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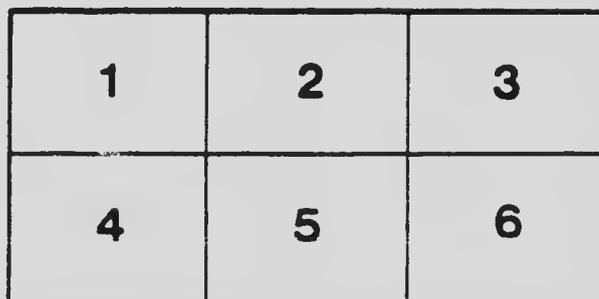
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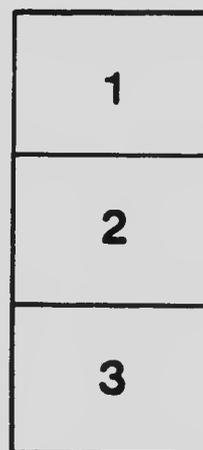
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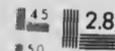
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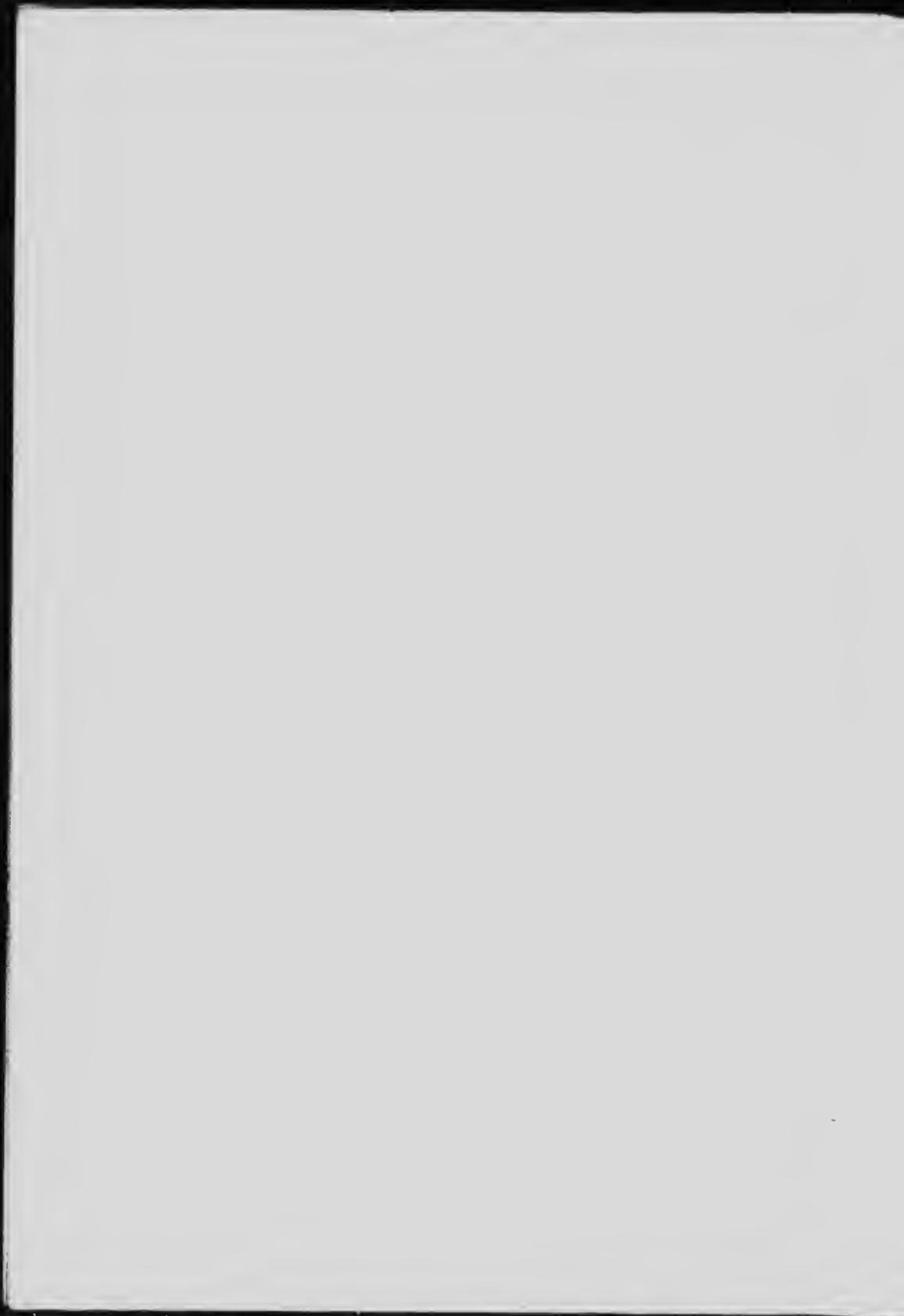
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THE HORNET'S NEST







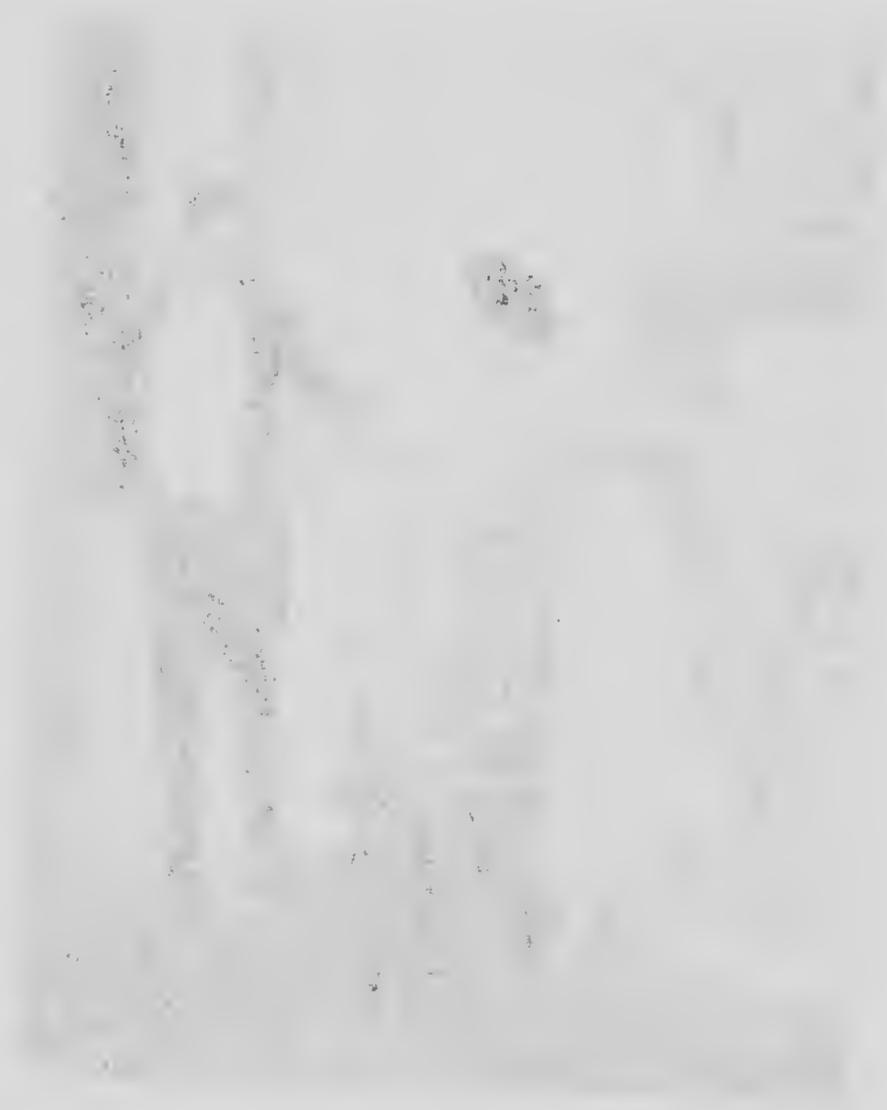
“Oh,” she showed the edge of her teeth in a flashing smile,
“you did have the nerve to follow it up?” FRONTISPIECE.

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1857



THE HORNET'S NEST

BY
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TORONTO
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1917

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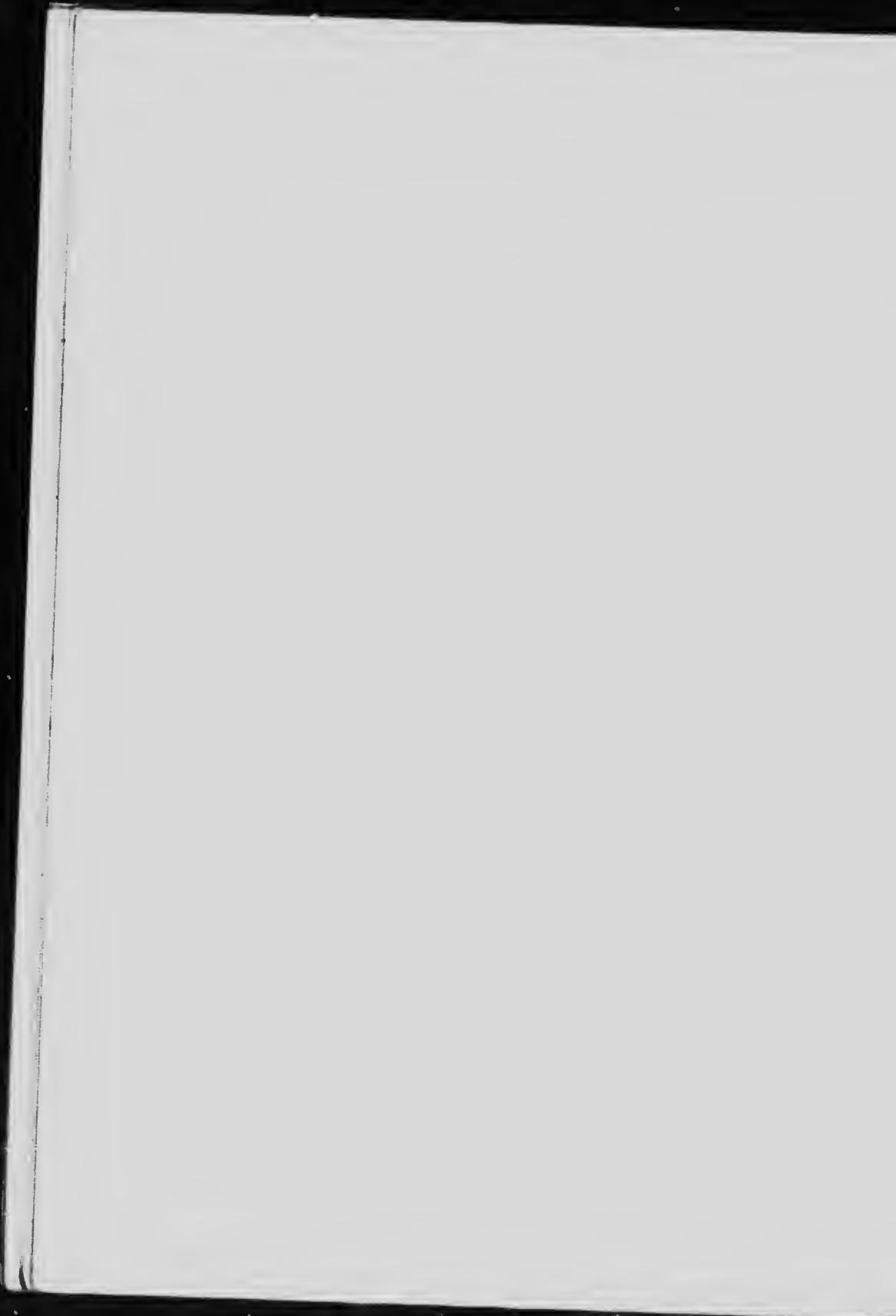
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THE HORNET'S NEST

CHAPTER I

THE Girl walked down Fifth Avenue from Fifty-ninth street, while the Ghost walked up from Fourteenth. Since they were on the same side of the street, their passing was as inevitable as it was unpremeditated. Converging rays from widely differing spheres, they were destined by the sheer logic of direction to meet.

The Girl's name was Muriel Fletcher, and she was about twenty years old. Now and then as she walked, some one would turn to look at her. Her individuality was even more arresting and vivid than her looks, and yet upon that mere question of looks she was not easily to be ignored. There was a sort of vital glow about her, but it was the glow of fire not of sunshine, and it had its contrasting — one might better say, its corresponding — gloom, a gloom with an edge on it.

No matter from what point of view one took her, whether mental or physical, one quality always seemed to contradict another. Her melody had its dissonances.

To get the purely physical presentment of her then, it may have been her hair — deep, thick auburn-brown in some lights, red in others — which helped most in producing that effect of dark splendor. Her face was square rather than oval, but it took a second glance to

note that her chin, so whitely round, was tilted at a particularly defiant angle. Her mouth, not small, was sullen and secretive; but being soft, and richly red, this passed unregarded.

Her eyes were remarkable, a dense, dusky green — olive almost — with a long sweep of the brows and lids which gave a languid subtlety to her expression; yet this was but a matter of line, for when she really opened them, the impression of mystery and romance vanished. They were almost disconcertingly intelligent.

Her skin was of the smooth, thick whiteness of the camellia, and it was only when the color rose in her cheeks that she was obviously beautiful.

New York is the city of a thousand worlds, each distinct and yet oddly interpenetrating; but each has its own particular hallmark with which it stamps indelibly its denizens. On Muriel Fletcher was the seal of the world of leisure and enjoyment. She moved in the atmosphere of its supreme confidence. It was the only world she had ever known or could imagine, and yet for days, for weeks, now, she had been vaguely aware that she was on the verge of an excursion into far different and wider ones. She thrilled to the call of the unknown.

The material aspect of the Avenue, with its splendid offerings of rugs and silks, its mosaic of flowers and jewels behind the broad, plate-glass windows, and its crowding procession of shining motors in the roadway, was too familiar to impress her. Objects did not interest her; people did. She scrutinized the passers-by as if she were looking for some one. And, indeed, she was. This afternoon walk was no aimless stroll, but a quest — a secret, definite quest.

The Ghost and she were constantly drawing nearer. Only a block or so separated them now; and for her with a present and no past, and for him with a past but no present, the future was at hand. She was ready for it. As she walked, her hand clutched the more tightly something in her muff — a small, hard package wrapped in white paper.

When the Ghost in his walk up the Avenue had reached Madison Square, he paused to gaze uncertainly at the northward perspective.

The years and change are synonymous. The last time Ashe Colvin had gazed at Madison Square and its environs, the Dewey Arch still spanned the roadway, somewhat battered and discolored, it is true, with its mermaids and Tritons sadly in need of a bath, and great holes knocked in its base to expose the hollow mockery of its lath and plaster construction, yet impressive even in its decay, worthy of a better fate than merely to grace a single holiday.

Over to the east of the Park, Colvin saw now, instead of the brown stone houses he remembered, a huddle of skyscrapers, and a great dominating clock-tower of white marble. Ahead of him, the old Brunswick Hotel had given way to a lofty structure of red brick; across on the Broadway side, the Albemarle and the Hoffman House were in course of demolition, and the famous Fifth Avenue with its porticoed front had been supplanted by a modern office building, while on the site of the former dingy Flatiron had risen a soaring triangle, which even a ghost could hardly fail to recognize. Surely Hades must have picture post-cards — else it would not be Hades.

Searching for some familiar landmark, Colvin could

discover only the Garden with its lovely soaring Diana, and the faded five-story building which houses the School of Languages, and even the latter was shadowed by the rough board shack and stone heaps of a construction station for the new aqueduct, which might have been the shaft house and ore dumps of a Colorado mine transplanted bodily from Leadville or Victor.

The sight of all this welter of change and innovation stirred Colvin's dead soul to a faint flutter of curiosity, a dull desire for further exploration.

"I wonder," he muttered, "if it's just as different all the way up town."

He hesitated a moment, half-turned back, then reconsidering, faced about again, and with a little tingle of excitement walked on toward Murray Hill.

There was nothing particularly spectral about his advance: no unearthly blue light, nor any other weird and uncanny manifestation. On the contrary, he walked quite regularly, in the clear light of the sunny October afternoon, along crowded Fifth Avenue.

These things are "not done" by apparitions; but Ashe Colvin was a ghost just the same — the mere dead simulacrum of a man who fifteen years before had laid down a life brimming high with youth and ambition and promise, to go out into oblivion.

Like the Dewey Arch which lingered in his memory, he had held for a day the admiration and applause of his world. Then mudbespattered, with his reputation falling from him in great shreds and patches, he had hidden himself in the vast, human dump heap of the East Side.

At twenty-five, Colvin had accomplished more than most men can boast of at forty. It is usually some

cave man from the West or South who comes in to knock New York over the head with his club, and win her adoring submission; but Colvin was a New Yorker born and bred with a pedigree so cross-hatched with Rhinelanders, and DePeysters, and Livingstons, and Van Cortlandts, that it read like a down-town street directory. He had been acquainted with finger bowls from his youth up, and took a butler as much for granted as a house cat.

With his Harvard accent, and his Tenth Street tailor, and his habit of getting what he wanted, they sent him up to Albany as a member of the General Assembly, and he had made good.

He was a lawyer who had sat at the feet of Joseph Choate, and had crossed swords, not unsuccessfully, with DeLancy Nicoll. He could stroll into the Grand Avenue Hotel, and sit down on a red plush bench beside Platt in the Amen Corner without any one raising a question. Those were the days when a nod from the "Eas. Boss" was like an appointment from Royalty.

You might see him on first nights at the opera, or at Daly's chatting in the foyer with Gebler or Stanford White, stopping to congratulate Clybourne on his latest success, or bending down to listen to Marshall Wilder's newest joke.

In the paddock at Sheepshead Bay, he would be hobnobbing with John Madden, or Rogers, or some of the other big trainers, or sauntering over for a word with Tod Sloane or George Odom, as they waited in their silks for the bugle call; and then, in front of the clubhouse, he would, as likely as not, watch the race in company with Keene or Whitney, or a group of other great men of the turf.

At the Opera House, one would be sure to see him in the box of either Mrs. Fish or Mrs. Astor. No Matriarch's, Patriarch's, or Junior Assembly was quite complete without him; and although he was no gambler, the doors of Canfield's peachblow palace were always open to him. From Harlem to the Battery, and from Chuck Conners to Bishop Potter, he knew everybody, and everybody knew him.

Before him he saw nothing but plain sailing. Albany and the General Assembly for a few years, and then Congress. So far as that he was promised.

And then, as by a prearranged signal, the lights went out suddenly in his house of mirth; and upon the brilliant spectacle of his popularity, the curtain was rung sharply down.

Nearer and nearer drew the Girl and the Ghost; and now the moment had come in which he with a past and no future, and she with a future and no past must meet.

She, seeking constantly for the one who was to serve her purpose, saw him first. A tall man, with the hopelessness of failure in his vague, sad eyes, appearing dull and shabby in comparison with the vivid burnish of the Avenue folk; and yet, in spite of the shadow in which he walked — a metaphorical shadow, but none the less perceptible — his inherent distinction, his unsubduable individuality still had power to reduce the crowds about him to a mere blurred background.

Muriel, as she saw him, half-lifted one hand as if to brush a perplexing cobweb from her eyes. In a vivid flash of memory, she seemed to see a picture of

a Christmas party in their old Long Island house, and she, a tiny child, sitting on the knee of a handsome young man with eyes full of laughter, who was making her repeat "The Night before Christmas" after him.

"The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave a luster of mid-day to objects below. . . ."

She remembered how her baby lips had twisted and tangled the unfamiliar words.

On his side, Colvin, wandering along in the haze of a thousand recollections, only occasionally sighting some landmark like the Holland House, or the Waldorf to assure him that this was still Fifth Avenue, became suddenly conscious of the gaze that was fixed on him. Their glances held for a moment; then he saw her give a quick nod of decision, and move toward him.

Her face had paled, her eyes stormed him, besought him. She drew her hand from her muff, and in it he saw the small white parcel. Then, as she held it out toward him, he halted and half drew back. But the girl gave him no opportunity to refuse.

"Take it, please," she murmured, and thrusting it into his hand, pushed on to lose herself immediately in the crowd.

Half a block farther on, Colvin cautiously opened his hand. The package was wrapped in white paper, and tied with a cord. He was before the Library. Hesitating a moment, he mounted the broad, white steps between the smug, grinning lions, until he reached the flagged walk; there he saw a stone bench unoccupied. He sat down and cautiously unwrapped the parcel. It contained a visiting card and a small,

gold coin purse. Upon the card was engraved the name:

MISS MURIEL FLETCHER
4 East Seventy-Sixth Street

There was also scribbled upon it in pencil this request:

“Will you call at the address on this card at nine o'clock this evening for the purpose of returning the purse and its contents. Ask for Miss Fletcher. It is a matter of the utmost importance to me.

M. F.”

Frowning, puzzled, he turned the purse over in his hand, and then opened it. It held a few coins, another visiting card, the duplicate of the first, but without the penciled note, and a beautiful diamond and pearl pendant.

He stared at this for a dazed moment, and then, suddenly mindful of the passers-by, slipped it into the breast pocket of his coat. He drew a pipe and some tobacco from another pocket, filled and lighted the pipe, and then sat gazing down at the broken bricks in the walk before him.

The one emotion of which he was conscious for a long time was a passive sort of astonishment, mingled with an obstinate incredulity, and an inability to grasp the facts of the situation in which he found himself.

The early autumn dusk had begun to fall, the October chill was in the air, the film of gray was rapidly obscuring the gold of the streets; but Colvin never saw it. His mind worked slowly nowadays. He had lived for long what might be called the cloistered life and had unconsciously suffered the gradual condensa-

tion and narrowing of his few indifferent interests — these, since an income which he had inherited from his mother relieved him of the necessity of earning his living, the public reading rooms of the East Side where he browsed for hours a day, and long walks, sometimes through the sordid and uninspiring streets to which he had hitherto confined himself, and sometimes into the open country, provided his only occupation. He gave less time to the few acquaintances he had made in the course of his exile. With not one of them was there any bond of congeniality. He and they were too widely separated by an entirely opposite social consciousness, and were merely drawn together by the gregarious instinct into a purely superficial comradeship.

Then there were his little charities, the amusement of telling stories to the children who clustered about him in the public parks, a spell of nursing now and then, a little legal or medical advice.

Destiny — the whole question of fate — he regarded, if he thought of it at all, with amused skepticism. Why waste time on childish abstractions? There were laws of cause and effect in the mental as well as in the physical realm. A belief in any infraction of them was pure superstition. And yet, this very afternoon, the impossible, the incredible, the unexplainable had happened.

Gradually, as his mind accustomed itself to the unbelievable situation in which he found himself involved, his thoughts reverted more and more insistently to the girl.

Was it not plausible to consider her mentally unbalanced? Some daughter of wealth — evidently that — who had succeeded in temporarily evading her

attendants, and had chosen this fantastic method of apparently losing her purse containing a little money, a valuable jewel, and a visiting card with her name and address on it, in an attempt to enlist aid in effecting her final escape?

Plausible and reasonable; yes. But his mind rejected the hypothesis. He had looked into her eyes, and he did not believe that she was crazy. Her motive? Well, that enigma was for the evening to unravel. He was on the threshold of the new, the unexpected. He had no idea of what awaited him on the other side; but he meant to see.

He had come upon that door in the wall of Fate which every man with a drop of red blood in his veins longs to open. And while he sat considering it, there began to tingle in his nerves and sing in his brain the most alluring and provocative strain that the heart of man has ever listened to — the call of adventure.

He was thousands of years old. The world was over and done for him. And yet, through all the submerged and wasted manhood of him, that unspent, dynamic energy which had been stifled and suppressed until it was lethalized and paralyzed, there began to wake and throb some tremendous response to that great, primitive need which is as strong as sex or hunger — the old, old passion, Adventure.

Colvin drew a great breath which expanded his ribs until they seemed to crack. Maybe, maybe, there was a chance for one good fight yet! If the gods would give him that, let him pit his trained muscles, which owing to some old habit of bodily discipline he had kept in condition through the barren years, and at the same time give him a chance to match his wits with a tangible foe, he'd call it all quits.

Muriel Fletcher? Muriel Fletcher? He knew that name. It had been long tucked away somewhere in his memory. Why? It must be the same. He had known her as a pretty child. It was all coming back to him now. Her father had been Jask Fletcher, and her mother was Betty Whitefield and they had both gone down in a great disaster at sea.

This girl was related to the Whitefields. Old William Whitefield, who had been instrumental in putting him through the mill and grinding him to grist, must be her uncle.

What did they mean by letting that child wander about the streets, and give diamond pendants to stray tramps? Was it a ruse to get him back into the game and into their power again some way? Well, what if it were? That meant action—the fight his whole body and brain ached for. And no matter what lay before him, he meant to see it through.

CHAPTER II

THE gray, October dusk had deepened until the myriad, regular lines of electric globes had begun to bloom like yellow flowers through the dim, purple twilight and still Colvin sat staring at the flags at his feet, the broken pattern of which he could no longer trace. The traffic — that impatient crowding traffic of home-going motors — was growing denser every moment. There was a sort of strident rising and falling rhythm in the hoarse honk of their horns. The pedestrians walked more briskly, as if hastening to escape the impending army of workers who would pour out from the shops and offices and take possession of the Avenue and the side streets with their solid, marching phalanxes.

As if all this in some indefinite way conveyed to Colvin the lateness of the hour and the necessity for haste on his part, he presently roused from his long reverie, and lifting his head, looked anxiously, and in an almost alarmed manner, about him.

He had forgotten time altogether as he sat there, and now he remembered that there were many things to be done before nine o'clock. Then his eyes widened. A double-decked, green motor-bus lumbered into view — another innovation since his day — and he decided to take it, and ride down as far as it went.

It stopped before the curb, and he hurried down the

Library steps to board it before the painted disks of the semaphore at the next street intersection should swing about with their imperative order "Go!"

That newly roused spirit of adventure was dominant in him. He climbed the steps and narrow stairway to the top of the bus, found a front seat vacant, and swept off his hat, inhaling a great draught of air with the faint and excited tingling of the nerves which still persisted, and which roused in him an almost apprehensive wonder.

To one who had been dead so long as he, it was a strange, almost awesome thing to realize that one was still alive. It frightened him. He shrank from this buried self in him, which stirred in its grave clothes and threatened to rise, not lethargic from its long, drugged slumber, but a giant refreshed, thrilling with a new life, awake to a thousand crowding desires, on edge to play the game.

That ride down the Avenue did more to awaken and to free him than it was possible for him to appreciate at the time. The ichor his starved impulses craved was distilled in the spacious and splendid street — commercialized, almost brutalized, like the great city of which it is the main artery, and yet, like the city, unequalled in youth, luxury, and hard, reckless daring.

He got off under the trees of Washington Square and turning eastward, plunged through a mesh of streets toward his home. He was used to them, sordid, dismal, with no skyscrapers to give them a stark and violent impressiveness. And here the atmosphere was no longer stimulating but depressing.

These streets typified that restriction of idea and impulse which translates itself into environment, and

is — Poverty. But to-night Colvin had no mind to occupy himself with philosophical deductions drawn from obvious comparisons. He strode along, oblivious to the sordid world about him, subconsciously taking the right turnings, his conscious mind busy with other things, until he reached his dingy lodgings.

These were in an old house which had long ago been a dignified and imposing residence, and which in spite of the cheap shops that filled the contracted space of the basement and first floor, still retained an air of detached and mournful dignity. It was kept by a German family who let out the rooms, and it was at least clean, although sadly out of repair.

Colvin climbed the stairs and let himself in with a latchkey to the little flat which he had so long occupied, a front room of fairly large size, and a smaller bedroom and bath. It was dark, and he struck a match, and lighted a whistling, flaring gas jet. The room revealed was plain, austere, and yet comfortable. The walls were covered with books which reached almost to the ceiling; a table in the center was crowded with newspapers and magazines. There were several chairs and one or two other articles of furniture, but not an ornament, a picture, or even a photograph that was reminiscent of his old life.

He pushed a chair or so out of the way, and opening a closet door, dragged out an old trunk, and kneeling beside it, raised the lid. Then he drew out a suit of evening clothes. A queer smile came over his face, as he shook them out, and held them between the light and himself.

They had been lying away so long that they were a mass of wrinkles. It seemed improbable that even the tailor's iron could smooth them out after all these

years. They must be grotesquely out-of-date, no doubt of that. But even so, the idea of not wearing them never entered his head.

Folding them up, he hastily wrapped them in paper, stuffed them under his arm, hurried down-stairs and out into the street again. He went straight to a dingy, little basement shop, where a homemade sign swung in the window. The sign was of white cardboard, the bottom of a box, and painted on it in crude, straggling black letters was the notice that "Max" did pressing and repairing of "gents' garments."

As Colvin opened the door, a bell jangled, and "Max" looked up from a cashbook he was studying behind a heap of clothes on a counter. He was an anemic, undersized Jew, with bowlegs and protruding, light blue eyes.

Sighing heavily, he took the bundle from Colvin. He was hungry and wanted to close the shop and go home to supper, but a job was a job. He held the suit up and looked it over with searching, practiced eyes, sighed again, and reluctantly promised to have it ready within the hour.

"Awful fine goods," he admitted, "but pretty near ten, fifteen years behind the times. Well," with even deeper reluctance, "I have them ready when you say."

It was just on the stroke of nine when Colvin walked up the steps to the Whitefield door. The butler's palm still thrilled pleasantly to Muriel's honorarium; for he presented an impassive front to any irregularities of the situation. As Colvin stepped past him, saying as he did so "Mr. Vernon," he murmured imperturbably:

"Miss Fletcher is in the library, sir."

One of the most potent of all mental laws is the law of association. The moment that Ashe Colvin passed through that door, he was again in the world which he had known so well, and from which he had made so startling an exit. This was his natural element. There was no difficult moment of adjustment. So easily did he slip back, that it was the life of the last fifteen years with its profound renunciations, its bitter realizations, which suddenly became to him as the mirage on his horizon.

The admirable butler preceded him to the library door, and stood aside for him to enter. An unnecessary attention in this case, as the arrangement of the house, its geography, and general scheme of decoration had not been materially altered.

There was the shadow of a hard smile on Colvin's lips, as he reflected that it was not the first time he had passed through that hall and hastened to the library to meet a beautiful woman.

Had time stood still? The same clear firelight burned on the wide hearth, and reflected itself in the polished surfaces of the table and bookcases of carved, old Welsh oak. A somber, handsome room, with its faded beautiful rugs, its books, its atmosphere of repose. Yes; everything was the same, even to that faint, unforgettable fragrance of fresh roses, but — he drew a quick breath of relief — the woman was different.

Muriel was leaning — lounging, one might better say — against the mantelpiece, her eyes fixed eagerly upon the door. She wore a short, white dinner frock, very simple, very girlish, and particularly unsuited to her. It looked as if some one else had chosen it, this sweet, little *débutante* frock, destined, if it had fulfilled

its mission, to subdue and eclipse its wearer; but the girl, while accepting it, had countered audaciously and triumphantly, as Colvin, who had intuitions about women, fancied that she always would.

It was accomplished, polished, this countering, with a *naiveté* which silenced criticism. No one could object to a young girl wearing a few flowers. And Muriel, with three or four red carnations on her breast, and two in the dense, auburn hair above her ear, achieved one of those studies in contrast most intriguing to the masculine imagination.

"Oh," she showed the edge of her teeth in a flashing smile, "you did have the nerve to follow it up? Well, then, I shan't need this." She tossed a sealed envelope into the fire. "My confession." Again she smiled audaciously. "I had it all prepared to slip to you, in case Uncle William and Aunt Freda should change their minds at the last minute, and not dine out. Won't you sit there?"

She indicated a chair on one side of the table, and herself took another on the opposite side. There was a bowl of full-blown, saffron roses between them. He remembered that Freda had always adored yellow roses.

"You can imagine how anxious I am to have the confession," he said, smiling, too.

She gave a short laugh.

"I had a sort of a bet with myself that you wouldn't come, that you might think me crazy; almost any one would, wouldn't he? Or else seeking some sort of notoriety." She grimaced at the idea.

"You certainly took your chances when you gave a valuable jewel to a passer-by whom you had never seen before."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I put it to the touch to win or lose it all. I had reached that point —" a shadow fell over her rebellious face,— "but there was more method in my madness than you think." She gave him one of her odd glances. "I guess I'll plunge right into my story, and it's a queer, mixed-up one, I warn you."

"I should fancy it might be," he returned, still studying her.

"Mr.—" she began, and then hesitated, looking at him inquiringly.

"Vernon. That's not my real name, but it's the one by which I am known now, and which I gave the man at the door."

There was a little sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

"Now I feel as if I were really beginning to live. To know a man who isn't called by his real name!"

He laughed outright. He had had considerable knowledge of the various types of debutante in his day, among them the kind who wished to appear reckless and sophisticated and daring, but this girl was new; it didn't seem a pose with her. He decided that she was something of a savage, but an interesting one.

"Why does an assumed name strike you as a part of living?" he asked.

"It's so different from anything in my experience," she answered frankly. "It belongs to a sort of fascinating, adventurous world one reads about. We are the strictest sect of the Pharisees."

But she didn't laugh as she said it. Her mouth twitched, and her eyes grew sullen.

"Mr. Vernon, did you ever hear of my uncle, William Whitefield, who owns this house?" she asked abruptly.

William Whitefield. If she had been looking at him, she would have seen that his eyes grew a shade more alert, while his face set and hardened; but there was no perceptible change in his tone.

"Yes. Every one has heard of him. He's rather a unique personality. A great politician. A great financier. One of our truly successful Americans." There was a sudden edge on his voice.

She nodded.

"He's all that," she said, "but that is not explaining my action of this afternoon, although dear Uncle William in a way explains it; and no doubt you're as nervous as can be, sitting alone in the room with an able-bodied lunatic." She threw back her head and laughed.

"So I'm going to try to make the whole thing clear to you, although it's terribly mixed up. You see, the story of my life begins a long time before I was born."

"Most of us could say the same thing," he interpolated, laughing.

"Naturally. Well, if you know of my uncle, you've probably heard of my grandfather, old Amasa Whitefield."

"A character in his day," he answered readily; "he piled up a great fortune."

"Yes. He intended, I've been told, to divide his money equally between his three children, my uncle William, my aunt, Mrs. Warren Hempstead, and my mother, Mrs. Fletcher; but before he died, my mother and my father had been drowned at sea. Aunt Eleanor Hempstead had also died, so my mother's and my aunt Eleanor's shares of my grandfather's estate were left in trust for my cousin, Fletcher Hempstead, Aunt Eleanor's son, and myself. I was about two at the

time of my grandfather's death, and Fletcher was fifteen.

"There!" She paused to take breath. "Have you got that all straight in your head?"

"Quite," he smiled; "I have an indistinct impression of having heard it all before."

She looked at him with that subtle, narrowed gaze of hers. Her face was impassive as an Indian's, but her eyes were speculative.

"The will," she continued, "was an odd one, largely, I fancy, because grandfather detested Fletcher's father, Warren Hempstead." Her quick eye caught the smile which flitted over Colvin's face. "A brilliant but unscrupulous and dissipated man, and grandfather feared his getting some control over his son's inheritance.

"By the terms of the will, our property, Fletcher's and mine, was to remain undivided until I was twenty-five. By that time, if you will stop to calculate, Fletcher would be almost forty. In the meantime, we were to receive such an income as our trustees, Uncle William Whitefield and Cousin Samuel Cruger, though suitable, and we were to be educated and to live after the manner decided upon by those two."

She paused to give one of those short laughs of hers. He had been tremendously interested in watching her expression while she was speaking. It was as if a surface mockery played over depths of bitter and suppressed resentment.

"Delightful arrangement, don't you think? Only unfortunate thing about it was that it didn't work in Fletcher's case, at least." There was a touch of pride and admiration in her voice.

"When he was about seventeen, his father died.

and from that time he was in one quarrel after another with Uncle William. There were frightful scenes between them. I have a very dim remembrance of Fletcher, but I love him like a brother, when I think of the dance he led Uncle William.

"Of course, dear Uncle William could, and did retaliate. He cut Fletcher's spending money down to nothing, and humiliated him in every way that he could, but it simply didn't work. He's tried the same thing with me in another way," she had clasped her hands behind her head and was smiling with vindictive and feline enjoyment, "but I'm giving him a run for his money, and I've got plenty of wind yet."

Colvin reflected that this was highly probable.

"Then Fletcher did something — oh, quite beyond everything — dreadfully disgraceful, and disappeared. They made every effort to find him, but unsuccessfully, and it was taken for granted that he was dead. But during the last year, as I have gathered from various significant hints that Cousin Samuel has from time to time let fall, there is reason to believe that he has returned from wherever he went and is now here in New York."

She had turned while speaking and leaned her arms upon the table between them. His eyes were on the fire, but hers, no longer shadowed by their heavy lids, were on his contemplative profile.

"Ever hear of Cousin Samuel Cruger?" she broke off to ask most casually.

"Tubby?" At last he was caught off guard. "Oh, yes."

She gave the faintest of satisfied nods and went on before he noticed his slip.

"He'd let me do as I please," she said, "but Uncle

William rules him with a rod of iron. Well. From what I can gather from Cousin Sammy's rather frightened confidences, Fletcher has been seen more than once, and is supposed to be living in or near town."

"I see," said Colvin in a sudden enlightened flash, turning quickly to face her. "You have been looking for him yourself, and you thought that I might be he."

"No," she said slowly, "not exactly that. I did have a curious feeling when I saw you as if — as if," she frowned. "Oh, it gives me a sort of confused feeling to think of it, but as if I had known you somewhere — It's something about my childhood, but I can't remember.

"Of course, on every opportunity I got, I've looked for Fletcher; but barring finding him, I hoped to meet some one else who would help me in my search."

He looked at her in amazement.

"And so you have wandered about the streets ready to give jewels into the keeping of any strange tramp!"

The fantasy, the recklessness of the thing appalled him, and he showed it.

"It sounds like Haroun Al Raschid, or Prince Florizel of Bohemia."

Her face darkened.

"Oh," she cried angrily, "I'm not such a fool as it sounds. I had a plan, although you may not think it. I couldn't employ detectives. I haven't enough freedom for that. I had to be my own detective. And I never had any intention of giving jewels to stray tramps.

"You are not very flattering to yourself, Mr. Vernon. I've carried that purse and the pendant in my muff for weeks now. But," and here she leaned forward and struck the table lightly with her fingers, as

if to give emphasis to her words, "the moment I saw you, I knew, I knew positively that my search was over. I could see that you, like Fletcher, had been born a gentleman and yet — and yet —"

"It was plain also that apparently, like your Cousin Fletcher, I too was down and out." There was the zest of real mirth, the first that had rung there for years, in his laughter. The bitterness of the fact had long passed, lost in that vast apathy which had engulfed him.

"Yes, thank you," she said carelessly. "In all that crowd, you looked as if you didn't belong, but had just strayed there."

She appeared indifferent to his feelings.

"You seemed to have come from that big, shadowy, submerged world which lies all about us, and of which we know so little. And I knew that I could trust you."

A flush rose on his cheek.

"Thank you."

There was sincere feeling in his voice. "That is the first real compliment that I have ever received. But," he added curiously, "if you had that feeling about knowing me long ago, why were you not equally sure that I was your cousin Fletcher in person? You must have been a tiny child the last time you saw him."

"Oh," she said carelessly, "I would most certainly know him. When he was about ten years old, he had an accident which left a deep scar on his face, just here," she ran her finger from her right eyelid downward across her cheek.

There was the flicker of illumination in his face. Almost he exclaimed "The Hornet!"

He looked at her appalled and incredulous, and yet, after the first shock, there was no doubt in his mind.

Fletcher Hempstead, and "The Hornet" almost surely were the same.

A vision of this cousin she sought rose before him. Tall, emaciated, stooping, with his quick, lithe movements not devoid of grace. His haggard, cynical, drug-haunted face, his menacing, bitter personality, his base and disillusioned outlook, his corrosively sarcastic wit. And that slash across the cheek, biting deep into the flesh, and running diagonally almost to the mouth.

Colvin's memory went back almost two years. He remembered a night dense with fog, when he had found "The Hornet" pressed close to the wall in his doorway. There had been a moment or so of conversation, when Colvin, with a thrill of surprise, had recognized the other man as of his class, and had given his unbidden guest the freedom of his rooms until the immediate search by the police had abated.

Once or twice after that, "The Hornet" had drifted in late at night and smoked Colvin's cigars and entertained him with his mordant philosophies, his acid comments on life. And Colvin in turn had spent an occasional evening at the other's flat.

And "The Hornet" was the girl's — this girl's next of kin!

He shifted in his chair and frowned.

"Why are you so anxious to find this cousin?" he asked abruptly.

"Because," she answered, "I've learned from Cousin Samuel that Fletcher and I together could take some kind of legal steps and perhaps get a readjustment of our affairs. The circumstances under which I live make it almost impossible for me to do anything alone."

She leaned nearer him.

"Mr. Vernon," she burst out, "I am nineteen years old, and I am treated as if I were ten. I'm an heiress with no money, a woman with neither rights nor privileges. The only outlet for my energies at present is in tormenting Uncle William and Aunt Freda; especially Aunt Freda, and I must say she's a foeman worthy of my steel.

"Oh-h!" her lips drew back from her teeth, her eyes burned with a green fire through her lashes. "How I hate my Aunt Freda!"

There was a sudden leap of answering fire in his eyes. Then he looked beyond her at the rows of books behind her head. His voice was almost too casual as he said:

"She is considered a very beautiful woman, is she not?"

"Oh, she has been a professional beauty for years. And she is very sweet and terribly good."

The ironic bitterness of her smile was reflected in his, a thousand times intensified.

"I know."

"You've met her?" she asked quickly, her eyes again alert and speculative.

"I know the type," he explained suavely. "But there are surely other ways that an heiress of nineteen might gain her freedom."

"You mean marriage?" she asked immediately.

She pushed a box of cigarettes on the table toward him. "Will you smoke?" she asked, and then took one herself.

"Thank you," as he held a light for her; "I do this to annoy Aunt Freda. Of course, marriage would be an escape of sorts — but the few men that Aunt Freda allows me to see anything of don't appeal to me. No. Marriage isn't in my scheme yet." She shook her head

decidedly. "I've got to find myself before I find a man."

She suddenly sat upright, tense.

"Listen. I thought I heard a motor stop before the door. I had no idea it was so late." She darted into the hall, and returned in a moment with his hat and coat.

"It is they," she said. "That door leads into the dining-room," she pointed toward the end of the room. "There are French windows giving on a porch, with a flight of steps to the garden. Oh, hurry, that is the door!"

He was down the room in a second.

"But how shall I communicate with you?" he asked quickly, his hand on the knob of the door.

She looked at him in consternation, but she was a young woman who thought rapidly, and was not likely to lose her head.

"As my tailor," she whispered. "M. J. Hodgeson. Go."

The sound of voices — voices he well remembered — was growing perilously distinct. He stepped through the door and closed it softly behind him.

CHAPTER III

As Colvin closed the door of the library behind him, he was relieved to find a dim light burning in the dining-room.

It was a large, stately room, lighted during the day by the long windows of which Muriel had spoken. He quickly crossed the floor, and pressing the catch of one of the windows opened it, only to find that his way was still barred by heavy iron shutters. These in turn were secured by a bolt, which he slipped back, and then, pushing ajar the shutter, he stepped cautiously out upon the porch.

It was so dark outside that before going farther he waited a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. Then, treading warily, he crossed the porch, and followed the short flight of steps down to a narrow, graveled path. Hearing no stir, except the occasional passing of a vehicle along the street, he walked on until he came to a gate opening into Seventy-fifth Street. The street was empty so far as he could see, but he did not draw a long breath until he turned into Fifth Avenue. Then he stopped under a lamp to light a cigarette and look at his watch. It was after eleven.

His immediate inclination was to look up the "Hornet." Not by any means to inform that dangerous and disastrous person that he had discovered his probable identity, or to tell him of the fact that his young cousin

was conducting a search for him on what might be considered new and erratic lines. God forbid! Colvin had never uttered a more devout protest. He was merely of the mind very thoroughly to investigate this problem which had been forced so abruptly upon his attention.

Once or twice curiosity had led him to accept the "Hornet's" invitation to spend an evening with him, innocuously be it said, at the latter's flat, over on the West Side above Greenwich Village.

Ashe meant to walk home anyhow, and he decided, if his mood still held by the time he had reached the streets in the 'teens, to turn westward and look in upon his chance acquaintance. He had no fear of being too late a caller; the "Hornet," for professional and personal reasons, was rarely at home before midnight.

And midnight — Colvin realized as he entered that exotic zone which begins at Forty-ninth Street and ends at Forty-second — was a chameleon word up here in the theater-restaurant belt — a glittering, gaudy cognomen, very different from the dim, shrouded, gray name by which it was known in the business and residence districts. The playtime of the tired business man and his silken, painted, perfumed companion, was just beginning. Faster and faster spun the lacquered motors through the great circles of light shed upon the asphalt from electric globes. Their occupants were well-groomed, amiable, hard-eyed men, and women with faces tilted upward like flowers from their fur and chiffon wraps. Their mingled laughter trailed through the night. The theaters were just out; the restaurants beckoned.

Colvin tried hard to retain his poise, his detached outlook. He had thought in those old, dead, brilliant

days of his that the world moved as fast as it possibly could whizz through space. But that whizz was a snail's pace compared to this Twentieth Century clip. Of old, the voice of the city had uttered its perpetual, monotonous admonition, "Step lively!" but to-day its insistent, iterated murmur is, "Speed up! Speed up!"

It confused him a little, all this cinematographic activity, this flare and blare with its sprinkling of cayenne; but it continued to arouse in him that same tingling excitement which he had known ever since he had met Muriel that afternoon.

However, his interest was soon exhausted, and again his mind concentrated itself upon the problem. He smiled then half-whimsically, half-cynically as he admitted — for Colvin was one of those rare persons who are honest with themselves — that it was the girl even more than the situation that was puzzling him. Yet, as he told himself, this was only natural. The concrete is ever more engrossing than the abstract; the person, than the condition.

Take his situation, for instance. He hadn't an idea where it was going to lead him. Into difficulties certainly; thick and plenty. Into dangers, probably — well, the more the better.

In an unexplainable way, Ashe was becoming aware of some things very definitely; and these assurances came to him not through reasoning and deduction, but through those far more infallible guides, feeling, emotion, prescience. He knew that he had received his cue once more to take his place among the actors on life's stage, and without stopping to analyze the conviction, he returned to his consideration of the problem — and the girl.

He was still of the mood to look up the "Hornet", but after finding him, what then? In the first place, that elusive person was hardly likely to have left unclaimed for years a large estate and a constantly accruing income, unless there were excellent reasons for his doing so. Would not those reasons still hold? Not necessarily. Owing to a lapse of time, or for any one of a number of causes, Fletcher Hempstead might be quite willing to join forces with his young cousin.

Colvin shuddered. Could he, dared he be an instrument in bringing these two together? Imagine her — that splendid, willful, rebellious creature — coming under the sinister influence of the "Hornet"!

He was down in the 'teens now, and he turned westward, traversing three of the long blocks of a cross street, until he neared the old square where the Episcopal Seminary creates its own atmosphere of repose and meditation — an oasis of ivied walls and iron-railed green, with the desert of shabby gentility stretching stark about it.

He stopped before a dingy flat house, looked up to make sure of the number, and mounting the stoop, peered among the letter-boxes in the vestibule, until he found one bearing the noncommittal name of Johnson, and then rang the bell.

The front door clicked, and he opened it, passed through a very dimly lighted hall and up a single flight of steps, and so arrived at the "Hornet's" flat.

Again he rang, and this time the door was opened on a cautious chain-latch by a woman who studied him warily through the aperture.

"How do you do, Mrs. Johnson," Colvin said reassuringly. She was either the "Hornet's" wife, or passed as such.

She looked at him dubiously. "Mr.—?" she hesitated.

"Vernon," he supplied.

"Oh, yes; I remember now." Her face cleared. "Alf ain't here yet; but I'm expecting him any minute. Come right in and wait."

"If you think he will be home soon, and that it will not inconvenience you." It was Colvin's turn to hesitate now.

"Not a bit," she urged hospitably, throwing the door back for him to pass. "Leave your things on the hat-rack there."

She waited while he did so, and then preceded him down a short hall and into the living-room.

"Rest yourself in a chair, Mr. Vernon; that Morris over there is a comfortable one. Alf he always eats his supper about twelve," she ran on; "and I'm getting it ready for him now. You see, he's a pretty poor sleeper. That's the reason he walks around so much at night." She looked at him as she said this, with a quick, sidewise glance in which an appeal for him to believe her was mingled with a furtive fear that he would not.

And this furtiveness Ashe found pathetic. It affected him, as one is affected and saddened by the precocious knowledge of evil in a child. It was so obviously acquired in a painful school of experience.

She sat down on the edge of a chair opposite him, determinedly hospitable, and spoke of the weather. Although still young — in the early thirties, perhaps — and still pretty, she was distinctly not of an urban type. No department store lounge, she; no untiring stalker of the big game of small bargains. She had never acquired the habit of gossiping from window to window across a court two feet wide, nor with arms

comfortably disposed upon the cushioned ledge, gazing down for hours upon the passing world.

She was a typical home body, the rustic intonations still lingering in her voice, the rustic shyness in her eyes. Excellent assets for a mate of the "Hornet," and no doubt duly valued by him.

The room, too, disarmed suspicion — pleasant, homelike and expressing a shining order. The windows were crowded with blooming plants, but whatever fragrance these may have sent forth was overborne by the appetizing odors of the supper in course of preparation.

"What pretty flowers you have," said Colvin, intuitively choosing the subject which would set his hostess most thoroughly at ease. This ability had ever been one of the chief secrets of his charm. "Who is the winter gardener; you, or Mr. Johnson?"

"Oh, me." Enthusiasm brightened her face, as she turned to her window boxes. "I don't like anything so much as pottering over flowers, and they do so well for me, too. I can make a stick grow."

"I can easily believe it. Most house plants are a spindling lot, but these are beautiful." He won her heart by his interest and admiration.

Presently, in the full tide of the life history of a pelargonium, she started sharply.

"My land! I'm forgetting my Sally Lunn. You must excuse me; I've got to take a look at the oven. Something's burning already. My! I do wonder what's keeping Alf." She left him to his meditations.

Picking up a newspaper from the table, Colvin read a paragraph or two, and then laid it aside. He was more interested in this simple, wistful creature with whom he had been talking. Her face held the sweet-

ness and the pathos of the woman who loves blindly, and who merely accepts whatever her lot without question. He wondered how she had escaped, if indeed it were possible for her to escape, the poison of the "Hornet's" personality, and then in a moment of insight so poignant that it almost brought the tears to his eyes, he realized that all that was deadly and virulent in this companion of hers was transmuted in the alembic of her maternal love. He, the "Hornet," whose venomous flights she could not follow, who cultivated the will to wound and the impulse to destroy, had roused in this humble, bewildered soul a passion of self-sacrifice and unquestioning devotion, which was for her at once a cruel and yet supreme intensification of life.

"I'm afraid Alf's been detained." Her plaintive voice sounded from the doorway. "I've kept things so long, the supper ain't fit to eat. Say, Mr. Vernon, I wish you'd let me give you a cup of coffee, and just a taste of something."

Colvin started, impatient with himself for these habits of reverie which had grown upon him during his years of isolation.

"Oh, thank you. Not so late." He was already half way to the door. Then, seeing her disappointment, he halted. "I am afraid, I can't resist, if you will let me drink it standing."

He glanced at the clock, and started again. "Oh, forgive me." His voice was shocked. "I had no idea of the time."

But she had vanished to return quickly with a tray temptingly arranged with coffee, buttered toast, and sandwiches.

Colvin found them delicious, and delighted her soul

by praising them unstintedly. Then he made his departure, inwardly fuming at himself.

"I've acquired all the stupid habits of the confirmed recluse," he said to himself, as he closed the hall door of the flat behind him. Then, hearing footsteps on the stairs, he waited a moment, thinking that the "Hornet" himself might be coming. But instead, it was a messenger boy, who paused at the head of the flight, and looked about him. Colvin noticed that he carried a flat, square package.

"That Johnson's flat?" he asked, pointing to the door before which Colvin stood.

Ashe nodded, and went on down the stairs. By the time he reached home, he was desperately weary. For one who had companioned so long with solitude, this had been an eventful day, to put it mildly—a day of mental awakening, of mental acceptance, elimination and selection, and its complement in the physical had been a day of happenings.

He had been literally pitchforked into his crowded hour, and tired as he was in body and mind, he knew that if he went to bed it would not be to sleep. Therefore, with the idea of resting a few moments and seeing things a little more clearly in perspective, he threw himself into an easy chair.

It was several hours later when he sat up suddenly and listened incredulously to the clock striking nine. Impossible! He got up, shook his shoulders, stretched his legs, and then walked rapidly up and down the room. He felt stiff and cramped from his heavy sleep in an uncomfortable position; so, deciding that it was too late or too early to go to bed, he prepared to draw his bath and dress for the day.

But before he could do this, his landlady's daugh-

ter, a girl of twelve or thirteen, brought up his breakfast. She returned his "Good morning, Elsa," with her usual broad smile on her broad pink and white face, and then her round, blue eyes widened. Even her shining, flaxen pigtails seemed to curl upward in surprise. He realized with amusement that it was his evening clothes, the whole full-dress effect of him at his breakfast hour, which had caused her astonishment. Then, mindful of her manners, she set the tray on the table, and laid beside it a neatly folded newspaper.

"Coffee, cream, sugar, grapefruit, eggs, rolls, butter, pepper and salt, forks, spoons, knives, napkin," she enumerated slowly. "I haven't forgotten anything."

"You never do," he smiled.

She blushed with pleasure, and then closed the door behind her with her usual careful precision.

Colvin picked up the paper, and glanced at the headlines. Then his grip upon it tightened. His attitude, his expression, showed the most concentrated attention, while he read the story which had been considered of sufficient importance to warrant double-column headlines on the front page:

WILLIAM WHITEFIELD ROBBED

Sensational Burglary and Murder at the Home of the
Fifth Avenue Millionaire Politician
Safe Looted of Valuable Jewels and Papers, and a
Policeman Shot in a Desperate Encounter
with the Escaping Thieves.

CHAPTER IV

MECHANICALLY Colvin poured his coffee out into the cup, but the steam of it rose unheeded while his eyes remained glued to the printed columns before him.

“A fusillade of revolver shots and a scurry of retreating footsteps,” so ran the story, “created a sensation in the exclusive district along upper Fifth Avenue last night about midnight.

“The disturbance came from the home of William Whitefield, the traction magnate and former member of the Republican National Committee at 4 East Seventy-Sixth Street, and when Patrolman Frank Chivers and Bernard Myer of the Central Park Squad arrived on the scene, they were met by the panic-stricken household, and found one of the French windows opening into the dining-room from a porch at the side of the house standing open, while at the foot of a short flight of steps running down from this porch lay Patrolman Charles McNamara, still breathing, but unconscious and mortally wounded from a shot in the right temple.

“Chivers and Myer hurriedly summoned assistance from the Arsenal Police Station, and had McNamara removed to the Presbyterian Hospital, where he died about an hour later without recovering consciousness, or making a statement of any kind.

“From the conditions at the house, however, it was not difficult to reconstruct what had taken place.

Shortly after the family had retired for the night, a burglar or party of burglars entered by way of the dining-room window, and then proceeding to Mr. Whitefield's study, forced his private safe, and removed the greater part of its contents. Escaping then with their booty, they left by the same way they came, but were evidently halted in the garden by McNamara, who, it is supposed, either saw them as they were making their exit, or else had his suspicions aroused by finding the gateway open into Seventy-fifth Street and had gone in to investigate.

"An exchange of shots must have taken place, for the dying officer's revolver was found clutched in his hand, and three of the cartridges in it were exploded, but it is not believed that any of his bullets took effect. At any rate, the cracksmen got safely away with their haul.

"This, it was rumored at first, included Mrs. Whitefield's famous collection of sapphires and pearls, which were doubtless the bait that led to the daring burglary; but it was later denied by both Mr. and Mrs. Whitefield that these jewels had either been in the safe, or were missing.

"The actual loss, as inventoried by Mr. Whitefield for the authorities, consisted of about \$600 in money, some rings, brooches, and unset stones, totalling a value of between six and seven thousand dollars, and a package of private papers.

"The disappearance of these papers seemed to be what chiefly concerned the traction man, and he showed the utmost perturbation on discovering their loss. Later, however, in discussing the matter with the reporters he attempted to minimize the importance of the missing documents, although declining to give any information as to their character or contents.

"They were of no possible value to any one but

myself,' he said testily. 'And I cannot understand the object of the thieves in taking them.'

"Nevertheless, it is significant that he should have caused an advertisement to be inserted in all the city newspapers offering a reward of \$5,000 for the return of the package, and 'no questions asked.' And this deep anxiety for the recovery of the papers leads to the suspicion in some quarters that they were concerned with important traction matters — either deals in prospect, or transactions already closed, which in view of recent legislative activity Mr. Whitefield has no desire to see in other hands than his own.

"Reverting, though, to the details of the crime itself, there is still no definite clue to the identity of its perpetrators.

"The police were at first strongly inclined to an 'inside job' theory, arguing that the burglars must have been assisted by some member of the household from the fact that the iron shutters to the dining-room window were found unlatched, and showed no signs of having been tampered with, and also from certain discrepancies in the story of the butler. But both Mr. and Mrs. Whitefield are loth to accept the suggestion.

"They insist that the entire staff of their household is above suspicion, and offer as an explanation for the unlatched window that one of the robbers might possibly have entered the house during the day or even after dinner, and have secreted himself until the family had gone to bed, when he admitted his confederates.

"The actual work upon the safe seems to offer a better lead: for here the detectives are agreed that expert ability of a high order was displayed, and they claim to recognize in it the handicraft of a cracksman long suspected by the department, but who has hitherto always managed to elude arrest.

"Orders were issued last night for the rounding up of this man, and the police expect to have him in custody within a few hours."

Colvin laid down the paper, and stared straight before him, gnawing his lower lip. The color had not returned to his face. Again he abstractedly lifted the coffee-pot, and poured out its contents, until his cup overflowed into the saucer before he noticed it. There was an odd smile on his lips.

His mind leaped to a question. He could not help wondering, if, when the butler had been subjected to examination, he had mentioned the fact that an unknown man had called at the Whitefield house at nine o'clock on the evening before — a man who gave his name as Vernon, and who asked for Miss Fletcher, and for whom, he, Dempsey, had not opened the door upon his departure.

Colvin frowned and twisted his mouth. There was no evading the conclusion that, if the girl and the butler told all they knew, he was certain to fall under suspicion. Fortunately, or at least he hoped so, the butler did not know as much as the girl, and it might be that his own interest and Muriel's bribe had nerved Dempsey to evade the searching questions put to him. And Ashe could not imagine the girl telling the police that her visitor had left the house through the dining-room window. No, he smiled confidently; there was one thing of which he was sure, and that was, that they would never get any of the facts of that evening from Muriel unless it suited her purpose to tell, and he was ready to stake his faith on her silence.

An odd coincidence — this robbery — if indeed it were a coincidence. Of course it was possible that he

might have been seen leaving the house by some one who realized the opportunity of those unlocked iron shutters and grasped it. But, no matter how he studied this or that phase of the affair, the undercurrent of his thought was always the girl. It was years since his curiosity had been so piqued, his interest so fully aroused as it had been by Muriel Fletcher's unusual individuality.

Yet there was a factor in the case which kept the thought of Muriel merely an undercurrent. His dominating consideration was that package of stolen papers, vaguely referred to as relating to a traction deal. The very mention of them roused in him a wild hope, something he did not dare regard as a possibility; and yet his mind clung to it with a thousand tentacles, and in spite of himself his spirit soared.

Long, long ago he had abandoned his dreams of an inevitable, if postponed, justice which should include a full restitution. In the days when his downfall — his death, as he always mentally referred to it — impended, he had done everything not only to avert the ruin which threatened him, but to nullify its results when the avalanche of full publicity came.

In his endeavor to enlist powerful influences, he had consulted lawyers who were not only personal friends, but men eminent in their profession; and for the first time this darling of fortune read incredulity not un-mixed with scorn in their eyes. He who had met only smiles and eager welcome encountered that same unfamiliar expression in the eyes of every friend and acquaintance he had on earth. He had resolved to carry off the thing high-handedly, with all of the insouciance, the *savoir faire* with which he was credited; to give it the light indifference with which one treats

a matter of no importance. But the world's opinion was too well defined for this.

He was noticeably avoided in all of his old haunts. Men who were indebted to him for a hundred favors were too much occupied to see him at his clubs, in the restaurants, on the street. Women — Ah, women! — who had felt their personal prestige immeasurably advanced if they were seen with him, now looked sedulously in another direction. His mail which had daily numbered so many invitations that he never bothered to count them, dwindled to a few bills and business communications. Hostesses, whose invitations he had already accepted, suffered from sudden maladies and enjoyed equally speedy recoveries.

"But, great heavens!" he said to the lawyer to whom he finally turned. "I'm pilloried as if I were a criminal, and I'm a public benefactor. Although I have been politically opposed to Whitefield, and have represented interests inimical to him and all his crooked affairs, still I discovered this gigantic steal by a mere fluke — this rotten merger they have put through. They've made millions out of it — millions! — the public has been swindled and robbed past belief, and — I'm the goat."

There was something in the ring of his voice, a passionate sincerity, a desperate protestation which made Judge Gregory turn and look at him steadily. The scrutiny of those cold eyes gradually softened, there was the shadow of something like sympathy on the ascetic, intellectual face.

"Colvin," he said slowly, "you're not the sort of a man to be the goat, unless you're considerably more of a fool than I or any one else has ever thought you. That's the gist of the whole matter. That's the reason

public opinion, even among your closest friends, stands as it does toward you. It's the things you can't — or won't — explain, the — er — rather noticeable discrepancies — ”

He took off his eyeglasses and wiped them with meticulous care. Colvin's face had flushed, his lips tightened.

“ You,” went on the lawyer in his even, judicial tones, “ you permitted — well, more than a hint of this information you claim to possess, to leak out. You allowed the newspapers to make certain insinuations. And then, when they had the public sufficiently excited, and were prepared to spring a big sensation, you refused the definite proofs of your various allegations — refused them, and in spite of the influence which the united press brought to bear upon you, you have simply maintained silence.” His voice dropped coldly, and as it seemed to the man who listened, from an immense distance. “ An inexplicable silence! ”

“ What else is there to do? ” cried Colvin hotly. “ Public records have mysteriously disappeared, papers have been stolen from my desk, witnesses have either vanished or denied their previous sworn testimony. I am in a most devilish and unbelievable mesh. How could I have foreseen it? I can't yelp now. Nobody will believe me. As for the insinuations in the newspapers, they never came from me; they leaked out through associates who were keen enough on the chase when it looked as though we had unearthed this stupendous fraud, and then disclaimed all knowledge of it when the bribe was high enough.”

He spoke vehemently, and yet there was something lacking of the sincerity of his previous words; and Gregory was not insensible to it.

"Leaders are invariably blamed for the blunders of their subordinates," the Judge said drily. "Events, like persons, are judged on appearances in a world which has no time to sift and weigh evidence. And then," he spoke more slowly now, and even more coldly, "your willingness to expose the Whitefield crowd, when you had appeared rather conspicuously for the past year as the Whitefield *ami du maison* — Well — That complicates the matter considerably. Many men who would have paid small attention to the business and political fight in itself, can't overlook the — I'm sorry, Ashe — the caddishness of it. The universal comment is: He was crazy about her, and when Whitefield shut down on the affair, Colvin attempted a dirty public revenge and couldn't get away with it."

"Yes; I know," as Ashe wheeled violently in his chair. "Brutal. But that's the world, and that is the real reason your warmest friends feel that you deserve all that's coming to you. You've made yourself in the public eye something worse than a criminal — a ridiculous figure."

Colvin's face was gray as he stared at the sheet of window before him. Judge Gregory's untempered statements of fact had fallen about him like hailstones. He realized dully and in a surprised sort of way that words were things. He felt their impact, cold as ice, and yet stinging like acid, searing his flesh, burning their way into his very soul.

Gregory fussed among his papers for a moment. "You are very young," there was a hint of emotion in his voice, "and you have had enough notice to turn any man's head. You have unusual gifts; a great career was before you. I honestly believe that the information given out, as you say, by your associates

to the newspapers was neither an hallucination on your part, nor a bruited of mere unfounded rumors and suspicion in the effort to create a sensation. I believe that you had definite proofs to back up your charges and allegations. But my personal conviction of course counts for nothing."

He leaned his arms on the desk, and looked steadily at Colvin, speaking with an almost solemn emphasis.

"It's not too late yet, Ashe. The public is still willing to let you prove that you are neither a knave nor a fool. But you can't let the matter rest where it stands, as you seem bent on doing; you can't, and avoid the consequences. Your excuse that your witnesses were bought up, that records were destroyed, and that important papers were stolen, is palpably weak. You are too clever, too astute not to have reckoned on all those accidents in advance, and to have known that your case was unassailable before you placed it at the mercy of even the closest of your associates. You claim that the proofs upon which you especially relied were locked up in your apartment, and that your desk was robbed. But you have made only the most perfunctory effort to investigate that robbery. What stopped you? What was your motive?"

He paused a moment, but Colvin did not answer. "Only one, I am convinced," he went on. "A woman. Well," sighing, "we live by our traditions, and principally we die by them. You are not the first man of brains who has seen his career wrecked, his usefulness nullified, his life ruined by giving all to protect what in nine cases out of ten is not worth protecting, and that is the very hypothetical white flower of a woman's honor. Any woman who is con-

scious of an honor to protect is quite competent to guard it herself."

A brief silence fell between them, and when the judge spoke again, the vigor had gone out of his voice. There was the tired drag of age in it.

"Perhaps I am imaginative, although I can hardly accuse myself of that," there was a bleak smile around his lips. "But, Ashe," his hand wavered toward the bowed head of the younger man, "don't let the tradition fall on you, and grind you to powder as it will. Don't belittle your usefulness. Don't give up everything for a quixotic whim. Don't let the idiotic ideal of a false chivalry break you. You are a big man, Ashe. Life's been too easy for you. You haven't yet been taken as seriously as you're entitled to be. You've posed around the town too much as a Beau Brummel. But all that would soon fall away from you. And this country needs men of your powers. For God's sake, don't quit the game, because of a mere sentimental episode of your boyhood."

Colvin got up, and walked to the window. The sun shimmered on its surface; but even had the pane been clear, he would not have seen the bay crowded with shipping, nor the sky-climbing buildings, each striving to top the other. His eyes were turned inward, and the pictures of what Gregory had called a sentimental episode rose upon his mental vision, while his brain dispassionately reviewed them.

Months before he had stumbled on this steal, he had been attracted to Freda Whitefield. She had enlisted his interest in the first place by her beauty, and there had ensued one of those intimate, platonic friendships — sentiment raised to its *ut* power, hovering thrillingly on the verge of passion, but not yet drawn

into the vortex. The old, eternal drama of the beautiful woman unequally yoked, and the sympathetic young man. It progresses through inevitable stages: her favorite flower is sent her daily; they discover a strangely mutual taste in poetry; her spiritual ideals are timidly disclosed to him, and he accepts the revelation with an almost ecstatic reverence; she will be at this dinner or dance; they meet with handclasps, ardent, clinging, yet quickly withdrawn; there are long, long glances, and hastily averted eyes. It is a game played without variation from Timbuctoo to Kamschatka.

The affair had reached the stage where a divorce from Whitefield was seriously contemplated, when Colvin made his discovery of the traction scandal. For weeks he lived through the struggle which comes at least once to every son of Adam — that of choosing between duty and the woman — and the choice was not an easy one. He loved her madly, but the steal was too vast, too flagrant. A great city had been greatly robbed, and the bandits, secure in success, were now planning other depredations upon an even larger scale.

Finally, at the height of his mental conflict, he laid the whole thing before Freda; and she, her civic virtue aroused, had strengthened his wavering purpose. As for her, she would not remain under the roof nor eat the bread of a man who had mercilessly and in cold blood ruined thousands.

Incited by her spirit, upheld by her faith in him, Colvin prepared to force the issue. Then, on the eve of public disclosure, there had occurred the time-honored midnight visit from her. Even her unconventionality was conventional.

He had come to his rooms late, and found her there. She threw herself into a chair, and lay sobbing. Her husband had accused; she had admitted. The ultimatum was that if Ashe gave over to the authorities the information in his possession and at which the newspapers were hinting, Whitefield would immediately sue her for divorce, and name Colvin as correspondent.

He had his evidence; it was sufficient. But if Colvin were willing to drop the traction investigation, he would condone. He could consider no other terms.

Freda clung to Ashe, wrapped her arms about him, weepingly besought him to save her; and he soothed her, promising delay for the present, at least, or until they could decide what had best be done.

It was not until she left that he noticed a certain disorder in the room. He strode over to his desk; the lock was broken, the contents of the desk were in confusion. His most important proofs were gone. When he was at last able to think, and had somewhat recovered his reasoning powers, he called up Freda on the telephone. She had noticed nothing amiss in the room, she averred; was in no condition, indeed, to do so. She regretted the loss of his private papers, but was surprised, nay, more, wounded, that he should question her in regard to them.

And not long after this the society reporters began to make enthusiastic mention of the sapphires and pearls which were dimming the glory of all the other jewels worn at the opera that winter — Delilah's price!

At last Colvin turned from the shimmering window and from his unwilling mental review.

"Thank you, Judge," he said, and there was a faint

smile upon his lips. "In a choice between a quitter and a cad, wouldn't you rather be a quitter?"

"I refuse to admit that it is a choice," Gregory protested hardly. Then his stubbornness broke. "Oh, I know the fallacy of my own arguments. I know that at this stage of our evolution a man can't involve a woman, much as she deserves it, without making things worse for himself. But what then are you going to do?"

"Clear out," Colvin responded laconically. He was tensely erect, his head thrown back, that embittered, proud smile was still on his lips.

"Not that. Oh, no," pleaded Judge Gregory as if to a son of his own. "Don't throw away half a loaf, because you can't have the whole. Hang on to every crust."

Colvin's whole figure suddenly crumpled; his face broke up; there were hot tears in his eyes; his shoulders heaved. His guard was down at last. To this old man who loved him, he showed himself a heart-broken, bewildered boy, crushed in spirit, in pride, in self-confidence.

"They've got a complete frame-up, and they'll use it, too. They know I won't come back at them," he choked. "They've blinded my eyes, and shorn my hair, Judge, and there's nothing for me but the treadmill."

"Then, for God's sake, pull the temple down about their ears, no matter what means you use," cried the old man. His eyes, too, were wet, and he dabbed at them furiously with his handkerchief.

Colvin roused himself impatiently. Here he sat with his breakfast growing cold before him, reliving

again a long dead past. Why was he thinking of all that? Judge Gregory had died almost ten years ago. The first thing to be done now upon his own return to life was to put from him definitely this habit of reverie.

And yet his mind clung with a strange pertinacity to that midnight hour when he had turned to his rilled desk, and sorting over its contents with trembling hands, had become damnably conscious of the delicate perfume which exhaled from its tossed papers — Freda's favorite violet.

Could it be — Was it possible? — that the package stolen from Whitefield's safe the night before, and for which the traction man was so eagerly advertising, contained the proofs whose loss had shipwrecked his career?

Did chance, fortune, fate ever deal the cards like that? Was the spinning ball to drop red for him at last after all these years of black? A vain, wild hope, his reason told him; and yet he found himself thrilled and excited at the possibility.

Pushing aside his untasted breakfast, he caught up the newspaper again, and read with sedulous care every detail of the previous night's robbery.

The suggestion that he himself might fall under suspicion through some admission on the part of the butler or the girl no longer served as the basis of his interest. The burglary, the murder of the unfortunate patrolman, every other feature of the affair was now subsidiary in his mind to the engrossing question: Were those stolen papers his long-missing proofs?

But as this question took form in his mind, with all its improbabilities, there came another: How could he make sure?

Obviously, only by seeing them, and for that he would have to find the man who took them.

He gnawed his lip. What sort of a wild goose chase was he setting himself? He was even more in the dark than the police. They at least claimed to know who had broken into the safe—an expert cracksman, whose hall-mark, they said, was unmistakable.

But how was he to find out who the fellow was, get in touch with him, and satisfy himself as to the contents of the stolen package?

He had a number of shabby, shady acquaintances whom he suspected of more or less connection with the underworld; but none from whom it seemed likely he could gather information.

Then suddenly an idea flashed upon him. The Hornet! Why had he not thought of him before?

With an impulsive haste long foreign to him, Colvin caught up his hat and coat, and hurried to the door.

Half way down the stairs, he paused at the sight of the telephone, and stopping in the hall, he called up the Whitefields' number.

"Is Miss Fletcher in?" he asked.

"I'll see, sir. Who shall I say wishes to speak to her?"

"Hodgeson, her tailor."

In a moment Muriel's voice sounded in his ear.

"Mr. Hodgeson? You wished to speak to me?"

"Yes. Shall I assure you that the events of last night were as much of a surprise to me as to you?"

"No; it is not necessary," she said almost curtly.

His heart gave a quick bound. The idea of a collusion at least between himself and the real burglars must have occurred to her. She was too intelligent

for it not to have done so. But her indifferent dismissal did more to restore his self-confidence than a thousand protestations.

"Thank you," he returned, and there was the faintest tremble in his voice. "I will give you my telephone number now, in case you should wish to call me, and I hope that we may soon be able to discuss some definite plans."

"I hope so," she answered. And then: "One moment." in a lower voice. Her words came to him over the wire in scarcely more than a whisper.

"The butler has been closeted with my uncle and the police for more than an hour," she said. "He's certain to tell all that he knows. Good-by."

Colvin hung up the receiver. Under suspicion! Well, it was nothing more than he had expected. All the more reason that he should find the Hornet as quickly as possible.

He hurried across town, and up to the flat which he had visited the night before. But his repeated rings at the bell brought no response. While he stood puzzled and waiting, a slatternly janitress came clumping down the stairs.

"Lord! Somebody else to see them folks?" she grumbled at him. "The police was here half the night; but Johnson and his wife, they beat it while the goin' was good."

"Gone!" Colvin stared at her, the skyscraper of hope which he had been unconsciously building, crashing to the ground. "And they left no address?"

"Left about everything else," she tittered. "Clothes, furniture, ice-box full of grub, even the cat, but not no ad-dress. What is it they say on them

postal cards the LeBeaus down on the first floor gets from their brother on the other side? 'Somewheres in France.' Well, maybe that's where you'll find Mr. and Mrs. Johnson."

CHAPTER V

SEISMIC disturbances, whether in volcanoes or households, are reasonably certain to cause some marked alteration of the daily habits of the creatures within their radius of action; and in this respect the upheaval in the Whitefield mansion showed no departure from universal law. The ordinary routine of its occupants was noticeably disorganized.

Mr. Whitefield's secretary, young Everett Babcock, had just told the chauffeur that instead of having the motor before the front door at exactly twenty minutes to eleven, the invariable custom every business day in the year, it might not be required at all; Mr. Whitefield hardly thought he would go down to his office. Then, telephoning one or two more messages, he returned to the study to receive any further orders which might be issued.

This room, which had been invaded the night before by policemen and detectives, not to mention reporters, now showed no trace of these rude presences. The dusty bootmarks of many feet, the litter of cigar and cigarette stubs which had been strewn heedlessly over the broad hearthstone and handsome rugs, the disorder caused by books, papers, and ornaments having been indifferently disturbed in the unavailing but conscientious search for clues, these had all been removed.

The sun fell with a subdued radiance through the

curtains of the windows, and warmed to a pleasanter harmony the admirably blended browns and greens of the decorations. A masculine room, handsome, orderly, reserved. But just now the whole composition was thrown out of key by the safe with its circle of neatly-drilled holes about the knob.

William Whitefield himself was sitting on the farther side of the large, desklike table looking over some papers, when Everett returned. Young Babcock was the typical secretary of the great man, well-appearing, well-mannered, well-groomed, a product of efficiency, with about as much personality as a blank wall. His small, tidy mind was fitted out with a complete set of alphabetically arranged pigeonholes, and in them were stored all of the thousand and one details with which his employer could not afford to clutter up his own brains.

Faultless machines, such secretaries, but hardly to be regarded as human beings with parts and passions; red ink, not blood, flows in their veins. Scratch one of them, and you come on a card-index system. Yet even Everett Babcock, whose only initial impulse was his master's voice, had in the immediate reign of disorder fallen under suspicion.

Mr. Whitefield was at the moment eyeing him from under his heavy brows, and considering the impossible possibility of his having been implicated in the occurrence of the night before.

Whitefield himself, or the presentment of Whitefield which the world regarded as the real man, was a tall, rather bulky person of a little over sixty years, with a full, florid face, gray hair and moustache. But his nose was long and thin, and his gray eyes were of the rapid-fire kind — they never rested long on any-

thing, just pierced and then glanced off — yet like Muriel, his niece, he had the trick of veiling his too acute gaze. The impression he created was that of the blunt, overbearing man of power, fond of his tri-weekly golf, his auction bridge at the club, his carefully selected dinners, his well-chosen wines. Adopting this rôle early in his career, he had played up to it until it had become very real in texture, an admirable outer envelope masking his true and far more formidable characteristics, which were an unscrupulous and far-seeing cunning, a hard determination, and a patient diplomacy.

"Anything else, Mr. Whitefield?" asked Babcock.

Whitefield pondered the question a moment or two, pulling at one of his long, bushy eyebrows. Then, with the tips of his fingers, he ran the scales for one hand on his forehead, a mannerism of his.

"Ask Miss Fletcher to come here a minute," he said, and rising, began to walk up and down the floor, stopping finally before the safe and carefully scrutinizing its drilled door for perhaps the twentieth time.

He turned away from this contemplation as his niece entered, and beamed paternally upon her. But the beam only widened his mouth; it failed to occupy his eyes. He also suppressed a sigh. If he were formidable in his way, so was she in hers. These encounters with her, whether in the nature of skirmishes for position, or a definite drive with all the artillery in action, were, as he knew, nerve-racking affairs, which so far had never resulted in a decision for either of them.

"Sit down," he waved her toward a chair in which she would face the light, while he resumed his former seat before his desk. From that tactical vantage point

he again smiled at her. "Some stir, last night, Muriel; some stir. Frighten you much?"

She lifted her shoulders slightly. "I was more excited than frightened," she said. "What did you want to see me about, Uncle William? Are there new developments which in any way involve me?"

Her prompt refusal to be put on the defensive, and the audacity with which she carried the attack into his territory at once aroused in him the mixture of unwilling admiration and wary antagonism which he always felt upon these occasions.

He began his soundless scales upon the table — one, two, three, four, five — crossed his thumb neatly under his fingers, and began again.

"H'm. That's just the point. Muriel, there's evidently something more in this robbery than an ordinary theft. The loss of certain files shows that. Yes," he shifted his attitude, leaning on his elbow now, and eyeing her keenly; "there's something behind it all, and I mean to find out what it is. This matter is going to be sifted to the bottom."

"Is it so important as that?" she asked ingenuously.

Her uncle studied her as she leaned forward in her chair, her elbows on its arm, her long, white hands loosely clasped together. She was a sufficiently striking figure. Her white serge frock was trimmed with a heavy embroidery of the most vivid tints, blue and green and scarlet, and the long string of gold beads which hung about her throat and fell below her waist gave a barbaric touch that emphasized not only the gown, but her own subtle and powerful personality.

If Whitefield had followed his impulse, he would have cried: "My God, I don't dare think how im-

portant! It's almost a matter of life and death with me!"

But after that moment's regard of Muriel, he merely said: "H-m-m," pursing his lips. "Puzzling, rather than important. And puzzles always did interest me; yes. Now, as Dempsey discovered the theft, after the first excitement caused by the shots was over, I naturally questioned the rascal pretty closely myself when the police got through with him. Well," with a slight, menacing smile, "he was mighty close-mouthed at first, but he didn't stay so very long. And I found out some interesting facts, very interesting."

"Yes?" Muriel's attention was still polite, but not absorbed. Her head was thrown back against the chair; her eyelids were almost closed, the narrowest line of dusk emerald showing; her throat was like a column of white marble.

"One fact," continued her uncle, "was that a man called here last night after your aunt and I had left the house, and asked for you. He gave his name as Vernon, and was shown into the library by your orders. Dempsey says that he never saw him before; I had hard work believing the story; still, if Dempsey is not crazy, it is a circumstance which requires considerable explanation from you."

Muriel settled herself more deeply in the chair. She crossed one knee over the other, and rested her finger tips lightly together.

"Dempsey's all right," she said abruptly. "It's perfectly true."

"And the meaning of it?" he drew in his breath ominously.

With annoying deliberation, she opened a small, embroidered bag which hung by her side, and draw-

ing from it the mesh purse which Vernon had returned the night before, handed it to him.

He took it, showing his surprise, and glancing at her doubtfully from under his brows.

"Open it," she said.

He did so, still suspicious that she was playing some trick upon him, and took from it the visiting card, the pendant, and the loose change, and spread them out carefully upon the table.

"Well?"

"I walked down to Brentano's yesterday afternoon to order some books. I also meant to leave my pendant to be repaired; you see, the ring is broken. I lost the purse on the way. The man you speak of found it, and as my name and address were on the card, he returned it last night."

Whitefield showed his teeth slightly in the smile which those who knew him best felt no desire to provoke.

"Perhaps you will explain how you happened to know that he would return it, also his name, and at what hour he would be here? You must have been aware of those facts before you could give your instructions to Dempsey."

Muriel's heart dropped a beat. "We have telephones in the house," she said laconically.

"Why didn't you speak of the loss of your purse when you came home?" He pounded this question at her. "You go out for a walk, lose an expensive gold bag and a valuable pendant, and then saunter home, and never mention the matter either to your Aunt Freda or me? Natural behavior, eh?"

She looked at him with an entire absence of expression in her face, which irritated him more than

any of the baffling tricks she was wont to use in their mutual warfare.

"But then, you see, I am not natural with either you or Aunt Freda."

She waited a moment for him to retaliate: "Whose fault is that?" and embark upon a long argument which would distract his attention from the main issue. But he was not to be drawn aside, and seeing this, she made her explanation before he could accuse her of attempting to evade his questions.

"I've got to remind you again, Uncle William, that we have telephones in the house. Since my mind had been set at rest about my loss, I didn't see any reason for mentioning the matter, and being scolded for my carelessness."

"Bosh!" the word came explosively. "We can quibble all day about how this man came here. You and I can take that up later, and we will, too, young lady. What interests me now is how he took his leave. That is the crux of the whole matter, and that is what must be very fully explained. But first, I will ask just one more question. Why did this mysterious stranger stay so long?"

As lifelong adversaries, each had a certain respect for the other's fighting qualities, and each possessed a good working knowledge of the other's methods of attack and retreat. But although this facilitated, in a measure, the procedure of battle, it never really simplified the essential combat; for each was fully aware that the other possessed reserves which neither so far had found it necessary to draw upon.

Muriel had now begun to realize that this was something more than a mere clash of wills between them. Her uncle plainly suspected that Vernon was impli-

cated in this, for her, inopportune robbery, and he meant to get at the facts underlying the visit of the night before, or there would be trouble. Now, if he succeeded in entangling her in conflicting admissions so that she would be forced to confess not only her action of the day before, but the motives which lay behind it, there were certainly five long years before her of an even more restricted life than this from which she was striving so desperately to escape. This thought nerved her afresh, steadied her. She fenced for time.

"So long?" she asked. "What do you mean by his having stayed so long?"

"Any time over fifteen minutes would be long. Yet Dempsey is certain that he was here over an hour, well over an hour; perhaps two. And oddly enough, Dempsey didn't see him take his leave. Neither did he open the hall door for him."

"I suppose," she returned coolly, "that when he got ready to leave, Dempsey had probably retired to the pantry for a drink. I can not explain it any other way."

Whitefield ran the scales on the table, his eyes following his fingers. This innocent exercise gave him time to conceal his intense irritation, and decide on his next move. Then he leaned back comfortably in his chair, showing that he was in no haste to end the conversation.

"Muriel," he said, in what was meant to be a pleasant, reasonable tone, "you are willful, obstinate, headstrong, and a few other things but you've got the Whitefield brains too, and I'm relying on that fact when I frankly ask your help and coöperation in a difficult matter. You and I might keep up this kind

of talk until kingdom come, and we would get nowhere. Now, to come down to brass tacks; with your looks and that air of yours, not to mention your money," he showed his teeth in a cynical smile, "you can not help attracting a lot of attention. Here, let me present a case for you. In some way you run across a man, who, for certain reasons, you are pretty sure will not meet with the approval of your Aunt Freda or myself; so, perhaps at his suggestion, you invite him to come to your home on an evening when you know we will both be out. But lest this interview should be discovered, you provide a rather plausible excuse." He touched the mesh bag with his fingers. "But, Muriel, in spite of your cleverness, you have practically no knowledge of life, or the ways of the world. That is nothing against you; it's bound to be so at your age, and thank the Lord for it. Isn't it highly probable, then, that you might be a target for unscrupulous persons, say, a group of people who would select an especially attractive man to excite your interest? Why, my dear, that sort of thing is done every day.

"You might meet him a few times, and ask him to come to the house," he went on. "And understand, Muriel, I'm not blaming you in any respect. Great Scott, I haven't forgotten that I was young once myself! Well, he comes, gets the plan of the rooms, a few hints about the habits of the family, the lay of the land generally. That is all these slick fellows need, and," he waved his hand palm outward, "the robbery occurred last night." He was looking at her eagerly from under his brows as he finished.

Muriel laughed as if she were genuinely amused. "You read too many mystery stories late at night,

Uncle William. The clerk at Brentano's told me yesterday that he had half a dozen new ones laid aside for you. Honestly, the circumstances of Mr. Vernon's visit were just as I have told you. I found him interesting, and was sorry when he left." She allowed a pensive expression to grow upon her face. "To a sub-debutante like me, a real man is a rarity. I do not see anything but a few college kids, and some of Aunt Freda's tame cats; and they all look at me through her eyes."

Whitefield succumbed to the inevitable, and shifted his point of attack very neatly.

"Well, it looks as if my theory was all astray," he conceded good-humoredly. "I guess you're right about the mystery stories. This affair last night has made me suspicious of everything and everybody." He shrugged his shoulders, deliberately lighted a cigar, and picking up a newspaper, glanced over it.

"So your new acquaintance was interesting?" His tone was carefully casual. "I have known several Vernons. I wonder if I have ever met him. Was he a fellow who has been living on the other side for a number of years, tall, good-looking, with a Van Dyck beard, and a taking smile, a very taking smile." It was a thumb-nail sketch of the Ashe Colvin he had known fifteen years before.

Muriel laughed. "You're away off, Uncle William. Mr. Vernon isn't at all the 'Arsene Lupin' you are trying to picture."

Whitefield joined in her laughter, but his eyes were baffled. He shifted his ground again.

"Heigho! How time flies." His tone was ruminative. "Do you know, Muriel, I'm just beginning to realize that you are grown up? It's possible

that Freda and I, in our anxiety to guard you against certain dangers which threatened you, have hedged you about with too much care. I — ”

He stopped as there was a hasty knock on the door, immediately followed by the entrance of Mrs. Whitefield. She was in street costume, evidently just ready to go out. She threw back a lace veil from her hat, but it fell again, half-concealing her face which was pale and worried. There were small, unbecoming pouches under her eyes as if she had not slept. Her mouth was compressed and nervous. She swept Muriel with a quick, suspicious glance, and then turned to her husband.

“There’s nothing new, is there?” She looked from one to the other. Her voice trembled a little.

Whitefield shook his head.

“I’m going down town, William,” she continued. “There are some things I want to attend to this morning. I don’t have to bother with those stupid detectives any more, do I?” She watched him anxiously as she asked the question.

“No. Go out and get the air; it will do you good. You look rather seedy this morning,” he replied. “But now that you’re here,” he got up and pushed a chair toward her, “give us just a minute.”

She hesitated a second; then sat down impatiently on the edge of the chair. She was a woman with the air of beauty, an asset almost as great as beauty itself, and often more convincing; but the positive quality was there also, a beauty pensive and Madonna-like, of the type most appealing to the heart of man.

But the zenith of that loveliness had passed. In spite of her eternal vigilance, her figure was becoming a thought too opulent, and upon her face the years

were writing their inexorable and merciless record, implacably revealing certain secrets of temperament which youth had successfully masked. Hers was a delicate, oval face, with large, full, brown eyes, a small, beautiful mouth, pale russet hair with the sheen of satin, and a skin which had many times been likened to a white rose petal.

Muriel scrutinized her thoughtfully. She did not remember ever having seen her aunt so affected by anything as this robbery.

"Freda," Whitefield spoke with a suave geniality that his wife thoroughly understood, "I'm afraid that you and I haven't noticed that Muriel is out of pinafores. She has a feeling that we have been treating her a little too much — How was it, you expressed it, Muriel? — as a sub-debutante. Ha-ha!"

His wife lifted the thin, arched line of her brows. "Muriel can usually find something to fuss about, if she tries," she commented.

"What I want is soon stated," broke in Muriel, pressing with vigor what she knew to be an advantage. "I don't want any more paid spies — you can call them Aunt Freda's social secretaries, or my companions, or anything else you please — tagging around after me. I want to buy my own clothes, and not wear 'junior misses' things which a girl of fourteen would decline to be seen in. I want to choose my own friends, too. All I ask is just about the same amount of freedom that any girl of my age is entitled to."

"I don't see any reason why your request shouldn't be granted." Whitefield shot a quick glance of significance toward his wife. "But all that talk of paid spies is very foolish, my dear. As your guardians, your Cousin Samuel and myself have recognized that

there were certain dangerous influences which might possibly attempt to reach you; but I think, as you say, that you are now old enough and discreet enough to be entrusted with a little more liberty."

"Thanks," said Muriel, as she rose with alacrity, and started for the door, giving him no time to reconsider. Outside, in the hallway, she indulged in a triumphant foxtrot, castanetting her fingers joyously, but without sound. She showed all her white teeth in a gleam of intense amusement.

"The old fool!" she laughed. "He thinks I'll be meeting 'Arsene Lupin' around the corner before the day's over, and he'll have some one on the job. Nothing doing, Uncle William!" Again she soundlessly castanetted her fingers. "Nothing doing!"

CHAPTER VI

So ABRUPT was Muriel's departure, that Whitefield's lips were framing to form another sentence as she snapped him off with her swift acceptance of his terms, and whisked out of the room.

He sat gazing a moment at the door as it closed upon her, his eyes slightly narrowing. Then he turned to see Freda rising to follow in the wake of his niece.

It was her manifest impulse to hurry away. She seemed anxious to avoid a direct interview with him; also she showed difficulty in meeting the glance he bent upon her. She cast down her eyes, and fumbled with the fastening of one of her gloves, as she waited for him to speak.

Whitefield, however, failed to observe her nervousness. He was absorbed in other and weightier considerations.

"Well, Muriel rather thinks she got me that time. And so, I suppose, do you?" He waited a moment, as if expecting her to ask an explanation.

"It does seem a good deal of leeway to give a girl of that age," she returned indifferently; "especially such a girl as Muriel. However, if you have made up your mind to indulge her in —"

"Oh, there's a method in my madness." He nodded emphatically. "I am throwing out a sprat to catch a herring. I propose to find out who the man is, who was here to see her last night."

"Didn't she tell you?"

"Not she. A very clever little fairy story was all I got out of her; very clever, but it didn't pull the wool over my eyes. So now I am going on the theory that if you give a thief enough rope, he will hang himself.

"Freda," he rose and began to walk up and down the floor, "there is a good deal more than appears on the surface. It is evidently a pretty big plot of some kind, and Muriel's been used as a cat's paw." He stopped, and glowered at the floor. "Do you happen to know anything of Ashe Colvin's whereabouts?"

"Ashe Colvin?" Her hand fluttered to her breast; her pallor deepened perceptibly. "I have not heard of him for years. He went abroad, didn't he? Certainly, you do not suspect him?"

"The Colvin papers were taken," he answered moodily.

"So were my —" She caught herself quickly. "So were my rings. So was the money. So was that forged check of Fletcher Hempstead's."

"Ye-es." He scowled. "We can dismiss the rings and the money, I guess; they were just lagniappe." He did not see her lift her brows and bite deep on her lower lip. "What was really wanted out of that safe was the Colvin package and Fletcher Hempstead's check. Now what's the connection? Are those two working together? Fletcher, with that check out of the way, can demand an accounting. Colvin, with those proofs back in his hands, can — Good Lord, what can't he do?"

"But didn't you say last night that you believed the legislative investigating commission must be back of it?"

"Well, maybe it is. Maybe it's some snooping, yellow newspaper trying to cause me trouble. I'm looking out for all the possibilities. I can muzzle a newspaper, or the legislative commission; but the other contingency worries me.

"This Vernon — He is the fellow who was here last night to see Muriel; probably changed his name by this time — he's the one clue I have. He is the key to the whole situation, and I've got to get hold of him. The question is, then: Will he meet Muriel again, or will he not? I rather think he will; Muriel's got a lot of money."

He touched the buzzer on his desk, and Babcock, the efficient, appeared.

"Everett," he said, "I have a rather delicate commission which I am going to entrust to you, and I want it carried through without any hitch. During the next few days I must have a complete record of all of Miss Fletcher's movements, where she goes, what she does, whom she meets — especially whom she meets. Put an expert man on the job, and have a report ready for me every evening."

"That is all, sir?" Babcock bowed, slipped his notebook into his pocket, and retired.

Whitefield resumed his walk up and down the floor. "Why don't the police round up that damned cracksmen," he grumbled, "this 'Hornet' they talk so much about? He knows who employed him, and I guess, if he gets money enough, he'll open his mouth. He ought to be easy enough to find, too. They say he has a scar on his face."

Freda rose with a startled gleam on her face. "A scar?" she gasped. "A scar? Why — ! Why, William, do you remember Fletcher?"

He stared back at her. The color faded from his face. His jaw dropped.

At the moment that Whitefield and his wife were discussing the circumstances of the robbery, Colvin was turning away from the Hornet's empty flat. He was profoundly depressed. He felt that his one hope, a vague idea of rehabilitating himself, had vanished. A sense of being baffled and defeated remained with him as he walked slowly homeward. The sights and sounds in the streets proved more or less diverting, but once he had gained the solitude of his room, he sank, deeper than ever, into the old apathy and hopelessness.

From this condition he was presently roused by the whirr of the telephone bell, but the tinkle which most persons find so aggravating sent a thrill of excitement through his nerves. It was Muriel Fletcher, and even in the commonplace and conventional "hello" he noticed a new quality in her voice, half laughing, half triumphant.

"I hope you won't feel frightened," she said, "but I think all of Uncle William's suspicions are fastened on you. I had a long session with him this morning; he saw that I didn't intend to confide in him, and he offered me the freedom of a real girl. Uncle William doesn't offer something for nothing. You're the prize. By the way, I am telephoning outside, in a booth in a drug store; so it's all right."

"Well, if he's given you more freedom, that's something gained, isn't it?"

"It's a world," she laughed back, "only there are more worlds to conquer. But now that I am allowed my own playmates, will you play with me?"

As she said the last words her voice fell to a gayer,

softer tone, full of a faint, husky sweetness, and Colvin became for the moment thrillingly aware that a great part of her magnetism lay in her speech.

"Suppose Uncle William incarcerates me; there might be unpleasant consequences for you."

"Bah!" It was as if she mentally snapped her fingers. "The Whitefields are all born gamblers; we take the long chance, every time. Uncle William is taking it on me now."

Colvin hesitated a second. Then he threw himself on her mercy. He felt his cheek grow red, and he stammered a little as he spoke.

"I want very much to see you." His tone left no doubt of his sincerity. "But I've lived out of the world so long that I am not familiar with the customs of the country to-day. Is it all right for me to ask you to take luncheon with me, or perhaps tea?"

"Not if I were still a 'sub-deb,'" she said, "but under the present circumstances, tea is perfectly all right."

"To-day?" came quickly back over the wire.

"Not to-day nor to-morrow," she answered regretfully. "I won't have a minute before Friday."

She had calculated quickly that by Friday a new frock which she had ordered might possibly be ready.

"Friday afternoon, then," he replied, "and where?"

"Oh, Sherry's, I suppose, at five. Good-by."

Colvin turned from the telephone, his spirits rising, and his disappointment at not seeing her at once greatly mitigated by the fact that before Friday he should be able properly to prepare for the event. He had, in his day, been one of the makers of manners, but during his exile tailors and haberdashers had

ceased to play any part in his scheme of existence. He had indifferently worn the garments which remained of what had once been a vast wardrobe, nor thought of replenishing it. But to return, even temporarily, to a world which he had foresworn, and to explore it with a girl like Muriel, demanded a renovation, not only of ideas, but of appearance. He decided that some of the builders of good clothes who had been authorities in his days must still be important. He had the true New Yorker's respect for appearances; that desire adequately to dress whatever part one may be playing. He looked up several addresses in the telephone directory, and then went out to see about the matter.

But it was not only because it gave him more time to select a wardrobe that he was glad Muriel had named Friday; it also gave him more time to adjust his mind to the events in which he found himself plunged, and to consider the immediate future.

During the next few days he endeavored to put himself more and more in touch with the environment he had once so passionately renounced, and which had, in retrospect, been so abhorrent to him that in years he had not dared to think of it. He went to the theatres once or twice; dined in the hotels which had been put up since his day, and studied with wonder the newer aspects of a city which continually transformed and renewed itself, changing its business and social districts with all the caprice which a spoiled whimsical woman shows in discarding old gowns for fresh ones.

All this, however, was in the way of diversion. He never for a moment ceased his vigilant search for the Hornet, fruitless though it was. But on Thursday

noon, as he was strolling home to his lodgings, he noticed a little ahead of him a man who had stopped to light a cigarette, but who was plainly without a match. He went through all his pockets vainly, and then, as Colvin was about to pass him, stepped up to the latter and asked for a light. Colvin handed him his match-box.

"Thanks," said the man as he gave it back, and then added quietly and with scarcely a movement of the lips, "Johnson will be at The Dome Monday evening. Wants you to take dinner with him early. Be careful; they're after him pretty close since the Whitefield affair."

He moved on before Colvin could reply. But Ashe did not mind that; he walked with a light step. A little good news, the sort of news one wants to hear, always goes to one's feet as well as to one's head. He wondered if he were crazy in believing that the Hornet would not have risked seeing him unless he had some information which would be of interest to him. Anyway, it was plausible to believe so, but he determined to waste no time in conjecture. He did not care about chancing many more disappointments; therefore, the better to ignore the matter, he tried resolutely to turn his attention into other channels.

The idea had come to him several times of leaving his present quarters, but his mind had slanted off of it, refusing to contemplate so definite a move. In fact, in spite of his efforts to clarify his thoughts, everything seemed inchoate; events had followed events with a rapidity which had left him a little stunned, and his course of action for the future depended much on what the Hornet might have to tell him.

It was a good sporting bet that the Hornet had

opened the safe and taken the jewels, but it was just one chance in a million that the papers which had also been removed related to him. When he got this far in his speculation, he always stopped himself and tried to think of something far remote from these absorbing personal matters which only led into a blind alley. Yet now the question of moving assumed a different aspect.

If, as Muriel said, Whitefield suspected him, it would probably be no time at all before the police would ferret him out, and then for days, weeks perhaps, he would be shadowed. That would mean a blocking of all his plans. Under such circumstances, it would be impossible for him to see either Muriel or the Hornet, for their sakes as well as his own.

Therefore it seemed expedient for him immediately to move. So he packed up his belongings, leaving his furniture, however, and holding the rooms, and removed at once to a quiet up-town hotel on one of the side streets, communicating to no one, except to Muriel, whom he informed by telephone, his present address.

To his landlady he merely explained that he would be away for a time. He regarded it as a purely temporary departure. As for other plans, they were for future consideration: in the present there was afternoon tea with Muriel.

And Friday dawned. A light rain had fallen during the night, and the atmosphere had a clear shining, a freshly washed and inspiring radiance. The air was sparkling as wine, the sky was the dome of a thousand sapphires, the sunlight a shimmering flood.

Something of the joy of the day touched Colvin's spirit as he hurried towards Sherry's twenty minutes

before the hour. The early autumn twilight was beginning to draw violet veils over the sparkle of the afternoon. Within that shrine of dinners forgotten and dinners anticipated, women were gathering, stunning women groomed like shining race horses, gayly greeting the good-looking men who awaited them.

Five o'clock. The favorite hour of flirtation in New York. The shadows growing grayer and deeper without, within the little table in a remote corner with its vase of red roses, its dim, pink-shaded lights. The music of the moment sighs through the rooms, the fragrance of tea fills the air. An exquisite hour! Very, very far away is the commonplace home atmosphere. Is it any wonder that women love it, this little period of relaxation when the cares of the day may be definitely cast aside, and it is not yet time to put on the silken spangled harness of the evening, to call the duty smile to the lips, the duty sparkle to the eyes, and "how to the world's low footlights."

The moments passed. It was now well past five. Colvin began to feel disconsolate. He had been looking forward so eagerly to seeing her again, and now it looked as if she were not coming at all.

And then she came, a little breathless as if she had hurried greatly. How vital, how electric she was! Not so baffled and rebellious as when he had seen her last, but more conquering than ever. Involuntarily a sharp sigh arose to his lips. She seemed to strike his heart like a wave of the sea of life; the light became warmer, more glowing, the music infinitely sweeter.

And over her face too there passed a faintly startled expression. It was little more than a week since, acting upon an impulse, a blind faith, she had

taken an enormous chance with destiny, and given her purse and her secret to a shabby, sad-looking man in the street; a man with something about him ghost-like and remote, as if he had wandered from some dim land of shades. And now he was coming toward her, the same, yes, but with a different air, moving in a different atmosphere, temporarily at least, an easy denizen of the great world. Only his eyes revealed that he still lingered on the border of some cloudy hinterland.

"I know I'm dreadfully late!" she exclaimed, "but I have just managed to lose my new chaperon. It has been a great chase," as they moved toward the door of the tea-room, "I have been leading the poor soul — it's a man you know — such a dance since about three o'clock. He was very nimble, but I finally lured him to my dressmaker's; there I vanished into one of the fitting-rooms which has two doors, made my way to the back of the building, and came out on another street."

"Do you mean that you are being watched?" he said in a shocked tone. "Oh, I'm afraid that is all my fault."

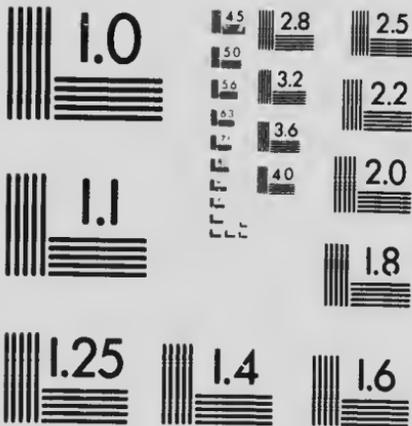
"Don't bother about it," she laughed. "I'm enjoying it." She seated herself at the little table which he had secured in a secluded nook. "I feel really out in the rush of things at last. Oh, tea? Oolong please, and orange marmalade sandwiches." She threw back her furs and opened her coat. "I've had tea with what Uncle William calls my young companions, and with Aunt Freda and Ollie Darnton or some other of her tiresome men, but never with a man of my own before."

He was unused to the extreme candor of the mod-



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ern young woman, license our grandmothers would have called it, but to him, crushed by circumstances, deadened by the undeviating routine of apathetic and monotonous years, it was as stimulating as heady wine; and more than anything else the little tingling shock which her audacity gave him made him feel at one with his old self.

"Oolong tea and orange marmalade sandwiches," he said to the waiter, while a tinge of red showed under the skin of his cheek. Then he leaned across the table, no longer the ghost, the shell of a man, but the old Colvin again, with life and fortune at high tide. His gray eyes were full of laughter and emotion, and on his lips was the old smile, tender, possessive, ardent, which had never failed to strike a responsive chord in the heart of the woman on whom it was bestowed.

"Am I—that?" He had dropped his voice almost to a whisper; then, as her astonished, almost frightened eyes met his, "your man?"

A little white flash went over her face as she realized that he had captured her unmeant, careless speech, and colored it with the rose hue of a romantic significance. It was her first encounter with passion. There was a brief struggle with the conventional and conventual training of years, the shyness of girlhood, and then she followed her instinct with a glorious intrepidity, an uncalculating courage, which stirred his blood to a mad beating. Her green, dusky eyes gleamed through their narrowed lids, and there was fire in them. Her red mouth was no longer sullen, but bewilderingly sweet; her smile held the lure of the world's desire.

The moment revealed more to each of them than a thousand years of speech, and then the curtain, lifted long enough for both to gain a flash of the ancient

wisdom, fell again. Training and convention asserted themselves.

Muriel, looking down, rearranged her fork and spoon. They sipped their tea. She praised its flavor. She was the intelligent, worldly-wise, sexless, twentieth-century young woman, sedulously ignoring all traces of beautiful and real emotion. She was able to look at him again, even to make her glances appraising. Coolly she noted the classic shape of his head, the brown hair with the gray above the ears and on the temples, his high-bred features, the grace and distinction of his figure. Her pulses controlled, she had will enough for anything. She appeared, as she forced herself to this detached scrutiny, to be turning over something in her mind. Finally she decided to voice it, and when she spoke, it was with even more than her customary abruptness.

"Mr. Vernon," she said, "just in the little time I've known you, I've told you more about myself than I have ever told any one in the world. Don't you think it's about time we talked a little of you?"

He leaned his elbow on the table, his cheek on his hand. His face fell into the old lines, his mouth drooped again. His eyes became vague and sad as they followed the smoke wreaths of his cigarette; his years seemed as profitless and drifting.

"That is only fair," he said, but the life and interest had gone out of his voice. "Perhaps you can make it easier to tell you anything you wish to know if you ask me some questions."

"Any questions I want to ask?" quickly.

"I can't imagine any you could want to ask," he smiled, but unhappily.

"Naturally," she was looking at him with those

penetrating, Whitefield eyes of hers, "I've thought a lot about you since we met. This is my first real adventure. But it is all so contradictory. There is so much that I do not understand and can not piece together."

He lifted his eyebrows.

"You would be a clairvoyant if you could."

"Anybody can see that you've had all kinds of things in your life," she mused. "Mr. Vernon," with one of her quick changes to impetuous speech, "you keep my imagination working over time. I am thinking of you constantly." Her tone was petulant. "You seem to me like a man I've read about, one of those French abbés of the seventeenth century who spent their lives at court and in drawing-rooms, pulling wires and flirting with pretty women, and then suddenly left it all and went off to the new world to be missionaries to the Indians."

He looked at her, both amazed and amused at the analogy.

"Do not get any romantic ideas about me in your head," he said. "I just quit, dropped out, deserted from the big army of workers."

"What made you desert?" She was like some cool, competent young surgeon probing a wound, not because she found it pleasant, but because it was necessary; and he bore the probing for that reason.

"I thought at the time it was circumstances," his voice was depressed. "I have come to the conclusion since that it was a streak of yellow in me. You see, circumstances gave me more than one knock-out blow, but there was one in particular which seemed to deprive me, not only of the will, but even of the desire to come back."

He drank his tea, and smiled at her across the cup.

"Miss Fletcher, I am not even a visitor from the night's Plutonian shore. There is something virile and positive in hell, but I am just a kind of a dim shade from Purgatory, stealing a little while to look in a moment upon a world I once cared a lot about."

She continued to gaze at him in that abstracted way as if he were more a problem she were trying to solve than a man who interested her.

"I don't know much," she said, "but I am sure of one thing. Mr. Vernon, you can't stay outside it all; you've got to come back."

He felt the current of her dynamic resolution; it seemed to flow to him from her in a flood of strength and confidence. The words, as she said them, were like an electric shock. Come back! As he sat there with her, it almost seemed possible. She was as affirmative as sunlight. The tide of shadow which engulfed him ebbed, until it seemed to him that he stood free of it, and then — its stealthy lapping began again.

"Can a man ever really come back?" he asked moodily, his eyes on the table, his cheek on his hand.

"It's a big, splendid world, and there are big, splendid things to do in it, and it's men like you who ought to put their shoulders under it, and push it along. You're good, you're sincere. Oh, yes, you are. I trusted you the minute I saw you, and even that night, when everything seemed to point to you as the guilty person, I never doubted you."

"Ah, that brings me back more than anything else could do," he murmured with profound gratitude. "You can not imagine what that means to me. Since I've begun to be alive again, I've been feeling, realiz-

ing something intensely; I seem to get something from the air. At first I thought it was just the newness of everything that made me think that things were different; but I've been increasingly conscious that that's not so. The whole mental outlook of the world has shifted and altered. It is this war! It has given the world a new impulse, a new faith. Our shallow scepticisms and cynicisms are done for. Faith in the essential things, ourselves unfettered by traditions, that is one of them. Oh!" it was a low, exceeding bitter cry, "you ask me to come back! How can I, when every avenue is closed, every opportunity is barred? Oh, if I were only not on the scrap heap!"

"How dare you say that!" Her voice challenged all the manhood of him. She looked straight at him; no subtle narrowing of the lids now; no softening nor sympathy in her eyes; he could not have borne it if there had been.

For him the barriers were down at last, the proud reserves of tradition and training, an armor which encased him, hardened by suffering, melted in the warmth of her understanding.

"That afternoon," he said brokenly, "that afternoon when I met you, you trusted me, you asked me to do something for you. It restored me to life; I was a man again. I wanted to plan, to think, to fight and lose, maybe, but to make a fight of it, and that desire, that longing, comes back to me when I am with you. Then I am young again. The fifteen years I spent in hell are gone like smoke, but alone—Muriel, Muriel, do you realize what a part habit plays in our lives? I have fifteen years behind me of death, of apathy, of indifference and negation, and it's like a visible thing now, a shadow always about me. It

holds me in its power, and I can't escape; I can't shake off its influence."

She stretched her strong, warm young hand across the table and caught his.

"No shadow can touch the sunshine," she said, "and I'm going to stand in the sunshine till the Day of Judgment if necessary, waiting for you, for you've got to come back."

CHAPTER VII

THE early night of autumn had already fallen when Colvin walked down from his hotel to The Dome. His mind was naturally centered on his coming interview with the "Hornet," and yet he could not be wholly insensible to the picturesque quality of the region through which his way took him.

A bit of old New York, which Colvin had always loved, and which, in spite of its soaring, modern apartment houses, still retains its individuality. In the center of the square, the garden behind its high, iron fence preserves its peaceful and charming seclusion; and in the white flare of the electric lights, its flowers, its old trees, its plashing fountain, dream as placidly as in the time when the "Sage of Gramercy" looked down from his study windows upon the lamp-lighted enclosure.

A few blocks farther on is The Dome, and as Colvin entered the restaurant, he saw that the tables were rapidly filling. There was the blare of an orchestra in his ears, a hazy curtain of blue smoke before his eyes. At the far end of the long, oak-panelled hall, a famous Gypsy violinist balanced himself on the edge of his platform. Hunched over his violin, and keeping his whole body in rhythmic time to the music, he bent, and swayed, and bobbed, and bowed, the broad grin of a delighted barbarian on his face.

Ashe moved slowly down the room, but as he glanced

about among the diners, he saw no one who in the least resembled the "Hornet." About the middle of the hall and down two or three steps was another long room lying at right angles to the first. He stepped into it; here the tables were more sparsely filled, but still he looked in vain.

He had about decided to sit down and await the "Hornet's" coming, when he heard some one say: "Hello, Vernon."

He turned sharply to see a man sitting at a small, round table just behind him and looking at him amusedly. While Ashe stared in the effort to place him, the other pulled back a chair at his side and motioned Colvin to sit down. Ashe did so, still staring. It was difficult for him to believe that this was really the "Hornet."

"Stop stamping me so hard, or you'll attract attention," growled his companion, a tall, quiet looking person who wore glasses and a dark moustache. "Here, study the card instead, and I'll talk."

Colvin allowed his eyes to rest on the menu, but his pulses were bounding. It must be as he had suspected. The "Hornet" was badly "wanted." Else he would never have gone to such pains to conceal his identity.

"Where did you leave your scar?" Ashe could not help asking.

"It's puttied up and painted, and I'm only hoping my moustache won't fall off in my soup."

"Can they do a job like that?" Colvin breathed in wonder, permitting himself another swift glance at the other's cheek.

"'They' can do anything these days, if they're paid for it. Believe me."

"But, Johnson —"

There was a sudden, swift change in the lounging, commonplace man. He was a slack wire instantaneously taut, a steel spring automatically coiled for action.

"No names here," he snapped. "Don't forget again."

The cold menace of that voice would have made the most hardened shiver. Colvin recalled that no matter how mild and friendly a hornet might appear, it was yet fashioned to sting.

"I understand," he agreed. "But weren't you a little reckless, eh, picking out so well patronized a place as this for our meeting?"

The "Hornet" had relaxed again. "Safe as the church which it resembles. I keep away from Broadway, and also from the cheap and nasty haunts of my fellow laborers in the vineyard."

Ashe smiled. "Good reasoning, no doubt. You've surely done it remarkably well. You, as you sit there, are one of ten thousand respectable, middle-aged men, employed from eight in the morning until six in the evening. You look as if your only dissipation was a newspaper, a glass of beer, a cigar, and maybe a game of pinochle."

"My dissipations are more exciting than that," chuckled the other. He was in high good humor. "It's one to see you to-night, old man. I feel like talking to some one who speaks my language."

The waiter appeared with the excellent bourgeois dinner they had ordered, and the two spoke of casual topics while he served it. But Ashe was wondering every moment what lead he could make that would induce the "Hornet" to discuss the Whitefield rob-

bery; for the latter appeared to be in a lazily reflective and philosophical mood.

"It's not bad here," he said, surveying the black, oak walls with the frieze of painting depicting interesting adventures in the life of a hero of romantic verse; "especially if you know how to choose your food. But that's true of most places."

"I'm admiring your nerve," broke in Colvin genuinely enough, but still with the idea of leading up to the essential topic. "To come right out into the open like this. Your disguise is great to my unsophisticated eyes, but there are quantities of other eyes looking out for you which are not unsophisticated. You can't alter your height, nor the way you carry your shoulders, nor your walk, for instance."

The "Hornet" laughed again, evidently pleased. "Oh, can't I?" he said. "I'll bet that your first impression of me this evening was that I was considerably stouter than the man you were looking for, and, if you had squinted twice, you would have seen that my shoulders are higher and more sloping than his. As for my walk, I have half a dozen. I couldn't have risen to eminence in my profession unless I had long ago mastered those little stunts."

Ashe was feeling vastly entertained. This man had the faculty of compelling interest, and Colvin, with Muriel in mind, was studying him closely to see if there were any points of similarity between him and his young cousin.

In a way: yes. Hempstead — for he never doubted that Alf. Johnson, alias "The Hornet," and Fletcher Hempstead were one — and Muriel had the same quality of personal magnetism. They might each repel as strongly as they would attract, but neither could be

overlooked. The voice of authority meant nothing to either of them. They made their own laws, and abided by them when it suited them to do so. And there was the slightest of physical resemblances, also, a mere suggestion. It lay more in the lift of the head and the long slant of the eyes than in any actual likeness.

"Sorry, if I seem inquisitive," said Colvin; "and you'll know how to put me in my place if I am. But your speaking of your profession gives me an opening. My own position, as one like yourself, outside of the big game, makes it possible for me to ask you the question. Why should a man like you have undertaken a profession like yours?"

The other sipped his beer, and smiled with a sort of saturnine mellowness.

"What do you mean by a man like me?" he asked.

"Oh, obvious birth, education, all that sort of thing."

The "Hornet," still smiling, struck a match on the box, and leisurely lighted a fresh cigar.

"I lay it all up to heredity," he mused. "My blood's to blame for it. We're an uncurbed lot, we —" He broke off on the brink of the name. "Did you ever consider, Vernon, that brains in themselves are not dangerous; it's the temperament that goes with them. Temperament will boss the brain every time. Well, we — the Smiths, say" — he chuckled again — "have all got more will, imagination, and recklessness than is convenient. Scramble the combination, and you get deviltry. All this talk of a criminal instinct, unless in the case of an absolute defective, is rot. I made my choice a little too early in life, flung myself out of what you call the 'Big Game' in a huff — a

boy's dream of being the King of the Outlaws. Too much will and imagination, you see.

"Now, my uncle," he went on, "a superdevil, has a pinch less will and several grains less imagination; and he is a great financier and politician."

"Just so," agreed Colvin drily.

The "Hornet" glanced sharply at his companion as if a new thought had struck him.

"I wonder if by any chance you know who I am?" he probed.

"By the merest of chances, and an odd one at that, I do."

Meeting the dark, intent gaze bent upon him, he scribbled the name across an edge of the menu card, and passed it across the table.

The other nodded, as he tore off the penciled line, and shredded it between his fingers.

"Well, that simplifies things, at any rate. I'd like to know how you found it out — there aren't many people wise to it — but your eye defies me to ask you the question.

"Ah, Vernon," he leaned back, sipping his beer, and philosophizing again to the annoyance of his impatient companion. Colvin was on tenterhooks to hear the "Hornet's" version of the robbery; but he knew the man was given to sudden transitions of mood, and if hurried too much, might refuse to discuss the subject at all. So he dared not interrupt.

"Ah, Vernon," repeated the "Hornet," surveying the rings on his beer mug with lazy satisfaction, "luck's an odd thing. There are times when, do what we will, the tide'll go out on us, taking every blessed thing we've got, and leaving us with nothing but bare, dry sand in sight. And then all at once that blasted

tide turns, and we're overwhelmed, carried into port without the least effort on our part. The fact is, Life's feminine. Just because we can't understand her, she fascinates us. She's the siren that will take our last cent if we are starving. She grabs everything, and gives nothing. But once in a while, once in a coon's age, and a blue moon, she's in the humor to melt. And, God! How sweet she is. How she loves us. How she smooths our rough and rotten path.

"The other night, for instance"—Colvin drew a long breath here. Surely, he could be referring to but one night—"she decided that she'd love me a little, and she threw a big opportunity my way. You understand me, I imagine. I had been watching and waiting for it a long time. Well, it came. Everything went smooth as glass—with one exception. And a damned unfortunate one, too, for me, considering some plans I had in view." His whole face darkened.

"Oh, well," he flicked the ash from his cigar, "no man ever yet 'took a chance' for a good woman. It's the hussies, the women who look at us with a maddening devil in their eyes—Satan bless 'em!" smiling his cynical, distorted smile. "So, here's to you, Life, you Jezebel!"

"Not Jezebel." Colvin set down his glass. "If you ever went to Sunday school, you will remember that Jezebel played the game like a man and a clever politician, and got thrown to the dogs for it. What you mean is: Here's to you, Life, you Delilah!"

"Oh, I was well drilled in the Scriptures in my early days," grinned the "Hornet." "Delilah? Sure, I know the lady. She laid for her man, made the poor

boob think she loved him, got all his secrets, cut his hair, and then sold him out to the Philistines."

"Yes; and she's been doing it ever since." Colvin's tone was as bitter as his smile.

The "Hornet" called the waiter and ordered more beer. The room echoed with the sound of clapping hands. The diners were vociferously applauding the Gypsy's passionately sentimental rendition of "The Rosary."

"I have the faculty of never forgetting a name once heard, or a face once seen." The "Hornet" bent a half-mocking, half-curious glance on the man who sat beside him. "Years ago, when Ashe Colvin was one of New York's picturesque figures, I saw him." He paused a moment, but Ashe never stirred. "Well, ever since that night when you found me flattened against the wall in your doorway, and took me up to your room, I've known that you were he."

Still Colvin made no sign.

"A life-saver you were that night, sure," the "Hornet" went on. "They'd have caught me with the goods, and for the first time, too. It wasn't exactly up to me to ask you any questions; but I knew you right away, and I remembered how you had made your fade-out, and how the papers were full of it. By Jove, at the time it all happened, I believed that my dear Uncle William was at the bottom of it. That's right, isn't it? Frame-up, eh?" He had leaned his elbows on the table, his piercing, Whitefield eyes on Colvin.

Ashe nodded, but without looking up. He was building a log cabin of matches on the tablecloth, and apparently giving his entire attention to the elaborate structure.

"Well, when I was looking over William's safe the other night, chiefly for something concerning only myself, 'a mere scrap of paper'—and, by George, I got it, too;" the "Hornet" gave his deep, throaty, sardonic chuckle, "I saw a neatly docketed package with 'Colvin papers' written on it. Sit down!" He gripped Ashe's arm with his long, slender, uncannily efficient fingers. "Shut up! I'll do the talking."

Colvin obeyed him. Slowly his whole tense figure relaxed. He drew one deep breath, and lifted his eyes—searchlights of hope—to the "Hornet."

"Do you mean it?" he stammered. "Do you mean it? Then where are they?" His jaws were set like a trap. "Let's get out of here." He started to rise.

"This is a good, safe place for the present." Again the other's steel-like touch pressed him back into his chair. "You listen, son, and sit tight if you want to hear the rest. I took those papers with the full intention of turning them over to you; but when the accident happened outside—you know—it was a case of my getting to cover in a hurry. I had too much on me that was of value to run any risks." There was a deep, secret sparkle in his eyes. "So I sent the package to Retta with a note telling her to give it to a friend of mine who would take care of it for me, while she made a get-away.

"You see," he explained, "I wanted to throw the 'dicks' off the scent, while I attended to the stones, and I knew that they would follow her. She left for Charleston that night, I am told, and has since sailed for Honduras, with them trailing her, of course. But what I can't figure out is what she's done with that package. She didn't give it to—well, my friend."

Colvin gave an inarticulate exclamation of disap-

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He gripped Ashe's arm with his long, slender, uncannily efficient fingers. *Page 90.*

pointment. His log cabin lay in ruins, a heap of scattered matches over the table. Mechanically he began sorting them into orderly rows.

"Oh, don't be downhearted," encouraged the "Hornet." "The package isn't lost."

Ashe laughed drearily. "So far as I can see, it might as well be. Whitefield's reward will probably draw those papers right back to where they came from."

"And me to reckon with?" Something in the grating incredulity of the voice made Colvin turn, and he was struck more forcibly than ever, in this instance consolingly so, by the malevolent power, the sinister dominance of this quiet, inconspicuous person at his elbow.

"The devil of it is that I can't get in touch with Retta to find out what she's done with them." The "Hornet" was plainly annoyed. "She won't attempt to communicate with me until they stop waiting for me to join her. She'll let them watch for a while, and then she'll slip through their fingers, and lose herself. And it won't be until then that she will try to reach me. Even then it won't be directly; the word will come through some one else."

There was a little lightening of the cloud on Colvin's face. "You have done something for me I will never forget, never," he said. "But have you no idea at all where that package may be. It means everything on God's earth to me to get it."

The "Hornet" slowly shook his head, frowning perplexedly. "It gets me," he said. "I've had some inquiries made, but there's nothing come of them. However, I'll get down to it myself in a day or so: I've been pretty busy on some mighty delicate and

important work." He grinned with a sort of gloating and reminiscent satisfaction. "Oh, you Uncle William!" His wicked chuckle rattled in his throat. "I cast my net, and pulled in everything in sight. I could turn virtuous and stay so on what I took from Uncle's strong box. Strong box?" he scoffed. "There ain't no such animal."

Ashe looked at him with a surprise that was three parts scorn. "Good Lord, man!" he exclaimed involuntarily. "Are you gloating this way over a few rings and brooches?"

"Hell!" The "Hornet" deeply outscorned him. "Why, son," he looked cautiously around him, and then murmured so low that Colvin barely heard him. "I got the sapphires!"

"You got —?" Ashe looked at him speechlessly and then faintly raised his brows.

A great, sagging disappointment lay like a weight about his heart. Delusions! Delusions of a drug-wrecked brain. The Colvin papers and the sapphires

And yet some papers had undoubtedly been taken from the safe; and what were they, that Whitefield had shown such anxiety to recover them? But the sapphires? Incredible.

Ah, these brilliant, iridescent thought-bubbles of a morphia-maniac. They had floated deceptively for a moment before Colvin's eager vision, and now as he strove to grasp them, they vanished, flinging a splash of cold water in his eyes.

Across his meditations broke the rasping laugh of his companion, and Ashe looked up with irritated impatience.

Hands deep in his pockets, his legs stretched com-

fortably under the table, the "Hornet" was shaking with mirth. His eyes were reading Colvin's mind.

"Don't believe it, eh?"

"How can I?" Ashe asked dully. "So likely that the police and everybody concerned would ignore a loss like that?"

The "Hornet" thrust his face close to Colvin's. It gleamed with a hard triumph.

"They don't know it. My lovely aunt put them in the safe herself about twelve o'clock. I saw her do it." He hugged himself at the recollection. "I told you Life loved me that night, but who ever dreamed she would be so good to me as that?"

"Oh, it's true enough," nodding, as Colvin still stared at him. "For weeks I had been watching one particular mouse-hole. I was tipped off more than two months ago that my aunt's latest lover, Ollie Darnton, had pawned them. He was in an awful hole, and her blue stones pulled him out. He got them back late that afternoon after the banks had closed. I had him shadowed. He gave them to her at a dinner at the Hortons'. She had no place to keep them but in the house. Didn't dare tell William, of course. Well, I knew then that they were my meat. And that wasn't all I wanted, and meant to get, either. The 'scrap of paper'—indisputable evidence of my first transgression. It was outlawed some time ago. but as long as the old devil held it, he could dictate terms in a way. So I got that. Oh, it was all too easy." His face darkened. "And then came that damned accident outside the door. I'd give a farm if it hadn't happened. That's what comes of using unskilled labor."

"You mean you didn't do it?" Colvin asked the quick question.

"My dear fellow, I'm a cracksman, not a butcher. It was this way. I had an outside man, a green hand. He lost his head, and fired at the wrong time. That is the absolute truth. But," he added with a shake of the head, "I will never be able to prove it. They have fastened it on me, and I will have to stand for it.

"And murder is something else, Vernon." He relapsed into sombreness. "It's never outlawed, always hanging over you. I tell you, it's put an awful kink in some plans I was making. And yet," he shifted his position, and apparently cast regrets from him, "there are ways to get around anything on earth."

"Vernon," he said, lighting his third cigar, "as I remarked before, my trade is one that appeals to the romantic and disorderly instincts of youth. I do not suppose a boy ever lived who didn't dream of being a bandit chief. But it's like every other game; it takes a lot of brains to be anything but a piker in it, and even then what do you get? You're hunted from rat-hole to rat-hole, and the rewards are piffling compared to those of big business. You're 'outside,' with all the handicaps that word implies. Now, inside the lines of organized society, the game is every bit as crooked, but the rewards are twice, five times as great. Vernon, I want to get back. I want to play inside the lines. And, if I know anything about human nature, and the thoughts of a man 'when he comes to forty year,' I'll bet my hat that you do, too."

Ashe looked at him strangely. Both "outside!" Both oddly thrown together in life's big shuffle! Both

acted by the same longing, the same determination — to get back, to play inside the lines again!

"I understand. Colvin spoke quietly. "I feel the same way myself. I've got to do it, but—" He passed his hand perplexedly over his forehead.

"Let's pool our interests," said the "Hornet" softly. "Two heads are better than one. Two working together for the same end can travel a mile, where one goes a half. The way I stand is this." He took a pencil from his pocket, and began making lines on the tablecloth. "There's a large fortune waiting for me to claim. Don't tell me that Uncle William hasn't been using the income, and probably the principal all these years. But I never felt like doing anything on account of that forged check he held. It is in my possession now."

"But —?" Ashe looked at him dubiously, and hesitated.

The other caught the meaning of that hesitation immediately. "You mean my police record?" He glanced up from the neat squares and triangles he was drawing on the table cover. "Son, I haven't any — no rogues' gallery portraits, no measurements, no thumb imprints. For years I have been a legend to the Detective Bureau. They haven't got a thing on me. They know my work, but not me. Who can tell, though, how long luck like that will hold?" There was a fatalistic expression on his haggard face. "I want to go back, while I still hold some of the trumps."

Colvin stared before him. It seemed to him that every word the man spoke was a menace to Muriel, a black cloud on her horizon. But he let the "Hornet" continue unchecked.

"I want to get out of the country," the latter went on. "There's nothing in New York to interest me. You see I've been quitting 'dope' lately, under treatment, and ambition stirs. I don't care to just drift around the world. As a matter of fact, I've picked up some rather big concessions over there." He jerked his thumb vaguely over his shoulder.

An overwhelming sense of relief filled Colvin, and then an idea was born in his brain, inchoate, lacking completion, and yet—it might solve the difficulty. He closed his eyes. Behind them the idea seemed to dazzle and crash through his head.

"I'm going home." He spoke with a sudden resolution. "I've got to think." He stood up, gay, assured, the Colvin of fifteen years before. The light that had flickered out of his eyes during his long period of apathy and eclipse shone clear and undaunted. The old, confident smile was on his lips.

"Partners?" He caught up the other's offer. "All right; we'll play it as it lays. You go out and round up that missing package for me, and I'll draw the lightning off you. My friend, we are going to give Uncle William the fight of his life."

The "Hornet" looked at him doubtfully a moment, a frowning question in his glance. Then the smile in Colvin's eyes found a harsh and cruel reflection in his.

"Whitefield wits against Whitefield wits, with Ashe Colvin on the side, eh?" He gave his malevolent, one-sided grin. "It'll be a peach of a duel in the dark."

CHAPTER VIII

A FEW days after Colvin had his momentous talk with the "Hornet" at The Dome, he paid a visit to two aunts of his who lived alone in an old house east of Fifth Avenue in the Fifties.

This call was dictated by two motives; one was genuine affection and a sincere desire to see his only living relatives again. The two sisters had been tremendously fond and proud of him in his Prince Fortunatus period, and later, when the rains descended and the floods came, they had been his staunchest supporters and at the last his only defender.

The second motive was more complex. The "Hornet" and himself had decided that the best way for him to return to the fold of society was by what Colvin knew instinctively would be for him the open door of his aunts' house. There were certain reasons, too, why this move would prove especially perplexing to Whitefield — reasons which tickled irrepressibly the "Hornet's" sardonic sense of humor.

But as Colvin took his way to the house late on a cloudy afternoon in early November, the question uppermost in his mind was in what manner and with what fitly chosen words he should apprise his aunts of the return of their long-lost nephew.

He had not reached a decision when the door was opened to him, and he was still in doubt when he was shown into the well-remembered, old-fashioned draw-

ing-room. So he concluded to leave it on the knees of the gods. Perhaps it would be best to disclose his real identity gradually; otherwise, it might be too much of a shock. There were cases in which the dead, no matter how passionately mourned at the time of their passing, would have proved a few years later to be most unwelcome and embarrassing intruders.

But it was Colvin himself, and not the ladies, who was to suffer the shock. Not so much on account of his Aunt Martina, Mrs. Vansittart, a widow who had elected to stay so in spite of flattering opportunities to do otherwise; but principally because of his Aunt Estelle, the elder of the two sisters, who also had turned a deaf ear to eligible offers, and remained a spinster, purposely neglecting to provide herself with the customary excuses. She disclaimed both the proverbial "unhappy and romantic, youthful attachment," and the "lover who had met with an untimely death on the very eve of our marriage," while the *s'accuse* "spinster by choice and not by necessity" met with her well-merited scorn.

The years seemed to roll from Colvin as he entered the drawing-room, done in the style of the Second Empire, and practically unchanged since his earliest remembrances. It was adorably mid-Victorian, and so consistently outside the prevailing vogue that it was frequently admired as the last new thing in drawing-rooms.

Mrs. Vansittart, stout and comfortable, sat before a cosy grate fire, reading, a tea-table at her elbow. When Colvin was announced, she looked up with a cup half-way to her mouth, and the inquiring expression on her face changed to a lively interest, as this

distinguished looking stranger, with a deep, livid scar across his cheek, advanced.

Of course she must have met him some place, and have asked him to come and see her; but it was odd that she should have forgotten any one so noticeable. It might be, though, that he was an acquaintance of Estelle's.

"How do you do, Mr. Vernon." She put down both her teacup and book. "I was beginning to think no one would be in. Such a dreary afternoon. My sister will probably be here any moment. How will you have your tea?"

Her voice, her presence, the appearance and atmosphere of the old room brought back former days to him with a diaphanous vividness. The call of blood is a more potent one than most of us realize. In spite of himself, Colvin followed his impulse, and cast his doubts and fears to the wind.

"Don't you know me, Aunt Martina?" he asked, with a quiver of feeling in his voice. "I'm Ashe. Ashe Colvin."

She stifled a cry, ran toward him, and then drew back slowly, giving him a long, intent look in which suspicion and wonderment were mingled.

"Take off those glasses," she commanded. As he obeyed, she came a step nearer, and looked deep into his eyes. "You are!" There was a sharp, high note of excitement in her voice. "You are! Oh, where did you come from? Where have you been all these years?" She threw her arms about him, kissing and hugging him. Then she stood back from him, the tears streaming down her cheeks. Once more she clasped him in her arms. "My boy! My dear boy! This is one of the happiest moments of my life.

"But, oh!" she shuddered. "How did you get that dreadful scar?"

His heart smote him to deceive her. Yet how could he tell her that it was only the painted semblance of a wound, done with infinite care and skill.

"I had an accident." His tone prevented further questioning.

His aunt shuddered again. "Where is Essie?" she cried impatiently. "She'll probably be dancing somewhere until dinner time. But then you'll stay to dinner, of course? There'll be three or four people here, but you won't mind that."

He hesitated. "Not if you promise to introduce me as Mr. Vernon."

"Oh, dear Ashe!" in shocked protest. "An assumed name! Such a common thing to do. And why?"

"Can't help it. Look here, Aunt Martina," he gazed down at her, his smile a little strained, but eager and pleading; "there's a chance, a bare chance, that the old mystery may have a little light thrown on it. And on that bare chance of unearthing something, I want to come back to the world. But not as Ashe Colvin. That would be too great a handicap." He laughed, but without bitterness.

"Now, I want you to look at me well, with the eyes of the most suspicious and curious person you know, and tell me frankly if you think there is any chance of my being recognized, or remembered."

She gazed at him searchingly, her hands on his shoulders; and then she moved away, and studied him carefully from varying distances and at different angles.

"I don't believe it's a possibility," she said at last, speaking slowly, and a little sadly. "You've changed.

You're so much older. And that terrible, disfiguring scar alters the whole expression of your face."

She winced again, and then she forced herself to speak more cheerfully.

"Fifteen years is a century in New York, and the world forgets so soon. People you never heard of are in the saddle now, and the few who might remember you would never recognize you as you look to-day. I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll try you on Essie, when she comes." Her face cleared at this inspiration. "She's not easily fooled. She'll probably think you're some adventurer I've picked up, and that you're trying to marry me for my money." She shook with laughter.

"But how can I stay to dinner, if you have guests," he looked down at himself; "that is, unless you let me go back to my hotel first, and dress."

"Nonsense. People are not nearly so formal as they used to be. It's a slip-shod, go-as-you-please world to-day. You can run up to one of the guest rooms, and tidy up, while I get into my dinner gown. And, goodness gracious!" glancing at the watch on her wrist, "I'd better be about it. Come up with me now. If you don't find everything you want, just ring. You've got half an hour."

She left him at the door of the blue guest room, first seeing that the lights were switched on; and after washing his hands, and brushing his hair, he carefully scrutinized his scar in the brilliantly lighted mirror. Satisfied, he selected a book from a small table, pulled the cord of the reading lamp, and sitting down, began to read. But this was impossible. He could not concentrate his attention to save his life.

The last few days had been full of thought and

action. There had been many conferences with the "Hornet." With infinite pain, they had mapped out a campaign. It had been something like playing a game of chess, with Whitefield as a dummy. They had played not only their own game, but his as well, trying to anticipate every move.

Then Colvin had paid his bill at his hotel, and departed — a quiet gentleman with an undisfigured countenance. A few hours later he took rooms at another hotel, a marked man anywhere.

And now he had definitely cast the die. He was fulfilling his promise to Muriel, and coming back. It hadn't been easy. It had been terribly hard now and then to merge the man of reverie, of moody introspection into the man of constructive thought and definite action. Sometimes he felt that he, more than all men, must realize the agonies of attempting to obey the high command of St. Paul, and put off the old man. But at the moment of wavering, he had only to remember Muriel's words, to picture her standing in the sunshine waiting for him until the Day of Judgment; and his courage would return, his will become alive and vigorous again.

One side of him hated this painted scar on his face; it seemed a cheap and unworthy trick. But there were certain possibilities which would arise from "Vernon," so eagerly desired by William Whitefield, joining a coterie of socially important people with Fletcher Hempstead's scar upon his face. Bewildered Whitefield! Puzzled police! The "Hornet" had roared with laughter to the prospect. And the spirit of adventure, which had stirred anew so strongly in Colvin, helped him to bear his disfigurement with resignation.

The clock on the mantelpiece of the blue guest cham-

ber chimed. The half-hour Mrs. Vansittart had given him was passed. He threw down his unread book, and hastened down the stairs to find that the guests had already assembled. His Aunt Martina at once took possession of him, and introduced him to about six people, the average dining-out group.

For some reason, perhaps with malicious intention, she presented to him Mr. Samuel Cruger last. "Tubby," deep in conversation with another man, had wheeled at the sound of his hostess's voice. He looked more like a Santa Claus without whiskers than ever, if the imagination can conceive of such a being. When he heard the name, Vernon, he showed visible agitation; and then, as he glanced up at Ashe, and noted the scar, the color left his round, pink face, his short, rotund body went limp. But before he could do more than murmur inarticulately, Mrs. Vansittart swept Colvin on.

She was doing the thing splendidly, Ashe thought. She managed to infuse into every introduction the impression that Mr. Vernon was a person of rare distinction, and that she had achieved a triumph in persuading him to remain for dinner. She was rather superb, Mrs. Vansittart, dumpy and clumsy though she was; still, with her white hair rolled back from her broad, ruddy face, her trailing, lusterless, black silk gown, with heavy jet chains covering her fat, white neck, and with her grand air, few could have been more imposing.

"I've just been telling every one that you stopped in to see me this afternoon after an absence of several years at the ends of the earth," she managed to whisper. "I left it vague, so you can choose any place you please. I'm going to put you beside Estelle, and

I'll bet you a thousand of your favorite brand of cigarettes against five pounds of Page and Shaw, that she won't know you. And Estelle's eyes are pretty keen, when she uses her high-power lorgnette. Oh, here she is."

Miss Colvin — his Aunt Estelle — came in just as the most important event of the whole day was announced. The morning papers and dinner! They rouse an intensity of interest, a thrill of anticipation, which none of the other occurrences in life's routine can quite compass.

And this was his Aunt Estelle! Colvin looked at her almost shyly as they walked down the hall together. Was she really two years older than her sister — this slender, graceful, positively lissome woman, with her shining, waved, brown hair, her vivacious face, touched up a bit perhaps but still handsome? She wore a beautiful dinner-gown of old rose and blue with a sort of iridescent gleaming through it and a few odd and handsome jewels.

Estelle, as he had known her years before, was beginning to be a rather faded and old-maidish person, perilously near what may be called the apologetic age, when a woman becoming increasingly and morbidly conscious of wrinkles, sallow skin, pied or dappled hair, mentally craves the pardon of the world for having ceased to adorn it. But here his astonishment was shot athwart with remembrance. He recalled the fact that she was a Gansevoort, and the Gansevoorts did not apologize, neither did they succumb. They either accepted what they considered the inevitable, and made merry in it as had Mrs. Vansittart, or they went, and saw, and conquered, like Estelle. A wise virgin, there was no echo, "Too late!" in her ears. She had

trimmed her lamp, and used it to light her to the beauty doctor, the dancing and skating classes, and had thriftily multiplied her interests in life.

"My sister said something about your having just arrived from the other side of the world, Mr. Vernon," she remarked, as Ashe sat down beside her at the table. He felt a little frightened to have her thus open fire on him without wasting time. He knew that she was at once cleverer and more subtle than her sister. "The Far East, was it? 'From the desert, you come to we?'" smiling.

He laughed at her twist of the quotation, and capped it. "But not 'on my Arab shod with fire.'"

"I suppose the desert has its pleasures, but skating would hardly be one of them, would it?"

"Hardly," he returned.

"And skating is really the only thing worth living for at the present time. That, and a few other things. What would you consider the things that are really worth while, Mr. Vernon?"

Ashe was perfectly aware, that quite delightfully and gracefully she was leading up to several sugar-coated questions which would be put with such skill that he might find them hard to evade. These, baldly, were: Where did you meet Martina? How long have you known her? How do you and she happen to be on such intimate terms that she has persuaded you to lengthen out an afternoon call to take in dinner? Why has she never spoken of you? Who are you, anyway, and what is your business in life?

Another thing that amused him intensely was that opposite him, and a little farther along the table, sat Mr. Samuel Cruger, and the poor gentleman was not an adept in concealing his feelings. He was an ami-

iable, good-natured little man; but in meeting a stranger with the disconcerting name of Vernon, he had received a shock which he felt might permanently impair his digestion.

It was only a day or two since, that William Whitefield had told him of Muriel's mysterious visitor the night of the robbery. He had detailed the suspicious circumstances that surrounded the man's leave-taking, and wound up by asking Samuel to bear in mind and immediately collect any facts he could about any person he met or heard of by the name of Vernon. He stated that he, Whitefield, had already instructed the police to give him a report upon any Vernons they could round up.

Surely it was hard, "Tubby" considered, that when he had temporarily cast off his perplexities about his ward, Muriel, his old friend, Martina Vansittart, should have taken the opportunity to introduce a Vernon — and a Vernon with a long, hideous scar, which, it seemed to him, he remembered only too well.

He sat there at the table, so different from his usual cheerful, chatty self, that it would have been noticeable if every one else had not been in an especially gay and loquacious mood. It seemed impossible for him to take his eyes from the scar and its possessor. He did not doubt that this was the man for whom William was combing the city, and he was almost equally certain that it was Fletcher Hempstead.

True, this Vernon did not particularly resemble Fletcher, as he remembered him; but then Fletcher was only a boy of seventeen when he had gone away. By Jove, he must be forty now — just about the age of this Vernon person?

He stole another furtive glance. The man certainly did not have any of the earmarks of the Whitefield; but wasn't there — yes, he was sure there was — a sort of a Hempstead look about him? Again he suppressed a groan. He knew Fletcher of old. There was nothing, nothing in the world, that ever could stop him when he took the bit in his teeth? He feared neither God, man, nor devil. And "Tubby" had not the least doubt that Fletcher had returned, and was about to strike at Whitefield and himself through Muriel in some diabolical, humiliating, and probably public manner.

He attempted diplomacy. "Is Mr. — er — Vernon a New Yorker? He talks like a Frenchman," he said to Mrs. Vansittart.

"Really, I am not sure," she returned vaguely.

"Odd scar! Horrible to be disfigured like that, horrible. Was it the result of an accident?"

But before she could answer, a woman on the other side of the table inquired eagerly:

"Oh, Mr. Cruger, is there any fresh news about the Whitefield robbery? Have they recovered the jewels, or any of the stolen things?"

"I believe not," he said; and then added in a tone which was meant to have a peculiarly menacing significance for Vernon: "But that's only a matter of a short time. The police have very definite information in regard to the crooks. They're in a net, although they do not suspect it, and it will be practically impossible for them to escape now."

The whole table had paused to listen, and, "How interesting! Wonderful how they manage those things!" was breathed about it.

"Will Mrs. Whitefield be well enough to appear at

the coming-out dance for that pretty Muriel Fletcher?" queried a thin woman on the other side of Colvin.

"Oh, yes," returned "Tubby." "She is getting over the shock of the robbery very nicely."

"Don't you believe it," murmured the thin woman, speaking across Colvin to Estelle. "She'll side-step it somehow. No contrasts of *passé* beauty and radiant youth for her."

"Well, I wouldn't be recovering nicely," returned Estelle, "losing all those perfectly good rings." She turned to Ashe. "You have been in town since the Whitefield robbery, haven't you, Mr. Vernon?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I've read the accounts of it with deep interest."

"So did every one else," said the thin woman. "Half the women one knows were hoping against hope that Freda's sapphires or pearls might have been taken, but," she shrugged her sharp shoulder bones, "no such luck."

"They do say," she continued in a lower voice, "that she's terribly broken up over what was taken, and that Ollie Darnton had been kept busy drying her tears. I saw her yesterday, and truly she looked a wreck."

"Lucky Ollie!" sighed a man in her ear, sinking his voice so that Ashe barely heard it. "Freda's the only woman left with whom it's the least bit exciting to flirt. She makes you think it's such a deadly sin, and that you're one of those melodramatic villains who spend all their time making assaults on impregnable virtue. Awfully flattering."

"Mr. Vernon," called Mrs. Vansittart down the table, "if Estelle's lipping any nonsense into your ear

about my being her older sister, don't believe it. She's my senior by a good two years."

"More shame to you," returned Estelle. "I don't let any old-age microbes bite me. I'm no nice, dim, old family portrait hung on the walls and forgotten. I'm a motion picture."

"No answer to that." Martina nodded, and they rose from the table.

But scarcely had they reached the drawing-room, when Mr. Cruger pleaded illness, and left. The others also soon took their leave to meet various engagements. Estelle made no effort to conceal her surprise that Vernon stayed on.

Martina laughed outright. "I win!" she cried. "Essie, do you really mean to say that you don't know Mr. Vernon?"

Her sister looked from one to the other in bewilderment, and shook her head.

"I suppose I am extremely stupid, if I ought to know Mr. Vernon; but I do not. And yet, there is a something, a sort of familiarity which has bothered me all evening."

"Oh, Essie, Essie!" Martina was unable to bottle up her secret any longer. "It's Ashe come back again!"

Estelle, although not so demonstrative as her sister, was equally excited and happy; and Colvin felt like an undeserving prodigal, when he recalled his years of silence, the anxiety he must have caused these two kind women. And yet it was delightful to bask in the warmth of their welcome.

They sat late, talking. There were a thousand questions to be answered, a thousand explanations to be made. At last, Colvin said good-by.

Just as he was leaving the room, he stopped, smiled in an odd way, and then walked over to the window, and cautiously lifting the side of the shade, peered out.

"I thought so," he said, beckoning his aunts to apply an eye in turn to the peephole.

What they saw was a man leaning against a tree box across the way, and unmistakably watching the house.

"But Ashe!" the aunts drew back in alarm. "What does it mean?"

"It means that 'Tubby' has wasted no time in communicating with Whitefield, and Whitefield has put a man — probably a small regiment of men — at the job of shadowing me. Farewell, my privacy!"

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Mr. Samuel Cruger tottered down the steps of the Gansevoort house, he flapped a limp hand at the first passing taxicab, and stumbling into the safe port of its cushions, gave to the driver in a voice which was a mere asthmatic whisper the number of the Whitfield residence.

He was in a state of psychic befuddlement where he was unable to distinguish between mental and physical sensation. As he rolled along, he put his hand to his brow, and groaned. He also felt his pulse. The beat, it struck him, was very rapid and uneven. He choked up with an intense irritation, even indignation against his old friend, Mrs. Vansittart. It seemed to him like deliberate malice on her part to have asked him to meet a man with the name of Vernon and Fletcher Hempstead's scar across his face.

Mr. Cruger's aim throughout existence had been to keep his feet on the uncomplicated path. He had no adventurous longing to explore the entangling thickets, and so far he had been able to enact admirably the rôle of the cheerful, amiable onlooker. Yet now, suddenly he found himself hurled—pitchforked, one might say—into the midst of a thorny, briar-strewn maze from which he would have given much to keep clear. So he sat in the cab, quivering with the same resentment, the same moral indignation one feels when

a fire, or an earthquake, or a cyclone devastates the locality one has chosen because of its promised immunity from such cataclysms. He regarded it as monstrous that things which simply did not happen to persons so environed by ease and respectability as himself should actually have come to pass.

But the cab having stopped before the Whitefield door, he roused himself from his disturbed meditations, descended heavily, paid the man, and entered the house.

Dempsey admitted him with a chastened smile. Dempsey's bearing, always dignified and imposing, was now noticeably subdued. Much cross-examination had left him the impersonation of injured innocence. "Tubby" learned from him that both Mr. and Mrs. Whitefield were at home, and took his way to the library. There Mr. Whitefield sat smoking in a large easy-chair, surrounded by a white, billowing sea of evening papers.

Freda, her chaise-longue drawn near the fire, her toy dog "Elf" on her knee, was languidly knitting; she had cancelled all her engagements since the robbery. Indeed, the shock had affected her health so greatly that her doctor had ordered an immediate change of air and scene, but she had thus far refused to obey his orders, and had obstinately remained in town. She smiled faintly at her husband's cousin as he entered, and then began to count her stitches again.

Whitefield looked at the visitor over the top of his glasses with a touch of surprise.

"Hello, Sammy." He rose slowly, shaking the ashes from his coat as he did so. "What's up now? Must be something doing to bring you around at this time of night?"

Cruger sank down into a chair, and breathed heavily. He waved away the cigar that Whitefield offered, and shook his head once or twice.

"I guess I've found your fellow, Vernon," he said. "The most annoying, upsetting thing that ever happened to me."

Freda's needles clashed together. Whitefield's hand let go of the newspaper he had been holding.

"What do you mean?" He took a quick step forward.

"I mean this." "Tubby's" resentment was mitigated for the moment by a certain sense of importance. "I dined at Martina Vansittart's this evening. She had about eight people there. One of them was this Vernon."

"At Martina Vansittart's?" Whitefield's darting eyes were alive with interest. "What kind of a fellow was he? All right? A—a gentleman?"

"Martina and Estelle Gansevoort wouldn't be likely to have any other sort, would they?" The tartness of Cousin Sammy's answer showed how greatly his nerves were upon edge. "I thought at first he was a foreigner. . . . Something foreign about him." He frowned as if trying to recall just what.

"Foreign, eh?" Whitefield gave this phase of the matter momentary but interested consideration. "But," testily, "what did he look like, man? That's what I want to get at. How did he appear?"

"William," Mr. Cruger's voice sank almost to a whisper, his round, pale eyes were full of a frightened meaning, "this man was about forty years old, with very dark hair, black I think, and quite gray at the sides. He wore eyeglasses, and"—he paused to draw a line with his forefinger across his right cheek

from the corner of his eye to his mouth —“he had a deep scar right here.”

Whitefield stared back at him for the fraction of a second. “Where did you leave him?” he demanded.

“There at the Gansevoorts. Why?”

But Whitefield was already across the room at a telephone in an alcove, and was calling the number of a detective agency. When he got it, he gave instructions that two men be sent at once to the neighborhood of Mrs. Vansittart's to watch for a tall man with a scar across his face, and if he came out, to shadow him at any hazard.

As he spoke to the agency, Freda had started up with some show of agitation as if to protest, but realizing no doubt the futility of any interference, subsided once more into her seat, clutching the little dog so tightly that it whimpered in reproach. Her knitting lay unheeded where it had fallen to the floor.

“Case of locking the stable door after the horse is gone, I suppose,” grumbled Whitefield, returning from the telephone. “He probably got out about the same time that you did. My Lord, Sammy, why didn't you have sense enough to let me know sooner? Why did you not call me up the minute you left the house?”

“Taken me as long to find a telephone booth as to drive directly here,” returned his cousin pettishly.

“Umph!” Whitefield let it go at that, and took a turn or two across the room. Presently he exploded the silence with a “Damn!” Then he began to talk again. He liked to do his thinking aloud. He knew it was a dangerous habit, but it helped him to get his ideas straight.

“Of course there's a chance that he may still be

there," he pondered; "and if he is, my men will be able to get a certain line on him — what he does, and where he lives, and all that sort of thing."

His face brightened for a moment at this suggestion; but as his thoughts roved on, it settled again into deep lines. He leaned across the back of his chair, and stared at the fire.

"H'm-m! That scar!" He was still thinking aloud. "Dempsey didn't say anything about a scar. . . . But then Dempsey's a muttonhead. Wouldn't be a butler, if he wasn't, I suppose. . . . Well, unless all signs fail, one thing looks sure, anyhow: Fletcher is both Vernon and 'The Hornet.' . . . Crook, eh?" His mouth twisted to one side. "One of the big ones, too. . . . That is, if he is really this 'Hornet' those fellows from Headquarters are always talking about, and I dare say he is. . . . Still, anybody might have known he'd turn out like that. I never did believe that he was dead. Too devilish. Only the good die young. . . . But how in Sam Hill did he ever break in at Martina Vansittart's?"

He pushed out his heavy lower lip, and pulled at it reflectively. Then he lifted his head, a flash of excitement in his eyes.

"Look here, Freda; wasn't Ashe Colvin some relation of the Gansevoorts?"

Her head was turned away from him. She lifted the dog from her lap, and put it carefully down on the floor before she answered.

"Mrs. Vansittart and Miss Estelle were his aunts," she said.

"Ha!" Whitefield clenched his fist down on the back of the chair. "Plain as the nose on your face now. There's a deal on between—" But just then

he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of Cousin Sammy's gaze fixed on him with an expression at once puzzled, curious, and apprehensive, and he caught himself up short.

"Sammy, you don't look right," he exclaimed, eyeing his cousin solicitously. "Sure you're well?"

Cruger's attention immediately reverted to himself. "I am very far from well," he said, with an injured expression and a failing voice, his fingers again on his pulse.

"You ought to go home, and get to bed," Whitefield gave him a pat on the shoulder, which was at the same time a boost helping to assist him to his feet. "Put a mustard plaster on your head, and take a sedative or something. Don't let this affair upset you," in his usual hearty tone. "Nothing to it."

"Tubby" shook his head mournfully. "If it is Fletcher come back under a false name, there's sure to be a scandal," he bleated.

"Don't you believe it," Whitefield's voice rang with a spurious assurance. "You trot along, and get that mustard plaster as I tell you. Leave me to manage Fletcher. I can do it." He nodded emphatically once or twice.

"I hope so. I shouldn't wish to be asked to cope with Fletcher." "Tubby" shuddered. Then, shaking his head, and trailing his feet, he made a gloomy exit.

Whitefield walked over, and closed the door behind him. "I forgot that little nut was sitting there," he muttered apologetically. "But, as I say, it is plain as the nose on one's face how the land lies. Plot between Fletcher and Colvin. They're probably pals. Both born crooks, and they just naturally drifted to-

gether. . . . Some class, Fletcher. It was he of course who broke into the safe, and got his own forged check and the Colvin papers. That much looks sure."

He sat down at the table, frowning, concentrated, and began to run his unending scales.

"Yes; I guess Fletcher is Vernon all right," he continued, after a pause. "The scar proves that. . . . And he's after Muriel. . . . Why? Probably wants her to join with him in some action over their property rights. . . . Yes, sir; that's Fletcher's game. I can see that easy enough. . . . But Colvin's game? H'm-m. That's not quite so clear." He squinted at the fire, and his lips shut slowly like a trap. "If we catch Fletcher, though, and can put the screws to him hard enough, perhaps he'll tell. By God, he's got to tell!"

Freda turned about in her chair. The blue shadows lay darker under her eyes; there was a drawn look about her mouth.

"But are there not some things that you have failed to take into account?" she said. "Rather important things, it seems to me."

"What, for instance?" he asked.

"Why, the fact of Fletcher's appearing openly this way, when he must know that the police are scouring the town for him. That doesn't look very much as if he were afraid of being arrested, or of anything else. Oh!" She pushed back the hair from her brow with hands which trembled. "The whole thing seems to get more terribly complicated every minute. How can you have him arrested under the circumstances — a robbery and a murder? Your own nephew, William! Think of the scandal."

"Who said anything about arresting him?"

Whitefield gave an impatient movement. "You notice I sicked an agency on to him, not the police. All I want is to get him properly cornered, and make him come across with those papers and what information he's got. Then we can arrange to hush the business up, and get him quietly out of the country.

"You have managed to hit on a rather vital point, though," he granted, with a scowl. "It's not going to be so easy throwing a scare into him. As you say, he's fairly courting an arrest, and therefore he must have all his plans laid, and be ready to meet any emergency."

He stopped to consider this phase of the question a moment, then went on.

"Of course, he may be counting on the side of it that you've just brought up — family pride, and all that sort of thing. But he knows I wouldn't let that interfere with me too far. No; he has something stronger than that up his sleeve. A fire-proof alibi, maybe. Anyhow, he's plainly not afraid." He drew in a deep breath. "And that puts me up a blind alley again.

"Oh, if I only actually had the goods on him," he broke out irritably, a second later. "All that Dempsey can say is that he didn't see Vernon leave by the front door, but the idiot admits that he left the hall twice for five minutes at a time. Had the impression each time he came back that Vernon was still in the library. Can't swear to it, though. And Muriel — well, you know her. If you'd pull her teeth out one by one, she'd probably stick closer to her story than a fly to fly-paper."

"Oh, Muriel!" The exclamation was full of bitterness.

Whitefield, however, had reverted to an earlier train of thought.

"Still, the matter might be handled in another way," he murmured. "Fletcher alone wouldn't be difficult to deal with, I don't believe. Pay him all that's coming to him for the last twenty years with a reasonable amount on top of it for blackmail, and turn over his estate into his own hands, and he'd probably come into camp.

"Sounds simple, doesn't it?" His laugh had little mirth in it. "Well, if it comes to that, I may have to call on you for those sapphires and pearls of yours. They're good for almost a million any time.

"Oh, what on earth's the use of your taking it like that?" as Freda buried her face in her hands and shivered as if in a nervous chill. "Good gracious! I don't know what's come over you lately. You used to have some nerve. Can't that doctor of yours do something for you? What's he good for, anyway?"

"I am all right." She sat up resolutely. "Go on. You were saying that Fletcher alone might be dealt with, but that — ?"

"Well, it looks now as if I also had Ashe Colvin to consider, and that's different. How deeply are they tied up together? Everything depends upon that. However, there's one good thing about it; they're not going to start anything in a hurry."

"How do you know?"

"Look at the way they have set their stage," he said. "You don't suppose Fletcher, or Vernon, as he chooses to call himself, is breaking into society, and seeking Muriel, and all that, without some very definite object in view. It's a campaign they're starting. I tell you, and a campaign takes time. Just what end

they are aiming at, I can not say now; but this I do know, they are not ready yet to play trumps."

But she was not in the mood to gather comfort or reassurance from anything he might say.

"They will never rest, they will never rest until they crush us." The words came from her dry lips in a frightened whisper. "They are both so horribly clever. And they mean to get even with us."

Her husband got up from his chair, and stood on the hearth-rug. He loomed there, powerful of physique, wary and cunning of brain, all his foxlike faculties keen and sharp as the steel of a tempered dagger blade.

"You do not suppose I'm sitting idly by, waiting for them to finish me, do you?" He gave a short laugh. "There have been a good many men trying to crush me for a good many years. Pretty clever, a lot of them, too. But I am not finished yet." He took out his watch, and began to wind it up. "No, nor likely to be," he added. "H'm-m. I'm going to bed."

Mr. Whitefield had the Napoleonic ability to sleep at will. Therein lay the great source of his undiminished mental vigor and clearness. While his wife tossed that night upon her sleepless pillow, rising now and again to walk the floor, until with haggard eyes she watched one of earth's dreariest sights, the cold, gray dawn breaking over the disconsolate world, he slept the deep, refreshing sleep of one whose digestion is above rubies.

When he awoke, and had eaten his usual excellent breakfast with his usual excellent appetite, and had read the morning papers, he summoned his secretary.

In one way, Everett Babcock was wasted on his

present employer. Only the really irritable and worry-haunted millionaire could have fully appreciated him. His personality, or lack of it, was like cold cream, cooling and soothing to fevered and abraded mental surfaces. A well-oiled piece of human machinery in good running gear, he inflicted no wear or tear whatever upon the nerves.

As usual, his response to Mr. Whitefield's ring was immediate. He entered, noiseless, efficient, and inconspicuous, and laid his employer's correspondence, opened and unopened, in neat piles before him.

Whitefield absorbed himself in them. When he had finished, Babcock spoke.

"By the way, Mr. Whitefield, I heard something yesterday which might be of interest to you."

"All right. Go ahead," returned Whitefield absently, his eyes still on a letter he held in his hand.

"A fellow who knows her well by sight told me that he saw Miss Fletcher taking tea at Sherry's last Friday afternoon with a man he didn't know."

Whitefield looked up suddenly. "Why didn't the detective I told you to hire report it then?" he growled.

"Very true, sir." Babcock permitted himself the faintest of smiles. "I investigated that, and found that she gave him the slip, fooled him at her dress-maker's. He thought she was having a gown tried on, but she slipped out by another door. He kept it dark."

"Capable agents you employ." Whitefield's face darkened. "I placed this matter in your hands, Babcock, and I expect you to put it through properly. Discharge that fellow, and get another — two of them, if one can not attend to the job."

"I have, sir," returned Everett. "And now —"

But before he could speak further, the telephone rang sharply, and he hastened to answer it. He listened a moment, the receiver at his ear, and then his perfunctory attention became suddenly alert.

"It's 3100 Spring calling, sir," he said. "Police Headquarters, you know; the Detective Bureau. They say they have discovered that a man answering the description of the 'Hornet,' and passing under the name of Vernon is living at the Hotel Marmontel. The Inspector has already started up there to have a talk with him. They thought you might like to know."

Whitefield hesitated, frowning down at the polished surface of the table. Then he nodded.

"Thank them," he said briefly; and after a pause: "Why not? It is what he would be expecting, and maybe it'll help us to get a line on him. Everett," glancing over toward the secretary, "I wish you would ask Mrs. Whitefield to come here a moment."

"Certainly, sir."

Whitefield was still deep in a brown study when Babcock returned.

"Mrs. Whitefield is out, eh?" he repeated the secretary's report. "And she did not leave word where she was going, nor when she would be back? All right," he shrugged his shoulders; "it's of no pressing importance. Maybe, she will come in before I start down-town. I think I will wait a bit to hear from the Inspector."

"Then you will see Miss Fletcher, I suppose, sir. I met her in the hall just now, and she told me she'd like to have a few minutes' talk with you, if possible."

"Muriel?" Whitefield's wandering attention focussed in an instant. "What does she want?"

"She did not say, sir." The tone indicated also that the secretary regarded it futile to ask. Muriel was not one to trust her business to an intermediary.

"Very well," drumming a moment or two with his finger tips upon the table. "Tell her to come in. But first, take this letter for me, will you, Babcock." He dictated a rather lengthy and careful answer to an entirely inconsequential inquiry which had come in the mail — something which could have been put aside for a week, and covered satisfactorily in a single paragraph.

Consequently, it was fully fifteen minutes before Babcock went out to tell the waiting girl that her uncle was ready to see her.

She had just returned from her ride, and was still in her skirted coat and breeches, tapping her crop impatiently against her boot as she stood in the hall. The sharp, autumn air of the Park, aided perhaps by some rise of temper at the delay she had encountered, had whipped her cheeks to a deep carnation glow, and her lips to a more vivid red. But if Whitefield had hoped to get her at a disadvantage by his tactics, he was destined to be disappointed. There was something so vital, so gay, so youthful about her, that even he, her supreme antagonist, was moved to a sort of impersonal pride and admiration. The gorgeous Whitefield looks were there, and, by the Lord, the spirit and devilry, too — the Whitefield spirit that nothing could bend, nor break.

"My word, Muriel!" he exclaimed. "You're some looker this morning."

She struck an attitude. "Little old prize-beauty, Me!" she said.

But she hadn't come to discuss the abstract question of her appearance. She went straight to the point with her customary abruptness and certainty.

"I say, Uncle William, I want you to see that Mr. Vernon is invited to the dance."

He gasped. There was no limit to her nerve. His teeth showed with a wolfish unpleasantness in the smile he bestowed upon her. Then, as he gave a second thought to her request, his expression changed and became more complaisant. Ever since Cruger's visit of the night before, his desire to see this so-called Vernon person with his own eyes had steadily increased. He felt sure that if it were really Fletcher, he would know him. Cruger's opinion counted little or nothing with him. Sammy was such a quaking custard of a coward, and such an unobservant ass as well, that his views didn't amount to a row of pins, one way or the other.

"H'm-m." He didn't give her an answer at once. "Been riding with him this morning?"

"Yes," she assented lightly, almost casually. But her eyes met his for the fraction of a second, and steel clashed against steel.

A sudden, violent anger shook Whitefield. It took all his self-control to repress the words that rose to his lips. "What's the game — yours and his? Why the devil don't you make some move?" That was what he wanted to say. To think that he, Whitefield, standing on the brink of a precipice whose depths he did not dare consider, should be baffled and outwitted by this vicious girl. All his astuteness, his long-headed diplomacy, his wary resourcefulness, crumpled

against her stubborn resistance like so many blades of lead.

Of course, she was only Fletcher's instrument, but she was a mighty good one — for Fletcher. He wanted to shake her, to throw her against the wall, to choke the truth out of her with his thick, strong fingers.

But he gradually composed himself with the reflection that even if she had resisted him so far, there were several different kinds of pressure which still might be brought to bear upon her.

"I think," he said, smiling upon her as a fox might smile upon a plump young pullet, "that considering it's your own party, we'll have to humor you in this; so I'll tell Freda to see that an invitation is sent to your friend of the streets. I'll have to place a guard at my study door that night, I suppose; Mr. Vernon might be unduly interested in the new combination I've had put on the safe. Also, I will have a detective follow Freda about pretty closely. She'll probably be wearing either her sapphires or her pearls."

"Why not use the one you had following me?" Muriel replied imperturbably; and then with open insolence. "She probably needs a detective considerably more than I do."

CHAPTER X

It was early that morning that Colvin and Muriel had taken their ride together — the laggard sun was just rising above the trees. But early as it was, Colvin was waiting at the Fifty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue entrance to the Park at least twenty minutes before Muriel came. A groom was there with her horse, however, a rather rakish, brown mare who picked up her feet with extreme daintiness, and seemed to enjoy quite humanly the admiration with which two or three loitering grooms and horsemen regarded her.

It was one of those opaline days of the lingering New York autumn. The air was soft, and yet infinitely fresh and stimulating. The falling breeze, faint as some sweet, forgotten tune, was full of the last, rich fragrances the earth gives out, and of the smell of burning leaves and brushwood.

For Colvin, the years and Time and disappointment were not. His heart beat like a boy's as he saw her hurrying toward him in her smart riding clothes. She waved her crop at him. His heart seemed to stop for a moment, and then it soared on wings. The morning had externalized itself in Muriel.

He swung from his horse and started impulsively to meet her, but with a sudden recollection, halted and put his hand quickly up to his cheek in a gesture of concealment.

Before he reached her then, she had already mounted with the aid of her groom; and the restless mare, tired of her ballet-dancing and her attempts to jerk the boy around in circles, immediately bolted and was off at the top of her speed.

There was a bit of a dash for both of them before Colvin caught up with her. He was still holding his hand to his face, and he saw the laughter in her eyes change suddenly to an expression of solicitude.

"What is it?" she asked. "Why do you hold your hand to your cheek? Are you hurt?"

"No. No, indeed," he made haste to reassure her. He reddened, and his eyes showed a touch of downcast embarrassment. "It's only that I am hiding something ugly—a brand-new scar. You never heard of a brand-new scar before, did you?" He did his best to speak lightly.

Her gaze, still bent on his cheek, was full of perplexity. "But there isn't such a thing," she contended. "Scars come from old wounds."

"Not this kind," he asserted, holding his tone to that lightness he was far from feeling. "Mine is painless, and put on with a brush. There!" He took down his hand to show the livid mark extending across his cheek.

She shivered. "Oh, how frightful!" she cried. "Do you mean that it is painted on? Never. It couldn't be done. It must be real."

"But I assure you that it is not. It is only a thing of acids and grease paint put on with great skill—and for a purpose."

She stiffened in the saddle, and her face darkened stormily. Colvin had never noticed how proud her mouth was, until this deep shadow of disdain lay on

it. But there was a deeper shadow in her eyes — the pain of disappointment, as if in some way the soul of her were hurt. It stabbed him to the heart, and roused in him an intense and surging emotion.

“Why, it’s a *trick!*” Her voice scorned, but her eyes reproached him, and begged him to restore her faith.

He was stung to a passionate justification. Her faith in him was all he had to cling to.

“I know it’s a trick,” he cried; “a shifty trick of the underworld. But can’t you understand? I’m down to the dregs, and I’ve got to come back. I’m so far down to the dregs that I haven’t a weapon left to fight my way with. I was absolutely, completely, and forever out of the game. Nothing left me but my wits and my ingenuity, and I’m trying to hack my way back with them. Maybe, I’m making the crowning mistake of a life full of mistakes. But if I wait to pick and choose — to discard one method, and take up with another — I will end by never starting at all. So I’ve pushed into the first crooked, brambly path that opened before me, and seized the first weapon that came to hand.

“Oh, if you’ll only accept me as I am for a short while,” he pleaded, “and try to believe that I’m doing my best? Perhaps I am asking too much, but if you could just trust me a little — ?”

Their horses’ feet made no sound on the soft loam of the bridle path. The trees crowded close about them. The great, turbulent, clamorous, waking city seemed very far away, nowhere upon their horizon.

She looked at him questioningly. The sun trickled through the leaves and branches above her head, and fell in dancing motes over her hair and upon her cheek

that was like the petals of a creamy magnolia blossom. Her eyes, bent upon him, were the color and depth of a forest pool. And then, even in their depths, they suddenly reflected the sun.

"I'll trust you," she said.

"Thank you." He bit his lip; it trembled a little. "That means a lot to me. You see, in this affair of mine, I am signalling the universe for trumps, and I haven't got them yet; so in the meantime I have to finesse a bit. Try to look at it in that way, won't you?"

She merely nodded, and starting up her horse, rode for nearly a mile in silence. Then she began to talk of entirely extraneous things, but she made him realize that there was to be no change in her feeling toward him, no break in their oddly intimate and understanding friendship.

They had a brisk gallop or two together, and then she said good-by. But his heart was high, and continued so all the way to his hotel. He entered his rooms humming lightly under his breath—a snatch of an old music-hall ballad popular at Koster and Bial's in the 'Nineties. It was a thing he hadn't done for years.

Wimms, his new valet, after helping him out of his riding togs, turned him to the light, and gave him critical inspection.

"Your cheek will need a little attention, sir, I think," he warned, in a confidential tone. "The color is rubbing slightly, I see."

Colvin twisted his shoulders, and gave an impatient laugh. "You talk as if you were a lady's maid, Wimms." He stalked into the bedroom, jerked off his collar and necktie, and sat down irritably before

a mirror, looking disgustedly at the table beside him on which the man was busily arranging unguents, bottles, and an array of fine, small brushes and curiously shaped instruments.

"If I had known all the trouble I was letting myself in for with this fool scar," he grumbled, "I'd have thought a precious long while before I ever let you get within reaching distance of me."

Wimms' face bore the expression one might see on a mother's who has just heard the excellences of a darling child impugned.

"That, of course, was up to you, Mr. Vernon," he replied with respectful dignity; "but you said you wanted a scar, and you've got it — a beautiful scar. Why, sir, you couldn't get as artistic a piece of work done anywhere else in the world. No, sir; not in London, or Paris, if I do say it myself."

"Oh, I'm not belittling your skill, Wimms. I give you full credit as a master, at this trade. But I must confess, I envy the 'Hornet.' He can plaster up his own disfigurement, and let it go at that, without having to be fussed and potted over every time he comes into the house.

"Beg pardon, sir," the valet smiled dubiously with an air of superior knowledge; "but I'm willing to wager that at this very moment he's swearing quite roundly over his job. You've got to know just how to do these things, sir.

"Now, Mr. Johnson's clever," he went on; "there's no denying that. The special paste he's using has to be rubbed in very carefully with the tips of the fingers; and he's got finger tips which is most sensitive — eyes in the ends of 'em, you might almost say. Really, sir, no one except those in his own line can quite appre-

ciate Mr. Johnson's work. His touch! Why, a butterfly's wings ain't no lighter, and a bullet ain't so sure. Still, even with him, it took quite a bit of showing before he could learn to work the paste in properly, and even now I wouldn't want fully to guarantee the results.

"However, as you know, sir, he didn't think it wise that I should be going back and forth from one to the other of you; so he decided to take the risk on what he could do for himself. You are very fortunate, sir," with restrained reproach; "very fortunate."

Ashe controlled his inclination to smile; Wimms insisted upon an absolute immobility of the countenance upon which he was engaged. He occupied himself, therefore, with speculations upon this strange attendant of his.

Wimms was in his way a character. A small-mouse-colored, mouselike creature, he was as unobtrusive as an unnoticed background, and with his noiseless entrances and rapid exits, he almost seemed to appear or to fade from the scene while one was looking directly at him. He had a good deal of the mouse's nervousness, too. He hated noises, and would jump at the sudden opening of a door, an unexpected call.

Colvin wondered idly if his name, Wimms, were not a contraction or corruption of the English "Wemyss." The "Hornet" had given a rather sketchy account of him, when Ashe had asked some questions. He was Cockney born, the "Hornet" said, but had lived considerably on the Continent, and knew the inside of many European prisons. It was intimated vaguely, too, that it was a passion for the skilful imitation of

signatures which had led to his present semi-retirement.

The inaction was growing tiresome. Ashe bravely suppressed a strong desire to yawn.

"How did you happen to take up this particular expression of art, Wimms?" he mumbled through closed lips.

If he could have seen the valet's face, he would have realized the enormity of his mistake. In the circles in which Wimms moved, it is not only a want of tact to inquire regarding one's past, it is often dangerous.

Indeed, the ægis of the "Hornet's" friendship was all that saved Colvin now; for Wimms was a stickler for convention.

He stood with the camel's-hair brush he was wielding poised in air. There was the silence of icicles for a moment. When he spoke, his tone was instinct with reserve.

"It came about, I suppose, sir, from an early connection with the theatrical profession. I was dresser for a prominent actor when I was quite a boy, and the business of make-up always interested me greatly. Later, I studied to gain the more permanent effects. The other is mere rough daubing compared to it. And I may say, sir," his voice relaxed slightly as his pride warmed, "that I have raised the whole standard of the work. Most of the preparations I use are my own that I've worked out with a chemist. The coloring is the most difficult part to get right, hitting off the exact shade and all that, you know; but I've studied scars everywhere—gone right into the hospitals after them. I can paint you a scar in any stage you ask—old or new—without a model. Got it all right here, sir." He touched his forehead.

"Now you, sir," the man went on. "Take that scar of yours. It'll stand the test of the strongest sunlight. No one could possibly detect that it isn't genuine. You can even wash your face, sir, if you use a bit of care."

"Who wants to wash one's face, and use a bit of care?" Ashe grumbled.

But Wimms was not to be dashed by any lack of appreciation on the part of his subject.

"There, sir!" His tone was that of a sculptor uncovering a masterpiece. He whisked the towel from Colvin's throat, and held a handglass before him at the same time. "Nature herself couldn't have done worse by you than that."

Ashe scowled at the reflection presented to him. He felt like seizing the towel and rubbing at his cheek until he had expunged the results of his valet's handiwork. Why, just at this especial time, did he have to be made to look so repulsive — so sinister?

He waved away the glass with an impatient gesture, and started to his feet; but Wimms, laying a respectful hand on his shoulder, detained him in his seat.

"Your eyebrows, sir," he reminded in a tone kindly but firm. "They're a bit noticeable still, and must be made more strictly conventional."

"Oh," Ashe writhed in futile protest. "You're a throwback to the Spanish Inquisition, Wimms; jerking them out that way, hair by hair. Ouch!"

"Why, ladies think nothing of this, sir." Wimms shook his head reprovingly. "They have their brows arched, just as they have their nails manicured, and almost as often."

"I always insisted that they were the stronger sex," Ashe murmured. "Now I know it."

"And one final word, sir," admonished Wimms, standing small but commanding before him. "You are very good about your accent. It couldn't be better, and you use it as natural as can be. But, if you'll bear with me, sir, you're not quite careful enough about your walk, and the way you use your hands. Shorter steps, and don't throw out your right hand when you're talking. Just keep those things in mind, sir," his voice became almost pleading. "Make 'em a part of yourself-like."

Colvin had been once more surveying himself in the glass, and with a growing distaste for the presentment. To any one else he would have appeared merely as a distinguished-looking gentleman unfortunately disfigured, but to his own hypercritical eye he seemed a Caliban.

His heart sank. No matter how courteously Muriel concealed it, she could not have regarded him other than with horror. And then upon his doleful reflections, Wimms broke in with his cautioning admonitions.

"Make 'em a part of yourself-like," he repeated.

Colvin rose, and held his arms to let the valet slip on his coat.

"You believe in playing the game with every ounce that's in you, don't you, Wimms?" he said. "Well, so do I, but —"

He sighed wearily, adjusting his thick-rimmed eyeglasses, and strolled toward his sitting-room, but paused as Wimms gave one of his mouse-like, nervous starts. The telephone bell was clattering.

"Answer it," he waved his hand toward the instrument, and stood waiting while the other took up the receiver, and listened a moment.

"A lady to see you, sir." Wimms glanced at him dubiously.

"A lady?" Ashe stared back in surprise, then drew his breath sharply. Muriel? But chill second thought told him it was far more likely to be one of his aunts. There was, however, a possibility.

"Ask her to come up," he said, and walking quickly into the sitting-room, rearranged a chair or two, and drew the shades at the windows so that the painted fraud upon his cheek might not be so glaringly in evidence.

He had barely finished before there was a low knock upon the door. Wimms opened it, bowed, and faded into the inner room, closing softly the door through which he passed.

A woman came in, veiled and furred. For a moment Ashe stared, entirely forgetful of his manners. It was not Muriel. It was not his Aunt Estelle, nor his Aunt Martina. It was—! He suppressed a hasty exclamation. In spite of her wraps and veils, something in her movements, something in the lift of her head, proclaimed her. Yes; it was Freda!

Never before in all his life had he so strongly to draw upon his self-control. He was taken unprepared, at a disadvantage. True, he stood upon his own territory. He was master of the ground. But that by no means meant that he was master of the situation. He could not feel master of the situation until he was sure that Freda did not recognize him.

"Mr. Vernon?" Her voice was so low that he barely caught it, and yet how familiar those soft, hesitating tones.

"Yes?" Extreme formality shaded the politeness of his bow.

"I am Mrs. Whitefield — Mrs. William Whitefield." She advanced farther into the room, and spoke more audibly. "I have come to see you upon a — upon a confidential matter. Something purely personal and confidential."

"Yes?" still interrogatively. He drew a chair toward her, and placed it so that she would face the light. "Won't you sit here, Mrs. Whitefield?"

Mentally, he was both applauding and envying her woman's cleverness. It was she who, having sought him, must explain the reason for her visit. He had all the best of it, so far as position went, and yet she had managed to secure her purely feminine advantages.

Knowing that she was about to throw herself, so to speak, into the spot-light, she had utilized all the possibilities of costume to protect her. The brim of her hat fell low over her eyes, effectually shading them, her furs, which she did not remove, were high about her face, and the veil that she wore was of heavy mesh and an intricate pattern.

He waited for her to speak, determined not to give her an opening, conscious meanwhile that she was studying him warily from behind the barrier of her defenses.

"I hope," she began at last in a halting voice, "that you believe me, when I repeat that I am on a purely personal mission. I am not sent by any one else, nor acting for any one else. No one even dreams that I am here."

He bowed as before, and again stood on guard. But realizing that they might go on this way indefinitely, with his side of the conversation confined to noncommittal bows and monosyllables, he decided to change his tactics. What profit was there in a duel

of that sort, he asked himself. He could hold the pose, of course, could even pretend to be ignorant of the identity of Mrs. William Whitefield, and of any reason which she might have for coming to him. But it would be palpable pretense. He, therefore, broke his silence.

"You mean, Mrs. Whitefield," he said suavely, "that no one knows of your being here, with the exception of the two men whom your husband has employed to follow me. You could hardly have escaped their notice."

She gave the sharpest of starts; but her answer showed that she had not ignored this phase of the situation, and to his surprise she spoke frankly, even with a certain nonchalance.

"They will report of course that a woman called on you at this hour, but I hardly think it likely that they will be able to say who it was. I came in a taxicab which I picked up on the Avenue, and I wore this," she shook out a dark, chiffon veil which she carried over her arm.

"Mr. Vernon," she bent forward a little. Her voice throbbled, almost broke in her throat. "Of course you do not believe me. No matter what I say, you will continue to regard me as an emissary of my husband's. But if you will only try to lay aside any prejudice, any suspicions you may have on that score, I think I can soon convince you that I am here solely upon my own initiative. The very nature of what I have to say will prove that."

She puzzled him. No assertion of hers could carry any weight with him; yet there was an undeniable sincerity in her voice. He took refuge in silence, and waited for her more clearly to show her hand.

His mind surged with the strangeness of the moment, the fatefulness of this encounter. To meet again after all these years the woman who had inspired his first great passion, to whom he had given the love of his youth, whom he had idealized and set apart above life's dusty and trodden pathways — and who had at the last sordidly betrayed him!

The ghost of that old passion swept across his heartstrings, but evoked no response. It was but the momentary echo of words once full of meaning, but which had now lost their significance, and was succeeded by a sort of wonder that a past could be so dead. This woman, whose soft and exquisite loveliness had once filled his heart, who had shone like a star above him, stirring him to high, ambitious dreams, was powerless now to affect him in any way. Between them, instead of a vibrating ether full of colorful emotion and a thousand palpitating messages, was only cold, empty space.

And Freda on her part felt each moment more uncertain of herself and her mission. She had come with a plan of attack mapped out. But if it were the family scapegrace, time had wiped out every identifying feature by which she remembered him. Only the scar remained; and scars, even of so distinctive a character, are hardly a monopoly. Rather than make a mistake, therefore, and since he himself had shown no inclination to acknowledge the relationship, she decided to treat him as a stranger.

"Mr. Vernon" — her voice, although it could no longer move Colvin, had, he recognized, lost none of its wistful appeal — "I am going to ask you a question. If you answer in the negative, I shall accept your word and leave at once. That would be an easy

way to get rid of me, would it not?" she smiled faintly; "but I don't believe that you are the man to take it. To come to the point then: Are you the Mr. Vernon who called to see Mr. Whitefield's niece the night of the robbery which occurred at our house?"

"Yes," he answered readily. "I found a purse which Miss Fletcher had lost on the street that afternoon, and returned it the same evening."

He looked at her as he spoke, smiling a little. She was gazing at him, and suddenly as their eyes met, her scrutiny became more intense, more vital. It was as if a flame had leaped to her eyes, and focussed itself upon him as through a burning-glass. A quick thrill darted through him. Did it mean that she had recognized him? Then she brushed her hand across her eyes; the light he dreaded dimmed to a haze of perplexity.

She plucked vaguely at the fur of her muff, evidently a little at sea.

"You spoke a moment or two ago of the detectives my husband has following you. That can hardly be pleasant?"

He gave his quick, French shrug. "Sooner or later, it will stop, when Mr. Whitefield begins to understand that he is incurring an expense for which he is getting no results."

"Perhaps?" Her lips compressed a little. "But indifferent as you choose to seem, I cannot but believe that you would prefer to be freed of this espionage. The situation must be far from an easy one. It isn't necessary to go into all that, however, What I want you to understand is that my own situation is fully as unpleasant as yours; so I am here to propose a bargain to you."

"Yes?" said Ashe encouragingly.

"I want to ask your aid in recovering my jewels. My influence with my husband is well known. He will do — Well, it lies in my power to divert every suspicion from you. Truly, Mr. Vernon, I would do almost anything to get back those jewels of mine."

She had given the cue to her visit at last, and he drew a breath of relief. This made his course a simple one.

"I must confess that you surprise me, Mrs. Whitefield," he returned with grave courtesy. "Naturally, I know something of the Whitefield case; I read the newspapers. And I had gathered that your loss was inconsiderable, at least to so rich a woman as yourself — merely a few trifles."

She made a despairing gesture. She was forlorn, touchingly feminine. But he remained unmoved. He had seen her so before. There is nothing so pitiless in all the world as the eye which looks with a new and inevitably hard appraisal upon the object which it has once ardently adored. Poor, bare, shivering object of a past adoration! It stands there stripped of all those rosy veils of illusion which once lent it ineffable grace and charm — stripped even of whatever inherent beauty it may possess, because upon it is inflicted the self-scorn of the observer.

"Oh, those things on the police list do not count." She clasped her hands together, a sob broke from her lips. "You know well enough what I want — my sapphires worth a fortune. I am throwing myself on your mercy. . . . My husband must not discover the loss of those stones. They are only mine nominally. . . . Mine to wear, that's all. He looks upon them as an investment of his own."

Colvin could barely repress an ironic smile. The whimsical turns of the wheel of fate! This woman sitting opposite him had sold him out for a handful of pearls and sapphires. And now she was asking them of him, pleading with him to give her back her price.

He raised his eyebrows slightly. "An unfortunate situation, as you say. I am sorry I cannot be of any assistance to you, Mrs. Whitefield. I do not pretend of course to misunderstand your object in appealing to me. You believe that I am connected with the robbery. Not flattering, but forgivable under the circumstances."

"Robbery — and murder," she interrupted sharply. "You must admit that there are several coincidences in the affair which might prove annoying, even disastrous to you."

He laughed quite naturally, as if amused; and at the sound, she lifted her head quickly. Again her eyes focussed themselves upon him, that burning gleam in their depths.

"That's vague," he said. "You've hinted to me of reprisals several times since you've been here; but —"

He shrugged his shoulders, and as he did so, she again relaxed her scrutiny, and that haze of perplexity once more filmed her eyes. She heard him saying:

"The mere fact that I happen to have called at your home and talked with your niece some hours before the robbery occurred is hardly enough of a coincidence to base an accusation upon, Mrs. Whitefield. I am not even a material witness."

But she was rapidly losing her self-control. "Oh,

why will you insist upon this game of cross-purposes?" She pressed her arms down hard upon the sides of her chair. "I make you a fair offer. If you will only restore my sapphires, I will promise that you, in turn, shall not be bothered in any way. I will do more than that for you," eagerly. "You shall not be the loser. I will take you to the houses of my friends—women with even more valuable jewels than mine. I will give you information that you can use, will help you in a hundred ways."

Before he could answer this amazing proposal, they were interrupted by a knock on the door, distinct and imperative.

"Open up there, 'Hornet,'" commanded a voice from the outside. "No use stalling. We know you're in, and we want to see you."

Ashe looked up, startled, and then threw a glance of quick suspicion toward his companion. But her dismay was too real to be simulated. She turned to him, unnerved, imploring.

"What shall I do?" she gasped. "No one must see me here!"

He followed his instinctive impulse to protect a woman under any circumstances, and stepping quickly to the door of his bedroom, opened it and motioned her to go in. She did so, noiselessly closing the door behind her; and then, as she leaned faint and dizzy against the panel, she heard him cross the room, and admit his importunate visitors.

"Well, my boy, you seem to have been cutting quite a swath lately?" a gruff voice gave greeting. She recognized it as that of the police inspector who had been at the house on the morning following the robbery. "New line of goods you're showing this sea-

son, eh? But you ought to have known that you couldn't get away with it, not with that gash across your map; for as the old song runs: 'Everywhere that Johnson went, his scar was sure to go.'"

He gave a short, throaty chuckle; then his tone changed, and he began to browbeat.

"But getting down to business, Hornet, suppose you tell me —" He broke off abruptly, and Freda could picture the covert pulling of his companion at his sleeve. There were two of them, she had gathered when they entered the room.

A moment later, she caught a hoarse, warning whisper. Evidently they were very near to the door behind which she stood.

"Full, Chief; that ain't no more Al. Johnson than you are!"

There was a startled pause succeeding this, a sort of befuddled hiatus: then the Inspector whispered back in protest:

"But he's got the scar, all right?"

"So's a dozen other guys around town, maybe. He's about the same height and general description, too. You can't blame the boys for handing us the wrong dope. But get a fair slant at him, and anybody who knows Johnson could tell the difference."

"You're sure, Sergeant?" The Inspector was plainly reluctant to abandon his quarry. "They say this bird is there with the disguise stuff to a finish. Might it not be the 'Hornet' after all, just pulling off a new stunt on us?"

"Pos-i-tively not." The answer was uncompromising. "I'd know Johnson anywhere in a million, and I tell you it ain't him."

The whispers ceased; and after a pause, the Inspec-

tor addressed Colvin again, but in a far less free and easy fashion.

"Er —" He stopped and cleared his throat. "Suppose you tell us just who you are?"

"I might perhaps more justifiably ask the same question." Freda could imagine the light, derisive shrug accompanying the words. "But it is unnecessary; the earmarks of your trade are unmistakable. But the reason for this call with which you have honored me is somewhat less obvious. I gather, though, from some allusions to my unfortunate scar," she could almost see him lay his finger to his cheek, "and to a person you call the — the 'Hornet,' was it? — that you must have been misled into believing me some notorious criminal that you are after.

"Under the circumstances, then," he laughed amusedly, "I suppose, I had better clear myself of suspicion. Will you sit down and have a cigar? . . . To begin with, my name is Vernon, and —"

Freda, with her tense interest relaxing, suddenly became conscious of another presence close at hand. She turned with a little start to see Wimms standing just behind her, and also listening to the conversation on the other side of the door.

He moved back guiltily, but she took a quick step toward him.

"You are Mr. Vernon's man, are you not?" she asked in an undertone.

"Yes, madam."

"Then isn't there some way to get me out of here?" glancing around. "That door yonder? Does it lead into the hall?"

She started toward it as she spoke, but he raised a quick hand in caution.

"Wait a moment, if you please, Madam. I think the coast will probably be clear now, but I had better make sure."

He tiptoed over to the door, opened it carefully, and glanced up and down the corridor. Then he nodded to her to come ahead.

She paused a moment to fumble at her purse as she passed him, and slip a coin into his hand; and Wimms took advantage of the opportunity.

"I might perhaps be of further service to Madam," he murmured softly.

There was a significance in his tone which caught her attention. She turned quickly and looked at him.

"Unless I am mistaken, Madam has lost some valuable sapphires?" He formed the words with his lips, rather than spoke them aloud.

She dropped her hand sharply on his wrist. "And you can get them for me? Do so, and I will pay you well."

"How much?" The valet's face was like a mask; only his lips moved.

"Five thousand dollars."

A contemptuous smile flickered across his mouth. He shook his head.

"Ten thousand," breathlessly. "I can do no more than that."

Wimms leaned toward her, his narrow, ratlike face sharpening as if to the scent of some peculiarly rich cheese.

"It is not enough," he murmured. "But — Madam will understand that I, too, have been listening at doors — there was a proposition made to Mr. Vernon a while ago — Your friends — The ladies with

jewels even more valuable than your own — Would that offer also be open to another party?"

She fell back a step or two, repressing a slight gasp. Her eyes widened slowly. She stared at him as if fascinated. Then she drew herself up haughtily, and started across the threshold, but only to turn as a recollection of her desperate plight swept over her.

"Come to my house this afternoon," she said. "I will see you at three o'clock."

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Colvin and the "Hornet" had parted, the one to take up his more or less conspicuous rôle at the Hotel Marmontel, the other retiring to subdolous haunts and activities of his own, they made the separation between them complete.

The "Hornet," with what seemed to Ashe an excess of caution, had discountenanced any exchange of communication beyond that provided by an ingenious system of signals which had been agreed upon, and which served as a means to report their respective progress.

Realizing, however, the possibility of an emergency demanding more detailed consultation, he had arranged a method whereby under exceptional circumstances they could talk to one another over the telephone.

So strongly had he impressed upon Ashe, though, that this was never to be risked except as a last resort, that the latter withstood the temptation to use it, although he would have given much to obtain an expression from the "Hornet" upon that morning's events.

It was a great relief to his mind, therefore, when early in the afternoon there was delivered to him from one of the department stores a pair of gloves which he had neither bought nor ordered.

It was the pre-arranged signal by which the "Hornet" was to inform him when he wished to be called

up; and since the gloves were of gray castor, two-buttoned, Colvin gathered that he was to do so at two o'clock that afternoon.

Accordingly, leaving Wimmus to his own devices, he started out ostensibly for a walk, and crossing over to Broadway just as the clock on the Herald building pointed to the hour, entered a telephone booth.

Taking a leaf from Muriel's book, he had put in the forty-five minutes or so since leaving the hotel at a game of hide and seek, with the purpose of shaking off his dogging shadows, and fancied that he had succeeded. Still, even with the chance that one of them might be at his heels and able to "listen in," he had little fear that anything of importance could be gathered from the conversation; for the "Hornet" had instructed him on such occasions to clothe his speech in a casual and conventional hyperbole designed to bewilder any one trying to overhear.

The "Hornet" proved to be as prompt as himself. There was no delay in effecting connection.

"Well, how's everything?" his deep, harsh voice asked over the wire.

Colvin took his cue from the tone, direct, business-like, but as between friends — the "Bill and Joe" sort of thing.

"Oh, so, so," he replied. "Rather a busy day for me so far. Had a rush of customers all morning. Two from down-town — Center Street."

"H'm." The "Hornet" evidently caught the significance of this. "Have any bother in handling them?"

"No. They were looking for a special brand of goods — the 'Bumblebee' it was, or something like that — and they made me show my entire line. But

finally they seemed satisfied that they had come to the wrong shop."

"The buyers from that house are all boobs," the "Hornet" observed contemptuously.

"Nevertheless, they had me on edge for a while," confessed Colvin. "The situation was a bit thick, you see. I had a lady customer at the same time."

"A lady customer? At your place?" His satirical laughter rattled through the receiver. "Oh, I see. One of your aunts, eh?"

"On the contrary, it was yours." Colvin couldn't resist that, and he was repaid by a quick gasp from the other end of the wire.

"You don't mean it! What on earth did *she* want?"

"Jewelry," returned Colvin laconically. "She made me a rather staggering offer, but not having exactly what she wanted in stock, I was compelled to decline. Perhaps, also," he added, "she had another reason for coming. She has heard a good deal about me, you know, and she may have wanted to satisfy her curiosity."

"And did she?"

"I don't think so. The other buyers interrupted us before we had quite finished, and I had to slip her out the back way. If I'm any judge, though, she left me more puzzled than when she came."

"She won't stop there." There was a warning note in the nephew's voice. "You want to look sharp, son."

"By the way," Ashe broke in with apparent irrelevance, "I'd better tell you now that I won't be at home to-morrow evening, in case you should want me for anything. I am going to a dance at the White-

fields, and am dining first with Mrs. Vansittart and Miss Gansevoort."

The "Hornet" chuckled. "It sounds like the Society column in the Sunday supplement, which my wife pores over."

"Ah, yes; and how is your wife?"

"I haven't heard this week," returned the "Hornet" with equal gravity. "You know the doctor ordered her away for a complete change."

"Yes," still politely sympathetic.

"Yes," echoed Hempstead, and there was now a significance in his tone which made Colvin listen with a concentrated intensity. "And all of her friends have been so considerate in inquiring for her — except one."

There was an ominous emphasis in his voice now, something that advised his listener to heed every word and catch the meaning that lay beneath it.

"I hear that this person is away now on a little trip," the "Hornet" went on. "I think I shall have to look her up, and find out the cause of the coolness. Nice girl, very; and she's always been a good friend of my wife's, but a little mercenary, I'm afraid."

Ashe strove desperately to grasp exactly what the other was trying to convey. He realized that this was of tremendous importance to himself.

"You — you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean nothing very serious," interrupted Hempstead in swift warning. "I'm not very fit; that's all. And I may have to run out of town for a few days on a much needed vacation. I won't be leaving for a day or so, though. I want to decide on a location. It would be odd, if I should happen to run across this friend of my wife's, wouldn't it?"

Ashe groaned impatiently. "Isn't there any way I can meet you, and have a real talk?"

"This way, and that's all." The "Hornet's" tones were sharply decisive. "You want to cultivate a more philosophical attitude. Anyhow, I've told you all I know. Good-by."

Colvin hung up the receiver, and left the booth. He walked out into the noise and bustle of Broadway, heedless of the jostling crowd. Following the bent and also the training of his mind, he tried to arrange in a logical and coherent sequence all of the bits of information which he had gleaned from his associate.

It must be that the latter had at last some definite clue to the missing package—the Colvin papers. There was no other reason to have risked the telephone talk, unless that was the fact to be conveyed. Second, the "Hornet" had reason to believe that the papers were in the hands of some woman who had known his wife. Third, this woman had disappeared with them, and judging from what Hempstead had said of her mercenary tendencies, she was determined to be paid before giving them up. Fourth, the "Hornet" was not quite sure where she was, but meant to find out and go after her in person. Colvin devoutly prayed that the journey might be taken soon.

This waiting game was getting on his nerves. He reflected that if Whitefield found it even half as harassing as he did, it was almost in his heart to sympathize with the old fox.

Indeed, he would have had ample opportunity to do so, if he could at that minute have played the part of Asmodeus, and have lifted the roof of Whitefield's study. There he would have found visible proof that

the enemy was quite as much perturbed and annoyed as either he or the "Hornet" could possibly have wished.

Whitefield was sitting before the big table, his head bent on one hand, while he constantly ran the scales with the other. He had not changed his attitude for perhaps half an hour, when young Babcock came in with his usual noiselessness.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "But Mrs. Whitefield wants to see you as soon as possible on a matter of importance."

Whitefield lifted his head. Freda, he knew, would not have sent that message unless she really had something worth while to say.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"I'm here," said a voice behind the secretary.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," her husband grumbled, as Babcock left them together, and closed the door behind him. "What do you think those idiots from Headquarters have done now? Another piece of mismanagement. . . . Tramped up to the Marmontel this morning, broke open the door, or something equally clumsy, asked this Vernon a few polite questions, and found out — nothing. Too clever for them of course. Succeeded in convincing them he wasn't Fletcher. Blockheads!"

"His scar is exactly like Fletcher's," she said.

"Of course it is. Because he is Fletcher." Then, struck by her tone, he glanced up at her. "But what do you know about it?"

After a moment's silence, she said quietly:

"I saw him this morning."

"You — what?" he was immediately alert. His eyes darted at her from under his heavy brows. She

bore the scrutiny perfectly, lying back in her chair, languid, weary, impassive.

"I saw him this morning," she reiterated. "I went to the Marmontel, and asked for Mr. Vernon. I made a pretense of coming on a sort of a secret mission concerning my rings," she spoke quite smoothly. "But the truth of the matter was that Sammy Cruger had roused my curiosity. I didn't want any second-hand opinions. I wanted to see if this Vernon was either Ashe Colvin, or Fletcher."

"And did you find out?" The words leaped from his lips, his shoulders shook a little as he bent forward.

"I — don't — know," she rejoined slowly. "I wouldn't have believed that I could have been so baffled. I would have sworn that under any and all disguises, I should have known —" She caught herself suddenly — "either of them."

"But you must have some idea in your mind?" he said impatiently. "You can't be absolutely in the dark?"

She passed her hand wearily over her hair. "It may get clearer to me, but just now I feel utterly confused. I had forgotten how many years have gone by. That scar — it is so terribly disfiguring. Of course, too, I haven't seen Fletcher since I was first married. I was so young then, you know. I merely remember him as a tall, weedy boy with a sneering, defiant face, and a frightful scar across his right cheek."

"You ought to remember Colvin better." There was an explicit and unpleasant meaning in his voice but the only sign she gave was a more pronounced pallor. Her voice was as impersonal as ever.

"Ashe Colvin's hair was a light brown," she said reminiscently. "And this man's is almost jet black, and very gray over the temples. Ashe had a peculiarity of the eyebrows. One of them had a sharp, little peak, a sort of upward twist in it. This man's eyebrows are perfectly straight. I don't remember Fletcher's voice at all, but —" She seemed to have forgotten Whitefield's presence. Her eyes had an odd, introspective look as if she swept every secret corner of her memory — "there was something in this Vernon's laugh, and now and then a tone in his voice that made me think of — Ashe. Vernon speaks with a slight French accent, though, and when he makes a gesture, which isn't often, it's a Latin-race gesture. Ashe Colvin went to school in France, when he was a boy."

"Well, what of it?" Whitefield squared about and looked at her in astonishment. "There are always a lot of coincidences which fit every case when you're looking for them. Pshaw! It's crazy, idiotic, to suppose that Ashe Colvin and Fletcher would both have scars exactly alike. This man is Fletcher, of course. We might as well take that for granted. All right," straightening his big shoulders; "when he's ready to play, so am I. I wish, though," his long fingers curved in, "I wish I knew some way to choke what Muriel knows out of her."

He drummed on the table in silence, while Freda lay back in her chair, watching him beneath her half-closed lids.

He stopped his finger exercises presently, and looked straight at her.

"I'm just wondering," he said, in that casual tone she knew to be dangerous, "if you are playing per-

fectly square with me? That visit this morning without a word to me first. Suspicious, you know. You may have some game of your own on. Muriel insinuated a while ago that you needed a detective to watch you more than she did."

"Muriel!" She spat the word. The slow crimson crept up her neck, and settled in two deep spots on her cheek. Her mouth tightened, her breast heaved. Then with an effort she forced her self-control.

"Your game has always been mine," she said.

"H'm!" He had begun to drum again. "But you loved Colvin."

"Loved him?" She did not raise her voice, but the irony smouldering in its repressions vibrated through the room, and seemed to ring from the very walls. "I ruined him! I killed him for all I know — for you!"

"Not for me, my dear, to be exact. If it had been just a choice between men, you would not have wasted a minute deciding the question." He gave a short, dry laugh. "Your choice was really between Colvin and the social code. I am a pretty close observer, and I'll bet that I know more about the ins and outs of your character than any one living, even yourself. The only thing you really love is your pose. You simply couldn't give up being the beautiful, saintly Mrs. Whitefield. That's the reason I can always bank on you. There's one man anyway who has no illusions about you."

She had clutched the arms of her chair tightly with her hands, the red spots on her cheeks deepened almost to purple. she never lifted her eyes, she did not dare trust herself to look at him.

After a few minutes' silence he began to talk again, apparently forgetting their personal differences in the more serious problem before him.

"Why don't they act? It may be, though, that Fletcher is still trying to locate Colvin."

"Oh, yes; it may be that, or anything else." Freda rose impatiently. "But all this speculation is idle. It makes me nervous." She twitched her chair, and moving toward the door, stopped to say: "You will have the opportunity to see this Vernon man yourself to-morrow night at the dance. I sent him an invitation as you directed."

"Just so," he returned, and she left him frowning and furrowed. But his meditations were soon interrupted. Babcock came in to lay a note upon the table.

"This just came by special delivery, Mr. Whitefield."

Whitefield turned over the envelope in his hand, looking at it curiously. It was addressed in a large, upright, feminine hand not in the least familiar. He opened it. Upon a sheet of thick, white paper was written:

If you will state a time when you can see me privately, either at your office, or at your house, I may be able to give you some valuable information in regard to certain documents which were stolen from your safe. Address reply to,

Miss Hazel Phillips,
General Delivery,
Philadelphia.

He re-read the letter a second time, and then sat thoughtfully considering it.

"It may be a fake, it may be to draw my fire," he muttered at last; "but if it's genuine — I've got 'em!" He folded the sheet, and slipping it back into its envelope, put it in his pocket. "I'll know better how to handle this after to-morrow night. As Freda says, I'll have an opportunity at the dance to see this Vernon for myself."

CHAPTER XII

It was the night of the dance.

"Who's the new man that Estelle Gansevoort and Martina Vansittart have on leash?" one woman paused to inquire of another on the marble steps leading up to the reception hall in the Whitefield house.

"A Frenchman, or half-Frenchman, I believe. Somebody worth while, or else they wouldn't have him. Probably an officer convalescing, and sent over here on a mission of some sort. That scar tells the story. Freda's looking as good as new to-night, isn't she?" The woman stood on tiptoe to peer over the heads above her to the top of the stairs, where Mrs. Whitefield and Muriel were standing.

"She's got to," returned the other, "or that girl will snuff her out like a candle. My word! She's struck a new note for débutantes. No white tulle with a touch of silver for hers."

"I always want to wear smoked glasses when I look at her. She's a minx, believe me."

Mrs. Vansittart toiled up the staircase, panting slightly, but looking almost shapely in diaphanous black and jet, while Estelle stepped lissomely beside her, resplendently defying age. Colvin followed them.

Freda, aware that Muriel was sure to dazzle the eye of the beholder, had instinctively and with subtle, feminine wisdom, chosen to present a complete contrast, and thus avoid all odious comparisons. Gray gauze



For the first time he could scan his antagonist of this cloak-and-lantern duel. *Page 159.*



as impalpable as mist fell about her, its sad and tender tone unbrightened by the sparkle of diamonds; there was only the opaque luster of her splendid pearls.

But if the aunt had seen fit to emulate the twilight, the niece had borrowed her colors from the sunrise. Muriel was a picture by Goya. She was in yellow — yellow with the tang of flame in it, and unsubdued.

Whitefield, standing in line with the two, bent a glance upon Ashe which swept him like a scythe. Never had those knife eyes been so keen as now, when for the first time he could scan his antagonist of this cloak-and-lantern diel. Ashe bore the scrutiny easily. He had no particular fear of recognition from that quarter.

The two men murmured a few conventional words, Freda standing by with her loveliest smile — that sweet, remote, wistful smile which had haunted the imagination and stirred the hearts of many men. And then Colvin turned from them to look into Muriel's eyes.

As she greeted him under the gaze of her guardians, for Sammy Cruger hovered just behind her shoulder, a sparkle of audacious mischief glimmered on her lips.

"How often are you going to dance with me?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"As often as you ask me," she laughed.

"But that will include every one for the entire evening," he said.

"All but this," as some tall youth came up to claim her. "Come for me after the fourth dance," she whispered back over her shoulder, as she walked away.

He danced dutifully with his Aunt Estelle, and enjoyed it, but he undutifully offered thanks that his Aunt Martina, considering her bulk and weight, had

no such frivolous inclinations. Then he danced with various women to whom Estelle presented him. And then — after several centuries — the fourth was over.

Muriel was free to dance with him! Muriel was in his arms! And the scene was no longer a mere pageant; this handsome, elaborately decorated ballroom, these dancers — whirling hues of orchid and rose, italicized by the sharp black of men's coats.

He was one with it — the gaiety, the music, the movement. They danced into the sea of light. The syncopated beat of the measure was in his blood. Were they really bounded by walls, the confines of a room? He unleashed his imagination, and let it wander free. They floated through space to the rhythm of the universe — he and this beautiful girl whose narrow, drooping eyes were wide now and full of the zest of life.

When the music finally stopped, and they with it, they found themselves before a tall, trellised screen covered with vines. Muriel, quick to think and quick to act, drew him into the recess behind it. In front of them was a long window leading out upon a small balcony overlooking the narrow garden. She opened the door and stepped out; and Ashe, following, closed the door behind them.

By chance — or was it by chance? — a long, dark, velvet cape hung across the railing of the balcony. He picked it up and wrapped it around her, eclipsing her sunrise splendors.

Ashe inhaled a deep breath. The quiet, serene sky, the shadowy garden! A city asleep, its mighty, insistent voice as faint as the murmur of a tired sea! Dim, beautiful world! And Muriel with her rich, mysterious loveliness, the dusk velvet of her purple

cloak, shared and was one with the glamor of the magnetic night.

Imperceptibly she moved nearer. The slight contact thrilled him. He looked down at her quickly. Her head was thrown back almost against his shoulder. Her eyes were gazing straight into his.

He caught her in his arms. He held her as if he could never let her go. For each of them, thought was submerged in feeling, profound and passionate. He kissed her upraised lips. Then reason asserted itself, and remembrance. He pushed her away.

"That's all," he said in a harsh, broken voice. "For always!"

"It's not all," she whispered. "You haven't yet told me that you love me."

"Oh, yes, I have. And you know it." He laughed, but no one could have associated happiness with that dreary mirth. It clinked dully like a spurious coin. "I'm forty, and you are nineteen," he said moodily. "There's a great gulf fixed between us, which even love can't bridge."

"You're not sincere now," she accused, with that direct way of going to the heart of a matter, which always aroused in him admiration for both her intelligence and her candor. "The difference in our ages doesn't really count."

He lighted a cigarette, his hands trembling a little as he did so. Then he flicked the match over the balcony and watched its tiny spark of light whirl down through the darkness.

"I mean what those years span." He leaned back against the railing, his arms folded, facing her. "I would hate to ask you to look over that bridge."

"Oh, I am ready to look," she cried. "I have been

right along. Only, you haven't thought me worth your confidence."

"What nonsense! I know your courage, my dear. That's one reason I'm disillusionizing you. Since you are certainly going to say good-by to me, it would be much easier for my vanity if we should part now, while you could remember me with a little regretful sentiment."

"I'm not one to care much for regretful sentiment," she said brusquely. "I prefer to look into your tiresome old gulf."

"You are merciless, daring lady. All right, then. No use to harp again upon the fact that I am forty years old. But I will mention it in order to say that when I was twenty-five, my name — a good name, too — was so considerably tarnished that it was a case of getting out of Society, or being kicked out of it. So I got out."

"You are telling facts." In the dim light he could see that her eyes were narrowed; the warmth had gone out of her voice, it was as cool as if she were discussing with him some quite impersonal problem. "You are telling facts, but you don't give the reasons for them."

"I can't," he answered curtly. "It's one of those things that is not done." His smile was bitter. "To you, I will say that my intentions and my acts were honest, or seemed so to me. But I was in a position, where, if I had tried to clear myself, I should have violated every article of the unwritten code of a decent sport." He lighted another cigarette, and in the moment or so of silence, she made no comment on what he had said.

"You are too young to know that the essence of life

lies in our hopes and dreams," he went on. "The moment this — this thing overtook me, my — well, what you might call my vision of achievement — was dissipated like smoke. There was no more work for me to do. I was dead and buried — dead and buried for fifteen years. And then you came, and I discovered that the ambitions which I thought dead were only lying fallow, and were really stronger than ever.

"Muriel, if I found myself involved in a set of peculiar circumstances years ago, I am in a position to-day which is still more odd. You say that I have failed to give you my full confidence. I shall do so now."

"Yes?" Her voice held a curious, waiting quality.

He glanced quickly at the window into the ballroom, saw that it was tightly closed, drew nearer to her, and sank his voice still lower.

"Very well, then. To come back, I have got to ruin your uncle morally as far as the public is concerned, and probably financially. That prospect with you out of it leaves me cold. I have no feeling of either hatred or revenge. I left that sort of thing behind me years ago. It is the fortunes of war, and I say let the best man win; only, I mean to be the best man. As for him, he has faced this sort of thing from one source or another for years. But it's just as I told you the other day, the rotten part of the whole thing is, that I am not fighting in the open. I'm under cover, and I'm using any old weapon that comes to hand."

She laughed, and slipped her fingers through his arm. "Bully for you," she whispered. "You're a man after my own heart."

He laughed, too, in involuntary pleasure and amusement, and pressed her arm closer against him. Then he moved resolutely away; his face became deeply serious.

"It won't do, Muriel. I can't and won't let myself go. You must understand that in order to offer you a clear name of my own, I've got to blacken irreparably your family name; and there's nothing whatever of honor or achievement in the matter. It's merely a plain showing-up of your Uncle William. And so, my dear, to-night is good-by to any sentiment between us. Hereafter, we meet only on the ground of friendship, for I think I can still be of service to you. I love you with all my heart, but I'm going on my own way, and fight this thing out to the bitter end. It sounds like canting hypocrisy to say so, and I don't suppose you'll believe me; but nothing on earth would make me so happy as to take you with me, drop this whole beastly affair, and start off for the other side of the world."

"And why not?" she asked softly.

His jaw set. Again he folded his arms tightly across his chest. "No. I can't do that even for you. I've bungled things sadly; I ought never to have let you know that I cared. But my mission now is to save you from yourself and from me. And that is what I am going to do."

"Suppose, I don't want to be saved?" She had plucked a leaf from the vine on the wall beside her, and was tearing it to bits.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Do you think, I am going to take advantage of your splendid courage, your youth, your —?"

"Oh, you've got such Victorian ideas about youth,"

she moaned. "I love it in you, but if you would only understand that the girls of my age to-day know a lot about life."

"No one knows a lot about life unless he has lived it, and you have not. Your cleverness and keenness of observation are substitutes of no value. You —"

"I don't think all those things have any bearing on the matter," coolly interrupting him.

She drew her breath in sharply, as if she hesitated a frightened moment on the brink of unfathomed depths. And then she plunged, impelled by her own sheer, uncalculating daring.

"I know perfectly what I want — It's you."

The moving ardor of her voice! It stirred his heart unbearably. For the moment — only for the moment, to do him justice — he forgot reason, caution, everything. He threw his own excellent arguments to the wind. But although he stepped toward her, murmuring broken, passionate words, he stopped short before he reached her. It was the bravest act of his life, his supreme effort of self-control. When he spoke at last, his voice was husky, almost inaudible.

"That's a choice, Muriel, of which no sane person could approve."

"You talk like Uncle William," she cried rebelliously. "Just because you are considerably older than I am, you think you can decide what is best for me. . . . As if anybody ever could for another person. . . . And you offer the usual conventional reasons. But . . . you can't carry it off, Mr. Vernon!" She waved the tattered ivy-leaf triumphantly across his face. "You talk so safely and sanely about how I'm to play my game of life. What about yours? Are you playing it safely and sanely? Far from it.



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You're playing outside the lines, under cover of darkness. You acknowledge it."

He couldn't help laughing; she had countered so neatly. "Necessity," he said quickly. "Anyway, I'm a man; you're a woman. The rulings and the handicaps are different."

"Forget it," nonchalantly she brushed this aside. "Now I want the floor. I didn't interrupt you — much. So you will please show me the same courtesy."

She rushed on impetuously, without giving him a chance to answer.

"I know myself much better than any one else knows me. They've tried to repress and stifle me into bud-hood, when I was really a full-blown woman. But I'm perfectly sure of what I want. I always have been in a way. You spoke a while ago of your vision of achievement. Well, I've got mine."

"What is it?" he asked. Her mental processes always interested him intensely. "What are some of the things you think you really want?"

"All that you, or I, or anybody wants are just the things we think we want," she flashed at him. "Well, then," she clasped her hands together, her face shone with the beautiful, untried enthusiasm of youth, "I want — I want the crest of the wave, the wine-cup brimming. I want love, romance, ambition, struggle — all the work, and all the play there is. Most girls have yearnings to do things. They want to be artists, or actresses, or writers, or else do settlement work and redeem the world. I don't. I have not any gifts to cultivate. The Whitefields are not artistic, nor altruistic. But they know what they want, and they go straight for it.

"I wish to help some man make a career," she cried. "I wish to build with him. These immature boys I have to play with bore me to suicide, and the men seem so piffling. They would like to marry me, and have a good time on my money. La-la!" She snapped the fingers of both hands in the air. "I think not.

"Do you know the only kind of a man I will ever marry?" Her voice now was like bubbling honey, her emerald eyes sparkled with fire and laughter. "He must be a brilliant, intellectual man who knows many phases of life and the world, who won't give up something he's started out to do, even for the woman he says he loves; who fights in the dark, if necessary, and fights to win."

She ceased to describe her hypothetical man, and became naïvely personal.

"I don't care if you do ruin Uncle William; he's due for it. If you do not, somebody else will. That is, if they can; you've always got to make that reservation, when you speak of Uncle William — And it's awfully amusing when you talk about staining my family name. My grandfather, who was an unscrupulous old wretch I've heard, put several black marks against it. Uncle William has spilled the indelible ink bottle all over it. And Fletcher Hempstead, who Uncle William says is the 'Hornet,' has done his little best to add to the general discoloration. By the way," quickly, "you haven't kept your promise, and found him for me."

"Yes, I have," he asserted.

"You have?" excitedly. "And when do I meet him?"

"Never, if I can help it. I shall be the go-between."

"But —? But —?" she cried.

"That's all I can say at present." Colvin's tone was final.

She did not pursue the subject. There was a pause. Some one opened a window beyond them, and the music came more clearly to their ears.

Muriel sighed, turned, and laid her hand upon the door as if to push it open.

"You really refuse a proposal very tactfully, Mr. Vernon," she said over her shoulder. Under the lightness of her tone there was a hurt note which tortured him.

"Oh, my child! Say, instead, that I have broken my heart, trying to save you from an impossible mistake."

"Time wasted." There was unreadable mockery in her eyes. She pushed wider the window, and tossed her purple cloak back over the railing of the balcony. Then the light and the music engulfed her.

Colvin smoked his cigarette case empty before he returned to the ballroom. As he stood inside again, waiting a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the dazzle, he saw his Aunt Estelle signalling him from across the room.

"My patience!" she said. "William Whitefield and Sammy Cruger have been on Martina's and my trail all evening. They're like two hungry bloodhounds, and Martina and I have been fleeing Elizas, tipping about on cakes of mighty thin ice. Only champagne and our feminine love of intrigue have enabled us to go through the ordeal."

"I should never have put you in such a position," he said with compunction.

"We love it. What is life without excitement? But, my dear boy, do be cautious. I saw Freda's eye

as she looked after you this evening, and they — Well, they made me nervous, they were so deadly. I suppose I am perfectly absurd, but women do have intuitions. And I feel — Oh, I can't just describe it — But I feel as if you and Freda were on the eve of some terrible reckoning."

"The sooner the better, then," he said curtly. Both his face and voice were hard. Then he smiled down at her. "Those feminine intuitions are usually nerves. Don't you —?"

He stopped short, staring before him. Muriel and a tall man were skirting the dancers, evidently making their way from the ballroom. Ashe's brain whirled. He peered again, refusing to accept the first testimony of his eyes.

But there could be no mistaking that lithe figure, that haggard, cynical face.

It was the "Hornet" !

CHAPTER XIII

COLVIN stared, dazed, doubtful, unwilling for once to accept the convincing evidence of his own eyes.

So far he had glimpsed only one side of his sinister partner, a "Hornet" under cover and on the defensive, wary, absorbed in calculations and cautions, yet beguiling the tedium of inaction, as is ever the habit of the freebooter and adventurer in his moments of repose, with sage and philosophic reflections. Now Ashe, all unprepared for the metamorphosis, mind and eye both rejecting the audacity of it as a thing incredible, was to witness the "Hornet" in a direct attack, poised, lancelike, ready to sting.

It was some seconds before he could grasp the fact that this was really Hempstead. The suggestion of a "double" presented itself to his mind, but only to be immediately cast aside. Here was no case of chance resemblance; the man with Muriel was the "Hornet" himself, and none other. The very smoothness of that unmarred cheek — unmarred to the observer at least, as a result of Wimms's tutelage and his own constant practice — proclaimed him. There were other proofs of his identity; an occasional shifty flicker of the eye, his odd, twisted smile, and above all, a mischievous, malicious elation, which Ashe if no one else perceived, and which was more characteristic of the man than any mark in the whole Bertillon catalogue. Evidently the "Hornet" was enjoying himself — as much perhaps in the consciousness that he had outwitted his colleague

and had gained speech with Muriel, as in the fact that he had undoubtedly "put one over" on their common adversary.

What his reason might be for this daring excursion Colvin could not imagine.

As a matter of fact, the "Hornet's" strategy had been very simple and direct. A few days previous to the dance, a financier who had extensive interests in South and Central America had introduced to Whitefield a Mr. James Prentice, the representative of a number of companies in that part of the world which held concessions or franchises for traction lines in several important cities.

Mr. Prentice naturally had a proposition to submit, and he presented it so attractively that Whitefield's cynical and flagging interest was caught, and he was led into making an investigation of the other's claims. Then upon examination the project appeared so excellent, the promises of a large return, exaggerated though they had sounded, proved to have been so conservatively stated, that the traction man took up the subject in earnest.

Notwithstanding the personal anxieties which had absorbed him since the night of the burglary — perhaps, indeed, because of them, since it could not have failed to strike him that South America might prove a refuge under certain circumstances — he had had a number of interviews with Prentice, and they had discussed the matter more or less in detail.

There were certain preliminary complications — restrictions in some cases against the acquirement of the properties by foreigners, and things of that sort — which would have to be straightened out, and Prentice had suggested that he personally should see what could

be done through the use of his influence with the State Department at Washington.

They were now waiting for some word from the Department, and consequently it was no surprise to Whitefield when late in the evening he was summoned to the telephone by a call from his new associate.

Prentice's voice, harsh, a little unpleasant, but undeniably forceful, grated to him over the wire.

"Sorry to disturb you at such an hour, but I've got news from Washington that will not wait. That old granny you have over there has muddled things just as I feared he would, and the Secretary is clear out of line. We've got to get somebody else on the job quick — somebody that'll know how to put things straight. I've picked out the man all right, and I think I know just how it can be handled, but before going ahead, I'll need your O. K. to it. Isn't there some way that we can get together for about fifteen minutes? I don't like to talk over the telephone, of course, and it's rather important that we settle on a program without delay. I'm talking from the Biltmore now, and I can meet you here, or at your club, or if it's more convenient to you, I'll take a cab and come up to your house."

Whitefield hesitated half a second. "Make it at the house," he decided. "My wife's got a party on to-night, and they've swept over the place like locusts, but I guess I can find a corner for us. My study's free; I've locked 'em out of that. How soon will you be here?"

"Five or ten minutes."

"Good. I'll be down by the hall door waiting for you. Otherwise, you might run the chance of being picked up as a suspicious character," he chuckled.

"There's a small regiment of Hawkshaws on duty here to-night."

"Thanks for the tip," drawled the other. "In that case, I will leave my burglar tools at home."

One of the guests who was leaving early stopped to shake hands with his host as the latter lingered down beside the entrance.

"Why this outpost service?" he laughed. "Are you checking us up as we go to see that no one makes off with the spoons?"

"No," Whitefield grinned in return; "merely waiting for one of the two things that are always welcome—a pretty woman and a chance to make money. Guess which it is?"

"The pretty woman every time." The man shook an admonishing finger. "Fie, fie, and likewise, naughty, naughty. Have I really stumbled on a scandal in 'igh life—midnight rendezvous, and all that sort of thing?"

"Not to-night," Whitefield grinned again. He had been drinking rather freely this evening, although he only showed it in a touch of added mellowness. "No pretty woman wanting money this time, just an ugly man coming to bring me some—I hope."

"Hope? Sure thing, you mean, if the fellow ever gets into your clutches. He'll be lucky if he saves his shirt. By Jove, if I had your pile, I'd begin to let up."

It was all good-humored jesting of course; but Whitefield's gaze as it followed the other out through the door held more than a tinge of irony. If the world only knew how much of that reputed "pile" of his was false pretense! A call for a show-down now would mean his ruin. And it might so easily come. If

Hempstead or Ashe Colvin were able to force his hand at this stage of the game, he was lost. He passed his hand quickly before his eyes, as if to brush away the shadow of apprehension which was continually plaguing him, and stepping abruptly into a little lounging room at the side of the hall, took down a bottle and glass from the closet and poured himself out a stiff drink.

It restored and steadied him; so that returning to the doorway, he was able a few moments later to greet his expected visitor with perfect equanimity.

The "Hornet"—for it was the "Hornet" of course—was never in better mood, easy, assured, and undeniably distinguished in appearance.

"I'm afraid this intrusion is unpardonable," he said, as he and Whitefield shook hands; "but —"

"No 'buts.'" Whitefield caught him by the arm, and guided him along the hall to his study. "Business is always excuse enough with me for anything. And really it's a relief to get away for a few minutes from all that cackle and fluff." He waved his hand toward the stairway, down which was borne to them a spray of dance music and the babble of voices and light laughter.

"Wait a second." He paused before the door of the study to fumble in his waistcoat pocket for the key. "Ah, here it is. As I told you, I've kept this room locked to-night," he explained, as they entered, and he switched on the lights. "In a big crush like this, one never knows just who might be able to get in. And once burned, twice shy."

"Ah? So this is the room where your burglary occurred?" The "Hornet" glanced interestedly around, and quite naturally stepped toward the safe to

bend a scrutiny upon it — just how minute and searching a scrutiny Whitefield did not realize.

“A Clinedinst and Kipp?” he commented, turning back to his host. “Why, that’s generally considered the last word in safe-building. How was it opened; with a drill, or nitroglycerine?”

“Oh, this isn’t the one which was cracked,” Whitefield hastened to enlighten him. “This is one which I have had put in since; twice as big and twice as strong as the old one was. Double shell, two separate combinations, every late improvement that you can think of. The manufacturers guarantee that it would take the most expert crook ten hours of uninterrupted labor to get on the inside of it. But even so, I am taking no chances.”

The “Hornet” detected a certain boastful note, a slight expansiveness which betrayed Whitefield’s recent indulgences.

“Wired up with an alarm system, of course?” he probed, and as the other assented, he stepped forward again to run his hand tentatively down the safe’s smooth, shiny, black side.

“However, this isn’t what I came to see you about,” he broke off, after having shown just the proper degree of interest under the circumstances — not a bit too much, and not a bit too little.

He dropped into a chair, and drawing it forward toward the desk where Whitefield had seated himself, began to outline the nature of the emergency which he had mentioned in his telephone message; but he had hardly begun to speak before the other interrupted him to press the button and give orders for something to drink.

“Scotch and soda for me,” the “Hornet” responded

to the invitation, as a man servant entered in answer to Whitefield's ring.

"That's good enough for anybody. Make it two, Williams. And hand the cigars to Mr. Prentice before you go. Lots of time, Prentice, lots of time. Make yourself comfortable. I'd rather a hundred times be down here than up-stairs." He raised his head, as the servant opened the door to go out, and the noise from the rooms above broke for a moment upon their ears. "An isle of safety," he smiled, "in a sea of skirts and cats."

The "Hornet" sipped deliberately at the tall glass with its bubbles tinkling as they rose and broke upon the surface like the chime of fairy bells. Whitefield, less fastidious, drained his glass incontinently. He was obviously in that stage of half-intoxication where a little judicious urging would put him completely under the influence. But it was no part of the "Hornet's" scheme to get his uncle drunk. Like a dutiful nephew he was concerned to see that his relative kept coldly sober, although this rather from practical than sentimental motives.

He wanted the Whitefield wits clear, and the Whitefield judgment unimpaired; for this was no game of hocus-pocus which he was playing upon his kinsman, no seductive swindle, but a legitimate project.

He had hinted to Colvin that evening at the Dome that he had a number of irons in the fire, and had also confided something of his weary distaste with the ways of crime, and an ambition to rehabilitate himself in the world in which he had been born.

Mere vaporings of a "dope" dreamer, Ashe had believed this at the time. "When the Devil was sick, the Devil a saint would be," he thought. But he had

failed to take into account the Whitefield will and stubborn strength of purpose.

With the "Hornet" it was no snivelling "change of heart" of the ordinary, little crook in moments of discouragement and defeat. He had no yearnings for reform, no prickings of conscience to bother him. He was a recognized leader in his craft, applauded, envied, looked up to, an indubitable big frog in the murky puddle of crime. But his joy of empire was spoiled by the smallness and dirtiness of the puddle, not to mention the thronging dangers on its shores which kept him continually diving out of sight, or burrowing into the mud for concealment. He was convinced that for a frog of his constructive, daring, and resourceful talents, there were opportunities in that wider and more protected pool which he was pleased to call the "big game" of organized society. He wanted to foregather with the pickerel, the swordfish, and the shark, and operate within the law, rather than outside of it.

Yet in his yearning for the waters of respectability, he was also aware that he would have to seek some cove or corner where his previous career was unknown. His opportunities in New York, or even in the United States, were apt to be limited by the jack-in-the-box quality of a "past." And with such a gaudy and bedizened past as the "Hornet" had acquired, the possibility of having it pop from under its lid and confront him at some inopportune moment was too disastrous to be considered.

South America, however, presented no such limitation. Even from his boyhood, when his imagination had been stirred by an old book of travels which had somehow fallen into his hands, it had been the goal

of his dreams, and early in his roving career he had visited it to find the reality quite as enchanting as he had anticipated. He liked the country, he liked the customs, he liked the people — the peculiar Latin temperament with its subtleties, its love of intrigue, its soft-spoken, silken exterior masking the fire of passion. He understood them, and got along with them far better than the ordinary visitor from the States.

He had made his first journey there, well-to-do and with no other purpose than to take a holiday and wait until the excitement caused by a series of brilliant coups for which he was responsible had blown over; and thereafter, whenever too hard-pressed by the authorities, or simply feeling the need of rest and recreation from his work-a-day cares, he had always gone back. But never had he gone wrong below the Isthmus, never made a move which could in any way be questioned.

Most members of the underworld have some city of refuge — usually their native town — where, be they cracksmen, forgers, crooks, or what not, nothing could induce them to be guilty of a depredation; and all the territory from Colon to Punta Arenas was a real refuge for the "Hornet." His record there was unblemished, the pseudonym of James Prentice under which he was known was a guarantee of probity and honorable dealing.

Consequently, when he conceived the idea of re-establishing himself, it was to South America and its opportunities that his mind turned; or possibly he saw the opportunity, and that suggested to him the question of reestablishment. At any rate, he had embraced the chance. With his acquaintance, his reputation as a man of wealth and integrity, and his comprehension of the methods of the people, this was no very difficult

task. Within less than a year, the Señor Prentice had his scheme complete — franchises and concessions covering a chain of capitals and prominent cities, powers of attorney, credentials as business plenipotentiary, and a trunkful of statistics, blue prints, profile maps, and sworn statements from auditors and engineers.

But the real test was ahead of him. He had to get the capital to finance his proposition, and with Europe involved in war there was but one place to get it, New York; while in all New York he knew of but one capitalist with the traction experience or brains to understand his plans, or the necessary connections, political prestige, or practical ability to put it through — his Uncle William.

Yet to this incredible venture had the "Hornet" set himself, and for its furtherance were forged all those various "irons" which he had told Colvin he had in the fire, red-hot rivets to bolt and hold together the bridge which should carry him from the under to the upper world.

So far he had played an absolutely straight hand with Whitefield. In the mapping out of his campaign he had decided that all personal feeling — the old hostilities and resentments — must be set aside until his object was accomplished. He was dealing not with his uncle, he told himself, but the financier; and he needed the latter's aid and influence too much at this juncture to jeopard the stakes by anything in the way of trickery or fraud.

And then fate had unexpectedly thrown the Colvin papers in his way, and he saw his way clear to a supreme revenge. He had at last an instrument with which to crush Whitefield at any time he chose, and strip him bare.

But that was all in the future. At present he required all of Uncle William's trained sagacity and whole-hearted support, and never more so than tonight, when the business stood at such a critical stage.

"I can't let him get pickled," he thought, frowning at the glass in his hand with its rising bubbles. "I've got to have the very best he has in the shop, if we are to handle this situation down at Washington."

Resolutely he set himself to the task of preventing his uncle from taking anything more to drink. He plied him with hypotheses and rosy schemes and crisp suggestions instead of Scotch and soda. He mixed a cocktail compounded of clever expedients and stratagems, which gripped the financier's flagging faculties and spurred him into vigorous consideration of the issue.

Under the stimulus of the "Hornet's" keen presentation of the subject, Whitefield's brain cleared, and he was roused to a spirit of bold decision. Never had he shown himself more masterful, more farsighted in his grasp of a question.

Together the two took counsel, testing and weighing each point brought up, until at last they had outlined a program to which neither could offer any further amendment. Then, seating himself at the long distance telephone, Whitefield held a five minutes' conversation with a man in Washington, and the thing was done.

The "Hornet" could hardly believe it. Everything had come about so easily. The last obstacle in the way of political interference with his scheme was swept aside. All that remained now was the financing of the project, and Whitefield had assured him that there would be no difficulty in regard to that.

But it was not in the "Hornet" to betray his inward emotions — neither elation when he won, nor disappointment when he lost.

He rose briskly from his seat, and extended his hand across the desk.

"Well, now that's settled, I'll be on my way," he said. "Sorry to have kept you so long from your guests."

But Whitefield shook his head. He was exhilarated with the show of power he had just given, and he did not wish to return to the effete inanities of the ball-room. It was like offering cream puffs to a lion with the taste of blood in his mouth. Besides, the "Hornet" interested and amused him.

"Nonsense," with a glance at the clock. "Why, it's just the shank of the evening." Then a sudden idea came to him. There was no question of the "Hornet's" presentability. "Listen," he said, "they'll be just about serving supper up-stairs now, and you must stay and join me. I'll have one of the men arrange a table in some quiet corner, where we can eat our supper, and still not be interrupted.

"Or, I'll tell you what I'll do," he added. "I'll make that a table for five, and then I'll round up Wallace and Harding and Calhoun — they're all here tonight — and you can lay your proposition before them. How's that? Keep things moving right along? Strike while the iron's hot?"

The "Hornet," who had appeared to hesitate at first as if casting about for some way to decline, yielded now to his hospitable urging, and together the two left the study together.

"Don't get the idea into your head, either, that you've got to hold yourself strictly down to business."

Whitefield prompted, as they mounted the staircase. "Enjoy yourself. Have a good time. I'll introduce you to some mighty good-looking women, if you say so. Oh, Freda," as she passed them at the moment, "I want to present my South American friend, Mr. Prentice."

He left them talking together, and hurried off in search of the men of whom he had spoken, prominent figures in the world of finance, whose names graced almost every page in the Directory of Directors.

Soon he returned with the three of them. "A Harriman, a John Gates, and a Russell Sage," the "Hornet" classified them, out of his profound knowledge of human nature.

"A little supper party we've made up, my dear," Whitefield explained to Freda. "Mr. Prentice is going to tell us something about South America." And then, leading the way, he guided them to the palm-sheltered nook where he had directed that their table be laid, and where two footmen in scarlet evening livery stood waiting to seat them.

The "Hornet" was surprised to find how little he was impressed by the exalted company in which he found himself. His confidence and sense of power grew as he realized how easily he held the attention of these lords of earth, cold-eyed though they were, sated with schemes and propositions, skeptically from Missouri.

It came to him thrillingly that he need waste no more years in furtively prying locks and making stealthy entrances to get what he wanted. Henceforth he would come boldly and by daylight, and men like these would gladly admit him, and hand over their checks to finance the ideas he presented.

And as his spirit expanded, his tongue loosened into picturesque expression, and the magnetism of his conviction swayed and held them captive. The shifting crowds of Rio with its tessellated sidewalks, its fresh-washed house fronts, its stately Avenue Rio Branca they saw through his eyes. They smelled the fragrance of the orange and lemon trees, and warmed to the sunshine of a summer land. The sparkling, deep blue bay spread itself before them, with its ring of encircling mountains — Sugar Loaf, Tres Irmaos, Corcovado and Tijuca, Gavia's huge, sail-like bulk. Palm trees rustled in their ears, not the few stunted bushes of the florist which screened them in, but trees lofty and commanding, whole forests of them.

He waved his hand, and the purple, tropic night descended. Lights glowed from the dark hills around Rio like the flash of fireflies, and twined themselves into strings and festoons along the water front and down the broad avenues. A pleasure-loving, pleasure-seeking population trooped out of its houses, and gathered by the thousands at the parks and places of recreation.

The night life of Rio, gentlemen! Why, New York with its few block of lobster palaces and cabarets is like a staid New England village compared with this metropolis where everybody turns out, and the spirit of *fiesta* bubbles up fresh with each setting of the sun.

He switched to São Paulo, brilliant, modern, breathing of opulence; to Bahia; to Para; to Pernambuco with the long rollers of the South Atlantic breaking over its rocky reefs in a smother of foam. He sketched for them the scintillating, Paris-like gaiety

of Buenos Ayres and Montevideo; carried them in the twinkling of an eye from Caracas to Lima, and from Quito to Santiago.

But always his tale was of crowds — crowds at the race tracks, tremendous outpourings at the bullfights, holiday throngs on the frequent Saints' days, thousands of worshippers seeking the churches and cathedrals on Sundays and fast days, a constant movement of people day and night.

And that all means transportation, gentlemen — pesos, milreis, the equivalent of our homely, American nickel. It's a continent just awaking to the development of its resources and possibilities. Coffee, rubber, cattle, lumber, sugar, spices, fresh fruits, wheat and cotton, ore, asphalt, oil and coal. Every one of them spells expanding towns and cities and expanding populations.

The champagne frothed untasted in their glasses as they listened, and the courses were served and removed with their plates untouched; for the "Hornet" spoke not only with the tongues of men — the business jargon that they could understand and appreciate — but he also waved the wand of a magician, and invested his proposition with all the romance and color of adventure.

As the group broke up, and the three financiers drifted away, Whitefield gripped him hard by the arm and bent toward him.

"You've got 'em, Prentice," he breathed exultantly. "When those three dead fish sit there for an hour with their mouths open and their eyes popping out of their heads like a bunch of kids listening to 'Jack the Giant Killer' for the first time, and when old Dwight Calhoun offers to blow you off to luncheon to-

morrow — it'll probably cost him all the way to thirty-five cents — there's nothing else to it."

They came out to the ballroom, and stood together talking a moment at the edge of the floor.

"Want to dance, Prentice?" suggested Whitefield. "You must meet my niece, Miss Fletcher."

"I shall be delighted to meet Miss Fletcher," returned the "Hornet." He did not confess that he did not dance until he was talking to Muriel.

"I suppose it's pure trespass of me to take up your time when I am so hopelessly out of it, Miss Fletcher," he said. "I can't even one-step."

"How nice." She spoke indifferently, opening and shutting her big, feather fan. "I'm tired myself."

"Then maybe you'll let me talk with you about ten minutes — where we shan't be interrupted?"

She glanced up at him quickly; then her eyes dropped again in wary caution.

"It sounds awfully interesting." The languor in her tone was perceptibly forced now. "But — why should I?"

"Well, say on Vernon's account."

If the "Hornet" had possessed any acquaintance with his cousin — known her as Whitefield did, for instance — he would have recognized that the swift tangling of her black lashes, as she again looked up at him and again dropped her lids, was a danger sign. It meant that she was on guard, that the buttons were off the foils, and she stood ready for the quick game of parry and thrust.

"Uncle William must be failing, Mr. Prentice," she laughed contemptuously. "This is too clumsy. Why, a kiddy could see through it."

The "Hornet" leaned toward her under pretense of looking at her card.

"Now don't start, or jump, or make a show of yourself," he murmured. "I'm going to tell you something. This isn't a game where Uncle William and I are against you, but where you and I are against Uncle William. Do you understand, *ma belle cousine?*"

"Oh!" There was just the quick, half-stifled exclamation, scarcely more than a catching of her breath. Then, with admirable control, she recovered her usual indifferent, almost sullen manner.

"You'll do." The "Hornet" nodded his satisfaction. "I thought I could take a chance. It's seldom I make a mistake in sizing up any one, either man or woman."

She swept aside the implied compliment with a wave of her fan. "Fletcher Hempstead had a scar," she frowned slightly.

"He lent it to his friend, Vernon," his mouth twisted in his sardonic smile, "at the cost of much mental anguish and mortification of the flesh. This damask cheek is harder to maintain than you may imagine."

She shook her head. Her eyes were still full of suspicion. "What do you wish to talk to me about?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll not ask you to commit yourself; don't be so distrustful," he laughed. "Vernon will vouch for me, if it becomes necessary. Put him the point-blank question to-night, if you choose. But in the meantime, just take the matter for granted, and give me the five or ten minutes that I want with you."

She considered a moment. "What is it about?"

she asked again, but in a different tone. "Have you some plan to get our money away from Uncle William and into our own hands?"

He nodded. "Yes; but that isn't what I wish to talk about with you now. That comes later. I'll make him come across all right — with your share at least, and mine, too — although possibly in another way. It seems hardly likely now that I shall care to change this smooth, Prentice skin for the Hempstead spots, as I should have to do if I made a direct claim. But I'll get what's coming to both of us, never fear. First, though, I've got to clear things up a bit. I'm playing three hands in this game, you see. There's mine, and there's yours, and there's — Vernon's. And they've all got to dovetail and work in together.

"That's why I want to talk to you," he concluded. "I take it for granted that you are with us and that you'll help. But I want to know just how much you are able to do, and I want to arrange some way of getting into quick communication if I should need you. I haven't sought you out before, because it didn't seem necessary, but it begins to look, little one, as if you would have to bear a hand as well as the rest of us. Now are you willing to come with me? There must be some place," he looked questioningly around him, "where we can be undisturbed."

She hesitated but one brief second, as she thought of the little balcony where she and Colvin had so recently stood. There was a twinge of the heart, but this was no moment for sentiment. She was a woman of courage and decision.

"This way," she said; and it was then as they crossed the room that Ashe saw them together, and experienced the most amazed moment of his life.

And with his astonishment and wonder, he was conscious of a dull sense of defeat. He had been over-matched, out-generalled. The meeting he had struggled to avert was accomplished, and what the consequences might be no one could determine.

He must know the motives which had led the "Hornet" to seek Muriel, and self-willed, impressionable, reckless as she was, who could foretell the influence which that warped and cynical nature might have upon her life?

The "Hornet's" presence there could not be sheer bravado. Something must have arisen, some unexpected complication, which had caused him to emerge from under cover, and hazard such a desperate expedient. He required the girl's air of coöperation in some way; that must be it.

And against this, Ashe's heart rose in a surge of protest. She should not be made use of, nor involved in any of their schemes. Whatever the outcome to himself or the "Hornet," no taint of this sordid struggle must rest upon her. He would fight against that with every ounce of strength that was in him. If he asserted himself, he did not doubt that he could make the "Hornet" see reason. Yes; but how about Muriel? He had failed in this instance to prevent her from getting her own way; against all his opposition was her determination to gain speech with his cousin. How then could he look with any confidence to a second encounter, where her interest and inclination, her hatred of her uncle, her desire for freedom, the lure of intrigue and excitement, would all be pitted against him?

He wished that he knew her better — inscrutable, brilliant creature. Yet he knew, too, that a great

part of her fascination for him arose from the fact that he had not fathomed the secret which lay behind her eyes. Her strength was obvious, but what were her weaknesses? He was uncertain where to question, and where to depend. He wondered if her will, her intelligence, her shrewd perceptions balanced adequately her audacity, her headstrong daring.

His Aunt Estelle had turned away, and was talking to a little group of people, and so his meditations were for the moment undisturbed. He leaned back against the wall with arms folded, the frown between his eyes deepening as he gazed down at the floor.

"Not dancing, Mr. Vernon?" It was the voice of Freda. She had stopped for a moment with the group about Miss Gansevoort, and now she moved on to speak to him.

"No," rousing with a slight start. "I'm longing to, though, if you are not too tired." He forced himself to smile and answer courteously.

She too smiled and lifted her eyes to his, and he felt a chill, unmistakable premonition of impending danger.

CHAPTER XIV

THE blare, the riotous syncopations of a fox-trot broke across the ballroom as Colvin extended his arms, and Freda shook her head and drew back with a faint frown.

"I am afraid I am old-fashioned, Mr. Vernon. All this trotting wears me out, I find, and I think I should like to waltz. Let us wait until I can send word to the musicians to play a good one. Any preference? Mine," she paused, smiling up at him slowly and sweetly, "is always 'The Beautiful, Blue Danube.' You see how remote I am from the present era." She turned her head, and asked a man to carry the order to the musicians.

"Poor present era. It has lost heavily in charm and grace," Ashe returned with easy flattery. But every nerve in his body was taut.

He wondered what that half-revealed menace in her eyes meant. Was she merely casting about in the dark, trying to solve the puzzle of his identity, or had she succeeded? Some chance expressions, some slight, familiar gesture might have betrayed him.

At any rate, she was putting him now to a test he would have gone far to avoid. A waltz! They must have waltzed miles together in the old, dead days; she knew his step perfectly. And the Blue Danube! It had had some sentimental significance to them — just what he could not now remember, nor had he the slightest desire to do so.

However, it was too late to hedge or draw back. He had to go through with this dance, no matter what the result. He exchanged small talk with her during the interval until the fox-trot ended — the superficial, casual chatter of such an occasion.

Then upon his unwilling, angry ears there fell the first slow, rhythmic beat of that waltz, perhaps the most sensuous and seductive ever written, artificial as the flower-garlanded Viennese fêtes for which it was composed, sweet as the roses which have faded in the glitter and light of a thousand ballrooms, passionate and evanescent as the kisses exchanged in dim conservatories while its music still lingered in the air. The roses are dust, the kisses long ago forgotten; but the old waltz yet has power to stir the blood of younger generations.

In spite of his reluctance, Colvin fell under its spell. Freda danced as gracefully as ever, and although the woman was nothing to him, he found it impossible not to enjoy the perfect conception of time and rhythm of such a partner. They did not speak, simply danced on and on until the music stopped.

"Ah! That was dancing!" exclaimed Colvin, speaking naturally and freely for the first time. "Your choice was an inspiration, Mrs. Whitefield."

She looked back at him, unsmiling; there was an odd, excited glitter in her eyes.

"I am glad you found it so. But I have another inspiration. We did not half finish our conversation at your hotel yesterday morning. Won't you come to my sitting-room a few minutes? I am sure I can make myself clearer than I did then, and explain not only my unfortunate mistake, but — several other things."

She was his hostess; there was nothing to do but

acquiesce. But even if there had been a loophole of escape, it is doubtful if Colvin would have accepted it. There was a sense of fatality upon him. If this were the moment to try conclusions with her, then let it come, and have it over with. It was, therefore, in the spirit of the gamester who, with a "hunch" that the spinning ball will fall against him, yet resolutely plays the red or black his game calls for, that he followed Freda to her sitting-room.

As he entered, he looked about him with a quickening of interest and surprise. He remembered it well as the conventional, chintz-bright, flower-sweet, photograph-strewn boudoir of a pretty woman.

But what a difference now! Arachne's web. Low-toned, soft and dim, at first glance restful, and still flower-sweet. Freda's love of saffron roses had never been supplanted. There was a bowl of them on the table beside Colvin's chair, and their petals were falling on a small, wonderful, bronze tigress couchant, her claws unsheathed, her lip drawn back from her teeth, ready to spring — the eternal symbol of the ruthless, treacherous, eternal feminine. It seemed the one definite note in an atmosphere of evasions. Fog! That was the keynote of the room.

"Ah, you are admiring my bronze!" Freda was leaning back in a long, low chair. "I have some really nice pieces. I must show them to you before you go."

"Your room is very interesting," he replied. "A person's environment is so apt to be an expression of character, don't you think?"

"Ye-es." She looked at him a little suspiciously, as if divining some deeper meaning in his tone, but failing to grasp it. "I suppose most people have more than one side to their natures."

He nodded. "Yes; that strange, hidden self which is so much more real and interesting than the side one sees. Sometimes it is beautiful, sometimes ugly; but it is always fascinating."

"Our hidden self," she said slowly. "It lives in all of us, doesn't it?" Absently she pulled the petals from a rose which swayed near her, and closed her fingers about them. "The life of all women perhaps — but certainly of women like me — is the life of the heart. The heart's history!" She spoke with apparent irrelevance, but he doubted both the seeming and the irrelevance. Then she fell to silence, but it was brief.

"When I was very young and very poor — for we were awfully poor for people who had to keep up a social position, you know — it seemed a wonderful thing to me to marry Mr. Whitefield, a door of escape from everything that I detested. He could give me all that I had longed for and dreamed of. Perhaps I was too young to understand; I didn't know my own temperament, never took it into account; so I gained everything and — nothing." Her head drooped on her hand, the rose petals fell unnoticed to the floor. "I have had youth, health, good looks, admiration, but —" She paused.

He took his cue. Well he knew the next move in the game. "Many men must have loved you. You are the type that all men adore." He forced the note of flirtation. He had an intense curiosity to see where she was leading.

She let her eyes rest on his a long moment. She knew that she was still beautiful, and that she was at her loveliest in her wistful, twilight grays. To-night at least, the empire which was slipping away so fast

was still secure. She swayed toward him. Her voice was low, quick, touched with feeling.

"Ah, you are one of the few people who understand. It is easy to talk to you, to tell you something that I want you to know. I'm not just droning on about myself; I will get somewhere in a moment if you will be patient with me. I suppose I am a very rash woman; I know that I am a very feminine one, for I always follow my instincts and intuitions. And my intuition is to trust you, and my instinct is to confide in you." She smiled her sweet, slow, siren smile.

"I am more than flattered, I am honored." He was taking his cues more easily now.

"Very well, then. My confidence, even if it bores you, will at least explain as nothing else could do my action of yesterday morning." For the first time there was a trace of nervousness in her manner. "There is a dear boy, Ollie Darnton; perhaps you have met him. It is absurd, of course, but during the last year he has rather lost his head about me. It is only fair to myself to say that I did my best to show him the folly of it, even while I could not help feeling the sweetness of the tribute. You know, a woman becomes accustomed to that sort of thing; but she only appreciates it when she realizes the flight of time, sees that her beauty is subject to change—" She shivered, and broke off. There was a film over her eyes, tragedy in her tightened mouth. But after a moment she controlled herself, and went on.

"To be brief, Ollie has no business ability; he is a child about money, and last spring he managed to get into very serious financial difficulties. The market broke wrong for him. He had been foolish — And I — I let him pawn my sapphires. His father re-

turned this fall from Europe, and helped him out, and he redeemed them, and returned them to me. He gave them to me the night of the robbery, and without my husband's knowledge I took them down about twelve o'clock, and put them in his safe. They were taken with the other things.

"Mr. Vernon, my husband is in such a mental state at present that I dare not let him know of the loss of those sapphires. He is under a strain so severe that even he is beginning to show it. If he ever discovered that I had permitted Ollie to pawn them, he would be utterly savage. He would never believe that the boy and I hadn't planned the robbery, and carried it through. You see, he is counting on those sapphires, and these," she touched the string of large, superbly-matched pearls which fell below her waist, "to raise a large sum of money if the necessity arises. If he learns that they are gone, I dare not think of the consequences.

"Oh!" She broke down completely. Her face was tortured, twisted. She stretched out her clasped hands to him. "I know that you can continue to be politely mystified, or perhaps insulted; but you can not dismiss it that way, you can not. You can not put me off with meaningless words. You know, and I know, that there is something back of my suspicions. The links fit too well in the chain. I feel, I am sure, in spite of anything you may say or do, that you have some knowledge of my sapphires.

"No, no," as he gave his French shrug, and lifted his brows in disclaimer; "that is not convincing. Mr. Vernon, you must understand that my case is an absolutely desperate one. I am making a desperate appeal to you."

There was no doubt in his mind of the sincerity of her words, and although she did not move him, she made him miserably uncomfortable and unhappy. He was so indifferent to her that her personal distress meant little to him; but as she said, she was a woman in a desperate position, making a desperate appeal to him, and he was of a nature which could not be deaf to an appeal from any human being without feeling the impulse to help and assuage.

There was no satisfaction in this achievement of a completed revenge; no triumph in seeing her suffer what he might, after the manner of men, regard as a just retribution. The primitive notion of the wronged and wounded creature to wrong and wound in turn had never had much place in his soul, and what little existed had long ago burned itself out. He struggled to be philosophical. Freda's abasement was one of those inevitable things which any one with a penetrating insight into life must have foreseen. The mills of the gods were grinding, that was all; but he profoundly wished that he might have been spared the spectacle.

His resentment against the "Hornet" flared again. He wished to heaven that Freda had not so inexplicably tangled the situation by placing her sapphires to the "Hornet's" hand, and that the latter had for once resisted his professional impulse to appropriate them.

"Mrs. Whitefield," he said, "what you think, or do not think about my collusion in the theft of your jewels is immaterial to me. I am no more insulted by your suspicions than I would be pleased by your faith in me. But this you must believe: that it is quite out of my power to aid you in recovering your lost stones. If I

had the best will in the world, it would still be impossible."

She gave a little suppressed cry which turned into a moan, and twisted her hands together. She did not believe him. His words in a way served to convince her that he knew more, much more than he was willing to admit. She felt that she had failed so far because she had not used the right method; but when it came to methods, there were more than one. She raised her eyes. Beyond Ashe, and facing her, was a long, narrow mirror in a faded, antique frame. In this subdued room, where the lights were so softly shaded that they shone as warmly dim as the sun shrouded in mist, her image wavered, shadowy but still lovely, alluringly lovely.

"That means," she said slowly, "that you will not help me. No judge could have given me a more terrible sentence." Her voice was even; then she broke suddenly. "Oh, my punishment is too great!"

She was still sincere enough, but the sincerity was calculated now, employed to produce a definite effect.

"Mr. Vernon, do you remember that terrible and true line of Oscar Wilde's, 'And each man kills the thing he loves'? I wonder if many lives are doomed to such a horrible realization of it as mine?"

She had not asked the question of him, but he answered it. His chin was lifted, his face was very cold, his mouth was stern.

"I do not know, Mrs. Whitefield. I am not your father confessor."

"You are very harsh," she sobbed; "and yet you must, you must listen to me. There was a man once whom I loved with all my heart — But circumstances came up — The price I had to pay for loving him

was too high." She bent her head on her hands, her voice was broken by her weeping. "To save myself, I ruined him. I do not know where he is . . . whether he's dead or alive. . . . I only know that I've paid. I've paid through every day, and year, and hour since. I've paid with my soul's remorse, with an unceasing ache of my heart."

And now he was to reckon with a new and undreamed-of element — the vitality of memory. She, the woman, could not reach him; but these unloosed forces of pent feeling, the emotion vibrating through the room, created an atmosphere which reacted on his nerves, and vivified the buried past. His mind thronged with pictures. He lived again the scenes of the night when she had come to him in her weakness, her fear and her love, and had left him bankrupt in friends, honor, and hope. He felt stilled, smothered. The very air seemed heavy with old regrets and rebellious and passionate longings. His impression of fog in the room increased.

She had fallen on her knees before him. Her poignant face, her streaming eyes, were lifted to his.

"Oh, isn't there any forgiveness for me," she cried; "anywhere?"

The years were dissolved. His old memories and his present consciousness made union. So had her face looked that night when anguished, tear-wet, it had lain on his breast, and she had betrayed him with a kiss. His breath came in short, sharp pants. There were drops of sweat on his forehead. His teeth were clenched. His voice came through them in a strident, labored whisper.

"You can't play it on me again, Freda. Never again."

"Oh! Oh!" With a deep, tearing, gasping breath, she was on her feet. There was both terror and triumph in her eyes. Half-cowering away from him, she still stared as if fascinated.

"I knew it! I have known it ever since we danced together. You are Ashe Colvin."

He had a chaotic moment — that terrible minute in the game of life when by one foolish move we lose the stakes on which our very soul is set. With Ashe this was quickly followed by the imperative impulse to retrieve. He bent all the strength of his will to resist the discouragement and bewilderment he felt. This was no time to weaken. He looked back at her steadily — faintly smiling — lifted his shoulders with an essentially Latin shrug, and spread his hands palm outward.

"You should see your doctor, Mrs. Whitefield. Your nerves are playing tricks on you."

He realized that it was weak; but it gave him time to think, and also put the next move up to her.

Freda did not answer, merely threw back her head with impatient contempt. Then she sat down, and leaning her cheek on her hand, thought deeply. Finally she looked up at him, and spoke abruptly.

"Mr. Vernon — I'll continue to call you that — I've got to have those sapphires. Got to! I don't very much care how." She held his eyes, and there was a significance in hers which he could not for the moment decipher. "I do not have to rely on my prayers to you to help me get them. You and Fletcher Hempstead do not hold all the trumps. For instance, there is the girl!"

He suppressed the exclamation that rose to his lips; but in spite of his determination to maintain an iron

self-control, he started. There was an unmistakable threat in her tone. He tried to convince himself that it was only an hysterical attempt at "frightfulness" on the part of an overwrought woman; but this was futile. He had to realize that he was dealing with that most subtle and dangerous creature on earth — a woman inherently without a scruple, and a woman cornered. In his own experience she had shown that she would wreck any life, if by so doing she could preserve and enhance her own interests.

"The girl?" he repeated questioningly. The mental maelstrom which her words had precipitated calmed a bit. The fear which had clogged the free beating of his heart eased. This woman was weak, shifting, underhanded; Muriel was strong, quick-witted, confident.

"Ycs," and now her attitude became easier, more relaxed; "my charming niece. As I told you yesterday morning, I can make it possible for you to see a great deal of her. But," she shook her head regretfully, but the vindictive gleam in her eyes belied the regret, "I'm afraid if you do not help me to get my stones that I shall be so occupied with my own problems, that I — Well, that I might relax something of my vigilant care of her. Of course one cannot fail to realize in these days that the path of an heiress is beset with dangers. Accidents — often fatal ones — occur almost every day, and Muriel is so wilful, so daring."

Never before had Colvin known what it was to feel a murderous instinct, but he comprehended it fully now. He longed to strangle Freda, and leave her gasping, dying upon the floor. His anger and his contempt for her were so great and burned so fiercely

within him, that he wondered his glance did not scorch her like flame, sear that white skin of hers, until it blackened and charred before his eyes.

But almost it seemed to him as if some warning, quieting voice repeated in his ear: "Don't give way! Hold on to yourself! Play the game!"

"I think you will help me — Mr. Vernon." Her voice was softly confident.

The fog which had seemed to envelop him in this dim and shaded room, and becloud his faculties, suddenly broke.

He deliberately took his cigarette case from his pocket, opened it, and held it out to her. She declined, and, "with your permission," he lighted one himself. He was standing with one hand resting on the back of his chair. Lazily he watched the smoke wreaths float away across the room.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Whitefield, that you forget your interesting confidences of a few minutes ago. If I were Ashe Colvin — the Ashe Colvin you say you knew — I might respect those confidences. But Vernon's — different.

"Now listen to me," he tossed away the cigarette he had just lighted, and spoke with an icy, vitriolic incisiveness. "If you permit the least harm to come to Miss Fletcher, if even a hair of her head is injured, I will lay bare the whole story of the sapphires. And, as you intimated a few moments ago, it might cause the authorities to view the circumstances of this mysterious robbery — and murder — from an entirely new angle."

Without another word, without even a glance at her, he left the room.

His one desire now was to see the "Hornet," but

a tour of the rapidly thinning rooms convinced him that the latter must have already left. He therefore seized his coat and hat, jumped into a taxi, and was back at his hotel, "while one with moderate haste might tell a hundred." His intention was to send Wimms at once to the "Hornet" with a note; but Wimms inexplicably was not there awaiting him. So, casting caution to the winds, and with an entire disregard of instructions, he rang up the "Hornet's" telephone number. But he called in vain; there was no answer.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was a reason for Ashe's failure to elicit any response to his persistent telephoning. The "Hornet" was absent not only from his rooms, but also from the city. Another of his "irons in the fire" required attention, so, leaving everything at loose ends, he had set off posthaste to look after it.

When he left the Whitefield house the night of the dance, and returned to his own obscure lodgings, his one thought had been to get to bed. But as he turned up the light in his bedroom, and began to draw off his gloves, he saw a telegram lying upon his dressing table, and paused abruptly to open and read it.

The contents seemed innocent enough, merely some unimportant directions relating to the stock market; but they served to arouse his interest.

Hurriedly he changed his clothes, and went out into the streets again, alert, purposeful, forgetting his fatigue. At a garage some eight or ten blocks away, he found a man awaiting him, a short, thick-set man whom the "Hornet" called "Buffalo."

"Where you been?" The latter grumbled. "I've been hanging 'round this smelly old dump since before midnight."

The "Hornet" drew him aside, and for half an hour they talked in undertones, the "Hornet" evidently in the rôle of questioner, and requiring from the other detailed and explicit answers.

Satisfied at last, he nodded, and stepping over to the

office of the garage, engaged a car and the services of a chauffeur for a trip into the country. As they whirled across town, and down to the ferry, the sun was just gilding the tops of the tall buildings, and the troops of early workers were beginning to invade the streets.

Twenty minutes later they were in the open country, with wooded hills of a the horizon and an occasional perspective of sparkling water, as from some eminence they caught a glimpse of the bay. But the "Hornet" had no mind for the beauties of nature. Leaning back against the cushions, he drew the brim of his soft hat down over his brow and closed his eyes, although not for slumber. Exacting as the night had been, he had if anything a still more exacting day ahead of him, and he must lay his plans with caution.

For the two or three hours of the journey he maintained his reverie unbroken, scarcely even shifting his position. Then as the motor drew up and stopped before the one inn of a little village down along the New Jersey coast, he opened his eyes, and sat up.

"This is the place?" he asked, and receiving an affirmative answer, got out, entered the inn, and having found the dining-room where he was presently joined by the chauffeur, they ordered and ate a hearty breakfast. That finished, the "Hornet" sauntered out to the desk, and idly and indifferently glanced over the register. When he came to the name of Miss Hazel Phillips, New York, his interest ceased, and he turned to the hovering hotel proprietor to engage him in some affable and apparently aimless conversation.

No, the proprietor informed him, business wasn't overly brisk just at this season. There was the regulars, of course, they stayed all year 'round; but this

week only one transient had showed up, the little lady from New York. Actress wanting a rest, she said she was. What did folks do here? Oh, nothing much; just sat around on the porch mostly, or in their rooms. Miss Phillips, she didn't mix much with the rest, spent most of her time alone down on the beach.

The "Hornet" nodded uninterestedly, and strolled out on the porch. He lighted a cigarette, smoked it, tossed the stub away, and carelessly descending the steps, walked down the quiet, elm-shaded street toward the sea. The chauffeur settled himself comfortably to a game of checkers with the hotel proprietor in one corner of the office.

It was one of those perfect, Indian summer days, when the ocean merely ripples against the shore, and the crisp air is delightfully sun-soaked, and the earth is agleam with a fugitive and deceptive radiance.

The "Hornet" evidently enjoyed it. Smiling appreciatively, and without any appearance of haste, he took his way to the water's edge, and stood there several minutes gazing out to sea. Then he turned and wandered in a leisurely way up the beach. His glance, however, from under his down-turned hatbrim, sharply scrutinized everything on the broad, sandy stretches.

As he approached a big, grass-tufted dune, he saw a woman sitting lazily at the foot of it, a woman whose attention was as evidently focussed upon him as his was on her.

"Hello, sister," he said, his smile widening as he drew nearer.

She looked him up and down. It was plain from her expression that she was both puzzled and suspicious.

"The voice is all right," she said. "But what have you been doing to yourself — if it is really you?"

"You allude to the loss of my beauty spot?" He touched his cheek. "An exigency required its disappearance — temporarily. I'm young Lochinvar himself, though, all right. I've stayed not for brake, and I've stopped not for stone to reach your side. Give me the 'once over' again. Look into my eyes, darling, and lose your fears."

She followed his advice, searching; then she gave a little exclamation expressing her admiration. "I didn't know it could be done like that. But where have you been?" She flashed a mocking glance at him. "What has kept you? I've been looking for you to show up every day for a week."

"A week? Be exact, sister; be exact. Five days, you mean; not seven."

"Sure." She laughed amusedly. It happened as a matter of fact to be just five days since by an ingenious ruse she had got the Colvin papers from the woman to whom Retta Johnson had at the last moment intrusted them.

As she sat there on the sand in her white-serge skirt and white sweater, with a black velvet tam on her head, she appeared astonishingly young. She was a small, slim creature, at once insouciant and appealing. She had a delicate face with a tilted-up, little nose, and a tilted-up, large mouth. Her hair, which was light, and must once have been very flaxen, was brushed off her brow and worn in a knot at the back of her head. But her eyes were the striking feature of her face — large, gray-blue eyes, wells of innocence and candor.

"Well — it certainly is good to see you again."

The "Hornet" also settled himself comfortably against the dune. "Down here for rest, they tell me. You sure selected the drowsy, dreamy place for it, didn't you? We can sit here all day if we want to, and I can look out at the sea, and you can tell me things. Wonderful spot for that," he glanced around; "no one to hear, except ourselves and the ocean."

"If I only had anything to tell you," she said regretfully. "But I haven't."

He shifted his position slightly so as to turn toward her, and looked at her with admiring eyes.

"Pretty child!" he said indulgently. "Does she really think that she's a match for poor, old, battle-scarred father?"

"Her doesn't think it." She crinkled her nose at him, and showed her white teeth. "Her knows she is."

"The vaunting confidence of youth," he sighed. "Alas, I had it once myself."

"Just so," she teased; "and you'd like to have some of it now, but you haven't."

The "Hornet" gazed thoughtfully out at the sea for a minute or two. Then he tried a new tack.

"Hazel, do you know I've been thinking of you constantly. I haven't been able to get you out of my head for days, and —"

"Be exact, Hornet," she turned his own admonition on him; "be exact. "You mean, since —"

"And," he went on, unheeding the interruption, "I'm wondering if you wouldn't like to see a little present I've brought you — conditionally."

"Oh, conditionally, of course." There was the smile of a knowing gamin on her lips.

He drew a leather case from his pocket, and took out of it several small, flat, neatly-folded packets of white, tissue paper. Then from another pocket he brought a handkerchief, and spread it on her lap. Opening one of the packets, he laid it before her on the handkerchief.

"Oh!" She hung breathless over it, immovable. Before she could recover herself, he opened another white slip, and laid it beside the fire. Jewels! The eternal lure which no woman can resist.

Upon her knees there gleamed a great, blue, Cashmere sapphire and a splendid diamond which caught and held all the life and sparkle of the sea. Six, seven of them he spread before her avid eyes, as she bent over them hungrily, hypnotized and enchanted, in a trance of admiration and covetousness.

At last she looked up at him. Her face was no longer young; her eyes dewily innocent. Those eyes were rapacious, the face sharp.

"For me?" she whispered. "For me?"

"For you," he replied; "on one condition. Turn over to me those papers you have, and I'll give you these seven stones—the three diamonds and four sapphires."

She studied the matter deeply. Then she turned over the largest sapphire carefully with her finger.

"How many carats?" she asked.

"About seven."

"And the value?"

"Eleven or twelve thousand dollars, I should say."

With the same careful finger she touched a diamond, and asked the same questions, nodding as he answered her.

She went through some mental calculations, pon-

dered a moment or so longer, and then slowly shook her head.

"Not enough," she said.

He raised his eyes to the sky, his most satirically amused smile playing across his lips.

"Don't try to bargain with me, little one. I'm no old clo' man. Take 'em, or leave 'em," he began to gather up the jewels; "that's all you get. Whitefield only offers five thousand dollars for the luggage."

She looked at him for a second out of the corners of her eyes, and burst into a peal of laughter so genuine and infectious that the "Hornet" couldn't help joining in.

"Him?" Again her laughter pealed. "Why, boy, he's going to be a perpetual meal-ticket to me. He'll pension me for life, and be glad to."

The "Hornet" stopped laughing. "Never think it, Hazel." He shied a stone across the beach. "Whitefield's no boob."

But she only laughed the harder, and continued to glance at him in that maddening fashion out of the corners of her eyes.

"Do you know," the "Hornet" spoke casually, as if he were commenting on some phenomenon quite unrelated to themselves, "you rouse strange, contradictory ideas in my breast? One moment I want to kiss you; the next to drown you."

"Too bad, you're not going to do either."

"Don't be so sure." He lifted himself on his elbow. "I may do both. You've been sidestepping consequences for quite a stretch of years now, my dear; but there's always bound to come a day, you know. And I have a suspicion — almost an intuition, you might call it — that yours is just about due."

"Not by a long shot," she shook her head. "I'm several calendars away from it yet."

He straightened up, and faced about toward her. "Now, look here, Hazel; let's get down to business."

"By all means," she encouraged. "We've had the *hors d'œuvre* now, and I guess we're both ready for something solid. But I warn you, 'Hornet,' you'll have to go a little stronger than anything you've shown me yet. I haven't much of an appetite for — just threats."

She still smiled, looking straight into his eyes, which was a thing very few persons cared to do, when the "Hornet" was in his present mood. For one moment his expression had never been wickeder. Then he relaxed, and lying back upon the sand, looked at her with lazy admiration.

"You mean, I suppose," he said, "that if you shouldn't show up in New York some day soon — say, to-morrow or next day — that a certain package will be delivered to Whitefield, and the reward claimed. In other words, you arranged in advance for the unexpected pleasure of my visit."

"Marvellous!" She clasped her hands in mock admiration. "Isn't that what Dr. Watson always said to Sherlock Holmes?"

"Quite so. Quite so. But you may can these spontaneous tributes to my genius for the present. It doesn't 'intrigue my imagination,' as I read in a magazine story the other day, at all. I am more concerned just now in paying tribute to yours. Do you know, Hazel, dear, outside of everything else, you are the one woman I've ever known who didn't seize the first opportunity to tell me the story of her life?"

"Dear me! In the magazine language you have

just been using, 'I fear I have been guilty of an oversight.'” She laughed again.

“No; honestly, I'm interested.” His curiosity rang genuine. “You're easily the best thing in skirts in our line. How did you come to break into the profession? Trained up to it, were you? Was your father —?”

“No,” she spoke shortly; a veil of caution and reserve seemed to fall over her face. “My people are all right.”

“Lover, then?” he probed. “Somebody that's up the river now? Is that the reason you're on your own?”

“Not me,” she repudiated the suggestion. She clasped her hands about her knees, and laid her cheek down against them. For a moment or two she was silent.

“I don't get you exactly, 'Hornet,'” she said at last, slowly. “What's the idea? Since you seem to be on the level, though, and really wanting to waste your time, I don't mind being good-natured. But you want to understand before I start that there are no particular thrills; this isn't a story that would go in the movies.

“To begin, then, I was born in a country town, and I was born with my eyes wide open. I went through the schools at my home place, and then when I was seventeen, I — No, you guessed wrong,” she laughed; “I didn't come to the great city and fall a victim to its terrible and unsuspected pitfalls. I came to New York all right, but as for the pitfalls — Well, if you've been brought up in a country town, you know more about life and human nature than New York can teach you in a thousand years.

"I had to earn my own living; so I looked over the field, and studied the various ways which are open to a woman. I could make a bare living with my hands — cooking, sewing, or in somebody's office, or shop. I could make a living with my looks, a good one probably — for a limited time. Or I could live on my wits. That was the way I chose.

"I took the little money I had brought to the city with me, and spent it in qualifying myself for the job of lady's maid. I learned hair-dressing, manicuring, facial massage, and all that, and got a place in a big house. Then I angled around until I got a fly cop for my steady, a young 'dick' from down at Headquarters. From him, I learned all the dangers and possibilities of the game I was aiming to play. Poor boy, he never dropped for a minute to what I was really after. Then, one night when I had everything fixed, I cleaned out Madame's jewel case, and got away with it. That was my start. Since then, I've just gone on. That's all there is to it, 'Hornet'; everything there is to tell."

"You little devil!" he grinned appreciatively. "How do you keep up that innocent, kid look, though? You haven't changed a day since I saw you first, and that must have been — Oh, at least six or seven years ago."

He lay against the sun-warmed dune, and again gazed out to sea. Occasionally, as she watched him, she saw his eyes contract a bit. For fifteen minutes perhaps he lay there, quite motionless, his attention absorbed apparently in following a distant sail.

Finally he gave signs of returning life. He turned over on his side, and gave a chuckle of sinister amusement.

"You're a wonder, Hazel," he complimented her. "Lord, if I wasn't sick of the rotten game, or if I were ten years younger, I'd like nothing better than to go into partnership with you. Believe me, we'd spoil the Egyptians."

She didn't like his tone, and she didn't like that chuckle. It was altogether too well satisfied. She stirred a little restlessly, and shot another sidewise glance at him.

"This is a dead hole," she said uneasily. "I only came down here because I thought it would be a good safe place to hear what you had to say."

"I think I spoke very eloquently," he replied; "in sapphires and diamonds. Look here, my child," he edged a bit nearer her, his tone grew earnest; "I want you to listen to me a moment, and think hard over what I'm telling you. I am offering an extravagant price for those papers. Honestly, they aren't worth a tinker's dam to me personally. I'm only after them to oblige a friend of mine. That's straight. You know me, and you know that you can believe what I say.

"Now just cast your eyes over them again." He took the handkerchief from his pocket, and spread the glittering jewels once more before her. "Beauties, aren't they? Enough to dazzle any man's eyes, and make any woman's mouth water. And further than that," he tapped the back of his hand with his forefinger to give emphasis to his words, "I'll pay you five thousand cash to boot; put the money in your little hand right now, if you say so." He took a bill-fold from the inside pocket of his coat, and opening it, riffled a great sheaf of bills with his fingers. From among them, he drew out a dozen of large denomina-

tion, and laid them with the jewels. "Look 'em over," he said; "feel 'em."

"The finest sight in the world." She clutched them in her hands. "They touch almost as good as your blue and white stones."

"And it's all yours," he urged. "Count it. A cool five thousand in cash, and the seven stones. All yours, the minute you turn over that package to me."

She bit her lip, and stared out at the ocean, then back again at the jewels in her lap and the money in her hand. There was a burning greed in her eyes as she huddled over the stones, avarice in the very way she grasped the money.

"It's the only thing to do, Hazel," he went on persuasively; "and in telling you that, I'm looking at the proposition from your side as well as from my own. If anybody could put the trick over on Whitefield, it's you; but it's a mighty ticklish job, little girl, a mighty ticklish job. He's no mark, my dear, but a smooth old bird, as smooth as they make 'em; and more than that, he's got the very best of 'em down at Headquarters at his elbow. If they can't get you any other way, they'll frame you; you know that, don't you? It's too much of a gamble, dearie. Better take the sure thing, and close with me.

"Besides," his eyes narrowed, "there's another slant to it, which you seem to have overlooked. If you do business with Whitefield, you'll be double-crossing me, and I've got a long memory, as you may have heard. I've told you that those papers don't mean anything to me, and they don't in one way. But you surely don't imagine that I'm paying five thousand and these stones for a bunch of soap wrappers. I want that package for my partner — a poor devil that White-

field framed and did for fifteen years ago. They mean the earth to him, Hazel, the whole round earth, and all that's in it. Have a heart, girl. My God, have a heart."

"Give me a cigarette," she said abruptly, "I want to think." She took one from the case he offered her, lighted it at the match he held for her, and then sat, a hunched-up, little figure, smoking and staring off across the waves.

When nothing remained of the cigarette but its cork tip, she threw that away, straightened up, handed the "Hornet" back his money, and motioned him to gather up the jewels from her lap.

"You know I'd do a lot to oblige you, 'Hornet,'" she lifted her guileless eyes, smiling sweetly, "and ready-to-wear stones and ready-to-spend money are mighty tempting. Also, what you say about the risks and the danger I am chancing is all true. But you see, this is just one of those cases which appeals to one's professional pride. I've got my heart set on trimming Whitefield. Everything else in sight is too dead easy." She sighed with ennui.

Then she dropped her pose for a moment, and a gust of almost stormy emotion swept her cool little face.

"Hornet, it's a rotten life, as you said a bit ago. I'm sick of it. You're all right, and I'd do a lot for you: honest, I would. But whatever you'd offer wouldn't be enough. You can't raise it, boy. Whitefield, though! There's millions there. He'll pay, and pay, and pay before I get through with him — that is, if he falls for me at all." She paused, and looked up at him with a naïve glance. "Think I can get him, Hornet?"

"You could get any man you go after," he said brusquely; "even me."

"I want the big coin," her lips pouted resentfully; "and I want it settled on me for life. No hand-outs of five or ten thousand sandwiched in conditions. I'm playing for a million, I tell you. Anything less is chicken feed to me. It takes a million to satisfy me."

"And that won't long," cynically.

"Then I'll get more. If you've got one million to start on, you ought to make twenty. Bet you I could."

"I'm not giving odds on what you could do, or what you will do," he returned. "All I want out of you just now is to keep quiet. You've upset my calculations, and I've got to think — got to dope out a new line of action. One way or another, I'm going to have those papers, even if I have to break your neck to get them."

He dropped back again against the dune, and settled himself to renewed meditations, while she sat quietly awaiting the result.

"All right!" he said at last. "I see my way clear, without resorting to the painful necessity of garroting you, or flinging you to the fishes. You've made things deuced unpleasant for me, and are forcing me now to a play that I'd give a farm to keep away from. But I forgive you, Hazel; I forgive you."

"That for your forgiveness!" She snapped her fingers. "I think I understand this play you have in mind. But don't make any mistake, Hornet; I'm not asleep at the switch."

He smiled upon her with a saurian benevolence. "Distrustful still?" He shook his head. "My dear, I'm not going to raise a finger to interfere with your delivery of those papers to Whitefield. Play your

game, little one, play it to the limit. Only when the time comes for you to give him the papers, I want a favor, and in return I'll make you a present of any one of those three diamonds I showed you. Just the slightest of favors, Hazel."

She eyed him warily. "A favor. Three carats of blue-white diamond for a favor? I'm afraid that's not an order which our house would care to take. What is it you want, though?" she demanded abruptly. "Forgery?"

"Not at all, my dear. Nothing so crude as that. I merely want you to let me name the place and the time of day when, if your negotiations are successful, you will transfer the package of papers to Whitefield, and I promise you that you shall not be interrupted in their delivery, nor interfered with in any way."

She considered this for a moment, plainly puzzled.

"That's all? Sure?" she asked searchingly. "No string to it? Yet you must have some reason."

"I have, but it's a reason that does not in any way concern you, or affect your graft. Didn't I tell you, my dear, that working together, you and I could trim the world. Well, here's where we take a little whirl at it. Come now, give me your hand and promise me that it's a go."

She hesitated a moment longer; then slowly extended her hand and laid it in his.

CHAPTER XVI

THE "Hornet" arose and dusted the sand from his clothes.

"Well, now that that's settled, I must be getting back to town." He glanced at his watch.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"A quarter after twelve."

"Oh, then I must be going, too." She held out her hand for him to help her up. "We can walk back to the Inn together. Why don't you stay and take luncheon with me?" she suggested, as they started off across the sands.

The "Hornet" did not answer immediately. His attention was focussed upon a small, mouse-like man a hundred yards away along the beach.

What on earth, he wondered, could have brought Wimms down there?

It cannot be said that his tried and faultless self-control gave way. Neither by start, nor change of expression did he betray himself even to the sharp eyes of his companion; but there was a perceptible pause — a hiatus, so to speak — in which a score of apprehensive surmises and suspicions jumbled in his brain.

Then, as she repeated her invitation, he explained regretfully that it would be impossible for him to accept.

"Sorry, my dear. There's nothing I would like better. But, in the language of our calling, I've got three fall-guys up in New York that I'm planning to

throw the hooks into this afternoon, and I can't afford to let them get away."

By this time the furtive figure of Wimms sidling among the dunes like a crab was almost abreast of them.

"Also," said the "Hornet," raising his voice slightly, "another fellow wants to see me — one of those human pests who are always turning up at the wrong time — and I suppose I shall have to stop and give him a few minutes on my road back to town. So, you see, Hazel, this is my busy day."

He laughed lightly, and glanced toward Wimms who was just passing. Neither gave the slightest sign of recognition; it was the mere impersonal scrutiny of strangers which they bent upon one another. Wimms continued on his way up the beach; the "Hornet" and Miss Phillips toward the Inn.

There was nothing in the "Hornet's" easy flow of repartee, as they walked on, to indicate that he was either preoccupied or perplexed; and yet he was both. His flippant banter with the girl was but a thing of the surface; underneath, he was trying to puzzle out the reason for Wimms's unexpected appearance.

That it was to see and talk with him, he could not doubt; no other errand could have brought the valet down to this out-of-the-way village and lonely stretch of shore. He knew, too, or thought he knew, that Wimms would never have followed him in such a manner, unless it were a matter of immediate importance. Colvin must have sent him, and Colvin, who was neither rash nor impulsive, would not have done so, except in the case of some pressing exigency. Moreover, "Buffalo" was the only person from whom Wimms could have gained a knowledge of his present

whereabouts, and "Buffalo" would have been extremely chary about giving such information even to Wimms, unless he were thoroughly convinced of the urgency of his mission. The circumstance, therefore, could mean but one of two things — either a warning to him, or an S. O. S. call for assistance.

So pleading the necessity of haste in getting back to town, he said good-by to Hazel Phillips, and was whirled away. A short distance down the road, though, he halted his car, and telling the chauffeur to wait for him, once more set off toward the shore.

Nearing the ocean, his eye raked the wastes of sand. The beach was almost deserted; a few children dug and built castles, and one or two women sat and watched them, but there was not a man in sight. The "Hornet" swore under his breath; but even as he did so, Wimms made one of his sudden, disconcerting materializations, coming out from behind a dune.

The "Hornet" took a hasty step or two toward him. "What's up?" he demanded sharply. "Did Vernon send you after me?"

"Mr. Vernon? Oh, no; not at all, sir." Wimms shrank back apologetically, almost timidly. "I came quite on my own."

"You did, eh? You trailed me down here like this? What the devil did you mean by it? Was it so important that you couldn't wait?"

The "Hornet's" eyes were as savage as his voice, and Wimms shrivelled to even smaller proportions under that double fire.

"Important? Well, yes, sir; in a way, quite so," he endeavored to speak placatingly. "I couldn't bear to think of ready money — pick-up money, you might say — slipping through my fingers, and that would

have been the case, sir, if I hadn't got to see you. So, as the risk really wasn't great, I took a chance."

The "Hornet's" first feeling was one of relief. And with the relief he was stirred to a sense of curiosity. What had the little wretch in mind? Wimms would never have dared such an expedition unless there was something big in sight, something eminently worth while.

"Money would have to slip mighty fast to get through your fingers," his lip twisted; "but just what ready money are you talking about, may I ask? Don't take all day to spin it out, either. I've got to be off."

"It's a little matter of fifteen thousand cash, sir, and —"

"Fifteen thousand!" The "Hornet's" voice rasped with quick irritation. "Who told you to go prospecting off on any such lay-out? This is no time for a job on the side."

"Certainly not, sir," Wimms agreed hastily. "But you see, the lady that called on Mr. Vernon day before yesterday, she told me —"

"Ah? The lady that called on Mr. Vernon?" interrupted the "Hornet" again, looking at him with new interest. "How the dickens did you get to talking with her?"

"Just a word, sir; just a word. It was when the visit of the Inspector rather took her and Mr. Vernon unaware, as you might say. He hurried her out into the room where I was replacing some clothes in his wardrobe, and closing the door, left us alone together. She was in trouble, that was plain to be seen, sir; and I'm very tender-hearted — chivalrous is perhaps the better word — I always like to know what ails 'em, and be of help if I can. I suppose, sir, she felt my

unspoken sympathy; for it was scarcely any time before she'd confided to me all about the loss of her sapphires, and how she had to get them back, and how she stood ready to pay for them."

"And fifteen thousand was all that you could do with her, eh?"

Wimms winced before the acid sarcasm in the "Hornet's" voice.

"A moment, sir, please. First, she offered some trifling sum — I forget just what now — but I told her I couldn't think of it, and I kept shaking my head at each raise she'd make until she reached her limit. You can always tell by the look in their eyes, when they can't wring out another cent — sort of desperate and final-like. She swore to me that fifteen thousand was the most that she could give, and that meant taking some awful chances. I'm weak, sir — I'll admit it — but I never could bear to see a woman in tears. And fifteen thousand, you know, sir, isn't to be sneezed at."

"It isn't, eh? For the return of a set of sapphires conservatively valued at something over half a million? And you promised to get them for her without the slightest idea where they might be found. Oh, Wimms, Wimms, I'm afraid that you are right; chivalrous is the word for you, after all."

The "Hornet" laughed consumedly. Then his grating mirth ended abruptly.

"You must be losing your wits, chasing me down here. To take up my time with this rot."

Wimms looked up at him with a touch of naïve drollery, as if to say: "What's the use of keeping up a pretense with me?"

"Lord, sir!" He spread out his palms deprecatingly. "Life's so full of chances. Something's al-

ways apt to turn up at any minute. How was I to know that those stones might not come into my hands? To quiet the lady, I promised to call on her at three o'clock that afternoon, but of course I didn't go. Instead, I rang her up on the 'phone and told her that I had not as yet been able to get my hands on her stones, but not to worry, as I undoubtedly would have them for her, probably within a day or so, certainly before the end of the week."

The "Hornet" stared at the mouse man. It was quite beyond him to understand this incongruity of spirit and flesh which Wimms so strikingly exemplified.

"It takes a goo' deal to faze me," he said, "but, Wimms, I'll have to hand it to you. As a player of long shots, I've never met your equal. Yet why these promises to the lady, and why do you come with them to me?" He frowned. "Surely, you're not seriously proposing the surrender of those sapphires — worth a king's ransom, — for a mere fifteen thousand dollars? It must be that you are afflicted with the artistic imagination, Wimms, also with the artistic temperament. The artist is notoriously a poor business man. Still I have never discovered any symptoms of the sort in you hitherto, and I am loth to believe in it now. So, if you have any explanation or defense to offer, I shall be delighted to listen. Please advise me clearly and without circumlocution — in words of one syllable, so to speak — just what you are driving at."

The valet cocked an eye at him with a respectfully impudent air peculiarly his own.

"It's just a feeling with me, sir, a matter of principle in a way. As I tell you, I can't bear to see good money slip away from me. If fifteen thousand dollars

was offered me for the moon, I suppose I'd take a shy at it; or, rather," he paused significantly, "I'd take a shy at making the party think I was getting it. Now, as you say, sir, when the lady spoke to me about her sapphires, I hadn't an idea in my head where they might be, and I haven't now; but you know so many things, and you're so clever," again he flashed that quick glance of understanding, "well, I thought that maybe you could help me out."

The "Hornet" laughed, and in that harsh chuckle of his rang his old challenge to the world. Then he cut his amusement short.

"Yes, but that doesn't explain why you have come tearing down here into the country after me. Couldn't you have waited until I was back in town?"

"Oh, that was due to Mr. Vernon, sir."

"To Vernon? I thought you said he knew nothing about it."

"He doesn't. But he was at the lady's house last night, at a ball."

"Surely. What of it?"

"Well, Mr. Vernon — begging your pardon, sir — isn't just like you and me. He has notions, scruples you might call them, that are a detriment in this line of work. And there's been something between him and that lady; I don't know just what, but something. I gathered that, when he was talking to her at our rooms the other morning. So, when I learned that he was going to this ball, I began to fear that he might in some way —" Wimms hesitated as if for a suitable phrase.

"Might spill the beans," supplied the "Hornet."

"Thank you. Quite so, sir. So I managed to get acquainted with one of the staff at the house, and

arranged to have an eye kept on him. Late last night, or rather this morning, sir, the party I speak of reported to me that his mistress and Mr. Vernon had been having a long, private interview in her personal sitting-room. What passed between them, the party could not say, it being inconvenient to listen closely when so many was about, but on two occasions he heard their voices raised high, he says, and when they came out both showed traces of agitation."

"H'm!" the "Hornet" commented thoughtfully.

"Consequently, sir," continued Wimms, "I felt that there was no time to be lost. Trust the lady to have got some sort of an advantage out of an hour's interview. You never can tell what a woman's up to, sir, or what she will do. I only feel that the fifteen thousand ought to be got from her without delay, this afternoon if possible.

"You wouldn't really have to give up the stones to her," he urged, forgetting in his eagerness to keep up the pretense between them. "Of course I never for a moment thought of that. You would only — But you know what I mean, sir."

The "Hornet" laughed again, but shook his head. "Yes, I know well enough what you mean, you old rascal; but I've cut it all out, Wimms. The hot, red blood of youth no longer flows in my veins. I don't suppose I'll ever get entirely away from the lure of the big chance," he was speaking more to himself now than to his companion, his reflective smile deepening the lines about his mouth; "but it will only be such a chance as society countenances. Yet, oh, how true it is, that when we strive to lead the better, in other words, the highly critical life, our past continually rises up to set traps and temptations for our feet."

Wimms looked bewildered. "I'm sure, I wish I had your past, sir. You always got the fat without burning your fingers."

The "Hornet," however, was not listening. His eyes became more concentrated. Finally he lifted his head.

"If I've got to take one shot," he muttered cryptically, "I might as well take another."

"You see, sir, there's absolutely no risk," insinuated Wimms at his elbow. "When the lady finds out that she hasn't got her jewels, nor her money either, what can she do about it? Her hands are tied."

"Just so. What a clear, concise way you have of putting things. Far be it from me to adopt any holier-than-thou attitude, Wimms, but I must remind you that I am not of the gold-brick brotherhood. Cheer up, though," as Wimms's face took on a tinge of deep dejection; "there are more ways than one of killing a cat."

He paused, as if considering a moment longer; then his queer, twisted smile flashed over his lips. He had evidently reached a determination.

"Tell you what, Wimms, there's only one way to manage this that will be satisfactory to everybody."

Wimms looked at him, still bewildered, but hopeful now.

"How is that, sir?"

The "Hornet" explained.

"You, Wimms, shall return the lady her sapphires. A splendid deed that, true chivalry thus to restore several hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels to beauty in distress. It ought to appeal highly to that knightly soul you were boasting of a few minutes ago. Then everybody's happy. Ah!" he rolled up his eyes,

"playing god of the machine does have its compensations after all."

Wimms, however, failed to betray any great degree of enthusiasm. On the contrary, as the "Hornet" unfolded his plan, he appeared at once to contract and collapse. His mouth fell open, and he stared as if he thought that the other had taken leave of his senses.

"But — but —" he stammered incoherently a moment. Then, recovering himself in a measure, he voiced a vehement, if still outwardly respectful protest.

"But, sir, that would be really letting the lady have her stones for the fifteen thousand. And, as you've said, they're worth a half a million. I beg your pardon, sir, but I can't see it. It don't seem reasonable, sir. It ain't in nature. Now, if you would only —"

"Don't worry," the "Hornet" cut in with an impatient gesture; "I know what I'm about. You go ahead as I tell you; pocket our fifteen thousand, and leave the rest to me. There is, however, one stipulation I want to make," and strangely enough it was the same sort of a request he had made of Hazel Phillips only a short time before. "I must dictate the time and the place at which you will turn over to the lady her jewels. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir." With the "Hornet's" assurance, Wimms had resumed his normal manner and expression. His faith in human nature, and in the "Hornet's" quality of human nature was fully restored. "Very good, sir. Much obliged, I am sure."

"And now," the "Hornet" frowned as he looked at his watch, "I must get back to town. You'd better take the train, Wimms. I won't offer you a seat in my car. No need of taking any chances of being seen together."

"Quite so, sir."

They parted, and ten minutes later the "Hornet's" motor was making such speed along the road leading back toward the city as its engine and the occasional proximity of a rural constable permitted.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN the "Hornet" arrived in town, he found that it was still too early to keep the appointments which, as he had intimated to Hazel Phillips, he had for that afternoon with various lords of high finance. Consequently, mindful of the adage, "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do," he repaired to his lodgings, and there began the task of resetting the few sapphires he had extracted from the necklace for the purpose of dazzling the eyes of Miss Phillips.

The "Hornet's" lodgings were so arranged as to make any unexpected intrusion upon him difficult, so he worked away without fear of interruption, absorbed in his delicate task.

The shrill ringing of the telephone bell aroused him with a start, and with an instinctive movement of caution he covered over the jewels with his hand as he reached for the receiver. He drew a breath of relief, when he found that it was Colvin who was calling.

"So you're there at last?" Ashe's tone showed a similar relief. "I've been ringing you up at intervals ever since last night, and I'd begun to get anxious over my failures, especially as my man seems to have disappeared, too. I got home from the dance last night to find no Wimms, and nothing have I heard of him since. I began to believe that the spooks or something must have spirited you both away. You have no idea what has become of him, have you?"

He was endeavoring to speak casually in accordance

with their agreement, but it was evident from his tone that he was perturbed.

"Oh, Wimms is all right," the "Hornet" assured him. "He'll be showing up in a little while. But tell me about the dance. Did you have a good time?"

"So so. A lady gave me a rather uncomfortable half hour."

He stopped, wondering how with the veiled speech which the "Hornet" had prescribed for their telephone conversations, he was to convey to the other the salient features of his talk with Freda, its high lights, and the mental turmoil and uncertainty into which he had been plunged by it.

"A lady gave you an uncomfortable half hour," repeated the "Hornet." "Well, that's a way they have. Was she young or old?"

"When we danced together, she preferred to waltz, and she asked the musicians to play The Blue Danube. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes. I think I have her picture. And I think I see, too, what she was after. Did she succeed?"

"In that respect, yes. But she had a stronger motive. She thinks I can find some valuables which she has lost, seems to imagine apparently that I am a sort of a fortune-teller, or seer, and declares if I don't exert my occult powers in her behalf, she will get even through—" his voice faltered slightly—"through others."

"Ah?" The "Hornet" evidently comprehended. "But it's only threats, son; just threats. She realizes that you have slipped through her fingers for good and all, and she'd say anything that she thought would enable her to get back at you. They usually become tearful and abusive at that stage of the game. The

lady's training alone, not her inclination, prevented her from driving her nails into your face."

"I wish I could think so," Colvin answered. "My reason tells me you are probably right, and that is all there is to it, but — The long and short of it is that I've lost my nerve."

"I can tell you how to get it back, neatly spiking her guns, and insuring full protection for the person you are chiefly concerned about, if you want to know."

"How?" demanded Colvin skeptically.

"Why, by simply marrying the girl," returned the "Hornet." "Wouldn't that accomplish all I say?"

There was no answer. The "Hornet" waited until a full minute had gone by, then ventured a tentative "Hello!" but only as he spoke heard the receiver at the other end of the wire hung up. So, with a chuckle, he turned back to his work.

But his words had not fallen upon barren ground. Twenty minutes later, Colvin, after much hurried pacing of the floor, turned to the telephone again, and calling up the Whitefield house, asked for Miss Fletcher on the bare chance that he would find her in. He was fortunate. In a moment she herself was answering him.

"Will you give me ten minutes of your time within the next hour?" he asked, throwing caution to the winds. Then, as she hesitated, he added: "It really is important. Please say you will." His tone was deeply serious.

"I was just about to start for a walk in the Park, when you called," she said.

"And you will let me join you there, will you not? I'll jump into a cab, and come up at once, if you'll tell me where I shall be most apt to find you."

"Oh, I daresay I shall be sauntering about in one of the paths near the Seventy-second Street entrance."

"Good," he returned. "I'll be there almost as soon as yourself."

It was now five o'clock, and the dusk had already fallen. The light had gone from the sky; it seemed to brood, all smoky depths, just above the treetops. There was no breeze, but although the air was still, it held the blood-stirring, autumn tingle.

Muriel had not reached the Mall when Colvin, true to his promise of arriving almost as soon as she did, overtook her. She evidently recognized his step, for she smiled over her shoulder at him.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, as she looked up into his face. "It must be something tremendously important. Even our familiar shadows seem shocked at the audacity you are showing." She glanced back at the two detectives loitering in the distance.

"But really," her tone changed, as she noticed that he did not smile at her flippancy, "has anything annoying happened? I know, you see, that when you bother, it must be something worth bothering about."

"I think it is," he answered gravely. "I am bothering about the only thing in the whole world worth bothering over — and that is you."

"Me?" she cried, glancing up at him in surprise. They had reached the end of the Mall, and turned now into one of the narrower paths. The twilight was deepening. Only an occasional passer-by noticed them, and then went on, indifferent and preoccupied. The trailing detectives hovered a decorous distance to the rear. In her dark walking dress and furs, and against the dull and dim background, Muriel's face gleamed vivid and warmly-tinted as an hibiscus flower.



Her glance was full of a quizzical mockery. *Page 233.*



As Colvin gazed at her, it seemed to him that the whole scene symbolized in a way what life now meant to him. An illusory, vaporous world with neither distinct outlines nor meanings, static, with all its vibrating, effulgent force centered in this girl. And she was menaced by an evil power — weak, mean, but still a power. The sudden clutch of fear at his heart staggered him. He had known that he loved her, but not like this.

“Muriel,” he said abruptly, “will you marry me? I mean to-day, at once, as soon as I arrange for a license and a clergyman.”

She stopped in the path, and looked at him. For a second her glance was full of a quizzical mockery, and then the earnestness, the solemnity almost, of his expression sobered her.

“What is it?” she asked quickly. “Something has happened. Last night you positively refused to marry me, and now this afternoon you take my breath away by asking me to do so at once. I thought it was only we women who had the privilege of changing our minds rapidly in such matters.”

“Oh, don't,” he said with an impatient movement of the hand, “don't begin to jest and fence with me now. Last night, considering the position in which I stand to the world, and solely for your own sake, I felt that all the decency, all the manhood in me required me to refuse to let you sacrifice yourself for what might be only a girlish impulse. But circumstances, events which occurred after I talked to you, have changed my point of view. Oh!” he swept off his hat with a large, irritated movement, and ruffled his hand over his forehead. “What is the use of going into all sorts of futile explanations?” His eyes had never been harder

to withstand, his smile was never more persuasive. "Won't you, can't you love me enough to marry me now?"

"But it was only last night —"

"Don't," he repeated. "The immediate question is —"

"The immediate question with me," she interrupted him in turn, "is that you refused to marry me last night, and now, not twenty-four hours later, are urging me to do so. And your only explanation is a vague hint of circumstances which have risen. Don't you think I have a right to know what these circumstances which have occasioned such a startling change of heart, may be?"

With her natural directness, she had asked just that one question which he had hoped she would not.

"Please be content to let that rest for the present," he begged. "If I promise to tell you at some future day, won't that do? Take my assurance that I am doing the wisest thing for us both, and let your feminine curiosity go by the board for once."

"No," she said, and with a sinking of the heart he saw her mouth shut in a close line. Her eyes, as she lifted them to his, were opened more widely than usual, and full of a laughing fire, but the laughter was only of the surface.

"No," she repeated; "anything I do, especially anything so momentous as getting married, I do with my eyes open. And I know that something of the utmost importance must have occurred to cause you —"

"If you say, 'change of heart' again," he brought his face down close to hers, his eyes as determined as her own, "I'll either slap you or kiss you, I don't know which."

She laughed. "But the circumstances?"

He drew an exasperated sigh through his teeth.

"You're driving me to become a cave man. I don't want to argue. I want you to marry me. I'll carry you off in about ten minutes."

Her laughter rang out louder. "You'd have a fine time, playing cave man here in the Mall with a remarkably husky young woman, and our 'shadows' dodging back there just around the bend. Come; tell me the worst."

His patience was at an end. He capitulated.

"Muriel, you must believe me. There are certain dangers which threaten you. They are intangible, but only the more terrifying on that account. You need some one to protect and defend you. Oh, my dearest, listen to reason, listen to me."

"Dangers?" She considered that a moment. "Threatening me? Absurd. Let me relieve your mind, Mr. Vernon. I am sure that I'm in no such need of protection that you must sacrifice yourself to the extent of marrying me. Of course, Uncle William would be delighted if I were smashed up in a nice accident, or something like that, but he'd never attempt to bring it about. Oh, I know," with a sudden illumination, "it's Freda who has been frightening you. She's probably been trying to make you believe that she's got a convenient Apache in the background who wouldn't hesitate at a word from her to garrote me, or put poison in my food. That's her idea of drama. Bah! She's the last person that I'm afraid of. Truly, Mr. Vernon, I'm as safe in that house as I would be in a church. Don't get any foolish, excited ideas about me."

He walked on beside her, his head bent. Probably

she was right, and he had been morbid and fanciful; but even so, he was not able to shake off the forebodings which Freda's words had aroused in him the night before. The tone, the manner in which she had made her threats, still haunted him. Her hatred of Muriel was genuine, and behind it was that obstinacy which is the strength of the weak. But even more than all that, more than his impulse to save Muriel from possible or probable dangers, was the ardent longing to make her his own.

Muriel, for her part, was a thoroughly modern young woman with the ideas and tendencies of her generation considerably strengthened by her naturally unfettered outlook on life. But even so, she could not abrogate all the traditions of her sex, and she did not forget that she had offered herself to this man the night before, and had been refused. It did not at all appeal to her that he had acted from the most disinterested motives, or that he had exercised an almost superhuman self-control in his resolution to abide by what was best for her, regardless of the suffering to his own heart.

She judged him by every standard of the feminine view of love, and found him wanting. If she cared enough for him to offer herself in marriage, then his love didn't match hers, or in the torrent of feeling which her words should have evoked, all doubts, scruples, questions of any kind, whether fine or ignoble, should have been swept away.

She considered it an almost unforgivable affront that during such moments his reason had not only held its sway, but had asserted itself and maintained its dominion. It was impossible for her to understand that his renunciation had been the hardest thing he had ever done in his life.

It was the difference between the man's and the woman's point of view. Hers: If he is to convince me that he really cares, it must be "all for love and the world well lost." His: "I could not love thee, dear, so much loved I not honor more." They might argue and explain forever, and not cast even a straw across that gulf of opposite viewpoints.

And now for him to come to her thus, for her to see fear accomplish what she and her love could not do, was unbearable. It made no difference that it was fear for her and not for himself. She felt that she would rather die than let him see how she suffered, and yet it was with difficulty that she kept back her tears.

He divined something of her thought, but what could he say? If it had all to be gone over again, he could not have altered his attitude, nor taken a different one.

A Scotch mist had begun to fall, blurring still more the now almost indistinguishable features of the landscape. To Colvin it seemed as if the fog which had permeated Freda's room the night before encompassed him more densely than ever. It had spread until it dimmed the sunshine in which, to his fancy, Muriel always stood, and blotted out his vision of the future. From that dark, doubting world of shadow, in which he had lived so long, it stretched cold, vaporous fingers whose touch chilled his heart. He struggled against it.

"I've loved you with every hope of the future, every beautiful dream of the past," he said brokenly. "I've loved you as I never dreamed I could love a human being, with a passion, a strength, a tenderness I didn't know it was in me to feel. And you loved me last night." He bent his head, his words coming quickly, ardently. "You can't change so quickly, you can't. Muriel, you're judging me from the standpoint of the

traditional woman, and that is not worthy of you. You're too big, too fine, too splendid for that. You are perfectly capable of forming your own opinions and setting up your own standards. It is your nature to do so. We can travesty anything. Of course it seems to put me in a ridiculous light to say that I refused to marry you last night, and am begging you to marry me to-day. I am quite indifferent to that; all that I care for is you. Last night I had nothing to offer you. To-day, I can give you defense and protection. Oh, Muriel, listen to me!"

She longed to throw herself in his arms, but her wilful spirit restrained her. She was raw and sore. Her pride had upheld her last night and through the greater part of to-day, but it was almost gone now, worn too thin to trust.

"I don't want to talk any more," she said. "I can't feel differently."

They had reached the Seventy-second Street entrance, and they walked the rest of the way in silence, and without any further words parted at the Whitefield door.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHATEVER virtues Hazel Phillips may have lacked, punctuality was not one of them. Having made an appointment to meet Mr. Whitefield in person — she would negotiate with no one else — she was at his office at half-past eleven o'clock, precisely to the minute.

Whitefield, when her name was brought in, glanced at the clock in surprise; ladies of the class to which he had mentally assigned his visitor were not usually so prompt.

He nodded, however, as an indication to the messenger that she was to be admitted, pushed aside some papers upon which he was engaged, and swung about in his swivel chair.

When Miss Phillips entered a moment later, his eyes, piercingly keen and intent under their bushy brows, subjected her to a brief but comprehensive analysis which left no detail of her appearance or characteristics unnoted. Again he felt a touch of surprise, this time not unmixed with gratification. He shifted his gaze slightly, and settled back in his chair.

He had, indeed, very much the same feeling of relief and relaxation that the wolf must have experienced at the trusting approach of Little Red Riding Hood. This was so restfully easy.

And, to tell the truth, nothing could have looked less formidable than Miss Phillips. She was so obviously young, and simple, and plain. As he looked at her, Whitefield felt the necessity of readjusting his mental focus. He had had in mind a picture gallery of ac-

cepted types, and was confidently expecting one or the other of them to appear. The motherly old soul, perhaps, thoroughly up in every trick of the extortioner's trade, or the young and innocent Broadway "chicken" with her profound sophistications, or the attractive young woman of about thirty with the hard mouth and crook eyes. But this girl — Why, it would be like dealing with a child.

After she had responded to his "Good morning," and had unhesitatingly taken the chair he indicated, so placed that the light fell full upon her face, she said no more, but left the next word to him.

"Well, Miss Phillips," he began, his usual bluff, quick manner of speech modified to a firm, businesslike tone, "you are here, as I understand, to give me some information regarding a package of papers which was stolen from my safe?"

"Yes," she answered quietly, "the Colvin papers."

Her directness slightly disconcerted him. Then he smiled upon her encouragingly, paternally. His manner seemed to say: "Have confidence, little girl. In me you will find a true friend."

"And you have those papers?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered again.

"Absolutely in your own possession, I hope? You see, I want you to be in a position to claim the entire reward."

"They are in my own possession."

"You have brought them with you, eh?" In spite of himself, the quick gleam in his eye betrayed his consuming anxiety.

"Oh, no." She appeared surprised that he should have expected that. "We have our terms to make first, you know, Mr. Whitefield."

He leaned back in his chair, and bent another long, keen look on her. She bore the scrutiny without any trace of self-consciousness.

"Our terms?" he repeated. "The terms were fully stated in my advertisement, five thousand dollars for the return of the papers. Some one may have advised you, of course, that I am a very rich man, and that you can get more; so we may as well settle that question once and for all. Understand, if you please, that those papers are absolutely without value to any one except myself, worth at the most the few cents which a rag-man might give for them. But since I attach a certain personal importance to them, I was willing to pay for their recovery, and have named five thousand dollars as the amount. An absurd sum under the circumstances. But I offered it; and what I've offered, I'll stand by."

She shook her head. "Five thousand dollars doesn't interest me, Mr. Whitefield."

By a determined exercise of will he smoothed away the scowl which was gathering about his eyes. His visitor presented more of a puzzle than he had thought. What was her game? Finally he came to the conclusion that she must be merely the mouthpiece, the errand girl in this case, behind her some shrewd and crafty principal of the underworld, or possibly a gang.

"Then there's nothing more to be said," he spoke crisply, with a decisively final emphasis on his words. "You can tell the people back of you that I refuse to be held up. They can't sell those papers; there's no other market for them. And they can't hold them over my head as a club, either. Let 'em try it, and see where they land."

"Mr. Whitefield," her voice was clear and quite

self-possessed, "it will simplify things, I fancy, if you will believe me when I say that I have no advisers in this thing, no backers, and no associates, but am acting entirely on my own. I don't have to consult with any one, or report to any one. You and I can settle matters between us right here and now."

"Nothing to settle." He shut his mouth, and nodded definitely at her once or twice. "You either accept my offer, or you don't. In any case, I've very little time to give you; plenty of more important matters awaiting my attention. So you can either take the five thousand dollars, or leave it; but you'll have to decide which pretty quickly. And, if there are any more hints at blackmail, I'll send for an officer, and have you arrested."

She looked at him, and then burst out laughing as she shook her head.

"Thank you for stating your position so clearly," she said. "I hope I can make mine as plain. I have no desire to blackmail you, Mr. Whitefield; I am simply trying to get the best price for what I have to sell. And, in spite of your denials and explanations, I can't help believing that there are others as anxious to secure those papers as yourself. As you say, five thousand dollars is an absurd amount — absurdly large as a reward, absurdly small as a bid. Those papers must be of equal or greater value to some one else, or they would never be worth so much to you."

"Not necessarily so," he interrupted quickly.

"But I am acting on the assumption that it is," she parried. "When I say, therefore, that five thousand dollars doesn't interest me, it is because I believe that the papers are worth more than that to you, and that you will pay more."

"Never." Whitefield ran his scales on his desk very slowly, and with deliberate exactness. He wondered if it would be worth while to threaten her, then decided against it; his one attempt in that direction had not been particularly fruitful. Half-involuntarily his glance turned to the pigeonhole in front of him where lay the report his detectives had gathered in regard to Miss Phillips; innocuous, colorless, but doubtful, yet there was nothing in it to give him any handle or hold over her.

"How much does the other side offer?" he asked abruptly.

Again she laughed, her candid, gray eyes full of amusement. He understood that she did not intend to answer him.

"You won't admit that you are dickering with the other side? Well, as I told you, I'm a busy man. Very little time to waste. Suppose, just to get at some tangible basis, you tell me exactly what you do want?"

Her face became serious, but her voice still held its note of raillery.

"You are so kind," she didn't attempt to disguise the mockery of this, "that I have an impulse to confide in you. Your sympathetic manner emboldens me."

Whitefield was not only shrewd, but he was more or less intuitive — intuitive not only as regarded persons, but circumstances as well — and he had the courage to trust these intuitions and follow them. A large part of his success was due to that ability of his to catch the trend, the feeling of the moment, and utilize it.

Again he gave Hazel his careful study. What was she up to? She certainly had not attempted the pathetic rôle, neither had she tried to play the siren. Her

attractions, although she possessed them, were not obvious, and — he noted with another comprehensive look — she minimized, rather than emphasized them.

That inconspicuous blue serge, well-worn, though not exactly shabby, was hardly the uniform of a vampire, nor that black velvet tam on her pale hair, nor the plain, blue shirtwaist buttoned up to the throat. No ornaments. The only touch of coquetry lay in the thin silk stockings, the smart little shoes.

The result, however, was so attractive, so appealingly fresh and ingenuous, that Whitefield wondered if it were not the same old siren in a more effective and piquant masquerade. The demureness of Priscilla is sometimes the most subtle form of coquetry.

There was, though, according to his experience, one way that you could always find out what you wished to know — by getting them to talk about themselves. That absorbing topic was a certain avenue to self-revelation.

“I hope you are in earnest,” he nodded at her with one of his more amiable expressions. “It would perhaps be a very wise thing for you to confide in me. You are a bright girl, and, I should say, an ambitious one, and with my experience and knowledge of the world, I might be able to advise and help you. Tell me something about yourself. Have you any business or profession?”

“The business of making a living,” she answered.

“Yes; most of us have that. But in what especial way?”

Her nose crinkled slightly, her whole face was irradiated with the smile of a naughty child.

“I live by my wits,” she said. “It is very stimulating. It develops one’s faculties enormously.”

Whitefield found himself immensely diverted. "So?" he laughed; then matching her frankness of speech with his own: "What sort of a crook are you? Shoplifter, pickpocket, confidence woman, or black-mailer?"

He was suddenly aware that all this outer semblance of hers, the simplicity of manner, the inconspicuous appearance, was deceptive. Her individuality was so strong and vivid that she masked it for her own purposes. And, as she answered his question, he realized that he had been guilty of stupidity. He should have understood that she was a personage in her own world, whatever that world was.

She swept aside his "shoplifter, pickpocket, black-mailer" with a distasteful movement of the hand.

"I am a crook, if you will, but none of those other contemptible things. To apply them to me is like asking you if you keep a peanut stand, or cry, 'Ol' clo'!' along the street, or trundle a pushcart. I am something of an expert, you must understand, something of a specialist. I plan things, and negotiate big deals like this with persons who are worth while, like yourself."

"Just so," he smiled wryly. "Birds that are worth the plucking — like me. But go on. You were about to tell me your story."

"No," she shook her head. "There's no reason why I should gratify the impertinent curiosity of you or any one else on that score. But," and now she smiled with a winning candor, "I would like to tell you my ambitions."

Whitefield nodded, and settled himself to listen. Now, he felt sure he would get a line on her, as he phrased it to himself, would be able to discover her

weak spots, and decide now best to cope with her.

"I am fairly well educated as those things go," she began her revelation; "books, facts, and all that. But I'm a lot better educated in life and human nature. I'm quick, mentally and physically, too; I'd never have gotten where I am, if I wasn't. But I'm ambitious — Oh, very ambitious. I don't want to continue a crook. It would be no satisfaction to me, for instance, to blackmail you out of five or ten thousand dollars, and then sit down in stupid, unthinking luxury, until the money was all spent, and I would have to look around for a new victim. No; that sort of thing doesn't interest me any more than your picayune reward does. I've got to have an interest, an occupation, an aim in life; and in my efforts to rise in the world, I need the advice of a man like you who juggles millions, who thinks in the large. I want to be able to come and consult with you, to talk over my plans, and have you counsel and direct me. As a consideration for that direction and advice, I will let you have the Colvin papers for fifty thousand dollars cash. Without the advice, my price is one hundred thousand."

Whitefield rested his hands on the arms of his chair, and leaned forward, as if to get a better look at her.

"My dear young woman," he said, "have you just escaped from a lunatic asylum?"

"That's immaterial, isn't it," she retorted, with her irresistible laugh; "so long as I have the papers, and hold them at a certain figure."

He capitulated. In his intense relief at the prospect of getting those damning papers back in his own hands, he was disinclined to haggle, even though her demands had been twice as exorbitant as they were. Anyhow, he told himself, it was worth something merely to have

met and talked with the oddly original Miss Phillips. Her idea of throwing off fifty thousand dollars in return for his consent to act as her guide, philosopher, and friend, struck him as intensely amusing. Not in years had anything so tickled his sense of humor as the mingled naïveté and audacity of her proposal.

He swung around to his desk, took out his private checkbook, began to write in it, and then paused with his pen poised. He had intended to fill out a check for one hundred thousand dollars as an evidence to her that the money would be forthcoming on the delivery of the papers. But a sudden thought came to him.

"Suppose," he questioned her, "I should accept this proposal of yours, and agree to give you my advice and direction, what is your idea? How, for instance, would you employ the fifty thousand dollars I am to pay you? Go down, and try to clean up the Street, eh? Expect to make a killing on the tips that I could give you? Is that it?"

"I want to be your pupil," she said with charming deference. "I believe I have business ability, and I want to prove it — to prove that I am not merely a clever crook, but can stand for something and be worth while in the decent world, as well. Believe me, I will not be a bother or nuisance to you, Mr. Whitefield. On the contrary, I'm willing to bet that you will find me a help."

"By Jove!" he cried. "I'll take a chance on you. Let's settle the business in hand first, though. When and where do I get those papers?"

She hesitated a moment. True to her promise, she had communicated with the "Hornet" that morning, telling him of her appointment with Whitefield, and in return had received his instructions. She believed that

she had fathomed the purpose back of those instructions, and she was questioning now whether it lay more to her advantage to follow or disregard them.

The "Hornet" was hardly a safe person to antagonize or trick. Invariably playing straight himself, the "double cross" was in his category the one unpardonable sin. Yet, on the other hand, Whitefield would be as quick to detect and resent any evidence of crooked dealing, and her destiny now seemed bound up with his.

In the end, she decided to abide by her agreement with the "Hornet" for the present, ready to throw him over, however, at any moment it seemed advisable to do so, and trusting to her cleverness to extricate herself from any difficulties which might arise. She would at least have that big, white diamond he had shown her. That was perhaps the determining factor in her calculations.

"I won't be able to get the package to you before this evening," she told Whitefield. "And it will be a little late at that. Let me see; you'll probably be at home after six, won't you? Suppose, then, I agree to be at your house with the papers at exactly half-past six o'clock?"

He expressed some dissatisfaction at this arrangement; but she insisted that it was the best she could do. So, rather than let the matter go over to another day, he assented.

That settled, he finished making out the check he had started to write, filling in the amount for fifty thousand dollars, and with the promise that he would have it cashed and ready for her upon the delivery of the papers, held it out for her inspection.

"Quite a sum of money all at once, young lady," he

said. "Ever have that much in your hands before?"

"No," she admitted. Her face had gone a little pale as she gazed at the check. She drew in her breath, and exhaled it in a rapturous sigh. Then she crinkled her nose again. "Pooh!" she cried. "I don't expect fifty thousand to be more than cab fare to me in the future. We are going to do big things together, Mr. Whitefield. I can help you in ways that you don't dream."

She rose as if to terminate the interview, but he lifted a detaining hand.

"Wait," he said. "That's the second time you have boasted that you could be of assistance to me. Suppose I give you a chance to prove your words."

She seated herself again. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you know of course where those papers came from, that they were stolen from my safe, and you also know, no doubt, the person who took them."

A gleam of suspicion flashed in her eye, her voice grew hard. "There were to be 'no questions asked,'" she reminded him. "I'm not incriminating myself, thank you."

For answer he arose and stepping to the door of a closet on the other side of the room, opened it to disclose a rather embarrassed stenographer.

"You may come out, Bates," he said. "I shall not need you further. And let me have your notes, please."

He took the book, as the stenographer hurried out of the office, and walking over to the waste-basket, tore the record into fragments.

"Now, my dear, you may speak as freely as you choose."

"I'm afraid you are in for a disappointment," Hazel

laughed, and there could be no question of her absolute sincerity; "for honestly, I don't know a thing that would help you. I have my suspicions of course — maybe, something more than a suspicion — but nothing that would serve as legal evidence.

"You see," she explained, "I came into the case after everything was all over. A woman with whom the papers had been left talked too much. I had happened to see your advertisement, and by putting two and two together, decided that it was the package you were after. I knew who you were, and fancied that I could do a stroke of business, so by a bit of finesse I got hold of the papers. The woman who had them didn't have an idea of their real character, and the person who left them with her — a mere go-between at the best — is out of the country. So that lead is absolutely blocked."

Whitefield frowned, and drummed upon the arms of his chair. "Still you know who did the job," he persisted, "or can make a pretty close guess at it. The police have utterly failed in the case, bungled it from start to finish, but it strikes me that a bright girl like you, by a little investigation, and with the sources of information which you possess, might easily get all the confirmation necessary. It is a matter of importance to me," he added. "I want to find the person responsible for that robbery. So, if you really wish to help me as you say, here's your opportunity. At the same time, I'll make it well worth your while."

Hazel nodded understandingly. "I'll try." She sat silent a moment as if thinking. As a matter of fact, she was reflecting that, if the worst came to the worst, she might use this to cope with the "Hornet." A wicked little glimmer stole into her eyes.

With her thoughts thus occupied, a question which Whitefield suddenly shot at her almost took her off her guard, but she managed to repress the slight start it gave her.

"Do you happen to know a man they call the 'Hornet'?" he asked.

"The 'Hornet'?" Her eyes, looking straight into his, were limpidly innocent. "A man with a scar on his face?"

"Yes; he is the one that the police have always suspected."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He might have been 'in' of course; but it was some one else I had in mind. I'll tell you," she steered away from dangerous ground. "Suppose I try to get on the right track by dropping around to the places where the stuff taken would most likely have been disposed of, and doing a little discreet gossiping."

"Good," he commended. "And if you could locate any of it, that would give us direct connection with the thief. We should need no better evidence."

"Have you a list of the various things they got?" she asked in her usual businesslike fashion.

He reached into one of the pigeonholes of his desk, and handed her a typewritten sheet. But as she scanned it, noting that it listed only a few inconsequential trinkets, she appeared puzzled.

"But this is not all?" she exclaimed. "There were also some sapphires taken, were there not? Big sapphires, worth more than all of this junk put together." Her tone betrayed how she still regretted the loss of those four splendid stones which the "Hornet" had let her touch but not keep.

"Sapphires?" repeated Whitefield with a start.

Hurriedly he took the list from her hand, and glanced over it. "No; there are no sapphires here, and this includes everything which was taken."

Hazel saw that she had made a false step of some kind.

"I thought I remembered a mention of some sapphires in the newspaper accounts," she hedged a bit. "However, it doesn't signify. I'll try to trace up what's here," she repossessed herself of the list, as she rose again to leave. "And I'll see you this evening at half-past six, Mr. Whitefield."

CHAPTER XIX

FOR several minutes after Hazel Phillips left, Whitefield sat absorbed in thought; then, swinging around to his desk, he drew another of those typed lists from the pigeonhole, and studied it carefully.

There was nothing in it to suggest sapphires, and he knew that this was exactly the same list which had been furnished to the newspapers, and published by them.

Odd, then, that the girl should have made such a mistake. Odder, still, that she should have described stones of the same character as those which composed Freda's magnificent necklace.

A hundred circumstances of the last few weeks, hitherto unnoted, but now assuming a disturbing significance, thronged upon his mind. He took up a cigar to help him clarify his thoughts, cut off the end of it, and thrust it in his mouth, but quite forgot to light it. His hand was busy, though, running his perpetual scales.

Finally, he turned to the telephone, called for his house, and asked to speak with Freda.

"Anything especial on for to-day?" he inquired, when he heard her voice in response.

"Nothing very important," she replied. "Why?"

"Oh, I'm having an off day in a way. Only routine matters here. I thought, if you don't mind, we might have luncheon together somewhere. Let me see; it's half-past twelve now. Can you get down here by one?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed. "I had just sent for my car, anyway." She made a brief pause. "There's nothing you wish to talk to me about, you say? Nothing unexpected has come up?"

"No. Oh, no. Just come along. I'll expect you by one." And he hung up the receiver.

With that, as if he had settled upon his course, and saw no need to give it further reflection, his mood changed. He pressed a push-button on his desk, and when Bates, the stenographer, appeared, plunged briskly into a mass of correspondence. He had just finished dictating the last letter when Freda arrived.

As she came into the office, Whitefield looked at her more closely than he had done for a long, long time — not merely accepting her as one of the features of his environment, but actually seeing her as something detached and individual.

Had he but realized it, Freda was looking better than she had for weeks. Her expression, her whole general effect, was more carefree, less harassed with the improvement in her spirits. The assurance she had received from Wimms of having her sapphires restored had acted upon her like a tonic.

Whitefield knew her pretty well — thoroughly, he thought. He felt sure enough of her coöperation in anything which she thought might advance their mutual interests, but he was also acquainted with her duplicities and slippery evasions. Therefore, not wishing to arouse her suspicions to the point where she would be on guard, he approached the issue indirectly, and then not until they were in the limousine and on their way. They had proceeded a half dozen blocks or more, when he turned to her quite casually and naturally.

"By the way, Freda, I want you to get me your sapphires."

He saw her quick movement, and its instant repression. There was a moment of strained silence.

"My sapphires?" She exerted all her will, all her power of self-control, and yet she realized, furious at herself, that her voice as she answered was uncertain, trembling.

"Yes." He was still perfectly matter-of-fact. "And your pearls, too. I want to have both sets reappraised. Diamonds have gone up considerably in price, I know, and I suppose the other stones have also. But I'd like to get an exact valuation. We can drive on to the bank now, and get the two sets out of safety deposit, and then after luncheon, we'll go over and leave them at Reiffenberg's." He started to give his directions to the chauffeur.

The blood in Freda's veins seemed turning to ice. There was a wavering darkness before her eyes. She felt dully that she was on the verge of fainting, and fought despairingly against it.

"Oh, not to-day," she demurred, striving to speak lightly, with a suggestion of caprice. "I thought we were going to have just a good time, with no worries or bothers of any kind. Besides, I'm literally starving. Let's go straight to luncheon now, William. And this afternoon I want you to go with me to the American Art Galleries to see the De Marsae collection."

"Fine," he agreed cheerfully. "Fellow was telling me about those pictures only last night at the club. This little matter about the sapphires and pearls won't take up any time, though. All we have to do is get them and leave them at Reiffenberg's; and then it will be off my mind."

"But — But —" She cast wildly about for an excuse. "I haven't the key to my safety-deposit box with me. Do let this idea go until to-morrow. It will throw us out on everything."

"Nonsense, Freda!" There was a touch of irritation creeping into his voice. "Why are you putting up all these fool objections? The sapphires are there all right, aren't they? You haven't done anything with them?"

She forced a smile, and shook her head. "Oh, William, you are so wearing at times with your persistence. What difference does it make whether you get those things to Reiffenberg to-day or next week? And I'm only asking you to wait until to-morrow. I haven't been very strong this autumn, as you know, and now you are spoiling the pleasant little luncheon I was looking forward to. Also, I've set my heart on seeing the De Marsac collection this afternoon. I think you might yield to my whims once in a while, even if they do seem absurd and unreasonable to you." She laid her cheek against his shoulder, and stroked her hand coaxingly down his sleeve.

"Sorry," laconically. "But in view of some rather important things which may come up, I've got to know where I stand, and I want an immediate revaluation of those pearls and sapphires. A day might make all the difference in the world."

"Wait then at least until after luncheon," she pleaded.

"No. By the time that we had finished, and you'd go home after the key, there might be some other delay, and then it would be too late to get them out to-day. Don't be so foolish, Freda. It's a very small thing I am asking of you. Let us have no more argument

about it. "Home, Waldo!" he instructed the chauffeur through the speaking tube.

Freda leaned back, silent. Trapped, she was wondering wildly if there was any possible way for her to extricate herself. But the nearer they approached the house, the more confused and hopeless her thoughts became; and when they arrived, it seemed almost impossible for her to drag herself up the steps.

Whitefield, directing the chauffeur to wait, followed close behind her, but turned in at the door of his library.

"Now don't be forever getting that key," he said as she started up the stairs. "I'm beginning to feel hungry, too."

She was gone about five minutes; then she walked swiftly into the library.

"William," she spoke with the courage of despair, "the sapphires are not at the bank. They were in the safe here the night of the robbery, and were taken with the other things. They will be back in my hands, though, at half-past five o'clock this afternoon."

"You don't mean the entire set was stolen?" He stared at her. This was the real surprise to him.

"Yes: the entire set."

"And the pearls, too?"

"No. I wore them the night of our dance, you remember."

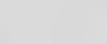
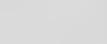
Yes, he did remember that. But his expression of relief at this assurance was transitory. He scowled heavily at the thought of the greater loss, and took a step toward her.

"But why didn't you mention such a loss to me before?" he demanded. "Why didn't you speak of it at the time? What's back of all this, Freda? It's



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perfectly useless for you to hedge, or try to lie out of anything. I want the straight facts, and I mean to have them. Do you understand?"

Freda's mouth felt dry. There was a choking sensation in her throat. She put her hand to it, as if to ease the constriction.

The scene she had dreaded and feared was on. Sometimes at night she had wakened from sleep, dreaming of this cross-examination. She struggled now to remember her points, and make plausible and coherent the story she had decided to tell.

"I—I happened to be at the bank the afternoon before the robbery," she began her explanation. "It was in my mind to wear my sapphires at that dinner of the Collinges the next evening, and it struck me that I could save another trip by taking them with me. So I got them out and bringing them home with me, put them in the safe. I put them there myself."

"And then when the robbery occurred, and you knew that they were gone, you didn't think it worth while to mention the matter." He muttered an oath. "All you saw fit to tell about was a few rings and brooches?"

"You were so terribly upset over the loss of the Colvin papers," she pleaded. "I realized, too, that the affair was more than a simple burglary. There was a plot behind it to ruin you. I hadn't the courage to tell you about the sapphires, and add to your anxieties."

His eyes, as he continued to gaze at her, contracted until they seemed like pin-points of fire. A slow, deep red crept up into his cheeks. His voice was a little thick.

"Don't attempt to bamboozle me with your weak,

rotten lies. I'll get the real truth out of you before I'm through; never fear. But there's just one point I want made clear before we go any further. You said something about getting the stones back — something about having them in your hands at half-past five. What did you mean by it?" He eyed her sharply. "Only another silly subterfuge?"

Her throat eased a little at the prospect of even a temporary respite from the inquisition to which he was subjecting her. There was a sob in her voice as she spoke, but it was a sob of relief.

"I've moved heaven and earth to find those sapphires, William, to get some trace of them; and owing to my efforts, a man — not one of the actual thieves, I think, but closely associated with them — got into communication with me the other day, and after a lot of haggling, agreed to return the set for fifteen thousand dollars. That is the very least that I could get him to take; he held out for a great deal more. He has promised to meet me at half-past five o'clock this afternoon to receive the money and hand me over the stones. That is the reason I tried so hard to put you off until to-morrow."

She was telling the truth now, he was certain of that. But the truth he found even less plausible than her fictions.

"H'm-m!" Again that piercing look from under his wrinkled brows. "Fifteen thousand dollars? Why, that's a bagatelle compared to what he could get for them. It doesn't sound reasonable."

"I tell you he wanted a great deal more. It was only when I convinced him that it was all I could offer, and that I would not appeal to you, that he consented. Perhaps," she ventured, "the police are closer on their

trail than we imagine. Perhaps he did not dare to go into any lengthy bargaining, or to try to dispose of them elsewhere, but preferred to play safe."

"The police?" He laughed scoffingly. "No; I know what's doing there, and they're as much up in the air as they ever were. I'm done with them."

"Well, then, as I was about to say, and this is nearer my own idea, it may be that the man is selling out the thieves — betraying a trust they've placed in him, or something of the kind. That would explain his eagerness for quick results."

"Ah?" with a nod. "That is more like it. And he has arranged to meet you this afternoon to return the stones? Good. We'll get the sapphires and him both, if what you're telling me is true." He reached out for the telephone. "It's odds on that a fellow of that sort will tell the whole story, if we can get our hands on him."

"No, no," she laid a detaining hand upon his arm; "you must not do that. You will spoil any chance of recovering the sapphires. He told me so. He said that if I made any attempt to have him spied upon or intercepted, I could say good-by to them once and for all. Besides, it will be impossible to catch him; he has made his arrangements too cleverly. I am to leave the house alone, and start out as if for a walk. Somewhere along the street a taxicab will pick me up, and take me to him. That is all he has permitted me to know."

He hesitated a moment at her protest and set down the telephone; then on reconsideration took it up again.

"We'll give him a run for it, anyway," he said. "On a simple proposition like this, the police can generally be trusted. It is only a matter of following up

this taxicab, as I see it. I'm going to lay it before the Inspector."

"William, wait!" She caught at his hand again. Paler than ever, she looked ghastly now, and her voice was a shrill, strained whisper. "The police must not be brought into this," she insisted. "There is no reason why they should be. I do not care anything about this man. All I want is my sapphires. Why take even a risk in the matter?"

"I'm going to speak to the Inspector just the same." His voice was cool, but too well she knew the meaning of the knife-edge in it. "Let go of my hand, please."

She threw herself forward instead, and snatching at the instrument, struggled with him for its possession.

"You shall not telephone the police!" she cried, clutching frantically to hold the receiver down upon its hook. "You shall not. I will not have them brought into this thing. They would get to probing into the theft and all the rest of it, and that would mean a scandal."

Whitefield abruptly released his hold upon the telephone, and left it in her hands. Then, walking over to a table near by, he selected a cigar, and clipping the end, lighted it, all with the utmost deliberation. When it was going to his satisfaction, he returned.

"So?" Again he bent upon her the battery of his eyes. "That brings me back once more to the point where I was led to digress — the real facts of this so-called 'theft' which you are so anxious to avoid having investigated. You've said too much now, Freda, to try to keep anything back. You might as well tell the whole story. Nor is there any use in entangling yourself in any more lies. You're simply wasting time."

In her frightened, overwrought state, there was

something almost appalling to her in his steady purpose to discredit every feature of her story, his calm, unwavering determination to dig down to the very roots of the matter. And behind the collapse of her resource and power of invention — responsible for it, in fact — was the constantly recurring fear that he knew more than she had thought. This conviction had been forcing itself upon her ever since his first mention of the sapphires, until now it had sapped the foundations of her self-control. But still she struggled, endeavoring to use all of her feminine subtlety in the effort to save herself as much as possible.

“Oh, it is all so simple, if you would only understand,” she cried. “It doesn’t really amount to anything. “I didn’t want to tell you at the time, because, as I have said, you were so terribly upset over the loss of the Colvin papers; and then to-day the whole thing seemed so silly, that I just made up a convenient story. It was weak of me, I know; but you really forced me to it, the way you have been making mountains out of mole-hills. However, the actual facts are — You’ll think me an awful fool, of course, but — Well, it was this way. Ollie — Ollie Darnton, you know — had got in an awful hole, went broke on the market, and he — he confided in me. You see, he was here so much, and he literally didn’t know where to turn, or what to do. Some of the money he had used was not his own. He was, oh, wild, threatening to commit suicide, don’t you know. And I got worried and sympathetic, and offered to help him raise the money by letting him pawn my sapphires. Oh!” she burst out hysterically, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, “I can’t go on if you keep looking at me like that, as if I had committed a crime. It was only a loan — a loan which was sure

to be paid back. Why, I knew it was good, and so it proved.

"Ollie's father gave him the money as soon as he got back from Europe, and Ollie at once redeemed the stones, and brought them back to me. He gave them to me at the Hortons' dinner — the evening of the robbery, you know — and that night about twelve o'clock, I slipped down-stairs and put them in the safe. I have often wondered if the robbers were not in the house even then, and watching me as I did so. And then, when I found that they had been taken, I didn't dare, as I say, to tell you. And — that's all."

"I wonder if that is all? I wonder," muttered Whitefield. Every trace of bluff geniality had vanished from his face and bearing. His glance was dark and wolfish. "I wonder if it was not you and Darn-ton who planned this robbery together? By Jove, if you did —! But no; you would have tried to hold me up before this."

He shook his head, and put the supposition from him. Then he came back to the moment, and to the woman cowering in her chair, dabbing at her eyes.

"You fool!" he said, with a contempt beyond words. "You fool! I thought I knew you through and through. I see I flattered you. I thought your measly soul was all in your luxuries. I thought that you fully appreciated the value of your position as my wife. But I under-estimated your idiotic vanity. Was Ollie Darnton the best that you could do? A poor, brainless whiffet, willing to let a woman dole him out pocket-money and pull him out of his holes. If I cared a tinker's dam about you, Freda," he pounded on the table with his open palm, "I'd give you a good beating, kick that degenerate little ass out of my house, and

see to it that you behaved yourself in the future. Do you think for a minute that you have fooled me all these years? Not for one second. But I simply — didn't — care. All you ever had to attract a man was your looks, and they are about gone."

Just then his eye caught an oval mirror in a frame of chased silver, hanging where a shaft of sunlight fell across it. He was on his feet, and had caught Freda by the arm, and was pushing her toward it before she realized what he was doing.

"There's your judge!" he cried, pointing toward her reflection. "There's your sentence! There's the question and the answer!"

The sun-lighted mirror gave back her image with a merciless distinctness. The beauty for which she lived had betrayed and deserted her. Time, the satirist, had stripped her of her worshipped mask of glorious flesh, and had written upon her face and in her eyes the small, the base, the sensual secrets of her soul.

And, as she looked, she felt hope, the savor of life — life itself, it seemed to her — die within her. The world, all the world she could conceive of, was in ruins. It was not in her either to imagine or to build another. She had doomed herself to wander amid the dust and ashes, mourning the vanished mirage of her own loveliness.

CHAPTER XX

BUT cataclysms and crises alter but little the regular business of life. Breakfast, dinner, and supper go on as before; waking follows sleep; seedtime and harvest do not fail; habit asserts itself.

Maimed and crushed, beaten and dispirited though she was, Freda never thought of failing to set out at the appointed time to recover her stolen jewels. It was a relief to substitute action of any kind for her dreary reflections.

The gray, early dusk was falling as she came out of the house, muffled in her dark furs, but it was still light enough for her to be recognized; and as the Avenue was thronged with motor and carriage folk whom she knew, she turned with the stricken creature's instinct to hide, and hurried off eastward.

She had received no instructions as to the way she was to take, and consequently choosing her own paths, she found herself presently on Lexington Avenue. For perhaps a dozen blocks she walked straight ahead, growing more nervous and apprehensive all the time. The unusualness of her errand, the large amount of money she was carrying, gave rise to all manner of sinister suggestions. She glanced back over her shoulder every step or two, with the feeling that some one was creeping stealthily up behind her.

And then a taxicab whirled up to the curb beside her and stopped.

There was no question asked in regard to her identity; she had evidently been watched and followed from

the moment she left the house. The driver merely threw open the cab door, and nodded to her to enter.

"Be quick, please," he said.

Freda hesitated a second, then obeyed. The door slammed upon her, the driver threw forward his clutch, and they were off. The course seemed to be devious, with many detours, but she judged from various landmarks that the direction was generally northward, and presently they flashed across Broadway at One Hundred and Forty-ninth Street, and so on into Washington Park Road.

So far the driver had hardly slackened speed, but now, as they came to a lonely stretch where the trees grew close along a bend in the road, he slowed down without actually coming to a stop. An instant later the door opened, and a small figure whom Freda recognized as Wimms slipped inside.

Crouched back in her corner, tense and frightened, she could barely repress a scream at his sudden appearance, but he made haste to reassure her by offering apologies in that soft, humble voice of his.

"I beg pardon, I'm sure, ma'am, for giving you such a turn, but one has to be a bit careful at times in handling these little affairs. Oh, yes, indeed; quite so."

He was so small and insignificant, so obviously innocuous, that Freda felt her courage return. She made an impatient movement of her hand to cut short his excuses.

"Have you got them — the sapphires?" she asked.

For answer, Wimms drew from an inner pocket of his coat a flat parcel, and carefully unfolded the paper in which it was wrapped. He breathed with a sort of worshipping awe. Finally disclosing a leather case,

he laid it open on her knee, and drew back slightly, mopping at his brow with his handkerchief.

"My word!" he sighed. "It's almost enough to turn one's brain to see a set like that. I'm used to handling jewels now and then -- But these --!" He gazed at them reverently. "Well, they're something you dream about."

Freda paid no heed to him. She was bending over the case, staring down absorbedly at the familiar pieces. Then the tension broke, and clutching the case to her, she fell to sobbing in passionate relief.

Wimms restrained an inclination to pat her on the shoulder. Resolutely putting duty before his sympathetic impulses, he laid a firm hand on the case instead.

"There, there," he murmured soothingly, "'tis natural you should wish to hold on to 'em. But first, please remember, there's a little matter of business to be settled between us."

"Oh, yes," said Freda; "the fifteen thousand dollars. I had forgotten."

She reached into her muff, and taking out a roll of bills, handed them over to him.

"Count it, please," she said.

"I was about to do so, ma'am," and he did in a furtive, hasty way, but, she could see, very thoroughly. "Quite correct," he licked his lips as he finished; "and thank you kindly. Well," he pressed his face against the glass of the door, "here's where I get off, ma'am. The man will take you to the neighborhood of a subway station, and you can easy get a train downtown. So thank you again, ma'am, and good-by. I'm sure there's no one wishing you more health and happiness than me."

He rapped lightly on the front pane of the cab, and then as the chauffeur slowed down, vanished as he had come.

It was not more than twenty minutes afterward that Freda reached home. With the case under her arm, she walked straight to her husband's study, and laid it on the table beside him.

He was sitting, making a pretense of reading one of the evening papers, but in reality his mind was concentrated on the two events of real importance to him just then, the recovery of the sapphires and the Colvin documents.

"Here are the sapphires." Freda's voice was repressed, emotionless.

He threw over his electric reading-lamp so that the light fell directly on the table, and opened the case; but drew back blinking before the dazzle of blue fire which blazed up at him.

"By Jove! The real thing, all right!" Then, more cautiously: "Sure, there are no substitutes here and there?" He lifted the set, piece by piece, and carefully examined each.

Freda gave a smile of weary contempt. "I know them all by heart," she said.

"Yes; they're the real thing," he muttered, gloating over their blue magnificence. Ah, he was winning, winning all along the line!

"Good girl!" he said approvingly. "I'm willing to overlook considerable for this."

"But what about me?" she asked, still in that dull, colorless voice. "It's all over with me — everything — the whole big, empty, stupid show. I'm done."

"Oh, come now," in a tone of rough kindness;

"you mustn't —" Then as he saw her ghastly face with the deep, black circles under the eyes, he pulled a chair toward her, and pressed her into it.

"Here, sit down," peremptorily. "I'll ring for Dempsey to bring you a glass of sherry. Your nerves have simply gone to smash over these sapphires. No wonder. I know what I've been through on account of the Colvin papers. And look here; you mustn't take to heart what I said a while ago. I was upset and excited, I guess. Forget it."

He broke off to give Dempsey, who had appeared at the door, the order for the sherry. Then, when the butler returned, he took the glass himself, and held it to Freda's white lips.

"Drink it," he urged, and as she silently obeyed, "you will feel better soon."

He took the empty glass, and set it down upon the table. "There are one or two things I want to say to you, Freda, and if you don't mind," he glanced at her inquiringly, "I'd like to get them said, and out of the way."

"By all means," she replied politely, but without interest.

"Freda, we have each gone our own way too many years for me to rant around now over my rights as a husband. As my wife, you have certainly adorned the position, and that is all I could reasonably ask. I have always held, as you know, that a man's or a woman's outside friendships or affairs of the heart were entirely their own business, so long as they were conducted with a due regard for the proprieties and in good taste. You stumbled a bit in both respects in this last matter; and that, and the thought of losing a fortune in jewels through your folly, made me guilty of my rather melo-

dramatic rudeness to you. I can only say that I am sorry."

He had sat down while he was talking, but she on the other hand had risen from her chair, and now she laid her hand on his shoulder. The action was mechanical. She did not even see him. Her eyes were fixed on the dreary, meaningless wastes of the years before her.

"In your own words, William, forget it," she said. "I have had very little to complain of in that way from you. You may be all that the newspapers call you — Wall Street crook, corruptionist, and all the rest of it — but you are undoubtedly a big man; and you have been good enough to me, too good. But, you see, the trouble all along has been that we never loved each other. Perhaps — who knows? — if we had, it might have saved us both. You were quite right when you said that the only attraction I ever had for you was my beauty, and that that sort of a hold doesn't last very long with a man. So we went our separate ways."

She seemed to have forgotten Whitefield, as she went on, although her hand rested on his shoulder. Her eyes still looked into unfathomed emptiness.

"I suppose, though," she continued, "every one has got something real somewhere in their hearts and lives, and the one real thing in my life was my love for Ashe Colvin. But I dreaded and feared realities, so I sold that love for pearls and sapphires, and continued to 'adorn my position as your wife.' Yet the heart has to have its Day of Judgment as well as the soul. You can stifle and smother feeling, joy, and suffering for years perhaps, and believe that they are killed in you; but there finally comes the reckoning, the dreadful reckoning, when all the loss and the pain and the

smothered love comes sweeping back to you like a wave of the sea, and you can't stop it, you can't check it. It overwhelms you; it drowns you!"

She would probably have said more; but at this point she was interrupted by a light knock at the door and the entrance of Dempsey.

"Miss Hazel Phillips to see you, sir." A clock in the hall chimed the half hour even as the butler spoke. Punctual as ever, Miss Phillips was there to keep her appointment.

Whitefield gave a start. "Certainly. Show her in," his eagerness was apparent. Then his eye fell on the jewel case upon the table. "Or wait a moment, Dempsey. It will be about five minutes before I can see her. I will ring to let you know. And close the door, please, as you go out."

He turned to Freda. "Sorry, my dear, but this is the girl I spoke to you about, the one who has the papers. I fancy she would prefer to see me alone."

A glint of bitterness showed for a moment in her eyes. Reaching out again, as he was, to grasp more firmly the reins of power which had almost slipped from his hands, he was putting her and her affairs aside as matters of no consequence. She noted the tense alertness of his manner with a touch of envy; for him, there was still the game and the struggle. Then the bitterness and the envy died in a wave of apathy. After all, what did it matter? What did anything matter? She did not begrudge him his zest for life. And if he had been the soul of sympathy, how could he have helped her? She bowed indifferently to his request, and passed, a silent, tragic figure, from the room.

Whitefield hurriedly manipulated the combination of the safe, and having opened its door, placed the case

of sapphires in an inner compartment. Then he touched the bell for Dempsey.

In the brief interval that he waited for the appearance of his visitor, he noticed with surprised irritation that his knees were shaking and his hand trembling, as it rested on the table, and when he muttered an oath at these evidences of his anxiety, his voice sounded husky and uncertain in his ears.

Hazel entered with that mixture of demureness and intrepidity which characterized her. But his eyes scarcely rested on her a moment; they fixed themselves, instead, with hungry intensity upon the black bag she carried in her hand, a shopping bag of rather large size.

She laid this on his desk, and snapped open the clasps; then she took out the package, and handed it to him. He would have known it anywhere. There could be no question of its genuineness. The Colvin papers were again in his hands.

Involuntarily Whitefield had risen while the girl was opening her bag. Now he sat down again suddenly and hard. He broke the seals of the package, and ran over the different documents it contained; but this was more as a matter of form, and to let him get hold of himself. Everything was there, and all in proper order. Almost solemnly he looked up to Hazel, and said:

“Little girl, for this I’ll make your fortune!”

“I’ll hold you to that, Mr. Whitefield.” She smiled with serene assurance. Then, as he rose with the package of papers in his hand, she whisked around the desk with inconceivable rapidity, and threw herself between him and the fireplace, where a fire of logs was briskly blazing.

"No, you don't!" she panted, throwing out her arms. "You don't destroy those papers yet. Not until I get my fifty thousand."

Whitefield laughed admiringly at her pygmy defiance. "You needn't be afraid, my child," he said. "As a matter of fact, it was your — er — honorarium, that I was just going to fetch. Naturally you thought that I would get rid of these as soon as possible," he tapped the papers in his hand; "but as it happens, there are certain harmless items among them; records of old business transactions, which I wish to keep. I intend to go over them with my secretary this evening, extract the wheat from the chaff, and then burn the chaff. However," he broke off with another laugh, "I am still keeping you waiting."

He walked over to the safe which he had left open, and laid the papers inside. Then he came back with a package of bills, and placed it on the table before her.

"There, my child, are fifty thousand-dollar bills, and I may say that I have never paid out fifty thousand dollars before with more pleasure, or to better advantage."

Her eyes widened, her color came and went. She picked up the money in a frightened sort of a way. Her supreme self-confidence vanished; she appeared all at once very small and meek. Slowly, and still in a bit of a daze, she turned over the crisp, rustling notes.

Then, as her mind fully grasped the fact that not only was each one of these bills her own, but also the entire amount which they represented, a dazzle swept over her face. Her whole figure appeared to dilate, as she saw the farther and yet farther horizons opening before her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You can talk about sun-

rises and sunsets, and jewels, and works of art; but, believe me, Mr. Whitefield, this," she spread the bills out fanlike before her, "is the most beautiful picture in all the world!"

She gathered the bills together, and tucked them into the bosom of her blouse, buttoned her jacket over them, and from one of her pockets took a tiny but efficient pistol which she showed him.

"I'm running no chances, you see," she said; "not with this picture gallery on me. Good night."

"Good night," he returned heartily.

The door closed behind her, and he walked over to his impregnable, new safe which now at last held not only the sapphires, but something far more precious. Carefully he closed the heavy door, and threw on the combination, whistling under his breath as he did so. He had just turned away, and was glancing at the clock, when there was a knock, and Muriel stood in the doorway.

She was entrancingly, unusually lovely in one of those evening frocks which she affected where all the hues of the sunset seemed blended. The color in her cheeks and lips was vivid as carnation petals, and her emerald eyes gleamed with a smoldering excitement.

"What?" she said. "Not ready for dinner? Well, come along as you are. I told Dempsey that I would let you know that Aunt Freda has sent word she will not be down to-night; so I am going to utilize the hour to talk over some matters of great importance to me."

"Actually going to confide in me, or ask my advice about anything?" he exclaimed with exaggerated sarcasm.

"Oh, I don't promise that," she replied coolly.

"Just want to inform me of your intentions, eh? I see," he laughed unctuously. Nothing had the power to irritate him at that moment, not even Muriel. "All right." He followed her from the room.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the hall Muriel left him for a moment to give some directions to the man at the door.

"What was that?" Whitefield asked sharply as she came back to his side. With her he was always more or less suspicious.

"Nothing." She raised her brows slightly at his tone. "I was just sending James out for some cigarettes. There are none of my kind in the house, and I can't smoke those little, inane, gold-tipped things which Aunt Freda affects."

"Couldn't you get one of the other servants to run your errands?" he grumbled. "With Dempsey back in the dining-room, and James away, there is no one in the hall. I don't like it."

He cast an uneasy glance back at his unguarded study and hesitated, as if meditating a return to it.

"Oh, nonsense, Uncle William!" Muriel scoffed. "What does it amount to? James won't be gone two minutes; it's only just around the corner. And there isn't a chance of anybody coming to the house at this hour."

He realized that he was exaggerating a trifle, and therefore, yielding to the light but impelling pressure of her hand upon his arm, permitted himself to be guided into the dining-room.

Meanwhile, James, leaving the house by the area door, had started for the tobacco shop a block away on Madison Avenue.

The "Hornet" and Colvin, seated on a bench over

in the Park, which while somewhat secluded, yet afforded a thorough view of the Whitefield premises, saw him as he turned the corner, and rising, they walked briskly out of the Park, and up the Avenue. At a point directly opposite the house they crossed over and mounted the steps. There was such an absence of anything furtive in either their manner or their movements that the two watchmen guarding the front of the house bestowed upon them only a perfunctory scrutiny, and the fact that the door opened almost immediately to them, as if at the hand of a ready servitor, helped also to disarm suspicion.

The "Hornet" had accomplished this by having the key ready in his hand and thrusting it straight into the lock as he reached the door, trusting to the shadow of the vestibule, and to the figure of Colvin bulking just behind him to screen his strategy. It required then but the twisting of the latch, and the way stood open before them.

They entered, the "Hornet" closing the door noiselessly, and stole on tiptoe down the hall to the study. Inside, they paused a moment to reconnoiter. Swiftly crossing the room, the "Hornet," the more experienced of the two at such adventures, peeped from behind a corner of the drawn curtains at one of the windows. Undisturbed, the two watchmen along the sidewalk still held their stolid vigil.

Returning then to the door which led into the hall, the "Hornet" laid his ear to it a moment, and listened. The house was quiet. From the dining-room sounded faintly a peal of Muriel's laughter. The "Hornet" drew back.

"Coast's clear," he muttered curtly. "We ought to have at least an hour free from interruption."

Colvin, who had been standing rigidly alert just inside the doorway, relaxed his tense attitude, and glanced around him.

"I never dreamed that it would be so easy," he said wonderingly.

"That's it," scowled the "Hornet"; "it's too easy. What's that?" He gave a quick start as one of the logs in the fireplace burned in two, and fell with a slight clatter to the hearth. "I'm as nervous as a cat. If there was any way to put it off, I'd back out, and go home right now."

Colvin made no answer. It was evident that none was expected; for by this time the "Hornet," crossing over to the safe, had dropped on his knees beside it, and as his fingers dexterously turned the knob of the combination, all his faculties were centered on the click of the revolving tumblers.

"Put this down," he growled over his shoulder to Colvin who stood behind him, ready with pencil and paper. "Start at 7, three full turns to the right, and back to 5, two and a half to the left, stop at 9. . . . Lord! How I'm enjoying this!" he interrupted himself. "It's like going back to old times. If only I wasn't so sure that something is going to happen."

All day long the "Hornet" had been full of these Cassandra-like forebodings and prophecies of evil. He had shown it that morning when he had sulked into Ashe's apartment to discuss the task, which in view of Hazel Phillips's return of the papers to Whitefield, and Winms's restoration of the sapphires to Freda, must be accomplished that evening.

Leaning back in a low chair with his long legs swinging over the arm of it, he moodily cursed Hazel Phillips as the cause of his misgivings.

"She's the 'ace in the hole' that keeps me guessing," he muttered. "Ever since she came into the picture, my luck has turned. I spilled my salt all over the tablecloth the morning I went after her, and with me that never fails as a sign of disaster."

Colvin looked at him in surprise. The "Hornet" was such a born organizer, so resourceful in the face of almost any difficulty, that to find him now balking at shadows and giving way to superstitious fancies seemed incongruous, out of character. He raised his eyes a little as he regarded his despondent companion.

"But, my dear fellow," he argued, "aren't you rather overestimating the complication? Miss Phillips, being human, is limited to a certain number of circumscribed moves. The most important of these, and the one upon which all the others hang, you have yourself dictated, and can therefore in a measure discount. She is either going to play square with you, or she is not. And since she has given every evidence of going straight so far, I can personally see no reason why she should not continue to do so."

The "Hornet" shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, Hazel will keep her word to me to the letter," he said. "Those papers will be returned to Whitefield at exactly half-past six to-night just as she has promised. It is what she may do afterward that is bothering me."

"However," he swung his legs back over the side of the chair, and sat up straight as if reaching a decision, "there seems no way to avoid it. We have simply got to go ahead, and trust to her good intentions. It is the risk one takes. Whether we walk into a trap or not, those papers must be recovered to-night, and we've got to go after them, too, the minute that she leaves the house."

"At half-past six in the evening!" Colvin stared at him. He had known in a general way that it was the "Hornet's" plan to get the papers by breaking into his uncle's safe again, but had supposed that, as before, this would be accomplished at a midnight visit. "With the servants all about? With every one at home, and the lights on? With those guards outside? It cannot be done."

"Ah, that is where my little cousin must make herself useful," rejoined the "Hornet." "Uncle William must not have an uninterrupted moment to destroy those papers."

"Muriel?"

The "Hornet" misunderstood the nature of the quick protest. "I know," he grumbled. "It's another woman to depend on. But in this case it can't be helped."

Colvin twitched his shoulders restlessly. "Is — is that absolutely necessary?" he asked. "Isn't there some other way, so that she need not be involved?"

The "Hornet" comprehended now, and in the glance he gave Colvin there was a touch of humorous mockery.

"There might be," he said, "if it wasn't for Muriel herself. She's so eager to be involved, that I think if we were to try anything else now, she'd be very apt to dump the apple-cart."

"She knows, then?" asked Colvin sharply.

"Oh, yes; she knows. That is, she understands what is to be done, and to some extent the part that she is expected to play. The final details are still to be arranged, though; it was a telephone conversation I had with her, and naturally we had to speak guardedly. So I've made an appointment with her to meet us at

tea at the Waldorf this afternoon, and get her instructions.

"Now, now!" He gave an impatient wave of the hand as Ashe started to expostulate. "This is no time to be raising Chesterfieldian objections. Muriel's an indispensable cog in our machinery, and she has to be used. Furthermore, as I tell you, she intends to be used. You forget that she has as much of an interest in the success of this thing as you or I; her own little individual mess of fish to fry with Uncle William."

There was nothing left for Colvin to say. He realized, better than the "Hornet" could tell him, the utter futility of attempting to curb or divert Muriel, now that she knew of the nature of their scheme. The rude justice of it, the touch of daring and adventure, the opportunity it offered to score against her uncle, all made it an enterprise which exactly appealed to her.

He still tried to plead various alternatives, but the "Hornet" paid little heed to these remonstrances, and went ahead with an outline of his programme.

"She will be at the Waldorf between half-past four and five," he said, "ostensibly to take tea with you. Then, of course, if I should come sauntering through the rooms, there would be nothing strange in my stopping to speak to her — her uncle introduced us, remember — and taking a seat at your table. That is the arrangement we have made. However, I suppose I had better call her up, and make sure that she will be there."

He caught up the telephone as he spoke, and securing connection with the Whitefield house, asked for Muriel.

"Is this Miss Fletcher?" His harsh voice softened to urbanity. "Yes; it is Prentice talking, although only as a proxy. Vernon is so immersed in business

this morning that he has deputed me to remind you of your engagement to take tea this afternoon, and I have undertaken the duty rather eagerly, because I am looking forward to joining you myself before your first cup is finished— Ah, that is very nice of you— Then I may relieve Vernon's mind, and tell him that you will be there without fail?— Yes; the Waldorf, at a little before five— Thank you. Good-by."

He sat down the instrument, and came back to his chair. "Well, that's settled, and off my mind," he said.

Colvin smiled unhappily. "But not off mine," was his unspoken thought. This would be the first time that he and Muriel had met since that afternoon in the Park the day following the dance, and with no word, nor even a sight of her in the meantime, he was uncertain as to her attitude. At a dinner with other people present, it would have been less difficult to encounter her without a chance of awkwardness. But tea *à deux* is not hedged about with the protecting formalities of dinner. One changes one's clothes for dinner, and to a great extent one's face and one's manners, too. But one drops in to tea, not having entirely abandoned the cares of the day, and makes of it an intimate hour, a sort of half-way house on the road to the ultimate relaxation of the night.

Ashe's trepidation increased as the day wore on. He longed, and yet dreaded to see her again. He was early at the Waldorf, arriving at scarcely more than half-past four, and wandered restlessly up and down its crowded corridors, and in and out of the reading rooms, while he waited for her.

At last she came—by way of the Thirty-fourth Street entrance, as she had been directed—and look-

ing so darkly, richly beautiful, so aloof and remote, her greeting so courteously, indifferently distant, that to Colvin it seemed as if both his courage and his spirits had reached their final ebb.

As they took their way to the tea room, and were shown to a table, he began to realize even more acutely the disadvantage of his position. His intuitions, rapier-keen where she was concerned, pierced the cloak of suave smiles and light commonplaces she had chosen to assume, and divined that underneath lay all the proud, resentful forces of her nature, bent on resisting him and repudiating his influence. It stirred a counter-feeling on his part, a passionate impulse to assert that influence, to take her by storm, and win her in spite of herself, but he was incapable of such a step. His life's experiences, reacting upon a nature grown almost abnormally sensitive, served to check and hamper him.

And Muriel on her side was merciless, how merciless she was too young to know. Her youth, her beauty, her cleverness, she flaunted before him as barriers behind which she was impregnably entrenched.

When Colvin turned to her after giving the waiter their order, she flashed a brief, surface smile upon him, a smile of the lips only, no deeper.

"This is a business meeting, is it not?" she said. "At least, that is what I understood from my cousin. Is it very important?"

"It is far more important that you should not be drawn into this thing." He leaned toward her and spoke urgently, quickly. "There is no reason for it. No matter whether Hempstead considers your aid necessary to us, or not, I am unwilling to believe —"

"Oh, if Fletcher thinks me necessary, that settles it," she interrupted with a little nod of finality. "Since our interests are practically the same, I have decided to follow his lead absolutely in the matter. Uncle William thinks most highly of his ability as a business man, you know." She laughed with a piquant appreciation of the satiric humor of the situation. Then, as she glanced across the room, she broke off, and added quickly under her breath: "Here he comes now."

Colvin turned his head, and meeting the "Hornet's" eyes, bowed. Muriel smiled at him, and "Mr. Prentice" threaded his way through the tables to speak to them.

"Have a cup of tea with us?" Muriel asked.

"Yes; do join us," Colvin seconded the invitation, although with no great degree of cordiality.

The "Hornet" pretended to demur a moment, then smilingly accepted. The waiter brought another chair, and took the additional order. When it had been filled, and the man was about to step back, the "Hornet" stayed him with a gesture.

"Look here, waiter," he said, raising his peculiarly piercing and commanding eyes. "You've served us now. If we want anything more, we'll summon you. Otherwise, please keep your distance. I have a regrettable distaste for having some one breathe down my neck, or whisk food from before me, when I want to talk." He slipped a substantial tip into the waiter's hand, and the latter, used to the vagaries of patrons, accepted both the hint and the gratuity with thanks, and retired well out of earshot.

"Now," said the "Hornet," speaking with authority, "the way I see the matter is this. The entire ac-

tion of this sketch will take place between six and half-past seven o'clock this evening. During that time, Vernon and I must enter the house and secure the papers which will have been returned to Uncle William and also the sapphires which Aunt Freda will fondly believe are again safe in her hands. We must decide now how we are to get into the house. Muriel, have you a key to the hall door? I thought not," as she shook her head. "Then you must get one."

"You might as well tell me to get the Roc's egg," she exclaimed.

He twisted his head impatiently. "Has Freda one?"

"Of course; but —" She hesitated; then her face brightened. "Oh, I know! Everett Babcock."

"Good." The "Hornet" nodded. "Get it at any hazard." He leaned forward, and tapped her on the hand. "The success of this undertaking depends upon you. Get that key from Babcock by six o'clock this evening. At a quarter after six, go out to post a letter, and as you are doing so, drop the key on the sidewalk by the post box. Then return to the house and wait until you see a woman shown into Uncle's study. She will be there at exactly half-past six, and will probably remain ten or fifteen minutes. The moment she leaves, you must get Uncle William immediately out of the room on one pretext or another, and keep him out, too."

"I can do that," she agreed, after a moment's thought. "I'll smash something in his Bohemian glass collection, and that will keep him busy until dinner is served."

"That's a Whitefield touch for you. Blood will tell," grinned the "Hornet." "I guess we're safe in leaving you to work out the details in your own way.

Only remember! I must have that key to the house at a quarter after six o'clock."

"I'll not fail you," she said confidently, rising as the "Hornet" did; but before she could say good-by. Colvin, who had remained silent, spoke.

"Miss Fletcher, I am going to ask you to give me just two minutes. It shall," with a faint smile, "be by the clock if you say so."

Although the words were in the form of a request, the spirit of them was almost a command, and there was something so determined in his expression, that after the briefest hesitation, she haughtily and reluctantly resumed her seat. Her gaze, withdrawn from Colvin, followed the vanishing figure of the "Hornet" in his progress down the room.

"I know that I have only time for a word," Ashe's voice was low and controlled, "and I am not going to waste that time in protesting further at your taking part in this business of to-night. But, Muriel, I can't leave you with this misunderstanding between us. I have written many letters to you, and have torn them all up." His speech was broken, and yet resolute. "You know that I love you — how deeply, you can never know. That night at the dance — How could I accept what was so rashly and generously offered in a moment of beautiful impulse? — I, who had worse than nothing? That afternoon in the Park I could offer you at least protection and a refuge from danger, when it seemed to me you needed them. You refused. Now I am throwing myself on your mercy. If we are successful to-night, and if I may really stand clear once more before the world, will you help me to build up a future? I could not do it myself. Alone, I lack the courage, the will, even the desire to do so. But with

you I shall have all things, all courage, all faith, all determination to succeed. Will you help me try and make a cornerstone of what the builders rejected? Muriel! Will you?"

A wave of emotion swept over her face. "It is not fair to ask me that question now," she cried in a trembling voice. "There is still so much to be thought of, so much to do — Oh, I must go!" she started up from her chair. "I need all my wits about me. We dare not risk a failure."

CHAPTER XXII

As the hands of the clock pointed to half-past five that evening, Everett Babcock was still toiling over the composition of a business letter which Mr. Whitefield had instructed him must be a model of diplomatic phrasing — the iron word in the velvet expression, so to speak.

Everett was conscientious and efficient, but not brilliant. Therefore, he had shut himself up in his own little den across the hall from his employer's study, where the rattle of his typewriter would not disturb the great man's meditations, and had lost himself in the construction of his masterpiece.

He was so engrossed in fact, that he remained for some time quite oblivious of a gentle, but persistent knocking at his door, and when he did finally awake to the realization that some one was there, it was at the moment when the patience of the person outside had given way. The knob was vigorously turned, the door opened, and Muriel entered.

Babcock, his mind still on his work, looked at her in a sort of dazed surprise, as if he half-doubted the evidence of his senses. Muriel was not in the habit of seeking his companionship — quite the reverse — and never before had he been honored by a visit from her.

She closed the door quickly behind her, and stood leaning against it, a dazzling and propitiating vision

in her scarlet dinner gown with a mist of gold over it, and with a long velvet and fur coat thrown over one arm.

"Don't get up," she protested as Everett arose, and then walking over toward him, coolly seated herself in the one other chair the room contained, and selected a cigarette from the open box on his typewriter table.

There had never been any comradeship between these two. Everett was the exemplary son of a widowed mother — one of those reduced, diplomatic, and ever-climbing matrons who are adepts in putting a social best foot forward. In securing Everett the position of private secretary to the great Whitefield, she had almost reached the limit of her present ambitions for him; but still nourished roseate dreams of the union of her incomparable son and the beautiful heiress. But, although Everett had at first shared her hopes, his faith in their ultimate realization had steadily dwindled. Muriel had a most disconcerting way of seeming unaware of the existence of those who failed to interest her, and her treatment of Everett had always been particularly cavalier. Her present air of intimate friendliness, therefore, completely disarranged his tidy, card-index mind, and threw it into hopeless confusion.

"I got ready for dinner early," she said sweetly; "so I thought I'd drop in and talk to you."

Everett remembered with a thrill that especial efficacy is attributed to the prayers of the widow and the fatherless, and Muriel's words were to his reviving hopes what water is to a thirsty flower.

"I am going out this evening," she was almost tenderly confidential, "and I may be quite shockingly

late; so do be a good fellow, Everett, and lend me your key to the hall door."

She smiled alluringly at him as she made her request. Everett found her unwonted softness of look and speech heady; but he was shrewd. His impulse was to yield at once, and hand her over the latchkey. But a moment's thought convinced him that by granting her this favor, he might be losing more than he would gain. She would hardly be going out to remain until a late hour alone, and he might thus be the means of throwing her into the society of a dangerous rival. Also, in case her uncle should discover his connivance, he would certainly lose his enviable position.

He let the key which he had half-drawn from his waistcoat pocket drop back again, and shook his head.

"I'd like to," he said with unfeigned sincerity. "Nothing would please me better. But it's too much of a risk. It would be worth my job, if Mr. Whitefield should find it out."

She pouted bewitchingly. "He'll not," she insisted. "Oh, come, Everett; do be a sport for once. I promise you that I will be the soul of discretion. The key shall be back in your hands the first thing to-morrow morning, and Uncle William will never know the difference. But I—!" Her eyes held sweet promises, her voice besought him—"I shall never forget it!"

His inherent caution and timidity were all that saved him now. He still hesitated.

"I don't see why you are so vicious to me, Everett?" Was that small, plaintive, almost tearful voice Muriel's? "Of course, it is only natural that you should range yourself with Uncle William. He's your

bread and butter. But you and I might be perfectly good pals, if you only would."

Everett's pale eyes glowed. "You've never given me half a chance," he complained.

"Well, I'm doing it now," she fluttered her lashes at him, her narrow eyes gleaming through them. "Everett, please lend me that key."

Some faint throb of sporting blood stirred young Babcock's even pulses.

"I'll take a chance," he bargained with a little, unsteady laugh; "but I've got to have payment in advance." He went on breathlessly, overwhelmed by his own temerity, the color burned in his cheek. "— I will trade the key for a kiss."

"Everett!" she exclaimed, and held her hands before her face. "But I've got to have the key." She was enchantingly appealing. "And after all, a kiss —"

Exalted visions flamed before his eyes. Youth and ardor asserted their ascendancy. His insufficient supply of red blood, stimulated by her apparent surrender, proved strong enough to rout the cautious white corpuscles. He sprang up, and came toward her with extended arms.

But she, too, had risen, and now she shrank back, laughing, the palms of her hands against his chest.

"No! No!" she cried. "Wait a moment. You are so impetuous, so masterful, Everett, that you make me afraid of you. You are a regular cave man. You'd take me by storm, and before I knew it, you'd be getting a dozen kisses.

"No," she insisted, as he caught her arms and pressed nearer, "I only agreed to one kiss, and I'll

give it in my own way. You go and sit down where you were."

"I'll do anything you say for that kiss." He spoke huskily.

"Then sit down there," she commanded, pointing to his chair. "I'm afraid of you, Everett, so I'm going to tie you up." Flushed, laughing, she began to unwind a silk sash from about her waist.

It all seemed part of an amusing, fascinating game. That was the spirit which Muriel threw into it. So he obeyed her.

"I'll sit down to please you, but no tying up," he laughed. "It would be just like you to leave me that way."

"I am no highwaywoman," she returned. "You know I always play fair. You'll get your kiss, but I simply will not be grabbed."

"All right, then." Still laughing, he fell in with her mood.

Deftly she threw the scarf over his shoulders and slipped it down his arms, binding him fast to the chair.

"There!" she cried. "Oh, dear, I've laughed so much that the tears are running down my cheeks. Wait until I get my handkerchief; it's in the pocket of my coat."

She moved across the room, caught up her velvet cloak, and then stood behind him silent for a moment.

"Where's my kiss?" he demanded.

As he asked the question, she swiftly slipped between his parted lips a gag which she had prepared in advance, and tied it securely at the back of his head.

He made an inarticulate effort to cry out, twisted his head about and plunged in his chair; but the scarf held him fast.

Muriel stood back from him, breathing rapidly, and glanced down at the watch on her wrist. She had no time to lose. But now she saw that there was still something to be done. Everett was beating a regular Devil's tattoo on the floor with his heels, and she feared that it might attract attention. She looked hastily about her, and then tore loose the cords which held back the heavy silk curtains at the window, and with them bound his ankles to the legs of the chair.

She stood up and surveyed him, making sure that her task was complete. Then she laughed into his accusing, furious eyes.

"Cheer up, Everett," she said; and leaning over, touched him lightly with her lips on his brow. "There's your kiss. I always keep my promises. Try and be patient. I won't leave you this way more than an hour."

As she spoke, she reached down and took the key from his waistcoat pocket. Then, throwing her cloak about her, she turned off the lights, and left the room, locking the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN hour later, as Muriel took her seat opposite Whitefield at the dinner table, she had with apparent insouciance dismissed all disturbing mental pictures of the poor secretary who had trusted her, struggling in the darkness to free himself from her silken bonds, and also of the unsurpassed cracksman whose precise and exquisite manipulations were at the moment menacing the invulnerability of her uncle's safe.

Dempsey presented a tray. "The cigarettes you sent James for, Miss Muriel."

Whitefield shook his head at the sight of them, but benevolently. Muriel laughed back at him, deviltry in her olive eyes.

"James is on the door again, Uncle," she mocked. "Wicked burglars can't break in now to steal our beautiful family skeleton."

He drank his Scotch whiskey and soda, and looked at her appreciatively.

"May I venture to remark that you are looking very beautiful to-night? Is that a new frock?"

"Yes. I am going on to a play after dinner," she accepted the compliment smilingly. "But about that matter of importance I wanted to discuss with you?"

"Matter of importance, eh? Well," he was still jovial, "you've certainly chosen your time wisely. I'll probably give you anything you ask for this evening, even to the half of my kingdom."

"I may ask it," she replied; "or a quarter of it, anyway."

Whitefield chuckled.

"The half of my kingdom isn't worth much to-night, my dear," he said. "This is pay-day, you must understand, and it's little they've left me but my bare bones."

Muriel took a sip of wine.

"Settling all your debts, Uncle? That's good."

There was a hint of significance in her tone — whether he fancied it, or not — which made him vaguely uneasy. He applied himself to his soup, wondering what she might be up to. As the plates were removed, though, she spoke again so frankly that he decided he was unnecessarily suspicious.

"It isn't much use to try to do any talking while the servants are in the room, is it?" she said. "One has to break off every time anything is served. I think I will postpone my important 'something' — the matter I wish to discuss with you — until we reach the coffee."

"I didn't expect to find you so sensible," he returned. "The dinner table is the last place on earth for a family conference, anyhow. Nothing is so upsetting to the digestion. I and my appetite both thank you for the respite, my dear. For women have enough respect for their food to put off any kind of a discussion or wrangle."

So, with that, they turned to indifferent topics, until presently Whitefield happened to ask her what play she was planning to see that evening.

"I really don't know," Muriel answered. "I just accepted an invitation from Mrs. Vansittart and Miss Gansevoort to be one of their party."

Whitefield raised his bushy brows in sudden enlightenment; but mindful of their compact to avoid personal issues until after dinner was over, repressed the obvious comment, and contented himself with remarking:

"Martina carries her years very well, while Estelle chucks hers."

"I wonder which is the wiser course?" Muriel inquired laughingly. "I'll be old myself some day, so I want to know. It's one of those questions on which one needs masculine advice, not feminine."

"It's a question you needn't bother about for many years yet." He looked at her with the grudging admiration which her rich and glowing beauty always evoked in him.

She smiled at him, that radiant, brilliant smile which obliterated all those traces of sullenness and secretiveness which her mouth held in repose; and again he caught intuitively that disquieting warning of breakers ahead.

"She's up to some trickery as sure as I'm alive," he said to himself. "I'll lie low, and see what."

"It's a pity, Muriel, that you and I have never hit it off," he said aloud. "Case of too much Whitefield in both of us, I guess. My private opinion is that you'll come a big smash sooner or later. You're so utterly wilful, and headstrong, and inexperienced. But if you can only manage to keep your balance, there's a big place in the world for you. You have the air of splendor even at nineteen; at thirty, you will be magnificent. You can be a great social power if you choose, a big factor in some man's career."

"Do you really believe that?" Her attitude, the

sparkle in her eye showed her interest in his answer. "How about politics?"

"The very thing for you. I'll see that you meet all the promising young politicians, and you can take your pick."

"And who are they?" Her interest was unabated.

"I will have Babcock make you out a list, with all their past performances and prospects, complete dope on each one of them," he laughed. "By the way, I wonder if he has come in yet?" He half rose from the table. "I have something I want him to do this evening, and he might as well be about it. There's no use in his loafing in the library, reading the evening papers."

"Oh, let him read in peace," she pleaded. "You promised to give a few minutes to my important affairs." She took up a cigarette and lighted it.

Whitefield settled down in his chair once more. "Well, what is your important matter?"

"Uncle William, I'm leaving here to-night. I shan't be back after the play."

There was a sharp flash in his eyes. He thrust out his lower lip, and ran his scales on the tablecloth.

"Does that mean Vernon?" he demanded. "An elopement? Or is it a wedding at Martina Vansittart's?"

"If it were, you couldn't sue for abduction," she parried. "I'm nineteen."

"Yes; but you are not twenty-one. I could go to the courts, and as your guardian —"

"Nonsense!" she said. "We will cross that bridge when we come to it. I want to talk to you now about my property."

"Oh, that old subject again." He stood up.

"No. One minute. I'm not going to bother you."

"I'll give you half an hour, or an hour in the morning, Muriel."

"But just a moment!" Muriel had risen also, and was nervously crushing her cigarette in the ash-tray before her.

Whitefield looked at her fixedly. No smallest evidence of excitement or apprehension escaped him. She bore his scrutiny like a soldier, haughtily, indifferently, with her head up. And yet her agitation was unconcealable.

Why was she agitated? Why was she so anxious to keep him at the table? Why, when he had spoken of sending Babcock to the study, had she diverted his attention? His mind leaped to a swift conclusion.

He rang the bell. "Dempsey," he said, when the butler appeared. "I'm going to my study. If I ring, you are to come at once with one or two of the other men."

Then as Dempsey bowed and disappeared, he said to Muriel: "Now, we'll see what you have been up to."

He preceded her out of the room and down the hall. There he stopped before a table, and opening a drawer in it, took out an automatic pistol. She was just behind him as he laid his hand on the knob of the door leading into the study. He heard her quick breathing over his shoulder. Heedless of her, he flung open the door, and entered.

There was a quick movement from the two men who were in the room. The lights were on, the curtains drawn.

Whitefield whipped out an o n, and levelled his

revolver straight at the "Hornet," who with his back to him, was just removing the Colvin papers from the safe. Then, his eye turned to Ashe, who sat on the arm of a chair, watching the "Hornet's" marvelous manipulations.

"Caught at last, Vernon!" His vindictive sneer was like a shout of triumph.

The "Hornet" closed the door of the safe, gave a final dexterous twirl to the combination, and turning, faced his uncle.

"Prentice?" The pistol wavered in Whitefield's grasp. He took a step or two into the room, threw the weapon on a table beside him with a little clatter, and sat down suddenly. "Prentice! Well! What the deuce does this mean, man? Why, you stood to make millions with me behind you. Have you gone crazy — throwing such chances away to rob a safe?"

"I'm throwing away nothing," replied the "Hornet."

"What do you want with those papers?" demanded Whitefield. "Are you one of the 'Hornet's' gang?" His heavy brows were almost drawn together. There was a deep, vertical line between them. A puzzle, incredible and unsolvable on any basis, confronted him.

At his question, the "Hornet" merely shrugged his shoulders, without making answer.

"Well, my man, you are in a net, with your friend there to keep you company. It's a tight net, too, no breaks anywhere. I've got three or four husky fellows just outside the door," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "and there are two private watchmen on guard outside the house. You fellows could never have got in, if it hadn't been for my vicious niece here," he nodded toward Muriel.

"The Hornet" laughed, and threw himself into a chair; lazily extending his hand, he took a cigarette from the table, and lighted it.

"Tight net, eh? Looks like it on the surface, doesn't it?" he said.

"It does not merely look like it. It's a fact," asserted Whitefield. "Any reason why it shouldn't be?"

"Several reasons," drawled the "Hornet." "The first one is that it's going to put you in a queer position. I'm Hempstead — Fletcher Hempstead, you know."

"What?" Whitefield gripped the arms of his chair. "Fletcher Hempstead?" He studied him, squinting his eyes, and pursing his lips. "By George, I'd believe you, if you had a scar."

"I lent it to Vernon there."

Whitefield appeared struck dumb for a moment, looking from one to the other.

"H'm!" he commented with sneering contempt. "A trick that's quite worthy the pair of you. And so — you are the 'Hornet'? Low-down crook and thief, eh?"

"We Whitefields can't afford to indulge in such pot-and-kettle repartee among ourselves, Uncle William. Yes; I am the 'Hornet,' by some laudatory brother-professionals considered the best cracksman in the world. It took Whitefield brains, and initiative, and nerve to reach the top of the ladder. You can't beat us."

"I guess I've got you beat," returned his uncle with conviction.

"Did I suggest the rather difficult position you would find yourself in, if you resorted to extreme measures?" interrogated the other pointedly.

"You've got to show me that. Bluffs don't go to-night." Whitefield was curt and brief. "There's a murder charge in this, remember."

"All right;" the "Hornet" dropped his languor. "I'm Fletcher Hempstead, and I'll blazon that fact to the skies."

"Bah!" said Whitefield. "Don't imagine that I would let any sentimental reasons stand in the way of giving you your deserts. And you, too, Vernon — whoever you may be."

"Oh!" exclaimed the "Hornet" as if he had just remembered something. "Do excuse my negligence, Uncle William, and let me introduce — Mr. Ashe Colvin."

Whitefield went a bit pale. "Colvin? Colvin!" he muttered. "I knew he was in it somewhere, but that scar fooled me."

"And will you let me state that my cousin, Miss Fletcher, also stands with us," continued the "Hornet."

"That doesn't surprise me," his uncle spoke with vigor. "She has always been ready to double-cross me — contrary vixen. But it doesn't make any difference what sort of combination you've got. Turn over those papers, or I'll take means to make you."

The "Hornet" laughed scornfully. "Just start something, Uncle William. When the police come in, I shall simply demand that a representative of the district attorney be sent for. I can clear myself from the charge of murdering that unfortunate cop. But there is worse than merely killing the body," he flung out an arm toward Colvin, "that you'll have to answer for."

Whitefield considered a few minutes. His keen face was drawn and lined. Then his mouth set like a vise. He sat bolt upright, and lifting his arm, smashed his fist down on the table.

"So, that's your program, is it? Then go as far as you like. I've a curiosity to see just what weight a discredited slyster with a sham scar on his face and a second-story crook long wanted by the police may have with the district attorney."

He rose as he spoke, caught up the pistol, and held the two men covered, while with his free hand he pressed the buzzer on the table.

Muriel made an impulsive rush forward.

"Get out of the way," Whitefield ordered sharply. "One move for those papers, and I shoot your friend, Colvin."

She shrank back; but it was not the recoil of a frightened woman, it was the crouch of a panther making ready to spring again.

The door burst open, and the butler, with the other men-servants crowding behind him, rushed into the room.

"Seize those fellows!" Whitefield commanded over his shoulder. "And one of you call in those two detectives from the sidewalk."

Colvin submitted in disdainful quiet. The "Hornet," as they caught his arms and held him, gave his deep, sardonic chuckle.

"Don't stop with the detectives, Uncle," he said. "Send for the camera-men, too. This will make a peach of a moving picture. Subtitle, 'Whitefield's Last Bluff.'"

The detectives entered while he was speaking, and took over the custody of the prisoners.

"Search them," directed Whitefield. "I just surprised them at work on my safe. Be careful; they are probably armed."

The "Hornet" laughed again. "Why expose your ignorance of technique, Uncle William? You belittle my professional standing. Nobody but a yegg or an amateur would carry a 'canister' on an expedition like this."

The man who had been going over the "Hornet's" person gave an exultant exclamation, and drew from inside the latter's waistcoat the case containing the sapphires.

"Jewels. My wife's sapphires," commented Whitefield, as they were laid upon the table. "Anything else?"

"Only this." The detective a little doubtfully held up the package containing the Colvin papers. "Is it yours, sir?"

"Yes." Whitefield took the envelope and glanced through it. "And taken from my safe, too. But of no importance," he laughed. "Merely some old, worthless securities." Negligently, with even a touch of drama, he tossed them into the heart of the fire.

He was rather superb as he stood there, nodding in malevolent triumph. Colvin gave a gasp. "Whip-sawed," muttered the "Hornet."

But Muriel — ? The panther sprang again. Before any one realized what she was doing, she had thrust her hand into the flames, caught up the blazing papers, and was stamping them out on the floor.

A flash of fire ran up her scarlet and gold frock. Colvin pushed the startled men about him aside, and catching her in his arms, dragged her away from the

burning papers, and frenziedly beat at her dress with his hands.

It was over in a moment, and but for her blistered fingers and scorched gauzes, Muriel was unharmed. But the papers on the hearth had charred to a fluttering heap of ashes.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE complete destruction of the papers, with Muriel's gallant, if vain attempt to rescue them, formed a swift interlude so amazing, so unexpected, so far-reaching in its consequences, that Colvin and the "Hornet" were beyond speech. Their moment of dumb defeat was broken by the sound of footsteps and of voices in the hall without.

Then through the open door of the study Hazel Phillips was pushed by a woman whose naturally rosy face was flushed high with indignation, and whose kindly eyes were now hard and determined.

"Retta!" the "Hornet" cried in utter astonishment.

She looked at him wildly. "Alf!" Her consternation and surprise were pitiful. "What does this mean? These men? Have they got you?" But even then she did not relax her grasp on Hazel Phillips's wrist.

"It's all right, Retta," he reassured her. "But what's up?" quickly. "What are you doing here with her?" He motioned toward Hazel who stood sullen and furious, with white face and burning eyes.

"Go on," he urged, as Retta glanced questioningly at him and then at the others, fearing to involve him in what she had to say.

"That package you left with me, Alf. I got in early this afternoon," she indicated her steamer coat,

"and went at once to Belle Davis to find out how I could get in touch with you. Of course I asked for those papers, and she," Retta's voice choked, "she told me that this sneaking brat had flimflammed her out of them. You'd better believe I lost no time in getting to Miss Phillips's flat, and I waited there for her to come home. She didn't dare lie to me, and she confessed that she had sold the package to Mr. Whitefield. But I had to make sure, so I dragged her here, and now —"

Whitefield broke in hastily and authoritatively. "I can settle this," he said. "There are too many in the room. You men wait outside the door," giving his orders to the detectives. "Dempsey, James, Stephen, go about your business. Go on. Clear out.

"Now what does this mean?" he turned threateningly to Hazel Phillips as the door closed behind them.

"Can't help it, Mr. Whitefield," she shrugged her shoulders. She jerked the crisp, new bills from her blouse, and tossed them on the table before him. "Fifty thousand isn't enough to go up the river for. And this woman knows enough to send me for twenty years. She can prove it, too."

As Hazel gave back the money, Retta flew across the room, and cast her arms about the "Hornet," crooning over him like a mother, utterly oblivious of the presence of the others.

But although he had thrown an arm about her, his keen, incisive mind was grappling with the possibilities of the new situation. His eyes telegraphed a swift question to Colvin, and as Colvin nodded back, his expression showed that the same thought was in his brain.

The "Hornet" pushed Retta aside not ungently. "Dear Uncle, we've got you!" his harsh voice purred.

Whitefield stood at bay. "Got me, how?" He tried to make his voice as insolently secure as ever.

The "Hornet" permitted himself the luxury of a chair. Taking out a cigarette, he lazily scratched a match.

"Colvin," he waved his hand with the smoking match between his fingers toward Ashe, "you're the lawyer. Suppose you explain."

Colvin leaned his elbow easily on the mantelpiece.

"I think that Mr. Whitefield fully understands," he said. "He has destroyed the papers, but their existence and the character of their contents can be proved by oral testimony. Hazel Phillips, Mrs. Johnson here, and — was it a Belle Davis you mentioned, Mrs. Johnson? — can all swear that this package was endorsed, 'The Colvin Papers.' Hazel Phillips has here admitted that you, Mr. Whitefield, paid her fifty thousand dollars for the recovery of that package as the one taken from your safe. In view of all these facts, and of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the restoration of the package, can you doubt that any court in the land would fail to accept as genuine the copies of those papers which I hold, and have retained all these years?"

Whitefield took up the sheaf of bank-notes which Hazel had thrown upon the table, and ran them over through his fingers as if counting them. He was evidently thinking hard and fast.

His glancing eyes under the bushy brows shifted from Colvin to the "Hornet," to Retta, to Hazel Phillips. "The sworn testimony of a gang of crooks!"

he sneered. Then his gaze fell upon Muriel. She met it, undaunted, hostile, pitiless. This witness was unassailable.

Whitefield, like a good poker-player, looked over his hand. "It strikes me," he said slowly, "that this is a time for diplomacy, and not for war. Fletcher, see here; I'll turn over your property to you, and the girl's to her within a reasonable time." Then he lifted his head and looked straight at Ashe; there was a hard, bitter smile on his face.

"But I wouldn't care to be in your position, Colvin," he said. "Frankly, I think it's worse than my own. Of course you're aiming now for a big public vindication. Yes; that is undoubtedly your plan, Mr. Colvin, and a very satisfactory one to you, I don't question. But what about your friends here? You are certainly asking a mighty big favor of Hempstead; I shall not refer to my niece just now. You are asking him to give up a big, comprehensive business scheme. He has given years of thought and study to the development of it, and he has done it brilliantly. You do not see how you are asking him to give it up?" as Ashe stepped forward impetuously. "Why, he knows, and I know, that it will take a long, long time for him to go ahead with it unaided, and he may then fail, after all; whereas, with my practical knowledge of traction conditions to assist him, my connections and affiliations thrown his way, my name stamped on the project of guarantee, it may begin to reap his harvest at once. But with me discredited, out of it — ?"

For an instant no one seemed to breathe. Over the room had fallen one of those tense silences, ominous with the intimation of coming storm. Colvin had

paled until the painted scar on his cheek stood out in livid prominence.

"You are quite right, Mr. Whitefield," he said. "I cannot see my friends lose."

There was a sharp exclamation from Muriel, but before she could speak, the "Hornet" was on his feet.

"What are you talking about?" impatiently. "It's my own affair, if I stand to lose anything. The entire blame for this present muddle rests on me. I planned it, engineered it, was sure of putting it through."

Whitefield turned to Ashe. "There, you see. A deadlock. You are hardly the man to accept such a sacrifice, I take it. And yet," he lighted another cigar, "there is a way out."

"Mr. Colvin," he threw all the weight of the dynamic Whitefield individuality into his proposition, "you have submerged your identity in Vernon. Well, 'Vernon' has made a very good impression. Why not remain 'Vernon'? I do not deny that you have suffered through me, although I do maintain that I acted in self-defense. Financially speaking, you were just about to cut my throat, and naturally I took means to protect myself. That is all a dead issue, though. 'Vernon' to-day could make a fine place for himself. His social, political, or business ambitions would be furthered to an unlimited extent. It is well worth considering." He looked at Ashe with a keen expectancy.

Colvin rested his hand upon the back of a chair as if he felt the need of some support. In the last five minutes he appeared to have grown five years older. The snap and the life seemed all to have gone from him.

"I — don't — know," he said slowly. "I cannot

of course accept such a sacrifice on your part," he spoke to the "Hornet;" "but as to coming back permanently as 'Vernon'—?"

"You see," he took a step across the room toward Muriel, and spoke to her, looked at her as if she were the only person there, "it has seemed to me all these years that I owed something to Ashe Colvin. When I promised you that I would come back, I promised myself that it should be as Colvin. This may have been merely an egotistical fancy—"

"No! No!" she cried vehemently. "You *are* Ashe Colvin! 'Vernon' is only a shade. You shall not linger in any more shadows. You shall not continue to skulk under a borrowed name. We've got to face facts here to-night." She flung the words at the three men. "One of you is bound to go under, and it isn't going to be Ashe Colvin a second time. Once before he was the scapegoat, in order that things might be kept nice and quiet and Uncle William pursue his scandalous ways in peace. But never again! You shall not play on that quixotically chivalrous, high-bred strain in his nature. I am not so high-bred. I am not too proud to fight. And I'm fighting not only for him, but for myself, and the children we may have. For I'm going to marry him, and he's going to give me a name to be proud of. And that name is Colvin."

A great light swept over Colvin's face. He caught her hand strongly in his own and held it.

"You said that you would stand in the sunlight, waiting for me until the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment is now, and I am here to stay as Colvin!"

Whitefield bit down savagely on the cigar between

his teeth. "Vindictive to the last. You she-devil!" His eyes were like coals of fire.

"I am not vindictive," Muriel cried. "I am too indifferent to you and Freda, and even to my cousin there, to be vindictive. But you two can't dance, and leave the other man to pay the piper. This is one of the things that shall not be covered up any longer, no matter how much dirty linen we Whitefields have got to wash in public."

"By Jove, you're right," said the "Hornet." "But look here," he moved up closer to the table; "there must be some way out of this. There's a way to get around anything on earth, if you've only got the wits to see it. It strikes me that we might arrange a compromise."

Muriel threw her head up. "Never!" she exclaimed.

"Hold on a minute, Cousin. I'm not trying to prevent Colvin's complete vindication. But he's been waiting for it fifteen years; can't he wait a little longer?"

Ashe looked puzzled. "I don't quite get your drift, Hempstead. What is it you want?"

"Simply this. New York isn't going to be a very pleasant place for you, Uncle William, after all this comes out, and it's no paradise for me. But South America is waiting to welcome us both."

"Ah?" Whitefield stood a moment reflective. South America as a last resort was not an entirely new idea to him. But he still fought for terms.

"With time to arrange my affairs in this country, and place them under an efficient management where I should still exercise control, it might be done," he granted. "There would also have to be sufficient

time allowed properly to swing the deal upon which Fletcher and I are engaged."

"How much time?" questioned Colvin.

"Ninety days?" suggested the "Hornet." "That's long enough, isn't it, Uncle William?"

"Possibly. We can go into that later. I have your assurance, I suppose, Mr. Colvin, that there will be no prosecution of any kind, or action against me in the courts?"

This was the question for which Colvin had been waiting. "On one condition," he said. "I have no desire for revenge. I am seeking only my rehabilitation. And to obtain that, I must have a written statement from you which will contain the substance of those burned documents, and fully exonerate me."

"You couldn't well ask more, Uncle William," said the "Hornet." "Scandal soon dies, and South America is a long way off?"

There was a brief silence. It was broken by Hazel Phillips, who during this consultation had been sitting huddled in a chair, intently watching the face of first one man and then another. Now she stood up, buttoned her jacket, and straightened her hat.

"So ends my career in high finance." She gave a little, bitter, reckless laugh.

Whitefield turned with a start, and looked at her; he had quite forgotten her presence. A flicker of aroused interest passed over his furrowed face.

"Hold on," he said. "Not so fast. I keep my bargains. And don't think I'm out of it, either. I have said I would make your fortune, and I'll do it.

"I have a curiosity to see how far you'll go. Here," he pushed the fifty thousand dollars to her across the

table; "take it. It is yours. You earned it. And come and see me at my office, as you planned."

She stared down at the money. Then her eager hands reached out and clutched it. Her insouciance, her sparkle, her soaring self-confidence was restored to her in superlative measure.

The "Hornet" turned to Retta. "You had better go, too," he suggested. "I will be along as soon as I can leave here — No use leaving anything at loose ends," he added, as the two women left the room. "Let's get right down to it, and draft out that statement for Uncle William to-night." He looked at his watch. "It is early yet."

Whitefield demurred. "But I will need my secretary," he said. "He hasn't shown up this evening."

Muriel turned her head languidly over her shoulder. "Is it Everett you want, Uncle William? He's tied up in his office."

"Tied up? Great Scott!" Whitefield started for the door. The "Hornet" burst out laughing, and followed him.

The moment they two were alone, Colvin's arms closed about Muriel.

"Will you really help me build my life again?" he asked.

"Love of my life, we'll build a world, and a kingdom, and a home together."

"And when will you marry me, heart of my heart?"

"I told Uncle William that I was leaving this house to-night," replied the intrepid girl.

