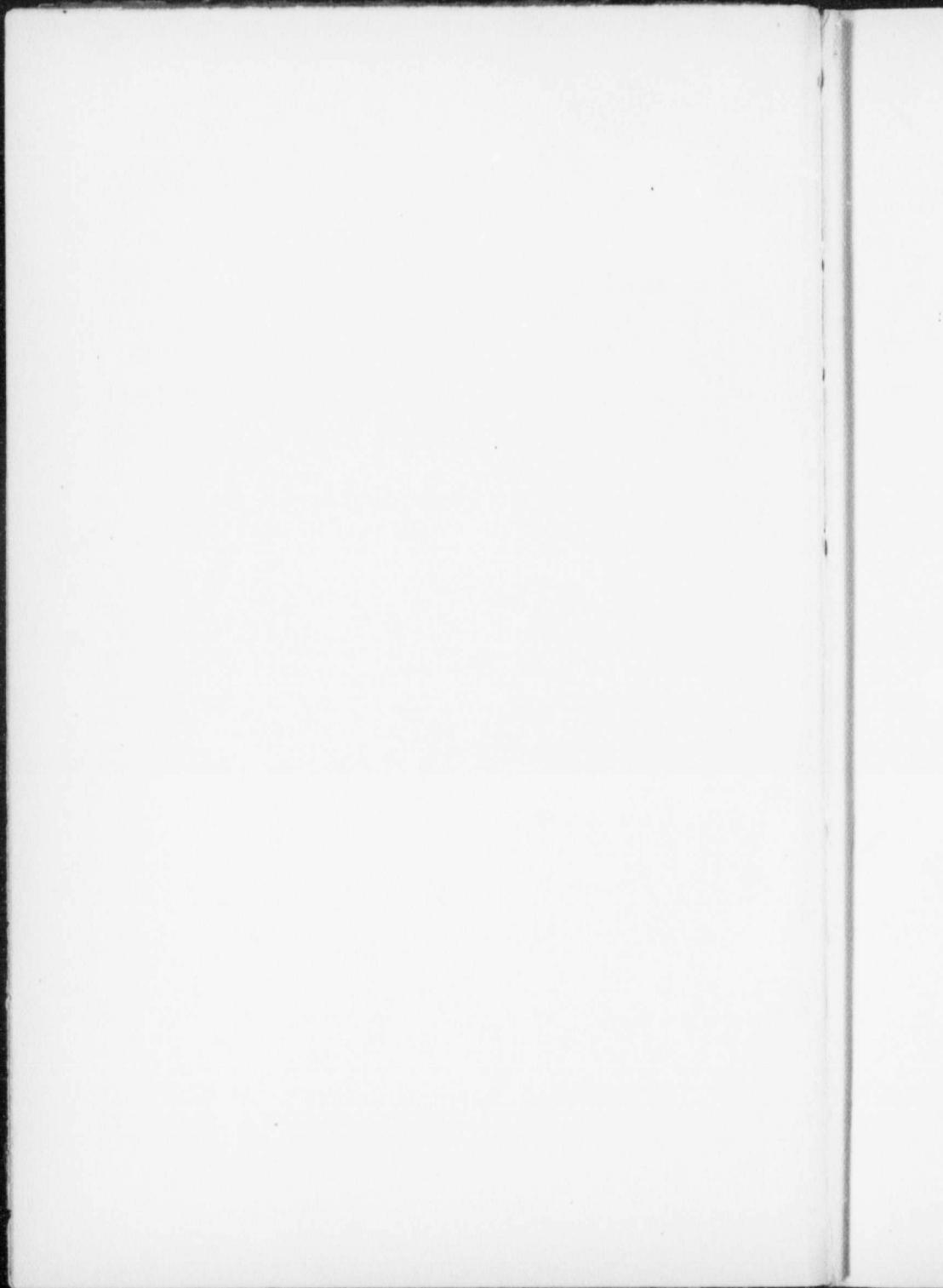


PHANTOM
WIRES

ARTHUR
STRINGER



PHANTOM WIRES





"She turned with a start, though her loss of self-possession lasted but a moment." Frontispiece. See p. 99.

PHANTOM WIRES

A Novel

BY

ARTHUR STRINGER

Author of "The Wire Tappers," "The Loom of Destiny," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK CO., LIMITED

1907



"She turned with a start, though her loss of self-possession lasted but a moment." Frontispiece. See p. 99.

PHANTOM WIRES

A Novel

BY

ARTHUR STRINGER

Author of "The Wire Tappers," "The Loom of Destiny," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK CO., LIMITED

1907

LP
FS 8537
T 73 P 47
1907

Copyright, 1906,

BY ARTHUR STRINGER.

Copyright, 1907,

BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.

All Rights Reserved.

Published, March, 1907.

Printers

S. J. PARKHILL & Co., BOSTON, U. S. A.

#3-

May 1969

K. E. Saunders

Jan 1907

43-

May 1969

K. E. Saunders

Jan 1969

I

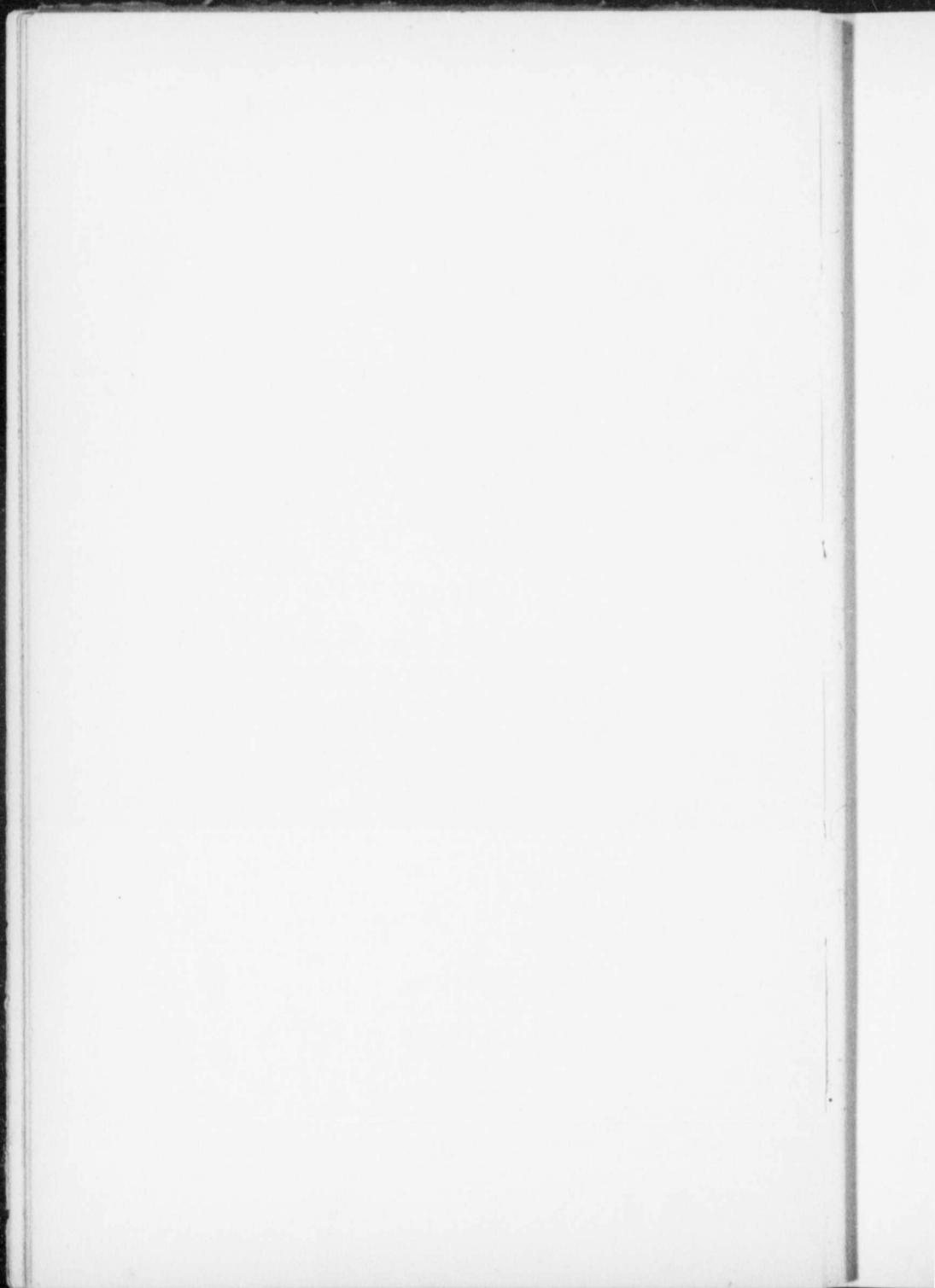
*It's the bad that's in the best of us
Leaves the saint so like the rest of us:
It's the good in the darkest curst of us
Redeems and saves the worst of us.*

II

*It's the muddle of hope and madness,
It's the tangle of good and badness,
It's the lunacy linked with sanity,
Makes up and mocks Humanity!*

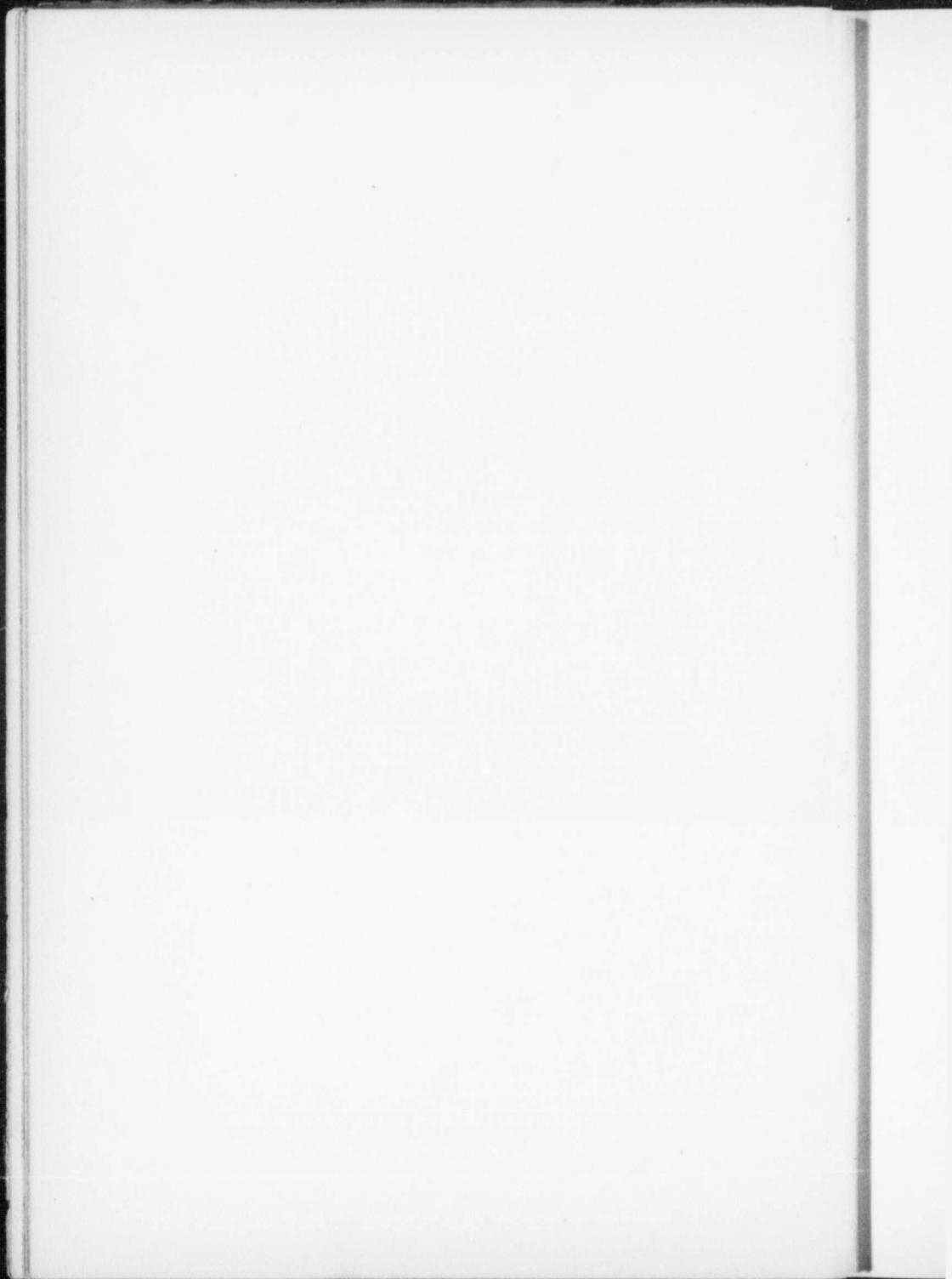
A. S.

1076818



CONTENTS

CHAPTER		<i>Page</i>	
I.	THE END OF THE TETHER	“	1
II.	THE AZURE COAST	“	8
III.	THE SHADOWING PAST	“	20
IV.	THE WIDENING ROAD	“	29
V.	THE GREAT DIVIDE	“	39
VI.	THE WOMAN SPEAKS	“	54
VII.	OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY	“	67
VIII.	“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”	“	77
IX.	THE LARK IN THE RUINS	“	89
X.	THE TIGHTENING COIL	“	98
XI.	THE INTOXICATION OF WAR	“	105
XII.	THE DOORWAY OF SURPRISE	“	115
XIII.	“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”	“	123
XIV.	AWAKENING VOICES	“	137
XV.	WIRELESS MESSAGES	“	152
XVI.	BROKEN INSULATION	“	160
XVII.	THE TANGLED SKEIN	“	167
XVIII.	THE SEVERED KNOT	“	178
XIX.	THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST	“	191
XX.	THE SPIDER AND THE FLY	“	201
XXI.	THE PIT OF DESPAIR	“	210
XXII.	THE ENTERING WEDGE	“	219
XXIII.	THE WAKING CIRCUIT	“	223
XXIV.	THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT	“	230
XXV.	THE RULING PASSION	“	242
XXVI.	THE CROWN OF IRON	“	249
XXVII.	THE STRAITS OF CHANCE	“	256
XXVIII.	THE HUMAN ELEMENT	“	262
XXIX.	THE LAST DITCH	“	274
XXX.	ONE YEAR LATER — AN EPILOGUE	“	287



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- "SHE TURNED WITH A START, THOUGH
HER LOSS OF SELF-POSSESSION
LASTED BUT A MOMENT" . . . *Frontispiece*
- "FRANCES DURKIN KNEW IT WAS
POBLOFF" *Page 78*
- "'THEN WHY ARE YOU UNKIND TO ME?'
SHE ASKED, MORE CALMLY NOW" . . . " 165
- "'STOP THAT!' CRIED DURKIN, SHARPLY,
AS HE SAW THE MOVEMENT" . . . " 275



PHANTOM WIRES

CHAPTER I

THE END OF THE TETHER

Durkin folded the printed pages of the newspaper with no outward sign of excitement. Then he took out his money, quietly, and counted it, with meditative and pursed-up lips.

His eyes fell on a paltry handful of silver, with the dulled gold of one worn napoleon showing from its midst. He remembered, suddenly, that it was the third time he had counted that ever-lightening handful since partaking of his frugal coffee and rolls that morning. So he dropped the coins back into his pocket, dolefully, one by one, and took the deep breath of a man schooling himself to face the unfaceable.

Then he looked about the room, almost vacuously, as though the old-fashioned wooden bed and the faded curtains and the blank walls might hold some oracular answer to the riddle that lay before him. Then he went to the open window, and looked out, almost as vacuously, over the unbroken blue distance of the Mediterranean, tremb-

PHANTOM WIRES

ling into soft ribbons of silver where the wind rippled its surface, yellowing into a fluid gold towards the path of the lowering sun, deepening, again, into a brooding turquoise along the flat rim of the sea to the southward where the twin tranquilities of sky and water met.

It was the same unaltering Mediterranean, the same expanse of eternal sapphire that he had watched from the same Riviera window, day in and day out, with the same vague but unceasing terror of life and the same forlorn sense of helplessness before currents of destiny that week by week seemed to grow too strong for him. He turned away from the soft, exotic loveliness of the sea and sky before him, with a little gesture of impatience. The movement was strangely like that of a feverish invalid turning from the ache of an opened shutter.

Durkin took up the newspaper once more, and unfolded it with listlessly febrile fingers. It was the Paris edition of "The Herald," four days old. Still again, and quite mechanically now, he read the familiar advertisement. It was the same message, word for word, that had first caught his eye as he had sipped his coffee in the little palm-grown garden of the Hotel Bristol, in Gibraltar, nearly three weeks before. "Presence of James L. Durkin, electrical expert, essential at office of Stephens & Streeter, patent solicitors, etc., Empire Build-

THE END OF THE TETHER

ing, New York City, before contracts can be culminated. Urgent."

Only, at the first reading of those pregnant words, all the even and hopeless monotony, all the dull and barren plane of life had suddenly erupted into one towering and consuming passion for activity, for return to his old world with its gentle anæsthesia of ever-widening plans and its obliterating and absolving years of honest labor.

He would never forget that moment, no matter into what ways or moods life might lead him. The rhythmic pound and beat of a company of British infantry, swarthy and strange-looking in their neutral-tinted khaki, marched briskly by on the hard stone road, momentarily filling the garden quietnesses with a tumult of noise. A bugle had sounded from one of the fortified galleries high above him, had sounded clearly out across the huddled little town at the foot of the Rock, challenging, uncompromising, thrillingly penetrating, as the paper had fluttered and shaken in his fingers. He had accepted it, in that first moment of unreasoning emotionalism, as an auspicious omen, as the call of his own higher life across the engulfing abysses of the past. He had forgotten, for the time being, just where and what he was.

But that grim truth had been forced on him, bitterly, bafflingly, after he had climbed the narrow streets of that town which always seemed to him

PHANTOM WIRES

a patchwork of nationalities, a polyglot mosaic of outlandish tongues, climbed up through alien-looking lanes and courts, past Moorish bazaars and Turkish lace-stores and English tobacco-shops, in final and frenzied search of the American Consul.

He had found the Consulate, at last, on what seemed a back street of the Spanish quarter, a gloomy and shabby room or two, with the faded American flags over the doorway clutched in the carven claws of a still more faded eagle. And he had waited for two patient hours, enduring the suspicious scowls of a lean and hawk-like Spanish housekeeper, to discover, at the end, that the American Consul had been riding at hounds, with the garrison Hunt Club. And when the Consul, having duly chased a stunted little Spanish fox all the way from Legnia to Algeciras, returned to his official quarters, in English riding-breeches and irradiating good spirits, Durkin had seen his new-blown hopes wither in the blossom. The Consul greatly regretted that his visitor had been kept waiting, but infinitely greater was his regret that an official position like his own gave him such limited opportunity for forwarding impatient electrical inventors to their native shores. No doubt the case was imminent; he was glad his visitor felt so confident about the outcome of his invention; he had known a man at home who went in for that sort of thing — had fitted up the lights for his own

THE END OF THE TETHER

country house on the Sound; but he himself had never dreamed such a thing as a transmitting camera, that could telegraph a picture all the way from Gibraltar to New York, for instance, was even a possibility! . . . The Department, by the way, was going to have a cruiser drop in at Mogador, to look into the looting of the Methodist Missionary stores at Fruga. There was a remote chance that this cruiser might call at the Rock, on the homeward journey. But it was problematical. . . . And that had been the end of it all, the ignominious end. And still again the despairing Durkin was being confronted and challenged and mocked by this call to him from half way round the world. It maddened and sickened him, the very thought of his helplessness, so Æschylean in its torturing complications, so ironic in its refinement of cruelty. It stung him into a spirit of blind revolt. It was unfair, too utterly unfair, he told himself, as he paced the faded carpet of his cheap hotel-room, and the mild Riviera sunlight crept in through the window-square and the serenely soft and alluring sea-air drifted in between the open shutters.

It meant that a new and purposeful path had been blazed through the tangled complexities of life for him, yet he could make no move to take advantage of it. It meant that the door of his delivery had been swung wide, with its mockery of open and

PHANTOM WIRES

honest sunlight, and yet his feet were to remain fettered in that underworld gloom he had grown to hate. He must still stay an unwilling prisoner in this garden of studied indolence, this playground of invalids and gamblers; he must still dawdle idly about these glittering, stagnating squares, fringing a crowd of meaningless foreigners, skulking half-fed and poorly housed about this opulent show-place of the world that set its appeasing theatricalities into motion only at the touch of ready gold.

Durkin remembered, at that moment, that he was woefully hungry. He also remembered, more gratefully, that the young Chicagoan, the lonely and loquacious youth he had met the day before in the *café* of the "*Terrasse*," had asked him to take dinner with him, to view the splendor of "*Ciro's*" and a keeper of the *vestiaire* in scarlet breeches and silk stockings. Afterwards they were to go to the little bon-bon play-house up by the more pretentious bon-bon Casino. He was to watch the antics of a band of actors toying with some mimic fate, flippantly, to the sound of music, when his own destiny swung trembling on the last silken thread of tortured suspense! Yet it was better than moping alone, he told himself. He hated loneliness. And until the last few weeks he had scarcely known the meaning of the word! There had always been that other hand for which to reach, that other shoulder on which to lean! And suddenly, at the sting

THE END OF THE TETHER

of the memories that surged over him, he went to the window that opened on its world of sea and sunlight, and looked out. His hands clutched the sill, and his unhappy eyes were intent and inquiring, as they swept the world before him in a slow and comprehensive gaze.

"Wherever you wait, wherever you are, in all this wide world, Frank, come here, to me, now, now, for I want you, need you!"

His lips scarcely murmured the vague invocation; it was more an inarticulate wish phrasing itself somewhere in the background of his clouded brain.

But as he awoke to the tumult of his emotions, to the intensity of his attitude, whilst he stood there projecting that vague call out into space, he turned abruptly away, with the abashment of a reticent man detected in an act of theatricality, and flung out of the room, down into the crowded streets of Monte Carlo.

CHAPTER II

THE AZURE COAST

As Durkin and the young Chicagoan once more stepped out of the brilliantly lighted theatre, into the balmy night air, a seductive mingling of perfumes and music and murmuring voices blew in their hot faces, like a cooling wave. Durkin was wondering, a little wearily, just when he could be alone again.

A group of gay and laughing women, with their aphrodisiac rustle of silk and flutter of lace, floated carelessly past.

"Who are *they?*" asked the youth.

Durkin half-envied him his illusions and his ingenuousness of outlook; he was treading a veritable amphitheatre of orderly disordered passions with the gentle objective stare of a child looking for bright-colored flowers on a battleground. Durkin wondered if, after all, it was not the result of his mere quest of color, of his studying art in Paris for a year or two.

"I wonder who and what they are?" impersonally reiterated the younger man, as his gaze still followed the passing group to where it drifted and

THE AZURE COAST

scattered through the lamp-strewn garden, like a cluster of golden butterflies.

"Those are the slaves who sand the arena!" retorted Durkin, studying the softly waving palms, and leaving the other a little in doubt as to the meaning of his figure.

The younger man sighed; he was beginning to feel, doubtless, from what different standpoints they looked out on life.

"Oh, well, you can say what you like, but this is the centre of the world, to *my* way of thinking!"

"The centre of — putrescence!" ejaculated Durkin. The younger man began to laugh, with conciliatory good-nature, as he glanced appreciatively back at the sweetmeat stateliness of the Casino front. But into the older man's mind crept the impression that they were merely passing, in going from crowded theatre to open garden and street, from one playhouse to another. It all seemed to him, indeed, nothing more than a transition of theatricalities. For that outer play-world which lay along Monaco's three short miles of marble stairway and villa and hillside garden appeared to him, in his mood of settled dejection, as artificial and unnatural and unrelated as the life which he had just seen pictured across the footlights of the over-pretty and meringue-like little theatre.

"Well, Monte Carlo's good enough for me, all right, all right!" persisted the young Chicagoan,

PHANTOM WIRES

as they made their way down the lamp-hung Promenade. And he laughed with a sort of luxurious contentment, holding out his cigarette-case as he did so.

The older man, catching a light from the proffered match, said nothing in reply. Something in the other's betrayingly boyish laugh grated on his nerves, though he paused, punctiliously, beside his chance-found companion, while together they gazed down at the twinkling lights of the bay, where the soft and violet Mediterranean lay under a soft and violet sky, and the boatlamps were languidly swaying dots of white and red, and the Promontory stood outlined in electric globes, like a woman's breast threaded with pearls, the young art-student expressed it, and the perennial, ever-cloying perfumes floated up from square and thicket and garden.

There was an eternal menace about it, Durkin concluded. There was something subversive and undermining and unnerving in its very atmosphere. It gave him the impression of being always under glass. It made him ache for the sting and bite of a New England north-easter. It screened and shut off the actualities and perpetuities of life as completely as the drop and wings of a playhouse might. Its sense of casual and careless calm, too, seemed to him only the rest of a spinning top. Its unrelated continuities of appeal, its incessant co-

THE AZURE COAST

quetries of attire, its panoramic beauty of mountain and cape and sea-front, its parade of corporeal and egotistic pleasures, its primordial and undisguised appeal to the carnival spirit, its frank, exotic festivity, its volatile and almost too vital atmosphere, and, above all, its glowing and over-odorous gardens and flowerbeds, its overcrowded and grimly Dionysian Promenade, its murmurous and alluring restaurants on steep little boulevards — it was all a blind, Durkin argued with himself, to drape and smother the cynical misery of the place. Underneath all its flaunting and waving softnesses life ran grim and hard — as grim and hard as the solid rock that lay so close beneath its jonquils and violets and its masking verdure of mimosa and orange and palm.

He hated it, he told himself in his tragic and newborn austerity of spirit, as any right-minded and clean-living man should hate paper roses or painted faces. Every foot of it, that night, seemed a muffled and mediate insult to intelligence. The too open and illicit invitation of its confectionery-like halls, the insipidly emphatic pretentiousness of the Casino itself — Durkin could never quite decide whether it reminded him of a hurriedly finished exposition building or of a child's birthday cake duly iced and bedecked — the tinsel glory, the hackneyed magnificence, of its legitimized and ever-orderly gaming dens, the eternal claws of greed beneath

PHANTOM WIRES

the voluptuous velvet of indolence — it all combined to fill his soul with a sense of hot revolt, as had so often before happened during the past long and lonely days, when he had looked up at the soft green of olive and eucalyptus and then down at the intense turquoise curve of the harbor fringed with white foam.

Always, at such times, he had marveled that man could turn one of earth's most beautiful gardens into one of crime's most crowded haunts. The ironic injustice of it embittered him; it left him floundering in a sea of moral indecision at a time when he most needed some forlorn belief in the beneficence of natural law. It outraged his incongruously persistent demand for fair play, just as the sight of the jauntily clad gunners shooting down pigeons on that tranquil and Edenic little grass-plot at the foot of the Promontory had done.

For underneath all the natural beauty of Monaco Durkin had been continuously haunted by the sense of something unclean and leprous and corroding. Under its rouge and roses, at every turn, he found the insidious taint.

And more than ever, tonight, he had a sense of witnessing Destiny stalking through those soft gardens, of Tragedy skulking about its regal stairways.

For it was there, in the midst of those unassisting and enervating surroundings, he dimly felt, that

THE AZURE COAST

he himself was to choose one of two strangely divergent paths. Yet he knew, in a way, that his decision had already been forced upon him, that the dice had been cast and counted. He had been trying to sweep back the rising sea with a broom; he had been trying to fight down that tangled and tortuous past which still claimed him as its own. And now all that remained for him was to slip quietly and unprotestingly into the current which clawed and gnawed at his feet. He had been tried too long; the test, from the first, had been too crucial. He might, in time, even find some solacing thought in the fitness between the act and its environment — here he could fling himself into an obliterating Niagara, not of falling waters, but of falling men and women. Yes, it was a stage all prepared and set for the mean and sordid and ever recurring tragedy of which he was to be the puppet. For close about him seethed and boiled, as in no other place in the world, all the darker and more despicable passions of humanity. He inwardly recalled the types with which his stage was embellished; the fellow puppets of that gilded and arrogant and idle world, the curled and perfumed princes, the waxed and watching *boulevardiers* side by side with virginal and unconscious American girls, pallid and impoverished grand dukes in the wake of painted but wary Parisians, stiff-mustached and mysterious Austrian counts lowering at

PHANTOM WIRES

doughty and indignant Englishwomen; bejeweled beys and pashas brushing elbows with unperturbed New England school-teachers astray from Cook's; monocled thieves and gamblers and princelings, jaded tourists and skulking parasites — and always the disillusioned and waiting women.

“That play got on your nerves, didn't it?” suddenly asked the lazy, half-careless voice at his side. Durkin and the young Chicagoan were in the musky-smelling Promenade by this time, and up past the stands at the sea-front the breath of the Mediterranean blew in their faces, fresh, salty, virile.

“This whole place gets on my nerves!” said Durkin testily. Yes, he told himself, he was sick of it, sick of the monotony, of the idleness, of the sullen malevolence of it all. It was gay only to the eyes; and to him it would never seem gay again.

“Oh, that comes of not speaking the language, you know!” maintained the other stoutly, and, at the same time, comprehensively.

He was still very young, Durkin remembered. He had toyed with art for two winters in Paris, so scene by scene he had been able to translate the little drama that had appeared so farcical and Frenchy to his older countryman in exile.

Durkin's lip curled a little.

“No — it comes of knowing *life!*” he answered, with a touch of impatience. He felt the gulf that

THE AZURE COAST

separated their two oddly diverse lives — the one the youth eager to dip into experience, the other a fugitive from a many-sided past that still shadowed and menaced him. He listened with only half an ear as the Chicagoan expounded some glib and ancient principle about the fairy tale being even truer than truth itself.

“Why,” he continued argumentatively, “everything that happened in that play might happen here, tonight, to you or me!”

“Rubbish!” ejaculated Durkin, brusquely, remembering how lonely he must indeed have been thus to attach himself to this youth of the studios. But he added, as a matter of form: “You think, then, that life today *is* as romantic as it once was?”

“*Mon Dieu!*” cried the other. “Look at Monte Carlo here! Of course it is. It’s more crowded, more rapid; it holds *more* romance. We didn’t put it all off, you know, with doublet and hose!”

“No, of course not,” answered Durkin absently. Life, at that moment, was confronting him so grimly, so flat and sterile and uncompromising in its secret exactions, that he had no heart to theorize about it.

“And a thing isn’t romantic just because it’s moss-grown!” continued the child of the studios, warming to his subject. “It’s romantic when we’ve emotionalized it, when we’ve *felt* it, when it’s hit home with us, as it were!”

PHANTOM WIRES

"If it doesn't hit too hard!" qualified the older man.

"For instance," maintained the young Chicagoan, once more proffering his cigarette-case to Durkin, "for instance, take that big Mercedes touring-car with the canopy top, coming down through the crowd there. You'll agree, at first sight, that such things mean good-bye to the mounted knight, to chivalry, and all that romantic old horseman business."

"I suppose so."

"But, don't you see, the horse and armor was only a frame, an accidental setting, for the romance itself! It's up to date and practical and sordid and commonplace, you'd say, that puffing thing with a gasoline engine hidden away in its bowels. It's what we call machinery. But, supposing, now, instead of holding Monsieur le Duc Somebody, or Milord So-and-So, or Signor Comte Somebody-Else, with his wife or his mistress — I say, supposing it held — well, my young sister Alice, whom I left so sedately contented at Brighton! Supposing it held my young sister, running away with an Indian rajah!"

"And you would call that romance?"

"Exactly!"

Durkin turned and looked at the approaching car.

"While, as a matter of fact," he continued, with

THE AZURE COAST

his exasperatingly smooth smile, "it seems to be holding a very much overdressed young lady, presumably from the Folies-Bergère or the Olympia."

The younger man, looking back from his place beside him, turned to listen, confronted by the sudden excited comments of a middle-aged woman, obviously Parisian, on the arm of a lean and solemn man with dyed and waxed mustachios.

"You're quite wrong," cried the young Chicagoan, excitedly. "It's young Lady Boxspur — the new English beauty. See, they're crowding out to get a glimpse of her!"

"Who's Lady Boxspur?" asked Durkin, hanging stolidly back. He had seen quite enough of Riviera beauty on parade.

"She's simply ripping. I got a glimpse of her this afternoon in front of the *Terrasse*, after she'd first motored over from Nice with old Szapary!" He lowered his voice, more confidentially. "This Frenchman here has just been telling his wife that she's the loveliest woman on the Riviera today. Come on!"

Durkin stood indifferently, under the white glare of the electric lamp, watching the younger man push through to the centre of the roadway. The slowly-moving touring-car, hemmed in by the languid midnight movement of the street, came to a full stop almost before where he stood. It shuddered and panted there, leviathan-like, and Durkin

PHANTOM WIRES

saw the sea breeze sway back the canopy drapery.

He followed the direction of the excited young Chicagoan's gaze, smilingly, now, and with a singularly disengaged mind.

He saw the woman's clear profile outlined against the floating purple curtain, the quiet and shadowy eyes of violet, the glint of the chestnut hair that showed through the back-thrust folds of the white silk automobile veil swathing the small head, and the nervous, bird-like movement of the head itself.

He did not move; there was no involuntary, galvanic reaction; no sudden gasp and flame of wonder. He simply held his cigarette still poised in his fingers, half-way to his lips, with the minutest relaxing of the smile that still hovered about them, while a dull and ashen grayness crept into his face, second by waiting second.

It was not until his eyes met hers that he took three wavering and undecided steps toward her.

With a silent movement—more of warning than of fright, he afterward told himself—she pressed her gloved fingers to her lips. What her intent eyes meant to say to him, in that wordless, telepathic message, Durkin could not guess; all thought was beyond him. But in a moment or two the roadway cleared, the car shook and plunged forward, the floating curtains fluttered and trailed behind.

THE AZURE COAST

Durkin turned blindly, and pushed and ran and dodged through the languidly amazed promenaders, following after that sudden and bewildering vision, as after his last hope in life. But the fine, white, limestone Riviera dust from the fading car's tire-heels, and the burnt gases from its engines, were all the road held for him, as it undulated off into hillside quietnesses.

He heard the young Chicagoan calling after him, breathless and anxious. But he ran on until he came to a side street, shadowed with garden walls and villas and greenery. Slipping into this, he immured himself in the midnight silences, to be alone with the contending forces that tore at him.

If his companion was right, and such things as this made up Romance, then, after all, the drama of life had lost none of its bewilderment. For the woman he had seen between the floating purple curtains was his own wife.

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOWING PAST

Durkin's first tangible feeling was a passion to lose and submerge himself in the muffling midnight silences, the silences of those outwardly quiet gardens at heart so old in sin and pain.

He felt the necessity for some sudden and sweeping readjustment, and his cry for solitude was like that of the child wounded in spirit, or that of the wild animal sorely hurt in body. Before he could face life again, he felt, he had to build up about him the sustaining fabric of some new and factitious faith.

But as intelligence slowly emerged from the mist and chaos of utter bewilderment, as reason crept haltingly back to her seat, his first blind and indeterminate rage fell away from him. His first black and blinding clouds of suspicion slowly subsided before practical and orderly question and cross-question. Thought adjusted itself to its new environment. Painfully, yet cautiously, he directed his ceaseless artillery of interrogation toward the outer and darker walls of uncertainty still so blankly confronting him.

THE SHADOWING PAST

It was not that he had been consumed by any direct sense of loss, of deprivation. It was not that he had feared open and immediate treachery. If a rage had burned through him, at the sudden and startling sight of his own wife thus secretly masquerading in an unknown rôle, it was far from being a rage or mere jealousy and distrust.

They had, in other days, each passed through questionable and perilous experiences. Both together and alone they had adventured unwillingly along many of the more dubious channels of life. They had surrendered to temptation; they had sown and reaped and suffered, and become weary of it. They had struggled slowly yet stoically up towards respectability; they had fought for fair-dealing; they had entered a compact to stand by each other through that long and bitter effort to be tardily honest and autumnally aboveboard.

What now so disturbed and disheartened him was the sudden sense of something impending, the vague apprehension of some momentous and far-reaching intrigue which he could not even foreshadow. And it was framing itself into being at a time when he had most prayed for their untrammelled freedom, when he had most looked for their ultimate emancipation from the claws of that too usurious past.

But, above all, what had brought about the sudden change? Why had no inkling of it crept to his

PHANTOM WIRES

ears? Why was she, the passionate pleader for the decencies of life whom he had last watched so patiently and heroically imparting the mastery of the pianoforte to seven little English children in a squalid Paris *pension*, now lapsing back into the old and fiercely abjured avenue of irresponsibility? Why had she weakened and surrendered, when he himself, the oldtime weakling of the two, had clung so desperately to the narrow path of rectitude? And what was the meaning and the direction of it all? 'And what would it lead to? But why, above all, had she kept silent, and given him no warning?

Durkin looked up and listened to the soft rustling of the palm branches. The bray of a distant band saddened him with an unfathomable sense of homesickness. Through an air that seemed heavy with languid tropicality, and the waiting richness of life, he caught the belated glimmer of lights and the throb and murmur of string music. It carried in to him what seemed the essential and alluring note of all the existence he had once known and lived. Yet day by day he had fought back that siren call. It had not always been an open victory—the weight of all the past lay too heavily upon him for that—but for *her* sake he had at least vacillated and hesitated and temporized, waiting and looking for that final strength which would come with her first wistful note of warning, or with her belated return to his side.

THE SHADOWING PAST

Yet here was Opportunity lying close and thick about him; here Chance had laid the board for its most tempting game. In that way, as the young Chicagoan had said, they stood in the centre of the world. But he had turned away from those clustering temptations, he had left unbroken his veneer of honorable life, for her sake — while she herself had surrendered, unmistakably, irrevocably, whatever strange form the surrender might even at that moment be taking.

All he could do, now, was to wait until morning. There would surely be some message, some hint, some key to the mystery. While everything remained so maddeningly enigmatic, he raked through the tangled past in search of some casual seed of explanation for that still undeciphered present.

He recalled, period by period, and scene by scene, his kaleidoscopic past career, his first fatal blunder as a Grand Trunk telegraph operator, when one slip of the wrist brought a gravel train head-on into an Odd Fellows' Excursion special, his summary dismissal from the railroad, and his unhappy flight to New York, his passionate struggle to work his way up once more, his hunger for money and even a few weeks of leisure, that his long dreamed of photo-telegraphy apparatus might be perfected and duly patented, his consequent fall from grace in the Postal-Union offices, through holding up a trivial racing-return or two until he and his outside con-

PHANTOM WIRES

federate had been able to make their illicit wagers, then his official ostracism, and his wandering street-cat life, when, at last, the humbling and compelling pinch of poverty had turned him to "overhead guerrilla" work and the dangers and vicissitudes of a poolroom key-operator. He recalled his chance meeting with MacNutt, the wire-tapper, and their partnership of privateer forces in that strange campaign against Penfield, the alert and opulent poolroom king, who had seemed always able to defy the efforts and offices of a combative and equally alert district-attorney.

Most vividly and minutely of all, he reviewed his first meeting with Frances Candler, and the bewilderment that had filled him when he discovered her to be an intimate and yet a reluctant associate with MacNutt in his work — a bewilderment which lasted until he himself grew to realize how easy was the downward trend when once the first false step had been made.

He brought back to mind their strange adventures and perils and escapes together, day by day and week by week, their early interest that had ripened into affection, their innate hatred of that underground life, which eventually flowered into open revolt and flight, their impetuous marriage, their precipitate journey from the shores of America.

Then came to him what seemed the bitterest memories of all. It was the thought of that first

THE SHADOWING PAST

too fragile happiness which slowly but implacably merged into discontent, still hidden and tacit, but none the less evident. That interregnum of peace had been a Tantalus-like taste of a draught which he all along knew was to be denied him. Yet, point by point, he recalled their first quiet and hopeful weeks in England, when their old ways of life seemed as far away as the America they had left behind, when they still had unbounded faith in themselves and in the future. Just how or where fell the first corroding touch he could never tell. But in each of them there had grown up a secret unrest—it was, he knew, the hounds of habit whimpering from their kennels. “No one was ever reformed,” he had once confided to Frances, “by simply being turned out to grass!” So it was then that they had tried to drug their first rising doubts with the tumult of incessant travel and change. His wife had lured him to secluded places, she had struggled to interest him in a language or two, she had planned quixotic courses of reading—as though a man such as he might be remolded by a few months of modern authors!—and carried him off to centres of gaiety—as though the beat of Hungarian bands and outlandish dances could drive that inmost fever out of his blood!

He endured Aix-les-Bains and its rheumatics, with their bridge-whist and late dinners and incongruous dissipations, for a fortnight. Then they

PHANTOM WIRES

fled to the huddled little hotels and *pensions* of the narrow and dark wooded valley of Karlsbad, under skies which Frank declared to be bluer than the blue of forget-me-nots, where, amid Brahmins from India and royalty from Austria and audacious young duchesses from Paris and students from Petersburg and Berlin, and undecipherable strangers from all the remotest corners of the globe, it seemed to Durkin they were at last alone. He confided this feeling to his wife, one tranquil morning after they had drunk their Sprudel from long-handled cups, at the spring where the comely, rubber-garmented native girls caught and doled out the biting hot spray of the geyser. They were seated at the remoter end of the glass-covered Promenade, and a band was playing. Something in the music, for once, had saddened and dispirited Frank.

"Alone?" she had retorted. "Who is ever alone?"

"Well, our wires are down, for a little while, anyway!" laughed Durkin, as he sipped the hot salt water from the china cup. It reminded him, he had said, of all his past sins in epitome. Frank sighed wearily, and did not speak for a minute or two.

"But, after all," she said at last, in a meditative calmness of voice, "there are always some sort of ghostly wires connecting us with one another, holding us in touch with what we have been and done,

THE SHADOWING PAST

with our past, and with our ancestors, with all our forsaken sins and misdoings. No, Jim, I don't believe we are *ever* alone. There are always sounds and hints, little broken messages and whispers, creeping in to us along those hidden circuits. We call them Intuitions, and sometimes we speak of them as Character, and sometimes as Heredity, and weakness of will—but they are there, just the same!"

The confession of that mood was a costly one, for before the week was out they had, in some way, wearied of the sight of that daily procession of nephritics and neurotics, and were off again, like a pair of homeless swallows, to the Rhine salmon and the Black Forest venison of Baden. From there they fled to the mountain air of St. Moritz, where they were frozen out and driven back to Paris—but always spending freely and thinking little of the vague tomorrow. Durkin, indeed, recognized that taint of improvidence in his veins. He was a spendthrift; he had none of the temperamental foresight and frugality of his wife, who reminded him, from time to time, and with ever-increasing anxiety, of their ever-melting letter of credit. But, on the other hand, she stood ready to sacrifice everything, in order to build some new wall of interest about him, that she might immure him from his past. She still planned and schemed to shield him, not so much from the world, as from himself. Yet

PHANTOM WIRES

he had seen, almost from the first, that their pursuit of contentment was born of their common and ever-increasing terror of the future. Each left unuttered the actual emptiness and desolation of life, yet each nursed the bitter sting of it. Day by day he had put on a bold face, because he had long since learned how poignantly miserable his own misery could make her. And, above all things, he hated to see her unhappy.

CHAPTER IV

THE WIDENING ROAD

Under the softly-waving palms of that midnight garden, Durkin relived their feverish past, month by remembered month, until they found the need of money staring them in the face. He reviewed each increasing dilemma, until, eventually, he had left her in her squalid Paris *pension* with her music pupils and the last eighty francs, while he clutched at the passing straw of an exporting house clerkship in Marseilles. The exporting house, which was under American guidance, had flickered and gone out ignominiously, and week by desperate week each new promise of honest work seemed to wither into a chimera at his feverish touch. He had been told of a demand for electrical experts at Tangier, and had promptly worked his passage to that outlandish sea-port on a Belgian coasting-steamer, only to find a week's employment installing a burglar-alarm system in the ware-house of a Liverpool shipping company. In Gibraltar, a week or two longer, he had been able to supply his immediate wants through assisting in the reconstruction of a moving-picture machine, untimely wrecked

PHANTOM WIRES

on the outskirts of Fez by Moorish fanatics who had believed it to be the invention of the Evil One.

It was at Gibraltar, too, that his first mocking hopes for some renewal of life had come to him, along with the vague hint that his transmitting camera had at last been recognized, and perhaps even marketed. But escape from that little seaport had been as difficult as escape from gaol. He had finally effected a hazardous and ever-memorable migration from Algeciras to Cimiez, but only by acting as chauffeur for a help-abandoned, gout-ridden, and irritable-minded ex-ambassador to Persia, together with a scrupulously inattentive trained nurse, who, apparently, preferred diamonds to a uniform, and smuggled incredible quantities of hand-made lace under the tonneau seat-cushions. And then he had found himself at Monte Carlo, still waiting for word from Paris, fighting against a grim new temptation which, vampire-like, had grown stronger and stronger as its victim daily had grown weaker and weaker.

For along the sea-front, one indolent and golden afternoon, he had learned that an American yacht in the harbor was sending ashore for a practical electrician, since a defective generator had left its cabins of glimmering white and gold in sudden darkness. Durkin, after a brief talk with the second officer, had been taken aboard the tender and hurried out to where the lightless steamer rocked

THE WIDENING ROAD

and swung at her anchor chain in the intense turquoise bay. He had hoped, at first, that he was approaching his ship of deliverance, that luck was favoring the luckless and at last the means of his escape were at hand. So he asked, with outward unconcern, just what the yacht's course was. They were bound for Messina, the second officer had replied, and from there they went on to Corfu for a couple of weeks, and then on to Ragusa.

He went on board and looked over the armature core. It was of the slotted drum type, he at once perceived, built up of laminations of soft steel painted to break up eddy currents, and as he tested the soft amber mica insulation about the commutators of hard-rolled copper, he knew that the defective generator could be repaired in three-quarters of an hour. But certain scraps of talk that came to his ears amid the clink of glasses, from one of the shadowy saloons, had stung into vague activity his old, irrepressible hunger for the companionship of his own kind, his own race.

It was uncommonly pleasant, he had told himself as he had caught the first drone of the lowered, confidential voices, to hear the old home talk, and even broken snatches of old home interests. As he explored the ship and minutely examined automatic circuit-breaker and switchboard and fuse, he even made it a point to see that his explorations took him into the pantry-like cabin next to the saloon from

PHANTOM WIRES

which these droning voices drifted. As he gave apparently studious and unbroken attention to a stretch of defective wiring, he was in fact making casual mental note of the familiar tones of the distant voices, listening impersonally and dreamily to each question and answer and suggestion that passed between that quietly talking group. One of the talkers, he soon found, was a Supreme Court judge on his vacation, equable and deliberative in his occasional query or view or criticism; another was apparently a secret agent from the office of the New York district-attorney, still another two were either Scotland Yard men or members of some continental detective bureau — this Durkin assumed from their broad-voweled English voices and their seemingly intimate knowledge of European criminal procedure. The fifth man he could in no way place. But it was this man who interrupted the others, and, apparently taking a slip of paper from some inside pocket or some well-closed wallet, read aloud a list which, he first explained, had been secured from some undesignated safe on the night of a certain raid.

“Three hundred and twenty shares of National Bank of Commerce,” read the voice methodically, the reader checking off each item, obviously, as he went along. “One certificate of forty-seven shares of United States Steel Preferred; two certificates of one hundred shares each of Erie Railroad First

THE WIDENING ROAD

Preferred; eighteen personal cheques, with names and amounts and banks attached; seven I. O. U.'s, with amounts and dates and initials."

"Probably worthless, from our point of view!" interposed a voice.

The dreaminess suddenly went out of Durkin's eyes, as he listened.

"Postal-Union Telegraph bonds, valued at \$102,345," went on the reading voice, and again the interrupting critic remarked: "Which, you see, we may regard as very significant, since it both obviously and inferably demonstrates that the telegraph company and the poolrooms are compelled to stand together!"

Durkin followed the list, with inclined head and uplifted hands, forgetting even his simulation of work, until the end was reached.

"In all, you see, one quarter of a million dollars in negotiable securities, if we are to rely on this memorandum, which, as I stated before, ought to be authentic, for it was taken from the Penfield safe the night of the first raid."

Durkin started, as though the circuit with which his fingers absently toyed had suddenly become a live wire.

"Penfield!" The word sent a little thrill through his body. Penfield—the very name was a challenging trumpet to him. But again he bent and listened to the drone of the nearby voices.

PHANTOM WIRES

"And Keenan, you say, is in Genoa?" asked one of the Englishmen.

"If he's not there now he will be during the week," answered the American.

"You're sure of that?"

"All I know is that our Milan man secured duplicates of his cables. Three of them were in cipher, but he was able to make reasonably sure of the Genoa trip!"

"It would be rather hard to get at him, *there!*"

"But if he strikes north, as you say, and goes first to Liverpool, and gets home by the back door, as it were, by taking a steamer to Quebec or Montreal——"

"That's a mere blind!"

"But why say that?"

"Because he's too wise to strike British territory, before he unloads. It's not a mere matter of stopping the transfer of this stock, or whether or not all of it is negotiable. What we want is tangible and incriminating evidence. The signatures of those cheques are——"

That was the last word that came to Durkin's ears, for at that moment a steward, with a tray of glasses, hurried into the pantry. His suspicious eye saw nothing beyond a busy electrician replacing a switchboard. But before the intruding steward had departed the second officer was at Durkin's elbow, overlooking his labors, and

THE WIDENING ROAD

no further word or hint came to the ears of the listener.

But he had heard enough. The flame had been applied to the dry acreage of his too arid and idle existence. He had remained passive too long. It was change that brought chance. And even though that change meant descent, it would, after all, be only the momentary dip that preceded the upward flight again. And as he gazed thoughtfully landward, where Monte Carlo lay vivid and glowing under the sheltering Alpes-Maritimes, like a golden lizard sunning itself on a shelf of gray rock, he felt within him a more kindly and comprehensive feeling for that flower-strewn arena of vast hazards. It was, after all, the great chances of life that made existence endurable. Its only anodyne lay in effort and feverish struggle. And his chance for work had come!

Half an hour later he was rowed ashore, with a good Havana cigar between his teeth and three good English sovereigns in his pocket. As he made his way up to his hotel he could feel some inner part of him still struggling and shrinking back from the enticing avenue of activity which his new knowledge was opening up before him.

He smiled, now, a little grimly, as he sat under the rustling palms and thought of those old, unnecessary scruples. He had been holding himself to a compact which no longer existed. And, all

PHANTOM WIRES

along, he had been regarding himself as the weakling, the vacillator, when it was he who had held out the longest! He had even, in those earlier hesitating moments, consolingly recalled to his mind how Monsieur Blanc's modestly denominated Société Anonyme des Bains de Mer et Cercle des Étrangers made it a point to proffer a railway ticket to any impending wreck, such as himself, who might drift like a stain across its roads of merriment, or leave a telltale blot upon one of its perennially beautiful and ever-odorous flower-beds. But now, as he reviewed those past weeks of hesitation and inward struggle, a sense of relapse crept over him. As he recalled the picture of the clear-cut profile between the floating purple curtains, a vague indifference as to the final outcome of things took possession of him.

He almost exulted in the meaning of the strange meeting, which, one hour before, had seemed to bring the universe crashing down about his head. Then, as his plans and thoughts took more definite shape, his earlier recklessness merged into an almost pleasurable sense of relief and release, of freedom after confinement. He felt incongruously grateful for the lash that had awakened him to even illicit activity; life, under the passion for accomplishment, under the zest for risk and responsibility, seemed to take on its older and deeper meaning once more. It was, he told himself, as if the

THE WIDENING ROAD

foreign tongue which he had so wearily heard on every side of him, for so long, had suddenly translated itself into intelligibility, or as if the text beneath the pictures in those ubiquitous illustrated papers from Paris, which he had studied so blankly and so blindly, had suddenly become as plain as his own English to him.

But his moment of exaltation, his mood of careless emancipation, was a brief one. He was no longer alone in life. His bitterness of heart had blinded him to obligations. He had not yet fathomed the mystery of Frank's appearance. He had not yet even made sure of her relapse. Above all, he had not put forth a hand to help her in what might be an inexplicable extremity. The morning could still bring some word from her. He himself would spend the day in search of her. He would have to proceed guardedly, but he would leave no stone unturned. It was not, he told himself, that he was giving fate one last chance to treat more kindly with him. It was, rather, that all his natural being wanted and reached out for this woman who had first taught him the meaning and purpose of life. . . . His mind went back, suddenly, to one afternoon, months before, at Abbazia, when they had come up from sea-bathing in the Adriatic. He had leaned down over her, to help her up the Angiolina bath steps, wet and slippery with seawater. The mingled gold and chestnut of her thick

PHANTOM WIRES

hair was dank and sodden with brine, the wistful face that she turned up to him was pinched and colorless and blue about the lips. She seemed, of a sudden, as she leaned heavily on his arm, a presaging apparition out of the dim future, an adumbration of her own body grown frail and old, looking up to him for help, calling forlornly to him for solace. And in that impressionable moment his heart had gone out to her, in a burst of pity that seemed deeper and stronger than love itself.

tfootful
and
of a
sag-
bra-
cing
sol-
eart
med

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Durkin waited until, muffled and far away, the throb and drone of an orchestra floated up to him. This was followed, scatteringly, by the bells of the different *tables d'hôte*. They, too, sounded thin and remote, drifting up through the soft, warm air that had always seemed so exotic to him, so redolent of foreign-odored flowers, so burdened with alien-smelling tobacco smoke, of unfamiliar sea scents incongruously shot through with even the fumes of an unknown and indescribable cookery.

While that genial shrill and tinkle of many bells meant refreshment and most gregarious frivolity for the chattering, loitering, laughing and ever-spectacular groups so far below him — and how he hated their outlandish gibberish and their arrogant European aloofness! — it meant for him hard work, and hard work of a somewhat perilous and stimulating nature.

For, as the last of the demurely noisy groups made their way through the deepening twilight to the different hotels and cafés that already spangled the hillsides with scattering clusters of light, Dur-

PHANTOM WIRES

kin coolly removed his shoes, twisted and knotted his two bath towels into a stout rope, securely tied back his heavy French window-shutter of wood with one of his sheets, and having attached his improvised rope to the base of the shutters, swung himself deftly out. On the return swing he caught the cast-iron water-pipe that scaled the wall from window tier to window tier. Down this jointed pipe he went, gorilla-like, segment by segment, until he reached what he knew to be the hotel's third floor. Here he rested for a moment or two against the wall, feeling inwardly grateful that a Mediterranean climate still made possible Monaco's primitive outside plumbing—to the initiated, he inwardly remarked, such things had always their unlooked-for advantages. He also felt both relieved and grateful to see that the two windows between him and his destination had been left shuttered against the heat of the afternoon sun. The third window he could see, was not thus barricaded, although, as he had expected, the sash itself was securely locked.

Once convinced of this, he dropped down, stealthily, and lay full length on the balcony flooring, with his ear close against the casement woodwork, listening. Reasonably satisfied, he rose to his knees, and took from his vest pocket a small diamond ring. Holding this firmly between his thumb and forefinger, he described a semi-circle on the heavy window-glass. He listened again, intently. Then he

THE GREAT DIVIDE

took a small cold-chisel from still another pocket, and having cut away the putty at the base of the semicircle, smote the face of the glass one sharp little tap.

It cracked neatly, along the line of the circling diamond-scratch, so that, with the help of a suction cap made from the back of a kid glove, he was able to draw out the loosened segment of glass. Then he waited and listened still again. As he thrust in through the little opening a cautiously exploring hand the casual act seemed to take on the dignity of a long-considered ritual. It was a ceremonial moment to him, he felt, for it marked his transit, across some narrow moral divide, from lonely ascent to lonely decline.

The impression stayed with him only a second. He turned back to his work, with a reckless little up-thrust of each resolute shoulder. His searching fingers found the old-fashioned window lever, of hammered brass, and on this he pressed down and back, quietly. A moment later the sash swung slowly out, and he was inside the room, closing the shutters and then the window after him.

He stood there, in the dark quietness, for what must have been a full minute. Then he took from his pocket a box of wax matches. He had purchased them for the purpose, from the frugal old woman who month by month and season by season carried on her quiet trade at the foot of the Casino

PHANTOM WIRES

steps, catching, as it were, the tiny drippings from the flaring tapers in that Temple of Gold. And day after day, one turn of the roulette wheel took and gave more money than all her years of frugal trade might amass!

Taking one of the vestas, he struck a light, and holding it above his head, carefully examined the room, from side to side. Then he tiptoed to a door, which stood ajar. This, he saw by a second match, was a sleeping-room; and the two rooms, obviously, made up the suite. A door, securely locked, opened from the sleeping-room into the outer hallway. The door which opened from the larger room was likewise locked, but to make assurance doubly sure Durkin slid a second inside bolt, for already his quick eye had caught the gleam of its polished brass, just below the door-knob of the ordinary mortised lock. Then, groping his way to the little switch-board, he touched a button, and the room was flooded with light. He first looked about, carefully but quickly, and then glanced at his watch. He had at least two hours in which to do his work. Any time after that Pobloff might return. And by midnight at least the Prince's valet would be back from Nice, to begin packing his master's boxes.

He slipped into the bedroom, and took from the bed a blanket and comforter. These he draped above the hall door, to muffle any chance sound. Then he turned to the northeast corner of the room,

THE GREAT DIVIDE

where stood what seemed to be a dressing cabinet, with little shelves and a plate-glass mirror above it. The lower part of it was covered by a polished rose-wood door.

One sharp twist and pry with his cold-chisel forced this flimsy outer door away from its lock. Beneath it, thus lightly masked, stood the more formidable safe door itself. Durkin drew in a sharp breath of relief as he looked at it with critical eyes. It was not quite the sort of thing he had expected. If it had been a combination lock he had intended to tear away the woodwork covering it, pad the floor with the bed mattress, and then pry it over on its face, to chisel away the cement that he knew would lie under its vulnerable sheet-iron bottom. But it was an ordinary, old-fashioned lock and key "Mennlicher," Durkin at the first glance had seen—the sort of strong box which a Third avenue cigar seller, at home, would scarcely care to keep on his premises. Yet this was the deposit vault for which hotel guests, such as Prince Ignace Slevenski Pobloff, paid ten francs a day extra.

The sound of footsteps passing down the hallway caused the intruder to draw back and listen. He turned quickly, waited, and came to a quick, new decision. Before doing so, however, he re-examined the room more critically.

This Prince Ignace Slevenski Pobloff was, obviously, a man of taste. He was also a man of

PHANTOM WIRES

means — and Durkin wondered if in that fact alone lay the reason why a certain young Belgian adventuress had followed him from Tangier to Algeciras, and from Algeciras to Gibraltar, and from Gibraltar still on to the Riviera. She had, at any rate, not followed a scentless quarry. He was not the mere curled and perfumed impostor so common to that little principality of shams. Even the garrulous young Chicagoan, from whom Durkin had secured his first Casino tickets, was able to vouch for the fact that Pobloff was a true *boyard*. He was also something or other in the imperial diplomatic service — just what it was Durkin could not at the moment remember.

But he nursed his own personal convictions as to the moral stability of this true *boyard*. He had quietly witnessed, at Algeciras, the Prince's adroit card "riffing" in the sun-parlors of The Reina Cristina, when the gouty ex-ambassador to Persia had parted company with many cumbersome dollars. Durkin's only course, in that time of adversity and humility, had been one of silence. But he had inwardly and adventurously resolved, if ever Fate should bring him and the Prince together under circumstances more untrammelled, he would not let pass a chance to balance up that ledger of princely venality. For here indeed was an adversary, Durkin very well knew, who was worthy of any man's steel.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

So the intruder, opening and closing drawers as he went, glanced quickly but appreciatively at the highly emblazoned cards lying on the little red-leather-covered writing-table, at the litter of papers bearing the red and blue and gold of the triple-crowned double eagle, at the solid gold seal, at the row of splendid and regal-looking women in silver photograph holders, above the reading-desk, and a decanter or two of cut-glass. In one of the drawers of this desk he found an ivory-handled revolver, a toy-like thirty-two caliber hammerless, of English make. Durkin glanced at it curiously, noticed that each chamber held its cartridge, turned it over in his hand, replaced it in the drawer, and after a moment's thought, took it out once more and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then his rapidly roving eye took in the sable top-coat flung carelessly across the foot of the bed, the neat little heelless Tunisian slippers beneath it, the glistening, military-looking boots, each carefully nursing its English shoe-tree, a highly embroidered smoking-cap, an ivory-handled shaving-set in its stamped morocco case, one razor for each day of the week, and the silver-mounted toilet bottles, so heavily chased.

Having, apparently, made careful mental note of the rooms, Durkin once more turned back to the switchboard, and prying loose the fluted molding that concealed the lighting-wires, he scraped away

PHANTOM WIRES

the insulating tissue and severed the thread of copper with a sweep or two of his narrow file. He felt safer, in that enforced darkness, for the work which lay before him.

The black gloom was punctuated by the occasional flare of a match, and the silence broken now and then, as he worked before the safe, by the metallic click and scrape of steel against steel, and by the muffled rasp and whine of his file against the wax-covered key which from time to time he fitted into the unyielding safe lock. As he filed and tested and refiled, with infinite care and patience, his preoccupied mind ranged vaguely along the channel of thought which the events of the last half-hour had opened up before him. He wondered why it was that Fortune should so favor those who stood the least in need of her smile. For four nights during the last seven, he knew, the Prince had won, and won heavily, both in the Casino and in the Club Privé. Yet, on the other hand, there was the little Bulgarian princess with rooms just across the corridor from his own, and the rightful possessor of the plain little diamond with which he had just cut his way into this more sumptuous chamber. For a week past now, down at the Casino, she had been losing steadily, as of course the vast and undirected majority always must lose. Even her solitaire earrings had been taken to Nice and pawned, Durkin knew. Three days before

THE GREAT DIVIDE

that, too, her maid — and who is ever anybody on the Riviera without a maid? — had been reluctantly and woefully discharged. At the Trente et Quarante table, as well, Durkin had watched the last thousand-franc note of the Princess wither away. “And this, my dear, will mean another three months with my sweet old palsied Duc de la Houspignolle,” she had laughingly yet bitterly exclaimed, in excellent English, to the impassive young Oxford man who was then dogging her heels. She was a wit, and she had a beautiful hand, even though she was no better than the rest of Monte Carlo, ruminated the safe-breaker easily, as he squinted, under the flare of a match, at the ward indentations in his wax-covered key-flange.

His thoughts went back, as he worked, to the timely yet unexpected scene at the stair-head, two hours before. There he had helped a slim young *femme de chambre* support the Princess to her room, that royal lady having done her best to drown her ill fortune in absinthe and American high-balls — which, he knew, was ever an impossible combination. She had collapsed at the head of the stairs, and as he had helped lift her he had first caught sight of the solitaire diamond on the limp and slender finger. This reactionary mood, in the face of the earlier more tragical hours of that day of wearing anxieties, was almost one of facetiousness. He seemed to revel in the memory of what, in time, he knew,

PHANTOM WIRES

would be humiliating to him. It was a puny little diamond ring, of but three or four carats' weight, he mused, and yet with it had come the actual, if not the moral, turn in the tide of all his restless activities. It marked the moment when life seemed to fall back to its older and darker areas; it was the first diminutive milestone on his new road of adventure. But he would return the ring, of that he stoutly reassured himself, for he still nursed his ironic sense of justice in the smaller things. Yes, he would return the ring, he repeated, with his ever-recurring inapposite scrupulosity, for the young Princess was a lady of fortune under an unlucky star, like himself.

Durkin smiled a little, over his wax-covered key, as he still filed and fitted and listened. Then he gave vent to an almost inaudible "Ah!" for the bit of the key made the complete circuit, at last, and the wards of the lock clicked back into place.

He swung open the heavy iron door, cautiously, listened for a moment, and then struck another match.

That Pobloff might have the bank-notes with him was a contingency; that he would carry about with him two thousand napoleons was an absurdity. And Durkin knew the money had not been deposited — to ascertain that had been part of his day's work. The Prince, of course, was a prodigal and free-handed gentleman — how much of his

THE GREAT DIVIDE

winnings had already leaked through his careless fingers it was impossible to surmise. Durkin even resented the thought of that extravagance — as though it were a personal and obvious injustice to himself. If it was all the fruit of blind chance, if it came thus unearned and accidental, why should he not have his share of it? Already Monte Carlo had taught him the mad necessity for money. But now, of all times, it was necessary for him. One-half, one-quarter, of the sum which this careless-eyed Slavic aristocrat had carried so jauntily away from the Trente et Quarante table would endow him with the means to come into his own once more. It was essential that he secure his sinews of war, even before he could continue his search for Frank, or rescue her from the dangers that beset her, if she still wished for rescue. If he regretted the underground and underhand steps through which that money could alone come into his possession, he consoled his still protesting conscience with the claim that it was, after all, only a battle of wit against disinterested wit. For, self-delusively, he was beginning once more to regard all organized society and its ways as a mere inquisitorial process which the adventurous could ignore and the keen-witted could circumvent. Warfare, such as his, must be a law unto itself!

Then he gave all his attention to the work before him, as he lifted from the safe, first a small

PHANTOM WIRES

steel despatch box, neatly initialed in gold, "I. S. P.," and then a packet of blue-tinted envelopes, held together by two rubber bands, and written on, here and there, in a language which the intruder assumed to be Russian. Next came a japanned-tin box, which proved to hold nothing but a file of quite unintelligible, Seidlitz-powder-colored papers, and then what seemed, to Durkin's exploring fingers, to be a few small morocco cases. The question flashed through his mind: What if, after all, the money he was looking for was not to be found! He struck still another match, with impatient hands. His first fever of audacity had burned itself out, and some indefinite cold reaction of disdain and disgust was setting in. Stooping low, he peered into the safe once more.

Then he gave a little sigh of relief. For there, behind a row of books that looked like small ledgers or journals, he caught sight of a stout leather bag, tied with a corded silk rope. He dropped the burned-out end of the match, and, thrusting in an arm, lifted out the bag. As he placed it on the floor the muffled click of metal smote on his ear. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, with a sense of relief. He had risked too much to go away empty-handed.

He tore at the carefully knotted cord, first with his fingers and then with his teeth. It was not so heavy as he had hoped it might be. On more

THE GREAT DIVIDE

collected second thoughts, indeed, it was woefully light. But the knot defied his efforts. He took out a second match, and was on the point of striking it.

Instead of doing so, he stood suddenly erect, and then backed noiselessly into the remotest corner of the room. For a key had been thrust into the lock of the anteroom door, and already the handle was being slowly turned back.

Durkin's breath quickened and shortened, and his hand swung back to his hip pocket. Then he waited, with his revolver in his hand.

He counted and weighed his chances, quickly, one by one, as he stood there, in the black silence. He caught the diffused glimmer of the reflected light from the outer room as the door opened and closed, sharply. But the momentary half-light did not give him a glimpse of who or what was before him, for in a second all was blackness again. His first uneasy thought was that it was a very artful move. He and that Other were alone there, in the utter darkness. Neither, now, would have the advantage. He had been a fool to leave one of the doors without its double lock, of some sort. He had once been told that it was always through the more trivial contingency that the criminal was ultimately trapped.

He strained his ears, and listened. He could hear nothing. Yet he was positive that he could

PHANTOM WIRES

feel some approaching presence. It may have been a minute vibration of flooring; it may have been through the operation of some occult sixth sense. But he was sure of that mysterious Other, coming closer and closer to him.

Suddenly something seemed to stir and move in the darkness. He crouched, with every nerve and muscle ready, and a moment later he would have relieved the tension with some sort of cry, had he not realized that it was the wooden Swiss clock above the cabinet, beginning to strike the hour.

The sound came to an end, and Durkin was assuring himself that it could now be neither Pobloff nor the valet, when a second sound sent a tingle of apprehension through his frame.

It was the blue spurt of a match that suddenly cut the blackness before him. The fool — he was striking a light!

Durkin crouched lower, and watched the flame as it grew on the darkness. The direct glare of it made him blink a little, but he swung his revolver barrel just above it, and a little to the right. He was more confident now, and quite collected. However it all turned out, it could not be much worse than starving to death, unknown and alone in some public square of Monaco.

As the tiny luminous circle flowered into wider flame the match was held higher. Durkin could see the rose-like glow between the phalanges of the

THE GREAT DIVIDE

fingers shielding the light. Then, of a sudden, a face grew out of the blackness, a white face shadowed by a plumed hat. It was a woman's face.

Durkin lowered his revolver, slowly, inch by inch.

It was his wife who stood there in the darkness, not six paces away from him.

"*You!*" he gasped involuntarily, incredibly. Sheer wonder survived his instinctive recoil. It was the bolt, striking twice in the same spot.

The two white faces looked at each other, gaped at each other, insanely. He could see her breath come and go, shortly, and the deathly pallor of her face, and the relaxed lower jaw that had fallen a little away from the drooping upper lip. But she neither moved nor spoke. The match burned to her finger-ends, and fell to the floor. Darkness enveloped them again.

"*You!*" he repeatedly vacuously. The blackness and the silence seemed to blanket and smother him, like something tangible to the touch. He took three steps toward where she still stood motionless, and in an agonized whisper cried out to her:

"My God, Frank, what is it?"

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

"Ssssh!" said the woman under her breath, as she clutched Durkin's arm.

He shook her hand off, impatiently, although the act seemed at cross-purposes with his own will.

"But you — here!" he still gasped.

"Oh, Jim!" she half-moaned, inadequately. Yet an *aura* of calmness seemed to surround her. So great was his own excitement that the words burst from him of their own will, apparently, and sounded like the utterance of a voice not his own.

"What's it mean! How'd you get here?"

He could hear her shuddering, indrawn sigh.

"What, in the name of heaven, do *you* want in here? Why don't you speak?"

There was a moment of unbroken silence. For the first time it seemed to come home to him that this woman who confronted him was his own wife, in the flesh and blood.

"What are *you* doing here?" she demanded at last.

He responded, even in his mood of hot antag-

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

onism, to some note of ever-sustained appeal about her. Even through the black gloom that blanketed and blinded him some phantasmal and sub-conscious medium, like the imaginary circuit of a multiplex telegraph system, seemed to carry to his mind some secondary message, some thought that she herself had not uttered. She, too, was suffering, but she had not shown it, for such was her way, he remembered. A wave of sympathy obliterated his resentment. He caught her in his arms, hungrily, and kissed her abandonedly. He noticed that her skin was cold and moist.

"Oh, Jim," she murmured again, weakly.

"It's so long, isn't it?"

Then she added, with a little catch of the breath, as though even that momentary embrace were a joy too costly to be countenanced, "Turn on the lights, quick!"

"I can't," he told her. "I've cut the wires."

He felt at her blindly, through the muffling blackness. She was shaking a little now, on his arm. It bewildered him to think how his hunger for her could still obliterate all consciousness of time and place.

"Why didn't you write?" she pleaded pitifully.

"I did write—a dozen times. Then I telegraphed!"

"Not a word came!" she cried.

"Then I wrote twice to London!"

PHANTOM WIRES

"And *those* never came. Oh, everything was against me!" she moaned.

"But how did you get here?" he still demanded.

She did not answer his question. Instead, she asked him: "Where did you send the Paris letters?"

"To 11 bis avenue Beaucourt."

She groaned a little, impatiently.

"That was foolish—I wrote you that I was leaving there—that I *had* to go!"

"Not a line reached me!"

He heard her little gasp of despair before she spoke.

"I was put out of there," she went on, hurriedly and evenly, yet with a *vibrata* of passion in her crowded utterance. "There wasn't a penny left—the pupils I had gave up their lessons. What they had heard or found out I don't know. Then I got a tiny room in the rue de Sèvres. I sold my last thing, then our wedding ring, even, to get it."

"And then what?"

"I still waited—I thought you would know, or find out, and that in some way or other I should still hear from you. I would have gone to the police, or advertised, but I knew it wouldn't be safe."

Once more the embittering consciousness of some

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

dark coalition of forces against them swept over him. Fate, at every step, had frustrated them.

"I advertised twice, in the Herald?"

"Where would I see the Herald?"

"But you must have known I was trying to find you — that I was doing everything possible!"

"I knew nothing," she answered, in her poignantly emotionless voice. And the thought swept through Durkin that something within her had withered and died during those last grim weeks of suffering.

"But here — how did you get here — and what's this Lady Boxspur business?" he still insisted.

"Yes, yes," she almost moaned, "if you'll only wait I'll tell you. But is it safe to stay here? Have you thought where we are?"

"Yes; it's safe, quite safe, for an hour yet."

"Why didn't you send me money, or help me?" she asked, in her dead and unhappy monotone.

"I did, eighty francs, all I had. I hadn't a penny left. I didn't know the damned language. I prowled about like a cat in a strange garret, but I tried everything, from the American consul at Nice to a *Herald* correspondent at San Remo. Then I got word of a consumptive young writer from New York, at Mentone — but he died the day I was to meet him. Then I heard of the new Marconi station up the coast, and worked at wireless for two weeks, and made twenty dollars, before

PHANTOM WIRES

they sacked me for not being able to send a message out to a Messina fruit-steamer, in Italian. Then I chanced on the job of doctoring up a generator on an American yacht down here in the bay."

"Yes, yes — I know how hard it is!"

"But listen! When I was on board at work I overheard a Supreme Court judge and a special agent from the Central Office in New York and two English detectives talking over the loss of certain securities. And those securities belong to Richard Penfield!"

He knew that she had started, at the sound of that name.

"Penfield!" she gasped. "What of him?"

"When the district-attorney's men raided Penfield's New York gambling club, one of Penfield's new men got away with all his papers. They had been withdrawn from the Fifth Avenue Safe Deposit Company, for they were mostly cheques and negotiable securities, worth about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. But beyond all their face value, they constituted *prima facie* evidence against the gambler."

"But what's all this to us, now?"

"They were smuggled to New Jersey. There the Jersey City chief of police took action, and this agent of Penfield's carried the documents across the North River and up to Stamford. From there he got back to New York again, by night, where

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

he met a second agent, who had secured passage on the *Slavonia* for Naples. The first man is MacNutt."

"MacNutt!" ejaculated the listening woman.

"Yes, MacNutt! He compromised with Penfield and swung in with him when the district-attorney started pounding at them both. The second man is a lawyer named Keenan, who was disbarred for conspiracy in the Brayton divorce case. Keenan and his papers are due at Genoa on Friday. I found some of this out on board the yacht. I thought it over—and it was the only way open for me. I couldn't stand out against it all, any longer. I thought I could make the plunge, without your ever knowing it—and perhaps get enough to keep you out of any more messes like this!"

"You had given me up?" she cried, reprovingly.

"No—no—no—I'd only given up waiting for chances to *find you*. My God, don't you suppose I knew you needed me!"

"It would have been too late!" she said, in her dead voice. "It's too late, already!"

"Then you don't care?" he demanded, almost brokenly.

"I'll never complain, or whine, again!" she answered with dreary listlessness.

"Then why *are* you in this room?"

"*I mean that I've given up myself*. I'm in it,

PHANTOM WIRES

now, as deep as you! I couldn't fight it back any longer — it *had* to come!"

"But why, and how! Why don't you explain?"

He could feel her groping away from him in the darkness.

"Wait," she whispered.

"But why should I wait?" he demanded.

"Listen! That second room door is still unlocked, and there's danger enough here, without inviting it."

He groped after her into the bedroom. He could hear the gentle scrape of the key and the muffled sound of the lock as she turned it, followed by the cautious slide of the brass bolt, lower on the door. He waited for her, standing at the foot of the bed. He could hear her sigh of weariness as she sat down on the edge of the disordered mattress. Then, remembering that he had cut the wires of only the larger room, he felt his way to the button at the head of the bed. He snapped the current open and instantly the blinding white light flooded the chamber.

"*Is* it safe here, any longer?" she asked restlessly, pausing a moment to accustom her eyes to the light, and then gazing up at him with an impersonal studiousness of stare that seemed to wall and bar her off from him. Still again he was oppressed by some sense of alienation, of looming tragedy between them. She, too, must have known

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

some shadow of that feeling, for he saw the look of troubled concern, of unspoken pity, that crept over her face; and he turned away brusquely.

She spoke his name, quietly; and his gaze coasted round to her again. She watched him with wide and hungry eyes.

Her breast heaved, at his silence, but all she said was: "Is it safe, Jim?"

"Yes, it's perfectly safe. So tell me what you have to say. It doesn't mean any greater risk. We would only have to come back again — for I've work to do in this room yet!"

The return of the light seemed to give a new cast of practicality to his thoughts.

"What sort of work?" his wife was asking him.

"Seventeen hundred napoleons in gold to find," he answered grimly.

"Oh, it's not that, not *that!*" she said, starting up. "It's the papers, the Gibraltar papers!"

"Papers?" he repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, the imperial specifications. Pobloff's a paid agent in the French secret service. They say he was the man who secured Kitchener's Afghanistan frontier plans, and in some way or other had a good deal to do with the Curzon resignation."

"Ah, I *thought* there was something behind our *boyard!*"

"A year ago last March he was arrested in Jamaica, by the British authorities, for securing secret

PHANTOM WIRES

photographs of the Port Royal fortifications. They court-martialed one of the non-commissioned officers for helping him get an admission to the fortress, but the officer shot himself, and Pobloff had the plates spirited away, so the case fell through. Now he's got duplicates of every Upper Gallery and every new fortification of the Rock at Gibraltar."

"But why waste time over these things?"

"Pobloff got them through an English officer's wife. She was weak — and worse — she lost her head over him. I can't tell you more now. But there is an order for five hundred pounds waiting for me at the British Embassy, in Rome, from the Foreign Office, if I secure those papers!"

"That's twenty-five hundred dollars?"

"Yes, almost."

"And I was on the point of crawling away with a few napoleons!" said Durkin in a whisper. He began to succumb to the intoxication of this rapidity of movement which life was once more taking on. He was speed-mad, like a motorist on a white and lonely road. Yet an ever-recurring dismay and distrust of the end kept coming to him.

"But how did you come to find all this out? What happened after the rue de Sèvres?"

"Oh, it was all easy and natural enough, if I could only put it into words. After a few days, when I was hungry and sick, I went to one of the

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

English hotels. I would have taken anything, even a servant's work, I believe."

He cursed himself to think that it was through him that she had come to such things.

"But I was lucky," she went on, hurriedly. "One afternoon I stumbled on a weeping lady's maid, on the verge of hysterics, who found enough confidence in me, in time, to tell me that her mistress had gone mad in her room and was clawing down the wallpaper and talking about killing herself. It was true enough, in a way, I soon found out, for it was an English noblewoman who had fought with her husband two weeks before in London, and had run away to Paris. What she had dipped into, and gone through, and suffered, I could only guess; but I know this: that that afternoon she had drunk half a pint of raw alcohol when the frightened maid had locked her in the bath-room. So I pushed in and took charge. First I wired to the woman's husband, Lord Boxspur, who sent me money, at once, and an order to bring her home as quietly as possible. He met us at Calais. It was a terrible ordeal for me, all through, for she tried to jump overboard, in the Channel, and was so insane, so hopelessly insane, that a week after we reached London she was committed to some sort of private asylum."

"And then?" asked Durkin.

"Then Boxspur thought that possibly I knew

PHANTOM WIRES

too much for his personal comfort. I rather think he looked on me as dangerous. He put me off and put me off, until I was glad to snatch at a position in a next-of-kin agency. But in a fortnight or two I was even more glad to leave it. Then I went back to Lord Boxspur, who this time sent me helter-skelter back to Paris, to bribe a blackmailing newspaper woman from giving the details of his wife's misfortunes to the Continental correspondent of a London weekly. But even when that was done, and I had been duly paid for my work, I was only secure for a few weeks, at the outside. All along I kept writing for you, frantically. So, when things began to get hopeless again, I went to the British Embassy. I had to lie, terribly, I'm afraid, before I could get an audience, first with an under secretary, and then with the ambassador himself. He said that he regretted he could do nothing for me, at least, officially. He looked at my clothes, and laughed a little, and said that of course, in cases of absolute destitution he sometimes felt compelled to come to the help of his fellow-countrymen. I told him that I knew the world, and was willing to undertake work of any sort. He answered that such cases were usually looked after at the consulate, and advised me to go there. But I didn't give him up, at once. I told him I was resourceful, and experienced, and might undertake even minor official tasks for him, until I had heard from my hus-

THE WOMAN SPEAKS

band. Then he hesitated a little, and asked me if I knew the Continent well, and if I was averse to traveling alone. Then he called somebody up on his telephone, and in a few minutes came out and shook his head doubtfully, and advised me to apply at the consulate. Instead of that, I went not to the English, but to the American consul first. He told me that in five weeks a sea-captain friend of his was sailing from Havre to New York, and that it might not be impossible to have me carried along."

"That's what they always say!"

"It was the best he could do. Then I went to the British consul. He spoke about references, which left me blank; and tried to pump me, which left me frightened. But he could do nothing, he told me, except in the way of a personal donation, and that, he assumed, was out of the question. So I went back to the Embassy once more. I don't know why, but this time, for some reason or other, the ambassador believed in me. He gave me a week's trial as a sort of second deputy private secretary, indexing three-year-old correspondence and copying Roumanian agricultural reports. Then he put me on ordinance-report work. Then something happened — I can't go into details now — to arouse my suspicions. I rummaged through the storage closet in my temporary office and looped his telephone wire with twenty feet of number

PHANTOM WIRES

twelve wire from a broken electric fan, and an unused transmitter. Then, scrap by scrap, I picked up my first inklings of what was at that moment worrying the Foreign Office and the people at the Embassy as well. It was the capture of the Gibraltar specifications by Prince Slevenski Pobloff. When a Foreign Office secret agent telephoned in that Pobloff had been seen in Nice, I fought against the temptation for half a day, then I went straight to the ambassador and told him what I knew, but not how I came to know it. He gave me two hundred francs and a ticket to Monte Carlo, with a letter to deliver in Rome, if by any chance I should succeed."

"That would give us the show we want! *That* would give us a chance!"

She did not understand him. "A chance for what?"

CHAPTER VII

OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY

Durkin was pacing up and down the small room in his stockinged feet, looking at her, from time to time, with a detached, but ever studiously alert glance. Then he came to a stop, and confronted her. The memory of the night before, in the Promenade, with the sudden glimpse of her profile against the floating automobile curtain, came back to his mind, with a stab of pain.

"But what has all this to do with Lady Boxspur?" he suddenly demanded, wondering how long he should be able to have faith in that inner, unshaken integrity of hers which had passed through so many trials and survived so many calamities. But she hurried on, as though unconscious of both his tone and his attitude.

"That has more to do with the next-of-kin agency. I left it out, of course, but if you *must* know it now, and here, I can tell you in a word or two."

"One naturally wants to know when one's wife ascends into the aristocracy!"

PHANTOM WIRES

“And a Mercedes touring car as well! But, oh, Jim, surely you and I don't need to go back to all that sort of thing, at this stage of the game,” she retorted wearily. She felt wounded, weighed down with a perverse sense of injury at his treatment, of injustice at his coldness, even in the face of the incongruous circumstances under which they had met.

But she went on speaking, resolutely, as though to purge her soul, for all time, of explanation and excuse.

“That next-of-kin agency was a dingy little office up two dingy stairs in Chancery Lane. For a few days their work seemed bearable enough, though it hurt me to see that all their income was being squeezed out of miserably poor people — always the miserably poor, the submerged souls with romantic dreams of impending good fortune, which, of course, always just escaped them. That, I could endure. But when I found that the agency was branching out, and was actually trying to present me for inspection as a titled heiress, in sore need of a secret and immediate marriage, I revolted, at once. Then they calmly proposed that I embark for America, as some sort of bogus countess — and while they were still talking and debating over what mild and strictly limited extravagances they would stand for, and just what expenses they would allow, I bolted! But their scheming and plotting had given me the hint, for I knew, if the worst

OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY

came to the worst, I would not be altogether under the thumb of Lord Boxspur. So when I came South from Paris I simply assumed the title — it simplified so many things. It both gave me opportunities and protected me. If, to gain my ends and to reconnoitre my territory, I became the occasional guest — remember, Jim, the most discreet and guarded guest! — of Count Anton Szapary — who carried a hundred thousand crowns away from the Vienna Jockey Club a month or two ago — you must simply try to make the end justify the means. I was still trying to get in touch with you. One of his automobiles was always politely placed at my disposal. It was a chance, well, scarcely to be missed. For, you see, it was my intention to meet His Highness, the Prince Ignace Slevenski Pobloff, under slightly different circumstances than would prevail if he and his valet should quietly step through that door at the present moment!"

She laughed, a little bitterly, with a reckless shrug of the shoulders. Durkin, nettled by the sound of tragedy in her voice, did not like the sound of that laugh. Then, as he looked at her more critically, he saw that she was white and worn and tired. But it was the words over which she had laughed which sent him abruptly hurrying into the next room with a lighted match, to read the hour from the little Swiss clock above the cabinet.

PHANTOM WIRES

"If we're after anything here we've got to get it!" he said, with conscious roughness. "It's later than I thought."

"Very well," she answered, quietly enough. Then she turned to him, as he waited with his hand on the bedroom light-button, before switching it off.

"You need never be afraid that I will bother you with any more of my hesitations, and scruples, and half-timid qualms, as I once did. All that is over and done with. I feel, now, that we're both in this sort of work from necessity, and not by accident. It has gripped and engulfed us, now, for good."

He raised a hand to stop her, stung to the quick by the misery and bitterness of her voice, still asking himself if it was not only the bitter cry of love for some neglectful love's reply. But she swept on, abandonedly.

"There's no use quibbling and fighting against it. We've got to keep at it, and wring out of it what we can, and always go back to it, and bend to it, and still keep at it, to the bitter end!"

"Frank, you mustn't say this!" he cried.

"But it's truth, pure truth. We're only going to live once. If we can't be happy without doing the things we ought not to do — then we'll simply *have to be criminals*. But I want my share of the joy of living — I want my happiness! I want *you!*

OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY

I lost you once, and almost forever, by hoping it could be the other way — but it's too late!"

"Frank!" he pleaded.

"I want you to see where we are," she said, with slow and terrible solemnity. "If I am to be saved from it, now, or ever again, *you* must do it — *you* — *you!*"

She drew herself together, with a little shiver.

"Come," she said, "we've got our work to do!"

He looked at her white face for one moment, in silence, bewildered, and then he snapped shut the button.

"We had better look through the safe at once," she went on apathetically. Something in her tone, if not her words themselves, as she had spoken, sent a wave of what was more than startled misery through her husband. He once more felt, although he felt it vaguely, the note of impending tragedy which she was so premonitorily sounding. It brought to him a dim and hurried vision of that far-off but inevitable catastrophe which lay, somewhere, at the end of the road they were traveling. Their only hope and solace, it seemed to him, must thereafter lie in feverish and sustained activity. They must lose themselves in the dash and whirl of daring moments. And it was not from pleasure or from choice, now; it was to live. They must act or perish; they must plot and counterplot, or be submerged. Yet he would do what he could to save

PHANTOM WIRES

himself, as she, in turn, must do what she could for herself — if they came to the end of their rope.

A minute later they were bending together over the contents of the dismantled safe. He was striking matches. By this time they were both on their knees.

“You run through these papers, while I see what can be done with the despatch box,” he whispered to her. Then he put the little package of vestas between them, so they might work by their own light. From time to time the soft spurt of the lighting match broke the silence, as Frank hurriedly ran her eye over the different packets, and as hurriedly flung them back into the safe.

It was a relief to Durkin to think that he at least had someone beside him who could read French. Busy as he was, he incongruously recalled to his mind how he once used to study the little printed announcements in his hotel rooms, wondering, ruefully, if the delphic text meant that lights and fires were extra, and if baths must be paid for, and vainly trying to discover what his last basket of wood might cost.

Yes, he told himself, he was a hunter out of his domain. He would always feel intimidated and insecure in this land of aliens and unknowns. He even sympathetically wondered who it was that had said: “Foreigners are fools!” Then a sudden, irrational, inconsequential sense of gratitude took

OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY

possession of him, as he felt and heard the woman at work so close beside him. There was a feeling of companionship about it that made the double risk worth while.

"There's nothing here!" Frank was saying, under her breath.

"Then it *must* be the box!" he told her.

Durkin knew it was already too late to file and fit a skeleton key. His first impulse was to bury the box under a muffling pile of bedding and send a bullet or two through the lock. But his wandering eye caught sight of a Morocco sheath-knife above them on the wall, and a moment later he had the point of it under the steel-bound lid, and as he pried it flew open with a snap.

He waited, listening, and lighting matches, while Frank went through the papers, with nervous and agile fingers, mumbling the inscriptions as she hurriedly read and cast them away from her.

"I thought so!" she said at last, crisply.

The packet held half a dozen blueprints, together with some twelve or fourteen sheets of plans and specifications, on tinted "flimsy." Durkin noticed they were drawn up in red and black ink, and that at the bottom of each document were paragraphs of finely-penned, scholarly-looking writing. One glance was enough for them both.

Frank refolded them and caught them together with a rubber band. Then she thrust them into the

PHANTOM WIRES

bosom of her dress. Both rose to their feet, for both were filled with the selfsame sudden passion to get into the open once more.

"That must go back, now!" whispered Frank, for Durkin was stooping down again, over the leather bag that held the napoleons.

"Thank heaven," he answered gratefully, "it's not *that!*"

"Not *yet!*" she whispered back, bitterly, as she heard the chink and rattle of metal in the darkness. But some day it might be.

Then she heard another sound, which caused her to catch quickly at Durkin's arm. It was the sound of a key turning in the lock, followed by an impatient little French oath, and the weight of a man's body against the resisting door. Then the oath was repeated, and a second key was turned, this time in the nearer door.

"It's Pobloff!" she whispered.

She had felt the almost galvanic, precautionary response of Durkin's body; now she could hear his whispered ejaculation as he clutched at her and thrust her back.

"*You* must get away, quick, whatever happens," he said hurriedly. There was a second tremor and rattle of the door; it might come in at any moment.

"Don't think of me," she whispered. "It's *you!*"

"But, my God, how'll you get out of this?" he

OUR FRIEND THE ENEMY

demanded, in a quick whisper. He was trying to force her back into the little anteroom.

"No, no; don't!" she answered him. "I can manage it — more easily than you!"

"But how?"

He was still crowding and elbowing her back, as though mere retreat meant more assured safety.

"No, *no!*" she expostulated, under her breath. "I can shift for myself. It's *you* — you must get away!"

She was forcing the packet from her bosom into his hands.

"Take care of these, quick! Now here's the window ready. Oh, Jim, get away while you've got the chance!"

"I can't do it!" he protested.

"You *must*, I tell you. I wouldn't lie to you! On my honor, I promise you I'll come out of this room, unharmed and free! But quick, or we'll both lose!"

Even in that moment of peril the thought that she was still ready to face this much for him filled his shaken body with a glow that was more keenly exhilarating than wine itself. There was no time for words or demonstration: the action carried its own eloquence.

He was already halfway through the opened window, but he turned back.

"Do you care, then?" he panted.

PHANTOM WIRES

He could hear the quick catch of her breath.

"Good or bad, I love you, Jim! You know that! Now, hurry, oh, hurry!"

He caught her hand in his — that was all there was time for — while with his free hand Durkin thrust the packet down into his pocket.

"If it turns out wrong — I mean if anything should happen to me, go straight to the Embassy with them, in Rome. Good-bye!"

"Ah, then you *do* expect danger!" he retorted, already back at the window again.

"No — no!" she whispered, resolutely, barring his ingress. "Hurry! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," he whispered, as he slipped down on his hands and knees and crawled along the balcony, like a cat, through the darkness.

Then the woman closed the window, and waited.

CHAPTER VIII

“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”

Frances Durkin, as she turned back into the darkness of the room, desperately schooled herself to calmness. She warned herself that, above all, she must remain clear-headed and collected, and act coolly and decisively, when the moment for action arrived.

But as the seconds slipped by, and the silence remained unbroken, a shred of forlorn hope came back to her. Each moment meant more assured safety to her husband — he, at least, was getting away unscathed and unsuspected. And that left her almost satisfied.

She still waited and listened. Perhaps, after all, the Prince had taken his departure. Perhaps he had gone back to the *portier's* office, for explanations. Perhaps it had not even been Pobloff — merely a drunken stranger, mistaken in his room number, or servants with a message or with linen.

She groped softly across the room, until she came to the door. She found it draped and covered with a heavy blanket. Holding this back, she slipped under it, and peered through the keyhole into the

PHANTOM WIRES

illuminated hallway. There seemed to be nobody outside.

"It is a rule of the game, I believe, never to shoot the rabbit until it is on the run!"

The words, spoken in excellent English, and barbed with a touch of angry cynicism, smote on her startled ears like an Alpine thunderclap.

She emerged from under the blanket, slowly, ignominiously, ashamed of even her Peeping-Tom abandonment of dignity.

As she did so she saw herself being looked at with keen but placid eyes. The owner of the eyes in one hand held a lighted bedroom lamp. In his other hand he held a flat, short-barreled pocket revolver, of burnished gun-metal, and she could see the lamplight glimmer along its side as it menaced her.

She did not gasp — nor did she shrink away, for with her the situation was not so novel as her antagonist might have imagined. Indeed, as she gazed back at him, motionless, she saw the look of increasing wonder which crept, almost involuntarily, over his white, lean, Slavic-looking face.

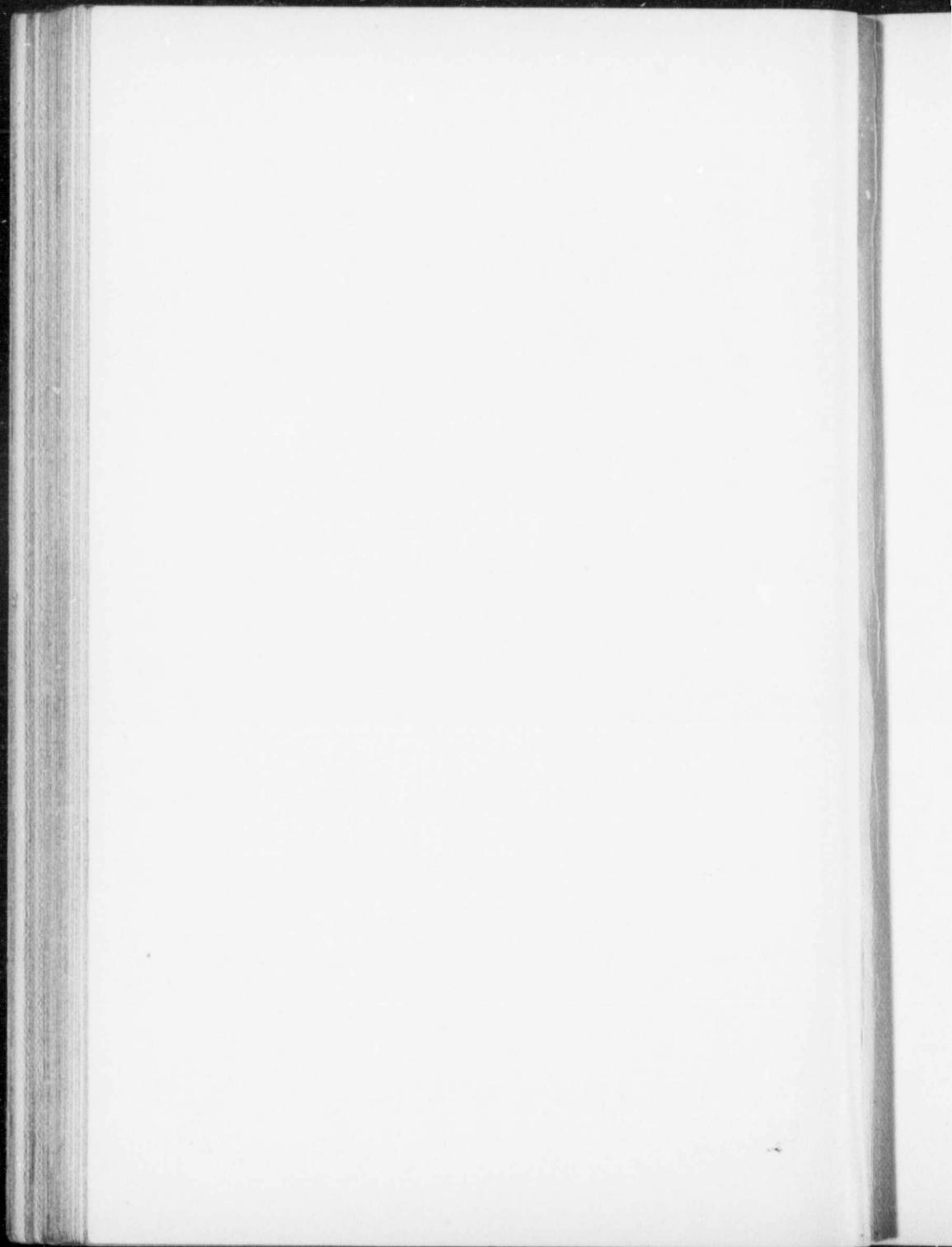
Frances Durkin knew it was Pobloff. He was tall, exceptionally tall, and she noticed that he carried off his faultlessness of attire with that stiff but tranquil *hauteur* which seems to come only with a military training. The forehead was high and white and prominent, with oddly marked depres-

body
r to
and
her
ig-
Tom
l at
eyes
his
re-
see
aced
for
an-
she
c of
un-
was
car-
but
h a
and
res-



ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

“Frances Durkin knew it was Pobloff.” Page 78.



“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”

sions, now thrown into shadow by the lamp light, above and behind the highly-arched eyebrows, on each extremity of the frontal bone. The nose was long and narrow-bridged, and the face itself was unusually long and narrow, and now quite colorless. This gave a darker hue to the thin mustache and the trim imperial, through which she caught a glint of white teeth, in what seemed half a smile and half a snarl. The hair was parted almost in the centre, a little to the right, and but for the pebbled shadows about the sunken, yet still bright eyes, he would be called a youthful-looking man. She understood why women would always speak of him as a handsome man.

“I am sorry, but I was compelled to force the bolt,” he said, slowly, with his enigmatic smile.

She still looked at him in silence, from under lowered brows. Her fingers were locking and unlocking nervously.

“And to what do I owe this visit?” he demanded mockingly. He was quite close to her by this time.

She took a step backward. She could even smell brandy on his breath.

“Your English is admirable!” she answered, as mockingly.

“As your energy!” he retorted, taking a step nearer the still open door. Then he looked about the room, slowly and comprehensively. On his face, in the strong sidelight, she could see mirrored each

PHANTOM WIRES

fresh discovery, as step by step he covered the course of the completed invasion. She followed his gaze, which now rested on the rifled safe.

A little oath, in Russian, suddenly escaped his lips.

Then he turned and strode into the anteroom, and she could hear him making fast and locking the outer hall door. Then he withdrew the key, and came back to her.

"I must still regard you, of course, as my guest," he said slowly, with his easy menace.

"You Europeans always give us lessons in the older virtues!" she retorted, as mockingly as before, in her soft contralto.

He looked at her, for a moment, in puzzled wonder. Then he held the lamp closer to her face. He nursed no illusions about women. Frances Durkin knew that for years now he had made them his tools and his accomplices, never his dictators and masters. But as he looked into the pale face, with the shadowy, almost luminous violet eyes, and the soft droop of the full red lips, and the still girlish tenderness of line about the brow and chin, and then at the betraying fulness of throat and bosom, the mockery died out of his smile.

It was supplanted by a look more ominously purposeful, more grimly determined.

"What, madam, did you come here for?" he demanded.

“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”

She shrugged an apparently careless shoulder.

“His Highness, the Prince Ignace Slevenski Pobloff, has always been the recipient of much flattering attention!” She found it still safest to mock him.

“We have had enough of this! What is it? Money? Or jewelry?”

She spurned the leather bag on the floor with the toe of her shoe. He could hear the clink and rattle of the napoleons that followed the movement. He started suddenly forward and bent over the broken despatch box. His long white fingers were running dexterously through the once orderly little packets.

“*Or something more important?*” he went on, as he came to the end of his stock.

Then he gave a little half-cry, half-gasp; and from the look on his face the woman saw that he realized what was missing. He peered at her, with alert and narrow eyes, for a full minute of unbroken silence. Then, with a little movement of finality, he turned away and put down the lamp.

“I regret it, but I must ask you for this — this document, without equivocation and without delay.”

She opened her lips to speak, but he cut in before any sound fell from them.

“Let there be no misunderstanding between us. I know precisely what you have taken; and it will be in my hands *before you ever leave this room!*”

PHANTOM WIRES

She had a sense of destiny shaping itself before her, while she stood a helpless and disinterested spectator of the vague but implacable transformation which, in the end, must in one way or the other so vitally concern her.

"I have nothing," she answered simply.

He waved her protest aside.

"Madam, have you thought, or do you now know, what the cost of this will be to you?"

He was towering over her now. She was wondering whether or not there was a ghost of a chance for her to snatch at his pistol.

"I can pay only what I owe," she maintained evasively.

He looked at her, and then at the locked door. His face took on a sudden and crafty change. The rage and anger ebbed out of him. He placed the lamp on the dressing-table of polished rosewood. Then his lean, white fingers meditatively adjusted his tie, and even more meditatively stroked at the narrow black imperial, before he spoke again.

"What greater crown may one hope for, in any activity of life, than a beautiful woman?" he asked quietly.

There was a moment of unbroken silence.

For the first time a touch of fear came to her shadowy eyes, and they were veiled by a momentary look of furtiveness.

"What do you mean?"

“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”

“I mean, madam, simply that you will now remain with me!”

“That is absurd!”

She noticed, for the first time, that he had put away his revolver.

“It is not absurd; it is essential. Permit me. In my native country we have a secret order which I need not name. If the secrets of this order came to be known by an individual not already a member, one of two things happened. He either became a member of the order, or he became a man who — who could impart no information!”

“And that means ——?”

“It means, practically, that from this hour you are, either willing or unwilling, a partner in my activities, as you now are in my possession of certain papers. Pardon me. The penalty may seem heavy, but the case, you will understand, is exceptional. Also, the nature of your visit, and the thoroughness of your preparations” — he swept the dismantled room with his grim but mocking glance — “have already convinced me that the partnership will not be an impossible one.”

“But I repeat, this is theatrical, and absurd. You cannot possibly keep me a — a prisoner here, forever!”

He looked at her, and suddenly she shrank back from his glance, white to the lips.

“You will not be a prisoner!”

PHANTOM WIRES

"I am quite aware of that!"

"You will not be a prisoner, for then you would not be a partner. The coalition between us must be as silent as it is essential. But first, permit me!"

She still shrank back from his touch, consumed with a new and unlooked-for fear of him. And all the while she was telling herself that she must remain calm, and make no mistake.

The remembrance came to her, as she stood there, of how she had once thought it possible to approach him in a more indirect and adroit fashion, as the wayward and life-loving Lady Boxspur. She shuddered a little, as she recalled that foolish mistake, and pictured the perils into which it might have led her. She could detect more clearly now the odor of brandy on his quickening breath. His face, death-like in its pallor, flashed before and above her like a semaphoric sign of imminent danger. Action of some sort, however obvious, was necessary.

"I want a drink," she gasped, with a movement toward the cabinet.

He turned and caught up the heavy glass brandy-decanter, emitting a nervous and irresponsible laugh.

In one hand he held the decanter, in the other the half-filled tumbler. That, at least, implied an appreciable space of time before those hands could be freed. In that, she felt, lay her hope.

Quicker than thought she darted to the door over which still swung the shrouding blanket. She knew

“FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS”

the key had already been turned in the lock, from the outside; the only thing between her and the freedom of the open hall was one small bolt shaft.

But before she could open the door Pobloff, with a little grunt of startled rage, was upon her. She fought and scratched like a cat. The blanket tumbled down and curtained them, the plumed hat fell from the woman's disheveled head, a chair was overturned. But he was too strong and too quick for her. With one lithe arm he pinioned her two hands close down to her sides, crushing the very breath out of her body. With his other he beat off the muffling blanket, and dragged her away from the door. Then he shook her, passionately, and held her off from him, and glared at her.

One year earlier in her career she knew she would surely have fainted from terror and exhaustion. Even as it was, she seemed about to school herself for some relieving and final surrender to the inevitable, only, her vacantly staring eyes, looking past him, by accident caught sight of a little movement which brought her drooping courage into life again.

For she had seen the window-shutter slowly widen, and then a cautious hand appear on the ledge. She watched the shutter swing in, further and further, and then the stealthy figure, with its padded feet, emerge out of the darkness into the half-lighted room. She could even see the pallor of the

PHANTOM WIRES

intruder's face, and his quick movement of warning that reminded her of the part she must play.

"I give up!" she gasped, in simulated surrender, falling and drooping with all her weight in Pobloff's arms.

He caught her and held her, bewildered, triumphant.

"You mean it?" he cried, searching her face.

"Yes, I mean it!" she murmured. Then she shuddered a little, involuntarily, for she had seen Durkin catch up one of his shoes, hammer-like, where it protruded from the side pocket of his coat — and she knew only too well how he would make use of it.

As Pobloff bent over her, unwarned, unsuspecting, almost wondering for what she was waiting with such confidently closed eyes, Durkin crossed the carpeted floor. It was then that the woman flung up her own arms and encircled the stooping Russian in a fierce and passionate grasp. He laughed a little, deep in his throat. She told herself that she was at least imprisoning his hands.

Durkin's blow caught the bending figure just at the base of the skull, behind the ear. The impact whipped the head back, and sent the relaxing body forward and down. It struck the floor, and lay there, huddled, face down. The woman scrambled to her feet, breathing hard.

"Close the shutters!" said Durkin quickly.

"FOREIGNERS ARE FOOLS"

Then he turned the unconscious man over on his back. Then he caught up a couple of towels and securely tied, first the inert wrists and then the feet. Quickly knotting a third towel, he wedged and drilled a sharp knuckle joint into the flesh of the colorless cheek, between the upper and lower incisors. When the jaw had opened he thrust the knot into the gaping mouth, securely tying the ends of the towel at the back of the neck.

"Have you everything?" whispered Frank, who had once more pinned on the plumed hat, and was already listening at the panel of the hall door. There was no time to be lost in talk.

"Yes, I think so."

"Your baggage?"

"My baggage will have to be left, but, God knows, there's little enough of it!"

He wiped his forehead, and looked down at the bound figure, already showing signs of returning consciousness. They heard laughter, and the sound of footsteps passing down the hall without.

Durkin stood beside his wife, and they listened together behind the closed door.

"Not for a minute — not yet," he whispered. Then he looked at her curiously.

"I wonder if you know just what a close call that was!"

"Yes, I know," she said, with her ear against the panel.

PHANTOM WIRES

He peered back at the figure, and took a deep breath.

“And this is only an intermission — this is only an overture, to what we may have to face! Now’s our chance. For the love of heaven, let’s get out of here. We’ve got hard work ahead of us, at Genoa — and we’ve got only till Friday to get there!”

He did not notice her look, her momentary look of mingled reproof and weariness and disdain.

“Now, quick!” she merely said, as she flung the door open and stepped out into the hall. Luckily, it was empty, from end to end.

Durkin, with assumed nonchalance, walked quietly away. She waited to turn the key in the door, and withdrew it from the lock. Then she followed her husband down the corridor, and a minute or two later rejoined him in the fragrant and balmy midnight air of Monaco.

CHAPTER IX

THE LARK IN THE RUINS

It was not until Frances Durkin and her husband were installed in an empty first-class compartment, twining and curling and speeding on their way to Genoa, that even a comparative sense of safety came to them. It was Durkin's suggestion that it might not be amiss for them to give the impression of being a newly-married couple, on their honeymoon journey; and, to this end, he had half-filled the compartment with daffodils and jonquils, with carnations and violets and roses, purchased with one turn of the hand from a midnight flower-vender, on his way down from the hills for any early morning traffic that might offer.

So as they sped toward the Italian frontier, in the white and mellow Mediterranean moonlight, threading their way between the tranquil violet sea bejeweled with guardian lights and the steep and silent slopes of the huddled mountains, they lounged back on their hired train-pillows, self-immured, and unperturbed, and quietly contented with themselves and their surroundings. At least, so it seemed to the eyes of each scrutinizing guard and official, who,

PHANTOM WIRES

after one sharp glance at the flower-filled compartment and the crooning young English lovers, passed on with a laugh and a shrug or two.

Yet, at heart, Durkin and Frank were anything but happy. As they sped on, and his wife pointed out to him that the selfsame road they were taking between confining rock and sea was the same narrow passage, so time-worn and war-scarred, once taken by Greeks and Ligurians, Romans and Saracens, it seemed to Durkin that his first fine estimate of the life of war and adventure had been a false one. His old besetting doubts and scruples began to awake. It was true that the life they had plunged into would have its dash and whirl. But it would be the dash of a moment, and the whirl of a second. Then, as it always must be, there would come the long interval of flight and concealment, the wearying stretch of inactivity. He felt, as he gazed out the car window and saw town and village and hamlet left behind them, that the same wave of excitement that cast him up would forever in turn drag him down — and it all resulted, he told himself, in his passing distemper of fatigue and anxiety, in a little further abrasion, in a little sterner denudation of their tortured souls!

It was at Ventimiglia that the *capostazione* himself appeared at the door of their compartment, accompanied by a uniformed official. The two fugitives, with their hearts in their mouths, leaned back

THE LARK IN THE RUINS

on their cushions with assumed unconcern, cooing and chattering hand in hand among their flowers, while a volley of quick and angry questions, in Italian, was flung in at them from the opened compartment door. To this they paid not the slightest attention, for several moments. Frank turned to her interrogators, smiled at them gently and impersonally, and then shook her head impatiently, with an outthrust of the hands which was meant to convey to them that each and every word they uttered was quite incomprehensible to her.

The *capostazione*, who, by this time, had pushed into their compartment, was heatedly demanding either their passports or their tickets.

Frank, who had buried her face raptly in her armful of jonquils, looked up at him with gentle exasperation.

"We are English," she said blankly. "English! We can't understand!" And she returned to her flowers and her husband once more.

The two uniformed intruders conferred for a moment, while the *conduttore*, on the platform outside, naturally enough expostulated over the delay of the train.

"These fools — these aren't the two!" Frank heard the *capostazione* declare, in Italian, under his breath, as they swung down on the station platform. Then the shrill little thin-noted engine-whistle sounded, the wheels began to turn, and

PHANTOM WIRES

they were once more speeding through the white moonlight, deeper and deeper into Italy.

"I wonder," said Frank, after a long silence, "how often we shall be able to do this sort of thing? I wonder how long luck — mere luck, will be with us?"

"*Is it luck?*" asked her husband. She was still leaning back on his shoulder, with her hand clasping his. Accompanying her consciousness of escape came a new lightness of spirit. There seemed to come over her, too, a new sense of gratitude for the nearness of this sentient and mysterious life, of this living and breathing man, that could both command and satisfy some even more mysterious emotional hunger in her own heart.

"Yes," she answered, as she laughed a little, almost contentedly; "we're like the glass snake. We seem to break off at the point where we're caught, and escape, and go on again as before. I was only wondering how many times a glass snake can leave its tail in its enemy's teeth, and still grow another one!"

And although she laughed again Durkin knew how thinly that covering of facetiousness spread over her actual sobriety of character. It was like a solitary drop of oil on quiet water — there was not much of it, but what there was must always be on the surface.

In fact, her mood changed even as he looked

THE LARK IN THE RUINS

down at her, troubled by the shadow of utter weariness that rested on her colorless face.

"What would we do, Jim," she asked, after a second long and unbroken silence, "what would we do if this thing ever brought us face to face with MacNutt again?"

"But why should we cross that bridge before we come to it?" was Durkin's answer.

She seemed unable, however, to bar back from her mind some disturbing and unwelcome vision of that meeting. She felt, in a way, that she possessed one faculty which the rapid and impetuous nature of her husband could not claim. It was almost a weakness in him, she told herself, the subsidiary indiscretion of a fecund and grimly resourceful mind. Like a river in flood, it had its strange and incongruous back currents, born of its very oneness of too hurrying purpose. It considered too deeply the imminent and not the remoter and seemingly more trivial contingency.

"But can't you see, Jim, that the further we follow this up the closer and closer it's bringing us to MacNutt?"

"MacNutt is ancient history to us now! We're over and done with him, for all time!"

"You are wrong there, Jim. You misjudge the situation, and you misjudge the man. That is one fact we have to face, one hard fact; MacNutt is not over and done *with us!*"

PHANTOM WIRES

"But haven't you made a sort of myth of him? Isn't he only a fable to us now? And haven't we got real facts to face?"

"Ah," she said protestingly, "there is just the trouble. You always refuse to look *this* fact in the face!"

"Well, what are the facts?" he asked conciliatingly, coercing his attention, and demanding of himself what allowance he must make for that morbid perversion of view which came of a too fatigued body and mind.

"The facts are these," she began, with a solemnity of tone that startled him into keener attentiveness. "You found me in MacNutt's office when he was planning and plotting and preparing for the biggest wire-tapping *coup* in all his career. You were dragged into that plot against your will, almost, just as I had been. But MacNutt gave us our parts, and we worked together there. Then — then you made love to me — don't deny it, Jim, for, after all, it was the happiest part of all my life! — and we both saw how wrong we were, and we both wanted to fight for our freedom. So I followed you when you revolted against MacNutt and his leadership."

"No, Frank, it was *you* who led — if it hadn't been for you there would never have been any revolt!" he broke in.

"We fought together, then, tooth and nail, and

THE LARK IN THE RUINS

in the end we surrendered everything but our own liberty — just to start over with free hands. But it wasn't our mere escape to freedom that maddened MacNutt; it was the thought that we had beaten him at his own game, that we had stalked him while he was so busy stalking Penfield. Then he trapped us, for a moment, and it was sheer good luck that he didn't kill me that afternoon in his dismantled operating-room, before Doogan and his men attacked the house. But, as you know, he kept after us, and he cornered you again, and *you* would have killed *him*, in turn, if I hadn't saved you from the sin of it, and the disgrace of it. Then we thought we were safe, just because the world was big and wide; because we had made our escape to Europe we thought that we were out of his circuit, that we were beyond his key-call — but here we are being led and dragged back to him, through Keenan. But now, just because there is still an ocean between us, you begin to believe that he has given up every thought of getting even!"

"Well, isn't it about time he did? We've beaten him twice, at his own game, and I see no reason why we shouldn't do it again!"

"But how often can we be the glass snake? I mean, how many times can we afford to leave something behind, and break away, and hope to grow whole and sound again? And when will MacNutt get us where we can't break away? I tell you, Jim,

PHANTOM WIRES

you don't know this man as I know him! You haven't understood yet what a cruelly designing and artful and vindictive and long-waiting enemy he can be. You haven't seen him break and crush people, as I once did. It's the memory of that makes me so afraid of him!"

"There's just the trouble, Frank," cried Durkin. "The man has terrified and intimidated you, until you think he is the only enemy you have. I don't deny he isn't dangerous, but so is Pobloff, and so is Doogan, for that matter, and this man Keenan as well!"

"But they would never crush and smash you, as MacNutt will, if the chance comes!" she persisted passionately. "You don't see and understand it, because you are so close to it and so deep in it. It's like traveling along this little Riviera railway. It's so crooked and tunneled and close under the mountains that even though we went up and down it, for a year, from Nice to Nervi, we could never say that we had seen the Riviera!"

Durkin looked out at the terraced hills, at the undulating fields and the heaped masses of blue mountains under the white Italian moonlight, and did not speak for several seconds.

He had always carried, while with her, the vague but sustained sense of being shielded. Until then her hand had always seemed to guard him, impersonally, as the hand of a busy seeker guards and

THE LARK IN THE RUINS

shelters a candle. Now, for some mysterious reason, he felt her brooding guardianship to be something less passive, to be something more immediate and personal. He knew — and he knew it with a full appreciation of the irony that lurked in the situation — that her very timorousness was now endowing him with a new and reckless courage. So he took her hand, gratefully, before he spoke again.

“ Well, whatever happens, we are now in this, not from choice, as you said before, but from necessity. If it has dangers, Frank, we must face them.”

“ It is nothing *but* danger! ”

“ Then we must grin and bear it. But as I said, I see no reason why we should cross our bridges before we come to them. And we'll soon have a bridge to cross, and a hard one.”

“ What bridge? ”

“ I mean Keenan, and everything that will happen in Genoa! ”

CHAPTER X

THE TIGHTENING COIL

Henry Keenan, of New York, had leisurely finished his cigar, and had as leisurely glanced through all the three-day-old London papers. He had even puzzled, for another half-hour, over the pages of a *Tribuna*. Then, after gazing in an idle and listless manner about the empty and uninviting hotel reading-room, he decided that it was time for him to go up to his room. He made his leisurely way to the lift, ascended to the fourth floor, stepped out, and drew his room-key from his pocket, as he walked down the hall, in the same idle and listless manner.

As he turned the corner the listlessness went from his face, and a change came in his languid yet ever-restless and covert eyes.

For a young woman was standing before his door, trying to fit a key to the lock. This, he decided as he paused three paces from her and studied her back, she was doing quite openly, with no slightest sense of secrecy. She wore a plumed hat, and a dark cloth tailor-made suit that was unmistakably English. She still struggled with the key, unconscious of his presence. His tread on the thick car-

THE TIGHTENING COIL

pet had been light; he had intended to catch her, beyond equivocation, in the act. But now something about the lines of her stooping figure caused Henry Keenan to remove his hat, respectfully, before speaking to her.

"Could I assist you, madam?" he asked, close to her side by this time.

She turned, with a start, though her loss of self-possession lasted but a moment. But as she turned her startled eyes to him Keenan's last doubt as to whether or not it was a mere mistake withered away from his mind. He knew, from the hot flush that mounted to her cheeks and from the mellow contralto of her carefully modulated English voice, that she belonged to that vaguely denominated yet rigidly delimited type that would always be called a woman of breeding.

"If you please," she said shortly, stepping back from the door.

He bent over the key which she had left still in the lock.

As he did so he glanced at the number which the key, protruding from the lock, bore stamped on its flat brass bow. The number was Thirty-seven, while the number which stood before his eyes on the door was Forty-one.

Under ordinary circumstances the apparent accident would never have given him a second thought. But all that day he had been oppressed by a sense of

PHANTOM WIRES

hidden yet continual espionage. This feeling had followed him from the moment he had landed in Genoa. He had tried to argue it down, inwardly protesting that such must be merely the obsession of all fugitives. And now, even to find an unknown and innocent-appearing young woman trying to force an entrance into his room aroused all his latent cautiousness. Yet a moment later he felt ashamed of his suspicions.

"Why, this is room Forty-one," she cried, over his shoulder. He withdrew the key and looked at it with a show of surprise.

"And your key, I see, is Thirty-seven," he explained.

She was laughing now, a little, through her confusion. It was a very pleasant laugh, he thought. She looked a frank and companionable woman, with her love for the merriment of life touched with a sort of autumnal and wistful sobriety that in no way estranged it from a sense of youth. But, above all, she was a beautiful woman, thought the listless and lonely man. He looked at her again. It was his suspicion of being spied upon, he felt, that had first blinded him to the charm of her appearance.

"It was the second turn in the corridor that threw me out," she explained. He found himself walking with her to her door.

She had thought to find some touch of the Boweryite about him, some outcropping of the half-

THE TIGHTENING COIL

submerged bunco-steerer. Instead of that, both his look and his tone carried some tinge of quiet yet dominant gentility, reminding her, as she had so often been taught before, that the criminal is not a type in himself, that only fanciful and far-stretched generalizations could detach him as a species, or immature and mark him off from the rest of his kind.

She glanced at him still again, at the seemingly melancholic and contemplative face, that strangely reminded her of Dürer's portrait of himself. As she did so there was carried to her memory, and imprinted on it, the picture of a wistful and lonely man, his countenance touched, for all its open Irish smile, with some wordless sorrow, some pensive isolation of soul, lean and gaunt with some undefined hunger, a little furtive and covert with some half-concealed restlessness.

"Aren't you an American?" he was asking, almost hopefully, it seemed to her.

"Oh, no," she answered, with her sober, slow smile. "I'm an Englishwoman!"

He shook his head, whimsically.

"Indeed, I'm sorry for that!" said the Celt.

She joined in his laugh.

"But I've lived abroad so much!" she added.

"Then you must know Italy pretty well, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; I've traveled here, winter after winter."

PHANTOM WIRES

She picked out a card from her pocket-book, on which was inscribed, in Spencerian definiteness of black and white, "Miss Barbara Allen." It had been the card of Lady Boxspur's eminently respectable maid — and Frances Durkin had saved it for just such a contingency.

He read the name, slowly, and then placed the card in his vest pocket. If he noticed her smile, he gave no sign of it.

"And you like Genoa? I mean, *is* there anything to like in this place?" he asked companionably. "I'll be hanged if I've seen anything but a few million mementoes of Christopher Columbus!"

"There's the Palazzo Bianco, and the Palazzo Rosso, and, of course, there's the Campo Santo!"

"But who cares for graveyards?"

"All Europe is a graveyard, of its past!" she answered lightly. "That was what I thought you Americans always came to see!"

He laughed a little, in turn, and she both liked him better for it and found it easier to go on. She felt, from his silences, that no great span of his life had been spent in talking with women. And she was glad of it.

"I like the Riggi," she added pregnantly.

"The Riggi — what's that, please?"

"That's the restaurant up on the hill." She hesitated and turned back, before unlocking her door. "It's charming!"

THE TIGHTENING COIL

He was on the point, she knew, of making the plunge and asking if they might not see the Riggi together, when something in her glance, some precautionary chilliness of look, checked him. For she had seen that even now things might advance too hurriedly. It would be wiser, and in the long run it would pay, she warned herself, to draw in — for as she still lingered and chatted with him she more and more felt that she was face to face with a resourceful and strong-willed opponent. She noticed, through all the outward Celtic gentleness, the grim and passionate mouth, the keenness of the shifty yet penetrating hazel-gray eyes, the touch of almost bull-dog tenaciousness about the loose-jointed, high-shouldered figure, and, above all, the audacity of the careless Irish-American smile. That smile, she felt, trailed like a flippant and fluttering tail to the kite of his racial solemnity and stubbornness of purpose, enabling it to rise higher even while seeming to weigh it down.

“And you always travel alone?” he finally asked, shaking off the last of his reserve.

“Oh, I’m a bit of a globe-trotter — that’s what you’d call me on your side of the ocean, isn’t it? You see, I go about Southern Europe picking up things for a London art firm!”

“And where do you go next?”

“Oh, perhaps to Milan, perhaps to Naples; it may even be to Rome, or it might turn out to be

PHANTOM WIRES

Syracuse or Taormina. With me, everything depends, first on the weather, and, next, on what instructions are sent on."

She inwardly marveled at the glibness and spontaneity with which the words fell from her tongue. She even took a sort of secret joy in the dramatic values which that scene of play-acting presented to her.

"And do you ever go to New York?"

"Yes, such a thing might happen, any time."

It was as well, she told herself, to leave the way well paved.

"*That's* the city for you!" he declared, with a commending shake of the head.

Of the truth of that fact Frances Durkin was only too well aware; but this was a conviction to which she did not give utterance.

As they stood chatting together in the deserted hallway, a man, turning the corner, brushed by them. He merely gave them one casual glance of inquiry, and then looked away, apparently at the room-numbers on the lintels.

The young woman chanced to be tapping half-carelessly, half-nervously, with her key on the panel of her door. It meant nothing to her comrade, but to the passing man it resolved itself into an intelligible and coherent message. For it was in Morse, and to his trained and adept ear it read: "*This — is — Keenan — keep — away!*"

CHAPTER XI

THE INTOXICATION OF WAR

It was two days later,— and they had been days of blank suspense for him,— that Durkin made his way to Frank's room, unobserved. His first resolution had been to wait for a clearer coast, but his anxiety overcame him, and he could hold off no longer.

As he opened the door and stepped noiselessly inside he caught sight of her by the window, her face ruminative and in repose. It looked, for the moment, unhappy and tired and hard. She seemed to stand before him with a mask off, a designing and disillusioned woman, no longer in love with the game of life. Or it was, he imagined, as she would look ten years later, when her age had begun to tell on her, and her still buoyant freshness was gone. It was the same feeling that had come to him on the Angiolina steps, at Abbazia. He even wondered if in the stress of the life they were now following she would lose the last of her good looks, if even her ever-resilient temperament would deaden and harden, and no longer rise supreme to the exacting moment. Or could it be that she was acting a part

PHANTOM WIRES

for him? that all this fine *bravado* was an attitude, a rôle, a pretense, taken on for his sake? Could it be — and the sudden thought stung him to the quick — that she was deliberately and consciously degrading herself to what she knew was a lower plane of thought and life, that the bond of their older companionship might still remain unsevered?

But, as her startled eyes caught sight of him, a welcoming light came into her relaxed face. With her first spoken word some earlier touch of moroseness seemed to slip away from her. If it required an effort to shake herself together, she gave no outward sign of it. She had promised that there should be no complaining and no hesitations from her; and Durkin knew she would adhere to that promise, to the bitter end.

She went to him, and clung to him, a little hungrily. There seemed something passionate in her very denial of passion. For when he lifted her drooping head, with all its wealth of chestnut shot through with paler gold, and gazed at her upturned face between his two hands, with a little cry of endearment, she shut her mouth hard, on a sob.

“You’re back — and safe?” he asked.

She forced a smile.

“Yes, back safe and sound!”

“But tired, I know?”

“Yes — a little. But —”

She broke off, and he could see that she was

THE INTOXICATION OF WAR

rising from her momentary luxury of relaxation as a fugitive rises after a minute's breathing-spell.

"Well?" he asked anxiously.

"*Pobloff has found us!*" she said, in her quiet contralto.

"He's here, you mean?"

"He's in Genoa. I caught sight of him in a cab, hurrying from the French Consulate to the Cafè Jazelli. I slipped into a silversmith's shop, as he raced past, and escaped him."

"And then what?"

"Then several things happened. But first, tell me this: did you get a chance to look over Keenan's room?"

"I was bolted inside twenty minutes after you and he had left the hotel. His trunk was even unlocked; I looked through everything!"

"Which, of course, was charming work!" she interpolated, with not ungentle scorn.

He shrugged his shoulders deprecatively. "Not quite as charming as dining with your new friend!"

"I almost like him!" admitted the woman frankly, femininely rejoicing at the note of jealousy in the other's voice.

"And no worse than some of the work we've done, or may soon have to do!"

Then he went on, with rising passion: "And I'll tell you this, Frank whatever we do, and whatever we have to go through, we've got to get those se-

PHANTOM WIRES

curities out of Keenan! We've got to have them, now! We've got to pound at it, and dog him, and fight him, and outwit him, until we either win or lose and go under! It's a big game, and it has big risks, but we're in it too deep, now, to talk about drawing back, or to complain about the dirty work it leads to!"

"I wasn't complaining," she reproved, in her dead voice. "I only spoke a bald truth. But you don't tell me what you've found."

"I got nothing — absolutely nothing; not one shred of information even. There's nothing in the room. It stands to reason, then, as I told you from the first, that he is carrying the papers about with him!"

"That will make it harder," she murmured monotonously. "And you're sure your telegram has sent the Scotland Yard men to Como?"

"It must have, or we'd be running into them. The New Yorker is a Pinkerton man."

He started pacing back and forth in front of her, frowning with mingled irritation and impatience.

"Then what about Pobloff?" he suddenly asked.

"Five minutes after we had stepped out of the hotel he met us, face to face. With Keenan, I had no chance of getting away. So I simply faced it out. Then Pobloff shadowed us to the Riggi, watched us all through luncheon, and followed

THE INTOXICATION OF WAR

us down to the city again. And here's the strange part of it all. Keenan saw that we were being shadowed, from the first, and I could see him fretting and chafing under it, for he imagines that it's all because of what he's carrying with him. So, on the other hand, Pobloff has concluded Keenan and I are fellow-conspirators, for he let me go to the lift alone, just to keep his eye on Keenan, who told me he had business at the steamship agency."

"But why should we be afraid of Pobloff, then?"

"It's a choice of two evils, I should venture to say. But that's not all. As soon as I was free from each of them, and had left them there, carrying out that silent and ridiculous advance and retreat between them, I had to think both hard and fast. I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to slip down to Rome, at once, and make my visit to the Embassy."

"Yes, I found your note, telling me that."

"When I saw that I was being followed at the station I bought a ticket for Busalla, as a blind, and went in one door of my compartment and then out the other. My *wagon lit* was standing on the next track. I didn't change from the one train to the other until the train for Rome started to move. Then I slipped out, and jumped for the moving platform, and was bundled into my right carriage

PHANTOM WIRES

by a guard, who thought I was trying to commit an Anna Karenina suicide — until I gave him ten francs. Whether I got away unnoticed or not I can't say for sure. But Pobloff will have resources here that we know nothing of. From now on, you may be sure, he will have Keenan watched by one of his agents, night and day!"

"Then, good heavens, we've got to step in and save Keenan from Pobloff!"

"It amounts to that," admitted Frank. "Yet, in some way, if we could only manage it, the two of them ought to fight our battle out for us, between themselves!"

"That's true — but *did* you get to Rome?"

"Yes, without trouble."

"And you got the money?"

"Only half of it. They hedged, and said the other half could not be paid until Pobloff's arrest. Jim, we must be on our guard against that man."

"Pobloff doesn't count!" ejaculated Durkin impatiently. "It's Keenan we have to have our fight with — *he's* the man, the offender, we want! — *that* means only two hundred and fifty pounds!"

"But that is money honestly made!"

"And so will this be money honestly made. The one was legalized by the government authority; the other, in the end, will be recognized as — well, as detectional and punitive expediency. That's why I say Pobloff doesn't count!"

THE INTOXICATION OF WAR

"But Pobloff *does* count," persisted Frank. "He's a vindictive and resourceful man, and he has a score against us to wipe out. Besides all that, he's a master of intrigue, and he has the entire secret service of France behind him, and he knows underground Europe as well as any spy on the Continent. He will keep at us, I tell you, until he thinks he is even!"

"Then let him — if he wants to," scoffed Durkin. "My work is with Keenan. If Pobloff tries interfering with us, the best thing we can do is to get the British Foreign Office after him. *They* ought to be big enough for him!"

"It's not a matter of bigness. *He* won't fight that way. He would never fight in the open. He knows his chances, and the country, and just where to turn, and just how far to go — and where to hide, if he has to!"

"That's true enough, I suppose. But oh, if I only had him in New York, I'd fight him to a finish, and never edge away from him and keep on the run this way!"

"Of course; but, as you say, is it worth while? After all, he's only an accident in the whole affair now, though a disagreeable one. And, what's more, Pobloff will never follow us out of Europe. This is his stamping ground. He had misfortune in America, and he's afraid of it. As I said before, Pobloff and Keenan are the acid and the alkali that

PHANTOM WIRES

ought to make the neutral salts. I mean, instead of trying to save them from each other, we ought to fling them together, in some way. Let Pobloff do the hunting for us — then let us hunt Pobloff!”

“But Keenan is wary, and shrewd, and far-seeing. How is he to be caught, even by a Pobloff?”

“That only time and Pobloff can tell. It will never be by brigandage — Keenan will never go far enough afield to give him a chance for that. But I feel it in my bones — I feel that there is danger impending, for us all.”

Durkin turned and looked at her, wondering if her woman's intuition was to penetrate deeper into the unknown than his own careful analysis.

“What danger?” he asked.

“Impending dangers cease to be dangers when they can be defined. It's nothing more than a feeling. But the strangest part of the whole situation is the fact that not one of us, from any corner of the triangle, dares turn to the police for one jot of protection. None of us can run crying to the arms of constituted authority when we get hurt!”

A consciousness of their lonely detachment from their kind, of their isolation, crept through Durkin's mind. He felt momentarily depressed by a sense of friendlessness. It was like reverting to primordial conditions, wherein it was ordained that each life, alone and unassisted, should protect and

THE INTOXICATION OF WAR

save itself. He wondered if primitive man, or if even wild animals, did not always walk with that vague consciousness of continual menace, where lupine viciousness seemed eternally at war with vulpine wariness.

"Then what would you suggest?" he asked the woman, who sat before him rapt in thought.

"That we watch Keenan, continuously, night and day. He has been hunted and followed now for over two months, and he is only waiting for a clear field to take to his heels. And when he goes he is going for America. That I know. If we lose sight of him, we lose our chance."

Durkin walked to the window, and looked out at the tiled roofs and the squat chimney-pots, above which he could catch a glimpse of bursting sky-rockets and the glow of Greek fire from the narrow canyons of the streets below.

"What are all the fireworks for?" he asked her casually.

"It's a Saint's Day, of some sort, they told me at the office," she explained.

He was about to turn and speak to her again, after a minute's silence, when a low knock sounded on the door. He remained both silent and motionless, and the knock was repeated.

"In a moment!" called the woman, as she motioned Durkin to the door of her clothes-closet. He drew back, with a shake of the head. He re-

PHANTOM WIRES

volted momentarily against the ignominy of the movement. But she caught him by the arm and thrust him determinedly in, closing the door on him. Then she hurriedly let her wealth of chestnut hair tumble about her shoulders. Then she answered the knock, with the loosened strands of chestnut in one abashed hand.

It was Keenan himself who stood in the hall before her.

CHAPTER XII

THE DOORWAY OF SURPRISE

"May I speak to you a moment?" asked Keenan, taking a step nearer to her as he spoke. She seemed able, even under his quiet composure, to detect some note of alarm.

"Will you come in?" she asked, holding the door wide for him.

"If you don't mind the intrusion."

She had closed the door, and stood facing him, interrogatively.

"What I am going to ask you, Miss Allen, is something unusual. But this past week has shown me that you are an unusual woman." He hesitated, in doubt as to how to proceed.

"In America," she said, laughing a little, to widen his avenue of approach, "you would call me emancipated, wouldn't you?"

He bowed and laughed a little in return.

"But let me explain," he went on. "I am in what you might call a dilemma. For some reason or other certain persons here are watching and following me, night and day. In America — which, thank God, is a land of law and order — this sort of thing wouldn't disturb me. But here" — he

PHANTOM WIRES

gave a little shrug —“ well, you know what they say about Italy!”

“ Then I wasn't mistaken!” she cried, with a well-rung note of alarm.

He looked at her, narrowly.

“ Ah, I suspected you'd have an inkling! But what I have here makes the case exceptional — and, perhaps, a little dangerous!”

He drew from his pocket a yellow-tinted manila envelope, of “ legal ” size. Frank's quick glance told her that it was by no means empty.

“ It may sound theatrical, and you may laugh at me, but will you take possession of these papers for me, for a few days? No, let me explain first. They are important, I confess, for, although valueless commercially, they contain personal and private letters that are worth a good deal to me!”

“ But this means a great responsibility,” demurred Frank.

“ Yes; but no danger — at least to you, since you are in no way under suspicion. You said that in five days you would probably be in Naples. Supposing that I arrange to meet you at, say, the Hôtel de Londres there, and then repay you for your trouble.”

“ But it's so unusual; so almost absurd,” still demurred the acting woman. The eavesdropper from the closet felt that it was an instance of diamond cutting diamond. How hard and polished

THE DOORWAY OF SURPRISE

and finished, he thought, actor and actress confronted each other.

"Will you take the risk?" the man was asking.

She looked from him to the packet and then back to him again.

"Yes, if you insist — if it is really helping you out!" she replied, with still simulated bewilderment.

He thanked her with something more than his professional, placid crispness, and put the packet in her outstretched hand.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, everything."

"In Naples, in five days?"

"Yes; the Hôtel de Londres. And now I must leave you."

He startled her by taking her hand and wringing it. She was still looking down at the packet as he withdrew, and the door closed behind him.

She listened for a moment, and then turned the key in the lock. Durkin, stepping from his place of concealment, confronted her. They stood gazing at each other in blank astonishment.

Frank's first impulse was to tear open the envelope. But on second thoughts she flew to her alcohol tea-lamp and lighted the flame. It was only a minute or two before a jet of steam came from the tiny kettle spout. Over this she shifted and held the gummed envelope-flap, until the mucilage softened

PHANTOM WIRES

and dissolved. Then, holding her breath, she peeled back the flap, and from the envelope drew three soiled but carefully folded copies of the *London Daily Chronicle*. The envelope held nothing more.

A little cry of disappointment escaped Durkin, while Frank turned the papers over in her fingers, in speechless amazement. The very audacity of the man swept her off her feet.

It was both a warning and a challenge, grim with its suggestiveness, eloquent with careless defiance. That was her first thought.

"The fool—he's making fun of you!" said Durkin, with a second passionate oath.

Frank was slowly refolding the papers, and replacing them in the envelope.

"I don't believe that's it," she said, meditatively. "I believe he is trying me—making this a test!"

She carefully moistened the gum and resealed the envelope, so that it bore no trace of having revealed its contents. She stood gazing at her husband with studious and unseeing eyes.

"If he comes back I'll know that I am right," she cried, with sudden conviction. "If he finds that I am still here, and that his packet is still intact and safe, he'll do what he wants to do. And that is, he'll trust me with the whole of his securities!"

She quenched the alcohol flame and replaced the lamp in its case.

THE DOORWAY OF SURPRISE

"If he comes back," mocked Durkin. "Do you know what you and I ought to be doing, at this moment? We ought to be following that man every step he takes."

"But where?" She shook her head, slowly, in dissent.

"That's for us to find out. But can't you feel that he's left us in the lurch, that we're shut up here, while he's giving us the laugh and getting away?"

"Jim, listen to me. During this past week I've seen more of Keenan than you have."

"Yes, a vast sight more!" he interjected, heatedly.

"And I feel sure," she went on evenly, "that he is more frightened and worried than he pretends to be. He is, after all, only a tricky and ferrety Irish lawyer, who is afraid of every power outside his own little circuit of experience. He's afraid of Italy. I suppose he has nightmares about *brigantaggio*, even! He's afraid of foreigners — afraid of this sort of conspiracy of silence that seems surrounding him. He's even afraid to take his precious documents and put them in a safe-deposit vault in any one of the regularly established institutions here in Genoa. There are plenty of them, but he isn't big and bold enough to do his business that way. He's been a fugitive so long his only way of warfare now is flight. And besides, he can

PHANTOM WIRES

never forget that his work is underground and illicit. That is why he carries his documents about with him, on him, in his pockets, like a sneak thief with a pocketful of stolen goods. I don't mean to say that he isn't smooth and crafty, and that he won't fight like a rat when he's cornered! But I *do* believe that if he and Penfield could get in touch today, here in Genoa, he would hand over every dollar of those securities, and give up the job, and get back to his familiar old lairs among the New York poolrooms and wardheelers and petty criminals where he knows his enemies and his friends!"

Durkin strode toward the door impatiently. He hesitated for a moment, but had already stretched out his hand to turn the key when he drew back, silently, step by step.

For a second time, on the panel, without, the low knock was sounding.

Frank watched the closet door draw to and close on Durkin; then she called out, with assumed and cheery unconcern, "Come in."

She did not look up for a moment, for she was still busy with her hair.

The door opened and closed.

"I trust I do not intrude?"

Frank's brush fell from her hand, before she even slowly wheeled and looked, for it was the suave and well-modulated baritone of Pobloff.

"What does this mean?" she demanded va-

THE DOORWAY OF SURPRISE

cantly, retreating before his steady and scornful gaze.

"Simply, madam, that you and I seem seldom able to anticipate each other's calls!"

She made a pretense of going to the electric signal.

"It is quite useless," explained the Russian quietly. "The wires are disconnected."

He took out his watch and glanced at it. "Indeed, as a demonstration that others enjoy privileges which you sometimes exert, in two minutes every light in this room will be cut off!"

The woman was panting a little by this time, for her thoughts were of Durkin and his danger, as much as of herself. She struggled desperately to regain her self-possession, for there was no mistaking the quiet but grim determination written on the Russian's pallid face. And she knew he was not alone in whatever plot he had laid.

She would have spoken, only the sudden flood of blackness that submerged her startled her into silence. The lights had gone out.

She demanded of herself quickly, what should be her first move.

While she stood in momentary suspense, a knock sounded still once more on her door.

"Come in," she called out quickly, loudly, now alert and alive to every movement.

It was Keenan who stepped in from the half-

PHANTOM WIRES

lighted hall. He would have paused, in involuntary amazement, at the utter darkness that greeted him, only footsteps approaching and passing compelled him to act quickly.

He stepped inside and closed and locked the door. She had not been mistaken. He *had* come back.

CHAPTER XIII

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

There flashed through Fances Durkin's mind, in the momentary silence that fell over that strange company, the consciousness that the triangle was completed; that there, in one room, through a fortuitousness that seemed to her more factitious than actual, stood the three contending and opposing forces. The thought came and went like a flash, for it was not a time for meditation, but for hurried and desperate action. The sense of something vast and ominous seemed to hang over the darkness, where, for a second or two, the silence of absolute surprise reigned.

The last-comer, too, seemed to feel this sense of something impending, for a moment later his voice rang out, clear and unhesitating, with a touch of challenge in it.

“Miss Allen, are you here? And is anything wrong?”

“Stand where you are!” the voice of the woman answered, through the darkness, firm and clear.
“Yes. I am here. But there is another person in

PHANTOM WIRES

this room. He is a man who means harm, I believe, to both of us!"

"Ah!" said the voice near the door.

The woman was speaking again, her voice high and nervous, from the continued suspense of that darkness and silence combined, a dual mystery from which any bolt might strike.

"Above all things," she warned him, "you must watch that door!"

Her straining ears heard a quiet click-click; she had learned of old the meaning of that pregnant sound. It was the trigger of a revolver being cocked.

"All right — I'm ready," said the man at the door, grimly. Then he laughed, perhaps a little uneasily. "But why are we all in darkness this way?"

"The wires have been cut — that is a part of his plan!"

Keenan took a step into the room and addressed the black emptiness before him.

"Will the gentleman speak up and explain?"

No answer came out of the darkness. Frank knew, by this time, that Keenan would make no move to desert her.

"Have you a lamp, or a light of any kind, Miss Allen?" was the next curt, businesslike question.

"Oh, be careful, sir!" she warned him, now in blind and unreasoning terror.

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

“Have you a light?” repeated Keenan authoritatively.

“I have only an alcohol lamp; it gives scarcely any light — it is for boiling a teapot!”

“Then light it, please!”

“Oh, I dare not!” she cried, for now she was possessed of the unreasoning fear that one step in any direction would bring her in contact with death itself.

“Light it, please!” commanded Keenan. “Nothing will happen. I have in my hand here, where I stand, a thirty-eight calibre revolver, loaded and cocked. If there is one movement from the gentleman you speak of, I will empty it into him!”

Both Keenan and Frank started, and peered through the blackness. For a careless and half-despising, half-contemptuous laugh sounded through the room. Pobloff, obviously, had never moved from where he stood.

Frank slowly groped to the wall of her room, and felt with blind and exploring hands until she came to her bureau. Then sounded the clink of nickel as the lamp was withdrawn from its case and the dry rattle of German safety-matches. Then the listeners heard the quick scrape and flash of the match against the side of the little paper box, and the puff of the wavering blue flame as the match-end came in contact with the alcohol.

After all, it was good to have a light! Incon-

PHANTOM WIRES

gruously it flashed through her mind, as wayward thoughts and ideas would at such moments, how relieved primitive man amid his primitive night must have been at the blessed gift of the first fire.

The wavering blue flame widened and heightened. In a moment the inky room was pallidly suffused with its trembling half-light. Outside, through the night, sounded muffled street noises, and the boom and hiss and spurt of fireworks.

The two peering faces turned slowly, until their range of vision had swept the entire room. Then they paused, for motionless against the west wall, between the closet door and the corner, stood Pobloff. His arms were folded, and he was laughing a little.

Frank drew nearer Keenan, instinctively, wondering what the next movement would be.

It was Pobloff's voice that first broke the silence.

"This woman lies," he said, in his suavely scoffing baritone. "This woman ——"

"Why don't you say something — why don't you do something!" cried Frank, hysterically, turning to Keenan.

"Ring the bell!" commanded Keenan.

"It's useless — the wires are cut," she panted. She could see that, above and beyond all his craftiness, his latent Irish fighting-blood was aroused.

"Then, by God, I'll put him out myself. If there's any fight between him and me" — he turned

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

on Pobloff — “we won’t drag a woman into it!”

The tall, gaunt Russian against the wall was no longer laughing.

“Pardon me,” he said, advancing a step. “This woman has in her possession a packet of papers — of personal and private papers, which concern neither you nor her!”

“But what if it *does* concern me?” demanded Keenan.

“The gentleman is talking nonsense,” said Pobloff, unperturbed. Yet he leaned forward and studied him more closely, through the half-light, studied him as the deliberating terrier might study the captured rat that had dared to bite back at him. “This woman, I repeat, has certain papers about her!”

“And what of that?” cried Keenan blindly. Frank saw, to her joy, that he was misled.

“Simply this: that if the lady I speak of hands those papers to me, here, the matter is closed, for all time!”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then she will do so later!”

A grunt of sheer rage broke from Keenan’s lips. But he checked it, suddenly, and wheeled on the woman.

“Give him the package,” he ordered. She hesitated, for at the moment the thought of Keenan’s trust had passed from her mind.

PHANTOM WIRES

"Do as I say," he repeated curtly.

Frank, remembering, drew the yellow manila envelope from her bosom, and with out-stretched arm handed it to Pobloff.

The Russian took it in silence. Then with a few quick strides he advanced to the alcohol lamp. As he did so both Keenan and Frank noticed for the first time the blunt little gun-metal revolver he held in his right hand.

"Again you will pardon me," said Pobloff, with his ever-scoffing courtliness. "A mere glance will be necessary, to make sure that we are not — mistaken!"

He tore open the envelope with one long forefinger, and stooped to draw forth the contents.

It was then that Keenan sprang at him. Frank at the moment, was marveling at the unbroken continuity of evidence linking her with her uncomprehending opponent.

The sudden leap and cry of Keenan sent a tingle of apprehension up and down her body. She asked herself, vaguely, if all the rest of her life was to be made up of this brawling and fighting in unlighted chambers of horror; if, now that they were in the more turgid currents for which they had longed, there were to come no moments of peace amid all their tumult and struggling.

Then she drew in her breath with a little gasp, for she saw Pobloff, with a quick writhe of his thin

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

body, free his imprisoned right arm, and strike with the metal butt of his revolver.

He struck twice, three times, and the sound of the metal on the unprotected head was sickening to the listening woman. She staggered to the closet door as the man fell to the floor, stunned.

“Jim! Oh, Jim, quick! — he’s killing him! — I tell you he’s killing him!”

Durkin said “’Sssh!” under his breath, and waited.

For in the dim half-light they could see that the Russian had ripped open Keenan’s coat and vest, and from a double-buttoned pocket on the inside of the inner garment was drawing out a yellow manila envelope, the fellow to that which had already been thrust into his hands. It was then that Durkin sprang forward.

Pobloff saw him advance. He had only time to reverse his hold on the little gun-metal revolver and fire two shots.

The first shot went wide, tearing deep into the plastered wall. The second cut through the flap of his assailant’s coat-pocket, just over the left hip, scattering little flecks of woollen cloth about. But there was no time for a third shot.

It seemed brutal to Frank, but she allowed herself time for neither thought nor scruples. All she remembered was that it was necessary — though once again she asked herself if all her life, from that

PHANTOM WIRES

day on, was to be made up of brawling and fighting.

For Durkin had brought down on the half-turned head the up-poised bedroom chair with all his force. Pobloff, with a little inarticulate cry that was almost a grunt, buckled and pitched forward.

"That settles *you!*" the stooping man said, heartlessly, as he watched him relax and half roll on his side.

Frank watched him, too, but with no sense of triumph or success, with no emotion but slowly awakening disgust, against which she found it useless to struggle. She watched him with a sense of detachment and aloofness, as if looking down on him from a great height, while he tore upon the manila envelope and gave vent to a little cry of satisfaction. They at last possessed the Penfield securities. Then she went over and replenished the waning flame in the alcohol lamp.

"We've got to get away from here now," said Durkin quickly. "And the sooner the better!"

She looked about her, a little helplessly. Then she glanced at Keenan. "See, he's coming to!"

"Are you ready?" Durkin demanded sharply.

"Yes," she answered, in her dead and resigned voice, as she took up her hat and coat. "But where are we going?"

"I'll tell you on the way down. Only you must get what you want, and hurry!"

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

“But is it safe now?” she demurred, “and for you?”

He thought for a moment, with his hand on the doorknob. Then he turned back.

“You’d better keep this, then, until I find what we have to face, outside here!”

He passed into her hand the manila envelope, and stepped out into the hall.

A moment later she had secreted the packet, along with Pobloff’s revolver, which she picked up from the floor. Then she ran to the door, and locked it. She would fight like a hornet, now, she inwardly vowed, for what she held.

Then she caught her breath, behind the locked door, for the sounds that crept in from the hallway told her that her fear had not been groundless.

She heard Durkin’s little choked cry of pain and surprise, for he had been seized, she knew, and pinned back against the door. It was Pobloff’s men, she told herself. They had him by the throat, she knew by the sound of the guttural oaths which they were trying to choke back. She could hear the kick and scrape of feet, the movement of his writhing and twisting body against the door, as on a sounding-board. She surmised that they had his arms held, otherwise he would surely have used his revolver. She was conscious of a sort of wild joy at the thought that he could not, for they were going through him, from the quieted sounds, pocket

PHANTOM WIRES

by pocket, and she knew he would have shot them if he could.

"There's nothing here!" said a voice in French. Frank, listening so close to them, could hear the three men breathe and pant.

"Then the woman has it!" answered the other voice, likewise in French.

"Shut up! She'll get on!" And Frank could hear them tear and haul at Durkin as they dragged him down the hall — just where, she could not distinguish.

She ran over to Keenan and shook him roughly. He looked at her a little stupidly, but did not seem able to respond to her entreaties.

"Quick!" she whispered, "or it will be too late!"

She flung her pitcher of water in his face and over his head, and poured brandy from her little leather-covered pocket-flask down his throat.

That seemed to revive him, for he sat up on the carpeted floor, mumblingly, and glowered at her. Then he remembered; and as she bathed his bruised head with a wet towel he caught at her hand foolishly.

"Have we lost them?" he asked huskily, childishly.

"No, they are here! See, intact, and safe. But you must take them back. Neither of us can go through that hall with them!"

“ THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR ”

“ Why not? ”

“ We’re watched — we’re prisoners here! ”

“ Then what’ll we do? ” he asked weakly, for he was not yet himself.

“ You must take them, and get out of this room. There is only one way! ”

“ What is it? ”

“ You see this rope. It’s meant for a fire-escape. You must let yourself down by it. You’ll find yourself in a court, filled with empty barrels. That leads into a bake-shop — you can see the oven lights and smell the bread. Give the man ten *lira*, and he’s sure to let you pass. Can you do it? Do you understand? ”

“ Yes, ” he said, still a little bewildered. “ But where will I meet you? ”

She pondered a moment.

“ In Trieste, a week from tomorrow. But can you manage the rope? ”

He laughed a little. “ I ought to! I’ve been through a poolroom raid or two, over home! ”

“ In Trieste then, a week from morrow! ”

She handed him her brandy-flask.

“ You may need it, ” she explained. He was on his feet by this time, struggling to pull himself together.

“ But you can’t face that alone, ” he remonstrated, with a thumb-jerk toward the hall. “ I won’t see you touched by those damned rats! ”

PHANTOM WIRES

"'Sssh!" she warned him. "They can't do anything to me now, except search me for those papers!"

"But even that!"

"I'll wait until I see you're safely down, then I'll run for the stairs. They've shut off all the lights outside, in this wing, but if they in any way attempt to ill-treat me, before I get to the main corridor, I'll scream for help!"

"But even to search you"—began Keenan again.

"Yes, I know!" she answered evenly. "It's not pleasant. But I'll face it"—she turned her eyes full upon him—"for you!"

They listened for a moment together at the opened window. The red lights were still burning here and there about the city in the streets below, and the carnival-like cries and noises still filled the air.

And she watched him anxiously as he and his packet of documents went down the dangling hemp rope, reached the stone paving of the little court, and disappeared in the square of light framed by the bake-shop window.

Then she turned back into the room, startled by a weak and wavering groan from Pobloff. She went to him, and tried to lift him up on the bed, but he was too heavy for her overtaxed strength. She wondered, as she slipped a pillow under his head, why she should be afraid of him in that coma-

“THE FOLLY OF GRANDEUR”

tose and helpless state — why even his white and passive face looked so vindictive and sinister in the dim light of the room.

But as he moved a little she started back, and caught up what things she could fling into her Gladstone bag, and put out the light, and groped her way across the room once more.

Then she flung open the door and stepped out into the hall, with a feeling that her heart was in her mouth, choking her.

She ceased running as she came to the bend in the hall, for she heard the sound of voices, and the light grew stronger. She would have dodged back, but it was too late.

Then she saw that it was Durkin, beside three jabbering and gesticulating Guardie di Pubblica Sicurezza.

“Oh, there you are!” said his equable and tranquil voice, as he removed his hat.

She did not speak, accepting silence as safer.

“I brought these gentlemen, for someone told me there was a drunken Englishman in the halls, annoying you, and I was afraid we might miss our train!”

She looked at the *gendarmes* and then on to the excited servants at their heels, in bewilderment. She was to escape, then, in safety!

“Explain to these gentlemen just what it was,” she heard the warningly suave voice of her husband

PHANTOM WIRES

saying to her, "while I hurry down and order the carriage!"

She was nervous and excited and incoherent, yet as they followed at her side down the broad marble staircase she made them understand dimly that their protection was now unnecessary. No, she had not been insulted; not directly. But she had been affronted. It was nothing — only the shock of seeing a drunken quarrel; it had alarmed and upset her. She paused, caught at the balustrade, then wavered a little; and three solicitous arms in dark cloth and metal buttons were thrust out to support her. She thanked them, in her soft contralto, gratefully. The drive through the open air, she assured them, would restore her completely.

But all the while she was thinking how needlessly and blindly and foolishly she had surrendered and lost a fortune. Her path of escape had been an open one.

"Won't they find out, and everything be known, before we can get to the station?" she asked, as the fresh night air fanned her throbbing face and brow.

"Of course they will!" said Durkin. "But we're not going to the station. We're going to the waterfront, and from there out to our steamer!"

"For where?" she asked.

"I scarcely know — but anywhere away from Genoa!"

CHAPTER XIV

AWAKENING VOICES

Frances Durkin's memory of that hurried flight from Genoa always remained with her a confusion of incongruous and quickly changing pictures. She had a recollection of stepping from her cab into a crowded sailors' *café chantant*, of pushing past chairs and tables and hurrying out through a side door, of a high wind tearing at her hair and hat, as she and Durkin still hurried down narrow, stone-paved streets, of catching the smell of salt water and the musky odor of shipping, of a sharp altercation with an obdurate customs officer in blue uniform and tall peaked cap, who stubbornly barred their way with a bare and glittering bayonet against her husband's breast, while she glibly and perseveringly lied to him, first in French, and then in English, and then in Italian.

She remembered her sense of escape when he at last reluctantly allowed them to pass, while they stumbled over railway tracks, and the rough stones of the quay pavement, and the bundles of merchandise lying scattered about them. Then she heard the impatient lapping of water, and the outside roar of the waves, and saw the harbor lights twinkling

PHANTOM WIRES

and dancing, and caught sight of the three great white shafts of light that fingered so inquisitively and restlessly along the shipping and the city front and the widening bay, as three great gloomy Italian men-of-war played and swung their electric search-lights across the night.

Then came a brief and passionate scene with a harbor ferryman, who scorned the idea of taking his boat out in such a sea, who eloquently waved his arms and told of accidents and deaths and disasters already befallen the bay that night, who flung down his cap and danced on it, in an ecstasy of passionate argumentation. She had a memory of Durkin almost as excited as the dancing harbor orator himself, raging up and down the quay with a handful of Italian paper money between his fingers, until the boatman relented. Then came a memory of tossing up and down in a black and windy sea, of creeping under a great shadow stippled with yellow lights, of grating and pounding against a ship's ladder, of an officer in rubber boots running down to her assistance, of more blinking lights, and then of the quiet and grateful privacy of her own cabin, smelling of white-lead paint and disinfectants.

She slept that night, long and heavily, and it was not until the next morning when the sun was high and they were well down the coast, that she learned they were on board the British coasting steamer *Laminian*, of the Gallaway & Papyani Line. They

AWAKENING VOICES

were to skirt the entire coast of Italy, stopping at Naples and then at Bari, and then make their way up the Adriatic to Trieste. These stops, Durkin had found, would be brief, and the danger would be small, for the *Laminian* was primarily known as a freighter, carrying out blue-stone and salt fish, and on her return cruise picking up miscellaneous cargoes of fruit. So her passenger list, which included, outside of Frank and Durkin, only a consumptive Welsh school-teacher and a broken-down clergyman from Birmingham, who kept always to his cabin, was in danger of no over-close scrutiny, either from the Neapolitan Guardie Municipali on the one hand, or from any private agents of Keenan and Penfield on the other.

Even one short day of unbroken idleness, indeed, seemed to make life over for both Frank and Durkin. Steeping themselves in that comfortable sense of security, they drew natural and easy breath once more. They knew it was but a momentary truce, an interregnum of indolence; but it was all they asked for. They could no longer nurse any illusions as to the trend of their way or the endlessness of their quest. They must now always keep moving. They might alter the manner of their progression, they might change their stroke, but the continuity of effort on their part could no more be broken than could that of a swimmer at sea. They must keep on, or go down.

PHANTOM WIRES

So, in the meantime, they plucked the day, with a touch of wistfulness born of their very distrust of the morrow.

The glimmering sapphire seas were almost motionless, the days and nights were without wind, and the equable, balmy air was like that of an American mid-summer, so that all of the day and much of the night they spent on deck, where the Welsh schoolmaster eyed them covertly, as a honeymoon couple engulfed in the selfish contentment of their own great happiness. It reminded Frank of earlier and older days, for, with the dropping away of his professional preoccupations, Durkin seemed to relapse into some more intimate and personal relationship with her. It was the first time since their flight from America, she felt, that his affection had borne out the promise of its earlier ardor. And it taught her two things. One was that her woman's natural hunger for love was not so dead as she had at times imagined. The other was that Durkin, during the last months, had drifted much further away from her than she had dreamed. It stung her into a passionate and remorseful self-promise to keep closer to him, to make herself always essential to him, to turn and bend as he might bend and turn, but always to be with him. It would lead her downward and still further downward, she told herself. But she caught solace from some blind belief that all women, through some vague opera-

AWAKENING VOICES

tion of their affectional powers, could invade the darkest mires of life, if only it were done for love, and carry away no stain. In fact, what would be a blemish in time would almost prove a thing of joy and pride. And in the meantime she was glad enough to be as happy as she was, and to be near Durkin. It was not the happiness she had once looked for, but it sufficed.

They caught sight of a corner of Corsica, and on the following night could see the glow of the iron-smelting fires on Elba, and the twinkle of the island shore-lights. From the bridge, too, through one of the officers' glasses, Frank could see, far inland across the Pontine Marshes, the gilded dome of St. Peter's, glimmering in the pellucid morning sunlight.

She called Durkin, and pointed it out to him.

"See, it's Rome!" she cried, with strangely mingled feelings. "It's St. Peter's!"

"I wish it was the Statue of Liberty and New York," he said, moodily.

She realized, then, that he was not quite so happy as he had pretended to be. And she herself, from that hour forward, shared in his secret unrest. For as time slipped away and her eye followed the heightening line of the Apennines, she knew that tranquil Tyrrhenian Sea would not long be left to her.

It was evening when they rounded the terraced

PHANTOM WIRES

vineyards of Ischia. A low red moon shone above the belching pinnacle of Vesuvius. Frank and Durkin leaned over the rail together, as they drifted slowly up the bay, the most beautiful bay in all the world, with its twilight sounds of shipping, its rattle of anchor chains, its far-off cries and echoes, and its watery, pungent Southern odors.

They watched the ship's officer put ashore to obtain *pratique*, and the yellow flag come down, and heard the signal-bells of the engine-room, as the officer returned, with a great cigar in one corner of his bearded mouth.

There was nothing amiss. There were neither Carabinieri nor Guardie di Pubblica Sicurezza to come on board with papers and cross-questions. Before the break of day their discharged cargo would be in the lighters and they would be steaming southward for the Straits of Messina.

That night, on the deserted deck, at anchor between the city and the sea, they watched the glimmering lights of Naples, rising tier after tier from the *Immacolatella Nuova* and its ship lamps to the *Palazzo di Capodimonte* and its near-by *Osservatorio*. And when the lights of the city thinned out and the crowning haze of gold melted from its hillsides, with the advancing night, Frank and Durkin sat back in their steamer-chairs and looked up at the stars, talking of Home, and of the future.

Yet the beauty of that balmy and tranquil night

AWAKENING VOICES

seemed to bring little peace of mind to Durkin. There were reasons, of late, when moments of meditation were not always moments of contentment to him. His wife had noticed that ever-increasing trouble of soul, and although she said nothing of it, she had watched him narrowly and not altogether despondently. For she knew that whatever the tumult or contest that might be taking place within the high-walled arena of his own Ego, it was a clash of forces of which she must remain merely a spectator. So she went below, leaving him in that hour of passive yet troubled thought, to stare up at the tranquil southern stars, as he meditated on life, and the meaning of life, and what lay beyond it all. She knew men and the world too well to look for any sudden and sweeping reorganization of Durkin's disturbed and restless mind. But she nursed the secret hope that out of that spiritual ferment would come some ultimate clearness of vision.

It was late when he called her up on deck again, ostensibly to catch a glimpse of Vesuvius breaking and bursting into flame, above *Barra* and *Portici*. She knew, however, that slumbering and subterranean fires other than Vesuvius had erupted into light and life. She could see it by the new misery on his moonlit face, as she sat beside him. Yet she sat there in silence; there was so little that she could say.

PHANTOM WIRES

"Do you know, you've changed, Frank, these last few months!" he at last essayed.

"Haven't there been reasons enough for it?" she asked, making no effort to conceal the bitterness of her tone.

"You're not happy, are you?"

"Are *you*?" she asked, in turn.

"Who can be happy, and think?"

She waited, passively, for him to go on again.

"You said you didn't much care what happened, so long as it kept us together, and left us satisfied."

"Isn't that enough?" she broke in, hotly, yet thrilling with the thought that he was about to tear away the mockery behind which she had tried to mask herself.

"No, it isn't enough! And now we're out of the dust of it, these last few days, I can see that it never *can* be enough. I've just been wondering where it leads to, and what it amounts to. I've had a feeling, for days, now, that there's something between us. What is it?"

"Ourselves!" she answered, at last.

"Exactly! And that is what makes me think you're wrong when you cry that you'll stoop every time I stoop. Every single crime that seems to be bringing us together is only keeping us apart. It's making you hate yourself, and because of that, hate me as well!"

AWAKENING VOICES

"I couldn't do *that!*" she protested, catching at his hands.

"But I can see it with my own eyes, whether you want to or not. It can't be helped. It's beginning to frighten me, this very willingness of yours to do the things we oughtn't to. Why, I'd be happier, even, if you did them under protest!"

"But what is the difference, if I still *do* them?"

"It would show me that you weren't as bad as I am — that you hadn't altogether given up."

"I couldn't altogether give up, and live!" she cried, with sudden passion.

"But you told me as much, that night in Monte Carlo?"

"I didn't *mean* it. I was tired out that night; I was embittered, and insane, if you like! I *want* to be good! No woman wants sin and wrongdoing! But, O Jim, can't you see, it's you, you, I want, before everything else!"

He smote the palms of his hands together, in a little gesture of impotent misery.

"That's just it — you tried to make me save myself for my own sake, — and it couldn't be done. It was a failure. And now you're trying to make me save myself for your sake —"

"It's not your salvation I want — it's *you!*"

"But it's only through being honest that I can hold and keep you; can't you see that? If I can't trust myself, I can't possibly trust *you!*"

PHANTOM WIRES

"Couldn't we try — once more?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

He looked up at the soft and velvet stars that peered down so voluptuously from a soft and velvet sky. He looked at them for many moments, before he spoke again.

"If I got back to my work again, my right and honest work, I *could* be honest!" he declared, vehemently.

"But we *are* going back," she assuaged.

"Yes, but see what we have to go through, first!"

"I know," she admitted, unhappily. "But even then, we could say that it was to be for the last time."

"As we said before — and failed!"

"But this time we needn't fail. Think what it will mean if you have your work on your transmitting camera waiting for you — months and years of hard and honest work — work that you love, work that will lead to bigger things, and give you the time, yes, and the money, you need to perfect your amplifier. But outside of that, even to have your work — surely that's enough!"

"I'd have to have you, as well!" he said, out of the silence that had fallen upon them.

"You always will, Jim, you know that!"

"But I'm afraid of myself! I'm afraid of my moods — I'm afraid of my own distrust. I have

AWAKENING VOICES

a feeling that it may hurt you, sometime, almost beyond forgiveness!"

"I'll try to understand!" she murmured. And again silence fell over them.

"I'm afraid of making promises," he said, half whimsically, half weakly, after many minutes of thought.

"I don't want you to promise — only *try!*" she pleaded, swept by a wave of gratitude that seemed to fling her more intimately than ever before into her husband's arms. Yet it was a wave, and nothing more. For it receded as it came, leaving her, a moment later, chilled and apprehensive before their over-troubled future. With a little muffled cry of emotion, almost animal-like in its inarticulate intensity, she turned to her husband, and strained him in her arms, in her human and unhappy and unsatisfied arms.

"Oh, love me!" she pleaded, brokenly. "Love me! Love me — for I need it!"

They seemed strangely nearer to each other, after that night, and the peacefulness of their cruise to Bari remained uninterrupted. And once clear of that port Durkin's nervousness somewhat lightened, for he had figured out that they would be able to connect with one of the Cunard liners at Trieste. From there, if only they escaped attention and detection in the harbor, they would be turning homeward in two days.

PHANTOM WIRES

One thing, and one thing only, lay between Frank and her husband: She had not yet found courage to tell him of the loss of the Penfield papers. And the more she thought of it, the more she dreaded it, teased and mocked by the very irony of the situation, disquieted and humiliated at the memory of her own pleadings for honesty while she herself was so far astray from the paths she was pointing out.

That sacrifice of scrupulosity on the altar of expediency, trivial as it was, was the heritage of her past life, she told herself. And she felt, vaguely, that in some form or another it would be paid for, and dearly paid for, as she had paid for everything.

It was only as they steamed into the harbor of Trieste, in the teeth of a *bora* and a high-running sea, that this woman who longed to be altogether honest allowed herself any fleeting moment of self-pity. For as she gazed up at the bald and sterile hills behind that clean and wind-swept Austrian city, she remembered they had been thus denuded that their timbers might make a foundation for Venice. She felt, in that passing mood, that her own life had been denuded, that all its softening and shrouding beauties had been cut out and carried away, that from now on she was to be torn by winds and scorched by open suns — while the best of her slept submerged, beyond the reach of her unhappy hands.

AWAKENING VOICES

But Durkin, at her side, through the driving spray and rain, pointed out to her the huge rolling bulk and the red funnels of the Cunarder.

"Thank heaven!" he said, with a sigh of relief, "we'll be in time to catch her!"

The *Laminian* dropped anchor to the windward of the liner, and as dusk settled down over the harbor Frank took a wordless pleasure in studying the shadowy hulk which was to carry her back to America, to her old life and her old associations. But she was wondering how she should tell him of the loss of the Penfield securities. It was true that the very crimes that should have bound them together were keeping them apart!

Suddenly she ran to the companionway and called down to her husband.

"Look!" she said, under her breath, as he came to the rail, "they're talking with their wireless!"

She pointed to the masthead of the Cunarder, where, through the twilight, she could "spell" the spark, signal by signal and letter by letter, as the current broke from the head of the installation wires to the hollow metal mast, from which ran the taut-strung wires connecting, in turn, with the operating office just aft and above the engine-rooms.

"Listen," she said, for in the lull of the wind they could hear the short, crisp spit of the spark as it spelt out its mysterious messages.

Durkin caught her arm, and listened, intently,

PHANTOM WIRES

watching the little appearing and disappearing green spark, spelling off the words with narrowing eyes.

"They're talking with the station up on the mainland. Do you hear what it is? Can't you make it out?"

It was, of course, the Continental, and not the Morse, code, and it was not quite the same as stooping over and listening to the crisp, incisive pulsations of a "sounder." But Frank heard and saw and pieced together enough of the message to clutch, in turn, at Durkin's arm, and wait with quickened breath for the answering spark-play.

"No — such — persons — on — board — send — fuller — description."

There was a silence of a minute or two, and then the mysterious Hertzian voice lisped out once more.

"Description — not — forwarded — by — Embassy — man — and — wife — are wanted — for robbery — at — Monte — Carlo — also — at — Genoa — name — Durgin — or — Durkin."

The listening man and woman looked at each other, and still waited.

"Oh, this *is* luck!" said the listener, fervently, as he drew a deep breath. "This *is* luck!"

"Listen, they're answering again!" cried Frank.

"Why — not — confer — with — Trieste — authorities — will — you — please — telephone — our — agents — to — send — out — tender — to take — off — Admiral — Stuart."

AWAKENING VOICES

Then came the silence again.

“Yes,” sounded the minute electric tongue from the mountain-top, so many miles away. “Good — night!”

“Good — night!” replied the articulate mass of heaving steel, swinging at her anchor chains.

CHAPTER XV

WIRELESS MESSAGES

"What are we to do?" asked Frances Durkin, turning from the masthead to her husband's studious face.

"We've got to jump at our chance, and get on board the *Slavonia* over there!"

"In the face of those messages?"

"It's the messages that simplify things for us. All we now have to do is to get on board in such a manner that the ship's officers will have no suspicions. They mustn't dream of linking us with the runaway couple who are being looked for. That means that we must not, in the first place, appear together, and, in the second, of course, that we must travel and appear as utter strangers!"

"But supposing Keenan himself is on board that steamer?" parried Frank.

"It is obvious that he isn't, for then it would be quite unnecessary to send out any such messages by wireless."

"But supposing it's Pobloff?"

"Didn't you say that Pobloff would never follow us out of Europe?"

WIRELESS MESSAGES

"But even if it's Keenan?" she persisted.

"Then you must remember that you are Miss Allen, at your old trade of picking up little art relics for wealthy families in England and America. You will have yourself rowed directly over to the *Slavonia's* landing ladder — you can see it there, not two hundred feet away — and go on board and secure a stateroom from the purser. The clearing papers can be attended to later. I'll have the *Laminian* dingey take me ashore, somewhere down near Barcola, if it can possibly be done in this wind. Then I'll come out to the *Slavonia* later, having, you see, just arrived on the train from Venice!"

She shook her head doubtfully. An inapposite and irrational dread of seeing him return to the dangers of land took possession of her. She knew it would be impossible for her to put this untimely feeling into words, so that he would see and understand it; and, such being the case, she argued with him stubbornly to alter his plan, and to allow her to be the one to go ashore, while he went immediately to the liner.

He consented to this at last, a little reluctantly, but the thought that he was safely installed in his cabin, as she made her way shoreward through the dusk, in the pitching and dripping little dingey, consoled her for the sense of loneliness and desertion which her position brought to her. The wind had

PHANTOM WIRES

increased, by this time, and the rain was coming down in slanting and stinging sheets. But her spirit did not fail her.

From the water-front, deserted and rain-swept, she called a passing street carriage, and drove to the Hotel Bristol. There she sent the driver to ask if any luggage had arrived from Venice for Miss Allen. None had arrived, and Miss Allen, naturally, appeared in great perturbation before the sympathetic but helpless hotel manager. She next inquired if it was possible to ascertain when the Cunard steamer sailed.

"The *Slavonia*, madam, leaves the harbor at daybreak!"

"At daybreak! Then I must go on board tonight, at once!"

"I fear it is impossible, madam. The *bora* is blowing, as you see, and the harbor is empty!"

"But I *must* get on board!" she cried, and this time her dismay and despair were not mere dissimulation.

The landlord shrugged his shoulders, while Frank, calling out a peremptory order, in Italian, to her driver, left him at the curb looking after her through the driving rain, in bewilderment.

She went first to the steamship offices. They were closed. Then she sought out the Cunard tender — it was lightless and deserted. Then she hurried to the water-front, driving up and down along

WIRELESS MESSAGES

that lonely stretch of deserted quays, back and forth, coaxing, wheedling, trying to bribe indifferent and placid-eyed boatmen to row her out to her steamer. It was useless. It could not be done. It was not worth while to risk either their boats or their lives, even in the face of the fifty, one hundred, two hundred *lira* which she flaunted in their unperturbed faces.

Grating and rocking against the quayside, above the heads of the group about her, she caught sight of a white-painted steam launch, with a high-standing bow, and on it a uniformed officer, smoking in the rain.

She approached him without hesitation. Could he, in any way, carry her out to her steamer? She pointed to where the lights of the *Slavonia* shone and glimmered through the gray darkness. They looked indescribably warm and homelike to her peering eyes.

The officer looked her up and down in stolid Austrian amazement, trying to catch a glimpse of her face through her wet and flattened traveling veil. Could he take her out to her steamer? No; he was afraid not. Yes, it was true he had steam up, and that his crew were aboard, but this was the official patrol of the Captain of the Port — it was not to carry passengers — it was solely for the imperial service of the Austrian Government.

She pleaded with him, weeping. He was sorry,

PHANTOM WIRES

but the Captain of the Port would permit no such irregularity.

"Where is the Captain of the Port, then?" she demanded.

The officer puffed his cigar slowly, and looked her up and down once more. He was in his office in the Administration Building — but the officer's shrug and smile told her that it was, in his eyes, no easy thing to secure admission to the Captain of the Port. The very phrase, "the Captain of the Port," that had been bandied back and forth for the last few minutes, became odious to her; it seemed to designate the title of some august and supernatural and tyrannous power who held her life and death in his hands.

She turned on her heel and drove at once to the Administration Building. Here, at the entrance, she was confronted by a uniformed sentry, who, after questioning her, passed her on to still another uniformed personage, who called an orderly, and sent that somewhat bewildered messenger and his charge to the anteroom of the Captain of the Port's private secretary. Frank had a sense of hurrying down long and jail-like corridors, of ascending stairs and passing sentries, of questionings and consultations, of at last being ushered into a softly-lighted, softly-carpeted room, where a white-bearded, benignant-browed official sat in a swivel-chair before a high walnut desk.

WIRELESS MESSAGES

He shook his head mournfully as he listened to her story. But she did not give up. She even amazed him a little by the sheer impetuosity of her speech.

"Is there much at stake, *signorina?*" he asked, at last, as she paused for breath.

"*A man's soul is at stake!*" was the answering cry that rang through the quiet room.

The Captain of the Port smiled a little cynically, scarcely understanding.

Yet something almost fatherly about his sad and wistful face steeled her to still further persistence, and she afterward remembered, always a little shamefaced, that she had wept and clung to his arm and wept still again, before she melted and bent him from his official determination. She saw, through blurred and misty eyes, his hand go out and touch an electric button at his side. She saw him write three lines on a sheet of paper, an attendant appear, and heard an order briefly and succinctly given. She had gained her end.

The Captain of the Port rose as she turned to go from the room.

"Good night, and also good-bye, *signorina!*" he said quietly, with his stately, old-world bow.

She paused at the door, wordlessly demeaned, momentarily ashamed of herself. She felt, in some way, how miserable and low and self-seeking she stood beneath him, how high and firm he stood

PHANTOM WIRES

above her, with his calm and disinterested kindness.

She turned back to him once more.

"Good-bye," she said inadequately, in her tearful and tremulous contralto. "Good-bye, and thank you, again and again!"

He bowed from where he stood in the center of his quiet and sheltered office, seeming, to her, a strangely old-time and courtly figure, a proud yet unpretentious student of life at peace with his own soul. The years would come and go, the years that would so age and wear and torture *her*, but he would reign on in that quiet office unchanged, contented, still at peace with himself and all his world. "Good-bye," she said for the third time, from the doorway.

Then she hurried down to her waiting carriage and raced for the quay. There she took an almost malicious delight in the bustle and perturbation to which her return gave sudden rise. The sleepy and sullen crew were stirred out, signals were clanged, ropes were cast off; and down in her little narrow cabin, securely shut off from the driving spray, she could feel and hear the boat lurch and pound through the waves. Then came shrill calls of the whistle above, the sound of gruff voices, the rasp and scrape of heaving woodwork against woodwork, the grind of the ladder against the boat-fenders, the cry of the officer telling her to hurry.

WIRELESS MESSAGES

She walked up the *Slavonia's* ladder steadily, demurely, for under the lights of the promenade deck she could see the clustering, inquisitive heads, where a dozen crowding passengers tried to ascertain just who could be coming aboard with such ceremony.

Leaning over the rail, with a cigar in his mouth, she caught sight of her husband. As she passed him, at the head of the ladder, he spoke one short sentence to her, under his breath.

It was a commonplace enough little sentence, but as the purport of it filtered through her tired mind it stung her into both a new wariness of attitude and thought and a new gratefulness of heart.

For as she passed him, without one betraying emotion or one glance aside, he had whispered to her, under his breath:

"Keenan is here, on board. Be careful!"

CHAPTER XVI

BROKEN INSULATION

The *Slavonia* was well down the Adriatic before Keenan was seen on deck. Both Frank and Durkin, by that time, had met in secret more than once, and had talked over their predicament and decided on a plan of action.

"Whatever you do," Durkin warned her, "don't let Keenan suspect who I am! Don't let him get a glimpse of you with me. My part now has got to be what you'd call 'armed neutrality.' If anything unforeseen turns up — and that can only be at Palermo or Gibraltar — I'll be watching near by to come to your help in some way — but, whatever you do, don't let Keenan suspect this!"

"You mean that we mustn't even look at each other?" she cried, in mock dismay.

"Precisely," he continued.

"What if an officer should introduce you to me?" She laughed a little.

The untimeliness of her laughter disturbed him. More and more often, during the last few weeks, he had beheld the signs of some callousing and hardening process going on within her.

BROKEN INSULATION

"Oh, in that case," he answered, "you'll find me very glum and uncongenial. You'll probably be only too glad to leave me alone!"

She nodded her head in meditative assent. Her problem was a difficult one.

"Jim," she said suddenly, "why should we play this waiting and retreating game during the next two weeks? Here we have Keenan on board, with nothing to interfere with our operations. Why can't we work a little harder to win his confidence?"

"We?" asked the other.

"Well, why couldn't *I*? All along, during those days in Genoa, I had the feeling that he would have believed in me, if some little outside accident had only confirmed his faith in me. We can't tell, of course, just what he found out after that Pobloff affair, or just how he interpreted it, or whether he is as much in the dark as ever. If that *is* the case, we may stand just where we were before with Keenan!"

"But I thought you wanted to get away from this sort of thing?"

"I do — when the time comes," she evaded, tortured by the thought that she had withheld anything from him. "I do — but are we to let Keenan go, when we have him so close to us?"

"Then go ahead and both capture and captivate him!" said Durkin, with a voice that was gruff only

PHANTOM WIRES

because it was indifferent. Still again he was oppressed by the feeling that she was passing beyond his power.

"But see, Jim — I'm getting so old and ugly!" And again she laughed, with her own show of indifference, though her husband knew, by the wistfulness of her face, that she was struggling to hold back some deeper and stronger current of feeling. So he thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and refused to meet her eyes for a second time.

"I don't see why we should be afraid of either Palermo or Gibraltar," Durkin went on at last, with a half-impatient business-is-business glance about him. "Keenan is alone in this. He has no agents over here, that we know of, and he daren't put anything in the hands of the authorities. He's a runaway, a fugitive with the district-attorney's office after him, and he has to move just as quietly as we do. Mark my words, where he will make his first move, and do anything he's going to do, will be in New York!"

"Then why can't I prepare the ground for the New York situation, whatever it may be?" she demanded.

"You mean by standing pat with Keenan?"

"Precisely."

"Then how will you begin?"

"By sending him a note at once, telling him how I slipped away from Genoa to Venice, and asking

BROKEN INSULATION

him the meaning of the Pobloff attack — in other words, by appearing so actively suspicious of *him* that he'll forget to be suspicious of *me*."

"And what do you imagine he will answer?"

"I think he will send me back word to say absolutely nothing about the Genoa episode — he may even claim that it's quite beyond his comprehension. That will give us a chance to meet more naturally, and then we can talk things over more minutely, at our leisure."

Durkin wheeled on her, half-angrily. Through all their career, he had remained strangely unschooled to any such concession as this. It was an affront to his dormant and masculine spirit of guardianship; it seemed a blow in the teeth of his nurturing instinct, an overriding of his prerogatives of a man and a husband.

"While you're making love to him on the bridge-deck, on moonlight nights!" he flung back at her, bitterly.

"Do you think I could?" she murmured, with a ghost of a sigh.

Durkin emitted a little impatient oath.

"Don't swear, Jim!" she reproved him.

The vague prescience that some day he should lose her, that in some time yet to be she should pass beyond his reach and control, still again filtered through his consciousness, like a dark and corroding seepage. He caught her by the arm roughly, and

PHANTOM WIRES

looked into her face, for one silent and scrutinizing minute.

"Do you care?" she asked, and it seemed to him there was a tremor of happiness in her tone.

"I *hate* this part of the business!" he cried, with still another oath.

"Oh, do you care?" she reiterated, as her arms crept about him valiantly, yet a little timidly.

He surrendered, against his will, to the gentle artillery of her tears. They startled and unmanned him for a little, they came so unexpectedly, for as he crushed her in his sudden responding embrace, the impulse, at that time and in that place, seemed the incongruous outcropping of some deeply submerged stratum of feeling.

"If you *do* care, Jim, why do you never tell me so?" she demanded of him, in gentle reproof. He then noticed, for the first time, the hungry and unsatisfied look that brooded over her face. He confessed to himself unhappily that something about him was altered.

"This cursed business knocks that sort of thing out of you," he expiated, discomforted at the thought that a feeling so long disregarded could grip him so keenly. And all the while he was torn by the misery of two contending impressions; one, the dim, subliminal foreboding that she was ordained for worthier and cleaner hands than his, the other, that this upheaval of the emotions still had



“‘Then why are you unkind to me?’ she asked, more calmly now.” *Page 165.*

the power
wordless
congruity
vaguely
as he lo
studied t
and the
impulse,
eloquent
stronger

“ I lov
cried, wi
as she la
with the
he stoop
mouth.

Yet a
touch of
he foug
ated cry

“ The
more ca
“ Oh,
cried.

“ The
be give
asked, v
his face

“ God

BROKEN INSULATION

the power to shake and bewilder and leave him so wordlessly unhappy. It was the ever-recurring incongruity, the repeated syncretism, which made him vaguely afraid of himself and of the future. Then, as he looked down into her face once more, and studied the shadowy violet eyes, and the low brow, and the short-lipped mobile mouth so laden with impulse, and the soft line of the chin and throat so eloquent of weakness and yielding, a second and stronger wave of feeling surged through him.

"I love you, Frank; I tell you I do love you!" he cried, with a voice that did not seem his own. And as she lay back in his arms, weak and surrendering, with the heavy lashes closed over the shadowy eyes, he stooped and kissed her on her red, melancholy mouth.

Yet as he did so the act seemed to take on the touch of something solemn and valedictory, though he fought back the impression with his still reiterated cry of "I love you!"

"Then why are you unkind to me?" she asked, more calmly now.

"Oh, can't you see I want you — all of you?" he cried.

"Then why do you leave me where so much must be given to other things, to hateful things?" she asked, with her mild and melancholy eyes still on his face.

"God knows, I've wanted you out of it, often

PHANTOM WIRES

enough!" he avowed, desolately. And she made no effort to alleviate his suffering.

"Then why not take me out of it, and keep me out of it?" she demanded, with a cold directness that brought him wheeling about on her.

He suddenly caught her by the shoulders, and held her away from him, at arms' length. She thought, at first, that it was a gesture of repudiation; but she soon saw her mistake. "I swear to God," he was saying to her, with a grim tremor of determination in his voice as he spoke, "I swear to God, once we are out of this affair, *it will be the last!*"

"It will be the last!" repeated the woman, broodingly, but her words were not so much a declaration as a prayer.

It w
other t
antine
down,
berth i
world
contine
board i
the cus
operato
City, a
for all

Ther
kin, sit
there
and gh
after t
ranean
of the
to be b

She
tions o

CHAPTER XVII

THE TANGLED SKEIN

It was the *Slavonia's* last night at sea. In another twelve hours the pilot would be aboard, Quarantine would be passed, the engines would be slowed down, and the great steamer would be lying at her berth in the North River, discharging her little world of life into the scattered corners of a waiting continent. Already, on the green baize bulletin-board in the companionway the purser had posted the customary notice to the effect that the steamer's operator was now in connection with New York City, and that wireless messages might be received for all points in Europe and America.

There was a chill in the air, and to Frances Durkin, sitting beside Keenan on the promenade deck, there seemed something restless and phantasmal and ghostlike in the thin, North Atlantic sunlight, after the mellow and opulent gold of the Mediterranean calms. It seemed to her to be a presage of the restless movement and tumult which she felt to be before her.

She had not been altogether amiss in her predictions of what the past fortnight would bring forth.

PHANTOM WIRES

She had erred a little, she felt, in her estimate of Keenan's character; yet she had not been mistaken in the course of action which he was to pursue.

For, from the beginning, after the constraint of their first meeting on board had passed away, he had shown her a direct and open friendliness which now and then even gave rise to a vague and uneasy suspicion in her own mind. This friendliness had brought with it an easier exchange of confidences, then a seeming intimacy and good-fellowship which, at times, made it less difficult for Frank to lose herself in her rôle.

Keenan, one starlit night under the shadow of a lifeboat amidships, had even acknowledged to her the dubiousness of the mission that had taken him abroad. Later, he had outlined to her what his life had been, telling her of his struggles when a penniless student of the City law school, of his early and unsavory criminal-court efforts, and his unhappy plunge into the morasses of Eighth-ward politics, of his campaign against the "Dave Kelly" gang, and the death of his political career which came with that opposition, of his swinging round to the tides of the times and taking up with bucket-shop work, of his "shark" lawyer practices and his police-court legal trickeries, of his gradual identification with the poolroom interests and his first gleaning of gambling-house lore, of his drifting deeper and deeper into this life of unearned

increme
which
Commit
of retai
services
Saratog
said litt
Althoug
might l
natural
nal, low
was a c
and suc
crime, t
the digi
and soc

Yet,
enough
too muc
to make
mitted t
aster —
and sul
when c
game, l
cedure,
contin
of thos
he decl

THE TANGLED SKEIN

increment, of his fight with the Bar Association, which was taken and lost before the Judiciary Committee of Congress, and of his final offer of retainer from Penfield, and private and expert services after the second raid on that gambler's Saratoga house. Frank could understand why he said little of the purpose that took him to Europe. Although she waited anxiously for any word he might let fall on that subject, she respected his natural reticence in the matter. He was a criminal, low and debased enough, it was true; but he was a criminal of such apparent largeness of mind and such openness of spirit that his very life of crime, to the listening woman, seemed to take on the dignity of a Nietzsche-like abrogation of all civic and social ties.

Yet, in all his talk, he was open and frank enough in his confession of attitude. He had seen too much of criminal life to have many illusions or to make many mistakes about it. He openly admitted that the end of all careers of crime was disaster — if not open and objective, at least hidden and subjective. He had no love for it all. But when once, through accident or necessity, in the game, he protested, there was but one line of procedure, and that was to bring to illicit activity that continuous intelligence which marked the conduct of those who stood ready to combat it. Society, he declared, owed its safety to the fact that the

PHANTOM WIRES

criminal class, as a rule, was made up of its least intelligent members. When criminality went allied with a shrewd mind and a sound judgment — and a smile curled about Keenan's melancholy Celtic mouth as he spoke — it became transplanted, practically, to the sphere and calling of high finance.

But if the defier of the Establish Rule preferred the simpler order of things, he continued, his one hope lay in the power of making use of his fellow-criminals, by applying to the unorganized smaller fry of his profession some particular far-seeing policy and some deliberate purpose, and through doing so standing remote and immune, as all centres of generalship should stand.

This, he went on to explain, was precisely what Penfield had done, with his art palaces and his European jaunts and his doling out of political patronage and his prolonged defiance of all the police powers of a great and active city. He had organized and executed with Napoleonic comprehensiveness; he had fattened on the daily tribute of less imaginative subordinates in sin. And now he was fortified behind his own gold. He was being harassed and hounded for the moment — but the emotional wave of reform that was calling for his downfall would break and pass, and leave him as secure as ever.

“Now, my belief is,” Keenan told the listening woman, “that if you find you cannot possibly be the

Napole
to be t
tach m
stead c
nesses
erator.
and I g

“Th
be pun

He

two.

“No
someth
Americ

him.

sents
stands

battle
gain, a

betwe
the ille

“Yo

“I
Bower

you tr
place -

takes
him th
dange

THE TANGLED SKEIN

Napoleon of the campaign, it is well worth while to be the Ney. I mean that it has paid me to attach myself to a man who is bigger than I am, instead of going through all the dangers and meanesses and hardships of a petty independent operator. It pays me in two ways. I get the money, and I get the security."

"Then you believe this man Penfield will never be punished?"

He thought over the question for a moment or two.

"No, I don't think he ever will. He stands for something that is as active and enduring in our American life as are the powers arrayed against him. You see, the district-attorney's office represents the centripetal force of society. Penfield stands for the centrifugal force. They fight and battle against one another, and first one seems to gain, and then the other, and all the while the fight between the two, the struggle between the legal and the illegal, makes up the balance of everyday life."

"You mean that we're all gamblers, at heart?"

"I mean that every Broadway must have its Bowery, that the world can only be so good — if you try to make it better, it breaks out in a new place — and the master criminal is a man who takes advantage of this nervous leakage. We call him the Occasional Offender — and he's the most dangerous man in all society. In other words, the

PHANTOM WIRES

passion, as you say, for gambling, is implanted in all of us; the thought of some vast hazard, of some lucky stroke of fate, is in your head as often as it is in mine. You tell me you are a hard-working art collector, making a decent living by gadding about Europe picking up knick-knacks. Now, suppose I came to you with a proposal like this: Suppose I told you that without any greater personal discomfort, without any greater danger or any harder work, you might, say, join forces with me and at one play of the game haul in fifty thousand dollars from men who no more deserve this money than we do, I'll warrant that you'd think over it pretty seriously."

The woman at his side laughed a little, and then gave a significantly careless shrug of her small shoulders.

"Who wouldn't?" she said, and their eyes met questioningly, in the uncertain light.

"Women, as a rule, are timid," he said at last. "They usually prefer the slower and safer road."

"Sometimes they get tired of it. Then, too, it isn't always safe just because it's slow!"

It seemed to give him the opening for which he had been waiting. He looked at her with undisguised yet calculating admiration.

"I'll wager *you* would never be afraid of a thing, if you once got into it, or wanted to get into it!" he cried.

She li
ing little

"I've
mitted s

"I kr

"Wh

"I co

age, and
and you
gether.

and you

There
glance a
him.

"The
she ask

She l
ously t
scrutiny

some r
tion.

"An
ingly.

"We
worked

Ever
could n
zled fa

way, s

THE TANGLED SKEIN

She laughed again, a self-confident and reassuring little laugh.

"I've been through too many things," she admitted simply, "to talk about being thin-skinned!"

"I knew as much!"

"Why do you say that?"

"I could see it from the first. You've got courage, and you're shrewd, and you know the world — and you've got what's worth all the rest put together. I mean that you're a fine-looking woman, and you've never let the fact spoil you!"

There was no mistaking the pregnancy of the glance and question which she next directed toward him.

"Then why couldn't you take me in with you?" she asked, with a quiet-toned solemnity.

She had the sensations of a skater on treacherously thin ice, as she watched the slow, cautious scrutiny of his unbetraying face. But now, for some reason, she knew neither fear nor hesitation.

"And what if we did?" he parried temporizingly.

"Well, what if we did? — men and women have worked together before this!"

Even in the dim light that surrounded them she could notice the color go out of his intent and puzzled face. From that moment, in some mysterious way, she lost the last shred of sympathy for his

PHANTOM WIRES

abject and isolated figure, and yet she was the one, she knew, who had been most unworthy.

"And do you understand what it would imply — what it would mean?" he asked slowly and with significant emphasis.

She could not repress her primal woman's instinct of revolt from the thoughts which his quiet interrogation sent at her, like an arrow. But she struggled to keep down the little shudder which woke and stirred within her. He had done nothing more than respond to her tacit challenge. But she feared him, more and more. Until then she had advanced discreetly and guardedly; and as she had advanced and taken her new position he had as guardedly fallen back and held his own. It had been a strange and silent campaign, and all along it had filled Frank with a sense of stalking and counter-stalking. Now they were plunging into the naked and primordial conflict of man against woman, without reservations and without indirections — and it left her with a vague fear of some impending helplessness and isolation. She had a sudden prompting to delay or evade that final step, to temporize and wait for some yet undefined reinforcements.

"And you realize what it means?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said in her soft contralto. A feeling of revulsion that was almost nausea was consuming her. This, then, she told herself, was the bit-

THE TANGLED SKEIN

ter and humiliating price she must pay for her tainted triumph.

“And would you accept and agree to the conditions — the only conditions?” he demanded, in a voice now hatefully tremulous with some rising and controlling emotion. She had the feeling, as she listened, that she was a naked slave girl, being jested over and bidden for on the auction block of some barbaric king. She felt that it was time to end the mockery; she no longer even pitied him.

“Listen!” she suddenly cried, “they are beginning to send the wireless!”

They listened side by side, to the brisk kick and spurt and crackle of the fluid spark leaping between the two brass knobs in the little operating-room just above where they sat. They could hear it distinctly, above the drone of the wind and the throb of the engines and the quiet evening noises of the orderly ship — spitting and clattering out into space. To the impatient man it was nothing more than the ripple of unintelligent and unrelated sounds.

To the wide-eyed and listening woman it was a decorous and coherent march of dots and dashes, carrying with it thought and meaning and system. And as each word fluttered off on its restless Hertzian wings, like a flock of hurrying carrier-pigeons through the night, the woman listened and translated and read, word by word.

“Then we go it together — you and I — for all

PHANTOM WIRES

it's worth!" Keenan was saying, with his face near hers and his hand on her motionless arm.

"Listen," she said sharply. "It — it sounds like a bag of lightning getting loose, doesn't it?"

For the message which was leaping from the lonely and dipping ship to the receiving wires at the Highland Heights Station was one that she intended to read, word by word.

It was a simple enough message, but as it translated itself into intelligible coherence it sent a creeping thrill of conflicting fear and triumph through her. For the words which sped across space from key to installation-pole read:

"Woman — named — Allen — will — bring — papers — to — P — Field's — downtown — house — I — will — wait — word — from — you — at — Philadelphia — advise — me — of — situation — there — and — wire — D — in — time — Ker-rigan."

It was only then that she was conscious of the theatricalities from which she had emerged, of the man so close beside her, still waiting for her play-acting word of decision. It was only then, too, that she fully understood the adroitness, the smooth and supple alertness, of her ever-wary and watchful companion.

But she rose to the situation without a visible sign of flinching. Taking one deep breath, as though it were a final and comprehensive gulp of

unmena
and ste
"Ye
it's for
"An
gin, yo
"To
there v
her tor
doubted

THE TANGLED SKEIN

unmenaced life, she turned to him, and gazed quietly and steadily into his questioning eyes.

"Yes, if you say it, I'm with you now, whether it's for good or bad!"

"And this is final!" he demanded. "If you begin, you'll stick to it!"

"To the bitter end!" she answered grimly. And there was something so unemotionally decisive in her tone that he no longer hesitated, no longer doubted her.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEVERED KNOT

It was in the gray of the early morning, as the *Slavonia* steamed from the Upper Bay into the North River and the serrated skyline of Manhattan bit into the thin rind of sunrise to the east, that Durkin and Frank came suddenly together in a deserted companionway. She had been praying for one hour more, and then all would be set right.

"I want to see you!" he said sharply.

She looked about to make sure they were unobserved.

"I know it—but I daren't run the risk—now!"

"Why not now? What has changed?" he demanded.

"I tell you we can't, Jim! We might be seen here, any minute!"

"What difference should that make?"

"It makes every difference!"

"By heaven, I've *got* to see you!" For the first time she realized the force of the dull rage that burned within him. "I want to know what's before us, and how we're going to act!"

"I tell you, Jim, I can't talk to you here!"

"You
"Can't
"Trus
ness like
"It is
it!" Ar
terness o
last night
a feeling
on this sl
time. A
only dra
out, in th
"Yes,
I'm sick
"Oh,
wail. "
His or
out of th
escape h
could m
only pay
himself,
should
ready, i
"Wo
her voic
to see t
would s

THE SEVERED KNOT

"You mean you don't care to!" he flashed out.

"Can't you trust me?" she pleaded.

"Trust you? What has trust to do in a business like ours?"

"It is *your* business — until you put an end to it!" And her voice shook with the repressed bitterness of her spirit. "I tried to see you quietly, last night, but you had gone to your cabin. I have a feeling that we're under the eye of every steward on this ship — I *know* we are being watched, all the time. And if you were seen here with me, it would only drag you in, and make it harder to straighten out, in the end. Can't you see what's going on?"

"Yes, I *have* been seeing what's going on — and I'm sick of it!"

"Oh, not *that*, Jim!" she cried, in a little muffled wail. "You know it would never be that!"

His one dominating feeling was that which grew out of the stinging consciousness that she wanted to escape him, that the moment had come when she could make an effort to evade him. But he was only paying the penalty! He had sowed, he told himself, and it was only natural that in time he should reap! Already he was losing her! Already, it might be, he had lost her!

"Won't you be reasonable?" she was saying, and her voice sounded faint and far away. "I've got to see this through now, and one little false move would spoil everything! I must land by myself.

PHANTOM WIRES

I'll write you, at the Bartholdi, when and where to meet me!"

The noise of approaching footsteps sounded down the carpeted passageway. He had caught her by the arm, but now he released his grip and turned away.

"Quick," she whispered, "here's somebody coming!"

She was struggling with the ends of her veil, and Durkin was aimlessly pacing away from her, when the hurrying steward brushed by them. A moment later he returned, followed by a second steward, but by this time Durkin had made his way to the upper deck, and was looking with quiescent rage at the quays and walls and skyscrapers of New York.

Before the steamer wore into the wharf Frank had seen Keenan and a last few words had passed between them. She sternly schooled herself to calmness, for she felt her great moment had come.

At his request that her first mission be to deliver a sealed packet at the office of Richard Penfield, in the lower West Side, she evinced neither surprise nor displeasure. It was all in the day's work, she protested, as Keenan talked on, giving her more definite instructions and still again impressing on her the need for secrecy.

She took the sealed package without emotion — the little package for which she had worked so hard

and lost
apathetic
she passed
way. S
of the g
pitied hi
ness.

"Don
teeth, as
riedly n
It was r
Keenan'
she real
had been
was tin
emotion
later.

She
wooden
muffled
in the g
sense o
triumpl

As s
opened
by a n
as the
her.
slam.

THE SEVERED KNOT

and lost so much and waited so long — and as apathetically secreted it. Equally without emotion she passed Durkin, standing at the foot of the gangway. Something in his face, however, warned her of the grim mood that burned within him. She pitied him, not for his suffering, but for his blindness.

“Don’t follow me!” she muttered, between her teeth, as she swept unbetrayingly by him, and hurriedly made her way out past the customs barrier. It was not until she had reached the closed carriage Keenan’s steward had already ordered for her that she realized how apparently cursory and precipitate had been that hurried word of warning. But there was time for neither explanation nor display of emotion. It could all be made clear and put right, later.

She heard the nervous trample of hoofs on the wooden flooring, the battle of truck-wheels, the muffled sound of calling voices, and she leaned back in the gloomy cab and closed her eyes with a great sense of escape, with a sense of relief tinged with triumph.

As she did so the door of her turning cab was opened, and the sudden square of light was blocked by a massive form. She gave a startled little cry as the figure swung itself up into the seat beside her. Then the curtained door swung shut, with a slam. It seemed like the snap of a steel trap.

PHANTOM WIRES

"Hello, there, Frank!—I've been looking out for you!" said the intruder, with a taunt of mockery in his easy laugh.

It was MacNutt. She gaped at him stupidly, with an inarticulate throaty gasp, half of protest, half of bewilderment.

"You see, I know you, Frank, and Keenan doesn't!" And again she felt the sting of his scoffing laughter.

She looked at the subdolous, pale-green eyes, with their predatory restlessness, at the square-blocked, flaccid jaw, and the beefy, animal-like massiveness of the strong neck, at the huge form odorous of gin and cigar smoke, and the great, hairy hands marked with their purplish veinings. It seemed like a ghost out of some long-past and only half-remembered life. It came back to her with all the hideousness of a momentarily forgotten nightmare, made newly hideous by the sanities of ordered design and open daylight in which it intruded. And her heart sank and hope burned out of her.

"You! How dare *you* come here?" she demanded, with a show of hot defiance.

He looked at her collectedly and studiously, with an approving little side-shake of the bull-dog, pugnacious-looking head.

"You're the same fine looker!" was all he said, with an appreciative clucking of the throat. Oh,

how she
stood!

By the
the tang
citywar
wich vi

Frank
tude at
trap in
not lea
ond fee
lowing
would
need—
held he
never l
literate
paid f
Keenan
now—
but sh
presen
wall a
in Eu
meeting
sleep.

Mac
though
said:

THE SEVERED KNOT

how she hated him, and everything for which he stood!

By this time they had threaded their way out of the tangled traffic of West street, and were rumbling cityward through the narrower streets of Greenwich village.

Frank's first intelligible feeling was one of gratitude at the thought that Durkin had escaped the trap into which she herself had fallen. That did not leave the situation quite so hopeless. Her second feeling was one of fear that he might be following her, then one that he might not, that he would not be near her in the coming moment of need — for she knew that now of all times MacNutt held her in the hollow of his hand — that now, as never before, he would frustrate and crush and obliterate her. There were old transgressions to be paid for; there were old scores to be wiped out. Keenan and his Penfield wealth were nothing to her now — she was no longer plotting for the future, but shrinking away from her dark and toppling present, that seemed about to buckle like a falling wall and crush her as it fell. Month after month, in Europe, she had known visions of some such meeting as this, through nightmare and troubled sleep. And now it was upon her.

MacNutt seemed to follow her line of flashing thought, for he emitted a short bark of a laugh and said: "It's pretty small, this world, isn't it? I

PHANTOM WIRES

guessed that we'd be meetin' again before I'd swung round the circle!"

"Where are we going?" she demanded, trying to lash her disordered and straggling thoughts into coherence.

"We're goin' to the neatest and completest pool-room in all Manhattan!"

"Poolroom?" she cried.

"Yes, my dear; I mean that we're drivin' to Penfield's brand-new downtown house, where, as somewhat of a hiker in the past, you'll see things done in a mighty whole-souled and princely fashion!"

"But why should I go there? And why with you?"

"Oh, I'm on Penfield's list, just at present, kind o' helpin' to soothe some of the city police out o' their reform tantrums. And you've got about a quarter of a million of Penfield's securities on you — so I thought I'd kind o' keep an eye on you — this time!"

Her first impulse was to throw herself headlong from the cab door. But this, she warned herself, would be both useless and dangerous. Through the curtained window she could see that they were now in the more populous districts of the city, and that the speed at which they were careering down the empty car-tracks was causing early morning foot-passengers to stop and turn and gaze after

them i
herself
tion.

With
the do
driver
he had

She
should
peated
carriag
fightin
ing de
cab sw
a patro
from
careeri
to a s
crowd

A h
ficer br
the sur
the far
dove
the off

It w
blind f
tried t
ishly,

THE SEVERED KNOT

them in wonder. It was now, or never, she told herself, with a sudden deeper breath of determination.

With a quick motion of her hand she flung open the door, and leaning out, called shrilly for the driver to stop. He went on unheeding, as though he had not heard her cry.

She felt MacNutt's fierce pull at her leaning shoulder, but she struggled away from him, and repeated her cry. A street boy or two ran after the carriage, adding to the din. She was tearing and fighting in MacNutt's futile grasp by this time, calling desperately as she fought him back. As the cab swerved about an obstructing delivery-wagon a patrolman sprang at the horses' heads, was jerked from his feet, and was carried along with the careering horse. But in the end he brought them to a stop. Before he could reach the cab door a crowd had collected.

A hansom dashed up as the now infuriated officer brushed and elbowed the crowd aside. Above the surging heads, in that hansom, Frank could see the familiar figure, as it leaped to the ground and dove through the closing gap of humanity, after the officer.

It was Durkin; and now, in a sudden passion of blind fear for him she sprang from the cab-step and tried to beat him back with her naked hands, foolishly, uselessly, for she knew that if once together

PHANTOM WIRES

MacNutt and he would fall on one another and fight it out to the end.

The patrolman caught her back, roughly, and held her.

"What's all this, anyway?" It surprised him a little, as he held her, to find that the woman was not inebriate.

"I want this woman!" cried Durkin, and at the sound of his voice MacNutt leaned forward from the shadows of the half-closed carriage, and the eyes of the two men met, in one pregnant and contending stare.

A flash of inspiration came to the trembling woman.

"I will give everything up to him, officer, if he'll only not make a scene!" She was fumbling at a package in the bosom of her dress.

"He can have his stuff, every bit of it — if he'll let it go at that!"

Durkin caught his cue as he saw the color of one corner of the sealed yellow manila envelope.

"Stand back there!" howled the officer to the crowding circle. "And you, shut up!" he added to MacNutt, now horrible to look upon with suppressed rage.

"This woman lifted a package of mine, officer," said Durkin quickly. "If it's intact, why, let her go!"

His fingers closed, talon-like, on the manila en-

velope
officer
seme
ineffec
cross-

"A
licema
ever i

"L
cab.

"B
want

"C
lighth
— he'

out o
a pack
in mo
on the

"A
won't
the in
unrul

"I
faced

"A
quick
soon!

"E

THE SEVERED KNOT

velope. He flashed the unbroken red seal at the officer, with a little laugh of triumph. That laugh seemed to madden MacNutt, as he made a second ineffectual effort to break into that tense and rapid cross-fire of talk.

"And you don't want to lay a charge?" the policeman demanded, as he angrily elbowed back the ever intruding circle.

"Let 'em go!" said Durkin, backing toward his cab.

"But what's the papers, and what t'ell does *she* want with 'em?" interrogated the officer.

"Correspondence!" said Durkin easily, almost lightheartedly. "Kind of personal stuff. They're — *he's* drunk, anyway!" For stumbling angrily out of the cab, MacNutt was crying that it was all a pack of lies, that they were a quarter of a million in money and that the officer should arrest Durkin on the spot, or he'd have him "broke."

"And then you'll chew me up an' spit me out, won't you, you blue-gilled Irish bull-dog?" jeered the irate officer, already out of temper with the unruly crowd jostling about him.

"I say arrest that man!" screamed the claret-faced MacNutt.

"And I say I'll run *you* in, and run you in mighty quick, if you don't get rid o' them jim-jams pretty soon!"

"By God, I'll take it out of *you* for this, when

PHANTOM WIRES

my turn comes!" raved MacNutt, turning, purplish gray of face, on the deprecating Durkin. "I'll take it out of you, by God!"

"There — there! He's simply drunk, officer; and the woman has squared herself. I don't want to press any charge. But you'd better take his name!"

"Drunk, am I? You'll be drunk when I finish with you. You won't have a name, you'll have a number, when I'm through with you!" repeated the infuriated MacNutt.

"Look here, the two o' you!" suddenly exclaimed the outraged arm of the law, "you climb into that hack and clear out o' here, as quick as you can, or I'll run you both in!"

MacNutt still expostulated, still begged for a private audience in the street-corner saloon, still threatened and pleaded and protested.

The exasperated officer turned to the cab-driver, as he slung the street loafers from him to right and left.

"Here, you get these fares o' yours out o' this — get them away mighty quick, or I'll have you soaked for breakin' the speed ord'nance!"

Then he turned quickly, for the frightened woman had emitted a sharp scream, as her bull-necked companion, with the vigor of a new and desperate resolution, bodily caught her up and thrust her into the gloom of the half-curtained carriage.

"Oh
cried r
But th
with w

"Do
you se
her we

A ne
seemed
the ca
plungir

"Yc
said th
slipped
gers.

pens al

The
said, v
the ga

Dur
ing.

enemy
and by
throug
done!

he hac
with t
cut he
him!

THE SEVERED KNOT

"Oh, Jim, Jim, don't let him take me!" she cried mysteriously to the man she had just robbed. But the man she had just robbed looked at her with what seemed indifferent eyes, and said nothing.

"Don't you know where he's taking me? Can't you see? It's to Penfield's!" she cried, through her weakening struggles.

A new and strange paralysis of all his emotions seemed to have crept over Durkin, as he watched the cab door slammed shut and the horses go plunging and curvetting out through the crowd.

"You'd better get away as quiet as you can!" said the policeman, in an undertone, for Durkin had slipped a ten-dollar bill into his unprotesting fingers. "You'd better slide, for if the colonel happens along I can't do much to help you out!"

Then, with his hand on Durkin's cab door he said, with unfeigned bewilderment: "Say, what's the game of your actress friend, anyway?"

Durkin turned away in disgust, without answering. She was no longer his friend; she was his enemy, his betrayer! He had lived by the sword, and by the sword he should die! He had triumphed through crime, and through crime he was being undone! He had led her into the paths of duplicity; he had taught her wrong-doing and dishonor; and with the very tools he had put in her hand she had cut her way out to liberty, and turned and defeated him!

PHANTOM WIRES

Then he remembered the scene on the *Slavonia*, and her passionate cry for him, for his love. In the wake of this came the memory of still earlier scenes and still more passionate cries for what he had so scantily given her.

Then suddenly he smote his knees with his clenched fists, and said aloud:

“It can't be true! It can't be true!”

Any
soon l
like I
pened
for pa
tomar
for sc
ger ca
was r
which
which
It
troub
Barth
man-c
flaunt
to the
On
distri
admis
peal t
the cl

CHAPTER XIX

THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST

Any passion so neutral and negative as jealousy soon burned itself out in an actively positive brain like Durkin's. And it left, as so often had happened with him, manifold gray ash-heaps of regret for past misdeeds. It also brought with it the customary revulsion of feeling, and a prowling hunger for some amendatory activity. Yet with that hunger came a new and disturbing sense of fear. He was realizing, almost too late, the predicament into which he and Frank had stumbled, the danger into which he had passively permitted his wife to drift.

It was not until after two hours of fierce and troubled thought, however, that Durkin left the Bartholdi, and taking a hansom, drove down that man-crowded crevasse where lower Broadway flaunted its Semitic signboards to the world, directly to the Criminal Courts building in Centre street.

Once there, he made his way to the office of the district-attorney. As he thoughtfully waited for admission into that democratized court of last appeal there passed through his mind the dangers and the chances that lay before him. The situation had

PHANTOM WIRES

its menaces, both obvious and unforeseen, but the more he thought it over the more he realized that the emergency called for action, at once decisive and immediate. He had already bungled and hesitated and misjudged. Blind feeling had warped his judgment. Until then he had blocked out his path of action only crudely; there had been little time for the weighing of consequences and the anticipation of contingencies. He had acted quickly and blindly. He had both succeeded and been defeated.

Still again the actual peril hanging over his wife came home to him. In the dust and tumult of battle, and in the black depths of the jealous vapors that had so blinded and sickened him, he had for the moment forgotten just what she meant to him, just how handicapped and helpless he stood without her.

If the thought of their separation touched him, because of more emotional reasons, it was already too early in his mood of reaction to admit it to his own shamefaced inner self. Yet he felt, now, that through it all she was true gold. It was only when the tie stood most strained and tortured that the sense of its actual strength came home to him.

As these thoughts and feelings swept disjointedly through his busy head word was sent out to him that he might see the district-attorney.

The office he stepped into was curtain-draped and carpeted, and hung with framed portraits, and

strewn
arm-cl
iron-gr
tle sta
pervad

Tilt
a high
glimps
old fig
Americ

The
his tas
and m
see tha
nance
straight

"Th
paign a
ator an

The

"Th

every l
rected,

written

asked o

"I'n

His ea

more l

powers

THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST

strewn with heavy and comfortable-looking leather arm-chairs. Durkin had expected it to look like an iron-grilled precinct police-station, and he was a little startled by the sense of luxury and well-being pervading the place.

Tilted momentarily back in a leather chair, behind a high-backed hardwood desk, the visitor caught a glimpse of one of those nervously alert, youngish-old figures which always seemed to him so typically American.

The man behind the high-backed desk paused in his task of checking a list of typewritten names, and motioned Durkin to a seat. The visitor could see that he was with an official who would countenance no profligate waste of time. So he plunged straight into the heart of his subject.

"This office is at present carrying on a campaign against Richard Penfield, the poolroom operator and gambler."

The district-attorney put down his paper.

"This office is carrying on a campaign against every lawbreaker brought to its attention," he corrected, succinctly. Then he caught up another typewritten sheet. "How much have you lost?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I'm not a gambler," retorted Durkin as crisply. His earlier timidity had faded away, and more and more he felt the relish of this adventure with the powers that were opposing him.

PHANTOM WIRES

"I suppose not—but how much were your losses?"

"I've lost nothing!" Durkin was growing impatient of this curtly condescending tone. It was the ponderosity of officialdom, he felt, grown playful, in the face of a passing triviality.

The district-attorney turned over the card which had been brought in to him, with a deprecating uplift of the eyebrows.

"Most of the people who come here to talk about Penfield and his friends come to tell me how much they've lost." He leaned back, and sent a little cloud of cigarette smoke ceilingward. "And, of course, it's part of this office's duty to keep a fool and his money together—as long as possible. What is it I can do for you?"

"I want your help to get a woman out of Penfield's new downtown house!"

"What woman?"

"She is—well, she is a very near friend of mine! She's being held a prisoner there!"

"By the police?"

"No, by certain of Penfield's men."

"What men?"

"MacNutt, the wire tapper, is one of them!"

"And you would like us to get after MacNutt?"

"Yes, I would!"

"On the charge of wire tapping?"

"That should be one of them!"

"Th
Court
pellate
viction
law un
"Bu
woman
"Is
Durk
"Is
Durk
answer.
"I d
"Sh
"No
"So
times!"
"She
not rec
"Ah
do?"
"I w
day, be
"Wh
Durk
ings int
ous sea
tween t
plain-sp

THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST

"Then I can only refer you to the decision of the Court of Appeals in the McCord case, and the Appellate Division's reversal of the 'green-goods' conviction of 1900! In other words, sir, there is no law under which a wire tapper can be prosecuted."

"But it's not a conviction I want, as much as the woman. I want to save *her*."

"Is she a respectable woman?"

Durkin felt that his look was answer enough.

"Is she a frequenter of poolrooms?"

Durkin hesitated, this time, and weighed his answer.

"I don't think so."

"She's not a frequenter?"

"No!"

"Some rather nice women are, you know, at times!"

"She may have been, once, I suppose, but I know not recently."

"Ah! I see! And what do you want us to do?"

"I want your help to get her out of there, today, before any harm comes to her."

"What sort of harm?"

Durkin found it hard to put his fears and feelings into satisfactory words. He was on dangerous seas, but he made his way doggedly on, between the Charybdis of reticence and the Scylla of plain-spoken suggestion.

PHANTOM WIRES

"I see — in other words, you want the police to raid Penfield's downtown gambling establishment before two o'clock this afternoon, and release from that establishment a young lady who drove there, and probably not for the first time, in an open cab in the open daylight, because certain ties which you do not care to explain bind you to the young lady in question?"

The brief and brusque finality of tone in the other man warned Durkin that he had made no headway, and he caught up the other's half-mocking and tacit challenge.

"For which, I think, this office will be adequately repaid, by being brought into touch with information which will help out its previous action against Penfield!"

"Who will give us this?"

Durkin looked at his cross-examiner, nettled and impatient.

"I could!"

"But will you?"

"Yes, on the condition I have implied!"

"In other words, you stand ready to bribe us into a doubtful and hazardous movement against the strongest gambler in all New York, on the expectation of an adequate bribe! This office, sir, accepts no bribes!"

"I would not call it bribery!"

"Then how would you describe it?"

THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST

"Oh, I might be tempted to call it — well, co-öperation!"

Some tinge of scorn in his words nettled the officer of the law.

"It all amounts to the same thing, I presume. Now, let me tell you something. Even though you came to me today with a drayful of crooked faro layouts and doctored-up roulette wheels from Penfield's house, it would be practically impossible, at this peculiar juncture of municipal administration, to take in my men and carry out a raid over Captain Kuttrell's head!"

"Ah, I see! You regard Penfield as immune!"

"Penfield is *not* immune!" said the public prosecutor. The oldish-young face was very flushed and angry by this time. "Don't misunderstand me. As a recognized and respected citizen, you always have the right to call on the officers of the law, to secure protection and punishment of crime. But this must be sought through the natural and legitimate channels."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean go to the police."

"But to lay a charge with the police would be impracticable, in this case."

"Why would it?"

"Simply because it wouldn't get at Penfield, and it would only lead to — to embarrassing publicity!"

"Exactly so! And you may be sure, young man,

PHANTOM WIRES

that Penfield is quite aware of that fact. To be candid, it is just such things as this that allow him to be operating today. If you start the wheels, you must stand the racket!"

"Then you allow a notorious gambler to break every law of the land and say you can give me no help whatever in balking what amounts to a criminal abduction?"

The swivel-chair creaked peremptorily, as the public prosecutor turned sharply back to his desk.

"You'd better try the police!" he bit out impatiently.

Durkin strode to the door. He was halfway through it, when he was called sharply back.

"Don't carry away the impression, young man, that we're not fighting this man Penfield as hard as we can!"

"It looks like it!" mocked the man in the doorway.

"One moment — we have been after this man Penfield, and his kind, and we're still after them. But we don't pretend to accomplish miracles. This city is made up of mere human beings, and human beings still have the failing of breaking out, morally, now in one place, now in another. We can compress and segregate those infectious blots, but until you can show us the open sore we can't put on the salve. If you are convinced you are the object of some criminal activity, and are willing to hold noth-

THE ULTIMATE OUTCAST

ing back, I can detail two plain-clothes men from my own office to go with you and help you out."

Durkin laughed, a little recklessly, a little scoffingly. Two plain-clothes men to capture a steel-bound fortress!

"Don't trouble them. They might make Penfield mad — they might get themselves talked about — and there's no use, you know, making a mess of one's mayoralty chances!"

And he was through the door indignantly, and as indignantly out, before the district-attorney could so much as flick the ash off his cigarette-end.

But after doing so, he touched an electric button, and it was at once answered by an athletic-looking clerk with all the earmarks of the collegian about him.

"Tell Barney to follow that man who just went out. Tell him to keep him under his eye, closely, and report to me tonight! Hurry these papers back to the Fire Commissioner. Then get that window up, and let the Mott Street Merchants' Protective Association in!"

Durkin, in the meantime, hurried uptown in his hansom, consumed with a feeling of resentment, torn by a fury of blind revolt against all organized society, against all law and authority and order. Still once more it seemed that some dark coalition of forces silently confronted and combated him at every turn. The consciousness that he must now

PHANTOM WIRES

fight, not only alone, but in the face of this unjust coalition brought with it a desperate and almost intoxicating sense of audacity. If the law itself was against him, he would take fate into his own hands, and go to his own ends, in his own way. If the machinery of justice ground so loosely and so blindly, there remained no reason why he himself, however recklessly he went his way, should not in the end disregard its engines and evade its ever-impending cogs.

He would show them! He would teach them that red-tape and officialism could only blunder blindly on at the heels of his elusive and lightfooted wariness. If they were bound to hold him down and delegitimize him and keep him a pariah and a revolter against order, he would show them what he, alone, could do in his own behalf.

And as he drove hurriedly through the crowded city streets, still lashing himself into a fury of resentment against organized society, he formulated his plan of action, and mentally took up, point by point, each new move and what it might mean. As he pictured, in his mind, each anticipated phase of the struggle he felt come over him, for the second time, a sort of blind and irrational fury, the fury of a rat in a corner, fighting for its life and the life of its mate.

“
Mac
Fr
gling
to be
that
comm
Squa
arter
beari
and a
ous a
unini
build
Bu
make
store
wom
In
perfe
drea
of th

CHAPTER XX

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

"And here's where we two hang out!" It was MacNutt who spoke.

Frances Durkin was neither protesting nor struggling when he drew up in front of what she knew to be Penfield's lower gambling club. It stood in that half-squalidly residential and half-heartedly commercial district, lying south of Washington Square, a little to the west of Broadway's great artery of traffic. A decorous and unbetraying door, bearing only the modest sign, "The Neptune Club," and a narrow stairway leading to an equally decorous and uncompromising hall, gave no hint, to the uninitiated, of what the great gloomy walls of the building might hold.

But on one side of the narrow door she could make out an incongruously ornate and showy cigar-store; on the other, an equally unlooked-for woman's hair-dressing and manicuring parlor.

In the one, indeed, you might sedately purchase a perfecto, and take your peaceful departure, never dreaming of how closely you had skirted the walls of the busiest poolroom south of all Twenty-third

PHANTOM WIRES

street. In the other you might have your hair quietly shampooed and Marcelled and dressed, and return to your waiting automobile, utterly oblivious of the fact that within thirty feet of you fortunes were being still staked and lost and won and again swept away at one turn of a wheel, or one stroke of a chalk on a red-lined blackboard.

It was through the hair-dressing parlor that MacNutt led the dazed and unprotesting Frank, pinning her to his side by the great arm that was, seemingly, so carelessly linked through hers. He gave a curt nod to the capped and aproned attendant, who touched a button on her desk, without so much as a word of challenge or inquiry. The machine-like precision with which each advance was watched and guarded, disheartened the imprisoned woman.

"I'm boss here for a while, and I'm goin' to clean out the building, so that you can have this little picnic all to your lonely!" remarked MacNutt, as he pushed her on.

A door to the rear of the second parlor swung open, and as she was led through it she noticed that it was sheathed with heavy steel plating. Still another door, which opened as promptly to MacNutt's signal, was armored with steel, and it was not until this door had closed behind them that her guardian released the cruel grip on her arm. Then he chuckled a little, gutturally, deep in his pendent and flaccid throat,

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

"We're up to date, you see, doin' business in a regular armor-clad office!"

Frank looked about her, with widening eyes. MacNutt laughed again, at the sense of surprise which he read on her face.

It was obviously a poolroom, but it was unlike anything she had ever before seen. It was heavily carpeted, and, for a place of its character, richly furnished. The walls were windowless, the light being shed down from twelve heavily ornamented electroliers, each containing a cluster of thirty lamps. These walls, which were upholstered with green burlap, bordered at the bottom with a rich frieze of lacquered and embossed *papier-mâché*, were divided into panels, and dotted here and there with little canvases and etchings. On the east end of the room hung one especially large canvas, crowned with a green-shaded row of electric lamps.

MacNutt, with a chuckle of pride, touched a button near the door, and the huge canvas and Bouguereau-looking group of bathing women painted upon it disappeared from view, disclosing to Frank's startled eyes a bulletin blackboard, such as is used in almost every poolroom, for the chalking up of entries and the announcement of jockeys and weights and odds.

MacNutt pressed a second button, and the twelve electric fans of burnished brass hummed and sang and droned, and filled the room with a stir of air.

PHANTOM WIRES

"A little diff'rent, my dear, from the way they did business when you and me were pikers, up in the West Forties, eh?"

Frank remained silent, as the bathing women, with a methodic click of the mechanism, once more dropped down through the slit in the picture frame, and hid the red-lined bulletin board from view.

"Gamblers, like us, always were weak on art," gibed MacNutt. "There's Dick Penfield, spendin' a hundred thousand a year on pictures an' vases an' rugs, and Sam Brucklin makin' his Saratoga joint more like a second Salon than a first-class bucket-shop, and Larry Wintefield, who knows more about a genuine Daghestan than you or me knows about a Morse sounder, and Al MacAdam, who can't buy chinaware fast enough! As for me, I must say I have a weakness for a first-class nood!" The woman beside him shuddered. "That's all right — but I guess a heap o' these painters would be quittin' the profession if it wasn't for folks of our callin'!"

Frank's roving but unresponding eyes were taking in the huge mahogany table, in the centre of the room, the empty, high-backed chairs clustered around it, the countless small round tables, covered with green cloth, which flanked the walls, and the familiar Penfield symbol, of three interlaced crescents, which she saw stamped or embossed on everything.

He
which
touch

"E
attenc
dress
friend
Blonc
tariur
Mott
girl,
drink

Th
quest
walls
ample
nousl
anoth
pendu
the t

"N
to ma
the d
up in
He
to a
a pla
"N
venti

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

He went to one of the five cherry-wood desks which were strewn about the room, and still again touched a button.

"Blondie," he said to the capped and aproned attendant who answered the call from the hair-dressing parlors, "I want you to meet this lady friend of mine! Miss Frances Candler, this is Miss Blondie Bonnell, late of Wintefield's Saratoga Sanitarium for sick purses, and still later of MacAdam's Mott Street branch! Now, Blondie, like a good girl, run along and get the lady something to drink!"

This proffered refreshment the outraged lady in question silently refused, staring tight-lipped at the walls about her. But MacNutt, on this score, made ample amends, for having gulped down one ominously generous glass of the fiery liquid, he poured another, and still another, into the cavern of his pendulous throat, with repeated grateful smacks of the thick and purplish lips.

"Now, I'm goin' to show you round a bit, just to make it plain to you, before business begins for the day. I want you to see that you're not shut up in any quarter-inch cedar bandbox!"

He took her familiarly by the arm and led her to a door which, like the others, was covered with a plating of steel, and heavily locked and barred.

"Necessity, you see, is still the mother of invention," he said, as his finger played on the elec-

PHANTOM WIRES

tric signal and released the obstructing door. "If we're goin' to do poolroom work, nowadays, we've got to do it big and comprehensive, same as Morgan or Rockefeller would do their line o' business. You've got to lay out the stage, nowadays, to carry on the show, or something'll swallow you up. Why, when we worked our last wire-tapping scheme with a hobo from St. Louis, who was rotten with money, we escorted him, on two hours' notice, into as neat a lookin' Postal-Union branch office as you'd care to see, with half a dozen fake keys a-goin' and twenty actors and supers helpin' to carry off the act. *That's* the up-to-date way o' doin' it! That's how a man like Penfield makes this kind o' graftin' respectable and aboveboard and just about as honest as bein' down in the Cotton Exchange!"

He was leading her down a narrow hallway, four feet wide, with unbroken walls on either side of them. At the end of this still another armored door led into a medium-sized room, as bald and uninviting as a dentist's waiting-room. Here he led her to two horizontal slits in the wall and told her to look down.

She did so, and found herself peering below, out into the well-stocked cigar-store, with a clear view of the entrance.

"That's the conning-tower of this here little floating fortress," chuckled MacNutt, at her shoul-

der.
woul
for a
self,
and
betw
in li
side
know
out,
off.
come
touch
thro
butto
to do
red l
push
back
build
of e
inch
steel
see,
time
office
our
F
in ea

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

der. "This place you're in is steel-lined, and it would take three hours o' chisel and sledge work for anybody, from Eggers up to Braugham himself, to get inside, even though he did find us out, and even though he did escape the sulphuric bottles between the bricks. Each one o' these little slits is in line with a nice gilded cigar sign on the shop side of the wall. So no one down there, you see, knows who's eyin' them. *We* don't need any lookout, hangin' round the street-front and tippin' us off. Our man down below sizes up everyone who comes into that shop. If he's all right, the button's touched, and the white light flashes, and he gets through. If he's not, the cigar clerk rings another button, just under his counter, and we know what to do. If it's a case o' raid, our lookout flashes the red light through each o' the four rooms, with one push of the button, and then our second man throws back the switch and puts out every light in the buildin.' Then with another button push, the locks of every door are thrown shut, and they're four inches thick, most of them, and of good oak and steel. If the electricity should give out, here, you see, are the hand bolts, which can be run out at any time. Then we've got a little mercerized steel office, which you won't see, where our cashier and our sheet-writers work!"

Frank said nothing, but her still roving eyes took in each detail, bit by bit, as she warned and schooled

PHANTOM WIRES

herself to note and remember each door and room and passage.

"And now, in case you may be lookin' for it without my help, I'm goin' to take you down and show you the way out. We go through this little passage, and then we take up this steel trapdoor. It's heavy, you see! Then we go down this nice little grill-work iron ladder — don't pull back, I've got you! — and then we open this next very fine steel door — so; and here we are in what you'd call the safety-deposit vaults. It's a mighty handsome-lookin' safe, all laid in Portland cement, as you can see, but we're not goin' to tarry lookin' into that just now."

He was already feeling his way ahead of her, and she was still desperately struggling to impress each detail on her distracted mind.

"You see, if we want to get out, we go through this hall, and follow this little passageway, one end openin' up right under the sidewalk, in the refractin' glass manhole. Leading to the back, here, is a second passage, all barred, the same as the others. So, if our front is shut off, and they're hot on our trail, we shut everything after us as we go, and then open this neat little steel trapdoor, and find ourselves smellin' fresh air and five lines full of washin' from that Dago tenement just above us!"

"And why are you showing me all this?" demanded Frank.

He
eyes,
the b
" I
we r
start.
place
few
myse
— so
band
" V
you
lessly
" I
Nutt,
damr
He's

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

He looked at her out of his pale-green furtive eyes, and locked the door with a vindictive snap of the bolts.

"I'll tell you why, my gay young welcher, for we may as well understand one another, from the start. Now that Penfield's shut up his Newport place and is coolin' his heels up in Montreal for a few months, I'm runnin' this nickel-plated ranch myself. And I've got a few old scores to wipe out — some old scores between that enterprisin' husband o' yours an' myself!"

"What has he ever done to you? Why, should you want to punish *him*?" argued Frank, helplessly.

"I'm not goin' to punish him!" declared MacNutt, with a little laugh. "That's just where the damned fine poetic justice of the thing comes in. *He's goin' to punish himself!*"

CHAPTER XXI

THE PIT OF DESPAIR

Frances Durkin looked at the jeering man before her, studiously, belligerently.

"What do you mean by saying he'll punish himself?" she demanded.

She seemed like a woman who had just awakened. Her earlier comatose expression had altogether passed away. There was life, now, in every line of her body.

"I mean that Durkin's got his quarter of a million in securities, all right, all right, but, by God, I've got *you!* And I mean that he's goin' to, that he's *got* to, make a choice between them and you. So we'll just wait and find out which he loves best, his beau or his dough!" And he laughed harshly at the feeble witticism, as he added, in his guttural undertone: "And I guess we get the worth of our money, whichever way it goes!"

Frank's impression was that he was half drunk, that he was mumbling vaguely of revenges which grew up and died in their utterance. Her look of open scorn stung him into a sudden tremor of anger.

"Oh, don't think I'm spoutin' wind! If Durkin's

the m
tryin'
tonigh
"A
with t
"H
get wi
and h
station
no cap
to buc
poke
man w
thinks
less ta
can pu
for po
Penfiel
knows
and br
garret
to do,
by his
he's go
night,
monly
"Y
here?
"N

THE PIT OF DESPAIR

the man you think he is, and I hope he is, *he'll be tryin' to nose his way into this place before midnight tonight!*"

"And he will," cried Frank, exultantly, "and with the whole precinct police force behind him!"

"He daren't!" retorted MacNutt. "He daren't get within a hundred yards of the Central Office, and he daren't show his nose inside a precinct station-house! And that's not all, either. There's no captain on this side of New York who's goin' to buck against the whole Tammany machine an' poke into this Penfield business. If that young man with the butterfly necktie over on Centre street thinks he can keep us movin', he's got to do a heap less talkin' and a heap more convictin' before he can put *our* lights out! That air is good enough for politics — but it's never goin' to break this here Penfield combination! Oh, no, Jimmie Durkin knows how the land lays. He's one o' your bold and brainy kind, who likes to shut himself up in a garret for a week, and make maps of what he's goin' to do, an' how he's goin' to do it, and then trip off by his lonely and do his huntin' in the dark! And he's goin' to try to get in here, before midnight, tonight, and what's more, *he's goin' to find it uncommonly easy to do!*"

"You mean you'll entice him and trap him here?"

"No, I won't lay a finger on him. You'll do the

PHANTOM WIRES

enticin', and he'll do the trappin'! I won't even be round to see — till afterward!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean we're holdin' open house tonight," mocked MacNutt, "and that Durkin will maybe drop in!"

"And then what will it be?"

"Come this way, my beauty, and I'll show you. First thing, though, just notice this fact. We're not goin' to make it too hard and discouragin' for Durkin. This trap-door will be left unlocked. Also, that front manhole will be left kind of temptingly open, with a few chunks o' loose coal lyin' round it, so that even a Mercer street roundsman couldn't help fallin' into it! Oh, yes, he'll find it easy enough!"

Frank followed him without a word, as he made his way through the low and narrow steel-lined tunnel leading to the vault-room.

"Now, my dear, I guess this is the only way he'll be able to get at you, unless he comes in a flyin' machine, and the first place he'll nose through will be this room. So, bein' old at the business, he's sure to try a crack at our safe. At least, he'll go gropin' around for a while. Not an invitin'-lookin' piece o' furniture, I grant you, but that's neither here nor there. It's not the safe that'll be detainin' Durkin, or any other housebreaker who tries to get gay on these premises. If you look

hard, i
sight 1

Fra
great
surrou
gine.

"Y
rogate

She

He
steppe
on th
and t
short

"A

Fra
on th
mome

There
face

chang
was 1
was r

chan
fixed
her,

fract
" /
Th

THE PIT OF DESPAIR

hard, maybe you'll be able to see what's a damned sight more interestin'!"

Frank looked, but she saw nothing beyond the great vault and the burnished copper guard-rail that surrounded it, like the fender about a marine engine.

"You don't notice anything strikin'?" he interrogated wickedly.

She did not.

He emitted a guttural little growl of a laugh, and stepped over to a half-hidden switchboard, high up on the wall. He threw the lever out and down, and the kiss of the meeting metals sounded in a short and malevolent spit of greenish light.

"Are you on?" taunted MacNutt.

Frank's slowly comprehending eyes were riveted on the burnished copper railing, on which, only a moment before, her careless fingers had rested. There was no sign, no alteration in the shining surface of that polished metal. But she knew that a change, terrible and malignant, had taken place. It was no longer a mild and innocent guard-rail. It was now an instrument of destruction, an unbuoyed channel of death. She stood staring at it, with fixed and horrified eyes, until it wavered before her, a glimmering and meandering rivulet of refracted light.

"Are you on?" reiterated the watching man.

The wave of pallor that swept over her face

PHANTOM WIRES

seemed to change her eyes from violet to black, although, for a moment, their gaze remained as veiled and abstracted as a sleep-walker's. Then a movement from her companion lashed and restored her to lucidity of thought. For, from where it leaned against the wall, MacNutt had caught up a heavy door-sheathing of pressed steel. It was painted a Burgundy red, to match the upholstery of the upper room where it had once done service, and on the higher of the two panels was embossed the Penfield triple crescent.

This great sheet of painted steel MacNutt held above his head, as a hesitating waiter might hold a gigantic tray. Then he stepped toward the shimmering guard-rail, and stood in front of it.

"Now, this luxurious-lookin' rear-admiral's rail-fence is at present connected with a tapped power circuit, or a light circuit, I don't know which. All I know is that it's carryin' about a twenty-eight-hundred alternatin' current. And just to show that it's good and ready to eat up anything that tries monkeyin' round it, watch this!"

He raised the Burgundy-red door-sheathing vertically above his head, and stepping quickly back, let it descend, so that as it fell it would strike the metal of the sunken vault-top and the copper guard-rail as well.

The very sound of that blow, as it descended, was swallowed up in the sudden, blinding, light-

ning-
flame
cande
ing a
the c
burni
odors
geon.
"I
gropi
M:
char
desce
of bu
a litt
a loo
circle
Or
the p
ing
reach
in hi
spine
the
looki
bald
dim
wher
fatal

THE PIT OF DESPAIR

ning-like flash, in the hiss and roar of the pale-green flame, as the sheet of steel, tortured into sudden incandescence, bridged and writhed and twisted, warping and collapsing like a leaf of writing-paper on the coals of an open fire. A sickening smell of burning paint, mingling with the subtler gaseous odors of the corroding metal, filled the little dungeon.

"Don't! That's enough!" gasped the woman, groping back toward the support of the wall.

MacNutt shut off the current, and kicked the charred door-sheathing, already fading from incandescence into ashen ruin, with his foot. The smell of burning leather filled the room, and he laughed a little, turning on the woman a face crowned with a look of Belial-like triumph, with dark and sunken circles about the vindictive, deep-set eyes.

Once, in an evening paper, she had pored over the picture of an electrocution at Sing Sing, a haunting and horrible scene, with the dangling wires reaching down to the prisoner, strapped and bound in his chair, the applied sponges at the base of the spine, the buckled thongs about the helpless ankles, the grim and waiting gaol officials, the boyish-looking reporters, with watches in their hands, the bald and ugly chamber, and in the background the dim figure of Retributive Justice, with uplifted arm, where an implacable finger was about to touch the fatal button. Time and time again that vision had

PHANTOM WIRES

brought terror to her midnight dreams, and had left her weak and panting, catching at her startled husband with feverish and passionate hands and holding him and drawing him close to her, as though that momentary guardianship could protect him from some far and undefined danger.

"Oh, Mack," she burst out hysterically, overwrought by the scene before her, "for the love of God, don't make him die this way! Give him a fighting chance! Give him a show! Do what you like with *me*, but don't blot him out, like a dog, without a word of warning!"

"It's not my doin'!" broke in her tormentor.

"It's inhuman — it's fiendish!" she went on. "I can't stand the thought of it!"

MacNutt laughed his mirthless laugh once more.

"Oh, I guess you'll stand it!"

"But I can't!" she moaned.

"Oh, yes; you'll stand it, and you'll see it, too! You'll be right here, where you can take the whole show in, this time! It won't be a case o' foolin' the old man, like it was last time!"

"I will be here?" she gasped.

"You'll be right on the spot — and you'll see the whole performance!"

She drew her hands down, shudderingly, over her averted face, as though to shut something even from her imagination.

"And do you know what'll be the end of it all?"

MacN
all en
Journ
cracks
with a
very a
cigar-
know
much

She

"I

walls

and f

bone;

twiste

it! A

for it

on hir

anothe

as you

your f

She

vitupe

drawn

in the

of her

"K

Nutt,

threat

THE PIT OF DESPAIR

MacNutt went on, in his frenzied mockery. "It'll all end in a little paragraph or two in the *Morning Journal*, to the effect that some unknown safe-cracksman or other accidentally came in contact with a live wire, and was shocked to death in the very act of breaking into a pious and unoffendin' cigar-store vault! And you'll be the only one who'll know anything different, and I guess you won't do much squealin' about it!"

She wheeled, as though about to spring on him.

"I will! I will, although I wither between gaol walls for it — although I die for it! I'm no weak and foolish woman! I've known life bald to the bone; I've fought and schemed and plotted and twisted all my days almost, and I can die doing it! And if you kill this man, if you murder him — for it *is* murder! — if you bring this dog's death on him, I will make you pay for it, in one way or another — I'll make you mourn it, David MacNutt, as you've made me mourn the first day I ever saw your face!"

She was in a blind and unreasoning passion of vituperative malevolence by this time, her face drawn and withered with fear, her eyes luminous, in the dungeon-like half-lights, with the inner fire of her hate.

"Keep cool, my dear, keep cool!" mocked MacNutt, without a trace of trepidation at all her vague threats. "Durkin's not dead yet!"

PHANTOM WIRES

She caught madly at the slender thread of hope which swung from his mockery.

“No! No, he’s *not* dead yet, and he’ll die hard! He’s no fool — you’ve found that out in the past! He will give you a fight before he goes, in some way, for he’s fought you and beaten you from the first — and he’ll beat you again — I know he’ll beat you again!”

Her voice broke and merged into a paroxysm of sobbing, and MacNutt looked at her bent and shaken figure with meditative coldness.

“He may have beaten me, once, long ago — but he’ll never do it again. He won’t even go out fightin’! He’ll go with his head hangin’ and his nose down, like a sneak! And you’ll see him go, for you’ll be tied there, with a gag in your pretty red mouth, and you’ll neither move nor speak. And there’ll be no light, unless he gets so reckless as to strike a match. But when the light does come, my dear, it’ll be a flash o’ blue flame, with a smell o’ something burnin’!”

The woman covered her face with her hands, and swayed back and forth where she stood.

Then MacNutt held back his guttural laugh, suddenly, for she had fallen forward on her face, in a dead faint.

It
as th
polic
well-
the l
apar
and
T
som
chat
and
ladd
of b
towe
hous
If
his f
the
grap
noor
ing
F

CHAPTER XXII

THE ENTERING WEDGE

It was at least four o'clock in the afternoon — as the janitor of the building later reported to the police — when a Postal-Union lineman, carrying a well-worn case of tools, made his way up through the halls and stairways of one of those many Italian apartment houses just south of Washington Square and west of Broadway.

This lineman worked on the roof, apparently, for some twenty minutes. Then he came down again, chatted for a while with the janitor in the basement, and giving him a cigar, borrowed an eight-foot step-ladder, for the purpose of scaling some twelve feet of brick wall, where the adjoining office building towered its additional story above the apartment-house roof.

If the janitor had been less averse to mounting his five flights of stairway, or less indifferent as to the nature of the work which took the busy telegraph official up to his roof, he might, that afternoon, have witnessed both a delicate and an interesting electrical operation.

For once up on the second roof, and sure that

PHANTOM WIRES

he was under no immediate observation, the lineman in question carefully unpacked his bag of tools. His first efforts were directed toward the steel transom which covered the trapdoor opening out on the roof. This, he discovered with a grunt of disappointment, resisted even his short, curved steel lever, pointed at one end, like a gigantic tack-drawer. Restoring this lever to the bottom of his leather tool-bag, he made his way to the southeast corner of the building, where a tangle of insulated wires, issuing from the roof beneath his feet, merged into one compact cable, which, in turn, entered and was protected by a heavy lead pipe, leading, obviously, to the street below, and thence to the cable galleries of Broadway itself.

It took him but a minute or two to cut away a section of this protecting pipe. In doing so, he exposed to view the many wires making up an astonishingly substantial cable, for so meager an office building. He then turned back to his tool-case and lifted therefrom, first a Bunnell sounder, and then a Wheatstone bridge, of the post-office pattern, a coil of KK wire, a pair of lineman's pliers, and a handful or two of other tools. Still remaining in the bottom of his bag might have been found two small rubber bags filled with nitroglycerine, a cake of yellow soap, a brace and bit, a half-dozen diamond-pointed drills, a box of timers, and a coil fuse, three tempered-steel chisels, a tiny sperm-oil lantern and

the s
again

Th
he as
his s
Each
vaniz
listen
as th
of jc
odds
keys
wom
sorro
dess

Bu
mess
many
the p
wher
hurri
opera
hope
some
fore

H
necti
befor
he li

THE ENTERING WEDGE

the steel "jimmy" which had already been tested against the obdurate transom.

Then, skilfully relaxing the metallic cable strands, he as carefully graduated his current and attached his sounder, first to one wire and then to another. Each time that the little Bunnell sounder was galvanized into articulate life he bent his ear and listened to the busy clattering of the dots and dashes, as the reports of races, as the weights and names of jockeys, and lists of entries and statements of odds and conditions went speeding into the busy keys of the big poolroom below, where men and women waited with white and straining faces, and sorrowed and rejoiced as the ever-fluctuant goddess of chance brought them ill luck or success.

But Durkin paid little attention to these flying messages winging cityward from race-tracks so many miles away. What he was in search of was the private wire leading from Penfield's own office, whereon instructions and information were secretly hurried about the city to his dozen and one fellow-operators. It was from this wire that Durkin hoped, without "bleeding" the circuit, to catch some thread of fact which might make the task before him more lucid and direct.

He worked for an hour, connecting and disconnecting, testing and listening and testing still again, before the right wire fell under his thumb. Then he listened intently, with a little start, for he knew

PHANTOM WIRES

he was reading an operator whose bluff, heavy, staccato "send" was as familiar to his long-practiced ear as a well-known face would be to his watching eyes.

It was MacNutt himself who was "sending." His first intercepted message was an order, to some confederate unknown, to have a carriage call for him at eight. That, Durkin told himself, was worth knowing. His second despatch was a warning to a certain "Al" Mackenzie not to fail to meet Penfield in Albany, Sunday, at midnight. The third message was brief, and seemed to be an answer to a question which had escaped the interloper.

"Yes, got her here, and here she stays. Things will happen tonight."

"Ah!" ejaculated Durkin, as he wiped his moist forehead, while the running dots and dashes resolved themselves into the two intelligible sentences.

Then he looked about him, at the leaden sky, at the roofs and walls and windows of the crowded and careless city, as a *sabreur* about to enter the arena might look about him on life for perhaps the last time.

"Yes," he said, with a meditative stare at the transom before him, "things *will* happen tonight."

It
of fir
then
pool-
now
way
silenc

Dr
went
keepi
cigar
by a
fract
so he
had l

He
he di
unde
glass

It
abou
then

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WAKING CIRCUIT

It was a thick and heavy night, with a drizzle of fine rain blanketing the city. Every now and then a lonely carriage spluttered along the oily and pool-strewn pavement of the cross-street. Every now and then, too, the rush and clang of the Broadway cars echoed down the canyon of rain-swept silence.

Durkin waited until the lights of the cigar-store went out. Then he once more circled the block, keeping to the shadows. As he passed the darkened cigar-store for the second time his foot, as though by accident, came sharply in contact with the refracting-prismed manhole cover which had sounded so hopefully hollow to his previous tread. As he had half-suspected, it was loose.

He stooped quickly, to turn up his trousers. As he did so three exploring fingers worked their way under the ledge of the unsecured circle of iron and glass.

It came away without resistance. He looked about him cautiously, without straightening up; then by its shoulder-strap he carefully lowered his

PHANTOM WIRES

leather tool-bag into the passage below, and as guardedly let himself down after it.

He waited and listened for a minute or two, before replacing the cover above him. From the river, in the distance, he could hear the booming and tooting of the steam craft through the fog. A hurrying car rumbled and echoed past on the Broadway tracks. Two drunken wanderers went singing westward in the drizzling rain. Then everything was silence again.

Durkin replaced the covering, noiselessly, and feeling to right and left with his outstretched hands, crept inward through the narrow tunnel in which he found himself. His fingers came in touch with the chilly surface of a steel-faced door. It sounded heavy and unyielding to his tentative tap, and his left hand was already reaching back for the tool-bag which hung by its strap over his shoulder when his questioning right hand, pushing forward, discovered that the door was unlocked, and swung easily outward without resistance.

He felt and fondled the heavy bolts, thoughtfully, puzzled why it should be so, until he remembered seeing the half-dozen pieces of anthracite lying about the manhole on the sidewalk above. That, he told himself, possibly explained it. Some careless wagon-driver, delivering his load, had left the place unlocked.

But before he crept into the wider and higher

pass:
volv
limb
cyclin
there
hip,
his c
along
in a
shrou
refra
the d
of d
was
hated
He
that
when
locke
some
picio
throu
He
lence.
Th
As h
his ri
denly
of m

THE WAKING CIRCUIT

passage before him he paused to take out the revolver which he carried in his hip pocket, to unlimber it, and carefully feel over the chambered cylinder, to make sure every cartridge-head stood there, in place. This done, he replaced it, not at his hip, but loose and free, in the righthand pocket of his coat. Then he once more began feeling his way along the smooth cement floor. He was enveloped in a darkness as absolute as though he had been shrouded in black velvet — even the glimmer of the refracted street lamps did not penetrate further than the doorway of the first tunnel. There was a smell of dampness in the air, as of mouldy plaster. It was the smell of underground places. Durkin hated it.

He had to feel his way about the entire circle of that second narrow chamber before he came to where the inner doorway stood. It, too, was unlocked, and for the first time some sense of betrayal, some intimidation of being trapped, some latent suspicion of artfully concealed duplicity, flashed through his questioning mind.

He listened, and was greeted by nothing but silence.

Then he swung the door softly and slowly open. As he did so he leaped back, and to one side, with his right hand in his coat pocket. For there suddenly smote on his ears the sharp clang and tinkle of metal.

PHANTOM WIRES

He stood there, crouched, for a waiting minute, and then he laughed aloud, for he knew it was only the sound of some piece of falling iron, striking on the cement. To make sure of it, he groped about the floor, and stumbled on the little bar of steel that had fallen. Yet why it had been there, leaning against the door, he could not comprehend. Was it there by accident? Or had it been meant as a signal? It showed him one thing, however; its echoing fall had demonstrated to him that the room he had entered was both higher and larger than the one he had left. It might be nothing more than a furnace-room, yet he told himself that he must be on his guard, that from now on his perils began.

Then he wondered why he should feel this premonitory sense, and in what lay the dividing line, and where lay the difference.

Yet as he stood there, with his back against the wall, he felt something dormant and deep-seated stirring within him. It was not a sense of danger; it arose from no outward and tangible manifestations. But somewhere, and persistently, at the root of his being, he heard that subliminal and submerged voice which could be neither silenced nor understood.

He took three groping paces forward, as if to put distance between himself and this foundationless emotion which some part of him seemed strug-

gling
stockst
presenc
ly han
said, h
an imp
how th
life of
tions t
equivoc
the mo
a sort
dashes
inarticu

As h
and th
stood b
to the r
garding
he caug

As h
his stra
nished r
and the
deposit

The
upthrus
and feel
of great

THE WAKING CIRCUIT

gling to defy. But for the second time he stood stockstill, weighed down by the feeling of some presence, oppressed by the sense of something vaguely hanging over him. He felt, as Frank had once said, how like a half-articulate key, at the end of an impoverished circuit, consciousness really was; how the spirit so often, in this only half-intelligible life of theirs, flutters feebly with hints and suggestions to which it could never give open and unequivocal utterance. Even language, and language the most artful and finished, was, after all, merely a sort of clumsy Morse — its unwieldy dots and dashes left many a mood of the soul unknown and inarticulate.

As he stood there, in doubt, questioning himself and that vague but disturbing something which stood before him, he decided to put a summary end to the matter. Fumbling in his pocket, and disregarding any risk which the movement might entail, he caught up a match and struck it.

As he shaded the flame and threw it before him, his straining eyes caught only the glimmer of burnished metal — a guard-rail of some description — and the dark and ponderous mass of what seemed a deposit vault.

The match burned down, and dropped from his upthrust fingers. He decided to grope to the rail, and feel along the metal until he reached some point of greater safety. He extended his fingers before

PHANTOM WIRES

him, as a blind man might, and took one shuffling step forward.

Then a thought came to him, with the suddenness and the shock of an electric current, as a radiating tingle of nerves, followed by a strangely sickening sense of hollowness about the chest, swept through his body. *Could it be Frank herself in danger, and wanting him?*

More than once, in the past, he had felt that mysterious medium, more fluid and unfathomable than electricity itself, carry its vague but vital message in to him. He had felt that call of Soul to Soul, across space, along channels less tangible than Hertzian waves themselves, yet bearing its broken message, which later events had authenticated and still later cross-questioning had doubly verified.

He had felt, at such moments, that there were ghostly and phantasmal wires connecting mind with mind; that across these telepathic wires one anxious spirit could in some way hold dim converse with the other; that the Soul itself had its elusive "wireless," and forever carried and gave out and received its countless messages — if only the fellow-Soul had learned to await the signal and disentangle the dark and runic Code. Yes, he told himself, as he stood there, thoughtfully, as though bound to the spot by some Power not himself,— yes, consciousness was like that little glass tube which electricians called a coherer, and all his vague impressions and mental-

gropi
of ni
ity ar
fleet :
some
livere
often
past,
ghost
what

He
thrille
ious b
sub-cc
of ter
in the
"F
dema
him.

He
ing v
nothin
in fro
things
his bo
"W
hoarse
dure t
round

THE WAKING CIRCUIT

gropings were those disorderly, minute fragments of nickel and silver which only leaped into continuity and order under the shock and impact of those fleet and foreign electric waves, which floated from some sister consciousness aching with its undelivered messages. And the woman who had so often called to him across space and silence, in the past, was now sounding the mystic key across those ghostly wires. But what the messages was, or from what quarter it came, he could not tell.

He stood there tortured and puzzled, torn by fear, thrilled and stirred through every fiber of his anxious body. This was followed by a sense of terror, sub-conscious and wordless and irrational, the kind of terror that comes to a child in unknown places, in the dead of some unknown night.

"For the love of God, what is it?" his dry lips demanded, speaking aloud into the emptiness about him.

He waited, almost as if expecting some answering voice, as distinct and tangible as his own. But nothing broke the black silence that blanketed him in from the rest of all the world and all its living things. The sweat of agony came out on his face; his body hung forward, relaxed and expectant.

"What is it you want to say?" he repeated, in a hoarse and muffled scream, no longer able to endure that silent and nameless Something which surrounded him. *"What is it you want to say?"*

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

In the ensuing silence, as the unbroken seconds dragged themselves on, Durkin called himself a fool, and, struggling bitterly with that indeterminate uneasiness which possessed him, pulled himself together for some immediate and decisive action.

He could waste no more time, he told himself, in foolish spiritualistic séances with his own shadow. He had too much before him, and too short a time in which to do it. His troubles, when he came to face them, would be realities, and not a train of vapid and morbid self-vaporings.

He advanced further into the darkness of the room, slowly, with his hands outstretched before him. He would feel for the friendly support and guidance of the metal railing, and then grope his way onward. For as yet he had only carried the enemy's outposts. Then, for a second time, and for no outward reason, he came to a dead halt. He felt as if some elusive influence, some unnamable force, was holding and barring him back. Again he struck a match, recklessly, and again he saw noth-

ing but
mass of

It wa
he stoo
ically, i
the ligh
scrutini
ing eyes

There
reached
haps no
many he
wonderi
accident
slightly
director

To ri
tralize tl
his gaze,
the forn
ness hel
toward v
netic nee
Surrende
darkness

As he
his spin
tremor s
shudder

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

ing but the burnished metal railing and the dark mass of the vault.

It was with almost a touch of exasperation that he stood there in his tracks, and slowly, methodically, thoroughly, surveyed the four quarters of the lightless room in which he found himself. He scrutinized the heavy, enmuffling gloom with straining eyes, first in one direction and then in another.

There was nothing to be seen, and not a sound reached his ears. He had been in the room perhaps not three minutes, yet it seemed to him as many hours. Then he peered about him still again, wondering, for the first time, by what psychological accident his eyes turned in one particular direction, slightly above and before him, to the right of the direction in which he was advancing.

To rid himself of this new idea, and to decentralize the illusion, he shifted his position. But still his gaze, almost against his will, turned back toward the former point, as though the blanketing blackness held some core, some discernible central point, toward which he was compelled to look, as the magnetic needle is compelled to swing toward the North. Surrendering to this impulse, he gaped through the darkness at it, with a little oath of impatience.

As he did so he began to feel stir at the base of his spine a tiny tremor of apprehension. This tremor seemed suddenly to explode into a mounting shudder of fear, flashing and leaping through his

PHANTOM WIRES

body until the very hair of his head was stirred and moved with it.

The next moment the startled body responded to clamoring volition, and he turned and fled blindly back into the outer passageway, with a ludicrous and half-articulate little howl of terror.

For growing out of the utter blackness he had seen two vague points of light, two luminous spots, side by side, taking on, as he faced them, all the mysteries of all the primeval night which man ever faced. He felt like a hunter, in some jungled midnight, a midnight breathless and soundless, who looks before him, and slowly discerns two glowing and motionless balls of fire — who can see nothing else, in all his world — but from those two phosphorescent points of light knows that he is being watched and stalked and hunted by some padded Hunger lurking behind them.

In the unbroken and absolute silence which seemed to mock at his foolish and stampeding fears, an immediate reaction of spirit set it. He felt almost glad for this material target against which to fling his terrors, for this precipitation of apprehension into something tangible.

He groped through his bag, hurriedly yet cautiously, for his little sperm-oil lantern. Then he took up the revolver that lay loosely in his coat pocket. A moment later a thin little shaft of light danced and fingered about the inner room.

He c
burnish
flashing
moment
mass o
with w
fear ab
glow w
terror.

But t
He play
down, a
adjustin
area of

It wa
the fact
ceded, s
dimly-ou
made ou
by the u
ing to t
this stair
into the
on the r
stairway
and his

For th
hidden b
made ou

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

He could, at first, see nothing but the line of burnished copper stretching across his path and flashing the light back in his eyes. Behind this, a moment later, he made out the dark and gloomy mass of the black safe. Then he looked deeper, with what was still again a flutter of enigmatical fear about his heart, for that twin and ghostlike glow which had filled him with such precipitate terror.

But there was no longer anything to be seen. He played his interrogative finger of light up and down, and it was a full minute before his slowly-adjusting sight penetrated to the remoter and higher area of the surrounding walls.

It was then, and not till then, that he discovered the fact that the wall on his right opened and receded, some five feet above the floor-level, into a dimly-outlined alcove. As he looked closer he made out that this alcove had, obviously, been filled by the upper portion of a heavy iron staircase, leading to the floor above. The entire lower half of this stairway, where once it must have obtruded into the vault chamber, had been cut away. It was on the remaining upper portion of this dismantled stairway that his pencil of light played nervously and his gaze was closely riveted.

For there, above his natural line of vision, half-hidden back in the heavy shadows, his startled eyes made out a huddled and shadowy figure. It was

PHANTOM WIRES

a woman's figure, in black, and motionless. It was bound hand and foot to the iron stair-stanchions.

He did not notice, in that first frenzied glance, the white band that cut across the lower part of her face, so colorless was her skin. But as he looked for the second time, he emitted a sudden cry, half-pity, half-anger, for slowly and thinly it filtered into his consciousness just what and who that watching figure was.

And then, and then only, did he speak. And when he did so he repeated his earlier cry.

"My God, Frank, what is it?"

There was no response, no answering movement or gesture. He called to her again, but still absolute silence confronted him.

As he crept closer to her, step by step, he saw and understood.

The two luminous eyes, burning through the dark, had been his wife's. She had been imprisoned and tied there; but bound and muffled as she was, the strength of her desire, the supremacy of will, had created its new and mysterious wire of communication. Some passion of want, some sheer intensity of feeling, had found and used its warning semaphore. She had spoken to him, without sound or movement. Yet for what?

Yet for what? That was the thought that seemed to dance back and forth across the foreground of his busy brain. That was what he won-

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

dered and demanded of himself as he clambered and struggled and panted up the wall into the narrow and dusty alcove, and cut away the sodden gag between her aching jaws. The tender flesh was indented and livid, where the tightened band had pressed in under the cheek-bones. The salivated throat was swollen, and speechless. The tongue protruded pitifully, helpless in its momentary paralysis.

"Oh, he'll smart for this! By heaven, he'll smart for this!" declared Durkin, as he stooped and cut away the straps that bound her ankles to the obdurate iron, and severed the bands that bruised and held her white wrists. Even then she could not speak, though she smiled a little, faintly and forlornly and gratefully. She struggled to say one word, but it resolved itself into a cacophonous and inarticulate mumble, half-infantile, half-imbecile.

"Oh, he'll pay for this!" repeated the raging man, as he lowered her, limp and inert, to the floor below and leaped down beside her. She sank back with a happy but husky gasp of weakness, for the benumbed muscles refused to obey, and the cramped and stiffened limbs were unable to support her.

All she could do was to hold her husband's hand in her own, in a grateful yet passionate grip. She must have been imprisoned there, he surmised, at least an hour, perhaps two hours, perhaps even longer.

PHANTOM WIRES

He started up, in search for water. It might be, he felt, that a lead water-pipe ran somewhere about them. He would cut it without compunction.

He took two steps across the room, when an audible and terrified note of warning broke from her swollen lips. He darted back to her, in wonder, searching her straining face with his little shaft of lantern light.

She did not speak; but he followed her eyes. They were on the burnished copper railing refracting the thin light that danced back and forth across that dungeon-like chamber. He questioned her fixed gaze, but still he did not understand her. She caught his hand, and retained it fiercely. He thought, from her pallor, that she was on the point of fainting, and he would have placed her full length on the hard cement, but she struggled against it, and still kept her hold on his hand.

Then she took the tiny lantern from his fingers, and bending low, tapped with it on the cement. Durkin, listening closely, knew she was sounding the telegrapher's double "I"—the call for attention, implying a message over the wire.

Slowly he spelt out the words as she gave them to him in Morse, irregular and wavering, but still decipherable.

"The — railing — is — charged!"

"Charged?" he repeated, as the last word shaped itself in his questioning brain.

He t
the sha
there h

Then
it was a
der he
at the c

"I se
Then
crossed
had fal
This ba
the met
copper.

Then
the cor
current,
twisted
life. F

That
That w

He s
agent o
him lik
face wa
color.

Then
them r
gether,

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

He took the lantern from her hand, and swung the shaft of light on the glimmering copper. From there he looked back at her face once more.

Then, in one illuminating flash of comprehension, it was all clear to him. With a stare of blank wonder he saw and understood, and fell back appalled at the demoniacal ingenuity of it all.

"I see! I see!" he repeated, vacuously, almost.

Then, to make sure of what he had been told, he crossed the room and picked up the bar of steel that had fallen at his feet as he first entered the door. This bar he let fall so that one end would rest on the metal vault-covering and the other on the rail of copper.

There was a report, a sudden leap of flame, and the continued hissing fury of the short-circuited current, until the bar, heated to incandescence, twisted and writhed where it lay like a thing of life. He drew a deep breath, and watched it.

That was the danger he had so closely skirted! That was the fate which he had escaped!

He stood gazing at the insidious yet implacable agent of death, spluttering its tongue of flame at him like an angry snake; and, as he looked, his face was beaded with sweat, and seemed ashen in color.

Then a sense of the dangers still surrounding them returned to his mind. He shook himself together, and, making a circuit of the room, found

PHANTOM WIRES

the switch and turned off the current. As he did so he gave a little muffled cry of gratitude, for across the rear corner of the room ran two leaden water-pipes. Into one of these he cut and drilled with his pocket-knife, ruthlessly, without a moment's hesitation. He was suddenly rewarded by a thin jet of water spraying him in the face. He caught his hat full of it, and carried it to Frank, who drank from it, feverishly and deeply. It not only brought her strength back to her; but, after it, she could speak a little, though huskily, and with considerable pain.

"Can you walk?"

She signalled, yes.

"We've got to get out of here, at once!"

He could see that she understood.

"Can you come now?" he asked.

She nodded her head, and he helped her to her feet. Together, the one leaning heavily on the other's arm, they paced up and down the already flooded floor, until power came back to her aching limbs, and steadiness to her tired nerves.

"It would be better not to go together. I'll help you out and give you fifty yards' start. If anything should happen, remember that I'm behind you, and that, after this, I'm ready to shoot, and shoot without a quaver."

Again she nodded her head.

"But listen. When you get up through the side-

walk g
toward
and go
nothing
does o
stand t
home i
and as
From t
thing d

By t
tunnel-
the rain
"Wl
you!"

Thei
narrow
incongr
ing sen
sonal co

Ther
walls w
tesque
street.

Thus
way d
through
her fig
reaching

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

walk grating, keep steadily on for two blocks, toward the west. Then turn north for half a block, and go into the family entrance at Kieffer's. If nothing happens, I'll join you there. If anything does occur to keep me back, give them to understand that you've missed the last train for your home in East Orange; put this five-dollar bill down and ask for a front room on the second floor. From there you must watch for me. If it's anything dangerous I'll signal you in passing.

By this time he had led her down the narrow, tunnel-like passageway and was helping her up into the rain-swept street.

"Whatever happens, remember that I'm behind you!" he repeated.

Their struggles, as he assisted her up through the narrow opening, were ungainly and ludicrous; yet, incongruously enough, there came to him a fleeting sense of joy in even that accidental and impersonal contact of her hand with his.

Then he braced himself against the narrow brick walls where he stood, appearing a strange and grotesque and bodiless head above the level of the street.

Thus peering out, he watched her as she beat her way down the wind-swept sidewalk. Already, through the drifting midnight rain, the outline of her figure was losing its distinctness. He was reaching down for his wet and sodden hat, to fol-

PHANTOM WIRES

low her, when something happened that left him transfixed, a motionless and bodiless head on which startled horror had suddenly fallen.

For out of the quiet and shadowy south side of the street, where it had been silently patrolling under lowered speed, swerved and darted a wine-colored, surrey-built touring car with a cape top. Durkin recognized it at a glance; it was Penfield's huge machine. Its movement, as it swung in toward the startled woman, seemed like the swoop of a hawk. It appeared to stop only for a moment, but in that moment two men leaped from the wide-swung tonneau door. When they clambered into it once more Durkin saw that Frank was between them. And one of the men was MacNutt, and the other Keenan.

He heard the one sharp scream that reverberated down the empty street, followed by the fading pulsations of the departing car, when with an oath of fury, he was already working his arms up through the narrow manhole. As he did so he heard a second, hoarser cry, succeeded by the heavy tramp of hurrying feet, and then a peremptory challenge.

Turning sharply, he caught sight of a patrolling roundsman, bearing down on him from the corner of Broadway; and he saw that the officer was drawing his revolver as he charged across the wet pavement.

It was already too late to free himself. With

an insti
the mar
saw the
the repe
hesitate
as he fo
dropped
heard th
from th
cover v
the tun
fled and
A m
and vib
asphalt

THE GHOSTS OF THOUGHT

an instinctive movement of the hands he caught up the manhole cover, shield-like. As he did so he saw the glimmer of the polished steel and heard the repeated challenge. But he neither paused nor hesitated. He let his knees break under him, and as he fell he saw to it that the rim of the manhole dropped into its waiting circular groove. Then he heard the sound of a shot, of a second and a third, from the policeman's pistol. But as he secured the cover with its chainlock, and dropped down into the tunnel below, the reports seemed thin and muffled and far away to Durkin.

A moment later, however, he heard the ominous and vibrant echo of the officer's night-stick, on the asphalt, frenziedly rapping for assistance.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RULING PASSION

Beyond that first involuntary little cry of terror Frances Durkin uttered no sound, as she found herself in the hooded tonneau, wedged in between MacNutt and Keenan. That first outcry, indeed, had been unwilling and automatic, the last reactionary movement of an overtried and exhausted body.

A wave of care-free passivity now seemed to inundate her. She made no attempt to struggle; she nursed no sense of open resentment against her captors. The battery of her vital forces was depleted and depolarized. She experienced only a faintly poignant sense of disappointment, of indeterminate pique, as she realized that she was no longer a free agent. Leaning back in the cushioned gloom, inert, impassive, with her eyes half-closed, she seemed to be drifting through an eddying veil of gray. The voices so close beside her sounded thin and far off. An impression of unreality clung to her, an impression that she was floating through an empty and rain-swept world from which all life and warmth had withered.

"It's not *her* I want — it's Durkin!" MacNutt was saying, with an oath, as they swung around

the corn
Eighth a
goin' to

"Well
tested K

"Can'
to get th
juices!"

He pu
him, and
sharp wo
he sudde

"Wha
manded

Keena
making a
unknown
face that
shoulder.

"I'm

"Is i
other.

"I'm
I have t
precinct!

"And

"Ther
and the s

"And

THE RULING PASSION

the corner into the blinking and serried lights of Eighth avenue. "It's that damned groundhog I'm goin' to dig out yet!"

"Well, you can't go back *there* after him!" protested Keenan.

"Can't I? Well, I'm goin' back, and I'm goin' to get that man, and I'm goin' to fry him in his own juices!"

He pushed the woman's inert weight away from him, and leaned out from under the cape, with a sharp word or two to Penfield's chauffeur. Then he suddenly whistled and waved his arm.

"What are you doing that for?" Keenan demanded of him.

Keenan had caught the drooping figure, and was making an effort to support it. His face, for some unknown reason, was almost as colorless as the face that lay so passively against his rain-soaked shoulder.

"I'm goin' back!" declared MacNutt.

"Is it worth while — now?" demurred the other.

"I'm goin' to get my hooks on Durkin, even if I have to wade through every raidin' gang in the precinct!"

"And then what?" deprecated Keenan.

"Then I'll meet you at Penfield's house, uptown, and the show will come to a finish!"

"And what am I expected to do?" demanded

PHANTOM WIRES

Keenan, impatiently. For the approaching four-wheeler had come to a standstill beside them, and MacNutt was already out in the rain.

"You take care o' *that!*" he pointed a contemptuous finger toward the motionless woman, "and mighty good care!"

"But how's all this going to help us out?"

"I'll show you, when the time comes. Here's the key for Penfield's house. You'll find it nice and quiet and secluded there, and if I *do* bring Durkin back with me, by heaven, you'll have the privilege o' seein' a lurid end to this uncommonly lurid game!"

He tossed the key into the tonneau. Keenan picked it up in silence.

They heard the clatter of the horses' hoofs on the wet asphalt, the sharp closing of the cab door, the rattle of the wheel-tires across the steel car-tracks, and he was gone. A moment later they were dipping up the avenue between two long rows of undulating lights, with the rain drifting in on their faces.

Then Keenan turned and looked down at the woman beside him. During several minutes of unbroken silence Frank nursed the dim consciousness of his keen and scrutinizing glance. But her mind seemed engaged in a body that was already dead; she had neither the will nor the power to look up at him.

Then,
stooped
mouth.

At an
fought a
red blood
it. But
to it. S
tide of t
self weig
was not

She e
enlighter
seen. It
drama; j
It meant
and war
her brea
end.

She k
she knev
between
impulse
concert
was the
of duty
as the w

And
tion she

THE RULING PASSION

Then, with no warning word or gesture, he stooped down and kissed her on her heavy red mouth.

At any other time, she knew, she would have fought against that tainting touch; every drop of red blood in her body would have risen to combat it. But now she neither repulsed it nor responded to it. She seemed submerged and smothered in a tide of terrible indifference. She even found herself weighing the meaning of that affront to all that was not ignoble in her.

She even caught at it, with an inward gasp of enlightenment. It meant more than she had at first seen. It brought a new scene to the shifting drama; it meant a new turn to the hurrying game. It meant that if she only waited, and could be wise and wary and calculating, she still might hug to her breast some tattered hope for the impending end.

She knew that Keenan was still watching her; she knew that he was, in some manner, being torn between contending feelings, that some obliterating impulse was falling between him and that grim concert of forces of which he was a member. It was the shadow of passion falling across the paths of duty — it was the play and the problem as old as the world.

And what was she, then? That was the question she asked herself, with a little sobbing gasp —

PHANTOM WIRES

what was she, trading thus, even in thought, on her bruised and wearied body? What had she fallen to, what was it that had deadened all that was softer and better and purer within her, that she could thus see slip away from her the last solace and dignity of her womanhood?

There, she told herself bitterly, lay the degradation and the ultimate danger of the life she had led. It was there that the grimmer tragedy came into her career. The surrender of ever greater and greater hostages to expediency, the retreat to ever meaner and meaner instruments of activity, the gradual induration of heart and soul, the desperate and ever more desperate search for self-deceiving extenuations, for self-blinding condonement, for pitiful and distorting self-propitiation — in these lay the inward corruption, more implacably and more terribly tragic than any outward blow! She had once deluded herself with the thought that a life of crime might lose at least half of its evil by losing all of its grossness. She had even consoled herself with the thought that it was the offender against life who saw deepest into life. It was but natural, she had always argued with herself, that the thwarted consciousness, that the erring and suffering heart, should yield deeper insight into the dark and complicated ranges of spiritual truth than could the soul forever untried and unshaken. The tempted and troubled heart, from its lonely towers

of unh
ing of
and he
ventur
had lo
most s
that so
light-h
untaint
which
some d
ues wh
good n
way be

But
was th
She wa
lous w
it appa
She w
woman
hoped
of tha
fallen.

Yet
mean ;
told he
arsenal
ironic l

THE RULING PASSION

of unhappiness, must ever see further into the meaning of things than could those comfortably normal and healthy souls who suffered little because they ventured little. She had ventured much, and she had lost much. She had thought to hold some inmost self aloof and immune. She had dreamed that some inward irreproachability of thought, some light-hearted tact of open conduct, might leave still untainted that deeper core of thought and feeling which she had long thought of as conscience, while some deceiving and sophistical transmutation of values whispered to her adroitly that in some way all good might be bad, and that all bad might in some way be good.

But that, she now knew, was a mockery. She was the sum of all that she had thought and acted. She was a disillusioned and degraded and unscrupulous woman, steeped in enormities so dark that it appalled and sickened her even to recall them. She was only the empty and corroded shell of a woman, all that once aspired and lived and hoped in her eaten away by the acid currents of that underground world into which she had fallen.

Yet rather than it should end in that slow and mean and sordid inner tragedy of the spirit, she told herself fiercely, she would fling open her last arsenal of passion and come to her end in some ironic blaze of glory that would at least lend sinister

PHANTOM WIRES

radiance to a timelessly base and sorry eclipse. So she lay back in Keenan's clasp quiescently, unresistingly, but watchfully. For she knew that the end, whatever it might be, was not far away.

Dur
and h
narrow
impote
into th
be, fo
This f
tration
and ho
machin
Yet,
pidity
ments
chinery
impenc
an esse
his fina
ever th
weakne
Wha
he hur
which

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CROWN OF IRON

Durkin's first feeling, as he scrambled to his feet and half-stumbled, half-groped his way along the narrow, tunnel-like passage, was an untimely and impotent and almost delirious passion to get out into the open and fight — fight to the last, if need be, for all that narrowing life still held for him. This feeling was followed by a quick sense of frustration as he realized his momentary helplessness and how comprehensive and relentless seemed the machinery of intrigue opposing him.

Yet, he told himself with that lightning-like rapidity of thought which came to him at such moments of peril, however intricate and vast the machinery, however carefully planned the line of impending campaign, the human element would be an essential part of it. And his last forlorn hope, his final fighting chance, lay in the fact that wherever the human element entered there also entered weakness and passion and the possibility of accident.

What now remained to him, he warned himself as he hurriedly locked and barred the two steel doors which shut off the first and second passageway, was

PHANTOM WIRES

to think quickly and act decisively. Somewhere, at some unforeseen moment, his chance might still come to him.

As for himself, he felt that he was safe enough, for the time being. The officer who had detected him in the manhole would be sure to follow up a case so temptingly suspicious. The police, in turn, could take open advantage of an intrusion so obviously unauthorized and ominous as his own, and find in it ample excuse for investigating a quarter which for many months must have been under suspicion. But, under any circumstances, well guarded as that poolroom fortress stood, its resistance could be only a matter of time, and of strictly limited time, once the reserves were on the scene.

Durkin's first thought, accordingly, was of the roof, for, so far as he knew, all escape from the ground floor was even then cut off. Yet the first door leading from the vault chamber he found to be steel-bound and securely locked. He surmised, with a gasp of consternation, that the doors above him would be equally well secured. He remembered that Penfield never did things by halves, and he felt that his only escape lay in that upward flight.

So he saw that it was to be a grim race in demolition; that while he was to gnaw and eat his way upward through steel and brick, like a starving rat boring its passage up through the chambers of a huge granary, his pursuers would be pounding and

batteri
pursuit

He
clear-
to him
to his
he kne
from o
ture of
quickly
obstruc
and sho
the mo
sure to
the nitr

Ther
the con
like a b
and a s

But l
locked
through

The
tattered
now lay
ing to t
again b
wrench
head fr

THE CROWN OF IRON

battering at the lower doors in just as frenzied pursuit.

He no longer hesitated, but moved with that clear-thoughted rapidity of action which often came to him in his moments of half-delirium. Turning to his tool-bag and scooping out his bar of soap, he kneaded together enough of the nitroglycerine from one of the stout rubber bags to make a mixture of the consistency of liquid honey. This he quickly but carefully worked into the crack of the obstructing door. Then he attached his detonator, and shortened and lighted his fuse, scuttling back to the momentary shelter of the outer passage, making sure to be beyond the deadly "feathered radius" of the nitro.

There he waited behind the steel-bound door for the coming detonation. The sound of it smote him like a blow on the chest, followed by a rush of air and a sudden feeling of nausea.

But he did not wait. He groped his way in, re-locked the passage door and crawled on all fours through the smoke and heavy, malodorous gases.

The remnants of the blasted door hung, like a tattered pennon, on one twisted hinge, and his way now lay clear to the ladder of grilled ironwork leading to the floor above. But here the steel trapdoor again barred his progress. One sharp twist and wrench with his steel lever, however, tore the bolt-head from its setting, and in another half-minute

PHANTOM WIRES

he was standing on the closed door above, shutting out the noxious smoke from the basement.

Between him and the stairway stood still another fortified door, heavier than the others. He did not stop to knead his paste, for already he could hear the crash of glass and the sound of sledges on the door at the rear of the cigar-shop. Catching up a strand of what he knew to be the most explosive of all guncottons — it was cellulose-hexanitrate — he worked it gently into the open keyhole and again scuttled back to safety as the fuse burnt down.

He could feel the building shake with the tremor of the detonation, shake and quiver like a ship pounded by strong head seas. A remote window splintered and crashed to the floor, sucked in by the atmospheric inrush following the explosion-vacuum. He noticed, too, as he mounted the narrow stairs before him, that he was bleeding at the nose. But this, he told himself, was no time for resting. For at the head of the second stairway still another sheet of armored steel blocked his passage, and still again the hurried, hollow detonation shook the building. The ache in his head, behind and above the eyes, became almost unbearable; his stomach revolted at the poisonous gases through which he was groping. But he did not stop.

As he twisted and pried with his steel lever at the lock of the trapdoor that stood between him and the open air of the housetop, he could already hear

the tell
muffled
of feet.
by this
upper s
wrenche
their w
heart of
for thos
the inac
single-h

“Goo
“Give i
put 'em

Then
the sulle
door sw
wind, co
grimy f
opening.

Even
below
squatted
eye ever
way, go
against
still leani

Then
his way t

THE CROWN OF IRON

the telltale splintering of wood and sharp orders and muffled cries and the approaching, quick tramping of feet. He fought at the lock like a madman, for by this time the trampling feet were mounting the upper stairs, and doors were being battered and wrenched from their hinges. He had at least made their work easy for them; he had torn open the heart of Penfield's stronghold; he had blazed a path for those officers of the law who had bowed before the inaccessibility of the building he had disrupted single-handed!

"Good!" he cried, in his frenzied delight. "Give it to them good! Wreck 'em, once for all; put 'em out of business!"

Then he gave a sudden relieving "Ah!"—for the sullen wood had surrendered its bolts, and the door swung open to his upward push. The night wind, cold and damp and clean, swept his hot and grimy face as he pulled himself up through the opening.

Even as he did so he heard the gathering sounds below him growing clearer and clearer. He squatted low in the darkness, and with a furtive eye ever on the dismantled trapdoor, groped his way, gorilla-like, closer and closer to the wall against which he knew the janitor's ladder to be still leaning.

Then he dropped flat on his face, and wormed his way toward the nearest chimney, not twelve feet

PHANTOM WIRES

from him, for a wet helmet had emerged from the trap opening. A moment later a lantern was flashing and playing about the rainy roof.

"We've got 'em! Quick, Lanigan; we've got 'em!" cried the helmeted head exultantly, from the trapdoor, to someone below.

The next moment Durkin, prone on his face, heard the crack of a revolver and the impact of the ball as it ricocheted from the roof-tin, not a yard from his feet.

He no longer tried to conceal himself, but, rolling and tumbling toward the eave-cornice, let himself over, and hung and clung there by his hands, while a second ball whistled over him.

He felt desperately along the flat brick surface, with his kicking feet, wondering if he had misjudged his direction, sick with a fear that he might be dangling over an open abyss. He shifted the weight of his body along the cornice ledge, still pawing and feeling, feverishly and ridiculously, with his gyrating limbs. Then a joy of relief swept through him. The ladder was there, and his feet were already on its second step.

As he ran, cat-like, across the lower apartment-house roof, he knew that he stood in full range of his pursuers above, and he knew that by this time they were already crowding out to the cornice-ledge. There was no time for thought. He did not pause to look back at them, to weigh either the

problem
he only
noticed
multi-col
familiar
the shee
uncertain
crowded

"Let
voice abo

tation to
Durkin
line of
brief flig
would h
falling r
sagging
more gra
of the rai

As his
under the
with his
over, lim
his arm-p
that ever
and liner
figure sn
hidden in

THE CROWN OF IRON

problem or the possible consequences in his mind; he only remembered that that afternoon he had noticed five crowded lines of washing swinging in multi-colored disarray at the back of that many-familied hive of life. He hesitated only once, at the sheer edge of the roof, to make sure, in the uncertain half-light, that he was above those crowded lines.

"Let him have it—there he goes!" cried a voice above, and at that too warning note his hesitation took wing.

Durkin leaped out into space, straddling the first line of sodden clothes as he fell. Even in that brief flight the thought came to his mind that it would have been infinitely better for him if the falling rain had not weighted and flattened those sagging lines of washing. Then he remembered, more gratefully, that it was probably only because of the rain that they still swung there.

As his weight came on the first line it snapped under the blow, as did the second, which he clutched with his hands, and the third, which he doubled over, limply, and the fourth, which cut up under his arm-pit. But as he went downward he carried that ever-growing avalanche of cotton and woolen and linen with him, so that when his sprawling figure smote the stone court it fell muffled and hidden in a web of tangled garments.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE STRAITS OF CHANCE

How his flight ended Durkin never clearly remembered. He had a dim and uneasy memory of the lapse of time, either great or little, the confused recollection of waking to his senses and fighting his way free from a smothering weight of wet and clinging clothes. As he struggled to his feet a stab of pain shot through his left hand, and up through his forearm. It was so keen and penetrating that he surmised, in his blank and unreasoning haste, that he must have torn a chord or broken a bone in his wrist. But on a matter like that, he felt, he could now waste no time.

If he had, indeed, been unconscious, he concluded, it had been but momentary. For as he groped about in search of his hat, dazed and bruised, he found himself still alone and unmolested. Creeping through the apartment-house cellar, and out past the door of the snoring and still undisturbed janitor, he crouched for a waiting moment or two behind an overloaded garbage-can, in the area.

Hearing nothing, he staggered up the narrow stairs to the level of the sidewalk, wet and ragged

and dish
The stre
He fe
not giv
along, sp
depressic
self on a
indeed th
dark and
humiliati

In fron
he could
creep ins
to secrec
quarter
police wo

As he
der of ho
soggy asj
that it v
police re
But as h
out a hi
pany's d
him.

He sta
motion, c
and spect
a sharp a

THE STRAITS OF CHANCE

and disheveled, blackened and soiled and begrimed. The street seemed deserted.

He felt sick and faint and shaken, but he would not give up. He half-stumbled, half-staggered along, splashing through little pools of rain held in depressions of the stone sidewalk, supporting himself on anything that offered, hoping, if this were indeed the end, that he might crawl away into some dark and secluded corner of the city, to hide the humiliating ignominy of it all.

In front of a Chinese laundry window he saw that he could go no further. His first impulse was to creep inside, and make an effort to bribe his way to secrecy, although he knew that within another quarter of an hour the tightening cordon of the police would entirely surround the block.

As he swayed there, hesitating, he heard the thunder of hoofs and the rumble of wheel-tires on the soggy asphalt. His first apprehensive thought was that it would prove to be a patrol-wagon, with police reserves from some neighboring precinct. But as he blinked through the darkness he made out a high-platformed Metropolitan Milk Company's delivery-wagon swinging down toward him.

He staggered, with a slow and heavy wading motion, out to the centre of the street, a strange and spectral figure, with outstretched arms, uttering a sharp and halting cry or two.

PHANTOM WIRES

The driver pulled up, thirty long and dreary feet past him.

"What in hell d'you want?" he demanded irately, raising his whip to start his team once more, as he caught a clearer view of the seemingly drunken figure.

"I'll give you a fiver," said Durkin thickly, "if you'll gi' me a lift!"

He held the money in his hand, as he stumbled and panted to the wagon-step. That put an end to all argument.

"Climb in, then — quick!" cried the big driver, as he caught his passenger by a tattered coat sleeve and helped him up into the high-perched seat.

"But for the love o' God, who's been doin' things to you?" he went on, in amazement, as he saw the bruised and bleeding and ash-colored face.

"They threw me out o' their damned dope shop!" cried Durkin, with an only half-simulated thickness of utterance, as he jerked a shaking thumb toward the lights of the Chinese laundry. "And I guess — I'm — I'm a bit knocked out!"

For he felt very weak and faint and weary, though the cold rain and the open night air beat on his upturned face with a sting that was gratefully refreshing.

"They certainly did make a mess o' you!" chortled the unmoved driver, as they rumbled westward and took the corner with a skid of the great

THE STRAITS OF CHANCE

wheels that struck fire from even the wet car-tracks. He tucked the bill down in his oil-coat pocket.

"Feelin' sick, ain't you?"

"Yes!"

"Where d'you want to go?" he asked more feelingly.

"Where d'you go?" parried Durkin.

"Hoboken Ferry, for th' Lackawanna Number Eight!"

"Then that'll do me," answered the other weakly.

He leaned back in his high and rocking seat, grasping the back rail with his right hand. He felt as if the waves of a troubled and tumultuous sea were throwing him up, broken and torn, on some island of possible safety. He felt dizzy, as though he were being tossed and plunged forward to some narrow bar of impending release and rest. He did not ask of himself just what seas boomed and thundered on the opposing side of that narrow stretch of promised security. He knew that they were there, and he knew that the time would soon come when he must face and feel them about him. He had once demanded rest; but he knew that there now could be no rest for him, until the end. He might hide for a day or two, like a hunted animal with its hurt, but the hounds of destiny would soon be at his heels again. All he asked, he told himself, was his man's due right of momentary re-

PHANTOM WIRES

lapse, his breathing spell of quietness. He was already too stained and scarred with life to look for the staidly upholstered sanctuaries, the padded seclusions of simple and honest wayfarers. He was broken and undone, but his day would come again.

He looked at his limp and trailing left hand. To his consternation, he saw that it dripped blood. He tried to push back his coat sleeve, but the pain was more than he could endure. So with his right hand he lifted the helpless arm up before his eyes, as though it were something not his own flesh and blood, and for the first time saw the splinter of bone that protruded from the torn flesh, just below the wrist-joint.

He felt for his handkerchief, dizzily, and tried to bandage the wound. This he never accomplished, for with a sudden little gasp he fainted away, and fell prone across the oil-skinned lap of the big driver.

That astounded person drew up in alarm at the side entrance of a street-corner saloon. He was on the point of repeating his sturdy call for help, when a four-wheeler swung in beside his wagon-step, and delivered itself of a square-shouldered, heavy-jawed figure, muffled to the ears in a rain-coat. The newcomer took in the situation with a rapid and comprehensive glance of relief.

“So there he is, at last!” he said, as he came

THE STRAITS OF CHANCE

forward and caught up the relaxed and still unconscious figure.

"Where'd you get a license for buttin' in on this?" expostulated the surprised driver.

"Buttin' in?" cried the man in the raincoat, as he lifted the limp figure in his great, gorilla-like arms. "This isn't buttin' in — this is takin' care o' my own friends!"

"Friend o' yours, then, is he?" queried the weakening driver.

"A friend o' mine!" cried the other angrily, for his man was already safely in the cab. "You damned can-slinger, d'you suppose I'm wastin' cab-fare doin' church rescue work? Of course he's a friend o' mine.

"And not only that," he added, under his breath, as he swung up into the cab and gave the driver the number of Penfield's uptown house, "and not only that — he's a friend o' mine who's worth just a little over a quarter of a million to me!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

It was slowly, almost reluctantly, that Durkin returned to full and clear-thoughted consciousness. Even before he had opened his eyes he realized that he was in a hurrying carriage, for he could feel every sway and jolt of the thinly cushioned seat. He could also hear the beat of the falling rain on the hood-leather, and on the glass of the door beside him, as he lay back in the damp odors of wet and sodden upholstery.

Then he half-opened his eyes, slowly, and saw that it was MacNutt beside him.

The discovery neither moved nor startled him; he merely let the heavy lids fall over his tired eyes once more, and lay there, without a movement or a sign.

Tatter by tatter he pieced together the history of the past few hours, and as memory came tardily back to him he knew, in a dim and shadowy way, that he would soon need every alertness of mind and body which he could summon to his help. But still he waited, passive and unbetraying, fighting against a weakness born of great pain and fatigue.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

He was keenly conscious of the cab's abrupt stopping, of the passing of money between MacNutt and the lean and dripping night-hawk holding the reins, of being half-carried and half-dragged, in the great, bear-like grasp of his captor, across the wet sidewalk, to the foot of a flight of brownstone steps. These steps were wide and ponderous, and led up to an equally wide and ponderous-looking doorway crowned with ornamental figures of marble on a sandstone background. These carven figures, wet and glistening in the light of the street-lamps, stood out incongruously gloomy and ghostly, like the high relief on a sarcophagus.

Instead of mounting the steps, however, MacNutt hauled his captive limply in under their shadow, to the basement door opening off the stone-flagged area. There, after fumbling with his keys for a moment or two, he quietly unlocked the heavy outer grating of twisted ironwork and then the inner door of oak. Durkin made a mental note of the fact that both of these doors were in turn locked after them.

The two then made their way through the darkness down what must have been a long passage. Its floor was padded with carpet, and some fugitive and indefinable odor seemed to suggest to the prisoner an atmosphere of well-being, of a house both carefully furnished and scrupulously managed.

MacNutt softly opened a door on the right, and,

PHANTOM WIRES

after listening for a cautious moment or two, as softly entered the room into which this door led. And still again a key was turned and withdrawn from the lock.

Even with his eyes closed Durkin, as he lay there husbanding his strength, was conscious of the sudden light that flooded the room. Covertly opening that eye which remained in the heavy shadow, separating the lashes by little more than the width of a hair, he could make out a large room, upholstered and carpeted in green, with green-shaded electroliers above two billiard tables that stood ghastly and bier-like beneath their blanketing covers of white cotton. Against the walls stood massive, elephantine club chairs of green fumed oak, and it was into one of these that MacNutt had dropped the inert and unresponding Durkin. At the far end of the room the stealthy observer could make out what was assuredly the entrance to an electric elevator. In fact, as he looked closer he could see the two mother-of-pearl buttons which controlled the apparatus; for it was plain that this elevator was one of those automatic lifts not uncommon in city residences of the more palatial order.

Then, as he quietly but busily speculated on the significance of this discovery, Durkin suddenly caught sight of a triple crescent carved on the arm of the chair against which he leaned. And as he made out that familiar device he knew that he

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

was in Penfield's uptown house once used as his residence and later as his private clubrooms.

At this discovery his alert but well-veiled glance went back to MacNutt. He saw his captor fling off his wet and draggled raincoat and then shake the water from a dripping hat-brim. This he seemed to do without haste and without emotion.

Durkin next saw his enemy gaze about the entire circle of the room scrutinizingly, the subdulous green eyes coming to a rest only when they fell on his own relaxed figure.

"And this is where the music starts!" muttered MacNutt aloud, as he strode toward Durkin.

Even before he had uttered that half-articulate little sentence his captive was possessed by a sudden conviction of approaching climax. He knew, somewhere deep in the tangled roots of consciousness, that either he or the other must go down that night, that one was destined to win and that the other was destined to lose, that the ancient fight was about to be settled, and settled for all time.

In that agonized and hurried and yet lucid-thoughted summing up of ultimate values Durkin realized that it would be useless to resist what was immediately before him. He was too shaken and weak for any crude battle of brute strength against brute strength. With his wounded hand, which even then sent throbbing spears of pain from fingertip to shoulder, and with his bruised and weary and

PHANTOM WIRES

stiffened body, he knew that any test of strength in the muscular and ape-like arms of MacNutt was out of the question. So he lay back, weak and unresisting, every now and then emitting from his half-opened lips a little moan of pain.

But behind the torn and battered ramparts of the seemingly comatose body his vigilant mind paced and watched and kept keenly awake. As he felt the great hands pad and feel about his body, and the searching fingers go through his clothes, pocket after pocket, some sentinel intelligence seemed to watch and burn and glow like a coal deep within the ashes of all his outer fatigue. He waited quiescent, as he felt the heated, animal-like breath on his face, as the ruthlessly exploring hands tore open his vest, as they ripped away the inner pocket which had been so carefully sewn together at the top, as they drew out the tied and carefully sealed packet of papers for which he had been searching.

More than once Durkin thought that if ever those documents, for which he had endured and suffered and lost so much, were again wrested from him, it would be only after some moment of transcendent conflict, after some momentous battle of life's forlornest last reserves. Yet now, impassively and ignominiously, he was surrendering them to the conqueror, supinely, meanly, without even the solace of some supreme if vain resistance! He listened to MacNutt's gloating little "Ah!" of

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

triumph without a sign or movement. But, even then, in that moment of seeming frustration, Durkin's subterranean yet terrible pertinaciousness, his unparaded bull-dog indefatigability, glowed and burned at its brightest. They were not yet in their last ditch.

"That's *one* part of it!" muttered MacNutt, as he stowed away the packet and rebuttoned his coat.

It was a shadowed and lupine eye which Durkin cautiously opened as he felt more than heard MacNutt's quick footsteps on the carpeted floor. covertly, and without moving, he saw the other man walk to the elevator, saw the play of his finger on the mother-of-pearl button, saw the automatic door noiseless slide away, and the descended and waiting cage locked on a level with the floor. He saw MacNutt step inside, and the finger again play on one of a row of five pearl buttons set in the polished wood of the cage-wall, and the elevator noiselessly ascend.

The moment it went up Durkin was on his feet.

He first ran to the two doors at the opposite end of the billiard-room. They were both securely locked; and they were his only means of escape. Then he hurriedly circled the two huge tables, in search of some implement of defense. But the denuded room offered nothing.

Then he dashed to the elevator shaft. As he had surmised, it was an automatic electric lift,

PHANTOM WIRES

operating from the cellar below to the top of the house. The cage, so far as he could make out, now stood opposite the third floor. The controlling apparatus, the motor into which the power wires led, was, of course, in the cellar beneath him. It would be easy enough to twist one of the billiard-table covers into a rope, and drop down to the shaft-bottom, twelve feet below. There he could tie a bit of string to the emergency switch, watch the first movement of the descending cage, and shut off the current at the right moment. That would mean that the descending cage, robbed of its power, would hang a dead weight in its steel channel, the safety brake would automatically apply itself, and anybody within the cage would remain locked and imprisoned there, halfway between floors, helpless to descend or ascend, hemmed in by the four blank walls of the shift.

He decided not even to waste time on twisting up a table-cover. He would hang by his right hand, and drop to the bottom. But a sudden glint and flutter of light reminded him of his danger. The cage was descending.

It was only a matter of seconds before MacNutt stepped once more from the cage into the billiard-room, yet as he did so he saw nothing but the still limp and relaxed form of Durkin, huddled back in his huge chair, emitting from between his half-parted lips an occasional weak groan of pain.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

A gloating and half-demoniacal chuckle broke from the newcomer's lips. In one hand he carried a decanter of brandy, in the other a seltzer siphon. Durkin could hear the gurgle and ripple of the liquid into the glass; a moment later he knew that MacNutt was bending over him.

"Here, you, wake up out o' that!" he said, with still another chuckle of ominous glee.

He shook the relaxed figure roughly.

"Get awake, there! This is *too* good — this is something you can't afford to miss, you damned welcher!"

He poured the scalding liquor down the other's throat. Some of it spilled and ran into the hollow of his neck; some of it dribbled on his limp collar and his coat lapels. But Durkin took what he could, and was glad of it. The pain of his wounded arm was very acute.

"Kind o' recalls our first meetin', eh?" demanded MacNutt, as he watched the other slowly open his wondering eyes. "Kind o' remind you of the day I loosened you up with brandy and seltzer, that first time I had to drag and coax you into this dirty business?"

And again his captor laughed, wickedly, mirthlessly.

"Go on, take some more! I'm goin' to give you enough to light you all to glory!" he gloated. And

PHANTOM WIRES

still he poured the liquor down the unresisting man's throat.

He dragged the other to his feet.

"Come on now, quick! There's a little scene waitin' for you upstairs—something that'll kind o' soothe and console you for gettin' so done up!"

They were in the elevator by this time, mounting noiselessly upward. Durkin could feel the fire of the brandy soar up to his brain and sing through his veins. MacNutt supported him as they stepped from the elevator cage into a darkened room. On the far side of this room, from between two heavy portières, a gash of light cut into the otherwise unbroken gloom.

A sound of voices floated out to them and MacNutt tightened his grip on the other's arm, as they stood and listened, for it was Frances Durkin and Keenan talking together, hurriedly, impetuously, earnestly.

"But does it make any difference what I have been, or who I am?" the woman's voice was asking. "I did my part; I did my work for you. Now you ought to give me a chance!"

Still holding the other back, MacNutt circled sidewise, until they came into the line of vision with the unsuspecting pair in the other room. Keenan, they could see, held one heavy hand on the woman's shoulder, intimately; and she, in turn, looked up into his face, in an attitude as open and intimate.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

"You know, now, what *I* have known before you!" whispered MacNutt, into the ear of the tortured Durkin.

"You lie!" murmured Durkin's lips, but no sound came from them, for his staring eyes were still on the scene before him.

"Listen then, you fool!" was all his tempter whispered back. And they stood together, listening.

"But I *am* giving you a chance," Keenan next replied, and his long, melancholy Celtic face was white and colorless with emotion. "I'm giving you the only chance that life holds for both of us!"

"I know it!" said the woman.

Keenan's arms went out to her, and she did not draw back. Instead, she reached up her own seemingly wearied and surrendering arms, without a word, and held him there in her obliterating embrace. He swayed a little, where he stood, and for a moment neither moved nor spoke.

MacNutt, narrowly watching the shadowy face of Durkin, saw pictured on that pallid and changing countenance fear and revolt, one momentary touch of despairing doubt, and then a mounting and all-consuming passion of blind rage.

In that drunken rage seemed to culminate all his misgivings, his suspicions, his apparent betrayals of the past. He trembled and shook like a man in a vertigo; the fingers of his upraised right hand

PHANTOM WIRES

opened and closed spasmodically; his flaccid lips fell apart, vacuously, insanely.

"I'll kill her!" he ejaculated under his breath.

MacNutt knew that his moment had come. Without a spoken word he caught his revolver up from his coat pocket. Then he thrust it, craftily, into the other man's hand.

The insane fingers closed on the handle of it, the glaring and expressionless eye peered along the steadying barrel. MacNutt held his breath, and waited. It must be soon, he knew, before the moment of madness had burnt itself out.

The woman under the white light of the electrolier drew back from Keenan, with her eyes still on his face, so that her head and shoulders stood out, a target of black against the white fore-ground. Then she drew one hand quickly across her forehead, and, wheeling slowly, let her puzzled glance sweep the entire circle of the room, until once more her eyes rested upon the expectant eyes of Keenan.

Durkin, through all his rage, shut his teeth on a sudden sob. It was all over. It was the end.

A change suddenly swept across the woman's face, a light of exaltation leaped into her dilated pupils, and her hand went up to her heart.

Was it some small sound or movement that she had heard, or was it some minute vibration of floor that she had felt?

"Jim, it's you!" she shrilled out suddenly, into

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

the heavy silence, in a tense and high soprano, with a voice not like her own.

"*Jim, where are you?*" she called passionately, as she beat Keenan impotently back with her naked hands. "Help me, quick! Can't you see I need you? Can't you see this is *killing me?*"

Keenan fell back before her, aghast.

"You fool, you weak fool!" she shrieked at him madly. "Do you think I meant that? Do you dream I could respect or care for an animal like you! Do you imagine I would endure the touch of your hands, if it wasn't to save me till this? Do you dream ——?"

She stopped suddenly, for with one sweep of his advancing arm Durkin tore the heavy portière from its curtain-rings, and he stood before them, in the flat white light of the electrics.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LAST DITCH

Durkin advanced into the room quickly, the revolver in his right hand. It was a short-barreled bull-dog gun of heavy caliber, ugly and menacing as it swung from his out-thrust wrist, held low, with the right elbow pressed close in to his side. In the doorway stood MacNutt. His eyes were staring, his bullock head thrown back, bewildered at the sudden change that one sweep of an arm had brought to the scene.

As Durkin edged craftily round, with his back to the side wall, so that his eye commanded the silent trio before him, Frank made a movement to draw away from Keenan, who stood grotesquely petrified, his lean jaw fallen, the melancholy Celtic face touched more with wonder than with fear.

"Don't move!" commanded her husband, as he saw the motion. "Stay where you are!"

She looked at him, as bewildered as the others.

"That man, you'll find, is armed."

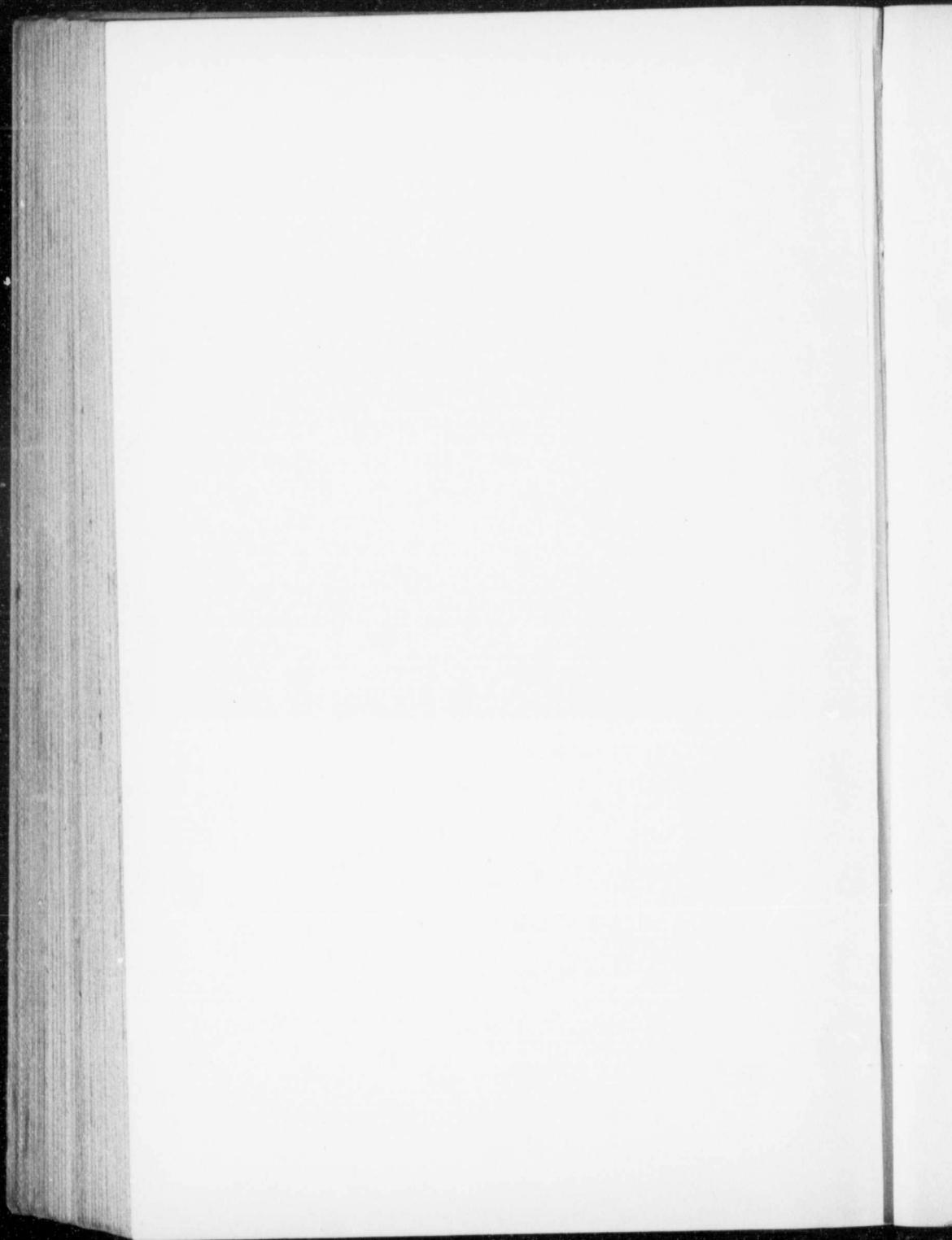
"You lie — you fool!"

"That man, I say, is armed!"



“‘Stop that!’ cried Durkin, sharply, as he saw the movement.”

Page 275.



THE LAST DITCH

Keenan laughed, scoffingly.

"Take his revolver from him!" commanded Durkin.

A momentary hesitation held her back.

"Take it, I say! And, by God, if he so much as moves a finger, I'll blow the top of his head off!"

The woman confronted Keenan once more, but he fell back a step or two.

"There's no need of that," he broke in angrily. "If you want the gun, I'll give it to you!"

And as he spoke his arm swung down and back to his hip pocket.

"Stop that!" cried Durkin sharply, as he saw the movement. "Keep those hands up, or, by heaven, I'll let you have it!"

His arm, by this time, was tense and rigidly outstretched, and his steady pistol-barrel pointed just between the other man's ludicrously blinking eyes. In the silence that followed the woman reached back, and without further hesitation drew the revolver from the motionless man's pocket.

It was a formidable, long-barreled "Colt," which, with one sharp motion of the fingers, she promptly unlimbered, exposing the breech. In each cylinder chamber, she saw, lay a loaded cartridge. Once assured of this, she snapped shut the breech and balanced the gun in the purposeful embrace of her fingers.

"Now what?" she asked, with her eyes turned

PHANTOM WIRES

to her husband. But the triumph suddenly died out of her face.

She was only in time to hear Durkin's sharp cry of anger, and to see his quick spring through the wide door-way, as the guard-door of the elevator closed and the cage shot up into space.

"We've missed him!" he gasped, with a cry of rage, as he ran to the door through which MacNutt, in that moment of excitement, had disappeared.

Frank kept her eyes on Keenan. She, too, began to feel the sense of some vast finality in their moves and actions that night.

Keenan laughed. It was a dry and joyless laugh, but it was discouraging.

"What's on the floor above?" demanded Durkin, wheeling on him.

"The floor above," slowly responded the other, "is Richard Penfield's private offices, where his safe is, and where your friend, no doubt, is now depositing his valuables, behind a burglar-proof time-lock!"

"Oh, that's it, is it!" cried Durkin. He turned to the woman sharply.

"Frank, quick! Leave Keenan to me!"

"Yes!" she answered, with coerced attention.

"MacNutt must not get out of this house! We must stop him before he gets down this shaft. You go down by the stairs, quick, to the lowest base-

THE LAST DITCH

ment. You'll find the motor operating the elevator. What you must do is to get to the switch, and shut off the power before this car can get past us! Quick!"

He still faced Keenan, but his eye followed her to the door.

"If he does come, kill him; shoot him down, I say, like a dog — *or he'll kill you!*"

He could hear, through those silent hallways, the muffled rustling of her skirts and the sound of her flying feet on the waxed and polished wood. Then the silence suddenly became oppressive.

It was the unseen foe that he was afraid of, the undiscerned force that he feared. His uneasy and alert mind struggled to grasp the problem of how and where MacNutt would strike, if strike he did, out of the darkness of that silent and deserted house.

Durkin decided that above all things he must render impossible the descent of the elevator cage. But for a moment he could think of no bar that might be flung across the path of that complex and almost irresistible machinery, once awakened into its full power. Then the solution of the riddle came to him.

Still menacing the silent Keenan with his revolver, he flung over, with one quick and reckless push of his foot, the heavy mahogany table that stood in the centre of the room.

PHANTOM WIRES

Then he turned to Keenan.

"Push that table out into the elevator shaft!" he ordered. The other man did not move. And time was precious; every second was precious!

Durkin repeated his command.

"Furniture-moving is not my vocation!" answered Keenan, folding his arms.

As Durkin sprang forward, there was no mistaking his meaning.

"I'll count ten," he said, white-lipped. "Unless the table goes out, *you* go out!" And he began counting, silently, numeral by numeral.

"Well, if you insist!" said Keenan, with a shrug.

Even as Keenan, at the menace of his reiterated command to hurry, threw open the guard door, Durkin was wondering, in his feverish activity of mind, just how soon MacNutt's next move would come, and just how and where he would strike.

The answer to that question came more quickly than he had expected. And it came grimly, and in a manner most unlooked for.

For even as the reluctant Keenan stooped over the heavy table, not ten feet from the shaft, the elevator cage descended. It flashed by the open door without stopping on its hurried course. But as it winged past that square of open light a revolver shot rang out and reëchoed through the room.

Durkin, peering across the curling smoke, saw

THE LAST DITCH

Keenan pitch forward on his hands, struggle and thrash to his feet once more, like a wounded rabbit. Then he fell again, prone on his face, close beside the shaft door. There he lay, breathing in little gurgles.

Durkin, with little beads of sweat on his pallid face, realized what it meant. That flying shot had been intended for *him*. MacNutt, in that desperate and hurried and unreasoning last chance, had delivered his blow, but had been mistaken in his man!

This knowledge flashed through his mind with the rapidity of a kinoscope plate, and a moment later was obliterated by still another hurrying impression. For, through the deserted house rang two short and terrified screams, high-pitched and piercing. They were a woman's screams, and he knew they could come from no one but Frank.

He turned and hurled himself down the stairway, without even waiting to recover the revolver that had fallen a minute before from his startled fingers. He was conscious only of flinging the weight of his sliding body on the flume-like surface of the smooth balustrade, with his feet clattering on the polished steps as he went. He turned and dashed on to the head of the next stairway, and in the same manner flung himself to the floor beneath, and then to the next, and the next, until he was in the gloom of the basement itself.

Breathless and panting, he groped his way

PHANTOM WIRES

through the darkness, to where a glimmer of light came from what he hurriedly took to be the engine-room.

There, as he darted through the narrow doorway, into the circle of dim light from the one tinted globe in the lowered elevator cage, a strange sight met his eyes. It shocked and flung him into a second or two of blank indecision, of volitionless and thoughtless inactivity. For one moment of ominous calm it smote and held him there, before the sudden blind, cyclonic rush of brain and body which the vision gave rise to.

For at the door of the open cage MacNutt and Frank fought and struggled and panted together. The man was inside, on the bottom of the cage, the woman was outside it. Her huddled but still resisting body was locked and jammed halfway across the narrow door. One of her opponent's great, ape-like strangling arms was about her neck. But the fingers at the end of it were caught between her strong white carnivorous teeth; and they became stained with blood as, in her frenzy, she fought and bit and struggled, with the blind fury of some final despair. Her revolver she had been unable to use; it lay out of her reach, behind them on the floor of the cage.

MacNutt, as he strained and tore at her resisting body, was fighting and edging his way with her back into the cage, to where that waiting revolver

THE LAST DITCH

lay. He himself was already well within the narrow opening, sprawled out red and disheveled and Titanesque on the cage floor. But she was resisting him, inch by inch, fighting desperately, like a cornered cat, for her very life, yet knowing there could be only one end to that uneven conflict.

Durkin, after one comprehending glance, followed his first animal impulse of offense, and descended on MacNutt, beating at the prone, bull-like head, with its claret-colored bald spot, across which ran one livid scratch. He pounded on the clustered fingers of the gorilla-like hand, crushing and bruising them against the gilded iron grill-work, through which was interwoven the Penfield **triple** crescent.

The clutching arms **relaxed**, but only for a moment. In that moment, however, Durkin had stooped and with the one hand that remained with him to use, struggled to tear Frank away from the deadly clutch. This he would surely have done had not MacNutt seen his chance, and with his free hand suddenly caught at the wounded wrist that hung stained and limp at his enemy's side. That sudden, savage torture of the lacerated flesh was more than the weak and exhausted body of Durkin could endure. He emitted one little involuntary cry; then every protesting nerve and sinew capitulated, a white light seemed to flash and burn at the base of his very brain, and then go out. He fell fainting on the hard maple floor.

PHANTOM WIRES

For a moment or two, like a defeated prize-fighter, he panted and struggled, ludicrously yet pathetically, to rise to his feet, but the effort was futile.

It was as he found himself ebbing down through some soft and feathery emptiness that he seemed to hear a pitiful and imploring voice call thinly out, "*Mack!*" Still fainter he seemed to hear it, "*Mack! Come up! I'm dying!*" He remembered, lazily, that it sounded like the distant voice of Keenan — but where was Keenan?

Then he seemed to hear the purr and murmur of distant machinery, followed by a gentle puff of sound and what he hazily dreamed was the smell of powder smoke. Then he remembered no more.

.

Just how or at what juncture he lost consciousness he could never clearly remember. But his first tangible impression was the knowledge that his wife was once more pouring brandy down his throat and imploring him to hurry. Then the sound of muffled blows echoed from above.

"Quick, Jim, oh, quick, or it will be too late. No, not that way. We can't go by the front — that's cut off. By the back — this way — I've got everything open!"

"But what's the noise?" asked Durkin weakly.

"That's the police, with a fireman's axe, breaking in the front door. But, see, it's not too late!"

THE LAST DITCH

These steps take us up to the back court, and this iron gate opens on a lane that runs from the supply department of the hotel there, right through to the open street!"

He shambled after her, white and tottering.

"Quick, Jim, quick!" she reiterated, as she supported him through the low gate, and kept her arm in his as they passed down the dark lane, with its homely smells of early cookery and baking bread. Only one passion possessed them — the blind and persistent and unreasoning passion for escape, for freedom.

"But MacNutt — where's MacNutt?" demanded Durkin, coming to a stop.

"No — no — quick!" gasped Frank, tugging at his arm.

"I tell you I've got to have it out with that man!" protested the pitiably dazed but dogged combatant at her side.

"You can't, Jim!"

"But I've got to!"

"You can't — you can't," she moaned, "for he's dead!"

A sudden sickening fear crept through his aching bones, seeming to leave them fluid, like wax.

"You — you did it?" he asked unsteadily. The face he gazed into looked aged and worn and pallid in the dim half-light of the breaking morning. A sudden great pity for her tore at his heart.

PHANTOM WIRES

"No," she cried fiercely. "No — not me!" But she was still tugging insanely at his obdurate arm. "I tell you, Jim, you must hurry, or it will be too late!"

"Thank God!" he gasped, scarcely hearing her pleadings.

They were skirting three early delivery-wagons, waiting to unload at the supply door of the hotel. A boy passing in the street beyond was shrilly whistling "Tammany."

"Tell me — now!" demanded Durkin.

"When you fainted MacNutt reached back for the revolver. He would have shot you, only Keenan called for him. He cried down the shaft that he was dying. He — he must have pushed the button as he fell. MacNutt was still on the floor of the cage, leaning out to take aim at us. Then the steel of the shaft-door and the steel of the elevator cage as it went up came to — oh — I *can't* tell you now!"

Durkin came to a stop, swaying against her.

"You mean the cage worked automatically, that it went up, with MacNutt still leaning out?"

"Yes!" gasped the woman brokenly; and Durkin felt the shiver of the tortured body on which he leaned.

He was silent as they swung into the open street. His exhausted and uncoördinating brain was idly busy with some vague impression of the poignant

THE LAST DITCH

irony of that end, of how that uncomprehending yet ineluctable power with which this man had toyed and played and sinned had, at the ultimate moment, established its authority and exacted its right.

He pulled himself up with a fluttering gasp, weak, sick, overcome, and was wordlessly grateful for the sustaining arm at his side.

For, once in the open, they were walking eastward, without a sense, momentarily, of either direction or destination.

Above the valley of the mist-hung street a thin and yellow light showed where morning was coming on, tardily, thickly. The boy whistling "Tammany" passed out of hearing.

"Thank God! oh, thank God!" Frank suddenly sobbed out, tossed and exalted on a wave of blind gratitude.

"God?" moaned the defeated and unhappy man at her side, dragging painfully on with his bruised and bitter body. "What has God to do with all this — or with us?"

She could not answer. She saw only a wide and gloomy vista of tangled crime and offense, stretching back into the past, as the tumbled and huddled waves of a sea run out to its crowding skyline. But it was the sea that had delivered them.

Broken, frustrated and defeated, hunted and homeless, without consolation for her Yesterday or respect for her Today, she looked up at the slowly

PHANTOM WIRES

wakening morning with a feeling that seemed to fuse and blend into the fiercest of joy.

Then the momentary exaltation died out of her weary body. They had life—but life was not enough! A sense of something within her falling and crumbling away, a silence of dark questioning and indecision, took possession of her.

Then out of her misery she cried still again, passionately, persistently, as she clutched and clung to him, her mate for whom and with him she was once destined to be a wanderer over the face of the earth:

“There must be a God! I tell you, there *must* be a God. He has let us escape!”

The man looked at her, questioningly.

“Don’t you understand? This is the last?”

“The last?”

“Yes—yes, the last! You said it would be never again, if once you escaped from this!”

He had forgotten. But the woman at his side, holding him up, had remembered.

“Come!” she said. And they went on again.

CHAPTER XXX

ONE YEAR LATER — AN EPILOGUE.

Frances waited for her husband, walking slowly up and down under the row of pallid city maples. She preferred the open light of the Square to the gloom of the street that cut like a canyon between the towering office-buildings on either side of it. There was a touch of autumn in the air, and a black frost of the night before had left the sidewalks carpeted with the mottled roans and yellows and russets of the fallen leaves.

Summer was over and gone. And all life, in some way, seemed to have aged with the ageing of the year. There was something mournful, to the ears of the waiting woman, in the very rustle of the dry leaves under her feet, as she paced the Square. The sight of the half-stripped tree-branches, here and there, depressed her idle mind with the thought of skeletons. The smell of the dying leaves made her heart heavy. They seemed to be whispering of Death, crying out to her at the mutability of all things that lived and breathed. And she had so wanted always to live and exult in living; she had so trembled at the thought of these

PHANTOM WIRES

creeping changes and the insidious passing away of youth and all it meant to her! "I hate autumn, most awfully," she had confessed to her husband that morning, dolefully.

She went on, passing from under the shadow of the trees, grateful for the reassuring thin sunshine of the late afternoon, that touched the roofs and the tree-tops with gilt, and bathed the more towering office-buildings in a brazen glory of light, and left the street-dust swimming in a vapor of pale gold. The city noises seemed muffled and quiescent. A sense of fulfillment, of pensive maturity, of tranquillity after tumult, lay over even the urban world before her. She scarcely knew why or how it was, but it left her melancholy, lonely, homesick for things she could not name.

The waiting woman looked up, and saw her husband. Suddenly, with one deep breath, all the emptiness of life was a thing, if not of the past, at least of the background of consciousness.

He was quite close to her by this time, and as she stood there, waiting, she swept him with her quick and searching gaze. He appeared before her, in that fleeting moment of impersonal vision, strangely objective, as completely and acutely visualized as though she had looked upon him for the first time.

Something in his face wrung her heart, foolishly, something in the wordless, Rembrandt-like poignancy with which it stood out, through the cold

ONE YEAR LATER — AN EPILOGUE

autumn sunlight of the late afternoon, in its mortal isolation of soul, its sense of being detached and denied the companionship of its kind. He looked old and tired. He, too, was voyaging towards some melancholy autumnal maturity, some sorrowful denudation of youth, that left him pitiful to her impotently aching heart. He, too, stood in want of some greater love than even she could ever bring to him, as surely as she still cried out for the solace of some companionship, not closer than his, but of a different fiber. She had found herself, of late, vaguely hungering for some influence less autumnal, less vesper-like, to hold and wall her back from those gray hours of retrospection which crept into her life. Yet this was a secret she had kept always locked in her own holy of holies. For even in the face of that indeterminate feeling, it still stabbed her like a knife to think of any thought or life coming between her and her husband.

She hurried to him, with her habitual little throaty cry, and caught his arm in hers. The gesture was almost a passionate one.

"Jim, you're working too hard!" she said, as they went on again, arm in arm.

He studied her upturned face. The pale oval under the great heavy crown of glinting chestnut seemed paler than usual, the violet eyes seemed more shadowy. There clung to her a puzzling and unfamiliar sense of fragility.

PHANTOM WIRES

"What is it?" he asked, coming to a stop.

"I'm worried about *you!*" she cried. "This is the fourth, almost the fifth month, you've shut yourself up with that transmitter!"

"But it's *work!*" he answered, unmoved.

"Yes, I know, but work without a holiday, without rest ——"

"But think what it's going to be to us! All I've got to do now is to get my selenium cell simplified enough for commercial purposes! And another month will do it!"

"But eight months ago you said that!"

"There's nothing left to stick us *now*. Once I get this cell the way I want it, we'll start manufacturing, for all we're worth. In less than six months we'll be filling contracts here in America. Two months later we'll be introducing into seven different countries in Europe a fully protected and patented transmitting camera as far ahead of the old-fashioned photophone as a Bell telephone is ahead of a tin speaking-tube."

"I know, Jim; but you must be more careful! You must, in some way, stop working so hard!"

"Who could help it, at this sort of work?" he protested, contentedly. She felt that he, too, had stumbled upon that timeless and mysterious paradox of existence, that incongruous law which ordains that as one surrenders and relinquishes and gives, so one shall live the richer and deeper.

ONE YEAR LATER — AN EPILOGUE

“I tell you, Frank,” her husband was saying, “the more I know of electricity the more I bow down before it, in wonder, the prouder I am to be mixed up in its mysteries! Just think of what it’s come to be, this thing we call Electricity, since the day primitive man first rubbed a piece of amber and beheld the puny miracle of magnetic attraction! Why, today it harnesses tides and waterfalls, and tames and orders force, and leaves power docile and patient, swinging meek and ready from a bit of metal thread! It lightens cities, at a turn of the wrist; it hurls your voice half way round the world, it guides sailors and measures and weighs the stars; it threads empires together with its humming wires; it’s the shuttle that’s woven all civilization into one compact fabric! It’s the light of our night-time, and the civilizer of our world. It explodes mines, and heals sickness. It creeps as silent as death through a thousand miles of sea, and yet it’s the very tongue of our world! It prints and carves and beautifies; it rises to the most stupendous tasks, and then it stoops to the most delicate work!”

“And it lets me ring you up, my beloved own, and hear your voice, your living voice!” Even beyond her laughter he could catch the rapt note as she spoke. He responded to that note by catching at her gloved hand, and keeping it in his gratefully.

PHANTOM WIRES

“Yes, but it does even more than annihilate space and turn wheels and despatch trains. Think what it’s doing with wireless alone! And *that* is only the beginning! Why, the whole world is alive and athrob with energy, with stored-up power aching to be used — and some day it will be electricity that will teach all nature how to work and toil for man! As yet we don’t even know what it is! It’s formless, to us, bodiless, invisible, imponderable! It’s still unknown — as unknown as God! — and almost as mysterious!”

“Oh!” she reproved.

“I’ve sometimes wondered if those lightning flashes and those terrifying things that used to fill the temples in the Eleusinian Mysteries didn’t simply mean that those old priests of Apollo knew more about electric currents than we imagine.”

“And even Jove’s bolts were only electricity, weren’t they?” she assented. “So you’re right, in a way — their god and their power *were* electricity! Perhaps it was electricity Prometheus stole!”

“No, it’s older than Prometheus, it’s older than Adam, it’s mixed up in some way with the very origin of life itself! It’s the most mysterious thing in the world — and the most beautiful!” he concluded, with solemn conviction.

They walked on in silence for a moment or two. A dead leaf fell and drifted between them. The afternoon deepened into twilight.

ONE YEAR LATER — AN EPILOGUE

"O, Jim, not the most beautiful!" said Frank, suddenly, thrilled and shaken with some wayward passion of gratitude, as acute as it was unheralded. He looked down at her, puzzled.

"Oh, I'm glad, Jim; glad!" she cried, irrelevantly.

"Glad for what?"

"For this — for you — for everything!"

His face clouded a little, for a moment, with the shadow of the past that could and would not be altogether past.

"I thought we'd decided to let that — stay closed?" he said. There was a note of reproof in his voice.

"Do you know what *I* think is the most beautiful thing in all the world, Jim?" she went on, as irrelevantly as before, but holding his arm still more tightly entangled in hers. "I think it's Redemption!"

"Redemption?"

"Yes — I think there's nothing ever done, or made, or written of, or sung of by poets, more beautiful than a soul, a poor, unhappy human soul, coming into its own once more! Oh, I don't believe I can ever make you feel it as I feel it — but I don't believe there's an adventure or a movement in all life more beautiful than the rehabilitation — that's the only word I can use! — of a man's heart, or a woman's! Think of it, Jim! — what can be lovelier

PHANTOM WIRES

than the restoration of sanity and beauty and meaning to a suffering and tortured life? Health after sickness is lovely, and so is healing after disease, and quietness after unrest, and peace after struggle. But that, Jim, is only for the body. It's only for something of a day or two, or a year or two. When a soul is redeemed, it's something that leaves you face to face with — with Eternity!"

Again he studied her rapt and mournful eyes, at sea, wondering to what new turn the sacrificial instinct of her sex was leading her.

"What has made you think of all this?" he demanded of her, a little unhappily, a little afraid of the old wounds that were healing so slowly. "Why should you remind me of how hard it is, and how little I've been able to do?"

She was silent for several minutes again, as they walked on, slowly, under the spectral autumn trees, with the rustling dead leaves at their feet. She found it hard to answer him.

"'The saints are only the sinners who kept on trying!'" she quoted to him, for the second time in their lives. Then she came to a full stop.

"Oh, Jim, I need you so much, *now!*" she cried out, at last, pitifully, and still again he could not bridge the abyss that lay between one thought and another.

"Need me?"

"Yes, need you!"

ONE YEAR LATER—AN EPILOGUE

Again a dead leaf fluttered and drifted between them.

"What is it?" he asked, more gently.

She put her hand on his shoulder, and when she spoke her voice was little more than a whisper.

And he, the man who had spoken of trivial mysteries, bowed before that supremest mystery which broods and centres in the thought of motherhood.

"We'll have to be good now — terribly good!" she wailed. And she tried to laugh up at him, with a touch of her old bravery, in a futile effort to make light of her tears.

" 30 "

