bookcase and drew out an encyclopaedia. With his wife's taunt rankling in his mind, he opened the book at the section "P," and ran his finger down the pages until he reached "POISONS."

IV. — MORNING COCOA

EARLY next morning, Sonia arrived at the offices of the Riverpool *Chronicle*. It was a ramshackle building in the old part of the town, and not far from the Waxwork Gallery. The district itself was rather unsavoury. Instead of attaining the dignity of age, it seemed incrusted with the accretions of Time, as though the centuries—tramping through it—had spattered it with the refuse of years.

But Leonard Eden—the owner and editor—liked the neighbourhood. His paper was not only a rich man's hobby, but a refuge from a talkative wife. He was happy in his shabby sunny room, overlooking the stagnant green river, for he was not allowed to talk at home, and he had views which he liked to express on paper.

He left the practical end to his staff; young Wells, the sub editor; Lobb, the reporter; and Horatio, the office boy and the office authority on spelling. If they were not enthusiastic over his news of an amateur addition, Leonard appeared blandly unconscious of the fact.

He was a numb, courteous gentleman, with a long pale face, a monocle, and a stock; and, although he was popularly credited with the brain of a sleepy-pear, his hobby cost him considerably less than a racehorse or a lady.

When he interviewed Sonia at his London hotel, she believed that her appointment was due to the fact that he recognised her flair for journalism. Bubbling with enthusiasm, she lost herself in a labyrinth of words to which he barely listened.

He belonged to a generation that delighted in a pretty ankle, and resented that fact that when skirts rose, imagination ceased to soar. So he admired Sonia's lashes, while he decided that it would be a kindly deed to let her rub off her rough edges for a few months at his office, at a nominal salary. Besides being his god-daughter, he was a relative; her father had recently remarried, and the family horizon was dark with storm.

As for her fine future, he was confident that some young man would soon remove her, painlessly and permanently, from the sphere of journalism.

He lost no time in taking her to the main office and losing her there. Lobb was out, but Wells' dog occupied the editorial chair, while Wells scraped his pipe as a preliminary to work.

Leonard murmured a languid introduction.

"Mum-mm Wells. Miss Thompson. Did I mention her to you, Wells? Mr. Wells will find you some odds and ends and explain anything. Don't overdo it to-day."

There was a moment of stunned silence after the door had closed, while Horatio, in the background, hurriedly smoothed his hair with moistened palms.

"Didn't you expect me?" asked Sonia.

"Well, we'd heard a rumour," replied Wells, "but we didn't actually believe in you."

"Isn't that like my cherished Leonard? By the way, what d'you call him? The 'Chief?'"

"No. 'Buns.'"

"Oh...Well, will you call me 'Thompson,' and treat me just like a man? I mean, I don't want to cramp your style, or have preferential treatment."

In spite of her overture, young Wells already felt the first hint of restriction as he looked at her. She was an attractive young creature, with slanting butterfly brows, generous red lips, and the greyhound build of her generation. She wore the standardised fashion of swagger-coat and small hat, tilted over one *eye*, but her vivid face saved her from the reproach of mass production.

Young Wells knew instinctively that she was free from herd instinct. She would lead—and he would follow. She would smash precedent, create chaos, upset routine.

Perhaps, he heard, too, faintly in the distance, the clang of closing doors, and fought against his fate; for man is, by nature, a free animal and dreads the thought of the inevitable cage.

But while he regarded her bleakly, he found favour in her eyes. He was rather short and thickset, and she liked his broad shoulders and three-cornered smile.

"It's the dream of my life to work on a paper," she said. "What are you, by the way?"

"I'm rather a composite person," Wells told her. "I'm the sub and the sporting editor, and Kathleen, and Uncle Dick."

"*I'll* be Kathleen."

"No you won't. You're too young for the Women's Page. You have no idea of the questions you'll have to answer. I've come to the conclusion women have no refinement."

"Don't be absurd...Are you all the staff?"

"No. Lobb's our star turn. He's out now. He covers the water front and I cover the pubs. And here's Horatio."

Soma's smile made Horatio—who was impressionable—her slave.

"Are you going to be a journalist, too?" she asked.

"No, miss. An editor. My mother says there's always plenty of room at the top."

"You go and tell that to the old man, and study his reaction," advised Wells. Then he glanced at the clock. "Ten to eleven, you young slacker."

The youth vanished, after another languishing glance at Sonia. She looked around the big untidy room, with the frosted-glass windows, the sun-blistered paint, the ink-stained table, the battered typewriters—and then she sighed.

"Not a bit like the Pictures?" asked Wells. "One more illusion gone west?"

"It's very peaceful. But I did think of it like—like you said. You know. Telephones ringing like mad and every one using language. Doesn't a big story ever break?"

"Oh, yes. Sometimes a woman sets her chimney on fire on her neighbour's washing day."

"Then—it's not, a *real* newspaper office?"

"Yes, it is—if *you're* a real journalist."

There was a rasp in young Wells' voice, which Sonia resented in spite of her plea for non-preferential treatment.

"Well, I've had no experience," she confessed.

"But you're here. That's your answer."

There was a brief silence. Then Wells' dog got down from his chair and pointedly laid his head on Soma's knee, after a preliminary sniff. Young Wells took the hint and relented.

"You shall be Kathleen," he said. "As a matter of fact, a lady has just told Buns that she reads my page to get a good laugh. He had me on the carpet. He's very sensitive over the paper, remember...And you can have the Children's Corner, Film Notes, Poultry World, Gardening—"

"But I don't know—"

"Just lift them from any reliable source. Three parts *The Gardener*, and one part Beverley Nichols is the mixture for our Gardening Column—"

He broke off at a tinkling sound outside the door.

"Miss Thompson," he said solemnly, "you are about to share in our great moment, when the whole building vibrates with dynamic life."

"Oh, do you mean going to press?" asked Sonia eagerly.

"No."

"But—it can't be putting the paper to bed?"

"Where did you learn your weird language? No. Here it is." He flung open the door. "Eleven o'clock cocoa."

He laughed at Sonia's disappointed face, as Horatio entered with a tray and three steaming cups.

"It's an inspired idea," he said. "Buns always has it, so we have it too, to keep us from going Red."

Sonia enjoyed the cocoa-party, even while she dimly resented it. She had pictured her plunge into journalism as a dive into molten emotions, and a frantic race against time, to the stamp of overdriven machines.

But, even while she sipped her cocoa, while the clock ticked lazily on, a new element was creeping into her life. Young Wells looked at her with fresh interest.

"I'm wondering why girls leave home," he said presently.

"Meaning me?" she asked. "Well, you shall have the story of my life, but I warn you it's pathetic...Nobody loves me at home. The only time I was popular with my father was before I was born. I believe he mistook me for a boy. And he's just gone and married a girl who was at school with me."

"Poor girl," said Wells with feeling. "I bet you gave her hell."

"You bet I did." Sonia added, "For one ghastly moment, I thought you were going to pity *me*. Such a lot of men have poor-kidded me since the marriage. And I loathe it."

"I knew that. Here's Lobb. Trust him to turn up in time for the cocoa. He's a meal hound."

Sonia looked curiously at the tall gaunt man who had just entered. He was a striking figure for Riverpool, for he wore a cape and slouched black felt hat. Yet, in spite of appearing shabby, unhappy, and ill, his ravaged face held some of the dark broken beauty of a fallen angel.

"This is our Miss Thompson," said Wells. "She's real."

Sonia saw the light leap up in Hubert Lobb's sunken eyes, like fire rising through charred ash. He stared at her almost thirstily, as though he were refreshed by her youth.

"We'd come to regard you as fabulous. Rather like a unicorn," he explained, as he dropped down on a chair and drank his cocoa quickly, draining his cup.

Sonia, who was watching him, wondered compassionately whether he had come out without a proper breakfast. After glancing at his dusty coat, she decided that he was at the mercy of a neglectful landlady.

He met her speculative gaze with a half-smile.

"A new venture, isn't it?" he asked. "I hope you'll let me help you in any difficulty. But—you won't be here long."

"No," Sonia spoke eagerly. "This is only a jumping-off place for Manchester or Birmingham. After that, London."

"Ah. If I'd one grain of your enthusiasm, plus my weight of failures, I should be—" He pointed upwards and added, "Not here. As things are, Horatio has the only chance of being in the first flight."

"All the same, I rather envy you. You've lived. I feel so—unbegun."

Young Wells, who had noticed Sonia's interest in his colleague, thought it time to intervene.

"How's your wife, Lobb?"

"Not too well, thanks."

"And the kid?"

"Perfectly fit."

"Coming home for the holidays?"

"I suppose so." Lobb rose, the light in his eyes extinguished. "I suppose I must do some work—. or what passes for work here. By the way, Mrs. Forbes, wife of the chemist in Flannel Street, had her bag snatched last night."

"That's new for Riverpool. We're looking up. Does she know who lifted it?"

"No, too dark. She says someone snatched it and was round the corner in a flash."

"Much chink?"

"The week's housekeeping money...Do you want to see me, sir?"

He spoke to Leonard Eden, who stood drooping in the doorway.

"No, Lobb. Sonia, my wife is expecting you to dinner. As early as you can get out. Better not start here to-day. Just get the feel of things. Wells will give you a copy of the *Chronicle* for you to study. If you want anything for the office, my wife has an account at Cuttle's. Have it charged. Good-bye, my dear...Wells, downstairs, please."

Leonard drifted from the room, and Wells prepared to follow him. He stopped, however, to speak to Sonia.

"What's wrong here? Do you really want to shop?"

"Of course. I simply must have an amusing waste-paper basket. And a vase. I can't work without flowers. And a cushion. Shall I get some for the rest of you?"

"Please do." Wells spoke with deadly sweetness. "My colour's blue. I can't work unless everything's blue. But it *must* match my eyes."

As the door slammed, Horatio, who had been typing furiously to impress Sonia, moistened his lips nervously.

"Oh, Miss Thompson, if you got *him* a cushion, he'd pitch it into the fire. Why, he's the best centre-forward the team's ever had. And he's captain."

"Then he should play back. I always did. Hockey, I mean. We'll discuss the point one day, Horatio. Good-bye, angel."

She patted Wells' airedale, whose name was "Goal," and then glanced into the inner office, where Lobb was rattling away on a defective machine.

"Apparently a story has broken at last," she murmured.

Since bag-snatching had become epidemic, she could not enter into the general excitement, although she realised that it was a local novelty.

But no one, with the exception of the victim, knew of the exceptional feature connected with this special theft.

V. — THE VOICE

RIVERPOOL had already astonished Sonia by the unexpected size of its Waxwork Gallery and also of its chief hotel. It had a third surprise for her in Alderman Cuttle's shop.

It revealed him as a man of ambition and taste. Although not a modern trade palace of marble and metal, it was unnecessarily spacious and expensively decorated in grey and silver. The carpets were thick purple pile and the assistants all wore violet.

It was run on a skeleton staff, and when Sonia entered there were only a few customers. But the apparent slackness of trade did not worry the alderman, who was laughing heartily as he chatted to Miss Yates.

The daylight showed up the hardness of the woman's face and the patches of rouge on her high cheek-bones. She wore a skin-tight black satin gown, and spectacles with an orange frame to match her hair.

She took no notice of Sonia, but stared exclusively at her clothes—her eyes passing directly from her scarf to her hat, and leaping the gap of her face. But the alderman, who looked vast in long baggy grey plus-fours, gave her an impressive welcome.

"I'm honoured to see you here, Miss Thompson. I hope you will test my claim that you can do as well here as in London or Paris. Although we never tout for custom, I think we can satisfy the most critical taste."

"I'm sure you can if Miss Yates' dress is a sample," said Sonia diplomatically.

"Ah, you've got the name already. The journalistic instinct, I suppose. You see, we know all about you. Penalty of fame."

His laugh rolled down the building, as Miss Yates beckoned to an assistant and walked away. He certainly made Sonia's shopping easy, for he had a selection of articles brought from different departments. While she worked through her list, he lingered, giving advice and chatting casually.

Although she did not intend to be drawn, she thawed gradually under the geniality of his manner. His questions ceased to appear curiosity and became genuine personal interest.

"How do you stimulate your imagination?" he asked. "Strong tea? Alcohol? Or do you smoke opium like de Quincey?"

"I don't imagine." Sonia could not resist feeling flattered at being mistaken for an experienced journalist. "I just write up facts."

"I see. I do the murder, and you tell the tale. Ha, ha. Have you decided where you are going to live?"

"Yes. Tulip House."

"Oh, no. That's not quite good enough for *you*. They've just converted a house, and Nurse Davis has a charming flatlet there. Why not take a little flat?"

"I don't want the bother. And they say Miss Mackintosh makes her people comfortable. Besides—this is the real reason—I like the name of the house."

"Yes, that's how ladies generally pick a horse." He lowered his voice, although the assistant had gone to another department, "I often lay money for my lady customers. Not too profitable for me. They expect their winnings, but they usually forget to pay when they lose."

Again his loud laugh rolled through the shop.

"Thanks, but I don't bet," Sonia told him.

"No vices?"

"One. I write."

He cast her a penetrating glance from his small hazel eyes.

"Do you think you will like Riverpool?" he asked.

"I've hardly seen it yet. But I'm enchanted with the Waxworks. I intend to do a series of feature articles about it."

"Oh, good. I take an interest in it myself. I believe I am the only member of the council to use our private key. As future mayor, I believe these municipal relics should be preserved. Sometimes when I've an oddment of silk or velvet, and we're slack in the workrooms, I re-dress a model. At this moment, Parnell is

wearing one of my suits. He was getting too much an advertisement for the Nudists."

"I'll look out for it," said Sonia.

"Mrs. Ames will show it to you. She's a character, but she has got to be watched. She clings to her old figures until they're nearly verminous."

"I know. She's terribly upset, at present, about Mary of Scotland. I suppose—you couldn't—"

"Mary? Ah, yes. She's about done for. She'll have to be scrapped."

For a moment, Sonia thought she surprised a gleam of cruelty in his eyes, as though he was discussing the fate of a real person who had displeased him.

"Absurd," she thought. "Why should he dislike a waxwork?"

Although her shopping was finished, the alderman still lingered. When the bill was paid and the assistant went to the cash-desk for change, he spoke confidentially.

"Quite made up your mind about Tulip House?"

"Quite."

"Then, there's an end of it. But I'd like to give you a word of warning under the hat about the other lodgers."

"Miss Mackintosh has already told me about them." Sonia spoke stiffly. "I understand Miss Blair is your mannequin, and Miss Brown is Dr. Nile's dispenser. She said they were both nice quiet girls."

"So they are. Bless my soul, yes. No, it's Miss Munro—the teacher at St. Hildegarde's College. She's *peculiar*—to say the least of it. Very peculiar. If you're wise, you won't get friendly with her."

Before Sonia could speak, he changed the subject.

"I expect you'll find it dull at first, with no friends. My wife will ask you to tea if you care to come. We're plain people—but she'll be your mayoress next year...Well, Bessie?"

He broke off, as a pale pretty girl approached with the stereotyped mincing step of a mannequin.

"Lady Priday is outside," she told him.

"I'll come at once."

The alderman strode down the aisle like a cyclone. He made Sonia think of a tempestuous draught which creates a vacuum in its wake, for directly he had gone the shop seemed empty and flat.

When she left a few minutes later, he was chatting to a lady who was seated inside an impressive Lanchester. They appeared to be on excellent terms, for her laughter mingled with his.

Apparently he did not notice Sonia; but, after she had passed, she turned suddenly and saw his reflection in a side-window.

He was looking after her with an expression of acute dislike in his eyes.

It reminded her of the flash of hatred with which she believed he had discussed poor Mary's fate; but this time it was not her imagination.

Apart from a shock to her vanity, she was principally perplexed, for she was used to rather more than her fair share of attention.

"If I'm not his type and he's bored, he wouldn't glare like that," she thought. "No. I've *done* something. What? I've spent money at his shop—but he can't hate me for that."

Before she had walked far, she believed she had found the solution.

It was the Waxwork Gallery.

"Of course," she decided. "He meets his ladies there. He is afraid I might attract other people if I write it up."

She tasted an anticipatory glow of the power of the press.

She went early to Leonard Eden's house, which was not the old Georgian mansion—indicated by his monocle and stock—but a modern sun-trap with butterfly wings. During dinner Mrs. Eden kept up her record for monologue, and Sonia realised the motive for Leonard's hospitality when she saw him steal happily away to his library.

Her hostess had talked her into a state of coma, when at last she was sent back in the car, for it was raining torrents. She

thought, as she drove through it, that she had never seen any place more desolate than the dark deserted town, with its streaming pavements and puddled roads.

It was like the vision of a nightmare of a hundred years ago, and she was glad when she reached the Golden Lion.

"A dirty night," said the porter, as he opened the glass doors.

"Yes," she replied, "I pity any one out in this weather."

She regretted that it was her last night in the hotel, for her bedroom seemed doubly warm and luxuriant in contrast with the rain which lashed against her panes. It was newly decorated, with white walls, striped with silver, and cupids stamped over the blue bed-hangings.

On the dressing-table was a note which had been sent by hand. As she read it, she rather repented her criticism of the alderman, for it proved that not only were his impulses hospitable, but that he was prompt in action.

It was from Mrs. Cuttle, inviting her to tea at Stonehenge Lodge. She studied the note with interest, for already she was subconsciously concerned with Mrs. Cuttle. It was written in a thick, immature writing, with the backward slant adopted by some schoolgirls when they first try to make their script appear adult. The paper was thick and the address heavily stamped.

"I'll go," decided Sonia. "How that poor woman must loathe having strange girls wished upon her."

Although she was tired, she lay awake for a long time tossing in bed; and when at last she slept, she had confused dreams. She thought Mrs. Ames was showing her round the Waxwork Gallery. She was in the nude, but Sonia accepted it as quite the right conduct for a former artist's model. The figures were people whom she had already met in the town. Alderman Cuttle, glossily tinted and wearing grey plus-fours, stared at her with blind glass eyes. Hubert Lobb was crowned with an enormous black hat, under the shade of which his features were yellow wax.

The most appealing Waxwork was a shapeless figure, with a slit bodice which exposed straw stuffing.

"Poor Mrs. Cuttle," wailed Mrs. Ames. "She's doomed."

Then the dream shifted, and Sonia found herself in a shop, which stretched out in endless vistas after the manner of a nightmare. She had urgent need of a long list of articles, but she could not get served because all the assistants were Waxworks. She recognised Henry the Eighth behind the ribbon counter, while Elizabeth wore spectacles with orange rims.

Suddenly she was awakened by the sound of shrill ringing.

Her heart leaping from shock, she jumped up in bed, and snapping on the light looked at her watch. It was ten minutes past three. At that hour in the morning, there was an urgency in the telephone bell which she feared was the prelude to bad news.

In a panic, she picked up the receiver and heard the sleepy mumble of the porter who had connected the call with the extension.

"Hallo," she called.

A voice seemed to limp over the wire. It was faint and breathless, as though the person had been running.

"Are—you—there?"

"Yes," she replied. "Who are you?"

"Are you Room Eight, Golden Lion?"

"Yes. Who are—"

"I want to speak to my cousin. Miss Smith. She's staying here, in this room."

"I'm sorry, but you've got the wrong number," Sonia told the voice.

"No, *please* wait. It's so desperately urgent. Don't ring off...Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"So am I. So terribly alone."

The distress in the Voice touched Sonia's pity.

"Where are you speaking from?" she asked.

"From a call-office."

Sonia looked at the outside darkness with a shudder. The rain was still streaming down the glass. When she realised that a

woman was out in merciless weather at that time of the morning alone—she felt almost ashamed of her own security and comfort.

"Why don't you ask the porter if your cousin is staying here?" she asked. "You've probably been told the wrong room."

There was no reply but a strangled sob. Sonia began to wonder whether the cousin were a fiction born of necessity.

"Are you in trouble?" she ventured.

"Trouble?" The voice laughed bitterly. "I'm drowning in deep water."

"Well." Sonia hesitated and then took the plunge. "If you'll come here and ask for me, perhaps I may be able to—to help."

"No. I'm past help."

"But—I don't understand—"

"You couldn't understand. I'm desperately lonely. I wanted to hear another voice. To know someone was alive beside myself. Devils are following me...I'm *afraid*."

"What are you afraid of?"

Two words jolted over the wire so faintly that at the time Sonia could not distinguish them. Then silence followed. She spoke several times, but got no reply. Presently she gave up and rang off.

"Pray it was a practical joke," she muttered. She looked around her bridal blue and silver room, and the festive cupids for reassurance, before she switched off the light.

Just as she was dropping off to sleep, the last two despairing words stirred inside her ear like the murmur of the sea in a shell.

"I'm doomed."

VI. — THE BIRTH OF MURDER

WHEN Sonia walked in at the gate of Stonehenge Lodge two afternoons later, she felt, not only an old member of the staff of the *Chronicle*, but that London had withdrawn to an incredible distance. The ancient town, with its worn cobbles, its murmurous underground river and hollowed pavements, had hypnotised her almost to the belief that she had lived there all her life.

When she was shown into the drawing-room Mrs. Cuttle was entertaining two other guests; or, to be accurate, she was at home to them while they entertained her.

Sonia had been prepared to find her hostess the pathetic creature of her dream. She had come in a generous spirit—eager to champion her, if help were necessary or possible. It was, therefore, rather a disappointment to discover that the lady was stolid, prosperous, and very well satisfied with herself.

As she sat enthroned in a corpulent chair, she reminded Sonia of an over-stuffed satin pin-cushion. Her eyes were blue and expressionless, except when they rested on the tea-table which gleamed with the best silver. Then they reflected complacency.

Sonia recognised Nurse Davis—still in becoming uniform. The other girl, who was tall, slight, and had honey-gold hair, was introduced as Mrs. Nile.

She chatted like a fountain, while Nurse Davis rolled on like a river, leaving Sonia free to study the room. It was large and crowded with good furniture; the carpet was a hand-made Sparta—the hangings expensive. But there was too much of everything; from the Italian landscapes on the walls to the vases which held more flowers than they could display effectively.

"It's the room of a greedy person," thought Sonia. Then she softened her judgment to "Or someone who's been kept short."

In spite of its size the drawing-room was warm and airless. A huge fire burned in the brass dog-grate, and heavy blue velvet curtains shut out the still grey November daylight.

Presently Sonia felt too torpid even to attempt to talk. At the same time her mind remained acutely receptive and tuned in to capture every impression.

She seemed to be a spectator of some domestic drama. At first the action was sluggish, for the talk was of servants. Nurse Davis declared that there was a domestic famine, and told long stories of the local ladies' shifts and difficulties. She had barely stopped for breath when Mrs. Nile gave a lively exaggeration of

the system of bribery and corruption by which she said she kept her servants.

Mrs. Cuttle listened with pursed lips and nods. Presently she explained her own domestic arrangements.

It was like listening to a vast cistern being emptied drop by drop. She spoke slowly—often pausing to capture an elusive word. Yet she remained unflurried, and resisted any attempt to hurry or help her account.

"My girls are quite good. Well, not too bad. But I have to let them sleep out. It suits me. They come at seven and prepare the supper before they go."

This was the gist of her long and detailed statement. But had she been outside Time, instead of being enclosed in a padded chair, she might have realised the future significance of her domestic arrangements.

When at last she ran dry, Nurse Davis rushed into the gap.

"Your house is always so beautifully kept," she gushed. "This room looks as if it had just been spring-cleaned."

Mrs. Nile caught Sonia's eye with an elfin grin.

"Mrs. Cuttle has no pets," she said.

"No." Mrs. Cuttle nodded complacently. "Mr. Cuttle would like one, but cats scratch the furniture and dogs bring in dirt. I have a husband, so I don't want an animal."

"And I have a husband, two dogs, and a cat with expectations," remarked Mrs. Nile. "You can't keep a good woman down."

Still listening with detachment, Sonia decided that she liked Lilith Nile. She might be provocative and indiscreet, but she was also good-natured, amusing and gay.

Presently Mrs. Cuttle explained the delayed tea. "I'm waiting for my husband."

"I suppose he'll be bringing some girls along?" suggested Nurse Davis archly.

"I wouldn't put it past him. They won't leave him alone."

She spoke with placid indifference; and, when a few minutes later the alderman burst in, accompanied by Miss Yates and his model, Bessie Blair, Sonia saw no change in her face.

The alderman went directly to his wife and kissed her.

"Here we are, my love. These girls have missed their tea, so I ran them up in the car. They've been out at Lady Priday's. Poor Bessie's been modelling all the afternoon."

"Sit down, Bessie," invited Mrs. Cuttle.

She spoke a second after both her visitors were seated.

Miss Yates, who managed to look willowy even in a short belted fur coat, was completely at home. She ran her sharp eyes over the room, as though, when she was its mistress, she would know how to deal with its deficiencies, or rather superfluities. Sonia could see that she was both quick and capable; she watched Mrs. Cuttle slowly pouring out tea, as though she ached to sweep her off her chair and finish the job.

The alderman introduced a new element into the stuffy room. Every one grew more vital, and ceased to talk of servants and clothes. He flirted indiscriminately with the ladies, with the exception of Miss Yates and Sonia. But, while he was distantly polite to her, Sonia felt that there was an understanding between Miss Yates and himself.

As she watched him ogling Nurse Davis, whose pink bow-shaped lips and dimpled cheeks were wreathed in smiles, it struck her that the alderman was a figure which might become legendary. When the Twentieth Century had rolled away, an old civic Register and contemporary gossip's diary might resurrect the Amorous Alderman as a brilliant, fantastic figure capering against the faded tapestry of the past.

Already his flirtations and popularity were proverbial. On this occasion he was specially tender to his mannequin, Bessie Blair. Pale, with brown hair and green eyes, she had the symmetrical figure and features of a model, together with a reverential attitude towards clothes.

"Cake, Bessie?" asked Miss Yates.

Sonia was sure that Mrs. Cuttle resented the invitation. She opened her lips dumbly, as though in a vain struggle for speech. At that moment her stupid blue eyes were pathetic, as they strained against her handicap of inarticulation.

"Oo, they do look tempting," said Bessie, "but I daren't. The icing might start my tooth aching again. The stopping has come out of a back tooth."

"Dear, dear," clicked Nurse Davis. At the call to her sympathy, she changed instantly from a voluptuous Reubens goddess to a kind and motherly soul. "I've something that will cure that."

Opening her bag, she drew out a small case containing glass tubes.

"I've just been giving a patient a hypodermic," she explained. "Here, Bessie. Crunch this morphine tablet and put it in your tooth, but be careful not to swallow the saliva."

"Why?" asked Bessie.

"Because it's poison."

"Oo!" Bessie took up the case and read the names on the tubes. "Digitaline, atropine, strychnine, hyoscine, morphine...I thought you couldn't get poisons?"

"*You* couldn't. But I'm a nurse and use them medically."

"But how thrilling. I got *The Trial of Madeline Smith* out of the free library. It must be thrilling to be in a famous trial. Every one looking at you, and describing you and your dress, and wanting to marry you."

"But what about the eight o'clock walk?" asked the alderman.

"Madeline Smith got off. And anyway, she'd be dead by now. Nurse, do tell me. How many of these little things would it take to kill any one?"

"Let me think." Nurse Davis was purposely vague. "Each pilule is one seventieth of a grain. Perhaps eight or ten. But even a doctor can't say definitely. All drugs and poisons act differently on different people. And there's always an outside chance of an abnormal case."

"Anyway, there's *somebody's* death in that wee bottle," persisted Bessie. "Isn't it thrilling? How long would they take to act?"

"About a quarter of an hour if injected. Four or five hours, perhaps, taken by the mouth."

"Would the person know she was taking poison?"

"Yes. You'd have to disguise the taste in some highly seasoned food."

It was plain that Bessie was fascinated by the poisons. But as she watched the girl's empty, amiable face, Sonia received the feeling that she was but the mouthpiece of a stronger will. She was a model; usually, a lay-figure on which to drape clothes—now, a machine wound up to ask questions.

"Which would taste least?" she persisted.

"Hum," pondered Nurse Davis. "I should say digitaline was the least bitter."

"And what would it do?"

"It's a narcotic, so it would make you very sleepy. The breathing becomes stertorous, and there are some unpleasant symptoms. The least exertion is fatal. Gradually the heart slows down and then it stops."

"How thrilling," gasped Bessie. "Suppose any one took a fatal dose, could you bring them round again?"

"Yes, if the dose is not too heavy, and it's taken in time with a stomach-pump and a wash-out. But once it's right in the system you're good as dead."

Involuntarily Sonia studied the circle of listeners. She noticed Miss Yates' strained face, her greedy hollow palms and curving crimson-tipped fingers. The laughter-lines sprayed round the alderman's eyes had deepened to spurs in his concentration. Pretty Mrs. Nile was thoughtful, and seemed to have grown a few years older. Bessie's cheeks were flushed with excitement.

Mrs. Cuttle alone was unmoved, as she dipped a corner of her napkin into hot water and wiped a spot of grease off the teapot.

Sonia shuddered. She told herself that, here in the room, were three women who would like to be sitting in Mrs. Cuttle's chair. She was the predestined victim—superfluous, stupid, helpless.

The alderman broke the spell with a laugh like an exploding bombshell.

"Well, Nurse, now you've told this young lady exactly how to poison some one, you'd better tell her what she'll get if she tries it on."

With a feeling of relief Sonia shook off her morbid fancy. She saw the scene as it was in reality—a prosperous middle-class drawing-room, filled with ordinary people of sound morals and conventional virtues. The alderman was a clumsy bumble-bee, blundering from flower to flower; but he always kissed his wife before he went out and when he came home.

And yet—in spite of the muffins and the best china—in that warm, flower-fragrant room, the Spirit of Murder had actually struggled to birth in the dark cell of one brain.

VII. — THE WATCHER

"WHERE do you live?" asked Lilith Nile as Sonia rose to go.

"Tulip House."

"Then I'll come with you. It's on my way."

Although it was early, the November twilight had already deepened into darkness. The lamp over the front door lit up the cemented drive; but, outside in the lonely residential road, the time might have been midnight. Occasionally the illumined window of a house gleamed through its barrier of bare trees, or a lamp cast a feeble circle of light on the damp pavement.

Mrs. Nile talked continuously as they rustled through layers of rusty leaves; she asked questions, but, mercifully, did not expect replies.

"Did you see the autumn crocuses? Pathetic, aren't they? How d'you like Tulip House? My husband's dispenser digs there. She is frightfully sweet-looking. He says she's a little wiz at the work, and better than a man...You can't think how grateful I am for a new face. But I hope you're not discreet. Discreet people are so boring. As you've noticed, I'm indiscreet, on principle—or rather, lack of principle."

"Why?" asked Sonia to fill in the pause.

"Because it's expected of me. I say idiotic things just to see their silly faces. Every one here is waiting for me to come a cropper. So why should I disappoint them?"

"I seem to have heard something like that before."

"You mean—I'm dramatising myself?" asked Mrs. Nile, with unexpected penetration. "Well, you're bound to hear about me, if you've not already...Dr. Nile chose his wife from a tainted source. You see, I've one mother—and several fathers."

"What fun," said Sonia lightly. "You can pick your own."

"It's nice of you to be so modern about it. But it's the only thing I'm old-fashioned about. I always feel a father is one of those little facts which should be cut and dried."

Sonia was touched by the slight quiver in the elder girl's voice.

"I've been up against it myself," she said. "And you may be interested to hear that my trouble was a father—and a very definite one. A bit like the Barrett of Wimpole Street. After he married we had nothing but rows. So I cleared out. That's my solution. Work."

"You're lucky. I've nothing to do. No family—no servant worries. I was pulling their legs just now. Servants always adore me."

"What about sport? Golf?"

"I was an hotel child, and I never learned to play games. Except one. And that's the one my mother plays."

"Then why don't you start something?" persisted Sonia. "A bridge club, or some dances?"

"You can't get up things here. At least, you can't keep them spinning. The first may be a success, but the next will be a flop, You've got to depend on some one influential, and she's bound to drop out, and the whole thing collapses."

"What are the people like?" asked Sonia curiously.

"Lousy."

"No, but seriously. I want to understand them, because I'm going to work here. Have you heard I'm the new 'Kathleen?'"

"I'll write and consult you about my affairs. Plenty of *them*. I'm following in father's footsteps—one of my fathers."

"I'll tell you how the people strike me," remarked Sonia. "They're keeping a secret."

"No." Again Mrs. Nile surprised Sonia with a flash of shrewdness. "One half is keeping a secret. The other half is trying to find it out."

"Which is Alderman Cuttle doing?"

"Neither. He's perfectly obvious. Out to flirt with anything in a skirt."

"Not with me. He doesn't like me."

"Aha, who's dramatising herself now? You've the usual features. That's enough for him...And here's the parting of the ways."

They halted under a central lamp-post, from which radiated five residential roads. While they chatted, the Town Hall clock began to strike.

"Quarter to six," remarked Lilith Nile. "Later than I thought...Look here, I may play the fool, but I'd never let my husband down. He's given me things that other people take for granted. They mean everything to me. But he's *got* to trust me. And now I must fly home to him."

Sonia glanced down the dark vistas of stone garden walls topped by shrubs.

"What lonely roads," she said. "Are you nervous of walking home alone?"

"I don't. Ask the town. And what's there to be nervous of? Nothing ever happens here."

Fate, with dramatic effect, chose that moment to give the lie to her words. The garden gate of a large house, half-way down one avenue, was pushed open and two maids ran out into the road. One was in a parlourmaid's livery, the other wore a cooking-overall.

They stopped, panting, by the lamp.

"Have you seen a man running this way?" asked the cook.

"No," replied Sonia. "Why?"

"One of my ladies has had her bag snatched on her way home. I suppose there's not a policeman about?"

They looked down all the deserted roads, and then the cook shook her head.

"He's got clean away. Yes, mum, my mistress has 'phoned the police station. Come back, Nellie."

"That's the second snatch-and-grab," said Lilith jubilantly. "I wonder if we're in for an epidemic. What fun. Come back with me and see my angel Peke."

"No. I've got to have dinner, and then I'm going to the Waxworks."

"No, not there," called Mrs. Nile, as she turned down Arcacia Avenue. "All the low characters of the town go there. Including myself."

It was characteristic of Sonia to think of other people instead of her own concerns. Although she was younger than Mrs. Nile, she felt her senior. Presently she came to the conclusion that it was a case of transposed development. When she was a wretched hotel child, Lilith Nile was probably a premature woman, used to every kind of sordid shift. Now that she was grown up, she was trying to play.

And when a married woman starts to become juvenile in a small town, she is naturally rather a monkey-puzzle to her neighbours.

"Pathetic in a way," thought Sonia. "But I like her."

Tulip House was an old residence, situated in the heart of the town, and formerly occupied by Dr. Mackintosh, of mid-Victorian period. Its long narrow windows and double flight of steps were set flush with the pavement. Inside were large rooms, a fine hall, and a winding staircase.

The shabby furniture and worn carpets testified to a succession of boarders, by means of whom Miss Mackintosh—the doctor's daughter—preserved her childhood's home. She was an excellent cook, and, in spite of its shortcomings, Tulip House was clean and comfortable.

When Sonia entered, Miss Mackintosh stood at the foot of the stairs talking to Miss Munro, the History teacher at St. Hildegarde's. Sonia had been interested in her because of the alderman's warning, but so far, she had been invisible. Like Sonia, she had her private sitting-room, and she never used the communal rooms.

The hall was dimly-lit with one gas jet, but Sonia could see that Miss Munro belonged to a different world from that of the other boarders. There was distinction in the lines of her tall thin

figure, and a suggestion of elegance in her tight dark suit. Her large eyes looked as if they had been recently blacked, in the dead white oval of her face.

Sonia credited her with pride, reserve, and fastidious taste. She felt instinctively that Miss Munro was not concerned with surface values. She might ignore her coat, but she would be meticulous about its lining.

"You ladies should know each other, as you'll be meeting in the house," said Miss Mackintosh.

Sonia advanced with a smile which met with no response. Miss Munro merely bowed stiffly, and then turned pointedly away and began to mount the staircase.

Miss Mackintosh began to canvass for breakfast orders.

"Would you like haddock?"

"Is she always as rude?" asked Sonia indignantly.

"Or perhaps you'd prefer eggs?"

It was evident that Miss Mackintosh would not discuss her boarders. Sonia respected her reserve and went into the dining-room, where Caroline Brown—beautiful and fragile, as though spun of roses and the west wind—was adding up figures in a small account-book while she devoured an enormous tea.

Bessie Blair, who had just returned from Stonehenge Lodge, looked on enviously.

"How you *dare*. If I ate dripping-toast, I should put on stones."

"I can give you something to keep you slim for all time," offered Caroline. "A dear little worm in a gelatine capsule."

"Don't be disgusting." Bessie continued to look critically at Caroline's sylph-like figure. "It beats me why you slave, when you could be a mannequin."

"I'm not a sap," said Caroline. "A face lasts about five minutes, but the rest of you goes on for years, and it's got to be fed. I'm saving in the Halifax Building Society for my old age. I had an aunt in a beauty chorus, and all she did was to come home with a bundle in her arms. I had to bring it up just as I'd finished

with my little brothers and sisters. But I always prefer illegitimate children. They're like mongrels, more intelligent and affectionate."

She scraped the jam spoon with skilful spatulate fingers which contrasted so oddly with her floral face, and got up from the table.

"The alderman's taking me to the pictures," she announced. "Aren't I lucky?"

"Not my idea of luck to go out with a fat married man," said Sonia.

"Ah, it's easy to see you've never paid for your pictures."

"But what *is* the special attraction about the alderman?"

"He pays."

Bessie looked thoughtful as she shook her head.

"No, Caroline, there is something about the boss. I think it must be his strength. I've seen him tear a trade journal in two."

Sonia was to remember that remark later, in different circumstances. At the time, in the shabby comfort of the room, with cheerful company, it made no impression.

She ate her dinner with a book propped in front of her, and directly it was finished she walked to the Waxwork Gallery. The instant she passed through the mahogany doors, and smelt its characteristic odour, she was gripped by the fingers of the past. The advertisements in old magazines in her grandmother's book-cupboard suddenly stirred in her memory.

She was swept back to an era of primrose kid gloves and lavender silk gowns, perfumed with cherry blossom, and smoothed by Macassar oil—when feminine complexions were due to Pears' soap, and masculine appetites tempted by Gentleman's Relish.

A simplified era of sharply-defined social distinctions and moral values—when a painted face marked the biological difference between a lady and a woman, while a man remained triumphantly a man.

Mrs. Ames, in a creased mauve smock, surged to meet her, greeting her as an old friend.

"Ah, I knew we'd meet in Philippi."

"Yes, I simply had to see your fascinating Waxworks again," Sonia told her.

Mrs. Ames, who was in a sentimental mood, gulped.

"They'll like to hear you say that. Ames says I'm crackers over them. But when this Gallery was first opened all the gentry flocked to it. I feel my figures must remember those old days, and they don't like being neglected."

"Never mind, they'll soon be popular again. I'm going to put them on the map. When I've written them up, all the visitors to the town will come here."

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Ames. "'Trust no future, howe'er pleasant.' Sometimes I get the hump with no visitors. And no tips. Under the rose, my dear, I get a trifle now and again to keep my lips closed."

"You mean—the lovers?"

"'Sh. There's no sin, of course. But all the same—forbidden fruit. One of my artists used to quote Swinburne to me. A nice poet, but sad. 'Where the apple reddens, never pry, lest we lose our Edens, Eve and I.' But all I lost was my figure. And I might have kept that if I'd stuck to apples...Have you got a penny?"

"Yes."

"If you put it in that slot, Gert and Bert—that's what I call them—will dance the minuet."

Mrs. Ames pointed to a glass case which shielded two smaller figures with dingy powdered hair, and dressed in faded peach brocade.

As Sonia inserted the coin she felt that she was giving the old mechanism the surprise of its life. It grunted, complained, and wheezed rustily; but presently it released a faint tinkling melody, like a ghost-tune from an old musical-box.

After an interval the two figures jerked into spasmodic motion in a grotesque parody of a dance.

Sonia stifled her ribald amusement when she noticed that Mrs. Ames was affected almost to tears.

"Gin," diagnosed the modern maid. "It's made her all mushy."

But as she listened to the faint limping music, she, in her turn, felt touched by the melancholy of dead romance. She glanced through thickets of ancient Waxworks to the alcoves; but to-night the curtains did not stir.

It was the secrecy which lent the hidden lovers the glamour of mystery. In spite of the lure of the music, no human being emerged to listen and watch. A group of five statesmen—among whom she recognised Gladstone and Disraeli—went on in their voiceless discussion of Victorian politics.

"They're sweet," said Sonia, as the last tinkling note died into silence. "But they're a bit out of practice. I shall have to put them through their paces again." She lowered her voice. "I suppose the alderman often meets his ladies here?"

"No," replied Mrs. Ames, whose large mournful eyes still swam with tears. "Never. But he comes here sometimes on council business. He's very kind, dressing the figures. But he's got his favourites. I've pleaded to him for poor Mary of Scotland, but he's got *something* against her."

"She's so old," explained Sonia.

"She's getting a bit passée. But Caesar and Bloody Mary are older. And look how he's dolled them up."

Sonia frowned with perplexity as she studied the two Waxworks. Caesar's eaten features were shiny and yellow as soap, but he made an imposing show in a clean white cotton tunic and draperies edged with purple. Mary of England also looked prosperous in a crude crimson quilted gown of cheap satin; but her lashless sunken eyes and pallid face proclaimed her an antique.

"You see," repeated Mrs. Ames, "he's got a spite against poor Mary."

"And against me," thought Sonia. "Why?"

The obvious reason for the alderman's dislike had been shattered by Mrs. Ames. Sonia's interference with the Gallery disturbed no delicate sentimental complication. She remained thoughtful as she went to the door, accompanied by Mrs. Ames, who was worked up to a pitch of melodrama.

"Must you go?" she asked. "'Say Au Revoir, but not Good-bye.' 'Parting is such sweet sorrow,' as we say in 'Romeo and Juliet.' Oh, *thank* you, miss."

The Gallery had one more surprise in store for Sonia. As she turned in the doorway, in order to carry back a last impression, she gave a start.

Instead of five politicians, there were now four. A Waxwork had chosen the psychological moment while their attention was distracted by the old figures, to come to life and slide out of the Gallery.

VIII. — SONIA COVERS A STORY

THE more Sonia thought of the incident the less she liked it. It suggested ugly passions—suspicion and jealousy. Someone who wanted revenge was watching for evidence of intrigue.

As she walked back through the short cut of the Arcade, she realised that that Gallery was an ideal hiding-place. It was dimly lit and crowded with irregularly-spaced clumps of figures, which at first sight created the illusion of a crowd. Any one could blend into his surroundings with the fidelity of insect-mimicry in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington.

It was support of her first horror of the Waxworks—proving that her instinct had not betrayed her. The place repulsed her even while it fascinated. She was sure that it had some vague connection with evil. It bred shadows of the future.

Mrs. Ames had conjured up the grim spectre of unborn Murder stalking poor helpless Mrs. Cuttle. And now she had glimpsed faintly another distorted outline tracking its victim.

When she got back to her room she lay awake for a long time. During her stay in Riverpool she never slept well, partly from

climatic causes, for the district was relaxing and Tulip House was situated in an airless part of the town.

That night her brain was over-excited, and she tossed and listened to the distant drip of a cistern until her imagination exaggerated Life to a jungle set with man-traps.

At that hour, when every aspect assumed its darkest hue, she wondered whether there were a plot to smash Lilith Nile's happiness. And she liked Lilith because of her spirit and courage; in spite of a poisoned childhood, and a husband twenty years older than herself, she was gay as a spring blossom.

Sonia awoke to a dark morning of watery fog. It draped the town like soaked sheets hanging between the chimney-pots. On her way to the office, she stopped and looked over a stone wall to a triangle of still sepia water, penned between the buildings of an old flour-mill and a derelict tannery.

She was always fascinated by the river which ran through and under the town. As usual, she watched it foaming through a grating in an ale-coloured froth, and then traced its almost imperceptible current across the pool to the low arch through which it sucked underground again.

This morning, the hidden brown water, creeping mysteriously under the buildings of the tangled town, reminded her of treachery.

She shook off her morbid mood directly she reached the office. Wells' sane outlook always acted as a mental tonic. Whatever happened, he carried on as usual, and was only concerned as to whether the town would win on Saturday.

Although beaten, he was still fighting—or rather, shadow-sparring—his fate. He grumbled about his job of licking raw material into shape, even while he admitted that Sonia was both quick and adaptable. Instead of smashing routine, she had taken Horatio's hint, and made no attempt to improve working conditions. On the contrary, his chief complaint was that she neglected her own smart outfit in favour of his own makeshifts.

In the short time she had worked on the *Chronicle*, there were readjustments of relationships. Horatio had become her slave, and she was the slave of Goal—the airedale who occupied the editorial chair.

But while Sonia claimed Wells—instinctively and indirectly—she was chiefly stimulated by Lobb's dark personality. Like the Waxwork Gallery, it drew her and repulsed her. She took advantage of his absence that morning to question Wells.

"I wish you'd give me the inside dope about Hubert Lobb."

"For a pure young girl, you use revolting language," Wells told her. "He's all right."

"Like that. Well, what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing. He's brilliantly clever and brilliantly unlucky, or he wouldn't be here."

"But why don't you like him?"

Spurred by subtle jealousy, Wells yielded to the temptation to warn Sonia.

"Well—for one thing, he's mean. I've been here over two years, and I've been to his place only once. I'd like to go often. Clinking cooking—and I adore Mrs. Lobb. I want pure and unsentimental relations with her. In fact, if she died I should sob, 'Dead'—and she never called me 'Brother.'"

"You're a meal-hound, and he won't encourage you," said Sonia.

"I'm not. I refuse nearly every bally invitation, because I prefer Goal's society...And that's another thing about the blighter. Why doesn't he have a dog?"

"Because he sees what a fool you are over your mongrel...Yes, angel, I'm praising you."

"Stop mauling my dog...My biggest score against him is Cynthie. She's a splendid kid. I always call her, 'Mrs. Wells.' She's only ten, yet she's packed off to boarding-school when we have St. Hildegarde's here. And he usually sends her away in the holidays because he can't stand her noise."

"His wife may be to blame for that."

"Wait till you see her. She's my idea of the perfect wife. Besides he openly says he doesn't like animals or children. I distrust that sort of man."

"Thanks. You've warned me off an affair."

"With *him?* Why, he's clinkered ash."

"I like blasted faces, but we'll talk of something else. Has Buns said anything about my work?"

"Not yet. But you'll know when you're chucked."

"He can't judge me on what I've done. Won't you give me something besides snippets?"

"No." Wells looked into Sonia's eager eyes. "Yes. You can call on the Misses Miller and get some particulars of the stolen bag."

"Cover the story?" Sonia sprang from her chair. "What are the Misses Miller like?"

"Rich spinsters. One's very big. One's very small. Perfect ladies. You'll probably get the K.O."

"Then I'll wait for cocoa."

Sonia had already grown to welcome the eleven o'clock break, when the staff was united to gossip and drink cocoa. As she looked round the big untidy room, it amused her to remember her former disdain. That first morning already seemed far away, so completely had she been assimilated by the town.

"I had rather a weird experience at the Gallery last night," she said. "There was a 'Peeping Tom' there who pretended to be a Waxwork."

"Who?" asked Lobb quickly.

"I only saw his back. Besides. I mistook him for a genuine figure. I never saw him go. He was too quick for me."

"Perhaps he was the extra figure," broke in Horatio. "They say there's one. If you count the Waxworks you can never get them to come to the same total twice. And they say, if you meet him, he's *Doom*."

"What a thrill. I must ask Mrs. Ames about him."

"If you'll take my advice," said Lobb, "you'll steer clear of that Gallery. It's in a bad quarter. You may run into danger."

"She's running into worse danger now," grinned Wells. "She's going to her first interview."

"Every one's warning me against the Gallery," thought Sonia, as she walked through the raw, shrouded air. "If I were superstitious I should take it for an omen."

Half-past eleven in the morning seemed an ungodly hour to thrust herself upon strangers. When she reached the Cedars, the house itself seemed withdrawn behind its screen of vapour.

The heavy gate—thickly beaded with moisture—had stuck, as though to oppose her entrance. She had to use force to push it open, when it yielded with a rusty scream.

Feeling self-conscious and slightly nervous at being heralded, Sonia crunched over the sodden red gravel drive up to an imposing pillared entrance.

The formal parlourmaid who opened the door was a different being from the excited girl of the previous evening. She grudgingly admitted that her mistress was at home, and led the way to a mornin-groom, which was furnished in far better taste than Stonehenge Lodge.

When Miss Miller appeared, she wore an outdoor tweed suit, which helped to explain the chilly atmosphere. Tall and stout, with cropped grey hair, she looked a formidable subject to interview. She was followed by her younger sister—a feeble little creature with protruding eyes.

Sonia received the impression that Miss Miller had expected to be solicited for a subscription to a charity. Her aggressive manner altered when she heard her visitor's mission.

"From the *Chronicle*? Sit down. I welcome any publicity that may help me to recover my money."

Although her younger sister was the lady in the news, Miss Miller told the story.

"My sister, as usual, cashed my cheque for twenty pounds at the Midland Bank just before closing-time. Afterwards she went upstairs and had tea with the manager's wife, who lives on the bank premises. She stayed there until it was dark. As she was

coming down our road, she heard footsteps behind her. When she reached the gate and opened it, she was pushed forward on to her knees, and her bag was snatched from her."

"Did she see the man as he ran away?" asked Sonia.

"It was too dark. But she heard him running down the road."

"Which way?"

"There's only one outlet. The other end is a cul-de-sac formed by the wall of a park."

"Have you any idea of the time?"

"Yes. The gate is stiff, and I heard it creak directly after the clock struck a quarter to six."

"But—"

As Sonia started to speak she looked at Miss Edith Miller, and noticed that her chin was trembling violently.

"It wasn't my fault," she said. "He pushed me down. I showed my sister the hole in the knee of my stocking."

"Were you bruised?" asked Sonia warily.

"Oh, no. I was wearing my long squirrel coat."

Sonia glanced down at Miss Edith's tweed skirt, which was ankle-length, and hoped that Miss Miller had not noticed this proof of faked evidence.

In any case, she knew that the story was a fabrication, because she had stood under the central lamppost chatting to Mrs. Nile for several minutes before the clock struck.

During the period, all the roads radiating from the circle had been deserted. Yet Miss Edith's fear was real, and it was not pleasant to watch.

She did her best to cover it up, as she snapped the elastic band around her notebook.

"I'm afraid that your sister has had a bad shock. I hope she'll soon get over it, and that the *Chronicle* will prove helpful."

"I hope so, too," said Miss Miller. "Twenty pounds is a stiff price to pay for carelessness."

"But it wasn't my fault," bleated her sister. "A tradesman's wife had her bag snatched too."

"I'm not blaming you. All the same, it would not have happened to *me*. I should have turned and faced the man...However, the opportunity will not occur again."

Sonia welcomed the cold fog outside the Cedars as a pleasant change from the atmosphere of the house.

"No one should be so frightened of another human being," she thought. "It's not likely that she stole it. They're evidently well-off, and she's too old to be keeping a man. She's not the type to bet or have vices...The poor little devil must have lost it, and someone's had a lucky find."

When she reached the office, she turned in her story without comment.

"I'm getting as secretive as the rest of the town," she thought. "But it mustn't leak out. I'd better warn Mrs. Nile in case she blurts out something when she reads the account."

She could not understand her own depression. The incident itself was normal. Miss Miller might be a bully, but the younger sister was undoubtedly a trial of patience.

"Thank goodness it has nothing to do with the Waxworks," she reflected.

The place was affecting her like some insidious drug. She felt it pulling at her all the afternoon. She wanted to see the funereal mahogany walls and domed ceiling, to smell the faint gas odour of stored mephitic air, to listen to fireside gossip of long ago.

With Horatio's story as her excuse, she paid it a visit on her way home. She struck a dead hour, when Mrs. Ames evidently expected none of the public. Only one central light had been switched on. It dangled like a dying star over a forest of dark figures.

There was no sign of Mrs. Ames, and the Gallery seemed entirely deserted. But as Sonia lingered to gaze around, to her surprise she saw in the distance the back of another woman who wore a grey squirrel coat.

She was on her knees, and her head was bowed, as though she were praying to a wax effigy clad in plum satin.

It was Mary of England.

IX. — HIGH SOCIETY

THE woman bent still lower until she was nearly prostrate before the figure. After a slight pause, she rose to her feet, and stole swiftly towards the door, winding in and out between clumps of Waxworks and avoiding every clear space.

As she drew nearer, Sonia stiffened in unconscious imitation of wax, more from a sense of intrusion on spiritual privacy than with any idea of eavesdropping.

The woman was Miss Edith Miller. Her face was now tremulous with overpowering emotion. She whispered with smiling lips, as though she assured herself of some future ecstasy, while her bolting eyes were lambent with a flame of rapture.

She passed so close that Sonia could have touched her. She held her breath and maintained her rigid pose until the thud of the door told her that she was alone.

"*Well*," she gasped.

The incident was inexplicable. While the tying of a shoelace could account for Miss Miller's posture of adoration, it was impossible to reconcile that rapt expression with a commonplace explanation.

Sonia remained staring stupidly at the statue of a stout bull-necked man with whiskers and a stock. This was Josiah Plum, the speculative builder, who had sunk his fortune in the Gallery while William the Fourth sat on the throne. Apparently he had still faith in his venture, for he seemed to be counting invisible patrons through the vanished turnstile.

Presently a door opened and Mrs. Ames shuffled out of the cloak-room which she used as her private quarters. She knitted as she walked, while a thin and dirty white kitten clung to the vast hump of her shoulder.

"Like a nice strong cup of tea?" she invited. "The pot's been drawing on the stove all the afternoon."

When Sonia declined, she explained the kitten.

"It's a stray. They come in for the warmth, and I never have the heart to turn them away. They say it's the poor that help the poor."

Sonia was fond of animals, so the woman rose in her opinion. She had already detected the shoddy parts of her outfit and had diagnosed her as an old rip. In modern fashion, she believed the worst of her, even while she did not consider it the worst.

"That's sweet of you," she said, as she tickled the kitten's chin.

"No, it's my nature. I love dumb animals and little children. 'Kind hearts are more than coronets,' although I could have worn a coronet myself. I was seventeen and he was turned seventy and delicate in his head. He bought my portrait in the Academy. Just *Me*, you know, with my hair hanging down, for the sake of the public."

Oddly enough Sonia believed her, although she would have discredited the tale had it been told by a contemporary.

"Kitty will have a great time catching mice at night," she said.

Mrs. Ames was horrified by the suggestion.

"*No*, I shall take it home with me every night. I live just down the street. I couldn't leave the poor little thing here all alone. Animals get just as frightened as we do."

"Frightened? What of?"

"The Waxworks." Mrs. Ames lowered her voice. "They're friendly now. But at night, they're—different. They've put the wind up me, and I know all their thereabouts...People have been found dead here. I wouldn't pass a night here for a hundred pounds."

"Perhaps *I* will. If I do, I'll tell you all about it in the *Chronicle*."

"You won't. Dead men tell no tales."

"Well, anyway, will you tell me the story of the tragedies? We've got the low lights. Let's have soft music."

As Sonia put her penny in the slot of the case, the minuet-dancers clicked into grotesque motion, glimmering whitely

through the gloom, like gold-fish appearing in the depths of a dark aquarium.

She listened to the old-world tune, while Mrs. Ames peopled the Gallery with horrible ghosts. A ghastly object—purple-faced and fighting the air—dangled from a rope. A painted woman, with crimped hair and lace petticoats, sprawled in the alcove—her cart-wheel hat on the floor and her throat cut from ear to ear. A dirty bundle of rags, huddled at the feet of Henry the Eighth, sighed once, and was still.

Sonia wished that Mrs. Ames was not so conscientious in her locations. She pointed out exactly where the tragedies had taken place. It was a relief to watch the kitten—a scrap of joyous life—chasing its tail on the dusty floor.

"Pretty-pretty," she remarked, "but it's good copy and must be paid for in the usual way. How many figures are there?"

"There were originally three hundred and sixty-five, one for each day of the year. There's not nearly so many now. When the council took it over, they kept weeding out and getting fresh figures, although there's not been a new one since Edward the Seventh in 1902. It's all chop and change. There's a number of Waxworks stored in the lumber-room which come out sometimes. But there's only a few of the originals left."

Later Sonia remembered opening her bag to reward Mrs. Ames, but it was not until she had wished her "Good-bye," that she mentioned Miss Edith Miller.

"She seemed thrilled by Mary of England," she said casually. "Does she often come here?"

"Not that I know of," replied Mrs. Ames, "but I'm not always about in the day. Besides, visitors come to the same figure time after time, just as if they were drawn. I've a theory about that. I believe that we've all lived before."

She gave Sonia time to absorb her original idea, and then went on.

"And I believe that every humble and unknown person has been some famous person, like Napoleon and Shakespeare. That's

how I account for the inequality of Fate...Perhaps Miss Edith Miller was Bloody Mary and she remembers her former life."

Sonia felt utterly mystified as she cut through the Arcade on her way home.

"Everything seems to lead back to the Waxwork Gallery," she thought. "It keeps me guessing. One day I'll have to come to grips with it."

When she reached Tulip House the front door was open, for Miss Munro had just mounted the steps before her. She was lingering in the hall when Sonia entered, and to the girl's surprise spoke to her.

"Miss Thompson." Her voice was attractively low and husky. "I want to apologise. I was vilely rude when Miss Mackintosh introduced us, but I thought you were just another girl—like *those*."

She glanced scornfully in the direction of the dining-room where Caroline Brown and Bessie Blair were at their evening meal.

"I am, unless I'm a freak," said Sonia stiffly.

"No, please don't misunderstand me. The truth is, I hate girls. I teach them all day—and all night, too, sometimes. When I'm extra done, I bring them home with me. I can't forget them."

Sonia's resentment melted at the flat note in Miss Munro's voice.

"Teaching must be revolting if you haven't a vocation," she said.

"Nobody has. Teachers are the victims of Fate. We are expiating the sins of our fathers and forefathers unto the third and fourth generation. I was a little beast when I was at school. I used to try and outstare the teachers when they were nervous or sensitive...*Now*, they stare at me. I wonder if you would come up to my room after dinner?"

After a slight hesitation, Sonia promised to come. She was not drawn to Miss Munro, but she was purposefully cultivating fresh contacts in order to study human nature.

Caroline Brown was having her usual huge meal in the dining-room, while Bessie nibbled water-biscuits and drank reducing-tea. Sonia noticed that they exchanged glances when she mentioned Miss Munro's invitation.

"She's very highly-connected," remarked Caroline. "Remind her, in case she forgets to mention it."

"I'll give her the low-down on my own family. We're a mixed grill. I'll match my dustman against her duke."

The girls looked at her with admiration. Although she was younger than either they respected her for her poise and her private sitting-room.

Sonia did not hurry over her meal. When at last she went up to Miss Munro's sitting-room, she received an extraordinary reception. Miss Munro sat at her table, covered with a green serge cloth. Her face was held between her hands, and she neither rose nor spoke.

She merely stared at Sonia as though she were an apparition.

"Didn't you expect me?" asked Sonia.

"Oh, yes." Miss Munro wrenched herself out of her trance. "Nice of you to come. I'm sorry—but it was your dress."

Sonia, who had changed into one of her smartest frocks, looked down at it in surprise.

"What's wrong with it?" she asked.

"It's enchanting...But it's black velvet. It always affects me. It has figured in certain episodes in my life. I sometimes think I wore black velvet the last time I died. Do sit down."

Sonia found the only free chair. Like the rest of Tulip House the room was large and shabby, but it had none of the comfort of her own. Miss Munro apparently used it as a dressing-room; her outdoor garments were strewn about, and face-powder had been spilt over the tablecloth and the marble mantelpiece.

Sonia noticed, too, the numerous unframed photographs which were stuck in every available space, and which had grown faded from exposure. They reminded her of the groups of Society

people in the picture-papers—polo, house-party, and wedding—mixed with pictures of stately homes.

She felt slightly repelled by the disorder, and also by Miss Munro. A close-up of her under the glare of the gas-globe destroyed the illusion of elegance. She looked as though she had made an elaborate and fashionable toilette a week ago, and had slept in it ever since.

She made another palpable effort to entertain Sonia.

"Sorry I haven't a cigarette. I've just run out and it's too late to buy any."

"That's the ultimate disaster," sympathised Sonia. "Poor you." She offered her case. "Do have these. I've plenty in my room."

"No, thanks. I'm forgetful. I might not return them."

"Would that matter? A few fags."

To Sonia's surprise, Miss Munro flushed deeply.

"I never accept presents or any form of charity," she said stiffly. "I belong to the Legion of the Lost, but I'm too proud to borrow and too inexpert to steal. But please smoke one of your own cigarettes."

Sonia had the uncomfortable feeling that Miss Munro was watching every ring of smoke. She was resolving to get back to her own room as soon as possible, when Miss Munro began to explain the photographs.

"This is my uncle." She mentioned the name of a well-known peer, and then picked out a girl in presentation dress. "My cousin Agatha. We were presented at the same Court. This is my favourite hunter."

"You've quite a gallery," said Sonia.

"I keep them to remind me of the depths of my degradation. And to remind me that once I had a place in the sun."

"Are you in any of these groups?"

"Hardly. One could not exhibit a photograph of oneself."

Sonia hoped that she concealed her scepticism, as she tossed the stub of her cigarette into the fire and rose.

"I've a special article to write," she said.

"No, don't go." Miss Munro pressed her fingers to her forehead. "I've a racking headache. Do you know of anything to stimulate the brain?"

"Strong coffee? Or tea?"

"Useless. Sometimes my head's not clear. Somehow those damnable girls always know when I'm on the point of losing the thread of my lecture. I nearly dried up this afternoon, but the word came just in time to save me. I seem to see my words flying away into that awful blank. Those girls were watching me. I've not broken down yet. But I *will*. And they know I will."

"Why don't you take a holiday?" suggested Sonia.

"I'm afraid that kind suggestion will come from my Head. Good-night. Do come again. I—I'm lonely."

Sonia was glad to get back to her own room with its clear fire and cinderless grate. She arranged her writing materials on her table, lit a cigarette, and then discovered her bag was missing.

After searching both rooms in vain she crossed the landing and knocked on Miss Munro's door.

She opened it at once, and then retreated at sight of Sonia. Evidently she had not expected to see her, for she was smoking a small Russian cigarette, while a limp packet lay on the table.

"Did I leave my bag here?" asked Sonia.

"You hadn't one," Miss Munro told her.

"Oh, surely. A small one—really a pochette. I opened it to get out my cigarette case."

Miss Munro bit her lip at the reminder.

"No," she insisted. "You were holding your case when you came in."

"Was I? Do you mind if I look all the same?"

"Please do."

Miss Munro languidly assisted in a hunt which was foredoomed to failure.

"Perhaps you left it in the hall," she suggested. "Presumably you opened it to get out your latchkey."

"No, the door was open. But it doesn't matter."

"Was there any money in it?"

"No."

Miss Munro plainly did not expect the reply. Her eyes opened wider and her lips parted. But she did not fall into Sonia's trap.

"In that case, I shouldn't mention it to Miss Mackintosh, unless you are certain it was lost in the house. Servants resent being under suspicion of theft…Like all of us."

"Thank you for the hint. Good-night."

Sonia found it difficult to settle down to her article. The incident was distinctly unpleasant.

"I've nothing to go on," she thought. "She might have been speaking the truth about the photographs. She might have found those cigarettes, too, after I left. They looked as though they'd been buried for months. And I might have dropped my bag on the way home. I cannot remember anything about it after I tipped Mrs. Ames."

Miss Munro forgot Sonia directly she was out of the room. Another face—with pallid worn features and smoke-dark sunken eyes—rose before her, compelling her allegiance.

She had lost the wish and the will to resist. Yet she knew she followed to her damnation.

And she knew the end.

X. — GLASS HOUSES

THE next morning Sonia told Wells about the missing bag.

"Was your name in it?" he asked.

"Yes, and my address."

"Money?"

"Four pounds ten in notes, and some silver."

"Hum...I'd say nothing about it. When you lose anything, other people feel injured and let you know it. If an honest person picks it up either in the street or Tulip House you'll get it back. If it's pinched you won't."

He paused before he added, "Do you suspect Miss Munro?"

"I don't know what to think," declared Sonia. "I'm positive she knew that there was money in the bag, for she was on the point of contradicting me when I said there wasn't any. But, against that, I genuinely hurt her pride when I offered her a few cigarettes—just to save her life."

"Well, you can't accuse any one without proof." Wells lit his pipe as a sign that he was due to begin work.

"Want to know anything else?" he asked, as Sonia still lingered by his desk.

"Yes. Does Miss Miller bully her sister?"

"Just because she's big? I know the crowd always shouts for the little one. But, all the same, if I was Miss Miller I should probably wring her neck. She's half batty."

"Then, it's futile to worry about her—her actions?"

"It's futile to worry about anything. Wash her out."

Sonia drew a breath of relief. Wells' commonplace outlook was welcome to her as a bone-dry change after sodden garments.

"You're a refreshing person," she told him. "While I'm going round in circles you take a short cut through."

"You're refreshing yourself. When Buns brought you in that morning I said to myself, 'One consolation is, she's ordinary,' Nice change after working with a mystery chap who looks like Lucifer on the bend...Did *you* speak?"

Wells turned to his dog, who was growling because Sonia had kicked his master. Glancing up, he saw Lobb, looking like a smudged crayon cartoon of Death, as he stalked towards the inner office.

Horatio, who was shadowing him, like an imp in horn-rimmed spectacles, turned down his thumbs to show that he was in one of his silent moods.

Sonia began hurriedly to talk of Miss Munro.

"She was bragging to me about her family. Is she really related to titled people?"

To her surprise, Lobb paused to hear Wells' reply.

"Well—I believe she is a sort of throw-out from some Stately Home of England. But I don't like the woman. She's a neurotic type. Doesn't look as if she washed behind her ears. Unhealthy. Don't have anything to do with her."

"That's odd. Mr. Cuttle warned me against her, too."

"The alderman?"

"Yes. Until I came here, I thought there were always four aldermen on every town council."

"I get you." Wells began to chuckle. "Cuttle's title is a triumph of personality. But wait till he's mayor. He's only living for the day when he'll walk through the town in his robes of office, with the band playing and the crowd cheering. If anything happened to prevent him, I believe he'd throw a fit and pass out."

"The pinnacle of worldly ambition," remarked Lobb in his deep sarcastic voice.

"Isn't it petty?" agreed Sonia.

"You think so because you've never lived in a small town. It's the world viewed through a reducing-glass. Remember that if you hope to get our angle. If you wish to be a success here, your paragraphs must seem more important to you than the leading article in the *Times*. You've only to look at our subscription lists to realise that we think in shillings and half-crowns. And that is why the Devil can drive such good bargains in small towns. He knows we will sell our souls for the lowest cash offer. We'll do any sort of

cruel and dirty work for a few quid. 'If I lay damned in the deepest hell, Mother o' mine,' I'd look up and see on the sign-post the name of some small town."

"If you feel like that, why don't you clear out and go to a big town?" asked Sonia.

"I have, my prattling child. Many a time. You underrate my talent for losing situations."

"He's got a pretty stiff attack of Riverpool this morning," remarked Wells after Lobb had gone into the inner office.

"He only wants his cocoa," explained Sonia, as she bashfully laid a typescript on Wells' desk. "Here's the first Waxworks article. I worked on it half the night. I know you'll think it feeble. And can I take a little time off about four?"

"Aren't you glad this isn't a *real* newspaper?" Wells asked her. "Be a good girl and write your sticks and we'll see."

Sonia felt in high spirits that afternoon as she walked along the familiar residential roads. For the first time since her arrival, the town did not lie under a stagnant drapery of mist. A high wind was blowing, which veined the thick grey sky with blue scratches. Shrivelled leaves were swept along the pavements, and whirled aloft in the air like flocks of birds.

Although it was in a private road, Dr. Nile's house was soon reached from the town. It was conspicuous by its quantity of glass roofs and shutters. Just as Sonia walked up the path, the setting sun broke through the clouds, and the verandah, conservatory, surgery, dispensary and connecting passage each reflected a copper fire on scores of panes.

Lilith Nile—wearing a honey-gold frock which matched her hair—met her in the hall. It was obvious that she had forgotten Sonia, but she remembered her with such pleasure that the girl forgave her.

"Sweet of you," she cried. "Come and see Jane's kittens. On the evidence, the father is not the one we chose for them. But the evidence is enchanting."

She led the way into the drawing-room where the cat lay in its basket before the fire.

"Jane's doing it in style, best room and all," explained Mrs. Nile. "She had a qualified doctor in attendance, and Caroline Brown stayed on late to see it through. Frightfully decent of them. I do think I'm lucky now with such lovely people, after mixing with scum."

"That's why I came," said Sonia bluntly. "This time I'm going to be indiscreet. I hope you'll like it. But—if you value your luck, you'll give up meeting Sir Julian in the Waxwork Gallery. I've a hunch that Lady Gough is collecting evidence for a divorce. Any old way, I saw a man there, watching."

"Watching?" echoed Mrs. Nile. "Heavens, I never thought of that. But it's absurd. She's got crowds of evidence without me. He's living with another woman now."

"All the same, if any mud's going to be stirred up, you want to be out of it and miles away. A scandal won't do the doctor any good. Or you."

Sonia was glad to see that Mrs. Lilith's face had grown pale.

"*What* a fool," she confessed, as she looked around the gracious room where the old Georgian mirrors reflected blue twilight and red fire glow. "Risking all this for nothing. You can't understand what security means to me."

Lighting a cigarette, she paced the room talking excitedly.

"I was so bored. Nothing to do, and all day to do it in. And I loved the excitement of the meetings. That was all. In those dreadful days before I married, I used to dread going to every fresh hotel, and all the staff being so attentive, because of the humiliation of being chucked out. But sometimes we staged a getaway. I adored that. And this was something the same thrill. Listening on the stairs, seeing if the coast is clear, walking creepy-creepy, slipping through the back door. And when I got to the Waxworks, there was such a gloriously guilty atmosphere...But July meant nothing to me. And nothing happened."

Sonia got up from her knees.

"Of course, you won't go to the Gallery again," she said.

"But darling, I must. Just once to tell him it's off. Letters are so dangerous, and I can't meet him anywhere else. If I don't explain things to him, myself, and make him realise that it's absolutely final, he'll keep on trying to see me. I know my man."

Sonia wondered if it were not an excuse for a dramatic scene of renunciation. Now that Mrs. Nile was recovering from the first shock, she appeared cheered by the thought of future excitement.

At that moment the door opened and a maid announced Mrs. Cuttle. She wore an expensive fur coat and a matron's trimmed hat perched on top of her head. Her blank blue eyes made a critical survey of the room before she greeted her hostess without a smile.

"I came to see the doctor. But as he's out, I thought I'd have tea with you while I was waiting."

"It will be in in a minute," Mrs. Nile assured her. "I'm sorry you're ill. What is it?"

"Your husband will have to tell me that. What's in that basket?"

"Kittens."

"Kittens in the drawing-room? What next? Why don't you have babies?"

Mrs. Nile nobly resisted the counter-thrust.

"Because I can't give them away," she said. "All of these are promised."

"But you're making a mistake. You'll never keep your husband without a family."

This time Lilith Nile was goaded to retaliation. She fell from nobility.

"You took the risk," she remarked.

"That's different. I've kept my husband faithful to me for twenty-five years because I know *how*. He doesn't want children, or any of the girls who swarm round him. He only wants *me*. But the doctor's different. You've only been married to him for about

five minutes. Don't put off doing your duty. You'd better play for safety and engage the nurse."

Mrs. Cuttle threw open her coat, mopped her face, and then turned to Sonia.

"And you'd better try to find a husband, instead of doing a man out of a job. The men ought to have all the work to keep wives and families."

Sonia resented the advice. Fresh-minted from college, and self-hurled into circulation, she was a reckless experimentalist—vehement in theory and intolerant of dogma.

"I may prefer security," she said. "If I am dependent on myself, it's up to me. But a married woman is absolutely dependent on some man who may let her down. When she's no longer young, he may desert her for a younger woman. Or, unless the new Act becomes law, he may die and leave every penny away from her."

As Mrs. Cuttle merely stared at her blankly, Sonia wondered if she had spoke too rapidly for her to follow the thread. Once again she was vaguely touched by the strained expression of her eyes.

"I'm sorry you're not well," she said apologetically.

"It's pains in my stomach," explained Mrs. Cuttle. "I put it down to our late suppers."

Sonia looked up sharply and noticed that Mrs. Cuttle's face was somewhat pinched. Although she knew that she was giving way to morbid fancies, she felt not only chilled with a presentiment of impending doom, but plagued with a sense of submerged responsibility, as Mrs. Cuttle went on speaking deliberately.

"My husband brought back Regina Yates with him last night. They'd been working late on the books. Stocktaking. She was very clever, and wanted to show off. She went out and made some egg-mess. It stirred up my bile and I was sick in the night."

Sonia took advantage of the arrival of tea to get back to the office where the cheerful atmosphere cured her depression. But it

returned that evening with double strength after she had entered Tulip House.

In the hall she met Caroline Brown who was dressed for the street.

"Going back to the surgery?" she asked.

"Not for long," replied Caroline. "We're slack at present. I'm chiefly going to see if Mrs. Nile is keeping to Jane's diet. She loses her head."

"You certainly look for work," said Sonia. "How did you enjoy your Pictures with the alderman?"

"All right. We went in the three-and-sixpennies."

"Was he amorous?"

"Oh, tried it on at first. And then we got talking about my work. Aren't men funny? It's all right if you act or type, or serve in a shop; but if your work is outside the recognised things they seem to look upon it as a huge joke."

"I know. The alderman was humorous about my writing."

"But he always pretends to be interested in it. That's his line. I'm wise to it, but I always fall for it. I do love my job. So he jollied me along, answering a string of questions."

"What about?" asked Sonia.

Her heart leaped at the casual reply.

"Oh, chiefly poisons."

XI. — END OF AN EPISODE

SONIA'S article on the Waxwork Gallery received little official recognition. Lobbs and Wells—suspecting the disappointment under her nonchalant air—were kind; they repeated alleged compliments, and invented a few more. But from the fountainhead of the *Chronicle*—Leonard—she received only the usual bland greeting.

Mrs. Ames' reception of her complimentary copy of the paper helped to soften the blow. She assured Sonia that the references to herself would be placed in her collection of press-cuttings, and added that Fame only made her feel humble. Afterwards, she showed four fresh signatures in the Visitors' Book, and pointed to the address—"Ohio, U.S.A."

"They visited the Gallery because they read about it in the paper," she said. "*And*—they came all the way from America."

Afterwards Sonia jeered at her own disproportionate throb of pleasure.

"Hubert Lobb's right," she thought. "I'm viewing my life's ambition through a reducing-glass."

All the same, her article had a topical value that evening at a certain dinner-table. Throughout the meal Dr. Nile had been uneasily noticing the veiled gleam in his wife's eyes, and the suppressed smile flickering round the corners of her mouth.

He knew that she was up to mischief. Although she was too sweet-tempered to vent her boredom on him, he was familiar with all the symptoms of mutiny.

His heavy face grew lined with worry; yet he dared not remonstrate with her because of the surplus twenty years in his age. He never forgot them, just as she always remembered that he had taken her from a certain flat in the Charing Cross Road, where her mother flirted eternally under pink-shaded candlelight—and all the candles were burned at both ends.

Life had become a vicious circle with the Niles. Because Lilith had nothing to do, she did so many things. These things

required money—and when the doctor tried to make money he lost more.

Recently he had been unlucky over one of Sir Julian's tips. The consequences had been a definite coolness. To increase his grudge he had lately begun to suspect that Sir Julian was trying to add his wife to his list of local conquests.

He cleared his throat.

"Did you read Miss Thompson's little piece in the *Chronicle*?" he asked. "Nice little girl. Someone ought to warn her against going to that Gallery. No decent woman who values her reputation would go there."

"I'll tell her from you that she might pick up a flea," offered Lilith.

"She certainly would. It's a septic hole...Never been there, I suppose?"

"No, but I'm going very soon. With you, my sweet. I want you to show me the spot where the commercial traveller passed out."

"You horrible little scavenger." The doctor was nearly fooled by her reference to a joint visit. "Are you going out to-night?"

"Yes, darling. Are you?"

"I am. Professionally. Where are you going?"

"Prices'. For contract."

"I'll drop you. It's on my way."

Lilith felt the familiar excitement—the goad to her imagination and the recognition of a countermove. Her husband had scored first, because he had given no clue to his destination, but had waited for her to blunder.

In his turn, he received a check; for, instead of pleading the need of exercise, Lilith jumped at his offer.

"That suits me. When are you starting?"

"Directly dinner is over."

Lilith chatted gaily during the short drive, and gave no sign that while her tongue was working overtime, her brain was busy over the problem how to keep her appointment in view of the check to her timetable. She noticed that her husband waited while

the maid answered her ring and did not drive away until the door was closing.

Meantime, Sir Julian had arrived at the Waxworks. Mrs. Ames bore down on him triumphantly, waving a copy of the *Chronicle* which was already thumbed and shaded.

"We're in the news," she told him. "Once again I've seen my name in print."

Sir Julian pushed the paper aside, and peered cautiously among the groups of wax men and women, who regarded him with impersonal stares.

"Any one here?" he asked.

"Not yet, sir."

"Curse. Why the hell can't women be punctual?"

"Ah, you're impatient, like all the gentlemen. But I'll lay you kept your mother waiting when you came to town."

Sir Julian joined in her laughter.

"And what's the price of catalogues to-night?" he asked.

"You best know what it's worth to you," she told him with meaning.

"Damned precious little," he muttered. "But put that in your stocking. No one's looking."

"Pardon me, sir. There's the tone of the Gallery to consider."

Although Mrs. Ames spoke with dignity, she respected Sir Julian for his profanity, which she considered a sign of virility. The fact that he had given her a florin, instead of the usual shilling, told her that he had drunk sufficient to be mellow—that desirable stage, which in her past, always signified generosity.

"I'll slip her the word when she comes," she whispered.

"No. I'll surprise her."

But as Sir Julian threaded his way past dusty stands, he experienced a sensation of oppression. The figures were crowding in upon him, standing in his way, and confusing his bearings. The dim light from above lent them a parody of humanity. He hated the putty faces of the women and the jaundiced skin of the men.

They had grown old in vice, like dissipated cronies—smoke-dried and pickled in alcohol.

What annoyed him most was their suggestion of familiarity. At any moment he expected one to lurch against him, or to poke him in the ribs with a lean yellowed finger.

He knew that high blood-pressure was responsible for his physical discomfort. The place was nearly hermetically sealed. The domed mahogany roof of awful Victorian solidity was like the lid of a sepulchre, capping compressed layers of dead mephitic air.

The blood began to drum in his temples as he wiped his brow. He had heard that marionettes were credited with definite personalities, and that they were capable of imposing their wills on those who pulled the strings. Somewhat uneasily, he wondered if these wax people were trying to hypnotise him.

In order to assert himself, he spoke to a majestic figure, which had been leering at him with lewd eyes.

"Henry the Eighth," he said, punching the padded chest. "Eight wives. You're a blanker fool than me."

His Majesty seemed to nod assent as he rolled in silent laughter. While he was thus holding Sir Julian's attention, according to time-honoured conspiracy, a second Waxwork was stalking him in the rear.

Suddenly it sprang. He felt the throttling grip of a pair of arms around his neck, and his heart gave a violent leap. The next second he heard a familiar laugh, and turned round to see Mrs. Nile's amused face.

"You gave me—the devil—of a start," he panted.

Lilith laid her hands upon his heaving chest.

"You're like a billy-puffer," she said. "Did you think I was the Big Bad Wolf?"

"Old—ticker, you know," he explained.

"Then why don't you go on the water-waggon?"

"Now, my darling girl, I can get that line of talk from your husband...And how is the famous doctor? Sure he suspects nothing?"

"There's nothing to suspect. Where's the harm in our just meeting here on the sly?"

"None, except that it's on the sly. Come in out of the rain."

Sir Julian pulled aside a dusty black velvet curtain, and they entered the alcove which was theirs by a courtesy right of precedent. Directly they were enclosed in the darkness, Sir Julian put his arms around Mrs. Nile, but she pushed him away mechanically.

Instead of breaking her news to him she let the blow fall with dramatic effect.

"Julian. This is the last time. We shall never meet here again."

"And why not?"

"It's not safe. I'm running a terrible risk in meeting you to-night. But I love risk. Every one should live dangerously."

"You've sold it to me." Sir Julian's laugh was unpleasant. "You're cooling off...Do I know him?"

"It's not another man. Julian, we're being watched. Your wife has evidently heard about your fascinating lady-housekeeper, and is having a tab kept on you. I won't be dragged into it too. I must consider my husband. And I cannot risk being cast out into the wilderness."

As Lilith spoke she saw herself and Sir Julian as flickering shadows on the silver screen. But she missed her great moment of drama. Sir Julian was biting off a curse when they heard a rapid flap of footsteps outside the alcove, and the curtains were hitched apart.

"The doctor's here," whispered Mrs. Ames. "Come out and act natural."

The situation was forced upon them so rapidly that they obeyed. Both respected Mrs. Ames' advice as coming from a mistress of intrigue.

Lilith's first instinct had been either to hide or to try and steal from the Gallery unseen. She realised now that both courses were damning evidence in case of discovery.

Her heart thumped with excitement as she walked boldly to meet her husband. The thrill of calling his bluff was worth more to her than a score of stolen meetings.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I thought you said you had a professional visit. Which of these enchanting wax ladies is your patient?"

Dr. Nile's face had darkened at the sight of the advancing couple; but it cleared slightly as he looked into his wife's blue shallow eyes.

He reminded himself that she was merely elfin—reckless and remote—playing ball with human hearts from sheer love of mischief.

He turned to Sir Julian and spoke with his habitual quiet suavity.

"How are you, Gough? You've not been in to see me lately about your blood-pressure."

"You knock me off too much," explained Sir Julian, with a forced laugh.

"But your trouble, Gough, is too much. Too much eating, too much drinking, too much—everything."

"You mean I live. Every *man* should live dangerously."

"*You're* doing it." Dr. Nile gave him a keen professional glance. "What are you doing in this godforsaken hole?"

Lilith answered for him.

"We're both doing the same thing. We've come to view the scene of the tragedy. Where is it?"

"Haven't you found it yet?"

"No, we've been doing the figures. This is the show one. Henry the Eighth. Isn't he enchanting?"

"Is he?" The doctor raised his brows. "To my mind he has the low animal expression of the man who habitually neighs after his neighbour's wife."

"Oh, come, he wasn't too bad," mumbled Sir Julian. "Just a bit of a joker."

He felt impelled to speak in the Waxwork's defence, just as if the figure had hypnotised him into accepting a conspiracy of joint-interests. But he recognised the personal taunt beneath the criticism, and his bold eyes grew watchful.

Lilith took her husband's arm and dragged him on.

"Show me where the man committed suicide," she urged.

"Here." Dr. Nile stopped before the alcove which staged Virtue's death-bed. The patriarch, whose yellowed face was almost hidden by a bush of dusty white beard, was having an uncomfortably crowded passing, surrounded by a positive tribe of descendants. An angel with moulting wings pointed upwards to the ceiling. His gesture was duplicated by Virtue and copied wholesale by the mourners, so as to leave no doubt as to his destination.

"Going UP," said Lilith. "But he couldn't have collected all that family virtuously...Where did the suicide lie? And what did he look like?"

"On the bed," replied Dr. Nile, "and he wasn't a fragrant spectacle."

Lilith looked around her and gave a dramatic sniff.

"The air here is tainted," she declared. "I'm psychic. I can smell sin."

"More like drains to me," remarked her husband.

"No, darling, be romantic. The atmosphere is full of that man's pain and fear. His dying gasp must be somewhere floating around. If I were to pass the night were, I am sure I'd get materialisation."

"You'd certainly get a nervous breakdown," said Dr. Nile. "*I'm* the only one of us who could spend the night here with no ill results beyond a thick head."

"Why you?" asked Sir Julian quickly. "Are you trying to tell me you're a better man than me?"

"No. Only physically."

"Physically?" Sir Julian choked at the insult. "Why, I could knock you out in one round."

He threw out his broad chest as he spoke and reared up his head. Mrs. Ames, who was watching in the distance, paid him her highest tribute to shape. She pictured him without any clothes, in a Roman chariot.

"I'm not referring to muscle," explained Dr. Nile. "I mean that I'm physically fit, while you're in very bad shape. I'll prove it. Put out your arm at full stretch. Now, compare it with mine. You see? My fingers are steady while yours are shaking. Sign of nerves. You couldn't stay alone here in the dark without going to bits."

As her husband made his point Lilith burst into a peal of laughter.

"He's telling you that you're afraid of the Waxworks," she said to Sir Julian. "Are you going to take it lying down."

"I'm not going to lie down here, if that's what you mean. I prefer a decent mattress."

"Sound judgment." Dr. Nile glanced at his watch. "It's nearly closing-time. We'd all better go home."

But the spirit of perversity had entered into Mrs Nile. She remembered that this was the close of an exciting chapter, and she wanted to prolong its thrill.

"I believe you *are* afraid," she said.

"Afraid of a few pounds of candles?" Sir Julian flushed with anger. "Do you dare me to pass the night here?"

"Yes. I dare you."

"Good. I'm on."

"No, Gough." Dr. Nile spoke with authority. "As your doctor, I forbid you."

As Sir Julian merely laughed contemptuously, he laid his hand on his sleeve.

"My dear fellow, you must listen to me. You've no idea of the tricks nerves can play when you're in the dark. You'll fancy strange sounds. The figures will appear to move. All imagination—but it will seem real to you."

"That's all right. I'll keep the blooming Waxworks in their places. Come on, be a sport and risk your money. What will you bet me I don't stay?"

"Nothing."

"Then—you?" Sir Julian turned to Lilith. "What do you bet me?"

She glanced warily at her husband before her lips shaped in an imaginary kiss. He smiled, nodded, and blew her a return kiss, as the sound of a bell rang through the Gallery.

The usual nightly flitting took place, swiftly and discreetly. Anonymous couples wound in and out and round about the groups of figures, and slipped out into the night—fitting into the darkness like bits of a black jigsaw puzzle.

Sir Julian accompanied the Niles to the door, where he spoke to Mrs. Ames.

"I'm stopping the night, mother. Shaving-water at eight."

Her lips were parted to protest; but before she could speak Sir Julian had slipped a note into her hand.

"It's for a bet," he explained.

"Then good luck, sir. Be bloody, bold and resolute, like Macbeth. But, remember, I know *nothing* about it."

Mrs. Ames' face was a study in conflicting emotions as she shelved her conscience. Switching off the light, she stood aside for Dr. Nile and his wife to pass.

But just before she locked the door, Dr. Nile darted back into the Gallery.

"Give it up, Gough," he urged. "It's sheer suicide."

"That's not clever, Nile." There was a sneer in Sir Julian's voice. "You want to show me up as a coward before your wife...You lose."

"Then it's your own funeral."

Dr. Nile turned away, but jealousy made him come back.

"Gough," he whispered. "*If* you come out, you may claim that kiss from my wife."

XII. — AT DAWN

DURING her short walk home Mrs. Ames experienced the sensations of one who had drawn a horse in a big sweep. Her luck seemed too good to be true, although she could feel the note slipping down inside her wrinkled stocking.

When she entered the bedroom, her husband sat propped up in bed, smoking and listening-in to the wireless. He forgot to twist his face into the conventional contortion of pain, but she was too excited to notice.

"How's the screws?" she asked.

"Chronic. Had a good night?"

"So-so. Sir Jay came across with two shillings, besides the usual."

She laid the coins on the mantelpiece in token of good faith.

She lay awake for a long time, as she planned the spending of her secret windfall. Presently, although her conscience was stunned, her imagination began to stir. She thought of the Gallery as she had seen it on the night her husband had forgotten the candle.

It was still going on—that dark labyrinth where hostile wax people planned furtive business. The gang of sinister poisoners were gathered together in the Hall of Horrors to draw up their list of victims. A little shiver ran down the base of her spine as she remembered their chill scrutiny.

Those figures knew too much. For they had seen Death.

Suddenly Mrs. Ames remembered an old studio story of an artist who had been mysteriously done to death by his own lay-figure. She also recalled a smattering of the explanation advanced by the man who had told the yarn. Although she could not understand all of it, she vaguely gathered that some of the victim's nervous force had been gradually stored up inside inanimate matter—much as a table will absorb the human electric-current gathered around it—and that it had been released in one spurt of energy.

For the first time Mrs. Ames began to wonder whether the figures drew something out of her, during the long hours she spent in the Gallery. She loved them as her own children, but, like a nursing-mother, her vitality might be drained by them. Considering her big frame she was often below par. Dr. Nile declared that it was the result of living in an unventilated atmosphere.

She knew that his theory was wrong. Nothing was healthier than a stove-heated studio with all the windows closed. The only foes to health were draughts and clothes.

Still, if there was any truth in the artist's theory, there was power stored inside the Gallery. Her own experience had proved the wisdom of the foolish. She had blundered unwittingly into a strange dimension, and directly she had missed her bearings she had rushed out again in terror.

But, even while she lay warm and safe under the blankets, Sir Julian was locked up inside the building of his own free will. Hundreds of glass eyes were playing on him in a merciless battery. He was exposed to the terrific mass-hypnotism of the Waxworks.

Sweating with fear, her superstition over-rode the medical history of the list of tragedies. The bed groaned with the travail of her guilt and her responsibility.

As she tossed, she made excuses for herself.

"He's a masterful man. The doctor couldn't influence him, so what chance could I have? No, not with that nose. And I couldn't sink so low as to ask the police to put out a gentleman."

"Can't you lay still?" grumbled her husband sleepily.

"I'm just slipping over to the Gallery," she replied in careless tones, although she had begun to shake before her feet touched the cold linoleum.

Dressed only in her coat and shoes, she shuffled down the dimly-lit street, meeting solely a cat on the way. As she passed each lamppost, which marked another stage nearer her goal, she reproached herself for her folly. Only a few minutes ago she had quaked at the thought of the dark Gallery in the safety of her bed;

now she was actually outside the house, and on her way to some unknown situation.

She reached the Waxworks only too soon. Unlocking the door, she pushed it ajar, and flashed her torch in front of her, for her distrust of the police persisted.

Gradually, as her eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, she distinguished those figures which were illumined by the street-lamp outside the window, but she was too far off to see their faces plainly.

She lingered on the threshold, listening fearfully to the faint noises within—creaks, rustles, snaps. Before her was a thick warm blackness which smelt. Summoning up her courage, she raised her voice in a shout.

"Hulloa."

To her relief, the answering shout was not an echo.

"Hulloa."

"Are you all right, sir?" she called.

"Yes. Go away."

"Sure you want to stay, sir?"

"Go to hell."

The profanity assured her that she was carrying on a long-distance conversation with a gentleman. Feeling happier, she re-locked the door and went home. As she reached the bedroom, the Town Hall clock struck the half-hour after one.

It was earlier than she had thought. Soon she was back in bed and asleep. But although she had purged her conscience, she had a confused nightmare about the Gallery. She knew that something had happened there, and that a Waxwork was outside her house, knocking on the door.

The knocking persisted, as though some imprisoned person were making a frantic appeal for freedom. Rap-rap. Thud-thud...She heard the hammering even as she shot out of her dream, wide-awake.

"Someone's at the door," mumbled Ames sleepily.

"I won't go," she declared, getting out of bed.

When she reached the passage she was afraid to slip the bolt, lest she should meet a glassy dead stare gleaming from an unhuman wax face. But, as she lingered, a lantern was flashed through the glass top of the door.

Her visitor was the alderman's policeman friend—Tom.

"You've left your key in the lock," he told her. As he was a member of the Force she scented insult.

"You're mistaken, officer," she said with dignity, as she wrenched out the key and slammed the door in his astonished face.

"Who was it?" asked Ames, when she returned. "A drunk?"

"Worse. A policeman with a dirty mind."

Again Mrs. Ames got into bed but she couldn't rest. Something was creeping about at the back of her mind. She knew she was on the verge of an unpleasant discovery, and she vainly tried to stave it off by sleep.

Presently she awoke from an uneasy doze with a cry, and gripped her husband's arm.

"Ames," she said, "I've got to tell you. Sir Jay's in the Gallery for a bet. He gave me a pound note. I went to see if he was all right and he shouted back...But now I'm not sure that it was *him*. It comes back to me that it was more like some one trying to imitate his voice."

"Where's the note?" asked Ames.

His wife took it out of her pillow-case.

"That's all."

He laid it on the bed-table, and shut his eyes again to show the matter was finished.

"Ames, what ought I to do?" asked his wife.

"You done quite right not to interfere. You will never change human nature by making laws. If people want to bet, they will. And why should the law let the rich man bet on horses and make it difficult for the poor man to bet on dogs? What I say is this. Horses and dogs is a man's best friends. I say—"

"'Sh."

Mrs. Ames laid her hand over his mouth to silence him, while she counted the strokes of the clock.

"Four," she said. "Shall I slip over and see if he's all right?"

"No," replied Ames.

In that one word he sentenced a man to death.

Four hours later Mrs. Ames awoke with a start. The fears of the night seemed very remote and unreal as she made the swift toilet of a former model. She put the kettle on the fire and the kippers under the grill before she roused her husband.

"Keep an eye on the breakfast. I'm just off to unchain the tiger. He'll be cursing me, because I'm a minute or two late, same as he was yesterday."

She was in high spirits at the thought of the pound note, even although it was communal property. As she unlocked the Gallery door, she called out a greeting to her Waxworks.

"Good-morning, dearies. I hope you had a good night and behaved yourselves like ladies and gentlemen."

The door stuck when she tried to throw it wide open, as though something were wedged behind it. Slipping through the aperture, she saw on the other side the doubled-up body of Sir Julian.

His fists were still clenched as when he had hammered on the wood in a last desperate bid for freedom, and the hands of his watch—which was smashed by his fall—pointed to ten minutes past four.

XIII. — LITERARY SUCCESS

WHEN Sonia heard of Sir Julian's death she felt the guilty sense of importance of an astrologer who has foretold disaster. She alone had snapshotted the horror on the wing—before it swooped; and her article had been justified by an apposite tragedy.

It was a keen disappointment when the *Chronicle* ignored the topical value of her contribution to concentrate on the sensation. Lobb, in particular, leaped on the job like a lion on a smoking hot kill. His eyes glittered with eagerness, as though their fires had been newly stoked.

The inquest did nothing to foster the growth of superstition. Dr. Nile testified that Sir Julian had insisted on testing the truth of a certain local legend, in spite of his strong opposition. He had treated the deceased professionally for heart trouble and blood-pressure, besides other disorders, and knew that he was in no condition to face a nervous ordeal.

Mrs. Ames also refrained from allusions to the sinister reputation of her Waxworks. She supported Dr. Nile's evidence about the bet; and when she mentioned her own visit to the Gallery she confined herself to the commonplace.

"Did you see Sir Julian?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. It was dark, and he was at the other end. But I heard him. He told me to go to hell—and here I am."

The laughter which greeted her remark was recognition of her grilling by the coroner, who was severe on her official laxity. It gratified her completely and encouraged her to make further intentional slips.

The doctor who had performed the post-mortem, which Dr. Nile refused to undertake, supported the medical evidence. There were no marks of violence or any sign of a struggle. The jury, therefore, brought in the verdict—"Death from natural causes," and added a rider that precautions should be taken to prevent future sensational exploitation of the Gallery.

No one paid Sonia any compliments, so she carried on as usual—writing sticks. Strangely enough it was Alderman Cuttle who was first to lick her wounds. He rolled into the office just as she was bringing in the eleven o'clock cocoa. Horatio was ill, so she was doing his jobs instead of wearing laurels.

"I must congratulate you on your scoop," he said. "That's the word, isn't it? I had no idea you were such a talented young lady."

Even while he flattered, he managed to convey the idea of a private joke at the expense of her sex, which Sonia resented.

"Any one can write," she told him. "Male or female. You haven't got to take out a gun-licence to slaughter the King's English. Cocoa?"

"It's très bon," broke in Wells.

"It must be, if Miss Thompson made it. But I'm on a diet between meals." His laugh boomed through the office. But his face was grave when he turned to Sonia.

"Honestly," he assured her, "I was very impressed by your article. I'll tell you why. You and I work on very different lines, but we both depend on advance intelligence. I've got to know exactly which new fashion is going to catch on, before the other man displays it in his shop window...Now, what gave you the hunch that the old Waxworks story was going to break again?"

Against her will, Sonia responded to his appeal. There was no suggestion of mockery in his eyes—only shrewd speculation.

"The first time I went to the Gallery," she told him, "it struck me as copy. It's criminally neglected. And I want to make it the rage."

"I—see. Well, as future mayor, I applaud your public spirit, although I think it's a trifle morbid."

"But you must admit Sir Julian's death is another score to the Waxworks. There always is a death."

"Due to suggestion, plus macabre surroundings," explained Wells. "Every person who passes out stone-cold makes it more likely that the next one will follow on. Your little piece in the *Chronicle* will do its bit to help on the merry work."

"Then it will be up to me to investigate the truth of the legend, and put an end to it for once and all. I'd like to write up a first-hand account of imagination on the nervous system."

"A bon idea, *this* side of the Waxworks," remarked Wells.

Sonia glanced quite affectionately round the room, which was engrossing her interests. The fact that it was not the bustling electric place of her hopes had its own compensations. People used it as a kind of social club, where they could smoke and gossip, until Wells cleared them from the premises.

That morning they had their first lady visitor. She tapped a quick tattoo on the door, and then entered in a kind of rush. She was dark, middle-aged, and made on a big scale, with a colour like a damask-rose.

Wells sprang to his feet in eager welcome.

"Mrs. Lobb. This is my lucky day."

As she watched her Sonia understood Wells' championship. There was a warmth and radiance about her that compelled liking. Like autumn, she suggested rich maturity and a nature planned on the heroic scale—free from petty meanness and malice.

"How's everybody?" she asked breathlessly. "I've brought my husband a letter. It seemed important. I saw the alderman go in, so I knew I should not interrupt work. How's everybody? And I wanted to meet Miss Thompson."

For all the fine swing of her entrance she was not at her ease. Her face was flushed and she spoke too quickly, repeating herself, after a quick deprecating glance at her husband.

Sonia, who had believed Lobb to be the victim of a matrimonial misfit, was won over by the charm of her greeting. There was heartiness in the pressure of her hand and friendship in her smile.

"And you're all alone in rooms?" she asked. "How terribly dull. We must fix up a little supper and—and bridge. Saturday evening next. Will that suit you? Mr. Wells must come too. He likes my cooking."

Sonia accepted, but Wells was doubtful, as the football team had a fixture at a neighbouring town. While he was consulting a local timetable, Lobb's deep voice tolled like a passing-bell on the prospect of pleasure.

"I'm afraid I cannot manage next Saturday. I've a hangover of work I want to clear."

"Oh, bother the old work. There's Sunday. Mr. Cuttle, will you come too? And Mrs. Cuttle. How is she? I promise not to trump your trick again. I'll write to your wife. How is she?"

"She's been having a little indigestion," replied the alderman. "Thanks, we'll come."

The matter was settled in the teeth of Lobb's inhospitality. Once again Mrs. Lobb turned to Sonia.

"My husband has been singing your praises. I'm jealous."

"Oh, you mean—the Waxwork article?" asked Sonia eagerly.

"Something far more important." Mrs. Lobb laughed. "He was raving about your cocoa."

Sonia joined in the laughter, although her face was red.

"I'm sorry there's none left for you to sample. Cigarette?"

She noticed that Wells sprang forward with a match, almost with an air of homage. Although she was palpably nervous, Mrs. Lobb dominated the attention of the men. The alderman and Lobb scarcely removed their eyes from her, while Wells was her slave.

"Is this how men work?" she asked. "Gossiping?"

"This is a conference," explained Wells. "We were trying to get a new angle on Sir Julian's death."

"Oh, yes, poor Mrs. Nile. I do feel sorry for her. It's awful for her...Oh, I shouldn't have said that. Hubert, *don't* look at me as if I was a precocious child talking of babies."

"You've given us the new angle, my dear," said her husband.

"You mean, I'm a woman, so I think of the human element. Well, so's Miss Thompson. She'll agree with me."

"Oh, no, Miss Thompson's a smart young newspaper man," cut in the alderman—the laughter-wrinkles spraying round his eyes.

"But it was really disastrous that Dr. Nile was there," went on Mrs. Lobb. "Of course, he *had* to try and stop Sir Julian. And that was the sure way to get him to do it."

The short silence which underlined Mrs. Lobb's fresh indiscretion was broken by Lobb.

"You might be right," he said in his toneless voice, "about the commercial traveller. Probably he died of fright. But I believe that Sir Julian was—murdered."

He threw his bomb, and then sat silent through the repercussions. When the storm of protests was dying down he spoke again.

"Sir Julian had enemies. Men hated him. He lost their money and made love to their wives. Nothing would be easier than for one of them to lie in wait for him and kill him...In the present circumstances, *I* could commit a murder in the Waxworks and get away with it."

"How?" asked Wells.

"To begin with, the porter's a bonehead, and most of the time his wife does duty for him. I'd hide just before closing-time, and slip out again directly the door was opened in the morning. The place is overlooked only by deserted warehouses and so on. No one would notice me coming and going."

"And how would you commit the murder?"

"I should aim to get the desired result by fright. That would be the fool-proof way. Work up a few effects. If that failed I should try a little artistic strangulation."

"And leave marks of your fingers?"

"Not necessarily. There are methods which show no trace, as every expert knows. Sir Bernard Spilsbury knew exactly how Smith drowned his brides in shallow water without marks of violence. The papers keep quiet about it, as they don't wish to

educate the public in that kind of accomplishment...You could easily smother a woman with a soft pillow or pad."

"Wouldn't her face be congested?" asked Cuttle.

"I think it would die out before discovery. In any case, the faces of both Sir Julian and the traveller were cyanosed."

Suddenly, Sonia found that she was studying in turn the hands of the men. The alderman's were muscular, healthy in colour, with a down of ginger hairs. Wells' fingers reminded her of Caroline Brown's, being spatulate and capable. But Lobb's knotted joints suggested the muscular contraction of a dead man's grip.

She wished she had not looked at them. She shuddered as Lobb went on talking.

"If I had an enemy, I'd lure him inside the Waxworks. The place is a death-trap."

"And have you an enemy?" asked the alderman.

"Who hasn't?"

"Then I'll take jolly good care to meet you in your own house and not the Waxworks on Saturday night."

The alderman's jolly laugh cleared the air as the conference was ended by the sound of the buzzer. Sonia, who answered the call, was thrilled by Leonard's languid voice through the speaking-tube.

"I wish to speak to Miss Thompson on a matter of importance...Oh, is it you, my dear? Don't delay."

She raced down the dirty stairs, covering half a flight at each leap. When she entered the editor's room, Leonard was partaking of his famous eleven o'clock lunch. He was eating a Bath bun with an air of elegance which reminded her of its ancient fame, and also revived the dignity of historical association when Cocoa-Houses were the resorts of literary wits.

"Ah, my dear." He adjusted his monocle. "I wanted to ask you about your future plans? I hope you are not going to forsake us at the end of the stipulated three months?"

Flattered and surprised, Sonia began to flounder.

"I hadn't thought about it. You see, I wasn't sure you liked my work. Of course, I'll stay longer if I'm—any good to you. I shall never forget that I owe my start to you."

"It may be a mutual obligation, my dear."

"I'm so glad. You don't know what this means to me. But I don't want praise. I'd rather you criticised my article."

Leonard nodded vaguely, while his face assumed its numbed expression.

"I'm sure you have a—a feeling for words," he said. "Thank you for your promises. Good-morning."

He raised his cup to signify that the interview was over. When Sonia had reached the door, he spoke to her again.

"How did you make this cocoa?"

"I followed the directions," she replied defensively. "It's exactly like Horatio makes it."

"Oh—surely not?"

"Well—I only added milk and boiled it up again."

Leonard smiled.

"It's excellent. I hope, in future, that you will be responsible for it—even if Horatio has to act under your directions."

Wells ran into Sonia at the turn of the staircase. "What are you grinning at?" he asked.

"I'm not," she replied. "I'm smiling cynically. When I write my biography, I shall have to record that my first literary success was—cocoa."

XIV. — DIAGNOSIS

"WAS I right about Mrs. Lobb?" asked Wells triumphantly, as they walked upstairs to the office.

"Yes," admitted Sonia, "I like her. Of course, she's a man's woman. But why is she so nervous?"

"Isn't Lobb enough to make any woman nervous? And don't bank on that supper. He'll find some excuse yet to wriggle out of it. In any case, I shan't be able to show up till later. The trains

don't fit." He added, "The super's just dropped in. I'm going to roast him. There's been another snatch-and-grab."

As they entered the office, they were greeted by a thick-set good-looking man with china-blue eyes and thick curly grey hair. Superintendent Fricker was a keen supporter of local sport, and was friendly with Wells as captain of the football team. Apart from this mutual interest they were united by real liking, and the superintendent often dropped in at the *Chronicle* office for a chat.

"Well, super," said Wells, "Major Freeman tells me that his wife had her bag pinched last night. That's three. Waiting for the lucky number? What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," replied the superintendent as he offered his cigarette case to Sonia. "Miss Thompson, I was interested in your article on the Waxworks."

As he spoke, Sonia thought that he exchanged glances with Lobb.

"Never been there," said Wells. "There's something about a wax figure that gets my goat. If I was forced to have one in this office, I would be jolly careful to treat it as only a bit of furniture."

"Why?" asked Sonia.

"Well, I knew a chap who had an exclusive tailoring business, and he used to keep a model in his office. It was the most life-like beggar you ever saw, with a rolling eye. He looked no end of a joker, and this man used to call him 'Percival,' and talk to him as a kind of joke. One day I dropped in to see him and found Percival gone, and when I asked about him, the chap confessed that Percival had begun to get on top. That's what comes of being matey with a Waxwork."

Wells gave a slightly shamefaced grin at the conclusion of his tale.

"You've got me sidetracked," he said. "What I want to know, Super, is why the united brains of the Force—to say nothing of its legs—is unable to cope with one clumsy bag-thief?"

The superintendent smiled as he looked around him.

"You all of you read detective-stories," he said, "and probably write them too, where the professional dick is always a sap, while the amateur brings home the bacon. But let me remind you that Scotland Yard—and all the little provincial and rural yardlets continue to function. Sew a button on that."

He added as he got up from his chair, "I'll tell you the reason why we've made no arrest later on, Wells. With luck I may have a story for you."

Glancing again at Lobb, he saluted Sonia and left the office.

"Decent chap," said Wells. "Wonder what he's got up his sleeve. By the way, has your bag turned up?"

"Of course not," replied Sonia scornfully.

She received another inquiry about her missing bag that evening. When she returned to Tulip House, she passed Miss Munro in the hall. They had not met for several days, since Sonia had purposely avoided meeting her. The memory of that evening spent in her room was too distasteful.

At the first glance, she realised a change in Miss Munro. She had lost her lethargy and regained her poise. She wore a black evening gown, with a high draped neck which hid her hollow collarbones. Her make-up was carefully applied, and her hair brushed off her face in a glossy sweep.

"Did you find your bag?" she asked carelessly.

"No. I didn't expect to," replied Sonia.

"Tiresome." Miss Munro glanced at the grandfather's clock. "I'm going out to dinner, so I mustn't be late. I always agree with the opinion that 'unfaithfulness in the keeping of an appointment is an act of clear dishonesty. You may as well borrow a person's money as his time.'"

Sonia felt rather guilty as she went into the dining-room. She had suspected this patrician lady of being a thief, only to be confused with a quotation of lofty principle.

Caroline Brown and Bessie Blair were having high-tea together. Bessie—wearing a toothache-bandage of white linen as a

guard against double-chin—called attention to the hot-house pine and bunch of white muscat grapes on the table.

"From Miss Munro," she said.

"She does that sort of thing occasionally," explained Caroline. "It's her gesture. Of course, she can't have meals with two working girls, for fear she'd catch our accent, so she waggles the old school tie to remind us that she was educated with the crowned heads of Europe and does the grand."

"Well, I call her gesture darned cheek," said Sonia. "She refused to borrow even a cigarette from me."

"Ah, I know what's the matter with her," remarked Caroline.

"What?" asked Bessie.

"I'll tell you about Miss Thompson. Is there gout in your family? Thought so. You'll end up a cripple if you don't watch your step. All your superfluous energy means suppressed acidity. And your hair is gouty. That's why it always looks nice and doesn't smash...But it's all right. Knock off meat and your morning cup of tea, take a hot saline instead, and drink about six pints of cold water between meals, and you'll live to be a hundred. Unless you are murdered or try to stop a bus."

Caroline stopped to stuff grapes into her mouth and then went on.

"The D.R. rags me about my fatal passion for diagnosis, but I do guess right. Now, this is one of my wide shots. It would never surprise me if the alderman went mental. He has got monomania. Always thinking and talking of being mayor. If any one tried to stop that he could turn very nasty. I suspect an epileptic taint in his family history."

Bessie burst into derisive laughter.

"You're dead wrong this time," she declared. "I've never seen the boss in a temper. He's always a lamb."

"That's because no one's tried to stop the way," persisted Caroline. "He's got the right sort of wife. Most men have, even Dr. Nile. Nature intended him to be a mother."

"Has Mrs. Nile got over Sir Julian's death?" asked Sonia.

"Definitely. She was upset at first because she thought she might be to blame, but the D.R. spoon-fed her with assurances every hour. It seems to have pulled them together. And the kittens are coming on fine."

Caroline shook the crumbs in her lap into the grate.

"I'm working late on the books," she announced. "I ask you, do they encourage us poor girls to be good?"

After she had gone, Sonia lingered chatting to Bessie about clothes. She had grown to like these two girls who were so different from her own friends. Bessie, who was simple and lymphatic, already cherished a passion for herself, but Caroline, although harder, had far the better brain.

"Miss Munro gets good things," said Bessie. "Fancy, she's never bought a thing from me, although she must know it would mean a small rake. And I help to keep my granny."

"I'm coming in soon to get a frock from you," declared Sonia impulsively.

It was a momentous promise—just as some of the chatter uttered within those shabby flock-papered walls was not mere forgotten breath drifting out into the air-waves. It was to return later to Sonia's memory, even as she was to see—in a tense moment—the homely comfort of the dining-room, with its faded grass-green curtains and the hospitable hollows in every worn leather chair and sofa.

One fact soon emerged from the conversation. Caroline Brown possessed more acumen than young Wells. Lobb did not break the supper engagement for Saturday night. On the contrary, he called for Sonia and took her down to his house.

It was a damp ivied building in the old part of the town and near the river.

"We took it in summer when it was picturesque," he explained. "At twilight during a heat-haze you can imagine the slums are Venice. Besides we're off the track of callers. I'm afraid we're rather an unsociable couple."

Sonia saw no reason for his implicit apology for his house. It seemed essentially a home, from the first minute of Mrs. Lobb's hearty welcome. She was flushed from cooking the meal, and her hair was untidy. In her dark red dress she reminded Sonia of a rose, slightly battered by storm, but doubly sweet in the steamy heat of the succeeding sunshine.

When Sonia entered the drawing-room she noticed a large photograph of a little girl with a specially winsome expression.

"Cynthia?" she asked. "She looks as if she'd piles of character."

"Bad character, I'm afraid," said her mother. "She takes after me. But she's rather a darling. I never see half enough of her."

Her sigh was so heavy that Sonia felt suddenly savage with Hubert Lobb.

"Why don't you keep her at home?" she asked.

"Oh, her father thinks it best this way."

Luckily, the Cuttles' entrance saved Sonia from any comment. Mrs. Cuttle wore a silver lamé coat, and, as usual, greeted her hostess without a smile. But the alderman was in excellent spirits, bowing and shrugging to imitate a Gallic greeting.

"I've just been interviewing a French traveller, so I'm full of French beans," he explained. "He's brought over a bankrupt stock. Real Paris models. I'm buying the lot. Doesn't that tempt the ladies?"

"Rather," exclaimed Sonia impulsively. "I must have one."

The alderman gave her a preoccupied smile. His small hazel eyes were fixed on Mrs. Lobb, who seemed suddenly ill at ease.

"Would you like me to send up a selection on approval?" he asked. "It's not incumbent to buy."

"Oh, yes...No, I don't think so. I've plenty of frocks."

"Well you know best. But the chance won't come again."

"No. Then, perhaps, yes."

Mrs. Lobb glanced apprehensively at her husband and then spoke hurriedly.

"Will you excuse me? I've only a young maid and I must see to the dishing up."

True to Wells' verdict the supper was excellent. Mrs. Cuttle ate in a massive silence, but her husband, who also displayed an excellent appetite, was vocal with compliments.

"I only wish you were on hire as a chef, Mrs. Lobb," he said. "I'd engage you on the spot to be responsible for my Mayoral Banquet."

Sonia made a mental note of the remark. A little later Cuttle mentioned his favourite colour.

"Any one who's been in my shop knows it's purple. When I'm mayor my lady mayoress will wear a purple velvet gown."

"Caroline was right," thought Sonia. "It *is* his obsession."

"Won't you find it a bore and terrible expense?" she asked.

The alderman stared at her as though he could not grasp her meaning.

"It will be worth the expense," he said.

"How noble. I'd rather spend my money on something more worth-while."

"Worth-while?" he repeated. "I can imagine no higher ambition for any man than to rise to be mayor of his own town. It is the peak of civic honours."

Sonia had never before seen him so moved; the veins stood out on his temples and his voice shook with emotion.

"You won't get me into purple velvet," remarked Mrs. Cuttle in her flat monotone. "I haven't the colour."

When supper was finished they played auction. Sonia did not enjoy the game for she cut Mrs. Cuttle as her partner against the alderman and Hubert Lobb.

Mrs. Cuttle converted bridge into a deadly trial of patience. She hesitated even between playing a two or a three, and seemed immune to suspicion that the other players were fretted by her slowness. Against her will Sonia was impressed by her inpenetrable stolidity, and the inflexibility of her self-satisfaction.

To make matters more annoying, the alderman was aggressive in his cheerfulness. Since his wife was his opponent, he whitewashed her blunders—even while he roared with laughter—and complimented her on her tactics. Whenever he was dummy, he left his chair and rolled out into the kitchen on the pretence of helping Mrs. Lobb, who was making coffee in readiness for Wells' arrival.

On each excursion Hubert Lobb displayed a jealousy which was so obvious as to be an embarrassment. Sonia could see the muscles twitching in his thin cheeks like the springs of a steel trap.

"How dare he?" she thought indignantly. "She's far too nice to be carrying on an affair."

It was a relief when the rubber was ended. She had lost all interest in the game, so was surprised to find that she and her partner had actually won owing to the amazing cards which Mrs. Cuttle had held.

"I always pick up the cards," she said complacently. "That is all you want for bridge."

While they were settling up, Wells joined the party.

"I dropped into the office on my way up," he said to Sonia. "There was a parcel for you in the letterbox, so I brought it along."

Sonia pulled off the carelessly-knotted string, and then gave a cry of surprise as she opened the paper.

"It's my bag."

A card was enclosed with the words, "PICKED UP IN THE ARCADE," printed upon it in block letters.

"Why this mystery?" asked Sonia, as she looked at the address on the paper. This was also in Roman characters to preserve the anonymity of the finder.

"Natural precaution," explained Wells. "Whoever picked it up does not want to be under suspicion of returning an empty bag."

"But it's *not* empty."

Sonia's face was flushed with excitement as she opened the bag.

"Four pounds ten in notes," she counted. "And here's the loose silver and coppers too."

The alderman whistled.

"Are you going to tell me that your bag has been lying in the Arcade for any length of time. When was it lost?"

"Oh, some days."

"And it's not been noticed? Why, it's a slur on our public services."

Lobb, who had been watching Sonia's face, noticed its sudden change of expression.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"No, but it's rather peculiar. These are not the notes I lost. Those were new ones, in a sequence just as I got them from the bank...But all of these have been used before."

XV. — PURPLE VELVET

THAT night Sonia stayed awake listening to the drip of the cistern. She was upset about the incident of the returned bag, without reason. As Wells had pointed out, she might have been suspicious if used notes had been replaced by a brand-new currency.

But the exchange held some of the furtive element that she was growing to dislike. It was true that any one with a preference for clean money might have picked up the bag in the Arcade; but that presupposed a fastidious nature which would not delay in restoring it to its rightful owner.

It appeared more probable that the unknown person was in desperate need of a short loan, for which she—Sonia used the pronoun deliberately—was too proud to ask, hence her anonymity.

As she tossed, sleepless, tortured by the irregular ticking of the water, the town seemed undermined with treachery. Suddenly it became personified; she saw it typified by a shrivelled limping widow with tainted breath—heavily veiled and dressed in rusty black. The creature poked her in the back, and speaking in a hoarse whisper, furtively offered for sale lewd picture-postcards of the Waxwork Gallery.

It left her with such an impression of loathing that, next afternoon when Lobb was out and they were alone in the office, she confided her doubts to Wells.

"I'm seriously thinking of whanging out of Riverpool."

Wells' face expressed utter consternation.

"Why?" he asked.

"The place doesn't suit me. And I'm out of pocket. Besides I don't think I ought to get in a literary groove. At another newspaper office I might have a shot at concentrating on tea...The real reason is I hate the town."

"Why? What's wrong with us?"

"*You're* all right. But there's something wrong with the people. They never come out into the open."

Wells drew a deep sigh of relief.

"Glad you let me out. As for the town, you're making the common mistake of generalising. We scrape together millions of people with different bodies, minds, and morals, and call this composite person 'The Englishman,' 'The American,' and so on. You're doing the same with Riverpool. Every one's not mysterious."

Sonia immediately began to find exceptions.

"Of course, I only know a very few. And I like Mrs. Nile. She's ultra-frank. And the two girls at Tulip House. They're sweet."

"Mrs. Lobb?" suggested Wells.

"Ye-es, but she's so jumpy. She's part of the confusing element."

"Lobb makes her like that. She's really one of those fine big generous fools who jump into deep water to save a drowning person, then they can't swim themselves."

As Sonia made no comment, he said, "I hope you won't go. Fact is I've got used to seeing you around."

Sonia met his direct eyes with a responsive gaze.

Suddenly she realised that the most galvanic newspaper office of the screen—without Wells—would be dreary as a provincial High Street on a summer Sunday afternoon.

"If it comes to that," she confessed, "I believe I've grown rather fond of this funny place. I think I should miss Goal."

The airedale looked up sentimentally at his name, and acknowledged the compliment by rolling over and stretching himself over a wider area of floor. He nearly upset Horatio who carried in a basket of mail.

"Mr. Eden's finished with these and marked out some for publication," he announced. "My word, it's a bigger post than ever. They wouldn't get more letters than this at the *Daily Mail*, would they, Mr. Wells?"

"Not half so many." Wells winked at Sonia. "Well, Horatio, I suppose you've been through them. What's the general trend?"

"Scared stiff of the Waxworks. I don't believe any one would pass a night there for fifty pounds. In fact, I believe I'd be safe to offer a million."

"Do nothing you might regret, my son. It might be claimed. What would you do then?"

"Pay up and look pleasant. I didn't say a million *what*."

Horatio's superior smile proclaimed that he was not to be trapped by lesser brains. Wells chuckled as he glanced through some of the letters.

"Gosh, there are actually people who write for the press without expecting payment. Grammatical and well-composed stuff some of it. This makes me more satisfied with my job. But I never knew before that people were so superstitious. You've certainly started something with your Waxwork ramp, young Thompson."

"Yes, and I'm not so proud of it as I was," confessed Sonia. "It's demoralising for them to get windy like this. I'll have to spend a night in the Gallery myself to prove it's all rot."

"*No*, Miss Thompson, you mustn't," urged Horatio. "I believe it's DOOM. That extra fig—"

He broke off to answer the telephone.

"Call for Miss Thompson," he announced. When Sonia crossed to the desk she was surprised to hear Bessie Blair's voice over the wire.

"Miss Thompson, would you like to see some absolutely divine French models?"

"I've heard about them already from Mr. Cuttle. Sorry—but I think I better not. I don't want to be broke for Christmas."

"But you needn't *buy*. Just *look* at them, you know. Before they're all mauled about. I always feel it *cheapens* a model so to be tried on. Really, they're marvellous."

Bessie Blair's voice was so reverential that Sonia weakened.

"I'll come. But keep Miss Yates away. She annoys me."

"You needn't see her at all. Walk straight upstairs and go into the first door on the right. I'll be modelling for copies in there."

"They are not exactly slow business people in Riverpool," remarked Sonia as she hung up the receiver. "Mr. Cuttle has got busy already on his precious French models. Wonder if Mrs. Lobb has fallen."

Her curiosity was to be satisfied in dramatic fashion. Just as Horatio was boiling the kettle for tea, they heard some one running upstairs and Mrs. Lobb made a tempestuous entrance.

It was plain that she was in a state of great agitation, although she did her best to behave in a natural manner.

"Oh, I didn't mean to burst in on you just at teatime," she said breathlessly. "Really, I didn't mean to cadge for tea. But I wanted to speak to my husband."

"Sorry, he's out," Wells told her. "You'll wait, won't you?"

"Thanks." Mrs. Lobb took the cigarette he offered her, but crushed it out after two nervous puffs.

"Something terrible's happened," she burst out.

"Cynthia?" asked Wells.

"Thank God, no. It's those miserable French models. Mr. Cuttle sent me a selection in a big leather box. The boy said he was to bring back the box and he'd call for the returns later, as they were short of boxes. I was busy in the kitchen. So I took the box into the dining-room and just turned out tissue paper and all on to the table, and gave the box back to the boy. He was waiting at the front door, so I couldn't close it in his face, could I? But the awful part was that I forgot to shut it again. My hands were floury, so I thought I'd finish my pie before I touched the dresses. And when at last I went into the dining-room there was nothing on the table and they had disappeared."

Mrs. Lobb told her tale in disjointed gasps. Her cheeks were scarlet and she twisted her wedding ring desperately with trembling fingers.

"Stolen?" asked Sonia feebly.

"I'm afraid so. It's happened before. I left the front door open, and somebody took my husband's new umbrella. It's not a very good part of the town, you know. He warned me then. That's what makes it so awful now."

"How much is the damage?" asked Wells gruffly.

"Nearly forty pounds. It's paralysing. They left the invoice on the floor. But they took everything, even the tissue paper."

Both Wells and Sonia did their best to soothe her; but after accepting tea she laid aside her untouched cup and sprang to her feet.

"Will you tell my husband what's happened?" she asked eagerly. "He'll get over the worst of it before he comes home. You angels. I mustn't disturb you any longer. What depressing weather."

At the door she stopped and her eyes filled with tears.

"You don't know how abject I feel. I'm the lowest of the low. I've let my husband down again."

Wells went downstairs with her, and evidently accompanied her home for he did not reappear. Consequently Sonia was left to tell Hubert Lobb the story of the stolen goods. He did not speak at first, but she noticed that his face had grown livid.

She broke a painful silence.

"Perhaps they're insured. In any case, I suppose you need not pay up until it's quite convenient. I can't imagine Mr. Cuttle putting on the screw. He's so genial."

"It's not the cursed money," said Lobb. "But can you imagine the mentality of a woman who does not shut the front door in a low neighbourhood like ours?"

"I can," said a defiant voice. Wells stood in the doorway, his hair ruffled by wind. "You forget your wife's not used to a 'low neighbourhood.' She's from the country, where people don't lock up their houses."

His face softened as he added, "Sorry, old man. Hope this doesn't put you in the jam."

"I have money, if that's what you mean," was the petulant reply. "I planned to take them out for a week at the winter sports in Switzerland. I thought she'd like her daughter to learn to skate. But they'll have to do without. They can't cut me up vertically as well as horizontally and not expect me to bleed."

Horatio ventured to break the silence.

"I believe there's ice in Hammersmith," he said hopefully.

Lobb scowled at him and then strode into the inner office, banging the door behind him.

"I hope he won't beat her when he goes home," said Horatio virtuously. "No one should strike a woman. My mother says he has a very queer temper. I've a good mother, Miss Thompson. She made me into a gentleman, but she goes out cleaning, and she used to go to the Lobbs."

"He's not that sort," said Sonia hastily. "Don't get light-headed, Horatio. It's time you saw to the post."

Although she would not have admitted it, the incident had raised her spirits. She told herself that there was nothing mysterious or underhand about the robbery. It was plain cause and effect, and a natural sequence to carelessness. On the whole, considering his nervous temperament, she considered that Lobb had shown considerable self-control.

Remembering her promise to Bessie Blair she left the office earlier than usual. When she reached Cuttle's store, she ran up a flight of broad stairs, covered with grey pile carpet, and pushed open the first door along the corridor.

The additional direction "on the right" had escaped her memory, so that she blundered into Miss Yates' private room.

She disturbed her privacy at a critical moment. Miss Yates stood before a long, unframed mirror, posturing in order to get her effects. A bale of material lay on the floor. Several yards had been unwound and were draped around her shoulders and hips.

What made Sonia gasp was the ugly significance of the material. It was purple velvet.

XVI. — AFTERNOON TEA

AS Sonia watched, Miss Yates minced a step forward and extended one hand graciously, as though to welcome an imaginary guest. Although the inference was obvious, it was not enough to account for Sonia's sudden horror.

It was natural for the woman to reconstruct her secret ambition, just as a screen-struck girl imitates Garbo in the privacy of her bedroom. Yet to Sonia the masquerade was ghastly, because she was reminded of an obtuse elderly matron who stopped the way.

She rattled the dull silvered door-handle to attract attention. At the sound, Miss Yates swung round on a high Spanish heel.

"I am looking for Miss Blair," explained Sonia.

"Blair? She's in the model-room."

Miss Yates gave curt directions, while she wound up the roll of purple velvet with rather a self-conscious air.

"I'm just trying out effects for someone else," she explained.

"A state occasion, I imagine," said Sonia. "It looks like a gown for some civic reception. Mr. Cuttle was telling us the other day that his mayoress was going to wear purple velvet."

Miss Yates jumped at the opportunity to save her face.

"That's right," she said.

"But aren't you rather premature?"

Sonia spoke without double meaning. She was astonished, therefore, to see the look of defiance snap on Miss Yates' face.

"What are you insinuating?" she asked shrilly.

"Nothing, except that the present mayor has barely begun his year of office."

"That's right," remarked Miss Yates with her strident laugh. "But we have to be ahead of time in our business."

"Well, you probably won't thank me for interfering, but I heard Mrs. Cuttle say positively that she would not wear purple velvet."

"Then I must think out some other toilette for her that will meet the case."

As Sonia went away she had a mental vision of Miss Yates—regal in purple velvet draperies—sitting in state on the platform of the town hall, while Mrs. Cuttle was wearing her best night-dress some eight feet underground.

Although she had no justification for her suspicions she felt she did not want to enrich the alderman, so she sent an excuse to Bessie Blair by a runner, and left the shop.

The Lobb robbery was the chief topic of conversation at Tulip House. Bessie Blair throbbed with excitement as she gave detailed descriptions of the stolen models.

"I tried on every one of them directly they came," she said reverentially. "They were an inspiration. I could be good in them."

"More likely bad," remarked Caroline Brown cynically.

"No," insisted Bessie. Her green eyes were dark as emeralds, as she turned to Sonia. "Miss Thompson, do you believe in answer to prayer?" she asked.

"I'd like to," replied Sonia doubtfully, "but it raises such a perplexing question of preferential treatment when two people want the same thing."

"Well, I *do*. I have proof of it."

"I wonder if the police will find the stolen goods," broke in Caroline. "They never got wise to the bags that were snatched."

"If they did, the models would be definitely second-hand after going into some dirty house," declared Bessie.

There was a note of triumph in her voice. But Sonia was not interested in her special mystery.

The next morning was a day of rare sunshine, which gilded rather than illumined the ancient buildings of the town. The pale blue sky was dappled with soft white clouds, and a robin sang from the branches of the bare tulip-tree in the back garden. Sonia, who had left the office to do some unimportant business, felt reluctant to return to four walls.

When some one touched her arm she turned round expectantly, to see the excited face of Lilith Nile.

"Oh, my dear," she panted, "I feel such a criminal."

"You mustn't get warped," Sonia told her. "He was in bad shape. It would probably have happened in any case."

"Oh, you mean—Julian? That? Oh, yes. Of course, even when I'm gay there'll always be a shadow hanging over me. But I can't go through life glooming...What I meant just now was I feel mean for not asking you to come and see Jane's kittens."

Sonia dutifully inquired after them, and noticed that the shadow was perceptibly lifting as Mrs. Nile went into raptures.

"Enchanting. Caroline Brown says it's the result of the mixed strain. It makes me quite hopeful about myself. But what do you think of the robbery? Isn't the woman a fool? I expect her terrible husband will give her hell. She's terrified of him. Husbands are the big drawback to marriage. I've the only perfect one. My dear, he was sweet over the Julian affair. And do you know, he never blamed me when Mother spent the money he'd given her for my trousseau? And when the bills came in again he paid them all, because she did a weeping act."

Although the fountain of Lilith Nile's chatter was spilling to waste, it was a refreshing change to Sonia after the slow dark slide of underground water. The girls walked together along the crowded street, talking gaily, until they met the alderman, who was cracking a joke with Nurse Davis.

"Will you ladies come to tea with me at the café?" he shouted. "I can't take Nurse alone. I'm afraid of being compromised."

He wore a blatantly new golfing-suit, and was at the top of his form—noisy and cordial—and hospitably anxious to collect a snowball party.

"Can we find any one else? Oh, yes, here's Mary, Mary, quite contrary, coming back from school."

Sonia turned to see Miss Munro, her white set face like an enamel mask under her black cap. There was an air of distinction

about her thin figure in its tight dark suit. She held her head high, and stared in front of her with patrician scorn, as though blind and deaf to her plebeian surroundings.

To Sonia's surprise the alderman laid his hand familiarly on her sleeve.

"Will you come to tea with me?" he asked confidently.

She shook off his fingers.

"No, thanks," she replied icily.

"Not with an old friend?"

"I don't understand. Have we met socially? I thought our relations were purely business."

"I apologise, madam." A smile flickered round the alderman's small tight mouth like a forked tongue of fire. "You speak to me in my shop but not in the street."

He took off his hat and bowed deferentially before he turned to his guests.

"Ladies, after that pleasant interlude, shall we go to the café?"

Mrs. Nile and Nurse Davis had much to say on the subject of Miss Munro's snobbery, but the alderman merely laughed.

"My mistake. I forgot she had blue blood."

"On the wrong wide of the blanket," snorted Nurse Davis.

The alderman's glance flickered towards Mrs. Nile, and he changed the subject before she could notice the remark. Sonia was astonished by the delicacy of his tact, considering that he blustered and roared like the east wind.

The café was a long narrow room, cut up into pews by screens of carved wood. The walls were covered with scarlet leather, decorated with gilt crescents, but they only slightly relieved the discreet gloom. Most of the recesses were occupied with pensive couples or solitary tea-drinkers. Voices were pitched low and there was no orchestra.

The alderman galvanised the place to life. Two waitresses rushed to take his order, and the winner received so much chaff that her laughter mingled with his own roar.

It was heard by a stout elderly lady, who sat in an alcove a little beyond the alderman's table. She had just finished her tea, but when she heard the familiar bellow, she took several fancy cakes from the dish. She ate them slowly, frowning the while, as though to clear her thoughts.

Presently the waitress brought her the bill.

"You can take that to my husband," said Mrs. Cuttle as she rose to go.

She left by another exit, so that no one knew of her presence in the café until the waitress brought the bill to the alderman.

"Mrs. Cuttle says you will pay this."

The alderman roared with laughter.

"She put one over me," he said, rising to show that he had wasted enough time over frivolity. "Don't you ladies hurry. I'll call in and settle later." He turned to Sonia. "I'm going to the 'Crocodile' office, if you've quite finished."

When they were in the street he referred to Miss Munro.

"In spite of nurse, that lady really is an aristocrat. She proves it by her attitude towards debt. She's been brought up to believe that it's not done to settle a tradesman's bill. You just pay something on account every now and then, and go on collecting more goods. That's how she's always done business with me...Well, I admit I've been soft. I let her run on. But when it comes to cutting me in the street it's time to assert myself. I'm future mayor of this town, and probably this time next year I shall be 'Sir William Cuttle.'"

"I'd rather not discuss her private business," said Sonia.

"There *is* none to discuss."

When they reached the *Chronicle* office, both Wells and Goal gave the alderman a hearty welcome.

Lobb, however, cast one dark glance in his direction, ripped his sheet of paper out of his typewriter and carried it into the inner office.

The alderman winked at Wells and followed him, closing the door to indicate a private interview. As both men shouted, however, every word could be heard in the main office.

"Look here, Lobb," began the alderman, "about those stolen gowns. I don't want to take your money. You never had the stuff. So, why the hell should you pay for them?"

"In that case who will be the loser?" demanded Lobb.

"Well, I suppose I'll be left to hold the baby. Of course, I shall try to touch the Insurance Company, but I've made several claims lately and I doubt if they'll admit this one. They will consider the circumstances show culpable negligence—"

"That's enough, Cuttle. I'll send you a cheque."

"No, hang it all, man, I can stand the racket better than you."

"What do you know of my financial affairs?" shouted Lobb.

"Oh, come, Lobb." The alderman's laugh boomed out. "I don't want to be personal, but to start with, just compare River House with Stonehenge Lodge."

"I won't compare two different values."

The alderman changed his tone.

"Honestly, Lobb," he said earnestly, "I'm not making this offer for the sake of your bright eyes. I'm doing it for your wife. She's a sweet woman, and I don't want her to suffer."

"Leave my wife's name out of it," thundered Lobb. "Send me that invoice and you'll receive my cheque by return post."

The alderman skipped out of the room as lightly as a ballet-dancer, and turned down his thumbs with a Puckish smile.

"Decent of him," commented Wells, when he had left the office.

"Was it?" frowned Sonia.

She contrasted the alderman's sandpaper handling of the situation with his sensitive deference to Lilith Nile's feelings.

"He could afford to give us tea," she thought. "Hubert Lobb really paid the bill."

Mrs. Cuttle mentioned the tea-party to her husband when he returned to Stonehenge Lodge.

"I'm sorry I didn't pour out for you, but I'd just finished my own tea. I expect Miss Yates took my place, though."

"Regina? She wasn't there. Just that old gasbag, Nurse Davis, Mrs. Doctor, and the *Chronicle* girl."

Mrs. Cuttle did not appear to listen.

"How's business?" she asked.

"Not too good. But there's one bad debt the less."

The alderman smiled slightly as he made the announcement.

That evening Sonia heard the postman's knock and came running down the stairs to find Miss Munro already standing at the hall-table. She turned over the letters on the salver and selected one, which she opened eagerly.

As she read it her face turned a sickly green, and she slid to her knees, pitching forward at Sonia's feet in a faint.

XVII. — THE LAST POST

AT the sound of Miss Munro's fall, both Miss Mackintosh and Caroline Brown came running into the hall. Caroline took charge of the situation, while Miss Mackintosh fetched brandy. Between them they soon revived Miss Munro, who stared in front of her with dull eyes.

"Better?" asked Caroline.

"Yes. I'm perfectly all right.'

"What made you turn faint?"

"I had a shock. Bad news."

"Shall I telephone for a doctor?" suggested Miss Mackintosh.

"No. I only want quiet. Please see that I am not disturbed."'

"Certainly, Miss Munro. Can you walk upstairs by yourself?"

"Of course."

At the petulant voice, Miss Mackintosh picked up the brandy bottle and walked away followed by Caroline Brown. Sonia was also turning towards the staircase when Miss Munro spoke to her.

"Where's my letter?"

Sonia picked it up from the floor where it had lain during the commotion.

"You can read it," said Miss Munro. "It has upset me. I am not used to threats from tradespeople."

The note consisted only of a few typewritten lines which Sonia read at a glance. It was from William Cuttle and was clipped to another paper.

DEAR MADAM,—

Enclosed please find account to date. Pending its settlement in full, I regret that I can allow you no further credit.

Yours faithfully—

She stared in surprise at Miss Munro's trembling lips.

"But it's quite mild in tone," she said. "He doesn't even press for payment."

"You know so much, don't you?" The older woman's voice was scornful. "It's an insult. But I had to guard against future liberties. How dare a shopkeeper ask me to tea in a public café?"

"I went," Sonia reminded her. "It was fun. Besides, what are you kicking at? You don't get your clothes from him."

Although she admired Miss Mackintosh's reticence, she yielded to the human weakness of gossip directly she returned to the dining-room. Together, she and Caroline Brown held an inquest over the incident.

"Did you find out what was in the letter?" asked Caroline.

"Yes. I suppose I can tell you because there was nothing in it. It was just an ordinary business note."

"I thought she was lying. But she really had a shock to pass out. Wonder what it was."

"Well, I'm not going to get brain-fag over it. The Waxworks are calling me again, and I want to write another article."

Several days elapsed, however, before Sonia was able to revisit the Gallery. During that period, she did not meet Miss Munro in Tulip House, although she was conscious of her as an uneasy presence on the other side of her bedroom wall in the night. Whenever she woke she heard her pacing the room; and if she chanced to go to the window, the reflection on the pavement told her that her neighbour's light was burning continuously.

One morning, when she had run into Cuttle's shop on her way to the office to get stockings, she saw Miss Munro in conversation with Miss Yates. Her back was turned to her, but she noticed that her thin figure appeared less elegant than shrunken. She was speaking in a low voice, while Miss Yates purposely talked in her strident tones so that the world might hear.

"Sorry, Miss Munro, but it's no good going over old ground again. The boss has given orders for your account to be closed."

Apparently Miss Munro begged her not to speak so loudly, for her light eyes gleamed with malice behind her orange-rimmed spectacles.

"There's no need for *me* to whisper. Everything's above board here. Our methods of credit are well known. They're fair and business-like. The boss can't give one customer preferential treatment and not extend it to another."

Sonia watched the expression on her face as she listened to Miss Munro's remarks, which were inaudible to her. Her thin vermilion lips writhed in a smile which expressed triumph and cruelty.

"I don't advise that tone," she said. "We've nothing to fear from publicity and you would certainly be the loser. We have the St. Hildegarde College account, you know."

Sonia felt quite hot to notice that Miss Munro seemed anxious to prolong the unsatisfactory interview. Miss Yates told her that she could spare no further time but she continued to argue. Although she did not like Miss Munro, she left the shop in a hurry so as to avoid witnessing her humiliation.

She had succeeded in forgetting the incident when next she visited the Waxworks, which appeared to have lost some of its air of desolation. It was no longer a municipal No Man's Land, but a place of local interest. A splashed touring car was parked outside, and as she entered Mrs. Ames had just finished conducting a small party of visitors round the Gallery.

In view of the Waxworks' increasing popularity, she was dressing the part of cicerone, and wore a black velveteen smoking-jacket and cap instead of her usual overall. She took no notice of Sonia, who tactfully turned away to an alcove which was labelled "MURDER, 1897," while the bloodstains on the floor had been renewed to a festive cherry colour.

While she was studying these new effects, Mrs. Ames had collected her tips and joined her. She was accompanied by the stray kitten, who had washed to advertise the fact that he was on regular rations.

"You see," she said, pointing to the card, "we are now duly documented as a *cher ami* of mine—a lawyer, used to say. Ames is printing placards for all the locations. One of these days we might even aspire to descriptive tableaux of the tragedies. Ah, me, 'So little done, so much to do.' I've named the kitten 'Mussolini.' How do you think he's looking?"

"Prosperous," replied Sonia. "He has developed a smirk. In fact, you all seem on the up-grade."

As she spoke, she looked around her appreciatively at the thickets of dingy waxworks. Suddenly, to her surprise, she recognised Miss Munro, who was studying the exhibits with close attention.

"Miss Munro seems interested," she remarked. "I never knew she patronised the Gallery."

"She's been haunting the place for the last few days," confided Mrs. Ames. "I expect she wants to rub up her history. It's her subject at the college, you know. But she clears off whenever I come near her. Very proud."

Sonia guessed that Miss Munro was abstracted rather than snobbish, when she noticed that the woman was about to pass them as though they were invisible. She was shocked, too, by her untidy appearance. She had evidently powdered her face with a charged puff, without looking in the glass, and had neglected to brush away the overflow which speckled her black costume.

"Good-evening, miss," said Mrs. Ames.

Miss Munro came out of her trance and stared haughtily at Mrs. Ames.

"Are you the cleaner?" she asked.

"No."

"Then who cleans this place?"

"Me. But I am a caretaker."

"Then you can take a message to Alderman Cuttle from me. Tell him this Gallery is a disgrace to the corporation. It is dirty, unsanitary, and a meeting-place for illicit love. I have influential friends, and I can get it condemned by the sanitary inspector. And

then this lot of rubbish "—she glared at the Waxworks—"will be thrown out on the scrapheap."

Sonia was staggered by the hatred in Miss Munro's voice, which seemed to spurt venom. Mrs. Ames was also thunderstruck by the fury of the attack. Her big mild face grew tremulous with emotion, but it was chiefly rage.

"Be careful," she said, in a shaking voice. "*They're* listening. And they're watching you. They'll know you again. Don't *you* ever spend a night here. Yes, laugh. You'll laugh on the wrong side of your face before you're much older."

Throughout the interview Miss Munro had seemed unconscious of Sonia's presence. She turned away, a scornful smile on her lips, while Mrs. Ames watched her, her great eyes swimming with tears.

"I've never been so mortified in my life," she declared.

Sonia looked at the dingy shining faces around them. The incident had been so unpleasant that she felt strung up to a nervous condition when she could imagine that the Waxworks were actually memorising what had been said. Feeling that she wanted no more special "atmosphere" for her article, she left the Gallery.

It was raining heavily when she went to bed. When she drew up her blind she looked down over a forest of wet slates. It reminded her of a specialty dreary night just before she came to Tulip House, when she had been roused from sleep by a telephone-bell.

Although she read until her lids fluttered she could not quiet the ferment of her brain. She kept listening to the sound of footsteps on the other side of the wall—a monotonous tramp from end to end of the room—like a prisoner pacing the condemned cell.

It irritated her almost beyond endurance. She was on the point of calling out, when she heard Miss Munro open her door stealthily and go down the staircase.

"I wonder if she's ill," she thought.

Unable to settle down to sleep, she waited for Miss Munro's return; but, as the minutes passed, she grew vaguely uneasy. She knew that any interference would be resented and she sympathised with this attitude; but at the same time she could not overlook the possibility that something might be seriously wrong.

After a time she got out of bed and crept out on to the dark landing. From the black cave of the hall rose the low murmur of a voice. The sound was magnified by the stillness of the house, so that she was unable to locate the speaker who was whispering into the telephone.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you." Sonia could just catch the words. "No, *please* listen. Don't ring off. I'm not playing a joke. Do let me explain."

Sonia could realise, from the painful urgency of her voice, that Miss Munro was desperately anxious to hold the stranger at the other end of the wire.

"My friend gave me this number," she went on. "I have important news for her. Illness. We've no telephone here, and I am speaking from a booth—-"

Suddenly Sonia remembered her festive blue and silver room at the Golden Lion, the streaming darkness outside, and the breathless voice which had come limping over the wire. She recognised it now.

The cry from the night had come from Mary Munro.

XVIII. — THE TRAGIC MARY

SONIA shrank into the shadow and stole back to her room, closing the door noiselessly. This revelation of a human tragedy shocked her profoundly. It was like a landslip of those pretences and polite fictions which cover up the jagged fangs of stark nature.

Her imagination leaped upon the mystery. She believed that while Mary Munro had plunged herself into a hell of utter loneliness, she still craved the reassurance of human company. Her cancerous pride suspected pity, so that she shrank from her fellow-creatures in the flesh. She could only meet them when disembodied by distance.

Once before, she had welcomed Sonia as a voice; she was then merely impersonal—some migrant sleeping at an hotel, who could not trace her or recognise the caller. Sonia began to understand why she had telephoned to the Golden Lion; while it was essential to get in touch only with a stranger, she could not ring up any other town, because of the difficulty of the exchange. Her story of speaking from a call-office was a lie to cover her identity.

In spite of her youth, Sonia was able to crawl down a little way into the blackness of the pit where the soul of Mary Munro was buried. She could imagine the tense anxiety of that S.O.S. sent out over the wire, and the thrill of response when hearing another human voice.

The whole incident suggested such urgency of need that Sonia resolved to take the plunge. She waited until Mary Munro came up to the landing, and then opened the bedroom door.

"Oh, Miss Munro," she said, "I can't sleep...Shall we chat for a little?"

Miss Munro did not reply at first.

"So you've been spying on me," she said at last.

"No—because, you see, I know all about it."

"I don't understand you."

"Then I'll have to tell you. I know that you are lonely, and that you ring up strangers. You rang *me* up when I was staying at the Golden Lion."

Miss Munro threw up her head proudly.

"You're making a most extraordinary mistake," she said. "I never rang you up."

"No," insisted Sonia. "*Please*. I don't want to force any one's confidence, but there are such things as decency, and—and all that. When you are in trouble it's not so bad when it's shared. I may be able to help."

"You?"

Sonia shrank before the scorn conveyed by that one word. It made her realise her utter inexperience and her crudity. She had not left college very long, and the awe of authority still persisted. She remembered that Miss Munro was a mistress at St. Hildegarde's, and she felt that she was once again a schoolgirl in disgrace.

"Sorry," she muttered, as she bolted back to her own room.

Next morning, however, the tables were turned, for Miss Munro had to get up from her bed, where she was uneasily dozing after a sleepless night, and face the merciless scrutiny of her class. As usual, she only swallowed half a cup of coffee, and sent away the rest of her breakfast untouched.

Sonia, who was looking out of the window, watched her go down the street from behind the safety-screen of the curtain. She felt skinned after their interview of the night before. When she got to the office, Wells was refreshing as a mountain-torrent, with his even spirits and sane philosophy.

"What did you mean when you said it didn't pay to be matey with a Waxwork?" she asked. "Do you really credit them with hypnotic power?"

"Of course not," he replied. "But if you're so nutty as to make a habit of talking to a dummy, it shows you've got an obsession, which is a kind of curdling of the brain. In short—you're thick in the clear. Comprenny?"

Sonia took the hint to heart and decided to forget Miss Munro. This was easy while she was at the office; but when she returned to Tulip House, the atmosphere seemed impregnated with her gloomy personality.

Both the girls were out, so she ate her dinner without her usual company. On her way upstairs to her sitting-room, she met Miss Mackintosh coming down with a tray.

"Anything wrong with that?" she asked, showing Sonia a well-fried sole and a small strawberry-shape. "It's waste of time taking food up to Miss Munro. But she's paid for board. So I have to bring it up, and then take it down and eat it myself."

Sonia could guess that Miss Mackintosh was wrought up to a pitch of extraordinary annoyance when she broke her golden rule—to discuss her lodger.

"Is she ill?" she asked.

"She hasn't mentioned it," was the reply.

"But she must be practically starved."

"She may not. I've had maids who were pantry-mice."

"Well, I think she looks appalling. Can't you persuade her to see Dr. Nile?"

Miss Mackintosh's thin grey face grew severe.

"My concern with my boarders is to give them what they pay for," she said. "Their life and death is their personal affair."

It struck Sonia that she must be the sole lunatic in a clear-thinking world. So she went to her room, stirred the fire to a blaze, and read a thriller—as an escape from life.

The other side of the wall, Miss Munro sat at her toilet-table looking at herself in the glass. But something was wrong with the mirror; instead of throwing back a reflection she had grown to hate, it showed a pallid waxen face and dull black eyes.

The same thing had happened that afternoon at school, when she had been giving a lecture on history. She asked a question of a girl with a fat rosy face. As she waited for the reply, she saw that the pupil's features had grown putty-hued and peaked.

While she was staring at her, she became conscious of a stir and a whisper, and awoke to find that the whole class was looking at her with a smile on its communal lips.

She glared back at it, hating it for the mockery in its eyes. And then, under the force of her stronger will, it had dissolved into a cluster of schoolgirls abashed before the lash of her tongue.

But now she was alone—and a slave to something more powerful than herself. It was calling to her to come; but if she obeyed there was no reward. She had been sucked dry as an orange and thrown away—worthless, empty.

"Mary, Queen of Scots." She murmured the name distractedly as she paced the floor.

Suddenly she reached breaking-point, when she could endure the compression of four walls no longer. A mad hope awoke within her, that even now—at the eleventh hour—the sentence of death might be annulled.

Rushing to her wardrobe she snatched up the first garment—a black silk evening cloak. Without stopping to change her evening slippers, she ran down the stairs, and out into the streaming darkness of the night.

Sonia heard the opening of her door, and peeped over the balustrade down into the hall, in time to see Miss Munro dash out of the house. She noticed that she wore no hat, although it was raining, but what was even more indicative of a distraught mind was the fact that she had left the door open.

Feeling that it was an unpleasant duty to follow her, Sonia put on her burberry and beret and ran after her. When she saw her disappear inside the black mouth of the Arcade, she shivered slightly, for she guessed the end of the journey. Fearing to attract attention she had to keep in the rear, so that Miss Munro was first to reach the Waxwork Gallery.

When Sonia crossed the muddy road the woman was beating on the panels of the locked mahogany door. The scene was one of utter desolation, with its background of decaying warehouses

dimly visible through slanting skeins of rain—the deserted street—and the faint glimmer of lamplight like drowned stars.

For one moment Sonia almost yielded to the temptation of running back to Tulip House. There was something uncanny in the attraction of those strange wax men and women inside the building which drew the living from the shelter of their homes. They could call through thick walls and locked doors—and they were answered.

Sonia caught Miss Munro by the arm.

"What's the matter?" she asked sharply.

The elder woman looked at her with dazed eyes. Her face sagged as though every muscle had been nicked and her chin wobbled.

"Mary," she whispered hoarsely. "I must—"

"Mary of Scotland?"

"Yes...I...What are *you* doing here?" The old imperious Miss Munro spoke in a rush of returning identity.

"I just happened to be passing—"

"That's a lie. You were following me. It's an outrage. I will not tolerate it."

To Sonia's relief Miss Munro had recovered her pride. She turned away from the Gallery and walked back to Tulip House, with the dignity of an offended sovereign.

When Sonia entered she was waiting for her in the hall.

"Miss Thompson," she said—speaking as though it required a supreme effort to articulate—"I have a right to privacy. Understand that. I am not ill. I don't need help. But I demand to be *alone*."

"Of course," replied Sonia casually. "Sorry I bumped into you just now."

Feeling that the matter was definitely out of her hands, she went up to bed. But she found that it was impossible to get any rest. She kept listening to sounds through the adjoining wall. There were footsteps, pacing the room from end to end. Sometimes she heard a voice, which she could not recognise,

speaking in hoarse accents. Once, too, came a strangled cry which wrung her heart.

It had struck twelve, when, to her relief Caroline Brown's laugh floated up from the street. She remembered that the dispenser had spoken of going to the Palais de Danse on the chance of collecting a partner. Three of them were now escorting her home, and the leave-taking was so protracted that Sonia's patience grew exhausted.

When presently Caroline let herself in through the front door, she found Sonia waiting for her in the hall.

"It's like the good old days when my father used to meet me with a strap," she said. "Anything wrong?"

"Miss Munro. I'm worried stiff about her."

"Oh, don't be silly. She's all right. I've had a heavenly time. I want to dance—and dance—"

Sonia reflected grimly that it was just the extra bit of bad luck that Caroline's Spanish mother should be uppermost to-night. The music and dancing had excited her Southern blood. Her cheeks flamed and her eyes were black with passion, as she swayed around the hall clicking imaginary castanets.

"Can't you get Dr. Nile to see her?" she asked desperately.

"The D.R.?" Caroline stopped pirouetting and became her practical self. "Has she asked to see him?"

"No."

"Then he can't thrust himself on her."

"Then—can you do anything?"

"No—because it's no good. Come along and I'll give you a practical demonstration."

Caroline ran lightly up the stairs and knocked loudly on Miss Munro's door.

"It's Caroline Brown," she called. "Are you ill? Can I get you anything?"

As there was no answer to her knocks, she turned away with a shrug.

"I'll make no charge," she told Sonia. "Now go to bed and wash her out—same as me."

Sonia did her utmost to follow the advice. Although, presently, she dropped off to sleep through sheer weariness, she had the most wretched night she had ever passed at Tulip House. Her nerves would not let her rest; they remained quivering even while she dozed, so that she started at every sound.

After a while she reached that indeterminate condition when she did not know whether she slept or were awake. She thought that she was in bed, but strange things were happening in the house. She kept getting up to shut doors in order to keep out some malignant visitor—and the next moment they burst open again.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew through the house, so that every door and window began to bang. She heard the front door crash open, and ran downstairs to the hall in an agony of terror.

Something was standing in the entrance—a grim and terrible figure dressed in black velvet, and with pallid eaten features. It was Mary of Scotland—alive and instinct with some horrible purpose.

As she rushed forward to bar her advance, she woke up to find herself in bed. Her heart was leaping and her pyjama-jumper was damp with sweat as she sat up to listen.

There was the sound of a dull thud downstairs. The front door was actually open and banging in the draught.

No one else seemed to have been awakened, so she lit her candle, and shielding it carefully walked down to the hall. By this time she was too irritated to feel any fear as she drew the bolt.

"If you've gone out again you can stay out, or knock to be let in," she muttered.

When she got back to bed she heard the clock strike four. The house now seemed to be very quiet. There were no more sounds from the other side of the wall. Miss Munro was either absent or had gone to sleep. In either case, she felt relief at the absence of an uneasy tenant. Drawing up the blanket against the chill of dawn, she fell asleep.

When she awoke, just as it was growing light, her first thought was for Miss Munro. Stealing to her door, she opened it stealthily and peeped inside. The blinds were drawn and the room was in darkness, but she could distinguish the outlines of a figure seated before the mirror. Apparently Miss Munro had fallen asleep in her chair.

Sonia stepped cautiously to the window and drew up a blind, admitting a ray of pallid daylight. Then she gave a scream.

Miss Munro was no longer there. In her place was a stiff figure, dressed in black velvet, with a white wax face and staring glass eyes.

XIX. — A WAX CASUALTY

DRAWN by Sonia's scream, Caroline Brown, in pyjamas and with her mass of dark hair falling over her eyes like grape-tendrils, rushed into the room.

"Oh, my Heavenly Father," she cried.

Sonia gripped her arm.

"How did it come here?" she gasped.

"What?"

Sonia pointed fearfully to the waxwork.

"Mary of Scotland," she whispered.

"Are you crazy?" asked Caroline. "That's Miss Munro. She is dead."

As she stared at the stark figure, Sonia realised that death had brought out the likeness between Mary Munro and the waxwork. She remembered that Mrs. Ames had spoken of some elusive resemblance. Once again she was caught by rushes of darkness, which cleared to a smother of green water, through which the gigantic wooden face of Mrs. Ames plunged, dripping, towards her.

She gave a little stagger as Caroline Brown, who had been stooping over the corpse, straightened herself.

"Cold," she remarked, touching the face. Then she took Sonia by the arm and ran her out to her own room.

"Stay here," she said, "while I ring up the D.R. I'll soon be back."

Feeling cold and helpless, Sonia waited, listening to footsteps and voices on the landing as the household awoke to the tragedy. Presently Caroline, wearing a stout brown woollen dressing-gown, which contrasted strangely with her tremulous beauty, entered. She carried two tumblers, one of which she forced inside Sonia's cold fingers.

"Sal volatile," she said. "Here's luck. Oop. *Down* it goes."

She gulped down her own pick-me-up, and then patted Sonia's shoulder.

"Pull yourself together, old lady. We've all got to die. It would be worse if we didn't, like the Wandering Jew."

As she listened to the cool voice with its North Country accent, Sonia felt a rush of admiration for the other girl.

"You really are wonderful," she said.

"Just practical. I'm glad she passed out. I was afraid she would come to a sticky end. Suicide. And I knew I'd never fancy using the dinner-knives here again."

"Whatever made you think of that?" gasped Sonia.

"She was a physical and mental wreck. I wonder she didn't fall to bits. She couldn't say two words without blurring them. And she was finished at the school. I heard it some time ago on the Q.T."

As Sonia's eyes began to fill with pity, Caroline shook her head.

"Don't get mushy," she entreated. "Remember, she gave herself this deal. She started with everything—money, friends, education. Now, take me. I'm one of fourteen, so it was 'God for us all, and the Devil take the hindmost.' My father was a doctor, but he was too soft-hearted. He got struck off the Register for not leaving things to nature. When I was seven I used to scrub down the front steps as mother was too fat. Little things like that. But I think life's a grand show, so long as I've teeth, and something to

put between them...But I've got a job to hold down, and it's time to dress."

Caroline paused at the bedroom door and frowned.

"Dress," she repeated. "Now, what made her put on that old black velvet? The last time she wore it was when her man called here and broke it off."

"Was she engaged?" asked Sonia.

"Yes, to an officer in the Guards. I didn't blame him. A man has a duty to posterity."

Dr. Nile arrived at Tulip House, and left again while Sonia was at her breakfast. After she had walked down the steps, she looked up at the two windows where the blinds were drawn down.

"When you come back to lunch the upset will be over," Miss Mackintosh had assured her favourite boarder. "Dr. Nile thinks it is heart-disease. But she's not been having medical advice, so they'll have to make sure she didn't take poison."

The normal behaviour of others acted as a tonic on Sonia's nerves; she had almost recovered from her shock when she reached the *Chronicle* office.

Wells received her news with an absence of emotion.

"Kicked the bucket, has she? Would you like to write it up?"

"Oh, no," shuddered Sonia. "I want to forget it."

"And you call yourself a tough newspaper man?" grinned Wells.

"I do—as long as I can make cocoa."

Wells was glad to see Sonia's answering grin.

To raise her spirits, he began to play the office sport of testing Horatio's infallibility.

"Horatio, how d'you spell 'monogamist?'"

Horatio spelt it, glibly and correctly.

"Good. Are you a monogamist, Horatio?"

"No, Mr. Wells."

"You young rip."

"I'm not married, Mr. Wells, so I couldn't be one."

The gratified gleam behind Horatio's big spectacles showed that he was fully aware of his omniscience.

He looked up with the alert expression of a seal catching bits of fish, when Sonia took a hand in the game.

"Horatio, how d'you spell 'sanguine?'"

He rattled off the correct spelling.

"Fine. D'you know what it means?"

"Yes, Miss Thompson. 'Bloody.'"

There was a howl of delight from Sonia and Wells.

"No—'hopeful.'"

It was the first time Horatio had suffered defeat, and he would not admit it.

"Then it must mean 'bloody hopeful,'" he muttered.

Lobb entered in the midst of the uproar. His tense lips and smouldering eyes showed that he was in his dark mood; but Sonia was too triumphant to notice.

"I've stumped Horatio *at last*," she cried.

"Very interesting." Lobb's voice was gall.

"Have you heard that Miss Munro was found dead in bed this morning?"

"Yes. I found her."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it since it affects you so deeply."

"No, Lobb, that's not fair," broke in Wells, as Sonia bit her lip. "She came to the office in tears. I've just made her forget—and now you've gone and made her remember. Curse you."

Wells' cheerful voice made the malediction sound positively matey; and he thumped Lobb's back with a brotherly blow.

"What's got you, old-timer?"

"It's the end of a woman," muttered Lobb. "What an end. Unhonoured and unmourned. There'll be an inquest. Every secret of her wretched life will be dragged out to make spicy reading for this damnable town. She'll be buried deep in mud before she's even put into the earth."

"In that case, Lobb, suppose you cover the inquest. You can see what's to be done in the way of suppression."

"Right. I'll take care of her."

Contrary to the expectations of the scandalmongers, however, there was no public exposure of unsavoury details. The coroner held the opinion that an inquest was solely a last act of justice towards the dead, and not a morgue of living happiness. He confined himself to the reason of why Mary Munro died, and not how she lived.

In spite of her boast, nothing was seen or heard of her hosts of grand friends, although, to Sonia's surprise, the peer whose photograph had been displayed was represented by his agent. He stated that his lordship was a distant cousin of the deceased, but had lost sight of her for years.

Miss Mackintosh identified the body as her boarder, and mentioned the fact, that although she did not appear ill, she had practically starved herself, owing to a form of hysteria.

This was confirmed by Dr. Nile, who said that malnutrition had helped to hasten her death from heart-disease and a form of lung-trouble. The verdict, accordingly, was "Death from natural causes."

The peer's agent arranged for an adequate funeral, which was non-stop from the police station to the local cemetery. There were three wreaths—one from the residents at Tulip House and another from the staff and pupils at St. Hildegarde's College. The third—and best—was from Alderman Cuttle, who was responsible for the funeral, and who was its most dignified feature.

The end of Miss Munro was an announcement of her death in *The Times*.

Sonia felt very depressed on the evening of the funeral in spite of Caroline Brown's philosophy.

"You can't get her back; and if you could she wouldn't come. If you knew what I do, you'd say jolly good luck to her."

"What do you know?" asked Sonia.

"As much as the D.R. And he told it to the world."

"All the same, I wish I'd been more decent. I'd give anything to see her again."

Sonia knew that she was giving way to a morbid fancy when she yielded to an impulse to visit the Waxwork Gallery. But she felt that already her memory was idealising the dead. When she tried to recall her, she saw a girl with mournful dark eyes and a face like a white rose—very much, in fact, what a certain officer in the Guards was remembering, as he glanced at *The Times* while waiting for a cocktail.

Believing that the sight of Mary of Scotland's yellow wax face and glassy eyes would help to lay this lovely pathetic ghost, she went out into a night of raw fog and glimmering pavements. Riverpool wore its most depressing aspect; and when she reached the old town, the derelict buildings and glimpses of stagnant black water appeared the acme of melancholy.

She was glad to hurry to the refuge of the Gallery. But directly she passed through its funereal mahogany portals, she realised a change. The place was several tones darker and seemed silent as the grave. There was no sign of Mrs. Ames and no sound from the curtained alcoves.

Suddenly Sonia felt afraid. The vast building appeared a habitation of the dead. She wanted to retreat; but because she knew she dreaded seeing Mary of Scotland, she forced herself to visit the Waxwork.

She threaded a way through clumps of dark semi-human figures until she reached the place where she had last seen the ancient effigy, with its moth-eaten black velvet robe and pallid blurred face.

To her horror the stand was empty.

XX. — BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

FOR a moment Sonia stood locked in the grip of superstitious awe, as though Mary Munro and the waxwork—Mary of Scotland—were actually fused in a dual personality. She started at the sound of Mrs. Ames' voice behind her.

"She's gone. You'll never see her again."

Sonia purposely spoke in her most matter-of-fact tone.

"Was it condemned?"

"No. She cheated them."

It was evident that Mrs. Ames meant to make the most out of her opportunity for drama. Although facile tears filled her eyes, she told her tale with enjoyment.

"Well, in confidence, the alderman was right about the poor thing. I wouldn't admit it, but she was riddled with rot, and her face was cracked all over. I think a cat must have jumped at her in the night. I sometimes let an old ratter stay here to keep down the mice...Anyway, in the morning she was lying on the floor, a horrible mess."

Sonia did not ask the date of the smash. Her sense of dramatic unities dictated that the two Marys should come to an end at the same moment; and she thought it was more probable that nothing of the kind had occurred.

"You didn't like the idea of scrapping her, so it was a lucky accident," she said. "Is it my fancy or is the Gallery darker than usual?"

"Very likely. One of the lights has fused."

"Of course. Not many people here to-night, are there?"

"Only one couple. But our attendance is increasing daily, and we've been patronised by some of the best people. You must look at the visitors' book presently." She added with watery eyes, "I put it down to your writings. You've been a good friend to my waxworks—and they won't forget it...Oh, how you startled me, sir."

Both jumped at the sudden appearance of the alderman, slipping between two queens. He laughed heartily at their surprise.

"I heard voices and wanted to hear some scandal."

"We were merely discussing the Waxworks," said Sonia rather stiffly. "It's curious how certain figures seem to correspond with local people."

"What d'you mean?"

The alderman's voice was so rough that Sonia raised her brows.

"Well, don't Mary of Scotland and Miss Munro make a pair?" she remarked casually.

"And I always say that Henry the Eighth looks exactly like you," chimed in Mrs. Ames.

"That's all right so long as I don't look like him."

The alderman's laugh rolled through the Gallery.

"I shall have to work fast if I'm to follow him over wives," he said. "I've had the same old one for nearly twenty-five years. It's our silver wedding next year. Have you heard, under the hat, there's the prospect of a royal visit then? As I'm mayor, I shall probably be knighted. Sir William Cuttle at your service."

While he was talking, Sonia was dimly conscious of an intent scrutiny. Looking up she saw that she was directly in the line of vision of Henry the Eighth's glass eyes. In the dim light they appeared green with tigerish cruelty. As she turned away she met the alderman's penetrative stare, as though she were picked out by two batteries. At that moment they might have been twin brothers.

She guessed that her morbid fancies were the result of insomnia, and when she returned to Tulip House she pleased Caroline Brown by appealing to her for advice.

"You expect to stay awake, so you do," Caroline told her. "A mild bromide to quiet your nerves will break the habit."

That night Sonia slept round the clock. She arrived at the office in a cheerful frame of mind which was not duplicated by

Hubert Lobb. He looked so heavy with gloom that she asked if he were ill.

"No," he replied. "It's Cynthia. She has measles."

"Badly?"

"No. But her mother frets because she is away from home."

"You should have sent her to St. Hildegarde's," chipped in Wells, "and then you could have checked up her spots for yourself."

"I'm so sorry for Mrs. Lobb." Sonia spoke impulsively. "She says the office amuses her. Won't you bring her in to tea this afternoon?"

"Thanks, but she has an engagement."

"Pity. I haven't seen her for ages. If she's feeling down, shall I slip down to see her? On these dark days it's depressing to be alone too much."

"Please don't." Lobb's voice was curt. "I don't want to seem ungracious, but the fact is my wife is not too fond of casual visitors. When she is feeling sociable she comes out of retreat and bursts upon the world again. But she really *prefers* to be alone."

"I understand perfectly."

After her rebuff, Sonia shrugged the Lobbs off her mind. When a few mornings later Lobb arrived at the office, his face a map of worry-lines, she pointedly asked no questions.

"You'll have to carry on without me for a couple of days, Wells," he said abruptly. "I've got to go and see Cynthia."

"Is she worse?" asked Wells quickly.

"No, but she's fretting to see one of us. If I run down to the school, it will probably save worry and expense in the long run."

"Why doesn't your wife go?"

"She's not too fit."

"Well, you know best. Personally, I should have thought a mother met the case better than a mere father."

Wells jutted out his chin in token of annoyance.

"It was as much as I could do to keep off blasting him," he confided to Sonia when Lobb had left the office. "Cold-blooded devil. A man without natural feeling ought not to marry."

Rather to his surprise, Sonia did not champion Lobb.

"I'm beginning to wonder if he's not a sort of Bluebeard," she said. "Is he jealous?"

"Doesn't it look like it?"

"Yes. Why does he make out she's unsociable? She didn't give me that impression."

"She's not. She loves life. Only he's got her completely under his thumb."

Sonia continued to think of Mrs. Lobb while she typed a quarter of a column of borrowed advice on forcing lily-crowns for Christmas. Presently she left the flowers at a critical stage of their growth, to rattle off a personal note, which she carried over to Wells.

"Read this," she said. "I wasn't asking for any more insults this morning. Now, it's up to her. I'm sending it by express messenger."

Wells grinned as he read the letter.

Dear Mrs. Lobb,

I'm so sorry about Cynthia. As you're now a deserted wife, may I blow in tomorrow afternoon? I'll bring your devoted Wells. Just scrawl a line on the back of this if you'd like us to come, but we shall quite understand if it's not convenient.

Sonia Thompson.

The express messenger did not live up to his name, for he was a sociable youth with an interest in the pageant of life as presented in the streets of Riverpool; but eventually he returned to the *Chronicle* office with Mrs. Lobb's reply.

"Enchanted," she wrote in her big dashing handwriting, over the back of Sonia's note. *"I'm aching to see some one. Come to tea, and come early. R.L."*

The following day was always the most stagnant in the *Chronicle* office. Sonia and Wells had cleared the work by three o'clock; so, since Leonard had run up to London for the night, it seemed safe to leave Horatio in charge for an hour or two.

"Remember, you're now an editor, my son," Wells told him. "You can sack the lot of us, and raise your own screw. Only, don't forget you'll have to pay it."

There was no answering smile on Horatio's face. "Do I sit in the editor's room downstairs?" he asked gravely.

"Gosh, no. Hang out here to receive the public. There'll be nothing in except a small 'ad' or two. If there should be something you can't handle, get on your bike and come to me at River House."

Sonia and Wells experienced the guilty sense of playing truant, as they hurried beside the soupy rain-swollen river, overhung with a rookery of decaying houses.

"First time I've taken french leave since I was at school," said Wells. "And a girl tempted me then. There may be something in the rumour about the Fall."

When they reached the low ivied house, Sonia was struck by its desolate aspect.

"There's no smoke coming from its chimney," she said, "and the curtains are drawn."

"Probably they burn gas," suggested Wells, as they walked up the slippery greened path.

No one answered the door, although Sonia rang twice.

"The maid must be changing," she said. "Bad staff-work."

"But they don't keep one. They only have an occasional woman," explained Wells.

"Then she's forgotten she asked us."

"Well, this will remind her that we want our tea."

Wells' tattoo with the knocker was so thunderous that Sonia protested. But it had no effect on the invisible guardian of the house.

They exchanged a flurried glance. Then Sonia spoke in unnaturally flippant tones.

"I've got to crash this hospitable home. I'm starving. Let's risk it and try the back."

They pushed past a damp laurel bush which had overgrown the side path of the tradesmen's entrance, and reached the back door. Upon the step were the customary signs of an unawakened household—a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk.

Wells and Sonia looked at each other with undignified concern.

"Wonder if she's ill," said Sonia. "We'll see if we can look inside. The windows are lower on the other side."

They got round to the front door again just as a telegraph-boy leaned his battered red bicycle against the gate. He handed a telegram to Wells.

"Any answer?" he asked. "I've been here twice before."

To Sonia's surprise, Wells ripped open the envelope. An expression of relief flitted across his face as he read the message.

"No reply," he said.

After the youth had been tipped and had ridden away, he showed the telegram to Sonia.

"'Cynthia much better. Returning by earlier train,'" she read. "Well, now you're properly in the soup. You've opened Mrs. Lobb's telegram."

"I was afraid it was bad news about Lobb," he told her. "She'll understand. But first we have to find her."

Pushing past the shrubs, they managed to get a glimpse of the dining-room through a gap in the curtains. The door was open, revealing a peep of the passage.

"Look," said Sonia, "the gas is still burning in the hall."

"Um. Can you make out anything?" muttered Wells.

There were confusing reflections on the dark glass, so that it was difficult to distinguish anything inside the room. Suddenly Sonia gripped Wells' arm.

"Is that someone in the chair?" she whispered.

As they looked at each other with startled eyes, they heard the grate of the gate and turned to see Lobb walking up the path.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked.

"Your wife invited us to tea," explained Wells. "But I'm afraid there is something wrong."

He had scarcely spoken, when Lobb leaped to the door, inserted his latch-key and wrenched it open. Without any thoughts of intrusion, Wells and Sonia rushed after him into the passage.

The dining-room was a scene of utter disorder and squalor. The air was sour, and a saucepan was poised crookedly on top of dead coals in the grate. Its contents had overboiled and dribbled down on to the tiles, while a newspaper was scattered over the floor in crumpled sheets. One chair was overturned. Sonia noticed that Cynthia's photograph had been removed from the drawing-room, and was placed upon the table, which was covered with the remains of a meal. From the dried stains on the china, she guessed that it was a relic of the preceding day.

Then she recoiled in horror at the sight of Mrs. Lobb. She sat crookedly in her chair like a stuffed bundle of clothes. Her hair was in tangled wisps, and she looked at them without a gleam of recognition in her dulled eyes.

Every trace of spirit had been stamped out of her face.

XXI. — CONFESSION

NEITHER Wells nor Sonia dared to look at Lobb. He crossed over to the chair and took one of his wife's limp hands.

"That wretched neuralgia again?" he asked. "You'd better come upstairs and lie down."

Although his voice was gentle he spoke lightly. Mrs. Lobb peered at him with a kind of webbed gaze and shook her head. She resisted his efforts to raise her to her feet. Wells made no attempt to help, but stood staring through the window at the damp ivied wall of the garden.

Presently Lobb managed to grip his wife under her armpits and hoist her to her feet. Supporting her weight on his shoulders, he slowly guided her out of the room. Wells shut the door after them, but they could hear the thuds upon the stairs, and Lobb's voice raised in encouragement.

"Up—up. *That's* the way. Now, another. Yes, my darling, you *can*."

Sonia started at the sound of a scuffle, followed by a fall. Her face was pale as she whispered to Wells.

"Is she drunk?"

"No." His eyes were stern. "I don't think it's that."

"Isn't it damnable?"

"It's hell."

She looked around the room.

"Can I tidy up?" she asked.

"Yes, go ahead. I'll help."

It was impossible to do much without cleaning materials, although Wells sacrificed his handkerchief to flick the worst of the dust from the table and mantelpiece. But they were able to straighten the furniture, collect crumpled sheets of newspaper, and clear away some of the rubbish. Sonia was revolted by the disorder as she threw a mass of egg-shells, cigarette-ends, dead flowers and burnt matches into the choked grate. After she had

swept up the hearth, she stood wiping her fingers with the handkerchief.

"You know now," she said, "why he sent Cynthia away."

"Yes."

"And why he wouldn't risk neglected animals."

"Um. You were right."

"I wish I wasn't...Let's go."

"No." Wells shook his head miserably. "We can't look down our noses and pretend we've seen nothing. We've got to stick it out."

Sonia approved his courage, although she wished she were miles distant when she heard Lobb's heavy step in the passage. As he entered, she was horrified by his face. It was ghastly and streaked with sweat as though he had been stoking a furnace. His eyes were hollow and his hair plastered over his brow in damp black jags.

"Still here?" He gave a grating laugh. "Where's your tact? Why haven't you faded away like all my other friends?"

Wells opened his cigarette case and passed it to him.

"Drugs?" he asked casually.

"Yes."

"Curse...Lobb, I'm fond of that woman upstairs."

"I know."

Lobb put out a hand which was gripped by Wells. Sonia was on the point of following his example, but refrained at a sudden memory of Tweedledum and Tweedledee dancing round the mulberry-bush with Alice. So instead of offering sympathy, she was practical.

"What's to be done?" she asked.

Lobb wiped his face and sank into a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "You don't know the relief this is. I want to tell you how it began. She had an operation when drugs were used to relieve the pain. After a bit, she found she was depending on them. She fought it and won. She *won*. But she still had bad days...We came here, and presently I noticed an improvement. I

put it down to the change. Then to my horror I discovered someone, some devil, was secretly supplying her with the drug."

"Who?" asked Wells.

"I don't know."

"But can't you get her to tell you?"

"No. I *cannot* ask her. I have to pretend I know nothing. Notice nothing. If once she knew *I* knew, she'd lose her self-respect and go completely to bits. I believe the shame would drive her to commit suicide."

"So you call it neuralgia? I understand."

"Sonia doesn't." Lobb looked at the girl's self-reliant face and firm lips. "She's judging her. No one but myself knows how splendid she's been. The original illness was brought on by strain and overwork. When I couldn't get work, she kept us sewing, nursing, cooking, singing, gardening—any mortal job she could get...If I could lay my hands on the devil who's got at her, I'd kill him."

Wells smoked furiously to hide his feelings.

"There's another solution, and a better one," he remarked. "We've got to find out the source of supply, and stop it. Do you suspect any one?"

"No. I've looked all round the thing. I'm sure Rosamund is not the only victim. Some one is carrying on a filthy little peddling drug business for the sake of a few miserable pounds." Lobb turned fiercely to Sonia. "I told you to use a reducing-glass to understand this cursed town. Lives are being ruined so that some damned louse may buy cigars or a model gown."

Wells brought him back to the straight.

"It comes to this, Lobb," he said reflectively, "the—agent must be some one of definite social standing. Also some one who has the opportunity of mixing freely with people. He has to gain the confidence of his clients, before he sounds them. He must be a cool customer. He runs the devil of a risk whenever he fishes for a new client...Now—what about a doctor?"

"I thought of Nile," said Lobb. "He would know the medical history of his patients and which were vulnerable."

"But Nile's too decent," objected Wells.

"It *is* someone who's considered decent." Lobb's voice was corrosive. "But I doubt if it's Nile. None of the people I suspect of being addicts are patients of his."

"Good. Have you thought of the late unlamented Sir Julian?"

"Yes. He was my principal suspect," confessed Lobb. "My feelings were those of a savage when I heard of his death. I wanted to stamp on his grave. But almost directly afterwards I could tell she'd got hold of a fresh supply."

"How?"

"Because she was gay and almost like her old self. Active and generous. At first there is always a change for the better. But it is followed by a worse relapse."

"Um. What about a woman?"

"That's a distinct possibility. She would have chances of approaching other women and gaining their confidence. A woman has tact, finesse, and no moral sense or conscience."

Lobb had forgotten Sonia, who smiled faintly.

"Now," he continued, "there is Miss Yates—"

"No," interrupted Sonia. "It's the alderman. *I feel* it is. The first time we met he tried to sound me. He asked me if I took drugs to stimulate my brain. And when he found out I was no good to him, he seemed to dislike me."

Both men looked doubtful, although they paid her idea the tribute of a thoughtful silence which Wells was first to break.

"Well, Lobb?"

"He certainly has the chance to meet women," admitted Lobb. "But his heart is set on being mayor. If anything prevented that, I believe he would have a stroke and pass out. So I can't see him running unnecessary risks. Besides, the man's obviously prosperous. He's too respectable for all his gallantry. He is careful even over his ladies."

"That seems so," agreed Wells thoughtfully. "If he was slipping them cocaine, the easiest way would be to have an affair as a blind."

Sonia listened to the argument, still unconvinced; but before she could interrupt them, Wells had raised another point.

"Sorry to ask, Lobb, but this stuff, whatever it is, isn't exactly cheap. How did Mrs. Lobb pay for it?"

Sonia saw that Lobb shied at the question, which he answered with brutal directness.

"By every kind of shift and lie. Unpaid bills. Buying at cheap shops. Sometimes the food wasn't fit to eat. In fact, the whole thing has been a constant drain. Having to send Cynthia away most of the holidays as well. Over-paying women to come in and hold their tongues about anything they might notice. That parcel of frocks from Cuttle which were stolen was about the last straw. It would never have happened if she had been—responsible."

Sonia remembered his unkempt appearance with a pang of sympathy.

"I suppose you had to come home sometimes to *this*?" she asked.

"Yes. I often cooked my meals, or tried to. But I'm no good at tidying. Too impatient. I just curse and throw the things about—"

He broke off at the sound of a heavy thud overhead and listened intently. As he met the question in Wells' eyes, he shook his head.

"She's only knocked over the chair by her bed. Better leave her to sleep it off. She mustn't suspect she's watched."

Then he glanced at Sonia.

"Our hard-boiled young man looks pale," he said. "Go home, my dear, and forget all about it."

"Yes," agreed Wells. "I'm staying on."

"It's so futile just to be sorry," Sonia told Lobb, when he walked with her to the gate. "I wish I could do something."

"You've tidied the room," he said, with a ghost of a smile. "That's like you. The first time I saw you, I stared. I noticed you

seemed surprised. But you looked so eager, so clean. You reminded me of Rosamund as she *was*."

Sonia felt rather tremulous as she walked back through the dingy streets. Twilight had imparted a jade-green hue to the river and a picturesque squalor to the overhanging tenements. Intent on her thoughts, she crossed the stone bridge, and turned the corner of a public-house, where she collided with the alderman.

He looked especially festive and prosperous in a new suit and with a red carnation in his buttonhole. Still obsessed by her private suspicions at the unexpected meeting, she was overpowered by a molten flux of emotions.

She stopped and spoke impulsively. It was not until she heard the breathless rush of her words, that she realised what she had said.

"Oh, Mr. Cuttle, can you get me some 'snow?'"

XXII. — THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

"SNOW?" repeated the alderman. "Do you mean—cocaine?"

His face and voice expressed utter surprise. But Sonia had gone too far to retreat.

"I know it sounds awful," she said. "But it's like this. I'm ambitious, and I want to write something worth while. But I'm kept on donkey-work at the office all day, so the night's my only time. By then my brain feels clogged. And some one told me that cocaine made you feel simply wonderful—full of energy and clear-headed."

"Who told you that? Miss Munro?"

"Yes," romanced Sonia, snatching at his suggestion.

"*Ah*. But what made you think *I* could get you some? Don't you know it's a penal offence?"

His tone was so stern that Sonia felt that she had made a bad blunder.

"I know," she murmured. "Only, it *can* be got by some one with a knowledge of the world. I suppose I thought of you because you're the local Selfridge."

"I'm sure I'm flattered." The alderman's big laugh rolled out. "Lady, I'd gladly jump into the lions' den to pick up your glove. But I'm the next mayor so I couldn't risk any scandal...Besides, it's a bad habit for a girl."

"I wouldn't let it become a habit," said Sonia. "I'd only take the least pinch. When you're writing it's so difficult to make a start. Once I got going I'd be all right."

"Sez you." The alderman laughed again. Then his jovial face grew grave and he looked at her shrewdly.

"You wouldn't stop at a pinch," he told her. "You'd want more and more until you couldn't do without it. It's very expensive. Of course, you know it's sold secretly in the town?"

"Yes."

"Well, whoever sells it has the monopoly. He—or she—can stick up the price on you when the time comes that you cannot do without it. You couldn't afford it."

Sonia did not realise what she had admitted when she answered the alderman's carelessly interposed question. While he had tricked her into revealing inside information, she was still puzzled by his attitude. Intent on testing his cupidity she decided to boast.

"What do you know of my financial position?" she asked coldly.

"Nothing," he replied. "I can only judge by appearance. As a rule, even charming young ladies don't earn high salaries."

"But I'm not dependent on my job, I live at Tulip House, instead of taking a flat, because I like to meet other people. My father's quite wealthy. So you see my money's safe."

"But you don't keep your promises."

"What d'you mean?"

The alderman shook a big forefinger at her.

"What about a certain young lady who promised to buy a model costume?"

"But I'm going to. I told Bessie. Blair I would get it from her."

His small almond eyes glittered.

"Well," he said, "after that, I suppose I must see what I can do. I admit I know my way about. Perhaps I *might* be able to find some early snow."

Sonia hid her triumph.

"I only want a small quantity to experiment with," she told him. "When will you let me have it?"

"Now, let me think. Suppose you come to a little tea-party at the Mayor's Parlour to-morrow afternoon. Fourish. My wife will be there. You see, everything has got to look above-board. I'll manage to find a way to slip you the stuff...But remember, I won't guarantee results."

"I understand. It will be at my own risk. You really are a sport, and I won't forget to buy that frock."

"Thank you, madam. We will do our best to merit your esteemed patronage. Was Mrs. Lobb wearing her new gown to-day?"

"No."

Sonia turned and walked quickly away. She did not want to give any information about Mrs. Lobb. It was not until later that she realised that his question had been a shot in the dark.

She told Wells about the episode the following morning at the office.

"I'm afraid I spilt the beans," she confessed. "He knows *I* know about the drugs and he know who told me. But I've got him where I want him."

"My poor child." Wells shook his head. "What makes you connect the alderman with these drugs? He goes everywhere, so he's probably heard the local rumours. But Lobb thinks the betting's against him."

"We shall see. May I get off this afternoon?"

"Of course. You're no earthly good, are you? But you'll only waste your time. He was stringing you along with spoof. You'll find the place empty."

Wells proved a false prophet. As Sonia mounted the mud-flecked steps of the town hall, she could hear the sound of voices before she turned down the broad corridor, covered with cork-matting. One familiar voice—tones higher than the rest—was like a bruise on the air. It gave her advance information that Mrs. Eden—Leonard's talkative wife—was one of the guests.

The Mayor's Parlour was a bare official room, with a big central table, topped with black shiny leather, and uncomfortable wooden chairs. A portrait of the present mayor over the mantelshelf was the only concession to its title.

It seemed to be full of important people in the persons of large scented ladies, and was presided over by the alderman. He wore his favourite grey plus-fours, and beamed over the company like the spirit of hospitality. He went forward to welcome Sonia, and to introduce her to the guest of honour.

"This is our Gentleman of the Press, Lady Priday."

Lady Priday was a vague middle-aged woman with a weak face. Sonia only recognised her by her distinctive sables. Besides Mrs. Eden, the party had the municipal support of the mayoress—another big expensive lady. Mrs. Cuttle, in ruby velvet, poured out the tea, which had been sent in from a café.

Miss Yates acted as waitress. Against her will, Sonia had to admit that she was the smartest and most attractive woman present. In contrast with Mrs. Eden, who was a painted scarecrow, she did not seem haggard or artificial, while she wore a dark purple caped suit almost with a swagger of defiance. The alderman carried round a plate of locally-famed cakes.

"You must try our maids-of-honour," he said. "When I am mayor, Miss Yates is going to be a maid-of-honour, because she is wearing my favourite purple this afternoon."

"Not much 'maid' about her," remarked Mrs. Cuttle bluntly.

Miss Yates was swift to translate the speech as a comment on her age.

"That's right," she said. "You must pick schoolgirls for your little maids, boss. But perhaps I'll grace the function in another capacity."

It was plain that she despised the intelligence of the company. Her harmless words were impudent in their implication as she smiled at the alderman. His back was turned towards Sonia, so that she did not know whether he responded.

As usual, it was impossible to tell what Mrs. Cuttle thought of the situation. She concentrated on her tea and ate quantities of muffin; yet her strained blue eyes often stared dully at Miss Yates, as though she resented her presence. She listened, with her usual accompaniment of nods, to Mrs. Eden's boast of her financial flair in buying and selling shares; and at the first pause captured the conversation with her slow monotone.

"I don't believe in speculation. You never know which way the cat's going to jump. My husband and I have always gone in for insurance. We've both of us insured our lives. So, whatever

happens, we're safe. It's the best way of saving. You pay your premiums, and you know where you are. If you save, you're apt to stint. You don't get comfort. Or good living. But we both carry a lot of insurance."

"That's quite all right for the one who lives longest," said Miss Yates, with her shrill laugh.

Sonia was vaguely disturbed by the speech. As she looked at Mrs. Cuttle she imagined that her eyes appeared sunken and her nose pinched. Acting on impulse, she crossed over to her.

"You don't look well," she said.

"I'm not too grand," admitted Mrs. Cuttle. "I suffer from indigestion and flatulence. It's these late suppers. I blame it on my husband. Of course, I can't sit by and watch him eat, but I often tell him that we're digging our graves with our teeth."

She stopped as the alderman called for silence by clapping his huge hands. He looked like an outsize Puck, as he beamed mischievously on his guests, the laughter-wrinkles spraying round his eyes.

"I told you this was a surprise party," he said. "Now, I wonder if you ladies would like to sniff snow? Those in favour of the motion will signify in the usual way by holding up their right hand."

Every lady present extended her arm, amid a chorus of excited voices and laughter.

"Don't split on me, any of you," went on the alderman roguishly. "I'd get into hot water if the mayoress told her worshipful husband. Now, I have a small parcel for each of you. It's little, but valuable. You mustn't open it until you're at home, and alone. Then—take one pinch, sniff it up through your nostrils—and you'll have a foretaste of paradise."

"It's only his nonsense," explained Mrs. Cuttle indulgently.

Her husband clapped his hands.

"Miss Yates. Forward, please."

Sonia felt a prick of excitement, as Miss Yates opened her expensive violet bag and drew out several small envelopes, which the alderman took into one closed fist.

"Here you are, ladies," he announced. "But first I must explain that 'snow' is too expensive for me to give away. I've got to sell it. And as I cannot touch tainted money myself, I am going to send the proceeds to a London parish to provide Christmas dinners for poor little kiddies."

"It's his pet charity," explained Mrs. Cuttle, without enthusiasm. "I tell him, charity begins at home with a man's wife."

Prancing clumsily, like a dancing-bear, the alderman went around the circle of his guests. The mayoress shook her head with a deprecating laugh.

"I've too many charities of my own. I'd like to sell you something instead."

"With pleasure," the alderman assured her. He passed on to his wife and bowed.

"Louie, my love, are you going to patronise the old drug-merchant."

"No," replied Mrs. Cuttle. "I've given the tea."

"Tough luck. Now I'm bound to get a third refusal. Lady Priday, won't you break the spell? This is worth ten pounds to you."

"Then here's ten shillings," laughed Lady Priday. "I suppose I must make a start or the children will get no pudding."

The alderman slipped the folded note into his pocket and passed on to Mrs. Eden. Sonia's brain worked furiously while she waited. It was her turn next and she was still in a state of utter bewilderment. While the alderman had promised that the transfer should be made in a manner that was above suspicion, the drug-party was an obvious joke.

She decided that if it were merely an excuse to save his own pocket at the expense of others, while he gratified his generous instinct, she would follow the mayoress's example and plead her own charities. And yet she could not be certain. The joke might be

a pretext to palm her a genuine specimen, in which case she dared not risk a refusal.

Mrs. Eden protested before she paid for her envelope.

"It's too bad of you, alderman. Here's something for your poor children, but I can't afford it."

She made the exchange less discreetly than Lady Priday, and Sonia had a glimpse of what really looked like a folded bank note.

Her heart hammered with excitement as she realised that she had received a valuable pointer. If cocaine were being distributed she must not miss her chance of getting a sample. At the same time, the incident was open to another interpretation. Mrs. Eden might be giving a genuine contribution to charity in an unostentatious manner, so as not to stress the difference between Lady Priday's donation and her own.

Her turn had come. As the alderman stood before her, he winked.

"Is this worth a pound to you, Miss Thompson?" he asked, holding out a tiny packet. "One pinch and you'll write a masterpiece for posterity. But you must take my word for it. The joke may be on you."

As she hesitated he winked at her again. Suddenly she was convinced that he was making audacious use of the mayoress's presence to sell these drugs under her respectable nose.

"I'll buy," she said, handing him a pound note.

She was exhilarated when, almost directly afterwards, Lady Priday broke up the party. Both she and Mrs. Eden seemed in a hurry to go, as though they had what they came for, and were anxious to sample its delights.

She, in turn, was eager to get back to the *Chronicle* office. She ran most of the way, and was panting when she reached the inner room where Lobb was typing.

"I've got it," she said triumphantly.

Lobb almost snatched the paper from her. He tore it open, smelt its contents, and then tasted the powder with a moistened

forefinger. Wells, who had followed Sonia, did the same. Then both men looked at each other.

"Well?" asked Lobb tonelessly.

Wells pulled down the corners of his mouth as he turned to Sonia.

"How much did you pay for this?" he asked. "A pound," she replied. "Why?"

"Why? You poor mug, he's sold you a pup. This is nothing but powdered borax."

XXIII. — SOME ONE SHOULD DO SOMETHING

ALTHOUGH Sonia was indignant at the trick which had been played upon her, and even more furious with herself for her gullibility, her chief emotion was disappointment. She had backed her instinct, and had been betrayed by a woman's trump-card—feminine intuition.

Hubert Lobb agreed with Wells' ultimatum concerning the alderman.

"Wash him out. He didn't rise when you told him you had chink. That settles it, for Lobb says it's some mean devil who would sell his mother's shroud for old rags."

"He might have wanted to put me off the scent," argued Sonia.

"In any case it's stalemate," said Lobb wearily. "We've nothing on Cuttle, unless we can connect him up with those stolen goods."

Sonia was still smarting under her defeat, when, a couple of mornings later, she met the alderman in the Arcade. He stopped to speak with an impudent grin.

"Well, what does it feel like to 'sniff snow?'"

Sonia managed to force a smile.

"You were a fraud. I want my money back."

"Too late, lady. It's been sent up to the poor kiddies."

"In that case, I don't grudge it. But, all the same I was in earnest. How can I write about things I've never experienced?"

The alderman's face grew severe.

"Did you seriously imagine that *I* could procure the filthy stuff?" he asked. "A man holding my civic position. Really Miss Thompson, you must be mad. Besides, a clean-living girl should not touch drugs with a long pole."

Sonia shrank before his indignation as he went on.

"You're clever, Miss Thompson, but you must guard against being too clever. Have you heard the latest about the Waxworks? We had a council meeting last night, when there was a strong feeling in favour of closing it altogether."

"Oh, *no*," protested Sonia. "It would simply break Mrs. Ames."

"I am glad you realise that. But it's a bit late in the day. You see, a literary young lady has stirred up so much local superstition with her ingenious articles, that members of the council feel it is their duty to protect a section of the public from the consequences of their own folly."

"But it's utter nonsense. Every one knows that all the people found dead in the Gallery were duds. There's not a scrap of truth in the legend. The place would have no effect on a sound person, like—like Mr. Wells."

"Are you thinking of asking him to test your theory?" asked the alderman. "I'm afraid his survival would prove nothing. He's a football hero and tougher than the average. The man-in-the-street would expect him to be immune."

"Then what about myself?" asked Sonia impulsively. "Will you lend me your private key?"

"When?"

"To-night. The sooner the better."

"Certainly not. It's civic property. Besides, it strikes me that you're a young lady who has to be shielded from her own impulses."

He strolled on, smiling, while the matter still hung in the air. But Sonia was left with a clouded impression that he had been gradually edging her into some requisite position. Although she

had not a glimmer of reason to support her suspicion, her innate distrust of him made her feel that she was being exploited.

She returned to the office with news of the latest development, but her proposal to spend the night in the Gallery met with strong opposition. In spite of Wells' counter arguments, she stuck to her point like a limpet.

"I must consider Mrs. Ames. It will be my fault if she's booted out. The legend's got to be killed. I started it and it's up to me to put an end to it...Besides, I'm best for the job. I'm not nervous, but I've got sensitised perception. I shall record my reactions on the spot while they're piping-hot."

"Aren't you making Lobb and myself look rather small?" asked Wells quietly.

"Mr. Lobb has got to stay with his wife. And I've already explained to you why you're no good."

Presently Wells gave in conditionally.

"You'll have to agree to safeguards or I'll blow the whole thing," he said.

They wasted some of the morning discussing details and plans. Sonia's head was full of the project; but when she returned at noon to Tulip House, the matter shrank to secondary importance.

She found Caroline Brown already in the shabby dining-room having her meal. Her beautiful limpid eyes were gazing passionately into a glass casserole-dish, while she stirred its contents with a fork.

"I've just spiked a bit of fowl," she gloated.

"Thank goodness I can enjoy smashed meat again now Miss Munro has passed on. She always left her dinner, and Miss Mackintosh comes from Aberdeen."

"You're back early for lunch, aren't you?" asked Sonia, as she lit a cigarette.

"Yes. I've got to take a bottle of medicine up to Stonehenge Lodge before I go back to the surgery. The boy's out on the round and the D.R. forgot it. And it's important."

"Is Mrs. Cuttle worse?" inquired Sonia uneasily.

"She's just had a nasty turn. As Blair's not here I can tell you in confidence that it wouldn't surprise me if Regina Yates isn't sitting pretty. She may be the next mayoress."

Suddenly Sonia remembered the glance she had intercepted between Miss Yates and the alderman. When she thought of him, sleek and debonair, smiling on the ladies at his tea-party, she felt rather cold.

"I met Mrs. Cuttle the day before yesterday," she said. "I didn't know she was so ill. What's the matter with her?"

All the southern languor deserted Caroline's eyes as she explained.

"It's like this. She's very strong, and she has nothing that won't yield to treatment. I could make her up a prescription myself that would do the trick. But she's too fat and eats too much. And she will take drugs of her own on the sly."

"Drugs of her own?" repeated Sonia faintly.

"Yes. You can't pull the wool over our eyes. It's not giving us a fair chance. If she'd take milk-slops instead of supper, and leave off dosing, she'd be all right. As it is, she'll probably get a gastric ulcer, and if it busts—What's the matter? You look quite old-fashioned?"

Sonia did some quick thinking.

"I didn't get much sleep," she explained. "I'm working on a thriller. And that reminds me. I'm coming to you for information about poisons."

"Sorry, but I never give away dangerous information," declared Caroline.

"But you told me that you'd been telling the alderman about poisons."

"Oh, no, I just led him up the garden. Of course, anything I said would be safe with *him*; but he might mention it quite innocently to someone else who might make use of it. I don't believe in making things easy for people and explaining all the

snags, like that leaky fool, Nurse Davis. She lets herself be drawn wholesale...I say, you do look green."

Bessie Blair's entrance saved Sonia from explaining her pallor. The mannequin, who was wearing green to throw up the colour of her eyes, greeted Sonia with a radiant smile.

"The boss tells me I'm going to sell you a frock," she said. "He sprung it on me just now. Are you coming in this evening?"

Sonia felt stiff with disgust. She considered that the alderman's trick had wiped out their bargain, but he plugged away persistently.

"Yes," she replied, "I made a promise, so I will keep it. Will you look up something black—all line—and I'll drop in to-night on my way back from the office."

She was very sober all that afternoon. Wells put down her silence to repentance and hoped that the Waxworks experiment was off. As a matter-of-fact, however, she was not thinking about it; it seemed a trivial escapade compared with the greater issues of life and death.

She was faced with certain significant facts. To begin with, Mrs. Cuttle was growing steadily worse; her condition seemed symptomatic of the criminal's usual method of giving small initial doses of poison, which weakened the system in readiness for the fatal dose.

Secondly, Miss Yates had a flat in the same block as Nurse Davis. She was wily as a serpent while Nurse Davis was simple; it would be easy for her to tap special information, and even to tamper with the nurse's case of hypodermics.

Lastly, there was both motive and opportunity, besides a pair of guilty lovers and a stupid and superfluous wife.

Sonia did her best to dislodge the matter from her mind. She told herself that it was a bad business, but none of hers. But even while she reminded herself that it was not her responsibility, she kept thinking, inconsequently, of a picture in *Punch* which had amused her at the time. It represented a child playing on a spring diving-board over deep water, while various groups of people

watched it, as they murmured distractedly, "*Someone* ought to stop that child."

In spite of the absurdity, she could not ignore the parallel. Someone had to warn Mrs. Cuttle of her danger. And since no one appeared to recognise the danger besides herself, if she sat by and did nothing she might be conniving at a crime.

She crossed the office and whispered to Wells.

"Going now. Don't ask me any questions because I can't answer them. I'll meet you to-night in the Waxworks."

XXIV. — THE WARNING

NOT long afterwards, Sonia sat in the drawing-room at Stonehenge Lodge, nerving herself for the ordeal. Directly she got inside the house she knew her mission was doomed to failure. In its middle-class prosperity, ashine with a high polish, it typified a household where conventional homage was paid to the Ten Commandments.

Mrs. Cuttle's face was still creased from the pillow when she came downstairs. Sonia noticed the dark pouches under her eyes, but otherwise she appeared normal. The only concession to illness was her elaborate teagown of coffee velvet and lace.

"No," she said, in response to Sonia's inquiries, "you didn't disturb me. I was just coming down for my tea."

"I only called to know how you were," Sonia told her. "I'm really on my way to the Free Library. I have to collect some facts about poison for the thriller I'm writing."

She smiled faintly at the thought that her nonexistent novel certainly deserved the description of "strong fiction;" but Mrs. Cuttle was unimpressed.

"Why don't you write a love-story?" she asked.

"This one will have a love interest. It's about ordinary people. The husband falls in love with another woman and they plot together to poison the wife. It's rather interesting to realise that mental monsters are the exception. Most crimes are committed by everyday people just like ourselves."

"I don't know any," objected Mrs. Cuttle.

"But you read about them in the papers every day. I often wonder when the idea first came to them. And if they were terribly shocked by it. And how long it took to get accustomed to it. And when they finally yielded to temptation if they were incapable of remorse...When I marry, I shall watch out for mysterious pains."

Mrs. Cuttle's eyes were blue marbles in a blank face.

"Why don't you get married?" she asked. "A newspaper is no place for a respectable girl."

Sonia was baffled by her impenetrability. She had a hopeless sense of picking away at a wall of rock in order to rescue an entombed intelligence. Only a charge of dynamite would reach Mrs. Cuttle's brain. She knew that she was beaten and she rose to go.

"I enjoyed your party in the Mayor's Parlour," she said.

"It was an expensive tea for you." Mrs. Cuttle sucked in the corners of her mouth as though in relish. "But Mr. Cuttle told me you could afford it."

"And it was for charity...I must fly." Sonia discarded the excuse of the Free Library, as she made a last bid to warn Mrs. Cuttle. "I'm going to buy a model frock. Your husband has marvellous taste. I always admire Miss Yates' clothes, and I conclude they come from the shop."

"That's right. I can't wear models. They're always too tight."

"But I saw an advance-model for you. I surprised Miss Yates trying effects with purple velvet, and she told me that it was the mayoress' reception gown."

As she spoke, Sonia watched Mrs. Cuttle's face closely, but she could not discover whether her shot had found its target.

"Then she was too clever by half," she said. "I never wear purple."

She accompanied Sonia through the hall, and switched on the lamp over the front door, revealing a patch of unnaturally vivid green grass and mauve metal crocuses, before she apparently finished her speech.

"I'm too pale."

The addition illustrated the slow creaking of her brain. Sonia felt utterly depressed as she hurried down the cemented drive, and past dark gardens overhung with acrid-smelling shrubs. It was a close evening with a weeping sky which damped the drifts of fallen leaves underfoot. She had not only failed, but had wasted time, for she wanted to reach Cuttle's shop before closing-time.

Although she had never grudged spending money on clothes, she disliked this especial purchase. But she told herself that it had

become a point of honour to buy the miserable frock. The alderman should not have a chance to taunt her with a broken promise, even though he had not fulfilled his part of the bargain. Besides, she really wanted to keep faith with Bessie.

The big lighted store seemed a haven of cheer and even luxury after the pinched streets. Bessie, wearing her make-up and an elastic slip, met her and led the way to a private purple-carpeted room. Sonia was following her when she was hailed by a familiar gay voice, and turned to see Mrs. Nile.

"Buying a frock?" she asked. "May I help you choose? If you can't have one yourself, it's amusing to hinder some one else."

"Why don't you have one, too?" suggested Sonia.

"Can't. I have to pay cash. My credit's stopped. Isn't it, Bessie?"

Bessie was too awed by the holy atmosphere of clothes to smile. She paraded and posed with utmost seduction, but the dress-show was not a success. The critics on the violet leather chairs kept turning down their thumbs.

"We are not attracted," said Mrs. Nile.

"But Miss Yates chose these for Miss Thompson," declared Bessie.

"I see," remarked Sonia. "Good enough for me. Well, will you explain to her that I want to see something from that French bankrupt stock? Unless, of course, she has the monopoly."

Bessie obediently swayed from the room, and presently minced in again, wearing a black two-piece suit of distinctive line and cut.

"I'll try on that," decided Sonia.

The fitting-room was badly-lit and rather crowded, since Mrs. Nile insisted on coming as well. As Bessie drew the gown over Sonia's head she told them its history.

"This is the only one we have like it in stock. It's the duplicate of the one that was stolen from Mrs. Lobb's. It was too tight for her, but Miss Yates put it in for her to see the style."

"That was a bad break for her," commented Mrs. Nile.

"It was a lucky one for us," chuckled Bessie. "The boss got paid for the whole lot. She'd only have bought one, if she did that, and the rest might have hung on in stock...And it was precious lucky for *me*."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Nile.

Bessie explained the reason of her good fortune. She had just finished her story when there was a cough outside the grey velvet curtain.

"May I intrude?" asked the alderman. "What a charming spectacle."

He paid Sonia florid compliments on her appearance, but she suspected underlying irony. Feeling suddenly impatient to end the transaction, she turned to Bessie.

"I'll take it. I can't wait to change, so I'll wear it, if you'll have my other things sent to Tulip House. If I pay for it now shall I get five per cent. for cash?"

"With pleasure." The alderman bowed. "Will your ladyship accompany me down to my office?"

When they were inside the small panelled room, he turned to Sonia.

"I've something for you to check, since you are such a business-like young lady."

Taking a paper from a spike, he showed her an official receipt from a London vicarage for two pounds five shillings.

"Miss Yates gave the extra five shillings," he said. "I was quite touched. She has only her salary—and no wealthy father."

The remark stung Sonia to reprisal.

"But she can afford model gowns, as I pointed out to Mrs. Cuttle only this afternoon. I went to inquire about her health. Every one is talking about her mysterious illness."

The alderman's small eyes glittered with fury.

"Have you been making mischief with my wife?" he asked. "You are a very dangerous young woman. I warn you once and for all to keep your fingers out of my pie."

His attack was like the sudden rush of an angry rhinoceros. Sonia could scarcely believe that the scowling face above her was that of the jovial, amorous alderman. She was frightened momentarily by the change; but almost directly she realised that at last she had forced him out into the open.

She had failed to make the wife understand her peril, but she might yet prevent a crime by sheer audacity. She managed to speak coldly, in spite of the rapid fluttering of her heart.

"I don't know what you mean about 'warning.' I know where I stand—and where others stand, too. I have eyes and ears. I've used both. And I've some intelligence."

"What do you know?" he blustered.

"Probably more than you think. I'm not speaking without proof. I warn *you* that if you wish to become mayor, it is safest to keep on the right side of the law."

The alderman swallowed violently as he tried to dislodge a thick hot taste in his throat like blood. Thrilled with the triumph of her bluff, Sonia went to the door.

"If you send in the bill, I will pay it at once," she said.

After she had gone, the alderman stood staring at the electric-fire and biting his thick thumb. Presently there was a tap on the door and Bessie Blair entered, dressed for the street.

"I'm just going, boss," she said. "I'm glad I pulled off the sale. Those French models take some displaying. It's one of our most expensive. Will you please tell Miss Yates about my 'com?'"

"I'll speak to her to-morrow," he promised. "Good-night."

Struck by a sudden recollection, he called her back.

"What were you all laughing about when I came into the fitting-room?"

"I was telling them how lucky I was when the original two-piece was stolen. You know, I was trying it on when I stopped for tea. The coat was lying, inside out, just as I'd peeled it off, on a chair, when to my horror I dropped my buttered toast on to the lining and spotted it with grease. I didn't dare say anything about

it, but I knew if it was discovered I should be on the carpet...Goodnight, boss."

There was a peculiar expression on the alderman's face, as he rapped Bessie's smooth forehead with his forefinger.

"You've a pretty head, Bessie. Anything inside it? It doesn't matter so long as it's pretty. Goodnight."

Again he felt the thick hot taste in his throat. It rose higher and rushed up to his head.

Then he smiled.

XXV. — SUPPER FOR ONE

THE alderman was still smiling when he reached Stonehenge Lodge. The glow of the outside lamp welcomed him as he tramped up the drive; and directly he was inside the hall he smelt the familiar blend of furniture polish, carpet, and hot-house flowers.

As usual he shouted for his wife.

"Lou-ie. Lousiana Lou, I'm home."

When Mrs. Cuttle waddled out of the dining-room, he stared at her tea-gown.

"Got up to kill?" he asked.

"I've been lying down," she explained. "I have had one of my sick turns."

"Now that's too bad. Poor pet." Not noticing that she had not presented her cheek for the customary kiss, he pinched her chin. "What's for supper?" he asked.

"You ought to know. You were in the kitchen this morning, talking to the servants as usual."

"Ah, yes, devilled chicken. I was telling them to put more 'devil' in it."

"You'll ruin the membrane of your stomach. But you won't listen to me. Have it as hot as you like. I'm not having any supper to-night."

The alderman's face fell with disappointment.

"Are you going to leave me to eat all on my lonesome?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm going to have some Bengers' in bed."

"Well you know best," he shrugged. "What's one man's meat is another man's poison."

His wife looked rather strangely at him as she turned to the staircase. When he tried to kiss her, she pushed him away.

"My breath's bad. Good-night."

"Good-night, my love. I'll sleep in the dressing-room to-night. Don't wait up for me. I don't know what time I'll be in."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To play poker with some of my little friends. No ladies. Only other boys."

Mrs. Cuttle continued to watch him as he pranced in the direction of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"I'm only going to jolly the girls."

"You go there far too much. Don't hinder them. It's getting on for eight."

When the alderman entered the white-tiled kitchen, both maids had removed their uniform and wore hats, although their coats still hung upon their pegs. The cook was spooning up a savoury mess into a silver chafing-dish, while the housemaid, who was red-haired, was talking to a tall burly man at the back door.

It was the alderman's policeman friend, in mufti. He saluted the master of the house, who grinned at him.

"Come to pinch me, Tom?"

"Not this time. I'm only calling for the young ladies."

"Well, go ahead. I'm not looking...Well, Glady's, have you got Satan simmering in the pot?"

He forked a fragment of fowl out of the dish and ate it appreciatively.

"Damn good. I can taste that. Your mistress isn't having any of this."

"No, sir."

"Well, pity to waste it. You'd better finish what's left. Tom, like a bite of supper with the girls?"

"I don't mind if I do," replied the policeman.

"Well, carry on. You'll like it. Plenty of red pepper," He winked towards the housemaid's flaming hair and grinned before he turned to the cook. "I don't know when I'll have mine. Turn the light down to a blink, and leave it in the dining-room."

The alderman strolled from the kitchen, jingling the coins in his trouser-pockets.

"No side," remarked the policeman. "You can't help liking him, though he used to crib from me chronic."

"Hurry up or we'll be late for the pictures," remarked the cook.

Divided among three, the portions of devilled chicken were small, so the meal was soon finished. Shortly after eight the domestic-staff locked up the back premises, let itself out at the front door, and met the policeman outside on the road. The alderman smoked a big cigar in his study, while his wife, wearing a turquoise bed-jacket of artificial silk, sat up in bed, checking the time of the maids' departure like a careful mistress.

Presently only two lights were burning, and there was little movement in the house until the alderman went into the dining-room, about ten minutes to ten. Directly she heard his step, and knew that he was eating his solitary meal, Mrs. Cuttle drew a sigh of content.

As though to illustrate the unity of their married life, she began to spoon up her own bowl of Bengers.' When she had finished she got out of bed, and boiling up the electric-kettle, she filled two rubber bottles with hot water.

After putting one between her own blankets, she wrapped the alderman's gaudy flowered pyjamas round the other and slipped it inside the dressing-room bed. Then she opened the wardrobe and drew out her husbands coats, all of which she examined minutely.

It might have been wifely precaution to satisfy herself that they were in no need of repair; or it might have been natural feminine instinct to detect any contact with charming ladies, on the evidence of powder or stray hairs.

It was Mrs. Cuttle's secret...

While the alderman was making a hearty meal, Sonia was in the Waxwork Gallery waiting for the clock to strike. It was understood that Mrs. Ames must not be a party to the experiment. Although she had not been held responsible for the Munro tragedy, she had been censured for conniving at Sir Julian's bet. So, according to agreement, Wells attracted her attention while Sonia slipped unseen into the Hall of Horrors.

She was in high spirits and welcomed the adventure after the tension of the day. Her encounter with the alderman had left such an unpleasant impression that she wanted to force it out of her mind. Already the atmosphere of the place was working its familiar spell. Her eyes were bright with excitement when Wells stole through the door.

"Ten minutes to go," he said. "Wonky? Let me feel your pulse."

"Don't be fatuous, you idiot."

"Got everything?"

"Of course." She checked her belongings. "Cushion, rug, fountain pen, sandwiches, thermos, notebook, cigarettes—"

"Smoking forbidden," he reminded her. "I'd better take them or you'll be sure to slip. We can't risk burning the place down."

"How?"

"Well, you might drop off to sleep."

"I shan't. But perhaps you'd better lift the matches, too. Suppose I lit one if I was windy, and chucked it down somewhere."

Wells took them and slipped his pocket-torch into her hand.

"I know you belong to the stronger sex," he said, "but you've just hinted that even your nerve might crash. If it does, flash this under the window. If you stretch your arm above your head, the light will be seen from the street."

"And what will happen then?" asked Sonia.

"I shall knock up the miserable Mrs. Ames and let you out."

"But how will you see the light?"

"I shall be in the street, of course, my bright child."

"All night?"

"Yes. I often sleep there." Wells grinned as he added, "I couldn't let any woman, even one so aged and unattractive as yourself, feel she was beyond the reach of help."

Sonia touched his arm impulsively.

"You really are rather a dear," she said. "Now I feel safe as houses."

"Good. Oh, whatever you do, don't use that torch for light, or the juice may give out. It's due for a new battery."

"I'll remember...Do you like my new dress?"

"No. I hate black."

"You fool, it's a French model. I'm wearing it so that I shall be invisible against the black hangings. You see, I'm taking every precaution."

Instead of being impressed by her thoughtfulness, Wells heaved a sigh.

"Sonia," he said, "you admit you are running a risk...Isn't all this rather rough on me?"

"But it's my own risk. Why should you worry?"

"Because—Oh, dash it all, what's the use of pretending? You *know*."

"Yes." Sonia spoke in a low voice. "Of course, I know."

"Feel the same about me?" asked Wells, after a pause.

"Yes."

"Darling."

His arms were round her, but as their lips met, the bell rang out through the Gallery.

"Hell," said Wells as they broke apart.

"Hurry," cried Sonia, pushing him through the door.

In spite of the warning, the light did not go out, although ten o'clock had struck. As Sonia was wondering what had happened, to her surprise Wells again slipped into the Hall of Horrors.

"I tipped Mrs. Ames to give me a few minutes to look for a stick I'd lost," he whispered. "Every one's gone, and I've searched the place from end to end. Just let me O.K. this little lot of beauties, and I'll be sure that you really are alone."

Sonia laughed although her eyes were soft.

"You're sweet," she said.

"Sweet to myself. I always remember the tale of the man who locked up his wife with a dead snake, and its mate came along and joined the party. But I seem to have stopped all the holes. I don't see how you could come to any harm."

"Darling, I'm as safe as if I was in prison."

"I know, but I don't like it." Wells continued to frown. "Give it up for my sake."

"And let Mrs. Ames be booted out through my fault. Don't let's go all over it again. Besides, I'm too thrilled to be afraid. Chris, isn't it wonderful?"

"You bet. Ever since you came to the old *Crocodile*, I get a kick out of just being alive."

"Me, too. When I wake up in the morning, I love to think you're waking up in the same town. It was nice of you to get born—for me...And now, you've got to go."

His parting kiss was still warm on her lips when she made her first entry in the notebook.

Ten minutes past ten. The Gallery is dark. Every one has gone. I'm writing this under the big window, by the light of the lamp outside. Mrs. Ames has just locked the outer door. I can hear her footsteps on the pavement, echoing down the street. They grow fainter. Now—there is silence. I am alone.

XXVI. — A FREE LODGING

WHEN the clock struck twelve, Sonia could hardly realise that she had spent two hours in the Gallery. The time had passed in a flash of tumultuous emotion. Whenever she tried to concentrate on her surroundings, her mind slurred back to her parting with Wells, or leaped forward into the future. Life appeared a chaotic whirl of rapture, as one plan blew up after another, to dissolve like rainbow bubbles.

As she counted the chimes she came back to earth and opened her notebook.

Twelve o'clock. A complete blank. Nothing to record. Not a vestige of reaction. The Waxworks seem a commonplace lot, without a scrap of hypnotic force. They're positively matey.

She scribbled the last words without realising their significance. Then she stopped writing to gaze around her. The Gallery looked far more mysterious than under the glow of the electric-globes, and seemed to have grown in size—stretching out at either end into black tunnels. But the darkness was only comparative. It held no uncanny element, while the row of waxworks, visible in the light which streamed through the window, did not suggest life.

They looked what they were—a collection of second-rate dummies. It was difficult to believe that, according to Dr. Nile's theory, they could assume unpleasant mannerisms and terrorise a human being to death or madness.

"He said it was imagination," she reflected. "So anything which might happen would really happen inside my own mind. I should be seeing my own thoughts. I must remember that. I have nothing and nobody to fear but *myself*."

The joyous spin of her brain had subsided, leaving her composed and practical. She knew that any experience would be the result of cumulative impressions. But while it was still too early to fear any assaults on her nerves she decided to prepare for every contingency.

The chief points were to be as comfortable as possible in body and in mind. To preserve an academic interest in the experiment. Above all, to refrain from unpleasant memories.

At the back of her mind, one was knocking to be admitted. She had a sudden recollection of her duel with the alderman. His face rose up in the darkness, swollen with rage and tight-lipped with cruelty.

She shook it off.

"He can't hurt me here. I'm safe from him."

There was no live snake here, like Wells' story. She blessed him for the precautionary measure of searching through the Gallery. He had beaten the jungle from end to end.

Then an officious doubt reared its head. Had he assured himself that the figures were all innocuous wax? Or was there an extra mourner round the Virtuous Man's bed? Another statesman bringing Victorian politics up to date in a conversation-group?

To comfort herself, she looked at the torch lying by her side and smiled. It was a link between them. At this moment, he was patrolling the street—a sturdy figure in old tweeds, his cap pulled over his eyes and his pipe in his mouth.

The pipe reminded her of her own craving for cigarettes; and since she could not satisfy it, she determined to have her supper. As she scrambled to her feet, she smiled instinctively at the waxworks.

"Back in a minute," she told them.

Her belongings were cached in the Hall of Horrors, which had no window and was black as the Hole of Calcutta. She had to switch on her torch, in order to locate the rug and attaché-case, revealing the select gang of poisoners. Their glassy stares,

however, made no impression on her as she looked around her with the intense gaze of one who strives to re-capture a rapture.

"It was *here*," she murmured.

The place did not house Murder—it held Love. All the same she was careful to close the door tightly after her. Common sense told her that, later on, the knowledge of open spaces might rob her of her sense of absolute security.

"Here I am," she said to the waxworks, who seemed to be waiting for her. She had a ridiculous fancy that they were greeting her.

"You're good company," she told them. "Yet they say you're the villains of the piece. I simply refuse to believe it."

Spreading her rug on the floor, she opened her attaché-case and unpacked her sandwiches and thermos of coffee. She was hungry enough to look forward to her meal and was without a qualm. So far, she was really enjoying her adventure, while her only foe seemed boredom.

It struck her that the town was by no means deserted. An occasional car passed the window, flooding the Gallery with its headlights. Considering the late hour, plenty of citizens were still abroad, which was cheerful knowledge. She tried to pick out Wells' footsteps from those of the other passersby.

With a sudden spurt of happiness, she raised her flask of coffee and toasted him.

"All my love."

The waxworks were watching her benevolently. Mary of England had lost her droop, and Elizabeth's beady eyes were softer. Perhaps she remembered Essex. Yielding to impulse, Sonia drank also to the waxworks.

"Here's health and happiness to you all."

Her voice rang out in the stillness with startling effect. It was succeeded by a low murmur from every corner of the Gallery, as though the rest of the waxworks, invisible in the darkness, were returning their thanks.

Her heart beat quickly before she realised the explanation.

"It's an echo...But I mustn't shout again. One could swear they were speaking."

She spun out her supper to its limit, but presently was faced with another blank. To kill time she counted the visible waxworks and tried to memorise them.

"Eighteen, nineteen. Nineteen is only a shape. Wolsey, Elizabeth, Hamlet, Guy Fawkes...Napoleon, you ought to go on a diet. Ever heard of eighteen days, Nap? Poor old Julius Caesar looks as though he'd been sun-bathing and forgotten to wipe off his oil."

To her, the waxworks appeared a friendly crowd, appreciative of her recognition. Mrs. Ames always credited them with feelings of gratitude for her efforts to popularise the Gallery. Yet, according to medical evidence, Sir Julian had been shaken out of life by gusts of terror.

Sonia shook her head. She could not imagine how these harmless figures could influence a hardheaded man of the world to the pitch of madness.

"No," she decided, "there's more in Hubert Lobb's theory."

Again she saw the big untidy office, the glowing fire, the sun-blistered paint, and the cocoa-dregs in the cups. When Lobb had mentioned murder, it had seemed a far-away fantastic notion; but here she realised its possibility.

Inconsequently, another memory stirred in her mind of the dining-room at Tulip House, when Bessie Blair paid tribute to the alderman's strength.

He could tear a trade journal in two.

At the reminder, there flashed before her eyes a vision of muscular hairy hands, with gripping fingers, tearing, rending, choking...

"Idiot," she murmured. "Why did I let myself think of that, just now?"

But the mischief was done, for her confidence was shaken. Even as she reproached herself for morbidity she broke off to stare at the door which led to the Hall of Horrors.

She remembered that she had closed it tightly...But now it gaped open by an inch.

She looked at the black cavity, recognising that this was the first test of her nerves. Later on there would be others. She must realise the fact that within her cool practical self, she carried a passenger, hysterical and neurotic, who would doubtless give her a lot of trouble with officious suggestions and uncomfortable reminders.

She resolved to give her second self a taste of her quality, and quell her at the start.

"It's a faulty catch," she announced in a firm voice, as she deliberately crossed over to the Hall of Horrors and shut the door.

When she came back, rather quickly, she looked sharply at the waxworks, as though to detect which had played the trick. As they stared in front of them with a cryptic gaze, the passenger took the opportunity to point out an initial mistake.

She had grown matey with the waxworks. And someone had said it was bad policy to become familiar with a waxwork.

Presently she made an entry in her notebook with fingers which were not quite steady.

One o'clock. I begin to realise that there is more in this than I thought. Perhaps I'm missing my sleep. But I'm keyed-up and horribly expectant. Of what? I don't know. But I seem to be waiting for something. I find myself listening. Listening. The place is full of mysterious noises. I know they're my fancy. And things appear to move. I seem to distinguish footsteps and whispers, just as though the waxworks in the darkness, which I cannot see, are beginning to stir into life.

Sonia dropped her pencil at the sound of a chuckle. It seemed to come from the end of the Gallery, which was wiped out

in shadows. As her imagination began to bolt away with her, she reproached herself sharply.

"Steady. Don't be a fool. That sound came from the cloak-room. It's air escaping from a pipe—or something. I'm only frightened because I'm ignorant. All fear is ignorance."

In spite of her brave philosophy, she retreated rather quickly into her corner. She felt less apprehensive with her back against the wall. But she recognised her cowardice as an ominous sign.

She was afraid of someone, or something, creeping up behind her and touching her.

"I've struck the bad patch," she told herself. "Probably it will work up to its peak about four. After that, every hour will bring me nearer to the dawn. It's all a matter of keeping cool. Whatever happens, I won't give up. Because I *know* I'm safe."

All the same she looked speculatively at her torch. It was helpful to realise that she could put an end to her ordeal any moment she chose. Feeling the need of making a gesture, she opened her bag and drew out her powder-puff and lip-stick. As she repaired her face, her fears died down again. In a few hours she would be back in the office, sunken-eyed and looking like a bundle of old clothes, but happy and triumphant. When she wrote up her copy, she would rejoice over every symptom of groundless fear.

"I've got my story," she gloated, speaking to Hamlet, who drooped like a sooty flamingo. "And the waxworks will be saved."

Suddenly she found herself foolishly appealing to the figures, although she had resolved to ignore their claims to identity.

"Look here, you people. I've always been your friend. You might have confidence in me. Can't you understand? I'm working for *you*."

This time they did not appear to hear her. Somehow she received an uneasy impression that they had become remote and secretive, as though they were removed to another plane where they possessed a hidden life.

Feeling forsaken by them, she began to listen for Wells' footsteps. She could not hear them, although the street had now grown still. At last the town had gone home to bed. The lights were turned out in every house.

As the silence persisted, she tried to picture him propping up the opposite building, solid and immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar.

But it was no good. For the first time, doubts began to obtrude.

"I don't believe he's there. After all, why should he stay? He knows I'm safe. He only pretended to be in the street, so as to give me confidence. A psychological dodge. He's gone home to bed."

She wished fervently that she herself were back in her room at Tulip House, tucked up under the blankets. All sorts of pleasing pictures floated before her eyes to tempt and tantalise her...A steaming tea-pot. Cigarettes. A cocktail. A hot-water bottle...

Presently she realised that she was growing drowsy. Her lids felt weighted as though with lead, so that it was an effort to keep them open.

This was a complication which she had not foreseen, and was probably due to the lack of ventilation. Although she longed to drop off to sleep, she knew that she must fight the temptation.

"No," she murmured, "it's not fair. I've set myself the job of recording the impressions of a night spent in the Gallery. It *must* be the genuine thing."

She blinked more vigorously as she stared across at Henry the Eighth.

"Mrs. Ames is right," she thought. "There really is a look of—*No*, I mustn't think of him. No—"

Her head fell forward and she dozed. After a time, she had a vivid dream. She thought she was still in her corner in the Gallery so that she could not tell whether she slept or was awake. She was watching Sir Julian, as he slowly paced to and fro in front of the window. He was dressed as when she first saw him, in evening-

clothes, with a white muffler; but his face was very pale, as though he were indeed the phantom of Mrs. Ames' pretence.

Suddenly she saw that he was being followed. A bulky shape was stalking him as a cat stalks a mouse. Sonia tried to warn him of his peril, but, after the fashion of a nightmare, found herself voiceless. Even as she struggled to scream the shape sprang. A grotesquely long arm shot out, and monstrous fingers gripped Sir Julian's throat.

In her dream Sonia saw the face of the killer. It was the alderman.

She woke up with a start and a little cry—feeling that someone or something had touched her arm. *Something?* As she stared at the waxworks, they became instinct with fearful possibilities. Some were merely blurred shapes, with opaque glimmering ovals for faces. But those illuminated from the street were revealing themselves in a new guise.

Queen Elizabeth, with peaked chin and fiery hair, seemed to regard her with intelligent malice. The countenance of Napoleon was heavy with brooding power, as though he were willing her to submit. Cardinal Wolsey held her with a glittering eye.

She realised that she was letting herself be hypnotised by wax.

These figures were only so many pounds of candles, moulded to human shape. But they were bound to take advantage of her weakness, since she had taken the fatal step of treating them as equals. Braced by the knowledge, she opened her notebook and began to scrawl jerkily.

Two o'clock. They're only wax. They shall not frighten me. But they're trying to. One by one, they're coming to life. Charles the Second no longer looks like sour dough. He is beginning to leer at me—

She stopped writing to glance uneasily at the image of the Stuart monarch. His black velvet suit appeared to have a richer pile. The swart curls which fell over his lace collar looked less like horsehair. There really seemed a gleam of amorous interest at the back of his glass optics.

Absurdly she spoke to him in order to reassure herself.

"Did *you* touch me? At the first hint of a liberty, Charles Stuart, I'll smack your face."

Instantly the satyr reverted to a dummy in an historical moth-eaten costume. But even as she drew a breath of relief, Sonia's heart gave a violent leap.

She was positive that she had seen a dark shape cross the aisle and disappear into the darkness at the end of the Gallery. A waxwork had actually come to life.

She managed to keep her head as she realised that it was time for her to give up the experiment. Her imagination had got the upper hand and the jumpy passenger was no longer her secondary self, but in control. She knew it was the cumulative effect of her grim company, with their simulated life and sinister association, that had rushed her defences.

Instinctively she paid homage to the waxworks. She was defeated by wax. Although it was bitter not to see the thing through, she could make capital out of her own capitulation to the power of suggestion. She comforted herself with the reminder that she had sufficient copy for her article.

"I know now what happened to the others," she thought. "*Nothing happened*. The waxworks can injure no one. But I'm growing afraid of them. Terribly afraid. So it's time to go."

She snapped the elastic band around her book and half smiled at the thought that Wells would be grateful for the end of his vigil, whatever Mrs. Ames' state of mind when she was aroused from her bed.

At that moment, the incredible thing happened. A faint tinkling melody stole on the air, like the ghost of an old musical-box. As she stared through the gloom in the direction of the

dancers' case, she was positive she could see white flickers amid the darkness.

In a sudden panic she groped for her torch. But her fingers only scraped dusty polished boards. The lamp had disappeared.

XXVII. — THE EXTRA FIGURE

IN a panic, Sonia dropped down on her knees and searched for the torch, sweeping her arms in circles for yards around. She raked feverishly among the loose sandwich wrappings in her attaché-case, and shook out her rug. As her heart began to flutter, she pushed back her hair from her damp brow and tried to collect her thoughts.

"I must have put it somewhere else. If I keep cool, I must remember. I *must*."

Her head throbbed and a tiny gong began to beat in her temples. She recognised the signs as a prelude to a brain-storm, and did her utmost to remain calm. Instinct warned her that it was wiser to face the situation without questions as to the source of her loss.

Yet she could not altogether stifle the suggestion of malign human agency. Somewhere in the darkness, a heart was beating in time with hers, and a brain was pitted against her own. The feeling made her realise that it was essential to get in touch with Wells.

Since the link between them was snapped, she had to try and reach him through some other channel. She looked up at the great window, only to shake her head hopelessly. It was composed of a mosaic of crude stained glass protected by a wire netting, and did not open, with the exception of small upper panes at the top. Even if she stood on a chair, she could neither see through it nor be seen by any one in the street.

She understood now why Wells had arranged the signal of the torch. Its glimmer would attract his attention, like a glow-worm shining through a thicket. That lamp was her link with safety. Now that it was too late she realised its importance. It should never have been out of her hand for a minute. She should have clasped it even while she wrote and ate.

"I *must* show a light," she thought.

Almost directly, she had to admit that she was faced with an impossible proposition. The electric switch was in the vestibule, and just outside the locked inner door. And she had no matches.

A second wave of panic flooded over her as the blood rushed to her head. The place seemed hot and airless, as though she were buried in a vault. She tore off her coat and threw it on the floor; then she pressed her fingers tightly over her eyeballs.

"I must think," she murmured.

Instead—she found that she was listening.

The tinkling melody was silent, but she had never noticed when it came to an end. In any case it did not matter. To her horror, she knew that she no longer feared the waxworks.

But the darkness seemed full of inexplicable sounds, which mimicked footsteps and whispers. She could almost, swear that some one was moving stealthily about the building. As she tried to locate the movements, she was conscious of peril.

She clung to the last shred of her self-control and tried to banish fear by reason. She told herself that she was perfectly safe. No one was inside the Gallery before it was locked. And no one could come in.

Suddenly her heart dropped a beat as she remembered that the alderman had a key. He knew that she was going to spend a night in the Gallery, for she had told him so herself. And since then she had made him her enemy.

Although there was now a breach in her sense of absolute security, she managed to keep her head. The very fact that the alderman had the key was a reminder of his office as a pillar of the town council. She pictured him in different dignified situations—wearing his Sunday frock-coat in the stately perambulation of sidesmen to the altar with the offertory; parading the street in his alderman's gown of dark-blue, trimmed with bands of fur; later, leading the procession in the mayor's scarlet robes, which symbolised his highest civic honour.

Slightly reassured, she picked up her coat, which she had torn off in the heat of panic. One of the wide sleeves was inside

out, revealing its oyster satin lining. She was about to reverse it, when she was arrested by a spatter of faint specks on the material.

A wave of excitement shook her as she held it up to her eyes. There was no doubt about the origin of the stains. They were spots of grease. This was the original coat which Bessie Blair had marked when she dropped her buttered toast upon it.

The thrill of the discovery wiped out every other emotion. She actually held the link which connected the alderman with the traffic in drugs.

Even if the proof were not absolute, it established some ugly and significant dealings. To begin with, there had been only a phantom theft; yet the alderman had accepted Hubert Lobb's cheque as compensation for a non-existent loss. It proved that he was taking money from a woman for an unspecified cause. That alone would create sufficient scandal to kill his public career.

Although she could not think clearly, Sonia felt that she could trust the issue to a better brain. When she gave Hubert Lobb her stained coat he would know what steps to take. They would have the additional evidence of Bessie Blair, and Mrs. Nile would corroborate the model's story.

She began to realise how the theft had been worked. Miss Yates had probably prepared a box which contained nothing but the necessary weight in wrappings, and the boy had brought this dummy to River House. He had waited outside on the step, while Mrs. Lobb had presumably unpacked the dresses, which, in reality, had never left Cuttle's shop. Mrs. Lobb had been persuaded to take part in the conspiracy in order to pay for the drugs which she could not resist.

In her triumph Sonia forgot her fear. It returned as suddenly she heard a strangled cough, as though very far away a lion roared in the jungle.

Some one else was in the Gallery.

Her heart began to hammer as she realised that it could be only one person. The alderman possessed a private key. It was

municipal property, but no other member of the council had a motive for a midnight visit.

"He's come here to steal my coat," she told herself.

But she knew that the alderman was ignorant of that piece of damning evidence. If Bessie had confessed to the accident, the sleeve would have been re-lined before it was again offered for sale.

She had made him believe that she possessed proof of his complicity in the drug distribution. Her shot in the dark had hit a different target.

Probably her suspicions about his wife were wide of the mark, and her illness was due only to indigestion.

She had said too much and not enough. If he construed her threat as a menace to his ambition she could expect no mercy. Already she had seen his work in the case of one household; he had smashed lives for the sake of an insignificant gain. Besides being greedy and cruel, he was a monomaniac, and, if Caroline Brown's diagnosis were correct, liable to epileptic rage.

From their first meeting, he had suspected her of being an obstacle because of her interest in the Waxworks. Only a few hours before their duel, she had sensed that he was moving her as a pawn in his game. And now he had her exactly where he wanted her—in the Gallery.

Her memory began to reproduce, with horrible fidelity, Lobb's theory about Sir Julian's death. She remembered the acute interest in the alderman's face as he listened.

"Artistic strangulation." She pictured the cruel agony of life leaking, bubble by bubble, gasp by gasp. It would be of necessity slow, but leave hardly a tell-tale mark.

"Another death," she thought dully. "If it—happens, every one will say that the Waxworks have killed me...What a story. Only I shall not be the one to write it up."

Then the instinct of self-preservation stirred within her, galvanising her sluggish memory. She knew she had taken her

torch with her to the Hall of Horrors, in order to find her belongings. It was possible that she had left it somewhere inside.

Hope flared up again. It was worth taking a risk, for she had only to cross the Gallery. She listened intently as she nerved herself to make the plunge. But when she was on the point of creeping into the central aisle, she shrank back to the shadow of the window.

The headlights of a car was bathing the Gallery in a brilliant glow. Immediately every waxwork leaped into a startling imitation of life. She saw Elizabeth, Wolsey, Henry the Eighth—and then another figure which had been hidden by the others.

The beam flickered over it and swept on; but in that fraction of time, she saw a burly figure, florid and ginger, seated in a chair. It wore familiar grey plus-fours; and under the brim of a felt Homburg hat, she caught the flash of a smile.

It was the amorous alderman.

After the Gallery had sunk again into gloom, she could still distinguish him as a black shape, blocked against lesser darkness. He seemed to be looking in her direction.

The tramp of feet rang out on the pavement below. It may have been the policeman on his beat, but she wanted to feel that Wells was still faithful to his vigil.

For a moment she was tempted to scream for help. But the idea was too desperate. If she failed to attract outside attention, she would simply seal her own fate.

She sat rigid, scarcely daring to breathe, waiting. There seemed to be no other sound now save the beating of the tiny gong inside her temples. The minutes crept away but nothing happened.

The clock struck three. In the succeeding silence, she held her pose, as though her life depended on her immobility. The paralysis of fear numbed her to the pain of cramped muscles. Presently, however, an overpowering weariness and inertia began to steal over her as the dead air sapped her exhausted vitality.

Although she knew that the alderman had but to strike a match in order to find her, she dared not stir lest she should precipitate his attack. As the tension increased in severity, she had to bite her fingers to keep back a scream.

The alderman was torturing her as a cat plays with a mouse. It seemed evident that he did not realise that she knew of his presence in the Gallery, and was putting into practice Lobb's theory of a fool-proof method of murder.

He was playing on her superstitious fear in order to frighten her to death.

A terrible possibility stirred in Sonia's brain. He could not afford to wait too long. She had heard that death from strangulation resulted in a cynotic condition of the face. He had to allow sufficient time for any marks to fade.

She felt she had reached the limit of her endurance, yet she resolved to hang on to the last flicker of her will. But, although she tried to keep awake her surroundings persisted in growing shadowy. Sometimes she knew that she was in the Gallery, but at other times she strayed over strange borders. She was back in the summer, walking in a garden with Wells. Roses and sunshine...

She was aroused with a violent start by the sound of heavy breathing. It rose and fell like the working of a pump. With every nerve quivering she tried to locate it; but, baffled by the darkness, it seemed to be everywhere, all around her, and in the air.

The sound was animal in its intensity—suggestive of a raw primal fury, panting against restrained desire. She felt instinctively that it was the prelude to attack. While she waited, she was forced back beyond her last line of defence. There was a singing in her ears, and the faces of the waxworks were blotted out by a black mist.

For the first time in her life she fainted.

When she struggled back to consciousness, she stared vaguely around her with faint wonder that she was still alive. But even while she tried to realise her surroundings, nature came to the rescue, and she passed into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

She awoke with a start as the first grey gleam of dawn was stealing into the Gallery. It fell on the row of waxworks, imparting a sickly hue to their features, as though they were creatures stricken with plague.

It seemed to Sonia that they were waiting for her to wake. Their peaked faces were intelligent, and their eyes held interest as though they were keeping some secret.

She pushed back her hair, her brain still thick with clouded memories. Disconnected thoughts began to stir—to slide about...Then suddenly her mind cleared and she sprang up, staring at a figure wearing familiar grey plus-fours.

The alderman was also waiting for her to wake.

He sat in the same chair and in the same posture as when she had first seen him in the glare from the motor-car. He looked as though he had never moved from his place.

More than that, he gave the impression that he could not move. His face had not the appearance of human flesh. A doubt began to gather in Sonia's mind as she stared at him, with the feeling of a bird hypnotised by a snake.

Growing gradually bolder, she crept closer to the figure. Then her laugh rang joyously through the Gallery, as she realised that she had passed a night of baseless terrors, cheated by the power of imagination.

It was a waxwork, a libelous representation of King Edward VII, wearing an old suit of the alderman's.

As she looked at it she remembered Mrs. Ames telling her that it was the last modern addition to the collection. It had probably been stored away with other surplus figures for she had not seen it before.

In her relief she turned impulsively to the waxworks.

"My congratulations," she said. "You are my masters."

They did not seem entirely satisfied by her homage, for they continued to watch her with an expression half sinister and half benevolent.

"Wait!" they seemed to say.

She turned from them and opened her bag to get out her mirror and comb. There, among a jumble of letters, handkerchief, lipstick and powder compress, she saw the electric torch.

"Of course," she cried, "I remember now, I put it there. I was too windy to think properly. Well, I'd better pack up."

The Gallery seemed much smaller in the returning light. When she reached the Hall of Horrors, she started back at the sight of a waxwork which was lying upon the floor. For the second time she gazed down on a familiar suit of Harris tweed. Then she nerved herself to turn the figure over so that its face was visible.

She gave a scream. There was no mistaking the staring eyes and rigid jaw. She was looking at the face of a dead man.

It was Alderman Cuttle. Beside him, dropped by his nerveless hand, was a small object which she instinctively picked up and hid inside her suit-case. As she did so her fingers trembled violently, while a wave of horror shook her at its ghastly significance.

The concealed evidence was a rubber pad.

XXVIII. — INQUEST

THE news of the alderman's death spread through the town like a prairie fire. It came as a severe shock to his fellow citizens. He was such a vital and prominent member of the public, that no one could connect him with mortality. When others died, he assisted at their funerals, wearing an immaculate frock-coat and a mourning-band round his silk hat, together with the air of special dignity which was his tribute to the majesty of death. As soon as the ceremony was over, he was first to beckon his friends to the nearest bar, and raise their spirits in the time-honoured way.

It was impossible to believe that this big jovial man, with a laugh and a joke for every one, should attend a burial in the silent character of the corpse. He left a blank which no one could H. Directly the news came through, nearly every shop in the town put up one shutter as a sign of mourning, and the flag was flown half-mast over the Masonic Club and Town Hall.

Sonia was astonished by the evidence of his amazing popularity, when she went to the office in the afternoon. Everywhere grave-faced people stood in groups, talking in subdued voices about the dead alderman.

Even Horatio gave her a tragic greeting.

"Oh, Miss Thompson, isn't it awful about the alderman? My mother says it feels like the end of the world."

"Oh, cheer up, Horatio," said Sonia shakily.

At the sound of her voice, Wells came out of the inner office.

"Scram," he said to Horatio. Then he turned to Sonia and scowled at her.

"Why aren't you in bed?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep," she replied. "Besides, I always like being here. You understand, of course, that I shall keep on with my work after we're married."

"Sure." He winked, unseen, at Goal. "You'll have to work three times as hard to keep yourself, Goal, and me. But we'd better have a talk now you're here. We left things rather in the air."

As they looked at each other, their eyes said so much more than their words. Between them was the memory of the raw drama of their meeting at dawn, Mrs. Ames' screams, and the wax poisoners, citrine in the sickly light, furtively gazing at the dead body on the floor of the Hall of Horrors.

Although Sonia collapsed in Wells' arms, she had recovered her calm before the arrival of the policeman, and made a brief statement, according to Wells' coaching.

"Tell the truth, but damn little of it."

Now that they were together again she wanted to get at grips with the situation.

"Where's my coat?" she asked.

"Lobb has it."

"Does he think the alderman sold the drugs?"

"Definitely. He's nutty with joy, although he knows there is a spot of hell in front of them. But she won through before. And the man's dead."

"Yes." Sonia's voice was strained. "The waxworks killed him."

"In a manner of speaking, yes," admitted Wells. "It's all over the town that he passed out in a fit. Those big chaps are often pulpy in a jam. High blood-pressure and what not...But *why* was he in the Gallery?"

"He was waiting to kill me."

Wells' eyes grew fierce as he listened to the story of the alderman's threats.

"He was cruel," she said. "He smashed up lives. And he thought I had something on him. Really, I was only talking through my hat. You see, I had a silly hunch he was poisoning his wife. We were at cross-purposes."

"Lucky for him he died," muttered Wells. "If he hadn't, I'd have killed him."

Then he ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'm thinking about the inquest. They'll want to know why he was there too. You'd better tell them about your chat with him,

and make it appear as if he'd come to protect you in case you cracked."

"Do you expect me to shield him?" gasped Sonia.

"Yes, darling The man's dead so it doesn't matter a rap now about what he did. If you kick him he can't feel it. But his widow might."

"I'd forgotten her. But you're right. Poor Mrs. Cuttle."

Sonia was not alone in her pity. Although the alderman's wife had not been specially popular, his widow had a new claim to the respect of the town. The more striking her husband's qualities, the more poignant her loss. They felt that she had become pathetic and defenceless—a mere quivering mass—like a snail scooped out of its guardian shell.

When Dr. Nile broke the news to her, she broke down completely and had hysterics. After she had regained her self-control, she spoke to the doctor.

"Where is he?"

"In the mortuary at the police station."

Her dull blue eyes stared at him in horror.

"Why?"

The kind-hearted Dr. Nile looked abjectly miserable.

"I'm afraid there'll have to be a post-mortem," he told her.

"No, no." Her voice broke in a scream. "This is the last straw. I can't bear it. You know, doctor, how delicate he was about things. He couldn't stand the indignity of being cut up."

The doctor nodded. Although the alderman was such a healthy animal he was bashful as a schoolgirl over aspects of illness. He could enter, therefore, into the widow's outraged feelings. As he was a weak nature, he let himself be carried away by his feelings.

"Well," he said soothingly, "perhaps it may not be necessary. I know his medical history. I'll see what I can do in the matter of the certificate."

Reassured by his promise, Mrs. Cuttle went upstairs to her bedroom and gave orders not to be disturbed. The maids, who

were red-eyed from crying, entered into the drama of her bereavement and often paused to listen outside the locked door.

Presently the housemaid knocked upon the panels sharply.

"It's Miss Yates, mum," she called. "She's brought some mourning for you."

"Bring her up," said her mistress.

She unlocked the door to admit Miss Yates, who carried a suit-case. The room was in darkness and reeked of eau-de-Cologne.

"Can I see him?" asked Miss Yates.

Her voice cracked as she spoke and she turned abruptly away.

Her emotion caused Mrs. Cuttle to break down also.

"He—he isn't here," she gulped.

For one amazing moment the two enemies were united by the common bond of hysteria. Then Miss Yates spoke in her usual hard voice.

"Shall I draw up a blind?"

"No. Turn on the light."

In the glow from the elaborately-shaded electric lamps, Miss Yates looked a wreck. Her carelessly-applied peach powder showed up the deep-graven lines on her face. But her hands did not shake as she unstrapped her case and held up her selection of mourning for Mrs. Cuttle's approval.

"Nothing fancy, or 'Merry Widow,'" said Mrs. Cuttle, frowning at a becoming gown with dainty lawn collar and cuffs. "I want all black."

She nodded as Miss Yates drew out heavy widow's weeds.

"That'll do. I want to show him respect. No woman ever had a better husband."

"You can't tell me anything," said Miss Yates. "I've worked for him."

"But I'm his wife."

"No, you're his widow."

Mrs. Cuttle winced at the cruel reminder.

"Wife *and* widow," she told Miss Yates. "And all the years we were married my husband was always faithful to me."

A spot of colour out-burned the rouge on Miss Yates' high cheek-bones. She strapped her suitcase and moved to the door.

"I know what I know," she said. "But the man's dead. Whatever we say about him he can't contradict. So I'm saying nothing."

Mrs. Cuttle stared at her in the old stupid manner, straining for speech. She was still dumb when Miss Yates spoke in more subdued tones.

"He'd want me to do all I can now. I'm still working for *him*: Would you like me to write some of the letters?"

"Yes."

"Then you must give me some private notepaper."

The two women descended the staircase together. On the landing which divided the two flights, Miss Yates ran back to the bedroom to get a forgotten glove. Afterwards she lingered in the hall, staring around her with light glittering eyes.

"Taking a last look round," she said, when Mrs. Cuttle came out of the library with the stamped stationery.

"Yes." Mrs. Cuttle spurted unexpected venom. "You've often done that. Choosing new wallpaper and furniture. I've watched you. But you counted your chickens before they were hatched."

At the taunt, Miss Yates' painted lips quivered with passion.

"Why did you let him go to the Gallery?" she demanded. "You knew he was ill. Couldn't you keep him for just *one* night?"

Mrs. Cuttle quailed before her fury.

"But he was all right when he left," she quavered. "And I was upstairs in bed."

"Then how do you know he was quite well?"

"Because he went. It's not my fault. He would overload his stomach at night. I warned him. I knew he'd have a stroke."

Miss Yates looked at her with a penetrative stare and then went to the front door.

"I'll send up gloves and stockings for the inquest," she said.

The inquest was held the following afternoon at the Town Hall. It had been rushed through out of sympathy for Mrs. Cuttle's request. The coroner was one of the alderman's oldest friends and she appealed to him by telephone.

"I want him back at his own house," she said. "I can't bear to think of him degraded at a police station. I want him to lie in state in his robes, and have an official funeral. It's the last thing I can do for him."

The inquest was short, for a reason which was not disclosed at first. The widow, whose dumpy figure was shrouded by a dense black veil, was a pathetic witness when she formally identified her husband. She only lifted a corner of the sheet, revealing a glimpse of an unfamiliar face, at the sight of which she broke down and began to sob.

As prearranged by Dr. Nile, Miss Yates led her away and saw her to the waiting car.

"You'll be wanted at the house very soon," she whispered.

"Will IT come back to-day?" asked the widow.

"*He* will come home," corrected Miss Yates.

Sonia, who had succeeded Mrs. Cuttle in the witness-box, was surprised by the brevity of her ordeal. When she gave evidence as to her finding of the body, no other questions were put to her. She stepped down to make room for Dr. Nile.

Then she, and every one in the court, understood. The medical evidence was the vital feature in the inquest. Like the other victims of the Gallery, the deceased had died from heart failure, but its cause was different.

The alderman had been poisoned.

XXIX. — POST-MORTEM

THERE was tense silence in the court as Dr. Nile went on to state that he had found digitaline in the stomach of the deceased. It had been mixed with his last meal of devilled chicken, which would disguise its taste. Death took place between three and four in the morning. Certain organs had been removed and were to be sent up to the Home Office to ascertain the exact quantity of the drug.

Pending the result of the analysis, the inquest was adjourned.

When the news became known the excitement in the town reached fever-pitch. Miss Yates, her face grim as a painted skull, had a short interview with the superintendent, and then hurried back to the shop—true to the trade slogan of "BUSINESS AS USUAL." Sonia also walked back to the office, her brain in a ferment.

She thought of the sterterous breathing echoing through the Gallery with a little shiver.

"He was dying then. But *before*? When I saw that waxwork move it was really him. He made the figures dance to frighten me. And then—he waited in the Hall of Horrors...I nearly went to him, but the waxworks saved me. They frightened me, but they were my friends."

She knew that she was drawing on her imagination; yet she could not forget those dawn-sickly wax faces, with the intelligent eyes. "*Wait!*" they seemed to say, as though they had something they wanted her to see.

Meantime, Wells sat with his friend, Superintendent Fricker, in his private office at the police station.

"Got a statement for me?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Fricker. "The police are following up an important clue and expect soon to make an arrest."

They grinned at each other. Then Wells' face sobered.

"So the poor devil never lived to be mayor after all.'

"He wouldn't have been mayor in any case," said Fricker. "We'd have had something on him by then."

Drugs?

Fricker nodded.

"What do you know about it?" he asked.

He looked thoughtful as Wells told him of Sonia's vigil in the Gallery and the evidence of the stained coat.

"Since you're in the know, I'll tell you the rest," he offered. "Strictly under the hat, of course."

"For my private information and not for publication," supplemented Wells. "First of all, do you think Miss Thompson ran any real danger last night?"

"That's the question I'm asking myself. I don't like certain things. To begin with, when she made her statement in the Gallery, she said the alderman told her that the place was going to be condemned. I checked up on that, and found that there is no truth in it."

"You mean," asked Wells sternly, "he induced her to go to the Gallery and then went himself. *Why?*"

The superintendent bit his nail.

"Why?" he repeated. "Of course, Miss Thompson stood to ruin him. Still, I can imagine him squeezing a girl's waist, but not her throat. And yet...there's no doubt he had no moral sense. He practically killed Miss Munro in a specially cruel way."

"How?"

"By suddenly cutting off supplies of her special drug. She was the only real addict in the place. In her case it ought to have been reduced gradually. But she didn't pay up except a bit on account, which was her aristocratic way of payment to a mere tradesman. I fancy he had his knife in her as well. That letter he sent closing her account at his shop was her death warrant."

"Does any one else know this?"

"Nile might suspect. But his certificate covered the truth, and he was too kind-hearted to advertise the unnecessary fact that she took drugs."

Wells rubbed his hair.

"How did you get on to the alderman?" he asked.

"By a series of eliminations. We got to know drugs were sold in the town. One man—I can mention him, since you know about him—Lobb, consulted us. With his aid, we compiled a list of problematic victims. All women with a medical history—insomnia, neuralgia, or some nerve pain. The agent was plainly some one in the confidence of ladies. After suspecting several worthy folk, we settled on the alderman."

"Why?" asked Wells.

"He had the best means of distribution in his shop—although he wasn't to be caught napping that way. He used to listen to that old wind-bag Nile, and pump him about his patients. When he was flirting with Mrs. Nile and the dispenser, he was picking their brains, too. He had a perfect gift for asking questions. That was how he knew who to approach."

"You can't help admiring his instinct in selection," admitted Wells. "He knew Miss Thompson was a wrong one from the start. His feelers must have been delicate as a sensitive plant. All the time he was walking on egg-shells. Yet he never turned a hair."

"No, he counted on their dependence on him. They wouldn't dare split, for fear he'd cut off supplies. In fact, as long as he stuck to a few influential and wealthy ladies he was on velvet. We suspect Miss Yates used to bring them the stuff, when she visited them with a selection of dresses. We could do nothing merely on suspicion. He made his mistake when he roped in the small fry."

"His ruling passion was avarice," commented Wells.

"Yes. He evidently figured out he could double some of his little accounts. But once the thing got wholesale, so to speak, it was dangerous. He could not be connected with it in any way, or have it taken from his shop, and he could only risk Miss Yates occasionally for his big clients."

"What about the post?"

"We'd put the wind up him by spreading the report that letters and parcels were being opened at the post office, in

connection with the law against sweepstakes. All bunkum, of course, but few people know the law...So he made his customers clear the stuff for themselves."

"At the Waxworks?" asked Wells.

"Good shot. Yes. The place was neglected and had a bad name. He planted the stuff there, and if any unauthorised person found it by chance, there was nothing to connect it with him So far as we can make out, he assigned to each client a special waxwork. For instance, Miss Munro might have had Mary of Scotland. Then, when a lady got a business postcard saying her order would be ready on a certain date, she would go to the Gallery and get her little package, which was concealed on the waxwork."

"If you knew this, why didn't you arrest him?"

"Because, you chump, we couldn't pinch a prominent citizen on suspicion. You've no notion what a delicate business it is when a big pot takes to crime. We wanted to get him in the act of planting the stuff. We hadn't the staff to shadow him, and he was fly. Besides, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Only a few of all those figures were 'loaded.' And the stuff would only remain there for a very short time."

"How did you get on to it?" asked Wells.

"By examining two figures which he had redressed in his work-rooms. That fact made us suspicious. Evidently Miss Yates had put the finishing touches to their costumes, for we found a tiny pocket in the hem of Caesar's tunic, and in the skirt of Mary of England. Some of my men hid among the waxworks to watch these two figures, but they never struck lucky. Even Lobb took a hand in pretending to be a waxwork. Of course, Miss Yates was in it, too. She made out the faked bills."

"I call it pretty slick guess-work on your part," remarked Wells, as he rose to go. "By the way, what about that story you promised me about the bags?"

"Oh, *these*:" The superintendent spoke wearily. "Elementary. They were never stolen, of course. The women had to invent some way of getting money from their husbands...Well, all that's come

to an end. The town will be happier and cleaner for Cuttle's death. But it's a blow for me."

"I suppose we shall miss him in a way," admitted Wells. "He was such a good mixer. But now we know him for what he is, it will be a good loss."

"I didn't mean it in that sense," admitted Fricker. "Although this was only a tiny ramification of the drug traffic, Cuttle was a link in the chain. I wanted to find out his source of supply and follow it up. Now the hope has gone west. He's dead and I know who murdered him."

"Then it's no good asking you," said Wells, with a grimace.

"None. It would be premature. But I'll tell you this. It's the person who stands to gain most by his death."

XXX. — THE BLACK WIDOW

MRS. CUTTLE was the loser by her husband's death. In one stroke she was deprived of her comfortable income, her big house and garden, and her future honours. She would never be Lady Cuttle and receive her civic guests in the glory of sapphire velvet and ermine at the Mayor's Reception.

After her first outburst of hysteria, she bore up well and displayed both calm and fortitude. Instead of nursing her grief, she set about making her arrangements for the future. As she waited in the drawing-room for the master of the house to come home, the housemaid tapped at the door.

"It's the vicar, mum. Will you see him?"

"Yes."

The vicar rather dreaded the interview because of its tragic circumstances. Fortunately for his peace of mind he was ignorant as the widow of the inquest sensation. But to his relief, Mrs. Cuttle was stoically unemotional. Dressed in deepest mourning, she sat still as an ebony statue, and listened stonily to his condolences.

"Thank you, vicar," she said. "Now I want to settle about the funeral."

Although she was slow, she was business-like in making the necessary arrangements for the service.

"I want the hymn to be 'For all the saints who from their labours rest,'" she told him.

The vicar made a note of it, although his expression was rather doubtful. His own respect for the marriage bond made him prone to censure the late alderman's amorous character.

"I hope we are not going to lose you, too," he said.

Mrs. Cuttle began to tell him her plans.

"I'm going away directly I've settled up. Perhaps I'll take a cottage in the country. My means will be small. The alderman didn't save. But there's the insurance. And the house and furniture. There's a lot of money locked up here."

The vicar, whose simple taste was revolted by the crowded luxury of the drawing-room, wondered whether it would be easy to sell a white elephant like Stonehenge Lodge.

"I hope you'll soon find a purchaser," he said.

"There's one now," Mrs. Cuttle told him. "He's wired that he'll send the cheque as soon as the sale goes through. He's a buyer who used to come here with the alderman. He always coveted the house and furniture."

"But has he the means?"

"Yes, he came into money. He made us a spot-cash offer then. But Mr. Cuttle wouldn't sell."

The vicar tactfully congratulated her on her good fortune.

"Although money does not count in the face of your loss, it would be worse if you were left destitute," he reminded her.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm going to sell the shop, too. One or two will bite. It's the best business premises in the town. I've a lot to see to."

As she stared at him with expressionless blue eyes, he wondered what depths of desolation they shielded.

"You've much on your shoulders," he said. "Have you no relatives?"

"No."

A life partnership of many years' standing had been violently ruptured. The vicar felt she must be bleeding inwardly. She had no child to help her bear the burden. She suffered in silence, and alone.

"You will be given courage and strength," he told her. "Even now, you are being helped in material ways. Perhaps your husband is still looking after you from the other side."

For the first time, Mrs. Cuttle gulped.

"It was our silver wedding next year," she said.

"Then you've much to remember. Twenty-five years is a long time."

"Yes, you get used to each other...I've lost the best husband in the world, vicar."

"I'm sure of it."

"There's some that misunderstood him. About—about women and girls. But it was only his fun. They wouldn't leave him alone. I want you to know that he never gave me the least cause for jealousy."

The vicar looked at her with new respect. He felt that this stupid dumpy envelope concealed an unsuspected force of character. When Mrs. Cuttle left the town they would lose a personality.

"I've always had much liking for your husband," he said. "He was kind-hearted, sympathetic and generous. Whenever I made an appeal, he was first to respond."

"Yes, vicar. If he hadn't given so much to charity, I might have kept my beautiful home. But you'll miss his subscriptions. I'd like to send you a last cheque before I go. It will be from both of us."

The vicar thanked her and rose to go. As he shook her limp hand, she asked him a question.

"Do you believe there's no marriage in heaven?"

"I'm sure we shall not be parted from those we truly love," he replied.

"Um…But the Bible must be true."

Slightly at a loss, he smiled down at her.

"I'll pray for you," he promised.

At the door, he looked back at her, a solid black shape blocked out against the ornate furniture, motionless and inscrutable as Fate.

Walking down the drive, however, two lines of Browning's flitted across his mind.

"I knew you once, but in paradise,
If we meet, I will pass nor turn my face."

Suddenly he wondered whether Mrs. Cuttle was really anxious for future reunion. Even the most patient wife might weary in forgiveness. He had a fleeting vision of Mrs. Cuttle

cutting her husband in some celestial street. Her loyalty might be a form of the Lie Magnificent.

When she was alone, the black widow ceased to be an enigma. She looked around her with a glare of hatred. She had grown to loathe this room, because of endless hours spent in pacing the carpet while her husband stayed at the shop with Miss Yates. It recalled tortures of imagination, as she pictured them making love and planning divorce, while they jeered at the stupid dupe at home.

All the same, the house had been her best investment. It was a means of saving, for the alderman liked the best of everything, in order to advertise his prosperity. Those weary years of accumulating still more furniture to be polished were justified. At last she would be able to convert her frozen capital.

She gave a sigh. For the first time she felt secure. Her pupils shrank to pin-pricks as she thought of the time when she had nursed the alderman through typhoid. She was a plain woman in the thirties, stupid in her profession, and worried about the future.

Her refuge lay in marriage. She had practised every art, and—to her own surprise—had succeeded in snaring her patient. But she was never sure of him. Outwardly a model husband, his eyes were always rolling after other women.

Those other women. She was jealous of every fresh face. Each successive flirtation put her on a rack of suspense. With the advent of Miss Yates her anxiety grew more intense, for it was plain that an understanding existed between the two. Her husband's appraising glance seemed to weigh her in the balance. She was a symbol of respectability, but the world has a short memory.

Hatred of her husband had grown from a compact of jealousy and fear. She lay awake at night, sweating. And then Nurse Davis had made her a present of the idea.

She remembered the afternoon when her husband had forced her to give a tea-party for a strange woman, and had

insulted her further by bringing back a parcel of his girls. The model, Bessie Blair, had asked questions about poisons. As she listened to Nurse Davis' explanation, she suddenly realised that she had special facilities for getting away with a crime.

It was difficult to convict in a poisoning charge, unless the purchase and possession could be proved. Her own case of hypodermics was a relic of her nursing days; no one knew about it, and it would be impossible to connect her with a sale.

To her great surprise, just as she was wiping a tiny spot of grease from the teapot, she resolved to poison her husband.

It was true that she was shocked by the idea. It lay dormant in her brain as a remote possibility. But she had gradually grown used to it, so that it no longer repelled her.

When her husband hinted that he was not coming home that night, she had jumped to the conclusion of another woman. Flayed with jealousy, something had snapped in her head. She had waited until he was in his study, to steal downstairs and mix digitaline with his devilled chicken.

When she heard of the tragedy, she was shaken with gusts of natural remorse. She could not believe that she had actually done this terrible thing. Her slow brain had only dully realised that the logical sequence to an act of murder was death.

But as the instinct of self-preservation began to stir, she shed her regrets, and thought all around her crime. The threat of arrest did not touch her supreme imperturbability. As the death had taken place, most providentially, in the Waxwork Gallery, she hoped that it might be attributed to a stroke. In her opinion, Dr. Nile was a fool who could be dissuaded from performing a post-mortem. And at the worst it would be impossible to connect her directly with the crime.

After many years she felt secure. Owing to the insurance her future was provided for. She reminded herself, also, that she must lose no time in destroying her case of hypodermics. Yesterday she had been too upset to think about evidence.

But there was plenty of time. First, she would sign that cheque for the vicar. It was not only a gesture to win the respect of the town, but a bid to get on the right side of the church. The vicar was going to pray for her, so all would be well.

She did not know that, even then, two gentlemen visitors were on their way. One was the alderman returning in state to his house. The second was Superintendent Fricker, who had recently acquired the key to the locked medicine-chest in her bedroom.

Miss Yates had just given it to him. She had been linked to the alderman by joint interests, and also by a twin passion of cupidity. Furious at the loss of her partner, she had resolved to avenge his death. Although she despised the tongue-tied wife, the silent widow had seemed sinister as the dog that does not bark. Rent by sudden suspicion she had made an excuse to return to the bedroom alone. Prudence had told her not to search in the cupboard, but merely to remove the key.

In a few minutes Superintendent Fricker would politely request Mrs. Cuttle's permission to unlock the chest in her presence. The case, with its empty phial of digitaline, would bear the betraying signature of her finger-prints. These would be awkward to explain away in the presence of another fact.

A policeman and two maids had eaten the devilled chicken with no ill results. It was between the hours of eight and ten—when she and her husband were alone in the house—that the fowl had been further devilled by the addition of toxin.

As she crossed the room to her desk, she glanced absently at the clock. It had stopped at the fateful hour of eight.

She took her book out of a drawer, found her pen, and squared her elbows to write. The front door bell rang, as—august and respectable in deepest mourning—the black widow made out a cheque for the vicar.

A grim smile was upon her lips. For she did not know that, through the irony of Fate, she had murdered her husband solely for a crime which he had never committed.

He had always been faithful to his wife.