

IN THE DARK

Books by

SYDNEY HORLER

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BY
SYDNEY HORLER



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TO MY
MOTHER AND FATHER

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THE elderly clerk adjusted his spectacles, frowned, and then looked at the young man on the other side of the counter.

"Do you really wish to insert this advertisement, sir?" he inquired.

"Certainly!" There was no hesitation about the reply. It was brisk and business-like.

Once again the elderly clerk adjusted his spectacles, frowned, and looked at the prospective advertiser.

"Excuse me, sir—but——"

"Oh, confound it, man! get on with your job."

The precise-looking individual, who spent his working-day reading the most piquantly interesting public announcements that appear in English, coughed. Mr. George Griffin had often placed it on record, when in the bosom of his family, that nothing could astonish him—*nothing*.

Yet as Napoleon had his Waterloo, so did Mr. George Gregory Griffin, a much more

important person in his own estimation, now almost have to acknowledge defeat. He had started to dash through the advertisement in his usual perfunctory manner, checking off the number of words to arrive at the proper amount of payment; but when he had counted only ten words, he paused, pencil poised. During the whole of the thirty years he had been behind the counter of the *Meteor* advertisement department, he had never known an occasion such as this.

"I am not sure if we can insert this advertisement," he said at length; "I must see the manager."

Presently he returned with a round-faced, clean-shaven man, who stared at Martin Creighton from behind thick tortoiseshell spectacles.

"I am the advertisement manager," this person announced; "you wish to insert this advertisement?"—flipping the piece of paper he carried.

"I have already said so."

"H'm!" Two heads were placed close together, and a vocal hum ensued. "Most unusual . . . he looks sane . . . yet good publicity . . . every paper will quote it . . ." were some of the fragments of sentences that Creighton caught. Finally:

"How many insertions?" inquired Mr.

George Gregory Griffin stiffly. He had the manner of one who, having settled with Destiny, intended to see the matter through.

"One."

"Seven-and-six, please"—and the deal was closed.

Later that afternoon a compositor in the case-room of the *Morning Meteor* set up the following advertisement for the next morning's Personal Column :

Old Public School Boy (27) wishes to sell his life. £5,000. Desperate, healthy, adaptable. Box N. 4197, or Museum 10,000.

There are many ways in which a man can be ruined. One very effective one is to allow a financial optimist, whom you have just met, to take over your money affairs. Martin Creighton, home from South America with £5,000 saved from a silver mining expedition, had listened to the specious voice of a stranger to whom he had been introduced in the Wanderers' Club and had parted with his £5,000. It sounds the act of a simpleton, but, bless you! the wisest of men can behave like pie-cans on occasion. And do: ask Throgmorton Street. Creighton had dined well on this particular evening, and the prospect which

the other dangled before him was an alluring one.

"Certain to pay at least 25 per cent. to start," cooed the charmer; "if you hadn't been vouched for by old Trevelyn here, I don't know that I should have said a word, because my people, who are doing all the brokering, are naturally keeping it dark. . . ." There was a lot more of it, equally unimportant, but the end of it was that the following morning Creighton went to his bank to make the necessary arrangements to draw out the exact sum of £5,000.

"Don't think me inquisitive, but may I ask what you intend to do with all the boodle?" inquired the manager. At any other time, Creighton would probably have been inclined to open his heart to the speaker, who was ruddy-faced, lean-limbed, walked with a horseman's roll, and who looked more like a fox-hunting master of hounds than a bank manager.

"Make it earn some more," he contented himself now with saying.

"Don't expect it to make *too* much—War Loan's as good as anything if you want a steady return. That's perfectly safe, you know."

"I have something better than that," Martin said, and chuckled.

The manager pursed his lips, looked as though he would like to say something more, but turned back into his private office.

That had been two months ago—exactly eight weeks since Martin Creighton, after going into things pretty thoroughly, had made his last visit to the pawnshop before going on to the *Meteor* office. He was now minus watch and cigarette-case. He had been minus his £5,000 for a month past.

There was some mystery about the rubber company in which his £5,000 was supposed to have been invested; but there was no mystery at all about Ronald Warbeck, the financial optimist to whom he had entrusted all the money he possessed in the world. Three days after he had passed the cheque to Warbeck, Martin called at the latter's office. He was received with suspicion. This soon changed to consternation when he informed the head of the firm that Warbeck had recently received a cheque for £5,000 from him.

"Ronald Warbeck has not been to the office this week. From inquiries made we have reason to believe that he has left the country."

The last sentence sounded ominous, especially as the speaker's manner was very perturbed.

"Do you mean that the fellow has proved

himself a crook?" Creighton's jaw stiffened as he asked the question.

"I am afraid that is the real meaning of his sudden flight. You say you gave him a cheque for £5,000 last Saturday?"

"I did."

"But what did you know of the man? If you wanted to do business with this firm, why did you not come to the office yourself and state your requirements, when the matter would have been put through in a proper business-like fashion? I don't see how anyone could be fool enough to give a perfect stranger a cheque for £5,000."

Now that the thing was put in that way, neither could Creighton. It is remarkable how these sudden flashes will come. It is equally remarkable how light can suddenly be thrown upon a subject so that an entirely different view-point is inevitable. Before that moment Martin had been rather inclined to congratulate himself upon being a very shrewd fellow over this rubber deal; now——

"Yes, I am inclined to agree with you that I'm a damned fool," he said.

"Come into my private room," remarked the other, a different tone in his voice.

But although the manner of the head of Ronald Warbeck's firm changed, that brought Martin Creighton no monetary consolation. It

was made quite plain to him, in other words, that the loss of his £5,000 was a personal matter between Warbeck and himself, for which the firm could take no responsibility.

"I cannot understand you being such a fool," the senior partner kept repeating. It was to shut out the words that Creighton took his leave.

Not another word was heard of Ronald Warbeck; it was as though the earth had opened to swallow the swindler. Brought face to face with ruin, Martin hunted a job. But although he hunted desperately—wearing his shoe-leather out tramping the streets, writing letters until he was sick of seeing a pen and his own scrawled signature—a job for a healthy, adaptable, ex-Public School boy of twenty-seven seemed the rarest thing in the world.

He would have gone abroad, but all the posts were already filled by the time he arrived on the scene—and he was up at six every morning scanning the newspapers!

By the time he had reached his last pound-note he was not only desperate, but sardonic. The only thing he had left was his life. Well—with a grim laugh—he would try to sell that!

But, with his luck as it was, he did not think for a moment that he would get any buyers.

AT 6.30 p.m. on the day the advertisement appeared in the *Meteor*, the telephone bell rang. That was the last day of his tenancy of the small furnished flat in Guilford Street. Creighton had played the game, going to the estate agents from whom he had rented the place and telling them that, his financial resources being now nil, they would be well-advised to take the flat off his hands from the following Saturday morning.

"I'm sorry to hear this, Mr. Creighton," said the agent.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, but that doesn't alter it, unfortunately."

He had waited in all that day. It was just possible, he considered, that there might be a sudden boom in the Human Lives for Sale market. In any case, this was his last throw of the dice, so he was entitled to a little unreasonable optimism.

Every now and then he would pick up the *Meteor* and look at the advertisement, which had been set out with a craftsman's skill. Suppose he were a wealthy man and wanted a human life for any particular purpose: would that advertisement appeal to him? He thought

it would. But, then, the next moment he realised with a sudden sick feeling that nobody would take such an outrageous announcement seriously. They would think it a hoax or something too cryptic to bother about. Of course! What an ass he had been!

He lunched off biscuits and the last of the cheese, and smoked all the tobacco left in his pouch. At five o'clock he decided to chuck it—every one had finished with the morning newspapers by this time. No one would bother now. Besides, it was not likely that anyone would phone on such a subject; they would write, of course, and in very guarded terms.

He had put on his hat and overcoat, when he suddenly flung both off again. He would stick it out for another hour or so—say until half-past six. Then—well, he'd go and be run over or something exciting like that, since he had but a shilling left in the world.

The weariness of that waiting! Creighton was essentially an open-air man, and he was almost crazy for a smell of the wind-swept streets, so, the clock on the mantelpiece showing the half-hour after six, he put on hat and coat again.

Then, shattering the silence, the telephone rang. . . .

For a moment he stood hesitant. He was the last person to entertain any foolish fancies,

yet the air seemed heavy. Tempted to ignore the thing, he still hesitated. Should he go out into the clean and more wholesome atmosphere of the street?

Then, suddenly, feeling a fool, he turned, walked across the room, and picked up the receiver.

“. . . Help! Oh-h . . .!”

The words rang in his ears like the despairing cry of one utterly lost. It was a girl's voice, and it had vibrated with unmistakable terror. The last word had been cut off as though a hand had been placed suddenly over the speaker's mouth.

Creighton found his own voice.

“Hello . . . hello . . . who are you? Where are you speaking from?”

Then a suave, cultured voice—a man's voice this time—inquired:

“Are you Museum 10,000?”

“I am,” replied Creighton curtly. Before he could say any more, the other had gone on:

“Am I correct in assuming that I am speaking to the gentleman who advertised in the *Meteor* newspaper this morning?”

“You are correct,” said Creighton; “but look here——”

He was interrupted, courteously but decisively.

“If you wish to do business with me, you will attend carefully to what I am about to say,” The voice of the Unknown had taken on a harder note. “Are you willing to listen or shall I ring off?”

Quickly Martin replied: “I will listen.” The horror-cry of the girl still rang in his ears. The whole mysterious occurrence intrigued him. He forgot his own miserable affairs.

“Very well,” the voice continued. “Now, I want you to dine with me to-night. Is it convenient for you to be at Rimini’s Restaurant in Piccadilly at seven-thirty? I will make it eight if you like.”

“Half-past seven will suit me. But who are you? How shall I know you?”

He heard a short laugh.

“It will be sufficient for my purpose if I know you. You say you are twenty-seven in your advertisement. I imagine you to look like a gentleman, although your luck is out. Very well; wear in your button-hole a white carnation. You will be in day attire, of course, since, being so hard up, you will have already pawned your evening dress. At seven-thirty, then.” There was a soft click, and Creighton realised that the other had rung off.

“Damn!” he said very decisively. There was an air of unreality about this business which was irritating. It wasn’t like real life—

it was more of the Arabian Nights form of existence, about which he had generally smiled tolerantly when reading novels.

But—and here he unconsciously stiffened—that girl's cry had been real enough. Good God, yes! It had thrilled him. He had felt like jumping through space. The girl, whoever she might be, was in such terror—and perhaps peril—that she had sent that agonised appeal for help to an absolute stranger. He could not disregard or ignore it.

And the only way to try to find out who the girl might be, so that he could make some attempt to help her, was by keeping that dinner appointment at half-past seven. Of course he knew Rimini's: it was his favourite restaurant; he had spent a good deal of money there since returning to London.

As he put on a clean collar and changed his tie, he felt a quiet glow of excitement. It was his sense of manhood being restored to him. For so many weary weeks now he had been forced to have the utmost contempt for himself. The consciousness that no one seriously considered him as being fit to do any kind of decent work had induced this. But now Fate, Chance, or whatever it was, had given him a job worthy of a man. Yes, it was a man's job all right, rescuing a helpless girl from a position of great peril.

He even whistled a little tune as he left the flat.

Luigo, the *maitre d'hôtel*, recognised Creighton with a smile. Luigo was a man of perception; he flattered himself he could tell a gentleman when he saw one. From the first he had liked the tall, tanned, handsome young Englishman, who talked little, but was always so appreciative of good service. Luigo himself conducted the patron to a much prized seat in the corner.

"I am meeting a—friend," Martin told him.

"*Bien*, Monsieur. And is Monsieur's friend dining, too?"

"That I cannot say. I should think so. I will wait."

He waited for half an hour, and then rose to go.

"But Monsieur is not leaving—he has not dined!" Luigo was one with the poet; having dined, a man could wrestle with Fate, but not otherwise.

Creighton looked at the head waiter.

"I have no money, Luigo. I am down and out—ruined, busted, what you like. This man I was to meet invited me to dine here, presumably with him, but he has not turned up."

A look of consternation passed over the other's expressive face.

"If Monsieur is ruined, it is all the more reason why he should dine," he said, and bowed.

"You do not understand, Luigo—I was perfectly serious when I told you I had no money. I spent my last shilling on this carnation before coming in here. If I dined, I couldn't pay you."

"It is sad, but not hopeless. Life is a coming and a going—is it not so? Monsieur is without money to-night. To-morrow he may have plenty. Then he will come in and say: 'Luigo, here is sufficient to pay for my dinner last night.' It is necessary that Monsieur should have his dinner. Will you honour me by being my guest to-night, Monsieur?" This admirable fellow bowed again as though he were standing before Royalty.

"That is awfully kind of you, Luigo—most awfully kind. But you must see yourself that I could not possibly accept."

"Monsieur, is offended at my audacity, at my boldness? Monsieur, do you not think that I know a gentleman when I see one? Monsieur is not a thief, a crook, a swindler. . . . Eh! but you are hungry. I will go."

It was impossible to refuse the man without giving him deep offence.

"You understand that I will pay you not later than to-morrow night even if I have to commit murder?"

"Monsieur jokes. But, of course, Monsieur will pay. Have I been a head waiter in Rimini's for fifteen years without knowing the patrons?"

After that Creighton felt there was nothing else for it but to eat his dinner. His conscience was more or less salved by the man's insistence, and surely it would not be long before he was in possession of fifteen shillings or a pound?

"Monsieur will leave it to me?" Luigo, bustling back, placed *hors d'œuvre* on the table.

"Luigo, if I were King of England I would leave the entire management of the country to you."

It was a wonder meal. The other diners in the fashionable restaurant made inquiries who the distinguished man in the corner was to whom the great Luigo paid such assiduous attention. The fact that the diner was in ordinary clothes certainly added to the speculation as to his identity. A Prince incognito, the women decided.

"And now Monsieur will smoke?" Without waiting for a reply, Luigo signalled a passing waiter. Two minutes later a Corona

was clipped and handed reverently to the diner.

"But the bill, Luigo?"

The head waiter shrugged his shoulders. Then he smiled. Picking up the napkin which Creighton had dropped, he put it back on the table. In its folds Martin could see he had placed two one-pound notes.

This time it was the diner who shrugged. He lit his cigar and sipped his coffee in appreciation.

When next he looked up the room, Martin saw a man and woman approaching him. They were such a striking-looking couple that everyone was staring. The man was hugely built, but his immense frame seemed to be made entirely of bone and muscle. He was dressed in wonderfully cut, immaculately fitting evening kit.

Clean-shaven, his face had a ruddy glow. In vivid contrast to his otherwise raven-black hair were three white patches, which arrested the attention immediately. At a rough glance Martin estimated the man's age as being between forty-five and fifty. The thought also flashed into his mind that he would be a bad enemy to make; for such was the impression formed even by a casual glance.

By the man's side walked a woman. She was in the early twenties, Martin judged. A

second look at her made him catch his breath. The voluptuous, untamed beauty of this girl—she was little more—struck him like a blow between the eyes. Dangerous, decidedly—a creature designed for the discomfiture, and, perhaps, ruin of men. Her face was exquisite in feature and colouring, and yet the eyes glowed with a fire that was subtly evil. She walked with a bewildering grace, and her swaying movements accentuated every curve of her wonderfully alluring figure. Martin thought she must be a Slav.

This was the pair who, halting before the table at which he was seated alone, looked at Martin intently.

“I regret we are late,” said the man. He did not add, although Luigo could have told him, that they had been dining themselves at Rimini’s that night, but in a position from which they could watch Creighton without the latter being aware of the fact.

Creighton looked at the man. He did not like his tone.

“Have you made a mistake?” he asked coldly.

“You are wearing the carnation? You are the person I expected to find.”

“The type of man, perhaps,” corrected Creighton; “I have never seen you before in my life.”

The Colossus pulled out a chair.

"You will permit us to join you in coffee and a liqueur?" he said. "My dear"—turning to the girl, who flashed a look from her brilliant eyes at Martin—"this is Mr.——"

"My name is Creighton."

"Mr. Creighton, my dear. Our names do not matter for the time being. You will know them soon enough." There was still a curt finality about his speech which Creighton found particularly objectionable.

"And suppose I asked you now?" he replied.

The big man made a contemptuous gesture with the black cigar he had lit.

"You would not be told, and all negotiations would be immediately broken off."

The almost overwhelming temptation his listener had was to tell him to go to the devil and walk away. But as the blood flushed to his face, and the hand resting on the table became clenched, a girl's despairing appeal rang in his ears. The words she had screamed haunted him—would continue to haunt him until he solved the mystery. This man was a human devil, unless he was utterly at fault in reading his character. The woman by his side was a fitting companion for him. In such hands, what chance would a solitary girl have?

He bit his lip and swallowed the words he would have liked to utter.

"Very well; I will be content to listen."

The man smiled.

"That is very wise of you. But I do not propose to talk here. I must ask you to come where it will be—safer."

As he said the last word, Martin felt the eyes of both fixed intently upon him. They wished to test his courage, he supposed. All right. He wouldn't disappoint them.

"Very well. I will pay my bill."

"You must permit me to have that pleasure. You came here to dine at my request."

"As you like," replied Creighton indifferently. Certainly he wouldn't have dined at Rimini's if it had not been for this man.

The latter signalled to a passing waiter.

"Include my friend's bill with mine."

They left the waiter bowing over a five-pound note, from which, the big man had intimated, he did not expect any change.

"To what I am going to tell you now, Mr. Creighton, I desire you to pay particular attention," said the Unknown. "As I have told you, I do not desire to discuss anything here. But, on the other hand, there are certain reasons why I do not wish you to know where we are going. Because of these, I must ask you to allow yourself to be blindfolded until

we arrive at our destination. Have you any objection to that?"

"My uncle has forgotten to add, Mr. Creighton, that no harm will come to you. It is—what you say?—a necessary precaution, that is all."

Prejudiced as he was against this pair, Martin Creighton felt annoyed that the girl's voice should so affect him. He was unable to prevent himself feeling thrilled as, leaning across the table, she smiled. An elusive scent was wafted to him.

"Since you wish to be melodramatic, I have no objection," he replied.

The Colossus made an exclamation of impatient anger, but the girl continued to smile.

"I felt sure you would be reasonable," she told him.

At the door Martin contrived to hang behind for a moment. He saw that Luigo wished to speak to him.

"Monsieur, I beg of you to be careful," said the head waiter.

"What do you mean?" he inquired, as he passed to the other the two one-pound notes.

"Monsieur, it is not for me to say anything more about Monsieur's friends, but I beg of you to be careful." The next second he had turned and walked away.

When the three entered the huge limousine, which waited at the door of the restaurant, it was the girl who tied the black silk handkerchief round Creighton's head. This was not the first time she had done the trick, Creighton was ready to swear. When he was thus effectively blinded, he conjectured what degree of a fool he had been to run such a risk. The fact that these people must know that he was down and out, and thus not worth the trouble of trying to rob, became, however, a minor consolation.

As the heavy car swung easily round a corner, he wondered whether the thoroughfare was Park Lane. For a moment or two he thought of endeavouring so to concentrate his mind that he would be able to remember the way to the place to which he was being taken. But soon giving up the attempt because of its obvious futility, he waited more or less patiently for this mad adventure to take the next form.

He could not correctly gauge the time, but he imagined that about a quarter of an hour must have passed since leaving Rimini's, when the car, which, expertly driven, had glided like a phantom through the night, suddenly stopped.

"Please give me your hand," he heard the Colossus say.

As he reluctantly complied, soft, clinging

fingers, thrilling to the touch, caught hold of his other hand.

"Do not be afraid," whispered a voice. The girl's lips must have been close to his face, for he could feel her breath on his cheek. Again he experienced that sharp sense of annoyance: this girl was subtly dangerous with her tremendous sex appeal; was it her intention to make a fool of him?

Steps were mounted. There was a brief pause—caused, no doubt, by a door being opened—then a walk of twenty paces or so on a carpet into which his feet sank, and which gave forth no sound. After that, he felt the girl's hand slip from his. A moment later there was a faint click; he was told to sit down. He did so; the bandage was untied, and he looked round blinkingly.

He was not surprised to find himself in a room that was furnished not only luxuriously, but in exquisite taste. A wonderful Aubusson carpet was on the floor; the chairs were Chippendale, and every other article in the room would have excited the envious admiration of a connoisseur. This was a room which both wealth and culture had combined to render triumphal. It soothed the senses while intoxicating the eye.

"Will you have a cigarette or a cigar, Mr. Creighton?"

Now that he was in his own home, the Colossus employed a more courteous manner. Martin was perfectly willing to respond in kind; no two persons he had yet met interested him so much as this man and woman. Apart from the mystery of that unknown and unseen girl's gasping cry for help, apart, also, from the mystery of what these people wanted with him, there was the intriguing and tantalising puzzle of who this couple really were. As he selected a cigarette from the lapis-lazuli box which the girl placed before him, he resolved to know all these things in time. He had wanted something to enliven existence, and he had certainly achieved it.

A uniformed servant entered, to whom the Colossus spoke rapidly in a language which Martin did not understand, but which he imagined to be Italian. Quickly the man returned, and started to serve coffee and liqueurs.

Creighton sipped the finest Kümmel he had ever tasted, and sat back prepared to listen. The Colossus lighted a cigar, and the girl—Martin started wondering if she really were the man's niece—puffed engagingly at a cigarette.

"You were perfectly serious in your advertisement, Mr. Creighton?" The Colossus had started the talk in a voice that was magnetically brisk and businesslike.

"Perfectly serious."

"Do you mind explaining to me your exact circumstances? I hasten to add that for my purpose (which I will presently explain) it is necessary for me to have this information."

Martin overcame his natural reluctance to tell these people of his folly. He narrated the Ronald Warbeck incident briefly, but succinctly.

At the end the listener nodded.

"You were a simpleton, of course," he commented; "but that may be——"

Martin was ready to take his oath that, *absentmindedly*, perhaps, the Colossus was going to complete the sentence by adding the words "an advantage," when the girl, leaning forward, cut in with: "Many clever men have been simpletons at one time or another of their lives, uncle." She flashed Creighton a look, as much as to say that she was sticking up for him, but this time her arrow glanced away. He was too busy studying his host to pay any attention to her.

Unquestionably, this man was a power. His attitude denoted a contemptuous disregard for the ordinary rules and customs of life; although he had not said so much, Creighton sensed this. He felt convinced that no crime would be beyond this man if it suited his purpose; he would commit murder with the

same unemotional calm and perfect poise as he now shook the ash from his cigar.

"Tell me something more about yourself—your weight, exact height. Are you strong, fit, healthy? Have you travelled? If so, in what countries? What languages, if any, do you speak? Can you use firearms?"

This was becoming increasingly interesting. Martin said that he stood five feet ten inches in his socks, and weighed twelve stone two pounds. He was twenty-seven years of age.

"I know that from your advertisement," he was brusquely interrupted; "please keep to the information I have asked you to supply."

Creighton flushed, but continued to reply to the catechism. He said that he had been a heavy-weight boxer at his Public School as well as a Rugby player. He was as strong as most men, he believed, and just now was in very fit condition. He could use a revolver, having carried one in South America. He was not much good at languages, but he could manage French, while he could make himself understood in Spanish.

Coming to an end of his accomplishments, which, with this man's drilling gaze upon him, seemed ridiculously inadequate, Martin ventured to ask a question in return.

"What do you want?" he said firmly.

The Colossus moved in his chair. He

ignored the question, but glanced at the girl. The latter smiled, and nodded her head.

"Mr. Creighton," the Unknown said in a voice that, in spite of the self-control he was exerting, made Martin tingle at the back of his neck, "you have offered to sell your life. I'm inclined to buy it."

CHAPTER III

THE SEEKER OF SECRETS

IN an upstairs room of the house to which Martin Creighton had been taken that night, a girl, in her early twenties, was trying to find the solution to a bewildering puzzle. Margery Steers was not only a very attractive girl, but a most intelligent one, yet the answer she sought still eluded her. Although she was one of the principal private secretaries of Lord Belshaven, the British Foreign Secretary, what object could these people—whoever they were—have in kidnapping her? The day for that sort of thing was passed; it might be described in a book, but it could not happen in real life. Yet when she looked at the barred window of this room to which she had been taken, and tried once more the handle of the door that she already knew to be locked, the realisation that she was possibly in a position of actual danger again become convincing.

That had been her first thought upon finding herself in a strange house and confronted by a man whose appearance caused an apprehensive shiver to pass down her spine. It was his look which had impelled her to rush forward, snatch the telephone receiver from the huge man's hand, and make that desperate, if ineffectual, appeal for help earlier in the evening. She had been unnerved for the moment. It had been a man at the other end—she had caught the deep tones of his voice as he said "Yes?" No doubt another member of this organisation—was it a criminal one?—which had carried her off so audaciously from the crowded street.

Margery tried to marshal her thoughts and to arrange them in some kind of order. That afternoon she had left the Foreign Office rather late—the new Geneva Conference had caused a tremendous amount of additional work—and she was still preoccupied, when a woman stopped her at the top of Downing Street. At first glance she thought this woman the most fascinating creature she had ever met.

"Are you Miss Steers—Miss Margery Steers?"

"Yes," she had replied, wondering who her questioner could be.

"I have called with the car to take you to the Countess—she wishes to see you at once."

"The Countess of Belshaven?"

"Yes, of course—who else?" was the smiling rejoinder. "I am the Princess Trovinainsky—surely you have heard the Countess speak of me?"

As a matter of fact, Margery hadn't; but she knew from experience that the wife of the most astute and talented statesman in England was a very volatile personality, who did the most erratic things on occasion, and who numbered amongst her acquaintances many exotic personages. The speaker might well be one of these.

"Do you know what it is the Countess wishes to see me about?" she asked.

"I haven't an idea, but she was most insistent I should come in the car to fetch you."

At any other time Margery's clear and well-disciplined brain might have sounded a warning; but she had had a very busy day, and her mind was chiefly concerned with the important work still to be done before she went to bed that night. Not wishing to waste any further time in fruitless conversation, she stepped into the car, the door of which the Princess Trovinainsky held open—and remembered nothing more! . . .

That was perhaps the most exasperating and annoying feature of the whole incident. She was convinced that no one else had been in the car at the moment of her entry besides this foreign-looking woman, who was so physically

fascinating, and who had a subtle charm which, even in the short time she had been speaking to her, she had found very difficult to withstand.

Then it must have been the woman who had temporarily robbed her of her senses. But how? And why? Still she had no idea. All she could remember was awakening to consciousness in a large, beautifully furnished room. A hugely-built man was the only other occupant of this room. He was a striking figure, looking fit and agile in spite of his enormous size, and evidently possessing a magnetic personality. He was immaculately dressed. His face glowed with almost rude health, and she noticed that in his otherwise raven-black hair were three white patches, which arrested the attention immediately.

"Good-evening, Miss Steers; I have just a telephone call to make." A commonplace, polite remark; nothing more.

She watched him ask for a number, and then, acting on an impulse which she could not control, she had rushed forward and taken the receiver out of his hand. She had been able to gasp only two words—what was it she had actually said?—when a hand was placed brutally over her mouth, and she was dragged away from that elegantly furnished room, and placed in this bare attic, which possibly had been a servant's bedroom at one time.

There she had been left. How slowly the time had passed! No doubt keeping her in that state of suspense was part of these peoples' campaign. Yet what could possibly be their object?

She sprang up. That was someone at the door. A quick glance round showed that there was nothing which she could employ as a weapon: in the old days she could have used her hat-pin, but now there was nothing but her bare hands. And what use would her bare hands be against that Colossus?

A moment later the man with the white patches in his hair entered. He had closed and locked the door on the inside before she could cross the room.

"Now, Miss Steers," he said, turning, "I want to have a chat with you, and I sincerely hope you are not going to be foolish. To begin with, I do not want you to waste my time by asking foolish questions. I will admit at once that you have been brought to me through a ruse—a trick, if you like that word better——"

"For what purpose?" she interrupted. "You apparently know that I am a private secretary to Lord Belshaven, the Foreign Secretary. He is scarcely the type of man to allow this sort of thing to happen. Already, I expect, he has informed Scotland Yard of my absence."

At the mention of the words "Scotland Yard," a slow smile passed over the determined face of the man.

"I think we can dispense with Scotland Yard," he said.

The girl stamped her foot. Her clean-cut, aristocratic face was flushed. She brushed back the chestnut-coloured tendrils of hair, which had strayed over her forehead, impatiently.

"You may wish to dispense with Scotland Yard," she said, "but it is a certainty that Lord Belshaven will not. As I say, no doubt he has already lodged a complaint. This sort of outrage cannot be tolerated; I am determined to leave here at once."

The Colossus waved his hand in contemptuous dismissal of the proposal.

"I have already warned you not to be foolish," he said peremptorily; "now, please listen to me without any further interruptions. Otherwise, your father——"

Despite the warning, Margery broke in.

"How dare you mention my father! What have you to do with him?"

"This. I have power, not only to ruin your father, but to send him to prison for a long term of years."

There was conviction in the tone: these were no empty words. The speaker thundered them

out with a force that sent the girl's hand to her heart.

Only for a moment, however, she was staggered. Then she rallied.

"My father is a highly respected Civil Servant. He occupies an important position at the Treasury. Your suggestion that he is dishonest is ludicrously absurd."

"Very well. I will not argue. I will simply say that I have proof—convincing and overwhelming proof—that your father has been helping himself to State funds for a number of years. A word of this in the proper quarter——"

The girl shivered.

She felt the charge to be grotesquely false, and yet—— Who was this man, and how did he get such information?

The Colossus answered as though he could read her thoughts.

"No doubt you will wonder how I, a stranger to you—and, yes, to your father; I do not mind admitting that—am able to make such a positive statement. I have not time to explain further now than to say I am a Seeker of Secrets. The secret of your father's dishonesty has been brought to me——"

"The man who told you is a liar." But even as she said the words a lump came into her throat. Was it possible that her father, from

whom, through no fault of her own, she had been estranged since her mother's death two years before, had become reckless through that secret failing of his? But, no; she couldn't realise it: it was too horrible.

"The man who brought me this information is absolutely reliable," was the unequivocal answer. "But I will not have any more of my time wasted," he went on, in a quick change of tone; "you have been brought here to obey a command——"

"I am not accustomed to obey commands from strangers. Once again let me warn you most seriously that unless I am allowed to leave this house immediately the police——"

A hand shot out. It seized her wrist.

"Sit down!" The Colossus roared the words. Feeling all her strength suddenly leave her, Margery was forced to comply.

"I will tell you briefly what I wish you to do," said the man. Apparently he had ignored her threat. "Being the private secretary of Lord Belshaven, you are, of course, in his confidence. Isn't that so?"

She made no reply. Light was beginning to illumine her former darkness.

"Being in his confidence," went on the voice, "you will naturally know where Lord Belshaven's private papers are kept. It is certain of those private papers that I want."

She laughed scornfully.

"And do you think for a moment that you are going to obtain any of Lord Belshaven's private papers through me?"

The Colossus smiled ironically.

"I certainly do. In fact, I am sure of it. That is why I had you brought to me here to-night."

She sprang to her feet again.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

Again that ironical smile.

"I have already told you. I am a Seeker of Secrets. That must suffice, I am afraid."

"You will not obtain any secrets through me. I absolutely refuse."

"We shall see. There will be a time-limit. If at the end of that time you are still obstinate, the necessary proof of your father's guilt will be passed to Scotland Yard, where, I assure you, it will receive the most earnest and careful attention."

"You would be afraid to go to Scotland Yard, even if your information was true, which, of course, it is not. For you are a criminal," she said boldly.

"And, naturally, while you are making up your mind, you will remain here," said the Colossus finally, as if he had not heard her words. He walked to the door, unlocked it, stepped outside, and then slammed it to again.

For a few moments Margery remained motionless, staring at the locked door. Then, realising at last her hopeless position, she clenched her hands and turned away towards the window. But escape through that, barred as it was, was as impossible as by the locked door.

Then a thought came to her. That man to whom she had made that appeal for help through the telephone. . . .

He must have heard her.

Would he respond?

It was a faint hope, yet it was the only one she had.

CHAPTER IV

AT 2 A.M.

“You have offered to sell your life: I’m inclined to buy it.”

The words, beating upon Martin Creighton’s brain, made him want to laugh. There was such a ridiculously bizarre quality about them. It seemed almost inconceivable that they could have been soberly uttered.

Up till now he had not realised the position in which he had placed himself. His extraordinary action had been prompted by a sardonic mood and in a fit of rebellion against life.

The only thing he had left was his life. Well, he would sell that if he could find a buyer!

Now, as he looked at the man who had uttered the above arresting words, he felt his body tingling. This amazing scene was *real*: this man actually was offering to buy him, body and soul!

"Should you wish to go back upon your word, Mr. Creighton, of course——"

"I have no such wish." The contempt with which the words of the Colossus had been edged taunted him to a quick and reckless reply.

"Very well. Now you will please listen to me: I will give you the sum you name—£5,000. In return, you shall hold yourself absolutely and completely at my bidding for the period of at least twelve months. During that time you must obey unquestioningly any wish I may express. If I send you into danger—and I may—you will fulfil that particular duty to the best of your ability. In other words, you will regard me as your employer—but, remember, I shall be one to whom you cannot give notice! I admit that the agreement which I shall presently get you to sign would probably not be valid in a court of law, but there are other ways of enforcing the bargain. Naturally, I am not a fool."

Creighton did some rapid reflecting. He was about to plunge into very deep waters—his

native common sense, as well as his knowledge of the world, told him that—and the probability also was that in doing so he would place himself outside the law. That was what the man had hinted; what else could his words about there being other ways of enforcing the bargain have meant?

There was still time for him to draw back from this fantastic arrangement. He had not yet committed himself definitely to anything.

"You are still weighing the chances, Mr. Creighton?"

This time it was the woman who spoke. Her curved, voluptuous lips were parted in a mocking smile; she blew a cloud of smoke in Creighton's direction. Plainly her eyes said: "£5,000, and the pleasure of knowing me: isn't it worth a little risk?"

"I am not concerned with the chances," he replied; "I am prepared to take whatever may come."

"Well said," the woman replied, with a short laugh; "then, why are you hesitating? Believe me, my uncle is a most generous man to those who work for him."

"Exactly what work would you expect me to do?" Creighton asked, turning to the man.

The Colossus boomed:

"Are you the buyer, Mr. Creighton? I

afraid I am not agreeable to answering too many questions at the moment. You either accept my terms—which, as my niece has pointed out, are somewhat generous—or you don't. If you do not, then you will be blindfolded again and taken back to the Café Rimini or wherever else you may choose. It is for you to say." He turned away, as though he were rapidly losing interest in an unsatisfactory subject.

This was a challenge to Creighton's manhood, and he accepted it. Having gone so far, his self-respect would not allow him to draw back. What was more, he realised that if he left the house—which he would never be able to find again—he would lose trace inevitably of the girl who had made that mysterious and startling appeal to him for help. He could not utterly fail her; he had already promised himself that much.

"I have no further questions to ask or objections to raise," he said; "I realise my position perfectly. It is a case of Hobson's choice—and I accept."

The manner of his future employer changed.

"I am glad you have seen reason," he said, in a more friendly tone than he had yet used; "now, for the present, I shall want you to stay in this house. You need not be afraid that anything will happen to you—on the contrary, everything will be done to make you feel com-

fortable. I have work to do myself, but my niece, Xavia, will be pleased to entertain you." He turned abruptly, and walked out of the room.

"Do you play billiards, are you interested in wireless, or would you prefer to talk?"

The situation made him feel inclined to laugh, but he controlled himself with an effort.

"A game of billiards appeals to me—it is so long since I played," he added quickly. He would have liked to ask his companion a heap of questions, but he guessed it would be so much waste of time: not one of them would be answered to his satisfaction. Until he had been approved, no confidence would be reposed in him—he could scarcely expect it to be otherwise. The Colossus was no fool, as he had himself explained.

"Now that we are comrades, we must be good friends, yes?"

The woman, whose physical allure was so potent, smiled up into his face.

"Certainly," he replied. Mere politeness made him answer, but, in spite of himself, his voice broke a little. He could not fathom what this woman's game might be, but she seemed determined to be pleasant. He guessed that being pleasant to men was an art which she practised assiduously; but all the same, the

spell of her made him bite his lip. It would be so easy to make a fool of himself in that direction.

Xavia—he did not ask her other name, and she did not supply the addition—handled a cue with wonderful skill for a woman. The billiards-room was splendidly appointed, and as he watched his companion compiling an admirable break of forty-five, Creighton found himself marvelling more and more. What was the rest of the night to bring forth?

“I congratulate you,” he said when, by missing a difficult run-through cannon, the break came to an end.

There was invitation on her red lips as she smiled her thanks.

“Now that you have decided, there is no reason why you and I should not play more games of billiards,” she replied.

Then a servant came to announce that supper was served.

Creighton heard the clock on the mantelpiece chime again. That must be half-past one. He turned once more in the bed.

That evening, from 6.30 onwards, had been so phantasmagoric that his brain refused to be pacified. Sleep simply would not come: he was forced to go over and over in his mind the astonishing events of the day.

There were so many questions to be answered. The first, of course, was: Was the girl who had appealed to him over the telephone staying in that house? Who was she, and why was she being ill-treated or detained against her will? What did the Colossus intend to do with her?

Lying there in the deep silence of the night, Creighton clenched his fists as the words of anguish which this girl had uttered returned to him. She had been in dire peril: there was the agonising ring of it in her voice. A cultured voice, the words must have been literally wrung from her.

From the unknown girl, whom he swore to meet as soon as possible, his mind went to the remarkable man who had bought his life. However outrageous the phrase sounded, it was practically literally true: the Colossus had said in so many words that he would have the power of life and death over him, and that he intended to use it. Who was this man with the wonderful frame and the magnetic personality? What was his name, and what was the work he did? Something sinister, he felt convinced. Unless he were mistaken, he had allied himself to a dangerous if subtle criminal; perhaps a very king of the underworld. Yes, that must be it. That was why, no doubt, Luigo, the head waiter at Rimini's, had given him that warning

as he left the restaurant. Luigo knew every-one; he would have the faculty of singling out the crooks from the honest men among his patrons.

Martin felt his heart take on a quicker beat; whatever the future had in prospect for him, it certainly did not promise to be dull. Before he had heard that mystery-girl appeal for help over the phone that evening he had been desperate enough to turn crook himself. Now—— He made another turn in the wide, comfortable bed, and, in doing so, he noticed the door slowly opening.

This was a somewhat singular proceeding from Creighton's point of view. Why anyone should wish to pay him a visit, even in this strange household, at two o'clock in the morning was puzzling—so puzzling that he decided to ascertain the cause straight away. Whoever it was had unlocked the door, which, when he had tried it a few minutes after going to this room, had been securely fastened from the outside. But what was the object of the visit?

If he pretended to be asleep he would have a better opportunity of discovering, he felt, and so he quietly snored. Evidently, from the stealthy manner of the caller's approach, he was expected to be asleep.

He emitted another gentle snore, but this ran a narrow risk of ending in a snort of

astonishment. By this time Creighton was prepared for shock, but he certainly did not expect to perceive such an apparition as now sidled up to the bed.

The visitor, Martin was able to glimpse through his half-closed eyelids, was a dwarf, hideous to see. He stood only four feet six inches or so on his thick, stumpy legs, and the distorted body ended in a heavy face that might well belong to some evil, obscene monster. The man had thick, coarse lips, framing a mouthful of broken, discoloured teeth; the fleshy jowls were unshaven and the hair on his huge head was matted. This was the Thing which, holding an electric torch, now approached.

To discipline his already over-taxed nerves was difficult; but, exerting all his self-control, he managed to keep still, and to give the impression of being sound asleep. He reserved the right, however, to spring up and attack this monstrosity if the latter touched him.

Standing by the side of the bed, the dwarf flashed the torch in his face. He was obliged to close his eyes completely now or he would have been forced to blink. Although he could not see, he was able to hear the dwarf muttering.

“A very good subject; I must see about it.” A sly, stealthy-sounding chuckle preceded the words. “And now for the girl.”

Then the light was lowered and Creighton heard the man turn away.

Already intensely alert, the last few words he had heard the dwarf mutter galvanised him into instant action. Waiting only long enough for the freak to shuffle out of the door, he put on a dressing-gown and started to follow. He hoped that "the girl" the man had referred to was the one whose voice he had heard over the telephone; but in any case, this repulsive creature was no fit caller on any girl at two o'clock in the morning.

The dwarf was so engaged with his thoughts, apparently, that it did not occur to him that he might be followed. At any rate, he never looked round. After mounting a short, circular staircase at the end of the corridor, he fitted a key in a lock and entered a room. A second later, Creighton heard a stifled scream. He could visualise vividly the picture of a girl waking up to find this dreadful visitor in her room, and putting a hand up to her mouth to cut off the cry of sheer terror which rose spontaneously to her lips.

Two steps, and Creighton himself was in the room.

Crouched in a chair in the far corner was a girl, whose face was frozen into an expression of horror. Regarding her was the dwarf, his coarse lips working spasmodically.

"You are very beautiful," Martin heard him remark.

The tension was unendurable; he sprang forward and caught the dwarf by the shoulder, swinging him round.

"I have come to help you——"

He just had time to tell the girl this when he was attacked by something that seemed more animal than man. The dwarf, with a bestial cry, had rushed at him. The strength of the creature was almost inhuman; his abnormally long arms gripped his body with a force that threatened to crush his ribs.

The dwarf's eyes were blazing; his breath was coming in quick, convulsive gasps. Martin had managed, however, to get his hands round the thick throat, when he was hurled to the ground. As he fell, he heard the girl give a sobbing sort of cry over him.

Then the room filled with people. He caught the voice of the Colossus rapping out decisive orders. These were evidently addressed to the dwarf, who released his hold and scrambled to his feet.

"What is the meaning of this, Creighton?"

He faced the searching eyes of the Colossus. The man's look was chilling. Martin replied hotly:

"You have a strange household. I woke up in the middle of the night to find this"—he

looked at the dwarf—"bending over me. He seemed to find some considerable satisfaction from the sight—my rugged form of beauty apparently appealed to his æsthetic sense—and then I heard him mutter: 'And now for the girl——'"

A stream of words in a language that Creighton could not understand came from his interrogator. They were directed at the dwarf, who muttered fiercely to himself, as though in protest. When the flood of invective increased in power, however, he cringed, and after the speaker had pointed to the door he shambled away like a cuffed schoolboy.

"I couldn't imagine our friend being a very pleasant visitor to a girl, especially in the middle of the night," continued Creighton, "and so I took the liberty of following him when he left my room. I arrived here just in time to prevent him molesting a girl whom he had already terrified. This lady——" He looked round and then stopped. The girl had gone.

The Colossus smiled.

"You must have dreamt all this, Mr. Creighton; as you can see, there is no girl here."

"But there *was* one. The scene was too real for me to have dreamt it. And, hang it! that scrap, short as it was, with our pal the dwarf

was no dream; I'm afraid he's rather messed up this dressing-gown——”

The other disregarded his remarks.

“You have had a rather trying day, Mr. Creighton,” he replied, in a tone that might have been used to an imaginative child; “I strongly advise you to get back to bed now and forget all about it.”

Creighton bit his lip. He would not say anything more; it would be merely a waste of words. In the circumstances, he judged it would be unwise for him to press the matter.

“Yes, I confess I do feel rather done up,” he murmured with a yawn. “I trust that you will instruct that dwarf not to pay me any more early morning calls. If he does, he may get hurt—I don't like his face.”

“He shall not trouble you again, Mr. Creighton—I promise you that.”

“Right-o! Then I'll get back to bed.”

He was not allowed to go alone, the Colossus accompanying him to the door of his room. After an exchange of good-nights, Martin heard a key turn in the lock. He did not bother to protest, however, for by this time drowsiness had come, and, tumbling into bed, he fell quickly asleep.

CHAPTER V

THE THUMB-MARK

"WHO was that man? What did he want with me?"

Back in the attic bedroom, which had served for her prison, Margery asked the question of her captor.

The Colossus smiled.

"What does it matter who he is?" he replied; "he will never trouble you again unless you are unreasonable. Then he may."

Her nerve, resolute as she had tried to make it, failed before the memory of that dreadful dwarf. To have to face him again would be unendurable.

"I do not wish to disturb you now, Miss Steers. You would be well advised to go to bed. You decline? Well, it is very foolish of you, believe me. There will be no more disturbances to-night, I give you my word—and rest is such a valuable factor in maintaining health, I have always understood."

With that he closed the door, locked it, and a moment later she heard him walk away.

Margery went to the wash-hand-stand and bathed her eyes. There was such a throbbing pain over her forehead that she would have given anything for an aspirin. As for undressing, the suggestion was impossible in that ter-

rible house. She would keep her clothes on in case an opportunity occurred for her to get away. In the meantime, Lord Belshaven was certain to have had inquiries made.

If that second man would help her! He looked a clean, straight type, and he had shown his decency by tackling the dwarf; but his very presence in the house only went to prove that he must be a member of this kidnapping gang. He might save her from assault, but he would not help her to escape—he would not dare to do that.

Her head by this time was revolving like a whip-top, and to ease that bewildering feeling of vertigo she lay down on the bed. Shortly after she fell asleep.

The first waking thought Martin Creighton had was to endeavour to find the girl he had been able to befriend the night before, and to have a few minutes' private conversation with her. The manner of the Colossus had convinced him that it must have been this girl who had made that dramatic appeal for help over the telephone. It was through her, principally, that he had embarked on this mad enterprise. . . . Yes, he must certainly see her. For one thing, she was in desperate need of help, he felt certain, while for another, he had to sustain his new-found sense of manhood.

A manservant entered with tea and the announcement that his bath was ready. When he returned from the bathroom, which, like everything else he had seen in this house, was most handsomely appointed, he found his suit brushed and the trousers pressed. It was with a pleasurable sense of excitement, quite unlike his feelings of the night before, that he went down to breakfast.

He found places laid for three, and his only companions at the meal were the Colossus and the exotic girl he had heard addressed as Xavia. Both greeted him pleasantly, and the unreality of his position appealed to him afresh.

Every time the door opened he hoped to see enter the girl he intended to help. The action did not pass unnoticed.

"Are you looking for Professor Zoab, Mr. Creighton? My uncle has told me about your encounter last night."

Martin smiled across at the speaker.

"A professor, eh? He scarcely looks a university don to me," he said.

"Nevertheless, he is. He was a lecturer at Toledo University before we knew him. He has a wonderful reputation for——"

"My dear," sharply interrupted the Colossus, "can't you see that Mr. Creighton is ready for some more coffee?"

The girl flushed under the rebuke.

"I can't say that I am very anxious to meet the Professor again, whatever his distinguished qualities may be," remarked Creighton; "and I warn him, through you, if you like, that if he continues to make a habit of creeping into people's bedrooms in the middle of the night, he's asking for something worse than an ordinary thick ear."

The Colossus flashed him an interrogating glance.

"I hope you have swept from your mind the delusion you entertained last night, Mr. Creighton?" he asked sharply.

"Delusion! What delusion? By the way, it's rather awkward not knowing your name."

The other ignored the last sentence, and concentrated on the earlier part of the reply.

"The delusion that you saw a strange girl in this house last night."

"Didn't I? Hanged if I can remember exactly what *did* take place last night. All I know is that I was so mad at finding your Professor friend bending over me, muttering some gibberish—the roll-call at Toledo University in the original Spanish, perhaps—that I followed him. What happened after that?"

"You came to grips with him in an upstairs attic bedroom, and you must have received a knock on the head, because when I pulled you apart you muttered something about having

saved a girl from Zoab. A moment later you had to admit that there was no girl there. And the idea of poor Zoab, ugly as he is, willingly terrifying a girl is grotesque, isn't it, Xavia?"

"Ludicrous!" was the answer; "in spite of his deformity, Zoab is really the kindest of creatures."

"Another instance of a jewel in a toad's head, then," commented Creighton. "Well, I'm sorry if I made a fool of myself, but being awakened and seeing a fright like Zepher, or whatever you call him, was enough to put the wind up anyone." He spoke in a tone of half-jesting casualness, in the wish to divert the man's attention from the all-important subject—that of the girl he hoped to meet again. That the Colossus did not intend for him to meet her was very plain, although why he should expect a normal man to credit that he was suffering from a delusion was not equally clear.

In this endeavour he appeared to be successful, for the man, who was now his employer, replied briskly:

"I can undertake that you won't be troubled with the Professor again, however. He does not stay here; it was merely a coincidence that he was in the house last night. In any case, he is eccentric, but why he should have troubled to enter your room I do not know. I am certain,

however, that he did not mean you any harm; as my niece has said, he is really the quietest of creatures."

Martin nodded. He didn't believe a single word the man had said, of course, but the present was no time to proclaim the fact.

"And now we will get down to business," said the Colossus, rising. "I have already prepared a little agreement, Mr. Creighton, setting forth the arrangement we came to last night, and if you will kindly step into the study, you can put your signature to it. Then everything will be in order."

Wondering what phraseology the other could have used in setting forth the statement that he had purchased another man's life, Creighton followed the speaker into a cosy library-study. There was a piece of paper on the table, and the Colossus, picking this up, passed it to his companion.

"Please glance through this," he said.

Creighton could not prevent his hands shaking a little as he took the paper. This situation outdid in its note of sheer bizarrerie anything he had either heard of or even read. Once again it struck him how incredible the whole amazing affair really was.

The next moment he had sobered himself sufficiently to read through the document.

It was severely practical. It set forth that

the undersigned Martin Creighton had entered into an agreement on that day to undertake certain duties, for which, if successfully accomplished, he was to receive at the end of twelve months the sum of £5,000, less the amounts already advanced to him from time to time. There was no mention of his employer's name, and, after reading through the paper again, he commented on the fact.

"You may call me 'Jones,'" was the reply.

"And your niece?" asked Creighton.

"Miss Smith," was the equally serious answer.

Creighton nodded. The time had not come for him to call the other a liar. And "Jones," for his purpose, was as good a name as any other.

"All right, Mr. Jones," he now said; "I'll sign this, since you wish me to." He did not know much about the law, but he was pretty certain of two things. The first was that this document wouldn't hold water in a court, and the second was that the man who so unassumingly called himself plain "Jones" would not wish to take it there. What the object of this by-play was, therefore, he could not determine.

Then came a hint at the solution.

"You will not only sign in the usual way—that is, by writing your signature—but you will

make a thumb-mark legibly on the paper," said Jones; "here is an ink-pad."

This was pure nonsense, and he had difficulty in not laughing. It was not until he had complied with the last seemingly ridiculous request, and the Colossus had taken the document away to lock it in a drawer, that something like realisation came. As he looked at the man's face, he felt a cold wave pass through him. What had he done? How had he committed himself?

"Why did you want my thumb-mark?" he asked sharply.

CHAPTER VI

THE LONE HAND

BREAKFAST had been finished for half an hour, and the occupant of this comfortably furnished room overlooking St. James's Street lit a fresh cigarette before turning once again to the front page of London's most famous morning newspaper.

"Queer!" commented Bunny Chipstead.

Adjusting a monocle, he re-read the advertisement which had attracted his attention. Chipstead, who knew his Europe as well as he knew his New York, was used to the strangeness of the modern adventure called

Life, but this notice certainly was so much out of the ordinary that he made a curious little clicking sound with his tongue.

Old Public School Boy (27) wishes to sell his life. £5,000. Desperate, healthy, adaptable. Box N. 4197 or Museum 10,000.

“Queer!” commented the reader again. Chipstead, because it was partly his business, and partly his pleasure, to collect little curiosities of this description, carefully cut out the advertisement from the front page Personal Column of the *Morning Meteor* and put it away in his pocket-book.

Bunny Chipstead was a slight, wiry, immaculately dressed man of forty-four. At first glance he might have been taken for a soldier of fortune come into a rich inheritance, or a big-game hunter home on holiday after completing a hazardous trip. As a matter of fact, Chipstead was a little of both. He had soldiered in many countries, whilst the big-game he had hunted had included many men who were more desperate than any wild beasts. His lean face, that had a wind-swept, bleak expression, was redeemed from utter grimness by humorous grey eyes. He was tanned almost to a leather hue; he weighed exactly one hundred and thirty-five pounds, could use

his fists or a revolver with equal facility, had once half-killed an Apache in a back-alley of Paris by a simple ju-jitsu trick, and owed his nickname of Bunny to a curious circumstance.

Chipstead had had an American father and an English mother. His father, Samuel P. Chipstead, had worked his way up from a mechanic's bench to be a famous maker of motor-cars; his mother had been one of the Derbyshire Knowltons. From his father he had inherited a hard-headed, dominant quality, typically American, and from his serene-eyed, beautiful mother, who was one of the most fearless riders to hounds of her time, a smiling disregard of all risk, which had brought him successfully through many desperate chances.

It was out of compliment to his English wife that the motor-car manufacturer had named his only child Buncombe, after Edith Knowlton's favourite brother.

He little recked at the time what a heritage he had passed to his son; but after the boy had fought practically everyone over his weight at his school, the derisive "Bunkum" had become an affectionate Bunny, and Bunny it had remained.

From an early age the youth, who had passed through Cornell University, evinced a total dislike for anything to do with a motor-car,

except the capacity to drive one at a high speed. Bunny Chipstead belonged to that small army of modern day adventurers. He had dived with death in many ways and in many countries. During the European War, after being badly wounded, he was taken into the Intelligence Corps, and he displayed such extraordinary capacity for the work that, within an amazingly quick time, he had risen to very high rank.

It was a hazardous game, and Bunny responded to the thrill of it. When the whole business was over, he had adopted the suggestion made to him that he should become a free-lance of the American Secret Service. At Washington and elsewhere he had made the acquaintance of some highly placed officials of England's Intelligence Department, and with one of these at least, Sir Robert Heddingley, he had struck up a firm friendship. They were men of much the same type, although Sir Robert was chained to a desk, whilst Chipstead was essentially a man of action.

Blessed with an ample fortune and with absolutely no ties, Bunny travelled extensively, executing delicate commissions, not only for the American, but for the British Government, working for the love of the job alone. He had a highly developed flair for this sort of thing, and the secret files in the

two capitals testified to his many successes. The thought of any payment was out of the question, but Bunny always made one stipulation: he had to work entirely on his own, and refused to be fettered by any official rules.

Smoking his cigarette, Chipstead strolled to the big window. Below him the famous street was awakening to its daily life. Immediately opposite was the imposing entrance to a very celebrated club. Bunny smiled as he recalled how, three years before, he had placed the barrel of his revolver against the side of a certain gentleman who was a member of that club, and had requested him to step outside, without any fuss or cavil. Of such incidents did Chipstead's normal life consist.

He was interrupted in his brief reverie by the faint muffled whirring of the telephone—a discreet sign of modern civilisation wholly in keeping with the dignified ease and comfort of that luxurious bachelor flat, which Chipstead always made his London headquarters.

A manservant entered.

“Sir Robert Heddingley on the telephone, sir.”

“All right, Brooks; I'll come.”

Insensibly the speaker's face had hardened a trifle at the mention of the name. He walked now to a cabinet set into the wall of the hall,

and, carefully closing the folding-doors behind him, picked up the receiver.

"Morning, Bob," he said, in a low tone.

The voice of the man at the other end of the wire sounded strained.

"I want to see you at once, Bunny. Can you come round?"

"Of course. Be with you in ten minutes." The short, clipped sentences seemed characteristic of the man.

With a quarter of a minute to spare, Bunny Chipstead was seated in a small room in a certain Government building. Facing him, across a big desk, was a grey-haired man of distinguished appearance, whose exceedingly grave manner had somewhat brightened at the visitor's coming.

Sir Robert Heddingley offered a cigar, which Chipstead declined.

"Let's hear your news, Bob," he said.

The other man lit his cigar before replying. He appeared to require the soothing influence of tobacco.

"I got your note last night, Bunny," he said, "and I don't think I have ever been more pleased in my life. It's a Godsend for me that you are in London at the present time. Bunny"—looking fixedly at the other—"I want your help, and I want it damned badly!"

Chipstead contented himself with nodding.

"Something entirely new has broken out," continued the other, the gravity in his voice increasing—"something so big that it almost takes one's breath away. We know all about an individual being blackmailed, Bunny, but what about a whole Government?"

"Sounds pretty tall," commented Chipstead. No emotion was betrayed in his voice, but the speaker's eyes showed a sharper glint.

"Tall! It's ghastly! Bunny, I've been put in charge of this thing, and—and—well, it almost frightens me!"

"Just for the sake of something to say, you might try to explain exactly what you mean by a whole Cabinet of Ministers being blackmailed."

The reply was surprising.

"That's just what I can't do, Bunny. Although I am in charge of this business, I am being kept, to all intents and purposes, in the dark. What I have already told you is merely conjecture on my part—but a conjecture which, I feel sure, is substantially true. Williamson, the Secretary of State, was——" The speaker stopped. Rising quickly to his feet, he walked across the room and turned the key in the lock before returning to his place. "What I am going to tell you now, Bunny, is in the strictest confidence, of course,

but Williamson, the Home Secretary, was found this morning poisoned."

"Dead?" questioned Chipstead.

"Nearly. It was a close thing. If his manservant, after hearing a strange noise in the bathroom, hadn't forced the door, the newspapers this morning would have been publishing full biographical details of one of England's most prominent politicians. As it is, not a word of the affair will be allowed to leak out. But why, Bunny, should a man like Sir Wilmot Williamson wish to take his own life?"

"There may be many reasons," was the matter-of-fact reply, "but it certainly seems to point to blackmail. It would appear to be a case of personal blackmail, however. In that event, why should they come to you at all? Is Scotland Yard in on this?"

"No. A special branch of the Secret Service—a sort of Secret Service of the Secret Service—has been formed, and, as I have already told you, I have been placed in charge of it. As for your query, Bunny, frankly I am mystified. The fact is known to very few. I am expected to root out this evil, but how they imagine I am going to do it I don't know, because they are tying my hands by withholding valuable information. They tell me so much, but no more. What I think is taking

place is this : By some means or other secrets in the lives of the men who form the present Government are being obtained (if you think the idea far-fetched, Bunny, reflect from your own experience what man hasn't a secret in his life) and utilised for blackmail of one sort or another. More than that I cannot say at present. It is all very hazy and difficult, and that is why I want your help."

Chipstead was prompt in his reply.

"I'll do anything I can, Bob, of course. Where do you think we can make a start?"

Sir Robert shook his head.

"I am completely in the dark," he said again; "I called you in this morning, Bunny, because I wished to know if you were free to take on this work. Perhaps in a few days' time I may have the beginning of a clue. Directly I have, I will give you a call."

The two men, who were such old friends, and who had such respect and liking for each other, shook hands, and the short interview was over.

Chipstead was about to turn to leave, when the door, which the Secret Service chief had unlocked, was violently thrust open.

A man, whose deeply lined, cultured face was twitching with emotion, confronted Sir Robert Heddingley.

"I must see you at once," he said,

apparently unaware of Chipstead's presence; "something terrible has happened."

Bunny, noiselessly leaving the room, recognised in the speaker the Prime Minister of England.

Bunny Chipstead walked slowly to his club. The impression made on him by his visit to Sir Robert Heddingley was considerable. The British Secret Service chief was not the type of man to become so seriously perturbed without reason, and the tense feeling with which Chipstead was so familiar when starting on a "job" came back to him. After the bustle of the streets, the dull atmosphere of the Granville Club soon became tedious, and, changing his mind, Bunny walked to the Savoy for lunch.

His work had tuned up all his faculties to an astonishing degree of efficiency, and it was by accident, and not design, that he found himself overhearing the conversation of the two men at the next table.

"I tell you," said the distinguished-looking man with the gardenia in his buttonhole, "that the fellow has completely lost his nerve. Poor old Ferraby!"

"Old!" ejaculated his companion; "I was at school with Phillip Ferraby. He's not a day over thirty-six. He always was a brilliant chap—even when a kid he talked about going

into politics—and now at thirty-six he is a Cabinet Minister. What do you think it is, Maitland?”—lowering his tone; “drugs?”

Quiet as was Maitland’s answer, Chipstead caught the words: “No one knows, but the poor devil’s a wreck all right. Well, I must be going.”

The two men rose and walked out of the restaurant.

Chipstead finished his light meal and lit a cigar. Then he did some reflecting. The thing, to the solution of which he had pledged himself, was assuming tragic substance. He had known before that Bob Heddingley was not the man to send him out on any wild-goose chase, but this conversation he had just overheard substantiated, in his mind, the startling gravity of the situation. The Hon. Phillip Ferraby was His Majesty’s Minister for Education in the present Government.

Still reflecting, Bunny Chipstead walked into the Strand. The first thing he noticed was a newspaper placard:

SUICIDE

OF

CABINET MINISTER

Before he paid his penny for the paper, Bunny knew that the dead man was the Hon. Phillip Ferraby. . . .

Upon arriving back at his flat, he had another surprise.

Brooks, looking very pontifical, handed him an envelope.

"This was left for you an hour ago, sir."

"By whom?" sharply demanded Chipstead.

"By a man, sir."

Bunny exploded.

"What kind of man, you fool?"

Chipstead was slightly on edge. He had already glanced at the note.

Brooks' majestic mien sagged a trifle. To be addressed in that curt fashion by a man whom, in his secret soul, he regarded as a distinctly irresponsible member of society was gall and wormwood to the portly ex-butler. He answered now in a tone in which ruffled dignity and justified reproach were equally mingled.

"Really, Mr. Chipstead, I am afraid I am unable to give you a detailed and accurate description of the person in question. Beyond noticing that he had a slight squint in the left eye, the man struck me as being distinctly nondescript. May I enquire if the message was important, sir?"

"Not in the least, Brooks. But, all the same, I shall be glad if you will increase your powers of observation a little."

Brooks bowed. He felt that moment unable

to reply in words. He left the room with the stately carriage of an archbishop.

With the man gone, Bunny turned his attention to the note, which he read again.

Neatly typed on a piece of ordinary white paper were the words :

*“YOU are seriously advised not
to attempt to interfere in matters
which do not concern you.
Kindly accept this, your first and
only warning.”*

CHAPTER VII

CREIGHTON IS BAFFLED

THE only answer that Martin Creighton received to his question, “Why did you want my thumb-mark?” was an enigmatic smile. The Colossus, without vouchsafing any word of explanation, turned away.

Only one thing prevented Creighton from rushing at the man and forcing the truth out of him. The power that made him refrain was the memory of that beautiful girl he had seen crouching in piteous terror in her room the night before. This girl, every instinct told him, was in the man’s power. By some devilish mischance he had such a hold over her

that she was being detained in that house of mystery against her will. After this perplexing incident with "Mr. Jones," he was more than ever determined, not only to rescue and befriend this girl, whoever she might be, but to get at the bottom of the whole baffling affair.

That ridiculous piece of melodrama, for instance, by which he was compelled to sign a document with his thumb-print—what could be the possible solution? When, in that fit of ironical desperation, he had advertised his life, he had imagined that the only possible type of purchaser would be a man who wished him to start, perhaps alone, on some mad and foolhardy enterprise, from which the chances were he would never return. The craze for hazardous adventure, if the articles in the newspapers were to be believed, was not entirely dead, even in this prosaic age; and he had thought that the promoter of some particularly dangerous expedition might have been attracted by his bizarre advertisement. That had been the only chance, he had thought. Yet here he was, plunged up to his neck in an embroglio of mystery which bewildered him at every turn.

This waiting was infinitely wearisome. But for the fact that Martin felt fairly certain the girl was still in the house, he would have left

by some means or other, despite the grave warning he had received from the Colossus.

"You must remain here and await my orders," the latter had told him. The door of the room was locked behind the speaker, and Creighton had been left to some fresh bewildering reflections.

He would have to be patient, for only by being patient could he help that girl who was in such dire distress. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that some evil plot was being woven around her. A subtle plot, for that remarkable man whose acquaintance he had made in so strange a manner was no ordinary personality. Like the girl, his companion, he was both vivid and magnetic—an individual who stood out head and shoulders above the majority of his kind. A great personal power, assuredly. And this was the man whom he, just a careless, penniless, casual, happy-go-lucky specimen of his class, had sworn to thwart and bring to earth.

Pacing up and down that luxuriously furnished room, he found himself gripped by a great emotion. He knew this to be something entirely different from mere nerve reaction from the excitement of the past few hours. It was a new and vital force which had been born in him through looking into the

troubled depths of a girl's brown eyes. So far girls had never troubled him a great deal; certainly they had not occupied much of his attention nor any noticeable part of his thoughts. Knocking round the world as he had done, Creighton had found the tang of life in rough places sufficiently absorbing. He had never discussed the subject, but his secret opinion had been that a fellow only fell in love—to use the usual phrase—when he hadn't sufficient else to occupy his mind. Returning to London from the mining camp in South America, he had certainly thought that pretty women gave a distinctly decorative effect to the streets, but these women he regarded in the mass, and not as individuals. Luck, or fate, had not sent him any particular representative of the sex, and so he had gone on viewing women merely in a vague, haphazard manner.

Now—it was so amazing that he could scarcely bring himself to realise the truth—a conviction was forced home upon him: he was so interested in one particular girl that everything else in life sank into insignificance. Looking back, he realised that this interest had been awakened the moment he had heard her appeal for help over the telephone wire. And it was not the mere chivalrous instinct alone which had aroused this interest; the cause

went deeper and further than that. Creighton was not very imaginative; still less was he impelled by any high-sounding, romantic nonsense; yet, as he sat down once more, a mental picture, very real and very vivid, came to him. He fancied he saw, standing clear and definitely outlined, this girl. Although she was in the midst of thousands of other people, she seemed to dwarf all the rest. She was looking straight at him, and her arms were outstretched. . . .

Creighton woke with a start. For the last few minutes he must have been asleep. Yet the mental picture which had come to him in a dream was as real as ever.

He pulled himself together, annoyed that he should have dropped off in that fashion. Then he remembered that he had had practically no sleep for several nights past.

Although served with luncheon and tea, the hours dragged by. It was not until twilight had come and the room was in comparative darkness that his intolerable boredom was relieved.

There was a gentle clicking sound, and the door opened. The same manservant who had brought him his meals now entered.

"Mr. Jones wishes to see you, sir. Will you please follow me?" The tone was quite calm and matter-of-fact; the speaker might

have been a servant in a perfectly conducted household.

Only too pleased to change his present position, Creighton followed the man as directed.

He was conducted along a panelled corridor to the room in which he had signed in so strange a manner the extraordinary document that morning. The Colossus rose as he entered.

"I hope you have not found the time hang too heavily on your hands, Mr. Creighton," he inquired suavely.

"I confess I shall be glad to know what you intend to do with me." He decided that it would be just as well, for the present at any rate, to meet suavity with suavity.

"The worst of youth is that it is so impetuous," smiled the other. The Colossus pulled out a pocket-book bulging with bank-notes, counted out several of these, and passed them over.

"Here are fifty pounds," he said; "please regard them as a first instalment of payment. Now I will answer your remark. To-night I intend you to leave this place. You will go to some quiet and homely lodgings in Hampstead. Fitzroy Street is a secluded thoroughfare in the neighbourhood of the Heath. You will find Mrs. Perkins a comfortable old soul,

who will endeavour, I feel sure, to make you thoroughly happy."

Creighton did not know whether to smile or swear. Because the ludicrousness of the situation was irresistible he smiled.

"You are most kind, Mr. Jones," he commented.

A light of warning flashed from the man's eyes.

"If you will permit me," said the Colossus, "I will do what talking is necessary."

Again came the overwhelming desire to lash out at the speaker with both fists. In spite of his magnificent presence, Creighton felt there was something reptilian about the man. He had an evil aura.

Somehow or other he kept himself in check. Nodding, he waited for the other to proceed.

"To Mrs. Perkins you are a young engineer who has recently returned from South America. You have a little money, but you are seeking an opportunity to follow your profession in London. All that you will be required to do at No. 13, Fitzroy Street, is to await instructions, which will be sent to you. No restriction will be placed upon your liberty—you can roam the glorious Heath at will, for instance—but I must warn you that any attempt to leave your comfortable lodgings will be frustrated. As a business man, you

will understand, Mr. Creighton, that, as your employer, I require some security. I must safeguard my own interests. That is why"—a thin, suggestive smile edged the speaker's lips—"I state that it would be very injudicious, not to say ill-advised, for you to make any attempt to—forgive the vulgarism—clear off."

"You need not worry on that account, Mr. Jones. I intend to stay by my bargain." Yes, he was certainly going to do that.

"Very well." The tone of the Colossus was incisive.

The thought had flashed through Creighton's mind that possibly he might be able to discover, when leaving the place, where this house of suspicion was situated, but this object was frustrated in a very effectual manner.

"You will travel to Fitzroy Street by car," announced the Colossus, "and"—producing a black silk scarf—"you will go there blindfolded."

There was nothing to do but to submit, and apart from the fact that Mr. Jones' niece, Miss Smith, did not accompany them, this night drive, although longer, was similar to the one he had taken nearly twenty-four hours previously.

His senses rendered acute, Creighton speculated as to the type of woman Mrs.

Perkins might be. He found her just the comfortable old soul the Colossus had described. She bustled about from the moment of his arrival, evidently almost painfully eager to please her lodger.

"But that my poor, dear husband died last year, I don't think I could ever 'ave brought myself to take in young men, 'owever respectable they might be," she announced to her somewhat bewildered guest; "but the insurance money was only small, and a lonely woman 'as to do something in these 'ard times. So when Mr. Dropstick, 'im as was at the gas office, left me at the age of forty-nine to get married, I was forced to advertise for another lodger. The *Mercury* is such a respectable paper if you want anything, and, sure enough, I had a very nice reply from your uncle, Mr. Jones."

While the garrulous widow stopped to collect her breath—they had reached the second landing by this time—Martin wondered what she would say if she knew the real character of Mr. Jones, and how he himself had come to her humble abode with his eyes melodramatically blindfolded.

Mrs. Perkins continued:

"Mr. Dropstick always said that no one ever made him more comfortable, so what he wanted to go off and get married for, all in

a 'aste like that, I can't tell. I only saw her once, but she seemed to me to be one of those bits of 'ussies, showing more legs than sense. Not at all the sort of wife I should have chosen for Mr. Dropstick—and 'im being at the gas office all these years. He was a very nice man, Mr. Dropstick; most particular about his carpet slippers, and was scarcely any trouble—just drank up his cup of cocoa at ten o'clock every night and then off to bed."

Martin Creighton, who felt by this time that he had known the estimable Mr. Dropstick from the day of his birth, now coughed.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Perkins, that I cannot promise to be in bed every night at ten myself." His landlady turned from her task of smoothing the bed-cover.

"And I'm not askin' you to, beggin' your pardon, Mr. Creighton, sir. I'm old enough to know that there is some as likes a quiet life and there is others who prefer a bit of hexcitement. My poor, dear husband was a rare one for 'is bit of hexcitement—once a week reg'lar he went to the Oddfellows 'All to play draughts with that Mr. Muggleton, who 'as only one leg. But there"—breaking off—"I mustn't stay here gossiping any longer; you'll be wanting your supper. Would you fancy a nice slice of fried 'am with a couple of eggs?"

"I certainly should, Mrs. Perkins," replied

Creighton. By this time the humour of the situation had returned to him, blotting out, for the time being, the rush of turbulent thoughts. Of the two, he certainly preferred the company of this talkative relic of the lamented Mr. Perkins to the subtly evil presence of Mr. Jones, who had so considerably turned himself into an uncle.

Whatever her failings as a conversationalist might be, Mrs. Perkins proved herself an admirable cook. Martin ate an excellent meal, during the course of which he learned that his "uncle" had agreed he should pay the weekly sum of two guineas in return for his board and lodging.

After supper the need for fresh air became insistent. He had had no exercise since the previous day, and he felt that a good walk was a much needed luxury.

"I am going out for an hour," he informed Mrs. Perkins.

Leaving the house, he looked round carefully to see if he were being shadowed, but beyond a workman returning home from an obvious visit to a neighbouring public-house, the quiet street was deserted.

He climbed the slope to Hampstead Heath, and feeling now the invigorating air upon his face, he struck off down the road leading to the Spaniards. Some time before he had

reached the famous inn he felt braced and fit to meet anything that might happen along. Indeed, his one wish now was to run across a creature of Mr. Jones', and thus give himself an opportunity to get at something of the truth.

But it seemed that he had the whole glorious expanse of rolling heathland to himself. Had it not been for the thousands of lights that twinkled below him, he might have imagined that he was hundreds of miles away from the greatest city in the world. Here, with the soft night wind playing about his temples as he stood bareheaded, he was lapped in peace. The quiet serenity of the deserted Heath enveloped him. And yet, not many miles away, the man to whom he had sold himself sat in his luxurious spider's den, weaving a web of—what? Somewhere near this man was a beautiful girl, whose deep brown eyes were, perhaps, once again haunted with terror.

Creighton clenched his hands, and walked rapidly back to No. 13, Fitzroy Street. He moved so quickly that he did not notice the slinking form that, gliding out from behind a bush, shadowed him to his lodging.

The next morning Martin went into the West End. He had a debt to pay to Luigo.

He arrived at Rimini's just before one

o'clock. The well-known restaurant was filling up rapidly, but Luigo, his face smiling a welcome, piloted him in person to a seat usually reserved for the great and distinguished.

"I really came in to thank you for all you did for me two nights ago, Luigo," he said.

The *maitre d'hôtel* bowed inimitably. Then his expressive face became serious.

"Pardon, M'sieu," he said, "but I trust M'sieu took my warning? That man with the streaks in his hair — I think he is no good to M'sieu. And the woman . . . Ah! she is very beautiful . . . but very dangerous, M'sieu."

Creighton unrolled his napkin.

"Luigo, you know everyone. Who are these people?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"A million pardons, M'sieu, but I do not know. That was the first time they had come to my restaurant. What I have told you I have said on what you call the instinct. It is my knowledge of the human face that caused me to say it. Be warned, M'sieu, I pray you."

Creighton pressed the man's arm in a little affectionate action.

"Thanks to you, Luigo, I am warned all right; you needn't be afraid. I——"

He broke off so suddenly that Luigo stared.

The young man was looking fixedly across the room.

Creighton had a difficulty in keeping his seat. He was literally struck dumb with amazement.

Walking by the side of a tall, distinguished-looking man, a girl had just entered the restaurant.

Creighton stared again.

There was no possible mistake.

This girl, so elegantly dressed, so thoroughly sure of herself and her surroundings, was the same as he had seen crouching in piteous terror before the hideous Zoab, in Mr. Jones' house of mystery, two nights before.

Finding his voice, he turned to Luigo.

"That girl"—he started, tensely—"who is she?"

The *maitre d'hôtel* lowered his voice.

"M'sieu, I regret I am not familiar with the lady's name, but her companion is a well-known patron of mine. He is Lord Belshaven, the Foreign Secretary."

SHE must play for time. That was the decision to which Margery had come. The fate threatening her father was so terrible that, although she hated the thought, she was forced to temporise with this polished blackmailer who called himself a Seeker of Secrets.

That was why, at the second interview she had had with the man, she had pretended to be ready to listen to his proposals. The Colossus had been suavity itself.

"Believe me, my dear Miss Steers, I have no desire to be harsh or even inconsiderate. It would distress me beyond measure to be forced to use the threat I have already mentioned. All I ask is for you to perform a simple service, and your father will never be troubled."

Hating herself, she had to act.

"I realise that you have me in your power," she replied, "but what you call a 'simple service' will be very difficult. I am not sufficiently in Lord Belshaven's confidence to know his private affairs, and if I were caught the consequences——"

The man interrupted her.

"Please do not worry yourself about such

a contingency," he replied. "When the time comes, as it will very shortly, you will find that I have made all the necessary arrangements. And now"—smiling as a fond father might have smiled at a favourite child—"seeing that we understand each other more thoroughly, there is no reason why you should not return to your normal life. You must be prepared, however, to obey instantly and without demur any orders that I shall send to you. Refusal to do this, or any other foolish conduct on your part, and——" The speaker did not finish the sentence, but the gesture he made with his hands was painfully expressive to the overwrought girl.

This second interview took place after tea.

"You may return home immediately," announced the Colossus. "In order to protect yourself from an impulse you will not be allowed to see where this house is situated, but the sensation of being blindfolded need not cause you any unnecessary alarm. Just one final warning: Do not attempt to deceive me in any way, Miss Steers. The consequences would be very serious."

The girl who had lured her to this place now came in. For all her beauty and arresting grace, Margery felt that she was as treacherous as a snake. Yet she made no resistance when a black silk scarf was placed

over her eyes and knotted at the back of her head.

Twenty minutes later she was set down at the door of the small house in Peter Street, Westminster, where she had her rooms. The girl she hated and distrusted only spoke once during the motor-car journey. This was in parting, when she said: "Do not attempt to betray us in any way, or I will kill you myself."

Entering her sitting-room, she was surprised to find a man lolling in a chair near the window. Her father.

"Where have you been, Margery?" he asked brusquely.

She did not reply immediately. For one thing, she was astonished to find what ravages the last few months had made in her father. The estrangement that had sprung up between them shortly after her dear mother's death had been characterised by intense bitterness on the part of the man standing before her. Her father had acted in a most cruel and unnatural way, and she had been forced to leave him. Yet, even in the moments when grief clutched her most tightly, she had tried to excuse him in her own mind by attaching the blame, not to the man himself, but to his secret vice of reckless gambling. It was this which had changed her father's whole nature and been

the direct cause of her mother's death. What curious kink was it that could cause such a clever man as her father to be so weak-minded in this respect?

"Why have you come to see me, father?" she now asked, ignoring his question because she did not know what reply to make to it. Love suddenly welled up in her breast. "Are you ill, father? Is that why you have come to see me after so long?"

Hathway Steers made an impatient gesture.

"Ill!" he ejaculated fiercely; "no, I am not ill. Why should I be ill?"

A dull pain stabbed her.

This man was the same unreasonable being she had found it impossible to live with. His vice had so blunted his finer instincts that she was scarcely able to recognise in him the father she formerly adored.

"I asked you where you had been, Margery," her father harshly repeated. "Lord Belshaven rang me up this morning to know if you were ill."

She thought quickly.

"I had to go away suddenly to see someone," she invented. Now that the crucial time had come, she was afraid to ask her father the vital question—afraid because the truth of the terrible accusation made against him by that hugely built man who had had her

kidnapped was written, she feared, in the ravaged features of the Treasury official.

"I shall be able to explain to Lord Belshaven," she went on. Then, looking him straight in the face, she asked: "Was it merely anxiety for me that made you come here to-night, father?"

Hathway Steers twisted in his chair.

"Of course," he replied; and then: "That was the principal reason," he added. His manner had become confused.

Margery waited, and the expected revelation came.

"The fact of the matter is, my dear," said her father, "I am a little short of money at the moment. Some investments in which I have placed great faith have turned out very badly. I strongly dislike being forced to ask my own daughter for a loan, but—can you let me have fifty pounds, Margery?"

The girl's face went white. A sense of nausea almost choked her.

"Yes, I will let you have fifty pounds, father," she replied in a dull, dead tone. "It is practically all the money I have been able to save since leaving home, but you shall have it." While her father squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, she spoke again: "Father, what I am going to say I want you to remember; never forget it, because it is very serious. You

have an enemy in the Treasury, a man who watches and spies on you. So far as I can understand, everything you do is known to this man—*everything*, you understand.”

Hathway Steers sprang from his chair.

“Where did you get this ridiculous notion from?” he stormed. “Who is the man? You must tell me!”

She made a little despairing gesture with her hand.

“I do not know. All I can tell you, father, is that you are being watched, and that——”

Her father raised his clenched fists.

“Give me that fifty pounds!” he raved. “I am desperate—desperate, don’t you hear?”

With her heart feeling like a leaden weight, she wrote out the cheque. Immediately he had it in his hand, her father picked up his hat and left the house without so much as kissing her.

Fear had Margery under its cruel rack for the remainder of the night. Her father’s manner had convinced her that the damning charge made against him by the Seeker of Secrets was true—at least, there must be some semblance of truth in it: her father had flinched and a hectic flush had come into his sunken cheeks when she had said the words. The rage into which he had flung himself had

been a rage of crazed terror rather than of honest indignation.

What was she to do? Where was she to turn for help?

After Luigo had left him, Martin Creighton tried to occupy himself with the modest lunch he had ordered. But his eyes kept wandering to the other side of the restaurant. That girl! What was she doing with a Cabinet Minister? And if she had such a powerful friend as the Foreign Secretary, why had she displayed such terror in that house two nights before? And what was she doing there at all? Why, above all, if she was the same girl as he believed, had she been reduced to such panic that she had uttered that strangled cry of help through the telephone?

These were bewildering questions, and when he saw the Foreign Secretary rise and, with an evident few words of apology, leave the restaurant, Creighton, acting on an irresistible impulse, crossed the floor.

The girl had been reading what appeared to be some typewritten documents placed beside her plate, and she did not notice his approach until he stood by the table.

Creighton was so determined that his voice sounded almost sharp as he spoke.

"Please excuse me," he said, "but I met

you in very peculiar circumstances two nights ago, you will remember. I made up my mind then to offer you my help, and I repeat that offer now. It is impossible for us to talk here, I know, but will you please tell me where I can see you alone as soon as possible?"

A short, startled cry burst from the girl's lips. Those seated near turned round. Creighton realised he was in a most embarrassing position, but he stuck to his guns.

"I am offering you help—all the help that I can possibly give you," he repeated earnestly; "there is no need for you to be frightened."

But the girl was frightened—almost agonisedly frightened.

"Go away!" she breathed tensely. "How dare you speak to me! Go away!"

Before Creighton could think of any response, he felt his arm seized. A man with the face of an old-time fox-hunting squire was glaring at him in a bellicose fashion.

"Confound you, sir! what do you mean by molesting this lady?" demanded this chivalrous, but mistaken, individual.

Martin shook off the restraining arm. He was conscious that the crowded and fashionable restaurant was in a state of commotion, and that every eye was upon him.

Through the throng came two figures. One was Luigo and the other Lord Belshaven.

He had to extricate himself with as good a grace as possible.

"I mistook this lady for someone I thought I knew," he explained to Lord Belshaven. "Will you please accept on her behalf my most profound apologies?"

Unable to remain in the place, he went to the cloak-room, picked up hat and stick, and hurriedly walked out of the restaurant.

Was he going mad? Was the whole world going mad? For a moment he wondered whether he could possibly have made a mistake; but then he recalled the look of recognition which had dawned in the girl's face directly he spoke to her. This recognition had caused her to view him with horror, it was true, but there could be no possible doubt that she had remembered him.

And this, of course, only added to the amazing perplexity of the whole thing.

CHAPTER IX THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

THE morning after Bunny Chipstead had received the anonymous typewritten message of warning, he called at that imposing building

on the Embankment known to the world as Scotland Yard. His ostensible reason for doing so was to pay a visit to the famous Black Museum, that storehouse of grizzly mementoes of celebrated crimes. He was received with every courtesy by the officials, was shown over the Black Museum, and was afterwards informed that the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Jarvis Stark, would very much like to have a word with him in his private room before he left.

A few minutes later Bunny found himself shaking hands with the man whose name was popularly supposed to strike terror into the minds of even the most hardened and desperate criminals.

Mr. Jarvis Stark had risen to his present high position through sheer ability. Starting as an ordinary constable, he had worked his way up, until now practically the whole of that vast crime-thwarting organisation moved to his will. His was an enormous responsibility, but the efficiency with which the various departments under his control worked was the best testimony to his ability.

Chipstead, whose own line of work had not brought him previously in touch with the Deputy Commissioner, regarded Mr. Jarvis Stark with considerable interest. The man who rose from his chair to greet him looked

anything but a successful tracker of criminals. He was tall, loose-jointed, had an awkward frame, and a pale, almost flabby, face, whose natural expression appeared to be one of intense lugubriousness. The likeness to the type of chapel deacon burlesqued on the music-hall stage was increased by a pair of extremely pale blue eyes and a psalm-singing voice, very much in keeping with Mr. Jarvis Stark's melancholy expression.

Bunny might secretly have smiled had he not known from Stark's record that the man standing before him was resolute, and possessed of an iron determination in the discharge of his duties.

"I felt I could not allow you to leave the building, Mr. Chipstead, without enjoying the pleasure of making your acquaintance," stated Stark in a sing-song tone, extending a huge, bony hand in greeting. "Although our work lies along somewhat different lines, yet essentially we are toilers in the same field. Let me extend to you, Mr. Chipstead, a very hearty welcome to Scotland Yard. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Chipstead smiled in acknowledgment of the friendly words.

"I don't think so, Mr. Deputy Commissioner," he replied. "Having half an hour to spare this morning, I thought I would

drop in to see your wonderful Black Museum. The inspector-in-charge was very kind."

"Brownrigg is an excellent fellow," stated the Deputy Commissioner, who now, somewhat to Chipstead's surprise, sighed. "It is very hot in here this morning; do you notice it?" The speaker pulled out a handkerchief and wiped a forehead which had become bedewed with perspiration.

Bunny did not reply. He was slightly startled by the remark. As a matter of fact, he had thought that the room, perhaps owing to the poor fire, was distinctly on the chilly side.

Then came an explanation.

"I have not been well lately," stated the Deputy Commissioner, "and I am tremendously overworked—tremendously. But"—breaking off—"I must not burden you, Mr. Chipstead, with my misfortunes. May I offer you some hospitality—a glass of wine or a whisky-and-soda? I am a teetotaler myself, but I shall be pleased to join you in a cigarette."

Bunny had his whisky-and-soda. A collector of curios, human and otherwise, this skilled Chief of Scotland Yard interested him more every minute. As he put down his glass, he realised that the pale blue eyes of the Deputy Commissioner were regarding him intently.

"And why have you come to London, Mr. Chipstead?" inquired the Deputy Commissioner pleasantly.

Bunny gave one of his rare smiles.

"I felt I wanted a holiday," he said, "and of all the places I know in which to spend a holiday I prefer London."

"You being such a cosmopolitan, Mr. Chipstead, that is a compliment which every true Londoner will appreciate."

There was a tap on the door, and a police-clerk entered bearing a sheaf of papers. These, Bunny noticed, were typewritten, and as he watched them being placed on the Deputy Commissioner's desk, he found himself leaning forward.

As he left the building, after another cordial handshake from the Deputy Commissioner ten minutes later, Bunny Chipstead softly whistled—an unconscious habit of his when deep in thought.

Bunny Chipstead was no Spartan. He believed in the good things of life in reason—and in season. That was why, after leaving Scotland Yard, he walked briskly to that famous rendezvous of the fastidious luncher, Rimini's.

It was whilst seated at a secluded table in the balcony that he noticed a young man,

somewhat shabbily dressed, but of striking athletic appearance, rise from his seat in the large room below, cross the floor, and speak to a remarkably beautiful girl, who, judging from her look of consternation, regarded him with marked disfavour.

Anything unusual intrigued this keen observer of life, and Bunny found himself speculating on the reason why this girl should have so behaved. In spite of his shabby clothes—clothes which in the beginning must have been cut and fashioned by Savile Row craftsmen—the young man in question was distinctly good to look upon. In any case, he was not the type, judged superficially, from whom the ordinary girl would have shrunk.

Sipping his Moselle, Bunny was further surprised a minute later to discover that a very distinguished actor in this strange little drama was one of the greatest personages in England. In the tall, striking-looking man now hurrying to the girl's side, in company with Luigo, the well-known *maitre d'hôtel* of Rimini's, he recognised instantly Lord Belshaven, the present Foreign Secretary. He had met Lord Belshaven twelve months before in Washington, had dined with him, and found the distinguished politician a very charming man indeed.

Bunny's face became thoughtful. The

words of Sir Robert Heddingley the day before flashed back into his mind. Was Lord Belshaven included in this sinister plot against every member of the Cabinet? Whilst he pondered the question, Chipstead noticed the athletic young man speaking earnestly to the Foreign Secretary, and then, without another look in the girl's direction, rapidly leave the room.

Chipstead half rose. It was his original intention to follow the man. Then he reflected: Luigo the Admirable would be able to tell him, no doubt.

Half an hour later he sat in Luigo's little cubby-hole of an office. His host's expressive face beamed a welcome. One of the best-known figures in London life, Luigo had friends scattered all over the world. Patrons of his famous establishment, they invariably made a habit of shaking hands with the great *restaurateur* when they came to London. Not to know Luigo personally was to miss a great joy and a rare honour.

The little rotund man poured out with his own hands two liqueur glasses of wonderful Napoleon brandy. One of these he raised, saying: "It is a real pleasure to see you again, my dear Chipstead." He spoke now not as the *mâitre d'hôtel* talking to a patron, but as a man of the world chatting to a friend

and an equal. "Are you here on business?" he went on to inquire.

"Perhaps, Luigo." And the non-committal reply made the wise eyes of the little man twinkle. Knowing all the highest Secret Service men of every nation, and being himself a trusted agent for a certain Foreign Power, Luigo was not committing a *faux-pas* by asking the question. Neither was he non-plussed at having his question evaded. He knew that Chipstead would tell him all that he could tell him, and, maybe, the other would ask for his help.

This was exactly what happened.

"There was a little scene in the main dining-room just now, Luigo," started his guest. "I watched it from the balcony. A young fellow, who looked to me to be a very decent sort of chap, walked across the floor and commenced talking to a remarkably pretty girl. The latter looked at him as though he were something unclean. I couldn't catch what she said, of course, but she seemed to be telling him that she would be sending for the police unless he left her at once. Just then you and Lord Belshaven came up. This girl had been lunching with Lord Belshaven——"

"She is an under private secretary to Lord Belshaven, who, as you know, is Foreign

Secretary in the present Government," put in Luigo. "His lordship informed me of the fact when we were called to the disturbance." The *restaurateur* stopped to regard Chipstead with a very keen scrutiny. "That young man," he said, "you do not intend him any harm, my friend?"

Bunny became non-committal again.

"I don't know him from Adam," he observed indifferently. "Why should I wish him any harm?" Then: "Do you happen to know him, Luigo?"

The other smiled at the sly thrust. After that his expressive face grew serious.

"I know him, yes—and I like that young man. Listen, my friend Chipstead, and I will tell you a story that might form the basis of one of those romances of modern London which the novelists are so fond of writing about. This young man"—as Luigo warmed to his tale the pace of his voice quickened, and he gesticulated with his hands—"is well born. He is what you call a gentleman. He has been to a Public School, has played all kinds of sport, but is forced to leave England because this country is not able to provide him with a decent job. So—he goes away. To South America, or some such place as that, where he makes money as a mining engineer. He returns with this money, but is foolish enough

to lose it through a bad investment—he could not see a shark when he met one—and so he is put upon the ends of his beams—or what you say.”

Chipstead flicked the ash from his cigar.

“May I ask how you know all this?” he inquired.

“Partly I am in the young man’s confidence, and partly I make inquiries because I wish him well.”

Bunny nodded. He had benefited himself by Luigo’s good nature in the past.

“Two nights ago,” continued Luigo, “this young man—Martin Creighton is his name—came here to dine. He had an air of quiet recklessness about him, but he wore a flower in his buttonhole. He is that type, my dear Chipstead. So, if circumstances forced him, he would go to his death, I feel sure—with a flower in his buttonhole and a leetle smile. The longer I live with the English, the more I admire the type of young man that they produce. You, my dear Chipstead, are half English and will appreciate the compliment.

“He is—this Martin Creighton—what you say—at his last gasper. It seemed that someone had asked him to dine, but this someone did not turn up—at least, not until—— But I am putting the horse before the cart.”

“Suddenly he beckons to me.

“‘I have no money, Luigo,’ he says; ‘I am ruined, busted. This man I was to meet here invited me to dine, but he has not turned up.’

“What did I say to him? I told him that if he were ruined and busted, it was all the more necessary that he should dine. Then, when he told me he had no money, not one penny left in all the world, I offered, very discreetly, you understand, to lend him two pounds——”

“Good on you, Luigo!” commented the listener; “but that’s just the sort of thing you would do, of course.”

“Haven’t I already said I liked this young man? At first he refused, but I persuaded him. Imagine, my dear Chipstead, a man leaving Rimini’s without having dined!

“M’sieur Creighton dined. I served him myself. Then—— Are your ears wide open my dear Chipstead?”

“As wide open as a barn door.”

“Something happened,” continued Luigo, in a thrilling whisper. Regardless of the fact that he himself had been concerned in many an adventure of pure sensation, he imparted to his narrative a quite unnecessary embellishment. “Do you know, my dear Chipstead, a man standing at least six feet three inches

high, weighing at least fifteen stone, and who has three curious white streaks in his otherwise black hair? He is a new one to me." Luigo spoke as a collector.

"He is a new one to me, too," replied Bunny.

"He came into my restaurant with a girl. *Mon Dieu!* that girl! . . . Had I been young, my dear Chipstead, I might have—what you say—fallen for her. She was too ravishing to be good, and, from the first, I could see that she made the eyes at M'sieur Creighton."

There was the sound of a scraping of a chair. Impervious to the wiles of women himself, Bunny Chipstead knew from experience what potent weapons they were in the underworld arts of crime and intrigue. He had become interested in Luigo's tale.

"It was these two who talked to Creighton," continued the *restaurateur*. "After a while the three left. It was a very handsome car—a Victory of superb make.

"Although I knew neither the man nor the girl, I whispered a warning to M'sieur Creighton. He listened as he passed, but something stronger than my warning made him enter that car.

"Regardless of my patrons, I snatched up a coat and a hat from Alphonse, one of my

waiters, and so I saw—— My dear Chipstead, what do you think I saw that girl, who was too ravishing to be good, do to that unfortunate young man?"

"Kiss him?" was the laconic query.

"*Non!* I saw her take a black silk handkerchief and bind it over M'sieu' Creighton's eyes. He made no resistance."

"Did you also happen to see the number of the car, Luigo?" No highly coloured, melodramatic tale of ravishing maidens who tied black silk handkerchiefs over the eyes of unfortunate young men could move Bunny Chipstead out of his unemotional calm, it seemed. He drew pencil and paper from his pocket, awaiting Luigo's reply.

The Frenchman smiled.

"So long as you do not mean any harm to my young friend," he said, "I will give you the number."

He did so.

For the remainder of the day Bunny was busy. In the absence of further information from Sir Robert Heddingley, he decided that it might possibly be worth his while to try to solve what was at the back of the strange story Luigo had told him. Here were all the elements of an intriguing affair, and concerned in it, although perhaps quite unconsciously,

was one of the leading statesmen of the day. On the face of things, and in the light of the curious knowledge that he already possessed, both the young man from whom Lord Belshaven's private secretary had recoiled and the girl herself became persons of suspicion. He could leave the girl for the time being, and concentrate on the man, Creighton.

It was while he was walking away from Rimini's that he suddenly stopped, pulled out his pocket-book, and read a certain advertisement which he had cut a few mornings before from the Personal Column of the *Meteor*.

Bunny softly whistled. According to the description which Luigo had given him of the young man, Creighton, this advertiser, who offered his life for £5,000 cash, might have been the same man. Luigo had said that Creighton was down and out, that he did not possess a penny in the world. . . . With a quickened pace, Chipstead moved on.

As already stated, he spent a busy day. The result of his researches was to prove that the advertiser had indeed been a young man of the name of Martin Creighton. In another direction, however, he was not so successful. Luigo had said that the car in which Creighton, after being blindfolded, had been driven away from Rimini's two nights before had been a magnificent Victory. His inquiries

established the fact that the number Luigo had said was on the car really belonged to an Austin Seven driven by a Balham grocer.

This man, a Colossus in build, with parti-coloured hair: he was certainly worth investigating. Bunny, as he drank his nightcap of whisky-and-soda, decided to make his acquaintance as soon as possible.

There was another.

"This is becoming interesting," Bunny said aloud. Whistling softly a little tune, he went cheerfully to bed.

CHAPTER X THE HOUSE AT HIGHGATE

STANDING desolate and forbidding, amidst grounds that were weed-ridden and unsightly to the eye, this house did not invite inspection. Indeed, it had such a repellent effect that the average passer-by almost averted his gaze, hastening on as though the grim story of the past was actually taking physical shape again.

The Mount had the reputation of being haunted, and in the neighbourhood this rumour was believed. Fifteen years before a particularly atrocious murder—a crime which sent a wave of horror throughout the whole civilised world—had been committed within its

walls, and from that time the house had had no occupant.

Recently, however, a new legend had become circulated. This was to the effect that a repulsive-looking creature, a dwarf in stature, had been seen prowling through the deserted grounds like some animal in its native jungle. Word had been sent to the police, for the owners of the adjacent properties had already been forced to suffer considerably, and it was felt that any fresh horror associated with The Mount could not be endured. Apparently this strange story had been merely a figment of the imagination, for the local police inspector had dismissed it with contempt.

“You people ’ave got The Mount on the brain,” he told an eminently respectable houseowner named Perry. “You go to the Pictures and sees all sorts of ’orrors, and then you sits up all night ’olding ’ands and imagining things about The Mount. As though I ’adn’t got something more to do than to listen to such rubbish!”

It would have been interesting to have watched Police Inspector Twemlow’s ribucund countenance had that worthy representative of law and order been in a certain room of The Mount at eleven o’clock on the same evening as he had pronounced the above dictum.

Even a police inspector can be wrong on occasion, it seems. On this particular evening the house which had such an evil reputation *was* occupied. In the huge underground kitchen several men and one woman were holding a meeting.

The chairman of this assemblage proved to be a giant in stature, in whose otherwise raven-black hair were three curious white streaks. With his perfectly fitting, immaculately cut clothes, he was a singular person to be present in that mouldering underground room, the desolation of which was almost overwhelming. Yet an even more singular occupant was the strikingly attractive girl who sat by his side. This girl, who wore a coat of sumptuous sables, looked like an orchid blooming in a dirty back yard.

The other occupants of the room were six men, most of them nondescript in appearance, yet all of whom had a furtive look, as though afraid of being trapped in that noisome den. The Colossus held up his finger in warning as mutterings spilled nervously from the lips of these creatures of his.

"You fools, to question the plans of The King!" he boomed; and the already electric atmosphere seemed to vibrate at the words.

A man with a rat's face made a snarling sound, showing his teeth.

"I'm sick of all this play-acting," he replied. "Who is this man, and why do you call him The King?"

The Colossus loomed gigantically.

"Because he is the king of all crooks," he replied—"the greatest criminal in the world. If you are not satisfied, Ferrinski, you know what to do. But if you leave us, I warn you your throat will probably be cut within twenty-four hours. I have already told you that I do not know who The King really is myself, but I am proud to serve under him. What is good enough for me and for Xavia here should be good enough for such as you."

Murmurs of assent came from the other five, but Ferrinski snarled again.

"Why all the mystery, then?" he sneered. "Why is the fellow afraid to show himself?"

There was the creak of an opening door, and the critic, turning, drew himself up rigidly, whilst a low, rising sob of terror suddenly welled from his twitching lips.

A man had entered. He was tall, and walked with a resolute air. His carriage was one of iron determination. Beyond that there could only be speculation, for the whole of the face was hidden by a black mask.

The Colossus immediately rose.

"The King!" he said; and there was homage in his voice.

He vacated his seat at the head of the long table, and the masked man, with a brief inclination of his head, took his place.

"Peter Ferrinski, what is your grievance?" he asked.

The rasp in his voice, the cold, steely edge to the words, made the former critic shiver.

"I was only saying, King, that I should like to see you," he replied shakily.

The masked man regarded him intently.

"You see me now," he said. The words were sufficient. There was such authority in the speaker's tone that Ferrinski, who had risen when giving his explanation, collapsed into his seat.

"We will get to business," announced The King. "Juhl"—turning to the Colossus—"I will listen to your reports."

As though he were a secretary attending a board meeting of his directors, the Colossus read from a book that had the appearance of a ledger. This information, which probably would have puzzled Police Inspector Twemlow very considerably, dealt with large sums of money that seemed to have been paid by various men and women whose photographs and names appeared very prominently in the public Press.

When the reader had come to an end, the

masked man rapped on the table with his knuckles.

"Attention, please!" he ordered. "Our affairs are proceeding satisfactorily. But we must increase our business. The next person to whom we will devote our attention is Sir Simon Baste." At the mention of the well-known financier, who was popularly supposed to be a multi-millionaire, sharp, staccato cries came from those who listened.

"I have certain information," proceeded The King, "and now we will go into details." He spoke rapidly for several minutes, and then, turning to the man whom he had addressed as Juhl, concluded: "As usual, I now leave the matter in your hands. Do not fail."

After a brief, but animated, discussion, The King stood up again.

"You will now leave one by one," he said, "and await your orders. Ferrinski, if you are still dissatisfied, I am willing to accept your resignation."

There was a cold, deadly menace in the words, and the little rat of a man put up a shaking hand.

"Please—please, King, I don't want to resign," he said quaveringly.

"Very well, then; but I shall be watching you, friend Ferrinski, and if I see anything suspicious I shall know how to act."

Ferrinski was the first one to leave the room.

This remarkable trio—The King, the Colossus called Juhl, and the girl Xavia—were now left alone. The three chiefs of a small, but remarkable, criminal organisation their future discussions dealt with matters too important and too secret to be heard by those who had left.

The King, who retained his mask, turned to Juhl.

“This man, Zoab—I am not too sure about him,” he said. “I have taken him on your valuation, remember. I should like to see him.”

“Certainly.”

The Colossus rose and left the room. When he returned he was accompanied by a dwarf, whose stunted frame was surmounted by a face so repellent that the girl, in spite of herself, put slender fingers before her eyes. The masked man looked at the monstrosity with eyes that gleamed through the slits in his mask. He evidently found the strange creature he had summoned to his presence very interesting.

Juhl was the first to speak.

“Professor Zoab,” he said, “this is The King. He wishes——”

"I want to ask you certain questions, Professor," cut in the masked man. "First, as to your qualifications."

The dwarf twisted his thick lips into a smile which shewed a mouthful of broken teeth.

"My qualifications!" he repeated in a harsh, discordant tone. "You may ask Schmidt of Munich; Courvillier of Lyons; Pisani of Rome; the Jew, Chumitz of Vienna; the American, Gorer; the Edinburgh Scotsman, Robertson—all these, skilled men in bacteriology, could tell you of my qualifications. What I have said to Juhl I can do." The stunted man raised his abnormally long arms, at the ends of which, strikingly incongruous, were two beautifully moulded hands. An expression of almost maniacal triumph glowed in his face. "I tell you," he shrieked, "quite shortly now I can be master of the world! This Thing which I can unloose will ruin any country within a month!"

The King motioned him to silence.

"That would be madness," he commented. "Unless we had the power to stop it. We might be destroyed ourselves. You must prepare an antidote, Professor."

Zoab nodded sullenly.

"As you will," he replied; "I am a man of science, and to me everything is possible."

The masked man made a sign, and Juhl

rose, touching the dwarf on the shoulder. He conducted the shuffling Zoab out of the room and quickly returned.

Directly he sat down The King spoke in an impressive voice.

"That man," he said, looking towards the door, "has tremendous possibilities, but he must not be allowed out of your sight, Juhl. I leave him in your charge. I think, in view of his having been noticed here, you had better find another place for him. See to it at once. And now, please, I want the man's full history."

"Zoab is of mixed blood," commenced the Colossus, "partly Spanish and partly native Mexican, I think. He is now forty-five years of age. From a boy he had a passion for medical research work, and from sweeping out a doctor's office he rose, by extraordinary industry and by living on practically nothing a day, to a minor post in Toledo University. By this time he had shown a positive genius for bacteriology. But in spite of his brilliant attainments his repulsive appearance made him strongly disliked. Time after time the University authorities were urged to get rid of him, but they refused, because they knew that they possessed possibly the greatest authority in his line in the world. The agitation against the man increased in volume, however, and

then came a terrible scandal. Zoab will not speak about it, but I understand that one night a party of students, assisted by one or two dons, waylaid poor Zoab, took him to a deserted house outside the city, and there horsewhipped him until he was nearly dead.

“Zoab returned to his duties . . . and one by one his assailants died. They all died mysteriously, and the cause of their end could not be ascertained by even the cleverest doctors. Naturally enough, suspicion fell on Zoab, although there was no definite proof, and the University authorities, yielding at last to the clamour of public opinion, dismissed the Professor from his post.

“He became an outcast, absolutely penniless, and but for me I believe he would have died. Thinking that a man of his ability would prove very useful at some later date, I have kept him going. Already”—a slow, sinister smile passed over Juhl’s face—“he has done me a service. No, not in this country; in France. Apart from me, Zoab hates the whole human race; that is why he is perfectly willing to wipe out creation with this new and terrible disease on which he is working. A useful man, I submit, Chief?”

The words were put in the form of a question.

The reply came immediately.

"If he is taken care of; not otherwise. I charge you with this duty; be careful that you obey me."

The Colossus gripped the arms of the Windsor chair in which he was seated. Then he slowly rose. His face became convulsed.

"I have never allowed any man to treat me with contempt," he said, and at the back of the words were a hidden menace. "You speak to me as though I were a dog. Until now I have obeyed all your orders unquestioningly——"

"You will continue to do so." The voice of the masked man had the chill of death in it.

"I have said," repeated Juhl, "that until now I have obeyed all your orders unquestioningly." He looked at the tall man who, now that he stood, was within a couple of inches of his own height. "I have done all this—*without knowing who you really are*. Now——"

"Well?" The tone of the other had become even more icy.

"Now," concluded the Colossus, "I must know who you are; I must know with whom I am dealing. This"—indicating the black mask—"may impress those fools who were here just now, but I—and you know it—am of a different type from them. Take that mask off and let me see your face."

There was a moment's dramatic silence.

"Fool!"

The taunt sounded like the lash of a whip. The Colossus clapped a hand to his pocket, for it was plain that he expected himself to be covered.

But the masked man had no weapon. He had only his voice.

"You are a fool, Juhl. You would turn to bite the hand that feeds you! That shows your common clay. You would dare to threaten me—a man who, by lifting a finger, could crush you! You have worked with me long enough to know how I deal with traitors. You know that I do not kill them always, but have them removed to penal settlements where they go almost mad trying to think out the means by which I sent them there. Do you want to go to Dartmoor yourself, Juhl?"

The Colossus seemed about to spring.

"By God! You wouldn't dare!"

"Dare! What a fool you are! If you weren't a fool you would know that no living man can successfully say 'dare' to me. Think of my record! Think of what I have done during the short time that you have known me, and then—get on your knees, you dog, and beg my pardon!"

The silence was so intense that both men could hear their watches ticking. The girl,

who all this while had remained motionless and speechless, crouched away into a corner like a beaten thing before the basilisk glare that came through the slits of the black mask. Then :

“I am sorry,” said the Colossus. He was cowed. “Whoever you are, I will always obey you.” It was an impressive moment, and the girl broke the tenseness that followed the words by uttering a short scream.

“Don’t look like that,” she cried—“don’t look like that.”

“It is my will to remain unknown,” said The King. The matter was settled.

“There is just one other thing,” said The King. “What about that young man who advertised his life?”

“He also will come in useful later on,” replied Juhl. He proceeded to describe in what manner, and the other nodded.

CH. XI MARGERY RECEIVES INSTRUCTIONS

MARGERY STEERS was living in a state of agonised suspense. She felt that wherever she was a sword was hanging over her head, and that the slender thread which held it might snap at any moment.

That ordeal in Rimini's Restaurant had been almost too painful to bear. Upon reporting for duty the morning after her return home, she had endeavoured to make a plausible excuse for her absence. Whatever he thought privately, Lord Belshaven had accepted the explanation without question.

"The illness of your friend has evidently upset you considerably, Miss Steers," he commented. "It will do you good to have a little mild excitement. What do you say to lunching at Rimini's to-day?"

What could she say except to falter her thanks? Not for a single moment did she intend to act treacherously towards this great man who honoured her so with his friendship, but it cut her to the heart not to be able to give him her confidence. Threatened as she was, feeling that she had no alternative, she yet hated herself for having lied to Lord Belshaven. For a moment or so she pondered again over the advisability of telling this distinguished servant of the State the real reason of her absence from duty the day before; but then came the horrifying image of her father, his hands manacled, being thrust into a prison cell! No; she could not do it. She could only wait and pray that Providence might yet snatch her out of this abyss of terror.

To have as one's host at a fashionable

restaurant one of the most distinguished statesmen of his day was an honour which Margery appreciated to the full, and the woman in her rose to the occasion. The old elasticity came back into her step, and she held her small head proudly as she walked into the restaurant by the side of the peer.

The gaiety of the stimulating scene, combined with the excellent food, banished for a time the grim spectre of worry. Halfway through the meal, a waiter informed her host that he was wanted on the telephone. With a few charming words of apology, Lord Belshaven rose.

It was not until he had gone that Margery noticed the man sitting in the corner on the opposite side of the room. Immediately her heart commenced to beat a tattoo of fear. In spite of this man's straightforward, open face, the sight of him brought back a very dreadful memory. It brought back all that she would have given many years of her life to have been able permanently to forget. It brought back the memory of the dreadful dwarf, and, even worse still, the face of that huge man who boasted that he held both her father and herself in his power.

She tried to rally her failing forces against Lord Belshaven's quick return. But her nerves, already cruelly tortured, went back on

her. So shaking became her hands that she was forced to put down her knife and fork—and then she saw the man rise from his seat and walk towards her.

Exactly what he said she did not know, neither was she aware of the reply she made. All she was conscious of was the powerful desire that this man should go before Lord Belshaven returned. His presence filled her with mingled dread and fear. He was an associate of the Colossus—he must be that, else why had he been in that house of suspicion?—and to attempt to explain his speaking to her was to risk having to tell everything to her host.

She was vaguely conscious of a scene having occurred—people at the surrounding tables had turned to stare—and then Lord Belshaven was bending over her, solicited in his grave face.

“My dear Miss Steers, I am most awfully sorry that man should have so alarmed you. Do you know him by any chance?”

She found herself saying, “No; he is a stranger to me.”

Lord Belshaven frowned.

“The fellow said that he mistook you for some one else. It seemed a thin enough excuse, but he certainly appeared very apologetic. Please do not allow it to spoil your lunch.”

Not only her lunch but the rest of the day,

however, was spoiled for Margery. The Shadow had come back.

Mixed with her fear during the days that followed was a curious feeling of reproach. Had she misjudged that man whose good-looking face was so straightforward? Certainly the evidence was against him, but, on the other hand, now that she could reflect more calmly, it was impossible to forget that not once but twice he, a perfect stranger, had gone out of his way to offer her help. Why should he have done this?

On the second day after the incident at Rimini's, a thought so fantastic as to seem unreal came to her.

Could this man be the one to whom she had appealed for help over the telephone? In spite of the million and one chances against the possibility, the strange idea still persisted in her mind. Why, she could not tell.

And yet he was allied to that super-black-mailer. . . . The more she thought about the situation, the more perplexing it became.

Three more days passed. During this time she was allowed to pursue her work unmolested, and so resilient is the mind of youth that but for one incident the haunting terror would have receded further and further from her.

She was snatching a hasty meal in a Parlia-

ment Street tea-shop, when a man who had been a constant visitor to her home before her mother's death entered. He smiled, and sat down at her table, but seemed confused when starting a conversation. He appeared to be worried about something or other, and at last he blurted out in the manner of an awkward schoolboy :

"I have just seen your father, Margery; he looks dreadfully ill. Excuse me, but do you know what is worrying him?"

She hesitated for some moments. Then, a reply being inevitable, she said :

"I saw father about a week ago. He told me then that some—some investments had turned out badly. I did what I could to help him—I should always be willing to do that—but father——"

She could not say any more, and, excusing herself on the plea of having to return to her work, hurriedly left the place.

That afternoon she was forced to work late, and it was not until seven o'clock that she reached her rooms.

Her landlady met her in the hall.

"There is a young lady waiting to see you, Miss Steers."

With her mind still occupied with the work she had left behind, the words conveyed little

to Margery until she opened the door of her sitting-room. Then realisation came back in a flood. The "young lady" waiting to greet her was the exotic foreign girl who had lured her by a trick to the house of the Colossus.

"What are you doing here?" The words came to her lips instinctively.

A light flashed from the girl's brilliant eyes.

"I have come to take you to my—uncle again. A car will call in five minutes. You are not going to be foolish, I hope?"

Although Margery felt as though her heart was being squeezed by a giant hand, she forced herself to remain calm.

"What is going to happen?" she asked; "what does your—uncle intend to do with me? Although I have said nothing to anyone about the other night, Lord Belshaven will certainly be alarmed if I disappear a second time."

The visitor smiled somewhat scornfully.

"You will not 'disappear' unless you attempt to be foolish. My uncle has certain instructions to give you; that is why I have to take you to him. Here is the car." From outside came the sound of a soft and melodious motor-horn.

Margery rose wearily.

"I must see my landlady," she said, "and explain that——"

"There is no reason why you should not

return to-night, providing, of course, that you promise to obey my uncle."

Margery kept silent. She felt that whatever she said would be merely so much waste of breath. An evil chance had thrust her into the power of these people, and there was an end of it.

She submitted to being blindfolded, and the car was driven at a rapid pace. After what seemed a long time, but probably, she felt, was only a few minutes, the car stopped, she was taken by the arm, and led up a flight of stairs, and then found herself facing the man she feared.

The Colossus wasted no time.

"The moment has come, Miss Steers, for you to do me the service required," he said. "To-morrow night Lord Belshaven is giving a reception at his house, No. 66, Carlton House Terrace. He will have in his safe a copy of the new treaty with France. You are to obtain this, and take it to your rooms, where my niece will be waiting to receive it. The time-limit is midnight. Unless my niece has the document in her hands by that time, I shall reluctantly be forced to place certain information concerning your father with Scotland Yard. That is all. Having received your instructions, you will now be driven back to your rooms."

It was so futile to attempt to argue that she

did not make the effort. She had a blessed respite of about thirty hours; something might—*must*—occur within that time to help her. Now all she wished was to get out of that evil presence and to be alone.

Again she was blindfolded and led to the waiting car. Her companion, the girl Xavia, was silent throughout the return journey, and she parted from her in Peter Street without a word.

Margery did not sleep at all that night. The fact that the blackmailer had changed his plans, and wanted her to obtain an important political document from her employer instead of private papers, brought no relief. One crime was as dastardly, if not more so, as the other.

The dawn found her still turning restlessly. Before many more hours were passed she had to turn criminal in order to save her father from a felon's fate.

CHAPTER XII

THE UNINVITED GUEST

MARTIN CREIGHTON, meanwhile, in his Hampstead lodgings lived a quiet, uneventful life—so uneventful, in fact, that it was almost impossible for him to believe the truth. He had more than a passing suspicion that all his move-

ments were being watched, but this was not the cause which kept him on the spot. There was the girl—that girl about whom he found himself thinking at practically every moment of the day. Sooner or later the Colossus would be bound to send for him, and then he must take his chance of meeting her again. Although she had turned from him in something like horror at Rimini's Restaurant, he felt that, however foolish the idea might be, his whole future life was bound up in this girl whom he had met in such bizarre circumstances. Fate, having an insoluble reason of its own, had caused their paths to cross. He had to protect her, for that she was still in dire peril he knew instinctively.

Two things he asked himself. The first was what connection had the girl with the British Foreign Secretary? And the second: Why had she been in the house of the Colossus that night? There was a third query: Was she the girl whose appeal for help he had heard over the telephone wire? But the answer to this problem was linked with the second.

It was weary waiting, and even his walks across the glorious Heath palled after the first two days. He spent practically all his time out of doors—first, because he felt himself to be in training for some stupendous future ordeal; and, secondly, because Mrs. Perkins' reminiscences of that distinguished servant of the local

gas office, Mr. Dropstick, increased in volume as time went on.

Returning from a visit to Highgate on the afternoon of the third day, Creighton stiffened to attention when his landlady informed him that he had a visitor. Uttering a mental "Now for it!" he walked into the sitting-room. One look at the deeply tanned man lounging in the uncomfortable easy chair, and he burst out laughing: what he had expected and what he had found were as the poles asunder.

"Jenkins!" he exclaimed; "how the deuce——?" The last time he had seen Harry Jenkins was in a South American mining camp.

"Never thought to see me turn up again like a bad penny, did you, old son?" The visitor rose and gave the other a hearty hand-grip. "But the truth was, after you cleared out I got fed up with everything and decided to come home myself. I sold out for just over six thousand quid, and came home in style like a bloomin' multi-millionaire. Travelled first class, and, the luck holding good, fell in with a big pot on the boat, one Sir Benjamin Travers, who offered me wonderful terms to go out to China in six months' time. In the meantime, I intend to enjoy myself, and I want you to chip in with the wassail bowl business. You know I was always fond of you, you old son of a gun! No excuses, now—you'll have to dine with me

to-night and go on to a show afterwards. Possibly we may take one over the—hic—eight, but if you're the same chap as you used to be you'll raise no objection to that. If there's one thing I positively loathe," concluded Harry Jenkins, "it is getting well lit up by myself."

Martin was obliged to smile.

"Yes, I'll dine with you, Harry, and it's damn glad I am to look at your ugly old mug again. But how on earth did you run me down?"

Jenkins chuckled.

"That was easy," he said. "I called at the flat in Guilford Street from which you wrote me last, found you had gone, but got this address from the housekeeper, who has been forwarding on your letters. How are things going with you, Martin?"

Creighton was tempted to tell this old friend the plain, unvarnished narrative of all that had happened to him since arriving back in England. Then he decided to wait. Jenkins, so far as he knew him, was one of the best chaps in the world, but he hated the thought of having to confess that he had lost five thousand pounds through what he knew now to be an act of plain idiocy.

"Oh, fairly," he compromised.

"If you are fed up with London by the time I leave, you had better come out with me to

China," suggested the other. "In the meantime, you are all right for to-night, then? Make it seven o'clock at Prince's. Suit you?"

"I'll be there," promised Creighton.

Jenkins arrived ten minutes late. He was full of apologies.

"Do you mind if we cut the show out for to-night, Creighton?" he asked. "When I got back to the hotel, I found a telegram from my guv'nor. He is arriving at King's Cross from the North at nine-thirty, and has asked me to meet him. Dear old boy, I feel I must go."

"Of course. You're lucky to have a father to meet, Jenks."

It was an agreeable meal, Jenkins doing most of the talking. Martin was thankful his companion was such a voluble conversationalist, since, as time went on, he found it more and more difficult to start relating his own adventures. He knew very well what would happen: his companion would receive the story about the Colossus and his advertising his own life with an amused grin of incredulity. The other would think that he was trying to pull his leg. And then there was the girl. . . . He did not care to discuss her with anyone. At nine o'clock the two friends parted, Jenkins hailing a taxi to take him to King's Cross. Left to his own resources, Creighton strolled idly through

the West End towards the Hampstead Tube at the Trafalgar Square end of the Strand.

In order to avoid the crowd in Coventry Street, he turned into Lower Regent Street, and, attracted by the quietude of the Mall, found himself, after a short while, in that noble thoroughfare Carlton House Terrace.

Being in no hurry, he stopped to watch with idle curiosity a number of men and women in evening dress entering an imposing mansion. Creighton knew that many of the houses in Carlton House Terrace belonged to distinguished families, and guessing that a ball was being held in this particular house, he was about to pass on, when he quickly and determinedly changed his mind.

He was going into this house himself!

What had made him come to this unorthodox decision was seeing a girl step out of a taxicab. The light from an electric standard fell full upon her face as she crossed the wide pavement.

Martin drew in his breath. He had not been mistaken. She was the girl of his dreams—the girl who had fallen into the power of the Colossus, the girl whom he had sworn in his heart to protect and succour.

What could she be doing there? Why was she entering that house? Was she one of the invited guests?

Quickly came some sort of revelation. He

remembered Luigo's words: "A million pardons, M'sieur, but I do not know the young lady. Her companion, however, is a patron of mine; he is Lord Belshaven, the Foreign Secretary."

This must be Lord Belshaven's house. Then what——?

Instantly his mind went back to "Mr. Jones." This girl, no doubt, had been given instructions by that super-crook. She was entering the house of a famous politician, a man occupying one of the most important positions in the State. . . .

Exactly what he intended to do, should he be successful in gaining an entrance, Martin had no definite idea. His mind was centred solely on the girl. Some instinct warned him that she might be going, probably against her will, into a position of danger. She might——

He waited no longer. Fortunately he was in evening kit, and when the footman, standing just inside the entrance, looked at him questioningly, he acted on the inspiration that had suddenly come.

"I am from the Foreign Office," he said with brusque authority; "I have an important message for his lordship."

"Very good, sir." The man bowed, and Creighton passed on.

The great house contained some hundreds of

guests, and mingling always with the biggest groups, saying nothing, but keeping both eyes and ears alert, Creighton succeeded in his endeavour to remain in the place unsuspected. He was on tenterhooks all the time, however, for if the girl once recognised him he was afraid she might give the alarm. Why, after his two offers of help, she should shrink from him as she had done at Rimini's, he did not know; but he must keep as near as possible to her that night, nevertheless.

It was not until half an hour had passed that Creighton caught sight of the girl. Standing near the open doorway of one of the large rooms, he looked upwards, to notice her passing along a small balcony leading from the top of the stairs.

He followed quickly, two resolutions firmly fixed in his mind. The first was that he had to see the girl alone, and explain to her once again that he was a friend and not a creature of the Colossus. The second was that he felt he must be on hand should the girl attempt to do anything foolish.

His footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet, and the girl did not look back. Quickening his pace, he was within six yards of her, when she turned into a room on the right of the corridor.

Apparently she was in a hurry, for she neg-

lected to close the door behind her, and Creighton, looking through the six inches of space, watched her cross the room that was furnished as a study, go to a bureau and, selecting a key from a bunch, unlock a drawer.

In the whirl of thoughts that he had, Creighton came instantly to the conclusion that his first impression was correct: this girl had been forced by the Colossus to commit a criminal act. Forgetting everything but his desire to help her, he crossed the room, and was by her side as soon as she had withdrawn a sheaf of papers, bound with red tape, from the drawer.

“Put them back!” he said quickly.

Then several things seemed to happen almost at once. The startled girl, after one nervous glance at him, made a sudden cry, the door opened wider, and a slim, wiry man with a determined face, wearing a monocle, strode into the room.

Creighton’s brain worked rapidly. He guessed that this man, who was a complete stranger to him, was suspicious—perhaps he was something to do with a branch of the Secret Service—and he must concentrate this suspicion upon himself so that the girl could be entirely cleared.

He had already snatched the papers from the girl’s hand. His original intention, of course,

had been to replace them in the drawer, but now, thrusting them into an inside pocket, he started for the door.

"What's the hurry?" asked a voice in clipped tones. The speaker's hand went to a pocket, and emerged holding a small revolver. "I suggest you return those papers," added the stranger.

Creighton, in reply, acted in the most suspicious manner that he could devise. Assuming an expression of desperation, he rushed blindly forward and, disregarding the weapon the other held, endeavoured to fling the man to the floor. There was a brief but spirited struggle, and then, taking advantage of his unknown opponent slipping on the polished floor, he hit him with his clenched fist under the chin.

Gaining the corridor, he sprinted along this, dropping the papers into a large Etruscan vase standing in a corner on a pedestal.

By this time some sort of alarm must have been given, for from below there came sounds of hurrying feet.

He had to get away. There were two vital reasons. The first and most important was that his escape would completely concentrate all the attention upon himself. Also, it would be fatal for his other plans if he were captured. He must retain his liberty in order to run the Colossus to earth.

Escape through the crowded hall was impossible; moreover, he had to act in a markedly suspicious manner if he were to achieve his purpose. Turning the corridor, he noticed a door which, by some lucky chance, was open. Slipping through this, he found himself at the top of an iron staircase, which apparently led down into the garden.

A minute later he was running across the wide lawn towards the high wall, on the other side of which was the Mall. Once over that wall and he felt he would be safe.

But for the creeper which covered this eight-foot obstacle, however, he might have been unable to climb it; but, securing both hand and foot holds, he was soon in the Mall and walking rapidly away in the gloom.

There came no sound of pursuit. His foresight in quietly closing the door leading to the iron staircase had prevented anyone tracking him. No doubt all the rooms in the great mansion were being searched, and by the time that the correct solution was made he would be well away.

He arrived home at 13, Fitzroy Street without further mishap. He was minus hat and overcoat, but remembered that there was nothing about either by which he could be identified.

Grateful for the chance which had enabled

him to render the girl a service, he went contentedly to bed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN IN THE MALL

WHILE the great house remained in tumult, Margery Steers was kept in a state of mingled relief and bewilderment. She was relieved because she would now have an excuse to give her relentless taskmaster for the non-delivery of the copy of the French treaty, and she was bewildered because the mystery of the strange young man who had twice before offered her help became more and more perplexing.

After it was definitely ascertained that the intruder had escaped, she was called into a room where there were three men. One was Lord Belshaven, another was the man with the monocle, while the third was a stranger.

"Something that might have been very serious occurred to-night, Miss Steers," said the Foreign Secretary in a grave tone; "please tell us actually what happened after you entered the study."

"When you told me to get the papers dealing with the Manson Inquiry," she replied, "I opened the top drawer with the key, and had taken out the papers, when I felt them being

snatched from my hand. Then this gentleman"—looking towards the wearer of the monocle—"came in. That is all I know, Lord Belshaven."

The Foreign Secretary frowned.

"The Manson papers happened to be of no particular value. Moreover, they have been found. The thief, either realising that they were not negotiable or afraid that he might be captured with them in his possession, flung them away before he left the house. But it would have been all the same if the documents had been important secret papers of State. That will do, Miss Steers. Take a taxi home and try not to worry too much about it; no blame is to be attached to you, of course."

It was with a very full heart that Margery left. All the time she had been in the room she was conscious of the keen, searching look of the man with the monocle. Had Lord Belshaven commenced to question her closely, she felt that she would have been bound to betray herself in one way or another.

When the three men were alone, the Foreign Secretary turned to Bunny Chipstead.

"I am delighted to see you again, Mr. Chipstead," he said, "but regret that the occasion was not more auspicious. You say that you know this thief by sight?"

"Yes. I am sure he was the same man who

created the scene with your secretary at Rimini's Restaurant the other day."

Lord Belshaven started.

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Miss Steers—and I have no possible reason to doubt her word—assured me that the man was a complete stranger to her. He would seem to be either a madman or a dangerous criminal. In any case, he cannot be allowed to remain at large. His audacity is proved by his being here to-night. Grimwade——" The speaker had turned to the third man, when Bunny, with an apology, interrupted.

"If you don't mind, sir, I should like to follow up this matter myself," said Chipstead. Friend Grimwade is busy as usual, I expect?"

"Confoundedly busy," growled the British Secret Service man.

Lord Belshaven nodded.

"I shall be awfully obliged if you will, Mr. Chipstead. And now, as no serious damage has been done, fortunately, we will forget the matter for to-night at any rate."

He rang a bell, and a footman entered with glasses on a tray.

Bunny Chipstead was very thoughtful. The fact that he, such an old hand at the game, had

lost his man that night was not soothing to his soul. But, at any rate, he had discovered how the intruder had escaped from the house in Carlton House Terrace. That quietly shut door leading to the garden—why hadn't anyone thought of it at the time?

The man had escaped, but he would get him. He wouldn't rest until he got him. That clip on the jaw had to be repaid. Chipstead was not the type to allow a debt like that to remain uncollected.

Bunny did not imagine that anything further would happen that night, and after making a thorough search of the garden, and satisfying himself that the would-be thief had really escaped that way, he bade Lord Belshaven good-night and left the house.

Being in so thoughtful a mood, he decided to have a stroll in the Mall before turning in. He had walked perhaps a hundred yards along the broad pathway leading to St. James's Place, when he heard a stealthy sound behind him.

He swung round instantly, and in doing so probably saved his life; for the long-bladed knife which his unknown assailant evidently intended to bury in his back was knocked up by the quick upraising of Bunny's arm, and merely inflicted a superficial flesh wound on the shoulder.

Without waiting to ascertain the amount of damage he had done, the attacker, his main purpose foiled, immediately took to his heels, stooping as he ran. Quick as Bunny was to pull out his revolver, he saw the man's form merge into the general darkness at the moment he raised his weapon.

He did not shoot. For one thing, the chance of hitting the man in that dense blackness was very slight, and although thoroughly justified in the action, he remembered that the English police had very strong views about the use of firearms in the public parks. For the time being he wished to remain as much outside the jurisdiction of Scotland Yard as was possible; he had certain work to do, and he wished to do it unhampered.

Bunny kept a sharp look-out during the rest of that short walk home; and yet he was destined to have another narrow escape from death within ten minutes of the first encounter. Crossing St. James's Street to get to his flat, a sixth sense made him swerve violently backwards as a great touring car hurtled past at fifty miles an hour. This juggernaut, which had turned out of Jermyn Street, would undoubtedly have run him down if he had not instinctively stepped back. One out of every three motorists these days was quite likely to be a mad fool; but all the same, after that affair

in the Mall only a few minutes before, the circumstance was decidedly suspicious.

Entering his flat, Bunny, following out his thoughts, went straight to a bureau and pulled out a sheet of paper. On this were some type-written lines :

*“ YOU are seriously advised not
to attempt to interfere in matters
which do not concern you.
Kindly accept this, your first
and only warning.”*

“ But, by Heck !” muttered Bunny, lapsing into Americanese, “ practically everything does seem to concern me. It strikes me as being fairly possible that the kind-hearted gentleman who sent me this had a large-sized hand in to-night’s affairs. Maybe we’ll meet one day. . . .”

Brooks, entering with the whisky-and-soda, found his master smiling grimly at what seemed a secret joke.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TEMPTRESS

THAT romantic body, Mrs. Perkins, was all of a twitter.

“ Your cousin, Miss Smith, has called, Mr.

Creighton. Such a beautiful girl, although so foreign lookin'! If you will excuse me, sir, directly I saw her I said to myself: 'What a 'andsome pair they do make!' Of course——"

"That's all right, Mrs. Perkins." In this summary way Martin checked the flow of soul.

Regardless of his landlady's changed countenance, he put down hat and stick and walked into the sitting-room.

The girl, whose beauty to the average man would have acted as a dangerous drug, rose as he entered. She wore a wonderful sable coat reaching to the hem of her short skirt. Creighton caught a glimpse of silk-clad legs and a pair of exquisitely shod small feet.

He put the vision, which might have proved so intoxicating in any other circumstances, out of his mind.

"May I ask your purpose in coming here?" Even to himself his voice sounded harsh.

The girl's warm lips curved into a smile.

"You are not very polite, my friend," the visitor replied. "Please be assured that I had a very good reason for calling. I am here on business—strictly on business."

She looked at Creighton, who was still standing, and again she smiled. This time it was a smile of sheer calculation.

"You are very foolish," she commented.

"Foolish?" Creighton, although holding

himself well in hand, was curious to know what she meant.

A laugh with an intoxicating lilt ran through the room.

"Foolish because you look so cold when I offer you my friendship. Confess, now, you do not like me being here? You would rather it were someone else, is it not so?"

He remained aloof, although, in spite of himself, the spell this woman cast was very potent.

"There is no one I know who would visit me here," he said.

"Miss Smith," took a cigarette from a small gold case, lit it before Creighton could produce a match, and blew a little cloud of smoke. Then her warm, red lips made a *moue*.

"It is nothing," she said, with a wave of her hand, "but the time may come, let me warn you, M'sieur Creighton, when you may need a friend. But now"—as though dismissing the subject—"I have come to give you certain instructions."

Martin sat down; his head was in a whirl, but he tried to keep his voice steady.

"Were you sincere just now—I mean, about you wanting us to be friends?" he asked.

The girl leaned towards him. He was acutely conscious of her nearness. From her clothes came a subtle fragrance.

"Of course," she said softly.

"Then will you tell me something?" he went on.

"Anything that I can," was the answer.

He nerved himself.

"Who is the girl I saw in your house that night?"

For a moment she looked at him, then the lips, which had been curved before, straightened into two hard lines.

"Why do you want to know?"

He blurted out the truth.

"Because I want to get her out of that man's power." Fool that he was, he realised instantly how fatal had been his mistake.

The girl flung away her cigarette.

"So-o!" she said, as though speaking to herself. "You are even more foolish than I had imagined, my friend."

There was mockery in her voice—a hard, biting mockery which set Creighton's teeth on edge.

Too late Creighton repented his impetuosity. The woman's attitude had completely changed. However ridiculous it may have seemed, she appeared jealous of the interest he had shown in the other girl. She threatened now to be an active enemy.

Confused and annoyed with himself, he kept silent. He had already said too much. The only thing he could do, he determined, was to

wait until he stood face to face with the Colossus again, and then, whatever the consequences might be, he would force that man to give up his secret concerning the girl.

“You will listen carefully to your orders.” The visitor’s voice was cold and incisive.

Martin nodded. For the present he was forced to be submissive. Only by doing so could he reach the Colossus again.

“You are to go to-night at eleven o’clock to a house in Highgate called The Mount,” the girl said. “It is situated——” The speaker continued for a few moments in a low tone, and then resumed: “You will be met outside. Is everything perfectly clear?”

“Quite,” answered Creighton.

The girl rose.

“I need scarcely warn you, I suppose, not to attempt any treachery. The consequence of that would be extremely unpleasant, not only to you, but to——” She did not say any more, but, sweeping past him, left the room.

At eight o’clock that night Martin had another visitor. When he first looked at the caller, he braced himself for a desperate emergency—this man with the monocle was the fellow he had knocked out in Lord Bels-haven’s house

“My name is Chipstead,” announced the

visitor. He spoke in a slow, conversational tone. "You are Mr. Martin Creighton, I believe?"

Creighton was puzzled. At the same time, he was intensely curious on two points. The first was, how this man had been able to trace him to 13, Fitzroy Street, and the second, his object in coming there.

"I shall be glad to know what you want?" he asked abruptly.

The other's composure remained unruffled.

"I have come here for a definite reason, Mr. Creighton," said the wearer of the monocle, "and, if I may say so, you will be well advised to pay attention to what I have to say."

Martin rose to his feet.

"Before we start, I should like to know whether you think of attempting to arrest me?" he said.

"That depends," was the laconic reply. "You are in a position of considerable danger, and I am not certain but what it would be in your best interests to arrest you."

"All the same, I should not advise you to attempt it," came the instant warning. "And now, please, tell me as briefly as possible why you came here to-night."

Bunny Chipstead surveyed the toe of a well-polished shoe.

"Luigo, of Rimini's, is a very old friend of

mine," he started. "When I saw him a few days ago he spoke about you. He gave you a very good character, Mr. Creighton. Had he not done so, it is quite possible that, instead of coming alone to-night, I should have brought some police officers." The speaker broke off, and shifted his gaze to his listener's face. "I am connected with the British Secret Service," he said, "and, for the sake of Luigo, I should like to help you. Will you please tell me, Mr. Creighton, what caused you to act as you did the other night at Lord Belshaven's house?"

Martin did some quick thinking. This man might or might not be what he represented himself. It was possible that he was an ally of the Colossus, sent there to trap him. This, after the visit of the girl that day, was a likely contingency.

"I am afraid, Mr. Chipstead, that I cannot answer that question." Even if the man was a Secret Service agent, he could not speak for the sake of the girl. Besides, he was going to work out this thing on his own; he didn't want any outside interference.

The face of the visitor hardened.

"You are behaving very foolishly, Mr. Creighton. I have already said that you are in considerable danger. Your actions during the past few days have been highly suspicious.

It is my belief that, consciously or unconsciously, you have allowed yourself to become entangled in a conspiracy against the State, and your common sense will tell you that the result to yourself is bound to be very grave."

Creighton walked to the door and opened it.

"I do not wish to appear inhospitable, Mr. Chipstead, but I happen to be rather busy."

The immaculately dressed, wiry little man picked up his hat and stick.

"When perhaps it is too late you may remember what I have told you to-night," he commented, and then walked through the open door.

CHAPTER XV

AN EPISODE AT MIDNIGHT

It was like some highly exciting, yet fantastical, dream. This scene in that mouldering room below the surface of the earth might have been taken out of a stage melodrama.

Martin had found his way to the deserted house in Highgate that night without mishap, and directly he arrived at his destination, the man who was to act as his guide appeared.

"Walk in front of me," ordered this man.

As he spoke, he disclosed the fact that in his right hand was a revolver.

The two passed through a dilapidated door in a high garden wall and walked across a jungle of neglected garden until they stood beneath the shadow of a big, gloomy house.

“Down there!” said the guide.

He pointed to some stone steps leading below ground.

Creighton was a model of submission. He was besieged with fresh curiosity. Mixed with this curiosity was that newly acquired determination to get something of the truth about the girl out of the Colossus, and he felt that meeting the Colossus would be one of the incidents in that evening’s entertainment.

Arriving at the bottom of the steps, his guide rapped three times with his left hand on the door. This, after a short pause, was opened.

“Get inside!” now curtly ordered Creighton’s companion.

It did not surprise Martin to find himself looking at both the Colossus and the girl Xavia. What did surprise him, however, was to see that, apart from the man who had conducted him to this underground meeting-place, there was yet another person in the room.

This was a tall man dressed in dark,

nondescript clothes, whose entire features were hidden by a black mask.

This man rose immediately.

"I have had you brought here so that I may see you for myself," he announced in a tone that made Creighton realise instantly he was in the presence of a commanding personality.

"I hope you are satisfied," he found himself replying. This mummary business had long since become ridiculous. Who was this fresh mystery-man? What was the meaning of his mask?

"You would be well advised, young man, to be serious," warned the masked man.

Creighton's smouldering impatience broke its bonds.

"I am already so serious," he said, "that I want to ask you one or two questions. 'Mr. Jones' here"—a faint, satirical smile played round his mouth—"refuses to give me any information. Perhaps you will be more kind. Evidently you are his superior——"

He was not allowed to proceed any further.

"I would remind you, young man, that you are scarcely in the position to compel answers to any questions. What is more, I am not inclined to waste time in that way. I would recall to you, on the other hand, that you have recently entered into an agreement with

the gentleman you have called 'Mr. Jones,' and that, under that agreement, you have placed your services—and, if need be, your life—unquestioningly in his hands for the space of twelve months.”

Creighton inclined his head.

“I need scarcely tell you in reply,” he said “that such an agreement would be considered ridiculous in any court of law.” However injudicious it might be to attempt to argue with this man, he felt compelled to do so. The whole thing had become so grotesque that he had a strong inclination to laugh in this man’s face and to tell him, without further parley, to go to the devil.

The masked man stepped forward. Through the slits in the black cloth his eyes glinted like fiery sparks.

“May I ask, Mr. Creighton, if you intend invoking the aid of the law?” His voice was suave and yet deadly.

Creighton stood his ground.

“I have not said so,” he parried; “what I wish to convey to you, however, is that I am getting somewhat tired of all this gesturing. Also, I should like you to know that the threatenings with sudden death which I have been promised from time to time do not alarm me unduly; they are, to me, frankly ridiculous. I am perfectly willing, however, to listen to

anything you have to say—and to fulfil my bargain to ‘Mr. Jones,’ provided that I can do so in an honest and decent manner.”

There was an impatient, smothered outcry, and the Colossus was on his feet. Before he could say anything, however, the masked man had waved him back to his seat.

“You will allow me to attend to this,” he said sternly. Turning to Creighton, the speaker fixed his gaze intently upon the young man. “You say you are tired of gesturings, Mr. Creighton. Yet, because to-night you have proved yourself such a fool, I am compelled to make one more gesture. I can assure you without the slightest exaggeration that, at the present moment, I hold the power of life and death over you. You come here, a prisoner to my slightest wish, and yet you have the audacity to state on what terms you will be kind enough to serve me.”

The masked man, during this amazing statement, did not once raise his voice. He spoke in a level tone throughout. Yet Creighton, in spite of his resolution, felt himself involuntarily shivering. Either this man was mad, or he was a cold-blooded monster capable of any ruthless crime.

“You are prepared to be a murderer, then?” Creighton asked.

The other’s tone did not change.

“In the course of my work I have been compelled to order the deaths of many men, and now that you are in my Organisation, Mr. Creighton, if you refuse to obey me I shall not hesitate to add your name to the list. But already I have wasted too much time,” the speaker went on; “you will now listen carefully to my instructions.”

Five minutes later Creighton was led out through the deserted garden by the same man who had previously acted as his guide.

He had many feelings, but the main impression in his mind was that he hated this masked man even more than he hated the Colossus.

Also, he felt certain he was an infinitely more dangerous personage.

As already intimated, that house at Highgate with the evil memories, called The Mount, was not the kind of place to attract the average person. Yet crouched in the undergrowth of that jungle of a garden on this particular night was a man who took an especial interest in all that he saw.

Bunny Chipstead, in the patient, painstaking manner customary to him, was working on his new job.

ON the night that Martin Creighton went to The Mount, Margery Steers had a further summons from the Colossus. When she entered her sitting-room, to find the girl Xavia there, her first impulse was to rebel; but at the thought of all that would follow her rebellion, her courage sank.

Half an hour later she was in the house of mystery.

"Because you have failed, Miss Steers, I intend to teach you a lesson," said her taskmaster. "As a punishment for your failure you will remain in this house until further notice."

Although Margery had the impression that the threat was merely a bluff, and that the man's intention was principally to frighten her, the long-controlled anger now burst forth.

"Do what you like," she declared, stamping her foot; "you cannot frighten me. I was a weak fool ever to listen to you. Whatever happens, I will not do anything for you. You are a scoundrel, and you are bound to be arrested sooner or later."

The face of the man became thunderous. He did not make an outburst, however, but contented himself with a reply of few words.

“Very well, Miss Steers. The position is quite clear now.”

She was given some food, which she was unable to touch, and then taken to the small attic bedroom she had occupied before. In spite of the knowledge that a very real peril surrounded her, she felt happier than she had been for some time. She was no longer a hypocrite—that pretending to become a traitress had placed an intolerable burden of shame upon her shoulders. Now, whatever was in store, she felt she could breathe freely once again. Help *must* come sooner or later, and then the whole wretched business would be over.

For an hour this thought consoled her. It was after that first hour that the girl's spirits began to flag again. Not a sound came to her from outside that small, poorly furnished room. The door had been locked on the outside, and there was no hope of escape through the barred window. It was as though she had been placed in a tomb.

It was this waiting which proved so unnerving. Margery Steers was an accomplished girl—had she not been she could not have held her important post—and her vivid imagination now commenced to play tricks upon her. She remembered reading a recent newspaper article on the alarming

number of girls who disappeared in London each year, and of whom nothing was ever heard again. Now that she had openly defied the blackmailer, he might have no scruple about murdering her! It seemed very likely.

Time dragged wearily on. If only this suspense could be snapped! If only something would happen! But the intense silence continued. She commenced to abandon all hope.

Later—much later, when she was digging her nails into the palms of her hands to prevent herself screaming—she looked once again at the time. It was five minutes past one. She had been in that room for over four hours—a lifetime of dread, it had seemed.

In order to try to soothe her overwrought nerves, she now lay once more upon the narrow bed. She really must get a hold of herself, otherwise she would be unable to put up any sort of a fight when the crisis came.

How she would have welcomed sleep! But even the most fitful dozing was impossible.

What appeared to be another eternity of time passed.

Then——

What was that? She sat upright, every sense alert, her heart pounding, so that each beat was plainly audible.

It had been a faint clicking sound she had

heard. She strained forward, her eyes fixed on the door.

The next moment she had put a hand to her mouth. She was living through again a scene that would always be imprinted upon her memory. The door had slowly opened, and shuffling towards her was the same dreadful-looking dwarf who had come to that room on a previous night. He carried an electric torch, and the light of this fell full upon her, dazzling her eyes.

She tried to speak, to force herself out of that stupor of fear; but her brain refused to function, and no words came.

"Hush! I am your friend . . . you are in great danger . . . and I have come to take you away."

She felt that she must be dreaming. This stunted man, whose very presence was so terrifying, her friend? . . .

Yet the words caused hope to come back to her in such a tumultuous flood that she found her voice.

"Who are you?" she asked breathlessly.

The dwarf waved a hand, which she noticed was beautifully moulded.

"I am your friend. I swear that!" he added earnestly. "You are in great danger in this house—that is why I have come to take you away. You must have confidence, for we

cannot waste time in talking. Come quickly and make no noise."

Margery stood up. After the terrific strain of the past few hours, her legs felt so weak that she could scarcely remain erect. But her prayer had been answered; although employing an unattractive agent, Providence had helped her!

Ten minutes later she stood outside the house. The street was deserted. She did not recognise it, but guessed the thoroughfare, by the type of houses on either side, to be one of the main streets of Mayfair. She noticed the number of the house from which she had escaped to be 247.

"Quickly! I have a car waiting! We must get away!"

It was the dwarf speaking.

"You will take me to my rooms?" she asked.

"Come! Come!"

The man had brought her out of such deep trouble that her only feeling was one of tremendous relief. Now, however, some faint stirrings made her look at her rescuer. The man was regarding her intently. His eyes seemed faithful. The inclination she had to turn and run away was repressed.

"You have been very kind to me," she said.

The dwarf made an indistinguishable sound, and caught hold of her hand.

“The car!” he said, pointing.

She went with him. Her brain was a riot of conflicting emotions. Her left hand was burning, set on fire, it seemed, by the touch of the dwarf’s fingers.

The car was a powerful two-seater racing model.

“Get in!” exclaimed the dwarf excitedly.

When she had complied, he took the seat at the wheel, looking like some hobgoblin of a nightmarish fancy.

He proved a capable driver, however, and Margery reflected gratefully that within a few minutes she would be safely at home.

Her first definite suspicion came when the dwarf quickened the pace of the car alarmingly. He—he was not going towards Westminster! They were speeding through some unknown suburb.

“Where——?”

The rest of the question died on her lips. Slackening the pace of the car, the dwarf leaned towards her.

The next moment she experienced a sickening sensation of nausea. The dwarf had thrust something over her mouth, the fumes of which were rapidly robbing her of consciousness.

Her last impression was of being driven through the night at a terrific speed. Then blackness came . . . and oblivion.

Margery awoke with a surge in her ears. She was in a peculiar room. It was perfectly circular. For a window there was a long, narrow aperture with deep embrasures. Looking at this, the still half-conscious girl noticed that the walls of this singular room must be at least two feet thick.

And that monotonous surge! . . .

She rose unsteadily and walked to the narrow slit. Between the beginning of the wide ledge and the glass frame was two feet of space. A foot away from the glass were two stout iron bars fixed horizontally in the masonry. These not only precluded any thought of escape, but interfered with her vision of what might be immediately below.

Looking beyond, she was able to see a wide expanse of grey, tossing sea; this new prison of hers must be perched on a cliff.

Stunned and bewildered by the fresh twist in her affairs, she did not hear the door opening until, turning suddenly, she saw the dwarf grimacing at her. Instantly she questioned him.

"What is this place? Why have you brought me here?"

The dwarf looked at her with burning eyes. He made a curious, deep obeisance.

"I have brought you here to be my bride," he said in a thick, guttural tone. "I love you—I loved you from the first moment that I saw you. I am ugly, despised, shunned, penniless, now, but soon"—his voice rising almost to a scream—"I shall be a king—the man wielding the greatest power in the world. Riches will be mine in abundance, and I shall place them all at your little feet."

He paused, as though expecting some reply, but Margery was too paralysed by astonishment to speak.

"You shrink from me. I am used to that." He paused again, while a gust of emotion shook his misshapen body. "Let me explain," he went on, "why I was forced to drug you on the journey here. I knew that you would not come of your own accord. You are the most beautiful living thing—beautiful enough to be Queen of the World. And that is what I am going to make you . . . for soon, quite soon now, I shall be the Emperor of the World. Yes, I, Guillamez Zoab. My dear, you must not look upon my face—you must look beyond this ugly body of mine and see into my heart"—he thumped his left breast with a curiously beautiful hand—"that

heart which, because of my love for you, is big and splendid."

He looked at her as she still shrank away from him, huddled against the wall, and then made another deep obeisance.

"I will leave you now, sacred treasure of my heart."

Margery noticed as he turned away that his eyes, deep-set in that repulsive face, were like a faithful dog's, and that they brimmed with tears.

CHAPTER XVII

ZOAB GIVES AUDIENCE

STRAIGHT from leaving the girl, Zoab went to another room in that curious new residence of his. He was about to give audience to three very powerful men, all of whom were multi-millionaires.

It did not matter to the ex-Professor of Toledo University that these men were utterly unscrupulous, and that they intended to use him as their tool for the most damnable plot yet conceived by man. These three, Schriner, Zundt, and Wilowski, international financiers, represented money to the bacteriologist, and, because of the girl he had just left, Zoab wanted money badly. This unholy confederacy had promised him an initial

payment of ten thousand pounds when his work was complete. This would not take him much longer. Another week, a fortnight at most. . . .

Guillamez Zoab had become a changed man. Like Victor Hugo's immortal character, he had fallen in love with a beautiful human flower. Meeting Margery Steers had effected a complete transformation. For many months previous his consuming ambition had been to extract a terrible vengeance upon mankind for the indignities he had been made to suffer. Like another, but more terrible, Nero, he would have glutted himself upon the spectacle of a ravaged and panic-stricken world being decimated by a new disease so contagious and ruthless that thousands would die from it every day.

That he was penniless had not affected him then. All he lived for was bringing that loathsome germ to fruition. While he was doing so, he had food to eat and clothes of a sort to wear.

The first night that Margery Steers had been brought to the house of Juhl, Zoab, in looking at her, had had a new vision; he almost forgot his lust for vengeance in the suddenly born wish to take this girl away to a secret place and devote the rest of his life to adoring her.

Reflection had made him realise that this desire was impossible without one thing. He must have money—money to buy this girl dresses, jewels, everything which the heart of woman could desire. He must place her in a shrine that was fitting in every way; and this was only possible through the possession of wealth.

For some time he had nursed this passion in secret; and then, unable to keep it in control any longer, he had approached Juhl, making a bold demand for no less a sum than ten thousand pounds. His mind, used always to abject penury, could not conceive a greater amount than this; it represented illimitable riches.

The Colossus had been staggered. For some moments he was literally stricken dumb. The thought of this shambling wretch of a man desiring money—and such an amount of money—then turned him into a raging volcano.

“I will not give you a penny,” he stormed; “you must be mad. Remember all that I have done for you already. Do you wish to be whipped again, Zoab?”

The dwarf drew away. Although Juhl did not realise it, that unthinking and callous remark had made Zoab swear to kill him. Already the bacteriologist did not like the idea of Juhl forcing him to work for an unknown

man—a man whose face he had never seen, but whose voice filled him with dread.

Affecting contrition, he had shuffled away. But that night, when the envoy of the unholy confederacy had approached him, he had been only too willing to listen. Who the masters of this man were, what they wished him to do—these were matters of indifference; the only thing that counted was that the man had promised him wealth, great wealth.

So, with the picture of the girl always filling his mind, he had conducted those secret negotiations which had brought him now to the meeting in that heavily panelled room, perched high over the surging sea.

An ordinary man would have been repelled by looking into the faces of the three who awaited his coming. All had reptilian eyes; these were creatures who had sold their souls to the devil in return for financial power. Although each was already possessed of enormous wealth, they spent their lives plotting, sometimes against each other, to secure more millions. In the present case, it pleased them to unite their forces. Schriener was to operate in Europe, Zundt in America, and Wilowski in the East. Once this powerful weapon was placed in their hands by the bacteriologist, they intended to bring the whole world to their feet, cornering markets

through the sense of awful terror that was bound to ensue.

Schriner was the spokesman.

He stood up as the dwarf entered, holding out a package.

"Here is the money you were promised," he said; and while Zoab tore open the thick envelope excitedly and commenced counting the notes of heavy denominations, the speaker continued: "You will be quite safe here to continue your research work. We have bought this derelict castle, constructed a laboratory, and you stand no risk of interference. What we wish you now to tell us is how quickly you consider you can complete your investigations. We should also like to have from you a description of this particular poison germ and its effect——"

Zoab, his eyes shining fanatically, launched into details. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

(THE ARREST

MRS. PERKINS, standing in the doorway looked inquisitively at her lodger.

"Two men have called, Mr. Creighton," she said; "they have funny-lookin' hats on, and I don't like their faces. They says they want to see you particular."

Martin Creighton sprang up. He was tired of mysterious callers.

"I'll go out and see them, Mrs. Perkins," he replied; and putting action to words, he walked quickly down the small passage that led to the front door.

Standing at the end of this passage and inside the front door, which was closed, were two broad-shouldered men. They had "detective" stamped all over them.

"You want to see me?" asked Creighton brusquely.

One of the men stepped forward.

"Are you Mr. Martin Creighton?" he demanded.

"I am Martin Creighton."

"Then, Martin Creighton, I hold a warrant for your arrest on a serious charge."

Creighton felt a sudden stab of dismay. What fresh devil's trick was this? With an effort he kept his voice steady; no good would come of making himself a fool.

"What is the charge?" he asked.

The man who had been spokesman throughout produced an official-looking document.

"You are charged with the murder of Sir Simon Baste on the night of the fourteenth instant. I have to warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence against you."

"The fourteenth was last night," commented the accused. "Of course, the charge is ridiculous. I have never met Sir Simon Baste, although I knew he was a well-known financier. You haven't a shred of evidence against me. On what grounds do you dare to come here?"

"I am not free to say anything in reply to your questions," returned the detective; "I have to take you at once to the nearest police station, where you will be formally charged with the crime."

Creighton clenched his teeth.

"All right," he snapped, "but I warn you that the police are making fools of themselves. You are barking up the wrong tree, and the consequences may be serious."

The detective remained unmoved.

"The authorities know their own business best," he replied stolidly. "As this is a most serious charge, Mr. Creighton, I must ask you to hold out your hands."

"You mean to handcuff me?"

"I must do my duty."

Mrs. Perkins, her face convulsed with astonishment, saw her paying guest being led away by the man who had previously handcuffed him. There seemed a calamity upon her lodgers. First Mr. Dropstick had left her to be married, and now this young man, who was so quiet and gentlemanly in his

ways, was being taken away by the police. Of course, a terrible mistake must have happened. but it was all very upsetting.

"What has happened, Mr. Creighton?" she inquired, running after the small party.

"These fools say that I've committed a murder, Mrs. Perkins. They are taking me to the police station, but I shall be back soon." Even in his anger Creighton tried to soothe the woman's feelings. Mrs. Perkins was a decent sort, and he hated having brought this disgrace upon her home.

"Come along, now!" sharply said the chief detective; "take my advice, sir, and save your breath."

Twenty minutes later Martin Creighton stood in a small room at the local police station. In addition to the two detectives who had brought him there, this room contained three other men. One wore the uniform of a superintendent of police, while the other two were in plain clothes.

At the sight of one of these men, Creighton sprang forward, clenching his manacled hands.

"So you're the rotten swine!" he cried; "you'll pay for this!"

The small, immaculately dressed, wiry-looking man remained unruffled by the words.

Sitting back in his chair, he turned his gaze towards the ceiling, as though he had not heard the other speak.

"It will be in your own interests, Mr. Creighton, if you retain your temper." The words, uttered in a sing-song voice, caused Creighton to look at the second man dressed in ordinary clothes. He found himself looking into a pair of extremely pale blue eyes set in a somewhat flabby face, whose natural expression appeared to be one of intense lugubriousness.

Creighton instinctively disliked this man, and he made no bones about it.

"Who the deuce are you?" he demanded.

From three out of the four men in the room came a gasp.

"I am Jarvis Stark, Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard," replied the melancholy-looking man.

It was then that Creighton had his first real sensation of fear. Whoever had spun this web about him had used subtle and cunning means. The Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard himself. . . .

Yet he faced this lugubrious, but powerful, personage boldly.

"I warn you, Mr. Deputy Commissioner, as I have already warned your detectives, that a grave error has been made in arresting me

to-night," he said. "I understand that I am charged with the murder of Sir Simon Baste. In reply to this monstrous and ridiculous accusation, I tell you that I have never even seen Sir Simon Baste."

The sing-song voice of Mr. Jarvis Stark made an instant reply.

"Then how do you account for this revolver being found near the murdered man?"

The Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard extended to the accused a Colt automatic revolver. Before he took it into his hand, Creighton recognised it as a weapon which he had brought from South America, and which, until that moment, he had had every reason to believe was in a drawer in his bedroom at 13, Fitzroy Street. He stared blankly, while the realisation of what this must mean flooded through him.

"Is this your revolver? Quickly, now!" The tone of Mr. Jarvis Stark's voice had changed. As he spoke, Martin Creighton leaned forward. He was trying to puzzle out what seemed to him to be an amazing mystery. It could not be—and yet——

"Yes, that is my revolver." He marvelled how calm his own voice sounded.

The Deputy Commissioner looked at him fixedly.

"I take it, Simmonds, that you have already warned the accused?"

The detective who had arrested Creighton nodded.

"Yes, sir, I told him at the time that anything he said might be used in evidence against him at his trial."

At the word "trial," Martin felt a wave of madness pass through him. His mind conjured up a horrifying picture. He saw himself standing in the big dock at the Old Bailey, a police warder on either side. In front of him, on the raised bench, a scarlet-garbed judge, on whose white wig rested a small square of black cloth, was speaking in a voice broken with emotion: "Martin Creighton, you have been declared guilty of the terrible crime of murder . . . you will be taken to the place from whence you came. . . ."

"It's all a damned lie" he cried at the top of his voice. "I am innocent!"

The manner of Mr. Jarvis Stark changed once again. He might now have been a chapel deacon conducting a religious service.

"If you are innocent, Mr. Creighton, rest assured that no harm will come to you. The fact that you acknowledge this weapon to belong to you, however, is damaging. Certain finger-marks have also been found. . . ."

Now the whole fiendish plot was laid bare. That monster, who so sardonically called himself "Jones"—had spun this web. He had wanted a catspaw. Good God! a catspaw for murder!

That thumb-mark! Now he knew the significance of it. By some devilish cunning they had duplicated this impression; it would be used as damning evidence against him—and——

He pulled himself together, urged to do so by his innate sense of manhood.

"For the last time, Mr. Deputy Commissioner, I have to say I am innocent," he declared.

MR. Jarvis Stark made a gesture with a bony hand.

"Take him in a car to Cannon Row Station, Simmonds," he ordered. "Have his fingerprints taken, and report to me in the morning."

As he was hustled from the room, Martin turned to look at the small, wiry man seated on the Deputy Commissioner's right hand. What was *he* doing in this matter? Was he an associate of the Colossus?

In the circumstances it seemed incredible, but as he continued to stare at this man, the latter gave him a wink of encouragement!

Whilst waiting for the car which was to

take him to captivity, Creighton saw the man approaching him. No words were passed, perhaps, Martin considered, because of the presence of the detectives, but again he was given an unmistakable look of encouragement.

What was behind this glance Creighton was unable even to conjecture. He had little time for reflection, in any case, for a closed car now drove up to the entrance of the police station, and the detective Simmonds ordered him curtly to get inside.

A minute later the car was proceeding across a portion of the Heath in the direction of the City.

CHAPTER XIX CHIPSTEAD GIVES AN OPINION

RETURNING to the room in the police station, Bunny Chipstead was frowned upon by Mr. Jarvis Stark.

"With the best will in the world, Mr. Chipstead, I don't quite see your connection in this matter," said the Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard. There was a covert hint of hostility in the official's tone.

Chipstead became apologetic.

"I should hate you to think that I butted in on purpose, Mr. Deputy Commissioner," he replied. "The reason I came out here to-night was because I called at Scotland Yard

and found you had gone. You will remember being kind enough to promise me any help I might require whilst in London?"

Mr. Jarvis Stark's face lost something of its former thundery expression.

"My dear Mr. Chipstead," he said, in the sing-song tone so characteristic of him, "I regret that in the heat of the moment I was a little off-hand. But I have not been well lately." It was an intensely interested Bunny Chipstead who watched the speaker wipe a bedewed forehead with a large handkerchief. "Now tell me, Mr. Chipstead, in what way I can be of service to you." The Scotland Yard official put away his handkerchief and leaned forward in his seat.

Chipstead was quick to reply.

"Do you happen to know if 'Darkey' Mottram is in England, chief?" There were two notes in Chipstead's voice. One was anxiety for the information required, and the other was a manifest respect for the man he addressed.

Mr. Jarvis Stark sighed. It might have been a sigh of relief now that the arrest of the man he had recently charged with murder had been safely effected, or it might have been caused by the wickedness of such men as "Darkey" Mottram.

"I haven't heard that Mottram is here," he

answered; "but I will instantly make all necessary inquiries, of course, Mr. Chipstead."

"That is awfully kind of you, chief."

"What's 'Darkey' been doing now, then?" inquired the Scotland Yard official, evidently pleased at being so addressed.

"According to a cable I had this afternoon," replied Chipstead, "he's been showing too much interest in Mrs. Van Hooten's famous jewel collection. New York thinks he will make for London sooner or later, and hearing I was on this side, they sent me a cable on the off-chance."

The Scotland Yard Deputy Commissioner raised his loose-jointed frame and extended a bony hand in farewell.

"I'll do all I possibly can," he promised; "drop in at the Yard to-morrow morning, and I may have some news for you. There are one or two things I have to settle up here."

It was a plain hint, and Chipstead was sensible enough to act on it.

"Good-night, chief—and thank you very much," he replied. Leaving the place, he broke into a soft whistle.

An hour later the Secret Service man was closeted in the study of Sir Robert Heddingley, at the latter's private residence. Heddingley's face was lined, and he looked appreciably older than when Chipstead had last seen him.

He had greeted his visitor warmly, his eyes searching the other's face.

"You're not looking well, Bob," was Bunny's comment as they shook hands.

"Well! I'm worried to death. This thing I was telling you about a little time back——"

The speaker broke off, turned away, and groped with an unsteady hand for a pipe. This he filled and lit.

Three minutes later, when the two were seated opposite each other in deep leather chairs, Sir Robert Heddingley spoke again.

"I suppose you haven't been able to get a line, Bunny?" he asked eagerly.

Chipstead caressed a silk-clad ankle.

"At the present time, Bob, I prefer not to say anything definite," he replied; "but I dropped in to-night to let you know that I am working on this job—working a good many hours a day, too."

"Good old man!"

"I am heading in a certain direction, Bob," went on Bunny; "I may want some help later on, and directly I do I will let you know. For the present I'd much rather be on my own."

Sir Robert Heddingley nodded. He knew his man.

"By the way, Sir Simon Baste has been murdered, I understand?"

"Yes. I hear there has been an arrest."

Bunny Chipstead pointed the stem of his pipe at the speaker.

"Scotland Yard have made almighty fools of themselves over that arrest, Bob," he said startingly.

The other looked at him.

"There's something behind that remark, Bunny. Isn't the man guilty?"

Chipstead smiled.

"He's no more guilty than you or I, Bob. By the way, do you know anything of a man named Juhl? He's a great brute of a fellow, almost dazzlingly handsome in an animal fashion, and he has three curious white streaks in a mop of black hair."

Sir Robert Heddingley's lined face softened into a smile.

"Sounds like a film Sheik," he commented. "No, I can't say I know the gentleman."

"You will later on," declared Chipstead, and rose to go.

CHAPTER XX MARGERY HAS A REVELATION

HORROR and amazement were the predominating impressions left on Margery's mind as the dwarf shuffled from the room after making his declaration.

The conclusion to which she was bound to

come was that Fate, instead of showing her a way out of her troubles, had plunged her into an even deeper perplexity. That stunted man had been sincere! He was as fanatical about his passion for her as about that mysterious work, as a result of which he was to achieve such tremendous power.

Sitting on the small bed, Margery experienced a series of bewildering emotions. To be worshipped by such a man! It frightened her because Zoab, she knew, was not only abnormal in body, but abnormal in mind. He was a human ogre, and yet she felt sure that he would willingly die for her sake if the necessity arose. And, actuated by the same irresistible force, he would kill anyone who attempted to thwart his desire—he would even kill her should she make any attempt to escape. Such a man was purely primitive; he made his own laws.

She could not get his frenzied words out of her ears. "Emperor of the World!" What could such a high-sounding phrase mean?

Her mind then went back to the Colossus. The latter, she had the best of reasons to believe, was a super-criminal. Zoab, until that night, had been associated with him—had committed crimes on his behalf, no doubt. It was fairly easy for her to understand what had happened: inflamed by his desire, the dwarf had seized his opportunity to kidnap her. No

doubt he was working now for a fresh master, a man who was willing to supply him with unlimited money in order to profit from the scheme on which Zoab was engaged.

What was this scheme? What work could such a person as Zoab do? That it was of immense proportions, and that it was fraught with tremendous possibilities, were certain—unless the dwarf had lost his reason.

She continued in the endeavour to thrash out this baffling problem. Always her reflections brought her back to one central point—the Colossus. She had this, at least, to go upon: that huge man with the parti-coloured hair was the declared enemy of Lord Belshaven, her employer. Did it not also follow, then, that Zoab, once the associate of the other, was also an enemy of Lord Belshaven, even though he might now be working for another master?

“Emperor of the World!”

The words rang in her ears like a sinister warning.

Was it not possible that this dreadful dwarf, having some obscure and mysterious reason of his own, was striking at England?—and perhaps through the very person of Lord Belshaven?

She got to her feet. Resolution had come to her. She felt herself being filled with a new spirit. Up till this time she had been some-

thing of a coward, and she reproached herself bitterly for the fact. But now this greater peril had enabled her to put on armour; her country, she felt sure, was threatened by a terror of which perhaps she, and she alone, was aware.

She must stay on in this place. And whatever the cost to herself—God knew it must be a bitter one—she was bound to seek out this monstrous thing, discover actually what the plot was, and then, should no help come to her in the meantime, endeavour to outwit the conspirators. An overwhelming task for a girl single-handed, but she had to attempt it, nevertheless.

Once the resolution was made, she was surprised to find the weight on her heart lifting. Stranger still was the thought which a moment later came so unexpectedly—she would have liked a comrade in this stupendous task, and the person who stood out in her mental vision was that young, tall, clear-eyed man who twice had offered her aid. What a fool—what a crass, stupid fool—she had been to refuse this help! How she would have welcomed it now!

There are moments in life when one gets lightning flashes of intuition. These usually come in times of crisis. Desperately at bay, Margery Steers had a revelation vouchsafed to her—this man she had suspected she knew now to be clean and true. What did it matter that

circumstances had caused him to be surrounded by suspicion? No doubt he had regarded her with similar suspicion. Yet this had not stopped him from offering her help when he felt she was in danger.

Margery Steers' hitherto uneventful life had not been disturbed by any love affairs. She had thrown herself into the work that proved so interesting with a zeal which almost completely absorbed the rest of her life. Love, therefore, had been merely an abstract factor—something to be read about in novels, something to be wondered at when overtaking her friends, but that was all. Love had never come marching bravely down Whitehall to catch her up in his swift, tumultuous embrace. Now and then, sitting over the fire in her rooms or idling half an hour away in St. James's Park, she had speculated in a vague and hazy fashion about the chance of one day a man entering into her own life. No stupidly romantic moods, these; Margery was essentially a modern girl, and the erotic or foolish balderdash of lady novelists she would have flung unhesitatingly into the fire. Yet, feminine to her finger-tips, it was but natural that, living a bachelor girl's life, she should think occasionally about men. She did not want a lover, but if one came she pictured him, above everything else, as a comrade, a man whom she could meet on level

ground with no artifice of sex—just a true, clear-eyed pal; just such a man, in fact, as that unknown whose friendship she had been stupid enough to refuse.

Would she meet this man again? Any pretence she might have had was now stripped from her; her soul was bare.

Her heart beat out a message; should he come again, all the friendship that she could give him would be his.

The thought consoled her. Whatever fears the future might hold, yet she had this small hope—that once again the unknown would look into her face and say: "I am your friend. I have come to help you."

Not many miles away the man of whom Margery Steers was thinking was fleeing, like the hunted criminal he had become, through the dark night. Travelling at terrific speed, the police car had smashed against a high wall an hour before. Wondering that he was still alive, he had crawled from beneath the wreck, and was now running across country in the direction, he hoped and believed, of the sea.

FIVE minutes after being formally charged with the murder of a man he had never seen, Martin Creighton, his hands manacled, was seated beside one of the detectives who had arrested him that night. The other police officer was driving the car at a powerful pace across Hampstead Heath.

In some uncanny fashion which he did not stop to analyse, Creighton's thoughts were not with the present; they were in the past.

A certain scene was vividly etched in his memory. He saw the rat-like face of the ex-convict, who had drifted down to the South American mining camp, as clearly as though the man stood before him. Jake Colman had been the man's name, and he was reputed to be one of the most expert safe-burglars in America. On arrival at the mining camp he was in a pitiable condition, being a physical wreck. In spite of a natural antipathy, Creighton had helped the man to the extent of giving him food and clothes, and providing him with a shelter. Colman, who had just served a long prison sentence, had been grateful, human reptile though he was.

His gratitude had taken a most singular form.

"I don't s'pose that you'll ever get across the dicks yerself, but if yer do, matey, here's a trick that will prove useful," he said one night, after looking up his benefactor at the latter's shanty.

To Martin Creighton's surprise, the ex-convict produced a pair of handcuffs.

"Put these on my wrists, matey," he said, "and I'll show you what I mean."

Somewhat unwillingly Creighton did as he was desired.

The ex-convict held out his handcuffed wrists. There was a smile on his hard, criminal face.

"Now yer wouldn't think," said Colman, "that any guy, trussed up like this, had any more chance than a snowball in hell of getting free, would yer now?"

"No, I shouldn't," curtly rejoined Creighton.

The smile on the criminal's face broadened.

"Well, that's where I've got yer beat—see? There's just two guys in this world who can get their 'ands out of the steel 'mitts' without raising a hair. Haljeli, the guy who goes round on the music 'alls, is one—and *I'm the other!* Like to see how it's done? You never know yer luck, and I may be doin' yer a good turn without knowin' it."

It was more out of kindness of heart than

anything else that Creighton had expressed a wish to see this astonishing trick performed. He did not like Colman, the very presence of the man was offensive to him; but in spite of the deep rascality of the other's nature, the ex-convict, he knew, was grateful to him for the humanity shown, and he was trying in the only way he knew to show his appreciation of the other's decency. It would be churlish to refuse his offer.

He affected more interest than he really felt.

"Do you really mean to say that you can get free?" he asked.

"Yes. Look!"

The movements the man made could not be accurately followed by the watcher, but at the end of a very few minutes Creighton was forced to gasp in astonishment. Although he had tested the security of the handcuffs for himself, the ex-convict had miraculously freed his wrists, and was now holding the manacles in one hand.

"Wonderful!" he admitted.

Jake Colman showed discoloured teeth in a third broad smile.

"Only two guys in the world can do that so far as I know," he said, "but if you likes you can be the third."

Creighton had stared. The thought that this

singular accomplishment might ever be of any use to him was ludicrous, of course; but he was excusably curious to know how the remarkable feat could be done. What was more, he disliked casting cold water upon Jake Colman's enthusiasm.

"I should certainly like to see how you do it," he admitted.

The ex-convict demonstrated.

He showed infinite patience, and, still filled with his enthusiasm, he at length persuaded Creighton to put on the handcuffs himself.

Three months arduous work followed. Wondering why he was such a fool, Creighton, always under the tutelage of the ex-convict (who, having stated that he wished to return to an honest life, had been given a small job at the camp) and amidst the ribaldry of Harry Jenkins, his friend, persisted in acquiring the gift which Colman insisted should be his.

At the end of the three months, Martin Creighton, to the jubilation of Jake Colman, was able to free his wrists from any pair of handcuffs that could be procured.

Having accomplished the task, Creighton had thought no more of the matter. As a matter of fact, the incident had passed entirely from his mind. By a master-stroke of irony, however, it now forced itself upon his attention.

He leaned forward as though overcome by

dejection. His manacled hands were hanging between his knees. Had he lost the trick? . . .

Five minutes later he sat upright.

"Here——" started the detective by his side.

The man said no more. Noiselessly, but with terrible force, the prisoner, who had freed himself, struck him on the point of the jaw. With a queer, half-strangled sob the detective sank back into his seat, unconscious, whilst his colleague, sitting in front, slowed down to negotiate a difficult corner. Creighton acted on impulse. One man was disposed of; before he could be safe he must see to the other.

He heard a growl, and then a voice: "Blast this engine!"

The next moment the car had stopped.

Creighton, his nerves on fire, looked out of the window. He saw the driver get down from his seat and walk to the front of the car with the evident intention of starting up the engine again. Now was his chance. Fate was lending him a hand after playing such a scurvy trick.

Opening the door to the left of the driver's seat, he noiselessly stepped from the car. The blackness of the night shielded him. Outlined by the headlights, he could see the stooping form of the detective.

"You needn't trouble, Simmonds; I can manage it," he heard the latter say.

In two bounds Creighton was upon him. He was thoroughly desperate, and this was not the occasion to stand upon scruple. His freedom, perhaps his very life, depended upon outing this man and getting away. Within a few hours he must be out of England.

It was almost ludicrous to watch the astonishment dawn in the detective's face when he saw who his assailant was. Yet, a man trained to surprises and emergencies, he wasted no words.

But surprise had given Martin the advantage, and he made the best use of it. Although much the lighter man, he packed such power into his first blow that the detective staggered. Before he could put his hand into the pocket which Creighton suspected held a weapon, his assailant had launched two more blows. The first skidded off the detective's head, but the second took dramatic effect, for, landing on the jaw, it knocked the police officer as unconscious as his colleague in the car.

Creighton pulled the body to the side of the roadway, and then, going back to the car, half carried, half dragged the still unconscious Simmonds to join his comrade. Cranking up the car, he leaped into the driver's seat, turned in the opposite direction, and sped off into the night.

STAGGERING into the place, Martin Creighton collapsed in a heap. He was completely exhausted, and could not have gone another yard. Outside this barn, or whatever it was he had stumbled upon, he could hear the rain still falling in pitiless torrents. An hour before he had been soaked to the skin, and now his clothes hung on him like bedraggled rags.

His position was desperate. For forty-eight hours he had been a hunted man. The entire police force of the country had been striving to capture him. How he had escaped detection he did not know, since he had been forced to run many risks.

Meeting that drunken tramp on the roadside had been a godsend, of course. The change of clothes had been quickly effected. He had neither shaved nor washed, and with that filthy bowler hat, disreputable coat and trousers, that were only held together in some places by pieces of string, he presented an appearance which he hoped was as different from the Martin Creighton that the police were looking for as to enable him to get to the coast, his destination, unhindered.

The unmistakable smell of an English farm-yard came to him. In the blackness of the

night he had merely seen the outline of what appeared to be a barn, and, completely spent, he had decided to rest there for at least a couple of hours. Fit as he was, the strain of the past forty-eight hours had been tremendous. Moreover, except for the rank cheese and grubby bread that he had found in the pocket of the tramp's coat, he had eaten no food since the night of his escape.

His weary body had found a fairly comfortable resting-place on a bundle of sacks. He was famished with hunger and very thirsty, but his most urgent need was sleep. He tried to battle against an overwhelming desire to sink into oblivion, but the struggle was an unequal one; and within a few moments the fugitive whose name was being broadcasted throughout the country, not only through the newspapers but by wireless, sank into such a heavy sleep that he might have been drugged.

"Hey, what be you a-doin' here?"

Martin Creighton, aroused out of that deep, dreamless sleep, stared into a weather-beaten face fringed with curious whiskers. This man was dressed as a farm labourer, wearing a shapeless felt hat, a waistcoat with sleeves, and drab, corduroy trousers, strapped at the knees.

Still feeling stupid, Creighton sprang up. He must get away! What a fool he had been.

He endeavoured to push the labourer aside, but the man had the stolid stubbornness of the true yokel.

“Doan’t you be a-goin’ ter lay yer ’ands on me, mister, or ’twill be the worse for ’ee, you varmint. Nobody ever puts a ’and on Joe Adams without gettin’ the worst of it, so I be tellin’ ’ee.” Still standing in the doorway, the speaker raised his voice: “Hey, Bill, Andrew, Sammy! ’Ere be a drunken, stinkin’ tramp a-messin’ up the barn!”

The next moment three other men, more or less replicas of Joe Adams, filled the entrance.

Creighton, fully awake now, did the only thing possible: lowering his head, he endeavoured to force a way out. But these yokels seemed made of granite and iron; they appeared impervious to blows, and it was not long before a clumsy sledge-hammer swing from Joe Adams’ leg-of-mutton fist, catching the hunted man on the side of the head, sent him reeling to the floor.

“Now we’ll see what the maister says,” pronounced Adams, directing operations like a rustic field-marshal. “Hey, Sammy, and you, Andrew, tie up ’is ’ands while I goes to the ’ouse.”

It was an extremely humiliating experience, but Creighton realised the opposition was too much for him.

A quarter of an hour or so passed, and then he heard a cultured, impressive voice say :

“What are you doing here, my man?”

Looking at the speaker, Creighton received a distinct shock.

In the man standing before him he recognised Lord Belshaven, England’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Martin did some rapid thinking.

“I should like to see you privately, sir,” he said.

The man in tweeds passed a hand over his shaven chin. He was obviously surprised to find that this disreputable figure had the voice of a gentleman.

“You look all in,” he commented.

Creighton put a hand to his head. He was giddy through want of food.

“I—I’m afraid I am, sir,” he replied.

To the gaping astonishment of the farm labourers, Lord Belshaven said kindly :

“Come up to the house. You must have some breakfast.”

Creighton flushed beneath his grime.

“Perhaps you will be kind enough to let me have a bath, sir? I——” His voice trailed off, and he staggered.

“Adams, give this gentleman a helping hand. Bring him up to the house.”

The one remaining tooth that Joe Adams

possessed stood out arrestingly as he gaped in wonderment. But it was the "maister" who had spoken, and he did as he had been bidden.

This comfortable room, smelling so agreeably of old books and good tobacco, faced a wide expanse of velvety lawn, which was reached by means of the wide French windows. It was a beautiful autumn morning, and to Martin Creighton the cawing of the rooks in the tall elms at the bottom of the lawn was one of the most soothing sounds he had ever heard.

Only a real aristocrat could have treated him in the way Lord Belshaven had done. Despite his disreputable appearance, he had been taken by a servant to a wonderfully appointed bathroom and then back to a bedroom, where a suit of tweeds belonging to the Foreign Secretary himself had been placed at his disposal.

After that had come breakfast—a meal the memory of which, Martin felt, would be impressed upon his mind until the day of his death: grape-fruit, porridge, grilled sole, eggs and bacon, toast, marmalade, with he could not remember how many cups of glorious coffee. His host had not said a word throughout the meal, occupying himself with *The Times*.

It was only when Creighton had finished the most wonderful meal of his life that Lord Belshaven gave any sign of being conscious of the other's presence.

"We will go into the study," he said; "it is quiet there, and we shall have no interruptions."

Dumb with amazement, Creighton followed his host into that long, pleasant room, the walls of which were lined with books.

Lord Belshaven pointed to a deep red leather chair.

"You smoke, no doubt?" he asked, placing within the other's reach a box of famous cigars.

Like one in a dream, Martin lit the cigar and blew a cloud of smoke. Then he was brought back to reality.

"Now, young man, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what you were doing in my barn last night?" Lord Belshaven, looking intently, suddenly changed his tone. His voice had been firm but courteous before; now it was sharp and insistent.

"I remember your face now," he said; "you spoke to my secretary in Rimini's Restaurant some days ago. You frightened Miss Steers, I remember . . . you must give me an explanation."

The young man turned and faced his interlocutor.

"I am going to tell you a very remarkable story, sir. Every word will be the truth. My name, to begin with, is Martin Creighton."

Lord Belshaven started.

"The man wanted for the murder of Sir Simon Baste?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." It was too late to draw back now, and Creighton did not wish to do so. He felt intuitively that this man would help him to find justice. Besides, desperate as was his own plight, he hoped, through the agency of Lord Belshaven, to hear of the girl whose fate had become so strangely mixed up with his own. Hunted criminal that he had become, he could see little hope of giving her the assistance to which he had pledged himself; but his host, powerful personage that he was, would be able to do so, no doubt.

"Now, if you will be so kind as to listen, sir," he started; and Lord Belshaven nodded his head.

Creighton went on to narrate his astonishing adventures during the past few weeks. He told of the advertisement he had inserted in the *Meteor*; of his meeting the Colossus and the girl Xavia; of his experience with the dwarf, his following the latter to an attic room occupied by a very beautiful and terrified girl; of his signing a bizarre document with a thumb-print; of his meeting the masked man

in the house at Highgate; of his entering uninvited Lord Belshaven's London residence in Carlton House Terrace, and what happened there that same night; and then, finally, that uprooting accusation of murdering a man he had never even seen.

"If you don't mind, sir," he went on, "I will leave myself out of it for the moment. I should like to talk to you about Miss Steers."

The Foreign Secretary's face became grave.

"I am very worried indeed about that young lady," he confessed. "Miss Steers disappeared from her rooms in Peter Street, Westminster, two nights ago, and no word has come to me of her since. I immediately informed Scotland Yard of the occurrence, but up till now they have been unsuccessful in tracing her. It is remarkable that you should have told me this strange story. What connection Miss Steers could have had with the persons you have described, I cannot possibly conceive. During the time she has worked for me, Miss Steers has proved herself not only a highly efficient, but a very loyal private secretary."

Creighton burst out :

"The man who called himself 'Jones' must have had some hold over her, of course, sir; that is the only possible conclusion. That was the reason, no doubt, why she refused to let

me help her—she must have thought that I was a member of the gang myself after seeing me in that house. Haven't you any idea at all, sir, where she can be?"

The Foreign Secretary shook his head.

"None at all," he replied; "but I will ring up Scotland Yard at once, and tell them to search London for the man you have called 'Jones.' You couldn't possibly give any idea of the position of that house of his, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. You see, I went and returned there blindfolded. But there's a house at Highgate——

Lord Belshaven walked to the cabinet on which stood the telephone.

"That shall be thoroughly searched, of course," he said, before taking off the receiver.

At the end of ten minutes, after hanging up the instrument, he turned to his guest.

"What I have to decide now, Creighton, is what is to be done with you. I believe your statement that you are innocent of the murder of Sir Simon Baste. I believe also your story, incredible as it at first appeared. There is no doubt in my mind that the man 'Jones' has used you as a catspaw—it may be that he himself committed the murder."

The speaker stopped, as though to collect his further thoughts.

“My obvious duty,” he resumed, “is to tell the police that you are here. I do not intend to do that, however. You noticed, Creighton, that in speaking to Scotland Yard just now I made no reference to you? If I handed you over to the police you would be subjected to a terrible ordeal. Although innocent, the circumstantial evidence against you must be very strong, or Mr. Jarvis Stark, the Deputy Commissioner, would not have had you arrested.”

“The evidence against me is false, sir. So far as I can understand, it is based principally upon two things—finding my revolver near the body of the dead man and the discovery of my finger-prints upon various things in the room.”

“But you say you were not there?”

“No, sir. The revolver was stolen from a drawer in my bedroom—how and by whom I do not exactly know, but, presumably, either by the girl Xavia or by a man who called himself Chipstead——”

“Chipstead! You can leave him out of your calculations entirely, Creighton. Chipstead is a personal friend of my own, a trusted Secret Service agent, and a man more likely to be your friend than your enemy. What did he want with you?”

Creighton, remembering the glance of en-

couragement which Chipstead had given him at the police station on the night of his arrest, began to see a little daylight.

“He called at my lodgings to inquire what I was doing in your house on the night I have described. Thinking that he might have some connection with the man who called himself ‘Jones,’ and not wishing to implicate Miss Steers in any way, I refused to give him any information. He then seriously warned me, saying that I was in a position of very great danger. He added something about my being concerned in a State conspiracy, but at the time I did not know what he meant. After that he left, and I did not see him again until the night I was arrested. Then, to my surprise, I found him at the police station with Mr. Jarvis Stark, the Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Naturally enough, I imagined at first that it was through him I had been taken, but—— Excuse me, sir, would you mind telling me what sort of a man Mr. Stark is?”

“Mr. Jarvis Stark has done wonderful work at Scotland Yard,” was the reply. “I understand that he has filled his responsible post with every credit to himself and to his department. Why do you ask?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, sir, I don’t exactly know. I didn’t like him—apart

altogether, of course, from his charging me with a crime I did not commit."

The Foreign Secretary apparently paid no heed to the words. His mind was on the main question.

"I intend to do a very unorthodox thing," he said; "I propose to keep you under cover here until this mystery is solved. As I have told you, if you were handed over to Scotland Yard you would be forced to undergo a very distressing experience, and in the absence of any rebutting evidence you might even be declared guilty and sent to the scaffold. I intend to return to London to-morrow, when I will make a point of seeing Mr. Chipstead and giving him my confidence. He is a man I can thoroughly trust, and no doubt will be able to give me some assistance, not only in your affair, but in the matter of Miss Steers' disappearance. What I propose is to engage you as an indoor servant. The fact of your being in my employ should save you from any suspicion. The other servants, no doubt, will present a little difficulty, but I will get the butler to warn them not to talk. Is this course agreeable to you?"

To Martin Creighton it was as though he had been hauled from engulfing quicksands.

"I can only thank you, Lord Belshaven, from the bottom of my heart," he replied.

“Very well, then. For some days I should not leave the house. It is better to be on the safe side. And”—very seriously—“I need scarcely warn you to keep your own counsel.”

“Of course, sir.”

The interview was ended.

CHAPTER XXIII

JUHL IS FRIGHTENED

It was the morning following Martin Creighton's arrest.

In the sumptuous Mayfair house occupied by that picturesque and dangerous criminal, Oscar Juhl, everything was confusion. Plans so carefully laid had miscarried.

The girl Xavia had risen early with the intention of visiting Margery Steers in the latter's attic prison. A tigress at heart, Xavia had wished to feast her eyes upon the captive's discomfiture. It was this pale chit of a child with whom Martin Creighton, the man she herself desired, was in love. He must have fallen in love with her the first night he came to the house.

Xavia, mounting the stairs, snapped together two splendid rows of white teeth. Strange that she, who had had in her time so many men at her feet, should be despised by the very one she had selected as her mate.

This tall, athletic young Englishman with the serene grey eyes had caused her heart to beat rapidly at the first moment of meeting. She had set herself out in her exotic fashion to win him. The passion for this man had grown daily until she felt herself willing even to cut adrift from Oscar Juhl, to leave, if needs be, her present life altogether. She, who had been used to spending many thousands of pounds a year, would have been content, she told herself, to live quite simply, even humbly, for this man, into whose eyes she had smiled without response.

Tssh! The small, immaculately manicured hands were clenched as she arrived outside the room to which Margery Steers had been taken the night before. This girl was her rival, her successful rival. . . .

Fitting a key into the lock, she was astonished to find the door opening. The next moment she had burst into the room—to discover it empty! Although the bed was disturbed, it had evidently not been slept in.

The main thing, however, was that the girl had gone! But how? She had taken it upon herself to lock the door the night before, and had placed the key on the dressing-table in her own room. It had been there when she awoke in the morning. Moreover, her own bedroom door had been locked from the inside.

She hastened downstairs. Oscar Juhl, her immediate chief in this firm of blackmailers, was already seated at the breakfast table.

"That girl—she is gone!"

Juhl sprang up, his face twitching.

"What do you mean? How can she have gone?" he demanded.

Xavia shrugged her shoulders.

"That is what I am asking you," she replied. "All I know is that when I went up to the room just now I found the door unlocked and the room empty."

The Colossus stood frowning for several seconds. Then he clenched his right fist.

"Zoab!" he roared. "*Zoab!*"

He rushed away, but when he reached the basement room that had been set apart for the dwarf's use when Zoab was called to the house, no answer came to his summons. This room also was empty.

The camp bed had not been slept in, but pinned to the pillow-case was a piece of paper.

On this was written the message:

*"Others will give me the money I want,
so I go to them.—G. Z."*

The few words had the effect of sending the reader into a state of frenzy. For several moments Juhl acted like a madman. Everything breakable upon which he could lay his

hands he smashed into fragments, cursing without cessation.

Sanity only returned when he thought of that masked man who was his master. What would The King say when he told him—as tell him he must? Zoab had been placed directly in his charge—and now he had allowed him to escape! Oscar Juhl looked a craven as he speculated upon the consequences to himself.

Throughout the day the fear never left him, and when, at eleven o'clock that night, he kept the appointment at the Highgate house, he was in a highly nervous condition.

In uneasy tones he narrated what had happened.

“You realise what this means, of course, Juhl?” replied The King sternly. “Zoab is now working for someone else, and the greatest opportunity we shall ever have has passed out of our hands. I give you a week to retrieve your error. If at the end of that time Zoab is still missing, I shall destroy you!”

As Juhl left the room, he was whitefaced and shaking.

“WHAT is it, Brooks?”

The pontifical figure standing in the doorway made a slight inclination of the body. Then he coughed behind his hand.

“There is a person here, sir. He wishes to see you.”

Bunny Chipstead laid down his cigar.

“You’re priceless, Brooks! I suppose, even if another war came, you wouldn’t lose your Middle-Ages outlook! Tell me, now—what is a ‘person’?”

Brooks bore the expression of a martyr being hurried to the stake. He deeply resented the jocund familiarity of his employer, but that graven mask of a face conveyed no hint of the turmoil raging in his butler’s breast. Instead his large, pale countenance carried a look of patient resignation.

“Perhaps I should have said a man, sir.” Jove, when reminded that he had been caught in the act of nodding, might have used the same tone.

“Come, come! You’re improving, Brooks. Looking at you now, I might almost imagine that you were human. But”—with a change of voice—“who is this man, and what does he want?”

Brooks slightly gave ground. His voice sank two distinct tones.

"Perhaps I had better be candid, sir——" he started to reply.

Chipstead looked at him curiously.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," he commented. Then, still regarding the man intently: "You seem to have something on your mind, Brooks."

The butler lost a little more of his perfect poise. He looked now something like a fish struggling to escape from the hook.

"The man is my nephew, sir. His name is Arthur Alpess, and"—the speaker hesitated—"he was in the service of Sir Simon Baste."

Chipstead rose.

"And he wants to see me? Show him in," he added decisively.

At the words Brooks evidenced increasing signs of agitation.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough, sir," he said, "to allow me to make a short explanation beforehand. This young man Alpess, two years ago, got into trouble. It caused all of us a great deal of anxiety. It would be very distressing if this affair was raked up again. May I rely upon your discretion, sir?"

In spite of his natural pomposity, the man was obviously distressed. Chipstead felt sorry for him.

"You needn't worry, Brooks. Now show the man in." The information that his caller had been in the service of the man whose recent murder was still the sensation of the country had excited his keenest interest.

Brooks left the room, to return, within a couple of minutes, with a pale, sandy-haired, somewhat furtive-faced young man, who looked a typical specimen of the London manservant.

"This is Alpass, sir," the butler announced. Chipstead nodded.

"Thank you, Brooks; you may go."

Turning on his heel like the perfect automaton he had become once again, the butler left the room.

Bunny Chipstead had spent a good deal of time during his interesting life in interviewing men and women who, being possessed of certain important knowledge, desired, for the sake of their conscience, to relieve themselves of this burden. He recognised the unmistakable signs in Alpass immediately.

His manner was firm, but kind.

"Sit down, Alpass," he said, pointing to a chair; "perhaps you would like a cigarette and a drink?"

The caller had evidently not anticipated such unconventional cordiality. Some of his nervousness left him.

“If you would be so kind, sir, I *should* like a drink, and that’s a fact. I don’t mind telling you, sir, that it took a bit of doing, coming here to-night. But then I thought of Brooks—that’s my uncle, sir——”

“Here, drink this.” Chipstead interrupted by placing a whisky-and-soda at the man’s elbow. When the glass was half emptied and set down again, Chipstead resumed. “You have come to tell me something about the murder of Sir Simon Baste, I suppose?” he remarked in a conversational tone.

Into the white face of the caller crept a tinge of colour. Alpass strained forward in his chair, his hands clutching the arms.

“Yes, sir. I know who did it. It wasn’t that Mr. Creighton whom the police arrested. It was——” He stopped, and then went on in a quicker and more agitated tone. “Before I say anything though, sir, I want you to promise me to keep my name out of it. Since I’m here, I suppose I had better tell you that two years ago I got into some trouble. There was something said about my stealing some money—I was with Sir Archibald Luckless then—and the police—damn them!—put me in quod for three months. That’s why I’ve kept my mouth shut about this up till now. If I went to Scotland Yard, they’d be sure to rake up that affair again, and”—his voice

was shaking with real terror—"they might even say that I had done this murder myself."

"If you tell me the truth, and nothing but the truth, Alpass, I promise you that you need have no undue fear concerning the police," Chipstead remarked.

The caller became slightly more reassured.

"Thank you for saying that, sir. I'm glad I came to you now. It took me some time to make up my mind, though. Then I thought of my uncle, as I've told you before, and I remembered that he worked for a gentleman who knew all about the police and their little ways. So I came along and saw Brooks, told him that I knew something about the Baste murder, and asked him if he thought you would be likely to help me. I'll say this for Brooks: although he's never liked me—especially after that affair of two years ago—he said he felt sure I ought to tell you what I knew."

"And what do you know, Alpass?"

The man hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"I dare say you are aware, sir, that there were a good many stories going round about Sir Simon Baste? Some said as how he was nothing better than a crook, having started his fortune out of diamond mine robberies abroad. Some years ago a man got seven years for

trying to blackmail him on this account. But I don't care what people say—he gave me a job when I was down and out, and was always nice to me whilst I worked for him. He never once mentioned about my having gone to quod—that's why I've always called Sir Simon Baste a sportsman, sir."

"He was a good employer, then?"

"The best I've ever worked for," declared Alpass emphatically; "but now to come to my story, sir."

"Yes," rejoined Chipstead.

"I was second footman," continued Alpass, "and my job every night at ten o'clock was to take Sir Simon's two Sealyhams—he fairly worshipped those dogs—into the grounds at the back of the house for exercise. I don't know if you know the house in Grosvenor Circus, sir, but there are nearly three acres, a great deal of it being lawns, and the dogs loved their run each night.

"Sir Simon's private room was a kind of library—very fond of reading he was, although people said he had never had any education—and this room looked out on to the rose-garden. Well, on the night of the murder"—Alpass' voice sank to a whisper, as though he were living through that terrible scene again—"I passed close by Sir Simon's room on my way back to the servants' quarters with the dogs.

I could look straight into the room, and I saw——”

Chipstead briskly interrupted.

“One moment, Alpass. Weren’t the curtains drawn?”

“No, sir. I should explain, perhaps, that Sir Simon was what you might call an eccentric man in many ways. One of his fads, when sitting in this room, was never to have the curtains drawn. All the servants had the strictest instructions never to draw the curtains in the library. Sir Simon seemed to hate to feel closed in; even at night he’d spend hours looking out into the darkness. Jenkins, the butler, used to reckon that he was always on the look-out for someone who would come at night.”

The air became tense; even to Bunny Chipstead’s rigorously disciplined mind it seemed that the spectre of Death, riding on the ebony wings of the night, had entered the scene.

“What did you see in that room, Alpass?” he asked.

“There were two men in the library, sir. One was the master, and the other was a much taller man, whose face was covered by a black mask.”

“A tall man with a black mask!”

Chipstead mentally repeated the words before asking: "What were they doing?"

Alpass leaned forward in his chair. There was an unnatural light in his eyes.

"The master was sitting in his chair, sir. The man in the mask was bending over him. I could only see part of his face, but by his attitude I thought at once that he was threatening the master. It was because of this that I did not wait any longer. I rushed back through the servants' quarters, with the intention of telling Jenkins, the butler; but before I could get upstairs I heard the shot which must have killed Sir Simon."

"And the masked man?" questioned Chipstead curtly.

"God knows where he went, sir, but he must have vanished directly he did it—out through the window as like as not. I can see now, sir, that I was wrong to have kept my mouth shut for so long; but as I've told you, I was afraid that the police might think I had a hand in it myself."

"You certainly acted very wrongly, Alpass," commented Chipstead; "but at least you have tried to make some reparation by coming here to-night. Now it is necessary that I should have your address. You may have to give evidence——"

The footman shivered.

“You won’t let the police get me, sir . . . you promised.”

“I will pledge you my word, Alpass, that no harm shall come to you.”

The man rose, made his conventional servant’s bow, and waited.

Chipstead took a notebook from his pocket and wrote down the address which the other gave him.

“That is all, Alpass; you can rely on me.”

“Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir.”

“Good-night.”

Alone again, Chipstead filled a pipe, mixed himself a drink, and sat down in that deep, comfortable chair beside the fire. Really, this was a most interesting case—perhaps the most interesting of his career.

He had not finished his drink before the door was violently burst open. A pitiable figure, Brooks, no longer a perfect automaton of a butler, but merely a very frightened man, confronted his master.

“Alpass! . . . *murdered!* . . . ”
The two words spilled from his twitching lips.

In a second Chipstead was by his side.

“Where did it happen?” he asked.

“Just round the corner, sir. . . . He couldn’t have left the flat more than three

minutes. A policeman who knows me has just called."

"I will see him."

The information the constable gave Chipstead was slight, but highly sensational. It was to the effect that the unfortunate footman was shot down with amazing effrontery by a man who walked straight up to him, put a revolver against his back, and fired instantly. There appeared to be nothing conspicuous about the assassin except for a black slouch hat which he had pulled well down over his eyes.

"He got away?"

"Yes, sir. It was all so sudden. . . . All I saw myself was the dead man lying on the pavement two minutes after the murder had taken place. I was on duty in Piccadilly at the time."

Bunny Chipstead swore an oath as he returned to his flat. If it cost him his own life, he would bring that masked man of mystery to justice, and that before very long.

CHAPTER XXV

THE HOSTAGE

MARGERY, looking up from her book, stared through the small window. It was little enough that she could see, but she would have

given up her dearest possessions to have been able to step from her prison to that small tossing boat on the grey, restless sea, which represented to her the outside world.

This room was in Wildwood Castle. She had read in the newspapers of this historic half-ruined pile, which many public-spirited men had urged the Government to buy from time to time; and now complete confirmation of the fact had been obtained from the book which she laid down. That morning, rendered almost distracted by her thoughts, she had pleaded with Zoab to get her something to read. The dwarf, eagerly conciliatory, had returned after a while with a bundle of books and newspapers. As he placed these beside her, he said quickly: "My princess, it will not be for long—this waiting. I am working both day and night—working for you. Until the time does come, please, please be patient."

With that he had left her, and because she had to banish all thought of him from her mind, she went through the pile of books and scanned their titles.

It was intuition that caused her to associate this prison with the castle, the history of which she finally decided to peruse. Although she had been brought there in a drugged condition, and had not been allowed to leave that room, the longer she read the more convinced she

became that the new employers of Zoab had selected this historic castle, which had been built by the Normans under William the Conqueror, as the workshop for the dwarf's fiendish design.

If the dwarf was to stay in England, no better place could have been chosen. It was perched on the chalk cliffs of the Kentish coast, was very secluded, and while the sea faced it in front, according to this book a huge forest guarded it from behind.

Its grey walls were steeped in English history. It was in Wildwood Castle, for instance, that the knights who killed Thomas á Becket in Canterbury Cathedral plotted the prelate's death the night before the tragedy. They had crossed from France, at the bidding of their King, answering the challenge, "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" and had sat round a table, whispering their evil intent. Perhaps it was in that very room that they had schemed. . . .

And it was here, behind the walls that were part of England itself, that the foulest plan yet conceived in the mind of man was even now being brought to a ghastly fruition. On what Zoab was actually working she had as yet no definite idea, but her imagination forced her to the above conjecture.

She must have another talk with the dwarf.

Any means that her woman's wit could devise she would not scruple to use. She would—shudderingly she even faced this horror—suffer his caresses if only she saw a chance of getting away. Perhaps she could so work upon this love he said he had for her that he would finish his evil work and with her leave the castle.

All day a whirlwind of thoughts, representing alternately hope and fear, passed through her mind. When darkness came, a man entered to light the two large candles that served as illumination. By this time she had nerved herself to almost any task. That night, she resolved, would be the last she would spend in Wildwood Castle.

She looked at the man. He had a saturnine face, and was of the valet type.

“Do you wish to earn some money?” she asked.

The man gave no sign that he had heard. Either he was a deaf-mute—a quite likely contingency in the circumstances—or—and her heart sank at the thought—he had received very definite instructions not to answer any questions that she might put to him.

With her evening meal came Zoab. The dwarf was twitching with excitement. His joy at being with her again filled her with mingled embarrassment and hope. Yet his first words chilled her blood.

"You have been indiscreet, my princess," he said; "you have done that against which I should have warned you. You asked that man a question to which he could make no reply."

"Why not?" she demanded. And then, leaning forward in her agitation and touching Zoab's arm: "If you think so much of me, if you"—she struggled bravely with the words—"if you—love me, take me away from this place to-night—now."

Zoab shook his head. Something that might have been a sob came from him.

"Princess, you ask the impossible," he replied. "Although I work so hard, I have not yet finished my task. Until I do I am a prisoner myself. There are many men in the castle, and they are paid, not only to keep anyone from getting at me, but to prevent me from leaving before I have done what was promised. Even when I walk at night they are with me. Those for whom I work have allowed me to bring you here, so that in the few fugitive moments I can snatch I may have the rapturous joy of your companionship. My princess, will you not be patient?"

Feeling almost stifled, Margery asked the question which had been in her mind all day. She was afraid to get the answer, yet she had to know.

"What is this work you are doing, Mr. Zoab?" Her voice faltered long before she had come to the end.

Again the dwarf shook his head.

"It is not wise for you to know, queen of my heart. I deal in tremendous things, and this force which I shall presently unloose——" He stopped, as though conscious that he had already said too much. "That is a side of me with which you have no concern, my beloved," he added.

"Although you wish me to spend the rest of my life with you?"

He looked at her, and then—how she stopped from shuddering she didn't know—he took her hand. Raising it to his lips, he kissed the soft flesh.

"Believe me, beloved, this is not a time for me to tell you of certain things," he said; "let it suffice that soon I shall have finished, and then we shall go from this grey land of yours. We shall fly into the heart of the sun. Waiting in the grounds of the castle is an aeroplane, fitted with four of the most powerful engines yet constructed. A skilled pilot is in readiness. He is to take us to any place I name. Japan, perhaps—that land of flowers would seem to be your fitting home, princess. All I shall live for is your happiness."

In order to blot out the vision, Margery had

closed her eyes. And in that darkness of make-believe, the voice of Zoab was a true lover's voice—stirring, loyal, and almost musical.

But with the dwarf gone, all the pent-up horror of her position came back to her in a fresh flood. The grotesque mockery of that honeymoon journey high up above the clouds!

This final touch threatened to break down her last strongholds of resolution and drive her mad.

CHAPTER XXVI THE DOOR IN THE WALL

CREIGHTON paused in his walk to breathe gratefully the sweet-scented night air.

The time was nearly eleven o'clock, and, as it was, he would not be able to get back to Roughmoor, Lord Belshaven's Kentish retreat, until well past midnight. But he had made arrangements with the butler, and, if he continued of the same mind, he would stay out till dawn. That was his mood.

This was the first walk he had had since reaching his unexpected haven. He was revelling in every moment of it. The joy of being free again with no prying eyes to watch him!

Although, after Lord Belshaven's injunc-

tion, he had been received without question by the servants at Roughmoor, yet he could not help having the impression that he must be the subject of suspicion.

At nine o'clock that night, when the butler was shutting up the house—early hours were kept at Roughmoor—he had announced his intention of going for a walk. Lord Belshaven had taken the morning train to London that day, and, apart from the butler, he had no one to consult.

The butler had listened to his words, and then replied:

“Just as you like, sir. Do you expect to be very late?”

Martin had not pledged himself.

“I feel I want a good long walk,” he replied. “Yes, I may be late.”

After some evident hesitation, the butler had given him the key of the side door.

“It was his lordship’s last words to me this morning that I should do everything to make you comfortable, sir.” The man’s manner plainly showed that if he had not received these instructions he might have acted very differently.

Once away from the house, Martin felt a different man. Lighting his pipe, he set off at a brisk pace down the deserted lane. Save for an occasional night-call made by bird or

beast, the world slumbered. The sensation of being safe from observation was so intensely gratifying that he felt he could have walked on for ever. For the first time since that moment when he was charged with the terrible crime of murder, he felt himself to be at peace. Soothed and comforted by the gracious mantle of the night, he swung himself into a yet brisker pace.

Beyond taking a careful note of his surroundings—he did not wish to become lost—he walked on. Presently an unmistakable sound came to his ears—he was nearing the sea.

The sough of the waves rolling over the shingle fascinated him; he had always been tremendously fond of the sea. Turning down a rough road, he came upon a stretch of coast-line. The moon, which had been hidden behind heavy clouds until now, emerged, and by its light he was able to take stock of his surroundings.

Walking to the edge of the cliffs, he looked long and intently at the wide expanse of dark water below him. He could not forget that it had been his original intention to escape across the Channel—thirty hours before he would have welcomed the opportunity to have even attempted to swim the twenty odd miles.

Now so much had changed, however, that he realised how mad was the idea. Lord

Belshaven had gone to London that day to set wheels working on his behalf. What was more, he had someone else to consider besides himself. There was Miss Steers—Margery.

Standing with bare head—he had taken off his hat so that the night wind might cool his forehead—he said the word softly again, Margery. How sweet and attractive a name it was! How it typified the girl!

What had become of her? What could have happened to her? That swine who called himself “Jones” must have kidnapped her again. And—and—— But he found he was unable to bear the strain of developing that line of thought, and so he started to walk again.

Following the coast-line, he presently found himself confronted by a high stone wall which projected itself to the very edge of the cliff. He could not proceed any further, and was faced with the alternatives of going back the way he had come or of following the wall round on its landward side. He decided on the latter course.

Martin had not proceeded very far when he came to the conclusion that this wall, broken away in so many places, must be the ruined outer bulwark of some old castle. Old castles had always been a subject of great interest to him in view of their historical connections, and he was wondering what could be the name of

this place, when, from a short distance ahead, he heard the sound of men speaking.

The first instinct of the hunted creature is to take cover. Martin drew back. Free from anxiety about himself as he had been a few moments before, he now became instantly on the defensive. The consciousness was forced home to him remorselessly that he was a man wanted for murder. He was unarmed, and, judging by the sound that had reached his ears, these men formed a small party. He dared not take any risk.

Slipping behind thick bushes that were part of some extensive undergrowth, he waited for the men to pass. A moment later the night scene was flooded with light, for the moon had now risen to her full majesty. Creighton was thus able to discern three figures—three men walking side by side. These passed, and as they did so the watcher stiffened to the most acute attention. The middle man of the trio was an unmistakable figure, and he had every cause to remember him.

Zoab the dwarf!

There flashed upon Creighton's mental vision an unforgettable picture—he lived through once again that scene in the attic bedroom of the house of mystery. He saw Margery Steers shrinking in abject terror from this stunted man.

What was Zoab doing there? Who were his companions? Why should the three of them be taking a walk in the dead of night and in that deserted part of the countryside? He must get to know these facts.

Watching intently, he saw the three approach what looked to be a small, heavy, wooden door, built in the high wall. One of the two companions of the dwarf pulled a key from his pocket; the door swung open, the party of men passed through, and then came the sound of the door being closed again.

Directly he felt it was safe, Creighton approached the spot, but any hope he might have had was soon destroyed. The door had no handle and was immovable.

There remained the chance of scaling the wall. He considered for a moment whether to make the attempt. Two influences were at work in his mind. The first was the possibility that the presence of Zoab in this isolated spot might mean the presence also of Margery Steers. Zoab he knew to be a creature of the Colossus, and it might be that the latter had placed her in the charge of the dwarf. He felt that he could not ignore this possibility.

Against this, however, he had to consider the promise made to Lord Belshaven. His benefactor had obtained a pledge from him that he would be discreet. What was behind

that wall he did not know, of course, but the supposition was that the three men had gone to a house of some sort.

For five minutes he paced up and down, thrashing out the problem. On the one hand, his love for the girl urged him to take immediate action; but much as he would have liked to follow out this plan, he realised that he would be running counter to Lord Belshaven's wish in doing so.

In the end, he very reluctantly turned away. Lord Belshaven was due to return the following afternoon, and he would place the matter before him. Even if this place was Castle Despair, and even if the Beautiful Princess, in the guise of Margery Steers, was languishing there in durance vile, he would have an infinitely better chance of rescuing her with Lord Belshaven's aid than if he attempted the task single-handed. It cost him a great deal to accept this point of view, but finally his common sense prevailed, and he set off at a quick pace to return to Roughmoor.

Dropping from such a height, the force of his fall seemed to jar every bone in his body. But Creighton quickly rose and, with a careful look round, started to grope forward.

In jumping from the top of that high, massive wall he had shut himself off from all

connection with the outside world. This consciousness was forced upon him. Although the night was so deathly still, he had the feeling that a heavy gate had clanged behind him, shutting off any possible escape.

Yet, as he continued to grope forward, he told himself there had been no alternative. Duty had called, and he had been obliged to obey.

Roughly, twenty-four hours had passed since he had so reluctantly turned away from this place, after watching Zoab and his two companions pass through that door in the wall.

Much had happened during those twenty-four hours. To begin with, he had been devoured by anxiety. Each succeeding hour had conjured up fresh scenes, in all of which Margery Steers had figured. He imagined her a prisoner in some close-smelling, narrow room, with Zoab her gaoler. When dawn came his face was so haggard as a result of these apparitions of the night that he shrank back from the mirror. As he did so, he made a resolve: he would waste no more time.

At noon a telephone message came. It was to the effect that Lord Belshaven would be detained in Town over the night. When Creighton heard it, it seemed that circumstances were forcing him to the only decision possible—he must go to that place

single-handed and ascertain if his premonitions were true. Apart altogether from his love for Margery Steers, there was a debt he owed Lord Belshaven.

He had simply told the butler upon leaving the house that he was going for another walk; this was a matter in which he could have no confidants. For a weapon, since no revolver was available, he had taken from the wall of the hall a knobkerrie.

Conscious that the eye of the butler was on him, he explained that in his walk the night before he had seen some men, and he wished to have some protection if attacked.

"Very good, sir." The butler was too well trained to speak his mind, but it was evident that he regarded Creighton and all his doings in a most unfavourable light. What his lordship could be thinking of in harbouring a criminal wanted for murder he had not been able to conceive.

Once clear of the house, Creighton forgot the disapproving butler. He had far more important things to think about.

He covered the distance within the hour, and, pausing only long enough to get his breath, he started to climb the wall near the wooden door. The crumbling nature of the wall aided him in the matter of footholds, but by the time he had reached the top he had

been forced to expend so much physical energy that he was panting.

The width at the top was at least three feet, and lying at full length, he rested for a few minutes. Then, lifting himself on to his hands and knees, he took a survey.

The moon was not affording him the same assistance as on the previous night, but he was able to come to the following conclusions: Some two or three hundred yards on the other side of the thick belt of trees, which reared itself at about the same distance from him, was a pile of masonry, showing up dully in that uncertain light. His original surmise, he judged, had been correct—this place was an ancient castle, which might or might not be occupied. If it were occupied, the tenant had either neglected the outer wall shamefully, or he was so poor that he could not afford the necessary repairs. Judged by externals alone, he would have come unhesitatingly to the decision that the whole place was a ruin—dotted here and there along the coast-line of England, he remembered, were a few famous old ruins of castles which had been allowed to moulder into decay.

Against this, however, he had to set the circumstance that only the night before he had seen three men pass into these grounds at a spot barely six yards distant. And one of

these men he guessed to be a social outlaw of the worst description.

Goaded into a fresh fury of anxiety by the remembrance of Zoab, he took one look at the ground ten feet below him, and then swung himself into space, landing with a tremendous thud.

That had been ten minutes before. Proceeding with infinite caution, he had covered the intervening ground, passed through the deep belt of trees, and now found himself facing what he knew from its structural design to be a large, castle-like building, probably dating back to the time of the Normans.

The moon had now risen, and the three hundred yards or so of space that was between him and the castle was bathed with silvery light.

Stretched at full length on the grass, he listened for a sound. An owl hooted, there was a faint crack of brushwood such as a rabbit might have made, but apart from these noises a deep and settled silence enveloped everything.

The castle itself was in complete gloom. He had almost decided that he had come on a fool's errand, when, high up in one of the towers, a faint light suddenly showed.

There was someone in the place !

Martin Creighton had never been of an imaginative nature, but now Fancy seemed to take possession of him. He pictured that faint light as a lamp lit to guide him. Had it been placed there by Margery Steers herself, as though she had been conscious of his coming?

Then cold reason reasserted itself. He must stop this idle dreaming. That light, viewed now in sober common sense, assured him of only one thing—that the castle was inhabited. The facts already in his possession went to show that Zoab the dwarf was staying there.

He must get to Zoab, and force the truth out of him. If the dwarf did not know where Margery Steers was, he would know the exact address of the Mayfair house. This address he had to get to pass on to Lord Belshaven.

How to get into the castle: that was his first task. Raising himself, he was about to creep forward, when he felt a violent blow on the back of his head. Immediately everything swam before his eyes. The earth collapsed beneath his feet, and with a low, gasping cry he realised that he had been attacked.

His assailants must have showed extraordinary cunning in approaching him, for he had had no hint of their presence until that smashing blow from behind almost robbed him of consciousness.

He endeavoured to put up some sort of fight, but his enemies showed no mercy, and the second blow sent him crashing into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXVII BUNNY MAKES SOME CALLS

IN one of the less salubrious streets of Lambeth the place was situated—this resort of quick-witted criminals. For many months past the London police had been working night and day to discover this secret address, in the hope of making a notable haul, but so far they had been unsuccessful. Scotland Yard was aware of this crooks' club's existence, but the keenest brains of the C.I.D. had not been able to locate it. What Scotland Yard had failed to do, however, Bunny Chipstead had accomplished. Disguised as an American confidence man with whose career he was familiar, and whom he knew was safely behind the walls of Sing-Sing Prison at that moment, he sat at a small table in the underground restaurant which was the meeting-place of London's cleverest criminal clan.

Almost without exception the men and women about him were carefully groomed. The majority were in evening dress; some, indeed, had come on from the fashionable

West-End restaurants, hotels, and theatres. Crime was evidently paying big dividends just now, for money was being spent freely. Champagne and other expensive wines were being drunk, and although this underground rendezvous did not boast an orchestra, the atmosphere was composed and cultured.

Bunny, smoking a Corona, watched the scene with nonchalant interest. He was lucky to be there. Quite by chance he had become possessed of the three passwords, without which no one, however satisfactory his other credentials might be, was able to enter this place.

He had to make the most of his opportunity, but he must step warily; although he had every faith in his disguise, these men and women were very shrewd.

“Hello, Clay!”

Chipstead took just the requisite length of time in which to turn round. In spite of being taken unawares—he had not seen the speaker approach—his face reflected a sufficient amount of surprise.

“Why, hello yourself!” he drawled.

Beneath the shelter of the table his fingers closed on the small revolver he carried in his pocket. Again chance had helped him—fortunately, he recognised the speaker as a society crook whose trail he had crossed in

Washington nine months before—but he kept a tight rein upon himself. This conversation, which he could not avoid, was likely to be of the touch-and-go variety—a false step, an unthinking word, and the alarm might be given. This would mean that he would be forced to make a running fight of it, with the strong probability that he would not leave that room alive.

Did this man—hang it, he forgot his name!—know that the real Clay Sherman was actually in Sing-Sing Prison? Evidently he didn't, or he would have been more excited in his greeting.

The other sat down without invitation and poured himself a glass from Chipstead's bottle of Pommery. Bunny waited, his nerves tense. The next few minutes were likely to be interesting.

"How long have you been over, Clay?"

Chipstead made a mental sigh of relief. He was thankful now that he had taken such infinite pains with his disguise. The fact that Brooks, his butler, had not recognised him when leaving the flat that night was insignificant compared with this crook's acceptance of his impersonation.

"Oh, just a few days. I crossed on the *Merengaria*."

"Busy?"

Chipstead remembered that he was supposed to be a confidence trickster.

"The mugs seem to be dying out," he commented; "so far I am not paying my hotel bill."

The other lowered his voice.

"Ever worked for another man, Clay?" he inquired, and while the supposed Sherman stared, he went on quickly: "There's a big fella in London just now who could put all the work in your way that you wanted," he said.

Chipstead pulled at his cigar. He appeared bored at this announcement, but his mental processes were working at lightning speed.

"Aw!" he yawned; "I've heard of these Big Fellas before. And I've never gone 'splits' with anyone, and I don't intend to start now." He guessed that this scoffing attitude might lead the other to expand, and his surmise proved correct.

"Now listen here, Clay," said the other, in a tone of nervous excitement: "I'm going to give you the straight tip—see? If you intend to remain on this side any time, you won't be able to ignore this particular big fella. He's got the handling of everything worth while in London, and if you don't work with him he'll soon put you out of the business."

"Is that so?" drawled the listener. "Well, I guess I'm too old to develop any flutterings. Who is this guy, anyway?"

His companion looked round. Although in a safe retreat, and surrounded by men and women of his own class, he was evidently in a state of fear. His voice sank.

"If you hadn't helped me out that night at Boston, Clay, I shouldn't be telling you this at all," he said; "but I reckon that turn saved me from seven years in the 'pen,' and so I'm putting you wise." The speaker's voice sank to an even lower tone. "'The King' is what they call this big guy, and I reckon he deserves the title, for he's the king pin of all the crooks in this country. Where he's got everyone beat is that no one knows who he really is. He never shows himself without a mask——"

"Cut out that dime novel stuff; I've got a split lip."

The narrator ignored the scoffing interruption.

"Laugh if you like, Clay," he resumed, "but a man who can put the fear of the Lord into Spider Foley is no imitation out of a book—he's a real man. As I was telling you, this big fella's hold is that no one knows who he really is. But he knows Crooks' Alley down to the last turning; there isn't a man or a

woman in the business of whom he hasn't got the life history. To those he wants to work with him he makes a fair offer. If they come in, all well and good—he treats them on the level, and they get a good share of the rake-off. But he's sudden death to anyone who tries a false game. It's a wonder"—the speaker broke off—"he hasn't been after you already, Clay. The better the man, the more The King wants him."

Bunny Chipstead made no further interruptions. What the crook had told him was of absorbing interest. He had come to this place with the intention of gaining from the members of the underworld themselves some news about the master criminal he was pursuing, and every particle of information which his companion could give him he stored away for reference.

The man he was after was as subtly dangerous as he had imagined him to be. To one who knew the underworld as Chipstead did, it was easy to understand the tremendous hold The King exerted. His marvellous knowledge, his audacious methods, and, above all, the impenetrable secrecy with which he surrounded himself, had cast such a spell upon the criminal fraternity that now the unknown might have been a phantom instead of a real man.

He continued to listen to the other's extra-

ordinary story. According to this informant, this new force in the criminal world had only arisen during the past nine months. But although the time had been so short, he had advanced far beyond any other ruler of the underworld. He was fair to those who worked under him so long as they served his purpose. When they failed to do this, he was remorseless in his methods. Although relentlessly punishing any attempt at double-crossing, yet he did not hesitate, it seemed, to employ this terrible weapon. Many men—and women, too—of whom he had had the least suspicion had been caught and themselves in the toils of the police—undoubtedly betrayed to them by The King himself.

“Has no one any idea who he really is?” at length asked the listener.

“No,” breathlessly replied the other. “Mark my words, Clay, if you stay on in this burg you’ll have to reckon with The King. As I’ve said, the wonder to me is that he hasn’t sent for you before.”

Chipstead gave the impression of being awed in spite of himself.

“After what you’ve told me, if he does send I shall go,” he replied.

Shortly afterwards he left. In one sense, his night had not been wasted. In another he had failed—failed not through his own fault,

but through the deep cunning of the man he had sworn to bring to justice. He had captured many notable "heads" in his time, but he realised that laying The King by his heels would be by far the most notable "bag" of his career.

Bunny Chipstead spent a busy night. Instead of going home to his flat after leaving the crooks' club in Lambeth, he took the Tube to Highgate. In walking away from the station, he made a quick, but comprehensive, survey of those about him. Before hearing that night's news of The King, he was aware that this secret criminal had resolved to kill him. Poor Alpass had paid with his life for divulging what he knew; and how much more determined must The King be to silence a man he was aware must be on his track?

The small crowd contained no one, however, of whom he felt any suspicion, and Chipstead set off briskly in the direction of his destination.

Arriving outside The Mount, he made another careful survey, and then, climbing the wall, dropped into the grounds on the other side. It was possible, he thought, that The King might be holding another of his company meetings.

It did not take the investigator long, how-

ever, to learn that this derelict house was completely deserted. Forcing a window, he went from room to room, flashing the small electric torch he carried.

There was nothing in any of the upstairs rooms to attract his attention, and even when he reached the underground chamber that The King had used for a meeting-place, he searched in vain for any likely clue.

It was not until he was about to leave the place that he noticed in a far corner what appeared to be a trap-door. Pulling this up by means of the iron ring, the light from his torch showed him a flight of worn stone steps leading into a yet deeper cellar, from which, as he peered into it, there came a dank, close smell.

This smell intrigued him. He resolved to investigate it.

A minute later he stood at the bottom of the steps. The odour of chemicals, which he had detected before, was now more pronounced. Thoroughly on the alert, he proceeded to make a minute inspection; and it was not long before he realised, with ever growing interest, that this cellar deep in the bowels of the earth had been used by someone as a laboratory. Little apparatus remained beyond a few test-tubes, but it was evident that at a previous date it had been well equipped.

Who was this man? And why had he gone?

Here and there, over every inch of space, flashed the light from the electric torch, and presently Chipstead pounced upon a small rolled-up piece of paper beneath a wide stone bench. Smoothing out the creases, he read a few lines of typescript, evidently part of a letter. More than half of the communication was missing, but two words, between which he guessed there was a connecting link, provided him with some satisfaction.

Bunny had just put the piece of paper carefully away in his pocket-book, when, out of the stillness of the cellar, a voice accosted him.

"Put 'em up or I'll drill you!"

Turning swiftly, Chipstead saw a man confronting him. The other had levelled a revolver at his head.

CHAPTER XXVIII ROOM WITH WHITE TILES

THE first thing of which Martin was conscious on opening his eyes was a blinding light. This illumination was so intense that he was forced to blink.

He looked round in wonderment. His vision, he found, was somewhat restricted, owing to his being bound to a stout wooden chair. Yet what he was able to see caused an irrepressible wave of something akin to fear to pass through him.

This room was white-tiled from floor to ceiling, and was lit by huge naked bulbs of electricity, the light from which caused the tiles to gleam and glisten.

What was the meaning of all that apparatus? Racks of test-tubes, most of them half full; the glass bench at which someone evidently worked; the microscopes on stands, apparently of tremendous power; the Bunsen burners; the white-painted box, on which was the word "incubator;" the numerous glass slides stained different colours—what were these things?

In a flash of intuition Creighton realised the truth. He was in a laboratory. In this place such a workshop could only be used, he felt, for an evil purpose. At the realisation that he had been brought to this room in a helpless condition, he had to summon all his manhood to prevent an unnerving fear from possessing him.

Then, suddenly, all thought of himself vanished. The door of this strange room had opened, and shuffling towards him came a man whose repulsive features had been imprinted on his memory for weeks past.

Zoab the dwarf stopped only a foot away from the prisoner.

"So—o!" he said, "you would meddle a second time!" The speaker motioned with a beautifully moulded hand towards the

apparatus behind him. "There will be no third time," he added; "you came of your own free will . . . but, having come, you will serve your purpose."

There was no malice in the tone. Creighton was surprised to hear Zoab speak in a well-controlled, natural voice. Yet, notwithstanding, there was a sinister purpose hidden behind the words. Of that he felt sure.

The next moment all thought of self had again left him. The appearance of the dwarf brought to his mind the memory of one who was as beautiful as this man was hideous.

"You swine, where is Miss Steers? That is why I came here, and I am determined to know."

Swept by a tempest of rage, straining at his bonds until he was scarcely sane, Creighton was yet able to notice the amazing change in the dwarf. It was as though the man had received a galvanic shock. Repulsive before, his face now became bestial. The eyes glowed with a mad light, and froth showed on the thick animal lips.

"What is Miss Steers to you?" Zoab snarled.

It was as though Creighton had become light-headed. Still twisting in the ropes that held him so securely, he looked straight into that unpleasant visage, and said :

"I don't mind telling you, you dog! Miss Steers is going to be my wife."

The declaration was greeted by a quick hissing intake of breath. Zoab staggered. A grey pallor spread over his face, the colour ebbed from his lips and the lids closed over his eyes, whilst a shudder caused his short misshapen body to quiver. He mastered himself after a while.

"It is important that I should know," he said to Creighton; "were you speaking the truth just now?" His tone was painfully eager.

"Of course."

Zoab made a gesture with the hands, whose shapeliness was so incongruous with the rest of his body.

"Then it is all the more necessary that you should die," he said. The tone was once again calm and matter of fact. "You may derive what consolation is possible from the knowledge that you will be lending me assistance in the greatest discovery of the last hundred years," went on the speaker. "Perhaps you are wondering at the equipment of this room? I am a bacteriologist, and this is where I conduct my research work. For some time now I have been concentrating on a new disease—something unique, which will defy the rest of the medical world. So far I have only been

able to experiment on rats; it is necessary for the perfection of my discovery to inoculate a human being. You will do admirably; you are strong and young. It will be most interesting to watch the fight you put up against my new germ. Fate," continued the speaker, before Creighton could make any exclamation, "has evidently destined you to play this important part. That night in Juhl's house, when I came to your room, I remarked what a promising subject for bacteriological investigation you would make. . . ."

"You can't frighten me, you swine!" declared Creighton. The truth was, however, he was very frightened; he was sick with terror, not so much through actual fear for himself, but because he had solved the secret of this man.

The dwarf was in love with Margery Steers himself!

"I'll have you removed now," he heard Zoab say; "it is necessary for me to make certain preparations."

He pressed a bell in the wall, and two men quickly appeared. The dwarf said something to them in a low tone, and Creighton was picked up, chair and all, and carried from the laboratory.

"You, who are so beautiful—have you never loved?"

Margery Steers wondered at the tone in Zoab's voice. He had come to her a few minutes before in a state of great agitation. She had never seen him like this, and at first a wild hope surged up in her heart: Was help from the outside world near at hand? Were Zoab and the men who employed him beginning to be afraid? And were they, in consequence, thinking of abandoning their dreadful plans?

Quickly this hope died. It was something connected with herself that had caused the dwarf so much uneasiness. This she realised before he had put to her that puzzling question.

"I have always been too busy in my life to think of love," she replied. Forced to evade this difficult query, her mind as she said the words brought back a memory of a certain man whom hourly she prayed might come to her rescue. It seemed a vain and preposterous wish, but she had not entirely given up all hope.

Zoab came nearer, making her that queer obeisance with which she was now so familiar.

A great deal of the former agitation had left him. Probably he was aware that she had merely parried his direct question, but, nevertheless, he seemed more confident.

"It will not be much longer now, queen of my heart," he said, "before we fly away in

that giant aeroplane waiting in the courtyard. Then you, who, on your own confession, have not known love before, shall learn to understand a man's devotion." He broke off suddenly to ask another question. "That young man who was with you in Juhl's house—did he never say he loved you?"

Margery paled. The deep-sunk eyes of the dwarf were blazing. He was looking at her with such intensity that she knew there must be some deep purpose behind his remark.

"Why do you ask that?" she demanded. Then the control which she had exercised so long snapped. Could it be that her prayer had been answered? Had Martin Creighton traced her? Was he in the castle?

"Is he here?" She stepped forward and caught the dwarf's arm. "Tell me! Tell me!" she went on imploringly.

Zoab released her hand with a gentle movement of his own.

"This young man Creighton has just told me that you have promised to be his wife," he said. "Whether you love him or not, princess, you must resign yourself to his death. He is as necessary to me in one respect as you are necessary to me in another."

He turned quickly, evaded the rush which she made at him, and before Margery's numbed brain could fully take in the sig-

nificance of his words, he had closed the door behind him. She heard the grating of the key in the lock, and then everything swam before her eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE KING MOVES

JUHL, looking through the window, saw a closed car draw up to the front door. A tall man, whose face was obscured by turned-up overcoat and heavy slouch hat, stepped on to the pavement. The watcher awaited his visitor in some trepidation.

If he had thought that The King would be less secretive than usual, he was mistaken, for when the servant opened the door it was to usher in a man whose features were entirely hidden by a black silk mask.

The caller was in his customary mood of peremptory command.

"I have little time to spare," he said, "so please give me your closest attention."

Juhl inclined his head submissively. He was too eager to regain the unknown's goodwill, for without this, shrewd and capable as he was, he realised he was powerless.

"Anything you have to say shall receive my closest attention," he promised.

There were glasses and whisky-and-soda on a tray near at hand, but the caller waived the proffered refreshment aside.

"I do not drink," he said curtly. "Now listen, please."

Oscar Juhl put down the cigar he had been about to light.

"I have found Zoab," started The King. "He is staying at present at Wildwood Castle, on the Kentish coast, not far from Hythe. He is working under the orders of Schriner, the Jew millionaire financier. Schriner is hoping to corner the money market through the dwarf's new disease, but we shall step in before that happens.

"We must get Zoab back. For one thing, he must be punished for his treachery, and for another, he is very valuable. My information is that Schriner has twenty men guarding him at Wildwood Castle; I am placing thirty under your orders. You are to take these men to Wildwood to-morrow night and effect an entry into the castle. This should not be difficult, because one of my own men is being employed by Schriner; naturally, the Jew does not know this. This man will meet you at midnight at the main entrance of the castle and place himself under your instructions."

"What shall we do with the men?" inquired Juhl.

THE KING MOVES

“Leave them in the dungeons. If Schriner is there, bring him away—we may induce him to pay handsomely to keep this new venture of his quiet—but what you must not fail to do is to bring Zoab. There is also the girl Steers at Wildwood. The dwarf took her to console him in his exile.”

During the ensuing quarter of an hour, Juhl asked what questions seemed necessary. He received short, but satisfactory, replies.

Bunny Chipstead was used to desperate situations. When, standing in that dismantled cellar of The Mount, he was commanded to throw up his hands, he started to do so unhesitatingly. But when his right arm was half raised he switched off his electric torch and swerved to one side.

His assailant was using no light himself, and owing to Bunny's manœuvre the cellar now became enveloped in stygian darkness.

A shot rang out, filling the place with reverberating noise; but before the man could fire again, Chipstead, gauging the distance with a sort of extra sense, dived at the other's legs, got a firm grip, and sent him crashing to the stone floor.

The man fought with the desperation of a wild beast, but with the tables so unexpectedly turned, he was always waging a losing battle.

Among the Secret Service free-lance's accomplishments in a rough and ready mêlée of this description was a working knowledge of ju-jitsu. A pressure of a finger and a thumb on a certain portion of the neck. . . .

Five minutes after Chipstead had been so rudely disturbed his interrupter was a helpless prisoner. His hands and feet were tied. Bunny's white evening scarf served admirably to fetter the man's ankles, whilst an ordinary silk handkerchief was sufficient to bind his wrists.

"Didn't The King tell you I was already here, you fool?" Chipstead decided on strategy.

He was partly successful, for at the mention of the master he served with such fear the other trembled.

"He said nothing of the sort. Who are you?" he stammered.

"My name's Clay Sherman," quickly replied Chipstead. "I came over from New York ten days ago to join up with The King. I'm in on this business—that's why I'm here to-night."

The other stared.

"The King said nothing to me about you," he replied, suspicion reasserting itself in his face; "my strict instructions were to lay a fuse outside this cellar and blow the whole

place up. My God!" he went on, "if you're trying to double-cross The King!" The man shivered.

Chipstead had learned what he wanted. Evidently The King wished this place to be destroyed. Perhaps, after all, there was some incriminating evidence concealed in The Mount. Or, perhaps again, this man was lying.

This last question was answered in a startling fashion.

"The fuse! Oh, my God! The fuse. I'd forgotten it. Let me go!"

Bunny stiffened to attention.

"What do you mean—'the fuse'?" he asked.

The man writhed in a vain endeavour to free himself.

"I lit it before I caught sight of you!" he gasped; "the tube is just outside . . . we shall both be blown to hell!"

Chipstead briefly hesitated, while the terror of the man threatened to rob him of sanity.

"You blasted fool! Take me away! Take me away!" he shrieked hysterically.

Even then Chipstead did not reply. This man might be a consummately clever actor. He was taking no chances.

"I'll carry you out," he announced. After all, he had obtained what he personally wanted and was quite ready to go.

Without wasting any more time he picked up the man, who must have weighed at least two stone more than himself, and commenced to walk up the worn stone steps of the cellar. On arrival at the top, he caught an acrid smell of burning.

“Quick! Quick!” screamed the man.

Chipstead hurried now in real earnest. Unable to use his torch because both hands were occupied, he lived through an eerie experience. The only thing to guide him was his sense of direction. The weight in his arms became heavier every moment, threatening to drag him down. By the time he reached the ground-floor rooms, his breath was coming in short, staccato gasps. He was almost spent with exhaustion.

Still he kept on. He had to save this man as well as himself. His burden now lay passive in his arms, whimpering like a child. The ordeal had seemed to turn his brain.

Just as Bunny felt he could go on no longer, he saw across the room the window through which he had entered the house half an hour previously. Lurching now like a drunken man, he flung himself through this with his burden, and the two rolled down a grass bank into the jungle-like grounds.

One moment of blessed rest, and then he had picked up the man again. Progress now was

exceedingly difficult, but he did not stop until he had reached the high wall bordering the street. Scarcely had he flung himself down beneath this before a terrific explosion shattered the silence, like the crack of doom. The night sky was lit up by gigantic tongues of flame, and the air became full of flying fragments.

When comparative stillness had come again, Chipstead turned to the shivering man crouched by his side.

"I'm going to let you clear off now," he said, "because the police are bound to be here soon, and they may ask you some awkward questions."

This fellow might be a hireling of The King, and therefore a danger to society, but he had gone through sufficient that night. Untying the silk handkerchief that bound the man's wrists, Bunny wished his companion in that strange adventure good-night and slipped away. As he dropped quietly over the garden wall, there came to his ears the hurrying footsteps of an approaching crowd.

CHAPTER XXX AN INTERRUPTED BREAKFAST

LORD BELSHAVEN put down the telephone receiver with a jerk. He was considerably perturbed. The world seemed to be going mad that morning, and the information he had just received from Roughmoor had spoilt an unusually good appetite for breakfast.

He had barely reseated himself at the table before a footman, after uttering an apology, brought him in a card.

"The gentleman said he must see you at once, your lordship," stated the man.

The face of the Foreign Secretary cleared as he noticed the name.

"Show Mr. Chipstead in here immediately," he ordered.

The famous politician shook hands warmly with his early visitor.

"I hope you haven't breakfasted, Chipstead?" he asked. "Everything seems to be going wrong this morning, and your company will be welcome."

The visitor's reply was brisk and business-like.

"I'll drink a cup of coffee, and, if you don't mind, I'll talk whilst you have your meal, Belshaven. I've come on here from Sir

Robert Heddingley. He tells me that your secretary, Miss Margery Steers, is still missing."

The politician paused in the act of pouring the coffee, and the cloud returned to his face.

"Yes," he replied. "I have appealed to the police, but they have given me no help. By the way, you remember that young fellow Creighton—the man who created the disturbance in this house the night of the reception?"

Chipstead nodded.

"You mean the man who is supposed to have murdered Sir Simon Baste? Yes, I remember him very well."

Lord Belshaven frowned.

"Well, he's disappeared too. I must explain that I took the law into my own hands in connection with Creighton. After being arrested by the police, he made a sensational escape. Whilst working his way to the Kentish coast, with the intention of crossing to France, he took refuge in a barn at my country place, Roughmoor, which is not far from Hythe. He was disguised as a tramp, and my servants were going to deal summarily with him, when I gave him the chance of telling me his story.

"It was an amazing story—so amazing that I knew that he could not possibly have invented it. It appears that, being very down

on his luck through being swindled out of five thousand pounds, he inserted an advertisement in the Personal Column of the *Meteor*, offering to sell his life! He received an answer through the telephone, and got into touch with a man whom he referred to as the Colossus—quite evidently a very dangerous criminal. He was taken blindfolded to the London house of this man, and there saw my secretary, Miss Margery Steers! What Miss Steers could have been doing in this house I have yet to discover, but from Creighton's statement it would certainly seem that by some extraordinary means the man had some hold on her. It was a peculiar household, apparently, for another member of it was a particularly hideous dwarf."

Chipstead interrupted by pushing aside his coffee cup.

"I think I may be able to help you, Belshaven," he put in. "I haven't told you before, because Heddingley wished the matter to be entirely private, but I have been working on this Cabinet Blackmail Scandal."

Lord Belshaven softly whistled.

"A very terrible scandal, too, Chipstead," he commented. "It has already killed two of my colleagues, whilst the Prime Minister himself is daily expected to collapse. But what has that to do with the Creighton affair?"

"A great deal, unless I am mistaken. The evidence is pretty strong that both Miss Steers and Creighton became entangled with the very gang who are running this audacious blackmail business. The dwarf you just mentioned is employed by this gang, who used to meet at a house in Highgate called The Mount. This was blown up last night, and I"—with a somewhat grim smile—"nearly went up with it.

"I called there," continued the speaker, "in the hope of getting certain information. You say you have a place in Kent, Belshaven—is it anywhere near an old castle known as Wildwood?"

Lord Belshaven nodded.

"Roughmoor is only three and a half miles from Wildwood Castle," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," replied the Secret Service man slowly, "I think that Wildwood Castle will have some interesting disclosures to make to us. I shouldn't be surprised, moreover, if your missing private secretary, Miss Margery Steers, isn't being kept a prisoner there at the present time."

His host sprang up.

"And the man Creighton, too," he said. "I was going to tell you just now that after Creighton—who, unless I am very much mistaken, is in love with Miss Steers—had

told me his story, I was convinced not only that he was innocent of the murder of Sir Simon Baste, but that he had been made a cat's-paw by this man he referred to as the Colossus. Instead of handing him over to the police, as I suppose I should have done, I decided to help him. Engaging him as an indoor servant, I resolved to keep Creighton under cover at Roughmoor until the real murderer had been discovered. Just before you called this morning, I received a telephone message from my butler at Roughmoor saying that Creighton had gone out for a walk last night—and had not returned. It may be, assuming that your surmise is correct, that Creighton, wandering near Wildwood Castle, fell again into the hands of his old enemies. The thing is, What are we to do? The police——”

Chipstead waived the suggestion aside.

“Believe me, Belshaven, this is not a matter for the police,” he said, so seriously that the politician stared at him: “I am going to follow your example and go outside the law for once. I shall spend the rest of the day hunting up a number of men whose assistance Bob Heddingley has placed at my disposal. These fellows can be relied upon, all of them being in the Service. But we shall want a G.H.Q.——”

This time it was the Foreign Secretary who interrupted.

"Allow me to offer you Roughmoor, Chipstead, and if I'm not too old and too far gone in the wind, I shall be delighted to serve under you. I am not only very fond of Margery Steers, but am anxious to see that young Creighton gets a fair deal. What time do you intend to start?"

Bunny Chipstead smiled at the boyish eagerness in the tone.

CHAPTER XXXI THE UNAVAILING SACRIFICE

"You sent for me, princess?"

Margery groped with her hands for the chair which was behind her. She was thankful for this support.

"Yes," she replied. "Mr. Zoab, there are some important questions I must ask you and which you must answer me."

The dwarf inclined his huge shaggy head.

"I have already told you, queen of my heart, that it would be better if you did not know certain things," he said. "Soon, as I have promised you many times, we shall be away from this place, away from all its associations . . . and we will never talk of it again."

The small hands that were clutching the back of the chair tightened their grip. Margery realised that only by means of self-control and feminine strategy could she obtain the vital information, but the mental torture she was undergoing was agonising.

"Yes—yes," she murmured quickly, "but there are some things I want to know now, Mr. Zoab. If you have any regard for me, if——"

"I place my life at your service, princess," the dwarf interjected.

"Then you *will* tell me?" she pleaded passionately.

Zoab made a gesture of reluctant submission.

"Ask me what you want to know, princess."

But now that the promise had been made she felt too afraid to ask. Already she was convinced, from what the dwarf had previously told her, that Martin Creighton was not only in the castle, but was a prisoner like herself. For the third time he had endeavoured to help her, but luck must have been against him. Her heart seemed to rise in her throat as she recalled the well-remembered face of the man she now knew she loved. Perhaps even at that moment this face was twisted with pain. . . .

"I am waiting, princess."

She tried to rally herself, conscious that the dwarf was watching her closely. What a

mockery it was that not only the entire future happiness, but the very lives of Martin Creighton and herself depended upon the will of this malformed creature! Thrice hideous became this mockery at the thought, which now flashed through her mind, that it was this human oddity's passion for her that had placed both of them in this position of peril.

Falteringly she found her voice.

"When you were here just now, Mr. Zoab, you mentioned a young man—Mr. Creighton, I believe his name is, I mean," she went on, conscious that her words must sound very confused, "the young man who was at that house of—did you say the name was Juhl?"

The dwarf nodded. In some subtle way Margery felt that he had changed.

"And what about the young man Creighton, princess? Did you not tell me when I was here before that he had never made love to you? Why are you showing so much interest in him?"

With a stab of apprehension she felt that at any moment she might make a fatal slip—perhaps she had already done so.

"Mr. Creighton did me a splendid service once," she contrived to reply. "Perhaps you do not know, Mr. Zoab, but the man Juhl was beastly to me. He got to know that my father was doing something . . . something which

—which was not quite right, and he threatened to expose him unless I stole some papers from Lord Belshaven's private safe. Lord Belshaven was my employer—I acted as one of his private secretaries.”

The dwarf made no comment. He did not appear interested. Yet she had to continue in the endeavour to gain his sympathy, and the soul-panic, which increased every minute, made her further words ring with dramatic fervour.

“I want you, Mr. Zoab, to try to realise the embarrassing position in which I was placed. On the particular night of which I am now going to tell you, the man you call Juhl issued to me an ultimatum: either I was to bring back from Lord Belshaven's London house a copy of the new French treaty, or he would hand over my father to the police.”

“The police?” echoed the dwarf.

Margery felt a trifle more hopeful. Zoab at last was evincing some interest.

“Yes. I could not understand myself why a man who was undoubtedly a criminal should talk of the police. But he assured me that any information he sent to Scotland Yard would receive very careful attention. Preposterous as it sounded, his manner was so impressive that I was convinced against my

common sense. I was terrified for my father, as you may imagine."

She paused again, but this time her listener kept silent. Zoab had become abstracted and apparently indifferent again.

"That night," she went on nervously, "whilst I was in Lord Belshaven's study, the young man Creighton ran a great risk for me. How he had learned of my danger I do not know, but in order to save me he took suspicion upon himself. Fortunately, he escaped . . . and that is why I do not want any harm to come to him." She looked at the dwarf pleadingly as she concluded, but was not able to gain any reassurance.

Instead the answer Zoab made caused her to give a terrified cry.

"Creighton is a criminal himself—he is wanted by the police for the murder of a man named Sir Simon Baste."

Margery was unable to stop the scream that rose to her lips.

"He didn't do it! He couldn't have done it!" she protested vehemently.

Zoab did not take his eyes from her face.

"I am afraid you were not telling me the entire truth, Miss Steers, when you implied that you had no particular affection for this young man. It is not on a dangerous murderer

that I would like you to waste so much thought."

With a fresh fear Margery realised that she had allowed her senses to overcome her. Irretrievably, perhaps, she had blundered.

Before she could frame any words Zoab had gone on. His voice, previously so gentle when addressing her, was now harsh and jarring.

"So that you may forget this foolishness, Miss Steers, I am going to make a statement to you," he said. "By profession I am a bacteriologist. At this moment I am on the eve of making a tremendous discovery. It is necessary for this work that a human being should be inoculated with my new disease germ. In certain countries—England, unfortunately, lags behind in this respect—the suggestion is being seriously considered of condemned criminals being handed over to such men as myself, in the interests of medical science. In any case, the lives of such wretches are already forfeit on account of their crimes, and in the last few weeks of their existence they may be able to pay back in generous measure the debt they owe to humanity. Now with regard to this young man Creighton——"

Margery Steers screamed for the second time.

"He is here, I knew it! And you, you

fiend, you would do this awful thing! O God, help me!"

"Miss Steers——"

What the dwarf was about to say she did not wait to hear. In that moment of terrible vision an idea had been born in her half-crazed brain.

"Listen! I will make a bargain with you, devil though you are. If you will give me your solemn assurance that Martin Creighton can leave the castle to-night unharmed, I will—marry you. . . . To-night, if you wish."

For several moments the man to whom she had made the offer stood silent.

"You must love this young man very much, Miss Steers," Zoab said.

"Yes. I didn't realise it before, but I—do."

"And you hate me?"

"Don't ask me! Don't ask me! But I will marry you. . . ."

The dwarf stepped back.

"To you, Miss Steers, I am the meanest, most contemptible creature living," he said, "but even Zoab—Zoab the dwarf—has his pride. I cannot accept your offer."

When Margery lifted her head the room was empty.

ONCE again Creighton was back in the room with the white tiles. His wrists and ankles were still bound. And watching him with what seemed a morbid interest was the man who had threatened him with such a dreadful death.

Zoab now spoke.

"The greatest poet who ever lived, my young friend, once said :

" ' All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.' "

Probably there never has been a stranger last act than that in this little play of ours."

"Cut out the talk, Zoab," curtly answered Creighton.

The dwarf lifted those beautifully shaped hands of his in a little gesture of hopelessness.

"Talk!" he echoed. "Talk!"

He took one look at the instruments strewn about the glass bench at which he was seated, and then turned to Creighton with fresh energy.

"Before I submit you to a small operation," he said, "I have a story to tell. Because not only you, but Miss Steers——"

"Leave Miss Steers out of it, you dog!"

Zoab accepted the epithet with resignation.

"That is impossible," he said; "but you need have no fear, Mr. Creighton, that I shall be disrespectful. Miss Steers is the only living person for whom I have ever felt affection."

In spite of himself, Creighton was hushed into silence. The strange note in the speaker's voice commanded attention.

"I must represent a grotesque rival to you," went on the dwarf, "but, like you, I fell in love with Miss Steers. It is not necessary for me to tell you about my early life; I need only say that in a world which has always openly showed its contempt and hatred of me, Miss Steers appeared as an angel of beauty and graciousness.

"It was madness for a person like myself to have any thought about her, I know, but this madness overcame me. So I took her out of the house of Juhl and brought her here. Incautiously, perhaps, I mentioned your name to her. Almost immediately I knew that she loved you. She loves you to such an extent that she offered to make, for your sake, the greatest possible sacrifice: if I consented to let you escape from the castle unharmed she promised to marry me—to-night, if I wished."

Creighton was so shaken that he could not speak when the dwarf paused.

"I know what you are thinking," Zoab con-

tinued; "you are shuddering at the possibility of a beautiful human flower like Margery Steers being married to such as I. But that once cherished dream is now dispelled. I refused her offer."

"Thank God!" Creighton could now speak.

Zoab did not show that he had heard, but continued in that grave, even-toned voice, which was so peculiarly impressive.

"Once I realised the truth—the truth being that I remained the most repulsive thing on earth to Miss Steers—I had to refuse her offer. That is not to say," he went on, "that I considered myself obliged to let you leave this place unharmed."

"I don't care a damn about myself," declared Creighton; "and, look here, you can't do things like you talk about in England. Miss Steers is the private secretary of Lord Belshaven, one of the most influential politicians in the country. He will be moving heaven and earth to find out where she has gone."

The dwarf waved his hand in a half contemptuous movement.

"We will come back to you," he rejoined, with a note of finality.

"When you were last in this room," the speaker added, "I gave you the information

that I intended to inoculate you with my new disease germ. I still intend to do so. Although the only chance of happiness I have ever dreamt of has been completely shattered, I remain, I trust, an honourable man. I promised to perfect this new disease germ, and in fairness to my employers I must do so. You are necessary to my further research work. Being already a criminal wanted for murder, perhaps you will reconcile yourself to dying in my laboratory instead of on the scaffold."

"Why not get on with it?" Creighton endeavoured to be sardonic, but his body felt cold. The story which the dwarf had just told him, bizarre and incredible as it had sounded he had been bound to believe owing to the simple sincerity of the speaker.

But that Margery Steers should love him! . . . And that he should know it just before being condemned to a foul death! . . .

"You ask me to commence," said Zoab, stretching an arm over the glass bench. "Very well; I will. . . ."

Martin Creighton watched what followed as though he were dreaming this horror instead of living it. Zoab approached him and removed his collar and necktie. Then he unfastened his shirt at the neck. . . .

Going back to his glass bench, he picked up a hypodermic syringe which he had pre-

viously filled from a test-tube containing a vivid green fluid.

"We will start with a moderately powerful dose," he heard Zoab say; and then, with the dwarf standing so near him that he could feel his breath upon his cheek, Martin Creighton did the one unpardonable thing for a self-respecting man.

He fainted.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE RECKONING

JUHL frowned.

"You will stay here," he said in an authoritative voice.

The strikingly beautiful girl, who had been his companion in crime for the last two years, showed dazzling white teeth in a defiant smile.

"On the contrary," she replied, "I intend to go with you. You talk of danger, but have I ever shown you any sign of fear?"

"No. But this is no affair for a girl." Juhl stopped in his walk, to look at her closely. "Are you hoping that that fool Creighton will be at Wildwood?" he asked, with an angry snarl.

“Well?” The girl stamped a foot, whilst the colour flamed into her cheeks.

The Colossus did not reply for some moments. When he spoke his words cut the air like the vicious swish of a sword.

“You are the only woman I have ever really wanted in my life,” he said, “and do you think that I am going to allow you to throw yourself away on this stupid youth? You seem to forget, moreover, that the Hangman has an appointment with him.”

The girl snapped the fingers of her right hand. In that moment she might have been a tigress at bay.

“For so big a man, my friend Juhl, you are surprisingly foolish,” she told him in turn. “Do you think that I do not know who killed Sir Simon Baste? And do you think that I am so afraid of The King that I will not tell the truth? Even if the rope were already round Martin Creighton’s neck I would save him.”

Her companion looked round, as though afraid of an unseen listener.

“You don’t realise what you are saying, Xavia,” he replied in an undertone that carried fear; “if The King had the least suspicion about you, he would——”

“Psst!” She snapped her white fingers

again. "Have I not already told you I do not care that for The King? He may terrify you, Juhl, but he cannot frighten me. I go now to rest for an hour. At the end of that time I shall prepare to accompany you to Wildwood Castle. You say the girl Steers is there—I want to have another talk with her."

Before Juhl could reply she had left the room. The Colossus, lighting a cigar, flung his huge frame into an enormous leather chair and blew cloud after cloud of smoke. His nerves badly wanted soothing.

His mind was fully occupied with Xavia. A man who knew the entire civilised world, a man who had tasted life to the full, Juhl found himself possessed of an almost insane jealousy. What he had told Xavia was true: compared with his desire for her every other feeling he had had for a woman was insignificant. He had waited so long, had waited with a patience which, to such a man, was marvellous. For two years he had thought continuously of his reward, and now Xavia calmly told him that the man she wanted was not himself but that fellow Creighton. . . .

Juhl's mind went back to a night in Paris two years before. He had been supping at Maxim's, in that noble thoroughfare the Rue Royale, when Flossie Covinger, the American

blackmail specialist, had come excitedly to his table.

"Oscar," she said breathlessly, "would you like to meet a very beautiful girl? From what I can make out she may be useful to you."

Oscar Juhl had always been a master of beautiful women and not a slave, but the words naturally enough aroused his interest.

"Of course, Flossie," he replied; "bring her along."

Directly he saw the girl he knew her to be a personality. Although only twenty years of age, she had the composed assurance and perfect poise of a cosmopolitan woman of the world. After Flossie Covinger had made the introduction, Xavia had turned to him and said: "I want five minutes with you alone."

Flossie had taken the hint in characteristic good humour—when not working on one of her blackmail schemes she was a generous soul—and had taken her departure.

The opening words of his companion caused Juhl to stare.

"I want to get some excitement out of life," she started. "I have learned, through Miss Covinger, that you are a criminal of brilliant accomplishments. Will you train me, and when I am efficient let me work with you? I

will pay you five thousand francs if you agree."

Juhl had been able to see infinite possibilities in this enigmatic but fascinating recruit to crime. He had accepted the strange offer immediately, and, until this moment, had never regretted his decision. The girl was quick-witted, startlingly audacious, and had carried off several large coups with an aplomb that had excited his admiration and gained her his praise.

He was still ignorant of Xavia's early history. Beyond telling him that she was the daughter of a Russian nobleman and a famous French actress, both of whom were dead, she gave him no information about her past. He had made his own inquiries, however, and from these he had been able to gather, in an indirect way, that the girl had been affianced to the son of a Paris banker millionaire. Xavia, upon learning that her future husband was a degraded libertine although quite a young man, had broken off the engagement, and had disappeared from Paris society.

No doubt it was the bitter chagrin at this lover's faithlessness that had caused her to take her revenge in such a startling and dramatic fashion; in any case, she became classed among the most dangerous women criminals of the world.

For all his natural ruthlessness, Juhl had always secretly been afraid of her. Her pride of race alone caused Xavia to command from any man the utmost respect, and it was this quality, coupled with her remarkable beauty of face and figure, that had aroused in this human wolf a passionate desire to possess her both in thought and deed.

It had been a strange partnership. Although they had worked and even lived in the same home for over two years, Juhl had never been allowed to take the slightest liberty. For all his devouring desire, the most concession he had been allowed was occasionally to kiss her hand. Once—only once, he had asked for her lips. The girl had turned on him like a fury, yet her face might have been of stone.

"We are partners in crime—and nothing else," she told him.

But Juhl had not ceased to hope and plan. After Zoab had produced the disease germ which was to frighten the British Government into paying an enormous sum in blackmail, he intended to cut adrift from The King, leave the world of crime altogether, and settle down in the French Riviera for a life of luxurious pleasure. He had meant to have as his companion this wonder-woman, Xavia Sergioff.

He gritted his teeth as the enchanting vision faded.

Zoab, looking at the unconscious figure of his intended victim, suddenly turned. Outside the laboratory came the sound of running feet, and now the door was swiftly opened, and a number of men rushed into the room.

At their head was a huge person, whom the dwarf recognised, in wonderment, as Juhl.

The latter quickly took command of the situation.

"Take this fellow away," he said, pointing to the bound figure of Martin Creighton, "and then leave me to deal with this—this abortion." He looked at Zoab as he spoke.

The order was immediately obeyed. With the door closed after the men, Juhl faced the dwarf, whom surprise had seemingly rendered stupefied.

"Now we will have the reckoning, Zoab," he said. "First of all, however, I will set your mind at rest by telling you that the castle is completely in our hands. You thought you were clever, no doubt, hiding yourself away here with the girl; but The King soon discovered you—as a matter of fact, one of his men was already in Schriners' employ—and he

sent me down here to hunt you out of your hole and take you back to him. He will know how to deal with you. You are not a pretty sight now, but you will be a great deal less attractive after he has finished. . . .

"But I cannot allow The King to have all the pleasure," the speaker went on: "you are the first man who has ever dared to play false with me——"

"I asked you for money; you refused it," now broke in the dwarf.

"That is no answer, and you took the girl. She also will have to pay. . . . *Stop!*"

Like a tiger-cat the dwarf had leapt. In his right hand was a scalpel, which he had snatched from the glass bench.

Juhl was a man of giant strength, but before he could adequately defend himself Zoab had driven home his impromptu weapon.

"You—shall—have—your—reckoning!" he hissed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FIVE SECONDS

WHAT had happened?

Unable, as usual, to sleep, Margery had spent the past two hours gripped by a fresh terror and an ever-increasing perplexity. Even

through the thick walls she had been able to hear many sounds which were strange to her. The castle that night was the scene of unaccustomed activity.

Keenest and most poignant of all her fears was the dread that by her own action she had placed Martin Creighton in fresh peril of his life. Zoab had refused her offer, it was true, but there could be no possible doubt but that the dwarf had Creighton at his mercy somewhere in the castle. Would he exact a fiendish revenge for his disappointment? Margery trembled with the agony of the thought, clenching her hands and tossing, fully dressed, on the small bed from side to side.

Then her mind came back to the many strange sounds with which the castle seemed to be filled. It was useless for her to endeavour to ascertain anything, because escape by either the door or the window was impossible. Yet for perhaps the twentieth time that night, she went to the door in the vain hope that she could open it.

But it was immovable.

Then, as she was about to turn away, she heard someone outside. A key grated in the lock and the heavy door swung inwards.

Directly she saw the door move, Margery, obeying an impulsive instinct, sprang forward.

“Keep back!”

A small but powerful hand was pressing upon her throat. Yet it was not this physical resistance which so startled the captive. That an attempt would be made to stop her was only to be expected—but this visitor! It was the girl Xavia!

One enemy after another. . . .

Before she could recover from her surprise, the visitor, looking unnaturally excited, had entered the room, slammed the door after her, sat down in a chair with her back to it, and produced from her handbag a small ivory-handled revolver.

“You are surprised to see me, no doubt, Miss Steers, but I want certain information from you, and you will be well advised to give it me.”

Margery had time to notice now the speaker's singular appearance. The tailored suit she wore was covered with dust, there was a rent in one of her silk stockings, and the expensive snake-skin shoes were coated with slime.

“I have been making a search,” the visitor said, as though reading the other's thoughts, “but Martin Creighton is not to be found. That he is here, however, I feel sure, and I am relying upon you to tell me what you know.”

The first impression Margery had was one

of tremendous elation. Martin must have escaped.

"Thank God, he has got away!"

Without realising that she was speaking her thoughts aloud, she raised both arms in a gesture of thankfulness.

A low, scornful laugh made her look at the girl in returning apprehension.

"No, he has not got away. He is hidden somewhere in the castle, and I want to know where he is."

"Why?"

Margery looked quickly at the speaker. With a woman's intuition the real reason why this girl had come was dawning upon her.

Xavia impatiently tapped her weapon with the nails of her left hand.

"Juhl has come here to-night with a party of men to take Martin away, but they shall not have him. I want him. I love him——"

"*You!*"

"Yes, I. Do you think that I would have come to this foul place for any other reason? I have searched and searched. . . . You must tell me where he is."

Although her heart seemed turned to ice, Margery's voice was calm. More than ever now she had to control herself.

"I do not know where he is," she replied.

The exotically beautiful girl guarding the door sprang to her feet. Her face was livid.

"You lie!" she exclaimed. "I give you five seconds. Unless you tell me I shall kill you."

Margery perceived that the girl was unbalanced. Something must have snapped in her brain. And—unnerving thought—it was love for Martin Creighton which had brought her to this state!

"You are mad to behave like this. On my honour, I do not know where Mr. Creighton is. I believe he was in the castle, because Zoab the dwarf practically told me so, but I know nothing beyond that. And if you have searched——"

"*One!*"

"Can't you listen to reason? Have you no sense left?"

"*Two!*" called the girl with the revolver.

"Why won't you understand? I was brought here by Zoab against my will, and have been kept a prisoner in this room ever since."

"*Three!*"

"I have not once seen Mr. Creighton. Why don't you ask the man Juhl? He should know."

"*Four!*"

The girl was implacable. Margery realised it was no use saying anything more. No matter

how she tried to explain, this half-crazed creature would kill her.

"*Five!*" called the murderess.

As Margery put her hands before her eyes she heard her name called.

It was a man's voice, a voice she knew, a voice she loved.

She looked up, to see Martin Creighton standing in the doorway.

Through a mist she watched his right hand shoot out. A woman screamed; the weapon which, a second later, would have killed her fell to the floor. . . . And then, while her heart leapt like an imprisoned bird, strong arms went about her, and she heard her rescuer say: "My dear! Oh, my dear! . . ."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DOUBLE HAUL

"THIS takes my mind back to the war." Lord Belshaven, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, gave the tin hat he had put on a final approving pat and picked up a heavy, loaded stick. "I am quite ready," he announced.

A short, appreciative smile spread over Bunny's face. It was remarkable how circumstances could change a man's nature. Here

was England's most distinguished politician looking forward to a rough and tumble fight, which might have tragic consequences, with much of the eagerness of a boy going to a football match! The tin hat the Foreign Secretary had donned was the identical one worn by his son during the autumn of 1918.

Outside, the cars which were to take Chipstead's warriors to the "meet" were already waiting, and no further time was lost in making a start.

"You really think this will be heavy enough?" inquired Lord Belshaven, passing his loaded stick to Bunny.

Chipstead handed the weapon back, after balancing it in his hand.

"You ought to get in some really nifty work with that, sir. But remember, I mustn't be held responsible to the Prime Minister."

The corridor was filled with fighting men. At the head of the invaders was England's Foreign Secretary, battling like a figure of romance.

Chipstead, the generalissimo of the attacking forces, had been somewhat puzzled by the ease with which they had been able to gain an entrance into Wildwood. He had expected to find scouts stationed in the castle grounds, but

after dropping over the outer wall nothing had stayed their progress.

A much greater surprise awaited them, for they found the entrance to the castle left open. Debating the possibility of a trap, he hesitated for a few moments, but then decided to waste no further time. Putting himself at the head of his men, he rushed inside.

Something of a sensational nature had occurred recently, he concluded, from the state of confusion which everywhere met his eye, but it was not until they reached this long corridor that any blows were exchanged.

It was a spirited scrap while it lasted. The disappointment to many of the invaders was that it didn't last long enough. These men of the Secret Service were used to work of this description, and they brought to the job an enthusiasm stimulating to see. Their foes, on the other hand, were merely hired braves—present-day mercenaries—and when they realised who their opponents actually were, those who could endeavoured to scuttle away into safety. Moreover, they had lost their leader. No one seemed to know what had become of Juhl. This was an important factor.

The invaders had cleared the corridor successfully, when everyone's attention was riveted by a girl's scream.

"That must be Miss Steers," announced Lord Belshaven, artistically applying a finishing stroke to the head of an obstinate adversary.

"Come along, boys."

He led the way, racing up a flight of stone steps, at the top of which was a half-open door. One glance through this, and he was inside the circular-shaped room which had been Margery Steers's prison.

"Help him!"

A girl, who was shaking with fear, and who seemed on the verge of collapse, pointed to the writhing mass of men, forming what might have been a Rugby scrum, in the centre of the room.

The Foreign Secretary proved once again to be a man of quick decisions. Whenever a head showed he hit it, and by the time that Chipstead and some of the others had arrived his loaded stick had brought him quite a respectable "bag."

Out of the crush crawled a young man, breathing uneasily. It was Martin Creighton.

At the sight of Bunny Chipstead he drew back, putting himself, spent though he was, into an attitude of defence.

"It's all right, Creighton"—Lord Belshaven's tone was reassuring—"we're friends here, not enemies. Let's hope your troubles are over now."

The words seemed too much for Creighton. He put his hand up to his forehead, as though trying to bring relief to his troubled brain. Then, with a few muttered, indistinguishable words, he slipped to the floor.

“Those brutes nearly killed him.”

Stooping beside Creighton, Margery drew the man's head to rest on her knees. The look in her face convinced Lord Belshaven of the truth of his former surmise.

“Give him some of this, Miss Steers,” the politician said. He drew a spirit flask from his pocket and passed it to the girl.

“Now, Chipstead, you can carry on yourself. These two people represent my department. I will stay here and see that no one else bothers them. Come back when you've finished.”

The room had been cleared by this time, and with Chipstead and his men gone, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs drew a kitchen chair to the door, which he proceeded to guard. Lord Belshaven had lost his collar, his tin hat was askew, there was a great rent in his coat, his aristocratic face was streaked with blood and dust, but he looked what he was—a very happy man. His back was turned to the two young people he had rescued.

Behind him Margery Steers and Martin Creighton became lost to every other consideration but that Fate had brought them together once again. The girl's arms were supporting the injured man, whose head was upon her breast.

"Martin! Martin! . . . I always knew you would save me. I prayed. . . ."

The words came in little sobs of thankfulness.

"I was lucky," explained Creighton. "I was being taken by Juhl's men to one of the dungeons when their attention was attracted by sounds of a scrap up above. In answer to a shout for help, two of my warders rushed off. I managed to get away from the other two. Then I thought of you, and"—lamely—"you know the rest."

For reply she kissed him on the lips.

It was ten minutes later. The heat and the tumult had somewhat died down.

"I was beginning to get the cramp." Lord Belshaven rose and stretched himself. He looked at Chipstead, who entered at that moment. "What's the news?"

"Well, from what I can understand, there was a previous schemozle here to-night. The dungeons below are full of men. Apparently"

—turning to Creighton—“a party of crooks, led by your old friend who called himself ‘Jones,’ but whose real name is Juhl, called here earlier in the evening and did the dirty on the original garrison. Then we happened along, and have thus been able to bring off a double haul.”

Creighton stretched out a hand.

“Lord Belshaven has been telling us about you, Mr. Chipstead. I am most awfully grateful——”

“And I was most awfully lucky.” Chipstead smilingly made this confession. “Our friend the dwarf”—he affected not to see Margery Steers shudder—“was not as careful as he might have been. In his former laboratory at Highgate he left a screwed-up scrap of paper which turned out to be part of a letter. On this were the two words ‘Wildwood’ and ‘Castle.’ That’s why I came here to-night.”

“You mentioned Juhl just now,” broke in Martin; “where is he? That man’s dangerous, and he’s ‘planted’ on me a charge of murder. I must get hold of him.”

Chipstead looked grave.

“I quite realise the importance of finding Juhl,” he replied, “but so far we haven’t been successful in tracing either him or the dwarf.”

“Have you tried the laboratory?” At the

mention of that word Margery Steers uttered a sharp cry.

"Thank God, you escaped!" She turned to Creighton and caught hold of his arm.

Martin patted her shoulder encouragingly.

"Hush, darling! That is all over now. You must promise me not to worry any more." Leading the girl to a chair, he then turned to Chipstead. "We must destroy that beastly place," he said tensely. "Come with me."

A few minutes later he stood, with Lord Belshaven and Bunny Chipstead, outside the room which he knew, from bitter experience, contained such a grizzly secret.

"It's locked. But we must get in."

Chipstead nodded before placing a revolver to the lock, which he proceeded to blow out.

With the door thrust open, the three sprang in. The room with white tiles was in complete darkness.

"The lights! Switch on the lights!" ordered Chipstead; "something has happened here!"

When the place was flooded with electric light, the truth of Bunny's words was apparent. Two men were in the laboratory, but neither of them moved.

"That's Juhl," said Creighton, pointing.

On the floor was the figure of the Colossus.

One glance told them that Oscar Juhl had committed his last crime. The colour had gone from his striking face, which was so distorted that two out of the three watchers turned away. Only Chipstead had the necessary nerve to examine the gaping wound in the man's neck.

"Murdered, without a doubt," commented the Secret Service free-lance.

He turned at an exclamation from Lord Belshaven. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was pointing to a figure huddled over a littered glass bench.

"The dwarf!" exclaimed Creighton; "he, too, must be dead. What does it mean?"

Chipstead waved his two companions aside. Then, without touching anything, he made a rapid examination.

"He committed suicide, probably after killing Juhl." The speaker stretched forward and picked up a tiny glass phial. "Cyanide of potassium. . . . He knew the quickest way."

Creighton felt beads of perspiration running down his face. Although the dwarf had planned to kill him in a horrible fashion, the significance of this tragedy aroused his deep compassion. Zoab, the outcast, one of the most abhorred of all God's creatures, had had his hour. Uplifted out of himself, he had loved—loved with a fervour that vanquished everything else. In his

heart he must always have known the hopelessness of his dream, and so, when Fate had declared its relentless decision, rather than face the world again he had taken that swift certain way out of his misery.

A lump rose in Creighton's throat as he murmured a respectful obsequie over the still form of the man who had been, in life, his luckless rival.

He leaned across and touched Chipstead's shoulder.

"Miss Steers must not know of this; it would upset her terribly."

The other nodded. He did not understand, of course, what was at the back of Creighton's words, but he realised that the girl upstairs must be saved any further distress.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE UNMASKING

DAWN was breaking when the principals in the Wildwood Castle drama returned to Roughmoor. As the car swung in through the wide gates, Lord Belshaven turned to Margery Steers and the man by her side, and said:

"My dear young friends, I want you to feel that you are coming home."

The phrase was so apt, it so typified what was in the girl's mind, that she smiled through a mist of happy tears.

This comfortable old house was, indeed, a home—a veritable haven of rest after the tumultuous events of the past few hours. Lord Belshaven was the kindest of hosts, and at his bidding Roughmoor was soon humming with activity.

Sleep was impossible, everyone felt. After bathing, food was the first essential, and within an hour a substantial English breakfast was ready.

It was during the course of this meal—the happiest Margery had ever known—that the Foreign Secretary, looking at his three guests with a kindly, affectionate glance, made one of those little impromptu speeches for which he was so famous.

“I count myself,” he said, “a very fortunate man this morning, inasmuch as I have the pleasure of having beneath my roof the three persons who have saved the nation from a very real and terrible peril. On behalf of the country, I thank you—Margery, Creighton, and you, Chipstead—for all that you have done. I shall make it my business to see that the information reaches official quarters.”

In that sweet-scented garden nothing broke

the blessed peace but the cawing of the rooks in the tall elms, and the gentle sough of the wind as it whispered an accompaniment to the voices of the lovers.

Margery was now speaking.

"I always felt, all through those dreadful days and nights, that my prayer would be answered—that you would come again to me. Martin, say that you have forgiven me for so misjudging you." She looked up into his face, her sweet lips quivering.

Creighton stooped. There was only one thing, he felt, that could stop those nervous tremors: with his arms about her, holding this precious argosy safe, he kissed her.

"There is nothing to forgive, darling; worried as you were, it was only natural that you should suspect me." Then he loosened his arms and drew back. "It is I who must ask forgiveness," he went on; "I haven't a penny in the world, and yet I have dared to kiss you."

The confession did not seem to perturb the girl. On the contrary, she clapped her hands like a happy child.

"It is shameless of me, I suppose, but I like you to kiss me." She looked at him roguishly. "If you stand so far away, how can I tell you my news?"

"What news?"

"I can only whisper it."

Even then Martin kept himself in hand. What right had he to make love to this wonderful girl?

"Lord Belshaven— isn't he a dear?—has promised to get you a job good enough——"

Dizzy with happiness, Creighton pretended to be stupid.

"Good enough for—what?" he inquired.

"You—you had better ask Lord Belshaven."

Now he was by her side, drawing her to him in that swift, impetuous way she discovered was so enchanting.

"I prefer you to tell me, Margery."

"Are you sure—quite sure that you love me?"

Creighton supplied the only really satisfactory answer.

"I feel sure in my own mind that a thousand a year is sufficient to get married on," said Margery Steers, a minute later. . . . "But here's Lord Belshaven himself. Martin! He musn't see you kissing me."

Creighton broke into what he felt to be the first real laugh of his life.

"Rot!" he roared; "if he isn't careful, I'll kiss him too."

They dined alone with their host that night. Chipstead had gone up to Town by the morning train. He had to consult, he told Lord Belshaven, the British Secret Service authorities.

"What about Scotland Yard?" asked the Foreign Secretary.

Bunny gave a fugitive smile.

"I still prefer to leave the police out of it," he replied.

At ten o'clock Lord Belshaven looked across at the girl.

"You must be tired, my dear."

"I am—dreadfully. If you will excuse me, I think I will go to bed."

He held the door open with that gracious courtesy so familiar to her.

"Tell Carter if there is anything you require."

Closing the door, the Foreign Secretary mixed two whiskys-and-sodas.

"To your future happiness, my boy." He smiled as he raised his glass.

Martin shifted in his chair.

"You have been most awfully kind, sir. But there is one thing I am afraid we have all forgotten."

"And that?"

"The police are still wanting me, no doubt, on a charge of murdering Sir Simon Baste."

His host pushed a blazing log into position on the wide hearth.

"I have had a talk with Chipstead," he said; "he will be dealing with the matter to-day, and in the morning you and I will go up to Town. I will take you myself to the Home Secretary. The charge against you must be dropped." Once again Creighton endeavoured to express his gratitude, but his host smilingly refused to listen.

"A game of billiards before bed? We keep early hours when my wife is not here, but a hundred up should not take long. What do you say?"

Martin, feeling that all the good fairies were now watching over him, accepted.

"And so, Mr. Creighton, you have brought me a note from Sir David Warburton, the Home Secretary. Apparently he has been convinced by Lord Belshaven that you are innocent of the atrocious crime with which you have been charged. Of course, if a mistake has been made——"

"You must know that a mistake has been made, Mr. Stark. You have heard my story. I have told you how the man Juhl, who is now dead——"

Martin Creighton stopped. The Deputy

Commissioner of Scotland Yard looked as though he was going to be very ill. All through the interview he had been wiping his forehead continually, as though he found the heat of the room oppressive, and now he clutched the side of the table for support.

Creighton stepped forward, but Mr. Jarvis Stark waved him back.

"I am not feeling myself this morning," the Deputy Commissioner said. "I have been tremendously overworked lately . . . tremendously overworked. . . ." The voice trailed off.

Sorry as he was for the man, Martin felt that this was proving a most unsatisfactory interview. Earlier in the afternoon he had been taken by Lord Belshaven to see the Secretary of State. The latter had listened attentively, not only to what the Foreign Secretary had said, but to Creighton's own story. At the end he had pursed his lips.

"This is indeed a very grave matter," he pronounced, "and I am very grateful to you, Belshaven, for bringing Mr. Creighton to me. I understand that Mr. Jarvis Stark, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, is not at his office to-day, but I will give you a note, Mr. Creighton, to take to him at his house. Mr. Jarvis Stark has dealt with the Sir Simon Baste affair

himself. He will be very interested in what you have to tell him."

Martin had been asked to step into another room while the two Cabinet Ministers conferred together in private. As he passed through the door, he heard the Home Secretary remark to his colleague: "A most lamentable error. . . ."

He had taken a taxi to the address on the envelope, and had been shown into this large and rather poorly furnished room on the ground-floor. Evidently Mr. Jarvis Stark was something of a Spartan as regards his personal comforts.

"If you are not the murderer of Sir Simon Baste, who is?"

Wiping his forehead again, the questioner sank into a chair. Undoubtedly the man was ill, Creighton decided. Yet he was bound to reply.

"That is your business, not mine, I suggest. Perhaps it was the man Juhl."

Jarvis Stark rolled his handkerchief into a ball.

"The man Juhl," he repeated. "But he is dead, you say?"

"Yes. And now I must ask you, Mr. Stark, to give me your assurance that I shall not be subjected to any further annoyance from you or your policemen."

The Deputy Commissioner rose. He proved to be unsteady on his feet.

"I will give you the necessary assurance—I will—I will get it now. Please excuse me for a few minutes." Before Creighton could make any reply he had left the room.

After five minutes had passed, Martin became impatient. The irritation he had experienced from the beginning of this interview increased until he felt he could not stay in the room any longer. He had the impression that Jarvis Stark was somehow fooling him.

He had stooped to pick up his hat and stick, when a voice, harsh and impelling, called: "Put up your hands!"

Creighton swung round instantly. Confronting him was a tall man whose features were entirely covered with a black mask.

"You have betrayed my plans and you must pay the penalty." The masked man levelled the revolver in his right hand.

Creighton gasped. This man was that Emperor of Crime, the Lord of the Underworld to whom Juhl had given unquestioning allegiance. This was the masked man, addressed as The King, whom he had met in the house at Highgate. And now he saw him again in the house of the Deputy Commissioner of Police. . . .

“ Duck, you ass !”

The warning immediately preceded the appearance of a thin, wiry-looking man, immaculately dressed, who, appearing sensationally from space, leapt on the back of the masked man, his fingers clutching the other's throat.

“ Here, give me a hand, Creighton !” called Bunny Chipstead.

A minute later the Secret Service free-lance tore the mask from the face of the man whose wrists he had manacled.

“ Jarvis Stark,” he said, “ I arrest you for the murder of Sir Simon Baste.”

CHAP. XXXVII CHIPSTEAD TELLS HIS STORY

It was to a deeply interested gathering of police chiefs, Cabinet Ministers, and other high Government officials in the office of Sir Robert Heddingley that Bunny Chipstead told his story.

“ In the first place,” he stated, “ it is my firm conviction that the report of the eminent alienists who are now examining him will give the opinion that Mr. Jarvis Stark is mad. He

has been seriously unbalanced, in my view, for some time past."

"Mad!" The Prime Minister of England turned to the speaker with an impatient gesture. He looked as though he found it difficult to take Chipstead's words seriously.

Sir David Warburton, the Home Secretary, turned in his chair.

"Personally, sir, I should much prefer to believe that Stark was mad. The idea of a Deputy Commissioner of Police behaving as we now know this man has behaved and being in his sane senses is a too unpleasant one to contemplate easily."

Murmurs of assent came from the others in the room.

"If Mr. Chipstead may be allowed to resume, sir——" suggested Sir Robert Heddingley.

The Prime Minister nodded.

"Certainly. I feel sure that I am voicing the thoughts of everyone present when I say that we, as the rulers of this country, owe a lasting debt of gratitude to you, Mr. Chipstead. Now, please."

The Secret Service free-lance took up his tale unruffled.

"One of the reasons why I have hazarded the guess that Jarvis Stark is mad," he resumed,

"is because, my cousin being a rather well-known alienist on the other side, I have been able to dabble somewhat extensively in the subject myself. Of course, I do not pretend to be a mental specialist, but Jarvis Stark during the past few weeks has afforded me many glimpses into his mind; there were certain unmistakable signs. . . .

"But, gentlemen, I will not weary you with information that really belongs to a medical textbook, and which you will hear later from your own experts. Instead I will come to facts.

"Naturally, when my friend Sir Robert Heddingley asked me some weeks ago to give him what help might be possible in this perplexing affair, which had already assumed very grave proportions, I was anxious to do what I could. That it was not an ordinary criminal with whom we had to deal was apparent. I early realised that the person directing this campaign of systematic blackmail was a man highly placed himself. He was a man who moved in circles where the most exclusive information could be obtained.

"This conclusion was forced home to me by the fact that, only a few hours after I had received Sir Robert's confidence, a warning not to interfere in the matter was delivered at my flat.

“Calling at Scotland Yard the following day, I made a rather queer discovery. Whilst talking to the Deputy Commissioner a clerk entered the room and placed some typewritten documents on his desk. Although not wishing to be inquisitive, I could not help noticing that the machine used for these reports was fitted with the type known as elite. Now, although machines fitted with this type are very common in the United States, not many English business men employ them. I believe also that such machines are not favoured in your Government offices?”

The Home Secretary spoke for his colleagues.

“That is so.”

“There were two other coincidences which made me regard those reports with some significance,” continued Chipstead. “One was that the letter *w* was out of alignment, and the second that a green ribbon had been used.” He paused to look round the room, and then added: “In the unusual communication I had received some hours previously the machine used had been fitted with elite type, a green ribbon utilised, and the letter *w* in the word ‘warning’ was out of alignment.

“If this story of mine was taken from fiction instead of real life,” said Chipstead, after

another pause, "you would all say that the detective in the case had blundered in a miraculous fashion upon the very clue he wanted. But my experience goes to show that in crime the most obvious facts are generally the most misleading ones. The coincidences I have mentioned were, in a way, somewhat remarkable, but it would have been ridiculous for me to have assumed that, in the whole of London, there was only one typewriter which could produce the similarities mentioned.

"What interested me more than the typescript on his desk was Jarvis Stark himself. The man, I had always heard, was odd in his manner, but his behaviour that morning was so peculiar that I could not help retaining the memory.

"After leaving the building, an idea, so bizarre as to be credible in only the most sensational novel, came to me : what man in London was in a better position to become a blackmailer on a high plane than a Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard?

"You gentlemen will all remember the case of the Austrian Colonel Redl, who shot himself a few years ago," went on the speaker, after astonishing the company with his last sentence. "Colonel Redl, you will recall, was a very highly placed officer in the Austrian Intelli-

gence, who used his position to sell his nation's secrets. I happened to be in Vienna at the time of his arrest, and it was through receiving a postcard from a friend now living in that city that the idea I have mentioned first assumed definite shape in my mind.

"I had to keep this startling suggestion entirely to myself; I dared not tell even Sir Robert. But during the weeks that followed I never allowed the possibility, that the man I was after might be Jarvis Stark, to escape my notice.

"I will not waste time by narrating how I kept Stark under constant supervision, but after a while it became plain to me that he must be the directing force behind this gang of crooks.

"It was an extraordinary discovery to make, but I waited because I wanted absolute proof. Bit by bit I obtained this, until it became perfectly clear that an outwardly respectable Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard was also an exceedingly dangerous criminal, who, within a few months, had gained such a hold over the Underworld that he was the recognised 'big noise' of crime. For the explanation of this phenomenon you must listen to your experts."

"Did the man Juhl know who Stark really was?" asked a listener.

“No. Stark used the deep cunning of the unbalanced man. No one employed by him succeeded in penetrating his disguise. His chief hold over those who worked under him was that he could utilise his power as a police official to have them arrested if they tried to trick him.”

“And do you seriously think that it was Stark who hounded poor Ferraby to death?” the Premier inquired.

“I have no doubt, as I have already said,” replied Chipstead, “that Jarvis Stark was the power behind this campaign. He confined himself to personal blackmail, however. The scheme of attempting to terrorise the whole Government through the new disease belonged to Juhl.”

The Home Secretary drummed with his fingers on the arms of the chair.

“I think you will agree, sir,” he said, looking at the Prime Minister, “that it was a good idea in the circumstances to leave the investigation in the hands of the Intelligence people. Heddingley, we are much indebted to you.”

“There’s the man who must have the credit,” the Secret Service chief replied, pointing to Chipstead. “As a matter of fact, I was completely in the dark myself, principally

because I was given so little information which was of any value."

The Prime Minister rose.

"We will not pursue the subject further," he announced; "the affair has been exceedingly unpleasant. Once again, Mr. Chipstead, allow me to thank you on behalf of the Cabinet."

"There are just three things I should like to know, Chipstead." Creighton and the Secret Service free-lance were walking down Whitehall. "The first is, why did Stark kill Sir Simon Baste?"

"Because the millionaire refused to pay him blackmail. Baste had had a very speckled past, but he felt himself to be sufficiently strongly entrenched in the good opinion of his fellow-men to resist the demands. But in the end he paid—with his life."

"And do you think that Juhl first approached me because he wished to have a cat's-paw for murder?"

"Quite likely. In fact, looking back, that is the most probable reason why he telephoned you. Of course"—with a grim smile—"he never intended to pay you that five thousand pounds."

"Why did Stark betray himself in his own house?"

“ Because he must have had a sudden brain storm. His plans had miscarried, he knew the end was approaching, and seeing you was the final straw. But why worry? The gang is broken up now, and you are a free man. The girl Xavia is to be deported, and the scandal of Hathway Steers will be hushed up. I had the news this morning that he had died from a heart attack. There would seem to be nothing to prevent you now from being quite happy.”

Two hours later Creighton walked with Margery Steers in the peaceful garden of Roughmoor.

As they turned the corner, the sun came out from behind a cloud and shone full upon them.

To them both, as they stood silent, it was a symbol: from the darkness they had passed into the light.

THE END

