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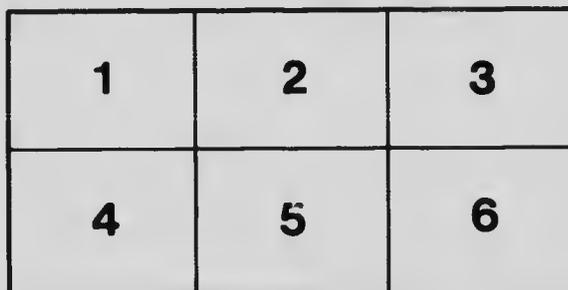
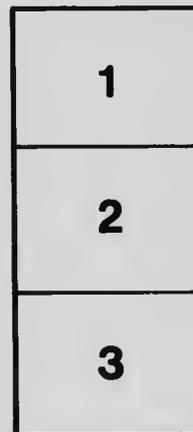
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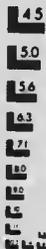
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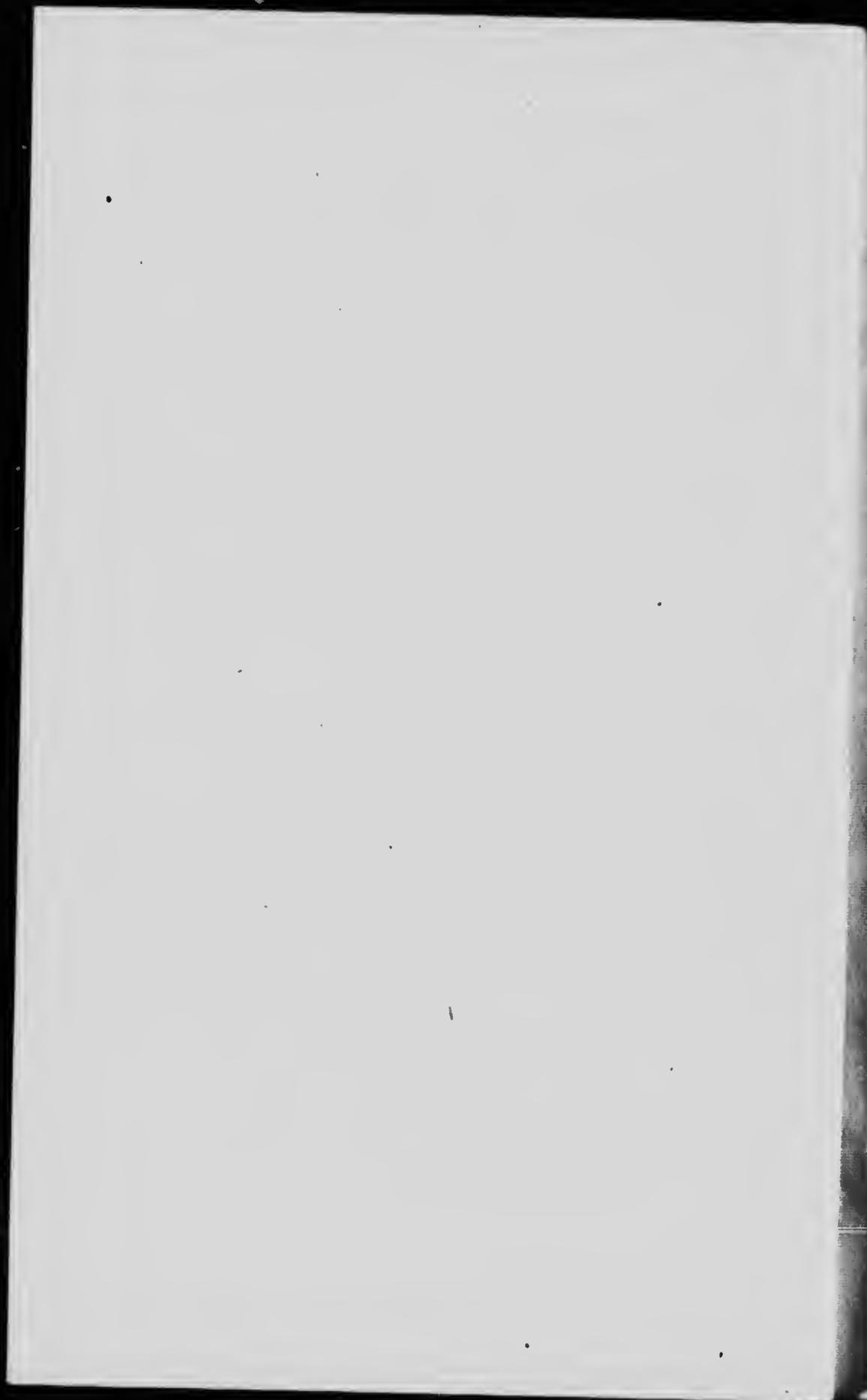
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# SHARKS

BY

GUY THORNE

AUTHOR OF "WHEN IT WAS DARK," "THE OVEN," etc.

AND

LEO CUSTANCE

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*POPULAR EDITION*

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# SHARKS

## CHAPTER I

### THE COMPANY FACTORY

THE Mansion House stands like a great rock in the flood tide of London, and the surge of humanity beats upon it in vain.

Mr Percy Thawne got down from his omnibus at the corner by the Bank of England, and crossed the wide pavements between an avenue of silent traffic waiting for the fall of the policeman's imperious hand. He stopped at the police station under the steps of the Mansion House and read the notices displayed there in a leisurely manner; then he looked at his watch, a slim and dapper little engine, not much thicker than a five-shilling piece, secured to his person by a neat chain of aluminium and gold—quite the newest sort of chain.

It was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning.

The young gentleman was tall and slim. His eyes were clear and candid, his clean-shaven face well cut and with a certain genial serenity which happy youth can give to a man who has learnt the great secret of thoroughly enjoying life but not enjoying it too much. He appeared to be about twenty-eight or nine years of age.

In the City of London the observer may notice three distinct types of young men moving through the swirl of the streets, entering or leaving the great banks and business houses. These three types or species may be infinitely sub-divided, but they are primarily important and generic.

There is the clerk or business man who is obviously unprosperous, the sort of man whose shirt, or at least the visible parts of it, takes to pieces in sections like a puzzle, and can be renovated cuff by cuff—so to speak—without disturbing the foundation—the shirt proper. The silk hat of this young man is brushed well, but not often ironed. His collar is not in the mode, his tie is of a certain dingy utility, and betrays little or no

joy in life. Such a one is a member of the vast army of men-machines who can be hired for about thirty shillings a week. An advertisement in a daily paper will produce a thousand of him within two hours of its appearance, and each unit of the thousand looks as if he were related to the next.

The second type of wayfarer in the business hive is very different. His boots shine brilliantly, and are often of patent leather with kid tops. His frock-coat is cut with a certain rakishness of which a smart City tailor seems to have the secret. His neck-tie carries a pin, and there is a general glossy blatancy about him which is as loud and obvious as a pillar-box for letters. As the first type is pillar and patron of the aerated bread shop, so the second is supporter and mainstay of the West-End music-hall and bar. It was, moreover, from a close observation of the second type that some phrase-monger must have been delivered of the word "Bounder." That is the first and last word to be said on the subject.

The last type is much less common than the other two, though it nevertheless consists in considerable numbers. The members of it

are always very well dressed, but dressed like any gentleman in Piccadilly or Pall Mall. Though commerce claims them during the day, and the pleasant haunts of the West End know them not, yet they would not be out of place there, and they do not buy their clothes east of Trafalgar Square. To this class belong the public-school and university men who enter their father's business, the great mass of young fellows, well-bred and well-born, whom inclination or circumstance have thrown into a City life.

And to this class belonged Mr Percy Thawne. The young gentleman looked at his watch with a cool, reflective smile. It pleased him to think that there was no immediate hurry for him to reach his office, that he was not tied down to a definite hour for appearance there, and was in a sense his own master. The morning was brilliant with sun; peripatetic hawkers of fruit promenaded the side-streets; men stood on the edges of the pavements offering penny palm-leaf fans for sale. Percy Thawne was struck with an idea! A glass of iced punch, he thought, would be just the thing to help him through the coming labours of the day—a glass of

Birch's famous iced punch. He entered the odd little shop, one of the landmarks of the City, by the Royal Exchange. Here he met one or two friends who, like himself, were spending an idle hour, and enjoying their idleness the more by its contrast with the humming life of the wide streets outside. It was approaching midday when Mr Thawne bought a gardenia from a flower-girl who stood on the curb outside the offices of Rothschild's, and strolled towards the scene of his labours.

The offices of Slygne & Co. were situated on the west side of a narrow street not a quarter of a mile from the Mansion House.

Burdett Street connected two thoroughfares, but it was too narrow for ordinary traffic. Only an occasional hansom cab rattled over the macadam, on its way to Cannon Street Station, and none of the great vans of Mincing Lane or Tower Street were to be found there. The street was not occupied by commercial houses. Not a single merchant of repute had his offices there; no established business had chosen it for its headquarters, yet every floor in the tall buildings was tenanted; a plate with a more

or less important-sounding name was fixed to every door. Burdett Street, in short, was the home of the company promoter. The great financiers who dealt in millions did not conduct their operations there, but the smaller fry found it congenial and convenient. Here might be found a score of astute individuals, quite well known in the City, all of whom managed to extract two or three thousands a year from the public pockets, any one of whom might at any time succeed in pulling off a *coup* which would take him to Park Lane—though frequently only *en route* to Dartmoor.

The entrance to Slygne & Co.'s office was by a double swing door, which bore the name in black letters let in to a zinc plate. A flight of narrow stairs, with worn leaden treads upon them, went up to the clerks' office, a large room upon the first floor, which led to the secretarial department. Immediately overhead were the three private rooms of Mr Horatio Slygne himself. The firm drew its name from its head, and also its very existence. It was what is known in the City as a "one-man show," and, with its head removed, would have immediately ceased to

exist. The business was, in fact, merely the machinery by which Mr Slygne raked in money for his own personal use and comfort. It was the web of a single spider, and none other had part nor lot in it.

At No. 12 were also placed the headquarters of three joint-stock companies, as various smaller plates on which were painted the words "registered offices" showed. Into all these concerns Mr Slygne had himself breathed the spark of life, and they existed under his personal supervision and management. Moreover, they would sink into oblivion only at his word or owing to a lightning stroke from the great cloud of "Limited Liability" which hung over Burdett Street, and gave such a comforting and friendly obscurity to the financiers who practised there.

The *Mount Pisa Gold Mine, Limited*, now in its second year of life, had been launched off the rails of a prospectus that sent its one pound shares up to three and a half ten days after flotation. It was confidently predicted that before long this mine would pay its proprietors one hundred per cent. Mr Slygne himself had not entirely concurred in this view. "My

friends," he would say to intending investors who called at the office, "are over-confident, I consider. Optimism is all very well, my dear sir, but if you knew City affairs as well as I do, you would agree that optimism is a dangerous thing. Yes, I quite admit that the *Financial Bulletin* has made a public pronouncement on the subject of a cent. per cent. return. I believe the editor, whom, by the way, I do not know, is a sound critic of mining prospects. But I am a cautious man, my dear sir, and I should not care to guarantee or even hold out hopes of a hundred per cent. profit. Sixty or seventy I *don't* say no to, but not a hundred at first." Such a frank opinion delivered in so confidential a manner had its effect. The prospective investor became an actual one, and on his return to the country hinted darkly at certain confidential knowledge which he alone was privileged to share with "the man at the helm up in town."

Although the prophecy of sixty or seventy per cent. had not yet been fully realised—the company, in fact, had paid no dividends whatever in this early stage of its life—Mr Slygne was still managing director, and his

well-proven tongue continually soothed impatient shareholders with golden promises of wealth to come.

The *Wild West Oil Corporation*, on the other hand, which blazed forth upon the financial horizon some fourteen months after the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, proved to be a very exceptional affair, and much more worthy of its parentage. Curiously enough only a few weeks before the registration of the company hundreds of the smaller provincial journals had contained a long and brightly-illustrated article upon the fabulous wealth, the luxurious yachts and mighty palaces of Mr John D. Bockfeller and other American oil kings. A newspaper syndicate, situated in a Northern county, had offered stereo plates of this article, illustrations included, to the editors of nearly every weekly and smaller daily paper in Great Britain, and with unaccustomed liberality the newspaper made no charge for the plates. A general idea was born in many a sleepy country town or remote farming centre that oil was the shortest road to wealth in modern times. Many a prosperous farmer as he walked among his fields sighed to think that the

shares of the wells in Baku were all in the hands of the trust, and longed to see the crystal-purple fountain of wealth burst up in his quiet English wheat-fields.

At that juncture the prospectus of the *Wild West Oil Corporation* made its clamorous appearance. The fabulous riches which were at this company's command quite threw the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine Company* into the shade. The picture upon its prospectus, which at anyrate bore the appearance of being an actual photograph, showed volumes of oil spouting from a map of Buffalo Bill's country as if a herd of gigantic whales were wallowing there. The unresting public rushed to subscribe for shares; the capital was over applied for, and those fortunate folk who had obtained an allotment had the supreme satisfaction of receiving a fifty per cent. dividend on the first half-year's trading.

About that time a brother financier, meeting Mr Slygne alighting from his private hansom in Burdett Street, invited him to lunch at "Pimm's."

"I must really congratulate you, my boy," he had said. "It's been a really nice thing for

you, and it's a pity you won't be able to keep it up for a little longer. But it was the prospectus that did it. Everyone says that. Indeed, everyone is asking *who* does your prospectuses for you. There's something about all of 'em, the style more than the facts, that positively makes people's mouths water. I'd give a hundred down to know who put those touches in for you, my boy!"

"Offer me a thousand, old chap, and I should hand it you back," Mr Slygne had said, and after another half bottle of Georges Goulet the two financiers had parted in perfect good-humour.

Many people "in the know" had wondered who wrote Mr Slygne's prospectuses for him, but the secret was well kept, and in time it began to be considered as valuable as the recipe for a patent pill.

After the first half-year or so, however, the Oil Corporation shares dropped most unaccountably till they reached but a few shillings. Dividends became conspicuous by their absence. People rose up, spectre-like, in Burdett Street who were heard to whisper that the fifty per cent. had come out of the company's original capital, and that there

had never been any profit at all. But envy has as many tongues as rumour, and Mr Slygne knew more than one way of soothing both public and private conjecture.

The third company which was housed under the hospitable roof rented by Slygne & Co. was a very different affair. Its prospectus had never been widely circulated. Indeed, few people outside the City radius had ever seen that document. Nevertheless the third company really paid a most substantial profit, and one which was now steadily growing. This profit, however, went into Mr Slygne's pockets continuously, for though "Limited" the company was a private one, and it would have puzzled a Vidocq to trace the few signatories to the Articles of Association to their homes. It will be recognised as an economic fact that even sharks—City sharks—require certain machinery with which to conduct their operations. Belonging—as he so emphatically did—to the shark industry, Mr Slygne had long pondered over this. A brilliant idea had come to him while engaged in these cogitations, a brilliant and most simple idea.

If an Asmodeus could have followed the financier's trend of thought at this time, there would have been little doubt but that he would have found it run as follows: "Here are several hundred persons all round me employed in getting money out of the pockets of the public in precisely the same manner that I am employed. But only a few of these gentlemen conduct their operations with the same success that I do. I will therefore keep them in their game for a substantial consideration."

The *Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate, Limited*, promptly made its appearance. It was almost a philanthropic effort in the fields of finance. It was, in fact, simply a concern for buying up plots of land in obscure parts of the globe at cheap rates. These plots were then sold to companies, corporations, and persons desirous of wealth, immediate and great.

It frequently happened, almost invariably, that some valuable metal, rubber, or other commercial commodity was afterwards discovered on these estates. But that was not Mr Slygne's affair. He sold the land and other people discovered his generosity in

parting with prospective riches. On such discovery they naturally hastened to take the public into their confidence.

The *Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate* had therefore become a really well-to-do concern. It also afforded its promoter opportunities for occasional foreign trips, which not only increased that gentleman's already wide knowledge of men and things but were of great benefit to his general health.

And in a few months all Burdett Street recognised that here was genius indeed, and when it wished to float a copper mine it came to Mr Slygne for a few acres of likely land in Spain.

To the layman in matters of finance it would naturally occur that the secretaryship of any one of these companies was a position of great emolument and considerable importance in the City of London. Such a post would require—so his thoughts would run—a man of vast experience and assured position. Nevertheless the secretaryship of all three companies was held by a single individual, in short, by Mr Percy Thawne, the nice-looking young gentleman with a *penchant* for iced punch.

And another still more startling fact was that Mr Thawne had only entered the offices of Slygne & Co., as an articulated clerk, eighteen months before he was advanced to the dignities he held on the summer morning in which this chapter opens.

Mrs Thawne, Percy's mother, lived in West Kensington upon her pension as the widow of a general officer in the army, and a couple of hundred pounds of her own.

The lady went into decent society, for age had not robbed her of a real love of human event and a light-hearted capacity for pleasure. Mrs Thawne had met Mr Slygne at the house of a mutual friend in Portland Place. At the time, it happened that she had two hundred guineas for investment, and knowing Mr Slygne to be a good business man, she asked his advice about the disposal of the sum.

Learning in the course of conversation that Mrs Thawne also had a son, who since leaving Oxford had made no more definite start in life than the winning of an amateur racquet championship at Queen's Club, Mr Slygne, who was rather short of clerks just then, offered to give Percy a thorough business

training in return for his mother's two hundred guineas. This, as he was careful to explain, would produce much more satisfying results than the very best of market selections could do for such a small sum. With the training that Mr Slygne was so eminently able to afford him, the young gentleman would undoubtedly be able to make his own fortune—and that of his mother as well—in a very few months after the expiration of his articles. The transaction was concluded with mutual congratulations, and Percy Thawne became a business man.

He was an intelligent youth and had imagination. In a very short time he began to acquire a stock of most invaluable business knowledge. Youth is plastic, and the morality of the business life to which he was introduced did not trouble him much. To pick a pocket with one's fingers was of course a blackguard thing. But to pick a thousand pockets with a prospectus did not occur to him as that. Morals are, after all, something dictated by environment. Climate alters them, every society has had and will have its own.

In 1700 gentlemen constantly got drunk,

in 1900 they didn't, *autre temps autre mœurs!* And in the City the young man found the shark an ordinary and popular fish, a fascinating fish sometimes, a fish with commendable domestic habits and inclinations towards churchwardenships. Company promoting was recognised. It was legitimate enough. Everything preyed on everything else throughout life, every time Percy had a beef-steak for lunch some great steer must die. And who was he to question a great fact, after all?

A far more rigid temperament than his would have been lulled to sleep by such specious arguments. Now and then, certainly, the disgrace and punishment of a very big shark, a Balfour in finance, would send an uneasy ripple over the financial pools of Burdett Street. But these soon died away, the surfaces became calm, all went on steadily and happily as before.

So Percy Thawne entered easily into his new life with high hopes for the future, when he also would become a full-grown shark. He watched the process by which "Good Things" are picked up and placed on the stock markets. He learned the real value of

"Expert Opinions." He lost faith in "Our Manager at the Mine"; he came to read prospectuses with insight. As a natural consequence of superior knowledge his respect for the general public intelligence fell considerably, while for Mr Slygne and gentlemen of that kidney his respect rose proportionately; and from Mr Slygne himself the secretary took lessons in the art of palliative elocution, until he had greatly advanced in the subtle arts of proving that black, if not exactly white, was at all events a delicate shade of magenta.

He grew familiar with that distrust the shark has for his brother sharks, a mutual attitude which forbids that even the division of spoil in Burdett Street shall be an altogether amicable ceremony. And he had early learnt the true significance of certain words in use in City circles, words which have an altogether different meaning elsewhere. He knew to a hair's-breadth the narrow line between "right" and "wrong," "fair" and "unfair," "reasonable" and "unreasonable," "exceptional" and "splendid," "clever man" and "knifer."

Percy's salary as secretary to the three

companies was twenty pounds a month. Before his arrival in Burdett Street each company had boasted its own secretary and each one of them had enjoyed an emolument equal to Thawne's. Mr Slygne was clearly justified—in the interests of the shareholders—in appointing Percy to the posts at a saving of four hundred and eighty pounds a year. It was such economies, used to supplement his larger *coups*, that carried Mr Slygne so successfully through life and preserved for the City one of its rising stars.

## CHAPTER II

### MR HORATIO SLYGNE AT WORK

PERCY THAWNE entered the secretarial room took off his hat, put on a short jacket, lit a cigarette, and sat down. The room was comfortably furnished and neatly kept. A good carpet, brick-red and peacock-blue, covered the floor, the morocco-covered writing-table was massive and expensive, the chairs were padded with crimson leather. There was not, it is true, any particular evidence of activity there. Few papers lay about inviting work, there was none of the miscellaneous litter of an ordinary business room. But it was eminently solid and respectable, while the richly-framed pictures of the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine* which hung upon the wall—showing an army excavating a mountainous range—were in themselves an artistic joy and an industrial curiosity.

“Thank Heaven,” Percy said to himself

as he lit his cigarette, "Thank Heaven that I have got such a sensible sort of business here; no silly restrictions as to non-smoking, and regular hours, and no bending over ledgers all day long. Really, company promoting is the only gentlemanly thing left to do in the City."

He opened a drawer. From it he took a newspaper which appeared to blush for its own contents, so vividly pink it was, and began to study the betting quotations for the Derby. Percy did not gamble, a sovereign two or three times a year was the extent of his "turf investments," but the young gentleman's tastes were catholic, and he considered it his duty to know all that was going on.

Suddenly the door opened and Mr Slygne himself entered. The financier had just arrived at the office.

Mr Slygne was of middle height and wore a neatly-trimmed yellow beard, torpedo shape like a naval officer. His nose was straight, his blue eyes clear and candid. He was dressed in a light-grey frock-coat and wore an orchid in his button-hole. When he spoke his voice was cultured, essentially a well-bred

voice, and had a certain ring of joviality and content that was pleasant to hear.

"Good-morning, Thawne," he said pleasantly, not in the least disturbed by the occupation and the easy pose of the secretary. "Beautiful day, Percy, my boy. Don't be out about four, please, as I shall want to see you then."

With a kind nod and smile Mr Slygne left Percy's room and went to his own.

This was a more imposing place than the other. There were one or two handsome bronzes on pedestals in the corner; a copper bowl full with early sulphur-coloured roses—many of Mr Slygne's visitors were ladies—stood upon the table. At one end of the room was a large piece of furniture in old oak. Had it not been where it was, most people would have unhesitatingly pronounced it to be a sideboard. However, it bore nothing but a directory or two, some time-tables and a clothes-brush. Had the cupboards beneath been opened, however, it would have been seen that the proper function of the article was fulfilled. Cigars flanked several bottles of champagne and port, while a regiment of shining glasses was drawn up close by.

Mr Slygne sat down at his desk and unlocked several drawers. He took a mass of papers from them and bent himself to work. His face seemed keener and older. The genial smile which lurked on it was not apparent now. Concentration was in every line of the alert figure. For nearly an hour the financier was engrossed in his calculations. At the end of that time his attitude relaxed, he breathed a sigh of satisfaction as if some difficulty had been conquered.

Suddenly there was a low whistle from the mouth of a speaking-tube which lay upon the desk. Mr Slygne held it to his ear and frowned angrily. Then he spoke into the little vulcanite trumpet. "Keep Mrs Cragge waiting for fifteen minutes," he said, "and then show her in."

He got up, put away the papers he had been engaged upon, substituted others for them, and sat down again. His face now wore a placid and kindly smile, as he blew into the tube and summoned his visitor.

A clerk opened the door and a stout, middle-aged lady, in black and mauve, burst angrily into the room.

Mr Slygne squared his shoulders and waited.

Mrs Cragge was purple in the face by reason of her passion. Her eyes were shining, her fingers trembled convulsively; her whole being swayed with emotion. She was thoroughly roused.

"Two years ago," she stammered, waving one finger fiercely at Mr Horatio Slygne, "Two years ago you induced me to invest my money in the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, telling me that the dividends were to be enormous. I have your very letter here!" she cried, fumbling in her bag, and presently bringing to light a sheet of paper. "Yes, here it is, and you say:—'*I cannot do better than advise you to invest your money in the Mount Pisa Gold Mine, Limited. This concern will be before the public next week, and is starting business under the most favourable circumstances that can be imagined. The dividends will, it is confidently expected, be magnificent, and a steady appreciation in the price of the shares on the London market may be reasonably anticipated.*' This is what you told me two years ago, and since then I have not received one single dividend. And now the shares are unsaleable, and my broker tells me that, in his opinion, the

company will shortly go into liquidation. And then, sir, then, where shall I be?"

The lady burst into tears as she finished speaking, but her action had not much visible effect upon Slygne. He never turned a hair, but, stretching out his hand, took the letter which she held, and ran his eye over it. Then he smiled, almost compassionately, and let the sheet fall upon the table between them.

"I am sorry about that letter," he began in a strong, quiet voice, the voice of a doctor soothing a hysterical patient. "You will notice, however, that the wording is—'We cannot do better than advise,' and that it is signed by a gentleman named John Jones. Now Mr John Jones"—the financier's voice became dreamy as he thus spoke of the past—"was at that time secretary-designate of the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, and I fear that his ardent temperament must have impelled him to write you this letter. Do not misunderstand me, I have as much faith in the company to-day as I had two years ago, but I disagree, on principle, with the writing of such letters."

"Send for Jones!" gasped Mrs Cragge, gazing expectantly round the room.

Slygne raised both hands in the direction of his shoulders.

"I fear," he replied, "that what you ask is an impossibility. Mr Jones has unfortunately left this office. A too ardent temperament, if you can understand me, may prove a fault even in business."

He regarded her in eloquent silence for a few moments.

"But now," he continued, a trifle more briskly, "let us go into the details of this question, and see if we cannot clear away some of your doubts. Your brokers think that the company is going into—" Slygne pursed his lips.

"Liquidation!" moaned Mrs Cragge.

Slygne laughed pleasantly.

"That is a very good joke," he said. "I like that immensely. By-the-bye, who are your brokers?"

"Slamme & Datchit."

He made a note of the name.

"And you believe them?"

"Ye-es."

"Of course, of course: every lady believes what she hears in the City, especially if it is wrong. Now I am the managing director of

the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, and the registered proprietor of two thousand shares." (He did not mention that the company had given him these shares as remuneration for services which had been, or were to be, rendered.)

Mrs Cragge looked up with rounded eyes.

"Oh!" she said.

"And I will tell you," went on Slygne—"in the strictest confidence of course—that there is about as much chance of the company being wound up, as there is of my flying to the moon."

"Oh," said Mrs Cragge again. "But then why have you not paid a dividend yet?"

Slygne shrugged his shoulders good-temperedly.

"Rome was not built in a day, my dear madam, nor will you and I make our fortunes in a couple of years. In order to work a company of this kind, with any hope of success, it is necessary to be very patient whilst the preliminaries are being settled."

"But two years, sir. Surely—"

"Not at all, my dear madam, not at all."

Two years is by no means a sufficient time for us to cope successfully with the vast mineral wealth which we now have *actually within sight* at the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine!* These ignorant stock jobbers know nothing whatsoever about the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine.* I and my co-directors are the people who know, and it is with the greatest pleasure that I am now taking you into my confidence. Remember that gold mining is at best a somewhat slow task, but that it is proportionately sure. I will not try and bewilder you by talking about *lodes* and *veins, assays* and *slimes.* I wish simply to let you know that we have a really first-class property out there, which will, before very long, be paying its proprietors in princely fashion. Do you think that I would cheerfully keep my own little holding, were I not certain of our ultimate success? Of course I would not. And now, how many shares have you, may I ask?"

"Two hundred."

"Ah, well, all I can say is, stick to them, my dear madam, stick to them; and, if a chance offers, buy some more. They will pay you cent. per cent. before long, and when they do,

remember how I told you of it beforehand. Good-day, and should you ever be doing anything on the stock markets, come to me, and I will give you an introduction to my own brokers, first-class men of business who know a good thing when they see it, and would not sell you a *Mount Pisa* share to-day for thirty shillings—not for thirty shillings! Good-bye; good-bye. It is not a trouble! It has been a pleasure, I assure you—but don't tell everyone you meet about *Mount Pisas*. One cannot be too cautious in such a case, believe me. Thomas! Show Mrs Cragge downstairs.”

Mrs Cragge departing in this fashion, Mr Slygne settled down before his table, and began scribbling little rows of figures upon little scraps of waste-paper. Mrs Cragge's entrance had disturbed him in the working out of an important financial scheme, but now he resumed the labour, banishing from his mind, with one effort, all further thought about the lady and her ambitions. When people said, with quite varying intentions, that Mr Slygne was “a true man of business” they stated nothing more than the literal fact. The financier never allowed

more than one thing to occupy his mind at the same time.

Mr Slygne's mind was indeed a wonderful mechanism. The psychologist would find in it traces of the legal, the philosophical and sometimes even the ecclesiastic temperament. The rapidity with which the financier could recognise the rights and wrongs of a case was judicial. The most complicated deal was clear to him and but served as a philosophical foundation for future reasoning. And if ever in such a transaction Mr Slygne had lost so small a sum as a five-pound note he was able to tell you who was the knave in the affair and why he himself had been outdone.

Inversely, if he was the gainer and the other man the loser, he was unhesitatingly able to show what his true intentions and motives were. In fact, humbug, half suspected, became almost complete philanthropy and betrayed a tinge of the last in the list of temperaments. Such is the business mind which in some way has powers superior to any other, and makes "business" rise far above any profession which the world has ever, or can ever, hope to know.

Mr Slygne was still deep in his calculations

when a clerk knocked at the door. The financier looked up sharply. "Well?" he said.

"Please, sir, Professor Pentique is in the general office, and wishes to see you, if you please."

"Show him up," said Mr Slygne.

Certain classes of people in the City were very well acquainted with the name of Professor Pentique. At one time in his career, it was stated, he had been employed in Edison's work-shop in New York and many inventions were known to have originated in his brain. Pentique, however, was one of those richly-endowed scientific men who are more frequently to be found in the purlieus of Capel Court than at work in their laboratories. He was always in the City—indeed, he had a small office in Lime Street—and he was the mainspring of a good many flotations which, if they did not attract very much attention in London, caused many eyes to open and mouths to water in the provinces.

The Pentique electric loom was an accomplished fact, though Northern cotton spinners had not as yet purchased it in any large quantities. It was known also that the Professor's new aerial ship was rapidly

approaching completion. A picture of it had appeared on the magazine page of a halfpenny journal and it was confidently announced that the problem of flying was nearer solution than it had ever been before.

And then the personality of the "Professor"—he had once held a chair of physics at the Colorado University and wrote himself Ph.D.—was certainly abnormal. "No one," so people thought, "would be quite like that if he were not a genius. He was of continental Jewish extraction, plump and with an intelligent, hairless face. There was something arresting in the man's ugliness and something powerful also. The wolf and the pig struggled for mastery in his face. His eyes were small and brilliant, shining at the end of a lane of fat like stars in a tunnel. His lips were very thick, mobile, and expressive, his voice harsh but with a certain force and weight of conviction behind it which had more effect upon wavering minds than many more melodious organs.

Professor Pentique entered Mr Slygne's private room, humming like a hive of bees preparing to swarm. He ran into the room with his head upon one side, his eyes half

closed and the fingers of his podgy hands opening and shutting spasmodically. The inventor had been endowed with a nervous temperament which caused him to wear out as much adipose tissue in a day as a normal man does in three weeks. He had to eat very largely to make up for it. When he was excited he hummed, when he was angry he buzzed, purred, and spat like one of his own dynamos. And when he was not angry he was always excited, and when angry, excitement was too tame and colourless a word to convey a hint of his state of mind.

It may be noticed that a very nervous and excitable person may irritate and bore some people, but hardly anyone ever suspects him. It is your smooth and suave-mannered man who brings suspicious thoughts to the brains of the wide-awake and shrewd.

To his clerks Pentique was a terror, and, had he lived at a more religious epoch, his name would certainly have figured in many a young man's Sunday Litany. He would stamp, and swear, and bully, and rant, in a way which has been extinct in the City for fifty years, whenever anything went wrong in his office. And if, as was sometimes the case,

he himself proved to be responsible for what had happened, then he was naturally ten times more indignant, since to keep three clerks, and still have mistakes, was nothing short of ridiculous. When Pentique started from his private room for a raid on the clerks' office, it was like the coming of a tempest over the China seas. First, in the distance, a door banged; then another. Then came a rumble, penetrating, like thunder, to the very backbone. As he approached, the banging of doors grew louder, one could distinguish the patter of his little feet, like raindrops from the approaching siroc. And his awful hum grew louder, and more imminent, till at length the last door fell back, shivering, into its frame, and with a mad, dizzying buzz, the whirlwind had arrived.

Pentique, then, ran into Slygne's presence with his head on one side, and having grasped the financier's hand, sank down into a chair and took off his hat.

"Well," he said, gazing eagerly into Slygne's placid face with a scrutiny that did not in the least disturb the financier. "What about the company now? How are

things going? What have you decided? It's time we came to a definite conclusion."

Slygne calmly lit a cigar. "I've just been figuring things out a little," he said, "and I'll tell you the conclusion I've come to. I calculate that the capital will have to be two million sterling!"

There was a silence in the room at that. Pentique's nervous humming stopped suddenly and for some seconds his figure was quite still. Then he spoke, in a slow, quiet voice, most unusual coming from him. The words dropped slowly from the fat lips like goutts of treacle.

"Is not that a great deal for these days, Slygne?"

"Of course it is, my dear fellow," Slygne answered. "Nobody knows that better than I do, you may be sure. It's an enormous sum. But you must remember the vast, the universal interest involved! Don't look at it from *our* point of view, Pentique. That is fatal. Of course then two million pounds—which I have every confidence we shall handle before long—*does* seem an enormous sum. But it won't seem much to the public when we remember how they *must* view what we

tell them we are going to do! And I'm pretty certain the public will bite. The thing is quite beyond their experience, there is no precedent to warn them and if the scientific part is all right—

"Leave that to me, Slygne."

"When I've seen that the thing *can't* go wrong in its preliminary stages I'll certainly leave it to you," retorted Mr Slygne. "However," he continued, "I don't think you need have very much fear as to the amount of the capital. I know the investing public better than you do, and nothing like this has ever been proposed before, it is not too much to say in the history of the world! And recollect that in laying such a company as we propose before the public we appeal not only to their natural desire for money but also to the loftier and more patriotic feelings which are deeply implanted in the breasts of my countrymen." Mr Slygne delivered himself of the last sentence or two with a certain oratorical flavour. The words came pat from his lips, *ore rotundo*, as if he had pondered them before.

He looked at Professor Pentique with some dignity as he finished speaking, and not by

the movement of a muscle could a third person have detected what was in his mind. Pentique was not so impassive. His features relaxed into a hideous grin of amusement like a pantomime mask. At this, for one single second, the lashes of Mr Slygne's left eye descended to his cheek and rose again.

"You are right!" hummed the Jew. "You are right, my dear boy, as you always are. Now what do you say to drinking to the success of the comp—to the two millions?"

Mr Slygne's face lit up for a moment at the ecstatic admiration of Professor Pentique—for we all have our little weaknesses—and then he walked briskly to the sideboard and opened a bottle of champagne.

It might have been noticed that while the nervous temperament of the scientist seemed to require a good deal of the wine, the more phlegmatic financier took but a single glass.

"Yes," Slygne said at length; "I think we can arrange that the financial parts of the scheme shall be wholly favourable. It is the technical ways and means about which I must have a clear understanding with you."

Mr Slygne leaned back in his chair,

twiddling a pencil between his fingers as spoke. Except for the expression in his eyes and the peculiar tones lurking in his voice, he might have been asking Pentique whether he was certain the day was fine.

The Professor began to vibrate and to hum. He laid his chubby hands upon the table, and leaned over them.

"I have explained to you almost everything," said he. "All that is now required will be a few acres of land in some distant part of England. I say distant because London is so full of very poor, but very cunning rascals that it would be well if we precluded the possibility of their interfering with us. The blackmailer, unfortunately, is always with us! We cannot entirely rid ourselves of the poorer classes"—Slygne looked sympathetic—"but we can choose a more—ah—thick-headed set than those of London. What do you say?"

Slygne looked at his companion critically.

"I can get you the land," he said. "I can raise you the capital. I can float you the company. But"—he paused, threw his pencil on to the table, and jumped forward in his chair—"But I must be certain that your

operations on that land are going to be *safe!*"

He hissed the word at Pentique, and the furrows between his eyebrows deepened suddenly. "If they will not be safe; if you cannot wager your life upon their safety; if you have the slightest shadow of doubt about their safety; then tell me so, here and now, before it is too late, and we will turn our attention to something else from this moment onward."

Pentique rose from his chair, shaking with excitement.

"My dear boy," he cried, "I am certain—absolutely certain—about the safety of my scheme. How in the world could you conceive my undertaking such a risk if I were not certain? It would be madness!"

"It would. But remember, you wouldn't be the first man whose eyes had been blinded to the possibility of accidents through his dream of wealth."

"I swear to you, Mr Slygne, that it is safe. The preliminary secret is known only to me and my amanuensis, Herr Blachen, and the working will be in our hands alone. I can, of course, however, show it to you if you wish?"

I can make the technical details simple for you, and you will readily understand the plan."

Slygne nodded and the Professor, at a sign, came round the table, and began to draw on a piece of paper. Slygne meanwhile rose from his chair, and walking noiselessly across the room, turned the key in his office door. He did it in a casual way, and then came back to scrutinise the diagram which his friend was preparing.

For some time they remained thus, with bowed heads, while the Professor whispered explanations, and Slygne nodded as each point was made clear to him. Then at last he looked up.

"That will do, Professor," said he. "There is a match in that box, and the fire-place is empty. Stamp on the ashes for safety's sake, though; you know I have a perfect horror of fire." He smiled curiously and then added in a louder voice, "Prevention is better than cure, you see."

Pentique did as he was bid, and then they were sitting opposite one another again. Slygne broke the silence first.

"The land which you require," he said

"will be in Somerset, a county, as I daresay you know, in the south-west of England. I have a brother who owns an estate there, on which he lives. He will sell me a few acres of land, I have no doubt, since the price does not matter much. This, I think, will just suit our purpose, because the West-Country people are very placid by disposition, and so will not trouble us with their curiosity."

"It would be well to negotiate this matter at once," remarked Pentique.

"True, and I will have it done immediately. I will go down myself. No, but I cannot do that just at the moment. Let me see. Ah, yes, I know. I will send down my secretary."

He unlocked the door, touched an electric bell, and the next moment a young man stood before them who seemed to appear from space, for his approach had been inaudible, and he entered the room without knocking.

Slygne regarded him with a pleasant smile.

"Mr Thawne," he said, "Professor Pentique and myself are engaged upon the carrying out of a financial scheme which will prove to be the largest, most important and most lucrative to all concerned that I have ever turned my attention to. I tell you all

this in the strictest confidence, remember," he went on, making Percy feel that he had just been entrusted with some stupendous secret. "I tell you this in your private capacity as head of my staff, and not as a public secretary to my companies, remember. I have told you partly because I like you to take an interest in the work of this office, and partly because I feel that you will, in all probability, be connected, in an official capacity, with my new concern. The secretaryship of this company will carry an emolument more than double that of the *Wild West Oil Corporation*, and treble that of the *Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate*. What do you think of that prospect, eh?"

The young man's eyes glittered, and he gulped twice.

"Such plums as this one, however, are not easily procured, and before I put you in the way of earning the sum I have mentioned, I naturally expect you to prove yourself worthy of the position. You must know, then, that in order to carry out our scheme, it is essential that we procure a small quantity of land in the county of Somerset. This is the task which I wish you to perform. You will

therefore proceed by the first train you can catch to-morrow from Paddington, and call upon Mr Ernest Slygne of Whitleigh Hall, Bridgwater, who is my brother. You will bear a letter of introduction from me, and by the next morning I shall expect you to have obtained say ten acres for me at as cheap a price as possible. I do not know much about the price of land," Slygne continued regretfully, "but I do know that my brother will try and charge you double as much as the land is worth; and that is precisely what I will not pay. Please be quite clear on that point! Find out how the local prices run before seeing him, therefore, and remember that upon the success of this business depends the position which you occupy in regard to my new company. If you give more for the land than it is worth, I shall find you out, remember, for I shall myself be in Somerset before long. Now, here is the letter, and then you can be off."

The great man traced a few lines upon a sheet of notepaper, which he put into an envelope. Then, having scrawled the address, he handed the note to Percy, saying, as he did so,—

"Don't forget that secretaryship, Mr. Thawne; and be back here in the course of the day after to-morrow, and you may draw five pounds, no, four pounds ten, let us say for travelling expenses."

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## CHAPTER III

### A FLEET STREET NOCTURNE

PERCY THAWNE left the office that evening, or to be correct that afternoon at a quarter past four, in a state of considerable excitement.

The glittering prospects unfolded by his chief had fired his imagination and he had visions of a very splendid order indeed.

“Already,” he reflected, “I have obtained a position in which the salary is not inadequate, where there is little or no arduous work and which is, as minor City posts go, one of some importance. I’m not a clerk or any sort of quill driver. I’m not ordered about by any bounder with a cockney accent and half my education. I am secretary to three important City companies — and practically my own master. And I’m in with a first-rate business man who is already well-to-do and about to make a fortune. It’s hard if I can’t

pick up a bit while he's doing so! Of course I don't trust our friend Horatio, but I like him well enough and it's always pleasant to be with a genial sort of chap. I wonder what's in the wind now! From the way Slygne spoke it must be something very big indeed. Pentique is always round at the office. Of course it must be some big scientific game. I wonder if it's the flying machine. I should hardly think so. That's rather too too, even for Horatio. Well, I suppose I shall know in time. Anyway there's going to be money in it for me. That's the important thing, and I've got a nice little trip on to-morrow. It's ripping weather for a day in the country. All's well with the world!"

Percy Thawne lived in a narrow and old-fashioned street which ran down to the Embankment from the Strand.

It was characteristic of his temperament that he liked to be in the thick of things, liked to hear the stir and movement of a vivid pulsating life all round him. His mother had sensibly acquiesced in his desire to leave the flat in West Kensington when her son began to earn enough money to start his own small bachelor establishment. A soldier's daughter

and a soldier's widow, she thoroughly understood the wisdom of letting a young man move unaided and uncumbered through life. And she knew that Percy would not make a fool of himself. He was light-hearted and fond of gaiety, but cheap vices did not attract him. "Thawne always knows how to keep his tail up," some of Percy's less steady friends used to say wonderingly and enviously, when they went to him in self-borrowed trouble for advice or help.

At Oxford Percy had managed to take a pass degree without much trouble, and though he had been picturesquely lazy during the three golden years he had never been in any serious trouble and the Dean of his college was wont to speak of him as "a kindly hedonist, quite frank, don't you know, but still sane, eminently sane."

Percy took the Underground from Cannon Street to Charing Cross, and in twenty minutes from the time he left the office was entering his chambers.

The *cul-de-sac* of Buckingham Street was perfectly quiet, save for the distant tinkling of a piano. The old water-gate at the end was warm and mellow in the long lights of

the afternoon and the vivid green of the trees in the garden beyond it gave it a charmingly remote and pastoral effect.

Leaning out of his window, Percy could see the silver Thames with here and there a red-masted barge drifting slowly by.

It was a charming place and hour. A little oasis in the very hub and centre of London's roaring life, but redolent of another century and clime. Percy smoked a cigarette at the window, smiling sympathetically at a young lady who lived opposite with her mother in a small flat. She was an actress, he knew, for she left the flat each night at the same time and returned to supper about midnight.

He didn't know the girl to speak to and he didn't want to. Probably she spoke with the horrid and affected drawl of the chorus girl and had manners that would set one's teeth on edge. But they always smiled at each other when at their respective windows, which was not without a spice of romance, and far better than the concrete and probably boring fact of an introduction.

When he had finished his cigarette Percy went into his bedroom and changed into a flannel suit and a straw hat. On these hot

summer nights it was far more pleasant thus. There was not only the physical comfort of the thing, but also the indefinite but quite real sense of roaming London in disguise. One might be anyone dressed like that, and it was the only way to seek evening adventures in the Metropolis. There was a strain of Haroun Alraschid in the young man. He meant to see as much as he could of human nature on his way through the world, to study men in their hours of ease, to gauge human motives and to see something of human event.

This, he was quite sure, was the royal road to success, this calm, dispassionate spectatorship. So night and night saw him East and West, in haunts of pleasure or of work, completing his scheme and adding to his knowledge of his fellow-creatures. No one knew Percy Thawne at all intimately, everyone he was in the habit of meeting thought that he knew him thoroughly well. Mr Slygne, for example, regarded Percy as a shrewd, pleasant youth whom it was well to have about the place because of his good appearance and manners. He liked Percy well enough, but he never for a moment regarded the young man as a serious factor to or helper in his

affairs. Had Slygne realised the quiet determination and ambition of his secretary at even one-half of its worth he would have got rid of him at once. Such a man was dangerous. Mr Slygne wanted pawns in Burdett Street, if possible pleasant, nicely-varnished pawns, but still pawns. He wished to combine all the powers of the more important pieces in his own person as he moved—often in a curiously zigzag course—over the City chess-board.

Percy Thawne knew that he had very little to expect in the way of inheritance. When his mother died she would leave him her two hundred a year. That was all. He also realised that for a man who is generally clever a fortune large or small can be more quickly picked up in the City than anywhere else, provided he has once secured the *entrée* to Tom Tiddler's ground.

This Percy had done already, though as yet he was but inside the gate where the shekels had been already gathered. He was, however, quite determined upon one thing. He would make a fortune—a small fortune, he would be quite content with that—before he was many years older. He didn't want to

toil away the best years of his life as a doctor or barrister, and by the time he had secured a thousand or two a year to be past all enjoyment. He would give himself four years in which to make enough money to retire upon. And then, oh, then! away from these drab islands for ever and a day. Away to wide, brilliant, and smiling skies, where life laughed itself away among sweet and drowsy flowers, odorous winds, and wine-coloured summer seas. That was the goal, but Percy was too shrewd to allow himself to dwell upon it often. Daydreams were delightful, but they were enervating and marred the present. One *must* live in the present when one had his aims, one must keep one's eyes remarkably wide open, which is precisely what dreamers don't do. Meanwhile, stick to Slygne like a limpet, a limpet with a trap-door in its shell and a telescope!

This evening, before setting out upon his nocturnal rambles, Percy resolved to have a swim in the Westminster Baths and to visit his mother in West Kensington. He never allowed a day to pass without indulging in some strong physical exercise. In the summer he swam or played racquets at Queen's Club,

in the winter he boxed and otherwise developed his muscles at the German Gymnasium. He had early learnt at Oxford—where he got a half-blue for racquets—that to keep a clear and watchful eye in life one must not lead a sedentary life. A liver-ridden existence was no part of his scheme.

He plunged into the shimmering green water with an enormous satisfaction. His muscular right arm rose and fell forcefully, conquering an element, and when he at length emerged into the evening and went towards St James's Park Station he was full of physical exultation and the glow of perfect health ran through his young blood.

Two old gentlemen on their way to Bedford Park eyed him enviously as he sat in the first-class carriage, a fine example of a healthy young Englishman of the upper middle classes. When he left the train at West Kensington both of them returned to their *Westminster Gazettes* with a reminiscent sigh.

Mrs Thawne, a tall and graceful woman still, greeted her son with great pleasure in her little Queen's Club Gardens flat.

"I've got some dinner to give you, dear," she said; "fortunately I'm not dining out. But I'm going to Lady Olsson's At Home by-and-by—the academician's wife, you know. It's a pity you haven't your evening clothes here, you might come with me."

"I don't feel quite in the mood for a party, mother," Percy said, "thank you. I'm going out of town to-morrow on some business for Mr Slygne and I mean to have a quiet ramble by myself to-night."

"I hope everything goes well in the City, dear," his mother said. "Curiously enough I had a little conversation this morning about that very matter. I went to my solicitors about my railway shares, you know, and Mr Barlow inquired how you were getting on. 'I think on the whole,' he said, 'that you have done right in placing your son with Mr Slygne. I know something of him and he is a man who is going to make a fortune in the near future. It's sharp practice, but he takes no risks and does not speculate with his own money. Tell your son from me to keep his eyes and ears wide open. Tell him to keep in with Slygne for a time, get as much as he possibly can out of him without being

identified with any of his schemes too closely. Then let him bring his money to me to invest in sound securities, leave Mr Slygne and look out for something less rapid but more steady.'"

"Well, that's very much my own idea, mother," Percy said. "I *do* keep my eyes open, and I can see things coming along rather fast. Only to-day I have heard that my prospects are considerably better than I thought they would be. In fact, I shall in all probability be making quite a lot of money soon."

"Well, be careful, dear," said Mrs Thawne, with a maternal smile, "and try some of this omelette. Mary makes an omelette *fin* very well. Now I must go and dress. Come and see me again in a day or two and tell me all your news."

She kissed him with great affection and left the room. As he went out and began to walk towards the Park, Percy reflected that he had a most sensible and helpful mother. It was always a relief to him to spend a quiet hour with her. She didn't worry, didn't want to know this or that detail, she let him alone and trusted him, though when he did ask her

advice upon any point he found it ever sane and pertinent. Old Barlow, the solicitor, was right. He must endeavour to make money swiftly out of his connection with Slygne. A single respectable *coup* and the thing was done. There had been little or no opportunity with Mount Pisa or the Oil Corporation. He had been too inexperienced at the time, and in any case there was but little plunder in those two companies for anyone but the chief. But something seemed on the cards now! It really seemed as if a chance were coming. Slygne's words were pregnant with meaning. Yes! the opportunity was at hand. It should not be his fault if he did not take the tide at the flood.

As Piccadilly opened before him like a long grey ribbon fringed with jewels—for the lamps were now lit—a strange sense of coming good fortune came to the young man. He felt strong and powerful, alert and wary. He was *convinced* that things were working well with him, that the fates were imminent with good gifts.

He had never felt anything like it before; it wasn't a hope, it was almost a certainty, and quite outside the region of pleasant dreams.

He wandered along happily through the summer night. Carriages full of beautiful women passed him going to balls and parties. Men in evening clothes, very carefully groomed, flashed by in hansoms. Piccadilly Circus was a blaze of warm yellow radiance. He went into the Criterion and had some coffee, watching the curious crowd of folk sitting about under the golden mosaics of the roof, listening to the band which was beginning to play in the distant supper-rooms.

On that night, caught up as he was in this new sense of expectation, he seemed to hear the whole machinery of London life crashing in its grooves. He left the restaurant and wandered on down the Strand, and still the systole and diastole of London was beating in his ears.

It was half-past eleven when his wandering steps took him into Fleet Street. East of Temple Bar the long hill was comparatively silent. The roar of the westward Strand had faded away to a distant murmur. There was but little traffic. An omnibus passed now and then on its way to Liverpool Street, a few crawling hansoms waiting for a chance to

get into the Strand for the theatre and supper people—for no empty cab may enter the Strand at this hour—alone broke the monotony.

But a previous knowledge of this unique London street taught Percy that all round him the fiercest activity that London knows was in its nightly progress. In those narrow side-streets and ancient echoing courts, brilliant brains were at work. Along the dim web of wires overhead the news of the world was flashing.

Percy turned up a narrow entry into a court. On one side of it hung a lamp, an old-fashioned thing hung on antique iron work, bearing on it in faded red letters, "The Old Cheshire Cheese."

In this ancient haunt of wit and library folk, a hostelry which still jealously preserved its external aspects, Percy was sure of finding some odd derelict of humanity. In the low bar-room with its leaded window-panes, its sanded floor, and massive benches, the strangest literary jetsam was wont to assemble. Here one met the failure, the disappointed man. The fringe of London journalism gathered here to bewail its unhappy state

and hurl thunders of harmless spite against more successful writers. In harmony with their setting, the *habitués* had generally reached the confines of middle age. They represented an alien generation, one which was forgotten and passed by. Here was a famous leader-writer in the sixties, a man of ponderous words, mouthing Horace *ore rotundo*, intolerant of pyramid head-lines, halfpenny journalism, and the roar of the Hoe rotary machines.

With the long tweed ulster and silk hat of his period, both ill-brushed and very old friends, he would fulminate over his gin and water in a manner delightful and refreshing to the modern youth, who gained many lessons in life at the expenditure of a shilling or two.

It interested Percy extremely to become the confidant of these weird out-moded folk. To study failure, complete and utter, was to learn of pit-falls. He had always thought that the successful man must specialise in the lives who were less fortunate than he meant to be.

This evening Percy found but one tenant of the quaint, dimly-lit place. This was a man of medium height, very fat, with a stiff,

broom-like black beard and bristling moustache.

He wore a frock-coat, somewhat greasy about the lapels and button-holes of the waistcoat, and a silk hat with a broad brim which had an odd ecclesiastical suggestion about it. He was reading an evening paper as Percy entered, and marking certain paragraphs with a stub of blue pencil.

Percy looked at the man with interest and a curious reminiscent feeling. Somewhere or other he had seen him before, of that he was quite certain. He had seen him several times, but try as he would he was unable to remember where.

The man began to count the lines of the marked paragraph carefully. At last he looked up. "Ninety lines, Mary, my dear," he said triumphantly to the barmaid. "Ninety lines this afternoon. At two pence a line it works out at fifteen shillings exactly, which is the sum I shall draw to-morrow morning. I will buy you some chocolates if I remember, and Heaven bless the Italian gentleman who stabbed his mother in Smithfield to-day, for he has done me a good turn."

The man spoke in a shameless, jovial impudent voice, but with an accent in which culture still lingered. "He must have been a gentleman once," Percy thought; "but who in the world is he? Where have I met him before?"

At that moment, the fat man advanced to the bar from the table where he had been sitting, and pushed forward his glass with a request for some more gin. The light from a hissing gas jet fell full on Percy's face, and the other looked at him with recognition.

"Mr Thawne," said the fat man. "How d'you do? And what are you doing in Grub Street, please? Has the financier immediate need of me?"

Percy looked at the creature in considerable surprise.

"You know my name," he said, "but, excuse me, I don't remember yours. Yet your face seems quite familiar to me too!"

"My name is Blaber," said the other. "John Blaber. You remember my face because you've seen it in Burdett Street. I occasionally go there to see Mr Slygne."

"Oh yes," Percy said quickly, "of course. Foolish of me to forget. One of our share-

holders perhaps? In the Mount Pisa, or the Oil Corporation? I'm the secretary, don't you know."

He had assumed something of the "palliative" manner instinctively, taken off his guard as he was by this unexpected meeting. It did strike him as he spoke that the person before him did not exactly suggest the typical investor, but the surprise had momentarily robbed him of his usual readiness.

For answer the fat man sat down suddenly upon an adjacent bench. His eyes almost disappeared in lanes of fat, his coarse but clever mouth opening widely, and a torrent of noisy laughter flowed into the room.

No man cares to be the object of another's mirth when he is profoundly ignorant of the reason that excites it. The rich, gin-fed laughter rolled out into the room and made every nerve in the young man's body quiver with anger. There was something startling and also extremely repulsive in the man's amusement. Percy's high spirits began to sink rapidly in spite of himself.

Loth to enter into any unseemly altercation with such a person and in such a place,

## SHARKS

he was turning to go, when Mr Blaber's laughter suddenly ceased, as if turned off by a tap. "You really must excuse me, Mr Thawne," he said in a very different voice from the one he had hitherto used. He spoke like a gentleman now.

"I am extremely sorry to be so unmannerly," he continued, "but the idea of my holding shares in the Mount Pisa Mine was a little too much for me. I ought to explain myself to you, and I will do so. But suppose we adjourn to some other place, a little more secluded than this. I promise that I will interest you, but not here."

Something in the man's tones, which had become informed with considerable meaning, made Percy take a sudden resolution. He would ask the man to his rooms.

There was a little mystery here, he scented it at once. Well, why should he not solve it? It might be that this was another chance put in his way, that his visions had not been vain after all.

"Suppose, Mr Blaber," he said, "you come and have a smoke in my rooms in Buckingham Street—that is, if you have no other engagement. Any friend of Mr Slygne's is

very welcome to me. What do you say? Will you come?"

The man looked doubtfully at Percy for a moment. Then he said, "Thanks, I'll come with pleasure, Mr Thawne."

They went out of the bar, crossed Fleet Street, and, at Blaber's suggestion, debouched upon the Embankment, now quiet and almost deserted.

"That was very kindly done, Mr Thawne," said the fat man. "It is long since I sat as a guest in anyone's chambers. I am beginning to wonder how long I shall be admitted into the saloon bars of Fleet Street! Your invitation is very welcome. I have run out of tobacco, and I have spent my last three-pence in gin and water."

Percy smiled sympathetically. "Well, I can supply those sort of wants in my chambers," he said. "A life without tobacco—even a few hours without it—is not pleasant."

"It is not, Mr Thawne, though it is frequently my lot," said Mr Blaber. "But these famines are common among the less successful brethren in Fleet Street, and are, after all, only temporary. I had an excellent matricide this morning, for which I shall draw fifteen

shillings to-morrow, and Fortune smiles on me even more. I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again to-morrow, for I am summoned to Burdett Street."

"For my part, I shall be away, Mr Blaber," Percy said. "I have some business out of town. You are to see Mr Slygne, you say?"

"Exactly, I will show you his letter when we get upstairs."

They had arrived at Buckingham Street by this time, and soon the journalist was sitting back in a saddlebag chair with a sigh of comfort, while his physical needs were gratified by a large Dutch cheroot and a foaming glass.

Percy noticed the remarkable frontal development of his guest's skull as he sat there, and wondered.

"I suppose you're going away on business connected with the new company," said Mr Blaber at length.

Rage filled the young man's heart. Who was this whisky-drinking backslider to be in Slygne's confidence while he himself was kept in the dark?

"New company?" he said innocently. "What new company is that?"

The journalist began to chuckle. "Good!"

he cried in an ecstasy of enjoyment. "Smart! oh, damned smart! You City men are wonderful. It has always been a pleasure to me to work with Mr Slygne, and now I can see that you are a worthy pupil of that truly remarkable man."

He pulled a letter from his pocket and handed it to Percy. "I suppose you know nothing about that, Mr Thawne?" he said—"nothing whatever! Of course not! And yet I shouldn't wonder if you wrote it yourself!"

Percy read the letter with as sphinx-like a smile as he could summon.

It ran as follows:—

"DEAR BLABER,—I shall be glad if you will call upon me to-morrow at mid-day. I have some important work to propose to you, work which will tax your energies to the utmost, but which I have little doubt that you will carry out in the same brilliant way as you have done in the past, though this is a greater matter than I have before entrusted to you. The emolument may reach a hundred pounds or more.—Faithfully yours,

"HORATIO SLYGNE."

He gave the letter back to Blaber without any comment.

"Well," said that worthy, "of course if you won't tell me, you *won't*. I shall hear everything to-morrow morning. But this must be a bigger thing than your people have touched before. Slygne is the devil to part with money. Why, I only had fifteen pounds for the Mount Pisa Mine prospectus and twenty for the Oil Corporation. It's poor pay for such work. I wish I knew some other financiers to work for. Slygne was at school with me, you know, in earlier years and he employs me for that reason—at least, so he says. He is always grumbling about my work."

A sudden light flowed into Percy's brain. He had made a discovery of considerable importance, and might make more if he played his cards with care.

"Well, Mr Blaber," he said, "for my part I have always admired your work greatly in this direction, and I've often wished to meet with the possessor of such a brilliant pen. We must be better acquainted. I shall be back in London on the day after to-morrow. Will you dine with me here at seven?"

## CHAPTER IV

### WESTWARD HO!

THERE were not very many passengers by the two o'clock train from Paddington. The long platform was dotted here and there with well-dressed people but there was no noisy crowd. The great station which leads to the west always has its own dignity and repose. It is the most aristocratic terminus in London. None of the pushing throngs of Euston or Victoria are seen there. All the passengers seem to belong to a definite class, the leisured well-clothed folk who have houses in the west of England. What is true of London is true of England also; all the "best" people from the social point of view seem to gravitate towards the sunset. Percy felt this as he chose his carriage and watched the sedate movements of the folk on the platform. Smart grooms stood by piles of luggage, sleek valets carried gladstone bags and bundles of fishing-rods, the black-haired lady's-maid from

France with miraculous boots and roving eyes flitted from carriage to carriage.

The huge space under the glass domes was filled with a warm apricot light, and the platforms were wonderfully clean and fresh-looking beneath it.

Everyone Percy saw looked pleased and happy, and he himself was thoroughly in tune with the general sense of *bien être*.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, by the huge station clock upon the departure platform. The stir of the departing passengers had for the moment somewhat subsided; their luggage had already disappeared, and now the train destined to bear them westward waited but the signal for departure to set out upon its journey. Percy, comfortably settled in the corner of a carriage to himself, had watched the hour approach with satisfaction, wishing no company on his trip to the land of cider, while his brain was so busy with calculations about that bright future which Mr Slygne had painted for him.

It was at precisely three-quarters of a minute past two, and the guard's whistle already touched his lips, when there was a sudden agitation at one of the doors leading to

the booking-hall. A porter rushed forward, threw open a carriage door, and slammed it again upon a vision of pink and white, who, entering like a breeze in summer, dropped on to the seat opposite Percy like a bunch of rose-leaves blown by it, just as the whistle actually sounded and the train began to move.

The train had already gathered considerable momentum and was beginning to fly through the unlovely suburbs of Shepherd's Bush when coherent thought returned to Percy Thawne. Immediately upon the explosive entrance into the carriage he had sunk upon his knees in the effort to gather together the possessions his companion had shed upon her arrival. The floor and seats were covered with a very varied impedimenta but worst of all his tasks the young man found that of gathering up the remnants of a pearl necklace. Half under the seat he chased the tiny elusive things into obscure corners without a word.

The vision still panted from exertion. Evidently she had been hurrying to catch her train, and, indeed, it was a wonder that she had not missed it altogether. He had just captured a fifth pearl when she spoke.

"Please do not bother about gathering up

those stupid pearls. I have been longing to lose them for weeks and weeks. Yes, I really mean what I say."

"But—" Here a sixth came to hand—"But it seems a pity to leave them."

"Nevertheless, I would much rather that you did. I hate pearls."

Percy emerged.

"Thank you so much; and now please sit down. It quite fidgets me to see you under the seat like that."

She smiled charmingly. "And I would rather talk to you than watch you crawl. Will you mind me talking, I wonder? It is my failing, you see. Wherever I go I must talk, and although we have not been introduced, I do not think that there is any harm in my talking, so long as you don't misunderstand me."

"No one could possibly misunderstand you," declared Percy, warmly.

At that she smiled again. When this girl smiled, her lips caught themselves together into the sweetest of little pink knots. In the curve of her left cheek there hovered a dimple, and her chin was drawn up in a crease of indescribable subtlety.

"You mean that?" she asked.

"Most certainly I do."

"Well, then, we can be friends. I always try and make myself understood, it is so much the best, I think. And then, you see, if I did not do so—with my weakness for talking—I should always be getting into scrapes. I consider talking a necessity, remember. I think it enlarges one's mind, and, certainly, makes life much more interesting. It seems so silly to go through life like a vegetable, I think; but that is what most girls do. The fact is, they are afraid of saying what they mean, whereas I always say just what I mean, on principle."

"But don't you think," replied Percy, "that if everyone always said just what they meant, polite conversation would die a violent death?"

"Yes, perhaps it would; not because there is any harm in being oneself, but because so many people do not possess any self that is worth expressing."

"This is very severe," he said.

"Oh, not at all. For you must yourself have noticed how very uninteresting lots and lots of people are—especially girls. They

really have not two ideas in their heads, and so they trot through life, ready to take any cue from men. Whenever they meet a man they listen to see what most interests him, and then they pretend to be interested too. That is just what makes you men so egotistical and conceited."

"And what do you do, when you meet a man?"

"I? Oh, I talk to him, of course, and if he likes to agree with me, he can; if not, well, he must simply listen."

"I am sure that any man would find an equal pleasure in doing either."

"It is quite right of you to say so, whether you mean what you say or not."

"Oh, don't mistrust me! The habit of saying what one really means is most infectious."

"That is nicer still!" she exclaimed.

"When truth is really nice," replied Percy, with much gravity, "why should we not permit ourselves the luxury of indulging in it?"

She began to laugh.

"The luxury," she answered, "becomes, under such circumstances, an absolute duty."

"That is precisely my own feeling," he assented, "and it is for this very reason that I have been speaking so truthfully for the last ten minutes."

"But don't you usually speak the truth?"

Percy hesitated. He thought of Slygne and the Wild West, of the Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate and of the Mount Pisa Gold Mine. Therefore he answered cautiously,—

"I am in business."

"Are you, though!" she cried. "I have heard lots about business, and it always seems to me so complicated. Surely one must be very clever if one is in business?"

"Not exactly clever. I should say tactful rather."

"Oh, I did not know that men were ever tactful. What sort of tact do you mean?"

"I think you would call it diplomatic tact," he answered.

"Should I? Tell me more about it."

"Well, business chiefly concerns the making of money, and, as money-making is the greatest problem of the present day, it naturally follows that ordinary people must have their money made for them by other

people who understand more about business than they themselves do, who are in fact specialists. In order to do this, and yet keep their own knowledge sacred, business men have all to learn the art of diplomatic tact."

"I see. But why should not everyone know all about business?"

Percy looked hurt.

"In these days of widespread education," he answered, "that is just what people wish to do. I do not mean to say that all such education is bad; no, *a little* knowledge of business—in others—is a very pleasant thing. What I mean to say is that it would be obviously unfair to business men if everyone understood business. People would—"

"Yes?"

"Well, people would become so practical, so suspicious, that business would accordingly deteriorate."

"And that would be such a dreadful thing for the country, wouldn't it?" she asked sympathetically.

"I think it would *ruin* the country," he replied, with great earnestness.

Then they both began to laugh, although who smiled first neither could tell.

"What is the head of your office like?" she asked presently.

"He is one of our rising financiers."

"Is he tactful?"

"He is the very soul of tact. That is why he has been so successful at business."

"Are you fond of him?"

"I entertain a very deep respect for his talents, and hope that I may turn out to be one-half so clever a man of business."

She pursed her lips.

"Your replies," she said, "are the very essence of caution, for, whilst they express little, they convey a great deal. Can you see what I mean?"

"I think so. But surely we have talked of business long enough. Will you not tell me something of yourself?"

She closed her mouth severely.

"Would you like to know why I am here?" she demanded.

He nodded.

"I am punishing papa."

"What!"

"I am punishing papa. You must have

noticed that I refuse to recognise the superiority of your sex; and I carry this doctrine even into my family life. Therefore, when papa becomes troublesome, I take matters into my own hands and give him a lesson. He and I make up the whole family circle, so that when I punish him he always feels it, because he has no one else's society to fall back on. Do you see?"

"Of course; but what was his particular offence in the present instance?"

"He refused to take me into the country for a holiday. He said he was much too busy; yes, he even went further, and forbade me to go alone, which was, of course, particularly foolish."

"Particularly," Percy assented.

"You see," she continued, "I need a holiday (I know this for a fact), and when I need anything I always make a point of taking it. If a girl does not do so, she never gets anything; men are so selfish."

"Exactly."

"Well, then, as I wanted a holiday, and papa would not come, I naturally had to start alone."

"What did he say?"

"I expect he will say a great deal when he gets back from the City to-night. That will make no difference to me, however, as I shall be in Somerset by to-night."

"I suppose you have friends in Somerset?"

"Oh yes, I am going to stay with my uncle. I wired this morning, telling him to expect me."

"I myself am going to Somerset," remarked Percy. "I am going to a place called Bridgwater."

"Well, that is capital, because Bridgwater is my station."

"Really, then perhaps you know that part of the country well?"

"Of course I do. Why, my uncle lives there, and I often go to stay with him when I am tired of London."

"Can you tell me how far Whitleigh is from Bridgwater?"

She opened her eyes.

"Whitleigh! Why, that is where my uncle lives; that is where I am going to. It is ten miles from Bridgwater, and you will have to take a cab which will crawl, and pay a fare which will stagger you. What in the world are you going to Whitleigh for? There is no

business there, unless you are interested in pigs.

"I am interested in land," he answered, with dignity. "I have to call on a gentleman named Mr Ernest Slygne this evening— But what is the matter?"

She was in fits of laughter.

"Mr Ernest Slygne!" she cried. "He is my uncle. Just fancy, we are going to the very identical house!"

Percy gaped.

"I have come down from Mr Horatio Slygne's office—" he began, but could proceed no further.

"Mr Horatio Slygne's office!" she repeated. "Do you know, sir, that Mr Horatio Slygne is my *father*?"

Then Percy went pink and white alternately, for a great discomfort was upon him, and he knew not precisely what to say.

"I am very sorry—" he began.

"Oh, nonsense," she retorted. "I shall not think of allowing you to adopt that tone. Do you really mean to tell me that, just because I happen to be Miss Slygne, you think we have done anything wrong in speaking to each other?"

"Not for a moment," he answered. "Yet there are some quite harmless occurrences which, when repeated to a third person, sound absolutely horrid."

"Quite so; but suppose they are not repeated to anyone, or only to people who would appreciate the circumstances. Where is the harm then?"

"There is certainly no harm then," Percy said.

Miss Slygne's face brightened.

"Exactly," she said. "Now, take the present case as an illustration. I have a dear father and a dear uncle. They are both dears in a different way though, because no two people are alike, are they?"

"Of course not," replied Percy, looking at her and thinking of Slygne.

"Well, then, if my uncle happens to be the sort of person who would understand something which my father would not, surely—"

She paused and looked at him. Percy nodded.

"If you are 'lucky enough to possess one relation who can appreciate a true story," he said, "there would be no harm in his hearing it; but, as I am about to transact some

business with your uncle, you can understand that it would be very awkward for me if, by chance, he did not appreciate the story."

Bella Slygne laughed merrily.

"My uncle is a perfect darling," she declared. "And he is also very fond of me, so fond that whatever I tell him to do he always does. Indeed, he is far better behaved in that way than papa, I assure you. So there!"

"That is very nice," said Percy. "And I only hope that he will be in a good temper when I meet him."

"Uncle Ernest is always in a good temper. But what is your business? Perhaps I can help you."

"Your father wishes to buy a few acres of land from your uncle, for certain business purposes, and if I can get them at a cheap rate my salary will be raised."

"Oh!" She thought for a moment.

"Would you like me to help you?"

"I should not dream of asking you to trouble yourself in the matter, Miss Slygne."

"Nonsense. What is your name?"

Percy laughed.

"Thawne," said he.

"And what position do you occupy in my father's office?"

"I am the secretary to his companies."

"How grand! Do you sign transfers and read Agenda?"

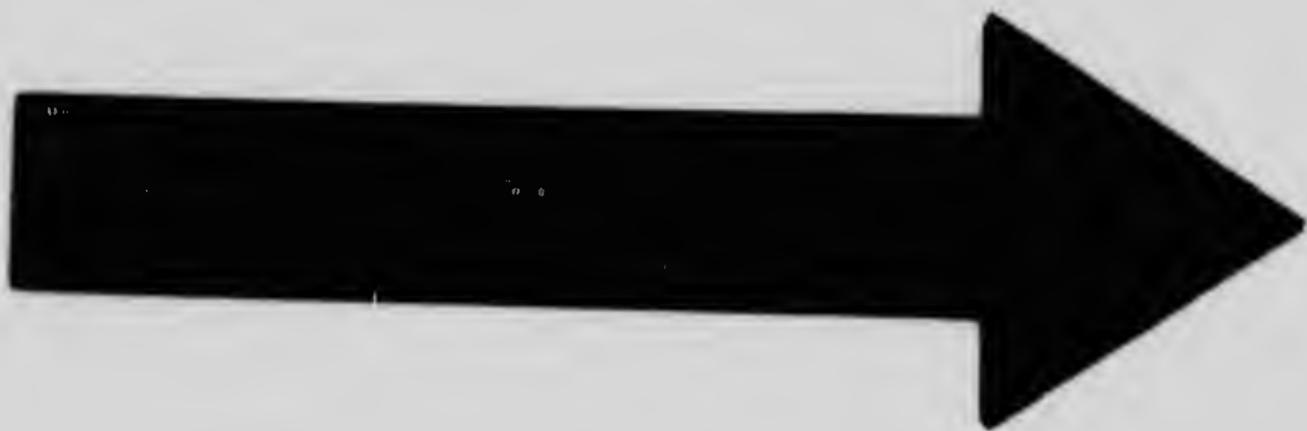
"Yes, that kind of thing."

"Ah, well, I will do the business for you like this. You see, Uncle Ernest will send his carriage to meet me at Bridgwater, and I shall reach Whitleigh before you do; so by the time you arrive everything shall be settled."

"Really, this is too good of you!"

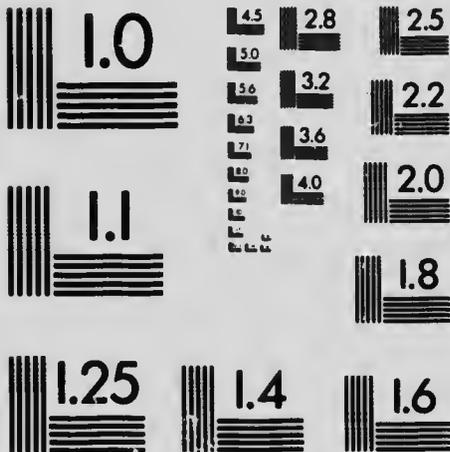
"Not a bit of it. I love telling people to do things, and uncle loves doing what I tell him!"

She broke into a merry peal of laughter, in which Percy joined heartily. Their mirth had scarcely subsided when the train drew up at Swindon platform.



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## CHAPTER V

### ILLUSTRATES THE EXTENT OF MR SLYGNE'S OPERATIONS

PERCY was on tenterhooks as the train stopped in one of the busiest and ugliest stations in England.

He glanced at his companion.

She was leaning back in her seat and held *The Lady's Pictorial* open in her hands. But she did not seem to be much interested in the paper. Every now and again she glanced with a certain apprehension at the door of the carriage which opened on to the platform.

The young man's heart beat a little quicker as he saw the dainty head turn suddenly as anyone passed the carriage door. He thought—and he hoped he was not mistaken—that Miss Slygne shared his own fear of an intrusion. It was a comforting thought. For an hour Percy had been congratulating him-

self upon his good luck and realising that his elation of the night before had not been without a cause. His star indeed was in the ascendent. So pretty a girl as Bella Slygne he had not often seen, such a charming one never. Such freshness and innocent unconventionality were rare in these sophisticated days. And that this damsel should be the daughter of his astute chief seemed to point in some way—he could not say how—to prosperity and success. The Fates were with him. All these thoughts passed through his brain as the noise and tumult of Swindon filled the carriage with shouts, the rumble of trucks, the blowing of whistles, and the deafening roar of escaping steam.

He sat with one hand upon the door handle of the carriage, grimly determined to cling to it till the last moment. He recalled a plan of the London City man as he comes up from the suburbs in the morning with a foot—unseen from the platform—tightly wedged against the handle. He wished he had a railway key. The stop at Swindon was timed to last five minutes. Four had already gone, and the young couple were beginning to breathe more freely when capricious

Fortune, angry at their self-congratulation, dealt them a swinging blow.

A huge, red-headed porter dashed up to the door, opened it with one jerk of his powerful wrist, and pushed in an old lady of benevolent appearance, who, misinterpreting Percy's look of annoyance, beamed upon him with motherly sympathy.

"You look depressed, young man," she said. "Is it quarrelling with your sweetheart you've been? Ah, but don't let that depress you, for the quarrels of lovers are like the seasoning of a stuffed chicken, they add flavour to the dish. Sure I remember that I and my dear husband used to quarrel two or three times a day before we were married, and I assure you it made us grow fonder than ever of each other in the long run. There's nothing like quarrelling with those whom we are fond of; it strengthens our affections, just as hardships strengthen our characters. Of course you don't believe me, but what I'm telling you is true nevertheless."

When the old lady began to talk she was like some patent toy which is wound up, and cannot stop until it has run the whole length of its spring. She spoke very fast, and rau

her words into one another; further, she possessed a strong Irish brogue which served to complete the confusion of her listeners, who could barely comprehend one word out of every three which she uttered.

Percy, making a brave effort to disguise his irritation at her arrival, answered with becoming respect,—

“I have not the least doubt but that what you say is true, madam.”

“Ah, well, I am very glad to hear you say so. And now, can you tell me whether this is the right train for a place called Bridgewater, in the county of Somerset?”

“It is the train,” groaned Percy.

“Thank you. I never feel certain where I'm going to when I travel in England, your trains have such an unsympathetic way with them, far different from the old trains in Ireland which I remember when I was young. Why, sure, when mi father wanted to catch a train on the railway at home. (Mi father, you must know, was a Justice of the Peace for County Galway, and a Magistrate into the bargain). Well, I say, when mi father—or any of us for the matter of that—wanted to catch one of these same trains in the old

days, we'd just to send a butler to the foot of the lawn to signal the engine-driver, and the train would stop, sure enough, for our convenience. There could be no mistake as to where you were going then, for if the engine-driver could not tell you, I'd like to know who could. Eh, sir?"

"Exactly," said Percy, absently, with his eyes turned in the direction of Miss Slygne.

"Are ye much of a traveller?" inquired the old lady, imperturbably.

"Oh yes, I travel every now and then, don't you know," he answered.

"Do you now? But I don't expect you're so great a traveller as my son. My son is a barrister, you know, or at least he used to be before he went on the stage. Indeed, he was a very fine barrister, too, I can assure you. Sure, once he was complimented by the late Lord M'Gowney on his conduct of a case in Belfast. I remember it as well as if it had happened yesterday. Mi dear boy was defending a housemaid who had been charged with stealing eggs from her master, who kept a chicken farm, and handing them to her sweetheart, who, it was asserted, sold them to some egg dealers in Londonderry. It was

a case of circumstantial evidence, and the odds were quite even until my dear Stephen brought forward some customers of the Derry egg dealers, who asserted on oath that the eggs purchased by them from the firm in question were almost invariably rotten. Then my boy got up and delivered a most telling defence for the poor girl, showing that if she had been in the habit of dealing in the eggs grown on her master's farm, they must necessarily have been fresh. For, ye must understand, that according to their evidence, she made away with them very quickly, leaving them no time at all, at all, to get bad in ; and as it is a known fact that eggs will keep several weeks before they become perceptible, the girl naturally got acquitted of the harrowing accusation, and mi son was complimented upon his able conduct of this somewhat complicated case."

There was a moment's silence whilst she recovered her breath, then she was off again,—

"Did you ever by any chance do any chicken farming?"

"No," replied Percy, hastily, and, thinking to avoid any further stories which, in his

present frame of mind, he could not appreciate, he added, "I am in business."

The old lady's face lit immediately. "Are ye now, really?" she said. "I've been wanting to meet a business man for some time lately, for you must know that I have some shares which I don't know much about, and maybe you'll be able to tell me something about them. The concern is a gold mine, by name the Mount Pisa, and, although I bought the shares two years ago, sure, they've never paid a dividend ever since, and I'm beginning to wonder if they ever will. I bought them on the advice of a young man named Mr John Jones whom I met at the offices of the company one day, when I called to see Mr Slygne (who floated the company, you must know), and, unless I hear something good of the concern soon, it's after Mr John Jones that I'll be coming the next time that I am in London. Now, do you happen to know anything of the Mount Pisa Gold Mine, sir?"

Percy composed his features into a smile of professional courtesy before replying.

"The company you mention," he said, "is, as you have observed, in the hands of Mr Horatio Slygne, and Mr Slygne is one of our

rising financiers. He has devoted his life to company work, and I therefore think that it is only reasonable to expect something quite uncommon from any company which actually has its headquarters at Mr Slygne's own office. Mr Slygne is the managing director of the Mount Pisa Gold Mine, and has himself a large interest at stake in the company. In saying this, I think I have sufficiently indicated what my own private opinion is. At the same time you will, of course, understand that I have no wish to influence you unduly either way in the matter."

For the rest of the journey Percy was treated to an uninterrupted discourse from the old lady, dealing with her children, ancestors and acquaintance. His own part in the conversation was limited to the interjection of a sympathetic *yes* or *no* at the proper moments, a duty which became, after a time, quite mechanical and almost unconscious. Her voice seemed to be more and more soothing as they progressed westward, and had it not been for Bella Slygne's presence, Percy must have infallibly gone asleep. As it was he came to his senses with a perceptible start when the train at last

drew up, and a husky voice in his ear suddenly ejaculated "Igewarter!"

The old lady sprang to her feet, and wishing them a hurried adieu, at once disappeared, whilst Percy and Bella alighted somewhat more slowly.

"And now I must wish you *au revoir*," she exclaimed, turning to him. "No, I sha'n't want you to help me with my luggage, thank you all the same. Do you see a tall and very pompous footman behind me? Yes? That is Uncle Ernest's man, so everything is all right, and by the time you find yourself at Whitleigh Hall I shall have settled the business. Now, go over the bridge, and choose yourself the most able fly horse you can see, and heaven send you patience on the drive, for it will take a long, long time, I'm afraid!"

With that she turned from him, and Percy proceeded to set about following her advice. The virtue of patience, so prettily recommended to him, seemed an easy one at that moment. No drive could be too long, no horse too slow. He was going straight towards her once more, there was no doubt about that. And he wanted time also, time

to recall the conversation in all its details, time to consider his position, to realise that he had been caught up in an unsuspected tide.

Where was it going to lead him?

## CHAPTER VI

### ARRIVAL AT SLEEPY HOLLOW

It is probable that no county in England lies in such tranquillity and peace as the county of Somerset. It is like its own Isle of Avilion—in summer at anyrate—“*where falls not snow, nor rain, nor mist, nor even wind blows loudly.*”

A deep quiet and somnolence lies over the pleasant land. The pastoral people have much of the happy lethargy of their own flocks and herds. The hands of the clock go round slowly to the humming of innumerable summer insects; the outer world may roar and rave, but its fierce and strenuous music beats upon drowsy and unheeding ears. The people have built a crystal barrier of indifference between them and the roar of cities, and against it the turmoil, the fever, and the fret beat in vain.

Percy found his cab. It was an ancient victoria, roomy, faded, and slow. The driver was a lean and sleepy fellow in a faded blue coat, trousers of butcher's linen and a battered straw hat. He seemed to be imbued with the dreamy melancholy of a veritable Don Quixote, and his tired horse was an incarnation of Rosinante as it ambled feebly through the leafy lanes.

How pleasant it was on this summer afternoon! Sweet airs blew from gardens which blazed with flowers. The gentle breezes rustled among the leaves of the sycamore trees, the long lights poured through them and threw a pattern of delicate grey lace-work upon the white and dusty road.

Every now and then Percy saw some mellow homestead with red-roofed out-houses and a cluster of golden hives about the door. Or the slow progress would take him past some great lodge gate of twisted iron between tall pillars topped with great stone balls, or, more rarely, with heraldic griffins with outstretched wings and curved talons. There would be a delightful vista of a long avenue, and at the end, a mile or

more away, a great grey house with towers and battlements. Such a house, the young man thought, he would some day have. When some great *coup* had made him a modern Midas, then he also would enjoy the state and pomp of this ordered and commendable country life.

It was very difficult to believe that Paddington, the City itself, was so few hours away. The great, throbbing heart of London had sounded in his ears only on that morning, he had been an active and eager part of it all. And now he was wrapped round with the immemorial peace of this old garden county, and now he had met a girl.

Yes, what of this girl? Why did his face feel warm when he thought of her? why did his pulse begin to throb in an unwonted movement?

And why were her hands as white as the milk the dairy-maids were bringing home, her eyes like pools of still water with sunbeams irradiating them, her voice like water falling into water?

These, and thoughts like these, passed through his brain like gentle music as he went on his solitary way. For few folk

were abroad upon the quiet roads. Once a splendid carriage and pair drawn by great grey horses, with a liveried footman, passed him at a great rate, as an Atlantic liner passes a tramp steamer.

Two old ladies sat in the carriage, which had a coronet upon its doors. Under their parasols Percy could see that their faces were yellow and their noses hooked. Now *her* face was like cream and roses. Then a plump clergyman passed him upon a staid cob, a clean-shaved, comfortable-looking man, rosy about the gills and well thriven upon the marrow of the ox.

Two pretty farmers' daughters with eggs and butter rolled by in a roomy trap and half smiled at the slim young gentleman in the station cab. And that was all. There was little human incident to distract his thoughts. But as he passed the last milestone before his destination, Percy pulled himself together, as befitted the commissioner of Mr Horatio Slygne, and forced his vagrant fancies into a more mundane channel. Whitleigh was near.

No one had ever ventured to accuse Whitleigh of being up-to-date; such an accusation

would have been absurd on the face of it, since Whitleigh scorned that turmoil which men call progress, electing rather to live to-day as it had lived yesterday.

The occupation of the inhabitants was agriculture, and their drink the juice of the apple. This, a beverage that makes for content, would seem to have been coupled with the ploughshare by a kind Providence, in order that mortal eyes might not recognise all the limitations of the latter implement. The toilers of Whitleigh, at least, appeared to take this view of the case, if one might judge from their attitude towards the cider-keg. Should you pass the low wall of the "Sphere Inn" upon any day of the week, a possee of Whitleans was certain to be collected there, considering the weather's possibilities—and their diurnal mugs of cider. When the skies looked threatening and the cider was good, they would remain patiently at the "Sphere" to watch for rain. When the skies were bright and the cider very good, they would remain, with equal patience, to make certain of the elements before commencing work. That low wall bounded the oasis of their lives.

It was at the "Sphere" that Percy drew up this evening. Gathering that the "Sphere Inn" was a social institution of the place, he decided to take a bedroom there, certify himself about the land question, and then proceed to the Hall and interview Mr Ernest Slygne about his business. He did not take these precautions because he mistrusted his fair coadjutor, but rather from his knowledge of her father. Of course, Miss Slygne might arrange the business for him as she had promised, but, on the other hand, she might not, and in either case his primary duty was to discover what price per acre land in mid-Somerset was actually sold for.

It was not without some misgivings that he walked up the long drive leading to Whitleigh Hall upon this eventful evening. For, besides the charming picture of Bella Slygne, there also rose in his mind the figure of an irate "Uncle Ernest," who seemed to ask unanswerable questions and threaten fearful things. On setting out from the "Sphere," Percy had been quite hopeful as to the result of his business; by the time he reached Ernest Slygne's front door he considered the issue more than doubtful.

It was a beautiful and mellow spot, this country mansion to which he had come. He looked over a broad and level lawn, which the care of centuries had smoothed and rolled to a delicious level and greenness. Beyond was a wide and irregular avenue, bordered by elms grown to a stately maturity, and further still was an unbroken piece of wide upland, tree studded, with old farms nestling here and there, dignified, ancient, *English*. The house was Tudor, grey, mullioned and covered with dark, shining ivy, the leaves of which in their rich lustre seemed as if they had been cunningly enamelled or japanned.

Over the great doorway was carved the motto of the Slynnes. Percy knew it was the family motto because, once or twice, notes had come to the office from Mr Slynne's West End house to say that he would not be in the City that day.

*"Esse quam videri!"*

"To be rather than to seem!" Well, that might be the legend of the family in the past, might still be applicable to this old mansion and the dwellers there, but it was oddly incongruous in Burdett Street! He hadn't

even thought of it before. The humour of such a legend on Mr Horatio Slygne's newspaper had not struck him. But here, he began to realise it, something odd was come to his point of view. The City didn't seem quite the happy and glorious hunting-ground that it usually did to him.

"To be rather than to seem!" Percy thought of the Mount Pisa Gold Mine, the Wild West Oil Corporation, the Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate, and, as the same pompous footman that he had seen at the station opened the huge oak door, Percy blushed.

He crossed a large hall with a wide stairway leading up to a gallery which ran round it. Suits of armour stood round the panelled walls, and some tattered banners hung from them here and there.

Percy was shown into the study, a long, low room, panelled in white and with Jacobean carving on the pillars of the bookshelves and the supports of the high mantelshelf.

Here, for five minutes or so, the young man waited the arrival of Mr Ernest Slygne.

Mr Ernest Slygne entered the room briskly. He was a large man; Percy could not help noticing that. His head was covered with

thick, brown hair, and his clean-shaven face wore an expression of great good temper. He was not very like Mr Horatio Slygne, except that his eye shone with the same peculiar twinkle, which led some people to describe the financier as "good-natured." Percy, however, knowing the breed as he did, was not in the least reassured by that twinkle.

They sat down opposite one another, and Mr Slygne proceeded to read the letter of introduction which Percy had handed to him. Then, dropping the note upon the table, he bent forward and said,—

"So you've come down from my brother to obtain a few acres of ground from me at a price to be arranged between us?"

Percy bowed.

"Hum! It is not every day that one gets the chance of selling land to so wealthy a man as my brother, eh?"

"That is the view which Mr Horatio Slygne seemed to think you might take," answered Percy.

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, and is it not a very natural and proper view to take, eh?"

Percy smiled languidly.

"I suppose it is natural," he admitted.

"But not proper, you mean to say?"

"Mr Horatio Slygne does not think so."

"Indeed. And what do you think?"

"I permit myself no thoughts in the matter, sir. I am here solely as your brother's agent."

"Ha, ha! That's right enough; yes, certainly, that's very right. But now, as to terms; what have you got to say there?"

"Mr Horatio Slygne, upon whose behalf I am acting," replied Percy, suavely, "has instructed me to lay particular stress upon the fact that he could not entertain the idea of paying a heavier price than that which rules in the country at present."

Ernest Slygne smiled very broadly.

"Horatio's come down in the world then, has he? Business bad, eh?"

"Money is very 'dear' just now, sir, and Mr Slygne happens to have a good deal of capital tied up, one way or another. Consequently, although his financial position is sound enough, he cannot, for the moment, command sufficient ready money to warrant his paying fancy prices for anything."

There was something in this idea which

seemed to tickle Ernest Slygne vastly, and several moments elapsed before he spoke again.

“But how are you to know whether the price I ask is high or low?” said he. “What do you know about land near here, I should like to know? You may know the price of Mount Pisas—ha, ha, ha,—but the price of land at Whitleigh—eh?—eh?”

Percy gazed into space abstractedly. His glance was one of patience and at the same time almost of reproach.

He answered Mr Ernest Slygne with great distinctness.

“Of course,” said he, “it is not in the nature of things that I should know as much about the value of land in Somerset as you do. But, in regard to your price, I do happen to know something. You see I have been in this county now for several hours, and during that time I have stopped at one village inn. There I have had the pleasure of meeting one, Bill Crowse, who lived—and still lives—at Whitleigh, and who is a tenant of yours. I naturally discovered something about the price of land round here. And any further knowledge which I required

was supplied to me, very shortly after my arrival at the "Sphere Inn" by several other people whom I interviewed. Should you, therefore, demand a higher price from Mr Horatio Slygne than you would from, say—Farmer Layne or old Bill Crowse—I shall be compelled to ask you to reconsider this question before we can possibly come to terms."

To Percy's surprise, when he ceased speaking, Ernest Slygne leant back in his chair and burst out laughing.

"Now, that's good," he said, slapping his knee. "Damme, that's very good. Upon my soul, Mr Thawne, you're a worthy pupil of Horatio's, hang me, if you ain't! Why, you can't be more than eight-and-twenty, are you?"

Percy shook his head.

"No! By Jove, I wonder what you'll be at thirty!"

There ensued a few moments' silence; the thought of Percy at the age of thirty evidently impressed Mr Ernest Slygne, for he regarded the young man pensively for some moments. Then he began to speak again, smiling as he did so.

"Yes, I think you'll do credit to my brother's training, Mr Thawne; but as for the present case, well, it's settled you must know. Bless you, Bella and I fixed it all up half an hour ago, and I am going to sell my brother a couple of fields at a price which shall be satisfactory to all concerned. You shall, in fact, have them for the ordinary market price in this district, and if that won't suit you, I don't know what will, eh?"

"I need scarcely say that what you suggest will be perfectly satisfactory to Mr Horatio Slygne, and I must thank you for the sporting way in which you have met me," answered Percy, with a smile.

"Not a bit of it," returned Mr Slygne. "You've got to thank my niece, Bella, for this, not me. Why, you'd have probably gone away with a flea in your ear, had you come down here alone and tried to hustle me into such a bargain. I should have refused to sell you any land at all, very likely. But when it comes to Bella—ah, there you have me, I admit. Bella is irresistible. Well, anyhow, we've done with business now, so there's an end of it. Where is your portmanteau, eh? Of course you're going to stay the night, after

having come all this distance? What! left your bag at the "Sphere"? You seem precious fond of these country inns, young man. However, we'll soon have it fetched round from there, and, meanwhile, there's just time for a cigarette before we get ready for dinner. Have no dress clothes with you? What does that matter? 'The dinner will be just the same, dress or no dress."

He rang t' a bell, and gave orders for Percy's bag to be fetched, and th · while they waited, he and Percy discussed the crops, and the rainfall, and the prospects of the partridge season, until presently a gong sounded, and they both went upstairs to get ready.

The stars in their courses were still fighting for the secretary.

## CHAPTER VII

### QUICK WORK

DINNER was a delightful meal in every way. The big dining-room, which was, in fact, known as the "banqueting-hall," was rarely used, and the party sat at a round table in a small, low-ceilinged apartment which opened on to the terrace.

The evening sunlight poured into the place, making the candles in their heavy silver holders seem wan and pale. Percy was introduced to Mrs Slygne, a charming old lady with an abundance of snow-white hair. She was very gentle and sympathetic and made the young man feel at home immediately.

And how different this atmosphere was from that of London! Business, stocks, shares, companies were all unknown to these delightful people. Such things did not interest them and were not mentioned at all.

Instead, Percy found himself telling of his school and Oxford days, his success at racquets and his old love of sport, which seemed now to be almost dead within him, or banished by the exigencies of his life in town.

He saw that he was interesting his hosts and their niece, that they regarded him as one of themselves. Mr Slygne of London, on the other hand, while realising that Percy was a gentleman and of decent birth, had never made any social advances to him outside the office.

There were trout caught locally, there was a pair of leverets shot on the estate, the vegetables came from Mr Slygne's gardens, the bread was baked in his own kitchens. It was a meal which had been produced entirely on the land of its host, as he told Percy, and it had a peculiar charm which was in thorough keeping with the sense of *bien-être* that the young man felt.

And Pol Roger on ice is certainly a tonic beverage, which will banish melancholy as few others can do.

If Bella Slygne had looked pretty in her travelling dress, Percy thought her radiantly

lovely now. She wore black, her corsage was framed in gauzy chiffon, from which her white and slender neck gleamed like a tower of ivory.

It was obvious that the old couple idolised their niece. Their admiring glance waited on her every movement. Childless themselves, Bella filled the place of a daughter to them. Every sentence that fell from her lips was received with eager interest. Her mildest jests excited inordinate laughter.

It was pleasant to see how Miss Slygne received all this worship. Percy watched her loving smiles as she talked to the old lady, her bright interest in all her uncle's country news. The analytic habit was still strong within him. Generally, as he had found on his way through life, the more he analysed and dissected his fellow-creatures the less worthy he found them. As Tom Thurnall said of his chemicals, "the more one analyses them the worse they smell!"

But here and now he was quick to mark each favourable sign, each indication of perfection. By the time of dessert Percy Thawne knew that he had found the paragon of girls at last.

The ladies went away, and the butler brought in coffee in odd little silver cups, massive and of a favourite design in the Caroline period.

Percy leant back in his chair. An excellent cigar was in his mouth, his whole physical being had been flattered into a moment of intense ease by the pleasant meal and kindly talk.

He stretched out his legs under the table and knew that everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Old Mr Slygne made most of the conversation and was very well content to do so. If a man of a certain age may not hold forth a little over his port, then, indeed, he is hardly treated. His opinion of his young guest, favourable from the first, rose immensely as he noticed the grave attention and interest with which his remarks were received.

Nowadays, when the manners of youth are by no means what our grandfathers tell us they once were, an old gentleman who receives an unaccustomed deference is naturally pleased.

And it was not for nothing that Percy Thawne had spent some months learning the

*suaviter in modo* at the Burdett Street Company factory. Tact was the greater part of the stock-in-trade to be found there, and he was tactful in much less easy and pleasant circumstances than this.

But his thoughts were very far away from the hunting and shooting stories of his past which appeared to give him so much pleasure. This night he felt that he was walking on air among rosy-bosomed clouds. His mind always worked rapidly; to-night it was rushing into the future at tremendous speed. Visions of a very glorious order indeed occupied his mind.

Some may smile, others sneer, a few will appreciate and understand the swift blood of youth. Be this as it may, Percy had already quite determined to marry Miss Bella Slygne!

At last the old gentleman proposed an adjournment. The two men went into the terrace drawing-room, a room furnished in delicate blues and greys. Miss Slygne was seated at the piano, trifling with the notes. She rose when Percy and her uncle entered.

"Mr Thawne," said Mrs Slygne, in a delicate and refined voice, which her friends said always suggested the clinking of porce-

lain cups one against the other, "Mr Thawne, you have not yet seen the gardens. And as you say you must get back to town to-morrow—though it seems a pity that you should go so soon—you won't have time to see them unless you do so to-night. We are very proud of the gardens, you know, and you ought not to miss them. Bella darling, suppose you take Mr Thawne round."

The old gentleman, who generally took a short nap after dinner, composed himself to it in a brocaded chair. Mrs Slygne took up the *Spectator*, and Percy stepped out into the warm night with his guide.

It was one of those serene and perfect summer evenings that are rare, even in England. A huge, honey-coloured moon hung low in the sky and poured sheets of silver along the avenues and terraces. In a distant wood a nightingale was singing, and the sound came over the velvet lawns like the sound of fairy flutes.

The heavy air was scented with innumerable blooms that give up their perfume to welcome the night. Now and then a cockchafer boomed athwart their faces as they strolled along, the sudden organ-note, re-

ceding as suddenly, being almost startling in the silence of the beautiful night.

Again the fates seemed at work upon the destiny of this fortunate young man. Here was a night for lovers, a night stolen straight from the mysterious kingdom of Romance—that kingdom where all the inhabitants are lovers and all nights scented, languorous, and heart-hallowing.

“Oh, how beautiful it is!” Bella said at length very gently, and with a kind of awe in her voice.

Percy thought the serious note in her was inexpressibly sweet.

“If it would only last!” he said. Then there was a silence again. Both the young people were unconscious of banality. Each believed the other had said something poetic and profound. Percy thought of Rosalind or Juliet, she of Romeo or young Orlando in the magic woodland court.

Such is the influence of the “best-beloved night!”

But a natural caution, which is implanted in the heart of all nice maidens when a man's voice falls a full tone and she is alone with him in the night, came Bella. She pouted.

"You men are never contented," she said. "Even upon such a night as this you'll be thinking of the high noon. How horrible! The mere thought of the blazing, yellow sun seems vulgar and wrong to-night."

"No," Percy said, "I am thinking of the high noon, but not in the way you mean. I'm dreading it."

"Well, then, why not make the most of the present?"

He looked down at her where she stood, with the moonbeams on her eyes and hair.

"How I long to!" he whispered.

She tilted up her chin, and looked at him.

"Talking of to-morrow is not making the best of to-day," she said.

"Let to-morrow go hang," he answered. "One moment like this is worth a thousand to-morrows. Don't you think so?"

"Look at the moon!" exclaimed Bella, suddenly. "How beautifully it shows up the leaves of that old oak tree."

He bent his head to see where she was pointing, and then somehow a golden curl was tickling his cheek.

"Don't you admire the moon when it is between branches like that, Miss Slygne?"

"Oh yes, it is sweet—"

"And is not a moment's life in this moonlight worth years of the dull old sunshine?"

"Perhaps."

"Miss Slygne."

"Yes."

"I am the secretary of three companies. In a year or two—"

"A glow-worm! A glow-worm!" cried Blla. "Is it not like some midget bicycle lamp in the grass?"

"Exactly. You are fond of glow-worms?"

"Very. Aren't you?"

"No; I hate them."

"Why?"

"Because they are always in the way."

"I am afraid you do not possess a sympathetic nature if you dislike glow-worms," she remarked sadly. "I am disappointed in you."

"Oh, please, don't say that."

"But I am."

"No, no; you are only joking, Miss Slygne. Do not say horrid things to me here. It is probably the last time that we shall meet."

"What does it matter?"

"Nothing—to you."

"And you?"

"More than anything."

"Why?"

"Come nearer and I will tell you."

"No. Tell me while I stand here."

"I can't; my enemy would hear me."

"Your enemy? Who is your enemy?"

"The glow-worm, of course."

"Bother the glow-worm."

"I thought you loved him?"

"So I do, but I want you to tell me—"

"What?"

"How should I know?"

"Come nearer, and I will tell you."

She took one step in his direction.

"Nearer! I can't tell you so. The bats are out, and the nightingales are beginning to sing, and the moon is looking in at us through those leaves overhead—and altogether you must be near me before I can tell you, Miss Slygne!"

"Yes."

"May I say Bella? The other is so long, and Bella is such a lovely name. Woul' you mind if I said Bella?"

"I couldn't tell until I heard you say it."

"Bella."

"Yes."

"Do I say it nicely?"

"I think it seems nice."

"Oh Bella!"

"Well?"

"I am the secretary of three companies—"

She pushed his arms back, and stopped her ears with her fingers.

"Oh, what do I care for your wretched companies?" she cried impatiently. "Don't be so proud of your position. Do you think I came nearer to be told about my father's companies? I will have them taken away from you if you mention them to me again!"

Percy looked comically distressed.

"I was going to tell you something else as well," he pleaded.

"Then tell me quick, so that I shall forget!"

"I will!"

He made one little movement, and had gathered her to him.

"Bella! Bella! dearest! I can't think that this is to be our parting, when I love you so. How I love you—love you—love you! And, darling, if you will try and love me but a little bit too, not all the world shall take us apart again. Say that we shall not part—"

say you will try and love me—say you do not despise or misunderstand me—say one word, and together we can laugh at the whole world if it tries to part us. Bella, what can you say to me, dearest?"

The chin needed no tilting this time. It was already at an angle. The lips, so sweet and smiling, moved bewitchingly,

"I think," she whispered, "that you are . . . a perfect darling. . . . But . . ."

"But what, love?"

"But I shall expect you to like glow-worms in future!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### A CONVERSATION OF EXTREME MOMENT

To turn aside from the roar of Cornhill into the gloom of Burdett Street, after the experience of the night before, was distressing, and struck a certain chill to the heart.

As Percy walked towards the offices, the day after his visit to Whitleigh, life seemed very commonplace and dull. Romance had gone from it, he thought, and the sights and noises of London were alike hard and unsympathetic and alien to his mood. But he was not of a gloomy temperament. He crushed his melancholy by the thought that, harsh and ugly as his surroundings were, it was here that the key which would unlock the door to happiness and to Bella must be found.

He ascended the dark stairway and found that Mr Slygne was closeted in his own room with Professor Pentique.

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The clerk told him that the Professor had been in Burdett Street all day and that, though numerous callers had been, Mr Slygne would see none of them. "There's something big on," said the young man, knowingly, and with an after-sigh of envy as he realised how little difference the biggest *coup* of Burdett Street would ever make to his own meagre salary of thirty shillings a week. Percy went in to his chief.

The room certainly bore the impression of an important confabulation. Piles of papers covered the table; plans, drawings, and sheets of figures lay upon the chairs. Both Mr Slygne and Professor Pentique looked pale and tired. Their faces were set in that rigidity that stern and unremitting application to one thought gives. There was even a suppressed excitement in their manner, Percy imagined, as he entered.

He reported the satisfactory result of his business and was only commended. But he saw that the financier was very little interested in the land question at that moment. His remarks were perfunctory and his thoughts were obviously elsewhere.

"Well, then, that is all right, Thawne," he

concluded. "Give me the title-deeds when my solicitor sends them to you and I will put them in the safe. That is all, I think. Hope you enjoyed the little excursion. See that I am not disturbed again, will you?"

Percy went away to his room. Again the fascination of City life began to grip him. What were these two doing or concocting? He would have given almost anything to know. He had not the remotest idea of the nature of the business that was occupying Slygne's attention. But that it was altogether exceptional, and out of the common way, he was well aware. Slygne was by no means the kind of man to waste six hours a day upon any financial scheme which would not yield a very handsome return for his pains. "He's discovered some new El Dorado," he thought. "Some quite unexploited source of wealth. Or at least he's discovered the key to El Dorado. Everyone knows that El Dorado has changed its name. It is called the 'British Public' now!"

Then he remembered that he was due that evening to dine with the odd journalist he had discovered in the Fleet Street bar. By this time Mr John Blaber must have had

his interview with Slygne, and probably the financier's directions would very considerably brighten the present obscurity. It was certainly a great stroke of luck to meet the hidden genius who wrote the prospectuses. Percy quite realised the value of the knowledge. Slygne had always jealously preserved the secret of his valuable discovery from everyone. It was a tremendous advantage to know the truth, and especially to know it without Mr Slygne suspecting his knowledge. It strengthened the secretary's hand.

For he saw very clearly that the future would of necessity be somewhat of a contest between himself and Slygne. He had no illusions about his chief, and was perfectly aware that he could only expect to do well by him by the exercise of constant vigilance and cunning. It was diamond cut diamond all through.

He smiled as he realised how strong his hand already seemed to be becoming. And as he thought of Bella, of the velvety, scented lawn in the moonlight, he smiled again, though this time it was with a certain anxiety.

But *what* was going on? That was the

immediate and all-important question. What was the new company to sell or exploit or pretend to sell and exploit?

It could not be gold. Gold in England had been tried once or twice. A gentleman, who had his offices only a few yards down Burdett Street, had made a very comfortable little thing out of gold in Cornwall. He had put it there himself originally.

But Percy knew that the "gold in England" story no longer received any credence by the public. It was quite played out as a workable scheme. Oil? No, it could not be oil either. Oil in Somerset was rather too much. His thoughts turned to radium. There might be something in that, perhaps, though it was difficult to know exactly what use radium was as a marketable thing. Still, there was the discovery that the precious and mysterious substance had been found in the waters of Bath. There was a possibility of radium. And, to be sure, it might be some magnificent farming scheme. Yet, in that case, why had he not been commissioned to procure more land? Twenty acres for an agricultural company! No, it was not that. Slygne's transactions were

A CONVERSATION OF MOMENT 123

ever large and splendid, conducted on a broad and princely scale.

And with these distracting thoughts, which banished even love from the young man's brain for a time, the latter part of the afternoon passed slowly away. And, however much he racked his brains to account for that solemn council, which was going on upstairs, he was quite unable to do so.

At about five — indeed the hour was actually striking from the clock of the Royal Exchange, and all the city churches were following suit—there was a movement of feet and the shutting of a door overhead.

Then Pentique came downstairs, followed by Slygne. The latter looked into Percy's room on his way out.

"I shall not be back to-day," he said, "as Professor Pentique is coming home to dine with me. Please have his office rung up, and tell them not to expect him back either. Good-night."

Percy himself went to deliver the telephone message. He was feeling restless.

"Are you there?"

A foreign voice from the other end announced itself as present.

"Professor Pentique will not be in the City again to-day. He has gone home with our Mr Slygne."

"Very good, sir. May I ask if you are Mr Thawne?"

"I am."

"Are you very busy at the present time?"

"No, not if there is anything which I can do for you."

"Well, you say that Mr Slygne and Professor Pentique have left the City? If you are sure they will not return again this evening, I should like to come round and see you on a matter of business. I am Herr Blachen, Professor Pentique's amanuensis."

"Come round, by all means, sir; and you may rely upon our interview being uninterrupted."

"Good! I will be with you in three minutes."

It was a quarter-past five when Herr Blachen entered Percy's room. He was a young German, with greasy, black hair, a long nose, and sharp, bright eyes. His movements were feline, and something about his manner of looking round him also recalled the domestic pet. He greeted Percy cordially

with a shake of the hand, and then took the seat proffered him.

"I have wished much to make your acquaintance, Mr Thawne," he began, "but business has always prevented me from it. For it seems to me that you and I should, in the future, get to know each other very well. How say you?"

"That is the very idea which has lately occurred to me," replied Percy, with great candour, and wondering what on earth his new friend meant.

Herr Blachen seemed pleased, for he began to chuckle quietly.

"The Professor and your Mr Slygne," he continued, "are working together in this business. They are (how say you?) glove hand in, is it not?"

Percy nodded.

"They are glove hand in," repeated the German.

Blachen drew his chair nearer to Percy's.

"There is money in this affair," he whispered. "Piles and piles of money, but only for those who know all things. Mr Slygne and Professor Pentique know all

things. They work together, and so make much wealth continually. Is it not so?"

"Yes, that is right."

"Well, then—?"

Blachen paused, and leaning forward, stared hard into Percy's face. The secretary of the Mount Pisa returned his gaze with Sphinx-like insistence. As he knew nothing whatever about the matter under discussion, this was, on the whole, his safest plan.

"Well?" repeated Blachen, presently.

Percy allowed his features slowly to relax into a smile of unutterable cunning.

"Well," he answered, "is that all you have to say?"

Blachen sat up very straight in his chair.

"Do you not trust me, Mr Thawne?" he asked reproachfully.

"Trust you? My dear fellow!" exclaimed Percy. "You must not misinterpret my motives; but we public secretaries have to be so extremely cautious that really—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Blachen, "with the outside public certainly; but between friends. Can we not be friends, Mr Thawne?"

"I hope so, Herr Blachen."

There was another pause, whilst the battle of the eyes told Percy that he was still holding his own.

"I have already said that Mr Slygne and Professor Pentique are glove hand in together," resumed the German, presently. "Does not this suggest anything to your mind, Mr Thawne?"

"It suggests a good deal to my mind, Herr Blachen."

"And you are willing to entertain the idea?"

"Perfectly willing," replied Percy.

"Can I count on you?" demanded Blachen, rather excited.

"As implicitly as I count on you," returned Percy, warming to his work.

"Then it is done!" exclaimed Blachen, putting out his hand.

Percy rose solemnly.

"It is done!" said he.

They shook hands with fervour, and sat down again.

"Good," murmured Blachen, rubbing his hands together. "We, also, then, work together. We also make much money; and

when the smash comes, we also retire with great wealth."

Percy laughed. Then, feeling that diplomatic tact required that he should say something, he spoke.

"It is the biggest thing in companies that we have ever been connected with," he observed.

"Ach! so I should think. Is not the capital to be two million pounds?"

"I understand that it is," said Percy, who had never heard a word about the matter before.

"And you will be the secretary, will you not?"

Percy, smiling, laid one finger on his lips.

The action amused Blachen.

"Oh, your caution, Mr Thawne!" said he. "But there is no need for it here. Was not Professor Pentique already in the room when Mr Slygne promised you the secretaryship? And have you not just returned from getting land for the earth-raisers?"

"Yes—for the earth-raisers," murmured Percy, his heart leaping and beginning to beat furiously at the word. It was a momentous occasion! The secret was about

to be solved. On all sides the powers were pouring knowledge into his hands.

"Yes; for the earth-raisers," he repeated mechanically.

"Has Mr Slygne explained the process to you?" Blachen inquired, bending forward again.

"He mentioned something of it the other day," said Percy, coolly, "but I could not quite follow his explanation. These scientific processes, you know—" Here he broke off and winked, judging that a wink would not be altogether misplaced at this point. Nor was he wrong, for Blachen began laughing at once.

"I have the diagrams here," said Blachen, tapping his coat pocket. "And I will show you them some time, if you like."

"Yes, do," assented Percy. Then, curbing a mad curiosity, he added: "But first let us settle how we are to work together. What is your suggestion?"

"Ach, that is simple," replied his companion. "When the Company is floated you and I buy many shares. Then you are appointed secretary, and I go out with Professor Pentique. You watch all things

here in England: I tell you how all things go on the other side. Then when the smash-up (you say smash-up in English?—good)—when the smash-up is coming I advise you, we sell our shares, and are rich always. How say you?"

"I say good business!" Percy replied.

Blachen laughed uproariously. Percy saw that the fellow was getting extremely excited. His vulgar hilarity was offensive to the secretary, though he was far too clever to show it. He noticed also that Blachen became more and more German as he went on, occasionally breaking out into guttural exclamations in his mother tongue.

"Good business!" he cried. "Gutes Geschäft! Na, in der that ein gutes Geschäft! It will indeed be very good business when the article is publish. Him will do all the preliminary trick. Ist es nicht so?"

"I am sure the article will do everything you think," Percy answered with serene assurance. "You see we leave very little to chance in Burdett Street."

"Did you write the article then?" Blachen asked, with a congratulatory smile.

"Vortrefflich! und so gut geschrieben!" (Splendid! and so well written!) German you do not know?"

"Well, I should not quite like to say that," Percy answered. "That would be an admission, wouldn't it? And I never make admissions. But still—well—ah!"

Blachen nodded repeatedly.

"Ya, these financiers they take all the honour as well as the money diese Kapitalisten!"

"Every bit of it!" Percy assented.

"But der article he is really splendid," Blachen continued. "De can be no doubt of that, mein guter freund und partner. I have it also with me."

He pulled a manuscript from his pocket. "Soh!" he cried.

"I wish you'd let me glance through it again," said Percy, carelessly lighting a cigarette. "I have a sort of idea that Slygne has toned it down slightly."

Blachen handed him the paper.

Some folk believe in an obscure science which is known as psychometry. If a medium is handed an article of clothing, a glove or shoe, or the handwriting of an

absent person, it is claimed that the medium can in many cases tell the nature and even the name of the distant owner.

Percy was no psychometrist, had indeed never heard of that science, but as he took up the paper a sure instinct told him from whose hand it came. He had an absolute conviction, which he would have betted on—and Percy was a cautious youth—that this manuscript had been produced by his friend of the Cheshire Cheese. He had never seen that gentleman's handwriting, but he could, he thought, recognise it now. There was something scholarly and yet dissolute in the penmanship.

His hand trembled a little as he took the paper. His excitement was intense, though Blachen did not in any way notice it.

Then, mechanically assuming his limited-liability smile, Percy began to read the manuscript.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PRELIMINARY ARTICLE

PERCY read as follows :—

#### AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY

#### ALLEGED GREATEST SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT IN THE WORLD'S HISTORY.

The history of science in late years is one continuous record of marvel. Time and space have been almost annihilated and the world of to-day is a changed place. The conditions under which the modern man and woman live are utterly different from those of even sixty years ago. The wildest dreams of Tesla, Marconi and Edison have come true, and to-day there is a general attitude toward science which expects, and refuses to be startled by, anything, however marvellous.

Even as this article is written the news of

the world is rushing through the air to the great liners which plough the Atlantic waves. Thought itself has become fluid and travels through ether. When we contemplate this latest wonder of Science we are inclined to believe that her last and most remarkable word has been spoken. But now news has come of so startling and stupendous a character that the brain reels, the mind shrinks appalled from the contemplation of it.

The victory over Nature of which this article is to tell is certainly the greatest that has ever taken place in the whole history of the world.

A great majority of English people, certainly all of those who have received an education worthy of the name, have heard of what is spoken of as "THE LOST CONTINENT." The ordinary idea of the ordinary man is vague enough on this point. He remembers an ancient and classical story of a vast country which is now submerged beneath the waves of the ocean. Some there are who will remember that the ancients gave the name "ATLANTIS" to this prehistoric land, and that the great sea

which stretches from the rocky coasts of IRELAND to the crowded harbours of NEW YORK is said to cover it.

According to the best classical scholars we learn that the ancient tradition tells of a great island west of the Pillars of Hercules in the ocean, opposite Mount Atlas. This lost land possessed a numerous population, and was adorned with every beauty. Its powerful princes were said to have invaded Africa and Europe, only, however, to be defeated by the Athenians and their allies. Its inhabitants afterwards became wicked and impious, and the island was in consequence swallowed up in a day and a night. This legend, it will be remembered, is given by Plato in the *Timaeus*, and is said to have been related to Solon by the Egyptian priests. The Canary Islands, or the Azores, which were possibly visited by the Phœnicians, may have given rise to the legend; but some modern writers regard it as indicative of a vague belief in antiquity in the existence of the Western Hemisphere.

So much for myth and legend. We moderns are unlikely to believe that an offended deity of the ancient world swallowed

up a fair and flourishing country in the waves. But the tradition which has so long existed may very well have some foundation in fact. Modern geographers and geologists have written a history of Nature's stupendous operations at those dim and unthinkable times, æons of ages back, when no conscious life moved upon the planet, and from these researches the world has learnt that the surface of the globe is continually altering. Plains have become mountains, mountains have been levelled to plains by the hand of Time. Seas cover the sites of ancient countries, land has suddenly made its appearance in the sea.

Do we not know that in the warm southern oceans the tiny coral insects are building up to-day land that in future ages will be habitable and fertile! Indeed, the scientists have given, for all to read, circumstantial evidence bearing upon the past history of the earth which is furnished, without possibility of mistake, with no chance of error as to its chief features, by the stratified rocks. THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY has stated that, "It results from the simplest methods of interpretation, that leaving out of view

certain patches of metamorphosed rocks, and certain volcanic products, all that is now dry land has once been at the bottom of the waters. It is perfectly certain that, at a comparatively recent period of the world's history—the Cretaceous epoch—none of the great physical features which at present mark the surface of the globe existed. It is certain that the Rocky Mountains were not. It is certain that the Himalaya Mountains were not. It is certain that the Alps and Pyrenees had no existence.”

The human mind has thus grown accustomed to know that vast forces of upheaval have ever been at work on the structure of the world, and equally vast forces of submergence.

This being so, it will be readily seen that the old Greek legend of ATLANTIS, OR THE LOST CONTINENT, had in all probability a basis in strict geological fact and was quite possible without the supernatural agency that the old historians imputed to it.

This much being conceded, we may allow the possibility of the story of a great continent which lay where now the stern waters

of the Atlantic toss unceasingly and which was submerged beneath them by a terrible convulsion of Nature.

Some years ago the possibility presented itself to that distinguished scientist, Professor Pentique, whose discoveries are now famous and the effects world-wide.

The hypothesis fascinated the scientist. He began a series of costly and exhaustive experiments to determine, if possible, the truth of the ancient story.

The science of oceanography and the distribution of depths in the ocean was very vaguely known so long as the question was merely one of scientific curiosity, although ingenious apparatus for ascertaining the depth had been devised by Robert Hooke and Stephen Hales in the seventeenth century, and the use of the lead in shallow water early became habitual with sailors. When the question of laying submarine telegraph cables gave practical importance to a knowledge of the form and temperature of the sea-bed about 1855, the methods of deep-sea sounding and temperature taking were rapidly improved, and scientific oceanography may be said to date from that period.

The marvellous exploits of H.M.S. *Challenger* and the record of her deep-sea soundings are still fresh in the public memory. The observations of Professor Pentique—which for a reason to be presently explained have not as yet been published—have taken up the work of the *Challenger* where that left off. The great task which Professor Pentique set himself was to discover if the LOST CONTINENT did in fact and truth exist at some remote period of the world's history. His efforts were crowned with success. Six years ago the scientist satisfactorily proved the truth of the ancient legend. *He has discovered without a shadow of a doubt that ATLANTIS actually existed.* The record of the soundings and experiments cannot be published within the limits of this article. They are too comprehensive and also too technical for the general reader. Suffice it to say that at a certain part of the Atlantic the soundings showed a general shoaling of the ocean, indicating the approach to a continent. By collecting and analysing all samples of deep-sea deposits which had been secured the Professor discovered a significant and remarkable symmetry in their

arrangement. The globigerina ooze, and in deeper waters the red clay, carpeting the northern part of the areas investigated, merged on the southward into a great ring of diatom ooze, which gives place in turn to a terrigenous blue mud. The fine rock particles of which the blue mud is composed are such as occur in all submerged volcanic islands, and the further discovery of large blocks of sandstone proved the existence of sedimentary rocks within the area also. But space will not allow us to go into these elaborate scientific details. It is enough to say that when the existence of the submerged land was proved beyond a doubt Professor Pentique began to employ his wonderful invention of a deep-sea camera. This machine can take photographs beneath the water to at least a mile of depth. At that depth the pressure of the water is about a ton and a half to the square inch. The camera is made of toughened steel, and the light which makes it possible for the sensitive films to record what the lens may show is a glass bulb of enormous thickness, to which a strong electric current is supplied from the ship above, travelling through the securing wire. At a depth of half a mile

Professor Pentique has actually succeeded in taking photographs of remains which seem to be those of an ancient stronghold or castle, probably built as a watch-tower or fort upon the top of a submerged mountain.

Six years ago these experiments were concluded. "Why then," it will be asked, "has the world now heard of them for the first time? Is it fair, nay more, is it moral for any single man to withhold from Society the result of such labours. Is there any justification for Professor Pentique's long silence upon a subject so fraught with scientific and antiquarian interest, so eloquent with the poetry of the past?"

We are about to supply the answer to all such questions. They will never be asked again. We reply that there is a reason so weighty and tremendous for the delay that when once it has been told no single voice will be raised in blame.

And before making an announcement which we may safely say is the most sensational announcement ever made in a public print since newspapers began, we pause for a single moment. The nature of our communication is such that it will invite an

immediate and natural incredulity. We ask our readers to do nothing more than keep an open mind till we have said our say.

Let us, however, remind them that a few years ago the feats of the modern scientist would have seemed nothing short of miracles. To have told our grandfathers that their grandsons and great-grandsons would travel more than a mile a minute, would make ships of iron float and build tunnels under rivers, pierce their way beneath mountain ranges, or climb their sides in carriages weighing tons, make boats which would swim like fishes beneath the surface of the water, and even conquer the air itself and sail in navigable balloons from place to place, would have been to upset all their ideas of the limits of human possibility and to gain for oneself nothing but the reputation for insanity. Yet all this and much more has been done, so let no one say as yet that Professor Pentique cannot do what he proposes to do, and what indeed on a smaller scale he has already done.

When this giant of science had finally placed the existence of **THE LOST CONTINENT** beyond all doubt he at first

resolved to publish his discovery without delay.

Then it was that his stupendous idea came to him. "How sad a thing for the world it is"—thus, or in some such way his thoughts ran—"that this ancient continent with all its wondrous civilisation, its fertility, its richness in metal"—for enormous loads of the most valuable metals have been discovered in Atlantis—"should be forever lost to mankind! Would that I could wave an enchanter's wand and bid the LOST CONTINENT rise out of the sea once more to confer an inestimable benefit upon mankind."

And for weeks this thought was ever present in the Professor's brain. At last one day a sudden scientific fact, an obscure fact which occurs time after time in all electrical researches, came to the scientist. It was a germ, a small thing, but it set his whole frame shaking as he realised what it *might* really mean. Faintly, dimly, but as the days went on with more and more certainty, the superhuman promises of this germ idea grew clearer. At last a certain theory was perfected.

*Theoretically it was proved possible to*

*raise sunken or submerged land above the sea level once more, or to convert a plain to upland!*

The theory seemed perfect. It remained to be seen if it could be put into practice. To begin with, the great continent which lies beneath the Atlantic Ocean was beyond the power of any single individual, however wealthy. A smaller attempt must be made, but still an enterprise of great costliness.

At this juncture, we are permitted to say, Professor Pentique approached one of the rising financiers of the city of London, whose name is well-known in connection with many prosperous companies—Mr Horatio Slygne.

The City man saw and believed. He realised the fact that this wonderful and mysterious invention, if practicable, would affect the future history of the universe in an immeasurable degree. He supplied a large capital and operations were begun upon an island in the South Seas which has been submerged since the memory of man, but not more than some hundred yards below the surface of the Pacific Ocean.

THE ISLAND HAS BEEN SUCCESSFULLY  
RAISED, OFFICIALLY CHARTERED  
AND NAMED "PENTIQUE ISLAND"!!!

There is no doubt whatever about this fact. By dint of untiring energy, a scientific genius such as the world has never before seen, and innumerable experiments, Professor Pentique can to-day present us with the matured fruit of his labours. He has solved the problem. The world is our own, literally the World!

Little more remains to be added to this bare preliminary announcement. Scornful incredulity will at first attend it in many quarters, but we assure the world that this will not be for long.

*The raising of the LOST CONTINENT is to be started shortly.*

A great company is in the course of formation. Mr Horatio Slygne, the financier, who originally made it possible for Professor Pentique to begin his gigantic task in the Southern Seas, is actively engaged in settling the preliminary details of what will prove to be the greatest national combination England has ever known. An Imperialist by con-

viction, and an Englishman by birth, Mr Slygne is about to aid Professor Pentique to provide his fellow-countrymen with a British continent! A period of national wealth almost impossible to imagine is approaching us.

We will say no more at this moment. In a day or two further news of a most startling kind will be published. Shortly, also, the public and the Press are to have an opportunity of actually judging and testing the power of Professor Pentique's invention.

*The earth-raisers are already at work in one of our English counties.*

## CHAPTER X

### ON PROSPECTUS-WRITING

BLACHEN sat toying with his earth-raiser diagrams. He no longer watched Percy with suspicion, and when the reader began to laugh he scarcely looked up.

How he ever got through that reading without giving himself away completely Percy Thawne never knew. All his pulses were singing, and the words seemed to dance to and fro as he tried to steady his trembling fingers. So this was the grand secret, this the business over which Slygne, Pentique, Blachen, he himself, were to make their fortunes. It was stupendous indeed!

When his first feeling of triumph had begun to abate somewhat he handed the paper back to Blachen.

"No, he has not altered it," he said. "And now will you not explain to me the earth-raising process? You men of science

can put things so clearly. You can explain matters that even a genius like Mr Slygne could not altogether describe."

Blachen smiled as he proceeded to lay out the diagrams.

"Here, out of sight," he explained, "we have the electric batteries. And here, in three rows, are the earth-raisers. As you will see, the latter stretch, underground, from side to side of the fields which you have bought for us. These raisers, you observe, consist of steel plates fastened in rows upon a stout wire cable. To set them in motion the Professor and I press buttons at points B and C. This sets in motion the electric currents, which run through the wire cables, acting upon the steel plates. These plates heave the earth upwards towards the centre of the field, so that in time we have a small hillock. You must, however, remember that we only work the raisers for a few weeks before the Company is floated. Then also, it is a fact, recollect, that our work on dry land is infinitely harder than such work under water. (Why you shall learn another day.) Therefore, if we can actually raise land to this extent in a country

district on hard ground, how much more so shall we be able to do it in mid-ocean?"

Blachen laid the fore-finger of his right hand upon the left side of his nose, and closing one eye gave Percy a light dig in the ribs.

"These diagrams," he concluded, "would be worth two million pounds to a blackmailer, but there are only four people in the world who know of their existence, and those four people will make their millions in another way. Ha, ha! Gutes geschäft! Ist es nicht so, mein guter freund und partner!"

As Percy left the office and walked down Queen Victoria Street towards the Embankment his brain was boiling. His thoughts seethed within it like molten metal. He could not control them for some time, try as he would. The noise of the huge street was in tune with the tumult within him; he felt like a drunken man. As he passed the great building which is the headquarters of the Salvation Army he reeled against "General" Booth himself, who was just about to get into a hansom cab which was waiting by the pavement. His arm was grasped kindly but

firmly, and for three minutes the patriarchal old gentleman in his red jersey gave the unfortunate secretary a friendly but awakening lecture upon the horrors of strong drink.

Released at last, Percy hurried along to Blackfriars. He darted across the most dangerous crossing in London and came to the arch of the quiet courtyard of De Keyser's hotel. It seemed a haven of rest. He went in, and in a moment or two was seated in a cool smoking-room among a group of voluble Spanish gentlemen from Buenos Ayres, who were smoking straw-covered cigarettes and drinking orange juice and water, coloured pink with cochineal and cooled with powdered ice.

Here, in the course of half an hour, he began to recover himself. His thoughts fell into ordered sequence once more. At first he was awed. The colossal daring of Mr Horatio Slygne was impressive. It was almost too great to contemplate with serenity. Could such a scheme as this have any chance whatever? The British Public—at anyrate the investing British Public—was, he knew, primarily and essentially credulous. But

would it swallow this? It was difficult to believe it.

And yet who knew his *clientèle*, actual and potential, better than Slygne?

Probably no one in London.

Would the financier risk so much if he did not expect an adequate return? It was not his way. Granted that the Company was actually floated, that it was possible to float it with success, then Percy saw his own way very early. There was a fortune in it for him—the *coup* he had always dreamed about was within sight at last!

And, moreover, this meant Bella!

He put his hand in the inside pocket of his coat and felt a little glove which nestled there—a preposterous little glove!

One thing he did realise very clearly indeed. That was, that despite his newly-acquired knowledge and the tremendous power it gave him, he must walk with the very greatest wariness and circumspection. He knew that Slygne was the last man in the world to be trifled with. The prospective proprietor of the Lost Continent was hardly to be frightened by his own secretary.

The time was getting on. Percy had

arranged to meet Mr Blaber at his chambers at eight. He hurried down the Embankment and reached the quiet by-street as the clocks were striking the hour. He found that the journalist had not yet arrived, but in a moment or two he was shown up into the room.

Mr Blaber's appearance had considerably changed for the better. He wore a new suit, which, though the critical eye in such matters might have surmised was ready made, was clean and fitted him very fairly well. His hat was new and glossy, his boots fresh from the makers, his linen was snowy and his bristling black beard was trimmed.

He took out his watch. "Ah," he said, "I am quite punctual I see. What a blessing it is to have one's watch again! This old friend"—he tapped the case affectionately—"is rarely with me. Last time I got it out from the pawn-broker's I found that it had contracted Jewish habits and would not go on Saturday!"

He sank into an armchair and gratefully accepted a sherry-and-bitters.

"You see me now, Mr Thawne," he said "entirely rehabilitated. My clothes are new

and I have satisfied the demands of a long-suffering landlady. And all this is owing to the emoluments already received from our mutual patron, the worthy Horatio Slygne. Here's to him."

"I read your article this afternoon," said Percy as they walked towards the restaurant where they were to dine, making a bold shot at what he suspected was the truth.

Mr Blaber winked.

"Slygne," he said, "shut me up in his private room for two hours yesterday with a bottle of champagne. At the end of that time the article was written, the bottle was empty, I went away with a cheque and the financier took the manuscript over to the offices of Professor Pentique — that genius!"

"It was a remarkable article," said the secretary.

"It was," admitted the journalist. "I have always thought that my talent lay in the direction of fiction."

They entered the restaurant, chose a secluded table, not too close to the string band which was playing under the dome, and Percy ordered dinner.

For a half-hour the conversation turned upon ordinary topics, but gradually, warmed by the generous meal and the potations which accompanied it, Blaber began to be expansive. He took it quite for granted that Percy knew as much as he did about Mr Slygne's plans, and the young man did not contradict him.

"How it's done, or how it's going to be done down in the country, I don't know and can't pretend to say," Mr Blaber said in a fat and confidential whisper. "*You* may know or not, it don't concern me. All I know is that I have written the preliminary article and been very well paid for it. And moreover, to-morrow I retire to a quiet country village by the sea. It is a secluded place in Norfolk. There I shall establish myself in the village inn and fare on the best. Mr Slygne will pay. I have a large packet of notes and documents at home, and am about to devote my whole time and attention to what I purpose shall be my masterpiece."

"The Lost Continent Prospectus?"

"Nothing less than that. All the talent of a pen which was once highly thought of,

and which still retains much of its cunning, is to be employed in this great cause. It will surpass all my previous efforts in this direction. The Wild West Oil Corporation prospectus shall be as the clay sketch compared to the finished statue of the Lost Continent Company."

"It is a great art," Percy said, "one that requires a tremendous knowledge of human nature. But you excel in it, Mr Blaber, you really do. The prospectuses issued from our office always command the admiration of City men."

"I believe I *am* good at writing a prospectus," said the fat man, modestly. "I should have made a name in fiction were it not for my unfortunate fondness for ardent liquor. That has always kept me down, and it always will. The time for regrets is over. I merely accept the situation without any emotion whatever."

"It seems a pity," Percy said, "that you should not throw yourself more into City life. With your talent I see no reason why you should not make money yourself. At present you merely provide others with a tool to open the treasure house."

Blaber shook his head.

"No," he said, "I couldn't do it, Mr Thawne. Fleet Street, which I know like a book, is the theatre of all my activities. I could not leave it. It has me body and soul and I can breathe no other air. Yet, apart from the much-needed coin that my work for Mr Slygne occasionally brings me, I like the work. It amuses me to think, as I sit in some obscure tavern up a dingy court, that the words written by my pen are charming the gold from the pockets of greedy people all over England, that my words can sway and move the huge crowd of people who are dying to get rich without working! The fools—the grasping fools deserve to be cheated! Most of them do at anyrate! And how lovingly I bait the hook for them. Your ordinary prospectus is either too dry and uninteresting to attract a speculator or it is so glowing and flowery that it frightens him. The secret of my success is that I know how to combine both methods. Point out the advantages of what you are putting on the market, *but do it without adjectives!* That is one of my secrets. The man who reads a prospectus—mind I'm not talking of an

*article*, only a prospectus—is used to flowery adjectives. I put the case in the strongest and most vivid way, but I use as few adjectives as possible. The result is that an impression of solidity and sincerity is conveyed and a certain freshness and newness is found which the reader can't analyse but nevertheless feels. In a day, when thinking it over, the prospective investor imagines his first impressions to be entirely his own and entirely justified. I tell you, Mr Thawne, that one can hypnotise your ordinary greedy prospectus reader with decent English."

Every now and again Percy replenished Mr Blaber's glass. During the evening, and before he finally assisted his guest into a cab, Percy had heard a lecture on the art of prospectus-writing profound in its cynicism, brilliant in its mastery of the technique of this difficult art, and intensely illuminating to the young financier.

The golden road gleamed brighter and brighter as his ardent eyes looked into the future. But nevertheless Percy slept his usual placid sleep that night. Not a dream disturbed his tranquil rest, and though he

carried the Lost Continent in his head it occasioned him no unrest whatever.

Youth! How beautiful thou art! Well did Homer chant of the youth that is "crystal-clear." *Si jeunesse savait!*

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## CHAPTER XI

### A LITERARY EFFORT FOLLOWED BY THE FIRST CHECK

It is a curious thing that in business a man's feelings are often so sacred that he dare hardly confess them to himself, much less to the individual with whom he is dealing. Percy now knew the whole of Slygne's secret, and the financier's mysterious preparations needed no further explanation. It was not difficult now to account for the visits of this or that wealthy stockbroker; the sleek smile of soft-coated solicitors; the vibrating nervousness of Professor Pentique. Where money is there will the City be also, and Slygne, having laid his fingers upon a golden line, did not ask in vain for help in the baiting of its hook.

Blachen was despatched to Somerset the day after his conversation with Percy, in

order to superintend the laying down of the earth-raisers. Pentique and Slygne also made several trips to Bridgwater, so it was evident that matters were swiftly coming to a practical head. Percy went through his official duties in a state of nervous excitement which was very difficult to disguise. For, in spite of the manifest progress which was being made, Slygne never breathed a word of enlightenment to his faithful secretary. Percy, for all he knew, was as ignorant of the business in hand as Thomas, the office-boy.

To the layman such reticence as this on the part of Mr Slygne may appear unfriendly and selfish; but not so to anyone who is versed in the higher laws of business. Such people know well that when a first-class business man gets hold of a really "exceptional thing" his primary duty is to tell as few people about it as possible. Slygne could not help Pentique and the stockbrokers and the solicitors knowing about his Company, because without them the Company must have failed. To tell Percy was a very different and quite unnecessary proceeding. Therefore he refrained from mentioning the subject at all

to the secretary of the Wild West Oil Corporation.

If this was the attitude of Mr Slygne, it may be wondered :—Why, then, did Pentique tell the secret to Blachen? Their case, however, was rather different. Pentique and Blachen had worked together for so many years that Blachen was, by this time, Pentique's second self, and anything that Pentique knew, Blachen, as a matter of course, knew likewise. Blachen indeed understood Pentique so well that it would have been clear waste of prudence on the Professor's part to have kept anything back from his amanuensis, while Pentique knew such a great deal about Blachen's personal history, that the slightest indiscretion on the part of this intelligent young German would certainly have blighted his otherwise promising career. And it is a striking fact, that in very few other circles of life are to be found these beautiful reproductions of the old David and Jonathan story. Neither can any picture in modern civilisation compare, for beauty, with such honest friendships and mutual admirations, as those which exist upon the eastern side of the Bank of England.

Slygne and Percy, alas! had not yet penetrated to such sublime heights of affection, but Fate was even now forging the fetters of a golden chain, which should finally unite their interests for ever.

It was about a fortnight after his interview with Blachen that Percy one morning found a letter on his plate, bearing the Bridgwater postmark, which he opened with trembling fingers, to read as follows:—

“DEAR MR THAWNE,—This is a line to inform you that the earth-raisers are now already complete. You will, therefore, doubtless be publishing the article almost at once. Is it not so? Please let me have a line, and much oblige—Yours very sincerely,  
“PAUL BLACHEN.”

Percy could not help laughing, although his supposed position of confidant to Slygne seemed likely to place him in rather awkward corners. After some little thought he drew up a letter, explaining that Slygne himself had not yet settled when to publish the article, which he would probably do at a moment's notice. If anything definite, however, was settled beforehand, Blachen should

be advised at once. This letter he posted on his way to the City, and then waited.

Surely the sage who remarked that "Time flies" must have led a tranquil existence, for at the great crises of our lives Time has a habit of dragging himself by in a way that maddens the waiter, and at a pace slower than that of the veriest cripple. Who, enduring the agonies of suspense, which Percy did, could have accused Time of flying? The greatest philosopher would have found it hard to enter up a share ledger, whilst over his head the latest babe of science was being initiated into the mysteries of the joint stock world. Then how much more so a young man whose business teeth were scarcely cut? Yet Percy had to do this for one—two—three weary days after the arrival of Blachen's letter. The number of daily papers which he devoured during the interval was incredible. Upon the third day the total ran into double figures.

The morning after that he came down to breakfast rather later than usual, and opened his paper somewhat listlessly. Reaction had set in during the night, and he felt that it would take but little more to bring on total

collapse. He went so far as to drink half a cup of coffee before glancing at the news. Then he glanced. . . .

It was there—there in all its blushing simplicity; there, clothed in its plain frock of printer's ink, there before him in black and white.

There are moments in every life when our feelings cannot be set down, when our hearts thump out a tune which has never been written. Inexpressible moments which no pen can describe, to which no tongue can give full expression—moments of intense life, of compressed emotion indefinable. And so it was with Percy, as he read through once again that description of Pentique's discovery, the great triumph of science.

Indeed, who could have read those simple words without feeling a thrill of national pride or sublime exaltation? How many common-place breadwinners upon that momentous morning were shaken out of their self-complacency, and hurried Citywards in a whirl of patriotic glee? Through the length and breadth of England that message had been spread, and the men of England leapt at its summons.

Before three days had passed every paper in London was full of letters on the subject of earth-raising. A man from picturesque Sheffield got into print first, writing :—

“ Is it not high time that the sensational and frivolous methods of conveying news to the public, indulged in by some of our papers, should be done away with, before the evil spreads ?

“ The announcement of an important scientific discovery was published yesterday, in terms which might well have befitted the placards of some variety entertainment. Big type, exaggerated language bristling with superlatives, and tortuous phrasing stamped with the hall-mark of vulgarity what might otherwise have been an interesting statement.

“ ‘ The most stupendous and marvellous discovery,’ ‘ This wonderful and mysterious victory over nature,’ ‘ The world is our own—literally the world,’ ‘ The new continent will be British.’ What, sir, is all this but common high-falutin ? Why could not the writer content himself by stating in a few straightforward words the information which he had obtained ? Is advertising to be supreme, even in literature ?

“ I appeal to the common sense of the British Public, and to the good taste of our editors, that they may nip this new weed of commercialism in the bud, and so prevent our Press falling from that high and honourable position which it has now occupied for so long a period.”

Someone living at Glasgow came second. His composition ran thus :—

“ DEAR SIR,— ‘ A stitch in time saves nine.’ Now that we are about to witness the latest marvel of science put into practical operation, would it not be as well for the Government to bestir itself, and carefully watch the proceedings of Mr Horatio Slygne ?

“ We are told that this new continent is to be raised under the British flag. If so, let us take a lesson from our past experiences, and keep it out of the hands of any limited company.

“ Let the Government take over the whole affair as soon as ever success is assured, and not procrastinate according to precedent, until they have to pay the original company millions where thousands would previously have sufficed.—I am, sir, yours truly,

“ VERB. SAP. SAT.”

A progressive County Councillor ably represented London in the literary contest. His letter was very widely appreciated, on account of its zealous spirit. "While we have men like this to represent us," the people said, "our rights are safe." The epistle, being clothed in official language, occupied one column and a half, but the pith was contained in two paragraphs.

"How comes it, that Professor Pentique is being allowed to raise land in Somersetshire, I wonder, without a crown charter? Can men, in the name of mere science, play thus with the face of our country at will? Are there no boards or councils in Somerset to guard against such proceedings?"

"This matter, in my opinion, calls for a very searching inquiry, and were I an inhabitant of the western district, I would never rest until a thorough investigation had taken place."

It was a Northampton man who wrote:—

"SIR,—Let someone step into the breach and save England from ruin.

"It has been for some time apparent to the thoughtful minority that our gradual

expansion of empire, if continued in the future as it has been conducted in the past, must certainly bring us to destruction.

“ We already possess far more colonies than we can possibly look after in time of war, although few persons seem to recognise the fact. And now, thanks to Professor Pentique, we are threatened with fresh countries which the greed of our so-called *Imperialists* has already christened British territory.

“ What do we want more territories for? Have we not enough—too many—as it is? Let us raise these new tracts of country, by all means, but there is not the least necessity for us to keep them. On the contrary, let us put them on the market and knock them down to the highest bidder.

“ This would be sound financial policy, and also more truly *imperial* than most of the dreams cherished by our wonderful politicians of that school.—Yours truly,

“ POLITICAL ECONOMY.”

Besides this somewhat frivolous correspondence there naturally appeared a large number of serious articles in the illustrated magazines and weekly journals. Someone

demonstrated how many men it would take to drink the Atlantic dry, supposing that it were bitter beer. Someone else compiled an article, with illustrations, describing the shapes into which Professor Pentique could make the world, if he piled all the countries on top of one another. A rather ingenious scribe explained what horse-power Professor Pentique's apparatus was equal to. This article was very convincing, and had the additional advantage of taking up plenty of space, since it was chiefly made up of ciphers. The editor was so delighted with its literary quality that he put a notice in brackets at the bottom of the page to the effect that further contributions would appear from time to time by this author.

One day, whilst the Press correspondence was still raging like a fire among haystacks, Mr Slygne and Percy sat together in the Wild West offices. They had already disposed of the morning's business, and Percy was preparing to retire, when Slygne turned to him in an unusually solemn manner.

"There is one other matter about which I want a word with you, Thawne," said he. "It concerns my new Company."

Percy composed himself promptly, for this was the only mention that Slygne had made of the Company since that first eventful journey to Bridgwater.

“In view of the very wide-spread interest which Professor Pentique’s discovery has aroused,” Slygne went on, with becoming gravity, “I have decided to issue a technical work dealing with this subject.”

“I see,” said Percy.

“You can readily understand that I wish to pave the way, as far as possible, for the reception of my new Company.”

“Exactly,” said Percy.

“And so,” continued Slygne, “this work must be commenced at once. I wish it to take the form of a pamphlet, tastefully got up, and clearly written. It must explain fully the scientific side of Professor Pentique’s earth-raising process, and yet the explanation must be couched in language which the man in the street will readily understand. That, in fact, is the reason why I have not entrusted the work to Bla——, er—to other hands. I don’t want any fine writing or ‘literary’ flavour about the thing. It must be written without any view but to state certain facts.

It's not a prospectus, remember, but something quite different."

Percy nodded.

"I have therefore decided that the authorship of this work shall rest with you, and I want you to get on with the writing of it at once."

Percy said, "Certainly, sir," coolly enough. He would, of course, have said the same thing, had Slygne requested him to go out and jump from the top of the Monument. It was tact, that was all, the tact one learns in business.

"You will obtain the data for your pamphlet from Professor Pentique," went on Slygne, affably. "And you must adjust it to your present requirements as quickly as may be, for I should like, if possible, to have the whole thing complete and before the public by the end of next month. Do you think you can manage that?"

"I expect so," answered Percy, hopefully. "Had I better go round to Pentique's office at once, and collect some information to begin on?"

"Yes, I think that would be a very good plan. There will not be much office work for

you to do during the next few weeks, so you will be able to devote all your time to the pamphlet. If you get into any difficulty you can always apply to me or to Professor Pentique, but I expect you will be able to get along all right, when he has given you his papers."

In this simple manner was conceived the famous pamphlet which created such a stir on its publication. And there was something magnificent in the very simplicity of its conception. Slygne raised his hand, and the work was done! How seldom, in private life, can we obtain such practical action. Most people, on being told to do anything at all out of the common, will plead ignorance or incapacity, arguments as untenable as they are absurd. Percy had long ago learnt their worthlessness. He knew that, to get on, it is necessary to be prepared for anything in the world; and, though he knew nothing whatever about science, he was perfectly willing to write any kind of pamphlet, did Slygne desire it. Indeed, it is only through cheerful obedience of this kind that any young man may hope to do well at business, nor can sufficient stress be laid upon the simple

maxim. It follows, accordingly, that as soon as Percy received orders to embark upon the stormy seas of literature, he did not sit down and hesitate, or wonder whether his venture would be a success. On the contrary, he just proceeded with the utmost *sang froid*, to ensure that success which others might have been content to pray for. In short, without more ado, he went round to Professor Pentique.

The Professor received him affably—that is to say, he grunted twice, and said, “Well?” The Professor looked upon Percy as little better than a clerk, and the Professor’s opinion about clerks was rugged, even menacing. When Percy had explained his mission, Pentique rang the bell. Part of the Professor’s data, it appeared, was contained in a series of articles which he had contributed to a paper called *The Throttle Valve Weekly*, now many years defunct. Also in a printed lecture read by him before the Association of Zurich Electrical Apprentices.

All these papers were at present in his office. Up to this point the matter was simple enough, but when he had despatched three clerks to different top rooms, in order

that the papers in question might be produced, and when they had come back one by one with no papers, the difficulties of the situation began to make themselves apparent.

The Professor grew more animated every moment. He began by banging books about on his table, with a noise like pistol reports. Then he stamped; and, presently, rising from his chair, he literally danced round the "*pig-fool idiots*," who could find "nothing of all he wanted." Next he proceeded to give his candid opinion concerning the individuals before him in a cheerful and hearty manner, which was very convincing.

When the three "idiots" had been sent off to find the data in fresh spots, Pentique began hunting on his own account. He overturned books, pushed chairs into far corners of the room, opened the drawers in his desk, and sorted out the papers therein with great energy. He seemed to enjoy turning things upside down, Percy thought, until at last he uttered a strange gurgle, and after a final dive, sat up straight in his chair, brandishing a packet of dusty papers.

"Here they are," he exclaimed triumphantly. "Those damn fools are worth nothing

at all. Here you have the information required, but be sure and return it to me when you have finished."

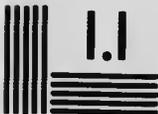
Percy promised to do so, and forthwith departed, leaving Pentique in his chair murmuring maledictions against the fools, whom Providence had sent into his office in the guise of clerks.

Having thus secured the information necessary for his purpose, Percy set to work in deadly earnest. He commenced by carefully reading through all the papers which Pentique had given him. These in themselves were a liberal scientific education; nor were they all dull, for, in addition to the lecture and articles, Percy came upon some MSS. in Pentique's handwriting, descriptive of his life at Pentique Island, the details of which were semi-domestic in nature, and possessed a piquancy of their own which was peculiarly refreshing. Whether the Professor had intended to part with them is doubtful, but Percy read them through carefully enough, since it was his duty to study the subject of earth-raising under all conditions. At the end of the week he felt competent to start his book, and accordingly, on the following



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Monday morning, the first words of the new pamphlet were actually set down.

The work was not altogether easy, but by the exercise of careful selection and appropriate adaptation, Percy soon began to acquit himself with credit. He did not know a great deal about science, except a few commonplace facts, such as the roundness of the world, the laws of gravity, and so forth; but he did understand grammar and the rules of English composition, which, after all, was a great deal more to the point.

Those were happy weeks for the secretary of the Wild West. No one troubled him; nothing disturbed him. Alone in his own room he sat, and there from hour to hour he wrote and wrote. Every now and then, when the labour of literary production grew wearisome, Percy changed his subject. He left the Arabian Nights detail of Professor Pentique's achievements, and turned his attention to more personal writing. It was then that his pen flew over the paper, his pulses throbbed with the joy of a conviction that no mere earth-raising statistics could ever give. And the fair Miss Bella Slygne, as she roamed the scented gardens of

Whitleigh Hall, thought that no girl ever had such love letters before!

At the end of June Percy was able to carry the pamphlet, in its rough form, to Slygne, who had already made arrangements with a friend of his, in the publishing business, for its production.

At the end of July it appeared.

The cover was green, with gold lettering thereon, and, within, it was what the book-sellers call "profusely illustrated." The work was divided into three parts, of which the first dealt with Pentique's long researches and experiments; the second with his triumph and the raising of Pentique Island; the third with his proposal to raise The Lost Continent, and his connection with Mr Slygne. The first part was of scientific, the second of universal, and the third of financial interest. The illustrations were reproductions of photographs which had been taken by the Professor and Blachen at different periods, and one of the noblest of these appeared in the second part. The illustration represented Pentique clothed in an umbrella and pyjamas standing before a palm tree; whilst in the background there squatted several blacks,

with their eyes fixed upon the great inventor. The Professor looked very noble amid these surroundings, whether by force of contrast or not is uncertain, since the picture possessed no explanation beyond these simple words printed beneath:—"Professor Pentique at Pentique Island."

In addition to such pictures as this, there were several diagrams showing the earth-raisers at work, one of which had been taken under water, on the bed of the South Seas. And, more startling and convincing than all else, there appeared the dim and ghastly photograph of the ruined castle on the top of the submerged mountain of THE LOST CONTINENT. A more sensational and yet simple publication had never been issued from the press. That was what the reviewers said, and a reviewer's opinion should be worth something, since he is paid for giving it. Percy, at anyrate, could not complain of the way in which the critics handled him. They were more than kind; they were enthusiastic.

"No one but an expert could have written the little work before us," one of them wrote. "The book teems with interesting scientific

information put forward in the most attractive and simple manner. We must congratulate Mr Thawne no less upon his scientific knowledge than upon his excellent literary style."

One of the monthly magazines sent round someone to interview Professor Pentique, and the interviewer, who was a smart youngster, took the opportunity of looking up Percy on his way home. Then, in the next issue of this periodical, there appeared under Pentique's likeness a little picture of Percy, with an inscription beneath:—"Mr Percy Thawne who helped Professor Pentique in his researches." In the report of his interview, the journalist described Pentique as "leonine in appearance," which made disagreeable people laugh. But we will not dwell on such frivolities. It is pleasanter to reflect that, in the execution of his plain duty, Percy Thawne found an unexpected road to glory.

Certainly his friends used to chaff him as the numerous reviews followed one another in rapid succession, and he himself used to laugh over the various flattering remarks which these unsuspecting pressmen put forth about him. But those days were pleasant days,

nevertheless. There was but little work to be done; he was in love; and in the near, near future lay a fat, new secretaryship which would be the reward bestowed by a grateful employer. How pleasant are such brief moments in our lives; how sweet our anticipations.

Percy even as yet did not know the City completely, nor did he guess what scheme was now maturing in Slygne's mind. Else why should he have been so thunderstruck by a little paragraph which he read in the evening paper one night about this time, which stated:—

#### “THE PENTIQUE DISCOVERY.

“We are now able to state officially that, as a result of negotiations between Professor Pentique and Mr Horatio Slygne, a limited liability company is about to be floated, with a view to recovering The Lost Continent.

“The name of this Company will be *The Lost Continent Recovery Company, Limited*. Its capital will be £2,000,000 sterling. The Board of Directors will include some of the

best known men in the country, and Lord Alfred Gildover, youngest son of the Marquis of Lackstough, has been appointed secretary."

When Percy had read that announcement, he clenched both fists and looked out of the window without speaking.

## CHAPTER XII

### BENEVOLENT INTENTIONS

PERCY's first feeling, after he had read the secretarial announcement, was one of great indignation. He almost got up to go and punch Slygne's head, in primitive public-school fashion. Remembering, however, that his day for such reprisals had now gone by, he soon came to a more reasonable frame of mind, and finally went to bed as though nothing had happened. The reasons for Slygne's appointment of Gildover to the new secretaryship were fairly apparent. The Marquis of Lackstough, though comparatively poor himself, was an influential man, and had probably taken a hand in the formation of that powerful Board of which the paragraph spoke. As a return for this, Slygne had evidently given the appointment to young Gildover, whose years forbade that he should

himself be a Director. Percy recognised that all this was very pleasant, but at the same time he could not consent tamely to be thus fooled out of an appointment upon which his every hope had centred. Slygne, he decided, must be given to understand that his old secretary was something more than a nonentity, and then, if he still refused to fulfil his promise. . . Percy's thoughts became somewhat indefinite here. He did not wish to anticipate evils; he was ready to hope for the best, although not altogether unprepared for the worst. So musing, he fell asleep.

The next morning Slygne and Pentique arrived at the office together, as it appeared that they intended going down to Bridgewater by the mid-day train. Percy waited impatiently to catch Slygne alone, but the Professor showed no sign of leaving, so at last, in desperation, he walked upstairs, determined to face them both.

They sat opposite one another, as usual, and on Percy's entrance Slygne looked up. His expression was by no means genial.

"What is it?" he asked shortly.

"I wanted to see you for a few moments," answered the secretary.

"Well, here I am, but be quick. We have to be off in a few minutes."

Percy hesitated. "I would rather see you alone," he said.

Slygne shrugged his shoulders.

"Professor Pentique is waiting for me to accompany him to the station. If the business is private, you must wait."

Percy saw that it was to be a three-cornered affair, and braced himself accordingly.

"I saw an announcement in last night's paper," he said, "to the effect that Lord Alfred Gildover was to be appointed secretary of *The Lost Continent Company*. Have I your authority for contradicting that statement, Mr Slygne?"

"Well, hardly, Mr Thawne, since it is quite true," the financier answered, with a smile.

"But you will excuse my saying that I do not understand how this can be, since you promised me the secretaryship six weeks ago in this very room."

"Really, Mr Thawne! You must have been dreaming."

"Not at all, sir. It was upon the occasion of my visit to Whitleigh Hall."

"Indeed? I am interested."

Percy bit his lip. Then a thought struck him.

"Professor Pentique was present at the time," said he.

Slygne's face brightened at that.

"Let us appeal to him, then," he exclaimed.

"Professor, Mr Thawne says that I promised him the secretaryship of our new Company the other day, and that you were present at the time. Do you recollect my having done so?"

The Professor glared at Percy for a moment and then turned to Slygne.

"You have never promised Mr Thawne the secretaryship whilst I have been here," he growled.

Percy shifted his ground.

"This is scarcely fair to me, Mr Slygne, after your having led me to believe that I should have the post."

Slygne never left off smiling for a moment. He was almost laughing, in fact.

"My dear Thawne, you must have grossly misunderstood me, if you really mean to say that you expected this post."

"But I do."

“Well, I am very sorry to hear you say so, because the arrangements which I have been making for your future are of a somewhat different nature.”

“Then you have been making some new arrangements for me?”

“Most assuredly. I never overlook the services of anyone who is, or has been, connected with me in business.”

Percy bowed.

“You must know then, that I have lately been giving my very earnest consideration to the subject of your future, Mr Thawne. For it is very gratifying to think that any slight business knowledge which I have been fortunate enough to put in your way has not been wasted upon you.”

Percy bowed again with becoming modesty, and Slygne continued, waving one hand as though to indicate the breadth of his own generosity.

“It is this indication of zeal on your part which has led me to desire your promotion in my office. Of course I do not lose sight of the fact that your articles will not actually expire until the 1st of January next year, and that you are not legally entitled to a

salary from me until after that date (although drawing your £20 a month at the present time). These slight technical matters, I say, must not be overlooked, since they might easily prove a great obstacle in your path, did I care to exercise my rights in the matter. I am, however, prepared to waive my personal claims upon your unremunerated services, and propose to raise your salary to £25 a month, leaving you in sole charge of this office when I am at the offices of the new Company, which will now be floated almost immediately. I do not mind confessing that it is as much for your mother's sake as your own, Mr Thawne, that I am doing this, because I know what a pleasure it will be to her when she hears how well her son is getting on. I myself am a parent, you may know."

Here Slygne paused suddenly. Then, as though by preconcerted signal, he and Pentique both rose, collected their belongings, and marched out of the office.

"We have settled that little matter, I think," observed Slygne, as they drove to Paddington.

"I cannot conceive," grunted the Professor

in reply, "why you are so ceremonious with these twopence-halfpenny clerks. Their cheek seems always to me a great deal too much."

Slygne and Pentique never did agree on this point, for Slygne was a diplomatist, and Pentique what one may call an optimist. Pentique believed, that is to say, in the abnormal cheerfulness of life to such an extent that he felt bound to exert himself continuously as a counteracting influence to it. In his daily business dealings he came and went like a rain-cloud, driving back before him that aggressive sunlight which would be for ever forcing itself into the lives of those common workers whom he employed. Pentique hated to see any expression but one of gloom upon the faces of his clerks; and that they should dare to betray any feeling beyond an awed sadness whilst he had to toil at money-making for several hours a day was, in his eyes, both unreasonable and disrespectful.

When Slygne and the Professor had left him, Percy stood for some time just where he was, in an attitude of deep thought. He perceived at once that, in order to judge the

precise magnitude of his employer's generosity, it was necessary to take into consideration several minor points. Thus, his appointment as treble secretary, in the first instance, had meant a saving to Slygne—that is to the companies—of £40 per month. By raising Percy's salary to £25 a month, Slygne at once, and with reckless prodigality, paid away another £60 a year. Percy's mother, however, had paid a premium of 200 guineas to Slygne eighteen months previously, and so, by means of a subtle calculation, it could be accurately gauged just how much Mr Horatio Slygne was out of pocket by his present liberality. And now he proposed to give away the plum of the basket, his new Company, to young Gildover, a gentleman whom he had scarcely heard of till within the last three weeks. To say that Percy was indignant would not be a comprehensive explanation of his feelings, but since he was now alone, there could be but little gained from storming, and he accordingly went downstairs to his own little room and began to think the matter out.

There is a curious infection about the air of the City. You may go down from the West

End filled with high-minded ideals and lofty ambitions, yet, if you stay in the East long enough, the atmosphere of this place must affect you. It will creep over your spirit, crumble your ideals, and finally fill your soul with a fierce desire which nothing can assuage but the magic touch of gold. Percy had only been in his present situation for a short time, but the fever was upon him, and that he should consent to be outdone in the way that his superior intended was impossible. If Slygne made Gildover secretary, Slygne must be made to pay for that freak of choice.—Yes, but how? Percy slowly turned over in his mind every particle of knowledge which he possessed concerning Slygne and his somewhat intricate financial affairs. The more he did so, the less he could resist a feeling of great satisfaction, for there was no denying the fact that he was very well posted on the subject. Knowledge is money in business, this is a truism, and Percy determined that the present case should prove no exception to that rule.

At this point in his reflections there came a tap on the door, and Thomas entered to announce a visitor in the outer office. “Mr

T. Grady," Percy read from the greasy card which was handed him.

Mr Grady was quickly ushered in; a red-haired man, with rubicund face and bright blue eyes. He looked Percy sharply in the face, and then settled himself comfortably in a chair by the table.

"I represent the *Investors' Ferret*," was his first observation.

"Indeed," said Percy. "I don't think I know the journal."

"Do you not? That is queer, considering the interest which we take in your office."

"You flatter us, I am sure," said Percy.

"Not at all," returned the other. "Investigation into the affairs of limited liability companies is our speciality, you must know."

"I am very interested to learn the fact. Are you investigating at the present moment, may I ask?"

"Oh, dear, no. This is merely a friendly call. In your case investigation is scarcely needed."

"You mean that we are what we seem to be," smiled Percy.

Mr Grady bowed. "I mean that we know you for what you are," said he, "which is, of

course, very much the same thing. This is my paper," he continued, laying a printed sheet on the table.

" 'A journal devoted to the exposure of joint stock swindles, and to the interests of shareholders generally,' " Percy read aloud. "A noble enterprise, sir, and worthy of all success."

"We have been singularly fortunate, thank you," replied Mr Grady, quietly, "and I think the paper has a great future before it."

"I am sure it has," Percy agreed. "May I keep this copy?"

"Please do," answered the man of letters.

"Thank you," said Percy, rising. "And thank you also for your friendly call. I hope next time that I shall have more time to spare, but, in the present instance, an important engage—"

"Half a minute, sir," interrupted the other, turning slightly in his seat, but making no other sign of movement. "I am sorry to detain you, but talking of the *Ferret* reminds me that your Mr Slygne is not a subscriber to our journal."

"No. Mr Slygne has, to tell the truth, so many calls one way and another, that even an

important financial paper like your own must, I regret to say, necessarily be overlooked."

"Yes? And I also regret it, if such is indeed the case."

"I have just stated the case, sir."

"Then I must draw your attention to the power which my paper exercises in the financial world. Always an unpleasant task, believe me."

"Your modesty forces the admission, no doubt."

"Doubtless, my dear sir."

"Well, I must ask you to give me the particulars quickly, since my time is not my own," observed Percy, moving to the fireplace.

"Certainly, Mr Thawne. I'll not detain you a minute. Now, first of all, the *Ferret* has a sneaking admiration for your Mr Slygne, and is therefore disposed to be friendly towards him. If, then, Mr Slygne will meet our wishes, this small matter may be amicably settled between us. If not, well, the *Ferret* is the *Ferret*, and the *Wild West* is the *Wild West*, eh, Mr Thawne?"

"What is it that you think Mr Slygne might do to earn this valuable friendship of yours?" inquired Percy, courteously.

“What else but subscribe to the *Ferret*, of course. Say a year’s subscription, Mr Thawne.”

Percy’s eye glittered. “Which would amount to?” he demanded.

“Well, seeing that the *Ferret* is strongly inclined to be friendly with Mr Slygne, I think a year’s subscription amounting to, say, £500, would be quite satisfactory to everybody concerned.”

Percy laughed drily. “That should certainly prove a satisfying sum,” he admitted. “And if Mr Slygne refused to pay it?”

“The *Ferret* would be reluctantly compelled to withhold its friendship from Mr Slygne and from M. Slygne’s companies.”

“And you think that we should not survive such a calamity?”

“You could try, of course,” responded Grady, cheerfully.

Percy meditated for a few moments. There were several sides to the question, and they could not all be considered in two minutes. Percy said as much.

“I quite appreciate your position,” replied Mr Grady, “and I am willing to allow you a reasonable time for consideration.

When may I have the pleasure of calling upon you again ?”

“ Well, the truth is that Mr Slygne is very busy just at present with our new Company. I will, however, approach him on the subject when he comes back from Somerset next month, and, if you care to call here in September, I shall be pleased to see you.”

“ I will call on the 15th September at 11.30 a.m.,” Mr Grady answered. “ And now I need detain you no longer. Good day, sir ; and I am delighted to have met the distinguished author of *Earth Raising and Its Practical Application*.”

With these words Mr Grady bowed himself out of the office, leaving Percy alone with his own reflections. But it was an afternoon of surprises, for scarcely three minutes had elapsed before Thomas again appeared in the doorway.

“ A lady to see you, sir,” said Thomas, and then, standing aside, he admitted the lady herself into Percy’s presence.

## CHAPTER XIII

### BELLA VISTA! A SHORT AND SWEET CHAPTER

PERCY'S heart gave a great thump, stopped still for a moment, and began to beat furiously like sudden drums at midnight sounding an alarm.

The girl who was ever in his thoughts, when the claims of finance would permit it, stood before him!

She was dressed in a frock of delicate mauve colour, her gloves were white, with little black lines upon the back, and her hat was cream-coloured and purple. She brought a delicate odour of violets into the room which suddenly seemed to be irradiated.

The aspect of the place changed to the young man who sat there. His face flushed and a sick disgust came to him as he realised that the gentleman from the *Ferret* had been poisoning the air there but a moment or

two before. How sordid his schemes and thoughts suddenly seemed to become.

He rose like a man in a dream and waited for her to speak.

"I am travelling *incog.*," explained Bella, as soon as the door was shut upon them, and in response to Percy's look of alarm. "You see," she went on, "I have never been to father's offices before, and so no one here knows me. Why, I daresay they do not even know that papa has a daughter! It seems very absurd, does it not, to think that such a thing is possible, but it is through our system of suppressing the women. Now, I am certain that, if papa let me come here once a week, I could manage a great deal of his business much better than he can himself, and yet, were I to suggest such a thing, he would be absolutely indignant."

She had rattled out this much before Percy had time to walk round the big table and come up to her.

When he had done so all his disquietude fled in a single moment. Despite a pretty protest, which did not seem quite sincere, he took her in his arms and held her close to him. "Dearest," he said, with swift and

passionate utterance. "Bella mine! how wonderful it is to see you again, to hold you in my arms, sweetheart!"

For a moment or two she was silent. The strength of his passion was overwhelming. She rested in those strong arms and looked up into the clean-cut boyish face with eyes that were tremulous as his. It seemed very safe, eternally satisfying to be where she was!

And then her natural gaiety reasserted itself. The exhilaration of this adventure bubbled up in her. A naughty light came into the pretty eyes, the lips curved in a mocking little smile and her cheeks were dimpled.

She broke away from him with a sudden movement.

"Yes!" she said, "I'm quite sure I should make an excellent business woman and be able to keep you all. And yet my stupid father would probably be quite angry if I proposed it to him!"

Percy acquiesced.

"Yes, and you think he would be quite right too, I can see," she went on smartly. "You are as much a tyrant as any of them."

"My darling! I'm not really! Really, except in a few unimportant ways, I believe that women are infinitely superior to men."

"You say that to flatter me; but never mind, it is meant well. Good boy! And so this is your own temple. It looks very important, but horribly dusty."

"Oh, but that's the proper thing, you know, in the City. It would cost the office-cleaner her place if she disturbed any of my papers."

"Poor woman, and how she must long to tidy up sometimes! For instance, why not keep all the blue plans together, instead of mixing them up with the yellow ones, as you have done? And then I should put these papers together, according to their sizes, and not have long ones tied up in the same parcel with little tiny ones like those by the window. You men have no sense of proportion, you know."

"I know," admitted Percy. "We prefer method, I am afraid."

"Do you call this method?" she asked, touching a pile of ragged and ugly-looking sheets.

"Very much so. And whatever you do, don't disturb them. Do you know that I can

turn up any date for the last ten years in that pile, as it now is?"

"But what are they?"

"Drilling sheets, dearest."

"What are drilling sheets, please—anything military?"

"Oh, no. They are the records of an oil well whilst it is being worked or drilled."

"Really. They look so dirty. *May* I dust them?"

"Please, no. You would fill the whole room with dust in two seconds."

"How dreadful. I don't think I should like to be in an office."

"No, I fancy it would depress you rather; but don't let's talk of business. What have you been doing lately? I haven't seen you for weeks, and you write me such tiny little letters."

"I don't believe in letter-writing; that's why. And besides, I have been saving up the latest excitement till we could meet. Do you know, father has bought a steam yacht? It's such a beauty, he says, and very fast. It is a twelve-hundred-ton ocean-going steam yacht, fitted with a complete installation of electric light, nickel-plated binnacles, and a calliope

attachment to her steam whistle—whatever that may mean. Isn't it *lovely!*”

In summing up the prominent qualities of Mr Percy Thawne, no one who was acquainted with them could fail to give a quickness of apprehension, a power of seeing things in sudden illuminating flashes, a very high place indeed. This enviable faculty came to his aid now. He saw at once that another preliminary step, in the great and dangerous game that Mr Horatio Sly was about to play, was entered upon.

Like a skilful general, at the very outset of his campaign the financier had already quietly arranged his line of retreat. How admirable the man was!

“How awfully jolly, dearest,” he answered quickly, his enthusiasm for his chief's acumen creeping into his voice and making the girl think that it was his sympathy with the news that had pleased and excited her so much.

“Dear boy,” she thought to herself, “how different he is from most men. He takes such an interest in everything. It will be almost like having a girl friend and a husband in one!”

“What has made him buy a yacht?” Percy

continued, though he was much more aware of the reason than even the dainty girl at his side could be.

She nestled up to him as she answered.

“He says he means to take me for a long trip so soon as business will allow him. Won't that be jolly?”

“Very,” assented Percy. “By-the-bye, where is the yacht?”

“Down at Bristol. I suppose we shall start from there. I wish there was a chance of your coming too.”

Percy twiddled a pencil in silence. Then he came and leant over the back of her chair.

“I think there *is* a chance of my coming,” he whispered.

“Oh, dearest! do you *really* think that you will be able to get round papa? After all, there is no reason why you should not, is there? Shall I tell him everything?”

“No, no, dearest, please. Leave everything to me just this once, and you shall have your own way for the rest of your life.” (He kissed her.) “Believe me, all will come right if you can trust me absolutely. Just at present your father is on the brink of a great business undertaking which must occupy

his whole attention for several months, but after that I think I see a time when he will take us both for a long trip on that yacht, but only if you *never* breathe my name to him meantime. Can you be silent without questioning me why, dear?"

"Of course, Percy. That will be another way of showing my sex's superiority over yours!" She sealed the bond trebly.

## CHAPTER XIV

### “LE DERNIER CRI”

POPULAR excitement in France is perhaps more immediately apparent than it is in England. The thing is better organised than here. Upon the arrival of a new sensation the ordered army of comic writers and singers, of caricaturists and so forth springs into immediate prominence. In Paris especially this is very marked. The city lends itself to advertisement. It is explicit of the craze of the hour, because its opportunities, pictorially and superficially, are greater than those of London. Imagine Victoria Street, for example, ever being externally altered by a wave of popular feeling! It is unthinkable.

Nevertheless, when once a novel idea *does* catch the British temperament, it is not too much to say that it lasts longer in its grip and the effects are more real than in the gay city over the narrow seas.

In Paris there are perhaps fifty or sixty little Boulevard newspapers of the lighter sort. Each one of them will appear with a clever—if generally improper—cartoon of what is interesting the public. But an aggregate of separate feebleness can never have the same force and power as the authoritative word of an established institution. Let but *Punch* speak to one class and *Ally Sloper* to another, and, whatever the subject of fun or derision may be, the sociologist realises how deeply it has bitten into the public mind.

And now England had got a popular cry which thoroughly and completely satisfied the popular mind.

Two or three days after the appearance of the "Preliminary Article" the fun began slowly. Then when Percy's pamphlet appeared it gathered momentum, and shrewd pleasure-caterers began to see their opportunity.

The first night of the real boom may be said to have been inaugurated at the Pavilion Music Hall in Piccadilly Circus.

It was on that occasion that Mr Lan Deno, the famous comic singer, sang his new song,

the "Earth Raisers," for the first time. In a week London was singing it also; in three it was chanted in the ale-houses of remote Welsh villages.

Bursting on to the stage dressed as nearly like the ordinary garden-worm as the exigencies of costume would allow and the genius of Mr Wilby Clerkson could accomplish, the famous little laughter-maker began,—

"I am," he informed an audience which had become one vast single grin, "a man to be envied. I have a pint and a half of the best wasp stalking in Europe, one idiot child, and two square feet of mould which I am about to raise into my new cryptoconchoid-symphonostomata, double-rolled, hot-pressed, iridium-pointed, jewelled-in-four-holes mayonaise machine." After a spirited clog dance, a little more patter, and a verse of the song, Mr Deno then burst into that chorus which is said to have rivalled "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" in its insidious appeal to the English-speaking world.

"So every man of worth  
Is going to raise the earth,  
And all the boys and girls are at it too!  
For so they say it won't be long

Before the CONTINONG  
Will come jumping through the gay Atlantic blue.  
Oh! (big drum) he's got some cheek  
Has the earth-merchant Pentique!  
WHIZ! BANG! COCKADOODLE-DOO!"

A week after this epoch-making occurrence the hunched sage of Bouverie Street spoke. A cartoon in Mr Sambourne's happiest vein appeared. It represented the nations of the earth sitting upon peaks and rocks of the two continents. Each pictured personality held an anxious telescope to his or her eye. The focus of each glass was directed towards a vast ocean. In the middle of this ocean was a mountain top just emerging from the waves. Upon this John Bull was sitting. A pleased smile was on the jolly face and he raised his hand in blessing upon Neptune who stood upon an enormous dredger, labelled H.M.S. IMPERIAL, directing the operations of the crew.

In the Strand an ingenious sixpenny toy was in great demand. A gaudy little tin Britannia turned a handle, and out of a circular tin globe, painted to resemble a map of the world, the Lost Continent rose majestically to the music of a hidden squeaker.

At Earl's Court, in the great Empress Theatre, a vast mechanical panorama was built. There, in the afternoon and evening, and for the modest price of sixpence, the public might witness a huge spectacular performance showing the Lost Continent leaping from the ocean like a gigantic salmon trout.

And, perhaps the most significant sign of all, Mons. Jules Verne awoke from his long sleep at Amiens and, explaining that he had predicted this very event in one of his earlier novels published in 1804 (or thereabouts), sent a stirring message to the youth of Great Britain which was published in four colours in the next issue of *The Boy's Own Paper*.

A hundred other indications of the hold which Professor Pentique's marvellous idea had taken on the mind of this country might be given. But that is hardly necessary. Suffice it to say that never was there such excitement upon a national question before.

"A national question!" An "international question!" Yes! the business was already spoken of as these.

Meanwhile the Company had not been floated, and even the prospectus had not

appeared. Mr Slygne and his friends were biding their time. They were whisking the general excitement as a cook whisks eggs for an omelette. They know that everything comes to the man who can wait, and though they knew of the proverb that "Time and tide wait for no man," they enlisted both in their service, and so shrewdly gave the lie to the ancient adage.

This much for the general sentiment about the startling news. The man in the street took it for granted. An inert brain accepts anything that is much talked of as a fact.

Naturally there were a large number of people who ridiculed the whole thing. Such stupendous operations *must* be impossible they said.

A prominent London daily sent a representative to Lord Mevin, the leading scientist of the day. His lordship ridiculed the possibility of raising the Lost Continent, declared that it was utterly impossible, and could never be done by any means whatever.

But his lordship made one little concession which entirely destroyed the force of his remarks, and which illustrates the shrewdness of Professor Pentique and his friends.

*Pentique's process had never been given to the world.* It was preserved as an inviolate secret. But, and here the wisdom of the promoters shows itself most clearly, a certain scientific principle which if pursued to its furthest theoretical limits might possibly give some such result as the Professor confidently stated he had obtained, did actually exist.

"Of course," said Lord Melvin to the reporter, "if so and so were possible, and if such and such experiments could be carried out—well, then anything might happen :"

At once the papers in favour of Pentique and Slygne raised the cry of scientific jealousy and brought innumerable instances of the opposition of men in official positions to anything new. Stevenson and the *Rocket* were cited, and one adventurous print even hazarded a reference to Galileo and the Inquisition !

And above all there were the two practical proofs, the island in Polynesia and the works at Somerset.

It was proved without any possibility of doubt that a small island *had* suddenly made its appearance in the South Seas. It was not marked on the Admiralty chart in 19—, and in 19—, three years later, owing to a

communication from Professor Pentique, it *was* duly charted as Pentique Island.

For a year previously it was known that Pentique had been cruising in the neighbourhood in an old steam yacht from Sydney.

Fortune ever favours the audacious. In those remote seas a slight volcanic disturbance is not infrequent and news of it but rarely penetrates to the outside world. And if the Professor had taken advantage of an actual fact and made Nature his accomplice—though scientific critics might come near the truth—the man in the street was content to accept the famous earth-raiser's explanation.

An enormous number of people visited Whitleigh and were convinced there.

It was as though the whole of England meant to settle in Somerset. Paddington became one hustling mob, without and within. The train service was demoralised and the cry was "Still they come!" The Great Western Directors took counsel together, and ran a special set of excursion trains in order that the public demand might be satisfied. Bands of police were posted at all the principal stations *en route* to regulate the conduct of would-be passengers, hundreds

of whom contended fiercely for seats in every train as it came in. This step on the part of the authorities was, moreover, by no means unnecessary, for several fatalities had already occurred as a result of these mad platform contests. At Paddington itself effective measures were quickly put into force, the station being treated like a theatre, and its crowds regulated on the *queue* system.

"Go to Whitleigh" quite superseded a former expression of impatience, whilst "Are you an earth-raiser?" became the catchword of the day. Even in the politest circles no one could claim to have done "the thing" until he or she had viewed the famous "raisers."

It was the making of Bridgwater. That somewhat unobtrusive town now blossomed out as an important commercial centre, since it was the station for Whitleigh, and the latter place, being eleven miles away, it naturally followed that a new cab-driving industry sprang up.

The Western citizens took up this trade with such energy that good little girls learning their geography were taught to answer the question, "What is Bridgwater famous

for?" by "Cabs." After a time these cab horses came to be recognised as a distinct breed of their own, and someone even went so far as to float a company, having for its object "the improvement of the Bridgwater breed of cab horse." The Company was not a success, unfortunately, presumably because the breed had already progressed beyond improvement.

It was a very good-tempered Slygne, therefore, who sat in his office nowadays. Good-tempered and affable until one fatal afternoon, when Mr Percy Thawne came knocking at his door.

## CHAPTER XV

### A MATTER OF FIGURES

MR SLYGNE looked up with a good-humoured smile when Percy entered, and invited him to take a seat.

"Now what can I do for you?" he asked affably.

Percy crossed his arms slowly, and rested them upon the table before him.

"I wish to see you about the proposals for my future which you were good enough to tell me of a short time ago," he said. "I have not had a chance of catching you alone since you returned from Somerset, or I should have taken the opportunity of seeing you before."

"Oh, don't mention it," returned Mr Slygne, politely.

"I must thank you very much," Percy went on, "for the offer which you then made

me, and after careful consideration I have come to a definite decision."

"Which is?" inquired Slygne, his face all wrinkled with smiles.

"To accept your kind offer, upon one condition."

"Dear me, and what may that be, pray?"

"I must ask you to give me 400 shares in *The Lost Continent Company*, to compensate me for my disappointment at not being created secretary."

Slygne heaved a big sigh; then he opened his eyes to their widest extent, and whistled.

"Po-o-o-oh!" said he, "I like your modesty. Why, do you know that the capital will be trebly subscribed for?"

"Yes, and that is why I want the shares; neither do I see why you should refuse to give me them since I have always done my best for you."

"But I cannot give you them wher the Company is not even floated yet."

"If you choose to give me the shares you can arrange that I have them."

Slygne bridled.

"It would be defrauding the public, sir."

"Not at all, Mr Slygne. I am one of the public."

"Well, you are not going to have the shares, do you understand?"

"If I don't get the shares I cannot take over your Companies."

"All right, don't! I can get a hundred secretaries to-morrow by advertising," sneered the promoter.

Percy looked thoughtful.

"Secretary of three Companies at £240 per annum under the eminent company promoter, Mr Horatio Slygne. Do you think they would accept those terms, now that you are so famous, sir?"

"Of course they would," retorted Slygne, fiercely. "In these days of higher education the clerical supply is limitless. And now, are you going to take my offer or not? I cannot waste time with you."

"I want the shares," replied Percy, doggedly.

"Then by Gad, sir," yelled Slygne, jumping up in his chair and leaning over the table, "you won't get them! What's

come over you that you dare to talk to me like this?"

Percy leaned back and smiled tenderly across the table.

"I had better go then," he remarked. "But I mean to have those shares all the same, and I daresay the *Wild West* shareholders would like some too."

"They're going to have some, you young fool."

Slygne was literally grey with passion. He had been so utterly unprepared for a scene that now he rapped out information on the spur of the moment. Had he been in the least prepared for a row he would never have shown temper thus.

Percy tapped with his fingers on the table.

"Oh, is that how the matter stands? Rather a good way of quieting them."

The financier recovered himself quickly. His indiscretion cooled him, and though sweating with anger, he now moderated his voice. Leaning his chin on both hands, he began to speak. His face was set like a mask, with the furrows standing out, as though carved in wood.

“You can do me no harm, you young hound, and you must be mad if you think the contrary. People will take my word before yours, and you will find no proof against me anywhere.”

“Never mind the harm,” answered Percy. “I want the shares.”

“I have told you I cannot give you them.”

“Oh, well, I must go and start an opposition somewhere, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I may not be able to do you any harm, but I know by this time pretty well where to go for your enemies. I daresay they would like some information about your old Companies, for instance. You could scarcely prevent them from buying shares in the Wild West, could you? And now I come to think of it, I will have some *Mount Pisa* shares myself. An old-established Company like that will probably pay dividends before a new concern like *The Lost Continent*. I admit the *Mount Pisa* has not issued a Report and Balance Sheet for two years, not since it paid that mysterious dividend, in fact; but doubtless your new secretary will be able to account for this easily enough. We might start a correspondence in the *Financial Times*. It would

be good for the shares on 'Change, would it not? And then you know there is another thing to be considered, Professor Pentique's processes!"

Slygne dropped slowly back into his chair, his hands still clasped on the table before him, while a look of troubled meditation settled down over his countenance. He was uncertain how much his secretary actually knew.

"You are a disgrace to my office," he remarked slowly.

"Are you not a little unreasonable?" replied Percy. "Think a moment."

"Because I will not give you shares in a Company that has not yet been formed?"

"You can give me the shares right enough if you like, seeing that you are the most important man connected with the Company."

"But I do not consider that it would be right for me to give you shares."

"Four hundred is nothing to you."

Slygne shook his head.

"An impossible number, absolutely impossible. I might get you five."

"I would take 300," went on Percy, ignoring the offer.

"With trouble I might even secure you ten."

"I will take 300, but not one share less," remarked Percy with emphasis.

"But they are to be £10 shares. You are asking for £3000."

Percy nodded.

"Impossible! I should have to give you my own shares. Take £50 worth of debenture stock; it will be a gilt-edged security."

"They won't gamble in the stock on 'Change like they will in the shares," Percy answered promptly. "I want 300 shares. It is a good dealing number."

"But I should have to give you my own shares," groaned Slygne.

"I don't care whose they are."

Slygne looked out of the window. He was grinding his teeth with fury, for if there is one thing which a City man loathes more than another it is to give away something on which he has been counting. If the profit on a deal is to be £25, £25 it must be. Is it shorter by two and sixpence, whips and scorpions! it is the devil to him!

Percy knew this, and smiled to watch his employer's agony of mind.

"Are you going to give me them or not?" he inquired, after a pause.

"I could not possibly get you more than 100," replied Slygne. "The other 200 would have to be my own."

"I want 300 shares," remarked Percy, regarding the ceiling intently. "There is a blank transfer beside you, I notice."

Slygne took the document in his hand and viewed it wistfully, while Percy looked at a fly on the window. Presently Slygne began to write. Then he touched a bell, and a clerk entered.

"Witness this signature," said he, shortly. "And now go. Well, Thawne, here you are."

Percy came round and stood beside him.

"I should like you to call them 'fully paid up' shares. And you might number them 1 to 300, if you please."

"Oh—I forgot—yes—"

"And please do not trouble to date the transfer. I would rather have it stamped when the Company comes out. Thank you, I had better get back to my work now, had I not? Good-day."

"Good-day. Oh, and Thawne."

The secretary turned, with his hand on the door knob.

"Of course I cannot raise your salary after treating you so liberally over this matter."

"Very well. Good-day."

There was a gleam of triumph in Percy's eyes as he paced briskly through the streets after leaving Slygne. The first part of his day's work had gone off most successfully. The next job was comparatively simple.

He went straight to Lime Street; Herr Blachen was the man he wanted now.

Professor Pentique was in Somersetshire, and Blachen received him alone.

"Ah, Mistah Thawne, how are you? Sit down."

There was a touch of patronage in the foreigner's tone which Percy had never been able to detect before. It exasperated him greatly.

"Have you seen the new secretary yet?" he demanded.

"Not yet, Mr Thawne," replied Blachen, grinning.

"No. And you had better not either."

"Ha! And why not, pray?"

"Because he is a fool, for one thing. And because I say so, for another."

"Ah, *you* say so. But, unfortunately, you have nothing to do with the Company."

"I have enough to do with it, and know enough about it and you, to cook your kettle of fish any day, my friend."

"Ach, you could cook my kettle-fish?"

"I could and I will, unless you do what I tell you."

Blachen laughed cheerfully.

"You joke well, Mr Thawne. Doubtless you are a big shareholder in this Company?"

"I am, but unless you are careful, *you* will not touch one-sixteenth part of a share."

"Ha! ha! But I am Professor Pentique's amanuensis. I do his business for him, and he has already promised me shares."

"And I am Mr Slygne's amanuensis, and unless Mr Slygne consents you will not get one share."

"Good! Then Mr Slygne can regulate everything, can he? Ha! ha!"

"He and I can make it pretty uncomfortable for you. And we will too unless you are careful."

"But you would only wreck the Company,

and then none of us would make any money."

"I would rather wreck the Company than be cheated by you. You made a bargain with me the other night, and unless you mean to stick by it, I'll ruin you."

"I do not think you can ruin me, but—well, well, I am willing to keep my bargain."

"How many shares is Pentique giving you?"

Blachen puffed out his chest. "Five hundred," he said.

"Then you will sign me a transfer for 100 of them," remarked Percy coolly, producing a document from his pocket.

Blachen's jaw dropped. Then his face turned a hot crimson.

"You dam devil! I will not!" he shrieked.

"All right, don't; don't, and I will publish the secret of the earth-raising fraud to-night. Everyone in England shall know you for a knave and a scoundrel before twelve hours have passed."

Blachen turned white and pink alternately.

"You cannot," he stammered. "I libel you if you do, and you pay much damage."

Percy laughed ironically.

"No, you do nothing of the kind," he cried. "But I ruin the Company, and I ruin Horatio Slygne, and I ruin Professor Pentique, and I ruin you. Oh, yes, I ruin you worst of all. Now look here," he continued briskly, "are you going to sign this transfer, and work with me, or are you not?"

Blachen took the paper, shivering.

"It is filled in for 100 shares, and unless you sign quickly I shall alter the number to 250."

With unsteady fingers Blachen slowly traced his name. The signature was witnessed by Pentique's ledger clerk, and then they were alone once more.

"You are a devil of an Englishman," Blachen snarled. "A devil!"

"Yes, am I not? And now let's have no more nonsense. We agreed to stick by one another, and that's what we've got to do. You would never have got on with Gildover, he is such a fool. When do you leave England?"

"Pentique and I go directly the new apparatus is made. That will be soon, for we have worked already a long time over it. I expect we shall be able to start soon after the Company is floated."

"Well, then, don't forget to keep me advised."

"No," replied Blachen, sulkily.

Percy snapped him up swiftly. "Look here, if you don't keep me advised by every mail I will get up a scare this end on my own hook."

"Do not fear, I will advise you. Indeed, Mr Thawne," went on Blachen, brightening, "I like you, really; you are so damn smart. And I do not grudge you my 100 shares, no! I was thinking of giving them to you."

Percy could not repress a smile.

"And I am thinking that you will get more than 500 out of Pentique," said he.

Blachen paled. "I will advise you of all the work as it goes on," he began hurriedly; nor did he stop talking until Percy rose to go.

And this was how Mr Thawne, secretary of the *Wild West Oil Corporation*, the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, and the *Young Companies' Propagation Syndicate, Limited*, accomplished his first important day's work in higher finance, at the age of eight-and-twenty, in the City of London.

## CHAPTER XVI

### STRICTLY FINANCIAL

THE *Lost Continent Recovery Company* was actually floated in August, a time of year when business in the company world is usually slack. This fact, however, was rather favourable than otherwise to the "Continent," since the financial world, having no other distraction, gave its undivided attention to Mr Siygne's new company. The capital was subscribed for six times over, and this fact caused little surprise, owing to the enormous sensation Pentique's discovery had already created.

The Company's £10 ordinary shares were run up to 20-21 before the allotment was out, and by the time they were fully paid the price was 30. Needless to say, excitement ran high. The babel in Throgmorton Street each evening was deafening for weeks after the Company had obtained an official quotation.

The shares went up by leaps—35-40 ; 45-46 ; 50-52 ;  $58\frac{1}{2}$ - $60\frac{1}{2}$  ; 68-70.

Then the "bears" made a raid, and the price fell for two days, stopping at  $65\frac{1}{2}$ -66. For a time it looked as if they might get the upper hand, but they could not frighten the public, who were thirsting for shares, and presently the "bulls" came back with a rush that carried everything before them; the price touched 100 in five days, and there were ten "bear" failures in the House at the next Settlement.

Everybody seemed to have gone scrip-mad, and everywhere, town or country, men could talk of nothing else but "Missing Links," as the Stock Exchange had christened *Lost Continent* ordinary shares. People with money clapped every penny they possessed into the new concern. People without money opened *carrying over* accounts, and did very well too. Half a share was sold for £57, and a small lot of five once fetched £506, 10s.

Those were days on the Money Market! No one ever mentioned Industrials; British Rails *slumped* hopelessly; Mines were altogether neglected; and even Yankees failed to attract the speculator. The truth was that

he preferred to deal in *Missing Link* fractions. "Support our new Home venture," Slygne had said at the Statutory Meeting of the *Lost Continent Company*, and England rallied to his call.

The Professor and Herr Blachen were by this time in mid-Atlantic, preparing to raise the *Lost Continent*. They had gone out with a big flotilla, the doings of which were wrapped in great mystery, and, after forming a cordon of ships round the spot where they intended to work, had established wireless telegraphic communication with Poldhu. By this means they cabled home monthly information as to the proceedings of the Company, and their reports having been knocked into shape at the London office by Slygne, were published regularly in the financial papers. The *Lost Continent* offices were in Broad Street. They were on a much grander scale than those of the Wild West Company, a scale befitting the importance of the Company and of its Managing Director, Mr Horatio Slygne. For Mr Slygne was by now an important public character. His time was occupied entirely by directors' meetings, official speeches, complimentary banquets, and Stock Exchange trans-

actions of a technical character, which it would be useless attempting to explain. He never went near the *Mount Pisa* office now; he never thought of the *Wild West*, or the *Y.C.P.S.L.*; he simply had not the time. But Percy was in charge. Percy, with his salary of £20 a month, and his 400 *Missing Link* shares, was very much in charge of those ancient financial chickens. He soon found that control of the *Wild West* office meant also responsibility for the *Wild West* office. Any inquiries addressed to Slygne were now referred back to "my temporary manager"; and when Percy asked for advice he received but scant courtesy from Horatio Slygne.

Such are the ways of business men, and if you offend a man like Slygne, you must be prepared to stand the consequences. Percy had offended Slygne. He had extracted 300 *Missing Links* from the financier, and though it is quite possible that another man would have been forgiven, the ingratitude of this act in Percy's case was altogether too much for Slygne. He therefore proceeded to make careful preparations for Percy's ruin by mixing him up as much as possible with that

unfortunate affair, the *Wild West Oil Corporation, Limited*. Percy very soon awoke to this fact, and, in his turn, prepared to escape from the toils thus set for him. It seems odious that we should have to write in this way of two such talented men as Slygne and Percy, but the facts of the case being these, it is impossible to escape from telling them. And so, whilst the merry month of August went by, these two plotted and counterplotted against each other.

One day, about the middle of the month, Percy was sitting in his office when Thomas entered hurriedly to announce a lady. "An old lady, sir; and she seems very anxious to see you," he explained.

"Show her up," Percy answered.

The old lady bustled upstairs, with much panting, and Percy, looking up at her entrance, saw a figure which struck him as strangely familiar. She was a lady of rotund proportions, who beamed pleasantly as she advanced. A couple of yards from Percy she hesitated suddenly, and throwing up her hands, exclaimed,—

"Why, young man, haven't I seen you before, or am I dreaming? For you must

know I have a wonderful recollection for faces, and it's seldom I am at all mistaken. Yes, the Lord MacIlkey himself once said to me at the Dublin Ball, years ago, 'Mrs O'Mea,' says he, 'I'd trust your recollection of a face you've once seen anywhere.' Now, let me think and I'll tell you in two minutes where it was that I've met you before."

"I think," said Percy, taking the bull by the horns, "that we met on a railway journey, when we were both going down to a place called Bridgwater."

"Yes, yes, yes, to be sure," cried the old lady, coming forward, and taking Percy's hand in both her own. "And so you're the secretary of the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, and you never told me so when I asked your opinion, Well, well! I'm glad it's a friend that I've found, instead of Mr John Jones, the young blackguard who persuaded me to buy *Mount Pisas*. But, come now, we'll get to business. You must know that I have a mighty small income, and I can't afford to be holding shares in a Company which does not pay a dividend at all, so I've come to you to have a chat about these precious certificates of mine which don't seem worth two

farthings apiece, so far as selling the shares is concerned."

"Well," replied Percy, "you must recollect that because you cannot sell a share it does not follow that the share is valueless. The market is made up of many different securities. Some have come to the period of fruition, and pay handsome dividends; others are not yet fully developed. The shareholders in these latter companies must therefore wait patiently for their companies to join the paying class of investments. Until such a stage is reached, every company is at the mercy of many unscrupulous persons connected with the Stock Exchange, who make it their practice to depreciate the value of shares, in order that they may buy in cheaply those shares which they know will eventually be valuable. The *Mount Pisa Gold Mine* is a case in point. This Company is not yet in a position to pay dividends, since its properties are not by any means developed, and for this very reason it is essential that our shareholders should exercise a reasonable patience, knowing that our future is assured."

Mrs O'Mea tapped on the ground with her

umbrella. "Young man," she said, "don't talk nonsense to me. I've waited two years for these fine dividends which you and Mr John Jones have been talking of, and never a sign of them have I seen. Not only that, sir, but the shares can't be sold on the market by hook or by crook, and as for what you say about unscrupulous persons buying them at a low price, it's all blarney, if you'll pardon me the expression. Sure there's a firm, by name Messrs Slamme & Datchit, who are offering to sell 5000 Mount Pisa shares to any good-natured soul who'll condescend to buy them. Don't I know that for a fact? And yet you'll be telling me that the market is buying *Mount Pisas* on the sly. Never a bit of it, Mr Thawne, take your grandmother's word for it, sir."

"You will, in your turn, excuse my saying," replied Percy, "that to anyone outside the immediate circle of the stock market the position and movement of mining shares is apt to be nothing short of bewildering. For instance, Slamme & Datchit are avowed enemies of ours, and the fact that they are offering 5000 or 10,000 shares to-day does not preclude the probability that to-morrow

they will be buying 20,000. You cannot rely upon such items of information, believe me, my dear madam, since the Stock Exchange, *entre nous*, is worked to a great extent by *bluff*."

"Ah, yes, that may be all very well in general, but I tell you it does not apply to the present case at all. There's no bluff about selling *Mount Pisas*, and lucky's the man who can do it. Don't I know that Slamme & Datchit are genuine sellers, just as well as I know that you're sitting there?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders after the manner of Mr Slygne. "What is your object in seeing me, if you will not accept my well-meant efforts to help you?" he asked with comic helplessness.

"I'll tell you," answered the old lady, "it's not you at all that I really wanted to see, although I thought I'd begin by coming round here to give Mr John Jones a piece of my mind. As Mr Jones, however, does not seem to be about"—Percy shook his head sadly—"as he's not about, I am now going off to Mr Slygne in Broad Street, do you see, and I want you to ring him up on the telephone and acquaint him with the fact."

"Certainly, madam," answered Percy, glad to be rid of the garrulous old creature.

Having seen the last of her, he proceeded to do as she had requested him. He rang Slygne up, and told him that a discontented shareholder was on her way to Broad Street. "I could not deal with her," he added, "so thought it best to refer her to you."

"Very good," replied Slygne, grimly, "I'll see her."

Accordingly, on her arrival at the Lost Continent offices, Mrs O'Mea was quickly ushered into Slygne's comfortable private room, where she found the famous man, sitting in an armchair, waiting to receive her. She plunged at once, after the fashion of her race.

"I've come to see you about *Mount Pisas*, Mr Slygne, for you must know that I can't afford to hold shares that do not pay a dividend, and are, moreover, unmarketable."

The financier chafed his hands together thoughtfully.

"Yes?" he said.

"I have been to my stockbrokers, but they tell me the market in *Mount Pisas* is dead, so far as selling shares is concerned."

"And therefore you are very keen to sell, I suppose?"

"I am most anxious to get rid of shares that do not pay any dividend. Can you sell *Mount Pisas* for me?"

"Unfortunately my business does not include stockbroking," Slygne answered.

The tone in which he spoke caused Mrs O'Mea to flush angrily.

"No! But you are Managing Director of the *Mount Pisa*, and you do not draw your fees from that Company for laughing at its shareholders."

"I have for some time past drawn no fees whatever from the *Mount Pisa*," answered Slygne, with admirable equanimity. "I have considered it my duty to work for the Company without remuneration until we have established ourselves more firmly, and I can only wish that some of my fellow-shareholders would cultivate a like patience."

Mrs O'Mea gave a short laugh.

"My dear bhoy," she answered, "don't you be coming round me with your beautiful devices for soothing the troubled breast, for it's waste of breath. I'm only an old woman, maybe, but I've had a mighty long connection

with the City, one way or another, having a nephew in business at this very moment, as his uncle was before him. What I want is to get rid of *Mount Pisas*, and not to have balm poured on the troubled waters of my soul by you."

This unexpected outburst had absolutely no effect on Mr Slygne.

"That a person with a long business experience such as yours should attempt to fasten responsibility upon me for the state of the Mining Market," he said, "is very extraordinary. And I must inform you that I have quite enough to look after, without attempting to regulate the movements of *tape prices*. If you wish for information about the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*, I, or the Secretary of the Company, shall be quite prepared to provide the same, but to come here blustering because your stockbrokers cannot sell the shares is both useless and absurd."

Mrs O'Mea grew red again.

"Mr Slygne," she said, "I'll not leave this office until I have obtained some satisfactory information about the Company."

"What do you wish to know?" he interrupted sharply.

"Why there are no buyers of *Mount Pisas* on the market."

"The question is ridiculous. Go and ask your stockbrokers."

"I have, and they reply, 'Go and ask Horatio Slygne. He knows all about *Mount Pisas*. The mine is bankrupt as far as we know.' So there you are."

"And I contradict that statement most emphatically. So there *you* are, madam," responded the financier coldly.

"A contradiction goes for nothing."

"It goes for more than the assertion you have just quoted."

"Not at all, sir, since the assertion is backed by evidence."

"What evidence?"

"Messrs Slamme & Datchit are sellers of 5000 *Mount Pisa* shares."

"Slamme & Datchit!" he sneered. "They are not genuine sellers. If you were a business man you would understand."

"Oh, I understand well enough. What you mean is that they are 'bearing' the shares; but sure, that's all wrong, for did I not see the very certificates of the 5000 shares which they want to sell? Tell me

now, am I correct in guessing what you mean?"

Slygne looked at Mrs O'Mea with a glance of peculiar intelligence, but he only said, "That is precisely what I meant."

"Ah, yes, and is it not exactly what I thought. Sure I know stockbroking terms well enough or I'd not be here now disputing with you. So, as I've said before, Slamme & Datchit are just genuine sellers of Mount Pisas, only that they cannot get any soul on the market foolish enough to buy. Yes, I saw the certificates of the shares right enough."

Mr Horatio Slygne gave a dry sort of chuckle to himself, and then, having adjusted his *pince-nez* with care, he spoke again,—

"Tell me," he said, "have you no other suggestion to make by which you can get rid of these shares? Supposing I do not see my way to giving you any cash for them. What then?"

"Ah, I don't want cash for them particularly," answered Mrs O'Mea, hurriedly. "My idea was that we might have an exchange, and that you should give me a few *Lost Continent* ordinary shares in exchange for my Mount Pisas."

Slygne laughed very genially.

"And how many *Mount Pisas* do you hold?" he inquired.

"Two hundred."

"And would you part with every one of them?"

"Every single one of them. If you will give me some Lost Continent shares, there will be one shareholder less to worry you about the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine*."

Slygne rubbed his hands.

"I could not possibly think of doing such a thing," he said.

"Then I shall worry you."

"Pooh! How can you do that?"

"In many ways. Will you give me the shares?"

"No. Not a single one. I defy you."

"Very well, Mr Slygne, you shall repent of it. Wait till I and my nephew get up a correspondence in the financial papers and organise a body of protesting shareholders against you. Wait till the whole country knows what a failure the *Mount Pisa Mine* is. Wait for that, Mr Slygne, and see how you like it."

"Then it comes to this, madam, that unless

I give you *Lost Continent* shares, you mean to start a campaign against me in the Press?"

"I do ; and in a businesslike way too."

Slygne took off his *pince-nez* and laid them aside. Then he leaned across the table.

"Mrs O'Mea," he said, fixing his eyes on hers, "I want to ask you a question."

"Well, and what may it be?"

"Who put you up to coming round here this afternoon?"

It was as though a bomb had fallen at the old lady's feet. The smiling face suddenly lengthened, the colour died away for a second, and then returned, flooding her cheeks crimson.

"What do you mean?" she stammered.

"What I say," replied Slygne, never moving an eyelash.

"No one," she gasped, still very pink.

"My good woman, it is not the least use your prevaricating. I have asked you a simple question, to which I expect an answer."

"I have answered you."

"I want a true answer, madam."

"Sir! Do you insinuate—"

"Yes, I do," he answered, with gathering indignation. "I want to know who sent you

here to rush me into bribing you to hold your tongue." Slygne banged on the table whilst he spoke till the inkpots spluttered. "Do you imagine that you can take me in with your clumsy acting? Don't I know Slamme & Datchit well enough? Yes, and probably that other friend who has taken a hand in sending you here this afternoon. However, we will have his name if you please. Who is he?"

"I don't know what you mean," answered the Irishwoman, recovering her spirit. "I am perfectly within my individual rights when I ask you about *Mcunt Pisas*, and you're not going to be rough-riding over me, Mister Slygne."

The financier checked his anger.

"I don't think you appreciate the situation," he remarked quietly.

"Do you not?" retorted Mrs O'Mea, misreading his coolness. "Perhaps I appreciate it too well to suit your convenience."

"For instance," went on Slygne, ignoring her interruption, "you do not appear to understand that by threatening me as you have done you lay yourself open to a serious charge of blackmail which it will not be at all

hard for me to prove; more especially since your visit here can be proved to have been the result of a plot between yourself, Messrs Slamme & Datchit, and a third party whom it will not be difficult to discover. Probably, also, you do not know that blackmailing is a crime which our judges punish most severely with imprisonment. I am inclined to think that you are ignorant of this fact, since, otherwise, I cannot believe that you would have allowed yourself to be thus made a cat's-paw of by some unscrupulous ruffians, who, knowing the law themselves, are afraid to approach me, preferring rather to use the services of a third person, on whom the penalty may fall."

Slygne paused for a moment to take breath. Then he went on again in a more cheerful tone of voice,—

"Of course your ignorance of the law may stand you in good stead, and will possibly serve to shorten the period of imprisonment to which I shall have you condemned. But the worst of these law cases is their expense, and so I am afraid you will find yourself in rather an unfortunate position by the time this business is completed. You see I am,

luckily, in a position to prosecute an action like this to the very end; but with you it must be different since you cannot afford to hold 200 shares that do not pay a dividend, whilst I hold 2000 of the same shares without a murmur. In view of all this, therefore, I cannot but think that you made a mistake in joining this conspiracy. Do you not agree with me?"

Mrs O'Mea had begun to fidget unpleasantly. Her eyes, at the same time, were wandering round the room. She reminded Slygne of a mouse which he had trapped that morning in his bedroom at home.

"You are trying to intimidate me," she declared bravely.

"Not a bit of it," he answered, smiling. "I am trying to state the case as pleasantly as possible."

"But you would never win a case upon such slight evidence."

"It will not be the first that I shall have won upon very much the same evidence," he answered. "The Counsel's charges work out at about 20 guineas a day, I admit, but the result is certain, and I do not mind spending money in the interests of the community."

Mrs O'Mea gradually broke down. First of all she began to snivel. Then the tears welled slowly up in each eye, rolled over her chubby red cheeks, slid down her bonnet-strings, and finally were lost to sight beneath the ledge of the table.

"Do you want to ruin me?" she sobbed.

"Not in the least," answered Slygne.

"But if you take this action, and I defend it, I'll be ruined; and if I do not defend it, I'll be sent to prison. Can't you see that clear enough?"

"The position does seem difficult for you, I admit," he conceded. "But you have brought it on yourself, remember."

"I did not mean to."

"Ah, the consequences of an action can be measured beforehand so seldom!" observed Slygne, heaving a sigh.

For several moments there was a silence, broken only by the snuffling of Mrs O'Mea. Presently she collected herself and turned to him again.

"What good can it do you bringing a poor woman to ruin, Mr Slygne?"

"It will do me no personal good whatsoever, madam; but in the interests of the public I

consider that it is my duty to crush, whenever I can, that abominable crime of blackmail."

"Can you not let it pass this time, considering the circumstances?"

"Why should I?"

"I will do anything if you agree," she pleaded.

"Duty is duty, madam, and besides, I cannot believe that you mean all you say, since you have flatly refused to give me the name of that other gentleman who sent you here."

"It was my nephew, Mr Slygne."

"Oh, and what may his name be, pray?"

"Grady, Mr Slygne; editor of one of the leading financial papers."

Slygne lay back in his chair and raised his eyes to the ceiling. He felt an intense desire to whistle, which he checked. When he had collected his feelings he sat up again.

"Mr Grady is very well known in certain circles," he said. "Permit me to congratulate you on possessing so—intelligent a relative. I have never had the honour of meeting him yet; perhaps it is a pleasure to come. And now I do not think I need

detain you any longer. Good afternoon, madam."

"But the action. Will you promise not to bring the action?"

"I will promise to let you know before I do. Good afternoon, madam."

"But promise; please promise me. I cannot live in uncertainty. Please, Mr Slygne."

"I must think it over."

"No, Mr Slygne; I cannot leave you without knowing. Please tell me, just yes or no. If you please."

Slygne looked at his watch and noticed that he had already wasted a good deal of time over a trivial matter.

"Well," he said, "I will promise; but only on condition that you promise never to come near this office again."

"I swear to you that I never will."

"Very good, madam. And I promise not to have you imprisoned so long as you fulfil your part of the bargain. Good afternoon, and let this be a warning to you."

So she passed from his sight.

## CHAPTER XVII

### TELLS OF A PLOT THAT FAILED

PERCY'S present position was somewhat dubious. He had taken the reins into his own hand, and had driven through a tightish place with success, but the road ahead still looked extremely dangerous, and disaster seemed inevitable at the finish. By obtaining the shares from Slygne he had declared war against a man who was now the strongest financier of the day. By taking over control of the Companies he had placed himself in what might easily become an awkward position in regard to the public; and now when the *Lost Continent Company* was actually floated, he remained quite outside the official circle, and knew no better than the greenest speculator what Slygne's plans were for its future. How could he know? Blachen, safely across the sea, had not sent him a scrap of information; Slygne counted

him as an enemy, and Bella knew nothing whatever about the great stakes for which her father was playing. Where could he turn in order that he might outwit the Napoleon of Finance? At present the only possible person for his purpose seemed to be Mr Grady, and he was surely the most broken of reeds on which to lean. He considered the matter critically from all sides, striving to regard himself as a third person in some interesting fix. The "fix" was undoubted, but his interest was not impersonal, and his nerve wavered.

Then an inspiration seized him.

He possessed an old school friend who lived at Clifton, the fashionable suburb of Bristol, where Slygne's yacht was lying. Why should he not find out the boat's name, ask his chum to make friends with her captain, and then himself go down and investigate with a view to learning the plans which Mr Slygne must be making? For it was essential that he should know when the financier meant to leave England, otherwise he would himself be left in the lurch that he might satisfy the misplaced justice of an infuriated mob. No sooner was the thought

conceived than he proceeded to put it into practice. First of all he wrote to Bella asking for the vessel's name. Then, having obtained this, he wrote a little note of instructions to his friend at Clifton, and awaited, as best he could, for developments.

With the last week in August came his friend's reply. He had scraped an acquaintance with the Captain of the steam yacht *La Belle*. He would be delighted to see Percy at Bristol upon the following Saturday afternoon, when nothing would be easier than to contrive a meeting with Captain Clark. Percy sent a wire clinching this arrangement, and so the matter was settled.

As luck would have it, the ensuing Friday was Settlement Day on the Stock Exchange, and Percy received a handsome cheque that morning in payment for some *Missing Links* which he had sold. This he at once cashed, and, having secreted a liberal sum about his person, felt thoroughly prepared for his westward trip.

Slowly that week dragged by, until at last the eventful morning had come, and he was actually *en route* for the metropolis of the west. His fate really seemed to be bound up

with the Great Western Railway, for on that Company's line he had first met his sweetheart, and by the present expedition he hoped to outdo Slygne. How many more such journeys would he take before the farce had been played out? Not many, surely, since no mortal power could keep the *Lost Continent Company* afloat so soon as people found out that there was in reality no Lost Continent forthcoming. The present "boom" might continue for a month, or for six months, but the crash must come at length. Percy trembled to think that, unless he could find out something definite beforehand, this same crash must bury him in ruin. But no, it should not be; he would learn all Slygne's plans in a few hours' time from Captain Clark. A West-Country clamour of voices disturbed his reverie. Bristol was reached.

The Temple Meads Station was at its busiest. Youths in flannel suits dashed to and fro; rosy-cheeked damsels peeped from beneath deep-brimmed straw hats. On the far platform aristocratic Cliftonians moved languidly about in parties, waiting for a Salford train to take them up the river.

"I have arranged a most precise

programme for you," M'Cawe explained later, as they spun Cliftonwards on the top of an electric tram. "I am going to take you to call on some very decent people first of all. Then we will go down to the quay, where I happen to know that Captain Clark will be this evening. After that we can either dine *tête-à-tête*, or ask the skipper to come with us, whichever you like."

"I think then that I will invite the Captain to dinner if you don't mind. You see, I am anxious to get at the truth to-day."

"All right, my dear boy. And here we will get off."

When their social duties had been brought to a graceful close, M'Cawe and Percy set out for Bristol once more.

Near to the old drawbridge Percy's friend stopped suddenly. "Look!" he said, with a wave of the hand, "there is *La Belle!*" Percy started, and with very mixed emotions surveyed the big and graceful boat as she swung lazily at her moorings. She certainly seemed built for speed; the most inexperienced eye could see that the sharp tapering bows and the gently swelling sides, glistening white in the long lights of the afternoon,

would all contribute to a power of racing over the seas.

"Slygne," reflected the secretary, "knew what he was about. Nothing short of a torpedo boat could catch *La Belle*."

He looked at the beautiful boat with intense interest. What would she mean to him? What part was she to play in his life? Did she indeed mean freedom and escape from a situation which was daily becoming more complex and dangerous? Or would it be that one night she would steal out into the Channel with all that made life worth living to him on board, while he remained forsaken, alone, and a scapegoat? He clenched his teeth and resolved that come what might that should never be.

"The Captain," said M'Cawe, "will be waiting for us in the 'Ship' Inn about half a mile away. But we are not due to meet him for an hour yet. Would you like to go on board? I have often been; the sailors know me as a friend of Captain Clark's, and there wouldn't be the slightest difficulty."

Curiosity moved Percy strongly and with some eagerness he agreed. In five minutes a waterman had taken them out to the yacht,

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and they mounted the gangway steps, which were down, and stood on deck. A steward met them, and, scenting a tip, conducted them over the vessel with much voluble explanation.

It certainly was a magnificent boat. Slygne was evidently determined that his "withdrawal" from the scenes of his arduous labours should be as comfortable and luxurious as possible.

The main saloon was domed in ivory and gold and the walls decorated with a profusion of tritons, nymphs and, as Mr Weller put it, "fabberlous animals of that sort," while the light of innumerable little electric lamps were arranged to flash over these glories when night fell. The fore and aft ends of the place were decorated with fine specimens of carved oak, and the seats and couches upholstered in pale green leather.

Adjoining the main entrance of the saloon, on the promenade deck, was a beautiful little library, containing a well-chosen collection of modern and standard works, among which Percy looked for the familiar green boards of *Earth Raising and its Practical Application* in vain. This room was panelled in light oak

and lined at the sides, with windows covered with glass shutters of an Italian design which admitted a subdued and mellow light further augmented by a dome of stained glass. Further aft was the smoking-room, a pleasant and cosy place.

The cabins were as luxurious as all else, the bathrooms fitted with aluminium and panelled with a frieze of white tiles and bird's-eye maple.

One significant fact was told the visitors by one of the engineers who was sitting at the engine-room hatchway enjoying the air. Steam was kept up in the boiler day and night by order of the owner. Moreover, the coal bunkers had been greatly enlarged and the boat could carry fuel for a three months' cruise at half speed and for twenty-one days at full power. The engines also, as the man remarked with some pride, were extremely powerful and the very best that skill and money could procure, simple compound from the Clyde shores, and capable of seventeen point three as a fair normal.

They left the steamer with the sleeping but ready power in its heart and, walking along the quay, came to the "Ship" tavern, a

brown, mellow and old-fashioned place which seemed a fitting haunt for mariners and those that go upon the seas. And in this tavern they found Captain Clark. He was a short, dark man, with a tanned face and clear blue eyes. He looked the sort of fellow who could stand any weather and (Percy ruefully admitted to himself) any drink. However, it was no time for regrets, and he proceeded to "run" the Captain in a genial and natural manner, which the latter seemed to appreciate fully.

After a somewhat trying twenty minutes, Percy explained his desire to give a dinner. He made an effective little speech on the subject, and wound up by asking them to lead him to a good restaurant, not too far away. The other two rose promptly at his summons, and took him forth into Baldwin Street.

"This is the place for us," remarked M'Cawe, leading the way into a *café* on the right-hand side of the road, where they were met by a stout and smiling proprietor.

"Get me a magnum of champagne, waiter," was all that Percy said as they took their seats.

Now it has been stated that Percy was not in the habit of drinking anything beyond a very occasional glass of potent liquor, whereas Captain Clark, on the other side, owned a thirst that was practically unquenchable. Vulgar writers in the lower class of comic papers have asserted that such a thirst is invaluable, some even going so far as to say that they would not sell theirs for money. It is at anyrate conceivable that the gift may be useful upon occasion. It would have been useful to Percy then. The secretary was already feeling queer pulses in his head, as the result of his opening encounter with Captain Clark at the quay tavern. And since M'Cawe was but little better, the duty of ordering dinner fell to the Captain's part.

Captain Clark may not have been a gourmet, but he was a British sailor and knew how to do his duty. He ordered a dinner which no alderman would have scorned, and which called forth an eloquent tribute of praise from Percy. "Captain," declared the secretary of the Mount Pisa Gold Mine, stammering slightly, "C-Clark, you make a splendid M.C-c." The Captain

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thought he was referring to cricket, and modestly disclaimed all knowledge of the game. But Percy insisted, and the compliment was accepted under protest.

Before they had accomplished the second course Percy formed a decision. He settled that he would not try and pump the sailor until later in the evening. All things considered, this was sensible of him.

During the third course M'Cawe became very talkative, but Percy was sentimental. He remonstrated more than once with his friend for not recognising the higher beauties of life, and appealed to the Captain on the subject. Clark said he had always heard that life was beautiful, but personally he wasn't much of a judge of colours, and the crimson of old port suited his fancy well enough. Percy ordered a bottle of old port at once, because, as he touchingly observed, Clark had a "soul." The Captain pointed out that he was eating chicken, but admitted he had done some fishing in the past.

At something after ten o'clock they left the restaurant, as the Captain said he knew of a very good American bar up Clifton way. As they emerged into Baldwin Street, Percy

thought he had never seen such a brilliant night in his life. The number of stars was amazing, and he could almost have sworn that there were two moons out. So sure was he of the fact that he called his friends' attention to the strange phenomenon, but, though M'Cawe seemed inclined to agree with him, the Captain laughed unmercifully at Percy's theory. At Morley's statue, which stands hard by Bristol Bridge, M'Cawe expressed an earnest desire to make a speech from the middle of the road; the Captain, however, persuaded him to take a tram instead. All the way up to Clifton the seaman was obliged to exercise a persistent firmness, or nothing would have saved them from M'Cawe's speech. Opposite the Prince's Theatre they descended, and were soon inside the American bar, of which Captain Clark had spoken. The drinks were chosen by Clark, and paid for by Percy.

"I don't think much of this," that young gentleman remarked, as he sipped a very obnoxious compound which the Captain had called "angostura dead-eye."

Clark laughed. He was as cool as a cucumber, and enjoying himself immensely.

But then he did not know that he was in reality the victim of a deep-laid plot.

When the angostura had disappeared, Percy felt somewhat revived, and suggested a short stroll in the open air. The party accordingly went out again.

"Now," thought Percy to himself, "this is my time to find out when he sails."

Adopting, therefore, a careless and genial tone, he began,—

"I say, Captain, will you have another evening with us before you sail?"

"As many as you like," cheerfully answered the Captain.

"Right you are; but when will you be starting?"

"Haven't the least idea," said Clark.

"The governor's a close man and never tells me his plans."

Percy cast a look of despair at M'Cawe, but that worthy was busy with his projected speech, and the look was wasted on him. By mutual consent the three came to a standstill near a lamp-post.

"Clark," said Percy, stroking the tar's sleeve, and looking into his eyes with deep affection, "Clark, try and collect your

memory, and tell me when you sail. Do!"

"Don't know, I tell you," replied the other, grinning. "So how can I?"

Percy drew himself together, and laid both his hands upon the Captain's shoulder.

"Clark," he began once more, in anguished tones of entreaty, "I implore you to try and remember. I know we have had rather a rowdy night, and perhaps you are a little upset; but try, try, for my sake try to recollect the date."

The Captain gave a loud laugh.

Percy clasped his hands together and the tears rose to his eyes.

"Oh, Clark," he said, "I know it is hard, but please try."

"Ladies and gentlemen," began M'Cawe in deep tones.

"Stow it!" exclaimed Captain Clark.

"Shut up, you fool!" added Percy.

"Clark!" Percy said again.

"I wish to say a few words," continued M'Cawe.

"Come and have a drink," interrupted Captain Clark. "An angostura is what you want."

"My friend Mr Thawne has come down from London—" said M'Cawe, addressing his remarks more particularly to a couple of ragged paper boys who, with several other persons, had now come to a standstill at the lamp-post — "has come down from Lond—"

"Now, then, move on here, please!" A policeman of huge proportions spoke. Then he caught the Captain's eye with a look of recognition.

"Hullo, Jim, you here!" he said. "Teaching your grandchildren to swim, I suppose?"

"Yes, and they're out of their depth, I'm afear'd," answered Clark, sadly. "But they're doing me proud, Bill, don't you forget it!"

"It makes a chap wish he'd never joined the force, Jim," replied the policeman, dolefully. "Take them away, Jim, take them away."

Percy could never remember what happened after that point in the evening. He was so overwhelmed by the failure of his crafty scheme that he might have done anything. M'Cawe, writing on the subject afterwards,

described his friend as having pursued a cat unsuccessfully for several hundred yards under the belief that he was himself a dog. Percy, however, absolutely refused to believe the tale, which, even had it been true, M'Cawe was in no position to remember. Whatever took place is now shrouded in mystery; but, next morning, it is certain that Percy Thawne woke up with a racking headache, mentally promising himself that it was the last time he would ever venture into that treacherous country where Bacchus holds his sway over fools.

## CHAPTER XVIII

MENTIONING ONE SCENE AND PROMISING ANOTHER

*"The Lost Continent Recovery Company Limited. Report from Professor Pentique for September.* I am glad to announce that work has been proceeding most satisfactorily, and, from soundings taken last week, I find that the continent is now within two miles from the water's surface. In another three months all the more important mountain chains should begin to show above the ocean."

This was the announcement which threw England into fresh ecstasies and drove *Missing Link* shareholders wild with delight. The shares leapt five points on the strength of the report; but its further effect was unforeseen, even by Horatio Slygne himself.

It led to a debate in the House of Commons. The Labour Party was in power; but O'Fistycough, the great Irish leader, commanded so large a following that he was able to make things very hot for the Government whenever he chose, and he generally chose.

Upon the night in question some Liberal member had asked whether the Government intended taking over control of the new Continent, when raised, or whether it was to be left in the hands of Mr Slygne. The Minister replied that this subject had not yet been considered, it being thought time enough when the continent had actually appeared. Thereupon O'Fistycough rose and delivered an impassioned speech on Irish grievances, winding up with a demand that the new country should be given to Ireland as a place where Irishmen might settle down in freedom, prosperity, and peace, such as they had enjoyed long years ago. The applause was Hibernian and complete.

There followed an ex-Minister of the old Tory party. He said that if the new country was to be in mid-Atlantic, as he understood, O'Fistycough's proposal would have at least one advantage. "Because," he went on, "in that case the meetings of the Irish Parliament will disturb no one, and the corpses of those who die fighting within its precincts can then be sunk, with naval honours, in the ocean." A scene of the utmost disorder followed, this speech being made a pretext for the periodical

free fight. When that was over, and O'Fistycough had gone out to bandage his eye, the discussion was continued by someone who drew attention to the possible danger which might be caused by rising continents to trans-Atlantic steamers.

"The Company's last Report," exclaimed this gentleman wildly, "states that mountains will soon begin to appear above water. What, therefore, will be the result if any of our steamships strike against their summits?" This knotty point occupied the Legislature's mind for several weeks, to the complete detriment of any other business, until, at last, in despair, the Government appointed a Special Commission to inquire what the result actually *would* be. The papers again took up The Lost Continent Company as a source of "copy." Passenger traffic across the Atlantic came to a standstill, since none would consent to risk their lives upon so hazardous a journey until Parliament should have declared the route safe. Would-be travellers, therefore, stayed at home to watch developments, and the boats ceased running.

This, for certain reasons of his own, was exactly what Mr Slygna desired, although he

had not dared to hope for a result so pleasant, and obtained so easily. He watched matters with considerable private amusement. He had anticipated some little excitement, but nothing on a scale of such magnificence. It reminded him of old days, before the Company was floated. Then he sold a few shares at the increased price, and turned to consider his own private affairs.

While Slygne indulged in thoughts of such a pleasing nature, Percy's state of mind was anything but complacent. Not only had his sagacious plans with regard to Bristol failed, but he could see nothing else to do except fall back upon the assistance of Mr Grady. This, when compared with the Bristol conspiracy, was a very left-handed affair, and that he should be able to outwit Slygne, even with Grady's aid, seemed little short of impossible. For all Percy knew to the contrary, Grady would be utterly worsted in any encounter which he might have with Slygne, and, at best, the editor of the *Investors' Ferret* was not to be trusted half a yard, either as a friend or an enemy. The only plan which Percy could think of was to obtain particulars of the encounter from Grady directly it was over. For it seemed

to Percy that, unless Slygne carried all before him in his interview with the blackmailer, he would probably temporise; and, in that case, the length of time which he asked for would undoubtedly measure the life of the *Lost Continent Recovery Company*. When Percy was once in possession of this information, he would have drawn one step nearer to the solution of the problem which now troubled him.

It was upon the 13th of September that Percy thought on these things, and it was two days later that he received his second call from Mr Grady. His visitor entered smiling, and sat down with an easy grace, saying as he did so, "Well, Mr Thawne, and what news have you for me this morning?"

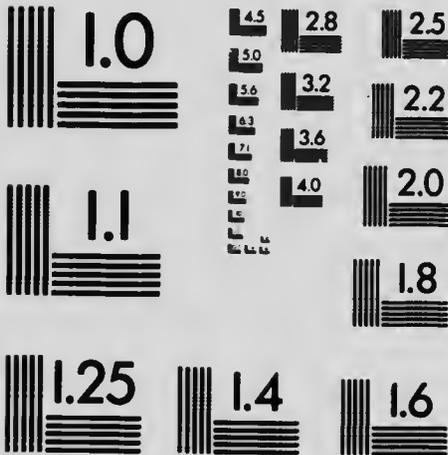
"Sir," replied Percy, "since we last met, your proposals have received my careful consideration, and, as a result, I have judged it best not to mention the matter to Mr Slygne at all. I am convinced, in my own mind, that he will never think of subscribing to your paper, and should you disagree with me, I can only advise you to go round and interview him on the subject."

"And is that the extent of your deliberations, Mr Thawne?"



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“There is scarcely anything to add, Mr Grady. I refer you to Mr Slygne, and consider it highly unlikely that you will persuade him to subscribe. Supposing I am right in this—”

“Well, and supposing you are right?”

“Well, then I have nothing at all to suggest, except perhaps . . .”

“Yes; except perhaps what?”

Percy yawned. “It is such a pity that I cannot trust you,” he said. “Trifles become so difficult under the circumstances.”

“My dear Mr Thawne, really you are mistaken.”

“I wish you were right.”

“I am. What have I to gain by deceiving you?”

“That is precisely what I cannot tell you,” replied Percy. “But the habits of—er—diplomacy—are very insidious, you know.”

“Believe me,” returned Mr Grady, “when I tell you that I do not wish to deal diplomatically with you in any respect, and, if you have any scheme in your mind by which I can help you and benefit myself—I mean my paper—”

“Yes, yes,” replied Percy, “I know all that,

and the thing which I thought of asking you to do might sound extremely simple. Nevertheless, I am perfectly certain that it would be the hardest task in the world for you to accomplish."

"Tell me what this may be, Mr Thawne, and I will at least try."

"I was simply going to suggest that you should come back to me, after having interviewed Mr Slygne, and give me a true account of your conversation with him. By complying with my wishes in this matter you might have added a new subscriber to your paper."

"I shall be delighted to do so," said Mr Grady.

"I know that," retorted Percy. "But how could you possibly give me a true account of your interview with Mr Slygne? You might try, of course; but how can I believe that you would be at all successful?"

"I *would* really try," responded Mr Grady, wistfully. "You see there is nothing to be gained by my not doing so."

A painful silence followed, during which Percy regarded his companion sorrowfully, whilst Grady screwed his features into a look of mute determination.

"I presume," began Percy, presently, "that, should my forecast prove correct, you will feel bound to threaten Mr Slygne with the publication of certain particulars concerning the *Mount Pisa Gold Mine?*"

Mr Grady bowed. "And possibly other concerns in which Mr Slygne is largely interested," he added.

"Mr Slygne may defy you."

"I do not think so. We have such a very exceptional record in the past. If you remember the *Pneumatic Kite Flying Company* crisis two years ago, you may also recollect that we were responsible, in the first place, for the revelations which ultimately led to the winding up of the Company, and to the ruin of its Directors."

"The Directors were guinea pigs," answered Percy. "But Mr Slygne is a financier."

"That is at once his strength and his weakness," observed Mr Grady, with the sleekest of smiles. "I think I will go and see Mr Slygne at once."

"Do, by all means; and I shall be very pleased to hear how you get on, if you care to come round here afterwards."

"I shall certainly do myself the pleasure of

calling upon the Secretary of the *Wild West Oil Corporation*," answered Percy's visitor, moving towards the door.

"Remembering, I hope, that there is a grain of truth in what he said some time ago about the habits of diplomacy?"

"Truth always compels attention from me, sir," remarked the editor.

"If only by reason of its rarity, I suppose," replied the secretary, and they parted, bowing.

## CHAPTER XIX

### IS ACRIMONIOUS

"I REPRESENT the *Investors' Ferret*."

Mr Grady spoke. He was standing in Slygne's private room at the offices of *The Lost Continent Recovery Company*. He stood thus, waiting to be offered a seat. Slygne, however, who was alone at his table, did not speak. He simply leaned back in his chair and looked up over the rim of his *pince-nez*. Mr Grady sat down uninvited.

"I represent the *Investors' Ferret*," he repeated, after a reasonable pause.

"Then the sooner you get out of my office the better for you," remarked Slygne, and, leaning forward again, he resumed his writing.

"As it happens, I have come to see you on business, Mr Slygne," answered the black-mailer, quietly.

"Unfortunately, I am too busy to attend

to you," answered Slygne, without looking up.

"Then why did you allow me to be shown in, sir?"

Slygne sat up for a moment.

"I wished to look at you," he said. "I have now satisfied my curiosity and you can go."

Grady laughed.

"To be looked at by you, Mr Slygne, is an honour I am sure; but having gratified your curiosity, it may interest you to know that I have come here on business of a somewhat urgent nature."

"Urgent for you, perhaps. Personally I am engaged."

"I am sorry that I must intrude myself upon you, Mr Slygne. Will you kindly give me ten minutes?"

"No, sir, I will not."

"You would prefer me to go away?"

"Yes, and I shall take steps to ensure your going away should you insist upon troubling me much longer."

Grady began chuckling to himself. Then, ignoring Slygne's last remark, he said,—

"I may tell you that my business is

connected with the *Investors' Ferret*, Mr Slygne. Do you happen to know the paper?"

"I should think that everyone who has been in the City for a year must know the paper. I, at anyrate, wish to hear nothing further about you or your libellous rag. Leave my office!"

"Oh, Mr Slygne, I must really protest against your violent language. How can you speak so of the *Ferret*, a paper which is strongly inclined to be friendly towards you."

"I want none of your friendship. It is a credit to be hated by such a parcel of knaves as you and your agents. Now go."

Grady placed his hat on the floor and spread out a copy of the *Ferret* upon the table before him.

"This is pleasant banter, Mr Slygne," said he, "but you must know as well as I do that you cannot afford to despise us."

Slygne clasped one hand over the knuckles of the other, and the veins in his temples began to swell.

"How many times am I to repeat what I have said?" he demanded hotly. "I tell you that you are a pack of blackmailing scoundrels, and I would scorn to deal with you—yes, even

if you had come here to buy my friendship, instead of trying to sell me yours, as you would like to do. If you think you can succeed where your dupe, Mrs O'Mea, failed, you are wrong. Go back to her, sir, and rub your bruised head against hers. You will get no satisfaction out of me."

Mr Grady's fingers opened and shut nervously. He sat, crouched up over the edge of the table, like some fat tom cat that watches a hen with chickens.

"This comes well from you, Mr Slygne," he sneered. "Have you such a white past that you can afford to fling mud at me and my paper, a paper which has, at least, helped the deluded shareholders in more than one Company with greater claims to respectability than ever the *Wild West* possessed. But then you must say something, I suppose, and I am not going to be angry because you show a little natural heat over my visit. Faith, it's a wonder that I have not called on you before, although I am glad I did not. You were never so well known—famous I might almost say—as you are to-day, and therefore I have chosen the best time to lay my proposals before you. You must be a rich man by now,

Mr Slygne—yes, and I growing richer every day. Why not receive me quietly, then?"

Slygne answered in a dangerously monotonous tone,—

"If you do not leave this room in ten seconds I will send for the police."

"Oh, fiddlededee! Talk sense, pray, sir; or be quiet and let me talk."

Slygne got up, shaking in every limb. He came round the table at a half-run and laid his hand upon Grady's collar.

"Are you going, man?" he snarled, putting his lips almost in the other's ear. "For, by Gad, if you stay much longer you're going to get into trouble."

But the pressman never flinched.

"Listen to me, Horatio Slygne," said he. "I've come here to do business, and not to watch your theatricals. Have you forgotten with whom you are dealing, that you go on in this childish way? Do not I know enough about you and your Companies to raise such a scandal in England that it would topple you from your present position in ten days? Remember that you will not be the first man whom the *Ferret* has brought to disgrace. Have you forgotten the case of Colonel

Gardene, Chairman of the *Noiseless Explosives Company*; or Richard Cobbe, Managing Director of the *Patent Spinning Machines of Great Britain and Ireland*; or, last of all, Lord Eadon and his brother Directors of the *Pneumatic Kite Flying Company*? Did any one of these stand successfully against the *Investors' Ferret*, swells though they were? Tell me, Horatio Slygne, could one of them stand against me; and then tell me if you imagine that you will accomplish what they failed to do?"

Slygne resumed his seat slowly. He had grown cooler while the other was speaking.

"Grady," he said, "I remember every one of the men whom you have mentioned, and I can tell you, from personal knowledge of them, that they were, one and all, resourceless fools. Perhaps you think that in me you have one of their kidney to deal with, but you are wrong. I know the City, sir, every turn of it, every trick of it. More than that, my friend, I know the men who have their hands upon its most secret strings. And, knowing what I do, sir, I defy you, and invite you to do your very worst against me.

I am stronger than you at every move in your own game. Now go."

Grady, however, made no movement.

"If what you say is true, Mr Slygne, why are *Mount Pisas* quoted in the City at a discount? Why has the Company issued no Report for two years? Why are the shareholders discontented, and only waiting for a leader to break into open revolt against the present management? Tell me that, Mr Slygne."

The financier laughed.

"I have no time to discuss the affairs of the *Mount Pisa* with you this morning, I fear. Throw open the columns of your paper to such a discussion. It will give you 'copy,' and can do me no harm."

"I will," said Grady, quietly. "The affairs of the *Wild West* shall also figure in our pages."

"Good," responded Slygne. "But remember this," and he leaned over the table with a malicious grin,— "The first sign of a movement on your part will also be the signal for me to take action against you."

"Very good, Mr Slygne. You shall have a strong case to combat, never fear. And

now I think I will go. There is nothing more to be done, except to prepare the articles."

The two men rose simultaneously, and for several seconds they stood looking at each other.

"You have no further remarks to offer, Mr Slygne?"

"Absolutely none."

"Then I will return to the Wild West offices. Good day."

Grady turned away, but Slygne stepped quickly between his visitor and the door.

"I should like an explanation if you please," he said, and there was a white light in his eyes,

"What do you mean?" asked Grady.

"You said you would 'return' to the Wild West offices. Am I to understand that you have already been there?"

"Certainly."

"Oh! May I inquire how you were received?"

"I was received with considerably more courtesy than you have exercised, Mr Slygne."

Slygne stroked one end of his moustache, and regarded Grady thoughtfully the while. He

seemed to balance a decision. Then he moved aside and threw open the door.

"Good afternoon," he said, with a slight smile.

And Mr Grady answered, "Good afternoon."

All this time Percy sat in the *Wild West* offices, picturing to himself the scene which he knew to be taking place between Slygne and Grady. He would have liked to be present at the meeting of two such redoubtable warriors, but, since that was impossible, he fell back on his own imagination, and silently rehearsed a series of animated conflicts between them.

At about half-past four he was startled from his reverie by Thomas, who dashed in to announce that Mr Slygne was "on the telephone," a summons which Percy hurried off to answer at once. Slygne's first words made him feel dizzy.

"Have you suggested anything to Mr Grady of the *Investors' Ferret* about paying him blackmail money?"

"No."

"Oh! I understood from him that when he called on you this afternoon your attitude

was rather in that direction. At anyrate, he will be round at your office again in a few minutes. Please be very careful in your dealings with him, and remember all that he says to you. I may wish you to repeat it to me afterwards. Good-day."

That was all.

The telephone bell rang, and Percy went back to his seat feeling as if he had just escaped from falling off a precipice. Here was a pleasant ending to his plot! Grady had not only been worsted by Slygne, but had actually tried to put Slygne against his own secretary. That was Percy's reading of the incident, and his blood boiled against the knave from whom he had expected so little, and had received still less.

He waited for his visitor in a glow of pugnacious anxiety. Nor had he long to wait, for, five minutes later, Mr Grady appeared in the flesh, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Well, Mr Thawne," he began. "I am glad to inform you . . ."

"I don't want to hear your d—d lies," broke out Percy, wrathfully. "I gave you one simple condition to fulfil, and you have

tried to turn it into a weapon against me with Mr Slygne. If you come gammoning me any more I'll kick you downstairs, you miserable little cur!"

Mr Grady's jaw dropped.

"What . . ." he began.

"Don't 'what' me, sir," thundered Percy, "but clear out of this as quick as you can. I've seen a great deal too much of you already this afternoon. Cut it, do you hear!"

"Mr Thawne . . ."

"Will you go?" roared Percy again. "Or do you want helping?"

He sprang up as he spoke and ran towards Grady. But the editor, who was a small man, did not wait his coming. He turned tail and rushed out of the room as fast as his feet could carry him, leaving Percy to recover himself as best he could.

This the young man found somewhat difficult of accomplishment, for he was very much upset at the failure of his scheme for discovering Slygne's movements. For the next hour he sat taxing his powers of ingenuity, that he might find some new method of achieving the desired purpose.

And still there seemed but one course left open, a modest course after his late plans, yet one which at length, and for lack of anything more elaborate, he decided to adopt. He settled down to write a letter to his friend M'Cawe, a letter which was a forlorn hope, containing the instructions of a commander whose forces had been disorganised. "Dine with Captain Clark," it ran, "at least three times a week, and make certain upon every occasion that he does not know when *La Belle* starts. As soon as ever you do discover the date of her sailing, wire to me, and so earn the eternal gratitude of your old friend, Percy Thawne."

## CHAPTER XX

### A TIME OF WAITING

Now began a time of calm, of calm that was tempered with anxiety and the sense of imminent happenings. Percy could do no more at the moment. He must wait on events and possess himself with such patience as he could.

Already he found himself a wealthy man. With great caution he had sold small parcels of his shares, though he still retained a considerable number. His bank account was substantial, he felt himself a man of means. But knowing what he did, he realised for how short a space the sun would shine on his Tom Tiddler's ground and how dark the night which must soon fall would be.

But there was nothing to be done but wait. This period of calm had many consolations. Daily Percy met the girl of his heart, and these happy hours were none the less happy

when he remembered that Bella was the daughter of Horatio Slygne. The fact gave an added joy to the situation in his ingenuous mind.

Many persons regard that tract of ground named *Kensington Gardens* as nothing more than a semi-public enclosure for the recreation of London citizens, with a pond in the middle for the convenience of ducks, small boys, and dogs. But the Gardens at Kensington were, for Percy and Bella, a sacred grove, a domain of fancies, a realm where phantom castles sprung to sight like magic and fairy whispers thronged the grass blades. Here it was that they were wont to keep the tryst of love, meeting close to a certain obelisk not far from the old Round Pond. Here, whilst Slygne napped at home, or worked out his daily profits before dinner, the lovers used to meet and whisper the hopes and fears of their devotion. Here, whilst greedy speculators checked their bargains, and pressmen sent in the "day's prices" for print, Percy would meet his Lady Love and pray for that day when *The Lost Continent Company* should exist no more. Such moments were his only relaxation from the perpetual strain

of the contest which he was waging against Slygne, a strain which, as the weeks flew by, became ever more and more intense.

Meantime the price of *Missing Link* shares was gradually creeping up. Some days they would relapse for an hour or so, but their closing price always showed an improvement, since the public still appeared keen buyers, and there was consequently no trouble about disposing of the shares. By far the greatest number sold were bought by people speculating on the "cover" system, and, as these shares were "carried over," outsiders never knew who was the real seller. Not that it would have mattered if they had known, for *Links* were only dealt in by fives, as a rule, and the *transferor's* name was generally John Jones. From this fact it would seem that Slygne was in the habit of giving John Jones little presents from time to time. Great men are always good friends, and Slygne could never have been an exception to this rule. Most probably, whenever he felt good-natured, he used to ring up John Jones on the telephone, and talk to him in this sort of way,—

"Is that you, Jones? Ah, well, I am very

fond of you, so I want to give you a trifling present. I have some *Missing Links* here which I should like you to accept. We will transfer them into your name, in lots of five, and upon a nominal consideration. Then you will, of course, sell them. No, do not thank me, dear boy. Good-bye."

This supposition is strengthened by the fact that several *Link* transfers, on a ten-shilling stamp, were left for registration at the Continent office by John Jones himself. These Slygne would examine, pass, and hand to Gildover for new certificates. Then, when Viscount Noddelhedd, a *Link* Director, next called, in case Slygne had any papers for signature, that great man would give his lordship these particular certificates for signature, and the job was finished. Of course, Noddelhedd never examined any paper which he signed. He did not understand business sufficiently for that, and besides, he knew that whatever Slygne said must be right. The gifts, therefore, passed all unnoticed, as, according to Scripture, every gift should pass. Indeed, Horatio Slygne's right hand seldom knew what his left hand did.

And yet, in the face of all this evidence, there were to be found, at a later date, persons who accused Slygne of dishonesty. They declared that John Jones was a mere cat's-paw, that Slygne used him in order to conceal the fact that he was himself the real seller of Link shares, and made a hundred other accusations, as uncharitable as they were contemptible.

Whilst affairs were progressing so favourably in the City, it must not be thought that Slygne paid no attention to the demands of his social life. Upon the successful flotation of *The Lost Continent Company*, he had given up his flat in Kensington to realise the more substantial glories of Park Lane. As Managing Director of *The Lost Continent Company*, people began to regard him in the light of an embryo statesman, and several brilliant prophecies concerning his future had already been put about. At the same time polite London was very much taken with the financier, since, besides being wealthy and a widower, he had none of that vulgarity which is so often to be found in conjunction with suddenly acquired riches. His house afforded a singular example of this modesty and good

taste. There was not a bit of valuable furniture in the building, no good china, no rich carpets, no pictures worth looking at, scarcely a silver teaspoon even. This was what gained for Slygne the heart of Belgravia. Society vowed they thought it delightful to see such a man so utterly free from ostentation.

"People of that class generally go to the other extreme, you know," they declared pleasantly.

Whenever Slygne overheard this remark he used to smile, and his smile upon such occasions was peculiarly modest and self-effacing.

Thus everything continued quietly in its appointed groove whilst the month of October came and went. The Mount Pisa shareholders did not revolt; no startling disclosures appeared in the *Investors' Ferret*; and *The Lost Continent* October Report seemed full of brightest promise. Yet, nevertheless, beneath the surface of this widespread calm, the instruments of trouble were slowly shaping themselves to a definite form. Mr Grady scribbled away in his office, building up "the biggest Campaign of

Inquiry on which the *Ferret* had ever embarked." Percy sat at the Wild West headquarters, watching Old Broad Street morning, noon, and night, for fear that Mr Slygne should go flitting without his knowledge. And down at Bristol, M'Cawe, by Percy's express desire, dined three nights a week with Captain Clark, trying continually to discover on what date *La Belle* should sail, although the Captain, honest tar, had not as yet the faintest notion. All these influences for evil were slowly developing, though no one could possibly have guessed the fact without a clue.

. And *Lost Continent* ordinary shares touched  $122\frac{1}{2}$  upon the 31st day of October.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A PRIVATE COMMUNICATION FROM MID-OCEAN

You may easily discover the man who speculates. As soon as ever the evening paper arrives at his house it is brought to him for perusal, and while he scrutinises the market lists you can observe his brow contract or expand as the case may be. He always discusses general news according to its influence upon the Stock Markets. He explains to you fully why a share standing at £3, 10s. must touch £10 within the next three months. He is for ever doing little mental arithmetic sums to settle what his exact profit would be on a rise of "ten points." When markets are dull he gives his brokers a selling limit £2 above top price, and, directly the market strengthens, his limit is increased lest he shall miss the "boom." A small profit makes him restless, a loss puts him on his mettle. He pays

"differences" like a man, and consigns his tradesmen to the devil. He listens to "reports on a property" as children listen to fairy tales. He knows the future of every company in which he is interested by heart, and, whatever befall, he is still sanguine. Other companies may come to grief, other directors may mismanage; his company is different, and his funds are safe. The faith which he displays is quite astounding, when one considers how old the world is. He lives in a gorgeous atmosphere of his own, where it rains sovereigns and hails diamonds. He stands knee-deep in gold dust; he is clothed in coupons. A new Midas, he stalks through this, otherwise, practical world, the ever-present example of unquestioning credulity.

Whenever this man makes up his mind that there is a fortune to be made out of any given company, and has persuaded his brethren of the fact, there is joy in Throgmorton Street. Markets are lifted tumultuously, for our friend will take no refusal, and is determined to buy, as the world may shortly know. Nor does he believe in the sharp tricks practised on "'Change." He desires a certain share, and will give the

market price for it: if that price advances he is prepared to follow; the share is the thing. So it comes about that a natural "boom" ensues.

By November thousands of speculators were committed heavily in *Link* shares, and doubtless their gradual appreciation in price brought daily comfort to many a hearthstone, whilst many an eye was strained over Pentique's reports from the scene of operations. These reports now came to hand weekly, since it was evident that the Company was approaching the critical time in its existence. The announcements were still of the most hopeful nature, but nothing particularly sensational had been published, until, on the 7th of November, came tidings which aroused even the most lethargic. They were to this effect—*The Continent had risen to within one mile from the ocean's surface, and a mountain was showing above water.*

"In my opinion," Pentique's report went on, "before the end of next month we shall have an area of land above water several square miles in extent. My next report should reach London about the 29th

December, and until then we can only remain confidently hopeful."

Truly *The Lost Continent Company* had aroused unexampled excitement once or twice before in its history, but the anxiety created by this notice was more intense than anything that had gone by. Everyone felt that the moment of Pentique's utmost triumph had almost arrived, that now or never their Company must assert itself as the most wonderful concern ever known in the annals of joint stock enterprise.

How slowly the days dragged by!—December the 10th — the 20th—the 28th, and so on into the new year; on until the 4th of January, that momentous day, when Rumour whispered, and the message went round, "It has arrived."

Yes, and upon the 5th of January, upon the evening of Tuesday, the 5th of January, Pentique's report appeared in all the evening papers.

Then the floodgates burst. . . .

Crowds thronged the streets. Newsboys yelled outside the Press offices, from sheer excitement, and then dashed away headlong, to be first at their districts. Business men,

pale and haggard, crept out at the cry of "Special Shon!" Speculators careered madly eastwards. Old ladies had fits in Holborn. Young ladies fainted against lamp-posts in Whitehall. The great news was cut. It spread mile on mile with incredible rapidity. . . . People shrieked, and stood still. People listened, and danced as with delirium. London turned hysterical: Britain was demented.

The blessed news had come that *three square miles of the new Continent were now above water!*

Consider calmly what this meant to the hundreds who had put their money into *Missing Links*. The Company was safe, its future assured, and they were rich. Imagine the grateful prayers that must have ascended heavenwards that day, prayers for the welfare and happiness of Slygne—prayers of benediction upon Pentique, that noble pioneer in the realms of Science. Consider how England's heart must have gone out to these two great men in this the hour of their triumph. All their labours were fructifying now. All their efforts were now, at last, to be crowned with joy. The Napoleon of

Finance and the Columbus of Science were victorious together.

How the crowds rejoiced! They stood outside the *Lost Continent* office, and cheered till they were hoarse and the police intervened. They ran about the City, intoxicated with delight, shouting, chaffing, capering. Such enthusiasm had never been witnessed before in the City of London.

And all the time Slygne sat in his office as though nobody in London knew anything about him or his business. He showed never a sign of elation, never a twitch of self-satisfaction; in truth, a great man may only be discovered at such times as this.

He was reading a letter. He had already perused it three times, and his pent brows testified to the concentration of his mind. The letter was from Pentique; it was written in cypher and ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR SIR,—By the time this reaches you you will have received my report saying that we have actually raised the Continent, and this is to warn you that Herr Blachen and I are now about to separate.

"We shall leave the cordon of vessels here, but few men, and discovery must only be a matter of days. Our first provision steamer calling after this date, must inevitably find out everything.

"I calculate that the news will not reach England before the 15th January, so this will give you time to leave in your yacht on receipt of my letter. Doubtless you will say that you are coming out on a visit to the Continent, *eh bien!*

"Good-bye, sir. We have carried our business through splendidly, and I wish you a long and prosperous life.—Yours most sincerely,

"FELIX PENTIQUE."

When Slygne had finished reading this letter for the third time, he opened his desk and took therefrom a sheet of foolscap paper. Then he touched his bell. "Give this," he said to the clerk who answered his summons, "to Miss Jones, and tell her to type me ten copies at once, as I shall wish it to appear in the principal papers to-morrow morning."

## CHAPTER XXII

### A PROMISE FROM MISS SLYGNE.

PERCY was sitting in his own room in Burdett Street on the afternoon of the 5th of January.

It was a dull, lowering day, and very cold. A heavy pall of fog hung over London, but it hung high and had not descended to trouble the throats and eyes of the folk in the streets. But beneath it the City looked spectral and wan, a grim, doomed place.

A blazing fire glowed on the hearth, and he sat by it, smoking innumerable cigarettes, feeling nervous and depressed.

The tension of his position was growing hourly, and in this sombre and menacing weather it was almost too hard to bear.

Oh for a brighter sun, flowers, the hum of insects and tropic skies!

There was nothing whatever to do in the office and no one had called.

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The need for a little light, the stir of men, the voices of companionship grew imperative. He would go out, he decided, and take a cup of coffee in one of those gleaming little underground "Meccas" which abound in the City, and where the electric light makes a false day always, and the outside world seems far away.

The astute person who first realised the charm of an underground refuge from the troubles of daily life—however momentary the sojourn there may be—deserves a monument. He realised a great truth. In a London fog the deep-down coffee-room, or, better still, the Oriental surroundings of a Turkish bath, are the only mechanical means of physical comfort available.

In five minutes Percy was seated on a divan, while a neat damsel with provoking eyes and a kind manner brought him coffee. "Yes," she said sympathetically, not unwilling to linger for a moment with the good-looking young man who often dropped in there, "it is a beast of a day, Mr Thawne, and no mistake! Nothing doing either. Hardly any one of our regular customers has been in to-day. The City's as dull as ditch-water—after effects of Christmas, I s'pose."

The damsel had just said this and was entering the amount of Percy's purchase upon her tablets, when there was a loud though distant shouting and heavy, muffled trampling just overhead.

The alcove in which Percy was sitting retreated for some way under the pavement of the street outside which formed its roof.

"Hullo!" Percy said, "what's that?"

"It's the newspaper boys shouting, I think," the girl answered. "Something special on. Wait while I go and see."

She flitted away, and in a minute returned with a special edition of *The Evening News*.

Percy opened it and read the stupendous announcement of the actual appearance of Atlantis!

He paid his bill hurriedly, flung on his overcoat, and rushed from the *café*.

The report filled him with immediate terror, for it was obvious to him that Slygne could not possibly stay in England very long after such definite tidings, since curiosity alone must quickly impel people to go out and see this phenomenon with their own eyes. As no wire had arrived from Bristol,

moreover, the secretary realised that matters had now come to such a stage of "touch and go," that whether he outwitted Slygne, or was himself to be outwitted by the financier, was very even betting indeed. Therefore he seized his hat and set his face to the West End, feeling that he must take counsel with Bella in his hour of extreme need.

The streets were filled with laughing multitudes, bent, apparently, upon making as much hubbub as possible. The noise of tin trumpets, laughter and singing resounded on all sides. Everyone appeared to be in a good temper, and loud chaff was continually exchanged between the strolling groups as they passed each other on the pavements. Sometimes the crowds would overflow on to the roadway, bringing all vehicles to a standstill, vehicle behind vehicle, like waves of the Red Sea at Israel's crossing. Then the police would clear a path once more, and a mile or two of congested traffic would resume its interrupted course.

Such delays, which were constantly occurring, irritated Percy exceedingly, since he counted every second of his journey as wasted time. The whole expedition was

bold in character, it being the first time that he had ever ventured to call at Slygne's mansion in Park Lane. This afternoon, however, everything was urgent, and Percy threw discretion to the winds in the face of so grave a crisis.

He was braced to meet any adventure, and found himself, presently, knocking upon Slygne's door. He was shown into a scantily-furnished drawing-room, where Bella soon joined him.

"You look excited, dear," she said.

"I am. There is a lot to be got through in a short time, so far as I can see. It's this little matter which I asked you to trust me in, you know. Now, tell me, has your father said anything to you about packing?"

"Packing? No. Why should he? What is the matter? Do tell me."

"I cannot explain everything now. You must trust me for a little bit longer, and then everything will come right. Just do what I ask you for about three days more, and, after that," Percy smiled—"you may look forward to a life of wilfulness! Now listen. I think that your father will probably tell you to pack when he comes back from

the City to-day. I think that he is going to start for that yachting trip which he mentioned to you some time ago. I am not quite certain, though, and I must find out to-day."

"How charming; and will you come too?"

"If everything turns out as I expect it will, I shall be able to come—upon one condition," said Percy, drawing her to him.

"What condition?"

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. She blushed delightfully.

"Oh, Percy!"

"Yes, that is the condition; but it depends upon my finding out your father's plans before the day is out. Will you help me, without questions?"

"Of course, dear, but I hope the mysteries will soon be finished with. Why not let me tell papa everything, and rely upon my diplomacy to bring him over to our views?"

"My dear child, No! You must remember that your father is unfortunately prejudiced in this matter, and that unless I can appear to him, at the right moment, in a rather higher capacity than that of his secretary, he and I will never be able to understand and appreciate each other."

"What can I do then?"

"I will tell you. See him when he comes back from the City this evening, and listen carefully to all he says. Then, before dinner meet me at the Marble Arch, tell me exactly what has happened, and if, as I expect, he has told you to pack up at once, I will tell you my plans. Is this settled?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I must be off, for I have no time to waste. Good-bye, and remember what I have said. Seven-thirty, at the top of Park Lane beside the Marble Arch."

The clocks were striking five when Percy, with a buzzing in his head, left Park Lane for the City. He was by this time wildly excited. He felt like a gambler watching the colour on which his last coin lies. The masterful cunning of Slygne extorted his admiration even though he was himself its victim. Surely to run successfully a company like *The Lost Continent* as Slygne had done, and at the same time outwit a man who knew the secret of this Company down to its weakest spot, was as smart a feat as anyone could wish to accomplish in the City of London. He felt proud to be playing against such a master

mind, and the more determined to win his hand.

It was nearly six o'clock when he reached the office, and the boy eyed him reproachfully, producing at the same time a telegram which, he said, had just arrived. Percy tore open the envelope and read:—

*“La Belle sails Thursday the 7th instant.—*  
M'CAWE.”

The young man sank into his chair with a sigh of relief; he had gained his information at last.

“Smith,” he said cheerfully, “I am sorry to have kept you so late to-day. Here is a small present for you. And now you can go. I may not be at the office till late to-morrow, but be down in good time yourself.”

He pressed a sovereign into the bewildered youth's hand, and wishing him good-night, fled downstairs as quickly as he had ascended. In his breast-pocket reposed a long envelope which he had taken from his private safe. He could feel it pressing against his heart. A day or two before he had turned down a narrow court in Ludgate Hill and entered a dingy door which proclaimed itself as the habitation of the Vicar-General. There, for a

not inconsiderable sum, he had procured a certain document, "available during any time for not longer than three months," in which, surprising though it may appear, one Edward Thawne, Archbishop of Canterbury, greeted Percy Thawne as his well-beloved friend!

It was dinner-time but he found it impossible to eat. The fever in his blood prevented him from sitting still. He resolved to walk down Holborn and Oxford Street to his rendezvous.

He had passed Oxford Circus, walking with quick strides, his brain alive with the urgency of the situation and the pulses in his temples beating like little hammers, when a voice suddenly hailed him, a rich resonant voice.

He looked up. A four-wheeler had been drawn up at the curb. A large wooden trunk or sea-chest was bound upon the top. The door of the cab opened and Mr Blaber, the journalist descended. It seemed that even at this time Percy was to meet this versatile gentleman his appearance changed.

To-day he was dressed in a suit of navy blue and wore a yachting cap with a shining black peak.

For a moment Percy could not recognize

him, though his voice was familiar enough. The alteration in Mr Blaber's appearance not only included his style of dress but his face also. He was clean-shaved, save for a little fluff of whisker on each cheek. With some solemnity he took Percy's arm and drew him swiftly into an adjacent bar. He pulled out a fat silver watch.

"Just time for one drink and a word of farewell," he said with unction. "This, my young friend, is in all probability the last time we shall meet in this world. My days of prospectus writing are over, Fleet Street will know me no more. While you—thanks, a little more soda—while you, Mr Thawne, will go on to fortune and distinction in the train of your worthy and brilliant chief, Mr Horatio Slygne, I shall be far away in other climes. There is only a moment more. I will explain myself briefly. A love of travel and adventure has always been inherent in me from youth. But I have never been able to gratify it. Three weeks ago I woke up to the fact that journalism and Fleet Street had lost their attractions for me. I was still down in Norfolk, where I have remained ever since the writing of my last

and most brilliant prospectus—that of the *Lost Continent Company*. I resolved upon an altogether new mode of life. Fortune favoured me. Among the guests at the little seaside hotel where I was staying was the assistant manager of Messrs Rivers Watts, the great yachting agents. We became friends, and I am to see the world at last. I have accepted the post of confidential butler and steward to a millionaire and I am to join his steamer at once. I am to meet the agent's manager in five minutes to receive my final instructions. As yet I do not even know from what port I sail. I was summoned from Norfolk by wire this morning though for several days previously, in the assurance that some such appointment as this would speedily be found for me, I had made preparations. And now farewell! Our paths lie in very different directions. One more? No? Then good-bye and good luck."

With these words Mr Blaber re-entered his cab, waved a fat hand, and was soon driven away.

The encounter had amused Percy for a moment and was certainly extremely unexpected. But his own affairs were

clamant and he did not long think of the kindly and shameless old gentleman who had flitted in and out of his life. As he found that time was getting on, he turned in to one of the "Tube" stations.

He reached Hyde Park at seven, and wandered about restlessly for half an hour. Every movement of a petticoat in Park Lane set him imagining that it was Bella, but Bella in the flesh did not appear until the appointed time, and then she was as excited as himself.

"I am to pack at once," were her first words. "We are going to Bristol on Thursday. He strictly forbade me to come out to-night, but of course that was just like his dear old obstinacy. I suppose he thought I might want to go out. And now, what am I to do? I have so short a time. I shall have to sit up all night."

"But you need not do it yourself, surely?"

"Of course not, Goose, but servants are so stupid that I must oversee their movements."

"Will you meet me at Paddington by eleven to-morrow morning?"

"It may be eleven-five, dear. Would that matter?"

Percy laughed.

"Dearest Fibster, I know that it will be twenty-five minutes past eleven," he said. "But as long as you are there before noon it does not matter. Your father will not be back from the City until half-past five, will he?"

"No."

"Well, be at Paddington as early as you can before, say, eleven-thirty."

She drew herself up.

"It will probably be at five minutes past eleven, sir," she said. "And now I must hurry away and pack."

"I will come a little way down Park Lane," he said, and they set off together.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### EMOTION AND ELOQUENCE

THE article which had been typed at the *Missing Link* offices overnight appeared next morning in all the London papers. It was composed in Slygne's happiest vein, and stated that, after due consultation with his brother Directors, Mr Horatio Slygne had determined on a short trip to the Lost Continent, in order that he and Professor Pentique might carry out a thorough inspection of the Company's new possessions, with a view to arriving at a decision as to what steps should be taken for their shareholders' benefit.

Mr Slygne proposed to leave town next day, the 7th January, journey to Bristol, where his yacht lay, embark at once, and set off on a journey which would probably occupy two or three months. On his return to England an Extraordinary General Meeting

of the Company would be held at Winchester House, when Mr Slygne would give a detailed account of his trip, at the same time offering his own opinions and proposals. It could then be definitely decided as to what course the Company should adopt, but whatever that course might be, Mr Slygne confidently predicted a brilliant and successful future for their enterprise. This was his honest conviction, and if any personal endeavour could bring his prophecy to pass, never, they might rest assured, would he relax his efforts upon their behalf.

So touching a devotion to the interests of other men did not fail to stir the nation's heart very deeply. The more so, perhaps, because it came on the top of Professor Pentique's last Continent report, which had already thrown England into a state of feverish ecstasy. On reading this article, the man in the street voted Slygne "a real good sort," the country parson christened him "truly zealous," and the speculator wallowed before him. None were found whose mouths were not full of praise.

Then people began to ask one another if such a deserving man could be permitted to

leave London as if he were of no importance, and to this question the reply arose emphatically, "No." Little time remained for elaborate preparation, but it might be still possible for the Metropolis to give her son a spontaneous farewell, such as had never before been witnessed on the banks of Thames. She determined at least to try.

The first necessity was to discover the time at which Slygne proposed to go away, and this information was quickly procured through the enterprise of a young reporter, who, as a proof of his smartness, claimed the honour of having once interviewed Pentique. This news having been certified, a number of enthusiasts drew up a notice which they proceeded to get printed, and, having hired twenty dozen sandwich men, the message was sent forth through all the principal thoroughfares in London.

This was the placard :—

COME OUT TO-MORROW  
AND WISH  
HORATIO SLYGNE  
GOOD-BYE!

## SHARKS

PARK LANE, 9.45 A.M.

OR

PADDINGTON, 10.35 A.M.

COME AND SHOUT!"

This simple invitation worked wonder. It seemed to demoralise everyone, and employers gave their men a holiday in desperation. The Commissioner of Police hastily drew up a set of special regulations for the next day, and the military received orders to garrison Paddington overnight. For the spirit of festival had got abroad, and the people shouted together.

All this time Mr Slygne was in the City working away with so much energy that he scarcely noticed the unusual tumult which was going on outside. He seemed to be exceptionally occupied that day, and yet he never once sent for a member of his staff all the time, a fact which was the more surprising in view of his imminent departure from England.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon Lord Alfred Gildover knocked at his chief's door.

"I rather want to leave early this after-

noon, Mr Slygne," he explained, "as I am dining to-night at Mrs Pyles-O'Tynne's house, don't you know, and, unless I leave the City early, I am afraid I shall be late, thanks to the crowded state of the streets."

"Quite so; certainly," replied Slygne, and there was a short pause.

"I looked in also to see if you had any particular instructions for me," went on Gildover, seeing that Slygne did not speak. "I hear that you will not be at the office to-morrow, and so I shall not see you again until you return from the Lost Continent."

Slygne gave himself a sort of shake together.

"Ah, no, of course not, of course not," he said. "What a duffer I am not to have sent for you before to give my final instructions. But there, the fact is that I have so many things on my mind that I scarcely know whether I am on my head or my heels."

"I can quite understand it," replied Gildover.

"Now, let me see," resumed Slygne, knitting his brows. "I do not know that there is anything particular that I need tell you. You know enough about the Company to

carry it on successfully until — ah — my return, but of course your conduct must always be regulated by events." He cast a penetrating glance over the secretary's unobtrusive features, and nodded sagely once or twice. "Remember that rule, my lord," he continued. "I have always found it a very good one myself, and when I am gone you should like to think that you will remember it. Will you?"

"Certainly Mr Slygne, but you do not anticipate my having any particular difficulties in my face, I hope?"

Slygne gave a dry chuckle.

"Good heavens, no," he exclaimed. "Why the Company is gilt-edged now, since the raising of the Continent. When I talked of acting according to events, I was thinking of life in general. As for the Company, you can always cable to me if you are in difficulty, can't you? And now I think that is all. Good-bye, my lord, and I wish you a pleasant evening."

"Thank you, Mr Slygne. Good-night and good-bye, and a pleasant voyage."

Left to himself, Mr Slygne slowly relapsed into the extreme depths of his biggest arm

chair, and laying a hand on either knee, resigned himself to a fit of the most uncontrollable mirth. First his shoulders began to tremble a little, then a little more, until his head was nodding like that of a china Mandarin. All the wrinkles in his face broadened, the points of his moustache mingled with his beard below, the furrows along his forehead were all smoothed away. And then, the laughter, taking him as it were in both hands, seemed to shake him soundly, bringing at last great tears of merriment to either eye.

It was not for some time that Mr Slygne recovered himself, and then he began making his preparations to leave business for the day. When he had filled a small satchel with papers, and put on hat and coat, he paused. He paused in the centre of the room, and began looking round slowly, as one looks who is setting out upon a long, long journey. Doubtless it was mere sentiment, for, of course, his journey to the Lost Continent was not going to be such a very long one. However, Mr Slygne, prompted by some unknown thought, did so stand to cast a glance of farewell over the scene of his all successful

labours, and it was with an almost plaintive sigh that he finally turned away and walked out of the offices of The Lost Continent Recovery Company.

On reaching home, the financier's first action was to walk upstairs to his daughter's snuggerly, a little room on the first floor where Bella used to write or read, and which was filled with her dearest possessions. This evening, however, it was empty and dismantled, a fact which Slygne noticed with a smile. "Good girl," he murmured, "she has packed everything." And he proceeded to the drawing-room. This room was empty too, an air of unwonted dreariness hanging over the curtainless walls. Mr Slygne walked out on to the landing, and began to ascend the stairs in the direction of his own room. On the way, however, he stopped to tap at the door of his daughter's bedroom.

There was no answer.

"My dear," exclaimed Mr Slygne, "do not overtire yourself with packing."

Still there was no reply. A shade of anxiety crossed the paternal visage, and he turned the handle to set the door slightly ajar.

"Bella," he said, "may I come in?"

The jingle of tumblers on a tray, carried by a servant through the hall below, was the only reply which he obtained.

Slygne threw open the door and walked into his daughter's room.

The carpet was littered with odds and ends—bits of ribbon, hat feathers, little scraps of millinery, an empty scent bottle or two, and a hundred other knick-knacks. But the trunks, the trunks which had been brought down overnight to be packed, of these there was absolutely no trace.

Slygne stood in the middle of the room and looked blankly round its bare walls. Then he rang the bell and went out upon the landing. A footman answered his summons.

"Where is Miss Bella?" Slygne demanded.

"She has gone, sir."

"Gone! What do you mean?"

"She left this morning, sir, in a cab, soon after you had started for the City."

Slygne's face went dull yellow.

"Where did she go to?" he said.

"I don't know, sir. She gave her own orders to the cabman."

"What was his number?" the Man Business demanded.

"I—I did not notice, sir."

"Did she say that she was returning to-night?"

"No, sir; but we understood that she was not returning."

"I see. Have dinner ready at the ordinary time, and lay two places as usual."

"Yes, sir."

The footman went downstairs, and Slygney walked on to his own room. He had scarcely shut the door before his quick eyes detected something lying upon the dressing-table. It was a note in his daughter's handwriting.

"DEAR DAD,—Don't think me cruel, but I have gone away to be married. We shall meet to-morrow.—Your loving BELLA."

Mr Horatio Slygney sat down upon the side of his bed and looked at the opposite wall with stupid eyes. His attitude was one of dazed helplessness, an attitude which would have considerably astonished any of his City acquaintances, could they then have seen him

His moustache kept moving suspiciously at the corners from time to time. And presently, down either cheek, along those furrows traced by the stern hand of business, there actually fell two big tears.

For once in his life the financier was "dead beat."

He was aroused by a knock.

"Yes," he said.

"Please, sir, Mr Barcourt has called. He sends you his compliments, and may he stay to dinner?"

"Give him my compliments, say that I shall be delighted to put him up for the night, and show him into the blue room. I will be downstairs in a minute."

Whenever there was any definite action to be taken Slygne became himself. In the present case he quickly set about removing the traces of an unwonted emotion, and prepared himself for dinner without more ado.

Mr Sam Barcourt was an old friend of Slygne's. Together they had "put through" many a complicated deal in the City, and it was to Barcourt that Slygne had owed his

first introduction to Professor Pentique Barcourt was himself an inventor, his speciality being aeronautical apparatus; but so far his inventions in this direction had not been attended by the full success at which he aimed, his idea being to perfect a small portable flying machine, and then sell the rights to a company which Slygne was to float.

The large dirigible balloon had, he asserted, had its day. Santos Dumont and Mr Spencer had worked well to pave the way for something less cumbersome. His aim, he said, was to produce a small aerial canoe, which would speedily become the adjunct of every house in much the same way as the bicycle of to-day is.

This was the last opportunity he would have of seeing his friend for some weeks, and he wished to talk the matter over with him before his departure.

"I have done it all right, my dear Horatio," he said enthusiastically. "The machine is workable and successful. I want you to think over arrangements for the company during your trip. It will be as big a thing as the Lost Continent."

During the afternoon a dray had brought the latest result of Mr Barcourt's experiments to Park Lane. It lay now in the great hall of the house, a long, canoe-like structure, which three or four men could carry.

After dinner, while Slygne looked on doubtfully, the enthusiast pointed out the advantages of his machine and explained the mechanism.

During the whole of dinner the noise outside in Park Lane was growing louder. Songs, street music, and cheering arose continuously, while every now and then loud cries for Mr Slygne to appear were raised by the more enthusiastic rowdies. As the hours passed these cries became more persistent, so much so, that at about 10 p.m. Slygne at last consented to appear at a window on the first floor. He was greeted with tumultuous cheering by the multitude, who at once demanded a speech. Seeing how matters stood, the great financier consented. He took for his subject the future of The Lost Continent Company, and he spoke for half an hour.

He began quietly, such was his wont.

Then, by degrees warming to eloquence, he built the lofty metaphor, tossed forth the epigram, and rose to height after height of impassioned oratory, until all the self-control of the mob was wrenched away and his words were drowned in thunder after thunder of mad applause. Still he spoke on, with his quiet air of conviction, painting them pictures so magnificent, calling up visions so glorious and golden that they became as lunatics set free. Howling, rolling, jumping beneath the window, they tossed their hats high into the air.

Thus did Mr Slygne once more prove his own address and power, and stand as a supreme witness to the supremacy of (that battle-cry of to-day)—the BUSINESS MIND.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### DEALS WITH THE PLUCK OF A FINANCIER

LONDON rose early next morning. It was a fine frosty sunrise, but long before daylight appeared there could be heard the dull tramp of holiday-makers, bent upon obtaining good positions from which to view Slygne's triumphal progress to Paddington. Hour by hour the throngs swelled, until, at eight o'clock, the police were gradually being overpowered and driven together in little clusters of blue, amid the parti-coloured sea. Slygne and Barcourt breakfasted in bed, so that it was not until after nine o'clock that they met, and together walked into the drawing-room to look out upon what was taking place in the street below. Slygne never forgot the sight which met his eyes.

Up and down Park Lane, as far as the eye could see, was one solid mass of people. Of the police who had attempted to line the

route nothing could be seen, the roadway being as completely blocked up as the pavements upon either side. Not a speck paving-stone could be distinguished anywhere, but, instead, one undulating sheet of hats and faces, moving, oceanlike, between the railings of Hyde Park and the opposite houses. Close under the walls of Slygne's house the mob was cheering; from the middle distance came sounds of singing; further again, shouts and laughter could, at intervals, be heard; whilst, from away beyond, the deep murmur of that mighty concourse was borne to the listener's ear like echoes from some giant hive of bees. To attempt driving through such a crowd would evidently be impossible, unless the crush abated very considerably during the next half-hour, which was hardly likely.

Slygne walked briskly to and fro about the room; he did not speak, but his eyes shifted continuously as though he were trying to find some crack through which he might take flight. Sometimes he stood still for a few seconds and tugged his moustache. Then he would move on again, his face set, and hands clasped behind him. Evidently he had con-

centrated his mind upon the situation, and was trying to solve the problem as to how he would be able to reach Paddington; a problem which, unless solved by him, threatened to resolve itself into something more than a problematical question of ways and means.

As time went on his restlessness increased. He bit his fingers, blew his nose, or played the devil's tattoo with two fingers on the table.

"How are we to get there?" he exclaimed restlessly. "How can we do it?"

He realised that here and now was the crisis of his life, sudden, unexpected, absolute.

"We can't do it," responded Barcourt, glancing over the sea of faces, "at least not by ordinary means," and he gazed at his companion stolidly.

"There's nothing funny about it," snapped the financier, with growing irritation.

"To me it seems rather a joke," replied the man of science.

"Well, then you're a fool," retorted Slygne. "You know that I *particularly* wish to leave London, and yet all you can do

is to stand there and grin when a mob of dirty rascals have stopped the way."

"Horatio! they are your admirers. How can you call them rascals?"

"Because they are, sir. At anyrate, your point's not worth discussion. Why can't you make some sensible suggestion instead of talking nonsense? What's the use of that big scientific head of yours, I should like to know, if you can't invent a way out of such difficulty as this?"

Barcourt laughed fatly.

"You don't really believe in Science, Slygne," he said, "and so for the moment Science has deserted you. If you were a believer in Science she would not have deserted you in the hour of need, but rather would have saved you through me, who am her servant."

The big man folded his arms upon his breast and cast a dignified look at his friend.

"I *must* go to-day," he exclaimed impatiently, "so if you know a way out of the difficulty for Heaven's sake tell me instead of grinning in that stupid fashion."

Barcourt laughed fatly.

"I could get you to Paddington easily enough," he said, "if you would trust me. But you will not trust me, so you must stay here, don't you see?"

"No, I do not. Let me hear how you propose to take me."

The scientist pondered; then he began laughing again.

"You remember the canoe which I left in your hall last night?"

"Yes."

"Do you realise what it exactly is?"

"Yes, of course, so far as I could understand your scientific explanations, it is a flying machine."

"Exactly, it is my latest patented flying machine, the *Bellerophon*, and I have just perfected it to such an extent that I can rely upon it for a journey of at least ten miles. I called on purpose to show it to you before you left town, and, if possible, to take you for a short trip in it, but I did not know that fortune was going to be so favourable to my plans as this. Now then, shall I have it brought upstairs, and will you come with me?"

"There were three deaths in the paper last

week as the result of flying-machine accidents answered Slygne, gloomily. "And every one of the machines, I remember, could be relied upon for journeys varying from ten to twenty miles, although they came to grief after they had gone only five hundred yards."

"My machine is the best on the market," said Horatio.

"So were the others, my dear fellow."

"I shall ring for it to be brought up," said Slygne, despite your fears," said the inventor, gauging and, suiting the action to the word, he touched an electric bell. Such was his enthusiasm, however, that he could not find patience to await its arrival, and ran off downstairs to superintend the moving himself.

Slygne, now alone, drew a chair to the window, and sat down astride, leaning his hands upon the back. He gazed out across the Park, setting his teeth as he did so, for there was a shiver at his heart, which still went colder at each shout from those who stood below that window. Slygne could take his chance with the boldest, so long as the game demanded technical skill, but suspense like this, unexpected and at the last moment that was what unnerved him. How near

England might not the news of Pentique's flight be by this time? The great financier trembled and all his mouth went dry at the thought. He rose and helped himself to brandy from a decanter which stood by the door. Then he started at a noise on the stairs, the noise of men staggering under a great weight. Nearer and nearer they came, panting, struggling, stamping. And then the door flew open, and Barcourt entered backwards, gesticulating with great energy to Slygne's three men-servants, who next appeared, panting grievously under a long, pointed structure, in appearance something between a gondola and a coffin.

"Get the chairs out of the way, Horatio," cried Barcourt excitedly, "and help me to run the table against the window. So. Now then, my boys, shift her on to the table, point towards the window. That's it. Now, Horatio, throw the window wide open, put on your hat, and we'll be at Paddington before you can wink."

Slygne looked from Barcourt to the *Bellerophon* with an expression of dismal apprehension, but the man of science was by this time busy with his machine. He had

lodged the nose out over the window sill, and was now screwing two circular electric wheels to the bottom of the machine. Now he proceeded to screw a set of similar appliances along either side and at the stern of the mysterious structure, and then, with one touch of a handle, the whole were set buzzing frantically. The room was filled with a miniature whirlwind which sent the door to with a slam and made Barcourt smile with pleasure.

"Now," he said, "in you get, and we will be at Paddington in ten minutes."

"Or somewhere else," muttered Slygney. But Barcourt did not hear the remark; he had already put on his hat, and was climbing into the stern of his carriage.

Slygney, grey with anxiety and fear, slowly began to follow his friend's example. When they were both seated Barcourt addressed the servants.

"Push us out of the window as hard as ever you can!" he said, and turned his face to the daylight.

The three men laid their hands upon the stern, and, with one long shove, sent the master, Barcourt and the *Bellerophon* sliding into space.

The financier could never recall very distinctly what followed that fateful push. He was conscious of a hum like twenty sewing machines, which came from the electric flappers. He felt the machine drop about ten feet. He saw the crowd below coming nearer and nearer, whilst the wind on his damp forehead struck ice-cold, and, behind, Barcourt swore softly but with expression.

Then, in the tenth of a second, the head of their vehicle heaved upwards, the humming grew fiercer and stronger, the crowd below disappeared for a moment, and before them rose the railings of Hyde Park. Barcourt was panting with excitement, but Slygne closed his eyes, under a sickening conviction that they would be impaled upon the railing points. The crowd were by this time bellowing at them in supreme admiration. The whole affair was, to Slygne, like an unholy dream. To the great man it seemed hours before he opened his eyes again, but when he did so they were whizzing through the open air, whilst, underneath them, ten thousand throats were raving themselves hoarse from enthusiasm.

"Not bad travelling, eh?" remarked

Barcourt, as he twiddled first one handle and then another one. "We had an awkward drop at starting because your window was not high enough. But I am glad we went from that room, since I particularly wanted to prove that I could start the *Bellerophon* from the second storey. It is the only machine on the market which will successfully start from such a low height. Why, poor Farjen killed himself trying to start from the same altitude. Do you not think that there are thousands of pounds in this discovery?"

"Ye-es, I should thi-ink so," answered Slygne, jerkily.

"Are you chippy?" inquired Barcourt, still aggressively cheerful. "Never mind, we shall soon be there, and now that you have proved the efficiency of my air-motor, you will be able to make a second *Lost Continent Company* out of the business, won't you?"

"Anything you like," gasped Slygne.

"Are we nearly there?"

"One minute more," responded Barcourt. "There, do you see the red coats of the soldiers who are posted outside the station? Now we will begin the descent. A swerve for the hotel and straight down beside the departure

platform. Soho! How do you feel, old man?"

"A brandy as quick as possible," groaned the financier, descending hastily with his friend's assistance.

It was a churlish fate which decreed that Slygne should feel so unwell during his journey from London that afternoon, for upon any ordinary day of his life he could not have failed to enjoy the extraordinary demonstrations of welcome that awaited him at every station upon the main line between London and Bristol. But since his aerial progress from Park Lane to Paddington in the morning, Mr Slygne's feelings had been considerably upset, and now the very movement of the train, let alone the vociferous cheering of his admirers, only served to increase his nausea. This state of affairs was the more to be regretted upon his arrival at Bristol, for here the Lord Mayor, city aldermen, local volunteers, leading manufacturers, and Clifton gentlemen, together with large crowds of the soapless, had assembled before the entrance of the Temple Meads Station to receive the financier, and conduct him to a

great feast which had been got up entirely in his honour. There are few things more irritating to the human mind and upsetting to the human temper than a derangement of the inner man, exemplified by a very yellow countenance, upon an occasion when, of all others, one should be looking one's very best. Such, however, was Slygne's present case, and how he ever lived through that afternoon's festivity he could never afterwards imagine.

The rich turtle soup choked him; the wines he could not drink, not even Harvey's *Bristol Milk*; at the fumes of the city's choicest cigars his soul melted in his mouth, and his head swam as the time for speeches drew nearer. A Bristol paper, commenting upon the scene afterwards, remarked that "the financier appeared quite overcome by the welcome afforded him," which certainly described Mr Slygne's feelings during that banquet, although the origin thereof was not his welcome. And when at last the company rose, and with jovial gait sought the outer air, none was more relieved than the guest of the afternoon. Such is Fate's irony!

They saw him to his yacht with royal ceremony, cheering him till their voices failed.

But he disregarded them, for his soul was smitten.

"Show me my cabin, Clark," he said, and that was all.

It may have been five minutes, or it may have been five hours later, when there came a tap upon his cabin door. Slygne was too upset to calculate time, but he said "Come in," chiefly because he felt irritable and wanted to swear at someone.

And at that two persons entered the cabin, and stood side by side before him.

The unhappy financier turned, and then, suddenly gazing through widened eyes, an exclamation of amazement escaped from his lips.

"What," he demanded, gripping the side of his berth fiercely. "What, in the name of Providence, does this mean? And, Bella, how dare you, how dare you, I say, hold that young cub by the hand?"

"Because, father," Miss Slygne answered firmly, but very softly, "because Mr Percy Thawne is now my husband."

## CHAPTER XXV

### RIOT

THERE can be few spectacles more pitiful to the really thoughtful being than any form of undue excitement on the part of his fellow-creatures. One of the primary objects of education is the attainment of a capacity for self-control, and yet it is an object very seldom realised, for persons of the most elaborate upbringing are constantly in the habit of losing all pretensions to this characteristic. Moreover, the further civilisation advances the more obvious does it become that there are few—very few—things in the world over which it is worth while troubling one's head, in spite of which simple truth you may observe, upon any day of the week, elderly and responsible people well-nigh tearing their hair with passion, disappointment, or impatience.

When the news reached England that there

was, in reality, no such thing existent as a partially recovered Lost Continent, and that Pentique had disappeared from the scene of his supposed triumph, the British public went mad. Its conduct was governed neither by the laws of culture, civilisation, nor those of common decency. It forgot itself in a complete and very regrettable manner.

To begin with, the people proceeded to wreck the *Lost Continent* offices, smashing every bit of furniture which they could lay hands on, and seriously maltreating such of the staff as they were able to intercept. Gildover, thanks to his laudable habit of coming down to business rather late in the morning, was not present when the raid took place, but several office boys and a few junior clerks were taken off to the nearest infirmary before the police intervened—a punishment of Slygne's minions that must have given great satisfaction to the crowd, since just retribution in the proper quarter is always so much appreciated.

Everything in Mr Slygne's private room was, of course, demolished, amongst the papers being all the old transfers of the Company's shares. Some persons regretted

this destruction, on the ground that the lost transfers would have made interesting reading to anyone of a cynical turn of mind, but the man in the street thought that the crowd were well within their rights when they burned such nefarious documents. When the Old Broad Street offices were completely broken in pieces, the raiders naturally turned their attention to those of the *Wild West Oil Corporation, Limited*. Here they were balked, however, since the police, being now fully awake to the public danger, had formed up in rank before the coveted entrance. The office was thus saved at the cost of a most satisfying combat between the enraged citizens and the guardians of public order. This worked off a lot of superfluous energy, and did comparatively little damage.

Meanwhile, the west of London, not to be outdone by their eastern brethren, repaired *en masse* to Park Lane, and there dealt with Mr Slygne's private residence in a fashion similar to that ruling the arrangements at Old Broad Street. But Mr Slygne, with his customary foresight, had evidently thought of this contingency, for the rioters found absolutely nothing of any value in his mansion, and had

to content themselves with wrenching doors off their hinges, battering the walls with pokers, and other noisy amusements of a boyish character. When these pastimes became tedious, they formed up in procession and marched eastward.

Curiously enough, at about the same time, the eastern forces took it into their heads to start west, and so the two bodies came into contact with one another at Ludgate Circus. It is possible that their meeting would have been friendly in character, had not the day been so cold ; but since it was freezing, and everyone felt benumbed, human nature demanded that they should have a fight, which they accordingly did. The easterners, however, having lost the flower of their fighting strength outside the *Wild West* offices, were on this occasion badly worsted, being driven, with great bloodshed, back to St Paul's Churchyard, where the final stages of this interesting conflict were definitely brought to a conclusion. The whole affair was a perfect godsend to Fleet Street, as "copy" had been rather scarce for some time past.

Such scenes as those just recorded, though interesting enough from a top window, can

hardly be pardoned from a financial standpoint, since anyone possessing an elementary knowledge of the Money Market must also know that riots are the very worst things for the prices of any share in which he may be interested. So, in the present case, there can be no doubt but that if the public had allowed Mr Slygne to stay in England, he would have been able to arrange matters quite satisfactorily. Slygne knew that to remain would be dangerous, so he left, and *Missing Links* fell to 3s. in three days. Slygne was the misunderstood martyr of a widespread ignorance. The public drove him away, ignoring the fact that in order to keep a share at a good price it is quite unnecessary to trouble about the Company which that share represents. The public refused to keep *Missing Links* at the price which they should have realised, and a panic ensued. It was a striking example of pig-headed ignorance! and shows the need of a more widespread education in the principles of BUSINESS.

## THE LAST CHAPTER

ON the remote shores of Pentique Island, far from the false glitter of the Money Market, where his exploits of three years back were already forgotten, untroubled by the thousand whispers of spiteful tongues, Mr Horatio Slygne reclined in a deck-chair.

The clicking fans of a great palm tree moved above his head and wooed the soft breezes of this Eden. Blaber, the butler, was standing by his master's side concocting a cocktail with the same skill which he had, in former and forgotten days, compiled a prospectus.

Mr Slygne, who looked much younger than he had done three years ago, took the long bubbling glass from the salver. Blaber bowed and retired.

How pleasant it was to sit thus on the verandah of the luxurious bungalow, caring no longer about closing prices, recking nothing of bull and bear alike.

Hark! a shot, high up on the mountain side! Slygne smiled happily. There would be a salmi of game to-night, Percy was shooting.

The ex-financier reflected on his happiness with a drowsy smile. The tempests of life had at least driven his barque into a peaceful haven. In this change lay wisdom, in this peace was content. Here no echo from Europe penetrated the free and joyous life of the tropic.

Here, where the strange bird-calls mingled with the murmurs of the nymph-haunted Caribbean, Horatio Slygne sought rest not in vain. The battle was over, the warrior's firm hand relaxed its muscles in repose. He slept sweetly.

The scented hours glided away. The bungalow's whitened walls no longer dazzled with the reflection of that midday splendour, and creatures of the noon awoke from their sun baths. A fat lizard, rousing himself from rest, waddled off into the shelter of a thick-leaved shrub, whilst a seagull, hovering for a moment right overhead, shrieked his farewell to the departing day, then, pitching down some twenty feet, shot out again to seaward.

The sun was sinking, sinking, and a cool breath of approaching night trembled in the air. Insect life, so busy under the former heat, now yielded its activity up to the animal kingdom, and man, setting the example, ventured softly forth.

Slygne, who had been dozing for hours with a book on his knee, roused himself little by little, and began to read idly. He had opened the page at random, but the words which caught his eye touched him like the flow of some cool ointment poured over a traveller's bleeding feet by a loved hand in summer. His features relaxed into an expression of unspeakable content as he read the immortal lines of his favourite poet:—

“ Indeed the Idols I have loved so long  
Have done my credit in this World much wrong :  
Have drowned my Glory in a shallow Cup,  
And sold my Reputation for a song.”

He closed the book and smiled sweetly, as had been his wont in the days gone by when driving a particularly advantageous bargain ; it was a magnanimous, forgiving smile, the smile of a philosopher, and it became his

features well. Its influence had scarcely died away when a small voice broke in upon his reverie.

"Granddaddy, muvver says tum in to supper, daddy's tum back."

THE END

