THE SCREAMING SKULL

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THE SYDNEY HORLER NOVELS

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Harlequin of Death
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The Man Who Shook the Earth
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THE SCREAMING SKULL

And Other Stories

SYDNEY HORLER

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person.

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To

THE THREE

WHO WENT WITH ME

TO

DUNKERY BEACON

THE SCREAMING SKULL

AN ADVENTURE ON EXMOOR

CHAPTER I AN EPISODE AT THE LOTUS CLUB

BECAUSE of the trade he followed, Martin Lorne was not easily surprised, but as he watched the girl flash a smile at her dancing partner, he murmured a few entirely unconventional words beneath his breath. He prided himself upon being the least conceited of men, but if there were glances of hero-worship going begging, what was wrong with the girl bestowing them upon him? True, he wasn't the handsomest bloke alive—not quite—but compared to that dago unpleasantness . . . In any case, he hated to see an Englishwoman associating with such a type—and the girl stood in a class of her own. Half an hour's careful scrutiny of her had done nothing to lessen this original impression.

He had sauntered into the Lotus Night Club that evening in a mood of sheer boredom. Life was pretty punk; nothing seemed to happen. Anyway, it hadn't happened recently. He had been told by the Old Man—that grey-haired taskmaster who seemed to possess no bowels of compassion—that he must "hang on" in Town: hang on, indeed, when he hadn't had a spot of leave for over twelve months and when he had made all plans to join the Amerys in an early

Mediterranean cruise! It wasn't as though he had really done anything worth while during this period of loafing; it had been merely a case of killing time—and he was utterly fed up with it. To-morrow, he decided, as he ordered a second whisky-and-soda, he would see the Chief and get something definite out of him. Either that, or he would take French leave and pack off with the Amerys.

In the meantime, his eyes wandered back to the girl. The dance had finished and the unpleasant-looking gentleman with the too utterly beige complexion had piloted her to a table not far from where he himself was sitting. With an elaborate gallantry that made Lorne long to kick him afresh, the creature bowed his companion into a chair.

Lorne, sipping his drink, was puzzled: he could not "get" the situation. Women at the best were curious creatures, but by every instinct he felt she possessed, this girl should have shrunk from the man with whom she was obviously on such terms of familiarity. Granted that he had a prejudice against all dagoes; granted, also, that it was no business of his, yet Martin could not help feeling furious. Other people besides himself were looking curiously at the ill-assorted pair. No doubt they shared his opinions—first, that there was something peculiar about the acquaintanceship, and secondly, that Joseph, the presiding genius of the Lotus, would have to watch his membership-roll more carefully than this if he wished to keep up the good character of his Night Club.

Cursing himself for his folly, Lorne kept on studying the pair. And the more he looked, the greater became his wonderment. By every standard he knew, this girl appeared a thoroughbred—a lady, in the best sense of that terribly tortured word. She had dignity of bearing, she was simply but exquisitely dressed, and she was utterly and completely feminine in every dainty curve of her. A *woman*, in short, which in modern London, filled with hipless, breastless, hairless caricatures of the sex, was a surprise so pleasantly startling that it almost took his breath away.

That unassuming black frock—how well it suited her! How charming were her unringed hands, how graceful the unadorned neck. . . . Martin, old-fashioned enough to enjoy these delights—he was twenty-eight—pulled himself up short: he was well on the way to becoming maudlin. The words of the Old Man, on the first day he joined that grim ogre's staff, recalled themselves once again: "Women are the very devil in this job. Use them, if forced, but avoid them otherwise like the plague. More good men in our game have been ruined by women than I care to think about."

The Mole—he was called that because like all Secret Service Chiefs he burrowed underground—had snapped his teeth as he bestowed this piece of advice. He was in deadly earnest: "Never forget what I've just told you, young man!" he growled, and Martin had sworn mentally and audibly that he never would.

It had not been difficult up—to the present. The keenness with which he had done his job

had been a strong, influencing factor. But now, looking at the girl again, he told himself it was all very well for The Mole (sixty years of age, quite bald and very wrinkled) preaching this monkish gospel. What did *he* know about it, anyway? His time for dallying with the wenches had long since passed. Supposing The Mole could switch the clock back thirty-two years and sit where he was sitting now, looking across . . . Martin finished his drink quickly: he was becoming asinine again. This girl had nothing on earth to do with him. Supposing a spark of electricity *had* passed from her to him? —he mustn't become hysterical simply because he considered her devilishly attractive. And, besides, there was her companion. He didn't intend to compete with a dago: that came under the heading of The Things Which Are Not Done.

He would clear out. A little exercise was indicated. It would banish the whim-whams. He could have danced—but the present style, consisting of clutching some strange and generally intense female so tightly that neither of you could scarcely breathe, did not appeal to him.

Martin had half-risen when he sat down again. A sensation which was distinctly pleasurable had swept through him. His nerves tingled. The girl, noticing perhaps his movement, had turned her head. For a moment she had looked intently at him and into her eyes had flashed a look of recognition.

It was that look which caused him to resume his seat. He tried to believe that he was mistaken, that his imagination had tricked him,

but neither excuse held: this girl either believed that she knew him, or the look she had sent was an indication that she wished to make his acquaintance. Forgetting the wise words of The Mole, he decided to wait a little longer. He was flattered. Developments promised; and these, when they came, would possibly be intriguing. In any case, the girl had evidenced interest in his presence. Good enough!

Search his memory as he would, he was not able to recall when or where he had seen this girl before. Had he previously met her, he could not have had any difficulty in remembering the circumstance; she was far too arresting a type to slip from the mind. And yet the start she had made—instantaneous and involuntary as it had been—was unmistakable. If she had not met him before, she knew who he was. Undoubtedly

To receive a look of recognition from a singularly attractive girl—from a girl, moreover, who has been engaging one's attention for the past half an hour—is one of those experiences which give a fillip to a jaded soul, and Martin Lorne would have been inhuman had he not warmed to it. Before he left the Lotus Club that night, he would certainly make this girl's acquaintance; it was a promise. There must be a reason why she had sent him that look of recognition and he would not be satisfied until he knew what it was.

There was the beige gentleman, of course . . . but a moment later, as though his wish had become an answered prayer, an attendant, wearing the maroon livery of the night club,

approached the girl's companion and, bending down, spoke a few words to him. It was plain that he brought a message, for the hearer, after making a brief explanation to the girl, rose and walked towards the entrance.

Now was his chance. One is still young enough at twenty-eight to plume one's feathers when approaching a pretty girl, and Martin straightened his tie, pulled down his waistcoat, and did a little general preening before rising and walking through the throng of tables which separated him from the object of his devoirs.

The Lotus Club is exclusive—at least, Joseph, the former *restaurateur* who runs it, invariably impresses that fact upon people he is anxious to enlist as new members—but it is also mildly unconventional. Within the precincts of the Lotus (where minor Royalty has been known to dance and generally make merry) the circumstance of a lady having smiled is sufficient excuse for the recipient of such a favour to approach the donor of largess and improve the shining hour of the night by making her acquaintance. Martin Lorne, as a member of eighteen months' experience, knew this. Everyone speaking to everyone was the sort-of-thing in the Lotus: the majority of the unattended women, indeed, asked for attention. There could be no possible risk in talking to this unknown.

He stopped at her table, looking down at her. To his surprise, she made no response. Mortification followed surprise, for when he spoke, saying the conventional "good evening," she stared at him without reply.

Embarrassment brought confusion.

"I—I thought just now that I knew you—must have met you somewhere," he dithered.

"It's so easy to make mistakes of that sort, isn't it?" Her tone was cold and her manner showed that her dignity had been offended.

"Quite—only, you see, I happen to be speaking the truth." The minx, to turn him down flat like this, making a public fool of him, after she had given that encouragement! It was only by an effort of great self-control that he didn't take the chair lately occupied by that unpleasant-visaged dago and tackle her with the direct question: "What the deuce do you mean by first pretending to know me and then riding the high horse like this? I demand an explanation."

"I wish you would not annoy me."

He had to bite his lip to keep his temper in check.

Then:

"Madame," he replied; "I hasten to remove my exceedingly objectionable presence. Before I go, however, I should like to make the remark, obvious as it may be, that there is more than one mistake which one is capable of making at the Lotus Night Club. I see your friend is returning, so I will wish you good-night."

Scarlet leapt into her cheeks like a brand of shame. Equally quick was Lorne's sense of remorse. He had been a pretty rotten cad, he told himself, to have said such a thing. Yet, damn it all, why did a girl like this show herself in such a notorious gossip-shop as the Lotus with a dago? Hadn't she any sense of fitness?

It was too late for him to repair the damage. The girl had turned deliberately aside and to have endeavoured to attract her further attention would merely have meant calling undesirable notice to himself. Besides, the beige gentleman was now only a few feet off.

So Lorne concluded this very unsatisfactory episode, disturbing to his good temper and annihilating to his self-esteem, by walking away. Passing the dago, he frowned upon his beigeness with such heartiness that the man showed his teeth and the whites of his eyes. But he made no comment, which was just as well for the quietude of the Lotus Club, for Lorne was in that inflammatory condition when one's only solace is to hit something very hard indeed.

As for women, he muttered an anathema upon them all.

CHAPTER II SECRET ORDERS

Not being able to take a large-sized, hefty whack at the dago, whose unexplained and unnecessary existence upon the earth had caused so much of the trouble, Martin endeavoured to find relief in walking the few hundred yards to his rooms. As he climbed the stairway of the block of chambers, he saw a figure waiting outside his flat door.

"Confound you, Lorne, why don't you stay

at home when you're wanted ? I've been waiting here quite five minutes ! "

But for that recent few minutes' walk, the recipient of this cheery greeting would in all probability have consigned the speaker to the uttermost depths of those regions which, in any weather, are supposed to be rather too warm for anyone's comfort. And this although he recognised the visitor immediately by his voice.

It was The Mole.

" You have no objection, I suppose, sir, to one going out occasionally for a mouthful of fresh air ? " Without waiting for a reply to this unexpected *riposte*, he unlocked the door and stood aside for his caller to enter.

" Whisky ? Cigar ? Or both ? " He was in the mood when he wanted to annoy someone very much, and what better subject than this grey-faced individual who, judging by his demeanour, assumed that he had powers of Life and Death over his staff ?

He expected an explosion—but, perhaps because he would have welcomed it, the fusillade did not come. Instead, the caller, seating himself comfortably by the side of the still-existent fire, threw a lump of coal on the flame with his bare hand and replied like an ordinary human being: " A whisky-and-soda, by all means, my dear boy."

Staggering beneath the shock, Lorne shuffled across the room and drew up at the sideboard.

" Have one yourself," suggested The Mole.

" Thanks—er—I will." And he mixed himself three-fingers.

Having disposed of half of this, he brought the remainder over to the fireplace.

"Lucky you called, sir," he remarked; "I was coming round to see you in the morning."

Sir Harker Bellamy raised his tufts of eyebrows.

"Indeed?" He was invariably a man of few words.

"To tell you the truth, sir, I want a holiday. Excuse me putting it as bluntly as that, but there it is. It isn't as though I was doing any good messing round just killing time like this."

"You talked about going to the Mediterranean, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am afraid that part of the programme must be changed. You shall have your holiday, my boy, but you will have to take it in a different part of the world."

"I've practically promised the Amerys to join them at Marseilles—that is if I could get away, of course. Their yacht will be there at the beginning of next week."

The Mole shook his head.

"Very sorry, my boy—but it's Exmoor for you."

Lorne gave a masterly impersonation of a man rendered stupid by surprise.

Then he rallied.

"Exmoor! Why Exmoor?"

Sir Harker Bellamy met this demand with a brief, wintry smile.

"Personally, I see nothing wrong with Exmoor for a holiday. Providing the weather keeps as it is—you must admit we are having a wonderful

October—you ought to spend a very pleasant time indeed. The autumn tints will be upon the trees; you can reread 'Lorna Doone'; the stag-hounds will be meeting once or twice a week; that part of Somerset is noted for its good living——"

"Just one moment, sir," broke in the bewildered listener; "what exactly is the idea?"

"The idea is that you catch the 9.30 from Paddington to-morrow for the West of England. You change at Taunton for the small but picturesque village of Cleveley, not far from Minehead. Cleveley is famous for its castle, and was once the centre of a thriving yarn industry."

"Guide-book stuff, sir. I can look it up myself—if I want to."

This was the first occasion on which he had even remotely suspected the Old Man of having a sense of humour, and he did not relish being made the subject of it.

"Whilst you are at Cleveley," continued Bellamy, "I should strongly recommend you to pay a visit to the *Cleveley Arms*—the local hotel. It used to be the Prior's residence in the days when monks, in common with the parishioners, used the church. There is a famous oak-room in the *Cleveley Arms* which——"

"That, no doubt, is the room you have booked for me?" interrupted Lorne.

The sarcasm was lost upon Bellamy.

"Thinking you would be less conspicuous, I have taken the liberty of fixing you up at the Yew Tree Farmhouse just outside the village. The Yew Tree is kept by some very worthy

people called Warriner, and you can depend upon being very comfortable with them. If you send him a wire, Mr. Warriner will be sure to meet you at the station. I think that is all I need tell you." The speaker rose and stretched himself.

"A holiday, you say, sir?"

For the second time The Mole ignored the shaft of sarcasm.

"A holiday—under sealed orders, young man!" he replied sternly.

Then Martin understood.

He had not been able to catch the morning train from Paddington, and it was dusk by the time he stepped out on to the small platform at Cleveley. A tall, burly figure in well-cut tweeds greeted him.

"Mr. Blake?" (Gerald Blake was the accommodation name with which he had been furnished by Sir Harker Bellamy.)

"Yes—are you Mr. Warriner?"

"I am," declared the giant, shaking hands.

"Do you mind waiting a minute while I get a Bristol evening paper, Mr. Blake?" he went on. "We are rather cut off from news here, and my wife likes to know what's going on."

Naturally signifying his consent, Martin pulled out his case and lit a cigarette. As he did so, he heard a woman speaking.

"There is only the suit-case, Max."

A smartly-dressed girl, wearing a fur coat and a tight-fitting hat, passed him. By her side walked a chauffeur in uniform, carrying a suit-case.

"Sorry to have kept you, old chap," said Warriner, returning with the Bristol evening paper; "mind these steps—they *will* keep this station so damned dark, somebody'll break their neck one day. We cross the line here; hope we shall be able to make you comfortable; we're homely folk. Left your uncle quite well, I trust?"

"Uncle?" He was taken unawares, and, besides, his mind at that moment was occupied by a very puzzling reflection.

"The gentleman who wrote, booking rooms for you. I understood he was your uncle. Friend of Lady Cranden, who stayed with us last summer."

"Oh, yes, he's very fit, thanks." Why the devil hadn't Bellamy informed him of this fact? "Uncle," indeed!

"That's good—I like to hear of people being well. Haven't had a day's illness in my life myself and wish everyone else could say the same. Keep to the right, old chap, there's a car coming."

Martin obeyed the instruction, and a few moments later a huge limousine swept past. The interior of the car was lighted, and turning his head, he found himself staring in astonishment.

The occupant of the car was looking out of the window so that she could not have failed to see him. It was the girl he had seen at the Lotus Club the night before.

"Nice car," he commented after the first shock of surprise had passed.

"Yes—although, for my liking, give me a good horse. There are far too many of these great cars spoiling the roads nowadays for honest traffic. I keep a Norris myself for running into Minehead, but they're nerve-racking abominations at the best, if you ask me."

Martin nodded in agreement, but Warriner's views on present-day road traffic were not what chiefly concerned him. What was that girl doing on Exmoor? What strange coincidence had induced her to tread on his heels in this manner? Although The Mole had refused to open out, something had happened, was happening, or was about to happen in that part of the country which demanded investigation. A sixth sense gave him warning that this girl must be mixed up in it. Well, after the way she had behaved the night before, she deserved little consideration—and she would not receive much from him.

He wanted information.

"I suppose the car that passed just now belonged to the local squire?"

His guide, helping him over a rough piece of the road, laughed shortly.

"I'm afraid Mr. Latymer, squire of Cleveley, isn't well enough off to be able to afford a Rolls-Royce of that size. That car belongs to a gentleman who's lately come to stay out Greenaleigh way, just the other side of Minehead. Nobody seems to know much about him except that he's supposed to be very rich—and has a black servant."

"Why a black servant? Has he come from

abroad ?" Lorne's thoughts went instantly to the dago who had been with the girl at the Lotus Night Club.

His companion knocked his pipe out somewhat noisily upon the side of a wall they were passing.

"I daresay it's nothing but local gossip," he replied; "people round about here have little else to do but mind each other's business." His manner indicated no desire to pursue the subject.

A minute later lights gleamed ahead, showing up cheerily in the murk.

"Here's the farm, sir," announced Warriner. "We dine at seven, so you'll have nice time. We don't dress—just a dark suit. . . . Hello, mother," he called, as a door opened to show a woman standing ready to give them welcome; "this is my wife, Mr. Blake—you can depend upon her trying to make you comfortable."

"I haven't any fear of that," the guest gave assurance, as he shook hands with the smiling Mrs. Warriner; he might soon be finding himself in a sea of trouble of some sort or other, but he felt that Yew Tree Farm at least would be a trusty anchorage.

Like practically every other building in the neighbourhood, Yew Tree Farm belonged to the distant past. Its origin was lost somewhere in the early fifteenth century when it was supposed to have been built, so Lorne was to learn later, by the Abbot of a neighbouring monastery as an additional rest-house for travelling friars. It had been restored from time to time, and now looked what it was: a

relic of the past that brought good cheer to the present.

Martin was shown into a room that might, for its size, have harboured in earlier times a whole order of monks. Huge oak rafters straddled the ceiling, the fireplace could have accommodated an ox, and the door, although swinging easily on its hinges, was three inches thick and solid oak at that.

As he changed, Martin pondered over one question: Had that girl followed him? Was it because she knew who he was that that involuntary look of recognition had leapt into her eyes at the Lotus Club?

He spread a map of the district out on the bed. Here was Cleveley standing a little way back from the sea, perhaps a mile away. This place Greenaleigh which Warriner had mentioned was beyond Minehead, on the coast.

Then why had the girl left the train at Cleveley when her natural destination was Minehead, the end of the railway line? Was it because she wished to make sure where he went? Warriner would be well known for miles around—with his commanding stature he must be almost a local landmark—the natural conclusion the girl would draw would be that he was staying at the Yew Tree Farm guest-house.

Ought he to tell the Chief about this shadowing? Damn it, although the superficial facts were pretty strong against her—that was assuming, of course, his theory was correct—he still did not want to believe that such a girl was mixed up in anything crooked. Putting the

map away, he called himself a maudlin ass and went downstairs.

In a room that must have caused the old wandering monks' eyes to gleam, dinner was served. It was a meal to put heart into a man—freshly-caught fish, a couple of ducklings, a noble rib of beef, apple tart, cheese—and lashings of honest beer.

Apart from his host and hostess, there was only one other diner. This was an elderly, charmingly-mannered man who was introduced to Lorne as Sir Robert McHugh. The latter gave his fellow guest a friendly greeting and, far from being a bore, engaged him straightway in a conversation that was to prove exceedingly entertaining. Sir Robert stated that he was devoting his leisure to the study of archæology, especially ancient churches. "This part of Somerset, you know, is full of them," he added; "perhaps if you feel inclined, you would like to accompany me on some of my rambles?"

There are some people to whom one is drawn irresistibly and instinctively, and Martin found himself attracted to this Scottish aristocrat who, in spite of his dry-sounding hobby, had an unfailing fund of quaint humour which kept the table in a continual roar. From a remark which his hostess passed, Lorne gathered that Sir Robert had been rather lonely as the solitary guest at the farm and welcomed on that account an addition to the household.

"If the weather holds good, we'll drive to the meet of the local staghounds to-morrow morning," said Warriner at the conclusion of

the meal; "being from London, Mr. Blake, it should be a novelty to you."

"It will, indeed—I should like nothing better." A day in the Exmoor air sounded attractive. Later on in the evening he intended to draw Warriner out about the owner of the Rolls-Royce car, but for the moment he was content to allow his mind to dwell on the pleasure promised for the morrow.

CHAPTER III "THE SCREAMING SKULL"

COFFEE was served in a room that was panelled in dark oak from floor to ceiling. With the log fire lighting up the beauty of the wonderful old wood, Lorne had the feeling that Time had slipped away and that he was back amidst the Cistercian monks who, centuries before, must have held high revel in that very room.

It was the claim of the Warriners that they made everyone who stayed at the Yew Tree Farm feel members of the same family, and the conversation soon took on an intimate tone.

"Did you see anyone at the station, father?" inquired Mrs. Warriner, busy with a work-basket.

"Saw that great car of Mr. Sylvaine's—or whatever his name is," replied her husband, puffing at his pipe.

Sir Robert McHugh looked up from the copy of the *Times Literary Supplement* he was reading.

"Do you mean the man who has taken that peculiar house at Greenaleigh?"

"That's the fellow," answered Warriner, after a glance at his wife.

Lorne considered this an appropriate time to intervene.

"Supposed to be very rich, isn't he?" he inquired casually; "at least, one would assume so judging by his car."

Mrs. Warriner picked up a sock, examined it critically for a couple of seconds, and then took upon herself to reply. Lorne imagined that she welcomed the opportunity for a little innocent gossip. The world must revolve in a small circle for those who lived at Cleveley.

"We know very little about this Mr. Fenton Sylvaine," she said in the cultured voice Lorne had already found so attractive; "we do not even know if that is his right name. Certainly it's a very curious name for a man who has elected to settle in the midst of a hunting county like this. Now if he had been a musician or an artist——"

"I heard in the *Cleveley Arms* this afternoon that he was supposed to be a bit of an artist," put in Sir Robert; "one of these amateur dabblers, I expect," he added, looking across at Martin Lorne.

Mrs. Warriner greeted the interruption with a flourish of the darning-needle.

"I always felt there must be something romantic about a man with a name like 'Fenton Sylvaine,'" she declared, and then continued her story.

"It was about a month ago that everyone in this neighbourhood, including the whole of Minehead, was thoroughly excited over the news that the most notorious house in the whole of Somerset had been bought by a very rich man, a stranger, who intended to live in it. I should explain, perhaps, Mr. Blake," smiling across at her new guest, "that Somerset is a county saturated, as you may say, in superstition. The fact that so many of the bigger houses, especially in this neighbourhood, date back for hundreds of years, possibly accounts for these stories in some way, but I must say that there seems to exist a great deal of substantiation in certain cases. There is very good reason, for instance, to say that this house is haunted."

The speaker's husband wagged the stem of his pipe admonitorily.

"You shouldn't have said that, mother, especially——" He stopped, and the archæologist completed the sentence with a laugh.

"Especially as you have been given the identical room, Blake."

Noticing that his hostess appeared somewhat distressed, Martin hastened to make light of the matter.

"I say, that's rather jolly! So you've given me the room of honour, Mrs. Warriner! How awfully kind of you! Naturally, one cannot expect to stay in a house as old as this without bumping up against a ghost. What is the story?"

"I expect you will declare it all nonsense."

"I'm keeping an absolutely open mind until I meet the fellow—is it a man? I always did dislike female ghosts."

"Yes—it's a man: a servant of the house at the time of the Civil Wars. A party of Cromwell's men is declared to have broken into the Manor, as it was then called, and slain the servant who remained faithful to his trust."

"Does he do anything violent?"

"No—he just shows himself, pointing out the wound in his chest where he was stabbed."

"Well, if he turns up to-night, I'll do my best to console him. Has he any particular time for going the rounds?"

"He is supposed to appear usually at the time he is presumed to have been murdered—at a quarter-past one in the morning."

"Well, he needn't think I'm going to wait up for him! If I'm awake, all well and good, but if I'm asleep he'll have to cut along and unburden himself to you, Sir Robert. By the way, being a Scotsman, what happens to be your views on ghosts?"

"Like yourself, I keep an open mind. I was brought up in an atmosphere of spooks, second-sight and phenomena of that sort, but although I have gone out of my way to meet any apparition that was said to be handy, I must admit that up till now, and I shall be sixty-five years of age next week, I have never had the luck or misfortune, whichever you may like to term it, of running across a real bogy. However, some people who have stayed here profess to

have seen this particular specimen, don't they, Mrs. Warriner ?"

"Oh, yes. And others have sworn that, although they did not actually see it, they have been placed under its influence. But I am getting away from my original story: still sufficiently interested to want to hear the rest, Mr. Blake ?"

"Are you referring to the notorious house in which you say this mysterious rich man Sylvaine is now living ?"

"Yes."

"Is this another ghost story ?"

"It's worse than a ghost story."

"By Jove, yes !" boomed her husband.

"Then by all means let us hear it, Mrs. Warriner," said Sir Robert McHugh, finally laying aside his newspaper ; "I dote on horror stories."

Evidently well pleased with the impression she had created, Mrs. Warriner rose to the occasion by abandoning her work and concentrating all her energies on telling her tale.

"As I have already said," she resumed, "this part of Somerset is particularly rich in stories of the weird and wonderful. The house I am going to tell you about is called 'The Beacon.' At least," pausing and shivering slightly, "that is the postal address. It is situated practically on the cliff at Greenaleigh Point, which is a promontory on the other side of Minehead from here. 'The Beacon,' although a very handsome residence, had been empty for some years before this Mr. Fenton Sylvaine surprised us all by purchasing it."

"It had been unoccupied because of the story, I presume?" put in Lorne.

"Yes. The local people are fairly strong-nerved, but the tradition attached to 'The Beacon' was too much even for them. Of course, only a rich man could have entertained such a place, so that the choice of a future owner was somewhat limited, but I happen to know that at least two millionaires, one of them an American, and both interested in hunting, had a look over 'The Beacon' with a view to buying it only two years ago. Somehow or other—it is difficult to prevent a story of that description getting about—they heard the legend and in both cases that meant an end to the negotiations."

"You're working me up into a tremendous state of excitement, Mrs. Warriner!" stated Sir Robert; "do get on with the legend."

"Well, the legend is this: This house of the Screaming Skull, as it is called locally, was owned hundreds of years ago by a man who had made a fortune out of the slave trade and had come to this lonely spot from Bristol on account of his being ostracised by the local society.

"This Mr. Delamere brought with him, amongst his large household staff, a faithful negro servant, who was a slave. Delamere was undoubtedly a monster, and one night, in a fit of drunken fury, he murdered this servant. It was a foul and horrible crime, and I will not harrow your feelings by going into the terrible details. But this is the point: whilst the negro was dying, he told his slayer that if his body

was not sent back to Barbadoes, he would be in unrest for ever.

"This request was disregarded by the drunken murderer; in fact, the body was not even laid in the neighbouring churchyard. Afraid that his crime would become known, Delamere himself dug a shallow grave in the grounds of the house that same night and flung the corpse into it without bothering about any religious ceremony.

"Not many hours afterwards—so the story goes—the night was made hideous. From the direction of the crude grave came the most terrifying screams; the windows of 'The Beacon' rattled, the floors heaved, doors creaked until finally they came off their hinges, and a state of nightmare reigned generally.

"The final horror was to come: at dawn, the servants, frightened out of their wits by these unnatural occurrences, burst open the locked door of Delamere's room to find—*nothing but a grinning naked skull in the bed!* Delamare had vanished, and from that day to this no trace of his body has ever been found. The skull was that of a negro, and the local superstition is that the Devil came during some period of that dreadful night to carry away his henchman, leaving the skull of Delamare's victim in mockery."

"Pretty gruesome," admitted Sir Robert, "if rather more far-fetched than the average story of its kind. What became of the skull? They destroyed it, I should hope?"

"The skull is the kernel of the story," was the reply; "directly it is touched, it starts to scream."

"*Scream?*"

"That is the story—a fairly well-authenticated one, too. A noise like a scream, only magnified a hundred times, is said to come from the skull if it is touched—and that scream is generally supposed to be the precursor of Death. As to that, I am not prepared to say, but old Doctor Gamble, who died last year at Minehead at the age of ninety-five——"

"Ninety-six, mother."

"Ninety-six, then, attended the last owner of 'The Beacon' and he always swore that the man died in a fit of apoplexy directly after hearing the skull scream."

"And so the skull is still in 'The Beacon'?"

"Presumably. At least, it was according to old Dr. Gamble the last time he went to the house, which was shortly before he died as the result of a fall whilst hunting."

"Staunch old sportsman!" declared Lorne. "Nice cheery sort of dug-out; what do you say, Sir Robert?"

The archæologist carefully lit a cigarette.

"I would rather like to see this interesting curio," was his answer.

"There won't be much chance of that now, I am afraid," said Warriner; "the story in Minehead is that this new owner is peculiar in many of his ways. For one thing, he is a chronic invalid, lost the use of his legs, or something, and he has let it be known that he does not intend to do any entertaining. Callers won't be welcomed, apparently."

"Does he live alone?" asked Lorne. Into

his mind had flashed the prospect of that beautiful girl whose face he had seen only a few hours before looking out at him from the Rolls-Royce, living in that house of ill-omen. In the name of all that was devilish, what could she be doing there ?

Warriner, honest fellow, choked over his pipe.

" If you will excuse me mentioning it, mother," he said with a look at his wife, " Mr. Sylvaine is believed to have a very beautiful young lady staying with him ! "

" His nurse, perhaps."

" Perhaps. Well," turning to his guests, " what do you say to a whisky-and-soda as a nightcap, gentlemen ? "

" By Jove, yes!" came from Sir Robert McHugh.

" Make it a large one," said Martin Lorne; " what with screaming skulls and the gentleman who may be waiting for me upstairs—I feel I want it."

CHAPTER IV ON DUNKERY BEACON

By eleven o'clock Martin was in his room. Early hours were kept at Yew Tree Farm unless a party of bridge addicts were staying in the house. Undressing quickly, he got between the lavender-scented sheets.

In the ordinary way, he would have been quickly asleep, for he possessed that inestimable gift of being able to drop off directly his head touched the pillow.

To-night was different. The fact of being in a room which was supposed to be haunted was not the influencing factor, however: the features his imagination conjured up out of the darkness were not those of a Royalist servant of the seventeenth century, but of a girl of the modern day.

He fell asleep at last; but even then the face of this girl, who had enchained herself to his mind, persisted. In a dream which was particularly vivid she appeared to stand before him as he was about to enter a huge, gloomy-looking house. Her hand was uplifted: she was giving him a warning. He saw her lips move; they formed a single word—a word of sinister importance—D E A T H!

Martin was awake long before the entry of the maid at seven o'clock with the morning tea. The sense of impending personal peril which this vision had brought was so strong that, once roused out of slumber with a start, he sat up in bed actually expecting some sort of attack. The gloom in the room was intense; at first he found himself staring into a pool of impenetrable blackness. Then, gradually, the different objects became outlined—the screen, the table in front of the bed, the two easy-chairs, on one of which he had placed his clothes.

He looked at his watch. It was three-thirty—

long after the time for the appearance of the ghost; and, in any case, he disregarded the possibility of seeing this apparition. He was far more interested in the living than the dead. Rummy that he should have had that dream! Had it any significance? Was this girl really standing between him and danger? The house he had seen in his sleep remained so clear in his memory that he could have given a detailed description of it.

Further rest seemed impossible, so, lighting the candle by the side of the bed—the electric switch was at the other end of the room by the door—he filled and lit a pipe.

Illuminated by the vague light of the candle, Martin Lorne's face showed clean-cut features, a good profile and a firm jaw. It was the face of a man who had not only seen, but done, things.

For the last two years he had been 'doing things'—of various descriptions. By the time he was twenty-six something like a crisis had come into his life; comfortably off financially, he had been promising himself some wild game shooting in the more secluded jungles of Africa when Jaffery, the hunter who was to have acted as his companion and guide, suddenly died. At the dead man's rooms he had met a stern, grey-faced, elderly man, a close friend of Jaffery's, it appeared. This man (Bellamy, he said his name was) had listened to his story and had concluded with an unexpected invitation to dine with him the following evening. Lorne kept the appointment, fearing he would be bored.

It was a false alarm. His host spoke little,

but what he said was very much to the point. After finding that Lorne was an old Uppingham boy ("I went to Uppingham"), he asked his guest such a number of questions that Martin finally put one himself:

"I hope you don't mind me inquiring, sir, if there is any reason at the back of all this?"

"I never do anything without a sufficiently good reason, young man," was the brusque reply; "in a couple of days I may be in the position to give you an explanation."

The explanation, as a matter of fact, was given within a week. This time Martin dined in the other man's rather gloomy flat in Albany.

"I have made certain further inquiries about you, Lorne," said Sir Harker Bellamy as they sat over the port, "and these appear to be satisfactory."

"I'm glad of that, sir," replied his guest, wondering if he ought to regard the words as a compliment; "but you make me feel rather like a murderer on the point of arrest."

Bellamy paid no regard to the remark.

"You say you are at a loose end—that you have no definite object in view—that your time is your own, and that you are a free agent, having no ties. Very well, I have a suggestion I should like to put before you."

Briefly, the proposal was that Lorne should join the branch of the British Intelligence of which he was Chief.

Once having accepted the invitation, Martin, despite the pessimistic prognostications of Bellamy ("it's a dog's life—I'm warning you"),

had not found himself having any real regrets. In many respects it *had* been a dog's life—he had faced unthought-of hardships, had several times been in danger of his life, had been at the beck and call of a man who seemed (although he wasn't) a merciless tyrant, but, nevertheless, it had been worth while. How worth while he, perhaps, had not fully realised until that recent dull patch of three months had come in which he had been compelled to loaf. How the former excitement had been missed!

But now, thank Heaven, there was another job to be done! The reflection gave him a relish for the breakfast which was still some hours ahead.

Breakfast at Yew Tree Farm came under the same category as dinner and was, therefore, a substantial meal.

Warriner was in high spirits. He wanted to show his beloved Exmoor to his new guest, and, as he said, "there couldn't have been a better day for it." It was certainly a most glorious morning—one of those days when autumn catches summer in a close embrace. From the tennis-court by the side of the house, an entrancing view could be obtained of the neighbouring hills. The gorgeous autumn tints were staining wood and hill with a palette of colours that no painter would have dared to challenge. A cool air blew from the sea a bare mile or so away: Life, for once, was flawless.

"You won't mind sitting in the dicky, Lorne?" inquired Warriner. By this time he

had run out from the cowshed turned garage a Norris which, although somewhat time-worn, looked as though it still promised useful service.

Standing by the gate, Mrs. Warriner, smiling as every true woman will smile at seeing her men-folk happy, handed up the sandwiches. Her husband had already seen to the beer; and, with a wave of the hand, he set off, his long legs almost reaching to the wheel of the two-seater.

For the next couple of hours Lorne forgot everything but the joy of the unaccustomed scene. A blue sky overhead, a sweeping panorama of hill and dale, composing vistas of beauty so exquisite that the sight of them caught the breath, the steady drone of the engine taking them higher and higher into these romantic steeps—he was just content to keep his pipe going and allow the wonder of this day of days to sink into his soul. There would never be another one quite like this: of that he was sure.

They had not gone many miles from Yew Tree Farm when they saw the first rider hacking to the meet. Warriner was known to every one, and cheery greetings soon fell thick and fast around the unassuming but trustworthy Norris.

Presently, at a crest of a commanding slope, the driver swung his legs over the side and beamed upon his passengers.

"Shanks's pony from now on, gents!" he said; and by the way he stamped his feet he showed himself to belong to that band of the elect who would rather use the legs that a good God had

given them than ride in any Lord Mayor's carriage.

Shanks's pony it was—jumping streams that wended their rippling way to the deep valleys beneath, through pine woods, the scent of which was a separate glory, up zigzag paths that tested wind and muscle; then through a winding lane, past a picturesque farmhouse which, Warriner stated, a famous hunting-artist had made his headquarters during the summer, and into a huge meadow where the meet was to be.

Martin thought that the beauty of that picture —so typically English that it could not possibly have belonged to any other country—would never leave his mind. He was not an imaginative man—at least he had never believed himself to be—but now he did not know what reply to make when Warriner asked him what he thought of it. But when his host exclaimed with passionate sincerity: "There isn't a better spot in the world than this!" he nodded his head; for, indeed, there could be no argument about the matter.

The fine morning had drawn a splendid field. Upwards of three hundred riders could be counted, including one scarlet-coated huntsman whose wiry frame gave the lie to his grey hairs.

"We'll get on up to the top of Dunkery," said Warriner, pointing to a wide plateau, topping woods so dense that, from this distance, they looked like moss clinging to a gigantic boulder. "How are you, Sir Robert?"

"Don't waste breath—it's too valuable," replied the archæologist with native sagacity.

His sixty-five years were sitting lightly on him that morning; memories of deer-stalking days in days gone by returned—he wasn't going to be left behind!

So, another climb, with Warriner, his long legs moving with effortless ease—country life had kept him vigorously active at fifty-two—setting such a pace that, after a while, Lorne, looking at McHugh, inquired: "Is this chap trying to take the place of the stag?"

But when the top of the moor was reached eventually, they were well repaid for the labour. Here, at a height of over one thousand, seven hundred feet, the eye could travel over several counties.

"This," announced Warriner, proudly, "is said to be one of the finest views in the country."

"I can quite believe it," replied Sir Robert, full-stretch on the ground; "did any one say bottled beer?"

"The noblest words in the English language," supported Lorne, watching the chuckling Warriner undo the strap of the knapsack which, like a Briton, he had borne throughout the heat and burden of the morning.

Gurgle! Gurgle!! Gurgle!!!

With pipes going sweetly, they watched the hounds getting the scent in the distance, heard the thunder of hoofs on the road below, caught a view of the stag speeding swiftly towards the shelter of Horner Woods and then, having done all they could as spectators, decided to set about the serious business of lunch.

From out of that blessed knapsack Warriner produced (besides further beer) all kinds of succulent sandwiches with home-made cakes as a follow.

"Not much of a place, *this*, for ghosts—at any rate just about now," he remarked to Lorne, after passing over some more crab sandwiches; "by the way, I haven't asked you—did you happen to see *our* particular fellow last night?"

Martin was about to make some jesting denial when the sound of a heavy car being pulled up caused him to turn his head. The words he had been going to say remained unuttered: the girl who had visited him in that vivid dream had once again appeared in the flesh.

She was sitting in a Rolls—the same car, no doubt, that had passed him on the way from Cleveley station the previous evening. By her side was an elderly man wearing a heavy overcoat, the fur collar of which was turned up round his neck.

Lorne felt himself change; every nerve in his body stiffened to attention. In the midst of this pastoral charm there had entered something which chilled. This girl, beautiful and attractive as she was, had brought her own atmosphere—and that atmosphere was alien and antagonistic.

Noticing that the other had not replied, Warriner turned to see the cause. "By Jove!" he muttered to Sir Robert McHugh, "there's the man Fenton Sylvaine—what's brought *him* here?"

The archæologist's curiosity made him take

a casual glance at the new owner of 'The Beacon.'

"Looks an invalid," he commented; "got the appearance of one, anyway. Scarcely the type, I should have thought, to have buried himself in a house with that reputation. Hullo, here's the chauffeur coming. What the deuce can he want?"

The driver of the Rolls had left his seat and was walking towards them.

"My master's compliments, gentlemen, and he would be glad to know if the hunt has killed yet." Although the speaker might have been taken for an Englishman, there was more than a hint of some foreign accent which Lorne could not trace, but which, nevertheless, was unmistakable to his trained ear.

All three sprang to their feet.

"No," replied Warriner, "they haven't killed. The hunt is still on. The last we saw of the stag was a few minutes ago when he was heading for Horner Woods."

"Thank you, sir—I will tell my master." The man, with a short bow, which owed something to Latin ancestry, the closely-observant Lorne would have been ready to swear, acknowledged the information and turned on his heel.

Interested as he was in the new owner of 'The Beacon,' Warriner was still more interested in the hunt; and when the hounds in full cry burst through a coppice only a few hundred yards away, he started off at a quick pace.

"Come on, you chaps!" he cried.

McHugh looked at Lorne.

"Go on, sir—I'll follow," said Martin.

The archæologist did not raise any quibble: he accepted the remark and made no attempt to argue about it.

Martin had said the first words that entered his mind. An impulse had come to him; if it was humanly possible, he intended to have a word with this girl. How, he did not at present know, but if the car remained he could approach and volunteer some information about the beauty of the day or the progress of the hunt. He had noticed that, as at all sporting meetings, a certain *camaraderie* existed amongst the spectators. And, besides, the man Sylvaine, her companion, had opened the ball.

The car had not moved, although the chauffeur had resumed his place at the wheel. He walked the twenty yards or so between them and raised his hat.

"Did you notice the hounds just now, sir?"

He was close enough to see distinctly the man he addressed. Fenton Sylvaine—if this was he—was not an agreeable object. His complexion was that of a chronic invalid; he looked as though he was ridden hard by some disease.

He turned his face at the words and looked at the speaker.

"Yes—a wonderful sight. It made the journey here quite worth while."

The voice was that of a cultured man and fairly agreeable. But it was not the man's voice which held Martin Lorne's attention.

The eyes are always the windows of a man's mind. If he had not known it by instinct, his

training under Sir Harker Bellamy would have taught him this truth.

And the eyes of this man were evil.

A light, weird and devilish, gleamed in them—a hellish malignancy which made Martin think at first he was facing a madman. If he had not kept an iron grip on his nerves, he would have betrayed himself. As it was, he pretended not to have noticed anything, and looked across at the girl.

The latter surveyed him with the same hostile blankness she had shown at the Lotus Night Club.

"I am afraid you are feeling the cold," she said to the man beside her; "shall Max drive on?"

"If you wish it, my dear." Sylvaine raised his hat, smiling with his lips whilst his eyes raked Lorne again with that same disturbing malignancy. Martin was left staring after the car, feeling a fool.

Yet he had some measure of consolation. He had been snubbed yet again by the girl—but he had learned something from the man. He had discovered that Fenton Sylvaine was possessed by some potent evil force which betrayed itself perhaps without his knowledge.

And that girl lived with him—and in a house from which the ordinary person would have turned away in justifiable dread. . . .

He sank down in the sweet-smelling heather. The crowd had gone, following the main body of the hunt; he was alone. The beauty of the landscape had not changed; it seemed incredible that evil could lurk behind such a scene. And

yet he had just stood face to face with it. There had been no mistake.

One thought was inevitable: did this man Sylvaine represent the danger against which the girl had warned him in the dream the night before?

He filled and lit a pipe. Then, reclining on one elbow, he watched the blue smoke float lazily into the pellucid air. The promise he had made to McHugh to follow on was forgotten: a greater event was occupying his thoughts than the eventual kill of an Exmoor red deer.

The tobacco in the bowl of his pipe was half-consumed when he heard a step. Turning, he saw to his astonishment it was the girl. He sprang to his feet instantly.

"Mr. Fenton Sylvaine presents his compliments and hopes you will give him the pleasure of coming to dinner one evening soon," was what he heard after waiting for her to address him.

Fateful as were the words, it was the girl's face which held his attention. She had something far more than mere beauty; there was an undefinable quality about her which gripped him in spite of himself. Friend or foe, this girl was unforgettable; and he knew that, through all the years that might stretch ahead, he would never forget her. The memory of her would be imperishable.

"That is very kind of Mr. Sylvaine—especially as I am a stranger," he found himself replying.

The girl drew herself up; she became taut. In an instant she had changed completely

"I have given the message," she said; "now I will give you a warning. *Do not go!*" Her tone was low, but vibrant. She was in desperate earnest.

"But——" he started to remonstrate.

"I have already risked a great deal by warning you," came the interruption; "why have you come down here meddling?"

This was becoming rather difficult to follow and somewhat trying to the temper.

"I am afraid, Miss——"

"My name does not matter."

"Snub number three," said Lorne. "Well, as I was saying, Miss-Whose-Name-Does-Not-Matter, I don't quite understand why you should go out of your way to scatter warnings broadcast in this manner to a perfect stranger. No doubt you have your reason, but it seems a curious habit. If the information interests you sufficiently, I came down to this quarter of the globe with the intention of having a quiet holiday."

"You came here to spy!" she said sharply.

Lorne almost lost his temper.

"The boot would seem to be on the other foot, if I may say so. I understand you live at Greenaleigh, on the further side of Minehead. Yet you left the train at Cleveley station last night. Presumably you already know where I am staying, but in case you don't, any communication sent to The Yew Tree Farm, Cleveley, will find me. The name is Blake."

The girl disregarded his militant banter. She leaned forward; her eyes were bright with some

sense of excitement and her voice when she spoke shook with earnestness.

"I warn you again not to accept this invitation, Mr. Lorne—it will mean——" Then she broke off suddenly for the chauffeur's voice suddenly interrupted: "The master complains of feeling cold, Miss."

"Very well, Max; I will come."

Knocking the cold ashes out of his pipe, Lorne watched her out of sight.

This was a damned rummy business.

The rumminess increased after he had decoded the letter which he found waiting for him upon his return to Yew Tree Farm at dusk.

"Glad to see you back!" declared Mrs. Warriner with characteristic animation; "you'll all want a bath, I know—well, there's plenty of hot water. And, oh—here's a letter for you, Mr. Blake; it came by the four o'clock post—we only have two in the day, you know; one at a quarter to eight and the other at four o'clock. . . . Now, father, go and change, and then you shall tell me what sort of a day you have had. . . ."

Martin locked the door of his room before he tore open the letter. The scrawl on the envelope was that of 'The Mole.' What Bellamy wrote was usually very secret—and invariably it was written in code.

Five minutes later the following message was fixed firmly in the reader's mind:—

There is a man calling himself Fenton Sylvaine living at a house known as 'The Beacon' at Greena-

leigh, a few miles away. Watch him carefully. He is up to some mischief and I want to know what the devil it is. Report quickly.

B.

The letter burned, Lorne whistled softly to himself as he went to have his bath.

CHAPTER V THE GIRL WHO TOOK AN OATH

JESSIE MILBURN returned to the Rolls with eyes fixed steadily in front of her. She hated this foreign chauffeur with his too elaborate politeness, his babyish pink and white complexion, and his stealthy manner. When she first met him, his clear skin had led her to believe he was English, but she soon learned that the Latin predominated. His foreign blood showed itself unmistakably many times a day.

How much had Max heard? Had she betrayed herself? If so, he would pass the word to Sylvaine, and then—— Well-disciplined as she had forced herself to be, she shuddered at that prospect. Life with Fenton Sylvaine had become far more nerve-racking than she had ever imagined it could be. Alone in that horrible house with him. . . . Even meeting Valdez in London, and having to pretend to be flattered by his nauseating gallantry, had been a relief. Valdez would be coming to 'The Beacon' the

next day, and would then continue, no doubt, his sickening attentions. If only she dared slap him across the face—just once! But, because of the task she had set herself, she had to smile—and go on smiling. For how much longer she could depend upon her resolution, she did not know; her will had practically reached cracking-point a week ago.

But she must keep on. The oath she had made years before compelled her. If she were false to that trust now, she would never forgive herself. Eight years before, on the night that her dying father had made the confidence, she had sworn to seek his murderer out and expose him to the world. Eight years—and now, after what had seemed insurmountable difficulties, she believed the end was in sight.

She would do it alone; she had to do it alone. There must be no interference, no outside help. That was why she had warned this man Lorne, whom Valdez had told her in the Lotus Night Club was a British Secret Service agent, to keep away. The reckoning with this monster, Fenton Sylvaine, had to be with her first; afterwards the Law could step in if it liked. But hers would be the hand to strike the first blow. She must be the one to strip the pretence from this master-mummer.

Sylvaine looked at her intently when she reached the car.

"Did he accept?" he asked. The evil eyes seemed intent on reading her soul.

"I gave him your message, Mr. Sylvaine, but he did not say if he would come or not.

He asked me to tell you, however, that he was staying at the Yew Tree Farm. Perhaps that means he would like a more formal invitation." She had to say something.

"Well, get in—I want to get home." The tone was sharp and incisive; he might have been speaking to a servant. But that, Jessie reflected with bitterness, was exactly what she was. The word "secretary" in her case was a mere mockery. Sylvaine treated her as a natural bully treats one whom he considers to be absolutely in his power.

During the drive home she speculated what the man she had warned, and whom she had purposely treated with such coldness, must be thinking of her. Apparently others besides herself were now aware of Sylvaine's true character, how he spent his energies in evil researches—and this Martin Lorne, masquerading under another name, had evidently been sent down by the authorities to watch him. Taking up the attitude she had done, Lorne would probably think that she herself was connected with this conspiracy which she believed her employer was hatching against the Government. What did it matter if he did? And yet, as a rush of blood flushed her cheeks—she found she could not ignore the tense expression which had been in his eyes. And the mockery of his voice—how it had stung!

They had passed Minehead by now and were out on the cliff road. The gloomy mass of 'The Beacon' soon showed against the skyline. If only she could master the secret of

this house! The legend, ghastly as it was, she felt she could dismiss—her affair was with a monster of flesh and blood.

"I shall dine alone to-night—I have some problems to solve," stated Sylvaine as the car stopped outside the entrance.

She bit her lip. Then: "Very well, Mr. Sylvaine—if you should want me, will you kindly let me know?"

A grunt was the only answer.

CHAPTER VI A NIGHT ADVENTURE

After dinner that night Lorne, making an excuse, slipped out of the room. He put on hat and overcoat and quietly left the house. On the table in the hall was an electric torch and he took the liberty of borrowing it. The next morning he would have to run into Minehead and purchase one.

It was as well he had borrowed this torch, he found, as he struck off into the lane branching off into the high road, that led in turn to the village a mile or so away. There was no moon, few stars were out, and it was as black as the inside of a bag. It was impossible to see more than a foot ahead.

He knew the general direction of the village from a talk he had had with Warriner; and, after leaving the Police Superintendent's house on the left, it was a comparatively easy matter to find

the turning which led upwards into the main street of what he had heard Sir Robert McHugh describe as one of the three prettiest villages in England.

Arrived at the Cleveley Arms, which he had made his destination, Lorne ordered a drink in the snuggery to the left of the entrance, and joined for a short time in the conversation of the three men already present. Then, catching the landlord's eye, he asked if it was possible for him to use the telephone. "I want to get through to London," he explained.

The landlord led the way into what appeared to be a private sitting-room.

"But, excuse me, sir, aren't you the gentleman who's staying along with Mr. Warriner down at Yew Tree Farm? I fancy I saw you at the meet to-day."

"I daresay, landlord; I was there with Mr. Warriner. And you're quite right about my staying at the farm."

"Well, sir, you mustn't think me personal or anything like that, but the Farm is on the telephone; you could have saved yourself this walk if you had had a mind to."

"Well, I'm hanged!" was the reply; "you don't mean to say Warriner has the 'phone?"

"Yes, sir—he has."

"Who'd have thought it—but, then, you see, this is my first visit—and I only arrived last night. In any case, the walk back won't do me any harm—at least, I hope not. No dangerous characters about here, I suppose, landlord?"

The other laughed.

"Not since they sent old Bob Amos—Tom Baker as he was called—to prison for beating his wife. . . . That'll be your call, sir," as the telephone shrilled.

As he came out of the room five minutes later, Martin noticed a man whose hat was pulled well down over his eyes dart rapidly away in the direction of the hotel entrance. The sight caused a slight smile to appear round his lips; and, because he had anticipated that something of this sort might happen, he felt a glow of satisfaction. The walk had been worth while.

"Everything all right, sir?" inquired the landlord, emerging from his snuggery.

"Perfectly, thank you. I got a good line through to London and there wasn't any trouble at all. I hope you won't mind having a drink with me, landlord?"

"Lord bless you, no, sir, thank you kindly! Won't you be staying, sir?"

"No, I must get back, I am afraid—Mr. Warriner will wonder where I've disappeared. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Gripping the stick he had brought with him tightly by the ferrule-end, Lorne stepped out into the middle of the road and commenced his return journey without using his torch. He had established one fact—namely, that he had been spied upon whilst telephoning—and he was curious about establishing another. He had no idea who the listener-in might be,

but he wondered what the eavesdropper's thoughts were as he overheard the request he had made over the 'phone—to tell Aunt Bessie that he had received her postcard and that he certainly wouldn't forget to wear the bed-socks she had so kindly sent him.

More important than the thoughts of the man, however, was the action, if any, the fellow proposed to take. There was a matter of a mile to be traversed before he arrived back at the farm—with the blackness of the Pit every inch of the way. A perverse sense of humour prevented Martin from switching on the torch; besides, the man, if he attacked, would do so from behind. On the other hand, of course, he might by this time have gone about his business, pondering over the peculiar problem of Aunt Bessie and the bed-socks.

But when he had walked into that pitch darkness for perhaps a quarter of a mile, Martin fancied he heard the sound for which he had been straining his ears. This was the soft pad-pad of footsteps on the hard roadway behind.

Someone was tracking him.

He did some quick thinking. Although he could not see, he calculated he was within a hundred yards or so of the main road off which he had turned to get to the village. For the space of three or four hundred yards he would have to walk along this main road which, being the main thoroughfare into Minehead, was always fairly busy with vehicular traffic. After that, there came a turning into a deserted lane

which ran all the way to the farm. The point of all this was: if the man behind intended to attack, would he do so before they came into the main road, or wait until they were nearer the farm?

Lorne smiled as he suddenly stopped. He would like a look at the man. It seemed desirable that he should give himself the chance of memorising the fellow's face. The problem of when and where the man might attack became waived. To get a good look at the vermin—he had his torch—that was the chief idea now.

Pausing for a moment as he made the complete turn, Martin listened. Monsieur, the enemy, whose own hearing must have been pretty acute, had also stopped; at any rate, no sound of following footsteps could now be heard: that sinister sound of gentle padding after had ceased.

Lorne, from his experience in this sort of work, argued that if the tracker had the least idea that suspicion had been aroused in the man he was following, he would not remain in the middle of the road; rather would he slink into the greater security of one of the hedges. Then, if the quarry should happen to turn, he would be in the better position of pouncing on him—should he want to pounce.

In this particular instance, Lorne had resolved to do the pouncing. He had proved to himself on previous occasions that he possessed the faculty of being able to sense a man's presence even in the darkness and he was now going to put this gift to the test.

Creeping along the side of the road nearest

the right-hand hedge, he had proceeded for perhaps sixty yards when he suddenly stopped. What he sought was in front—just in front: not more, perhaps, than a bare yard away.

He could see nothing—but he could hear a sound which, to him, was unmistakable: the sound of a man's rather hurried breathing.

Still, he was unable to visualise anything clearly. There was a vague outline which was probably the man's body, but beyond that—nothing. And yet—straining forward, he was able to see two whitish spots at a height of a man's head.

One quiet step forward—and he switched on his torch.

There was a dull click—but no light came. Something had gone wrong with the battery. It must have been the purest accident because no one had had the opportunity of monkeying with the thing. He himself was to blame; he should have given the torch a closer examination before setting out.

He must be now within a foot or so of the man because he could feel the other's breath upon his face. And yet, uncanny and inexplicable as it was, he was unable to trace the man's face. Where his face should have been was nothing but blackness—a blackness that was no different to the abysmal gloom everywhere around. Only those two dirty-whitish spots showed. There was only a very short distance between them. . . .

Suddenly Martin understood. Those white spots were the man's eyes. He was unable to

outline the rest of the face because the colour fitted in so well with the darkness. Here, unless he was mistaken, was the beige gentleman: friend Dago come so unexpectedly to life in the strange setting of an Exmoor lane!

He did not waste any words. There was no need for any explanation—the man had eavesdropped and then stealthfully followed him—why he should remain mute and inglorious now he could not understand unless the fellow was rigid with fear.

Stepping back a pace, Martin put all he had into a swinging right. Aiming at a spot six inches below the now flickering white spots, he had the satisfaction of feeling his fist connect with something that felt substantially like a jaw bone.

A crash followed: the beige gentleman, if, indeed, it was he, had billowed back into the thorny embrace of the hedge.

If there had been any rustic lovers within hearing, their mating-whispers would have been interrupted a moment later by a series of strange-sounding but vehement oaths. Being in a foreign language, they, mercifully, would not have understood the dire import of the words, but all the same they would have been shocked.

Martin Lorne was not shocked; but he was extremely interested. So well as he was able to understand, the gentleman who had fallen into the briers was cursing him in a mixture of three languages—French, Portuguese and Spanish—and after this he had no longer any reason to doubt that here, in the flesh, was

the very man he had desired so ardently to hit when seeing him for the first time at the Lotus Club two nights before.

But to hit him was not sufficient—however satisfying—when he remembered the girl: he must try to discover the motive the man had first in endeavouring to listen-in to his telephonic talk, and secondly in sneaking after him like a footpad.

With this intention, he reached forward, groped for a moment or so and then, catching hold of the other's collar, he started to pull him to his feet.

But the linguist evidently had other ideas. Unexpectedly Lorne received a violent blow in the pit of the stomach. The man must have kicked him, and the pain was so excruciating that he was forced to relinquish his hold. There was a quick scuttle—the other, having got away, was, judging by the sound, running as fast as his legs would carry him down the country road. Meanwhile, Lorne was gasping in agony.

By the time he was able to stand upright, Martin realised it would be useless to attempt to follow the man. The thought of how he had been worsted was galling, but he had this satisfaction—for how much it was worth: the fellow was dark-skinned. It must have been either the dago or the black servant Warriner had said was in Sylvaine's household. Were these two the same? He determined soon to find out.

He reached Yew Tree Farm without any further incident, but, upon arrival, discovered the Warriner household in a state of the utmost commotion. Instead of the composed conversationalists he expected, he found a seriously-disturbed household. Mrs. Warriner was speaking agitatedly through the telephone in the hall, her husband had an expression of perplexity on his usually jolly face, and Sir Robert McHugh was frowning over a cigarette.

Lorne caught Mrs. Warriner's final words: "Yes, doctor, I should like you to come at once, please. . . . Yes, very serious, I am afraid . . . oh, thank you—good-bye."

Warriner, noticing Martin, walked across to him.

"Nasty business, this," he said.

"But what's happened? I've been out—up to the village." He didn't proceed to explain further.

Mrs. Warriner and Sir Robert joined them.

"I'm most awfully sorry anything so disturbing should have happened, Mr. Blake."

"I was just asking your husband what the trouble was, Mrs. Warriner. I've been up to the village." Lorne noticed Sir Robert raise his eyes at the words.

"If you had said, I would have come with you." Then, forestalling his hostess, McHugh continued: "An extraordinary thing occurred

here just now. We were sitting chatting in the lounge when we heard a scream. Before any of us could get to the door, this was burst open, and Marjorie, one of the maids, burst in. Her face was white and she was evidently in a state of great fright—and I don't wonder at it, poor girl.

"Apparently," resumed the speaker after a short pause, "Ellen, the other maid in the kitchen, had been listening-in to the wireless programme and telling Marjorie, who was engaged in some ironing—was it ironing, Mrs. Warriner?"

"Yes, Sir Robert, Marjorie was ironing one of her aprons."

"Well, Blake, as I was saying, Marjorie was engaged in this domestic duty whilst her friend was entertaining her with scraps of information from the News Bulletin, when, without any warning, this poor girl Ellen suddenly gave a low cry and collapsed across the kitchen table. Marjorie, as she explained to us, was so startled that at first she did not know what to do. Then she rushed to Ellen's assistance and took the earphones off. As she did so, she said she felt what she described as 'a tingling feeling, something like an electric shock,' in her hands. She had something else to think about at the time, however, and when she found that Ellen had gone off in a dead faint, she rushed to her mistress."

"Was it a heart attack, do you think, Mrs. Warriner?" Lorne asked.

"Something far worse than that, I am afraid.

It seems an extraordinary thing to say, but the girl appears to be in a trance . . . oh, how I wish the doctor was here! And now I must go up to Ellen again."

"Is this girl strong?" McHugh asked Warriner, when the latter's wife had left them.

"So far as I know. She has been with us for over three years and hasn't had a day off through illness. If anything serious has happened to her I don't know what my wife will do. She's devoted to her maids—that's why we have so few changes and why the girls will do anything for her—and Ellen does not belong to the district. Her home is in Shropshire."

"You mustn't anticipate anything very wrong, Warriner," advised Sir Robert; "let us hope the doctor, when he comes, will be able to reassure you."

But before Dr. Wyngate from Minehead could arrive, Mrs. Warriner, almost in a state of collapse herself by this time, had told the three men that Ellen was dead.

The doctor could but give confirmation. He asked a number of questions, made an exhaustive examination of the body, and then frankly admitted that, without a *post-mortem* examination, he was quite in the dark as to the cause of death.

"There will have to be an inquest—when I get back I will ring up the Coroner," he said, and departed, leaving the occupants of Yew Tree Farm as bewildered as ever.

"Sounds almost like Black Magic," commented Sir Robert McHugh to Lorne when

they were left alone. "It's a horrible thing to think of a young and presumably healthy girl like that dying in this extraordinarily mysterious fashion. What's your idea, Blake?"

The man he addressed busied himself with filling a pipe. Had he been a free agent, he would have given his companion—a man for whom each hour brought a greater liking—his confidence. He would have told McHugh his real name—he had always hated masquerading—and what had brought him to Exmoor. Much as he would like to have done this, his hands were tied—he was under the strictest instructions to keep both his job and his right name secret.

"Like you, I am absolutely stumped, Sir Robert. As you say, the affair is extraordinarily mysterious."

"I will tell you something, young man," said McHugh, speaking with great earnestness; "this tragedy to-night is no ordinary occurrence. It is bound to create a tremendous commotion—not to say panic—and I would give a great deal to be able even to start to solve the mystery."

"You think there is something behind it, sir?"

"I do!" was the emphatic answer; "and now let's go to bed for we can't do anything for the poor soul, and, I must confess, the affair has distressed me."

Alone in his room, Lorne considered seriously McHugh's startling words. What had he meant when he said he was convinced there was something behind the girl's death? The tragedy was certainly peculiar, but to suggest, as McHugh

had done, that some evil agency had been at work that night seemed to be stretching imagination too far. Who, for instance, could wish to bring about the death of an ordinary servant-girl? And, even assuming that the girl did possess an enemy sufficiently malignant—why, the man would have to be a genius! Death by wireless! It might be good enough for the basis of a sensational film, but such a weird possibility had to be ruled out of any practical consideration.

And yet—— This thing had happened whilst he had been, not in the house it was true, but certainly in the district. Had that fact any significance? That girl had said something about death—it had been the whole substance of her warning. . . . The puzzle seemed insoluble and he decided to give it up, at least for that night. But he locked the door and saw to the fastenings of the windows before getting into bed.

As he dressed the following morning he noticed Warriner rushing across the paddock, evidently in a state of intense excitement. He was clutching what looked like a newspaper.

Soon he heard pounding on the stairs. Then a knock sounded on his door.

"Blake! Blake!!"

"Come in—the door's not locked," he replied; and, as a staring-eyed Warriner rushed into the room: "Why—what's the matter?"

"Matter enough!" replied Warriner; "read that!" He pointed to an article on the front page of the *Daily Comet* which he was holding.

Lorne took the paper from him, caught sight of the staring headlines and read :

"MYSTERY WIRELESS DEATHS.

"OVER 100 IN SOMERSET AND DEVON.

"WIDESPREAD CONSTERNATION.

"At a late hour last night the 'Daily Comet' received a number of telegrams and telephone messages from its Correspondents in different parts of Devon and Cornwall containing news of the most startling character. The information sent in each case was that, whilst listening-in to the Second News Bulletin last night, various wireless enthusiasts collapsed mysteriously and, in practically every case, died shortly afterwards.

"Upwards of a hundred deaths are reported altogether. The occurrences, as may be imagined, have caused the utmost consternation, and it is expected that questions will be asked when Parliament sits to-day.

"Meanwhile the authorities have taken the matter in hand."

"So there were others," said Lorne as he handed back the paper. "This is a serious business—have you seen Sir Robert yet ?"

"No, I'm just going along to him. I came in here because your room was first. This will finish wireless; I'll have the damned aerial taken down and the whole thing done away with."

"I think it would be wise, Warriner—at least until we get some sort of official explanation."

"The whole country will be panic-stricken. . . . Oh, well; we'd better have some breakfast, I suppose. I'll go along and see Sir Robert."

It was a very solemn party that met at the breakfast-table a quarter of an hour later. A shadow hung over the room, and even Warriner, who was usually such a good trencher-man, merely made a pretence of eating his food.

After the meal was over, McHugh touched his fellow-guest on the shoulder.

"I want to walk up to the village—care to come?" he asked.

"Yes—I'd like to."

For a hundred yards or so, after leaving the house, the two men were silent. Then Lorne started the conversation with: "Do you think, in the circumstances, we ought to clear out of the farm, sir? Mrs. Warriner will have her hands full with that affair last night?"

"No, we must stay on," was the answer; "certainly we must stay on. The body of the girl will be taken to the mortuary to-day, and, besides, I expect Mrs. Warriner will be glad of our company. She may even," with a glance at his companion, "require our help."

"What's the idea? Place likely to be raided or something?"

"I mean this: after the news in the morning paper, I am more than ever convinced that there is some devilish agency at the back of this business."

"Human?"

"Yes, human. Although we are in a district still sated with superstition, I do not attribute this epidemic of deaths to any ghostly medium. There's a fiend loose somewhere—perhaps not far away—and it's up to every decent-minded member of the community to try to find him."

Lorne looked at the smoke curling upwards from his pipe.

"We're going back to what you hinted last night, sir—but, excuse me, I think your idea is —well, somewhat far-fetched."

"You can think what you like, my boy; I have my own ideas and I am going to stick to them, and, if necessary, work them out, too. Let me remind you of what William said about there being more things in Heaven and earth than—well, you know the rest."

"I always imagined that applied more to things of the spirit, sir."

"It can apply to anything which is uncanny and devilish—and these wireless deaths are both. Hullo, what's up here?"

By this time they had reached the Police Superintendent's house, outside of which they could see a small crowd. Listening to the remarks, they soon learned that there had been another Cleveley victim to the previous night's unseen death horror besides the maid at Yew Tree Farm. This was a widow, much beloved, who, since her eyesight had failed, had found in her wireless set her chief consolation. Living alone, the discovery had not been made until that morning. The news had been taken to the Police Superintendent, and

the latter was in consultation with his superiors at Taunton. The crowd were waiting for him to come out and speak to them.

"We shan't get anything here," whispered Sir Robert, "so we might as well walk on. I have a telegram I want to send off."

At the small post office they found the staff in a state of high nervous tension. To begin with, the news of the two Cleveley deaths had caused tremendous exitement in the village, and then again they were being heavily overworked. The fine weather had caused a good many visitors to remain on in the district, and these persons' relatives, naturally anxious after reading the morning's sensational news, had sent off relays of telegrams begging for reassuring replies.

It was apparent that Sir Robert would have to wait a considerable time before he could receive attention, for the office was crowded to the door, and Lorne stated that he would stroll up the village street in order to kill time.

"Very well—you might get me some Navy Cut tobacco as you will be passing the tobacconists."

As he walked away, Martin once more debated with himself the advisability of telling this fine old sportsman at least a portion of the truth about himself; he hated to be sailing under false colours, although in doing so he was merely carrying out his instructions.

Purchasing the tobacco, Martin returned to the post office just in time to see McHugh emerge.

"This seems to be for you, Blake," he said, extending a buff envelope; "from an anxious friend, no doubt."

"Perhaps," Lorne replied because he did not know what else to say.

He took the telegram, feeling in his bones that it was from Sir Harker Bellamy.

His surmise was correct. The message to the ordinary person would have been conventional enough, being merely a statement from "Harry," to the effect that the sender was posting off the required magazines that day, but, even without his code-book, the Secret Service man was able to decipher its meaning:

"*Report on Sylvaine required urgently.*"

There was no signature—and none was needed.

"Not bad news, I hope?" inquired Sir Robert McHugh politely.

"Oh, no—rather good, as a matter of fact," Lorne replied somewhat lamely. He had made up his mind about McHugh—he could not drag a man of his age into a position of such danger as he was about to enter. The telegram from Bellamy was explicit: he had to get to close quarters with Fenton Sylvaine, find out as much as he could about the man, analyse his character, ascertain what he was doing in that house with its terrible history, and then report to London.

All this had to be done at once.

And he would have to do it alone.

CHAPTER VIII SYLVAINE IS JUBILANT

JESSIE woke that morning with a curious sense of foreboding. She had the conviction that something dreadful was about to happen. This feeling had been always more or less with her during her six months' association with Fenton Sylvaine and more particularly since arriving at 'The Beacon,' but this morning it was particularly acute. She fancied the previous day's events—meeting the man whom Valdez had said was Martin Lorne—must have made her peculiarly sensitive.

She found it extremely difficult to assume control of herself, however, after picking up the morning paper which had been placed at the side of her plate at the breakfast table. In her overwrought state—she had slept very badly the night before—her eyes had leapt at the sensational headlines on the front page of the *Comet*, England's favourite morning journal. The *Comet* might be vivid, but it was certainly enterprising and, as the occupants of Yew Tree Farm had previously been made aware, it had dealt ably with the best piece of home news that had come across the wires for a long time.

Allowing her food to get cold—Jessie was breakfasting alone—she read and re-read the announcement of the wireless deaths the night before. As she did so her mind went back to the weird moaning and whistling noises that, from time to time during the past month, had

kept her awake at night. Upon her employer remarking on her washed-out appearance one morning a week ago when she had reported for duty (Sylvaine made no pretence to gallantry) she had asked him what these singular sounds could be.

Sylvaine had smiled, if that twitching of the lips could be called a smile, in the manner she had grown to loathe, and replied: "You must either have heard the skull screaming, Miss Milburn—you remember my telling you of the legend when we came to 'The Beacon'—or your imagination must have been allowed to get the better of you." With that he had somewhat peremptorily dismissed the subject, with the additional remark: "It is foolish to give your mind to such idle fancies—in all probability what you heard was nothing but the wind."

She had not been convinced. Of course, it might have been the wind—the wind, when Nature was in an angry mood, could certainly howl like a demon being robbed of its prey—but her employer's manner, mocking and satirical as it had been, had forced her to believe that Sylvaine was hiding something. Coming to the skull, did he believe in that gruesome legend? If so, strong-nerved as he might be in spite of his disability, why had he picked on this house of all others in which to live?

Laying aside the newspaper, she forced herself to eat some breakfast. It was stupid to go without food. When the crisis for which she had been preparing and steeling herself for so long at last came, she would have need of all her vitality. After she had been successful in

accumulating sufficient evidence against the man who called himself Fenton Sylvaine to hand him over to Justice, then would come a further ordeal. She would have to give evidence in a Court of Law. It would be her word alone—backed by the evidence she had been able to gather—which would send this human devil to prison for the rest of his life. She would be alone—terribly alone—with no one to help or sustain her. But she was going through with it. The oath she had made to her father on his deathbed that night in Madras was a sacred bond.

The time came for her to take up her day's work. This started with a visit to her employer in his room. Max, the Belgian, who combined the duties of chauffeur with that of valet-attendant, had prepared Sylvaine, and when she entered the room she found her employer sitting up in bed finishing what had evidently been a hearty breakfast. Fenton Sylvaine's nervous system might be impaired, but his digestive apparatus remained in good condition.

Jessie was surprised to notice the jubilation which Sylvaine displayed : the man was positively beaming ! Often, when she went in to take correspondence after breakfast, he was almost unbearable. When he was in these vile moods it took all of even Max's tact to manage him.

But this morning he behaved like a man who had received some extraordinary good news.

" Sit down, my dear ; I shan't keep you but a minute or so. Well, Max," turning to his attendant, " so it's another fine morning, eh ? "

" A very fine morning, M'sieur—when I cleaned

the car this morning I found myself whistling—it was so good to be alive."

A burst of inexplicable laughter greeted the words. Sylvaine was shaking with mirth.

"Did you hear what this fool of a Max said, my dear?" he asked, turning to Jessie; "he felt so pleased with himself at being alive this beautiful October morning that he found himself whistling with joy!"

"There is nothing very strange in that, Mr. Sylvaine, surely?" she felt bound to reply; "I envy Max his feeling."

"Why?" came the sharp reply. "Are you not feeling like whistling for joy this beautiful October morning?"

"Not exactly—I've just been reading about all those poor people who died last night. It depressed me."

"The wireless deaths. Very remarkable," replied Sylvaine, after a pause; "but you mustn't allow it to affect you. I have a curious philosophy: I can't help thinking that more than two-thirds of the people encumbering the earth at the present time would be better dead. So that, you see, this Visitation, or whatever you may care to call it, which occurred last night, may after all have been nothing but a blessing in disguise. You will recall, no doubt, the words of Shakespeare—

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

and nothing we can do can stop it." As he looked at her, with his lips twitching in the way she had grown to hate, she thought his eyes had never before seemed so full of loathsome evil. For a man like this to prate about not being afraid to die! There should be a separate hell being got ready for such as Fenton Sylvaine.

Without waiting for her to reply, Sylvaine dismissed the attendant and motioned for Jessie to commence taking dictation. In addition to exchanging correspondence with a great many people all over the world on various scientific matters, Sylvaine occupied himself with compiling treatises which, so far as she could tell, were never published. Much of the matter thus dictated was almost unintelligible to her and she had the greatest difficulty in finding the correct spelling of the technical terms. The mastery which Sylvaine evidently possessed of obscure subjects induced her reluctant admiration for the man's intellect.

It was his intellect, as much as the man himself, which she mistrusted. Although she had as yet only general principles to go upon she sensed that Sylvaine was using his remarkable brain for an illegitimate and even evil purpose. What line of scoundrelism he was pursuing she could not tell; but for weeks past she had come to the conclusion that this scientific work which she typed was merely a hobby: it was not the task which absorbed him. That he did in secret—with, perhaps, the help of Valdez.

For over an hour Sylvaine dictated letters and memoranda at such a rapid pace that the hand

holding the fountain-pen ached with the strain. Then she was dismissed; and it was with a sigh of thankfulness that she escaped.

The secretary had scarcely gone before a door to the left of the bed opened and the person whom Martin Lorne had playfully termed "the beige gentleman" stepped into the room.

Fenton Sylvaine greeted the newcomer with a burst of laughter.

"Well, Valdez, have you nothing to say to me—the ruler of the fates of men? Confess, now, that, with your help, I have become a genius!"

The Portuguese did not respond in kind to this verbal extravagance. On the contrary, he frowned. He looked as though he had something on his mind.

"I did not know you would go so far as this; don't you realise the danger?" He shuddered as he spoke in low, excited tones.

"Danger?" Sylvaine mouthed the word in bitter contempt. "Can you achieve anything without risk? You want money; so do I. Well, we hold a colossal fortune in our hands, and you prate like a weak-minded fool about danger! Faugh! Isn't this Thing so powerful that no one dare touch us? You have seen what I did last night?" and he pointed to the morning newspaper lying at the foot of the bed.

The other remained unconvinced.

"It is too dangerous," he repeated, "and," sinking his voice, "already they are suspicious. There is, for instance, the fellow Lorne."

"You needn't worry about him," replied the

man propped up by pillows; "I have invited Mr. Martin Lorne here to dinner to-night."

The Portuguese half-caste raised himself on his toes. He looked like a crouching beast preparing to spring.

"You have invited him here?" he screamed; "*here. . .?*"

"Precisely. It may not have occurred to you, Valdez, that it is rather important I should know what exact motive has induced Mr. Martin Lorne, of the Department X2 in the British Secret Service, to come to this particular part of Exmoor at this particular time. I know no better way of extracting the necessary information from the gentleman in question than by inviting him to partake of my hospitality."

"He will not come."

"You seem rather positive about it—but I venture to differ, my dear Valdez. In fact, I am quite willing to wager that Mr. Lorne will be my guest at no later period than to-night. I will tell you on what line of reasoning I base that prediction: he is suspicious of me, perhaps (for what reason I confess I am yet in the dark), but I disarm that suspicion by inviting him to my house——"

"That very fact will make him doubly suspicious!" interrupted the other with an oath; "why should you, he will ask himself, invite a perfect stranger to your house? A thousand devils, Sylvaine, are you completely mad? Has this—this," pointing with a quivering finger to the newspaper, "turned your brain? I am beginning to think so."

Had Jessie been present she would probably have marvelled at the control which Sylvaine continued to exercise. It was as though his good spirits that morning refused to allow him to lose his temper.

"I am very sane," he replied; "unlike you, Valdez, I am at my best now that my dreams are beginning to bear fruit. I can look success in the face. But to reply to your argument: you are wrong when you say that Martin Lorne is a perfect stranger. On the contrary, Miss Milburn and I met him yesterday when we went to the meet of the local staghounds. He very courteously spoke to us, explaining something of the intricacies of the chase. He struck me, I must say, as a very likeable young fellow—so directly I get up I am going to send him a written invitation by Max to dine with me to-night."

"It is madness! I tell you, he is not a fool! And he has, already, his suspicions. He is one we should dispose of, not encourage——"

"Rest assured, my dear Valdez, that if I decide it is necessary, he *will* be disposed of." The eyes of the speaker gleamed.

"But it will be known that he has come here. Already the police of the country will be on the watch . . . surely you have gone mad, Sylvaine?"

"The tone of your conversation is becoming just a trifle wearisome, my dear Valdez; if you are so afraid, there is nothing to prevent you leaving this house—or, indeed, the country."

"And allow you to rob me of my brains! A thousand devils, do you tempt me to kill you?"

"Be careful what you are saying." The invalid put a hand behind him and produced a revolver. "You know me well enough to realise that I should not have the slightest hesitation in shooting you like a dog if you dared to attempt anything foolish, Valdez. But this is merely hysterical nonsense on your part," he added, with a change of tone. "Let me assure you once again that you need have no alarm; if I decide it necessary to dispose of my visitor to-night, you can rest satisfied that it will be done in a thoroughly safe manner. But, first, it will be necessary to know what is in that young man's brain."

"It will be better that I should not be here. No, it is not that I am afraid, but——"

"But—what? I can see you have something else on your mind. What is worrying you now?"

Valdez hesitated before making his reply.

"I have not been happy about this man," he said finally, "so, last night, when you were making your experiments—"

"You were in such a funk that I was glad to get you out of the way," commented the other curtly.

"Granted I was afraid—and no wonder; as I have said, I did not expect you to go so far. But, enough. When I was in Cleveley, I saw this man Lorne enter the local hotel. He had come, I discovered, to telephone to London—does that not tell you something?"

"Well? Did you manage to hear what he had to say?"

"It was difficult—but, yes, I managed it."

"And what did he say ?"

"I only got near enough to the private room he used to catch the end. What he said sounded like the merest nonsense, but——"

"You had better leave me to be the best judge of that."

"Well, all I could make out," continued the narrator with a grimace, "was that he wished to thank his Aunt Bessie for sending him the bed-socks."

"And this," guffawed Sylvaine, "is the man of whom you confess to be afraid !"

"It must have been a blind, that message. Perhaps he guessed he was being overheard—I do not know about that—but there must have been some reason. He was on his guard, in any case, because when I started to follow him after he left the hotel——"

"Why did you follow him ?"

"I thought he might be going to put information before the police."

"Valdez, for a man possessing one of the greatest inventive brains in the world, you certainly possess very little common-sense."

"I tell you I do not like this man, Lorne, being here," expostulated the Portuguese. "It was singular, was it not, that he should have been present at that Night Club the other evening——"

"There may have been nothing more in it than mere coincidence."

"You dismiss everything !" stormed the other. "Let me tell you that this man, Lorne,

will not walk blindly into your trap—or, if he comes here, it will be for his own purpose. He guessed I, or at least someone, was following him last night."

"Did he speak to you?"

"*No, he did not speak. He hit me instead.*" The speaker put a hand up to a jaw that still felt very tender.

"And what did *you* do?"

"I kicked—and ran away. It would have been suicidal had he recognised me.

Sylvaine snorted in fresh contempt.

"You've been doing far too much thinking lately, my friend. Your nerves have gone back on you, in consequence. It would be better, as I suggested just now, if you took a little holiday."

"I cannot do that, Sylvaine," was the answer, "because I do not trust you. The original idea was mine; I will not have it stolen. It is madness, this attempt of yours to blackmail—it would have been far better had we sold it straightaway to——"

"That is sufficient," Sylvaine cut in before the Portuguese could say the name; "in this I am determined to have my own way. As for the man, Lorne, he shall be dealt with as I have promised."

Squirming with impotent fury, Valdez backed to the door. Whilst he had a hand on the knob, he turned.

"And this girl. She, also, is not a fool—that I know. When we were in London she asked me many questions—too many. You will let

me deal with her if what I think is true ?" His voice was febrile with excitement.

"And what is it you think about my secretary ?"

"That she also is a spy!" declared Valdez, and went out, banging the door.

"The man hasn't the heart of a herring," Sylvaine told himself as he reached forward to pick up the morning newspaper.

As he read the principal news-item, blazoned on the front page, his face became convulsed. Any unprejudiced observer would have been prepared at that moment to have supported the Portuguese's accusation that the man was mad.

CHAPTER IX NIGHTMARE

"I MUST make you a thousand apologies, my dear Mr. Blake," said his host; "it is inconceivably stupid of my chauffeur to allow the one car I happen to possess to break down at such an awkward moment. Had I not been foolishly old-fashioned, I should have had the telephone installed; as it is, I am afraid there is only one alternative—I propose that you grant me the privilege of staying the night. What you require can easily be provided, of course. What do you say ?"

"Well, if it's no inconvenience."

"Inconvenience!" Sylvaine scoffed at the

idea. "If I may say so without fulsomeness, I have appreciated your company so much to-night that I am loath to see you go." The speaker wheeled his invalid's chair nearer the blazing fire and smiled upon his guest.

"It's very kind of you to say so." Lorne looked across at the girl who made up the party. "If Mr. Sylvaine goes on displaying such agreeable hospitality, Miss Milburn, you will soon be turning people away in shoals from 'The Beacon.'"

His attempt to draw her into the conversation was not successful. All through the evening—ever since his arrival, in fact—she had looked ill and worried. Was this because he had so deliberately disregarded her warning of the day before?

He endeavoured to get a minute's private talk, but this had proved impossible. Sylvaine's evil eyes had never left him from the moment of his arrival; and although the man went out of his way to insist that the girl should remain after dinner instead of going to her own room as she had requested, he had allowed them no opportunity of speaking together.

The girl now rose. Turning to her employer, she said: "My headache is worse; if you will excuse me, Mr. Sylvaine, I will go to bed."

Lorne felt his temper rising as he noticed the way the invalid regarded her. Sylvaine looked like an ogre.

Her employer gave his consent.

"Of course, we will excuse you, my dear; I have a great many things I should like to

talk over with Mr. Blake, and we may be up late. Good night, and very pleasant dreams." The man's lips twitched in a manner that Martin found peculiarly repulsive.

Standing by the door, which he had sprang up to open, he tried to give the girl a reassuring look as she passed through. If he could have had the least glimpse into her mind he would have known how to treat her; as it was, she remained an enigma. The only clue he had was that all through the evening she had shown herself to be in deadly fear of her employer, that sinister-looking invalid. Was the terror on her own account—or on his? If only she had given him a clue. . . .

Shutting the door, he returned to his seat by the fire. By consenting to stay the night—that story about the broken-down Rolls had obviously been an invention, and a somewhat clumsy one at that—he had definitely committed himself. As it happened, however, this proposal of his host's had fitted in with his plans—the secret which this house contained (he was positive there was a secret and that Sylvaine controlled it for some nefarious purpose of his own) had to be learned and at the earliest possible opportunity. Otherwise, his visit would have been fruitless.

"I must apologise for the disability which prevents me from performing my duties as a host as well as I should like," said Sylvaine, "but I do beg of you, Mr. Blake, to make yourself absolutely at home. You will find cigars——"

"I prefer a pipe if you don't mind." Lorne, putting a hand into his pocket to pull out a briar, was reassured by the cold touch of the tiny automatic which nestled against his tobacco-pouch. The two things probably made a decent-sized bulge, but he could not help that: it was just as well, perhaps, that Sylvaine should know he wasn't such a consummate ass as to venture into his lair totally unprepared.

"Do help yourself to some whisky—the tantalus is behind you, my dear fellow."

The "dear fellow" caused Martin to feel that someone had thrust a handful of spiders down his back, but he controlled his reply.

"I'm quite happy, thanks."

Sylvaine smiled.

"I daresay you were somewhat surprised to receive my invitation, Mr. Blake?—your name is Blake, is it not?"

"Blake is correct." Where was the fellow leading? Had he any suspicion?

"Of course—Blake. Oh, yes—of course. Sometimes I am afraid my memory isn't what it was. I have been an invalid for so many years. . . . But I do not intend to bore you with my infirmities. I was remarking that no doubt you were surprised to receive my invitation. As a matter of fact, if I may say so, I was very much struck by your kindness in speaking to a lonely old man yesterday at the meet. Also, your personality happened to appeal to me—and there you are!" The speaker wound up with a kind of verbal flourish.

"It was very kind of you, sir; and I have

had a most pleasant evening." Lorne kept the words courteous enough, but he was very much on his guard. The man was watching him with feverish interest; he might have been a human spider regarding a fly. But, although he had ventured of his own free will into the spider's parlour, he was fully aware of the danger.

"You are a stranger to these parts, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes. That is to say, I've never stayed here before. But I was a little run down after an illness and I was recommended to try the Exmoor air. Jolly good it is, too! Bucked me up no end, although I've been here only two days."

Sylvaine nodded in agreement.

"Comfortable where you are staying?"

"Very. Do you happen to know Mr. and Mrs. Warriner?"

"No. You see, like yourself, I am practically a stranger to this district. I was recommended to live here by a London specialist. As you are a visitor, perhaps you do not know the legend attached to this house—you're not nervous, by any chance, I hope?"

"Good Lord, no!" declared the visitor. Once again Lorne asked himself what the other could have in his mind.

"I only asked you because this is supposed to be a house with a somewhat terrible history. It is known in the neighbourhood—indeed, throughout Somerset, I believe—as The House of the Screaming Skull."

"Rather weird," commented Lorne, studying

the other from behind the smoke-screen made by his pipe.

"Of course, it's all a lot of nonsense—but I merely warn you in case if you do hear a devil of a rumpus during the night you will know that it's the skull having one of its periodical screams. Ha! Ha!"

"Seems a curious habit for a skull." He must not let Sylvaine think he was aware of the story. That would betray the fact that the invalid had been under discussion by the Warriners. Sylvaine could form his own conclusions if he liked.

"Oh, it's just another of these stupid superstitions, I expect, that's been handed down from one generation to another. This house, according to the house-agent from whom I am renting it (and he only told me after I had signed the contract!) was built several hundreds of years ago by a man who was supposed to have made a fortune out of the African slave trade. He is believed to have murdered a negro servant here, and it is this nigger's skull which is supposed to do the screaming. A lot of damned rubbish, I should say. Whoever heard such a story?"

"Why does it scream?"

"Heaven knows."

"Is the skull still in the house?"

"Oh, yes. I'll show it to you to-morrow if you like. I've had a very good mind to pitch the thing into the sea, but, according to the local tradition, it's very unlucky even to touch it. As I've already hinted, I'm not exactly a firm believer in superstition of this sort, but at

the same time I don't know that I want deliberately to flout the gods. They have already dealt pretty badly with me," glancing down at the legs which were covered by a rug.

"I can quite understand your point of view. If I were you, Mr. Sylvaine, I should certainly allow the skull to remain where it is—so long as you find it doesn't do any harm."

"It hasn't up till now; in fact," with a silent spasm of laughter rather revolting to watch, "I have come to regard the relic as my mascot. I have been better in health since I came here, for instance, than I have been for very many years. Of course, it is lonely—but, then, I like loneliness. I have been a lonely man, if it comes to that, all my life."

Lorne pressed down the tobacco in his pipe.

"And your secretary, Miss Milburn. Doesn't she complain?" he asked. "This is rather a bleak spot for a girl."

His host wagged his head reassuringly.

"Miss Milburn is devoted to me," he replied; "such loyalty is very rare in these days. Wherever I am, there she is content to be. And, of course, Minehead is a very short distance away—a matter of a mile or so. Tell me, Mr. Blake (you are, I should say, a judge of character), what is your opinion of my secretary?"

"For what it's worth, I should say that she is a girl distinctly above the average." Since he was obviously expected to say something, he might just as well say what he conscientiously thought.

"Yes, she is. Sometimes I feel very selfish

in keeping her tied to the side of an invalid like myself, but she is very loyal—oh, extremely loyal: I doubt very much if she would consent to leave me even if I gave her notice. She is quite devoted to me."

But for the spasm of laughter which again seemed to convulse him, the speaker might have been merely indulging in a fit of maudlin rhetoric. As it was, Martin was now able to make a pretty shrewd guess at the reason of the girl's restrained terror that night. Sylvaine had recently discovered something which he was probably holding over her as a threat. And now he was making a mockery of the fact.

"Well, it is getting late—dear me, it's gone twelve o'clock. I hope I haven't been boring you, Mr. Blake?"

"You certainly haven't been guilty of that, Mr. Sylvaine."

"Sleeping so badly as I do, I am a very late person myself, but I mustn't break in upon your night's rest. I will ring for my man to show you to your room."

Lorne rose. He would have given a great deal more money then he carried on him to have known all that was passing in this man's mind—but he imagined he knew a certain amount. Sylvaine was looking at him in the same way as, earlier in the evening, he had seen him look at Jessie Milburn. The man was feasting his horrible eyes on him—gloating. . . . There was the avid lust of an inconceivable cruelty in his invalid's face.

Physical weakling though the other was,

Lorne was sorely tempted. He wanted to take him by the neck and shake him until he was dead. For Fenton Sylvaine was one of those creatures, he felt sure, who actually deserved death. But this man was not so cunning as he himself imagined; he had already exposed his weakness, and, to beat him, he must continue to act the part of the simpleton he had pretended to be.

In answer to the bell which Sylvaine had pressed, the man Martin had seen acting as chauffeur the day before appeared.

"I am not able to keep up a large establishment, Mr. Blake, but you will find that Max will be quite competent to see to your comfort. Max, take Mr. Blake along to his room."

"Yes, sir."

Following the man, after wishing his host good night, Lorne was shown into a large and comfortably furnished bedroom. A suit of pyjamas was laid out on the bed, a box of cigarettes was on the small table by the side; the appointments of the room generally were such as a welcome guest might hope to find.

"Can I get you anything, sir, before you retire?" asked the man.

Martin looked at him keenly. How much did this servant know? Was he wholly in Sylvaine's confidence? That he held some position of trust, apart from his motor-driving and flunkeying, seemed fairly certain.

"No, thank you; tell Mr. Sylvaine I shall be able to look after myself quite well." As though ignoring the other's presence, he took

from his coat pocket the small automatic and flung it on the bed.

"Take a tip from one who knows—never sleep in a strange house without a loaded gun. What chance is there, do you think, of my seeing this ghost, or whatever it is that hangs around here at night?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, pursed his lips, raised his eyebrows in foreign fashion—but said nothing. Perhaps he was too astonished to make any reply.

"Well, you can clear off now," said Lorne sharply, and the man, making a short bow, departed.

"A trifle showy, perhaps—but I did want to see that fellow jump!" Martin told himself; "now for a look round."

The first objects of his examination were the door and the window. The former was of stout wood, capable, if necessary, of withstanding any ordinary siege, providing—but, when he looked, he found there was no key on either the inside or the outside lock.

Turning away, he walked across the room to the window. This proved to be of the lattice variety, easily opened and large enough for a man's body to pass through in an emergency.

Opening the window, Lorne whistled. There was a drop of at least thirty feet to the ground below. Not so good!

So much for that. He now turned to the few objects in the room. The solid mahogany wardrobe looked harmless enough, and proved to be practically empty. A chest of drawers

likewise yielded nothing suspicious—not that he expected it to do so—but he made the examination as a matter of routine and principle.

Nothing now remained, apart from the bed itself, but a wall cupboard. This was quite empty.

Placing a heavy chair against the door, Martin prepared himself for a vigil. When the time was ripe—say, in about another hour—he intended to make a tour of the house; there were many things he expected to see. Unless luck was extraordinarily kind, he would not be able to see all that he would have liked, but he trusted he would find sufficient for his purpose.

In the meantime, he must be patient. And, because, no doubt for a time, at least, he would be watched, he must be tactful. Being tactful meant switching off the light after a reasonable period. The switch was in the most awkward place, of course, being right away from the bed, and he did not exactly relish the darkness in the present circumstances, but there seemed nothing else for it.

After waiting another ten minutes, he strolled over to the switch, turned the light off, and seated himself in a chair to resume the vigil which he had imposed upon himself.

There is an uncanny element in waiting for something which is both definite and yet indefinite—something which one feels certain is sure to come, although the form it will take is unknown. It is the latter fact that taxes a man's nerve, and Martin felt the strain of this before many minutes had passed. It was im-

possible to ignore the fact that 'The Beacon' was the house he had seen in his dream.

In the deep, brooding silence of the night every noise was exaggerated—the creaking of some old wood in the roof seemed to fill his ears with sound. Outside, the wind, rustling the leaves of the creeper, took on a deafening clamour.

"Don't be a fool!" Lorne told himself. "It's merely nerves, you ass!"

How easy to talk, how difficult to act upon the advice! In that fever of unrest—of anxiety and impatience for that indefinite something to happen—he found it exceedingly difficult to remain still after the first half an hour. Half an hour!—it seemed a separate lifetime!

He was like a dog straining at an invisible leash—cocking his already super-sensitive ears to catch the slightest sound. Once he rose and tiptoed to the door. He could have sworn that he had heard first footsteps, slithering and softly malignant, and after that whisperings. Whisperings too disturbing to be borne——"He'll be asleep—asleep! It will be easy!" And then, a laugh . . . such a laugh as could only have come from the throat of Sylvaine. . . .

His revolver ready, he had waited. Silence. Feeling that action of any sort was better than this suspense, he moved the chair away and flung the door open. There was nothing before him but a well of blackness. No one had been there.

Then, the door closed again and the chair replaced—should he be attacked, that chair would give him a valuable warning—the light

from his electric torch fell on a sheet of white paper lying just inside the room. Someone *had* been outside the door, but had gone again, leaving—what ?

Directly he stooped, he knew the message came from the girl. His heart took on a yet quicker beat at the realisation. Girls—modern girls—left him cold. They wanted so much and gave so little. They scorned everything that lived and yet had no grace themselves. He had no use for them. But this one was different—she carried the whole world of difference in her face, her manner. Her dress alone would have marked her out, kept her apart.

A very faint waft of some wholesome perfume —was it lavender ?—came to him as he unfolded the sheet of paper.

"*You know already that you are in danger—that is why I am taking the risk of you still being awake. For God's sake be on your guard. Sylvaine means to kill you. Why did you come ? I could have managed on my own.*

"*J. M.*"

"Managed on her own." He didn't quite get that; what did she mean ? What—— ? Then, with a flash, he thought he understood: this girl was herself playing a part; she was bent on exposing Sylvaine on her own. Was that it ? Unless his reasoning powers had gone all flooie, this must be the meaning behind the message.

But she had spared time to send him a

warning! And had added this to the other risks which by this time must be hedging her in on every side. The plucky kid! But, then, from the beginning, he had always considered her remarkable. Martin was quite pleased with himself at being able to recall this fact. Hadn't he singled her out from every other woman in the room that night at the Lotus? By George, he had!

But what the devil was he doing there? He had to be out and about—this girl Jessie (by Jingo! she really was a wonder—so unforgettably attractive) might have been seen walking along that passage to his door. Sylvaine already suspected her; that much had been apparent by the fellow's attitude to her during the evening; and possibly, by this time, he had decided to come out in the open. Off with the masks and all that sort of thing. Unless he was miles wide of the mark, friend Sylvaine was suffering from a bad—a very bad—case of megalomania: something must have happened recently to have excited the poor fish.

Martin mentally gave this disparaging classification to the man because reading that note had wrought such a really remarkable change in him. Those few lines had acted as a wonderful stimulant: they stirred his being, caused nerves and muscles and what not to tighten, and made him long for action. In any case, he told himself, it was time he started that promised trip of exploration.

First, he must endeavour to find the girl. She had risked so much for him that he felt

obliged to ascertain before anything else if she were safe. Besides, they were now allies—the note she had sent him made them so—and the information she could give might be extremely valuable.

"Steady does it!" he murmured as for the second time he pulled back the chair propped against the door. The impression, distinctly disturbing before, that a particularly ugly kind of meandering death might spring out at him at any moment, had now become almost pleasurable. It's a poor heart that doesn't rejoice at the chance of going to a lady's rescue even in these unromantic days. And this particular lady—delightful kid!—had just lowered her banner in salute. . . . Good enough!

Lorne opened the door and looked out. Nothing but the blackness of the Pit again. Oh, well, it had to be done. He had just switched on his torch when, from behind, there came a sound that did its level best to convince him he was actually looking into hell. It was as though a hundred fiends had been let loose from the lower regions on condition that they made the most ghastly row of which they were capable.

Placing his back against the door, Lorne faced about. He had to meet this Horror, whatever it might be—meet it and fight it. His self-respect demanded no less.

A fierce, swiftly rising and falling howling sound, weird beyond description, filled the room. It beat about him in waves; it seemed to leap at him, strike a ghostly blow and then retreat,

making mock with snarling laughter that curdled the blood.

Martin waited. This demoniac row, he felt fairly certain, was just the curtain-raiser of the night's entertainment, merely the devil's orchestra playing the overture.

Still nothing could be seen. But eyes were raking the darkness for him, no doubt. Somewhere in that room Sylvaine, or one of his men—perhaps the beige gentleman he had biffed the previous evening—had a secret peep-hole. That was why he decided to stay where he was, showing no light to guide the enemy. Or, perhaps, it was unwise to remain by the door? He moved away, keeping his back to the wall.

Up till this time he had been disturbed but not definitely perturbed. The sound was hellish, but he preferred to wait a little longer before deciding to become actually afraid.

Yet, when the drama proper started, he had really begun to feel his nerve was giving way.

There was a banging noise to add to the general unearthly clamour, and before him he saw, gleaming in the darkness, a skull.

The Thing was illumined—by what means he could not determine—but it had eyes which gleamed and moved. . . .

The house of the Screaming Skull. . . .

The legend with all its horrific circumstances flashed a message to his stunned brain. The story, then, was true; the weirdly screaming noise still filling the room must come from this skull. And—what was it Mrs. Warriner had said?—the screaming was merely a prelude to

Death. The skull never screamed unless to foretell someone's violent end. . . .

He felt himself shaking. Yes, he was really afraid—terribly afraid. So afraid that if he stayed still he feared he would lose his manhood.

He started to rush across the room, and as he tore ahead he raised his revolver and fired at the Abomination. . . .

There came a sudden quiet. The noise died down in a kind of whimpering moan. And the skull vanished. . . .

"Exit the ghost; enter the human," Martin muttered and fired again. A wave of confidence returning, he hated himself for having been such a mutt. Kid's play—and he had fallen for it.

Then the silence—so intense after the previous racket as to induce a sense of being stifled—was disturbed by a faint hissing sound. Something brushed Lorne's head, settled so softly on his neck as to be almost a caress, but a second later tightened so that he choked in sudden, inexplicable agony. He was jerked violently backwards, his feet went from beneath him and he fell full-length upon the floor.

Then came a stunning blow on the head.

CHAPTER X VALDEZ THREATENS

At that moment Jessie Milburn, in another room of this house of ill-omen, was wishing that she might die. All the plans that she had made,

all the hopes for the realisation of which she had suffered so much had, in one harrowing minute, been ruthlessly shattered.

She was lying on a couch in a room she had not seen before. Her wrists and ankles were tied by rope and a vile rag had been stuffed between her teeth so that she could not speak.

The Portuguese, Valdez, was standing over her.

"I told Sylvaine to-day that you were a spy. He would not believe me—but now I can give him proof." The words were hissed so melodramatically that in any ordinary circumstances she might have been inclined to smile—but, bound as she was, with that rage-distorted saffron-coloured face glaring down at her, she was afraid—so afraid that the perspiration stood out on her forehead in thick beads. And this was not merely fear for herself—there was the man who by her action she had betrayed. He, too, would suffer.

The Portuguese was speaking again.

"Sylvaine promised me to-day that if I brought him proof I could deal with you as I liked. *As I liked!*" His lips drew back at the repetition of the words: then the nicotine-stained teeth, pointed like an animal's, snapped.

"When we were in London together I had my first suspicion of you—until then you were merely the beautiful English girl who was so cold when I poured out the adoration that possessed my soul. But in London when, by Sylvaine's orders, you met me, your manner had changed. You were prepared to smile, to tolerate me—yes? I asked myself why this

was so? Was it that London with its gaiety, its music and its dancing, had intoxicated you? No; you had previously proved yourself too much mistress of yourself for that to have happened. Then, why? It didn't take me long to discover the reason. As I said this morning to the employer you have been able to deceive, you asked me too many questions. Since you are so curious, I promise that you shall have a complete answer very soon. You shall know everything. But it will not serve your purpose, whatever that may be. No; I can safely promise you that."

The captive shivered. Would this ordeal never come to an end? With a convulsion of shame she realised that her dressing-gown had become disarranged in the struggle five minutes before. For this man to see her thus. . . .

"You were clever, but not clever enough," resumed the hateful voice. "You pretended in the Lotus Club not to know the man Lorne. But I saw the look which passed between you. Somehow you must have communicated—no doubt you wrote; how easy that would have been considering you were both working in unison and for the same employer!—for then we find—and no later than the next day, too—Mr. Lorne arrives in this district! What was the message slipped between his bedroom door just now?" the man cried in a crescendo of rage. "Answer!" he demanded, tearing the gag from her mouth. "Those beautiful lips!" he said in bitter mockery and bent and kissed them.

"Beast!" she said; "you can kill me but I shall tell you nothing!"

"We shall see. You have proved that the way I intended at least promises good results."

She fought down that sickening nausea of fear and replied in a level tone: "Except this: you are wrong about Mr. Lorne. I know nothing except what you have told me. He did not come here at my request. He is a stranger to me—I never met him before. I was the spy—it's a horrible word, but now I am proud of it: I became Sylvaine's secretary with the express purpose of obtaining sufficient evidence to hand him over to the police."

Instead of indulging in another and fiercer outburst, Valdez took a cigarette from a case and lit it.

"I must control myself or I shall go mad," he said in a tone that was more terrifying to her than his previous insensate rage.

"For what you have said you will have to die. You know enough to ruin me—and, what is worse, you would be the means of my being robbed of a tremendous fortune. But before you die I promise you I shall have my revenge."

She turned her face to look into his blazing eyes.

"You will have to deal with Mr. Lorne first." She did not know why she spoke; the words had formed themselves automatically in her brain and she had uttered them. Perhaps it was because the thought of Lorne, lithe-limbed, a typical Englishman, afforded such a vivid contrast to this olive-skinned beast.

Her challenge was answered immediately.

"So, you are counting on Lorne! He may have received your message, but that won't help him. Sylvaine has——" He stopped as an eerie whistling sound, potent with power, shattered the night's silence as with a blow from a hammer.

"The mad fool!" shouted Valdez. The next moment he had rushed out of the room.

Although she was alone, Jessie could not feel relief. Her own torture had been postponed, but that nerve-racking noise which persisted had a dreadful significance. And Lorne was concerned in it—perhaps he was being tortured, killed. . . . And she in a measure would be responsible for his death. . . .

Consciousness slipped from her at the thought and she remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XI THE MEGALOMANIAC

He had been moved into another room. That was the first thought Lorne had when he recovered consciousness sufficiently to realise he was still alive.

The air was dark in this room and smelt of the earth. Then he looked at the walls. They were running with wet. This must be a cellar. A cellar? Why a cellar? His wits recovered themselves quickly then. Of course, they were

going to kill him—and this cellar was to be his burial-ground. Simple enough to understand.

The thought of being put to final rest in such a place brought back the desire to live. He started to try to move his arms and legs, only to find, however, that he was quite helpless. Both sets of limbs were securely bound. Sylvaine had taken no chances.

This was pretty damnable; but worse was to come: regarding him fixedly, as he lay stretched on a bench, was the man he knew as Fenton Sylvaine. But something had changed in the fellow—he was different.

"You miss my invalid's chair?" inquired Sylvaine. "Yes, as you can see, I have dispensed with it. One of my whims since I came to this district was to induce people to think I was a hopeless invalid. It would take me too long to explain to you why I carried out this plan, but I will throw out this hint—when you wish to give your brain abnormal exercise, save your body. For the past month I have used my brain to a greater extent than perhaps any other man living to-day; the strength which I should have used up in physical effort has been devoted to another purpose."

The prisoner did not reply to this extraordinary statement. One fact was becoming increasingly apparent to him. This was that he was dealing with a man who, in addition to being a perverted genius, was also mad. The reflection, whilst opening up speculative channels of thought, was not pleasant.

"I refuse to burden you with a list of my

other eccentricities, Mr. Lorne—you see, I know your real name as I am also in possession of other interesting facts about yourself. The immediate question is : what shall I do with you ?

"Your present position, I have no intention of disguising from you, is an extremely dangerous one. By some means or other which, no doubt, you will be kind enough to explain shortly, you have seen fit to interest yourself in my activities, and, therefore, you must pay the penalty.

"For—I will not quibble—my present activities, amazingly successful as they have proved to be, will not tolerate any interference. And I have no possible doubt that you came here to-night with the express purpose of interfering. Have you any answer to that ?"

Lorne endeavoured to raise himself on an elbow, failed, and swore at his futility.

"The only answer I intend to give you, Sylvaine," he said passionately, "is that you seem to be talking a whole heap of gibberish. I don't know what you imagine you are doing, but I give you this warning: if I am not released within the space of one minute from now I'll make it my business to see that you suffer pretty badly for this outrage."

It was the purest bluff, of course, and by the contemptuous laugh with which the other greeted the words, he knew that Sylvaine recognised it as such.

"It would be entirely erroneous for you to imagine that you would be allowed to leave this house alive," said Sylvaine; "I have far

too much at stake. If I did not kill you myself, Valdez, my Portuguese colleague, who has even fewer moral scruples, would certainly do so. Just now, he is engaged with my secretary, Miss Milburn. She is, I have been given to understand, a colleague of yours in this spying business."

If he had wanted to rouse his prisoner he succeeded.

"She is nothing of the kind," declared Lorne in a white heat of fury. "My God, Sylvaine, if you or that filthy dago as much as put a finger on Miss Milburn, I'll see that you rot in hell for it!"

A quiver of some undecipherable emotion passed over the other's face.

"You dare to threaten me—the ruler of countless millions of lives!" he cried.

What had been puzzling Lorne for so long became now abundantly clear. Benighted fool, not to have seen it before! This man Sylvaine was the human devil who had been responsible for those wireless deaths! His was the twisted genius who had caused such untold anguish and suffering throughout Devon and Cornwall.

And if he were not stopped, he would soon have the whole of England at his mercy. . . .

No wonder Bellamy had wanted him watched!

"I repeat—I control the lives of countless millions!" continued the megalomaniac. "I have but to turn a switch in my wireless laboratory next door and England cowers before my genius!" The man was rapidly working himself into a frenzy. "I confess," he went on,

"that the original research work was done by Valdez, my collaborator. The Portuguese has no liking for you, my friend; you have insulted his pride, and before the night is over he has sworn he will have his revenge But Valdez was a mere fumbler in the dark compared to me; I had to build and keep on building upon his flimsy foundation. And now I have succeeded! The future of England is in my power; I can command what money I like from the Government! Since you came here for information, you shall have it; I give it you freely—and all the more readily because you will never be able to make use of it. For within a few minutes you will be dead."

Because this swine thought he had all the trumps, Lorne made answer:

"You can't commit murder as simply as all that, Sylvaine. Success has turned your brain; otherwise, you would realise the risk. You have been so bursting with news that you haven't given me a chance to impart a little useful information myself. Listen a moment: you think you have done wonders in your own beastly, lunatic way, but all you have done, you fool, is to draw the net closer about you. Ever since you came to Minehead—and probably before—you have been suspect; that was why I was sent down by my Chief, Sir Harker Bellamy—do you happen to know the name?—to keep an eye on you. It was by his telegraphed instructions that I am here to-night. If anything happens to me, Sylvaine—*he will know where to look!* The only safe thing for you to

do is to throw your hand in: then they will probably send you to a lunatic aslyum where you rightly belong."

The answer was snarled:

"They may look, but what will they find? Just a small pile of dust. In my laboratory, only a few feet away, I have an electrical appliance which will shrivel your flesh, dry up your blood and burn your bones until all that remains is merely a handful of fine dust. Will Sir Harker Bellamy be able to identify his trusted but not very intelligent agent by that?"

"He will be able to identify *you*—which is much more important. It will be the hangman's rope for you now, Sylvaine, not the lunatic asylum: I'll see to that."

The words seemed to drive the inventor beyond all endurance. Whipping out a revolver, he pointed it straight at the prisoner.

Lorne knew his time had arrived. But he would die game—facing the creature.

Suddenly blackness came. This, he felt, must be death, although he could not remember to have heard a report or to have felt any pain.

From out of the darkness came the sound of a scuffle. Then a voice:

"Just in time, you young ass!"

This was the most astonishing thing of all the astonishing things that had happened that night: the man who had spoken was Sir Robert McHugh.

THE light came on again and Martin saw a curious spectacle. Fenton Sylvaine was on the floor apparently insensible. Over the body leaned the man who had come in such a miraculous way to rescue him. The archæologist held in his right hand what looked suspiciously like a loaded stick:

"Very useful, these little fellows—I can recommend them thoroughly." McHugh held up the weapon with which he had outed Sylvaine and regarded it tenderly. He might have been examining a Gothic arch.

"And now, I suppose, you'll want some sort of explanation," he said, coming across and cutting the prisoner's bonds with a knife. "I hardly know if you deserve one, however."

"Explanation is scarcely the word, Sir Robert," replied Lorne, stretching himself in luxury. "Call it 'miracle' and have done with it."

"'Miracle' be hanged—there's nothing very miraculous about it. When you didn't return at a reasonable time, I said nothing to Warriner—he's had enough worry lately—but slipped out the back way and borrowed his Norris—the thing's outside now, waiting to take us back. But to proceed: Having tried the two doors and what windows I could reach and found them all impossible, I pulled up something that looked like a grating and fell into the local coal-cellar.

. . . Which may account for my present slightly dishevelled appearance."

Dishevelled was more or less correct. One trouser-leg had a rip at least seven inches long; streaks of coal dust on the face gave the speaker the look of a dissipated nigger-minstrel, and there were other casualties. But with it all McHugh was tremendously happy.

"But, as I remarked before, I got here only just in time, my boy. That hound was going to shoot you when I tapped him one with Percy the Persuader here," regarding the loaded stick with fresh affectionate regard.

"By Jove, sir, I forgot—the girl!" exclaimed Martin. "There's a dago here, and he——"

"I strongly dislike dagoes!" concurred the archæologist.

Cursing himself for the lapse, Lorne led the way out of the cellar. Outside was a stone passage with a circular stairway leading upwards. They had no light but the electric torch which Sir Robert carried, but this proved sufficient.

The living-rooms were all deserted, and, in a fever of anxiety by now, Martin commenced to take the main staircase four steps at a time. He had reached the room in which he had seen the skull when, from somewhere above, he heard a stifled scream. It was a woman's voice—and the joy to know that the girl was still alive! He knew something else: that every nerve in his body, every drop of his blood ached to rescue her.

Up another short staircase he rushed, shouting: "Miss Milburn!—coming!! coming!!!"

The sound of a beastly laugh told him which was the room.

"Locked!" he said to Sir Robert, who was labouring on behind.

"Both shoulders to it, my boy!" was the immediate reply.

Youth and Age, united in the same purpose, rushed at the door, which crashed open.

Several things happened very quickly after that: there was the whine of a revolver bullet, which missed its mark, and a low Rugger tackle, which didn't. Grabbed by the legs, Valdez went to earth with a crash which caused the revolver to drop from his hand and rendered him almost immediately, in a very literal sense, *hors de combat.*

Martin was not running any risks; the memory of that beastly laugh made him seethe afresh. He hit the beige gentleman for the last time—but he hit him as hard as he could.

"Better treat this fellow as I have his mentor downstairs," remarked that very astonishing person, Sir Robert McHugh. Before Martin could voice his surprise, the archæologist had nipped a pair of light-weight handcuffs on the dago's wrists.

"They make a very good combination with Percy the Persuader," he commented.

Lorne took another look at the speaker and then shook his head.

"I give you up," he confessed.

McHugh laughed.

Lorne by this time was across the room. Jessie Milburn was lying motionless on a sort of couch.

A greater fear than any he had known throughout that night caused Lorne to turn to the older man.

"God! I believe she's dead!"

"Nonsense! Let me have a look." The speaker proceeded to examine the girl and then, taking a flask from the pockets which seemed to contain everything necessary for an emergency, held it to her lips.

"Mr. Lorne——?" were the first words that came from her lips.

McHugh beckoned to Martin, who sprang forward.

"My dear!" he said. The words and the action which accompanied them—the putting of an arm round her shoulders and holding her tight—came so spontaneously as to seem perfectly natural.

"If you will excuse me, I think I'll have a quiet look round," remarked Sir Robert McHugh.

When he returned he felt it necessary to cough. Otherwise, his presence would probably have passed unnoticed. The pleasure which these two young people were evidently finding in each other was interesting but scarcely surprising—he had long since ceased to be surprised at anything.

"Let me introduce Miss Jessie Milburn to you, Sir Robert," said Martin Lorne, springing up. "Sir Robert," he proceeded to explain, "has been staying at Yew Tree Farm with me and is an archæologist."

"Amongst other things," remarked McHugh

dryly, "years ago I used to be in the Secret Police of India. That was where I first saw Sylvaine, and explains my suspicions of the man. He called himself by the more unromantic name of Bilstead, then."

The girl caught the speaker's arm.

"You must have known my father—Greville Stevens. He was an inventor, and this man Bilstead robbed him. On the night Daddy died, killed by Bilstead because the theft broke his heart, I swore I would avenge his death. I knew that the man was a scoundrel, but I followed him to England and then, as luck would have it, he advertised for a secretary—and I called instead of sending a letter."

"A secretary," mused Sir Robert.

"Sylvaine was a man of tremendous intellect—he was an authority on many subjects."

"Yes, he was undoubtedly a genius. I've just been looking round the wireless laboratory he has downstairs. Of course," turning to Lorne, "he was the man responsible for those wireless deaths. You remember, I suggested that the fiend was possibly not far away from Cleveley?"

Lorne nodded.

"Yes, Sylvaine was responsible. He admitted everything to me in a fit of megalomania just before you turned up so marvellously. Apparently, he improved upon an idea of Valdez's to utilise wireless as a means of mass-murder. Valdez wanted to sell it to an unmentioned nation, presumably, as a war-weapon, but Sylvaine, who was certainly on the brink of

lunacy if not actually mad, was determined, so far as I could gather, to blackmail the British Government. Why, he didn't say."

"His madness took that form, apparently. Well, he won't have the opportunity—I'm going into Minehead to bring out the local police. You won't mind waiting here until I return? Sylvaine and Valdez won't give you any further trouble: I've locked them both in the coal-cellar."

Lorne looked at the girl, and Jessie flushed.

"After I have dressed myself properly, I'll see if I can't have some breakfast ready by the time you come back, Sir Robert."

"Heaven bless you!" said that remarkable man.

The three servants, when roused, took the news calmly. "I always did dislike staying here with those two foreigners—and as for the Master, he always did give me the creeps, to say nothin' of the noises at night that kept a decent body from their rightful rest." It was the cook speaking, and the two maids nodded in violent agreement.

Max could not be found—neither, upon investigation, could the Rolls.

"He may have developed a sudden funk and bolted," said Lorne; "in any case, we have the two principal birds."

"Thanks to you," replied Jessie. "When I think what a conceited fool I was to try to handle this alone——"

"It was the pluckiest thing I've ever heard

of," exclaimed her listener—" and I'm not going to listen to another blessed word ! "

" Not even why I spied upon you at Cleveley the night you arrived ? The explanation was very simple : I was going on to Minehead, but Max appeared on the platform unexpectedly and, as I was curious to see where you were going, I got out of the train."

" Then you knew I was in the train ? "

" Yes. I saw you change at Taunton. As a matter of fact, I was only two carriages behind."

" Then, why—— ? " he demanded.

But she turned her head and walked out of the room.

Sir Robert McHugh produced yet one more surprise upon his return.

" I have brought with me Professor Alastair McGabe, one of the foremost scientists in Scotland and therefore in the world," he announced. " It was he to whom I sent a telegram yesterday morning. I knew McGabe was in London, and he arrived in Minehead in time to eat his supper last night. One of his hobbies is wireless research, and he is particularly anxious to look over this fellow Sylvaine's laboratory. Meanwhile, the local police will cart that pair of precious scoundrels back to Minehead. I have warned the Inspector that if he loses either on the way, I shall report him myself to Scotland Yard."

" All you poor people will want something to eat," said Jessie. " I have persuaded the cook to get you breakfast. Cooks, as you know, are

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" All you poor people will want something to eat," said Jessie. " I have persuaded the cook to get you breakfast. Cooks, as you know, are

proverbially fond of policemen," with a laughing glance at Martin Lorne.

It was not until the meal was practically over, however, that Professor McGabe, a tall, typical Scot, with an interesting smile lighting up his rugged features, made his reappearance.

"I have seen it all, and it is very interesting," he announced. "Sir Robert, I would not have missed this for worlds: I am much indebted to you.

"What this man Sylvaine succeeded in doing has been the aim of a good many research wireless workers, scrupulous and unscrupulous, ever since this wonderful invention was placed within the use of the public. I will not go into technical details, but the nation, and indeed the whole world, owes you two men a very great debt. If Sylvaine had not been stopped, he might have done incalculable mischief; thousands, indeed millions, of deaths would have been placed at his door—assuming, of course, that the general panic had not become such that no one would have gone on using wireless.

"What this man did last night was to transmit from the laboratory downstairs a ray—to avoid being technical I use this term—on the wavelength of one of the broadcasting stations—which had properties dangerous to human life under certain conditions."

"Then why were not more people killed?" asked Lorne.

"Because, thank God, this must have been more or less in the nature of an experiment. It is safe to say that Sylvaine could not have

known at the time what a terribly potential weapon he possessed. The fact that the ray was only half-matured (again I refuse to become technical), that it operated, probably, only up to a certain number of miles, and that—although here I am straying out of my own country and into the province of medical knowledge—only a percentage of the listeners-in became affected, due to medical causes of which I cannot speak —that is why, my friend.

"In any case," the scientist overcoming the moralist for the moment, "it was a marvellous discovery that these two men made—although, a terrible one. No doubt, the Portuguese hit upon it by an accident—all these discoveries are found 'in the blue,' in a way of speaking—but the greater genius of the other man was needed for its development. Hasn't this house a curious legend to it, Sir Robert ?"

"Let me tell the story; I happen to know," pleaded Lorne, and he narrated the appearance of the screaming skull.

McGabe laughed.

"That was nothing more than a practical joke, Mr. Lorne. Sylvaine wanted to make you feel nervous because, no doubt, he wished to attack you later on—he did attack you, didn't he ?—and so he decided to give the ghost story a run. Intense oscillation on a high-power valve receiving set proceeding from the mouth of a loud speaker placed at the back of the skull but hidden from view (wasn't the skull in some sort of cupboard, you say?) would have accounted for that terrible row."

"But the damned—I beg your pardon, Miss Milburn!—thing was lit up?"

"Phosphorous," replied McGabe, shortly. "After breakfast we'll hunt it up and you see if I'm not right."

Professor McGabe proved right in every instance—including the remark he made to his crony, Sir Robert McHugh.

"Those two young people don't seem to be worrying very much; hoots, mon, Providence moves in a mysterious way: doesna' it do your heart good to see them?"

THE WHITE WITCH OF CURZON STREET

A STORY OF MAYFAIR

THE breakfast-table, set in the big bay window overlooking the Green Park, was a pleasant enough sight for a hungry man, and Peter Foyle beamed.

The hour was the comfortably lazy one of ten o'clock—sufficiently late for the chill to have been taken off the morning, but not late enough to cause any conscience-qualms. Not, anyway, to Foyle, who loved ease, luxury, and the good things of life generally.

Foyle, seating himself at the table, looked at the kidneys and bacon and saw that they were good. A copy of his favourite morning newspaper was ready to hand; the coffee gave forth a most agreeable aroma; to his right the wood fire crackled in the way that every self-respecting fire should crackle; in short, everything was rather tophole that morning. So Foyle ate, drank, read, and was very well content. Every now and then he would glance at the small pile of letters on a side-table, but each time he successfully restrained the temptation. Careless over certain things—such as risking his neck in the hunting field or whilst playing scrum-half for the Harlequins and England—he had a certain system in other matters. One evidence

of this was his determination not to open any letter until after he had safely and securely breakfasted. "Damn it," he had been heard to exclaim, "it might be a bill. . . !"

The second cup of coffee disposed of, and the first cigarette of the day lit, Foyle rose leisurely, picked up his letters, adjusted the monocle which seemed inevitably part of himself, and settled himself before the fire.

At that moment the telephone-bell rang shrilly and insistently. The noise shattered the benign atmosphere like the anachronism it was.

"Dommett!" yelled Foyle.

From without there came the sound of an answering growl; then the clamour ceased.

Thirty seconds later the door opened.

"Sir 'Erbert's on the 'phone," announced a voice.

Foyle looked upon the almost repulsively homely features of his ex-pugilist man servant.

"Did he say what he wanted?" It was annoying to be disturbed when so comfortable.

"'E wants to speak to you," replied the survivor of a more robust age. Dommett's visage bore testimony to the fact that he had pursued his calling in a day when ring-fighters really fought and not cuddled each other for £100,000 a side.

"Oh! very well!" Making an effort, Foyle rose and walked in characteristically leisurely manner across the room. Dommett, who knew from experience what a tornado of energy his master could be on occasion, watched him in the grimly affectionate manner of a grizzly bear

regarding its young. Sport, pleasure—even the threat of death—these two had shared together; such things bind men.

"Hello, sir?" called Foyle at the telephone.

A voice that was urbane, and yet had the snap of authority, answered him.

"Oh! you *are* up?"

"Certainly! *And* breakfasted. It's the early bird that catches the grilled kidney. . . . I say, old thing, don't be so frightfully owl-like. It's positively indecent at this time in the morning. . . . Don't rot? But I'm not rotting! I'm merely administering a chaste rebuke to an over-serious Government official. . . . Oh! all right, Nunky darling. I'll wait until you pop along. But make it fairly snappy. I'm due at Sunningdale at eleven-thirty."

The man whom Foyle had so irreverently addressed was ushered into that pleasant room overlooking the gracious highway of Piccadilly fifteen minutes later. He was in the early fifties, modishly dressed in a perfectly-fitting morning-coat and striped trousers, which were a separate work of art. He was slim and sinewy. Race was stamped upon him. In any part of the world, no one could have mistaken him for anything but an Englishman, of the ruling caste. His name was Sir Herbert Mandeville, and he was the Chief of a very important Government Department. Being a branch of the Intelligence, it was known merely by a letter and a number —Y1.

"Peter, you're appallingly disrespectful to

your elders," he said, accepting a cigarette and taking a chair.

The tone was only mildly reproachful. Between these representatives of different generations—one was fifty-two and the other twenty-seven—there was a genuine affection born of a mutual respect. It takes soldiering with a man to learn his worth. Mandeville had soldiered with Foyle in a secret war, the details of which never got into the newspapers. It had been a Secret Service job, but it had lost nothing of its danger on that account.

Peter Repington Foyle smiled across at his distinguished relative.

"Why the corrugated brow?" he asked, "the distraught air, the gravity of demeanour, and the general what-not? Dash it! you've ruined my morning; it's too bad!"

"Peter," said Sir Herbert Mandeville in reply, "I want your help."

The manner of the young man sitting opposite him in that room into which both fitted so admirably underwent a subtle change.

"Carry on, sir," he said, in a tone that matched the other's. "By the way, if you're interested, I may mention that I heard from Sylvia this morning. She said she was going on to California from New York and that I could not expect her home for another two months. Shocking, the way these modern wives neglect their husbands, don't you think?"

The answer was unexpected.

"Speaking from a selfish point of view, I am not sorry your wife is in America, Peter. I am

afraid she would not approve of my giving you this commission."

Peter whistled.

"A real job of work?" he queried.

His uncle nodded.

"Well, let's hear about it. Now that foot-and-mouth has ruined what decent hunting one can get in these degenerate days, and as the gammy ankle has gone flooie again, putting Rugger out of the question, a little healthy excitement would not be amiss."

"It may prove to be distinctly unhealthy excitement."

Foyle's face brightened.

"Really? What's the hub-bub?"

Sir Herbert threw his cigarette-stub into the fire.

"Briefly," he answered gravely, "the leaking of official secrets. Never was foreign espionage so concentrated on London as it is at present. We have arrested several of these spies, although only two cases have been reported in the Press, but these people are comparatively unimportant. It is the men and women behind them whom we are after; and I tell you quite frankly, unless we get them, the results may be very serious."

"Have you any idea, sir, who the king-pins may be?"

"Not the slightest. We have kept track of all the recognised foreign agents, but we are satisfied that the danger does not come from them—or, at least, if it does, that they are employing different methods. Naturally, I am worried, Peter; you see, this sort of thing falls

to my Department instead of the police. I become responsible. There was a full Cabinet meeting yesterday at which the matter was discussed. I was informed by the P.M. that this organised conspiracy to steal our national secrets must be scotched. If I don't succeed, it is just possible I may be forced to resign."

His nephew whistled.

"As bad as that, eh? It's quite true then about these political blokes having no conscience?"

"I didn't mean to infer that I should be forced to resign by the authorities; but I shall be compelled to retire from the work of Y1 unless I can get to the roots of this business."

"Well, old thing, here's hoping! But exactly where do I come in?"

Sir Herbert Mandeville allowed a little excitement to creep into his voice.

"If it doesn't inconvenience you, Peter, I should like you to continue your present rôle as a brainless young fool."

Foyle sat bolt upright.

"Oh! of course," Foyle replied, with an attempt at heavy sarcasm, "it's perfectly natural for me to be an idiot."

Mandeville made a gesture with a manicured hand.

"You understand me," he retorted. "I have very good reason to know that you are anything but a fool——"

"For those few kind words I am profoundly grateful——"

"——but, so far as I can understand, the

general opinion is that, sport apart, you are a rather delightful young ass possessing rather more money than you know what to do with, whose only concern is the reckless playing of games, and who was fortunate enough to persuade one of the most charming girls in London to marry you."

Foyle smiled the lazy smile of amused interest which many people find irresistible.

"It's a pity Sylvia is not here," he commented.

"So far as I have been able to ascertain," continued Mandeville, "no one has the least idea that now and then you help me in the work of my department. What I want you to do, Peter, is to continue to lead your life of shocking sloth—but to keep your ears and eyes open whilst you are doing it. I should like you to start right away, if possible."

"But, dash it all, I'm playing a medal round at Sunningdale to-day!"

"Play your golf, by all means. I am not entirely without human feeling. Your duties will not commence until to-night. I want you to look in at the Maypole."

"Why the Maypole?"

Sir Herbert was enigmatic.

"Why not? I do not intend to give you any definite instructions. You have a very good idea of the situation and—I leave the rest to you." The speaker smiled. "A more unlikely-looking detective I never saw. And now I must hurry back."

Alone once again after escorting his uncle to the door, Foyle cleared a space and did a few

meditative hand-springs. The last of these was of such an ambitious and involved nature that it sent a large Persian vase crashing to the floor from its stand.

The Maypole is deservedly famous. It is the most swagger of all London's night-clubs. American visitors ask to be led to it almost as soon as they step off the boat at Southampton. Guigliano, the *maître d'hôtel*, receives an Ambassador's salary for controlling its gilded destiny. Not to sup and dance at the Maypole is not to live. It is *chic*, it is *la mode*, it is the Thing.

When Peter Repington Foyle sauntered into the place after being mildly amused at a performance of the revue, "Clowns in Clover," he was greeted by Guigliano himself.

"I have reserved a table for two, Mr. Foyle. It is very desirable."

It certainly was a very desirable table, being so placed in a recess that, whilst occupying a charming seclusion, it commanded a view of the whole crowded room.

Seated in one of the two chairs was a girl.

"Confess, Peter dear, that you are enraptured to see me!" she said, extending a hand.

"Most adorable of all women named Cecilia, I am unbalanced by joy!" Then, sitting down, he whispered, "By the way, I suppose Cecilia is all right?"

"Jessica would have been more correct," replied this complete stranger. "But do order, old chap; I'm ravenously hungry."

After dismissing the waiter, Peter glanced at his companion. It was a piquant situation for a respectable married man like himself to be greeted endearingly by a stranger in the most fashionably "advanced" night-club in Town. Certainly he had no complaint; the unknown was becomingly gowned and personally attractive. She wore no rings on her shapely hands, and she was innocent of make-up. Her skin was without blemish, her eyes were bright, her lips naturally red. Foyle thought of a rose in a hothouse of orchids.

Her eyes met his, and danced.

"You may call me 'Jess' if you like," she said. Then, quickly, "Will I do?"

"Splendidly. But what good fairy——?"

"The name starts with the letter 'M'—but it is not to be mentioned in public. If you please," she went on in the same low tone, "I am to work with you under orders. Naturally a plain, simple person, most rigidly virtuous, I may on occasion play the part of a coquette to whom you have lost your heart. . . . Do you mind?"

"My dear old thing, it is with the utmost difficulty that I stop myself from jumping up and capering."

"Which would probably result in your spilling this excellent George Goulet over my second-best dinner-frock. You must restrain yourself."

"Only on one condition. What follows Jessica?"

"Smith."

"Not honestly?"

She raised a finger.

"Hush!"

The waiter came to serve.

If Foyle had not been really devoted to the absent Sylvia, he might have stood some danger of losing his heart that night. Miss Jessica Smith danced divinely; she could talk intelligently on a number of subjects, and, above all, she was the possessor of a very distinctive personality. People with personality had a special appeal to Foyle—perhaps because he was credited by all but a few chosen intimates not to have anything of the sort himself.

They had returned to their table in the recess after another fox-trot, when Peter laughed.

"Don't think I have a single, solitary complaint," he said. "For a grass-widower, I am having a perfectly gorgeous time—but what was the idea in you-know-who sending us both here?"

Jessica Smith puffed at her cigarette. She was about the third woman he had ever known who could smoke with zest and yet retain her essential femininity.

"My impression is that I was to take all my orders from you."

"But—dash it!—I haven't any orders! He-who-must-be-nameless came along to my rooms this morning in a white heat, told me I was to pop in here to-night, and—left it at that."

His companion smiled.

"Sounds very sketchy. But M. never does anything without a reason—I've worked for him

too long not to know that. If he told you to come here, there was probably a good cause——"

"The Good Cause is most charming; dances like an angel——"

He broke off because Miss Smith was quite evidently not paying any attention, and to say the right things one simply must have attention.

"Did you ever see a more beautiful creature?"

It was his companion who spoke.

He followed the direction of her eyes. A dozen yards away a man and a woman were being bowed ceremoniously into their seats by the obsequious Guigliano. The man he knew by sight; the woman . . .

"I worship that woman!" said Miss Jessica Smith enthusiastically. "To me she is just supremely lovely. It's rather a novelty nowadays to see anyone retaining such an air of—what can I call it?"

"Virginal purity?" suggested Foyle. "Yes, quite—but, tell me, who is the lady?" He affected complete ignorance.

"My dear man, where have you been living? The backwoods? Don't you recognise in that marvellous creature the most be-photographed, the most be-paragraphed, the most be-fêted woman of the day? Lillah Tremaine her name is, and she has all London at her feet."

"Which accounts for her having such a distinguished escort. You have humbled me to-night, my dear young woman, by imparting information which I should have already known. At the risk of boring you, I propose to give you in return a short sketch of the gentleman who,

judging by his manner, is almost foolishly in love with your paragon of a charmer. You probably already know everything I am about to tell you, but I pray you, for my self-complacency, not to remind me of the fact."

"I will be as quiet as a mouse," promised Miss Smith; "it is absolutely rude of them, I know, but when you look at Lillah Tremaine yourself, can you wonder that all these people are staring at her?"

Foyle, adjusting his monocle, looked again at the subject of their conversation.

"It doesn't seem to worry her," he commented. "But then, perhaps she has one of those angelic natures which are willing to suffer in order that others may not be deprived of pleasure."

Miss Smith frowned.

"Now you're being cynical," she declared. "I'm not sure that I like you quite so well as I did." She pondered the problem rather fascinatingly, looking at Foyle steadily, her chin propped upon interlocked hands.

Peter laughed.

"Cynical? Oh! well . . . But don't you know that when something is so out of reach that he can never hope to touch it, a man will often hide his grief in forced humour?"

His companion shook a slim finger at him.

"Now you're making fun of me," she said. "You had better change the subject."

"I will, to the extent of giving you an outline of Hugo Battersby's career," he replied. "The subject of our sketch," he continued, in a slightly oracular tone which caused Miss Smith to

appreciate for perhaps the fifth time that evening that there was far more in her companion than appeared on the surface, and that the monocle he wore acted as a very effective mask for his features, "was born in affluent circumstances in the year 1890. His father was that famous statesman, Mortimer Battersby, who served in two Conservative Governments as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Foreign Secretary. In the latter important office, he was declared to have displayed genius. Incapacitated when he was only fifty years of age by a paralytic stroke, he has devoted the latter years of his life to watching the meteoric career of his only son—the aforesaid subject of our sketch."

Miss Smith was about to address a smiling remark to the speaker, but Foyle did not give her the chance, continuing in his low, slightly mocking tone:

"At the age of thirty-nine, Hugo Battersby has followed so well in the footsteps of his father that he has become Assistant Secretary for Foreign Affairs. In many respects he is said to have assumed full control of that important branch of our national Government, for Lord Eversherd, the Foreign Secretary, is more or less a figure-head."

Again she would have made a comment, but again he forestalled her by continuing to talk quickly.

"Very few brilliantly successful men are *persona grata*, but Hugo Battersby is particularly unfortunate in this respect. If report does not lie," continued Foyle in that amusingly oracular

tone which caused Jessica Smith's lips to pucker, "the subject of our sketch is most unpopular with practically every member of the Cabinet except the P.M.—I refer, of course, to the Premier, Old Man Jedburn himself—an amiable ass, if ever there was one, by the way—and he, being a life long friend of Hugo's father, has made Battersby his particular pet."

This time Miss Smith was resolved to speak.

"You ought to go into politics yourself, Mr. Foyle. You have a perfect House of Commons delivery."

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed in horror; "am I such a ghastly bore as that?"

"On the contrary, what you have said is very interesting; but tell me, why is Mr. Battersby so unpopular?"

"Report says that the subject of our brief biographical sketch is very conceited. He refuses to suffer bores gladly. Moreover, he is the youngest man of any prominence in this fossilised Government, and the old men gnaw their vitals and gnash their false teeth in futile jealousy."

"Any vices?" asked Miss Smith.

Foyle's monocle clattered against his shirt-front.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I asked you if the—er—subject of our brief biographical sketch had any vices—in more polite language, weaknesses?"

Peter replied by asking a somewhat singular question himself.

"Has Miss Tremaine any, do you happen to know?"

Jessica Smith appeared nonplussed for a moment.

"I have not the pleasure of her acquaintance; in fact, I have never even spoken to her——"

Foyle interjected.

"That omission in life's scheme may shortly be rectified," he said; "unless I'm mistaken, the lovely lady in question is coming over to talk to us now."

"To us?"

Her companion smiled bafflingly.

"Apparently she hasn't been able to resist the glances of invitation I have been sending her from time to time."

A sharp retort was trembling on Miss Smith's lips when a voice that held many enchantments said beyond her: "Why, Peter, this is delightful! I haven't seen you for—how long is it?"

Foyle, bowing over Lillah Tremaine's extended hand, replied: "Far too long for me to wish to remember, dear lady. . . . May I introduce Miss Smith? Miss Jessica Smith, Miss Lillah Tremaine."

Foyle watched Jessica Smith's wonderful self-control with complete admiration. But, although she had perfect restraint, his companion could not repress her admiration of the beautiful older woman. Certainly Lillah Tremaine, as she stood there, was charming enough to enrapture any eye. Her beauty had an almost ethereal quality. Her face was so serene, it might have belonged to a nun.

"Mr. Hugo Battersby, Mr. Peter Foyle. Mr.

Battersby, Miss Smith. Now we all know each other."

By the scowl on Mr. Battersby's somewhat heavy face—there was rather too much flesh round the jowls—the evening for him had not been improved. Four, to his mind, was obviously a mob. He kept looking inquiringly at Lillah Tremaine, but each time she was so occupied with Peter Foyle that she paid no attention. Overcome, perhaps, by being in such proximity to Fame, Miss Jessica Smith became tongue-tied. Lillah Tremaine was quite the loveliest thing she had ever seen, but she was rather inclined to resent her presence. She wasn't at all sure she ought not to be jealous. When she had a famous politician all to herself, why did the woman want to monopolise someone else's cavalier ?

Shrewd-witted as her work had forced her to be, Jessica asked herself another question. It seemed a natural one in the circumstances. Why had Peter Foyle pretended to know nothing about Lillah Tremaine when the two were apparently close friends ?—so close, indeed, that the woman made no attempt to keep the affection out of her voice when she spoke to him.

Someone yawned.

It was that great man, Hugo Battersby, expressing his boredom.

It was so impolite a sound that Lillah Tremaine had a vexed expression upon her spiritually beautiful face as she looked up.

" Tired, Hugo ? " she asked.

" I must confess I am," replied the great man. Just that—nothing more.

"Very well; we will go." Lillah Tremaine smiled sweetly.

That smile squeezed Jessica Smith's heart. It renewed something of her faith in her disappointing sex. It was a smile, she esteemed it, of willing self-sacrifice.

Lillah not only made the sacrifice, she endeavoured to cover her companion's boorishness.

"Mr. Battersby is tremendously overworked," she said. Turning to Foyle: "Now that you know my address, I shall expect you to tea one day very soon, Peter. Promise!"

"Dear liege lady!"

With these flamboyant words, Foyle bowed over the small hand. Jessica Smith felt so angry with him that she almost forgot to be jealous. When the loveliest lady in London strewed her favours, ought the lucky man to reply to her in a mocking voice?

"Very well; I shall expect you."

Peter Foyle straightened up to look into the baleful countenance of Mr. Hugo Battersby. That great man, the Assistant Foreign Secretary, was quite palpably angry. He glared at Foyle, did not extend a hand in parting, but fairly spat the word "Buffoon!" as he turned to follow the loveliest lady in London out of the room.

The insult had the most astonishing effect on Peter Repington Foyle. His shoulders shook, his face slipped, and he burst into a cackle so inane that Jessica Smith almost shuddered. At that moment her companion looked a fool; there was no possible doubt about it.

"Why? ——" she started to ask.

"No questions yet, old thing," was the reply she received. "Let's dance."

They danced.

They were the best couple on the crowded floor.

It was a week later that Peter Foyle did another surprising thing; he awoke out of a deep sleep at two o'clock in the morning. Usually he absolutely refused to wake once he had got off, but there were exceptional circumstances about this occasion.

The door which connected his dining-room—that pleasant room already described—and his sleeping-apartment was open, and he heard distinctly a low but quite definite exclamation of pain. Getting quietly out of bed, he slipped his hand beneath the pillow, and then walked silently across the room.

By the door he paused. He knew that his dark-blue silk pyjamas blended into the gloom, and he watched for a few moments, every sense alert, but a desire to laugh proving almost irresistible.

There was a man in the adjoining room—a crook, a thief. It was a curious object for mirth, yet Peter Foyle continued to regard the matter as being humorous. Judged ironically—and although no one suspected it except perhaps Miss Jessica Smith—Foyle was more than a bit of an ironist himself—this was a cream of a jest.

In the meantime, he allowed the thief to advance towards the wall-safe—the man went gingerly (his recent move had evidently caused him physical if not mental anguish), and then,

suddenly flooding the room by means of the additional switch just inside the door, he said quietly, "If you don't mind, I am afraid I must interrupt you."

The man swung round like a panther. The upper part of his face was masked, but through the slits his eyes glowed like two pin-points of flame.

Foyle was disarmingly casual.

"I don't know whether you are anyone any good," he drawled, as though the matter was of no actual consequence. "I suppose not, really, because it's only the failures in your line of business who descend to 'breaking and entering' —mere ordinary burglar stuff, what?"

Whilst speaking, he had advanced into the room.

It was when Foyle was within reaching distance that the other elected to spring. In spite of what he had been told, the fellow was obviously just a fool. . . .

Strangenesses happened during the next sixty seconds. To begin with, the attacker did not "connect"—with an uncanny intuition the fool had glided aside. Then, instead of getting his fingers round the fool's throat, he had the unpleasant experience of feeling himself undergoing such exquisite pain that he almost fainted. Within a ridiculously short space of time, he became limp—limp and useless.

"Just a touch of jiu-jitsu," drawled a voice he now feared. "I can recommend it—in your business you ought to have a smattering yourself. I believe they teach it at Scotland Yard. But perhaps you would rather not look in there. . . . Quite so."

The man collapsed into a chair.

"Damn you!" he said between clenched teeth.

"By all means, if it gives you any satisfaction. At the same time, it would be more fitting if you damned yourself for making such a hash of what looked like a simple job. Listen, my friend," Foyle continued, "you were sent here, never mind by whom, although I happen to know, to get a certain paper. You were quite correct in assuming it was reposing in that wall-safe. . . . No; stay there. I have one or two more jiu-jitsu tricks I should be very pleased to show you, and this revolver also happens to be loaded. Stupid to have a revolver and not to keep it loaded, don't you think? By the way, you had better pass me yours—of course, you brought one?"

"Next time *I* may have the laugh," snarled the goaded man, as, with the nose of Foyle's automatic only six inches from his heart, he handed over a revolver.

"You're optimistic, old thing," was the reply. "I'm afraid there won't be any 'next time' for you—at least, not for a while. I mentioned Scotland Yard just now; well, willy-nilly, old bean, you're going along there. I may be mistaken, but I rather fancy the Special Branch, may be interested in you. And if not they, someone else will. . . .

"You see my difficulty," went on the speaker. "If I let you go foot-loose from here you'll be sure to spill the beans. In other words, you'll go straight back to the—ah—person who gave you this commission, and say that I am

on to things. Now I don't want that. I realise that you're only a cog in the wheel. Cogs in wheels are useful in their way, but they are not king-pins. And the people I'm after are the king-pins ; they're dirty, rotten creatures, and, to continue the vernacular, I'm going to try to nail their hides to the wall. And now, if you will excuse me, I'll ring for my man."

A couple of minutes later, Dommett, wearing a dressing-gown which, although faded, still made the eyes blink, entered the room. He took in the situation at a glance.

"Why didn't you call me, guv'nor ?" he asked, reproachfully.

"I've called you now ; it was really quite a simple job. Mix this gentleman a stiff whisky-and-soda."

Sighing at the vagaries of a person he adored but could not always understand, Dommett fulfilled the commission. The man gulped the drink greedily.

"Now put him safely in the cellar, Dommett," ordered Foyle. "It's a shame to worry Scotland Yard at this time of the morning. Lock him up with a blanket, and after I've had breakfast I'll ring up the police. Any complaint ?" the speaker inquired of the prisoner.

The reply was not printable.

Visitors were rather crowding Peter Foyle. That same night he had a most distinguished caller.

"I'm glad I found you in," said Mr. Hugo Battersby. His voice was thick and blurred, his

eyes glassy. He looked as though he had been drinking too much.

Foyle cleared a chair by the simple expedient of sweeping everything off the seat on to the floor.

"Really? How jolly to have one's wishes gratified like that. Won't you take a pew? Now"—when the visitor had sunk glaring into the chair—"what can I do for you?"

"You know damned well what you can do!" Battersby appeared to make some effort to control himself, but it proved futile. "You can stop calling on Miss Tremaine," he choked.

Foyle, adjusting his monocle, bleated like the innocent many thought he was.

"But why should I?" he asked. "What harm have I done?"

"Why should you?" Battersby rose, his face mottled and convulsed. "I'll tell you why! Because, if you don't, I'll wring your neck, you damned young fool! I've stood about enough of it—more than enough. I called here to-night to give you this warning—if you don't leave Lillah Tremaine alone I'll kill you!"

Foyle smiled. Then he rang the bell.

"Dommett, this gentleman requires the air. Lead him to it."

When the raving Battersby had gone, he smiled again. Grimly this time.

"And a blasted fool like that is given control of the destination of this country!" he commented bitterly. "Well! now for the fair Lillah."

Going to the telephone, he made another

appointment to call at the tiny, exquisitely-appointed house in Curzon Street.

The loveliest lady in London looked up with a smile. The smile was forced, but Lillah Tremaine had always been a great actress.

"Darling boy!" she cooed, patting the side of the deep divan drawn up before the inviting fire.

"Thank you—I won't sit," said Foyle. "You don't mind if I lock the door? I've got something rather important to say to you."

She was evidently puzzled.

"Peter, dearest, you are so strange. What has happened?"

"Rather a lot. For one thing, friend Battersby is not going to run away to Paris with you to-morrow morning. I hate to scotch a love idyll, but if necessary he will be prevented by force. Sounds melodramatic, I know, but, you see, we're dealing with melodramatic people—you and Battersby would make a pretty decent crook play between you—you as the beautiful spy and Battersby as the poor, trusting, sap-headed mutt. And the bloke is practically a Cabinet Minister. O God!"

"Peter!"

She had flung herself forward, that pure, beautiful face reflecting anguish.

"What was it you called me, Peter?" A voice here to melt a heart of stone, but Foyle merely nodded.

"I called you a spy, Lillah—aren't you?"

"How dare you make such an accusation?—

such a cruel, inhuman, utterly false charge! I'm British through and through."

"Thank God you're nothing of the sort! There isn't a drop of British blood in you—you're a mix-up of the Scandinavian races—and about the vilest thing I've ever had the misfortune to meet." Foyle put his hand into his pocket and withdrew, not the expected handkerchief, but a revolver.

"This is just a reminder," he said, "that it would be foolish for you to attempt any nonsense. Lillah, my dear, take your hand from beneath that cushion, please. And don't attempt any languishing, darling; thank God! I've been cured of that! I allowed you recently to imagine that I had had a recurrence of the disease, but that was merely because I had a job of work to do. If you don't mind, I'll have a rest now." With his eyes never leaving the woman, he drew up to the side of the divan and sat down facing her.

Lillah Tremaine looked as though she had been turned into stone. But for the slight tumult of her breast, she might have been dead.

"When you have finished insulting me——" she breathed.

"My dear," replied Foyle, "I believe it is impossible to insult you. Instead, I am going to narrate something of the truth about yourself."

She jumped up suddenly. The uncanny calmness had been replaced by a tigerish activity.

"Unlock that door!" she commanded.

Foyle, rising, faced her.

"If I unlock it before I have finished telling

you what I came here to say, you will find Scotland Yard officers waiting for you on the other side. They already have the man Phatz," he concluded.

Her manner changed again.

"Phatz? Who is Phatz?"

Foyle became his old slightly-mocking self.

"He calls himself Paine in this country, I believe. Surely you know him, Lillah?—you, who sent him to get a certain paper out of my safe?"

"You are a liar!" came from the parched lips, beautiful still even in fear.

"Very well; have it your own way. In any case, the fellow won't be available for any further jobs of the same description for some time. I don't suppose our people will be too hard on him; he is merely a cog in the wheel; it is the people higher up I am after."

"*You!*" The laugh was scornful.

He beamed upon her.

"Haven't I told you I occasionally do little odd jobs for the British Secret Service? How remiss. That ought to whet your appetite, old thing, for what is to come. . . . Do sit down again; you make me feel nervous."

She edged away from him and sank back into her former seat. Fear now claimed her.

"That's much better; now we're quite cosy again. . . . No, I really must insist upon you keeping your hand away from that cushion, Lillah. . . . Thank you.

"You, of course, know what people call you, my dear? They call you the 'loveliest lady in

London.' I believe some clap-trap gossip-writer in one of the cheaper newspapers coined the phrase, and it was so high-sounding that it stuck. Not that it's extravagant: I believe you are the loveliest lady in London. You were so lovely five years ago that I fell desperately in love with you myself.

"What a fool I was, Lillah!—do you remember? How you fooled me with your sweet nun's face, your tender, gentle ways—and your devil's mind!

"Although I was little better than a kid then, you made me worship you. You wouldn't let me kiss you; your soul was too pure for anything earthly like that; but you encouraged me to write you the most stupid letters. Then you had bills to pay, and after I had nearly ruined myself by giving myself the privilege of paying them, you reminded me—ever so gently!—that you held letters in which I had written the most poisonous bilge. I had got to know you by this time as a white witch, a vampire, a woman who bled a man dry but never by any chance gave anything in return, and so rather than bring disgrace on my people, I bought those letters back. It was a stiff price you named, my dear, but by God it was worth it!"

A spasm of passion showed momentarily in the beautiful face which had become once again a carven mask.

"I paid you ten thousand pounds for those letters. Directly you received the money you vanished. It is only within the last three months that you have returned to London. A fortnight

ago I met you. You had the effrontery to try to drag me into your net again. The facts that I was married, that you must have realised I hated you, were of no consequence. *You wanted something, Lillah, and you were determined to get it!*"

The woman opposite seemed to be experiencing some difficulty in breathing.

"You were slightly careless when you returned me my letters, Lillah. Pushed inside one of the envelopes was—what, do you think? I will tell you—a confidential letter from Desmares, Chief of a certain European Secret Service. It was a remarkably indiscreet letter even for Desmares to have written. It referred to the wonderful work you had been doing for the Special Branch of this certain Intelligence. It even gave the number by which you were known—237. The fool was in love with you himself, no doubt, or he would have had his wits more about him. However, ten thousand pounds wasn't too big a price to pay for the letter, because it gave us just the information we wanted. We know now one source of the leakage of official secrets which has been puzzling the authorities for some time. No doubt that poor fool, Battersby, your very latest victim, has been writing you letters himself. It's a good job his father died recently, for it might have broken the old man's heart to have heard of his son's resignation—as, of course, he will have to resign. There's no possible doubt about that."

"What are you going to do with me?"

The woman's spirit was completely broken. Her voice trembled. The beautiful face was haggard.

"Providing you do two things, you can avoid arrest."

"What are they?" She asked the question eagerly.

"First, to write a confession of the way you duped Battersby, and then to leave the country instantly. I will see you off myself, by the way."

She hesitated only for a moment. Then:

"Give me some paper."

The following night Miss Jessica Smith dined with Mr. Peter Foyle. Miss Jessica Smith was inclined to be piqued.

"M. is delighted," she said, "but I should like to know exactly where I come in? I am told off to work with you, and in return you destroy ruthlessly perhaps the most precious illusion I have ever had; after that you proceed to ignore me completely. Hardly sporting, I think."

"Most charming of all women christened 'Jessica,'" replied Peter Foyle, with the smile she now knew so well, "circumstances forced me to play this hand alone; you see, it was—how shall I put it—a personal matter. This time I bagged the boodle—should Fate be kind enough to allow us to work together on another job, I have no doubt the luck will be more evenly distributed. Then it will be my turn to kick."

"You are really rather nice," declared Miss Smith. "Do you feel like dancing this one?"

As they swung into the fox-trot, they heard a man say: "Funny business, Battersby resigning from the Foreign Office, don't you think?"

THE VAMPIRE

TEN MINUTES OF HORROR

UNTIL his death, quite recently, I used to visit at least once a week a Roman Catholic priest. The fact that I am a Protestant did nothing to shake our friendship. Father R—— was one of the finest characters I have ever known; he was capable of the broadest sympathies, and was, in the best sense of that frequently-abused term, "a man of the world." He was good enough to take considerable interest in my work as a novelist, and I often discussed plots and situations with him.

The story I am about to relate occurred about eighteen months ago—ten months before his illness. I was then writing my novel "The Curse of Doone." In this story I made the villain take advantage of a ghastly legend attached to an old manor-house in Devonshire and use it for his own ends.

Father R—— listened while I outlined the plot I had in mind, and then said, to my great surprise: "Certain people may scoff because they will not allow themselves to believe that there is any credence in the vampire tradition."

"Yes, that is so," I parried; "but, all the same, Bram Stoker stirred the public imagination with his 'Dracula'—one of the most horrible

and yet fascinating books ever written—and I am hoping that my public will extend to me the customary 'author's licence.'"

My friend nodded.

"Quite," he replied. "As a matter of fact," he went on to say, "I believe in vampires myself."

"You do?" I felt the hair on the back of my neck commence to irritate. It is one thing to write about a horror, but quite another to begin to see it assume definite shape.

"Yes," said Father R——. "I am forced to believe in vampires for the very good but terrible reason that I have met one!"

I half-rose in my chair. There could be no questioning R——'s word, and yet——

"That, no doubt, my dear fellow," he continued, "may appear a very extraordinary statement to have made, and yet I assure you it is the truth. It happened many years ago and in another part of the country—exactly where I do not think I had better tell you."

"But this is amazing—you say you actually met a vampire face to face?"

"And talked to him. Until now I have never mentioned the matter to a living soul apart from a brother priest."

It was clearly an invitation to listen; I crammed tobacco into my pipe and leaned back in the chair on the opposite side of the crackling fire. I had heard that Truth was said to be stranger than fiction—but here I was about to have, it seemed, the strange experience of listening to my own most sensational imagining being hopelessly out-done by FACT!

The name of the small town does not matter (Father R—— started); let it suffice it was in the West of England and was inhabited by a good many people of superior means. There was a large city seventy-five miles away and business men, when they retired, often came to —— to wind up their lives. I was young and very happy there in my work until—— But I am a little previous.

I was on very friendly terms with a local doctor; he often used to come in and have a chat when he could spare the time. We used to try to thresh out many problems which later experience has convinced me are insoluble—in this world, at least.

One night, he looked at me rather curiously I thought.

"What do you think of that man, Farington?" he asked.

Now, it was a curious fact that he should have made that inquiry at that exact moment, for by some subconscious means I happened to be thinking of this very person myself.

The man who called himself "Joseph Farington" was a stranger who had recently come to settle in ——. That circumstance alone would have caused comment, but when I say that he had bought the largest house on the hill overlooking the town on the south side (representing the best residential quarter) and had had it furnished apparently regardless of cost by one of the famous London houses, that he sought to entertain a great deal but that no one seemed anxious to go twice to "The

Gables."—— Well, there was 'something funny' about Farington, it was whispered.

I knew this, of course—the smallest fragment of gossip comes to a priest's ears—and so I hesitated before replying to the doctor's direct question.

"Confess now, Father," said my companion, "you are like all the rest of us—you don't like the man! He has made me his medical attendant, but I wish to goodness he had chosen someone else. There's 'something funny' about him."

"Something funny"—there it was again. As the doctor's words sounded in my ears I remembered Farington as I had last seen him walking up the main street with every other eye half-turned in his direction. He was a big-framed man, the essence of masculinity. He looked so robust that the thought came instinctively: This man will never die. He had a florid complexion; he walked with the elasticity of youth and his hair was jet-black. Yet from remarks he had made the impression in —— was that Farington must be at least sixty years of age.

"Well, there's one thing, Sanders," I replied; "if appearances are anything to go by, Farington will not be giving you much trouble. The fellow looks as strong as an ox."

"You haven't answered my question," persisted the doctor. "Forget your cloth, Father, and tell me exactly what you think of Joseph Farington. Don't you agree that he is a man to give you the shudders?"

"You—a doctor—talking about getting the

shudders!" I gently scoffed because I did not want to give my real opinion of Joseph Farington.

"I can't help it—I have an instinctive horror of the fellow. This afternoon I was called up to 'The Gables.' Farington, like ever so many of his ox-like kind, is really a bit of a hypochondriac. He thought there was something wrong with his heart, he said."

"And was there?"

"The man ought to live to a hundred! But, I tell you, Father, I hated having to be near the fellow, there's something uncanny about him. I felt frightened—yes, frightened—all the time I was in the house. I had to talk to someone about it and as you are the safest person in —— I dropped in. . . . You haven't said anything yourself, I notice."

"I prefer to wait," I replied. It seemed the safest answer.

Two months after that conversation with Sanders, not only —— but the whole of the country was startled and horrified by a terrible crime. A girl of eighteen, the belle of the district, was found dead in a field. Her face, in life so beautiful, was revolting in death because of the expression of dreadful horror it held.

The poor girl had been murdered—but in a manner which sent shudders of fear racing up and down people's spines. . . . There was a great hole in the throat, as though a beast of the jungle had attacked. . . .

It is not difficult to say how suspicion for

this fiendish crime first started to fasten itself on Joseph Farington, preposterous as the statement may seem. Although he had gone out of his way to become sociable, the man had made no real friends. Sanders, although a clever doctor, was not the most tactful of men and there is no doubt that his refusal to visit Farington professionally—he had hinted as much on the night of his visit to me, you will remember—got noised about. In any case, public opinion was strongly roused; without a shred of direct evidence to go upon, people began to talk of Farington as being the actual murderer. There was some talk among the wild young spirits of setting fire to "The Gables" one night, and burning Farington in his bed.

It was whilst this feeling was at its height that, very unwillingly, as you may imagine, I was brought into the affair. I received a note from Farington asking me to dine with him one night.

"*I have something on my mind which I wish to talk over with you; so please do not fail me.*"

These were the concluding words of the letter. Such an appeal could not be ignored by a man of religion and so I replied accepting.

Farington was a good host; the food was excellent; on the surface there was nothing wrong. But—and here is the curious part—from the moment I faced the man I knew there *was* something wrong. I had the same uneasiness as Sanders, the doctor: *I felt afraid.* The man

had an aura of evil; he was possessed of some devilish force or quality which chilled me to the marrow.

I did my best to hide my discomfiture, but when, after dinner, Farington began to speak about the murder of that poor, innocent girl, this feeling increased. And at once the terrible truth leaped into my mind: I knew it was Farington who had done this crime: the man was a monster!

Calling upon all my strength, I challenged him.

"You wished to see me to-night for the purpose of easing your soul of a terrible burden," I said; "you cannot deny that it was you who killed that unfortunate girl."

"Yes," he replied slowly, "that is the truth. I killed the girl. The demon which possesses me forced me to do it. But you, as a priest, must hold this confession sacred—you must preserve it as a secret. Give me a few more hours; then I will decide myself what to do."

I left shortly afterwards. The man would not say anything more.

"Give me a few hours," he repeated.

That night I had a horrible dream. I felt I was suffocating. Scarcely able to breathe, I rushed to the window, pulled it open—and then fell senseless to the floor. The next thing I remember was Dr. Sanders—who had been summoned by my faithful housekeeper—bending over me.

"What happened?" he asked. "You had

a look on your face as though you had been staring into hell."

"So I had," I replied.

"Had it anything to do with Farington?" he asked bluntly.

"Sanders," and I clutched him by the arm in the intensity of my feeling, "does such a monstrosity as a vampire exist nowadays? Tell me, I implore you!"

The good fellow forced me to take another nip of brandy before he would reply.

Then he put a question himself.

"Why do you ask that?" he said.

"It sounds incredible—and I hope I really dreamed it—but I fainted to-night because I saw—or imagined I saw—the man Farington flying past the window that I had just opened."

"I am not surprised," he nodded. "Ever since I examined the mutilated body of that poor girl I came to the conclusion that she had come to her death through some terrible abnormality.

"Although we hear practically nothing about vampirism nowadays," he continued, "that is not to say that ghoulish spirits do not still take up their abode in a living man or woman, thus conferring upon them supernatural powers." What form was the shape you thought you saw?"

"It was like a huge bat," I replied, shuddering.

"To-morrow," said Sanders determinedly, "I'm going to London to see Scotland Yard. They may laugh at me at first, but——"

Scotland Yard did not laugh. But criminals

with supernatural powers were rather out of their line, and, besides, as they told Sanders, they had to have *proof* before they could convict Farington. Even my testimony—had I dared to break my priestly pledge, which, of course, I couldn't in any circumstances do—would not have been sufficient.

Farington solved the terrible problem by committing suicide. He was found in bed with a bullet wound in his head.

But, according to Sanders, only the body is dead—the vile spirit is roaming free, looking for another human habitation.

God help its luckless victim.

THE TRAITRESS

A SECRET SERVICE STORY

THAT dull red stain was blood.

The realisation came swiftly to Chertsey as he stood, uncomfortable and bewildered, in the centre of the room.

At his feet was a murdered man.

He supposed Baintree was dead. The man, clad in evening dress, lay perfectly still; his arms were outflung, and his legs were supine. Their limpness was so horribly grotesque, they might have belonged to a giant doll. In Baintree's breast was the wound which the assassin had made. The stiff white shirt was ugly with it. With a shudder, Chertsey remembered that some of that life-blood was on his hand.

He looked round. He did not deny that he was nervous—very nervous. One had to live through an ordeal like this to know how deeply one could be stirred.

The sight of the telephone on its stand in the far corner reminded him of things outside—of the Police. . . . In such a case one always telephoned for the Police. He was suddenly filled with dread. . . . With that blood on his hand. . . .

Thirty yards away, in Piccadilly, a taxi-cab passed with hooting of horn. Inside this room there was a deep, immovable stillness—the

uncanny silence of death. It began to frighten him. He felt he could not stand it any longer. Whatever discomfiture the action might bring, he must ring up the Police.

And then, as he took the first step across the carpet, the door opened and a man walked into the room.

The suddenness of this man's appearance, following upon the tremendous shock he had just received, made him pull up with a start. And instantly the thought came as he looked into the stranger's face that he must appear a guilty man. He certainly felt one.

The stranger was calm and clear-headed; in the circumstances amazingly so. Keeping a steady gaze upon Chertsey, he quietly closed the door. After he had done this, his hand went into a pocket. It was withdrawn holding a revolver.

"Who are you?"

It was a voice with a vibrant note—like the sound of steel cutting the air. It matched the speaker. Mesmerised by the behaviour of the other, Chertsey continued to stare. He saw a thinnish man of perhaps forty-eight, dressed in a dinner-jacket suit beneath a light overcoat. Used to forming impressions, he swiftly summarised the man's face. The colour of the flesh was grey, and every feature was grim; the thin, tight-locked lips, the challenging jut of the jaw, the angry blaze of the eyes—a granite man, this.

"Who are you?" The demand was more peremptory this time.

"My name is Gilbert Chertsey."

"Profession?"

"I'm a novelist."

It seemed that the merest flicker of a smile passed over the other's stern mouth.

"A novelist—well, what are you doing here?"—and then, as Chertsey moved aside—"put your hands over your head! No nonsense!"

When Chertsey hesitated, the other crossed to him with startling speed. The novelist had the incredible sensation of feeling a revolver thrust against his heart. He obeyed the bizarre command, conscious that the other had noticed the blood stain on his hand. The man said nothing, but his expression was significant.

"Sit in that chair and tell me everything you know about this"—he pointed with his left hand to the figure on the floor. "One moment!" Kneeling, the speaker examined the body of Baintree.

"Dead," he said.

"I understand so."

The other showed his teeth.

"Who killed him?"

"I haven't the least idea—I can assure you I didn't. Possibly——"

"Possibly—what?" The inquisitor had his deeply-lined face out-thrust.

Chertsey felt himself hating the man almost as much as he feared him.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me who you are," he said.

The thin lips parted in a mirthless smile.

"That can wait," was the reply; "in the

meantime, let me assure you, Mr. Chertsey, that I occupy a position which entitles me to take up my present attitude. Unless the explanation of your presence in this flat is thoroughly satisfying, I shall have you immediately arrested. . . . What is that on your hand? I must hear all your movements to-night."

Chertsey pulled himself together. It was absurd to be afraid.

"I dined at the Club——"

"What Club?"

"The Mayflower."

A nod.

"After dinner a party of us played billiards and then went back to the smoking-room to talk. Someone—Ringwood I think—wanted to know if I was doing another novel. I said yes, but that I wasn't getting on very fast."

"Where does this lead?"

Chertsey kept his temper.

"If you will excuse me," he replied, "I am coming to the point."

The other growled: "Quickly, then!"

"I can fully understand that my work has no possible interest for you," commented the novelist, "but as it was my present book which brought me here to-night I had to mention the fact. Mr. Robert Baintree was, I understand, a great traveller."

"Possibly."

Chertsey endeavoured to remain unruffled.

"It was Ringwood—a friend of his—who sent me along to see Mr. Baintree to-night. Ringwood——"

"What Ringwood is it?"

"The Harley Street nerve specialist. He told me he was at Repington with Baintree."

"Did he tell you anything else?" There was a snapped eagerness about the question.

"He said that Baintree knew Europe from one end to the other and that if I wanted local colour for the Constantinople scenes in my new novel he was the man to see. Ringwood was good enough to ring up Baintree and fix an appointment. I was to drop in here at 10.30 to-night."

"And you kept this appointment?"

"I did. . . . But, I say, it's very disconcerting not to know to whom I am talking. . . ."

"Don't let that affect you—please continue your story. I find it very interesting." It was impossible to decide if the man was being grimly facetious.

"All right. I have already told you I kept the appointment. As a matter of fact, I was five minutes too early; when I entered the lift on the ground-floor I looked at my watch and saw that it was exactly twenty-two minutes past ten."

"There was no one else in the lift?"

"No. I came up alone. Then——"

"Well?" growled the listener.

Chertsey winced. He was now reaching the crucial point of his narrative, and he realised that his conduct did not reflect the greatest credit on himself.

"There is a small brass plate outside this flat door with 'Baintree' on it. I rang the

bell and waited. But no one came and so I rang again. It was then that it happened——"

"What happened?" The listener was bending forward.

"The door suddenly opened and a man rushed out."

A sharp intake of breath came from the other chair.

"Describe him."

"I am afraid I cannot. You see, he was past me in a flash."

"Didn't you notice anything about him?" The inquiry was rasped.

"Nothing—except that he had his overcoat collar turned up and that the upper part of his face was hidden by a soft felt hat turned down."

"You didn't follow him?—— Good God, man, why didn't you follow him? He had just committed a murder!"

"Look here," complained Chertsey, "I'm not going on any longer unless I can put my hands down. For one thing I want a smoke." He lowered his hands without waiting for the permission and thrust them into his overcoat pockets. From these he drew out a pipe and tobacco pouch. The stain on the fingers was a horrible reminder, but he filled his pipe, regardless of the revolver by which he was still menaced.

"How was I to know the man was a murderer?" He had filled his pipe somewhat unsteadily and had got it going by this time, and still kept his hands down. "Baintree was

a stranger to me; it was no concern of mine if he entertained men who were eccentric enough to leave his flat as though the place was on fire. As a matter of fact, however ridiculous it may sound now, that was the thought which came to me—the flat was on fire and this man was rushing out to get assistance."

"What about the telephone?"

Chertsey shrugged.

"Of course; I have already said that it sounds ridiculous. But this is the first time I have actually come into contact with murder."

Lifting his hand, he found that his forehead was wet. The strain was beginning to tell. Who was this questioner, and why did he not give some hint of his identity? He was tempted to make a rush for the door in spite of the revolver. After all, he was innocent. Why should he tolerate such treatment?

"You did not disturb anything here?"

"Nothing. Let me finish. The fleeing man had left the flat door open. I walked inside—you understand I was vaguely suspicious; that was why I entered without ringing again. As I stepped into the hall I called out: 'Mr. Baintree'; but no answer came. Then I stepped into the first room I came to—this one."

"Was the light on?"

"No. The room was in darkness. That strengthened the feeling I had that something was wrong—very wrong. I found the switch after a little while and then I saw—*that!* I knew it to be the body of the man I had come to see because Ringwood had described Baintree.

"At first," continued the novelist, "I was bewildered, especially when, after stooping to examine how badly Baintree was injured, I found this"—he held up his right hand—"on my fingers. I realised that possibly I might be suspected of the crime myself, but I was just going to the telephone to ring up the Police when you entered. What I have told you is the truth," he concluded.

The other rose.

"You have withheld nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Then," said the other, placing the revolver back into his pocket, "you may go after giving me your address. Where do you live?"

"128B, Hertford Street, Mayfair. Practically round the corner."

With the receipt of this information the other appeared to lose all interest in him.

"Good night, Mr. Chertsey."

The novelist hesitated. He did not know if he were justified in leaving this man who refused to give any account of himself in the flat.

The other spoke sharply.

"There is one fact I must impress upon you before you go, Mr. Chertsey. It is that this affair to-night must not be discussed with anyone. It will be necessary for you to give me your promise on that point."

Chertsey bridled.

"You take a great deal for granted. I know absolutely nothing about you. Suppose I refuse?"

"Then, believe me, you will find yourself in a somewhat uncomfortable position."

"Oh—go to the Devil!" His patience was exhausted. The interest which he had formerly experienced had been replaced by annoyance. So exasperated that he felt he could not trust himself to say anything further, he opened the door. A minute later he was in the street, walking rapidly towards his own rooms.

It wasn't until the following morning that he found the thing. Going through the pockets of his evening kit, his fingers touched something soft. It proved to be a thin, black leather pocket-case. As it did not belong to him, Chertsey was puzzled. Although he had no clear recollection on the point, the only conclusion to which he could come was that he must have found the case on the floor of the murder-room the previous night and inadvertently placed it in his pocket.

It had a clear connection with the crime, no doubt, and his first inclination was to open the case, but he overcame the desire. Directly after breakfast he got into the taxi which had been ordered and gave an address: "New Scotland Yard."

The official to whose room he was conducted listened attentively to everything he said, before picking up the case. He asked only one question:

"Do you know what this contains, Mr. Chertsey?"

"I do not. You see it does not belong to me."

"Quite so. Well—thank you, Mr. Chertsey." The speaker rose, intimating that the interview might be considered over.

"I hope I did right in bringing the case here?"

"Certainly. You did quite right. Thank you once again."

"If I had only known where to find the mysterious gentleman who cross-examined me last night in Mr. Baintree's flat I would have gone to him."

"Quite so."

"Am I committing a breach of official etiquette in asking where that gentleman can be found?"

The Scotland Yard official walked to the door and held it open.

"I'd forget all about this affair if I were you," was his reply.

Chertsey stalked out.

He would have been only too pleased to forget, but he could not dismiss the affair. He dealt professionally in mystery—his novels were of the thriller class—and the death of Robert Baintree contained all the elements to enchain and rivet a man's attention. The escape of the supposed murderer, the finding of the body in that hushed room, the appearance of the unyielding, grim-visaged inquisitor, the peculiar reticence of the fellow at Scotland Yard—these were the circumstances which kept the tragedy fixed in his mind.

It was the secrecy of the whole thing which was so baffling. Much as he hated the idea, he expected to be besieged by reporters, but

none of the newspapers even printed the story of Robert Baintree's death. So far as any publicity was concerned, the tragedy might not have happened. More and more strange!

That night he sought out Ringwood. The latter looked worried. Naturally enough, Chertsey commenced to talk about his experience. Long before he had finished his story, the Harley Street specialist, after glancing uneasily over his shoulder—and this was in the ultra-respectable atmosphere of the Mayflower Club—caught his arm.

"If I were you, old man, I'd forget everything about that business—try to persuade yourself it never happened."

"What the devil are you talking about? Wasn't it through you that I went to see Baintree?"

"Yes, yes. But—well, the truth is, old man, I can't tell you what I know—and you'll have to be satisfied with that."

Chertsey looked at him squarely.

"Do you know who that man—Grim-face—was?"

"Yes, I know."

"And you won't tell me?"

"I can't . . . have another drink?"

"To hell with you and your drinks!"

Reaching home disgruntled and annoyed, his servant told him a gentleman was waiting.

"What's his name?"

"He didn't give any name, sir. I said you were certain to be home by eleven, and he decided to wait."

"I don't exactly care for people who are afraid to give their names being allowed to wait in my rooms, Dixon."

"There's nothing suspicious about this gentleman, sir. A very masterful type. He just brushed past me."

"Short, thin man?"

"Yes, sir—very grey."

Grim-face!

So it proved.

"I called, Mr. Chertsey, to thank you for handing over that case to Scotland Yard. You did not look inside it, you say?"

"I made that statement to the official at Scotland Yard, and, in the ordinary way, I usually endeavour to speak the truth."

Grim-face looked as though he contemplated a rebuke.

"Why did you not tell me about this case in the flat last night?"

"I say, excuse me not asking you before—but won't you have a drink?"

"I do not want a drink, thank you."

Chertsey continued to smile.

"I do wish you would have a drink. I'll tell you why: before I insult a man I always like to give him a drink."

"Do you intend to insult me?"

"I most certainly do. I'm going to answer one more question—the one you have just asked—and then I'm going to request you to go to the devil. Do you imagine that I intend to spend the rest of my life being cross-examined by you?—a man whose name I do not even

know? Now for the answer: I have no clear recollection of having picked up the black leather case which I took to Scotland Yard, but the strong probability is that I found it on the floor of the room in Baintree's flat and that I inadvertently placed it in my pocket. Now—do you mind going? You irritate me."

For the first time since he had known him, the other smiled.

"I can quite understand you being irritated, Mr. Chertsey. My name," he added, "is Sir Harker Bellamy, and I am a Departmental Chief of the British Secret Service."

Chertsey became penitent.

"I say," he stammered, "forgive me for being such a fool. . . . I might have known. . . ."

"There is sufficient reason why Robert Baintree's death and everything connected with it should not be talked about. The essential quality about our work is its secrecy. I should not have said as much, Mr. Chertsey, if circumstances had not brought you into this business. And now I'll wish you good-night."

Chertsey motioned to an easy-chair by the side of the glowing fire.

"Can't you stay a few more minutes, sir? . . . just long enough to smoke a cigarette? I—I rather wanted to ask you a favour."

The expression of Sir Harker Bellamy was non-committal as he tapped the cigarette he had taken from the cedarwood box.

Chertsey was nervous.

"What I am going to say may sound very

ridiculous," he started, "but I should like to be allowed to take a hand, if it is at all possible, in trying to solve the mystery of Robert Baintree's death. A man cannot have such an experience as I had two nights ago without feeling it. As you have said yourself, circumstances brought me into the affair. They brought me into it against my will, but, once in, I should like to stay in."

The only sign the other made was to flick the ash off his cigarette. It was not encouraging, but he went on:

"I don't mind confessing that my motive is not an entirely unselfish one. For months I have been fed up with the commonplace—ordinary existence, ordinary travel—but there was something so dastardly about Baintree's death that I should welcome the chance, for its own sake as it were, to get a hand on that beastly murderer. I'm expressing myself damned badly, I know, but——"

Bellamy rose and flung his cigarette-stub into the fire.

"Better stick to your novel-writing, Chertsey," he said.

"Does that mean—— ?"

"It means that novel-writing is considerably safer."

"I speak four languages. I am very fit——"

"Good-night—sorry."

Grim-face was gone.

To every man at times comes a dangerous mood. One is inclined then to break with

the settled order of ordinary existence. Life becomes stale and pallid; whatever tang it may once have held is gone. It is this chafing which sends some men into the Divorce Court, others into Africa to shoot lions.

A week before Chertsey had entered the open door of Robert Baintree's flat in Half Moon Street, he had crossed from New York in the *Berengaria*. The sea had upset him; made him restless. He had bought a number of novels at Brentano's in Fifth Avenue the last afternoon, but he had found it impossible to read one of them. Concentration of any sort was out of the question; he just loafed and he found even this fretting to the nerves.

He could have flirted, of course, but none of the would-be *amourettes*, whether married, single or widows, appealed. Even intense boredom—or whatever it was which was making him irritable—was preferable to an insipid love affair.

His mood of discontent became intensified during the first week in London. Usually he returned from a cross-Atlantic trip with a sense of renewed vigour and fresh interest. "Now," he would say to himself as he stepped back into his comfortable study, "for work. . . ."

But, although the story he was on had been promised for an early date, he could not bring himself to write more than a few paragraphs a day. The fatal inability to concentrate still dogged him. Writing novels suddenly seemed a ridiculous and absurd occupation.

Then he had stepped across the threshold of a door and found himself face to face with something real, vital, dynamic. Life with the lid off.

But Grim-face had turned him down cold.

His mood had not improved by the experience.

There were the usual pile of letters on the breakfast-table, but he pushed them aside whilst he had his meal. Then, gathering them up, he crossed to the wide fireplace, lowered himself into a worn morocco chair, and filled and lit a pipe.

The mood of irritability was rather worse that morning—the memory of the talk with Grim-face the night before was very vivid—and Chertsey's perusal of his mail was marked by a series of short explosions. He was not a mean or selfish man—but he wished these charity-mongers would leave him alone for a bit. Then there were the immaculately-typed envelopes which, upon being opened, proved to contain the compliments of Samuel MacJacob and his tribe, who, upon note of hand alone, were prepared to advance any sum up to twenty-five thousand pounds. . . .

Another. This from the editor of a monthly magazine:

DEAR CHERTSEY,

"*I want to start that serial.*

"*Where the deuce is it?*

"*Yours sincerely,*

"JOHN BEZZANT."

The reader groaned. He was sick of work.

The last envelope of the batch was small and azure-coloured. A faint fragrance drifted to him as he picked it up. He viewed it curiously for a minute. The writing was not familiar, and it had been addressed to him c/o his English publishers. He tore the flap.

"DEAR MR. CHERTSEY,

"*I hope you won't think me too much of an abandoned female if I write to say how much I enjoyed your last book? I have read them all—they are my favourite bed-time literature, as a matter of fact!—but 'The Lure' beats all the rest.*

"*I hope you are not too hopelessly conventional; judging from the kind of stuff you write I should not imagine you were. If you feel capable of such a rash act, let me offer you some tea one afternoon. This is not an entirely disinterested invitation, I warn you—I want your autograph in some of my favourite novels.*

"*You might ring me up if you think anything about it.*

"*Sincerely yours,*
"SOPHIE LAURENT."

His worst enemy could not have said that Chertsey had many illusions about himself. He was fast advancing towards the unromantic forties, he was only moderately good-looking, and he regarded his novels mainly as a means of livelihood. It was necessary that he should make money somehow, and writing appealed

to him as the easiest way he knew. Contrary to the average experience he had sold his stuff from the start and as time went on he got better and better prices for it. He was fond of change and he could work whilst he travelled.

He might have become conceited. His novels contained nothing of sex, and yet all classes appeared to read them. In the *Berengaria* library list there was a long row of them, and the library steward said they were always "out."

In the ordinary way he would probably have ignored the letter and concentrated on the businesslike epistle of the editor of the *Centurion Magazine*. That meant something practical: English magazines paid badly compared to American ones, but he had got Bezzant up to one thousand pounds for the serial rights of "The Midnight Club"—and what was even more important, directly he delivered the manuscript he could receive his money.

But when he looked through the open door into his study which adjoined and saw the typewriter waiting . . . he reached out for the telephone. Holding the letter signed "Sophie Laurent," he asked for a number.

"So you have been bored? We must see to that."

Chertsey watched through the cigarette-smoke her eyes quizzing him.

"I am no longer bored," he said.

She reached out for a fresh cigarette from the jade box, and he sprang up—rather

awkwardly, for the Chesterfield was deep—to strike a match. As he held the flame cupped, the girl's fingers touched the back of his hand. A gleam of amusement was in her eyes, which held a deeper challenge.

"It was very good of you to come."

"I hope you are not too disappointed?"

"On the contrary." She smiled again. "It would, I confess, have been a terrible blow if you had proved to be a fat, bearded person with a large family."

"Many of my tribe are just like that."

"Really? Then the beautiful emotions they express are nothing more than their secret longings and desires?"

"Probably. But what would you have done had I turned up with a beard and a family portrait album?"

"Given you tea, of course, got your signature to my books—and then discovered an acute headache. As it is——" She gestured with her free hand.

"I am flattered—and grateful."

"Thank you. This *is* rather jolly, don't you think?"

She motioned again with a white, ringless hand, exceptionally groomed. The movement was comprehensive. It embraced the glowing fire, the corner of the room in which they were entrenched, the Chesterfield on which they were both seated—and her visitor.

It was evidently intended as a compliment. Chertsey, soothed by his surroundings, accepted it as such. For the speaker was by no means

ordinary; on the contrary, she was distinctly unusual.

Sophie Laurent was not beautiful in the orthodox, stereotyped fashion—her mouth was too large and her features too irregular for that—but she was a striking type, nevertheless. Her body had an attractive suppleness, and its grace was shown off to advantage by the afternoon gown she wore.

She had a personality, and it was compelling. Chertsey found himself becoming more and more interested—almost fascinated. This woman—he put her age down at twenty-six or so—was intensely alive. The movements of her body, the animation of her voice and glance, the play of her hands showed it. He liked people to be alive.

They drifted into more or less intimate talk: the girl had let the barriers down, and Chertsey, never a slave to convention, willingly stepped over the threshold. She told him that she was alone in London, that, although possessed of sufficient private means, she was herself often-times bored and——

"You don't think me a too dreadful person for writing you, I hope, old chap?" she asked. Her outstretched hand picked a speck of dust off his shoulder. "I've never done such a thing before, but there's something in your work which thrills me. Is it the way you make your heroines behave, or what?"

"My dear—you overwhelm me!" he replied.

"Not at all. I mean it. Tell me, have you had many adventures yourself?"

He looked at her ; she was extremely attractive with the firelight playing on her white, opulent skin.

"Amorous or otherwise ?"

"'Otherwise,' of course. You don't think I've lured you here in order to get details of your dreadful past ? No, what I mean is, you describe action so well in your books that I always feel you must have actually taken part in something of the sort yourself. I should like you to have met a great—a very great—friend of mine. He's dead now. But Bob Baintree——"

"You knew Baintree ?" His surprise made him interrupt.

She regarded him with astonishment. "Do you mean to say you were a friend of his, too ? But, how extraordinary !"

"I saw him once—that's all." Some intuitive feeling—he could not tell what instinct it was which guided him—made him temporise.

She nodded.

"He died a couple of days ago—quite suddenly, and rather mysteriously. When I say 'mysteriously,' I mean that it seems strange to think of a man in the prime of life, and as strong as he was, dying at all. And no one seems to know what it was that struck him down."

Into the listener's mind flashed a picture. Chertsey saw that still form with the grotesquely limp limbs lying on the blue-patterned carpet with the blood staining the shirt-front. Should

he tell this girl what he knew? He decided not—evidently she was ignorant of the truth—and it might cruelly distress her.

"My feelings for poor Bob were never more than those of a friend—a very dear friend—but he—he always said he was very much in love with me. He wrote me the most wonderful letters. The night before his death he called here. It was rather a painful scene we had. You see, he asked me once again to marry him and I refused. He was a dear, and I liked him awfully—but it's absolutely suicidal to marry anyone you do not love—don't you think?"

"I should imagine so."

"It was then I gave him back his letters. I felt I no longer had the right to them. I fancy I can see his face now"—she shivered slightly, although the room was very hot—"as he put them away in a black leather case. It's hateful to think that prying eyes may read the words which must have been sacred to him."

Chertsey leaned forward.

"You would like to have those letters back?" he asked.

"Only to destroy them. Now that Bob is dead . . . perhaps you can understand?"

"Of course. But if the letters are addressed to you, they are your property. Mr. Baintree's executors would deliver them up to you if you made application."

"Oh, but I have written—and received no reply. Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I have the idea—although Bob never told me, great friends as we were—that he was engaged on some private work for the Government. That would explain the secrecy which has so surrounded his death. It might also explain why I cannot get my letters returned. Being a woman, I feel so helpless——" She paused, biting her lower lip. "Then there is another possibility. They may have been stolen. There is the chance of blackmail."

It was obviously up to Chertsey.

"If I can do anything——" he started.

She turned to him so impulsively that one rounded arm encircled his neck.

"Oh, will you? Thank you! I know where the letters were put—if only you could find that black leather case. . . ."

The red lips were parted; her eyes sent forth an invitation, but, strangely enough, when Chertsey found himself five minutes later out on the Earl's Court pavement, it was not of the woman he had just left that he thought. His mind dwelt on the still form of a man lying on the floor of his flat—brutally murdered.

A month passed. It was during this month that Gilbert Chertsey's friends went round inquiring of each other what the deuce had happened to him. On the principle of going to the fountain-head, Ringwood, who was really anxious, rang up the novelist's literary agent.

"Don't ask me," replied that harassed individual; "all I know is that he won't work and that he spends all his time with some

woman. . . . No, I don't know anything more than that. . . . I can't tell you her name, but she's got him all right; they're inseparable. I saw them lunching at the Savoy yesterday, and when I reminded Chertsey that he was already two months behind with his new novel he nearly bit my head off. . . . Yes, he's either mad, or is going to get married . . . 'bye."

Chertsey adjusted the gold-rimmed spectacles of plain glass, fingered the small moustache glued to his upper lip by spirit-gum, and walked on.

It was difficult to believe that he was in London—even in the noisome East End: this dark, fetid alley was more in keeping with the underworld of some foreign capital. It was so dark that he could scarcely see his hand in front of him.

Dread struck him: he might not be able to find the place again; he had been there only once before. And he had to find it.

He stumbled on until he reached the end of this unsavoury alley. A turn to the right brought him more light and a clearer knowledge of his surroundings. He was in a street now—a street lined with grimy-looking houses that frowned evilly upon the few persons walking furtively upon the pavement below.

Into one of these houses he turned, watched by many curious eyes. Up the rickety staircase he climbed until he reached a door on the third floor. He thrust this open without the preliminary of knocking.

For such a house it was a surprisingly comfortable room. At a big desk placed against the further wall, a girl sat writing. As the door opened, she swung round in her chair.

"Yes?" she demanded. Her right hand was in a pocket of her short skirt.

"Don't trouble to shoot, Sophie," said Chertsey.

The girl stared incredulously and then tilted back her head. There was relief—and something else—in her laugh.

"You're wonderful, old thing," she declared —"but why the disguise?"

Chertsey turned to lock the door.

"Yes, I should have done that; it was very careless of me. I don't know what Philip would say." Her tone changed. "By the way, he should be here—it's not like him to be late. You haven't seen him?"

"No—but I've heard about him."

Her expression changed as she saw the look in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Has anything happened to him?"

"He's been taken."

She opened her mouth to scream, but self-control asserted itself.

"How do you know? When did it happen? Philip! . . . Oh, God, they'll hang him!"

"Undoubtedly," Chertsey confirmed, "but then he always knew they would."

She passed over the singular remark in her urgent desire for further information.

"When did it happen?"

"He was arrested an hour ago in the *California Hotel* in Leicester Square."

She came closer.

"Gilbert, how do you know this?"

"Ever since the night of Baintree's death I have been shadowed—under suspicion——"

She caught his arm.

"That has been through me. Oh, my dear, they will not touch you . . . is that why you came here disguised?"

He disregarded her question, and continued: "I thought two could play at that game and so I did a bit of spying back. That is how I knew of your brother's arrest." He freed his arm from her hand.

"I came straight here to warn you. They know that your brother had a woman working with him. Although they have the murderer of Baintree"—he wondered she did not notice the hardening of his voice—"they will not be satisfied. I have heard of this man Bellamy: he's a tiger; and he will not rest until he has got you as well. He must know all about you by this time."

It seemed incredible that she did not suspect him. But the girl remained calm, almost impassive. Was she stunned by grief?

He went on hurriedly.

"They may be here any moment. This place can be traced now that they have O'Donnell."

She just smiled. It was pathetic.

"I do not care," she said; "let them come."

Chertsey caught her by the shoulders.

"You don't realise what you are saying,

Sophie. Through O'Donnell there may be the clearest evidence against you. Although England is not at war, the country cannot afford to be sentimental against agents working for a foreign power which is known to be hostile. Don't you realise the risk ? "

"I have taken a greater risk than that—and lost."

"A greater risk ? " He was puzzled.

"When I endeavoured to make you love me, Gilbert." She sat down again at the big desk at which she had plotted so brilliantly against the country which was giving her hospitality.

"I, who had sworn to steel my heart against all emotion, have lamentably failed ; that is why I do not care what the future may hold. . . ."

Chertsey kept silent because he did not know what to say. He had played the traitor to this girl who had trusted him, and the reflection was not pleasant. He had encouraged her to love him—and now this love, unless she got away, might mean her death.

"This is the end—and I do not care," continued Sophie Laurent. "You know part of my story ; I will be very brief with the rest. I am Irish. My father was killed—butchered is the better word—by those licensed murderers known as the Blacks and Tans in 1920. I had just left the Convent then. Philip, my half-brother, had sworn vengeance against England, the employer of my father's murderers, and he persuaded me to join him in his work. He soon found a way. . . ."

"Russia?" There was contempt in Chertsey's inquiry.

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

"What did it matter for whom we worked?" she said wearily. "Germany, France, Italy—it would all have been the same. We were out for vengeance, not money; neither Philip nor I ever received a penny."

Chertsey shifted in his chair. She paid no attention.

"Philip had no special personal animosity against Robert Baintree, but Baintree was the most dangerous of the special branch of the Secret Service working against us. He had collected certain information——"

"Which was in the black leather case."

"Yes. It was just a forlorn hope asking you to try to get it back."

"It was already in the hands of Scotland Yard; I took it to them on the morning after the murder."

She showed no surprise.

"I guessed it all along—but I would not allow myself to believe it true. Then it was you who betrayed Philip?"

Chertsey nodded.

"It was I. When I saw the dead body of Baintree, I swore I would bring his murderer to justice. I asked Sir Harker Bellamy to let me join his staff. He curtly refused and so I worked on my own. We have been on different sides, Sophie—the luck of the game. I happen to have won."

"Yes, Gilbert, you've won. You have been

true to your principles, but I have been false —a traitress. If Philip knew, he would curse me with his dying breath." She stopped to bite her lip. I have no desire to escape because I realise that you do not care sufficiently to go with me. So I will stay until—until Sir Harker Bellamy and your other friends come. You can hand me over to them yourself: it will be a further triumph for you."

He passed her gibe by.

"To the best of my knowledge they do not know of this address. They have not learned it through me. But Philip may have papers on him. . . ."

"By rights I should kill you, but, God help me, I love you! I started out to make a fool of you, but it is I who am the fool. . . . Gilbert, have you no pity for me! See to what depths I have sunk!"

A maddening desire to crush her to him, to take all that out of her love she was prepared to offer almost overwhelmed him. But between him and the temptation rose a picture—the image of a murdered man.

"We are on different sides, my dear," he replied.

"But, listen to me—God! how shameless I am!—I will throw up the work——"

There was a peremptory knock on the door.

He rushed to her.

"Quickly! Isn't there another way out? —a secret exit? You must go!"

"No! Let them take me! Nothing matters now! You have won!"

"Open this door!" called a strident voice.

"I love you," lied Chertsey. "I will join you in Paris!"

"You swear that?"

"I swear it."

She pressed a hidden spring beneath the big desk and the wall fell apart. Into this opening, after snatching up hat and coat, she stepped.

"Gilbert!"

"Go!" he ordered.

The panel had scarcely swung to before the door of the room crashed open. A number of men rushed in. At their head was Sir Harker Bellamy.

"Arrest that man!" he ordered.

Chertsey tore off the false moustache and removed the plain-glass spectacles.

"Chertsey! What in the devil are you doing here?"

"Clearing up. I understand you have arrested a man named Philip O'Donnell for the murder of Robert Baintree. You did so on the strength of an anonymous typewritten communication—supplied by me."

"By *you?*"

"It's rather a long story, but when you turned me down I resolved to find Baintree's murderer on my own. Luck was on my side."

"How?"

"The circumstances are personal and I do not propose to explain them."

Bellamy came back to the essentials.

"O'Donnell worked with a woman named

Sophie Laurent. She was his half-sister. She was the brains of this outfit—and we want her. Where is she ? "

" How should I know ? "

" Know ! Of course, you know ! You've been constantly in her company for weeks. I'm serious, Chertsey, and you had better understand it. Even now I'm not certain but what you're not mixed up in this poisonous business yourself. We know this to be the hiding-place of O'Donnell—the woman can't be far away."

Chertsey shrugged with as much ostentation as he could contrive.

" Since you are so well-informed, find her."

" I know this much : the woman, Sophie Laurent, fooled you to the top of her bent, and perhaps made a traitor out of an honest man. Stand back ! . . . Stevenson, see that crack in the wall by the side of the desk ? . . . If you don't stand aside, Chertsey, I swear I'll shoot ! "

" Don't be a fool, Bellamy ! "

" Stand aside ! "

From the other side of the wall came a voice, clear if unsteady :

" Gilbert—Good-bye ! "

Then a revolver shot filled the room with sinister sound.

MR. PETTILOE CITES A CASE

THE PERFECT MURDER

"WHEN you ask me if murder is ever justified," said Mainwaring, "you strike at the very root of modern Justice. By temperament, legal training, and—yes, actual experience—I say 'No.' The man who takes life—any human life—should be punished. If insane, he should be sent to a place appointed to hold criminal lunatics; if sane, he should go to the scaffold. In the case of——"

The famous medico-jurist, the "scientific policeman," as he had so often been called, stopped as though conscious that he was about to say something which must remain locked within his own breast, something which he could not discuss even in the smoking-room of his favourite club.

"Well," commented Sir Benjamin Shipsbee, whose reputation as a surgeon was almost as great as was that of Mainwaring as a crime pathologist, "I don't agree with you. We all know that the law must outwardly be respected, but there have been many instances in my own practice when a slip of the knife would have brought the greatest relief and happiness to the world generally. I may say, however," looking round the small circle of interested listeners, "that I never had sufficient courage to put my view into effect."

There was a silence for a few moments, and then Pettiloe, the solicitor, moved his chair slightly nearer the fire.

"I have only been concerned in one actual murder," he said, in a quiet, even tone, "but I must say I agree with Shipsbee. In my case, for instance, after I had killed this man, I never had a moment's remorse."

Although not a word was spoken, cigars were taken out of mouths.

Pettiloe a murderer! This was a notable jest. Why, his solemn respectability was one of the club's stock jokes. Each one of them had known Pettiloe practically all his life. A milder-mannered man never drew up a Bill of Costs. He had pale blue eyes, old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers, and wore a fob on his watch-chain.

"Never knew you specialised in doubtful humour before," said Sir Ronald Mainwaring, in his customary dry, clipped tone.

"Phew! You gave me quite a shock, Pettiloe," was Shipsbee's contribution.

"If only one of your clients had heard you!" laughed Ferriburn, the actor.

"I dare say what I said just now startled you," remarked Pettiloe. "No, Mainwaring," looking at the man whose evidence had sent so many criminals to the scaffold, "I was not joking. But, all the same, even you could not get me hanged for this twenty-years-old crime —if you decide it was a 'crime.' I killed too skilfully for that. As for my clients, Ferriburn, I am giving up practice in a week's time and the man who is succeeding me is one of the

most respected solicitors in London: Meredith; you all know him." The spellbound audience nodded.

"It is not conscience, nor any feeling of remorse, that makes me willing to tell you this story—should you care to listen to it," went on the even voice of this grave, little man, who might have stepped out of a previous century. "Understand me, I have no fear. But the argument which has started among us to-night is of such an interesting nature, and deals so vitally with one of the most important problems of human conduct, that I was constrained to say what I did. The man I killed deserved death—which is why I support Shipsbee's view."

There was a scraping of chairs, a general leaning forward, and then, with a gesture that he might have used to a client to whom he was about to explain an intricate point of law, Pettiloe told his story.

"The thing wanted care," he said. "Naturally, being in the prime of life and successful—I was forty-one at the time it happened—I did not desire to be arrested and hanged."

"No," with a bright smile, "I didn't devote myself to the reading of detective fiction. What I did was to study this problem just as I should have studied any particularly difficult piece of ordinary business. And in the end I knew that my idea was flawless. That I am telling you this now, even although twenty years have passed, is sufficient proof that it was flawless.

"We will call the man 'James Morrison.'

That was not his real name, of course. Morrison was generally spoken of as being one of the 'lucky kind.' Certainly he had many advantages. He was strikingly handsome in the fine, commanding way which both men and women admire; he had been left money by his father as well as by other relatives; he was universally popular. Both dogs and children adored him. Life, in the expressive phrase, 'had no corners for him'—women openly flattered him, men apparently trusted him. I trusted him myself."

The speaker paused to sip the teetotal drink which was by his elbow.

"One of my clients," resumed Pettiloe, "had been left a house on the Cornish coast. It was a huge, rambling place, hundreds of years old, very lonely and very eerie. There was not another dwelling within a mile. Consequently it had lain derelict for years. When it had been made habitable, my client invited me down. It was mid-March—but I went.

"How I induced my client to leave the house this particular night and how I contrived to be alone in it with Morrison would take me some time to tell you—and, as neither circumstance, although bearing on the main story, is material in itself, I do not propose to waste that time. It is sufficient for me to state, I think, that on the night of the—er—occurrence—the man Morrison, who was down from London at my invitation, and I were alone in the house except for the two old cronies, man and wife, who acted as servants.

"We had a very decent dinner, considering——"

Pettiloe stopped to take another sip at his innocuous teetotal drink. Four pairs of eyes did not leave his face, which up till now had displayed no emotion: the elderly solicitor might have been recounting a dry anecdote about the conveyancing of some property.

"I had a particular reason for inviting Morrison to the place," Pettiloe continued. "Morrison, who was a professed disbeliever in anything ghostly, was to be put to a severe test that night.

"Whilst he was sipping his wine, the wind from the sea howled round the gables, and blew in fitful gusts against the mullioned panes. Strange and remote noises came to us from other parts of the house, just as though some storm-tossed spirit was breathing a chilling breath in corridors that had recently been disturbed by human foot after the lapse of countless years."

Pettiloe's tone became more concise. He cleared his throat and went on:

"I purposely brought the conversation round to haunted houses.

"'I suppose you are going to tell me that this place is haunted!' scoffed the man Morrison. 'Well, bring out your ghost!'

"'Yes,' I told him gravely, 'this house has the reputation of being haunted by a particularly sinister ghost. Perhaps I should have warned you before you came, Morrison.'

"He laughed at that.

"'You can't scare me, Pettiloe; if it interests you—as it evidently does, judging by your expression—tell me about the thing by all means. By the way, what sex is this particular demon supposed to be?'

"'Female!'

"Again he laughed heartily.

"'Well, that's all right, anyway,' he said, or words to the same effect. 'I'm rather fond of the ladies. And what is this particular specimen supposed to do?'

"'You had better hear the complete legend first, Morrison. The ghost is said to be the disturbed spirit of a certain Lady Sybil Trevillion. This house was built by a famous Cornish family, the Trevillions, in the middle of the seventeenth century. Lady Sybil was the young wife of the second of the line. She married at the age of twenty, and is said to have been so beautiful that visitors came from all over England, and even from abroad, just to see her.'

"'H'm!' commented the man Morrison. 'I should have liked to set eyes on her myself.'

"'Amongst those who came,' I went on with the legend, 'was a noted *roué*, my Lord Charles Chichester. Hearing of the wonderful beauty of this young Cornish bride, he journeyed from London, and, under a subterfuge, claimed hospitality for the night. A heartless scoundrel, he drugged the wine of his host, and then, with the assistance of some of his boon companions, burst into the room of Lady Sybil. . . .'

"'The unfortunate girl died shortly afterwards. Her body was buried in the family vault, but her spirit—her *avenging* spirit—is said to haunt this house.'

"'Well,' commented the man listening, yawning, 'let us hope she leaves *me* alone, at all events. But what do you mean by "avenging" spirit, Pettiloe?'

"I hesitated purposely before I replied, and then said, as though reluctantly giving him the information: 'The report, however well founded it is I cannot say, of course, from personal knowledge, is that she seizes the throat of any sleeping man and kills him in revenge for the horror which was visited upon her by the infamous Lord Charles Chichester.'

"Morrison became quite convulsed with laughter at this.

"'And you, a solicitor, one of the fellows that the chap must have meant when he wrote "grave and reverend seigneurs," a dry-as-dust cove like you—surely you don't believe this awful tosh? Why, if you like, you can put me in this blessed haunted room to-night!'

"'You asked for the legend,' I replied, as though feeling offended.

"'I know—and, by George, you've given me a beauty, a perfectly wonderful yarn! But, man, you must have got hold of the wrong story; all the ghosts I have ever heard about have belonged to rotters, not their victims. It should be that chap Chichester who wanders about moaning, by rights.'

"Talk turned to other matters after that—

I had said enough about the ghost topic—and it was quite early when we rose from our chairs. The man Morrison was tired, he said, and I, being his host, raised no objection to his evident wish to get to bed.

"There was neither gas nor electricity in the house—my client, the new owner, was very old-fashioned in some ways—and so I lighted the guest to his room by candle.

"'I must say, Pettiloe, you're looking after me very well,' he exclaimed, glancing round the room which old Trethewy, the butler, and his wife, had done their best to make as comfortable as possible—'roaring fire in the grate, cigarettes—really, I'm very much indebted to you. Now,' going to the box of cigarettes which I had placed myself on the dressing-table, 'I have just one letter to write and then I'll get between the sheets. Good night, Pettiloe,' lighting the cigarette he had selected, 'you're a good sort.'

"I went to the door, and laughed—as pleasantly as I could contrive in the peculiar circumstances.

"'Oh, I don't know whether I ought to tell you, Morrison,' I said, 'but this is the room which the ghost of Lady Sybil Trevillion is supposed to haunt.'

"He turned swiftly and looked at me. Whether I showed anything in my face I don't know—I certainly tried, as you may imagine, not to disclose my real feelings—but my heart stood still for a moment. Should he desire to leave this room—and I had planned so carefully——

"But, to my immense relief, he merely laughed.

"'You can't scare me, Pettiloe—good night!'

"I slammed the door. The noise enabled me to lock it from outside without the man Morrison hearing the key click in the well-oiled lock. As I walked away I knew he would never leave the room alive. He would die—horribly. Just as I had intended he should die."

It was Ferriburn who broke the poignant silence which followed.

"You killed him! How?" he cried.

Pettiloe finished what was in his glass.

"You shall hear," he said. "The room in which I had placed this man Morrison was at the end of a long corridor. If he cried out in the night I did not hear him—not, that is to say, that I slept. As for the Trethewys, they were right away in the other wing; a battalion of marching soldiers would not have disturbed them.

"At six o'clock I rose, dressed, and went along to the man Morrison's room. After unlocking the door and hiding the key in a place where I knew it could never be found, I knocked on the door.

"I did that, as you might say, for appearance' sake. I did not expect to get any answer.

"*And I didn't.*

"Then I opened the door, gave one look—and started to yell. I had dwelt for so long upon the moment when I should give that yell that it might almost be said I had actually rehearsed it.

"'Trethewy! Trethewy!' I roared, with the full force of my lungs.

"The old Cornishman, only half-dressed, came shambling along the corridor.

"'For the love of God, what's happened, sir?' he asked.

"I pointed a shaking finger at the room in which——

"'I think Mr. Morrison is dead,' I said; 'I went along to rouse him a few minutes ago, he having remarked last night that he wanted to be up early to see the sunrise over the sea, and knocked on his door. Getting no answer, I pushed the door open, and then——'

"By this time I had the poor old man shaking from head to foot.

"'If you're afraid of what you'll see, Mr. Pettiloe, I'll come in with you,' he said.

"We went in together. But we had scarcely crossed the threshold before old Trethewy set up a wailing that for sheer melancholy I have never known equalled. His finger, quivering like a leaf in a gale, pointed all the time at the bed.

"I must say the sight was unnerving—even to me, who had expected something of the sort. The man Morrison had undressed and apparently had got into bed. I say 'apparently' because when we found him all the clothes were on the floor, just as though he had kicked them off in delirium.

"The man's fingers were locked round his throat so tightly that it took the local doctor, for whom I sent Trethewy at once, some time

to disentangle them. The expression on the face was terrible—it was as though the dead man had been visited by such a horror that it had demented him——"

"The ghost?" asked Ferriburn, and his voice snapped like a violin-string.

"The fingers that tore the life out of the man Morrison's throat belonged to himself," replied Pettiloe; "besides, there never was any ghost; I concocted that legend of dreadful mystery myself. Do I look like a man who would spend a night in a haunted house?"

"Then—how?" demanded the actor. Shipsbee, the surgeon, and Mainwaring, the "scientific policeman," remained silent, but both had drawn, tense faces.

Pettiloe turned to them now.

"You must forgive me putting the question to you," he said, "but have either of you ever heard of the drug called by the Bgandu natives of South-West Africa, 'The Red Killer'?"

"It has never been used in England," snapped Mainwaring.

Pettiloe supplied a contradiction.

"I can assure you it has, Mainwaring, because I used it myself in the case now under discussion."

Leaving the eminent toxicologist frowning, Pettiloe went on: "For the benefit of you others who do not possess Mainwaring's remarkable knowledge, I will explain that this highly dangerous drug has not even to this day found its way into any European pharmacopæia, or, indeed, into any literature of toxicology.

"The Bgandu natives, however, are fully

aware of its potentialities; chopped fine, and put into the victim's food, it promotes such strong cerebral activity that the man or woman is first driven mad and then dies.

"It was Gervais, my client, who showed me some of the poisonous fibre—the drug is really a native root. He had brought some back from Bgandu as a curiosity. He little dreamt, of course, that I should mix it with tobacco, and place the cigarettes thus prepared so that an inveterate smoker like the man Morrison would be bound to notice them.

"How many of the drugged cigarettes the man Morrison smoked I cannot tell you—needless to say, I removed all trace of them, even the ash, before the police arrived—but there is no doubt that his brain was soon driven into a very excited condition. Whilst in that abnormal state, he may have believed that he saw the ghost of Lady Sybil Trevillion, and imagined that it was her fingers which were at his throat; or it may be that—as Gervais told me he had known from the one case of white-man 'red-killer' poisoning he had ever known—the drug had produced strong self-homicidal symptons. In any event, the result was the same; the man died—and, strictly speaking, I killed him."

"You will ask the reason, of course, and naturally, having said so much, I will tell you.

"The man Morrison was a Lord Charles Chichester of a later day. His methods were different, but he did the same evil. The girl I was engaged to marry—— Good-night, all."

CHURNED TURF

A TALE OF MODERN FOOTBALL

PROLOGUE — CHURNED TURF

THE boy watched intently as his father opened a cupboard, and brought something out which he handled with loving care.

It was a football, but little used, and covered with dark lines. As he drew nearer at his father's invitation, he saw that these thin, dark lines were really men's signatures. Each panel of the ball was covered with them. He gazed at this wonderful sporting relic—he was sure it was that—with reverential awe.

His father smiled as he saw the interest leap into the lad's eyes; smiled, and placed a hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder.

"I called you in here to have a little talk with you, old chap," he said. "I've never showed you this," tapping the football, "before, have I?"

"No, father. What is it?"

"It's the ball used in the match between Queen's Park, the famous team of Scottish amateurs, and the Corinthians some years ago at Glasgow. I had the wonderful luck to score three goals for the Corinthians that day, and to commemorate the occasion all the players and principal officials signed the ball and presented it to me."

"Guv'nor! How absolutely ripping!"

"Ripping, as you say, old chap. I am prouder of that ball than of anything else I possess. I have kept it all these years just as it was given to me, and now I am showing it to you because to-morrow you are going away to school for the first-time—and I want you to do something."

There was a vivid, almost feminine beauty about this boy. His mother had handed on to him her superb gifts of face and form. The features were startlingly clear-cut. The man, looking at the lad, felt a sudden misgiving; the son he adored, and on whom all his hopes were built, was likely to find the world more full of pitfalls and snares than the ordinary boy. Then he glanced at the well-formed limbs, remembered the easy, athletic grace of the lad, and warmed to his subject.

"It will not be easy. It will mean a good deal of sacrifice, as well as tremendous determination. But the reward, if you suceed, will be wonderful—I can promise you that."

The boy looked grave, almost afraid.

"What is it, father?"

The man smiled, and touched the football which was resting on his knees.

"When you get older, old chap, and can think for yourself, you will realise that you were born a very fortunate boy. Unless you wish to do so, you will never be forced to work like the majority of men for a living. You will be one of the lucky ones who can devote their time and their talent to sport.

"I want you to carry on after me, old chap," he continued. "You must keep this to yourself—never say a word about it at school or anywhere else, or you will be called a conceited ass—but when you are old enough I want you to play centre-forward for the Corinthians, just as I did years ago. It was a matter of tremendous pride to me to win my place in the Corinthians' forward line, and when the time comes I want you to feel the same."

"Father, if I only could!" The vivid beauty of the boy's face was transfigured. He took the ball from his father, and gazed with shining eyes at the famous names that were inscribed on the leather—S. S. Harris, S. H. Day, Kenneth Hunt, R. E. Foster—football giants whose deeds will ring down the ages, men whose craft with a football has passed into a legend.

"I'll try," he said. The young voice broke.

"That is what I want you to do, old chap. It will be the happiest day of my life when you pull it off. To be a good footballer is as worthy an ambition as to be a good doctor or lawyer. A man can serve his class and his country just as well—perhaps better—on the playing fields as in the House of Commons. We are a sporting nation; always have been, and always will be—and you come from a family of athletes, Dick. I'm too old, my football days finished years ago, but I want you to take my place—to carry on."

And fondling the cherished ball of fame, the boy said again, "I'll try, father."

THE thing Dick Cavendish remembered all his life was the gleam of malice in his brother's pale face and the quiet, mirthless laugh he gave.

They had always been brothers only in name. One had everything that made life worth living; the other had a pain-racked, twisted back that made him a hopeless invalid. And the malady from which Raymond Cavendish had suffered from his birth had warped his mind as well as twisted his body. He hated his younger brother, and this hate was now undisguised.

"Did you hear what old Fossett said?" he asked in a high-pitched voice. "He said that no will had been found. That means that I come in for everything—everything, you understand? And that's but a rotten return for all I've gone through."

"Is it worse than usual this morning, old chap?"

The sudden death of his father had overwhelmed Dick. His spirit had been sapped. He was in no mood for a quarrel. He spoke kindly.

"Leave me alone!" snapped the invalid querulously. "I've never asked for your pity, and I don't want it now. It seems to me that you're the one to be pitied. You won't be able to fly your kite so high now, my dear Dick!"

The look of malice was more pronounced. The last three words had been sneered.

"Pitied?" Dick repeated the word mechani-

cally, and, because he had not yet been able to see into the other's venomous and twisted mind, wonderingly, "I think we are both to be pitied," he replied. "The poor old guv'nor . . . He was the finest chap I've ever met!" A sense of utter loneliness swept over him. "You and I must try to pull a bit better together now, old man," he said.

"Pull together. I like that!" Raymond Cavendish's thin, discordant laugh made his brother feel sick and ashamed; he had spoken with the best intention, and because in that moment of bleakness he felt that, warped and even malignant as the other had always been towards him, they must now cleave together. "You've always had everything; but it is my turn now.

"My turn, understand!" he continued, leaning up from the cushions on the divan and thrusting his pale, distorted face towards the other. "For years you've fooled money away with both hands. Your father encouraged you. You were his favourite, and could do no wrong. You, with your straight body and the ability to play games and to kick a football was all he cared about. 'You will never have to work, Dick, keep on with your football!' How many times have I heard him say it! Well, you will have to work now, unless you can manage to live on the three hundred pounds a year your mother left you." And the thin lips parted in a smile that held only hate and gratified malice.

"Does that mean that you're going to keep everything—not allow me anything?" Dick

was surprised to hear how level his voice sounded.

"You are brighter than usual this morning! That *is* my intention. As the elder son, and in the absence of any will, everything passes to me—and I intend to stick to it. That will be my satisfaction for being slighted all these years."

The younger man flushed angrily. He had not been forced to exercise much self-control up till now, and, moreover, he had in full measure the unconscious antipathy of a healthy person toward a puling invalid. This brother had always repelled him, always sneered whenever he had tried to do anything for him. Like the squid, he had always seemed able and anxious to besmirch everything within his range with poison.

"You have always hated me, I know," he said, "but you wouldn't be such a swine as that, surely? I couldn't help it if the guv'nor favoured me, and it isn't my fault that you're an invalid, and—well, cut off from things. You've never wanted me near you: otherwise, honestly, I would have tried to be more decent to you."

"I thought you'd squeal; but that won't make any difference. Listen: I'll tell you what you are; I can't get about, but I keep my ears and eyes open. You're a spoilt fool. You've never had to deny yourself anything—and you've never said 'no' to anything in your life in consequence. Perhaps you don't know it; but although 'your father'"—it was characteristic of Raymond Cavendish that he always said "your father," never plain "father," when

speaking to his brother—"was completely wrapped up in you, you bitterly disappointed him. Did you know that?"

Deep down in his heart Dick Cavendish may have known this; but so that the other should not have a further chance to gloat over him, he indignantly denied it. Raymond went on:

"You haven't even got the guts to tell the truth! You're a weak-kneed fool, and you ought to go on your knees to me for giving you the chance to try to make a man of yourself."

"You poisonous hound! You know that I can't touch you. What else do you want to say?"

"Only this." The invalid's pale cheeks were flushed. He looked excited, almost happy. This might have been a pleasant ceremony in which he was playing a beneficent part. "You can have two days to get your things together, and then you will have to clear out. Personally, I shall be very pleased if I never see you again."

Clenching his fists, the younger brother rushed forward. In his madness he raised his right hand—but the mockery on the face of his brother made it fall to his side. Nothing would please the other better, he knew, than to taunt him into striking him.

"You know that I have only three hundred pounds a year from mother, and that you will be getting something like eight thousand a year, according to Fossett?"

"That is what gives me my present sense of gratification. But you don't seem grateful for the chance I'm giving you to go out into the world and make a man of yourself!"

"Damn you for an unnatural swine!" Dick, turned away. The temptation to seize this wretch, who had a maggot in his brain, by the throat was threatening to overpower him. But he must not yield to it.

"Close the door, please," called his brother after him.

He banged it—and shut completely out of his life the man who had always irritated him to an insensate feeling of fury.

For years life can run smoothly; but sooner or later Fate cries a halt. So it was with Dick Cavendish. He had been pulled up with a jerk, and the shock had stunned him.

Directly after his talk with his brother, he drove away from the great house in Clarges Square. For some time—since he had come down from Oxford—he had had rooms of his own in Half-Moon Street. It was the proper thing to do. He sensed that this had been against his father's wishes; but Robert Cavendish had not been loquacious on the subject.

"Do what you think best, old chap," he merely remarked.

Dick recalled the incident with a tear at his heart as he mounted the stairs and flung himself into an armchair in his sitting-room. The servant who "valeted" him and another young "blood" crept in obsequiously to ask if he could perform any service; but with a brusque toss of his head, Cavendish dismissed the fellow. He wanted to be alone—to think.

Instinctively his mind went back to that

tragic afternoon at Brighton. He was sitting in the lounge of the *Royal Albert*, that exclusive rendezvous of sport and fashion, when the evening papers were brought in. Casually he had picked one up, and then started from his chair with a cry.

FAMOUS CORINTHIAN DEAD
MR. ROBERT CAVENDISH'S SUDDEN END
IN WEST END STREET.

All sense went from him; he staggered back to his seat and then crumpled up. Whilst at Oxford he had once entered for a boxing contest, although his sporting skill rested in his feet rather than in his hands. He had been out-weighted and out-fought. The end came shortly; his opponent, lashing out with a murderous right, had caught him clean over the heart. He had the same feeling of stupid helplessness now. His father—*dead*! It was inconceivable. It was a lie! He would ring up the beastly rag . . .

He did so, only to receive confirmation that the report was true. His father had been sauntering down Old Bond Street, he was told, when he was observed to stop suddenly, put his hand to his chest, and stumble to the pavement. Sir Dyce Dykes, the famous Harley Street specialist, who was passing in his car, at once pronounced that the former celebrated Corinthian footballer had died from sudden heart failure.

That same night Dick faced the great specialist.

"But my father was an athlete, sir. How could anything have been wrong with his heart?"

"It had been wrong, nevertheless, for several years," replied the physician. "In fact, he had been under my constant notice. But he said nothing about it, to save you from worrying. Many famous athletes die suddenly in after life, you know. But it has been a terrible blow—your father was one of my dearest friends!"

Then back to the gloom-haunted house in Clarges Square, packed with so many poignant memories. . . . The agonising wait for the funeral—that nerve-racking experience. . . . Then the coming of Fossett, the family solicitor, with his startling news that Robert Cavendish had left no will. . . . And after that the interview with his brother.

That memory was perhaps the worst of all. He knew his faults—but he didn't want that warped Thing to remind him of them. His brother could keep the damned money; but he would have no more of his taunts. . . . Oh, God! if he could only see his father once more; if he could just catch hold of his hand. . . . But he only felt the emptiness mocking his vain regrets.

He had been a rotter. He had disappointed his father. It was the truth behind his brother's words that had forced the barb so deep. He was a weak-kneed ass. He hadn't the will to stick to anything long enough to make a success of it. Even football . . . his father's dearest wish . . . what he had so solemnly promised. . . .

He had established a reputation at school, and when he went up to Oxford it was thought

that he would walk into the University team. The curse of it was that things came so easily to him. For his father's sake everyone had made a fuss of him. Then he really was a brilliant player; but——

He remembered Warriner's words. Ben Warriner was the grim old International, who, late in life, had been appointed to the newly-constructed Corinthians F.C. After languishing for two seasons after the War, the famous Club had revived. The old enthusiasm was shown; a good ground was obtained; it was announced that the team would enter for the English Cup Competition—the greatest sporting event in the whole world of games—and a coach and trainer was appointed.

There was no nonsense about Ben Warriner. Football was the most serious thing in life to him. It was food, drink, wife and child; it supplied him with both religion and philosophy. He lived football in the day, dreamt about it in the night. There are such men; but they belong to a bygone age: if there were more of them to-day the present standard of play would not be so deplorable.

"You've got the skill, but not the grit, lad. Don't you understand that to play this game well, you must take it seriously? You must train properly and do what you're told. You treat everything as a joke: you won't play centre-forward for the Corinthians that way, you must remember."

And Dick had not. He would not be bored with the fag of training. After all, football was

only a game! So the brilliant promises which he had evoked were never realised; the fine sportsmen at the back of the Corinthians lost faith in him, and behind his back compared him very unfavourably with his father.

He could see it now; all the bitterness of it! Had that disappointment which his father must have felt so keenly—disappointment in him as a son and a man, not merely as a footballer—hastened the end? Raymond had repelled his father, just as he repelled his brother. The two rarely exchanged a confidence. Robert Cavendish had been completely bound up in his younger son. Had he had time to make a will——

This brought him back to his brother. What could a cripple do with all that money? Eight thousand a year—and all Raymond could do would be to lie among his cushions all day and gloat over the fact that he had sent out into the world without a penny the man with whom, by every just law, he should have shared this money.

What was it the fellow had said? Ought to be pleased to be given the chance to be forced to be a man? Yes, and by God, he *would* be a man!

The character of Dick Cavendish at this stage can be epitomised when it is said that this heroic mood did not last long. The tide turned, and he fell to bitter musing on his brother's selfishness. He imagined the future on the beggarly three hundred a year which his dead mother had left him in her will (he had been her favourite, as well, and this had not been overlooked nor forgotten by his invalid brother), and he recoiled from the picture. £6 a week! He would have to give up those

rooms, and go to a City tailor. He might as well "drop out" altogether and go abroad. Live in some filthy pension on the Riviera. . . .

He got up and pushed the electric-bell furiously. He had thought enough; he must get out and do something.

"Dress clothes!" he snapped when the servant appeared. "Quickly!"

CHAPTER II ELSIE WINTER SPEAKS HER MIND

TUBBED, freshly shaved, immaculate in evening kit—Dick Cavendish had the gift of looking a gentleman, and not a superior waiter in his dress clothes—he lit a cigarette, and gave dinner serious consideration. Hang it! Whatever happened in the future, he was going to do himself well to-night. He had precious little loose change; but Rimini had had enough out of him in the past; he would sign for it.

Suddenly his eye caught an engraved card on the mantelpiece. He would have to show up at the Goldings' dance some time or other. Perhaps Elsie Winter would be there; at the prospect he stared ahead, letting the cigarette smoulder in his hand.

Rimini, that noted *restauranteur*, was affability itself. He waved his palms and shrugged his shoulders in unspeakable distress that "Mistaire Cavendeesh should be without the moneys."

Could he sign for the grub and the wine to-night? Most certainly he could sign. Was not Mistaire Cavendeesh a gentleman, one of his most honoured guests? So—and much more.

Life had so far run away with him; but to-night Cavendish meant to get a stranglehold on existence. Good food and good wine (especially good wine) helped a fellow no end. He ordered a dinner that spoke to his sybaritic tastes—"and wine, Rimini—plenty of wine!"

One cannot drink wine alone—it is not done; it is a sacrilege to the impish god in the grape. So Cavendish gave the waiter a telephone number, and soon one of the young dancing ladies from the Whirlpool Theatre—she lived near, and happened to be "resting" at the time—came to join him.

"Cheerio, Peggy!" cried the lonely diner "I've got the pip so I 'phoned for you!"

"Well," commented Miss Peggy Levaine, "it's a good job your fairy-godmother wasn't out. Pour me a glass of fizz, dear, while I look at the Book of Words."

Having taken up the part of pip-dispeller, Peggy threw herself into the character with characteristic vivacity—if not to say abandon. Soon even the hardened frequenters of Rimini's were looking curiously at the table in the corner.

A party which had just entered, attracted by the noise, looked also—and at least one member lost her appetite. The pretty girl with the moleskin wrap and full creamy-white fur at the throat stared, bit her lip, and then went on, her head held high. At the particular moment that

Elsie Winter looked at the corner table, Peggy Levaine was holding a glass of champagne in one hand and blowing kisses to her host with the other. It was not a sight that appealed to the girl, who, up to that moment, had fancied herself in love with that handsome, fascinating boy, Dick Cavendish.

"But why, dear girl, why?"

Into the eyes that usually were the softest blue—the serene blue of a June morning—leapt a lightning flame.

"I would really prefer not to discuss it. Isn't that sufficient?"

"Hang it, Elsie—no! You can't turn me down like this. You know I'm awfully fond of you!"

Dick Cavendish, revived by the spirited conversation of Peggy Levaine, and Rimini's best champagne, had gone on to the Goldings' dance in Park Lane, after dropping his dining companion at the Empire. He had not seen Elsie Winter enter the restaurant, and, intoxicated by her dream-like beauty, had forgotten everything else in the heat of the moment—and had asked her to become engaged to him.

It was then that the flash had come into the eyes.

"I am sure you do not wish to insult me, Mr. Cavendish," she said, and her voice was ice-cold with scorn.

"Insult you?" He repeated the words incredulously, and became sobered. "I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world."

"Then please change the subject," she replied. If the summer lightning had died out of her eyes, the beautiful face was rigid and uncompromising. She was regal in her scorn—this same girl who, the last time he had met her, had promised with her eyes unutterable joys.

His pride had been hurt, and it made him obstinate.

"Why are you turning me down, Elsie?" he asked peremptorily.

"I saw you dining at Rimini's to-night." The small head swung round on her glorious white column of a throat. "But now that I've had time to think, I'm glad instead of being sorry. There was a time when I fancied myself getting to like you," she added with courageous directness. "You cured me of that idea to-night. Oh, it wasn't because that girl was with you exactly—I know that men do these things—but it was so characteristic of you.

"You have asked me to become engaged to you," she went on, "and I have refused. You have asked me for an explanation why I have refused. That is only fair—and so I will tell you. And yet I do not want to hurt your feelings."

"Don't be afraid of that! Most people are doing it these days. What particular crime do you accuse me of?"

"Slackness!" The word cut him like a whip. "I never listen to stories, but everyone agrees that you might do so much—and you do so little! You just fool with life! You don't seem to have any ambition, or any aim. I couldn't marry a man like that, Dick."

She said his name softly, almost kindly. Her gloved hand was upon the dark sleeve of his coat. But the great gulf which had come between them that night could not be bridged. Dick Cavendish knew that—he knew, too, that the girl had placed herself definitely and irretrievably beyond him.

"I've never had any need to do anything." In his heart he knew it for a poor excuse, but his wounded pride made him say something.

"That's just the point. There was no need—and so you don't care. From what I can hear, you have had every chance, but you have done nothing. Just fooled around. Why, you aren't even playing football now, are you?"

"I didn't know you were interested in football," he said in surprise. "Would you like me to take it up again?"

"There was a time when I was deeply interested in everything you did. But that time has passed."

"And yet the last time I saw you—?" he accused her.

"I know." A look of regret passed over her face. "I got carried away that night. Why are you so—unsatisfactory?" she demanded in equal anger.

"To-night, if I had not seen you in Rimini's, I might have allowed you to make love to me; I might even have promised to become engaged to you. But I am thankful that I have escaped."

"Escaped—from what?" This had been the cruellest lash of all; the girl's almost brutal

frankness made him rage. His collar seemed to be choking him.

"Escaped from much unhappiness, Dick. If you are honest with yourself—as honest as I am with you—you will see the truth of what I am telling you. You *are* unsatisfactory; you do not keep appointments, you are too lazy even to go in for sport, you loaf through life generally. I am different from the ordinary girl you meet, I suppose. I haven't seen much of so-called Society, and I should be glad to get out of it."

"And yet you're the most beautiful girl in the room! Everyone is talking about you!" The words had come spontaneously to his lips, and, characteristically, he had said them. He had never schooled himself to any discipline.

Elsie Winter smiled. It was not in answer to the words of admiration, but in reflection of her own thoughts. Strictly speaking, she did not belong to the glittering throng that crowded Lady Golding's impressive Park Lane mansion that night. She was tolerated because she represented a good match, and because her father was too big a man to be quarrelled with, but she did not *belong*. It was mainly for her father's sake that she played this butterfly rôle. William Winter, knighted for remarkable services to the country during the War, had decided that Society should bend its proud knee to the girl he idolised. Money didn't enter into the matter; he had enough and to spare for this project. He might be a crude person himself, but he had brought his only girl up to

be a lady, and no doors should be barred to her.

No doors were barred. The astonishing beauty of Elsie, coupled with the grim power her father wielded both inside and outside of Cabinet meetings—from an industrial, he had become, on arriving in London, a political power—had brought the proudest society hostesses to their knees—even as William Winter, chuckling over one of his long, black cigars, had prophesied and planned.

Yet the emptiness of her new life had palled on Elsie. With an almost limitless amount of money upon which she could draw, she had decorated and garnished her beauty with the world's best products—to please her father. She had been courted and fêted. But had she listened to her own dictates, she would have devoted her days to some special social service—and even as it was she was one of the most enthusiastic workers for charity that Mayfair knew.

Then she had met Dick Cavendish. Like many other girls before her, she had been fascinated by his handsome looks, his gay, reckless, yet perfect, manners. Like other girls, Elsie Winter had dreamed her dreams—for all that she was such a practical soul—and had seen pictures in the fire. Dick Cavendish was not only the fabric of her dream, but the embodiment.

It was the caution which had come to her from her father that had made her hesitate when Cavendish almost from the start of their acquaintance began to make love to her. It would

have been easy enough for her to respond, but she waited. She wanted to weigh up this fascinating young man ; to see if he were reliable, if he could stand the necessary tests.

It did not take her long to discover that this young god had feet of clay. He was irresponsible, had little or no balance ; he went jesting through life as though nothing had ever mattered or could matter. A brilliant young athlete, she learned he had given up football because it was too much fag to train !

And now . . .

The sight at that corner table in Rimini's had pulled her up short. It made her realise that she had never had, and never could have, any real part in that disillusioned, reckless world in which, for her father's sake, she moved so radiant, if reluctant, a figure. Yes, as she had told Cavendish, she was glad she had been able to escape. Both lives would have been ruined, she was convinced, had she yielded to Cavendish's earnest pleading. The night she had listened, and had turned to him with glistening eyes afterwards, she had been carried away. Now her native common sense had returned.

" Please take me back," she said.

White and quivering with hurt vanity, Cavendish took his leave of her a few minutes later. He cursed himself and the world as he flung himself from the house.

CHAPTER III MICHAEL MOSTYN PROPOSES A TRIP

THE astonishing thing about Michael Mostyn —as Harry Garrity once said—was that "The fellow didn't require any make-up." The most dangerous man in the whole of the West End, perhaps, he looked the part.

His face was too white, his hair too black. He had the drama villain's "small, neat moustache," as well as the long, slender, jewelled fingers and the much too suave manner. He smiled often with his mouth, but never with his eyes. He was a crook by instinct and profession.

With him at the Cabaret Night Club this evening was his satellite, Hugh Esdaile. The latter had been known as a good fellow—"hits the booze too hard, though, and never lets a pretty girl pass without ogling her"—(Harry Garrity's opinion again)—until he had met Mostyn; then came the moral landslide. At the present moment he earned his keep by being Jackal to his mentor.

"Cavendish! Ship ahoy!" Mostyn called out in buoyant *camaraderie*.

The brooding, handsome youngster who had sauntered in through the swing-doors stopped. He hesitated for a moment, then seated himself at Mostyn's table. He did not know the man intimately; had met him at this place and that; in bars, and crowds; had heard stories, of course—but the fellow had been cheery, and—oh, what did anything matter now?

"Haven't seen you for a long time, Cavendish," said Mostyn. "We must celebrate the merry meeting. Jules, you lazy hound, where are you?"

Mostyn ordered the vintage champagne; he was attending to business, and Cavendish was a likely client.

"Rough luck, old chap," he said later, "your father going off so quickly as he did." The tone of carefully prepared sympathy might have been taken at its right valuation by an older and more experienced man, but to the wine-fuddled youth it sounded genuine enough.

"Still," and Mostyn shrugged his thin shoulders, "you were the favourite son, weren't you?"

A passionate stream of words rose to Dick's lips. But he did not say them. He had his pride left, he told himself; he was not going to let the world know that he was practically a pauper.

"Yes," he said, "the guv'nor was always very decent to me."

Michael Mostyn caught a glance from Esdaile, and made an answering signal. This prospect looked even more promising than before.

Mostyn hitched his chair forward.

"Esdaile and I are going on a trip to Monte," he said. "Do you care to come? We'd both be delighted to have you, wouldn't we, Esdaile?"

"Rather!" supported Esdaile.

"Monte Carlo?" asked Cavendish quickly.

"Yes. It's topping, this time of the year —away from all the smoke and dust, wonderful

seas, wonderful skies, beautiful air—and the Tables. What do you say ? "

The boy who had never said " No ! " in his life hadn't the courage to tell this man, who was tempting him with a wonderfully alluring prospect that he couldn't afford to go—that he hadn't the money.

Monte Carlo ! The Tables ! He might be lucky and come back with bags of money. . . . Besides, he was sick of London ; sick of everything in England. . . .

" I'm on ! " he said. " When do you start ? "

Michael Mostyn turned to Esdaile with a satisfied smile.

" Friend Esdaile here is making all the arrangements," he said. " He'll let you know."

The soft, warm darkness of the night was like a stealthy caress. It inflamed the senses ; set the blood on fire. Ever since he had arrived at Monte Carlo, Cavendish had lived in an atmosphere of exotic excitement. Careless laughter had mingled with the sighing of violins ; the scent of flowers, rising like incense to the nostrils, had been less potent than the fragrance which was borne to him from women's hair.

Here was life—warm, passionate, vivid, real ! Its pageantry, that appealed so strongly to the senses, had ensnared him in its irresistible embrace.

But, alluring as it was even to take a walk through the exotic gardens, Cavendish was obsessed by one thought. He was going to try his luck at the roulette tables. He might

make a tremendous *coup*. It was done sometimes, because you could read about it in the newspapers.

To-night, under the tutelage of Michael Mostyn, who had been to Monte Carlo many times before, he was going to the Casino.

At the hotel he had fallen in with a cynical globe-trotter, an American. Perforce he had had to listen to him at lunch that day.

"So, young man, you've come to the Devil's Paradise; well, mind you leave it in the same state as you arrived. It is one of the wonder-spots of the whole earth, so far as natural beauty is concerned, and yet there are more suicides here than in any other place in Europe! But, then, if people *will* risk their reputation, their honour, their fortune on a piece of mechanism, it stands to reason that they must pay heavy forfeit in one shape or another.

"This place is built up on gambling. I can remember the time when they found it very hard to make it pay—and it would have been better for humanity at large if things had remained that way. The betting at the hole-in-the-corner Casino they used to have in old Monaco didn't amount to a row of beans; it was when the Corniche railway was put through, placing Monaco on the road between Paris and Italy, that the Devil established his playground here. Soon all the world was flocking to Monaco to gamble. Going to the Casino, I suppose?"

Dick admitted he was—that night.

"I don't know you from Adam," commented

the stranger in reply, "but—with your eyes—if you take the tip of an old man, who's seen a great deal of the world, you'll be careful. Excuse me, but you don't look to me to have the face of a gambler who can—stop. And stopping is the essential thing, don't forget."

Cavendish had got up angrily, and had walked away. Silly old ass! Who wanted to hear his moth-eaten philosophies? He hadn't come to Monte Carlo to be lectured.

At last he was there!

He had been too absorbed to pay much heed to the architecture of the place. On going in, Mostyn had asked whether he would prefer to play baccarat or roulette, and he had replied, "Roulette, certainly."

They took their places round the crowded table, pushed from behind, and of necessity pushing those in front who had already been fortunate enough to secure seats at the magic green table.

"*Faites vos jeux, messieurs!*"

The cry of the croupier, monotonous and yet compelling, rose high above the suppressed noises, which spoke to a multitude gripped by a veritable agony of excitement.

"Wait until we can get a seat," said Mostyn, and the boy, although his hands were itching to begin, nodded agreement.

In the meanwhile, he had a chance to look at those about him. It was a morbid, if fascinating, study. He saw men and women nervously clutching hands, pulling at their lips, frowning,

sighing, softly cursing, displaying their hopes and fears with a transparency that had a certain indecency, while the tiny ivory ball rattled in the grooves along the wooden rim, and the roulette wheel itself spun in the opposite direction.

The sharp click as the ball ended its journey by falling into a number ended the suspense. With a wild surge, the crowd craned forward. Eyes had turned glassy; there were clenchings of fists. Everything was still for a moment.

Then the hubbub burst. But mingling with the fevered murmuring came that implacable swishing sound which had now grown familiar to Dick as the croupier's rake drew in the losers' money.

If Cavendish had not been so intent on playing himself, he might have drawn a warning from the behaviour of those about him. He could have read the lesson of the gambler's state from the hard, ruthless faces of men and women staking their money; at another time he might have shuddered at the total lack of common courtesy which prevailed. Crazed by the excitement of the play, men treated women with the scantiest courtesy, elbowing them aside, and growling at them if they would not move.

And it was not merely the men who had lost their manners. Women, too, had laid aside those distinguishing traits of grace and gentleness which are supposed to be habitually theirs. The mouths of the women near Dick were hard, and their eyes were strained. They had thrown off the veneer of culture, the trappings

of civilisation, and revealed themselves as creatures swayed and possessed by the most primitive of all passions—the desire to gain.

All this Cavendish might have noticed, but his eyes were fixed on the square of green cloth before him, trying to figure out which was the most likely set of combination. Up till now he had had but a slight acquaintance with the Wheel of Chance; his gambling had been done mainly on the racecourse and at the card-table—and neither had proved profitable investments.

He might have held back, but since Elsie Winter had given him the *coup de grâce* he had become more reckless than before; and so, when the chance came, he slipped quickly into the seat left vacant by the man who rose with vacant, staring eyes and a hand pressed close to his forehead.

A mad thrill of excitement ran through him. Pulling out his roll of notes, he peeled off about a third of the money he had managed with great difficulty to squeeze out of Fossett, the solicitor, before he left London, and pushed it all on Red. Red was the colour of Life, the colour of Hope, the colour of all that was warm and passionate. Surely it would not let him down?

He would play Red all night. During the time he had been standing watching he had come to this decision. There would be no cautious saving combinations in his case; it would be a straight gamble—something really worth while.

* * * * *

With a reckless laugh, he pushed all the money he had left on—Black. To the devil with the Red! Three times it had let him down. Now Black, even if the colour did stand for Despair and Death, should have its chance.

He closed his eyes because they were throbbing so with the glare of the brilliant lights. Moreover, he dared not look; he hadn't the courage or the will. The pile of notes he had staked on the Black was all the money he had in the world. Fossett had parted with it only after a tremendous struggle.

"I cannot do it; if I realised the securities from which you derive your three hundred pounds a year allowance I should be exceeding my duty and should be disregarding the very definite instruction of your mother at the time of her death. If you wish, however, for a personal loan, I will try to oblige you. How much do you want?"

"A couple of thousand!" Cavendish had instantly snapped. Hang it, a fellow couldn't possibly go to Monte with less than a couple of thousand.

But the fussy Fossett had frowned in his heavy Mid-Victorian way.

"Certainly not!" he had replied. "A thousand pounds is the utmost I can advance you."

So a thousand pounds it had been—and what was left of it was resting on Black. If Red happened to turn up now he would be ruined.

The whir of the ivory ball seemed to him like the audible working of Fate itself as it sped on its way. The chattering had hushed. There was a

silence—a pregnant silence. The watching crowd were interested—not sorry, but interested—in seeing another youth broken on the Roulette Wheel. . . . But what a fool! To back a colour three times following, and then change his bet!

The sudden rattle as the ball dropped into place. . . .

"RED!" called several voices.

Dazed and stupefied, Dick remained in his seat. When a man—Mostyn it was—bent over him and spoke, he did not hear him.

One of the strolling officials stopped, looked hard at the youth, and then glanced significantly at Mostyn. The latter nodded.

"Come along, old man, your luck's out to-night," he said. Putting a hand under both arms, he dragged him to his feet.

At first he had to hold him because Cavendish's legs dangled like a drunken man's; but he eventually got his charge out into the cooling air of the grounds.

Behind them as they went crooned the monotonous croupier's call—

"*Faites vos jeux. . . .*"

The Wheel was claiming a fresh victim.

CHAPTER IV A WOMAN'S WHITE ARMS

"THE Comtesse de Lisle—Mr. Richard Cavendish."

Cavendish bowed—a trifle unsteadily, for he

was still feeling dazed—and wondered what it was made the woman's eyes appear so strange. They seemed to give off yellow and green fire. She was a tall, superbly-figured woman with a dull dead-white skin, against which the vivid scarlet of her lips showed up like blood. She bloomed like an exotic human flower in her velvet evening dress, cut low, and fitting to her form as closely as a glove.

To Cavendish she seemed strange and mysterious, but his head was still throbbing, and he could not analyse his feeling more deeply than that.

After leaving the Casino, he had rested for a time in the cool air of the grounds, and then Mostyn had spoken—it seemed in a kindly way.

"What you want, old fellow, is some peace and quietness after your hectic time in there," he had said. "Nine hundred pounds in a few minutes is pretty steep, and I don't wonder you feel all ends up. But you *would* do it, you know. I tell you what: I heard this afternoon that an old friend of mine, the Comtesse de Lisle—the de Lisles are one of the oldest families in France—is here. She left her card for me at the hotel. We'll go up to her villa and spend the rest of the evening."

The motor-car was forthcoming, and Dick was forced into it before he had time to voice any objections. Besides, what objections could he have had?

Perhaps if he had known that this woman possessed such strange eyes, and had such an air

of exotic mystery about her generally, he might have hesitated.

It was a wonderfully furnished room. But two impressions stood out above all others in it; they were the deep crimson of the window-curtains, and the dazzling whiteness of the Comtesse de Lisle's beautiful arms. The latter fascinated him; and since the Comtesse talked much, and always gesticulated as she talked, his eyes could not escape them. They were the most beautiful arms he had ever seen.

"You have been to the Casino, you say?" Their hostess spoke with a slight French accent that gave a piquancy to her words.

"Yes," answered Mostyn, "but Esdaile and I didn't play to-night. We left that to Cavendish—and he had an awful time. He lost nine hundred pounds in a very few minutes!"

"Nine hundred pounds!" ejaculated the Comtesse. "How many millions of francs would that represent at the present time?" She clasped her hands prettily once more.

"Oh, hardly millions, Comtesse! What is the exchange now? Something like one hundred and twenty francs to the English pound, I believe. Well, say one hundred and eight thousand francs."

"La! La! But it is a fortune! You are very rich, M'sieur, to gamble like this?" She had turned to Cavendish.

"Mr. Cavendish's father has just died; he was a rich man," explained Mostyn.

"You are to be congratulated, M'sieur," said the Comtesse de Lisle. "To be rich in these days is to be very fortunate."

Cavendish did not reply. Let these fools go on in their illusion, if they liked! He had never told Mostyn that his father hadn't left a will, and consequently that it was his elder brother and not he who had got the money. At first it was his pride which had kept him silent, but now he had another feeling. To carry on at all he might have to borrow from his companions, although, somehow, he did not like the idea of asking Mostyn. During the last few days there had been many little things he had noticed, although they had treated him very decently; he would say that. But neither Mostyn nor Esdaile were men of his own kind; he didn't feel exactly comfortable with them. The thought had come to him that perhaps some of the stories which were current about the two might be true.

"To have fortune—and then misfortune!" continued the Comtesse de Lisle, "that is but part of this sad life. But, pardon, I have not——" She pushed an electric-bell, and a servant appeared.

"Some wine!" she ordered.

When the champagne was brought in, the Comtesse de Lisle poured it into the glasses herself. Over one glass she lingered longer than over the others.

It was this glass she brought over to Dick Cavendish.

"To drown your cares my friend," she said, and raised her own glass.

As Cavendish lifted the glass to his lips, his last memory was of the woman's dazzling white arms. They seemed to have an hypnotic effect upon him.

Then he drank—and slipped into oblivion.

He woke in his own room at the *Hotel Splendide*. The sun was streaming in through the window with the promise of another perfect day.

How abominably his head ached! How rotten he felt! He tried to think, but it was such an effort that he gave it up, and fell back on the pillows again.

He was in a half-doze when the door opened, and a man appeared.

"M'sieur, ten thousand pardons, but I must search your room!"

With an effort Cavendish raised himself to a sitting position in bed. He stared at the stranger stupidly.

"Search my room?" he repeated. "What in the devil for?"

"Your room and your luggage," replied the other. "La Comtesse de Lisle has missed a most valuable necklace, M'sieur, and my information is that you visited her villa last night. You will excuse——" And he made for the wardrobe.

Cavendish continued to stare at the man. The fellow was a police-officer, he supposed, although he wore *mufti*—a detective, no doubt. What on earth did this mean?

But the mists were clearing now; he was beginning to remember things. He had gone to see the woman with the peculiar eyes and the wonderful white arms with Mostyn and Esdaile. He had been given some champagne to drink. What had happened after that? He couldn't remember. Had the beastly stuff been drugged?

"Ah!" The exclamation of triumph came from the supposed detective, who was standing before the dressing-table, a pearl necklace in his hand.

"You see?" he cried. "Madame the Comtesse's necklace—in that drawer, M'sieur!" The words were an accusation.

Cavendish jumped out of bed.

"Who are you, and what do you mean by coming into my room like this?"

"I am a police-officer, and I would advise you to let go of my arm. Already you will be charged with the theft of this necklace; it would not be well for you to assault me as well." The fellow looked the personification of outraged dignity, preening himself, and puffing out his chest like a turkey-cock.

"You're talking nonsense! I don't know anything about the rotten necklace. I've never seen it before in my life. I don't care a hang who you are; if you say again that I stole the thing I'll punch your thick head!"

"You threaten me, an officer of the law?" cried the man, waving his hands dramatically.

Then the door opened again, and Mostyn and Esdaile, both labouring under a great excitement, rushed up to Cavendish.

"What in Heaven's name have you done?" exclaimed Mostyn. "There's the most frightful scandal. . . . Who are *you*?" he demanded of the detective angrily.

"I am a police-officer, M'sieur," answered the man. "I have a warrant to search M'sieur Cavendish's room and luggage. I have done so,

and I find this!" And he held up the pearl necklace.

"Found it in this room? Good Heavens! Where?"

"In this drawer, M'sieur."

Mostyn bit his lip, and looked across at Cavendish.

"I wish to speak to my friend alone," he said, turning to the detective. "Do you mind leaving the room for a moment?"

"I shall be outside—just outside the door, M'sieur!" answered the other significantly.

When he had gone, Michael Mostyn swung round on Cavendish.

"Good Heavens, man; do you realise what you did in that mad, drunken frolic of yours last night? Of course, you couldn't have known what you were doing—but you stole the Comtesse's necklace!"

Cavendish, stretching out a hand, caught Mostyn by his coat-collar.

"If you say that I stole that necklace, Mostyn, I'll smash your face in," he said. "I tell you, as I have already told that wooden-headed fool outside, that I know nothing whatever about it. All I remember is that I had a glass of wine——"

"And after that, old chap, you gave us all we could do to manage you," put in Esdaile, who had been watching Mostyn's face. "I suppose it was the excitement of losing all that money at the Casino earlier in the evening, but, honestly, you were stark, raving drunk. No wonder you don't remember anything that happened afterwards."

"It made both of us feel pretty rotten,"

supplemented Mostyn, motioning to Esdaile and himself. "But the Comtesse was awfully decent about it, and accepted our apologies like the really good sort she is. She said she had know other cases where a man after spending a night at the Casino had taken just one glass of wine, as you did, and gone clean off his head for a time. Of course, she didn't think her hospitality would have that effect on you. And then you end up by sneaking her necklace! Good Lord, man, you're in a very devil of a hole! Naturally, Esdaile and I will stand by you, but this place is always full of high-class crooks, and the police are very severe in consequence. It might mean twelve months' imprisonment."

"You fool, I tell you I didn't do it! Do you want me to beat that into your head with my fist? I know nothing about it! It's a fine story you've just told me, Mostyn, but it's my belief that that wine I drank was drugged."

"Drugged!" Mostyn laughed scornfully. "Don't be an ass, my dear chap! Apart from the insult which you pay me, you are casting aspersion on one of the greatest ladies in France. It's a nonsensical suggestion, and let me tell you this: if you adopt that attitude I won't raise a finger to help you. It's not a very chivalrous suggestion, to say the least of it."

"It's as chivalrous as to suggest that I stole the lady's necklace. But, as a matter of fact, I feel so rotten this morning that I don't quite know what I'm saying."

Mostyn softened at once.

"That's all right, old chap," he said. "I

never hold anything up against a man when he's not the ticket. Now, naturally, neither Esdaile nor I believe that you stole the necklace—that you meant to steal it, I mean. But no doubt in your state last night it caught your eye, and . . . do you see what I mean, Cavendish ?"

"You mean that I did a thing whilst I was drunk—I must take your word for it that I *was* drunk, because, as I have already told you, I remember nothing about it—that I wouldn't have thought of doing if I had been sober ?"

"That's it exactly. Of course, the devil of it is that while we—Esdaile and I—understand the position, that explanation wouldn't weigh with the police here. The Comtesse woke up this morning and found her necklace—which she was wearing, as you may remember, the earlier part of the time we were with her, but which she took off later and placed in a jewel-case that was resting on a small table—gone. She at once communicated with the police. The latter made inquiries and came on to this hotel. No doubt if the fellow outside hadn't found the necklace in your room—the first one he came to—he would have come farther along the corridor and searched Esdaile's and mine. The thing to do is to see the Comtesse and try to get her to understand how the—shall we call it the 'mistake' ?—happened. Naturally, as the necklace, I take it, is very valuable, she was intensely annoyed when she woke up this morning and found it missing, but I'm a very

old friend of hers, and I hope I can persuade her to withdraw the charge against you."

While Mostyn was glibly talking, Dick had come to realise his position. Fate had dealt him another smashing blow. He had his suspicions that something was wrong—that he was the victim of a carefully-prepared plot—but that couldn't help him in his present dreadful dilemma. He could see his brother's pale face lighting up with malice as he read the report in the English newspapers. . . .

"It's very decent of you, Mostyn," he replied. "Tell the Comtesse that I absolutely swear on my honour that I know nothing about the sordid business. If I did take the necklace—and I can't believe that I did, even if I were not responsible at the time—it was the purest accident. What about this fellow outside? Hang it, he makes me feel like a convict already!"

"I'll manage him," smiled the reassuring Mostyn. "Some of these fellows are always open to a bribe, and, in any case, I'll take him along to the villa to see the Comtesse. You get some food inside you, old man, and wait in until we come back. I hope to fix it up all right."

With a smile Mostyn then left the room, followed by Esdaile. Outside, Dick Cavendish heard a brief conversation going on, presumably between Mostyn and the detective, and then footsteps hurried along the corridor.

It was some time before he could rouse himself sufficiently to shave and make his toilet. He

felt himself surrounded by a black wall which was implacably closing in on him. If the Comtesse should not relent! Then, he would be charged and sent to prison—and for a crime which he knew he had not committed!

CHAPTER V BLACKMAIL

An hour later, when he had finished a most indifferent breakfast, Mostyn returned. The man was agitated.

"Come to your room quickly!" he said. "I've done my best, but——"

In the bedroom Esdaile and the detective were waiting.

"You will wait outside again, please," said Mostyn to the latter, and the man bowed before obeying.

"This is the position, Cavendish," said Mostyn excitedly after closing the door. "I managed to square that detective fellow; and the Comtesse, when she heard what I had to say, was overwhelmed with grief. She was downright sorry; if she had known she would not have communicated with the police——"

"Then she will not prosecute?" asked Cavendish, anxious to get to the point.

Instead of replying immediately, Mostyn shook his head.

"No, the Comtesse will not prosecute," he

said slowly. "It is not the Comtesse we have to fear—but her husband!"

"Her husband?" repeated Dick, bewildered.

"He's an awful waster," said the other. "They live apart, but are not divorced. The Comtesse will not sue for her freedom although she is married to perhaps the worst blighter in the world. It is he we have to fear."

"Why, what has he to do with the matter?"

"He intends to prosecute. It appears that it was he who gave the necklace to his wife years ago when they were married. He—— What in the deuce is that?" A knock had sounded on the door.

"Open this door!" called a voice.

"It is he!" muttered Mostyn. "We had better see him, and find out what he wants."

Esdaile opened the door, and a man of forty stepped into the room. He was extravagantly dressed in foppish fashion, and had a dissipated, bold face.

"I come to see Monsieur Cavendish!" he said.

"Well," answered Cavendish, stepping forward, "what can I do for you?"

"I am the husband of the Comtesse de Lisle whom you had the effrontery to rob last night! I have come to get satisfaction. If this were but a few years ago I would challenge you to a duel, and in the letting of your blood I would satisfy my wounded pride and honour; but as it is, I have come to see you handed over safely to the police."

While Cavendish remained silent, fighting

the impulse to knock the speaker down, Mostyn stepped forward.

"Count," he said, catching the caller's eye, "my name is Mostyn, and I have the honour of being a friend of the Comtesse, your wife. Allow me to plead with you on behalf of my friend. He was not himself last night; the necklace was taken by mistake. He meant no harm; the Comtesse has forgiven him——"

"What is it to me that my wife, being a woman, should be weak enough to forgive such a crime, Monsieur? *I* cannot forgive! The necklace was given to my dear wife"—here he smiled a particularly odious smile—"by me in the days of our earliest love. It was the grossest sacrilege that a common thief's hands——"

He was interrupted at this moment by the sight of a swinging fist.

"Call me a thief again, and I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" cried the enraged Cavendish.

Immediately arose a terrific hubbub. Mostyn and Esdaile both tried to pacify the Count de Lisle, who evidently did not want to be pacified. Eventually Mostyn appeared to have calmed him.

"Now, Count," he said, "we both want to avoid a scandal. The matter must not be taken to the police. My friend is prepared——"

"To pay? To compensate me for my wounded honour, my damaged pride? Well . . . I will consider."

He walked away by himself into the opposite corner of the room.

Mostyn approached Cavendish.

"That was awfully silly," he complained. "For Heaven's sake don't do anything equally rash. The only chance is to buy this rotter's silence—and do it with as good a grace as possible. Perhaps it's blackmail, but if you threaten to charge him with extorting money from you he will merely laugh, and say that in that case he will proceed to prosecute you for the theft of his wife's necklace. You are in a cleft stick, I'm afraid; it was the worst possible luck that this rotter got to know about the affair."

It was on the tip of Cavendish's tongue to refuse indignantly any such suggestion, when the Count de Lisle turned.

"The necklace must be returned to my wife, of course, and I will accept the value of the necklace—that is to say, five thousand pounds in English money, cash down here in this room—not to say anything more about the matter. It is only because I have had the most terrible luck at the tables this past month that I consent. But it must be cash—what you say? Money down!"

"I'll see you to the devil before you get anything out of me," shouted Cavendish; "in any case, I haven't the money here."

Again the leering face of his brother, peering over the English newspaper containing the scandal, came to him. Anything better than that, it was true, and yet where on earth was he going to get the money from?

"I advise you to settle with him. I strongly

advise you to do so." It was Mostyn at his elbow. "If you will give me your promissory note I'll settle with him myself. Fortunately, I had a letter of credit this morning."

At twenty-three one does not weigh things up very accurately. Dick Cavendish's one idea was to get himself out of the appalling mess into which he had been landed. In his eagerness, natural in the circumstances, he was ready to snatch at any chance. He even forgot the blackguardly way in which he was being "bled" in his desire to have the situation cleared up and the danger of a prostrating scandal avoided. And, most important of all, he forgot he was poor.

"All right," he replied to Mostyn. "I'll give you a promissory note for five thousand pounds."

"Here's a pen and paper," went on Mostyn, and if Cavendish had looked up whilst he was scribbling his name he would have seen the man's eyes gleaming; would have seen the supposed Count de Lisle bending forward eagerly; would also have seen the door gently open and the face of the supposed detective show itself for an instant.

"Now get out of my sight!" Cavendish had handed the paper to Michael Mostyn, but his remark was addressed to the Count de Lisle, who bowed ironically, and then left the room.

"I should have told you before," he said miserably.

Mostyn ripped out a tremendous oath.

"I should damn well think that you should! Here I hold an IOU of yours for five thousand

pounds and the thing isn't worth the paper it's written on! What are you going to do about it?"

Mostyn, quite unexpectedly, had declared that he wanted his money. He couldn't wait until he got back to London; Cavendish would have to wire for it. As the truth could no longer be concealed after this, the other had been forced to confess that he hadn't the money in London to meet the debt.

"I'll do anything, Mostyn, but I can't pay you back just now. When I get back to London, I'll—I'll get it somehow. I promise you that."

He spoke rather hysterically; put more into his words than perhaps he intended to say. Of course, he really did intend to pay the money back—but there was an unconscious edge to his words that made Michael Mostyn and his inseparable satellite, Hugh Esdaile, look at each other significantly.

"*What* would you do?" asked Mostyn, studying his man; and, in desperation, and because he scarcely knew what he did say, Cavendish again replied, "Anything!"

"How much did your father leave—I know he was a rich man?" pursued Mostyn. The crook had been foiled just at the moment that he thought he was going to bring off a big "killing," but he was carefully cloaking his rage because he could see hope in the distance.

"He left eight thousand pounds a year—income from property. That should have been divided between my brother Raymond and myself."

"And now you have nothing?"

"Practically nothing—only three hundred pounds a year which my mother left me." He did not add that he had mortgaged three years' income at the Casino the previous evening. But the fact was not overlooked by Michael Mostyn, who, living by his wits, naturally had to be a quick-witted person.

"Your brother has treated you rottenly. I suppose you would like to get your own back on him?"

"I would! He's a swine! I can't help saying it, although he's crippled. Everything in him seems to have turned sour. He has been like it ever since I can remember. He hated my father, and now he hates me. He positively gloated over the fact that he could turn me adrift, practically without a penny!"

"M'm!" commented Mostyn. "And now suppose I could suggest to you a way by which you could get your rights? Have you a copy of your father's signature available?"

"Yes. But why?"

Mostyn looked cautiously round. He was about to disclose his hand, and he did not want any eavesdroppers about.

"You have been robbed—there is no other word for it—of four thousand pounds a year," he said. "It is only the rankest bad luck that your father died before he was able to make a will. As his favourite son, it is absolutely certain that you would have been left at least half of his annual income—probably more, but we will leave it at half. That means four thousand pounds a year—quite a useful sum."

"Now, Cavendish," he went on, leaning forward, and tapping the youth on the knee, "I can get that money for you—on terms. There's a certain risk about it, of course—and for that risk I want to be paid."

Conviction suddenly dawned in Cavendish's mind; his suspicions became crystallised.

"You're a crook!" he said tensely.

"Not so loud!" replied Mostyn. "And if you're talking about crooks, *you* come in that category. Don't forget you stole that pearl necklace. Don't be a fool, and I'll tell you how you can get that four thousand pounds a year out of your brother as easy as winking."

CHAPTER VI THE PROPOSAL

CAVENDISH sat back in his chair. He had to listen; he was in these men's hands, and was powerless to do anything else. Besides, caught in this web of circumstance, he was desperate, and at his wit's ends.

Mostyn lit a fresh cigar.

"How had your father invested his money? It must have been in real estate, otherwise you would have come in for half, whether a will was left or not."

"There was practically no money at the bank. The eight thousand pounds a year which Fossett, the family solicitor, reckons my brother

will now be worth all comes from house property. My father owned a number of houses in the West End. But what are you getting at?"

"I am trying to obtain all the available facts before committing myself to the scheme I have in mind. It is as I thought. But since no will was found, and your four thousand pounds a year depends on a will, we must provide one."

"Do you mean—forge it?" cried Cavendish.

"I would prefer myself to use the term 'provide' one," answered Mostyn. "Esdaile here is rather good at that sort of thing."

Stupefied, Dick Cavendish sat silent.

"It can be done quite simply. You say you have a letter bearing your father's signature. The only other difficulty is the witnesses' signatures. The trouble there is that they both must be dead, and both must have been known to be close friends of your father. Two of his football friends would be best. Do you know where you could put your hands on some old letters addressed to your father?"

"There are the signatures of a lot of his old friends on a football which he kept in his study," answered Cavendish. The moment he had spoken he regretted it. He had said the words without thinking; without realising that by so doing he was giving his help and consent to this nefarious scheme.

"But I won't have anything to do with it, you understand!" he cried, jumping up from his seat. "And that football in the study belongs to me!"

"You're behaving like an hysterical girl!"

sneered Mostyn. "You don't seem to realise your exact position. Here," and he held up a paper, "is a commitment made by you yesterday to me for five thousand pounds. You don't think I'm fool enough, do you, to risk an excellent chance of losing that? You say you have no money, and no prospect of having any. Yet you owe me five thousand pounds. I propose to you a way in which you can obtain four thousand a year for life—minus Esdaile's and my own commission—and you say you won't have anything to do with it. You can take this from me, Cavendish, that you *will* have something to do with it! I can force your hand; you mustn't forget that.

"Don't be a young fool!" he went on. "What affection can you possibly have for that precious brother of yours, who, on your own statement, turned you off without a penny, just because of a technicality in the law? You are as much entitled to half of what your father left as though it was down in his own handwriting in black and white, so what are you worried about?"

"It's not playing the game, Mostyn."

"If it comes to that, your action yesterday in committing yourself to pay me five thousand pounds when you knew you hadn't the money, wasn't playing the game. I want that letter with your father's signature," he added peremptorily. "You must give it me."

"I'll be damned if I do," exploded the young man.

"You'll be damned if you don't; you can take that from me. Once more I tell you not to be an

absolute ass. Oh, well," shrugging his shoulders as Cavendish got up at last and walked out of the room, "perhaps you will think better of it by to-night. I should certainly advise you to!"

Cavendish walked on—out of the hotel, and out of the town. Reaching the country, he flung himself on the grass, and tried to think out his problem.

To begin with, he did not deny to himself that he was sorely tempted. In fact, there was every reason why he should fall in with the scheme, criminal as it was, that Mostyn had outlined to him—every reason but one. Tremendous issues were at stake; on the one hand there was a great fortune—and money to which he was legitimately entitled—and freedom from exposure; on the other there was ignominy, disgrace, perhaps even prison.

But the odds were overwhelming; practically everything had been placed in one scale. If the will fraud went through—and Mostyn, he gathered, was too shrewd a crook to leave anything to chance—he would get satisfaction from his brother; he would be able to live once again in the style to which he was used; he would be able to pay back Fossett (who, in the circumstances, would be scarcely likely to give the supposed genuine will too keen a scrutiny, since the old chap warmly sympathised with him in being done out of his fair chance of the inheritance), whilst the threat which Mostyn held over him would be removed. Even supposing he did have to pay Mostyn one thousand pounds a year as hush-money, he would still

have sixty pounds a week left. And when Raymond died, there would be heaps more.

If, on the other hand, he exposed the conspiracy, what would he benefit? For one thing, a scandal would be caused in which he would move as the central figure. Then what evidence would he have? Without money, what advice, legal or otherwise, would he be able to obtain? Perhaps the whole affair the night before was a clever crooks' scheme—but how could he hope to prove it? Looking back, no doubt Mostyn's intention in getting him to Monte Carlo in the first place was to bleed him of a big sum of money in some way or other. Up till that morning Mostyn had naturally assumed that, being the favourite son of a very wealthy man, he would be well worth bleeding. It had been an ingenious plot which had only broken down at the last moment. The Comtesse de Lisle? No doubt she was an adventuress; she had certainly looked one. Then the supposed detective, and the man who represented himself to be the Count de Lisle? Both members of the same gang. It was like something on the film, but he had every reason for believing it to be true. And the whole thing had been so obvious—what a fool he had been not to see through it!

How simply he had been tricked! And yet, although he had done it innocently enough, he had tricked the chief trickster himself! Up till now the gang hadn't got a penny out of him.

But they would. Mostyn was scarcely the man to accept defeat. Moreover, he had played into the fellow's hands by giving him so

much information. There were the signatures on the football, for instance. . . .

He frowned and bit his lip. He knew he was a weak rotter—if he had had any character he wouldn't have been in his present position. He would have faced facts back in London, and would have got a hold on himself. Put right up against things, as he had been, he would have got down to the job. He would have been forced to give up his old life—but even that would have been an advantage. As Raymond had said with that malicious sneer, it would have made a man of him.

What an outsider he had been—what an outsider he was now! A backboneless drifter, taking always the easier course, studying himself instead of the "other fellow," he had broken the pledge that he had given his father time after time. Now, crowning infamy, he was practically consenting to a fraud that would have sickened Robert Cavendish—that would sicken any sportsman.

He wouldn't! He couldn't! Yet what was he to do?

He must leave Monte Carlo at once, and he must leave it without the knowledge of Mostyn—Esdaile didn't count, the fellow was merely the tool of the stronger mind. But he must leave without even Esdaile seeing him.

The thought of getting away from this well-named Devil's Paradise roused him physically and mentally. He had enough money to get to Paris, and there he could pawn his watch if needs be.

There was his hotel bill; but he would have to leave his luggage as security for that. Later, when he got to England, he would send the approximate amount.

And he must change his name. That was the only way in which he could retain even a shred of his self-respect. He was sick and weary of the person known as "Richard Cavendish"; he would become someone else. He was going to make a fresh start, and he would do so under a new identity. The name his father had handed to him, which, instead of uplifting and honouring, he had trailed in the dust, he would discard until such time as he considered himself fit to take it up again.

He felt buoyant; he was all eagerness now. This was characteristic of his nature to pass from one extreme to another.

But now he was looking towards the stars.

Two mornings later the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail* contained the following: "Considerable anxiety is felt by his friends in Monte Carlo as to the fate of Mr. Richard Cavendish, a young English visitor, who has been staying at the *Hotel Splendide* for the past few days. Mr. Cavendish mysteriously disappeared from the hotel last evening, and all attempts to trace his movements have so far failed. Foul play is feared, as Mr. Cavendish, who is known to be wealthy, has vanished without paying his hotel bill and without removing his luggage. He had been gambling heavily at the Casino, it is reported, and Mr. Michael Mostyn, his friend, with whom

he travelled from England to the Riviera, states that he is afraid he may have become entangled with some of the suspicious characters that are known to be in Monte Carlo at the present time."

Reading this telegraphed report in a London morning newspaper, Elsie Winter startled her maid by suddenly collapsing.

CHAPTER VII THE APPRENTICE

THE young man in the well-cut suit was such an unusual type for his present surroundings that attention was naturally focused on him. What was more, the avidity with which he tackled the coarse food caused the waitress to stare perplexedly.

"There's a toff down on 'is luck over in that corner, Maggie," she said, when she had got back to the kitchen of the working-man's restaurant. "A cruel shame, I call it—he's that hungry that he could hardly wait to pick up the knife and fork! And '*andsome*—Maggie, my dear, he's streets better lookin' than those fellers on the pictures!"

Her companion was caustic.

"Run away with your nonsense! Why don't you get married—that'd cure you of that sloppy way you've got! Here's the steak and kidney for King Beaver over there—and don't slop

all the gravy over before you get it to him, or he'll want his money back!" Love had passed by the speaker for so many years that she had long since lost heart, and had become cynical about Cupid in consequence.

Nevertheless, when the opportunity occurred —as it did shortly afterwards—Maggie stole a look at the young man concerning whom the waitress had become so stridently ecstatic.

"Too good-lookin' by half, if you asks *me*," she snorted. "That's why he's eatin' his breakfast in Mullinger's Rooms instead of at the *Savoy*. A proper young wrong 'un; I've seen his type before. Leave him alone, and if he suggests seein' you after the day's work is over, say 'Hop it! young feller-me-lad, I'm already bespooked!"

It is safe to say that the thoughts of Dick Cavendish—for the youth under discussion was he, in spite of the fact that in shaving off his small moustache he had altered his appearance considerably—were far removed from the waitress. He was facing the realities of life in a part of London that was crude and unlovely, and all his thoughts of girls were centred on Elsie Winter, whom, it seemed unlikely, he would ever see again.

He had read the report of his supposed sudden end at Monte Carlo with satisfaction. Since he had made up his mind to disappear it was just as well that the world should think him dead.

He had given up thinking about himself; there were so many more urgent matters to

be considered, but had he cared to do so, he might have found cause for congratulation in what he had already accomplished. Arriving in London cold, wet and miserable, he had deliberately turned his back on the West End, and all that in the circumstances it meant to him, and had walked in the other direction. The West End in the person of Fossett represented comfort in spite of everything; or he could have gone to his old rooms in Half-Moon Street for the night. But, urged by the feverish desire that had been born in him on his last afternoon in Monte Carlo, he persecuted himself.

That first night he spent on the Embankment —and found a certain glory in the fact that he did not sleep at all. With the morning he had gone, as has been said, east. His ideas as to his future were of the vaguest description, but he flogged himself with the determination to live up to his resolve. It was his fear of weakening that kept him going.

It had been a hard fight—was hardest of all now. He had earned nothing in two days. Outside a Labour Exchange—he did not know it was a Labour Exchange—he had seen a long row of men lined up. He asked one of them what they were doing—and the man had cursed him so fluently that he had passed on, hurt and bewildered.

He wanted to get some work, but he didn't know what to do. He knew that he was viewed with suspicion and disfavour—he looked so well off !—as he idled through the streets.

From the east he had turned north; but here things were just as bad. Then, with the last shilling he had in the world, he turned into a cheap eating-house, so hungry that he was afraid he would faint.

The food, coarse as it was, revived him. He knew there was a cheap cigarette in his pocket, and lighting this, he waited because he was tired and he did not know where to go.

At the next table two workmen were arguing.

"It ain't no use talkin', Charley. If the Swifts don't get a real centre-forward, a feller what don't fall over 'isself directly he gets the ball, they'll finish up at the bottom of the table. It's enough to make a man tear 'is 'air to see that bloke Wilton. Now wasn't he terrible on Saturday—now *wasn't* he?"

"I've seen better," confessed his companion.

"There you are! Terrible! That's what he was! Why, a kid from school could have done better!" Words failing the critic at this point, he made noises instead.

"What's the use of talkin', George?" now replied the other. "D'ye think the directors don't know it as well as you? Anybody'd think that you could pick up good centres off a barrer! Don't you know that they're as scarce as diamon's? There ain't about two good centre-forwards in the world. Ten thahsand pounds: That's what Everton would get for that Scotch feller, Andy McKie, if they was mugs enough to put him on the transfer-list. Ten thahsand—and worth every penny of it!"

At this point, the young man in the well-cut

suit who had "wolfed" his breakfast because he was so hungry, rose and interrupted the argument by approaching the table.

"Excuse me," he said, "but can you direct me to the Swifts' football ground?"

The fresh-complexioned man of alert middle-age, who had such a sharp, business-like way with him, looked up from the desk. If anyone in the Four Kingdoms had an eye for a football player, it was David Lowe. As International, and later as manager of the famous Swifts, he had spent the best twenty years of his life appraising footballers.

The look he gave the other was critical, but kindly.

"Yes, I'm the manager of the Swifts. Can I do anything for you?"

The caller smiled doubtfully.

"You can; but I don't know whether you will," he said.

"Well, what is it?" Lowe had left his desk. During the few seconds that the interchange of remarks had occupied, he had been studying his visitor. A likely build, but there was something wrong with him somewhere——

"I want you to give me a job, playing football," said the other. There was an earnestness in his voice which made the other man stare.

"As an amateur, of course," he replied, glancing at the other's Bond-street suit.

"No, as a professional. I have to get some work, and football is about the only thing I can do, it seems. Besides, I have a particular

reason——" Cavendish did not say more; it would have seemed ridiculous to have confided in the other that he was trying to make amends for many things—by playing football.

"Any experience?"

"I nearly got my place in the Oxford team last year; I *should* have got it if I hadn't slacked."

"That's the trouble, then—slackness?"

"Yes. It was slackness that stopped me from playing centre-forward for the Corinthians this year. I don't want to excuse myself——"

"No—no," put in David Lowe non-committally.

"Or boast—but you asked me what experience I had had."

"H'm," said the other, and then a mountain of a man bounded into the room.

"Cavendish!" he roared in the voice which only one man ("Podge" Waddington) possessed in the world, "what on earth are you doing here?"

David Lowe had a pawky sense of humour.

"He wants to play centre-forward for the Swifts," he said.

The manager of that famous football club was not a person with whom you could take liberties and yet Waddington hit him a mighty blow on the back.

"Sign him!" he bellowed. "Trust your Uncle Podger!"

THE dull roar, which had been like surf dashing against rocks, now changed into a higher, shriller, more hysterical note. Fifty thousand people yelled the delirious chant:

"Holt!" they screamed, "*Holt!*"

Down below the majestic, towering grandstand, a direct descendant of the amphitheatre of Rome, the institutor of People's Games, a slim figure, clad in a scarlet jersey, held the football stage. He had caressed the swiftly spurned football into subjection with one foot, bringing it docile to his will. Then, so quickly that the eye could scarcely note the witchery, he had wheeled, the ball at his toes, and was away.

As he sprang into that bewildering and dazzling dribble, his scarlet jersey seemed to burst into flame—a flame of hope; the man inside that vivid livery of the famous Swifts carried the hearts of fifty thousand people with him. No wonder that they screamed his name.

Six months had passed since, in shaving off his moustache, and signing on as a professional player for the Swifts F. C., Dick Cavendish had changed himself into Richard Holt. To David Lowe, manager of the Swifts, and his old Oxford friend, "Podge" Waddington, enthusiastic supporter of the famous team, he had explained simply that circumstances made him wish to play under his second Christian name, instead of his surname. Lowe had replied that the matter was entirely one for his own discretion; while to

Waddington, Dick afterwards, under a strict bond of confidence, which he knew the other would keep, had detailed certain of the circumstances which in the course of a few dramatic days had changed his whole life.

Waddington, who had conceived a strong and genuine affection for the handsome, headstrong youngster whilst at Oxford, had instantly offered all kinds of help.

But Holt waved them aside.

"Nothing doing, Podge!" he said wearily, but with a decision that caused the other to stare—in changing his name Cavendish had apparently changed his character. "I've made an ass of myself and have come no end of a mucker, in consequence. There was a time when I'd have fallen on your neck and accepted all the offers which you have so decently made me—but not now. I'm going to see this through myself, on my own. Don't think me a sentimental fool if I tell you something. Years ago, when I was a kid of ten, I made my father a promise. He asked me to try to be a good football player, if I had the ability. The fact that he had been the Corinthians' regular centre-forward for several seasons was the biggest thing in life to him. It was what he lived on in after years. Well, he wanted me to carry on—to take his place in the Corinthians when my time came—if I was good enough, of course. This sounds a lot of rubbish to you, I expect; but I'm telling you because you've gone out of your way to be decent to me, and because I think you'll understand."

"I think I do," said Waddington.

"That makes it easier, then. You know what a silly ass I was at Oxford, Podge. I had the chance to get my Soccer Blue if only I had tried."

"Yes. They said you promised to be the best amateur centre-forward since G. O. Smith."

The other nodded.

"And you know the reason I fell down. I slacked. It was too much fag; in other words I was too much rotter and not enough *man* to care. That was the first time I broke the promise I had made to my father."

He paused; hanging his head and scraping his foot on the ground.

"When I came down I tried for the Corinthians. They weren't too keen, for my reputation as a slacker must have preceded me. But, like the sportsmen they were, and because I was the son of my father, too, no doubt, they gave me a chance. . . . God! I wish I could have that chance now!"

"But——" started the other, when he was cut short.

"Ben Warriner, the coach, told me off, and I deserved it. Do you know what he said to me, Podge? I tell you because it's a relief to get it off my chest. He said, looking at me as though he would like to push his great fist into my face, 'You've got the skill, but not the guts, my lad. Don't you understand that to play the game properly, you must take it seriously?' But I wouldn't train, and I wouldn't take a good chap's advice. Ben Warriner would have done anything in the world for me——"

"There's many another who would still do that if you would only let them."

Holt waved his hand once more. "You can't tempt me, Podge," he said fiercely. "As I said just now, I'm going to see this thing through on my own. Can't you imagine what I'm feeling? The Guv'nor died suddenly—dropped dead in the street, perhaps you remember—and before I could get to him. He knew I was a rotter . . . died knowing it. . . ."

"Pull up, old son," said the fat and sympathetic Waddington, "every one makes mistakes. Listen!" he said eagerly; "if you really are anxious to make good as a player, you couldn't have come to a better team than the Swifts. You know how keen I was on soccer when I was at Oxford; well, it may seem surprising to you that I follow the Swifts instead of the Corinthians, but—well, the truth is that, much as it is criticised, I prefer professional football to amateur. There's a zest, a thrill about it which I can't very well explain, but which you'll find out for yourself once you are in it.

"But I was telling you about the team itself. They're a fine crowd—there's Arthur Grimwade, a real man from head to toe, and a clinking good footballer—he's England's centre-half. I'll introduce you to Grimwade, and he'll put you right."

That was the beginning. Superior critics may scoff at professional football; but so long as it provides men of the Arthur Grimwade type, the People's Game can safely answer all criticisms. Grimwade, a quiet, unassuming gentleman who

had taken up paid football because he thought sport was as good a profession as any other, warmed to the eager recruit at once. "Podge" Waddington had told him something, perhaps, and Grimwade, a student of human character, had guessed a little of the rest.

But it was Holt himself who appealed chiefly to the Swifts' captain. Grimwade had as eager an eye for "form" as any painter. A somewhat rugged shape himself, he joyed in the slim, lissom, almost poetic beauty of the new centre-forward's figure. Holt had the true lines of an athlete. Training would lick him into the litheness of a greyhound.

Grimwade had seven International caps. He had also a passionate regard for the success of the team which he captained. The Swifts, like almost every other First Division team, badly wanted a centre-forward of real class—and the recruit was desperately keen. England's centre-half took him in hand.

He had the willing assistance of the club trainer, Joe Paterson, a taciturn Scot, and between them they fashioned a jewel. It was not done without hard work, and harder discipline. After the trial, in which Holt had been pitted against Grimwade, the latter had gone to Paterson and David Lowe and said: "That boy, with proper care, is good enough to be an International." Weighty, high-sounding words, but Lowe, taking the cigarette out of his mouth, and regarding the curling smoke critically, nodded his head in agreement; and when Joe Paterson chimed in with: "Yon lad's an artist," it was

decided to make Dick Holt fit to play for England that year.

Grimwade, to encourage him, told the centre-forward this. He thought it best, because the lad was so desperately keen on being worthy of his tutors.

That remark played its part in the building up of the boy's character. How desperately tempted Holt was to break loose from the iron self-discipline which had been imposed upon him, he alone knew. He had "lived easy" all his former life, taking what came to his hands, and because of this, the flesh-pots tried to snare him with a very subtle and cunning lure.

Of course he got fit. What dissipation he had indulged in had left no lasting trace on his young, healthy body, and, with the hard exercise, he was soon trained as fine as a boxer about to enter the ring.

The skill had always been there, and now he had the application and the fitness. The three proved an irresistible combination.

Skill in games can be passed on to a man. Dick could never remember seeing his father play centre-forward, but old followers of the game told "Podge" Waddington, who told him, that he might have been a second edition of the famous Robert Cavendish, who never played for England, but should have done.

The "new boy" soon made football history. Before the profession had realised that a new "star" had arisen, he had made hacks of the Midchester Albion defence in his First League trial, scoring three goals.

One might have imagined that he would be nervous; but he was too earnest, too self-absorbed for that. When he heard the crowd baying as he followed the rest of the Swifts out on the ground, he was bewildered; but once the game had started he forgot the crowd and remembered only that he had to live up to the promise which was said to be in him.

It was not his natural skill—great as that was—which caused him to be such an outstanding success that day: it was sheer will power. He had slaved for two months to get this chance.

David Lowe never put a man into the Swifts' League team before he considered he was quite ready for the honour, and Holt was not going to let it slip. This was his third, last and greatest opportunity. The flame in his eyes told of his resolve.

He had gone from triumph to triumph—and they were not all football ones.

The road, for all the flaring headlines in the newspapers and the public homage, had been hard; but he had trod it with an increasing resolve that anyone who had known the Dick Cavendish of a few months back would have declared impossible. He surprised even himself; but always when he faltered, when he found himself surrendering mentally to the things which had held him so tightly in their grip while he was a slacker, he recalled the scene in his father's study. Thirteen years ago, but he remembered it all the more vividly because it was

only now that he was trying to keep the promise which he then had made.

This memory and his resolve were the two things which kept him straight and true to his trust. He could not fulfil his father's wish to the letter; he could not play centre-forward for the Corinthians, but he could keep the promise in the spirit. The greatest honour to be obtained in football was to lead the English forward line against their hereditary foe across the Border, and this he had long since determined to do.

The way seemed open to him—after all the hard work he had done during the last six months. He had loved this thrilling job; but even so, the mainspring had been the promise he had made to his father. When he had kept that—and until he had played for England against Scotland in the greatest match of the football year, he would not think that he had redeemed his word—he might begin to feel that he had rehabilitated himself in his own eyes.

For the world he cared nothing; at least he told himself so, and apart from one person—a slim-figured girl, whose eyes the last time he had seen her had been full of whipping scorn—this was true. His heart and soul were bound up in the Swifts, the men who played alongside him, who had been such splendid pals to him; the directors who treated him as a father might have treated a favourite child; and in that many-voiced crowd of loyal and enthusiastic supporters, of whom "Podge" Waddington stood to him as the chief. He loved them all.

* * * * *

This was the fourth round of the English Cup which the fifty thousand crowd were watching with goggling eyes.

Any game in the fourth round of the English Cup is interesting; but this particular encounter was nothing short of enthralling. The Swifts and Hampton Villa, their opponents that day, were old-time foes. It might be said that they represented the football pride of the Metropolis and the Midlands. They were perhaps the two most "classical" sides in the country; each had legends and traditions; each had a wonderful record both in League and Cup.

What added to the rivalry was the fact that in the identical match the previous season—this same fourth round of the English Cup—they had met on the same ground, and Hampton Villa had scored the luckiest win of the year. Day, the Swifts' right-back, had ruined a superb exhibition by unfortunately turning a ball, which he should have cleared, into his own goal.

Now there was a bare five minutes to go, and the scores were 1—1, and Holt, the idol of the Swifts' crowd and the most dangerous centre-forward in England, was speeding towards goal.

A flash of scarlet flame he was as he swerved past a plunging left-back, reeled as he slipped in the treacherous mud, and then, with the thudding cheers nearly splitting his ear-drums, righting himself, fled on.

The right-back had fallen back, but now he came forward to the challenge of this flying-footed wonder. He timed his vigorous tackle

well, but, wraith-like, his foe slipped past him. How it was done he could never say, and the crowd could not tell; but what mattered most, what brought men's hearts into their mouths, what caused them to clench their hands so that the nails cut into the flesh, was the sight of Holt scudding ahead for victory with only the prancing goal-keeper to say him nay.

There was no hesitation, no faltering, no torture to twitching nerves. For this, the supreme moment in a forward's fevered hour, Dick Holt had been trained. Arthur Grimwade, Joe Paterson and David Lowe, representing the Swifts' Committee of three, had spent weeks and months preparing him for that palpitating instant in front of goal when the whole world turns suddenly still, before bursting into delirium.

Holt had one of the greatest goal-keepers that had ever worn a jersey against him that day—the argus-eyed, tentacle-handed Sam Davy; but there was no flurry about his finish. He could shoot equally well with either foot—and tapping the ball, he drove home a lightning shot with his left foot when Davy was expecting him to aim for the opposite corner of the net.

Seeing the netting shake with that deftly-driven ball, the crowd gave delighted tongue, for the game had been won, and Hampton Villa, proud and aloof, lay in the dust.

Walking off the field of triumph, Dick Holt felt something compel him to look up.

Sitting in the front row of the grand-stand, in the Swifts' directors' private pew, was—Elsie Winter!

There was a proud, but sad, little smile on her face.

In the dressing-room Holt heard the news that William Winter, the millionaire, had joined the Swifts' Board of Directors.

The tidings gave him mingled feelings.

CHAPTER IX THE BALL AGAIN

WALKING swiftly down Regent Street, Dick Holt stopped, and swerved into a doorway.

Had the man seen him, and if he had seen him, had he recognised him? These were potent questions.

For the man was Hugh Esdaile—Michael Mostyn's jackal.

During the whole of the six months that Holt had been fitting himself for his new conception of manhood, two clouds had always hovered at the back of his mind. The first had been that he would never be able to speak to Elsie Winter again; the second was the haunting fear that one day Michael Mostyn would discover him.

He had expected the latter event any day, but month after month had gone by, and still he was left at peace, except with his conscience. Had Mostyn believed the story that the newspapers had printed—that he had been murdered by some crooks at Monte Carlo? Dick kept

asking himself this question; but had never been able to formulate a satisfactory answer.

Time had blunted in some measure the fear. If Mostyn really meant to hunt him down he would not waste six months over doing it. Knowing that he had no money—that Raymond, his brother, was the fortunate, and he the unfortunate, one—the man had doubtless flown after other game.

And then Esdaile had passed him—looking him straight in the face! His doubts were soon answered, for the man now came back, peering into the doorway where he was. Seeing him coming, Holt had the presence of mind to turn his back and appear to be intent upon studying the dainty fabrics that were in the window.

Suddenly he felt his arm seized.

"Cavendish!" the man said with nasty emphasis. "What in the——?"

"Let go my arm," interrupted the other in the roughest voice he could contrive. "My name's Holt."

It was sheer bluff that did it. Of course, the missing moustache and the changed expression which six months' discipline can give to a man's face had helped, but still it was the bluff that had carried it through.

"I'm sorry," muttered Esdaile bewilderedly. "I've made a mistake. . . . Sorry." And he passed on.

Holt watched him go up the crowded street, and found himself shaking all over. It was not physical cowardice. A free man, and he

would have asked nothing better than that he should be locked in a room with either Mostyn or Esdaile, or both for that matter. But to run across these swine just when he was congratulating himself that he was well clear of them was upsetting. It reminded him of all that he had been, of all that he had escaped from. Suppose Waddington, to whom he had only said so much, should get to know, or Arthur Grimwade—or—Elsie Winter. . . . Robbing a *demi-mondaine* of her necklace! That was the charge—and with his previous character as a weakling, who would believe the truth?

He felt a sudden hatred for the West End, all the glitter and gloss of it. He must get away. He could not think in this maddening babble.

A 'bus carried him to Liverpool Street, whence he took the train. He had done everything thoroughly, pitching his tent in some poor, but comfortable, lodgings near the Swifts' ground.

In the worn easy-chair in his lodgings, Dick reflected on the sudden change in his outlook.

One fact emerged clear at once. That was that the presence of Hugh Esdaile in Regent Street meant that this man's master-mind, Michael Mostyn, was also in London. And Mostyn would be after him at once; the only thing he could not understand was why the man had left it so long. For, if he could not get money, he would surely try to obtain his revenge. What could Mostyn do with that promissory note?

Could he send him to gaol for not paying? The thought made him shudder.

He lay back in his chair, memories flooding his mind. The square cowhide football bag lying in one corner of the room made him think once again of that morning thirteen years ago when his father had handed him a football covered with the signatures of famous players.

He must get that football.

The thought stabbed him swiftly. He wondered why the urgency had not occurred to him before. Then he recalled that he had always decided to claim the ball once he could show himself without shame in the life that he had left. In the meantime, it was there, in his father's study.

But *was* it? Had his brother, in petty spite destroyed it? He must find out—he would find out that night, even if he had to break into the house.

Then something else stabbed him like an avenging sword. He remembered when Mostyn had discussed the plan of Esdaile forging a will, making him an equal beneficiary with his brother, the man had asked where he could obtain the signatures of two dead friends of his father. He had told him about the signatures on the football, that sacred relic.

For obvious reasons it would be small use Esdaile forging a will now, making him, Dick, a beneficiary; but the two crooks might have some other devilry afoot. In the hands of an expert forger, as Esdaile appeared to be, that football, covered with the signatures of men some

of whom had died leaving comfortable fortunes whilst they were yet in their prime, might become an instrument of infinite harm.

And, utterly apart from that, to have that ball mauled by a crook's dirty fingers was intolerable.

There had been a light in the study when Dick arrived at ten o'clock. Very carefully he had walked down the cul-de-sac at the back of the house, climbed over the wall, and lain hidden in some bushes fringing the lawn, on the opposite side of which was the study window.

Dick knew that study window; unless it had been repaired, which was unlikely, for Raymond Cavendish was miserably mean, it would still open easily with the end of a pen-knife. He had only to put his foot on that jutting piece of masonry, manipulate the knife-blade, and he was practically inside the room.

He waited another half an hour, and then, with that side of the house in darkness, stole across the lawn.

Before long he dropped softly to the floor. He knew that room like the palm of his hand. The stand on which the football had always rested was over in the corner, behind the door. He decided not to trouble to strike a match, and went forward in the darkness.

Yet he was forced to have light because, when he went forward and reached the corner, neither ball nor stand was there!

Going to the electric switch, he flooded the room with light. He had no further need of

concealment; if the ball was not in that room, he would make his brother tell what he had done with it.

Suddenly he gave a cry of joy. Opening a cupboard, he saw the ball pushed inside with a lot of litter!

He caught hold of it rapturously. Then, whilst he was still on his knees, he heard the door open.

Quickly he was on his feet, the ball held tightly under his left arm.

Hugh Esdaile looked at him curiously for a moment.

"Then it *was* you, after all, Cavendish!" he sneered. "But I might have known. And still thieving, it seems. Your brother will be pleased to hear of this."

Something seemed to snap in Holt's head. He rushed forward. His speed was deceptive to the other, for before Esdaile could escape he was struck by what seemed to be a sledge-hammer, and he fell with a crash that shook the floor.

A stout man in butler's uniform plodded along through the hall.

"Mr. Richard!" he gasped.

"I shall be obliged if you will open the door, Jenkins," said the avenger, and walked out into the night.

But, because he knew his brother, he got into the first taxi he met.

CHAPTER X WINTER WRITES A CHEQUE

Dick Holt had dropped from his dreams into utter despair. He was standing as a criminal —as a thing to be loathed and shunned—and Elsie Winter was by his side.

Much had happened in the fortnight that followed his burglary at Clarges Square. For one thing, he had been picked to lead the English forwards against Scotland in a fortnight's time, and, for another, Elsie Winter had been unexpectedly kind. She had been so kind that . . . but these were dreams. Yet, to be sure, here was a snatch at Paradise.

So he had accepted the invitation to dine that night at Belgrave Place, and in evening-clothes, which he had not worn since the *débâcle* at Monte Carlo nearly seven months ago, he had been ushered into the drawing-room.

Others were there before him—two men and a woman, at the sight of whom his senses reeled. The dread moment that he had feared all along had come.

"Here is the man himself!"

The voice was Michael Mostyn's, and it held menace. Looking, Dick saw that the crook had brought his jackal, Hugh Esdaile, with him, and that the latter, like his master, eyed him venomously. Standing a little aloof from her confederates was the woman whose white arms had fascinated him that night at Monte Carlo. She was smiling at him from heavily-lidded eyes, yet he felt that this evidence of greeting,

of hateful remembrance, boded more harm to him than even the open venom of Mostyn and Esdaile.

But what were these crooks doing here? Why had they been allowed to come? Then he suddenly remembered that William Winter could not know them as crooks. "The Comtesse de Lisle, a distinguished member of one of the oldest families in France——" A man like William Winter might be impressed by jargon of that sort.

Both "Podge" Waddington and Elsie Winter came to him as he stared, frozen-faced, at the three.

"Do you know these people, old man?" asked Waddington quickly, and when Holt nodded his head (seven months before he would have vehemently denied it, perhaps), the beautiful girl on his left shivered as though she had gone suddenly cold.

"Know me? My dear sir," commented Mostyn in a tone of dignified affront; "I am not in the habit of having my word questioned. I resent the imputation that I have come here to-night with a cock-and-bull story which I cannot substantiate. This man, whose real name is 'Cavendish,' but who now calls himself 'Holt,' owes me five thousand pounds—and here is the promissory note to prove it!" He drew out a pocket-book and flashed a piece of paper.

There was a silence, during which a close observer might have noticed that Elsie Winter had stepped closer still to the boy who was the

storm-centre. It was as though she had put herself on guard over him.

Dick would have asked her to leave the room, if he had only dared. The thought of her hearing the shameful story which Mostyn would presently narrate in all its degrading detail made him flinch. It was true that Elsie had been very kind, had gone out of her way to be nice to him, and even apologised partially for the words she had said that night, seven months before, at the Goldings' dance; so kind, indeed, that she had never once pressed him to tell her why, with his real name "Cavendish," he played his wonderful football under the name of "Holt," although the temptation to do so must have been very considerable; so kind, also, that she had accepted him, although he was merely a professional footballer now, on an equality. Yet he could not, he dared not, expect her to continue her kindness after hearing Mostyn's story.

"I want to get this straight. Tell your story from the beginning!"

William Winter spoke so sharply that everyone in the room started—everyone, that is, except a small, insignificant-looking man who had retired into a corner as though he were shocked and terrified by the strange things which were going on around him.

"I will tell you, Mr. Winter. I have your permission to sit down again?"

Winter nodded curtly, and the visitors sank into the comfortable chairs. The Comtesse de Lisle did so with a lithe and sensuous grace.

"I met young Cavendish," started Mostyn, "at a time when he was in deep distress. He had just lost his father, and, moreover, had been defrauded—as he put it—of the sum of four thousand pounds a year through his father dying without leaving a will. That meant his elder brother coming into the whole yearly income of eight thousand pounds. I must say I didn't know the full facts at the time, or I might have acted differently.

"However, I invited young Cavendish to accompany my friend, Esdaile, and myself to Monte Carlo. I thought the change would do him good. Whilst at Monte Carlo I did everything I could to take him out of himself, and, amongst others, introduced him to my old friend the Comtesse de Lisle, who, much against her own feelings, has consented to accompany me here to-night."

He paused, and the little insignificant-looking man, who was still standing in the corner, ostensibly looking at a picture, smiled.

"I confess it came as a very disagreeable shock to me to know the sort of person young Cavendish really was," Mostyn went on. "After we had spent a most enjoyable evening at the Comtesse's villa, she discovered that a valuable pearl necklace was missing. It was discovered in young Cavendish's bedroom by a local detective the next morning."

"I don't believe a word of it!" cried Waddington.

Michael Mostyn shrugged his shoulders, indifferent to the interruption.

"I regret the unfortunate incident more than anyone else, since it was I who had the misfortune to introduce the young man to the Comtesse. My dismay was understandable; but I did what I could. I went immediately to the Comtesse and begged her not to prosecute. I said that Cavendish had undoubtedly taken too much to drink at the villa—the Comtesse is a Bohemian, and her hospitality has passed into a proverb—and that, therefore, he might not have been accountable for his actions.

"The Comtesse was graciousness itself. She rang up the local police immediately, and asked them to drop the matter. The necklace had been found, she said, and she wished the whole incident to be at an end. May I ask you, Comtesse, if that is so?"

The Comtesse de Lisle made a gesture as though she would shut out a bad memory.

"It is as you say, Monsieur Mostyn."

"Through the kindness of the Comtesse, the unhappy episode thus seemed closed. But we had reckoned without one factor. That was the Count de Lisle. I would explain," Mostyn continued, "that the Comtesse has been for years married to a thorough-paced villain—forgive me for saying this, my friend," bowing, "but I fear it is necessary."

The Comtesse gestured again, and the speaker continued.

"The Count, having run through his own fortune, lived by his wits. Of course, the Comtesse could have claimed a divorce, but this was against her principles. As it was, she lived

apart from him. Unfortunately for everyone concerned, the Count was also in Monte Carlo at this time."

Again the little man with his back to the room smiled.

"Somehow or other, the Count heard of the affair, and, bent on blackmail, presented himself at our hotel. He said that the necklace was really his, as he had given it to the Comtesse, his wife, and if she was weak enough not to prosecute, he could not possibly let the matter drop, the law must take its course. Of course, knowing something of the Count's reputation, and having heard something of his methods, I saw at once that he meant his silence could be bought. It really was a case of asking his price not to prosecute, to pay if it was not too high, or of allowing the police officers to take young Cavendish away to prison.

"You will readily see what a difficulty I had to face. On the one hand I had to agree to a most pernicious piece of scoundrelism, and, on the other hand, if I did not agree to it, the young man for whose personal safety I considered myself morally responsible, since he had come to Monte Carlo as my guest, would be eternally disgraced. It was a most terrible problem!"

He looked round the room as though expecting to hear some murmurs of sympathy; but, receiving none, went on, his voice harder now than it had been before.

"Rather than Cavendish should sacrifice his good name, I advised him to pay the Count.

The latter wanted as his hush-money the sum of five thousand pounds, the value of the necklace, and although it was perfectly monstrous, rather than have a scandal which would have ruined him, I strongly advised young Cavendish to close with the abominable offer."

"You utter rotter!" exploded "Podge" Waddington.

Michael Mostyn took a step forward. Then he shrugged his shoulders again, as though, secure in his righteousness, he could afford to let the insult pass by. Waving his right hand as though to exclude his critic from the audience, he continued:

"When it came to the point, Cavendish told me for the first time—for up till now I had presumed that he had plenty of money—that he couldn't pay. Seeing how extremely urgent it was I paid the money myself. Of course, I was forced to safeguard myself. That was why I requested Cavendish to give me a promissory note."

"Why—if he had no chance of paying you? You said you knew he had no money." This was from Winter, his first contribution to the conversation since Mostyn had got really under way.

"What else could I do? As for his having no money, I thought, naturally enough, he would get it from his brother. What concern of mine was it where or how he would get it? I had helped him out of a terrible hole, and I couldn't afford to lose five thousand pounds.

"Of course not," sneered Waddington. "I am sorry this is not my house, that's all!"

This last thrust of Waddington had turned Mostyn livid. Perhaps, too, the wolf which was in him could not be silenced any longer. He had taken great pains over this "case," and he hated things to be going the least bit awry. Anyway, the mask was off. He turned a venomous face to Waddington.

"I haven't the doubtful pleasure of your acquaintance, sir," he said; "but since you're so bent upon making me out a liar, and of befriending the fellow whom I saved from going to a Monte Carlo jail, you shall have the opportunity. Unless the promissory note is redeemed before I leave this house, something very unpleasant will happen to the young man whose signature it bears. After giving me the promissory note under the falsest of pretences, Cavendish fled from Monte Carlo like the thief he was. Since then he has been hiding under a false name, here in London. It was only by the merest chance that I heard of him again; but now he shall either redeem his promise to pay me five thousand pounds or I'll send him to prison."

"You can only issue a writ," scoffed Waddington, who knew something about Common Law.

"I repeat that I can send him to prison—and I will! It will be good-bye to his wonderful football feats then. My good friend, the Comtesse de Lisle, tender-hearted as she is, will be prepared to prosecute for the theft of her necklace. She forgave Cavendish for the crime; but she cannot forgive him for this ingratitude. Besides, there is another charge

which can be preferred. The other night, No. 9 Clarges Square, the house where Cavendish's brother lives, was burgled. Cavendish, here, was the burglar."

"Is this true?" demanded William Winter. The millionaire, while not approving of his daughter's obvious pleasure in the centre-forward's company, had conceived a personal liking for Holt, and this information, while it reeked of blackmail, was certainly dumbfounding.

"I went to my brother's house, which used to be my own home, Mr. Winter, to get something which belonged to me. I went in through the study window because I knew my brother, who hates me, and who took advantage of my father not having made a will——"

"But—" expostulated "Podge" Waddington strongly. Then, as though recalled to himself, the Swifts' most enthusiastic supporter lapsed into silence with an embarrassed "Sorry!"

"I was saying that my brother hated me to such an extent that he took advantage of my father not having made a will to collar every penny for himself. My father's income from property was something like eight thousand pounds a year, and my brother Raymond took it all, and wouldn't allow me a penny. I went to the house that night to fetch a football which I knew my father meant I should have.

"As for what this man has said, I swear to you all that it is nothing more than an elaborate blackmail scheme. I have no actual proof, and it is merely my word against his; but this is what really happened: At the time of my

ruined more young fellows than I'd care to tell you about. I want to catch them all red-handed —of course, that stunt they pulled off at Monte Carlo on the boy is as old as the Cotswolds. Look here, I want you to tell Mr. Waddington to pretend to agree to pay them—say he's Cavendish's friend, and wants to avoid any scandal; that sort of stuff. Make him give them a crossed cheque—I don't know whether Mostyn will take it, but I want him to have the chance. Then I'll get busy myself—and if I don't get 'em all, Lizzie included, a seven years' stretch—I don't know my job!"

"Smith," said William Winter, bringing a heavy hand down on the little man's shoulder, "you're still a wizard."

"Wizard enough to see that they don't get away with that five thousand pounds, anyway! No, come to think of it, *you* had better write the cheque, Mr. Winter. They know you'll be good for the amount, whereas they might think Mr. Waddington wasn't. Mr. Waddington must protest against your being such a fool. Call him out, and I'll put him wise."

"And now," said William Winter half an hour later, "I think we can all enjoy our dinner. You've had a rough time lately, Cavendish; but most fellows make mistakes at some time or other, and it was a good job for you perhaps that you made yours young. Smith can be relied upon to see that Mostyn and Company—including the Comtesse de Lisle, whose real name, he tells me, is plain Lizzie Pullan—won't do you any more harm."

"Podge" Waddington chuckled.

"I'd give something to be in that private room at the bank to-morrow morning, and see friend Smith drop out on them just at the moment that they're clicking for the coin. Who do you say that fellow Smith really is, Mr. Winter?"

"The greatest detective in the world," was the decisive reply, "although he looks more like a book-convasser. His insignificance, however, is his best asset. Whilst I was at the Ministry of Munitions during the latter days of the War, I got to know Smith well. He had been loaned by the C.I.D. Department of Scotland Yard, and his adventures during that period would, if printed, make one of the most exciting books ever published. I was attracted by the man, and we became great friends. In view of what has happened, his dropping in to-night was providential. Cheer up, Cavendish, your troubles look like being all over now!"

Dick Cavendish smiled as requested. He had been lost in a reverie. Even the fact that Elsie Winter was sitting by his side could not prevent him from visualising the scene, which had just been enacted, all over again.

He had not been let into the secret, and so when William Winter, producing a cheque-book, said that, in order to avoid any further scandal and to ensure that nothing occurred to prevent the Swifts' centre-forward from playing in the next Cup Tie, he would redeem the promissory note, he had sprung forward to protest.

"It's blackmail, sir!" he had said. "Don't do it!"

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"It's blackmail, sir!" he had said. "Don't do it!"

But the millionaire had waved aside both him and Waddington, who was so angry that there was no need for him to assume indignation.

"Please allow me to do what I think is best for all parties in this case," he said sternly.

"I should prefer cash," Mostyn had said.

"Do you think I keep thousands of pounds in notes in the house? You need not fear that the cheque I propose to give you will not be honoured." And the blackmailer had bowed, before opening the door for his confederate, the bogus Comtesse de Lisle, to pass through.

Dick had watched them go with mingled feelings—a choking sense of shame predominant. Then William Winter had clapped him in friendly fashion on the back, and said: "That's all right, it was only a trick. Giving them my cheque was only part of the game!"

After that had come the revelation; and the surprise had been so overwhelming that he could not speak, only marvel at the fact that by some queer working of Fate his luck had changed at last.

As though sensing his mood, Winter, Waddington, and the girl by his side had all tried to make him feel that they understood, and even sympathised with him.

"What was the interest attached to the football you spoke about to-night?" asked Winter.

When Cavendish had told what was to be told, he felt a small, warm hand, thrilling to the touch, rest on his for a moment under the table cloth. Looking at Elsie Winter, he noticed, with an

emotion that threatened to overcome him, that she seemed on the brink of tears.

There was someone else looking at the girl. This was Waddington. Suddenly he rose, his mouth open to speak.

"What are you going to do?" inquired William Winter jestingly. "Propose someone's health?"

"Podge" Waddington gulped, seemed confused, and then smiled.

"Not yet," he said enigmatically, and sat down again.

CHAPTER XI THE MAN WITH TWO NAMES

All London was athrob. It had a football sensation dear to its sporting soul. On the morning of the greatest match of the year, the annual Classic International, England v. Scotland, the newspapers "carried" a story that warmed the heart and thrilled the feelings of every one that read it.

"The Man with Two Names," one agile-minded sub-editor had called it. The story concerned the most-talked-of man in the whole of England and Scotland that morning, the man who had been chosen to lead the English attack, "the new centre-forward of genius," as he had been styled for the whole of the last two months. But let one journal speak for the lot:

"From the beginning of his short but illustrious career," said the 'Morning Messenger,' "the present centre-forward of the Swifts, Richard Holt, who leads the English attack against Scotland's granite defence to-day, struck one as having a romantic side to him.

"Now the Romance has come to light—just in time to give a last piquant interest to Holt's first International this afternoon.

"From a reliable source we learn that Richard Holt is only part of the Swifts' centre-forward's name. His full name is Richard Holt Cavendish. Now 'Cavendish' is a famous football name—not in professional circles, perhaps, but one Robert Cavendish, we seem to remember, was the finest centre-forward the illustrious Corinthians ever had playing for them. The Swifts' centre-forward—the man who will harry the Scottish defence to-day—is the younger son of that famous player.

"But he has played and won fame under the name of 'Holt,' it will be argued. Quite so; but therein hangs a most interesting tale. It seems that young Cavendish's boyish dream and hope was not only to follow in his father's footsteps as a great football player, but—the supreme audacity of youth!—to 'go one better' than his illustrious sire. Robert Cavendish was the Corinthians' centre-forward: his son wished to be England's centre-forward! But, because he desired to win the honour entirely on his own merits—of course, he could only have been chosen for the English team strictly on his own merits, in any case—he decided to play under another name than 'Cavendish' until he had achieved the honour of an International Cap. Here is a plo

ready-made for the spirited writer of sporting fiction."

That was all that was printed: "Podge" Waddington had kept back the rest.

Strident but good-humoured, the bonnet-wearers invaded the Metropolis. They had travelled all night from Glasgow and other Scottish football centres; and now, pipes skirling, tartans flaunting, kilts a-swirl, they cried a defiance to the Sassenach as they drove through the crowded West End to the spacious Kensington ground where the dust of conflict was shortly to rise.

"Where's your Cavendish?" they chanted. This was their battle-cry. Like everyone else, the Scottish camp followers wished to see the man about whom there was all this pother. They think in Scotland that they have a monopoly of good centre-forwards, and the audacity of mere England to produce a centre-forward of genius roused the Scottish spirit in them. Great sportsmen, these men from across the Border! But they lived for one thing—to see the shirt with the English rose on the left breast in the dust that day. Up in their fastnesses they had read every word—and there had been thousands of words—printed about the new centre-forward "star" who was to set the English forward line on the right path this afternoon.

And, outwardly at least, they had gloated. What would Jamie Mirren, the fourteen-stone right-back, do to this audacious stripling? Yet

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inwardly they feared. That was after they had read the *Morning Messenger* over their breakfast. The son of a Corinthian—aye, they knew those Corinthians of old. . . . It might be that this new lad was all that people said he was. But Jamie Mirren was the greatest back that Scotia had ever reared and trained. Well, it would be a bonny ficht!

It was all that.

Feeling that he was walking on air, that his blood was on fire, that every nerve was thrilling, Cavendish had stepped on to the closely-cropped turf of the battle-ground. A hurricane cheer greeted him. A hundred thousand had risen to give him homage. The earth seemed to rock with the glad sound. This slip of a lad represented England, and, as a counter-blast to the mad defiance of the bagpipes, the crowd chanted his name.

In the stand there was a girl whose heart beat in measure to the cheers, throbbed to the enchanting lyric: "He's mine; whatever happens, he belongs to me!"

And next to her, "Podge" Waddington, his eyes gleaming behind his huge spectacles, and his great round moon of a face one broad smile, beamed upon the world.

Cavendish—it was difficult not to call him "Holt," the name he had made famous—had his own captain, England's skipper, playing behind him.

From the start the game resolved itself into a personal duel of Titans: Jamie Mirren against

the pride of the English. Everything was dwarfed by it; everything else sank into insignificance beside it. Scotland had Wilfred Lennie at centre-half, but he became lost, almost forgotten, before the game was ten minutes old. The real battlers were Mirren at right-back and Dick Cavendish at centre-forward.

From the start, Mirren, a monument of a man, with massive thighs bulging with muscle, and the broad shoulders of a heavy-weight boxer, had instructed the Scottish right-half to look after the English left-winger. He knew where the real danger lay—it lay with the spear head of the opposing attack, in the tutored toes of that slim, immaculately-groomed youngster who had set the whole world of football by the ears.

On the treacherous surface of that cut-up ground—there had been rain overnight, and the going was "soft"—the English centre-forward was feeling at home. This was his natural element. He was like a skilled skater on ice, feinting, turning, swerving. He was working at his trade. He was like an actor in a tremendous rôle: in a part that he played with the very essence of his being.

Perhaps it was because they were themselves so fascinated by watching the deft dexterity of Cavendish that the English defence wavered when the first real danger came. This was a quarter of an hour from the start. Then little Alan Menzies, a bundle of roundness and football skill, went weaving a way down the left wing, before crossing an ideal ball that long Tom

Wilson at inside right cuddled to his toes, and then sent screeching past Bennett in the English goal before any one could say him nay.

How the Balmoral bonnets preened and fluttered! How the bagpipes skirled! And how gloomy was the face of the Sassenach!

But straight from the kick-off a boyish figure in a white shirt was seen scudding past all opposition. Faced with the mighty Mirren, he drew that doughty Scot, and flicked to his left. Here, Wombwell, laughing all over his comedian's face, was waiting. He swooped on the ball, flitted past Mirren, and thudded in a shot that nearly tore a hole in the net. Equality —but it was Cavendish's goal!

Another hour's stern fighting could not bring a change. Drought had followed the flood. Two goals in two minutes—and then nothing more!

But the play had quickened, instead of slackened. If Cavendish was a genius, Mirren was a superman, performing deeds of the legends. He did three men's work.

Let it go that five minutes from the end the greatest International game for twenty years had yielded two remarkable goals, and now seemed destined to end in a draw.

But this did not content the crowd. Dazzled and bewildered as they were at the fierce pace of the game, they wanted a clinching goal. It is always the same with a football crowd; delight them with clever schemes, fascinate them with wonderful work in midfield, it is

not enough. "All very well," they say, "but —give us a goal!"

Yet for two, three minutes out of the five only that were left for play, Scotland saw to it that the ball was not sent near Cavendish.

Then, from a throw-in, McNee, the left-half, missed his kick, and Milden, cutting in, whipped the ball from him, and was away down the wing.

Challenged by Hamilton, the left-back, he feinted, but instead of continuing his touch-line flight, centred.

The ball came to Cavendish, ankle-high. Twisting his boot, he brought it round with his ankle—round and forward, so that, without stopping, he could race ahead.

In almost the same movement, he could be seen speeding for the Scottish goal. Fast he had been before, but now his feet seemed scarcely to touch the churned turf.

Iron-jawed, Mirren ambled forward. This was the last challenge, and he must win it.

The crowd held their breath, for it seemed that the fourteen-stone giant must meet the ten-stone ten-pound forward and bury him in mud. But Jamie Mirren had, in his desperation, made his final lunge too precipitately, and, swerving widely, Cavendish was past him—past him to hysterical cheers that were like the deafening roar of drums.

Out from his lair, wild-eyed, with the clutching fear that he had, came Raisbeck, the Scottish goal-keeper. This was the testing-time—this the time when the nerve of the boy would be

tried to the cracking point; this the time when the whole world seemed to stand still, so agonising was the suspense.

Elsie Winter, sick with dread, turned away. She sensed that this was the one vital moment in the life of the man she loved. If he succeeded he would never more despair. That winning goal for England would be a sign and a symbol: henceforth he would walk with a sure step.

But she could not look, in case he failed. Then the world might topple down, and bury her happiness in the ruin.

"GOAL!"

Like a madman, "Podge" Waddington had jumped to his feet. He had a new hat in his hand, and he flung it far from him—into the teeth of the seething, delirious crowd that frothed and foamed below him.

"Wonderful!" he shrieked to the girl, clasping her hands. "Raisbeck came out too far, Dick flicked the ball over his head, and went on to score! Look, he's carrying the ball. *Wonderful!*"

Looking, Elsie Winter saw the hero she was forced to share with one hundred thousand raving maniacs, walking off the field, clutching the football of fame tightly to his muddied shirt. He looked like one in a trance.

With the grime of the field still upon him, Jamie Mirren, the Scotland captain, after knocking, strode into the English dressing-room. He walked up to Cavendish and extended his hand.

"A great goal, lad!" he said in his deep

Scots accent. "But ye played a great game all the way through. Would you like me to get the Scots boys to write their names on th' ball?"

CHAPTER XII "AND ALL'S WELL"

Now it chanced, as they say in the old chronicles, that Henry, better known as "Podge" Waddington, gave a dinner-party. It was the night of the England-Scotland match, and it was very select.

People said it was like "Old Podge's cheek" to put himself down to propose the health of the hero of the evening, but after he had finished it was agreed that he had been quite justified. For this is what he said:

"We are all friends of Dick Cavendish, so I won't ask you to interrupt your steady drinking by listening to any empty words. What I am going to say I will put very briefly—and then leave the room hurriedly in case Cavendish feels like murder!

"Most of us know Dick's story by this time. You know that when his father died he was left practically penniless. Then he started playing professional football because he couldn't get any money from dear old Fossett here without saying who he was—and he didn't want to do that. At that particular time he was more than a bit sick with himself.

"He had a job of work to do, and—well, he finished it to-day. I think that we all agree that he's done it rather well. Yes, and for doing it so well, I'm going to make him a personal gift. It's worth four thousand a year to you, Dick, old son," added the speaker, as he flung over a crinkling paper to the man who had brought victory to his country that day.

Dick Cavendish—with Elsie Winter, who was afraid everyone would be able to hear how her heart was beating, looking over his shoulder—gave one glance at the paper, and then turned to Fossett, the solicitor.

"It's all right—quite genuine—and as Mr. Waddington has just said, it is worth four thousand pounds a year to you," replied the man of law. "It's your father's will without a doubt."

"Let me tell the story, Fossett!" cried Waddington. "It's worth the telling—better than the average novel, I can assure you!

"One day, a few weeks ago, I went into a second-hand bookshop in Charing Cross Road. I saw some sporting books—football reminiscences, some of them—and I decided to buy them.

"You can imagine how glad I was when I found your father's name—Robert Cavendish—inside them. Your brother had cleared out the whole of your father's sporting books to this particular dealer.

"Now here's the incredible thing: Inside one of the books—the history of the Corinthians—I found that will, pinned to a leaf. Seeing how important it was, I took it at once to Fossett."

"Yes, and made me promise to say nothing about it until after the match to-day," complained the family solicitor.

"So that you should not have anything to take your mind off football, Dick! Don't forget that it was through me, practically, that you joined the Swifts, and I felt my responsibility! Besides, you might have got too excited if I had told you before the Scotland match." And, looking at Elsie Winter, "Podge" added slyly: "I wanted to keep it as a gift—a——"

It proved to be a wedding present alright!

BLACK MAGIC

THE HORROR OF "THE HEIGHT"

"My friend and assistant, Mr. Martin Huish," announced Sebastian Quin.

I acknowledged the introduction by bowing to the girl who sat in the client's chair in Quin's consulting-room. She was about twenty-four, I judged, tastefully dressed and normally very pretty. I say normally, because Violet Loring's face was now tortured by a look of restrained horror, which went straight to my heart.

"Miss Loring has come to us in great—very great—trouble," explained Quin. "She was about to tell me her story when you came in."

He looked encouragingly at the girl, whose hands were locked. Quite obviously, she had to brace herself before she could start on her narrative.

"What I am going to tell you, Mr. Quin, may sound so fantastic, so utterly preposterous, that you will have difficulty, perhaps, in believing I am sane." She stopped, unable for a minute to go on.

"I may say I have listened to many strange statements in my time, Miss Loring; and my experience of life is that the fantastic is usually the likeliest thing to happen—given certain conditions."

The tone was grave but encouraging. Sebastian

Quin, his thin, almost cadaverous, face thrust forward, was an impressive figure in that moment. His critics, whose scoffings were in every case occasioned by bitter jealousy, might say that he looked more like a jockey than a crime investigator, but the visitor evidently derived satisfaction from his manner.

"I live at Trevelyn, in Cornwall," she continued, gaining courage. "As you know, it is a popular seaside resort in the summer, but in the winter it is very lonely and desolate. Yet my father and I have been happy—he with his books and I with my sport and out-of-doors life—until the last few months. All this trouble has happened since"—she shuddered—"that man came!"

"What man?" inquired Quin.

"The man Memory—Rathin Memory, he calls himself."

"A singular name," commented Quin. "And what——?"

"He's horrible, dreadful," cried the visitor. "Mr. Quin, help me to save my father from that devil's power!"

Violet Loring's face had become convulsed. She was struggling for breath.

Sebastian Quin made me a sign, and I brought the brandy.

After a while the visitor became more controlled.

"I must tell you everything now," she said, "and I promise I shall not be so foolish again." Her hands locked tightly, she went on with her story.

"It was in late September last that this man, Rathin Memory, arrived in Trevelyn. He took the house called 'The Height,' on Pentire, which is a rocky headland jutting into the sea on the north side of the town. This house had been unoccupied for so long that the place was in a dreadful state of neglect. The iron entrance-gates were rusty and almost hidden by the weeds and coarse grass which had been allowed to grow.

"I should explain that this house, 'The Height,' has an evil reputation—the local story is that a dreadful murder and suicide took place there many years ago, that the bodies of the wretched people mysteriously disappeared in the night, and that the place—which is very old—is haunted. And it was to this house that the man who, for some mysterious reason, has constituted himself my enemy, came." The visitor's body was shaken by a fresh shudder before she continued:

"You can imagine, perhaps, what an interest was taken in the new resident. Everybody in Trevelyn knows everybody else, the town being so small, and the fact that Rathin Memory had taken a house which was generally believed to be haunted and which had never been let even in the summer months, had increased the natural curiosity about the man."

Quin nodded.

"Will you describe him, Miss Loring?"

Again the visitor shuddered. But the hesitation was only momentary.

"Please do not think it is my shattered nerves which make me describe him as a man one

doesn't like to look at," she replied. "His age is something between forty and fifty, I should say; he is very hairy—lets his hair grow and has a beard—and has remarkable eyes. Even when he has passed me in the street in broad daylight his eyes have filled me with fear. And I am not an imaginative person usually."

"A highly curious individual, I should imagine. But please go on, Miss Loring. Is anything known of the man—where he came from, for instance?"

"Nothing very much. The local newspaper tried to interview him, but all he would say was that he had been a traveller all over the world, that he had lately arrived from Tibet, and that he wished to be undisturbed. He lives quite alone in that huge house, with only a foreign man servant."

"He has done no entertaining, then?"

"None. As a matter of fact, there isn't a soul in Trevelyn who would venture into 'The Height.' And the man himself—as I know to my cost—is mysterious, devilish. He has a power over people, as I shall convince you, I believe, Mr. Quin."

Quin almost imperceptibly stiffened in his chair.

"I shall do everything I can to help you, Miss Loring, but I must have your complete story."

"You shall—whatever it costs me to tell it. Perhaps you will be able to realise my position better if I say now that this—this monster is in love with me! And I am already engaged to be

married," she went on before either Sebastian Quin or I could interject a comment.

"It was about a month ago that I first met Memory alone," Miss Loring explained. "I was walking on Pentire when I heard a footstep behind me. Looking around, I saw that the mystery-man—as Memory is called at Trevelyn—was close upon me. Although it was early in the afternoon and quite light, I felt myself suddenly trembling. That may seem a very weak and cowardly confession to make, but I cannot hope to convey the devilish atmosphere with which the man seems to be surrounded! I only know that it was very real to me when he looked at me with those awful staring eyes of his.

"I merely nodded when he raised his hat, and went to pass on. But he placed himself in my way.

"'You are Miss Loring, are you not?' he asked, and I said 'Yes!'

"'I should like you to be friends with me,' he went on. 'I am a very lonely man. I do not want many friends, but I should like to know you.'

"You can imagine, Mr. Quin, what my feelings were when I heard those words. For a moment I could not find my voice. But then, realising my position, I replied: 'I am afraid that is impossible. I do not know you, and I do not want to know you. Consequently, any question of friendship between us is absurd.'

"Once again I made to move on, but he would not let me pass.

"'That which I desire I always obtain,' he

said in a voice that filled me with fresh fear. 'I have asked for your friendship and I shall have it. There is no one strong enough to prevent me.'

"At that I became indignant.

"'My father will prevent it, for one,' I said.

"'Your father!' He laughed contemptuously. 'I tell you that no one is strong enough to prevent me from enjoying your friendship now that I wish it. You will see!'

"If he had not turned away then, I believe I should have struck him, for my rage had overcome my fear. The idea of this creature daring to dictate to me, presuming to force himself upon me, was so overwhelming that I scarcely knew what I was doing.

"I went straight back and told my father. Dad is usually a quiet man, whose only wish is to be left in peace to enjoy his beloved books, but when he heard my story he went straight away to consult his solicitor. Mr. Denning wrote a letter to Memory, warning him that his attentions were unwelcome to me, that I was already engaged to be married, and that any repetition of his conduct that afternoon would be communicated without delay to the local police. The local police," repeated the visitor in a hopeless voice. "Little did I realise at the time how helpless any police could be in dealing with a monster like Memory!"

Her strange words filled me with a sense of foreboding. I glanced at Quin, and saw that his eyes were unnaturally bright. Evidently this case was interesting him intensely.

Before she continued, Miss Loring took another sip of brandy.

"The following night the first terrible thing happened," she resumed. "My father had gone to bed early, but I had been sitting with my—the man to whom I am engaged, Mr. Harry Sinclair. Suddenly I heard a cry. I rushed upstairs, Harry by my side. I found my father ——" Sobs now choked her so that she could not continue.

"If you are too distressed, Miss Loring——"

"No! No! I must tell it and get it over. I was saying that I found my father—*paralysed!* He could speak, but that was all. He said he had cried out because he felt a strange numbness creeping over him, robbing him of all strength and power.

"No"—answering my look; "my father had not been stricken with any stealthy disease; neither had he had a stroke. The local doctor was puzzled, and sent for a specialist from Plymouth. The latter in turn wired for a big London man—Sir Timothy Brash——"

"I know him quite well," commented Quin. "He is a member of the same club as I. A thoroughly good man; about as good as any in the world, I should say. What did Sir Timothy say, Miss Loring?"

The girl's body was shaken by one of those convulsive shudders which were so distressing to see.

"It was Sir Timothy who referred me to you, Mr. Quin. After examining poor Daddy, he said that it was a case outside of medical science,

because, as far as he could determine, there was no physical cause for father's condition. Although not a robust man—but then Daddy had never been that—he said my father was wonderfully healthy and well preserved for his age. When I first heard him mention your name I thought you were still another doctor—— "

"Naturally," was the grave comment.

"And, to be frank, Mr. Quin, while of course I was anxious to do anything—*anything*—which could make Daddy better, I was so disappointed that I did not act at once upon his advice. You are not a doctor, Mr. Quin ? "

"No—only of the mind," replied my friend. "I can tell you why Sir Timothy Brash mentioned my name to you, Miss Loring. He considered that your father's illness was due to another agency rather than disease."

"What agency, Mr. Quin ? "

"That I cannot say with certainty until I reach the spot. Huish, look up the next train to Trevelyn. We shall return with Miss Loring. There is not a moment to lose ! "

I consulted the Bradshaw and glanced at my watch.

"There is a train from Paddington in an hour's time."

"We will catch it," said Quin decisively.

In the train Miss Loring told the rest of her amazing story. The malignant influence which was at work in her life had manifested itself in another direction besides rendering her father a helpless cripple. Harry Sinclair, her devoted lover, the man to whom she was engaged, had

suddenly seemed to become bereft of his senses, to lose his reason.

"Not that he has become actually mad," explained the girl, "but he regards me now more or less as a stranger, and he spends all his time mooning about on the sands. His manner has become so peculiar that he is the talk of the town, and people are saying that—that he ought to be taken away. Mr. Quin,"—stretching out a beautiful hand in anguished appeal—"do you think you will be able to help me?"

"I shall do all I can," was the grave response. "I promise you not to leave Trevelyn until the mystery is solved in any case."

"What is your view, Quin?"

He turned on me impatiently.

"I have no view at present," he replied. "There may be a filmy thought at the back of my mind, but it is far too early to speak about that yet. All I can say now, Huish, is that we are faced with a problem that has so many terrors attached that we simply must not fail! Even the thought of failure is so ghastly as to terrify me!"

I knew better than to provoke him into further speech at that moment, although God knows how anxious I was. The story which had brought us post-haste from London to this dreary Cornish coast town, would have seemed incredible had I not been mixed up sufficiently in Sebastian Quin's affairs to know from experience that, to quote the words he had himself said to the victim of

this diabolical plot, "the fantastic is usually the likeliest thing to happen—given certain conditions."

I looked at the man who had solved more mysteries than any other person living. He was so deep in thought over his pipe that there was a deep furrow in his forehead.

Sebastian Quin was an enthusiast of the bizarre. He was as unlike the ordinary crime investigator as the real detective is unlike the fiction variety. Possessed of comfortable means, he devoted his life to the study of crime in its more exotic and weird manifestations. He was a repository of so much varied knowledge that I often marvelled how and by what means he could have accumulated so many facts, knowing that he was still under forty. Quin had learned Chinese well enough to pass for a native within a month, and could speak altogether eighteen languages. That in itself gives proof of his mental powers.

He was far more than a mere detective of crime: he was a dissector, an analyst, an anatomist of the mind of the criminal. He was never satisfied with merely stopping a crime; he delved beneath and learned what had prompted the outrage. Altogether an amazing person, and my friendship with him was the greatest honour that I—or any other man—could have experienced. It pleased Quin to let me accompany him on certain of his investigations. The part I played was always an exceedingly humble one—I was merely a super on the stage; but Quin, like many other great men, had his moments of pardonable vanity, and he liked to have some

one near him to whom he could explain and expound after a "case" had come to a satisfactory conclusion.

We had decided upon *The Grand* because it was the hotel nearest to "The Height"—that mysterious house in which Rathin Memory lived; and, late as it was after we had seen Violet Loring safely to her own door, Quin and I had walked the half-mile of desolate cliff-land which separated the Grand Hotel from "The Height."

I shall never forget that walk. The wind had sprung up and was howling like the spirits of tortured fiends; every now and then the thundering of giant waters sounded, and we were drenched with spray as we walked along the zigzag path that ran between the golf course and the towering range of cliffs.

"This should be the place," Quin remarked, flashing the small electric torch he carried.

We climbed the mighty headland which Violet Loring had called Pentire, and a laborious business it was. A strange and erratic mind it must have been that conceived the idea of building a house on the top of that cliff which jutted straight out into the Atlantic Ocean. Like the nest of some gigantic eagle "The Height" looked as we stood before the iron gates which were rusty with disuse and almost hidden—as Violet Loring had said—by rank weeds and grasses as tall as a man's body.

The place was a monstrous blot of gloom. Not a light showed. There was no sign of any human habitation, and yet—I told myself it was fancy brought on by the story which had brought

us to this spot at eleven o'clock of a winter's night—something seemed to grip me by the throat as I stood staring there in the darkness.

"Quin!" I called, and then was ashamed of myself.

My companion came up and looked at me fixedly.

"What is it?" he demanded.

I tried to laugh, but succeeded only in making a dismal croak.

"I—I can't explain it, Quin," I stammered, "but just then—when I called, I mean—something devilish seemed to be trying to choke the life out of me! It had me by the throat. I was afraid for myself and for you too—that was why I called. Don't laugh at me!" I went on angrily. "The sensation was real enough—too real for my liking."

Quin switched off his torch.

"I am not going to laugh," he replied seriously. "I had exactly the same feeling myself—and you would not call me an unduly imaginative man, Huish?"

"I should not!" I said emphatically.

Quin was silent as we walked away.

The whole affair was steeped in mystery—evil mystery. On the morning following our arrival we saw David Loring, the girl's father. He was a pitiable object. Apart from the fact that he could speak, he was a complete paralytic. But his mind was clear enough.

"I am under the spell of some devilish influence," he told Quin. "That may seem an

incomprehensible thing to you—and, on the other hand, you may accept the statement because I understand you have had many strange experiences yourself, Mr. Quin. Dr. Logan will tell you the exact words that Sir Timothy Brash, the great consultant, said when he examined me."

Sebastian Quin, nodding gravely, took the grey-haired local practitioner on one side.

"From a medical point of view," said Dr. Logan, "Mr. Loring ought to be as well as you or I. He has been overhauled inside and out; all sorts of tests were made by Sir Timothy Brash, who said at the end: 'Well, the whole thing is incomprehensible from a medical point of view.' Poor Mr. Loring himself talks a lot about some malign influence, but, of course, all that is nonsense. This is not the Middle Ages."

"It may or it may not be nonsense," replied Sebastian Quin.

A short time after this we met Harry Sinclair, Violet Loring's fiancé, as he was about to enter the house. He proved to be a good-looking, manly young fellow—at least, I should perhaps say he would no doubt have given that impression in ordinary circumstances.

Now he did not appear to be in possession of all his faculties. His mind was wandering, and he was so careless in his attire that I noticed a flash of pain come into Violet Loring's face.

As for Sinclair, he stared blankly at her, and glared around at the rest of us.

"Harry, this is Mr. Sebastian Quin, from London," the girl announced.

Again she received a disconcerting, blank stare.

"Who are you? Why do you keep on speaking to me? Leave me alone!" the man said fretfully, and then a look of loathsome cunning transfigured his face as he added: "But I know who you are! You're David Loring's daughter. You're a bad lot, and I don't want anything to do with you! It's your father I want—I'm very fond of your father!" He chuckled obscenely.

A sob sounded behind me.

"You can see for yourselves," said Violet Loring, her distress racking her, "that this is not my Harry. This is some monster he has been changed into!"

While I tried to comfort her, Sebastian Quin had stepped between Sinclair and the door of the Lorings' house.

"I shouldn't go in now," he said quietly to the stricken man.

The wave of madness which made Sinclair's eyes glare and his whole body stiffen died down as suddenly as it was born when he looked into Quin's face. With a snarl like that of an angry dog, he turned away without saying another word.

For the rest of that day Quin kept a close watch on the Lorings' home, and, noticing how tense and strung-up he was, I ventured to ask him the reason.

"You may know to-night," was the only reply he would give me.

"Ah!" cried Sebastian Quin softly, yet with intense satisfaction. "There it is!"

He pointed upward. The left wing of "The Height' took the form of a short, squat tower, and it was from a window in this tower that a light—the first sign of human life or activity in the place that we had yet observed—now glowed like a star in a dark sky.

"Our vigil is ended," said Quin. "What we have to do now is to ascertain what is going on in that room with the light. The question is whether we shall achieve that purpose by entering the house, or whether we can sufficiently satisfy our curiosity by climbing up this incline, which is on a level with the window, and looking through by lying on our stomachs. I propose the latter method, for it will be quicker, and I feel pretty certain that time is valuable. Now for the climb. Be careful you don't fall!"

We were already standing beneath the shadow of the house of mystery. My heart beat at twice its normal rate when I contemplated the task which Quin had set us.

The progress of that hazardous climb, one false step in which would have meant not only the ruination of our plans, but inevitable death, is a memory upon which I never afterward liked to look back. It seemed to last an eternity, but eventually I found myself lying side by side with Quin upon the small plateau, and looking into the room the light from which had attracted us from the ground. There were some curtains to the window, but the man inside had evidently felt so secure in his own mind about not being overseen, that he had not troubled to draw them.

"Stay perfectly still, and do not do anything until I give you the word, *whatever you may see!*" whispered my companion, stressing the last few words in a way that sent a cold chill down my spine.

Every separate nerve in my body seemed to be twitching as I saw a man enter the room. By the description which Violet Loring had given us, I recognised him at once as Rathin Memory.

She had not exaggerated the dread with which this man would have inspired in the ordinary clean-living, clean-thinking, normal person. The man, even from a distance, seemed to be surrounded by an aura of evil.

"Watch!" came the tense whisper from Quin.

Memory was carrying a bundle when he entered the room, which as far as I could see was quite bare of furniture. Placing the bundle on the floor, he first took out five brass lamps of a peculiar design. Then followed a stoppered vessel. After that the man produced a white cock, alive—for it struggled—but with its feet and beak tied in some fashion that I could not ascertain because I was too far away. Then followed a knife, the blade of which gleamed in the light.

"What——?" I whispered, but Quin ordered me to be quiet.

I followed the subsequent actions of the man in the lighted room with breathless attention, for I realised that I was the witness of something which was full of significance—otherwise why should Sebastian Quin have been so absorbed?

I saw Rathin Memory measure out a space. Having counted off a number of feet—how many I could not reckon—he drew a circle of chalk. Then, taking the bottle, he pulled out the stopper and walked around inside the circle, sprinkling the chalk line with the liquid the bottle contained. At each step he stopped and made a peculiar gesture.

"The second sign of the unholy celebration," I heard Quin mutter.

The complete circle having been sprinkled, the man drew a five-pointed star with the chalk. Then, lighting the five small lamps which he had brought, he placed one at each of the five points. He seemed to be muttering some ritual as he did so, for I could see his lips move.

Placing himself in the centre of the pentacle, he commenced what must have been a chant, for his lips moved again and his hands swept upward and outward. Presently the uncanny thing which I had been expecting ever since I had first looked into the room happened—for from each of the five lamps guarding the points of the pentacle there suddenly sprang a reddish tongue of flame. These met and formed a solid barrier of fire around the man in the centre.

At this point Memory thrust out his hand and seized the white cock. Holding the knife aloft, as though first consecrating it to its task, he decapitated the bird with a single stroke, and I saw the blood splash on the floor inside the circle.

"Now that the blood is warm——" I heard Sebastian Quin mutter, but I was too fascinated

by the horrible ritual I was witnessing to turn to him.

I saw the unholy celebrant lift up his hands as though saying a prayer. As he did so, the wall of flame with which he had been surrounded died down. Five tongues of flame issued out of the solid fire and returned to the lamps which burned at the five points of the pentacle. The light of the lamps now burned low, flickered just as though assailed by a gale of wind. They were trembling as though some unseen force were trying to put them out.

"My God!" breathed Quin. "The real thing—the real thing!"

Again I was too absorbed to take any notice of my companion.

Spellbound I saw—or fancied I saw—a grey cloud beat about the figure of the man in the circle of the pentacle. I saw Rathin Memory's lips move again.

"Quickly!" A grip of steel was on my arm, and a voice that brooked no denial sounded in my ear. "Huish, get back to the Lorings' house at once! Murder may be done there at any moment! Go at once—I must stay here. Go, man!"

So strong was his control over me at that moment that I did not hesitate. I moved like a man in a dream, for the dreadful images I had seen were vivid in my mind—but I must have been quick, for within a surprisingly short space of time I found myself in the garden and climbing over the high wall that separated it from the cliff-land.

Once on the other side, I took to my heels like a man pursued by fiends. But I was not frightened. My one idea was to get to the Lorings' house cottage as quickly as possible.

Though it was long past midnight when I arrived there, I hammered at the door loudly enough to wake the dead.

But I was in the house long before the door could be opened. Going around to the side, I saw a ladder placed against a bedroom window. In a flash the realisation came to me that this led to David Loring's room.

Rushing up the ladder, I flung myself through the window—just in time to prevent a man from plunging a knife into the breast of the sleeping paralytic.

"Sinclair!" I cried. "What the devil are you doing here?"

I had hold of his wrist, and the knife clattered to the floor. And although he struggled like the madman he was, I was desperate myself, and ruthless. Getting clear, I swung a right to the jaw that carried every ounce in my body, and he crumpled helpless across the bed of the man he had intended to murder.

"What's the matter? Why—I can move! I'm better! I'm well!"

This night of strangeness was to hold another mystery. Imagine my amazement when David Loring, a hopeless paralytic the short time I had known him, jumped out of bed and came across to me.

"I'm well! I'm cured!" he cried, tears running down his cheeks.

The next moment Violet Loring rushed into the room.

"Daddy!"

She had been in his arms for several seconds before she seemed to realise that any one else was in the room.

Then—

"Mr. Huish! . . . *Harry!*" she cried.

As she spoke his name her lover sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Vi! I've had such a horrible dream! What am I doing here?" he said.

* * * * *

It was not until Sebastian Quin and I were ensconced cosily before our sitting-room fire at the *Grand Hotel* that I regained my normality. The mysteries I had seen following so quickly one upon the other that night had been too much for me to grasp.

"For Heaven's sake, Quin, explain matters—everything!" I snapped. This was 1930, and I was tired of trying to probe things to which there appeared to be no earthly explanation. Paralysed men suddenly jumping out of bed . . . madmen becoming sane through a blow on the jaw . . . tongues of flame . . . slaughtered cocks . . .

"I have already told you that Rathin Memory is dead," said Quin. "Exactly how he died is too horrible to relate, but, briefly, the evil forces which he conjured up by means of the black magic you saw to-night, and which he had used to work evil upon two other men—to paralyse David Loring and to make Harry Sinclair mad—

ed him. Once I had wrecked the five ring lamps of the pentacle, which I did with revolver shortly after you had left, he was no nger safe. And the spell which he had caused to be cast upon Loring and Sinclair was broken. The devils which he could control as long as those lamps served as protection seized him. I heard one short, strangled scream of dreadful horror, and I knew it was over."

While I stared at him in speechless amazement, Quin continued: "If you told the ordinary person that Black Magic was practised in England to-day, you would be thought a lunatic; but the fact is true, as you have yourself had the proof, Huish. I had my suspicions that this man Rathin Memory was an adept in the unholy art when I first heard Miss Loring's story, but it was too early for me to give any opinion on the matter until I had myself seen him at the actual practice."

"But that grey shape, Quin?"

"Was one or more spirits of evil—devils, if you care for the usual superstitious term. It is too technical a matter for me to explain now at length, but there is no doubt that the rites of Black Magic have been carefully preserved and handed down. The Egyptians unquestionably had the power to raise evil spirits and use them for purposes of personal vengeance. And have you not read how Madame de Montespan consulted a witch and took part in a Black Mass with the notorious Abbé Guibourg, so that she might win back the love of Louis the Fourteenth of France? Indeed, there is evidence enough!

"In Tibet to-day spirit-raising is practised in its most elaborate and secret forms. That was what first gave me the idea that this man Memory was an adept—the news that he had recently returned from that land of weird and uncanny mystery. And now"—yawning—"I'm off to bed.

I too went to bed—but I could not sleep.

[THE END]