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MEN OF AFFAIRS

BY

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PART I.

CHAPTER 1.

DISSOLUTION.

At a pawnshop in the Gray's Inn Road, Richard Frencham Altar disposed of the last of his worldly goods. Four suits from a tailor in Saville Row, two pairs of shoes in brown and patent by a craftsman of Jermyn Street, some odds and ends of hosiery, a set of dressing table brushes with black monograms on ivory and the gold cigarette case Doreen had given him on the day of their engagement. In consideration for which he departed with a sum of twenty-seven pounds sixteen shillings in his trousers pockets. At his rooms in Golden Square he settled his account with the landlady, a luxury that reduced his wealth by a matter of nineteen pounds. Of the eight pounds sixteen shillings remaining, five guineas were placed on one side for the tobacconist who had supplied him with Gold Flake and the margin transferred to another pocket for the purpose of one final engagement with the habit of high living. After that—well time would show. It was futile to speculate upon the future. He had the clothes he stood up in, the brain and tissue heaven had provided him with and a spirit unawed by adversity. Many men have started life with less.

A neighbouring clock chimed the hour. Too early to dine—besides there were things to be done first. From a highly decorated vase that stood upon a particularly restless over-mantel, he drew a small packet of letters and untied the tape that circled them. They were written in a careless sprawling hand, with lots of ink and little thought. They were very full of 'darlings' and 'dearests' and 'how much do you love me's.' They were very, very rapturous—they were very, very silly. They had made him very happy when first he read them because silliness and sincerity are often partners, but now he knew better—now they made him laugh. Not a very cheerful laugh perhaps—a little cynical maybe but on the whole tolerant and forbearing.

He put a match to the first and lit the others in succession one by one until a charred chain of memories stretched across the tiling of the grate. The last 'Doreen' straggled scarlet across a black and twisting page, whitened, greyed and disappeared.

"And I'll grow a beard and forget all about you," said Richard. "And it oughtn't to be very difficult really."

He rose, crossed to the window and looked out.

"If ever I fall in love again—if ever I earn enough for the luxury of falling in love again, it won't be with——" but he changed his mind about finishing the sentence, for, after all, it is folly to speak hard words against pretty little things that make the world very jolly while they last.

Besides Doreen had her way to make like any other girl, and no one can deny the difference between

the son of an exceptionally wealthy and indulgent parent and the same son after the parental wealth has exploded and the parental brain has been drilled with a .450 calibre bullet discharged at a range of two inches from the frontal bone and making a somewhat unsightly exit by way of the parietal.

James Frencham Altar, father of Richard, did not believe in failure or exposure or public obloquy. His lode-star was success and when the forward speed of success threw out its selectors and went suddenly into reverse the liquidation of his affairs was conducted by the firm of Colt and was covered in a single report. Thus ended an ambitious career.

Richard had suffered rather heavily under the generosity of his father whose cherished wish was that his son should be a gentleman and nothing more. Accordingly Richard had been sent to Eton, Oxford, and round the world three times. He had been given a racing stable, an enormous allowance and was instructed to spend as much as he could and enjoy himself all he knew how. Being a high spirited and obliging young fellow, Richard did all these things very engagingly, and somehow contrived not to spoil himself. He emerged from the war with a Military Cross, a row of service medals, a brace of foreign decorations and an ambition to do some work. His father appeared to applaud the ambition but actually discouraged it with specious argument and an introduction to Doreen—who did the rest.

Doreen, of course, was a perfect darling. She always bit her lower lip and she held her arms tight to her sides like a child who has been naughty. There was no possible excuse to refrain from hugging Doreen. One just had to and damn the consequences. Doreen would cry after being kissed and would continue crying until again kissed into an even frame of mind. Lots of people kissed Doreen because they could not help themselves and she forgave them all on that account. There never was such a darling. Richard Frencham Altar, fresh from the wars, simply wanted to eat her and, seeing that he was a handsome young fellow with a pleasant aura of gold about him, Doreen arrayed herself in her most eatable frocks and devourable smiles and just let him.

"Oh, Dicks," she cried, soon after their engagement—'Dicks' being the name she called him, for Doreens all the world over adore plurals and attaching 'S's' to names because it makes them so snakey —"Oh, Dicks, there's only one teeny-weeny thing I wish."

"What's that?" he said.

"I wish you were as poor as poor as poor so I could just love you for nothing but yourself."

It was very pleasant hearing, but when a year later he went to her and confided that he was as 'poor as poor as poor' it transpired she had only said it for something to say and infinitely preferred young men who were as rich as rich as rich.

Discoveries like that are a little apt to revolutionise a man's ideals even if they fail to destroy them altogether.

Richard kept his views to himself. He kissed the tearful Doreen for the last time and she waved a tiny georgette kerchief from the window as he passed down the street and out of her life. He had not a great deal of leisure to consider the extent of his loss. The proceedings of the coroner's court and the importunities of creditors occupied his days very fully. The chaos of his father's affairs and the winding up of his own provided ample entertainment. The net result was a settlement of something less than a farthing in the pound and the retirement into oblivion of one of the most able spendthrifts of the twentieth century. He had spent a couple of months looking for work, but the name Frencham Altar, coupled with his complete inability to point to a single marketable asset other than courage and a smiling disposition, conspired together to harden the hearts of employers. Old friends denied him interviews, business acquaintances turned him from their doors and the casual advertiser forbore replying to his enquiries. Of course, if he had been a little less honest he might very easily have cleaned up a quiet thousand or two from the wreckage of the estate. His solicitor had demonstrated the absurdity of Quixoticism in such affairs, but whatever other reproach might be laid to his account, Richard was no opportunist and lacked the parental liking for feathering his own nest at the expense of his fellows. Wherefore the whole of his worldly resources, if we except the courage and the smile, went into the whirlpool and were swallowed up.

Richard let the curtain fall across the window and crossed to the mantelpiece where he touched the bell. It occurred to him that there was a certain luxury in ringing bells—it was one of many comforts of civilisation that would pass out of his reach. No one answered the bell so he rang it again and was quite dispirited to hear footsteps ascending the stairs. If his connection with bells was to cease it would have been pleasant to have rung it a few more times. It is an awful thing to contemplate that you have rung a bell for the last time. One can get very sentimental over a thing like that. Dear jolly old bells, what an influence they have upon life. How bravely they whirr at the arrival of a dear expected—how madly they riot to the tune Wedding—how sadly they toll when the last of us is borne away.

Mrs. Walton, the landlady, came into the room and said "Yes."

"I am going now," said Richard.

"We shall be sorry to lose you."

"And I to go. Many thanks, Mrs. Walton."

"And what is your destination, sir?"

"I have my eye on a bench facing Green Park," he replied. "It is a favourite locality for the impecunious philosopher. In other words I don't know where I'm going but I have a pretty solid conviction that one of these days I shall get there. There are two empty trunks in my bedroom which I should be glad if you would accept."

Mrs. Walton shook her head.

"You could raise a bit of money on them," she suggested.

"Maybe," said Richard, "but I don't want to. There are only two kinds of money that are any use. Regular money or lots of money—a little money is no good to anyone and is better spent. By midnight tonight I hope to find myself with none at all."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Walton.

"That," replied Richard, "is precisely what I am relying upon. And I could not wish to start on my adventures under a happier ensign. Goodbye."

And to the amazement of the lady he hissed her very soundly and clattered down the stairs.

At the tobacconist he settled the last of his small accounts, purchased a hundred cigarettes and hailed a taxi.

"The Berkeley Grill Room," he said.

They were a little surprised at the informality of his attire, but there is something in the bearing of a restaurant habitué that would procure him the best the establishment can afford even though he appeared in a bathing suit.

"Stick me in a corner somewhere," he said, "I have no evening clothes."

"Monsieur has not had time to dress."

"I repeat I have no evening clothes, on the other hand I've a deuce of a good appetite. A brandy cocktail and the book of words, please."

They were supplied.

Richard ordered his dinner with a reckless disregard for expenditure and a nice choice of wine and dishes which earned the appreciation of those that waited upon him. He finished with a Villa Villa and a double Napoleon and sat back with folded arms, a pleasant smile and eyes that drowsed comfortably over the agreeable quiet of the café.

It caused him something of an effort to ask for his bill, dispose of it with the last of his notes, tip the waiter and rise to his feet. As he was approaching the swing doors that led to the little hexagonal foyer, a man at a table near by raised a pair of keen black eyes, glanced at him quickly, smiled and nodded. The man's face was unfamiliar but Richard returned the nod casually and passed out. The man half rose then changed his mind and sat down again. He was a tall man with black hair threaded with white. His face was large featured but clear cut, high cheekbones, a Roman nose, a straight, firm mouth and Wellingtonian side whiskers, his age forty or a little more. His companion at the table put a question but the man shook his head.

"I fancy I made a mistake," he said.

Richard tipped the porter with the last coins in his pocket, a shilling and five coppers, turned slowly down Berkeley Street and crossed Piccadilly. He passed the Ritz, of pleasant memory, and entered into the sleeping apartment of London's destitute—the single bench on the slope that faces Green Park, gratuitously provided by the generosity of the City of Westminster.

There was a constable by the cabman's shelter and him Richard addressed.

"A fine night, Bobbie," he said.

The constable agreed that this was so. He did not resent having been addressed as 'Bobbie.' There was no offence in it and Richard belonged to that class of individuals with whom familiarity is a cloak for courtesy.

"Taking a stroll, sir?" he asked.

Richard produced his hundred Gold Flake and bade the officer fill his helmet.

"Better help me out with a few or I shall be smoking all night," he said.

"In trouble, sir?"

"Broke," said Richard, "and I want your advice. I've had the devil of a good dinner with the last of my fortune and I'm looking for words of wisdom. In the first place, how about that bench?"

"The Rowton is better."

"Won't run to it."

"Not to be recommended, p'raps, but it's free to all," said the constable, nodding at the green seat which was already filling up for the night, with bundles of rags, voluminous overcoats and thin, shiny blue serges buttoned at the neck.

"I don't want to steal a march on the regular custom," observed Richard.

"It's first come hereabouts, but you'd better not leave it too late.
Anyway you'll get a shake-up when the four o'clock patrol comes on."

"How's that?"

"Always give 'em a shake-up at four o'clock. Don't make many odds. You just get up and sit down again. Takes the cold out of your bones if it does nothing else."

"I suppose," said Richard, "I couldn't doss down on that board that's perched on the two iron standards up towards Hyde Park Comer. It has a single room touch that I rather fancy."

The constable shook his head.

"I couldn't let you," he said, "though there's no particular harm in it."

"Then what's it for anyway?"

"Don't rightly know. They do say it was for the garden carriers to rest their packs on when they was coming up to market from the outlying farms. And again I been told that they laid the corpses on it what was being carried to the plague pits when there was one of these 'ere epidemics in London. Long while back that 'ud be."

"Hm," said Richard, "cheery sort of memory. Well I'll take a chance with the rest. Good night. Oh, by the way, how's one manage about getting a wash in the mornings?"

"You goes without."

"Well, there's a damn thing," said Richard and departed with a nod.

There was an empty place on the bench but Richard hesitated long before occupying it. Although no more than a single step it seemed a tremendous distance from the pavement to the seat. A happy memory of a similar sensation helped him to take the plunge—it was the trembling nervousness he had felt on the first day of his commission when he stood in an agony of suspense outside the anteroom of the officers' mess and tried to summon up courage to enter. A dark shambling figure approaching the spot decided him, and having accomplished the feat it was only to find experience repeating itself. No one took any notice, not a sunken chin was raised. The sleepers to right and left edged away a trifle to give him room and continued with their breathy muttering sleep.

Richard Frencham Altar lit a cigarette and buried his hands in his pockets and with the whole future before him to contemplate and with every vital problem that a man may be called upon to face, he said to himself, "Now I wonder who that johnny was who nodded to me at the Berkeley."

He was still wondering, for want of something better to do, when an hour later his friend the constable passed slowly by and looked him over critically. An official report of his observation would

have read as follows:—

Height, about five feet nine. Age, thirty odd. Hair, dark with a disposition to wave. Eyes, brown, merry and set wide apart. Well marked brows. Nose of medium length and slightly crooked to the left. Short upper lip. Firm mouth with an upward twist at the corners. A strong square chin. A habit of holding the head slightly at an angle. Quick way of speaking and walks with a springy step. Stands with one hand on his left hip.

"Doing all right?" asked the constable.

"Fine," said Richard.

CHAPTER 2.

EIGHT CLOSED DOORS.

As the taxi turned into the station yard from the Euston Road, Anthony Barraclough unobtrusively opened the offside door and dropped into the street. A pantechnicon concealed the manoeuvre from the traffic that followed. His taxi driver was blissfully unaware of his departure. It would seem a mean thing to have done but Barraclough had pinned a Bradbury to the vacated seat as a tacit apology.

On landing in the street he wasted no time and nipped very neatly into the open back of the pantechnicon. Here he concealed himself until a stream of a dozen taxis had passed by, and in the pleasant straw smelling shadows Anthony Barraclough grew a beard in precisely half a minute by the clock, and a moustache in even less time. It was a nice beard and a nice moustache, but even so it did not improve his appearance. He was much better looking without. If you doubt the statement here is an official report of his looks and bearing, by means of which you may judge for yourself.

Height, about five feet nine. Age, thirty-four. Hair, dark with a disposition to wave. Eyes, brown and set wide apart. Well marked brows. Nose of medium length and slightly crooked to the left Short upper lip. Firm mouth with an upward twist at the corners. A strong square chin. A habit of holding the head slightly at an angle. Quick way of speaking. Walks with a springy step. Stands with one hand on his left hip.

Compare this description with one printed in the foregoing chapter and a certain peculiar resemblance may suggest itself. The absence of the word 'merry' in the latter as applied to the eyes must not be mistaken for a careless omission, but rather as a piece of keen observation in physiognomy. These things are very important.

Having pressed his cheeks until the wax warmed and adhered, Anthony Barraclough threw a leg over the tailboard and alighted on the pavement. Scarcely a soul bothered to glance his way. At a smart walk he made for the tube station, bought a ticket at the twopenny machine and entered the lift. In the passages below he made a circular tour, entered an ascending lift and reappeared in the street. A 'bus was passing which he entered and travelled in for a few hundred yards. Then he got out and hailed a taxi and two minutes later was at the booking office of St. Pancras Station. As he was reaching for his note case a man in the queue behind him observed, vaguely, as though addressing the air:

"Pity to waste the money, Mr. Barraclough. Much better go home and be reasonable."

He returned the note case to his pocket and stepped out of the queue. A sudden inflammation of anger surged to his cheeks and his brows came down hard and straight.

The individual who had spoken was apparently absorbed in a copy of *Answers*.

"It is annoying, isn't it?" he remarked sweetly.

And then it was that Barraclough did a very stupid thing. He measured the distance speculatively between his own fist and the man's jaw and upper cut to the point as neatly as you could please. It happened so quickly that the onlookers thought the man had fallen from sickness. Barraclough was gone when they helped him to his feet. He was in a taxi speeding out of the yard.

"Drive north as fast you can go," he had shouted.

A loafer, standing by the station gates, who had witnessed his hurried entry into the cab, lounged in front as it was passing out. The driver swore and slammed on his brakes but the loafer took his own time and chances. The speed of the taxi fell almost to a walking pace. The loafer caught the nearside canopy stay with his right hand and slung his knee on to the projecting end of the rear wing. From there he mounted to the roof of the cab, keeping his legs clear of the side windows. It was quite a dexterous performance, and after all, what was against it? The fare for two is the same as for one and the poor must travel. So hugging his knees and smiling he sat on the battens of the luggage rack and congratulated himself, while within Anthony Barraclough was tapping with his foot and feeling very angry indeed.

And if you are interested to know why, here is the reason. The little affair that occurred at St. Pancras booking office was a repetition of seven similar incidents within the last twelve hours. By seven different routes he had endeavoured to get out of London and in every instance had been headed back. It had started with the affair on the Croydon train and the woman who fainted in his arms. Then there was the car on the Portsmouth road that had been crashed into by another at the top of Kingston Hill. Victoria, Charing Cross, Waterloo and Liverpool Street. It seemed to make no difference at all where he tried, the result was always the same. The little contretemps at Rotherhithe when he tried to board a tug was a sufficiently unpleasant experience for one day. A man gets out of the habit of being shot over after two years of peace and the memory of the little chips of flying woodwork flicked from the bows of the dingy as he had pulled out into the river was distinctly discouraging. Whoever fired the shots had a pretty knack with a rifle. It was the whirr of a bullet just over his head persuaded him to put back to port. After that the firing ceased. As he dragged the almost foundering dingy on to the mud a fast motor launch went scurrying down stream with a man on deck who shouted, "Go home."

But Anthony was not the type of man to turn back. Opposition sterned his resolve. Besides he had a pretty sure conviction that they did not mean to kill him. Very much the reverse. Were he to be dying of a sickness he felt certain they would dispatch to his bedside the finest physicians of the land. The problem was how to escape their unwelcome attentions and so far it had proved a problem without solution.

They were speeding along the Caledonian Road when the driver leaned out to ask where he should drive. The man on the top of the cab caught the answer "Hendon Aerodrome" and smiled because he admired a tryer.

"Better wait till we get to a quieter part," he reflected.

The taxi proceeded until at last the houses of Golders Green ran out into the fields near The Welsh Harp. Then very cautiously he spread out at full length and reached out his hand for the knee joint of the hood stay. The one on the right broke easily but the left was stiffer and bit his finger as the joint gave. He had already loosened the little clip hooks that secured the hood frame to the permanent structure. There was room for a knife blade where the frames united and they had slipped back easily. Holding the hood in position with his left hand the adventurous passenger produced a neat automatic with his right. Then he gave the hood a shove and presented the pistol at Barraclough's head. And since it is not in the realms of common occurrence for the tops to fly off cabs and reveal armed desperadoes no one will blame Barraclough for the views he expressed upon the subjects.

"Keep sweet," said the loafer in a very agreeable tone of voice when Barraclough had exhausted his first inspiration. "And if you'll keep your hands in your lap I'll come and sit beside you."

Never for an instant while this agile individual transferred himself from the roof of the cab to the interior did the caressing muzzle of the pistol waver from its mark.

"Sorry to be a nuisance," he observed as he settled himself beside Barraclough, "but I'm afraid you'll have to tell this joker to turn back. Golders Green Tube Station will do nicely."

And while Barraclough was leaning forward to comply with the instructions he very neatly removed a Harrington and Richardson from his unhappy victim's pocket.

"Just to be on the safe side," he remarked as he transferred it to his own. "You'll be getting a bit peevish maybe and might lose your sense of proportion after such a busy day."

"Tell me this," said Barraclough. "How many of you are there in this?"

"My dear chap, I don't know—hundreds I expect."

"Hm!" said Barraclough. "Well, I'm going home to bed."

"Sensible fellow and I'll see you get there safely."

They alighted at Golders Green Station where the driver was equally amazed by his open cab and the extra passenger.

"No, no, this is on me," said the loafer and handed out a couple of notes.

In the station he nodded to several men in a friendly fashion and repeated the performance to some others as they sat side by side in the tube carriage. He rather flattered himself on the inspiration that suggested this performance, for, as a fact, everyone of them was a stranger.

"Thought it safer to come home this way," he said to establish the point more firmly. "I felt a bit lonely with you in that cab."

They parted at the doors of Crest Chambers, W., where Barraclough had a flat.

"By the way, any message for Mr. Van Diest?"

"You can tell him to go to the devil," said Anthony Barraclough.

"Right, I will. I say, if you feel a bit neglected during the night don't worry, there are plenty of us knocking about in the street below and we shan't desert you."

Barraclough smiled grimly.

"You seem a genial sort of ass," he said. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. I must toddle along and make my report." He hesitated.
"But I would like to know what all this is about."

"So would a good many other people," said Barraclough and pressed the third floor button of the electric lift.

CHAPTER 3.

WHICH DEVELOPS AN IDEA.

The meeting of the directors had been arranged to take place at Lord Almont Frayne's house in Park Lane. Nugent Cassis was first to arrive. It was part of his scheme of life to be five minutes early for appointments. He nodded to the man-servant, crossed to the fire and rubbed his thin hands before it.

"I expect his lordship will be down directly," said the servant.

"Do you?" said Cassis and that was all.

A precise, erect, parchmentlike person was Nugent Cassis, entirely colourless in himself and his outlook. The emotions of life never for an instant affected him. He was apparently insensible to pain, passion, triumph and disaster. His brain worked at one unvarying speed with clocklike regularity. He was always efficient, he was never inspired. He believed in himself and his judgments and doubted everyone else and their judgments. He was a machine, self-contrived, for the purpose of making money, which he had no capacity for spending. He could carry in his head the entire overnight market quotations and invariably did so. He seldom made a mistake and never admitted the mistakes he made. His transactions were honest because his knowledge of the law was unrivalled and he knew to a hair how close to the wind a man might sail. As he never wasted a moment he occupied the time of waiting, in ringing up his broker and firing a barrage of instructions. This done he returned to the fireplace, consulted his own watch, corrected the mantelpiece clock which was a minute and a half slow, sniffed critically and proceeded to warm his hands again. There was nothing spontaneous in the action, warming his hands was as much a part of his daily programme as reading the *Financial Times*, the two minutes he spent lying flat on his back after lunch, or the single round of golf which he played every third Sunday throughout the year.

The clock was striking eleven when Mr. Hilbert Torrington, a bent, bald, clean shaven man of eighty years, entered on the arm of the servant. Mr. Torrington, his age claims the prefix, was a different type to Cassis. He possessed a pair of blue eyes that might have belonged to a child and the expression of his face, a face threaded with a thousand wrinkles, was sweet and calm. People who saw him but had no intimate knowledge of his powers, marvelled that this frail, kindly, stooping old man, with his look of

innocence that was almost sublime, could in reality be a giant in the world of money. Such was the case. Mr. Hilbert Torrington had his fingers on the financial pulse of the world and at a pressure could accelerate or decelerate it, to suit his mood. Unlike Cassis, Mr. Torrington had time for everything. When he worked he worked instantaneously, achieving in an hour work that would have kept a less remarkable man busy for a month. After one of these flashes he would relapse into pleasant gardens where he grew roses, or pleasant galleries where he looked with eyes of understanding into the heart of pictures. Sometimes he amused himself by playing with urchins in St. James's Park and on one occasion had been seen to divest himself of his coat to supply the wickets for an informal cricket match. When asked why he bothered to take part in the rack and strain of high finance he gave the amiable reply:

"Because it's such fun."

The servant piloted him to a high elbow chair and helped him to be seated.

"Thank ye," said Mr. Torrington. "And if you'll put a side table alongside I'll try a new patience. No, don't bother to tell me your master won't be long, I know that bit by heart."

He unwound a silk comforter from his neck, hung it over the arm of the chair and produced from his pocket a small pack of cards.

"Cold, Cassis?"

"I was cold," replied Cassis exactly.

"Hm! Fine growing weather, this."

He began to lay out the cards in neat little packs.

"Bulbs are coming through nicely. I was hoping to spend a day or two in the garden but I'm afraid not —'fraid it won't be possible."

Cassis put his hands behind his back.

"This business," he said.

"Yes."

Lord Almont Frayne, a rather resplendant young man of thirty, came into the room with all the bounce of youth. His chin shone from a ten minutes' old shave, his hair clove to his head like fresh laid paint and the crease in his trousers was razor edged.

"Most awfully sorry, dear hearts," he exclaimed in clamourous apology.
"Deuce of a late night at Thingumy's ball. Do excuse."

From which the reader may assume that his lordship was a bit of an ass—but no. Under the ecstatic exterior of twentieth century modern man-about-townism there existed in the composition of Lord Almont many of the shrewd qualities that had made his father one of the richest bankers in England. People in the know would assure you it was not only luck that had kept the parental millions secure and had even increased them after the old gentleman's decease. Lord Almont had a sense of the market and his intelligence was not entirely devoted to matters sartorial.

"Anybody have anything? No. Too early? Infernally hot in here. Mind if we have a window up?"

Cassis was only just in time to lodge an objection.

Lord Almont pointed to the street.

"Here comes old Cranbourne bobbing along. Shall we wait?"

Mr. Torrington continued playing his patience game until Cranbourne was announced. And if you are interested to know what manner of man Cranbourne might be then turn to the description of the diner at the table near the door in the Berkeley Café. As to his associations with these other gentlemen it remains only to be said that he was a supplier of ideas and occasionally of ideals.

"Anybody know anything?" said Lord Almont.

Cassis shrugged his shoulders negatively.

Mr. Torrington put down a card.

"Waste of time," he said. "Waste of time. Barraclough will never get out of London by ordinary ways. It was a useless attempt."

"Well, we don't know."

"He hadn't got through at ten thirty last night," said Cranbourne. "He was dining at the Berkeley Grill. 'Course he might have had a shot later."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No—just nodded. Billings tells me he was shot at when he tried to make the tug on the river."

"The boat was shot at, you mean," said Cassis.

"Anyone rung him up this morning?" asked Mr. Torrington.

"No, it was arranged we shouldn't."

"Then he's sure to be here soon."

The remark was prophetic for as the words were spoken Barraclough was announced.

"No good," he said.

"You look tired, Barraclough," observed Mr. Torrington, who thought about men as well as money.

"Am a bit."

"Did you try to make Hendon?"

"Did I try? Yes, I tried and travelled a Wild West shooting man on the lid of the cab who worked a hold up by The Welsh Harp. Far as I can see there must be hundreds out to prevent me." His mouth hardened. "But I'm going to do it. I mean to do it somehow."

Mr. Torrington smiled sweetly.

"Ardent young man," he said.

Cassis put his finger tips together and remarked:

"Recklessness is a luxury we can't afford."

"I'm prepared to take chances," said Barraclough.

Mr. Torrington quoted:

"'On the sand drift, on the veldt side, in the fern scrub we lay.
That our song might follow after by the bones on the way.'"

"That's all very well," said Cassis sourly, "but our sons won't be able to follow after so long as Barraclough obstinately determines to keep the secret entirely to himself."

"Pooh! pooh! pooh!" said Mr. Torrington. "That was understood."

"It was," said Barraclough and swivelled round to face Cassis. "I've said frankly that until I get the concession no one but myself will be told the map reference. That's absolute."

Cassis sniffed.

"It was a pity you didn't get the concession when you made the discovery."

"You know quite well that I wasn't sure. A false move might have brought every prospector in the world to the place—would have done. Besides with all this post-war territorial shuffle it was pretty nearly impossible to say which government actually owned the land. Been jolly if we'd got a title too soon and from the wrong people."

"But the territorial point has been cleared up now, hasn't it?" Cassis put the question shrewdly.

Barraclough shut up like a clam and made no answer.

Lord Almont butted in.

"Still you're pretty confident of getting the concession if you manage to get clear."

Barraclough nodded.

"If I can slip through and they don't stop me I'll be back with the whole thing settled in three weeks from the hour of starting."

"And during those three weeks," said Cassis sourly, "Van Diest and his crowd will subject us to an intensive course of financial buffeting. As matter of fact he has begun already."

"Well, it was no fault of mine the other side knew anything about it," said Barraclough. "If your confidential secretary had kept his mouth shut——"

"There is no use in discussing that," said Cassis.

Mr. Torrington swept the cards into a heap and shuffled them to and fro like a cook making pastry.

"Getting very active is Van Diest," he remarked. "Not a good loser, poor fellow. Quite set his heart on getting into our little syndicate. Started unloading American Rails yesterday afternoon—broke the market badly. I had to reciprocate by selling Dutch Oils. Our losses on the day were about equal."

Lord Almont remarked that his broker had rang him up to tell him of a fuss. Had no idea Van Diest was at the back of it. Cost him about ten thousand but he held on.

"Quite so and it's all very well if we are going to get a return for our losses," said Cassis. "But so long as Barraclough is held by the heels we become a mere kicking post for the opposition. Not good enough."

"Any suggestions?" said Barraclough.

"Yes. I suggest under the seal of confidence you inform us of the exact location of this field and we dispatch a trustworthy servant to carry out the necessary negotiations."

Barraclough remained silent.

"If you refuse to adopt that view all I can see for it is either to drop the whole thing or to let Van Diest come in and split the profit."

For one instant the placid blue eyes of Mr. Torrington were lit with a shiny white fire.

"Van Diest will not be in this, Cassis," he said.

"But look here, dear old Mr. Torrington," Lord Almont exclaimed.
"Surely you agree that Barra ought to give us his trust."

The old man smiled whimsically.

"Think so?" he said.

"I mean to say, we're not the kind of people to take advantage of a man."

"Nonsense! Of course we are," came the answer.

"That's honest," Barraclough laughed.

"Not at all, my dear boy, it's a confession of dishonour of which I am heartily ashamed."

Cassis could not leave the subject alone. Tenacity was one of his strong points.

"Suppose you were killed," he suggested. "The secret would be lost for all time. And where should we stand?"

"Several degrees better than myself," was the answer. "You'll come out with your lives."

"That's not the point. Our involvement is equivalent to yours. Your risk is physical, ours financial, and of the two, in my own opinion——"

"I know," Barraclough cut in. "Our views are opposed about that. I made the find and as soon as I have turned it into actual possession, you will have the chance to exploit it, but until——"

"Yes, but half a shake, old son," said Lord Almont. "How about the marvellous healing properties—all the jolly old hospitals we were going to endow. One doesn't want to be a dog in the manger."

Barraclough grinned. Whatever other qualities Nature had bestowed upon the ebullient peer philanthropy was not outstanding.

"I notice in this argument," he said, "money came over the horizon before the hospitals showed their smoke."

"Then deposit the map reference in a safe place so we can get hold of it if you break up."

"And where it will be at the mercy of the first man with a jimmy and a blow lamp. No, thanks."

There are certain types of stubbornness that increase in direct ratio to the pressure applied. To this type Barraclough belonged. He had yet to find the man who could induce him to talk against his will. Woman? Ah, that's a different matter. The argument took an angry turn.

"It occurs to me," said Mr. Torrington sweetly, "it was a pity I deserted my greenhouses this morning. We remain *in statu quo ante*."

A reproach from Mr. Torrington seldom failed to reach its mark.

"I'm sorry," Barraclough apologised, "but I give you my solemn word that somehow I'll win you the purse."

"The purse," Mr. Torrington smiled. "One almost forgets the purse in a case like this. It is eclipsed by the will to succeed. Adventure! The one thing of which old people never tire."

And then it was that Cranbourne who, curled up in the window seat with his chin resting on his knees, had taken no part in the debate, made his first observation.

"If Barraclough is to succeed it will have to be in the next three days. At midnight on the 27th he is going to be kidnapped."

All eyes turned upon Cranbourne as he made this announcement.

"How the devil do you know that?" exclaimed Barraclough.

Nugent Cassis answered the question.

"We have our private information bureau in the opposite camp."

"Ah! Anyone I know?"

"That's immaterial."

"I think I deserve your confidence."

"Have you given us yours?"

Barraclough lit a cigarette.

"Oh, very well," he said. "So I'm to be kidnapped."

"At twelve precisely," Cranbourne nodded. "In the course of the next three days Van Diest will try the persuasion of bribes and failing success you disappear, my friend, for a short inquisition."

Barraclough shut his fists tight.

"By God," he said. "So that's the way of it. Three days, what! I'll break through that damned ring if it kills me."

"I wonder," murmured Mr. Torrington. "Quite a lot I wonder. Still it's great fun. Don't do anything in a hurry. Three days is a life time. Take my advice, go and sit with your girl and calm down."

"Good idea, I will. We shall meet again?"

"Surely."

"Au revoir then."

As Barraclough moved toward the door Cranbourne spoke.

"Why did you pass me by at the Berkeley last night?"

Barraclough wrinkled his forehead perplexedly.

"The Berkeley?"

"Yes, about ten thirty."

"At ten thirty I was plugging a man in the jaw at St. Pancras Station."

Cranbourne sprang to his feet.

"Honest?" he cried.

"Honest."

"And you never went to the Berkeley?"

"Nowhere near it."

A light of wild enthusiasm leapt into Cranbourne's eyes and he brought his hands together with a loud report.

"Got it," he cried. "Got it! Oh, what an idea!"

"What's up with you?"

The enthusiasm came under control but his voice still trembled.

"It's all right, gentlemen, I can see a way. With any luck we'll succeed. Don't do anything until eleven o'clock on the night of the 27th. I'm going to try and find someone." And he made for the door.

"But hang it all," Lord Almont shouted, "be a bit more explicit."

Cranbourne turned.

"Have you missed it," he said. "Then here's something to think about.
Suppose Van Diest kidnaps the wrong man." The door slammed behind him.

Mr. Torrington laid a card on the table with careful deliberation. He was smiling.

"Great fun," he murmured to himself.

CHAPTER 4.

SITTING ON THE FLOOR.

When Anthony Barraclough left the Mansions he walked up Park Lane and turned into Green Street. Before a house with a white front door he stopped and attacked the knocker. He was admitted by a parlourmaid and informed that Miss Irish was in the boudoir. This was good news because it meant sitting on the floor and lovers all the world over are at their happiest when they sit on the floor. There is something soothing and familiar about it. A man loves to sprawl and a woman is always at her best curled up among cushions. It is impossible to be disagreeable when you are sitting on the floor. You couldn't conceivably have a row in that position. Perhaps a little sulking might be done but very little and only of the kind that provokes pleasant makings-up. Altogether it is a jolly fine institution and the world would be a better place if there was more of it.

In the opinion of Anthony Barraclough no one sat on the floor so divinely as Isabel, and to tell the truth he rather fancied himself as her floor partner.

"Don't you bother," he said to the maid. "I'll make my own way up."

He handed over his hat and stick and mounted the stairs and knocked at a door on the second floor.

"May I come in?" he asked and did not wait for the reply.

Isabel was built in among a nest of squabs and cushions that circled the tiny grate.

"Nice!" she said with a grin. "I was beginning to think you were deserting me. Rang up three times

yesterday I did."

"Awful busy I was," he returned and disposed himself luxuriously beside her. Then he said 'Please' and had every reason to say 'Thank you' only he preferred to express it otherwise.

"What you been doing?"

"Trous-sewing," she answered nodding at a small basket decorated with silk fruit and overflowing with pieces of flimsy needlework. "But I've been dull. Where were you yesterday?"

"All over the place. North, south, east and west and the nor'-nor's and the sou'-sou's into the bargain. It was a hectic day."

Something in the forced gaiety of his voice made her look at him critically.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. "I know I'm not handsome but——"

"I don't know yet," she continued looking, "but you've a kind of flat look at the corners of your eyes where the fun ought to be."

"Now what on earth do you mean by that?"

"A lot. Tony! Almost you've got the——"

"Well?"

"The money face."

"Money face?"

"Um! You mustn't laugh, it's a dreadful face. Daddy had it. He caught it during the rubber boom and it never went away. Are you still doing things with that beastly syndicate, Tony?"

"Here, chuck it," he implored humorously. "We're sitting on the floor, you know. 'Tisn't fair."

But her expression remained very grave.

"I sometimes believe," she said, "you think that's all I'm good for. You don't talk to me as I want you to talk. I'm not always sitting on the floor, Tony. It's lovely at times, but other times I'm different. I'm—oh, I'm a bit of a surprise really."

"What is it you want to know?"

"I want to be told what you're doing 'cos I've a funny feeling it isn't—oh! I don't know."

"You extraordinary child. It's perfectly all right. Rather important, that's all. There's nothing for you to bother about. I was going to tell you because I shall have to be away for three weeks and I thought ——"

"Three weeks? But we were going to be married on——"

"Yes, that's rotten part. Still the invitations haven't gone out—and if we were to put it off ten days to be on the safe side——"

"Our wedding!" she said.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for the world. It's frightful bad luck but——"

Isabel drew up her knees. Very little and lovely she looked. Her big brown eyes were open wide and her lower lip was drawn in. A shock of chestnut hair framed the sweet oval of her face. Tony had said she was like a serious angel and he was right.

She nodded twice.

"It must be very important," she said, "if we have to postpone our wedding. I see."

"You don't see," he said edging closer to her. "You can't because I haven't wanted to worry you with details, but it is important—enormously important."

"More important than I am?"

"'Course not."

"Yet it takes you away from me."

"Only for a little while—and look, dear, I don't want you to tell anyone I'm going."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, it mustn't be known."

"Tony, is—is what you have to do dangerous?"

He answered evasively.

"What I have to do—no."

"Then let me come too. We could be married first. I don't want a fashionable wedding. Let's do that."

He hesitated.

"Couldn't be done, dear. It wouldn't be——"

"Safe?"

"Practicable."

"You don't trust me."

"Of course I trust you," he said putting his arms round her. "I've trusted you from the moment we first met and I'm going on trusting you all the rest of my life. Isn't that good enough?"

"Not nearly," she answered and rose to her feet.

"Isabel," he said very seriously. "When I tell you that there are huge interests at stake—that all this is for something that—that defeats imagination, surely you will take my word."

She pressed a finger to her chin.

"Huge interests means money."

"It does," he replied, "but money on a colossal scale—illimitable. Doesn't that appeal to you?"

"No," she said. "I've all I want and you're well enough off. What's the good of more?"

"Just listen," he said. "If I bring off this deal there is no wish in the world one couldn't gratify, and bring it off I shall."

He started to pace up and down the narrow floor space of the tiny room, his hands opening and shutting and a light of enthusiasm dancing in his eyes. It was not the money face he wore as he spoke but the expression of the man of deeds, the man who joyed in accomplishment, in vanquishing difficulty, in facing long odds, buoyed up and carried along by the will to win.

"You can't understand, my dear, all this means to me and will mean to you. I haven't even imagined it myself. Think! We could buy islands, build hospitals, govern nations if the mood prompted us. And all for three weeks' work. Lord, it's—Oh! if I could make you see how big it is—how magnificent."

And womanlike she responded,

"I want you, Tony, the rest only frightens me."

"Forget the money," he said, "and bear this in mind. If I succeed the world will be richer by a tremendous healing force."

"A medicine?"

"Call it a medicine. It's lying out in the open within a little march of the common ways of men and women. I tumbled on the find by a stroke of luck and a little knowledge and a word inside me that whispered, 'Look, go and look.' You've read Kipling's 'Explorer'—I read it you. 'Something lost behind the ranges—something hidden, go you there.' It was like that with me—a pringly feeling—a kind of second sense—expectancy—belief—certainty. Nature has a trick of showing the combination of her treasure safe to one man before the rest—and I was the man."

The little chestnut head shook helplessly from side to side.

"What is it you've found?" said Isabel.

He looked at her searchingly and hesitated.

"If I tell you you'll keep it secret?"

"Yes."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

He dropped his voice.

"It's radium," he said.

She repeated the word dully.

"Radium as it never had been found before. A—whew! an inexhaustible supply. Look—look here!"

He drew from his pocket a small black cylinder with a glass peephole at the top, protected by a circular cap of a dark substance.

"It's the finest piece of radium ever found," he said, "and where I got it, at a single dip of the shovel—but never mind that. See, protect it with your hand so, and look through that eyehole."

At the bottom of the cylinder was a luminous speck like a fire seen from a long way off. Waves and jags of angry light burst from it ceaselessly, this way and that. The restless mass was alive, active, burning. Infinitesimal though its dimensions were it gave a sense of illimitable force and power, a prodigious energy.

Isabel returned the cylinder with a nervous shudder.

"I don't like it," she said. "It—it's horrid somehow—wicked looking." She shot a quick glance at him. "You say this is going to be of value to the world!"

He nodded.

"Then why are you in danger? Why aren't you protected as someone who—
Why are you in danger?"

He didn't answer at once and again she repeated the question.

"It's this way, dear," he said. "When anything great enough is discovered there is bound to be competition. I found the stuff but I haven't the capital to exploit it. I took my samples to a ring of financiers who are backing me."

"Mr. Torrington? Mr. Cassis?"

"Cranbourne—Frayne—that crowd. By sheer bad luck another ring got news of what was going on and are moving heaven and earth to get a share in the plunder."

"So it's plunder now," she said.

"From their point of view."

"And from yours?"

"Achievement—a game."

"That you're willing to risk your life for."

"One doesn't think of that," he answered.

"I do," she said.

"Wish I could give you some of my enthusiasm. What is it old Kipling says again:

'The game is more than the Player of the Game
'And the ship is more than the crew.'"

"Old Kipling, as you call him, wrote for men. What did he know about *me*?"

"Enough to guess you wouldn't have much use for us if we shirked standing our chances."

"The chances being?"

"The assault or favour of the other side."

"Favour?" she repeated.

Barraclough nodded and took from his pocket a folded sheet of notepaper.

"Listen to this," he said and read: "'Dear Mr. Barraclough, if you would grant me ten minutes private conversation, at your own convenience, I should be pleased to reward the courtesy with a sum of twenty-five thousand pounds. Faithfully yours, Hugo Van Diest.' And that's only ground bait."

"Did you meet him?"

"No fear."

Isabel rubbed her forehead perplexedly.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "I don't understand. But if this radium belongs to your side already——"

"That's just it," he explained. "I haven't got the concession yet. They know that—it's what makes 'em so devilish active. You'll understand they'll do their best to prevent me getting to the place."

Her eyes opened very wide.

"Their best? D'you mean they'd——"

"Lord, no. There'd be no point in that unless they had the map reference first."

"You'll be gone three weeks?"

"That's all."

"They'll follow you?"

"You bet they'll try."

"Suppose they got you! Tony! *Tony*, they might try and make you speak."

He did his best to calm her but she went on furiously.

"It's true. Men are brutes—vile beasts—where money is concerned. Oh, I hate this—hate every bit of it. Power—healing—it's only another name for the money grab—the horrible cutthroat money grab. Tony, you shan't go—I won't let you go—I'll prevent you by every means——"

"Now, my dear," he begged, putting his arms about her, "be a good sensible little girl—be a baby for three weeks. You've all your trousseau to get—heaps of people to see. Why not run over to Paris for a week? Then there's my mother in Devon. She'd be tremendously bucked if——"

"Is this place abroad?" said Isabel.

"I can't tell that even to you."

"When are you starting?"

"Probably in three days' time—latish."

"You're determined to go?"

"I must."

"Nothing I can say will prevent you?"

"I'm sorry, dear."

"Hm!" said Isabel. "Then I suppose we'd better make the most of the time that's left."

And very slowly she subsided on the Cushion pile in the corner, her chin resting on his shoulder and her left hand playing idly with a long gold tassel.

"Oh, you angel," he exclaimed, "I knew you wouldn't really make any difficulties. And there's no need to be frightened because they're fixing me up the easiest get-away in the world."

"I haven't promised anything," she answered noncommittally. Her eyes flashed up to his and in them shone the sweetest light imaginable. "But just for now I'm sitting on the floor again."

They forgot all about lunch.

CHAPTER 5.

EXPERIENCES OF A VAGRANT.

Richard Frencham Altar awoke betimes—as a fact he had been disturbed when the four o'clock patrol came round but subsequently slept for another spell. In the shuffle up he had changed the order of his companions and as he opened his eyes for the second time he found himself beside an old lady, generously skirted and shawled, who wore a hat from which the bare quills of several ostrich feathers pointed this way and that in raffish confusion. In her lap was a sack containing her various possessions. Richard watched dreamily as she emptied its contents upon the pavement and sorted them out in some kind of order. The proceeding was vaguely reminiscent of a barrack room kit inspection. So far as he could judge she was separating wardrobe from larder, the two having become painfully confused during the preceding day's march. To one inexpert in such matters it would have been hard to decide which was eatable and which wearable, and Richard observed the operation with a mixture of amusement and disgust. Having discovered her breakfast and selected a piece of rag to act as napkin, tablecloth, and subsequently a face towel, the old lady restored the remainder of her effects to the 'valise' and fell to. Noticing Richard was awake she addressed him in a singularly soprano voice.

"I'm up a bit early today," she remarked and added "Lovely air, isn't it?"

The unexpected aestheticism of the remark robbed him of speech. Ho had looked for mutterings or execrations but instead here was amiability and appreciation overriding adversity. A powerful desire possessed him to shake hands with his new acquaintance, but he did not risk it, being unacquainted with the proper etiquette of the benches. Recovering his composure he agreed about the pleasant quality of the air and threw in a word of praise for the sparrows.

"Dear little things," said the old lady over the grey crust to which she was applying a single tooth. Having gnawed off a corner she threw a glance at him. "Just come down?" she questioned.

Richard nodded.

"My first night," he said, "and I've rarely spent a better, though I confess I should enjoy a shave and a wash."

"There's a bit of mirror in the tobacconist," she nodded over her shoulder. "I often freshen up in front of it when the mood takes me. Many's the hat I've changed before that glass. But then I don't bother much these days." Once again her critical glance came in his direction. "After a time one loses interest, y'know."

The sentiment struck Richard chillily.

"And yet," he said, "you appear to have kept in touch with cheerfulness."

"Ah, but I'm old," she answered, "and to old people one thing's as good as another. But if I was you I wouldn't be content."

"I've no intention of being content," he said. "I just happen to have hit the rocks but I'll get sailing again one of these days."

"Well I'm glad to hear you say so, and now I must toddle along."

He asked what employment could engage her at so early an hour.

"I'm going to pick over the dustbins in Bond Street," she returned, and added "You never know what you'll find. Only you must be early. Goo' morning." And with a sunny smile the disreputable old thing shuffled away warbling a snatch of song as she went.

"By Jove," said Richard, "I suppose that's about what I'm doing—picking over dustbins and wondering what I shall find."

He looked across the park to where the golden orb of the sun was rising over the tree tops and lifted his hat in salutation.

"Good morning, day," he said. "Your servant to command. Gad! but I could do with some breakfast."

He rose and walked briskly toward Knightsbridge. The coffee stall by Hyde Park Corner attracted his attention. A few early carters and an occasional loafer were gathered about it and the smell of victuals was tempting. Richard noticed the driver of a large dray was leaning against the railings pouring tea into the saucer of his cup. He was a big man and his apparel was conspicuous by the fact that he wore a collar but no tie. The omission suggested an idea.

"Do you want a tie by any chance?" Richard asked and listened to a highly decorated ambition to know what he was talking about.

"Only this," he answered. "I've a notion I could do with some breakfast and it occurred to me as you might like to buy me one in exchange for a perfectly good Etonian tie."

For a space the driver examined Richard's necktie in thoughtful silence and his expression softened.

"I reckon that 'ud suit me," he observed judicially.

"It would," said Richard, "and a hard boiled egg would suit me with a cup of coffee to moisten it."

Somehow the absence of a tie seemed to ease the passage of the simple fare down his gullet and Richard felt twice his own man as he turned jubilantly into the park and swung along the lower walk. The breakfast had heartened him and he was ready to face the future with a bold front.

"I'll take a bit of a constitutional," he said, "and later on roll round to a labour bureau and see what's doing."

He paused for a moment by the rails of Rotten Row and watched some early horsemen canter by. In one of them he recognised an old acquaintance and instinctively covered the lower half of his face with his hand. His chin felt prickly to the touch for his beard had grown rapidly during the night. As a scrupulous twice-a-day shaver his senses rebelled at the notion of weed upon his face. However, it was useless to lament over trifles like that.

"I know," he said to himself. "A dip in the Serpentine."

A quarter of an hour later he was cutting through the water with long powerful strokes. On returning to the shore he had the good fortune to borrow a cake of soap from another bather who appeared, from the modesty of his folded garments, to be in equally hazardous financial circumstances.

"To tell the honest truth," his new acquaintance confided, "I bagged that bit of soap from a Great Eastern Railway carriage. Managed to nip in and collar it when no one was looking. Suppose I'm a thief of sorts but a man loses self respect if he doesn't wash."

They sat side by side until the pale sunlight had partially dried them.

"You broke?" Richard queried.

The man shook his head seriously.

"No, I'm a millionaire," he replied, "only I haven't any money—not a bean. Spent it all making myself rich. Look at this."

He untied a string that circled his neck. (Richard had noticed the string and a small linen bag it supported.) He opened the bag and produced a piece of yellow metal about the size of a lump of sugar.

"It's gold," he said.

Richard agreed that it looked like gold and asked where he found it.

"I made it," came the astonishing reply. "You needn't worry, it is gold all right. Bear any test." He restored it to the bag. "Seems stupid," he went on, "that here am I, with the knowledge to command millions, and I haven't a sou in my pocket. Cheap process, too, once you've got the plant. Dirt cheap. 'Course it's getting the plant's the trouble. No one'll believe me. Disheartening. Took that sample to the Bank of England—they asked me where I bought it—bought it! Lord! Oh well—one of these days, I

suppose. Meet again perhaps. G'bye."

And with a cheery wave of the hand he vaulted the railings and ran lightly across the grass.

"I'm damned," said Richard. "If a fellow like that can make gold it follows to reason I ought to be able to make good."

It was after nine o'clock when Richard turned down the Earl's Court Road. He stopped before a small sweet stuff shop, attracted by a card in the window which read, "Letters may be addressed here, 1d."

"I suppose a man, even in my circumstances, ought to have a town address," he argued. "After all, one never knows."

Accordingly he entered and registered under the modest name of John Tidd. To the little old lady who wrote it down in a small laundry book devoted to the purpose, he said he was probably going abroad and later might send a request to forward correspondence. It was a dignified and pleasant transaction although he was conscious of a feeling that he would have created a more agreeable impression had he retained his necktie.

Coming out of the shop he fell into line with the tide of city workers moving southward to the underground station. These were the nobility of commerce who picked up the reins of office at nine forty-five—persons of substance in no way to be confused with the eight-thirty worker. It was an honourable association to walk down the Earl's Court Road in such company. Richard swung along at an even gait with an important looking individual in a hard felt hat to the right of him and a stout gentleman with a King Edward beard to the left. The three entered Earl's Court Station abreast and approached the barrier, where Richard stepped aside and let them pass through. Leaning against the grill gates was a man reading a folded copy of the *Daily Sketch*. He looked at Richard for an instant, then looked again searchingly. The repeated action attracted Richard's notice and their eyes met.

"Hardly worth while, is it?" said the man.

"I beg your pardon," Richard returned.

"Oh, that's quite all right—but I really wouldn't bother with it." He pointed at the opening of Richard's waistcoat and smiled. "That's rather a sound notion—no tie—distracts the eye from looking too keenly at the face. You nearly passed me."

"To be perfectly frank," Richard answered, "I shouldn't have bought crêpe if I had."

The man laughed.

"Getting pretty sick of it, aren't you?" he queried.

A sure conviction possessed Richard that he was in the presence of a lunatic.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I'm just beginning to enjoy myself."

"Well, well, there's no accounting for tastes. But I should have thought you'd have had enough of railway stations. Better go home and stay there."

Richard shook his head sympathetically.

"Try taking a little more soda in it," he suggested. "You'd be a different man inside a week. So long."

The watcher by the gate was smiling pleasantly to himself as Richard turned away.

It was nearly one o'clock when his wanderings brought him back to the neighbourhood of Piccadilly. He had spent the intervening hours, with little enough success, at the labour bureau in Westminster. From there he had walked across the Mall and found an empty bench under the trees in Green Park looking up Park Lane. He had hardly seated himself when he saw a man come out of a big doorway opposite and hurry eastward in the direction of Piccadilly Circus. Even at the distance Richard had no difficulty in recognising the diner who overnight had nodded to him at the Berkeley.

"Half a mind to give him a shout," he thought, but on reflection "I don't know though, he seems in the deuce of a hurry and I can't imagine he's any work to give away."

It would have saved Cranbourne a lot of trouble if he had followed his first inclination.

CHAPTER 6.

CONCERNING A TIE.

Not a word had been received from Cranbourne. From the moment he left Lord Almont's flat he disappeared completely. That was Cranbourne's way, for once an idea started in his brain he rested not until it has been realised or disproved. He had given himself three days to find a human duplicate of Barraclough and among a population of seven millions the task was no easy one. His quarry had dined at the Berkeley on the twenty-fourth instant but beyond that point information languished. The redoubtable Brown, prince of head waiters, who knew the affairs of most of his customers as intimately as his own, was able to offer little or no assistance. He remembered the gentleman who had dined alone in a tweed suit and had said something about having no dress clothes. He believed he had seen him in uniform during the earlier parts of the war but couldn't recall the regiment. Had an impression he paid for his dinner with the last of the notes in his pocket but that might mean nothing. "A pleasant gentleman, spoke crisply and had a smile." John, of the cloakroom, recalled a half crown thrown on his little counter in return for a soft hat—"Wait a bit, sir, by a Manchester hatter I believe," and a rainproof coat "rather thinnish and brown."

The Manchester hat stuck in Cranbourne's throat a trifle since it widened the circle of enquiry.

The porter at the revolving door believed the gentleman had gone toward Piccadilly—walking. Yes, he was sure he hadn't taken a cab. Gave him a shilling and five coppers.

Cranbourne thanked them and spent the rest of the day passing in and out of every well known grill room in London. It was sound enough reasoning but it brought no results. At twelve o'clock the same night he paid a flying visit to all the dancing rooms—Murray's, Giro's, Rector's, The Embassy, Savoy and half a dozen others. At three o'clock he rang up Daimler's, hired a car and drove to Brighton because many men come up from Brighton by day and bring no evening clothes. Besides the time of his departure from the Berkeley plus a walk to Victoria Station more or less synchronised with the down train to Brighton. He spent the best part of the following day racing through hotel lists and looking up visitors at Brighton, Eastbourne, Hastings and Folkestone. He was back in Town again by 7.30, at the Theatre Library, where he bought a single ticket for twelve musical plays and revues selecting them from the class of entertainment Barraclough himself would have been likely to attend. It was a restless evening, dashing from one place to another and sorting over the audiences in the narrow margin of time allowed by intervals. Afterwards he spent an hour by the fountain in Piccadilly Circus keenly examining the thousands of passers-by.

It was very late indeed when he struck one hand against the other and cried out,

"Oh, my Lord, what a fool I am."

A new significance had suddenly suggested itself as a result of Brown's repetition of the mysterious diner's remark, "I repeat I have no evening clothes." Cranbourne had taken it to imply that there had been no time to dress but why not accept it literally.

Two whole days wasted looking at men in white shirt fronts and black coats!

"Lord, what an idiot I am. Alter your line of thought and alter it quick."

He began to walk briskly, muttering to himself as he strode along.

"No dress clothes—deuce of an appetite. Chap who had scraped up a few guineas perhaps to do himself well—on the bust. No, that won't do. Ordered his dinner too well for that. Had the air of a man accustomed to the best places. Brown said so. A shilling and five coppers to the porter. Queer kind of tip! What in blazes was the fellow doing? What sort of company does he keep?"

Cranbourne jumped into a taxi and returned to the Berkeley. It was closed but a night porter admitted him.

"Look here, I want to get hold of Brown," he said.

"You're in luck, sir," the man returned. "One of our visitors 'as been giving a supper and Mr. Brown was in charge. If 'e 'asn't gone I'll try and get him for you."

He returned a moment later with Brown following.

"Tremendously sorry," said Cranbourne, "but I want to ask you a few more questions about that

fellow I spoke of."

"I've been thinking about him myself, sir, and one or two things have come to mind. Remembered his tie for instance."

"Yes."

"Old Etonian colours," said Brown.

Cranbourne nodded enthusiastically.

"Anything else?"

"I was looking over his bill this afternoon and it seems to me he did himself too well to be natural. Rare for a man by himself to order a long dinner like that. Then again he looked at the prices on the menu just as if he meant to spend up to a certain amount. Something odd in that—unusual. But I'm pretty sure it was in his mind, sir."

"And you believe he spent the last of his notes."

"Certain of it."

"What's your idea?"

"He was very hungry—eat everything put before him. I should say—'course it's only a guess——"

"Well?"

"He'd gone a bit short and was wanting that meal."

"Did he seem depressed?"

"Not a bit. Rather amused. But it struck me when he got up he looked like a man saying goodbye to his mother."

"How old should you think?"

"Thirty-two or three."

"Old Etonian tie?"

"Yes."

"You're a man of experience, Brown," said Cranbourne. "Ever known a case of a chap who's on the point of going under, blueing the last of his cash on one big dinner?"

"I should just think so. There's a type does that sort of thing."

"His type?"

"Or one very like it."

"Many thanks. You've helped me no end. Now I'll get a taxi and drive to Windsor. Goodnight."

Just beyond the Ritz he found a taxi willing to undertake the journey. It was a pity he found it so easily for a hundred yards further down the slope the man he sought was sleeping fitfully on a bench facing Green Park.

It was not a lucky drive since it included three punctures and some engine trouble. They came into Windsor about 7.30 in the morning. Cranbourne made a hurried breakfast and set out to interview the photographers of the town. The particular one he sought did not arrive until nearly nine but on being questioned proved himself amiable and anxious to help. He produced Eton school groups of fifteen years antiquity and Cranbourne spent an hour anxiously scanning the faces of the boys in the hope of tracing a likeness to Barraclough. But boys are very much alike and very dissimilar from the men they grow into and though there were several dozen who might well have passed for Barraclough in infancy no particular one could have been selected with positive assurance. Cranbourne made a list of twenty names and Frencham Altar's was not among them.

Rather despondent he said goodbye to the photographer and entered the taxi.

"Think I'll go back by the Bath Road," said the driver, "it's a better surface."

"Please yourself," said Cranbourne and settled himself within.

He was beginning to feel a trifle done. His eyes had the sense of having been sand papered and his lips were dry and parched from want of rest. He glanced at his watch and shook his head.

"Only thirteen hours left," he said and closed his eyes.

Sleep comes very suddenly to the weary—like a pistol shot out of the dark. Cranbourne's head pitched forward against his chest and his hands slithered inertly from his knees.

He awoke with a start to the sound of smashing glass, a sharp rattle of imprecations and a sense of being turned upside down. The front nearside wheel of the taxi was in a ditch, the wind screen broken and a large dray horse was trying to put its fore hoof through the buckled bonnet. The taxi driver had fallen out and lay cursing gently on the grass slope to the left, one of his legs was up to the knee in water. Through the offside window Cranbourne caught a glimpse of the man in charge of the dray horses—a powerful person, high perched, his weight thrown bask against the tightened reins—his face purple with effort. From his mouth came an admirable flow of oaths, choicely adjusted to suit the occasion. Then Cranbourne saw something else. Beneath the man's vibrating jaw showed the pleasant colours of an Old Etonian tie. There could be no mistaking it—neither could there be any reason why the driver of a Covent Garden dray should exhibit such an ensign.

Cranbourne let the window down with a bang, stuck out his head and shouted,

"Where the devil did you get that tie?"

It is not hard to believe that this remark, apparently so irrelevant, did little to calm an already excited situation. The driver loosed his hold upon the reins, seized his whip and slashed it at Cranbourne's head. Cranbourne caught the whistling thong and tugged hard, with the result that the driver, who held on to the butt, lost his balance, pitched forward on to the flank of the nearside dray horse and rolled harmlessly on to the road. Cranbourne embraced the opportunity to get out, seized the bit rings of both horses and backed them away from the debris of the taxi.

Meanwhile the driver picked himself up and removed his coat as a proper preliminary to engagement.

"Put 'em up," he invited Cranbourne. "Put 'um up, you——" but the descriptive titles he employed do not affect the narrative.

Cranbourne shook his head and tugged a note case from his pocket.

"Five pounds," he said, "if you answer my question. Where did you get it?"

The driver exhibited some sample upper cuts and left hooks and beseeched Cranbourne to guard himself. But Cranbourne detached a fiver from its fellows and extended it temptingly.

"Don't you see I'm in earnest, man?"

The tone of his voice had a sobering effect and the amateur pugilist ceased manoeuvring.

"Why do you want to know?" he demanded.

"Never mind that—take the money and tell me."

"I got it," said the driver, "from a blame fool at the coffee stall by Hyde Park Corner. Bought 'im a doorstep and a ball of chalk b'way of return."

"When was this?"

"Day before yesterday—six o'clock in the morning."

"And what was he like?"

The answer clinched it.

"Was he shaved?"

"No."

"Broke?"

"I reckon. Been sleepin' out by the looks of 'im."

"Seen him since?"

"Couldn't be sure. Maybe it was 'im I saw sleepin' on the bench by the Shelter 'Ouse in Piccadilly 'bout four this morning. There was a bloke there with a soft 'at and a brown coat."

Cranbourne produced another fiver and pushed it into the man's hand.

"You're the best fellow I've met in years," he said. Then turning to the taxi driver, "Get home as best you can. I'm going to look for a lift. Here's my card. I'll stand your losses on this."

He looked over his shoulder at the sound of a persistent croaking. A long grey Vauxhall car with a special body was coming down the road at speed. Cranbourne ran forward in its track, waving his arms. The man at the wheel looked over and braked. The big car did a double two way skid, tore serpentine ruts on the metalled road surface and stopped.

"Trying to get killed?" asked its owner sweetly. "'Cos you seem to have got the right idea of doing it."

"I want to get to Town and get there quick," said Cranbourne.

"So do I," said the man at the wheel, grinning amiably, "but it's a daily habit of mine. In you get!"

"By gad," said Cranbourne, leaping in as the car began to move, "I believe you come straight from heaven."

"I come from the Slough Trading Company as a matter of fact," said the young man, running through his gears from first to top like a pianist playing a scale. "Hope you don't mind a bit of noise. She talks some when she's moving."

He trod hard on the accelerator and somewhere behind a machine gun opened fire, at first articulately and then, as the pace increased, becoming an inarticulate solid roar. The beat of the engine, the sense of speed and the rush of the wind past his ears infected Cranbourne with a fierce exhilaration.

"Bless your heart," he shouted, "keep her at it."

"You bet," came the response.

"Gad, she can move. You must have pretty urgent business to push her along like this."

"Want to buy some collars as a matter of fact," said the young man.
"No point wasting time on a job of that kind."

CHAPTER 7.

THE NIGHT OF THE 27TH.

At the flat in Albemarle Street Anthony Barraclough sat alone devouring a grilled steak. He was reticent of speech and every now and then he shot a glance at the clock. In the golden shadows beyond the rays of the table lamp, Doran, his servant, stood in silent attention to his master's wants.

Doran was a person of understanding and one of the few people in the world who shared a measure of Barraclough's confidence. A late corporal of the Black Watch, he had reverted to act as Barraclough's batman throughout the major portion of the war. Rather a curious mixture was Doran. He had a light hand for an omelette and a heavy fist in a mix up, a sense of humour in adversity and a seriousness in ordinary affairs of daily life, a shrewd observer, a flawless servant and a staunch ally. Very little got past Frederic Doran.

Barraclough shook his head at a bundle of cheese straws and lit a cigarette.

"Get those things for me?" he asked.

"They're in the dressing room, sir."

"Let's have a look."

Doran retired and returned almost immediately with a complete fireman's outfit. Barraclough tried on the helmet and nodded approvingly.

"Good enough. Stick 'em somewhere out of sight." And while Doran obeyed he added, "Damn silly idea, isn't it?"

"I haven't heard it, sir."

"Oh, it has its points, I suppose. See, I've got to get clear of here tonight and if—well—another scheme fails—I'm going to have a shot at it this way. At eleven forty-five you'll go out and ring up some fire engines."

"Just so, sir."

"I shall burn brown paper in that grate with the register closed. Windows open at the bottom—plenty of smoke—effect of flames produced by switching off and on the electric light. It ought to be good for a crowd of about ten thousand. Soon as the engines roll up I go out dressed as a fireman. Car at the top of St. James's Street. Coal train in a siding at Addison Road which pulls out at twelve five. Me under a tarpaulin somewhere. Whoosh! Gone!"

"And after that, sir?"

"Ah!" said Barraclough, "that's another story."

"Do you fancy it much yourself, sir?"

"Lord knows! The crowd ought to help. Reduces the odds in my favour a bit."

"At quarter to twelve, sir?"

"Um. That'll be after the gentlemen have gone. Clear away this stuff and put out some drinks. They'll be here at ten thirty. I'm going to change into something thinner, that won't brush up under that fireman gear. Got those notes?"

"Here, sir."

Doran produced a bulky package of bank notes.

"Good man."

He nodded and entered the bedroom to which there was a door below the fireplace.

A little later the bell rang imperatively, followed by a tattoo on the knocker.

"Who's that?" came from Barraclough's voice behind the closed door.

"Don't know, sir."

"What's time?"

"Ten past."

"They can't have arrived yet. Say I'm out."

Doran withdrew and returned almost immediately.

"Sir, there's——"

Barraclough threw open the door and came into the room. He was in trousers and a shirt and was fastening a tie.

"Well?"

"It's Miss Irish, sir. I said you were out but she didn't believe me.
Insisted on coming in."

"Lord, that's awkward. Where did you leave her?"

"The smoking room."

"Say what she wanted?"

"To see you, sir—very imperative."

Barraclough bit his moustache and glanced at the clock.

"Hm! I've ten minutes. Yes, all right. If the gentlemen arrive meanwhile put 'em in the smoking room. Get a coat. Shan't be a second."

He disappeared into the bedroom and Doran went out to fetch Isabel.

"If you'll take a chair, miss, he won't keep you a moment. The evening paper?"

"No," she said, "no."

It was a very different Isabel from the curled up little person who sat on the cushions. Her face was white and tense—her mouth drawn in a line of determination. She shook her head at the offer of a chair and waved Doran to go away.

"Tony," she called as soon as the door had closed. "Tony."

He came into the room buttoning his coat.

"I say, my dear, you shouldn't have come here—really—really you shouldn't," he said.

"I had to—had to," she repeated.

"You mustn't stay—these people'll be here directly."

"Horrible money people," she returned, "and you'd send me away for them."

"I told you——" he began.

"You told me they'd found an easy way for you to get out—a safe way.
It isn't true."

"How do you know?" was startled from him.

"I found out tonight from Lord Almont. Danced with him—made a fool of him—pretended I knew all about it—pretended I was sorry there was not going to be any excitement in the thing. Said I really only cared for men who tackled danger. Looked at him as though I thought he was wonderful."

"I'll smash that fellow's head," said Barraclough grimly.

"You needn't—he's loyal enough. Thought he was doing you a good turn—both of us a good turn. Said it wasn't going to be quite so easy as you'd expected. So now I know you see—know it's going to be horridly, hideously dangerous."

"Oh, my dear," he said, "why didn't you leave it alone?"

"I'm not the sort," she answered. "Where I love, Tony, I—I protect."

"You've a life time ahead to protect me in," he said.

"I'm going to do it now," said she. "You're not going, Tony."

"Listen," said Barraclough very earnestly, "there can't be any interference in this. A false move now might ruin everything. If they knew I was making a dash tonight——"

"They will know."

"How?"

"I shall tell them."

He shook his head. "Hardly, my dear. Besides I don't think you know who to tell."

"You forget the letter you showed me. Mr. Van Diest might be interested."

"I showed you that letter in confidence. You wouldn't betray——"

"Oh, wouldn't I? I'd betray any confidence that would keep you safe."

"It's lovely of you," he began.

"And I shall do it too," she cut in.

"Oh, very well," said Barraclough coldly.

Her arms went round his neck and drew his cheek to hers.

"Would you stop loving me if I did?"

"I couldn't stop loving you whatever happened."

"Oh, Tony, take me with you. I wouldn't mind then. I've promised to share my life with you—aren't I good to share a single danger?"

"Much too good."

She released her hold and stood away.

"So it's as grave as all that," said she. "Very well, if you refuse I shan't marry you."

"You don't mean that?"

"Give me a bible—I'll swear it."

"Isabel!"

"You have two alternatives. Take me with you or tell me where this place is."

"What use would the knowledge be to you?"

"All the use. If they got you I know very well they'd never make you speak. You—you wouldn't."

He nodded gravely at that.

"But I should. It 'ud give me the power to bail you out. Do you understand now?"

"I understand I should be every sort of a coward if I told you on those terms."

"Oh, you man—you man," she cried. "Well, you've the choice."

"To tell or lose you?"

"Yes."

In the silence that followed an electric bell rang sharply.

"There they are," he exclaimed.

"Be quick, I'm waiting," she said.

"Can't you accept my word that it's better you shouldn't know?"

"You've the choice," she repeated.

Anthony Barraclough looked round him desperately, then he spoke very fast.

"If I tell you you'll do nothing—say nothing till eleven o'clock this day three weeks?"

"I promise."

The words that followed rattled out like a hail of shrapnel.

"Brewster's Series nineteen. Map twenty-four. Square F. North twenty-seven. West thirty-three."

"I'll write it down."

"No, no, you won't," he cried. "I've fulfilled my part of the bargain and you've forgotten it already."

She fixed him with her clear blue eyes, square lidded and earnest.

"Brewster's Series nineteen. Map twenty-four. Square F. North twenty-seven. West thirty-three," she said.

He looked at her in sheer amazement.

"You wonder! You absolute wonder!" he gasped.

"If I were dead I should remember that," she said. "It's stuck for good." She touched her forehead, then quite suddenly her body went limp and tilted against him. "Oh, but if only it were over," she whispered huskily. "If only it were all—all over. Kiss me, please."

"Never fear," he said, his arms tightening round her. "Never fear. I couldn't fail with you waiting for me."

He kissed her again and again.

"Dear blessed beautiful little love of mine! Look, I'll take one of your flowers as a mascot."

"Hedge rose," she said and started. "It means hope, Tony."

"Hope it is, my dear. God bless you."

They stood apart as the door opened and Doran came in to announce the arrival of the gentlemen.

"All right. Attend to the front door. Miss Irish is going."

Doran went out and Barraclough turned to Isabel.

"Will you grin for me just once?" he begged.

The small face went pluckily into lines of humour.

"Not a very nice grin, Tony."

"The best in the world," said he and hugged her close.

They passed out of the room together.

When Barraclough returned Mr. Torrington was leaning on his arm.
Nugent Cassis and Lord Almont Frayne followed in the rear.

"I was sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Torrington," he apologised.

"Waiting? No, no. We were early. My train arrived at Waterloo this morning one minute ahead of time. It has put me out all day." The old gentleman lowered himself by sections into an elbow chair. "Heard from Cranbourne?"

Barraclough shook his head.

"Never expected you would," said Cassis shortly. "The whole scheme was waste of time. We don't live in Ruritania where doubles walk about arm in arm. Cranbourne has a bee in his bonnet."

"A whole hive," Lord Almont interjected.

"Perhaps," Mr. Torrington smiled, "but let us at least do him the justice to admit that they buzz very merrily."

Cassis shrugged his shoulders.

"Buzzing is of no value in the present circumstances."

Mr. Torrington continued to smile.

"Except so far as it helps our young friend here to buzz off," he said.

The modern slang on the lips of the octogenarian made Barraclough laugh. But the nerves of Nugent Cassis were frayed and laughter was an irritant.

"Let us keep to the point," he insisted. "Did you follow out those instructions I suggested?"

Barraclough nodded. The idea of the false fire came from Cassis and, like most of his schemes, suffered from complexity of detail. He began enumerating the points to be sure that all was in order.

Mr. Torrington shook his head and interrupted.

"A silly idea," he said, "clever but silly."

"If you have a better——"

Mr. Torrington put his fingers together and continued slowly.

"My method would be to go out through the main entrance wearing no hat and carrying a few letters for the post. There might be a cab waiting at the pillar box—to be exact there is, I ordered one."

"That's the idea," cried Almont. "Sweet and simple."

"That cab would dodge about the streets a while and eventually make its way to Wimbledon. At Wimbledon it would deposit Barraclough at Number 14a, Medina Road. He would enter the house and change into running shorts and a vest having appointed himself underneath with rather a large pneumatic stomach. Also he would wear a beard and a perfectly bald head. This done he would emerge from the house and start running in the middle of the road in whatever direction he likes with a man on a push bicycle pedalling behind him.

"But I can't see——" Cassis began.

"Precisely," said Mr. Torrington, "and nor could anyone else. Nobody sees the extraordinary individuals who run at night, they only laugh at them."

"If you ask me," said Cassis, drumming his fingers on the mantelpiece, "I am of opinion that we are merely losing time with all this talk and the sooner we get Barraclough away the better."

Mr. Torrington's eyes looked him coldly up and down.

"You should know me well enough, Cassis, to realise that when I lose time I lose it purposely. I am waiting for Cranbourne."

"Cranbourne's ideas are altogether too fantastic."

"We agreed to do nothing until eleven o'clock and it wants ten minutes to the hour."

"Not a very substantial margin to find Barraclough's double."

"It is as easy to find a man in ten minutes as in ten years—a mere matter of chance. For my own part I always favoured indifferent odds."

"By Jove, sir," exclaimed Barraclough, "you're my man. Damn the opposition. Damn the odds. We'll do it, what."

A measure of his enthusiasm infected the old man.

"We'll have a damn good try anyway."

"And if it comes to a rough and tumble——"

"Hit first and hit hardest."

An electric bell swizzed.

"He's there."

"Failed," grunted Cassis.

But Mr. Torrington's eyes were on the clock.

"Since he is five minutes ahead of time I imagine he has succeeded."

Doran came in.

"Mr. Cranbourne, sir."

"Alone?" Cassis rapped out the question like a pistol shot, but before there was time to answer Cranbourne burst into the room, his face aglow with excitement.

"I've done it," he said. "It's all right—terrific."

Lord Almont sprang to his feet.

"You don't mean?"

"Yes, I do."

"The real Mackay?"

"Alike as two postage stamps."

"Where've you got him?"

"Here, in your bathroom—changing."

"Changing?"

"Of course. Couldn't bring him as he was. They'd have spotted him for certain. So I draped him in a nurse's cloak and cap over his ordinary gear. Looked fine under a veil with his face painted pretty and pink. He's washing it off now."

"Is he like me?" said Barraclough.

"Like you!"

"How's he talk?"

"As you do. I'd have been here earlier only he was hungry—devilish hungry. He'd not eaten for best part of three days."

"But you saw him at the Berkeley."

"I know, that made it a bit difficult."

"Come on," said Barraclough, "let's hear all about it."

"Take too long. Had almost given up hope this morning, then I had a stroke of luck—hit a red hot trail—spent the day chasing through the West End staring at every man I saw. Got a glimpse of him at last in Clarges Street 'bout nine o'clock. Taxi with a heap of luggage drove up to a house and this chap came racing after it."

Cassis threw up his hands.

"Good heavens," he exclaimed, "a cab runner."

"Not he—down and out, that's all. I might easily have missed him for he'd grown a bit of a scrub on his chin during the last few days but when I saw the way he had of standing and that same trick of the head you've got I was sure enough. He's a sportsman, that chap, for he was wanting food and yet some decent restraint stopped him coming forward to help with the boxes. He'd meant to but at the last moment he shirked it. I could see him wrestling with himself—a step forward, then hesitating. At last the driver asked him to lend a hand with the biggest trunk and he shouldered it and carried it into the house. When he came out the fare was fumbling in his pocket for six-pences. It must have been the sight of this cut into his pride. He hadn't a cent of his own but something inside him rebelled. 'No, I'll be damned if I can,' he said and made off down the street. I picked him up on the bench by the cabbies' shelter ten minutes later. Made myself affable and asked if he'd care to turn an honest fifty. In fact I gave fifty as a bona fide. Told him to get himself shaved and roll round to Clarkson's to be fixed up in the nurse's gear—and get some food too."

"That was risky," remarked Lord Almont, "you might never have seen the jolly old bird again."

"I told you he was a gentleman, didn't I?"

Mr. Torrington leaned forward.

"Does he know what we want of him?"

"Roughly. I said it was to occupy a flat for three weeks."

"Ah! Barraclough, I am disposed to think you would do wisely to retire into the next room while we interview this young gentleman. The less he knows the better."

"Quite."

"There isn't a cupboard, I suppose, where you could fix yourself up with an easy chair until—well until the kidnapping is over."

"There's a wine cupboard."

"Excellent. We'll have a word together before you go."

There was a knock and Doran came in and addressed Cranbourne.

"The gentleman wishes to have a word with you, sir."

"Half a second," said Barraclough. "I'll slip out through the bedroom. There's a second door into the hall. Righto, Doran."

He disappeared, closing the door after him.

"The gentleman, sir," Doran announced.

Richard Frencham Altar came into the room. The privations of the preceding three days had paled him a trifle. His eyes glittered brightly and there was a hint of nervousness in the tenseness of his lower lip.

Doran went out. Richard closed the door and turned to face the company. Mr. Torrington leaned forward and as though by accident twitched down the table lamp shade that the light might be thrown on the newcomer's face. Lord Almont gasped and even Cassis was startled by the phenomenal likeness. Mr. Torrington nodded approval.

Richard's eyes went quickly from one to another. Then his hand moved to his throat and covered the empty space where his tie should have been. No one spoke and under the battery of glances his muscles tightened resentfully and his head jerked slightly to one side.

"Anything so very peculiar about my appearance?" he demanded.

Mr. Torrington was first to recover his composure and he rose with difficulty.

"You justly reproach our manners, Mr.—er——"

"Anything you like," said Richard, then with a flash of memory, "Oh, my name is Tidd—John Tidd."

"By gad, it's amazing," gasped Lord Almont.

Mr. Torrington waved his hand toward a chair but Richard shook his head.

"No, thanks—won't sit down. I came because I promised this gentleman to do so—but——"

"I find it a little trying to stand," said Mr. Torrington.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. For a minute then."

With an air of unwillingness he occupied a chair.

"A little whiskey and soda?" Lord Almont suggested.

"Not for me."

"Cigarette?"

"Ah! I'm a pernicious smoker." He lighted a cigarette, turned to Mr. Torrington and nodded over his shoulder in the direction of Cranbourne. "I'm afraid, sir, this gentleman took me at a disadvantage. To be frank, I was hungry."

Mr. Torrington shook his head despondently.

"As the senior member of a firm of dyspeptics, established for over fifty years, I envy you."

"You needn't, sir,—it was pretty crucial. He offered me fifty quid to occupy this flat for twenty-one days and to say 'no' to any question that might be asked. I wasn't myself at the time—I accepted. Since then I've had a good meal and that alters things. I hope, gentleman, I shall cause you no inconvenience if I recall my promise." No one replied and he went on. "My grub cost three and a bender and I spent a bob in cigarettes." He fished some notes and silver from his pocket and planked them on the table. "That's your change, gentlemen, if someone would be good enough to count it over. You don't mind, I hope, if I return the margin when I'm in a better position to do so. Goodnight, gentlemen." He rose, nodded to the company and walked to the door.

Mr. Torrington did not look in his direction. He spoke gently as though addressing an electric fitting on the wall facing him.

"I am sorry, Mr. Tidd, you are indisposed to remain. My friend had no thought of offending when he offered the temporary accommodation you have just returned. It was our intention to reward the

services of whoever assisted us in this matter with a sum that a gentleman might have no embarrassment in accepting. We should have been pleased to place five thousand pounds to your account."

Richard span round sharply.

"Five thousand—for being a caretaker—you—you're joking—rather unkindly."

"On the contrary I am speaking very earnestly indeed." The tone of voice was sincere.

Again Richard looked from one to another.

"You're a funny crowd," he laughed. "Ha! damn funny. S'pose you're getting some sort of satisfaction out of it, but a man with a hole in the sole of his boot doesn't much fancy having his leg pulled. Goodnight."

But Nugent Cassis intervened between Richard and the door.

"We give you our word, Mr. Tidd, the sum mentioned will be at your disposal tomorrow three weeks if you agree to remain."

"Your words," said Richard with a touch of irony. "I suppose you wouldn't care to give me your names as a guarantee?"

"Assuredly," Mr. Torrington replied. "It was a mere oversight that we have hitherto neglected to do so." And in the courtliest manner he introduced the company by name.

"The devil," said Richard, "I knew who you were all right, but I didn't imagine you'd tell me. That—that makes a difference." He hesitated, then sat down abruptly. "Well, come along, gentlemen, what is it you want me to do?"

Nugent Cassis, as the specialist of detail, briefly outlined their requirements. He spoke coldly and without emphasis. The programme was simple. Mr. Tidd would assume the name of Barraclough, he would occupy these chambers, or wherever else circumstance might happen to take him, for a period of three weeks. At the end of that time he might reveal his identity or not as he pleased. It was understood, was it not, that he would refuse to answer any questions that might be put to him. This was a point of considerable importance since there was a likelihood that pressure might be employed to induce him to speak.

"I'm pretty close when I mean to be," said Richard. "But what is the answer?"

"As to that," Cassis replied, "I must ask you to contain your curiosity."

"Well, it shouldn't be hard to say I don't know."

Cassis hoped so devoutly.

"To tell the truth," said Mr. Torrington very sweetly, "we don't know the answer ourselves."

Richard shot a doubtful glance at him, but the seamed old face betrayed nothing of the purpose it concealed.

"It's all very mysterious," said Richard, "and I'm not sure I like the look of it."

"If you are nervous——" began Cassis icily.

"Nervous be damned," he retorted. "I'm not easily scared, but I'd like you to know this. I may have slipped down the ladder a bit, gentlemen, but I'm not altogether an outsider."

Lord Almont and Mr. Torrington made a duet with "My dear fellar!" and
"We have already realised that, Mr. Tidd."

"So, if there's anything shady in the transaction?"

"Nothing."

Richard fixed on Cranbourne. "Political?"

"No."

"You've stirred my curiosity, gentlemen."

Mr. Torrington leant forward and laid a hand on his arm,

"To this extent we can satisfy it," he said. "We three are engaged upon an operation of considerable magnitude."

"I guessed that much, sir. When three men like yourselves forgather one can generally look for balloons in the sky."

"Just so. A gentleman in whom we are interested requires latitude to conduct certain important activities with freedom from observation. To provide latitude it is necessary we should persuade our opponents that the gentleman is peaceably residing at his own home."

"Half a minute. You want to get Barraclough out of the country or somewhere and I'm to fill his place."

Mr. Torrington nodded. "Am I like Barraclough?"

"Remarkably so."

Suddenly Richard sprang to his feet and brought his hands together. "Tell me," he cried. "These opponents—have they made a blockade—to prevent him getting away."

"A most effectual blockade."

Richard threw up his head and laughed.

"Lord, so that was it. They tried to stop me at Earl's Court Station day before yesterday. Oh, this is great, gentlemen. Come on, I'm your man."

"You consent?"

"I consent all right."

The three men exchanged glances of satisfaction.

"Then if you will kindly ring the bell," said Cassis, "your servant,
Doran, will correct the details of your wardrobe."

"So I have a servant."

"You have everything this flat contains and five thousand pounds at the end of three weeks."

"Oh, what a lark," said Richard gaily.

"I only hope it will prove so," said Mr. Torrington.

"Was wondering where I'd sleep tonight."

"I wonder where you will."

"All right, gentlemen, you can leave it to me. I shan't let you down. If you'll excuse me I'm going to have a bath. In the event of our not meeting again you might post that cheque to care of Porters, Confectioners, 106b, Earl's Court Road—my town address." He stopped at the room door and grinned. "Please help yourselves to a drink or anything you fancy. My entire resources are at your disposal. Goodnight."

The door closed and a moment later came the sound of water splashing into the bath.

"Well, what do you think?" Cranbourne demanded enthusiastically.

"A nice boy," Mr. Torrington returned. "Straight. I'm wondering how much he will have to go through in the next three weeks."

"Yes, but from our point of view?"

"Ah, from our point of view I think we might declare a dividend. If you would lend me an arm, Lord Almont, we will speak a word of farewell to Barraclough through the wine cellar door."

CHAPTER 8.

INTRODUCING A LADY.

It was Cranbourne, who at the door of the flat thought of a final precaution, excused himself to his companions and asked leave to enter the bathroom. Richard was standing on a cork mat, rubbing himself with a Turkish towel and, after the fashion of all good men, singing lustily in time with the exercise. He favoured Cranbourne with a grin as he materialized through the wreaths of steam.

"Hello, back again!"

Cranbourne nodded and cast an appreciative eye over the well articulated muscles of the stripped figure before him.

"Just one thing," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Fire away."

Cranbourne produced a notebook and a pencil.

"Scribble your signature on this bit of paper."

"I see. My writing. Here you are."

Richard took the pencil and book and sitting on the edge of the bath—and without thinking—dashed off his own signature. When he had finished he handed it to Cranbourne who shook his head sadly over the result.

"No good?"

"'Fraid not. It was hardly to be expected. Whatever you do, don't write."

"I won't."

Cranbourne glanced at the page again.

"This is your real name, I suppose."

Richard started, hesitated a bit, then nodded.

"There was a Frencham Altar mixed up in that Patagonian business."

"My father. Went broke and shot himself, you know."

"I remember. Left you on the rocks, so to speak."

"Yes, and wedged there good and hard. You see he aimed at my being a gentleman and nothing else—never was taught how to earn a living. That's why I'm cutting rather a deplorable figure now."

"I can't agree," said Cranbourne generously. "I think your father realised his ambition. Goodnight."

"Night-oh!"

At the door Cranbourne paused.

"I'm almost ashamed of having dragged you into this business," said he.

"Don't you fret, my dear fellar. I'm delighted. I've been spending that five thousand in imagination ever since I heard of it. Think I'll emigrate in the fine style."

"Hm!" he paused. "Altar! I shouldn't really tell you this, but you're likely to be kidnapped tonight."

"What?"

"I thought you might like to know."

"Thanks very much."

"That's all."

"Hang on a minute. Do you want me to defend myself? I'm pretty useful with my hands or a gun

either for that matter."

"It would help us if you did nothing at all—except comply."

Richard's face fell for he loved a good mix up.

"Oh, very well, if you say so."

"Thank you," said Cranbourne. "The best of luck, old chap."

"You bet."

Cranbourne went out and a moment later the front door slammed.

Then Richard began to laugh.

"Kidnapped, eh! What a game. Doran!" The last word rang out imperatively.

"Sir," came the reply.

"Have I got any clothes?"

"In the bedroom, sir."

"Righto." He put his feet into a pair of slippers, donned a bath gown and shuffled into the adjoining room. At the door he paused to survey the appointments.

"I think this is a nice bedroom of mine, don't you?"

Doran signified assent with a smile.

"Very nice flat altogether. What sort of taste have I in the matter of clothes?"

"Pretty good, sir. I've laid out a blue cheviot."

"Aha! And an M.C.C. tie. Shan't wear that."

"No, sir."

"I'm not a member."

"But in the circumstances, sir."

"P'raps you're right. A sound taste in shirtings, I see."

"Rather a strong feature with us, sir."

Richard whistled cheerfully as he dressed himself. The clothes fitted him astonishingly well—even the collars were right to a quarter size. In the intervals between whistling solos he put questions on a hundred matters.

"Am I a fairly decent sort of chap, Doran?"

The question received a frowning affirmative.

"Splendid! You stick up for me."

The rattle of enquiry proceeded. How much did he drink? How long had he had the flat? What were his clubs—games—favourite restaurants? What was his telephone number? Did he smoke to excess—go out much? Was he fond of reading? Had he got a profession?

"Ah! and this is important. What about money?"

"There's seven pound ten in that note case, sir."

Richard verified the statement.

"Suppose I want more?"

"There's about two hundred in the second drawer of the bureau, sir."

"That's the sort of bureau for me. And I can get some food here?"

"I shall look after that, sir."

"First rate. Everything seems snug and in order. Let's take a look round the flat."

They inspected every corner, with the exception of the wine cellar, paused for a moment in the hall to try on hats and finished up in the dining room where Doran presented him with a bunch of keys, explaining their various uses.

Richard dropped into a saddle bag chair and smiled expansively upon a friendly world.

"A very pleasant finish to the day," he remarked luxuriously. "If you'd mix me one small drink and put the cigarettes in reach, I'll bother you no more tonight."

Doran was moving toward the decanter when a low knock sounded at the front door. He stopped, raised his head, listened, and stood quite still. The knock was repeated.

"Better find out who it is," Richard suggested.

"Yes, sir," said Doran, but made no move.

"What's the matter? You look worried."

Doran admitted that he was worried—very worried.

"But good heavens, why? Tough looking chap—ought to be able to look after yourself."

"I can, sir, but I was forbidden to do so. And I was wondering if it's to be a bar of lead or a sponge of chloroform."

"Oh, rats," Richard laughed, "you go and find out."

"Very well, sir."

Doran took a grip on himself and marched out.

"And now," said Richard to himself, "I suppose the fun is going to begin."

He lit a cigarette and waited. It was quite a long time before the door opened and a woman came quickly into the room. And she was lovely. She had a mass of black hair swept clear of the brow. Her eyes were black, large and luminous. She was unnaturally white but her lips were scarlet. It was a beautiful mouth, shapely, sensuous, sensitive, but with a hint of strength. Her brows very straight and as thin almost as pencil lines. She wore a flame-coloured evening dress—'*Tout feu*' as a ladies' journal would describe it—and a cloak of smoke colour which fell from one shoulder and double draped the other. There was nothing ordinary in the appearance of Auriole Craven. She attacked the eye and held it captive. A woman would have declared her to be overdressed—*outre*—almost *demi mondaine*—would have denounced the white face and the red curled lips—would have criticised the uncanny knack of falling instantaneously into attitudes of flowing lines. But to a man the subject of these criticisms was matter for appreciation. By her very daring she stirred a spirit of adventure. Richard checked a gasp of admiration—of surprise—rose to his feet and bowed, but other than by settling her eyes upon him the girl gave no sign of recognition. Clearly it was up to someone to make a move, wherefore Richard politely offered her "good evening."

"Is that all you have to say?" came the answer.

"Of course not," he laughed, "but I make a point of saying that first.
Do sit down, won't you?"

She occupied the offered chair and looked up at him.

"At least I thought you'd be surprised," she said. "Still it doesn't matter."

"P'raps I am," he admitted reluctantly, "but my surprise was drowned in a very natural pleasure."

"Pleasure?"

"It was awfully nice of you to look in like this. Been to a theatre or something?"

"No."

"No?"

"I came to talk."

"Fine! We—we've every facility."

"Yes." Her head was slightly raised and she seemed to be listening.
"Yes."

"I didn't hear anything, did you?" said Richard gaily.

"No. Nothing." But again she raised her head.

"I say, are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Yes, perfectly."

"'Cause if I can get you anything——"

"You can hardly expect me to be normal," she retorted with a flash of bitterness.

It was difficult to know what to say, so he nodded understandingly. An inspiration suggested the offer of a cigarette, but she shook her head.

"I prefer my own," she said, and drew a gold case from her bag. "Try one."

He took the case and she nodded toward it.

"I still carry your gifts."

Richard turned it over and read the inscription "Auriole Craven from A.B." It was a stroke of luck to get her name without asking. He smiled and handed it back with the words,

"Ungallant of me to expose your identity and conceal my own behind initials."

Auriole laughed shortly.

"Perhaps A. B. guessed that a day might come when his name engraved on a present to another woman would be a mistake."

"Give him a chance," said Richard. "He hasn't all that subtlety."

"Men change their views very readily, Tony."

"Only men?" he countered.

She jerked the reply at him over her uncovered shoulder.

"My being here, you mean? My having joined the other side?"

This was a grateful piece of intelligence but Richard preserved a stern expression.

"Since you suggest it yourself——" he admitted.

"Do you hate me for doing it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not at all. I'm sure your reasons were adequate."

"They were. Still I thought you'd be surprised."

It was clearly evident that some sort of emotion would have to be expressed. Richard passed a hand across his forehead and walked to the fireplace.

"My dear Auriole," he said, "did I ever strike you as a man who betrayed my real feelings?"

"I always knew them," she returned.

"Then you must know how hurt I am—how very hurt—to think that you—well, I mean, it's dreadful—most—er—most dreadful."

"Were you expecting loyalty from me?"

"There are degrees," he replied with a reproachful glance.

"Wonderful," said Auriole. "It's wonderful really." Her voice dropped and she looked him squarely in the eyes. "Tony, you're not really in love with that girl, you know."

He was concealing bewilderment behind the action of mixing a drink, but the statement so startled him that he sent a column of soda water straight into his shoe.

"Look here," he declared, vigorously mopping his sock with a handkerchief. "If you're going to say things like that I simply——"

"You can't love her."

A tinge of scarlet showed upon her white cheeks. Evidently the girl was in earnest. It was useless to flirt with the situation.

"I am not going to attempt to prove it," said Richard very gallantly.

"In fact it's an offence for me to mention her name."

"You haven't—yet," he observed tentatively.

And as she took this to be a challenge, she leaned back in her chair and said "Isabel Irish" with very little charity of inflexion.

"Please!" said Richard—but what he really meant was "Thank you." Inside himself he was thinking "Damn that fellow Doran! Why the blazes didn't he tell me about all these girls."

The sound of Auriole's voice brought him back to the necessity of the moment.

"So *sans gene*," she was saying, "so innocent—so unworldly. I wonder what her views would be if she learnt you had entertained a lady in your flat at midnight."

"As the lady came uninvited," Richard returned, "I am hardly likely to refer to the matter."

"Suppose I referred to it—advertised the fact. Do you imagine she would marry you then?"

Richard smiled.

"I should say she'd be as likely to marry me then as she is now."

"A girl brought up as she has been?"

"Aha!"

"You're very confident. Tony, there are people watching this flat to-night."

"Dear, dear!"

"People who will talk tomorrow morning."

"What, the chatty-at-breakfast-kind. How dreadful."

"If you wish to stop them, there is only one way."

"Yes—tell me. Always believed they were incurable."

Auriole shut her hands tight and spoke with difficulty.

"Tony, I don't know how real your affections are for this girl, but I know this. If you refuse to answer our questions your chance of marrying her is worth—nothing. Understand? Nothing."

And all at once Richard became serious.

"Will that please you?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

"I don't think so. I don't think it will please you, really."

"What do you mean?"

"You're too good a sort to enjoy spreading rotten fables about people who are in love with one another."

She echoed the words "too good a sort" rather faintly.

"Yes. I suppose you—you're jealous or something—angry because my feelings have changed. I understand that—it's natural, and I don't defend myself, you know. It's natural you should want to hurt me, but aren't you choosing rather a rotten way of doing it, 'cos you're hurting an innocent girl into the bargain. It's way down below your form to side up with these men who are against me—isn't it, now? As a friend, I'd drop out of this deal—clean out—it—it's not up to your standard."

"Why do you say this to me?"

"Because I like you too well to associate you with——"

"You like me?"

"Yes."

"Still?"

"Not still," he answered, truthfully, "but now."

She was silent for a long while, then she shook her head.

"No good, Tony. It wouldn't make any difference if I dropped out. I know it's beastly, but that can't be helped. They mean to have their answer, whatever happens."

"They've come to the wrong house to get it," said Richard and he folded his arms very heroically.

"You refuse to speak?"

"I do."

"Mr. Van Diest would pay you—enormously."

"Course he would."

"Twenty per cent after exploitation and a million down."

It was a staggering proposition, but Richard preserved his calm and remarked humorously:

"I'll take it in copper, please."

Auriole sprang to her feet and put her hands on his shoulders. Her face was lovelier at close range. A faint and delightful perfume came to his nostrils, her eyes burned brightly and the scarlet mouth, with its moist trembling lower lip, was an exquisite invitation. This indeed was a very woman, he thought, a striking contrast to the small and wistful Doreen. With sudden intuition he realised he had but to open his arms and she would enter—willingly, anxiously. An insane desire possessed him to do this thing. She was adorable, desirable, magnificent, and he was certain beyond doubt she loved him. With a catch of the breath he raised his hands and in so doing his glance fell upon the sleeve of the coat he wore. The cloth was of blue Cheviot which reminded him abruptly that he was Richard Frencham Altar masquerading in someone else's clothes, a circumstance which in no way admitted him to the use of short cuts to the affections of their real owner's admirers. It is disappointing to have to acknowledge that someone is violently in love with someone else that you happen to resemble and the reflection sobered him quickly. With an awkward laugh he turned away and repeated:

"Yes, tell him I'll take it in copper."

"Tony!" she said, "Tony, don't fool with it! Don't you, realise how frightfully serious it is? Haven't you any imagination?"

Apparently he did realise—apparently he had some imagination, for he replied:

"I imagine it is much too late for us to be talking here together. I'm going to ring the bell."

"No," she cried.

"My man will get you a cab."

"If you ring you'll be sorry."

"Life is full of regrets," he answered, and pressed the button.

He saw the startled gesture she made to prevent him and simultaneously the hall and the bedroom

doors were thrown open and three gentlemen, each levelling a revolver at his head, advanced into the room.

CHAPTER 9.

AN INVITATION TO STAY.

To a person of less even temperament than Richard the unexpected appearance of these three gentlemen marching in the wake of nickel plated shooting irons might well have aroused feelings of alarm and indignation. But for a matter of some four years Richard had been shot over pretty thoroughly and the lessons of calm learnt in the hard school of war did not desert him in the present situation. He felt, moreover, a curious certainty that the chance of bullets flying around was pretty remote. The primary necessity was to keep his head and avoid any word or action that might betray the fact that he was not the man they believed him to be. The name Van Diest, which had occurred in his conversation with the girl, came quickly to his brain and he glanced from one to another in the hope of determining whether its bearer was present.

His eyes were held by a short rotund person of advanced middle age who occupied the centre of the room. In outline this person was distinctly Dutch. His face was heavily pleated, with dewlaps pendant from the jaw. He wore side whiskers that did not make a good pair and dark bushy brows almost concealed his small, twinkly eyes. He possessed very little hair, but what there was had been pasted in thin separated strands across the shiny bald pate. A low collar of enormous circumference encircled his short neck and his tie was drawn through a Zodiac ring. His clothes were ill-fitting—shapeless trousers and a voluminous morning coat, in the buttonhole of which was a pink carnation with a silver papered stem, an immense watch-chain spread across a coarsely knitted waistcoat of Berlin wool. And he seemed out of breath. The pistol in his extended hand vibrated in sympathy with an accelerated pulse rate.

Richard's left hand wandered carelessly to his hip.

"Look here, Mr. Van Diest," he said, "were you never taught that it's rude to point?"

A twang like the snapping of a 'cello string brought his head round sharply.

"Hands away from your side pocket."

It was less of an invitation than an order.

The speaker was a big, broad-shouldered American of the thruster school, heavy jaw, black hair and hurry. He held his gun dead rigid against his thigh and there was that in his eyes which foretold that where he looked he could hit. This was Ezra P. Hipps.

"Set down and don't move—this thing goes off," he said.

Richard considered the proposal and the speaker and judged both to be sound.

"Thanks," he said, "I'd like a stall for this entertainment," and dropped into a chair.

The man who was standing behind Van Diest came forward and smiled gracefully. He was sleek and too well dressed and gave the appearance of being out of his natural element and ashamed of the one in which he found himself.

"You remember me, Barraclough, old fellow," he said, swinging his pistol as though it were a cane.

"I'm a terror for forgetting trifles," Richard replied sweetly.
"Remind me."

"Oliver Laurence. Met you in '11 at old Dick Harris' place."

"Good old Dick," said Richard in the spirit of the scene. "But as I was about to remark, here we all are, gentlemen, and what happens next?"

Hugo Van Diest flickered his eyes at Auriole and asked in a soft guttural voice:

"You prevail—yes?"

Auriole shook her head.

"Mr. Barraclough refuses," she said.

Van Diest drew in his breath between shut teeth and Oliver Laurence sighed sadly.

"Refuse."

"'Fraid so," nodded Richard.

"You know vot is it dot we ask?"

"Perfectly, but if you'd care to repeat it——"

Ezra P. Hipps rapped his free hand on a chair back.

"Don't get fresh," he snapped, "we're after business."

"Sorry," said Richard. "Thought it was a kind of Wild West act."

Evidently Van Diest wanted to avoid a row. He approached the subject in his most agreeable tone which sounded like a puma purring.

"Twendy per cent and a million pounds for der map. A man like you he can't spend a million pounds in a lifetime."

"Don't be too sure," said Richard unwisely. "I might have inherited the knack."

"Let's hear a price."

Richard turned to the American with a grin.

"Honestly," he replied, "anything you got from me would be dear at a shilling."

The friendly quality died out of Van Diest's voice.

"We was very sincere, Mr. Barraclough."

"Oh, that's fine," said Richard.

Oliver Laurence laid a soothing hand on his shoulder and the touch of the man was beastly. It inspired an instant and substantial dislike. Richard rounded on him with his first show of temper and brushed away the hand.

"Look here, Daisy," he said. "Better not touch the exhibits unless you want to be hurt."

And at this point Ezra P. Hipps showed himself a man of action.

"Guess what you won't give we'll have to take. Keys?"

"Take 'em by all means," said Richard, fishing the bunch from his pocket. "Tell me if you find anything."

"It will save a lot of troubles to you if we find something," murmured
Van Diest.

There was a distinct menace in the words but Richard was too interested in the activities of Ezra P. Hipps to pay heed to that. With lightning-like rapidity the American had unlocked every drawer in the bureau, withdrawn them from their runners and laid them in a precise row on the floor.

"Guessed it," he ejaculated. "Simple. One of 'em is shorter than the rest."

He dived a hand into the cavity lately filled by the short drawer and produced a small steel despatch box.

"The goods!"

Richard leaned forward with a sudden impulse to prevent the box being opened but the caressing muzzle of Van Diest's revolver coaxed him back to the chair.

"Very simple," said Van Diest. "Maps inside. Open it."

Hipps wasted little time trying to find a key that would fit. He put the box on the floor and kicked it scientifically. From the wreckage he rescued a neat roll of parchment with a tape round its waist. Once again he remarked "The goods!" whisked off the tape and spread out the parchment.

"Writing."

"Read it."

And he read.

"That would be altogether too easy, gentlemen. Perhaps there isn't a map after all."

Richard settled himself comfortably with a sigh of satisfaction and the three men turned to look at him.

"Don't blame me," he said sweetly, "I never said there was a map, did I?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Auriole with a flush of what might easily have been taken for pleasure on her cheeks. It was very perplexing.

"Hm!" Van Diest nodded. "Hm! A wise man keep this sort of informations in his head."

"'Course he does."

"Yes, yes. Mr. Barraclough, a great deal you oblige by coming with us to an apartment we have prepared for your receptions."

"It's nice of you but I'm very comfortable here."

"I'm afraid we must insist."

"Since you're so pressing."

"And as a gentleman you make no troubles—no noise."

"There's no such thing as a noisy gentleman."

Ezra P. Hipps rapped the butt of his automatic on the table top.

"You can keep the cross-talking for the automobile," he said. "We're through here—step out."

As they moved toward the door Laurence slipped a hand through Richard's arm.

"My dear old fellow," he said, "if you only knew how distasteful all this is to me."

Richard drew his arm away sharply.

"So's that to me," he said, brushing his sleeve with the deliberate will to offend. Then he turned and bowed to Auriole. "Your friends are amusing but I'm afraid they are going to waste a lot of time. Are you coming our way?"

CHAPTER 10.

NERVES.

The clocks were striking seven when Anthony Barraclough descended the stairs of the flats and hailed a taxi. The street was deserted save for a policeman and an old hag who was sorting over the contents of a dustbin outside the adjoining house. She shot a quick glance at Barraclough and broke into a cackle of thin laughter.

"Didn't take you long to come up in the world," she piped. "Always thought you were a bit of a fraud."

Barraclough gasped. The disappointment was so cruel.

"You are making a mistake," he said and opened the taxi door.

"You've had a shave, that's all, but, bless you, that don't deceive me."

"Look here——" he began.

"You don't want to be recognised, my dear. I can easily forget, you know, if I'm encouraged." She stretched out a filthy clawlike hand.

There was something queer in her manner—a difference from the rank and file of Van Diest's regiment.

Clearly, too, her poverty was genuine. With a little tact her allegiance might be diverted. He pulled a note case from his pocket and detached a fiver.

"Take that," he said, "and if you want more——"

He rattled off Lord Almont's address in Park Lane.

"Save my soul!" gasped the old woman. "Are you crazy? Didn't expect more'n a florin. Bless your pretty heart. You must be badly frightened of something."

But Barraclough waited for no more. He jumped into the taxi with the words 'Westminster Bridge' and drove away, swearing to himself.

"Of all rotten luck. Yet I can't help feeling she didn't belong to that gang after all. Wonder if I've made an almighty fool of myself."

For the first time in his life his nerves were beginning to fray. His fingers drummed a tattoo on the leather seat of the cab and, despite the chill of early morning, his brow was hot and clammy.

"Likely enough it was just a begging stunt."

He put his head out of the window and said 'Waterloo Station.' A sudden memory persuaded him to glance above his head and reassure himself no other passenger was concealed upon the roof. The action in itself was fresh evidence of nerves.

"Must pull myself together," he said. "Those infernal hours in the wine cupboard have shaken me up."

To a man of action nothing is so wearing as inactivity. It had been intolerable sitting in the darkness while the new proxy had borne the enemy's assault unaided. He had heard the rumble of talk which had followed the first stifled cry from Doran when the sponge of chloroform was thrust into his face, and every now and again he had heard Frencham Altar's voice ring out high and mocking and exasperatingly like his own. Finally the front door had slammed but he remained concealed for over an hour in case of misadventure. Doran was lying in the hall when he stepped from his hiding place. Barraclough knew a little of the rough science of medicine and very heartily cursed the man who had doped his servant. A little more of the anaesthetic would have put a period to Doran's career. There was an hour's hard work with ammonia and respiratory exercises before the good fellow blinked an eyelid and made the wry faces of recovery. After that Barraclough stewed himself a cup of coffee, broke a couple of eggs into it and made ready for departure. Altogether it had been a trying night as his nerves were beginning to testify.

It was encouraging to find no suspicious watcher at booking office or barrier. He passed through unobserved and entered an empty first-class compartment in the 7.30 to Southampton. There were ten minutes to wait before they were due to start—minutes which dragged interminably. But at last the green flag dropped, the couplings tightened and the train began to move.

"Thank God for that," he exclaimed and relaxed against the cushions of the seat.

But his relief was short lived. A large man, running at full speed, came abreast the carriage window which was lowered, a suitcase came flying through and landed on the opposite seat, while the man himself leapt to the running board, threw open the door and sprang into the carriage.

"Jing! but that was a near squeak," he exclaimed. "Another half minute and you'd have beaten me."

Barraclough's muscles tightened and his mouth went hard and straight. So the bluff had failed after all. He was spotted. That idiot from the benches had given them away.

The man opposite did not appear to have lost his breath through the race and was looking at Barraclough with an expression of good-natured humour in a pair of twinkly blue eyes. He was of very powerful physique, broad-shouldered and bull necked. Also he had the appearance of being uncommonly fit. In any other circumstance Barraclough would have taken him for a pleasant, likeable

fellow, who might have helped to pass the tedium of a long journey. But his actual feelings were far removed from any such consideration. The smug affability of the man coupled with his obvious strength aroused such indignation in Barraclough that he was scarcely able to remain seated. The difference in their weight and stature precluded all chances of a successful frontal attack. It would be sheer waste of energy to seize this intruder and try to chuck him on the line. But, on the other hand, something drastic would have to be done. At such a stage of the game it was intolerable to contemplate defeat. He thought of his words to Mr. Torrington the evening before and of the assurance he had given to Isabel. Then there was the immense prize that success would award him. Was everything to be lost because of one piece of infernal bad luck. If he could reach Southampton unobserved he was confident that the arrangements he had prepared would baffle observation. Besides the presumption was that the watchers had been called off and this infernal smiling idiot on the seat opposite had failed to receive new instructions and was acting upon the old.

In Barraclough's right hip pocket was an automatic pistol but between its butt and his hand was a thick buttoned upholster. Any attempt to reach the weapon would surely result in an immediate counter offensive, with himself at a disadvantage. No, he must think of something subtler than that.

On the seat beside him lay a packet of Gold Flake cigarettes, bought from a trolley on the platform. It gave him an idea. He put one in his mouth and began to slap his pockets as though searching for matches. He might have saved himself the pains for the man opposite produced a lighter and offered it with a friendly word.

"Always keep one handy."

Barraclough, silently swearing, thanked him and lit up.

Clearly his companion was a person of some geniality. He spread out his legs, cleared his throat, and observed:

"All's well as ends well. Still, I didn't expect to catch you."

Barraclough assumed an air of indifference.

"Did you not?" he said.

"It's a fact, I didn't. Lying in bed I was twelve minutes ago. Used some words, too, when they called me up on the 'phone. But, all said, it was worth the rush. Means a good deal of money to me."

This final remark did little to improve Barraclough's temper. However, he preserved an outward calm and said he supposed so.

"I'm tenacious," said the man. "That's what I am—tenacious."

"A fine quality."

"And pretty useful in my trade."

"Must be."

Barraclough's mind was concentrated on finding a weak spot at which to attack and already a delicate idea was maturing. In the rack above his companion's head was his suitcase, the handle projecting outward. Apparently it was unusually heavy for Barraclough had noticed with what a resonant whack it hit the carriage cushions when thrown in through the window and also that it was only lifted to its present position with an effort. If that suitcase could be persuaded to fall on its owner's head it was reasonable to suppose the result would be anesthetic. And in Barraclough's hand was a crooked stick. The association of idea is obvious.

"Going far?" came the pleasant enquiry.

In common with all South Western Railway carriages, the wooden partitioning above the upholstery was decorated with choicely coloured views of cities and country-side.

"Since there would appear to be no point in hiding anything from you," Barraclough replied, "there is a picture of my destination behind your head."

"That's funny," said the man and, responding to natural curiosity, turned to examine the picture, while Barraclough embraced the opportunity to slip the crook of his stick through the handle of the bag and tug hard. But the bag was heavier than he had imagined. It scarcely moved and only by bracing his foot on the seat opposite was he able to upset its balance. Just a fraction of a second too soon the man turned. Conceivably he saw murder in Barraclough's eyes or else he was unusually quick at grasping a

situation. He flashed his eyes upward at the moment the bag was toppling, realised it was too late to save himself, and dropped his head forward. He caught the weight of the bag on his massive shoulders and, as though it were a pillow, slewed sideways and heaved it straight on to Barraclough's chest.

And Barraclough's lungs emptied like a burst balloon. Next instant he felt himself lifted into mid air as though he were a child.

"I've a damn good mind to pitch you through the window," said the man. "I would, too, if I didn't reckon you were mad. As it is, I guess I'll stick you up in the luggage rack out of harm's way."

And this he did without apparent effort.

"Damn me!" he went on. "What's the game?"

"The game," replied Barraclough, "isn't played out yet."

Which was true, for in the tussle his overcoat had rolled up under his arms, the pistol pocket was clear, and a blue black automatic flashed dully in the man's face.

"If either of us leaves this carriage I fancy it's going to be you."

To do the man justice he betrayed more amazement than alarm. He backed away a pace and his hand travelled upward to the communicator.

"If you touch that cable I'll put a bullet through your wrist," said
Barraclough. "Sit down and attend to me."

He obeyed, shaking his head perplexedly.

"Damn me, if I can get the strength of it."

"Then listen," said Barraclough, steadying his aim along the ash rail of the luggage rack, "and keep your hands in your lap. I'm going to carry my scheme through even if I have to shoot you and lots like you. My patience has run out—understand? I've been fooled and badgered and headed off and shot at for as long as I can stand. The boot's on the other leg now and whoever tries to stop me or follow me or get in my way will find all the trouble he's looking for."

"Yes, but it seems to me," said the big man plaintively, "that it's you who's looking for trouble. Been a nice thing if that bag had caught me on the lid. There were two fifty pound bells inside and a coil of wire for my trapeze act."

"Your what?" said Barraclough.

"Trapeze act. Done in my tour nicely, that would."

Barraclough's eyes narrowed and he looked at the man closely.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What's your name?"

"My real name's John Lever," he replied, "but I'm better known to the music hall public as Madrooba, the Muscular Muscovite."

"Madrooba—the chap who lets eight men stand on his chest?"

"That's me."

"Then what in blazes were you following me for?"

"Following you?" repeated Mr. Madrooba. "Never set eyes on you before.
Run after the train 'cause I got a contract to appear in Paris tonight."

Barraclough lowered the point of his pistol slowly.

"And you've never heard of Van Diest?"

"Never! Van Biene I know and Van Hoven, but——"

"Then it looks to me," said Barraclough regretfully. "It looks to me as if I've made a pretty substantial fool of myself. If you're big enough to accept an apology, Mr. Madrooba, I'd be glad to come off this perch and offer it."

"I reckon if I can stand eight men on my chest," came the reply, "I don't need to take a lot of notice of

this little misunderstanding. Let yourself drop and I'll catch you."

And from sheer relief Barraclough began to laugh—and laughed solidly for ten miles of the journey.

CHAPTER 11.

OUTLINING A PROGRAMME.

Richard Frencham Altar was exceedingly affable in the car. It was a big, comfortable, Rolls saloon, and he sat between Van Diest and the American. Laurence occupied the seat next to the driver.

He had tried to say a few words to Auriole before taking his place in the car but she had merely shrugged her shoulders and entered a waiting taxi. The two vehicles drove in opposite directions, from which it would appear that her task in the affair was accomplished.

"I hope I shall see some more of that young lady," he remarked. Van
Diest nodded gloomily and Hipps jerked out:

"Probably will."

After that they drove in silence.

"Forgive me for criticising your methods," said Richard at last, "but shouldn't I be blindfolded or something? I'm familiar with all these roads and could walk back without even asking the way."

"There might be difficulties."

"Oh, quite. It was only a suggestion. I want to keep up the spirit of the thing. If I have to be Shanghaied I'd like it to be done properly."

"You wass very high spirited, Mr. Barraclough."

"Why not? Comfortable car—pleasant company."

"Yees. With us this was a very serious business."

"That's all to the good, but let's keep in humour. By the way, since everything's open and above board, where are you taking me?"

"Laurence's house."

"Wanted to know 'cos of getting my letters forwarded."

"There won't be a whole lot of communication with the outer world," said Hipps.

"I see. And how long are you proposing to keep me there?"

"My dear old fellow," Laurence spoke over his shoulder, "that depends entirely on yourself."

There was deeper significance in the tone than in the words.

"That's cordial," said Richard, "downright hostly."

"But paste this in your hat," said Hipps ominously. "Conditions won't improve by outstaying your welcome. It'll be sweet if you make it short—if not——"

He did not complete the sentence.

"A declining stock," Richard smiled then shook his head reproachfully. "You know, gentlemen, yours is an extremely heterodox way of doing business. You must be feeling pretty hopeless to have resorted to measures of this kind."

"I guess the market'll improve," said Hipps and relapsed into silence.

It seemed ages before the car slowed down and entered the gates of a solid mid-Victorian house, isolated from similar houses by two or three acres of treeful grounds. The front door was opened by

two men-servants of none too prepossessing appearance, who came down the steps as the car pulled up. It was significant of precaution that they tacitly formed up one on each side of Richard and escorted him within.

"The only thing lacking," he remarked, "is a red carpet and an awning."

But his disposition toward gaiety was unshared by his companions. The two servants conducted him mutely into the dining room where a meal was awaiting them. Van Diest beckoned him to a place at the table and, tucking a napkin under his left ear, seated himself and began to attack the victuals without comment. Ezra P. Hipps turned the key in the lock and dropped it in his pocket before occupying the chair facing Richard. As the ostensible host Laurence sat at the head of the table and instructed the servants to open the wine. The change of courses was effected by means of a small service lift inset in one of the walls.

Not the smallest effort was made at conversation—dishes came and went, glasses were filled and emptied in absolute silence. There was something ominous in this freedom from talk and the quiet broken only by the tinkle of table implements and the rather noisy character of Van Diest's feeding. Richard was struck by the old man's prodigious capacity for devouring food. He ate with a calculated energy as though the safety of nations depended upon his sustenance. Apart from the ordinary fare, he demolished about eighteen inches of a long French loaf at his side, tearing pieces from it with his short stubby fingers and filling his mouth with great wads of crust and dough. Richard afterwards learnt that this voracity of appetite was nerve begotten. In moments of acute agitation it was Van Diest's custom to eat enormously on the theory that a full belly begets a placid mind. His little piglike eyes darted to and fro among the cates before him assuring themselves that he was missing nothing.

In direct antithesis to this wolfish feeding were the manners of Oliver Laurence. He toyed with his victuals, cutting them into the littlest pieces and almost flirting with his glass of wine.

Ezra P. Hipps ate and drank, as he did everything else in life—thoroughly and with conviction. The meal finished he pushed back his chair, unlocked the door, tilted his head to indicate to the servants that they could get out, locked the door again and crossed to the mantelpiece.

"Cigar," he said.

Laurence provided one and offered a light. Hipps shook his head and sticking the cigar in his mouth he proceeded to eat it with a curious rotary motion.

"Now!" he said and it sounded like a blow upon a gong.

"Curtain up," said Richard and steeled himself for any eventuality.

"You're caught, Mr. Barraclough."

"But not caught out," came the instant reply.

"Ever handled a cheque for a million pounds?"

"I have not."

"Van!"

Mr. Van Diest felt in his pockets and produced a banker's draft which he laid on the table before Richard. It was payable to the order of Anthony Barraclough.

Richard flicked it aside.

"Old ground," he said. "No good to me, gentlemen."

"Let's talk."

"Fire away."

"I needn't repeat what you have to do to earn that trifle, Anthony, but here's a point worth considering. Doubtless you got the idea the price we're willing to pay'll rise. You're wrong—it'll fall. If you speak tonight that draft's yours and an interest beside, but every day you keep us waiting'll cost you fifty thousand pounds."

"Thank God I can afford it," said Richard.

"Roughly speaking it'll pan out over a period of three weeks, at the end of which time you get just

nothing, savez?"

"I savez that you and I will be in the same position at the end as we are at the beginning."

Ezra P. Hipps shook his head gravely but his metallic blue eyes never shifted their gaze for an instant.

"Tony boy," he said. "The price isn't solely financial. There's a little physical programme in the skyline. Get me?"

"Sounds like a threat."

"And is," came the rejoinder.

"Interesting."

The American took three steps forward and leant across the table.

"For example," he said, "you smoke too much and smoking'll be curtailed."

With a quick movement he plucked the cigarette from Richard's mouth and threw it into the grate.

A dull red surged over Richard's face as he sprang to his feet.

"I warn you——" he began, then checked himself at the sudden memory of Cranbourne's words. He was not allowed to put up a fight.

"Well, what?"

"Oh, nothing. I've neither the mood nor the patience to teach you manners."

His hand went out to take another cigarette from a silver box at his side.

"No smoking," repeated Hipps in a level voice.

"Don't be asinine, my good fool."

His extended hand trembled, yearning to knot itself into a fist. The silver box was just beyond the American's reach but seizing a small glass jug he threw the contents over Richard's hand, drenching the cigarette he had picked up and half filling the box with water. The quickness and effrontery of the action, its insolent disregard of all the laws of courtesy acted on Richard's temper as a spark on gun cotton.

"I'm damned if I'll stand for that," he shouted and kicking his chair out of the way made a dash round the table toward Hipps. It was Laurence who shot out the leg that tripped him and before he could scramble to his feet both the American and the Englishman were sitting on his back.

"Steady, steady, old chap," Laurence beseeched him. "It's an almighty pity to start this way."

Hipps' long fingers had closed scientifically on the back of Richard's neck and were paralysing the movements of his head. His nose was pressed good and hard into the pile of the carpet. It was all very painful.

"Are you going to quit fighting, Anthony?"

After all there was no particular value in adding to one's discomfort. They were three to one and in a locked room with reinforcements outside. Moreover, had there been a chance of requitals or escape he was under orders to accept neither. But in his existing state of indignation Richard could not induce himself to acknowledge defeat. The fighting strain in his nature could only be satisfied by getting in at least one substantial return for the indignity put upon him.

He was lying near to the grate, his head having narrowly missed the fender rail in the fall. His right hand, which was free, lay across Dutch tiling within easy reach of the open fire from which was projecting conveniently a blazing log. The end nearest him was as yet untouched by the flames and, without considering consequences, Richard dragged it out of the fire and viciously thrust it upward. More by luck than judgment the burning brand scorched across the side of Hipps' face.

"Hell!" came the cry and instantaneously the weight on his back was gone and he was free to rise.

Oliver Laurence, to avoid danger, had thrown himself backwards and was now under the table, looking very like a child playing hide and seek. The American had backed against the buffet but his

general dignity suffered a reverse from the fact that his first thought was of remedy rather than revenge. He had picked up a piece of butter and was rubbing it vigorously on his burnt cheek. In the shadows Mr. Van Diest was shaking his head in sorrowful disapproval of the whole proceedings. For the life of him Richard could not help laughing.

"I'm extremely sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but you did ask for trouble." He raised the corner of the table cloth and addressed Laurence. "If you've quite done amusing yourself under there you might come out and give me a cigarette."

Laurence, looking painfully ridiculous, emerged and handed his case to Richard who took one and lit it slowly from the glowing brand which he still retained.

"I think we had better come to an immediate understanding," he said. "I am perfectly prepared to treat you all with civility as long as I receive the same treatment from you, but please understand that I will not tolerate any funny business." An idea flashed suddenly into his brain. "Just one thing more—there was some talk earlier this evening of trying to poison the mind of my—my fiancée in regard to a question of my morals. That was a particularly offensive idea and I want your assurance that you'll drop it. Otherwise——" he took a few paces toward the window, "I shall set fire to your curtains and keep you gentlemen busy until the woodwork has caught. I imagine you aren't wanting the fire brigade or the intrusion of any other respectable force at the moment."

"Seems to me, my son——" began Hipps.

But Van Diest interrupted him.

"Let us agree to this suggestion," he said. "For my part I wass very sorry to make enemy of our goot guest. S'no troubles about that."

"Thank you," said Richard. "Then if you've nothing further to ask me
I'd be glad to turn in."

Hipps walked across the room and unlocked the door. The two servants came in.

"Show this gentleman to his apartment."

"Goodnight, everyone," said Richard.

He was passing out when Hipps laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Say," he said, touching his cheek. "You fired me with some ambition to see your flag at half mast. Admire your spirit and all that, but it kind o' gets my goat being branded by a youngster. Ain't used to it. We want that inf. o' yours and want it quick. My advice to you is, don't monkey with our patience. It won't pay."

"If you count this as a day," Richard replied with a grin, "it's cost me fifty thousand already."

For a moment Hipps made no reply and when at last he spoke his remark appeared to have no bearing on the matter in hand.

"In France during the war?" he asked.

"I was."

"Awkward stuff, that poison gas."

"Very awkward."

"Beastly smell."

"Horrid."

"Makes me cry to think of it."

"But you're a born sentimentalist."

"Ah. Goodnight. Shan't be meeting again for a few days. But Laurence here'll bring any messages."

"I shan't trouble him," said Richard.

"No? Well, that's your concern." Once again he relapsed into silence, then very suddenly flashed out the single word "Pineapple."

Richard was accompanied up the stairs by the two silent servants. They ushered him into a room on the top landing, bowed and retired. The door closed with a metallic ring. He heard the sliding of a bolt, the jingle of a chain and the sound of footsteps descending. And all of a sudden he felt very lonely.

CHAPTER 12.

PINEAPPLE.

The room in which Richard found himself was of modest size and unpretentious in decoration. Its walls were panelled in white and below the fireless grate was a second door leading to a small bedroom. There were no curtains to the windows which were closely shuttered, the shutters themselves being made of steel plates rivetted together and held in place by a series of dropping bars. Apparently some system of burglar alarm had been installed, an exceptionally large electric bell being fitted in the framing where, normally, the cornice poles would have run. Glancing over his shoulder Richard observed the absence of a handle to the door through which he had been admitted. A plain deal table occupied the centre of the room, with a couple of hard upright kitchen chairs, one on either side. There was no carpet nor any rug upon the floor. A single unshaded electric light bulb hung from the ceiling.

"Hospitable sort of place," he remarked and passed through to the bedroom, the door of which was on a spring and closed behind him.

Beyond the presence of a bed of extremely uncomfortable appearance the same severity confronted him. There was neither washstand nor dressing table, chair nor picture. Nothing to read, nothing to look at. The windows were shuttered and, as in the other room, a single light point was the only illumination. High up above the bed was the mouthpiece of what looked like a motor horn. This and an iron ventilating register let into the wall a couple of feet away from the pillow were the only objects that provided any variety in the way of decoration.

The atmosphere of the place, though chilly, had a distinct sense of oppression. There was no vitality in the air—it breathed mossy and damp.

"Do with an open window," said Richard and moved toward the shutters. He had hardly covered half the distance when the lights went out with startling suddenness. There was something distinctly eerie in the absolute darkness in which he found himself. He stretched out a hand and felt for the nearest wall like a blind man, groped his way to the door and opened it. But the other room was also in pitchy blackness.

"Fuse gone somewhere," he conjectured. "May as well try and get to a chair and wait till the lights come on."

Roughly memorising the position of the furniture he made for the centre of the room with hands extended. The effort was a failure and brought him to the opposing wall. Accordingly he turned and tried again on a slightly altered course. He had hardly taken three steps when he received a shock. His left hand touched something rough but soft. There was a sense of warmth about it but no movement. Richard started violently and caught his breath.

"What's that?" he cried.

But there was no answer.

Standing very still he listened. The house was deathly silent and he could almost hear the pulsing of his heart. Then very faintly he became aware of another sound—the gentle hiss of a man breathing.

"Now we know where we are," thought Richard bracing himself up. "Sneaked in while I was looking at the bedroom, I suppose. Not going to let those idiots frighten me with bogey tricks."

As quietly as possible he went down on all fours and ran his fingers across the floor boards in a semi-circle. They had not travelled very far before encountering the hard edge of a boot sole. That was good enough for Richard. Judging the distance nicely he seized its owner's ankle in an iron grip and springing to his feet lifted it high into the air and flung it backward. There was a squeal and a crash as the chair went over and Richard broke into a laugh.

"Look here, Laurence," he said. "I've had enough of your practical jokes tonight. You'll get hurt one of

these days if you go on being so funny."

And without warning the lights went up.

Laurence was scrambling to his feet, rubbing the back of his head ruefully, and there were two other men in the room. The first was a stranger to Richard and the second, who stood by the door, was one of the servants. The stranger was a shrewd-looking young man of moderately prepossessing appearance. He nodded to Richard as to an old acquaintance.

"We meet again," he remarked affably, "though you don't appear to recognise me."

"Well you're not much to remember," replied Richard whose temper was a little frayed.

"My name is Smith. Had the honour of sharing your taxi to Hendon the other day. You were good enough to ask me in for a drink."

It was clearly the moment to be noncommittal.

"If you've come to get it," said Richard, "you'll be unlucky."

"Just thought I'd like to take a look at you, that's all."

He rose to his feet, for he had been occupying the second chair and scanned Richard's face closely. A shadow of perplexity showed in the wrinkles of his forehead.

"Sorry I'm not looking my best," said Richard, with an uneasy feeling of having been detected.

"Hm!" said the young man called Smith, "I'm not very often wrong about things like that but I can't remember those humorous lines at the corners of your eyes."

"Ah!" said Richard, "but I hadn't seen the humour of the situation when last we met."

"Bad light, I suppose," the young man nodded. "Still, it's rather surprising. Thanks, Mr. Laurence, I think that'll do. Goodnight, sir."

"Oh, goodnight. Drop in whenever you feel like it."

"I may." He moved toward the door then turned suddenly. "By the way,
I've a message for you."

"Yes?"

"Pineapple." He spoke the word incisively.

Richard shook his head.

"Haven't the smallest idea what you mean," he said, "but not to seem lacking in appreciation, bananas or any other fruit you've a fancy for."

The door opened and closed behind the three retreating forms and once again the room was plunged into darkness.

The business of getting into bed was embarrassed by the constant reverses of light into darkness and back again. There appeared to be no specified period for either—sometimes the light would burn ten minutes—sometimes two and sometimes would merely flash up and down. A more successful irritant could hardly have been devised. The shock of the extreme contrast was in itself enough to infuriate an ordinary individual. Richard would gladly have accepted total darkness in preference to the blinding changes. This, however, was no part of his tormentors' programme—it was clearly evident they intended to prey upon his nerves as actively as possible. He reflected that no doubt many other devices were in preparation to induce him to speak. There was this talk of pineapple which appeared to carry with it some kind of threat.

"Pineapple. Why the deuce should pineapple loosen a man's tongue?" he said aloud as he struggled into a pair of pyjamas that had been laid on the bed. "Might make his mouth water perhaps but——"

At this particular moment the lights came on and he was able to finish undressing and nip between the sheets before the darkness fell again.

He observed with satisfaction that there was nothing funny about the bed. It was soft and "cushy" and there were ample coverings. It was vastly more comfortable than the bench which had supported him during the preceding nights and this in itself was something to be grateful for. After all, even if these

earnest financiers perpetrated a few ill-humoured practical jokes upon him he was being absurdly overpaid to endure them.

Five thousand pounds for a fortnight's badgering. Who wouldn't put up with a bit of discomfort for that. The wily Hun had handed him over far more substantial terrors than these gentlemen were likely to command and his pay for enduring them had worked out at approximately three pound ten a week. He fell to considering in what manner he would invest his earnings and a very attractive farming scheme in New Zealand began to formulate prettily. Farming had always appealed to him and there was a spot in the Canterbury district which had taken his fancy when he had visited the South Island two years before. There were green plains there and lettuce green woods and it was watered by a network of fast running streams, great and little, where fat rainbow trout sunned themselves in the shallows or leapt and jostled where the water tumbled creaming over rock and boulder. By Gad! it would be something like to build one's house in such surroundings—and maybe later on to marry and ——

It was the word marry that switched his thoughts up another channel and in imagination found him once again standing beside the girl with the splendid eyes who called at Barraclough's flat two hours before.

"Wish she wasn't mixed up in this outfit," he said to himself. "A girl like that! Perfectly ripping creature. By jing! put her alongside a man after her own heart—some decent fellow with the pluck to stand up against that wayward strain—and there might be a good deal of happiness knocking around for the pair of them. I suppose that ass Barraclough turned her down. Pretty hard to please. Wonder if he got away all right. Ripping scent she used. Coty, I believe, something Jacque Minot."

As a man will who is trying to revive the impression of a scent he sniffed the air gently with his eyes shut, only to open them with an expression of surprise. Surely it was no imagination but the odour of Rose Jacque Minot, taint and exquisite, seemed to hang in the air. Thin waves of it growing and diminishing in intensity were wafted across his head almost as though directed from a spray.

"If that isn't the oddest thing," he gasped. "Now I wonder——"

The light flashed up for a second—just long enough to reveal the fact that the room was empty.

"Damn funny," he said and sat up in bed puzzling. He remained thus for several minutes but no solution to the mystery presented itself. Moreover, the scent had gone from the air and nothing but the memory remained.

"Suppose I can't have been fool enough to imagine it. Never heard of a man being haunted by a perfume."

He lowered his head to the pillow feeling, for no explainable reason, strangely disquieted, only to rise again almost instantly exclaiming:

"'Tany rate, this is no imagination."

For the reek of onions was in the air—gross and nauseous. You could have cut it with a knife.

Probably Richard's most violent antipathy was for the smell of onions. He abhorred it as the devil abhors virtue. With an exclamation of disgust he disappeared beneath the bedclothes and stuffed the sheet into his mouth. He lay thus for a long while before venturing to emerge and sample the air. To his relief he found the detestable taint had vanished and the atmosphere had recovered its original slightly tomby flavour.

"That's a blessing any way," he said. "I suppose it's no use wondering how it's done or why it's done. Better get to sleep and ask questions in the morning."

And quite unexpectedly he found he was afraid—filled with a kind of nameless dread—a horrible prescience of some villainy about to happen. There was a motive in this programme of changing scents, a deeper significance than the mere will to annoy. He knew without even asking himself how he knew that the smell of pineapple would be next. But why he should fear pineapple was not at the moment apparent. He only knew that when it came he would have to command every nerve to prevent crying out.

Sitting up in bed he sniffed the air tentatively.

"Nothing! (sniff) No, nothing. (sniff) Wait a bit, wasn't that—?
No. (sniff) No—"

And then it came—pungent, acrid, bitter sweet, gathering in intensity second by second.

With a stifled cry he clapped both hands over his mouth and swung a leg to the floor. His eyes wide open in the dark began to sting violently. He caught his breath and burst into a spasm of coughing. Somewhere from the wall by the bedside came the faint sound of gas hissing from a cylinder.

"Phosgene!" shouted Richard Frencham Altar. "You dirty swine!
Phosgene!"

It is a smell that once learnt can never be forgotten—a smell pregnant with memories. As it invades the nostrils the doors of a dreadful past fly open. The white mist hanging over the sunken road, the clangour of beaten shell cases ringing out alarm, the whistle of the warning rockets and the noise of men choking in the spongy fog.

Richard struggled back to the farthest corner of the room. He had picked up his shirt and thrust it over his mouth and nostrils but even so his lungs were nearly bursting. "You rotten, rotten swine," he repeated. "I'll make you pay for this."

And a voice answered out of the dark:

"If you find the atmosphere oppressive, Mr. Barraclough, why not go into the next room. It's perfectly clear in there. But don't wait to collect your blankets because we're going to intensify this little lot."

There followed a louder hissing from the cylinder and Richard waited for no more. Somehow he located the door, dashed through into the adjoining room, and fell gasping on the uncovered boards. For several minutes he made no effort to rise, then he sat up and shivered. The air was like ice. A bitter freezing draught swept across him, cold as winter spray.

His inquisitors were following up an advantage. There was to be no remission in the warfare. Dark, poison and cold. These were the instruments of torture devised to make him speak.

Richard struggled to his feet and stood with clenched hands.

"All right, my lads," he said. "You go ahead but I'll see you damned before I talk."

He could hear the ice-cold wind whining through the registers as though in derision of his boast. It cut him to the bone through his thin silk pyjamas.

For the rest of the night Richard Frencham Altar paced the floor, stamping his feet and beating one hand against the other.

CHAPTER 13.

HARRISON SMITH.

When the young man named Smith left Laurence's house after his interview with Richard he was slightly angry and not a little puzzled. The cause of his perplexity was the humorous lines round Richard's eyes and the cause of his anger was his failure to have noted them when first they met in the taxi and travelled home together on the Golders Green tube.

He had remarked on the peculiarity of this circumstance when he found Hipps and Van Diest in the dining room and had received no other comment than a snub from the American for his lack of observation.

These two gentlemen were in a state of exaggerated well being induced by enthusiasm over the capture they had made. Hipps was laying odds that after a course of treatment Anthony Barraclough would not only give away the secret but would breathe his first sweetheart's pet name. Van Diest was more concerned with details for the notation of the future radium company.

They appeared to regard the intrusion of Mr. Smith as a nuisance.

"Seems to me, gentlemen," he said, "there's something queer about the whole business. Barraclough was known to be starting tonight—and instead you succeed in laying him by the heels."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing—except that it was all so infernally easy. Then again the fellow seems in such high spirits."

Van Diest wrinkled his forehead and nodded at this but Hipps waved it aside.

"Take it from me, he's in darn sight lower spirits than he wants us to think. Anthony's a sport and he'll sure pull the cucumber act as long as the cool weather lasts."

"You may be satisfied, gentlemen, but I'm not! You don't think he'd have given the information to anyone else."

Van Diest looked at the young man with a pitying smile.

"If you wass possessed millions and millions of pounds, my friend, iss it very likely you would trust anyone to look after it?"

"Perhaps not——"

"Very well then."

"Still I'm sure there's something fishy. If I might be allowed to investigate——"

But Van Diest negatived this suggestion very heartily. He argued that persons prying about at this stage of the game would bring suspicions on themselves.

"Mr. Torrington and all those peoples are very happy to believe that
Barraclough hass given us the slip. S'no goot to make them miserable."

"Still if—without attracting attention——"

"You run along and play," said Hipps.

And so the interview ended.

Smith was heartily offended to be brushed aside in this fashion. He had served his employers faithfully and with sound intelligence. Practically the entire control of the ring which had prevented Barraclough's escape on the preceding days had been in his hands. Earlier in the night he had received telephone instructions to call off his watchers and having done so he had driven over to Laurence's house to satisfy himself that all was in order.

It was quite absurd he should be assailed by these feelings of doubt. Barraclough had been caught and there the matter ended. But in his own mind it refused to end. Why hadn't Barraclough put up a fight and how had Barraclough grown funny lines round his eyes? These were mysteries which for his own peace he was bound to elucidate.

It was four o'clock when he got to bed but he was up again in good time next morning, roughly sketching out a programme for the day.

At nine fifteen precisely he was standing by the ticket barrier at Liverpool Street station awaiting the arrival of the Woodford train. Presently it steamed alongside the platform and one of the first persons to get out was Nugent Cassis. He was swinging his cane and *mirabile dictu* he was whistling. In his buttonhole he wore a flower.

From a distance Smith had studied Nugent Cassis on many previous occasions and knew his peculiarities by heart—also he knew that there was no single precedent for this rare display of jauntiness.

Harrison Smith shook his head hopelessly. It was inconceivable with all their immense resources that Torrington's crowd had set no watch on Barraclough's movements over night. Surely they must be aware that his intended flight had been frustrated. Why Barraclough's servant Doran would surely have rung up and informed them. He was confident that somewhere a breakdown had occurred.

As he passed by Nugent Cassis said "good morning" to the ticket collector—a thing he had never done before.

Harrison Smith got into a taxi and drove to Shepherd Street, Mayfair. He sent up his card by the parlour maid with the request that Miss Craven would grant him an interview. He was asked to wait and was kept waiting the best part of three quarters of an hour while Auriole completed her toilet. When at last she entered she did not show the least enthusiasm for his presence but asked rather

shortly what he wanted.

"I'm tired," she added, "so be as quick as you can."

"All right," he said. "It's only this. You were an old flame of Barraclough's?"

"Well?"

"How long is it since last you met?"

"Until last night—four years, I suppose."

"Hm! Had he changed at all?"

"Changed?"

"In appearance—er—manner."

She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Bit more amusing perhaps—less of a prig."

"Ah!" said Smith. "Go on—anything else?"

"He seemed to have learnt how to smile."

Harrison Smith leapt to his feet and paced up and down.

"I knew I was right," he said, "but what the deuce does it mean? Anything else to tell me?"

"Yes. Sit down, for Heaven's sake. My head's aching and you irritate me walking about."

He obeyed and continued his interrogation.

"In love with him once, weren't you?"

"Once," she replied.

"And you've no very good reason for wishing him well?"

"I've a very particular reason for wishing him ill."

"Hm! His engagement to Miss Irish?"

"Perhaps."

"How did you come to be mixed up in this affair?"

"I happened to know Mr. Hipps and heard what was going on through him. It was my idea—kidnapping Anthony. Doubt if they'd have had the nerve to think of it for themselves."

"D'you think they'll get him to talk?"

"I don't think *they* will get him to talk," she replied, "but——"

"Yes?"

"But I could. He's a tough proposition among men but a woman can worm a secret out of him—at least——" She stopped and shook her head.

"Yes?"

"That used to be my impression."

"Has it altered then?"

"I'm not quite so certain as I used to be. He was different last night——"

Harrison Smith leant forward.

"Tell me," he said, very earnestly, "did you notice anything queer about his eyes?"

"I don't know."

"Try to remember."

"Four years is a long while."

"But to a woman like you."

"I believe something struck me—they puckered at the corners a bit—rather attractively."

"That's it," said Harrison Smith. "That's exactly it. Lord, I wish I could understand."

"What's troubling you?"

"Just a crazy idea—probably it's nonsense. By the way, I've had orders from our employers to leave it alone so you'd do me a kindness by saying nothing of this visit."

"All right," she replied listlessly. "But I don't see——"

"It's solid in my head that a muddle has been made—and between you and me, I'm going to sift it out."

"I shouldn't," said Auriole. "You won't be thanked for disobeying orders."

"Must take a chance of that," he answered. "Only learnt yesterday what it was all about and the size of the deal has got me gasping."

"Pretty tremendous, isn't it?"

"Big enough to be worth taking some private trouble over. You don't imagine Barraclough would have deputed anyone else to get the concession?"

She shook her head.

"Neither do I. But if it isn't that why does his crowd sit still and grin?"

"I suppose they don't know of his capture."

"Maybe. 'Tany rate, it's what our folk believe. I have my own views."

"Tell me."

"They're a trifle too fantastic for publication yet awhile." He rose and buttoned his gloves. "There's to be a meeting at Lord Almont's flat this morning. I'm going to hang about and study character."

"Better not be seen."

"Trust me. I'll take cover in the motor show rooms on the street level and watch 'em as they come out."

"Hm! Goodbye." And she held out her hand.

"Au 'voir. You look a bit down this morning."

"Don't feel up to much."

He scanned her face quizzically.

"Those tender feelings haven't revived, have they?"

"What do you mean?"

"For friend Barraclough?"

"Idiot," she retorted. "As if I had any feelings."

"He's a decent looking chap."

"Oh, go away," she said.

And he went—smiling.

Auriole waited until the front door closed, then picked up the telephone receiver and gave a number.

"I want to speak to Lord Almont Frayne. Oh, is it? Good morning. Yes, that's right. A. B. was kidnapped last night at twelve thirty. They've taken him to Laurence's house in Totteridge. What? Yes, perfectly satisfied. One of their agents, a man named Harrison Smith, has been here a minute ago. He seems to be suspicious about something. Thinks you all seem too contented. He'll be hanging about outside your flat this morning. Yes, that's all. Oh, Lord Almont, wish you'd explain the situation to me—can't understand it at all. Wouldn't make any difference. No, but what was to be gained by letting Anthony Barraclough be kidnapped? If you won't say it doesn't matter but it seems stupid not to trust one's own side. Oh, Mr. Cassis. I doubt if he'd trust himself. 'Bye!"

She hung up the receiver with a little gesture of annoyance and crossed to the writing table. From a small drawer above the pigeon holes she took a photograph of a man in flannels. It was signed "Yours for keeps, Tony." She read the inscription and smiled—and it was not a very kindly smile.

* * * * * *

Harrison Smith, as a prospective buyer, proved extremely tiresome to the staff of the Motor Show Rooms in Park Lane. He shilly-shallied from one car to another asking rather stupid questions for the best part of two hours. The exquisitely dressed salesman poured forth his eulogies in vain. Nothing could make Mr. Smith decide. He would listen attentively to long recitals of the respective virtues of this make and that and then would gaze out into the street as though lost in contemplation. In the midst of listening to a highly technical discourse on the subject of cantilever springs, without a word of warning he leapt into the interior of a big Siddeley Saloon and closed the door behind him. The salesman looked at Mr. Smith in amazement but Mr. Smith was looking into the street along which three very serious-looking men were slowly progressing. Two of them supported the third who was very old and very bent. His face was set in an expression of acute anguish. They helped him into a waiting automobile, shook their heads at each other and proceeded in different directions. The automobile started up and moved away. The old man's head was sunk upon his chest.

When all three were out of view Harrison Smith emerged from the Siddeley Saloon, glanced at his watch, thanked the salesman, said he would call again and passed out of the showrooms. On the pavement he halted and, like the three gentlemen who had occupied his attention, he too shook his head.

"They seem pretty well in the depths now," he reflected. "Wonder if
I'm making a fool of myself."

He would have wondered even more acutely had he seen Mr. Torrington straighten up and smile as the big ear turned into the Park through Stanhope Gate. Every trace of anguish had gone from the old man's face. To speak the truth he looked extremely well pleased with himself.

Harrison Smith walked slowly down Piccadilly debating in his mind whether or no he should abandon his investigations.

He stopped at the bottom of Clarges Street to allow a taxi, laden with luggage, to pass. The taxi had its cover down and inside he had a glimpse of a girl with a happy, smiling face. The girl was Isabel Irish and the brief glimpse decided him.

"One more cast," he said and jumped into an empty cab that was coming down the slope.

"Follow that chap in front," he cried. "The one with box on top.
Don't lose sight of him whatever happens."

He slammed the door and settled down on the cushions. Pursuer and pursued threaded their way through the traffic to Waterloo Station.

CHAPTER 14.

"OFF THE BEATEN TRACK."

Anthony Barraclough's mother was seventy-eight and still a sport. She loved her garden, she loved her son and she loved adventure. She was very fond of life, of punctuality, of the church, and of good manners. She was deeply attached to the memory of her late husband and her late sovereign, Queen Victoria, upon whom, with certain reservations, she patterned herself. The reservations were a taste for

stormy literature and a habit of wearing her ice-white hair bobbed. The bobbing of her hair, and it used to be waist long, was a tribute to patriotism. She sacrificed her "ends" in 1914 to give a lead to hesitating girls of the neighbourhood. This she conceived to be a duty and one that would materially expedite the close of hostilities.

Mrs. Barraclough lived in the sweetly named village of Clyst St. Mary where you will find Devon at its gentlest. She was waited upon by four strapping girls who bore the names Flora, Agnes, Jane and Cynthia. These young women arrived in a body during the spring of 1919 and took possession of the house. Flora who was spokesman of the party bore a note from Anthony in which he wrote—

"Mother Darling,

Am sending these girls to look after you. No more servant worries.
They are tophole. Flora and Jane saved my life when I was in France.

Love,
TONY."

That was all.

Being a dutiful mother, Mrs. Barraclough asked no questions;—instead she arranged accommodation and bought some new dimity chintzes for the top floor bedrooms.

As Anthony declared, the girls were certainly tophole and made their mistress so unreasonably comfortable that she greatly feared the risk of being spoilt. It is true they perplexed her not a little, since no single one of them bestrewed the house with fallen aspirates, sang while sweeping nor spoke ill of her fellow. Herein perhaps they provided some small ground for disappointment for, in company with many ladies of the older school, Mrs. Barraclough dearly loved bestowing an occasional rebuke in words calculated to improve and uplift. This, however, was a trivial concern weighed against the obvious advantages of loyalty, good nature and efficiency.

The house in which Mrs. Barraclough dwelt was called "Chestnuts" and it lay a few miles off the London Exeter main road. To reach it by rail you alighted at Digby Halt and were met by either a car or a governess cart. Mrs. Barraclough possessed both and invariably despatched the governess cart to meet her favourite guests, on the theory that a horse is more of a compliment than a "snuffly engine." As a matter of fact the car was a very sterling, if rather old, Panhard Levassor and in no sense could be accused of snuffling.

When once an enquiring visitor, after vainly searching the garden for chestnut trees, asked why the house was so named, Mrs. Barraclough replied—

"The chestnuts apply to myself and not to the vegetation. I am an old woman with an incurable habit of repeating the same anecdotes over and over again."

To this sanctuary of mid-Victorian calm Isabel Irish came in the late afternoon of the day following Anthony's departure into the unknown. To wait in London for three weeks without word or message was more than she could tolerate. Accordingly she sent a wire to Mrs. Barraclough and followed close upon its heels. Of the presence of Mr. Harrison Smith in the next compartment of the corridor carriage, she, of course, knew nothing, and this circumstance provided that enthusiastic investigator with every opportunity of studying her without attracting attention to himself.

On the pretext of smoking a pipe he lounged up and down the corridor, every now and then glancing at Isabel, who sat alone with compressed lips and chin sunk on her chest. He concluded from her attitude and expression that she must have heard of Barraclough's capture but later on another impression superseded the first, for every now and then a light of excitement and enthusiasm would leap into her eyes as though in imagination she were following her lover along the ways of desperate adventure. Harrison Smith shook his head.

"Don't know what to make of it," he muttered. "Certain sure they've got the man yet—I don't know ——"

Once he saw her do a very odd thing but foolishly enough paid little heed to it. A sudden blank look came into the girl's face—the kind of look people wear who have suddenly forgotten an important matter or discovered a loss. Her lips moved rapidly and her brow creased under an intensity of thought. She turned and breathed on the window glass and with quick movements of her forefinger wrote upon it half a dozen figures and characters. But before he had properly noted what they were the moisture evaporated and the glass was clear again. It did not occur to Harrison Smith to worry over his failure to

read what she had written, since he regarded the action as symptomatic of mere nervousness, but he noted with surprise that after this little episode the girl seemed to relax and her face assumed lines almost of contentment. After all, no one could blame him for failing to realise the true significance of that hurried, transient scrawl. One does not expect to find the map reference of probably the greatest source of wealth the world has ever known scribbled across the window pane of a South Western Railway carriage by the fat little forefinger of a girl scarcely out of her teens. Such an eventuality never even crossed the mind of Harrison Smith. Nevertheless the girl puzzled him more than he cared to confess.

To reach Digby Halt necessitated a change. Harrison Smith took good care to make his descent from the train as far as possible from Isabel's carriage. He watched her enter the governess cart and drive away before attempting to leave the station. Prior to this it struck him that he might have difficulty in obtaining lodgings in the neighbourhood without bag or baggage and this being probable he had resorted to the unpleasant expedient of stealing a suit case. Its owner, a clergyman, was at the time enjoying a cup of tea in the dining section—the risk therefore was small. The suit case bore no initials and might have belonged to anybody. Harrison Smith showed as little as possible of his face as he passed through the wicket gate. He turned in the opposite direction to the one taken by the governess cart, waited till he was out of sight and climbed through a gap in the hedge. Ten minutes later, dressed as a clergyman and looking very good indeed, he marched down the road in the direction of the village.

CHAPTER 15.

TEA AND TEARS.

It was Flora who drove the round, short legged pony, who drew the dog cart, and because Flora had driven a high power car in France during the war and had earned a reputation as a merchant of speed she looked, as she was given to look on these occasions, a shade sorry for herself.

Also, because she had an admiration for Anthony that was little removed from adoration she did not attend greatly to the business in hand, but instead engaged in a critical survey of the girl he was to marry. She decided that Isabel was very pretty but a shade too serious. She wondered if her nerves were any good. She wished she had been allowed to fetch her in the motor as there were one or two sharp corners on the way home which, taken fast, provided a good test of a passenger's courage. Perhaps it was as well that permission had been denied, she reflected, since had Isabel screamed or turned even the least bit pink she, Flora, would certainly have hit her with a spanner.

In extenuation for these violent emotions please remember that Flora, in company with Jane, had been instrumental in saving Anthony Barraclough's life when they found him lying on the roadside bleeding like a stuck pig during the great retreat of 1918. After all, a girl is justified in feeling strongly about a man's choice of a wife when he owes his life to her. She is more or less responsible.

Isabel said nothing for perhaps a quarter of a mile, then suddenly exclaimed:

"I say, this is beastly slow."

She could not have made a happier remark. Flora relaxed instantly.

"Isn't it chronic," she returned, "but the old lady was firm about it.
If I'd had the car we'd have whooped it up a bit."

"Wish we had. Can't stick this jogging—want to get out and run."

"Fond of speed?" said Flora.

"Um, rather. That beastly old train—then this. I'd half a notion to fly down only I didn't know any landings round here."

"You've flown then?"

"Yes, lots."

"Who with?"

"By myself a fair amount."

"Got a pilot certificate?"

"Yes, ages ago."

"I say!" said Flora and began to feel quite hopeful about Anthony's future. "Agnes was in the Flying Corps, you know."

"Agnes?"

"She's housemaid. 'Course she's been up dozens of times but she never handled the joystick. Ever looped?"

"Often."

"You must talk to Agnes," said Flora.

There was a bell under the pony's chin strap and it jingled continually. From her chair by the open French window Mrs. Barraclough could hear the jingle as the cart turned into the lane. Herein lay the essence of using the cart for particular friends, for Mrs. Barraclough knew that as soon as she heard that sound there would be just time to walk down the garden path and be at the gate to welcome the arrival. With the car one could never get there soon enough and to her way of thinking the hospitality of a house should be offered at the entrance to its grounds. She liked to stand under the arboured gate with extended hands and from there to speak the first welcoming words and then to link arms and lead the visitor indoors with promises of tea or fires in bedrooms and little kindly appreciations of the fatigue of travelling. She would as soon have omitted any of these gentle rites as have neglected to satisfy herself that the sheets were properly aired or the carpets swept beneath the beds.

Of course, with Isabel the welcome extended beyond the mere taking of hands. There is a proper way of embracing your son's affianced wife; that is, of course, if you happen to be of the same period as Mrs. Barraclough. A kiss on the forehead, one on each cheek, an examination at arm's length, and finally, after a perfect duck of a shared smile and a murmured "my dear," the gentlest kiss imaginable on the extreme point of the chin. It is at once a tribute and an acceptance—the cashier's neat initial that honours your signature to a cheque drawn on the account of happiness.

Alas, that some of our modern mothers have lost the knack of this pretty exchange. Their greeting is of a harsher tone. They bridge the separating gulf between youth and age with talk of Auction. They speak to the girl of "making a four" after dinner when the only real concern is that she should make a two that is spiritually one. And because this is so the modern mother will remain more often "in-law" than in heart, which is a very great pity indeed.

They had never met before but Isabel knew at the first touch of those sweet prim lips that Anthony's mother was also hers—was also a darling—was also a trump—was also every kind of good thing that she ought to be.

"Oh, I'm so glad I came," she gasped. "It won't be half so bad with you to help me wait."

And Mrs. Barraclough, who hadn't the smallest idea what she was talking about, nodded and replied:

"Of course not, my dear, of course not."

Inside the drawing room tea was waiting on a silver tray, with a silver kettle throwing out a hiss of silver steam. Never had Isabel seen any silver that was as bright as this. It shone with the innocent lustre of wedding presents and even the little methylated spirit flame that boiled the water looked as if it had been polished with a chamois leather.

There was a walnut tea caddy studded with brass that had to be unlocked, and inside were two compartments with tin-foil linings in which the precious leaves guarded their aroma and defied larceny. Mrs. Barraclough took two spoonfuls from one side and one from the other that the correct blend might be achieved and these she mixed upon a tiny square of white cartridge paper. Then the cups were warmed and the water was put in—and some muffins and Jane, who had apple cheeks and smiling red lips, came in the room and the business of pouring out began, which is almost as great and almost as lost a secret as the varnish of the violin makers of Cremona. And Isabel felt good all over because she knew that Mrs. Barraclough, and the room, and Jane, and the muffins, and the tea, and the evening were all the right temperature—warm—mellow—comforting. Outside the window was a thrush who sang. He was a soloist, and when he stayed to fill his throat a chorus of sparrows, close packed upon the upper branches of a tilting cedar, chirped gladly with a single voice.

And listening and tasting and feeling all the sweetness of the countryside, the fairness of tradition, the delicacy of age and custom, a lump came into Isabel's throat—hot, angry and convulsive. For somewhere out beyond was her man—facing unknown dangers, taking terrible risks, followed by relentless men.

Yet all this was his and he had left it. She was his and he had left her—deserting both at the bidding of that frightful master who commands us all—that ruler of men's destinies whose initials are L.S.D. [Transcriber's note: abbreviations for Pounds, shillings, pence.]

She put her tea cup on the tray with a little tinkle and suddenly covered her eyes with the palms of her hands.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried. "Why couldn't he have been satisfied?"

"What is it, my dear?"

"Money," she answered with a staggering breath. "Money. And it couldn't buy a moment that was as sweet as this."

The fair curly head tilted forward into the black silk lap. Mrs. Barraclough's hands went round the girl's shoulders and held them tight. They were shaking so.

A clergyman passing down the road halted for a moment and peered over the yew hedge into the open windows of the room. But nobody took any notice of him and he couldn't hear the words that were spoken. Had he heard he would not have understood for they were only the kind noises with which one woman will comfort another.

Mrs. Barraclough could almost feel the hot tears soak through the fabric of her gown.

CHAPTER 16.

A HYPHEN.

When first the question of radium arose in this chronicle it will be remembered that Barraclough, under considerable pressure, yielded the secret of the map reference to his fiancée, and by this very act made a present of it, through the pages of narrative, to whosoever might chance to read.

It would seem a perfectly reasonable supposition that there must be many avaricious persons to whom the possession of untold riches would prove more attractive than a mere interest in the doings of another man. Let it be said at once that although Barraclough certainly confided the correct map reference to Isabel, that reference, for the purposes of caution and public safety, underwent several important variations before passing into my hands. The reason of this precaution will be readily appreciated by the thoughtful however great may be the disappointment it provides to the adventurous. A memory of average length will recall the high percentage of disaster, of wrecked hopes and of ruin pursuant upon the gold rush to Klondyke at the close of the last century. Barely one man in a hundred made a living—barely one in a thousand saw the yellow specks in his shovel that shone so bright among the brown. Those who had set forth, buoyed up with boundless belief, dragged back to where they had started from broken in purse and spirit, barren of hope and faith.

What then would be the result if the illimitable source of wealth upon which by chance and a whisper Barraclough had stumbled should be revealed to the world? A panic—a mad headlong exodus of men and women too. Unequipped and unqualified they would pour from city and country-side, leaving desk and furrow, in a wild race to be first upon the scene—to stake a claim—any claim—to dig—to grovel—to tear up the kindly earth with fingers like the claws of beasts. Wealth, upon which our civilisation has been built, is the surest destroyer of civilisation. What it has given it takes away. Dangle a promise of gold before the young man at the ribbon counter and behold he is become a savage. Whisper it never so gently—and it will sound as the roar of torrents in our ears.

Brewster's Series 19. Map 24. Square F. North 27. West 33. Look it up for yourself. It exists all right but there is no radium there, not any within a thousand miles for aught I know to the contrary. In that location and over a large stretch of surrounding country-side the earth's outer crust is mainly argillaceous with here and there an outcrop of sandstone. There is not the smallest indication of pitch-blende anywhere in the neighbourhood, and radium, as even those little versed in chemistry or geology

are aware, is only to be found in that particular ore.

It would be well, therefore, to think twice before embarking upon a fruitless treasure hunt after reading what has here been set down. It was the knowledge of the inevitable consequences that would result from incautious confidence that sealed Barraclough's lips and made his movements on arriving at Southampton so secretive. It is known there was a fog over the Solent on the afternoon in question and that a small brown-sailed boat with a man sitting in the stern put out from the shore and was presently swallowed up in the white tasselled wreaths of mist. That same boat was discovered minus its passenger in the early hours of the following day. A coastal collier, racketing into port in the quiet of evening, brought the tale of a seaplane that narrowly missed crashing into her deck house. Long after it was out of sight the crew heard its engines droning overhead. Then for a while there was silence during which a curious pinkish glow appeared to the starboard and died away. This glow was repeated three times and at the third repetition the waterplane engine was again audible, increasing in volume every moment. Presently it cut out and nothing was heard for several minutes. When it started again it must have been quite near at hand for the sound of water cut by the floats was detectable. The engines howled and whined until the roar diminished to a sound no greater than the buzzing of a bee fading into nothing over the wake of the little steamer.

Whether or no these recorded circumstances have any bearing on the mystery of Anthony Barraclough's disappearance it would be impossible to say but the Harbour Authorities who were questioned as to whether they had knowledge of the movements of this particular waterplane replied with a regretful negative. They neither knew where it came from nor whither it went and there is a strong rumour that one or two quite important persons got into severe trouble for their want of information.

The one thing that is positively known is that Barraclough arrived in and disappeared from Southampton in a single day, but whether he went North, South, East or West is a matter for speculation.

PART II.

CHAPTER 17.

A DOUBTFUL ALLY.

"That guy," said Ezra P. Hipps, "that guy is some stayer."

Hugo Van Diest, from the deeps of a big arm chair, omitted a kind of rumbling affirmative. He was smoking a porcelain pipe enamelled with roses and forget-me-nots. His fat, short fingered hands were spread across the waistcoat of Berlin wool, his chin was sunk and his bearing that of a man who is out of humour.

Gracefully disposed upon the hearthrug stood Oliver Laurence, an excellent advertisement for his tailor.

Ezra P. Hipps, hugging one knee, sat upon the centre table and he was looking at Auriole Craven with much the same expression as might be seen on the face of a slave buyer in an African market. He had passed her shoes, appreciated her stockings, nodded approval at her gown and millinery and was now observing with satisfaction that the gloves which she was peeling off revealed two arms of perfect proportion.

"That guy," he proceeded, "has got to be made to talk. Looks like.
He's made fools of us too long. Looks like," he threw a glance at
Laurence, "your durn psychology isn't worth a hill o' beans."

"We haven't given it a chance yet," said Laurence in defence of his method.

"Seventeen days," grunted Van Diest. "And no progress—nothing. This was not an ordinary man."

"Am I to see him today?" asked Auriole.

Hipps shook his head and the girl brightened perceptibly.

"Seems to please you."

"No, it doesn't. I'll go up if you want me to—only——"

"Get on with it."

"I can't help thinking it's a mistake. Can't help thinking that somehow that minute I spend with him every day strengthens rather than breaks him down."

"Guess you're right—it would me," Hipps agreed. There was a shade of gallantry in the tone.

"I take leave to doubt that," said Laurence. "I'm positively sure that if a man is feeling the pinch all day long and everybody he comes in contact with is definitely against him, a momentary glimpse of someone who is seemingly sympathetic is far more likely to weaken his resolve than strengthen it. It makes him relax and even though you relax only a trifle it's the very deuce to get a grip on yourself again. You can see it when chaps are training—that extra cigarette—the whiskey and soda that isn't allowed plays the devil with their constitution. I know when I was at——" He stopped for Auriole's large eyes were looking at him critically.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied. "Nothing." Then to everyone's amazement burst out: "What a mean rotter you are, though."

"Here——" he began.

"I honestly believe you enjoy all this beastliness."

"Enjoy? My dear girl, do be sensible. Damn it, no one enjoys having to put on the screw. It's a case of necessity."

"Yes, yes, I suppose it is," she acquiesced hurriedly in an effort to regain her composure. "Only it seemed to me—but never mind."

Ezra P. Hipps crossed the room and put a hand on her arm.

"Come on, dear. What's the trouble?"

"I wouldn't mind," she returned, "if he weren't so—so desperately plucky."

"Hm!" said Van Diest. "I think it was a goot idea that you don't go to see this young man any more."

"That's nonsense," she replied hotly. "I'll see him. Besides he's used to my coming and if I didn't turn up he——"

"Disappointed," suggested Hipps.

"Exactly," said Laurence. "Perhaps it 'ud be a good idea to vary the programme for a day or two. Use the siren a bit more freely at night and cut down his water supply. If he isn't ready to talk in another forty-eight hours I'll be surprised."

"Had a word with him yet?" demanded Hipps.

"Not this morning."

"Then you and Van try a few sweet speeches."

The Dutchman rose heavily from his chair and nodded.

"It was a bad business all this," he said. "You come with us—no?"

"I'll be right along in just a minute."

He tilted his head a fraction toward Auriole and laid a finger on his lips.

Van Diest and Laurence went out. He waited until he heard their footsteps mounting the stairs before he spoke again. Auriole was looking through the window at the trees margining the little estate. She presented a charming silhouette against the light.

"Say, you look very womanly in that fawn outfit," said Hipps. "Where did you get it built?"

She turned with a smile that was a shade cynical.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Hipps."

"I do—fine."

"I'll wear it again."

"You've passed down the wardrobe hooks pretty prodigal these last few days. What is it—a dress parade?"

"One changes," she replied.

"That's sure what I'm frightened of."

"If you'd rather I appeared in a blouse and skirt——"; but he interrupted the sentence with an uplifted hand.

"I've a fancy we'll cut cross talking," he said, "and come to grips."

"About what?"

"This young fellow Barraclough has cut ice with you?"

"I thought you knew my feelings about him."

"To borrow from your vocabulary—'one changes,'" he replied.

"I haven't changed."

"Glad to hear it."

"I admire his pluck."

"It's a dangerous quality—admiration. Sure the old 'pash' hasn't looked up a bit?"

"Quite sure."

"Still it 'curred to me you were shaken some at the treatment we're serving out to him."

"That's not surprising. I merely wanted to get my own back, not—not——" She left the sentence unfinished.

Ezra P. Hipps took a cigar from his waistcoat pocket and chewed it reflectively, his eyes never leaving the girl's face.

"Women are queer ships," he said, "and never too even on the keel. You've an important hand to play and kind of to keep your mind from revoking here's a proposition to think over."

"Revoking?"

"That's the word. You're in this deal on a jealousy outfit and we're not after any renunciation, splendid sacrifice and that gear. We want you dead hard and seemed to me to get that I might do well to tie you up a bit closer to the cause."

"What do you suggest?"

"You're an ambitious woman."

"I suppose so."

"I suggest this child." And he tapped his chest with the chewed butt of the cigar.

"I don't see——"

"This child thrown in as a sweetener."

For a moment she flushed, then the colour died away and was replaced by a smile distinctly crooked at the corners.

"Are you making a proposal of marriage?" she asked.

"I sure am."

"Oh!"

He stretched his legs and rattled the coins in his pockets.

"I've a hell of a lot of money and damn! I've never asked a woman this question up to yet."

"Have you not?"

"Mention that fact 'cos I know they fall for molasses."

"You're very wise about women, Mr. Hipps."

But the irony was wasted.

"I read a bit of heart stuff in the trains sometimes," he said.

Auriole began to draw on her gloves.

"Isn't this rather a queer place to settle one's future?" she said.

"Donno—is it? Struck me it 'ud keep you from side-stepping having me on the horizon."

"I see. And do you always mix love making with business?"

"Sure. Marriage is a business and bank books talk sweeter than the long haired boys."

She flashed a glance up at him and there was a definite appeal in her eyes.

"Are you in love with me?"

The question seemed slightly to take him off balance.

"Damn! I think you're fine," he said.

"That is—splendid," she replied and turned her head.

"Feeling good about it?"

"Who wouldn't be?"

"Thought you took it quiet."

"I'm sorry."

"Maybe you had some hopes along this street?"

"I guessed there was something doing," she answered in an echo of his tone.

"It's all fixed then."

"I suppose so."

"Say I don't want you to think I'm only doing this out of expediency."

"You're not?"

"Not altogether."

"Better and better," said Auriole.

"I must scrape half an hour for lunch one of these days and we'll talk over settlements."

"That will be—jolly."

"I'll get right upstairs now."

"Goodbye."

He made no effort to take her hand or to kiss her and she offered no encouragement. At the room door he turned.

"Paris for the honeymoon?" he asked.

"Wherever you like."

He looked at her critically and she met his eyes without flinching.

"And you feel kind of strong—soft spots eradicated?"

"Naturally."

"I'm a hell of a tonic," said Ezra P. Hipps and closed the door behind him.

Auriole stood where he had left her. Presently she raised her hands and they were clenched so tightly that the knuckles were white as ivory.

"How utterly, utterly awful," she said to herself. "How unspeakable."

She picked up her bag and the other odds and ends a woman will carry and passed out of the house with flaming cheeks.

The chauffeur of the little two seater car that stood by the gates asked where he should drive.

"I don't care," she replied. "Anywhere you like. Get on a hill—some place where I can breathe."

The little Wolseley Ten wound through the green lanes and presently mounted a pine fringed slope. Away to the west hung the smoke of London with the pleasant countryside in between.

Auriole touched the chauffeur on the arm and he stopped. Alighting from the car she scrambled over uneven ground and presently threw herself down under the shade of a tree. Somewhere overhead a lark was singing and the air vibrated to the drone of summer insects. The day was blue, peaceful, sweet. A thin breeze rustled the foliage, and golden sun spots dappled the brown carpet of pine needles upon which she lay. A single cloud travelled in the sky and its shadow fell across the house and grounds in which Richard Frencham Altar was imprisoned. Auriole clenched her hands tightly and bit her lip. Somewhere behind those shuttered windows on the second floor the inquisition was going forward. Three men to one. The relentless interrogation. The same question repeated in a hundred ways and the same unshakable refusal to give an answer. It was fitting indeed that nature should cast a shadow over such doings.

"And I'm part of it," said Auriole.

Her thoughts flew back to her first meeting with Barraclough during the war. She was nursing then at a hospital in Eastbourne. He had had a bullet through the foot and was sent to the sea to recuperate. Strange how instantly they had liked each other. His good nature, pluck, generosity, were splendid assets in a friendship which went floundering loveward after the fashion of those crazy days. There was the fortnight they spent together in Town—perfectly respectable if a little unorthodox. He had money to burn and she helped him burn it. He had never asked more of her than companionship. Of course they kissed each other—everyone did during the war—that was understood; and he bought her presents too—ripping presents—and took her everywhere—theatres, undreamed-of restaurants, dances. A glorious time they had. He had denied her nothing except the offer of his name. After all there was no particular reason why he should have asked her to marry him—theirs was a mere partnership of gaiety added to which she knew well enough that it would not have been practicable. They were of a different mould. His blood was of the Counties and hers—Lord knows where she came from—"the people" is the best covering phrase to employ. She had been a mannequin in a Bond Street shop before the war. But was it fair—was it just to engender a love of luxury—to introduce her to all that her nature—vulgarised by unfamiliarity—coveted most! If he had proposed likely enough she would have been generous and refused him. But he didn't propose—he took it for granted that they were no more to each other than the moment dictated. There was a kind of long headed caution in his diffidence with regard to the future. He was exigent too in his demands and would not tolerate her being pleasant to anyone else. It was her nature to be pleasant to all men and restraints were odious and insulting. That was how the row came about. It took place on the night before his return to Prance. It was her fault no doubt because really he had been a ripping friend and loyal and trustworthy but the little climber felt that for once she had failed to climb. She was left, so to speak, in mid air, inoculated with the germs of all manner of new ambitions no longer realisable. Wherefore she forgot her affection for him and forgot all the lessons of politeness so studiously acquired in the years of climbing and let him have her opinions hot and strong as a simple uncultivated child of the people. The expression on Anthony Barraclough's face read plainly enough relief at his escape. He packed his valise and departed wondering greatly at the intricacy and unreasonableness of women. It did not occur to him that he was greatly to blame for having given her such a good time. Such a consideration was as remote as the thought of congratulating himself on his generosity. He was only awfully sorry she should have turned out as she did and rather perplexed at the apparent want of reason. And Auriole with the disposition to like him better than any man of her acquaintance suffered an entire reversal of feeling and went headlong to the other extreme in a spirit of unbecoming revengefulness.

And in the valley below, under the shadow of a cloud, this man was being tortured.

"I never meant that," Auriole cried. "I never meant that—did I—did I? I just wanted to pay him back. I just wanted——" She bit her lower lip and choked. "What a fool I am," she gasped. "Haven't I won a millionaire out of it? What's it matter if he does suffer a bit—he wouldn't be the only one. A millionaire," she repeated, "a millionaire—the wife of a railroad king. That's worth something surely."

A couple of unruly tears trickled out of her eyes and fell on her lap. It is really too absurd that even the thought of a million pounds cannot prevent a girl from crying.

CHAPTER 18.

HOLDING OUT.

Richard Frencham Altar had a sense of humour but never before in his hitherto easy going life had he so earnestly needed it. A sense of humour in a queer abstract way provides a quality of companionship —it gives a man the power to be a pal to himself—to talk to himself aloud—to laugh at adversity—to spot the comic side in the most pathetic predicament. Each day provided something new in the matter of discomfort or alarm. The calls he was obliged to make upon his resources of humour were therefore severe and exacting. Over and over again he had need to remind himself that there was something classically funny in three financial giants demanding from him information of which he was entirely ignorant and, technically speaking, putting him on the rack in order to obtain it. The fun was grim but it existed. No one ever thought of mentioning what it was they wanted to find out—doubtless assuming that to do so was waste of time. For his own satisfaction Richard would dearly have loved to ask point blank what it was all about, but to indulge curiosity to that extent would be to imperil the safety of the cause he represented.

To keep a record of days he made a scratch on the wall paper each morning with his finger nail. There were seventeen scratches in all and he was as proud of them as an old campaigner of his medals for they stood for seventeen successful engagements. Whoever it was had charge of arranging his persecution lacked nothing in the way of imagination. Methods of destroying his repose and a course of rigorous fasting were prominent features but these were varied with details of a terrifying and sometimes abominable kind. On one occasion thirty or forty rats were introduced into his apartment where they fought and squeaked and scurried all night long. But Richard's experiences in France had robbed him of any particular fear of rats. If anything he welcomed their appearance and devoted the short periods when the light was on to shooting at them with a catapult fashioned from the elastic of a sock suspender and a piece of angle iron detached from the underside of a broken armchair. For ammunition he used a few bits of anthracite coal which he found in the sitting room grate. Altogether he accounted for seventeen before the servants arrived and deprived him of his weapon. The remainder of the rats were corralled and carried away rejoicing. This little entertainment took place during the first week of his imprisonment and served the unhappy purpose of convincing his captors that Richard's nerves were not susceptible to frivolous attacks. Thereafter they concentrated on sterner measures. Food was reduced to a minimum and frequently doped with chemicals that caused him acute internal suffering. When the pain was at its height either Van Diest, Laurence or Hipps would pay him a visit and over and over again the question would be asked.

Times out of number sheer desperation and want of sleep almost induced him to give away the secret but something inside his nature—some fourth dimensional endurance over which he appeared to have the most astounding control—checked the impulse. Often he wondered at himself and questioned how he contrived to face the pressure put upon him, but the only motive he could trace beyond the stalwart desire of every decent man to take his gruel without squealing was an ambition to be able to meet Auriole Craven's eyes squarely when she came to see him and say "I'm afraid your friends haven't got my strength just yet." She would shake her head at that and reply cynically—"It's only a matter of time, Anthony." But at the back of her eyes was a light that seemed to read "Well done you."

He was in a sad enough plight on the morning of the seventeenth day when the door opened and Van Diest followed by Laurence entered the room.

Van Diest was chanting a German hymn, a habit greatly affected by him in moments of perplexity. With thumbs tucked in his waistcoat and fingers drumming upon the resonant rotundity of his waist line he marched slowly up and down moaning the guttural words in a melancholy and tuneless voice. Richard had learned to hate that song as cordially as its performer.

"Take it down another street," he implored.

Van Diest stopped singing long enough to shake his head and Laurence who had seated himself with crossed legs on one of the hard upright chairs said "Barraclough" with a note of pseudo-friendly warning.

"Why not have a shot at 'Avalon,'" Richard suggested sleepily. "Suit you, that would, and make a nice change for me." His throat was burning and talking was painful.

"Hm! A change," said Van Diest. "I wass thinking you would want a change very soon. It is tired you look this morning."

"That's queer, for I had a splendid night." Richard's hollow, dark rimmed eyes gave a lie to his words.

"Hm! Laurence, they use the siren—yes?"

Laurence nodded.

"Had it going every ten minutes. Didn't give him much of a chance last night."

"So! But to these young boys sleep comes very easily—I think—think it wass a goot idea to take away his bed—yes."

Richard rolled his eyes threateningly toward the speaker and checked a sudden torrent of abuse that sprang to his lips.

"It iss bad for these boys to have too much comforts—s'very bad; with the sleep fogged brain a man loses so much the intelligence. You will arrange—yes?"

"Of course I will if he insists," said Laurence.

"Oh, you swine," said Richard staggering to his feet. "You rotten blasted swine. Aren't you satisfied with what you've done—isn't it enough that you make the nights into a hell for me—a screaming hell. Sleep? How can I sleep? How can I sleep when——"

A violent, paroxysm of coughing seized and shook him this way and that.

"Tut, tut, tut! You haf a very bad cold there," said Tan Diest sweetly. "You must eat one of these lozenges."

Richard struck the box out of the hand that proffered it and fell heaped up into a chair beside the table.

"No pleasure to us you stay awake, eh, Laurence, eh?"

"'Course not. Now don't look at me like that, old fellar, I was thundering decent to you when first you arrived. Barring smoke, literature and alcohol it was a home from home. It's your own pigeon things have got a bit tight. Doesn't pay striking out against the odds."

"You little rat," said Richard turning a bit in his chair. "I'd like——" and he closed his fist.

"Silly talk, old chap, waste of time."

"I could waste a lot of time that way."

Laurence humped his shoulders.

"What are you to do with a fellar like this?"

Van Diest drew up a chair and smiled over the rims of his glasses.

"Of course we let you go to sleep if you waas sensible. Consider now the small shareholders that look to us for their little incomes. All these widows from the war. You speak and you wass a rich man all at once. Very soon forget the discomforts of these three weeks. S'no goot—no goot to make a fuss."

"I have nothing to say."

"Ach!" said Van Diest and rose. "I'm afraid, Laurence, we must take away this bed."

But Richard raised no further protest and somewhere below stairs a gong rumbled for lunch. It was part of the programme to emphasise the arrival of meals and in spite of himself he could not resist starting hungrily. Such signs and tokens were watched for. Laurence laid a hand on his shoulder and

whispered:

"There's a fourth place laid, old friend."

"Why not join us to the lunch," said Van Diest coaxingly, "just a word spoken and—oh, it's goot the lunch."

"Thanks, but I'm rather particular who I sit with," said Richard and moved unsteadily toward the fireplace.

"It's rather a special menu," Laurence remarked. "There's a lobster Americaine—that was in Hipps' honour. But perhaps you don't care for shellfish, Barraclough."

"No, no, thank you. Prefer a Spartan diet. Glass of water and a piece of bread."

"Bread? Yes. I hope the baker remembered to call. Be awkward if——
Well, come along, Chief, no good letting things get cold."

They passed out of the room and the bolt slammed home.

With a crazy impulse Richard staggered across the floor, seized the door handle and shook it violently. One of those violent paroxysms of hunger suddenly possessed him which while they endure are acute agony. The longing for food gripped at his vitals like an eagle's claw and drove reasoned action from his head. He knew well enough that there was no escape to be made through the shuttered windows but ignoring the knowledge he leapt toward them and seized the iron cross-bar. As he lifted it from its slot the alarm bell above the frame rang out a fiery summons.

He fell back a pace beating the air impotently and whining. The door opened and Blayney and Parker, the two men servants, entered. Parker placed a tray on the table, then returned to stand in the open doorway. Blayney, ignoring Richard's presence, replaced the shutter bar in its old position and the bell stopped ringing. Then he turned and said:

"I shouldn't advise you, to try the window, sir. There's a strong electric current passes through the catch."

"Thank you," said Richard and slouched despondently toward the table where his glance fell upon the tray. Whatever victuals had been provided were concealed beneath a small silver cover but there was a napkin, a knife and fork and a cruet. On the whole it looked rather promising. Then suddenly he noticed that the glass beside the plate contained barely an inch of water.

"I say," he exclaimed, "look! Can't I have a jog of water? There isn't——"

"Not today, sir," said Blayney.

The very courtesy of the man was an incentive to fury.

"Yes, but——"

"Not today, sir."

Parker in the doorway grinned.

"Don't smirk at me, blast you," said Richard.

Blayney nodded toward the bedroom and changed places with his companion. When Parker came out he was carrying a great pile of bedclothes.

"Here, what are you doing? Put 'em down. D'you hear me?"

"My orders were to take them away, sir."

As Laurence had said it was useless to fight against present odds.
Richard shut his teeth tight.

"Obey your orders," he said, but as the door was closing the craving for drink mastered his pride. "For God's sake," he cried, "for God's sake give me some more water. I'll give you twenty for a jug of water—honest I will—twenty——"

Blayney laid a finger to his lips and went out. The gesture might have meant anything. With trembling hand Richard seized the glass of water and drained it at a gulp. There was miserably little—it barely cooled the heat of his throat. Whimpering he set the glass down and lifted the cover from the plate.

Underneath was a cube of bread the size of a lump of sugar. With a savage cry he picked it up and flung it across the room but a moment later was on all fours gathering up the broken bits and pieces and eating them wolfishly.

Blayney found him searching pathetically for the last crumb when he came stealthily into the room and put a tin mug on the table.

"I'll collect that twenty later," he said and vanished.

Almost like a miser Richard took the mug in his hands and purred over it possessively. With a sigh of absolute content he raised it to his lips. Then a scream broke from him—harsh, strident, savage. There were no soft spots in the walls of Hugo Van Diest's fortress. The water was salt.

CHAPTER 19.

AT THE CHESTNUTS.

Mrs. Barraclough was one of those old ladies who are constantly being surprised. She courted surprise. She never forestalled a climax and of the hundreds of sensational novels which she so greedily devoured never once was she guilty of taking a premature peep at the last chapter to ensure herself that right would triumph. "I shall find out all about it in good time" was the motto she affected. This being so she made no effort to secure Isabel's confidence but simply waited for Isabel to speak. The same reticence possessed her in the matter of the four mysterious serving girls. She hadn't the smallest idea why Anthony had suddenly transformed himself into a domestic agency although, at the back of her head, she guessed at a deep underlying motive. It gratified her beyond measure to be surrounded by unfathomed waters and frequently as a corollary to her prayers she would thank God for the little excitements and mysteries He sent to flavour her declining years.

After the uncontrollable rush of tears on her arrival Isabel pulled herself together and made a show of gaiety and preserved it nobly for nearly three weeks. Anthony had gone and gloomy forebodings were of no service. Accordingly she helped Mrs. Barraclough in the garden and made the very best friends of the four girls. Perhaps she was the least bit resentful on finding out that they knew almost as much of Anthony's plans as she herself.

"But did he tell you?" she asked in surprise.

"It's like this," said Flora who generally spoke for the company. "Jane and myself were with him in the Secret Service during the last year of the war."

"He got us the job," Jane interpolated. She was a big, bonny girl with broad shoulders, steady blue eyes and a complexion that would have advertised any health resort. "Cook kicks herself that she wasn't in that show."

It was at this point Mrs. Barraclough came into the room.

"Kicks herself! What a very unbecoming expression, Jane."

"Sorry, madam," said Jane and she and Flora sniggered uncontrollably.

"You girls perplex me greatly," said Mrs. Barraclough. "You do not laugh in the least like ordinary servants."

"How do ordinary servants laugh?" Jane asked.

"Generally speaking, in a high note that echoes distressingly throughout the house, whereas you laugh like young ladies."

"Oh, you old darling," exclaimed Flora with sudden impulsiveness. "I suppose if a decent education and upbringing counts for anything that's just what we are."

Mrs. Barraclough sat down rather abruptly on a small upright sofa in the centre of the room.

"Then for goodness sake tell me what you are doing in my kitchen."

There was no escaping the explanation especially when Isabel contributed:

"Come on, Flora, out with it."

"It's this way, madam. Lots of us went broke after the war—lots of us who'd only fifty quid a year to live on."

"Quid?" said Mrs. Barraclough. "Isn't that something to do with sailors and tobacco?"

"Pounds, then. We ran across Mr. Anthony out in France."

"Picked him out of a ditch near Arras with a bullet through his foot,"
Jane contributed.

"And after that got most awfully friendly and kept knocking up against each other."

Mrs. Barraclough shook her head.

"It must have been very painful for him with a bullet through his foot."

"When he heard we'd gone broke he said—just like him—'my mother's a sport, go and look after her.'"

"So I'm a sport," said Mrs. Barraclough with a smile. "But even so, why should I want looking after?"

"That's what puzzles me," said Isabel.

Jane and Flora exchanged glances.

"I don't know whether we ought to," said Jane.

"He's my fiancé," said Isabel, "and you're jolly well not going to keep me in the dark."

"And quite incidentally," Mrs. Barraclough remarked, "he's my son."

"Oh, very well," said Flora. "It seems he was all over some great big, get rich quick scheme—and there was a chance anyone connected with him might be got at."

"Got at!" Mrs. Barraclough's dark eyes opened a little wider.

"Um! A tough crowd was up against him you see."

"I see." The old lady nodded gravely but there was a sparkle of excitement in her expression. "So you and Jane and Cynthia and Agnes are here to protect me against the assaults of—of a 'tough crowd.'"

"We're here if we're wanted," said Jane robustly.

"And somehow," said Flora, "I think we shall be wanted."

Mrs. Barraclough's hands went out and she drew the two girls a little closer.

"My dears," she said, "I don't know why but lately I've had a pringly sort of feeling—as if something were going to happen. It's a sense of adventure perhaps. I used to be a very wild girl myself."

"But you mustn't worry," said Isabel. "It's sure to turn out all right, you know."

"I'm not worrying. I'm only hoping that if anything does happen I shall be in it."

"But look here," exclaimed Flora, "that's the very thing he wants to prevent."

"Yes, yes, but I know my Anthony, bless him. It would be so beautiful to help him again after all these years." She smiled retrospectively. "When he was a little boy he was always coming into conflict with his father. Poor Mr. Barraclough, he was a very austere man and Anthony's scrapes inspired from him the severest judgments. Tony had a little signal—he was much too proud to speak—he used to take out his pocket handkerchief and quite carelessly tie a knot in the centre. Whenever he did that I used to come to his aid. Dear Tony, I was always the one to rescue him from difficulty."

"He gets his pluck from you," said Flora.

"His father was a brave man too, until he had a little misfortune with a mule which rather upset his balance."

"Generally does," Isabel laughed.

"Mental balance," Mrs. Barraclough corrected. "For the last few years of his life he thought he was Archbishop of Canterbury and if dead people think I'm sure he believes he is buried in Westminster Abbey. There, run along, my dears, and leave me to collect my thoughts."

But she kissed Flora and Jane before letting them go. Isabel stayed in the room.

"So my boy is in danger," said Mrs. Barraclough with the least touch of tragedy in her voice. Isabel came forward and put an arm around her neck. "You knew, my dear?"

Isabel nodded.

"They oughtn't to have told you."

Mrs. Barraclough snorted defiantly.

"Stuff and nonsense. Think I hadn't guessed? After all, a proper man ought to be in danger. Besides," she added, "he's a good enough reason, hasn't he?"

"What reason?"

"Doesn't he want to marry you?"

"I know," said Isabel forlornly, "but that would have happened in any case."

"Don't you be too sure, my dear. Now I'm going to let you into my confidence—mind I'm only putting two and two together but I'm pretty sure I've got the total right. Did you know that Tony had put every penny he possessed into this enterprise?"

Isabel started.

"No. What makes you believe that?"

"Because all I've got is in it too, and he would never ask of me what he feared to do himself."

"Then you know all about it?"

"Hardly anything."

"But he oughtn't——"

"I think the risks and dangers came afterward."

"Even so," said Isabel, "it's just for money. That's what I hate so."

"Isn't it just for you," said Mrs. Barraclough gently. "Just because if he failed he wouldn't be able to make you his wife."

"He never told me."

"Of course he didn't. How could he?"

"Are you sure of all this?"

"Practically certain. You see his Uncle Arthur is executor of Tony's affairs. Executors are not supposed to speak but Uncle Arthur was an exception who proves the rule."

"For me," said Isabel slowly. "For our marriage—for us. Oh, I'm so glad it wasn't for cash." A cloud came over her brow. "But it makes it frightfully difficult for me supposing I had to——"

"What?"

"I mustn't say—even to you."

Mrs. Barraclough didn't press for an answer. She was pleased there was a little bit of mystery left over.

Isabel kissed the old lady very tenderly and walked out into the rose garden by herself. There was a glow on her cheeks almost as pink as the roses themselves. It was a sweet relief that Anthony had gone into these dangers more for her sake than any other reason and that their happiness and future rested on his success. In her twenty-one years of life she had come too much into contact with men whose ruling passion was the dollar to the exclusion of all else. At the back of her head the fear had haunted her that Anthony had been bitten by the money bug—the hateful contagion that straightened and

thinned the lips, chilled the emotions and case-hardened the kindliest natures. But now that fear was gone to be replaced with glad assurance.

On a semi-circular stone bench that backed the roadside hedge Isabel sat and hugged her knees and here a few moments later she was joined by Flora.

"He's a topper, your man," said Flora. "A downright first rater."

Isabel grinned an acknowledgment.

"Did he have any trouble in getting away?"

"Awful, I believe, but—but they had a plan which he said would make it easy."

On the road side of the hedge, barely three feet away, a clergyman, who apparently was seeking protection from the sun, moved sharply and cocked a listening ear.

"What plan?"

"He didn't tell me that and anyhow I shouldn't be allowed to repeat it."

The listening clergyman looked disappointed.

"Do you know what he was going after?"

"Yes, I know."

"Wouldn't care to tell anyone, I s'pose. I'm as safe as a house."

"I'm certain you are, only——"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter so long as he got away all right. He did get away all right, didn't he?"

"Yes, I—I think so—he must have or his servant, Doran, would have told me."

Harrison Smith, on the far side of the hedge, pushed back his clerical hat and frowned deeply.

"And you had no message?"

Isabel shook her head.

"None. So I just tell myself everything is all right."

"Oh, I'm sure it is—certain," said Flora ecstatically. "It's bound to be. Mr. Anthony'd never let himself be beaten by any crowd." She paused. "If only one could be in it—but nothing ever happens down here. Are you staying much longer?"

"Going back tomorrow or the next day. I must be in Town on the night of the 18th."

"That the day he's expected?"

"Yes, at eleven o'clock."

"Wish I could be there to give him a cheer when he comes in."

Isabel slipped an arm through Flora's.

"It's great of you to be so keen," she said.

"Think so," Flora replied. "Jolly sporting of you not to mind. We've got a bit of a 'pash' on Mr. Anthony, you know."

"I thought you had," said Isabel sympathetically.

"Kind of hero worship it is. Nothing to bother about 'cos as matter of fact we're all engaged—'cept Cook who hates men. But even Cook can't help admiring him. Be a sport and let us know if he gets through all right. You could 'phone."

"I will."

"Any notion which port he'll arrive at?"

"Couldn't say. I've a sort of idea that it might be one of the little

Cornish fishing villages."

"What makes you think so?"

"No particular reason only——"

"Yes, go on—be a pal."

"You won't repeat it?"

"No fear."

"There was a West Country guide book on his table one day and I happened to glance at it."

"Um."

"Ever heard of Polperro?"

"Yes."

"On one of the maps Polperro had a pencil line ringed round it and a couple of very small dots marked in certain places."

"That might have been years old."

"It wasn't. I had lent him a blue pencil a few days before—rather a funny colour it was. He'd used that pencil."

"You're a bit of a Sherlock."

"I oughtn't to have said anything about it."

"It's safe enough with me," said Flora. "You can bet your boots I shan't blab."

A silvery toned bell sounded from the house.

"There's tea," said Isabel.

The two girls rose and moved away arm in arm.

Mr. Harrison Smith pulled out his watch and looked at the dial.

"With luck I can catch it," said he.

And through the drawing room window Mrs. Barraclough saw the unusual spectacle of a clergyman running like fury in the direction of the railway station. As she remarked a few moments later:

"This is indeed an age of speed. Even the delivery of the Gospel is conducted by express service."

CHAPTER 20.

A LITTLE HOUSEBREAKING.

The train which conveyed Mr. Harrison Smith back to London stopped at every intermediate station and did not arrive until after ten o'clock. He, therefore, was given leisure for thought and the result of his thinking was to bring him perilously near the truth.

He began with the premise that somehow Anthony Barraclough had succeeded in making good his escape—that he was even now obtaining the concession—that he would return to London on the night of the 18th instant at eleven o'clock in all probability carrying the document upon his person. All this was plain sailing but against it was the established fact that Anthony Barraclough was imprisoned in Laurence's house. If this were indeed the case further investigation was useless. But was it the case?

The girl Isabel Irish had said there was a plan to make his exit from London easy but no evidence had been given to suggest that this plan, whatever it was, had been put into operation. Torrington's syndicate was not composed of fools and yet the kidnapping of Barraclough had been mere child's play

without a speck of opposition. His own side had been guilty of an act of crass stupidity in failing to carry off the servant Doran as well as his master. It was one of those tragic oversights which occur in the most carefully laid plans. Unquestionably Doran would have told his employers what happened on the night of the 27th and they could hardly have failed to guess the truth. And yet, as private information assured him, not the smallest effort had been made to rescue the man in whose brain was a secret worth millions. And quite suddenly the truth, or a guess at the truth, dawned upon him. Torrington's crowd must have been aware of the intention to kidnap Barraclough and for a reason known only to themselves had deliberately allowed it to take place. Why? Had another man been sent in Barraclough's place? He dismissed that theory without dissection. The shape of Barraclough's jaw and the line of his mouth belonged to the type that does not unduly trust his fellow men. Why? Was another man occupying Barraclough's place—deputising for him in his absence?

Harrison Smith struck one hand against the other. "By God," he exclaimed. "It's the most unlikely thing in the world but I'm going to believe it. I'm going to believe that the chap with the humorous lines round his eyes is no more Barraclough than I am."

He alighted at Waterloo Station aglow with excitement. His first thought was to proceed post haste to Laurence's house and lay before them the result of his deductions, but a second and more personal consideration dissuaded him. There had been little enough encouragement when last he interfered. He had been rudely ordered to leave things alone. No, he would work out this deal himself and if anything came of it approach Van Diest and Hipps for a lion's share of the plunder. Weeks ago it had been arranged; if by any means Barraclough succeeded in slipping through the outposts and obtaining the concession, he was to be quietly thugged on his return and the paper destroyed. As Ezra Hipps had said, "If we fail to get it for ourselves it's damn sure no one else is going to profit." Wherefore all he had to do was to intercept the returning treasure seeker, put him securely away and then talk business to his own employers.

Harrison Smith hailed a taxi and told the driver to go down the Commercial Road as far as the Poplar Town Hall. This was not a job that could be tackled single handed—on the other hand it would be unwise to admit more people to his confidence than were absolutely necessary. He dismissed the taxi and proceeded on foot down one of the narrow crooked byways abounding in that region. The place was quiet and deserted save for a few Orientals—Lascars and Chinamen—who leaned against the walls of their dwellings in silent contemplation of the stars.

At the side door of a small and disreputable public house he paused and knocked thrice with the handle of his cane and presently the door was opened by a girl. She was a Jewess and lovely to look at, with the fresh, shameless beauty peculiar to very young girls of that faith. Recognising Harrison Smith she smiled a welcome and said:

"You're in luck—he's sober! Upstairs, in the front room."

She smiled again, revealing a perfect row of little white teeth which mocked the string of cheap pearls at her throat. As he climbed the stairs Harrison Smith speculated on the odd contrast this girl presented to her surroundings. The silk of her stockings, the bangles and gewgaws, the ultra patent leather of her shoes, bore so little relation to the squalor of the narrow passage with its damp stained walls, carpetless floor and hissing gas jet. Probably nowhere in the world do greater incongruities exist than in the East End of London.

Mr. Alfred Bolt, minus coat, collar, tie and shoes, was seated in an arm chair, his feet reposing upon the mantel-piece. At his elbow was a glass of whiskey and water with a slice of lemon floating on the surface. His waistcoat was undone and the white of his shirt emphasised the enormous girth of his corporation. His legs were short, his hands fat, his face round and margined with a half circle of hair beneath the chin. At the first glance you would have taken him for the model from which Will Owen must have illustrated the stories of W. W. Jacobs. One would have expected him to remind the passer-by that it was "a nice day for a sail" or alternatively to demand "Any more for the Skylark?" But a closer inspection would have shaken the foundation of so simple a belief for Mr. Alfred Bolt's eyes were not of the honest kind worn by men who go down to the sea in ships. They were close set, narrow lidded, cunning, piggy little eyes that caused unrest to look upon.

At the sight of Harrison Smith he removed his feet from the mantelpiece and extended an open armed welcome.

"Welcome and thrice welcome, my dear brother," he intoned in an admirable imitation of the accepted ecclesiastical method. "I rejoice indeed to observe that you are now in Holy Orders." Then with a drop into the vernacular. "Blind me, Smith, what the hell are you doing with your collar back to front?"

Harrison Smith gave a hurried explanation.

"But I thought that job was cleared up," said Bolt.

"Maybe it is, but there's a chance of a big coup that no one expected.
Now, if you care to take a hand."

Mr. Bolt fancied himself as a mimic, indeed he harboured the opinion that he was a peer even to the late Sir Henry Irving in the matter of "take offs." He could imitate a cat or a Chinaman, while his thumb nail impressions of sundry Hebraic neighbours were only rivalled by his flawless caricatures of natives of Germany or the New Hebrides. But best of all he loved to assume the inflexion, guise and bearing of a member of the clergy—a circumstance very possibly explained by the fact that his own private life was as far removed from the office of virtue as could be imagined.

"Be unafraid, my son," quoth he. "If your heart is full speak into my listening ear and may a blessing fall on your confession." Then fashioning a trumpet with his two hands he bellowed like a fog horn: "Becky! A drop of whiskey hot for the gent." And while the refreshment was being procured he observed parenthetically: "A nice little piece, ain't she? Very smart and dossy. Come on, Smith, my boy —my jolly old beau—dear old cracker, soak up the juice of the barley and expound the tale of woe."

Harrison Smith wasted no time in explaining the case while Bolt listened with great concentration, nodding approval at this point or that.

"Hm! Worth trying anyway," he agreed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take over my place at Clyst St. Mary. Can't explain why but I've a sort of notion things may happen there. It's a queer household—lot of smart girls looking after an old woman—Barraclough's mother."

"What's she like?"

"Never got near enough to find out. Decent enough old thing. Goes to church a lot."

"Shrewd?"

"Never struck me so at a distance. Might be anything—bit of a fool—mostly are—that old country sort."

Mr. Bolt mused.

"Goes to church, does she." His eyes travelled over Harrison Smith's black garments. "Why didn't you call?"

"Didn't strike me. Fancy she knows very little."

"'Curs to me," said Bolt, "I might do the clergyman stunt myself in those parts. I've got some stuff. A bit of the old Wesley—'Quiet harbourage from the turmoil of city life, my dear lady. An occasional hour in your beautiful garden.' That's the ticket."

"Then get off straight away. There's a train at five a.m. from Waterloo. You can have my room at the pub. I'll give you a note to the proprietor."

"And assuming I meet brother Barraclough?"

"Get him," responded Harrison Smith laconically. "Make as little fuss as possible but get him."

Mr. Bolt nodded and the piggy little eyes twinkled greedily.

"Trust me," he said. "Anything else you want?"

Harrison Smith thought for a moment.

"That chap Dirk," he said. "Could you find him for me?"

"Sure."

"Then tell him to meet me at Paddington tomorrow morning 9.50."

"Right."

"And you might lend me that bunch of spring-lock keys."

"Going to have a squint at that guide book?" queried Bolt shrewdly as he turned over the contents of

a table drawer in search of the keys.

"Going to have a try," came the answer.

Bolt rippled out a fat, greasy chuckle.

"Pleasure to work with you, Smith," said he. "Yes indeed. Though it's a bit risky putting one over on the Dutchman." He fell into a thick, guttural "S'bad—s'bad pizness. Dese servants wass ver' insubordinate. S'bad. Well, good luck, ole boy."

They shook hands cordially.

The Commercial Road was deserted when Harrison Smith came out of the narrow byway. The chance of finding a conveyance was small but his practical sense suggested turning into the West India Dock Road where, at the gates of the dock, he had the good fortune to secure a dilapidated four-wheeler. Progress was painfully slow and hours seemed to pass before they finally turned out of the broad cobbled highway and passed through the silent empty city. Two o'clock was striking when he dismissed the cab in Piccadilly. At his own rooms in Crown Court, St. James's, he changed into ordinary clothes and proceeded on foot to Albemarle Street. Before the entrance to Crest Chambers Harrison Smith stopped and broke into a torrent of imprecation. He had forgotten that the downstairs door would be shut. It was of heavy mahogany and secured by an ordinary variety of lock against which the bunch of keys in his pocket were of no service whatsoever. He was shaking his fist angrily when the sound of footsteps accompanied by a snatch of song attracted his attention. A young man in evening dress, wearing an opera hat at a raffish angle and carrying his hands in his trousers pockets turned out of the adjoining side street and approached the spot where he was standing. A single glance was enough to convince Harrison Smith that the young man was in a state of spiritual exaltation bordering on ecstasy. The words of a song he sang sounded unnaturally clear—like music from another planet.

"I'm one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit," he sang over and over again as though the words contained relish enough to justify any limit of repetition. Coming abreast of Harrison Smith he halted abruptly and, rocking on his heels, broke into a cherubic smile.

"Goo' man," he said. "Les-see, it's ol' Petersh, ishn't it?"

"That's it," said Harrison Smith, "old Peters."

With startling suddenness the young man produced a latch key and thrust it into Harrison Smith's palm.

"Ope' th' door, ol' top. Ope' door an' we'll have a quick lil' spot together."

Here was unlooked for good fortune of which Harrison Smith lost no time in availing himself. Lending a trifling support to his impromptu host they entered the building and ascended in the electric lift to the fourth floor. There was a brass plate on the front door which informed the curious that the owner of the flat was called Royston.

"Just a quick one," said Smith as they entered a comfortable sitting room adorned by photographs of lovely ladies. "I've had a trying day and want to turn in."

"T'hell with that," said Royston. "Wha's matter with seein' in the dawn?"

He produced a bottle of whiskey and two glasses—not without casualties among their fellows—set them on a coffin stool and fell into a deep arm chair.

"Help 'self and help me—'cos I'm ver' tired—ov' tired."

Harrison Smith embraced the opportunity of pouring out a perfect deadener for his host into which he discreetly added a pinch of cigar ash from a convenient stump (a concoction which in the absence of more potent drugs will produce very gratifying results).

While he was so employed Mr. Royston descanted freely on the subject of lovely women in the choice of which he declared himself to be an epicure.

"See that one—pho' frame—piano. Tho'bred—perfect tho'bred—a darling—love 'er—love 'em all."

"That's the talk," said Harrison Smith who was cursing the enforced delay. "Drink her health, old man, and no heel taps."

Mr. Royston rose nobly to the occasion and swallowed the contents of his glass at a single gulp.

"Blesh 'em!" he said. "Blesh 'em."

He seized the arm of his chair while the room spun round him in a dizzy whirl.

"Blast you, Petersh," he cried. "Thash pre-war whiskey. Sh-shot me clean through the brain pan. C-caught in the brewersh web."

He swayed a little and settled down on the floor by sections. Harrison Smith stooped and put a cushion beneath his head.

"All ri' soon—qui' all ri'. Fac' is I'm one of the ruins Crom'll knocked about a bit." The voice tailed away into a deep, slumberous groan.

A minute later Harrison Smith was at the door of Barraclough's flat on the landing below. The fourth key on the bunch turned the latch and silently as a cat he slipped into the hall. A quick observation of the chambers above had given him a fair idea of which room was which and he had no trouble in locating the study door in the dark. Before turning on a light he assured himself that the window curtains were drawn. He realised the need to be very silent in all his actions since Barraclough's servant was in all probability sleeping on the premises and ex-service men of the regular army have an awkward knack of sleeping lightly. He closed the door without even a click from the latch, then turned up a standard lamp that stood on the writing table. In the pen tray beneath the lamp was a blue pencil —a new one—since obviously it had never been sharpened and the chalk point was scarcely worn at all. The other end of the pencil had been deeply bitten in a dozen places, a circumstance which Harrison Smith noted with satisfaction. The other pencils and pens in the tray bore no teeth marks. It was reasonable, therefore, to surmise that its owner had been engaged in some knotty and puzzling problem at the time of use.

"I believe the girl was on the right track," he muttered to himself and turned his attention to the bookshelves. One of the cases was given over entirely to a collection of local guide books surprisingly complete in map and detail. There were four volumes dealing with Cornwall and it was only the matter of a moment to find the one to which Isabel had referred. Bringing it to the light Harrison Smith hastily turned over the pages until he came to the squared map that showed the village of Polperro. But here disappointment awaited him—for not a sign of the blue pencil mark showed upon the page. He was on the point of closing the book when he made a discovery.

The light striking across the paper revealed the fact that the surface in places bore a polished appearance. The reason was significant. Barraclough, leaving nothing to chance, had erased the pencil marks with indiarubber. If anything could emphasise the value of his discovery surely it was this and Harrison Smith fairly tingled with excitement. He picked up a magnifying glass and closely examined the erasement. There had been a line drawn round the village and on the outskirts, where three cottages clustered together, was the impression of a single dot. At roughly a mile inland from the village where a footpath converged with the road was another dot, seemingly situated in the middle of a clump of trees.

Harrison Smith was satisfied. He hastily dropped the book into his pocket, restored its fellows to their former position on the shelves and tiptoed across the room to extinguish the light. Thus far Fortune had favoured him, but she is a capricious lady wont to change her allegiance with startling suddenness. If there had been a length of yellow flex to the electric standard the accident would never have happened. It is simply asking for trouble to use red flex on a red carpet. Harrison Smith's foot tangled in the wire and down came the table lamp with a crash. Simultaneously there came a shout from another part of the flat. For a second Harrison Smith stood spellbound at the disaster he had caused—robbed of the power of action.

It was the sound of bare feet pattering on the parquet of the hall that restored his senses and as the door of the room flew open he stamped on the still burning electric bulb lying at his feet. The detonation as it flew into fragments came simultaneously with the sharp, stinging report of a small calibre pistol. The room was plunged into utter darkness in which could be heard the sound of two men breathing and the zinging of the mantelpiece brasses from the double explosion. Then silence—no movement—and the mind of Harrison Smith worked like a streak of lightning. His hand was on the back of a heavy arm chair and the touch of it suggested an idea.

He gave a thin, whispering sigh and cried out in a high pitched voice.

"My God! You've killed me!"

Then he tilted back the arm chair and allowed it to fall with a soft thud to the floor.

Another silence, then the sound of a man moving forward. Harrison Smith side stepped and, keeping

in touch with the wall, navigated through the darkness toward the door.

"Serve you damn well right," said Doran in a voice that was startlingly near.

Harrison Smith's luck had returned. He found the door and passed through it and down the hall as quietly as a draught. He heard a click as Doran switched up the lights, followed by an oath. Then he streaked down the main stairway with a flight and a half start. A second was lost at the hall door fumbling for the latch and in that second Doran fired again but missed. As Harrison Smith shot out into Albemarle Street he collided heavily with a constable, attracted to the scene by the noise of the shots, but him he overturned to such good effect that he was crossing Piccadilly before the blast of the inevitable whistle screeched through the night. There was no further opposition to his progress and in St. James's Street he fell into a walk and finally entered his own apartment unobserved.

A little breathless but entirely satisfied he flung himself on the bed for a couple of hours' sleep.

CHAPTER 21.

THE CORNISH RIVIERA.

In the summer time all the best people, and many who fall short of perfection, go westward to the Cornish Riviera. It is the thing to do. The taxi, the station 'bus, the private automobile, and even the almost extinct four-wheeler, high laden with luggage, by common consent roll down the slope into Paddington and deliver up their cargoes. Long are the queues at the booking offices, thronged the platforms, and loud the voices of those who command. Each little party of voyagers would seem to have its own alarums as an inevitable adjunct to excursion. The genius for organising is manifest on all sides with resultant chaos. Orders and injunctions are flung broadcast—misinterpreted and sometimes abused. The germ of panic infects the multitude.

There was nothing Freddie Dirk liked better than a holiday crowd. They inspired in him a sense of profound gratitude. Their generosity was boundless. To a gentleman of his skill in the matter of property exchange they represented a fortune. Whatsoever the imagination might picture and the heart of man covet could be had at the mere turn of a hand.

His appointment with Harrison Smith was for 9.50, but Freddie Dirk arrived half an hour ahead of time and this grace he put to excellent account. He had learnt from Bolt that Cornwall was their destination, wherefore his first care was to procure two first-class tickets for Plymouth from the cuff of a gentleman's raincoat—a feat in strict accordance with the laws of economy. The high cost of living had of late reduced his supply of ready cash, on which account he could hardly be blamed for taking possession of a wad of notes carelessly entrusted to a side pocket by another passenger who was seeking to economise by carrying his own bag. Being an essentially practical man Freddie Dirk resisted the temptation to acquire a suitcase in crocodile by Pound. Reticence in the matter did him credit and he rewarded himself with a single stone diamond scarf pin that greatly enhanced the appearance of his own cravat. He was debating with himself the question of a string of pearls of no very great value when Harrison Smith's hand fell upon his shoulder.

"That's a blame silly thing to do," said Dirk when he had recovered from his initial surprise. "Blame silly. Might 'ave a bit more respec' for a man's nerves."

Harrison Smith cursed him fluently as he led the way to a Ford car standing in the yard.

"Lot of use to me you'd have been if the splits had got you. It's a big job we're tackling and I don't want it spoilt by dam-fool sneak thief tricks."

Freddie Dirk apologised and explained his distaste for idleness.

"Ain't we going by train—'cos I got the tickets."

"No."

"Well, 'ang on a minute while I gets the money back."

But even this business coup was denied and with a sense of opportunity lost he entered the car.

There was nothing prepossessing in Freddie Dirk's appearance. He was of the low brow, heavy jaw, bruiser type. The term a "tough" fits him closely. He had a punch like a kick from a dray horse but when called upon to use his hands he preferred to rely upon his mascot to ensure success. Freddie's mascot was a few lengths of whalebone bound with twine and socketed into a pear-shaped lump of lead. Scientifically wielded it would go through the helmet of a City policeman like a hot knife through butter. He had a healthy dislike for firearms which was perhaps the primary cause of his failure to serve King and Country in the late war. His skill as a draft dodger had earned him a great reputation among many of his fellows equally diffident in their will to serve.

"I've got you into this," said Harrison Smith as they chugged up the station incline, "because I want a man who'll stick at nothing."

Dirk nodded.

"There's a chance we may have to——"

"That's orl rite—least said soonest mended."

"Barraclough is a bit of a bear cat and if he's got the concession on him you can lay odds he'll fight."

"If he's got the blinking thing don't see 'ow we're going to make much aht of it."

"Wouldn't his own side pay a goodish cheque? And wouldn't old Van cash in to have it destroyed."

Dirk grinned very prettily revealing his broken front teeth in all the glory of the morning sun.

"I get you. A private deal, like, favouring whichever market pays best."

"That's the idea. There's a fortune in it if we get him tucked away in some quiet place."

"It's a treat to work with you," said Dirk enthusiastically. "I'll lay a quart there ain't a finer 'ead piece than yours from 'Oxton to 'Ammersmith."

"Thank you," said Harrison Smith. "Try and remember that and obey orders quick as you get 'em."

"That's rite, captain, that's the talk. Give me a man wot talks strite."

A Ford is a marvellous eater up of miles and Harrison Smith did not spare his engine nor linger upon the way. Evening was falling when at last they descended the hill into the little fishing village of Polperro. They ran into the inn yard and tried to bespeak a lodging for the night but in this they were unlucky for there was no accommodation to be had. The best obtainable was a shake down in the stable loft, granted on a promise to refrain from smoking. Having refilled the petrol tank and assured themselves that the Ford was in sound running order against the morrow's needs they entered the inn.

"We'll get a snack now," said Harrison Smith, "and after that take a look round and make a few enquiries."

The schooners of ale provided by mine host to wash down the simple country fare were entirely agreeable to Freddie Dirk's parched palate. It had been a long day and, as he pointed out, refreshment had been all too scarce. Harrison Smith might be, and undoubtedly was, an excellent fellow but he did not understand the urgent need for beer without which no good man was at his best. It was all very well going out and asking questions and poking one's nose into this, that and the other but far greater advantage was to be won by poking one's nose into deep foaming tankards of beer. Closing hour came all too soon and it would be time enough to seek fresh diversion after that unhappy event.

Wishing to remain in the good graces of his companion Harrison Smith shrugged his shoulders and sallied forth alone in the direction of the quay. The tide was out and from the mud and sand came the pungent ozonous smell of rotting sea vegetation. Dazzling white gulls wheeled and hovered in the air or noisily disputed the possession of fragments of fish and the offal of the market. In the pool a dozen trawlers, green striped and numbered, with furled brown sails and slackened rigging rode sweetly at anchor. A knot of seamen leaned against the outer stone wall of the pier smoking pipes and gazing idly across the opal coloured sea. A couple of artists were wrestling valiantly with the thousand subtle difficulties of the scene—trying to transmit to canvas the changing lights upon the water, the pink blush on the white-washed houses and the dull grey shadows on the mud. It was a scene calm and sweet enough to awaken gentleness and set romance astir but in Harrison Smith's mind it inspired no more than a sense of doubt and disappointment. Surely this tiny harbour was an unlikely landing for a man to choose who carried in his pocket the key to millions. No decent sized vessel would ever put into such a port. The place was asleep—dead almost.

A blasting conviction that the marks in the guide book had no connection whatever with the business in hand came over him. Barraclough might have put them there expressly to deceive the girl. He was subtle enough to employ such a device. What if after all the others were right and it was indeed Barraclough they had kidnapped? A pretty fool he would look then.

Shaking himself out of these melancholy forebodings Harrison Smith approached an old seaman with the offer of a "good evening" and a fill of tobacco.

"Pretty quiet hereabouts," he remarked.

The old man nodded.

"Still I dare say you get steamers and such like popping in every day to liven things up."

"Bearn't draught enuff for steamers. They doan't bother us much, steamers doan't."

The reply was not encouraging.

"I see the fishing fleet is at anchor. Weather too calm?"

"Couldn't say thaat."

"Going out tonight?"

"Med-do."

"And how do you get rid of your fish?"

"Us sells 'er."

"I mean do you send it up by road?"

"Naw!"

"Steam trawler comes in to collect it?"

"Doan't come in—not very often it doan't."

Harrison Smith turned away with a sigh, leaving the old man sucking at his pipe and spitting reflectively. There was no illumination to be found in that quarter.

More than ever doubtful of success he passed slowly through the village to its inland outskirts and there he paused to study the map. It might be worth while taking a casual glance at the group of three cottages marked by Barraclough with the pencil point. They were easily located but their outward appearance suggested little enough connection with the mystery. They were fashioned of grey Cornish granite with slate roofs and the inevitable fuchsia bushes in the front gardens. One of them boasted a small stock yard roughly cobbled, an open cowshed and alongside a stable with a heavy double door. As a mere matter of form Harrison Smith determined to take a glance inside but on approaching the door he found it was fastened by an iron crossbar secured to an eyelet by a large and well made padlock. The door fitted closely into its architrave and there was no crack through which a man might see into the stable. Once more his excitement revived. With a quick glance over his shoulder to satisfy himself no one was about he scrambled over the shale wall of the stock yard and passed to the rear of the building. High up under the gable a few pieces of stone had been removed for ventilation. A broken horse trough placed against the wall served him as a ladder and a moment later he was peering through the gap into the inky darkness of the stable. Nothing could be seen so, with some difficulty, he struck a match and dropped it into the space beyond. It went out in the fall but in the brief space while still alight it revealed the bright parts of a long, low racing car.

Harrison Smith dropped silently to the ground and his breath came short and sharp.

"I was right—I was right," he gasped. "Hispano Suisa by the look of it—and fast too. Shouldn't have much chance against that outfit."

Naturally enough he resolved that it would never do to allow Barraclough to get as far as the stable. On the other hand it would be a wise precaution to disable the big automobile in case of accident. But between him and the carrying out of this resolve was an iron bar and a padlock. To attempt violence against the door would surely attract attention from the house. And all at once a simple and effective alternative suggested itself. If he himself were unable to enter the stable he would take measures to prevent the entrance of any other person. There was no difficulty about that and when five minutes later he strolled down the road toward the inn it was with the comforting reflection that the keyhole of

the padlock was entirely filled up with clay and grit in such a manner that no key could ever again force its way in.

He found Dirk already settling himself down for the night and Harrison Smith smote him boisterously on the back.

"A red hot scent, my son," said he. "We're on the winning side. Success, my boy—success."

Freddie Dirk smiled beatifically through a fog of beer.

"Goo' ni'," he murmured.

"It's up with the dawn for you and me—and then success."

Curious how success reacts even on the best balanced brain and obliterates the most obvious considerations. Harrison Smith entirely forgot the second blue dot on the map—the one situated a mile outside the village where a little footpath converged with the high road.

CHAPTER 22.

PLAIN SAILING.

The steam trawler "Felice" out of Cherbourg was not much to look at, but none the less she was a lady of virtue and of good intention. Her engines had lost the sweet voice of youth through long argument and bitter contest with the stern affronts of life. Where once they had hummed and purred now they racketed and nagged, but they got through the work none the less well on that account. The life of a fish wife hardens the temperament and loosens the tongue and the "Felice" was no exception to the rule. A plain, strident, powerful old woman bucketing through calm and trouble with the same reproach for either. The "Felice" wore rusty black—coarse and patched. She had long ago forsaken her girlish waist band of royal blue esteeming such fallals better suited to the children of the fleet. She was a no-nonsense lady, one of the "up and doing and you be damned" sort, but she boasted at least one unusual feature, the pride and envy of her fellows. She was fitted with an aerial, the relic of an age when small vessels went forth to sweep up big mines very often to be swept up themselves while so engaged and to mention the fact by wireless in the short interval between being struck and sinking.

Anthony Barraclough, wrapped in a suit of borrowed oilskins, leaned against the deck-house and grinned at the breaking day. Like a fire opal the sun rose out of the sea, its first rays dissipating the ghostlike wisps of fog that drifted over the water. The "Felice" was shouldering her way up channel against the slap of a running tide and the greeny-black waves, as yet undyed by the morning blue, spumed and spattered over the bows and wetted her decks with a sharp salt rain.

"Oh, Lord!" said Barraclough, dashing the spray out of his eyes. "Oh, Lord! it's good to be alive."

His hand travelled to an inside breast pocket and stayed there, his fingers lovingly caressing a case of morocco leather.

"And it's good to have brought it off. Damned good." His eyes looked aloft to the sagging wires of the aerial.

"Wonder if I dare send 'em a message. Better not perhaps. Besides, I want the fun of springing it on 'em myself. Still, I might give 'em a hint—something to set 'em thinking."

He puzzled for a moment then broke into a fresh grin for a dainty little code had suggested itself. It would be rather amusing to talk to a group of financiers in the language of flowers. A memory of Isabel's last words put the idea into his head when she had given him the dog rose on the evening of his departure.

"It means hope, Tony," and "Hope it is," he had replied.

He turned to the little companion ladder and shouted into the dark beneath.

"Ohe, Jean Prevost, half a minute."

And in answer appeared the head and shoulders of a short, thick-set, twinkly eyed, unshaven man who gruffly demanded "Quoi?"

Jean Prevost, skipper of the "Felice," was not an "oil painting" to look at but he was just as reliable as the craft he commanded. He and Barraclough had had dealings together during the war and they respected each other. If Jean Prevost were proud of anything it was of his acquaintance with Barraclough and the knowledge he esteemed himself to possess of the English tongue.

"Fizz me off a message on the wireless, there's a good soul."

"Hah!"

"Gerard, Regent Street, W. Deliver immediately single dog rose to Lord Almont Frayne, Park Lane Mansions."

Jean Prevost nodded and repeated the message verbatim.

"That's it. Quick as you can."

"I send 'im now, I blerdy will. We find ze trawlers blerdy soon."

Jean Prevost showed a regrettable liberality in the use of this popular adjective which he firmly believed lent vitality and refinement to any sentence.

"That'll set them thinking," said Barraclough, as he turned away with a smile. "Ha, the Eddystone!"

In direct line with their course rising like a thin twig out of the sea showed the silhouette of the lighthouse, while between it and the now faintly discernible mainland tiny dots of brown showed upon the water.

Your true Englishman is an absurd creation for he cannot return to his native land even after the shortest absence, he cannot see the faint familiar landmarks, the nestling villages, the rolling downs, the white chalk or grey granite of her battlements, without a throb of honest grateful pride. An imperial singing sounds in his ears—tuned to the measure of breaking surf—such a song as lovers sing whose single words are no more than this, "I am yours and you are mine."

"Tonight," he said. "Tonight I shall see her again."

There was the appointment at his rooms at 11 o'clock when he would place the concession in Mr. Torrington's hands. That would be a big moment. He could imagine Cranbourne's unbridled enthusiasm, Lord Almont's congratulations in the style of P. G. Wodehouse, and Cassis, that person of dry ashes and parchment, unbending to the greatness of the occasion. He, Barraclough, was a made man, every newspaper in the country would send its reporters to clamour at his doors, every charity seek his aid when the story and the magnitude of his find became known. From an ordinary commonplace individual, he would be transformed into a figure of the age, the observed of all eyes, the target of every tongue. And yet, the world at his feet, the wealth, the prominence, the power, the achievement, faded and dwindled into nothing at all beside one absurd but adorable longing. It was the thought of Isabel sitting on the floor, hugging her knees, resting her chin upon them, looking at him with great wide open eyes, smiling at him with moist trembling lips.

Over head the aerial fizzed and crackled as his message voyaged forth into space. The tiny dots between the Eddystone and the land took form and detail and became the brown sails of a fishing fleet lolling idly in the bay.

A hand on his shoulder aroused him from his reverie and he turned to find Jean Prevost standing beside him.

Barraclough pointed to the North East.

"Number fifty-seven," he said.

The old skipper focussed a pair of binoculars and steadied them against a stay of the funnel.

"Zere," he said, and pointed at a solitary sail to the West of its fellows. "Heem! You see?"

Barraclough nodded.

"Diamond's a reliable chap. Always as good as his word. How long shall we be?"

"Quarter hour—ten minit."

Nothing more was said until the "Felice" came alongside the solitary fishing boat from the bows of which a tall bronzed seaman gave them a welcoming hail.

"Good-bye and good luck, Jean Prevost," said Barraclough. "You'll hear from me in a day or two."

"And blerdy good luck to you," said the Frenchman gripping the extended hand.

Barraclough dropped over the side and landed on the stern sheets of Number 57. A bell clanked and the "Felice" lurched away ruffing the glassy water with her screw.

"Be ye right?" demanded Diamond, drawing up the cable of his anchor.

"Sure thing," said Barraclough. "Let her go."

The anchor came out of the water with a plop, the brown sail was twisted and a little auxiliary oil engine began to snort.

"Wind's settin' just right," said Diamond, the sheet in one hand and the tiller in the other. "Ye 'ad a good time?"

"First rate. Tell you all about it one of these days."

A friendly puff of wind from the South East filled the canvas and drove them shoreward at a slant, the water lapping gently against the bows. It seemed a very little while before they rounded the headland and entered the narrow funnel of cliffs leading into Polperro. Not a soul was to be seen at the breakwater, a circumstance Barraclough noted with satisfaction, although he had no reason to expect opposition. They lowered sail at the harbour mouth and came alongside a slippery wooden ladder stapled into the stone wall of the pier.

"Ye'll take a bite o' breakwus?"

"Not this journey, Jack. I'm getting off as fast as I can. Here, you'd better freeze on to these oil skins. No good to me." He stripped off the coat he was wearing, shook hands, and mounted the ladder.

"Thanks awfully. I'll be down this way for my honeymoon. Good-bye."

With a cheery wave and a smile he started down the jetty at a brisk walk.

CHAPTER 23.

AN ENCOUNTER.

Anyone who is acquainted with the village of Polperro knows the stone jetty which runs parallel with the horizon line of the sea. In length it is perhaps eighty or a hundred yards. At its Western end it turns at right angles past a terrace of old houses whose foundations are washed by the tide. Barraclough had almost arrived at this point when two men turned the corner and came toward him. One was a presentable enough fellow, but his companion was a person of low class. They were obviously in the heart of an altercation for the words, "You fill yourself up with beer like a blasted barrel," preceded their appearance.

Now there was one thing Barraclough never forgot—a man's voice—and as the words came to his ears he stopped dead. The moment of mutual recognition was almost instantaneous, but Barraclough had precisely one second's start to recover from his surprise. Behind him was the jetty surrounded by the sea, and the narrow passage in front was blocked by enemies.

Harrison Smith wasted a fraction of time crying out the name "Barraclough!" Dirk fell back a pace fumbling for the pocket in which he kept his "Mascot." It was a fatal mistake. Running down the length of the jetty between the two men was a fisherman's net, and as Harrison Smith sprang toward him pistol in hand, Barraclough ducked, seized the net and raised it in the air.

It was the barest fluke that the manoeuvre should have worked so well. Harrison Smith stumbled heavily, grabbed at Dirk and missed him. Barraclough's foot just above his waist line destroyed the last of his equilibrium and over the edge he went into the shallow water below. Unquestionably the beer was responsible for Dirk's failure to win the engagement. His quarry was before him in an open

position. He should have used his Mascot and used it hard. It was sheer criminal stupidity to have looked over the edge at his fallen commander. Maybe the angry scarlet of Dirk's complexion provoked Barraclough's attack and before the poor man had recovered from his surprise a heavy lobster pot came smashing down over his face with agonising force, the splintering basket-work playing havoc with his features. Then he, too, experienced the unique sensation of gliding downward through space, a delight somewhat marred by the rudeness of its finish.

Barraclough did not stay to behold the result of his offensive, but picked up his heels and ran. Just beyond the open fish market he saw a neglected Ford car and hesitated an instant to debate whether or no he should appropriate it. At the time he did not connect it with the two men wallowing in harbour waters. Had he done so he would certainly have driven it over the edge of the quay into the mud. His own car was waiting less than a quarter of a mile away—an Hispano Suisa built for speed—and the sense of speed ran through his own veins. As he raced up the narrow, twisting street the good wives of the village turned on their doorsteps, open mouthed, to watch him pass. He scarcely bothered to glance over his shoulder satisfied that he had gained an easy five minutes' start. Coming abreast of the three cottages he vaulted the stock yard wall, threw open a gate and made for the stable door fumbling in his pocket for the key of the padlock.

And suddenly an oath broke from his lips crisp, concise, and covering. The first trick had been scored by him but undoubtedly Harrison Smith had won the second. The blocked up keyhole told its own tale. He knew the door very well and it would be half an hour's work to break it down, also he knew the padlock having bought it himself. The Hispano Suisa would have to be abandoned.

He did not waste time cursing, but instead leapt the shale wall and took to the fields. A little footpath lay among the trees at the meadow end and Anthony Barraclough made for it with all possible dispatch jumping a brook and forcing his way through a fringe of thorn and bramble. There had been no rain for some weeks and the going was dry, a circumstance he noted with satisfaction, for your average Cornish footpath is as much a waterway as a thoroughfare for pedestrians. It was half a mile to his destination, a spot where the path converged with the high road and as he ran, Barraclough covered his face with his hand to avoid the swinging branches. A gap in the trees gave a view of the village and as he flashed across it increasing speed to avoid the risk of being seen he had a momentary glimpse of a Ford car with two men in it stopping at the gate he had recently opened.

"How in blazes they found out beats me," he gasped.

A sickening fear assailed him that his second line of escape might also have been blocked and, at the thought, he put out every ounce of speed he possessed. It was better to know the worst at once. The path widened out into a cart track and through an aisle of trees the white patch of the high road came into view.

A casual passer-by would never have noticed the low built pigsty that butted on to the hedge, its roof and sides being almost completely masked with brushwood and bramble vine.

Barraclough could not resist an exclamation of joy as he noted that the big piles of carelessly thrown kindlings were apparently untouched. He kicked away great bundles of them with his foot, produced a key and opened a small solid door. The relief was almost unbearable, but he did not linger to offer up prayers of thanksgiving.

The motor bicycle flashed bravely as he dragged it out into the sun, turned on the petrol and set the controls. He shoved the gear lever into second, lifted the exhaust and pushed, and the willing little twin fired its first spluttering salvo as he bumped out of the rutted lane into the main road.

Concentration on the single object of getting away had dulled his ears to other sounds, for normally he could not have failed to hear the chuff-chuff of the approaching Ford. As he swung into the saddle he saw it out of the corner of his eye and ducked. The vision of two men—an excited yell and an oath—they were almost on top of him when the twin took a healthy dose of the mixture and got away. Another second and they would have ridden him down. Barraclough swerved to the left to cut a corner and opened up. Harrison Smith did likewise, choking his engine with too wide a throttle and losing a dozen yards in half that number of seconds.

"Shoot, blast you! Shoot, you blasted fool!" he roared at Dirk.

Barraclough heard the order and swept over to the right to disturb the aim as a couple of leaden hornets buzzed angrily past his ear striking the macadam a hundred yards ahead and whining away into the distance.

Freddie Dirk's execution with an automatic was below the quality of his Mascot work. He cursed fluently as the shots flew wide and tried to steady his aim by resting the Colt on the iron crosspiece of

the wind screen.

"Take the wheel—take the wheel, damn you," cried Harrison Smith, snatching at the pistol with his left hand. "You can't shoot that way."

Somehow they contrived to change places. A sharp rise in the ground had perceptibly slackened the speed of Barraclough's mount and he reduced his lead still further by hanging on to the top gear a couple of seconds too long. The Ford, on the other hand, was beginning to improve and leapt at the hill eagerly. No more than fifty yards separated pursued from pursuer.

Harrison Smith sat on the back of the driving seat and bided his time. A glance ahead showed him the road winding up interminably at the very incline at which a Ford car develops its greatest efficiency and goes sailing past nearly everything else on the road.

"Got him," he said, "got him cold."

This comforting reflection awoke in his breast a sporting fancy. After all it was more fun to shoot a man than to ride him down.

The little twin in front was labouring bravely at the hill, but its muffled exhaust was pleading unmistakably for still another change down. Barraclough knew very well that were he to accept this invitation he would be lost. The only hope was to keep in second and pray hard that the engine wouldn't conk out. A glance over his shoulder revealed the Ford bounding up the hill toward him. Then it was Harrison Smith fired. Barraclough saw the flash out of the tail of his eye and simultaneously his motor cycle seemed to leap forward with a noisy roar. The bullet had struck the exhaust pipe cutting it clear of the silencer and making him a gift of five miles an hour. A new life seemed to run through the veins of the machine and the hill flattened out before him like a level track. As he realised the charity of Fate, Barraclough lifted a gladsome "Yoicks" and waved his right arm above his head. Again the pistol cracked and a red hot knitting needle seemed to pass through the palm of his hand. As he brought it back to the handle bar he saw a pale blue circle between his first and second finger bubble into scarlet and black.

"You scum, you dirty scum," he cried, "but it'll take more than a bullet through the hand to bring down my flag."

He jerked the gear lever back into top and shot full bore at the down grade before him. As the Ford car breasted the top of the hill its passengers were rewarded by the sight of a tiny speck of dust tearing along a ribbon of white in the valley below.

CHAPTER 24.

RIVAL FACTIONS.

Everyone agreed it was a difficult morning on the Stock Exchange, although for that matter a great many mornings during the past three weeks had been the same. The bottom had fallen out of innumerable cans. Persons with scarlet or greenish white faces were waving their hands and calling on the Deity to explain the collapse of cast iron securities. If there had been a threat of war things could hardly have been worse. The worst of it was that none of the big sellers seemed disposed to give their reasons for unloading. Mr. Hilbert Torrington, when asked why he had sold huge quantities of oil shares, courteously replied to all and various that he had no observations to make. The oil market, particularly that controlled by Hugo Van Diest, had slumped fifteen points in three days and the others had fallen sympathetically. And now, as though the oil collapse were not enough, appeared Ezra P. Hipps unloading Estuary Rails at a price that would hardly pay for printing the scrip. Ten days earlier the Estuary had looked like a cinch and Nugent Cassis, who had a reputation for sanity, had been buying it by the yard. Here was stock at nineteen shillings being offered at fivepence, and no rush to take it up even at that price. Everyone knew that Hipps was the moving spirit in the Estuary. His holdings were enormous.

"In Heaven's name, man, what's the idea?" was shouted at him from every side.

"I'm getting out," was the only answer he condescended.

Nugent Cassis was beginning to lose his nerve as emphasised by the fact that he was continually

winding his watch or pulling at his precise grey beard. His usual air of calm ill-humour had deserted him and, as Lord Almont laconically remarked, "Poor old Cassis is flapping in the wind."

"Can't understand their motive," he repeated over and over again. "If they believe they've got Barraclough tucked safely away, what can they gain by this stock juggling?"

"They are laying a false scent presumably," said Mr. Torrington.

"They must be aware that we know about the kidnapping."

"I imagine so. At any rate Cranbourne intends to put them wise."

"Then where's the object?"

"Our friend Frencham Altar has disappointed 'em perhaps, so they turn their attentions once more to our humble selves."

"Makes me almost wish we'd left the whole thing alone. Seventy thousand pounds in three weeks. Appalling! Appalling!"

"But consider how we shall be requited when Barraclough turns up with the concession."

"*If* he turns up."

"We shall know at eleven o'clock tonight."

"That's purely hypothetical."

"My dear Cassis, the world is made up of hypotheses—dreams that sometimes come true. What are you doing with your holdings in Estuary?"

"I'm selling."

The old man's eyes blazed.

"On the contrary, my friend. This is a fight and we fight to a finish, please. By your leave we do not take the count until tomorrow morning."

"I'm not made of money," Cassis complained.

"Very well then, if you are determined to sell—sell to me."

"Are you crazy?"

"Possibly. Come over here."

Mr. Torrington took Cassis by the arm and led him to the excited group surrounding Ezra P. Hipps. The American's head and shoulders appeared above the crowd. He was offering Estuary Rails at fourpence three farthings. Catching sight of Nugent Cassis he broke into a grin, shook his head sadly and asked:

"Coming to join the party?"

"We are," replied Mr. Torrington, "in the form of purchasers. I'll buy at four-three."

The American frowned.

"Say, you serious, Mr. Wise Man?"

"Perfectly."

"What'll you take?"

"All you've got."

The news went round like wild fire and half an hour later the price of Estuaries was running up like quicksilver dipped in hot water.

"What in hell do you make of that?" Hipps demanded of his chief.

Hugo Van Diest shrugged his shoulders.

"He wass a doughty adversary, dis Mr. Torrington," he replied. "Must egshpect dis sort of ting."

"Guess there's more behind it than that. What are they hoping on, anyway?"

"Donno—donno."

But the sudden appearance of Sydney Cranbourne did something to enlighten them.

"Forgive my intrusion, gentlemen," he said, "but could you give me a possible date on which we might expect the return of our mutual friend?"

Neither Hipps nor Van Diest betrayed the smallest surprise.

"Our mutual friend, Mister Cranbourne?"

"I was referring to a gentleman whose initials are A. B."

"A. B.! Wasn't that the guy who went out to look for a radium field three weeks ago today?"

"The same," said Cranbourne sweetly. "But we had reason to believe he changed his plans and accepted another invitation."

"You've been dreaming, dear," said Hipps.

"Perhaps I have, Mr. Hipps. The matter is of no great importance but I dreamt of the Old Bailey among other things and of three gentlemen, prominent in financial circles, who were charged with unlawfully detaining someone against his will and endeavouring to induce him to confide certain information."

"And then, I suppose," remarked Hipps, "you woke up and knocked over your cup of early tea."

"Why, no," replied Cranbourne. "I sat up in bed and worked out details for the flotation of the Radium Company in which I have an interest."

Hipps looked at Van Diest, shook his head and tapped his brow.

"Sure it's the heat," he said. "There ain't going to be any flotation that I've heard of."

"Think not? It would be a pity if you gentlemen gave way to overmuch expression of optimism. It hardly accords with your actions of the last few days."

Van Diest smiled expansively.

"Ver' distressing dis uneven market."

"I imagine you must have found it so."

"Poor Mister Cassis—he was ver' green dis morning."

"Our dear Cassis is a born actor. Well, gentlemen, I won't keep you any longer except to offer my sympathy that you have found A. B. so indifferent a confidant. Good day."

And with a polite bow he turned and mingled with the crowd.

"Can't quite get the strength of all that," observed Hipps as he and Van Diest passed out of the main door, "but one thing sticks out a mile. We can't hold our prisoner indefinitely. He must be made to talk right away."

"Dis evening we make the big effort."

"And assumin' it fails?"

"Dat would be a peety—such a peety."

Hipps stood thinking for a moment.

"I've half a mind to turn on the girl again. Let her vamp the secret out of him. We don't progress, you know. Say, you don't think they've a line on where we've got him hid?"

Van Diest waved away the suggestion.

"No, no, no. S'all right. S'arranged too well."

"Then I'll trot up West and buy Auriole a lunch. What time tonight?"

"At nine o'clock."

"I'll be along."

He jumped into a taxi, drove round and collected Auriole and carried her off to the Carlton Hotel. She seemed tired and lacklustre, a circumstance he noted with some small annoyance.

"See here, kid," he said. "We've a big set piece scheduled for tonight and you're a participant."

"I am."

"Sure. Our friend has proved a disappointment in the talking line."

For a moment a flash of enthusiasm burned in her eyes.

"The persecution has failed then?"

"It's early to say so but we've a notion it 'ud do no harm to accelerate a trifle."

"You'd hardly dare torture him more than you've done already."

"We thought of trying out one or two new effects but supposing they fail then it's up to you to take a hand."

"No," said Auriole, "no. You found me a failure before—let's leave it at that. My part's ended."

"Haven't you kind o' forgotten something?"

"What?"

"My offer to you was made providing we pull off this deal. Failing that it's cancelled."

Auriole's expression, seemed to go very flat indeed. There was a look of disgust in her eyes.

"What do you want?"

"Maybe we shall call on you for the 'whisper and I shall hear' act.
It'd make a nice variety for Anthony after the shouting."

"You want me to make love to him?"

"Sure. And I'll try and govern my jealousy for a short stretch."

She was silent for a longish while, then she nodded.

"But only as a last resort," she insisted.

"That's a bet. Me and Van'll be trundling along in the Rolls about ninish—care to join us?"

"No, I'll use the two seater."

"Back your fancy. But see here—no back sliding, mind. A hell of a lot hangs on his being made to talk—a hell of a lot," he repeated seriously.

"What do you mean?"

"Never do for a fine chap like him to die young."

"Die? You wouldn't dare."

"It's certain sure we wouldn't dare turn him out in the world again after what's happened."

"Do you mean you'd——"

"Think it over."

And she thought it over while Ezra P. Hipps addressed himself to a liberal helping of saddle of mutton smeared with great dollops of red currant jelly that looked to her like blood.

CHAPTER 25.

MR. BOLT DROPS IN.

An undercurrent of suppressed excitement pulsed through Mrs. Barraclough's household on the day of the seventeenth. You could feel it throbbing like the beat of a distant drum. Voices sounded different, eyes shone strangely, feet touched the ground as though it lacked solidity. A sense of electricity was in the air, like the unnatural calm that is herald to a storm. Mrs. Barraclough herself was the one person outwardly unaffected by the general mood and set about her daily duties as though nothing were happening. She never even mentioned Anthony's name but instead freely discussed the imminent confinement of Mrs. Brassbound, the wife of the village policeman. She loved babies and it struck her as a happy omen that the little arrival was expected on the very day that should mark her son's return from excursions and alarums.

Isabel rang her up during the morning—a trunk call—with the brave intention of expressing firm and unshakable optimism but the effort was pathetically tremulous and finally petered out with inarticulate sobs and chokings.

"Oh, dear, dear! That will never do," said Mrs. Barraclough, mastering a powerful desire to kiss the microphone into which she spoke. "You mustn't even imagine anything could go wrong. Now, what are you going to do this afternoon?"

Sniff! "I donno—nuffin'," came over the wire moistly.

"Then I'll tell you. You'll go round to your dressmaker's and try on your wedding dress and pretend you're walking down the aisle with your hand on Tony's arm."

"I c-couldn't—b-but it's a l-lovely idea."

"Of course you could and you've got to. After all, it's what you'll be doing in real earnest next Thursday."

Mrs. Barraclough could almost swear to having seen the smile that dried up those tears that fell a hundred and fifty miles away.

"I'll t-try," said a tiny voice. "You are a d-darling." And later in the afternoon the telephone bell rang again sad the same voice, with a brave ring to it, announced "I've got it on."

After that Mrs. Barraclough was perfectly sure everything would be all right and walked down to the village to enquire about the prospective mother.

Shortly after she had gone Jane, who was entering the drawing room with a silver tea tray, had a real adventure. On pushing open the door she had an impression of two black coat tails disappearing through the French windows into the garden. With perilous despatch she set down the tray and rushed out to the gravel path, calling loudly to Flora. Flora, arrayed in a greasy blue overall, came hurrying from the garage where she had been spending the day tinkering with the car.

"Yes, what is it?" she cried.

Jane was pointing down a grove of Dorothy Perkins at the end of which a stout figure in black was retreating.

"That old clergyman!"

"What about him?"

"I'll swear he was in this room when I brought in the tea."

"You sure?"

"Positive. I saw him pass the house two or three times this morning and yesterday too."

"Half a mo," said Flora and hurried over to the writing table. "I say, haven't these papers been moved?"

"Yes, they have. My eye! it's exciting. What do you make of it?"

"Something fishy."

"Do you think—do you possibly think it's anything to do with Mr. Anthony?"

Jane's eyes sparkled like jewels at the very thought of anything so adorable.

"I bet it has," said Flora. "What else could it be?"

"Might be just a rotten burglary."

"Chuck it," said Flora. "Don't spoil a decent show."

"I don't want to. But didn't she tell you Mr. Anthony had spoofed the crowd that were against him?"

"Um! But they were a downey lot and p'raps after all they didn't buy the spoof."

"Wouldn't it be terrific," exclaimed Jane, clasping her hands, "wouldn't it be terrific if there was a dust up down here and we were in it."

"Shut up," Flora implored, "it's a jolly sight too good to be true. Better light the spirit lamp, the old lady'll be in to tea directly."

The words were scarcely spoken before a shadow was cast across the floor and Mrs. Barraclough appeared at the window carrying a basket of roses.

"Conybeare," she said, addressing the old Devonian gardener who was trimming the borders a few yards away. "Conybeare, I am going down to Mrs. Brassbound later in the evening. I want you to cut me a nice bunch of grapes and some vegetables—nice ones."

The old fellow touched his cap and moved away. Mrs. Barraclough entered smilingly.

"And I shall want the car, Flora."

"It's all ready. I'll bring it round, madam."

"There's no hurry. Aren't these roses delicious?" She buried her face in the orgy of pink, crimson and yellowy-white blooms. "Give me that bowl, my dear."

And while she took a few from the basket and arranged them in the big silver bowl she continued pleasantly—

"I always wish I were a girl again when I pick roses. There's a sentiment about them—and perhaps a danger—a nice sort of danger. You know, it's very sad to reach an age at which danger no longer exists. By the way, a very singular thing happened to me on my way to the village. I was followed, Flora!"

"Followed! But who'd dare?" said Jane.

Mrs. Barraclough pouted pathetically.

"Please don't say that," she begged. "It makes one feel so old. After all, there is no law to prevent one being followed unless it is the law of selection."

"Who followed you?" asked Flora.

"A man," replied Mrs. Barraclough with ceremony. "A very respectable man. He revived a sense of youth in me by wearing elastic sided boots."

"What was his face like?"

"In the circumstances, Jane, I kept my eyes discreetly downcast, but I had a fleeting impression of clerical broadcloth."

"That man!" exclaimed Flora with sudden emphasis.

"My dear, it is most unbecoming to speak disparagingly of a member of the clergy. As a girl the word curate inspired in me feelings of respect and sentiment."

"There's not much to get sentimental over in that old beast," said Jane. "He's been hanging around since yesterday evening and what's more, I'll bet he's up to no good."

Mrs. Barraclough had her own opinion of the mysterious parson who had addressed her in the lane but she preferred to arrive at the opinions of others by her own method.

"I am sure it is very wrong to bet on clergymen as though they were race horses," she replied.

"But honestly," said Flora, "I believe he is a bad hat."

"Well, well, well," Mrs. Barraclough acceded, "if he isn't he certainly wore one—a black and white straw of a shape and pattern which I believe you moderns call 'boaters.' There, the kettle is boiling. Run along and leave me to myself."

After the two girls had departed Mrs. Barraclough stroked the end of her chin with a sensitive forefinger and murmured:

"I wonder what that man is here for? It's queer—I wish I didn't think—Oh, well!"

She leaned forward and poured herself out a cup of tea. A discreet cough caused her to start and rise quickly.

In the centre of the room stood Mr. Alfred Bolt, looking for all the world like the comic paper idea of a parson. A huge, black frock coat hung in festoons over his globular form, his scarlet face was wreathed in smiles. In his hand he carried a black and white straw hat and a pair of black kid gloves. He placed the hat in the middle of his waist line and bowed apologetically.

"I beg your pardon—I do indeed beg your pardon."

Mrs. Barraclough was equal to the occasion and presented a perfect example of mid-Victorian austerity.

"May I ask, sir, why you enter my house other than by the front door?
And also what persuaded you to address me in the lane this afternoon?"

"My dear lady," protested Mr. Bolt with a world of unction. "I come from a part of the country where formality is unknown and where a minister—a minister of the gospel—enters into the hearts and the homes of men and of women by the shortest possible route."

"Fiddlesticks," said Mrs. Barraclough uncompromisingly.

At which her visitor expressed himself as greatly shocked and turned his eyes heavenward.

"I remark with sorrow," he observed, "that you are not a true believer.
Your faith is not of the simple kind."

He could hardly have chosen an unhappier argument. Mrs. Barraclough's devotion was a byword in the parish. To be treated thus by a totally unknown clergyman was not to be tolerated. Her doubt as to the probity of this person fostered by Jane and Flora took definite shape. She decided to interrogate and, if necessary, expose him without further preamble.

"It is customary for visitors to be announced," she said. "I would be obliged if you would tell me your name."

Mr. Bolt sighed and seated himself heavily on the sofa, his little pig-like eyes roving round the room.

"My name, madam, is the Reverend Prometheus Bolt."

"And why have you called upon me?"

Mr. Bolt faltered. He did not like this lady who pointed every question.

"An act of civility, my dear madam. I am staying a few days in this enchanting vicinity and hearing of your benevolent character was persuaded to pay my best respects."

"My benevolent character! You are collecting for a charity? You are proposing to hand me a tract?"

"No, indeed no. My visit is connected with this world and not the next. I was informed in the village that this house was to let."

"You were misinformed."

"Furnished—to let furnished. Yes." This was a happy thought and he followed it up closely. "I should consider myself indeed fortunate if you, dear lady, would conduct me round its various apartments."

"The house is not to let under any consideration."

"Dear, dear! How disappointing."

"So if that is your only object in calling——" Her hand went out toward the bell.

"I pray you will allow me to remain a moment and recover my breath.
The heat of the walk, you know. I am not as young as I was."

"No one is," replied Mrs. Barraclough uncompromisingly.

"How very, very true," said Mr. Bolt with outward benevolence but inwardly with a powerful inclination toward violence. "Yes, very true, although it is bitter indeed to be taunted with lack of youth. In the words of the Gospel 'do unto others as you would be done by.'"

"In what particular part of the Gospel does that phrase occur?" demanded Mrs. Barraclough shrewdly.

But Alfred Bolt was not a man to be caught out in the first over.

"I can only recommend you a closer attention to the Book," he replied. "Search its pages yourself, dear lady, and treasures of gladness shall be yours."

It was a nimble evasion and he could not resist a smile of self-satisfaction, but to avoid further interrogation on Biblical derivations he hastened to lead the conversation into safer alleys and ones more relative to the object of his visit.

"I am informed in the village that you are the fortunate possessor of a son."

"I have a son," Mrs. Barraclough admitted.

"A priceless gift, dear lady. I should like to shake him by the hand."

"Why?"

Really this woman was too trying and the directness of the question for an instant deprived Mr. Bolt of his sense of character. Before he had time to collect his thoughts he had rapped out the reply:

"Needn't jump down a man's throat like that."

His effort to recover and mask this piece of startled irritability with a vague platitude did not deceive his audience in the smallest degree. Doubt became conviction in Mrs. Barraclough's mind. She did not know in what way this man was connected with her son's affairs but none the less she was certain he represented a positive barrier between Anthony and success. To denounce him as a spy might, however, do more harm than good, accordingly she took up the bell and rang it, with the words:

"My son is away and has been away for several weeks, nor is there any likelihood you will meet him when ultimately he returns." Then to the glowering Jane who had answered the summons of the bell; "Kindly show this gentleman out."

"Pray do not disturb yourself," said Mr. Bolt with dignity. "I can find my own way."

And with astonishing speed for a man of his build he seized the handle and threw open the door of Mrs. Barraclough's bedroom. The action was deliberate since he desired to find out who might possibly be concealed in the inner room and its advantages were immeasurable for at the very moment his back was turned Anthony Barraclough, dusty and spent, stumbled in through the French window.

Jane gave a short, stifled squeak and pointed and he was out again and ducking behind a rose bush before Bolt had time to turn and apologise for his mistake.

"Show this gentleman through the gate and down the road," said Mrs. Barraclough in a voice that did not betray her excitement by a single tremor.

"I thank you for your hospitality, dear lady," said the Reverend Prometheus, "and I trust I may have the pleasure of bettering our acquaintance."

As he bowed himself out he discreetly dropped his gloves behind a cushion on the sofa.

"This way, please," said Jane. "This way."

CHAPTER 26.

AMONG ALLIES.

The door had scarcely closed upon the retreating masquerader when once again Barraclough slipped into the room. His clothes were white with dust, his eyes hollow and deep set, but around the corners of his mouth was just such a smile as any mother might hope to see.

"Bless your sweet bobbed head," he whispered, throwing an arm affectionately about her shoulders. "Though why in blazes you entertain well known crooks to tea gets me wondering."

"Oh, my dear, dear boy, wherever did you come from?" she cried, patting him all over to convince herself of his reality.

"Down the chimney, mother, like Santa Claus."

"But why and without a word?"

"Hadn't a notion I was coming," he replied dropping on to the sofa and spreading out his legs. "I was whacked to the wide and had to stop somewhere and get me breath."

The door was flung open and Flora and Jane burst in.

"I say, that was a near shave," gasped the latter. "Where did you spring from?"

"Somewhere t'other side of Plymouth. Keep your eye on the window,
Flora. Don't want that old blackbird to get a view of me. Thanks!
Fine. See him down the road, Jane?"

"You bet."

"It's damn bad luck him being here at all. When did he first show up?"

"Last night."

"There's been a mess-up somewhere and I was looking for a clean run home."

"Home, dear?"

"Um! Back to London. How's mother's old car going, Flora?"

"Tiptop."

"Good, I shall need it. I say, I apologise for not saying how-de-do but things have been moving today. Everyone feeling good? Fine. Lord, I'm tired." And he passed a hand tied with a bloodstained handkerchief across his brow.

Mrs. Barraclough was first to notice it and called for an explanation.

"Oh, that's all right—a scratch—bled a bit. Nothing to bother about. Flora, if you leave that window unguarded you're sacked. Jane, if you love me, a large and a small."

"But what is it all about?" Mrs. Barraclough implored after shaking her head at the thought of whiskey.

"Money, dear—money and a bit of paper I carry in this note case that is earnestly coveted by quite a number of people it doesn't belong to. When I asked for a large and a small, Jane, I was endeavouring to convey the idea that I was thirsty."

But Jane was reluctant to go and only consented to do so on a promise that no secrets should be revealed in her absence.

"Be a darling, mother dear, and fill me a pipe."

It was characteristic of Anthony Barraclough that the entire household revolved round him from the instant of appearance.

"Then there is something wrong with your hand," said the old lady filling the pipe and putting it in the corner of his mouth, while Flora risked a month's notice by rushing forward with a lighted match. "I shall tie it up while you have your smoke."

Anthony's protests were unavailing when the ministering angel mood descended upon his mother. At such a time she was inexorable. She called upon Flora to fill the slop basin with warm water and provide scissors (always so elusive when needed) and naturally Flora, who was entirely absorbed in the adventurous side of the proceedings, could only find the rose cutters which were entirely useless.

"It's a bullet wound," Mrs. Barraclough declared. "You can't deceive me—it's a bullet wound."

"Well, p'raps it is, mother, but since it was never intended for my hand we needn't bother about it."

"You must have it bandaged and go to bed straight away."

"Bed!" He threw back his head and laughed. "It's likely."

"And you'll want a sling."

"Not for this David, mother. A sling would be a fat lot of use against the Goliaths I'm dealing with. Mother, I'm within a hundred and fifty miles of being one of the richest men in the world and, as far as I can see, they'll be the toughest miles I've ever covered in my life."

And suddenly from the window came Flora's cry of "Look out!"

Anthony did not waste time looking out but instead flung himself behind the upright piano which stood out from the wall. Nor was he a moment too soon for the massive form of Mr. Bolt was framed in the French windows. Mrs. Barraclough took three steps toward him as also did Flora, thus preventing a definite intrusion into the room.

"I beg your pardon—I do indeed beg your pardon," said Bolt in tones as rich as the fat of pork, "but I fancy—I rather imagine—I—yes, to be sure, left a pair of gloves on your sofa."

"If you had rung the bell, sir, your property would have been restored to you in the usual manner. I cannot——"

She stopped as her uninvited guest was sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Mrs. Barraclough," he observed, shaking his head sadly, "I fear I have caught you smoking."

Behind the piano Anthony was feverishly extinguishing his pipe with the ball of his thumb.

"I smoke all day," replied Mrs. Barraclough.

The door opened and Jane came in with an abnormally large whiskey and soda which she nearly dropped at the sight of the visitor.

"Oh! Mrs. Barraclough!" said Bolt, pointing an accusing finger.

But the old lady was equal to the moment.

"And drink," she said, seizing the glass and swallowing an immense gulp that almost paralysed the muscles of her throat.

Mr. Bolt smiled cynically and took his gloves from Flora's outstretched hand.

"Gloves are so expensive nowadays, are they not?" he asked.

"To be frank, Mr. Bolt, I do not wish to discuss with you either gloves or Christianity," said Mrs. Barraclough. "I would be glad if you would kindly leave by the way you came."

"I was about to do so, madam, after first thanking you for your hospitality."

Maybe it was appreciation of his mother's inflexible bearing that caused Anthony to relax, but whatever the reason the result was disastrous. There was a small table alongside of where he stood hidden upon which was a vase of sweet peas. Anthony's elbow struck and overset it. There was a splash of water and a tinkle of glass.

The three women held their breath and Mr. Bolt's eyebrows went up and down twice very quickly. Then he smiled.

"Once again allow me to thank you for your hospitality," he said.

"Show this person out," said Mrs. Barraclough.

And under the escort of Jane and Flora he was peremptorily bustled off the premises.

"H'm," said Anthony, coming out from behind the piano. "That was a pity."

Mrs. Barraclough was almost in tears.

"Do you think he realised you were hidden there?"

"Vases don't tumble over by themselves, mother dear, and our friend is not a fool." He tapped his teeth with a thumb nail reflectively. "Yes—yes—yes. We must curtail his activities. Can't have the old viper sending messages. Settle down at the telephone, best of mothers."

"I do wish you would not address me as though I were a sitting hen," said Mrs. Barraclough, drawing up a chair to the writing table.

"The telephone, mother, and ask for the police station."

"But the policeman is sure to be out."

"Then talk to his missus."

"That would be impossible, dear, Mrs. Brassbound——"

But Anthony did not listen to the objection.

"Tell old Brassbound," said he, "to run in friend Skypilot if he gravitates near the post office."

Mrs. Barraclough picked up the receiver and asked for the police station and while waiting to be connected remarked weakly:

"There is no law to prevent people sending telegrams, dear."

"Then we must make a few to fit the occasion."

"Is that you, Mr. Brassbound?" said the old lady in answer to a voice on the wire. "It's Mrs. Barraclough speaking. I wonder if you would very kindly arrest a clergyman for me."

"Put a bit more sting in it, mother—ginger."

"Ginger," repeated Mrs. Barraclough into the mouthpiece. "No, no, I didn't mean that. He's grey and elderly."

"Say he pinched something," Anthony prompted.

Mrs. Barraclough nodded.

"I rather fear he has appropriated a cream jug. Yes. I thought perhaps he might send it off from the post office. Thank you. And how is your wife progressing? Yes, of course she is. Yes, I am coming down to see her this evening if I can get away. Goodbye."

"What's wrong with the policeman's missus?" demanded Anthony.

"As you're not a married man, Tony, I shall refuse to tell you," said
Mrs. Barraclough in the manner of Queen Victoria.

"Going to see her?"

"I was going to take her this basket of roses and some vegetables, but as——"

"No, no, you take 'em and I'll go down to the village with you in the car and take it on. You won't mind walking home across the fields."

"Anthony," said Mrs. Barraclough seriously. "Is it very real danger you're in?"

"Pretty solid but don't you fret, I'm equal to it."

Flora and Jane came in from the garden.

"We've seen him down the road," they announced.

"Good. Now, look here, everyone, I've wasted a deuce of a lot of time when I ought to have been on the way. Here's the position of affairs. Flora, you're going to drive me to London."

"Right," said Flora with sparkling eyes.

"Jane! Still got that old service revolver I gave you?"

"Um."

"Keep it handy. Likely enough there'll be a couple of visitors here before long and you've got to detain 'em somehow."

"I'll keep 'em till they grow roots," said Jane stoutly.

"It's a damn shame, dragging you into all this, but that bullet did me in as a driver. It's no joke shoving a motor bike along with a bullet through your hand."

"But how did you get the wound, dear?"

As hurriedly as possible he outlined the day's happenings from the moment of landing at Polperro.

"Who are these men?" Flora demanded.

"Couple of spies belonging to a crowd that tried to prevent me leaving London three weeks ago."

"But what do they want?"

Anthony held up the morocco letter case and restored it to his pocket.

"Just this. I've given 'em a pretty good lead all day—played hare and hounds all over Dartmoor best part of the morning but somehow I don't believe I've shaken 'em off."

"Where did you leave the bike?"

"Couple of miles back on the main road. Shoved her in a thicket. Front tyre burst and that settled it. There's a bare hope they may have been kidded into believing I'd gone straight on but it's slender enough. Comberstone knows I have a home hereabouts and they're pretty certain to have watched my tracks on the road. Mother's old bus is going well you say?"

"I can whack her up to about a thirty average," said Flora.

"Thirty, and we've a hundred and fifty to go. Yes, yes—ought to be in Town by eleven."

"Easy."

"Then I'll just swallow a snack of grub and push off straight away. Get your engine started."

"There's a lovely pie in the larder, dear," said Mrs. Barraclough. "Just the sort you like best. Jane! My motor cloak and bonnet."

She took Anthony's hand and they hurried kitchenward together.

Flora and Jane looked at one another, their eyes adance with excitement.

"Oh, isn't this gorgeous," said Jane.

"Simply topping," echoed Flora.

"You lucky beast to be going up with him."

"I like that, when you've got a shooting programme."

"Oh, well, I suppose the honours are divided. Good luck."

"Same to you."

They parted with a wave of the hand, Jane following her mistress and Flora into the garden at a run. But she had scarcely reached the path when two men came round the corner of the house and bore down upon her.

Harrison Smith was too good a strategist to announce his arrival by driving up to the front door. He had left the Ford at the end of the lane and entered the grounds by way of the kitchen garden. At the sight of Flora he bowed very politely, greeting her with a charming smile and an allusion to the clemency of the evening. It is possible these social amenities might have carried some weight but for

the appearance of Freddie Dirk, whose heavy jowl, grimed with dust and perspiration, was not consistent with the idea of an afternoon caller. Flora fell back a pace into the room, wondering fearfully what course she should pursue.

"Don't be frightened, my girl, don't be frightened," Harrison Smith agreeably beseeched.

"Who are you? I don't know you," said Flora.

"We're friends of your master's, of course."

"That's it," said Dirk, huskily. "Pals of 'is, see!"

The tone was hardly convincing.

"My master is away, and has been away for some weeks."

"Yes, yes, yes, to be sure. But he's come back."

"No," said Flora.

"Look 'ere, girl,"—Dirk's fat, short-fingered paw fell on her shoulders—"we ain't soft—do you get me? We knows what we're torkin' abaht. Mister Barraclough is 'ere and the sooner——"

"Tut, tut, tut," Harrison Smith interrupted. "Don't talk like that, Dirk—you're scaring the girl. Now listen to me. Your Master has enemies, we're his friends. It is of the utmost importance we should see him at once." He moved away and opened the door of Mrs. Barraclough's bedroom. "As a matter of fact his life depends upon it."

"Yus—'is life," Dirk echoed.

"I tell you my master is not here."

"Isn't 'e—isn't 'e." Dirk's two hands fastened on Flora's wrist and twisted the flesh in contrary directions, a domestic form of torture known to the initiated as the Burning Bracelet.

"Let go, you brute—let go," she cried, and with her free hand caught him a full swinging slap across the face.

What particular line Dirk's resentment would have taken is unknown, for Harrison Smith came quickly between them with a muttered order and at the same time the door opened and Jane ran in. It speaks well for her courage that she did not cry out or betray alarm.

"Jane," gasped Flora very quickly, "these men want to see master—I've told them he isn't here——"

"Quiet you," said Dirk threateningly, while Harrison Smith descended on the new arrival under a coverlet of smiles.

"Come along, my dear," he said, "you're a sensible looking girl. Now where's Mister Barraclough, eh?"

For a second Jane seemed lost in consideration, then shook her head stupidly and replied in a rich brogue:

"Maister Bar'clough—doan't know 'un—never clapt eyes on 'un. 'Tis on'y larst week I took sarvice 'ere t'oblige."

"Have you seen anyone strange about the premises today?"

"Noa."

"A man—tall—broad shouldered—wearing a blue suit and cap."

"Oh 'im," said Jane, her face lighting up with a semblance of intelligence. "I did see some un 'bout 'arf an hour ago, 'twas."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"Come out of tool shed at garden end and kept low by the 'edge."

"Did he enter the house?"

"Noa. 'E lit off down the road as fast as 'e cud make."

"Damn! We've missed 'im," roared Dirk.

"Which direction?"

"Away from village 'twas."

Dirk was tugging at Harrison Smith's sleeve and dragging him toward the French windows.

"No, no," cried Smith, "the front way—it's quicker."

The two turned at the exact second Barraclough, entirely oblivious of their presence, walked into the room. The light flashed dully on the barrel of Harrison Smith's automatic.

"Put 'em up," he said, "put 'em up"—and as the order was obeyed—"Well met indeed, Barraclough, well met indeed."

CHAPTER 27.

A KNOTTED KERCHIEF.

The timing and arrangement of the situation was flawless. Barraclough with his hands upheld, Harrison Smith masking the persuasive automatic from the view of the two girls and Dirk's fingers travelling caressingly toward the pocket in which his mascot reposed. It was hugely dramatic. Flora and Jane, robbed for the moment of the power of speech and action, clung to one another on the far side of the room, their gaze riveted on their hero, who, in this moment of crisis, was whistling a bar of ragtime and accepting defeat with smiling eyes.

Harrison Smith's left hand ran professionally over the contours of Barraclough's coat to satisfy himself that there was no concealed weapon.

"Most opportune," he remarked, "and we had almost despaired of seeing you." Then in a lower voice —"All right, but no games."

"Thank you," said Barraclough, and lowering his arms he walked slowly to the writing table.

"And now you two nice little girls," said Harrison Smith, rubbing his hands together, "cut along and pick flowers. Much too nice an evening to be spending your time indoors. Off you go."

There was certainly a better chance of getting help if they could escape. Nothing was to be gained by staying. As they passed the table by which Barraclough was standing he whipped an envelope from his pocket and thrust it in Flora's hand with the words:

"Post that for me—quick."

Flora seized the envelope and made a dash for the window but hardly covered half the distance before Dirk and Smith closed in upon her, fighting for possession of the paper. It was given to Jane to translate the actual meaning of this extraordinary performance and she alone saw Barraclough take the note case swiftly from his pocket and bury it under the foliage in the basket of roses. The others were too busily engaged to attend to such a trifle.

"Let them have it, Flora," said Barraclough, sweetly. "They are friends of mine. Do as I tell you."

"You girls get out," gasped Harrison Smith, coming down breathlessly with the envelope, and after Flora and Jane had escaped into the garden, "Cornered, Mr. Barraclough, and we've got the goods."

Anthony was smiling.

"Hadn't you better make sure?" said he.

The envelope was ripped open and a letter withdrawn.

"What's this?"

"I don't know—something my mother wrote. Oh, I wasn't born yesterday and if you think I carry the concession—search me." And to emphasise the uselessness of such a course he pulled out the lining of his inner pocket.

Dirk and Smith closed in threateningly.

"We mean to have that paper," they said in a single voice.

"Haven't you chosen rather a public place to get it?" he answered steadily. "Oh, I realise I'm cornered, but is this the place for the kill? After all, I'm not much good to you without that paper."

"Where 'ave you put it?" hissed Dirk, edging closer. "Where 'ave you put it, eh?"

"Aha, my friend, that's the point. But it won't be cleared up by breathing hops in my face."

The barrel of Harrison Smith's pistol pressed unpleasantly into his short ribs and Dirk's mascot "whump-whumphed" in the air above his head.

"A little persuasion."

"No, not even with a little persuasion." His voice rang high on a note of challenge. "If you want that paper, you'll have to accept my terms and my terms are stiff."

"I can tell you 'oo'll be stiff ternight if he don't——"

The sentence was never finished, for from the hall outside came the sound of Mrs. Barraclough's voice:

"I may be a little late for dinner, Cook, so don't put on the potatoes till the half hour."

"My mother," said Anthony, warningly.

With a curse and a growl Smith and Dirk backed away, pocketing their weapons, as Mrs. Barraclough in a long motor cloak and veil came into the room.

For a second she stood in the doorway, her eyes travelling from her son to the two men and back again. From the astonishment on her features Anthony read plainly enough that Flora and Jane had failed to find and advise her of the danger.

At this perilous stage a false move might mean the loss of everything. The one hope was to preserve a seeming of normality and at the same time convey a message as to the real significance of the situation. And like a flash came into his head a memory of boyhood scrapes and a mother who had never failed him in the hour of need. He whipped out his white handkerchief and with a single hand, an old conjuring trick, threw a knot in the centre and dangled it before Mrs. Barraclough's eyes. No message by wire or wireless ever reached its destination in quicker time than that old S. O. S. of school boy fame. He saw her tap out the "received" signal with a forefinger on the front of her cloak, then turned with a wave of the handkerchief to introduce the visitors.

"Mother dear, these are two friends of mine, Sergeant Hammersmith and Mr. Cappell." They were the first names to come into his head. He added—"This is my mother, gentlemen, and I am sure you will be grieved to hear she has lately suffered from very indifferent health."

To give herself a moment for reflection, Mrs. Barraclough removed her veiled motor bonnet and put it on the couch. Then she turned and descended upon Dirk with outstretched hands and a high pitched falsetto that fairly rang with welcome.

"Oh, my dear Sergeant Hammer, this is indeed a pleasure. How very kind of you to drop in. So few people drop in now-a-days; dropping in seems to have quite dropped out and I do so dearly love seeing anyone from Town. Of course we are so old world and out of the way down here that we never see anyone—no one at all—nobody and to hear news direct from——" She broke off abruptly, fixed her glasses and fell back in an attitude of amazed rapture—"Anthony, dear, do look. Isn't Sergeant Picklesnip exactly like the vicar—the old one, not the present incumbent, he's too high for me. I do hope——" She descended upon Harrison Smith and wrung him warmly by both hands—"I do hope you agree with me that the Roman influence is most dangerous." And before he had time to reply—"Ah, but I wish you had known Anthony when he was a little boy and wore sailor suits—white on Sundays with a cord and a whistle round his neck. My poor husband could not endure the whistle, so he took the pea out of it and then it only made an airy noise instead of a blast."

"Mother dear," Anthony interposed, "aren't you going down to the village?"

A suggestion to which Harrison Smith proved a ready seconder.

"Don't let us detain you, Madam," he beseeched.

"No, I won't, I won't. Besides, I mustn't be late. As Mr. Gladstone said in '84—and oh, what a hot summer that was—he said—'Detention is the mother of time.'"

At which Freddie Dirk, who knew something of both detention and time, shivered uncomfortably and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Never be late," continued Mrs. Barraclough, rallying her resources for a new oration, "although I was late once for a flower show at Weston-super-Mare—or was it a funeral, Anthony? At any rate, there were a lot of flowers there, so it may have been a wedding or a garden party. But really, I mustn't stay a moment longer. I've got to see a Mrs. Brassbound—poor dear, she's—Anthony, go away, you mustn't listen—I'm going to treat you as friends—there's going to be a baby—she's the wife of our village constable, you know—such a nice man—but as I've always said, Policemen will be Policemen."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Harrison Smith, whose patience was running out, "very interesting. I have a friend staying at the hotel. I wonder if I might use your telephone."

Mrs. Barraclough caught the warning in Anthony's eyes as she gave her consent. Also she caught a glint of light from the rose cutters that lay on the sofa.

What more natural than for a hostess to be seated while her guest made his call and what more fortunate than the fact that the telephone wire passed over the arm of the sofa on its way to the insulator in the floor. The snip of the scissors as she cut the wire was quite inaudible because of the good lady's flow of remarks on the subject of telephony.

"They may keep you waiting," she said and kept on chattering until Harrison Smith hung up the receiver in despair of being connected with his ally Bolt.

"And now, Madam, I feel sure we have kept you much too long," he said.

"You'd better be off, Mother," said Anthony, who although vaguely aware that she was endeavouring to create an atmosphere of vacuity, could not fathom the advantage to be gained.

"I'm going, dear, I'm going. I was thinking, that's all."

"Thinking," came from Dirk.

"Wondering if you two gentlemen could eat mutton. My dear brother who died in '93 had very strong views about mutton, especially when it was cold. He said——"

But the prospect of hearing what he said so shook the good manners of her visitors that they almost breasted her toward the bedroom door. They would probably have succeeded in their object had not Flora hurried in from the garden.

"The doctor is with her now," said Flora. "I've got the car ready."

Mrs. Barraclough became almost hysterical. There was no limit to the instructions she showered upon the hapless Flora. Were the vegetables in the car? Had she been sent for? Was Mr. Brassbound there, and finally, had Flora put the "you know" into the basket?

"The 'you know,'" said Flora, hazily.

"Silly, silly girl," wailed Mrs. Barraclough. "Sergeant Ealing, do excuse me whispering to my maid, but it is so difficult to speak out in public."

She dropped her voice to a confidential whisper only for the briefest space and Flora nodded gravely and said:

"Yes, Madam, I quite understand," and went out.

"And now I really must be going," said Mrs. Barraclough at her bedroom door. But she descended again upon her visitors, now purple with exasperation, and possessed herself of their hands.

"I have enjoyed your conversation so much, Mr. Ravenscourt, and yours, too, Sergeant Chiswick, but even the best of friends must part; as Anthony used to say when I bought him his first comb. Goodbye—goodbye." She paused dramatically. "Oh, I nearly forgot my salts—my salts. It's most important. The doctor said that I should never go anywhere without my salts."

It was only by exercise of something approaching violence that the garrulous old lady was finally induced to enter her bedroom and the door closed upon her.

"If ever anyone ought to be certified," declared Harrison Smith blindly.

"I am very much obliged to you, gentlemen," said Anthony. "I don't imagine she will be long now."

"For everyone's sake I 'ope she ain't," Dirk contributed.

But as though to discount this pious ambition came a call from behind the closed door.

"Anthony, dear, Anthony! Will you ring the bell for Jane, please?"

"The bell is at your elbow," said Anthony. "It is for you to decide, sir, whether it should be rung."

Harrison Smith tugged at the bell pull viciously.

"And, Anthony, dear, will you bring me my motoring bonnet?"

Anthony pointed at the motoring bonnet lying on the table next to the rose basket, wherein, hidden by the stalks and leaves, was the morocco letter case.

"Take the damn thing in yourself," said Harrison Smith.

It was Dirk who moved forward suspiciously as Barraclough picked up the bonnet and moved toward the bedroom. Harrison Smith waved him back.

"There's no other door. Keep a watch on the window," he ordered.

Anthony entered unmolested and at precisely that moment Bolt came in from the garden.

The united forces did not waste time in greetings.

"We've got him," said Harrison Smith. "He's in there with his mother."

This was evident enough, for the sound of their voices was audible, Mrs. Barraclough's high pitched tones crying out:

"Don't sit on the bed, dear, it creases the quilt."

"Better look out," Bolt warned. "He's as slippery as an eel."

"Trust me, we're just waiting to get rid of the old woman, and then——"

The other door opened and Jane scampered in, crying:

"Did 'ee ring, marm, did 'ee ring?"

"Put that basket of roses in the car, Jane," Mrs. Barraclough replied, and as Jane turned to obey, from the garden in rushed Flora and Conybeare, calling on their mistress to hasten.

"Mrs. Brassbound, Mrs. Brassbound," cried Flora. "There's not a moment to lose."

"Terrible bad she is, and cryin' out for 'ee, m'am."

In the midst of this confusion appeared a veiled and cloaked figure, apparently belonging to Mrs. Barraclough, who nervously flapped hands and hastened, surrounded by a babbling mob of servitors, toward the nearest window.

It did not occur to Barraclough's enemies to offer any resistance to this general exodus, their attention was absorbed by the bedroom door, which had shut with a snap and the click of a key. They waited just long enough for the party of cackling females to get out of the room and down the path, then rushed at the door with foot and shoulder. It stood up longer than might have been expected, but Bolt's weight was more than ordinary woodwork could withstand. The lock burst—the headings split and it fell inward with a crash.

Standing by the window, waving a knotted handkerchief to a disappearing car was Mrs. Barraclough. She scarcely wasted a glance upon the intruders.

"Damnation—done!" roared Harrison Smith, as the truth dawned upon him.

In a solid block they swung round to find themselves staring down the black barrel of a service

revolver held dead rigid in the hands of Jane.

"Hands above your heads, please," she insisted.

"And if you'll first wait till dear Anthony turns the bend of the lane," cooed Mrs. Barraclough, "I'll go through their pockets and take away any nasty things I may find there. You put the roses in the car, Jane?"

"He's got it all right," came the answer.

"Dear roses," said Mrs. Barraclough, sentimentally.

CHAPTER 28.

SAND.

A panel is not beaten into shape by force but by recurrent blows, light and accurate, and by the same cumulative process, Van Diest and his colleagues sought to shape the will of Richard Frencham Altar to their intention.

The fact that their effort had so far failed in no way discouraged the belief that eventually it would succeed. There was no doubt in their minds but that in time he would be brought to speak, but Cranbourne's unexpected disclosure that the opposition knew of their captive's whereabouts robbed them of their most valuable asset. Time, so to speak, was no longer to be relied upon and they were compelled to resort to a more expeditious method.

True it would be easy to remove the captive elsewhere but easy matters are apt to go wrong on performance. A clue might be provided where at present no clue existed. If Torrington brought a charge it would be based on hypothetical evidence and come to nothing. On the other hand unpleasant suspicions would certainly be aroused and neither Van Diest nor Hipps greatly desired to attract the attentions of the Police.

If Barraclough could be persuaded to disclose the secret all would be well. He would be generously rewarded not only for his confidence but also for a guarantee to disclose none of the privations to which he had been subjected. The affair would end in an atmosphere of sweet accord. Torrington's crowd would be knocked out of business and a spirit of peace and harmony would descend like a benison upon the hard working trio.

Could any solution be more satisfactory, but there was a fly in the ointment. Barraclough's resolution strengthened with adversity, he kept his tongue behind locked teeth and said precisely nothing.

At nine o'clock that night the Dutchman's big Rolls Royce delivered him and Ezra Hipps at Laurence's abode and Laurence himself came out to meet them.

"Well?" said Hipps.

But Laurence shook his head.

"Nothing doing at present."

"Has he had any food?"

"Not today. He's weak enough in all conscience."

"Sleep?"

"Damn little. He dropped off two or three times and I got the chaps to spray him with cold water. That kept him lively. Blayney and Parker are sleeping in the room now and taking shifts to watch him at night. Awfully sorry, you two, but I've done my best."

"I'll get right up," said Ezra P. Hipps. "Say, Auriole'll be along presently. Tell her to stand by. She may come in useful."

He marched heavily up the stairs and entered Richard's room.

Blayney was on duty sprawling watchful on a camp bed, his elbows propped on a kit bag.

"Get out, you," said Hipps, and the man obeyed. Then he turned to Richard.

The last few days had wrought a desperate change in his looks. Caverns had sunk in his cheeks and his eyes were ringed with black. That he stood in earnest need of a shave heightened the pallor of brow and temples.

He was seated, cramped rather, in an upright chair with chin down. His left hand beat a tattoo on the table top and he sucked the thumb of his right hand like a badly trained child at a make-belief meal.

"Taste good?" asked Hipps. "If I'd known you'd a fancy that way I'd have brought along a soother."

Richard removed his thumb and said, "Go to Hell!" very distinctly.

Hipps walked a few paces toward him and remarked:

"Still pretty fresh, I see."

"Leaking badly, but still afloat," came the reply.

"Durn me! but you're a sound citizen, Bud. I respect sand but I despise a fool."

"All right you do," mumbled Richard sleepily.

"Pretty tired?"

"Not sufficiently wide awake to listen to your talk, damn you!"

The American smiled nastily.

"Maybe not, but this is a case of having to. Say! ever been in one of those big machine shops and seen a giant flywheel swizzling round at three hundred revs. a minute? Guess you wouldn't be gink enough to put out a hand and try to stop it. Never saw any machine yet that develops more power than I can."

Richard shrugged a shoulder; it was too great an effort to shrug both of them.

"And I guess you ain't going to stop the fly-wheel of my destiny."

"You've had a sample," he replied with a touch of spirit.

Hipps came a step closer and hooked his foot round a leg of Richard's chair.

"Know anything about the third degree?" he demanded.

"What you've shown me."

Richard's voice sounded far away and disinterested.

"Show you some more. Stand up! Stand up! I can't bear a drowsy man." And he kicked the chair half across the room. "Don't hang on to that table—stand on your legs," and grasping Richard by his shirt front he forced him into an upright position and held him there. His voice hardened and rasped like a cross cut file as question after question boomed out with the relentless quality of minute guns.

"A year ago you went travelling."

"You say so." The replies were barely audible.

"During that time you tumbled on your find."

"If I did, I did."

"When was it you struck?"

"That's my affair."

"I've made it mine. When was it you struck?"

"During the six months," said Richard with a twinkle of dying humour.

"That answer won't do."

"Only one you'll get."

"I'm pretty close behind you, Anthony Barraclough."

Again the twinkle came and went as Richard gave answer.

"Still behind?"

"Anthony Barraclough, I've a complete list of the places you visited."

"Been buying a pocket atlas?"

"The actual places."

"Fine!"

"And I could hazard a guess where the locality is. Like me to try?"

"If it amuses you any."

The American's voice rose and filled the room, reverberant as thunder.

"P'r'aps it isn't so far away after all."

And out of the wreckage of his resources, Richard Frencham Altar brought up his big guns for a final effort at counter battery.

"P'r'aps it isn't, p'r'aps it is," he cried. "Why, you blasted fool, you'll get nothing from me—nothing. If you know so damn much go and find the place yourself."

Ezra Hipps seized him by the shoulders and flung him back against the wall.

"We mean to find out."

"Not from me—not from me," Richard repeated, but the power which had upheld him was dwindling fast. He knew, knew beyond question that in a few more moments the truth would be shaken out of him unless he could devise some means of slackening the strain. And then he had an inspiration.

"You fool! You fool!" he cried. "Can't you see what you've done, you and your idiot crew? As you've driven health from my body so, by your blasted privations, you've driven memory from my head."

He tottered drunkenly toward a chair and sat down all of a heap.

"What's that?" demanded Hipps, with real alarm.

"I can't remember," Richard laughed hysterically. "I can't remember what you want to know," and his head fell forward into his hands.

For nearly a minute, Hipps looked at him in silence and his face was very white indeed. Then with the breath escaping between his teeth he turned away.

It was sheer lunacy on the part of Richard to peep through his fingers to judge the effect of his words. For it is an established truth that the nerves of a man's back are sensitive to another's gaze.

Ezra Hipps swung round so quickly that Richard failed to cover his face in time. The mischief was done.

"Very clever," said the American and laughed. "Very clever and I nearly bought it, but not quite." He seized Richard's wrist and twisted it downward. "A word of advice against the future, Mister Barraclough. Next time you're working a crumple-up don't let the chap you're pulling it on see you looking at it between your fingers." He strolled up to the door whistling pensively and halted with his hand on the latch. "I'm doubting if you're going to be a whole lot of use to us for you're a tough case. When it comes up at Committee my thumb points down."

He went out and the bolt shot home behind him.

For a long while Richard rocked in his chair muttering. He felt very lonely and his throat ached, his head ached—he ached all over—a childish desire to snivel possessed him and could not be subdued. If only there had been a shoulder, some sweet, kind, soft shoulder to soak up the tired angry tears that fell and fell. A kindly shoulder, a gentle voice to drive away the horror of these nightmare days. Was all sweetness gone out of the world? Was the world no more than four square walls peopled with devils

who asked and asked and asked? Was there nothing else but greed of money, hatred, want, and damnable persecution? A voice within cried aloud: "Why suffer it all? Why bear the brunt of other men's adventure?" Five thousand pounds. Was it a fair price for breaking one's body against rocks, for shattering one's soul against man unkind?

Wild uncontrollable resentment seized him and in its wave tossed him against the door of his prison battering at the panels with bare fists and shrieking aloud in a voice he could not recognise as his own.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! You've made a mistake. I'm not Bar'clough, nev' met him. Richard Frencham Altar I am—father shot himself—Torrington paying me five thousand—keep it up for three weeks—but you've made the course too stiff. I can't stay the distance. I can't stay the distance."

His knees gave way beneath him and he fell to the floor beating the boards and blubbering like a school-boy.

But there came no answer from the hollow empty house and presently the paroxysm passed and he looked up slowly seeing, as it were, a vision of himself false to every tradition of manhood he had held most dear.

"Coward!" he said. "Rotten blasted coward! Three weeks and this is the last day." He looked at his watch. "Only another hour and then I'm free to speak. Stick it for another hour. Stick it for another hour."

And the very saying of the words seemed to increase his stature, swell his chest, revitalise his manhood.

When a moment later the door opened and Van Diest chanting his perpetual hymn came quietly into the room he found Richard rocking on his heels beside a chair beating time to the music with a shaking forefinger while from his parched lips he emitted a pathetic pretence at whistling the same tune.

"S'bad," muttered Hugo Van Diest. "S'bad business. Must tink all the time and be worried by dese things. For God's sake you don't fidget. You tink all the suffering was wit you, but it was inside of me where the pain live."

"Ha ha!" said Richard.

"Discomfort is nutting. I haf before me the prospec' to be beat. It wass the torture to be beat. You know that."

"Not yet."

"Mus' be taught."

"Ha ha!" said Richard again and banged the dish cover against the table implements of a foodless tray that had marked the hour of a meal time.

"Don't fidget!" roared Van Diest, emitting a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Don't smoke!" Richard countered in the same tone.

"I shmoke on purpose."

"And I fidget on purpose."

With a sweep of the hand he sent the tray with a crashing to the floor.

"Ach! Ach! Ach!" cried Van Diest, and was almost choked with a violent attack of coughing.

"I make you to speak! I make you to speak! What if I burn you with my cigar—what if I——" he stopped abruptly and dropped his voice almost to a whine. "You don't know how goot I make myself to you. I wass a very kind man. At my home I keep the birds."

"Poor darlings," said Richard.

"The canaries; and you look what I haf here. A portrait of my little granddaughter Sibelle. She sit on my knee the Sunday afternoon and listen to the tale of Hansell and Grethel. She call me Grandparkins."

Richard swept the photograph aside with the back of his hand.

"I'm not sitting on anyone's knee, Grandparkins," he said.

A bright purple ran over Van Diest's features in blotches and streaks.
He rose to his feet and held out a quivering forefinger.

"You pay very heavy to make fun of my heart, Mister Barraclough. If you haf any senses at all you know that all mens wass the two mens—the home man and the business man—and the one hass nothing to do with the udter."

"Leave it at that," said Richard. "I'm not feeling altogether at home just now."

"That was your last word?"

"My last word."

"So!" said Van Diest. "So!" His eyebrows went up and down and he seemed lost in thought for a moment. Finally: "You go into the bedroom now please."

He gave the order slowly and to Richard's hypersensitive ears it held a threat of real and imminent danger. It sounded as the burial service must sound to a man who stands upon a trap with a knotted cord around his throat.

"No!" said Richard. "No!"

"The bedroom."

"No!"

An impasse. They stood like duellists trying to read intention in each other's eyes.

Hugo Van Diest made the mistake of his life when he abandoned mental force for violence. The hand he raised to strike Richard across the face never reached its mark; instead he felt himself go tottering backward across the room. There was not much force in the blow Richard struck, but the science was good and he put his weight into it. Van Diest took it on the point and as he measured his length on the floor he saw Richard make a dash for the door which had remained unlocked during the interview.

Ezra P. Hipps caught him on the landing outside and put on a jiu-jitsu armlock which closed the argument and sent Richard staggering toward his bedroom beaten it is true, but absurdly enough triumphant.

"Listen you," he gasped, his back against the panel. "You think I can be made to speak—you're wrong—You think I can be tortured and beaten and bullied into giving up the secret. You're wrong—wrong. There's something inside of me that'll lick you, lick you hollow. Do your damndest, my lads, my breaking point is outside your reach." And as a Parthian arrow he said "Blast you!" and banged the door.

CHAPTER 29.

INDIVIDUAL RESOURCE.

A point of interest arises as to how long one determined girl armed with a revolver can hold up three desperate men also armed and further fortified by greed of gold. Your average tough is not greatly alarmed by a pistol in the hands of a woman. He banks on the theory that so long as she thinks she is aiming in his direction, he is moderately secure from harm. It is when she is pointing at some other object fear arises as to his safety and well being.

In this particular instance, however, there was an unusually threatening quality in the demeanour of Jane. She trained her gun like any artilleryman and in a manner not lightly to be dismissed by the casual process of a rush. Added to which the position in which these adventurers found themselves—a compact mass in a single doorway—did not offer good opportunities for acts of individual or concerted heroism. They formed, as it were, a unified target, the bull's-eye of which was the centre of Alfred Bolt's immense corporation. To suppose that any marksman, however indifferent, could fail to register a hit upon so broad an invitation was to betray unreason.

Dirk who had had previous experience in similar situations remarked with melancholy that the steely eyed Amazon who commanded their destinies kept carefully out of reach of his foot. This was a pity

since he was contemplating trying the effect of kicking her on the knee-cap, a proceeding which if performed adroitly is often fruitful of happy results. Bolt, too, knew a very effective means of ramming his head into the solar plexus of an adversary, but this again was a form of attack dependent on proximity.

It was Harrison Smith's able staff work that won the day. An old enough trick, heaven knows, but one that generally works. He waited till her eyes were upon him, then shifted the direction of his gaze to a point somewhere behind Jane's back and nodded very quickly.

She is hardly to be blamed for having swung round, but in the second before she had recovered her wits and realised the bluff, the pistol had been snatched away and the three men were pouring through the French windows into the garden.

It was Mrs. Barraclough who caught her by the arm and prevented her from following.

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried Jane. "I've failed, failed."

"Nonsense, my dear," said the old lady. "You girls have been just wonderful." She pointed to an horizon of trees a mile away, where a cloud of dust showed against the shadows. "Look what a lovely start he has. My Anthony would never let himself be caught by a pack of such—such——" She hesitated for lack of a word and added "Dirty dogs" with astonishing vehemence.

"But what are we to do now?" wailed Jane.

"Let us walk down to the village church together and I don't think it would be wrong if we said a little prayer."

They had reached the front garden when the Ford car, making a considerable fuss about it, banged and snorted past the front gate.

There are those perhaps who will condemn Mrs. Barraclough's action, but let them remember she was a mother. After all it stands to the credit of any mid-Victorian lady who, notwithstanding the ravages of seventy years, is able to pick up a flower pot and hurl it accurately into a moving vehicle. The Reverend Prometheus Bolt caught the missile full in the side of the head and the last view the old lady had of him was under a shower of dirt and broken pottery, while from his lips arose a cloud of invective more azure than the skies.

From where the car had been standing appeared Cynthia the cook. In her hand she carried a watering can, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes wild.

"I'd have done in their car if you'd held 'em a moment longer," she panted indignantly. "Didn't have time to slash their tyres but I did manage to get about half a pint of water in the petrol tank before they slung me into the hedge."

And very valuable was the help thus afforded for within a mile the Ford had banged and snuffled itself to a standstill and twenty minutes were lost draining the tank and blotting up the rust coloured drops from the bottom of the float chamber. Both Dirk and Bolt were in favour of returning to the house in order to conduct a punitive campaign, but Harrison Smith would not hear of this.

"We must push the damn car all we know how," he said, Working feverishly at the union of the induction pipe with a spanner that didn't fit. "If we haven't caught up with them by eight o'clock I shall drop Bolt at a post office and he must get through to the Chief."

"What, the Dutchman?"

"No choice. It's infernal luck, but better that than let him get through with the thing."

"If you ask me, Smith," said Bolt critically. "If you ask my opinion
I'd say you've made a bloomer of this show."

"You can keep your opinion till I do ask for it," came the retort.
"Get in. She's clear now."

He took a heave on the starting handle and jumped to his place at the wheel.

"Keep your eye on those tyre marks, Dirk. If you lose 'em I'll break your head."

And from the spirit of this remark it will be seen that kindliness and fellowship had gone by the board.

CHAPTER 30.

THE TRUE AURIOLE.

Hugo Van Diest struggled to his feet gasping for breath and stroking his chin with sympathetic fingers. Comparatively speaking, Richard's blow had been a light one, but the Dutchman's training had not fitted him for taking punishment. He was hurt, outraged and resentful.

"This young man wass very violent, Hipps," he muttered jerkily. "I donno—s'no use—seems."

"Are we beat, Chief?"

"I don't like this word 'beat.' Mus' be a way." He paused for a moment to recover his breath then turned to Laurence. "This Miss Craven, she hass not arrifed yet?"

"She's here. Came five minutes ago."

"She know how we stand, yes?"

Hipps nodded.

"She don't quite register on the line we've adopted to make him talk.
Kind o' kept that in the background. Women are soft."

"Ask she come up," said Van Diest.

And Laurence went out passing Blayney who was on duty outside the door.

"What's the bend, Chief?" demanded Hipps.

Van Diest shook his head thoughtfully. "Donno, donno. Wass awful if we mus' do someting. Eh? Hipps, eh?"

And he tilted his head suggestively toward Richard's bedroom.

"His own damn fault," came the answer.

"But it wass a man's life, Hipps."

"I've no choice that way myself."

Van Diest began to pace the floor, his fingers tattooing on his chest and his head going from side to side.

"We ought to haf read better the character of this man. S'no good to know about the monies and not about the mens. We find ourselves in a terrible position. Ss! Terrible—terrible."

There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs and Laurence, a telegraph form in his hand, burst into the room.

"What you haf there?"

"Can't make head nor tail of the damn thing. Read it aloud," cried
Laurence excitedly.

Ezra Hipps moved over to his Chief's side as the old man picked out the code words and translated them aloud.

The message was simple enough.

"'Saw Barraclough Polperro this morning. Been following all day.
Escaped in Panhard, probably will enter London by Portsmouth or Great
Western Road. Am pursuing in Ford car. Obstruct. Harrison Smith.'"

It was handed in at eight o'clock and postmarked Wimborne.

"Saw Barraclough!" repeated Hipps. "Harrison Smith's gone crazy."

For a moment Van Diest said nothing, then remarked:

"Smart man, you know. Smart man."

"He's made a mistake," said Laurence. "How in hell could he see Barraclough when——" There was no point in finishing the sentence.

"S'not often he make a mistake. Our opponents haf been ver' quiet, you know, ver' quiet. Perhaps now they draw the kipper across the path."

"He's got bats," said Hipps. "Been standing in the sun."

"I'd ignore the whole thing," said Laurence. "Ten to one it's a trick. A stunt put up by our adversaries."

"In our private code, Laurence? No, no, no. I tink it wass well we take some precautions with this gentlemen who wass so like our guest. You will telephone to Mr. Phillips please that I would like some of those roads that lead into London made—difficult." Then as Laurence seemed disposed to argue: "You haf your orders," he thundered.

As Laurence was leaving the room, Auriole came in and stood hesitating on the threshold.

"Ah! Miss Craven," said Van Diest stooping to kiss her fingers. "For you a little work. You will talk to our guest, yes? So stubborn he wass. You ver' clever woman, ver' gentle. You put your arms around him —so! You whisper, you beseech, you ver' sympathetic. P'r'aps you make 'im cry. Then he tell you what he refuse to tell us. S'understood?"

"Yes, I understand," said Auriole in a small voice.

"Goot! Then we go downstairs now. Come, Hipps." At the door he paused. "S'ver' important you succeed because we haf tried all the rest." He spoke the final words slowly and with great meaning, then turned and went out.

Auriole caught Ezra Hipps by the sleeve as he passed her.

"What does he means—'all the rest?'" she questioned.

The American scarcely paused in his stride. "Think it over," he said, and closed the door behind him.

With a heart that thumped hammer blows against her side, Auriole turned toward Richard's bedroom and paused with her hand on the latch. She felt as a traitor might feel who was seeking audience of his sovereign. For a traitor she was. False to her original employers, to her ideals and to a man who, even though he might have stirred in her the hope of a wedding had never willingly wrought her a single wrong. A dozen times in the last three days her hand had gone out to the telephone and the will had been there to confess to Cranbourne that her allegiance to his side existed no longer, but even in this her honesty had broken down. She saw herself, as she hesitated on the threshold, a wretched mercenary creature—the sport of greed and jealousy—self-centred and governed by thought of gain. It was not a pleasant reflection. For the doubtful blessing of being wife to an unscrupulous millionaire she had deafened her ears to the call of every decent instinct.

And now the Fates had so contrived that it rested with her to make the supreme final appeal and on her success or failure depended the safety and future of the man within. A horrible conviction came over her that these men who held Barraclough captive would indeed stop at nothing to gain their ends and that the innuendoes they had uttered were terribly in earnest. Unless he were persuaded to speak his very life would be forfeit, and it was this consideration that fortified her to make the effort.

Richard was sprawling on the wire mattress when she threw open the door. He raised a pair of hollow eyes that looked at her without recognition. Instinctively she shrunk away from him appalled at the changes in his face and bearing.

"What have they been doing to you?" was startled from her.

Richard hitched himself into a sitting posture and coughed.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Don't you even know me?"

He thought before replying.

"Yes, I know you. You're the woman who was jealous of someone."

"Someone! Is that how you speak of your sweetheart!"

"Wait a bit. It's coming back. Isabel, wasn't it? Isabel Irish.
Well, what do you want?"

She came a little nearer.

"To be with you. I haven't seen you for a long time, now."

"You deserted me, didn't you? I m-missed you at first. Th' one bright spot your coming."

"Was it?" she whispered.

He staggered to his feet and walked rockily into the inner room.

"No! What'm I saying. Man with a sweetheart doesn't want you."

"Tony!"

"No, no. 'Cos you're the worst devil of the lot. Decoyed me to this damn place."

"Tony, I'm so sorry," her hand fell on his sleeve, but he drew away.

"Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I mustn't be touched."

"Then I'll sit over here," said she.

"Yes, there. No, get out. Leave me alone, d'y' hear?" His voice pitched up high and imperative, but as suddenly dropped again. "I beg your pardon. I'm not much of a man to talk to a woman jus' now."

"I think you're a very fine man, Tony."

"Ha! Yes. A devil of a fellow!"

"But so stubborn," she whispered.

"There you go," he cried. "I knew it. I knew you came here for that."

"Tony! Tony!" she implored. "This has gone too far. You've been splendid, but what's the use. Just think, my dear, how rich you'd be."

"I don't want to be rich. Rich men torture each other," he cried, steadying himself against the back of a chair.

"You've only to say one word and you can walk out of here without a care in the world."

The sound of violins was in her voice. The promise of life care-free and full of sunshine was in her eyes and the curve of her smile.

He tried to look away, but the appeal was too strong.

"I can walk out of here," he repeated. "Out of here!"

"Such a lovely world, too."

The touch of her breath on his cheek was like a breeze and the smell of her hair like violets.

"Yes, yes."

"A great big garden of a world," he crooned, and no song ever sounded sweeter.

He felt his power to resist was ebbing away—falling from him like a cloak. With a mighty effort, he replied:

"A garden full of Eves."

And he sat humped up upon the camp bed. Auriole glided toward him and slipped her arms round his neck. He made no effort to escape.

"Eves are rather nice," she whispered.

His head tilted back against her.

"Rather nice," he echoed. "Rather nice. Soft shoulders where a man can rest his head." A glorious drowsiness was stealing over his limbs, a blessed sense of drifting into unknown contentment. She drew up her knees and they sat huddled together on the narrow canvas bed like babes in a wood. He was barely conscious of her voice. It came to his ears as gently as the sound of waves running over sand.

"—all the wonderful things we could do, Tony. The plans we could make come true. We could go out to a fairy-like dinner together—in one of your wonderful cars you could fetch me—and the streets would be twinkling with lights like jewels in Aladdin's cave."

Then he found he was talking too.

"A farm in New Zealand," he said. "Great flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. I know the place. There are mountains with snow caps, green grass plains, black firs and running water. I could have all that—if only—But no."

"Nothing is out of reach, Tony. Everything can be yours at the price of a little sentence—just a little sentence."

"No, no."

"Yon need never see those others again, but just tell me. Men tell everything to women, they can't keep a secret from a woman. Nature never intended they should. That's why Nature made women the mothers because the first secret of life is theirs, and all the rest follow after."

"You're bad, bad," he moaned. "A cheat trying to get at me by kindness."

"And isn't kindness worth a little? Come, kneel down and whisper. It will be easy with your head in my lap and my arms around you. Kneel down and whisper."

Heaven perhaps could tell where Richard found that last speck of sand which gave him the power to spring to his feet, to shake off the subtle influence of touch and voice, and to answer in a voice that fairly rang with resolve:

"No, nothing—*nothing*."

To Auriole he looked almost godlike as he stood with clenched fists and every fibre quivering. It was in that instant of admiration and amazement she recognised him as another man and the cry burst from her lips:

"You're not Anthony Barraclough!"

Richard wavered visibly and for the first time she saw real fear in his eye.

"What are you saying? You're mad," he answered.

"You're not Anthony Barraclough!"

"I am. I am."

"No!" She seized him by the shoulders and stared into his face.
"You're different, your eyes, your mouth. Who are you?"

"Anthony Barraclough!" he cried.

"It's not true. Anthony would never have stood this. The men, yes.
The torture, yes, but he always gives way to a woman. Who are you?"

"I've said," he answered brokenly. "I've said."

A turmoil of thoughts raced through her mind and she spoke them aloud.

"Anthony away getting the concession. You here taking his place. It was clever—clever. Damn them for letting you do it. And you've done it so wonderfully—borne all this when at a word you might——"

"Talking nonsense," he moaned desperately.

"And you don't know what the secret is. No one but Anthony does.
That's true, isn't it?"

"I do know. I do know—won't say."

"You can't know. That's true, isn't it? Answer me—answer!"

And quite suddenly Richard Frencham Altar's world went all black and his knees gave way beneath him. He fell with his head in his hands crying and gasping like a broken hearted child. And Auriole came to him and put her arms round him and kissed his neck, his hair, and his poor thin hands.

"And I've helped in the torture," she sobbed. "Broken you down. Oh! what a beast. What a beast I am."

"Very tired," said Richard. "Want to go to sleep."

"There's no sleep for you in this house except——"

The door opened and Ezra Hipps walked in.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but how's things?"

"I was just coming," said Auriole with a quick pretence at light heartedness. "I have something important to say."

Hipps shook Richard by the shoulder.

"How's that memory?" he enquired.

Once again the last reserves were pushed into the line.

"Bad," said Richard. "Damn bad."

"Then I guess that ends the play," said the American.

"I want you," said Auriole. "Please."

They went out of the room together.

CHAPTER 31.

A WAY OUT.

When Auriole slipped quietly into the room five minutes later she found Richard asleep on the camp bed with Blayney's kit bag tucked under his head.

Below stairs there existed a state of turmoil. She had exploded her bombshell as to Richard's false identity secure in the belief that it would result in his immediate liberation.

"But Hell! what are you thinking off?" Hipps had roared. "D'you imagine we can pass him out after what's happened? So long as the fellar's above ground we ain't safe."

"You can't mean——" she had cried.

"We're busy. Keep out of the path, kid."

She had left them rattling instructions through the telephone to a person called Phillips. The need of the moment from their point of view was to waylay the returning Barraclough.

Van Diest was shouting for his car and from the jargon of voices, Auriole learnt their intention of making an immediate descent upon the rival camp to demand terms. In the midst of the chaos Auriole slipped away, snatched up a bottle of champagne and some biscuits from the dining table and ran up the stairs to Richard's room.

Parker, who was at the door, shot the bolt after she entered and in so doing destroyed a foolish hope that she might succeed in getting Richard out of the house while the excitement relaxed observation. Her two seater car was under the trees at the end of the road and if they could reach it——

She seized Richard's arm and stifled the cry he gave with her other hand.

"Hush, hush, for pity's sake," she implored. "Here's some champagne—drink it. No, no, it isn't poison

—drink—drink," and she filled a glass that stood upon the table. "Eat these biscuits too, and listen to me."

Of course he did not understand. He drank the champagne and ate the biscuits wolfishly while she talked. It was clear something had happened—some unlooked for reversal of feeling—but beside the food and drink nothing seemed to matter. The good wine felt like new life blood flowing through his veins.

"They're downstairs now," she said. "Making up their minds."

He found intelligence enough to ask:

"They know I'm not Barraclough?"

"I told them, yes."

"You shouldn't," he said simply.

"I thought they'd let you go."

"Well?" He refilled his glass.

"They said it wouldn't be possible now. That's why I've got to get you away—somehow—somehow."

She was moving desperately up and down the room as though by very desire she would create an opening in the walls.

"Get me away!" he said stupidly. "Why do you want to get me away?"

"Because you're a different man, a splendid man. And they're beasts and brutes."

It was all very confusing, very unbelievable. Richard had a faint impression that it was happening to someone else or in a dream. Why was this wonderful creature worrying about him. The wine was mounting to his head.

"A splendid man," he repeated senselessly. "And you want to get me away. Tha's kind—kind."

"I've a car outside if we could only reach it."

That was a droll thing to say, but it sounded real. He answered as though someone had actually spoken of a car outside and a chance of reaching it.

"Not a hope."

The bottle was empty now, which was a good thing.

"There must be. The windows!"

He shook his head as she ran toward them. If the beautiful lady wanted to play the escape game he might as well take an intelligent interest and play it sensibly.

"No good," said he. "Soon as you lift the shutter bar an alarm starts ringing and they all rush in."

"S'pose we did that," said Auriole with a sudden idea. "Worked in the dark, started the bell, and when they came in made a dash for it."

Sensible talk this, he must reply sensibly.

"No good. One of 'em always stands in the door."

"Then somehow we must get them away from the door into your bedroom."

That was logical, interesting, too.

"Of course we must get them away from the door. Tha's the idea. Tha's the idea," he said.

"Oh! can't you think of a way?" she begged.

It wasn't fair to ask questions. The game was of her invention, not his. Still, in common politeness one must take a hand, show a willingness. It would be awful if she lost patience with him and left him to his loneliness.

He answered that unspoken fear simply as a child.

"But you won't leave me alone again, will you?"

"Can't you realise I'm on your side," she said, shaking him by the arm.

"My side, yes," he repeated. "I'm glad you're on my side. We're friends aren't we?"

To this pleasant reflection he sat down on the hard chair and smiled happily. Friends is a lovely word to play with when one has been over long neglected. He wished she would sit too, and make a pillow for his head, but instead she was flitting from place to place acting in the oddest way. From the camp bed she had dragged Blayney's kit bag and was buttoning it into an old dressing gown provided for his use.

"I must have a head," she was saying, which sounded idiotic to Richard who saw that her own was beautiful.

He pointed to a bronze bust of Van Diest which had been placed on the mantelpiece a few days before, presumably to act as a reminder of the influence dominating the apartment.

"Try that one," he suggested, laughing inanely.

But Auriole did not laugh. She gave a glad cry and called on him to help. Together they carried the bust and soon had tied it securely inside the dressing gown.

It did not occur to Richard to ask the reason why this strange dummy had been created. It was all of a piece with the dream-like spirit which pervaded everything. Her explanation was voluntary.

"It's to put in your bed," she said. "We'll take out the electric bulbs, then start the bells going. When they come in and you don't answer they'll go into the bedroom. They'll find this and think it's you."

"Think this is me!" said Richard. "That's funny." He broke into a storm of laughter which ended as abruptly as it began, ended from a sudden realisation that all this folly and mummery was a real and solid effort to compass his escape. "Wait a bit," he said, rubbing his brow fiercely. "It's coming back. I see the idea. Bless you, for trying. We'll have a shot."

He dragged the dummy into the inner room by the waist cord of the dressing gown which was tied about its neck. The brain fog was gone. He was surprisingly clear headed now, and an unnatural vitality buoyed him up. The bedroom door swung to behind him and he heard Auriole cry:

"I'm doing the lights, be quick."

And at that moment he had a notion and acted upon it quickly. An old gas bracket over the door helped the operation. When he had finished he kicked over a chair and re-entered the now pitch dark room.

"I've got hold of the shutter bar," he heard her cry.

"Let her go," he answered.

And down in the hall below they heard the big alarm bell clang out the warning.

Clinging to each other's hands they waited, their backs flattened against the wall. And presently it came; the sound of men's footsteps dashing up the stairs. The door burst open and a number of dark shapes poured into the room. Framed in the open doorway, a black silhouette against the light from the well of the staircase, stood Blayney, a pistol in his hand.

There was a veritable hubbub of voices. "What's the matter with the lights?" "Where are the switches?" "Hell! that sucker is trying to put it over on us!" "The bedroom shutters—He's trying to escape." "For Lord's sake where's the door?"

Someone found the knob in the darkness and the bedroom door was flung open. There was a scream from Laurence. Then Hipps' voice bellowing:

"Great God! he's hanged himself."

Swinging from the lintel, shadowy against the grey light beyond was, apparently, the figure of Richard Frencham Altar dangling on a rope.

Even the perfectly trained Blayney deserted his post to leap forward and see, and in that instant of neglect, Richard and Auriole darted from the room and slammed and bolted the door.

Nor could Richard resist the temptation of lifting an exultant cry of, "Good-night, gentlemen," ere he

was seized by Auriole and hurried down the stairs.

As they passed through the front garden and ran stumbling toward the waiting car they could hear above them the sound of curses and hammer blows echoing through the house.

CHAPTER 32.

THE APPOINTED HOUR.

Hilbert Torrington was first to arrive. His big car deposited him at Crest Chambers at ten forty-five, a quarter of an hour before the time promised for Barraclough's arrival. The ever attentive Doran took his hat and coat, turned on the table lamp and provided him with a pack of Patience cards.

"You look hopeful, sir," he remarked.

"I always expect the best till I have knowledge of the worst," came the smiling rejoinder. "I trust you have quite recovered from the effects of the anaesthetic."

"Thank you, sir. But my recovery'll date from the hour the Captain gets back."

Doran liked to refer to his master by the military rank he had borne during the war.

"To be sure," said Mr. Torrington. "That will be a welcome event to all of us."

Next came Cranbourne, very anxious and ever pulling out his watch, tugging at his lower lip or pacing up and down.

"Why not take a chair?" suggested Mr. Torrington.

"Can't! I feel things y'know."

"All my life I've been feeling things without showing it," came the reflective observation. "If only I had that two of diamonds! It's sure to be the last card."

"How you can sit there playing cards!"

"I'm too old to walk about."

Cranbourne stopped and looked at him.

"Mr. Torrington," he said. "Has it occurred to you that in undertaking this thing we have been guilty of grave wrong-doing? To line our own pockets while we stayed safe at home men have gone out at the risk of their lives. We may talk of adventure—the romance of business—we may call our job by a dozen pretty names, but it analyses out at something fairly damnable when we apply the supreme test."

Mr. Torrington nodded.

"And yet what is the alternative?" he asked. "Life is only a matter of diamond cut diamond."

"It's a scavenger's job," said Cranbourne. "And you can't get away from that."

"Without conflict there would be no progress."

Cranbourne shook his head angrily.

"What right have we to control other men's destinies?" he said. "Where is the justice that puts such men as ourselves in command?"

"Opportunity does that, not justice," said Mr. Torrington slowly. "My first employment was cleaning windows. I saw a man, who was so engaged, fall from a fourth floor sill into the street. I picked him up dead, carried him into the building and I asked for his job. A nasty story isn't it?"

Cranbourne snorted.

"It covers us all," he said. "We spend our lives robbing flowers from cemeteries, keeping our souls in our trousers pockets along with the other small change. Hullo!"

Doran opened the door and announced Nugent Cassis. That meant that all over the town clocks would be striking eleven.

"Any news?" he rapped out.

"None."

"But there wouldn't be," said Cranbourne. "He promised to send a message when he was nearing home. It's time he was here." The little man was plainly agitated.

Hilbert Torrington smiled at him over the carefully arranged playing cards.

"They tell me, Cassis, your wife has been indisposed. I trust she is better."

"I really don't know," came the irritable response. "You can hardly expect——"

"These trifles so easily escape us," murmured the old man.

Nugent Cassis scowled and turned to Cranbourne.

"How's that other fellow getting on? What's his name—Altar?"

"He's holding out."

"At Laurence's house?"

"I believe so."

"You've heard from the woman lately!"

"Not lately."

"I've a doubt about that woman. She's been seen a good bit with the American. I've had them watched. Nothing would surprise me less than to hear she'd given us away."

"That's hardly likely, Cassis, since she believes it is Barraclough they've got hold of."

"Women are very tricky. I don't trust 'em! Suppose they've made it uncomfortable for Frencham Altar, what? Well it was only to be expected."

The callous practicality of tone fired Cranbourne to answer:

"Expected, yes. But one of these days if there's any justice knocking about this old world of ours we shall have to pay."

"Five thousand was the price," retorted Cassis.

It is probable there might have been a row had not Mr. Torrington intervened with the suggestion that Frencham Altar's cheque should be signed while they were waiting. Cassis obstructed the idea. He thought tomorrow would be quite soon enough. He scouted Mr. Torrington's statement that on the morrow they would have to see about Frencham Altar's release. He said that this was a matter dependant on Barraclough's return.

"Our contract with Altar terminated at eleven tonight," insisted Mr.
Torrington. "Kindly sign this cheque beneath my signature."

And very grumblingly Cassis obliged.

"We have staked a lot of money on this affair," he said.

"Yes, and not a little reputation," replied the old man.

"Don't follow your reasoning."

"I'm getting old, Cassis, reaching the age when the hereafter becomes the nearafter."

"Then I should retire from business before you waste any more money," said Cassis with surprising venom.

But Mr. Torrington did not resent the remark since he knew how nerves affect certain dispositions.

The arrival of Lord Almont Frayne, resplendent from the Opera, relieved the situation of tension. It would have taken a very practised eye to detect anxiety under the mask of bored and elegant

indifference he had assumed. He apologised for being late, but had been button-holed by a fellow in the foyer who wanted to talk polo. Very disappointing evening altogether. The prima donna had sung flat and an understudy was on for Tenor's part. It was only as an after thought he mentioned the object of their meeting and he touched upon it in the lightest vein.

"Nothing doing?"

"Nothing."

"Ah! well, it's early yet. Hot ain't it? Mind if I get myself a peg?" He was crossing to the decanter when he stopped, drew an envelope from his pocket and placed it on the table before Mr. Torrington.

"What do you make of that?" he asked. "Came early this morning, no post mark—nothing—just slipped through the box."

Hilbert Torrington took from the envelope a single flower pressed almost flat. It was a dog rose.

"Odd," he muttered, "distinctly odd." He weighed the flower in his hand and sniffed the envelope critically. It had no scent. "You have no one, Almont—I mean, there isn't anyone who'd be likely to—Well, you're a young man."

"Oh, Lord! no, nothing of that kind."

And Almont's inflection suggested that the very idea of such a thing caused him pain.

Hilbert Torrington pursed his lips and stared at the ceiling.

"What does a dog rose suggest to you, Cassis?"

"A silly interruption," replied that gentleman sourly.

"Yes, yes, but was there not—dear me, it's so long ago I've almost forgotten—was there not some floral Lingua Franca—Ah! the language of flowers."

Cassis snorted, but Cranbourne was at the book shelves in an instant.

"It's printed at the back of dictionaries," he said. "Here's one!" He took out a volume and turned over the pages as he spoke. "This is it. Rose—Love. Yellow rose—jealousy. White rose—I am worthy of you. Dog rose—Hope."

"Hope," repeated Mr. Torrington.

Lord Almont struck the table and sprang to his feet.

"By God!" he cried. "Barraclough's going to win through."

In the midst of a babel of tongues the telephone rang imperatively. Mr. Torrington picked up the receiver.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Who? You are speaking for Mr. Van Diest."

The three other men came instantly to attention and exchanged glances. There was a pause. Then Mr. Torrington said:

"Indeed! Oh, very well—delightful," and he replaced the receiver.

"What's happened?" Almont demanded.

"I don't entirely know. But it appears that Van Diest and his amiable colleague Hipps, are shortly paying us a visit—here."

There was a moment of consternation.

"But Good Lord!" exclaimed Cranbourne. "That may mean anything."

Nugent Cassis threw up his hands desperately. Every vestige of his quiet business habit had vanished and instead he was a nerve-racked exasperated man who paced up and down jerking out half sentences, reproaches and forecasts of failure.

"It's that fellow Frencham Altar given us away. Damn stupid introducing the type—man on a bench—Means ruin to the lot of us. Coming here are they? Refuse to see them. I knew there'd be a break down

somewhere—felt it in my joints—If everything had gone according to schedule, Barraclough would have been back by now—Punctual man—reliable——"

"Big stakes involve big risks," said Mr. Torrington sweetly.

"And haven't we taken them?" Cassis barked. "Good Heavens alive! why—What's that?"

There was a murmur of voices in the hall, the room door was thrown open, and Isabel Irish came in breathlessly. She threw a quick glance round the circle of faces as though seeking someone.

"Where is he? Where's Tony? It's after eleven—half past—Why isn't he here?"

Mr. Torrington rose and offered a chair, which she refused with a gesture.

"We are waiting, my dear."

"But why isn't he here?" she repeated.

"How can we possibly say?" ejaculated Cassis testily. "In a venture of this kind——"

She caught up the word "venture" and threw it back at him.

"No message, nothing."

Cranbourne was about to answer, but Torrington interrupted him to tell her of the dog rose Lord Almont had received.

"That was from him—that was from Tony," she cried. "I gave him a spray of them on the night he started."

"That's encouraging," said Lord Almont.

But Cassis was not in a mood to be encouraged.

"It may mean much or little," he snorted. "Still, there is nothing to prevent our hoping."

Of all worldly trials, waiting is the severest, and tatters the nerves quicker than any other. Isabel Irish did not like Nugent Cassis—he belonged to the money people who had no real existence in her reckoning—but ordinarily speaking she would never have lashed out at him with such vehemence. The fire in her voice and eyes entirely robbed the little man of power to retort. Nor was the tirade she uttered levelled at him alone, everyone present came in for a share. One small girl with a shock of curly hair whipping with scorpions the heads of a mighty financial concern.

"Hoping he'll get through with the cash," she said, "so that you can have money and more money and then more money. That's all he counts for to you—a machine to fill your pockets—— Doesn't matter if he gets broken throwing out the coins, wouldn't matter if he never came back at all so long as the concession came safely to hand. Oh! it makes me sick—it makes me sick." Her voice broke, but she forced the tears back by sheer strength of will. "He may be dead—anything may have happened to him —— And you could have prevented it all, sent an army to protect him. But no, that wouldn't do—too conspicuous—other people might find out—profits might have to be divided—so all you can do is to sit in a circle waiting—waiting—like a dog with a biscuit on its nose for the words 'Paid for, paid for.'"

And having emptied out her soul's measure of resentment she threw herself onto the sofa and sobbed and sobbed with her curly head in Mr. Torrington's lap.

No one spoke, not even when Doran came in and whispered that Van Diest and Hipps had arrived and demanded audience. It was Cranbourne who came forward and picking her up in his arms like an injured child carried her into the other room and laid her on Barraclough's bed.

"We haven't lost yet, my dear," he said, and stroked her forehead.

He left her crying gently on the pillow, her little pink cheeks all shiny with tears.

Mr. Torrington waited for Cranbourne to return before giving Doran instructions to show in the gentlemen. To Cassis' unspoken protest he replied:

"They evidently have some information which we lack. It would be wise to find out what it is."

Ezra P. Hipps was first to enter. He came in like a triumphant army occupying captured territory. Close upon his heels was Hugo Van Diest, smiling ingratiatingly and bowing to the company. Hilbert Torrington rose and returned the courtesy.

"An unexpected pleasure, gentlemen. And what precisely do you want?"

"I guess it's a talk to the man who shoots the bull in the ring," Hipps replied, and added: "That substitute trick has exploded and the chap who pulled it has done a guy."

Mr. Torrington and Cranbourne exchanged glances.

"Am I to understand that Mr. Frencham Altar has found your hospitality too oppressive?" he asked.

"Put it how you like, but that's a side show," came the answer. "We're here on business."

Nugent Cassis had recovered some of his self-possession and remarked crisply:

"We are very busy, Mr. Hipps."

"And since the light came into the temple, Nugent Cassis, we've been busy ourselves. Struck me one or two little matters need adjusting."

"Your treatment of the substitute for example," said Cranbourne.

"Not unlikely, but that job'll keep, and it's in hand already under Laurence."

"Dear me, we are being very frank, are we not?" murmured Mr. Torrington.

"Gentlemen, it's come to our ears that a certain Mr. Barraclough is taking grave risks tonight to get home."

Cranbourne flashed an eye at the bedroom door. "Go on!" he said. "Talk straight, man."

Hilbert Torrington held up a hand.

"One minute," he suggested. "I imagine Mr. Hipps is reluctant to speak out before so many witnesses. It would be better perhaps if Mr. Van Diest and myself discussed this matter in private. Is everyone agreeable?"

There was some small demur, but it was finally agreed upon. The others went out into the hall, leaving Mr. Torrington and Van Diest alone.

They were both very smiling and scrupulously polite, but the air of the room seemed to crackle with stored electricity. The Dutchman was given a chair by the writing table and cigarettes were placed at his elbow. Indeed, every social amenity was observed before Hilbert Torrington fired the first round.

"Let us assume, Van Diest, that we are neither of us honourable men."

Van Diest took quite a long time lighting a cigarette before replying.

"You don't mind if I smoke?"

"It's an admirable sedative for conscience and nerves alike. Wouldn't you prefer a cigar of Barraclough's?"

"Ach! it wass of this young man I wass about to speak."

"I had almost guessed it," said Mr. Torrington, and picking up the patience cards began to lay them out in little packs.

"It is said he iss on the road tonight—wass seen by a man who hass done some works for me."

"Indeed! That must have surprised you very much. After cherishing the belief that he was snugly accommodated at Laurence's house."

Van Diest acknowledged this thrust gracefully.

"A clever idea thiss substitute—a nice fellow too—vonderful determination."

"Hm! Careless of you to lose him."

"Mislay, my friend. I do not know thiss verb to lose."

"So you come to me for instruction? Ah well, it's never too late to learn."

For the first time Van Diest scowled, but quickly controlled his features and waved a hand over the cards.

"You tell your fortune, eh?"

"Dear me, no! I can wait for that to develop. A mere game of patience, nothing more."

"There are times, Mr. Torrington, when action is of more value than patience."

"I treasure your opinion," came the smiling rejoinder. "What was it you were saying? A man of yours saw Barraclough? Was that all he did?"

"Not a very smart man that."

"But you've others—smarter?"

"Mus' not let ourselves be beat, y'know."

"So galling isn't it?"

"I haf no experience," retorted Van Diest, and rising crossed to a canary cage in the window where, to Mr. Torrington's silent indignation, he spent quite a long while whistling and saying "Sweet sweet" to the little inmate.

"But what if you are beaten already, Van Diest? Anthony Barraclough is on his way home presumably with the concession in his pocket."

"But he hass not yet arrifed, eh? Dicky, eh? Oh, this poor little one he will miss his master. So the poor—the poor—Sweet! Sweet!"

Mr. Torrington frowned and placing a piece of sugar from the saucer of his coffee cup in a spoon held it out at arm's length.

"Present this sugar to your feathered friend with my compliments," said he. "And ask him to excuse you for a moment."

Hugo Van Diest returned to the table wreathed in smiles.

"So you wish to talk. Proceed."

"If Barraclough has the concession what have you to gain?" The banter had died out of the old man's voice.

"There wass millions of concessions never taken up. S'pose thiss one is lost, eh? Who will be the wiser?"

"I see. Dog in the Manger?"

"We lock the stable door before the horse arrife that is all."

"And how far have you decided to go—all the way?"

Van Diest appeared to deliberate before answering.

"Accidents, you know, they will happen. These boys wass ver' reckless. With all these motors and trains life is risky, the streets too, are dangerous. You never know with these boys." He stopped as Hilbert Torrington drew the telephone toward him. "What are you going to do?"

"Ring up the Police, my friend. You will be charged with conspiracy and intent to murder."

Van Diest's little eyes glittered threateningly. "By the time the Police arrife it will be too late," said he. "Put down that telephone. I wass not so easily frightened." His voice pitched up and seemed suddenly to catch fire. He rose to his feet and beat the table with both hands. "You fool, thiss wass business, business, business, the meaning, the motive of my whole life, and if you think I give way at the threat of a rope you don't know Hugo Van Diest. My heart, my whole soul, I haf invest in this enterprise and I don't leave it. I don't move one inch till I haf what I want."

"Money?" thundered Mr. Torrington.

"Pounds, my friend, shillings and pence."

"And men's lives." There was a fine scorn in the old man's tone. "Money! I hate the name of it. It turns the honour and cleanliness of men into trashy circles of metal. To business then. What chance has Barraclough of winning through?"

"Very small."

"Go on!"

"If you want that thiss radium company shall be floated you would haf the better chance if——"

"Well?"

"You gif to us one-third interest."

"And that represents his chances?"

Van Diest nodded unpleasantly.

"But you will understand of course, that there iss not a lot of time to lose."

"In a word you are prepared to call off your dogs for a matter of millions."

"So!"

The bedroom door was flung open and Isabel burst excitedly into the room.

"There are some horrible men watching the back of the flats," she cried. "Are they ours?"

"Perhaps you would like to answer this young lady?" asked Mr. Torrington.

But Van Diest only shrugged his shoulders. Isabel ran to the window.

"And there—down there," she pointed to the street below, "there are more. What does it mean?"

The sound of her cries brought the others hurrying into the room.

"What is it now?" demanded Cassis.

But Hilbert Torrington was at the telephone. What he actually said sounded incomprehensible, but what it actually meant to the man who received it was an order to despatch a dozen men immediately to the doors of the flats and distribute a sprinkling over the neighbouring streets. There might be a fight, there probably would. If Barraclough were seen a body guard was to be formed at once.

Isabel was repeating her question at the window.

"Those men! Who are they? What does it mean?"

It was Cranbourne who had the honesty to reply.

"Danger!"

CHAPTER 33.

A SMASH UP.

Flora's handling of the old Panhard was beyond praise. Accurate, well judged and with just enough dash of risk at cross roads or in traffic to steal an extra mile or two on the average speed per hour. The night had chilled and Anthony Barraclough, wrapped in his mother's cloak watched the girl beside him with a queer mixture of admiration and impatience. Admiration for her faultless nerve and impatience that the car for all its ancient virtue in no sense could be termed a speed-monger. Flora's attitude amused him too, it was so tremendously intense, so devoted to duty and withal so exactingly efficient. There is no particular reason why it should be so, but it always tickles the male sense of humour to watch a woman do a man's job as capably as a man himself could do it. Her conduct when they punctured on the long stretch between Wimbourne and Ringwood had been exemplary. She jacked up,

changed wheels and was away again in the shortest possible time. True a little over a quarter of an hour was lost, but the locking ring had rusted in its thread, as sometimes happens, and it was heavy work for a girl to shift it unaided. She had forbidden Barraclough to help and had made him picket a hundred yards down the road in case the pursuers should come up unexpectedly.

After that all had gone well—except for a plug sooting on number three cylinder and a halt for petrol about fifty miles outside London. A full moon had risen with sundown which lit the countryside brightly, and made the run almost as easy as by day.

Only once did Barraclough see the pursuing Ford, two spots of light visible from the top of the rise threading through the valley five miles to the rear. Of course, it might have been any other car, but a kind of second sense convinced him that this was not the case. He did not confide to Flora what he had seen, but the tapping of his foot on the floor-board gave her the information as surely as any spoken word.

She startled him not a little by rapping out the enquiry:

"How much lead have we got."

"Five miles."

"We shall do it. They won't average more than twenty-eight and we're good for that. Where are we now?"

"Hogs-back."

"What's time?"

"'Bout ten to eleven."

"Hm! Think they'll shove any obstacles in the way?"

"Depends," said Anthony. "If they sent a message through it's pretty certain we may run into a hold up."

"Going to chance it?"

"No. We'll slip off the main road at Cobham and trickle in through the byes."

"Right oh! tell me when."

For some miles they drove in silence and once again between Ripley and Guildford had a glimpse of the following lights. With a considerable shock Barraclough realised that the distance separating the two cars had greatly diminished. But hereabouts an unexpected piece of luck favoured them. At a point where the road narrowed between hedges a farm gate was thrown open and a flock of sheep was driven out into the highway. Flora contrived to dash past before the leaders of the flock came through the gate. Another second and she would have been too late. Glancing back Anthony observed that the entire road was solid with sheep, a compact mass that moved neither forward nor backward.

"Our friends'll lose five minutes penetrating that," he announced gleefully.

It did not occur to him until later that every one of those woolly ewes was an unknowing servant of Hugo van Diest and that their presence in the road was the direct result of a wire dispatched to a quiet little man named Phillips who had been given the task of making the way into London difficult. Mr. Phillips had not had very much time, but he had done his best. A series of telegraph poles had been cut down outside Staines, Slough, and at various points along the Portsmouth road. A huge furniture van with its wheels off obstructed the narrows at Brentford, and in one or two places wires had been drawn across the King's highway.

It was the side turning at Cobham saved them running into one of these obstacles by a narrow margin of scarcely a hundred yards. Also it was the side turning, bumpy narrow and twisted that proved their undoing.

An upward climb, a perilously fast descent, a corner taken a trifle too fine, a sharp flint, a burst front tyre, and at a point where two roads crossed the veteran car almost somersaulted into a ditch, wrecked beyond hope of repair. They were doing forty when it happened and it was a miracle they escaped with their lives.

Flora was first to scramble over the tilted side and survey the ruins of their hopes. Anthony still wrapped in his mother's cloak followed and shook his head over the extent of the damage.

"You hurt?" he asked.

"No. Are you?"

"I'm all right. What happened?"

"Front tyre. Wheel fairly kicked out of my hand."

"It's damn bad luck," said Anthony.

"Brutal." She bent over and switched off her lights. "What are we going to do?"

He looked at a sign-post, knocked crooked by the car when it plunged off the metal into the ditch.

"This road leads from Oxshott—London that way. With any luck we might get a lift."

"Late for anything to be about." She looked back along the way they had come. The road could be seen threading its way among pines for a couple of miles or more. "We shall know they're coming five minutes before they can get here. Still I suppose you won't wait for them."

"No fear. Couldn't put up much of a fight with this hand."

"Pigs," said Flora. "I'd like to kill them."

"Both sides are pretty lethal. Wouldn't fancy my chances if——"

"You think they'd——"

"Course they would. Why in blazes doesn't something roll up? Bet your life if they can't get the concession for themselves they'll take precious good care no one else shall profit by it." He paced up and down looking this way and that. "It was like my infernal conceit bringing the thing through myself. Anyone but an idiot would have registered it from Cherbourg. Almost wish we'd stuck to the main road. There'd have been some traffic there. Damn all motorists who're in bed tonight."

Very faintly through the thin night air came the throb of an engine.

Flora clutched his arm.

"D'you hear?"

"They're coming."

"That's no Ford," she said. "It's coming from over there." And she pointed toward Oxshott.

"You're right," said Anthony. "Got your gun—give it to me."

"What for?"

"Because that car is going to stop whether it wants to or not."

Flora clapped her hands ecstatically.

"Oh, let me hold 'em up," she pleaded.

"No fear. You've risked enough already. Run round the bend and meet 'em. If they won't pull up for you they will for me."

He took the pistol from Flora and planted himself squarely in the middle of the road.

"Off you go." And she went.

Through the darkness ahead came patterns of light making black lace of the twigs and branches. He heard Flora cry "Stop—stop," and the squawk of a Claxon horn. But still the car came on. It swung round the curve and made directly for him, flooding him in light from the heads.

It wanted some nerve to stand there, but nerve was a quality possessed by Anthony Barraclough. He never moved an inch and in his left hand held the pistol levelled at the approaching car.

"I'll fire," he cried.

He saw the driver snatch at his brakes, the steel studs tore up the surface of the road as the car, a small two-seater, came to a standstill within a foot of where he stood.

Then happened an amazing thing. A woman sprang out and ran toward him crying:

"Anthony—you!"

His eyes were dazzled by the head lights, but his memory for voices was not dulled. He leapt back a clear five feet and presented the pistol full in her face.

"I know you," he said. "You're Auriole Craven. But if you or any of that damn crowd try to stop me ——"

"No, no, no," she cried. "I'm with you—not against. What on earth are you doing here?"

"Doing? I'd almost done it. Smashed up in the final sprint. I want a seat in your car. Must get to London tonight."

"To London. No. It wouldn't be safe—it wouldn't be fair."

"Fair! You don't understand—don't realise—there are millions of pounds at stake."

"I don't care if there are hundreds of millions," she retorted. "The car is only a two-seater and slow at that. There are two of us already and——"

He interrupted her impatiently, with an order to chuck out her passenger—minor considerations had no weight with him—everything, everybody must be sacrificed to the need of the moment.

"Minor considerations?" said Auriole bitterly. "You speak as if you'd carried the game alone, as far as it has gone. But it was my passenger—the man you want to chuck out—who made it possible. The man who was tortured while you were free to——"

She did not finish the sentence for even as she spoke Richard Frencham Altar stepped shakily from the car and came toward them. The extraordinary resemblance between the two men wrung a cry of amazement from Flora.

"Barraclough?" said Richard rocking on his heels. "Pretty extraordinary meeting like this on the finishing straight. How goes?"

"Good God, man!" said Anthony. "They put you through it."

"That's all right," said Richard. "Never mind paying a price if you win the game."

"Get back into the car," Auriole pleaded. "You'll be caught again."

But he put her aside.

"Wait a bit—wait a bit. Looks as if my job isn't finished yet.
What's the trouble here?" and he nodded at the wrecked car.

It was Flora who poured out the story of the chase and ultimate smash and at the very moment of explanation the lights of Harrison Smith's Ford flashed for a moment upon the sky line to reappear a second later creeping down the avenue of trees on the hillside.

"Look, look," she cried.

To Anthony Barraclough it was a novel experience to act on another man's orders. In that instant of gathering danger Richard Frencham Altar became captain of the situation. He literally flung Anthony into the car and refused to listen to Auriole's protests.

"We're players of a game, aren't we?" he said, "and we're going to play it to a finish. I think, too, it 'ud do me good to have one clean smack at 'em before I'm through."

He hardly knew how it came about that he and Auriole kissed one another—somehow they found time for that and as the car moved away she leant out to say:

"You dear brave wonderful Sportsman."

Then he and Flora were alone in the road watching the red rear lamp disappear into the night.

"You've got some pluck," said Flora. As she helped him into the cloak that Anthony had thrown aside. "Going to wait and hold 'em up?"

"May as well. That little two seater would never have carried four.

Got a gun by any chance?"

"No, he had mine. Didn't he give it to you?"

"He did not, so that's that. You better make for those trees."

"If you think I'm going to desert," began Flora stoutly.

"You're going to obey orders, my dear. Go on—push off."

There was a quality in his voice that compelled obedience.

"Oh, I hate you," said Flora. "Please, please let me stay."

But he was inexorable.

"They'll be here in a minute. Go!" he ordered.

And to hide her tears of rage and mortification Flora went.

Richard glanced over her shoulder at the oncoming lights.

"Pity about that pistol," he muttered.

On the road at his feet lay a lady's hand-bag with silk cords. It was part of the equipment furnished by Mrs. Barraclough. Richard stooped and picked it up. There was a barrel of tar and a sand heap by the sign board and it struck him that both might by useful. With all the speed he could command he rolled the tar barrel up the road and left it blocking the way. Then he returned to the sand heap and filled the hand-bag very full and tightened the strings. It felt quite business like as he spun it in the air.

The noise of the oncoming Ford was now plainly detectable, but with it was another sound, a sound that caused him to throw up his head and listen. From the Oxshott road it came, the tump—tump—tump of a single cylinder motor cycle engine. He knew that music very well, had heard it a score of times during his three weeks' imprisonment. The particular ring of the exhaust could not be mistaken.

"That's Laurence's bike for a thousand pounds," he exclaimed and quickly pulled the hood of the cloak over his head.

To guess at the relative distances, the motor cycle should arrive half a minute before the car and banking on the chance, Richard sat down on the heap of sand and waited.

It was Laurence right enough—in evening dress, and hatless, just as he had sprung to the pursuit after at last they succeeded in breaking down the door.

He saw the wrecked motor and what was apparently an old woman huddled at the roadside. He pulled up within a couple of yards and shouted at her.

"Hi! you Madam! seen a car with a man and a girl in it go by?"

But he received no answer even when he shouted the question a second time. The old lady seemed painfully deaf and employing the most regrettable language, Oliver Laurence descended from his mount, leant it against the fence and came nearer to yell his inquiry into her ear. He did not have time to recover from his surprise, when the voice of Richard Frencham Altar replied: "Yes, I have." The sand-bag descended on the top of his head directed by a full arm swing. A dazzling procession of stars floated before his eyes as though he were plunged into the very heart of the milky-way—flashed and faded into velvet black insensibility.

From behind heralded by a beam of light and the squawk of a horn, came a crash as the Ford Car hit the tar barrel end on. Its front axle went back ten inches and the rear wheels rose upward. Two shadowy forms, that were groundlings at another time, took wings and flew in a neat parabola over the windscreen, striking the metal surface of the road with a single thud. They made no effort to rise, but lay in awkward sprawling attitudes as though in the midst of violent activity they had fallen asleep.

Richard Frencham Altar stood alone, blinking rather stupidly at the havoc he had wrought. It was such a relief when Flora stole out of the shadow of the trees and came toward him.

"What a shemozzle, isn't it?" he said dazedly. "I think we'd better get out of this, don't you?"

He wheeled the motor cycle into the centre of the road and bade her jump up behind.

Folks who were returning home late that night were astonished to see a hatless man with a white

unshaved face tearing through the side streets of the south-west district of London on a motor cycle with a pretty, but very dishevelled maiden clinging on to the Flapper bracket and deliriously shouting apparently for no better reason than joy of speed.

An old gentleman who signed himself "Commonsense" wrote to the papers about it next day and expressed his disgust in no measured terms.

CHAPTER 34.

THE FINISHING STRAIGHT.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Torrington. "We have an important decision to make. Barraclough is on his way home, presumably with the concession in his pocket. Our opponents have made certain dispositions to prevent his safe arrival—those dispositions they are prepared to remove in consideration of a third interest."

Cassis snorted violently. Actual propinquity with danger, the clash of mind against mind had in a large measure restored his self-possession.

"Preposterous," he ejaculated.

Hilbert Torrington continued.

"It rests with us to decide whether or no we will accept their terms or take a chance."

"Don't forget the chance is Barraclough," cried Cranbourne, then swinging round on Hipps, he demanded:

"What are the odds against him?"

"Steep," was the laconical rejoinder.

Cranbourne hesitated a bare second.

"Accept their terms," said he.

"In favour?"

"Of course in favour."

Nugent Cassis shook him by the sleeve.

"I am heartily opposed to their acceptance. It is absurd to suppose that Barraclough is unequal to the task we have set him."

"Against?" queried Mr. Torrington.

"Emphatically against."

When it came to Almont's turn to vote his distress of mind was pathetic. He stood alternatively on one leg and the other. He spoke of "Jolly old public school traditions." He "doubted if the dear old sportsman could endure the idea of being protected at such a cost."

"No, damn it all," he concluded. "Why should we split the prize?"

"We can't juggle with men's lives," urged Cranbourne.

"It's insanity to wilt at the last moment," said Cassis.

Up went Lord Almont's hand.

"I vote against," he said.

Rather piteously Cranbourne appealed to his chief. As Chairman of the board Hilbert Torrington's vote counted as two.

"It rests with you, sir," he said.

The old man nodded and a queer smile played round the corners of his mouth—the smile of a pranky schoolboy.

"But surely," he said. "No one will doubt the course I shall take.
One must always stand by one's colours. I accept the hazard Against."
He moved a pace or two forward and bowed to Van Diest. "Good-evening,
Gentlemen."

Until this moment no one had been conscious of Isabel's presence in the room. She had been a silent agonised spectator, controlled by the belief that the value of persons would eventually be proved higher than the value of things. But the cold blooded refusal to protect her lover at the price of a few paltry millions, appalled her beyond bearing. She ceased to be a pretty child with a shock of curly hair and was transformed into a veritable fury.

"You beasts, you brutes, you torturers!" she cried. "You'd let them kill him without lifting a hand—you—you, ohh!"

Van Diest and the American moved toward the door, but she barred the way.

"Pick up that telephone. You shall have your price."

"I can't think you command it," said Hipps.

"Can't you? Then listen. If you stop them—call off the men that are after him, you shall be told the map reference of the place where he found the radium."

There was a startled murmur from the company.

"He may have failed to get the concession. If that were so you'd have an equal chance. Will you call them off if I give you that?"

"But you can't, my dear," said Torrington gently.

"And even if you could, you mustn't," snapped Cassis.

"Mustn't!" There was something magnificent in her scorn. "Why I'd wreck the whole crowd of you for one sight of him. Here you——" and she swung round on Ezra Hipps. "Write this down."

"Bluff," said he.

"D'you think I'd let the man I love carry a secret I didn't share?
Write this down."

It was Van Diest who stepped forward with "I take her word. Go on."

"Brewster's Series 19," cried Isabel. "Map 24."

Instantly a condition of chaos ruled. Cassis cried to her to stop "for Heaven's sake." Someone else exclaimed "That European." "It covers the northern area of——" and "Go on. Go on." Hipps was shouting. To concentrate in the midst of such a din was almost impossible. She covered her cars, closed her eyes, to force memory of the words and the numerals that were to follow. "Square F. North 27. West 33."

"She's there," cried Hipps, and whipped out a pistol to cover Cassis who was making for the telephone.

"No you don't. Stand away." He picked up the instrument and gave a number. "That Phillips? Clear all roads."

It was all that Isabel wanted to hear, just those three words which meant one man's safety at the possible price of a mighty fortune. It meant nothing to her that the American was calling for "My man with a suitcase at Charing Cross straight away. I hit this trail myself." She was not even conscious of a medley of voices in the street below—a series of cries and shouts—the blast of a police whistle. All this was without meaning. Consciousness was slipping away and had almost deserted her when the door was flung open and Anthony Barraclough burst into the room. He stood an instant, chest out and with eyes feverishly bright.

"Sorry I'm late, gentlemen, but I've done the trick—this packet——" he rocked a little. "By Gad, I

believe I'm going to faint." He tottered forward into Isabel's arms and said—"It's you—how ripping!" That was all.

Cassis pushed forward with the words:

"Has he got it—has he got it?"

"This is what you want, I suppose," said Isabel, and taking the letter case from his pocket, threw it on the table. "He's fainted. Help me get him to his bed."

Doran and she half carried and half dragged him from the room.

No one was aware of Auriole, who had entered just behind and stood now with her back to the wall, biting her lip. After all, when a game is won, pawns are relatively of little importance—except to themselves.

"Signed? Registered?" said Van Diest, edging forward.

Nugent Cassis held the crackling document before his eyes—a Concession to Millions—and he answered between his teeth:

"Signed and registered."

"So," said Van Diest, with unexpected control, "we lose—Finish." But his hands trembled as he turned away.

Ezra P. Hipps did not desert his post at the telephone until he heard those words. Then he snapped viciously,

"Say, cancel those orders, Phillips—Wash out the lot."

It was too ridiculous at such a moment to contemplate the price of victory, but that is precisely what Auriole did.

"And you've never asked—never given a thought to the real man—the man who made it possible—who stayed out there on the road while——" She bit back her tears and turned savagely on Hipps and Van Diest. "Oh, God," she cried, "if anything has happened to him."

But nothing had—if you discount a little discomfort bravely borne. He walked into the room even as she spoke. Dirty he was, dishevelled and hollow-eyed, a very travesty of his former self. But there was a spring in his bearing that fires of adversity had failed to rob of its temper. He entered with a swing, a certain jauntiness—a dash of *nonchaloir*—pushing his way through the group of astonished financiers in the doorway and marching up to Van Diest and the American with a very fine air of "you be damned" about the carriage of his head.

"Get out," he said, uncompromisingly. "And tomorrow morning I'm coming down to Charing Cross to see you off by the Continental."

They both addressed him simultaneously and in very different tones to the ones he had grown accustomed to during the past three weeks. The word "cheque" figured largely in their proposals. Richard Frencham Altar cut them short with:

"Cheque from you? No, thanks. I'll take the smallest coin in each of your countries to wear on my watch chain. It'll remind me of my dealings with two millionaires. That train goes at ten tomorrow morning."

Ezra P. Hipps happened to see the light in Auriole's eyes as he and Van Diest moved toward the door. It was quite unmistakable and from his point of view, conclusive. He said nothing, however, and they passed out in silence.

It is probable that Hilbert Torrington also read a meaning in the girl's eyes for he was very active in marshalling his forces for departure.

"I think, gentlemen," he said, "we might meet tomorrow to discuss our obligation to Mr. Frencham Altar—an obligation by no means covered by the small arrangement we made with him." He grasped Richard warmly by the hand and there was moisture at the corners of his eyes. "What a splendid boy you are," he said. "Lord, but youth and adventure is a wonderful partnership, with a dash of romance thrown in as a prize. It's been a great game—hasn't it? A real tough fight. Great fun. Good night."

Even Cassis had something nice to say before they took their leave and left the man and the girl

together.

Then Richard looked at Auriole and grinned, perhaps because her expression was so desperately serious.

"Couldn't you smile at a chap?" he asked.

She wrapped her cloak around her.

"You don't understand," she said. "Everything seems good to you at the moment—even me."

He shook his head whimsically.

"Don't say me that piece," he begged. "It sounds horrid. Where are you going?"

"I don't belong here," she answered.

"For that matter, neither do I, but I dare say I could extend my lease for another half hour—even though it did expire at eleven o'clock."

She came down and faced him.

"Listen," she said. "I don't want to be a nuisance to you and I won't be."

"You will be if you keep going to that door."

"I don't even know your name, but if you look at me like that, with laughter in your eyes—if you play the fool at such a time as this—how can I possibly keep my resolve."

"What resolve?"

"To go away and never come back."

"Come here," said Richard Frencham Altar, "come here at once."

"Oh, please," she pleaded. "Honestly, my dear, I'm not up to much and I know you are going to think I am. Oh, what are you going to do?"

This because his arms had gone round her and he had raised her chin to the level of his own.

"I'm going to start on the greatest adventure of all," he answered.

THE END.

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