

WORD OF HONOUR

BY

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I. — WORD OF HONOUR

I

JIMMY STAUNTON's soldier servant smiled tolerantly behind a large hand as he produced the fourth evening collar for his master's inspection. Three had already been hurled into a corner, with oaths and curses, as unfit for a chimney-sweep to wear, and he waited patiently for the verdict on the last.

"What do they do with 'em, Wilton?" cried his master despairingly. "The blamed thing looks like a pleated skirt."

His servant preserved a discreet silence as Staunton put it on; then he handed him a black tie. Few things are hidden from a man's personal batman, and Wilton realised the solemnity of the occasion.

So much so, in fact, that when Jimmy, complete with overcoat and hat, was ready to leave his room, he permitted himself with a perfectly inscrutable face to say: "Good luck, sir."

For a moment his master stared him; then a slow grin spread over his face.

"Damn your eyes, Wilton. Go to blazes."

"Very good, sir. Tea the same time to-morrow morning, sir?"

But the door had already slammed behind the departing Jimmy. Should he, or should he not? That was the question. Point for: he loved her, and he felt tolerably sure that she rather more than liked him. Points against: he had exactly one hundred and fifty pounds a year beside his pay, and she couldn't expect any more than that, even if she got as much, from her father. For Tiny Tim—the nickname by which the said father was known wherever soldiers were gathered together—was notoriously not blessed with an overflow of this world's goods.

Tiny Tim—or, to be more formal, Lieut.-Col. John Mayhew, C.M.G., D.S.O. and bar, etc.—was Jimmy's commanding officer. And Jimmy, in company with every other officer and man of the 1st battalion of the King's Royal Loamshires,

would have cheerfully lain down and let the Colonel walk over them, if it would have afforded him any pleasure. And the trifling fact that the men felt the same about Jimmy is beside the point. All that occupied the mind of that worthy as he strode towards the C.O.'s quarters was should he, or should he not? He knew there was no one else dining—Tiny Tim had told him so. He also knew that his host had some work to do after dinner which would take him about an hour. And as he stood on the door-step waiting for the servant to answer his ring, he admitted to himself the futility of his mental argument. If he had an hour alone with Peggy there wasn't a hope.

She was alone when he went into the drawing-room, and his heart gave a quick bound forward as he saw her. What an utterly adorable girl she was; no wonder she was the apple of her father's eye. Especially since her mother had died....

"Come back from leave at last, Peggy," he said as he took her hand. "I'm thinking you've overstayed it badly."

"Three months, Jimmy," she answered. "And I'm off again the day after tomorrow."

In spite of himself his face fell.

"The dickens you are!" he said. "We'll have to get the C.O. to confine you to barracks."

And then Tiny Tim came in, and they went in to dinner. It was an informal meal, such as the Colonel generally gave when he asked any of his unmarried officers in, and the conversation was of that intimate type—half shop, half sport, and wholly regiment—which seemed to come natural when Tiny Tim was present. Boring to an outsider perhaps, but there were no outsiders there. And it was when the fish was being cleared away that it struck Jimmy that the girl was unusually silent. At first he thought it must be his imagination, until he saw her father glance at her once or twice with a worried look in his eyes.

The port was put on the table, and after it had been round once Tiny Tim turned to her with a smile.

"Look here, Kitten," he said, "you run along, will you? I want to talk to Staunton for a few minutes. Very confidential shop."

Slightly surprised, Jimmy opened the door for her. What on earth could the C.O. want to say confidentially to him at such a time?

And when he'd sat down again and said, "Yes, sir," politely, he got still more surprised. For Tiny Tim, who was usually the most direct of human beings, seemed to have considerable difficulty in beginning.

"What do you think of Peggy?" he blurted out suddenly. "Do you think she's happy?"

Jimmy Staunton stared at him open-eyed.

"Good Lord, sir!" he stammered. "I—er—hope so. She seemed a bit silent at dinner."

In silence Tiny Tim pushed the port towards him.

"Jimmy—I'm worried," he said. "She's all I've got, and—she's changed. She's been away, as you know—staying most of the time with a cousin of mine, Lady Badderley. I wanted her to have a good time and all that. I went and stopped there for a couple of weekends and, I dunno', but it struck me there was a pretty putrid crowd in the house. I'm not particularly old-fashioned: I can stomach all sorts and conditions of men—and women; but I'm not Peggy. I don't want her to get unsettled."

He broke off, and Jimmy sat silent, hardly knowing what he was expected to say.

"How's the work getting on for the Staff College?" said the Colonel suddenly.

"Pretty well, sir. I'm sweating like blazes."

"For your ears alone, Jimmy," said Tiny Tim: "I gather I'm going to get a brigade."

"I should damned well hope so," cried Jimmy.

"Brigade-Major is not a bad stepping-stone," remarked Tiny Tim thoughtfully, and Jimmy grew red in the face. At last, incredible though it was, he began to see what his host was driving at.

“Don’t forget I married on practically nothing beside my pay,” went on Tiny Tim.

“Good Lord, sir!” stammered Jimmy. “You mean that I—why—Great Scott! I just worship the ground she walks on.”

Tiny Tim smiled.

“You surprise me, Jimmy. Er—why not tell her so?”

“But do you think—I mean—is there a chance for me?”

“Damnation!” exploded the Colonel. “You don’t expect me to find out for you, do you?”

He rose and put his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder.

“I want her to be happy, old man,” he said gruffly. “They’re a rotten lot—some of those men she’s been meeting—and she’s young. Good luck. I can give her a little.”

Without another word he walked out of the room, leaving Jimmy Staunton staring after him open-mouthed. Brigade-Major—and then if Tiny Tim got a Division, which he would—G.S.O. 2, or perhaps even 1.... He could afford it.... With care to start with, it could be done.

Almost in a dream he found himself in the drawing-room. She was sitting smoking a cigarette as he came in, with her back towards him. And for a moment or two he stood by the door drinking her in—the proud little shingled head, the adorable shoulders, the whole wonderful attraction of her. Then, as he closed the door, she turned and looked at him.

“Hallo, Jimmy!” she said. “Finished your shop?”

“Yes,” he answered. “The destiny of the British Army has been settled. Why are you going away so soon, Peggy?”

He was standing beside her, while she stared at the fire.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Aunt Vera asked me to come back.”

“Find it dull here?”

“Dull!” Her voice shook a little. “I’d give everything I possess to stop here, Jimmy.”

“But what’s to prevent you, my dear?” It slipped out unconsciously, that “my dear.” “The regiment don’t think they’re being treated at all well.”

She gave a little shiver, but didn’t speak.

“Peggy, is anything the matter?” He tried to keep his voice even; but it wasn’t a conspicuous success. “I mean—if so, it might help you to cough it up, old thing. Won’t go beyond me, don’t you know.”

He bent down, and saw that her eyes were swimming with tears.

“My dear,” he muttered hoarsely. “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing, Jimmy,” she said, getting up abruptly. “Don’t let’s worry about it. What shall we do? I’ve got a lot of new music...”

“Damn the new music,” answered the man quietly. “I want to know what the trouble is.”

“There isn’t any trouble,” she said defiantly.

“Then why were your eyes full of tears? Sit down again, Peggy—and get it off your chest. Two heads are better than one, old soul.”

She drew in her breath sharply; then she pointed to a chair.

“Go and sit over there, Jimmy, and don’t look at me. And swear—swear that you won’t tell a soul.”

“It’s hardly necessary,” he said quietly. “But I give you my word of honour I’ll tell no one.”

For a time she sat in silence with her head averted; then, a little jerkily, she began to speak.

“I’ve been a fool, Jimmy—such a fool. It all started with a week-end party about six weeks ago. Aunt Vera had asked a lot of people down for a dance at a house a few miles away. The dance was on the Friday night, and they were all staying till Monday morning. Between them there were about half a dozen cars, so we all split up and went over in driblets. I was going with Aunt Vera, and then after dinner I tore my frock and had to go upstairs to get it mended. And when I came down Aunt Vera had gone, and all the other cars except one. It belonged to a Mr. Maxton—Paul Maxton—and he had waited specially for me. He’d been down a week-end previously, and I rather—liked him. At least I thought I did. He was a beautiful dancer and ... oh! I don’t know, Jimmy: I said I was a donkey, didn’t I? He had a two-seater coupe, and we followed on after the rest of the party. In the car he started playing the fool, and I suppose I wasn’t as angry as I ought to have been. Anyway, he kissed me.”

She stole a quick glance at Jimmy Staunton, and then went on hurriedly. For that young gentleman’s expression was not prepossessing.

“You see, I’m telling you everything, Jimmy—and I hate him now. We got there late, of course, and so, more or less naturally, we had a good many dances together. And he does dance divinely. And when it was over, I don’t know how he managed it, but I found myself going back with him in his car. I suppose, to be fair, I ought to admit that I didn’t try and go in one of the others.

“Jimmy, it was horrible—that drive home. He—oh! I can’t tell you what it was like. I’m not an innocent little fool—girls aren’t, these days. But it was so utterly unexpected: I’d never dreamed for a moment that he was going to behave as he did. And then”—her voice was low—“he asked me where my room was.”

A strangled grunt came from the chair opposite, but its occupant said nothing.

“It was then I smacked his face as hard as I could. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man look quite so surprised in all my life. For a moment or two he sat there staring at me, and then he smiled quite politely.

“I deserve it, Peggy,’ he said. ‘Please forgive me and forget all about it.’

“And we drove on home without another word being spoken. Next day he was perfectly charming, and—oh! don’t misunderstand me, Jimmy—I began to feel a little bit guilty. You know yourself that there are ways and ways of dancing,

and the night before I had been a bit excited. And then I'd let him kiss me, and—oh! I don't know. But I sort of felt that what had happened in the car on the way home was partly my fault. And so, when he came to me that afternoon—it was pouring with rain—and suggested that we should play bridge, I didn't refuse. He knew I played, and he knew I wasn't bad—so there was no excuse I could give for not doing so. Besides, I did feel, as I tell you, a little guilty.

“You and I,” he said, ‘will take on Singleton and Mrs. Talby. And we'll wallop their heads off.’

“Oh! Lord, Jimmy—what an ass I was. I can play bridge—family bridge, or when some of you come in to dine—pretty well. But I ought to have known; I ought to have stopped. Captain Singleton and Mrs. Talby, as I found out afterwards, had played together for years. I was absolutely outclassed, and, in addition to that, I did hold the most terrible cards. And all through that afternoon we went on losing steadily—my partner and I. In fact we were nearly four thousand points down when the dressing-bell went for dinner. And I got up, wondering if I had got two pounds left in my bag upstairs. You see, I'd never thought of asking what we were playing for. We always play sixpence a hundred here, and I sort of assumed that the stakes wouldn't be more than a shilling.

“I'll square up, Miss Mayhew,” said my partner, ‘and you can settle with me later.’

“So, after dinner—we were dancing to a gramophone—I asked him how much I owed him.

“Look here,” he said, ‘you had the most rotten luck to-day. Why not let's take them on again to-morrow, and get some of it back? You simply couldn't hold those foul cards for two days in succession. There's “Tea for Two.” Let's go and dance.’

“So we went and danced, and I didn't bother any more. I'd found a five-pound note that I'd forgotten about upstairs, so there was nothing to worry about, as I thought. And when it started to pour on Sunday worse than ever, I was quite ready for my revenge. Jimmy! if anything, the cards went worse. Every finesse went wrong, and when I did have a good hand it didn't fit in with my partner's. We lost and lost and lost, and big rubbers too. Doubles went wrong, and twice

we were redoubled, and our opponents pulled it off. I was absolutely frightened to look at the score sheet, but I did when we stopped play. Jimmy! we were six thousand five hundred points down—over ten thousand points in two days. However, that was a fiver, at a shilling a hundred, and luckily I had it with me.

“It was after dinner again that I tackled Mr. Maxton, and insisted on knowing what I owed him.

“‘It’s the limit,’ he said ruefully. ‘I’ve played bridge for years, and I have never known such a run of inhuman luck. Do you know that yesterday and to-day we have played twenty-five rubbers and only won two? Now as to settling up—I’ll let you know.’ He produced his notebook. ‘Ten thousand three hundred points down, and twenty-one rubbers on balance—that’s two hundred and eight pounds. One hundred and three for the points, and a hundred and five for the rubbers.’

“Jimmy, I nearly fainted! I just sat there, staring at him blankly, with my poor little fiver clutched in my hand. For a few moments the shock was so paralysing that I could hardly grasp it.

“‘But what were we playing for?’ said a voice I dimly recognised as my own.

“‘The usual stakes,’ he answered, rather surprised. ‘A pound a hundred, and a fiver on the rubber. But, if by any chance it’s inconvenient for you to write a cheque for that now, there’s no hurry. I’ve squared up with Singleton and Mrs. Talby. Let it stand over for as long as you like, and send me a cheque when it’s convenient.’

“I didn’t say anything: I was still too dazed. Two hundred and eight pounds!

“‘In fact, I insist,’ I heard him say. ‘As a matter of form, and to make it quite in order, give me an IOU.’

“‘It’s very good of you,’ I heard myself saying, as I signed my name to the paper he held out. ‘I’ll send you the money as soon as I can.’

“‘Don’t hurry, Peggy,’ he insisted. ‘Between friends such trifles don’t count.’

“And that was six weeks ago. Jimmy! what am I to do?”

Jimmy Staunton stirred restlessly in his chair.

“What’s happened since then, Peggy?” he said. “I suppose you’ve seen Maxton again.”

She nodded her head miserably.

“He’s been down for two week-ends,” she answered. “Last Sunday was the second. And, Jimmy, he was still very nice about it when he first arrived, but on Sunday evening he got me alone. And——” she covered her face with her hands—“he wasn’t nice about it any more.”

“What do you mean?” said Staunton hoarsely.

She covered her face with her hands, and he only just heard her whispered “Jimmy, can’t you guess?”

And the next moment Staunton was on his feet, white to the lips and shaking.

“The swine!” he stammered. “The ungodly swine! Peggy! Peggy! Look at me, dear. You haven’t...”

She looked at him instantly.

“No, dear. But—but—he wants to know this next week-end.”

“But, dear God! Peggy,” he cried hoarsely, “you’re not even dreaming of doing what this foul sweep suggests. Tell him to go to hell.”

“How I wish I could, Jimmy,” she said with a little twisted smile. “Oh! the mask is off the brute now—he knows he’s got me. ‘You smacked my face once,’ he said to me. ‘The IOU’s yours if you don’t smack it again.’ But if I do, do you suppose I don’t know what will happen? Do you suppose he’ll keep that IOU to himself? Everyone will know, and everyone will think the worst. He’ll see to that. Oh! Jimmy—what am I to do? I can’t ask Daddy; I won’t ask him. I haven’t told you that—but he made me promise I wouldn’t play cards while I was away. And you know what he thinks of anyone who breaks their word. It would just break his faith in me. Besides—he’s so awfully hard up just now, I know.”

And suddenly she gave a little gasp, for Staunton was kneeling beside her with his arms round her, and his face touching hers.

“I love you, Peggy,” he whispered. “I adore you. Thank God! you’ve told me. I’ll give you the two hundred pounds to-morrow.”

“Jimmy, my dear,” she cried, “but you’re mad! You haven’t got two hundred pounds. And anyway——”

“I’ll give you the two hundred pounds to-morrow,” he replied steadily, “and you’ll go and spend the week-end with Lady Badderley. And in her presence, Peggy, you’ll hand over the money to this damned, ineffable swab, stating what it’s for. Then come back here, my dear, and we’ll burn that IOU together. And when you’ve come back I want to ask you a question.”

Before she could answer she heard the door close behind him. And Tiny Tim coming in a quarter of an hour later, and finding her alone, sighed a little sadly. For not unnaturally he placed a totally wrong construction on the situation, though he said nothing about it to Peggy.

II

JIMMY STAUNTON had spoken with his eyes open to what he was saying. He knew that his own bank balance consisted of exactly eighteen pounds; he knew that he had no possible method of raising the money in the time—save one. And he knew exactly what that one method entailed. It was a court-martial offence, with certain cashiering as the result—if he was found out.

In every military unit there are certain funds which consist—not of the public money, but of money subscribed by officers and men for various purposes. There are the profits from the canteen and the Regimental Institute; there are subscriptions for cricket, football, shooting prizes and other things of a like type. And the officer who is responsible for these funds is the second-in-command.

Now the second-in-command—Major Peterson—was on leave, and was not returning for six weeks. And during his absence Jimmy was acting for him. He was empowered to write cheques, and pay in monies to the bank. In fact he was in complete charge of the accounts, and there was no one to say him 'Nay,' or raise any questions till the quarterly audit, which would take place on Major Peterson's return.

It was not the first time Jimmy had acted in this capacity, and he knew to a nicety how that audit was conducted. Every item in the regimental books was inspected, and the balance arrived at. Then from the balance in hand at the bank was subtracted any unpresented cheques, and if the two figures tallied—as they always did—the audit was over. But Jimmy had never known a detailed inspection of the pass-book: quite naturally it was deemed unnecessary. Moreover, he knew that the passbook was very near completion and that by the time Peterson returned a new one would have been started. Given three weeks he could raise the money from his father, who was at the moment in Canada. And the two unexplainable entries of a hundred and ninety pounds drawn out and paid back later would probably never be seen. If they were ... but Jimmy refused to let himself think about that. It had to be done: it was the only possible way. No one knew better than he did the ghastly risk: the chance of the old passbook being looked at—the possibility of the bank manager casually mentioning the matter to Peterson one day. But it had to be done.

And it was a perfectly calm and self-possessed young officer who presented a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds over the counter of Barclays Bank the next morning.

“A large cheque, Mr. Staunton,” said the cashier, raising his eyebrows a little.

“It is a bit,” agreed Jimmy. “But I want the money handy for prizes. We’re having a big show at the ranges shortly.”

When he returned the money he was going to say the show hadn’t come off.

“Let’s hope you have better weather,” said the cashier. “Any fivers?”

“All in pound notes,” said Jimmy. “I should only have to change the fivers.”

Fivers as he knew had their numbers taken, and if he returned different notes it was going to look suspicious.

With the notes in his pocket he left the bank, and going up the street he entered another where he was unknown. And there he exchanged the Treasury notes for tenners. Assuredly, he reflected grimly to himself, a career of crime had its complications. And after that he returned to lunch in the mess. As far as he could see he had taken every precaution that it was humanly possible for him to take to avoid being found out, but he was far too clear thinking an individual not to realise that the risk of detection was still enormous. One casual remark from the cashier at Barclays Bank, and the whole thing was bound to come out. And then ... finish.

He sent the notes plus his own eighteen pounds with a little covering letter to Peggy that afternoon. It was a stilted effusion: somehow Jimmy felt numbed and dazed. The one dominant thought in his brain that at all costs she must be saved, was jumbled up in his mind with the almost unbelievable fact that he—the product of a line of soldiers—had done what he had. He lied to her, of course; said an aunt had sent him two hundred and fifty pounds—more power to her elbow. Said it was just their secret.... Re-wrote it all four times, in the intervals of gazing dumbly out of the window.

“Wait for an answer,” he told Wilton, when at last he’d sealed it up.

It came, and he read it over and over again.

“My dear; I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Come and ask me that question when I get back next week—Peggy.”

And that was a Thursday. On Saturday morning the telephone in his office rang, and the pay sergeant answered it.

“Adjutant’s compliments, sir, and the C.O. wishes to see you at once in the orderly-room.”

For a moment or two Staunton stared at the N.C.O. almost uncomprehendingly. Impossible, of course: Tiny Tim couldn’t have found out. And yet his mouth was so dry as he reached for his hat that he could only nod his reply.

He crossed the barrack square, entered orderly-room and saluted. And as he left the door and advanced to Tiny Tim’s desk, the Adjutant rose and left the office. And Jimmy Staunton’s mouth was drier still. That fact always meant a man was on the mat for something serious, apart from the look on Tiny Tim’s face. It was stern and set, and his eyes were expressionless.

“I have sent for you, Staunton,” he said quietly, “to ask if you have any explanation to offer with regard to a most extraordinary item in the regimental accounts.”

For a moment Jimmy’s heart stood still; then he stiffened, even more rigidly to attention. The suspense was over: he knew he’d been found out.

“Quite by chance,” went on the C.O., “I met the manager of Barclays Bank dining out last night. And he said to me in the course of conversation that he hoped we should have a successful rifle meeting. I asked him what he meant, as we had no intention of having anything of the sort. He then told me that the cashier had told him that you had drawn a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds on Thursday morning for the purpose of prizes at this meeting, and that the reason why the cashier had mentioned it to him was on account of the largeness of the amount. I was dumbfounded naturally, and requested him to send up the pass-book this morning. I have it here, with the entry in question. And I would like your explanation.”

“I have no explanation, sir,” said Jimmy steadily.

“No explanation?” said the Colonel sternly. “You must have an explanation for drawing a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds on the regimental funds. What have you done with the money?”

Jimmy Staunton drew a deep breath. Just for a second he wavered: career, ambition, everything he had lived for—against his promise.

Then—“I have spent it, sir.”

“My God!” muttered Tiny Tim, “I can’t believe it. You, Staunton—you, of all men. What have you spent it on?”

“Betting, sir,” said Jimmy without a falter. “I’ve owed a bookmaker for months, and he threatened to write to you if I didn’t pay up before next Monday. I would like to say also, sir, that in three weeks from now I would have returned the money.”

“Everybody who steals is always under that impression,” said the Colonel harshly. “I presume you realise what this means, Mr. Staunton.”

“Perfectly, sir,” answered Jimmy.

“It means a court-martial for you with cashiering as the inevitable result.”

For a moment Jimmy stared at the face of the man on the other side of the table, and it was grey and drawn. For a moment there came again temptation well nigh overwhelming to tell him the truth. Cashiered! God! what would his father say? The indelible disgrace of it! With blinding clearness he saw the future stretching out in front of him, a future without hope and with the shadow of the thing that had happened always hanging over him. And then quite clearly and distinctly his own words rang through his brain—“I promise that I’ll tell no one.”

Least of all her father. It was out of the question; it couldn’t be done. And then he realised that Tiny Tim was speaking again.

“If you can replace this money in three weeks, why haven’t you obtained it before to pay this bookmaker? You tell me you’ve owed him for months. You’ve let it drift, I suppose, and when after what I said to you on Wednesday night you decided that something had to be done. Thank God! my daughter refused you.”

He wasn't looking at Jimmy, so he didn't see the look of amazement that showed for a moment on his face.

"Listen, Staunton: I'm failing in my duty, I know. But I can't have your father's son cashiered. You will go back to your quarters and send in your papers at once. You will then go on leave, until your resignation is approved. I will replace this money at once, telling the manager at the bank that you withdrew it under a misapprehension. You can send me a cheque for it—when you're able. And I need hardly add that you are to make no attempt in the future to communicate with my daughter. That will do."

Without a word Jimmy Staunton saluted, and turned blindly towards the door. It was the end, and he blundered past the Adjutant who was standing about outside without even seeing him.

"What the devil has happened?" muttered that worthy officer to himself, as he watched Jimmy's progress across the square. "He can't have been drinking."

And his amazement was not lessened when he entered the orderly-room, and had a momentary glimpse of Tiny Tim sitting hunched up in his chair with his face covered with his hands.

III

IT was the Adjutant who first told Peggy that Jimmy Staunton was on leave. They had hacked out together to a meet not far from the barracks, and as hounds were moving off she had remarked on his absence.

“On leave!” she echoed staring at him. “For how long?”

“The C.O. granted him two months,” said the Adjutant, as he shortened one of his leathers.

“But—I didn’t know he intended to go on leave,” she said.

“It was rather sudden,” agreed the Adjutant. “For your ears alone, Miss Mayhew, I think there’s been a bit of trouble. Jimmy had a confidential interview with your father and left the orderly house walking as if he was tight. And the Colonel hasn’t been his usual self since.”

“I thought Daddy was worried at dinner last night,” she said slowly.

“And further—still more for your ears alone,” went on the Adjutant gravely, “the most amazing rumour has reached me through the Regimental Sergeant Major. He’s got a pal who is chief clerk at Divisional Head-quarters, and the devil of it is that his rumours have never been far out before. He tells me that Jimmy has sent in his papers.”

“What?” cried the girl, and every vestige of colour had left her face.

“I can hardly believe it,” he said; “but that’s what the Regimental said to me yesterday morning after Guard mounting. And as I said I’ve never known him wrong.”

“But why?” she cried. “What can have induced him to do such a thing?”

“Ask me another,” remarked her companion. “He was sweating like blazes for the Staff College. Of course it may be a complete canard. I certainly told the Regimental he was talking rot.”

“But surely you must know, Captain Sykes,” she said desperately. “Anything of that sort would go through you.”

“His application for leave did, of course,” answered the Adjutant. “But nothing else. If it is the truth—which God forbid—it must have gone direct to the C.O.”

And the next moment he was staring blankly at the retreating figure of a girl going back to barracks on a justly enraged horse.

“Tiny—stop eating, and answer some questions.”

Tiny Tim looked up from his solitary luncheon at his daughter, who had just burst into the room like a typhoon.

“Why has Jimmy gone on leave?”

“For reasons, my dear,” said her father quietly, “into which I do not propose to enter.”

“For reasons, Daddy, into which you’ve got to enter,” said his daughter, equally quietly. “In case you don’t know it, I’m going to marry him.”

Her father stared at her blankly.

“I thought you’d refused him,” he muttered. “Anyway, Peggy,” he went on sternly, “you may dismiss any such idea from your mind at once. I absolutely forbid it.”

“Why?” she remarked ominously. “I have a right to know.”

“So be it,” said her father. “Staunton has been guilty of a crime only less culpable in an officer than cowardice. For his father’s sake I spared him being cashiered, and have allowed him to resign his commission.”

“I don’t believe it,” she cried proudly.

“Unfortunately he admits it,” said her father.

“What has he done? You must tell me, Daddy.”

For a while he hesitated, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Embezzled battalion money to pay his betting losses,” he said briefly. “Now you know.”

“Oh! my God.” It was scarcely more than breathed.

“He was in charge of the Regimental funds while Peterson was on leave, and he proceeded to steal a hundred and ninety pounds.”

“When did he do it?” she asked steadily.

“The point seems immaterial,” he remarked. “But if you want to know it was the day after he dined here—Thursday last.”

“Immaterial,” she said with a little sob. “Oh! Jimmy, my dear....”

She stood up suddenly, slim and erect in her riding habit.

“Get into mufti, Tiny; we’ve just got time to catch the 2.30. You know Jimmy’s address, don’t you?”

“What do you want to do?” said her father, staring at her amazed.

She flung her arms round his neck.

“Daddy dear, there’s been the most ghastly mistake. Only do what I ask, and you’ll see. It doesn’t matter what you were going to do this afternoon: everything else must wait.”

And because Tiny Tim was a man of understanding, he said nothing to her going, up in the train, but read Truth with great concentration. They took a taxi, and they went to an address somewhere in Bloomsbury, and all that he noticed was that Peggy’s eyes were full of a wonderful light.

He was sitting at the table was Jimmy, when they entered the room, his head on his arm. And Tiny Tim, looking over the girl’s shoulder, saw the hopelessness fade out of his face as he looked up at the sound of the door opening. She went straight up to him and kissed him on the lips.

“My darling,” she said quite steadily. “My darling boy.”

“Peggy,” stammered Jimmy, getting to his feet. “Peggy—is it all right?”

For a moment Tiny Tim was forgotten as he stood by the door.

“Quite all right, my dear,” she answered. “So you’ve been betting, have you, Jimmy?” She faltered for a moment: then she turned to her father.

“There was once a damned fool of a girl, Tiny, who went away to stop with one of her father’s cousins. And there she met a swine of a man, with whom she was idiot enough to play the fool—and bridge. And when she’d lost steadily for two days she found that instead of playing a shilling a hundred as she thought, they’d been playing a pound a hundred and a fiver on the rubber. He paid her losses—two hundred and eight pounds, and she gave him an IOU.

“He knew she couldn’t pay, and so he made a very definite suggestion as to the method of wiping off the debt. And because she’d promised her father not to play cards she was afraid of asking him for the money. And because she dearly loved someone else she told him, and made him promise not to pass it on. That someone else told her he’d just had some money left him by an aunt—and she believed him.”

With a sob she sat down and over her shaking shoulders the eyes of the two men met.

“Is that the truth, Jimmy?” said Tiny Tim gruffly.

Jimmy Staunton nodded.

“Yes, sir. That’s the truth.”

And Tiny Tim blew his nose with great violence.

“You blithering pair of young asses,” he fumed. “You’re absolute idiots—both of you, damn you. You’re neither of you fit to be allowed loose.”

He stumped up and down the room.

“Your leave is cancelled, Mr. Staunton. You will report at barracks to-night by the last train, bringing my daughter with you. Personally I’m going down to see the G.O.C. at once to discuss that resignation of yours. He’s still in his office, thank Heavens! I shall tell him—everything.”

And then the expression came over Tiny Tim’s face which had made men follow him to their deaths.

“Dear boy,” he muttered, and his voice was shaking. “I thank you.”

II. — THE MESSAGE

“TELEPATHY? Yes, there’s something in it, you know. There must be. And that strange bond of sympathy, or what is even stronger than sympathy, which exists between some people and knows not distance, is a very real thing. I remember the case of a brother and sister who idolised one another, and he was shot through the heart in one of the Egyptian wars. And when they had made the necessary adjustments for time they found that the moment he died was the same moment that his sister called his name out loud, put her hand to her heart and fainted. And she was in England.”

“I know another story too: even stranger.”

The little, sandy-haired man with eyes that were the most trustful things I have ever seen—and the saddest—stared thoughtfully out to sea. In the distance a band was playing: the front was crowded with people taking their evening stroll. And I felt my heart warm to the little sandy-haired man. He seemed so terribly lonely.

“There’s an hour before dinner,” I said encouragingly.

“They met first in one of the intermediate Union Castle boats going down the East Coast. I don’t know if you’ve ever done the trip, but if you have you’ll know that it is one where shipboard acquaintance ripens under very favourable conditions. Lots of ports of call: cargo delays: warm nights.

“She had come on board at Naples and was bound for Delagoa Bay to join her husband who was farming up in the Letaba district: he had embarked at Alexandria bound for the same destination.

“And from the very first it was one of those inevitable things that only immediate flight can save. And you can’t fly far on a ten-thousand ton boat.

“I think he was one of the most attractive specimens of manhood I’ve ever seen. Not that he was particularly good-looking: but then that doesn’t matter in the least. He was so intensely alive: you could see it bubbling out of him. To look at he was just a tall, lean, bronzed man in the early thirties: it wasn’t until you began to talk to him that you realised the magnetic virility that was his.

“He had quite sufficient money for his needs, and his trip to South Africa was principally one of pleasure. And also one of escape. For he was married too,

and his wife loathed travelling. In fact she loathed anything that took her far from London. She was, I gathered. an empty-headed, frivolous little fool, and she comes into this story for one reason only though it's a very important one. She was a devout Roman Catholic.

“So much for him: now for the woman. Everything that he was in a man found its opposite number in her. She loved life, and life looked as if it loved her. She was gloriously pretty, danced like an angel, and was utterly unspoiled. In fact the only remarkable thing about her was why she had married her husband.

“He was such a very ordinary man was her husband. Quite nice, you know: a decent sort of humdrum fellow with no peculiar vices and no particular virtues. The sort of man, in fact, who goes through life as one of the crowd. He was desperately in love with her, of course: crazy about her—who wouldn't have been? And he was under no delusions; she had been perfectly honest with him when they became engaged. It was a case of being taught on the rebound: he knew that. A girl so vastly attractive as she, was bound to have love affairs. And she'd had one rather serious one just before he came on the scene. She didn't tell him the name of the man, and anyway the point is immaterial. But this man, having been everything but definitely engaged to her had, at the eleventh hour, folded his tent and stolen silently away to the fold of a war profiteer who had a daughter.

“It was a jar naturally: a jar to her pride, and a jar to other things as well, because she had been genuinely fond of the man. And when one is young and the wound is raw, it is cold comfort trying to realise that one is well out of a man who can do a thing like that.

“But she was in the mood engendered by a deliberate jilt when she accepted her husband. Not that she wasn't fond of him—she was. Very fond of him indeed: but her feelings for him were never comparable to his for her. His were just blind adoration, and when she presented him with a son it seemed to him that life could hold no more.

“The boy was four years old at the time of my story, and was with his father in Africa. She had been on a visit to her people at home, and never having done the East Coast trip she decided to go back that way instead of by the direct route. Just Fate moving the pieces and chuckling inwardly. Because by the time the boat had reached Port Sudan things had come to a head. The real thing had come at last to two people, and they both knew it.

“The moralist of course may hold up pious hands in horror: fortunately, or unfortunately, according to your outlook on life, the world pays but little attention to moralists. And Nature pays none at all. It came to them quite suddenly—the certain blinding knowledge, and once again the moralist may cry out.

“It was on the beat-deck one night, and she found herself in his arms: she found herself kissing him even as he was kissing her with the kisses that sweep away every barrier. All very wrong, of course, but these things happen. And it’s all rather cynically humorous too, because they wouldn’t be missed if they didn’t happen. But once they have, they can’t be ignored. If you want peace in the menagerie, you must not loose the tiger out of its cage.

“She knew that all her former love affairs were as nothing; she knew that her marriage was as nothing if she answered to the dictates of Nature. He knew the same. And that was the position as that intermediate liner steamed on down the Red Sea.

“He said, ‘I’ll get off at Aden.’

“But he didn’t get off at Aden.

“He said, ‘I’ll get off at Mombasa.’

“But he didn’t get off at Mombasa.

“I don’t blame him; but then I’m not a moralist. I should have done the same in his position. Heaven knows there’s little enough happiness in this world for a man to throw it away when it comes to him. The future! Lord—if every man thought of the future and regulated his every act by it we should have a world peopled by automatic codfish. He gets his punishment if he doesn’t, so it’s quite fair. The longer you put it off the worse it is. And if he had got off at Aden—well, I shouldn’t be telling you this story.

“He stuck to his original plan and got off at Delagoa Bay, and it was there that he met the husband—the plain ordinary husband. The husband had come down from his farm to meet his wife and had brought the boy with him; and they all stayed at that big hotel overlooking the sea which is possibly one of the most perfect hotels in the world. And the husband, having eyes and thoughts for nothing except his wife, was deliriously happy. He had barely noticed the man when his wife had introduced them to one another: he had regarded him

merely as a casual shipboard acquaintance. The only coherent idea in his head was that his wife had come back; and the man who loved that wife stood in the background and tried to sort things out.

“Now I don’t know how far things had gone between the two of them, but the point is almost immaterial. I know it is not so accounted by the world, but we all have our own standards. And it seems to me that the main factor in the situation was the love between the man and the woman. I want to make that clear. It wasn’t just an ordinary vulgar flirtation—une affaire pour passer le temps—it was the real thing between two real people. When you have heard what is to come you will understand why I am so very sure on that point.

“And so for a week the play went on in that luxurious hotel—the play that was destined to finish on the twisting road that leads into the valley down Magoebas Kloof. No shadow of suspicion had entered the husband’s mind: his wife was to him as she had always been. I have said that he was under no delusions as to her feelings for him: he was content that she should return his adoration with a kindly feeling of regard. So he made his little jokes and chuckled over them consumedly—he was that type of man; and felt a genuine pity for all the unlucky individuals who were not as fortunate as himself.

“Off and on he talked a good deal to the man. He was frightfully keen, amongst other things, on South Africa as a country for the right type of settler, and in the man he saw an ideal one. At the time he didn’t even know the man was married; and when he learned that fact he still saw in him possibilities as a developer of country.

“‘It’s capital that is wanted,’ he said again and again. ‘Buy some ground; install a manager and come out for a bit every year. We shall always be delighted to put you up for as long as you like.’

“They were in the bar at the time, and the stem of the man’s cocktail glass broke suddenly in his hand. A flaw, obviously, in the glass; the barman was most apologetic.

“‘Come up and see for yourself now,’ went on the husband when the drink had been replaced by another. ‘I can give you some very fine shooting, and the district that I am in is second to none for fertility. Cotton, citrus—it’s marvellous. Unlimited water; railway at the door....’

“He rambled on—keyed up on his hobby. And the man heard not one word. In fact the husband remarked to his wife later that for such a singularly attractive man he was uncommonly dull and silent.

“‘Perhaps the poor devil is unhappily married, my dear,’ he said as he was tying his tie for dinner that night. ‘I’ve asked him to come up and stay with us...’

“‘What did he say?’ said the woman.

“Her back was towards him as she spoke: she was choosing a frock from the wardrobe.

“‘He didn’t say one way or the other,’ answered her husband. ‘Why don’t you have a go at him after dinner! He’s exactly the type of fellow this country wants....’

“He rambled on once again, and the woman heard not one word. In fact the husband remarked jokingly to her at dinner that he would have to change a shilling into pennies in order to buy all her thoughts. I’ve told you he made little jokes like that, haven’t I?

“‘You go and tackle him,’ he said as they rose from the table. ‘I’ve got to talk to a man over there about my last consignment of packing-cases. They were rotten; and I shall have to take some steps about it.’

“He moved off grumbling, and the man and the woman had their coffee together. And I suppose it was then that they settled it. I don’t blame them for their decision, though I think that if ever there was a definite stopping point jutting obviously out, it was then. He need not have gone to stay with them; equally he might have got off at Aden. But to go and stay with them was the deliberate taking of a fence, whereas stopping on in the boat was merely conforming to an original plan. Still, I don’t blame them: there are certain things which are difficult to judge by ordinary standards. And until one has been tempted as they were tempted one should not pass judgment. Only I sometimes think that now that the man had met the husband and seen the child, it was—it was...”

The little sandy-haired man paused and stared out to sea.

“A P. & O., I think,” he remarked.

I agreed, and wondered how a man whose eyes were full of tears could see a passing liner.

“So the man came and stayed at the husband’s bungalow,” he continued after a while. “They were still trying to sort things out—he and the woman—but they kept their secret very well. The husband, as he took the man riding and showed him the possibilities of the place, was utterly blind to the situation that lay under his very nose. Until one day——

“Astounding, isn’t it, how suddenly one’s eyes can be opened; how the fraction of a second can alter one’s life? Even so it was with the husband in this case. He had been out alone to an outlying part of his farm, and in crossing a drift his boots had got very wet. So that when he dismounted they picked up a lot of mud and became filthy. Which seem tiny details, but unless they had taken place he would not have taken off his boots outside on the stoep and entered his bungalow in his socks. Noiselessly, you see...

“It was in a mirror that he saw it—the thing which brought his world crashing. The man and the woman were standing one on each side of his son’s bed, and they were staring at one another across the child. For what seemed an eternity to the husband they stood there motionless; then they moved to the head of the bed where they were hidden from the eyes of the child. And the man took the woman in his arms and kissed her.

“There are some things which are torture too exquisite to describe. That was one of them. With his heart pounding in great sickening thuds, and his mouth dry and parched, the husband stood there watching. He felt rooted to the spot; his legs refused to work. And then, after what seemed an eternity, he heard the man’s voice:

“Dear God! If only it had been mine!”

“She gave a little choking gasp, and with it the power of movement returned to the husband. He moved out of the line of vision, and making no sound in his stockinged feet he went into the drawing-room. In a sort of inarticulate, hazy way he felt that he had to think things out before taking any action.

“He found himself looking at his reflection in the glass. And the face that stared back at him was the face of a stranger. It was drawn and white and lined, and he started muttering to himself unconsciously.

“This won’t do; you must have a drink. Pull yourself together.’

“He had a drink, and then he fetched his boots from the stoep. They were both in the drawing-room when he returned, and the woman gave a little cry of consternation when she saw his face.

“‘My dear,’ she said, ‘are you all right? Have you got a touch of the sun?’

“‘I’m a bit tired,’ answered the husband evenly—at least his voice sounded fairly even to him. ‘I’ll just go and have a bath and change.’

“He tried to reason it out as he lay in the water. Why, knowing what he did, had he gone and left them alone together? Why had he said nothing? And what was he going to do? Things couldn’t go on as if nothing had happened.

“What was he going to do? Bluster: tell them that he had seen: order the man out of the house. He could do all that: he would do all that. At once—before dinner. And then, insidiously mocking, stole in another thought. He tried to drive it out; it refused to be driven. He argued with himself savagely that she was his wife; it still refused to be driven away. Was his position sufficiently strong for him to adopt such a course?

“Legally it was, of course; who cares about the law? What would be the result if he did bring matters to a head? He knew a good deal of his wife’s character; he had a shrewd estimate of the man’s. And neither of them was of the type who would be intimidated.

“If those two had fallen in love with one another nothing that he could say would alter the fact. And by bringing matters to a head he might merely precipitate a catastrophe.

“Instinctively he knew that it was a big thing. The matter at stake was the whole future of three people and a child. And as he dressed for dinner he realised with a sick hopelessness that the person of those four who would count least when the decision came to be made was himself.

“Perhaps he was a coward; perhaps he didn’t dare risk losing her altogether. Perhaps, on the other hand, he may have been actuated by a strange sort of feeling of fairness. If she wanted to go was it playing the game to try and keep her? You see, he knew he counted least.

“And so he said nothing. All through dinner he acted his part, and made his little jests at which he laughed consumedly, just as he had always done in the past. Once or twice maybe he faltered when he saw the look on his wife’s face as she glanced at the man, but the lapse passed unnoticed. They were far too engrossed—the other two—to pay much attention to him. And when dinner was over he made some excuse and went out of doors.

“He left them alone purposely; he wanted to know the worst. And for an hour or so—or was it a few minutes?—he walked about blindly. God knows what his thoughts were: they were just blind chaos, I think. At times he cursed himself for a fool for not having spoken; at others the grey of blank despair clogged his mind like mist round a mountain top. But at last he felt he could stand it no longer and he went back to the house. One way or the other, he had to know.

“It wasn’t intentional: he didn’t mean to overhear. But knowing what he did, perhaps it was the best thing that could have happened. His wife and the man were sitting on the stoep, and as he approached the house from one side he heard their voices. And he stopped and listened.

“She said: ‘It’s the boy, Bill; it’s the boy.’

“And after a while the man answered. He had a singularly charming voice, and every word he said carried quite clearly to the husband standing just round the corner. Foolish from a worldly point of view perhaps to run such a risk of being overheard; but I honestly believe that it would have made no difference if he’d been sitting with them. The thing at stake was too big; the man would still have said what he did.

“Yes, dear—for you it’s the boy. For you also, it’s my wife. She wouldn’t divorce me; that I know. It’s contrary to her religion; if a woman with an outlook on life such as hers can be said to have a religion. And I couldn’t expose you to that. I know I couldn’t, in spite of the fact that at the moment I can think no coherent thought save that you’re the most wonderful thing in the world and that nothing matters or ever can matter except that you and I should never be parted again. That’s all that is seething through my brain now; there’s no room for anything else. But deep down in me—hidden at the moment, it’s true—is the sure and certain knowledge that I couldn’t expose you to living with me on those terms. And so, my dear, I’m going. This afternoon brought everything to a head. We drifted on board, and somehow things were different there. Now the time has come when we can drift no longer. So I’m going—to-morrow.’

“Oh! my God, Bill!”

“It was pitiful, that little heart-rending gasp of hers.

“To-morrow, woman of mine, I shall go. But there’s one thing I want you to remember through the long years ahead. If ever you want me—if ever you call to me, I will come to you, though I may be at the other end of the world.’

“And the next day he went.”

The little sandy-haired man fell silent for a long while and I didn’t hurry him. That he was the husband, I felt sure, and though the pathos of the thing from his point of view had got me rather gripped, I was wondering what was his reason for telling the story. Up to date it was an oft-told tale.

He must have guessed what was in my mind, I suppose, because he suddenly looked at me with an apologetic smile.

“I expect you’re wondering what this is all leading up to,” he said. “I’m afraid the preamble has taken a bit of a time, but I rather wanted to make the man and the woman clear to you. The husband doesn’t matter, but I wanted to make those two live in your mind. Because it’s wellnigh incomprehensible—the end of the story—unless you realise the relations between them....

“There was no apparent change in the woman after he went away. A little more silent perhaps; a little prone to fall into long reveries—but that was all. To her husband she was just the same as ever; if anything, she was kinder and sweeter than before. He never said a word, but he had a great longing which grew in intensity that some day she would tell him. And about eight months after the man had gone away she did. She said she thought it was fairer.

“It was after dinner one night when she told him, and her face was in the shadow. The man’s name had cropped up quite naturally over an account of a meeting at Brooklands. I don’t think I told you, by the way, that amongst other forms of sport he went in for motor racing.

“She told the story quietly and simply, and her husband listened in silence.

“I won’t say I’m sorry about it, old man,’ she said at the end. ‘I’m not, and there is no good pretending that I am. But I felt it wasn’t playing the game not

to let you know. It's over; it's finished, and humanly speaking I shall never see Bill again. Will you—shake hands on it?’

“‘My dear,’ he answered, ‘I’m so very glad you told me. I’ve been hoping all these months that you would. You see—I knew!’

“She was sitting forward in her chair staring at him in amazement.

“‘You knew!’ she whispered. ‘But how?’

“And then he told her what he had seen and heard, and it was her turn to listen in silence. But they had it out that night, and I think that the memory of the woman that lives most clearly in her husband’s mind is the sight of her by the open window just before they went to bed. She was in white, and she was staring out into the African night. For a long time she stood there motionless, and then suddenly she swung round and held out both her hands.

“‘It was rather big of you, Jack,’ she said simply. ‘Thank you, dear.’

“They never alluded to the subject again; all that could be said about it had been said that night. And after a while they found themselves mentioning his name quite naturally—so naturally, in fact, that the husband began to hope that she was forgetting. And to a certain extent, I suppose, she was. Time had healed the first raw edge; had the end not come it is possible that time might have healed altogether. Who knows?”

Once again the little sandy-haired man paused, whilst he idly traced a pattern on the ground with his walking stick.

“Do you know South Africa at all?” he continued. “Cape Town, Durban, I suppose. Well, the roads are all right there for motoring, but the same cannot be said of the country districts. It was up in the Northern Transvaal that they had their farm, at a place about seventy odd miles from Pietersburg. For a great part of the way the road was good, but for parts of the rest it was a mere track without any real foundation at all. When the weather is fine the track is hard and just as good as the road; when it has been raining the track becomes a layer of greasy slime. Even with chains I have known that seventy miles take eight hours to do.

“They had been down to Johannesburg for a week, leaving their car at Pietersburg. And as ill-luck would have it the husband had slipped playing

tennis and sprained his wrist. So that it was she who had to drive back. She had driven the car often before, though she always preferred not to. It's heavy work steering over the bumps in some of those roads—too heavy for a woman.

“The first part of the run is easy, and they made good time till they came to the high ground—a spur of the Drakensburg. And there they ran into a fine Scotch mist.

“It would have been nothing in England; it would have been nothing if the road had been good. But it was just the part where you find long stretches of unmetalled track; and in half an hour the going was wellnigh impossible. Very foolishly they had forgotten to bring any chains, and the back wheels, when they got any grip at all, were skidding all over the place. But there was no danger; it didn't matter if the car did leave the track. At least it didn't matter to start with.

“At last they got to the top of Magoebas Kloof. Below them the road dropped away corkscrewing into the valley. They couldn't see much of it; the mist was too thick. But they knew every inch of it—so that didn't matter. And then they started to descend. For a bit everything went all right, and then—it happened. And even to this day I don't know how it happened. It was at one of the turns that the car skidded suddenly. And the woman lost her head. She jammed on the brake, and turned the wheel away from the skid instead of towards it. The back of the car swung round with a lurch, and went over the edge. For a moment or two it seemed to pause: then the whole car disappeared.

“How the husband was saved is a miracle. He had risen to his feet instinctively, and I think the door on his side must have come open. Anyway, he was flung out against a tree, and lay there half stunned whilst with a series of sickening crashes the car plunged on downwards. They grew fainter and fainter—and at length they ceased.”

I glanced at the little man, and his forehead was wet with perspiration.

“She was dead, of course, when we got to her; crushed and unrecognisable in the twisted debris of the car. Any chance she might have had of being thrown clear was lessened by the fact that she was driving, and the steering wheel boxed her in. And the only thing the husband could pray for was that it had been instantaneous. The doctor said he thought so, thank God!

“It broke up the husband pretty badly, as you can guess. But there was the boy to consider, and after hanging on for a few more months at his farm he decided to go back to England. For a time he wondered if he would hear from the man, and then he realised that in all probability the accident would not have been reported in the English papers. And at last he decided to write himself. He knew his club in London, and somehow or other he felt that she would appreciate it. So he wrote him a letter telling him what had happened, and the answer came back about a week before he sailed. It was from a firm of lawyers, and ran as follows:

“Dear Sir,

“You are evidently unaware that Mr. William Broxton was killed when competing in the Grand Prix. The accident was a terrible one as he was travelling at over a hundred miles an hour at the time. He was hurled against a tree, and was killed on the spot.

“By what can only be described as an amazing coincidence, the accident took place on the same day as the one which cost your wife her life. Should you require any further details we shall be happy to write you more fully.

“And so, when he got back to London, he went and interviewed that firm of lawyers. There were many gaps to be filled in—points to be cleared up. Points which, when he had thought of them sometimes on the voyage home, had left him with a queer tingling at the back of his scalp.

“The lawyer told him all he knew, which was not much: the worthy man knew little, if anything, of motor racing. Apparently the car had overturned when travelling at speed and Broxton had been crushed between it and a tree. And the mechanic had had a miraculous escape by being hurled out between two trees and landing in a ploughed field. So the husband took the mechanic’s name and address and left. There was someone else he wanted to see now.

He ran him to earth in his club—a motor maniac surrounded by other motor maniacs.

“‘Bill Broxton?’ said his friend, shaking his head. ‘You were out of England, of course, at the time. Poor old Bill. I don’t suppose anyone will ever get to the bottom of that accident. The only man who might throw some light on the matter—Brownlow, the mechanic—at times seems to me to be holding

something back. He idolised the ground that Bill walked on—always drove with him, you know.’

“But what the devil can there be to keep back?’ chipped in one of the group.

“Heaven knows,’ answered the other. ‘He can’t have been tight, and he can’t have lost his head. Sometimes I think he must have gone mad. You see’—he turned to the husband—‘what happened, as far as can be found out from the spectators, was this: He was taking a slight corner, when he suddenly wrenched his steering wheel round almost to the full lock. The car did one frightful skid and then turned over. Brownlow was flung clear: Bill was crushed to death. I mean, as an accident to a driver of Bill’s calibre it was about equivalent to opening the door of an express train and stepping on to the lines.’

“What time did it take place?’ asked the husband.

“I can easily find out for you,’ said his friend, and with that the husband left.

“Only the mechanic remained to be seen, and he was the most important of all. He took a bit of finding—he’d gone to a new address—but at last the husband got in touch with him. A decent fellow, very, that mechanic, but singularly uncommunicative. He repeated the story all over again, but it seemed to the husband that what his motor friend had said was right. He was keeping something back.

“So at last he took the bull by the horns, and told the mechanic much that I’ve told you. He didn’t say he was the woman’s husband, though perhaps Brownlow guessed. And when he’d finished the other man was staring at him with dilated eyes.

“My God!’ he muttered, ‘but it’s strange. I’ll tell you now, sir, what I’ve never told a living soul before. It was Mr. Broxton’s last words just before it happened. I can hear ’em now ringing in my ears as clearly as the day of the accident. And I’ve never mentioned them to anyone: it seemed to me they was his secret, though I couldn’t understand them. It was just as we came to the corner when I saw his face change suddenly. I don’t know why I was looking at him, but I was. He half rose in his seat and shouted out, “Pull your wheel to the left, my darling.” And as he spoke he did it himself.’”

The little sandy-haired man took out his watch and glanced at it.

“Strange, wasn’t it? The times were simultaneous—I verified that. And you remember he’d told the woman he’d come to her even though he was at the other end of the world if she wanted him. And I think that in some mysterious way Bill Broxton went to his woman at the end when she called him.

“For just as those last words of his go on ringing in Brownlow’s brain, so do three other words go on ringing in the husband’s. They rang out clear and distinct just as the car on Magoebas Kloof disappeared over the edge:

“‘Bill—save me!’”

III. — TWO PHOTOGRAPHS

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

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

“It never lets you down,” pursued the other earnestly.

The fair-haired man in the corner smiled slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fair-haired man lit a cigarette with care.

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

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

The doctor grew profane.

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

The interrupter looked pained and subsided.

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

“The first character in order of entry is the lady. We will call her Verriker—Mrs. Verriker. I noticed her the first night I arrived at Parker’s Hotel in Naples. She was sitting in the lounge drinking her coffee, and she was the type of woman who took the eye. Most excessively so, in fact. I put her age at about thirty, and most of the other women in the place were staring at her as if she had an infectious disease, and surreptitiously trying to copy her frock. She was obviously English, though she was reading a French book. And she was really most extraordinarily pretty.

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

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

“Well, gentlemen,” he continued, “rightly or wrongly, it has always seemed to me that a pretty woman alone is one of those things that should not be. It is an unnatural state of affairs and cries aloud for rectification. And though on the one occasion that evening when I caught her eye she looked straight through me, yet I went to bed with the definite impression that in this case the rectification was not going to be very difficult. Impossible to say how these impressions arise, but ... However, I won’t labour the point. I will merely say that the following morning I was privileged to be of some small service to her. It appeared that she was unable to make a messenger from one of the shops understand what she wanted, so what more natural than that I should act as interpreter? She confessed so sweetly that she could hardly speak a word of Italian, that it was a real pleasure to help her. And the fact that I had overheard her the previous evening speaking fluent Italian to the concierge in no way, I may say, destroyed that pleasure.”

“Dirty dog,” chuckled the doctor.

The fair-haired man looked pained.

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

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

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

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

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

birth, he wasn't a sahib. And he was evidently an old friend of Mrs. Verriker's. We were sitting together in the lounge when he arrived, and I suddenly heard her call out, 'Why, it's Bill!'

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

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

"He looked at me and grinned."

"'Just as well—what?'

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

"Well, I abominate complications in an affair of that sort, and I realised that something would have to be done. I couldn't leave Naples—I was there on business—and Mrs. Verriker knew I couldn't. And since she was a clever little woman, I was not surprised to hear after dinner that she had just received an

invitation to stop with some friends in Florence, and was leaving by the early train herself, while Bill was going on to Palermo and possibly Taormina.

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

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

He smiled slightly and pressed out his cigarette.

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

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

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

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

“She shuddered.

“John, dear, you don’t mean fleas?’

“He let out a bellow of laughter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She looked me straight in the face.

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

“Then she smiled and held out her parasol.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The little devil looked at me and winked.

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

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

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

“‘My dear,’ he cried, ‘who do you think has just arrived? I saw him getting out of the hotel bus. Young Trannock. And there he is.’

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

“‘What a pleasant surprise,’ he murmured. ‘I’d no idea you were here.’

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

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

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

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

“‘Straker’s no photographer, Bill. He can look after Sylvia while we enjoy ourselves.’

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

“‘How lucky that Bill likes photography,’ I murmured.

“‘He loathes it,’ she answered, laughing helplessly. ‘But it’s useful.’

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

“‘She wasn’t offended in the slightest.

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

“‘I wasn’t exactly alluding to myself,’ I retorted. ‘I was thinking more of John.’

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

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

“Dear old John,’ she laughed. ‘I know how to manage him.’

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

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

The fair-haired man glanced at his watch.

“By Jove! it’s late; I must be getting on with it.... I don’t know if you gentlemen know that part of Italy; probably you do. But if you don’t, Solfatara—the worthy John’s destination on the following morning—is worth a little description. It is the crater of a once active volcano which can now be walked over with safety except in certain spots. You enter by a fine avenue of acacia trees, and then, after a few hundred yards, you start over the volcano proper. If you drop a stone on the ground it rings quite hollow; in fact, you are walking over what is practically a skin a few feet thick. Below that skin is the boiling foundation, which bursts out in certain places like a witch’s cauldron. There are holes here and there where the mud seethes and bubbles, and the ground is cracked and split. And it’s dangerous to go too near these holes.

“A strange place; an eerie place; with little eddies of white vapour bursting out of fissures in the hills around, and over everything the acrid smell of sulphur. Go there when you’re next in Naples, but take a guide and don’t venture too near those boiling, hissing mud holes, where the temperature is more than 150 degrees centigrade. If the ground does give way—and it’s under-cut near the

edge of some of the holes—it's a dreadful, frightful death. And it's the death that Bill Trannock died on the morning that he and John Verriker went to Solfatara.

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

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

"It was an accident, of course, but it necessitated a lot of explanation with the authorities. And since Verriker couldn't speak a word of Italian, it devolved on me to act as interpreter for him.

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

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

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

"I'm going to develop a photograph; one I took this morning,' he said heavily. 'And to-night the plate will be dry. And after it's dry I will make a print of it, and I will develop the print. And I think it will amuse you.'

"He walked off, leaving me staring after him. After all, I hold no brief for Trannock; as I've told you, I disliked the fellow. But; dash it all, the poor devil

had died the most agonising death only that morning, and even for a photographic maniac it struck me as being a bit callous. Still, perhaps it would take his mind off the tragedy.

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

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

“‘I will get my wife,’ he said, and I don’t mind admitting, gentlemen, that I instinctively glanced round the room for a weapon of some sort. A guilty conscience makes cowards of us all, and for the first time a wild suspicion had entered my brain that somehow or other John Verriker had found out. But how? And, if so, could it be that the events of the morning had not been an accident?

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

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

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

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

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

“‘One day,’ continued the inexorable voice, ‘the man went to Rumania on business. He hurried through the business as quickly as possible, because he

wanted to get back to the wife he adored and go on a little holiday trip they had planned together. She was going to be in Naples—that was the original idea—and he was going to meet her there. And then she changed her mind and went off to stay with a girl friend in Florence—or so she wrote to the man. And the man believed her; why shouldn't he? Did he not find her in Florence on his return from Rumania? So they travelled together back to Naples from Florence, preparatory to starting on their little trip—this damned fool and his wife.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“‘Come and see,’ he said.

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

“There was the pool, seething and smoking, and in the centre of it—caught at the psychological moment—was the distorted, agonised face of Bill Trannock. It must have been taken from close range, literally as he died.

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

“But he only laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

“‘This morning?’ I said at length.

“He looked at me heavily.

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

The fair-haired man lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

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

He turned to the seccotine maniac.

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

The other nodded profoundly.

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

The ship’s doctor arose in his wrath.

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

IV. — A MATTER OF VOICE

“TALKING of lovely women,” remarked the actor, “the most perfect, the most adorable, the most divine one I ever met had one small defect. At least, most people, I suppose, would consider it a defect. She was a murderess. However, as Wilde said, the fact that a man is a poisoner has nothing to do with his prose. And in the case I’m thinking of it certainly had nothing to do with her charm.

“Of course I have no actual cast-iron proof. My evidence would be laughed to scorn in a court of law, if one could imagine haling that glorious being into such a dreadful place. Anyway, since it all took place over thirty years ago, and, to my everlasting regret, I read in the paper only a few mornings back that she was dead, the situation does not arise.

“It was before I came to London, and I was on tour with a Number One company. For a youngster I had quite a good part. It wasn’t a difficult one, but it was fairly long, and I was frightfully pleased at having got it. We were playing at one of the south coast watering places, when I saw her first—this divine creature. She was sitting in a box and a man was with her, and whenever I glanced in their direction her eyes were fixed on me.

“Now, at twenty-five, a very soothing and pleasant sensation enwraps one when a lovely woman favours one so obviously. And when the next night found her there again, and the night after—this time alone—yours truly began to expand visibly. Being tolerably well favoured by nature in the matter of a face I leapt, like the damned fool I was, to the obvious conclusion that this adorable being had fallen in love with me.

“The note was brought round to my dressing-room on the fourth night. To my disappointment she had not been in her usual box, but the note more than atoned. I found it lying on the table, and the man who was sharing with me started to pull my leg. However, I soon shut him up, and then found to my concealed annoyance that my hands were positively shaking with excitement. Of course he shouted with laughter, and after a while I started to laugh too.

“‘Adorable man,’ he jeered. ‘Overcome by the beauty of your face and the marvel of your histrionic ability.... Go on: open it. Probably the landlady’s daughter asking for an autograph!’

“‘Go to blazes,’ I cried, and sat down to read it.

“It was short, but it raised me into the seventh heaven of bliss.

“Dear Mr. Trayne, [it ran],

“You will probably think this note a little peculiar, coming, as it does, from a complete stranger. I have watched your show for the last three nights from one of the stage boxes, and, without wishing to flatter you in the slightest degree, there is no doubt that you stand out head and shoulders from the rest of the caste—good though they all of them are.

“To come to the object of this letter. I have a certain request to make of you which, I trust, you will see your way to granting. As it is much too long to write, will you come and lunch with me to-morrow, at one o’clock? I shall be alone, and, since you have no matinée, we can take our time. The address you will see above.

“Yours sincerely.

“Violet Berningham.

“P.S.—I don’t think you will find the granting of the request unpleasant, so that, unless I hear from you to the contrary, I shall expect you.”

“Well, with a letter like that from a woman like that, what would you do? It merely became a question of watching the hands of the clock go round, and swearing because they didn’t go faster. Of course, it could only mean one thing: she had fallen desperately in love with me. And did I blame her? No—perish the thought: far from it. It showed a very proper appreciation of a deuced fine specimen of manhood. And the only thing that worried me at all was whether she was married or not.

“I reached her hotel at one sharp, and as I walked in a man whose face was vaguely familiar passed me. And suddenly I realised that he was the man who had been with her the first two nights in the box. Moreover, though he only glanced at me quite casually in passing, I thought I read a certain cynical amusement in his eyes.

“I frowned a little angrily, and then I forgot all about him. She was coming towards me with the sweetest smile and hand outstretched.

“How nice of you to come,” she remarked, and I give you my word, I could only stand and stare at her like the village idiot.

“Seen from the stage she had been beautiful: from close she was ten times more so. Superlatives are always dangerous; but the loveliness of that woman deserves a double-dyed superlative. And everything about her was in keeping—clothes, hands, feet. As I say, I stood there goggling like a callow boy.

“I’ve ordered lunch in my private sitting-room,” she went on. “I loathe feeding with other people, don’t you? And when we’ve finished perhaps you can spare me half an hour or so?”

“I hastened to assure her that I could and would spare her the entire afternoon if she wanted it.

“I mustn’t monopolise you to that extent,” she laughed. “Or I shall have hundreds of irate girls after me.”

“And so we started lunch. Half-way through I was in love with her; when the coffee came I was in a condition of blithering imbecility. She was wearing a wedding ring, and once or twice I wondered if the man who had passed me in the hall was her husband. But there didn’t seem to be any male traces in the room, such as pipes or tobacco, and after a time I ceased to worry. As I say, I was beyond human hope when the meal came to an end.

“Tell me, Mr. Trayne,” she said, after I had obtained her permission to smoke, “when does your tour come to an end?”

“In two months,” I told her.

“And what will you be doing then?”

“I wish I could tell you, Mrs. Berningham,” laughed. “But I’m afraid the futures of touring actors are not mapped out as closely as that.”

“You’re not going to be a touring actor for long, my dear man,” she said. “But we’ll talk about that later. Two months, you say. That brings us to the end of September. Would you be free for the first few days of October?”

“Free as air,” I told her. “But to do what?”

“To act in a little sketch with me. Of course I’m only an amateur, and you’re outstanding. But—perhaps...’

“And then I completely lost my head. She was looking at me half sideways, with a faintly provocative smile, and the next thing I knew was that I was on my knees beside her chair and that she was in my arms.

“But—enough. Over that portion of the entertainment I will draw the veil of reticence; as your host I must consider your digestions. Sufficient to say, that the standard of her kissing was, if possible, higher than the standard of her looks.

“At last she pushed me away and pointed to a chair.

“Go and sit down, Mr. Man, and behave yourself,’ she ordered. ‘I want to discuss the play with you.’

“It appeared that she lived in Surrey; and that there was an urgent need of supplying a home for incurable dipsomaniacs, or lost cats, or something, in the village adjoining. That necessitated funds, and the idea was to get up a show. You know the sort of thing: depressing tableaux-vivants and a conjurer.

“Her notion was that the main item should be a small play in which she and I should play the principal parts. My notion was that anything which enabled me to see her as often as possible was good enough for me. I hardly listened, in fact, to her explanations as to the difficulty of finding young men in the neighbourhood who could act; and how she wanted the thing to be a great success. What I did listen to was when she began to tell me as to why she had asked me.

“Heavens above! What a man will swallow when he’s young and infatuated. But I will say one thing in defence of myself: she did it amazingly well. She was an absolute artist, and she would have taken in ninety-nine men out of a hundred. You see, there was no reason why my suspicions should have been aroused. Women have become infatuated with men before now, and they will undoubtedly do so again. And I merely regarded it as an astounding piece of luck on my part that the one who had honoured me was so marvellously attractive.

“And now I’ve told you far more than it’s good for you to know,’ she said at length. ‘I want you to talk to me. No! I don’t want you to make love to me;

you're to sit where you are and smoke a cigarette. Tell me about your plans for the future; tell me about yourself. Because I think that perhaps I may be a little mixed up in that future.... Don't you.... No, you're to sit down and be sensible. Just talk.... You know, I adore your voice.'

"And so I sat and talked. She was that rare specimen—the perfect listener. She knew exactly when to put in a remark, and when to keep silent; she knew how to make a man talk his best. And she could dream your dreams and see your visions, and colour each one for you a little more vividly."

For a moment or two the actor paused and stared at the fire.

"As I told you at the beginning," he continued quietly, "it all happened thirty years ago. And yet, old and cynical as I am now and realising as I do that I was a dupe and a catspaw all through, I still say that, with that woman beside him a man could have reached the topmost peak.

"However, I'll get on with it. I left her that afternoon walking on air. She was going to send the sketch to me so that I could learn my part before we started rehearsing in October. And it was only as I sat down to dinner in my lodgings that it dawned on me that she'd never even mentioned the question of her husband. I wondered if he was going to take any part in the play, and what sort of a fellow he was. I felt it couldn't be the man who had been with her at the theatre, and who had passed me as I entered the hotel. No one could have behaved with such cool equanimity if he had known that his wife was proposing to spend several hours alone with another man. Guessing, too, something of the truth: realising that she must be immensely attracted by that other man to do such a thing.

"No: it was impossible—out of the question. And yet—who was he? Was he another would-be lover whom I had beaten in the race, but who was man of the world enough to take it as he had? Did he perhaps think that I was just a passing infatuation that would die away as quickly as it had been born? Poor fool! Poor, silly fool! Though I took off my hat to him for his sportsmanship. To lose such a prize and keep a stiff upper lip was a bit of a strain on a man.

"She wasn't in the theatre that night, and after the show was over I went for a stroll along the front. It was a glorious night—warm and delightful—and after a while I sat down on the beach with my back against the wall of the esplanade.

The band had long since finished, though a few couples still sat about. But it was late and most people had gone to bed, which was just what I wanted.

“I felt I had to be alone to dream over that wonderful afternoon. I was still in a completely dazed condition, and the thought of bed was an impossibility. So I sat on, seeing the most wonderful visions of the future. Only to come back to earth suddenly with a wild feeling of joy. From just above me had come her voice. And I was on the point of dashing up the steps towards her, when I realised that she couldn’t be alone.

“The faint smell of a cigar was in the air—so her companion was a man. I heard his voice vaguely, and began to see red on the spot. They were just above me, leaning over the railings, and I, sitting in the darkness below, was invisible. But I could see the glow of his cigar not six feet above me: I could see the outline of her head against the sky. Who was it; who was this cursed fellow who dared to poach on my preserves? The man she had been with at the theatre? And once again I very nearly darted up the steps.

“But I didn’t, and sometimes now I’m sorry I didn’t. For if I had gone up those steps I shouldn’t have heard the remark she made to him just before they both moved away. And I shouldn’t have had my little bit of evidence which would have been laughed to scorn in a court of law. It might have made me happier; I don’t know. Anyway, I sat on there in the darkness and I heard the remark.

“‘Mon ami, it is getting a little chilly; let us go in. Of course the whole thing is a matter of careful arrangement, but on the one main point you may set your mind absolutely at rest. The similarity is simply incredible; more marked even in a room than on the stage. I tell you that I myself would not be able to tell the difference if my eyes were shut.’

“Then they moved away, and after a time I, too, got up to go. And as might be expected, the part of the remark which boiled and seethed in my mind consisted of four short words. ‘Let us go in!’ It implied—— Heavens! What didn’t it imply? Or was it just a conventional phrase?

“As for the rest of the remark, though I’d heard and noted every word subconsciously, it made no impression on me whatever. To me the one main point was, ‘let us go in.’ I couldn’t get beyond that. And it was still the one main point when the tour ceased at Bristol at the end of September.

“During the whole of those two months I never saw her, and I only heard from her once. It was a short line, written from her club in London, to say she had found what she thought was a suitable sketch and that she would send it along in due course. And in the meantime I was to keep my head turned towards the dazzling goal—my own theatre in London.

“So I wrote back five pages of the most passionate adoration, and received in return—the sketch. And I confess that after I’d read the thing through I felt rather as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over me. I had expected something a little powerful: something with some drama in it: something where she and I could let ourselves go.

“Instead of that, I waded through twenty pages of the most drivelling piffle I’ve ever set eyes on. I am thankful to say that I have completely forgotten its name and that of the human horror who wrote it. But I do remember that the part I had to play was that of a curate who had an impediment in his speech.

“And then, at Bristol, I got another letter from her which made it all clear. I felt a fool for not having understood before.

“‘I know it’s the most ghastly rot,’ she wrote, ‘but you wouldn’t believe the difficulties of an audience like we shall have for an amateur show. One damn, and the whole house would file out. I’ve read hundreds of the beastly things, and though you won’t believe it there are many even worse than the one I chose. Never mind ... There are other things to do besides act—at any rate, act on the stage. N’est-ce pas, mon ami?’

“‘And now a word of warning. You will of course stay with us, and you must know that my husband is a great recluse. He had a very terrible accident a few years ago which deprived him of his sight. It also disfigured him, and he is morbidly sensitive about his appearance. So don’t be surprised if his manner is a little strange.

“‘Come by the nine o’clock train, and the brougham shall meet you at the station. I can’t ask you down earlier because I shall be out all day. I’m terribly busy organising everything—but it’s not the show I’m thinking of so much as ... Well, I’ll tell you that later.’

“As I say, it made everything clear. With a provincial village audience it was undoubtedly exactly the type of drivel to go down. The letter also cleared up

another point: the man who had been with her in the theatre was evidently not her husband. And it was just as I was once again cogitating as to who he was that I noticed a postscript.

“By the way, my dear, I have had to do one thing which I know you will understand. It would be absolutely suicidal in this neighbourhood if it came out that I had met you before. Everyone would immediately leap to the worst conclusions. Even my husband might wonder, and we certainly don’t want that, do we? So I have given it out that an agency in London is going to procure a suitable actor to the part, and that I don’t even know his name. We must meet apparently as strangers.’

“By George!” laughed the Actor, “as I look back now I become increasingly staggered. Age cannot wither the wondrous and simple beauty of that plot in all its cold-blooded unscrupulousness. It was a work of art, and as such it must be judged. I cannot see one detail that was neglected, or one unnecessary risk that was run. It was a cast-iron certainty from the moment the tapes went up.

“However—to get on with it. I left London by the nine o’clock train, and arrived at my destination about ten. And as I got out on to the platform a man brushed past me who was evidently going on by my train. Just for a moment the light of the solitary lamp fell on his face, and I recognised him at once. The same man again—confound the fellow! I couldn’t get away from him. Moreover, he had evidently come down in the brougham, for the inside smelt strongly of smoke.

“However, I soon forgot him: was I not going to see my divinity again in a few minutes—hold her in my arms? The horses seemed to crawl: my hands were clammy: you know—all the usual symptoms. And then when I saw her I very nearly forgot the postscript instruction.

“She came across the hall towards me dressed in some grey gauzy stuff, and she was more wonderful than ever. And I gave a step forward—an uncontrollable step—before I remembered that we had never met before.

“‘Mr. Trayne, I believe,’ she said, and held out her hand. ‘It is very good of you to come and help us.’

“‘Not at all,’ I murmured.

“But as the cause is very deserving perhaps you will overlook our defects,’ she went on with a smile. ‘Now would you like to see your room or shall we have a rehearsal at once?’

“She’d turned so that her back was towards the butler, and she gave me the suspicion of a wink. So you can be pretty certain which of the alternatives I chose.

“All right: I hope I’m word perfect,’ she said. ‘Take Mr. Trayne’s things up to his room, Wilson, and see that we are not disturbed for the next half-hour or so. Don’t forget, Mr. Trayne, that you must be merciful.... I’m only a beginner....’

“She was leading the way across the hall as she spoke.

“Let’s come in here.’ She opened the door, and I followed her into a largish room. It was half smoking-room, half library, and at the opposite end was an opening in the wall across which stretched some heavy black curtains.

“We shan’t be disturbed in here.’

“She’d shut the door behind her, and with it she’d shut out pretence. The change in her voice—I can hear it now.

“We shan’t be disturbed in here.’

“Oh! my darling,’ she said. ‘Kiss me—kiss me—and go on kissing me. Dinner to-night was an ordeal: I thought I’d never get through it—waiting for this. These last two months have been too terrible.’

“Well, I kissed her—and kissed her—and went on kissing her, and there is no gainsaying the fact that an onlooker during the next ten minutes or so would have had his money’s worth. Robert—whom I gathered was the blind husband—had gone to bed: Wilson had received orders that we were not to be disturbed, and things undoubtedly hummed.

“And then a little abruptly—I can distinctly remember a slight feeling of surprise at the abruptness—she stood up. She had been sitting in a chair facing the black curtains—I thought of that afterwards—and she suddenly pushed away my arms.

“‘Adorable man,’ she said, ‘I’ve just thought of something. It’s a little surprise for you. I’ll be back in a minute or two.’

“And the next moment she had left the room.

“I don’t know how long it was before I noticed it,” continued the Actor after a little pause—“that motionless bulge in the curtains. At first I paid no attention to it, and then the hair began to prick at the back of my scalp. For it seemed to me that the curtains had shaken slightly. It was close to one end, that bulge, and it was of the size and shape that would be made by a man.

“I suppose a man of action would have done something: though what was to be done God knows. All that I did was to sit in my chair and sweat, with my tongue bone dry and the glass in my hand shaking so uncontrollably that the whisky was spilling all over the carpet. For I realised instinctively what had happened. Robert had not gone to bed: we were caught.

“And then I heard a funny noise: it was myself trying to scream. For a hand had appeared from behind the curtain: a hand that groped along the wall. It was tanned and sinewy, and again I heard that funny noise. For I couldn’t move: I sat there petrified with horror, even though I knew what that hand was groping for. It was the switch, and, at last, it found what it sought. And the next instant the room was in darkness.

“It’s a confession of weakness, I suppose, but I’ve hated real darkness ever since. And the darkness in that room was the most intense thing I’ve ever known. There wasn’t a glimmer of light: just utter blackness that pressed in on one almost as if it was tangible. And still I sat there incapable of movement.

“The glass had fallen out of my nerveless fingers, and I could feel the liquid soaking through my sock and into my shoe. And it was the physical sensation of wetness that restored some semblance of activity to my brain. Somehow or other I must get to the door—save myself and warn the girl.

“So I made a desperate effort and lurched to my feet. Then I gave a dive in the direction, as I thought, of the door. And out of the darkness there came a low laugh. I blundered on: took a table with a crash, spun round and was lost.. All sense of direction was gone: I was just staggering round blindly in that inky darkness.

“Once again he laughed, and this time there was a note of triumph in his voice. I stood stock still: a new and hideous thought had suddenly occurred to me. The husband was blind: the darkness was no handicap to him. So that my only hope lay in making no sound. If I could get to the wall, and then creep along it, sooner or later I must reach the door. I took a step back, and another and another, feeling behind me the whole time as I moved. Suddenly my hand encountered a table, and I tried desperately to visualise the room. Where had the tables been: how many were there? And I couldn’t remember a darned thing.

“I ran my fingers along it trying to find the end, and at that moment I heard his breathing quite distinctly. He was close to me, and a wild, unreasoning panic seized me. I lurched back, knocked over the table, and felt a hand like a steel bar get me by the throat.

“‘Proof at last, you vile swine,’ came in a voice that was half snarl, half shout of triumph. ‘And I’m going to kill you.’

“I tried to scream, but his other hand was over my mouth. I tried to struggle: I was utterly powerless in his grasp. A strong man might have made some sort of a show, but I lay no claim to physical strength. And in that man’s hands I felt like a baby.

“I don’t know how long we fought: everything is a bit confused. I know that I heard his wild laughter through the roaring in my head, for an eternity, so it seemed to me, before the light went on. Violet was standing by the black curtains with a revolver in her hand. And even as I saw her her husband shifted one hand from my throat, whipped a long stiletto out of his pocket, and drove it with all his force into my chest.

“His grip relaxed, and I sank down. And in the last few moments before everything became blank, I heard scream after scream and the shot of a revolver. Then—oblivion.”

The Actor paused and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

“Now had the knife been the eighth of an inch more to the right I should not be telling you this story to-night. The double funeral of Robert and your humble servant would have taken place simultaneously. Honestly I think that in many ways she quite liked me, and that she was glad the wound was not fatal. But

from the point of view of the perfect work of art—which I maintain her plot was—the fact that I didn’t die constituted the one flaw.

“I gather it was some four days before I regained consciousness to find myself in a nursing home. A doctor was standing at the foot of the bed, and seated in the window was my adored woman.

“‘Splendid,’ said the doctor. ‘Don’t move: lie quite still, Mr. Trayne. How are you feeling?’

“‘Violet, her dear face terribly strained, had risen and was standing beside him.

“‘All right, thanks,’ I said. ‘A bit tied up round the chest, that’s all.’

“‘You’re thoroughly tied up round the chest,’ he laughed. ‘And you’ve had about the closest shave of death I’ve ever known. Now, Mrs. Berningham, I will give you just five minutes with him. Please see he doesn’t move.’

“‘My dear,’ she said brokenly after he had gone, ‘if you had died.’

“‘But I didn’t, sweetheart,’ I answered. ‘And I’m not going to. Tell me what happened.’

“‘He rushed at me,’ she whispered, ‘and I shot him through the heart. He’s dead.’

“‘Good God!’ I muttered. ‘But what do people say?’

“‘I had to make up my mind on the spur of the moment,’ she answered. ‘The servants came rushing in, and I had to say something. And so I said he’d suddenly gone mad: that we’d been rehearsing the play, and that he had dashed out and attacked you. Then I rushed into his room and got his revolver. And when I saw him stab you and then spring at me I fired.’

“‘But do they believe it?’ I cried.

“‘Yes, dear, yes. Everybody believes it: why shouldn’t they? He’s always been moody and morose, and just lately he’s been worse. And nobody knows that we’ve ever met before. There we were rehearsing that silly play, and he suddenly tries to kill us both. They’ve found a verdict that he was a homicidal maniac. You see—I couldn’t tell the truth, could I?’

“And then the doctor came back and announced that time was up, so that I hadn’t time to warn her about the man whom I had seen at the station. He knew we’d met before. And she didn’t come alone again: though she found a chance of whispering that it wasn’t that she didn’t want to. And then she went abroad: her nerves had given way.

“It was all rather beautiful, wasn’t it? To the world at large it was merely a shocking tragedy in which a man had suddenly gone mad. It was cynically remarked by a few people who knew the play that such a thing was only to be expected: but to attempt to murder a complete stranger and your wife is a somewhat drastic way of showing your disapproval.

“To me it was merely the eternal triangle in which, if the man had indeed gone mad, it was not to be wondered at. But it would have been her life or his, and anyway my lips were sealed. And it wasn’t until two years later that I began to wonder, and finally ceased wondering and, in my own mind, knew.

“At first my assumption had been that, after a decent interval, she would marry me. And I’ll say this for her: she disabused my mind of the notion very sweetly and gradually. It wasn’t that she wasn’t fond of me, but that the whole thing had been so terrible that she wanted to try and obliterate it from her life. And if I was with her.... Perhaps, in years to come we could meet again—when things might be different.... But now she couldn’t bear it....

“And so on, and so forth. I swallowed it whole until one night when a man came round to see me. I’d got to London then, and he came in after the show.

“‘Have you ever met Lord Raynor?’ he asked after we’d talked for a bit.

“‘Not that I’m aware of,’ I said.

“‘I met him out in Rapallo a few weeks ago. I couldn’t think what it was at the time that puzzled me, but I’ve got it now. It’s your two voices. Every note, every inflection is exactly the same. I mean it’s positively staggering. And you’re not a bit alike to look at. As a matter of fact I’ve got a snapshot of him.’

“He handed it over, and dimly out of the distance I realised he was still talking. For in the group was Violet, and Lord Raynor was the man who had been with her in the box and who had passed me on the platform.

“I got rid of him somehow after a while and sat there thinking.

“The similarity is simply incredible.... I tell you that I myself would not be able to tell the difference if my eyes were shut....’

“By Gad! you fellows, when the damning truth first came home to me it shook my world. I got over it in time, as one gets over everything. But just at first I nearly went off my head.

“Everything from start to finish had been part of a carefully thought-out plot. Raynor was her lover: had always been her lover. And the blind husband stood in the way. Probably he suspected. ‘Proof at last,’ he’d said to me. Raynor had been dining there, and at the last crucial moment she substituted me.

“That poor devil when he attacked me was attacking a voice: the voice of the man he hated. She knew he was behind that curtain the whole time, and it was when she saw the curtain shake that she left the room. She knew he’d try to kill me: she hoped he’d succeed. And what greater proof of homicidal mania could be had. To kill an utter stranger for no apparent reason....

“So she got her husband’s money, and she got her lover—she married him a few months later—and the sole item on the debit side to be one dead mummer.

“Gorgeous, wasn’t it.... Except for the mummer.

“For all that she was the most adorable woman I’ve ever known.”

V. — A NATIVE SUPERSTITION

BIG JIM SEFTON pulled himself together as his horse shied violently across the track.

“Steady, old gal,” he muttered. “It’s a broken branch, not a snake.”

The mare, still eyeing the thing that had alarmed her, sidled warily forward, and big Jim relapsed once more into his reverie. His face, tanned to a dark mahogany, was set and a little stern: his eyes—vivid blue eyes they were, contrasting strangely with the colour of his skin—were surrounded by a network of little wrinkles that proclaimed the dweller in the open of harsh lights. And just now the look in them showed that their owner’s thoughts were many miles away.

Twenty—to be exact: twenty straight ahead, at the destination to which he was riding. The burning midday sun beat down on him from a cloudless blue sky: he didn’t notice it. Big Jim had sojourned under that same scorching heat for too many years now for it to worry him. Splashes of brilliant colour in the trees that flanked the track, which would have called forth the excited admiration of most people, never even caused him to turn his head. The sight of an English rose garden would have appealed to him more than all the tropical flowers in the world. He had seen them all too often: he was sick of them with a deadly nausea. To him they were typical of the soul of the country: lovely, gaudy, and—meretricious.

“It’s rotten,” he suddenly said aloud. “Rotten. And why the devil I stay here, God alone knows.”

And then he laughed shortly: it was not the first time he had delivered himself of the same sentiment, and he was still there.

The laugh died away on his lips: once again his thoughts had gone back to the bungalow twenty miles ahead. How were the two people there faring in this land of harshness and crude contrasts? Two more unsuitable settlers it would have been hard to imagine—especially the man. And yet it was possible they had made good: in the course of his life big Jim had seen some amazingly square pegs fitting into the roundest of holes with apparent success.

It wasn’t that Jack Fairbrace was a weakling—far from it. He was a good shot, and a first-class player of ball games. But he was essentially orthodox: he was

part and parcel of the club life and social amenities of England. And big Jim couldn't picture him in Africa.

Enid—his wife—was different, but then a woman is always more adaptable than a man. He recalled that night at Henley four years ago when he had painted for her a description of the land he had made his own. Painted the glamour of it, and the beauty, the passion of it and the appeal. And he'd believed it—then: he invariably did when he was away, which was why he always came back. And she had listened with her lips parted and her head a little thrown back.

"Sorry, old gal," he said gruffly, as the mare fidgeted under a hand grown suddenly powerful. "For the moment I thought of other things."

For it had been on the lap of the Gods that night. The nearness of her and the scent she used had gone to his head. He could still hear the gentle lap of the water against the punt as they drifted lazily along; the faint strains of the band playing at Phyllis Court still rang in his head. And suddenly he had taken her in his arms and kissed her.

For a moment or two she had lain up against him, her lips on his. Then, very gently, she had pushed him away.

"Jim," she had said quietly, "I ought to have told you I'm engaged. It isn't given out yet, and that's why I'm not wearing a ring."

"I see," said big Jim, and lit a cigarette with a hand that shook a little. "I'm sorry; I didn't know."

And because of a certain strict notion of honour he had gone away the next day. And she had let him go. He had said nothing more, though the Fates that govern these things alone know what would have been the result if he had. He knew that he loved her—at least he'd loved her that night; and she—well, she had wondered and waited and finally married Jack Fairbrace. Which has happened before in this world, and is likely to happen again. Moreover, she was happy with him, for Jack was a good soul and a white man. And if sometimes she thought of a big bronzed man with vivid blue eyes, and wondered where he was and what he was doing, she kept those thoughts to herself. Once or twice she had seen him before he went back to Africa, but always when other people

were present. The mere fact that she had taken care that they were, may perhaps serve as a pointer.

And then one day Jim Sefton—having just finished a fifteen months' trek in the back of beyond up Tanganyika way—arrived in Johannesburg. It was his permanent postal address, and amongst the mail that had been collecting for him he found a letter from Enid Fairbrace. It was nearly a year old and it ran as follows:

My dear Jim,

By the time you get this—unless you're in Johannesburg at the moment—we shall be out in Africa ourselves. A bit of a surprise, isn't it, and I can still hardly believe that we're really going. But things are altering so in England, and servants are so difficult, and all one's money goes on merely living.

At any rate, we're going to try something new. Do you remember that time you told me about the country, and how wonderful it was? We've bought a farm, more or less in partnership with another man. And we're coming out to make our fortunes. So mind you come and see us if ever you happen to be in our locality. I know it's rather like asking a man who has been in India whether he knew your cousin, but however much out of the way it is you must make a point of coming to see us—if only to tell us where we are making mistakes. Come whenever you like; don't bother to write.

Yours very sincerely,

Enid Fairbrace.

He hadn't written; he had taken her at her word. It was so long now since her letter had come that he had decided it would be better to do so. In addition, he wasn't sure exactly when he would be able to get to the address she had given: he had one or two other things to do first. And now, those things finished, he was on his way to renew a friendship which might so easily have become something else.

It was over two years now since he had seen Enid Fairbrace, and he was conscious of a certain curious excitement at the prospect of meeting her again. He told himself that no trace of his old feeling for her remained: that he was merely going to see the wife of a man to whom he had taken quite a liking in England. But the curious excitement refused to vanish at this logical and cold-

blooded presentation of the case, and after a while, with a little shrug of his broad shoulders, Jim Sefton admitted the truth to himself. He was in love with another man's wife: he always had been in love with her, and he'd been a silly quixotic fool to let her go without a struggle.

He glanced at the sun and realised the time was about three o'clock.

"Another three miles," he muttered to himself, and broke into a jog-trot. The track was clearly defined, and with the directions given him by the man at the railway station thirty miles back, from whom he had hired his horse, it presented no difficulties to a man like Jim Sefton. To a townsman it would probably have seemed impenetrable jungle bush: to Sefton's practised eye the route was as clearly marked as if there had been signposts.

"There's the drift, old gal," he said as the horse splashed through the shallow water. "Only another two miles to go."

And then he pulled up: a white man, with a gun under his arm, had suddenly appeared in a clearing in front of him.

"Good afternoon," said Jim Sefton. "I'm right, ain't I, for the Fairbraces' house?"

"Straight as you can go," answered the stranger, staring at him intently. "Are you a doctor by any chance?"

"I am not," said Sefton. "Why? Anybody ill?"

"Fairbrace is pretty seedy," answered the other man. "I'm Granger—his partner. Live with them."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Sefton. "Malaria?"

"Personally I think he's got a bad dose of tampane fever," said Granger. "High temperature; all the usual symptoms."

"How is Mrs. Fairbrace?" said Sefton after a pause, and once again the other man eyed him intently.

"Very fit," he answered after a little pause. "A little uneasy, naturally, about her husband. You know them, I suppose?"

“Quite well,” said Sefton. “In fact I was on my way to answer in person a year-old invitation of hers to look them up. I’ve been up Tanganyika way, and found the letter waiting for me two or three weeks ago in Jo’burg. Sefton is my name.”

The other man nodded.

“I rather guessed you were. Heard them mention you often.”

“How are they getting on?” asked Sefton. “Have you got a good show here?”

“Quite,” said Granger briefly. “We want the railway, of course. But there’s always a catch somewhere. However, you’ll see for yourself. The house is on some high ground about a mile and a half ahead. And look out for snakes: there are a lot of mambas about.”

“Thanks; I will,” answered the other. “See you later, I take it.”

With a nod he trotted on, and then, just before he got to a turn in the track, something impelled him to look back. Granger was still standing motionless staring after him, though the instant Sefton looked round he turned and vanished into the bush. And a slight frown showed for an instant on big Jim’s forehead. Doubtless it was quite unreasonable, but he was conscious of a distinct feeling of dislike for Jack Fairbrace’s partner.

The frown deepened as he rode on. He had come now to stretches of cultivated land, which he knew must belong to the people he was going to see. And though he kept a wary eye skinned for that most deadly of all snakes—the black mamba—subconsciously he took in the condition of the ground through which he was riding.

Jim Sefton was not a farmer himself, but few men in Africa had a sounder knowledge of the game. And it was soon obvious to him that this was very far from being a good show. The part he was going through was under cotton, and he could tell at a glance that the crop was poor and the weeds plentiful. In the distance there were some tired-looking orange trees chiefly remarkable for the complete absence of fruit. In fact everything showed unmistakable signs of neglect and laziness.

“Something very wrong,” he reflected. “I’m glad I came.”

Suddenly in the distance he saw the house, and his mare, as if sensing the end of the journey, quickened her pace. And five minutes later he was shaking hands with Enid Fairbrace whilst a boy took his horse away to the outhouse that served as a stable.

“Jim!” she cried, “but I’m glad to see you.”

He smiled gravely, and studied her with his keen blue eyes.

“You’re looking well, Enid,” he said at length. “Awfully well. A bit worried, but I suppose that’s due to Jack’s fever.”

“How did you know anything about that?” she asked in surprise.

“I met your partner, Granger, down by the drift,” he answered, and if he noticed the sudden shadow that passed over her face he said nothing. “I’m sorry he’s so seedy. Granger said something about tampane fever.”

“He’s got this beastly temperature which he can’t shake off,” she said, leading the way into the house. “I don’t think it is anything serious, but it makes the poor old boy so weak and irritable. Come and see him.”

He followed her into her husband’s bedroom, and the sick man sat up with a smile when he saw him.

“Hallo, Jim!” he cried. “Where the deuce have you sprung from?”

Jim Sefton sat down on the bed and laughed.

“Out of the blue, as usual, old man,” he answered. “Only got Enid’s letter three weeks ago. This is a bad affair, though, finding you down with fever. How did you get it?”

“Out shooting the other day with Bill,” said Fairbrace irritably. “That’s Granger—my partner. Or, to be correct, I should say I’m his. This place belonged to him originally, and he supplies all the farming knowledge.”

“He does, does he?” remarked Jim Sefton. “And what do you supply—the capital?”

“Well, naturally I’ve put in a bit of cash,” answered the other. “And, by Jove! it’s a pretty expensive game. Still, as Bill says—you’ve got to put money in if you want to get money out.”

Jim Sefton grunted and did not pursue the topic. He took a glance at the marks on the sick man’s neck, and felt no doubt in his own mind that Granger’s diagnosis was right, and that tampane fever was the trouble. He told them so, which reassured Enid considerably, and then, having talked for a time to the invalid, he followed her into the hall for tea. And the first thing that struck him was the difference between the inside of the farm and what lay outside. There were no evidences here of the laziness and neglect which had been so obvious as he had ridden up: everything was cosy and comfortable—English chintzes, big easy chairs, flowers prettily arranged—and with a sigh of satisfaction he took the cup she handed him.

“You’ve made it charming, Enid,” he said. “Perfectly charming. Jack and his partner are two singularly fortunate individuals.”

And as he spoke there came the sound of a shot. It was fairly close to, and instinctively Jim Sefton sat up in his chair.

“It’s probably Mr. Granger,” said Enid. “He’s always shooting something.”

“It sounded pretty near,” said Sefton. “Not more than a couple of hundred yards away.”

“I expect it’s a snake,” she answered indifferently. “There are a lot near here.”

They looked round as a step came on the stoep outside, and the next moment Granger entered.

“Got a mamba,” he cried. “A big one. Care to see it, Enid? I’ve got it outside.”

She gave a little shudder.

“Well, please keep it there. Do you want some tea, Mr. Granger?”

He took the cup she handed him and sat down.

“I’ve really brought it up to show Jack,” he remarked. “Would you believe it, Sefton, but he’s never seen one all the time he’s been out here.”

Jim Sefton grunted his surprise and went on with his tea. At the moment he was more interested in the fact that Granger called his partner's wife Enid, and she, very pointedly, did not call him Bill. And during the next half-hour or so his interest did not wane. Not much ever escaped those keen eyes of his, and in this case the signs were plain to read. Granger was in love with Enid Fairbrace, and she was fully aware of the fact. Equally plain was the other side of the case, that she was not in love with Granger.

There was nothing novel in the situation, and once or twice a cynical smile twitched round his lips. When two men and a singularly attractive woman live together in the back of beyond, something of the sort is likely to occur. And the only variation that is of interest is the end, which in primitive places is frequently in keeping with its surroundings.

It was typical of the man that he should come straight to the point when he found himself alone with Enid that evening before dinner. They were strolling round the little garden she had made near the house, and suddenly he paused and waved his stick comprehensively round the ground that lay beneath them.

"What's the idea, Enid?" he remarked. "I suppose you know you're just throwing money away, going on as you are at present?"

She changed colour a little as she stared at him.

"What do you mean, Jim?" she demanded.

"My dear," he said gravely, "the work on your farm is rotten. I haven't examined it closely: I don't know whether you've got a good proposition here, granted it is worked efficiently, or not. But what I do know is that, worked as it is at present, you'll never make a penny."

"But Mr. Granger said it was going so well," she stammered.

"Then Mr. Granger is a damned liar," returned Jim Sefton. "You don't like him, do you, Enid?"

It was more of a statement than a question.

"No, I don't," she answered quietly. "I positively dislike him. But I thought he knew all about farming, and that's why——"

"You go on living in the same house with a man who is in love with you."

He lit a cigarette, and looked at her with a faint smile.

"You're pretty quick, Jim," she said.

"My dear," he answered, "I'm in love with you myself. I know it now: I've been in love with you all along. Like a fool, I let you go at the beginning, and now it's too late."

"Yes," she said very steadily, "it's too late now, Jim."

"Then it wouldn't have been too late if I'd told you before, if I..." For the life of him he couldn't help the tremble in his voice.

"No, my dear," she told him in a low voice. "It wouldn't have been too late. But I thought it was just a summer evening's madness."

For a while they stood side by side in silence; then big Jim squared his shoulders.

"We can all make pretty average fools of ourselves," he said abruptly. "And I'm certainly no exception to the rule. I guess I'll have to be moving on, Enid: to stop on here is going to be a bit beyond my powers. But before I go I'd like to try and straighten up this little show of yours. There's no earthly good you two going on as you are at present."

"But what are we going to do, Jim? Jack and Mr. Granger drew up a sort of deed of partnership. You see, the land belonged originally to Mr. Granger, and the idea was that Jack's money should be used for its development."

"And a very excellent idea indeed," answered Jim dryly, "if it was being properly developed. As it is, Granger is not doing his side of the bargain. What has been done with the money, I don't know. If it has been put into the land, then Granger is hopelessly inefficient: if it hasn't, he's a scoundrel. Either way he cuts no ice, and the sooner he's told so the better. My dear," he went on after a while, "I know the brand. I've met 'em before. They generally drink too much, and they're incapable of putting their backs into an honest job of work. In this case the specimen has fallen into very pleasant quarters. He is supplied with money by Jack; he has the most charming and delightful home; and he is in

love with you. And it's the last item"—his mouth tightened a little—"that gets my goat particularly."

"I hate him," said Enid under her breath. "It's the way he looks at me sometimes. Oh! Jim—if only we could get rid of him—buy him out or something—and you could come and help us."

It was out before she realised what she'd said, and Jim Sefton gave a short laugh.

"Do you think that would help, Enid?" he answered. "What about the last item?"

"I wasn't thinking, Jim," she whispered. "Forget it."

"Impossible," he smiled. "But we'll rule it out as a method of settlement."

"Anyway, you'll stop till Jack gets better, won't you, Jim?"

"Yes; I'll stop till Jack gets better. In fact, this matter can't be fixed up until he does get better. He's got to do the talking, and if he attempted to do it now it would only send his temperature up and make him worse. But I'll be here to back him up: I promise you that."

For a moment or two he stared at the sun as it sank lower and lower in the west. Then he turned to the woman at his side.

"My God! Enid—what fools we are at times; what cursed fools! You're very fond of Jack, I know: but there's something else I know too. And it was my fault, all my stupid blundering fault."

"No, dear," she answered quietly, "it wasn't. It was just one of those things that happen—why or how, one doesn't quite know when one looks back. And the only thing that is left is to play the game."

Big Jim Sefton nodded, and held out his hand.

"Right you are, partner," he said. "It's a bargain: we'll play the game."

And inside the house at that moment, whilst Jack Fairbrace tossed and muttered feverishly in his bed, his partner, with a three-finger sun-downer in his hand, was perfecting the last details of his particular game.

The sudden arrival of Jim Sefton on the scene was an undoubted nuisance. He looked the type of uncompromising individual to whom explanations might prove difficult. For even as Sefton had recognised the type to which Granger belonged, so had Granger placed the new-comer with equal accuracy. And big Jim belonged to the type that the Grangers of this world most fear and dislike: the type that is straight as a die and yet on occasions will take the law into its own hands and administer it in a fashion distinctly illegal.

That he was bound to spot that all was not well with the farm, Granger knew. The marvel was that he had been able to keep it from the Fairbraces for as long as he had. But on that point he didn't feel much concern: sooner or later it would have been bound to come out. He would have preferred to have postponed it a little, until the other thing had been settled; and even now it was quite on the cards that nothing would be said until Jack got over his fever.

With a hand that suddenly shook uncontrollably Granger poured himself out another stiff drink. Until he got over his fever....

It started another train of thought in his mind: the old, old train that had never been long absent ever since Enid Fairbrace had first come into his life. At first it had been vague and transitory; and then after a while it had become fixed and ugly. Once or twice he had recoiled from it—not because of some sudden interlude of decent feeling, but merely because it frightened him. Granger had a very wholesome respect for his own skin, and he was fully aware of what happened to those who broke the sixth commandment. And even if the thing could be done so that legally there was no proof against him, that would not be sufficient for his purpose. No trace of suspicion must arise in Enid's mind that he had anything to do with it.

It had been difficult: a hundred different schemes for the removal of what he fondly believed to be the obstacle to his own happiness had suggested themselves, only to be rejected one by one. A shooting accident had held pride of place for some time, but that had at length gone the way of the others. It was true it could be staged in such a way as to make his own neck safe, but what would Enid say? To kill a man accidentally is not the surest way of gaining the widow's affection....

And so it had gone the way of the others, and he had hung on, wondering and plotting, and never getting any nearer the mark until that very afternoon, when, in a flash, the master idea had come. He wondered if it was always the same: if the obvious, the only, plan invariably came suddenly like that. It was so simple, so sure. If not to-night, nor to-morrow night—then the night after. Or the one after that. He could afford to wait a few days now: he who had already waited a year.

He rose to his feet as the sound of steps outside announced the return of the others. So engrossed had he been in his scheme that he had almost forgotten Jim Sefton, and he scowled as he heard his deep laugh on the stoep. And then the scowl was replaced by a look of triumph; the second sundowner was beginning to take effect. All the more kudos to him for pulling off his plan right under the damned fellow's nose; he wasn't afraid of a dozen Seftons. His scheme was safe; absolutely and completely safe.

Throughout dinner he dominated the conversation, and the level of the whisky in the decanter fell rapidly. He could talk well when he chose to, and if the other two were a little silent he attributed it to his own brilliance. No reference was made to the farm, and after a while he began to wonder if his fears as to Sefton's powers of observation had not been groundless. So much the better; anyway it didn't much matter.

The meal concluded, he made some excuse and went out of doors. Sefton had declined his perfunctory suggestion that he should join him in a stroll, and stretched out in an armchair was watching Enid through the smoke of his cigarette. His opinion of Granger had been confirmed by what he had seen: he talked too much and he drank too much, which is a bad mixture in anyone, but fatal in a man whose job is the land.

And then he dismissed Granger from his mind. Enid was there in front of him, and thoughts were not included in playing the game. Yes: he'd been a fool—a silly quixotic fool. Or had it been, as Enid said, just one of those things that happen, one knows not why nor how?

Just once or twice their eyes met and held, and then with a sigh he rose and stretched his big frame.

"I'll go and look up the invalid," he said, "and after that I think I'll turn in pretty early."

She was doing some needlework, and just for a moment he laid his hand on her shoulder as he passed. She gave a little quiver, and his grip tightened. Then he went on into Jack's room.

For a while he stood looking down at the sick man. The fever had come back, and he was hot and restless. Outside the tree beetles kept up their everlasting chorus, and from the far distance came once the coughing grunt of a lion.

He sat down by the bed, and pulled out his cigarette case. There was nothing to be done for Jack Fairbrace: only time would cure him. But unbidden, thrust out as soon as it was there, the thought came into his mind. Supposing he didn't pull through; supposing...

He shut his case with an angry snap, and a cigarette rolled out on the floor. And then things happened rapidly. At one moment he was leaning forward to pick up his cigarette: the next he was at the other side of the room with every vestige of colour out of his face. For in stooping down he had looked under the bed.

And now, silent as a cat, he again stooped down and stared. For perhaps half a minute he remained motionless: then step by step, with a puzzled frown on his face, he approached the man who still tossed and turned and muttered. He took a candle off the table and put it on the floor in order to see better, and when at length he rose to his feet his face looked as if it had been carved out of granite. For temptation—fierce, bitter temptation—had come to Jim Sefton. And it lasted—but what matter how long it lasted? Time is not the essence of the thing that put big Jim on the rack and left him sweating.

Gradually his face relaxed a little, and he shook himself like a dog. The fight was over: it almost made him laugh to think that it had ever taken place. He walked to the door and glanced out: Enid's head was still bent over her work. Then he returned to the bed, and stooping down he pulled out the thing that lay underneath. Concealing it as well as he could with his coat he crossed the hall behind Enid's back and entered Granger's room. And the next moment there lay under Granger's bed that which had caused Jim Sefton such a shock.

He re-entered the hall, and sat down opposite Enid. His expression was normal again, the hand that held his cigarette as steady as a rock. And after a while—it was just as his keen ear caught the sound of a footstep outside—he spoke.

"I shall probably sit up latish with Granger to-night, my dear. But don't you wait up."

She looked up at him quickly: there was a strange new note in his voice.

"What is it, Jim? Why do you speak like that?"

But he only shook his head with a grave smile.

"Don't worry your head about anything. Just a native superstition: that's all. Go and sit with Jack for a bit, and then go to bed."

And as Granger opened the front door she rose and went into her husband's room. Jim Sefton had moved his chair a little so that his face was in the shadow. And he noted the gloating look in Granger's eyes as they followed her.

"Very pleasant out now," he said calmly, and Granger nodded.

"Very." He sat down, so that he could watch the door of Jack's bedroom, and Jim's eyes never left his face. For ten minutes or a quarter of an hour they kept up a desultory conversation, and then came the symptom Jim Sefton had been waiting for—the thing that proved finally what he wanted to know. Granger was getting nervous, and was answering at random.

Twice he rose and walked over to the door of Jack's room, and the second time he went in.

"Hadn't you better be careful, Enid," he said. "In case there's a possible risk of infection and all that."

"Tampane fever isn't infectious," remarked Jim Sefton quietly. "Still, you're looking a bit done in, Enid: why don't you turn in?"

He was standing behind Granger as he spoke, and when she saw the look in his eyes she rose at once.

"I think I will," she said, "I'm feeling a bit sleepy. Good night."

She passed between the two men, and they waited until they heard her door close.

“You’re quite right, Granger,” said Sefton. “In this climate women can’t do too much. Personally I think a little drink, and I shall follow her example.”

He followed the other man back into the hall, and glanced at his watch. It was nine o’clock, and at eleven they were still sitting there. Moreover the whisky bottle that had been full was now empty.

It was when he perceived the fact that Granger announced his intention of going to bed. A very decent fellow, Sefton, he had decided: misjudged him badly. Bit of a fool: give no trouble, anyway. As a matter of fact he’d meant to be in bed before; it might happen any moment now. Might have happened while they were sitting there, which would have been a bit awkward. Oughtn’t to have sat up so long. Once in bed bound to be a delay, and delay fatal.

He swayed a little; his brain was most confoundedly muzzy. Damned fellow Sefton must have a head like a copper boiler. And those blue eyes of his seemed to bore into one’s brain.

He staggered and pulled himself together; no doubt about it, he’d had one too many.

“Good nye, ole boy,” he remarked unsteadily. “Show you round the bally farm to-morrow.”

With a candle in his hand he lurched off to his room, whilst big Jim still sat motionless. Even after the door had closed he never moved, though his brain was busy. It was justice—primitive justice—if it succeeded. And if it didn’t...

A crash from Granger’s room announced that he had upset the water jug. And then it came—a sudden terrible scream of mortal fear. It startled even big Jim himself, though his hand was steady as he reached for the gun beside him.

Simultaneously the doors of Granger’s and Enid’s rooms burst open. But it was on Granger that Jim Sefton’s eyes were fixed.

“A mamba,” he yelled. “I’ve been bitten by a mamba. Quick! Oh! my God—be quick.”

“Where’s the potassium permanganate?” said big Jim, and Enid darted across to a cupboard.

“It’s empty,” she cried in despair. “It was full this morning, I know.”

And once again Jim Sefton’s blue eyes were fixed on Granger. His face was chalky; his shaking mouth jibbered inarticulate words.

“Who emptied it?” said Jim in a terrible voice. “Who emptied it, Granger?”

And Granger cursed foully, only to begin raving once again for mercy. Into his fuddled brain had come the certainty that Jim knew; the certainty also that nothing could save him. It was he who had emptied the bottle of permanganate; it was he who had signed his own death warrant. How his plans had miscarried he had no idea—all that mattered was that they had.

A figure in pyjamas appeared in the door of Jack’s room.

“What is it?” muttered the sick man weakly. “What’s happened?”

But no one answered him; no one even knew he was there. For the end was close to, and Granger was not a pretty sight. And Enid in spite of having loathed the man was crying softly, though her brain was racing in a jumbled chaos of thought. What had Jim meant by asking who had emptied the bottle?

It was Jim who took charge when it was over. It was Jim who went to the window of Granger’s room and shot the snake inside by the light of the candle on the table. It was Jim who put Jack back to bed, and sat up with Enid till she fell asleep in her chair. And he was still sitting opposite her when the dawn came, so that the first thing she was conscious of as she woke were those vivid blue eyes of his.

But during the days that followed he said very little, and she asked no questions. And it was only as he was going a fortnight later that she could stand it no longer. Jack was fit; arrangements for disposing of the farm were in train; and then they were going back to England.

“Jim,” she said, as she stood beside his horse, “there was some mystery that night. What was it?”

For a moment a tiny smile flickered over his lips.

“There is a native superstition, my dear,” he said gravely, “which like so many things of that sort is founded on fact. They say that if you kill a snake, its mate

will come to find it. Granger killed a mamba that afternoon; I killed the mate that night. You see the dead snake was under his bed.”

“But what can have induced him to put it there?” she cried.

“I wonder,” answered big Jim Sefton.

He bent down suddenly and raised the hand lying on his horse’s neck to his lips. Then he dug his heels in, and without a backward glance trotted off along the road that to a townsman’s eye would have seemed impenetrable bush.

VI. — BLACKMAIL

I

THE letter came to me as a voice from the dead. At first the handwriting on the envelope seemed strange, and then after staring at it for a few seconds I remembered. I hadn't seen that writing for twenty years, and one is apt to forget.

The postmark was New York, and with the letter still unopened in my hand I sat staring out of the window. So Jim Featherstone was in America—the man who at one time had been my greatest friend. We had lost touch with one another after the tragedy had happened and Jim had paid the price. I'd tried—Heaven knows—hard enough to find the dear old chap, but every time I'd come up against a blank wall.

And now here in my hand I held the answer to my search: at last Jim had broken the silence.

Unconsciously my thoughts drifted backwards to that dreadful time twenty years ago. And now that I felt instinctively that the clue to everything which had puzzled us all at the time—for there were many who loved Jim—lay here between my fingers, deliberately I refrained from opening the envelope. It had waited long years: it could wait a few more minutes while I sorted out in my mind the events as they had happened.

It had been midnight when the telephone bell had rung in my sitting-room. I remember I had one leg of my pyjamas off and one on, and I swore at the interruption. I was sleepy and wanted to go to bed: I'd been working pretty hard on a case, and I had to be in court early the next morning. Who on earth could want me at midnight?

But the bell went on ringing insistently, and I went into the sitting-room.

"What is it?" I cried irritably into the receiver.

"Are you Mr. Pollock?" came a man's voice.

"I am. Who are you?"

“Vine Street speaking, sir. Can you come down here at once? Mr. Featherstone is here, and has asked for you as a legal adviser.”

Into my mind there leapt at once the idea that Jim was tight, and wanted me to try and fix things. And my irritation did not decrease.

“What on earth does he want me for at this time?” I half muttered, forgetting the man at the other end could hear. “I suppose the old fool has got blotto.”

And from the other end came the reply:

“I’m afraid it’s not that, sir: it’s something infinitely more serious.” And the tone of the voice even more than the words pulled me together.

“I’ll come at once,” I said.

All the time I dressed I wondered what Jim could have been doing: all the way down in a hansom, which I was lucky enough to pick up, I was still wondering. Wild Jim was and always had been, but there was no atom of vice in him. He had money: at least quite enough, without being actually wealthy: he had hosts of friends. So what could he have been doing?

An Inspector met me and his face was very grave. He made no attempt at beating about the bush, but came straight to the point.

“It’s murder, Mr. Pollock, I’m sorry to say.”

I stared at him stupidly.

“You mean that Jim—that Mr. Featherstone—is accused of murdering someone?” I said.

He nodded.

“But it’s incredible,” I cried angrily. “Whom is he accused of murdering?”

“A Mr. John Parsons,” said the Inspector. “Perhaps you would go and see him, Mr. Pollock. He can tell you the story himself, but I am bound to admit that things look extremely black. You see, your friend makes no attempt to deny the charge; in fact, he admits it.”

"How did he do it?" I asked dully.

"He shot him with a revolver in Mr. Parsons's own study," said the Inspector.
"Will you come this way?"

II

MECHANICALLY I followed him, until he halted before the locked door of a cell. Jim was inside, sitting on the edge of the bed, and he got up with a cheery smile as he saw me.

"Sorry to drag you out, old man, at this ungodly hour—but as the Inspector has probably told you, I'm in a hole."

"Look here, Jim!" I cried, "there must be a mistake."

"Devil a bit, Bill," he answered. "There's no mistake. I've told the Inspector here everything that happened. I went up to Hampstead to interview Mr. John Parsons after dinner. I had a certain request to make to him, and had he seen his way to granting that request, I should not have killed him. But as he did not see his way to doing so, I did kill him. I warned him first, but he rather stupidly thought I was bluffing. I wasn't."

I stared at him aghast.

"But, Jim, old boy," I cried, "you don't seem to realise. It's murder."

"On the contrary, Bill, I realise it only too well. As you say, it's murder."

"But who is this John Parsons? I've never heard of him."

"No more had I until this morning," he answered. "But if it's of importance, and presumably it is, John Parsons is, or rather was, a foul blackmailing swine. He was a man dead to even the twinge of a decent instinct, a loathsome brute, a slimy cur. And though I realise quite fully that legally speaking I've committed murder, from every other point of view I have merely exterminated a thing that had no right to live."

"Granted, old man," I said hopelessly. "But that's got nothing to do with it. The only point of view we're concerned with is the legal one, and legally it doesn't

matter if he was all you say or an angel of light. Tell me, what was this request you went up to make and which he wouldn't grant?"

Jim smiled at me gravely, and laid his hand on my arm.

"I knew you'd ask me that, old man. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Sticks out a yard. But I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me?" I repeated. "But why not? Presumably you've sent for me because you want me to defend you."

"If you'll be so good, Bill."

"Good be blowed, Jim!" I cried. "Of course I'll defend you. But I must know all the facts of the case."

Once again he smiled gravely and shook his head.

"You shall know all except that, Bill. Believe me, old friend, I have a very good reason."

I argued, expostulated and finally lost my temper, but it was useless. He was adamant on that one point—the most vital point in the whole case. He had gone up to interview this man Parsons, having made an appointment by telephone. The object of the interview was to demand the handing over of a certain thing. And that demand had been refused. Parsons had merely laughed at his request. So Jim had taken the revolver out of his pocket, and had warned him of his unalterable intention of killing him if the request was not complied with. And once again Parsons had laughed and, rising from his chair, had crossed to the bell.

"It was then that I shot him through the heart, Bill," said Jim quietly. "After that I locked the door, took the keys of his safe from the body, opened the safe and found what I sought. The servants were hammering on the door, but it was a stout one. I burnt the thing I had come for, and then I opened the door. And that is absolutely all there is to it."

Moreover, that had been absolutely all there was to it when he was tried. Not by even so much as a hint had Jim given away what had been the object of his visit. I warned him of the consequences, but I might have saved my breath.

“I realise all you say, old friend,” he said patiently. “But it’s just impossible for me to tell you. I know what it means to me, but I can’t help it, whatever the result may be.”

III

AND so it came to the trial. The court was crammed, and the most self-possessed person there was Jim. I can see him now standing between the two warders, head thrown back a little, arms folded. And what a magnificent-looking specimen of manhood he was! He gave me a nod and a smile, but after that he looked neither to the right hand nor the left, though the court was crammed with his friends.

Quietly, inexorably, but with studied moderation counsel for the Crown outlined the case. He made no effort to gloss over the character of the murdered man: with scrupulous fairness he went so far as to emphasise it.

“As my learned friend will doubtless tell you, gentlemen,” he said, “John Parsons was that most loathsome of all things—a blackmailer. From documents discovered in his safe, no doubts can be entertained on that score. But, gentlemen, the law of England protects people against blackmail. Further, it punishes the blackmailer with the utmost severity. It is the safeguard of a civilised community, it is the thing to which appeal must be made. And no man, under any conditions whatever, has the right to take the law into his own hands.”

It was a short case. Though technically the plea was “Not guilty,” there was no dispute over facts. And there was no drama to it either until I put Jim himself into the witness box. Whether he liked it or not, I was determined to run sentiment for all it was worth. And I asked him once again the question point blank:

“What was the request you made to John Parsons?”

He looked me straight in the face.

“I refuse to say.”

“Did it concern a woman’s honour?”

For a moment he hesitated; then he answered firmly:

“Yes—it did.”

Of course, it was useless. Counsel for the Crown, as was his duty, pushed him hard on the point.

“Who was the woman?”

“I refuse to say.”

“Will you write down the name and hand it to his Lordship?”

“I will not.”

And then the Judge intervened. A little sternly he pointed out that Jim was jeopardising his chances by his attitude, and that his consistent refusal to give any information on this point not only tended to throw doubts on the veracity of his statement, but came perilously near contempt of court.

Jim bowed, and I can hear now his quiet, level voice.

“My Lord, I realise what you say only too well. May I, however, beg of you to believe that nothing is farther from my mind than any feeling of contempt of court. For what it is worth, you have my word: but I can bring you no proof, even if I wished to. For the proof was destroyed by me that night. And whatever your Lordship’s judgment may be on me, I thank my God that I was able to do so.”

A woman in court gave a little sob, and the Judge frowned.

I talked to him three years after at some banquet or other, and he told me his feelings at the moment. Notoriously one of the most impartial men on the bench, yet every sympathy he had was with Jim. And he felt that he was being stupidly quixotic.

“Are we to understand,” he said, “that there is a woman living so devoid of every decent sense that she allows you to stand on trial for murder—a murder perpetrated, as you say, to save her honour—without coming forward and giving evidence?”

I saw the muscles on Jim’s face tighten, and a strange look came into his eyes.

“The woman in question is dead, my Lord.”

And for a space there was absolute silence in court.

It was all over in one day. There could only be one end: the issue was never in doubt. There was no refuting the Crown's deadly arguments. If such a precedent were allowed, where would matters end? There was merely prisoner's unsubstantiated word that he had killed this man to save a dead woman's honour. Even if it were true, there was no justification whatever for such an act. And how could they possibly tell that it was true? The members of the jury must obliterate from their minds all questions of sentiment. They must not take into account the prisoner's personality, nor that of the dead man. All they must concentrate on was the fact that admittedly a man had been murdered, and that the only excuse for the act was an appeal to sentiment which might, he allowed, be true, but which, on the other hand, might be merely a lie put forward as a last despairing endeavour to mitigate a cold-blooded crime. Let them not forget that prisoner at the bar had gone to this man's house with a loaded revolver in his pocket....

And through it all Jim listened with the same grave, quiet attention. Never for one instant did any hint of agitation or fear show on his face, and when the jury left to consider their verdict and he was removed he gave me one of his usual cheery smiles. They didn't take long—ten minutes to be exact—and the verdict was the only possible one—"Guilty."

They took a couple of sobbing women out, and they closed the doors. And hands clenched, and knees twitched, for it's a dreadful moment, when a man's life is declared forfeit. They asked him if he had anything to say, and because he was white clean through he did have something to say. And it was this:

"Only one thing, my Lord. That had I been in any other position in this court to-day, either in your Lordship's seat or in the jury box, or conducting the case for the Crown, I only hope that I should have acted with the same scrupulous fairness towards prisoner that has been accorded to me to-day."

And then it was over. Jim was sentenced to death, and it seemed to me as I watched him that he was staring at something above him—something that he saw, and we couldn't. But then maybe my eyes were a bit dim.

Certain it is that even to the last he never faltered. He seemed to be sustained by some outside power; he seemed to be curiously aloof. And all through the days that followed he was just the same. When I told him that from every

corner of the country huge petitions were arriving for his reprieve he shrugged his shoulders and smiled a little sadly.

“Dear old Bill,” he answered, “you’ve been just wonderful over it all. But I don’t think I very much mind what happens. I’m not a particularly religious bloke, but perhaps—who knows—one might run across people over the other side.”

And again he seemed to be staring through the windows of his cell at something or somebody that I couldn’t see.

It was successful—the petition—and the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. The utter vileness of the man Parsons had a good deal to do with it, I think. And when I told Jim the news, and the two warders stood there smiling all over their face, he wrung my hand and thanked me. But even at the time it struck me that his chief feeling was gratitude for the trouble I’d taken, rather than joy at the result.

That was the last time I ever saw him. The years rolled by, and by the law of nature his memory grew a little dim. I became increasingly busy, and Jim faded a bit from my mind. But always I had marked the date of his release: I wanted to meet him as he came out. He had earned the maximum remission of his sentence, and the Governor of the prison had promised to let me know the actual date. And then, as luck would have it, I went down with a severe attack of influenza two days before he was due to come out.

I wired to the Governor asking him to tell Jim where I was, and he told him. But Jim never came. I went to old addresses: I followed every clue I could think of, but it was useless. Jim completely disappeared, leaving no trace, and, as I have said, I gave it up, a little hurt and offended.

And now, at long last, I held in my hands a letter from him. It was a very bulky one, and I gave a start as I saw the date. It had been written two years previously, though the postmark was recent.

“Old friend,” it ran, “don’t think too hardly of me. The Governor gave me your message, but fifteen years of prison changes a man. We should have been strangers, Bill, and I should have stepped back into a world I didn’t know, and that didn’t know me. I couldn’t have borne to meet the old set again. Most of them probably are married, and to their wives, who never knew me at all, I should have been just an unknown man who’d served a life sentence for

murder. It would have been an impossible situation: I couldn't have stood it. But it was good of you to think of me—awfully good, old pal. Only I'm thankful you had 'flu, otherwise I should have had to hurt you. For I had made up my mind irrevocably to cut adrift, and I should have had a terrible job trying to make you see my point of view.

“But now, during the three years since I came out, the conviction has been growing on me that it is only fair to you to let you, who defended me so ably, know the truth. You won't get this letter until I am dead”—for a moment I stopped reading and stared out of the window—“but you'll get it then. The old lungs got touched up a bit in prison, and they tell me that I ought to go to some sanatorium. But I'm thinking it's hardly worth while....

“All I ask you, Bill, is to burn this letter when you've read it, and promise me that never by word or deed will you divulge its contents to a living soul. Because it's the story of the only part of my life that counts, and the only part of the life of one other.

“I met her first at St. Moritz. She was nineteen and I was twenty-one. We were both pretty good skiers, and so she managed to get away from the two stout women who dogged her footsteps wherever she went. Because, you see, she wasn't an ordinary mortal like, you and me, old man; she was a Royalty. And yet she was just an ordinary mortal like you and me, in that she loved love, and life, and most marvellous of all, she loved one, Jim Featherstone. Useless to ask how these things happen; they lie on the lap of the gods for capricious distribution. And I—great Heavens! old friend, it would be beyond my power to tell you how I loved that girl. She was more to me than life itself. We were discreet; we had to be. She was there incognito, of course, but the two Gorgons watched her like lynxes. Had they had an inkling of our feelings for one another they would have whisked her away and buried her once more in the starchy ceremony of her father's Court. For he was a King, and it should not tax your ingenuity overmuch to find out the country he reigned over.

“But there are ways of eluding even lynx-eyed Gorgons, and for four weeks we managed to do it. And for four weeks we lived in a world of our own—my girl and I. We didn't bother much over what was going to happen—the present was good enough for us. Once or twice I alluded to it, but always she put her little hand over my mouth and stopped me. So I forced myself to forget the madness of it all, and lived just for each day as it came.

“But at last there came the time when it could be ignored no longer. We were up there in the snow, eating our lunch, when she told me in her sweet, broken English:

“‘To-morrow, Jim, I’m going. Going back to prison.’

“I’d known, of course, that it had to come, but that didn’t make it any easier. And something snapped inside me. I caught her in my arms, and begged and implored her to sacrifice everything and marry me.

“‘You’ll be happy as my wife, dear love,’ I whispered. ‘I’ve got a bit of money, and there’s the whole great world in front of us.’

“Just for a little she lay in my arms with the wonder of it all in her dear eyes; and then she gave a little twisted smile.

“‘If only I could, my Jim!’ she said gravely. ‘If only I could! But there’s something I haven’t told you. Maybe I’ve been wicked these last few weeks, letting you kiss me and make love to me. But I couldn’t help it, for I love you so, my dear. And I think I hate him.’

“‘Who?’ I demanded.

“‘The man I’ve got to marry. It’s been arranged for many years.’

“And she told me who he was. A diplomatic marriage—the usual thing: and for a while I cursed bitterly and foolishly, till the words died away in my throat and I grew silent, just staring into her dear eyes. It was to take place when she was twenty-one, so there were two years before the sacrifice.

“This isn’t a love story, Bill, and, anyway, there are things of which a man does not write. And that last afternoon is one of them. Sufficient to say that we said good-bye to one another up in the white purity of the snow. And white though it was it was no whiter than my beloved girl.

“The months went on, and I came back to London. I tried to forget in the way that men have always tried to forget, and I couldn’t. Time made things no better: if anything it made them worse. The official announcement appeared in the papers full of the usual lies. How wonderful it was that the close cementing together of the two nations should be accomplished by such a romantic love-

match—you know the sort of stuff. And I cursed the fools who wrote it, and went on all the harder trying to forget.

“It was three months before the ceremony was due to take place that a letter came to me at my club, and I stood there staring at it like a man bereft of his senses. I’d only seen her handwriting once, but I knew it in a flash. And the postmark was London.

“She’d sent it over by someone, of course—I’d given her my club as an address if ever she wanted me. That was my first thought, until I turned the envelope over. And on the back was the name of a London hotel.

“Bill, I was shaking like a man with the palsy when I opened that letter. I had to put it on a table before I could get it steady enough to read. She was in London for three days, and though she felt it was madness, she must see me again. Would I meet her that afternoon? She gave me a rendezvous, where she would be in her car, and then we would go for a drive.

“And now I’m coming to the end, old man. Madness it may have been—the time we spent those next three days. But it was a madness which has lived through the long, grey years, and will live with me till the end. She was strictly incognito: only one girl friend was with her—a girl who loved her even as I did. She knew, of course; she it was who came later and told me what had happened. It was the driver who was the traitor—God! if I could get my hands on that man he would die even as John Parsons died.

“But I’m jumping ahead. Why we chose Richmond Park for our last day I don’t know—though it wouldn’t have mattered much where we’d gone: the result would have been the same. But it was there, in one of those little copses, that I said ‘Good-bye’ to her for the last time. She was leaving next day, and we sat there hand in hand. And after a while my arms went round her, and she clung to me helplessly.

“‘Always and always; for ever and ever, my man,’ she said again and again.

“What’s the good of labouring it? The shadows were lengthening when I kissed her for the last time, and watched her stumble a little blindly back to the waiting car. It was the end, and from that moment I have only seen her twice. Once at Victoria Station the next morning, when for a moment her eyes met mine and she smiled pitifully: once amidst the pomp and ceremony of her

marriage. I watched her from the crowd, as she bowed and smiled to the cheering people. But her face was white, Bill: and it seemed to me that she was looking for someone—always looking. But maybe that was my imagination.

“Once again I came back to London and tried to forget. Now it was over, definitely finished: I told myself over and over again that I was a fool.

“‘Cut it clean out, you ass: it’s an episode—dead and finished.’

“But you can’t cut out a part of you—a vital part, and I couldn’t forget. I haven’t forgotten yet: I never shall.

“It was a year later that she died. She died giving birth to a son, and a nation went into mourning. So did an obscure individual in London, but he didn’t count—not until a little later. And then only he knew it and one other, and now you.

“It was the girl friend who came to me and told me what had happened. She came one morning and she had travelled over Europe without stopping. I take off my hat to that girl, Bill: she was superb—a thoroughbred clean through.

“‘They’re after me, Mr. Featherstone,’ she said. ‘But they’re a day behind.’

“‘What’s happened?’ I asked, staring at her, bewildered.

“She made no answer, but just took an envelope from her bag and handed it to me. I took out the contents and for a few moments I could hardly believe my eyes. There were six snapshots inside, and in every one of them there appeared my girl and me. They had been taken in Richmond Park, and subconsciously I recalled an occasional click-click that I had heard that wonderful afternoon. At the time I had hardly noticed it—put it down to a cricket or something. Now I knew. Some devil had been there hidden with a camera, and this was the result.

“‘How did you get these?’ I asked her.

“‘They were sent to a man at Court,’ she answered quietly. ‘Never mind how I got them: if you want to know, I stole them. But you know what intrigue is out there, and the man to whom they were sent is the leader of the anti-Royalist clique. For years he has been working secretly to overthrow the existing Monarchy: in the country he has a large following. He is utterly unscrupulous

and he proposes, I know, to publish those photographs and circulate them. You see what people will say, Mr. Featherstone: that the late Queen had a lover. Probably they will go further and say that the boy is not the son of the King. You must stop it. I don't care about the King or his house: I do care about her reputation. You loved her: you've got a day. Do something! You see, the films are still in existence. And that's the man who has them. I found his name and address when I took the prints.'

"I looked at the paper she held out to me, and then I laid my hand on her arm.

"Leave it all to me,' I said, and she went away comforted.

"Old friend, the rest you know. I rang that devil up twice on the telephone to fix an appointment. Each time he was out. So after dinner I went up to see him. He smiled when he saw me, and I had to control myself not to strike him in the face.

"And what can I do for you?' he asked, though he knew full well all the time.

"You can give me the films of those infamous pictures you took in Richmond Park,' I answered.

"He laughed again.

"But I value them highly,' he said. 'They've been worth a great deal of money to me, my dear boy.'

"You foul swine!' I cried, and he waved a deprecating hand.

"I regard it as a most creditable performance,' he continued. 'And really, you know, Richmond Park is a very public place for love-making. Anyone might have been there. In fact, as I followed your car and realised your destination I grew quite alarmed. But still, everything worked out very satisfactorily.'

"And at that moment the telephone bell rang beside him. He spoke into it and his face changed suddenly. I can still see him hanging up the receiver with a cold, sneering smile.

"So, my young friend, you have succeeded in stealing those photographs, have you? How very interesting.'

"I realised that the pursuers had arrived in London, and that time was even shorter than I thought.

"Photographs for which I have been paid a very large sum,' he continued. 'And here have I got all the trouble of printing another set.'

"You'll never do that, you blackmailer,' I said, and he leant back in his chair still smiling.

"May I ask how you propose to prevent me?' he remarked. 'The negatives are in that safe, the key of which is attached to my body by a steel chain. It is possible that you are a little stronger than I am, but not much. Anyway, there is a bell, and there are two menservants in this house who really are strong: specially engaged, in fact, for removing troublesome people. So may I ask you again how you propose to prevent me?'

"By killing you,' I said, and I pulled out the revolver.

"And still he smiled.

"They hang people for that in England, my dear boy. So I wouldn't if I were you. It's a stupid bluff, you know—that revolver game.'

"Bill, sometimes now I see the look in his eyes of cringing, hideous terror when he first realised it wasn't bluff. And I glory in it. He gave a sort of stifled scream, and reached for the bell, just as I plugged him through the heart.

"Then I locked the door and I burnt the films, and I knew that my darling was safe. Old friend, wouldn't you have done as I did?"

VII. — MRS. PETER SKEFFINGTON'S REVENGE

THIS is the story of Mrs. Peter Skeffington. She was a little fair-haired thing, with a pair of the most pathetic-looking blue eyes which deluded men into thinking she was helpless. Also into desiring strongly to kiss her. As far as I know, Mrs. Peter Skeffington did not kiss men.

The scene of this story is South Africa. The exact locality in which it took place is neither here nor there and is immaterial. Because South Africa is a crude country—though an almighty pleasant one—whether you regard her from the top of the Corner House at Johannesburg or from the stoep of a backveld farm. And the last thing little Mrs. Peter liked was crudeness.

She had another peculiarity—she adored her husband. Now, far be it from me to say anything against Peter Skeffington. In his way he was a very good fellow: in his correct setting he might have done admirably. But South Africa was not that setting.

She is a crude country, but she is also a strong country, and she demands of those who seek to live on her that they fight and fight and go on fighting. Skeffington gave up before the first “i” in the first fight was dotted. In fact the only thing that happened before he gave up fighting was that South Africa discovered his weakness. She always does discover a man’s weakness sooner or later: she found Peter Skeffington’s before he’d used his first ten-shilling book of chits at the Rand Club, of which he’d been made an honorary member for the duration of his stay in Johannesburg. Of that, however, more a little later.

What exactly brought the Peter Skeffingtons to the country is one of those little conundrums which no logic or argument can solve. At Surbiton—let us say—they could have lived and moved and had their being without any harm to Surbiton or themselves. In South Africa something had to happen. As food Peter and his wife were thoroughly indigestible to the land of their choice, and that entails a pain somewhere.

Why it was the land of their choice is, as I have said, insoluble logically. Any man who knew the conditions of living would have told them that they were totally unsuited for those conditions. He would also have told them that out of the many land advertisements appearing so bravely in the columns of leading London newspapers, ninety per cent. are cold-blooded, dastardly swindles.

Some day, incidentally, if I sit next the editor of one of these papers at dinner I must ask him why he allows these advertisements but prohibits money-lenders. You do get something out of a moneylender, anyway: it would save trouble to drop your money in the sea in the case of the others.

To return, however, to the Peter Skeffingtons. Why they came matters not—they came. By a great stroke of fortune they missed the ninety per cent. already alluded to, and stumbled into one of the seven per cent. class which are fair to good without being very good. The three per cent. of very good are shy, retiring birds: they can afford to be.

They found themselves, did the Peter Skeffingtons, in a proposition which in time, when God and the Government decreed (principally the Government, in this case: it was the usual question of irrigation), would turn out thundering well and give them a very ample and pleasant return for their money. In the meantime there was nothing to do but to sit down and wait. Which is a dangerous proceeding for some people in South Africa: especially for people with the weakness of Peter Skeffington.

To those who know, the fact that Peter's weakness was made manifest at the Rand Club is all that is necessary. There are others, however, who are not so well informed.

Of all the magnificent buildings in that marvellous mushroom city Johannesburg, the Rand Club is one of the most symbolical. In it you may obtain the comforts, cellar and table of the most exclusive London club: in it you may see—the world. Every sort and condition of man who has been, is, or will be anything in South Africa at some time or another has stood at the great three-sided bar. There was one man whose boast it was that he hadn't, and he died of drinking poisoned water.

You will see a man there who yesterday made a hundred thousand on a rumour concerning asbestos: beside him is the man who lost a good part of it. You will see a cheerful, friendly soul surrounded by pals. The calling is on him, and why not? He only owes them half a million, and his present assets he would sell willingly for a hundred. Moreover, they know it. But in addition you will also see all the men who really count.

But one great rule is necessary for the Stranger within the Gates—learn to drink slowly. And since Peter Skeffington did not know this rule—though,

seeing that his weakness was what it was, it wouldn't have much mattered if he had—South Africa had brutally probed the joint in his armour exactly one hour after he entered the bar of the Rand Club.

The trouble was threefold. First, he couldn't say No. Second, he had no head for drink. Third and worst of all, he thought he had. Which is just about as hopeless a combination as can be gathered together in a man. But had they remained in England there is no doubt in my mind that the Peter Skeffingtons would have carried on quite happily and lived to a ripe old age. In the year 1960 he would have alluded to the days when he was young and boys were boys and whisky was whisky. Because, and this is the point, Peter Skeffington was not a drunkard. He was a weak young ass who periodically drank far too much when opportunity offered. But it was the opportunity that was required—not the drink. You could have locked him up in a cellar of wine with safety for a week: you couldn't trust him in a third-rate bar for half an hour with a couple of pals. And if only someone who understood could have explained that simple fact to his wife this story would never have been written.

In the particular portion of South Africa where the Peter Skeffingtons had settled opportunities were as blackberries on an autumn hedge. The type of opportunities, too, were of exactly the sort to prove most dangerous. In the first place he had nothing to do; in the second, most of the days in which he had to do it in were hot, dusty, arid and shadeless: in the third, there were exactly twenty-seven other men in a similar position to himself: in the fourth, there was a club placed centrally in the community where the twenty-eight met each evening for their sundowner and discussed what particular brand of nothingness they had done during the day. And discussion is dry work, especially when it concerns that ever-prevalent subject—lack of water.

The net result was obvious. Peter Skeffington returned home in varying degrees of insobriety exactly six days of the week out of seven. That was due to the fact that the Club was shut on Sundays. I was one of the twenty-eight, so I know. We didn't notice it particularly at first because he never got offensively tight, but after a while its monotony made it obvious, and several of us refused to drink with him. But it didn't do any good: there was always someone who would. Particularly Jack Dernan....

Dernan was the typical product of a young country. Tall, broad-shouldered, powerful as a horse, tanned mahogany, he was a fighter from the beginning of the chapter. And if there was one thing for which he had profound contempt it

was weakness in any form. Now I don't think he realised for a moment what he was doing with Peter Skeffington. Certainly not at first. He regarded him with a kind of good-natured toleration, mingled with slight wonder. He was so completely the type of man that Dernan had no use for, that he was a source of amusement. Possessed of a head that no amount of liquor ever had the slightest effect on, it was with genuine feelings of amazement that he regarded the amount necessary to render Peter Skeffington drunk.

"No well conditioned fly could drown in it," he once remarked wonderingly. "The fellow's a damn freak."

But he didn't seem to be able to let him alone. Peter Skeffington's complete inability to absorb liquor seemed to fascinate him. He used to take mental notes of the amounts each night, and the condition arrived at. And after a time he and two or three others started private side bets on the result.

"Rather on the principle of the daily run on board ship," he explained. "Numbers from 6 to 12. 9 or 10 are good favourites, but the High Field hasn't an earthly. He'd be dead if he took more than a dozen, I should think."

"Go easy, Jack," said someone. "It can't go on like this."

"Great Scott!" cried Dernan, "I don't want to make the fellow tight. He rushes at it with his mouth open himself."

And so another of the tragedies—the square peg and round hole tragedies—began to gather form and shape: a tragedy which, as one traces it backwards, could have been so easily averted. If only someone could have explained things to Mrs. Peter—the real truth, instead of what she thought was the truth. If only someone could have said, "Take him away back to England, out of this country and never let him return here save on a Cook's personally conducted tour," all would have been well. But no one did say it, and so she took him to Durban instead, to fight this insidious devil that had crept into her Peter's life—the devil of drunkenness.

She took him to Durban where they could get sea bathing, and golf and tennis, and I saw them off at the station. And there was a look in Mrs. Peter's pathetic blue eyes that I had never seen there before. It was not one of helplessness.

They stayed away three months, and the devil was conquered with surprising ease. But it was the wrong devil: the real one wasn't there to fight. There was

lots to do in Durban: there was no small dusty club in Durban: and Peter, who was thoroughly ashamed of himself, behaved adorably to her in Durban. He made her all sorts of promises and vows about the future which he honestly intended to keep. And as proof of his assertions he pointed out to her the complete ease with which he had given up the stuff. Which would have meant a great deal more if they hadn't been chasing the wrong hare.

And so, the cure over, they returned triumphantly to begin all over again. For a fortnight the Club never saw him, though he drove past once or twice behind a new horse he had bought—an ugly-looking black brute with a vicious eye that no one but a Peter Skeffington would have touched with the end of a barge pole.

And then one evening, like a bolt from the blue, came the tragedy. Peter Skeffington came into the Club, and found Jack Dernan and four or five others. That was at six. At six-thirty he was drunk, and our secretary was tearing his hair with irritation and anger.

"It's incredible," he fumed. "It's outrageous. It's indecent. Five—five drinks has that fellow had, and look at him. He's a menace to humanity. Why, damn it, a baby in arms would drink him under the table."

"But look here," I began angrily.

"Mea culpa, my boy," he answered, "I admit it. I said to the blighter when I saw him, 'Hullo, little stranger, have a drink?' I give you my word at the moment I'd completely forgotten all about the show. 'I will,' he answered, and then the matter passed completely out of my hands. I left him for about twenty minutes while I talked to Jackson about that mealie crop, and when I got back I found he had had four more with Jack Dernan and some others, and was tight."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Man, you can't legislate for a bloke that gets tight on five whiskies and sodas."

"It's Mrs. Peter I'm thinking of," I said "The poor little woman thinks she's saved Skeffington's soul from the curse of drink and the first time he comes into the Club he goes and does it again."

A burst of laughter came from the bar, and I went in. There were about ten of them in there, and Peter Skeffington was holding forth very solemnly on the

political situation in the Union. So I got Jack Dernan on one side and put things in front of him.

“Look here, Jack,” I said, “it’s not playing the game to make that silly ass tight again.”

“Give you my word, old man,” he answered, “no one was more surprised than I was. We were playing poker dice and we’d only had four rounds when blown if I didn’t notice he was up the pole. Somebody had got the sweepstake going, and I found I’d drawn Low Field. Well, seeing that the first number is 6, I reckoned the pool was mine.”

He glanced at Skeffington who was swaying gravely by the bar.

“I really am deuced sorry, but what can you do with a fellow like that?”

“Well, for Heaven’s sake, stop him drinking any more,” I said. “We’ll lay him out to cool for a bit, and then I’ll drive him home.”

But Peter Skeffington had no intention whatever of being laid out to cool. He had got into the condition when he was very much on his dignity. Really, by the way we were talking, if it wasn’t so perfectly ridiculous, anyone who didn’t know any better might imagine that we thought he had had too much to drink. He was perfectly capable, thank you, of looking after himself, and he knew the time quite well and also that his horse and trap were waiting outside, a fact to which he trusted no one took any exception.

Jack Dernan shrugged his shoulders.

“Hopeless,” he said to me. “He’s worse than I’ve seen him. And if we go on he’ll get offensive, and someone will hurt him.”

It was half an hour later that Peter Skeffington descended the steps leading into the road. His eyes were slightly glazed; his speech was very precise; his legs moved stiffly. And suddenly—I know not why—an impulse came to me as I sat on the stoep watching him.

“I wish you’d let me drive you back, Skeffington. I’d rather like to feel the paces of that mare.”

He regarded me solemnly.

“Another time, Tredgett, I shall be delighted,” he said. “At the moment, however, the other seat is occupied with two large bags of chicken food.”

“Well, for God’s sake be careful with that brute to-night,” said the secretary uneasily, as he saw her ears go back and the whites of her eyes show up.

“I am perfectly capable of handling her,” replied Skeffington coldly, and even as he spoke he lurched against the mare, who lashed out viciously.

“Dash it,” cried the secretary, half rising to his feet. “Ought we to let him go? He’s not in a condition to drive.”

But Skeffington was already in his seat gathering up the reins with clumsy fingers.

“Go easy, man,” cried someone, and for answer the fool slashed the animal across the quarters.

For the fraction of a second she stood stock still at the suddenness of it: then it happened. With a spring like a thing demented the mare shot forward; there was a jerk and a crash, and the next moment she had bolted down the road with the trap swaying and bounding behind her.

“God! She’s away with him.”

I turned to find Jack Dernan beside me, and his face was white. We were all out in the road watching and no one else spoke. For the chicken food had been hurled out, and the reins were trailing low, and Peter Skeffington was half standing, half sitting in that crazy tearing buggy. Once we thought it was over, but it righted itself again somehow, and then came the end. One lurch into a rut, more crazy than the others, and Skeffington was flung out. And the next moment we were all of us rushing madly down the road towards him, for it seemed to us that he had hit a tree.

It was Jack Dernan who got there first, and when we got up he was standing by the thing that lay on the ground, and his hat was off. Peter Skeffington had hit a tree—with his head.

In the distance a cloud of dust was disappearing as the maddened mare, now completely out of control, galloped on; whilst here at our feet was sudden, stark tragedy.

“No good doing that,” said Dernan gruffly, as somebody put his hand on Peter Skeffington’s heart. “Look at his head.”

I did—and shuddered. His hands had hardly broken the impact at all. So we got the body back to the Club, and there we held a council of war. And by common consent I was deputed to break the news to Mrs. Peter.

“Of course,” said the secretary, “you’ll not mention the fact that he was drunk.”

“Of course not,” I answered as I went out to start my Ford.

But I wondered as I drove there whether she wouldn’t guess.

I found her waiting for me wild-eyed with fear. The mare had come back twenty minutes previously.

“What’s happened?” she gasped. “What’s happened to Peter?”

“Mrs. Peter,” I said miserably, “you must prepare for a shock.”

“He’s dead,” she said quietly, and I nodded.

“How did it happen?” she said after a while. “Don’t be afraid,” she added as I glanced at her. “I shan’t break down—yet. I want to hear—everything.”

So I told her, and when I’d finished she only asked one question.

“Was Mr. Dernan in the club?”

I stared at her in surprise: it was so completely unexpected.

“Why, yes,” I said. “Jack Dernan was there.”

And into her eyes there came a look to which I had no clue. It seemed to show a sort of savage determination, but to what end or on what account I could not guess.

She seemed strangely docile during the next few days. For instance, I had anticipated that she would insist on seeing her husband’s body, and there were reasons why she shouldn’t. The poor devil had hit that tree hard. However, when I explained things to her she made no trouble, but seemed to understand

perfectly. And another thing that surprised us all was the way she bore up. Even at the grave-side she retained her perfect composure, and I heard Mrs. Drage whisper to a woman standing next her, "She's like a woman in a dream: she'll wake up soon."

But she didn't: that was the amazing part of it. What happened during the long nights when she was alone only she and God knew: certain it was that during the days that followed her husband's death I never saw a trace of grief on Mrs. Peter's face. And I was up there off and on a good deal; she seemed to like having me about the place. Only that strange look—that look of set purpose—was stamped on her features, and it seemed to grow more quietly determined as time went by. She wasn't going to get rid of her farm, at any rate not yet; and I used to give her advice about it.

And then, about two months after Peter's death, business called me up to Rhodesia. I should be away for six months, and I went up the afternoon before I left to say good-bye. She gave me tea, and afterwards I sat on talking about the farm and various things, though I could see she was paying no attention.

And then suddenly she shot the question at me out of the blue; at least it wasn't a question so much as a statement.

"Of course, Peter was drunk that night." She looked at me with a faint smile. "There's no good denying it, Joe: your face has already given you away. Besides—I knew."

"He undoubtedly," I began feebly, "had had something to drink."

She stopped me with a weary little gesture.

"Oh! call it that if you like," she said. "I prefer not to mince words. He was drunk, and you know it. You remember I took him to Durban, don't you?"

"Of course I remember," I answered.

"And you know why I took him," she went on. "He was drinking too much, at that—that damnable club. Every night, Joe; practically every night. I cured him at Durban: never once the whole time he was there did my Peter get into that foul condition. He was cured when he got back here."

I said nothing: I didn't see that there was anything to say. Of what use to tell her that he wasn't cured at all because there was nothing to cure. Such refinements were beyond her: to her a man who got drunk was a drunkard.

"He talked to me while he was in Durban," she went on quietly, "when he was fighting against the craving."

"He told you he had a craving for it?" I asked curiously.

"But of course he must have had a craving for it," she said, staring at me as if I was a fool. "Why else should he have drunk? But he fought against it, and I helped him—and my Peter won. He was fine about it—fine."

"Quite," I agreed. "It was fine."

Once again there didn't seem anything else to say. I suppose it is finer to fight and conquer a terrible craving than to admit that one is so atrociously weak that you can't say No even when you don't want the stuff.

"Yes, he talked a lot to me during those months," went on Mrs. Peter quietly. "Particularly about Mr. Dernan."

"The devil he did!" I said, sitting up. "What had he got to say about him?"

She had turned away and I couldn't see her face.

"A great deal about his character," she answered almost carelessly. And then suddenly she swung round, and I gasped at the look in her eyes. "To my mind," she said tensely, "there is no hell deep enough, no punishment sufficiently vile for a man of that type."

"But, good God!" I stammered feebly. "I assure you, Mrs. Peter, that Jack Dernan isn't at all a bad fellow."

And the look she gave me flattened me out.

"To get hold of a man who has been fighting to conquer a craving, and who has succeeded, and tempt him and tempt him and tempt him until he falls again is your idea of a good fellow, is it? It isn't mine."

My mind went back to the night of the tragedy, and I realised the futility of any argument. To Mrs. Peter, her husband was a man who had fought and won, only to yield at last to the devilish temptation cast in his way by Jack Dernan. And was any good to be obtained by telling her the truth: telling her that, as a matter of fact, the first drink he had had that night had not been with Dernan at all? Telling her, moreover, that it would have made no odds if no such person existed in the world as Jack Dernan: that Peter Skeffington had been of the clay which, in certain conditions, was unsavable?

So I let it go, and even now, looking back with the light of what was to come behind me, I should do the same thing again under similar circumstances. For who could possibly have told that a woman of the type of Mrs. Peter could ever have done the thing she did?

I got back from Rhodesia eight months later, and one of the first men I ran into was Jack Dernan. He was in the club as I came in, and I stopped short and stared at him in amazement.

“Good Lord, old man!” I cried. “What’s the matter with you? Malaria?”

He looked ghastly: grey, with lack-lustre eyes and a loose mouth. He stared at me vacantly for a while, then he spoke.

“Go to hell,” he snarled, and shambled out of the club.

“What do you think of him?” came the secretary’s voice from behind me.

“What on earth is the matter with him?” I said as I swung round to greet him. “The man looks dreadful.”

“Come and have a drink, Tredgett,” he answered gravely. “I want to talk to you.”

I followed him into the bar and we sat down in a corner. Luckily we had it to ourselves.

“You know, I suppose, that he’s never out of Mrs. Skeffington’s pocket?”

“What!” I almost shouted, my drink half-way to my lips.

“Never out of her pocket,” he repeated quietly. “I’m pretty lax myself, as you know: anybody can do anything with reason, as far as I’m concerned: but this has been a bit over the odds. None of the women here will have anything to do with her, but she doesn’t seem to care. She’s infatuated with the fellow, and he with her. But she’s thrown the most rudimentary social laws to the winds. There’s no reason presumably why they shouldn’t get married: I’ve never heard of Dernan being entangled in any way. Instead of that, he’s up at her bungalow—alone with her until all hours of the night. And I’m really not surprised that everyone has put the worst construction on it.”

And in my mind was ringing a certain sentence:

“To my mind there is no hell deep enough, no punishment sufficiently vile for a man of that type.”

“But it’s the change in the man himself that is so amazing,” went on the secretary.

“You remember what he was like; you saw him a few moments ago. And he’s worse than that sometimes. His temper has become unbearable—positively unbearable. In fact, at times he’s positively dangerous.”

But I was hardly listening: into my mind had come a sudden ghastly suspicion.

“Has he seen a doctor?” I asked, striving to make my voice sound natural.

The secretary smiled grimly.

“Tim Murphy suggested that very thing to him,” he said. “But he only did so once. Dernan flew into the most ungovernable rage, and went for him. Here in this actual bar. We had the devil of a job pulling him off, and Murphy was nearly throttled before we did. I tell you, Tredgett—the man’s dangerous.”

“And has no one any idea what is the matter?” I said.

The secretary shrugged his shoulders.

“He’s knocking off drink considerably,” he answered. “Why—I don’t know. Possibly the lady has a lot to do with it. And whether it’s finding him out—rawing up his nerves or something of that sort—I don’t know. Anyhow, you’ve seen him for yourself, and can form as good an opinion as I can.”

I escaped as soon as I could and went back to my bungalow. Suspicion was hammering at my brain, and I wanted to think. Could it be possible that Mrs. Peter was poisoning him? That was the ghastly thought that would not be shaken off. Of what use to tell myself that the idea was incredible: that such things don't happen outside the covers of sensational fiction? Such things do happen, and, though Mrs. Peter was the last woman in the world one would have deemed capable of such a thing, I couldn't forget the look on her face the last time I had seen her. And if my suspicion was right, what was going to be the upshot? Sooner or later a man in Jack Dernan's condition of health would have to see a doctor, and—what then?

I tried to concentrate on arrears of work, but the figures danced before my eyes. The short dusk had gone, and outside the African night had come down, bringing no relief from the heat of the day. But I felt I could stand it no longer: I must find out for myself. Nothing would be more natural, I reflected, than that I should go and see Mrs. Peter on my return after such a long absence. And if Dernan was there I might be able to come to some conclusion.

I pulled out the Ford and started off. And it was only as I approached Mrs. Peter's bungalow that I suddenly decided to leave the car in the road and walk up the last few hundred yards. My feet made no sound on the earth track, and I was within twenty yards of the house when I saw a sight which stopped me dead in my tracks.

The light was shining out from the drawing-room windows, and I could see every detail of the room through the mosquito netting. Jack Dernan was there sitting on the sofa, and his arms were round Mrs. Peter. His face seemed more ghastly than ever, though she was looking up into it lovingly. And suddenly he bent and kissed her.

"Isn't it time yet, my dearest?"

His voice, harsh and discordant, came to me through the still night.

She reached for a little box at her side, and drew out something that gleamed. And in my excitement I crept closer. He was holding out his arm with the sleeve rolled up, and I saw her taking the shining thing in one hand whilst with the other she caught a little roll of his skin. And then I knew: knew that what I'd suspected was true. She was giving him an injection from a hypodermic syringe.

For perhaps five minutes after she had done it he lay still, and you could almost watch his face change. The grey tinge disappeared; the shiftiness grew firm; the eyes became clear. It was the old Jack Dernan who rose to his feet—more, it was a super Jack Dernan. He stood there—a magnificent figure of a man, with a look on his face of absolute triumph.

“My darling,” he cried, “how long are you going to keep me waiting?”

His arms were stretched out to her; even I could feel the commanding presence of the man.

And Mrs. Peter lay in the corner of the sofa and laughed.

“You fool,” she answered very clearly. “You damned fool!”

His arms dropped to his side and he stared at her.

“Only that I’ve been playing a game with you, Mr. Jack Dernan—and I’ve won.” She rose and crossed to the other side of the room so that the table was between them. “A game—you beast, you cur, and you never knew. You thought I was in love with you, when I hate you, loathe you, execrate you. If it hadn’t been for you, my Peter would have been alive to-night, you—you murderer. Listen, Jack Dernan—listen now, while the dope is in you, and your brain is working clearly. I’ve led you on from the very beginning, even though the touch of your hands nauseated me, and there were times when I didn’t think I could go through with it. It doesn’t matter how I got hold of the stuff; it was during that time I went up to Johannesburg. I went up there to get it, and I got it. That’s all that counts. Then I came back here, and I made you fall in love with me. And after that I tempted you—even as you tempted Peter. Do you remember that first night, Jack Dernan? It was a bit of a job, but I did it. You were frightened at first—frightened of drugs. Even as my Peter was frightened of drink. Then you saw me use the syringe on my own arm, and that persuaded you. But there was just plain water in mine, you fool, whereas yours had the drug in it. And so it has been all the time: I’ve been injecting myself with water, and you with the drug. And I’ve acted—God! how I’ve acted. You’ve seen me, as you thought, run down, panting for it. Acting, you devil, acting.”

She paused, and the man still stared at her speechless.

“It’s over now. Joe Tredgett has come back from Rhodesia and he would suspect. To-night is the last night I shall ever see you; to-night finished my

stock. But when the craving is on you, Jack Dernan, and every fibre of your body is shrieking for the drug it wants—think of

the man you killed as surely as if you'd shot him. I've turned you into a drug maniac, and that is my revenge. Go, you brute, go."

She stood there pointing to the window, and for a space there was silence. Then, with a strange, gasping cry Jack Dernan turned and, blundering through the mosquito netting as if it wasn't there, disappeared into the darkness.

Two months later Mrs. Peter Skeffington sold her land and returned to England. And I don't know if she ever saw a paragraph in the Johannesburg Star. It ran as follows:

"A dreadful tragedy took place last night in the Germiston district, resulting in the death of four men. Two of them were well known as being engaged in the traffic of cocaine and other drugs. The third was a native, and the fourth has been identified as a man called Jack Dernan. It is thought some quarrel arose over the disposal of the stuff, and revolvers were drawn. Three of the chambers of Dernan's revolver had been discharged."

At any rate, that is the story of Mrs. Peter Skeffington. It is not a pleasant one: but it happens to be true.

VIII. — MARIE

HE was a little, wizened-up old thing, his face a network of wrinkles. Seventy I put his age at—perhaps more: though in his eyes there still dwelt something of the fire of youth, and the hand that lifted the glass of vermouth to his lips was steady. It was the choice of that drink as an aperitif that had started the conversation, for our own countrymen of the class to which he obviously belonged do not, as a rule, indulge in vermouth.

He was French, of course, though for the last twenty years he had lived in London, and save for a few little mannerisms of speech he might have been English. He kept a barber's shop, and every night when business was over he came to the Dubonnet for his glass of vermouth.

Georges Pitou was his name; possibly Monsieur had observed his shop in Wardour Street? I fenced delicately, but the matter was dismissed with a wave of the hand. There were two assistants.

"And Madame"—I put in thoughtlessly.

"No, Monsieur," he said gravely. "I am not married."

He signed to the waiter to refill his glass.

"And Monsieur is what? I have not seen you here before."

I broke the news of my trade to him gently.

"Then," he said quickly, "you are here in search of copy?"

"Principally, Monsieur Pitou," I laughed, "I am here in search of a cheap dinner. It is one thing to write, and quite another to be read."

He nodded sympathetically.

"I know, Monsieur; sometimes one works one's very best and yet one is not appreciated. Even in my saloon I have known it to happen."

"Indeed," I murmured politely.

“Yes,” he went on after a few moments, “it is an unpleasant thing not to be appreciated. Though good for a man, Monsieur, when he is young. Always there lies in front of him the goal of success, and so he is spurred on. It is when a man is old—when a man who has once been appreciated and made much of begins to lose his hold—it is then that it becomes a terrible thing. You think not, perhaps; you say that he has had his day, and that it is time he made way for someone else. Listen, Monsieur, and I will tell you a story. And you shall write it down, and send it to a magazine. Listen—for I am in the mood this evening.”

He lit a cigarette and in the light of the match his face seemed even more amazingly wrinkled than before.

“Do not imagine, Monsieur,” he began, “that I was, always a barber. For twenty years, true, I have cut hair—and twenty years is a long time. So long that sometimes I think that I have cut hair all my life—but that is only when the black dog is about. And then I remember that there is always a bottle of wine and that life is what we make of it ourselves.

“Have you ever heard, Monsieur, of Blom’s Celebrated Circus. It was before your time, I know, and yet I thought everyone must have heard of it. For never was there a circus quite like it. In every corner of France—from Perpignan to Rheims, from the Gironde to the Vosges, Blom’s Circus was a household word. To welcome it villages would hang out their flags, and towns declare a general holiday.

“It was superb, magnificent. There was a giraffe, and a tiger in a cage; there was a pig with five feet and a bearded woman. And, mon Dieu! what a woman. Never shall I forget the blow she gave me when I trimmed that beard one day in a manner that was—how do you say it?—lopsided. But I was young, Monsieur: to me it was but a jest until she hit me.”

He sighed reminiscently and indicated his empty glass to the waiter.

“As you will have guessed I, too, was of the circus; I might almost say I was the circus. I can still hear those bursts of laughter, those shouts of applause as Pitou the clown darted into the ring. But it is not of myself that I would speak: merely is it necessary for Monsieur to grasp my position, and to realise that I am well qualified to tell the story by which Monsieur will make his name. For it is the story of Henri Dardot—the conjurer—and of Marie—his wife.

“It is not too much to say that the name of Henri Dardot was almost as well known as that of Pitou the clown. The amazing things he could do—with cards and rabbits and things in a hat. Once I remember there was a slight accident with regard to a top-hat he had borrowed, and in which he had promised to make an omelette. You will understand that he had in reality two top-hats, which he substituted from time to time. Behold then Henri breaking eggs gaily into the second top-hat. The omelette aux fines herbes—cooked to a turn—was all ready on its plate waiting to be slipped into the hat he had borrowed. He laughed and jested, and the crowd laughed too. And then suddenly the laughter froze on his lips; his face turned white under his make-up. Inadvertently he had mixed the two hats. And the hat of Monsieur le Maire, instead of containing a delicious omelette on a plate, was half full of raw eggs.

“A mistake, Monsieur—but the greatest men have made mistakes. And natural, too, at the time. For Henri was in love—in love with the most adorable girl. You have seen the field of waving corn; you have seen the scarlet poppies peeping out from between the stalks; you have seen the blue of the southern seas. Even so was the gold of her hair, and the scarlet of her lips, and the wonder of her eyes. I, too, was in love with her—we all were, but we soon saw that Henri was her choice. At the time I thought it strange, for though Henri was a superb conjurer and could juggle with soup plates, such qualifications seemed unnecessary in a husband. After all, in a happy marriage one does not make omelettes in top-hats, and the dinner service reposes on the dresser. Whereas a sunny disposition and a pretty wit, such as is vital to a clown, must be great assets in the home.

“However, it became evident that Marie had eyes for none but Henri. With her own handkerchief she wiped the inside of Monsieur le Maire’s hat; with her own hands she cooked the second omelette with the eggs she had so carefully saved out of the hat and shared it with Henri. And a few days later they were married.

“Monsieur is married himself? When success comes, as it will when he writes this story, he hopes to be? I see. Well, if I tried to I can think of no better wish to offer to Monsieur than that his marriage will be as the marriage of Henri and Marie was during the first nine or ten years.

“It is incredible, but it is the truth. Never for one moment did Marie look at another man; never for one moment did Henri look at another woman. Monsieur may think now that it is not at all incredible. I can only hope that he

will always be of the same opinion. And yet—who knows? There is happiness in this world too great to last; even as the happiness of those two. Fate—Nature—call it what you will, is hard and stern. If she sees us too happy, she steps in and cries ‘Halt!’ She keeps a book and she adds things up. And if the total is too big she gets angry. Sometimes you pay in instalments, Monsieur, and sometimes in a lump sum down. And so, though I wish you the happiness of those two during the first years of their married life, I hope at the end that the total will not be too big. Because they paid. Mon Dieu! how they paid!

“There was one child—a boy, and naturally his name also was Henri. And as the years passed by he became the pet of us all. He alone was allowed to pull the beard of the show lady: he alone was allowed to undo the waistcoat buttons of Monsieur Blom himself. Everywhere we went he went with us, and sometimes, as a treat, I would make him up as a clown and he would pretend that he was the great Georges Pitou. We would watch him capering round the ring turning somersaults, and Marie would laugh and clap her hands and say that he was better than his instructor.

“And then when the boy was about nine years old, there came a day when I found Marie in tears. She was sitting upon an old packing case, and standing by her knee was little Henri. And Henri the big—her husband—was walking up and down blowing his nose and muttering to himself.

“‘It is imbecile, Marie,’ I heard him cry. ‘You do not understand what the good Abbé has offered. Why, name of a name, he will make a gentleman of the boy. An avocat, or maybe a doctor. Does he not say that the boy has the bump of much knowledge upon his head?’

“‘But I don’t want him to be a gentleman,’ cried Marie. ‘I want him just as he is—my little boy.’

“And the boy clutched her knees and cried too, for he loved the circus and didn’t want to go away. Was not the dream of the young rascal’s life to be the second Georges Pitou?

“They asked me my opinion, and I—what could I say? It was a big question to decide, Monsieur—the future of little Henri. On the one hand the convent school of the Abbé, where the boy could be educated at no great cost: on the other the circus with its free and easy life. And for two days I thought it over, while they naturally waited for my advice.

“‘Mes amis,’ I said, ‘it is thus that I see it. Incredible though it may seem to us now, there may come a day when Blom’s Celebrated Circus will no longer draw the public as it does at present. True—you cannot believe me: to you such a thing is inconceivable. And yet the day must come when Henri Dardot can no longer produce omelettes from top-hats. Another will take his place, you say. Perhaps so—perhaps not. But what will happen when I—Georges Pitou—wish to retire? For no man goes on for ever. What will happen then, mes amis?’

“The argument impressed them, M’sieur: for the idea of Blom’s Celebrated Circus without Georges Pitou was frankly absurd.

“‘But that is many years away, M’sieur Pitou,’ said the bearded woman.

“‘Who knows?’ I said easily. ‘I have my eye on a little café not far from Avignon. And when M’sieur Blom sees fit to reward me as I deserve—— But, enough. It is not of myself I would speak. It is of little Henri, and what it is best to do for the boy. What, then, will happen to him if in ten years from now the circus is no more? Ten years is a long time, and many things may take place. The good Monsieur Blom may be dead: I, Georges Pitou, may have had an accident—or I may have retired. And if that is so what will the boy do? For what training he has had will be of no use to him if there is no circus.’”

“Common sense, M’sieur, you will agree. From every point of view it was better that the boy should go to a good school: from every point of view, that is, save one.”

Monsieur Pitou drained his glass and stared over my shoulder into space. A strange rapt look was in his eyes, and I think he was back again at the council of war where the fate of little Henri was being discussed, with the bearded lady gazing at him with suitable reverence, and Marie holding her son tightly, fiercely, as she realised that opinion was against her.

“Yes, M’sieur, from every point of view save one—his mother’s. What fools we men are—weighing up the points for and against: treating a soul as if it was a mathematical problem. For laws must conform to the soul: not the soul to laws. M’sieur perhaps may regard that as dangerous philosophy: nevertheless it is the truth. And that is why women drive men to the verge of insanity when they argue. For argument is based on law, and women know better than the law. At least they do on some things.

“Marie knew better than the law. I see it now, though at the time, I didn’t. Point by point I showed her the advantages that little Henri would gain by going to school. And when I’d finished, and her husband was nodding in agreement, and Alphonse, who trained the performing fleas and was always losing them—mon Dieu! every day, and he slept next to me: when all of us, as I say, had shown Marie clearly and logically that we were right, she just shook her head and whispered, ‘You’re wrong.’ And then the Abbé himself interfered, and he was as big a fool as the rest of us. But he went on a different line, and so he was more successful.

“‘My child,’ he said to her, ‘are you quite sure you are thinking of the boy and not of yourself?’

“M’sieur, it was a devilish question. Even now I can see the dawning look of terror in those wonderful blue eyes as she stared at him. For she realised she was beaten. With her woman’s intuition she knew, at once, that he had penetrated her defences, and that she had lost. For she understood the hopelessness of explaining to men that if she thought of the boy she must be thinking of herself too. You can’t divide a good mother and her son and treat them as two beings. A father and his child—yes: but not a mother.

“She walked away, I remember, and as she passed me I caught my breath at the look on her face. And when she’d gone we talked foolishly together, as is the way with men at such times, of the crops and politics and things that didn’t matter, until Alphonse lost another of his cursed fleas, and praise be to God the Abbé went off with it. At least he swore it was on him, and he was searching for it angrily when Marie returned. She went straight up to little Henri, and picked him up, and though thirty-five years have gone by since that day, the picture she made is as clear in my mind as ever. Their two heads were together, and the little chap’s aims were round her neck. And for a while she stared at the Abbé in silence, till at length he gave up the search and contented himself with an occasional scratch.

“‘Monsieur l’Abbé,’ she said quietly, ‘take him. Take him now before I change my mind.’

“‘You have decided well, my daughter,’ he answered gravely, and then he muttered maledictions under his breath, for Alphonse never overfed his pets. ‘You will not regret it.’

“I will come and see him before we leave to-morrow,’ said Marie, and I saw her arms tighten round her baby. And then she started to whisper in his ear, and I—I am not ashamed to confess it—I blew my nose with violence. There are moments, M’sieur, when the strongest of us find it difficult to speak.

“Ten minutes later we stood at the door of the tent watching the little figure trotting gravely along the dusty road at the side of Monsieur l’Abbé. Was he not going to something new, where he would play with other little boys? And is not the world very good when we are nine years old, and a funny man is beside us making sudden darts at various parts of his anatomy? Is not such a performance expressly intended for the purpose of making little boys laugh? And so we watched them till a turn in the road hid them from sight.

“He never even waved,’ whispered Marie, half to herself. ‘He never even turned round once.’

“Ah! Marie, my dear, little boys don’t turn round and wave when they are laughing. And little boys should always be laughing. It is the only way to balance the world’s tears. They look so intently at the present—and surely an Abbé with a flea is good enough for anyone. It’s not the past or the future that matters: they leave uninteresting things like that to the grown-ups. Which is why, perhaps, Marie wiped the tears from her eyes, as she thought of the last nine years, and then turned on us like a tigress.

“Oh, you fools!’ she stormed. ‘You miserable fools!’

“And there was fear as well as anger in her voice as she thought of the years to come.”

The wizened-up little man drained his vermouth and lit a cigarette.

“M’sieur can perhaps picture those years,” he continued after a while. “From Perpignan to Rheims, from the Gironde to the Vosges, Blom’s Celebrated Circus continued its triumphant career. And once every year we performed at the town where little Henri was at school. Ah! The first of those occasions: it was unforgettable. The excitement, and the laughing, and the kissing that went on! Henri and all his little friends came and sat in the front row, and cheered and talked all through the performance; never did Georges Pitou provoke such amusement. Never did Henri the elder produce his omelette so superbly.

“That is my father,’ came the proud voice of little Henri, ‘and if you’re good he will give you the omelette to eat.’

“But naturally: who else would have that honour on such a day? And after it was over they all came and stared at the bearded woman, and the fleas of Alphonse, until Marie caught up her boy and carried him away from the others. Was he happy? Were his socks mended? Parbleu!—at ten years of age one is always happy, and what is a hole in a sock, more or less?

“M’sieur—he fidgeted. Out of the corner of my eye—was I not doing one of my tricks for the others?—I could see that his eyes were fixed on me. He did not want to sit with Marie in a corner and talk of his socks: he wanted to show the others that he could jump through a hoop. And Marie wished for nothing but that he should sit on her knee with his arms round her neck, and pretend that he was her baby again.

“It was the Abbé himself who came to fetch them, and he said nothing but good of little Henri. His father was delighted, and Monsieur Blom himself presented the boy with a silver franc.

“He will make his name, that boy,’ said Henri to me that night. ‘Truly we did wisely in giving him his chance.’

“And Marie, who was sewing, said nothing, though we didn’t notice it at the time. She knew, M’sieur—she knew even then: women are like that. And there was nothing she could do: the matter was out of her hands.

“It came little by little—almost imperceptibly at first, the—how do you say it?—the crack in the violin. And with it there came another thing, which again was almost imperceptible at first—the waning popularity of Blom’s Celebrated Circus.

“I think it was little Henri who first put it into words with the brutal frankness of the young. He was twelve then, and for the last two years none of his school friends had turned up to see the circus.

“It is so dull, maman,’ he said. ‘Always you do the same tricks. And one gets bored with seeing the same tricks.’

“But there are always new people to see them, cried his father. ‘And an old trick is new to those who have not seen it. What, for example, of the boy—the

new boy of whom you wrote—Jean? He has not seen the tricks. Why did you not bring him?’

“And little Henri turned red and stammered.

“‘Jean,’ he said, ‘does not like circuses.’

“‘Ho, ho!’ cried his father, ‘and who is this strange fellow who does not like seeing an omelette produced from a hat?’

“‘He is the son of the Comte d’Albuisse,’ answered the boy.

“‘Mon Dieu!’ chuckled his father, ‘but we have swagger friends. Tell him that if he should come to-night, I will show him a new and wonderful card trick.’

“And the boy turned redder than ever.

“‘He does not know that I am here, papa,’ he muttered. ‘And anyway, he would not be allowed to come to-night: Monsieur le Comte d’Albuisse is very particular. He fears the—the measles for Jean.’

“‘And that is why you have kept silent,’ cried his father. ‘Good boy. Otherwise the little Jean would be jealous, n’est-ce-pas?’

“‘Yes—he would be jealous,’ repeated the boy.

“‘Considerate, you see,’ cried his father when he had gone. ‘A good trait which I am well pleased with. Mais, mon Dieu, Marie—you are crying. Was there ever such a woman? What is the matter?’

“‘Nothing, Henri, that matters,’ she said quietly, but to me, later, she told the truth.

“‘It is not the measles, Georges,’ she said sadly, ‘that has kept him away. It is that my little Henri is ashamed of us. He does not want his friends to know that his parents are in a circus.’

“And though I told her that she was wrong, I knew that she was right. And I realised that it was what she had feared and dreaded all the time, and now it had come. To her husband she said nothing, and she made me promise that I, too, would keep silence.

“It is done now, Georges,’ she said. ‘My little boy has been taken away from me, and now we can only hinder him. But I wonder if he’s really any happier than he was when he was here with us in the circus.’

“He had to have his chance, Marie,’ I answered. ‘And look how well he is doing.’”

She nodded her head a little wearily, and went on with her sewing.

“Georges,’ she said, ‘there was a time many years ago when I used to dream of the future when we had left the circus. Henri and I would have saved a little money—enough to buy a cottage somewhere and grow vegetables, and keep some hens and a pig. And in the next cottage would have been little Henri and his wife and babies. And we would have been all together—and so happy. But now—what is going to happen? He would not be happy in a cottage, and the money that we might be saving goes in his schooling and his clothes. He must be dressed better there than if he was still with us here, and it is terrible how much it costs. And what is going to be the end of it all, Georges? If only I could be sure he was going to be happy. Nothing else would matter at all then.’

“That was all she seemed to think about, M’sieur: was her boy going to be happy? Her own dreams had vanished; she was trying to find others to replace them. Sometimes when I painted for her pictures of her boy as a great man—as a deputy, nay, as the President himself—her eyes would sparkle and she would nod her head and laugh. And then the joy would fade from her face, and the life die out, until I grew almost angry with her. But she knew, M’sieur; she knew.

“It was when the boy was eighteen that the crisis came. For a long time we had seen it coming, but, as is the way with true artistes, we had hoped against hope. Business was going from bad to worse, and Monsieur Blom grew more worried every day. No longer did the people flock to see us: in fact there were performances when the only spectators were people who had been given their seats free. And the most worried of all of us were Henri Dardot and Marie. The boy’s expenses were increasing, and whereas the rest of us had saved a little, they had saved nothing at all. In fact, they were in debt. They had struggled and struggled to make both ends meet, but you cannot get a quart out of a pint pot. And now the last premium of their insurance was due, for when the boy had gone to school they had insured their lives so that in case anything happened to them his education should not be interfered with.

“And then came the final blow. Never shall I forget that afternoon to my dying day—the afternoon that Monsieur Blom called us all together to tell us the news. We had known things were bad, but we had not realised that they were as bad as they were. A man was with him, a nasty-looking man smoking a large cigar. He had on a fur coat, and Monsieur Blom seemed very much afraid of him.

“‘Mes enfants,’ he said, and his voice was trembling, ‘we are in a bad way. For twenty-five years we have been together all over France, and now——’

“‘The show is broke,’ put in the man with the cigar. ‘Cut the cackle, Blom. It’s not to be wondered at. It’s rotten. I watched it last night. It’s as dull as ditchwater. You’re doing the same futile tricks that you did ten years ago. Why, I saw the conjurer—what’s his name, Dardot—do that fool stunt with an omelette when I was a boy.’”

Henri Dardot’s lips trembled, and Marie put her hand on his arm.

“‘It wants freshening up,’ went on the man. ‘And if I’m to take over the goodwill in exchange for the money you owe me, all these people will have to go. This show as it stands at present is enough to make a deaf mute sob like a child.’

“‘Mon Dieu! M’sieur—it was terrible! We knew, as I said, that things were bad, but this news overwhelmed us. Go—be sacked after twenty-five years! What was to become of us? Above all—what was to become of Henri Dardot and Marie? We, as I told you, had saved something: they had nothing at all.

“‘I saw them after we had left Monsieur Blom sitting together in a dark corner, and this time it was he who was crying, whilst she had her arms round his neck as in the days when they first married.

“‘My dear,’ she said tenderly, ‘we shall manage: somehow we shall manage.’

“‘It is little Henri,’ he sobbed. ‘For how are we to send him to the avocat’s office, if we are turned away?’

“Then he got up and dashed away his tears: evidently a great idea had come to him.

“‘I will learn new tricks,’ he cried magnificently. ‘Now, this minute—I will think out something fresh and original.’

“And Marie clapped her hands together.

“‘I will go and tell that pig with a cigar,’ she cried, ‘that you are perfecting a new wonder.’

“‘Then he will not sack us. Though I wish we had the money for the insurance.’

“Monsieur—had I any alternative? You who are an artist will know how a paltry trifle like that will prevent a man from giving of his best. He is worried: he cannot concentrate. Assuredly we would show this pig in the fur coat what we could do: I myself had already sketched out some new turns. And Henri Dardot also.

“‘Mes amis,’ I cried. ‘Do not worry about that insurance. Are we not friends, and what is mine is thine. I will pay it.’

“We embraced, M’sieur; I would brook no refusal. And then we concentrated on our new tricks. The accursed man with the cigar was persuaded at length into giving us all a week’s further trial: principally, as he said, because it would take him a week to replace us. And for three days Henri Dardot thought and thought, whilst we all tried to help him. But it was hard: for undoubtedly his hand had lost its cunning.

“And then when we were almost in despair there came the great idea. M’sieur, it was a masterpiece: it was the idea of genius. At once we knew that it would make the name of Henri Dardot famous throughout Europe, and that any thought of their being sacked was now gone. It would be the making of the circus, and in my joy and excitement I told the pigdog who smoked cigars as much. And he laughed.

“‘We’ll see,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it couldn’t be worse than their present show.’

“For two more days we worked out the trick, and assuredly it was a creation of genius. At least so it seemed to us. I will not weary you, M’sieur, with the details of it: enough to say that at the great culminating moment a box which the audience thought to be empty was opened and revealed Marie dressed in her most beautiful clothes standing in a blaze of light. It was done by electricity: little bulbs were sewn into her frock and into her hair, and the good God alone knows how much Henri had had to pay the local electrician to do it. I know he had obtained his week’s salary in advance, and there was nothing of it left. But what did it matter: success and fame were his at last.

“It is true, Georges,’ he said to me; ‘that man is correct, I have been lazy. I should have used my great skill before to perfect other masterpieces. Then we should not be in the position we are. But there is still time: this is but the first of many by which we will save Monsieur Blom.’”

The wizened-up little man paused and lit another cigarette.

“The circus was fuller that evening, M’sieur,” he went on after a while. “Almost as it had been in days gone by. And we performed superbly. Were we not all worked up at the thought of Henri Dardot’s masterpiece that was to come? And at length the moment arrived. I stood, M’sieur, in the wings and I trembled with excitement. At my side was the accursed one with the cigar, and over and over again I said to him: ‘Now you will see, my friend—see and understand the genius whom you thought to sack.’ And he only smiled, and dug his hands deeper in the pockets of his coat.

“Mon Dieu! M’sieur, even now I can hardly bear to think of the next few minutes. For it failed: it was a ghastly, miserable failure. Everything went wrong. Marie was not in the box at the right moment; the fool of an electrician had bungled with the lights. And, what was worse, I realised that even if it had come off as Henri intended, it was not a masterpiece at all. It had all seemed so different when we planned and rehearsed it: now it was just a silly stupid thing.

“The audience giggled and somebody hissed, and I dashed on to try and save the situation. I passed Henri and his face was grey, whilst Marie was sobbing under her breath. To have one’s most magnificent hopes dashed to the ground is a terrible thing, M’sieur. And they had built so much on it.

“I darted off again as the next turn started, to find them both talking to the man with the cigar.

“If possible, Dardot,’ he was saying, ‘your show this evening is more utterly futile than when you produce that damned omelette out of a hat.’

“But, M’sieur,’ stammered Henri desperately, ‘it went wrong. To-morrow night——’

“There will be no to-morrow night,’ answered the other. ‘You’re sacked now.’

“And Henri gave a little gasping cry as if he had been struck in the face. They were standing side by side, he and Marie, and for a moment or two they clung together like children: then Marie with a sudden strange look on her face stepped forward.

“‘You engaged us for a week, M’sieur,’ she said quietly. ‘To-morrow is the last night. Give us that one chance.’

“For a few seconds he looked at her—did the man with the cigar. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

“‘All right,’ he said gruffly. ‘But I warn you that your show is no good. And I’m not going to take you on again.’

“To Henri it was a reprieve: the next night all would be well. He slaved and worked at his trick all through the following day, and I, though my heart was heavy with misgivings, helped him. Only Marie seemed strangely silent, so much so that I tried to cheer her up. Henri was busy with the electrician, and we were standing alone. She listened to me with a little sad smile on her lips and when I’d finished she laid her hand on my arm.

“‘Dear Georges,’ she said, ‘it’s no good, and you know it. The trick is a failure. We’re too old, Henri and I, for new things. To-night is the last night, mon ami,’ and she seemed to be looking at something I couldn’t see.

“‘Funny how the shadows play tricks, Georges,’ she went on. ‘I thought I saw little Henri playing with his hoop over in that corner, as he used to—years ago.’

“‘Marie,’ I cried, and I was almost in tears, ‘what are you going to do when you go? For you must have half of my money. I insist.’

“And then, M’sieur, she kissed me on the lips for the first and last time.”

He paused—that wizened-up little man—and there was such a wonderful light in his eyes that I understood why he was not married.

“It came at last,” he went on gravely, “that final performance. And Henri was trembling like a child, whilst I was no better. Only Marie was calm, with the same strange, inscrutable look in her lovely blue eyes that had been there all the day. You see, she knew, M’sieur: all along she had known. I can’t tell you how it happened—it was all so quick. The electrician swore it was no fault of

his: maybe he was right. Maybe, on the other hand, it was an accident, and the fool was to blame. For suddenly without warning, Marie—my beautiful Marie—was just a sheet of flame, and Henri's agonised cry rang through the tent. We darted to her, whilst the audience screamed in terror, but it was too late. We could do nothing; her flimsy dress had blazed too fiercely. The flames, it is true, were out, but they had done their deed.

"She never whimpered, nor cried, though she must have been in agony. Only once did she speak, and then she just whispered: 'Lift me up, my husband.'

"And Henri, who was sobbing pitifully, lifted her up. I was watching her, M'sieur, through my tears and her poor glazing eyes turned to the corner of the tent which had been little Henri's playground. For a while she stared across at it and a faint smile crossed her lips. Then she died.

"You see, M'sieur," said the wizened-up little man gravely, "now that the premium was met the insurance money would be paid. And that was enough for her two Henris—the big and the little."

And a moment later I was alone.

IX. — THE KING OF HEARTS

"I ASSURE you, Sir John, it's exactly what we want."

Mr. Dicker, chief Unionist agent for the constituency, rubbed his hands together, and contemplated the prospective Unionist candidate seated in a chair opposite.

"Exactly what we want," he repeated. "Mark you, Sir John"—he lifted his hand as if to forestall any objections that might be raised—"it will have to be done with care from every point of view. Nothing could be more repugnant to a man in your position than the slightest suspicion that you were in any way boasting."

Sir John Perton nodded decisively.

"And that is precisely what we shall avoid," went on the other calmly. "Again, we must avoid giving the other side any chance of saying that we are merely drawing a red herring across the electors' track. Of course that is precisely what we are doing, but that's a detail. It will therefore have to come not in any sense as an interview with you, but in a brief account of your career and life. And young Titmarsh in the Mercury here is the very man to do it. He writes an 'At Random' column every week as well as his other work, and it's there we'll have the episode of cutting that pack of cards emphasised. It will appear as a detail in the account of your life; it can be magnified when it's taken out and put in the column. It's gorgeous, Sir John—gorgeous. And I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't get you in on it. Besides, it will give us all something to talk about when we go round canvassing. The man who drew the four of spades.... Gambling with death.... I'll get Titmarsh now—this instant——"

He clapped on a hat and dashed to the door: in all his movements Mr. Dicker strongly resembled a terrier after a rat.

"Just think out the story, Sir John; plenty of human interest. All that bit about the water and the pitiless sun and the natives crawling around. And then your gamble with Mr. What's his name on the top of the hill. Gorgeous——"

He darted from the room, and Sir John Perton rose from his chair and crossed to the window. It looked down on the main street of Burchester, and with his hands in his pockets the prospective candidate watched the sleepy midday activity below.

But it is doubtful if he saw anything; if the big brewer's van unloading barrels opposite made any impression on his brain. For he was back in West Africa on that cursed little show—the show that Mr. Dicker described as gorgeous. He could feel that scorching heat again: he could hear that terrible scream which one of the men gave as he went mad and blew out his brains: he could see—God! would he ever cease to see the blazing hideous scorn in Bill Meyrick's face. With a sudden shiver he passed his hand over his forehead and found it wet.

He swore angrily under his breath: this would never do. The thing was over and done with: buried beneath two years of time. Much water had flowed under the bridge in that two years: his uncle and his first cousin had both been killed in a motor accident and he had come into a baronetcy which he'd never expected. From being a comparatively impecunious officer in a line regiment he had become owner of River Park with an income up in the fifty thousands. And so he'd chucked the service, and now he was taking to politics.

He was young—still on the right side of thirty-five: ambitious, good-looking. And the path of life is smooth for a good-looking unmarried baronet with fifty thousand a year. People prophesy smooth things in such cases, and, strange to say, are generally justified in so doing. Certainly the path that stretched ahead of John Perton seemed very much the primrose one. If only he could forget, if only... His fists clenched in his pockets: he would forget. He had forgotten till that fool Dicker had unearthed the story from Bimbo Charteris, second-in-command of his old regiment, and now staying with him at River Park. He had forgotten: except just sometimes when Bill Meyrick's face came to him out of the darkness.... At night, when he couldn't sleep, he'd see it and curse it foolishly....

And yet he was perfectly safe. Nothing could ever happen; the cupboard of this particular skeleton was his brain. Bill Meyrick was dead: of that there could be no doubt. Even Monica was beginning to accept it now.... And that reminded him—he was lunching with Monica at the hotel that day....

He glanced at his watch as he heard footsteps on the stairs outside. Twelve o'clock: he'd give this reporter fellow half an hour, and then—Monica. She liked him, he knew: wasn't he Bill Meyrick's best friend? And she'd been engaged to Bill.... But Bill had died two years ago....

"This is Mr. Titmarsh, Sir John," announced Dicker.

“Pleased to meet you, Sir John,” said the reporter, taking the proffered hand. “From the little Mr. Dicker has told me, it seems to me we’ve got the goods. And if we’ve got the goods you can rely upon yours truly to put ’em across.”

“I have explained to Mr. Titmarsh, Sir John,” said Mr. Dicker a little hastily, “that it will have to be done in the most tactful way. There is nothing a soldier dislikes more than appearing to buck about what he’s done.”

“A proof of the article shall be sent to you, Sir John, before it’s inserted in the paper,” announced Titmarsh. “And if there’s a word in it that offends you—strike it out.”

“I am sure that won’t be necessary, Mr. Titmarsh,” remarked Sir John quietly. “But really, you know, there is very little to tell. The thing was quite a trifling little affair.”

“It’s good enough for us, Sir John,” said Dicker firmly. “Now if you just run over the story, Titmarsh will make notes.”

With a slight shrug of his shoulders, Sir John Perton sat down. Then a little deliberately he lit a cigarette. After all—why not? If he didn’t, Charteris would. Tell the story, and tell it well: he was quite a good raconteur if he chose to exert himself.

“We were on detachment,” he began, “half a company of the Royal Loamshires. There were three officers and ninety men—holding a strong point. We took up our position at midday on a Tuesday, with the understanding that we should be relieved the following day. There was no sign of any natives when we got there—everything seemed perfectly peaceful. And yet by Tuesday evening we were completely surrounded. The way the natives had used the scrub as cover was simply amazing. We never saw a sign of them until we realised they were all around us. Even then we didn’t see them—except an isolated one here and there. We only knew by the firing.

“You must realise that we were on a little conical hill: the sort of position that is a death trap if there is any artillery about, but we knew the natives had none. Away to the east was a range of low foot-hills, and we knew relief would come from that direction next day. And until it came all we had to do was to hang on, which we didn’t anticipate would prove difficult. Without artillery the natives had but little chance of dislodging us.

“We assumed they would try and rush us that night and they did. But we’d withdrawn all the outlying pickets and formed a sort of Caesar’s camp at the top of the hill and we beat them off easily.”

Sir John was beginning to enjoy himself: the attention of his audience flattered him.

“Wednesday came and Wednesday went with its pitiless tropical sun, and still no sign of relief. Except for a little desultory sniping the natives didn’t trouble us, but they were still there. And they remained there all Wednesday night though they didn’t try to attack us again. But we were beginning to look at one another, we three officers, and wonder. There had been a good deal of ammunition expended on Tuesday night, and if something had delayed the regiment seriously—what was going to happen.... It was pretty obvious that the natives thought they’d got us, and they weren’t going to be such fools as to lose their lives attacking us, when all they had to do was to sit tight and starve us out.

“You see that was the trouble. Food and worse still—far worse—water. Thursday night—no relief, and the situation was critical. We’d heard sounds of intermittent firing from beyond the hills, but that was all. Came Friday, and the water question had become sheer hell. We had one petrol tin left with an armed guard over it....

“The Commanding Officer had taken one in the arm, and we were up against it good and proper. We had about ten rounds a man left when the ammunition was equalised out, and by Saturday morning, it was reduced to five. They very nearly got us that night....”

Sir John paused for a while; undoubtedly he was telling the yarn well.

“It was about midday on Saturday that Captain Seymour who was in command came to a decision. He called Mr. Meyrick—the other officer—and me, to him in a little sandy bit at the top of the hill which we’d turned into company headquarters, and he put things to us straight. Not that it was necessary: we knew already.

“‘We may be able to hold out for one more night,’ he said, ‘but after that it’s impossible. There will be no ammunition left—and no water. If the regiment comes to-day—well and good: if it doesn’t come to-morrow it’s the end.

Something must have delayed them, of course, but it's possible that they don't know the desperate position we're in. I therefore propose that one of you two should undertake the forlorn hope of getting through to the regiment. They must be over there beyond the hills.'

"I remember he wouldn't look at either of us.

"It's the most damnable thing I've ever had to do in my life,' he went on. 'Being in command here, I cannot go myself, and I take it hard that I have to suggest to one of you two what is practically certain death. Oh! God! Listen to that.'

"It was one of the signallers who'd gone mad and was screaming for water. He blew out his brains ten minutes later.

"Practically certain death,' he went on. 'But I cannot disregard the fact that there is a thousand to one chance on whoever goes getting through. And it is my bounden duty not to neglect that chance. I also cannot disregard the fact that it's certain death for all of us to-morrow night if the regiment doesn't come. Therefore I must ask you to decide between yourselves which of you shall make the attempt.'

"He left it at that, and Mr. Meyrick and I drew lots. We left it till a bit later, and then we cut. It was ace high—high goes, and he drew the ten of diamonds. I drew the four of spades."

He paused for a moment and stared out of the window.

"And that's about all."

"But did Mr. Meyrick get through, Sir John?" cried Titmarsh excitedly.

Sir John Perton shook his head a little sadly.

"That's the devil of it. He was my best friend, and it's two years since it happened. He's never been heard of since. And the cruel part is that had he waited all would have been well. Just as the sun was going down and the final rays were on the foot-hills we'd been watching so eagerly, I saw the flash of a heliograph. It was our relief..."

He got up and crossed to the window.

“They came next morning, and there were twenty of us left. Captain Seymour had been killed by a chance bullet in the night, and they’d seen no sign of Mr. Meyrick.”

He swung round a little deliberately.

“You will understand, gentlemen, that in many ways it is a very personal story. And I therefore must beg of you to treat it as such. I don’t want there to be any hint, for instance, that I am the source of your information. There are, of course, many people in the regiment who know the story, and from whom you might have heard it. I would be obliged if you would let it be implied that that is how you got it.”

“But of course,” cried Mr. Dicker. “My dear Sir John, it would lose half its value if anyone had an inkling that you were our informant.”

“Of course,” echoed Titmarsh. “Leave it entirely to me, Sir John.”

“I will,” said the prospective candidate, with a pleasant smile. “And now, if you will excuse me, I have a small luncheon party. Good day. Back at three, Dicker.”

“Gorgeous,” said Titmarsh as the door closed. “You were right, Mr. Dicker. Blazing sun: thirst: ammunition running out: the man who cut the four of spades. It’s a cinch, old man. Let’s go and have a spot.”

The two men strolled along the street and turned into the County Hotel.

“A cinch, my boy: a dead snip, Dicker—what’s that line I read somewhere... Thanks, Miss; a little more soda in mine.... By some poet ... Kipling—no not Kipling.... I’ll get it in a moment ... Wait: have got....

“Scornful men who have diced with death under the naked skies.”

A man with a big black beard who was standing close by turned round and stared at him.

“I’ll put that in next week in the column,” went on Titmarsh. “And then everybody will associate the two. The man who drew the four of spades: the man who diced with death.... It’s worth a thousand votes.” He broke off

suddenly and stared through the door. "Hullo! Hullo! Hullo! behold the small luncheon party! Isn't that Miss Stratton he's with."

Mr. Dicker nodded.

"She's helping him. And I think, my boy," he added knowingly, "I think.... But not a word about that.... Well, I must be getting on."

"I'll have a proof ready by the evening," said Titmarsh, finishing his drink.

The glass doors swung to behind them, leaving the black-bearded man alone in the bar.

"And who may those two be?" he asked the barmaid.

"The little perky one is Mr. Titmarsh who is on the Mercury staff," she said. "And the other is Mr. Dicker who is acting as agent for Sir John for the coming election. Sir John Perton, you know: such a nice gentleman. Always a kind word and a pleasant smile for every one."

The black-bearded man planked some money on the counter and strode towards the door.

"Which is more than some people 'ave," she fired at his retreating back. "A beaver," she continued darkly to space as she watched him go out into the street. "And a nasty black one. What's that? Two special Martinis for Sir John? We've only got one sort in here."

She turned to the waiter who had entered the bar.

"Did you see that black beaver? A perfect 'orror. Is Sir John lunching with Miss Stratton?"

"'E is," said the waiter.

"Has she got a ring on, yet?"

"Gaw lumme!" said the waiter, "there's about ten tables in there complaining about the beef. 'Ow would I know? Give me them cocktails."

"You ain't sat on a wasp, 'ave you? There they are, and don't splash 'em over with your shaking 'and."

"Shaking foot," retorted the waiter. "With the amount you put in a glass, it wouldn't splash over in a ruddy earthquake."

He hurried away with the drinks on a tray.

"Your special ones, Sir John," he announced as he placed them on the table.

"Thank you, Charles. And we'll have lunch in five minutes."

He watched the waiter hurry away, only to stop and speak to some people by the door. He saw the people glancing at him covertly and whispering. And a faint smile of satisfaction hovered for a moment round his lips. It was good to be Sir John Perton, fourteenth baronet, prospective member of Parliament: it was good to be having lunch with Monica Stratton. And he would not have been having lunch, nor would he have been fourteenth baronet, if ... Confound old Bimbo Charteris bringing up that yarn again. Still it might help him.... Clever chap, Dicker.... But Monica must never know it was he who had told it.... It would undoubtedly look a bit vulgar. Besides, Bill Meyrick: even now he wasn't quite certain how she still felt about Bill. On that subject she always dried up.

"I say, Monica," he said as they sat down to lunch, "there's a thing I rather want to talk to you about. Dicker has unearthed that old chestnut, when we were on detachment."

"You mean when you and Bill cut——" said the girl.

He nodded.

"He's got all the details—I think a chance remark of Bimbo's first put him on the track: and a confounded little newspaper man called Titmarsh has been buzzing round me like a fly all the morning. Well, the long and the short of it is that I'm very much afraid that it will all come out in this local rag the Mercury. And I thought I'd tell you at once because—" he hesitated for a moment or two—"because I wouldn't like you to think that I had anything to do with it. At first I flatly refused to allow it, but Dicker pointed out how futile it was. The Mercury people are backing me for all they're worth, and it's what I gather they call a stunt. They mean to print it whatever I say. So what I've done is to

stipulate that I shall see a proof before it's printed. And I'd like you to see one, too. I'd just hate—dash it all, Monica, you know what I mean—to make capital out of dear old Bill's death."

The girl smiled a little sadly.

"I know that, John. But Bill, if he knew, wouldn't mind. And if it helps you to get in, he'd just laugh as he always used to."

Sir John heaved an inward sigh of relief: how very wise he'd been to tell her. Then he looked her straight in the face.

"After I'm in, Monica—or not, as the case may be—I'm going to ask you a certain question once again."

She met his glance gravely.

"I won't promise a satisfactory answer," she said.

"Dear, is there any good hoping any longer?" he cried. "It's two years now: we'd at any rate have heard from the old chap by this time."

"I know that," she answered. "And you've been wonderfully patient, John. Only ... I don't know. I just don't know. Don't let's talk about it now, anyway. The important thing to be done is to get you in. And if that story does help, Bill will be so pleased."

And it did help. Titmarsh worked it with a skill which earned him the whole-hearted admiration of Mr. Dicker. Of what use to issue an official statement in an interview that it was nothing? Just ordinary duty, a thing which had no bearing on the election: a thing which the Liberal candidate would have done himself.

Of course Sir John would say that: it was his natural modesty. And the electors could visualise him, clean-cut, good-looking, scornfully "dicing with death under the naked skies." But by no stretch of imagination could they see his opponent, Mr. Timkins, a retired grocer, doing anything of the sort.

"Dicing with death." Titmarsh hugged himself over the flash of genius that had recalled that line. He'd had it in for the first time in the previous day's issue, and from information received it had gone right home. It had made the citizens

of Burchester sit up and take notice. "Dicing with death." That's the sort of member to have.

And the county regiment, too: great thing altogether. Fine man, Sir John: fine regiment: fine fellow, Titmarsh.

He looked up as the door opened and the office boy appeared.

"A man to see you, Mr. Titmarsh. Won't give no name."

Titmarsh removed his feet from the desk as a stranger came in. He was a black-bearded man, and the sub-editor felt vaguely conscious of having seen him somewhere before.

"Good morning," said the stranger quietly. "I was reading the Mercury this morning, and I was much interested in your article on Sir John Perton. I think I saw you two or three days ago in the County Hotel."

Titmarsh nodded: he had recalled him now.

"May I ask you one point?" continued the stranger. "You state that on the evening of the Saturday a heliograph was seen from the neighbouring hills—the long-looked-for message, as you so graphically put it, which announced relief. Is that statement correct?"

"Of course it's correct," said Titmarsh stiffly. "Otherwise it wouldn't be there."

"I see," murmured the black-bearded man. "And since I assume you were not there yourself, may I ask how you discovered that interesting detail?"

"From Sir John himself," said Titmarsh truculently. "He personally supplied me with one or two trifling points of that sort. Anyway, what the deuce has it got to do with you?"

The black-bearded man smiled.

"What, indeed? Good morning."

He rose from his chair, and there was a strange look in his eyes.

“Sir John himself! Well, well, Mr. Titmarsh, that is at any rate first-hand information, isn’t it? Have you any use in your paper for outside contributions? Of course—nothing of mine would be up to the standard of dicing with death and naked skies. Still, I may send something along for your consideration in due course. And I can promise you it will at any rate have the virtue of being topical—and true.”

With a slight nod he left the office, leaving Titmarsh staring after him. What the devil was the fellow getting at? Was he out for trouble, or what? He reached out for the telephone: should he ring up Dicker? And yet—what was the use? What could the man do? Heliograph: that was the signalling affair on which the sun flashed. And Sir John had distinctly said that just before the sun went down he’d seen it. The final rays on the foothills: his very words. No use ringing up: he’d just mention it next time he saw Dicker.

And so no telephone bell rang, and Sir John Perton sat down to lunch half an hour later in ignorance of the fact that a black-bearded man who had been interested in heliographs was even then approaching River Park.

It was a small luncheon—just the house-party consisting of Bimbo Charteris, Lady Stratton and Monica. And conversation centred round the coming election.

“I wish to heaven he’d never got hold of the yarn,” said Sir John. “‘Scornful men...’ Think of it, my dear people. The little blighter never told me he was going to put that in.”

“Doesn’t matter, John,” barked Lady Stratton. “Anything to keep that fearful grocer out. He’s just one of the new bunch of war profiteers. Out of the bottom drawer the whole lot. Got no use for ’em. They eat peas with a knife and talk about serviettes.”

“For heaven’s sake don’t start mother off on that topic,” laughed Monica, “or she’ll never finish her lunch.”

“Lady Stratton’s quite right, old man,” said Bimbo. “You’re the type of fellow we want in Parliament to-day.”

“And after all, John,” put in Monica, “it was a fine show. I know you like to pretend it was nothing: Bill would do the same if the cards had gone the other way. But the fact remains that you two did dice with death, and though it may

sound a bit melodramatic hi cold blood at lunch or in a newspaper, it was a fine show. It catches the imagination.”

“It does that all right,” laughed Sir John. “If only they hadn’t called me a scornful man. What is it, Jackson?”

He turned to the butler, who was standing beside him with a note on a salver.

“A gentleman has just brought this, Sir John. He would like to see you, but he wished you to have this note first.”

“Will you excuse me?” Sir John took the envelope and slit it open. “Truly the worries of a prospective candidate never cease.”

“Until you’re in,” said Lady Stratton. “Then you can sleep for years.”

She paused suddenly and stared at her host. “What on earth is the matter with you, John? You look as if you were going to faint.”

And assuredly Sir John Perton’s face was ghastly. Every vestige of colour had left it, and he swallowed once or twice as if he were choking. The opened envelope had fluttered to the floor at his feet, and in his shaking hand he held the enclosure. It was an ordinary playing card, and Bimbo Charteris, who had involuntarily risen to his feet, glanced at it.

It was the king of hearts.

“What is it, John?” cried Monica anxiously.

“Nothing,” stammered her host. “Nothing. Only, I must see this man. Will you excuse me, please?”

He pushed back his chair, and rose a little unsteadily.

“Outside the front door, you say?”

And then he staggered back and leaned against the table. A black-bearded man was standing in the doorway. For perhaps the space of five seconds there was silence, and then the girl gave a little cry.

“Why, it’s Bill!”

“Great Scott!” said Bimbo dazedly. “So it is!”

And once again silence settled on the room. For the man at the door said nothing: he merely stared at Sir John Perton.

“You don’t seem very glad to see me, John,” he said at length.

“It’s a bit unexpected,” stammered the other. “I thought you were dead.”

“We all did, Bill, dear,” said the girl, going up to him and laying her hand on his arm.

For a moment his eyes softened as he looked at her; then, with a little movement, he forced himself from her hand.

“For heaven’s sake don’t all stand about by the door in the middle of lunch,” cried Lady Stratton. “Come and sit down, all of you. John, tell that man of yours to give me some more food, and then send him out of the room.”

With shrewd old eyes that missed nothing, Lady Stratton watched her hoped-for son-in-law struggling to regain his self-control. His agitation had not been a pretty thing to see; in fact, it had been out of all proportion to what might have been expected owing to the complications that would now inevitably arise over Monica.

“What’s happened?” she said in a hoarse whisper to Bimbo Charteris.

“I wish to God I knew, Lady Stratton,” he answered, and his eyes were troubled.

“So you thought I was dead,” said Bill Meyrick, taking the chair that Jackson had placed for him before leaving the room. “Well, as you see, I’m not. They didn’t kill me: they only tortured me.”

“Bill—my dear!” The girl gave a little cry.

“They tortured me day in, day out, for eighteen long months. Would you have liked to be tortured for eighteen months, John?”

Sir John Perton stared at him with haggard eyes and did not speak.

“Answer me, damn you!” snarled Meyrick.

“Steady on, Bill,” said Charteris quietly. “Remember there are ladies here.”

“I apologise,” answered the other. “But two years of hell is apt to make one forget social amenities.”

“Confound your social amenities, Bill,” cried Charteris. “What’s on your chest? What’s all this mysterious business mean? What the dickens is this king of hearts doing?”

He bent over and picked up the card.

“You want to know the reason of the king of hearts? Why not ask John? You saw the effect it had on him.”

But Sir John Perton sat motionless, with his face buried in his hands.

“There is one thing which two years’ hell does for a man, Charteris. It may not be good or pretty, but it breeds a desire for revenge on the person responsible.”

The girl caught her breath sharply.

“You speak strange words, Bill Meyrick,” said Lady Stratton gravely. “Don’t beat about the bush any more. We know what happened. You cut for it—you two—and you lost. What more is there to be said?”

“You drew the ten of diamonds, Bill,” said Charteris. “And John drew the four of spades.”

“Did you draw the four of spades, John?” said Meyrick quietly.

And suddenly they understood.

“Oh, my God!” said the girl, and Charteris’s face was grey.

“We borrowed Private Atkinson’s pack of cards, you may remember, John,” went on Meyrick. “And I cut first. It was ace high—high goes. I drew the ten of diamonds. We joked about it; that put the chances definitely in your favour. And even as we joked your hands were trembling and your mouth was dry. You’d discussed your feelings pretty freely with me that afternoon—your rage

and annoyance at being scuppered on a little sideshow of that description. You had a title to come and much money. It all seemed so utterly not worth while. Why the devil hadn't you chucked immediately after the big war? But on this miserable little show—who cared? Who at home even knew about it? I remember you harped on that point; it was always a failing of yours, John—your love of the limelight. You'd harped on it so much that your nerves were like fiddle strings that day—and I knew they were like fiddle strings. So I offered to go without cutting; but you wouldn't have that. Certainly not; appearances must be kept up. And then I cut the ten of diamonds. I saw that wild hope in your face, John, as you saw my card. Surely you wouldn't draw higher than that. For you were afraid, John; sick with fear at the thought of going. So was I."

For a while he paused, but the man at the head of the table gave no sign.

"And then someone in my platoon shouted. It was Adams; he'd been hit, but I thought it might be an attack. So I went to the edge of that little sandy plateau to see. And my back was to you, John, when you drew. What card did you draw, you cur; tell them what card you drew. You won't; what matter? They know. You drew the king of hearts, and you were trying to put it back as I turned round. With your fumbling hand you'd got out the four of spades, and for a moment you tried to bluff it off. But I got you by the wrist, John, and when I taxed you with it you broke down. Sobbed like a child.... I didn't blame you for that; anybody might have croaked. But to cheat a man who was your friend was not a good thing to do...."

Once again he broke off, and for a long while no one spoke. And then Bimbo Charteris rose.

"Have you anything to say, Perton?"

"I haven't quite finished, Charteris," said Meyrick. "There is worse to come. What was my last word to you, John? I will refresh your memory. I said—'There's five minutes more of sunshine, John, and then the darkness will hide your shame.' And during that five minutes something happened, didn't it?"

The two women looked at him uncomprehendingly, but on Bimbo Charteris's face had come a look of scorn immeasurable. He understood.

“Oh! you cur,” he muttered; “you damnable cur. You always said he’d been gone for twenty minutes or half an hour.”

“But I don’t follow, Bill,” cried Monica. “What happened?”

“During that five minutes, Monica, John saw the helio on the hills to the east. And he never called me back. The direction I’d taken prevented me seeing it—and he never called me back though he could easily have done so. I didn’t find that out till I read the interesting article in the Mercury, John. I have thought of you these two years merely as a cheat, and not as a would-be murderer also.”

And then at long last Sir John Perton rose to his feet. His face was white and his hands trembled, though his voice was steady.

“I’m in your hands, Meyrick. I admit it all. I cheated you, and then I let you go to your death to keep it dark. My only excuse is that I wasn’t responsible for my actions, and that is not a man’s excuse. What are you going to do?”

Bill Meyrick stared at him thoughtfully.

“‘Scornful men who have diced with death,’” he quoted. “Shall I tell ’em the dice were loaded, John? A nice article in the Mercury?”

Bimbo Charteris swung round.

“The regiment, Bill. You’re still one of us.”

“But he’s not,” snapped Meyrick.

“He was when it happened.”

And then Bill Meyrick felt the girl’s hand on his arm.

“Bill, dear, there’s another thing you still are—engaged to me. Unless you want to break it off.”

“Break it off!” he cried. “Why, the worst torture I’ve had has been the thought that when I did escape I’d find you married.”

The hardness had gone out of his eyes as he looked at her.

“I’ll do what you say, Monica.”

“No, dear. You’ll do what you always, in the bottom of your heart, meant to do—the big thing. Why did you go, Bill, after you’d found he’d cheated?”

“Because he wasn’t fit to go himself.”

“Because you’re a bigger man than he is. I’ve always known it. Why not let it rest at that? He’s punished enough already.”

She pushed back her chair and rose.

“Let’s go, Bill. We’ve two years to make up.”

Which is the true story of why Sir John Perton, fourteenth baronet, decided at the last moment not to contest the constituency of Burchester, and went abroad for an indefinite period after letting River Park to his rival Mr. Timkins.

X. — THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

"THIS afternoon," remarked the celebrated doctor, "I have had one of the most salutary lessons of my life."

He carefully cut the end of his cigar, and his keen sensitive face seemed unduly serious.

"You've all of you at one time or another," he went on, "felt with regard to something you've just done—"That is very good. I, personally, have done it very well. I am a big man, or at any rate, a distinctly bigger man than my neighbour.' Of course, wild horses wouldn't drag such an admission from any of us. Should an acquaintance mention the fact of our bigness we wave a deprecating hand. But we also regard that acquaintance as a distinctly observant fellow, whose own good points we have scarcely done justice to up to date. And we strut a little, and puff out our mental chests, while the gods above laugh. They always laugh—we're so damned comical—but very often we don't hear the laughter. This afternoon I did.

"It was two years ago almost to the day that a card was brought to me in my consulting-room. The name was unfamiliar; the man had not got an appointment, and it was after my usual hours. And for a few moments I debated as to whether I would see him or not. I was a bit tired—I'd had a ticklish operation that morning—and I was leaving London next day for a month's holiday.

"I suppose my indecision was obvious as I turned the card over in my fingers, for my secretary suddenly spoke:

"I told him, Sir John,' she said apologetically, 'that I didn't think you would see him, and that you were going away to-morrow, but he seemed so terribly distressed that I hadn't the heart to refuse to bring you his card.'

"Show him in,' I said, and the next moment I was shaking hands with Mr. Robert Tremlin.

"He was a man of about forty—clean-shaven, and dark. He was turning a bit grey over the temples, but his whole bearing and appearance proclaimed him an out-of-doors man.

"It's very good of you to see me, Sir John," he said, as he sat down on the other side of my desk. "But I really am in the most desperate trouble, and I feel I can't go on much longer. It's about my wife."

"I don't know if you saw in the papers a fortnight ago the account of a terrible motor accident in Devonshire. At any rate, there was one, and the car in question was mine. It contained my wife and Gerald Weymouth—a very dear friend of us both. He, poor chap, was driving when it happened, and there was no one else in the car. He was taking her over to play tennis with some friends of ours who live about ten miles away, and there is one extremely bad hill to go down. What happened no one will ever know. Gerald was an extremely good driver; moreover, he had often driven the car before. Presumably the brakes failed to act, and the car got out of control on this hill. There's a turn half-way down, with a couple of big trees beside the road, and into these two trees the car crashed. Gerald was killed instantaneously, but by some merciful act of Providence my wife was thrown clear. The car slewed sideways after the accident, and she wasn't even cut by the windscreen. She was just pitched over the door—the car was an open one—and landed on her head on the grass. And when the people from a neighbouring house came rushing up they found her there, unconscious, but otherwise apparently unhurt, save for a few bruises. The car was like scrap iron, and poor old Gerald was dead."

"They carried her into their house, Sir John, and telephoned for a doctor and for me. By the time I got there he had already made his examination, and he met me at the door."

"A miraculous escape, Mr. Tremlin," he said gravely. "Of course, your wife is still unconscious, but there is no need to let that alarm you. The great thing is that there is nothing broken, and when she comes to herself again I think we shall find that beyond a severe shaking there is nothing the matter. Only, in view of the appalling nervous shock she must have had before the crash came, I consider it would be most ill-advised to tell her of Mr. Weymouth's death. She will, of course, have to know in time, but until she has fully recovered from the shock, she should be kept in ignorance of what has happened. If she asks any questions we can easily say that his leg was broken—or something of that sort—and that he has been taken to a hospital in Exeter."

"Can I see her, doctor?" I asked eagerly.

“Certainly,” he answered. “She naturally won’t know you as she is unconscious; but I repeat there is nothing to be alarmed at.”

“So I went and saw her, and then I went out to see what remained of Gerald Weymouth. My greatest friend, Sir John; he’d been best man at my wedding; and now ... However, I don’t want to bore you with all that; sufficient to say that it must have been instantaneous, thank God!”

“I must come to the point.”

My visitor moistened his lips, and I pushed over a box of cigarettes.

“Smoke, if you care to, Mr. Tremlin,” I said. “I shall see no one else to-night.”

“He took a cigarette and lit it, and his hand was shaking.

“My wife recovered consciousness the following morning, Sir John,” he went on after a while. “I wasn’t with her at the moment, but the nurse who had been sent for came and told me. We were both in the same house to which she had been taken after the accident; it belonged to friends, and the doctor didn’t want her moved. I went at once to her room and found her sitting up in bed. She just stared at me blankly for a moment or two, and then turned to the nurse.

““Where am I?” she said. “And who is this man? Have I been ill?”

“I knelt down beside her, and started to explain.

““There’s been an accident, darling,” I told her. “You’re in the Ashbys’ house.”

“But she still stared at me blankly, and after a while it became obvious that I was only distressing her by remaining. So I left the room, and waited until the doctor came.”

“Did she know the doctor?” I asked him.

“Mr. Tremlin shook his head.

“She knew no one: she knows no one now. And this is where I come to the distressing part for me personally. All through this last fortnight she has shown an ever-increasing aversion to me. I may say, Sir John, without fear of contradiction, that ours has been a wonderfully happy married life. That’s what

makes it so hard to understand. I adore her, and I think I can say that she feels the same for me. Or rather felt the same, until this ghastly thing took place. Now she can't bear me in the same room with her.'

"Have you any children?' I asked him.

"None,' he answered.

"And where is your wife now?'

"Still in the same house with the Ashbys.'

"Well, Mr. Tremlin,' I said, 'from what you tell me your wife seems to be suffering from complete loss of memory. Her aversion to you is not an uncommon feature of such cases, so you may reassure your mind on that point. A dislike to those who are nearest and dearest is a frequent symptom of brain trouble, and when memory returns the feeling is blotted off the slate and vanishes like a dream.'

"But when will her memory return?' he burst out. 'Sir John, this is absolutely killing me. A fortnight has passed, and there is no trace of improvement. Doctor Rodgers assures me that it is only a question of time, and that we can do nothing except wait. But though I have the greatest faith in him as an ordinary practitioner, a case of this sort is out of his beaten track. It stands to reason it must be. And that is why I've come to you. I was going to ask you to come down and see my wife, but your secretary tells me that you are going on your holiday to-morrow. Well now, I've got an idea. I don't know what plans you've made, but would it be possible for you to spend a few days with me at my house? I can give you some fishing: there are four or five horses it would be a kindness for you to exercise: and there's golf. And then perhaps you could examine my wife, and tell me what you think.'

"Well, I hadn't made any plans that couldn't be broken, and the long and short of it was that I promised to go. The poor devil was pathetically grateful, and we arranged to travel down together the next day."

The celebrated doctor blew out a cloud of smoke thoughtfully.

"So much for Mr. John Tremlin; now for his wife. She was an extraordinarily pretty woman about seven years younger than him, and when you met her there was absolutely nothing to indicate that anything was amiss. Tremlin

motored me over to the Ashbys' house the day after I arrived—which necessitated incidentally going down the hill where the accident had occurred. The marks of the car on the trees were still plainly visible, and he showed me exactly where his wife had been pitched to. And, by Jove! you fellows, when I saw the gradient, and reconstructed the accident in my mind it seemed inconceivable that she should have escaped death. However, that is by the way.

"Doctor Rodgers was waiting for us when we arrived, and he could only shake his head at my host's eager question.

"Just the same, I'm afraid, Mr. Tremlin.'

"He turned away wearily.

"I'll wait for you in the car, Sir John,' he said.

"A very strange case,' said the local doctor drawing me into a room off the hall. 'I make no pretensions to be a specialist or expert in brain matters, but I am prepared to stake my reputation on this being no case for an operation. I can find no trace of local pressure anywhere which would account for it.'

"A case of severe shock producing complete loss of memory,' I remarked. 'And, of course, in such cases the trouble may last for years.'

"Precisely,' he answered gravely. 'Though naturally I haven't told him so. It's pathetic, Sir John, quite pathetic. I think they were the most ideally happy couple I have ever met. His devotion to her was almost dog-like, and since the accident it's really been harrowing to see the way he has suffered. With his brain he understands the reason of it; with his heart he can't understand why he, of all people, should have been singled out for this acute dislike. Because it has turned to that now. To such an extent, in fact, that I have had to forbid him even to see her. And there's another thing too.... However, I don't think I'll mention it. I'd like to see if you notice it yourself, or whether it's my imagination. Shall we go up?'

"She was fully dressed, and as we entered the room she turned her head eagerly to look at us. As I've said she was a strikingly lovely woman, and her whole face was lit up with anticipation. And the next second the look had completely vanished: her expression was quite lifeless again. It was most noticeable, and I seized on it at once.

“‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘Are you expecting someone?’

“‘Yes, I am,’ she answered.

“‘Who is it?’ I asked.

“‘I don’t know his name,’ she replied wearily.

“‘Can you describe him? Because perhaps we can get hold of him for you.’

“But she seemed to have lost interest in the matter, and I could get nothing coherent out of her at all. She submitted to my examination listlessly, and after a while we went out and left her alone.

“‘There’s no mistaking it, is there?’ said Rodgers. ‘I thought it might be my imagination, but I’ve never seen it so clearly. And I’ve never spoken about it to her as you did.’

“‘You mean that look of expectation on her face,’ I said. ‘If we could find out who it was and produce him, it might do the trick.’

“‘Well, it’s certainly not her husband,’ said he grimly. ‘However, what do you make of the case?’

“I won’t weary you with professional shop, beyond saying that I concurred with him over the question of the operation. I could find no trace of pressure anywhere, and I told her husband so. It was a strange case, but by no manner of means an unique one. We were up, so to speak, against a blank wall. All that she knew and remembered was the fortnight or so of her life that lay on this side of it: we had somehow to get her to the other side.

“‘Is it going to be a long job, Sir John?’ he asked me.

“‘There’s no good buoying you up with false hopes,’ I said. ‘I can’t tell you. I don’t know. It might be that she will waken to-morrow morning perfectly normal; it might be—years.’

“‘Oh! my God!’ he muttered under his breath.

“‘Anyway, the first thing to do is to get her back to her own house. The familiar surroundings there may help her to get to the other side of the wall. And once we’ve got her there we’ve taken an enormous step forward.’

“So Mrs. Tremlin returned to Redlands that day, and I watched her with the greatest curiosity. In fact that night I went to bed considerably more hopeful. She had walked, for instance, out of the hall straight into the drawing-room and sat down in the chair which, her husband told me, she generally used. She had seemed, in a way, to recognise the servants; at any rate she had accepted them. And she had gone upstairs to her bedroom without having to be shown the way.

“But there it ended. Amazing though it seemed she still failed to recognise her husband, and the poor devil was almost distracted. In vain to point out to him the vagaries of the brain; he couldn’t get beyond the fact that there must be some glimmerings in her mind of what lay on the other side of the wall, if she could find her own way to her bedroom. And if that was the case why was the most important thing in her life—her marriage to him—hidden from her?

“I think it was the second day after she came home, that I found her in her husband’s study. I’d had to tell him to keep out of the way as much as possible, because although she no longer displayed actual aversion to him, his presence worried her. She had her meals with us, since my chief idea was that everything should proceed exactly as it had before the accident. And at table she didn’t seem to mind him. It was only when he got close to her that she began to get fidgety.

“And now she was standing by his desk holding a big photograph in her hand. There was a queer excited look on her face as she turned to me, and I was instantly reminded of the first time I’d seen her.

“‘Who is this man?’ she said.

“As a matter of fact the very first night I arrived Tremlin had told me.

“‘That’s Gerald Weymouth,’ I answered. ‘Do you know him?’

“‘Where is he?’ she cried, taking no notice of my question. ‘I want to see him.’

“‘Is he the man you were expecting?’ I said. ‘The man whose name you forgot.’

“I think so,’ she answered, passing her hand over her forehead. ‘It’s all so muddly. I seem to remember.... Gerald Weymouth.... Gerald.’

“Her voice died away, and I didn’t press her. To excite a case of that sort is fatal, but it started me off on a new line of thought. And that night I mentioned it to her husband.

“‘It may be,’ I said, ‘that those few ghastly seconds, whilst the car was dashing down the hill, and she was facing what must have seemed to her to be certain death, have imprinted on her mind a recollection of him. How clear it is, I can’t tell—but it’s there. And if only she could see Weymouth now it might save her.’

“‘Since the poor old chap is dead and buried,’ he said wearily, ‘I’m afraid that doesn’t advance us much, Sir John.’

“‘I know all that,’ I answered. ‘The point is—how clear is that recollection? Would it be possible to get a substitute?’

“He sat up with the light of hope dawning in his eyes.

“‘What do you mean?’ he said.

“‘It’s only a vague idea, Mr. Tremlin,’ I answered. ‘And I haven’t even begun to think out the details. Have you ever heard the story of the man who was driving with his servant along a road he rarely used? And as they went over a rather noticeable wooden bridge he said to his servant—‘Do you like eggs?’ And the servant answered, ‘Yes, sir.’ A few months later he again drove over the same bridge, not having been on that road in the interval. And as the trap got to exactly the same spot where he had put the first question, he said, ‘How do you like them?’ And the servant answered, ‘Fairly hard-boiled, sir.’

“He stared at me as if I had taken leave of my senses.

“‘I assure you I’m quite serious,’ I said. ‘Whether the story is true or not is immaterial, but it illustrates a very well-known law—the law of Inherent Connection. The second question was put under exactly similar conditions to the first, and although there was a lapse of months between the two—for the fraction of a second that lapse was non-existent in the servant’s mind. Subconsciously his surroundings recalled the first question, just as the second was put to him. Now I am wondering if we could do something of that sort in the case of your wife.’

“I’m afraid I must be very dense,’ he said, ‘but for the life of me I don’t see what you’re driving at.’

“I’m driving at this. You’ll agree that for a man to ask his servant suddenly if he likes eggs and then to say no more is a peculiar thing to do. And it’s very peculiarity stamped itself on his servant’s mind, so that when identical conditions were repeated, it immediately came to his thoughts. Moreover, it came in such a way and so naturally that his answer to the second question was quite spontaneous. Now suppose, Mr. Tremlin, we could reproduce the exact conditions which led up to the accident—let us say from the time your wife and Weymouth left the house in the car to the moment when the crash came. Only, this time there will be no crash.’

“He was staring at me fixedly now: he was beginning to get the idea.

“Understand: it’s only an experiment. It may do no good; but I don’t think it can do any harm. And if it’s successful we shall have got your wife to the other side of the wall. She will come up to it, as she did on the day of the accident; but this time she will go through it and come out on the other side.’

“Man,’ he cried, ‘do you think there’s a chance?’

“I certainly think there’s a chance,’ I said.

“But how can we arrange about Gerald?’

“There lies the principal difficulty, I admit. At the same time, I think it quite possible that a reasonable likeness will be sufficient for the purpose if all the other details are exact.’

“He was wearing flannels and a big white blanket coat. And he also had on a pair of motoring goggles. By Jove! Sir John,’ he almost shouted in his excitement, ‘if you put on a small black moustache, I believe you could do it yourself. You’re greyer, of course—but a hat conceals that; and your eyes are quite different—which doesn’t matter, either, behind goggles. You’re exactly the same height and build, and your voices are much the same.’

“He was pacing feverishly up and down the room.

“By gad, man!—you’ve given me hope. Don’t let’s dream of failure: don’t let’s even mention the word. You’re going to succeed: I know it.’

“And then we set to work to discuss details. The first thing was to get another Panler car—an exact replica of the one that was smashed. He wired for that in the morning. Then we had to find out as nearly as possible precisely what took place before they started. The butler could help there, for Tremlin himself had been out for lunch. So we called him in and explained the situation.

“‘I remember perfectly, sir,’ he said. ‘Mr. Weymouth drove the car up to the front door, which was open. He got out and entered the house, speaking to me as he passed. Mrs. Tremlin was in the drawing-room, and Mr. Weymouth went to the door and opened it. I heard him say, “Are you ready, Monica?” Then she came out, and I handed her her racket and shoes as I opened the door of the car. I said to her, “Shall I put them behind, ma’am?” and she said, “Oh! it doesn’t matter: there’s plenty of room here.” Then they drove off.’

“‘A point to remember,’ cried Tremlin. ‘There was a tonneau cover over the back seats.’

“‘That is so, sir,’ said the butler.

“Well, we sat far into the night discussing details, and by the time I went to bed I was as excited as he was. The whole scheme, which had started as just a vague idea, began to crystallise in my mind: I realised the possibilities. Of course, the fact that I had to play the part of Weymouth was the weak link, but during the next week, under Tremlin’s direction, I managed to get his voice more or less. Also, we had two dress rehearsals for appearance. We had down a man from London who was an expert in the art of making-up, and with the help of photographs and Tremlin’s criticism he turned me into a very creditable replica of Weymouth.

“And then we had to wait for the right day. I insisted on that: it must be the same sort of weather. The day of the accident had been sunny and warm; as luck would have it we had a fortnight of dull, overcast days. The car had arrived and was being kept in the local garage, from which I had driven it once or twice to get accustomed to it.

“I had left Redlands myself, and taken rooms in the local inn, as I thought it better that Mrs. Tremlin should see nothing of me. I formed no part of her pre-accident existence, and that was the atmosphere in which I wanted her steeped.

“And then at last there came the morning when her husband burst in on me at breakfast.

“‘It was just such a day as this,’ he cried, and he was shaking like a man with the ague.

“‘Steady, Tremlin,’ I said warningly. ‘We’ve all got to keep cool.’

“And, truth to tell, I wasn’t feeling too cool myself. Even with all our carefully arranged details there was still such a lot that must be left to chance. However, there was no question of backing out of it, and so we got on with our final preparations. Tremlin was in such a state of pitiful excitement and agitation that he was worse than useless: in spite of my warnings he was banking everything on success. And he had the hardest part, poor devil: he couldn’t be there to see what happened. The butler had been carefully coached; the whole staff had been warned just to behave normally.

“The man from London started on my face in the morning, reserving the final touches till after lunch, which Tremlin had with me. But he couldn’t eat anything, and it was with a feeling of relief that I saw him go after the meal. He was getting on my nerves rather badly.

“And then, at two o’clock, I left and drove up to the house. Every detail in the car was correct—side-wings, two spare wheels, tonneau cover, everything. The expert from London had done his work well, for the butler gave a positive start as he saw me.

“‘Magnificent, Sir John,’ he whispered. ‘You’re the living image of Mr. Weymouth.’

“‘Where is she?’ I asked.

“‘In the drawing-room, Sir John. I took the coffee there after lunch, as you told me.’

“So far, so good: that had been one of the many difficulties to contend with.

“‘And she has on a similar dress, Sir John: her maid managed that.’

“‘Excellent,’ I said. ‘You’ve got the racket and shoes? Then we’ll get on with it.’

“Nervous, you fellows—I was as nervous as a cat. Would the whole thing, after all the trouble we’d taken, be a ghastly failure? However, there was no use hesitating, so I went to the drawing-room door and opened it.

“‘Are you ready, Monica?’ I said.

“It was the crucial moment, and I saw a look of dawning amazement come into her eyes, to be replaced almost at once by an expression which defeated me. At least, it defeated me in one way only: it defeated me when I saw it on the face of a woman who was devotedly attached to her husband. Except from that point of view its meaning was too obvious.

“I stood aside, feverishly trying to think out this new and unexpected development. Then she passed me and walked quite normally towards the car. The butler was splendid: there was not a hint of hesitation in his voice as he opened the door for her.

“‘Shall I put them behind, ma’am?’

“‘Oh! it doesn’t matter: there’s plenty of room here.’

“And we drove off.

“‘Gerry, darling,’ she said, ‘I thought you were coming to lunch. You said you would.’

“Now here was the devil and all of a predicament. I had assumed that I might have to reply to an ordinary disjointed conversation on general topics; but a love affair, and a serious one, was a different matter altogether. And I was just racking my brains as to what I should say when she spoke again.

“‘I know you couldn’t help it, dear heart: but I grudge every moment you’re away from me.’

“For a moment I was surprised; then I realised that once again luck was with us. She didn’t require any answers from me: the answers were already there in her brain. And for the next quarter of an hour I drove in silence listening to what, to all intents and purposes, was one person speaking on a telephone.

“It wasn’t pleasant, I assure you. It was obvious that Mr. Gerald Weymouth had been a pretty useful swine. Certain it was that he had eaten Mr. Tremlin’s salt,

and then done him the greatest injury one man may do another. Certain it was, also, that he had had no intention whatever of sacrificing his freedom and becoming involved in the meshes of the divorce court. There was no need for his answers to be spoken aloud: they were obvious without that. His career, unnecessary scandal, poor old Bob's feelings—all the old, old stunts rattled off glibly.

"And suddenly a feeling of awe came over me. Just so had this thing happened a month previously: and even as the man I represented talked of his career, death was five minutes away from him. And then my professional instincts took charge: it was so wonderfully interesting. I hardly heard some of what she said: I was so frightfully keen to see what was going to happen when we got to the hill.

"'Why did you do it, Gerry?' Her voice suddenly arrested me. 'I used to love him so much, and now I can't bear him near me.'

"The doctor in me noted that point: the strange aversion was accounted for.

"'Of course, I disguise it—but I can't go on. You've—you've bewitched me.'

"And now we were at the top of the hill.

"'Gerry—be careful. Not too fast down here.... What's the matter—brakes gone? My God! Gerry—turn her: turn her into the bank...'

"I was letting her down pretty fast, you'll understand.

"'Turn her, Gerry.' Her voice rose to a shriek. 'Slip in a lower gear. O God!—you've lost your head. Bob wouldn't have ... Bob...'

"Her weight fell heavily against me—she'd fainted: the car was past the two trees. I pulled up, and laid her on the grass beside the road. Then I ripped off my disguise and brought her round. Now we should see whether it was success or failure.

"She stared at me wonderingly.

"'Who are you?' she said at length.

"'My name is Sir John Caston,' I answered, 'I'm a doctor.'

“But what on earth——’ she stammered in amazement.

“Listen, Mrs. Tremlin,’ I said quietly, ‘and I’ll explain things. You had a very bad accident some weeks ago, and were thrown out of a car on your head. Mr. Weymouth was driving you....’

“But he’s just been driving me——’

“Oh, no!’ I said. ‘I’ve been driving you. Perhaps you imagined it was Mr. Weymouth. You had a nasty knock on the head, you know, and that produces delusions.’

“But I’ve been talking to him to-day.’

“I smiled, and shook my head and lied.

“You haven’t said a word since you left the house,’ I remarked. ‘You’ve had a very vivid dream—that’s all.’

“I don’t understand,’ she said wearily.

“And I don’t want you to try to,’ I answered. ‘Don’t worry your head about it at all. Let’s get on back and see your husband.’

“Bob! Yes—Bob wouldn’t have lost his head.’

“And that was all she said. She got into the car, and we drove back quietly. I talked on outside topics and she answered quite coherently: the thing was a success. She had got to the other side of the wall.”

The celebrated doctor rose and mixed himself a whisky and soda; then he stood with his back to the fire-place, looking down at us.

“An utter, complete success,” he repeated. “Little by little we broke the truth to her, and she took it normally and calmly—even to Gerald Weymouth’s death. But the morning I went she asked me a question.

“That dream, Sir John; that terrible dream, when I thought you were Gerald. You’re sure I didn’t say anything?’

“Perfectly sure,’ I answered calmly.

“And under her breath I heard her say, ‘Thank God!’

“All that was two years ago, and at intervals I have said to myself—‘Good. You did that very well. No one knows her secret, save you: you have restored her to her normal mind, and from information received they are still a devoted couple. In fact, you are distinctly worthy of a pat on the back.’ And during those two years the gods have been laughing: this afternoon I heard their mirth.

“I lunched with them both at the Ritz, and afterwards she had to go out shopping. So I sat on talking to him.

“‘Pretty satisfactory, Tremlin,’ I said, full of the righteous glow of Fin champagne. ‘I’m proud of that little experiment of ours.’

“‘Are you,’ he said, with a twisted sort of smile.

“‘But, dash it, man,’ I said, aggrieved. ‘Aren’t you?’

“He looked at me, and his eyes were weary.

“‘At any rate she called for me when she thought the end was coming.’

“I positively stuttered at him.

“‘What, under the sun, do you mean?’

“‘Only that I was hidden under the tonneau cover at the back.’”

XI. — THE HAUNTING OF JACK BURNHAM

"It's an amazing story," said the doctor, "and I don't profess to account for it. Just one of those experiences which come out of the unexplored realms, and leave one utterly at a loss for any explanation. You remember Kipling's story of the man who was haunted by the ghost of the woman he'd lived with and chucked, and who went mad and died with the horror of it. Well, this might have ended the same way.

"We were at Rugby together—Jack Burnham and I. Went there the same term; were put into the same form; and were both at the same house. And there we laid the foundation of a friendship which has lasted till to-day. It was built somewhat on the law of opposites, for our characters and attainments are totally different. And the divergence was perhaps more noticeable at school than in later years. He was a magnificent athlete—a boy who stood out as a games player above the average; whereas I was always a mediocre performer. He was in the eleven and the fifteen before he was sixteen, and his physical strength was phenomenal for a boy of his age. Moreover, he was intensely matter-of-fact, with the temperament that enabled him to go in to bat at a crucial stage in a cricket match with the same sang-froid as he would have when batting at the nets. It's important—that point; it makes what is to come the more inexplicable.

"His father died when he was up at Oxford, leaving him quite comfortably off. I suppose Jack had four thousand a year, which relieved him of the necessity of earning his own living. It was just as well perhaps, because I don't think the old chap would ever have set the Thames on fire by his intellectual attainments. Moreover, it enabled him to become what he'd always been at heart—a wanderer.

"If ever a man had the wanderlust developed in him, it was Jack Burnham. He would disappear for years at a time, leaving no address behind him—only to pop up again in London as suddenly as he'd gone. And he was one of those fellows with whom one could pick up the threads just as if they had never been broken.

"I'd been installed in Harley Street about three years when the story I'm going to tell you began. Jack had been away for eighteen months, in the North of Africa somewhere, and strangely enough, I was thinking of him and wondering where he was when the door opened and in he walked.

“My consulting hours were over, and I got up joyfully to greet him.

“‘My dear old man,’ I cried, ‘this is great.’

“And then I saw his face clearly, and stopped short. There was a strained, haggard look in his eyes which I’d never seen before, and I realised at once that something was the matter.

“‘Bill,’ he said abruptly as he shook hands, ‘I want you to dine with me to-night. I think I’m going mad.’

“‘Is that the reason of the invitation, old boy,’ I said lightly. ‘You’re looking a bit fine drawn. What about dining quietly with me here?’

“‘Excellent. I’d love to.’

“I went over and rang the bell, and I was watching him all the time. He kept glancing into different corners of the room, and once he swung round suddenly and stared over his shoulder. Nerves evidently like fiddle strings, I reflected, and wondered what the devil had happened to reduce Jack Burnham, of all people, to such a condition.

“All through dinner it was the same thing. When he spoke at all his words were jerky and almost incoherent, and by the time the port was on the table I realised that something pretty serious was the matter. In fact, if I hadn’t known him to be thoroughly abstemious, I should have attributed it to drink or drugs. He had to use both hands to lift his port glass which was a bad sign.

“I didn’t hurry him; it was better to let him take his fences his own way. And it wasn’t until he’d lit a cigar that he took the first with a rush.

“‘Do you know anything about the occult, Bill,’ he said suddenly.

“‘Just enough to leave it alone,’ I answered.

“‘I wish to God I’d known as much as that,’ he cried despairingly. ‘Bill—you’ve seen the condition I’m in. My hands shaking like a man with the palsy; my nerves screaming; my reason tottering. I tell you, I am going mad—unless you can help me.’

“‘Steady, Jack,’ I said. ‘There’s generally a cure for most things. Tell me the yarn, old man, and take your time over it.’

“He didn’t answer for some time, and I could see he was taking a pull at himself.

“‘See here, Bill,’ he said at length, ‘what I’m going to tell you is God’s truth. It’s no hallucination—all the beginning part of it; it’s a cold, sober fact that I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. Whether or not the result of what I saw and heard is hallucination; whether or not what I’m tormented with now, is a hideous delusion—or cold sober fact—I’ll leave you to judge. I know what I think myself.

“‘It was a year ago that the thing began. You know I’ve wandered a good deal, and in the course of my wanderings I’ve seen some pretty strange things—things, that if you told ’em in a club smoking-room would be received with smiles of derision. I’ve seen black magic celebrated in age-old temples, where it was death to stir one step outside the circle of safety; where the blood in the great bowl placed on the floor outside the circle swirled and heaved and monstrous shapes rose out of it and hovered round us—waiting. I have seen things which no man would believe second-hand; but until a year ago I had never seen the most dreadful thing of all—the dead restored to life.

“‘I had heard rumours of it, but I had never actually witnessed it. So that when I found myself in the back of beyond in Morocco, as the guest of a chieftain for whom I had been able to do a service, and he asked me whether I would care to see it done, I accepted eagerly. I won’t bore you with a detailed description of what happened: anyway, no spoken word could adequately paint the horror of the scene.

“‘Picture to yourself an Arab burial ground—just a clearing in the scrub. Around us barked the jackals, and in answer the dogs from the village a few hundred yards away gave tongue. The smoke of the camel-dung fires came acrid to the nostrils, and the cemetery looked ghoulish in the greenish light of the flares carried by some of the men.

“‘It was a woman who was going to do the thing, and while some of the men removed the earth from a recent grave, she started singing some strange incantation.

“At last the men uncovered the corpse, and carried it in a piece of sheeting towards the central stone of the burial ground. Then they withdrew, leaving the woman alone. Now, mark you, Bill, that man had been dead over a fortnight....’

“He passed his hand over his forehead, and it was wet with perspiration.

“The woman, by now, was in a state of frenzy, and the harsh wailing from the other women who were seated in a circle around her seemed to madden her still more. And suddenly she began to shine with a faint radiance; I suppose she’d rubbed phosphorus on herself. A few seconds passed and she seemed to be on fire, while the chant grew louder and louder, and then abruptly stopped as the woman advanced to the corpse.’

“Once again he paused and shook himself like a dog.

“I’ll spare you the revolting details of the next few minutes—you wouldn’t believe them if I told you; but five minutes later she withdrew and the dead man was sitting up—alive. I don’t profess to explain it; I can only tell you what I saw. What power had entered that corpse to endow it with the capability of speech and movement I know not; whether it came from the woman or whether it was some disembodied spirit—possibly that of the man himself—I can’t say. All I do know, is that in the ordinary accepted meaning of words, the dead lived.

“Now he had been an ordinary peasant in life—a man of no account; but the instant he sat up the whole circle prostrated itself around him. Grave, dread questions were asked him as to the life to come, and in every case the answer was coherent and sensible. And then my host intimated that I might ask him a question. Without thinking I said the first thing that came into my head.

“‘What does the future hold for me?’

“For a while there was no reply, and, glancing up, I saw that the corpse was shaking uncontrollably. Then it spoke:

“‘Sleeping and waking you will be haunted by horror. Day and night it will be with you until the end. Then it will pass away.’

“That was all, and shortly after the ceremony ended. The corpse relaxed and was placed back in its grave, and I accompanied my host back to the village. He was silent and distraught, occasionally looking at me with an expression

almost of fear in his deep-set eyes. But he said nothing, and as for me, my mind was far too occupied with what I had seen to want to talk. Of the answer to my question I barely thought; it seemed such an insignificant part of such an amazing whole.

"I left the next day, and all the leading men of the village assembled to bid me good-bye. With the morning had come an amused scepticism, though I was careful not to show it. Ventriloquism undoubtedly: my eyes tricked by the smoky light. And as for the answer to my question, I forced myself to think of that ridiculous story of Oscar Wilde's—"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime."

"But there was no levity on the part of the Arabs: only a grave and dignified concern. I felt that they looked on me already as doomed and as such I was entitled to their commiseration and respect. And two months later I had forgotten all about it except as a strange and interesting experience.'

"He paused to relight his cigar, and I made no comment. In my own mind I felt tolerably certain that his morning reflections were correct and that he had been tricked, but the point was immaterial. The important part was still to come.

"So much is fact,' he went on after a while—'cold, hard fact. How it was done matters not. All that concerns us is that I saw and heard what I have told you. Now we come to the second chapter. I was in Biskra when it started—the thing that has gone on ever since. Never a night passes without it, Bill—so that I fight against sleep; and now hardly a day passes without it too. It's a dream at night, always the same in every detail; by day, God knows what it is.

"It starts with a kind of luminous cloud which swirls and dances as it retreats before me. Every moment I think I am going to catch it up—only for it to elude me always. But I know what's coming, and I wait—longing for it to happen. Out of the cloud there forms gradually a woman's face—lovely beyond the powers of description. And she beckons me to come to her. I strive madly to reach her, only to be eluded once more. I want to take her in my arms; and I swear she wants me to take her. But—never have I done so. Always just out of reach: always just beyond me. And then—sometimes very soon, sometimes after what seems hours—the horror comes. I know it's coming because I can see the look of frozen terror in her eyes, and I'm powerless to prevent it. And the horror—how shall I describe it? Something comes flapping round my head, buffeting me in the face: something that beats at me like the wing of some hideous bird till I feel smothered and choking; something that leaves behind it still the awful

smell of carrion. I tell you, Bill,' he shouted, 'I smell that smell: it's still lingering with me when I wake up sweating and dripping with fear.'

"Then he pulled himself together, and went on calmly.

"The first time it happened I put it down as an ordinary nightmare and thought no more about it. And then two or three nights later I had precisely the same dream. That was a year ago, Bill; for the last six months I've had that dream every night. The details may vary a little, but it's always the same woman, and it's always the same ghastly horror at the end. I'm fighting for my life against that smothering, fetid terror.'

"Do you know the woman, Jack?' I said, 'Is she anyone you've ever seen?'"

"He shook his head.

"No, I've never seen her: I'm certain of that.'

"And even as he spoke his face turned grey, and he stared over my head into the shadows of the room.

"My God!' he whispered, 'she's just behind you.'

"I swung round in my chair: there was no one there.

"You thought you saw her, did you?' I said quietly.

"He shook himself, and the grey look slowly left his face.

"That's the second part of the terror, Bill,' he muttered. 'She's gone now, but three months ago she started to come to me by day as well. I've seen her on board ship, in restaurants, in the street—always beckoning and imploring me to come to her. The first few times, so vivid was the hallucination that I thought she was really flesh and blood. I followed her—madly; to find she'd disappeared. She'd never been there at all. "Day and night it will be with you to the end." That's what that foul corpse said, and, dear heavens! it's true. It's true, Bill—I tell you: true. It's with me day and night, for even when it isn't actually there the thought that it may come at any moment haunts me. Do you wonder I said I was going mad?'

“He leaned forward, resting his head on his hands, and I did some pretty powerful thinking. Remember I knew Jack’s character, and his almost aggressive stolidity. He was the last man in the world to give way to hysterical fears: this thing that he had told me was as real to him as I was. You might call it a delusion, an hallucination—what you liked: there’s no virtue in a name. To him it was reality, and as such it had to be treated. And it seemed to me that the cure would have to come largely from himself. And it would have to come soon. Otherwise, in very truth he might go mad.

“‘Well, Bill?’ he said, looking at me with haggard eyes. ‘What think you?’

“‘It’s difficult to say, Jack,’ I answered. ‘I would like a little longer to think it over. But there are a few things that seem to me to stick out as obvious. In the first place, take what you see by day. Now you know, you’ve proved that what you see is non-existent. The woman is not there. Therefore you know that she is merely a figment of your imagination. Don’t misunderstand me: she seems very real. But she isn’t—and with one side of your mind you know it. Now, have you tried fighting with that side of your mind? Have you tried throwing a loaf of bread at this vision: kicking it hard: telling it to go to hell: forcing yourself to believe that you see nothing. Or have you been content to acquiesce in what you imagine you see, and not help the rational side of your mind to fight? Salvation, Jack, has got to come from you yourself. I’ll help to the limit of my weight: but it’s you, and you alone, who have got to come to final grips with this thing!’

“‘I get you,’ he said quietly. ‘But what about the dream? What about that ghastly end when she has vanished?’

“‘I believe, Jack, that the first thing to tackle is the daylight manifestation. If you can get rid of that, it will strengthen your subconscious mind to fight the dream. And I think’—it was a sudden inspiration that came to me—‘that I can give you an explanation of the terror at the end. The clue lies in the fetid smell you imagine. Now, in that atrocious experiment you saw carried out, didn’t the same smell of carrion hang round the grave yard?’

“‘Why, yes!’ he cried eagerly, ‘it did.’

“‘Precisely,’ I answered. ‘Now, nothing will make me believe that what you described to me really happened that night. But you were in a state of partial hypnosis, induced by the chanting and the lighting effect, and you imagined it.

And I know enough about such matters to realise your intense danger in being in such a condition in the circumstances. Your mind was a partial blank, ready to sop up impressions like blotting-paper sops up liquid. And one of the most vivid impressions that it absorbed was the fundamental one of the foul smell around you. And that impression comes back to you now each night. What the connection between it and the woman is, I don't profess to say. Don't forget that in the subconscious mind we have a jumble of disconnected thoughts, unlinked by any reason or argument. And for some strange reason the vision of this woman, and this beating, suffocating stench are joined together. Get rid of one, and you'll get rid of the other.'

"He was impressed, I could see, by my purposely materialistic arguments. And when two hours later he went to bed—I insisted on his stopping with me that night—he seemed a good deal calmer. I gave him a sleeping draught and waited until he'd gone off: then I got a book and settled myself down in his room for an all-night vigil.

"It was three-thirty when it began, and I woke with a start from a doze. And by the light of my reading-lamp I watched the terror come. Jack was sitting up in bed, his face convulsed with horror, beating with his hands at the empty air in front of him. He was croaking at it hoarsely, and his great fists were dealing savage blows at—nothing. I went over and stood beside him, and then there happened the thing which to this day I can't recall without a pricking at the back of my scalp. As distinctly as I can smell this cigar, did I smell the sickly stench of putrid carrion by his bed. And then it was gone, and Jack, wild-eyed and desperate, was staring up at me from the pillows.

"'Again,' he said in a shaking voice—I've just been through it again, Bill.'

"'I know you have, old man,' I answered quietly. 'I've been with you the whole time.'

"He got up unsteadily and peeled off his pyjamas, and you could have wrung the sweat out of them on to the floor. Without a word he rubbed himself down with a bath towel; then, putting on a dressing-gown, he lit a cigarette.

"'Every night, Bill. I can't go on. For God's sake, man, do something.'

"And that was the devil of it—what to do. I didn't tell him so, of course, but that one staggering thing—the fact that I had noticed the smell—had knocked every

idea of mine to smithereens. I realised that I was up against something beyond ordinary medical skill. And—what to do....

“Gad! how he fought during the next week. I kept him with me, and one night he nearly caused my butler to give notice. He bunged a glass full of whisky and soda straight at him, and then cried triumphantly, ‘It went clean through her, Bill.’ Unfortunately the butler was not equally transparent, and objected to receiving heavy cut glasses full of liquid in the chest.

“But the dreams went on, and at length I insisted on him seeing a brain specialist. But it was no use, and ultimately I began to despair. So did he.

“To the end, Bill,’ he said one day. ‘To the end. Pray God it comes soon.’

“Then it will pass away,’ I reminded him. ‘Don’t forget that, Jack.’

“But he only shrugged his shoulders: I think he had very nearly given up hope.

“And then one night came the staggering dénouement. We were dining at Claridge’s—just the two of us alone. I used to make him go to restaurants and theatres in the hope of taking his mind off it, and as we were finishing our fish I happened to look up. A man and a woman had just come in, and the woman was quite one of the most lovely things I’ve ever seen. She was dressed in pale green, and my eyes followed her as she went to the table reserved for them. Head waiters were bowing obsequiously, so they were evidently not unknown. And I began wondering who they were.

“Devilish good-looking woman just come in, Jack,’ I said idly. ‘Three tables away on your right, in pale green. Don’t turn round for a moment: she’s looking this way.’

“I saw him glance at her a few moments later, and the next instant I thought he’d gone mad. He was staring at me with his eyes blazing and his face a chalky white.

“You see her, Bill?’ he gasped. ‘She’s real? You saw her come in?’

“Of course I saw her come in,’ I cried in amazement.

“She is the woman of my dream,’ he said stupidly. ‘The woman who haunts me.’

“‘Steady, old man,’ I stammered urgently, while I tried to grasp this vast essential fact. ‘People are looking at you. You say that woman is the woman of your dream. You’re sure?’

“He laughed shortly.

“‘Don’t be a damned fool. Do you think I could make a mistake over that?’

“‘And you’ve never seen her before?’

“‘Never in my life. But one thing I’m certain of: I’m never going to lose sight of her again. To the end, Bill—to the end. And she and I have got to go there together.’

“It was useless to argue, and anyway the situation had gone beyond me. Half dazedly I heard him send for a head waiter, and ask who they were.

“‘Kreseltein’ he said to me slowly after the waiter had gone. ‘One of the South African diamond kings. Returning in the Arundel Castle next Friday week. Tomorrow, Bill, I go to the Union Castle office in Fenchurch Street. I also travel by the Arundel Castle next Friday week.’

“He was like a man bereft of his senses for the next ten days. The Kreselteins were staying at the Ritz, and Jack haunted the place like a detective. He lunched there, he dined there, he very nearly breakfasted there, and as the date of sailing drew nearer he grew more and more excited. And there was another strange development: from the night when he saw her first at Claridge’s the dream and the daylight hallucinations completely ceased.

“I dined with him at the Ritz on the night before he sailed, and the Kreselteins were a few tables away. And he was his old self again.

“‘It’s flesh and blood, Bill, now’ he said, ‘and flesh and blood I can cope with.’

“‘Tell me, Jack,’ I asked, ‘as a matter of interest, has Mrs. Kreseltein ever seemed as if your face was familiar to her.’

“‘Never,’ he answered decisively. ‘On the occasions when I’ve happened to catch her eye, she has always given me the blank look of a perfect stranger.’

“‘I wonder who she was?’ I remarked.

“Well, I’ve been making a few inquiries, if you want to know,’ he said. ‘She’s English, and she married Kreseltein when she was quite a girl. He’s a German Jew, and I gather from what I’ve heard a pretty foul swine. He flies into the most maniacal rages if she even looks at another man. There’s some story apparently about his having plugged someone in Kimberley with a revolver, who, he thought, was making love to his wife.’

“You’d better watch it, Jack,’ I said gravely.

“My dear old Bill,’ he answered, ‘I’m no particular slouch with a gun myself. But even if I couldn’t hit a haystack at five yards, it would make no difference. That woman is all that stands between me and insanity, and so I’ve got to go through with it. If I didn’t go in the Arundel Castle to-morrow, as sure as I am sitting here now the dream would start again. For some strange inscrutable reason Mrs. Kreseltein is going to be mixed up in my life. Her destiny and mine are going to meet—at the end. After that—God alone knows. But it will pass away; the horror will be gone.’

“He stared at me gravely.

“I’m under no delusion, Bill. I’ve got to go through the horror in reality, and I’ve got to come out on the other side. Only then will its power be dead!’

“The next day I saw him off in the boat train at Waterloo. He wrung my hand hard as he thanked me for the little I’d been able to do, and from my heart I wished him good luck. Then the train steamed out, and in almost the last carriage I saw the Kreselteins. He was deep in the morning paper; she was staring out of the window at the people on the platform. And her face was the face of a woman who was tired unto death. But lovely—Lord! how lovely—in spite of its weariness.”

The Doctor paused and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

“And with that ended the first part of the story of Jack Burnham,” he continued after a while. “Weeks turned into months, and I heard nothing more. Jack was always a bad letter writer, and even this time he proved no exception. He had vanished into the blue as usual, and I had nothing for it but to bottle up my intense curiosity as well as I could.

“And then, one day came the first news, and, knowing what I did, it was grave enough in all conscience. It was in the morning paper with head-lines all complete:

“MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF SOUTH AFRICAN DIAMOND KING

STILL NO TRACE OF MR. OTTO KRESELTEIN.

“The disappearance of Mr. Otto Kreseltein, the well-known owner of race-horses, and one of South Africa’s wealthiest millionaires, grows more mysterious daily. It will be recalled that he left his house in Johannesburg somewhat suddenly about a fortnight ago, stating that he was going north into Rhodesia. From that day no further news has been heard of him. The station-master at Bulawayo states that he believes a gentleman answering to Mr. Kreseltein’s description was on board the train bound for the Victoria Falls, but there were so many tourists travelling that he is unable to be certain. In the meantime an active search is being organised. It is thought possible that Mr. Kreseltein may be suffering from temporary loss of memory.’

“Three weeks later came another announcement.

“The gravest fears must now, we regret to state, be entertained concerning Mr. Otto Kreseltein. No trace has been found of him; no word has been received for over five weeks, and in view of the fact that he was in the middle of a big scheme of amalgamation when he left Johannesburg, and told his managing director that he only proposed to be absent for four days, it is impossible to avoid fearing that something very serious has happened.’

“Once again weeks passed by, and at last it was generally assumed that he was dead. Legally, of course, the assumption could not be entertained as yet; but from every other point of view his death was regarded as certain. And still I had no line from Jack to assuage my curiosity. For, inwardly, I was convinced that he could throw some light on the matter, though no mention of his name had ever been made in the papers connecting him with Kreseltein in any way.

“And then, six months later, he walked into my consulting-room. He looked a bit pale, and fine drawn, but his eye was clear and his smile was the smile of the Jack Burnham of old.

“I’ve been to the end, Bill,’ he cried. I’ve come out on the other side. And it has passed away.’

“Why the devil haven’t you dropped me a line, Jack,’ I demanded.

“Because, old man,’ he said gravely, ‘there are certain things it is better not to put in writing. Have you seen the papers this morning?’

“He held out a copy of The Times to me, and indicated a paragraph.

“The mystery of the disappearance of Mr. Otto Kreseltein has at last been solved. Two Englishmen, while shooting in the district north of Bulawayo, discovered the remnants of a skeleton lying behind a big rock. Vultures and other beasts of prey had long since rendered any chance of identification impossible, but some fragments of cloth and part of an envelope supplied the necessary clues. There is no doubt that the skeleton is all that remains of the unfortunate diamond magnate, whose sudden disappearance caused such a stir some months ago. What Mr. Kreseltein was doing there will probably remain an unsolved problem.’

“I put down the paper and glanced at Jack.

“An unsolved problem,’ he said with a faint smile. ‘Except to me, Bill, and one other. And now to you. I shot him.’

“The devil you did!’ I said. ‘Is it indiscreet to ask why?’

“Largely because of the fact that of all the devils in human form I have ever met, Otto Kreseltein was the worst,’ he answered grimly. ‘He lived like a swine, and he died like one, and you can take it from me that he’s no loss.’

“He flung himself into a chair and lit a cigarette.

“I’ll tell you the yarn, Bill,’ he said. ‘I guess you’ve a right to know. It was after we left Madeira that I made Joan’s acquaintance—his wife, I mean. He was mad keen on bridge, and with three others of the same kidney he spent the whole day in the smoking-room. And I talked to her. It was a case of love right from the very beginning—with both of us, I think. Even if it hadn’t been for the special reason which actuated me; even if I’d never been haunted by the horror, things would have come to a head. I’m going to marry her, you know.... She’s in London ...

“However—to get back to it. After I’d known her for a few days I told her everything. I felt absolutely certain that something was going to happen some

time, and I wanted her to be prepared. At first she hardly took it seriously, but after a while I convinced her that I wasn't fooling. And I think the thing that impressed her most was when I told her how I'd hit your butler in the chest with a whisky and soda.

"Towards the end of the voyage we grew a bit careless, I suppose. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was with her from after breakfast until we went to bed. And we danced a good deal together. Off and on in the intervals of bridge her husband had joined us, and I saw enough of him to fill in the gaps left by Joan. A thin-lipped, domineering swine, Bill; a man of the most colossal conceit—and a cad. A clever cad, and an able cad; but once or twice when he spoke to his wife my hands tingled to get at him. She might have been a junior clerk getting told off.

"He'd said nothing to me about being so much with his wife, and he'd said nothing to her. So it came as rather a surprise when, the night before we arrived in Cape Town, he came up to me as I was strolling up and down the deck waiting for the dinner bugle.

"I have just been—ah—speaking to my wife, Mr. Burnham," he said softly. "And she quite understands that her acquaintanceship with you must cease forthwith. Should you take any steps to renew it, I shall have to deal with you in a way you may not like!"

"And it was the way he said it, Bill, that finished me. Foolish perhaps, but I lost my temper—badly.

"When your wife tells me the same thing, Mr. Kreseltein, I shall obey immediately. Until then I would be vastly obliged if you would go to hell and remain there. Your general appearance is not conducive to an appetite for dinner."

"And then, Bill, the primitive man came out in him. His face was red with passion, and he shot out a great hairy hand and caught me by the wrist. He was strong—but I was stronger. I removed his hand, and I held him powerless for a few seconds.

"No, Mr. Kreseltein, I win on those lines," I said. "You'd better treat your wife better in future or I may have to give you a caning."

"Foolish, I frankly admit—but I was seeing red, old man. And the next morning as we got off the boat it wasn't red—it was scarlet. For on Joan's arms I saw two bruises, and I realised how he had spoken to her the night before. And for a moment or two I went mad.

"I went straight up to him in the Customs, and I got his arm in a grip I knew of old. I swung him round, and he faced me livid with fury.

"If I see another bruise on your wife's arm like that, you damned swine," I muttered, "I'll first break your arm—so," and, by Gad I Bill, as near as makes no odds I broke it then, so that he let out a squawk of pain—"and then I'll flog you till you scream for mercy."

"There was murder in his face when I left him, and I cursed myself for a fool. His fury was bound to be vented on Joan. And on the way up in the boat train I made up my mind: I'd take her away. I felt pretty certain that she'd come. And when she rang me up at the Carlton Hotel in Jo'burg I wasn't surprised.

"I can't stand it, Jack," she said. "He's become a devil incarnate. He—he thrashed me last night."

"God! old man—that finished it.

"Pack what you want, dear," I said, "and come to the Carlton. We leave for Durban to-night. I'm going to see your husband now."

"I rang off before she could say anything, and went round to his office. There was some meeting on, but I went straight into his private office. I suppose I looked a bit wild, for he rose to his feet and started opening a drawer in his desk. And I got to him just before he drew his gun.

"Shall we discuss this matter with or without an audience?" I remarked.

"The audience settled that and left rapidly.

"You thrashed your wife last night, Kreseltein," I said quietly. "We will now have a hair of the dog that bit her."

"Well, Bill, I broke the stick on him, and it was a stoutish weapon. And when I'd finished with him I told him I was taking her to Durban that night. He lay there huddled up in his chair with the malevolence of all hell in his eyes.

"I shall not divorce her," he croaked. "And in addition to that I shall make it my business to have you followed wherever you go, so that your relationship may be known."

"I was on the point of starting in on him again, when he suddenly sat up and stared at me.

"I admit that you are stronger than I am, Mr. Burnham," he said, "but there are other ways of settling affairs of this sort. Unless you're afraid."

"Get on with it," I snapped at him.

"I suggest revolvers," he remarked. "A shooting trip in Rhodesia—from which one of us will not return."

"I agree," I said instantly. "And we start at once."

"A sardonic smile twitched round his lips.

"To-night," he answered, and with that I left him.

"It was Joan who interpreted that smile.

"My dear," she said; "it's murder. Otto is supposed to be one of the half-dozen best revolver shots in the world."

"I guessed he'd probably shot before when he suggested it," I laughed. "But, don't you see, dear heart, that it's the only way. You know I'm not a complete dud myself."

"And so I pacified her as best I could though, to tell you the truth, I wasn't feeling too easy myself. I am a good revolver shot, but I lay no claim to being an expert."

"He lit another cigarette, and his face was grim.

"We staged it well, Bill; no one suspected. And four days later we met in a belt of scrub and desert about fifty miles north of Bulawayo. We were to stand back to back at thirty paces, and at the word "Fire" we were to swing round and shoot. We tossed for who was to speak—he won. And I, like a fool, trusted him. He plugged me through the back before he spoke. I heard the report; felt the

sharp, searing pain go through me, and even as my knees gave from under me and I crashed, for the second time I cursed myself for a fool. I thought it was the end, Bill; I couldn't see clearly, though he was standing over me shaking with laughter. And then there occurred the most amazing thing. The scene seemed to fade out from my mind, and I was back again in that Arab graveyard. But this time I was the corpse. I tell you, I could see the ring of natives around me, and that dreadful woman coming at me. I could see her shining and luminous; I could hear the chanting; I could feel her as she threw herself on me. And suddenly—it's incredible, I know, but it is so—I felt strength come into my arms which had previously been numb and powerless. I felt my right arm lift, until it pointed at the woman's heart. And dimly, as if from a great distance, I heard a report. Then everything faded out, though the last act had still to come.

"The dream came back. I saw Joan beckoning to me, with that same dear elusive smile, and then she faded away and I knew the horror was coming. Something came flapping round my head, buffeting me in the face, and I beat at it as always. The stench of carrion was ghastly; the smothering feeling more overpowering than ever before. On and on it went, that dream, and I couldn't wake up. Until at last my eyes forced themselves open and I was awake. Vultures, Bill—dozens of them. One great brute on my chest, and others flapping around me. And a few yards away was something that lay on the ground covered with them.

"And then everything grew hazy again. I have a dim recollection of the filthy brutes suddenly hopping away—of seeing the thing they had left behind them—of realising it was what was left of Kreseltein. I saw Joan's face too: imagined she was leaning over me. And Bill—she was. That wasn't a dream, as I found out later. She'd followed us, and she saved my life.

"Somehow she got me to a native kraal—the men carried me, and there I lay for three months. As soon as I was fit to be left she went back to Johannesburg, and there later on I joined her. For she'd been with me to the end, and the horror had passed away.

"Can you account for it, Bill?"

“I couldn’t—and to this day I can’t. He married her, of course, and there has never been any return of the horror. But what was the strange power that entered the arm of a man wellnigh dead, and directed the aim of his revolver at the heart of Otto Kreseltein?”

XII. — THE PROFESSOR'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

I

THE Professor ceased writing for a moment and stared at the window of his study. Outside the rain lashed down in typically Christmas fashion, but it was another sound that had temporarily disturbed his train of thought. At least it had seemed to him that he had heard something, though perhaps it had only been his imagination. Annoying to have one's line of argument broken....

Once more he bent over his desk, reading the last sentence he had written. Then the "J" Pen began to travel again across the paper.

"Before we can admit that Woman is a rational being in the same sense that the phrase may be applied to Man, we must consider, in all its aspects, the fundamental factor of Sex."

Again he raised his head: this time there was no mistake. Somebody was tapping at the window. And with a distinct frown on his face the Professor rose and pulled back the curtains, only to give a sudden startled exclamation and fling up the lower sash.

A girl was outside, huddled up against the wall, and a glance was sufficient to show that she was wet to the skin. Her hat resembled a piece of shapeless pulp; the sleeves of her jumper hung like sodden string to her arms.

"Good heavens! my dear child," stammered the Professor; "whatever are you doing out there?"

"Getting wetter and wetter," she answered. "May I come inside?"

Without waiting for an answer she clambered over the window sill, producing on the Professor's best carpet the effect of a movable shower bath.

"It seems to be raining," remarked the Professor brightly.

"It does," agreed the girl. "In fact, I distinctly felt a drop."

She was crouching over the fire, warming her hands, and it suddenly struck the Professorial eye that she was distinctly pretty. True, she looked sufficiently bedraggled and woebegone at the moment for the fact almost to have escaped

his notice, and yet, strangely enough, as he redrew the curtains he was definitely conscious that her appearance was prepossessing.

"I got lost," she announced, "and then I saw the light in your window. I rang the bell, but nothing happened, so I came and tapped. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," he cried. "The worthy Mrs. Timkins, who looks after me, is away for a couple of days. That's why no one answered the bell. I say—you are wet."

The girl broke into a little peal of laughter.

"My dear man, I haven't got a dry rag on my back. So what do you propose to do about it?"

"Do about it!" The Professor started violently. "Er—er—I'm afraid—er——"

"You see," went on the girl demurely, "I'm so afraid I shall catch cold."

"So am I," agreed the Professor unhappily.

Assuredly this was the most ghastly complication. Supposing the girl caught pneumonia or pleurisy or something like that. Common humanity would compel him to keep her in the house, and what on earth should he say to MacEwan, who was coming down to spend a couple of days with him? MacEwan was a very clever man: he liked MacEwan. But the fact remained that MacEwan was at times almost boisterously vulgar. He was under no illusions as to what MacEwan would say on the matter: he could hear him now retailing the story with the most appalling additions of his own to the select and intimate circle to which they both belonged at the Referee Club. The Professor shuddered mentally.

"I suppose Mrs. Timkins hasn't got anything I could put on while these dry," said the girl at length.

"Good heavens!" gasped the Professor. "You've never seen Mrs. Timkins. Her bedroom floor had to be specially strengthened to support her weight. Look here—" he swallowed audibly—"supposing I lent you a suit of my—my pyjamas."

“Angel man.” The girl clapped her hands together. “The very thing. Trot along and get them.”

The Professor trotted, and she heard him going upstairs.

“He’s a positive pet,” said the girl to herself, “and I wish I’d never come. It’s a shame, and I’ll tell the whole bunch so. Why, he can’t be more than thirty-five, and I love his freckles.”

The door opened and a hand holding pyjamas appeared.

“Here they are,” came a stifled voice from the other side. “And for goodness sake get undre—get your wet things off quickly.”

The door closed abruptly, and the girl shook with silent laughter. But she followed his advice. She had just begun to realise that it was very sound, and that she really was drenched to the skin. The jest had taken on a tinge of seriousness. If only she hadn’t lost her way in the darkness and the rain between the Hall and the Professor’s house it wouldn’t have mattered. But she had turned a ten-minute walk into one of twenty-five, and only the thought of the jeers of the rest of the party had prevented her from going back. It was Jack Simpson who had betted her she wouldn’t draw the badger.

“He’s a woman hater,” he had said. “He writes ghastly books, proving that women rank a little below dormice in the scheme of things. He’ll probably bark at you, and then send for the police.”

“Will he?” she had answered. “A thousand of my cigarettes, young fellah, that I have dinner with him to-night. Is it a bet?”

She had heard vaguely of Professor Hubert Morgan as a writer of profound and intensely dull books. Once she had been to a dinner in London where he was expected, but he had sent an excuse at the last moment and failed to turn up. And she had hazily imagined him to be an elderly man with ill-fitting clothes and spectacles. Instead she had discovered a man in the thirties, whose clever grey eyes required no artificial help. Shy, certainly, he seemed to be; but the situation was admittedly a little unconventional.

Deliberately she crossed to his desk and read what he had been writing. A bold, decisive hand she reflected, and then the sense of the words struck her. She

didn't know that it was only one phrase in a long and carefully reasoned argument: if she had, being a woman, she wouldn't have cared.

"We must consider, in all its aspects, the fundamental question of sex."

And if Professor Hubert Morgan, who in considerable trepidation was sitting in the dining-room wondering what was going to happen next, had seen the look in Hilary Staveley's eyes at that moment, his problem would have been solved. Rain or no rain, he would have fled from the house.

"You may come in," said the girl, opening the door. "They're a little big, but that's better than their being too small, isn't it?"

She was sitting in his easy chair by the fire smoking a cigarette as he entered, and the conviction that she was pretty grew and increased in strength in the Professor's mind. She was, in fact, quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his life. But far from rendering the problem any easier, it only seemed to make it harder.

"My dear young lady," he remarked in his most professor-like voice, "we must really consider what is to be done."

"Do you teach much?" asked the girl.

He stared at her in surprise.

"Teach? I—ah—occasionally give lectures."

The girl nodded.

"I know. I recognise the tone of voice. Now—ah—my dear young ladies, we will just run over a list of the wives of Henry VIII. Sausage Face—that was our history master at school—used to talk like that. Tell me, Mr. Man, what do you lecture about?"

"Er—nothing, I'm afraid, that would interest you much," he answered with a faint smile. "Psycho-analysis, and things like that."

"But you must be most frightfully clever," said the girl in an awed voice. "I wonder who you are."

“My name is Morgan—Hubert Morgan.”

“Not the Hubert Morgan?”

Feverishly the Professor sought for a firm ground. There must surely be something to which he could anchor himself; some great and true fact—scientifically proven—to which he could cling. What was it he had written himself in “The Claims of Woman: An Analytical Study of Present Day Conditions”?

“It must never be lost sight of that Woman, being by nature the weaker vessel, is forced inexorably to deceit, flattery and even fraud in order to obtain her ends.”

Like a drowning man clutching at a life-belt he clutched at his knowledge. And then rather foolishly he looked at the girl. With lips a little parted she was leaning forward in her chair staring up at him. Her great blue eyes, shining with admiration, were fixed on his. And, dash it, her ankle was most extraordinarily pretty.... The great and true fact—scientifically proven—began to recede.

“But I thought Professor Hubert Morgan was an elderly man and not good-looking,” went on the girl, a little breathlessly. “This is too wonderful.”

Somewhere in the Professor’s brain a mental life-belt went crash. The only outward and visible sign of this unfortunate accident, was a strange stuttering noise that came from the Professor’s lips, followed by a most painful and embarrassing sensation in his cheeks. In vain to reflect that the redness was due to the suspension of the action of the local vasomotor nerves: all that mattered was that the Professor blushed like an overgrown schoolboy.

“Er ... er...” he stammered. And once again—“Er ... er...”

Not a muscle on the girl’s face twitched.

“Yes?” she said sweetly.

“We must really think”—the words poured out in a rapid torrent—“we must really think what to do.”

"I leave it absolutely to you," she said gently. "I know it must be inconvenient to you to have me here, interrupting you in your work—but if I may just wait until my clothes are dry...."

The Professor's local vasomotor nerves failed him again: he had followed her glance to where the clothes were drying.

"It doesn't matter about my work," he said, hurriedly averting his eyes. "It's about your—your reputation."

"But no one need ever know," she answered. "I shan't tell anybody that I came and sat here in your pyjamas. Will you?"

"Great heavens! no," gasped the Professor fervently.

"Then what does it matter? We'll have a little dinner together in pyjamas: I mean in your pyjamas.—that is my pyjamas—anyway you know what I mean, and then my clothes will be dry, and I'll go on to the Hall."

"Are you staying there?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes. I must have lost my way going there from the—from the station."

"But, my dear child," he cried, "they'll send out search parties if you don't turn up. And this house is right on the road: they're certain to inquire here."

The girl shook her head.

"They won't get anxious yet. I said I mightn't be back till after dinner, and by then, my clothes will be dry. Give me another cigarette, will you?"

"Are you coming to the Hall for Christmas?" she said, as he sat down again.

"I think Lady Belmont kindly asked me," he replied guardedly. "But I'm rather busy just now, and I've got a man coming to stay with me who may stop on over Christmas."

"But you must come," she cried. "We're going to have the most frightful rag. Do, please. Promise you will. We're all going to dress up—just with things in the house. Nothing elaborate. And there will be a big Christmas-tree after dinner."

"I'm afraid I shan't know any of the party," he said weakly.

"You'll know me, won't you? Of course we'll have to pretend we haven't met before, but that will make it all the more fun. Or don't you—don't you want to meet me again? I really look quite nice, you know, when I haven't been out in the rain."

"I'm sure you do," agreed the Professor fervently. "And please don't think that I don't want to meet you again. I should esteem it a great—a great honour to be introduced to you—ah—formally, by Lady Belmont; and to continue, in circumstances a little more conventional, an acquaintanceship so—so strangely and, if I may say so, delightfully begun."

And Hilary Staveley, who would, had she heard such a speech from any other man she knew, undoubtedly have become hysterical from mirth, suddenly felt a queer little lump form in her throat. He was so simple, so utterly unlike anyone she'd ever met before. He was so—she searched for the right word—so trustable. And she felt more and more angry with herself for the trick she had played and was still playing. She had to go through with it now: something told her that in spite of his almost boyish gaucherie, she would prefer him not to lose his temper. But one thing she would ensure: that no one up at the Hall should split. He must always think that she had come from the station as she had told him. At half-past seven they dined off cold beef and pickles: at nine o'clock she was still sitting by the fire wondering why a large number of the men of her acquaintance were such fools. For Hubert Morgan—his shyness overcome—had ceased to be the Professor and had proved himself a perfectly delightful companion.

And when at ten o'clock she returned to the Hall—the rain had ceased by then—she was singularly uncommunicative. She was hailed joyously by the assembled party, but she quite refused to be drawn.

"I'll take those cigarettes, young Jack," she remarked. "And I've quite enjoyed myself, thank you very much."

"But what sort of a bloke is he?" demanded someone.

"Did he put you under a microscope?"

"Is his room full of dead bodies?"

“Crammed to the brim,” she answered.

“I sat on his mother’s corpse at dinner. But I’ll tell you another thing there is in his room—a thing which none of you bright specimens are ever likely to have: an international football cap.”

“What ho!” said Jack Simpson as the door closed behind her. “Our little Hilary has clicked. But what beats me is how a fellow who has been capped can write that sort of tripe. He’s in the middle of another book now, so somebody told me. Does anyone ever read ’em?”

The question proved unanswerable. It was decided that presumably somebody must, even if it was only the wretched man who published them. But it is to be feared that even that long-suffering gentleman would have rebelled had the continuation of the Professor’s argument on the fundamental factor of sex been submitted to him as it was written that night. And had he been told that four split infinitives, two flat contradictions, and an obvious lie—all within the space of twenty lines—were caused by the presence of a pair of the author’s pyjamas on his desk, he might well have wondered if that fine brain wasn’t beginning to soften. But, then, publishers are prosaic people....

II

"Of course you must dress up," said the girl. "Even if it's only burnt cork and a red nose."

Hilary Staveley, looking perfectly charming in a Neapolitan effect, regarded the Professor critically.

"Why didn't you come in pyjamas?" he asked with a smile.

"Haven't got any," she answered. "And I felt I didn't know you well enough to borrow yours again. I say, did I disturb you dreadfully?"

"Dreadfully," he said gravely. "But not at the time."

She looked away, acutely conscious of the message in his eyes.

"Bad thing to get into a groove, you know," she remarked lightly.

It was annoying: it was impossible: it was ridiculous. Only the second time she'd seen him, and yet ... she was frightened of herself.

"It makes one so serious," she went on. "And nobody ought to be serious on Christmas Eve—especially after dinner."

"There are exceptions to every rule," he answered.

"Well, this isn't one of them. Now then—here's a nose. Put it on, please."

"That's your job," he answered.

It was a large, red bulbous affair secured by elastic round the head. And as she slipped it on he caught both her wrists in his hands. For a moment she let him hold them: then she drew them away.

"That wasn't playing the game," she remarked quietly. "It was almost—serious."

"I intended it to be."

And suddenly she began to shake with laughter.

“Go and look at yourself in the glass,” she cried. “O man who understands women, don’t try to be serious looking like that.”

“Damn the beastly thing!” exploded the Professor, but when he looked round the girl was gone. From the next room there came shouts of revelry and mirth, but he felt in no mood to join in. If he could have had his way, he would have liked to transport Hilary, with the wave of a wand, back to his own house. Just alone: in his pyjamas again.

During the last week he’d thought it over from every angle. At least, he thought he’d thought it over: he hadn’t really. There was nothing to think over: it was a blatant, obvious fact. He was in love: just that and nothing more. And he’d passed through all the agonising phases of a man in that condition. At times he blessed the moment that had made her lose her way: at others, particularly to-night, he almost cursed it. That damned fool Jack Simpson, for instance.... Where did he come in? He seemed so confoundedly possessive. And all the other men, who seemed to regard him as a being apart.

A bunch of them came surging through blowing whistles, and the Professor escaped to the smoking-room. He felt he must be alone to think about Hilary. He’d sat next to her at dinner, which had struck him as being a wonderful piece of luck—but it had all been different from the other time. Only natural, as he told himself—but still...

Of course it was only natural. That other time had been a thing apart—a mere accident. And not by word or hint must he regard it as anything but that. To presume on it in any way was out of the question: it wouldn’t be playing the game. And as the phrase came into his mind he bit his lip. The very thing she’d said to him when he had imprisoned her wrists. That hadn’t been playing the game: he would never have dreamed of doing such a thing had it not been for that other time. Cad unspeakable that he was to have done it! He must find her and apologise: tell her that it was just an uncontrollable impulse and that it shouldn’t occur again.

He sat down in a deep arm-chair near the fire. His back was to the door, and he hardly noticed the fact that two men had come into the room and were standing by the table helping themselves to drinks. His mind was engrossed in his own problems, and he sat on motionless—so motionless that his host, who was short-sighted, and old General Laidley never saw him in the shadow.

“Damned pretty girl, that Hilary Staveley,” remarked the General. “Her father and I were in Egypt together in ’94. He was a wild devil if you like.”

“So is the daughter, old man,” returned his host with a chuckle. “Do you know what she did the other night? We’ve got a tame freak who lives about ten minutes from here—you’ve seen him to-night. One Professor Morgan: writes the most fearful trash. Well, he’s a woman-hater or something or other: so our young Hilary bet that youngster, Jack Simpson—good boy that, soldier: you ought to do something for him, he’s a gunner—however, she bet him a thousand cigarettes she’d not only draw the badger but dine with him. And she pulled it off. Went out from here in the pouring rain at six o’clock and got back at ten.”

“How did she do it?”

“She’s a bit close as to that,” returned the other. “But she did it all right. Of course he hasn’t an inkling that the whole thing was done for a bet. And the result, if I’m any judge of the situation, is that the poor blighter is hooked, gaffed and landed.”

“Don’t think I’ve noticed the fellow,” said the soldier. “But surely little Hilary ain’t interested in landing a man of that type. I mean, there’s nothing in it, is there?”

“Good Lord, no! Personally I think the modern girl wants smacking at times, but in this case it serves him darned well right. A bloke who writes his sort of stuff is riding for a fall, and I can’t say I feel the slightest sympathy for him when he gets it. Kiss ’em early and kiss ’em often was our motto, Bill—and I guess it answered....”

The sound of their voices died away: the room was empty again save for a man with a large, red bulbous nose who stared with unseeing eyes at the fire—eyes that looked like a dog’s eyes after he’s been beaten.

So that was it—was it? A joke! A bet! And everyone knew how the tame freak had been had! Everybody there that evening was roaring with laughter inwardly: Hilary was roaring with laughter. And he’d thought it was their secret.

A little unsteadily he rose to his feet, and then his jaw set as it had done that afternoon at Twickenham when he was changing into football rig and the

hoarse murmur of the huge crowd came dimly to the dressing-room. There was something analogous between the two events—the two biggest of his life. His right knee had gone in that match, and he knew that never again would he be able to play in international football. And now something else had gone.... Never again....

Stiffly he walked to the door. He must find Lady Belmont, and make his excuses for going. Pressure of work would do: that's about all they'd expect from a bloke who wrote his sort of stuff.

He passed through the room where the big Christmas-tree was standing. It was a blaze of fairy lights, and two or three children who had sneaked in against all orders were standing admiring it. But he was hardly conscious of their existence, until one of them suddenly cried out: "Oh, what a lovely nose!"

It was a little girl, in a pink filmy dress, and she was smiling up at him. He stopped for a moment and patted her head: she, at any rate, didn't realise that he was just a tame freak. And at that moment it happened. Two small boys skylarking: a sudden push: a fall.

So easy, and so quick. At one instant just a little fluffy-haired kid in her pink dress: the next a blazing mass of flames. She hadn't even time to shriek before the tame freak had picked her up and smothered her against his shirt and coat. In fact, when she started to cry out of sheer fright the flames were out. And when a terrified nurse, who had been searching everywhere for her lost charge, came running in, all she found were two scared boys, and a white-faced man with a big red nose who had little Joan on his knee. She didn't look at him even when she snatched her up: she didn't notice the beads of perspiration pouring down his forehead as, tight-lipped, he sat on in his chair. She hardly heard his reassuring remark: "She's all right, only scared," though his next—"Don't scold her, you fool woman: it's your fault"—might have made her flare up but for the sternness in the grey eyes that seemed to sweep away the ridiculous red nose. As it was, she only whimpered and left him alone still tight-lipped and sweating.

The boys had run away, and suddenly an involuntary groan came from the chair. It was the only one: after that there was silence for a few moments till the man who had been sitting in it rose. His hands were behind his back, and he walked quite steadily towards the door. It opened just as he got there to admit Jack Simpson, who stared at him in surprise.

“Hallo!” he cried. “Feeling a bit dicky?”

“I’m not feeling frightfully fit,” said the other, speaking with a sort of strained stiffness. “I think I’ll go home. Would you be good enough to make my excuses to Lady Belmont for me? I don’t want to cause an upheaval at the party.”

He walked on, swaying little, and Jack Simpson stared after him with a look of comprehension gradually dawning in his eyes.

“Tight, by gad!” he muttered to himself. “The freak is blotto! Holy smoke! what a supreme jape!”

He dashed off to find Hilary and impart the news.

“Tight, dear soul!” he cried. “Tight as a drum. How well I know the feeling! The room is rotating: one’s every effort is concentrated on getting through the middle of the door without a cannon. Forehead bedewed with damp, hands wet and dripping, and tum-tum expostulating vociferously. Thank heavens, it generally takes me in the legs!”

She stared at him, frowning.

“Are you fooling?” she said slowly. “Do you really mean he’s tight?”

“Not guard-room and boots-off business,” he answered. “He’s quite quiet. But solitude is indicated. So he’s gone home—red nose and all.”

“But where is he, Lady Belmont?” cried a woman behind them. “I want to see him and thank him.”

Bella Richley’s voice was penetrating, and Hilary swung round.

“Your Professor, Hilary: your Professor.”

“What about him?”

“My dear! he’s saved little Joan’s life. The child’s frock caught fire—she was playing round the Christmas-tree—and he put it out.”

“Good God!” muttered Jack Simpson under his breath.

“She was blazing, and he caught her up and pressed all the flames out. And she isn’t even hurt: only her frock ruined.”

“I’m after him at once,” cried Jack. “What a priceless fellow! And I thought ... He’s gone home, Lady Belmont: asked me to apologise and all that.”

“Do, there’s a good boy,” said his hostess, and, turning away with the agitated mother, she didn’t see a firm young hand laid on Jack Simpson’s arm.

“You’ll stay where you are, Jack: I’m going.”

There was a look in her eyes that brooked of no argument, and in that instant the youngster knew the truth with blinding certainty. His own dreams were finished: the tame freak had won. And being a white man he spoke quite steadily.

“Of course, dear. And I apologise for what I said. He didn’t want to upset the party.”

“Don’t tell them where I’ve gone, Jack.”

She left him, and ten minutes later she paused by the gate leading to Hubert Morgan’s house. A light was burning in his room, but the blind was down and she couldn’t see in. For a moment she hesitated—should she tap on the window as she had tapped before, or ring the bell? And the window won.

She knocked, and after a pause the blind went up.

“May I come in?” she asked softly.

For a moment or two he looked at her gravely through the glass. Great heavens! couldn’t she leave him alone just now? And yet, he couldn’t help it: his heart had started pounding again, so that he almost forgot—the other thing....

“Certainly,” he remarked. “The door is open.”

“But won’t you open the window? Then I can come in as I did last time.”

“I think you’ll find the door more convenient,” he answered.

With a shrug of her shoulders she turned away, and he heard her coming along the passage to his study. And when the door opened to admit her he was still standing by the window. He was facing into the room, with his hands behind his back, and he made no movement towards her.

“I hear you’ve been doing the young hero stunt,” she said quietly, striving to read what lay behind the steady eyes that faced her. “But why run away? The mother is dying to fall on your neck.”

“Then her life is in no danger,” he answered, still standing motionless.

She stared at him with a little puzzled frown.

“What’s the matter, Hubert? You’re so different—suddenly.”

It was the first time she’d called him by his Christian name, and he winced.

“Need we keep up the jest any longer?” he said quietly. “You’ve won your bet, Miss Staveley: you’ve hooked, gaffed and landed the tame freak—and doubtless my absence from the party will enable you to enjoy your triumph more openly than if I was there.”

“So you know.”

The words were hardly more than a whisper. At last she understood.

“Is that why you went away?”

“Oh, no: a trifle of that sort hardly counts. There were—other reasons.”

“You call it a trifle, do you?”

“Isn’t it to you? And since I prefer not to be in the picture any more, my feelings don’t matter.”

“And if I told you that your feelings matter everything? If I told you that it did start as a bet, but that almost as soon as I saw you I regretted it bitterly—what would you say?”

“That you are a wonderful actress,” he answered stiffly.

"I deserve that," she said quietly. "But since you understand women so well you should know we're all actresses."

She went close up to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"But we don't always act: sometimes we're serious. I'm serious now—as you were earlier this evening. Or is it necessary for me to put on your nose again for you to recapture the mood?"

He stood there without movement, and after a while her hands fell to her sides.

"I see: you won't."

"Don't you think you'd better go?" he said through tight-set lips.

"Perhaps I had," she agreed. "Evidently you don't believe me. Good-bye; I'm sorry you found it out, and I'm still sorrier that you don't believe my explanation."

She held out her hand, but he made no effort to take it. And after a time she frowned a little angrily.

"Most of the men I know, Mr. Morgan, shake hands, at any rate, after a frank apology. I'm beginning to think that you are a tame freak—as you put it."

"Good gracious me—what's all this?"

A genial voice behind her made her turn round, and she saw the local doctor bustling in with a little bag in his hand.

"Looking after the invalid and all that? Splendid! Splendid! Now then, Morgan, let's have a look at them?"

"In one moment, doctor. Good night, Miss Staveley."

"Invalid?" stammered the girl. "What do you mean?"

The doctor looked at her in surprise.

"What's this? What's this? You said you'd burnt your hands, didn't you? At least, that's what I gathered over that infernal telephone."

With a quick movement the girl darted behind his back, and then she turned very white.

“Oh, my God!” she whispered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Then she pulled herself together.

“I can help you, doctor: I’ve done a bit of Red Cross work.”

They were a ghastly sight—the tame freak’s hands—scorched, and burned, and blackened. Even the doctor whistled under his breath when he saw them.

“Good heavens, Morgan!” he said gravely, “you must have been in agony. Hands, of all things. How on earth did it happen?”

“Saving a kid’s life,” said the girl unsteadily. “That’s all.”

For a moment the doctor looked at her with shrewd, kindly eyes; then he bent over his task. And when, a quarter of an hour later, he was replacing the things in his bag, the twinkle returned.

“Can I offer you a lift?” he asked her. “I shall be going past the Hall.”

“I think I’ll just stay and see that the Professor is comfortable,” she answered.

“You’ll miss the Christmas-tree,” said the Professor.

And the doctor swears that he distinctly heard her say: “Damn the Christmas-tree.”

But he was in the hall by then and, anyway, he didn’t hear any more. And if he had, he’d have heard a most unbiased criticism of the Professor’s work.

“How you can have the temerity to write books about women, beats me. Do you mean to say that you would have let me go—not knowing about that?”

She pointed to his bandaged hands.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” he said feebly.

A wonderful light came into her eyes, and suddenly she was on her knees beside him.

“So I’ve got you hooked, gaffed and landed, have I?”

“My dear,” he whispered. “Oh, my dear! don’t play the fool.”

“‘We must consider, in all its aspects,’” she quoted, “‘the fundamental aspect of sex.’ You dear idiot—don’t you realise—that I’m hooked, gaffed and landed too?”

Her arms were round his neck, and for a time the fact that the blind was up escaped their attention. And it wasn’t till she got up to pull it down that a profound remark emerged from Professor Hubert Morgan:

“It occurs to me, on due reflection, Miss Staveley, that I shall have to rewrite that last chapter.”

THE END