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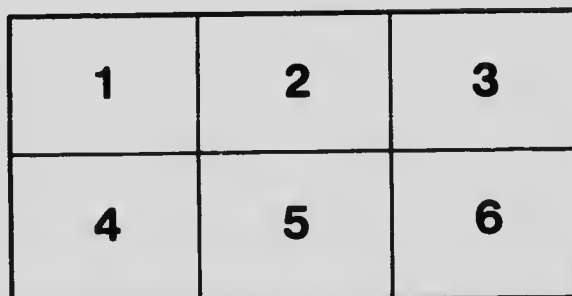
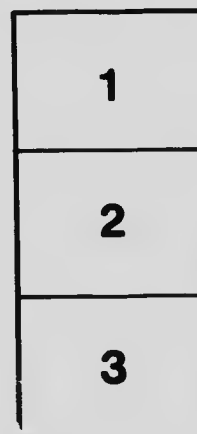
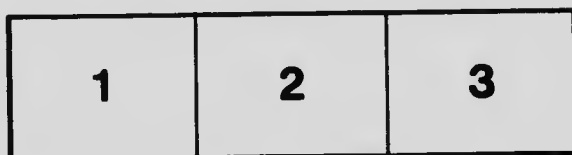
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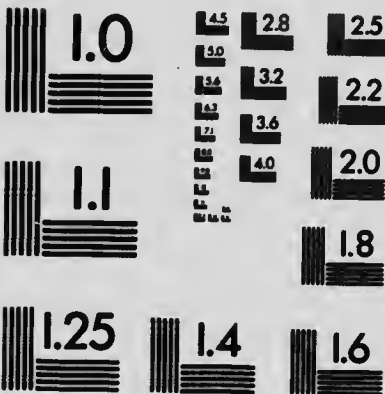
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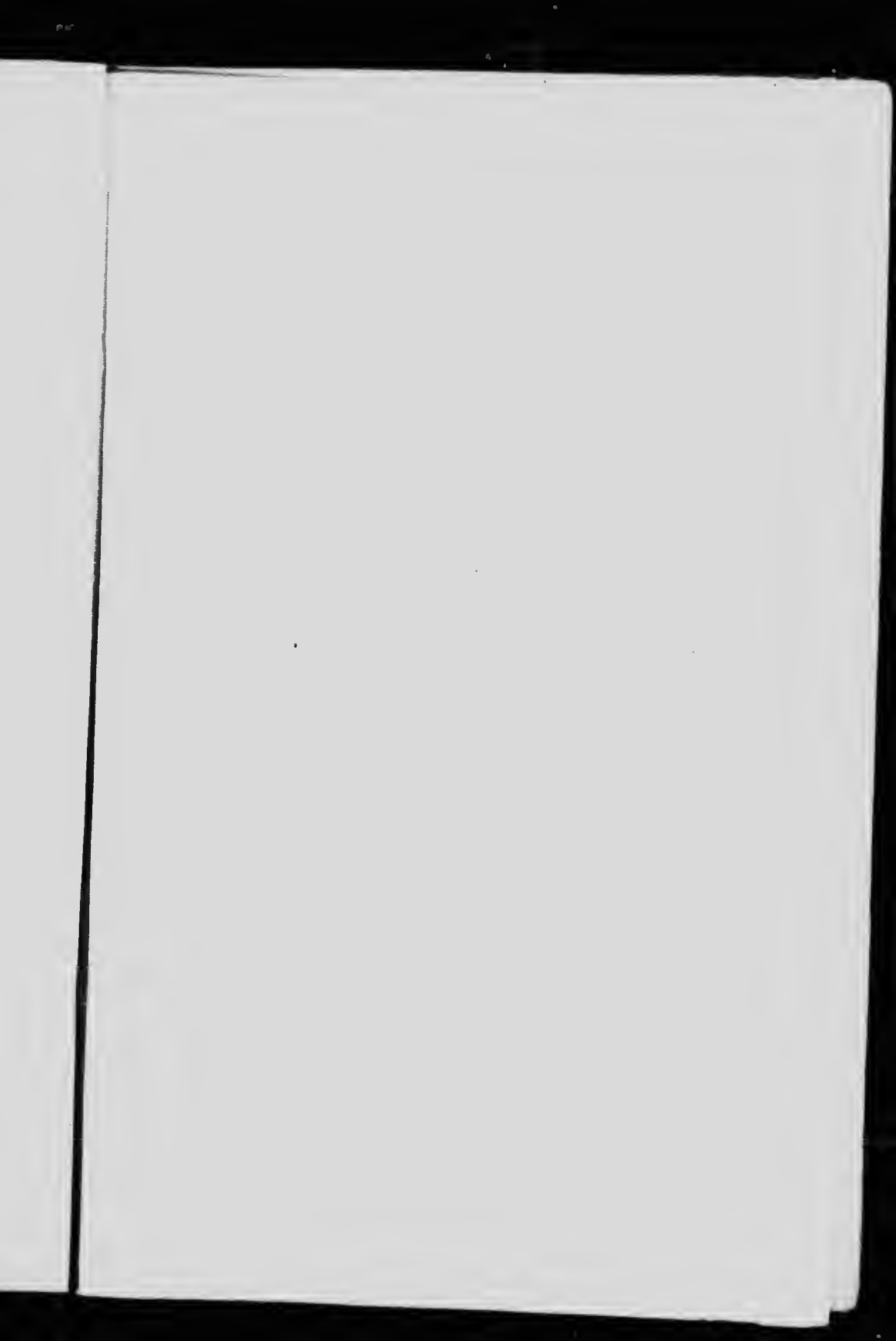
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YOUNG BECK







"THROUGH THE CLEAR BLUE CRYSTAL WE SAW THE FIGURE OF
A YOUNG MAN."

(See p. 347.)

Frontispiece.

YOUNG BECK

A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK

BY

M. M'DONNELL BODKIN, K.C.

AUTHOR OF "THE QUESTS OF PAUL BECK," ETC.

TORONTO
THE COPP CLARK COMPANY, LIMITED

1912

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PART I



YOUNG BECK

CHAPTER I

THE BERTRAM TWINS

As the old woman said at the play: "That pore 'Amlet had a deal of trouble in his family." It was just the same with the Kirwoods. I don't think there was ever yet a family, Hamlet's not excepted, to which so many strange and exciting things happened, and young Beck was pretty well mixed up with the lot.

Now and again something leaked out in the newspapers, all wrong as a rule, and the chaps at the clubs and at the House came bothering me for the details, for Beck was as close as an oyster, they never could get a word out of him. Moreover, he was as obstinate as a pig when I suggested that we should have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth into print, and have done with it.

"Not in my name, anyhow," he said. "The governor is, or was, a detective. If you must tell those stories, which I think are best let alone, put his name in instead of mine; he won't mind, he's used to that sort of thing."

So when I wrote a screed or two in the magazine

old Beck was the hero. The old man grumbled a bit in his own easy-going way, but the son didn't mind. It was the mother made trouble in the long run.

"I won't have it," she said. "Honour where honour is due. My old man has enough of his own without stealing his son's share."

Beck could never stand out against his mother, and he gave in at last with a growl. "Have it your own way and be hanged to you," he said.

I was full of the notion. I could do great things so long as Beck refused to let me do anything, but now I was by no means so sure of myself. We had been through a lot of queer and exciting adventures together, that was true enough anyway, and I thought Beck had been as clever as any of the chaps in the books, but there was nothing about him to tickle the curiosity of the reader. He could not play the violin, nor smoke shag tobacco, like Sherlock Holmes, he hadn't sharp features or sharp eyes, and he was quite incapable of the cocaine habit. He couldn't play cricket like Baffles, and he didn't want to write poetry like Captain Kettle. There wasn't a single label I could hang on to him. He was just a nice-looking little chap that looked a deal younger than his age. So I hung fire for a while.

The chief puzzle was how to begin. Often when Beck and I are sitting together after dinner smoking, perhaps a bit tired after a day's shooting or golf—we are good company for each other without a word spoken. At such times we seem to talk without words of the things we have been through together. Then my memory grows clear and I almost seem to see the places and people again, but clearest of

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all, clear as a snapshot in strong light, is the picture of young Beck himself on that September morning at Cambridge.

I had been there about three weeks when my tutor, old Dr Day, asked me to breakfast to meet a young fellow who had just come up and wanted a bit of showing round. There were four people in the parlour. Old Dr Day himself, in the front, tall and lank in his rusty old university gown, with a big bald forehead and a little frill of white hair at the back of his head; a small chap, and his mother and father stood in a group together near the window.

"Kirwood," said the Doctor, "I suppose you have heard of Mr Beck?" and made a little motion of his hand towards a stout good-humoured man that was standing with his back to the window.

"Suppose I had heard of Paul Beck?" Sherlock Holmes and Paul Beck were always prime favourites of mine. Sherlock was more exciting of course, but I knew Beck was real, which made a difference. It sent a little thrill through me to remember all the queer things he had been through. He looked just the kind of man I had imagined—very quiet and strong, with a pleasant something about his mouth and eyes. The nice little woman beside him I guessed was his wife, Dora Myrl, whom I always thought much too good for old Paul; the youngster standing close to his mother must be their son of course, the chap I was to take in tow, and I remember I thought it queer that any fellow should be such a mollycoddle as to bring his mother to college with him. This was my first sight of young Beck, with whom I was to be mixed up in so many strange adventures, and I may confess I

was not in the least bit taken with him. He was a "mother's pet" if ever there was one, and a "mother's pet" is not popular as a rule.

To begin with, he was more like a girl than a boy, with his blue eyes and round curly head. I noticed that he kept his mouth tight shut and that he had a dimple in his left cheek, and I thought it a queer girlish thing to have. Afterwards I learned that it was only when he was excited that the dimple showed. He looked smaller than he was by contrast with the lanky doctor standing beside him, and I had no notion then that so much muscle could be packed into so small a space. It would be poor fun, I thought, toddling round a duffer of that kind, and I must have looked what I felt, though I didn't mean to. The little woman with the bright eyes read my thoughts as if she were inside me.

"He is not such a duffer as he looks," she said, "if you will take his mother's word for it."

It was my turn to look a fool.

"I didn't mean that, really," I stammered, forgetting that I hadn't said a word. "I'm sure we shall get on well together."

"I'm sure you will," said Mrs Beck.

She was a true prophet. In less than a week we were fast friends, and from that day to this there has been no hitch in our friendship.

The Bertram twins were already famous when Beck and I came up to Cambridge, though they were only a term in front of us. Even for twins their resemblance to each other was extraordinary. Not their most intimate friends—tutor, professor, nor proctor—could tell one from the other. The result was they played all tricks with impunity. If one

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of them missed a lecture, the professor could not tell which; if one of them were caught in a frolic, the proctor could not tell which, and, by a strange coincidence, it was always the wrong twin that was accused—at least so he swore.

They were good-looking chaps enough, smart, black-haired and black-eyed, rather low-sized, but square-shouldered and as agile as monkeys. It was a sight to see them run and pass to each other at hockey, and at lawn-tennis they made a combination that carried all before it. They seemed to have no separate identity; which was Eddie and which was Freddie Bertram only themselves could tell, and they kept the secret.

Their doings and sayings were the talk of the college, but somehow, no one could say why, easy-mannered as they were and full of life and fun, the Bertram twins were not generally popular.

The twins were at St John's College and Beck and I at Cam's, and so it happened that we were at Cambridge about a fortnight before we ran across them. We make a pretty useful double at tennis, and one of the twins, Eddie or Freddie, I don't know which, seeing us play at the top of our form and win our match, challenged us for a fiver a corner. We took them on and got licked, three sets to two, every game and every set closely fought. I believe either of us could have beaten either of them singly but they were irresistible together.

The match caused a great sensation. It was agreed that Beck and I were to practise together and play them for double stakes in a fortnight's time. But Beck wouldn't play. At first he was

keen enough, but after the first week I could not get him to practise, and at the end of the second he backed out. I could see the twins were riled. When I suggested that we should coax Beck to change his mind they curtly refused.

I saw little or nothing of them after that, and my next falling in with them was a bit exciting.

I got into the habit of going out before breakfast on the Cam with a Rob Roy canoe, which I prefer to a row boat because it lets you see the way you're going. I am not a chap to rave about scenery, but I love a river with its lights and shades and bright pictures of tree and sky in the water. To my thinking it is the most lovely thing that God ever made.

One morning, when I was about two miles out of town, coming round a bend of the river I saw a light two-oared outrigger in front of me, and a moment later I recognised the Bertram twins at the oars.

Whatever else they did well they certainly rowed atrociously. Each pulled away on his own account without the least regard for the other, and the boat went up the stream in short jerky darts from side to side like a startled trout.

I was a bit surprised that they had never learned to pull together, but they gave me little time to think about it. The twin at the stroke oar caught a crab and pitched over on his back; at the same moment the twin at the bow pulled a short jerky little stroke which heaved the crazy little boat quite over, and the two white figures went splash into the water and vanished.

It was as sudden and as comical as a scene in a pantomime, and I burst out laughing. I never for a

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moment doubted they both could swim. A moment afterwards one of the figures came up spluttering and panting and gripped the side of the up-turned boat, the other was carried struggling down the stream. Half-way down between the boat and the canoe an arm and a head showed for a second over the surface and had just time for one wild cry for help before he went under again.

That cry took the laugh out of me, I can tell you, for I knew that the man was drowning. The body swirled close to the canoe and plunging my arm in up to the shoulder I gripped the white flannel of his shirt. Of course the canoe went over at once, and we were in the water. But I could swim like an otter, and I knew I had nothing to fear but the ducking.

The twin I had hold of, whichever he was, behaved splendidly. "No danger," I spluttered as I drew his head clear of the water and turned over on my back. "Keep quiet."

"Righto," he answered, and lay as still as a log in my hands and as easy to manage. I ran him down current to the bank, keeping in front of the two boats.

"Jump about and get warm," I said, "while I go back for your brother."

This time I brought the row boat with the twin clinging to it to the bank. When I had righted the boat and got hold of the canoe I found the twins as lively as crickets, and quite ready to row back. But I wouldn't have it, I didn't want a second job.

"If you are not too cold and promise to sit still," I said, "I'll take you back. We can tow the canoe."

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You should pick up some faint notion how to row or swim before you trust yourselves again in an outrigger."

"All right, I'm as warm as a toast," cried both together, in so exactly the same voice that it startled me.

They were full of life and fun while I rowed back, and made light of the danger and the ducking.

"All the same, old man," said one of them as they went ashore, "we won't forget that there would have been a brace of corpses in the river this morning if you had not turned up in the nick of time."

"The Coroner would have had some trouble about the identification," laughed the other.

But if they took the matter lightly with me they didn't with others. I soon found that the pair of them were chattering all over the place of my "gallant rescue." It was tiresome to be made into a little tin god, and to have the fellows congratulating me about nothing. But I could not be angry with the twins, who I knew meant well and who behaved very decently when I spoke to them about it.

Day by day the more I saw of them, the more I liked them. I may say without boasting I was in with a very decent set at college, and all the fellows I knew got to like the twins as well as I did—all except my own particular friend, Beck.

I tackled him about it at breakfast one morning—at least I was at breakfast, he had breakfasted some hours before. I suppose I was in none the best humour for having lost fifty-seven pounds at bridge the night before.

"Have you anything against the Bertrams, Beck?" I asked a bit tartly; "I think I am entitled to ask."

"I think you are; I have."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Why didn't you ask me? I am quite ready to tell you now. One of them is a low down scamp."

"Which of them?" I asked, without thinking.

Beck broke out laughing and in a moment I joined in. He has the most irresistible laugh of any man I know, he never laughs alone.

"Ask me another," he said, "and an easier one, please. I wish I knew myself, I'd punch his head for him if I did."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Worse. I would not talk of it to any one but you. Do you know little Miss Bloom?"

"The little tobacconist girl? Only just to look at and nod to. Pretty little woman."

"Miss Bloom is a lady," interposed Beck a bit stiffly. "You don't seem to know that. Her father was a rector with a good income and very popular. He died suddenly leaving his widow and only daughter a little less than nothing to live on. Lucy, I mean Miss Bloom, was a Girton girl at the time, and one of the brightest of them. But when her father died, by the help of some friends, she got hold of the tobacco shop at the corner, and has made a home for her mother and herself."

"You seem to know all about it, old chap," I said.

At this Beck blushed, actually blushed! Beck!

"Every one knows all about it except yourself, thickhead," he answered sharply. "All the chaps get their cigars and tobacco from her. They get the best of good value too, but that's not the question. They all treat her like the little lady that she is, all except your delightful Bertrams."

"One of them," I corrected.

"Yes, one of them. Confound him and them!"

"Well, what did he or they do?"

"He was rude to Lucy Bloom, like the unmitigated cad that he is."

"Which is?"

"Don't jest, Kirwood, I am in no humour for jesting. I confess my blood boils when I think of it. The poor little girl was having a walk by the river after having a hard day in the shop when this cub followed her, forced himself on her and tried to kiss her."

I confess I was not impressed, I could not share Beck's indignation.

"Well," I said, "where was the great crime in all that? We all like to snatch a kiss from a pretty girl once in a way."

At that Beck boiled over. I do believe our friendship was never so near snapping as at that moment. Without answering he turned his back on me and walked to the door.

"I beg your pardon, Beck," I called after him. "I did not mean to vex you."

He paused with his hand on the door knob, turned and came back.

"How would you like if this cub tried to kiss your sister against her will?" he asked abruptly. "I tell you what, Kirwood, your sister is not one bit a better girl than Lucy Bloom."

"But——" I began. I did not like his dragging in my sister.

"Oh, I know you are going to repeat that we all kissed girls in our day. That is all right where the girls don't mind. But only a cad would try to kiss

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a girl against her will, an unmitigated cad when the girl was Lucy Bloom."

He hadn't convinced me a bit by this nice distinction, perhaps it was because I did not know Lucy Bloom at the time. But Beck seemed so hot on the business that I thought it best not to argue it out.

"How did you hear all about it?" I asked.

"She told me herself. You need not look like that, she does not care two straws for me, and I'm not the least scrap in love with her either; I admire and respect her immensely, that's all. Well, about a week ago I caught her crying her eyes out one evening alone in the shop, and it all came out. She didn't want to hurt her mother by telling her, especially as the mother always wanted her to give up the place. After the ~~Bloom~~ cub had insulted her she ordered him never to put his foot inside her shop again. But they both come there regularly, especially when she is alone, and lean their elbows on the counter and look at her and talk to her whether she likes it or not. The trouble of it is that she cannot in the least tell which she wants to get rid of. 'Cheer up,' I said, 'I'll soon find out.' But I didn't find out. I spoke to one of them and he said he was not the man, then I spoke to the other——"

"To the other? Do you know one from the other?"

"Rather! but that didn't help me. Each laughed and said it was his brother, there was no getting behind that. Miss Bloom could not help me in the least, and I could not thrash either of them on the chance it was not the right one."

"Did you feel like that?"

"You don't know the girl, Kirwood, or you wouldn't ask. The gentlest little soul in the world. I tell you my fingers itched to lick the chap, whichever it was, that insulted her. One good has come of it, however, they both keep out of the place since I spoke to them."

"You might forgive and forget and come to a wine I am giving to-night."

"I'd rather not, old chap, if you don't mind."

I did mind but I did not say so. If the truth must be told I thought Beck a little quixotic to fall out with a chap so bitterly because he kissed, or tried to kiss, a pretty girl. If I did not know his Miss Bloom he did not know the twins. I did, and I liked them better and better every time I met them.

I am afraid I have a spice of the gambler in me, it runs in the blood. My father never backed a horse or touched a card in his life, but my grandfather had gambled away all the untailed estate, a good third of the whole. I fancy I caught the intermittent fever from him. The hereditary craving had jumped my father and lit on me.

I found the Bertrams on for anything and everything in the way of a game, from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter. They were delightful losers and winners. Though they preferred small stakes they did not shirk big ones, and were always ready for a "double or quits," no matter what the amount.

Their courage was its own reward. Bridge was the game we played, and as a rule they played together. As partners they were invincible. It was not so much good cards or even good play that did it. They were good players, no doubt, brilliant

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if a little erratic, but I can say without vanity that I played as well as either of them, and Tom Staunton, who was generally my partner, was by long odds the best player of the lot. Yet over and over again the twins pulled off the rubber against our strong cards. Their hands seemed to fit in wonderfully, and their leads and *finesses* almost always came off.

Their play, too, was transparently fair, in fact careless, and they won more often on their opponents deal than on their own. They were the most rapid players I ever met, and never hesitated for a moment on a declaration or a double. When one of the twins said "With you," or "I leave it to you, partner," or asked, "May I?" or "Partner may I play?" the answer was prompt as an echo.

Every day I thought luck would turn, but it kept straight on on the wrong road till I was out to the twins a bit more than I cared to think about. They were very decent about it, I must say that for them, always ready to take my paper, and never so much as hinting about payment.

Then something happened that put my troubles out of my head for the time being. Beck told me one morning that his people were coming down to Cambridge for a week, and I made up my mind that I would have my governor and Gerty down at the same time.

I don't know if I have mentioned Gertrude before this, one gets so mixed up in a long story. Anyhow it doesn't matter, as she only comes in here. She is my only sister, and though she is more than three years younger than I am she bosses me more than a bit, but it is fair to say she won't let any one else boss me.

I used to write to her from school about Beck, and

talk to her of him when I was at home, but I never could get her to cotton to him in the least. I fancy she didn't care to have me playing second fiddle to another chap, and the more I praised him the less she seemed to like him.

"Your beloved Beck seems a cute little chap," she said, "from what you tell me about him, but not in the least the sort I would care about. I like them big and strong and dark, and I have no use for pretty pink and white little men like your friend."

"Wait till you meet him," I said.

"I am quite willing to wait for ever," she answered, laughing.

Of course Gerty had read all the old Beck stories and the Dora Myrl stories, but she did not like old Beck any more than his son.

"Too meek and mock modest for my taste," she said, "and he tires me to death with all that talk about his luck, when I'm sure all the time he is patting himself on the back for being so clever."

But Dora she liked and wanted to meet, and that was my chance to get her down to Cambridge while Beck's people were there. It was luckily an off time with the governor, the Whitsuntide Recess, and I knew Gerty could be depended on to carry him with her wherever she wanted to go.

We had an awfully jolly time of it at Cambridge, at least I thought so whatever the others thought. Old Beck and his wife turned up first, and it was a delight to the son to see how they all made much of his mother. The Dons remembered her as a brilliant student, some of them had taught her, and the younger generation were tickled with the stories of her detective triumphs.

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I myself found it hard to believe that that quiet, matronly little woman had been through so many startling escapades. The sparkle in her eyes was all that was left of "Dora Myrl, Lady Detective."

The next morning my people arrived. We tossed up, Beck and I, to see who should have the lot to lunch, and he won. I never saw a chap in such a fidget as he was about the wines and the dishes and the flowers for the table. I fancy he was a bit frightened at what I told him about Gerty. He kept on interfering with the gyp, putting everything astray and running his hand through his hair till it all stood on end, when luckily his mother turned up half an hour before the time and took things into her own hands.

The governor and Gerty were about five minutes late, and Beck had made up his mind they wouldn't come just the moment before they arrived.

Gerty is a tall girl, and rather fancies herself on that score. I thought she was taller than Beck, but when they went together in to lunch I found it was the other way round, and Beck had two inches to the good.

She gave them a very stately little bow when they were introduced.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr Beck," she said. "I have heard a great deal about you from my brother."

You know the sort of civil common-place talk that takes all the life out of a person. No one is better at that sort of thing than Gerty when she chooses, though she can be lively enough, as a rule. I made up my mind I would give her a wiggling over it that evening.

The governor, too, was inclined to be a bit stiff at

the start. That's the governor's way. He thinks a deal too much about our family and position.

"My dear boy," he said to me that morning, "I don't like the notion of introducing your sister to this class of people. It's all right for you, of course, a man can meet every one, I wouldn't have you a snob for the world, and from what you tell me the young fellow seems quite presentable. Still, especially in those Radical days, we must draw the line somewhere."

But he thawed almost at once when bright-eyed little Mrs Beck took him in charge. She was a mighty clever little woman, and could tell a good story like a man in a few crisp sentences. But it was as a listener she won the governor's heart; he found it delightful to have such a nice-looking, clever woman so interested in all he had got to say.

Old Paul, who was sitting near her on the other side from his son, made quite a conquest of Gerty. The old chap had a wonderfully taking manner with him. It was fine to see the way he let Gerty draw him out and to watch her excitement and delight at his stories.

As the hurdler on the ditch I suppose I saw most of the game, and I quite pitied poor young Beck at the top of the table. It was quite plain he was taken with Gertrude at first sight, most men are, I don't know why, but chaps have told me that her eyes fetched them, and I know for myself how she can warm you out of a bad humour with a smile.

She wasn't rude to young Beck, though she could be real rude when she liked. She talked to him between whiles civilly enough, in fact too civilly, but

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she let herself go with his father, whom she was never tired of abusing.

"I'm in love with old Paul," she said to me that night as I sat on the foot of her bed in her room at the hotel. "I take back everything I said about him. Let his wife look out for herself. I withdraw all I said about him. It is impossible to believe that that easy-going old gentleman of sixty has gone through such performances; and the way he tells about them is neither bragging nor the other thing."

"Mock modest?" I suggested.

"Not a bit of it. Don't I tell you I confess and repent. Such a queer old lady-killer as he is. I'm not surprised that all the girls he met were half in love with him."

"What will his wife say to all that?"

"Nothing. She is a nice, sensible, clever woman, and almost good enough for dear old Paul. Dad is in love with her."

"And young Beck?" I asked, whereupon Gerty made a face at me.

"Just what I expected, a nice, well-behaved nothing. Oh, I wonder, Charlie, what you can see in him! I could understand your being in love with him if he were a girl, he ought to have been a girl with his pretty face and lady-like manners."

"He's as good a chap as there's going."

"I have no doubt he is very good, goody-good, if you prefer that. I love a man with a little spice of the devil in him, like his old dad."

"Young Beck has devil enough in him when he's roused," I replied.

"I fancy it would take an earthquake to rouse him," said Gerty.

"I've seen a little girl do it," I blurted out unconsciously, and in five minutes she had dragged out of me the whole story of Miss Bloom and the Bertram twins.

"I'll introduce you to the twins to-morrow," I said. "They are the rage just at present."

"And the girl, Miss what you call her, Miss Blood is she pretty?"

"Bloom, Miss Bloom, she is a nice little thing enough, too quiet for my taste; but you can have a peep at her yourself to-morrow if you want to."

"Not I," said Gerty scornfully, "why should I? Good-night, Charlie, we should have both been in bed hours ago."

Next morning Gerty remembered she wanted to buy a cigar case as a birthday present for the governor, whose birthday was only a fortnight off. "I may as well buy it," she said, "from your friend's friend, the Bloom girl."

Inside and outside the counter the two girls were as great a contrast as you would see in a day's walk. I could never rave about Gertrude the way I've heard some chaps do, though she is my sister and as good a girl as steps. But there is no denying she has a fine figure; her head is well set on her shoulders, and she carries herself as straight as an arrow, with an easy swing in her stride. She has eyes like old brown sherry, the same kind of light in them, and the way her copper-coloured hair breaks out into little curls on her forehead and the nape of her neck, whether she does it on purpose or not, is wonderfully fetching. She is as clever as they make them, and I don't know any one who can be nicer than Gerty when she gives her mind to it, but she

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is a holy terror when she is vexed, as I have once or twice found to my cost. She completely took the shine out of poor Miss Bloom, who looked a little more of a girl in comparison, pretty enough in an insignificant kind of way if you looked closely at her.

I thought Gerty was in a bit of a temper when we got to the shop, but you would have never guessed it inside. She was as nice as pie to the little Bloom, just the right sort of niceness without a touch of condescension in it, and they chatted in the friendliest way together while they chose a silver cigar case for the governor.

"Pretty little person," said Gerty as we came out together into the sunshine, the cigar case in a neat parcel in her hand. "Just the kind to suit your friend. I should think she wouldn't say boo to a goose."

"Meaning thereby?"

"Whatever you like."

"You are all wrong about Beck, Gerty," I said, pretty hotly. "He is not the least the kind of chap you are hinting at. He is as clever as can be, and there's no chap I'd sooner have beside me in a real row. As for Miss Bloom, I don't suppose he cares twopence for her or any other girl."

"Why does he want to fight the Bertram twins on her account?"

"That's Beck all over. He'd do as much for you or any other girl if he thought she was put upon."

"Thanks, I'm never likely to need his services," said Gerty sharply, which only proved how little she knew.

For sheer opposition's sake, I do believe, she was

immensely taken with the Bertram twins when I introduced them. They got talking to her of how I saved their lives, and all that sort of thing, until I was sick of it. But I could see that Gerty was pleased and took pains to be specially nice to them when Beck was at hand.

"I would be in love with one of them," she said, "if only I could tell which."

Mrs Beck and herself got to be great friends before the week was over, and I never saw Gerty so meek before as with that quiet little woman. But somehow she and young Beck never seemed to hit it off.

After the first day he quite lost his shyness and was as cool as the lady herself. They never had a row or anything of the kind, but through the whole fortnight, from first to last, they never got any nearer than when they first met.

It was a bit of a disappointment to me. I was young and foolish in those days, and I had a kind of notion those two might take a fancy to each other.

The governor was awfully riled when I unconsciously hinted it to him one evening when we were alone in my rooms.

"I'm more liberal minded than most people in such matters," he broke out, jumping from his chair and walking up and down the room, "but I confess that I am surprised at you, Charlie, surprised and shocked that you could entertain such a notion for one moment. After all, there are some distinctions that must be observed."

"You need not get so riled, sir," I said. "There is not the slightest fear of it." But it took him a good twenty minutes to cool down.

I am afraid he made young Beck feel those

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distinctions too plainly when they met next morning, and I cursed myself for a blundering blockhead.

But even the governor must have been quite satisfied in the long run. Gerty kissed Mrs Beck good-bye, and she nearly kissed old Paul, who from the look of him would have liked it, but to young Beck she was as cold as ice-cream.

"Good-bye, Mr Beck," she said, "and thanks for a very pleasant time."

"Good-bye, Miss Kirwood," he answered, in exactly the same tone, "I am glad you enjoyed yourself."

CHAPTER II

THE GRAND SLAM

FOR a day or two after the governor and Gerty went home I did not see much of Beck. He had a good chance of being picked for bow on the college boat, and he was training hard, so I was thrown in more and more with the twins. We still played cards, of course, and luck still ran against me. Whenever the twins played together they almost invariably won, and my losses began to count up to a figure that worried me a bit.

That was one of the reasons I wanted Beck to make up with them. He was a demon at bridge, and I was anxious to show the twins what we two could do together. But I did not care to mention the twins, for I was not sure how he would take it.

One day he suddenly broached the subject himself. I believe he had got me to his room, on pretence of a drink, really to talk about them.

"Your twins are a fraud, Kirwood," he said abruptly, after he had propitiated me with a long glass of iced cider-cup.

"I never knew such a prejudiced chap as you are when you take a notion into your head."

"I'll give you my reasons," he said shortly, "for the faith that is in me, and you shall judge for

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yourself. You told me the Bertrams could not row or swim?"

"I never saw two more complete duffers in a boat—or in the water."

"Sure it wasn't sham?"

"My dear boy, I don't know what maggot has got into your head. People don't risk their lives for the fun of the thing. There were never two chaps nearer drowning who didn't go the whole way."

"All right. Now I'll tell you my story. Two days ago, as I was lazing down the river bank a couple of miles outside the town, I saw the Bertrams go by in a two-oared outrigger. They knew how to row then, and no mistake about it; I never saw two fellows pull cleaner together. I promise you they made the boat go."

"They may have learned to row since."

"All right; again they are apt scholars if they did, that's all. But, easy a while, I've more to tell. They went round the bend in a flash; I ducked as they went by, and I'm pretty sure they didn't see me. I was more than a bit puzzled, as you may imagine, remembering what you told me. As you know, I have detective blood in my veins. The result is an intolerable curiosity. I can't bear to be puzzled about anything without trying to find out. Quick as I could I got back to the boat-slip and stole up the river after them in a canoe, keeping close to the bank and reconnoitring at every bend. I had my reward. As I came to the sudden bend—you know the place—the river deepens just beyond it—I heard shouts and laughing, and the splash of a frolic in the water. I ran the canoe's nose into the bank and swept round the bend under the trees. There, right

in front of me, not fifty yards off, were the Bertram twins, whom you saved from drowning three weeks ago, swimming and diving like ducks."

"They may have learned how to swim since; I'm sure they did not know it then."

"Don't be a fool, Charlie. You don't learn to swim in three weeks, not as they swam. It was a trick they played on you, I feel it in my bones. They wanted to be in with you and your set. Perhaps they thought it might lead to a little profitable card-playing."

He looked at me pretty sharply as he said this, but I gave no sign. I knew it would confirm his prejudice if I even hinted about card-playing.

"An idle brace of plausible scoundrels, that's what they are," he went on. "They loaf about all day and gamble all night. They shirk their lectures, by all accounts they do no private reading, and——"

There I cut him short.

"You are wrong there, anyhow," I broke in, "as I happen to know."

"What do you know?"

"That they work. Perhaps they don't want the name of study; it's foolish, I grant you, but lots of clever fellows are like that. They study, all the same. How do I know? I see the question in your eyes. Wait a bit, and I'll tell you how I know. A few days ago I went up to their rooms when I wasn't expected, and through the door I could hear the pair of them hard at work inside. I could not hear the words, but I could swear it was question and answer repeated over again and again. One of them was grinding the other. They were so engaged that they did not hear when I knocked, so I turned the handle of the door

and walked straight in and caught them in the act. One of them had a notebook in his hand, and he was questioning the other out of it. You never in your life saw two fellows more flabbergasted than they were when I suddenly appeared. At first I thought they were going to be nasty about it. 'What the devil do you mean?' the twin with the notebook broke out when the other kicked him on the shins and brought him up standing.

"Easy does it, Fred,' he said, winking at me.

"Kirwood won't give away our little secret; not that it matters much if he does.'

"Beg pardon, Kirwood,' interrupted the other as he locked the notebook away in his desk, 'you startled me when you came in so suddenly just now. Ed and I are a brace of fools. We have our doubts if we will get through our "little go," and we don't want the fellows to say we swatted if we fail, see? I hope you haven't come to tempt us from the straight path of duty. You don't say you want cards at this hour of the day, you gluttonous gambler!'"

I did not intend to mention cards, it just slipped out. Beck caught me up at once.

"Cards? Did you say cards? Then I was right."

"No, you were wrong," I retorted. "I didn't want them to play cards, I wanted them to arrange about a little party this evening at their place. I had forgotten the hour."

"But this evening means cards?"

"Well, I don't say it doesn't. We may have a modest little flutter after supper, I fancy."

Beck came close up to me and put a hand on my arm, the way one fellow holds another from danger.

"Charlie," he said, "you and I have been good pals for a long time: will you do something to please me?"

"Anything in my power, old man."

"Throw over the Bertram twins. I am a bad hand at preaching, but you told me yourself that card-playing to you is what drink is to another man. If you begin you cannot stop, if you get in you cannot get out. Don't get in, don't let those chaps coax you in."

I was stirred by his earnestness; I felt bound to tell him everything after that, though I did not like to do it, not one little bit.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, old man," I said; "I really am. But it's past praying for. I'm 'in,' as you say, pretty deep too I'm afraid, and I must try and get my own back."

Beck pulled up sharp, not another word did he say about dropping cards or twins.

"How much?" he asked shortly.

"About six hundred. That is to say, there are I.O.U.'s for six hundred, not to speak of the ready money that is gone the way of all flesh."

"I could lend you a thousand without any trouble. It would only mean a line home; they let me have what money I want. They are rich; I'm the only one, you understand, and they live very quietly. Say the word, and you can have the money the day after to-morrow."

"Thanks, old chap, I'm not down to that yet."

"I mean as a loan, of course."

"And the security, my luck at cards, I have no other to offer. Oh, hang it all, I don't mean to be nasty; it was very good of you to offer, but you see

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yourself that I cannot take the money from a friend."

"I see," said Beck reluctantly.

"I don't want to ask the governor," I went on, "he is not flush at present, indeed he never is, so the only chance is to have it back from the twins. There is a chap in Shakespeare who says :

" ' When I lost a shaft
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight
The self-same way with more advised watch
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both
I oft found both.' "

I liked the notion, so I got the lines by heart. That's exactly what I am going to do to-night ; I mean to have some of my I.O.U.'s back from the twins, or perish in the attempt. If you were a decent fellow you'd lend me a hand."

"All right, I will."

I was never more taken aback in my life.

"Do you really mean it?" I asked. "Don't come if you don't care to."

"I really mean it. Can you bring me to their rooms?"

"Of course I can; they have often asked me to bring you along. You needn't shake your head in that fashion, they are as decent a pair of chaps as ever stepped. It was I that made the pace so hot, not they, and it was not their fault that they won."

"Have it your own way. I'll come with you to-night and judge for myself."

As I had promised Beck, he had a hearty welcome from the twins. I could see that he was surprised at their rooms. From the coloured prints on the wall

to the turkey carpet on the floor everything was of the best, and the best taste as well. There were five of us in the party, including Tom Staunton. The supper was perfect, and so were the wine and cigars. The twins did the thing in style. After supper they got to the piano and sang us a rattling good comic duet that would have made their fortune at one of the halls.

It was I suggested cards ; they objected.

"Let the cards slide for to-night, Kirwood, and give us a song. There will be lots of time when your luck has turned. Of course, if you insist you must have your revenge."

"I've Beck here to-night, I may not catch him again in a hurry."

"I'll stand out," said Tom Staunton.

"No, I did not mean that ; we'll cut, of course."

"I know you did not mean it, old man," said Staunton good-humouredly. "But I'd rather not play, I really would. I don't play for anything like big stakes, I can't afford it, and would only spoil your game. I'll drink and smoke and look on ; I'm a first-class looker-on."

"Then Beck and I challenge you," I said to the twins. "Cut for deal." And so we settled steadily down to work.

Beck got the deal and went no trumps on a strong hand of hearts, diamonds and spades, but the third hand doubled. His partner led clubs, and they got two tricks. After a hard struggle we pulled off the second game by Beck's fine play, but they got the third and rubber.

At five-shilling points forty-seven pounds was added to the stack of my I.O.U.'s already in their

possession. I noticed with surprise that Beck, who prided himself on being a ready-money man, also paid with an I.O.U.

The next rubber they won right off the reel. Then our luck had a turn after a hard fight. At "game all" Beck dealt himself four aces, pulled off the little slam, and scored a big rubber. So the tide of success ebbed and flowed all through the night. At one time we were over three hundred pounds out when again our luck took a turn.

Towards the end Beck played in an extraordinary erratic way in defiance of all the rules. He seemed now and again by a kind of second sight to divine what was in our opponents' hands, and perpetrated some audacious *finesses*. After one of those lucky shots he leant back in his chair and whispered something to Staunton, who sat right behind him. Tom at first looked surprised as he glanced from one twin to the other, then he smiled and nodded, and watched the game more closely than before.

The grey light of dawn was oozing through the cracks in the shutters when the party broke up, and Beck and myself were just one hundred and seventy pounds to the bad on the night.

"Sorry I let you in for this, old man," I said to him as we mixed a small whisky and Pol, and lit a last cigar.

"All right," he answered cheerily; "better luck next time."

At this the gambler in me exulted. I had not hoped that Beck would go in for another try, and I too made sure of better luck "next time."

"Can you give us our revenge to-morrow night at my place?" I asked.

"Give it to you here instead ; don't want to change our luck," laughed one of the twins.

Now I did want to change our luck—I was a great believer in luck, and I would have held out for our turn, but Beck gave me away.

"More comfortable here," he cut in. "The best of everything is good enough for the likes of us, Kirwood, and, by Jove, these fellows give the best. Staunton will come too, just to see fair play."

At this one of the twins turned sharp round with an angry gesture.

"Do you mean to suggest——" he began hotly, but broke off at the sight of Beck's smiling face. "Of course Staunton can come if he will, only too delighted to have him."

"Thanks awfully, old man," said Staunton, to whom bridge, for its own sake, not for the stakes, was the business of life; "I will be delighted. I don't think I ever watched more interesting play. I hope to pick up a few useful hints to-morrow night."

That was the first of many nights' play. Staunton was almost invariably present, though he seldom took a hand. He was content, for the most part, to watch the fluctuations of the play with an interest that never flagged. Beck and I were almost always pitted against the twins, and though we had a turn now and again, the luck ran pretty steadily against us.

I was surprised one day to see Beck and Staunton in close confab, for they were not very chummy as a rule.

We met earlier than usual that night at the twins' rooms, and sat down at once after supper to cards. Beck handed a notebook over his shoulder to Staunton.

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"Keep a note, as I told you," he enjoined.

"All right," Staunton replied.

"A new kind of marker?" asked one of the twins, looking up from shuffling the pack.

"Well, yes," said Beck, "a new kind of marker."

"Your own invention?"

"Not exactly; a notion I picked up from watching the play. But I think it is a rather smart dodge, and I want Staunton to test it. He is the 'intelligent bystander,' you know, to-night, a kind of general umpire. I'll have his opinion later on. Cut! Seven, king, ace, nine—my deal. First blood to us, anyway, Kirwood; perhaps the luck is going to turn after all."

But it didn't. It wasn't the cards, for on the whole we held the better cards but the twins played into each other's hands in a way I never saw equalled. Beck and I were a strong combination, but we were nothing to them. There seemed to be positive inspiration in the way they declared and doubled. Their *finesses* almost always came off, each found what he wanted in the other hand. Now and again, of course, Beck and I had a turn, but on the whole the tide ran steadily against us.

At about half-past two in the morning we were each about three hundred pounds out; the other side were game up and it was their deal.

"Partner, you make a trump," said the dealer. His partner declared hearts, and put down four hearts with practically nothing else except queen and two knaves in his hand. To my amazement Beck, who was third player, instead of playing, laid his cards down flat on the table.

"I think we have had about enough of this," he remarked very quietly.

"All right," said the dealer; "when we finish this rubber we'll stop. Luck is against you to-night. You can have your revenge when you like."

"Thanks," said Beck as quietly as before, "I'll have my revenge here and now. How does that marker work, Staunton?"

"Like a charm," said Staunton with a curious thrill of excitement in his voice that I had never noticed before. "Right every time."

"Don't bother about markers, Beck," I cried irritably. "Let us get on with the game, like a good chap."

"Just one moment, if you don't mind; this is really very interesting." He took what he called the marker from Staunton's hand and showed it to me. This is what I saw in Beck's clear handwriting on the first page of the notebook:—

"DECLARATION.

"'With you.' . . .	Poor all-round hand.
"'Leave it.' . . .	Weak hand; strong spades.
"'I leave it.' . . .	Weak hand; strong clubs.
"'I leave it to you.' . . .	Weak hand; strong diamonds.
"'I leave it to you, partner.' . . .	Weak hand; strong hearts.
"'Make a trump.' . . .	Good all-round hand.
"'You make a trump.' . . .	Good hand; strong spades.
"'Partner make a trump.' . . .	Good hand; strong clubs.
"'Make a trump, partner.' . . .	Good hand; strong diamonds.
"'Partner, you make a trump.' . . .	Good hand; strong hearts.

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"DOUBLING.

LEADER—

" ' May I ?'	Have nothing.
" ' May I play ?'	Strong spades only.
" ' Partner, may I play ?'	Strong clubs only.
" ' May I play, partner ?'	Strong diamonds only.
" ' May I play to—'	Strong hearts only.
" ' Partner, may I play to—'	Good all-round hand.

THIRD HAND—

" ' Double.'	Want spades led.
" ' I double.'	Want clubs led.
" ' Partner, I double.'	Want diamonds led.
" ' I double, partner.'	Want hearts led."

I suppose I was a bit dense, but for a moment I did not in the least realise what the thing meant, my mind was all on the hand I was going to play.

"I can make nothing of it," I said impatiently.

"Perhaps our hosts can help you," said Beck, still dangerously quiet. He held out the notebook, and they looked at it, first one and then the other.

I was amazed at the result. The blood rushed into their dark cheeks and ebbed as quickly, leaving them a sickly yellow. Their black eyes blazed, their faces were contorted with passion. Both leaped to their feet, sending their chairs back with a crash, and one of them snatched furiously at the paper in Beck's hand.

But Beck was too quick for him.

"You may look but mustn't touch," he cried, shifting the paper dexterously to the other hand.

Then all of a sudden one of the twins broke out in a perfect frenzy of passion.

"You low sneak!" he shouted. "You contemptible spy! You have been rumaging in my desk and——"

He pulled himself up like a horse in mad gallop suddenly flung back on his haunches.

I was watching Beck at the time. I did not think he would stand this kind of talk, I expected a row, and I was ready to join in. But I was surprised at a sudden flash of triumph in his eyes.

"Thank you, thank you," he said mockingly, "but you are quite mistaken. I have not seen that code of yours yet. I made this up out of my own head by the simple process of putting two and two together. Staunton, will you kindly explain to Kirwood, who is looking as bewildered as a duck in a thunderstorm?"

"It means this," said Staunton in his slow, stolid way. "These two—gentlemen"—he dwelt on the word with elaborate emphasis—"have arranged a code of signals. Beck, here, discovered it by watching the fall of the cards. He made up a code of signals from their play; I've tested it to-night, and it comes right every time."

"It's a lie!" screamed the twins together.

"We'll soon see," snapped out Beck sharply, his politeness gone, the fighter roused in him at last.

"I mean to have a look at that desk."

With a cry one of them sprang between him and the desk. But again Beck was too quick for him. With a sharp movement of hand and foot, a trip and a push, the twin was over on the carpet and Beck was on top of him.

"Look to the other chap," he cried to me over his shoulder, holding his man down.

The other chap jumped for the sideboard, and his fingers were closing on the handle of a carving knife when I struck him sharply with the edge of my hand on the forearm, and he dropped the knife with a cry of pain. There was a short struggle, for he was fierce and active as a wild cat. As he waltzed me round and round the room, he made a desperate effort to kick Beck off his brother. Tables and chairs were thrown about, and the floor was flooded with cards. But in a moment Staunton came to my aid, and between us we mastered him.

"Tie his wrists and ankles," panted Beck. "Look alive! and give me a hand with my chap, he's a bit restive."

I heard the dull bump of a head on the carpet as Beck got his twin, who was trying to rise, down again on his back, while Staunton and I were at work on the other. We knotted the handkerchiefs tight on wrist and ankle, and presently, in spite of their struggles, we had the brace securely tied lying side by side on the carpet.

"Now for the desk," sang out Beck. "Hand me that knife, Staunton, like a good chap."

He thrust the pointed blade of the knife right in to the handle under the lid of the desk, then with a sudden twist of his wrist he burst the lock open.

He found what he wanted almost at once.

"Look, Staunton! Look, Kirwood!" he cried exultingly. "It's almost the same as my own code, only more elaborate. Devilish clever. This is the paper, Charlie, your friends were studying for the 'little go.' A very interesting document which I will keep for further reference."

He thrust it into an inner pocket, while the unmasked scamps writhed on the floor.

"Hallo, hallo!" said Beck, still rummaging at the desk, "what have we here? A big batch of I.O.U.'s, our own and others. We were not the only victims, Kirwood. I'll make a clean sweep of the lot."

He gathered from the desk a double handful of I.O.U.'s written on all sorts of scraps of paper, swept up the two little piles that still lay on the card table, the result of the night's play, and piled the lot into the empty grate.

"A match, Staunton."

The little red points of flame crept in and out among the loosely-piled scraps of paper. They smouldered for a moment and burst into a blaze.

"It feels like burning bank notes," said Beck. "Two or three thousand pounds worth of good paper gone in a flash." He grew suddenly serious as he turned from the fire. "What are we going to do with those chaps?" he asked. "That requires some thinking over."

So we three, in the dead waste and middle of the night, sat in judgment on the twins, who lay on the floor watching us silently. They had made no move and said no word from the moment they were overpowered.

To my surprise stolid, good-natured Tom Staunton was the sternest member of the court-martial. He was strongly for public exposure and ignominious expulsion. His devotion to bridge was, I think, at the bottom of it. To him it seemed a kind of sacrilege to cheat at the great game. Beck took a milder view, and after a while I sided with Beck, and Staunton was overruled.

"Listen, you chaps," said Beck, delivering the judgment of the court aloud, for we had consulted in whispers. "You are to leave this place for good—for good, remember—in three days, at the outside. Do you understand?"

"We understand," they said in a sullen whisper; then we unbound and left them.

At the door we parted with Staunton, and Beck and I walked back in the moonlight to our rooms. He was silent, but in a curious way I felt he wanted me to say something, and I was compelled to say it.

"Thanks, old man; I've had my lesson, I won't gamble again."

"What—never?"

"Well, hardly ever. Halfpenny points or something of that kind."

The pressure of his hand as we parted pinned me to my promise.

Three days later the twins left the University—softly and silently vanished away."

Several chaps in their set were no doubt agreeably surprised that their I.O.U.'s were never presented for payment.

"Anyhow, they won't trouble Miss Bloom any more," was Beck's comment.

"Tell me, Beck——" I began, and stopped short.

After a pause he answered my unspoken question.

"No," he said. "I'm not in love with Lucy Bloom."

CHAPTER III

A DERBY FAVOURITE

I HAVE sat for a good half-hour at the open window with a pen in my hand and a blank sheet of paper in front of me, puzzling how I will get on with this story, and coaxing my memory to carry me back, like Wells' "Time Machine," through the exciting scenes of my life in which Beck played his part. A queer sensation that, getting back into the past. The scenes go by like the pictures of a cinematograph while I am looking on from the outside. It is not myself but an image of myself I see moving there. That young fellow was once me, I suppose, but I have changed and outgrown my own identity. I feel for him the kind of interest a father feels for his son who reminds him what he was at his age.

I am looking back at Beck and myself at Kirwood Castle for the first weeks of the Long. I had done pretty well at Classics at my last exam., he had done a deal better at mathematics, and so we entitled ourselves to a good holiday. There was a certain excitement in the air which centred pleasantly round myself, for I was to be of age the next day.

I remember I had some trouble with the governor about an invitation for Beck.

"My dear boy," he said, "it is not necessary for

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a man of your position to keep up schoolboy friendships on to the end of your life. Besides, there is your sister to be considered. I am bound to be doubly particular as she has no mother."

"Gerty can take care of herself, sir," I answered; "she is not a flirtatious sort of girl that needs looking after, and, besides, young Beck is not the least bit of a lady-killer. He is the best friend I have; he has done me a dozen good turns, and there is no one, except yourself, that I would like better to have here."

The governor was staggered. He was specially anxious just then to let me have my own way. But it wasn't till Gerty tackled him that he gave in.

I have always maintained that Gerty is a brick.

"I don't care particularly for your Beck myself," she said, "but this is your day out, and if you want him you must have him. I'll undertake to show dad that he is not dangerous."

She got her way, of course, and, better still, she arranged that he was to be the only visitor.

The governor wanted a crowd, but between us we convinced him we were better by ourselves. I rather fancy now he did not really care to ask swell friends to meet Beck.

Beck and Gertrude got on a deal better than at Cambridge in a quiet, easy-going kind of way. Gerty, as I have said, was not a bit of a flirt, nor Beck a man to flirt with. After a while they were good friends without a trace of shyness on either side, and later on the governor took to him kindly.

Beck had been with us a fortnight, and was almost one of the family, on the day I am going to write about. At breakfast the governor said in a mysterious

kind of way there was something he wanted to show me, and after breakfast we all four started for a stroll across the grounds towards the home farm. Gerty walked in front with the governor. I remember she had no hat on, and the thick coils of her hair shone like burnished copper in the sunlight. Beck and I walked behind, smoking.

"Is it a new cow, sir?" I said, for the governor was a great breeder of short-horns, and was always wanting me to take an interest in them.

Gerty looked back over her shoulder laughingly.

"Shut your mouth," she said, "and open your eyes, and see what God will send you."

For about half a mile, perhaps a little more, we followed a path speckled with sunshine that trickled through the broken roof of the trees till we came to a wooden gate with stone piers set in the thick hedgerow. The governor, with Gertrude beside him, leant on the gate looking into the paddock, while Beck and I came leisurely up behind them.

It was as pretty a place as any one could wish to see. A noisy little stream nipped in through the hedgerow on one side and out again on the other, on its way to the river. Three great beech trees with a wide spread of leaves stood well apart near the middle of the paddock. I knew the place well, of course. It was a kind of Greenwich Hospital for old hunters and carriage horses that had grown stiff in the service.

But now my eye was caught by something new. A splendid long-tailed brood mare, dark chestnut, walked sedately under the trees with a three-months-old colt at her side dancing as lightly as a ballet girl.

"Hallo, governor!" I cried. "Where did you pick up that pair of beauties?"

Gertrude took the word from me.

"Isn't he a darling, Charlie? Look how he jumps sideways like a frightened deer."

"Red Deer is his name, my pet," said the governor, his hand over hers on the gate. "What do you think of him, Charlie? What do you think of him, Beck?"

"He is the prettiest bit of horse-flesh I ever laid eyes on!" I cried.

"Fit to win the Derby," added Beck.

"You are not the first that thought that," said the governor in high good-humour.

"But where did you pick them up, sir?" I insisted.

"Thereby hangs a tale, my boy, a rather curious tale which I brought you here to tell. I was left them by will. You may remember old Sir Roger Coverdale who died about Christmas last, a great friend of your grandfather's, and in a way of mine too, but especially of your grandfather's. The two had many a wild adventure on the turf together. Sir Roger made desperate efforts all his life to win a Derby, and ran the first favourite three or four times but never the winner. Well, he left me this brood mare and foal on the sole condition that I would enter the foal for the Derby. 'Knew he could trust me,' he said in the will, 'to do the straight thing.' The pair are worth money. The mare is Blush Rose that won the Grand National three years ago in record time. The sire is Orme, so the colt ought to be a flier."

"Have you entered him, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm coming to that. You see, I was in a bit

of a pickle when the will was read. You know I have set my face against horse-racing and gambling of all kinds"—I thought of the Bertram twins and tried to catch Beck's eye to thank him, but he was looking at Gertrude—"I suppose," the governor went on, "I should have refused the legacy right away, but I hadn't the heart. You see, I liked old Roger, and knew the one dream of his life was to breed a Derby winner. So I compromised with my conscience and entered the colt in your name."

"In my name?"

"I took that liberty," said the governor, smiling. "But it is no make-belief, Charlie, no nominal ownership. The colt is yours, my boy, from this moment: a coming-of-age present from your father."

"Thanks awfully, sir," I stammered; "you are too good to me."

"O Charlie," cried Gertrude, gripping my arm enthusiastically, "I'm sure Red Deer will win the Derby."

"He looks good enough," said Beck, "but——"

"But what," I protested jestingly, "you old growler? Do you insinuate I'll pull the colt?"

"There are more ways of killing a dog than hanging. I have heard from my father a lot of queer stories about the Derby."

"There will be no queer story about Red Deer," I retorted.

Little I knew.

Red Deer justified the promise of his foaldom. Hidden away in the quiet paddock far from the madding crowd of touts and tipsters, bookmakers and backers, he developed into a splendid yearling, graceful and fine from handsome head and arched

neck to slim fetlock and small black hoof. But not too fine. He was no weedy, long-legged, overbred greyhound of a colt. His shape promised speed and staying power both. The slight admixture of plebian blood he had from his mother saved him from over-fineness.

I confess I found it an exhilarating thing to be the owner of a Derby runner. The fellows chaffed me about it in college. But nobody, the colt's owner least of all, imagined for a moment he had a chance of winning the classic race for which so many millionaires had tried in vain, lavishing fortune after fortune in the attempt.

To this day I believe the colt would not have carried a shilling of his owner's in the race if it had not been for Gertrude. She was in love with Red Deer, there is no milder word for it, and the colt heartily reciprocated her affection. He would come dancing up at her call from the furthest end of the paddock, his head in the air, and his red-gold mane flying like a girl's hair in the wind. Resting his velvet muzzle in her small white hand he would look at her with full bright brown eyes, almost human in their affection. She had always ready, as she passed the paddock, an apple or a lump of sugar for her pet. It is a tribute to his excellent constitution that those dainties never troubled him.

When it was at last decided that the colt should go to Dobson for training Gertrude professed herself broken-hearted at the prospect of parting. Dobson, I should explain, was the chap who trained for my grandfather and old Sir Roger. He was uniformly unlucky, though both believed honest as the

sun, and his lack of luck had knocked him completely out of work. I chose him as a trainer because I knew no other, and he was unaffectedly delighted, indeed I may say I thought almost childishly delighted, at the chance of training a colt that was bred by Sir Roger.

But I am getting a bit in front of my story.

About three weeks before Red Deer went to the trainer, Gertrude came to me in my den with an air of great mystery and importance, and closed the door carefully behind her before she spoke.

"I want you to do something for me, Charlie," she said.

"Murder?" I suggested. "Well, I'm your man."

"Don't be silly. Can't you see I'm serious? But it is something a little out of the way, and I shouldn't like dad to know. I want you to back Red Deer for the Derby."

"Gloves?"

"No, money, real money. I've saved thirty pounds out of my dress allowance, and I want you to put it all on. Can you?"

"I don't know if it would be right."

"Please!"

There is no resisting Gertrude when she coaxes, even a brother cannot stand it.

"I'll try," I said; "I think I can manage it."

I ran up to London that afternoon. I had done a little business for myself before with that prince of bookmakers, Mr Benson, and was lucky enough to catch the great man himself at his office.

"Red Deer?" he said. "Let me see. Is there a Red Deer entered? I don't seem to remember the name. Sure?"

"Sure," I said, smiling, while he ran his eye over the entries.

"Here it is. Stupid of me to forget. Your own horse too, Lord Kirwood. Well, what can I do for you?"

"What odds can you give me about the horse?"

"Practically any odds you like. How would fifty to one suit you for a small bet?"

"My sister wants to lay thirty pounds."

"All right," said Mr. Benson, smiling that slow, wise smile of his that backers know so well. "Anything to oblige a lady. I'll book the bet at fifty to one. Your name, I suppose? It's worth her while to win, anyway."

Then the gambler in me woke up. Some men, I'm told, if they taste or smell a glass of whisky cannot hold themselves in.

"I'd like to put three hundred on for myself," I said.

"Sorry I cannot give you the same price, Lord Kirwood, I would stand to lose fifteen thou' if I did lose, though I don't think that likely. How would thirty suit? I think I could let you have thirty to one."

"Thirty would suit first rate," I said, and so the second bet was booked.

I was a bit shamefaced when I told Beck about it.

"You don't think I was going back on my word, old man? I only spoke of cards at the time, but of course I meant the other thing as well."

"Three hundred on your own horse, well you could hardly do less. It isn't every day Paddy kills a pig. We'll call it bridge at penny points, and let it go at

that. I'll have a bit on myself, if you like, to keep you company."

Beck got three hundred at twenty-five, and Tom Staunton had forty, all he could scrape together, at the same odds.

These four were, I verily believe, the only bets on Red Deer until close up to the race. For a long time his name was never even mentioned in the betting. But somehow the result of a startling trial leaked out at last, and the backers took hold. The horse's appearance, a perfect beauty in the pink of condition, helped the boom. Anyhow, the public got on to him and held on, and ran up the odds. For a time he and Sir Charles Vandelure's black horse Belerephon ran neck to neck in the betting list, then Red Deer slipped to the front and settled down steadily to "first favourite" at a short three to one while nine to two and even a point more was freely offered about Belerephon.

It is an exciting experience to be the owner of the first favourite for the Derby on the eve of the great race. I think it is Carlyle who says "a landlord's occupation is owning land." Owning race-horses is a still more exciting and popular occupation. So much reflected glory flows from the favourite to the owner that he is very liable to swelled head. He begins to imagine in some vague way the credit is due to him that the horse is so good, and the public, from the corner boy to the duke, do their best to make a fool of him.

I was up in London for a fortnight before the Derby, staying with Beck in the governor's town house. The governor and Gertrude were in the country, but had agreed to motor up for the race

I was asked about a lot, half a dozen invitations a day. It was like being the husband of a society beauty. No one, it seemed to me, wanted specially to meet Charlie Kirwood, but all wanted to meet the owner of Red Deer, first favourite for the Derby.

At one of those places, a bridge drive in Park Lane, I came for the first time across my rival, Sir Charles Vandelure. Strongly built, masterful, genial, he was known all the world over as the great financier, who at the age of forty made himself the Napoleon of the Stock Exchange, and kept a dozen companies going together, as a circus juggler has a dozen golden balls in the air, rising and falling continually but never quite touching the ground. He had taken to horse-racing and betting on a huge scale, as it was said, merely as a relaxation from more exciting speculation. His racing establishment was magnificent, and this was his third try for the Derby.

Sir Charles and I chummed up at once. No need, he said, to run against each other because our horses must. After a while I found myself telling the story of how I came to be the owner of Red Deer, and he listened with great interest.

"It is a terrible responsibility," he said, "to be the owner of a Derby favourite. One feels bound in some way to the people who have backed him. There have been three attempts to queer Belerephon in a month, and the last almost succeeded. I hope you have taken precautions."

I told him our arrangements for guarding the horse night and day as suggested by Beck, and he agreed that they were perfect.

"I want a fair run," he said, "and a good win. I

confess to you I think the public are on a wrong scent, not for the first time. I fancy my own horse. Would you care for a small bet, a thousand or so?"

I shook my head.

"I would give four to one against Red Deer or take four to one against Belerephon. You won't get such odds from the bookies."

"It's not the odds," I explained, "but I don't bet. I have three hundred on at a long shot, and that is my limit."

I could see that he thought this was an excuse, that I was nervous about my horse's chance, which I wasn't, but he was too well-bred to press me further.

"Come and dine with me," he urged cordially, "some day before our fate is decided. You know my place—not twenty miles out of London—half an hour's motor run."

"I'm afraid I'm engaged right up to the day before the race."

"I'll book you for that last day, then. Only ourselves. I'd like to show you about."

"I have a friend staying with me in town, I cannot well desert him."

"All right," he said, after the briefest possible pause, "bring your friend along too, I shall be delighted."

"We must get back early."

"As early as you like. Dinner at seven; will that suit? Then it's settled, and don't forget. Shall we look how they 'keep the bridge' in the next room?"

During the next week there were sensational rumours of big bets taken and offered against Red Deer. A regular raid was made on my horse. Half a dozen bookies simultaneously conceded a point

in the odds, and booked big bets against him. Sir Charles himself backed Belerephon with the splendid recklessness of unlimited wealth.

But the public through it all held steadily to its fancy, and on the evening I motored down to Sir Charles Vandelure's place, Feversham, Red Deer was still first favourite, though Belerephon was very close behind.

There is little to tell of the run down. The roads were good and hard, and we broke the speed limit to bits every yard of the way. About four or five miles from our destination the hill-climbing powers of our Mercedes were tested to the utmost. Without warning we came at a steep ascent round the sweep of a high desmene wall. Beck, who was driving, tried to rush it at top speed. But the hill was long as well as steep, and we just contrived to crawl at a snail's pace over the edge on to the level road at the top. After that the road was as smooth as a billiard table and almost as level, and less than a ten minutes' run brought us to the great twisted iron gates of the palace, which the Napoleon of finance had built for himself.

The avenue wound through well-grown trees, many of them transplanted in their prime from their native woods. The palace itself, from turret to foundation-stone was of red brown marble. At first glance, indeed, with its rich stone façade, it looked more like a temple than a palace. Within it was glorious: astounding.

I could go into pages of rapture about that wonderful place. But I have not the knack of description, and I fear my raptures would read like an auctioneer's catalogue. Every one knows by this time the

marvellous luxury, the miraculous art treasures of Feversham, so there is no reason to prose about all I saw with such wonder and delight.

We had nearly an hour to spare before dinner—we had come early by request—and our host showed us over a palace that a monarch or a multi-millionaire American might envy.

We dined at a round table in a small room, hung with dark crimson velvet with a series of delightful sporting sketches on the walls. There were no lamps visible, but the light was clear and soft as a June day when the sun is hidden behind white summer clouds.

I never dined like that before, I never hope to dine like that again. It was not so much that the food and wine were perfect, the exquisite plate, glass and silver, everything we saw, everything we touched was perfection. Lucullus' banquets, I fancy, were poor affairs by comparison. After dinner we drank Imperial Tokay out of large Venetian glasses with twisted stems, that had perhaps touched the lips of some old dodge in the great days of the old Republic.

"I won't say from whose cellar that wine was stolen, or how much I paid the thief," said our host; "but I will say I think it is worth the price. If you will honour me again this day week we will drink to the Derby winner in a bumper. I fancy I could name him now if I were pressed."

"Red Deer?" I suggested good-humouredly.

"Belerephon," he retorted with no less good humour. "Have you changed your mind, Lord Kirwood? Are you ready to back your fancy? I'm in a humour to give reckless odds if you make it worth my while."

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I was sorely tempted, but I shook my head, I could not trust myself to speak.

"What do you call reckless?" It was Beck asked the question.

"I'll back my own horse for any amount, twenty thousand and upwards."

"Against Red Deer?"

"No, not against any particular horse. If neither wins there may be no official decision of their places. But I will take three to one against Belerephon, I will give four to one against Red Deer, that's a long way better than the odds the bookies offer. What do you say, Lord Kirwood?"

Again I shook my head.

"Will nothing tempt you. Come, I'll play the devil effectively when I'm at it. I'll give you five to one against your horse, twenty thousand to win a hundred thousand. You won't have such a chance again in a hurry if you really think the colt can do the trick."

"I haven't got twenty thousand to lay. It is mere bagatelle to you, of course, Sir Charles, but twenty thousand pounds is a big pile of money to me."

"Don't bother about that," laughed Sir Charles.

"Just give me your initials in my betting book, and I'll take my chance of the rest."

If Beck had not been there I might have yielded, for I was all on flame for the bet. But I felt Beck's eye on me, and shook my head for the third time.

"Not to be tempted, Sir Charles," I said, and he knew I was not to be tempted.

"You, Mr Beck," he suggested blandly, "the offer is open to you."

To my amazement Beck seemed to hesitate.

"A hundred thousand to twenty against Red Deer," he repeated slowly.

"Just so."

At that moment Sir Charles, with his strong hooked nose and gleaming dark eyes fixed on Beck, seemed to me like a hawk with his foot on the prey.

But Beck was not caught.

"No, no," he said, "I must not rob you, Sir Charles, even of a trifle like a hundred thousand. You know how to spend money so splendidly you deserve to have it. All the same, I believe that, bar accidents, Red Deer will win."

For a moment I fancy a shadow of annoyance flitted over the strong, handsome face of Sir Charles. If so it was gone in a second.

"Bar accidents," he said, toying with his glass of Tokay, while his eyes glanced from one of us to the other. "That's not always a safe exception, Mr Beck, on the turf, as you may some day find. I congratulate you both on your prudence, gentlemen; I believe it has saved you quite a handsome little fortune to-night."

Not a word more was spoken of betting or racing. Sir Charles led the talk dexterously into new channels. It is always delightful to hear a clever man talk on the topic of which he is past master. He told us some thrilling stories of high finance, its wiles, its conflicts, its triumphs, and its tragedies.

I wish I could remember some of them, but I cannot. Perhaps it was the Tokay, perhaps it was subsequent events that blotted out the details. I carry away from that dinner only a vague but delightful memory of having thoroughly enjoyed myself.

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"Here's to our next merry meeting!" cried our host as we rose to go. At a motion of his hand a soft-footed butler filled our three glasses to the brim with the liquid gold of the priceless wine.

"Here's to our next merry meeting!" he cried again, and drained his glass.

"We'll meet all three to-morrow at the races," I said.

"If we are all three alive," corrected Beck, and Sir Charles murmured softly:

"If we are all three alive."

CHAPTER IV

A CLOSE SHAVE

To the last Sir Charles was most cordial, and insisted on our lighting huge cigars, though Beck declared that it was profanity to waste such tobacco in the hurricane of a motor drive.

Perhaps it was for that reason he went so slowly down the avenue. The night was pitch dark. I have heard it said that you cannot enjoy smoking unless you can see the smoke. I know I never enjoyed anything more than that superb cigar of which the red glow only was visible, bright or dim as I pulled at it.

When we got outside the gate Beck tossed his cigar away, a comet trailing a stream of sparks through the darkness.

"Why did you do that?" I asked. "You don't get cigars like that every day."

"I fancy I found a faint flavour of opium," he said. "It made me feel sleepy, and I most particularly don't want to feel sleepy."

We passed through the twisted iron gates, but still crept on at a snail's pace.

"Let her rip," I said. "Don't mind me, the glass shelters the cigar."

"I want to think."

"Can't you think and drive?"

"Not so well. Let me be for a few minutes like a decent fellow. I want to think about Sir Charles, he is a most interesting and important subject."

Still the car stole on, mile after mile, we were near the edge of the steep descent before Beck woke up from his brown study.

"Well," he said softly to himself, "he can do nothing to-night anyway, we must look out for to-morrow, that's all."

He was on the point, as he told me afterwards, of starting the car at high speed, and driving us both to death when a sudden thought gripped him.

"I wonder," I heard him murmur, then he cried out in sudden surprise and horror. That instant he threw off the clutch and jammed the brakes down, but the car still slid softly and silently of her own momentum towards the edge of the decline.

We were hardly a hundred yards off when Beck deliberately turned her across the road. She pushed against the wall, crumbled up one of her lamps, and stood stock still.

"Brakes won't work," he said.

"How——," I began.

"I think I can guess how, but we must see for ourselves."

The briefest examination showed us the thing was not the result of an accident. The brakes had been deliberately and artistically doctored.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I began, in sheer amazement.

"Near it," retorted Beck, a little impatiently.

"Very near being eternally and infernally jiggered. Man alive, can't you understand what this means?"

"Hanged if I can."

"Why, it's as plain as ABC! You know, I suppose, that if the nominator of a Derby winner is killed before the race the horse is disqualified. Sir Charles was very certain to-night that Red Deer wouldn't win."

"Oh!" I cried, in sudden horror.

"Double oh," Beck retorted, "that's just it. I should have suspected it before when he was so keen on that bet. I did suspect it in the end, but I never thought of this way out. I fancied to-morrow perhaps. There is no shirking it, Charlie, let us face the stark naked fact. Sir Charles meant murder, means murder. This was a trap for you. I have heard rumours that his financial position was shaky, but I didn't believe them at the time, now I do. He has enormous bets on the race, probably he stands to win or lose a million. A desperate and dangerous man, and he is not going to let your life stand in his way if he can help it."

"But how——" I began again foolishly. I was dazed by the sudden and terrible disclosure.

"We will have time to talk that over later on. The thing now is to get the brakes free."

"Can you?"

"I think so, if not we must walk back to town."

But he got them free after half an hour's hard work by the light of the glaring lamp, which I held for him; and we started again cautiously down the hill and rapidly along the rest of the road into London.

My man was in bed when we arrived. I had told him not to wait for us but to leave something ready on a tray. We both wanted a drink badly, so I switched on the electric light and led the way into the dining-room when Beck called out to me:

"Take the tray and the other things into this room where the telephone is. I fancy you may hear something to your advantage presently."

We had finished the bottle of Bollinger, which my man had left for us, and lit a final cigar when the telephone bell rang violently. I jumped to the instrument but before I reached it Beck called out to me :

"Don't answer, whatever you do don't answer him!"

"Hallo! Hallo! Are you there?" came a voice which I recognised at once. "Is that 209? Can I speak to Lord Kirwood? Is that you, Kirwood? Hallo! are you there?"

The receiver was put back at the other end, and the bell rang for a full minute as it seemed to me. "Hallo!" came that familiar voice again, "are you there? Are you there?" I still kept dead silent, and I heard on the other side a sigh of satisfaction. Then the bell rang off, and the one-sided interview was over.

"Why shouldn't I talk to him?" I asked, turning round to Beck whose cigar had gone out. "What does it all mean, anyhow?"

"It means that he wants to make sure, as far as he can, that you are dead and done for. Sir Charles is taking no chances. It was a very neat notion of his about the motor." Beck spoke in an impersonal tone, there was actually a note of admiration in his voice. "We should have been found crumbled up in bits, car and all, at the wall at the bottom of the hill. Just an ordinary accident, nothing to explain, no one to blame except perhaps the reckless driver, who had paid so dearly for his recklessness. Sir Charles is a man to have more than one string to

his bow, and it is just as well that he should think that no second shot is required."

"But to-morrow?" I objected. "He will meet me at the races to-morrow."

"I have been thinking of that. I suppose you must go."

"I wouldn't miss it for twenty Sir Charleses. The governor and Gertrude are to be there, you know. They would think I was dead. Besides what can he do, after all, on a crowded racecourse?"

"I don't trust him. I've often thought a crowd would make a first-class cover for an adroit murder. But I have a plan in my head if you don't think it too far fetched."

"Tell it, anyway."

I dropped into the plan at once. To me it seemed no end of a lark. For five minutes we discussed the details, then Beck said:

"We cannot do anything for three hours at least. Set the alarm clock, and let us get a spell of sleep. I think I know where we will catch what we want."

In the grey dawn we dressed carefully in full Derby rig-out. Caught a benighted hansom and drove to a benighted quarter of the East End with which Beck seemed familiar, but which I had never seen before. I have forgotten the name, and he is not here now to ask him.

The whole place was a ferment for the Derby exodus. There were coster-mongers and tent riggers and three card men and Punch and Judy operators, the survivors of the Codlin and Short generation, and donkeys and mules and ponies attached to all sorts of vehicles and all ready for the road.

The advent of two "Toffs" on the busy scene

created a lot of good-humoured bantering curiosity. When Beck explained vaguely that it was "for a bet" they were all at once eager to help us to win.

We had our pick of the many characters available, and after some hesitation we decided we would be "Aunt Sally's" men for the day. I had rather a hankering after a Punch and Judy show myself, but Beck persuaded me that we could never get the squeak right at such short notice. Two men and a boy ran the Aunt Sally. The boy was general utility and among other things drove the lively little pony that drew the neat spring van, in which the stock and trade of the business, including Aunt Sally herself and a gross of clay pipes, were stowed.

We hired the outfit for the day, including the boy at something in excess of its full capital value. Then we set about our disguises. Money talks persuasively in the East End. We secured two long, light drab coats, comparatively clean, and two pairs of big boots, with the old-fashioned elastic sides that slipped on quite easily over our own. Beck even managed, though with some difficulty, to procure for me a pair of false mutton chop whiskers, that belonged to thimble rigger's bonnet, and for himself a neat black moustache which I fancy was the private property of a pick-pocket.

"You see, old man," he said, "you will want to be yourself when you lead Red Deer to the enclosure."

"If he wins," I corrected.

"If me no ifs; I say when he wins." Beck was in wonderful humour, enjoying the frolic like a school-boy. "When he wins you can throw these things off, boots, coat and all, and come out yourself like a butterfly out of a caterpillar's overcoat."

"But the hats," I objected. "Won't the silk toppers give us away?"

"Not in the least," he said, "there is nothing in art or nature more disreputable than a Lincoln and Bennet rubbed the wrong way. See! One brush of the sleeve of your coat will make it all right again."

I should like to tell of that strange journey to the Downs in the heart of that fantastic procession and of the incidents that befell us in the ground. But these things are off the course of my story.

Comparing notes afterwards Beck and I agreed that we never enjoyed a Derby so thoroughly. A large number of the clay pipes we broke ourselves, free of charge, on the imperturbable face of Aunt Sally.

Beck developed a wonderful skill with the flying baton. His performances attracted crowds of spectators and admirers, who afterwards developed into competitors, and who filled the pockets of our loose overcoats with jingling coppers and sixpences—the only money either of us had ever earned in our lives. In the course of the day I had a flattering offer of an engagement as bonnet a "thick un hit or miss" from a three card trick man, for which I think I was indebted to my respectable mutton chop whiskers.

We pitched our canvas curtains as near as we could to the carriage enclosure, and early in the day we picked out the governor and Gertrude sitting together in the motor. She was looking her best in a light blue costume, that matched the blue of the sky, and all day long there was a buzzing group of young swells about the motor. I noticed that Beck's head

was often turned in the same direction, and that he did not look too pleased at times.

Twice I saw Sir Charles saunter up smiling, and talk to them, and once from the look on my sister's face I guessed he asked about me, and shared her surprise and annoyance at my unaccountable absence.

As the hour drew on for the big race all other business round the course began to flag; the governor and Gertrude moved from the motor to good places on the Grand Stand; and we let Aunt Sally shift for herself, and got as near as we could to the rails.

A great hush of tense excitement seemed to fall of a sudden on the vast crowd that thronged the course. I heard the distant clang of a bell. Then a loud cry with the deep volume of thunder went up from a hundred thousand throats:

"They're off! They're off!"

My heart leaped up as I saw the bright chestnut horse that carried my colours, green and gold, leap to the front at the start and flash across the sward with Belerephon, a splendid black, with rider in vivid scarlet jacket and black cap galloping close at his flank.

All else was forgotten as I watched the race in a fierce fever of excitement. Like a string of coloured beads the horses drew out round the wide green curve of the course. The glasses brought them so near that I could see the swift graceful swing of the horses' stride, and could see the jockeys crouched like monkeys on the arched necks of the flying steeds.

Red Deer kept his lead from the first, but

Belerephon still held his place half a stride behind upon the leader's outer flank; the knowing ones were right, there was nothing else in the race. Half a dozen times the pair were challenged; a speck of vivid colour drew slowly, slowly closer to them, drew almost level, and then fell swiftly behind while the chestnut and black, close together, kept their places in the front.

So they flew round Tattenham corner, so they raced into the straight, while the hoarse cry of the two names, "Red Deer!" "Belerephon!" "Red Deer!" "Belerephon!" swelled louder and louder on the quivering air.

What a long second it seemed as they came down the straight together, well in front of the field. My hope did not deceive me. I saw the chestnut draw slowly clear of pursuit. A light shone between the two horses. It widened while the cry on the course changed to one uproarious shout: "Red Deer! Red Deer! The favourite wins!" and the favourite shot past the winning post three good lengths in front of his rival.

Unnoticed in the mad confusion that followed, I tossed aside the covering dust coat, slipped the clumsy boots from my feet, plucked of the whiskers, rubbed my sleeve two or three times round my ruffled topper, and then with Beck at my side, pushing and elbowing my way through the throng, which parted for me at the magic words: "The owner, make way there, Red Deer's owner," till I reached my horse's head, as he came slowly back along the course. As I took the rein a thunder of cheering broke out louder than before.

I saw the governor and Gertrude leap to their feet

when they caught sight of me, and join frantically in the cheer; the governor, the sober, staid, anti-gambling governor waving his hat over his head like a mad-man.

Then for the first time, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Sir Charles Vandelure standing close to the rails watching me as a man might watch a ghost. He stood stock still with his right hand in the breast of his coat. The slant shine of the sun was in my face, half-blinding me, yet I fancied I could see a murderous light in his eyes. I must have been mistaken, for the next minute, when I got clear of the blinding glare, I saw that there was a smile on his face and his hand came out of the bosom of his coat to raise his hat in courteous salute as I passed.

It is no part of the story to tell what a jolly time we four, the governor and I, Beck and Gertrude, had in London that night, and how curious and amused Gertrude was by our mad frolic as Aunt Sally's retainers, little dreaming how grim a tragedy lay close behind.

Next day, in common with all London, we were electrified by the news that Sir Charles Vandelure had shot himself coming home in his motor with one of those new patent pistols with noiseless and smokeless cartridges. The pistol was found in the bottom of the car. The man beside him saw nothing, heard nothing, until at a jolt of the motor he lurched against him stone dead.

The Daily Telegraph, commenting on the tragedy, remarked what a peril such a silent and deadly weapon might prove in the hands of a cunning murderer.

I have my doubts to this day whether Sir Charles did not mean the bullet for me instead of himself, if he chanced to meet me before the race was run and won.

Beck declares he has no doubt at all on the point

CHAPTER V

FLIGHT

I DON'T think that I mentioned before that my father, Lord Stanton, was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, I suppose most people know that without my mentioning it. Anyhow, it wasn't necessary to mention it so far; it is now.

When this thing happened that I am going to tell about, Beck was with his own people in Kent, and I was lazing about doing nothing at home. It was settled that I was to go in for politics, but there was no seat ready for me at the moment. The governor, I remember, was very busy and excited, running up and down to London every other day, and the newspapers were full of rumours of war. There were all sorts of picturesque headings. One morning it would be: "The War Cloud Darkens," the next it would be: "The Silver Lining," a third, "The Scream of the Eagle"; and the government were denounced and exhorted in tremendous leading articles to spend more and more money on war-ships, submarines, and aeroplanes.

The governor was very solemn and mysterious about the whole business. Neither Gertrude nor myself could get a word from him beyond the vague statement that "affairs were very critical,

very critical indeed, but we must hope for the best." But he was constantly closeted with his new private secretary, Ernest Malvers, for hours at a time, and there was a perpetual procession of telegraph boys on bicycles up the avenue.

Perhaps this is the right time to say a word or two about Malvers, who plays a big part in the story. He was a young fellow with a long handsome face, jet black hair, soft brown eyes and about the pleasantest smile I ever saw when he did smile, which was not often. I thought for a while that Gertrude was a bit gone on him. She praised him, in a way that I never could get her to praise Beck. It was plain, too, that the governor thought no end of Malvers, who had come to him with a recommendation from the Prime Minister. He was constantly holding him up to me as a model, in a way that was bound to make me hate him if he was not such a thoroughly decent chap himself.

"Mark my words," the governor would say, "that young fellow is bound to go far. He has the two great essentials, industry and talent." And he did go far as we may see later on, but I must get on with my story.

Malvers was duetting with my sister in the music-room one evening, he had a glorious baritone voice. I was sitting out on the terrace smoking and listening with perfect contentment when the governor, who had just got down from London, came into the room in a fluster and scattered the lot of us.

"Have you got the correspondence copied, Malvers?" he said hastily.

"No, sir," said Malvers.

"Why not? why not?" He was nearer being angry with Malvers than I ever saw him before.

"You told me there was no hurry, sir," said Malvers mildly.

"But there is hurry," objected the governor, as if that were the other chap's fault. "In any case it is better to get through an important thing at once. It is always better to be too soon than too late, Malvers. The papers are wanted for to-morrow evening at the latest."

"Oh," said Malvers, evidently relieved, "I can have them ready easily to-morrow evening. It only means sitting up a few hours to-night and working steadily to-morrow. I have a good bit done as it is."

"You have kept the papers in the safe, as I told you?"

"Of course I have," said Malvers, then after a pause, "there is a passage that puzzled me a bit, sir, I would like you to have a look at it."

The governor went straight off with him to his room near the top of the castle, leaving Gertrude and myself alone.

"Clever of Mr Malvers," she said, smiling to herself as she put up her music; "of course he only wanted to show dad that he had all those papers safe."

"Do you like him, Gerty?" I asked irrelevantly.

"Pretty well; he is almost too clever for me, takes me clean out of my depth sometimes."

We saw little of the governor or his private secretary for the rest of the evening. It was a hot, cloudy night, I remember, and there was a strange hush and heaviness in the air. The kind of thing that makes one say afterwards, "I knew something

terrible was going to happen!" Towards morning a strong wind rose and howled dismally.

Something terrible did happen. Malvers did not come down for breakfast or lunch, he was supposed to be hard at work in his own room. About five in the evening the governor sent for him. The servant failed to get an answer or to get in. The door was found to be locked on the inside, and the key left in the lock. The governor, when he heard it got terribly excited, and ordered the lock to be burst open at once. The inner door of his bedroom was locked too, in the same way, and the lock held till the door burst from its hinges into a room already full of disorder and breakage. Malvers was not there, but there were plain marks in the room of a desperate struggle. Broken furniture was flung all over the place. On several articles there were blood stains, and almost the last thing found, flung far under the bed, I came upon a life preserver, with clotted blood and a few black hairs sticking to it.

The French window, which opened on a wrought iron balcony, stood ajar. A kind of grappling iron, a thing with curved prongs like a small anchor, was caught at the top bar of the iron railing, and a long knotted rope hung down within five or six feet of the ground.

It seemed pretty plain that Malvers had been attacked from behind as he sat at his desk. The desk itself was overturned and the ink spilt on the carpet. In the corner the safe stood wide open with the key in the lock, and there was not a scrap of paper of any kind left in the room.

I never saw a sane man so near madness as the

unfortunate governor as he ranged round the room. At first he could only rage and storm and fling his hands about like a lunatic. But at last I got him down to the study, and tried to quiet him a bit.

"For God's sake, sir," I said, "keep cool. If there is anything to be done——"

"Nothing can be done," he cried, "nothing! It is too late!" And then to my horror he burst out crying like a frightened child. I could only stand there and look at him helplessly. After a minute he came to a little.

"O Charlie," he sobbed, "this thing is too horrible. It means disgrace and ruin to me; that, I should not mind, but it means a European war into which England is sure to be dragged, and I am responsible. Their blood is on my head."

"That is pure nonsense, sir," I said gruffly. "You did your best, I'm sure. Do your best still. You have got to buck up, and let your mind act. It seems pretty plain that when the papers were stolen poor Malvers was kidnapped or murdered! Is there any one you suspect?"

"John Brandon, most likely, yet it could hardly be he."

"Who is this Brandon, anyway?"

"He is an international spy, the most ingenious, the most daring, the most unscrupulous. His exploits are famous in all the chanceries of Europe. He stops at nothing. He seems to be ubiquitous to pass from one country to another, quicker than steam can carry him. He has been caught half a dozen times, but when proof seemed most conclusive he had always an alibi still more conclusive."

"Where is he now?"

"In London, at least he was yesterday. He arrived quite openly, that's what put me into such a flurry. The Scotland Yard men had orders to watch him closely every minute of night and day. It was hardly possible he could have slipped away from them. I'll telegraph to London and find out."

The governor was himself again, the quick-witted, resolute man, who was respected in the Cabinet and the country. His mind had been thrown off its balance for a moment by the shock, it righted itself as quickly. A score or so of men were got together and sent out to search the grounds round the castle for the thief, or trace of the thief. Then he wired to Scotland Yard to have the ports and railway stations watched, though we both felt the precaution was futile while we were completely in the dark as to the thief's identity.

We were still hard at work, planning and writing, when a tap came to the study door. I opened it a little impatiently and found Gertrude there.

"Well?" I asked ungraciously.

"Don't be cross, Charlie," she pleaded. "I feel for poor dad just as much as you do. When I saw him in such a state I wired right away in your name to your friend, Mr Beck, to come over at once."

I could have kissed her there and then, indeed I believe I did kiss her.

"It was the very thing I should have done myself," I cried, "and stupidly forgot to do. You are a glorious girl, Gerty. Has he answered? When do you expect him?"

"He has come. He was here in his motor before his wire came to say he was coming."

"Where, where?"

"In poor Mr Malver's room. He told me to tell you he was come, and then ran right up like a squirrel."

"You tell the governor Beck is here, Gerty, like a good girl; he'll be glad, I know. I'll run up to him. If any one can help us out of this hobble he can."

"And will," she answered confidently.

I found Beck in Malver's room. He was going rapidly through the disordered furniture, now mounting a chair, now going down on all fours. Nothing escaped his keen scrutiny. I stood silent at the door watching him. In two minutes he had done. He set the life preserver with the blood and hair on, on a small table in front of him, and peered at it through a pocket microscope.

"Thanks for coming, old man," I said; "have you found anything?"

"So far only enough to puzzle me," he answered shortly, and went out of the French window on to the balcony. So absorbed was he that he did not appear to notice that I followed him.

There were six hooks in all to the grappling iron that held the rope to the top rail of the balustrade. Beck took it off twice, and replaced it twice. Then he surprised me.

"I'm going down this way, Charlie," he said. "Lock the door on the outside, and come down to me below."

Before I could answer a word he slung himself over the balcony and went down the long rope, hand over hand, as lightly as a spider on his thread.

I watched him to the end. The rope, as I have said, hung five or six feet clear of the ground. When he reached the end Beck swung backwards and

forwards for a moment before he dropped, rebounding from the ground like a rubber ball.

It was hard gravel where he landed, and he could hardly have hoped to find a footprint, but he at once bent down and examined it most carefully, first right under the rope's end, then in a wide circle. Presently he left the gravel and began to examine the flower-beds that surrounded it. I shut the window, locked the door behind me, and ran down to join him.

"Found anything?" I asked again.

"What I expected—nothing. I have been proving a negative. So far, the business is an absolute puzzle, but by proving what didn't happen we may come at last to what did. I suppose Lord Stanton is terribly cut up over this."

"Horribly. You can't imagine it, old chap. He swears it means disgrace and ruin to him; worse still, it means a European war if we can't catch the thief at once."

"I couldn't see him, could I? There is just a question or two I should like to ask."

"I'm sure he'd see you."

We found the governor and Gertrude in the study busy reading and despatching telegrams. Gertrude was going to slip away when we came in, but the governor called to her to stay. The hysterical fit, which had so shocked me, had completely disappeared; he looked pale and haggard, no doubt and no wonder, but his mind was in good working order again.

"Glad to see you, Beck, very glad to see you. This is a black business. Have you discovered anything to help?"

"I have been proving negatives so far, sir. I shall tell you what I have found in a moment, if you will allow me to ask you a question or two."

"As many as you please, my boy."

"Have any traces of the thief or thieves been found in the grounds?"

"None."

"So I expected."

"But why?" I began.

"In a moment. You were telling Charlie, sir, that there is an international spy you are inclined to suspect."

"Oh, he's out of it," said the governor. "I have had a wire from London to say that the police have never lost sight of him since his arrival in London. He has not even attempted to make any mystery of his whereabouts or movements."

"Perhaps," I butted in again, "he is preparing an alibi. You said he was a devil for an alibi."

"Have you by any chance a photo of the fellow?" asked Beck.

"Certainly," the governor answered. He went to a locked cabinet, selected a photo from a bundle, and carried it back to us.

"A Bertram twin," cried Beck and myself simultaneously.

Gertrude, to whom I had told the twin story in confidence, exclaimed, "One of the cheats!" and stopped in confusion.

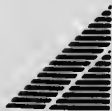
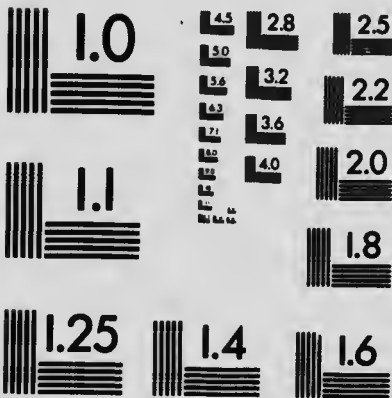
The governor looked from one to the other in utter confusion.

"The Bertram twins," explained Beck hurriedly, "are the two chaps whom Charlie and I met at Cambridge, and of whom we learned something not



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particularly to their advantage. They are as like as your two hands."

"This explains the alibis, anyway," I said.

"The fact that one brother is displaying himself openly in London," Beck went on, "suggests that the other is engaged secretly elsewhere. May I ask what power employs him?"

The governor whispered a name.

"Oh," cried Beck, "the danger of war is there?" and the governor nodded. I could see how hard he found it to hold himself in.

"Tell us what you found, Beck," I interrupted. "Have you got a notion who robbed Malvers?"

"No one," said Beck.

"Who assaulted and wounded him?"

"No one. He wasn't assaulted, he wasn't wounded, he wasn't robbed."

"But the furniture was all smashed about."

"He did that himself."

"But the bloody life preserver I saw you examine? He didn't break his own head, did he?"

"No one broke it."

"But the blood and the hairs, he must have been hit on the head."

"Nonsense," interrupted Beck. "How could a blow on the head with a round knob pull out those hairs? A sharp weapon might cut them off, perhaps. Malvers had false clues in his mind when he glued those hairs of his to the life preserver with blood that wasn't his own blood either, I dare swear."

"The rope that was flung up to the balcony?"

"It wasn't flung up, it was let down by Malvers. But he never went down it. You noticed I did not drop straight from the cord. I did not want to

spoil any tracks on the gravel right under, if there were any, but there were none. It was easy to find marks where I dropped. It was even possible to find traces of my feet across the gravel, but there were no others. Lord Stanton has just told us no trace of any kind has been found about the grounds. I am as certain as I stand here that no one flung up that rope to Malvers, and that no one came up or down it. It was a blind to throw us off the track."

"But, my dear fellow," I objected, "Malvers is certainly gone. There are only two ways out of his room, the door and the window. It could not have been by the door, for that was found locked on the inside, and you say it was not the window."

"I didn't say that."

"It comes to the same thing. He could not jump fifty feet down to the ground, and he could not jump thirty feet up to the roof."

"It is just like a wonderful detective story I have just read," chimed in Gertrude. "'The Mystery of the Yellow Room!'"

"Remember, Miss Kirwood," said Beck, "there was quite a simple solution to that mystery."

"Poor Mr Malvers seems to have vanished into air," said Gertrude. "There is not another way, he couldn't fly."

"Oh!" interrupted Beck sharply, with the cry of a man whom a sudden thought has hit hard. "Could any one get me an evening paper, a *Westminster* for choice?"

I thought he had gone off his head.

"See here, old man," I remonstrated, "you don't expect to find an account of the theft in the news-

paper! You don't imagine the thief would put in an advertisement!"

While I was prating, Gertrude brought him the *Westminster*. He moved a little away from us, turned the pages and searched it eagerly, seemed to find what he looked for, and then began to read. I watched his face as for a moment it showed something like despair, then at last hope kindled in his eyes.

"It is a desperate chance," he muttered as he crumpled the paper into his pocket, "but it is our only chance."

All the latent energy was awake in the man. He glanced at the clock, it was half-past seven.

"Charlie, can you come with me to Paris?"

"When?" I asked.

"Now, this instant. We shall catch the nine train from Charing Cross if we start at once."

"Why Paris?" I began, but Gertrude cut me short in a way sisters have.

"Don't ask such silly questions, Charlie; you will go, of course, if he wants you to go."

Meanwhile Beck was talking to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who listened as to an oracle.

"You can give us credentials for Paris, sir?" he asked.

The governor nodded, and sat down to write.

"Could you wire to the Chief of the Paris Police to meet us at the train with a motor and four or five armed men. There is no hurry about that, of course, the wire will be there long before us."

Again the governor nodded and went on writing. Something in Beck's manner, even more than his words, suggested the necessity for extreme speed.

A moment afterwards the governor handed him two notes, addressed to the English Ambassador and Chief of the Police. Beck slipped them into a letter case in his breast coat pocket.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"May I know your plans, Beck," asked the governor mildly. Gertrude only looked her curiosity.

"They are not worth knowing yet, sir, indeed I hardly know them myself. We are on a wild-goose chase, yes, that's the very word for it, a wild-goose chase. The moment I have anything to tell I'll wire."

I have a curiously distinct picture of the two, Gertrude and the governor, standing in the distance at the top of the tall flight of steps, when we started. I looked back as we sped down the avenue, and I saw her wave her hand, and then I saw her draw down his face and kiss him. It lightened my heart, for I could not stifle the feeling that I was deserting him in his sore need, and I felt angry with Beck for this mad-cap expedition into which he rushed me.

The car flew. We interchanged no word as we sped in a hurricane of our own making through the long sweeps of country road, or whirled on inner wheels round sharp curves, with the glare of the lamps like a runaway bonfire in front, reckless of danger to ourselves and others. We saw the pale flare of the lights of London in the sky, and all at once we were in the straggling outskirts of the great city, the first scouts that villadom sends into the country to spy out the weakness of the land. Beck took his watch from his pocket.

"In good time," he said, with a sigh of relief, "we may take it easy from this out."

Easy meant a good fifteen miles an hour through

the streets. We got to the station just ten minutes before the train started, and sent the car back with the chauffeur to say that the first stage of our journey was safely through.

I must have looked like a fool, I know I felt like a fool, as I lay back on the cushion watching Beck, who was too utterly self-absorbed to notice me. Here I was starting for Paris without as much as a toothpick in the way of luggage. I had not the least notion what I went to do, or how long I should be away. Is it any wonder I felt like a fool?

Beck, who had sent his two wires to Paris, was poring over the last edition of the *Westminster*, which he had secured as the train started.

"Beck," I broke out at last, when I could stand it no longer, "what is the meaning of this business?" I was on the point of saying tomfoolery, but I changed the word in time.

He looked like a man who has been awakened suddenly and cannot see for a moment.

"My dear fellow," he said slowly at last, "I badly want to think. Just let me be until we are on the boat, and I promise to tell you everything there is to tell."

CHAPTER VI

CAPTURE

WE got on board among the first, and took one of those foolish cabins on deck. Lucky we did. I was gazing listlessly out of the little window on to the lighted quay, when I was brought up with a jerk at the sight of one of the Bertram twins, coming leisurely on board with a heap of luggage in his wake.

Beck grabbed me from the window before he could catch sight of my face, and it was not until he had gone below, followed by his luggage, that either of us spoke.

"I expect his alibi duty is over," Beck said, "and he is off to join his brother. It looks as if we were on the right track, anyway, but we must board our train at Calais, Charlie, without his seeing us."

"That's easily managed. We are in light marching order and can get to cover quickly. But for goodness sake what's it all about? I'm bursting with curiosity, and you promised to tell me everything when we got on board the boat."

For answer he took the crumpled copy of the *Westminster* from his pocket and handed it to me. I read where he pointed. It was an account of a great international display of aeroplanes and dirigible

balloons the previous day near London. The startling events of the morning had driven it clean out of my head. I read obediently the long description of the performance, the report was poetic, picturesque, and very wearisome.

"I can find nothing to help in this," I complained.

"Kindly read on," he put his finger at the foot of the page.

"At this stage the navigable balloon Hohenzolern, which had showed such docility earlier in the day, answering to her rudder like a boat, suddenly lost way and fell out of the course. It was observed that her propeller no longer revolved. Something had plainly gone wrong with her engine or her steering gear or both, for she was swept like a withered leaf down the wind, rising as she drifted across the sky until she passed out of sight of the spectators. Great apprehensions are felt for the three daring aeronauts she carried on her lonely voyage through the heavens."

"Well?"

"Read on."

"THE MISSING HOHENZOLERN

"Special Telegram

"EXETER, 5 A.M.

"A large balloon, supposed to be the missing Hohenzolern, was observed at dawn this morning very high in the air. She was apparently wholly unmanageable, and she was drifting rapidly out to sea before a strong south-west wind. Her course, unless the wind changes, of which there seems to be little prospect, must take her right out across the Bay of Biscay. The gravest fears are entertained for the courageous men whom she is carrying to what seems inevitable doom."

CAPTURE

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The next paragraph was headed:—

“GOOD NEWS OF THE MISSING HOHENZOLERN

“LA ROCHELLE, 7 A.M.

“A great dirigible balloon, believed to be the Hohenzolern, has just passed close to the town at an elevation of about a quarter of a mile. She was beating against the south-western wind almost due east for Paris. Her propeller was working splendidly, and she appeared to have little difficulty in keeping her course.”

The next extract was shorter:—

“TOURS.

“A very large dirigible balloon passed here early this morning, heading for Paris.”

“From our Paris correspondent,” came the next item.

“Great excitement was created in the city this morning by the appearance on the western horizon of a small black speck which rapidly developed into a huge dirigible balloon, moving at a rapid rate towards the city. It was speedily identified as the Hohenzolern, which has so distinguished itself at the contest in London yesterday, and was afterwards blown out over the Channel. It is plain that the skilful and daring aeronauts she carried had contrived in some wonderful way to repair the injury done to her propeller, for it was working perfectly as she approached the city. At first it was thought that she would affect a landing on the outskirts, but she held her course straight over Paris, a wonderful object in the clear sunlit sky, casting a gliding shadow as she passed on the broad expanse of upturned faces that watched her from the gardens of the Tuileries. So close was she that with good glasses one could distinguish the features of the

three men in the boat-shaped car attached by aluminium stays and netting to the huge bulk of the balloon. She passed right beside the double tower of Notre Dame so close that the tower seemed almost to graze the silk of her envelope, then moving rapidly due east in the direction of Rheims, she lessened slowly to a mere black speck on the soft blue of the sky and vanished."

"Still I don't see——" I began.

"Read on, the last," Beck said; "it is the most important of all."

"RHEIMS.

"The dirigible balloon, Hohenzolern, came down close to the town this afternoon. Her silk covering has been torn and she was partially deflated. Workmen have been got out from the town. It is found that her injuries are slight, and it is expected that the balloon will be fully inflated and able to resume her flight early to-morrow."

I looked up wonderingly at Beck's eager face.

"But what has all this got to do with us?" I asked.

"Don't be wilfully dull, old chap, give your wits a chance. Surely you must understand Malvers was carried off with the papers and probably the other Bertram twin in the same car. They let down a rope to him on the balcony; you remember it was calm early in the night. The disablement of the balloon was all humbug; if the propeller had been injured they could never have set it right in mid-air. But they were making straight for the frontier with their plunder when they were disabled in earnest at Rheims. We have got to catch that balloon there if we can."

The thing was as plain to me as a pikestaff, as

most mysteries are when they are explained. I was ready to kick myself that I had not seen it at once.

"We can do nothing until we get to Paris," Beck went on; "what do you say to a game of piquet to pass the time?"

"I could not tell one card from another, my nerves are dancing a hornpipe. I envy you, Beck; how the deuce do you keep so cool? Do you think we shall be in time?"

"I hope so; worrying won't help, anyway."

The slow minutes dragged themselves along, and we crept in the dark into Calais. Beck hurried me off at once, and found a carriage near the engine, which a handsome *pour boire* to the guard secured to ourselves. Money, as they say, "talks" every language, and is understood all the world over.

"We have got clear of him this time," said Beck, as he settled down comfortably and lit a cigar. "I hope we shall be equally lucky in Paris."

Of course I knew without telling whom he was so anxious to elude.

Beck smuggled himself into the corner of the carriage and smoked his cigar placidly out to the end, then he drew the collar of his coat round his ears. Like many men of strong will power it was his privilege to command sleep in the midst of excitement.

I was not so lucky. The thought of the governor's words came back to me. I don't care who knows it, I hate war. I don't see the least fun or glory in it, only dirty butchery, just the hacking up of limbs and the beating out of brains of men who have done nothing to deserve it, the breaking up of homes, and the horrible misery of woman and children. At first I thought chiefly the ruin this

business might bring on the governor and the lot of us. Now that passed clean out of my mind, and the horror of war held me like a nightmare. While we rushed on and on through the darkness to the monotonous grinding of wheels and clang of pistons there came before my mind a picture of a battle-field all strewn with mangled bodies. I must have dropped to sleep, but still saw that battle-field stretching as far as the eye could reach through which I wandered, covered with blood from head to toe, and woke in a cold sweat of horror. I thought the journey would never end. At last, when the grey light of dawn was stealing through the darkness, the train slackened speed. We were in Paris.

As we slid slowly along the platform into the Gard du Nord, Beck got the door open, and we were out while the train was still in motion. We skulked off like a brace of thieves to the entrance of the station. A big handsome motor waited conspicuous among the string of *voitures* and taxis, and we made for it directly. As we came up the driver turned on a small electric light, and examined us both closely.

"Put that down!" cried Beck sharply, and handed him the note the governor had written to the Chief of the Police.

While the man was glancing over the note I noticed in the dim light a low-sized man, alert-looking, and perfectly dressed, who came up quickly followed by a huge porter with two bags slung by a leather strap over his broad shoulder. The man peered about, apparently on the look-out for a good *voiture* or taxi. As he passed close to us I saw his face, and instantly turned my back.

At the same moment I heard the police chauffeur say to Beck in perfect English, in which there was no trace of foreign accent :

"All right, sir, I was told to place the car at your disposal."

Thereupon Beck and I clambered into the back seat.

"Your luggage, sir," said the driver.

"We have none. Drive to Rheims as fast as you can go, there are many lives at stake. I will give you a hundred pounds amongst you if we are in time. That's nothing. Your government will think no reward too great."

Even at the moment I thought it a good sign that the driver answered not a word but gripped his wheel and got the car going.

"Beck," I whispered, as we slipped smoothly along the half-awakened streets, gaining speed as we went, "I saw him at the railway station quite close, but I don't think he saw us."

"Oh, yes, he did, worse luck! I noticed his eyes blink as he recognised you. There could be no mistake, it was horribly unlucky."

"But what can he do? He can't catch or stop us now."

"He can wire, my boy, and he will, don't you make any mistake about it. If those other chaps have any sense they will hire a motor the moment they get the wire, and skip with the papers across the frontier. My hope is that they will want to take the balloon, which is the best in the world, along with them; they won't like the notion of leaving it behind. That's our only chance."

"Why not wire yourself to have them detained?"

"I don't like to risk it. One of the lot might escape with the papers, besides I don't want the papers read, so we must be there ourselves at the capture. As my governor always says, we must trust to luck to pull us through. We can do no more now until we get to Rheims. By jove, she is racing!"

She was just. I never rushed so swiftly through space before. My trip from Kirwood Castle was a crawl in comparison. The road was perfect, broad, smooth, and straight. It slid, with dizzy speed, back under the wheels of the flying car. The sparse poplars by the roadside rushed by a tall green hedge, the long rows of vines whirled in wild circles in the fields on either hand, and the wind shrieked its mad protest as we burst through.

The darkness melted in the pink flush of the dawn, and still we sped with undiminished speed.

For more than two-thirds of that frantic drive Beck sat silent and quiet, with his arms folded, the rush of the wind made talk impossible.

We were three hours or so in full flight, our ears stunned with the incessant whirr of the engine, our eyes dim and watering from the swift procession of road and fence and the blinding rush of the wind, when Beck woke up at last.

He got out his race glasses and stared steadily in front of him. I noticed that his gaze was at the sky, and I knew he was watching in feverish anxiety for the escaping balloon. But no sinister speck marred in any direction the pure blue of the heavens. All of a sudden he called out "Rheims!" but it was nearly a minute later, when we were more than a mile nearer, before I could discover a single tower

like a streak of darkness against the sky above the dim, vapour-like bulk of the great cathedral. Still we raced on with relentless speed, and the town came forward out of the blue haze of the horizon to meet us, growing clearer as it came. We turned a curve that skirted the town a little to our right, and there with startling suddenness we had clear sight of the balloon.

There was no mistaking the peculiar shape when we got it clear against the sky, the huge cigar of inflated silk and the little boat hanging below it close to the ground.

From that instant we had no eyes for the town.

The balloon was stationary over a high sloping ground, about twenty feet in the air, swaying slightly in the wind and tugging at the ropes that held her.

As it came rushing out of the distance to meet us we could see the framework of the car and the men in it; we could see the rope-netting that held the balloon in shape; we could see the men busy around it. The field skirted the road with no fence between.

Beck leant forward and spoke to the driver, and the car began to slacken its tremendous speed.

It was plain that the men about the balloon had in their turn got sight of the motor. We could see them lean over the side of the car and cry out to those below, and there was a rushing hither and thither about the field. Closer and closer we drew, the faint sound of shouting came to our ears, as the motor swept on until we were right opposite the balloon; then it stopped with a jerk that almost shot us from our seats.

Almost before it had stopped Beck was out and

away across the field, shouting to us as we started to follow:

"Stay in the car! Watch the balloon!"

The men in the field were cutting the tow ropes that held the balloon down, and the men in the car yelled to them to hurry. One after another the ropes went loose, the balloon heeled a little to one side, and then leaped upward as the last tie that held it to earth was cut free.

Already the car was five or six feet from the ground when Beck came up with a rush, leaped and caught and clung to the netting. While the balloon shot up like a rocket we saw the nimble figure, which grew momentarily smaller as we looked, climb like a squirrel up the net work between the aluminium stays on to the body of the balloon. Two shots rang out, but he made no pause; like a sailor in the rigging, as swift and sure, he went up the network round the huge curve and disappeared over the top.

He told me afterwards all that happened.

"I saw they were hurrying to get off," he said, "and I raced across the field. It was my last chance, and I was only just in time; a second more and the whole thing was whisked out of my reach.

"It is a strange sensation, Charlie, seeing the field drop away from you through space when you are hanging on by the skin of your teeth, but I kept tight hold and never looked down. Just as I started to climb I heard two shots and my cap was twisted sideways on my head, I found the hole of the bullet later, the other shot must have gone wide. When I got over the bellying curve of the balloon I was safe. But it swayed terribly as I climbed, and we must have

heeled right over if it were not for the steady weight below. When I got to the top the silk sank under my weight between the stays, as a soft pillow sinks under a man's head, swelling in great curves all round me. So I lay securely in the hollow as a bird in its nest, and got my pocket knife open and drove it through the tough skin of the balloon, as though I were stabbing a living thing, and heard the hiss of the gas as it rushed out, like life blood, through the rent.

"I could see nothing from where I lay but the wide vacant dome of the sky above me. I could not even tell if the balloon rose or sank till very cautiously I crawled to the edge of the hollow, which sank under me as I crawled, and holding tight to the cordage looked over the verge. Yes, we were sinking. The ground far below, with its doll's town to the right, was rising slowly towards us. To the left I could see the car, a mouse-like speck, racing along the narrow ribbon of the road. At this minute they must have thrown out ballast, for I felt an upward jerk of the balloon. But live or die I was resolved to bring it to the ground. So again and again I drove my knife in to the hilt. The gas hissed all round me, through half a dozen rents, and the ground ran up to meet us with a swift noiseless rush that frightened me, for I knew we were falling fast. The next thing I remember I rolled down the collapsing side of the balloon and landed safely on my feet."

To come back to the motor. When Beck made his mad leap, and we saw him swing into the air, we thought it was all up with him, and his desperate climb over the netting to escape the revolver shots

made his plight the more perilous. The balloon rose rapidly to a height of about two thousand feet, drifting before the wind. No effort was made as yet to get the propeller in motion, and as the light wind carried it on almost parallel with the road our car kept pace with its flight.

After a little we noticed that it was sinking slowly, then some bags of ballast were tossed out and it rose with a jerk, but after a moment or two it came down again, more rapidly than before. Again the ballast was thrown out and it fell more slowly, but still it fell.

We left the motor and raced on foot across the fields. The balloon was now scarcely a hundred feet over our heads, still sinking. It dodged a tall poplar, swinging the car clear by a yard, and came down in an open space.

The car touched the ground, but before we could reach it it went up again, like the hop of a rubber ball. Beck slashed great gashes in the covering and down again came the balloon right on top of the car, which it enveloped in its bellying folds, while Beck rolled off the top of the collapsing monster like an acrobat.

We dug our three men completely cowed, from under the balloon, and handcuffed each in turn without resistance. It was curious to meet again one of Bertram twins, whom I had last seen stretched on his own carpet at Cambridge. He was as cool and self-possessed as ever, but Malvers was yellow and whimpering with fright. The other, a big-boned fellow, was plainly an assistant. I could have struck the hound, Malvers, across the face, remembering the agony his treachery had given my father.

"Where are the papers, you cur?" I asked, holding in my rage.

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He touched his breast with his manacled hands, and I drew out a large envelope full of papers from his pocket.

"That's all?" I asked.

"You cannot trust him," interposed Beck briskly, "we must search the lot, and have every scrap of paper every one of them has about him; that's the only safe way."

We found more papers on that liar Malvers, concealed in the lining of his coat, but when we came to search the Bertram twin he protested vigorously.

"I assure you, gentlemen," he said, "I have no other papers connected with this case. My friend, Mr Malvers, insisted on retaining possession of them all until his reward was paid in full. These documents relate to quite another matter, and are highly confidential."

"All's fish that comes to our net," said Beck. "Lord Stanton may find these documents interesting. You owe him some atonement, you know, some interest on the loan you took of his documents."

Having secured every scrap of paper, we moved with our prisoners towards our motor, which was waiting on the road.

"What are you going to do with these chaps, Beck?" I said.

"Let them go. Take their weapons and let them go. They won't have too good a time when they go back without the papers and without the famous balloon."

The Chief of the Paris Police nodded assent. When we had collected three serviceable revolvers from their pockets we took off their handcuffs and turned them loose.

Then we drove into Rheims. We were hungry and thirsty and draggled and exceedingly light-hearted. We wanted both food and drink badly, but our first move was to the telegraph station.

"This do?" asked Beck, and read out: "'Completely successful. All documents recovered.'"

"Capital!" I answered, and leaning over I saw the telegram was directed to "Lady Gertrude Kirwood, Kirwood Castle, England."

I thought he winced and blushed a little as his eyes met mine, but he answered sedately:

"It was she who engaged me, you know. I must report to my employer."

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PART II



CHAPTER VII

A PANIC IN PARLIAMENT

"YOU don't like Starkey Colthurst?" I asked Beck, as we walked down to the house together. I think I have said already somewhere that Starkey Colthurst was the governor's Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

"I didn't at first, I do now," Beck answered. "There was something in his face that vaguely repelled me. Then I found out what it was. He's very like our old friend, Maxwell, who was sent down at Cambridge, and has since developed into a bogus company promoter."

"You're right," I said, "there is a great likeness, though I never noticed it till you spoke. But make your mind easy, old man, Colthurst is not Maxwell. I saw the real Simon Pure several times lately; he haunts the House of Commons of late, and from his appearance he seems to be doing pretty well for himself."

"I have noticed him, too. He is not really like Colthurst, only just the outline of his face, so I have conquered my prejudice."

I mention this conversation just because it took place a few days before the tremendous political convulsion in which Starkey Colthurst had the

principal part. The main incidents of this exciting business are, more or less, in every one's recollection. They are not at all likely to be forgotten. I only want to make clear for the first time the part that Beck played in this sensational drama.

There was a German scare on at the time, indeed German scares had grown to be a common epidemic in London. The governor and Colthurst, who were engaged, there is no harm in telling it now, in an amicable and delicate arrangement with Germany, were pestered with irritating questions in the House of Commons.

The climax came when the Opposition put down a vote of censure: "That this House is of the opinion that His Majesty's government does not sufficiently realise the necessity of an adequate navy for the protection of our coasts," and a day was granted as a matter of course for its discussion.

In terms the motion was moderate enough, but the newspapers had been rampant for weeks, and now the orators got their chance. All the Imperial Jingoës in turn had a fling at His Majesty's government, and especially at the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. In language that was brutally plain Germany was pointed to as the country whose aggression was to be dreaded. "Our cowardly ministers," perorated one inspired speaker, "are licking the feet of the German Frankenstein that is arming to destroy us, instead of holding its navy ready to take the monster by the throat."

Of course the government had a steady and substantial majority and nothing in the nature of a defeat, or even a close division, was dreamt of for a moment. But the wild and whirling words made

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some sensation in the House and a great deal in the country amongst the multitudes stricken with the ague of war panic.

It was arranged that Starkey Colthurst was to wind up the debate on the part of the government, and it was confidently expected, at least among the ministerialists, that he would give the Jingoës their quietus.

Just a word or two about Colthurst before I come to what happened that night. He was a self-made man, a handsome well set-up fellow about thirty, who wore his hair short and his beard long; a bit standoffish, as self-made men often are. Shyness so often looks like pride. No one ever questioned his ability or force of character, but no one quite knew how he managed to push his way into Parliament, which is as hard of entrance for the poor man as heaven is for the rich.

His very first speech showed him a man to be reckoned with. It stirred up a languid house to the knowledge that a great debater had arisen—aye, and something more than a debater, a man with the passionate earnestness which stirs while it convinces.

In five years Colthurst, whose performances had outstripped his promise, had climbed up to his present position, and belief was prevalent he would go to the top.

He was still unmarried, and lived by himself in a small house in Chelsea, which was kept by an old housekeeper, who had come up with him from the country and, so it was said, had nursed him from a child.

Beck and I had been in the House, off and on, during the greater part of the debate, and we were

lounging about the lobby after dinner, about half-past ten or so, when Colthurst passed in, as I thought, looking very queer. There was a dour, determined look on his strong face that boded ill for somebody. So absorbed was he that he passed us quite close without the slightest sign of recognition, though he knew us both quite well.

As he walked up the floor he came right between the Speaker and the man who was addressing the Chair, an unpardonable breach of parliamentary etiquette, which invariably invokes an angry and universal shout of "Order, order!" from every quarter of the House. I've seen men stoop and scuttle like rabbits at this intimidating cry, but Colthurst stalked slowly on to his place, apparently quite unconscious of the storm he had awakened.

We followed him into the House. I had been a member now for nearly two years back, and Beck had a pass for one of the seats under the gallery, which was only separated by the back of the bench from the members.

Colthurst took his accustomed place on the ministerial bench close to the Speaker's chair. He spoke to none of his colleagues, but sat leaning back with his hat drawn down over his forehead and his beard stuck out.

A moment later the Leader of the Opposition began one of those adroit and brilliant speeches for which he was famous, full of sharp hits at the government, humorous and playful for the most part, but warming at the close into a kind of hysterical passion, at which his followers cheered uproariously.

Colthurst rose as he sat down, and instantly a hush fell upon the House. The occasion was too serious

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for applause, and there was something ominous in the man's voice and manner which compelled attention.

I don't know how to describe that epoch-making speech, for it is quite certain that my description will be coloured by what happened afterwards.

He began slowly in the dead silence. There was a tone in his voice that I had never heard before, a tone, as it seemed to me, of intense excitement. The opening sentences were in his best style, a style which he had made wholly his own, pre-eminently simple, earnest, compelling attention.

"I am come here to-night," he went on slowly, "at any cost to myself or to my party, to discharge a duty as solemn and momentous as has ever fallen to the lot of a member of this House." He paused amid breathless silence, no one could guess what was to come next. "I am here," he continued, "as the official spokesman of this government and in a special manner of the foreign office, for which I share the responsibility with Lord Stanton. My duty as a party man is to vindicate the government and office, and to defend their policy and action. I will do nothing of the kind, I can attempt nothing of the kind."

Surprise held the House silent for a moment, then the Opposition broke into a tumultuous cheer. Colthurst raised his hand and the cheering lapsed into instant silence.

"I have a higher duty to discharge. As a true born son of this fair and happy land it is my duty to set her freedom and happiness above all other considerations. Personal friendship and Party loyalty are nothing in the balance. There is an official

tradition that forbids me reveal the secrets of the office to which I belong. In ordinary circumstances that tradition should be implicitly observed. But, sir, these are no ordinary circumstances. Official concealment must not be maintained to the ruin of our country. Having failed to move the government from the disgraceful and disastrous course they have chosen, I am compelled to appeal to the only tribunal that can restrain them—the power and patriotism of this enlightened assembly, the supreme authority in the state. I do not value any tradition at a pin's point that would constrain me to a disgraceful silence. I speak no longer as a Secretary of Foreign Affairs but as a private member of this House, but I speak in the plenitude of the knowledge I have acquired. I proclaim the known truth when I declare that this government has shamefully truckled to Germany, and lowered the honour of England in the dust. It has abandoned its ship-building programme at the dictation of a foreign power, and its servility has been awarded by insult and menace. Even now we are threatened with an invasion which our starved and depleted navy is powerless to repel. Sir, the government have richly deserved the censure with which it is proposed to visit them. Only a strong and resolute administration, which will cast its evil traditions to the winds, can save the country. I will vote for the motion before the House."

A moment's silence as he sat down and then broke out a hurricane of applause. The indictment was unexpected, dramatic, conclusive. The well-known character of Colthurst for courage and honesty carried conviction. Already the government was condemned. The ministers sat in dumb amazement,

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that might be mistaken for guilt, no member rose to continue the debate.

When after a long interval the Speaker, a stately figure in bee-hive wig and flowing robes, got on his feet to put the question from the chair, no man there doubted what the answer would be.

In the momentary silence I heard Beck's voice urgent in my ear.

"Speak, man, speak! It doesn't matter what you say, keep the debate going."

The Speakers' solemn voice had already begun.

"The question is——" when I leapt to my feet.

"Lord Kirwood," the Speaker cried; as he dropped back into his seat I was in possession of the House.

I hardly know what I said. Beck told me later on I made a right good speech, but I don't believe him. I think the House bore with me for a while as my father's son, while I indignantly, though I fear a little incoherently, denied the charges of Colthurst. It was natural, of course, that I should stand up for my father, but the damning evidence of Colthurst, who had nothing to gain and everything to lose by revealing the truth, was conclusive.

Still I stumbled on from incoherency to incoherency until the House grew impatient of my eloquence and the rising cry of "Vide, vide, vide!" cut my sentences in two. While I was still struggling against the storm I heard Beck's voice behind me again: "You may sit down, Charlie, the debate is safe, the Irish are on to it."

Then as I collapsed into my seat, crushing my hat like a concertina, I heard the speaker cry, "Mr Mulreddy," and a soothing melodious brogue took up the tale.

"Mr Speaker, sir, I am amazed at the intemperate impetuosity of the gentlemen around me"—("Vide! vide!")—"There, sir, it is again. Is this the calm, imperturbable Saxon whom we poor excitable Irish are so often invited to admire?"—"Vide! vide!"—"Easy does it, we will divide later on, but first, Mr Speaker, I have a few words to say, and with the leave of the House or without it I mean to say them right out to the end. On those benches, Mr Speaker, we have been often accused of disloyalty, but for myself I am a great admirer of the British Empire"—("Hear hear!")—"in its proper place. I want to treat the British Empire, which seems in trouble to-night, with proper respect. You have often been good enough to give a night sitting to pass a coercion act for a poor little bit of a place like Ireland, we are going to return the compliment; we are going to give the British Empire a night sitting all to itself, and we won't go home till morning till daylight doth appear!"

The House roared and howled, but all to no purpose. The same genial smile illuminated Mr Mulreddy's face; the same mellifluous brogue filled up the pauses in the storm.

I noticed that Colthurst was getting uneasy on the front bench as the debate laboured on.

"Follow him, Charlie, he is going away," Beck whispered; "follow him."

"What is the use?" I retorted snappishly; "the mischief is done. If he were to recant every word he has just spoken the House would swear he had been got at."

"For goodness' sake don't argue but follow him. It is all important to stop him at any cost. Get him

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to assault you, get him arrested, but be careful, old chap, for he is sure to be armed."

I can never resist Beck when he talks to me like that.

"Right," I said. "Are you coming too?" for he had got up from his seat.

"No, I have other work to do. I am beginning to see my way out of this. If you can get your man to the police court on any pretence it's all safe. So long!"

Colthurst slipped out through the members' door, and walked rapidly across Palace Yard. To my surprise he did not take a car or a taxi, but turned to the right down the Thames embankment, while I followed close at his heels. He slackened his pace as he came to the corner of the National Liberal Club, and turned up Northumberland Avenue. There was an extra big policeman standing under a lamp-post—my opportunity was come.

I stepped up behind Colthurst and laid my hand on his shoulder. He turned on me with a snarl of an angry dog; there was murder in his eyes as they met mine. I saw his right hand dive into the pocket of his overcoat, and, remembering Beck's warning, I gripped his wrists and grappled with him, shouting: "Help! Police! Police!"

The big policeman jumped round and took a hand at once. Colthurst in his rage kicked him on the shins while he tried hard to break loose from my grip on his wrist.

"I charge the man with assault, constable," I panted. "He tried to shoot me with a revolver, see!" I wrenched Colthurst's hand from his pocket still gripping the revolver.

"Right y'are, sir," said the constable, with a rich Irish brogue, the first word always tells with the police. "Easy there, my fine fellow," to the unfortunate Colthurst, who struggled in the grasp of a Hercules. "Easy there, or maybe I'd have to hurt you. It's the best of your play to come quietly." He wrenched the revolver from the prisoner's hand as he spoke, and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists.

"I'll pay for the taxi, constable," I said, "I'm in a hurry."

Colthurst had his wits back by the time we had got to Westminster Police Station. He was as cool as cucumber while the charge was taken down—"assault and resisting the police in the discharge of their duty."

"What have you to say to this?" asked the Inspector.

"Very little," he replied, smiling. "Your constable is acting under a very natural mistake. Indeed I have to apologise for resisting him in what he believed to be the discharge of his duty. I am Mr Starkey Colthurst, M.P., Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. If you will kindly put your hand in my pocket you will find my card-case. This person wantonly assaulted me; I was defending myself when the constable came up."

The inspector was plainly impressed by the card-case and the perfect manner of the man. But my gigantic Irish friend, whose shins doubtless still smarted, came to the rescue. He looked closely into the face of Colthurst, who was dishevelled a bit by his struggle. Then, to my amazement, he laid his hand on the flowing beard and jerked it suddenly

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from his chin. "Mr Colthurst don't wear a false beard, I'm thinking," was his effective comment.

In the beardless face, distorted with rage, I recognised Maxwell, the expelled of Cambridge, the fraudulent stockbroker, and saw that he had recognised me and felt that the game was up.

"A trap," he said shortly, "and I'm caught. I suppose I have to thank Beck for this, Kirwood. You're too d—d a fool to have thought of it off your own bat."

"Yes," I answered, "Beck."

In my turn I produced my card and handed it to the inspector, who had listened bewildered to the dialogue.

"This is a serious case," I said, "more serious than you imagine. Take good care of your prisoner."

"N—, sir," he said, "he will be here when he's called for;" and I saw my big Irish friend hustle the unfortunate Maxwell into the lock-up before I took my departure.

Pulling my coat up about my ears, for there was a sting of cold in the night air, I walked back to the House. I did not go in but looked into the Chamber through the glass door. The storm still raged as tumultuously as ever, but it beat in vain on the Irish ranks. Man after man they opposed themselves, unruffled to its fury.

A friend, who passed out, told me that the Prime Minister had briefly interposed in the debate to deny the statement of Colthurst, and the denial was met with insulting laughter from all sides of the House. The Speaker had twice refused the closure, but there was an uneasy feeling that the next time it would be granted.

Too nervous to go in I loitered like an uneasy spirit about the lobby, which was buzzing with excitement, longing for a sight of Beck; I felt in my bones something would happen when he arrived.

Presently I was joined by the governor, who had listened to the debate from the Peers' Gallery. His face was drawn and very pale; he seemed like a man in great physical pain and weak from suffering. When I got him away to a seat at the side of the lobby I noticed that he tottered as he sat down.

"This is a terrible business, Charlie," he said in a whisper. "I hardly need tell you there is not a word of truth in Colthurst's speech. The man is an unspeakable liar and a traitor, and I trusted him."

"It wasn't Colthurst, sir," I blurted out.

"Who wasn't Colthurst?" he asked sharply. I fancy for the moment he must have thought I had gone mad.

"The man that made the speech," I answered.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he cried pettishly; "I know Colthurst as well as I know myself."

Very shortly I told him my adventure. "He is under lock and key in the Westminster Police Station," I wound up.

The governor listened with intense eagerness, the ghastly look passed from his face.

"Beck sent you after him, you say? Where is he now?"

"That I can't tell, sir. He asked me to wait here for him. He has some plan in his head, I only hope he won't be late."

"What are they doing in the House, Charlie," the governor asked anxiously; "go and see. It's ruin if they divide in their present temper."

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I went to the door and held it open for a moment. The Irish members still held the breach. Through the half open door I heard in a rich brogue: "The more haste the less speed. Those gentlemen opposite are wasting the time of the House with their foolish interruptions. They can't begin to build an adequate navy to-night, anyhow. The sooner they allow me to finish my speech the sooner I'll sit down."

"The Irish are still at it, sir," I reported to the governor. "They deserve Home Rule for this night's work, if there is any gratitude in England."

Just then there was a sudden silence in the lobby, the silence of an excitement that kills all sound. Some instinct told me what it meant. I jumped to my feet and stepped out to where I could see what was passing.

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNDERSTUDY

UP the long passage, between the railings, past the guarding police, came two men on whom all eyes were fixed. They walked slowly and one leaned on the other. The spectators for the most part were held dumb with excitement, but I could hear more than one whisper: "That's he, Starkey Colthurst, the pale man with the black beard, that's the man who smashed the government."

My father trembled as a condemned man trembles on the scaffold when the unexpected reprieve arrives, and rushed forward to grip Starkey Colthurst by the hand and hurry him to the House.

"Easy, easy," said Beck, "give him time, sir. He is terribly shaken, only a hero would come at all in his condition. Get him to a private room and let him rest a little; a glass or two of champagne would do no harm. Meanwhile, Charlie, you might have a word with the Speaker to prevent accidents."

"You forget nothing, Beck," cried the governor, "nothing!"

While the governor and Beck took Colthurst round through the corridor to the Prime Minister's own room, of which the Foreign Secretary had the use when he came to the House, I walked right up the

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floor to the Speaker's chair. He leant down to me over the arm of his great chair as, kneeling on the steps, I whispered as shortly and clearly as I could what had happened. "The impostor is in a police cell and the real Colthurst is with my father now, sir," I said, "in the Prime Minister's room. I fancy he will be ready to speak in a moment or two."

It is pleasant to remember that the Speaker never for a moment doubted my word. He only nodded to show he understood, and I heard him mutter under his breath: "Thank God I refused the closure."

The storm still raged as I crept back to my seat behind the ministerial bench and whispered to the Prime Minister: "My father would like to see you in your room, sir, he has good news."

There was a howl of derision from the infuriated Jingoës when the Prime Minister slipped out of the House behind the Speaker's chair. "Run away! Run away!" they yelled, and one raucous voice above the tumult shouted: "The policy of scuttle!"

I smiled to think of what was coming.

Another burst of ironical cheers greeted the Prime Minister when he returned, but it died away to the silence of utter bewilderment when Starkey Colthurst was seen walking close behind him. One or two young bloods at the back kept on yelling for a second or two after the rest, and broke off with a suddenness that was comical when they in turn caught sight of Colthurst. He was seen speaking to his colleagues on either side of him, and a furious cry of "Squared! Squared! Colthurst is got at!" was raised by the Jingoës.

The soothing voice of the Irish member who was

speaking at the time was heard in the lulls of the tumult.

"How you Englishmen love one another! I will not trespass any longer on this British love feast. I fear, Mr Speaker, that I have too long occupied the attention of the House. Yes, I see that is so; there is a touching unanimity in that cheer for which I am most grateful. In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I have only to express my thanks for the silence, attention, and perfect courtesy with which I have been heard."

He sat down and the leader of the Opposition rose. "I move," he said in solemn tones, "that the question be now put——"

To the amazement of the whole House Starkey Colthurst rose at the same moment.

"Order, order," cried the Speaker, "Mr Starkey Colthurst."

At this the angry outcry again broke loose. A thunder of voices all yelling together: "Spoke! Spoke!"

The Speaker rose slowly and the tumult subsided. "Order, order," he said again, and there was a dominant ring in that resonant voice, "Mr Starkey Colthurst."

Then as he began to speak it was seen that he was very pale and seemed to struggle with great physical exhaustion. At the first words silence fell on the excited assembly, and men craned their heads to hear.

"Mr Speaker," he said, "I have not spoken before in this debate. The House, the government, and myself have been the victims of an audacious conspiracy. The double who has personated me here

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to-night, who has presumed to speak from my place in my name, is at present a prisoner in Westminster Police Station. If any honourable member doubts me he can have the evidence of his own eyes at the rising of the House.

"I will not dwell, Mr Speaker, on the daring device by which I was detained from the House while an impostor masqueraded in my place. On the personal aspect of the question I have no desire to dwell. I am concerned only with the appalling danger to which the country has been exposed. But this much I must say, were it not for the insight and energy of one man, this disastrous conspiracy must have succeeded."

"Name! Name!" was shouted from all sides.

"He has forbidden me to give his name. For the work's sake he did the work, and never was better work done for England.

"I grieve, Mr Speaker, that any man in this House should have deemed me capable of the speech of sham patriotism and gross treachery which was delivered in my name. But I grieve far more that the speech should have been received with exultation by so many honourable members. The object of the conspiracy, which so nearly succeeded, was the ruin of the government and its expulsion from power. War would have been the inevitable result of its success.

"The government, Mr Speaker, stands for peace. There is a party in this House that is bent on war."

At this the Jingoës incautiously cheered.

"For war at any price," Colthurst repeated with scorn in his voice, "even at the cost of fraud, violence, and national dishonour. I hear no cheers now, sir, yet I have faithfully described the price they are

prepared to pay. Has this war party, I wonder, ever considered the infamy of the movement in which it is engaged? Has it realised what war means? Its horrors have been hidden by romantic phrases and spurious sentiment. 'The noble profession of arms, the pride, pomp, and pageantry of noble war.' But stripped naked of its glittering trappings it is nothing but murder organised, the savage science of slaughter.

"Sir, I am a man of peace. To me war is not noble but vile, not manly but brutal. I reverence the courage that soothes and saves, I loathe the courage that hurts and slays. In this courage the most savage beasts, the lion, the tiger, the bulldog, surpass the bravest man. War, Mr Speaker, is the curse of civilisation, the reproach of humanity. The highest achievement of human science is to promote efficiency in human slaughter. The wealth and industry that should secure the happiness of the race is lavishly expended to promote misery and death.

"Sir, I have a momentous announcement to make to-night on behalf of His Majesty's government, who through good report and evil have striven for peace, and whose striving has not been in vain. Four nations hold the peace of the world in the hollow of their hands; those four nations declare peace must prevail. It is my privilege to announce to the House to-night that Germany, France, England, and the United States have entered into a solemn compact of gradual disarmament. They have pledged themselves against further increase of army and navy; they have pledged themselves to establish a court of international arbitration, in whose constitution all

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countries will have a voice, by whose decisions all countries must abide, and whose awards they will, if need be, join their powers to enforce.

"Sir, His Majesty's government does not think it unreasonable that from this league of peace a new and happier era in the world's history may begin. The crushing taxes which great armaments impose may be remitted. The manhood of nations may be withdrawn from the barren and brutal pursuit of war to the productive and beneficent arts of peace, and the ghastly horrors of the battle-field may no longer be the reproach of man's inhumanity to man."

The earnestness of the man carried him through to the end. His voice rang clear and true. He spoke as an inspired prophet of the old days with a conviction that compelled the faith of his hearers. But as the last words were spoken the sustaining powers suddenly failed. He was seen to totter, throw out his hands wildly, and fall back on the treasury bench, like a man shot through the heart.

But his work was done. For a moment the House was held silent by the compelling earnestness of his words. Then the spell that held them broke, and the cheers rang out, again and again repeated, flung backwards and forwards, across the House in great waves of sound.

The Speaker rose, but it was full five minutes before he could make his voice heard. "The question is," he read, "that His Majesty's government does not sufficiently realise the necessity of an adequate navy for the protection of our coasts. As many as are of that opinion will say aye." The Speaker paused impressively, there was dead silence. In all that crowded House no single voice was

raised to support the motion. "The contrary 'no.'" He was answered by a deafening thunder of noes. The motion was unanimously rejected.

Meanwhile Starkey Colthurst lay in the Prime Minister's room in a dead faint, unconscious of this splendid triumph. He was as one dead for nearly an hour, but the superb vitality of the man triumphed. As he came slowly back to consciousness he feebly whispered: "What has happened?" It seemed to put new life in him when he heard. "I'm all right now," he said; "I can get home."

"You shall come home with me," the governor insisted. "My motor is in the yard."

"Get him to bed as soon as you can," the doctor advised. "The poison is still in his blood; he must sleep its effects away."

The excitement of the House had already overflowed into Palace Yard. In the cold grey light of the early dawn a crowd had gathered, and Colthurst was wildly cheered as he came out leaning on the governor and myself.

With Beck's help I got him comfortably into the car, which crawled cautiously through the cheering crowd out of the Yard, and went humming up Whitehall Avenue, gathering speed as it went.

To our fevered faces the cold night air was infinitely refreshing as we sped through the silent empty streets with the houses fast asleep on either hand.

We found Gerty waiting to welcome us in the hall. Beck had telephoned from the House of our victory, and she was eager for full news. I have always said that Gerty was a splendid girl, the best that is, though she is not my style of beauty. I must confess that she was good-looking this morning, dressed

all in plain brown with soft lace at her neck, and her red gold hair coiled in a long thick plait like a crown. It was like her, too, that she asked no questions until Colthurst and the governor were got away comfortably to bed.

"I will give you two just twenty minutes for a bath," she said, "then you will find me and breakfast ready in the dining-room."

I thought I made good time but Beck was before me, and Gerty was pouring out coffee for him when I came in. The room was a picture of comfort, a big fire burned in the grate, always a pleasant thing in the early morning at any season of the year.

"Gerty, you are a brick," I said, and helped myself freely to grilled ham and devilled kidneys.

"A brother's compliment," she returned good-humouredly. "But mind you have got to talk as well as eat, Charlie. I want a full, true, and particular account of last night's wonderful adventures."

"You must have it," I said, and I told her the story I have told here, with intervals for refreshment. When I came to the part where Beck despatched me in pursuit of Maxwell she turned on him sharply.

"You risked his life," she said. "How could you do it?"

"Oh, I knew Charlie was able to look after himself all right, especially as he had warning. No danger, no glory, and he did splendidly."

Gerty gave me a look that I liked.

"Yes, he did splendidly," she murmured.

"I was only a private soidier that obeyed orders," I said. "Now we want the general's account of the campaign. I am as much in the dark as you are,

Gerty, about that. How did you know, old chap, that Colthurst was Maxwell?"

"I guessed almost at first. Did you notice when he came in he walked straight between the man that was talking and the Speaker's chair? It struck me as strange for a man as accustomed to the House as Colthurst. Before he was speaking five minutes I was sure it was Maxwell."

"But how?"

"You must remember that trick Maxwell had of touching his hair back from his forehead. Probably he got it when he was a small boy with long curls and it clung to him. Colthurst's double did precisely the same thing in the same way."

"But how did you find the real Colthurst? How did you get him up in time?"

"The simplest thing in the world. I found him in his own house, in bed, asleep or unconscious, in charge of a doctor whom I promptly kicked into the street. The old housekeeper, who opened the door, told me he had been brought home unconscious in a four-wheeler about nine o'clock by a very pleasant gentleman, who had fetched a doctor and gone away. The doctor declared there was no danger, but the patient must on no account be disturbed.

"When I got out the enemy's doctor I got in a friend whom I could trust, one of the great guns of Harley Street, whom I was lucky enough to hit first shot on the telephone. He found, as I suspected, that poor Colthurst had been drugged with a very powerful narcotic. The doctor could not be sure what precisely, but no common drug anyway.

"He at once administered a strong restorative, and

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while Colthurst was still half-asleep we lifted him out of bed and walked him up and down the room until he came to himself. The story I had to tell roused him as no stimulant could. We helped him to get his clothes on, and while he was dressing he told me shortly how the thing happened.

"He was dining in the French restaurant, I forget the name—you know the place, Charlie, they give you a jolly good dinner for a half-crown—when a well-dressed gentleman of about his own age came in and, with an apology, sat down at the same table. They chatted on several subjects, and he found the stranger wonderfully pleasant and well informed. The chap must have contrived somehow, while they talked, to drop the narcotic into Colthurst's wine, for when they got up from the table Colthurst had a singing in his head and his knee joints felt loose. He was not alarmed, for he had often had the same kind of thing before—though not so bad—when he had worked too hard. But it grew much worse when he got out into the fresh air, and he was glad to take his companion's arm to prevent himself falling in the street. The man called for a four-wheeler, and Colthurst had just power to tell the cabby 'House of Commons' before he fell back unconscious on the seat. But the other chap, whom the cabby would regard as the sober man of the party, must have changed the address to Chelsea.

"He picked Colthurst's pocket of card-case and speech on his way home in the cab, terrified the housekeeper into helplessness, and left the patient in charge of a doctor of his own choosing, while he drove off to personate him in the House of Commons.

"After Colthurst got dressed he nearly fainted again, and the doctor swore it would be risking his life to go down to the House, but he insisted on it, and I backed him out and we carried the doctor with us in a taxi, protesting the whole way. You know the rest. I never heard anything finer than his speech. The man is a hero."

Gerty had listened with parted lips and heightened colour to the story.

"I know who was the real hero of this victory," she said suddenly. I don't think she was quite conscious of what she was saying, for she blushed furiously when she had spoken.

"Beck is," I chimed in promptly. "Only for him the whole thing would have ended in disaster, and he would not even allow his name to be mentioned."

"Have you no ambition, Mr Beck?" asked Gerty.

"Oh, yes, I have," he answered gravely. "A very exalted and audacious ambition which I may tell you about some day."

CHAPTER IX

FAIRY LILIAN

I HAD almost made up my mind to skip the chapter I am about to write, as a matter of fact I did skip it, and now I am turning back to put it in. No one likes to talk or write about his past love affairs, and I am quite conscious I don't cut a very brilliant figure in this particular affair. But, after all, this is Beck's story, and not mine; and Beck, at any rate, does not come badly out of it.

When this thing happened I had been for nearly a year acting as my father's private secretary. Parliament was sitting at the time, and there was a deal of trouble in the near East. Every afternoon Starkey Colthurst was asked a dozen questions in the House of Commons to which my father, as his chief, had to supply the answers. As may be well imagined, my nose was kept close to the grindstone.

Coming home late from the House one night, a bit fagged, I dare say, I found Gertrude sitting up for me with a particularly nice supper. She lectured me while I ate and drank on the value of health, and finally insisted that I should go down to Brighton next morning for a breath of fresh air.

Now Gertrude is the original of Ryder Haggard's famous heroine, "She, who must be obeyed." In

Yankee phrase, "What she says goes." Of course I had to promise before she kissed me good-night.

Just at the door she turned round to say: "You might ask your friend, Mr Beck, to go down with you, and you could bring him back here to dinner if he has no better engagement."

I wrote that night to Beck, who was staying with his people, and had a wire next morning to say that he could not go to Brighton, but he would meet me at Victoria Station in the afternoon and come back to dinner.

As a result I had to go down alone. Now Brighton is a place I hate—flat, fashionable and unprofitable. But a promise is a promise, and besides I was feeling a bit hipped, and thought the blow on the pier would do me good. The place has one advantage if it has no other, it is easy to get to, and better still, easy to get away from.

I wandered about the pier during the day, trying to kill time and feeling unutterably bored. Only one little thing happened worth remembering. As I was coming through the hall of the Grand Hotel after lunch I saw the sweetest girl I ever set eyes on, talking to that old reprobate, Lord Blackwathe. It chanced she looked up as I passed, and her eyes, blue as the summer sky, met mine for a moment, and I could not get her out of my head for the rest of the day.

I had just got in to a first-class smoker in the return train, feeling quite set-up as Gerty promised by the sea breeze and idleness, when this same girl passed my door and got into the carriage right in front. It was horribly tantalising, and for a moment I was tempted to throw away the excellent

cigar which I had lit and get out of my own carriage into hers, and I could cheerfully have murdered a chap, with a reddish beard, who, as the train was just starting, did what I dared not do, step as a matter of course into the same carriage as Miss Blue Eyes.

If it was not exactly love at first sight I felt it was precious near it. My heart was beating at least ten strokes faster per minute after I saw her than before, and I was determined, with Beck's assistance, to find out who she was and where she lived when I got to Victoria. But I was destined to be introduced to her long before that in a very lively fashion indeed.

The train was only a few miles out of Brighton when I heard in the next carriage a shrill agonising scream, broken off suddenly in the middle as if the screamer's mouth had been stopped. I craned my head as far as I could out of the open window. There was a crash of glass next door, and the window went in splinters. Then I saw a girl's arm in a light blue sleeve thrust through the opening, a man's hand came out after it, grasped the slim wrist roughly, and forced the arm back.

I suppose I was mad at the moment, at any rate I did a mad thing. Flinging open the door I stepped out on the footboard, which swayed under my feet like the deck of a boat in a gale. With body squeezed tight to the carriage I crept on in the teeth of the wind to the broken window. The girl was alone in the compartment, with her back to me; the door on the other side swung wide open, the man must have jumped out. I called to her, and she turned with a cry of surprise, and showed

the face of a frightened child, tear-stained and pale. She was a plucky little lady all the same. Her face brightened when she saw me, and she stretched out her hand, a little dimpled hand like a baby's, to help me into the carriage. But the moment I was safe in she went off in a dead faint in my arms. It was a trying situation for a man already three-quarters in love. I was strongly tempted to kiss the sweet little face so close to my own, but I resisted like a Spartan, and laid her gently down on the cushions. A glance showed me there had been a dreadful struggle. The pretty blue dress was torn in several places, her hat was off, and her hair a tangle of curls. Her hand-bag lay on the floor of the carriage, open and empty, with the contents littered about.

My brave little beauty came to in a moment, and found her tongue as she opened her eyes.

"He jumped out when he saw you coming," she said. "I'm afraid he is killed."

"Serve him jolly well right if he is," I answered brutally. "The unmitigated scoundrel! I hope he hasn't hurt you."

Her dress was sadly torn at the neck and bosom. She caught my glance, her hands went up to her breast, and she blushed rose red, while she drew the tatters together and pinned them with a brooch.

"I'm not in the least hurt," she answered, still blushing very prettily. "Oh, how can I ever thank you?"

I would have risked a hundred lives for the look she gave me with those innocent blue eyes.

"All's well that ends well," I began cheerily, when

her eyes lit on the open hand-bag and its scattered contents.

"Oh, they are not gone, they cannot be gone!" she cried, and down she went on her knees to rummage in the bag.

Plainly her search was in vain, and her little moan of despair went straight to my heart.

"Can I be of any use to you?" I asked shyly, but she went on searching, without heeding me, in a very frenzy of despair.

"They are gone, they are gone!" she cried at last. "What shall I do? I shall be utterly disgraced."

"Won't you let me try to help?" I began again.

"Oh, he has stolen them," she said. "That's what he came for, to steal them."

"Very likely," I answered soothingly, "but what has he stolen?"

"My jewel case," she answered. "I don't know what I shall do."

It jarred on me a bit to see her in such utter despair about a few trinkets. Still, though I had no idea at the time what the loss meant to her, I was very cut up to see her in tears.

"Are they very valuable?" I asked, scarcely knowing what I said.

"I was told they were worth three thousand pounds," she sobbed, "but it is not the jewels or the money I care about—at least not——" She hesitated for a moment, and I guessed she had a secret on the point of escaping.

But I did not think it fair to surprise her in that way, so I cut in quickly. "It does not matter in the very least," I said. "Make your mind easy, they are sure to be found. The thief will be crippled if

he isn't killed by his fall. He cannot possibly get away with the jewels."

Her eyes beamed with joy behind her tears. "Oh, thanks, thanks," she cried gratefully, "how good you are to me."

"Who wouldn't be good to you that got the chance?" I thought, but I only said: "You are sure to have them safe back to-morrow or the day after at the furthest. I will see the station-master the moment we get in, and ask him to wire."

"That will do splendidly. I cannot thank you enough Mr——" She hesitated for a second. "You don't mind telling me your name. I'm Lilian Saltern."

"My name is Kirwood."

"Not Charlie Kirwood?" she cried. "Oh, I beg your pardon! It just slipped out. I have heard you spoken about so often."

I wanted to ask her to call me Charlie always, but I did not dare just yet. I found her as easy to get on with as a child. She immediately took it for granted that I was right about the jewel case, though I was by no means so sure myself, and grew as bright as sunshine when the cloud has gone by, as gay as a bird when the frost is over. Every word, every look, I found her more fascinating. Just such another girl, I thought, must have inspired Tennyson's love poem to "Airy Fairy Lilian," whose "lightening laughter dimpled baby roses in her cheeks." She chatted to me like a school-girl to a school-girl, about the places she had been and the people she had met. Her talk was full of sly humour, punctuated with rippling laughter. She radiated vitality. But now and again a word fell

from her, which showed her wholly unsophisticated in the ways of the world.

For me it was the time of my life. I hated the swift rush of the train, and wished the journey could have lasted for ever.

"Is there any one to meet you at the station?" she asked.

This at once brought Beck to my mind. "The very man we want," I said. "He is three-quarters a detective. You've heard of Paul Beck?"

"Oh, yes, I have heard of him before," she said, "and of his father and mother as well." She had heard of every one, this wonderful girl that looked like a child. "Please, don't tell him a word about this, let it be a secret between us two."

"I cannot help telling, I'm afraid. He is to meet me on the platform, and will come with us to the station-master. Besides I have no secrets from Beck, and he is the one man in London to help us."

"You know best," she said, giving in at once. "Do just as you like."

Then we talked about many things, grave and gay, but there was not a word more about the robbery until the scattered houses merged into streets, and we drew into the noise and bustle of Victoria Station.

She had gathered her goods and chattels together into the rifled hand-bag, and almost before the train stopped we were out on the platform. I caught sight of Beck some way off, and made for him through the throng as quickly as I could, and almost at the same instant he saw me. I did not at all like the look of frank admiration he gave my companion as he joined us. I was in the humour to be jealous

with any one that looked at her, and Beck I always thought a wonderfully good-looking chap. Very shortly I told him what had happened, Lillian (I called her Lillian to myself even then) putting in just the right word in the right time. Beck listened without a sound until I did at the end what I should have done at first, introduced Miss Lillian Saltern.

"Not the daughter of Lady Saltern?" he said.

She bowed and smiled that ravishing smile, of which I coveted the monopoly.

"You know my mother, then?"

"A little," he answered, "and I will be delighted to do what I can for her daughter. Charlie, you take Miss Saltern on to the station-master, or if you prefer it wait here for me. I want to have a look at the carriage, and I'll join you in a moment."

I preferred to wait. I was in no hurry to part with my charge, and Beck was back from his inspection quite as soon as I wanted him. I noticed a wet smear of blood across the back of his right hand.

"How did you manage to cut yourself?" I asked.

"It's of no consequence," he answered hastily, and wrapped his handkerchief round his hand in order, as I guessed, to hide the sight of blood from Lillian.

The station-master was full of excitement and self-importance, and even more sanguine than myself about the capture of the thief and the recovery of the jewels.

"At the rate the train went," he insisted, "escape is impossible. The man is smashed up. I'll wire at once and have the line searched. The right-hand side, you say, about five or six miles out of Brighton? Make your mind quite easy, Miss Saltern," he concluded, in a fatherly fashion, as he shut up his note-

book, "you will have your jewels safe back to-morrow evening at the latest."

While Beck was having a few final words with the station-master I managed to get Lilian to myself.

"May I see you home?" I asked persuasively.

She gave a little cry of dismay.

"Gracious, I quite forgot my cousin, Aldred Harvey, was to meet me. He'll fancy I've got lost. Do let us hunt him up, please."

"First tell me if I may come to see you."

"Of course you may if you want to. Oh, there he is. Aldred!"

A tall young fellow, who had been looking round him on the platform, raised his hat and came up quickly.

"Aldred, I want to introduce you to Lord Kirwood."

"Very glad to meet you," murmured Aldred.

He was a languid young man, particularly well-dressed, with a light dust coat over his arm. Uncommonly good-looking, too, I was reluctantly compelled to acknowledge, clean shaven, clear featured, with the figure of an athlete, but his handsome face wore no other expression than languid self-complacency.

Beck came up and was introduced in turn, and the two fell into chat about horses. Beck had apparently some information to communicate about the Derby, in which the languid Aldred was interested, but a drawling "yes" or "no" was his sole contribution to the conversation. I was surprised that Beck should bother himself about him.

We walked down the platform together, and saw Lilian to her taxi. Aldred seemed to make a speciality of awkwardness. As he got into the taxi beside his cousin he dropped first her bag and then

his own dust coat, and when Beck picked them up for him he just managed to drawl: "Thanks awfully." The fellow seemed to make quite a compliment of seeing his cousin home. I saw a picture in an old "Punch" the other day in which a "young barbarian" at a dance says to a very pretty girl: "Sorry I can't give you a dance to-night, but if you are going to Perkins next Saturday I may manage to fit you in."

That was precisely the attitude of Aldred Harvey going home alone with the prettiest girl in London. Is it any wonder that I wanted to kick him?

CHAPTER X

"TWO ARE COMPANY"

WE talked over the adventure that evening at dinner, Gertrude, Beck, and myself, the governor was away in the country. Beck joined warmly in my praise of Lilian, and Gertrude assented coldly enough. She admitted that the girl "was pretty after a fashion," but declared the mother, Lady Saltern, was an "impossible person."

After dinner, when Gertrude was gone, Beck insisted that she herself was better looking than Lilian. I can't think how a chap can be so blind.

My heart was hammering my ribs two days later when I walked up the high stone steps of Lady Saltern's dingy house on Bedford Square.

Lady Saltern was out, the footman said—one point in the game. He could not say if Miss Lilian were at home, he would take my card and see.

I was not a minute in the great gaunt drawing-room when Lilian herself, looking more lovely and fairy-like than ever, in some soft white stuff that I think the ladies call tulle came quickly into the room.

"Oh, it's you," she said, giving me both hands and tolerating the warm pressure of mine. "I fancied you would come"—as if there could be any doubt on the subject—"I cannot talk in this great barrack

of a room, I have a little place of my very own, this way!"

The nest was worthy of the bird. A charming boudoir hung with a pale pink paper, with colour reproductions of Watteau on the panels, gay lords and ladies in quaint costume, dancing or love-making. A small tray in the centre of the room, laid with tea things for two, hinted that I was expected.

Lilian I found more fascinating than ever. There was a brighter light in her eyes, a rosier tint in her cheeks. Indeed her gaiety was almost feverish. She prattled delightfully on a thousand topics, but she was shy of any allusion to the robbery or the jewels. They had not been found, there were no traces of the thief. So much she told me and no more.

"But of course he must be caught soon," she insisted, "and I don't want to think any more about it till he is caught."

It was only by a good deal of coaxing that I got from her the written report of the railway company, which she had received the night before.

The line had been searched on either side by the police, no trace had been found of the thief, no mark of his mad leap from the train, no tidings of the jewels. It may be that I was mistaken, but I fancied I found between the lines in the report a faintly suggested doubt of the whole story, which insisted strongly on the extraordinary fact that a man should leap from the train at full speed without being killed or disabled. The thief, at any rate, had escaped so far, and there was no good reason why he should not get clear away.

It made me sad to see the poor little girl still

buoyed up with false hope, for which I myself was responsible and I endeavoured to hint a doubt.

"No, no, you mustn't croak," she protested. "Take your tea, Lord Kirwood. A little more cream? I like you ever so much better in a cheerful humour. You told me the thief was sure to be caught, and you must not go back on your word."

"I believed at the time he was sure to be caught," I said.

"Well, your belief is good enough for me."

"But I'm not so sure now. You see I thought he would be smashed up by the fall. As he wasn't caught at once I'm afraid there is no certainty of catching him at all."

Her eyes opened wide, and the colour faded out of her cheeks.

"Don't frighten me, Lord Kirwood, please don't frighten me. I must get the jewels back, I tell you I must."

More than ever I was convinced that there was some secret behind this anxiety, and now I was determined to find it out if I could.

"But if you don't get them?"

"I will, I must, I tell you. If I don't, oh, I don't know what is to become of me!"

She had overstrained her self-control. Suddenly she gave way utterly, flung herself on a couch and burst into an agony of tears. I was so put out I hardly knew what to do. Instinctively I caught her up in my arms and petted and comforted her. It was not love I felt at the moment, it was intense pity, the pity I might feel for a hurt child.

"Tell me what it is all about," I begged. "I know it is something more than the mere loss of

the jewels. I may be able to help you. I will, if I can."

"It is too horrible, too shameful, you would never speak to me again if I told you."

"You are mistaken in that, anyway," I said laughingly. "Try me."

Then gradually the whole story came out between her sobs.

It seems her mother, who ought to have known better, had sent her down to a house party at the Brabasons, the smartest of the smart set, using the word in the sense in which it is used in Yankee Land. The very first night she had been lured into bridge gambling. I could picture to myself the poor, innocent, little white lamb among that pack of greedy wolves.

"Before I began," she said, "I asked what the stakes were, and when I was told five shillings I was quite satisfied. We used to play half a crown a hundred at home, and I thought that five shillings once in a way would not hurt me.

"I held wretched cards from the first. We lost a rubber of three hundred and five points, and I took out my purse to pay. 'How much?' I asked old Lord Blackwathe, who was keeping the score for the other side. 'Only seventy-five pounds fifteen,' he said with a grin. I nearly fainted. 'Oh, no,' I managed to gasp out, 'it can't be as much as that.' 'Well, that's what I make it,' he replied. 'Three hundred and three at five shilling points, what do you say, Handcock?' 'That's O.K.,' said my partner, and he drew a cheque for that amount.

"I had only sixty pounds pocket money and no bank account. Mother is not at all rich, you know,

and I was so stunned that I did not know what to think or do. I took out my purse and began fumbling with my money, knowing all the time that I had not enough to pay. Then I caught Lord Blackwathe looking at me in a curious sort of way that made me shiver.

"My dear Miss Saltern,' he said, 'please put up that pretty little purse of yours, your I.O.U. is quite good enough for me.'

"I have sixty pounds here,' I stammered, 'I'll give you my I.O.U. for the balance.'

"Nonsense, my dear child,' he said, quite pleasantly, 'you'll want your money for other things. I feel it an honour to be your banker. Just put your initials to that and it will be all right. Very likely you will win it back next rubber.'

"He had torn off a scrap of paper from a page of a novel, and had written on it I.O.U. seventy-five pounds fifteen. It seemed such a trifle that it did not frighten me so much. I wrote my initials under the figure and passed it back to him.

"I meant to stop playing and write home for the money, honestly I did. I knew mother would make it out for me. But somehow I was forced to go on with the game, they all seemed to expect it as a matter of course. That night, or rather that morning, when we broke up at three o'clock, Lord Blackwathe had I.O.U.'s of mine for three hundred and odd pounds. He was quite nice about it. 'You had an awful run of luck,' he said, 'it is bound to change. I hope to give you those scraps of paper to burn to-morrow night. I would give them to you now if you asked me nicely.' He looked at me in the queerest way, so I just said good-night and ran. I

hardly slept at all, and when I did sleep I had the most horrible dreams. One I remember was that Lord Blackwathe was a bloodhound and was going to tear me to pieces. He has big slobbering lips, you know, just like a bloodhound, and small cruel eyes.

"All day I was tormented by the thought that I should go home and get the money, but somehow I put it off until it was too late. I was longing to win back what I had lost so I could not resist the temptation of playing again. That night I won. I had a hundred pounds to the good at one time if I could have only stopped then, but of course I had to go on playing. At the end I was almost clear. I made quite sure of winning the next night, and I swore to myself when I did I would make some excuse to go straight home. But my luck was awful the next night, and when we got up from the table Lord Blackwathe had my I.O.U.'s for more than five hundred pounds. After that I completely lost my head, I must have been quite mad, I do believe. I played recklessly, winning sometimes, but on the whole losing steadily.

"When the party broke up at the end of a fortnight I owed Lord Blackwathe fifteen hundred and seventy-four pounds. Just before I left I met him, and he only laughed when I told him I did not know how I could repay him. 'We'll find a way between us, my dear,' he said. 'Pay me when you like and how you like.'"

"The hound!" I muttered under my breath. Lilian did not hear.

"It was that put it into my head," she went on.

"Put what into your head?"

"The jewels. When he said 'how you like' I was

sure that was what he must have intended. The pearls are a kind of heirloom in our family, they were left to me by my godmother, and I had also a beautiful diamond necklace which my father had got a great bargain in India the year before he died. I had heard the two had been valued at three thousand pounds, but I was quite willing to give them both to be rid of Lord Blackwathe. I don't know how or why I was horribly afraid of him. So I wrote him a little note to Brighton."

"You wrote to Lord Blackwathe?"

"Only just a few lines to say that if he would meet me at any place I would wish to name I would pay my debt."

I groaned at the thought of it. I was full of fierce rage against the old reprobate, and I could have broken his lordship's bald head with pleasure. But my rage was mixed with wonder and pity for this poor innocent child, who could write such a letter to such a man.

She was watching me with fear in her eyes.

"Did I do something awful?" she whispered under her breath, and I just managed to stammer out: "Oh, not at all, it was most natural under the circumstances. What did his lordship say?"

"I went down to Brighton to meet him at the Grand Hotel. We met in the hall, and after we had talked there for a few minutes——"

"I remember I saw you talking to him in the hall, about three or half-past three," I said.

"That was the time I saw you come in. O Lord Kirwood, it was lucky you came down to Brighton; I'm sure that man in the train meant to murder me."

It was a very transparent attempt to get away

from Lord Blackwathe. Plainly she did not want to tell me any more about him, but I was inexorable.

"What did Lord Blackwathe say?"

She blushed and fidgeted with the silk tassels of the cushion before she answered.

"Oh, he took me to his private sitting-room to talk things over, as he said. At first he was very kind and courteous to me, though he would not take the jewels. He seemed surprised that I offered them.

"I don't take diamonds from pretty girls, my dear," he said, "I give them. There is no hurry about that little debt of yours until you find some other way to pay it without parting with your gee-gaws."

"When I was going out of the room he called me back and there was something in his voice that I didn't like at all. He came close up to me before he spoke again. 'What do you say to payment by instalments, Lily? I'll throw off five hundred for a kiss,' and he tried to put his arm round my waist.

"Oh, I was horribly frightened, but I managed to slip by him to the door. My heart beat so hard that I thought I would have fainted when I got out. I felt as if some one had struck me."

My rage was greater than hers, for I knew what it meant, and she didn't. "Damn——" I began and pulled myself together, for she was looking at me wonderingly, and I did not want her to know what an escape she had had. "Please go on," I said when I got my voice under control.

"Luckily there was no one in the hall when I came out, or they must have noticed that I was trembling all over and could hardly stand. When at last I got into the street I did not know which way to turn. Then all at once the thought came to me that I

might sell my jewels and pay him. The first jeweller's shop I found I went into. The owner, a nice old man with white hair, was ever so kind. He admired the jewels immensely and brought them to the light to look at them through a magnifying glass. I wondered since if the thief was watching from the street at the time. I was nearly a quarter of an hour in the shop altogether, it seemed to me the old man wanted badly to buy them. At last he put them hastily back into the case.

"'I cannot buy these, Miss Saltern,' he said. 'First because I have not ready money enough, and you say you must be paid at once. Second, you will forgive me saying it, I have not the pleasure of knowing you personally. Of course I take your word for it, but it might make a difference. If you go to any respectable jeweller in London who knows you he will give you about two thousand pounds for them. They are worth a bit more!'

"You know the rest of my story. I was coming back with the jewels to London, when I was attacked and you saved me. Have I been horribly wicked, Lord Kirwood?"

She looked at me wistfully like a child caught in some naughty escapade. A pitiable little figure huddled amid the cushions on the couch with ruffled hair and cheeks feverishly red.

My one thought was how I could best help her.

"Oh yes," I said, "just as wicked as a bird caught in a trap that hurts itself against the wires. The thing is how to get you out of the trap. Miss Saltern, will you do me the honour of letting me be your banker? I can send you the money to pay Lord Blackwathe to-morrow."

She was on her feet in a moment, and turned to me with her hands held out and a light in her eyes that made my heart beat foolishly. I took her consent for granted, her first word showed me my mistake.

"No!" she said, with a dignity I had not expected, her slim figure held very straight and her head high. There was no mistaking the meaning of that "no." "I can't and I won't borrow money from you. Please don't ask me again, for my answer must be always the same. Don't think I'm not grateful, for I am, but I'd sooner die than take money from you."

"It would be no trouble for me," I began, but she cut me short at once.

"Don't speak to me of it again. All will come right when the jewels are found, and they must be found soon. Oh, you can't think what a comfort it is to be able to tell my troubles to some one, to have some one to sympathise with me. I thought I would go mad puzzling over it by myself, but you will spoil everything if you offer to lend me money again. For pity's sake let us talk of something else, for this trouble has never been out of my mind for a moment for weeks."

She was right. I had no claim to lend her money yet, though I hoped I soon might, for if it was not love I felt at the moment it was something very like it. Still I could not tell her so on such short notice. It would sound like an abuse of the confidence she had given me. I could afford to wait a bit, nothing was likely to happen in a hurry.

"Just as you please," I said. "I won't say another word on the subject till you give me leave."

"While I have been worrying you with my woes,"

she answered gaily, "I have forgotten your tea. Will you touch the bell just there beside you."

It really did seem as if by telling her troubles she had banished them. No one would have guessed from her talk that she had a care in the world. When I left an hour later it seemed only five minutes, and I was more in love with her than ever.

"Mind," I said, as we clasped hands at parting, "it's a bargain that you tell me at once if there is a hint of trouble from Lord Blackwathe."

"And you are to get your clever friend, Mr Beck, to help you to hunt up my jewels."

"I may call again soon?" I pleaded.

"Certainly, you will always be welcome."

"I will try my luck the day after to-morrow at this hour, if I may."

The very next visit I paid I asked her to be my wife. I made up my mind that I wouldn't and I did. The temptation of eyes and voice was irresistible.

I was refused point blank.

"No, you don't mean it. It is not love you feel for me but pity. You are too generous. You have done so much for me you feel bound to do more. Be content to be my friend, the best friend ever girl had."

But with those eyes looking into mine I could not be content. I was not to be denied. I made hot love to her. I caught her hand and held it, I protested, I whispered, I coaxed, I drew her close to me until at last with downcast eye and flushing cheek she faltered out a confession of her love.

Then my passion wholly mastered me. I caught her in my arms and pressed her to my breast. Again and again those sweet lips were raised obediently to

my own. The memory of that rapturous moment thrills me even now.

My people at home were not delighted with my engagement when I claimed congratulations. The governor was deucedly cold and even snappy on the subject.

"You are your own master, Charlie," he said, "and can choose your own wife, but I don't pretend to be particularly pleased with your choice."

"But you don't know her, sir," I protested.

"I know the mother, my boy, an uncommonly bad lot, and the father had no great reputation out in India. But as you say, the girl herself may be all right."

"May be all right!" This was a way to speak of the sweetest girl in the whole world. But of course I knew the governor should love her when he met her, and I meant that he should meet her very soon.

Gertrude was still more uncompromising, indeed I strongly suspect that it was she who prejudiced the governor against Lilian.

"All men are fools where women are concerned, you are a bigger fool than most, Charlie. You fancy it's her people I object to. I don't care twopence about her people, it's herself I'm thinking about. Yes, I've seen her; I made it my business to see her. She is just a pantomime fairy with golden hair and blue eyes and a sweet figure. But she must be a clever little fairy to catch you the way she did."

I was so angry that I turned my back on her. "You will be sorry for this, Gerty," I snapped out.

"Very sorry, dear," she agreed placidly, "if you ever go and make that girl my sister."

Only Beck stood to me like a man. He praised

Lilian boldly, said she was one of the most fascinating girls he had ever seen, and made the governor growl and Gertrude snap. He busied himself, too, about the lost jewels, and even carried the imperturbable Aldred Harvey down to Brighton to help in the search.

Meanwhile I lived in Paradise. I found Lilian more and more fascinating every day I saw her, though she was very shy and shamefaced, and stinted her kisses abominably.

An interesting comment on my sister's sly hints and innuendoes, Lilian steadily refused, even yet, to let me pay off Lord Blackwathe's debt. "The jewellery will be found," she insisted. "I would hate my debts to be paid by your money. Don't grudge me that one little bit of pride, dear."

Indeed she wanted me at first to keep our engagement secret. "It is so sudden," she urged, "you may regret it. If you want your freedom be sure I will not complain." She would not take the engagement ring I offered her, a nice diamond and sapphire affair, but chose a paltry twopenny halfpenny little pearl and turquoise one instead.

The days went by and still there were no tidings of the missing jewels. I had lost all hope, and again and again I urged Lilian to let me pay off Lord Blackwathe and be done with it. I loathed the thought that she should be indebted to him.

"What will he think or say of me," she pleaded, "when he gets your cheque for my debt?"

I was stumped at this. The same thought had troubled myself, but I had not fancied it would occur to her.

"What does it matter what he thinks or says?" I protested. "Besides he need know nothing about it.

I will give you the money to lodge and you can send him your own cheque."

At last I coaxed her to consent.

"Will you spoil me like this when we are married?" she asked.

"I will do my best, darling, and soon, I hope."

Then before she could escape I caught and kissed her.

We were to meet next day to arrange about the money, but that evening the governor had an urgent mission for me to Paris, which he said would take a week at least. Gertrude was delighted, I could see, while Beck, who was staying with us at the time, was most sympathetic. I was strongly tempted to rebel and refuse, till Beck over-persuaded me.

"A row just now," he urged, "would be unpleasant all round, particularly for the girl. It's not worth a row; a week won't be long passing."

I did not agree to that, but all the same there was sense in what he said about a row, so I told the governor I would be ready to start in the morning. That night I wrote and posted a long letter to Lilian, telling her what had happened and begging her to forgive me. I gave her my address in Paris and implored a line in reply.

Virtue was its own reward. Next morning the governor told me in the kindest way that he did not want me to go after all. Gerty, too, was awfully nice about it, and she can be nice when she likes. "If I have been snappy to you lately, Charlie," she said, "I'm sorry, I did not mean to vex you."

Beck congratulated me on having taken his advice. "I was sure," he said, "it would turn out for the best." I caught a look between himself and Gerty, which I

did not quite understand. It seemed like a conspiracy of kindness.

Never in my life was I in better spirits than when I started out to call on Lilian, with a perfect rosebud in my button-hole, which I meant for her bosom. My joy had a damper when I heard she was gone to the country. She had taken one trunk, her maid told me, and had said she was gone away for a week but had left no address. Lady Saltern could tell me nothing more. Those two lived their lives apart, and she knew little of her daughter's doings.

Returning home I found Beck in the hall apparently expecting me.

"Been to see Lilian?" he asked.

"How do you know."

"The old proverb about eggs and shells. The red rosebud told me, you don't usually sport a button-hole. Found her out?"

"That's an odd way of putting it," I said, laughing in spite of myself. "She is gone away for a week. I wish you could tell me where she is gone to."

"I can," he answered, to my extreme surprise. "I thought in case the Paris expedition fell through you might like to know, so I found out for you. Don't ask me how, for I won't tell you."

He mentioned a delightful little place about thirty or forty miles up the river, which I knew very well indeed. A pretty, quiet hotel, much in request for unorthodox honeymoons by people who don't care to go boldly on the continent.

"I assume," Beck went on, "you will start at once and give her a pleasant surprise. May I go with you? I promise," he added hastily, when he saw me hesitate, "I promise not to be in the way."

We got down a little after two o'clock. It was a glorious afternoon in early summer, and the country was green with recent rain. I was as lighthearted as a bird at the thought of Lilian's surprise and delight when she saw me. The inn, too, looked its best, with its windows and peaked gables smothered with monthly roses, and a lawn, sprinkled with daisies, sloping down to the river that swept merrily by with the sunlight on the waters.

An ideal spot it seemed for lovers' meetings, and my disappointment was the more bitter when I was told that Miss Saltern was not staying at the place. "Never heard the name at all," said the man at the desk. All the beauty and light of the scene seemed suddenly quenched at once.

I turned reproachfully to Beck, who was in no way abashed.

"Let us look at the book," he said quietly.

There were few names in the book for it was early in the season. Running his finger down the page he lighted on "Mr and Mrs Blake." "Came to-day?" he asked the manager.

"Yes, sir, by the first train. They have taken rooms for a week, and are having lunch now in their private sitting-room."

"That's all right, Charlie," Beck said. "Mrs Blake and Lilian are inseparable. Come along. You need not announce us, waiter, we are old friends."

There was something strange in his manner, but I followed him instinctively, scarcely knowing what I did, down the passage to the door the waiter had pointed out to us. Without a moment's hesitation he threw the door wide open and pushed me before him into the room.

Two people, a man and a woman, who were seated at lunch, leaped to their feet as we entered. Facing me with her lips parted and her eyes staring in wild surprise was Lilian, my own airy fairy Lilian, in the wonderful light blue costume in which I admired her most.

The man wheeled round to the door and the glass of champagne in his hand fell and smashed on his plate. I recognised the imperturbable cousin, Aldred, whose mouth fell open with surprise and dismay when he saw me. But even then so complete was my surprise that I could not quite realise what was passing before my eyes.

"Why, Lilian," I stammered out, "what is the meaning of this?"

The woman found her wits first, as is the way with the sex. She knew the game was up, and she carried it off with splendid audacity. I saw the real Lilian at last.

"I presume," she said, pointing to Beck, who stood tranquilly at the door, "that I am indebted to you for this unexpected pleasure; he is too stupid to have thought of it himself. So kind of you both to look us up. Perhaps you will join us at lunch. No, must you really be going? Well, good-bye, Mr Beck, good-bye Lord Kirwood. Thanks for a very pleasant visit."

Beck got me out of the room somehow, and into a boat on the river. When the stunned feeling wore off I found that I was not as badly hurt as I imagined. I am not fickle, I hope, but the exposure was so complete, the mask thrown so boldly away, that my love vanished like a dream at the moment of waking, and only gratitude for my escape remained.

"How and when did you find it out, old chap?" I asked, as our boat lay at rest in a backwater under the trees, and we ate the sandwiches and drank the wine his foresight had provided.

"Almost at first. You noticed the blood on my hand after I searched the carriage? There was a little pool of it under the seat so I knew that the man who had cut his hand with the glass must have hidden himself there, not jumped out of the door as Miss Lilian pretended. The wet blood showed that he had waited till the train arrived, and then walked quietly out of the door when your back was turned. The young lady who said she saw him leap from the carriage, was, not to put too fine a point on it, a liar. Later on I noticed the faintest smear of blood on the lemon-coloured gloves of our friend, Aldred, and I took the liberty of abstracting a red beard and moustache from the pocket of his dust coat.

"Then of course their whole plot was as plain as a pike-staff. I don't expect they supposed you would have been mad enough to get out on the footboard, but it would have suited them just as well if you had pulled the cord or waited till the train got into Victoria. Of course the thief was not caught nor the jewels found for the very simple reason there were no jewels and no thief. I discovered, moreover, that Master Aldred had spent the forenoon of the day in Brighton, and that Miss Saltern owed no money to Lord Blackwathe. That French mission that didn't come off was arranged by your father and myself for your enlightenment?"

"But why didn't you tell me all this before? Why did you let me make such a silly ass of myself?"

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"In the first place because I don't suppose you would have believed me, in the second place if *you* had broken off the engagement you would have had to pay dearly for your folly. It was much better that the young lady should be induced to say "good-bye" for ever, and she has just said it.

CHAPTER XI

GERTRUDE'S QUEER LOVER

MY sister chaffed me until I was blue about my baby-faced, innocent-hearted Lilian.

"You are all the same, you women," I said. "No man can ever be up to you. Well, I've learned my lesson once and for all, and if I ever care for any woman again you may call me a fool."

"Do I want leave?"

"Oh, hang it all, Gerty," I said, "every man is entitled to make an ass of himself about a girl once in a way. Even Beck there had his case with little Miss Bloom at college. I fancy she turned him down, and it's once hit twice shy with him, too, I dare say."

I had been glad to get one in on Beck, who had been sitting like a fool grinning at Gerty's chaff, but I never expected he would take it the way he did.

"Shut up!" he snapped out. "Miss Bloom was not Miss Saltern. I don't see why you want to drag in her name."

"I'm sure Miss Bloom was a very charming young lady," said Gertrude, "and I'm very sorry for Mr Beck."

"You need not be, Lady Gertrude," protested Beck. "She was a nice little girl all right and I pitied her,

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but as for caring for her in any other way, that's just your brother's nonsense."

"Pity is akin to love," retorted Gertrude. I wondered why she was so bent on rubbing it in. Beck had to swear that he never cared twopence about Miss Bloom before she would let him alone.

Then they both turned on me, and Beck gave a description of our breaking in on the luncheon party, that nearly sent Gertrude into a fit. Honestly I could not see the fun of it myself, and I was a bit riled with Gerty for laughing the way she did.

"All right," I said, sulkily enough I daresay, "when you are gone on some chap, and he makes you look silly the laugh will be on my side."

The chance came sooner than I expected to get a bit of my own back. It was not that Gerty was gone on any one, but a man made such a fool of himself about her, and I took my chance to chaff her about her queer lover.

There was no doubt at all that old Colonel Maddox was stark, staring mad about her, and he made no secret about his lunacy. Perhaps I should not call him old, for he was not more than fifty-five, which, after all, was young for a self-made millionaire.

"Colonel" was, I fancy, an honorary American title, anyway I never heard to what regiment, or even to what army, he belonged. But he certainly contrived to roll up wealth in every country in the world, and he was probably one of the hundred richest men extant when he tumbled head over heels in love with Gertrude.

The Colonel was not much to look at; prominent knobby forehead, scrubby moustache, heavy jowl and strong square figure completed his physical outfit.

Millionaire as he was he might also be described as vagrant. He "had no fixed abode and no visible means of livelihood." He turned his hand to anything that had money in it and lived invariably at hotels. So far as it was known, he owned nothing but stock and cash. He collected nothing, bought nothing that could be hired, and had no home. There was one startling exception. He was the owner of the great blue diamond which was as big as a medium-sized hazel-nut, and was by many people believed to be the most beautiful gem in the world. But this precious jewel the Colonel preserved in a safe in London, and did not so much as look at it once in five years.

He was staying at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, engaged in a big electric power deal, when he met Gertrude at a garden party given by the Duchess of Avendale, and fell in love with her right away.

The strange thing about this sudden collapse was, that as far as it was known, Colonel Maddox never in his life cared a straw about any woman before. But like most people who take a juvenile disease late in life he took it badly, and his symptoms were plain to the world.

I never can make out why so many fellows go dotty about Gertrude. I know a score of girls who are brighter and prettier. Still there is no disputing about taste and no questioning about facts. Young Frank Ansley, the Colonel's nephew and private secretary, came almost as bad a cropper as his uncle.

The boy was the one creature in the world the tough old Colonel cared about until he met Gertrude. At first he did not seem to notice young Ansley's

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infatuation, but when he did, and the young chap to do him justice made no concealment, the Colonel went simply raving mad. Before half a dozen people he called him a jackanape, a puppy, a pauper, whom he had lifted out of the gutter, and whom he would fling back again into the gutter if he chose.

The boy never answered a word, but those present noticed that he went deadly pale, and a grim look came into his steel-grey eyes.

I must honestly say that Gerty behaved exceedingly well in the whole business. She was civil to both men, perhaps a shade more civil to Ansley of the two, which was very natural, as he was a very handsome, high-spirited young chap, and the best of good company.

Beck, I must say here, took a most unaccountable dislike to both. The Colonel he called a cruel and greedy old savage, who fancied that money could carry everything, and he professed to despise young Ansley for kowtowing to the insolent, old tyrant on the off-chance of inheriting his money.

Before the Colonel knew Gertrude a fortnight he proposed to her. She told me all about it afterwards, and from her account it must have been a very queer and embarrassing proposal.

He came down to our place in a splendid motor car, hired for the day, and stayed on for lunch and afternoon tea. All the time, Gertrude declared to us, she could see that he was simply brimming over with a proposal, but she managed, only just managed, to stave him off. He loitered so long that the governor, who is the most hospitable of men, asked him to stay to dinner and the Colonel needed no pressing, but just jumped at the invitation.

There were about a dozen of us in all, and when we got to the dining-room the Colonel, abandoning the lady he had brought down, planted himself on a seat next Gertrude, which belonged to another chap. No hint could stir him from the place, and Gertrude was afraid to make a fuss. She thought him quite capable, she assured me, of publicly declaring that he took that seat in order to propose for her.

The phrase, "madly in love," applied literally to the Colonel. He was as irresponsible for his actions as a madman, as careless of consequence and convention. Gertrude told me the whole story.

"Before the soup was removed he began the proposal, and kept on proposing through the fish and *entrées*. Fortunately the stout man on the far side was a little deaf and wholly absorbed in his dinner. The Colonel had turned himself half round with his back to his next neighbour, who was chatting to the young man at the other side.

"'Lady Gertrude,' he said, as the servant put down the soup, 'I have something important to say to you.'

"'Wouldn't some other time be better, Colonel Maddox?'

"'There is no time like the present,' he answered grimly. 'Besides, I may not be able to find some other time. It was hard enough to find this time.'

"I made a desperate effort to smile that the company mightn't notice.

"'You must hear me, Lady Gertrude.'

"'Well, if I must I must, I suppose.'

"'I don't very well know how to say what I've got to say. I never talked much to girls; I never

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cared for them. I suppose the best thing is to come straight to the point. I love you, and I want you to marry me. Wait a moment, if you please. This may seem sudden to you, but it is a sure thing. I never loved a girl before, I never knew what love meant, and used to laugh at the notion. But I am as near mad as a sane man could be with love of you.'

"I'm very much obliged, I'm sure. Please don't look like that, every one at the table will notice. I'm very grateful for your preference, but——"

"Wait a moment,' he interrupted again, 'let me finish. I'm not mad enough to suppose that you could be in love with a chap like me. I want you to take my love, not to give me yours. Yes, yes,—this to the waiter—'salmon or sole, I don't care which. That will do. Go away. What was I saying? Oh! I'm very rich, one of the richest men in Europe. Every farthing I have will be yours. I will settle every farthing on you. I can make more if I want to. Then there's the blue diamond. Queens have hankered after the blue diamond. It is yours right away. I brought it down in my pocket to give you.'

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Colonel—yes, hock, if you please, half a glass—I'm sorry, Colonel, but it can't be. Do please believe me, it can't be.'

"Is there any one else?'

"You have no right to ask that question, Colonel."

"Is there any one else, Gerty?" I asked.

"Don't interrupt, Charlie, if you want to hear the story. Where was I? Oh, yes. The Colonel fixed his eyes on me—they are awful eyes when he is angry.

'It is that young puppy, my nephew,' he said. He looked as if he meant murder.

"'No, no,' I managed to stammer out, 'you are quite wrong.'

"'Am I?' he said, his eyes still fixed on my face. 'I wonder if I am. I'll find out.'

"'There is no use finding out,' I said. I was sorry the next moment for I saw it made him more suspicious of young Ansley. 'In n case would I marry you, Colonel. Can't you be content, take my answer and be done with it?'

"'Content! Content to loose the one thing in the world I want! You might as well ask a devil to be content in hell. Give me some hope, my girl, I'll wait.'

"'No, no, don't wait,' I entreated. I was really sorry for him at the moment. 'I cannot, I never could. I am not worth your worrying about.'

"'That is a matter of opinion,' he said. 'I rather think life is not worth worrying about without you. Well, there is a way out, and I think I'll take it.'

"He had such a queer, quiet way, Charlie, that he made my blood run cold. 'You must not talk like that,' I begged him. 'You frighten me. It is not fair, you know you don't mean it.'

"'Perhaps not, perhaps not. Anyhow you will take the blue diamond?'

"'Of course I can't. How could I?'

"'Why shouldn't you? I was determined you should have it the moment I saw you. I had it made into a brooch, and have it in my pocket for you.'

"I shook my head, I think he saw I was determined.

"'All right, I'll leave it to you in my will. I don't

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think you will have long to wait, and I don't think you will refuse a dead man.'

"I was horribly frightened, but tried to pass it off. I was very nice to him during the rest of dinner and he was very bright and cheerful for him.

"'Good-bye,' I said, as he was getting into his motor that evening; 'I hope we shall always be good friends.'

"'Always may be a very short time,' he answered, 'anyhow I won't forget the blue diamond,' and before I could answer he drove away."

Gertrude told me the story the same night as the thing happened. I could see she was frightened about the Colonel. Two days later came the news of his murder at the Cosmopolitan Hotel.

I will put down here all I heard about the business from first to last.

The Colonel had been grumpy for a couple of days, especially with his nephew, with whom he dined alone the night before the murder, but his man, John Fraser, who had been with him twenty years, and who knew every turn of his temper, reported that he was in good humour when he retired to rest. The Colonel's last words as he left the room for the night were: "It is not such a bad world after all, John, I shall be sorry to leave it. There's no knowing what is on the other side."

About six the next morning the whole hotel was roused by the din of the electric bell from the Colonel's room and a storm of cries in the Colonel's voice. The boots rushed to the door, and found it locked on the inside. He flung himself recklessly against it again and again, but could not shake it. A crowd gathered in the corridor, frantic with

excitement. The cries continued, "Help! Help! Help!" Then there was a fall and a groan and dead silence.

Some one came rushing from a far room with a heavy dumb-bell, and battered in the door, crashing the panels and bursting the lock. The crowd, half dressed for the most part and mad with excitement and curiosity, broke pell-mell into the room.

At the further end, behind the chintz curtains of the bed, lay Colonel Maddox on his face, with his arms spread out, stone dead. A knife had been driven with tremendous force through his back to his heart. The window was open and both the bedroom and the bathroom, which was shut off by a curtain, were searched and empty.

I had the rest of the story from Beck, who was stopping at the hotel and reached the room a minute after the body was found.

The crowd was still speculating over the manner of the murder, and Beck specially noticed John Fraser, half dressed and very pale, gazing on his old master with a strange piteous look in his eyes as if striving to fathom the mystery. He saw the man's eyes turn from the corpse to the dressing-table.

"The blue diamond!" Fraser cried. "The blue diamond is stolen! It was on the master's table when I left him last night, it was there when I came in a moment ago."

"The fellow has a head on his shoulders," Beck thought.

"Shut the door," he cried. "If the diamond has been stolen by some one in the room it must be found."

The hotel detective shut the door and locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

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"Now," said Fraser, "search me first."

The detective searched him, then each in turn, none objecting, and found nothing.

Beck noticed that young Ansley did not appear on the scene. He found him later in his room groaning over a sprained ankle.

"What is the infernal row?" he asked. "I jumped to the door when I heard it, nearly fainted with pain, and only just managed to crawl back to bed again. I had a stupid fall last night, tripped on the edge of the carpet, sprained my ankle, and bleed my nose. What is the row about, Beck? I thought I heard my uncle's name."

"Your uncle has been murdered," said Beck deliberately. "He has just been found in his room, stabbed through the heart."

If ever surprise and horror were plain on a face they were plain on Ansley's. His mouth fell open, his eyes stared at Beck with a vacant stare.

"You don't mean it," he muttered in a hoarse whisper. "I must go to him." He made an effort to rise and fell back groaning and sweating with agony.

"If this is acting," Beck thought to himself, "it is superb." But he reserved judgment.

Little more was disclosed at the inquest. It was thought impossible that the murderer could have escaped from the window. There was a drop of nearly thirty feet into a tiled yard. A monkey could hardly have jumped from one window-sill to the other. Besides several people had looked out of their windows during the screaming and saw nothing.

Young Ansley gave his evidence clearly with a frankness that disarmed suspicion. When he had

gone up to his room that night he had tripped and fallen and sprained his ankle. His face came first to the floor and his nose bleed furiously. No, he had not called any one, he was a bit ashamed of making such a blooming ass of himself. The ankle did not pain so much that night. He tied it up as well as he could with a damp pocket handkerchief and a towel. It was all swelled and black and blue in the morning, and he could not move about without great pain. There was blood on his collar and cuffs, and a bloodstained handkerchief was found beside his bed, but that was accounted for by the bleeding of his nose.

The doctor's evidence was the surprise of the inquest. He gave it as his clear conviction that Colonel Maddox had been murdered several hours before the first cry was heard in his room. It might have been as many as six hours, but he was quite sure it was at least three.

So the matter rested for a week. A will was found which left the Colonel's whole vast property to young Ansley, but there was a recent codicil giving the blue diamond to Lady Gertrude Kirwood, with a prayer that she would accept it as a token of his esteem and regard.

Gertrude was in a terrible state over the whole business. She is as a rule quiet enough as girls go, but this got on her nerves and nearly drove her mad. I never saw such a woebegone face as she showed at breakfast the next morning after the news of the murder.

"This is terrible, Charlie," she said in a whisper, "terrible." And she looked at me as if I were a callous monster to be able to eat. Old Maddox

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was not a bad sort of chap, and I was very sorry for him, but I thought this was carrying the thing a bit too far.

"Try and eat some breakfast, Gerty," I said. "This is a bad business, of course, but it cannot be helped."

"No," she said softly, "it cannot be helped now. But it is terrible to feel myself responsible for his death."

"Responsible! You? Have you gone mad?"

"If I had been a little more gentle, a little more considerate, it might not have happened."

"In Heaven's name, what might not have happened?"

"Poor Colonel Maddox would not have committed suicide. You need not start in that foolish way, Charlie, of course it was suicide. He almost said he would kill himself. Remember I told you at the time and you would not believe it."

"But, my dear girl, a man does not commit suicide by stabbing himself in the back."

"It was to divert suspicion. He would contrive to fall on his knife like the old Romans fell on their swords."

"It was impossible," I said.

"Indeed," she said sharply, "and do you think it possible he was murdered, when there was no one else but himself in the room?"

"But if he stabbed himself," I argued feebly, for I was bewildered at her suggestion, "how could he call for help three hours, at least so the doctor swears, after he was stone dead?"

"If he was murdered how could he cry out three hours after he was stone dead?"

"That's true enough. It's a blank mystery any way you look at it."

"I feel it is suicide," Gerty insisted. "I have an instinct it is suicide."

"Have it your own way," I replied, "it is suicide." I went on with my breakfast, a little sulkily, I'm afraid. A man does not like to be put in a hole.

But she came behind me and put her hands on my shoulders, and when she stooped to kiss me I felt a tear wet on my cheek.

"O Charlie, you must not talk like that! Can't you see how miserable I am. I don't want to have it all my own way, as you call it. I would give anything in the world to prove it wasn't suicide. Can't you find out? Couldn't you get your clever friend, Mr Beck, to find out?"

"I'm sorry, old girl, if I hurt you. I'll do my level best, and see Beck about it to-day. Now eat some breakfast to please me."

She tried, but it was the merest pretence. Her fingers were trembling as she crumbled the toast on her plate. Twice the tears started to her eyes, but she kept them back bravely.

Beck was plainly put out when I told him about Gertrude, and when I laughed at the notion of suicide he got a bit riled.

"If it's not suicide," he said, "will you kindly say what it was. Who murdered Colonel Maddox, and when?"

"Surely you don't think it was suicide, Paul?" I asked in amazement.

"That's a different matter. I don't think anything at present, but I don't think there is anything

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to laugh at in Lady Gertrude's notion of suicide. The whole business is in black darkness."

"Perhaps young Ansley might help," I suggested.

But when we called at the hotel we were told that he was suffering from nervous prostration and could see no one.

"I will try and have a chat with Maddox's man, Fraser," Beck said; "he may be able to let in a little light somewhere."

We saw John Fraser next day. He had been left a hundred and fifty pounds a year by the Colonel in consideration of his long and faithful service, and was staying at a quiet and cheap hotel until he could get another place.

"Idleness don't suit me," he said to Beck, "but I am in no hurry for a new place, I have something to do first."

A strong, quiet, capable man was Fraser, of about fifty years of age, over twenty of which had been spent in the service of Colonel Maddox. His face was cast in the mould of rugged honesty, and his blue eyes looked you squarely in the face. He spoke now with great deliberation as if weighing the effect of each word.

"You may be sure, Mr Beck," he went on, "I would help you if I could to track the murderer. The Colonel was a good master to me. I had reason to like him, I have reason to be sorry for him, no man more. But I have found out nothing—so far."

"You suspect some one?" I said, caught by his manner, "you suspect something, Fraser?"

"Suspicion is no proof," he said slowly; "I have no right even to mention my suspicion."

Beck gave him a keen look.

"You are searching for proof," he said, "so are we. Why should we not work together?"

"If you give me your address, sir," Fraser said, "I will write to you the moment I have anything worth telling. I think it is better for me to go my own way at present and let you go yours."

"A shrewd fellow!" was Beck's comment when we got into the street. "Just the fellow to do what he wants to do. I should not be surprised if we get some useful information from Mr Fraser."

CHAPTER XII

THE LOCKED DOOR

NEVER before or since have I seen Paul so nonplussed.

"What worries me, Charlie," he said, "is that I feel there is a perfectly simple solution lying straight before our eyes and I cannot see it."

When we returned late that evening to Kirwood Castle we found Gertrude more convinced than ever that it was suicide.

"I know Mr Ansley didn't do it, if that is what you are suspecting, Mr Beck," she said.

"I suspect nothing and nobody for the present," put in Beck. "I am just feeling round with my eyes bandaged."

While we were having our coffee and cigar he said to me :

"Look here, Charlie, I'm about beat and I know it. I have been playing blind man's buff with the case long enough, and I badly want the bandage taken off my eyes. I'm thinking of running over to see my people. Very likely the whole thing will be as simple as kiss hands to them. The governor will laugh at my denseness and the mater, when she has given me the right hint, will try to make out that I knew it all along. I wish you would come over with me."

"All right, old man, but I don't believe any one else is likely to succeed where you have failed."

"That means you don't know the old folks at home. However, seeing is believing." Then after a pause he added a bit nervously: "Do you think your sister would care to come too? A change would do her good."

"I'm sure she'll come," I said. "Your people are great pets of hers; she doats on your mother."

"I hope you are right there. Shall we try?"

He drank his coffee and liqueur in two gulps and made straight for the drawing-room, but turned back at the door and let me in first.

Gertrude was sitting in front of the fire, her elbow on her knee and her chin on the palm of her left hand, looking the picture of misery, a very pretty picture of it she made, too. She brightened up when we came in, you would not think she was the same girl.

I proved right about the visit—she was delighted to go.

"Yes, yes," she said to me eagerly after Beck was gone. "Those two will find a way out if there's any way. They are supernaturally clever, and as nice as they are clever. I adore Mrs Beck."

"How would you like her for a mother-in-law?" I asked, hardly knowing what I was saying.

I never in my life saw Gerty so angry. She flushed rose red and her eyes blazed. I guessed what was coming and tried to run from the storm.

"Don't look so wrathful," I pleaded, "of course I was only jesting."

"But why of ~~course~~?" she snapped out. "I don't

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appreciate the humour of the jest. I won't go down with you to-morrow."

This frightened me. I could see that Beck was bent on her coming, I hadn't any excuse to offer, and I couldn't tell him what happened. So I grovelled and coaxed, and after much trouble I induced her to promise. I believe now she meant to come all the time.

We ran down by motor, and Mr and Mrs Beck met us at the door of their delightful house in Kent.

I wish I could give you a notion of Mr and Mrs Beck as I saw them standing there together on the high stone steps, their faces bright with welcome. The sight of their happiness would tempt any one to matrimony. They look young for their ages, for he must be well over sixty and she fifty, or close up to it. I suppose it is happiness and good humour that keeps them young.

If I wasn't mistaken there was a special welcome for Gertrude. Mrs Beck impulsively kissed her as she stepped from the motor on to the steps, and Mr Beck in a grave old-fashioned way lifted her hand to his lips. I have always thought old Beck's manner to women was the spirit of romance carried into the hurry scurry of the twentieth century. I can well understand why they are all so fond of him.

"The case is not to be mentioned until after dinner," he said to Paul. "If I were lucky enough to find a clue for you, or what is far more likely your mother found it, you would be for darting back to London the next minute. I don't want that, and I won't have it."

Gertrude paired off with Mrs Beck to look at

the rose garden that bordered the river, dropping red leaves into the stream, and to talk woman's talk. We three went for a game on the beautiful and beautifully kept golf links. Mr Beck played our best ball and beat us. He knew every blade of grass on the links and his short play was perfect, more like billiards than golf in his accuracy in placing and holeing.

"Dora beats me two games out of three," he remarked with a pleased chuckle on the way home. "I have often advised her to go in for the ladies' championship, but she hates publicity and excitement."

"Curious," I remarked, smiling at the remembrance of Miss Dora Myr's exciting career.

"But true," chimed in Paul. "The little mother would never care to go beyond the ring fence of our own grounds."

We dined in a delightful room, wainscotted in old oak and looking out through the wide, broad windows on the swift flowing river, from which the skilful hands of old Paul Beck had extracted many a lusty trout and salmon.

"Don't go," old Beck said, when dinner was over, detecting, as it seemed with the back of his head, Mrs Beck's little gesture to Gerty. "Don't go, we want the ladies in this cabinet council. We go with you or you stay with us, but we don't part. Dora, my dear, if you got the wine and dessert shifted to that little table close to the window, we could take our coffee there and make ourselves mighty comfortable."

Through the open window came the faint music of the stream, and the soft sweet breath of the

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roses on the gentle air, the ladies insisted that the cigars should be lit, and the men not unreluctantly complied. We were, as Mr Beck put it, "mighty comfortable," but it did not in the least look like a set scene for the discussion of a murder.

Gertrude opened the proceedings. "Now, Charlie, tell them all about it, or perhaps it would be better for Mr Beck to tell, if he will."

There was a short contest between us as to which should not tell the story. I won and Beck told it, short and clear, not a word too little or too much.

"I've examined the yard under the window," he said, "and found no sign of any kind, and I don't think a man could jump out without smashing himself. I thought at first that some one might have let a rope down but I found that the room overhead was let to the Dowager Countess of Callister, and she ran to the window the moment the cries for help were raised."

"What about the window of the bathroom?" asked Mrs Beck.

"Still more impossible. A small round window with no sill, only a bird could fly through it."

"If the murderer could not get out of the windows he must have got out through the door," said Mr Beck. "There was no other way."

"But the door was locked on the inside," objected Paul.

"The man escaped," insisted his father.

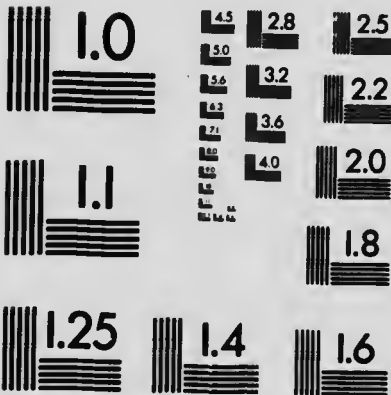
"Unless it was suicide," Gertrude ventured. "Oh, I'm horribly afraid it must have been suicide."

"It was not suicide," cried husband and wife together, and Gerty's face lit up with relief. Anyhow, the man's death did not lie at her door. It



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was curious how completely she took their word for it.

"Now, let us pass from place to persons," said the elder Beck. "Did you see young Ansley's ankle? Was it really bad?"

"Horribly black and swollen."

"He might have hurt it escaping," I suggested foolishly.

"Hardly," young Paul remarked, smiling. "He certainly could never get back with a badly sprained ankle from the courtyard to his bed."

"Were you there when the door was broken open?" old Beck asked his son. "Were you one of the first into the room?"

"No, I think I was one of the last. The crowd was gathered round the corpse when I came in."

"Most of them half dressed?"

"All of them looked as if they had just jumped out of bed and ran, anything on that just came to hand. Some had stockings, some had bedroom shoes, but most of them were in their bare feet."

"The man Fraser, how was he dressed? Was he in his bare feet, did you notice?"

"Of course I noticed, I could not help noticing. He was dressed in his shirt and trousers with his suspenders hanging down, and had his shoes on, unlaced."

Paul Beck, the elder, exchanged a glance with his wife, who nodded assent. It was plain that those two already understood each other, which was more than the rest of us did.

"Rubber heeled shoes?" Mr Beck asked.

"Yes," said his son, with a puzzled look on his face, "rubber heeled shoes."

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"Did it strike you as curious that he should have put on his shoes?"

"It did strike me as curious. I could make nothing of it then, I can make nothing of it now unless——"

"Wait a moment. When Fraser cried out that the blue diamond was stolen, you said that the detective searched the people in the room, including Fraser?"

"Including Fraser," Paul answered, and there was question in his answer. What was in his father's mind? He had a glimmering of his meaning, I fancy, and was thinking furiously. Gerty and I, on the other hand, were utterly bewildered by questions, which appeared to us mere purposeless jargon.

"Can't you guess now how the murderer got in and out?" old Beck asked; "and how the diamond vanished?"

Mrs Beck flew to her son's rescue.

"Of course he can," she chimed in, "if you will only give him a moment's time to think. Paul, did you happen to notice that there was a slit about the height of a man's eyes in the curtain between the bedroom and the bathroom?"

He started, and was silent for a moment. Then he drew a long breath and his face lit up as with a light from within.

"So that was it?" he said, turning to his mother.

"Yes," she said, nodding brightly, "that was it."

"I was a fool not to see it before, it was so simple. That little hole lets in the light."

"The simplicity puzzled you," interposed his father.

"It was so simple to stand an egg on its end, but no one could do it until Columbus tried."

Gerty's patience snapped at last.

"I don't want to know anything about Columbus," she cried, "but I do want very badly to know about this horrible business. There you three go talking in riddles, and looking so bright and pleased with each other while poor we stand out in the cold perishing with curiosity. You tell me please," she said, turning entreatingly to young Beck.

"I hope to tell you everything to-morrow evening," he said, "when I have something certain to tell. So far, it's only a good guess. I'm off to London to-night."

"So I expected," said his father. "I've ordered the motor, you will have a fine moonlight drive."

"Will you come, Charlie?" asked Paul.

"Why, certainly, I wouldn't lose it for the world. When do you hope to be back?"

"To-morrow evening, I trust."

"Then, Gertrude, you can stay here until we return."

"Good-bye, Charlie," she said. "Good-bye, Mr Beck," and she gave him her hand. "I hope you will catch the murderer and find the diamond."

"I hope so," responded Beck.

The car jerked forward, and we sped along the lovely avenue into the night, startling the darkness with the sudden glare of our lamps. We were up and out early next morning. At a hardware shop Beck bought a turnscrew. "To open the murderer's mouth," I suggested.

"To open something almost as important," he retorted.

We picked up a detective at Scotland Yard, and called on Mr Fraser at his private hotel. The detective stayed outside while we two went into the shabby parlour where Fraser was alone. He professed himself much pleased to see us.

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"I brought Lord Kirwood along," Beck explained. "He takes almost as much interest in the case as I do myself. Have you found out anything yet?"

"I think I have a clue, sir, which will enable me to lay my hand on the murderer any time I want to, but it would be injudicious on my part to say more at present."

"Quite right," said Beck cordially, "very injudicious on your part. Well, I've been thinking over it myself since, and I fancy I've found out something too. Very likely our suspicions point to the same person."

For a second I thought I saw fear start to light and vanish in the shrewd eyes of Mr Fraser.

"Indeed, sir," he said smoothly.

"I'd like to know what you think of my notion, if you don't mind."

Fraser nodded without speaking, and moistened his lips slowly with his tongue.

"I was puzzled," Beck went on, "by the fact that the murderer could not get in or out after the bedroom door was locked."

"That is just the puzzle," said Fraser, with the faint shadow of a smile.

"Well it occurred to me that he might have got in the night before, just after you left, you know."

"I left about half-past twelve," said Fraser, and added incautiously, "I was fully dressed at the time."

"Fully dressed, were you?" said Beck, with a grim smile. "Well, my notion is that the man that came back after you left was dressed only in shirt and trousers, and curiously enough in unlaced shoes with patent rubber heels."

For the life of him, literally for the life of him, Fraser could not refrain from glancing down at

the shoes he wore. They were laced shoes with patent rubber heels.

"Colonel Maddox must have known the man who entered after you left, Fraser, for it is plain that he was neither surprised nor alarmed. The cowardly assassin, whom he trusted, watched his chance and drove a knife through his heart. Then the murderer stole the blue diamond, which was not on the Colonel's dressing-table but in the Colonel's pocket, and hid it. Could you help me to guess where he hid it, Fraser?"

The man looked at him with staring vacant eyes, but said no word. Beck went on pitilessly:

"The murderer locked the door on the inside and made himself comfortable in the bathroom for the night. He did not like being so near the dead body, very likely, but he would not take the risk of coming and going. Is that right, Fraser, does your clue match mine?"

Fraser, who had sunk into a big, shabby chair and lay huddled up in it, nodded, actually nodded his assent, and I heard him mutter under his breath: "You're a devil from hell."

"Next morning," Beck went on, "the murderer himself raised the alarm, so that a crowd might assemble while he waited behind the curtain of the bathroom, in which he had cut a slit about the height of his eyes. When the door was smashed open the crowd burst in, and in the crush and confusion he joined the throng of half-dressed men, and was safe so far. You remember, Fraser, it was you who called out that the diamond was gone, and a search was demanded. At the same moment the assassin had the diamond cleverly concealed in a cavity in the heel of one of his shoes under the rubber covering,

which screws on and off quite easily. The shoes, I fancy, were like the pair you are wearing at present."

The man had got back something of his dogged courage.

"What do you want me to say?" he growled. "You have made my confession for me, and I have only got to put my name to it and be hanged. But I'll say this. It wasn't altogether for the diamond I did it. The man was a devil to those under his thumb, and I was under his thumb for a little thing he found out, which I did when I was no more than a boy. Many a time he struck me when he was in a rage, but his fist was nothing to his tongue, he could blister you with his tongue. Many a day I was tempted to do away with him, and when I got the chance I took it, that's all."

"And the diamond?"

"It is here," said Fraser, and stooped to unlace his right hand shoe. Then, quick as thought, he jerked it off, and with the same rapid movement sent it straight at Beck's face.

Quick as he was, Beck was quicker. He ducked as the other threw, and the heavy shoe went crash into the glass behind him. The detective came running into the room at the sound. Without the faintest show of resistance Fraser held out his wrists and the handcuffs were snapped on him.

Beck picked up the shoe.

"As he presented me with this, I think I am entitled to keep it. What do you say, Inspector?"

"All right, sir," said the Inspector. "Shall I see you in the court to-morrow about twelve? We will have him up before the magistrate."

"I'll be there," Beck promised; "though that leaves

me little time to spare. Come along, Charlie!" and he ran down the stairs with the shoe in his hand.

"The Cosmopolitan Hotel," he said, as we stepped together into a taxi. This time he insisted on seeing young Ansley, taking no excuse. "I have good news for him," he explained. "Good news that won't wait."

We found the boy lying on the sofa in his sitting-room. I seldom saw a sicker man than he looked. The bright, gay, happy-go-lucky young Ansley, whom I had known had wholly vanished. There was no sign of him, no likeness to him in that pale, wearied, worried-looking creature that lay on the sofa.

"Well, Beck," he cried impatiently, "you said there was good news. Tell it man, tell it! No news can be good to me unless the news that they have caught my uncle's murderer."

"That's just the news I've brought you," said Beck.

Ansley in his excitement leaped to his feet forgetting his sprained ankle, and fell back with a groan, but pain could not master his impatience.

"Is it true?" he whispered in a broken voice, struggling with his agony, "nod that it is true. How can I ever thank you, Beck? You know, of course, they suspected me because I got his money. I have been watched and spied upon, there have been all sorts of hints and suggestions. I have had anonymous letters roundly charging me with the murder and the theft of the diamond."

"The jewel is here," said Beck, holding up the heavy shoe.

He quietly twisted out the screws that held the rubber in its place, took from a cavity cut in the heel

of the shoe a small, red morocco case and offered it to Ansley.

"You are the executor to the will."

Ansley motioned it back.

"It's not mine," he said. "By the will the diamond is Lady Gertrude Kirwood's. No, don't open the case, Beck. I have never seen it, and I don't want to see it. Will you, like a good fellow, take it straight to Lady Gertrude. I would go myself if it were not for this confounded ankle. She didn't suspect me?"

"No," said Beck, "not for a moment."

"Will you take her the diamond from me?" Ansley asked.

I wondered to see Beck wince and hesitate for a moment before he spoke.

"All right," he said at last, "I will. It's only fair when you can't go yourself. Good-bye, Ansley. Come along, Charlie."

He had me out of the room before I had time to congratulate Ansley on his escape and his inheritance.

Old Beck and the two women received us on the door-step when our motor came humming up the avenue. Mrs Beck had her arm linked in Gertrude's. She looked twenty years younger than her age.

"Well," she said, with a smile for her son, "what about the curtain?"

"You were right, of course, mother," he answered, as we went into the drawing-room together. "Indeed I was so sure you were right that I did not even go to look for the slit in the curtain. We went straight off and caught the murderer and found the diamond."

"Glorious!" cried Gertrude. "Tell us all about it."

He told her all about it in a few words. I noticed that Mr and Mrs Beck did not seem to want any

telling. Then he put the little morocco case into her hands. "Mr Ansley desired me to give you this," he said shortly.

"What has Mr Ansley got to do with it?"

"He is the executor of the will."

"Oh!" She opened the case and stood speechless with delight at the beauty of the gem, a dazzling oval, about the size of a bean, of pure, pale blue set very simply in platinum.

Gerty's eyes opened very wide and her lips parted in a kind of rapture, the strange fascination that jewels have for women was full upon her, for a long moment she was silent. Then she said very softly, without looking at Beck:

"I am very grateful to poor Colonel Maddox for leaving me the jewel, and to Mr Ansley for sending it, but I shall always consider it as a gift from the finder. But for you, Mr Beck, it might have gone off in the heel of a murderer's shoe."

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLUE DIAMOND

BIG jewels have a way of getting people into trouble, witness the moonstone and other famous gems too numerous to mention. The blue diamond was no exception to the rule, within six months it vanished in a fashion almost as exciting as it came.

I was smoking a final cigar with the governor before my reluctant departure to Lady Betty Montague's ball, when, with a soft swish of silken skirts, Gertrude glided into the room.

"Well, how do you like me?"

She stood audaciously there in the rich glow of the rose-tinted lights, challenging admiration. She was dressed in some kind of rich, silky, cream-coloured stuff picked out with pale blue and edged at the bosom with old lace. Her hair was parted in two great waves above her brow, and its thick coils twisted into a coronet of old gold. She wore no jewels except the superb blue diamond. It gleamed and sparkled amid the lace in the dip of her white bosom, pure, pale blue as the summer's sky at noon, and as full of light.

What did I think of her? The governor took the word out of my mouth. "Superb! Perfect!" he said, then, as she stooped her stately head to kiss him,

"there is many a young fellow would give his immortal soul for that, Gerty."

"'To waste his whole soul in one kiss upon those perfect lips,'" I quoted. "You are very nice, Gerty, my dear, but it does not quite run to that. Even Beck——"

She turned sharply on me with a hot flush on her cheeks and a hot light in her eyes. She looks fine when she's riled.

"I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense, Charlie, you know I don't like it."

Whatever is the reason Gertrude can never stand any chaff about Beck. She is never as chummy with him as with other chaps, not fit to tie his shoe strings. I have often wondered why. Sometimes I am afraid she does not like him, and is even moderately civil to him for my sake.

"All right," I said, "all right. I'll promise not to do it again until the next time. But what about that diamond, Gerty? Had you not better be careful? There have been a lot of jewel robberies lately, one not a month ago at the very house we are going to."

"Don't be frightened, my dear, the diamond is all right. It is fastened under the lace with little gold chains to my corset. It simply couldn't be snatched without snatching me along with it."

"Anyhow, chains or no chains, I'm glad Beck will be there on guard."

"Mr Beck again," she said, shaking a warning finger at me. "Come along, lazy bones, we're late as it is. Good-bye, dad, I wish you were coming with us."

"And I wish I wasn't, even for the pleasure of

your society, my dear, the very little I would be likely to get of it."

I thought of the governor's words afterwards in the ball-room. He certainly would not have had much of Gertrude to himself. She was beyond doubt or question the belle of the ball. All the men fluttered round her, eager for a dance or even for a word or a smile in the intervals of the dances. All except Beck, who kept aloof from the crowd. He danced a couple of dances with Gertrude, and for the rest of the time loafed about chatting to men and women with whom he was equally popular.

Every man to his taste. Gertrude was very pretty no doubt, but to think or say she was the handsomest or most fascinating woman in the room was simply absurd. There was Margery Glenmore for one, the great actress, Gertrude simply couldn't hold a candle to her. Margery was a glorious brunette—I always liked brunettes. What is it Byron says: "Yet beautiful in its strength as the light of a dark eye in a woman"? My sentiment exactly. I found her as clever and as charming as she was beautiful, a little reserved at first—I heard she had a hard time as a girl—but after a while the ice melted and she was as bright and sparkling as a running stream. We had two dances and sat out a third. It was while we were sitting out the third the thing happened.

Gertrude, whom nothing ever tires, was enjoying herself to her heart's content, when in the middle of a two-step some awkward bouncer planted his hoof on her skirt and nearly tore it from her back. He burst the "gathers," or something of that kind; there was great danger the skirt would come off on the dancing-room floor. A pretty predicament that for

a girl! But Gertrude is up to any emergency. Holding her dress up as best she could she glided to a corner near the door, turned the handle swiftly and slipped out unseen.

Before the dancing began Lady Montague had specially called the ladies' attention to the fact that a sewing-maid was provided in the dressing-room for repairs. Straight as a bird for its nest Gertrude made for this harbour of refuge. The big room, when she got there, was dimly lit and empty, but a light came from a half open door at the further end of the room. Thinking perhaps the maid might be there Gertrude pushed the door wide open and looked in. The small bathroom was also empty, but it had been rigged up as a supplementary dressing-room for the occasion. It was brilliantly lit up. There was a full length glass at one end of the room, and on the dressing-table an inviting array of pin cushions. As Gertrude passed through into this inner room the door swung behind her and closed with a snap, then suddenly all the lights went out, and she was at once aware of a pungent odour in the air which caught her breath when she tried to scream.

Now thoroughly frightened she groped wildly for the door. It was fast locked and though she beat upon it wildly with her open palms till her hands ached, no relief came. Again and again she tried to scream, but her voice died away in a hoarse whisper. The potent gas in the small, closely shut room, was fast mastering her. She seemed gradually to lose all weight, to be lifted from the ground and float away into dark space, till at last she heard the dull thud of her own fall on the soft carpet, and passed into complete unconsciousness.

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The sewing-maid returning from her supper found her lying insensible on the floor of the larger room, and gave the alarm at once to her mistress. Just at that moment I entered the dancing-room with Miss Glenmore, and Lady Betty signalled me impatiently from the door.

"Your sister has fainted in the dressing-room," she said. "Don't look so frightened, I'm sure it's nothing serious. Come with me."

Gertrude was lying on her back on the carpet, her arms stretched out, so limp and motionless that for an instant I thought she was dead. There was a broad Chesterfield sofa in the room and I lifted her on to it, making her head comfortable on a pillow, while poor little Lady Betty with tears of sympathy in her eyes ran hither and thither like a frightened bird.

Gradually the colour stole back into Gertrude's pale cheeks, faint as the warming pink on the petal of a white rose. Her breath came more deeply and regularly, and before her eyes opened her hand stole up flutteringly to the bosom of her dress.

Then for the first time I noticed that the blue diamond was gone, torn with brutal force that burst the gold chain and rent the dress. At the same instant Lady Betty noticed it too, and her big eyes dilated with horror.

"It's stolen," she said in a awe-struck whisper.

"I hope the brutes haven't hurt her," I whispered back, my heart hot with rage.

For answer Gertrude's eyes opened suddenly and met mine.

"I'm not a bit hurt, Charlie," she whispered, "but—oh, yes, it's gone, my beautiful diamond is gone."

"Don't fret, darling," I said, kneeling down on the floor beside her. "Thank God you are safe. We'll get it back for you, never fear, and get even with the brutes that stole it. Are you quite sure you are not hurt?"

"I feel as well as ever, only a little weak. My head aches, that's all."

"But how did it happen, Lady Gertrude?" Lady Betty broke in, bubbling over with sympathy and excitement. Gertrude told her story amid a storm of sympathetic interjections on the part of Lady Betty.

"Oh, what shall we do?" cried her impetuous little ladyship at last. "I'm sure it's some gang of thieves that have been stealing everybody's jewels lately; no one seems to be safe. Fancy their forcing their way into my dressing-room! Perhaps it is one of the guests in disguise. Shall I telephone for detectives, Lord Kirwood, and have them searched?"

"Do nothing so foolish," I protested. "The thief, whoever he is, has had lots of time to hide his booty. It must have been a man, only a man's hand would have the strength to snap the gold chains in that fashion."

"But what will we do? We must do something!"

"You know my friend, Beck, Lady Betty?" She nodded twice. "Well, you might fetch him here, if you don't mind. Not a word, please, to a soul else, just tell Beck that we want him here, my sister and I. He has a wonderful twist for this kind of thing. If any man living can find a clue to the thief and the diamond, Beck is the man."

I thought I saw the colour heighten in Gertrude's cheeks when I mentioned Beck's name, and as Lady

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Betty vanished, she leaped lightly from the sofa, caught up a silk wrap, and deftly curled and coiled it to hide the breach in her bodice. Then, still before the long mirror, with dexterous little pats, she coaxed her tossed and rebellious hair into order. Her back was to the mirror when Beck came hurrying in, followed by Lady Betty.

The imperturbable Beck was strangely excited, the kind of excitement that shows in a pale cheek and low voice. I never before saw that queer little dimple in his chin so plain.

"You are not hurt, Lady Gertrude?" he asked.

"Not in the least, nor frightened. I would not mind anything, if I only had my diamond back."

"And the thief caught," chimed in Lady Betty.

"Yes," Beck agreed sternly. "I would dearly like to catch the thief. Would you mind telling again, Lady Gertrude, how it all happened?"

She told the story again in almost the same words. Beck listened in absolute silence, asking no question.

There was a long pause when she had done. Never before had I seen him look so quiet or so angry. It boded ill for the thief, I thought.

"Well," cried Lady Betty impatiently, "have you found a clue, Mr Beck?"

In spite of himself he laughed at her child-like impatience.

"I wish I had," he replied. "I'd give a lot to lay my hand"—he raised a hand clenched hard—"on the cowardly ruffian. But you must search for clues, Lady Betty, before you find them. Let me have a look at the room in which Miss Kirwood was locked."

The door of the room was fastened but the key was in the lock. The door opened readily, but swung

back with a strong spring and snapped as it closed. By an ingenious arrangement the closing of the door turned off the electric light. Behind the big mirror there was a rubber bag deflated with a weight pressing it down.

Beck sniffed.

"Laughing gas," he said, "it must have been discharged from the bag a few minutes before Lady Gertrude entered the room. What about the maid, Lady Betty? Why had she left just at that time? Perhaps she was hiding somewhere waiting developments. I should like to have a word with the maid if I might."

"Certainly," said Lady Betty, "I have sent for her, but I don't think it will be of any use. She is a most trustworthy girl who has been in my employment for five years."

"That may be," said Beck, apparently unconvinced, "but I should like to hear her explain why she was out of the room at this particular time."

"Oh, I can explain that. I told her she might go to her supper at two o'clock and stay for half a hour. She must have been at supper when Lady Gertrude came in; it was she who found her afterwards, you know. In any case she will be here in a moment."

Even as she spoke there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" cried Beck, and a pleasant-faced girl of about thirty came in, and stood staring in manifest surprise at the two gentlemen in the ladies' dressing-room.

"It's all right, Martha," said Lady Betty, "there has been something stolen, and we are making enquiries. Mind you are not to mention it to any one. You need not wait."

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"The girl is the soul of honesty," protested her mistress. "I'd risk my life she had nothing to do with the robbery."

"I quite agree with you," said Beck. "I'm very glad I saw her, all the same; it turned me off from a blind trail."

"You have thought of something," she cried, her curiosity excited by the tone of his voice.

"Not yet," he answered, smiling, "and to speak frankly, I would not tell you if I had. You see, I want to find the diamond and catch the thief, and prattling won't help."

"How dare you, Mr Beck! I never prattle about secrets."

"If you don't know them," laughed Beck suddenly, in high spirits.

"Even if I do."

"You say your prayers, I'm sure, Lady Betty, morning and evening. 'Lead us not into temptation.' I am not going to lead you into temptation."

"I'll match your quotation, Mr Beck," she retorted sharply. 'When the blind lead the 'dr.' I fancy you know no more than myself."

"Very likely. Then we agree that neither of us tell the other how much we know."

"I think it is time we were going," interposed Gertrude, who had listened with chill disapproval to Beck's badinage with the pretty widow. "I don't feel quite so well now. I'm very sorry to lose my diamond, of course, but I don't want you to worry about it, Lady Betty. I am sure you will accept our apologies. You don't mind, Charlie, I hope? Are you coming with us, Mr Beck?"

Gertrude was as cold as an icicle to Beck all the

way home in the electric brougham. But I, who knew him better than she did, guessed by his gaiety that he had already found out something.

"Good-night, Gerty," I said, when we were in the hall. "Don't go yet awhile, Beck, let us have a drink and a smoke and a talk over this business. I rather guess you have something up your sleeve."

"Mayn't I come, too?" said Miss Gertrude, as meek as a mouse.

"No," I answered with the frank brutality of a brother. "You were as cross as two sticks all the way home. Naughty little girls must be punished. Besides you are tired, you know, and must go to bed."

"But I'm not tired now."

"All the same," I began, when Beck cut me short without ceremony.

"Don't pay the smallest attention to him, Lady Gertrude. Of course you may come, if you like, and if you are not feeling too tired."

Gertrude's manner changed from chill winter to genial summer when we got together in my snugery.

"Whisky and soda is not good enough for this cabinet council," she said, and she knew where to fish out a bottle of champagne and two long thin tumblers. She herself, on compulsion, sipped a little cherry brandy and nibbled a biscuit. She was still looking pale from her exciting adventure.

"Now, Beck," I said, when we had got our cigars going, "whom do you suspect?"

"That's not a fair question," he protested. "Suspicion is not proof, much less certainty."

"That's always the way with you," I grumbled;

"you want to break the news on us in the end like a thunder-clap. We two are to be trusted ; we'll take an oath if you want us to."

"Wait a bit," Beck urged, "until I know something for certain."

"Please, Mr Beck," said Gertrude, and he gave in at once.

"Mind, it is only a guess, Lady Gertrude, but I think there is strong probability behind it. Did you happen to notice who stood on your dress?"

"No, there was a bit of a crush. I only just felt the tug."

"He didn't apologise, then? Under ordinary circumstances you would expect a gentleman to apologise."

"That's true, but I went out of the room very quickly."

"The man had time enough if he wanted ; he didn't want."

"Did you see him, Mr Beck?"

"Yes," said Paul, and I thought he coloured a little as he said it. "I happened to be looking that way at the time. I saw him tear your dress ; I saw him leave the room shortly after you. It looked to me as if the thing had been done on purpose. But I don't go on that. It must have been done on purpose so that you would have to go to the dressing-room while the sewing-maid was out of it. The thieves were too cunning to leave anything to chance. The laughing gas was ready for your coming ; if you had been five minutes late it would have been exhausted. It is plain there was a conspiracy. Now who were the conspirators? The man who tore your dress was one. Who was the other? Who had control of the

rooms? Who arranged that the sewing-maid should be away at the very time you should come to have your dress sewn up?"

"Lady Betty!" cried Gertrude. "Do you mean Lady Betty? Why, I thought she and you——" She blushed and left the sentence unfinished.

Beck went on quietly: "I don't say yes or no positively at present. I have only just told you in what direction suspicion leads me. When I add that the name of the man who tore your dress was the Honourable Neddy Baxter, a great friend of Lady Betty's, I have told you all I know."

"But you'll find out everything, you'll get back my lovely blue diamond," Gertrude entreated.

"I'll try my best," said Paul.

Gertrude thanked him as if he had already succeeded; I must confess I felt a little that way myself.

The rest of the story I have on hearsay. As we were smoking next morning after breakfast Paul said quite suddenly:

"I am thinking of going out of town for a few days, Charlie. Probably to-morrow morning at eight o'clock."

"Shall I go with you? I'd like to."

"Not this time, I'm afraid. I have already selected my travelling companion. The Honourable Neddy Baxter and myself have arranged to run over to Amsterdam together. That is to say, I've arranged it, and I fancy he will be good enough to fall in with my plans."

"Couldn't I go too?"

"No, I'm afraid not; he knows you and he doesn't know me. I mean this as a surprise party for the

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man who assaulted your sister and stole her diamond."

With those last words Beck dropped his tone of badinage, and there was a look in his eyes that I would not like to have brought there. I did not in the least envy the Honourable Neddy Baxter the pleasant little surprise there was in store for him.

CHAPTER XIV

HIDE AND SEEK

I SAW no more of Beck for a week, and had no word from him. Gertrude was in such a state of nervous excitement that I was afraid she would be ill. Every morning as she came down to breakfast she made for the letters that lay in a pile at the top of the breakfast table and turned away disappointed. It came at last. I saw her eyes light up as they fell on a packet.

"It is in Mr Beck's hand-writing," she said softly, "and the post-mark is Amsterdam. It looks like, but surely it cannot be. Why, he has only been six days away."

"If you open it you will know for certain," I ventured to suggest, for she was twisting the packet in her fingers without any apparent intention of breaking the seal.

"I suppose so," she assented, half reluctantly. Women like to play with surprise and curiosity.

She broke the seal and carefully untied the string instead of cutting it, and then from the cotton wool stuffing of a solid square box picked out the blue diamond.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she cried in sheer delight

and triumph. "But why hasn't he sent me a line with it? Oh, he has."

A small note was folded under the cotton wool in the wooden box, where I for one would never have looked for it. Gertrude fished it out and read it to herself. I thought a shadow of disappointment crossed her bright face as she read.

"May one hear?" I asked.

"Oh, any one may hear," she replied, "he is too modest for words. He writes as if he handed me a glove I happened to drop."

"MY DEAR LADY GERTRUDE,—I have much pleasure in restoring your blue diamond brooch. I send it by registered post to avoid delay. I trust the thieves who ill-treated you so shamefully will be brought to justice.

"I will be at Liverpool Station, London, the morning after you receive this note, and would be very glad if your brother could conveniently meet me on my arrival.—Yours ever sincerely,

"P. BECK."

"Would you like to come, too?" I asked maliciously.

Her bright eyes and heightened colour told how she was tempted.

"No," she said after a pause, "I'm afraid it wouldn't do. But mind, Charlie, you bring him straight on here; I'm simply aching to know what has happened."

"All right," I said, "straight as he'll come."

Let me confess that all that day my own impatience completely mastered me. I was, to use an Irish phrase, like "a hen on a hot griddle," never a moment at rest. Half an hour before the time I was on the platform, loitering aimlessly about, I thought the train would never come. But punctual to the hour it

steamed into the station. Beck's eye caught mine as the train went by, and he was at my side on the platform before it stopped. Always inclined to dandyism, he was dressed as I have never seen even Beck dressed before, in the extreme limit of masherdom. His tie was a triumph, his waistcoat a glory.

"Too good of you to come, old chap," he said as we shook hands, "and too bad of me to ask you. I've had the devil of a time of it, as the parrot said when he was interviewed by the monkey. Got a taxi? Yes, that bag, the new one, is mine, porter!"

"I'm under orders from Gertrude to fetch you straight home," I said, as I stepped after him into the taxi.

"No, no, I must go to my chambers first, have a bath and make myself moderately decent. I've wired to have breakfast ready. You join me at breakfast, and telephone your sister we will be over in an hour's time."

Of course he had his way, as he always had except when Gertrude is to the fore. When Greek meets Greek! In a quarter of an hour Beck was down to his breakfast, spick and span from his bath. While we ate we talked.

"You remember I told you I suspected the Honourable Neddy Baxter and Lady Betty Montague? Well, I was right."

"I guessed as much."

"It was not by any means their first venture in that line, I suspect. The plan was too adroitly laid for novices. Having marked my man I kept my eye on him as the easier of the two to watch. Amsterdam, you know, is the world's market for jewels. The

Honourable Neddy, I thought, was pretty sure to make for Amsterdam. Luck favoured me again.

"As I loitered about Liverpool station I saw him come in. There was half an hour to spare before the train, so I thought I saw my chance. I made a bolt to the telegraph office and sent a wire with a prepaid form to Lady Betty, and put his initials to it. 'Wire at once the lowest price.' Just as the train started I had the reply, 'Ten thou.' That clinched the question. With a light heart I purchased a first-class return to Amsterdam and stepped into the same carriage with the Honourable Neddy without as much as a tooth-brush in the way of luggage. I had got myself up in the rig you saw this morning on the chance of meeting him, but I stupidly neglected to take a bag and some things with me.

"We fraternised at once, interchanged civilities and cigars, and before we reached Harwich we were fast friends. You know how vacant I can look when I set my mind to it, and how candid. Well, I concealed nothing at all about myself from the Honourable Neddy. I told him I had lost my luggage and was travelling in the clothes I stood up in. It seems I had just come in for a pot of money by the death of my uncle and was celebrating. There as a little girl in the Alhambra that was gone on me, and I had promised to pick her up something pretty in the way of diamonds in Amsterdam, I had heard it was the place for that kind of thing. They piled on the price in London and Paris, but you could get something real nice for an old song in Amsterdam, if you knew the ropes.

"The Honourable Neddy knew the ropes and promised to help me, and we grew more chummy than

ever. We had a bottle of champagne on board to cement our friendship, and I took just a drop too much.

"I could not go to bed, of course, because I had no night gear, and my new pal obligingly offered to sit up with me. I don't know which of us suggested cards to while away the time, anyway, whichever suggested it the other gladly agreed. By a liberal tip we contrived to get a cabin to ourselves; by a lucky chance the Honourable Neddy had a couple of packs of cards in his bag. We played all through the night, first *écarté* and then *piquet*. He showed himself a past-master of both games, but though I played like a self-conceited duffer that fancied himself no end, he had only netted a beggarly hundred or so when we arrived at grey dawn at the Hook of Holland.

"I was, of course, eager for my revenge, the Honourable Neddy was good-naturedly willing to oblige me, so we started our game again, fresh as ever, the moment the train pulled out for Schiedam.

"It was a very interesting game, Charlie. The Honourable Neddy meant to pluck his pigeon clean. As I have said he played remarkably well, not to put too fine a point on it, he cheated shamelessly. Imitation, they say, is the sincerest flattery, I flattered him to the top of his bent. We were in the position of the two sharpers of whom one said to the other as they sat down to cards: 'Shall we play fair or all we know?'

"The Honourable Neddy and myself played 'all we knew,' and it turned out I knew a trifle more than he did. For one thing, I knew he was cheating while he regarded me as an innocent but honourable duffer. We played for a pretty smart figure from the first.

But when the hundred pounds came back to me he insisted on raising the stakes in order to make the most of his time. But I had a wonderful flow of luck, which his skill was unable to check. He kept on plunging recklessly, expecting every minute luck must change and skill prevail. All to no purpose. When we reached the Hagur I had his I.O.U.'s for £750 in my pocket-book.

"Then I refused to play any more. At first I pretended I was too sleepy, afterwards openly declared that he was not my match at the game, and that I had won as much of his money as I cared to. Gradually his temper began to flare up and I fanned the flame. 'You confounded young jackanapes!' he said at last, 'you know as much of the game as the sole of my shoe. It was your confounded luck that pulled you through. If you won't play, I won't pay, not a blooming farthing!'

"'I've got your I.O.U.'s' I retorted, and tapped my pocket-book for the express purpose of riling him. 'If you don't pay I'll post you in every club in London as a defaulter. I'll publish the I.O.U.'s facsimile in the *Winning Post*.'

"He was in a white heat of rage, but there was method in his madness. His eyes fixed on the pocket-book which I held so carelessly. I could see that he meant to have his I.O.U.'s back without paying for them. As you know, he is a big, muscular chap, twice my size, and did not expect that I should be much trouble, especially when taken by surprise.

"But I was playing for this all the time, and was ready when it came. As he made a sudden dash for the pocket-book I snapped it out of reach, and at the same time slapped him across the face. Then for

three minutes we had as pretty a tussle in the narrow, swaying, railway carriage as you could wish to see. He struck out furiously and I dodged, waiting my chance. Parrying a slogging right-hander I landed a neat upper cut with my left on the point of the chin, and, in the elegant language of the ring, 'put him to sleep.'

"It was a bitter disappointment. I made sure of finding the diamond. He hadn't got it, but it was some consolation to find in the inner lining of the last pocket I searched a long letter signed 'Betty,' which I saw at a glance was most interesting.

"Without scruple or hesitation I transferred the letter from his pocket to my own just as he began to wake up. He grunted, stretched himself and opened his eyes, little or none the worse of his knock out. I was kneeling at his side with the brandy flask in my hand, horribly flurried and excited and gabbling apologies and contrition. 'Oh, I am so sorry,' I cried, 'I thought I had killed you. I never got such a fright in my life. I know I behaved like a bounder. Of course I should have given you your revenge.'

"He took a strong pull at the brandy flask, sat up on his seat, and generously forgave me. Five minutes later we were at the cards again, hammer and tongs.

"My luck deserted me, as I had no further use for it, and he had practically got back his I.O.U.'s when the train glided smoothly through green meadows and bright wide flower patches, cross-barred with shining canals into Amsterdam. So busy and excited was the Honourable Neddy with the cards and the recapture of his I.O.U.'s that he never missed the letter until

after we had parted the best of friends at the railway station.

"Already I guessed what had become of the blue diamond. Lady Betty and her friend were taking no risks. The gem would come to him by registered post on the wire of his safe arrival in Amsterdam. There was nothing more to be gained by fraternising with Neddy, the friendly game was now completely played out. He was bound to miss the letter and guess how he had lost it. My trick with the wire from Liverpool station was also pretty certain to come to light. The Honourable Neddy would be on his guard, I must keep clear of him for the future.

"I heard him give the direction, 'Amsel Hotel' to the driver at the station, and I proceeded to quarter myself opposite, and selected a room where I had full view of his front door. Then I set out to buy myself necessaries in the town.

"You have never been in Amsterdam, Charlie? The whole place, streets, houses, people are appallingly clean. With the dust and grime of a day and a night's travel on me I felt like an outcast in this sanctuary of cleanliness, as out of place as a dirty boy in a maiden aunt's drawing-room.

"It was a curious feeling to walk about those clean streets and in and out of those speckless shops in a state of such absolute destitution. I bought a complete Dutch outfit, at last, and a bag to put it in, and so back to my hotel. My friend was going out as I passed the door, but I dodged down a side street, and, fortunately, he did not see me. He walked on briskly, I following, until he came to a telegraph office and went in. That was enough for me, if my theory was right, and I was pretty sure it was right,

the jewel was due by the next registered post. Then we should see what we should see.

"From my bedroom window I watched out for the postal delivery at the Honourable Neddy Baxter's hotel, then I watched out for himself. About eleven o'clock I was rewarded by seeing him come out into the street, and with a quick look up and down walk briskly away. Making all the haste I could I was only just in time to catch a glimpse of his figure as he went smartly round the corner. At first I had a hope, a vague hope, that he would carry the diamond straight away to some diamond merchant, that I should catch him *flagrante delectu*. Plainly he was too cautious for that. He turned into one or two shops as he passed, a tobacconist's and a stationer's, and made a few small purchases. Then he headed, walking a good four miles an hour for the open country, I following two or three hundred yards in the rear.

"From the motion of his elbows I could see he was doing something with his hands as he walked. What it was, of course, I could not tell, nor did I guess until afterwards.

"As we got further and further out into the country amid the meadows and gaily variegated beds of tulips, crocuses, daffodils, and hyacinths, I was strongly tempted to make a dash for the diamond then and there. He had it about him, I was almost sure, and I was not less sure that if I once laid hands on him I could secure it. But it was almost certain, too, that he was armed, and would not hesitate to shoot. He would have an excuse ready if I attacked him, and I had no wish to pose as a dead thief, so I waited and watched.

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"As an English tourist interested in my surroundings I carried my field-glasses with me and used them. But the queer old town, the windmills and the canals, the meadows and the fields of flowers in streaks and patches of vivid colours claimed very little of my attention. In all Holland there was no view half so interesting to me as the Honourable Edward Baxter.

"He slackened his pace as he got clear of the town, and sauntered slowly by the canal until he came to one of the innumerable bridges. Leaning over the parapet he took a cigarette from a small gold case, lit it with a match from a small gold matchbox, and smoked slowly and luxuriously.

"They were capital glasses of mine. Though we were nearly a quarter of a mile apart I could see every movement distinctly, and read every varying expression of his face. At present he seemed merely bent on wasting a pleasant half-hour watching the sluggish flow of the water that mirrored the pale blue of the sky. Still I watched and waited. He smoked his cigarette clean to the end, which he flung, a hissing spark, into the water. Very deliberately he extracted another from the case. But when he came to light it he fumbled with the small gold matchbox till it slipped from his fingers and flashed a streak of yellow light in the sunshine and splashed in the water below. Plainly, as if I were beside him, I saw a look of almost savage annoyance that came into his face and guessed that curses came from his moving lips. For a moment he stood gazing down into the muddy depths where the box had disappeared. Then with an angry gesture he flung the unlighted cigarette after the box and turned back into town.

"I guessed he had seen me watching him and this pantomime was for my edification; if so, it did not deceive me for a moment.

"Did I ever tell you, Charlie, how the governor fished out a necklace of drowned diamonds, which had been hidden in the depths of the sea with a cork float and fishing-line attached. Not for a moment did I doubt that the astute thief had played the same trick with the blue diamond. It was safely hidden, I felt certain, in the foot-deep mud at the bottom of the six-foot water of the canal. I had sight of him the whole way walking rapidly across the level plain until his solitary figure vanished into the town, then as rapidly as he had left I made for the bridge over which the matchbox had dropped.

"In my whole life I never experienced a keener disappointment. The surface of the canal below the bridge was clear as a newly dusted mirror. Not so much as a leaf or a twig or a blade of grass showed on the smooth dark water. With the powerful glasses I searched the surface as with a microscope, I made sure that if so much as a thread showed I should detect it. There was nothing. The matchbox had disappeared irretrievably into the mud at the bottom.

"Raging with disappointment I cursed myself as half a dozen different kinds of fools. The rogue was cleverer than I thought. He had seen me watching him, and had fooled me to the top of my bent. While I was loitering on the canal bridge he was disposing of the blue diamond to the best advantage to some not too scrupulous diamond merchant in Amsterdam.

"Could I be yet in time? There was a bare chance, one in a thousand, that I should catch him, and I set out at a walk that was almost a run for

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the town. I had reached the outskirts when the true explanation flashed upon me. It was so clear and so certain that I stopped short in my tracks and laughed aloud. Then I walked on slowly, laughing to myself at my discovery.

"Once in the town I went to my hotel and changed my clothes for a lighter suit, purchased a fishing-rod, as a pretext for fishing, and betook myself again to the bridge.

"For half an hour I fished assiduously and caught what I expected to catch — nothing. From the bridge I got down to the canal's brink, and, waiting until the coast was clear I laid my rod aside and slipped quietly, clothes and all, into the cold water. The touch of it chilled me to the bones, as I dived slowly towards the spot where the match-box went in, searching the dim depths with my eyes. Far down in the still water I caught sight of a little wavering line of white and struck out straight for it; within a yard or two I knew it was a wooden match magnified and distorted by the water. As my fingers closed upon it I felt the little tug and pull one feels when a fish is on his line; there was a thread fastened to the match, and as I pulled I felt a weight lifted from the mud below.

"The strain on my lungs was beginning to tell. The exhausted air went up in a little stream of bubbles from my nostrils, but I pulled away at the thread until the gold match-box came into my eager hands. Then I turned and darted upward for the light that glimmered and wavered over my head.

"Three strong strokes and my head broke through the placid surface of the canal, six more and I was at the bank.

"Some one must have seen me tumble in, for there was a little crowd on the bank when I came out. Three Dutch hands were stretched out to me and there was a guttural murmur of Dutch sympathy and satisfaction when I scrambled on to dry land. My rod lying about was the explanation of my ducking, and a good samaritan, who carried a rod, warmed me with a pull from a squat flask of fiery Hollands.

"With the gold match-box and its precious contents safe in the pocket of my clinging trousers I walked back at a round pace to my hotel, dripping canal water as I went. I changed my clothes without opening the box, I knew the diamond was there without looking.

"An hour later I was at the central police office with an application for the arrest of the Honourable Edward Baxter, on the charge of stealing the blue diamond. I had trouble in putting the Dutch police in motion, but when I showed them the jewel and the matchbox with his crest on it, and my story of the robbery was confirmed by wire from Scotland Yard, the Dutch police got busy at last.

"The Honourable Neddy, whom they found placidly lunching at his Hotel, made a bit of a fuss at the start, but at the sight of the matchbox he collapsed. When the extradition formalities are completed he will revisit his native shores.

"That is the whole story, Charlie, I was never so glad to have a scoundrel laid by the heels, he and his wretched accomplice might have killed your sister between them."

"How about Lady Betty Montague?"

"The warrant is out for her too; she may be arrested at any moment."

As he spoke the servant entered the room.

"A lady to see you, sir. Says she must see you at once, it is a matter of life or death."

"Show her up, John," said Beck quietly, then to me as the servant left the room, "I can guess who the lady is."

I guessed too, and we both guessed right. In another moment Lady Betty came in with a rush, charmingly attired and looking all the prettier for her manifest excitement.

"Oh, I'm so glad to catch you at home," she cried, stretching out a daintily gloved hand which Beck quietly ignored, "and you, too, Lord Kirwood. You are a very naughty man, Mr Beck," she went on, "and I suppose I ought not to speak to you at all. But as you got me in to all this trouble you may as well get me out of it. I have just had a line from poor Neddy, which he managed to write under the very noses of the stupid Dutch police. You were too hard on him, indeed you were. But he is a man and can stand racket, and has promised not to give me away.

"Of course you will save me," she went on after a pause, with a new note of anxiety in her voice, for Beck had said no word and made no sign. "You won't have me sent to jail for that wretched jewel, especially as the girl has got it back again. It was no fault of mine if I wanted money and had to get it the best way I could."

"I fear," said Beck coldly, "you have been reading the romances of Baffles, the 'amateur burglar,' and of the stupid imitators of Baffles. That's all very well in a story, but in real life robbery is robbery, whatever the ingenious fiction writer may think or

write to the contrary, and those that rob must take the consequences."

"Now don't be too absurd, Mr Beck," she protested half angrily. "Surely you do not class me with those low people who go about with jemmies and revolvers and break into safes, and all that sort of thing. I'm no hypocrite, goodness knows, whatever else I may be. I have to live, I suppose, as well as other people in my position, and I cannot live without money. My way is better than company promoters and money-lenders who cheat the widows and orphans. Whatever I take I take from people that can afford it; surely that must count in my favour."

"You can try that argument, Lady Betty," said Beck shortly, "when you come before a jury of your fellow-countrymen."

A quiet, middle-aged man entered the door behind Lady Betty and put his hand on her shoulder.

"You will excuse me, sir," he said to Beck, "duty is duty. I saw you leave your house, my lady, and followed you here. I've a cab waiting."

CHAPTER XV

THE FINGER MARKS ON THE CUP

AS has already been said the records of the Kirwood family were full of exciting adventures, which is indeed the main reason why this book came to be written. We were not well out of the robbery and excitement of one jewel robbery when we were into another.

"I've news for you, Charlie," cried Gertrude, as she darted impetuously into the breakfast room one morning, her silk skirts rustling like a small waterfall, her eyes dancing with delight. "Such news!"

"A marriage, of course," I said, looking up from my paper.

"Well, yes, a marriage, but you need not look so frightened. Margery is not going to be married, at least not to any one else. Now guess!"

"Not Beck, by any chance."

"Don't be absurd," she answered, with quite unnecessary heat, "you are too stupid for words. It's Cynthia Dale to Starkey Colthurst. Isn't it glorious? I had two letters, which I read in bed this morning, a short one from dad, and a gushing one from Cynthia, but they both came to the same thing, they are to be married in a month."

"I thought you said Starkey Colthurst. Well, I

wish the vernor joy, she will make a nice little step-mother."

"Don't try to be silly, I assure you it is an unnecessary exertion. But aren't you glad, Charlie?"

I was glad. Not as glad as Gertrude, of course—a man is never as much pleased with a marriage as a woman—but very glad all the same. Starkey Colthurst is the best fellow going, and Cynthia Dale is a fascinating little witch. I might have fallen in love with her myself if I had not seen Margery Glenmore.

The marriage was what chaperons would call "eminently suitable." Starkey Colthurst was a poor man, but by common consent the ablest member of the government, a man well in the running for the premiership, and Cynthia Dale was an heiress. Her mother had died when she was born, and her father when she was only a slip of a girl, appointing my father her guardian and trustee for her estates in three countries. She was horribly rich, but if she had not got a penny to her name Cynthia was a girl that any man might have gone mad about, a lively, lovely, little brunette, tingling with vitality from the toes of her tiny feet to the rebellious curls of her dainty head.

Gertrude and she had been at school together in Paris. There was just three years difference between them, and three years is an eternity to school-girls. Gertrude mothered her at school, picked her out of innumerable girlish scrapes into which she plunged, and loved her as women always love the people they are particularly good to.

In her first season Cynthia had caught Colthurst! Her first season; her first ball; her first appearance

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in the ball-room. He came, saw, and was conquered. Colthurst who, if he could help it, had never looked at a girl before.

Some one has said that a man of one book is a man to be feared. The man of one love is not less formidable. He wooed and won with the same irresistible force with which he conducted a debate, and carried a triumphant division. It was about the fastest love-making on record. A fortnight after they met they were engaged, in a month's time they were to be married. Never were a pair more unlike, never were a pair more desperately in love. The gay little coquette was puzzling her pretty head with high politics. The grave statesman was as recklessly, as irresponsively happy as a school-boy.

All this Gertrude told me in quick gushes of talk at the breakfast table, continually interrupting me and herself.

"And, O Charlie, she is to have the Dale emeralds as a wedding present. The old Countess of Rockwell is giving them to her. They came to the Countess as belonging to the elder branch. She is as old as the hills, and as poor as a church mouse, she hasn't two thousand a year of her own, but nothing would induce her to part with the emeralds, and now she is giving them away of her own accord. People say she is half in love with Mr Colthurst herself, she always goes to hear him in the House. At any rate, the emeralds have come out of the safe, where they have lain for the last thirty years, and are being reset for Cynthia. It is a lovely necklace. Cynthia saw it once; she says two of the stones are nearly as big as my blue diamond, but I don't believe her."

The course of true love ran smooth as it ran fast

The governor was to give the bride away and Gertrude was best bridesmaid. Among the guests that filled the house to overflowing were Mr and Mrs Beck, whom Gertrude had coaxed to come, though they hardly ever stirred from their own lovely home. Young Paul was with us too, of course.

Every day there was some fun on of one kind or another. Picnics on land and water, tennis, golf and cricket, flirtation and serious love-making. The Dale emeralds arrived and were duly gloated over by the girls, and all went merry as a marriage bell until the late arrival of Colonel Winstanley. That was really the beginning.

Colonel Winstanley was Cynthia's distant cousin and god-father. There was some doubt as to whether he could tear himself away from Monte Carlo for the wedding, and Cynthia was in high delight when the wire reached to say he was coming. Indeed we were all delighted, for Winstanley was one of the best fellows going. A gentleman of the old school, he had been everywhere and seen everything, and could make others see with his eyes. Bland, courteous, and kindly, with playful gossip for the drawing-room, and a wonderful stock of subtle delicately flavoured stories for the smoking-room; he was always king of his company wherever his company might happen to be. His ill luck at cards and on the turf were so constant as to be proverbial, but in all England there was no more good-humoured loser. To wind up, he was the best golfer in England for his age, always excepting old Beck.

We expected Winstanley to dinner and waited a trying quarter of an hour for him. When we had quite abandoned hope, to every one's amazement he

turned up about midnight. He had missed his train, but the plucky old chap was not to be beaten, so he came down in the guard's van of a cattle train, and, leaving his luggage at the station, he walked across, a matter of five miles, carrying his wedding present in a small black bag. Five times he had lost his way, but he blundered in at last after midnight, fresh as a daisy and with a hearty appetite for his supper. He told us his various misadventures while he ate, and had us all in a roar of laughter. Then he produced his wedding present from his bag and tantalised us all with a good look at the case. But nothing we could say or do would induce him to open it. The bride elect had gone to bed, and the bride elect he insisted should have the first look at his present.

I guessed what it was, right away. I can guess eggs when I see shells.

"It's the Winstanley Loving Cup, for a thousand, Colonel," I cried. "The shape of the case is enough for me."

"Right, my boy," said the Colonel; he was not a bit annoyed at being caught out. "It was made for Henry VIII., of bigamous memory, and is supposed to be the finest bit of silver in England. It is worth its weight in gold forty times over."

"I'd sooner have the gold," said young Roger Amser, "it would melt better."

It may be well to say just a word or two about Roger Amser while I am at it. He was a handsome young scapegrace of good family, full of fun and life, the very jolliest of the party, and a prime favourite of the men and women, especially the women. He was always the last in bed at night, the first up in the morning. Gertrude had asked him because Nancy

Lovel was coming, partly I think to rile the bitter old dowager, Lady Cardowan, Nancy Lovel's aunt and guardian, who intended the pretty little girl and her substantial fortune for her own dissipated son, but poor Amser took little by his invitation, for Nancy was under the complete control of her aunt.

The Colonel hurried off to his room after supper, leaving the rest of us to bridge or billiards, but before he went he insisted on placing his cup, still in its case, on a table in a room on the second floor specially reserved for the presents.

Early next morning I was awakened by an impatient knocking at my door and Gertrude's voice clamouring, "Get up, Charlie, get up at once! There has been a burglary in the house and Cynthia's wedding presents are all gone."

You bet I jumped into my clothes in less than no time, and was upstairs and in the room where a growing crowd were already assembled.

Gertrude and Cynthia, rushing up early in the morning to see the loving cup, had discovered the burglary, which was clearly the job of a cool and discriminating thief. All the gold and jewels were gone, all the silver and china and whatnots remained. One bit of silver, indeed, seemed to have tempted the cupidity or artistic taste of the thief. The loving cup was out of its case, it had been lifted from the table where the Colonel placed it the night before, and dropped by the thief on a table near the door, prudence at the last moment triumphing over greed.

The crowd when I entered was in a ferment of excitement, which made even the women unconscious of *déshabillé*. One fat old dowager had put on her

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wig with its back to the front, and a society beauty appeared with only one side of her face tinted for the day's triumphs. But they were in no mood to blush for themselves or laugh at their neighbours. Consternation at the burglar's clean sweep swallowed up all other emotions, as Aaron's rod swallowed up all the rods of the Egyptian impostors. The room was buzzing with exclamations, explanations, and suggestions. Every one found some clue of his own to explain the plunder of the jewels and ensure the capture of the thief.

Only three people in the crowd were silent, watching the scene with quiet attentive eyes that let no detail slip—the three Becks, father, mother, and son.

But it was Roger Amser who discovered the finger prints on the loving cup. It was Roger Amser who found the knotted rope hanging from the window, and the double row of footprints stretching away to the road, and when later on his own footprints were found in a different part of the lawn, footprints which led to the rose garden and were lost on the gravel walks, he had a ready and natural explanation. He could not sleep, he said, and passed out through the French window of his bedroom for a stroll in the moonlight. Then it came out a little reluctantly that after he got back to bed he heard a cautious footstep passing his door and return as silently half an hour later.

Why did he not give the alarm? Why did he not open his door to see who passed?

He thought it was a ghost, he confessed, and hid his head under the clothes. He was horribly afraid of ghosts. It was remarked at the time as significant that Colonel Winstanley, whose room was only two doors from Amser's, heard no footsteps.

It was Amser, as I have said, who found the double track of boot marks leading from the window to the public road about a quarter of a mile away, but it was young Beck who traced them along the road for about half a mile until they suddenly disappeared. He found it quite an easy job, he told me afterwards, as the burglar evidently made no effort to cover his trail.

Beck, beating about the place where the track vanished, with head close to the ground like a hound that has lost scent, made an important discovery. Buried close under the wall that fenced the road and covered with a large flat stone he found a pair of coarse, strong boots and a very complete and interesting burglar's outfit.

This treasure trove naturally created great excitement. The boots fitted the tracks on the lawn, the tools indicated the work of a professional. To the burglar's outfit no clue could be found either then or afterwards, but on the tags of the boots, which were almost new, was found the name of a shop in London where they were bought, and enquiry elicited very interesting information from the shopkeeper's assistant.

Just two days before the burglary the boots were bought for ready money by a man who directed them to be sent to his lodgings in Seven Dials. The shop assistant remembered the man minutely, a big, coarse man with a front tooth gone and a red scar over his eyebrow. The description fitted like a glove the notorious Simon Crackshaw who had emerged from jail only a week before on completion of a stretch of five years for a daring burglary, and who had apparently lost no time about getting back to work

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again. When the finger and thumb marks were examined in the Investigation Department and found identical with those of the burglar, that had been taken when he was last in prison, doubt passed to certainty.

The hue and cry was started at once. Portraits of Crackshaw were everywhere, in the widest circulating London dailies, on the dead walls and hoardings with a tempting notice attached offering £500 for such information as might lead to his arrest. His haunts were searched by the police, and traps were set in the public-houses he favoured in his brief interludes of liberty, but all to no purpose. The substantial Crackshaw had vanished into thin air and left not a trace behind.

At this time, as may be imagined, the excitement amongst the wedding guests was intense, and every day increasing in intensity. Nothing was talked of or thought of but the burglary. The papers were pounced on as they arrived from London and a dash made for the standing heading, "THE MYSTERIOUS BURGLARY," to the neglect of all other news. All amusements, except love-making, were abandoned for the fascinating pursuit of the amateur detective. The craze took different people in different ways. Some, like Von Molke, pondered over the problem in their rooms, reconstructing the crime (that was the great phrase), in their analytic minds. Others pursued it in the fields, diligently hunting for clues. These latter generally went in pairs—"mixed lonesomes"—they were called, and in the pretty woods and dells with which the grounds abounded, and by the mossy margins of the trout streams it is to be feared that they occasionally

allowed their minds to be distracted from the important business in hand.

Old Colonel Winstanley was in great request because he had actually seen and spoken to the redoubtable Crackshaw. Not only was he one of the magistrates who committed him for trial for his last burglary, but he had visited him in prison and was present at his trial from start to finish.

"One of the most remarkable men I ever met," the Colonel told me, "a man of infinite courage, cunning, and resource. As a soldier he would have gone far. I had a talk with him in prison, sir, and offered him a chance when he came out, but I found him quite satisfied with his career, and what's more proud of it. 'Bless yer innercent heart, gov'nor,' he said, 'I'm not down-hearted. I can do this little stretch on my blooming nut. I'll have time to think out things in my study with nothing to disturb me, and I'll be up to a new trick or two when I come out. Keep your eye close on your plate chest when my time is up, I wouldn't be surprised if I was to pay you a short visit jest for old friendship's sake.'"

In the detective race Roger Amser and young Paul were first favourites, and the betting was even between them. I backed Amser, for a dozen pairs of gloves with Miss Glenmore, who had been induced to come with her mother for a week end, and I went up next morning to London to buy a dozen pairs of sixes in case of accidents.

From the first Amser made no secret of his belief that the theft had been committed by a guest in the house, by the guest whose foot he had heard going past his door on the morning of the burglary. Colonel Winstanley, on the other hand,

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laughed at the notion. He pinned his faith to his friend Crackshaw.

"The fellow is a miracle," he said. "Alone he did it. If you saw him you could never doubt it."

Beck said nothing.

About a week after the burglary a curious little incident occurred. Something or another brought Winstanley to Amser's dressing-room one morning just before breakfast, and on the table he noticed a little diamond brooch shaped like a butterfly. It struck the Colonel, who had a quick eye for jewels, that it was very like one he had seen on the night he went to put the loving cup among the presents. Amser, when he spoke to him, laughed at the notion, and they agreed to have the verdict of Cynthia on the point.

Without a moment's hesitation she recognised the brooch.

"Of course I know it," she said. "It was sent to me by a dear friend in France. You need not look like that, godfather, it was a girl friend. I thought it the prettiest brooch of the lot, I just loved it. No, I couldn't possibly be mistaken."

At that it was, as the Yankees say, "up to" Amser to say how he had come by the brooch. The Colonel delicately hinted as much, but Amser point-blank refused. He couldn't tell, he said, it wasn't his own secret. When the Colonel pressed him he turned on him fiercely. Did he mean to suggest, he demanded, that he was the thief. If so he had best speak out, and he would know how to deal with the charge.

The thing came to my ears through Cynthia. It is only fair to say that she hadn't the faintest suspicion that Amser, who was a pet of hers, was implicated in

the theft. She thought, as she naïvely put it, if he would only tell where the brooch was found something else might be found in the same place.

Poor Amser was by no means as rampageous with me as he had been at the first blush with the Colonel. I suppose time had brought wisdom, but he was as obstinate as ever to retain his secret.

"It's no use, Charlie," he said. "I don't know whether you will still let me call you Charlie, you may think me a low down thief if you like, you may kick me out of the house if you like, and send for the police, but I simply can't tell. It isn't I won't but I can't. You would think the same if you only knew, but what is the use when you can't know."

I confess I was puzzled. The thing was queer, any way you looked at it. But in spite of myself I could not help believing Amser, and I was awfully glad when Beck, when I told him, advised me to lie low and say nothing.

I suppose Cynthia talked, though I dare swear she meant no harm. I could notice on all sides that the cold shoulder was politely offered to poor Amser. Often when two or three people got together they stopped talking suddenly when he came up and got red in the face. He could not help noticing, but he stuck it out pluckily until one evening the smouldering bomb burst.

There were about a score of people in the drawing-room playing bridge. Amser had been commandeered to make a fourth at a table with Lady Cardowan, with whom no one cared particularly to play. As dealer he went diamonds and Lady Cardowan doubled on strong outside cards. He got the Grand Slam with eight trumps and five honours in his own hand. Her

ladyship had a sharp tongue and knew how to use it. At the best she was never sweet-tempered at cards, but this tragedy was entirely too much for her temper.

"I congratulate you, Mr Amser," she said in a voice that might be heard three tables off. "You are wonderfully lucky in diamonds. I don't know how you find them to hand so conveniently."

There was no mistaking her meaning. Almost every one in the room had heard the whispered story of the brooch and bedroom. A sudden hush quenched the chit-chat of the other tables, as the shadow of a hawk silences the twitter of the song birds. Not a card was played. There was a long awkward silence while the players looked at each other not knowing what to think or say.

Then a man got up so awkwardly that his chair fell with a crash. I knew him for a decent, straight fellow and a great pal of Amser's.

"Straight talk is best, Lady Cardowan," he said. "What do you mean?"

"My meaning is plain enough," she answered icily, though I could see she was a bit frightened at having gone so far. "Mr Amser was found in possession of a diamond brooch that was stolen and cannot or will not tell how he came by it."

"But I can tell, I can tell."

It was a shrill girl's voice that spoke, and shy little Nancy Lovel flung herself boldly into the centre of the group. She was as pale as death and her blue eyes looked black in the whiteness of her face, but she faced the formidable Lady Cardowan undaunted.

"I can tell," she cried again a third time. "I found it on the path of the rose garden when we were walking there one night together. I saw it

glitter in the moonlight and I picked it up. Yes, aunt, we were walking together, you need not look like that. We are engaged and I was walking with him, too, the night the things were stolen, and he wouldn't tell for my sake. He is worth the whole lot of you put together, and you, you wicked old woman, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

With this last audacious fling at Lady Cardowan, she walked boldly across the room and stood beside her lover. If ever I saw adoration in a man's eyes it was in Roger Amser's then.

Colonel Winstanley was the first to break the silence with stately old-fashioned dignity. "We all owe an apology to Mr Amser," he said, "who have wronged his honour even by a doubt. I am glad to be the first to make it."

There was a general murmur of apology, but Lady Cardowan sat in ungracious silence. Amser bowed his acknowledgments, a little coldly, I thought, and left the room with Nancy Lovel.

Two or three days later he left the house, cutting short his visit by a week. "I would give my right eye to catch the thief," he said to Beck and myself as he shook hands at parting. "I shall be under a cloud until he is caught."

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PART III



CHAPTER XVI

THE ALIBI

ALL this time the two people most concerned seemed to take the least interest in the business. Cynthia and Colthurst were as gay as thrushes on a cherry tree on the rare occasions anybody caught sight of them.

"That's all very well," commented Gertrude, with the wisdom of her sex, "but wait until the honeymoon is over and the bridal parties begin, and she'll break her heart about the Dale emeralds."

With a great deal of manœuvring she managed to get the three Becks and myself together in the library and inaugurated a cabinet council on the burglary.

"Whom do you suspect, Mr Beck?" she asked old Paul abruptly.

"My dear young lady," he said, with that slow, wise smile of his, "I never suspect anybody."

"It must have been that man, Crackshaw," she persisted, "else how could the marks of his fingers and thumb get on Colonel Winstanley's loving cup?"

"I think I remember once," I said to old Paul, "long before I had the pleasure of knowing you personally, reading a case of yours in which the famous Baffles imitated the finger-marks of an absent

burglar with india-rubber gloves. I thought it very ingenious at the time. Could these marks by any chance have been made in the same way?"

"No," he said decisively, "I have examined them under the microscope. There are a score of proofs that they were made by the burglar in person. For one thing I found traces of blood, human blood or monkey's. No monkey has turned up in a burglary since the mystery of the Rue Morgue, so it must be a man."

"But why should a man make those impressions with his cut finger? Wouldn't he tie up the cut?"

"Unless he needed the blood to make them perfectly plain and unmistakable," suggested old Beck.

"You think, sir, that——" young Paul asked eagerly.

But Gertrude broke in impatiently before old Paul could reply.

"You are only laughing at me, and I want to talk sense. If Crackshaw in the flesh, as Mr Beck says, made those marks, Crackshaw must plainly be the man who stole the jewels. The first thing is to catch Crackshaw."

"Unless he is already caught," put in Mrs Beck.

"But if he is caught where is he?" queried Gertrude, hopelessly bewildered.

"That is the real question we have got to answer," said Mrs Beck, speaking to us but with her bright eyes fixed on her son. "If you read detective stories, Lady Gertrude, you will read in one of Gaboriou's that the ingenious criminal always provides a strong alibi."

"But the alibi is to prove that he wasn't there, isn't it?" objected Gertrude. "How can he prove he wasn't there when he was?"

"That is the very puzzle we must solve," said Mrs Beck, her gaze still on her son.

I saw young Paul's eyes suddenly light up.

"So that was it," he said slowly. "'Pon my soul I believe you are right, little mother, you are always right. A devilish smart trick, too! I'm off to London to-morrow. I fancy the fox is hiding in the dog's kennel."

Mrs Beck nodded brightly.

"You will drive me mad between you," cried Gertrude, with comical petulance. "Pray, what are you going to do in London, Mr Beck?"

"Look around me," said Paul. "Can you come, Charlie?" he added to me. "Can you get away for a few days? I think I am beginning to see light."

It was a bit of a grind getting away from a houseful of guests who, I verily believe, would have followed us hot foot in an excited procession to London if they had the least notion of what we were after, but Gertrude managed it for us on the faithful promise that she should have the first news.

Beck's first draw was the lodgings of William Watson, *alias* Simon Crackshaw, in Seven Dials. Rather to his surprise, I think, he found the lodging-house clean and respectable, and the landlady a decent, middle-aged Irish woman, every feature of whose good-looking good-humoured face denied any sympathy with crime. She was quite willing to tell us all she knew, plainly she enjoyed the mystery and loved to talk of the vanished Watson.

"I never laid eyes on him," she told us, "until he came after the room. A big, powerful man, dressed like a sailor, with a grin on his face as if he were having some sort of a joke with himself. Sorra a

handful of baggage he had with him," continued Mrs Maloney; "but he paid a fortnight's rent in advance like a man. Faix, I remember well, he took out a bundle of new five pound notes, and laid one down for me and asked me for change. 'There's more where that came from, me dear,' he says. He had his bit of dinner in the kitchen that night and not one thing with it but a quart of porter. Shortly after that he went off with himself carrying a pair of boots that came for him under his arm, and from that blessed moment I never seen sight nor light of him."

She showed us the poor, clean little bedroom that had been scrupulously reserved for the departed lodger. The man had only been in it a moment to settle his tie at a scrap of looking glass. The room told us nothing.

"A blank draw," I said, as we got into the street, "the fox has gone to earth."

"We'll dig him out," retorted Beck. "Let us have a good dinner somewhere, there is no more to be done to-night, and we have a hard day's work before us to-morrow and for some days to come, unless luck lightens the job for us."

Starting early next morning in company with an inspector we made a round of the police-stations in London, and were allowed to examine the charge sheets for the 17th May, the day before the burglary. The fourth try we got on his track. There it was in the big, sprawling hand of the police sergeant, the short and simple annals of "William Watson, sailor, drunk and disorderly and creating an obstruction in the street." The convictions at Westminster Police Court next morning completed the story.

Fined a pound with the option of a fortnight's imprisonment.

"He took the jail," said Paul confidently.

Eager as a hound on hot scent, he carried me straight for Wormwood Scrubs, and five minutes later we were in the cell of the redoubtable Watson, *alias* Crackshaw.

"Rum co e," the warder whispered to us as we walked down the echoing flagged corridor, "I can't make him out. He is in the best of spirits and full of his jokes, says he is cummin' into his fortin when he gits out, and that he is air-in-law to a first-class aristocrat."

William Watson was at home. He received us sitting on his low bed, nodded familiarly to the warder and grinned graciously at us. His burly frame looked huge in the tight-fitting uniform.

"Welcome, gents," he said. "To tell yer the truth I'm a bit tired of my own company. Won't yer interjuce us,"—this to the warder,— "oh, very well, please yourself, yer welcome anyways. William Watson, at yer service. What will yer have to drink?"

"Nonsense," said Beck sharply, "we know you are Simon Crackshaw."

The big man grinned.

"Have it yer own way, gov'nor. It's a pity a poor man won't be let have an incog. as well as his betters. The king himself don't always go by his own name, I'm told. What could Simon Crackshaw do for yer supposin' for a moment I was him?"

"You are wanted for a burglary at Kirwood Castle."

There was no sign of alarm on the broad, coarse

face, only amusement. Crackshaw grinned like a man relishing a first-class practical joke.

"Indeed, now, that's queer! I never heard tell of the place in my life much less saw it."

"The marks of your fingers and thumb were found on a silver cup."

Watson, or Crackshaw, chuckled hoarsely.

"When did yer say, mister, that the burglary was committed?"

"The eighteenth of May."

I thought Beck was a bit previous in giving away the case, but I did not like to interfere. Crackshaw turned to the warder.

"When did I come on this little visit?"

"The 17th May," said the warder.

"And I haven't been out much since, have I?"

"Not to my knowledge," said the warder, in grim appreciation of the joke.

The burly ruffian turned again to Beck in mock indignation.

"I always said those marks were most deceitful. I said it in my last trial, but the judge wouldn't believe me, but gave me five years instead, so he did; he knows better, I hope, by now. I tell you what, mates, I'll come on the government for compensation. I'll write to the *Times* about it, see if I don't!" He clattered his big feet delightedly on the stone floor of his cell.

"Wish you luck, Mr Crackshaw," said Beck good-humouredly. "You are a clever chap, and you have a clever friend."

"Thank you kindly," said the prisoner affably, and the closing door framed the same bulldog grin on his formidable face.

"Rum go, sir," said the warder, between whom and Beck a sovereign had unostentaciously passed. "Is it sure the marks are his?"

"Quite sure," Beck replied. "By the way, warder, when does he get out?"

"To-morrow, sir, at twelve."

"When does he meet his aristocrat, did he happen to tell you?"

"The evening he goes out, sir. He lets on the other is dying to meet him."

"I should like to see him off the premises, without his seeing me, of course. I want to make the acquaintance of this interesting aristocrat. Do you think it could be managed?"

"Quite easy, sir," said the smiling warder, who doubtless saw another tip looming in the distance.

The next day Beck started alone for the jail. "When the game is very wary," he explained, "it is sometimes prudent to tie up one of the dogs."

He returned to lunch in excellent humour, I have seldom seen him so exultant. "Now, by St Paul, the work goes bravely on," he exclaimed dramatically when we met. "By the way, Charlie, I ran across Colonel Winstanley and young Amser, and I asked them to dine with us at the Carlton. I fancy old Winstanley can help us in the quest if he cares to."

We had a most enjoyable dinner. Amser seemed a bit down in his luck, but Colonel Winstanley was in great form until some one, I forget who, mentioned the burglary. He stopped short with a gesture of comical horror.

"Not a word more," he pleaded, "not a word more of it if you love me. The confounded burglary drove me from your hospitable mansion, Kirwood, a perfect

wreck in body and mind. We had burglary for breakfast, dinner, supper, and afternoon tea. We thought burglars, we talked burglars, we ate, we drank, we dreamed burglars. Another week of it and I should have gone mad. Amser and myself are flying to the hospitable shores of France. We start in the morning for Paris."

"By Jove," cried Beck, "that's curious! Kirwood and I go too, we will be across together."

It was the first I heard of it, and I had hard work to hide my surprise while Beck enlarged on the strangeness of the coincidence. I noticed young Amser talked little, little at least for him, and drank a good deal. I fancied he was chagrined at having so signally disappointed his admirers by failing to find the mysterious burglar. "Any clue, old chap?" I heard him say to Beck, who shook his head despondently.

We went down in the train together to Dover, and found a nasty cross wind in the Channel raising a choppy sea. Amser went below right away.

"I'm the deuce of a bad sailor," he explained. "I'm always seasick unless I cover up my head and lie still."

"You employ the same tactics with ghosts, I remember," said Beck laughingly, and Amser grinned feebly back at him over his shoulder, and darted downstairs for his cabin.

Colonel Winstanley, Beck and myself made ourselves comfortable on deck chairs. Everything about the Colonel indicated the experienced traveller. He had got the best corner of the deck on the lee side of the boat, sheltered from the wind but with a wide look-out over the tossing and sparkling sea. His

feet and legs were comfortably encased in a rug, bagged at the end and lined with fur. The fragrant blue smoke of his cigar was very pleasant on the sharp air, and a small black bag, with a friendly flask in it, as I guessed, stood convenient to his hand. Beck found seats for both of us beside the Colonel, and to my amazement started off at once on the subject of the burglary.

"If you don't mind me bothering you, Colonel," he said, "I should like to have your notion of the business. I want to see my way, and I fancy you can help me."

"My dear boy," the Colonel answered heartily, "fire away. You may count on me to do what I can. You mustn't mind the nonsense I talked at dinner last night, it was more on Amser's account than my own. The wretched boy is bored to death with the business, they gave him no peace. I am very interested, naturally, and I will give what help I can to get my god-daughter back her trinkets. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks, no. Somehow I felt certain you would be interested. Well, to begin with, I've found Crackshaw."

"The devil you have. Then it's all over except the shouting. The finger-marks, the boots, and all the rest of it must nail him."

"They would but for one thing. Crackshaw was undoubtedly in jail when the burglary was committed."

There was no mistaking the surprise on the Colonel's face at the news. The cigar dropped from his lips, and for a full minute he stared blankly at Beck.

"But, my dear fellow," he said at last, "how can

that be? The fellow could not be in two places at once."

"I have a notion," said Beck, "how it was managed. Crackshaw plainly went to jail on purpose, he was preparing his alibi. He made the marks before he was jailed. It is easy to imagine he had an accomplice who stood, so to speak, in his shoes. It was a neat trick. Crackshaw was to be the scapegoat. No one would suspect the real thief; when Crackshaw was discovered at last the prison authorities themselves would supply him with a conclusive alibi."

"Ingenious, very," murmured the Colonel, as the plot dawned on him, "and very ingenious of you, my dear young friend, to figure it out as you did. Whom do you suspect?"

"I'm afraid," said Beck gravely, "it must have been one of the guests. The rope was hung, the tracks made and the boots and burglar's tools hidden merely as a blind. You remember the footsteps young Amser said he heard go by his room?"

"I remember," said the Colonel, with a faint smile. "He covered his head up with the clothes, thinking it was a ghost." Then, with a sudden change of manner as if a new light had broken in on him, "Good gracious, man, you don't mean to say you suspect young Amser?"

"I never suspect, Colonel, I make quite sure if I can," said Beck. "I forgot to tell you that while Crackshaw was in prison he bragged a bit to the warder of an aristocratic friend, who, he said, would make him heir at law. He was to meet the aristocrat the day he came out of prison. I knew the man, whoever he was, must wait in London until the day of Crackshaw's release to share the spoils, and I

thought it would be interesting to hang round and watch the meeting."

"Well?" There could be no doubt of the Colonel's interest now. He jerked the monosyllable at Beck.

"Well," said Beck slowly, "when I saw him call at the house of one of the guests, and when I saw him come down the steps half an hour later with his pockets bulging and a broad smile on his bulldog face, I could make a fair guess what had happened inside."

"So you concluded," the Colonel began in a strange hoarse whisper, which I would never have recognised as his—he paused, and Beck took him up.

"That the man who got Crackshaw to put his finger-marks on the loving cup was the man who stole the jewels."

For a moment no one spoke. As in a dream I saw the sunshine in dazzling points of light on the wide stretch of sea, I heard the ripple of the water against the boat's side, the swish of skirts and the murmur of talk on deck. But all the time my attention was absorbed in the tense excitement of the drama enacted before my eyes.

The Colonel was pale and rigid. His eyes only seemed alive, and they were fixed intently on Beck. I saw his right hand begin to move, and I feared a hidden weapon. Beck made no sign. Slowly the Colonel's hand slid down on the deck and came up with a jerk, holding the black bag in act to throw. But quick as he was Beck was too quick for him. Like the sudden pounce of a hawk his hand gripped the Colonel's wrist, and the black bag fell back on deck.

"It would be a pity," said Beck, as he picked it up, "that Miss Dale's trinkets should be lost at sea."

CHAPTER XVII

DEATH'S THRESHOLD

I DON'T like bringing myself or my love affairs more than I can help into my story. I am aware I did not come very well out of the first entanglement. But it may be as well to mention openly what my sister hinted at, covertly, I was gone on the great actress, Margery Glenmore, though I cannot say she cared two straws for me. To be quite candid, my heart was more or less occupied with other girls after the pretty Lilian was evicted and before Margery Glenmore came into possession. Amongst the weekly or monthly tenants of my heart was my distant cousin, Elinor Gibson, whom I had lost sight of for a year, until I met her again one September morning in the Green Park.

If it were not for Beck I should not be alive to tell this story; whether it is worth telling or not is another question; naturally it is very interesting to me.

When I met Elinor that morning it was the first time I had seen her as "Nurse Gibson," and the ghost of a palpitation began to flutter in my heart, she looked so charming in her dark blue uniform with white collar and cuffs.

Beyond all doubt Elinor Gibson was a splendid

woman, physically, mentally, and morally. Other girls would have crumpled up and gone over in the sea of troubles she had tided over serenely. When her father died she was supposed to be an heiress, and found herself a good deal closer to being a pauper. At once she took her life and fortune into her own hands. Now she was a nurse and meant to be a doctor, and no one could fill the double bill better. Strong, patient, clever, good-humoured, never tired, never cross, she was like sunshine in a sick-room.

As a prospective heiress she was an imperious beauty, and had a way of ordering about which I rather enjoyed. Later on, after the crash, she went abroad with a consumptive patient, and so we had completely lost sight of each other for a time. She was passing me by in the park without seeing me when I called to her:

"Hallo, Nellie, where have you been? You are looking lovelier than ever."

That was no lie for me, she did look stunning. The walk had brought a warm pink into the smooth cheek, and there was a light in her eyes, warm and sparkling, which I flattered myself was pleasure at meeting me.

"I should ask that question," she retorted, smiling, as we shook hands. "What have you been doing? Mischief I dare swear."

"Pining, brokén-hearted," I said. "Love *is* the mischief, you know, but there is no use complaining. The winter of my discontent is made glorious summer by the sight of you. Are you on for the theatre to-night, young woman? His Majesty's and supper afterwards at the Carlton. It's a long time since you and I had a spree together."

She thought for a moment, looking tall and strong with ruddy tinted cheeks, and hair and eyes shining in the bright September sunshine.

"It's this way," she said at last. "I'm Dr Strong's head nurse—you must have heard of Dr Strong, the great bacteriologist and fever specialist."

"Is that the chap that says we would live for ever only for the microbes?"

Elinor nodded. "That's so, and quite right, too. I am his right-hand woman in the hospital, and have ten other nurses under me. I am very much my own mistress, and can take a day or a night off whenever I want to, but we are very busy now and are getting a new nurse, Gray is her name, in to-night, so you must not tempt me."

"That means you will come."

"Well, I suppose it does. I cannot resist the chance of a talk about old times. If you'll call for me at half-past seven I'll be ready. I have a bachelor woman's flat in 15 Cheyny Row, Chelsea."

When I called she was ready. I never knew Elinor to be a moment late for anything. She stepped out gaily across the threshold the moment I knocked, and off we went together in a taxi.

There is no need for a fellow to be in love to find it very pleasant to have an evening out with a girl so handsome, fascinating and clever to talk to. There was a new play at His Majesty's called *Lady Averley's Lover*, with lots of love-making, and I was just in the humour for love-making.

I was rather set back, I confess, when I saw my cousin, Captain Cunningham - Bayard, in the box right opposite with little Mrs Nugent. The reader has met neither of them before, so I must introduce

them before I get any further. The Captain won't take long. He is my first cousin, and would come in for the title and property should anything happen to me. There was hardly a more popular man in the Guards than he was, hardly a more popular man in London both with men and women, especially with women, a splendid cut of a man, six feet two in his stockings, with the figure of a Greek athlete and a face to match. Nobody called the Captain clever, but everybody called him bright, good-humoured, and nobody's enemy but his own. He had seen sharp service before he went into the Guards, and had won the supreme prize of valour, the Victoria Cross.

It was not the Captain but Mrs Nevil Nugent who first discovered us. I noticed a pair of glasses fixed on my face where I sat back in the box, and returning the stare I found Mrs Nugent. The instant her face came into the field of glasses she bowed and smiled, as if we were only a couple of yards distant, though the whole width of the theatre was between us.

The situation was a bit embarrassing, for I had had a much warmer flirtation with Mrs Nevil Nugent than I had ever had with Nurse Gibson. She was a widow whose husband was supposed to have died in India. No one knew when he died or what he died of, no one knew her income or where it came from, but certainly she lived up to it. She was more popular with men than with women, but the women were civil to her for the men's sake, and she was to be met, on and off, at the very best country places. But she was chiefly famous for her dainty little dinners, never less than three, never more than nine, with good music and mild gambling to follow.

I suppose I had made a bit of an ass of myself with Mrs Nugent, but I never meant anything and I never pretended to her I meant anything. The thought of marrying her never entered my mind until one day in one of the society papers there was a pretty broad hint that we were engaged. Then I cooled down and came out as quickly and as decently as I could. I had not seen her for some time; she was a hot-tempered little woman, and I was not quite easy in my mind how she would meet me.

When the curtain fell on the second act of the play my cousin came across to our box and tapped . . . get in. If it were any one else I might have been a bit annoyed at the interruption, but no one ever is, or could be, annoyed with Bayard.

I introduced him to Cousin Elinor, whose cheeks flushed softly as their eyes met. Bayard's good looks are irresistible. I can't say I felt particularly pleased.

"What are you doing after the theatre, Charlie?" he asked genially. "We are going to have a bit of supper at the Carlton, shall we make a table of four?"

"Of five, if you please," I said. "A friend of mine, Paul Beck, is to meet us there; he couldn't come with us to-night."

"And wasn't much wanted, I fancy," laughed Bayard, with an admiring glance at the blushing Elinor. "We'll meet at the door, then," he added, "and drive over together. Mrs Nugent says you treated her shamefully. You can make it up at supper while Miss Gibson looks after poor me."

Beck was a few minutes late when we got to the supper room, and we waited for him. Mrs Nugent had captured me forthwith without resistance, and

turned Elinor over to Bayard. Never were two beautiful women in more striking contrast. The little widow was a rich brunette, dark as the nurse was fair, but beautifully made with dusky damask cheeks, black eyes and hair, and a faint dark shade over her upper lip.

"I was longing to have a word with you," she whispered, as we stood waiting for Beck. "Why have you deserted me? I thought——"

But at that moment Beck came up with apologies. We sat down to a small round table, and the talk became general.

"What shall we have?" I asked, taking up the *menu*.

"Oysters, anyway, to begin with," said Bayard.

"But oysters mean typhoid," protested Mrs Nevil Nugent, with a fascinating little shudder, "and I'm horribly afraid of sickness."

"Nonsense, little lady," he returned, "these are Red Bank oysters from Ireland. They came out of the middle of the Atlantic, and there never was a microbe within a hundred miles of them."

"What do you say, Elinor?" I asked. "You're a microbe expert."

"I vote for oysters," Elinor said, and oysters were ordered.

I'm not going to describe the supper. Amid the lively throng in that brightly-lit, flower-bedecked hall, where the music played a soft second to the talk, there was no gayer party than ours. Elinor sat on one side of me and Mrs Nugent on the other, Captain Bayard sat next Elinor, and Beck opposite me made up the circle.

The oysters were followed by dressed crab *à la*

Morgan, hissing hot in their own shells. The ladies had softly foaming moselle with the faint bouquet of muscatel, and the men double extra dry champagne with as much and as little flavour as soda water. The talk was mere gay nonsense, chatter for the most part, but now and again Mrs Nugent whispered soft reproaches for my neglect which I found it difficult to parry. To me, at least, the break up of the party came rather as a relief. Beck and I strolling home together with cigars alight through the lamp-lit streets, had little notion that the curtain had rung down on the first act of a tragedy.

About a fortnight later my sister and I were dining alone. I should have mentioned that the governor, who had been over worked, had been ordered off for a long sea voyage during the recess. For a day or two before I had been feeling a bit seedy, dull, headachy, and low-spirited, I, who had never been ill in my life before. Gertrude was quick to notice it.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" she said, when we got to the drawing-room. "You neither eat, drink, nor talk for the last few days, but sit like a 'merryman moping mum, who drinks no drop and who craves no crumb.' Are you by any chance in love?"

"Nothing to talk of, I feel a bit hipped, that's all. Sing me something."

She sang me that song of Gilbert and Sullivan's, the best thing, they say themselves, that they had ever wrote. I leant over her while I sang, and I felt I could not stand without leaning on the piano.

I don't know whether I should mention such a trifle, but it may make clearer what happened later. As she sang I noticed the sweetest, purest scent of roses.

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"What is the perfume, Gerty?" I asked. "Where have you got it?"

"Attar of roses," she replied smiling, "the sweetest perfume in the wide world and about the dearest.

"The odours of a crimson wilderness,
The breath of myriad roses men combine
In one sweet essence."

You know the lines of course. Half a drop fills the room with it. Just look at that."

"That" was a tiny trinket shaped somewhat like the feeder of a fountain pen, only ever so much shorter, not quite an inch in length, I should say. The bulb was shiny black rubber, and the shanklet fine gold terminating in a rather sharp point.

"The newest toy in scent-bottles. You carry it on your chain or in your glove. There is no trouble with a stopper and no fear it will spill. Hold your hand."

She squeezed the bulb, a tiny amber-coloured bead showed itself at the point and dropped into my open palm. It was as sweet as the scent of a rose garden in full bloom.

During the terrible weeks that followed, weeks of pain, delirium, and utter lassitude the sweet perfume of the roses was vaguely with me, mingling strangely with my dreams, full of bewildering associations that seemed to elude my feeble questioning.

For the next morning an unmistakable fever declared itself. Dr Strong, who was sent for in hot haste, hunted for and found the one or two insignificant little brown specks which tell the expert that the deadly microbe of typhoid is at work.

There was a stand up fight between Gertrude and

the doctor about the nursing. Of course I did not know this at the time, afterwards they told me. Dr Strong wanted to send straight off for Nurse Gibson to look after me. "She is the best nurse in the world, Lady Gertrude," he said, "what she does not know about fever is not worth knowing."

It was no use. Dear old Gertrude, God bless her, wouldn't have any one.

"I couldn't bear it, doctor, while I am here to nurse him. You don't know what Charlie and I are to each other. If you tell me what to do I'll do it, never fear. Just give me a trial, that's all I ask. If you are not satisfied you may send for your Nurse Gibson or nurse anything else you like."

It is not easy to refuse Gertrude when she sets her heart on a thing, as I ought to know. She got her trial, and after the first day or two even Dr Strong had no desire to change.

Her work was cut out for her, for I got the fever hot and strong and no mistake. She was as patient as an angel, as untiring and as obedient as an automaton.

I don't like to think of that time even now, much less even write about it. I was scorching hot and deadly cold by turns and horribly restless. My body was full of pains, but worst of all were the wild inconsequent dreams that plagued me.

I was always slipping over a precipice, grasping the sharp edges of the stones with hands that pained and bled, but always slipping, slipping, until at last I went off into delirium.

One evening at dusk—how well I remember it—I seemed to come out of the darkness into heat and pain and nameless fear. It was very still and dark.

The room was empty, only a night-light burning on the wash-hand stand behind the water-jug made the shadows sway uneasily on the ceiling.

I was always noted in the family for the keenness of my hearing. Just then my senses seemed unnaturally acute. There was a whispering in the next room. I could distinguish at first only the low notes of Dr Strong and the pure tone of my sister's voice. In a little while the sound shaped themselves into words.

"There is no use trying to hide it from you," the doctor said. "He is really bad. His temperature just now was a hundred and five, it hardly falls at all in the morning. The fever is burning him away. It puzzles me horribly where he got such a dose of it. Mr Beck mentioned an oyster supper some time ago; of course oysters sometimes give typhoid, but rarely, and only when they are contaminated. These were not, I should say. No one else at the supper got typhoid, as far as I can make out."

Gertrude cut him short.

"Is he in great danger, doctor?"

"There is always great danger in typhoid."

She changed the form of the question.

"Is there any hope?"

He replied after an ominous pause with the foolish old formula. "While there is life there's hope." But from the tone of his voice I knew he had none. But even then my brave sister did not despair.

"God willing, doctor," she said, "I will pull him back to life, see if I don't. I won't let him go."

Then the doctor went out, and she stole noiselessly back into the dimly lit room. As I lay there

in the silent room I knew how men felt when the sentence of death was pronounced. I fancy I am as brave as another when I have no time to think of death. Boy and man I have risked my life freely for a slight cause, but this was different. Why should I be ashamed to confess it? I sweated and trembled with fear—fear and a sickening self-pitying revolt against death. I was sick with loathing that made the pain feel as nothing. Blessed with keen powers of enjoyment I had heretofore found the world a very pleasant place to live in. It was almost impossible to believe I was going out of it for ever into bleak oblivion. For a man in the flush of life death is mercifully impossible to realise. But now, with a vividness that was agony intolerable, I saw it and I knew it. From where I lay motionless the dim outline of my sister's face was visible as she sat far back in the chair. How would she feel and look when I was dead? Clearly, as if the thing were happening before my eyes, I saw her bending over my lifeless body, dropping tears on the poor cold face that could not feel, lifting the lifeless hand that fell back on the coverlet. I was gone, lost in nothingness, and life moved on without me as before.

I suppose I must be a coward in my heart to feel like this. But I have from the first resolved to be frank in all I write, and this is what I did feel after the doctor had pronounced sentence as I lay there staring death in the face.

When pain, physical or mental, grows too great for human endurance, it brings merciful unconsciousness. Once more I drifted into delirium. So day followed day with waking intervals of hopeless misery. All through, as I have afterwards known,

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my sister watched me with the untiring patience of an angel.

Then, gradually by slow degrees, with many relapses, the fever ebbed away and left me, and I came back from the valley of Death, safe indeed, but feeble as a new-born child.

CHAPTER XVIII

NURSE ELINOR

"A MIRACLE," said Dr Strong. "You pulled him through, Lady Gertrude, alone you did it. I may frankly say I had no hope. He must have a constitution of wrought steel. But now that the patient is safe he must have a nurse."

"Oh, doctor, don't ask me to give up just yet."

"I don't ask, I command. I won't come again while you are here. You must go away."

"I surrender, doctor, on conditions. My brother's great friend, Mr Beck, has promised to come when I go, to take charge."

"That's fine! Mr Beck can be trusted, and I mean to put in two nurses when you go, night and day. That's a compliment, no one woman could take your place. Nurse Gibson will be one."

"No," said Gertrude unhesitatingly, "I don't think so."

"She is the best."

"That may be, but I don't like her. Let us have the second and third best, if you please."

She confessed to me afterwards she thought Elinor was in love with me. "She called so often to enquire, and I did not want any of that kind of nonsense," said my sister.

So Nurse Gray was installed as day nurse and Nurse Granley as night, and Beck occupied the room next to mine. He did not tell me at the time, but he had a dodge arranged by which the opening and shutting of my door rang an electric bell in his room.

As might be expected, meeting often in my room, Dr Strong and Beck grew to be fast friends. Beck was deeply interested in bacteriology, and the doctor, delighted in what he called his intelligent curiosity, took him off to his laboratory and showed him all his pet microbes swarming in what he called culture, which it appears is a kind of beef-tea the brutes enjoy when they can't get into a man.

As I grew stronger I grew horribly hungry, and railed at Beck, the doctor, and nurse having joined into a conspiracy to starve me.

Flavourless slops were all I had to eat and little of the same, but Lucullus never half as much enjoyed the best of his banquets. My appetite for food was a drunkard's for drink, the craving as strong, the delight as intense. I did not in the least believe the doctor when he said that more food or stronger food meant death for me, and I knew that if I got the chance I neither could nor would have resisted it.

One day Beck came into my room with a basket of fruit, which had arrived direct from the shop with only the words in a woman's hand, "To dear Charlie."

Paul was awfully particular, more particular even than the doctor, about what I should eat and shouldn't, especially what I shouldn't. There were wonderful peaches and grapes—I have no notion how they were got at that season of the year, they must certainly have cost a fortune, but he eyed and sniffed them

suspiciously, almost contemptuously. Then he got a magnifying glass and kept at it so long that I got impatient.

"What the deuce are you fussing over, old man?" I said at last. "One could think it was a bundle of stale vegetables instead of a basket of hot-house fruit. Be decent for once and hand them over, I'm famishing."

"Easy does it, you glutton, fruit gives typhoid sometimes as well as oysters."

"Don't be a donkey, not fruit like that!"

"I'm not so sure, the oysters seemed good too. Look at this—first swear you won't grab."

He passed me a magnifying glass and held a peach under it. On the glossy rose and green velvet of the fruit I saw two or three little beads of juice.

"That's nothing," I said.

"It's the same with the grapes," he answered gravely.

"Something pricked them."

"Yes, something pricked them, but what?"

"A thorn, I suppose."

"Vines have no thorns, nor peach trees."

"I think you have gone dotty, old man," I retorted.

"It's all right. Hand me over my property."

"Not a scrap until Dr Strong sees it, anyway, and I'll find out which of your girls really sent it. Keep cool, Charlie, there is no sense in getting riled, I could lick you with my little finger. You will have your arrowroot in half an hour with barley water to follow, and there is a promise of a bit of sole and a half glass of sherry and water to-morrow if you are a good boy."

"Slops and scraps," I groaned, "that's just what is

keeping me as I am. I could peg into a porterhouse steak and a pint of stout this minute."

"And 'peg out' afterwards," retorted Beck grimly. "No you don't while I am in charge."

I heard no more of the fruit, anyhow I never got a pick of it. A little incident that occurred two days later put it completely out of my head. The merest trifle is of interest in a sick room.

I had heard that meek little Nurse Gray had, as meek little women will, fallen desperately in love, and I gathered her sweetheart was a bit of a scapegoat. Her great confidante in her love affairs, indeed in everything, her guide, philosopher, and friend, was Nurse Gibson, whom she absolutely worshipped. Nurse Gray's sweetheart and the state of my health were the chief topics of discussion. Nurse Gray brought me many kind messages from my cousin, with whom, she took it for granted, I must be in love. Once or twice the shy little woman shyly hinted that I need not despair.

A telephone had been installed in my room shortly after Beck came in charge. It amused me to talk to Gertrude and the doctor whenever I choose, and as the number had not been put on the register I would not be bothered with outsiders. At least we thought not.

The first person who rang me up to condole and congratulate was Mrs Nevil Nugent, the second was Nurse Gibson. I could not understand how Mrs Nugent knew my number. Elinor, of course, got it from Nurse Gray.

All this time I have been skirting the incident which probably won't seem much when I come to tell it.

Nurse Gray was at her early dinner. She had always dinner in my room at two o'clock to the second, for like most meek little women Nurse Gray had a hearty appetite and liked punctuality at meals. The cover was off her dish of cutlets and the claret was in her glass when the bell of the telephone rang furiously.

"Hallo!" I shouted into the receiver, and was answered by a man's excited voice: "Is Nurse Gray there?"

"For you, nurse," I called out, and at once she leaped from the table and ran across the room. I could hear her terrified whisper: "It must be Jack."

"Yes, yes," I heard her voice on the telephone trembling with excitement. "Oh, I can't, I really can't. It's impossible. Don't say that. Indeed I would if I could. Anything in the world for you. Oh!"

The second "oh" was even more pitiful than the first. Passionate love and dismay were in the sound.

"Yes, yes," she said again, "just wait one moment." She turned to me.

"It's Jack, Lord Kirwood, he wants me to meet him at once. He says it is a matter of life or death. I won't be half an hour away. May I go?"

"Of course, little woman, you may go. Take your own time, I will be here when you come back. I do hope it is a false alarm."

With an "Oh, thank you!" that came from the very bottom of her heart she snatched up her nurse's bonnet and cloak and vanished.

Her dinner lay neglected on the table. From the

moment the telephone rang she never gave it a thought. The delicate perfume of the dish of cutlets tickled my nostrils, the ruddy glow of the wine in the glass fascinated my gaze. I do not attempt to excuse myself, for those who have never known the typhoid famine, excuse is impossible. The sight of unprotected food drew me as a magnet draws iron. I could no more resist than the drunkard with liquor to his lips.

What a laugh I'll have at the doctor, I thought, as I staggered out of bed. It was the first time my feet had touched ground for many a long day, and I almost went over on my head, I had not dreamt I was so weak. My knees felt quite loose as if the muscles had got untied and wanted tightening up again. But the sight and the smell of the food pulled me together.

Five faltering steps carried me across the room to the table, and I dropped into a chair in front of the cutlets. My hand was out to help myself from the dish when I felt the chair rise under me, and chair and all—I was a mere featherweight at the time—I was carried lightly back to bed. Screwing my head round I found Beck's laughing face close to mine.

"No, you don't, Charlie," he said, with that smile of his that made it impossible to be vexed. Then in a grave tone as he helped me unresisting back to bed: "Are you mad, man? Don't you know what the doctor says? Where is Nurse Gray? Why has she left you to your own evil devices?"

A little sulkily I told him why she had gone and when. He whistled softly as he listened. "I wonder!" he whispered to himself, but I heard.

"What do you wonder?" I asked, a little crossly, I'm afraid. My disappointment still rankled.

"I wonder if Nurse Gray met her sweetheart, if there was any sweetheart to meet, if——"

"If you are hinting at any trick on Nurse Gray's part," I interrupted, "you are quite out. I never saw a little woman more unmistakably excited and in earnest."

"I am not hinting at anything about Nurse Gray except that perhaps she made a little mistake. However, we shall see."

A quarter of a hour later we did see. Nurse Gray came back in a fluster, very puzzled and not a little frightened. There was no one to meet her, no sign of any one. "Perhaps he is dead," she faltered on the point of tears.

Beck consoled her. He has a wonderful way with women. I have heard that his father, who could not have been nearly so good-looking as the son, had the same knack.

"Don't fret, nurse," he said. "If I'm right it wasn't your Jack that was on the telephone."

She gave a little gasp of relief.

"Oh, I'm sure you are right," she cried out. "For a moment I half doubted that it was his voice. But why should any one pretend to be Jack just to frighten me? Who could have pretended it?"

"That's just what we have to find out if we can," Beck answered. "Meanwhile your dinner has got quite cold. I shall ring to have something hot brought."

"It doesn't matter in the least," she protested. "I can never forgive myself for deserting my patient the

way I did. What will Nurse Gibson think when I tell her?"

"It is not always easy to find out what any one thinks even by asking them," said Beck.

I was very grateful that he did not tell the nurse of my raid on her meal, though I fancy it was for her sake rather than mine he refrained, she was already so pitifully remorseful.

Beck certainly did not spare me when Dr Strong came. The doctor himself looked so grave when he heard of my escapade that I felt as ashamed as a school-boy caught in some bit of tomfoolery.

"Would it really have hurt me so much if I had eaten it?" I ventured.

"It would have meant certain death," he answered gravely, "nothing could have saved you from a fatal relapse."

"By Jove! I had a narrow escape. I don't want to die yet awhile, not in the least. But can any one guess what can be the meaning of the trick played on Nurse Gray? Some silly practical joke, I suppose."

"A pretty grim joke, I fancy," said Beck. "Have you examined the fruit yet, doctor?"

The doctor nodded. "It was as you suspected." Then as he was going out of the room he whispered in a voice not meant for my ear: "It's a queer business altogether, a d——d queer business. I can make nothing of it."

"I think I can," Beck said in the same low tone. "We used to play a game of hide-and-seek when I was a boy. When the seeker got near the thing that was hidden the other chaps cried, 'You're warm!' When he got very near, they

cried, 'You're hot!' I'm infernally hot at present, doctor."

Some one has said that it is worth while having pain to be rid of it. It is worth while being sick to be well again. Enjoyment comes by contrast, and convalescence almost pays for fever. It is a new life when all food is ambrosia and all drink nectar, and the world and the people in it seem all the pleasanter from one's having come so near to losing them.

As I sat in my easy chair I felt a newly awakening vigour warming all my veins, as one can fancy old earth feels when winter is past and genial spring comes again. My father had returned post haste, Gertrude was with me continuously, and I saw Beck every other day. Truly it was good to be alive.

I had lots of congratulations, and among others a cordial letter from Cousin Elinor, with a startling piece of news in the postscript.

"How shall I tell you?" the postscript ran. "I wonder will you be glad or sorry to hear it! I am engaged to be married to Captain Bayard. We both hope you and your father will be pleased. May we call and see you some day. Nurse Gray tells me you are almost quite well again. Please don't say 'no.'"

I tossed the letter over to Beck, who happened to be in the room at the time, and watched him read it right down to the postscript.

"Oh!" he said, when he had finished, just as a man says "oh" when you tell him the answer of a riddle that has puzzled him. He kept on staring at the letter.

"Well," I asked, "what answer shall I give?"

"Answer to what?"

"To the letter, stupid. Shall I ask them to come? You are the major-domo, you know. If you say come they cometh, go and they goeth. It will do me good to see the all-conquering Captain captured at last. Well?"

Still Beck waited silent again for a full minute as if weighing a weighty question. I had to ask him a third time.

"To be or not to be, Paul? Wake up, man."

"Let us have them by all means," he said at last. "It will be very interesting."

"We'll make a little luncheon-party of it here in my room, you and I, and the Captain and his lady-love, and we'll drink the health of the turtle doves."

"And the doctor," Beck said. "I beg you won't leave out the doctor."

"To frighten away microbes from our love feast," I said, laughing. "All right, we'll have the doctor. Get them to come a little while before lunch, I want to talk with Elinor."

She came early. I never saw her looking more beautiful, I never saw any woman looking more beautiful. She seemed glorified by love. She was dressed in an empire gown of dove-coloured silk, which showed her superb figure to the best advantage and heightened the dazzling purity of her complexion. She wore a necklace of turquoises, and I noticed a little toy scent-bottle like Gertrude's hanging on her chain. Bayard followed, looking shy and shamefaced, as engaged men will when they have been a bit lively on their own account.

"From what Nurse Gray tells me," she said, "you have had a close shave, Charlie. You must be careful still; you are not yet out of the wood. I have

known fatal relapses when the patient appeared perfectly well."

"Hallo, hallo, Nell," cried Bayard impatiently, "don't you play the blooming Cassandra. Every man has to die sometime, and it doesn't help to think too much about it."

"You are right, dear," she answered. "It doesn't help to think too much about it."

She turned to him as she spoke. If ever love shone from a woman's eyes it shone from hers then. Her whole soul seemed to go out into her gaze. She trembled a little and leaned towards him, as if drawn by a power stronger than herself. It was adoration I surprised in the momentary meeting of their eyes. The man was, I thought, less infatuated than the woman. It was not love so much as protection and encouragement that I read in his face. Tall, strong, and handsome as Apollo, with a reckless gallantry in his air that time out of mind had captured the feminine heart. He seemed worthy to win any woman's love and hold it.

A splendid picture they made standing there together, his hand laid lightly on her shoulder. I confess for a moment I felt near envying him the worship of that beautiful woman, whom I had come so near loving myself.

At that instant Beck entered the room in a hurry, and ran at once to get a seat for the lady, who was still standing. I have never seen Beck so awkward before, I could not imagine him so awkward. In his haste he tripped on one of the legs of the chair, and stumbled against Elinor so violently that she almost fell. Naturally he was profuse in his apologies, which were smilingly accepted. Presently

the talk became general, and we heard the news of the engagement. The Captain, it seemed, was retiring from the army; he wanted to "settle down." "I hope," he said vaguely, with the cheery optimism which was one of his charms, "to pick up some money somehow to live on."

"Father and myself would like to help," I ventured.

He laughed as if the notion pleased him. "I shall only be too thankful," he said. "I make no pretence of being proud. So the money comes, I'm not at all particular where it comes from or how."

Meanwhile lunch had been laid for five, and we only waited for the doctor, who came in presently with a small brown leather bag in his hand.

Elinor sat on my right hand with Beck at the other side. As the soup was about to be served I saw her hand steal quietly to her chain, and I noticed then that the little scent-bottle I had seen when she came in was gone. At the same moment she discovered the loss, and I was amazed at the look of surprise and terror that came into her eyes when her fingers felt for the trinket, and could not find it.

"You have lost something?" I said.

"Nothing," she stammered out, the red flush on her face fading into deadly pallor. "Nothing of any consequence."

"I fancy this is yours, Miss Gibson," said Paul, showing the little scent-bottle in the hollow of his palm, but making no motion to restore it. Nor did its owner claim its return.

Dr Strong and Beck exchanged glances.

"There is something I wish to show you, Lord Kirwood," said the doctor, rising.

I knew vaguely that some tragedy was close at

hand. All four sat silent at the table, waiting. Elinor's beautiful face was set and pale as death, her eyes turned in pitiful appeal to her lover.

The doctor took from his bag a microscope, a glass tube with a cotton wool stopper one-fourth full of some mud-coloured fluid, a silver wire with a glass handle and a tiny loop at the point, a spirit lamp and some small glass slides.

Dipping the silver wire in the glass tube he brought out the tiniest drop of the mud-coloured mixture on its point. He touched the point on the glass plate, and then held the wire over the spirit lamp until it grew to white heat. The slides he arranged one over the other in the microscope, which he set on the table before me.

I saw a round, semi-transparent white disc with a line of purer white running through the middle.

"That is the hanging edge of the drop," the doctor explained. "Not a ten-thousandth part of the drop is within the field of the microscope, you might as well expect to see all England from the top of a monument. Look at the left-hand side, close to the line. The microbes congregate at the edge, they are keen on oxygen. Touch the regulator and bring the lens to your own focus."

There was no need. In the left-hand side of the disc I could see myriad whitish dots shaped somewhat like canary seed moving rapidly to and fro. Now and then something like a tiny white snake, thin as a hair but as long as a dozen of the dots, would go wriggling through the swarm.

"Are those curious little white dots and hair serpents microbes?" I asked, but even as I asked I knew.

It was Beck that answered.

"They are the microbes of typhoid," he said. "They are from the tempting present of fruit a kind friend sent you some time ago. I enquired and found the fruit was sent, not by Mrs Nevil Nugent but by a very beautiful fair woman with golden hair. I discovered it was the same lady who called up Nurse Gray in her lover's name on the 'phone.'" He held out the scent-bottle to Elinor in the hollow of his hand.

"Can you guess, Miss Gibson, what this pretty little trinket contains? I felt it in that same lady's glove when I shook hands with her at an oyster party ever so long ago. I thought at the time it was a ring turned round, I know better now. That same lady knows all about microbes, she knows all about the culture of the typhoid germ. This little trinket is not filled with perfume, I fancy, but with that most deadly of all germ cultures. That night it was used for the oysters at the supper, to-day, I fancy, it was intended for the soup. Well, Miss Gibson, what have you to say on the subject?"

She sat silent and very pale, but Bayard never for a moment winced. His colour was fresh in his cheeks, his voice was easy as ever.

"Say nothing, Nell," he advised; "there is some old rule that you are not bound to incriminate yourself."

"He knew nothing," she broke out passionately; "he at least is quite innocent."

"That's hardly accurate," he went on, pleasantly as ever. "When I told Nell more than once that I would marry her if she had your position, Charlie, I think she guessed what I meant. She's clever

and I fancied she'd find a plan. I did not enquire into ways and means, I left that to her. Of course the business of the theatre and the supper was a put up job between us. You need not look at me in that fashion, Charlie. I have killed a few men in my day in honourable warfare, decent fellows enough, I dare say, against whom I had no grudge and nothing particular to gain by killing them. Why should I have any particular scruple about one life more or less—yours, mine, or another's? The real question is, what are you going to do about it?"

Again it was Beck spoke: "Nothing, if I may advise."

"That's good news, anyway, old girl," said Bayard, as quietly as if they were alone. "You are safe, quite safe."

Beck turned to him.

"There is no use trying again, Captain Bayard. Lord Stanton, as you know, up to this thought it fair that the family estates, though not entailed, should go with the title. You won't be surprised to hear that he has changed his mind. He made his will yesterday, by which, if his son dies without issue, all he dies possessed of goes to his daughter. In no case can you touch a penny."

"Then our little game is up," said Bayard, still to the girl, whose eyes never for a moment left his face as if those two were alone together in the room.

"But you will marry me all the same, Harry. It's not my fault. I risked everything for your sake."

"Hardly," he answered lightly. "Be reasonable, Nell. Matrimony without money would be madness for both. We can, of course, go on a little longer as we are going, if you care to"—her cheeks burned

at his careless words—"then you get back to your nursing and I go to the devil in my own way. Meanwhile," he went on, as if he had just noticed our presence, "we are keeping those good people from their lunch. We had better go."

Then with the trembling girl beside him he passed from the room as jauntily as if a friendly visit were just over.

A fortnight later, when I had quite recovered, I was sitting at breakfast with Beck. He passed me over the *Daily Telephone* with his finger on the heading "ROMANTIC EPISODE IN HIGH LIFE," and I read:

"We deeply regret to announce the death, under very romantic and pathetic circumstances, of the gallant and promising young officer, Captain H. Cunningham-Bayard, V.C. He was engaged to be married to the beautiful and highly connected Miss Elinor Gibson. Unhappily only a few days before the marriage Captain Bayard was stricken down by pneumonia in its most malignant form. His young and beautiful fiancée, reckless of infection, insisted on nursing him. She, too, caught the fell disease, and the faithful lovers died on the same day, almost at the same hour, to the intense affliction of a numerous circle of friends."

"Pneumonia," commented Beck. "I'm not surprised. The bacteriologists have not yet discovered the microbe of those swift and fatal diseases, smallpox, typhus, and scarlet fever. But the germ of pneumonia is well known in the laboratory. I think I can guess how Bayard caught his death."

CHAPTER XIX

AN EPIDEMIC OF MURDER

THE typhoid microbe is a queer little brute, it is hard to realise that so much eccentricity can be packed into so small a compass. Failing to kill he very often gives a new constitution. A month after my attack which had brought me half over the threshold of Death I was better than I had ever been in my life before.

It was a busy time in Parliament, patching up the International Peace Arbitration which is to make war impossible, and for which, so far at least as the public is concerned, the governor and Stanley Colthurst shared the credit pretty equally between them, though privately both confessed that Beck had been the man in the gap.

Even I had my share of the reward. When the death of Lord Appington caused a reshuffle of the Cabinet cards and Stanley Colthurst went up, as every one expected, to the Colonial Secretaryship, I was offered the Under-Secretaryship for Foreign Affairs. So far as I could make out, for the governor is as close as an oyster, he was himself the only member of the Cabinet who opposed the appointment on the ground that it was not becoming that the secretary and under-secretary should be father

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and son. But he was unanimously overruled by his colleagues especially by the Prime Minister, who declared it an admirable arrangement.

I strongly suspect that public spirit was not the governor's only motive for opposition. It is quite certain, at any rate, that the Foreign Office was at the time by no means a bed of roses.

There had been of late an epidemic of royal assassinations, none of which fortunately came off, though more than one reigning sovereign had a close shave for his life. The would-be assassins had all swarmed back to London as rats to their holes. One man especially, named Lascelles, lived at ease in Soho, though he was in request by the police of four different nationalities.

Now it happens that my father has a strong view on this question. He would grant an asylum, of course, to purely political offenders, but he draws the line at assassins and would-be assassins, and he strongly objects to London being made the refuge of the worst ruffians in Europe.

"We are none too tender to our own political offenders," I have heard him say. "An Irish agitator who makes a speech that doesn't happen to please the government of the day is treated like a pickpocket. But we allow no interference with the safety or comfort of a foreign assassin."

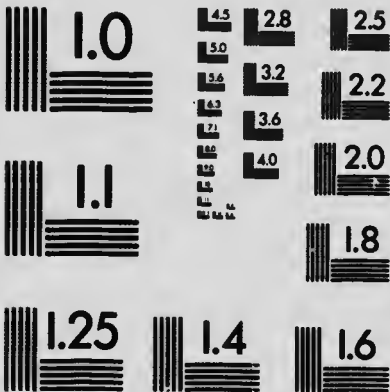
Just before my appointment he had persuaded his colleagues in the Cabinet to bring in a short bill by which "political" assassins and would-be assassins were liable to be extradited, and though the bill more properly belonged to the Home Office he took charge of it himself.

As may be imagined it roused an angry buzzing



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among the anarchists in the wasps' nest in Soho. In the House of Commons I was in charge, and being a new broom, I was determined to make a clear sweep of European refuse out of London. My vigour in pressing the bill forward was resented as vigorously by those for whom it was intended.

Every post brought me a sheaf of letters full of blood-curdling threats, among which sudden death was the lightest penalty suggested. I went my way rejoicing, not caring two pins for their threats. I would have taken a deal more than that to depress me just then.

There is no use delaying the confession, I was in love for the first time in my life. This confession may provoke the irreverent laughter of the undiscriminating, Gertrude certainly laughed long and loud when I told her, but it was true all the same. That I had thought myself in love before I don't deny, but how was I to tell when I had never known the real thing? I had all my life gaily answered the challenge of eyes, black, brown, and blue. But never did I know what love really meant until I met Margery Glenmore. It can hardly be called love at first sight, but at first sight the seed was planted that quickly grew and blossomed and filled my soul with its fragrance.

If I started out to describe her I would never stop, so I had better stop before I start. Most people have seen her or heard her before her retirement from the stage, where for two whole years she was the bright particular star in London, and no one who has seen and heard her has any use for my praise.

I met her at a party of Lady Betty Montague's, who afterwards was in trouble over the theft of the

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blue diamond, and we got on remarkably well together. Indeed, I was more than half in love with her when I was called away suddenly from her side. But when we met more than a month later at some theatrical bazaar, to which I had gone because I knew she would be there, she seemed to have forgotten my very existence. It was uphill work trying to get back into her good graces but "the labour we delight in physics pain," and I grew to be a friend, and, as I sometimes dared to hope, a little more than a friend. The privilege of her friendship was more precious from being so rare. For Margery offered no scrap of hope, comfort, or encouragement to her innumerable admirers. A minor poet had written verses in one of the magazines, in which she was described as the "matchless Margery of the marble heart."

While her triumphs thrilled London with delight she lived a secluded life in a pretty little villa about a score of miles outside the city. Her sole companion was her mother, a handsome, gentle, sad-looking lady, who spoke little and smiled seldom. Her sole extravagance was, if it could be called an extravagance, a well appointed motor that whisked her into the theatre every evening and straight home again when the performance was over.

The little suburban villa was as hard to enter as an enchanted castle. Only two people, so far as I know, were on the visiting list, and I was one of those fortunate two. The other was the famous actor, Arthur Maltravers, sharer in her dramatic triumphs.

It was a rare treat to hear those two play together, yet to me it was by no means unalloyed delight, for

the young actor, with the great dark eyes inherited from an Italian mother, was wonderfully handsome and Margery was manifestly fond of him. For his part, he made no secret of his adoration. Though half the women in London were in love with him, he had no eyes, no smile, no voice for any but Margery.

Strangely enough he and I were good friends from the first. If I was, as I have confessed, a little jealous of him, he did not flatter me by returning the compliment. At times it struck me as a bad sign that Maltravers knew he had no ground for jealousy. At times I found a gentle light, or thought I found it, in Margery's glorious eyes that forbade me to despair.

Meanwhile I pressed forward the second reading of my extradition bill with unrelenting vigour, and received each morning a larger consignment of threatening letters, which were promptly committed to the waste-paper basket.

One afternoon I had a surprise. Just as I was getting down from answering a foolish question about the German airship, one of the House of Commons attendants put a card into my hand, and I read "M. Victor Lascelles. Urgent." For a moment I thought it incredible. I stared at the card, half expecting the writing would fade and disappear. That the noted anarchist, for whom the police of many countries were clamouring, should seek out the minister in charge of the bill that was to deliver him into the hands of his enemies, seemed a thing to doubt. But the next moment I knew it was indeed Lascelles himself who had sent for me and waited for me; it was just the cool, audacious thing that I had thought a man, from all I had heard of him, was likely to do. In five minutes question time was over. The House

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emptied and I stepped out with the rest, the card in my hand, through the police barricade, when a tall, well-dressed man got up from a seat under one of the frescoes and accosted me.

"Lord Kirwood, I think," he said, with a conciliatory smile. "My name is Lascelles, you may perhaps have heard the name before. I was anxious to have a private word with you on the subject of this bill, a word which may prove to our mutual advantage."

Before I answered I availed myself of the chance of a good look at the notorious Victor Lascelles. He was certainly the best dressed and most presentable man in that crowded lobby. He looked about thirty years of age, tall, thin, and wiry, with dark eyes, green rather than blue, that seemed to search you through and through.

Without a word I led him back through the barrier to the inner lobby, where members and visitors bustled about together. I was glad to believe that no one in the crowd knew who was my distinguished visitor. We walked down the long corridor lined with members' lockers, and found a quiet corner in the strangers' smoking-room before either of us spoke again.

For a moment we sat silent and vigilant as fencers on guard. Lascelles spoke first.

"Lord Kirwood," he said, "you will pardon me, I'm sure, for coming straight to the point. You had best drop this bill."

"Perhaps you will kindly explain why."

I confess I should have been glad to catch him in any attempt at intimidation that would allow me to hand him over to the police.

"It would be much safer," he said.

I thought I had him.

"For whom?" I asked sharply.

A smile flickered on his thin lips as he answered. "For the government, in which as a Liberal I am much interested. It must hurt a Liberal government to pass a measure to abridge the liberty of the subject, to betray the sons of liberty who claim refuge on the inviolable shores of England."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite all. May I add, Lord Kirwood, that the supporters of the bill have good grounds for fear."

"Of whom? Of what?"

"Of their own conscience," he said, with the same mocking smile. "They will not fail to repent when it is too late."

"I, for one, am prepared to take my chance."

"I think you are foolish, very foolish. You cannot doubt that those who are injuriously affected by the bill will use every legitimate means in their power to prevent its passing."

The way he dropped in the word "legitimate" made his meaning quite clear, but I could take no exception to his words.

"Mr Lascelles," I said coldly, "there is no need to prolong this interesting interview. I think we understand each other thoroughly."

"And you mean to go on?"

"Certainly."

"You will pardon me saying that I think you are—foolish."

Then I showed him back politely to the outer lobby and a policeman, to whom I whispered a word.

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unostentatiously saw him safe out of the precincts of the House.

Let me honestly confess that the interview got on my nerves. Vague, indefinite, threatening letters did not affect me in the least, but this was different. Instinctively I felt that this man with the quiet voice and evil eyes was very much in earnest. I had heard rumours of a strange power which he possessed, compelling others to do his will against their own judgment. I did not believe it, of course, but all the same it affected me unpleasantly.

Most likely it was a coincidence that I was shot at two days later returning from a late dinner party. I thought the report I heard was the bursting of a bicycle tube, but when I got home I found a jagged bullet hole in the silk of my crush hat. The would-be murderer, of course, got clean away.

The very next night there was another attempt. Beck and myself were walking home from the House through the Green Park. It was a cool, quiet, starlit night, the red sparks of our cigars shone bravely in the dusk. Seventy yards away men were mere shadows blending with the darkness.

We were half way through the park when the shot was fired. There was no mistake about it this time. The report rang out clear and loud on the still night air, and we could see the spurt of flame from the mouth of the revolver.

The man turned and ran, Beck and I full tilt after him. Beck touched his heel with his toe as he ran, and the man went over and over like a shot rabbit on the grass.

The poor devil was utterly bewildered. A rather stout, stupid, good-humoured looking fellow he was,

the last man in the world whom one would expect to see engaged in such an adventure. He had thrown away his revolver when he started to run, now he offered neither resistance nor explanation, but lay still and whined for mercy.

We handed him over to a belated policeman, who, after the pistol shot had brought on the scene, and walked home, twisting the puzzle this way and that, but finding no answer.

The police investigation next day only made the business more puzzling. The accused was an Italian named Marco Sempri, who was engaged as superintendent of one of the theatres. It turned out afterwards that both Miss Glenmore and Maltravers knew him for a decent, harmless fellow. His lodgings were in Soho, but the police had absolutely nothing against him, and there was not a particle of suggestion that he belonged to the anarchists or any other of the pestiferous societies that infect the district.

He could give no explanation whatever of his attempt on my life. He had seen me two or three times behind the scenes in the theatre and knew my appearance in that way, but he had never spoken to me and had not the smallest grudge against me, nor the least reason for desiring my death. He just felt, he said, as if he must buy a revolver and watch me as I came out of the House of Commons and shoot me. This he was commanded to do by a voice which he could not disobey. The moment he had fired the shot he was horrified at what he had done.

The police magistrate, naturally enough, treated this story with scorn. He expressed his conviction that the accused was one of a gang, and urged the

police to spare no efforts to capture his accomplices. The prisoner was committed for trial, but Beck bailed him out.

"There is something more in this than meets the eye," he said. "This man does not look in the least like a murderer or a liar. I should not be surprised if the story he tells proves in the end to be the plain unvarnished truth."

For a week nothing happened, though meanwhile the bill had passed its second reading in the House of Commons. Then I had a strange and startling adventure.

A few days before, after many entreaties and refusals, I had secured from Miss Glenmore the privilege of seeing her sometimes in her room in the theatre during the intervals between the acts. She had always a few minutes to spare, for her stage toilet was the simplest of any woman's that ever faced the footlights. Her brilliant complexion defied their glare, no grease paint ever defiled her face. "Twas beauty truly blent, whose red and white Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on."

That night she was Shakespeare's sweetest heroine, Viola, and she played the part to the life. Her arch vivacity was touched and softened by a plaintive tenderness that melted my very soul. How lovely she looked, and how womanly withal in her gay, boyish attire, with her silken doublet and hose, her plumed cap on her dainty head and her velvet sheathed rapier by her side. How airily she stepped on the stage, the gay embodiment of youth and life; there was no room for wonder at the sudden infatuation of poor Olivia.

But it was her touching love plaints that moved

me most, with an eager longing to claim it
my own.

"She never told her love, my lord,
But let concealment, like a worm in the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek."

I was possessed while she spoke with a fierce and
increasing envy of the insensible Duke of Illyria,
gallantly played by Arthur Maltravers.

When the theatre shook with a thunder of applause
at the fall of the curtain and Viola bowed her
acknowledgments, each bow awakening a renewal
of the storm, I hastened to her room and waited for
her coming.

She came at last, flushed with her triumph, so
airily graceful, so radiantly beautiful that I grew
faint at the sight of her excessive loveliness. There
was a smile on her face as she came into the room,
but as I stepped forward, both hands out in warm
greeting, the smile vanished in a sudden frown, and
without a word or motion of warning she plucked the
rapier from its velvet sheath and lounged straight at
my unprotected breast.

Instinctively I threw up my arm and by a miracle,
as it seemed, I put the blade aside. But the point
pierced the sleeve and raised the skin.

Again the look on her face changed now to sudden
fear, as one who wakens from a dream of horror.
She looked amazedly for a moment at the naked
sword, from whose point dripped one drop of blood.

Then she dashed it from her on the ground, and
cried in a voice that set my pulses leaping:

"Oh, I have wounded you! I have killed you!
Why did I do it—why did I do it? I must have
gone mad."

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"It is nothing, nothing at all, the merest scratch on my arm."

"Show it to me," she commanded, "take off your coat and show it to me."

The white shirt sleeve was stained with crimson just above the elbow and the stain spread and deepened. In a moment she had me down in a chair, the shirt sleeve rolled up. It was maddening, a delicious madness, to feel her cool firm fingers on my arm as she washed the blood and bound the cut with her own handkerchief. Her voice and eyes were full of tender concern. Never had I felt myself so near her love. My lips were opened to beg for it when Arthur Maltravers, unannounced, came into the room, still dressed in the gorgeous costume of the Duke. His eye rested instantly on my blood-stained sleeve.

"Hallo, what is this?" he cried. "How did you get hurt?"

"I wounded him," said Margery, in a voice that still trembled with fright, and as I would fain hope with some more tender feeling. "I nearly killed him, I don't know how or why. As I came into the room and saw him there a sudden feeling came to me that I must instantly strike him with my sword. I had no power to resist. I drew and lunged straight at his breast. Only his own courage and coolness saved him."

"It is like the story of the wretched super," I cried in amazement. "The poor wretch may have been speaking the truth, after all. Beck thought so at the time."

"It was some sudden, overpowering madness," Margery said. "I had a terrible headache this morning, I thought I should go mad with it."

"It is mesmerism," said Maltravers, with conviction. "Some powerful will is using you, in spite of yourself to wreak vengeance on Lord Kirwood."

"But is that possible?" I asked, a little incredulously. "I thought all the mysteries of mesmerism were completely exploded."

Maltravers laughed indulgently.

"I am by way of being a mesmerist myself," he said. "I mesmerised Miss Glenmore's headache away this morning, and I claim to speak with some little knowledge of the subject. Of the deeper mysteries of mesmerism, it is true, I know nothing beyond my belief that they exist, but now and again I have come close to their borders. People whom I have thrown into mesmeric sleep have learned secrets that could not have come to them in their waking moments. One lady, for example, who lost a large diamond found it instantly in the toe of one of her slippers when she awoke."

"Coincidence," I suggested.

"Perhaps, but she told me she *knew* it was there."

I was still incredulous, but Margery was plainly impressed.

"I certainly felt," she said, "as if some malignant will had mastered my own. Oh, I am very frightened and tired, and I don't want to talk any more about it to-night, please. Arthur, would you mind seeing if my motor is waiting? Say I'll be ready in a quarter of an hour." Then as he left the room: "Can you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," I answered, "but I can never forget. That little scratch was a trifling price to pay for your pity, for pity, we are told, is——"

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"Stop!" she said, holding up a warning finger, but smiling as she spoke, "we must have no more foolishness to-night, I'm too exhausted." She flung aside the velvet cap with the gay plume, and the dark hair fell rippling over the crimson velvet of her doublet. "Be off with you at once, my maid is waiting in the room inside as tired as myself."

"Remember you lunch with us to-morrow."

"I shall not forget."

The tender light shining in her eyes sent me home rejoicing to rapturous dreams.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE GRIP OF THE HYPNOTIST

THERE were just five of us to lunch next day, Margery, Maltravers, Gertrude, Beck, and myself. Strive as we might, Margery could not keep away from the subject of her strange seizure the night before.

"The thought has a terrible fascination for me," she said, when we got to the drawing-room where Egyptian cigarettes were allowed. "I cannot for one moment get it out of my mind. It is awful to be the slave of the will of some unknown master, to be compelled to commit any crime at his command."

"I don't believe there is such power in Nature," said Beck. "I find no proof of it."

"Then you don't believe in hypnotism," said Maltravers quietly. "I can prove you wrong in that, anyway."

"Oh, you need not. Of course I believe in it as far as it goes. The question is, how far?"

"Hypnotism means that one will operates on another," ventured Gertrude. "Isn't that it?"

"Yes," said Beck, "that's about it, but——"

"There is a 'but,' then?"

"A very big 'but,' if I'm to judge. My view is that an outside will can operate only through the

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medium of the senses. I don't believe mind can communicate with mind any other way. Thought transference through space, telepathy as they call it, is, to my mind, impossible."

"I'm sure you're wrong there," said Maltravers earnestly. "Forgive me if I seem rude, but I have known thought transference within my own experience, and have heard on good authority of hypnotists who exercised a despotic control over people they never saw, much less spoke to. On your theory, how can you account for the fact that people in hypnotic trance came to the knowledge of secrets that have certainly not been communicated through the senses?"

"I don't pretend to account for the *fact*," said Beck. There was a slight ironic emphasis on the word "fact."

Then suddenly Gertrude, who had been listening with breathless interest, took sides with Maltravers.

"But how do you account for this murder epidemic, Mr Beck? Must there not have been some occult and malignant influence exercised by an enemy of Charlie's, first on the super and then on Miss Glenmore, impelling them to murder him? How did they catch the epidemic?"

"I cannot account for it—yet."

"You hope to?"

"Every riddle has its answer."

"A woman's instinct is often better than a man's reason," interposed Margery. "For my part, I am convinced that the dreadful man, Lascelles, who, Lord Kirwood told us, threatened him in the House of Commons, is at the bottom of the whole business. I saw a man in the stalls that night that must have

been staring at me all through the play; a dozen times I found his eyes looking straight into mine."

"I agree with Miss Glenmore," said Gertrude. "There is something uncanny about the man in the pictures I have seen in the papers. It must be Lascelles. I know we are right."

"Right or wrong, my dear," I said soothingly, "what does it matter? We cannot go for Lascelles on the strength of a lady's instinct. When all is said and done, there is only one thing for it—I must be on my guard constantly. I got this little plaything the day after I was fired at."

I took out a dainty little revolver of the latest pattern and laid it on the table. It fitted into my waistcoat pocket, but it could send its five soft-nosed bullets plumb straight at thirty yards. The ladies examined the deadly plaything with timid eyes and fingers.

"It won't go off, Charlie?" Gertrude asked.

"Not unless you pull the trigger. I can get my man with it at thirty yards."

"But isn't it terrible to think you may kill some poor man or woman that is, after all, only the innocent tool of that devil, Lascelles?"

"There is no choice when it comes to the question of killing or being killed. Self-preservation, my dear, is the first law of nature."

"Even against me?" whispered Margery, who sat beside me, so low that the others did not hear.

"I would sooner die a hundred deaths than hurt a hair of your head."

"At best," interposed Maltravers, "your revolver is good only against outsiders. It is no use against the members of your household."

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"Me, for example," said Gertrude, laughing. "What would you do, Charlie, if that wretch Lascelles got hold of my will and I took to shooting?"

"I'd stand quite still for fear you might hit me by accident."

"I will never put my hand on a weapon while I live, and I will never have one within reach," said Margery, "so you are quite safe from me, Lord Kirwood."

"I can never be safe from you, and what's more, I don't want to be," I said softly. "Will you come for a row to-morrow? I know you are not rehearsing, and the upper regions of the Thames are glorious just now. You need not be afraid of tossing me overboard, if the humour takes you. I can swim like a fish."

"I know I oughtn't to, but——"

"You will! I don't know how to begin to thank you."

After that, I had her to myself in a quiet corner for a good twenty minutes. I have not the least notion what the rest of the company said or did till Maltravers, who had come to us with Margery, got up to leave. Then I saw Beck looking grim, and I overheard Gertrude saying to Maltravers:

"But you are quite sure that if I were thrown into a trance I should know the secret of the attacks on my brother?"

"Not quite sure," he answered, in his low musical voice. "Unhappily we can hardly ever be quite sure of anything in this world, Lady Gertrude, but I think it is most probable."

The next scene in this strange drama was, if possible, more exciting than the last.

Two days later Gertrude, the governor, Beck, and

I were at breakfast when the thing happened. The governor and myself got talking over the extradition bill, and that naturally led on to the deadly hostility of the criminal classes to the bill, its authors and advocates.

"I hope you always carry your revolver, Charlie," said Gertrude, in a tone so strained, so different to her ordinary voice that I turned to her in surprise, though I knew how nervous she was on my account.

"Why, certainly," I answered, producing it.

Half unconsciously, as it seemed, she took the weapon from my hand. I noticed that she was very pale and trembling. I noticed, too, that Beck's eyes were fixed on her; but there was nothing strange in that, for Beck seldom looked at any one else when Gertrude was in the room.

In a moment she clenched the revolver tight in both hands, so tight that the knuckles showed white as bone, then suddenly, as gripped by a strong resolve, she turned the muzzle straight at me, her finger on the trigger. But before I could move or cry out Beck's hand was on her wrist. At the same moment the report rang out, the bullet struck the ceiling and sprinkled the breakfast table with a shower of plaster. The room was filled with pungent smoke, and Gertrude fell back in a dead faint into Beck's arms.

He was the only one that kept his head. The governor and myself both thought that Gertrude was dead, that she had shot herself.

"She has fainted," Beck whispered. "The fierce struggle against the overmastering outside influence, the horror of what she was compelled to do, proved too much for her. She will be all right in a moment.

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Just stand there, Charlie, where she can see you the instant her eyes open."

He sprinkled a little water on her white face, and forced a few drops of brandy between her teeth.

Presently the dead white of her cheeks warmed with a faint underglow of pink and her eyelids raised languidly. At the sight of me remembrance kindled in her eyes and her languor vanished.

"You are not hurt?" she cried eagerly, just as Marjory had done. "Oh, my God, how I have suffered, what I have done?"

"I'm all right, Gerty," I said. "How did it happen?"

In low tones that faltered and broke with fear she told us. All of a sudden a "silent voice," as she called it—she was sure it was the voice of Lascelles—commanded her to ask for the pistol. A little curious and more than a little frightened she obeyed without thought of resistance. It was not till the pistol was actually in her hand that she felt the inexorable order to shoot me. With all the strength of her will she resisted the horrible command—to no avail. Under that compelling force her power of resistance slowly ebbed away. She was forced to point the revolver straight at me, her finger was already pressing the trigger when Beck threw up the weapon and saved my life.

"I could not have lived an hour, Charlie," she whispered, "if I had shot you."

"All's well that ends well, Gerty," I said, as cheerfully as I could. "The third is the charm, and I have escaped three times. This may be the last attempt. The will power of Lascelles, or whoever is behind this cursed business, cannot hold out

for ever. You gave him a run for his money that time. Perhaps the strain of command is as hard on him as the strain of resistance is on you."

But though I talked cheerfully before the government and Gertrude, who, I could see, were devoured with anxiety on my account, I wasn't feeling particularly cheerful. I hope I am no greater coward than the next man, but it was by no means a comfortable experience to come three times within measurable distance of death without the least notion when the peril came or how it could be averted. Later on, when Beck and myself were alone together, I spoke out.

"It's not good enough, old man. I feel like the Czar of all the Russias when the anarchists are on the job—worse. My nearest and dearest are the keenest to cut me off. If you were one second later Gertrude had got me that time. I suppose you would have the nerve to shy yourself."

"Not if I know it."

"But you won't know it till it's done, that's the devil of the business."

"If you live till I hurt you, Charlie," he said confidently, "you'll live for ever."

"But there were Gertrude and Miss Glenmore—they did not want to hurt me if they could help it, but some devil got hold of them. I wonder if there's anything in Miss Glenmore's notion that Lascelles is at the bottom of it. Maltravers knows something about hypnotism and he thinks it likely, but then Lascelles skipped the country a week ago."

"Maltravers," said Beck, "thinks that a man in a hypnotic trance might discover the secret. I have a great mind to try."

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"The same thing occurred to me, Paul. I was going to ask him to hypnotise me on the off-chance."

"I spoke first," said Beck. "But I will be glad to have you on the premises when the thing is done. As I understand, and I've read about it a bit, your will is asleep when you are hypnotised; it is in complete abeyance, and the other chap steps in and takes possession with a word of command. I should like you to be present to see fair play, as it were, when Maltravers takes control."

Maltravers, whom we saw that night in his room in the theatre waiting to go on as Romeo, was not merely willing but eager to try the experiment. Gertrude's attempt on my life horrified him.

"It was in some degree my fault," he said. "At her earnest request I mesmerised her in the hope that she would discover the secret. She failed completely, but the result would be, I fear, to make her will weaker and render her more liable to other influence."

"Is it likely that I should succeed where she failed?" asked Beck.

"I think it is very likely. There is danger, of course, of other influences, but I have found that a man is far less amenable than a woman, and, as I understand, you don't believe that such an influence can operate at all except directly."

"I am always willing to learn," said Beck, "and own my errors when I find them. I think the experiment is well worth trying. Very likely it will tell us the secret we are in quest of. Could you put the thing through to-morrow morning, say eleven or half past, in my chambers? Kirwood and I are going for a motor drive in the afternoon."

It was the first I had heard of the motor drive.

"Eleven will suit me perfectly," said Maltravers.

"Is there any objection to Kirwood coming?" Beck asked. "He'd like it, and I'd like it, if you have no objection."

"Quite impossible," cried Maltravers decisively. "As I have said, I cannot in any case guarantee success, but I guarantee absolute failure even to induce the trance if there is any one but our two selves in the room. So sorry, Kirwood," he said, turning courteously to me, "but it is really impossible. If you care to be hypnotised yourself at any time shall only be too happy."

"All the same, old man," said Beck, as Maltravers at his cue rushed on to the stage, "you'll be there if you want to. It's only a pose on his part. The presence of a third party cannot effect him in the least, especially if he does not know the third party is present. Come over to my place as near to ten as you can manage."

At ten o'clock sharp next morning I found Beck in his study, and I at once noticed an innovation in the room. Over his bedroom door, which opened inwards from the study, there was hung a heavy curtain of dark crimson plush.

"You will get behind that curtain, Charlie," he said. "There is a slight slit in it, so you will be able to see and hear all."

"He will be sure to examine behind the curtain," I objected.

"You will be hidden in the bedroom when he does."

"But he may lock the bedroom door, and so lock me in."

"Of course he will. I have made arrangements for

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that. See, the key turns with a click but the bolt does not shoot. You must keep the door tight with your hand in case he tries the lock; afterwards you can get out silently behind the curtain. By the way, you might take as full a note as you can of the hypnotic dialogue."

"I'll take it in shorthand, if you like."

"Perfect; mind, I don't want to be hypnotised. I mean to keep my wits about me if I can manage it, but in case I succumb I should dearly like a record, both of what I say and what is said to me."

I felt a little ashamed of myself as Beck hurried me off to hide in the bedroom as Maltravers ring came to the door. Somehow, though I could not tell how, it seemed a rather low down trick, as if we wanted to trap him in some way, but Beck laughed at the notion.

"What harm can it possibly do him?" he asked, and as I had no answer ready he got his own way as usual.

He was right in his anticipation. Maltravers examined the curtain, and locked the doors both of the bedroom and the study. "One cannot take too many precautions," I heard him say to Beck, and I noticed a strange excited ring in his voice.

The *séance* had begun by the time I ventured to open the door of the bedroom and noiselessly creep back behind the curtain.

Beck was seated in a chair almost facing me, Maltravers's side was towards me, I could only see his profile. But in his whole body, in every movement, there was a strong suggestion of nervous strain.

I could not quite see what he was doing, but he had a small mirror in his hand, which sent a patch

of light dancing on the opposite wall. I heard him tell Beck to fix his eyes on the mirror, and I judged by the motion of his elbows he was making rapid passes with his hands.

Beck's face wore a look of quiet resolve, his eyes steady, his lips firmly closed, and I wondered if Maltravers knew he set himself to resist the incantation. If so it only impelled the other to more violent efforts. The passes continued more fiercely than before; one could feel that there was a duel in progress between the two men. I was wound up to a pitch of keen excitement. I wanted Beck to win. But after a long minute of silent strain, will against will, Beck's eyelids quivered once or twice, and slowly drooped. He opened them sharply, but after a pause closed them again. He nodded and caught himself up. Then the tension of his lips relaxed, his face lost its fixed expression, his arms grew limp, his head dropped back. He was unmistakably asleep.

A long, deep breath, almost it seemed of relief, escaped Maltravers. He came a little closer to the sleeping man and examined him carefully. At last he spoke, very slowly, very clearly, in that wonderful impressive voice of his.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

I would hardly have recognised Beck's voice, so quiet it was, so devoid of all expression.

"You are going for a motor drive with Kirwood this afternoon, you know that?"

"I know that."

"Listen now carefully to what you must do." He pronounced each word slowly and distinctly. "When the car is at full speed you must stoop as if you

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dropped something, catch Kirwood by the legs, and jerk him out on the road. Do you understand?"

"I understand!" It was Beck who spoke, but a sudden change was in his voice. The two words rang out like a pistol shot, and even as he spoke he leaped straight at Maltravers.

There was a short, sharp tussle. Maltravers was the bigger man, young and vigorous, but Beck's strength was enormous, and he had the advantage of surprise. In a moment he had him down and pinned on the floor.

"Lend a hand, Charlie," he shouted to me, "the fellow is dangerous."

Between us we tied him up hand and foot with strong cord, which was in readiness, and stretched him on his back on the carpet as helpless as a log.

"It's all up, Maltravers," said Beck, as the other strained at his cords. "You understand the trick Charlie?"

"I have a notion."

"Why, it is quite simple. He hypnotised the super, he hypnotised Miss Glenmore to cure her headache, he hypnotised your sister. While they were in the hypnotic sleep he gave them the murderous command, which they were constrained to obey."

"But why?" I asked, in utter surprise and horror. "I never injured the man!"

"You lie, you dog!" Maltravers growled between his teeth. It was strange, as he lay there helpless, to see the man's handsome face distorted with rage and jealousy. "You stole her love from me. She would have loved me if you had not come between. I am only sorry that I did not stab you with my own hand."

"It would have been less mean and cowardly anyway," retorted Beck, "but it is too late to think of that now. Would you touch the bell, Charlie? I've a couple of Scotland Yard men waiting to carry him off, as I fancied things might turn out as they did. He ought to get a dozen years at least for incitement to murder."

We did not go on our motor drive after all, but lunched instead with Gertrude and Margery.

"I thought you were to bring Mr Maltravers," Gertrude said to Margery as we sat down.

"It will be some time before either of you see Mr Maltravers again," Beck interposed gravely.

Something in his voice made both girls turn startled eyes on him. He answered the question in their eyes.

"Yes," he said, "the murder epidemic is over—we have sterilised the microbe."

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CHAPTER XXI

HELD UP

WHEN Maltravers in due course got his seven years for attempted murder, we were all disposed to smile at Lascelles and the terror he had inspired, but our smile proved somewhat premature.

The extradition bill was going merrily through the committee in spite of the opposition of a few sentimentalists, who would have protested against cruelty to a scorpion or undue severity to a rattlesnake. The threatening letters had ceased. Lascelles, as I have said, had skipped the country, and, if our information was true, was busy at some devilment in Spain. We thought we were quit of him in London for a time; as it proved, he was only drawing back to spring.

About this time Gerty was away in Kent with her friends, the Becks, whom she often visited, but always when the son was from home. It may be as well to mention here, if indeed it is necessary to mention, that we were all by this time very chummy with the Becks, not excluding the governor, who had completely got over his first prejudice. If young Beck himself was not altogether at ease with the governor, that was my fault.

One evening when Beck and I were smoking

together we got talking of the governor, with whom he had grown to be a prime favourite, and like a fool I dropped a hint what he had said to me when he had first met the Becks at Cambridge about class distinctions and drawing the line, and all that kind of thing. I wanted to show Beck how completely he had conquered his prejudices, but it didn't work in the least. Beck froze up at once. For half an hour I could hardly get a word out of him, and all the time I was cursing myself for a fool.

It seemed to me he never got on quite so well after that, either with the governor or with Gertrude, though goodness knows there was never the least trace of snobbery about Gertrude.

Beck was away fishing in Normandy when Gertrude went down to his people, and the day before his return she started for home. She wired us from Kent to say she was coming—and never arrived. We had a horrible time of it for three days searching everywhere, searching in vain.

On the fourth day, as we sat at breakfast, the governor had a letter which changed suspense to agony.

"MY LORD," it ran, "You must drop that infamous bill, you really must for the sake of your precious daughter. You know your Scriptures, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. The hour the bill passes your daughter dies. If the bill is dropped she will be restored unharmed. Reply, Victor Lascelles, Hotel Continental, Paris. Remember treachery means your daughter's instant death."

There was another sheet in the envelope which he

did not notice at first, it was in Gerty's hand-writing, very short :

"Darling," it ran, "save me if you can, but you know best.—Your own GERTY."

Not a word more. The words sprawled over the paper with wide spaces between, quite unlike Gerty's usual compact hand.

The governor turned as white as the table-cloth. He looked like a man who is sick of a sudden pain. I thought he was going to faint.

"My God, sir," I cried, "what is the matter?"

He tried to speak and couldn't. I could just hear him mutter "my poor little girl," all the time staring at the letter which had dropped from his trembling fingers on to the table. I picked it up and read it, and was as completely bowled over as the governor. The thing was too horrible. The thought of Gertrude in the hands of this hellish scoundrel simply drove me mad. Blind rage was what I felt. I tramped up and down the room longing to lay my hands on him. For a moment I could think of nothing else. Then I felt I was making a silly ass of myself, that there was nothing to be gained by foolery of this kind.

I put my hand on the governor's shoulder, his head was on the table, and he was sobbing like a child.

"Best telephone for Beck, sir," I said. "He'll help if any man can."

He leaped up at the hope. "You are quite right, Charlie," he said, "quite right!" and made for the telephone.

Within half an hour Beck was with us. He had

been keenest of us all in the hunt for Gertrude, for the last three days he had hardly eaten or slept at all. Yet there wasn't a feather turned on him. He was as neat as pins and looked more like a boy than ever as he came into the room, only his face was very white and set.

The moment he entered he saw we both were in a frenzy of anxiety. But he asked no questions, just waited without a word; that was so like Beck.

Without a word the governor handed him Gerty's letter. I watched him read it. That queer little dimple came into his left cheek; it came, I think, from the tightening of his lips, and gave one the notion of smiling when it was the last thing in his mind.

"You will drop the bill, of course, sir," he said, when he had finished the letter.

There was such a tremble in his voice that he could hardly get the words out. I had never heard Beck speak like that before, I had never seen him look like that before, he was in a blue funk.

The governor turned on him sharply.

"How can I drop the bill? What reason can I give for it? There are a score of ruffians, including Lascelles, on whom the police are ready to pounce the moment the bill passes. I'm disgraced if I drop it."

"That doesn't matter," Beck persisted. "The bill must be dropped, we cannot take the risk."

"And let this scoundrel go free?" said the governor.

"Time enough to think of that afterwards," said Beck, with something of his old manner, "time enough to hunt him down when she is safe."

"What security have we, even if we drop the bill,

that he will keep his word and let her go. The cunning devil may still hold her as a hostage for his safety."

It was plain that the notion struck Beck for the first time and struck him hard, he was usually so quick witted. For a moment he was stunned.

"That's true," he admitted at last reluctantly. "We must try some way to get her out of their clutches, but we will have to be cautious, it's an awful risk. Let me see her letter again for a moment, sir. You are sure it is in her handwriting."

It was curious that Beck had never seen a scrap of Gerty's writing.

The governor passed him over the letter. "Hardly her handwriting, but I am pretty sure she wrote it, though she writes differently as a rule."

"Show me something of hers."

The governor took from his pocket his daughter's last letter, and set it before Beck. It was beautifully neat and closely written.

Beck examined them both closely, glancing from one to the other. Then he took a powerful magnifying glass from his pocket and minutely scrutinised the scrawl.

"My God!" he exclaimed at last, "she is a wonderful girl!"

The admiration in his voice was so sudden, so spontaneous that the governor and myself were startled.

"It is about the brightest and the coolest thing I ever saw done," Beck went on.

"What is it," asked the governor impatiently. "You need not tell me she is clever and courageous, but I find nothing to show it in the letter."

"She has beaten those scoundrels at their own game. Under their very noses she has given us first clue to start with."

"Will you kindly explain," asked the governor.

"You can see that the letter is written with a fine hard pen?"

"I suppose so, now that you call my attention to it. I did not notice that before."

Beck passed him the magnifying glass.

"Look closely at the paper between the last line and the signature," he said, "and at the space above."

"I see a faint white scratch on the paper," the governor said, his eyes riveted on the glass. Then with sudden eagerness: "There are letters L-O-N-D-O-N, London," he spelt out slowly, "what does that mean?"

"We are not done yet," Beck answered; "look at the space just above."

"P-H-O," spelt the governor, "there is no such word as pho."

"Can't you see the N E?" asked Beck; "they are there plain enough—'phone."

"But again I ask," the governor cried, with growing impatience, "how did she do it? Why did she do it? What does it all mean, anyway?"

"She did it with an inkless pen," said Beck, "under their very eyes. The meaning is as plain as daylight. The house they have caged her in is not in Paris but London. I half suspected it from the first. It accounts for the delay. They sent the letter to Paris to be posted."

"And the word 'phone,'" I cried eagerly, "means, I suppose, there is a telephone in the house."

"You have it," answered Beck. "She scraped down the two things most likely to help us."

"What must we do?" asked the governor, brightening a little. The cheerful confidence in Beck's voice was a tonic against despair.

"The first thing," Beck went on cheerfully, "is to get into personal contact with Lascelles. Bring him to see you, throw him off his guard if you can. It is a great point in our favour that we know the girl is in London, while he fancies we believe her to be in Paris. The telephone will come later when we have marked down Lascelles. Meanwhile we must have time."

"I think I can manage that," I said; "it will be easy by shilly-shallying to keep the bill going for another week or more if we want it."

"Now for a letter to Lascelles, there is no time to lose."

Under the direction the following letter was written:

"SIR,—Your letter just received, coupled with the unwarrantable capture of my daughter, places me in a terrible dilemma. On one side is my duty and reputation; on the other the liberty, at least (for I cannot believe you would resort to murder), of my only daughter. I trust some other alternative may be arranged with no sacrifice to honour, and in this hope I am willing to discuss the matter with you if you will kindly call on me at your very earliest convenience.

STANTON.

"P.S.—Your personal safety will be respected."

"He'll come," prophesied Beck, "if only to convince you that they do mean murder."

Next morning the governor was rung up on the telephone from Paris. A pleasant voice with slightly foreign accent announced that Lascelle would call next afternoon about six o'clock.

"That looks as if he were in Paris, anyhow," the governor said to Beck later in the day.

"I think not," the other replied; "he worked the 'phone from London. He has an accomplice in Paris."

"Would you like to be present at the interview?" asked the governor.

"No, sir, he might recognise me afterwards. Those chaps are as wary as foxes, and your daughter's life is at stake. Don't look so frightened, we'll get her through all right. What you have to do is to hold the fellow on and off. He knows that there is no hurry, that your daughter's danger is his safety. Give him the notion, if you can, that you are sure to knock under in the long run."

There was nothing of the desperado about Lascelle when he arrived that evening at our door. A handsome, quietly dressed fellow with a gentle insinuating manner, soft voice, and sleepy looking, half closed eyes, that now and again opened suddenly with the cruel glare of a hawk's.

"Very sorry, my lord, to inconvenience you," he said, as he came into the room, "but really there is no other way out of it. I trust you have made up your mind to my terms." For an instant the cruel hawk-like glint showed in Lascelle's eyes. Then his lids half closed again, and his voice was as soft as ever as he said with a curious pride in his tone: "It would be most unkind to let you harbor any delusions on this score. If the bill passes t

House of Commons, Lady Gertrude Kirwood will lose her ears, which are so pretty and shell-like; if it becomes law, she will lose her life at the same hour."

"I shall think it over," said the governor feebly. "It wants time."

"Take your own way and your own time," said the other, with a politeness that was a subtle threat.

"But my daughter?" asked the governor anxiously.

"Your daughter is well and well cared for, though I cannot flatter myself that she enjoys her visit to Paris. She has suffered no violence and will suffer none. A porter in our employment met her at the railway station in London. He conveyed her and her luggage to a four-wheeler, whose doors locked with a spring, whose windows of thick plate glass are air tight, and whose driver is thoroughly to be trusted. A soothing gas prevented the young lady injuring herself or inconveniencing us by over exertion, screaming, or struggling. It was a most safe and serviceable driver and cab."

There was no mistaking the fiendish threat in the smoothly spoken words. The governor's fingers itched to take the sleek, cruel ruffian by the throat and squeeze the breath out of him; but he knew his darling's life must pay the forfeit.

"I will think it over," he said shortly, forcing himself to speak.

"Think it over very carefully," advised the Frenchman, with malign significance. "Meanwhile I have the honour to wish you a very good day."

Debonair Lascelles, as he silently hailed a random taxi at the corner of the street, hardly guessed that the foolish-looking boy, who drove him to his flat in

South Kensington, was Paul Beck—the man in all the world whom he had most reason to fear.

Paul had no trouble in learning all the flat had to tell him. It did hold the telephone, and it did not hold the lady. Further than that he could not go. Two days and nights' incessant shadowing convinced him that Lascelles neither wrote to or visited his confederates who were in charge of the lady.

Then more than ever he applauded the quickness and courage of Gertrude. Without the clue given by the word "phone" he would have found himself helpless.

As it was he had a long and persuasive interview with the managing director of the Universal Telephone Company.

"It is a most unusual, a most indefensible proceeding, Mr Beck," said that astute gentleman; "but from what you tell me the emergency justifies it. I'll take the risk."

Paul went straight from the telephone office to the governor, and found him restlessly pacing the floor of his study, backwards and forwards incessantly, like a wild beast in a cage. He had grown years older in those few days under the shadow of that torturing anxiety. It was pitiful to see the face he turned to Beck with restless agony in his eyes.

"Well," he cried, "what news?" Plainly his nerves were in a tangle; his voice, beyond his control, rang up to a high treble: "You have not found my girl?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Then why do you come to me?"

"For help. I want the use of your telephone, the sole use of it for a day or two."

"But why, Paul, why? You must not treat me like a child. What are you going to do? What do you hope to do? You must tell me everything."

"At present, sir, there is very little to tell. I have arranged that Lascelles's telephone shall be put into immediate connection with yours."

"Well, well?" asked the governor impatiently.

"Every word that he speaks on the telephone will be heard in this room, then, probably in a day or so, we will know where Lady Gertrude is hidden. But I must have the sole use of the telephone all the time. If one word is spoken through it, the scoundrels have their warning. I have told them so in the office. Have I done right, sir?"

"Admirably, admirably, Beck," cried the governor gratefully.

Three hours later the telephone in the study rang violently. At once Paul jumped from his seat, where he had been waiting in a fever of impatience, and clapped the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo, hallo, are you there?" came to him impatiently in the smooth voice of Lascelles, and for a second he was on the point of answering un-awares. The next second he heard the reply in a rougher voice with a strong Cockney accent.

"Yes, all right, governor, what is it?"

"How is the girl?"

"Fight as the mail, cheerful as a lark, swears she will hang the blooming lot of us. I'd like to teach her manners!"

"Fool!" Lascelles's voice was angry and menacing. "Treat her well, let her have everything she wants. Not a hair of her head must be harmed; all our safety depends on that. Your life will answer for the girl."

"Keep your hair on, governor," answered the rougher voice. "No one wants to hurt the girl; she'll be right and ready when she's wanted. How goes the bargain?"

"All goes well, only a little patience is needed. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

Beck heard the bell ring off. He replaced the receiver and looked at his watch. It was exactly a quarter to five. The conversation had lasted about two minutes.

"So far, so good," he said to himself. "Now I've only to find out who was on Lascelles's 'phone at a little before a quarter to five o'clock, and then pay a surprise visit on my own account to his friends."

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CHAPTER XXII

"FLAT BURGLARY"

LABURNHAM Lodge is a three-storied, semi-detached villa out Hampstead way, built in the jerrybuilder's most pretentious style. It stands back fifty yards from the road in "its own grounds," and has a scrubby garden in the rear. The companion villa, Beechwood, which shoulders up to it with only a thin party wall between, is identical in every particular. A low wire fence divides the grounds in the front, a low wall the gardens at the back.

The owners of the villas were genteel folk, who took their holidays on the continent and put their town residences on the agents' books, "To be let furnished," year after year without success. This year, to the agents' great surprise, Laburnham Lodge was taken for two months by a gentlemanly man with a slight foreign accent, whose references were unexceptional, and who paid half the rent in advance.

It never rains but it pours. Three weeks later Beechwood was taken by a dissipated-looking young gentleman, who came into immediate possession.

Breakfasting next morning Beck and I had a very singular conversation.

"You understand what you have to do?" he said.
"The smallest hitch may be fatal."

"I think I do," I replied. "About twelve o'clock I'm to fire the big blunderbuss through the right hand top window of the house next door. I hope sincerely it won't burst."

"No, there is no fear; there is only a half charge of powder. I don't want my bullets to get lost or injured."

"But why that window?" I asked.

"Because that's the room where they are going to put me."

"You?"

"Precisely. You notice the iron rods across the window and the window at the back. They are the nurseries when the owners are at home. In the ball room they keep Lady Gertrude."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Then why not get her out at once if we have to tear down the place and strangle the ruffians inside?"

"Because I daren't. Don't look so haughty, it's for her sake. I dare not risk it. Our first move would mean her death. Go on with your lesson."

"But——" I expostulated.

"There are no buts. What must you do when you have fired the shot?"

"Get back to the house as quick as I can and lie low. I may do what I like, you tell me, next day. What the blazes am I to do—eat my head out doing nothing? Can I go and see the governor?"

"Certainly not," snapped out Beck; "these fellows have their spies everywhere."

"All right, all right, I suppose I'll get through this time somehow. Next night, at about the same hour

I am to go under the back window and feel for a silk thread. To the silk thread I am to tie the cord ladder you brought yesterday and to wait in the shadow."

"And like a shadow," added Beck. "You must not be seen or heard as you value your sister's life."

"Is that all?"

"All. Now be off with you. You had better go out on your bicycle towards the heath. I have got to play the first innings off my own bat."

A quarter of an hour later the tenant of Beechwood was knocking and ringing furiously at the door of Laburnham Lodge. It was opened by a respectable-looking man-servant, who seemed mildly surprised by the aggressiveness of the visitor.

"I want to see your master," the other burst out angrily, overflowing his grievance. "Do you call this a respectable house? I was kept awake all last night by a loud knocking against the wall of the back room. I won't stand that sort of thing, I can tell you. I'll see what the police have to say if it isn't stopped."

"If you will kindly step in, sir," said the servant politely, as soon as he could get a word in edgeways, "I will tell the master."

He showed the visitor into a room at the back, and softly closed the door behind him.

Five minutes later the door opened again and the master came in—a big, square-built, powerful-looking man, whose broad face and huge arms, in spite of his quiet, well-fitting clothes, suggested a prize-fighter.

The moment he entered the irascible visitor began again an angry recital of his woes, the big man listening calmly, moving at the same time so as to bring his visitor's back to the door. In the midst of

the torrent of angry remonstrances the door began to open softly, an inch at a time and the servant crept through.

Suddenly he pounced and gripped the visitor by the body and arms from behind. At the same time the man in front clapped a hand as big as a small ham to his mouth, and silently, almost without a struggle, they bore him to the ground. In a trice they had him neatly bound and gagged, and went through his pockets with the dexterity and celerity of experts.

From his card-case they discovered that he was a wild young nobleman lately come of age and supposed to be "celebrating on the continent." A gold watch was in his fob, there were a score of pounds, in gold and notes, in his purse. But what interested his investigators most of all was his cheque-book. The book was half empty but the blocks bore testimony to the payment of very large sums indeed.

It was the cheque-book of a millionaire. Perhaps never in his adventurous life was Beck nearer to death than now, when he lay helpless bound and gagged at the mercy of those men, whose mercy was that of a tiger that has gripped his prey. They put their heads close together and jabbered as they read the entries on the blocks, and went out together locking the door behind them.

Lying there on the floor and listening with all his ears Beck heard the faint, penetrating tinkle of the telephone bell.

"It is all right," he thought contentedly, "they have rung up our friend Lascelles for instructions."

He had guessed what those instructions would be, and his guess was not wide of the mark.

"Quite right, so far," Lascelles said. "Lucky you caught him before any mischief was done, but it was a near thing, he might have gone blundering to the police. Try and make the girl keep quiet, don't let her knock on the wall, but above all no violence to him or her. We have enough on our hands at present. From what you tell me of the cheque-book the man will prove a prize later on. Search him thoroughly, keep him safe, but don't hurt him."

In less than ten minutes the two men were back in the room and carried Beck like a log upstairs. The window of the room they brought him to was barred, otherwise it was a comfortable, well-furnished bedroom, lit by electric light. Silently they ungagged and unbound him, but when he made ready to burst into a torrent of vituperation the big man frightened him into silence by a savage growl and gesture.

The victim's anger instantly changed to sudden fear.

"I meant no harm," he whined, "I will pay you handsomely if you will let me go."

"We'll see about that later on," the other answered surlily. "What you have got to do now is to keep quiet, and don't you forget it or there will be trouble, sure."

The brutes again searched him carefully, from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

"Mind," the big man cautioned him again, "mum's the word." So they left him shivering in a frenzy of fear.

But his mood changed at the shooting of the bolt as they locked the door behind them.

"I'm in the governor's luck!" he murmured, with a contented chuckle.

At midnight, a black, moonless night, I crept quietly from Beechwood, leaving the front door ajar and climbed over the low wire fence into the grounds of Laburnham Lodge, carrying a huge, old-fashioned blunderbuss with a bell-shaped mouth. The room in front on the third story was lit; the iron bars showed horizontal black lines across the glow.

Then the blunderbuss roared into the silence of the night as I pulled the trigger, and instantly scuttled away. A moment later two men from Laburnham Lodge rushed out half dressed into the grounds, and so on to the road. A policeman came bustling up breathless.

"That way, constable," said the big man, "I saw him run that way. Two of them were jawing on the road, one of them fired on the other."

The constable started in hot pursuit, and the two men went swiftly back to Laburnham Lodge.

"Near thing," the smaller man gasped. "The shot was fired into our place, Bill, I heard the tinkling of broken glass. What does it mean?"

"We'll soon see that," growled the other. "Look there's a light in the bloke's window. I wonder what trick he has been up to."

At the instant of the report Beck leapt out of bed. The shot struck the ceiling and the plaster and missiles came down together in a cloud of white dust. Quick as lightning Beck picked up what he wanted from the rubbish on the carpet. It was a very miscellaneous discharge he crammed under his pillow. A couple of small files, a little knife with a steel handle, a bit of strong wire, a tiny reel of silk wrapped in lead.

He had hardly got his treasures safely hidden

when his two jailors burst into the room. The cool air from the broken window struck in their faces as they entered. They found their unhappy prisoner sitting up in bed, his face distorted, quaking all over with abject unmistakable fear.

"Mercy," he whimpered; "don't shoot me."

"What has happened?" the big man demanded, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Some one fired through the window. I thought I was shot. Oh, let me go away out of this," he clamoured in a paroxysm of terror. "I'll give you any money you like if you let me go."

"We'll talk of that later on, for the present you must lie low. Some rowdy fired a shot on the road, and it chanced to come our way, that's all. You are quite out of the line, you couldn't be hit from the window. See, I'll shut the shutters. Don't meddle with the electric light any more and you are quite safe. Hang it all, man, you needn't be such a miserable coward! Let go!"

He flung the supplicating wretch roughly from him, and left the room with his comrade, locking the door behind him. Beck heard them go clattering downstairs to the ground floor. Then very gently and very persuasively he applied his bit of bent wire to the lock of the bedroom door. In a minute or two it "yielded to treatment." The bolt came back with a soft click, and Beck, turning the handle, stepped out on the passage.

The lock of the door opposite allowed itself to be just as easily persuaded, but as he pushed the door gently open he was conscious from the sound of strained breathing that there was some one awake in the room.

"Gerty," he whispered in my voice, "keep ve quiet."

"Oh," said a soft voice out of the pitch darkness a voice full of delight and surprise, "is that yo Charlie?"

"No, I'm not," he whispered back, "I imitated h voice lest you might be frightened and cry out. I Beck, and I've come to get you out of this ho Charlie's helping. Can you put your clothes on the dark? I'll come back in ten minutes, there no time to lose."

"Thank you very much," she said, in a voice th had no trace of fear; "I'll be ready when you come"

"She's a brick," Beck murmured to himself as h skulked back into his own room. Ten minute later when he opened the door again a warm litt hand took his with a firm pressure, in which ther was not a touch of tremor.

"This way," whispered the fearless voice. "Mind the table is almost opposite the door."

"Lady Gertrude," said Beck, when he was safe i the room and had closed the door behind him, "I've got two files of a special make. Between us w must cut out one of the bars of your window before morning. You see it must be cut in two places, and I want you to help. For the present, at least, w must work in the dark; those scoundrels might take it into their heads to go outside."

"Give me the file," she said simply, "and show me where to begin."

Side by side they sat at the open window, hour after hour, with brief intervals of rest, while the sharp edges of the files ate with a hissing sound deeper and deeper into the iron. While they rested he

told her of the governor and myself and our plans for her rescue.

A little after two o'clock Beck called a halt. He took her file in his hand and felt the depth of the wound she had made in the iron.

“Mine is almost clean through,” he whispered; “yours is deep enough, I will be able to wrench it out when the time comes. Meanwhile they must notice nothing.”

Finding his way in the dark like a cat he stuffed the scars in the iron with soap and soot from the chimney. “Now go back to bed, Lady Gertrude. If all goes well, you will meet your brother on the other side of this wall to-morrow night.”

Next night I was out again, and passing my hand backwards and forwards across the space of the wall under Gerty's window I could feel a thin thread drawn tense by a scrap of dangling lead. I fastened the cord ladder to it, as I had been told, and felt it mount swiftly in the darkness. Presently I was aware of a shadow coming down towards me through the darkness of the night. It grew more defined as it descended, and stretching out my hands I touched the hem of a woman's dress. The next moment Gerty was in my arms.

“Take her straight back to Lord Stanton,” Beck said, when we had got safely to Beechwood.

“And you?” asked Gertrude; she had recovered from the reaction of her escape and looked radiant. “You will come, too?”

“Oh, I fancy I will remain here for a little longer.”

I opened my lips to speak and closed them again; then after a pause: “All right,” I said slowly. “If you're ready, Gerty, I am.”

Left to himself Beck plumped down on an easy

chair, and in two minutes was fast asleep. hours later he was awakened by the ringing of door bell, and was on his feet in a moment awake. With a revolver in his hand he crept slowly to the door and opened it on the chain.

"Who is there?" he whispered through the door.
"Oh, you, Charlie. I suppose I might have expected you. Come in."

"You know why I've come?" I asked, as I stepped into the hall.

"Well, I can partly guess, but I don't want to really. I can manage those two chaps off my back with my bat."

"I knew if I asked, you would have said no, but you came without asking. I owe these blackguards something on my own account."

"And Lady Gertrude?"

"Oh, she is all right with the governor. It would have done your heart good to see him when she flung herself into his arms. They thought I was gone to my innocent bed and here I am."

"Well, if you must you must, I suppose, only be careful and obey orders. How about a revolver?"

"I brought my own, thanks. I thought it might come in handy."

"That's lucky, I had only one. Now we can start at once if you are ready. We can sleep as comfortably at Laburnhum Lodge as here."

When we had pulled up after us the rope ladder Beck said softly: "Come to my room, they bring me my breakfast first. I'll bolt the door on the inside to make sure they call us in good time."

We slept in our clothes that night. At seven o'clock the morning a key grated in the lock, and Beck w

instantly on his feet. The handle turned and pushed and then came an angry knocking at the door.

"All right, all right," Beck's voice responded sleepily, "I'm coming."

He slipped back the bolt, and, standing behind the door, the two men burst into the room; he banged it behind them. They stopped dumbfounded, each looking down the barrel of a revolver.

"It's all up, my boys," said Beck cheerily, "you may as well give in quietly."

The smaller of the two men took his advice. He put out his hands meekly, and I clapped the handcuffs on his wrists. The big fellow hesitated a moment then he roared out: "As well be shot as hanged!" and with his head down drove like a bull at his enemy. Beck stepped aside, shifted the pistol to his left hand, and with his right met him under the left ear and sent him crashing to the ground. Like a tiger he pounced on him, and there was a clean click of steel as the handcuffs met on his wrists.

"Your bull neck was meant for the rope, my friend," he said as he rose. "Would you mind taking charge of these chaps," he went on, "till I send the police to take them over, I have other fish to fry. If they try any tricks shoot without mercy. The first policeman I meet I'll send round."

"A man to see me?" said Lascelles, "a messenger from Lord Stanton. Show him up at once."

He was at his breakfast and seemed to enjoy it thoroughly. The interruption enhanced his enjoyment. An evil smile of triumph curled his thin lips and shone in his glittering eyes as he gave the instruction. He guessed what the message meant, Lord Stanton had given in.

The messenger, a slim young man, came briskly into the room, his hand outstretched in friendly greeting. Almost without thinking Lascelles gave his hand. It was instantly crushed in a grasp of steel that sent the blood to the finger-nails. Before he could react his left hand was gripped in turn, and he was flung heavily back into the chair from which he had just risen, a brace of bright steel handcuffs tinkled musically on his wrists. The whole thing was over in a second.

The man's eyes glared like a wild beast caught in a trap. For a moment he seemed too stunned to speak.

"What is the meaning of this?" he hissed.

"It seems pretty plain," Beck replied imperturbably.

"Treachery!"

"The reward of treachery and savagery."

"Lord Stanton shall pay for this. His daughter——"

"Don't worry yourself about his daughter," said Beck. "She was safe with her father six hours ago."

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CHAPTER XXIII

MARGERY SAYS “NO”

NO one was more broken-hearted about Gertrude than Margery, no one more delighted at her escape. She was awfully kind to me when I met her once during that terrible time, striving hard to comfort me in the teeth of her own fears, and afterwards she completely let herself go in joy. Gertrude must be the pluckiest girl alive, the awful ordeal she had been through did not seem to hurt her in the least. The day after she was in wild good spirits, though she did not like to talk about what Beck had done for her, and I thought she was ungrateful, and told her so.

But she bore me no malice, for she contrived that I should have a good time with Margery, whom I found alone in the drawing-room waiting for Gertrude, who, I suspect, cut her appointment to give me a chance.

I have been in some tight places in my day, but my heart never beat faster than when I stood at the door, trying to screw up my courage to the sticking-point.

I had come in quietly and she had not heard me. She was sitting on a couch near the window, her face turned from the door. I could just see the delicate

outline of her nose, chin, and eyebrow against light. She was thoughtfully pensive and wonderfully lovely. Her figure, in a clinging gown of grey-velvet, was the perfection of womanly beauty. She turned as I closed the door softly, and her face brightened as she saw me. She was infinitely desirable. Then in a very tumult of passion, without thought, I poured out my love. Twice she tried to stop me, but I went on to the end.

There was a torturing silence for a moment or two after I had done; I did not venture to look at her face before she spoke. If she had hesitated at all there was no sign of it in her voice.

"No," she said, and there could be no doubt that she meant it, "no. I'm very sorry, Lord Kirwood, that I have to refuse, but it must be no, now and always. I beg you will not speak of this again—I know you would not give me pain. For your own sake—well, for my sake as well as your own, let this be the end. I should be very sorry to lose your friendship and your sister's, but we can never be more than friends."

I had no answer ready, and indeed she gave me time to answer if I wanted to. With a timid smile like a child that pleads for pardon and a whisper of "good-bye," so faint that I hardly caught it, she was gone before I could get my wits together.

It was a nasty jar, I must own; her "no" was so quiet and so decisive that it left me no hope.

I don't think I quite realised how much I loved Margery until after I had lost her. She had been mixed up with my life, with all my thoughts, hopes, and ambitions. No pleasure was worth having if she didn't share it, and the world seemed a very

blank and desolate place without her. I did not see how I would keep on living. I have heard of men who have had a bad knock on the head, fallen from a horse or something of that sort, and have gone about their business in a dazed kind of way, hardly knowing what had happened to them. I felt exactly like that. I got through the time somehow, one day with another, but I had no zest in anything, and always the same dull pain of disappointment at my heart. Beck thought I was ill, and so did the governor, and made me send for a doctor; but Gertrude guessed the truth.

It was a bit curious that I didn't want to tell her about Margery. I didn't want to tell any one. I had told Gertrude all my other love affairs readily enough, and when she laughed at me I didn't mind much. But if she laughed now, I knew, it would cut like a knife.

She made me tell her, all the same; trust a woman to get her own way. I was alone in my snugery, smoking and making a pretence of reading, when she came in without knocking, closed the door and sat down.

"What is the matter, Charlie?" she asked softly. "I cannot bear to see you like this. Surely you can tell me. Is it Margery?"

Before I knew what I was saying I told her everything. It was an immense relief once I began, for the dear old sister was full of sympathy. She didn't laugh at me once, as she did at the other love affairs. When I was done raging and ranting she just patted me on the shoulder encouragingly.

"Why did she refuse, Charlie? She didn't tell you that? Why didn't you ask her?"

"What was the use?"

"You're a donkey," said this sister of mine calmly. "If you don't know what's in your way, how can you get it out of your way? I know she is fond of you."

"What!"

"Yes, of course, she is."

"Honour bright, Gerty. How can you know that?"

"How can one woman know about another, Gerty? Margery is only a woman, I assure you, one of ourselves, though, of course, I don't expect you to believe it. If I cared about any one she'd find me out quick enough, when you would have no notion of it, though I don't think she'd give me away, and I would not give her away either, to any one but you."

She blushed and stammered, but I was too absorbed in her astounding declaration to think of anything else.

"But if she is fond of me, why did she refuse point-blank and tell me there was no hope?"

"That's what you have to find out. Ask her boldly if she doesn't love you; that's a thing a woman can lie about."

I watched my opportunity, and caught Margery alone in her own drawing-room after Gertrude had skilfully lured her mother out shopping in the morning.

She came towards me smiling, and her hands outstretched with the light in her eyes that I loved.

"So we are to be friends, after all," she said. "I'm so glad."

"No," I answered, as I took her hand and held it. "I can never be content with mere friendship."

"There can never be more than friendship between us."

"But why, Margery, why? That is what I have come here to find out."

"Because there can't."

"Why can't there? Do you love another?"

"You have no right to ask that, but all the same I'll answer. No."

"Do you love me?"

It was Gertrude's question, and I felt an audacious fool as I asked it, but Margery did not laugh as I expected nor get angry. She looked at me in the queerest kind of way, and the tears began to grow in her eyes and the colour in her cheeks until she was as red as a rose. Then suddenly she covered her face with her hands and burst out crying.

"You are very, very cruel!" she sobbed.

I was beside myself with surprise and delight. I caught her to me without resistance.

"Then it is true," I cried, "it is true! Now you must marry me."

For a moment she lay passive in my arms, and my heart sang a song of triumph. I believed she was won. Then she put my arms aside, very gently but firmly, too.

"No, no, no," she said slowly. "It is cruel to press me—it can never be. I suppose I must tell you the whole horrible story. I have no father. I am no match for the future Earl of Stanton."

"O Lord!" I said, "is that it? Go on—what else?"

"Why will you torture me? Is not that enough?"

"No, it's not enough, it's nothing at all. Why should you and I be punished for your mother's fault?"

She turned on me indignantly. "My mother's

fault? My mother is the best woman alive. Twenty three years ago my mother ran away with young Arnold Cavendish, the only son of Lord Chester. But I am as sure as I stand here that they were married."

"Then it's all right," I said.

"It's not all right: I have no proof, not a scrap. Listen to the whole story, and you will understand. They went to Switzerland for the honeymoon. Her father was a great Alpine climber, it was in the family. There he came across his uncle, who was a greater climber even than himself. One morning my father and his uncle, the present Lord Chester——"

"The 'Glacier'?" I interrupted.

"——Yes, I believe that is what he is called—— set out on a perilous ascent, taking no guide, while my mother remained in a small hotel at the foot of the mountain in a fever of anxiety. My father never came back from that climb, his body was never discovered. When the news was brought to my mother she fainted, they thought she was dead. For a whole day she lay unconscious, and when she came slowly back to life her memory was gone, her mind was an absolute blank. She could not tell how she came to Switzerland or who came with her. She could tell nothing of her past life.

"Old Lord Chester died a few months later. I have heard that the shock of his son's mysterious death helped to kill him, but I have no knowledge of that, for it was before I was born. The present Lord Chester, the uncle, came into the whole property. He made an allowance of two hundred a year to my mother, but he would never listen to the suggestion that she was married to his nephew; if she

was he knew she would be entitled to twice as many thousands.

"When I began to make a little money on my own account I refused to take his or to allow my mother to take it. I had an argument with Lord Chester about it. 'Madam,' he said, 'I cannot appreciate your scruples. If I am right, your mother is fairly entitled to the annuity. If you are right, she is entitled to a great deal more. Then why refuse to take anything?'

"But I did refuse; and, what's more, last year I paid back every farthing with interest. Lord Chester took my cheque without another word of protest and sent me the receipt. Long ago I used to feel certain that some day I would vindicate my mother's character and my own, but latterly I have lost all hope."

"Don't lose all hope. Let me help you. Will you have me succeed?"

"What is the use of talking of that?"

"But will you?"

"When you succeed, ask me again."

I left her with my brain in a whirl of delight, and on my way home I bought a ruby brooch for Gertrude, who wasn't in the least surprised with what I had to tell her.

"Of course I knew the whole story before," she said sedately; "but I wanted Margery to tell you herself, that she might know I hadn't told."

For days I puzzled over the problem that every day grew more perplexing. I had not the least notion how to begin until at Gertrude's suggestion Beck was called into council.

"I know the 'Glacier' pretty well," I said as I concluded the story; "he was a wonderful climber

in his day. Always as cool as an icicle, that's why he is called the 'Glacier,' I suspect, but he has the reputation of being one of the most honest men in England. I confess I believe in him. A man does not get a reputation without deserving it.

"He must be very honest or very clever," agreed Beck.

"I hate him!" cried Gertrude. "I met him once, and I hate him!"

"But why?" I asked.

"There is no why. Just a woman's reason, I do because I do."

"Well, you see, Charlie," Beck went on quietly—he always appears to take Gertrude's side in a dispute—"if young Cavendish was married Lord Chester must know about it. He knew, I presume, that his nephew was staying at the hotel as a married man. He was out every other day on the mountain with him, and it is absurd to think he did not question him about the girl. If he was married Lord Chester knew it, if he was not married your quest is over before it begins."

"All right," I said impatiently, "have it your own way. But just tell me what I am to do, for I must be doing something."

"We have got three points to start from," said Beck. "First, Lord Chester is probably the only living man who knows what we want to know. We may get something out of him, though I doubt it. Secondly, we may find out where Arnold Cavendish was just before he was married; and thirdly, we may find something to help us in Switzerland. Now which of the three beats do you prefer, Charlie? Will you look up Lord Chester, who is in Paris at

present, or will you hunt up the trail of Arnold Cavendish?"

"Lord Chester," I said, after a pause. "I'm not keen on the job, but I'd never be able to hunt up a twenty-five-year-old trail."

"All right," Beck answered cheerily—I think that was what he wanted me to say—"you may start at once. I need not tell you to be cautious; whatever else his lordship is, he is keen as a razor."

As I said before, I always liked Lord Chester: I never liked him so well as when we came to breakfast together at the Continental Hotel, Paris. A handsome, middle-aged man, clean shaven and grey haired, with strong chin and mouth and clear grey eyes, as thin as a lath, and as straight and limber.

He was so friendly that I felt there was no need to beat about the bush. Before we had finished our aromatic coffee and crisp, flaky rolls—the most delicious breakfast in the world—we were talking freely of Margery Glenmore and her fortunes. It was his lordship who began it. He had heard, he said, a rumour from London connecting my name and hers, and desired to be quite frank with me. If there was anything in the rumour I had the right to know all he could tell me about the girl. Of course I felt impelled to be equally frank.

"I want to marry her," I said, "but she won't have me on account of her antecedents."

"That's bad," agreed his lordship gravely. He did not explain whether it was my proposal or her refusal that was bad. "Miss Glenmore, as she calls herself, is a very determined young lady when she makes up her mind. It is a sad story. I suppose she told you

as far as she knows it. By mere accident I ran across my nephew. I knew him as a reckless climber. I had some reputation for caution and experience and I actually forced my companionship on him. Only by the merest chance I heard of the young lady staying with him; he never once mentioned her name to me, and dissuaded me from coming to his hotel. Naturally I refrained from intruding on his confidence, but I had my suspicions, of course.

"It was snowing hard on the day the poor chap came to his death. A little after midday we were crawling cautiously down a glacier, he in front. I had not refused to be roped we would have both been smashed or neither--neither, I fancy. We had just come to the steepest part of the glacier where I could just see him dimly a few yards in front of me in the snow. Suddenly he began to glide away into the white obscurity; his figure grew fainter and fainter, a vague shadow through the snow, then there was an awful yell and he disappeared. With the help of my ice-axe I crept to the edge of the crevasse. It was hundreds of feet deep and very narrow. I got round one end and safe to the foot of the mountain. Next morning I came back with two guides, and ropes, but they shirked going down the crevasse, and they would not let me go down. It was snowing all night; there was not the slightest chance, they said, of recovering the body.

"The rest you probably know: the body was never found; the poor lady--very beautiful she was--lost her memory by the shock; the daughter, when she came to the use of reason, or unreason, seemed to take a violent prejudice against myself because I could not prove a marriage. Perhaps it was only natural; there

was a big bit of money and a lot of land which all came to me. The mother would be entitled to her share if the marriage could be proved, and I, of course, would be the loser. Yet I swear to you, Kirwood, I would have proved it if I could."

Let me say at once that I believed him. There was that in his voice and manner that compelled belief. At his request I stayed on a few days in Paris, because he thought he would be able to get across with me to Switzerland, and show me the very scene of the tragedy.

I never met or desired to meet a pleasanter companion. He knew Paris as the bee knows the hive. It was blazing hot that year in the great, clean green and white city, blue sky, dazzling sunshine, and still air that panted with heat. But Lord Chester, in light grey flannel suit and wide panama hat, was cool as a glacier. Perhaps that was how he earned his nickname, no one ever saw him heated in body or temper.

He was much interested in Beck and his mission to Devonshire. He knew Beck's father, he said: one of the keenest men that ever traced a crime, and caught a criminal like a bloodhound, rather by instinct than by intellect. I told him some of the exploits of young Beck, and read scraps of the letters which I got from Devonshire where he was already hard at work.

Two days before the date that Chester and I had arranged to start for Switzerland, I had the sharpest shock of my life. A wire came from Beck from London: "Return at once. Father dangerously ill."

I had just time to catch the train and boat. I wired before I started "What news?" but got no

reply. When I came rushing in a motor from London it was with a pang of delight I saw the governor standing at the door waiting for me, looking as strong and as hearty as ever he looked in his life. The sudden reaction from the long strain left me quite weak. I was just able to blunder out of the motor car, rush up the steps and grip him by both hands. In the hall I saw Gertrude and Beck together.

"Beck was right, as usual," said the governor. "He was certain that the same trick would be played on you as was played on him, and told us to expect you as quick as train, boat, and motor could carry you home from Paris."

It appeared that Beck had got a twin telegram to mine, and had come rushing back at the same speed from Devonshire. We talked the matter over at lunch, turning it in every direction, and Beck and Gertrude were certain that the "Glacier" had played the trick. I refused to believe it, and tried to find some other solution.

Suddenly Gertrude jumped to her feet with a cry of alarm.

"Oh, while we are chattering here something may have happened to Margery. I'm sure that awful man sent her a wire too."

With a sudden shrinking of heart I noticed the look on Beck's face.

"Do you think——" I began.

"Your sister is right," he said gravely, "it is just the thing he would do. I was an ass not to suspect it before. We must start at once."

A quarter of an hour later the motor was rushing at double regulation speed to London. Straight to

the theatre we drove, and were lucky enough to find the manager in his office. His good-humoured face wore a worried look, which brightened as he recognised us as friends of his leading lady.

"Welcome," he said, swinging round on his revolving chair from a table littered with papers and play bills, at which he was seated. "What news of Miss Glenmore?"

My heart went down to my boots.

"That's what we have come to find out," I faltered.

"Then that's what I can't tell you," he retorted, more worried than before. "All I know is that she went off yesterday just before the rehearsal, leaving a message with her maid that she couldn't play that night. I had to put on her understudy at the last moment, and she made a mess of the part. I would not mind if it were anybody else, but Miss Glenmore never before missed a rehearsal or a performance. I could get nothing out of the maid, perhaps you'd try your luck. She is in Miss Glenmore's dressing-room at the present moment."

Very little was to be got out of the maid, a slim, quiet girl, with straw-coloured hair and faint blue eyes, who was plainly devoted to her mistress and very anxious about her.

Margery had come early for a dress rehearsal of her part, a gay young widow in a society comedy. She had just got into her gorgeous stage dress when the telephone bell rang loudly, and she ran to it.

The maid thought from the tone of her mistress's voice that she was frightened. "Yes, yes," she said at the end, "I'll start at once."

She waited only to get her purse, to throw her motor coat over her costume, and was off. "Tell

Mr Mandeville," she said to the maid as she rushed out, "that I'm called away on urgent business, and that I won't be back for the rehearsal or the performance to-night. I shall wire to him."

That was the last that was seen of her; she never wired.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE "GLACIER"

BECK glanced round the room with keen eyes that took in everything. The receiver of the telephone had not been replaced, it lay where she had thrown it on the table.

"I am almost certain she has darted off to Paris," he said.

"To Paris! But why to Paris?"

"She knew you were there?"

"Of course."

"Then she is gone in obedience to a message from you."

I don't often get riled with Beck, I got riled then.

"This is not the time for jesting," I said.

"I'm not jesting, old chap; perhaps I ought to have put it plainer, it was quite plain in my own mind. Our friend Chester, who sent those two pretty wires, 'phoned to her, imitated your voice and called Miss Glenmore away to Paris. It was something like that your sister was afraid of."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I will make quite sure."

He took up the telephone receiver, and in a moment or two got on to Mrs Glenmore.

"Are you there?" I heard. "Yes, Mrs Glenmore it is I, Beck. Is Miss Glenmore at home?"

There was a long pause, a full minute, and Beck's soothing voice was heard again.

"All right, there is nothing to be the least uneasy about. Yes, Lord Kirwood is here. We think we know why she has gone. We are starting for Paris. Yes, certainly, we will wire you at once when we see her. Good-bye." And he rang off.

"Miss Glenmore," he explained to me, "wired her mother that she was called away to Paris; she hoped to be back to-morrow, that's to-day—she would stay at the Continental Hotel—that's your hotel—and she would write. She has not written, and I have no notion she will not come back for some time unless we go for her."

"Why, Paul, you don't think——"

"I don't think anything, man, I don't know what to think. Don't let yourself get into that state of mind, you will be no more use than a hysterical girl, and we will want all our wits about us to deal with Lord Chester. Will you come to Paris?"

"Of course."

"Then let us have a bit of dinner, we have an hour for it. Your sister had our travelling bags put into the motor, she had an idea we would want to travel somewhere. There is nothing to do for an hour."

Beck ate a hearty dinner, and forced me to eat a little, though I found it hard to touch a morsel, but a glass or two of champagne put life into me. I kept on looking at my watch like a fussy woman, and we were nearly half an hour too soon for our train.

In the train Beck told me he had been getting on famously in Devonshire when the wire called him

away. He found the village where Margery's father had been on a fishing excursion just before his runaway marriage, and he had found the woman with whom he lodged. "Lord Chester must somehow have discovered I was on hot scent when he called me off."

"Sure it was Lord Chester?"

"Quite sure. The whole plan is his. He wanted to get me out of Devon, and I fear the scent won't be so hot when I get back there again, and he wanted to get you out of Paris before Miss Glenmore arrived. Don't get into the fidgets again; she will come all right, never you fear."

From the station in Paris we rattled and banged in a vile trap—we could not get a taxi—over huge rough cobble-stones, through the worst paved streets in the world, to the Continental Hotel.

Our brief interview with the hall porter was eminently unsatisfactory. "But yes," he said. "A lady and gentleman had called yesterday to enquire for Lord Kirwood. I told them that Lord Kirwood had gone, and they drove away. I know nothing more."

A question or two identified the lady as Margery Glenmore. Her companion was a handsome, well-dressed man of about thirty or thirty-five, with dark moustache. "Most certainly a Frenchman."

"We must try back!" cried Beck.

This time we were lucky enough to catch a taxi, and were back in the station in less than half the time it took us to come from it.

Beck began at once to interview the porters. "Some of them," he said, "must have noticed that gorgeous dress. We will go right through them; it is a tough job, but it is the only way I see."

The porters were quite interested and excited. A

liberal distribution of francs had very little to do with their eagerness. There was a lady in the case, the presence of whom was sufficient to enthuse them. With much gesticulation and loud questions they shouted across the platform and gathered in an eager crowd around us. They reminded me of a swaying swarm of hounds at the cover side. At last one of them gave tongue. But yes, he cried, he remembered quite well. Madam was ravishing in blue—she was a vision! She had no luggage, but he carried a bag for monsieur to the *voiture*. Monsieur was French beyond doubt, but madam was most charming English.

Could he find the driver for us?

Most certainly. He came with us quite confidently to review the long row of vehicles, but his confidence vanished when put to the test. Twice we passed up and down the line, and twice he failed to find his man.

Then of a sudden he plucked off his cap with an angry gesture and flung it on the ground.

"I am a fool," he cried. "The dog!"

Without a word more the porter ran back the way he had come along the line of carriages, and in a couple of minutes returned, trotting beside a *voiture* on which sat a dandified young driver with a glazed hat as shiny as a black mirror, and a black curly water-spaniel planted comfortably on the seat by his side.

"It was the dog," the porter explained. "I remembered the dog. Madam admired the dog, and she spoke to it as she got in. Jean, here, remembered the madam. It goes well. Much thanks, monsieur. As Beck gave him a louis, and turned to the driver who stared with wide-open eyes at this magnificent *pour boire*.

"Yes," he declared, he remembered very well madam in the blue dress, and monsieur her husband. He drove them first to the Continental, and afterwards to the Hotel Sans Souci, a small hotel on the quays. Monsieur paid him when he got out, but madam gave him a five-franc piece for the dog, behold it all!

We had kept our taxi this time for fear of accidents, and in a minute more we were off to the Hotel Sans Souci, the driver and porter gesticulating wildly and crying good fortune after us as we started.

A stout, over-dressed man, with big nose and thick lips and an alert air, received us at the door of the Hotel Sans Souci.

"Yes," he said insolently, "I have good reason to remember madam whom you describe. Madam was a thief of the most infamous."

But for Beck I verily believe I would have strangled the scoundrel then and there.

"Easy does it, Charlie," he remonstrated; "we have something else to do than thrash insolent hotel proprietors."

My looks must have frightened the fellow, for he answered Beck's questions more civilly after that.

"But what do I know?" he began. "Monsieur and madam came to the hotel, monsieur wrote the names, M. and Mme. Vandelure, in the book; no, madam did not see what he wrote. Monsieur had a travelling bag, madam had no luggage, none at all. She went out and bought things when she came to the hotel, but all quite new. They slept that night in different rooms; I thought it droll—different rooms."

Again my fingers itched to throttle the greasy scoundrel, but Beck's restraining hand was on my arm.

"In the morning behold a lady in the hotel had been robbed. A search was made. Monsieur had gone early in the morning leaving his bag, and in his bag was found a bracelet, one of the things robbed."

"Madam's door was locked, but she opened it quickly, else they would have broken it in. Of herself or her husband she could give no account; she called herself first one name, then another—she was Miss Brown from London, at last. Of course she swore she was innocent, they all swear that; in the end the affair was for the police and the magistrates, not for him."

While the scoundrel of a landlord, now thoroughly frightened, was stammering out his story I got a clear notion at last of the diabolical plot in which poor Margery was involved. Alone in Paris, without a friend to turn to, charged with robbery under circumstances that seemed conclusive of her guilt, no wonder the frightened girl was confused, no wonder she gave a wrong name. If we had not turned up in the nick of time she would have disappeared into a French prison, leaving not a trace behind.

By this time the unfortunate proprietor, who, after all, was not so much to blame, began to realise that some horrible mistake had been made. He grew every moment more polite, and gave us all the information in his power.

Beck, like the real decent fellow that he is, left the rescue of Margery in my hands. I knew the English Ambassador in Paris, and from him I had a letter to the Chief of the Police, to whom I told the whole story in confidence, omitting only the

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name of Lord Chester. Then, with an order for her immediate release in my pocket, I darted off to the prison where my unfortunate girl was confined.

I found her in tears, frightened to death by the horror through which she had passed. Having been pestered for two long hours by a magistrate to make her confess her guilt, of which he assumed there could be no possible doubt, she had been sent back to her cell with an assurance of conviction.

The Margery that I found in that narrow cell was not in the least like the Margery I had learned to love: the woman of genius, mistress of herself and of all passion, who held crowds breathless and enthralled. Yet I felt I never loved that stately, queenly woman half as well as the new Margery, the weeping, pitiful girl who clung to me so appealingly for protection.

Beck effaced himself while we had a delightful *tête-à-tête* lunch at the Continental. Between sobbing and laughing, always on the verge of both but never quite tumbling over, she told me the whole story.

Really, there was very little to tell that Beck had not already anticipated, or that I did not already know. She could have sworn the voice on the telephone was mine. She thought she knew my voice well, she said with a quick, shy look quite new from her, which set my heart thumping. The voice begged her to start at once for Paris, and she obeyed—that was all. At Calais she was met by a distinguished-looking Frenchman, who gave his name as Gustave Durand, and told her he had been deputed by me to look after her. He had been most attentive, and she had never for a moment dreamt of doubting

him. At the Continental he told her they had left a message that they were to go to the Sans Souci to wait for me.

When she came to tell of the morning and all those excited French people clamouring round her and shouting "thief!" at her, the memory of all she suffered, the unutterable fear and shame of it, proved too much for her. At last she went over the verge, on which she had balanced so long, and burst into tears, and I had to coax and pet her back into good humour. Then I felt for the first time that there might after all be some truth in that astounding statement of Gertrude's that she loved me.

It was a delightful journey back to London. Beck proved an admirable chaperon; he saw to everything, and was never in the way, never out of it. On board the boat, when Margery went to lie down for a little, I got the chance of thanking him.

"I'll help you with your girl," I said, "if ever you want help."

He looked at me queerly for a moment before he answered: "All right. Mind, I'll hold you to that."

We had hardly arrived in London when Beck made a dash for Devonshire, but he was back in town in a few days.

"As I thought," he said, the same evening in the small smoking-room where Gertrude had forced herself against my protest; "as I said. The old landlady was spirited away, she has vanished into space. I found out, however, that Mrs Glenmore's maiden name was Spring, Nellie Spring, the doctor's only daughter, a wild, frolicsome girl—could you ever imagine it now?—who walked and fished with

the young lordling and finally ran away with him. I could find no record or even rumour of the marriage in the locality, and I think it is useless to try further. My next move is to Switzerland, where the accident occurred."

"Accident?" interrupted Gertrude.

"Well, we will call it so for the present; we may have always to call it so. I have been reading a lot about glaciers, their tricks and ways, and I've got a notion in my head that may come to something."

"I can help you there," I interposed. "I have minute directions and a map of the place which Lord Chester gave me when he never dreamed we could suspect him."

"Indeed," said Beck dryly. "Since you told me his lordship's story I have looked up the account of the accident in an old file of the *Times* at the British Museum. It mentions quite a different locality."

"Charlie is a fool," was Gertrude's disrespectful comment. "I believe he still trusts that cold-blooded murderer. Margery ought to marry you instead of him if you get to the bottom of the mystery."

"And if she won't?" asked Beck lightly.

"Perhaps some one else will."

"Is that a promise?"

"No, only a prophecy."

"When you two are done talking nonsense," I interrupted, "Beck might tell us when he intends to start."

"Are you quite sure it is nonsense?" asked Beck.

"Of course it is," said Gertrude. "I apologise

for calling you a fool just now, Charlie ; you are as wise as an owl in daylight."

Beck was nearly a week in Switzerland before we had a line from him. Then there came a long letter which I found a bit puzzling ; but Gertrude, to whom I read it, and who indeed finally captured it, insisted that it was as clear as daylight.

"MY DEAR CHARLIE," he wrote, "I think I have found something at last. This is a glorious place, close up to the snow line, with Alps all round holding up the sky, and deep grassy hollows green as emerald between. But I have had no time to look at the Alps or the valleys, I have been grubbing among the glaciers. The great big one into whose fathomless crevasse poor Arnold Cavendish fell, pokes its snout into the valley a couple of miles from the hotel. Now I want you to understand that glaciers are not stationary like rocks or mountains ; they are more like rivers, and a valley is their ocean. Fed by the snow on the hill-top they come sliding down, year after year, ever so slowly ; and their noses, when they poke them into the valley, are melted off by the summer sun, and so on, and so on. Do you see a chance there?"

I turned a perplexed face to Gertrude, who for a moment looked as bewildered as myself, then her face lighted up, and she said "Oh!" twice, but could not be induced to say a word more.

"I want you," the letter went on, "to bring out Miss Glenmore and her mother as soon as ever you can, and you shall see what you shall see. Could you induce your sister to come, too? You may tell her there is a good chance of her prophecy being fulfilled."

"What was your prophecy, Gerty? What does he mean by that?"

"Nothing!" exclaimed Gerty, blushing furiously. "Charlie, I think your friend Mr Beck hasn't an ounce of brains."

"Brains?" I exclaimed indignantly. "I think Beck is the cleverest chap I ever met."

"So do I," she retorted, with true feminine inconsistency, and kissed me. "Of course I'll go, Charlie, if you really want me to."

I was thrown a good bit with Mrs Glenmore on the way out while the girls were chattering together, laughing and blushing and keeping me out of their talk. Poor Mrs Glenmore looked older than her years. Her hair was pure white, though her complexion was fresh as a girl's. Placid, and even cheerful, she made no parade of sorrow, but her smile was sadder than another's tears. In her beautiful eyes there was a wistful, hopeless look as if she were trying in vain to peer behind the veil that hid her past life and love from her memory.

Beck quartered our party in a delightful little hotel, on whose peaked roofs, gables, and balconies the high hills frowned sombrely. Presently we found that he had desecrated the calm of the scene by the importation of an army of workmen, whose picks rang incessantly on the great glacier where it jutted into the valley.

Just at the peak the surface of the glacier was wholly different from the blue translucence that flashed back the rays of the sun farther up the mountain. For a depth of a few inches it was covered by a coating of congealed snow with a myriad minute air bubbles, that rendered it white

and opaque as muffed glass. Beck's workmen were employed in clearing off this white coating for a stretch of about a hundred yards or so from the blue transparent surface below.

"Lifting the veil," he called it, but he refused to allow any of the party to inspect the operation. So we skated on a high-lying lake, and tobogganed on a neighbouring slope, and even condescended to sliding and snowballing, and we all enjoyed ourselves amazingly; all except Mrs Glenmore, who showed a strange puzzled restlessness ever since she had got into the magic circle of the hills.

One morning while the glacier and snow-covered hills still shone like leagues of jewels, topaz, ruby, diamond, in the glowing dawn, Beck came to my room. He looked excited and worried as I had seldom seen him before.

"What's happened?" I asked, jumping out of my bed. "You're up early."

"I've not slept at all," he answered. "All last night my men were at work by moonlight. Early this morning I found what I was looking for, and now I'm horribly puzzled to know what to do about it."

"Can I help at all?"

"No, I will take my own risks. I only want you after breakfast to bring the ladies, especially Mrs Glenmore, to where we have been working. God grant all may go well!"

We ate little breakfast that morning, any of us; we were burning with feverish curiosity about Beck's discovery. I don't think any one of us guessed what it really was.

We found him before us on the first slope of the glacier, where the white ice had been stripped from

the long spur that jutted into the valley, till it gleamed dark blue, clear as glass in the sunshine. At one spot, about half way up the clear space of ice, the workmen were clustered, Beck amongst them, and hid the surface from our view. All four we climbed up to the group, Mrs Glenmore first, an agony of strained expectancy in her eyes. Then at a word from Beck the living curtain fell away and we saw.

Through the clear blue crystal we saw the figure of a young man, lying prone on his back, with his arms flung out as if in peaceful sleep. Marvellously life-like he seemed under the transparent covering searched by the strong light of the morning sun. The dark curls clung crisply round the white forehead, the dark eyes, wide open, looked out at us. I have heard that a dying man's last agony is frozen on the face of the corpse. It was not so here. If this man had met his awful death with fear or pain the passion had passed with his dying, his young face was tranquil as a child's. But through the bosom of his rough tweed jacket half the blade of a long knife stuck out, all red with rust, and on the cloth round the knife there was a wide blotch of more vivid red.

At the first glance my eyes turned instinctively from the face of the dead husband to the living wife. No words can tell what I saw there. All her life was in her eyes that were fixed on his face. After long years he had come back to her of a sudden as she had last seen him. A quarter of a century had passed making no change. He was the young lover-husband who had lain by her side the night before the tragedy; she, the girl-bride who had watched

for his waking with patient love. For one happy moment time had rolled back and death had restored its victim, and young life and love with all its joys were opened to her again.

Then, with a shrill cry, she threw up her arms and would have fallen to the ground, but Beck's watchful eyes were on her, and Beck's strong arms caught her as she fell.

The event justified his daring. The daughter, who was alone with the mother when she recovered from the swoon late in the day, came to us with the good news that her memory was restored. It had come back with a clearness that was almost miraculous; she was like one waking from a dream. Every incident of her life from her childhood to her girlhood, every detail of their wooing and marriage, were before her as if they had happened yesterday.

They had been quietly married in London. Her husband, she declared, always carried the certificate of the marriage in his pocket-book, and so it proved.

Poor lady, when the first burst of passionate grief was over, she was happier than ever her daughter had seen her before. I hardly knew her for the same when I saw her again. Her eyes were still sad, but they had lost that pitiful look of wistful helplessness; she had come back into the real world of memory, hope, grief, and joy.

Meanwhile the work of the evacuation of the glacier went on briskly. The body was recovered and buried quietly in the little Catholic graveyard of the district. But quiet as the burial was, something of the strange incident must have leaked out into the press. A few days later we read in the

Paris edition of the *New York Herald* the following paragraph:—

"TERRIBLE MOTOR ACCIDENT"

"We regret to announce that Lord Chester, who had been some months resident in Paris, yesterday met his death in a terrible motor accident. His lordship, who was a very expert driver, went out alone. He seems to have lost control of his machine in some unaccountable fashion. While at full speed it struck against a telegraph post. The motor was wrecked, and the unfortunate nobleman instantly killed."

There was a hush while I read the bald paragraph at breakfast, for we all knew why Lord Chester had died.

"God pardon his soul," murmured the woman whom he had most wronged, and my own sweet Margery softly whispered "Amen."

It was later in the day, in the glow of the soft sunset that filled the earth with radiance and rapture of heaven, that she shyly confessed her love and promised to be mine.

The day before our return, while I was sitting near the window with Gertrude absorbed in the glorious view that seemed somehow an integral part of my life never to be forgotten, Beck came slowly into the room. Gertrude started to her feet and would have gone, but he stopped her. "Please don't go," he said, and she stayed. Again I wondered why Gertrude did not like Beck, why she was so anxious to get out when he came in.

"Charlie," he said, "do you remember you promised to help me whenever I was in love, if I needed help?"

"I remember," I said, wondering why Gertrude was blushing. "How can I help you? Do I know the girl?"

"Yes," he answered, "you do know the girl. That's not it exactly; strange to say, the girl has consented conditionally."

"Who is she, anyway?"

"Charlie, you *are* a fool," said Gertrude, blushing more than ever.

Then with a shock of surprise the truth came to me.

"Oh!" I cried, "is that it?"

Gertrude nodded.

"Yes," said Beck, "that's it. I want you to help me with Lord Stanton. I fear he may be disappointed, angry even."

"So far as that is concerned," I said, "I often talked about Gertrude's marriage with the governor. He thought you were in love with her."

"And you?" asked Gerty sharply.

"Oh, I told him it was pure nonsense."

"Wise you!"

"But what did Lord Stanton say?" asked Paul.

"He said he hoped sincerely Gertrude would marry young Beck, that there was no man in the world to whom he would sooner give her; and I say the same, old chap."

THE END

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